

# ELECTORAL CHANGE, PARTY COMPETITION, AND THE POSITION OF THE EXTREME-RIGHT IN THE FLEMISH PARTY SYSTEM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tests the hypothesis that vote switching is more likely between ideologically similar parties than between more polarized ones using panel data on Flemish voters. Multidimensional scaling of symmetrical log odds ratios and the quasi-RC model are used to estimate the positions of Flemish parties from the pattern of electoral change (excluding the Flemish nationalist Volksunie). The results support a one-dimensional model of mainstream party competition with the liberal and Christian parties on the right, and the green and socialist parties on the left. This is broadly consistent with voter placement of parties on a summary left-right continuum which reflects economic, religious and post-materialist values. The Vlaams Blok have a strong anti-immigrant and anti-system platform. Since these issues cross-cut the summary dimension of mainstream competition, the Vlaams Blok, although clearly radical, mimics a centre party with respect to the pattern of electoral change.

**KEY WORDS:** Electoral Change, Belgium, Vlaams Blok, extreme-right, association models, policy position, proximity model.

One way to think about party competition is to imagine that political parties take positions in a policy space. This space represents the major issue dimensions that are important to voters and on which the parties have policies. Voters then vote for the party that best represents their preferences, i.e. the one that is closest to them in the policy space. This is known as the spatial (or proximity) theory of voting. Since parties and voters can move over time in the policy space, voters change who they vote for. Electoral change may also be the result of voter uncertainty and lack of information about party positions. Except in cases of radical change in party positions or public opinion, voting switching is much more likely to occur between parties which are similar to each other than between parties which are strongly polarized. This is the proximity rule of electoral change.

This paper tests this hypothesis using data on electoral change in Flanders from 1991 to 1995. This case was chosen both because there is a high quality panel survey covering these elections, and because the Flemish party system is a complex and interesting one. There are four major parties whose characters are roughly similar to equivalent parties in other western European countries, namely, the greens, socialists, Christian democrats and liberals. However there are also two Flemish nationalist parties. One is socially liberal (Volksunie), but the other is an anti-immigrant, anti-system, and extreme-right protest party (Vlaams Blok). How the relations between these parties can be summarized by positions in a policy space is a difficult question. It is also one that requires an answer in order to test the proximity rule of electoral change.

Various methods, including expert surveys, manifesto coding, candidate surveys, voter self-placement and voter placement of parties, are considered. The ordering of parties varies enormously between issues and so a complete picture of the policy positioning is necessarily complex. However, for the purposes of electoral competition, some issues and policy dimensions are more important than others, so the structure of party competition may be simplified and summarized in the minds of voters. For example when voters are asked to place parties and themselves on a left-right dimension, their answers reflect a combination of opinions on economic, religious and post-materialist issues. The Vlaams Blok do not fit comfortably in such a summary. Voters recognize

that the party is extreme, but they are unclear as to whether it is extreme left, or extreme right. This is because they mobilize support on different issues to those reflected in the left-right continuum (such as immigration), and voters know little about the position of the Blok on the mainstream issues.

Whilst the voter placement of parties on a left-right continuum is a reasonable one-dimensional summary of Flemish party competition, both the problem of interpreting the Vlaams Blok position and the inherent uncertainty over the 'true' shape of party competition imply that a straightforward test of the proximity rule against a single standard is impossible. Instead, we look to see whether the latent spatial model which best explains the pattern of electoral change is consistent with the general picture we have built up from various sources. With the assumption that the proximity rule is true, such a model can be estimated from the pattern of vote switching in two ways: multidimensional scaling of symmetrical log odds ratios; and quasi-association modelling. Both produce one-dimensional summaries of party positions which correspond reasonably well with our general impression of electoral competition. This suggests the pattern of electoral change is sensitive to party positioning as hypothesized. People were more likely to switch between parties that were similar to each other than between parties at different ends of the left-right continuum. Whilst the Vlaams Blok mimics a centrist party in the pattern of electoral change, this is understood in light of the fact that they compete on an anti-immigrant and anti-system platform and these issues cross-cut the economic, religious and post-materialist dimensions that form the basis of the summary left-right continuum.

### **The Proximity Rule of Electoral Change**

In their study of electoral volatility in Britain, Heath et al. (1991: Chapter 2) address the question of whether 'fluidity' between parties has increased. Fluidity between two parties is a measure of the extent to which people are willing to switch between them. Unsurprisingly, fluidity between the Conservative and Labour parties is always substantially lower than between any other pair of parties, or between any party and abstention. So consistent is the finding across time that Heath et al. claim, 'It is tempting to conclude that we have here a law of British electoral behaviour.'<sup>1</sup>

The empirical regularity seems to be founded on the simple intuition that electoral fluidity between more ideologically polarized parties is always lower than that between less ideologically polarized parties. In other words, people are more likely to switch to a party that is similar to their previous party than one which is very different. This idea echoes the spatial (or proximity) theory of voting (Downs, 1957). Within the spatial theory people vote for the party with the policy platform that is closest to their own policy preferences. Electoral change within the spatial model is the result of either a movement of the electorate, a movement of the parties or a change in the relevant policy dimensions on which the movement of voters and parties is measured. Taking this idea literally, there should be no change in voting behaviour at all if these things remain constant. However, there could also be idiosyncratic movement, error and uncertainty. In which case it is reasonable to suppose that the chances of individuals switching from one party to another depend on how far those parties are apart. Specifically, voters are more likely to switch to a party that is closer to their previous party than one further away. Since the proposition fits so well with the spatial theory of voting, it will be known as the proximity rule of electoral change.

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<sup>1</sup> Repeating the analysis of Heath et al. (1991) using the voter transition matrix between the 1992 and 1997 British General Elections shows that this pattern still holds. Fluidity between Labour and the Conservatives was lower than that between Labour and the Liberal Democrats even though there were more switchers between the former pair than the later pair between 1992 and 1997.

To test the proximity rule we need to know the distances between the parties, but measuring these distances is far from straightforward. Positions of parties on issue dimensions can be measured in different ways: by experts; through the opinions of party members and/or candidates; or by public perception. As the following section shows, the ordering of parties can be very different depending on the issue involved and on the method used. It is also far from clear how then to choose between the various estimates and compute the distances between parties to test the proximity rule. An alternative method is to see whether the pattern of electoral change together with the proximity rule is consistent with a broad picture of party positions. Thus we need to assume the rule is true and derive the party positions from the pattern of electoral change. If the proximity rule and the observed pattern of change point to a spatial model of the parties that is consistent with the general impression gained from other methods then this is good evidence that the proximity rule is true.

### Mapping Party Positions in Flanders

The party system in Flanders is complex because it reflects a number of different cleavages and issues. Two traditional cleavages separate the three largest and oldest parties in Flanders. Religion polarizes the Christian, Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP), with the socialist, Socialistische Partij (SP), and the Liberals<sup>2</sup>. The Liberals changed the name of their party from the Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang (PVV) in 1991 to the Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD) in 1995.<sup>3</sup> Divisions on the basis of economic interests see the CVP between the SP on the left and the PVV/VLD on the right. In the 1960s and 1970s the linguistic-cultural divide in Belgium became more politicized and this is reflected in the rise of the Volksunie (VU) in Flanders (Billiet, 1982). Two further parties emerged at the end of the 1970s, the extreme far right, racist and anti-immigrant Vlaams Blok (VB) and the green party, Agalev, giving expression to exclusive-universalist and materialist-postmaterialist dimensions respectively (Swyngedouw, 1995).

Although experts commonly accept that there are at least four dimensions at play in Flemish politics, in the eyes of the voter party competition may still be basically one-dimensional. This could be either because attitudes on different issues underpinning the different dimensions are moderately to highly correlated, or because some issues are very much more important than others. For Gabel and Huber (2000) the left-right dimension is defined to be the best one-dimensional summary of a variety of different political issues, and may vary from state to state and over time. For others, left-right is a more permanent structural feature of party competition, but it can mean different things in different places. Castels and Mair (1984) used a postal survey of experts to identify the positions of parties on a left-right scale. The results put the parties in the order {Socialist, Christian, VU, Liberal, VB} but omit the green party. With the exception of the Vlaams Blok the ordering appears to be based on economic policy. The Liberals are on the right because they are economically *laissez-faire*, the CVP are centrist on economic issues, and the socialists and greens are both on the left. Other expert evaluations of left-right position broadly agree with this ordering. A couple of expert studies have distinguished more explicitly between different dimensions. For instance, Laver and Hunt (1992) use a tax-spend scale on which the parties were found to be ordered {SP, AG, CVP, VU, VB, PVV} and a social policy permissiveness scale for which the order was {SP, PVV, AG, VU, CVP, VB}. One important problem with these surveys is that they may give an

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<sup>2</sup> Liberal in the continental sense, i.e. *laissez-faire* economic policy and libertarian views on cultural and ethical issues.

<sup>3</sup> The title VLD is sometimes used here to refer to both the PVV in 1991 and the VLD in 1995 for ease of reference.

outdated picture of party competition, since even the most recent were conducted before the critical election of 1991 in which the greens and the Vlaams Blok saw substantial gains in their share of the vote. There is one expert study after this time by Huber and Inglehart (1995) but unfortunately it excludes the Vlaams Blok and the Flemish Liberals.

Another problem with the expert judgement method of locating parties is knowing whether the position attributed to a particular party represents its current policies or some combination of present and past experience. The content analysis of manifesto data has become increasingly popular in part because it can yield a measure of party position at discrete points in time. The philosophy behind the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) is that parties compete with each other by emphasizing the issues that are important to them and this is reflected in the manifesto content. By measuring the amount of material on an issue you find the party position on that issue. Hence the slogan, 'emphasis is position'. Budge et al. (2001) go on to summarize a set of issues, including economic policy, education, social policy, foreign policy, human rights, traditional morality, law and order, and others, into a summary left-right position. The left-right position of the Flemish parties for 1991 and 1995 are presented in Figure 1. Although one of the advantages of manifesto data is comparable measurements over time, data for the VLD and Agalev are missing for 1995. Also unfortunately, the MRG left-right scores give an unusual, and probably false, impression of party competition. In particular, the Liberals (PVV) are positioned quite far to the left when they are generally thought of as right wing. Although they paid great attention to reforming the political system in the 1990s, they were very much *laissez-faire* on economic policies. Their leader, Guy Verhofstadt, was dubbed 'Baby Thatcher' by the press. Since there have been serious criticisms of the 'emphasis is position' approach and the construction of the left-right scale (Laver and Garry, 2000; Gabel and Huber, 2000), and the results paint an unfamiliar picture of Flemish party positions, it is wise not to proceed with them.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

A third method of identifying party positions is to ask politicians. Positions of parliamentary candidates in 1991 on various policies were measured by Maddens (1996) using a questionnaire mailed to candidates during the campaign. His results are reproduced in Figure 2 below and they show quite clearly that not only does the order of the parties vary substantially across issues, but they all give different impressions of the structure of party competition.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.

Figure 3 shows the mean positions of the voters for each party on the same issues, as recorded in the ISPO election survey (Carton et al., 1993). The correspondence between voters and candidates is far from perfect, although it is usually the case that the voters' attitudes are in the same direction, but not as strong as those of the candidates. This pattern is familiar in Britain (Norris, 1994). On some issues, such as the environment, candidates from most parties are more to one side than the voters. But even here the order of the parties is the same for both voters and candidates and the relative difference between the greens and others is similar. The congruence between voters and parties depends on the importance of the issue. For example, abortion, federalization and especially the arms trade (which was never a campaign issue despite being the immediate cause of government collapse in 1991) are all less salient than economic policy. So the relationship between party and voter positions is weaker. This may be either because the party fails to take a lead or because the voters are not interested. The general rule of congruence between the candidate and voter issue positions, and the ability to explain

exceptions in terms of salience all adds confidence in the candidate survey measures and the relevance of party positions to voting behaviour. Nonetheless, the problem with these measures is that party policy is not simply the average of candidates or voters positions. Rather, it is determined by the party as an organization, usually with strong influence from the leadership.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE.

A fourth method is to ask voters to place the parties on the different issue scales. Figure 4 shows the mean voter placement of the parties in 1991 on five issues. The first three of these are exactly the same scales as in Figure 2 above. The patterns are very similar to those of the voters, and especially the candidates, of each party. On the economy, the Liberals are to the right, with the SP and Agalev to the left. The voters recognize that the Vlaams Blok is distinctly anti-immigrant rights. The difference between the perception of the CVP as relatively pro-immigrant and the average CVP candidate position is probably related to the strong public anti-discrimination stance of the 1989 Royal Commissioner on immigration who was a prominent ex-CVP politician. On the environment Agalev is perceived to be even more radical than their candidates. Finally, although the question as to whether Flanders or Belgium should have control is not restricted to the social security question, as it is in Figure 2, the correlation between the two is extremely strong. Equivalent figures for 1995 show that the average placement of the parties did not change appreciably on all these issues, with the exception of a one point move by the CVP towards further economic regulation.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE.

On average, voter impressions of party positions are close to the positions of the candidates. However at the individual level there is a large variance in voter evaluations. The standard deviation is typically between two and three. Inspection of histograms shows that in many cases there is enormous uncertainty. Clustering of parties round the centre is more often the result of people who are unsure giving the mid-point answer than anything else. Whilst there is evidence to show that voters tend to align their own party with their own beliefs, and distance other parties (Merrill III et al., 2001), tests show that the order of the parties on each scale is robust, in the sense that voters are clear which of any two parties is more to the left of the other.<sup>4</sup>

The final line of Figure 4 gives voter placements of parties on a left-right scale.<sup>5</sup> Since respondents in the survey were given no guidance on what they should understand by the terms 'left' and 'right' it is not immediately clear what the placements on this scale may mean. However, there is research which shows that in the Netherlands, left-right party placement is strongly related to policy positions as described by the Manifesto Research Group, particularly, but not only, on economic issues (van der Brug, 1999). More directly, Knutsen (1995) has shown that voter self-placement on the left-right continuum in Belgium, and several other European countries, reflects a mixture of economic, religious and post-materialist views. So left-right as popularly understood is not simply the economic dimension, but a summary of major issues in mainstream Flemish politics. This idea makes sense when comparing placement on the left-right scale with others in Figure 4 and Figure 2. The Liberals are on the right because they are economically *laissez-faire*. The CVP are also on the right because they are the traditional Catholic party. The socialists and greens are on the left since they are neither Catholic nor *laissez-faire*, and in the case of the greens, clearly post-materialist.

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<sup>4</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule when parties are extremely close to each other.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the question was not repeated for the 1995 survey.

The position of the Vlaams Blok cannot be understood in the same way because the mean score gives a misleading impression that the Blok is viewed as a moderate right-wing party. Of those who attempted to place the Vlaams Blok on the left-right scale, 18 per cent put them on the extreme-left and 43 per cent put them on the extreme-right. The remainder were uniformly distributed on the scale. So the Blok is clearly an extreme party, it just wasn't clear whether they were extreme left or right. This is understandable for two reasons. Firstly, the voters have little idea about what position the Vlaams Blok take (if any) on the economic, religious and post-materialist issues. The levels of uncertainty for the position of the Vlaams Blok on mainstream issues are much higher, typically twice as high, as those for other parties. On post-materialism, 42 per cent said they did not know whether the Blok prioritized economic growth or quality of life. A further 13 per cent placed them in the middle of the scale, which suggests uncertainty. Similarly, when asked to place the Blok on the government regulation *versus* free trade scale, 48 per cent did not know, 9 per cent put them in the middle, and the rest were evenly distributed along the scale in where they thought the Blok stood. So, contrary to the Kitschelt and McGann (1995) hypothesis that the success of the radical right in Europe is partly due to *laissez-faire* economic policies, in the eyes of the electorate the Vlaams Blok has no position on economic policy.<sup>6</sup>

The second reason why the Blok has no real position on the left-right continuum is that they actually mobilize on issues that cut across those reflected in the left-right continuum. Whilst voters know little about the economic policy position of the Vlaams Blok, they are clear that the party takes an anti-immigrant stance. It is also true that attitudes to immigration are remarkably uncorrelated with attitudes on the issues that separate the mainstream parties (Billiet and de Witte, 1995; Swyngedouw 1993, 1995). So the issue on which the Vlaams Blok is most distinctive actually cross-cuts the summary left-right continuum. Furthermore, the Vlaams Blok argues frequently that the political system in Belgium is corrupt. They are also particularly vehement about the mainstream Flemish political parties (Mudde, 1996). So the Blok is also an anti-system (Sartori, 1976) or anti-political-establishment (Schedler, 1996) party, and as such it has a monopoly on protest voting to signal dissatisfaction with the political system (Swyngedouw and Ivaldi, 1999). This feature of the Vlaams Blok helps make it distinctive in the minds of voters, and therefore adds to the difficulty of placing it on the left-right continuum along with the mainstream parties.

This section has shown that whilst Flemish politics is clearly multidimensional, the dominant structure is visible when voters are asked to simplify the party competition by placing voters on a left-right scale. Whilst we cannot conclude that the positions of the parties on the left-right scale represent the 'true' nature of Flemish party competition, this is perhaps the best information we have when interpreted broadly and in light of other material presented here. In particular, when different issue dimensions are summarized into a single dimension, Agalev and the SP are to the left whilst the CVP and the Liberals are to the right, but the Vlaams Blok seem to have no real position on the issues that separate the mainstream parties. To this extent we have a general picture of the party positioning in policy space, not a precise model. Although it would have been ideal to have a particular set of distances between parties to test the proximity rule of electoral change, this has not been possible. Instead we must use the proximity rule as an assumption to estimate a model of party competition and compare the results with the picture developed here.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Swyngedouw (1993: 98).

## The Electoral Change Data

The data for this study are taken from the Belgian general election panel study from 1991 to 1995 (Beerten et al., 1997). The availability of a high quality panel study is an advantage for this work because the information on vote choice is collected in the months immediately after the election. This gives more confidence than vote recall data going back four years. Such recall data has been shown to suffer from a bias towards current voting behaviour. Even if all the measurement error is random there can be substantial difficulties in modelling contingency tables so minimization of the possible sources of error is very important (Hagenaars, 1993).

The response rate to the 1991 wave in Flanders was 64 per cent and resulted in 2691 interviews. Of these 2578 were selected for the panel study in 1995, and 1760 were successfully interviewed. This represents a response rate of 68 per cent, but it should be noted that 123 (5 per cent) of the 1991 respondents were found to have either moved or died between the 1991 and 1995 surveys, and there may be others who were not identified as such. Departures from the sampling population should not be considered as non-response and a potential source of bias. Here the sampling frame is all those who voted for a top six party in both the 1991 and 1995 elections for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. Thus, new electors in 1995 and those who left the electorate between 1991 and 1995 are not included. Voters for small parties that are not represented in parliament, non-voters and those who spoiled their ballot papers are also excluded.<sup>7</sup> If such electors were included, the resulting transition matrix would be so large and sparse that statistical problems for model fitting would arise. Since the aim is to study competition between the major parties rather than to account for all facets of electoral change, there is little to be lost and much to be gained by avoiding these problems.

Non-response affects the panel at two points. In the 1991 survey, Agalev, CVP and PVV voters were over-represented whilst the SP was under-represented. This problem has been tackled using a weight that adjusts the sample to the population margins according to age, vote and gender, whilst preserving the pattern of association in the joint distribution of age, vote and gender observed in the sample. In 1995, the panel attrition implied that resulting respondents were no longer a representative sample of the original respondents. Most notably those who voted for the Vlaams Blok in 1991 were under-represented. For this reason, all those respondents who voted for a top six party at both elections were weighted so that the 1991 distribution of the vote matched that for the sample of top six party voters in 1991 who were selected for the panel and did not die or move out of the population between 1991 and 1995. Since the 1991 weight provided by ISPO and a re-weight of the final panel have been applied, a reasonable attempt has been made to account for non-response bias at both surveys in the panel.<sup>8</sup>

### Testing the Proximity Rule of Electoral Change

The data are best presented as row percentages, as in Table 1 below, since these tell us about how the probability of voting for a particular party in 1995 depended on the party voted for in 1991. A large proportion of the voters for each party in 1991 remained loyal to that party in 1995. In fact 72.9 per cent of the sample studied here did so. However, the loyalty rates for each party were not all the same. They range from 44.5 per cent for Agalev to 87.9 per cent for the CVP. Typically, we find that the loyalty rate roughly increases with the party size, but more noticeably, the loyalty rates for the younger parties

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<sup>7</sup> Voting is compulsory in Belgium, so turnout is generally above ninety per cent.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, the analyses here have been run without any adjustment for non response and the results are similar.

(Agalev and the Vlaams Blok who were founded in the 1980s) are much lower than those for the traditional parties.

The parties have been presented in the order {AG, SP, VU, CVP, VLD, VB} since this is a plausible summary, particularly of the economic and immigration issues. However, this is intended merely as a working hypothesis for illustration purposes. Nonetheless, with this ordering one can see that there is a tendency for voters to be less likely to switch to parties that are further away from their party of origin than they are to switch to a party that is closer (the proximity rule). For instance, the first row shows that those who voted Agalev in 1991 were less likely to switch to a party the further it is to the right. For other cases we need to distinguish between moving to the left and moving to the right because those who voted for the SP, Volksunie or CVP in 1991 were more likely to vote for any party to the right than any party to the left in 1995. The opposite is true of PVV voters in 1991.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE.

For the Volksunie and CVP, the proximity rule holds (with respect to the given order) if we allow for the dominance of movement to the right. For the other parties there are some exceptions. First, 1991 Vlaams Blok voters were much more likely to vote SP in 1995 than we would expect if the proximity rule were true. This may be because many VB voters are former SP voters who are sensitive to the main issue at stake in the 1995 elections: the defence of the social security system. Second, surprisingly few SP or PVV voters in 1991 voted for the Volksunie in 1995. For the older generations of voters the Volksunie is still associated with the collaboration of the Flemish Movement, both before and during WWII, since the Volksunie has been the movement's political expression since 1956. This is particularly the view in freemasonry circles, which include both SP and Liberal supporters who like to see themselves as veterans of the wartime resistance. Coupled with this was a stark contrast between the images of the SP and the Volksunie in the early 1990s. After its exceptionally long participation in government (11 years by 1995), the SP came to be seen as an establishment party and developed a rather tough stance towards immigrants and illegals. The Volksunie, by contrast, was a post-materialist and Flemish nationalist opposition party with Bert Anciaux as its young and unconventional party leader. So the SP and Volksunie could be said to attract very different voters despite their similarities on policy platforms, and this view is supported by the fact that Volksunie voters in 1995 were younger and more educated, while SP voters were rather old and less-educated (Swyngedouw et al., 1999).

There are, however, more fundamental reasons why the flow of votes to and from the Volksunie should be unusual. The party was created in the 1950s with the federalization of Belgium as its *raison d'être*. In 1993 Belgium became a federal country and so the party had to fundamentally rethink its purpose and role. The Volksunie effectively split between 1991 and 1995 when several senior politicians, including its former leader, left the party for the revamped Liberal party. So it is unsurprising that between these two elections, there was a relatively high rate of switching away from the Volksunie particularly to the VLD. Given such a traumatic event and the multi-faceted nature of the Volksunie, the peculiar pattern of vote transfer involving this party is not surprising. Unfortunately, this effectively means removing the Flemish nationalist dimension from consideration in further analysis.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst there is mixed support for the proximity rule with respect to the ordering {AGALEV, SP, VU, CVP, VLD, VB} it is not clear whether it is good enough, whether

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<sup>9</sup> Although the Vlaams Blok are Flemish separatists, concern for Flemish autonomy is rarely a reason for Vlaams Blok voting, but the main reason for choosing the Volksunie (Swyngedouw, 2001; Vuylsteke et al., 1997).



some other ordering might be better, or whether any single ordering is sufficient. To answer these questions we estimate the best fit spatial model for the pattern of vote switching. There are two statistical techniques that be used to infer latent spatial models assuming the proximity rule of electoral change holds. The first is based on the symmetrical log odds ratios that Heath et al. (1991) used to measure electoral fluidity. The proximity rule prescribes that fluidity should be correlated with the distance between parties and therefore amenable to standard statistical techniques for distance data, such as multidimensional scaling (Everitt and Rabe-Hesketh, 1997; Kurscal and Wish, 1978). The second approach uses the log multiplicative model for contingency tables with ordered categories known as the quasi-RC model (Goodman, 1979). This model provides estimates of the party positions on a single dimension on the basis that people who voted for a party towards one end of the scale at one election are more likely to vote for a party towards the same end at the next election. These are applied in the following two subsections. Since the methods rely on the proximity rule working for all parties in the system, the Volksunie has to be excluded from further analysis. The flow of the vote to and from the Volksunie is extremely odd for known reasons, especially the party split. So it is impossible to make sense of the overall pattern of mobility if the Volksunie is included.

### **Multidimensional Scaling of Electoral Fluidity**

Symmetrical log odds ratios (SLORs) have been used by Heath et al. (1991) as measures of electoral fluidity. Formally, the symmetrical log odds ratio (SLOR) for two parties X and Y is the odds of voting for X rather than Y given a vote for X at the previous election, divided by the odds of voting for X rather than Y given a vote for Y at the previous election. The odds of voting for X rather than Y given a vote for X at the previous election is the conditional probability of voting for X divided by the conditional probability of voting for Y, given a vote for X at the previous election. So

$$\text{SLOR}(X,Y)=\log\left(\frac{P(X|X)/P(Y|X)}{P(X|Y)/P(Y|Y)}\right), \quad (1)$$

where  $P(A|B)$  is the probability of voting A given a vote for B previously. The intuition behind the SLOR is that it increases as the exchange of votes between the parties decreases relative to the number of voters remaining constant. So, the larger the SLOR the less willing people are to switch between the parties, hence the fluidity of votes is lower. So if the frequency of vote switching is driven by the proximity rule then the SLOR provides a measure of how far apart the parties are. However, the willingness to switch between two parties should depend not only on the distance between them, but also on the proximity of other parties. When a party has many close neighbours the willingness to switch to a party a given distance away is likely to be less than it would be if there were very few close neighbours. It is not clear how to account for this possibility so it must be assumed that the influence of other parties on the SLOR is negligible.

The SLORs for the voters of the top six parties in Flanders between 1991 and 1995 are presented in Table 2 in order of magnitude. The smallest SLOR is that between Agalev and the SP which shows that fluidity between these two parties was greater than that between any other pair of parties. By contrast, fluidity was unsurprisingly lowest between the two parties with the highest loyalty rates, the SP and CVP. The first two SLORs suggest the SP is close to both Agalev and the Vlaams Blok. The next three seem to indicate that the CVP, VLD and Vlaams Blok form a group. Since both groups include

the Vlaams Blok this suggests that the Vlaams Blok is in the centre of the political space, which is unsurprising given the pattern in Table 1.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Although it is not necessarily true that SLORs from voter transition matrices form a metric, there is good reason to believe that they will conform to the conditions in practice.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the SLORs in Table 2 satisfy the requirements. So there is the formal, as well as the intuitive justification for modelling the SLORs as distances between parties. If one assumes that these distances are derived from a latent space, multidimensional scaling (MDS) is a standard technique used to estimate the positions of the parties and the relevant number of dimensions. The one-dimensional solution is presented in Figure 5 below. The method allows a linear transformation of the SLORs, but the results are similar to those with only an affine transformation, or those from a non-metric analysis. The stress statistic of 0.0404 indicates a good fit to the data.

The MDS analysis, therefore, suggests that the party positions can be summarized along a single dimension with the greens as the most extreme to one end and the CVP the furthest to the other end. By and large the ordering of the parties is consistent with the idea of a left and right bloc. Agalev and the SP are together on the left whilst the VLD and CVP are on the right. The position of the Vlaams Blok in the centre of the scale is explicable both with respect to the observations in Tables 1 and 2, and in light of its detachment from the mainstream party competition. The Blok is not genuinely in the centre, but they appear to be so because they have no real position on the mainstream left-right continuum.

#### FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE.

As noted above, the dominant feature of the voter transition matrix is that the majority of voters in 1995 were loyal to the party they voted for in 1991. This loyalty rate varied substantially between parties and this has a very strong effect on the symmetrical log odds ratios. Indeed, the low loyalty rate of Vlaams Blok voters helped to contribute to the low SLORs involving that party and thus its position in the centre. One problem is that high loyalty rates for the older traditional parties may have more to do with high party identification as a result of political socialization, than issue positions. Similarly, the relative youth of the Vlaams Blok and Agalev mean that they benefit less from a stable long-term support base. This is likely to be an important part of the reason why the Vlaams Blok appears as a centrist party in the pattern of electoral change. In the following section we present a quasi-RC model of electoral change which takes account of differential loyalty by modelling only those who switched votes.

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<sup>10</sup> Any real valued function of two points, say X and Y, constitutes a metric if it satisfies the following four conditions. The first is symmetry, i.e.  $SLOR(X,Y)=SLOR(Y,X)$ , proof by inspection. Second, the SLOR must be non-negative everywhere. This is not necessarily true for any transition matrix, but is highly likely and certainly true for the data discussed here. Third,  $SLOR(X,Y)=0$  if and only if  $X=Y$ .  $SLOR(X,X)$  can be defined to be zero for all X, but it may still be that the SLOR for two different parties is zero. However, it is not true here and it is very unlikely in practice. Finally, the fourth condition is the triangle inequality:  $SLOR(X,Z)\leq SLOR(X,Y)+SLOR(Y,Z)$ . Roughly this can be interpreted as saying that the distance between X and Z must be less than or equal to the distance from X to Z via Y. Again this is another condition that is not necessarily true for any set of symmetrical log odds ratios defined on a transition matrix, but it is contingently true for the data used here.

## The Quasi-RC Model

A set of ‘association models’ for contingency tables with ordered categories have been developed by Goodman (1979) based on the idea that the pattern of association can be described by assigning scores to the row and column categories of the table.<sup>11</sup> The log multiplicative row and column association model (the RC model) is defined by the equation,

$$\log(F_{ij}) = \lambda + \lambda_{A(i)} + \lambda_{B(j)} + \phi\mu_i\nu_j . \quad (2)$$

Here,  $F_{ij}$  is the cell count for row  $i$  and column  $j$ ,  $\lambda$  represents a constant, the  $\lambda_{A(i)}$  are parameters that account for the differences in the marginal distribution of the row variable and likewise the  $\lambda_{B(j)}$  account for differences in the marginal distribution of the column variable. The final term of equation (2) describes the pattern of association in the odds ratios.  $\phi$  is the coefficient of association, which is a measure of the strength of association. The  $\mu_i$ ,  $i=1, \dots, I$  are the row scores and the  $\nu_j$ ,  $j=1, \dots, J$  are the column scores. From equation (2) it is easy to show that,

$$\log\{\theta_{ij(i'j')}\} = \log\{F_{ij}F_{i'j'}/(F_{ij'}F_{i'j})\} = \phi(\mu_i - \mu_{i'})(\nu_j - \nu_{j'}) . \quad (3)$$

So the log odds ratio for any two origin parties and any two destination parties is proportional to the product of the difference in the scores for the two origin parties and the difference of the scores for the two destination parties. Thus the chances of voting for party X rather than party Y in 1995 for someone that voted for party Z in 1991, increase relative to 1991 W voters, with the gap between parties X and Y on the destination scores, and the gap between parties Z and W in the origin scores.<sup>12</sup> Note that the pattern of association is not modelled as a function of the distances between the origin and destination parties, but as a function of the distances between origin parties and between destination parties. The justification for the RC model is by analogy with correlation. Suppose that observations from a bivariate normal distribution are in fact measured using two categorical variables instead of two continuous variables. When standardized scores are used for the row and column categories in the RC model the association parameter  $\phi$  corresponds to  $\rho/(1-\rho^2)$  where  $\rho$  is the correlation coefficient (Goodman, 1981). In the RC model, those who voted for a party with a high score in 1991 (row score) were most likely to vote for a party with a high score in 1995 (column score). So if the scores can be interpreted using a left-right dimension, for example, then we say that left wing voters are more likely to vote for a left wing party again than for a right wing party and *vice versa*. To this extent the RC model seems to accord with the proximity rule.

The quasi-independence model has been described as a ‘mover-stayer’ model since it divides voters into those who sometimes switch parties, ‘movers’, and those who always vote for the same party, ‘stayers’ (Blumen et al., 1955; Swyngedouw, 1987) . For the movers the probability of voting for a party is independent of the party voted for in the previous election. The quasi-RC model is an extension of the quasi-independence model in which the movers do not switch parties at random. Instead the probability of voting for a particular party for the movers follows an RC model. By allowing some of the voters on the main diagonal to be ‘stayers’ or ‘loyalists’, the quasi-RC model allows us to account for the very high level of consistency in voting behaviour. This is valuable because the large differences in loyalty levels between parties are probably the result of

<sup>11</sup> See also Clogg and Shihadeh (1994) for detailed exposition and applications.

<sup>12</sup> This assumes that the gaps between the scores are positive which is appropriate given that we normally talk about the size of gaps as if they were scalars. Strictly speaking, the differences in row and column scores in equation (3) within the RC model are vectors. The idea expressed here still holds however.

factors such as party identification. When the aim is to identify the spatial positions of parties, such additional influences on electoral change are nuisance effects. The quasi-association models 'control' for these influences and base the inference of party positions solely on the voters that actually switched parties.

Figure 6 shows the scores for the quasi-RC model with equal row and column scores estimated using LEM (Vermunt, 1997). The model has a good fit to the data since the likelihood ratio test has a p-value of 0.136. It is also a statistically significant improvement on the more parsimonious quasi-independence model, which does not provide a good fit to the data. Substantively, equal scores imply that the party positions remained constant between 1991 and 1995. The scores for each party are written in ascending order for ease of interpretation. The quasi-RC model should give the best one-dimensional summary of the distribution of parties as based on the pattern of switching by the 'movers'.

Although there are some common features, Figure 6 gives a different picture of party competition than Figure 5. The CVP and VLD are now practically in the same position. Also the greens are not clearly on the left with the SP, but much closer to the centre. In fact Agalev is almost as close to the centre point as the Vlaams Blok. Nonetheless, Figure 6 still divides the socialists and the greens on one side from the CVP and VLD on the other, with the Vlaams Blok in between. There is a change of in how the parties line up within the left and right blocs, but the blocs are still identifiable. Although it is not surprising that the two methods produce different results, it is difficult to explain why they differ in the way they do. Since the multidimensional scaling analysis relies heavily on the cells in the main diagonal and the quasi-RC model ignores them, one would expect the MDS solution to place parties with low voter loyalty close to the centre. In fact it is the quasi-RC model that places Agalev closest to the centre. Likewise, the CVP has a higher loyalty rate than the VLD, but the CVP is still placed slightly further to the right by the multidimensional scaling solution.

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE.

Since the quasi-RC model does not in fact place the parties with the lower loyalty rates further to the extremes than the multidimensional scaling analysis, there is little reason to prefer the quasi-RC model. The rationale for the quasi-RC model is more tenuous because it is based on the idea of correlation between the origin and destination (row and column) scores for the parties, with no consideration of the distance from the origin to the destination party. By way of contrast, the symmetrical log odds ratio measures willingness to switch between a pair of parties, and so it is an intuitive indicator of the distance between the two parties if one believes the proximity rule of electoral change. The multidimensional scaling of the symmetrical log odds ratios is therefore much easier to understand and more attractive on the grounds of transparency.

Despite this preference, both approaches to the estimation of party positions using the proximity rule are still valuable. Features common to the results of both estimation procedures are more likely to be robust and this gives the analyst greater confidence when drawing conclusions. Given the very substantial differences between the two techniques, it is comforting that there is a high degree of similarity in their results. Both find a one-dimensional model to be adequate and both support the broad conclusions about party competition based on the voter placement of parties on a summary left-right continuum. Both distinguish the left bloc (SP and Agalev) from the right bloc (CVP and VLD) even though the order within blocs differs. Also, both show that the Vlaams Blok mimics a centre party with respect to the pattern of electoral change, and this is consistent with the idea that the Blok has no real position on the left-right summary, but mobilizes on other issues unrelated to those which characterize mainstream party competition. It would be

ideal to see this represented in the results of our analyses, but there is insufficient information in the pattern of electoral change alone to distinguish between real centrist parties and those that stand alone on different issues.

### Conclusion

In the course of the argument this paper makes three main points. First, it is difficult to estimate, let alone summarize party positions. Expert surveys, manifesto coding, candidate studies and voter placement of parties each have their problems and they often disagree with each other. Not only does the order of parties vary enormously depending on the issue and dimension, but also different methods of measurement disagree about positions on the same dimensions. However, if one is primarily interested in electoral competition and how voters respond to the choices they have available to them, some broad conclusions are possible. Voter placement of parties on a left-right continuum reflects a combination of economic, religious and post-materialist values. The greens and the socialists are clearly on the left, whilst the Christian CVP and the liberals are on the right. The extreme-right Vlaams Blok do not have a place on this summary scale because voters do not know what position they take (if any) on the mainstream issues which influence placement on the left-right continuum.

Second, with the exception of the Volksunie, electoral change between 1991 and 1995 in Flanders does seem to be sensitive to the party positions on the left-right dimension. Both the multidimensional scaling of fluidity measures, and the quasi-RC model suggest that a one-dimensional model is adequate to explain the pattern of electoral change. Furthermore, both polarized the left bloc (greens and socialists) with the right bloc (CVP and Liberals). To this extent the proximity rule appears to hold with respect to the broad conclusions about the way voters summarize the structure of party competition on a left-right continuum. Unfortunately, the Volksunie, and therefore the nationalist element of Flemish politics, had to be excluded from the analysis because the pattern of vote switching involving this party is peculiar, not least because the party effectively split between the two elections under consideration.

Third, the 'extreme-right' Vlaams Blok resembles a centre party in the pattern of vote switching. There is a remarkable consistency between the rate at which people switched from other major parties to the Vlaams Blok and between the rates at which Vlaams Blok voters switched to the other parties. But rather than actually being in the centre of the party system, the Blok takes no position on the left-right continuum. Instead it mobilizes support on different issues that are largely unrelated to those which distinguish the mainstream parties from each other. The Vlaams Blok does not, therefore, conform to the Kitschelt and McGann (1995) hypothesis that radical right parties achieve success by adopting an authoritarian and *laissez-faire* stance. The economic policy of the party is ambiguous and unidentifiable for voters, and their position on the moral issues that separate the other parties is of minor importance in understanding the Vlaams Blok vote. Anti-immigrant sentiment is the political attitude which best predicts Vlaams Blok voting, and it is only very weakly correlated with other mainstream policy preferences. Similarly, the Vlaams Blok is also an anti-system party with a monopoly on the protest vote expressing dissatisfaction with the political system as a whole. In trying to mobilize support against the system, it is actually an advantage to advertise a fairly neutral position on the main dimension of party competition. This way the Blok has the potential to attract voters from all the other parties, as we observe. Thus, the Vlaams Blok appears in the centre because it stands alone in opposition to a common position by other parties on issues which cross-cut the dominant policy dimension.

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Table 1 Voter transition matrix for 1991 to 1995 (row percentages)

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	1995 Agalev	SP	VU	CVP	VLD	VB	Total	(N)
1991								
Agalev	44.5	22.7	10.0	10.9	9.1	2.7	100.0	(110)
SP	3.6	80.0	0.7	7.6	4.0	4.0	100.0	(275)
VU	3.8	5.4	59.2	14.6	9.2	7.7	100.0	(130)
CVP	0.8	1.9	1.9	87.9	4.8	2.7	100.0	(373)
PVV	1.1	6.4	0.8	13.6	76.5	1.5	100.0	(264)
VB	3.2	14.3	7.1	11.7	14.3	49.4	100.0	(154)
Total	5.7	22.8	8.4	33.2	21.1	8.7	100.0	(1306)

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Note: Unweighted  $N=1387$ .



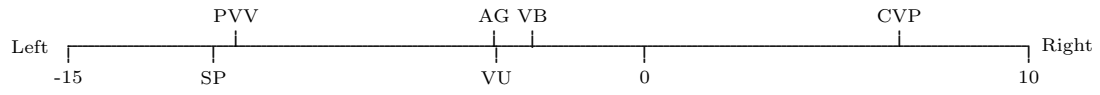
Table 2 Symmetrical log odds ratios (SLORs)

AG:SP	3.76
SP:VB	4.24
CVP:VLD	4.63
CVP:VB	4.93
VLD:VB	5.16
SP:VLD	5.47
AG:VB	5.51
AG:VLD	5.80
AG:CVP	6.10
SP:CVP	6.20

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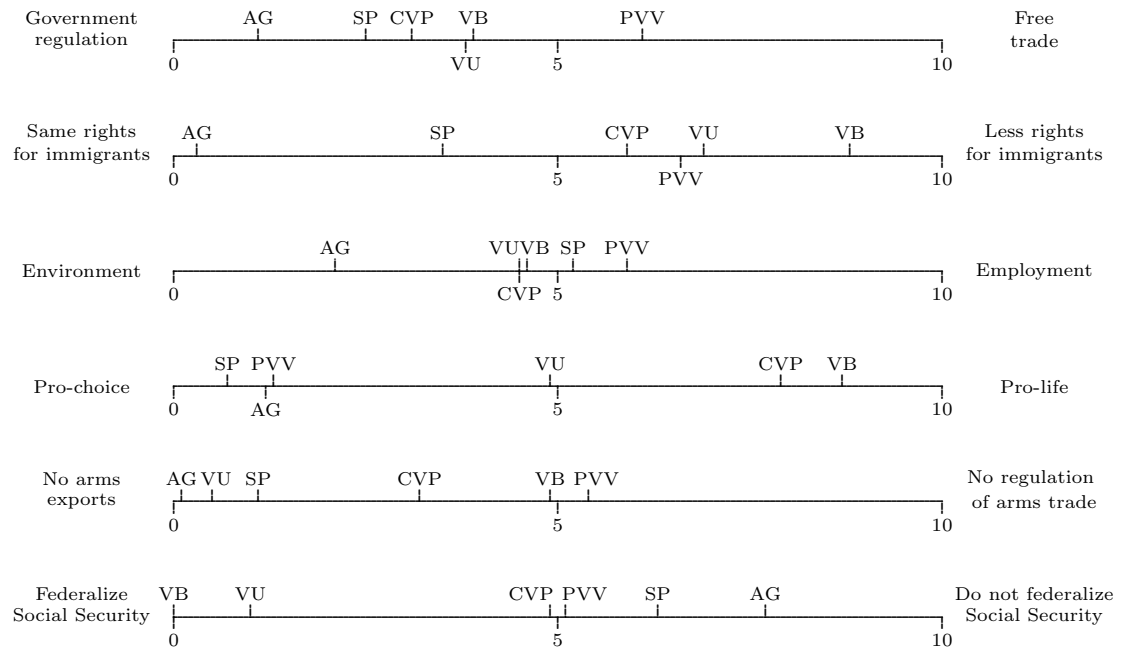
*N*=1387

FIGURE 1. Manifesto Research Group estimates of 1991 Left-Right positions



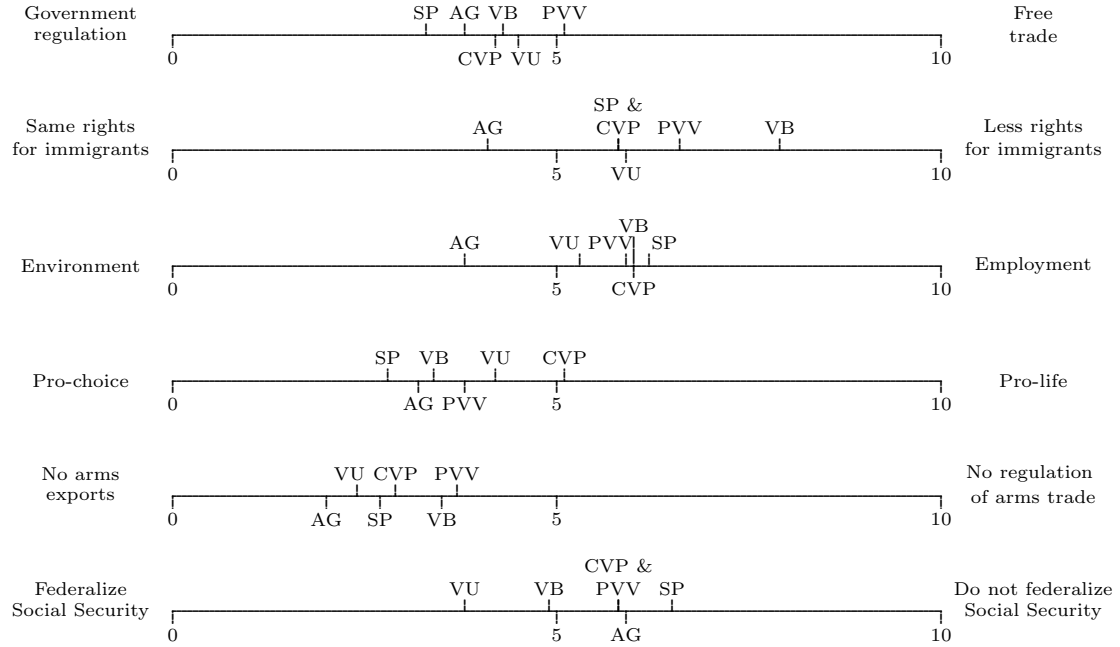
Source: Budge et al. (2001)

FIGURE 2. Mean positions of party candidates in 1991 on six issue-scales



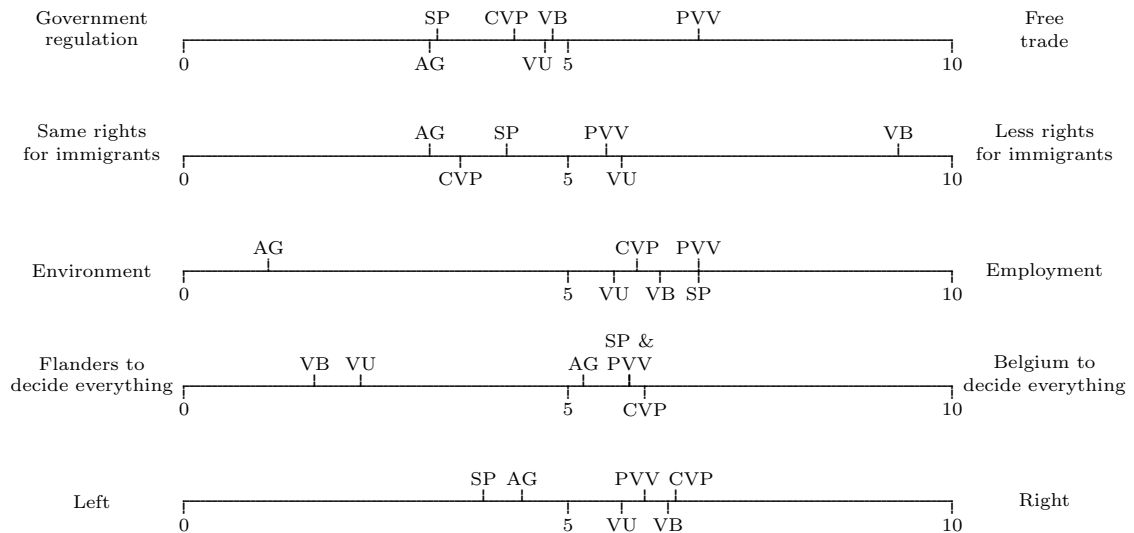
Source: Maddens (1996, Table 2).  $N=104$ .

FIGURE 3. Mean positions of party voters in 1991 on six issue-scales



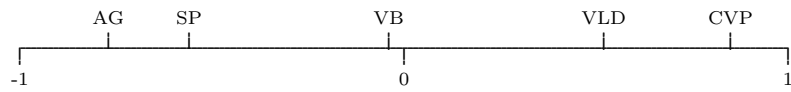
Source: Maddens (1996 Table 2).  $N=2691$ .

FIGURE 4. Mean voter placement of parties in 1991 on four issue-scales



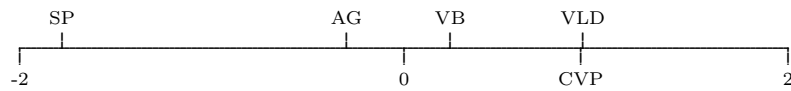
Source: ISPO Flemish Election Study.  $N=2691$ .

FIGURE 5. Multidimensional Scaling Solution



$N=1387$ .

FIGURE 6. Graph for the Quasi-RC model with equal row and column scores



Notes: The association parameter is 0.49 and fit statistics are, d.f.=7,  $L^2 = 11.06$ ,  $p = 0.1361$ .  
The scores are standardized to sum to zero with variance 1.  $N=1387$ .