

# Fertile grounds for extreme right-wing parties: Explaining the Vlaams Blok's electoral success

Hilde Coffé\*, Bruno Heyndels, Jan Vermeir

*Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium*

---

## Abstract

The Vlaams Blok is one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Europe. We empirically identify contextual determinants that contribute to its political success in the municipal elections of October 8th, 2000 in Flanders. The use of the Tobit II estimator allows disentangling the party's decision to participate in an election and its (latent) political success. We find that the Vlaams Blok is particularly successful in municipalities with a small network of social organisations. The presence of Turkish or Maghrebian citizens and a high average income also foster extreme right success. Economic deprivation reduces the probability of Vlaams Blok participating in elections, while a high crime rate positively affects the party's decision to participate in the elections. The findings on municipal elections are confirmed by an empirical analysis of the Vlaams Blok's success in the federal elections of 1999. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Extreme right; Local elections; Sample selection model

---

## 1. Introduction

The growth of right-wing extremism is a major concern in many Western European democracies. The anti-system attitude, combined with ethno-centrist positions of extreme right-wing parties is considered a threat for the well functioning of the democratic process. Whether or not this fear is justified, the fact remains that many countries have witnessed a growing popularity of these parties since the 1980s and that this growth in popularity is mirrored by a declining popularity of the more traditional political parties.

While the rise of extreme right-wing parties has been observed in many countries, it is by no means a universal

phenomenon. Whereas in countries like Austria, Belgium<sup>1</sup>, France, Italy and Norway extreme right-wing parties have been highly successful, in Spain and the United Kingdom their success has been limited. Several studies have demonstrated that vote intentions or election outcomes for extreme right-wing parties are affected by economic, political and social variables. In the present paper we investigate the determinants of the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok in the Flemish municipal elections, thereby concentrating on four macro-variables: the economic situation, the presence of immigrants, the crime rate and the level of social capital. The focus on

---

\* Corresponding author. Present address: Department of Sociology/ICS, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 253 48 30; fax: +31 30 253 44 05.

E-mail address: [h.r.coffe@fss.uu.nl](mailto:h.r.coffe@fss.uu.nl) (H. Coffé).

---

<sup>1</sup> Note the difference in success of the extreme right parties in Belgium. Whereas the Vlaams Blok achieved 24.2 per cent of the vote in Flanders in the most recent regional elections of June 2004, its Francophone counterpart, the Front National (FN), reaped 8.1 per cent in Wallonia.

the local — as opposed to the national — level offers the advantage that it provides a larger number of observations allowing for more robust statistical testing. Also, the interpretation of empirical results is facilitated by the homogeneity in the institutional and political setting.

Over the past decades, the Vlaams Blok has become one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe. Its successive electoral victories, both at the local, the regional and the federal level are probably the most notable political evolution in Flanders, and more generally in Belgium, since the beginning of the 1990s.

A brief description of the Vlaams Blok's (ideological) positioning and electoral evolution is given in the Section 2. As mentioned, our central question relates to four elements that may contribute to the (lack of) electoral success of extreme right-wing parties: the state of the economy and the presence of immigrants are two 'well-established' determinants in the empirical literature on extreme right voting. The evidence is, however, mixed. The level of crime and the role of social capital have received scant attention in previous work. In the second section we review the theoretical insights on each of these determinants as well as the existing empirical evidence. In our empirical analysis, presented in Section 4, we estimate a Tobit II model explaining both the Vlaams Blok's participation in the Flemish municipal elections of 2000 and its (latent) vote share. Indeed, since the party did not participate in all municipalities, we distinguish between the participation decision and the party's electoral success. This is a distinction that has not been made in previous empirical work on extreme right voting. We find that such a distinction proves highly relevant. Section 5 addresses the question to what extent the results on municipal elections can be generalised to other levels of government. A conclusion is given in Section 6.

## 2. The Vlaams Blok

The Vlaams Blok entered the political arena in the parliamentary elections of 1978 as an amalgamation of two dissident factions of the Volksunie (VU). At that time, the VU was the dominant Flemish regionalist party and, in the eyes of the Vlaams Blok, it was making too many concessions to French-speakers. The Vlaams Blok strove primarily for the independence of Flanders. This nationalist platform gave the party the stable but small support of between one and two per cent of voters. However, at its first municipal elections of 1982, the Vlaams Blok achieved a first modest electoral success in the city of Antwerp. It reaped 5.2 per cent of the vote. In the mid-1980s, the success of the Dutch Centrumdemocraten and the French Front National in

mobilizing people against immigrants provided a model that the Vlaams Blok was keen to imitate. The party conducted a fierce anti-immigrant campaign in the 1987 parliamentary elections. It doubled its number of seats in Parliament — from one to two — and won for the first time in its history a seat in the Belgian Senate using a new slogan, '*Eigen volk eerst!*' (Our own people first!). This slogan was based on the catchphrase of the French Front National, '*Les Français d'abord*'. At the same time, tension began to grow over the choice between prioritizing the immigration issue, which was electorally rewarding, and the original Flemish-nationalist ideology. The Vlaams Blok chose to follow the more electorally rewarding strategy, combining it with the original nationalism (Buelens and Deschouwer, 2002). In the municipal elections of 1988 the Vlaams Blok realised a local breakthrough in the city of Antwerp where it achieved 17.7 per cent of the vote. This success was an incentive for the other parties to install the strategy of a *cordon sanitaire*. Through this, they committed themselves not to conclude political agreements with the Vlaams Blok. The *cordon sanitaire* still exists today, despite being the subject of many debates.

The party's real breakthrough came in the federal parliamentary elections of November 24th, 1991 — a day that was afterwards known as 'Black Sunday' — when the Vlaams Blok obtained 10.3 per cent of Flemish votes. In Antwerp, every fourth voter supported the extreme right party, making it the strongest political force in the city. The Vlaams Blok continued to grow throughout the following decade. In the most recent regional elections (June 2004), the party reaped 24.2 per cent of the vote in the Flemish region. By that, it became the second largest party in Flanders.<sup>2</sup> The growth of the party is partly due to its populist rhetoric on racism and security and its anti-establishment discourse. In order to attract more voters, strongly worded ideological texts have been filtered and rewritten, and Vlaams Blok office holders have taken more moderate positions (Coffé, 2005). In November 2004 it was convicted for racism, the party changed its name into *Vlaams Belang* and wrote a new, more moderate party manifesto trying to present itself as a viable policy party.

## 3. What determines extreme right-wing parties' electoral success?

Many theories explaining extreme right-wing voting have been suggested. Since we are concerned here with

<sup>2</sup> The largest 'party' in the election was actually a cartel of two parties that formed two independent parliamentary parties (CD&V and N-VA). Thus, the Vlaams Blok became the largest party in the Flemish Parliament.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1052576>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1052576>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)