

ARTICLES

Introduction: Parties at the Grassroots

Local Party Branches in the Low Countries

*Bram Wauters, Simon Otjes & Emilie van Haute**

Local party branches are the basic organisational unit of political parties. They serve specific functions for parties (Clark, 2004; Geser, 1999; Paulis, 2017; Roscoe & Jenkins, 2015). They are recruiting and training agencies of party members, activists and political personnel. More broadly, they function as a learning environment for citizens to get familiar with political issues. They facilitate membership recruitment and integration (Carty & Eagles, 2005; Pruyssers, 2018). They are the door to the national party (Selle & Svasand, 1983). Most often, they designate representatives of the local branch to the higher party levels and are involved in selecting candidates for local elections. They provide a level to experiment with party renewal, as it is easier for a party to test new strategies at the local level, where changes are less visible and where their impact is less far-reaching. Furthermore, local branches provide participatory incentives for party members and interested citizens, be it in the form of social activities (such as dinners) or political activities (such as debates) (André & Depauw, 2016). These activities favour internal socialisation to the party, and, indirectly, party cohesion. Local branches also provide human resources to the party in the form of volunteer work during electoral campaigns (Van Aelst, van Holsteyn & Koole, 2012; Webb, Poletti & Bale, 2017). Finally, local branches are information and communication channels between the higher party levels and the grassroots.

Because they exercise these functions, local branches are an important resource for political parties. More instrumentally, research has shown that having active local branches has a positive impact on the electoral performance of a party (Aldrich, Gibson, Cantijoch & Konitzer, 2016; André & Depauw, 2013,

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2016; Carty & Eagles, 1999; Eagles, 2004; Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen, 2013; Farrell & Webb, 2000; Fisher & Denver, 2008; Frensdreis, Gibson & Vertz, 1990; Geser, 1999; Johnston, Pattie, Cutts, Fieldhouse & Fisher, 2011; Pattie, Whiteley, Johnston & Seyd, 1994; Ramiro, Morales & Jiménez-Buedo, 2012; Townsley, 2018; Webb et al., 2017). In addition, studies have also emphasised that a strong local anchorage increases the chances of survival of new parties (Beyens, Lucardie & Deschouwer, 2016; Bolleyer, 2013).

Both electoral success and party survival form strong incentives for parties to invest in their local branches. Yet the literature also emphasises that parties increasingly professionalise. They rely more and more on experts, consultants and public funding and increasingly less on their grassroots (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Poguntke et al., 2016). The age of the mass party and of mass membership seems to be over (Allern, Heidar & Karlsen, 2016). Mainstream parties such as Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties have been losing members in the past decades (Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014; Wauters, 2017; Whiteley, 2011) even if other party families have managed to stabilise or even to increase their membership base (Delwit, 2011; Kölln, 2016; van Haute, Paulis & Sieren, 2018). The increased professionalisation would make local party branches less crucial for parties.

As citizens no longer consider parties as trustworthy intermediaries to channel their interests to government, it is assumed that they seek other forms of participation (Wauters, Verschuere & Valcke, 2020). Referendums, citizen initiatives or more deliberate forms of participation are increasingly organised, without having formal affiliations with political parties (Bakker, Denters, Oude Vrielink & Klok, 2012; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Farrell et al., 2019).

At the same time, parties allow people to affiliate in other ways than as members, including as supporters or social media followers (Gomez & Ramiro, 2019; Scarrow, 2015). These alternative modes of affiliation provide new sources of volunteer work (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014), although they are not fully functional equivalent to party membership (Hooghe & Kölln, 2018; Webb et al., 2017).

These trends make local branches increasingly autonomous from the central party, acting as franchises of the national party during local elections (Carty, 2004). This would also favour the concentration of power in the hands of the local party representatives (Boogers & Voerman, 2010; Copus & Erlingsson, 2012). This raises the question of the relevance of grassroots, local party branches in this case.

This Special Issue puts the spotlight on local party branches. The central question is what the role and function of local party branches is in an era in which they are increasingly challenged by alternative modes of party affiliation (Scarrow, 2015) and by modes of direct citizen participation (Wauters et al., 2020). Without doubt, local party branches continue to play an important role in local elections, for instance by setting up local election campaigns and selecting candidates (Hennau & Ackaert, 2019). But are local party branches more than empty vessels that only present candidates at elections? To what extent are they able to fulfil their recruitment function? And what about other functions, such as politi-

cal integration and representation? Are they playing the role of linkage between the local and the national level? And how do local party branches relate to the new challenges of direct citizen representation? Do they oppose them or do they embrace them?

This Special Issue offers an attempt to address these questions. In order to do so, we rely on surveys among local party branches in Belgium and the Netherlands. Belgium has a long tradition of surveying local party chairs on a broad range of matters, while in the Netherlands, only recently has an attempt been made with a more specific focus. We first discuss the design and some basic results of these surveys, before providing an overview of the approaches and results of the articles in this issue.

1 The Local Chairs Survey in Belgium

Belgium has a long tradition of surveying local party chairs about the functioning of their party branch. This survey is always conducted in the run-up to the local elections, which are held every 6 years. An inter-university team of researchers surveyed local party chairs in 1994, 2000, 2006, 2012 and 2018 (Ackaert, 1994; Buelens, Rihoux & Deschouwer, 2008; Deschouwer & Buelens, 1996; Deschouwer, Verthé & Rihoux, 2013). The advantage of these surveys is that they have been conducted recently (in 2018 for the last time) but also several times before. This allows both for up-to-date as well as cross-temporal analyses. Ever since 1994, a core of questions has probed into different aspects of the functioning of local party branches, including negotiations about and experiences with governing coalitions (both previous and prospective), activity rate of the local branch, member participation inside the local party and preparations and expectations for the upcoming local elections. Local party chairs formally lead the local (extra-parliamentary) party. They are what Katz and Mair (1993) call “the party in central office”. Owing to the *partitocratic* nature of public decision-making even at the local level and the fact that they act as a link between the different faces of the local party, they wield considerable influence (even when not holding an elected mandate, which is not necessarily the case) (Deschouwer, Rihoux & Verthé, 2013).

The Local Chairs Survey of 2018 was coordinated by Kris Deschouwer and Emilie van Haute. The survey focused on chairs of local party branches of all national parties holding at least one seat in the national parliament. Independent local parties were excluded from the data collection, as well as small parties with no seat in the national parliament (such as DierAnimal). A Dutch and a French version of the survey was developed and harmonised by native speakers from the inter-university consortium. In Spring 2018, the explicit support and cooperation of the national headquarters of the various political parties was sought. In particular, the goal was to gather contact details of the local chairs as well as information about which local groups are recognised as official subunits of the party. All national parties agreed to cooperate. About half of them¹ provided the team with the requested contact details, while the other half preferred to organise the

distribution of the survey (including the follow-up) themselves for privacy reasons. In order to avoid outright refusals, the consortium of researchers accepted this option, although it lowered response rates (see Table 1). In early July 2018, local chairs (in)directly received an invitation to fill in the survey and were then directed to an online² version of the questionnaire. The data collection was open until just before the local elections took place (14 October). Reminders were sent out in late summer to increase response rates.

Local branches are generally structured around municipalities, although some municipalities that merged (especially larger cities) might still have multiple local branches. In Belgium, in 2018, there were 589 municipalities: 19 in Brussels (where all parties compete), 308 in Flanders (to be reduced to 300 on 1 January 2019) and 262 in Wallonia.

A party covering all Dutch-speaking municipalities would therefore have 327 local branches and 281 in French-speaking Belgium. Ultimately, of the 1,525 surveys sent out to the local chairs of Dutch-speaking parties, 487 were completed. This implies a response rate of a bit more than 31%, significantly lower than in 2012, when it was still 55%. The Liberal Party (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*, Open Vld) had the lowest response rate (10%), whereas the other parties reached a response rate of 30% or higher.

The response rate was considerably lower among the French-speaking parties. Of the 888 surveys sent, only 160 were completed, which corresponds to a response rate of only 18%. Apart from the Regionalist Party (*Démocrate, fédéraliste indépendant*, DéFI), which is present mainly in and around Brussels, the Christian Democratic Party (*Centre démocrate humaniste*, CDH) obtained the highest response rate. But with 26%, it is still well below the 30% of most Flemish parties. Moreover, responses from the French-speaking Green Party (*Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales*, Ecolo) and the Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*, PS) are almost completely absent. As these left-wing parties are prominent in French-speaking Belgium, their absence is problematic. Therefore, the articles using the Local Chairs Survey data in this issue focus only on Flanders.

We also present here some cross-temporal analyses based on Local Chairs Survey data from 2000 to 2018 to provide evidence of the dynamics at play in local party branches in Belgium.

First, a recurrent question in all versions of the survey throughout the years is whether the local party branch has suffered from a decline in party members in the last six years, i.e. since the previous local elections. Table 2 shows that the two established mainstream parties declare losing party members to a large extent: CD&V and sp.a always have more than half of their local party branch chairs, which indicates that they have lost members, except for 2006, when 'only' 40% of their local branch chairs lost members. This illustrates the continuing decline in the number of party members for these parties, corroborating international comparisons mentioned earlier. Based on the figures for 2018, this decline has not stopped yet. Open Vld, the other established party, sees an increasing number of local branches reporting membership loss: from 20% in 2000 to 50% in 2018.

Table 1 *Local Chairs Survey – response rates of Belgian political parties, 2018*

Party name	Original language	English	Abbr.	Questionnaires sent*	Responses	Response rate (%)	Response rate 2012
<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i>	Christian Democratic and Flemish	CD&V	315	120	38.1	52.8	
<i>Green</i>	Groen	Groen	208	78	37.5	58.9	
<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i>	New Flemish Alliance	N-VA	294	91	30.9	69.6	
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i>	Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	OpenVld	309	32	10.3	45.6	
<i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i>	Socialist Party Alternative	Sp.a	273	104	38.1	54.4	
<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	Flemish Interest	VB	126	43	34.1	41.8	
	Other**			5			
Total Flanders			1,525	473	31.0	55.3	
<i>Démocrate, fédéraliste indépendant</i>	Democrat, federalist, independent	DéFI	19	10	52.6	51.7	
<i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i>	Humanist Democratic Center	cdh	240	63	26.2	42.0	
<i>Mouvement réformateur</i>	Reform Movement	MR	282	30	10.6	35.6	
<i>Parti socialiste</i>	Socialist Party	PS	Na				
<i>Écologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales</i>		Ecolo	286	12	4.2	50.4	
<i>Parti du Travail de Belgique</i>	Workers' Party of Belgium	PTB	61	9	14.7	-	
Total French-speaking Belgium			888	160	18.0	42.8	

Note: *The number of questionnaires sent is a proxy for the number of local branches of the party. However, some parties declare having more local branches than questionnaires sent. In Flanders, the difference lies mainly with local branches in municipalities in Brussels; **respondents to the survey had to indicate their party of affiliation, which included an 'other' category.

Source: Local Chairs Survey (2018).

Nevertheless, their percentage of local party branches that suffer from declining membership figures is far lower than for CD&V and sp.a, and this continues to be the case even in 2018 (when 50% of Open Vld local branches declare having lost members versus 66% of sp.a and 77% of CD&V local branches).

For the Ecologist Party, Groen, and the Regionalist Party, N-VA, things are different. The percentages of local party branches reporting membership decline are far lower than those of the more established parties. Only in periods of severe crisis do these percentages peak: for Groen in 2006 with 41%, for N-VA (actually its

Table 2 *Local party branches that report membership decrease compared with six years before (in %)*

	Sp.a	OpenVLD	CD&V	Groen	N-VA	VB	PVDA
2000	76	20	55	14	78*		
2006	40	32	40	41	32		
2012	55	47	77	28	11	54	
2018	66	50	77	2	10	41	0

Notes: The N-VA was set up in 2001. The figure for 2000 corresponds to the local branches of the People's Union (*Volkswie*, VU), predecessor party of the N-VA (Beyens et al., 2017).

Source: Belgian Local Chairs Surveys (2000-2018).

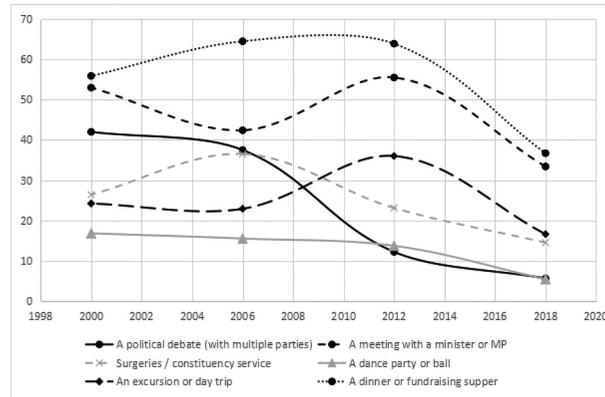
predecessor VU) in 2000 with 78% of local party branches. In the most recent survey of 2018, only a handful of local branches of these two parties witness a decline in members: respectively, 2% of local Groen branches and 10% of local N-VA branches. Rather surprisingly, a large part of local party branches of the radical right party VB, which was only included in the survey in 2012, report a membership decline, even in 2018, when the party was rather successful in the following local elections.

All in all, party membership decline occurs in all kinds of local party branches, but much more often in those of the established parties CD&V and sp.a.

A second aspect that we would like to highlight is the activity rate of local party branches. These activities give an indication of the vitality of the 'party on the ground'.

Although the kind of activities that were included in the questionnaire and the kind of questions asked differ from one survey to another, we still managed to select six activities that were included in all Local Chairs Surveys since 2000 and for which the wording allowed a uniform analysis. These activities are: (1) organising a political debate (with multiple parties), (2) organising a meeting with a minister or MP from the own party, (3) holding surgeries to discuss (often individual) problems with citizens or constituency service, (4) organising a dance party (or a ball), (5) organising an excursion and organising a dinner. We analyse the percentage of local party branches that organised such activities³ at least once a year.⁴

Figure 1 gives an overall picture of decline over time, especially between 2012 and 2018. This decline is most striking for organising a political debate at the local level with multiple parties. Whereas in 2000 more than 40% of the local party branches declared they organised such events, just over 5% of the local branches still do so in 2018. Also dance parties, service hours for discussing individual problems and excursions have become less common over time with now less than 20% of local party branches organising these activities. Dinners and meetings with MPs or ministers of the party are still more frequent, and the decline is less pronounced and has taken place only recently. According to the 2018 survey, slightly less than 40% of local party branches organise these kinds of activities at least once a year.



Source: Belgian Local Chairs Surveys 2000, 2006, 2012 & 2018.

Figure 1 *Evolution of party activities in Belgian local party sections (2000-2018): percentages of local party sections that organised this activity at least once a year*

As for differences between parties (not in the figure), two observations are striking. First, the ecologist Groen party branches are, in general, less active than those of the other major parties, reflecting earlier findings (Deschouwer & Rihoux, 2008). Second, decline over time has hit all parties in a similar way, except maybe for the regionalist N-VA, which skyrocketed in several elections after 2010. But unlike the rise in electoral shares, no increase in activity rate over time can be noted for this party. Rather, some activities like dance parties and meetings with MPs and ministers show stability over time. This is still better than a decrease, which distinguishes this party from others, but no reverse trend could be noted.

In sum, the analyses of the membership figures show a decline mainly for mainstream parties, whereas the decline in activity rates of local branches is more transversal, especially during the 2010s.

2 Surveying Local Party Sections in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the surveying of local party branches is less institutionalised than in Belgium. Since 2006, Gerrit Voerman and Marcel Boogers (Boogers & Voerman, 2018; Voerman & Boogers, 2008, 2011, 2014) have conducted a regular survey of all branches of national parties and independent local parties running in municipal elections in the Netherlands.⁵ As municipal elections take place every four years, there have been four surveys between 2006 and 2018. Compared with the Belgian survey, this study not only started more recently, but is also less ambitious in its substantive scope: the survey is focused on candidate recruitment and problems that parties run into. Compared with Belgium, the Netherlands has a stronger tradition of independent local parties that do not have any ties with

national parties. These are surveyed in addition to the branches of nationally active parties. All the surveys were financed by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom relations with a view to monitoring this aspect of the quality of local democracy.

The smaller scope is related to the ambition of the survey, but also to a structural difference between Belgian and Dutch politics: party boards and party chairs (the so-called 'party in central office') have less power in the Netherlands than in Belgium. This is true both at the national and at the local level. The role of local party boards is primarily organisational and not political. Boards of the local branches oversee the electoral cycle (recruiting candidates, writing election manifestos and campaigning), which is often, particularly in larger branches, delegated to specific committees. The political primacy in Dutch municipal politics, for instance when it comes to coalition negotiation, is with the municipal council group and its chair. In some national parties, formal rules will not allow a local office holder to serve in the local party branch boards.⁶

In the 2018 survey, which will be used in this Special Issue, the secretaries of the boards of independent local parties and party branches were contacted. The contact strategies differed between these two groups. The party branches were contacted through the national party headquarters.⁷ The independent local branches were contacted separately. National parties without national parliamentary representation, such as *Jezus Leeft*, were not included in the data collection. Not all national parties wanted to cooperate with the project: in 2018, the Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*, PvdD), the Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV), the Socialist Party (*Socialistische Party*, SP), *Denk* and Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*, FvD) did not cooperate. In numerical terms, the loss through this refusal is relatively low, as together they fielded only 6% of the lists that ran in the 2018 municipal elections.⁸ The national headquarters that did participate in the survey sent a link to a digital survey to the secretaries of the local party branches. This survey ran between 19 December 2017 and 10 May 2018. The elections were on 22 March 2018. A complicating fact in calculating the response rate is that because the surveys were sent out via the party headquarters, we do not know the exact number of branches that were emailed. The response rate for both national parties that participated and independent local parties is estimated at 28%. For national party branches, this is estimated at 30%.⁹ Table 3 gives an overview per party. This is on par with the Flemish results.

As in the Belgian survey, a recurring question is whether parties have lost members. We can see a clear division between two groups of parties in Table 4. A large share of the branches of the established mainstream parties (CDA, PvdA and VVD) report declining membership (which is also similar to Belgium). Between two and three out of five CDA branches report declining party membership. For the PvdA this is about half, with the exception of the Spring of 2006 (when it surged in popularity). For the VVD a quarter to half of the sections report declining membership. These parties have reported a steep decline of their national party memberships since 2002: combined, they lost 40% of their membership

Table 3 *Local Chairs Survey – response rates of Dutch political parties, 2018*

Party name			Branche	Respon-	Respon-
Dutch	English	Abbr.	s^a	ses	e rate
					(%)
<i>Lokale partijen</i>	Independent local parties	ILPs	987	243	25
<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i>	Christian-Democratic Appeal	CDA	376 ^a	130	35
<i>ChristenUnie</i>	ChristianUnion	CU	180 ^a	69	53
<i>Democraten 66</i>	Democrats 66	D66	255	58	23
<i>Friese Nationale Partij</i>	Frisian National Party	FNP	7	2	29
<i>GroenLinks</i>	GreenLeft	GL	177	62	35
<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i>	Labour Party	PvdA	330 ^a	75	30
<i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i>	Political Reformed Party	SGP	185 ^a	63	34
<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i>	Liberal Party	VVD	195 ^a	55	28
<i>50PLUS</i>			19	1	5
<i>Partij voor de Dieren</i>	Party for the Animals	PvdD	15	-	-
<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i>	Freedom Party	PVV	30	-	-
<i>Socialistische Partij</i>	Socialist Party	SP	109	-	-
<i>DENK</i>	Think/Equal ^b	-	13	-	-
<i>Forum voor Democratie</i>	Forum for Democracy	FvD	1	-	-
	2.749 ^a	758	28 ^c		

Notes: ^aThe number of lists, except for PvdA, CU, CDA, SGP and VVD, where we have the actual number of branches that were emailed. ^bThink in Dutch and Equal in Turkish. ^cExcluding parties that did not participate.

since 2002 (DNPP, 2020). For the other participating parties, most sections do not report decline. The exceptions, here, are periods of crisis when their electoral fortunes declined sharply. In 2018 *no* D66 or GL party branches reported declining membership. These figures reflect the national membership trends: since 2002, GL and D66 have seen their party membership double. The majority of SGP and CU branches, smaller Christian parties that are still strongly embedded in religious communities, do not report a decline either. This reflects much more stable figures in their national party membership. In summary, declining membership can be seen especially in local party branches of established parties (such as CDA, PvdA and VVD), while this is not reported by the other parties (except in crisis years).

As the Dutch survey is focused strongly on the recruitment function, we can, unfortunately, not report on party activities. But the survey can give us some insight into the basis of these branches in terms of members (Table 5). The average party branch reports having around 150 members. About a quarter of these are active in their municipal branch, such as during the election campaign, advising the municipal councillors, managing the website, attending local party meet-

Table 4 *Local party branches that report membership decrease ‘in the last years’*

	CDA	CU	D66	GL	PvdA	SGP	SP	VVD
2006	61	18	42	6	9	11	2	52
2010	39	14	1	8	58	19	34	35
2014	63	35	5	53	48	6	-	54
2018	56	15	0	0	45	17	-	28

Source: Boogers and Voerman (2018).

Table 5 *Active members in Dutch party branches*

	2006	2010	2014	2018
Average membership	139.6	157.9	144.6	159.0
Average active membership	25.1	26.1	24.7	43.7
Share of active members (%)	26.3	24.7	25.8	27.5

Source: Boogers and Voerman (2018); excluding independent local parties.

ings or the local party board. This is still a relatively small base for all political activities of local party branches. These figures, however, do not support the notion of party decline: rather, if anything, the *number* of active members was higher in 2018 than before: the average was above 40 compared while it was below 30 between 2006 and 2014.¹⁰

All in all, the decline of Dutch party branches should not be overstated: the membership decline is mainly among the established mainstream parties, not among their competitors. The aggregate image therefore shows more stability than decline. This is stability at a relatively meagre level. The active members that a local party branch relies on can fit into a high school classroom.

3 Articles in This Issue

This Special Issue discusses the role and function of local party branches in an era in which they are increasingly challenged. In order to contribute to this debate, the articles focus on three core functions of parties: as organisations, in the electorate and in government.

The first dimension is *party organisation*: what is the relationship with the other party levels? Are local branches ambassadors of the national party and upward transmitters of signals among the population (vertical integration in the national party and hierarchical structure), or are they acting independently (stratarchical structure)? In his article ‘Like Mother, Like Daughter? Linkage Between Local Branches and Their National Party Headquarters in Belgium’, Kristof Steyvers investigates the local-national linkage in Belgium to better understand territorial power relations in multilevel parties. To describe this linkage, the article focuses on three dimensions: vertical integration (the provision of various resources and services by the national to the local level), influence (*ex officio* representation

of local branches in national governance bodies) and autonomy (being allowed to deviate from the centre in domains such as candidate selection, manifesto, choice of coalition partners). The article shows that party families differ with respect to the local-national linkage, in terms of both scope and surplus. The findings reveal stronger linkages among socialist, regionalist and radical right party branches than among liberal party branches. For surplus, the context (electoral strength and governmental status) also matters.

The second dimension relates to *parties in the electorate*. As Simon Otjes, Marcel Boogers and Gerrit Voerman show in their article 'Getting Party Activists on Local Lists', the organisational strength of party branches matters electorally. Using Dutch party branches as case study, they show that local party branches continue to play an important role in local elections by selecting candidates but that local party branches that are empty vessels perform more poorly in recruiting candidates for municipal councils. The article shows that party membership drives the successful fulfilment of the recruitment function, but that more than the absolute number of members, the crucial factors are how these party members cooperate, the number of active members and the development of this number. These findings are in line with prior studies that emphasised that having active local branches has a positive impact on electoral performances and chances of survival.

The internal organisation of local branches matters for their capacity to recruit candidates in general, but also more specifically for the feminisation of electoral politics, as Robin Devroe, Silvia Erzeel and Petra Meier show in their article 'The Feminisation of Belgian Local Party Politics'. They start from the observation that the representation of women in local electoral politics lags behind the regional and federal levels. Subsequently, they analyse the internal feminisation of local party branches through the integration of women as party members, executive committee members and party leaders. The article shows that, in more feminised branches, the perceived difficulties in the recruitment of female candidates are much lower and the support for structural measures promoting feminisation is higher than in less feminised ones. This also translates into direct party strategies: parties with a female chair are significantly more likely to apply additional measures such as the zipper strategy than parties with a male chair. This confirms that the recruitment of candidates is a gendered process and that local politics continues to be a male-dominated political biotope. This also confirms that local branch organisation matters in that process.

The last dimension relates to *parties in government*. As Didier Caluwaerts, Anna Kern, Min Reuchamps and Tony Valcke stress in their article 'Between Party Democracy and Citizen Democracy: Explaining Attitudes of Flemish Local Chairs Towards Democratic Innovation', citizen participation in local politics finds itself in a unique position: the local political arena is often used as a laboratory to test democratic and participatory innovations. Such experiments can more easily be implemented at the local level because of the limited geographic scale and policy scope. However, most participation arrangements at the local level (advisory boards, hearings, referendums) are often still dominated by political parties who want to retain (or regain) their executive function. Therefore, the paper analyses

the extent to which and the means by which local party chairs support more citizen participation. The findings show that, although at the local level ideologies generally do not play a central role, ideologies are nevertheless alive and kicking with regard to democratic innovation. Support for citizen participation and different participatory techniques is driven mainly by ideological differences with progressive (socialist and ecologist) parties and populist parties. While municipality size plays no significant role, majority-opposition dynamics only determine support for the consultative referendums, with opposition parties being more supportive of consultative referendums than majority parties. Again, these results stress the important role of parties in the process, with their preferences partly bounded by the context in which they operate.

Overall, the articles in this Special Issue emphasise the crucial role of local branches for local politics. While the relation with the national party may differ depending on the party family, local party branch strength matters transversally in all parties. It matters for the recruitment capacity of parties at election time, indirectly affecting electoral performances and chances of survival. It also matters in the feminisation process of local politics. Finally, local branches are not electoral machines without clear preferences: their policy preferences differ, even if these are bounded by context. This should be a strong call for parties to invest in their local branches.

Notes

- 1 In particular the following parties: CD&V, Groen, N-VA, sp.a, VB, DéFI, PTB-PVDA.
- 2 A paper alternative could be obtained on request.
- 3 In the 2006 survey, a distinction was made between activities organised for the own members and for the general public. Unlike Deschouwer and Rihoux (2008), we coded a local party as organiser of an activity if it either organised it for the own members or for the general public.
- 4 In order to calculate these percentages in a uniform way (allowing cross-temporal comparison), we also include the non-responses of local chairs in the totals of 2012 and 2018 (on which percentages are calculated). Before 2012, surveys were conducted on paper and respondents had to tick a box to indicate whether they had organised such activities. Local chairs who did not organise an activity did not tick that box, as did local chairs who did not respond to this question. From 2012 onwards, the 'never' option was offered to respondents, making that the first time a distinction was possible between respondents who did not organise activities and non-respondents. In order to maintain comparability over time, however, we also included the non-respondents in the calculation of the totals of 2012 and 2018.
- 5 In 2002, there was a pilot project: *VNG Magazine* (2002). "Een op de twaalf partijen kan lijst moeilijk vullen" 56(9).
- 6 GL, PvdA and SGP exclude membership of the local board and the municipal council. CU and VVD make a member of the municipal council an advisory member of the section board, without the right to vote.

- 7 In the case of the Frisian National Party (*Friese Nationale Partij*, FNP), which is only active in Frisia through its central board at the provincial level.
- 8 168 lists out of 2,777 lists.
- 9 That is the share between responses of these parties and the number of lists they fielded, except for VVD, CDA and SGP, where we have data on the number of branches. These cases show the complexity of looking at the number of fielded lists. The VVD fielded 310 lists but has only 195 branches because these branches are on the supra-municipal level. One local party board that may cover multiple municipalities where the party is running candidates. The SGP fielded only 59 lists but has 185 branches, because there are sections that did not run in the elections and those that ran on a combined list. There were 332 CDA lists, 130 CU lists and 250 PvdA lists.
- 10 Note, however, that between 2006 and 2018 the response rate of the survey declined: from 62% to 30%. It may be the case that the municipalities that suffered membership problems no longer participated in the survey. It may be that the problems of the limited number of volunteers and decreasing time for political activities were such that section secretaries no longer had the time to answer the survey. Because the response rate of the surveys declined over time, caution is advised in a direct comparison of the numbers.

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