Ideology and party members.

The correspondence between election manifests and members’ opinions in the Flemish liberal-democratic party (1999-2012).

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1. Introduction

In the past, it sounded very reasonable and logical that parties defended what their members thought. Parties were based on societal cleavages, which implied a strong and fixed connection between structures in society (i.e. social groups and their interests) on the one hand, and political agency (i.e. political parties giving coherence and political expression to the interests of those social groups) on the other hand (Bartolini and Mair 1999; Knutsen and Scarbrough 1995). Mass parties were in that sense interest organizations that acted in favor of their ‘classe gardée’. Members of this preferred social group constituted a fixed group of supporters who joined in large numbers the party that defended their interests.

But things have changed, both on the side of the parties and in society. Owing to processes of secularization, individualization, etc. there is a de-alignment of traditional links between social groups and parties. Consequently, parties are nowadays increasingly operating as a ‘cartel party’ (Katz & Mair 1995). In this kind of parties, party elites have become professionalized and operate often autonomously from the basis of the party in order to respond to the wishes of the electorate. This implies that party members become far less important for party elites, who are strongly focused on attracting voters by running centralized and professional campaigns. Party elites refrain from being bound by party members’ wishes (Mair 1994). In addition, there is a decrease in party loyalty from voters and members (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) and declining party membership figures (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012) which all give rise to the question of whether members’ interests are still articulated by parties in current politics.

Only few quantitative studies have studied the influence of members on party ideologies (Rohlfing 2013:2). More in general are intra-party processes an aspect of political parties which has not yet been extensively researched (Van Haute & Carty 2012). The scientific interest has mostly been focused on the party as a uniform political actor or as part of a party system.

The analysis of the impact of party members on party manifestos may, however, be crucial in our understanding of the dynamics of intra-party decision-making. For instance it may give us insight into the extent to which party activists are responsible for programmatic differences among parties. Several scholars (Aldrich 1983a, 1983b, 1995; Miller and Schofield 2003) consider party members as an important factor of ideological divergence (Bouteca 2011).

Large-scale comparative research seems to indicate that parties do not listen to the ideological preferences of their members. But this research is still in its infancy, in-depth case studies are needed to substantiate these findings (Rohlfing 2013:9).
This paper would like to contribute to the discussion on whether parties (still) defend the views of their members. Do members and parties speak the same language, or have opinions of both diverged? From the literature, three mechanisms that possibly foster (or hinder) correspondence between members’ opinions and the positions of the party elite could be detected: recruitment mechanisms, internal democratic mechanisms and electoral mechanisms. We will argue that all of them impact on the relationship between members’ opinions and manifesto positions, but often in contradictory ways rendering the outcome of the relationship rather unpredictable.

The views of the members of the Flemish liberal party Open VLD will be compared with the positions of this party on the socio-economic left right cleavage, the religious-philosophical dimension and the post-materialist cleavage. In order to find out whether the positional distance between the party and its members has changed, the situation of 1999/2001 will be compared with the situation a decade later, i.e. 2010/2012. The positions of the members come from two similar surveys of OpenVLD party members. The party position is based on the manual coding of election manifestos. It is particularly intriguing to focus on a liberal-democratic party such as Open VLD because in proportion to social-democratic and extremist parties, there has been little attention for liberal-democratic parties in political science (Kirchner 1988:1).

In the remainder of this paper we will proceed as follows. In the next section we explain how party members and party ideology are related. Then we pay attention to the data and methodology that were used for this article. Afterwards our hypotheses are empirically tested by comparing the position of the Flemish liberal-democratic party with the position of its members. Based on these findings we will determine whether the Flemish liberal-democratic party (still) defends the views of its members.
2. Party activists and party ideology

In the current post-industrialized democracies, purposive incentives – i.e. motivations that are related to ideology - remain important for partisans to become a member of a political party (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Katz 1990). Other possible incentives to join a party, such as material benefits and a social network (Clark and Wilson 1961), have become less important. The OpenVLD members do not differ from the general picture in this respect (Wauters, 2010; Van Haute et al, 2013). On the one hand, changing political values reduced the practice of patronage which means that the material benefits of party membership, such as job offers or government contracts, have become less decisive. On the other hand, the expansion of recreational facilities outside of the party have eroded the intangible rewards, such as the enjoyment of social relations, that come from being a member of a party (Cross and Young 2002:868; Hulbary and Bowman 1998:30).

The fact that ideology matters so much to party members raises the question to what extent parties actually say what their members think. The points of view of the party will be analyzed by looking at the election manifesto. This is the most important document that parties use to formulate their policy preferences (Nimmo & Combs 1980:157-188; Budge 2001:5) and that is open to a wide audience. It is in general written by a small group of party-experts (Marks et. al. 2007:27), including MPs and senior party figures. They are often inspired by market research revealing what the electorate wants. Party members have to formally adopt the manifesto on a party convention and they have the possibility to amend the draft of the text, but the general principles are set out by the party elite. The limited possibilities of members to influence the ideology of the party can lead to a reasonable amount of divergence between the ideological positions of party members and the positions articulated in the manifestos. This is interesting, because if party membership is strongly determined by the fact that members want to assist in achieving the party’s ideological goals, there should be a strong correspondence between the official policy positions of a party and the ideological views of its members. If this is not the case, political parties lack internal legitimacy.

Theory on party membership does not give a clear-cut answer on the level of correspondence between opinions of party members and policy choices made by party elites. There are indications that point in the direction of similarity, but there are also elements that suggest that the ideological preferences of party members can seriously diverge from what is propagated in the official party manifestos.

We can point to three mechanisms that foster (or hinder) correspondence between members’ opinions and the positions of the party elite: recruitment mechanisms, internal democratic mechanisms and electoral mechanisms.
First, a general assumption in the literature is that members join a party that corresponds with their personal views on how society functions, how it should function and how its functioning can be improved (Van Haute & Carty 2011:886; Katz 2001). In other words, people become member of a party with policy positions in line with their own preferences. This could be called ‘self-selection’, i.e. people’s choice to become active in a certain party. People will choose parties that are in line with their own opinions. This causes differences between parties in terms of the composition of their membership, which reflect differences in their program.

Related, parties also recruit actively candidates and members primarily among people that share their views. The presence of parliamentarians, election candidates and party members from particular social groups helps parties to complement their party programs with a clearly visible image presented to the outside world. Parties like to be recognized both by their party program and by their ‘ambassadors’. The kind of people that joins a party and that is active in external party activities, plays an important role in defining what the party stands for (Katz 2001; Wauters 2012). Therefore, parties actively recruit candidates and members whose opinions are in line with the general party opinions.

This relationship is not always self-evident, however. A considerable amount of Belgian party activists admits to be an ideological misfit. That is a party member who recognizes that he does “not share the perspectives and political orientation of his party” (Van Haute & Carty 2011:886). Most of the time these misfits consider themselves more ‘extreme’ than their party. Misfits of left wing parties position themselves more to the left than their party, misfits of right wing parties more to the right (Van Haute & Carty 2011:888).

Misfits are a very specific group of party members, but also party members in general are supposed to be more extreme than party elites in some theoretical models (May 1973; Aldrich 1983a; Aldrich 1983b). According to May’s (1973) law of curvilinear disparity a political party is characterized by ideological diversity. May states that elected representatives hold views that are less extreme than the views of the party activists. Unlike representatives and party leaders, the rank and file are not accountable to the electorate nor do they have to reach comprises with other parties in government, which in May’s view moderates policy positions. Other scholars such as Aldrich (Aldrich 1983a, 1983b, 1995) confirm that party-activists are ideological purists because they are far less interested in winning elections than the party in public office. “The political role [of party activists] is to attempt to constrain the actual leaders of the party, its ambitious office seekers, as they try to become the party-in-government by appealing to the electorate.” (Aldrich 1995:183) In other words, party activists tend to take rather extreme policy positions, and as we will indicate below, the ambition to catch the median voter restrains party leaders from listening to their members.
A second mechanism that impacts on the correspondence between party members and elections manifests, refers to the (increased) role of party members in intra-party decision-making. Aldrich (1983a, 1983b, 1995) confirms that activists play an important role in the party’s ideological direction. They are in the driver’s seat as the party-car tries to find its ideological direction. Miller and Schofield (2003:259) endorse this thesis and attach great importance to the importance of members for the ideological choices of their party. Party activists apply opposite lock when their leaders try to change the ideological course of the party. The policy-motivated activists are a force of stability and they discourage ideological change; while the leaders of the party, the ambitious office seekers, are a dynamic force that is prepared to change the ideological position of the party in order to win elections.

At first sight, there seems to be no reason to think that this has recently changed. On the contrary, party members have gained new powers the last decades. In most parties they can pick party leaders and candidates and are allowed to vote at party conferences (e.g. Scarrow 1999; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Cross & Blais 2012). These organizational changes increased (at least on paper) the impact of party members on intra-party decision making in general, and on policy choices in particular. From an international-comparative perspective, Belgian parties have been frontrunners in this respect. In the 1990s, member participation and internal democratization turned out to be the new ‘buzz’ words in Belgian politics. In an attempt to renew the party organization, Flemish parties allowed their members to elect their party leader, to have a say in the composition of the candidate lists and to speak and vote at party conferences (Wauters, 2009). The influence of social and cultural pillar-based organizations and of middle-level party elites (presidents of regional and local branches for instance) was reduced within parties, in favor of individual members (Deschouwer and Lucardie 2003; Wauters 2013).

These organizational changes suggests that the differences between what members think and what Flemish parties advocate in their manifestos cannot be large and have even possibly decreased. Yet, the results of this process of internal democratization were rather ambiguous (Devos et. al 2004; Wauters 2009). Party statutes were officially amended in this sense but it did not seem to have influence on the way party elites behaved, and there was no shift in the internal balance of power. On the contrary, the internal reform has often strengthened the powerful position of party oligarchies, and of party leaders in particular, since their actions are now officially authorized by party members (Wauters 2013).

A final mechanism refers to electoral competition. We earlier discussed the ‘dealignment thesis’ (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) meaning that voters and members are no longer exclusively tied to
one particular party. Consequently, parties have to ‘earn’ their voters continuously. Winning elections has become a matter of convincing floating voters, rather than defending the interests of the party members. That is why present-day party manifestos are primarily the result of market research by professional marketers rather than the output of a consultation process within the party in which party members are involved (Panebianco 1988).

Another consequence of this ‘dealignment’ process is the decline of party membership figures across Europe (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012). This also accounts for Belgium. While Belgian party member figures initially declined slowly (Deschouwer 1994), this decline has grown rapidly in the 1990s and has become even stronger in the first decade of the new millennium (Quintelier & Hooghe 2010). Between 1987 and 2010, Belgian parties lost more than a quarter million of their members (from 637,954 to 377,235) or more than 40% of their total membership file (Van Haute et al 2013). This decrease has strengthened the need to professionalize party organization and to focus on voters more than on party members. Owing to the introduction of a far-reaching system of public funding of parties, the decline in revenues from membership fees has been compensated (and even more than that), rendering the need to keep members on board and attracting new members less urgent. Parties are today operating as cartel parties who seem to give more priority to the state (and its generous party funding) rather than to structured society (with a volatile, and hence unpredictable group of supporters).

Based on the three mechanisms described above, we end up with two competing hypotheses:

H1a Party members’ views and election manifestos correspond

H1b Party members’ views and election manifestos do not correspond

The methodology to estimate the position of party members and that of election manifestos differ from each other, however. The use of two different scales make a direct comparison between members and manifestos difficult. Therefore, we make a comparison over time in order to test these hypotheses. The crucial question then becomes whether members and manifestos has evolved in the same direction.
3. Methodology

As indicated, the empirical analysis of this paper is based on two different data sources: postal surveys among OpenVLD members – one conducted in 2001 and another in 2012 – and measures of party positions based on the electoral manifestos of OpenVLD in 1999 and 2010.

The party positions in the election manifestos were obtained through manual coding of these manifestos. We used measurements that fit closely with the socio-economic, religious-philosophical and post-materialist cleavages. We did not use the left-right scores of the CMP because these measurements are a mix of several socio-economic, religious-philosophical and post-materialistic categories of the CMP coding scheme.

In order to measure the position of Open VLD on the different dimensions, the entire manifesto was first split up into quasi-sentences using the CMP coding instructions (Volkens, 2002:3-4). In a second stage, it was decided which quasi-sentences could be identified as belonging to the economic left-right cleavage, the religious-philosophical dimension and the post-materialist cleavage. For this, we used the expert-coding scheme designed by Laver and Garry (2000) with some adjustments to match with the scales that were defined in the surveys.

The economic left-right cleavage clusters quasi-sentences on socio-economic issues such as the state budget, social security, taxes, the level of state intervention and the relation between employers and employees. The scale on conservative vs progressive moral values (religious-philosophical cleavage) is based on statements with regard to sexual values, abortion, euthanasia and the role of family life. The post-materialist cleavage is operationalized by looking at the parts of the manifesto that deal with the environment, quality of life on the shop floor and the level of democratic decision-making.

In order to determine the position of the party on each of the three cleavages, the different text units were assigned to the correct directional group. For the socio-economic cleavage this means that the quasi-sentences were put in a left or right category. A statement was seen as ‘left’ when it insisted on state intervention, more equality between the rich and the poor or when it defended the interests of employees. When a statement highlighted less state intervention, more individual freedom in the socioeconomic field or the protection of the interests of entrepreneurs, it was seen as ‘right’. The quasi-sentences that refer to the religious-philosophical cleavage were put in the categories conservative or progressive. Finally, the post-materialist cleavage was split up in quasi-sentences that relate to materialist or post-materialist values. Statements with no clear preference were coded as neutral, except if they were embedded in a paragraph that otherwise expressed a

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1 The total number of quasi-sentences in the manifestos of the liberal and social-democratic party between 1961 and 2010 was 26,128, 13,035 of which were identified as socioeconomic.
clear position. In that case, a neutral quasi-sentence was coded by analogy with the rest of the paragraph (see the coding conventions of Laver and Garry, 2000:624). Furthermore, of every coded statement a record was kept in the form of the category code next to every quasi-sentence in the analyzed manifestos. This did not only increase the transparency of the coding process, but also enabled us to make any adjustments in a second reading.

To determine the position (IIr) of Open VLD on the different scales, we applied the Laver and Garry (2000) method. We explain this method by means of the socio-economic cleavage. The number of left quasi-sentences with regard to the issue (Il) was subtracted from the number of right quasi-sentences dealing with it (Ir). This difference was divided by the sum of left and right text units conveying information on the cleavage. The result was a score between -1 (extreme left) and +1 (extreme right).

\[ IIr = \frac{Ir - Il}{Ir + Il} \]

We will now turn to the party member surveys. Two such surveys were held among OpenVLD members: one in 2001 and one in 2012. The main goal of the 2001 party member survey was to analyse the leadership elections that took place in that year. The policy positions of members were not the main focus of this project, but still a number of items were included. We contacted in total 785 members (between 20 April and 22 May 2011), finally obtaining 330 usable responses, i.e. a response rate of 42 percent.

For the 2012 survey, 1500 party members were approached between 9 May and 9 September 2012, resulting in 433 responses, which constitutes a lower response rate of 28.9%, but a comparable absolute number of responses. The approach of this survey was broader, and consequently, more items about policy issues (including some of 2001) were included. Data are weighted on the basis of gender and age category.²

Based on a factor analysis, we can distinguish between the three different groups of policy issues that were also detected in the manifesto analysis: socio-economic issues (left-right)³, religious-

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² Due to differences in data availability of the OpenVLD membership file (total population), the age categories on which we weighed our sample data are not exactly the same in 2001 and in 2012. For 2001, we used -40 years, 40-60 years, and +60 years old as age categories. For 2012, we used -35 years, 35-65 years and +65 years old.

We would like to thank An Gooijens from the OpenVLD national office for her willingness to share these membership data with us.
philosophical issues (conservative-progressive)\(^4\) and the post-materialist issues (materialist-post-materialist)\(^5\). These three variables are constructed on the basis of the membership survey data in such a way that they range from -1 (left, progressive, post-materialist) to +1 (right, conservative, materialist), just as in the manifesto analysis. These three variables will be used to estimate the positions that party members take on these three central policy dimensions.

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\(^3\) Based on the combined scores of a question about self-placement on a scale from 0 (enterprises should be completely free to do what they want) to 10 (government should closely monitor enterprises) and of an opinion question stating “government intervention in economics should be reduced” (1 = totally disagree – 5 = totally agree). Component loadings are 0.761 and –0.732.

\(^4\) Based on the combined scores of a question about self-placement on a scale from 0 (maintenance of traditional norms and values in moral-ethical issues) to 10 (individual freedom in moral-ethical issues) and of an opinion question stating “the introduction of gay marriage has been a good idea” (1 = totally disagree – 5 = totally agree). Component loadings are 0.863 and 0.857.

\(^5\) Based on the combined scores of a question about self-placement on a scale from 0 (citizens should be granted more possibilities to participate) to 10 (policy-making should be left over to politicians and the administration) and of an opinion question stating “economic growth is more important than preserving the environment” (1 = totally disagree – 5 = totally agree). Component loadings are 0.744 and 0.771.
4. Results

In this section, the results of our analyses will be discussed. We start by discussing the results of the analysis of the manifestos, then we move to the analysis of members’ opinions, and we end by comparing manifestos and members’ opinions.

4.1 Analysis of election manifestos

Figure 1 shows that on the basis of the election manifestos, Open VLD was more to the right in 2010 than in 1999 on the socio-economic cleavage. Based on our knowledge of these elections, this evolution comes as no surprise. At the 1999 elections, Open VLD moved to the left in order to get rid of their image of a rightist party with whom it was impossible to form a coalition government (Prevenier 2006). This explains the rather left position in 1999. The election of the new party leader Alexander De Croo, who defeated the candidate supported by the party establishment in a leadership contest in 2009, was seen as a protest against the dilution of the rightist profile of the party while in government. Not surprisingly, De Croo moved his party again in a more rightist direction on socio-economic issues at the 2010 elections (Bouteca 2011:203).

Figure 1: Ideological evolution Open VLD election manifestos on three cleavages between 1999 and 2010 (-1= extreme left, +1= extreme right)
On the other two dimensions Open VLD moved to the left\textsuperscript{6}, but only the evolution on the religious-philosophical dimension can be considered as meaningful. In the manifesto of 1999 there was some attention for the importance of family values. These rather conservative positions were replaced by progressive statements on euthanasia and the rights of gay couples in 2010. The changes on the post-materialist cleavage are not meaningful. The positions about quality of life and about the environment did not change a lot. Moreover, the large emphasis that was put on the level of democratic decision-making in the so-called ‘citizen manifestos’ of Guy Verhofstadt was mainly a phenomenon of the early 1990s which preceded our analysis. It appears that the party has maintained their positions on this issue in the late 1990s and in the first decade of the years 2000.

4.2 Analysis of members’ opinions

In Figure 2 and Table 1, we analyze the evolution in OpenVLD members’ opinions on the three issue groups at stake here.

\textbf{Figure 2: Ideological evolution Open VLD party members on three cleavages between 2001 and 2012 (-1= extreme left, +1= extreme right)}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{6} The amount of quasi-sentences that were used to determine the position of Open VLD varies strongly between the three cleavages. The socioeconomic cleavage 1999 (n=258), 2010 (n=438). The religious/philosophical cleavage 1999 (n=12), 2010 (n= 57). The post-materialist cleavage 1999 (n=80), 2010 (n=91).
Table 1: Average ideological position Open VLD party members on three cleavages between 2001 and 2012 (-1= extreme left, +1= extreme right)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>RELPHIL</th>
<th>SOCEC</th>
<th>POSTMAT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-0,0664</td>
<td>-0,0235</td>
<td>-0,2916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>-0,3567</td>
<td>0,014</td>
<td>0,0438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anova (Sign.)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>(ns)</td>
<td>***</td>
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Our analysis shows that there has been a significant shift in members’ opinions about religious-philosophical issues and about post-materialist issues. OpenVLD members have now more progressive attitudes than in 2001 about religious-philosophical issues such as gay marriage. In 2001, they were on average in the middle position between conservative and progressive opinions while now they clearly tend to favor more progressive points of view in religious-philosophical issues.

As for post-materialist issues, the evolution goes in the opposite direction: OpenVLD members have now significantly more materialist opinions than in 2001: they are less inclined to give priority to participation and quality of life.

As for the classic socio-economic cleavage, there are no significant differences between members’ opinions in 2001 and in 2012. Also for two socio-economic items separately, no significant changes between 2001 and 2012 could be observed. Both in 2001 and 2012, OpenVLD members took an intermediate position on a socio-economic left-right scale.

4.3 Comparison manifestos-members

The literature on the relation between members and their party first of all resulted in two competing hypotheses (H1a and H1b) that deal with the level of correspondence between members’ opinions and the positions of the party. In order to make a judgment about these hypotheses, we will compare changes over time in members’ opinions and election manifestos on three dimensions. We will start with the post-materialist cleavage. On this dimension the party did not meaningfully change. The positional difference between the manifesto of 1999 and 2010 is very small and hence, we cannot consider it as a meaningful difference. The opinion of the members on this kind of issues, however, evolved significantly in a more materialist direction. This means that the party did not move, while the members changed opinions.

On the religious-philosophical dimension both members and the party move to a more progressive position. On the socio-economic cleavage the Open VLD manifesto clearly moves to the right, while its members do not show significant change over time.
Table 2: Conclusion: changes over time in members’ opinions and election manifestos (1999/2001-2010/2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Manifestos</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-materialism</td>
<td>To the right</td>
<td>Not meaningful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious-philosophical</td>
<td>To the left</td>
<td>To the left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic</td>
<td>Not meaningful</td>
<td>To the right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, party members and election manifestos exhibit only the same evolutions in positions on religious-philosophical issues, on which they have both moved into a more progressive direction the last decade. As for post-materialist and socio-economic issues, there is no correspondence between members and manifestos: one of the two elements (members or manifestos) changed while the other did not show meaningful differences compared with 10 years ago.
5. Conclusions

Correspondence between what party members think and what parties stand for in elections is no longer self-evident today, due to evolutions on the side of society (dealignment, individualization, etc.) and of the parties themselves (‘cartel parties’, etc.). We have indicated that there are three mechanisms at work that determine the correspondence between members’ opinions and what is written in election manifests, i.e. a document in which parties publicly state what they stand for. These mechanisms (recruitment mechanisms, internal democratic mechanisms and electoral mechanisms) do, however, point into different directions, leaving us with two competing hypotheses, namely that members’ views and manifests correspond and that they do not correspond.

As we used two different data sources to estimate the positions of members and of the party, it is not appropriate to compare them directly, but we are able to compare evolutions over time. We have analyzed whether members’ opinions and pledges in manifests have evolved in the same direction the last decade.

Our results showed only a very weak correlation between evolutions in members’ opinions and election manifests. The ideological evolution of the Belgian party Open VLD between 1999 and 2010 and the evolution of the opinions of its members between 2001 and 2012 did not perfectly correspond with each other. In the case of perfect correspondence, members’ opinions and the position of a party would change in the same direction. In our research, this is never the case. Moreover, every dimension paints a different picture. The data on the ideological evolutions on the religious-philosophical dimension fit the model of perfect correspondence best. The party, as well as its members, have more progressive attitudes in 2012 than in 2001. The findings with regard to the other two dimensions are totally irreconcilable with the model of perfect correspondence. On the socio-economic dimension, the members do not move significantly between 2001 and 2012, while the party changed its position clearly to the right. On the post-materialist cleavage, the opposite evolution can be observed: party members changed into a more materialist position, but the party did not. The very divergent observations in this Belgian case leads to the conclusion that the correspondence is not proven. This supports earlier conclusions on this subject (Rohlfing 2013).

We are aware of the fact that our study has some limitations. First of all, a direct comparison of the attitudes of the members and the position of the party is not possible because both scales are measured in a different way by using different kind of data. Moreover, the ambitious approach of this study by making comparisons over time and consequently the limited availability of data forced us to focus on only one party, the Flemish liberal-democratic party. It would be interesting to analyze more parties, because according to different authors (Robertson 1976; Przeworski & Sprague 1986;
Kitschelt 1994; Meguid 2005) the party type is an important variable to understand the behavior of parties. Moreover, rightist parties – based on its socio-economic position Open VLD belongs to this party family – are considered as more flexible than leftist parties (Adams et al. 2009). This could mean that the extreme flexibility of the party that we found in our case could be influenced by the party type.

This brings us to avenues for future research. First of all, we treated party members in this paper as one monolithic bloc, but further analyses should look for differences between different kind of members. Based on May’s law we can assume, for instance, that there is a difference between members with a mandate and members without one. Or there could be generational differences with younger people for whom ideological motivations have become relatively more important to join a party.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to compare the ideological changes of parties with the opinions of voters (based on voter surveys). That way, it would be possible to test whether parties find it indeed more important to follow the electorate than their party members. The comparison with voters’ opinions could also shed more light on the reasons why on some issues members and manifestos correspond (socio-economic issues) and on others not (religious-philosophical and post-materialist issues). Perhaps on the issues of correspondence, members are in line with what voters think, and party elites are mainly following voters (and on the issues of correspondence by accident also the party members).

A final consideration is what all this implies for party membership. Party membership is in decline all over Europe and the findings of this study are not likely to give additional reasons to join a party. Even on the contrary: why would anyone join a party that does not take members’ opinions into consideration when determining what the party is standing for?
References


