Chapter 5

Party families in a split party system

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INTRODUCTION

One of the very peculiar characteristics of the Belgian political system is the absence of statewide parties. All parties that are represented in parliament – except for the small radical left Labour Party – limit their electoral mobilisation to one of Belgium's two language groups. They field candidates in either the north or the south and only run both in the Brussels constituency. There are therefore two sets of parties and two different party systems.

This absence of statewide parties is often evoked as causing problems for the quality of democratic governance (Pilet, De Waele and Jaumain 2009). First, such configuration is thought to prevent parties from contributing to national public opinion building, a traditional function of political parties (Sartori 2016). With separate electoral campaigns, separate media and separate debates, there is little room for a confrontation and presentation of alternative projects to the entire electorate. Parties tend to speak to only a part of the electorate, and thereby contribute to building distinct subnational public opinions. No one speaks for the centre (Deschouwer 2012). Second, the absence of national parties generates a lack of coordination across levels. For instance, Jans (2001) showed that the absence of national party actors in Belgium reduces the capacity of building compromises and agreements at the national level. Parties of the two language groups are facing different public opinions and experience different pressures, which makes it difficult for them to agree on common policies. Representation and accountability are limited to each separate language group. Third, party organisations are agents of socialisation for their own political personnel. In the absence of national parties, the political personnel is socialised at the subnational level. Since the split of the party system, new generations of politicians can have a political

career fully in their own community and in their own language without being socialised at the national level (Hooghe 2012). This awareness of a deficit in the democratic governance as a result of the absence of statewide parties is, for some, a good reason to defend a further or even final separation of the two communities. For others it has triggered a search for alternative devices that might create a minimal level of statewide representation and accountability, like the election of a number of federal MPs in a statewide district (Sinardet 2012; Deschouwer and Van Parijs 2013). Yet, for the time being, the country functions with a fully split party system.

The deficits in the democratic electoral representation in Belgium are actually not that different from those at the European level. Here too there are no political parties that appeal to the European public at large. Elections for the federal parliament in Belgium involve subnational parties that compete for seats in their community, like the elections for the European Parliament, which are basically national elections involving national parties that compete for national seats. At the European level an attempt was made in 2014 to 'Europeanise' the campaign with the introduction of *Spitzenkandidaten* by the major European parties, that is, their candidate for Commission president, albeit with limited effects (Hobolt 2014). National parties of the same family were still competing for the votes inside their own country only.

A crucial question is indeed to what extent political representation can work in a multinational and multilingual demos when the dialogue between parties and voters takes place at the national (in the EU) or subnational level (in Belgium). Mair and Thomassen (2010) argue that representation might function properly and better than assumed on the condition that the different national parties who subsequently collaborate in the same group in the European Parliament mobilise the same interests, identities and demands. The political representation might still function in an acceptable way and might produce sufficient congruence between voters and MPs if the national parties truly belong to the same party family. That is a question that is also quite relevant for Belgium. Do the Belgian parties of the two language groups really belong to the same party family?

ELECTORAL TRENDS

Looking at the way in which the partisan representation functions in Belgium, one can expect a negative answer to that question. Unlike the members of the European Parliament the members of the Belgian federal parliament do not form groups per party family. Only the two green parties form one single group, while there are two unilingual liberal, two socialist and two Christian democratic groups, each composed of the MPs of one party only. The two

'sister' or 'brother' parties in Belgium are furthermore not going through a process of coming together. On the contrary, they used to be one party and they fell apart because they deeply disagreed on the institutional future of the country. That institutional issue does remain salient in Belgian politics, which means that parties with the same ideological label do sometimes strongly oppose each other. The parties of the same family also face a different electorate, which means that their relations are far from symmetrical. Wallonia leans traditionally more to the left, with a strong socialist party. In Flanders the socialist party is fairly small, while Christian democrats have traditionally been strong. Internal tensions within the formerly national unitary parties were therefore not only institutional but also to some extent ideological (Delwit 2012).

Figure 5.1 displays the electoral evolution of the parties of the same family since 1978. These evolutions are quite similar in each of the families. Christian democrats have gradually lost voters in both language groups, while the liberals have gradually grown during the past few decades. The trend for the socialists is slightly downwards, but especially so in Flanders. And the greens have grown together, but then appear to start moving in different directions. The direction in which voters move per election is actually an interesting indicator of the common fate of the parties of a same family. Electoral politics
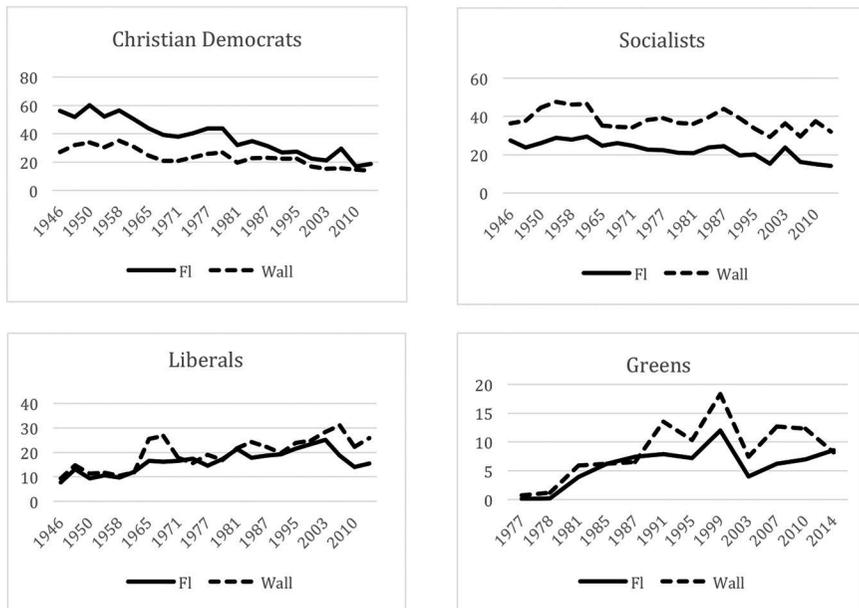

Figure 5.1.   The electoral evolution (federal parliament) for four party families. *Source*: http://cevipol.ulb.be.

have in general become more nationalised (Caramani 2004), which means that voters all over the territory react to messages that come from one national centre. In the Belgian case, the voters of the same family move in different directions – that could be a confirmation of the fact that two different public opinions are at work, each responding in their own way to the message sent out by the parties.

The figures in table 5.1 show the electoral swings for each of the parties per family at the federal elections since 1981, that is comparing the result at one election with the result of the previous one. This produces an index that is larger than one in case of electoral progress and lower than one in case of losses. Overall, these swings are the same for the parties in the north and in the south: they move together up or down. And when there is a difference in the direction of the movement, the difference is rather small. Yet, when focussing on the most recent elections, it is very clear that this pattern has been changing. For each of the couples we see different movements in the elections of 2007, 2010 or 2014, and we also see larger gaps between the indices in the most recent elections. This phenomenon most probably reflects

Table 5.1. Electoral swings of parties of the same party family (1949–2014)

	Christian democrats			Socialists			Liberals			Greens		
	Fl	*Wall*	*Diff*	*Fl*	*Wall*	*Diff*	*Fl*	*Wall*	*Diff*	*Fl*	*Wall*	*Diff*
1949	0.92	1.18	0.26	0.86	1.04	0.18	1.70	1.58	0.12			
1950	1.16	1.06	0.10	1.10	1.18	0.08	0.72	0.78	0.06			
1954	0.86	0.90	0.04	1.11	1.07	0.04	1.14	1.03	0.11			
1958	1.09	1.15	0.06	0.97	0.97	0.00	0.92	0.89	0.03			
1961	0.89	0.88	0.01	1.06	1.00	0.06	1.23	1.13	0.10			
1965	0.87	0.80	0.07	0.83	0.76	0.07	1.37	2.15	0.78			
1968	0.89	0.85	0.04	1.06	0.98	0.08	0.98	1.05	0.08			
1971	0.97	1.00	0.03	0.95	1.00	0.05	1.02	0.66	0.36			
1974	1.07	1.11	0.04	0.92	1.11	0.19	1.06	0.88	0.18			
1977	1.08	1.10	0.01	0.99	1.02	0.03	0.83	1.22	0.40			
1978	1.00	1.05	0.05	0.94	0.94	0.00	1.19	0.88	0.31	2.00	1.71	0.29
1981	0.73	0.73	0.01	0.98	0.99	0.01	1.23	1.30	0.07	19.50	4.92	14.58
1985	1.08	1.15	0.07	1.15	1.09	0.06	0.83	1.11	0.28	1.59	1.05	0.54
1987	0.90	1.03	0.12	1.02	1.11	0.09	1.06	0.92	0.14	1.19	1.05	0.15
1991	0.86	0.97	0.11	0.80	0.89	0.09	1.03	0.89	0.13	1.07	2.08	1.01
1995	1.02	1.00	0.02	1.03	0.86	0.17	1.13	1.21	0.08	0.91	0.76	0.15
1999	0.82	0.75	0.07	0.75	0.87	0.11	1.08	1.03	0.05	1.67	1.78	0.11
2003	0.95	0.92	0.03	1.57	1.25	0.33	1.08	1.15	0.07	0.33	0.40	0.07
2007	1.40	1.02	0.38	0.68	0.81	0.13	0.75	1.10	0.35	1.55	1.72	0.17
2010	0.57	0.93	0.36	0.92	1.27	0.35	0.75	0.71	0.03	1.13	0.97	0.16
2014	1.09	0.95	0.14	0.94	0.85	0.09	1.11	1.16	0.06	1.23	0.67	0.56

Source: http://cevipol.ulb.be.

the fact that, since 2003, coalitions at the different levels of government have not been formed by the same parties and that the two parties of the same family did not always govern together after 2007. This does 'disturb' one of the elements that made the parties of the same family move together before that date: both parties were in each language group either a governing or an opposition party (Deschouwer 2009). The very fact that this symmetry at the federal level and the congruence between the national and regional levels has been broken is another indicator of the weakening ties between the members of the same party families. One might therefore wonder to what extent they do indeed (still) belong to the same family. The remainder of this chapter will offer a systematic answer to that question.

ON THE CONCEPT OF PARTY FAMILY

The concept of party family is quite central in the comparative analysis of political parties. It is used to classify parties belonging to different party systems into broader categories of parties that have a common programmatic and ideological profile. It is actually at the roots of party typologies and classifications (see, e.g. Seiler 1986; von Beyme 1985). Mair and Mudde (1998) have suggested the use of four criteria or approaches to define party families. Parties of the same family should in the first place have a *common name*. This self-declaration of parties as being 'liberal' or 'socialist' or 'Conservative' is the most obvious and straightforward criterion. Next, one can also look at how national parties at the national level unite at the *transnational level*. When parties decide to be part of the same international party organisations or to sit in the same group in the European Parliament, they make a clear choice of belonging to one family rather than to another one. A third criterion is the *sharing of origins*. Parties of the same family have developed in the same way and are built on the same 'alignment of voters'. This refers to Lipset's and Rokkan's (1967, 2008) classic theory of cleavage politics linking parties to the conflict on which they originated. Parties that originated on a specific structural conflict dividing society would then see this reflected in their sociological composition. Parties of the same family mainly organise the same specific segments of society. The fourth and final criterion is having a common ideology and *similar policy positions*. This refers to ideological congruence between parties and is closely linked to the third criterion that sees parties from the same family as sharing a common project, defending similar interests located on one specific side of societal conflicts.

The concept of party family is used to compare and group parties across countries, to classify parties that belong to different party systems. It can therefore also be used to compare the Flemish and francophone parties in

Belgium. They do not compete across the language border and belong there-
fore to two different party systems. Yet since they do compete for power
in the same country, the question whether there are in Belgium not only
unilingual parties but also party families that represent similar demands in
both parts of the country is quite relevant. In Belgian politics one uses terms
like 'brother parties' (in French) and 'sister parties' (in Dutch) which does
clearly suggest that there are family ties between them. For three of these
pairs – the Christian democrats, the socialists and the liberals – there is a
common history. When the statewide parties split, the two remaining parties
were considered to be siblings, children of the same 'mother party'. Since
the split of these three large parties in the late 1960s and 1970s, several new
parties have seen the light. These include regionalist parties, radical right
parties and green parties. They may belong to the same family but do not
have a common history in the Belgian context, as in the case of the other
three pairs. The regionalist parties of Flanders, Wallonia (now defunct) and
Brussels have very different origins and obviously very different views on
the territorial organisation of Belgium. They have always been each other's
fierce critics. The radical right developed in Flanders first and combined that
position with a plea for Flemish independence. The much weaker and more
volatile radical right party in francophone Belgium has never seen itself as
being a natural partner of its Flemish counterpart, among others because of its
separatist stance. Only the two green parties, which developed more or less at
the same time but independently from each other in their own party system,
are among the new parties considering themselves as sisters and brothers. In
the analysis that follows we will therefore focus on these four families of two
parties (Christian democrats, socialists, liberals and greens). Following the
criteria put forward by Mair and Mudde (1998), we will first look at the party
names and at organisational ties within the families. Next we will look at the
party positions and the rank-and-file profiles.

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FAMILY NAME AND FAMILY TIES

The first type of organisational ties consists in sharing a common name.
Before the three traditional parties fell apart, the unified party had one name
that was translated into both languages. The Christian democrats were called
'Christian People's Party' or Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) – Parti Social
Chrétien (PSC). They kept the name, each in their own language only, when
they became two different parties in 1968. These names were however
changed later on. When the Christian democrats were pushed out of power
at the national level after forty years of constant presence in government
in 1999, both parties went through a deep crisis and tried to redefine and

reposition themselves. They did so independently from each other. The Flemish CVP renamed itself in 2001 into 'Christian Democratic and Flemish' or CD&V. It is quite interesting to note that the Flemish identity is now stressed in the name, together with Christian democracy. The francophone PSC renamed itself in 2002 into 'Democratic Humanist Centre' or cdH. In doing so, it abandoned the explicit reference to the Christian democratic heritage.

In 1972, the liberal 'Party of Liberty and Progress' or Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès (PLP) – Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang (PVV) split into two parties, each keeping their name in their own language (PLP and PVV). Yet that changed quite rapidly. On the francophone side the liberal party faced many splits and splinters and managed only in 1979 to regroup all components into one formation that was labelled 'Reformist Liberal Party' (Parti Réformateur Libéral). In 2002, the party was rebranded again into 'Reformist Movement' (MR), thus dropping the reference to liberalism. Its Flemish 'sister' kept the name of PVV until a major organisational reform in 1993. It then chose the name 'Flemish Liberals and democrats' (VLD – Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten). Here the reference to liberalism is kept and – like for the Flemish Christian democrats – the explicit reference to Flanders is added. In 2007, the VLD became 'Open VLD', only to accommodate some important members who had left the Flemish regionalist party Volksunie which had been dissolved in 2001 (Delwit and van Haute 2002).

The socialist party was originally called 'Belgian Socialist Party' or Parti Socialiste Belge – Belgische Socialistische Partij. When the party split in 1978, both new parties dropped the reference to Belgium and became 'Socialist Party' (Socialistische Partij [SP] and PS). The Flemish SP has added 'different' (anders) to its name – now it is called SP.a – also to accommodate the arrival of people from the disintegrated Volksunie (Delwit, Pilet and van Haute 2011).

Finally, the greens never used the same name. In Flanders, the green party was originally called AGALEV, meaning 'A different way of living' (Anders Gaan Leven). It renamed itself into 'Green' (Groen) in 2003. The francophone greens have always used the name Ecolo.

Only Ecolo and PS have thus kept their name. While the name change of the Flemish greens was not an attempt to reposition themselves but rather to choose a more 'normal' name than the one that was – rather jokingly – chosen in 1979, the name changes in the Christian democratic and liberal families are revealing. The Flemish parties stress their Flemish identity and keep the ideological label, while the francophone parties do not stress their francophone identity but have chosen names that position them less explicitly into the ideological family. Today, reading party names does not allow someone unfamiliar with the Belgian party system to easily connect sister parties, except for the greens and the socialists.

The fact that party names have changed and that parties in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgium did so independently from each other also reveals that the organisational ties between them have weakened and actually disappeared. In the early days after the split, they shared a same building, had a common study centre or some formal and informal organs for coordination, but all these ties have quite rapidly eroded. With new political generations being socialised in the unilingual parties, the personal ties that could provide some bridges between the parties have also by now disappeared.

The split of the three traditional parties was a hard one. They immediately became two different organisations and also considered themselves as being two different parties in the parliament. As soon as the central party organisation fell apart, the parliamentary groups followed suit. Party groups receive funding from the parliament and central party organisations receive funding from the Belgian state (Weekers, Maddens and Noppe 2009). For both channels of income, the split parties are treated as two separate entities. Nowhere in the organisation of the parliament or of the public subsidies for parties does the notion of party families plays a role. Interestingly though, the parties of the same family still sit very close to each other in the hemicycle of the federal parliament. From left to right the seats are allocated to PS, SP.a, Groen and Ecolo, Open VLD, MR, CD&V and cdH (with the other parties in-between or at the back). The logic of seat allocation is therefore based on ideological proximity (from left to right) rather than on language. As said earlier, the two green parties form one single group in parliament since 2007. The trigger to form a joint group was strategic in the first place: they would not have been able to form two separate groups given the small size of their respective parliamentary factions at the time. Yet they kept the common group when it was not needed anymore and presented it as proof of their ideological proximity and of their ability to find agreements between the two language groups on institutional matters.

Forming one single group in the federal parliament also means that both parties of the group must be either together in government or together in opposition. For the green parties that has since 2007 been the opposition (greens only governed at the federal level between 1999 and 2003). For the other three party families, the situation is different. One of the unwritten principles of coalition formation at the federal level in Belgium has been for a long time the 'symmetry' rule. It means that parties of the same party family govern together. All governments formed since the first party split in 1968 were formed according to that rule, until it was for the first time broken in 2007. The federal government then contained the PS but not the SP.a. The 2014 government contains CD&V but not cdH. Today, only the two liberal parties have never been separated in government or in opposition, yet there is no reason to believe that it might not happen in the future. Non-symmetric

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federal governments are of course a context in which it is impossible to have one single group per party family in the parliament.

While the parties have formally split and sit in separate groups in the parliament, one might still expect that when MPs seek collaboration with colleagues for legislative or other initiatives, they think of colleagues of the same party family first. Yet even here the separation appears to have been fully consumed. In the PartiRep MP survey all respondents were asked to give up to three names of members of other party groups in their assembly with whom they had good contacts. Table 5.2 presents the answers given by the Belgian MPs at the federal level. It shows a clear preference for colleagues of the same language group. Only the liberal MPs have a stronger preference for family members and they also cross more easily the language border to colleagues of other parties. Overall, these figures show quite clearly how the split of the parties and the absence of common groups per party family has provided an institutional context in which language has become a very relevant and strong barrier.

One can also look beyond the Belgian context and see how parties build organisational family ties at the transnational – European or international – level. When the Belgian parties meet outside of Belgium, they do indeed cross the Belgian linguistic divide. Sister parties all belong to the same European political party: CD&V and cdH are members of the European People's Party; PS and SP.a belong to the Socialists and Democrats (S&D); Open VLD and MR belong to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); and Ecolo and Groen are members of the European Green Party (EGP). At the international level, PS and SP.a are members of the Socialist International, MR and Open VLD are members of the Liberal International and Groen and Ecolo are members of the Global Greens. While CD&V belongs to the Centrist Democrat International, it is however not the case for the francophone cdH.

This overview of the formal organisational ties of the Belgian sister parties shows quite clearly that the ties are weakening. Except for the greens,

Table 5.2. Members of other party groups in the federal parliament with whom MPs have good contacts

	Sister party	Same language group only	At least one from other language group (not sister party)
CD&V and cdH	38.9	61.1	0.0
PS and SP.a	36.8	57.9	5.3
Open VLD and MR	58.8	29.4	11.8
Ecolo and Groen	16.7	83.3	0.0

Source: PartiRep MP survey.

the party names have diverged over time. Formal organisational ties at the Belgian level have disappeared, and the informal rule of symmetry in government formation has been relaxed. In Parliament, only the greens have formed a joint parliamentary group. The other parties physically sit alongside but do not form a joint group. It is only at European and transnational levels that formal ties persist, especially through the joint membership of European political parties. Yet at that level the functioning of party groups does not suppose and require the coherence that one can witness in party groups at the national level.

ORIGINS AND SOCIOLOGICAL BASIS

Next to organisational ties, Mair and Mudde propose to examine party families on the basis of their sociological basis and mobilisation. According to them, this approach aims 'to group together parties that mobilised in similar historical circumstances or with the intention of representing similar interests' (Mair and Mudde 1998: 215). The underlying idea is that parties from a same family are built upon the same cleavages and therefore represent social groups sharing common socio-demographic characteristics. The goal here is to determine whether this is the case for sister parties in Belgium.

There are *a priori* good reasons to believe that it could be the case. From a Rokkanian perspective, sister parties are born on the same side of the same cleavage (Deschouwer 2012; Delwit 2012). CD&V and cdH are the heirs of the Catholic Party that emerged on the Church side of the Church-State cleavage. It defended the interests of Catholics and of the Catholic pillar in the new independent state. The MR and Open VLD are the successors of the Liberal Party that initially emerged on the state side of the Church-State cleavage. In 1961, the Liberal Party transformed into PLP-PVV; its aggiornamento realigned the party primarily on the employers' side of the workers-employers cleavage, abandoning its anti-Catholic position and opening up to Catholics. The PS and SP.a are the children of the Belgian Workers Party that emerged on the workers' side of the workers-employers cleavage. It defended the interests of the working class in urban and industrialised parts of Belgium. Finally, Ecolo and Groen were born in the 1980s from environmentalist movements, defending the same positions on issues related to the environment.

These common origins give ground to the idea that sister parties would be sociologically composed of the same groups of citizens. Catholics would remain over-represented among both CD&V and cdH. Liberal voters would be composed of both Catholics and non-Catholics but mostly belonging to the middle and upper classes. PS and SP.a would attract citizens in more

industrialised and urban regions, and among citizens from the working class. Finally, Ecolo and Groen could be expected to remain mostly supported by middle class and highly educated citizens.

We use data from the 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey to describe and compare the composition of the electorate of the different parties. Table 5.3 presents the results for religious affiliation. And these confirm that both Christian democratic parties CD&V and cdH still share a strong Catholic basis. Some 75 per cent of voters of the two parties self-report to be Catholic, as opposed to the broader category of 'Christian', non-believer or other religions. Catholics are however only a small majority in the electorate (54 per cent). Other parties are around that average, except for the greens which attracts a very low number of Catholic voters. The most important finding here is thus that CD&V and cdH remain strongly Catholic parties. The same (amplified) patterns were found for party members (*see* van Haute et al. 2013).

Table 5.4 presents the level of education of the voters of the parties, which we use as the proxy for social class. Here too the expectations are met. The

Table 5.3. Percentage of 'Catholic' voters per party (as opposed to Christian, non-believer or other) among voters and members

	Catholic, %
CD&V (134)	71.4
cdH (104)	77.1
SP.a (103)	45.1
PS (213)	51.9
Open VLD (110)	57.3
MR (136)	56.3
Groen (74)	27.0
Ecolo (57)	31.0
Total (*N* = 1,445)	54.0

Source: 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey.

Table 5.4. Education level of voters per party

	None/Primary	Secondary	Higher education
CD&V (134)	16.4	50.7	32.8
cdH (104)	14.4	47.1	38.5
SP.a (103)	21.4	51.5	27.2
PS (213)	24.9	55.9	19.2
Open VLD (110)	9.1	46.4	44.5
MR (136)	8.1	50.0	41.9
Groen (74)	9.5	45.9	44.6
Ecolo (57)	10.5	36.8	52.6
Total (*N* = 1,445)	15.4	52.3	32.4

Source: 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey.

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two socialist parties clearly mobilise the lower classes. The francophone PS has however a sharper profile in this respect, with far less highly educated voters than the SP.a. Both liberal parties hardly attract lower educated voters but do mobilise the higher educated. The have a very similar profile. The Christian democrats are the parties of the middle. Their profile comes closest to the general population profile. Both green parties have voters who are mainly higher educated, even more so than the liberal parties. When we look at the origins and the sociological basis of the Belgian parties, we can clearly conclude that they belong to the same families. That is not a great surprise, since for three of the families there is a common origin and a long common history. The two green parties also appeared at the same time and are the
AuQ86   product of the 'silent revolution' (Inglehart 1977).

IDEOLOGY AND POLICY POSITIONS

Expert judgements

According to Mair and Mudde, parties from a same party family should be congruent on their policies and ideological positions (Mair and Mudde 1998: 217). We test this for Belgian parties by looking at the self-placement of both voters and MPs on different issues. However, we first look at expert judgements. The 2015 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015) provides data on the general left-right position of a wide range of parties in all member states of the EU. This allows us not only to assess the positions and closeness of Belgian parties but also to place them in a larger context. We can thus at the same time answer the question whether the parties of the same party family are perceived by the Belgian country experts as being ideologically close to each other, and check to what extent the distance between the Belgian parties is smaller or larger than the distance with parties of the same party family in other countries.

For the socialists and the liberals, we computed the average and the standard deviation of the scores of all the parties belonging to the European Parliament groups of, respectively, S&D and the ALDE, and for which there is a
AuQ87   score in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey. For the Christian democrats, we used the membership of the Centrist Democrat International, and for the greens the membership of the EGP. The figures in table 5.5 tell us in the very first place that the Belgian parties are placed very close to each other. For liberals and greens, the average score of the experts for Belgium is identical, and for the socialists the difference is very small. Only for the two Christian democratic
AuQ88   parties, there is a difference of 1 point, putting the francophone Christian democrats a bit more to the left. Yet while there is some distance between the

Table 5.5.   **Left-right position of the Belgian parties compared with the other members of their family in the EU**

	All parties average	*All parties standard deviation*	*Flanders*	*Wallonia*
Christian democrats	6.75	0.75	5.4	4.4
Socialists	3.84	0.58	3.0	2.6
Liberals	5.85	1.26	7.0	7.0
Greens	3.45	1.11	2.2	2.2

Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014.

two parties, they both firmly belong to the more leftist Christian democrats in Europe. Actually, the Belgian cdH is by far the most leftist party of the family in Europe, followed by the Italian UDC (5.28) and then followed by the Flemish CD&V. `Q89`

The Belgian socialists are seen by the experts as clearly on the left and on an almost identical position. Here also the Belgian parties are – together – on the left of their family. The Belgian PS is the most leftist party of the family, followed by the Polish SLD (2.76) and then followed by the Flemish SP.a. This leftist orientation is also present for the greens. Only the Green Party of the United Kingdom is placed a bit more to the left than Ecolo (1.86). Next are the Greek Green Party (2.25) and the Dutch GroenLinks (2.33), after which we arrive at the Flemish Groen that shares its position at 3 with the Austrian Greens. While Christian democrats, socialists and greens in Belgium are positioned on the leftist side of their family, the Belgian liberals are placed on the right. Their position is one standard deviation to the right of the average member of the ALDE, but the Belgian liberals are not the most extreme. They are, however, located on exactly the same position.

The voters

Experts might have of course a view that differs from the voters. Table 5.6 presents the self-placement of voters in electoral surveys conducted in Belgium between 1991 and 2014. Here also the distance between the voters of the sister parties is quite limited. It is remarkable to observe that decades after the splinter of the statewide parties, the gaps in the average left-right position of voters of sister parties range between 0.1 and 0.7 points on a scale from 0 to 10. The largest gap is in the socialist family, where the francophone PS is more to the left than the SP.a. In the liberal family, the MR is a bit more to the right than Open VLD. Green and Christian democratic voters in the north and in the south position themselves on average in an almost identical way.

Another way of measuring this closeness to the sister party is by asking the voters to give a score between 0 and 10 that indicates the degree in which

Table 5.6.   Average left-right orientation of voters (scale 0–10)

	CD&V	cdH	PS	SP.a	Open VLD	MR	Groen	Ecolo
1991	6.2	5.8	3.6	4.3	5.9	6.0	4.6	4.5
1995	5.7	5.9	3.3	4.0	5.6	5.9	4.2	4.0
1999	5.7	6.0	3.3	4.2	5.5	5.9	3.9	4.0
2003	5.5	5.7	3.6	4.2	5.3	5.8	3.4	3.9
2007	5.5	5.5	3.5	4.1	5.6	6.2	3.8	4.3
2009	5.4	5.2	3.4	3.7	5.5	6.0	3.5	4.5
2010	5.3	5.3	3.5	4.0	5.7	6.1	3.8	4.1
2014	5.2	5.4	3.3	3.9	5.6	6.3	3.9	3.6
Average	5.7	5.6	3.4	4.1	5.6	6.0	3.9	4.1
Gap	0.1		0.7		0.4		0.3	

Sources: ISPO/PIOP Voter Surveys for 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2010. PartiRep Voter Surveys for 2009 and 2014.

Table 5.7.   Agreement with the positions of the sister party (0–10)

	Sister party	Closest?
CD&V	4.2	N-VA: 4.6
cdH	4.5	yes
SP.a	5.6	yes
PS	4.5	cdH: 4.7
Open VLD	5.0	yes
MR	4.9	yes
Groen	6.8	yes
Ecolo	6.7	yes

Source: 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey.

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they agree with the ideas of other parties. In the 2014 PartiRep Voter Survey this question was asked to all voters, and for all the parties of the country. Voters in Wallonia could thus also give their opinion on Flemish parties and vice versa. The results of that are in table 5.7. Overall, the level of agreement with the positions of other parties is not very high. Only for the two green parties the agreement with the other one is quite high. Yet for the other party families the highest score is most of the time given to the sister party. That means that the positions of the sister party are seen as closer to one's own position than any of the other parties of the same language group. There are only two exceptions. The voters of CD&V appear to be a bit closer to N-VA than to cdH, but the difference is small and cdH comes third. The voters of the PS see the francophone cdH as a bit closer to them than the SP.a, yet here also SP.a is ranked third.

On these very broad measurements we do find strong family ties. We now also look at four more specific issues. Voters were asked in 2014 to position

themselves – always with a 0–10 scale – on the choice between free market economy and state control of the economy and on the choice for the environment versus the choice for employment. They were also asked to give their opinion on two institutional questions. The first is the internal Belgian discussion on the degree in which the central state should have all the powers or to the contrary the substates should have a maximal autonomy. The second asks in a similar way whether European integration should be maximal or to the contrary the highest autonomy of the member states is preferred. Table 5.8 presents the result for these four issues.

On state control versus free enterprise, the distances within the families are minimal. We find the Christian democrats both perfectly in the middle, the liberals on the centre-right position (with MR slightly more on the right than Open VLD) and the socialists as well as the greens on the centre-left position. On the environment versus employment issue, we find the owners of the issue – the greens – at exactly the same position in Flanders and Wallonia. For the other parties, there are larger differences, all revealing a greater attention for employment in Wallonia than in Flanders. That does reflect the more difficult economic situation of Wallonia where unemployment is higher than in Flanders. And it illustrates nicely how the two party systems are located in a slightly different society, which leads to divergences within parties of the same family. These divergences actually existed before the split of the parties and were in part responsible for it (Delwit 2012).

The figures for the institutional issues are interesting because they are surprising. On the question whether Belgium should move further in the direction of decentralisation or to the contrary keep more competences at the federal level, the parties north and south defend very different positions. When we look at the voters though, we do see this tension – the voters of the

Table 5.8. **Average self-placement of voters on issues (0–10)**

	State control–free enterprise (0–10)		Environment–employment (0–10)		Regional-federal (0–10)		Less–more EU integration (0–10)	
	Average	*Gap*	*Average*	*Gap*	*Average*	*Gap*	*Average*	*Gap*
CD&V	5.3	0.1	6.1	1.0	4.5	0.9	4.6	0.2
cdH	5.4		7.1		5.6		4.8	
SP.a	4.7	0.2	6.6	0.7	5.3	0.3	5.0	0.7
PS	4.9		7.3		5.6		4.3	
Open VLD	6.3	0.4	6.8	0.3	5.2	0.8	5.2	0.8
MR	5.9		7.1		6.0		4.4	
Groen	4.7	0.1	4.8	0.0	5.0	0.7	5.7	0.3
Ecolo	4.8		4.8		5.7		5.4	

Source: PartiRep Voter Survey.

Flemish parties are a bit more on the 'regional' side of the scale – but the gap is not extremely large. It does not go beyond 1 point on a scale from 0 to 10. The more radical regionalist positions that are present in Flanders, are among the voters of the regionalist N-VA and the radical right *VB*, and are therefore not displayed in table 5.8.

The positions on the future of the EU are also relatively coherent in each family. There are especially differences in the socialist and liberal parties, where in both cases the Flemish counterpart is more in favour of European integration. This does reflect a general tendency for a larger Euroscepticism in Wallonia than in Flanders. Yet here too the major gaps are not within party families. The strongest anti-European positions are found among the voters of the radical left PvdA/PTB and the radical right VB in Flanders and PP in Wallonia. The voters of N-VA are also less in favour of a deeper European integration.

The Members of Parliament

The results at the level of the voters show quite some degree of coherence. Voters of the sister parties are relatively close to each other, and quite often the sister parties are closer to each other than to a party in their own language group. For the MPs, we have similar measurements based on the Belgian sample of the PartiRep International MP survey (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). Table 5.9 presents the left-right self-placement of MPs. For the Christian democrats and the greens, the gap inside the family is minimal. The position of the green MPs on the far left is however not reflecting the voter's positions (see table 5.8) that are much closer to the centre. For both socialist parties, the MPs position themselves further on the left than their voters. Yet they do reflect the slightly more leftist position of the Walloon socialists. Among the MPs of the liberal parties, we also see that the francophones – like their voters – are more on the right than their Flemish sister MPs.

For the MPs we also have three of the four issues that we looked at for the voters (the question on the choice between environment and employment was not asked to the MPs). They are displayed in table 5.10. On the question about state intervention in the economy (where a 1–5 scale was used), the findings are remarkable. The parties of the same family are very close to each other. The largest difference is for the socialists, where we find again the francophones more on the left than the Dutch speakers. Yet despite that difference, we find that in all cases the closest party is the sister party. It confirms the findings on the left-right cleavage and on the issues at the level of the voters. The parties of the same family are ideologically quite close. They could be the same party with some internal divergences.

Table 5.9.   MPs' left-right self-placement (0–10)

	CD&V	cdH	PS	SP.a	Open VLD	MR	Groen	Ecolo
Average	5.6	5.3	1.6	2.1	5.2	6.3	1.8	1.9
Gap		0.3		0.5		1.1		0.1

Source: PartiRep MP survey.

Table 5.10.   Average self-placement of MPs on issues

	Regional-federal (0–10)		Smaller–larger government intervention in economy (1–5)		Too much EU–federal EU (0–10)	
	Average	Gap	Average	Gap	Average	Gap
CD&V	2.7	0.2	2.0	2.5	7.3	0.4
cdH	2.5		4.5		6.9	
SP.a	2.0	0.4	3.3	0.0	7.0	0.8
PS	1.6		3.3		6.2	
Open VLD	3.2	0.1	2.5	2.7	7.2	0.2
MR	3.1		5.2		7.0	
Groen	1.4	0.1	4.3	0.4	9.0	2.1
Ecolo	1.3		4.7		6.9	

Source: PartiRep MP survey.

Next we look at the position of the MPs on a 0–10 decentralisation scale. As argued earlier, this issue has been the most controversial in Belgian politics since the 1960s. But for voters we have not observed a wide gap between sister parties. When it comes to MPs, we do find very contrasted results. The gaps between sister parties are quite significant for the liberal parties and the Christian democratic parties. MPs from the Flemish Christian democrats and liberals are clearly in favour of further transfers of powers to regions, while their francophone counterparts tend to preach the status quo. By contrast, we also observe that for the two other party families, gaps in MPs' average self-placement are almost non-existent. For Ecolo and Groen, the convergence is explained by the more moderate views of the Flemish green MPs that position them apart from other Flemish parliamentary party groups. For PS and SP.a, it is the more pro-decentralisation position of MPs from the PS that explains that they stand very close. Among francophone parties, the MPs from the PS are on average the closest to the mean position of Flemish parties. We thus find more divergences inside the party families, but also a gap between the voters, on the one hand – who are generally rather moderate – and the MPs, on the other hand, who take more extreme positions on this intra-Belgian debate.

The final indicator is the position on European integration. The average self-placement of MPs from all parties but Groen is around 6–7. It indicates a clear support for further EU integration. The outlying position of Groen is actually for even further integration with a mean score of 9. The more pro-European position of the Flemish parties, emphasised for the voters, is also visible at the level of the MPs. Yet even more important is – like for the intra-Belgian institutional debate – the difference between the positions of the voters and the position of the MPs. While the MPs (of the traditional parties and the greens) take a solid pro-integration position, the voters are much more reluctant and position themselves in the centre of the scale or slightly towards the strengthening of the national powers.

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CONCLUSION

The Belgian party system is unique, simply because it does not exist. Except for a few smaller parties, of which only the radical left Labour Party is represented in the parliament, all parties limit their electoral mobilisation to either the Dutch-speaking north or the French-speaking south of the country. This split party system is one of the most important indicators of the gap between the north and the south. It is the consequence of deep disagreements within the former Belgian parties on the institutional future of the country. This split party system raises concerns about the democratic quality of political representation in Belgium, about the possibility of parties to be truly responsive to voters, and about the capacity of decision-making at the federal level. The functioning of parties and of party politics in Belgium is actually quite similar to that of the EU. In elections to the European Parliament, only national (and not Europe-wide) parties mobilise voters of their country. Reflecting on what that means for political representation at the European level, Mair and Thomassen (2010) have argued that it might still work properly if parties that subsequently sit in the same group in the European Parliament truly belong to the same party family and defend similar values, interests and identities in the different member states.

In this chapter, we have explored to what extent the split Belgian parties can be seen as belonging to the same party family. We have used the checklist suggested by Mair and Mudde (1998) to verify whether the two Christian democratic, the two socialist, the two liberal and the two green parties (still) have family ties. Our findings show that the parties are quite close to each other when one looks at party origin, cleavages, party ideology and sociological basis. There are some differences between north and south, but these are limited. We see that the francophone socialists are a bit more on the left than their Flemish sister party, and that the francophone liberals are a bit more on the right. That picture is the same for the voters and the MPs of the parties.

Yet parties that to a large extent defend the same ideas and represent the same societal groups do themselves not act as family members. In the past few decades the parties have – exception made for the greens – removed all formal ties between them. They do not confer before making decisions on party labels and names, on party programmes and even on party strategy. They do not form – contrary to what happens at the European level – one single group in the federal parliament. Coalition formation at the federal level has so far seen twice a government that has split one family into one governing and one opposition party. While the ideological gaps inside the families are limited and remain small, the structural gaps are deepening. Each party looks at its own party system in the first place.

The Belgian parties have fallen apart because they could not (and still cannot) agree on the best institutional future for the country. During the past twenty years, the divide has clearly been between the Flemish parties wanting to move decentralisation further and francophone parties defending the status quo. That is also what we see when we look at the opinions and positions of the MPs. The party voters however are not reflecting this deep divide. They have a rather moderate position, at least if one looks at the three traditional party families and at the greens.

When looking at the positions on the future of the EU, we find yet another gap between MPs and voters. Here – as has been illustrated in research in other countries – the party elites are much more pro-European than their voters. There is in Belgium also some difference between north and south: in Flanders, the support for a deeper European integration is somewhat higher than in Wallonia. But the major difference is between the voters who position themselves in the centre, and the party elites who position themselves firmly on the side of further European integration. The split Belgian parties are having great difficulties in acting like members of the same family. They might mobilise the same values, but they decide on their own about the way to do it and on the choice of entering or not a federal government. The language border has increasingly become a deep divide between them. Yet this gap between north and south is not the only one that characterises the Belgian parties. They are on institutional issues, both the Belgian and the European, not exactly in harmony with their voters.

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