



Remaining close or drifting apart? Explaining the divergent paths taken by Belgium's socialist parties in connecting to civil society

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Abstract

What explains why parties with shared origins, ideology, and government experience take divergent paths in connecting to civil society? I seek to answer this question with a comparative case study of two socialist parties in Belgium—the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and the *Socialistische Partij Anders* (SP.a). I show that far-reaching change in the form of new party competition, the mobilization of new discourses and the fracturing of longstanding policy consensus presented the parties with new challenges. Party elites' perceptions of the implications of these challenges for party competition, led the two parties to respond to these challenges in very different ways. While the PS retained a socialist vision and proximity to civil allies, the SP.a withdrew from institutions and communities that had connected them to civil society. The study contributes to the literature on relationships between parties and civil society showing how the perspectives of party elites shape key decisions in response to far-reaching change in political contexts, and adds to our understanding of why similar parties exhibit different patterns of connection to civil society organizations.

Keywords Civil society · Political parties · Party agency · Socialist party · Linkages

Introduction

In my youth the socialist Mayor and MP was accessible, he would be seen in the neighbourhood, come into my parents' bar and had office hours. Now to make an appointment with an MP is like trying to get an audience with the Pope (In. 24).

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Table 1 Connective density of PS and SP.a candidates

General elections—2007–2014			
Party	2007	2010	2014
PS			
Connective density	1.18	1.16	1.52
SP.a			
Connective density	1.04	0.98	0.65

Source Measurements based on the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS) 2016 and 2019

The connections between political parties and civil society are central to parties' performance of key representative functions (Mair 2013; Panebianco 1988). A party's links to civil society helps it articulate and aggregate social interests, and the strength of a party's connections to civil society organisations (CSO's) has electoral payoffs (Martin et al. 2022a; Poguntke 2002). A revival of scholarly interest in the subject of party relationships with organized civil society has supported earlier findings (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Poguntke 2002) that considerable variation exists in the strength of a party's connections. The expectation that party ideology and a party's experience of government office are important explanations for this variation is articulated in several studies. Parties' government experience is central to calculations made by parties and CSO's of the mutual benefits of close ties (Allern 2010), while the connections of left-wing parties have endured longer and exhibited greater path dependency than those of right-wing parties (Gunther 2005; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013).

Less is known, however, about why parties with shared origins, ideology, goals, and government experience exhibit different levels of, and trends in, connections to CSO's. Exploring explanations for divergence will add to our understanding of the factors that mediate the relationship between ideology and government experience on the one hand, and connections of parties to civil society on the other hand.

I address this question with a comparative case study of the two members of the socialist party family in Belgium—the francophone *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and the Flemish *Socialistische Partij Anders* (SP.a), which changed its name in 2020 and is currently known as *Vooruit* (*Forward* in English).¹ Party connections to civil society are measured by their connective density—a measure drawn from a novel dataset utilizing information from the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS 2016 and 2019). The two parties had very similar levels of connective density at the 2007 general election (see Table 1).² However, the two parties exhibited divergent trends

¹ Since the party was known as the SP.a during the timeframe of this study I refer to it by this name.

² Connective density measures connections between election candidates and CSO's for the two parties at the Federal elections of 2007, 2010, and 2014 (Martin et al. 2022a). It is a count measure, with a range of values from zero to four, of the number of candidates' memberships of CSO's aggregated and averaged at the party level. The dataset has 245 measurements of connective density for 152 parties at 30 general elections in Western Europe between 2005 and 2017. Connective density has a mean value of 1.09.



at the subsequent two elections. While the candidates of the PS sustained and even increased their levels of connection to CSO's, the connections of SP.a candidates declined.³

This divergence in connectivity between two parties that share important characteristics constitutes the research puzzle. I explore this puzzle adopting an inductive approach, conducting a comparative case study, and using a most similar systems research design. The two parties represent a suitable subject for such a design sharing the same *origins*, membership of the *socialist* pillar (Van Haute and Wauters 2019), highly similar *ideological positions*, and 26 years of shared *government experience* in coalition governments.⁴ They have severed all organisational ties allowing isolation and comparison of the role other factors play in determining the form and closeness of their ties to civil society (Deschouwer et al. 2017).

I deploy two main methods of data collection. First, semi-structured interviews with 28 respondents including current and former officials of both parties, country experts, commentators on Belgian politics, and representatives of CSO's. Second, triangulation of interview material with a comprehensive review of literature and secondary documentation, and a process tracing analysis of key political events between 1991 and 2014.

I explain the divergence in the parties' connections to civil society by exploring how the perspectives of party elites influenced their evaluation of the implications of far-reaching changes in the political, discursive and policy contexts of party competition in the Belgian regions. I investigate how decisions based on these perspectives had both direct and indirect impacts on the form and scope of their connections to organized civil society. In determining strategic responses to change, a party does not simply reflect external events but also refracts them through party actors' evaluations of opportunities, their goals and preferences (Elster 1989). Specifically, party actors have agency over their positioning on issues of importance to voters (Adams, et al. 2004), over whether and in what form they maintain regular or routine contacts with CSO's (Allern 2010), and whether they select candidates for party lists with strong connections to civil society (Cross 2008). A party also has agency over where and how to focus organizational resources, with consequences for its capacity to connect with and mobilize actors in civil society (Swyngedouw 2012).

I find that changes in the political, discursive and policy contexts in the last two decades presented the parties with challenges in the form of new party competition, the mobilization of discourses based on culture and national identity, and the fracturing of longstanding consensus in policy areas such as the welfare state. The two parties responded to these challenges in different ways, the PS retaining its socialist vision and policy of retaining close links to civil actors, and the SP.a withdrawing progressively from ties to institutions and communities that had connected them to civil society in the past.

³ More details on the CCS, the measurement of connective density, and comparisons on the measure between parties of the mainstream left is provided in Appendix 1.

⁴ With the exception of the period 2007–2011, when the PS, served in the coalition government but the SP.a did not, the two parties have served in government simultaneously.



This study makes an important contribution to the literature on the relationships between parties and organized civil society. It illustrates how the perspectives of party elites shape the decisions they make on policy positioning, the structure of party organization, and their ties to organized civil society in response to far-reaching change in political contexts, adding to our understanding of why similar parties exhibit different patterns of connection to CSOs. It also sheds new light on how party agency mediates the impact of party ideology and government experience on levels of connection.

Pathways to connectivity

Recent research has suggested that while formal contacts between parties and CSO's may have declined, informal connections persist (Allern, et al. 2021a; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013), and that the connections to civil society of elites in parties with government experience are frequently higher than those with no government experience (Allern et al. 2021a, b). The endurance of connections established by established left-wing parties (Gunther 2005) and the focus of newer parties of the left on articulating neglected issues taken up initially by civil society (Della Porta, et al. 2017), suggest that denser connections to CSO's may be a defining feature of left-wing parties. Recent empirical studies (Martin et al. 2022b; Lisi 2021) support this contention.

However, even amongst parties with similar ideological backgrounds and identical levels of government experience, connective density may vary (Martin et al. 2022b). I propose to explain the divergence in the extent to which parties are connected to civil society by exploring the role of *party agency*. Parties are known to respond differently to changes in the competitive environment, and especially to political, discursive and policy changes (Deegan-Krause and Enyedi 2010). This focus enables me to describe how parties assess challenges and opportunities and make decisions that impact on their connections to civil society.

Changes in context

Since the 1990s centre-left parties in Western Europe have been confronted by many similar challenges, in particular de-industrialization and the shrinkage of their traditional base in the industrial working-class (Rennwald 2020), pressures to reform the welfare state, the increased salience of the immigration issue, and the emergence of new party competition. Change, and centre-left parties' strategic responses to it, have also differed substantially between countries. First, effective competition from the radical right emerged at very different times, between the early 1990's and the late 2010's, in Western European polities (Ignazi 2003; Rydgren 2018). Second, the adoption by centre-left parties of 'left neo-liberalist' policies such as welfare reform, privatization and de-regulation also occurred at very different times, starting earliest in southern Europe, and differed substantially in scale and scope (Mudge 2018). Third, and perhaps most importantly for the argument here, centre-left parties exhibited very different strategic responses to both competition from the radical right



(Bale et al 2010), and to pressures for retrenchment of the welfare state (Schumacher 2012).

In Belgium, the case that I will study, three contextual changes are especially pertinent for the competitive environment faced by socialist parties. First, changes in *the structure of party competition*, with new challengers for a party's traditional or core electorates prompting elites to re-evaluate connections and alliances with CSO's that provide channels for the representation of voters' policy preferences (Blings 2020). Second, changes in the *political articulation of discourses* (Koopmans and Statham 1999) comprising ideas about, and representations of, the role and legitimacy of civic and political actors. Third, changes in a high-profile *policy domain* critical to established relationships between parties and CSO's, and previously characterized by stability and incremental policymaking (Kingdon 1984). Such changes undermine dominant policy paradigms and destabilise longstanding practices and routines of conflict resolution by political parties and civil society.

Party agency

A party has agency in how it chooses to respond to change. The choices of party elites about connecting to civil society are informed and influenced by their subjective beliefs about the nature and the consequences of these changes, and these beliefs will be informed by a party's values, goals, and preferences (Elster 1989). I focus in particular on party choices in three key areas—ideological positioning, party organization, and the form of organizational ties to civil society.

First, a party has agency in its *positioning* on issues of importance to different groups of actors within civil society, and on how to respond politically to new party competition (Bale et al. 2010). A party may adjust its positioning in response to shifts in public opinion, especially when public opinion shifts away from a party's established ideological position and is perceived as potentially 'harmful' (Adams et al. 2004). A party may also adjust positions in response to electoral results, shifting more when electoral losses are larger and the closer the policy adjustment in time to the previous election, (Somer-Topcu 2009), and in response to changes in the policy offers of competing parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2010).

Second, a party has agency over how it organizes in pursuit of its goals. The decisions of elites on questions of party organization, such as investment in local branch structures (Swyngedouw 2012), and initiatives to include actors from organized civil society on candidate lists presented at elections (Cross 2008), provide opportunities for different forms of interaction between a party and civil actors at many levels.

Third, a party has agency over the nature and form of any *regular or routine contacts* it maintains with CSO's, and whether to sustain links to civil actors with whom they have traditional ties (Allern 2010). They make strategic decisions, for example, about the involvement of CSO's in the development of party programmes and legislative proposals and output. And electoral incentives and party competition may prompt a party to develop new 'participatory and environmental linkages' with civil actors (Tsakakita and Lisi 2017), or to create and sponsor new social organizations, co-opting leaders and activists from CSO's into public office (Verge 2012).



I assume that party actors are benefit-seeking, aiming to maximise office, policy or vote seeking goals (Müller and Strøm 1990). Party actors make purposeful choices between alternative courses of action but do so under conditions of uncertainty. They may have imperfect information on the distribution of voters' policy preferences and face uncertain trade-offs when making strategic decisions. As a result, a party may mis-estimate political opportunities and make choices with both intended and unintended consequences for their connections to civil society.

Research design and case description

To explore the research puzzle, I adopt an inductive approach and conduct a comparative case study of the PS and the SP.a, deploying a most similar systems (MSSD) research design. An MSSD design is suitable for this case because of the strong similarity of the two parties on several substantive factors. The PS and SP.a share the same *origins*, formed in 1978 on the dissolution of the Belgian Socialist Party to create two separate parties competing for the support of Belgium's main linguistic communities.⁵ The parties are part of the socialist *pillar*—institutions comprising social insurers, health providers and networks of civic associations—that encapsulate Belgian citizens in ideational subcultures (Van Haute and Wauters 2019). The *ideological positions* of the PS and the SP.a have remained sufficiently close for them to be considered members of the same party family (Deschouwer et al. 2017). And the parties have 26 years of shared *government experience* as members of federal government coalitions. Over the last three decades, however, they have severed all organizational ties no longer consulting on strategies and programmes (Deschouwer et al. 2017) and diverged in connections to civil society. An MSSD design allows us to hold these shared factors constant while seeking explanations for the divergence (Anckar 2008).

Data collection

I collected data using two main methods. First, over several months I conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 respondents.⁶ These included senior officials of Belgian left-wing parties, country experts, commentators on Belgian politics, and representatives of CSO's. I identified interviewees initially by means of information in the literature on country experts and on the websites of the two political parties. Interviews with this group of respondents was supplemented by snowball sampling and through additional secondary research material. The interview transcripts ran to over 18,000 words, and I used initial and secondary coding methods to structure the analysis and group my arguments into theoretical labels. Summary details of the

⁵ Since Belgium became a fully Federal state in 1993 it has had three regional governments for Flanders (Dutch speaking), Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital region (both French speaking).

⁶ The case study took place during restrictions on travel and meeting due to the Coronavirus pandemic. This meant that all but four of the interviews took place online rather than in person in the field.



interview respondents are provided in Appendix 2, and a the full list of initial codes and their grouping into thematic categories is described in full in Appendix 3.

Interviews were conducted in English. The interviewees had a clear understanding of the core concept of a party's connections with CSO's and engaged with my own operationalization of the concept. This gives me reassurance that the concept of connective density is a meaningful one for political actors and not an artificial academic construct.

Second, I triangulated the interview material with a comprehensive review of literature and other secondary documentation, and by conducting a process tracing analysis of key political events between 1991 and 2014. The review included scholarly literature on both the Belgian case and on the relationships between political parties and civil society. It encompassed articles and commentary in newspapers and blog sites, party documents available on party websites and social media channels, and other political commentary. Original documents in Flemish and French were translated into English using online tools. Details of secondary documentation is provided in Appendix 3, and a summary process tracing analysis of key political events between 1991 and 2014 is provided in Appendix 5.

Analysis of the case

Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews and a process tracing analysis, I analyse how the perspectives of party elites on major change in political context, influenced key strategic decisions in ways that directly and indirectly influenced their connections to organized civil society. I start by analysing the response of both parties to critical changes in political context, and then consider the impact of decisions on party organization and the maintenance of ties to civil society.

Party competition

The two socialist parties were electorally successful until the early 2000's, obtaining a combined vote share of nearly 28% at the federal election of 2003. However, since then both parties have lost substantial support, the SP.a vote declining by 55% between 2003 and 2019 and the PS vote declining by 27% in the same period, with the combined vote share of the parties falling to 16%. The *structure of party competition* faced by both parties has changed substantially over the last three decades. While both parties faced new and similar levels of competition from Belgium's two regional Green parties—*Groen* (Flemish) and *Ecolo* (Francophone)—the most significant changes in the structure of party competition differed between the two regions.

The electoral breakthrough at the 1991 election—known as 'Black Friday'—of the radical right *Vlaams Belang* (VB) represented a key turning point in Flemish party competition. In French-speaking areas, despite the *Front National* (FN) securing 5% of the Francophone electorate and two seats in the Belgian Parliament in 1995, competition to the PS from the radical right was short lived and unsuccessful, the FN failing to contest elections after 2010 (De Jonge 2021). From 2008, however,



effective competition to the PS emerged from the left in the form of the radical left Workers Party, *Partij van de Arbeid-Parti du Travail Belgique* (PVDA-PTB). The party's *Renewal Congress* in 2008 represented a critical juncture in the party's political strategy, the party deciding 'to work with trade unions and not in competition with them' (In. 12), and 'to support the demands of new social movements whereas they had previously been critical' (In. 15). In the past decade the Flemish arm of the Belgian Workers Party, the PVDA, has also opened up new competition from the left to the SP.a. The PVDA's strategy of strong association with protest activity, organizational penetration of unions and CSO's, and activism in support of local communities, has attracted a lot of voters disaffected with the policy shifts of the SP.a. The party increased its share of the vote at Flemish regional elections to over 5%, and to over 8% at the last two municipal elections in the city of Antwerp.

In terms of *political positioning* the two parties' response to new competition differed substantially. The nationalist appeal of VB, as well as the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA),⁷ was perceived by senior figures within the SP.a as attractive to many of the party's traditional working-class voters in the socialist trade union. A national figure in the SP.a observed, 'In the 1990's my husband was in a football team of SP.a supporting workers. Now almost all of them vote VB, they lead difficult lives and feel left behind' (In. 19). This perception and its implications for positioning was summarized by a former senior figure in the SP.a, 'On economic issues we were competing with VB for our historical support in the working-class, for union members motivated by racism and migration' (In. 27). Officials of the SP.a were dismissive of the PVDA because of its opposition to joining government and 'disowned the administrative coalition between the parties in Zelzate' (In. 17).⁸

While Flemish nationalists mobilized outside the socialist pillar, the PTB sought directly to infiltrate PS strongholds within civil society. 'The PTB has complicated things—we notice their presence more in the unions and civil society but especially 'on the field' with people in every structure' (In. 8). For one commentator, the growing strength of PTB in elections for union representatives within companies, 'presents the PS with a problem because they have limited electoral margins to play with, it becomes increasingly hard to convince defectors to return' (In. 15). The success of the PTB's strategy of penetration caused increasing tensions within the socialist union the FGVB, and between the FGVB and the PS, culminating in 2014 in 'an open letter from the national federation to the PS arguing against their position and urging a leftward shift. The union said that it would invite its members to only support PS candidates who backed union demands and not just because they were on the party list' (In. 17).

The response of the PS to new party competition was to maintain a strongly left-wing ideological position and close and regular contacts with trade unions, and to seek to bridge the gap between party elites and civil society by trying to 'build

⁷ The N-VA emerged, on its dissolution in 2001, from the Flemish nationalist *Volkswijde* and since 2010 has been the largest single party at Federal elections in Belgium.

⁸ Following municipal elections in 2018 the SP.a and the PVDA agreed to form a coalition to govern in the industrial town of Zelzate.



closer links and trying to support alternatives proposed by NGO's, e.g. the CETA campaign in which PS was very strong' (In. 18).⁹

In summary, while both parties faced challenges from new party competitors they drew different conclusions about how to respond. The Sp.a moved to accommodate competition from nationalist parties while the PS retained a strong left-wing policy orientation.

Discursive context

The *discursive* context of party competition during the period of this study was transformed by the articulation of discourses on two issues that introduced tension to relationships between the parties and their civil society allies.

First, the activation of negative discourses on migration. Research over the period 1991–2014 (Billiet et al. 2017) found that levels of anti-migrant sentiment differed very little between voters in Francophone and Flemish regions, and that there had been no unequivocal increase in negative attitudes towards migration over this period (2017, p. 3). From the mid 1980's parties in both regions attempted to articulate and activate negative discourses at the level of party competition. In Flanders first the VB, and then later the N-VA, sought to frame migration as a threat to the Flemish culture and way of life (De Winter 2004). And in French-speaking Belgium the *Front National* (FN) mobilized nationalist and xenophobic sentiment (Ignazi 2003).

At first the SP.a refused to engage with the migration issue, 'Stevaerts [party leader between 2003 and 2005] said "let's not talk about it"' (In. 20). Electoral setbacks from 2007, when the SP.a lost 30% of its electorate, marked a turning point in the party's position. A key feature of the SP.a's response was the adoption of the VB's 'framing of migration as a security issue' (In. 15), and the adoption of policies that targeted migrant communities in key municipalities under its control (In. 26). Under the Mayorship in Antwerp of former leader Patrick Janssens, which started in 2003, the SP.a introduced a series of measures including a ban on the wearing of headscarves by municipal employees. The SP.a's urban policies between 2006 and 2012 were perceived as discriminatory by Muslims throughout Flanders (Gaasendam 2021), and were a 'major reason for [the party's] weak links with CSO's in the migration field' (In. 9). For one commentator, the party's ambiguity on multiculturalism was, 'clearly a mistake—they gave up a natural connection to ethnic minority voters assuming that they would never leave them' (In. 25).¹⁰

⁹ Ratification of CETA, the Canada Europe Trade Agreement, required endorsement by all regional parliaments. The PS led parliaments in Wallonia and the Federation of Wallonia-Brussels voted in 2016 to reject the proposed deal and called for the re-opening of negotiations.

¹⁰ In later general elections, voters defecting from the SP.a were nearly three times as likely to vote for Green or centre-right parties than they were to support either of the nationalist parties (Dassonneville and Baudewyns 2014). The VB and its predecessor the Vlaams Blok, increased their vote share at seven successive elections between 1985 and 2007. Thereafter its vote share fluctuated, recovering to 11.9% in 2019.



If the SP.a were initially hesitant and subsequently accommodating of discourses hostile to migration, the PS ‘combated the extreme right from the outset, including actions to try and make the playing field for it as small as possible’ (In. 20). At the same time that Patrick Janssens became Mayor of Antwerp, the PS leadership resisted pressure from within their own ranks for ‘an ethnocentric turn [to] stem losses amongst the native working-class. The PS elite never accepted this argument... In big cities the relative strength of PS is a reflection of their links to new multi-cultural associations which they have regarded as compensation for losses in the traditional pillars’ (In. 15).

A second discursive shift, from the late 1990s onwards, was constituted by a strong anti-union discourse framing trade unions as ‘a relic of a bygone era, opposed to the changes needed to keep Belgium competitive’ (In. 9), and articulated by parties in the Flemish government and employers’ associations (Zienkowski and De Cleen 2017). This discourse had a major impact on the ‘influence and high position trade unions enjoyed in civil society’ (In. 7).

A wary and dismissive attitude on behalf of the SP.a towards trade unions was a consistent theme in many interviews. The ‘unpopularity of trade union actions with mainstream publics’ in Flanders (In. 6), were held to be responsible for the unpopularity of ‘brand Socialist’ (In. 11), with trade unionists less present on party lists at the local level because, ‘they don’t get high scores in preference voting’ (In. 10). This negative perception of trade unions is reflected in the rationale party figures provide for infrequent contacts. ‘The trade union brand is less and less helpful, we don’t have to engage with them much apart from say on May 1st—we have to keep up some traditions’ (In. 11.), and ‘you don’t vote for us anymore so why should we listen to you’ (In. 6) were representative of this attitude.

Acknowledging the tensions between themselves and the unions, the PS, in contrast, regards constant dialogue as essential. ‘The best way to maintain good relations is to talk as often as possible’ (In. 8). The party maintained levels of representation of trade unionists on its lists of election candidates,¹¹ and, in response to the ultimatum from the FGVB in 2014, the party’s candidates moved sharply to the left.¹²

In summary, the activation of discourses hostile to migration and trade unions, presented fresh challenges to both parties. The PS chose to retain a multicultural discourse and close links to trade unions, while the SP.a distanced itself from trade union allies and adopted policies perceived as discriminatory by migrant voters in Flanders.

¹¹ The proportion of trade unionists (CCS 2016 and 2019) on the party’s election list rose from 51% in 2007 to 52% in 2010 and 64% in 2014.

¹² The left–right self-placement of PS candidates on an 11-point scale moved from an average of 2.11 in 2010 to one of 1.13 in 2014 (CCS 2016, 2019).



Shifts in a key policy domain

In the area of the *policy-domain* context I highlight reforms of Belgium's system of social protections. Reforms in two waves between 2001–2005 and 2011–2014 were led by socialist ministers from both the SP.a and PS, had adverse impacts on a diverse set of constituencies represented by CSO's, and were strongly resisted by shifting coalitions of CSO's that had traditionally maintained close ties to the two parties (Faniel 2012).

A key figure in the positioning of the SP.a on welfare reform was former party Chairman Frank Vandebroucke, who returned to Belgian politics in 1999 after a three-year academic sabbatical. The intellectual figure behind the party's adoption of 'the 'activation' concept of social welfare—focusing on the responsibility of the recipients of social welfare' (In. 15)—Vandebroucke ensured that the SP.a was closely associated by civil actors with the promotion of social welfare reform (Faniel 2012). The party held the ministerial positions responsible for the implementation of reforms, and conflict between the party and civil actors resulted in increasing distance between them. As one commentator observed, 'CSO's became reluctant to associate with the party because of its low reputation and an anti-politics sentiment in the context of its retreat from the left' (In. 6).

While the PS was a member of coalition governments that introduced reforms of the welfare state, it might best be described as a silent partner in the activation project. The reforms were deeply unpopular in Wallonia, 'because in places like Charleroi there was high unemployment but no jobs, making benefits linked to responsibility seen there as an attack on the unemployed' (In. 20; also In. 7). 'As a result the PS tended to hide a third way stance from visibility, retaining a left-wing rhetoric' (In. 13). The strength of grassroots representation on key party committees meant that the PS never formally adopted a third way position. 'In 2003 there was a strong revolt against a third way positioning, and the party continued with economic polarization at the sub-federal level' (In. 1).

In summary, both parties were members of governments that adopted 'third way' policies on welfare benefits, but the SP.a were more prominent as originators of the policy shifts while the PS sought to distance itself from the welfare reform agenda.

Party organization

The impact of changes in party positioning on connections to civil society were amplified by the parties' decisions on organizational structure. Organizational choices by both parties have left them with very different capacities to engage with voters on the ground. For the SP.a, without strong local branches, campaigns rely heavily on 'a central team and not the membership of the party' (In. 20). The evisceration of the party's organizational ground force is seen as instrumental in its failure to respond to heavy ground-based election campaigns by nationalist parties (Swyngedouw 2012). Since 2010, by contrast, the PS has reversed a downward trend in its membership providing it with numerous points of contact with local civil actors, and a potent tool for election campaigning. 'Our membership still constitutes a base that can be mobilized—in Liege alone



we have 10,000 members which is more than Ecolo have for the whole of Wallonia' (In. 15). Party infrastructure remains large and well-resourced. As one senior PS official suggested, 'We have a lot of staff (around 700 at all levels) and power, and are perhaps like a medium sized business. People are always coming and going between the party and influential organizations' (In. 2).

In the last two decades the PS and SP.a made very different choices about how to structure party organization. The SP.a recently ended the right of pillar associations to guaranteed places on its main decision-making board, and several interviewees highlighted how the SP.a has withdrawn resources from its branch structure to centralise its organization and focus on a 'marketing led' approach to campaigning (In. 6). Successive party leaders saw its membership base as an obstacle to progress, 'As long as you have to use the formal democratic systems of parties you only approve those things that are killing you as party' (In. 27). The party 'forgot its whole network of local contacts' (In. 21), 'that gave important signals to the leadership about the concerns of people on the ground' (In. 20). For the party's connections with Flemish citizens the result was that 'Grassroots links are no longer there' (In. 20). As one senior SP.a official conceded, 'It is hard to say what grassroots CSO's the party is involved with' (In. 11).

In organizational terms the PS' response to changes in its political context was one of continuity rather than change. The party 'retained relatively active local sections' (In. 17), and 'kept organizing local meetings to disseminate an ideology' (In. 7). The party maintained its commitment to an organizing principle of *proximité*, 'of links between its elected representatives and the communities they serve' (In. 20). The PS has retained automatic representation on the party board for the socialist union, the FGTB, and discussions with different ideological currents within the party and with CSO's are seen as a core element of *proximité*.

The PS and SP.a have also taken contrasting approaches to recruiting election candidates from civil society. When selecting candidates, the PS has stayed close to, and sought to reward, the associations that comprise the extended socialist pillar. 'I [PS senior official] find it hard to think of a candidate that had emerged from an independent CSO rather than one of the party's many socialist societies who we already know is a member of the party' (In. 8). In contrast the SP.a has consciously sought distance from traditional allies in civil society that it regards as unpopular. In the early 1990s the party centralized candidate selection decisions 'because it perceived that unions and social insurers had too much influence in candidate lists' (In. 22). In place of candidates from larger CSO's, as one national official of the SP.a confided, 'The different mindset of the twenty-first century ... will be reflected in younger candidates that are not from local branches but smaller CSO's, influencers and even celebrities' (In. 10).

In summary, the approaches of the two parties to internal organization diverged sharply. The SP.a centralizing control over party decisions at the expense of maintaining local structures, and the PS retaining comparatively strong local party structures and influence for party branches and pillar associations over party decisions.



Decisions on ties to civil society

The two parties also made very different choices about the nature and form of regular contacts with allies in civil society. Despite the enduring strength of trade unions in Flanders, the perceptions of SP.a elites of union unpopularity led the party to, ‘Intentionally move away from the institutions with which it had been associated traditionally’ (In. 25). The exit of the SP.a from the federal government, following the election of 2007, was a shock to the party causing it to double-down on the primacy of its office seeking goals. ‘The SP.a have clearly stated that they want to be a party who decides, for whom opposition is ‘not for us’’ (In. 17). The preoccupation with electoral goals influenced the SP.a’s strongly instrumental approach to links with civil society, ‘If our analysis that the time of membership parties is gone is correct then it would not have helped to retain connections... because it was not bringing in voters anymore’ (In. 27). The SP.a replaced enduring connections to membership based CSO’s with ad-hoc contacts with ‘local volunteers around issue based politics’ (In. 14).

By contrast a close dialogue between the party and CSO’s is important to key party decisions of the PS. ‘When the party is working on its programme before elections, we work with CSO’s in every field... Similarly, when we are in coalition discussions, we meet with CSO’s to consult and inform’ (In. 8). This strategy of drawing CSO’s into important discussions demonstrates the high value that elites in the PS place on maintaining their connections to organized civil society.

Throughout their history both parties have been office-seeking, placing a premium on being able to achieve something for their constituencies by sharing office in multi-party coalitions with parties of the centre-right. ‘We [the PS] pass bills and this is what people remember—we communicate what passes in parliament and how this affects people’s lives’ (In. 4). The two parties have however pursued office goals in different ways. One commentator observed that, ‘The PS knows it needs to also maximise votes or the other parties will form a government without them ... In regional government elections however the SP.a has not campaigned so hard in order to remain on good speaking terms with centre and right parties, and so it can enter the regional government’ (In. 20).

In summary, while both parties are office seeking they reached different interpretations about the implications of this goal for their ties to civil society. The PS opted to retain a close dialogue with CSO’s, while the SP.a concluded that close ties did not serve its electoral goals well.

Discussion

The PS and the SP.a are two office-seeking parties of the left in Belgium who share the same origins, ideology and experience of government, but who have diverged in connections between party elites and organized civil society. To explain this divergence, I conducted a comparative case study of the two parties using a most similar systems design. I find that the perspectives the two parties had on new challenges presented by changes in their political environments led



them to make different strategic choices with both direct and indirect impacts on their connection to civil society.

Both parties faced new political competition from opposite ends of the political spectrum, the articulation of new discourses hostile to civil groups with which the parties had enjoyed close relationships, and the fracturing of Belgium's long-standing policy consensus on social protections.

The SP.a responded to these pressures with a series of choices on party positioning and organization that led to the progressive withdrawal of party elites from the institutions and communities that provided its electoral base. In contrast the PS chose to confront rather than accommodate radical right discourses, retained its socialist vision, and was compelled by new competition from the radical left to draw closer to traditional allies in civil society.

The 'dilemmas of inclusion' (Dancygier 2017)—the challenge of balancing appeals to traditional groups of supporters while connecting with and mobilising new voters in growing migrant communities—are illustrated sharply in my case study. The perception of the SP.a leadership of the challenges this posed to its traditional support base meant that the party did not, as some theory expects (Tavits and Potter 2015), increase the emphasis it placed on socio-economic issues. Instead the SP.a pivoted towards the values dimension of party competition introduced by nationalist parties. This pivot, and frequent changes of party leadership, contributed to further electoral decline, the party failing to win back traditional supporters while alienating groups of both liberal-multicultural and migrant voters (Gaasendam et al. 2021).

My study makes important contributions to the literature on how the perspectives of party elites shape the decisions they make on policy positioning, organization, and their ties to organized civil society in response to far-reaching change in political contexts. It adds to our understanding of why similar parties exhibit different patterns of connection to CSOs. Taking a comparative approach to considering how party-based actors refracted far-reaching changes in the context of political competition enables us to bring a number of interesting questions into focus.

First, we can identify the cumulative and compounding effects of strategic decisions by party elites on their connections to civil society. For the SP.a, the impact of the deliberate decision of elites to distance the party from traditional allies in the socialist pillar was compounded by policy shifts in welfare reform and migration that alienated previously loyal groups of civil actor. The PS, by contrast, chose a different course, purposively maintaining a multicultural discourse and clear ideological position, enabling close links to both traditional groups within the socialist pillar and representative organisations of an increasingly diverse civil society.

Second, we can observe how the two parties different approaches to party organization resulted in different levels of decision-making autonomy for party elites. From the mid-1990s the SP.a centralized control over issues of policy, party campaigning and candidate selection, while neglecting its branch structure, enabling elites to set the parties' strategic direction without meaningful constraint from party members or pillar institutions. The PS by contrast retained a comparatively robust local party infrastructure and the strong influence of ordinary members on the party's policy



committees, as well as concerted pressure from local branches of the socialist trade union, constrained the party from making policy shifts opposed by civil society.

And third, we can observe how strategic miscalculation and the parties' differing levels of connection to civil society impacted their capacity to respond appropriately to competitive threats. For example, the SP.a policy shifts on migration harmed its relationship with migrant communities that make up a sixth of the Flemish electorate, and the party overlooked evidence that in the 2000's its supporters were more likely to defect to Green and centre parties than to nationalist competitors (Dassonneville and Baudewyns 2014). The party's organisational changes also weakened the signals it was receiving about the challenge posed by the PVDA in key municipalities, the SP.a, unlike the PS, failing to draw the implication that it should re-engage with CSO's and their claims in order to reverse defections to the PVDA. While the PS has also experienced some weakening of its local organization in recent decades, its comparatively strong links to pillar institutions and responsiveness to campaigns of newer social movements, has helped it limit electoral losses to new competitors.

My study also illustrates how parties' responses to changing competitive contexts mediate the relationship that two left-wing parties with government experience have with organized civil society. Further, it suggests that goal-based accounts of parties' relationships with civil society may have serious limitations when explaining variation in political outcomes. Neither the PS nor the SP.a are ambiguous about the primacy of their office-seeking goals, requiring sufficient electoral support to maintain their bargaining strength in post-election coalition discussions, and both responded to the threat to their electoral strength that new challenger parties represented. However, the choices of party elites on positioning and organization took them in opposite directions—the former maintaining *proximité* to civil society and the latter withdrawing from close ties.

My findings suggest a number of fruitful avenues for further research. First, while our case is suitable for a most similar systems design a number of features of the Belgian context such as federal structures of governance and the persistence of consociational practices may limit the transferability of my findings. Future comparative research could explore whether the impact and interaction of a changing competitive context and party agency have similar consequences for party-societal connections in countries characterized by a unitary state and pluralist structures of interest representation.

Second, the structure of civil society in West European societies has itself undergone transformation in recent decades with the emergence of new organizations in the fields of the environment, identity politics, and migration. This diversification of organized civil society presents new challenges, particularly to mainstream parties of the left, who want to retain their traditional ties but also engage with new constituencies. And the growth of digital forms of campaigning and mobilization has provided political parties with new opportunities to communicate directly with citizens rather than through intermediaries in civil society, adding further complexity to party strategies and the relationship between parties and CSO's. Studying the different strategic responses of social democratic parties to these challenges will help scholars understand the shape and efficacy of the connected left-wing party of the 21st Century.



Third, the measure of connections between party elites and organized civil society—connective density—is restricted to CSO’s that are central to political mobilization (Martin et al. 2022a). The Belgian case suggests however that in societies with traditions of citizen encapsulation into pillars (Van Haute and Wauters 2019), connections to organizations in the cultural field may continue to play a part in the selection of party candidates and in linking those candidates to communities at the local level. Further research could explore the contexts and conditions under which a more extended notion of connective density is relevant for different political and electoral outcomes.

In the autumn of 2021, the SP.a moved into a shared office building with the PS. My comparative case study provides much material to suggest, however, that the PS and SP.a, both under new leadership and, in the case of the SP.a a new party name and identity, are set to continue down different pathways of connection to organized civil society. While the PS has increased its openness to, and dialogue with, the broad field of civil society, the SP.a has further centralized its organization by closing its regional offices and removed the right of the socialist trade union, the ABVV to guaranteed representation on the party board, opting also for an issue based and social media led strategy of connecting directly to citizens. The effectiveness of these two contrasting approaches to relationships with organized civil society seems likely to play an important part in the future political and electoral fortunes of these two members of Belgium’s socialist party family.

Appendix 1: Measuring connective density with the Comparative Candidates Survey

Connective density is measured using Waves I and II of the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS). Wave I covered elections between 2005 and 2013 and Wave II covered elections between 2013 and 2018. Of the 30 elections covered in my data set, 21 took place during Wave I and 9 took place during Wave II. My dataset does not include all elections that took place in the countries under study for the period, for example in the Netherlands in 2010 and 2012, nor do I have observations for connective density for France. The CSS has not yet produced data for France. I also exclude four elections in Iceland, which are covered by the CSS. I make this decision because of Icelandic exceptionalism as explained in the literature and because of lack of data availability for key variables for several elections.

Categories of organization in Connective Density

In each wave of the survey candidates of each party were asked whether they were members of a number of organization types. Table 2 summarises which categories of membership organization were selected to operationalize connective density. The



Table 2 Connective Density

Wave (no. elections)	Categories selected	Treatment
I (21)	Trade Unions	Not adjusted
	Professional Associations	
	Interest Groups	
	Religious Groups	
II (9)	Trade Unions	Not adjusted
	Business Associations	Business treated as equivalent to Professional Associations in Wave I
	Human and Civil rights organisations	Human and civil rights and environmental organisations treated as equivalent to the single category of interest groups (in wave I) and coded so that a maximum value of 1 was possible in cases of membership of both groups
	Environmental organisations	
II (9)	Religious Groups	Not adjusted

selection was made on the basis of an assessment of whether a type of membership was pertinent from the perspective of electoral mobilization. On this criterion, for example, membership of sports or cultural associations was not included while membership of religious associations were. In order not to bias my measure of connections towards parties with specific ideological leanings, I balance memberships of organisations like trade unions, which are traditionally associated with left-wing parties, with memberships of business and religious associations that are traditionally associated with right-wing parties.

Table 2 shows that there was some inconsistency between the two waves in the categories of association surveyed. While candidates in both waves were asked about their membership of Trade Unions and Religious Organisations there were slightly different survey categories in other important respects.

The principal source of potential inconsistency was the higher number of relevant categories of membership in wave II opening the potential for a candidate to report higher connections as a product of a greater number of possible membership categories, thereby destabilizing recorded values across waves of the CCS. To correct for this, memberships of two categories of organization in wave II—Human and Civil Rights groups and environmental organisations—were treated as equivalent to interest group memberships in wave I and a new variable was computed that could only take on a maximum value of 1 in cases of candidates' membership of both categories of organization in wave II of the survey. The resulting values for mean country connective density are stable across waves for the seven countries with elections in both waves—falling, or remaining essentially flat across waves in three countries each, and rising significantly in just one country.



Table 3 Connective density: summary descriptive statistics

Parties	<i>N</i>	Min. value	Max. value	Mean	SD
All	245	0.00	2.09	1.09	0.41
Mainstream left	65	0.47	1.87	1.27	0.34

Table 4 % of candidates agreeing or strongly agreeing that parties are an essential link between citizens and the state

Party	2007	2010	2014
PS	72	65	65
SP.a	54	49	56

Table 5 % of candidates agreeing or strongly agreeing that special interests have too much influence on law making

Party	2007	2010	2014
PS	32	23	43
SP.a	17	19	27

Descriptive summary of connective density

Table 3 summaries descriptive statistics for connective density for all observations in the dataset ($N=245$) and for all observations for parties of the mainstream or centre-left ($N=65$). It shows that mainstream parties of the left exhibited higher mean levels of connective density than all parties (1.27 compared to 1.09) and lower variation in the measure (0.34 compared to 0.41).

The mean value of connective density for all parties other than those categorised as mainstream left ($N=180$) was 1.02. The difference in the mean values of connective density for mainstream parties ($N=65$) and all other parties ($N=180$) is, therefore, 0.25. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means is 0.13 to 0.36 and the p value for the difference is 0.000.

PS and SP.a candidates views on the role of candidates in linking citizens with the state and on the role of special interests in lawmaking

Tables 4 and 5 summarise the responses of candidates of the PS and the SP.a to two questions in the CCS (CCS 2016 and 2019). First, party candidates views on the statement that ‘Parties are an essential link between citizens and the state’, and second views on the statement that ‘Special interests have too much influence on law making’. Table 4 shows that PS candidates were consistently more likely to agree or



Table 6 Trends in the connective density of parties of the mainstream left

Country	Party	No. elections (dates)	Trend pattern	Range of connective density
Belgium	Parti Socialiste	3 (2007, 2010, 2014)	Stable increasing	1.18–1.52
Belgium	SP.a (Vooruit)	3 (2007, 2010, 2014)	Unstable falling	0.65–1.04
Finland	SDP	3 (2007, 2011, 2015)	Stable	1.23–1.55
Germany	SDP	4 (2005, 2009, 2013, 2017)	Stable	1.42–1.84
Greece	PASOK	4 (2007, 2009, 2012, 2015)	Unstable falling	0.52–1.87
Norway	Labour Party	2 (2009, 2013)	Stable increasing	1.11–1.75
Portugal	Socialist Party	3 (2009, 2011, 2015)	Stable	0.79–1.04
Sweden	SDP	2 (2010, 2014)	Stable	1.37–1.44
Switzerland	Social Democrats	2 (2007, 2011)	Stable	1.43–1.47

strongly agree with the first statement though the gap between the two parties was substantially lower at the 2014 election than in the previous two elections. Table 5 shows that PS candidates were also more likely to agree that special interests exert too much influence on law making in Belgium. Candidates of both parties were more likely to agree with this statement at the end of the period studied than at the beginning.

Trends in connective density for parties of the mainstream left

Where the CCS data makes possible multiple observations of connective density for the same party across several general elections the dominant pattern for parties of the mainstream left is one of stability rather than decline. For example, the connective density of the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) at four elections between 2005 and 2017 ranged from 1.42 (2005) to 1.84 (2013). By contrast the connective density of the Greek PASOK declined sharply following the economic and political crisis that the country faced after the financial crash from a high of 1.87 in 2009 to a low of 0.52 at the general election of January 2015. Table 6 summarises trends in connective density for parties of the mainstream left for which I have multiple observations. In Fig. 1 trends in connective density for mainstream left parties in three countries—one each in Northern, Central and Southern Europe—are illustrated.

Appendix 2: Structured interviews

I conducted a total of 27 structured interviews with 28 party officials, expert country scholars, and political commentators in Belgium. The majority, 23, of these interviews were conducted online because of the Coronavirus pandemic, but 4 were conducted in



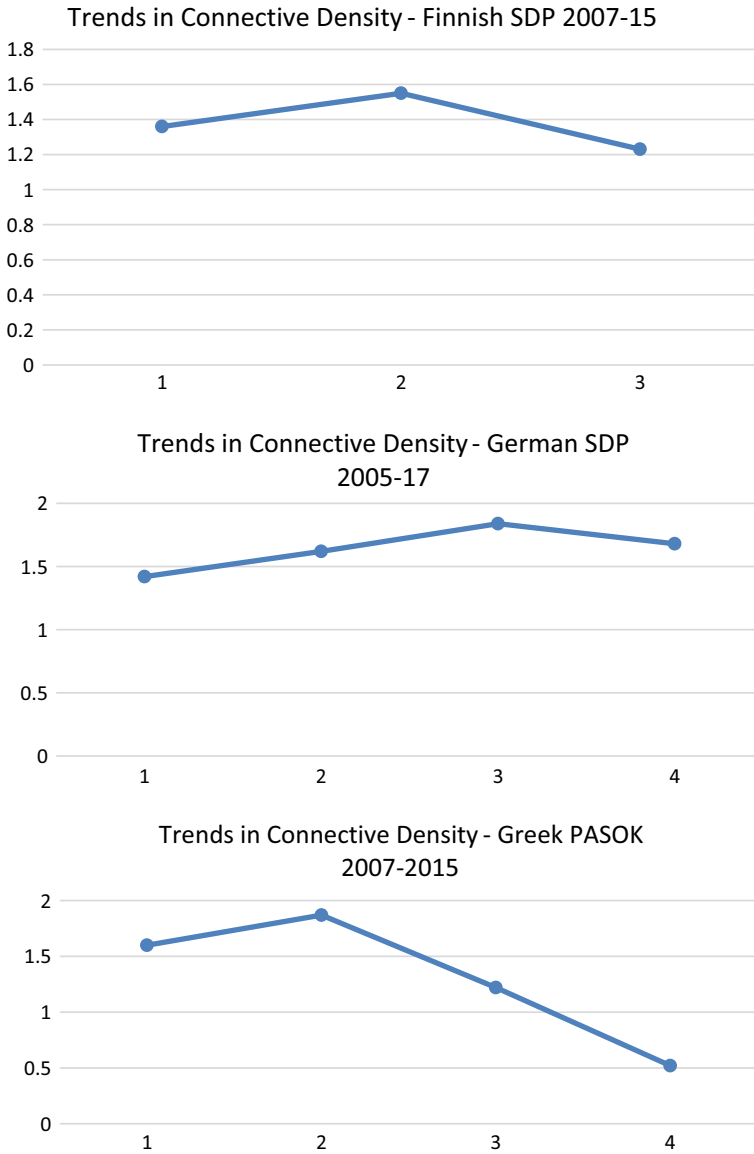


Fig. 1 Trends in Connective Density of mainstream left parties in Finland, Germany and Greece

person. Table 7 provides summary information on the interviewees, and lists interviewees in the order in when they were held.



Table 7 Interviewees

Interview number	Date	Format	Interviewee
1	28.4.21	Online	Country expert
2	14.5.21	Online	Country expert
3	17.5.21	Online	Country expert
4	29.7.21	Online	National officer, PS
5	12.8.21	Online	National officer, PS
6	27.8.21	Online	Senior Ministerial Advisor, SP.a
7	31.8.21	Online	Country expert
8	2.9.21	Online	Senior national officer, PS
9	3.9.21	Online	Country expert
10	12.9.21	In person	Senior national officer, SP.a
11	12.9.21	In person	Senior national officer, SP.a
12	12.9.21	In person	Senior national officer, PTB-PVDA
13	12.9.21	In person	Commentator
14	6.10.21	Online	Local officer, SP.a
15	11.10.21	Online	Country expert and former elected politician, PS
16	19.10.21	Online	Senior national officer, organization affiliated to the PTB-PVDA
17	25.10.21	Online	Former senior national officer, socialist trade union FGTB
18	29.10.21	Online	Senior officer, CSO
19	3.11.21	Online	Nationally prominent SP.a figure
20	3.11.21	Online	Country expert and former SP.a candidate and advisor
21	8.11.21	Online	Commentator and director of political journal
22	8.11.21	Online	Former senior regional official and candidate, SP.a
23	9.11.21	Online	Two senior national officers—CSO
24	30.11.21	Online	Former senior trade unionist and SP.a candidate
25	3.12.21	Online	Country expert
26	8.12.21	Online	Expert on migration studies in the low countries
27	6.1.22	Online	Former senior national and municipal officer, SP.a

Appendix 3: Coding of semi-structured interviews

To structure my case analysis I conducted initial and secondary thematic coding of my interview transcripts. Table 8 shows details of the initial codes, of how these initial codes were organized into secondary thematic codes, and provides a short description of the meaning and implication of each secondary code.



Table 8 Coding scheme

Initial codes	Secondary thematic coding	Description
Pillar strength; trade unions, capacity, influence, contestation, pressure, respect for unions, traditions, benefits, CSO umbrella, pillarization of migrants, action commune, municipal apparatus, public capitalism, clientelism, networks	Socialist pillar	The socialist pillar provided the traditional bedrock for connections between the socialist parties and civil society. The emergence of new party competition and social movements in recent decades placed pillar relationships under increased pressure
Messaging, discourses, branding, marketing, normalization, social media, framing, renewal, security, third way, migration, austerity, common platform, CSO platforms, migration debate, financial crash, flinks, modernization, civic turn	Discourses	The emergence of new discourses has presented both socialist parties with new challenges. The mobilization by Flemish nationalists of discourses around threats to Flemish identity was influential, in particular, in the changes in party positioning adopted by the SP.a
New left, party positioning, new issues, party satellite, renewal, nationalist coalition, bypass, rotten borough, weak (party) organization, leadership, branch structure, new connections, manipulation, youth, new talent, coalition calls, party organization, restructuring	Party competition/new politics	Both parties faced effective new party competition in the last three decades. In Wallonia the PS faced new competition from the radical left targeted at the PS' core allies in the socialist pillar. In Flanders new party competition took the form of the nationalist N-VA and the far-right VB
Base, penetration, rank and file, new social movements, disconnected, elite bubble, top-down approach, local networks, accessibility, participatory politics, issue-based, grassroots initiatives, community	Local (non-elite)	Both parties were perceived as increasingly remote from local actors amongst their core constituencies. The SP.a centralized its organization and weakened its local branch structure. While the PS has maintained a strong local organization it was challenged amongst its base in trade unions and civil society by a strategy of the radical left PTB of penetrating the PS base in local organizations
Responsibility, opposition, pragmatism, populism, popular concerns	Government vs. opposition	Both parties made substantial compromises to maintain coalition governments with parties of the centre-right. These compromises caused increasing tensions with civic actors that were strong allies in the past. The PS and SP.a both remain office-seeking but interpret what this means for connections to traditional constituencies in different ways



Table 8 (continued)

Initial codes	Secondary thematic coding	Description
<p>Migration issue, cleavages, social capital, identity politics, eco-socialism, ideology, norms, vision, Flemish identity, nationalism, multiculturalism, ethnic targeting, disunity, social justice, individual rights, collective goals, solidarity, consensus, breakdown, polarization</p>	<p>Values</p>	<p>Solidarism was a core value of traditional Belgian politics of consociational policy-making and social protection. Multiculturalism was also important to the two parties relationships with the country's large migrant population. Both core values have been progressively weakened by nationalist discourses on migration, by divergence in the respective economic performance of Wallonia and Flanders, and by a wave of reforms of the Belgian state and its system of social protection</p>
<p>Engagement, attraction, manifesto, coalitions, distancing, mobilization of opposition, mobilization of members, mobilization on the ground, campaigns, protest politics, street presence, depoliticization, demobilization, campaign issues, CSO networks, infrequent contacts</p>	<p>Mobilisation</p>	<p>Strong mobilization of political and civic actors against reforms initiated in government by both parties has been a major feature of contested politics in Belgium in the twenty-first century. The PS has retained a strong capacity to mobilise supporters at the grassroots while the SP.a has focused increasingly on a marketing and personality led campaigning strategy</p>



Appendix 4: Secondary documentation used to triangulate interviews

To triangulate the data collected from semi-structured interviews I consulted a wide range of secondary documentation.

Political parties

Party websites

Parti Socialist—<https://www.ps.be/>
 Vooruit (formerly SP.a)—<https://www.vooruit.org/>
 PVDA-PTB—<https://www.pvda.be/>

Party documentation

‘Recontres Ecosocialistes’, Programme for the Congress organized (2021) by the PS study bureau, the *Institut Emile Vandervelde*

‘A Principled Party’—document produced for the Renewal Congress of the PTB-PVDA, 2008

‘*Verbeden, Verbinden, Verdiepen*’—document produced for the Solidarity Congress of the PVDA-PTB, 2015

Political commentary

Articles, manuscripts and commentary pieces:

- In Samenleving and Politiek (SAMPOL) including:
 - Koen Abts and Marc Swyngedouw (2000)—Municipal Elections in Antwerp
 - Marc Swyngedouw (2010)—Social Democratic Challenges for the Future
 - Serge Govaert (2011)—PS/SP.a: sister parties after all
 - Wim Vermeersch (2018)—Why is migration such a difficult subject for socialists
 - Chris Gaasendam (2019)—The electoral paradoxes of SP.a
- Published by the Centre de Recherche d’information socio-politique (CRISP) for example:
 - Lefebve, V (2019)—Unemployment insurance reforms 2011–2019, CRISP, 2019/33–4, 5–104



- Blaise, P. et al. (2014) ‘L’evolution des parti politiques francophone’
- Published by the Flemish cultural foundation, *Masreel Fonds*
- Published by the Flemish think tank *Oikos*

Newspaper articles and interviews

A wide range of articles on, and interviews about, the two socialist parties accessed via Lexis Nexis and published in:

- De Krant van West-Vlaanderen
- De Tijd
- Diggit Magazine
- Knack
- Le Vif/L’Express
- Luxemburger Wort
- Trends magazine

Other reports and documentation

- European Commission Anti-Corruption Report (2014)—Annex on Belgium
- An open letter from the socialist trade union to the PS in 2014 urging a shift in the party’s position and undertaking to only back PS candidates who supported union positions.

Appendix 5: Summary analysis of historical process tracing—1991 to 2014 (Table 9)



Table 9 Historical process tracing: key events

Year	Event description	Theme	Significance
1991	'Black Friday'—electoral breakthrough of Vlaams Blok	New party competition—external shock	Turning point in party competition in Flanders influencing positioning of mainstream parties especially the SP.a on the issues of migration and state reform
1993	4th reform of the Belgian state	State reform	Belgium becomes a fully federal state
1998	Flemish parliament outlaws clientelistic practices	Codes of conduct	The first regulations in Belgium formally outlawing clientelistic practices that had traditionally formed a central feature of Belgium's pillarized networks
1999	Election of Patrick Janssens as leader of SP.a	Party positioning	A turning point in party organization for the SP.a with the centralization of powers, the weakening of the Party's branch structure, and investments in marketing led election campaigning
	Return of Frank Vandembroucke to Belgian public life		Started the turn in the policy of the SP.a towards welfare state reform and the adoption of an activation concept of social support that was actioned in subsequent legislation
2001	Reform of the 'minimum subsistence income'	Reform of social protections	Reforms led by Minister from the SP.a, strongly opposed by CSO's representing groups affected and criticized for a lack of consultation
2003	Electoral high point of SP.a	Party positioning	The SP.a ran a joint list with <i>Spirit</i> a grouping of progressives from the recently disbanded <i>Volksunie</i> party. This cooperation combined with the popularity of the SP.a leader, Steve Staevarts, propelled the party to its best ever election result. At each of the four subsequent elections the SP.a's vote share fell
2004	Reform of system of 'tracking' the unemployed	Reform of social protections	This reform was central to the activation agenda championed by the SP.a and was strongly opposed by a wide coalition of civil actors
2005	Reform of early retirement rights	Reform of social protections	A second reform within the activation agenda similarly opposed by civil actors



Table 9 (continued)

Year	Event description	Theme	Significance
2006	Rejection by PS leadership of an 'ethnocentric turn'	Party positioning	The PS leader Elio de Rupo allied with two leading figures who supported a multicultural position for the party to resist internal pressure to follow the SP.a in adopting an ethnocentric position
	Patrick Janssens wins election as mayor of Antwerp	Party positioning	The administration in Antwerp adopted a number of measures perceived by migrant communities as directly discriminatory. Resulted in the defection of large numbers of migrant voters and the defeat of the SP.a in the municipal elections of 2012
2008	Renewal Congress—PTB-PVDA	New party competition	Point at which the PTB-PVDA changed its strategy from opposition to trade union and social movements to support for them and to a tactic of penetrating key institutions of the socialist pillar. Opened up effective competition to the left of the PS in Wallonia
2009	Collapse of Dexia Bank	External shock	The Dexia Bank invested heavily in high-risk assets and collapsed following the financial crash of 2008. This collapse and subsequent efforts to rescue the bank are significant because Arco—cooperative holding company of the Christian Trade Union—held 90% of its investments in Dexia as did 800,000 small investors who are still taking legal action for compensation. Has had a continuing negative effect on the reputation and standing of the union
2011	6th reform of the Belgian state	State reform	Involved significant concessions by mainstream parties to Flemish nationalists in order to break the 500+ day deadlock in coalition negotiations
	Reform of unemployment benefits	Reform of social protections	Re-ignited conflict between the PS and its traditional allies in civil society



Table 9 (continued)

Year	Event description	Theme	Significance
2015	European Commission warns Belgian government of financial sanctions for failure to balance its budget by 2015	External pressure	Increased the pressure on the PS led coalition government to consider structural reforms and austerity measures to balance Federal budgets
2012	Municipal election in Antwerp—won by Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	New party competition	Marked the end of the 97-year political leadership in Antwerp of the SP.a
2014	Local branches of socialist trade union break with PS	New party competition	A significant rupture between sections of the socialist trade union the FGVB and its partner in the socialist pillar
	Electoral breakthrough of PTB-PVDA	New party competition	First significant results of the political strategy of the PTB-PVDA establishing strong competition to the left of the PS



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Conflict of interest The author states that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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