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Dirk Jacobs^a

^a Research associate at the Institute of Political Sociology and Methodology (IPSoM), Katholieke Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium

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The debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in Belgium

Dirk Jacobs

Abstract There has been debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in Belgium since the early 1970s. This article examines the presence and influence of the ethnic minority voice in the political debate on this topic. The reluctance of the main political parties to address the issue openly and the electoral struggle over the anti-immigrant vote incited immigrant (and antiracist) groups to rally fiercely for enfranchisement. However, there was little discernable evidence of any (positive) influence being exerted by immigrant associations and the wider suffragist movement on the parliamentary debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents. The absence of direct communication and lack of negotiation between the political elite and migrant associations and the antiracist movement has served to reduce the role of ethnic minority groups to that of being mere subjects of discourse in elite-driven domestic politics.

The anomalous situation of foreign residents, who are a significant part of the population, being excluded from regular politics, poses a challenge to any European democracy where it is claimed that policy-making should be in the hands of people who represent the whole population (Rath 1990: 127). Individual European states have reacted differently to this challenge. Some countries like Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands have enfranchised their foreign residents at the local level. Other countries like Germany, Belgium and France have continued to foster state citizenship as a precondition for local voting rights, despite over two decades of debate over and rallying for the enfranchisement of foreign residents. In accordance with the Treaty of Maastricht, as from 1996 all European citizens living in other EU member states should be eligible to vote in local elections. Belgium has, however, been somewhat reluctant to enfranchise its EU citizens at the municipal level. It took until early 1999 before Belgium implemented its European obligations. As a result, approximately 482,000 adult European foreign residents (6 per cent of the adult Belgian population in 1998) will be able to participate in the next local elections to be held in October 2000. Out of this group, 36 per cent are of Italian nationality. The 235,500 adult non-EU foreign residents (3 per cent of the adult Belgian population in 1998) still have no local voting rights and this will at best only be the case in the local elections of 2006. The overall majority of these non-EU foreign residents is of Moroccan (38 per cent) or Turkish nationality (22 per cent). Non-nationals (9 per cent of the total Belgian population in 1998) cannot vote in supra-local nor in national elections.

In my PhD research (Jacobs 1998b) I have studied how the issue of voting rights for non-nationals has been addressed in parliament in Belgium and the Netherlands between the early 1970s and the late 1990s. The corpus of data analysed in this endeavour comprised all official documents relating to voting rights for foreigners published by the different bodies of Parliament in the

period 1970–1997. Elaborating on that research, I want to focus in this article on the presence (or lack thereof) and importance of the ethnic minority voice in the debates over enfranchisement of foreign residents in Belgium. It should be noted that until very recently there have not been any ethnic minority representatives among the members of parliament. Hence, the question I will address is whether there was a direct influence of (extra-parliamentary) collective claims-making of ethnic minorities (and their supporters) on the outcomes of parliamentary debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals in Belgium.

Analysing the parliamentary debate

A few words of explanation may be in order regarding the choice of parliamentary debates as the main source of empirical material for the study of ethnic minority groups' importance in claims-making. It is the case that collective claims-making has been essentially an extra-parliamentary political activity and one *could* have set out to conduct an exhaustive analysis of the extra-parliamentary 'public debate' and rallying, but two immediate problems suggest themselves. On the one hand, there is, of course, the practical concern that it is a tremendous task to gather and analyse all available material through every possible channel (or even just the written media). On the other hand, there are the intertwined methodological problems of how to define the exact boundaries of the 'wider public debate',¹ of how to assess the discursive and political importance of contributions to the 'wider public debate' and of what material should be included (and on what grounds). Newspaper analysis undoubtedly constitutes an interesting strategy in studying public claims-making (see Statham, this issue). Such an approach, however, does not allow for a link to be made between public claims-making and (outcomes of) parliamentary debate, since especially the latter is not always reported. Hence, it is less suitable for the present purposes. Another research strategy could be to trace and contact all immigrant associations conceivably involved in the struggle for enfranchisement in order to reconstruct their side of the story. Again, however, this is inhibited by practical and methodological constraints. Apart from being a very time-consuming exercise, it raises the problem of how to trace all potentially relevant organisations, when a substantial number of them may have ceased to exist.

The fact that I have to rely on parliamentary data is less problematic than it might first seem. First, in the decision-making process, parliament has a veto (Immergut 1992) and is therefore an obligatory point of passage (Callon 1986). Parliament has the final say in the matter of enfranchisement and ultimately all 'public debate' and extra-parliamentary activity is aimed at influencing parliamentary debate and its decision-making. As such, parliamentary debate is a funnel for wider societal debate and for extra-parliamentary events. Given the large number of competing political factions and their divergent interests, chances are that most (and certainly the most influential) extra-parliamentary activities will be echoed in parliament. In this way, these activities and contributions can then be traced and further investigated by the researcher. At the same time, this approach resolves, at least to a certain extent, the problem of selectivity and the relative allocation of importance to activities and contributions. Matters which are discussed or referred to in parliament are included in the research as significant events. Consultation with experts and actors directly involved in the main immigrant associations served to act as a further safety net

to check that no crucial events were missed. It is by no means my wish to claim that analysis of parliamentary debate is the best or the only strategy suitable for studying the importance of collective mobilisation for policy outcomes, but I do think it is a sensible way of approaching the issue.

The Belgian constitution stipulates that in principle possession of state citizenship is a prerequisite for enjoying voting rights. Enfranchisement of foreign residents hence necessitates both a simple legislative change and a more complex constitutional change and thus becomes a very time-consuming process. The procedure for changing the constitution entails two phases. First, both chambers must pass a bill proposing constitutional amendment by a simple majority. When this has been passed parliament is dissolved and new elections are held. The new parliament must then adopt the amendment by a two-thirds majority. As a result, there is considerable inertia in effectuating constitutional changes: the major political parties are *de facto* 'held hostage' by the necessity of creating a broad consensus on the principles stipulated in the constitution. In Belgium the parliament traditionally consists of a relatively large number of different political parties and only coalition governments can obtain a comfortable majority. In recent Belgian history the governmental parties have not held a two-thirds majority in parliament. This means that in practice extension of voting rights to non-nationals (or indeed, any other measure necessitating a constitutional amendment) would only be possible if all mainstream political parties (both those in government and in opposition) were to reach agreement on the issue. Depending on the exact composition of parliament, at a minimum all major traditional political groupings (Christian democrats, right-wing liberals and social democrats) and, preferably also some of the more peripheral parties (moderate-nationalists and leftist parties) would have to grant their support to enfranchisement. Both left-wing and right-wing political actors would need to be willing and able to combine their political interests and ideological narratives into support for the enfranchisement of foreign residents.

The study of (the use of) discourses is crucial to an understanding of the success or failure of attempts to enfranchise foreign residents. Accepting the numerical strength of parties – the result of elections – as a given fact and as one source of politicians' 'power' to set policy, this authority must then be considered as the product of alliances based on discourses, rather than as the explanation for the composition of those alliances (see Latour 1986; Rose and Miller 1992: 183). Of course, stabilised networks (for example a coalition between governing parties) are a potent influence on the composition of tactical alliances between particular parties on specific issues. Where broad majorities are obligatory, however, the creation of alliances based on discourses entails an ongoing process of enrolment and mobilisation in its own right. As such, discourses (and especially the extent of their ability to provide a foundation for alliances) are important in causing and, concomitantly, in illuminating the outcome of debates. Of key interest is the influence of collective claims-making on the use of particular discourses by politicians and the possibilities which exist for creating particular alliances on the basis of these discourses. What is being proposed is that collective claims-making by ethnic minority groups or their supporters can be seen as significant if this action has led directly to both a change of use of particular discourses by central political actors and, in the wake thereof, to a successful alliance of different discourses in favour of enfranchisement.

A discourse can be defined as a relatively bounded set of claims, images and

tropes through which meaning is given to reality (see Ellingson 1995: 107; Hajer 1993: 45). Discourses are specific ways of 'signifying experience from a particular perspective' (Fairclough 1995: 135). They are 'situated in a field of debate wherein speakers struggle with one another to establish, meaning, earn legitimacy, and mobilise consensus on belief and action' (Ellingson 1995: 107). Because discourses are created in reference and opposition to each other, they tend to be organised on the basis of certain fundamental oppositions (Bourdieu 1991: 185; Ellingson 1995: 108) and are to a great extent interrelated in content and use.

Discourses structure perception by focusing on particular elements of 'the real world'. Obviously this process of constructing and framing reality is a highly significant element in debate and the overall political process (Hajer 1993: 45; Rose and Miller 1992: 175). Policy is, indeed, the result of the creation of networks (of politicians) on the basis of discourses that serve to make particular phenomena comprehensible within a framework of like language and logic, and with similarly-oriented goals (Rose and Miller 1992: 184). In the course of this process of formulation, negotiation and bargaining, certain interests may take shape while others may dissipate (Rose and Miller 1992: 184).

A particular discourse is used by a politician or a political faction to enforce a specific standpoint on the issue under discussion. This normally happens in order to influence policy in accordance with their own political opinions, although one should not rule out that there can also be more pragmatic electoral motives involved: sometimes a politician merely wants to profile herself to her electorate, hoping to gain or maintain support from certain groups of voters. However, in order to study the dynamics of the debate it is far more important to study the importance and significance of a discourse, rather than focusing on the intentions – which are in any case not traceable – of those persons using the discourse. One can state that the importance of a discourse depends on the extent to which a politician can gain support within the parliamentary arena for her specific perspective on reality. In the Belgian case no single political faction – due to the lack of a majority – is able to dominate parliament, and the different parties must therefore co-operate and attune their respective discourses. In such a situation, the importance of a discourse is assessed by looking at the way in which the political actors try and build 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer 1993) which consist of a set of actors who apparently share and defend the same social construct(s) as the basis for policy. The sharing of deeply-held values or societal insights is not necessary in the creation of such a discourse coalition; merely the partial orchestration and co-ordination of discursive elements in one seemingly coherent narrative is what matters here. At moments of decision-making, policy (changes) will, of course, be the result of the narrative in the discourse coalition in which the central political actors participate at that moment.

In my empirical research (Jacobs 1998b) I have traced the discourses in the debate over enfranchisement of aliens by using the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) as a method of qualitative text analysis, combining this with insights from linguistic pragmatics (Blommaert and Verschueren 1994). The corpus of texts was systematically analysed on two levels: the explicit argumentative layer was charted using the grounded theory method, while the implicit argumentative layer (linguistic transformations) was analysed using the discourse analytical toolkit. The argumentative

clusters (of statements) which resulted from this double-layered analysis were considered to be discourses.

Use of the grounded theory method in exploring the data led to the observation that the Belgian debate on voting rights for foreign residents can best be reconstructed in a two-dimensional space.² The first dimension is the question of whether foreign residents not being entitled to vote and to stand as candidate in elections represents a 'democratic deficit'. The second dimension concerns the extent to which certain conditions need to be fulfilled in order to have a viable multicultural society in which immigrants participate politically (insofar as this is possible or desirable) and whether or not this necessitates certain demands on foreign residents (and/or nationals of ethnic minority origin). The answers to these two basic questions constitute the most important discursive fields in the debate on political integration of foreigners in Belgium. By reference to these two dimensions nearly all statements made within the political discussions can be confronted with each other in one (imaginary) space, thus providing a means of compressing the debate. It is at the intersection of these two dimensions that four distinct discourses have been created concerning the issue of enfranchisement of non-nationals.

Four major discourses were distinguished analytically and empirically, and inspired by the labels Stephen Castles (1994: 21–22) gave to specific models of citizenship – I have labelled these *assimilationist exclusionary*; *assimilationist inclusionary*; *pluralist inclusionary*; and *segregationist exclusionary*. These discourses represent specific ways of defining and handling the issue of enfranchisement of foreign residents. Albeit that from an argumentative perspective they can be clearly distinguished from one another both analytically and empirically, it should be noted that it is not impossible to see them being used alternately by the same actors in short bursts of discussion. Although they are not exclusively linked to certain (clusters of) political parties, they are generally clearly connected to specific positions within the political spectrum. The *segregationist exclusionary* discourse is used by extreme right-wing parties, the *pluralist inclusionary* discourse is used first and foremost by left-wing parties, while the *assimilationist exclusionary* discourse is primarily used by right-wing parties. The *assimilationist inclusionary* discourse is used by both left-wing and right-wing parties, although more often by the latter.

In the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse* the fact that non-nationals are disenfranchised is not seen as a democratic deficit. The fact that non-nationals are not enfranchised is regarded as self-evident within the system of nation states and those foreign residents who wish for voting rights are expected to opt for naturalisation. Within this discourse, however, naturalisation is only possible after a degree of assimilation. In its most radical form, the newcomer is only allowed to adopt state citizenship if this equals 'melting' into the receiving nation (postulated to be a community of common culture) to the point of indistinctness (Feher and Heller 1994: 135). The fact that present-day society is *de facto* multicultural is accepted, but is only considered to be a temporary phase. To have a viable co-existence of different ethnic groups a set of conditions must be fulfilled and foreign residents should comply with specific demands, which all boils down to adjustment to the (proclaimed) 'national' (or 'Western') culture. An implicit reliance on the ideology of homogeneity as a world-view (see Blommaert and Verschueren 1994) assumes the ideal society to be as homogeneous as possible. To this purpose the conditions to which the foreigner has to

comply in order to acquire state citizenship should be (or remain) quite strict. Franchise for foreign residents is out of the question since this would only inhibit (the deemed necessary) cultural assimilation of non-nationals. Assimilation is first and foremost an individual responsibility.

In contrast, in the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*, the fact that (large) parts of the population do not have voting rights is regarded as a democratic deficit. Foreign residents should obtain or be granted state citizenship to the greatest extent possible in order to decrease or avoid this democratic deficit. However, at the same time account should be taken of certain conditions required to make viable the de facto multicultural society (in which immigrants can participate politically). A minimum level of cultural assimilation is obligatory. The state has an important responsibility in this process: it should 'educate' and 'mould' foreign residents into rational citizens as it does with nationals. The granting of voting rights could be instrumental in achieving this. The aim is to integrate immigrants into the political community, which at the same time requires a high degree of cultural assimilation on the part of the immigrants.

In the *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, the fact that (large) parts of the population do not have voting rights is also regarded to be a democratic deficit. In addition, it is believed that no specific demands need be imposed upon foreign residents in order to have a viable multicultural society in which immigrants participate politically. Society's responsibility for fighting racism is stressed as is the unequal societal (and legal) position of the immigrant population, while (possibly hidden) objectives of assimilating and deliberately 'acculturating' immigrants are explicitly rejected. Political rights for foreign residents are seen as unconditional rights, which should be granted without any restrictive measures. It is argued that it is self-evident that a modern democracy should enfranchise foreign residents at every level, regardless of nationality. Enfranchisement of non-nationals is presented as the next 'logical' – and even 'natural' – step in the 'history of democracy' (after enfranchisement of women). Within this discourse, immigrants are admitted to the political community, and there is acceptance of the retention of cultural differences which are not seen to be problematic.

In the *segregationist exclusionary discourse*, the fact that non-nationals are disenfranchised is not seen as a democratic deficit. The creation of a viable multicultural society is seen as an impossibility. Ethnic groups should at best be segregated and 'foreign elements' should in the worst case scenario be expelled or destroyed. This discourse has a clear ethno-centrist and racist tenet.

The above is a brief presentation of the four major discourses in the debate. The outcome of a debate is dependent upon the building up of discourse coalitions in favour of enfranchisement at specific strategic moments of the debate. The broad lines of the Belgian parliamentary debates over enfranchisement and the importance of the ethnic minority voice therein will be explored next. The main aim here is to present a brief reconstruction of the dynamics of the debate, paying special attention to the possible influence of collective claims-making by immigrant groups. I cannot discuss all the juridical and procedural aspects of the debate (see Jacobs 1998b). Nor is it possible to elaborate on the importance of the internal Flemish-Francophone divide for the debate (but see Bousetta and Swyngedouw 1999; Jacobs 1998b, Jacobs 1999).

Reconstruction of the debate

As in most West European countries, the issue of enfranchisement of foreign residents was put on the Belgian political agenda in the early 1970s by leftist politicians. Throughout the next two decades it remained primarily a 'left-wing' political demand. This will to some extent be because left-wing parties expect electoral progress from immigrant votes, but it is equally a result of the leftist ideology of international solidarity in which both native and immigrant workers are seen as part of a common working class suppressed by a dominant capitalist class (Rath 1990: 142).³ It is worth underlining that the support for enfranchisement by left-wing politicians was in first instance not the result of a suffragist movement among foreign residents themselves – such a movement did in fact not exist at the time. Individual socialist and communist politicians took up the issue in parliament in 1971 after it had been launched by the trade unions. The unions demanded enfranchisement of non-nationals after a number of serious incidents in 1969 and 1970 in which police and employers had tried to break major strikes by bullying migrant workers.

It should be noted that in the early 1970s it was initially only individual leftist politicians who supported the idea of (local) enfranchisement of foreign residents. At the party level, the socialists and Christian democrats limited themselves to supporting enfranchisement of EC citizens but only if this were to happen simultaneously in the entire European Community. Overall, most politicians objected to enfranchisement using an *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*. After several failures by individual MPs to establish the issue firmly on the parliamentary agenda, 33 Belgian associations (trade unions and antiracism movements) and 35 immigrant associations launched a suffragist struggle in 1976. The movement was called '*Objective 82*' referring to the demand for foreign residents to be enfranchised at the local level in the elections of 1982. Franchise was, however, not the only demand. An improvement in immigrants' legal position, especially in relation to residence permits, was another main issue. The prime objective of the movement was to put the overall issue of the immigrants' legal status onto the political agenda. The movement, which could be identified with a *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, influenced an increasing number of individual – albeit not very prominent – politicians from centre and left-wing parties to support the demand for local franchise for foreign residents. As a partial result of the lobbying, the Francophone socialist party took up the call for unilateral franchise for EU citizens as an official party position. Due to pressure exerted by *Objective 82* the issue of voting rights even played a (minor) role in the electoral campaign at the end of 1978. As a result, the centre-leftist governments Martens-I and Martens-II in 1979 and 1980 included local enfranchisement of all foreign residents in the government statement. Using an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*, the left-wing government promised to take up the issue, while the right-wing political parties in general opposed the idea of enfranchisement using an *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*.

Due to political instability the issue could, however, not be tackled and soon thereafter the consecutive left-wing governments favouring enfranchisement (and an intermediary tripartite government Martens-III and left-wing government Martens-IV) were replaced by a newly-elected right-wing government Martens-V in 1981. Faced with the competition of extreme right-wing parties and a militant Francophone party in the city of Brussels, the Francophone right-wing

liberals had by now – in the pursuit of votes – moved away from the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse* and closer to implicit anti-immigrant discourses (flirting with the *segregationist exclusionary discourse*). They forced the other parties of the right-wing government to drop the issue of enfranchising foreign residents even if they were still in doubt. This blocked the possibility of setting up a discourse coalition in favour of enfranchisement. Instead, in a discourse coalition combining the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* and the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*, *ius soli* was introduced in Belgian nationality legislation, partly in order to counter demands for the enfranchisement of non-nationals. At the same time coalition bargaining resulted in the introduction of new restrictive measures. It is important to note that the same bill which introduced *ius soli* also implemented limitations on foreigners' residence rights in the city of Brussels. Thus a much-debated illegal practice of Nols, the then mayor of the Brussels' municipality Schaarbeek, of spreading overt racist and populist propaganda in order to gain votes, was no longer merely condoned but in fact institutionalised; Nols had been refusing non-EC immigrants official registration within his municipality. This illegal practice had now been transformed into official policy for a number of Brussels' municipalities.

It was in this climate that the trade unions and migrant associations in 1985 reinstated their suffragist movement and named it *Objective 88*, referring to the next local elections to be held in 1988. This time, however, most politicians from traditional parties, including those on the left, were gradually backing away from pro-immigrant policies in fear of the perceived growing electoral appeal of extreme right-wing parties. Only the ecologists continued to offer firm support for the enfranchisement of all foreign residents, using a *pluralist inclusionary discourse* to do so. The views of the extreme right-wing parties had gained some credibility and *salonfähigkeit* from the fact that the right-wing liberals in government had adopted some of their positions and had initiated several policies which were unfavourable to immigrants. This had helped the (negative) polarisation which was evolving in relation to the immigrant issue and at the same time gradually nudged the spectrum of positions on immigrants in the direction of restriction. In the long run these processes helped the electoral success of the extreme right (especially the *Vlaams Blok* in Flanders). As such, the fear of a 'white backlash' turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy (compare Bourdieu 1998: 23).

The *Vlaams Blok* enjoyed its first major success in the national elections of 1987 and was able to secure 18 per cent of the votes in the local elections in Antwerp in 1988. The unexpected success of the *Vlaams Blok* promptly transformed the 'immigrant issue' into a major Flemish concern, where it earlier had been mainly a francophone topic in Brussels. The new left-wing government Martens-VIII decided to create the *Koninklijk Commissariaat voor het Migrantenbeleid* (KCM), which would co-ordinate the development of a new and for the first time systematic policy on immigrant and ethnic minority issues. It was, however, made clear from the outset that enfranchisement of foreign residents would be out of the question, given the electoral success of the extreme right. The use of an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* supported the introduction of a bill to further strengthen the importance of *ius soli* in nationality legislation.

In the national elections of 1991 the *Vlaams Blok* gained a tremendous electoral result, increasing its number of MPs in Chamber and Senate with 15 seats. The Francophone extreme-right party *Front National* gained one parliamentary seat.

Some months before, the centre-left government had signed the Treaty of Maastricht, in which Belgium agreed to create a European citizenship, implying unconditional local franchise for EU citizens. The new centre-left government Dehaene-I decided to postpone the constitutional change, which was necessary to make this enfranchisement possible, in order not to threaten ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. In addition, the government hoped to avoid a Flemish-Francophone conflict over the Flemish fear – fuelled by some influential journalists – that enfranchisement of EU citizens would weaken the political position of the Flemish in the bilingual city of Brussels and its periphery. Given the enormous electoral success of the extreme right, any reference to enfranchisement of all foreign residents had become a taboo within the traditional political parties more than ever before. In response to the triumph of the *Vlaams Blok*, several competing antiracism movements – in which migrant associations had only minor influence – were created. On the one hand, a rally was organised by the movement *Objective 479.917*,⁴ which had strong links with the extreme-left party PvdA-PTB, in support of a bill which would automatically grant Belgian nationality to all foreigners who had been residing in the country for over five years. On the other hand, there was the movement *Hand-in-Hand*, a conglomerate of trade unions and a wide range of new social movements, which organised a very successful antiracism demonstration in 1992. As long as *Hand-in-Hand* limited itself to a general and soft antiracist stance, the movement was openly supported by the centre-left parties in government. When the movement decided in 1994 to focus its rallies on the demand of enfranchisement of foreign residents, the Flemish parties withdrew their support, however. The antiracism movements were in any event clearly unable to influence effectively the political debate about enfranchisement.

In the local elections of 1994 the *Vlaams Blok* was able to attract 25 per cent of the votes of the Antwerp electorate, thus becoming the largest party in the city council. All other parties were forced to enter a coalition to keep the extreme right-wing party from gaining power locally. Later that year the Belgian government was able secretly to obtain an exceptional clause in the European directive regulating enfranchisement of EU citizens, allowing it temporarily to reserve the right to vote to nationals in municipalities with more than 20 per cent potential European voters. This was done in order to soothe Flemish politicians who feared a loss of Flemish political power in the Brussels periphery. Contrary to the objective this, however, only fuelled the internal Flemish-Francophone conflict and served to complicate the objective of changing the constitution and enfranchising EU citizens for years to come.

In the 1995 elections the extreme right was able to consolidate its position at the national level, even gaining an additional seat on the Francophone side. Secret negotiations between the trade unions and the centre-left government Dehaene-II in 1996, held at the demand of the antiracism movement *Hand-in-Hand*, could still not stimulate progress on the issue of enfranchisement of all foreign residents. Discontented with this situation, several individuals from different migrant associations created the *Nationaal Comité voor Algemeen Stemrecht* (NCAS), a national movement in favour of enfranchisement. It was explicitly only immigrants who could take part in the movement. This was done in order to show that immigrants *do* have an interest in the matter. It was hoped they could thus counter the argument of opponents of enfranchisement that foreign residents did not want voting rights and that it was simply a topic put

forward by extreme-left non-immigrant agitators. Their initiatives did enjoy a lot of media attention but could not influence the centre-left political parties to reopen the debate.

In March 1997, a dramatic event suddenly revived support for the idea of enfranchisement of all foreign residents. In the aftermath of the Dutroux-affair, the body of the nine-year-old kidnapped and abused Moroccan girl Loubna Benaïssa was discovered in Brussels. The funeral of Loubna triggered a state of national mourning, as had happened earlier in connection with the funerals of the other victims of child-sex crimes. The press and all commentators agreed on the fact that a special bond had been created between the different ethnic communities in Belgium, as had already been the case during the *White March*. During a live television interview shortly after the funeral, prime minister Dehaene initiated a discourse on the positive era of interethnic relations that could now be perceived and that would create new political possibilities. He was thereupon more or less forced by the interviewer to speak positively of possible enfranchisement of all non-nationals. Soon all traditional political parties – in the press and parliament – were almost stumbling over each other in their eagerness to state that they were in the process of partially revising their positions on enfranchisement. Suddenly, enfranchisement of all foreign residents again became an option with everyone using either a *pluralist inclusionary discourse* or an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. The *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*, which had dominated the debate so long, was pushed to the background and even the extreme right had difficulty in continuing to use its *segregationist inclusionary discourse*.⁵ Indeed, it seemed a new discursive phase had come about in which mutual respect and solidarity between Belgians and immigrants was being stressed, in total contrast to the earlier negative polarisation on the immigrant issue. Special reference in this respect should be made to a remarkable public appearance by Loubna's sister Nabela Benaïssa, an 18-year-old veiled Muslim girl. At a time of the first Dutroux-crisis when an infuriated crowd threatened to raid the Brussels Palace of Justice, Nabela's appearance had served to contradict completely the stereotype of the non-integrated Muslim immigrant and she had been able to calm down the protesters.

As a result, a compromise was gradually achieved between the major political parties to change the constitution in order to grant EU citizens local voting rights in 2000 and enfranchise the other non-nationals in 2006, combining a *pluralist inclusionary* and an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. Most remarkable was the radical change of position of the Francophone right-wing liberals who in the space of a few months had become one of the champions of enfranchisement of non-nationals. The internal Flemish-Francophone conflict, however, continued to slow down any actual constitutional change. A significant proportion of the Flemish politicians from across the political spectrum stressed the demand of guaranteed political representation for the Flemish in Brussels and denounced the new position of the Francophone right-wing liberals as an electoral strategy aimed at this potential new electorate and as a plot to weaken the Flemish. It was December 1998 before the constitution was finally adapted and February 1999 before the electoral law was changed in order to enfranchise EU citizens. On Flemish (mainly Christian democrat) demand, a transitory article was included in the constitution in which it was stipulated that non-EU-nationals could only be enfranchised after the year 2001 (in practice 2006).

Assessing the importance of the ethnic minority voice

All in all, one must conclude that collective claims-making by immigrant associations (and their supporters) had only limited importance in influencing the outcomes of the political and parliamentary debate about enfranchisement in Belgium. Immigrant associations were able to pressure leftist politicians at certain stages of the debate but were unable to influence the development of the debate more generally. In order to be successful in triggering policy changes on such an issue, collective claims-making would have had to influence both left-wing and right-wing mainstream political parties. This was not the case in the Belgian debate.

One important conclusion of the analysis is that one cannot assess collective claims-making by making reference to ethnic minority groups alone: immigrant associations, the antiracism movement and/or self-appointed non-immigrant advocates were almost always seen to join forces. The enfranchisement issue has in this sense not led to 'genuine' ethnic mobilisation – if this is understood as political mobilisation based mainly on ethnic identity. This does not really come as a surprise. The topic of voting rights for foreign residents is one which by definition concerns different ethnic minority groups. In fact, in countries with a diverse immigrant population, a potential suffragist struggle in favour of foreign residents has to bridge several ethnic identities and may thus even run counter to ethnic mobilisation. The antiracism struggle is the most obvious common denominator, involving non-immigrant actors on an equal basis.

One can nonetheless claim with a reasonable amount of justification that immigrant associations and their supporters played a significant part in the Belgian debate, especially if a comparison is drawn with the almost non-existent involvement of similar groups in the parallel debate in the Netherlands (see Jacobs 1998a). A plausible explanation for this could be that the proactive position of the Dutch political parties made a suffragist movement obsolete and merely led to low-profile lobbying, while the negative attitude of the Belgian political establishment proved the best incentive for immigrant and antiracist action.

A brief look at the Dutch debate will serve to develop this argument. Moluccan terrorism in 1977 had put the wider ethnic issue on the Dutch national agenda and all political parties had recognised the need for an integrated policy in relation to ethnic minorities. Support for local enfranchisement was used by the right-wing government as a quick symbolic means of showing that it was doing something with regard to the societal position of non-nationals (especially Moluccans), although the right-wing parties had previously always opposed enfranchisement. In order to avoid upsetting the ongoing process of reconciliation within the right-wing parties on the issue of enfranchisement (see Jacobs 1998a), leftist migrant associations were moved to engage only in low-profile lobbying and not to instigate public actions like demonstrations. In the early 1980s both right-wing and left-wing political actors made an effort to avoid open conflict over the modalities of enfranchisement in order to avoid indirectly stimulating the popularity of extreme right-wing politicians.

In Belgium, the debate took a completely different course. In contrast to the Netherlands, the political establishment did not choose to develop a proactive policy towards immigrants and thus firmly counter extreme-right ideas. After first having overtly neglected the issue and thus inciting the suffragist move-

ment to rally, the political establishment subsequently allowed the debate to be drawn into a struggle for the anti-immigrant vote. Right-wing politicians polarised the issue and flirted with populist anti-immigrant stances. As in France and Germany, the mainstream Belgian left backed down in their defence of immigrants and thus de-legitimised their original pro-immigrant positions (Guiraudon 1997: 284). As the spectrum of positions on immigrants gradually shifted to favour restriction, immigrant associations and the antiracism movement were consistently 'encouraged' to react and to fill the ideological gap. Their ideas and demands were, however, systematically marginalised and were depicted as being unrealistic and as encouraging a white backlash.

The involvement of migrant associations and their supporters in the debate over enfranchisement in Belgium and the Netherlands clearly differed in important ways and there were significant differences also in the roles played by right-wing politics in the two countries. I would contend that this is connected with the divergent development of the respective political establishments' reactions to the new challenges posed by the presence of ethnic minority groups. The explanation for the differential involvement should therefore in my opinion not be linked to differences in the *already-established* incorporation regimes, but to the different dynamics of the elite-driven domestic debates in which the policies towards immigrants – the *establishing* of incorporation regimes – were gradually developed and adapted. Contingency and elite voluntarism were important factors in this process. In Belgium, short-term electoral reasons were allowed to bring about a polarisation of views on the immigrant issue and steps towards developing an immigrant policy were only taken by way of a negative response to the success of the extreme right.

One can only conclude that neither ethnic minority groups nor the antiracist movement exerted any real direct influence on the debate over enfranchisement, nor on the more general debate on ethnic minority policy. The decisions were made, and the policy was set out, by the existing political establishment. The absence of direct communication and negotiation between the political elite on the one hand and migrant associations and the antiracist movement on the other, reduced the role of ethnic minority groups to being mere subjects of discourse within a framework of elite-driven domestic politics. It is striking that an unconnected and unexpected dramatic event (in which immigrants played a prominent role) was to bring about watershed in the debate. The funeral of a murdered 9-year-old Moroccan girl had more impact on the Belgian debate than did migrant mobilisation or antiracist rallies. The dramatic event triggered changes in existing discursive constructions of social reality and facilitated new discourse coalitions on enfranchisement, when ethnic minority and antiracist rallying had failed to do so. It can be noted that the same observation can be made about the Dutch debate; the train hijack by Moluccan youngsters proved crucial in shaping the debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents and even in determining the overall debate over ethnic minority policy (see Jacobs 1998b).

Collective claims-making by ethnic minorities was less important in changing the discursive patterns of parliamentary debate over enfranchisement than the chance occurrence of a special, dramatic event. Extraordinary events, which could not immediately be fitted into the currently used discursive frames by political actors, forced them to switch to an alternative discourse and opened the way for new pro-enfranchisement alliances. This does not mean that contingency

is the primary explanation for discursive (and policy) change. Unexpected dramatic events with high media exposure do not, of course, trigger change out of the blue. They are important, rather, as vehicles used by actors in an ongoing (discursive) struggle over the definition of reality and over the support of the electorate. It does illustrate, however, that collective claims-making by ethnic minority groups was of very limited direct importance in the elite-driven political debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in Belgium. Collective claims-making did not make the difference. Nitty-gritty politics was far more important in the elite-driven debate.

Perhaps the conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that (representatives of) ethnic minority groups should seek to become actively involved in the nitty-gritty politics within the different (and not only left-wing) mainstream political parties if they want to influence policy over voting rights for foreign residents. Those who are in favour of this should therefore applaud the fact that in the June 1999 elections, several Belgians of foreign descent were finally able to occupy winnable positions within the parties, both in the federal and the subnational parliamentary assemblies.

Conclusion

In studying the Belgian debate over enfranchisement, I have reconstructed the debate as a struggle with different discourses and I have looked into the discourse coalitions that were at the basis of the eventual policy outcome. Policy is seen as the result of the creation of a coalition of specific discourses that make certain phenomena understandable in a similar language and logic and that are strategically used by political actors. I have argued that polarisation to some extent transformed the Belgian debate over enfranchisement into an electoral struggle over the anti-immigrant vote. This had a crucial effect on the process of formation of discourse coalitions and at several stages of the debate made it impossible to create a coalition in support of enfranchisement. The debate was mainly elite-driven. The negative attitude of the Belgian political establishment proved to be a good incentive for immigrant and antiracist action, but the involvement of immigrant associations and their supporters did not exert any significant effect. The decisions were made, and the policy was set out, by the existing political establishment.

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Notes

- 1 It is very problematic to define a political or public debate if it is not clearly linked to particular settings (definable in time and space). In order to do a systematic and representative analysis of a debate a strict delimitation is essential. If this is not the case, there can be no control of selection and representativity, given that an exhaustive collection of material is often impossible. This is often a serious flaw in research claiming to analyse 'the public debate' on a particular issue.

- 2 It is striking and somewhat surprising that these same basic discourses were also at the heart of the political debate in the Netherlands (see Jacobs 1998a). I will not elaborate on this issue here, but I do want to stress that this can be explained post facto with reference to parallel historical developments influencing the formation of the discourses (see Jacobs 1998b: 268–69).
- 3 It should be noted that franchise of foreign residents is not always automatically advocated in leftist political narratives. Sometimes, and especially when anti-immigrant parties are winning support as was the case in the late 1980s and 1990s in France, Belgium and Germany, leftist parties object to extending voting rights to non-nationals out of fear of a ‘white backlash’ from the white working-class. Another motive for left-wing parties to oppose enfranchisement of foreigners has, for instance in the Netherlands, been the wish to counter the influence of extremist (right-wing) political groups among foreigners.
- 4 The number refers to the total amount of votes for extreme right-wing parties in the 1991 elections. The objective was to collect the same number of signatures in a petition within one year. The movement collected over 750,000 signatures.
- 5 For instance, Frank Van Hecke, the president of the Vlaams Blok, in a radio interview refused to answer the question if according to their programme the family Benaïssa should be forced to leave the country. Since all Turkish and Moroccan families should leave the country according to the official Vlaams Blok views, this is indeed the case. Van Hecke, however, refused to confirm this. On the contrary, he stressed that if Belgium had been tough on crime, the murder would not have occurred.

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Author contact details

Dirk Jacobs is a research associate at the Institute of Political Sociology and Methodology (IPSoM), Katholieke Universiteit Brussel. Dr Jacobs may be contacted at:

IPSoM
KUBrussel
Vrijheidslaan 17
1081 Brussel
Belgium

E-mail: <dirk.jacobs@kubrussel.ac.be>