Historical Continuity or Diverging Reality?

A Comparative Analysis of Local Councillors in Belgium, The Netherlands and France

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Abstract

The assumption that the local government system in Belgium’s two largest regions, Flanders and Wallonia, is gradually drifting apart formed an intriguing soil for the formal regionalisation of Belgian local government in 2002. Furthermore, it was expected that the regionalisation process would accelerate this divergence with Flanders evolving towards a northern-style of local government (e.g. the Netherlands) and Wallonia shifting towards the traditional southern-style (e.g. France). In order to test this hypothesis, the paper applies a comparative research design which sets out local government in Flanders and Wallonia to the Netherlands and France. In doing so it takes an actor-centred approach, addressing the vision of 2530 local councillors in an urban setting upon two basic and characteristic components of local government: the councillor role-set as the expression of the underlying ethos of local government and the acclaimed power distribution between the actors in local government. The paper shows that although the vision of Flemish and Walloon councillors does reflect different paths to some extent as hypothesised, the ancient Belgian tradition remains very much present from a comparative perspective. Being a local councillor still revolves foremost around representation in both regions. Besides, the power relations in local government align as well: in both Flanders and Wallonia, the impact of individual councillors seems strongly restricted by the power of the mayor, the executive, and even the local administration. As such contemporary Belgian local government generally bears witness of a path-dependent and historical continuity between its two main regions.

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1. Introduction

The federalisation process and the subsequent rise of meso-government have been two of the most important evolutions in the history of Belgian post-war politics (De Ceunink et al., 2005; Plees, 2005). These processes were mainly nourished by the ethnic tension between the Flemish population in the north and the Walloon population in the south (Hooghe, 2004). From the 1970s onwards the centrifugal dynamic has been crystallised in a series of state reforms, of which the fifth and (temporarily) last took place in 2001 (the Lambermont agreements). This paper is concerned with one specific implication of the latter, introduced in January 2002 after almost a decade of deliberation and negotiation: the transfer of the organic legislation on local government to the three Belgian regions Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia.

As De Rynck and Wayenberg (2010) argue, this fifth state reform marked a new dawn for local government in Belgium. An important element in this transition was the widely shared assumption which underpinned the regionalisation: “Repeatedly, the hypothesis has been put forward that Belgium’s main linguistic divide also functions as the demarcation line between two types of local government system. The ‘Franco’ or Southern European type tends to prevail in Wallonia (...) as the primarily French-speaking part (...) of the country, while the Northern European type appears in the Dutch-speaking area, Flanders” (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010: 14-15). Furthermore, both Flanders (2005) and Wallonia (2006) soon used their newly granted competence to install a genuine local government act. Both acts differ in scope and outlook as well (Pilet, 2008). Whereas the Flemish act was mainly interfaced with an efficiency-oriented logic, enhancing the democratic capacity of local government was the main device of the Walloon act. As such it is expected that the regionalisation will cause the Flemish and Walloon local government systems and cultures to (further) drift apart (Plees, 2005; Steyvers, 2006). Flanders would move towards the Dutch, efficiency-oriented style of local government, while Wallonia would take the French system of a mainly politically oriented local government system as reference point (De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Block et al., 2007). If this process would unfold as hypothesised, Belgium may serve as the paramount example of the growing intra-country diversity that marks the rapidly changing local government systems throughout Europe, especially in federal countries (Goldsmith & Page, 2010). On the other hand, if this would not be the case, and Flemish and Walloon local government systems would remain mainly indebted to the ancient Belgian culture, the Belgian case may corroborate the path-

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2 Currently, negotiations for a new round of state reform are a fundamental part of the formation talks at the federal level.
3 Only a few specific regulations on local government remained competences of the federal level (i.e. the existence, autonomy and elections of local government; the scrutiny of local police, registry offices and fire services; bilingual local governments; and the pension and social security of local politicians and administrators) (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010: 21). Following Hooghe (2004), we will use the shorter labels Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels to refer to the Belgian regions throughout the paper.
4 In the original quote the authors categorised Brussels along the Walloon system. In our paper, however, Brussels is not included in the analysis due to its specific character (e.g. a limited number of (19) municipalities; its bilingual status and specific statute as a region). Moreover, Brussels waited until 2009 to introduce a new local government act (“Local Governance Plan”), which seems less encompassing than the Flemish and Walloon acts.
5 This different approach is partly reflected in the name of the respective acts as well: the neutral “Flemish municipal decree” versus the “Walloon code of the local democracy and decentralisation”. 

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dependent theory on local government. According to this theory, “once a pattern (...) has been established, it becomes increasingly difficult to change over time” (Goldsmith & Page, 2010: 8).

The aim of this paper is to test which of both hypotheses comes closest to the reality of Belgian politics. Do Flemish and Walloon local government systems bear witness of the historical continuity in Belgian local politics, or do they express a diverging reality within the latter – evolving towards the northern and southern ideal-types? Obviously, this question can be tackled from different angles. The probably most straightforward way to proceed is to take a structural approach, scrutinising the institutional rules of the game and the formal political practices in the regions under study. Most studies hitherto have concentrated on this structural path. For instance, De Ceuninck et al. (2005) concluded that the apparent formal evolution of Flemish local government towards the northern government model does not exactly tally with the political reality yet. De Rynck and Wayenberg (2010), following their comparative study of the intergovernmental relations in the Belgian regions, argued that although Flanders does differ in certain formal aspects from Wallonia (e.g. with its stress on NPM-arrangements, a management-oriented style and local taxation), the southern Belgian government culture still and quite often persists as well. At least formally, Belgium seems characterised by a synthesis of historical continuity and diverging reality of local government in its regions.

This paper seeks to offer some further clues to unravel the matter by taking an actor-centred approach. Analysing the attitudes of the actors who shape the formal institutions in place might provide a better understanding of how the regionalisation affects (and reflects) local government in practice. Such endeavours have been undertaken less frequently so far, and those who did usually focused on political leadership. For instance, Steyvers et al. (2006) found that the attitudes amongst Belgian mayors tend to differ to some extent according to their region, alongside general social and partisan background effects. We turn to the local councillor as the basic unit of analysis, however. This choice is not a coincident one since councillors’ role and position is subjected to increasing concern and debate in academic and political circles. In fact, although local councillors are formally conceived as the foundation of local democracy, the interplay of social and political evolutions in local government (and beyond) has severely undermined their position in the centre of local decision-making across Europe (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Since both the role and the position of local councillors relate to the government system they incorporate, comparing these factors across Flanders and Wallonia might provide a useful complement to our existing knowledge about the implications of regionalisation for Belgian local government.

2. Research Methods and Data

The basic research hypothesis of the paper suggests that Belgian local government finds itself in a state of flux. Consequently, the most obvious way to assert whether Flemish and Walloon local governments diverge would be to set out current data to empirical data from the past. Unfortunately, such data are

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6 More specifically, Flemish mayors appeared to be more positive towards the principle of citizen consultation and the trustee model of democracy.
not available. To compensate for this empirical lacuna we apply a comparative research design which is constructed on the theoretical basis of two well-known and widely accepted local government typologies: the typology of Page and Goldsmith (1987) concerning the vertical intergovernmental relations and the typology of Mouritzen and Svara (2002) which assesses the horizontal intragovernmental relations. Starting from the typical features of ancient Belgian local government according to these typologies, we introduce France and The Netherlands in the analysis as benchmarks who have particular characteristics in common with Belgium, whilst systematically differing on others. This most similar – most different research design (Hopkin, 2002) forms the theoretical starting point of the analysis to which we then compare the current state of affairs in Flemish and Walloon local government. As such we are able to test the implicit assumption behind our main research hypothesis which entails that Flemish local government would emulate the Dutch system whilst Wallonia would shift towards the French system. Section three expounds this comparative framework, systematically comparing local government in Belgium, The Netherlands and France according to these local government typologies, and interpreting the implications of the regionalisation of Belgian local government for these categorisations. It results in the operationalisation of four specific research hypotheses.

The paper draws on survey data which represent the opinion of local councillors upon their role and position. These data were collected through a standard questionnaire that has been developed in the context of the comparative European research project “Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance” (MAELG) in 2008. The MAELG-project aims to compare local councils and councillors amongst a wide variety of structural and cultural settings. It was particularly concerned with councillors in an urban setting since this is where councillors are claimed to face most difficulties to function as central actors in local democracy (see e.g. Gabriel, Hoffmann-Martinot & Savitch, 2000; Haus, Heinelt & Stewart, 2005). As a consequence the dataset only includes councillors from municipalities that have a population of at least 10.000 inhabitants. This qualification implies that some variation stemming from the scale and corresponding culture in local government is probably reduced due to the urbanisation umbrella which forms the specific context of research.

In view of the research method of the paper, we select the data from Belgium (588 cases of which 450 Flemish cases and 138 Walloon cases), The Netherlands (1222 cases) and France (720 cases), resulting in a total dataset of 2530 cases. Since Dutch executives are no longer allowed to retain their council seat after the introduction of the Dualism Act in 2002, only non-executive councillors (and councillors who exercised an executive mandate before the survey) are included in the Dutch dataset. In Belgium and France on the other hand, executives and mayors are still allowed to retain their council seat during their executive mandate, and are therefore not excluded from research. Finally, due to the largely unequal distribution of response between countries and regions, the original dataset has been weighted as to guarantee an equal share of councillors for Flanders, Wallonia, France and The Netherlands. We run all empirical analyses on the base of this weighted dataset.

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7 See www.maelg.eu. The results of the project are forthcoming in a descriptive book and several articles.
8 The distribution of executives (and formerly executives) versus non-executives per country is as follows: Flanders 31.8% versus 68.2%, Wallonia 36.5% versus 64.5%, The Netherlands 9.1% versus 90.9% and France 37.2% versus 62.8%. The questionnaire did not allow to differentiate between mayors and executives.
3. The Comparative Research Design

In order to capture the similarities and dissimilarities between the countries under study as the theoretical point of departure, we construct a conceptual comparative research design that consists of two local government typologies. After briefly outlining the position of The Netherlands, France and Belgium in these typologies, hypothetical disparities between Flanders and Wallonia are put forward. These specific research hypotheses structure the empirical analysis in the fourth section of the paper.

3.1. The Vertical Dimension of Local Government: Community Representative or City Governor?

The vertical dimension of our comparative framework is concerned with the intergovernmental relation(s) between local government and its central pendant(s). The basic intergovernmental typology on local government has been constructed by Page and Goldsmith (1987), and modified by Hesse and Sharpe (1991). It has become widely accepted and frequently used in comparative research on local government (Lidström, 1999). Particularly relevant for this paper is the notion of the underlying principle or ethos that both typologies have in common (Page, 1991; Goldsmith, 1996; Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998). A northern group of countries is characterised by some form of legal localism or self-government which grants local government its primary purpose as producer of public services for its citizens. The Netherlands are typically classified amongst this northern type of local government. The stress on legal localism is reflected in an extensive system of public service delivery within Dutch municipalities. In order to maximise the efficiency at the output side of government the latter are subjected to an ongoing gulf of centrally imposed amalgamations (Toonen, 1991; Denters & Klok, 2005). Compared to Belgium and France, Dutch municipalities are rather large with an average size of almost 32,500 inhabitants. Yet although New Public Management tools should further help municipalities to achieve these goals, the search for responsiveness must not be overlooked as an integral part of the recent evolutions in Dutch local government either (Vetter & Kersting, 2003; Denters & Klok, 2005).

In contrast to these functionally oriented countries, the southern group much more adheres to forms of political localism. This principle translates core values of communitarianism and territorial representation in local government’s primary purpose of collective representation. France is a typical example of this southern or Franco group. Its outlook is very distinct: more than 35,000, mostly very small (75% of the municipalities have less than 1,000 inhabitants), municipalities give a political expression to the community identity. On the other hand, more than half of the total population of the country lives in municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, although these comprise only two percent of the total municipal landscape (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005). The political value of local government dominates its functional counterpart as local authorities play no more than a small part in the distribution of public services (Mény, 1987). To compensate for this lack of local capacity, municipalities engage in a patchwork of inter-municipal cooperations (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005).

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9 Numbers for 2002, see Denters and Klok, 2005.
Belgium is usually considered as a country of the southern or Franco group as well, albeit Goldsmith – before the formal regionalisation of local government – claimed: “given the fundamental divisions in Belgian society between Flemish and Walloons, one would expect the country to exhibit divided tendencies in terms of the north-south distinction” (1996: 177). Belgian local government has several features in common with France such as its stress on political localism, its relatively small municipalities (with an average population of 18,000) and its limited functionality. The regionalisation of local government in 2002, however, has further transformed a part of this reality (Plees, 2005). The discourse and subsequent reforms in Flanders paved the way for New Public Management and a more efficiency-driven ethos in the local authorities (e.g. budgeting, planning, and controlling; stress on privatisations and public-private partnerships; incentives for further amalgamations). Wallonia on the other hand prefers strengthening the political and democratic capacity of its local governments (Pilet, 2008). Rather than enhancing their functionality as such, local authorities involve in inter-municipal arrangements like the French example (Steyvers, 2006). This could be explained by the fact that Wallon municipalities are also significantly smaller than Flemish municipalities (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010).

Consequently, the core distinction between both types relates to “the fundamental dichotomy involved in reconciling the competing claims of local government to be both democratic and efficient” (Goldsmith, 1996: 174). This “democratic dilemma”, as Dahl (1994) calls it, also impinges on the role of local councillors who are responsible to reconcile these competing claims in practice. Although councillors can possibly assume a wide array of specific roles, the latter basically fluctuate between community representation on the input side of local government and city governance on the output side (Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Kalk & De Rynck, 2003). Accordingly, it could be expected that along the lines of the distinct local government ethos between north and south, councillors from Wallonia put more emphasis on the former, while councillors from Flanders tend to be preoccupied with the latter.

3.2. The Horizontal Dimension of Local Government: Layman Rule or Subordination?

The second typology classifies local government from a horizontal perspective. It has been developed by Mouritzen and Svara (2002) and addresses the relations between the different actors in local government. The basic idea behind this typology is that every local government system is characterised by the structural interplay of three organising principles: the layman rule (i.e. the elected (non-executive) councillors), political leadership (i.e. the mayor and the executive board), and professionalism (i.e. the municipal administration). Based on the combination of these principles, Mouritzen and Svara discerned ideal-types of local government which are particularly suited to assert the position of local councillors in the political constellation at the local level.11

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10 The average size of Flemish municipalities is around 19,500 whilst the Walloon municipalities have averagely 13,000 inhabitants.

11 The typology is constructed from the perspective of political leadership – and more particularly the executive functions in local government. As such its key issue is about “how political power is obtained, maintained, exercised and shared” (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002: 53).
A first ideal-type is the strong mayor form. In this system, the mayor is in charge of the political majority in the municipal council and all executive functions. Consequently, the layman rule and professionalism give in to the prevailing principle of political leadership whereby councillors are quite subordinate. France is one of the eminent examples of this strong mayor form. In fact, its political system is explicitly designed to guarantee this outcome. Elected amongst the members of the municipal council – in which the ruling party or coalition is overrepresented due to the electoral system – the mayor acts as the leading figure of the municipality. He usually holds all executive functions, and appoints his deputy mayors or cabinet – to which he is free to delegate. The administration and the municipal council fall under his supervision as well.

The collective form is a second ideal-type of local government. In this system executive functions are exercised by an executive body, consisting of elected councillors and a mayor who presides the board. The layman rule – and thus the municipal council(lors) – theoretically dominates the collective form to the detriment of political leadership and professionalism. Such a system is found in The Netherlands. The Dutch council elects the aldermen who form the executive board together with the mayor. The latter is an administrator who is appointed by the Crown, and thus not a popularly elected politician. The executive formally decides as one collective body, although executive responsibilities are distributed amongst the aldermen in reality. The executive remains formally under scrutiny of the council, which determines the general framework and main goals of municipal policy. Besides, the relation between the council and the executive has been drastically altered by the Dualism Act in 2002. This act transformed the personal monistic system, in which executives remained council members, into a strictly dualistic system. Executives now have to resign from their council mandate once they have been elected by the latter amongst its members. This transformation was directed at empowering the council vis-à-vis the executive, an intention that seems to have succeeded according to recent research of councillors’ role orientations (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010).

Belgium is categorised under the header of the collective form as well. Even if one could wonder to which degree this stipulation has ever accorded with the reality on the political field, the layman rule is formally considered as the prevailing principle in Belgian local government. The institutionalisation of the executive functions is identical with the Dutch system as it was before the introduction of the Dualism Act in 2002. The council elects the aldermen amongst its ranks. They form the executive board which formally operates as a collegial body, presided by the mayor. Yet in reality policy domains are distributed amongst the executive members. Belgian local government is thus functionally dualistic, but personally monistic. This situation leads non-executive councillors to be quite marginalised in the process of contemporary local governance (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2011).

In the aftermath of the regionalisation of local government in 2002, things have changed from here. As a response to councillors’ lack of influence, the Flemish legislator sought to re-empower both the council (e.g. by granting it the authority to elect its own president) and the councillors (e.g. by allowing them to

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12 The two remaining ideal-types are the committee-leader form (although there is one political leader in the municipality, the organising principles are balanced in practice whilst committees exercise much of the executive functions) and the council-manager form (a professional administrator holds all executive functions, layman rule and political leadership are accommodated to professionalism).
determine the agenda of the council or ask questions). In Wallonia, less emphasis was put on re-empowering the council(lor)s, except for the introduction of a constructive motion of distrust towards the executive board (Pilet, 2008). In this respect, a majority in the council may recall an executive or the entire board if this vote of distrust is accompanied by an alternative proposal. Yet the largest disparity between the regions stems from a fundamental change that has been introduced by the Walloon local government act in 2006. Indeed, the act incorporated a new way of electing the mayor. The system is described as quasi- or semi-direct: the candidate who obtains most preferential votes within the municipal coalition who has the political majority in the council, is automatically appointed as mayor (Pilet, Delwit & Van Haute, 2007). Consequently, we could expect the Walloon system to head more towards the strong mayor form of local government (Pilet, 2008). In Flanders, despite the fact that the discussion about directly electing the mayor dominated the political agenda for quite a while, the designation of the mayor remained as it was under the old Belgian federal act. Although this mayor is a popularly elected politician and his candidacy is proposed by the council, he is still ultimately appointed by central government. Flanders therefore hangs on to the collective form of local government.

3.3. Research Design and Hypotheses

In order to test our main research hypothesis we focus on the two specific and characteristic dimensions of local government outline above. This limited and deductive empirical research design aims to overcome two common criticisms on comparative studies of local government: their tendency to be mainly descriptive and the loss of depth due to the wideness of research (Lidström, 1999).

The two typologies are combined into a most different – most similar research design (see Figure 1). France and The Netherlands thereby theoretically relate to each other as most different cases in terms of both the role and the position of their local councillors. Simultaneously, France is considered to be most similar with Belgium in terms of the vertical dimension of local government (expressed in councillors’ role) whilst The Netherlands are assumed to be most similar with Belgium with regard to the horizontal power relation in local government (expressed in councillors’ position). France and The Netherlands therefore serve as the benchmarks for the presumed internal evolutions in Belgian local government. Accordingly, if the diverging-hypothesis would be right, we will notice a role-system amongst Flemish councillors that tends more towards the Dutch benchmark, and intra-governmental relations in Wallonia that evolve more towards the French benchmark.

13 In this respect, Belgium – and now Flanders – thus did/does differ formally from the Dutch system.
Table 1 translates this research design into four concrete research hypotheses. For each dimension of local government, the a-hypothesis states that Flanders and Wallonia are drifting apart towards respectively The Netherlands or France. The b-hypothesis, on the other hand, postulates that the role and position of local councillors in Flanders and Wallonia is still very much alike, resembling the path-dependent characteristics of Belgium as a country-type, and France or The Netherlands as reference point. We are well aware, however, that these differences will and cannot always be clear-cut, especially because problems with the role and position of local councillors are quite widespread throughout Europe. This is why we take into account not only the absolute results, but above all the comparative and relative differences between the indicators in the countries and regions. Besides, if none of the hypotheses would hold true and no large and/or systematic differentiation would cross-cut our research population, we could conclude that local government in an urban setting basically shows a clear pattern of convergence throughout Europe.

### Table 1. Research hypotheses

| Hypothesis 1a | The role of local councillors in Flanders and Wallonia diverges. Whereas Walloon councillors still abide by the typical role as community representative that characterised southern-style Belgian government before the regionalisation (and e.g. France), Flemish councillors tend more towards the role as city governor which is typical for northern-style government (e.g. The Netherlands). |
| Hypothesis 1b | The role of local councillors in Flanders and Wallonia reflects the tradition of Belgian local government before the regionalisation. As such they still mainly prefer and assume the traditional southern role as community representative. |

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14 For instance, councillors are very unlikely to be the most powerful actors in any type of local government.
Hypothesis 2a  
Divergence  
The power relations in Flemish and Walloon local government diverge. Whereas local councillors in Flanders still attribute more power to the layman rule that typified the collective form of Belgian local government before the regionalisation (and e.g. The Netherlands), Walloon councillors tend to attribute more power to political leadership that marks the strong mayor form (e.g. France).

Hypothesis 2b  
Path-dependency  
The power relations in Flemish and Walloon local government reflect the tradition of Belgian local government before the regionalisation. As such councillors in both regions still attribute (comparatively) much power to the layman rule of the collective local government form.

4. Results

4.1. Community Representative or City Governor: An Analysis of Councillors’ Role Attitudes and Behaviour

The vertical dimension of our comparative study scrutinises the universal role-set that is imposed to local councillors as central actors in government. The classic role-set for councillors distinguishes between representation on the input side of government, and policy and control as the two specific elements of the governor-role at the output side (Rao et al., 1994). The first component of this analysis turns to councillors’ role attitude as an essential precondition for role behaviour in practice (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010). We asked respondents to indicate the importance they attach to both the input-directed role as representative of the local community and the output-oriented roles as policy-maker and scrutiniser. Scores vary a 0-4 scale. Hence, this question indicates the degree to which councillors internalise their role-set. According to the divergence-hypothesis (H1a), we would expect that councillors from Flanders and The Netherlands would tend to the efficiency-directed output roles as governor whilst Walloon and French councillors would prefer their classic role as community representative. The path-dependent hypothesis (H1b), on the other hand, postulates that councillors from both Flanders and Wallonia still prefer the representative role. Table 2 presents the mean score and standard deviation per role for each country and region, as well as the percentage of councillors who indicate that the role is of great or utmost importance (score 3 and 4) for them.

Table 2. Role attitude of local councillors in Belgium, The Netherlands and France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X (S)</td>
<td>% (very) great importance</td>
<td>X (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>88.5 %</td>
<td>3.2 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>84.6 %</td>
<td>3.6 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>88.5 %</td>
<td>3.1 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>88.7 %</td>
<td>2.9 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>3.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>92.2 %</td>
<td>3.3 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 Original question: “In your experience as a councillor, how important are the following tasks for you as a councillor: representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; defining the main goals of the municipal activity; controlling the municipal activity.” Scores varied from 0 (None) to 4 (Very great).
Table 2 demonstrates that a large majority of the councillors, irrespective of their country or region, subscribes to the entire role-set. Generally representation is considered as somewhat more important than policy and control. Still substantial and significant differences between the groups come forward. Particularly the scores at the output side of government tend to differ.\footnote{For ‘representation’: Cramer’s V=.077 and Eta=.045 with p=.000. For ‘policy’: Cramer’s V=.190 and Eta=.302 with p=.000. For ‘control’: Cramer’s V=.141 and Eta=.226 with p=.000.}

If we compare the scores for France and The Netherlands as the benchmarks of the analysis, a pattern of path-dependency emerges. French councillors, in line with their local government tradition as unit of political identity, prefer their representative role over the role as policy-maker and, particularly, scrutiniser. We perceive a reversed pattern in The Netherlands, where local government serves foremost as a channel to deliver public services in the most efficient way. Accordingly, Dutch councillors attach most importance to their role as governor. Although representation scores high as well, it is deemed as less important than policy and control.

Where does Belgium fit into this picture? At first sight scores of Wallonia and Flanders tend to be quite similar. In both regions scores for policy and control give in to representation, which seems to remain the basis for a mandate as a councillor in Belgium. Furthermore, the differences in support for the output roles between Flanders and Wallonia are smaller than the differences between Flanders and The Netherlands. Therefore we would argue that councillors’ role attitude seems to basically confirm the path-dependent hypothesis on local government. However, some important nuances qualify this analysis. For instance, representation is in integral part of local government in The Netherlands as well, whilst French councillors also agree that it is an important task to define the main goals of the municipal policy as a councillor. Acting as a community representative certainly does not exclude governing the city, and vice versa. Rather these roles accentuate the typical local government systems as they have been developed over time. In this respect a second nuance might suggest that Flanders is gradually diverging towards the Dutch system on the long haul, since Flemish councillors attribute more importance to their output roles as scrutiniser and policy-maker than their colleagues from Wallonia. Follow-up research is needed to underscore this claim. Yet if we compare these results to the general scores for the aggregated research population, we are inclined to think that the path-dependent hypothesis serves probably still best to explain the current variation in the role attitude of local councillors in Belgium, France and The Netherlands.

Figure 2 graphically represents the relation between these role attitudes for each country and region, based on the mean scores per role. It further underlines our two-sided conclusion. The role attitude of local councillors in The Netherlands leans clearly more towards the output side(s) of local government than the role attitude of the other groups. The French system points sharper towards representation but also policy-making, and clearly less towards controlling the municipal activity. Flanders and Wallonia tend to be quite similar to each other, and bear most similarities with the French figure as we would expect according to the path-dependent hypothesis. In terms of role attitude we would therefore conclude that the Belgian system basically persists, even after the formal regionalisation of local government. Yet on the other hand Flemish councillors attribute more importance to their role as
policy-maker as well, leaning towards the Dutch system as posited by the diverging-hypothesis. Particularly in Wallonia, the figure points sharper towards representation as the core task of local councillors – resembling the typical southern system on local government. Therefore in terms of role attitude, hypothesis 1a cannot be rejected although hypothesis 1b generally tends to prevail.
Figure 2. Role attitude amongst Local Councillors in Belgium, The Netherlands and France
From this principal and attitudinal level we move on to the councillor role-set in practice: to which degree do councillors claim to fulfil their role as community representative and city governor in the political realm? To measure this role behaviour we asked our respondents to rate their contribution to representation, policy and control on a 0-4 scale, varying from ‘none’ to ‘very great’. Table 3 sets out the results, indicating per country and region the mean scores, standard deviations and the percentage of councillors who define their contribution to the roles as (very) great. The results are also graphically presented in Figure 3.

| Table 3. Role behaviour of local councillors in Belgium, The Netherlands and France |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Representation                               | Policy                                        | Control                                      |
| X (S)                                        | % (very) great contribution                   | X (S)                                        | % (very) great contribution                   |
| General                                      | 2.8 (0.8)                                    | 65.5 %                                       | 2.5 (1.1)                                    | 49.2 %                                       | 2.5 (0.9)                                    | 51.6 %                                       |
| Netherlands                                  | 2.5 (0.8)                                    | 50.5 %                                       | 2.5 (0.8)                                    | 52.1 %                                       | 2.5 (0.8)                                    | 50 %                                         |
| Flanders                                     | 2.8 (0.7)                                    | 66.8 %                                       | 2.2 (1.1)                                    | 35.6 %                                       | 2.5 (0.9)                                    | 50.5 %                                       |
| Wallonia                                     | 2.8 (0.8)                                    | 66.2 %                                       | 2.3 (1.1)                                    | 40.9 %                                       | 2.6 (0.9)                                    | 51.5 %                                       |
| France                                       | 3 (0.8)                                      | 79 %                                         | 2.9 (1.1)                                    | 68.7 %                                       | 2.5 (1)                                     | 54.5 %                                       |

The general scores point out that local councillors claim to contribute substantially less to their role-set than they would wish to. Councillors thus cannot put their principles entirely into practice, which already hints at the restricted influence of local councillors in practice throughout Europe. Seemingly, being a local councillor in Europe is first and foremost about representing the requests and issues that emerge from local society. The output-oriented role as city governor, defining and controlling the municipal policy, is barely fulfilled by half of the councillor population. Still this deficit is by no means identical between the regions and countries of our research. Moreover, these differences are highly statistically significant.

First we compare the reference points in our comparative research design, i.e. the councillors of The Netherlands and France who theoretically represent the northern and southern local government system. In The Netherlands, scores for representation, policy and control are almost perfectly balanced. Yet compared to the general figures of our research population Dutch councillors contribute less to their role as community representative, as could be expected along the lines of historical path-dependency. Similarly, ancient principles of the southern system colour the behaviour of French local councillors. Indeed, they contribute most to their representative role, both in absolute and comparative numbers, although French scores for control and especially policy are situated well above average as well.

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17 Original question: “In your experience as a councillor, how would you define your contribution regarding the following tasks? Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; defining the main goals of the municipal activity; controlling the municipal activity.”

18 The figures symbolise the relation between the roles in terms of their mean scores.

19 For ‘representation’: Cramer’s V=.145 and Eta=.215 with p=.000. For ‘policy’: Cramer’s V=.203 and Eta=.264 with p=.000. For ‘control’: Cramer’s V=.097 and Eta=.034 with p=.000.
Does the same path-dependent pattern persist in the behaviour of Belgian local councillors as well? The results for Flemish and Walloon respondents coincide remarkably indeed. Local government in Belgium still basically revolves around representation and the expression of community identity. Besides, whereas Flemish councillors did indicate their (slightly higher) preference for the role as city governor compared to their Walloon colleagues, this difference visibly melts away – and is even slightly reversed – in political practice.

These conclusions are further underscored by the graphic presentation of councillors’ role behaviour in Figure 3. The Dutch system seems fairly balanced between the output side and input side of local government. The French figure on the other hand points sharper towards the representative corner of the spectrum, as well as to the position as policy-maker. Finally, the figures for Belgium tend to concur, showing a clear preponderance towards the representative point of the councillor role-set. Hence, our data suggest that the transformation in the Belgian institutional setting does not reflect or bring about a fundamentally diverging reality between the regions in the north and the south. Rather, local councillors in Flanders and Wallonia still act very much alike, continuing the historical roots of local government in Belgium. Even more so than in France, Belgian councillors’ role as city governor gives in to their role as community representative, corroborating hypothesis 1b in terms of role behaviour.
Figure 3. Role behaviour amongst Local Councillors in Belgium, The Netherlands and France
4.2. Layman Rule or Subordination: An Analysis of Councillors’ Perceived Power Triangle in Local Government

The second part of the empirical analysis turns to the horizontal power relation between layman rule, political leadership and professionalism within local government. If the diverging-hypothesis would hold true, our data would indicate that the Walloon system tends more towards the French strong mayor form whilst Flanders would bear more similarities to the Dutch collective form. However if the data would corroborate the path-dependent hypothesis, results for Flanders and Wallonia would still be very much alike, ideally reflecting the Dutch collective form.

Following our general actor-centred research approach, we measure the power triangle in local government by asking local councillors how they perceive the impact of the actors that represent the three organising principles in local government. This influence is rated on a 0-4 scale. The item ‘single local councillors’ thereby embodies the principle of the layman rule, the principle of political leadership is conceptualised through the actors ‘mayor’ and ‘executive board’, and the ‘heads of department’ and the municipal ‘CEO’ stand for professionalism in local government. Such a reputational analysis is claimed to be a fairly good way to assess the impact of central actors in government, since “having a reputation for being powerful is an important base of power in itself” (Jacobsen, 2009: 227).

Table 4 presents the mean score and standard variation per actor, as well as the percentage of respondents who attributed a (very) high influence to the actor under study. Furthermore, the horizontal (extended) power triangle within local government is graphically represented in Figure 4 on the base of the mean scores per actor.

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20 Original question: “On the basis of your experience as a local councillor in this city, and independently of the formal procedures, please indicate how influential each of the following actors are over the Local Authority activities.” Scores varied from 0 (No influence) to 4 (Very high influence).

21 The power of the municipal council as an institution was not included in the questionnaire.

22 When discussing our results, however, it remains important to keep in mind that these figures represent the opinion of just one central actor in government. A full reputational analysis which encompasses the opinion of as many different actors as possible, however, fell beyond the scope of our research.
Table 4. Power triangle in Belgian, Dutch and French local government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single councillors</th>
<th>Mayor</th>
<th>Executive board</th>
<th>CEO</th>
<th>Heads of Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X (S) % (very) high</td>
<td>X (S) % (very) high</td>
<td>X (S) % (very) high</td>
<td>X (S) % (very) high</td>
<td>X (S) % (very) high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>1.8 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.4 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.1 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.9)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2.3 (0.7)</td>
<td>3.6 (0.7)</td>
<td>3.5 (0.6)</td>
<td>2.9 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.4 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>1.5 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.5 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.4 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.6 (1.1)</td>
<td>2.0 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia</td>
<td>1.5 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.4)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.8 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1.8 (0.8)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.8 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.3 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general scores for the perceived power balance in local government immediately put the finger on the spot: councillors are in reality no way near to being the powerful actors they are supposed to be. The hierarchy is even quite striking: local government seems above all dominated by the political leaders. The power of both mayor and executive board is deemed high to very high. The professional branch of local government comes second. The impact of the CEO and the heads of department thereby clearly outweighs the impact of individual councillors. Only a minority of the respondents attributes councillors the power they are formally supposed to have. As such, and regardless of region or country, the impact of the local councillor is considered as quite restricted. The pattern between the countries and regions under study, however, is highly variegated and statistically significant.\(^{23}\)

The relation between layman rule, political leadership and professionalism in The Netherlands seems to comply with the Mouritzen and Svara typology. Although Dutch councillors are far from dominant actors in their local government either, from a comparative perspective they correspond definitely most to the layman rule which is supposed to prevail in the Dutch collective form of local government. Whether, and to which degree, the introduction of the Dualism Act accounts for the relatively strong position of local councillors cannot be measured in this cross-sectional study, but the result is definitely remarkable. The mayor on the other hand is claimed to have less influence than on average, whilst the executive is perceived as the most powerful actor in Dutch local government. The limited power of the mayor could probably relate to the fact that this function is exercised by a civil servant who is appointed by the Crown in The Netherlands – and not by a popularly elected politician. The impact of the professional branch of local government, finally, barely exceeds the power of individual councillors.

\(^{23}\) For ‘single councillors’: Cramer’s V=.248 and Eta=.403 with p=.000. For ‘mayor’: Cramer’s V=.337 and Eta=.537 with p=.000. For ‘executive board’: Cramer’s V=.381 and Eta=.567 with p=.000. For ‘CEO’: Cramer’s V=.145 and Eta=.204 with p=.000. For ‘heads of department’: Cramer’s V=.147 and Eta=.216 with p=.000.
The historical path-dependency discerned in Dutch local government occurs in France, as the example of the strong mayor form, as well. The power of individual councillors is subordinate to professionalism and, particularly, political leadership. Relations amongst the latter are inversed compared to The Netherlands. Whilst the impact of the executive board is comparatively low, mayors are perceived as the outstanding and powerful actors by far. As such the French case exemplifies the path-dependent logic between institutional provisions and political practice. Indeed, the French formal system, designed with the explicit goal of appointing a strong mayor who controls the executive, has clearly led to corresponding horizontal relations in local government.

Furthermore, this path-dependent logic can be extended to the Belgian political system as well. Indeed, the results for Flanders and Wallonia are quasi identical, with the exception of the professional component of local government which is deemed stronger in the north of the country than the south. Apparently, the semi-direct election of the mayor in Wallonia has not yet resulted in increased power for mayors in the south, nor have institutional provisions empowered councillors as dominant actors in the north. The effects of these changes, however, might still emerge within the next decades.

Figure 4 further underlines the path-dependent nature of intra-governmental relations in the countries and regions under study. Whereas the French power triangle sharply points towards the mayor as the dominant actor in local government, the Dutch figure is clearly more balanced. Not only does it point more towards the executive and less towards the mayor, it also extends much more towards ‘single councillors’ than on average. The power triangle in Flanders and Wallonia is almost alike, reflecting the historical continuity of the power relations in Belgian local government, and conforming hypothesis 2b. Nevertheless, Flemish councillors attribute slightly more power to the executive, the municipal CEO and the heads of departments whilst the Walloon figure points sharper towards the mayor as the most powerful actor in local government. In this sense we could still perceive a small hint of diverging reality between the two largest regions of the country, and hypothesis 2a therefore cannot be reject entirely either.

A final comment relates to the applicability of the local government typology as such. Although the theoretical principles of the typology fit relatively well to the empirical reality in The Netherlands and France, Belgian power relations do not accord with the theoretically acclaimed dominance of the layman rule in its collective form of local government. Generally, the Flemish and Walloon power triangle seems to accord even better with the French triangle than the Dutch one. This conclusion highlights the need for further institutional renovation of Belgian local government in order to effectively strengthen the local councillors as the base of local democracy. Follow-up research might better outline and assess the longitudinal impact of the reforms introduced so far, but the Dutch experience clearly shows that a thorough reformation of the power relations in local government could require an equally drastic reshuffling of the institutional framework beforehand.
Figure 4. Power triangle in Belgian, Dutch and French local government
5. Conclusion

The assumption that the local government system in Belgium’s two largest regions, Flanders and Wallonia, is gradually drifting apart formed an intriguing soil for the regionalisation of Belgian local government in 2002. Over and above this acclaimed tendency, it was expected that the regionalisation of the organic framework on local government would give further rise to diverging local government systems in the north and the south of the federal state. On a formal-structural level, this seems to be the case in some domains, but not everywhere. The goal of this paper was to take a complementary, actor-centred approach to verify the claim on an informal-cultural level. As such it sought to test whether local governments in Flanders and Wallonia are heading towards different directions, or whether they still reflect the path-dependent nature of traditional Belgian local government.

Starting from a horizontal and a vertical comparative model on local government, the paper tackled the vision of Belgian, Dutch and French local councillors upon their role and position in the daily field of local politics. Since France and The Netherlands represent two opposing types of local government and have both important features in common with typical Belgian local government, comparing Flanders and Wallonia to these neighbouring countries should provide deeper insight in the dynamics of the regionalisation process. Which conclusions emerged from this analysis?

In terms of councillors’ role as the expression of the underlying ethos of local government, the analysis differentiated between the attitudinal level and the behavioural level. The role attitude of Flemish councillors tends (slightly) more towards the role as city governor which prevails in the northern system, while Walloon councillors adhere more to community representation. Yet from a comparative perspective it is still predominantly the southern political localism that prevails in colouring the attitudinal paths of local councillors in an urban context throughout Belgium – reflecting its path-dependent history. Furthermore, this path-dependency dominates also clearly in terms of councillors’ role behaviour. Representation remains the cornerstone of the mandate as a local councillor in Flanders and Wallonia, as is has always been in typical Belgian local government. Secondly, the perceived power relation in Belgian local government basically reflects historical path-dependency as well, although some evidence hints at a diverging reality again – with Wallonia showing a (slightly) stronger tendency towards the strong mayor form. Neither the divergence-hypothesis nor the path-dependent hypothesis is thus fully corroborated. Yet when taking into account the French and Dutch local government systems as benchmarks for the presumed divergence between Flanders and Wallonia, it seems as though the traditional Belgian local government culture is still very much alive.

Future research could help to interpret the meaning of these results in a longitudinal perspective. Even though it is impossible to foresee the precise consequences of the regionalisation over the next decades, it seems that there are thus reasonable grounds to assume that history will keep playing its role. Therefore the main conclusion of our paper endorses the claim of Lidström about comparing local government in Europe: “The European local government systems exhibit a remarkable continuity. (...) Of course, a number of factors (...) have modified and changed the systems. Nevertheless, they still bear signs of their origins” (Lidström, 1999: 107).
6. References


