

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

Chapter 13. The Local Political Elite in Brussels Region: a Changing Environment and New Elites?

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Introduction

The study of local political elites in Belgium is a relatively new scientific approach, but one which has advanced considerably, thanks to the works of Reynaerts (2000) and Steyvers (2004) in particular. A contemporary study of this subject is all the more significant since the work of the honourable local councillors involves a managerial process and creation of a more encompassing scope of networks (Huron, 1999 ; Malikova, 2000) within the context of evolution of local institutional reform (Vetter & Kersting 2003). Tarrow (1974: 8) mentioned the advent of *communes-providence* whilst, referring to a new mayoral election system in England, Hambleton and Sweeting (2004: 474) spoke of a "new political management of local government".

Examination of the socio-demographic and socio-political profile of local councillors is even more interesting in a Belgian context since the municipality (*commune*) is a place of authority and opposition

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forces that is extremely important in the Belgian institutional system. It is also a venue with distinct community-based identity for numerous citizens. From this perspective, the precondition suggested by Capo Giol (1992: 4) – “Studying councillors and mayors, the elected local leaders, means starting from a previous assumption: the importance of the local sphere in the understanding of the political system” – has been clearly met. Moreover, considering the system of political plurality in Belgium (Eraly, 2002), there is often a close link between functions carried out at national, regional and European levels and local mandates, especially at local executive levels.

The Brussels Region offered two key aspects for a study of local personnel. First of all, it is the only officially bilingual territorial and institutional region in Belgium. Consequently, political life in the municipalities is marked by the coexistence of French-speaking and Flemish councillors. Secondly, like many urban centres, it is subject to a significant level of mobility.

To begin with, there is spatial mobility. For a number of population groups, especially the self-employed and middle classes, living in the Brussels Region is normally a temporary situation before a move to the greener and more affluent French-speaking or Flemish periphery.

Then comes national or ethnical mobility. In the past, the Brussels Region witnessed the arrival of foreigners for mainly work-related reasons: Italians, Spanish, Portuguese and more recently North Africans, Congolese and Turks. Now, a large section of the Brussels population is a second or third generation migrant. That is why it was interesting to study to what extent this socio-demographic state of affairs was translated at the level of municipal councils and local executive responsibilities. As Garbaye (2000: 2) pointed out, this issue is crucial because it refers back to the integration processes undertaken by a State, especially within the political system: “Local representation, or its absence or weakness as is the case here, is an indicator of incorporation, or lack of incorporation, in the wider political system, and indeed often precedes representation at the national level. In turn, political incorporation is both an indicator and a factor of social incorporation in the host society. Hence, the problem of the relatively low North African representation in French cities is a key element to the understanding of the political processes that underpin immigrant

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incorporation in France". In Brussels Region, an initial evolution occurred during the October 1994 municipal elections (Lambert 1999: 87). On that occasion, fourteen municipal councillors of migrant origin were elected (Rea 1995). According to calculations by Pierre-Yves Lambert – based chiefly on names – the 2000 ballot was marked by the election of 86 representatives of North African and Turkish origin. However, not all accepted to sit and several had resigned at the time of our survey (Lambert, 2001).

In this contribution, we proceed in four phases. First we give a brief presentation of the politico-institutional context of the Brussels municipalities (*communes*). Secondly, we examine the socio-demographic profile of local Belgian elites, notably by testing the scenario of penetration into the municipal political arena by Belgians of foreign origin. Then we provide a breakdown of the socio-political positioning of local elected representatives. Finally, we analyse the positions of municipal councillors vis-à-vis reform proposals on local electoral law or local institutions.

To have a relevant approach to the last two items, we conducted a questionnaire survey with all local elected representatives in the Brussels Region, in order to assess both their profiles and their positions.

The survey was carried out via post or by e-mail. Representatives receiving the form in the post (70%) also received an attached "postage prepaid return envelop". We received two hundred sixty-eight replies, a 42.81% response rate. This seemed quite a lot to us, given that a certain number of people moved, resignations were submitted or those elected who held onto their elective office gave up their seat.

1. The political and institutional context of municipalities and local elected representatives in the Brussels Region

As we already pointed out, the Brussels Region is the only bilingual (French-Flemish) region in Belgium. There are nineteen municipalities (*communes*) with varying demographic weight. The largest municipalities, Brussels and Schaerbeek, have over one hundred thousand

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residents (135,875 and 107,488 respectively), whilst the smallest have fewer than twenty-five thousand: Koekelberg (16,551), Berchem-Sainte-Agathe (19,226), Ganshoren (20,065), Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode (22,284) and Watermael-Boitsfort (24,587) (*Moniteur belge* 2002: 23016).

The number of municipal councillors in the Region is six hundred twenty-six and is proportionate to the size of the municipality. The executive power of the *communes* belongs to the Municipal Executive (mayor and aldermen), under the leadership of the mayor. Traditionally the mayors and aldermen are also municipal councillors, even if that is not formally required. As far as we know, there is only one alderman in the Brussels Region who is not also a municipal councillor.

The municipal elections are held every six years by proportional ballot, with highest divisor for the distribution of seats. The lists put before the voters are semi-open. It is important to point out these features of the ballot system because the rules of municipal voting clearly offer a framework of opportunities for candidates, independently of the choice of their party as to their spot on the list. Indeed, considering the preferential vote prospect, candidates have the possibility of being elected on the fringe or next to party choices.

Belgian voters did actually have two official voting procedures. They could opt for the list in its order of presentation – block list vote. They could also cast a vote for one or several candidates on the same list – preferential ballot.

The division of seats inside the list was then made on the basis of an eligibility coefficient to be achieved, starting from the leader on the list to the last name. If, with his/her preferential votes, a candidate does not attain the eligibility coefficient, he/she “takes” votes from the “top of the list”, at least if there were any or if any remained. Indeed, increasingly fewer Belgians voted for the lists as such, preferring to vote for one or several individuals (Wauters, Weekers & Pilet, 2004). During the municipal elections, the eligibility coefficient is calculated differently than it is for the national or regional elections. For those elections, the coefficient is broken down as the ratio of the number of votes on the list to the number of seats to which it is entitled plus one

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$(V_a/(S_a+1))$. At local level on the other hand, it is the number of votes on the list multiplied by the number of seats to which it is entitled compared to the number of seats to which it is entitled plus one $V_a \times S_a/(S_a+1)$. In other words, all things being otherwise equal, the coefficient is proportionately higher in the local elections, which means that the common pot is emptied a lot faster, even if the latter is itself multiplied by the number of seats of the list. Consequently, the preferential vote plays a larger part in the election of local political personnel than it does in the election of regional or national personnel.

The incidence is destined to take on even greater magnitude in the October 2000 municipal elections, since lawmakers had halved the effect of list redistribution (see *infra*) (Cadranel & Delcor, 2001). In other words, the "block list voting" was reduced by half before the distribution of seats inside the list was carried out.

So many factors that were bound to increase even more the uncertainty with regard to the importance of the place on the list, *a fortiori* with greater magnitude in large municipalities. For our topic, it concerned a key element in the observation of local political personnel. In particular, these forms of institutional constraint were potentially favourable or readily available for at least two categories of candidates: (a) candidates implicitly or explicitly claiming affiliation with a community and/or (b) candidates with a line of approach regarding the strategic use of forms of institutional constraint. From this perspective, the issue of candidates of foreign origin was wide open, possibly being able to benefit from a community approach (North African and Turk in particular), which was sometimes mentioned as gauge of a potential *ethnic vote*.

The results of the October 2000 municipal elections confirm predictions concerning the relativity of positions on electoral lists for the election of municipal councillors. A number of them were elected thanks to "their" preferential votes, even though they were not necessarily eligible, considering their place on the list. This system also seemed to have corroborated a number of *community voting* processes, even if it is basically hard to prove. This is how a number of candidates of North African, Turkish (see *supra*) or even Italian or Congolese origin were elected.

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In the realm of purely strategic action, we should highlight the emblematic situation of the Liberal list in the Brussels *commune* of Uccle. Following the announcement by the outgoing mayor, André Deridder, that he was no longer running for the office of mayor, two figures announced their availability to replace him as Liberal mayor: Eric André, then Secretary of State at the Brussels Region, favoured by a majority of the local section and the entire party apparatus, and Stéphane de Lobkowitz, outgoing Alderman and one of the municipality's most popular personalities. Without really settling the question, the Liberal party placed them at the two top places on the list. Each conducted an intense campaign in order to win a maximum number of preferential votes, but de Lobkowitz went farther by offering voters a "block" list of candidates, inside the Liberal list, who were likely to support his mayoral candidacy. This campaign completely upset the deal. In the evening of 10 October 2000, the Liberal list scored a great victory but two additional aspects caught people's imagination straight away: (a) de Lobkowitz won more preferential votes than Eric André and (b) the candidacies backed by de Lobkowitz won a large number of preferential votes and were elected. So the Liberal group in the municipal council as a majority was favourable to the mayoral candidacy of de Lobkowitz, whilst the party was backing Eric André. That created a never-ending politico-legal saga that led to the mayor's office going to Claude Desmedt (FDF), the big loser of the elections (!). This also led to the exclusion of de Lobkowitz from Liberal ranks and to his attachment to the Christian Democratic party, the *Centre démocrate humaniste* (Humanist Democratic Centre).

1.1. Local political life under the thumb of national parties

In some countries, local political life escapes to a lesser or greater extent from the actors of national or regional political life. This is not really the case in Belgium and even less so in the Brussels Region. Indeed, the party influence on nominations is always higher in the city than in a semi-urban or rural zone (Soos & Kaalman, 2002: 72-73). One does certainly see lists of alliances, electoral coalitions or "general", "municipal" or "mayoral" interest lists... but when one closely examined exactly what was covered by the totality of lists that were presented to voters on 8 October 2000, one could see the obvious influence of national parties.

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In the French-speaking spectrum, there were mainly five parties at work: the *Mouvement réformateur* (MR, Liberals), the *Parti socialiste* (PS, Social-Democrats), Ecolo (Greens), the *Centre démocrate humaniste* (CDH, Christian Democrats) and the *Front national* (FN, extreme right wing). Scrutinised on the basis of party labels, the results in the nineteen *communes* were broken down as follows.

Table 1 Results of French-speaking parties in the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels Region

	MR	PS	Ecolo	CDH	FN
Anderlecht	30.02	17.79	13.85	4.29	3.31
Auderghem	62.54	7.94	14.79	5.49	
Berchem-Saint-Agathe	29.65	10.07	12.58	10.64	
Brussels	25.94	23.39	17.12	6.87	2.96
Etterbeek	44.71	12.55	16.49	14.50	
Evere	25.00	34.45	10.04	3.89	
Forest	36.08	21.26	19.12	4.48	
Ganshoren	33.23	7.82	10.07	11.00	
Ixelles	40.24	15.67	26.95	6.91	1.78
Jette	22.51	5.08	12.13	24.87	2.85
Koekelberg	41.11	16.19	14.03	3.18	3.80
Molenbeek	29.08	31.85	13.25	2.12	6.11
Saint-Gilles	17.35	46.63	20.29	6.84	2.87
Saint-Josse	26.63	29.08	16.10	15.17	
Schaerbeek	30.35	11.75	16.92	7.46	
Uccle	61.14	10.25	17.80	6.67	1.39
Watermael Boitsfort	36.27	10.64	21.99	10.16	
Woluwe Saint-Lambert	49.03	8.58	16.08	14.89	
Woluwe Saint-Pierre	57.08	6.24	14.50	17.45	
Brussels Region	36.62	16.94	16.46	8.60	1.63

Not unexpectedly, the *Mouvement réformateur* won by a comfortable margin and confirmed its position inside its strongholds – the municipalities in the south and east of Brussels – Uccle, Woluwé-Saint-Pierre, Woluwé-Saint-Lambert and Auderghem. Nonetheless, they did suffer

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two symbolic defeats: in Ixelles where its loss led to the appointment of non-Liberal mayor for the first time since Belgian independence, and in Brussels, where there too, they ended up in the opposition.

In the wake of its remarkable results in the 1999 regional and national elections, Ecolo obtained appreciable results well beyond those of 1994. As for the Socialist, the party had results that were unexpected for them, following the catastrophic regional and national elections in the Brussels Region a year earlier. The PS showed gains compared both with 1994 and with those elections. For its part, the Christian Democratic Party (CDH) confirmed its difficulty in maintaining a presence in the Region (Delwit 2002). However, it did hold on to a number of interesting posts in municipalities in the south (Woluwé-Saint-Pierre and Woluwé-Saint-Lambert) and north-west (Jette, Berchem-Saint-Agathe and Ganshoren). Finally, the Front national, after having been the surprise guest in the 1994 local elections, suffered huge losses and at local level was left with only feeble influence in the former working-class municipalities of Anderlecht and Molenbeek.

Table 2. Results of Flemish parties in the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels Region

	VLD	SP.A	CD&V	VI.Blok	Groen!	Volksonie
Anderlecht		7.91	7.42	7.87	2.31	
Auderghem				0		
Berchem-Saint-Agathe	3.71	1.12	10.64	8.56		
Brussels	1.73		2.29	5.33	3.26	3.89
Etterbeek					5.5	2.28
Evere	3.17	5.3	3.89	7.73	3.35	
Forest	1.71	2.66	0.5			
Ganshoren	7.82		18.34	6.68	5.04	
Ixelles	1.03			1.61	2.25	1.03
Jette	2.51	10.16	2.49	6.88		2.51
Koekelberg	3.18	6.36	3.18	5.70		2.66
Molenbeek		2.12	2.12	7.66		2.09
Saint-Gilles				2.22	2.54	

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Saint-Josse		2.91		4.90		
Schaerbeek				8.51	3.76	1.13
Uccle				1.83		
Watermael Boitsfort					3.67	
Woluwe Saint-Lambert			5.96		2.68	
Woluwe Saint-Pierre	2.63	0.62				
Brussels Region	1.09	1.95	2.53	4.27	1.98	1.06

What about the Flemish parties in the Region? In October 2000, six parties were in the race: the *Vlaamse en Liberalen Democraten*, the *Socialistische Partij anders*, the *Christen Democratisch & Vlaams*, *Agalev* which became *Groen!*, the *Vlaams Blok* which changed its name to *Vlaams Belang* and the *Volksunie* that imploded a year later (Delwit & van Haute, 2002).

Considering the low numbers of Flemish people in the different Brussels municipalities, the Flemish Democratic parties were often reduced to using electoral coalition strategies. There were generally two types: (a) on an ideological basis (with their French-speaking ideological alter ego) or (b) on a language basis. In this vein, the SP.A, CD&V and Groen! clearly had more ease in forming an alliance with their French-speaking partners, especially in the municipalities in the north and west of Brussels (Jette, Ganshoren, Anderlecht, Evere, ...). On the other hand, the set-up was more complicated for the VLD Liberals. On the one hand, the *Mouvement réformateur* was politically less powerful in the municipalities, which had proportionately the most Flemish. On the other hand, as the MR consisted of the Liberal reform party but also the French-speaking regionalist party, *Front démocratique des francophones* (FDF), drawing up the lists was not an easy step. This difference was expressed in seats. Whilst the SP.A, CD&V and Groen! had fifteen, sixteen and twelve local council seats respectively, the VLD only had seven. As for the Volksunie, being incapable of entering into a coalition with the French-speakers, it paid dearly for this political isolation, together with its loss of influence: it only succeeded in winning two local council seats. Finally, we point out the peculiar situation of the Vlaams Blok, the extreme right wing Flemish party. Despite its political isolation, it confirmed in this election its status of number one Flemish party of the Brussels-Capital Region and won no fewer

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than nineteen council mandates. It probably benefited from French votes, especially considering the low-level of visibility of the Front National in this election and the absence of FN lists in eleven of the nineteen municipalities.

This brief presentation of French-speaking and Flemish national parties within the municipal spectrum, showed the quasi-absence of local actors on the fringes of traditional parties. Indeed, at regional level, only 6.9% of votes went to a list without party label. These lists were able to pick up twenty-one seats. Four *communes* were most affected: Berchem-Saint-Agathe, Forest, Schaerbeek and Watermael-Boitsfort. Although these lists could not be classified regarding traditional parties, sometimes they consisted of prominent people who had broken away from a party or head of a party list.

Table 3. Results of lists without political label in the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels Region (In percentage points)

Anderlecht	5.23
Auderghem	9.24
Berchem-Saint-Agathe	13.03
Brussels	7.22
Etterbeek	3.97
Evere	3.19
Forest	14.18
Ganshoren	0.00
Ixelles	2.55
Jette	8.02
Koekelberg	0.61
Molenbeek	3.58
Saint-Gilles	1.28
Saint-Josse	5.22
Schaerbeek	20.12
Uccle	0.92
Watermael Boitsfort	17.27

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

Woluwe Saint-Lambert	2.78
Woluwe Saint-Pierre	1.48
Region	6.87

2. The socio-demographic profile of Brussels local elites

2.1. Age and gender structure

When studying the age structure of Brussels local councillors, three groups that stood out:

- The first was the one that grouped the core of professionally active people (age 35-54). It was in this group that one found the main number of Brussels local councillors since no fewer than 62.8% of them were in this age group.
- The second included people the majority of whom had ended their active professional lives (age 55 and up). This section added up to 22.3% of local councillors.
- The combined percentages of the two age groups brought to light the (very) low number of young local representatives. Indeed, only a bit less than 15% was under 35. This confirmed how difficulty it is to win an initial elective mandate.

Table 4. Gender and age of local councillors (In percentage points)

	Proportion of men in the age category	Proportion of women in the age category	Total	Proportion of women
18-24	2.82	0.98	2.02	20.00
25-29	4.93	7.84	6.07	53.33
30-34	5.63	8.82	6.88	52.94
35-39	11.97	17.65	14.17	51.43
40-44	18.31	21.57	19.43	45.83
45-49	15.49	14.71	15.38	40.54

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	Proportion of men in the age category	Proportion of women in the age category	Total	Proportion of women
50-54	12.68	15.69	13.77	47.06
55-59	11.27	3.92	8.10	20.00
60-64	6.34	4.90	5.67	35.71
65-69	7.75	2.94	6.88	21.43
70+	2.82	0.98	1.62	20.00
Total				41.80

What about things in terms of gender? Amongst the respondents to our survey, we counted 58.2% men and 41.8% women. Although the situation did not reach the equality promised by many leaders and political parties, we did see a trend toward more women nonetheless. This was confirmed in particular by the relatively higher proportion of women in the youngest age brackets. So amongst councillors in the 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 age groups, we counted more women than men.

On the other hand, as Steyvers and Reynaerts (2000:15) had noted for Belgium, the evolution towards more women was only a partial success for representatives carrying out executive responsibilities. Out of nineteen Brussels Region mayors, only three were women: Michèle Carthé, Corinne De Permentier, and Martine Payfa. And amongst the one hundred sixty-five aldermen, there were only fifty-four women (32.73%), which did indicate a significant development nonetheless.

2.2. The socio-professional status of local representatives

Among the two hundred sixty-six local councillor who accepted to answer the question relating to their social status, we noted that more than three-quarters of them were professionally active, which corresponded rather closely to the age profile we pointed out.

With those professionally active, we saw that the working class world was barely represented. This was due to at least two reasons. The first, well known to sociologists and political scientists, was that the working class world is under-represented in all political representation functions, including at local level (Magnier 2004: 174). The second

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had to do with socio-economic reality of the Brussels Region. Brussels has become service City-Region in which the service sector is predominant. More than half the service jobs performed in Brussels Region are held by workers with a university degree. Apart from a few exceptions (the Volkswagen plant for example), there is no longer any major industrial entity in the Region.

A contrario, we saw very a strong presence of the non-trading sector, particularly amongst civil servants, as well as with executives and professional people.

Table 5. Function among those professionally active (In percentage points)

Blue-collar worker	0.98
White-collar worker	17.07
Civil servant	29.27
Manager	18.05
Liberal Profession	15.61
Trade people	3.90
Other	15.12

Among a tiny fraction of those professionally inactive, we saw two grouping in particular. The main one included pensioners and those who took early retirement (60% of those inactive), followed by men and women who stayed at home (20%). On the other hand, considering the age of local councillors and the necessity to have a certain educational level to take on the job, we saw only a very small proportion of students (1.64%) and unemployed (6.56%), even though the unemployment rate in the Region is above the 20% mark.

Table 6. Status among those professionally non-active (in percentage points)

Unemployed	6.56
Househusband	21.31
Student	1.64
Pensioner	59.02

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Handicapped	4.92
No answer	6.56

What about the educational capital among Brussels municipal councillors? Measured by the yardstick of the last degree/diploma obtained, it turned out to be very high on average. Nearly 80% of local representatives had a degree or diploma of higher studies, university or non-university. And amongst those who did not pursue a higher education, the great majority had successfully completed secondary school. In short, a situation of low-level educational qualifications only appeared marginally amongst respondents. And it was evanescent in individuals with executive responsibilities. Indeed, nine out of ten mayors and alderman held degrees in higher education.

Table 7. Educational capital of local elites (in percentage points)

	Councillors	Mayors, Aldermen, and CPAS' Presidents
No answer	0.37	0.00
None	0.75	0.00
Primary	1.12	0.00
Lower secondary	2.24	1.64
Upper secondary	13.43	8.20
Technical	2.24	1.64
Professional	1.49	0.00
Superior	26.87	29.51
University	51.49	59.02

It was interesting to note the subtleties in the educational capital of town councillors according to the party label of those elected. So, all in all, we only found "weak qualifications" amongst Socialist representatives, 15% of whom did not complete their secondary school education, compared to less than 6% of Liberals, Christian Democrats and 8.5% of Greens.

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Likewise, we found that over 80% of CDH elected representatives held diplomas in higher education but mainly non-university. Paradoxically, the percentage of university graduates was proportionately lower with the latter.

Table 8. Educational capital of local elites according to the political label (in percentage points)

	PS	MR	CDH	Ecolo	Other	SP.A-Spirit	VLD-Vivant	CD&V-NV-A	(Agalev) Groen!	VI. Belang (VI. Blok)
No answer	2.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
None	0.00	0.96	0.00	2.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Primary	4.17	0.96	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Lower secondary	4.17	0.00	0.00	2.17	4.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Upper secondary	8.33	16.35	11.76	13.04	4.00	12.50	16.67	20.00	20.00	50.00
Technical	4.17	2.88	5.88	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Professional	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.35	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	20.00	25.00
Superior	29.17	23.08	47.06	34.78	28.00	0.00	33.33	0.00	20.00	0.00
University	47.92	55.77	35.29	43.48	64.00	62.50	50.00	80.00	40.00	25.00

Amongst the one hundred and forty councillors who went to university, we wanted to know which university they went to and what their field of study was. Inasmuch as the great majority of local representative were French-speakers, so were the universities that were mentioned. With the French-speaking local councillors who attended university, l'Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB, non-denominational) and the Université catholique de Louvain-La-Neuve (UCL, Catholic university) were chosen with identical percentages. Not surprisingly, the Universities of Liège (Ulg), Mons (UMH, FPMx, FUCAM), Namur (FUNDP) or the Saint-Louis University Faculties (FUSL) in Brussels were mentioned very seldom. Either for geographical reasons or because these institutions only offer part of the cycle of studies, since for a Masters one has to go to one of the three full universities in the French-speaking realm (ULB, UCL, Ulg).

Therefore the leading Université de Bruxelles is manifestly not the one most attended. That can be explained by three reasons. First of all, by

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

geography. The campus of the Catholic University at Leuven-la-Neuve is located only twenty kilometres away from the Brussels region and, for a good number of students and academic and scientific staff members, is comparable to a Brussels University. Aside from that, the medical school is located in the Brussels region. Secondly, tradition and ideology are involved in the choice of university. Historically, even if this aspect is diminishing, the choice of University is linked to position of the philosophical divide. In addition, more or less informal ties exist between the Catholic school education and the UCL and between community school education and non-denominational state-subsidised independent schools and the ULB. Even though these mechanisms are less significant than in the past, they haven't disappeared and family influence still plays a considerable role. Finally, this also entails subjects and subject-related traditions for which each of the two universities is more or less renowned.

Amongst the Flemish councillors, the first University mentioned is the Flemish alter ego of the *ULB*, the *Vrije Universiteit te Brussel (VUB)*, ahead of the *Katholieke Univeriteit Leuven* and the *Universiteit Gent*.

Table 9. University attended by those with university degrees (in percentage points)

ULB	39.29
UCL	38.57
Others	6.43
VUB	6.43
KUL	2.86
ULG	1.43
FUCAM	1.43
FUSL	1.43
RUG	1.43
UMH	0.71

There was constantly the striking influence of a law school education amongst political personnel ("amateur" or "professional"). Indeed, a fourth of university graduates studied law. The three other areas of

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

social sciences came in a good distance behind: political science, social sciences and economics. *A contrario*, we pointed out the poor showing of hard sciences (with exception, in part, of medicine). We only counted insignificant numbers of mathematicians, biologists, physicists, civil engineers or even chemists.

Table 10. Education taken by university graduates (in percentage points)

Law	23.91
Political Science	7.97
Social Sciences	7.25
Economics	5.80
Medicine	5.80
Journalism	3.62
Trade engineer	2.90
Civil Engineer	2.90
Roman Philology	2.90
Pharmacy	2.17
No answer	17.39
Others	17.39

2.3. The philosophic positioning

As we already pointed out, the question of philosophy was one of the main historical cleavages in Belgium (Delwit & De Waele 1999). Consequently, the relationship between belief and practice was a key issue. At the same time, the Brussels Region was the most secularised in Belgium and the least affected by the practices of the Catholic religion (Voyé & Dobbelaere 2000: 148-49). In this context, what was the prevailing situation among local councillors?

Curiously enough, we were able to isolate three groups. The first group, those who believe in God, included a bit less than 48% of respondents in our survey. The second, nearly as large in terms of size (41%) included the atheists. But we did also count 11% of local councillors who were not able to answer this question.

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

This observation was not new. This response was often due to people having a family socialisation steeped in Catholicism, mainly with regard to schooling, and who could not or did not want to accept any break with the faith. Interestingly, this response appeared relatively often amongst Green French-speaking representatives. Thus no less than 20% of Ecolo local councillors selected this response to the question about whether or not they were religious. This corroborated the substantial Christian Democratic stamp on a large section of this party.

Our data also went against the trend of the typical traditional image, which meant the women were more religious and more regular churchgoers than men. For the local councillors, we saw quite the reverse. If 51% of men stated their faith, only 42.6% of women did the same. The generation effect played a role in the result. Indeed, amongst the 18-34 year olds, the number of those who believed in God (41.67%) was lower than the number of non-believers (44.44%). In the 35-54 age bracket, the ratio is the other way around. There are 44.52% of believers to 41.54% of atheists. In the age group 55 and older, belief was clearly in the majority: 51.79% against 41.07% non-believers.

Table 11. Regarding belief (in percentage points)

	Men	Women	Total
No answer	0.00	0.93	0.37
Yes	51.27	42.59	47.57
No	37.97	44.44	40.82
I don't know	10.76	12.04	11.24

The study of the religions practised by believers showed (naturally enough) the very significant influence of the Catholic religion, which was well ahead of the other religions with slightly less than three-fourths of cases mentioned. But one could also point out the philosophical expression of the gradual diversification of local political personnel in the Brussels Region. Indeed, one in ten believers said they were Muslim. This undoubtedly concerned councillors of North African or Turkish origin.

Moreover, we should also note that 12% of believers said they were Christians, meaning by this choice neither Catholic nor Protestant. This choice often showed a step backing away from the Catholic Church

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

and papal decrees. On the occasion of an “exit poll” conducted in the Brussels Region, we also found that the electoral behaviour of *Catholics* and *Christians* differed considerably.

The levels of religious practice confirmed a form of indifference in Brussels Region. With Catholics (only statistically significant group), only 30% went to religious services at least once a month compared to more than half who only went occasionally and over 10% who said they never went. The religious observance figures were even lower amongst Christians and Muslims, but the data was less reliable statistically.

Table 12. Religion practised and level of religious practice amongst believers

	At least once per week	At least once per year	Sometimes	Never	No answer	Proportion amongst believers
Catholic	20.43	9.68	56.99	11.83	0.00	72.66
Protestant	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.78
Christian	6.25	6.25	62.50	18.75	6.25	12.50
Muslim	7.14	7.14	42.86	35.71	7.14	10.94
Jewish	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.78
Buddhist	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.78
Other	0.00	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	1.56

2.4 A gradual diversification of national origins

To conclude this examination of the socio-demographic profile, we tested the nationality of the parents, knowing that this indicator was relative, considering the potential acquisition of Belgian nationality by a certain number of foreigners. Nonetheless, the result confirmed our previous observations. Even though as expected, the great majority of local representatives had a Belgian father and/or mother, eight to nine percent stated that at least one of their parents had a foreign nationality. The first of those mentioned was Moroccan. We should note here the gradual diversification of origins amongst local Brussels representatives

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

still only partly affected executives positions inasmuch as there was a two to five point gap between local councillors and representatives with executive responsibilities with regard to the nationality of parents.

Table 13. Nationality of the father and mother of local representatives and representatives with executive positions (in percentage points)

	Father's Nationality		Mother's nationality	
	Local Councillors	Mayors, aldermen and CPAS' Presidents	Local Councillors	Mayors, aldermen and CPAS' Presidents
Belgian	91.32	96.67	90.11	93.33
Moroccan	5.28	1.67	5.32	1.67
Czechoslovak	0.38		0.76	1.67
Dutch	0.38		0.38	
Libyan	0.38	1.67	0.38	
Congolese	0.75		0.76	1.67
Turk	0.38		0.38	1.67
French	0.38		0.76	
Italian	0.38		0.38	
Algerian	0.38		0.38	

3. Local representatives and political position

In Belgium, there has virtually never been a federal, regional local government that was homogeneous in terms of ideology. Consequently, the cleavages were expressed within the scope of coalition executives and consociational regime (Deschouwer, 1999). At local level, absolute majorities were more common, particularly in Flanders, notably with regard to Christian Democrats and in Wallonia, especially to the benefit of Socialists. The occurrence is rarer in Brussels.

Do the consensual configuration of Belgium and the local political life tend to soften or tone down political conflict situations? Nothing is less

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

certain. Subjected to a political scale going from the position farthest to the left (0) to the position farthest to the right (9), the local councillors had to classify themselves.

The self-positioning of local representatives came to 4.00, a score that could be compared to a centrist or quagmire position for a large number of them. Actually what should be reflected in a Gauss graph was not really what came to light. For example, grade 4 was only the seventh most mentioned. The average therefore hid positions that were clearly paradoxical to a certain extent.

In this way, we counted 31.20% of local councillors who placed themselves on numbers farthest to the left (0, 1 and 2) and 30% on numbers farthest to the right (6, 7, 8 and 9).

Self-positioning of Brussels local councillors (in percentage points)

Considered under the aspect of party labels, the table corresponds, to a large extent, to political science expectations of presupposed political positions. The Socialist councillors (French-speaking and Flemish) were the farthest to the left in a group of representatives with respective averages of 1.67 and 2.00. They were *followed* by representatives from the two Green parties. The Ecolo councillors had an average figure of 2.28, with 2.40 for those from Groen! As for the Christian Democrats, they were in a centrist position amongst themselves with 4.29 on average for the CDH and 4.75 for the CD&V. Among democratic parties, the local Liberal representatives took up the position most to the right. The average MR score was 5.61 as compared to 6.00 for the VLD. We should mention that the few Vlaams Belang representatives who agreed to answer clearly took on their extreme right wing profile. Their average score was 8.33.

Table 14. Political self-positioning and party label (average score)

French-speaking Parties	
PS	1.67
Ecolo	2.28
CDH	4.29
Others	4.64

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

MR	5.61
Flemish Parties	
SP.A-Spirit	2.00
Groen! (Agalev)	2.40
CD&V-NV-A	4.75
VLD-Vivant	6.00
Vl. Belang (VI Blok)	8.33

This brief deciphering of the political profile of local elected representatives in the Brussels Region showed a situation of democratic political conflict, perhaps greater than one could have imagined. Perhaps it was due to the strong polarisation between Socialists and Liberals that we had been observing for several years. Obviously, this was also the expression of clearly left wing political positions taken by Socialists and likewise those equally clearly confirmed on the right amongst Liberals.

4. The local elites and the running of municipal institutions

In Belgian political life, debates and new ideas about the running of institutions and on the provisions of electoral law occasionally crop up. In the second half of the nineties, several political parties fuelled a political discussion on the interest, if not to say the importance of amending sizeable sections of electoral legislation. In the case of Liberal parties and a number of Socialist personalities (Delwit 2000), the most radical proposal consisted in advocating passing from a proportional voting system to a majority voting system.

The Rainbow Government (Liberals-Socialists-Greens) formed in 1999 did not follow such a radical proposal. However it did substantially amend the electoral laws. The effect of the list redistribution was reduced by half, the parity of list and of the two first spots was set up, the lists of stand-ins were eliminated then... reintroduced, the constituencies at Federal and Flemish Regional level were made provincial and finally, a 5% threshold was introduced for regional and national elections.

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

In this evolution, the municipal (*commune*) level was only partially affected. Nevertheless, as we said, the reduction by half of the effect of “block list voting” in this regard, did affect it and had an impact on the election of municipal personnel. Likewise, the possible advent of parity of lists and individuals in the top two candidacies could also have effects on the essence of local political councillors.

Amendments concerning municipal electoral law and changes in the running of local institutions did in fact arrive following the adoption of another principle by Belgian parliament: the complete regionalisation of municipal and provincial laws, adopted in 2001. Since then, the mayor is no longer appointed by the King but is chosen by the municipal councillors alone. In other words, from then on, electoral law and institutions could differ from region to region. Following adoption of this special law and following the municipal elections of October 2000, several proposals were drafted, mainly in the Walloon and Flemish spectrums: direct election of mayor, selection of mayor based on the number of preferential votes, establishment of a majority voting system, end of the mayor being the president of the municipal council, parity of lists, elimination of the “common pot”

In Brussels Region, these issues formed a more complex perspective given the bilingual character of the Region and the fear of Flemish local councillors of seeing a majoritarian process set up that would not be to their advantage.

Since 2001 however, the discussion has been underway and it was interesting to sample the opinion of local councillors on these different aspects. In this contribution, we considered three issues. The first had to do with the most radical proposal, the potential direct election of the mayor. The second, often mentioned by opposition representatives, was the end of the presidency of the municipal council by the mayor. The third aspect refers to possible majoritarian aspirations: to what extent do local councillors view, favourably or unfavourably, the coalitions between parties in the performance of their responsibilities.

4.1. Direct election of mayors

The possibility of direct election of mayors was rejected by a majority of local councillors. Indeed, 53% opposed it compared to 39% in favour and slightly less than 8% who had no opinion. We should point

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

out that there was a sort of polarisation on the question inasmuch as the two most often given responses were complete disagreement (35.96%) and complete agreement (27.34%). So essentially, the debate resulted in a confrontation between those firmly convinced of the positive points of this measure and those opposed to it and who saw serious flaws.

Positions ran across party boundaries but a number of points can be highlighted:

- (a) The “agree to the principle” scores were higher among local councillors from parties who counted the largest number of mayors: the *Mouvement Réformateur* and Socialists.
- (b) Beyond this stance linked to the current balance of political power, we could also pinpoint an ideological position. The principle of the direct election of mayors was more extensively accepted (and supported) in Liberal circles (Michel, 2004: 34). Nearly 57% of this party’s representatives advocated it. It was the only party in which a majority of local councillors stated they agreed to it. On the other hand, even though a fifth of Socialist councillors were in complete agreement with the measure, 58% were against it and a third of those were completely against it.
- (c) In the Christian Democratic and Green ranks, there was widespread opposition (87% and 74% respectively). This was due to their position in the party system at local level. The probability of having a directly elected mayor from the Christian Democrats and Greens was lower than through a hypothetical interplay of alliances. Amongst the Greens however, there was a bit of tension (which meant that an tenth of representatives were completely in favour of this development); even though a number of them showed that they considered the perverse effects of the measure, some also saw it as a means of enabling citizens’ “voices to be heard again” to the detriment of *interplay* between parties.
- (d) Considering the low numbers, it was not possible to get a proper analysis of the differences between Flemish parties. The trends shown by our results were in line with political science expectations: Vlaams Belang and VLD were indeed two parties who most forcefully promoted the principle of direct election of mayors with the same idea: “let the citizens be heard again”.

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

Table 15. Direct election of the mayor (In percentage points)

	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Fully disagree	I don't know	No answer
PS	20.83	10.42	25.00	33.33	8.33	2.08
MR	38.46	18.27	9.62	25.96	4.81	2.88
CDH	11.76	0.00	35.29	52.94	0.00	0.00
Ecolo	10.87	10.87	23.91	50.00	4.35	0.00
Other	28.00	16.00	12.00	32.00	8.00	4.00
SP.A-Spirit	0.00	0.00	12.50	75.00	12.50	0.00
VLD-Vivant	80.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
CD&V-NV-A	20.00	0.00	0.00	80.00	0.00	0.00
Groen!	20.00	0.00	20.00	60.00	0.00	0.00
VI Belang	75.00	0.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	27.34	12.36	17.23	35.96	5.24	1.87

Question: "The direct election of the mayor would be a good idea"

4.2. The end of mayors holding the office of president of the municipal council?

This issue of the mayor holding the office of president of the municipal council gave rise to fewer discussions, less political and media attention and less tension and polarisation. Nonetheless, it was on the agenda of discussions on the future of municipal institutions.

In the Brussels region, this proposal was very much in the minority among municipal councillors. Indeed, 61% rejected the proposal as compared with only 34% who backed it. Opposition to this was even clear for 40% of councillors expressing total disagreement. Even if opinions ran across parties, there were nevertheless clear-cut differences, depending on party colour and positioning on the municipal spectrum.

- (a) Thus there was especially clear hostility among councillors in the two parties that had the highest participation in councils and the most mayors in office. 75% of Liberal representatives and 69% of Socialist councillors stated they disagreed with this change whilst

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

63% of Christian Democratic councillors were in favour. Despite this, if one plots the results according to membership in a party in power or in the opposition, the figures show different readings. Among representatives in the municipal majority, only 29.19% backed this change in municipal council operations while 65.84% rejected it. With opposition councillors, the ratio was more balanced: 42.31% said they agreed to it, compared to 52.88% who rejected this measure.

(b) Nonetheless, the relation with exercising responsibility or standing in opposition did not explain it all. Consequently, we saw that nearly 60% of Ecolo's local municipal councillors voted for the measure by an overwhelming majority even though the party was directly involved in eleven of the nineteen executives in the Brussels Region. In the case of Green representatives and, to a certain extent, Christian Democrats, there was a desire to, both get better task sharing and further secure the opposition's right of expression and prevent as far as possible the holding of multiple mandates.

Table 16. Holding the office of president of the Municipal Council (in percentage points)

	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Fully disagree	I don't know	No answer
PS	10.42	14.58	18.75	50.00	6.25	0.00
MR	14.42	7.69	25.00	49.04	2.88	0.96
CDH	23.53	35.29	0.00	35.29	5.88	0.00
Ecolo	34.78	23.91	15.22	19.57	4.35	2.17
Other	12.00	8.00	20.00	60.00	0.00	0.00
SP.A-Spirit	12.50	25.00	25.00	25.00	12.50	0.00
VLD-Vivant	40.00	20.00	20.00	0.00	20.00	0.00
CD&V-NV-A	20.00	20.00	20.00	40.00	0.00	0.00
Groen!	20.00	40.00	40.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
VI Belang	50.00	25.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	18.73	15.36	20.22	40.82	4.12	0.75

Question: "Should the mayor continue to be president of the Municipal Council"

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

4.3. Show clear majorities?

How do coalition groupings perform in discharge of duties? The latter was indeed present very often since with the exception of the *communes* of Woluwé-Saint-Pierre and Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, all executives were alliances of several political parties. Was this a *boon* for democracy or should it be considered as complying with a majority governance philosophy (Seiler, 2000) in the eyes of local councils? Considering the polarisation noted between Socialists and Liberals, we could assume the majority rule option prevailed.

Moreover, as we explained, this issue takes on a different dimension in the Brussels Region owing to the existence of a Flemish minority that could see its representation undermined by a majoritarian process.

Generally speaking, and the latter dimension is certainly not irrelevant, majority rule determination appeared to be limited. The local representatives had a rather positive view of cooperation between several parties and the councils of mayors and aldermen. Three-quarters of local councillors considered this socio-political reality as appealing. Only 22% had an opinion to the contrary.

At the same time, we observed that opinions on the subject were not very clear-cut. The most straightforward opinions only totalled 24% of assessments returned.

Analysed on the basis of party label, the Liberals differed the most: they were least in favour of the coalition process (63.5%) and most against it (35%). *A contrario*, the representatives of the smallest (democratic) French-speaking party appeared as the most solid backers of the party coalition principle and the least in favour of a majority stance. The size of the party undoubtedly explains this (rational) choice. We should add that in the final stages of the October 2000 elections, the *Centre Démocrate Humaniste* (Humanist Democratic Centre) had played a pivotal role in the forming of majorities due to the unexpected and intense polarisation between Socialists and Liberals on the eve of the election. Reminding how careful one has to be in interpreting data, as expected, Flemish councillors expressed clear support for the principle of party coalitions.

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

Table 17. Party coalitions (in percentage points)

	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Fully disagree	I don't know	No answer
PS	14.58	72.92	12.50	0.00	0.00	0.00
MR	15.38	47.12	22.12	12.50	1.92	0.96
CDH	17.65	76.47	5.88	0.00	0.00	0.00
Ecolo	19.57	54.35	10.87	4.35	10.87	0.00
Other	28.00	52.00	12.00	4.00	0.00	0.00
SP.A-Spirit	37.50	50.00	12.50	0.00	0.00	0.00
VLD-Vivant	20.00	40.00	20.00	0.00	20.00	0.00
CD&V-NV-A	60.00	40.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Groen!	20.00	60.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	0.00
VI Belang	0.00	50.00	50.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	18.73	55.43	15.73	6.37	3.00	0.37

Question: "The coalitions between parties to manage the municipality add added value to the democratic life of the municipality"

5. Conclusion

The Brussels local elites clearly originated in national political parties and their influences in their designation was extensive. Nonetheless, we saw that the details of local electoral law and subsequent amendments to it clearly offered a pattern of opportunities for community ballots that could shake the processes of recruitment through reproduction and family tradition (Tilleux 2003: 21).

In terms of socio-demographic features, the local political personnel elected in the October 2000 elections consisted of people that mainly belonged to two major groups: the nucleus of active professionals (ages 35-54) and the world of pensioners (55 +). On the other hand, there was a limited number of young representatives, which definitely showed the importance of building social capital for acceding to positions as elected representatives, including at local level.

A steadily increasing percentage of town councillors are women. To be sure, men are still over-represented in terms of overall numbers – and even more so amongst mayors and aldermen, but as we saw, this was due

In Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers, Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet (eds), *Revolution or renovation. Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2005.

in part to a generation effect. In addition, the highly likely establishment of equality for election lists at municipal level should back this trend or even accentuate it.

Not surprisingly, the educational capital of representatives was high. A large number of local councillors completed higher studies and this was even more manifest amongst representatives carrying out executive responsibilities.

Faced with electoral law amendment proposals that could arise following the complete regionalisation of municipal law, we were able to pinpoint overall reluctance to a number of planned measures: direct election of mayors, the presidency of the local council being held by someone other than the mayor, willingness to enter into a majority process... None of these proposals received majority backing, even though the principle of direct election of mayors was advocated by a number of Liberal town councillors. One must interpret this as the relatively broad legitimacy of the running of municipal institutions in the Brussels Region and the political expression of local elections, despite, as we said earlier, the intense and unexpected polarisation between Socialists and Liberals on the eve of the October 2000 local elections.

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