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Opening and Democratizing Pillar Parties?

Internal reforms in Belgian political parties

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Abstract:

In most West European Democracies, parties have undertaken several internal changes. A common trend in these evolutions is the democratization of intra-party life through the empowerment of members in several respects (candidates and leaders selection, etc.). For pillar parties, these modifications have a peculiar signification as it could modify some of their core characteristics (oligarchy, overlapping membership and leadership, etc.). In that context, this article examines both the internal reforms in Belgian pillar parties and their impact. The three traditional Belgian party families linked to a pillar (Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals) have opened their membership procedures and democratized leaders and candidates selection. Though, the changes are more formal than effective. The internal reforms of Belgian pillar parties did not affect the core elements of this type of parties, which are elite control via oligarchy, and societal segmentation via overlapping membership and leadership.

Key words: Consociational democracy, pillar parties, intra-party democracy, party models, Belgium

Introduction

Generally speaking, the majority of studies analyzing the development of the Belgian parties tend to concentrate on inter-party relationships: party system change, federalization of the country (Deschouwer, 1999) and the emergence of new parties (Swyngedouw, 1995;

Deschouwer, 2002). Surprisingly, analyzes concentrating on any developments which may have taken place in the intra-party life of Belgian parties are, however, rarer, despite their central role within consociational democracy. The emergence of green parties has awakened some interest in the subject (Delwit & De Waele, 1996; Rihoux, 2001). Even so, as Luther (1999: 5) pointed out, remarkably little research has been carried out on those parties traditionally more closely linked to the consociational model, and the small amount of papers that addressed the topic need to be updated (Deschouwer, 1994; Maes, 1990).

Taking Belgium as a case study, this paper aims to examine the theoretical and empirical issues of the relationships between the theory of consociational democracy (and the challenges it faces) on the one hand, and the internal features of the political parties linked to that model on the other. In other words, the focus will be stressed on the three traditional party families (Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals), and not on the newcomers (regionalists, greens and far right)¹.

To this end, the paper advances on two fronts. The initial stage is mainly theoretical and exploratory. It is divided into two main sections. The first is an attempt to develop the elements of the consociational theory which have to do with the internal working of the parties. The second is more concerned with critiques and challenges to this model. The aim is to analyze the question of whether the traditional pillar parties adapted themselves internally to deal with these challenges. And if this turns out to be the case, which direction did these reforms take, and with which impact? Could it be considered as effective reforms? Therefore, the effects of the intra-party changes will be empirically measured. To do so, the analysis will be fed by data gathered on the party members (N=1728), the mid-level party elites (N=1363) and the party candidates in regional, European and federal elections (N=1997).

1. Consociational democracy and party theory

The concept of consociational democracy as developed by Lijphart at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies gave a very narrow sense to the word 'democracy'. The author himself admits that 'consociational democracy violates the principle of majority rule', a statement which is particularly important as regards the right of veto of each segment (Lijphart, 1969: 214). However, in Lijphart's view, this exception is the price which must be paid in order to ensure the stability and unity of the country and is justified by the danger of national implosion. The consociational model also drifts away from the classical model of democracy² in other ways. There are two features in particular which distort 'government by the people': the elitism in the decision-making process and the apathy of the masses (Steiner, 1971). These two characteristics apply both at the inter-party and the intra-party levels.

At the inter-party level, elitism and mass apathy have attracted the attention of political scientists to some considerable degree (Deschouwer, 1999). From this point of view, a consociational system reserves power and decision-making for a few elites whose duty is to represent the interests of their pillar³. However, the majority of the citizens is excluded from the decision-making process. Their power lies mainly in their role as collective representatives of a pillar (Lijphart, 1977). These pillars organize the lives of individuals 'from the cradle to the grave', allowing the citizens to be associated throughout their life with youth movements, schools, universities, trade unions, mutual societies, associations and party belonging to the same sociological world (Seiler, 1997). This social enrolment drives Huyse to talk about political apathy as hermetically sealed sociological worlds are reducing the power of individual political initiative (Huyse, 1970: 168).

Likewise, at the intra-party level the working of pillar parties is modelled on this specific decision-making process; elitism and the apathy of the masses also apply here. It turns up to be logical, with the parties consisting of the tip of the iceberg of pillarized society (Lijphart, 1981).

The party elites issue themselves key roles, while the party base plays a symbolic role in the decision-making process. This way of functioning has been frameworked by Luther (1999: 7), who distinguishes three roles or characteristics of a pillar party.

First, the pillar party is characterized by an organizational penetration and incorporation of the subculture, especially via mass party membership and extensive auxiliary network (Luther, 1999: 8). In an ideal-typical consociational system, the process of joining a party is demonstrated less in an active personal commitment than as a global sociological phenomenon. In this model, party membership is for a large number of citizens a natural, traditional move, if not actually automatic, arising from the belonging to a particular pillar. The function of party members lies mainly in collective and sociological representation of the pillar. Auxiliary associations assist parties in this task of integration.

The second characteristic of a pillar party relates to hierarchical party control of the subculture. To exert this control, pillar parties have many techniques available, amongst which (a) the bureaucratic principle, (b) the technocratic principle, (c) the oligarchic principle, but also (d) overlapping memberships, (e) overlapping leaderships, (f) party control of the reward system, and (g) formal rules or conventions facilitating parties' control of their subculture (Luther, 1999: 10-12).

In this view, the pillar party model shares some characteristics with the mass party model. The need for mass membership is a feature shared with the mass party model (Katz & Mair, 1995: 7). Besides, the mass party model takes as central unit very well defined social groups. The representative character of the party base in comparison with a social group or segment is a second shared characteristic with the pillar party model. Membership characteristics are thus common to both models: wideness, homogeneity, encapsulation and collective identity.

However, the two models differ in terms of mass-elite relationships, especially in the degree of hierarchical control. In the mass party model, these relationships are seen as bottom-up. Members choose delegates who, in their turn, can influence decision-making process through delegation (Katz & Mair, 1995: 18). In the pillar party model, bureaucracy, technocracy and oligarchy allow the party control on the grassroots. Elite control is also present in mass parties but the degree of elitism is lower than within pillar parties. Furthermore, in a consociational democracy, elitism is perceived as a desired feature to maintain stability. Consequently, elitism within pillar parties is theoretically less problematic than within mass parties.

Finally, the third characteristic of pillar parties insists on their role in political mobilization and provision of values or incentives for the subculture (Luther 1999: 9). This view contradicts the positive vision defended by some authors (DiPalma, 1970; Verba et al., 1978). Pillar parties would only provoke symbolic or acclamatory mobilization and would not stimulate involvement and interest in politics. They are more likely to sanction another type of linkage with the citizen (Lawson & Merkl, 1998), centred on the interests' representation of pillars at the level of the State.

2. Challenges to consociational democracy in Belgium

Few conditions are essential for the endurance of the consociational system. First, pillars must succeed at integrating all major cleavage lines. Second, the assent of the citizens is required; in Katz's views, consociational democracy could only work as long as 'the overwhelming majority of citizens were prepared to accept a marginal position in politics' (Katz, 1997: 297). This citizens' assent traditionally manifested itself through an attitude of deference towards the pillar elites and an acceptance of their authority (Lijphart, 1977). The outward signs of support are the citizens' overlapping membership to the multiple organizations of the pillar, their constant vote for the pillar party, and their acceptance of elitism.

In Belgium, these two conditions unravelled in the last decades. In the first place, the linguistic cleavage dividing Dutch- and French-speakers became dominant after the pacification of the religious and socio-economic cleavages in the late fifties, early sixties. Traditional pillars integrated this new cleavage by splitting up between 1968 and 1978⁴. Furthermore, Belgium entered a long period of constitutional reform towards federalism (Deschouwer, 1999).

Moreover, as in the majority of consociational democracies, it turned out that the citizens' assent deteriorated during the sixties and seventies (Luther, 1999). In the last decades, one could observe in Belgium a stream of criticism of elitism and the parties' monopoly on the State. This stream pleaded for an enlarged role of the citizen in the decision-making process. The condemnation of consociational democracy is grafting itself on other participationist demands identified in other western democracies (Scarrow, 1999). These demands derived

from the statement that political parties cannot encourage citizens' participation to a satisfactory degree.

Since the mid sixties, new parties emerged outside pillars and began to attract more and more voters by voicing these two criticisms. For instance, regionalist parties 'criticized pillarization [the growth of interest groups], the power of the traditional pillarized [interest group based] parties, and the poor democratic quality of the system' (Deschouwer, 1994: 83). These criticisms were also claimed by green parties (Delwit & De Waele, 1996).

We intend to evaluate the consequences of these evolutions for the pillar parties. These consequences may be both internal and external. External consequences have been largely described in the literature. First, the citizens' loyalty towards organizations of their pillar decreased. For an ever-growing number of Belgians the choice of an employer organization, health insurance, media, or an educational network is not connected to their belonging to a pillar anymore. On the other hand, even the pillar organizations themselves are increasingly opening up to members and organization of other social segments (Deschouwer, 1999, 2002; Swyngedouw, 1995). Second, citizens also developed involvements outside pillarized organizations and parties. This trend is not specific to Belgium; all western democracies have shown signs of increasing non-institutionalized participation and a declining party membership (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995: 429; Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Dalton & Kuchler, 1990; Whiteley & Seyd, 1998; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Mair & Van Biezen, 2001). Third, pillar parties had to face declining electoral results, greater electoral volatility and a splintering of the party system. This growing competition worked largely to the detriment of the pillar parties. Their results held simultaneously fell constantly over the period under review. A look at the two families embodying the prevailing pillars (Christian Democrats and

Socialists) reveals that the total share of their electoral results went from 82.2% in 1950 to 39.7% in 1999.

[Figure 1]

The present analysis does not aim dwelling on these developments. Nevertheless, one could point out the potential link between the challenges pillar parties faced and their adaptation. Indeed, according to the environmentalist approach (Müller, 1997), parties would adapt in reaction to electoral and ideological developments in their environment. In our case, new parties embodying criticism towards pillar parties destabilized the loyalty of the elector to his pillar party and collected electoral successes. It may have driven the pillar parties to transform and to take some of the criticism into account to regain their lost electorate.

Rather than to study the causes, our main point is to examine whether pillar parties really adapted and in which direction. To do so, three main domains of intra-party functioning will be tackled: membership procedures, leadership selection, and candidate selection. The intention is not to limit ourselves analyzing the formal rules adopted by the parties. As Bille very accurately stated, if you take these formal internal rules at face value you run the risk of being misled by appearances (Bille, 2001: 369). Therefore, we also aim to tackle the question of whether the effective intra-party life really altered in these three domains. This will allow us to test four sub-characteristics of pillar parties developed above: mass party membership, overlapping membership, oligarchic principles, and overlapping leadership.

3. The consociational parties - transformation

Membership procedures

Formal Rules

In recent decades Belgian pillar parties have mainly implemented minor changes to their membership conditions. One element, however, could be relevant to our issue: the location of the membership application. The traditional location of membership application for a pillar party was the local party branch. However, during the nineties, a number of parties envisaged the possibility of more direct membership applications, whereby the applicant may bypass the intermediate party structures. All parties, for example, plan on-line membership applications. Other parties (cdH, CD&V, MR and VLD) multiply the levels at which a candidate-member may apply (local, intermediate or national).

These transformations reduce the power of the local branches and establish a more ‘direct’ relationship between the party in central office and the party on the ground (Katz & Mair, 1993). By making membership more accessible, the idea could be enhancing affiliation or diversification.

Still the age of mass party membership?

One characteristic of pillar parties was to provide organizational penetration via mass party membership. But aside from this erosion of their electoral base, the pillar parties have also

suffered from falling membership figures. This fall started however later, in the 1990s (Katz & Mair, 1992: 334).

[Table 1]

Drop-off in membership figures during the nineties mainly affected the two families enshrining the most powerful pillars (Christian Democrats and Socialists). Between 1981 and 1999, they lost on the average 36.0% of their membership base. The cdH was the most affected. The party lost more than half its members (53.2%). The PS and the SP.A also faced a huge drop in their membership figures: respectively, 37.0 and 38.8%. The CD&V came better out of it with a fall of 14.9%. Their situation is analogous to the MR. It lost 17.6% of its members. The VLD faced an opposite trend with a growth of 24% of its membership base. The emergence of new parties (greens, regionalists) has counterbalanced this general loss, although not sufficiently. Indeed, these parties do not represent their electorate in large-scale membership (M/V ratio). Therefore, party membership has in fact been declining in Belgium since the beginning of the nineties, both in absolute and relative terms (M/E).

Reforming membership application did not stop the erosion of the base. Nevertheless, the 10 to 15% M/V ratio of the main pillar parties (Socialists and Christian Democrats) are still higher than in many other countries, superior than the Liberals (7-8%), and certainly higher than for the 'new' parties.

Still the age of overlapping membership?

In order to investigate that question, two types of surveys will be exploited; one conducted among mid-level party elites⁵, the other among party members in general⁶. As the purpose is to seek a possible opening up of the pillar parties and a breaking up of overlapping memberships, we will focus on the generations of party members⁷ in relation to a typical variable of the Belgian sociological worlds: the education network⁸.

[Table 2]

Not very surprisingly, the mid-level socialist elites mostly completed their schooling in the official network, the party satellite network (average: 83.8%). Among the oldest mid-level elites this domination by the official network is overwhelming (over 90%). A slight opening-up is observed among the most recent mid-level elites, but this is still very insignificant. Some 75 to 80% of recent mid-level elites still completed their schooling in the official network. Mid-level elites of the cdH, on the opposite, are mainly graduates of the free denominational network (average: 80.3%). A tendency towards opening-up is, however, also observed among the most recent mid-level elites (0-9 year membership), both in the direction of the official network (21.1%) and towards cross-networks schooling (11.3%). Among French-speaking Liberals (MR), the 'old established' mid-level party elites (> 30 years of membership) were characterized by graduation from the official network. But there was a net tendency to re-establish a balance among recent mid-level elites in favour of the free denominational education.

Diversification in the mid-level elites' profiles is thus still marginal in the case of the PS and the cdH. The MR, however, has been more successful in opening up. The survey among socialist members largely supports these findings.

[Table 3]

The results also display the clear dominance of the official network (average: 83.8%). This dominance appears to run out of steam to a small degree recently. If the old established members (> 20 year) emerged to a huge degree from the official network, this proportion falls among newer members (< 10 years). A significant proportion of these members had schooling within the free denominational network (22.1%).

As regards membership of a mutual insurance company⁹, the vast majority of socialist members are affiliated to the socialist mutual insurance company (average: 77.1%). However, as we have noted regarding educational networks, a slight and increasing trend towards opening up is detectable. Old-established members are almost all affiliated to their pillar's mutual insurance company (85 to 90%). Of the newer members (< 10 years), more and more are affiliated to the Christian mutual insurance company which has traditionally been competitor.

[Table 4]

On the whole, the opening up of the pillar parties is recent and hesitant, at least in the case of the PS and cdH. Overlapping memberships were and are still the reality, whereas trans-pillar membership is the exception. The educational career of members appears to be the factor which renewed most strongly, while party membership still largely overlaps affiliation to a

mutual insurance company. As in the case of membership figures, the MR also differs from the two other parties.

Leadership selection procedures

Formal Rules

The position of the party chairman is genuinely important in Belgium, and the power he exerts is considerable (Deschouwer, 1994). He is the party manager, but he also handles the political negotiations associated with the consociational nature of the democracy. He selects the political staff (a.o.t. ministers); they, in turn, are accountable to him.

Historically, and this is true of all parties except the VU and the communists, the leader was elected at a party Congress, election that could often be likened to co-optation. Indeed, since no party authorized its leader to be a member of the government, and since party leaders often took on such a position, it was frequently necessary to replace a resigning leader. An 'ad interim' leader was then appointed, usually by the office or the council and not by the Congress. Such ad interim leader was afterwards easily straightened out by the Congress (Maes, 1990: 43). The Congress delegates, in theory holding the power to select the party leader, saw their prerogative hijacked by the office or the council.

However, following the example of a number of parties almost everywhere in Western democracies (Scarrow, 2001; Davis 1998; Leduc, 2001), all democratic Belgian parties have adopted the direct election of their leader by a universal member suffrage. While all now

make use of this type of internal and direct political participation, the reforms have developed in four waves.

The French-speaking Christian Democrats were the first to adopt the measure in June 1970. One had to wait until the beginning of the eighties for Ecolo (1980) and Agalev (1982) – founded in the same period – to begin practising an original form of election by universal member suffrage, as well as the FDF (1980). The emergence of these new parties triggered a process of internal reform in the traditional parties. The third wave of internal democratization then took place at the beginning of the nineties: the French-speaking Liberals in January 1990, the Dutch-speaking Liberals in June 1993 and the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats in December 1993. The Dutch-speaking Socialists (December 1997), the French-speaking Socialists (October 1999) and the Dutch-speaking regionalists (VU - January 2000) made up the fourth and final wave of rallying intra-party universal suffrage. The two parties which emerged from the splitting of the VU (NV-A and Spirit) took on this technique.

In the final analysis the intra-party procedure used to select party leaders looks increasingly like the electoral process ‘one member, one vote’ (Leduc, 2001: 324).

Still the age of oligarchy?

Has this shift shrunk the oligarchy which characterized the old selection method? The answer to this question must be qualified. This new prerogative held by the members has not always been seized by them. Indeed, the average rate of participation to the direct elections of leaders only reaches 35.9%. As has been noted in other studies (Scarow, 1999: 355), the low turnout may partly be explained by the limited choice offered to the members.

Elections are seldom really competitive¹⁰. Three levels of competitiveness are discernible in party leader elections. The first level corresponds to an absence of competition (single candidate). This accounts for almost half of the cases (19 elections out of 41; 46.3%). In weakly competitive elections, several candidates join the fray but one of them is seen as ‘the apparatus candidate’ (14 cases out of 41; 34.2%)¹¹. Finally, competitive elections also count numerous candidates, and none of them is the apparatus candidate. Only 8 elections out of 40 fall in this category (19.5%).

The average rate of participation fluctuates according to the competitiveness: the larger the candidate offer, the greater the participation of the members¹². Uncompetitive elections only involve 31.7% of the members; weakly competitive elections, 41.6%; and competitive elections, 58.8%. Of course, the number of cases is rather small. But the variations are sufficiently obvious to confirm the hypothesis that there is a connection between the intensity of the competition in an election and the number of voters taking part.

The outcomes of the elections also confirm the existence of these three levels of competition. Hence single candidates’ scores attest to the low interest in these elections: on average they poll 95.9% of the votes. Likewise, the apparatus candidates generally record favourable scores despite competitors: on average they polled 71.5% of the votes. In competitive elections, leaders gather shorter majorities (on the average, 65% of the votes). It is unusual for an apparatus candidate to find himself disowned; and the worst result for a single candidate is 72%. In only 4 elections out of 19 did the result slip under 85%; similarly in only 4 cases out of 14 did the final score for an apparatus candidate fall below 60%. In contrast, in the case of

competitive elections, candidates never win with huge majorities (their votes were only twice over 60%).

In the case in point, the pillar parties display contrasting situations. Most of them appear to have adopted the election of the leader by universal member suffrage while never really intending to change the oligarchic principle. This is the case with the MR, the SP.A and the PS, but is also true of the CD&V until quite recently. In these parties, all elections were in reality offering a single candidate, except three¹³. In comparison, the VLD organized six leader elections, with systematically several candidates, of which 3 times with apparatus candidate¹⁴. The cdH situation is quite similar, with two-thirds of weakly competitive elections and one-third of competitive elections, occasionally placing the future of the party in jeopardy by revealing gaping internal divisions.

Candidate selection procedures

Formal Rules

During recent decades the trend in Western Europe has been towards the opening up of the candidate selection procedure. The party members, even the electors in the cases of primary elections, have become increasingly involved with this procedure (Rahat & Hazan, 2001). In Belgium, pillar parties did first the opposite, before very recently joining the common trend.

Actually, Belgian parties very early opted for intra-party democracy in the matter. At the end of the 1840s the emerging Liberal party was minded to set up procedures for selecting candidates via assemblies open to all members ('polls'). The same procedure was adopted by

the Catholics (around 1860) and by the Socialists (around 1885). The practice steadily spread to more and more constituencies. After World War II, polls had become such an integral part of political custom that it was taken up again from the 1949 elections on. However, aside from these general principles, various additional provisions reduced the power of the members and allowed the leaders to control the candidate selection process. In the Christian Democratic Party, members were asked to approve a 'model list' set by party leaders representing the various 'standen'¹⁵. In both the socialist and liberal parties, leaders too sometimes bypassed the power of the poll by keeping a few places 'off poll' (Obler, 1974).

In the seventies and eighties, running counter to the general trend in Western Europe (Scarrow, Webb & Farrell, 2000), the Belgian pillar parties reduced the prerogatives of their members in the candidate selection process (De Winter, 1988; Deschouwer, 1994). In 1989, the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats replaced the polls by assemblies of delegates. The French-speaking Christian Democrats set up district councils composed of delegates to approve model lists. In the socialist family too an oligarchy increasingly took control throughout the seventies and eighties. As a general rule a small group of federation leaders drew up the lists before having it approved by the members (Deschouwer, 1994). Finally, for the Liberals too, a few oligarchs took control of the candidate selection process.

However, during the last ten years, a number of Belgian pillar parties have reformed their statutes. The members have regained their say on the candidate selection process. This movement started in the newly reformed Dutch-speaking Liberals in 1992. The party modified a number of its positions with regard to democracy, particularly in terms of members' participation. Since then, the lists drawn up by the offices at constituency level became statutorily obliged to be approved by the members. The two Christian Democrat

parties also added in statutes the same duty. The N-VA did the same, as did the SP.A and the PS. Among the French-speaking Liberals, too, the members' vote became the norm. However, the party lies in an unusual configuration. It is an alliance of three organizations: the PRL, the FDF and the MCC. The result of the candidate selection process therefore needs to be balanced between these organizations. This task is undertaken by an ad hoc electoral commission, which then presents the results to the members and considerably reduces their room for manoeuvre.

Clearly, over the past few years the members' weight in the candidate selection process has increased in pillar parties. However, this provision remains pretty much a formality. The members often approve a list of candidates selected by a small group of managers, generally meeting within the office of an ad hoc body.

Still the age of oligarchy and overlapping leadership?

If we take a look at the profile of candidates and representatives from the Belgian French-speaking pillar parties during the last federal (2003) and regional and European (2004) elections and if we compare it to the information with that of the parliamentary elections in previous decades, it should allow us to test two other characteristics of pillar parties, namely, oligarchy and overlapping leadership. These characteristics will be investigated using an illustrative indicator: the openness to non-incumbent in the candidate selection process, and more precisely, safe seats¹⁶.

The analysis reveals that the proportion of incumbents holding a safe position on French-speaking pillar parties' lists is not very high in comparison with other democracies (Hazan,

2002). For the 2003 federal elections, it was below 40% and just below 50% for the 2004 European and regional elections. At this level slight differences can be observed between the two stronger pillar parties (PS and cdH) and the Liberals.

[Table 5]

At first sight, it appears that their degree of openness to newcomers is significant. Yet, such conclusion would be misleading. The elites deeply maintain control on this process. Many of the non-incumbents selected for a safe position on the lists are artificial non-incumbents: MPs from other assemblies or MGs, i.e. ministers from federal, regional and communities' executives (Table 5). In other words, about 3/4 of all safe positions are occupied by established politicians. This confirms Gallagher and Marsh's observation; the authors point out that 'incumbents stand a far better chance of being selected than any other groups of aspirants' (1988: 248). Furthermore, many of the newcomers used to work for the party (in central office, in government or in parliament) before the election. It concerned 7.8% of the Belgian deputies and senators in 2003 and 5.7% of the deputies in 2004. In conclusion, very few safe positions were finally attributed to real newcomers, confirming the control of party elites on the candidate selection process, but also the establishment of a class of professional politicians making genuine careers in politics.

Professionalization of the leaders' job was already a feature of the Belgian pillar parties in the fifties and sixties. However, a career at that time took place within a pillar. Elites moved from one organization to another within a pillar throughout their career. Being deputy was a stage, just like being a trade union leader or the leader of an employers' organization (Lijphart, 1968). The new configuration reveals the existence of political elites who are making a career

in the party, and not in the range of organizations anymore. Parliamentarians move from one mandate to another (at different level of powers) but remain within the political sphere. Passages between organizations within the pillar still exist but are less widespread.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze to what extent, and with what success, the pillar parties have implemented intra-party reforms.

The consociational model implied elitism and apathy of the masses, at both inter and intra-party levels. Pillar parties embodied three characteristics: organizational penetration (mass membership and auxiliary networks), hierarchical party control of the subculture, and political mobilization of and provision of values and incentives for the subculture (Luther, 1999: 7). Since the sixties, pillar parties were challenged by changes in their environment. Challenging ideologies emerged, criticizing elitism and insisting on citizen participation. These challenges materialized on the political scene with the development of new political parties (the regionalists in the sixties and the seventies, and the greens in the eighties).

The idea was to evaluate whether the pillar parties transformed their internal functioning given this changing environment. Three indicators have been analyzed: membership procedures, and leaders' and candidates' selection.

The study shows that in terms of procedures, pillar parties opened themselves. In terms of leaders and candidates selection processes, the pillar parties expanded their inclusiveness,

giving more weight to grassroots members but bypassing intermediate strata. This trend matches a general development in Western Europe, theorized in the shift towards the cartel party model (Katz and Mair, 1995). In contrast to the mass party characterized by delegation, the cartel party is characterized by a direct relationship between members and the central party office to the detriment of the intermediary strata (Lusioli & Ward, 2004: 454-5).

However, the analysis of the effective impact of the reforms only partly corroborates this conclusion. Some of the reforms implemented by the party leaders modify what characterized pillar parties, pushing them towards cartel party model. Undoubtedly, figures shows that mass membership is declining. Likewise, the leaders' and candidates' selection by the members did not alter oligarchy. These processes turn out to be rarely more than rubber-stamping decisions made at the top. Finally, overlapping leadership, formerly meaning going from one organisation top to another, changed towards professionalization. Rather than performing their whole careers within various organizations of the pillar, leaders nowadays opt for a genuine political career between political levels. In sum, declining membership, oligarchy and professionalization match the cartel party model. However, other reforms did not modify what characterized pillar parties. For instance, figures showed that pillar parties (at least the two strongest) are still composed of members and mid-level elite that are largely encapsulated in their pillar and characterized by overlapping membership (educational network, health insurance company).

In sum, this article shows that pillar parties have adopted cartel attitudes in terms of elite and elite-mass relationships, but that they still largely illustrate organizational penetration through overlapping membership. Therefore, the cartel hypothesis cannot be fully applied. This drives us to more general considerations. Lijphart used the term 'cartel democracy' to refer to a

‘depoliticised democracy’ (1968: 202; 1975: 201-3). According to his framework, a depoliticized democracy combines elite accommodation and homogeneous political culture. Our findings go along with the idea of elite accommodation but not with the one of homogeneity of the political culture (at least in the French-speaking community). Traditional subcultures are still observable in two stronger pillars. Therefore, these results partly refute the hypothesis of a depoliticised democracy within each of the Belgian communities developed by Deschouwer (2002: 82). But one could wonder whether the trend of slight opening up noticed in the younger generations will expand, therefore leading towards a homogenization in the long run.

List of parties

cdH (PSC until 2001): French-speaking Christian Democrats

CD&V (CVP until 2001): Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats

MR (PRL-FDF-MCC until 2002): French-speaking Liberals

VLD (PVV until 1992): Dutch-speaking Liberals

PS: French-speaking Socialists

SP.A (SP until 2000): Dutch-speaking Socialists

Ecolo: French-speaking greens

Groen! (Agalev until 2003): Dutch-speaking greens

VU (implosion in 2001): Dutch-speaking regionalists

NV-A: Dutch-speaking regionalists

Spirit: Dutch-speaking regionalists

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Appendix

Figure 1: Electoral results of pillar parties (%) – national scale

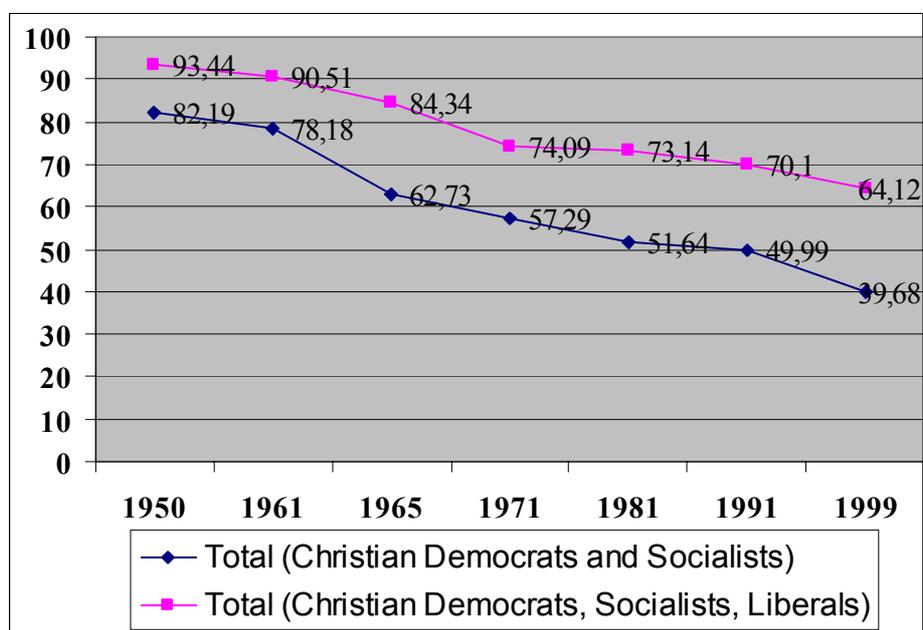


Table 1: Party Membership in Belgium (1950-1999)

	1950	1961	1971	1981	1991	1999
CD&V	71.679	137.830	105.652	124.473	131.722	105.939
CDH	27.481	70.555	45.998	54.021	31.432	25.283
<i>M/V</i>	4,2	9,5	9,5	11,2	10,8	10,7
SP.A	54.504	87.155	102.327	116.730	93.786	71.386
PS	73.118	111.845	132.742	166.530	126.795	104.886
<i>M/V</i>	7,5	10,3	16,3	18,8	14,1	14,4
VLD	7.409	18.000	29.134	60.926	66.381	75.780
MR	21.631	16.300	33.533	47.233	35.324	38.904
<i>M/V</i>	5,2	5,3	7,2	8,4	8,2	7,6
VU		2.511	41.458	46.671	36.474	15.504
<i>M/V</i>		1,4	7,1	7,9	10,0	4,5
AGALEV				870	2.038	4.281
ECOLO				900	1.360	2.903
<i>M/V</i>				0,6	0,6	0,8
VB				1.607	6.500	14.424
<i>M/V</i>				2,4	1,6	2,4
M	255.822	444.196	490.844	619.961	531.812	459.290
<i>M/E</i>	5,2	8,4	9,3	10,3	8,6	7,5

M = membership in absolute numbers

M/V = ratio of party members to party voters

M/E = members as a proportion of the electorate

Table 2: Educational network of the mid-level elites - French-speaking pillar parties (PS, cdH, MR)

Educational networks		Membership length (years)						Mean	Missing
		0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59		
PS	Official	79,2	76,1	74,2	90,2	95,7	87,5	83,8	
	Free - denominational	7,8	15,2	16,1	7,3	4,3	12,5	10,6	
	Free – non denominational	6,5	2,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,4	
	Several	6,5	6,5	9,7	2,4	0,0	0,0	4,2	
	<i>N</i>	77	46	62	41	23	8	257	7
CDH	Official	21,1	18,6	10,8	14,7	0,0	14,3	13,2	
	Free - denominational	65,4	74,6	76,9	79,4	100,0	85,7	80,3	
	Free – non denominational	2,3	1,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,7	
	Several	11,3	5,1	12,3	5,9	0,0	0,0	5,8	
	<i>N</i>	133	59	65	34	22	14	327	4
MR	Official	40,7	50,0	42,0	56,4	75,0	25,0	48,2	
	Free - denominational	50,0	31,8	42,0	28,2	8,3	75,0	39,2	
	Free – non denominational	3,4	0,0	4,0	5,1	8,3	0,0	3,5	
	Several	5,9	18,2	12,0	10,3	8,3	0,0	9,1	
	<i>N</i>	118	44	50	39	12	4	267	7

Table 3: Educational network - French-speaking socialist members (PS)

		Membership length (years)							Mean	Missing
		0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+		
PS	Official	70,9	74,0	86,9	89,5	84,7	96,9	83,3	83,8	
	Free - denominational	22,1	15,4	11,2	9,2	6,8	0,0	0,0	9,2	
	Free – non denominational	2,3	1,9	0,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7	3,1	
	Several	4,7	8,7	0,9	1,3	8,5	3,1	0,0	3,9	
	<i>N</i>	86	104	107	76	59	32	6	470	93

Table 4: Affiliation to a mutual insurance company - French-speaking socialist members (PS)

Insurance company		Membership length (years)							Mean	Missing
		0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+		
PS	Christian	15,0	10,7	4,7	4,3	1,4	5,0	0,0	5,9	
	Socialist	67,0	71,9	77,2	85,9	87,8	87,5	62,5	77,1	
	Liberal	3,0	0,0	0,0	1,1	1,4	0,0	0,0	0,8	
	Other	15,0	17,4	18,1	8,7	9,5	7,5	37,5	16,2	
	<i>N</i>	100	121	127	92	74	40	8	562	1

Table 5: Proportion of incumbents on safe positions - French-speaking pillar parties' lists 2003- 2004¹⁷

	2003		2004	
	Safe seats (%)		Safe seats (%)	
	Incumbents	MPs & MGs ¹⁸	Incumbents	MPs & MGs
Pillar parties	45,8	74,6	49,5	72,1
PS	47,8	73,9	47,6	73,8
cdH	53,8	76,9	52,4	71,4
MR	39,1	73,9	50,0	70,8

Notes

¹ See the list of parties in appendix.

² By “classical model of democracy”, we mean the most often used criteria of what is democracy, being a ‘government by the people and for the people’. We do not want to enter into the debate on what is democracy and on the multiple alternative models of democracy.

³ A pillar is the vertical encapsulation of a subculture through overlapping memberships in pillar organizations. In the Belgian case, the literature traditionally identifies two main pillars (Socialist and Christian Democrat), and a smaller one, the Liberal (Seiler, 1997). These pillars emerged from the organisation of the two first cleavages that structured the Belgian society since the independence of the country: the philosophical cleavage and the socio-economic cleavage (Lorwin, 1974). In this contribution, we will refer to pillar parties as ‘those that could be considered ‘playing the consociational game’ (Luther, 1999: 8), i.e. parties linked to the main historical pillars: the socialist parties (SP.A and PS), the Christian democratic parties (cdH and CD&V) and the liberal parties (MR and VLD). The other parties will be considered as ‘outsiders’.

⁴ The Christian Democrats split in 1968, followed by the Liberals in 1972, and finally the Socialists in 1978.

⁵ By ‘mid-level elites’, we imply a specific party level, the delegates to party congresses. The surveys were carried out between 2000 and 2003 during congresses and covered three French-speaking pillar parties: PS (N = 178), MR (N = 333), and CDH (N = 346).

⁶ Surveys among members were carried out by mail from a sample of 4000 members per party chosen at random. So far, only one pillar party could be surveyed in 2004, the PS (N = 822).

⁷ The generations are defined depending upon the year the subject of the survey joined the party. Groupings on a basis of 10 year periods were set up. This should allow to evaluate whether an opening up occurred, and to identify the exact moment of that opening up.

⁸ The Belgian educational network is divided across the State/Church cleavage. Each network historically belongs to a side of the cleavage and to a pillar, and is thus associated with the pillar party. The official network is related to the socialist and liberal pillars, whereas the free denominational network is related to the catholic pillar. Nowadays, the educational network is also divided across the communitarian cleavage, between Flemish and French-speaking networks.

⁹ In Belgium, the State does not run itself health insurance. It transfers the money received from taxes to semi-private health insurance companies. Citizens are obliged to register to one of these semi-public health insurance companies. Again, each pillar developed its own health insurance company (3).

¹⁰ By ‘competitive’, we mean ‘likely to stand competition with others; where competition is possible’.

¹¹ By ‘apparatus candidate’ we mean the former leader of the party or the acting leader. Acting or ad interim leaders are appointed to the position (not elected) after the resignation of a party leader; they occupy the position until the organisation of new elections.

¹² Missing cases: 8; FDF not included because of the unreliability of the information.

¹³ Three elections with an apparatus candidate: one for CD&V (Vandeurzen, 2004), one for the PS (Di Rupo, 2000) and one for the MR, Duquesne and Ducarme, 1990).

¹⁴ The party also experienced short periods of interim leadership, particularly during 2004 (election year).

¹⁵ The Christian Democratic Party (or parties after the split) is the political tie uniting a socially heterogeneous Catholic pillar. It includes trade unions and representatives from small business, farmers and employers. Each of these organizations corresponds to what one calls a ‘stand’, forming together the ‘standen’. The party strives to ensure a balanced representation for these standen, particularly when it comes to the candidate selection process.

¹⁶ We define ‘safe seats’ as the number of seats that the party gained at the previous election.

¹⁷ This analysis uses data from the research program KANDI-CANDI 2003-2004 run jointly by the political science department of the Katholiek Universiteit Leuven and the Cevipol from the Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium). This program was run with the collaboration of S. Depauw, S. Fiers, L. Libbrecht, B. Maddens, J. Noppe, S. Van Hecke, B. Wauters (KU Leuven), P. Delwit, JB Pilet, E. van Haute and B. Hellings (ULB).

¹⁸ MPs = candidates holding a legislative mandate in federal, European or regional assemblies, and MGs = candidates holding an executive mandate in federal and regional assemblies.