

Article

Living Apart Together? The Organization of Political Parties beyond the Nation-State: The Flemish Case

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Submitted: 14 September 2019 | Accepted: 27 November 2019 | Published: 13 February 2020

Abstract

This article aims to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the study of political parties in the EU context, focusing on party organisation. Theoretically, it draws on insights from various literatures to develop a novel typology of multilevel party organisation specific to the EU context. It argues that parties are goal-seeking actors that choose their organisation based on a cost-benefit analysis, involving both party characteristics and the institutional context. Empirically, the article applies this framework on the Flemish political parties. It finds that rational goal-seeking behaviour cannot fully account for parties' organisational choices. Results show that normative and historical considerations play a crucial role in parties' cost-benefit analysis. It therefore calls upon future research to expand the number of comparative studies and to further assess parties' goal-seeking behaviour regarding their multilevel organisation.

Keywords

European Union; multilevel democracy; political parties; vertical integration

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Political Behavior in the EU Multi-Level System" edited by Daniela Braun (LMU Munich, Germany), Martin Gross (LMU Munich, Germany) and Berthold Rittberger (LMU Munich, Germany).

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1. Introduction

The EU poses national political parties with a fundamental challenge, as it simultaneously issues significant constraints on the policy freedom of national legislators and presents parties with a political arena that goes beyond the boundaries of the familiar nation-state (Blomgren, 2003; Hix, 2008). The EU thus "confronts domestic political parties with a new structure of threats and opportunities" (Hix & Lord, 1997, p. 5), as they now "act outside the nation-state in ways that they have never done before" (Blomgren, 2003, p. 2). Indeed, "the EU, long characterized as a system of multilevel governance, is moving to a system of multilevel and perhaps transnational politics" (Laffan, 2016, p. 922; see also Braun, Gross, & Rittberger, 2020). However, parties have shown to be rather unmoved by these events: They have not fundamentally altered the way they organise in response to this changing environment (Poguntke, Aylott, Carter, Ladrech, & Luther, 2007).

Even so, while European integration might not have been a major instigator of organisational change, it nevertheless generated a level of governance on which a number of actors are active: Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), ministers, commissioners and several presidents—all of which "are predominantly recruited from political parties" (Hix & Lord, 1997, p. 1). Moreover, Europarties and the European Parliament (EP) groups are increasingly taking centre stage in the development of a genuine EU party system (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018), which also demands specific attention from national parties. More fundamentally, just as in the national arena, political parties also "embody the link between citizenry and EU institutions" (Lefkofridi, 2020). The main question this article thus aims to answer is: How do parties structure their contacts with the European level, and what explains differences between parties?

Building on the concept of vertical integration, this article aims to identify parties' organisational strategies and offers a rational choice institutionalist explanation

for why parties opt for certain strategies. Applying this framework to the Flemish parties, the article shows that, while electoral gain is an important incentive for parties, functional goal-seeking cannot fully explain parties' approach to multilevel interactions. Rather, parties also take into account historical and normative considerations in their cost-benefit equation. Moreover, the qualitative analysis makes clear that parties treat the EU primarily as a political issue, rather than as a genuine polity—which has significant implications for the democratic nature of the EU. These results highlight the importance of EU politicisation in the domestic arena, simultaneously showing that norms and traditions can overrule functional imperatives. The article therefore concludes by calling for more comparative research to address the concrete nature of parties' multilevel interactions.

2. The Vertical Integration of Political Parties

In their seminal study of the Europeanisation of national party organisation, Poguntke et al. (2007) have shown that parties adapt little to the existence of the EU. Ladrech (2007) went so far as to claim that national parties are in fact “missing in action” when it comes to European affairs. The Europeanisation literature, however, looks at a rather specific element of party organisation: the internal balance of power. It considers to what extent European integration has altered the accountability of party leaders and the influence of “EU specialists” on party decisions, (unsurprisingly) concluding that the EU has in fact not altered the fundamental organisational structures of national parties in any significant way (Carter, Luther, & Poguntke, 2007). Alternatively, while studies of the relationship between parties and MEPs have shown that parties hardly try to control their EU-level agents (Hix, 2002; Mühlböck, 2012; Raunio, 2000), recent research has highlighted strong indications that there are frequent contacts between national parties and their people at the European level (Jensen, Proksch, & Slapin, 2013; Senninger, 2017; Senninger & Bischof, 2017). They have not, however, delved into the concrete nature of these contacts. Indeed, they “do not provide an analysis of the fine-grained coordination mechanisms that shape policy issue transfer” (Senninger & Bischof, 2017, p. 158).

This article does not aim to re-do those excellent studies. Rather, it aims to take off where these studies explicitly say they ended: studying the concrete nature and structure of the contacts between the national party and the European level. To study this multilevel organisation of political parties, the article turns to federal scholars in the tradition of Deschouwer (2003), Fabre (2011), Thorlakson (2011), and Detterbeck (2012), who address the relationship between party organisations at different levels. They show how contextual and party-specific factors combine to define parties' multilevel organisation. Accordingly, this article uses the concept of vertical integration to describe and measure the cross-level interactions of political parties.

Vertical integration is understood varyingly throughout the literature as the “linking of activities and strategies at...different levels” (Deschouwer, 2006, p. 299), as “formal and informal linkages in organisation, personnel, finances and political programmes” (Detterbeck & Hepburn, 2010, p. 24), and as “the extent of organisational linkages, interdependence and cooperation” (Thorlakson, 2009, p. 161). Although emphases differ, they all convey the existence of a “common governance structure” between levels within a party (Thorlakson, 2009). This article thus aims to capture the common governance structures between the national and the European level within a party, focussing on both formal decision-making and informal coordination. These structures can be either weak or strong. Having ‘weak’ structures means that contacts are limited in quantity, but also that interactions are informal, ad hoc, and on the personal level. Having ‘strong’ structures, by contrast, means that contacts occur more frequently, and that interactions are formal, regular, and organised.

At the national level, one can arguably divide a party into the party organisation, the parliamentary group, and, when in government, the party in executive office. While a party's ministers are active simultaneously in the national government and in the EU's Councils, the distinction between a party organisation and parliamentary group has more or less been mimicked at the European level: the Europarties and EP delegations. While EP delegations perform a similar function to national parliamentary groups, the Europarties are important platforms for parties to coordinate at the European level beyond the legislative work in the EP. However, some of these are more ‘of the party’ than others. MEPs, for example, are official members of the national party and are competing in European (but nationally organised) elections where they represent their national party. The Europarty, by contrast, is a federation of national parties: its officials are not necessarily directly linked to the national party. It nonetheless offers its member parties a forum to debate European election strategies, develop a common manifesto, prepare for European Councils and even put forward their own *Spitzenkandidat*. Therefore, this article argues that national parties' multilevel interactions are structured along two dimensions: internal and external.

The internal dimension involves those actors who are formally part of the national party: MEPs, ministers, European Commissioners, party staff and EU experts—parties' “EU specialists” (Poguntke et al., 2007, p. 12). Vertical integration on the internal dimension is the extent to which there exist common governance structures with these EU specialists. Are they integrated in the functioning of the national party, or do they work in isolation from the rest of the party? MEPs' active participation in national group meetings and party boards, for example, can be considered an indication of ‘strong’ common structures. The external dimension involves those actors that form the European transnational partisan network in which national parties are active—given shape

through the Europarty. Vertical integration on the external dimension is the extent to which national parties are invested in the Europarty and broader network. Are national parties active and committed members of such a network, or do they go at it alone? For example, proactive preparation of and senior participation in a Europarty congress can be considered an indication of ‘strong’ common structures.

Four types of multilevel organisation can be identified (Figure 1). ‘Federated’ parties have strong external common structures, but weak internal ones. They are active in their European network, but keep the European level rather isolated from the rest of the parties’ activities. ‘Stratified’ parties have weak common structures both internally and externally. Their national and European activities are separated, nor do they significantly invest in a European network. ‘Integrated’ parties have strong common structures both externally and internally. They aim for an extensive integration of the EU in their own party structure, as well as for far-reaching cooperation in a broader EU network. ‘Unified’ parties, finally, have strong internal common structures, but weak external ones. They aim to keep their own party organisation as unified as possible, limiting coordination cost across levels.

One characteristic of the qualitative measurement of these indicators is that there is room for interpretation on behalf of the researcher. The common governance structures parties develop, both on the internal and external dimensions, may indeed vary from weak to strong. However, this distinction is not a strict dichotomy. Between ‘weak’ (informal, ad hoc, personal) and ‘strong’ (formal, regular, organised) structures, different concrete situations are possible that combine

weak and strong features. For example, one could imagine a situation where MEPs are not actively involved in decision-making within the party (‘weak’ structure), but are presented with and follow compulsory vote instructions by the national party leadership (‘strong’ structure). In such a case it would be up to the researcher to make a judgement, based on the overall information available about that party, whether the structures are deemed ‘weak’ or ‘strong’—and consequently which type of organisation the party is considered to have. Although the author of course maximised the objectivity of the research, a certain degree of interpretation is thus inevitable (see also Aylott, Blomgren, & Bergman, 2013).

3. Explaining Variation

To address the question which of these organisational strategies parties are likely to pursue, one must keep in mind that ‘weak’ structures are the default situation on which parties can fall back. The question then becomes: Why would parties decide to invest in more than the default situation? This article turns to rational choice institutionalism to provide an explanatory framework. Parties have limited resources and whether or not they invest in common governance structures is thus a cost-benefit issue. The costs involve building these structures, while the benefits involve reaching party goals—votes, office, policy, and internal cohesion (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Hellström & Blomgren, 2016; Müller & Strøm, 1999). Does building these structures help parties reach their goals? As such, parties are rational goal-seekers, who strive to make the most cost-effective decisions based on their own attributes and the institutional context that presents itself. Both these aspects will need to

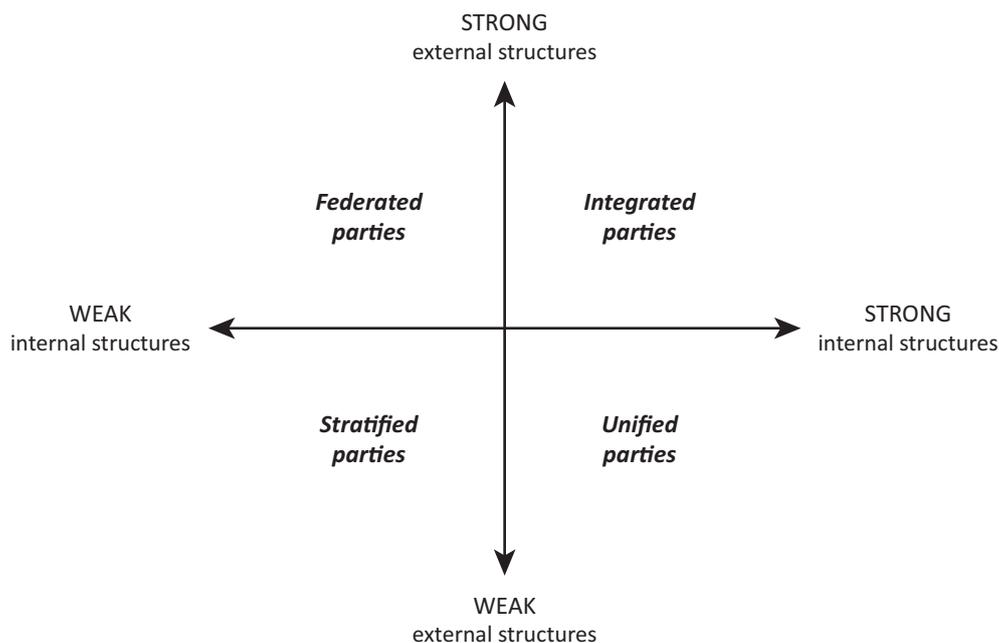


Figure 1. Typology of multilevel party organisation in an EU context.

be taken into account in order to get a full picture of both the costs and benefits involved (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Peters, 2005).

3.1. *The EU Context*

Generally, the EU's multilevel system increases the costs of investing in common governance structures, while the benefits gained are far from obvious. Although the European level is increasingly more important in terms of policy-making, politically it is a distant entity. The EU is often considered to have its own political dynamic that is often not reported on in national media. Additionally, the complexity of EU legislation and decision-making—with its many checks, compromises, and technicalities—increases the mental distance with 'Brussels' (Poguntke et al., 2007). Bridging this wide gap requires significant investment.

At the same time, the benefits that can possibly be incurred are not very clear. For one, it is far from certain that multilevel coordination will result in more votes or prestigious offices. The salience of EU policies in the domestic political arena is generally rather low: European elections are still second-order to national elections, meaning that whatever EU-level actors do will have little impact on the domestic electoral fortunes of their national parties (Cabeza, 2018; Hoeglinger, 2015; Mair, 2007; Marsh, 1998; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Additionally, it is difficult for individual parties to directly influence EU policy-making. They often only have a limited number of MEPs, while Commissioners are supposed to be apolitical and ministers in the Council need negotiating autonomy (Carter & Poguntke, 2010). Also, in terms of office the EU is unattractive, as majority parties cannot divide prestigious offices amongst themselves as they usually can in the national context. Not unimportantly, the EU can also be a highly divisive issue both within a party and the broader society (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Kriesi, 2016). All in all, the benefits of investing in vertical integration are thus far from obvious.

3.2. *Party Characteristics*

Although it is important to keep this context in mind, it applies to virtually all national parties in the EU and thus in itself cannot explain variation between parties within the same political system. One should therefore also consider party-specific characteristics. To explain differences between the Flemish parties, this article takes into account two fundamental variables: their government/opposition status, and the Europarty of which they are a member. While aware that there are other variables that could possibly have an influence, for the Flemish case these two are considered to be the most relevant in terms of parties' rational goal-seeking behaviour. For example, although internal dissent over the EU could be an important reason for parties to (not) invest in interaction with the European level, dissent within

the Flemish parties under study is so low that it is not taken into account for explaining variation.

First, keeping in mind that there was no asymmetry in Flemish/federal government composition during the data gathering period, opposition parties have less incentives to invest in internal common governance structures than governing parties. One can reasonably assume that most opposition parties aim at winning elections (vote-seeking). Given the low salience of EU affairs in Flanders, this is a goal they are unlikely to achieve by investing in multilevel coordination. Additionally, Flemish opposition parties have only one MEP, meaning that their chances of directly influencing major EU legislation are slim. Granted, as argued by several authors (for example, see Senninger, 2017), opposition parties might use their MEPs to gain information about EU legislation and as such reduce the information asymmetry with governing parties. However, keeping in mind that 'weak' structures are parties' default, it would seem unlikely that opposition parties would be swayed to invest their limited resources in multilevel coordination only to (sporadically) gain information that they might just as well gain from informal contacts. All in all, opposition parties thus have little to gain from that investment.

Governing parties, by contrast, take aim not only at votes but also at policies—a goal for which they need to spend time and energy on the EU (if only to transpose EU directives). Moreover, there are more people involved (often more MEPs, but also ministers and perhaps a Commissioner), which means that ad hoc and personal contacts might not suffice to keep everyone up to date. Additionally, governing parties are also more sensitive to the risks of discordance between the position they take at different levels and in different institutions. As argued by several authors over the past decades, a cohesive parliamentary group is crucial in Western party government—without it, governments and governing coalitions would be unable to govern (Bowler, Farrell, & Katz, 1999). The importance of party cohesion for governing parties also shows in the many pressures on majority Members of Parliament (MPs) to vote in line with the government. Although this pressure somewhat diminishes when crossing over to the European level, much like MPs also MEPs are expected to support their ministers (or at least not embarrass their minister by explicitly voting divergently). This "dictate" of party government is absent for opposition parties (Epstein, 1980). That is not to say that opposition parties are not at all concerned about party cohesion, but rather in a less pressing way than governing parties are.

H1: Governing parties will invest more in the internal dimension of vertical integration than opposition parties.

Second, parties of established transnational networks have more incentives to invest in external structures. European partisan networks are increasingly taking cen-

tre stage, with particularly the Europarties trying to serve as coordinating structures—much like the central offices of national parties (Crum & Fossum, 2009; Hix & Lord, 1997; Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018). The Europarties, among other things, support their member parties with preparing the European elections, write common manifestos, organise meetings to discuss electoral strategies, provide a forum to prepare European Councils, and, more recently, decide on the *Spitzenkandidaten*. However, the degree of institutionalisation of these networks differs greatly. The traditional party families (Christian-democrat, socialist, and liberal) have a more institutionalised network with established decision-making procedures and structures, which can significantly reduce the costs of navigating the EU for national parties, while possibly increasing policy influence and office rewards. By contrast, a disorganised network cannot ensure its people are put in top jobs, nor can it weigh on EU decision-making in a coordinated way. For example, a Christian-democratic party can significantly punch above its weight in terms of defining European policies if it is actively involved in the EPP. Much more so than, for example, a green party, given the difference in clout between the EPP and the EGP. As such, in terms of rational goal-seeking behaviour, it makes more sense for a Christian-democratic party to invest in such a network than it would for a green party, given the differences in the return on investment for both parties.

Of course, parties will have more difficulty seeing the added value of a partisan network if there is low congruence between their positions and those of the Europarty. Even from a rational choice perspective, there is little to gain from being an active member of a network if that network strives towards policy goals you disagree with. Recent research has shown, however, that on the dominant left–right dimension this congruence is quite high for the ‘traditional’ parties, while somewhat lower for the ‘new’ parties, such as the EGP and the ECR (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2014). This thus reinforces the expectation that members of established networks have more incentives to invest in external structures.

H2: Parties of established Europarties will invest more in the external dimension of vertical integration than parties of new Europarties.

4. Method and Data

This article assesses the multilevel organisation of national political parties by analysing how they interact with the EU level. In line with the typology outlined above, it measures the vertical integration of parties by looking at internal and external common governance structure. The focus is on ‘formal’ decision-making procedures and ‘informal’ coordination regarding policy positions. While formal procedures are usually put down in statutes, informal processes are more difficult to capture. For that reason, the article adopts a strongly qualitative approach, relying heavily on semi-structured in-depth interviews with party elites. 20 interviews have been conducted in total with five of the main Flemish parties (Table 1), with respondents selected in such a way as to ensure a diversity of perspectives. The radical right Vlaams Belang, although an interesting case, was not included in this study because the party declined to participate in the interviews for data gathering. Because nearly all respondents requested anonymity, citations will be referenced as ‘personal communication’.

This article explains variation by looking at two variables on the party level—the Europarty of which the party is a member and whether it is in government or opposition. For that reason, it will focus on parties in one particular environment: Flanders. This narrow focus allows us to control for domestic contextual variables, while maintaining sufficient variation between parties. Belgium’s largest region of Flanders was selected as a most-likely case, as many of the factors that make the costs of investment so high are mitigated in the Flemish context. For one, with Brussels as its capital, Flanders can be found at the core of the EU, both in terms of policy-making and geography. It greatly depends on policy-making by the EU institutions, while the proximity of the EU institutions minimises the physical distance from the parties’ central offices. Additionally, Belgium is a federated country with a highly complex institutional system. As such, Flemish politicians are accustomed to the complex situations and many compromises that EU decision-making requires. It is not a distant and complex system, but rather familiar and nearby. In fact, the only existing hurdle for Flemish parties to invest in coordination with their European agents is the total lack of politicisation of the EU issue in Flanders. With an average of 4.3 on a

Table 1. Flemish political parties.

Party	Europarty	EP Group	Party Family	Status
CD&V	EPP	EPP	Christian-Democrat	Government
N-VA	EFA	ECR	Conservative/regionalist	Government*
OVLD	ALDE	ALDE*	Liberal	Government
sp.a	PES	S&D	Social-Democrat	Opposition
Groen	EGP	Greens-EFA	Green	Opposition

Notes: * This article builds on data from 2018, before the Flemish nationalists left the Belgian federal government (December 2018) and before ALDE was reformed into Renew Europe (June 2019).

scale of 0 to 10, the salience of the EU issue in Flanders is significantly below the EU average of 6 (Polk et al., 2017). This situation allows us to isolate politicisation as a domestic contextual factor, which makes Flanders a rather suitable case to study the topic at hand.

Two additional characteristics of the Flemish parties need to be highlighted. First, the Flemish parties are not typical regional parties, nor are they regional branches of national ‘Belgian’ parties. For example, there are Flemish socialists and Walloon socialists, but no Belgian socialists. Moreover, Flemish parties have a clear federal outlook, as the national elections are first order. Second, Belgium is a prime example of a partitocracy (Dewachter, 2014). Political life and the intra-party power-balance is dominated by the party in central office. Particularly the party president provides overall leadership—responding to political crises, deciding on urgent party lines, maintaining party discipline, etc. (Dewachter, 2005). The central party leadership of Flemish parties thus tends to be highly involved in the internal coordination of the party and its mandatories.

5. Case Study: The Flemish Parties

Most Flemish party statutes go little beyond mentioning that their EP delegation is somehow represented in the party board. Moreover, not a single statute defines the relation with the Europarty—some do not even mention it at all. It is clear, then, that statutes are nowhere near a proper benchmark for parties’ multilevel organisation vis-à-vis the EU. Based on interviews, however, Figure 2 shows that there is quite some variation. The remainder of this section will go deeper into this variation, addressing first the internal and then the external dimension of parties’ vertical integration.

5.1. Internal Dimension

Overall, Flemish parties invest rather little in ‘internal’ vertical integration due to the overall electoral irrelevance of the EU: “Europe is the end of the line; first there are Flemish and federal issues, then EU issues...only when things become very, very acute is there a big discussion, for example on Brexit—but that is very rare” (personal communication). Indeed, far from a systematic interaction with their actors at the European level, national parties only invest in keeping up with the discussions and decisions at the European level when these are relevant in the domestic arena. Electoral gains thus generally outweigh other incentives when it comes to investing in internal coordination.

Nonetheless, there is variation between parties. Particularly the Flemish nationalists and Christian-democrats invest notably more in internal coordination. The Christian-democrats have over the years created an extensive system of coordination on European affairs that involves a wide range of actors: the party leadership, M(E)Ps, ministerial advisors, policy experts, and regular party members. The main spill of coordination is their internal working group on the EU. Whereas the leadership only gets actively involved on short-term high-salience issues, the working group serves as a forum to discuss the party’s position on European issues and takes the lead in preparing the party’s manifesto for the European elections.

The Flemish nationalists’ leadership is more directly involved. N-VA developed strong coordination mechanisms, with formal structures supplemented by extensive informal exchanges. The party executive gathers information from all its parliamentary groups (including the EP delegation) through regular written reports,

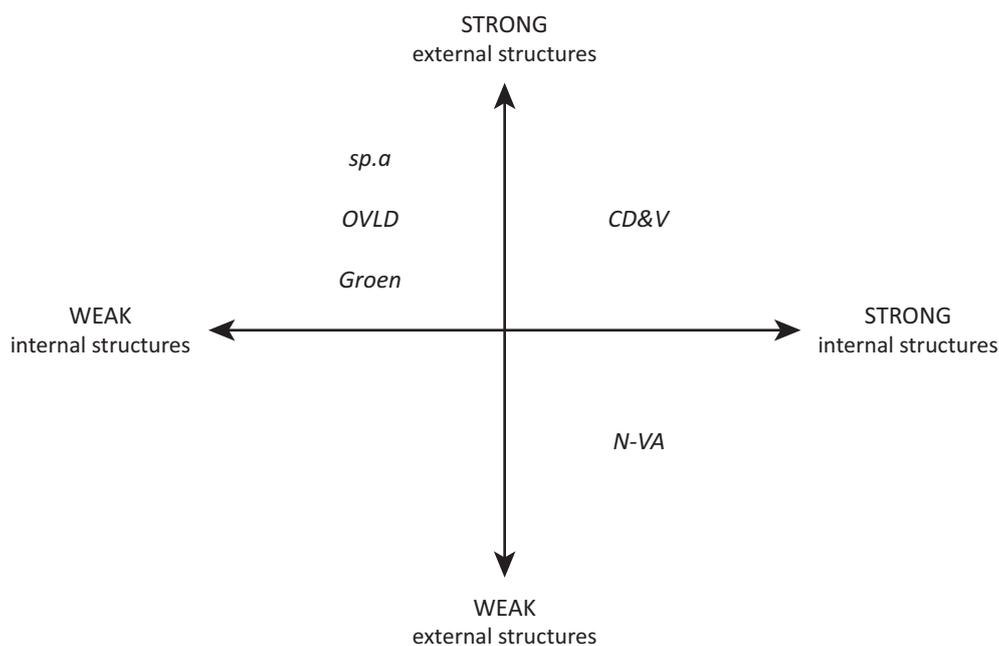


Figure 2. Flemish parties’ vertical integration.

also keeping track of what its ministers are doing in the Council. Particularly the party's 'daily management'—a smaller group including the party president, vice-president, secretary, and spokesperson—wants to be continuously aware of all the ins and outs at all levels, with an eye on being able to make swift informed decisions when an issue pops up.

Both parties highlight the importance of internal coordination for being able to effectively pursue their preferred policies. As one respondent explained: "We work together very closely and we try to streamline as much as possible, in order to have an impact as strong and direct as possible" (personal communication). The Christian-democrats are Belgium's governing party *par excellence*, having been in nearly every government for the past five decades, and as such build on a long tradition of paying attention to the European dimension—it would be "unthinkable not to put the EU on the agenda" (personal communication).

The Flemish nationalists additionally stress that their ascension into federal government was the main catalysts for building these internal structures. The fact that they got into federal government means that their ministers actively participated in EU decision-making, which required the party leadership to keep a finger on the European pulse, which in turn was facilitated by the increased number of MEPs they have. It is up to the leadership to ensure that all these noses are pointing in the same direction: "Every vote can potentially cause trouble, as once you voted on something you can be attacked on it. So you want to be sure" (personal communication).

By contrast, the liberals—the third party in Flemish government—have few formalised structures and rely on informal, personal interaction to provide coordination: "We do not really have an organised structure for [multilevel coordination]. Of course that can happen ad hoc, and it is more a matter of a reflex that needs to exist with all people involved" (personal communication). The liberals do not see the point of investing in internal coordination. They are highly united in their EU position, which "means that there will be few accidents in the EP delegation and MEPs will stay within the limits of the liberal river, so to speak—no flood" (personal communication). Their internal cohesion thus obliterates any incentives they might have to invest in internal coordination.

Also, the greens and socialists invest fairly little in common governance structures with their internal actors. Both parties delegate most European issues to their EU specialists, with little involvement of those who are not directly involved. Only on the most relevant topics does the party leadership intervene. The reason they put forward is very clear: their MEPs can hardly offer anything that can help the party win elections, and winning elections is the main goal of opposition parties:

The EP delegation works a bit in a bubble, but it is also true that the party does not invest a great deal in

trying to break that bubble. The party has limited resources and a limited number of people and mandates at its disposal, so it directs those resources to those issues that are politically useful—and preferably immediately so—to the detriment of EU issues which usually aren't. (personal communication)

Moreover, for both parties the EU issue is rather divisive. Although they are pro-EU generally, they have serious reservations about the policy direction in which the EU is heading. As such, neither leadership is jumping for joy to put the EU on the internal agenda.

Overall, functional goal-seeking, and particularly domestic vote-seeking, is the main driver for (the lack of) investment in the internal dimension of vertical integration. As such, government participation matters in the sense that not participating demolishes any investment incentives a party may have had. It simply does not pay off. However, once in government the image becomes more nuanced. Respondents have confirmed that government participation significantly increases the incentives to invest in coordination, both due to the policy opportunities and dissension risks. Yet, these incentives are mediated by other factors such as leadership style (N-VA), previous investments (CD&V), and internal cohesion (OVLD). While government participation thus seems to be a dependable overall predictor, it needs to be considered jointly with other party-specific factors.

5.2. External Dimension

With the notable exception of the Flemish nationalists, Flemish parties invest a significant amount of time and energy in the external dimension of vertical integration, i.e., cooperation and coordination with their respective Europarties and sister parties. The main incentives Flemish parties have to invest in them are the expected return in terms of office and policy. The Christian-democrats, for example, spend appreciable resources on interaction with the EPP. And with good reason: Investing in the EPP allows CD&V to "weigh on the course of the EPP and more broadly the EU far beyond what can otherwise be expected from essentially a rather small party" (personal communication). For one, EPP membership brought otherwise unattainable offices to key CD&V figures such as Dehaene, Martens, and Van Rompuy.

Similarly, the Flemish greens invest a great deal in the EGP, because the party believes the EGP "is the best way to communicate the green message in Europe" (personal communication). This is rather striking, however, given the fact that the EGP is nowhere near the level of institutionalisation of the EPP. As such, there is no immediate return on investment for Groen, as the EGP cannot offer them much high-ranking offices, nor does it have the organisational capacity to significantly weigh on EU policies. Groen's choice is thus both an ideological choice ('we are strongly pro-EU and thus want to see a strong EGP'), and a long-term rational investment ('one day a

strong EGP will yield the same returns as they see the EPP yielding today’).

Also, the socialist and liberal parties invest considerably in respectively the PES and ALDE, yet they have mixed feelings about the return on their investment. They are active members of their Europarties because they expect those Europarties to take the lead on a number of policy areas that outgrew the national level, e.g., climate change or the eurozone. And while both Europarties are quite vested and have more or less robust internal procedures, the Flemish socialists and liberals are frustrated about the lack of leadership and coherence their Europarties deliver. The PES is considered “a real disaster...nothing but the sum of national parties” (personal communication), while the initiatives taken by ALDE are deemed “interesting, but of little use” (personal communication).

One of the main reasons why they still invest in their Europarties is that the costs to do so are very small compared to the (reportedly limited) benefits—for example, a photo-op with a French president during campaigning. Additionally, both parties also stress their leaderships’ commitment to building transnational alliances, even though these do not seem to yield significant immediate gains. It is a matter of making a relatively small, but long-term investment that holds the possibility of high gains at a later stage, both in terms of office (e.g., Guy Verhofstadt) and policy.

The Flemish nationalists do not make this investment. Their comprehensive internal coordination is in stark contrast with the thrift with which they invest in external coordination. They pride themselves on not being coerced into positions by either the EFA party or the ECR group. Indeed, while the EFA is a weak Europarty that has little if anything to offer or demand, their choice for the ECR was both deliberate and imposed. Given how they felt they did not ideologically fit any of the existing groups, they purposely “chose for the ECR group because we were given the guarantee that we could pursue our own positions and not be forced by group pressure to go in one direction or another” (personal communication).

Their choice for the ECR that can thus be seen as a way of ensuring they are not forced into a straight-jacket that is too far off from their own position, but also as an insurance policy: they would get the benefits of being part of the third-largest EP group (e.g., in terms of offices and speaking time) without the obligation to agree upon sensitive issues with much more radical parties like the Polish PiS or the Sweden Democrats. As such, the N-VA is a good example of how various goals intertwine, but simultaneously of how a party’s prime concern is its position in the domestic arena rather than the European arena.

Overall, however, the Flemish parties spend no small part of their resources on their Europarties and maintaining transnational partisan networks. The main goal of this investment is to increase their (policy) influence in EU decision-making—and, perhaps on the side, to ob-

tain some prestigious offices—by using the Europarty as a leverage. The Flemish parties are very well aware of their relative smallness in the European context: “All of us [Flemish MEPs] together is about half the number of MEPs the CDU has” (personal communication). Therefore, parties try to compensate this lack of direct influence by investing in indirect influence through the Europarty—even if this influence is deemed insufficient, as with the liberals and socialists. Only the Flemish nationalists concluded that due to the dissonance with most Europarties, the investment is not worth the yield. They gladly sacrifice influence at the European level to ensure their own coherence and independence, which in turn necessitates greater internal investment.

However, functional goal-seeking is only part of the explanation. Indeed, the strength of the partisan network does not seem to be a reliable predictor of the investment national parties make. Although the positive argument holds for the ‘traditional’ parties, both the greens and the nationalists disprove it in a negative sense. Groen has no clear functional incentive to invest in the EGP and yet it does, while it is far from clear that the nationalists would make the investment even if the ECR/EFA would become a more institutionalised network. Rather, ideological considerations—a pro-EU stance (Groen) and ideological congruence (N-VA)—seem to drive their organisational choices. While the immediate benefits a European partisan network can offer thus certainly matter, they need to be considered in tandem with less functionally oriented factors.

6. Conclusion

This article assessed the multilevel organisation of national political parties in an EU context. By describing and explaining the way Flemish political parties are organised vis-à-vis the EU, it provides meaningful insights into an at times neglected element of EU multilevel governance. This conclusion addresses two issues. First, to what extent does the proposed framework sufficiently capture and explain parties’ choices for particular organisational strategies? Second, what do the findings tell us about multilevel democracy in the EU—do parties consider the EU a genuine political level, or are we living apart together?

This article builds on previous research that has shown that, while there is little to no ‘control’ of national parties over their EU-level agents, there are in fact significant amounts of contact between the domestic and European levels (Hix, Farrell, Scully, Whitaker, & Zapryanova, 2016; Jensen et al., 2013; Raunio, 2000; Senninger & Bischof, 2017). Looking more closely at the precise nature and structure of these contacts, the article presented a novel typology of multilevel party organisation in an EU context, based on the federal notion of vertical integration. By separating the external and internal dimensions of vertical integration, this approach allows for a holistic study of multilevel party or-

ganisation outside of the national and into the supra-national context—an aspect which has not received a lot of scholarly attention so far. Moreover, this article bridges different strands of literature by adopting a rational choice institutionalist perspective to explain why parties would opt for certain types of organisation. It argues that parties are functional goal-seekers that choose their organisation based on a cost-benefit analysis, involving both party characteristics and the institutional context. It was hypothesised that a party's government participation and the Europarty of which it is a member would explain its organisational choices.

Overall, Flemish parties are hesitant to invest a great deal in their vertical integration vis-à-vis the EU level, particularly on the internal dimension. The EU's limited electoral relevance seems to be the main reason for this. Indeed, in the domestic arena the EU is little more than a political issue that needs addressing when (and only when) it is salient. The cost of investing in coordination with those actors 'outside' the national arena, such as parties' EP delegation, is thus generally too great compared to the possible gains made 'inside' that arena. Drawing attention to the dominance of the domestic vote-seeking behaviour of parties, this article supports earlier accounts of the non-Europeanisation of political parties (Ladrech, 2007; Poguntke et al., 2007) and of party behaviour in multilevel democracies (Däubler, Müller, & Stecker, 2018).

Still, although (short-term) interaction seems to fluctuate with media attention, there is notable variation between Flemish parties in terms of their overall approach. Internally, government participation is a reliable indicator, as it largely determines the goal-seeking behaviour of parties: While opposition parties are mostly interested in gaining votes and winning elections, governing parties are confronted more directly with policy expectations and are more acutely concerned about internal cohesion. Still, the organisational traditions of a party also play an important role, as the cases of CD&V and N-VA clearly show. Externally, the strength of a European network can in itself only somewhat explain the observed variation. All parties recognise the functional advantages of being part of a European network, but additional normative concerns—such as the EU position of the party (Groen) and congruence with the Europarty (N-VA)—play an important mediating role.

Both H1 and H2 can thus only partially be confirmed, triggering the conclusion that the overall framework requires more refinement. Particularly, the differences between the Flemish parties point out that functional goal-seeking is not the only logic at play. Parties' organisational traditions and normative considerations also play an important role in their assessment of costs and benefits. As such, to understand party organisation, the rational choice institutionalist 'logic of consequences' needs to be supplemented by the logics of appropriateness and path dependency. Investing in vertical integration might be considered the (in)appropriate thing to do, or be a

compelling consequence of past investments, regardless of any concrete goal being achieved. While parties' rationality is thus not fundamentally in question, the case studies have shown that the cost-benefit analyses parties conduct also take into account norms and traditions.

As for the state of European democracy, these findings are not great news. Most Flemish parties largely separate their domestic and European activities, or confirm the dominance of the former over the latter. The EU is an issue that occasionally needs to be managed, but it is not a genuine polity of which parties recognise the political relevance (see also Braun, Hutter, & Kerscher, 2016). Yet, the meaningful translation of citizen preferences into EU decision-making requires intense cooperation both internally and externally. As such, the limited intra-party multilevel coordination significantly adds to the democratic deficit of the EU. Moreover, this study confirms the nation-state as the prime arena for public debate and democratic legitimacy. Considering the central role of parties therein, they have the responsibility to choose between pro-actively extending their activities to the European level—effectively breaking out of the nation-state—or to reconsider the democratic foundations of the EU as a collective of national democracies.

So, what can we learn from the Flemish case? These results simultaneously highlight the importance of EU politicisation in the domestic arena, while showing that norms and traditions can overrule functional imperatives. On the one hand, the variation between parties has shown the limits of rational goal-seeking behaviour as the chief explanation for parties' (multilevel) organisation. Parties, it would seem, have a wide range of specific incentives why (not) to invest in coordination with 'Brussels.' For example, as convincingly argued by Euchner and Frech in this thematic issue, the relationship between MEPs and national parties is highly complex and essentially questions the concept of parties as monolithic organisations (Euchner & Frech, 2020). Future research will thus need to look beyond domestic contextual factors, such as politicisation or proximity, and take a closer look at party-level factors to explain variation. Concurrently, the various incentives and motivations parties have to (not) invest in vertical integration, as well as the interplay between them, need to be qualified in more detail. Cross-country comparative research would add significantly to our understanding of the topic.

On the other hand, the case study has shown that politicisation matters greatly when it comes to multilevel coordination, particularly with parties' own EP delegation. The lack of domestic electoral relevance of what happens in the EP has led parties to maintain informal ad hoc contacts with their MEPs, rather than to invest in 'strong' coordinative structures. Although Belgium might have an exceptionally low politicisation, it is not by far the only country where the EU plays second fiddle. One can thus expect to find this overall result in most other EU member states: As long as the EU is not sufficiently politicised in the domestic arena, national parties will

have insufficient incentives to treat it as anything more than an issue. Until then, it remains most likely that we will be living apart together.

Acknowledgments

This article has benefited tremendously from the input from all participants to the 2019 Mons ECPR Joint Session on electoral democracy & European integration. The author would also like to thank professor Steven van Hecke for his invaluable input on the nature of Europarties, as well as professors Bram Wauters and Marc van de Wardt for their regular feedback.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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