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Introduction

It is often put forward that parties do no longer differ from each other when it comes to their proposed policy intentions. Since Kircheimer (1966) launched his well-known catch-all thesis it is generally agreed that there is an ideological convergence between political parties. In an attempt to seduce a larger part of the electorate, parties have polished their sharp ideological positions and replaced them for softer, less explicit points of view. But to what extent is this assumption also true for the Flemish political context? Are there no longer clear-cut ideological differences between Flemish parties?

Recent discussions in Flanders raises suspicions that there still exist remarkable ideological differences between political parties. This certainly looks to be the case on socioeconomic matters. The way politics should deal with the current economical crisis, revealed an old fashioned ideological debate between the major liberal (Open VLD) and social democratic party (SP.a). Different politicians of Open VLD were expressing their concerns about the budget deficit and rejected uncontrolled deficit spending while social democratic politicians defended a traditional Keynesian policy to solve the crisis (De Standaard, 20/03/2009).

Judging from what these politicians say it seems that nothing really changed and that both parties still support the positions they traditionally did on socioeconomic matters: social democrats are pro government intervention while liberals want to reduce state intervention. Which automatically raises the question if the Kircheimer thesis of decline of ideology can be fully applied to Belgian politics. What is his hypothesis worth if two parties that are each other’s historical antipodes on the socioeconomic dimension persist the same ideological distance as they used to do?

In this paper we will test the validity of Kircheimers convergence hypothesis for the Flemish liberal and social democratic party on the socioeconomic dimension between 1978 and 2007. The socioeconomic cleavage is the dimension on which both parties are theoretically each other’s opposites. In other words, possible convergence on this cleavage can be considered as extremely relevant. In a second stage we want to do an even more extreme test by excluding the impact of the least ideological issues (e.g. the amount of money spent on education) on the calculation of the left-right position by only analyzing core issues of both parties: (reduction of) taxes for the liberal party and (the extension of) social security for the social democrats. This are issues they own: policy areas on which they have a good reputation and their opponents don’t. It are issues that belong to the core of both ideologies. Therefore we may assume that changing positions on these core issues would be
the ultimate alternative for parties. If even in these policy areas, issue owners and their antipodes leave their original position (e.g. liberal parties defending taxes or social democrats defending tax cuts), we may speak of true convergence.

**Theory**

**Convergence**

Continuously scholars are questioning the existence of various ideologies. The idea that the ideological differences between political parties decrease is a belief that has been around since the 1940’s. The underlying thought is often that class differences have come to an end. Which means that if ideological convergence is to occur, this certainly should be visible on an isolated socioeconomic dimension which is the incarnation of socioeconomic differences.

The concept of ideological convergence stems from a train of political philosophers that can be united under the slogan *The End of Ideology* based on the essay of the same name written by Daniel Bell (1960). Bell gave this movement of thinkers a face but the idea he managed to put so catchy into words with the appealing title of his bestseller *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, was already living for a long time amongst several scholars. In the 1940s and 1950s James Burnham, Albert Camus, Herbert Tingsten, George Sabine, Thomas Humphrey Marshall and Raymond Aron¹ already suggested that ideology would become irrelevant (Sanders 2008:63). But it was Bell’s publication that really cranked up the discussion. After Bell different political philosophers kept on claiming the end of ideology (e.g. Lyotard 1979; Kolakowski 1990; Fukuyama 1992) and fostered the conjecture of a centripetal electoral competition.

Downs substantiated this idea of ideological convergence in his famous work *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). He started from the median voter theorem first proved by Duncan Black, which states that the median voter's preferred policy cannot lose in elections against any other. Downs left from this idea and for his spatial model of a two party system and predicted that parties would converge to the policy positions of the median voter. That is where most of the votes are. According this rational choice theory parties only care about winning elections and therefore try to get as many votes as possible. Since most of the votes can be gathered in the centre of the electoral spectrum it is rational for parties to converge to that centre. As a result political parties would no longer differ on ideological basis.

Kircheimer (1966) came to the same conclusion in his well-known article on catch-all parties. According to him, the mass integration party with clear-cut ideological points of view based on the class struggle, evolved to a catch all party. After WW II class differences were growing less apparent as a result of economical growth and the introduction of the welfare state. Everything the mass parties struggled for appeared to be realized which made it necessary to broaden their electoral pool. The cadre parties had the same reaction and understood that they could no longer only

concentrate on the establishment. Therefore cadre and mass parties decided to broaden their party programmes and distanced themselves from the old ideological positions they once defended. “Socialist parties in Europe, for example, abandoned the harsher dictates of Marxism and emphasized instead the welfare state. Similarly, the British Conservative party abandoned its cries for laissez-faire capitalism and quietly supported a mixed economy” (Jackson 1997:316).

Kircheimer developed his theory more than forty years ago but even recent party models point in the direction of the declining ideological differences between parties. According to Katz and Mair (1995) the heyday of the catch-all party is over and we have now entered a new fase in the evolution of parties with the breakthrough of the cartel parties. Does this mean that party convergence is no longer the case? On the contrary, party programmes become more similar and competition between parties is less than before. Political parties collude and “become agents of the state and employ the resources of the state (the party state) to ensure their own collective survival” (Katz & Mair 1995:5).

Finally, especially interesting for our research question, is The Third Way (1998) of Anthony Giddens. This leftist scholar stressed the importance of the use of (neo)liberal ideas to achieve socialist aims which means that market forces are not prompt put aside as a recipe of capitalists, but integrated in a broader social project. State intervention is no longer the only satisfying formula. E.g. a reduction of payroll taxes is a measure that would certainly please companies but is possible as long as it generates more work. His analysis of social democracy had strong effects on centre-left political parties in Europe and the world. It was well received by political leaders like Blair, Clinton and Schröder and It is generally assumed that their electoral success convinced other left politicians to chose for the third way also. This means that we may expect that the social democratic party in our research may be influenced by the ideas of Giddens. In that case SP.a should be the motor of the ideological convergence that may occur.

*Enduring divergence*

In spite of the multitude of scholars who suggest converging ideologies, the continuous differences between political parties is supported in equal numbers. Downs himself already made a subtle distinction between parties in a two-party and multiparty system. Whereas in the first parties converge to the position of the median voter, “parties in a multiparty system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible.” (Downs 1957:115). A hypothesis which was confirmed by other scholars (Cox 1990). The fact that Downs model only works under very specific conditions (e.g. two-party system, single round election for any office, the election chooses a single candidate...)leaves a lot of space for possible divergence (Grofman 2004).

But Downs proximity model was not only subtle approached by the theorists above, moreover it did not match the empirical reality it tried to explain because contrary to the theory’s predictions, in two-party systems, parties simply do not converge (Macdonald & Rabinowitz 1998:281). This nonconvergence is sometimes explained by the pressure of party activist who are generally ideological purists (Aldrich 1983a, 1983b, 1995), other authors refer to the presence of primary systems (Davis et al. 1970). Macdonald and Rabinowitz (1998:291) refer to the importance of valence issues for politics and relate this to the fact that parties that did well in government are advantaged on these issues. In that case the opposition has a valence deficit and has to create a distinct enough
image to attract electoral support. The result is “a fairly consistent divergence that would ebb and flow based on the degree of advantage, with a tendency for advantaged parties to move toward the median and disadvantaged parties away from the median voter.” (Macdonald & Rabinowitz 1998:291). In other words Macdonald and Rabinowitz argue that it is not rational on the long term for parties to settle in the ideological centre because those parties don't have loyal voters and unstable grassroots support.

Another well-known analysis of Downs’model comes from Budge (1994). His critique on the convergence hypothesis is based on the fact that is assumes fully informed voters and political parties. But parties have imperfect information about the position of the median voter which makes that they keep distance or just move little by little because they do not want to lose the votes they already have. Enelow and Hinnich (1984) already emphasized this incremental way of changing party positions and argued that the moving space of parties is limited. E.g. a social democratic party leader can’t all of a sudden change from pro trade unions to an anti position on this issue.

There are not only doubts about Downs proximity model, the ideological dimension of Kircheimers catch-all thesis has also been questioned. In his study on the catch-all party in Western Europe Krouwel (1999:140) rejects the idea of a centripetal electoral competition: “There is no linear development towards convergence of political parties, instead polarization and convergence alternate over time in all European party systems.” This result is confirmed by Budge and Klingemann who see nothing more than ‘trendless fluctuations’ (2001:19).

A pacified socioeconomic cleavage: the decline of class differences and the general acceptance of a mixed economy

Belgian political history was dominated by three cleavages which lay the basis for the Belgian party system. The oldest one is the antithesis between church and state and the community question is the youngest one. In between political life was mainly dominated by the socioeconomic cleavage. This last cleavage is the object of our research and therefore we make use of what is understood in Belgian politics when we utilize the term socioeconomic cleavage. This means that in this paper the socioeconomic cleavage is composed of two oppositions: more vs. less state intervention in the economy and the defense of workers and those who are underprivileged vs. privileges of the rich and enterprises. These oppositions have weakened a lot after WWII as a result of two evolutions: the decline of class differences and the overall acceptance of a mixed economy where socialist and liberal ideas about the economy are combined.

Let us first have a look at the decline of class differences. This evolution is often seen as an important factor in the debate about the ideological convergence of political parties. The clash of interests between employers and employees has lost its sharpness during the last fifty years. An important explanation for this evolution is in the reduction of the working class. In Europe the amount of industrial workers has decreased by a third in the second half of the 20th century while the middle-class knew an explosion (Dogan 2001:94). Since interest articulation is one of the most important functions of a political parties we may expect that they leave their most extremist points of view behind and sing a softer and more centrist tune on socioeconomic topics in their party manifestoes. This does not only count for leftist parties, but also for conservative parties that may regard the rise
of the middle class as an opportunity to seduce a larger electorate by promoting more centrist policies.

The general acceptance of the mixed economy is a second evolution that brought peace on to the socioeconomic cleavage. From 1945 until today almost all West-European countries had a mixture of state intervention and market economy with alternating periods in which one of the paradigms played the leading part. Broekhuijse (2007) distinguishes three periods: the golden age of social-democracy between 1945 and 1973, the end of social-democratic consensus with the breakthrough of neoliberalism between 1973 and 1991 and finally the age of a new social-democracy.

After WWII the idea that capitalism would bring prosperity was no longer defended by large groups in society. Instead there was a general acceptance that there was room for state intervention in the economy or a social-democratic consensus as Dahrendorf called it. The position and the role of the state was remarkably extended. It did not matter whether the social democrat Schmitt, the liberal d’Estaing, the conservative Heath or the republican Nixon were in power. They all went out from Keynes economical model with its emphasis on state intervention. “We were all followers of Keynes”, Nixon once said (Broekhuijse 2007:118).

The end of the social-democratic age begins around 1973 with the economical crisis. According to Dahrendorf the traditional social democratic paradigms were called into question and as a result neoliberalism wit its own paradigms could break through in the 1980’s (Broekhuijse 2007:22). The mixed economies stayed upright, but the economic policies noticeably more bore the stamp of the market economy. State intervention got a more negative connotation and in some countries (e.g. Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher) it was even totally rejected.

In the nineties in a lot of European countries social democratic parties were winning elections. But according to Dahrendorf this did not mean that state intervention worked itself back into the economic policy of the West-European states as it did before. Social democracy had undergone a metamorphosis and integrated (neo)liberal ideas into its economical programme. E.g. the state should support enterprises through tax cuts, avoid budget deficits and limit social security to its basic facilities (Broekhuijse 2007:129-130).

We may assume that the breakthrough of the idea of a mixed economy had a centripetal effect on the party manifestoes, but the emergence of neoliberalism in the seventies and eighties and the integration of liberal ideas by social democratic parties in the nineties may have caused fluctuations in the ideological distance between parties. This is probably less the case for the influence of class differences on party manifestoes since the decrease of the amount of industrial workers showed a more linear trend. In France in 40 percent of the people who had a job were industrial workers in 1992 this was shrunk to 27 percent (Dogan 2001:94). This constant reduction of the working class never knew a setback that could cause a sudden increase of ideological differences. But according to Adams (1999) and Merril and Adams (2001) this does not mean that class is no longer an explaining factor for existing differences between parties. They argue that class differences are still big enough to restrict the tendency of convergence.

Methodology and data
For our research we will analyse party manifestoes. Several scholars criticised these documents (e.g. Schattschneider 1942:567, Rose 1984:65, Mudde 1995:208). But the figures of the most renown research tradition that draws on party programmes, the Manifesto Research Group (MRG), are used by several authors for the most diverse studies in the most prestigious journals (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003:311). Thus, manifestoes may be considered as a reliable source for ideological research.

We will only analyze the manifestoes of the liberal OpenVLD and social democratic SP.a party and only on matters belonging to the socio-economic cleavage. This is the dimension on which both parties are theoretically each other’s opposites: the former defends state intervention in socio-economic matters, whereas the latter is seen as a supporter of the free market. The socio-economic cleavage also contains the issues that belong to the core business of both parties. In other words, possible convergence on this cleavage can be considered as extremely relevant.

The period of this case-study (1978 – 2007) covers the breakthrough of neoliberalism in the eighties and the heyday of the third way in the second half of the nineties. This means that we may expect social-democrats and liberals to diverge at first and converge afterwards. Until 1999 both parties did not want to govern together. They only made an exception of five months to solve the community question that had paralyzed Belgium during the seventies and both joined the tripartite government Martens III (1980). The first government Verhofstadt I (1999-2003) made an end to this mutual exclusion. For the first time since 1954-1958 both parties governed together in a purple-green cabinet. The considerable differences seemed to belong to the past and this was confirmed as second purple coalition, this time a pure one, took office under Verhofstadt II (2003-2007). Under these ‘extreme’ purple conditions, we could expect a contagion effect between liberals and socialists. It seems a natural thing that parties who worked together for such a long period, start to resemble a bit each other. This means that the political context was very fertile for ideological convergence to happen.

Method

By counting quasi-sentences and placing them in categories, policy positions were estimated. Therefore we made use of the expert-coding scheme designed by Laver and Garry (2000) with a few adjustments to the Belgian context. The result is a coding scheme that differs from the traditional MRG-scheme in two ways. First it is more fine-grained than the traditional MRG-scheme, which makes it possible to do an in-depth research of the socio-economic cleavage. In the second place it uses tripolar categories instead of unipolar ones.

The main reason for using the scheme of Laver and Garry instead of the traditional MRG-scheme is the fact that it is more fine-grained. The MRG-researchers designed a coding scheme with rather limited and broad categories. With regard to the socioeconomic cleavage it concern categories as ‘economic goals’, ‘incentives’ and ‘regulation of capitalism’. The limited amount of categories is defendable because of the international comparative motives of the original MRG-researchers. A limited amount of categories makes it more easy to manage the immense amount of data that is
under research but an important drawback is that lot of nuances tend to disappear in an attempt to aggregate the complexity of the political discourse. The MRG-scheme e.g. does not have a separate category on taxes. A category on taxes with subdivisions on income taxes, payroll taxes, taxes on company profits, VAT and taxes on capital is essential for this specialized research. The position of parties on taxes is an important issue in the socioeconomic debate. All the more since we may suppose that taxes is one of the issues on which social democratic parties have positioned themselves more to the right since the third wave of the nineties. This example shows that we have to integrate more detailed categories in our coding scheme if we want to do an in depth study of the socio-economic dimension. This is also acknowledged by MRG-researcher Budge (2001:90): “an authoritative general coding scheme for party policy positions does not always serve more specialized concerns within the policy field (...) Specialized investigations may well need their own specialized codings” (Budge 2001, p. 90). The fact that this research involves only two parties makes a more profound and labour-intensive analysis practicable.

Next to the fact that the coding scheme that is used here is more fine-grained, it also uses tripolar categories instead of unipolar ones. The MRG research method is based on the saliency theory of party competition according to which parties compete by emphasizing those topics where they feel they have a good reputation and not by suggesting opposite positions. Because direct confrontations between opposing policy stands are rare according to the MRG researchers, their scheme does not contain confrontational categories. Bipolar categories are not needed because ‘emphasis equals direction’ according to Budge (1999). Not everyone agrees with Budge, on the contrary several scholars assert that the distinction between emphasis and position/direction is fundamental (Kleinnijenhuis en Pennings 2001:162 en 180; Shikano en Pappi 2004:2-6; Rabinowitz en Macdonald:1989). Moreover Benoit en Laver (2006:66) point out that the MRG-scheme is not the pure salience-scheme the MRG researchers suggest in their theoretical discussions: “It is a positional coding scheme in which many of the potential positional categories have been censored in advance on the basis of the empirical expectations of the scheme’s designers”. Based on the idea that most of the important political issues are valence-issues, the MRG researchers dropped either the pro or con position in advance. This was at least the purpose, but nevertheless in contrast to the theory, the MRG-scheme contains pro and con categories. This is because even within the MRG not everyone was convinced of the saliency approach: “Scepticism on the part of certain members of the Manifesto Research Group at the very beginning of the coding operation resulted in ‘pro-con’ codings being put in for certain issue areas where confrontation between parties was thought most likely” (Budge 2001:78).

Despite the fact that the division between position and emphasis is less rigorous in practice than often suggested, the amount of positional categories in the MRG-scheme is limited and Budges statement that direction equals emphasis stays upright. Laver does not automatically want to accept this assertion and does not belief that information on policy emphasis is enough to determine the position of a party before this is empirically tested. Laver does not want to make this a-priori assumption. Nevertheless Laver acknowledges that Budges statement that emphasis equals direction is true for some issues: “There may well be a particular set of issues for which ‘direction equals emphasis’” (Laver 2001:73). But this is not always the case Laver says: “We have also seen, however, that there is another class of issue for which there may be extreme disagreement on substantive policies between actors who each hold the issue in question to be highly salient. In such cases, issue
emphasis provides no systematic information about policy position.” (Laver 2001:73) That is why Laver suggests to code texts on both components: position and emphasis.

The socio-economic left-right scale is defined as:

\[
\text{SocEconLR} = \frac{(\text{SocEconR} - \text{SocEconL})}{(\text{SocEconR} + \text{SocEconL})}
\]

Next to the pro and con category Laver suggest to make a neutral category and to code in a tripolar way in order to code every quasi sentence, even those that are not clearly pro or con a categorised issue. By making the sum of all pro, con and neutral quasi sentences we can figure out the emphasis of an issue. This method has the disadvantage that the inflation of categories may lead to more arbitrary decisions made by the coding experts (Budge and Laver 1992). This can be solved by using well defined categories with clear-cut limits.

The figure below is an excerpt of the coding scheme we used for this research. The revised manifesto coding scheme counts 129 separate categories on socio-economic issues and is hierarchically structured with broad policy domains at the highest level. Within these broad domains (e.g. taxes, social security...) the coding scheme has different branches. As we can see below the domain on taxes is divided in income taxes, payroll taxes, taxes on company profits, sales taxes and taxes on capital.

**Figure 1: Section of revised manifesto coding scheme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1112</td>
<td>+STATE+/Budget/Taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11121</td>
<td>Increase taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11122</td>
<td>(General statements supporting the need to increase taxation, which do not belong in any of the somewhat more specific categories 11121, 11122, 11123, 11124. Includes need to defend current taxation levels against demands for taxation reduction, the need to fight fiscal fraud and statements supporting the idea of taxation as a mechanism of re-allocating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11123</td>
<td>11121 +STATE+/Budget/Taxes/Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11124</td>
<td>(Income taxes, support increases or defend levels against demands for reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11125</td>
<td>11122 +STATE+/Budget/Taxes/Payroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11126</td>
<td>(Payroll taxes, support increases or defend levels against demands for reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11127</td>
<td>11123 +STATE+/Budget/Taxes/Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11128</td>
<td>(Taxes on company profits, support increases or defend levels against demands for reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11129</td>
<td>11124 +STATE+/Budget/Taxes/Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11130</td>
<td>(VAT or other sales taxes, support increases or defend levels against demands for reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11131</td>
<td>11125 +STATE+/Budget/Taxes/Payroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11132</td>
<td>(Taxes on capital, support increases or defend levels against demands for reduction)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

In their overview of the evolution of party positions on the left-right scale in 25 western democracies Budge and Klingemann also analyze the Flemish situation between 1978 and 1995 (2001:42). Since
1978 the ideological distance between all the parties has decreased considerably. The convergence has taken such dimensions that since 1991 the social democrats and liberals take about the same position on the left-right scale. But this does not automatically mean that this is also true for their positions on the socioeconomic cleavage because the left-right scale used by Budge and Klingemann (2001:22) is a broad scale which contains categories that go beyond socioeconomic policy (e.g. military: positive, peace, decolonization, Law and order, democracy, freedom, constitutionalism, internationalism...). It is possible that the convergence they found was mainly the result of liberals strongly emphasizing democracy or social democrats stressing the importance of human rights which are both not socioeconomic issues. But even if we restrict the analysis to the socioeconomic cleavage, which is the cleavage on which social democrats and liberals are traditionally antipodes, we indeed find proof convergence (figure 2).

**Figure 2: Ideological distance between SP(.a) and (Open)VLD between 1978 and 2003**

Figure 2 shows that the ideological distance between SP.a and Open VLD decreased in the period between 1981 and 2007. In 1981 the interval between both parties ran up to 1,689 but a quarter of a century later only half of that distance remained. This downward tendency is not linear but shows some ups and downs in the period 1978 and 2007. What strikes the most is the giant leap in ideological distance between 1978 and 1981. In figure 3 we can see that this increase is mainly the result of Open VLD taking a far more right position. The shift to the left of SP.a is peanuts in comparison to the move to the right of the liberal party. In three years and one election Open VLD evolves from its most left position in the period that was under research to its most right position. This radical shift can probably be explained by the breakthrough of neoliberalism in Open VLD which had a large following in the young generation of liberal politicians that took over the party at the end of the seventies.

Interesting in figure 3 is that the converging trend on the socioeconomic cleavage is mainly the result of the liberal party getting more left on these issues. The liberals leapfrog and make big shifts on the socioeconomic cleavage whereas the social democratic party holds a rather stable position on the
left during the whole period that was under research. Only in 1987 and especially in 2003 SP.a made a clear move to the right. The impact of the third way on the socioeconomic politics of the party seems to be less than expected. The cartel with the moderate liberal party Spirit for the elections of 2003 and the contagion-effect that arose as a result of governing with the liberal party between 1999 and 2003 may have had a bigger impact.

Figure 3: The evolution of Flemish social democrats and liberals on the socioeconomic dimension between 1978 and 2007.

![Evolution on socio-economic dimension (1978-2007)](image)

As described above the convergence seems to be a fact and is mainly the result of the liberal party getting more to the left. This is an interesting result because it suggest that convergence even occurs on the cleavage where parties are each other’s natural antipode. In a second stage we want to do an even more extreme test by excluding the impact of the least ideological issues on the calculation of the left-right position by only analyzing core issues of both parties. Therefore we will take a look at the evolution of party positions on taxes and social security.

If we take a look at the salience of both subjects, the results confirm that parties emphasize the issues they own more than their opponents. The liberal party emphasizes taxes a lot more than the social democratic party. With an average of 21% Open VLD dedicates three times more quasi-sentences of its socioeconomic program to taxes than SP.a. The same can be said about ‘social security’ that is especially popular in social democratic manifestoes. But different from the tax issue is the fact that the contrast between both parties is a lot smaller. Between 1981 and 1987 the amount of sentences dedicated to social security is almost the same for both parties while they defend complete different positions. A finding that seems to contrast with the saliency theory of party competition which states that emphasis equals direction.

Figure 4: Degree of emphasizing issues of social security in relation to the socioeconomic program
But to what extent do both parties converge in a positional way on both issues? If we consider the issues on taxes (figure 5) we can see that the liberal party stays rather stable on the right while the social democratic party alternates positive with negative scores. If Sp.a takes up a right position on taxes this is mainly the result of a right position on income taxes or payroll taxes. This are the categories that stimulate convergence when it comes to taxes which is in contrast with taxes on company profits and taxes on capital where the SP.a always takes a left stand.

**Figure 5: Evolution of the positions on taxes**
Where the converging tendency is rather limited in the domain of taxes, this is not the fact when it comes to social security. This is the result of the Open VLD moving to the left on this issue and Sp.a moving to the right. The elections of 1999 seem to be crucial in this evolution since that was the year when the liberal party positioned itself as a left party for the first time when it comes to social security becoming almost as left as Sp.a. After 1999 the liberal party shifted back to a less left position but the distance between Open VLD and Sp.a remained quite small because the social democrats moved along with their ideological antipode.

If we look to the more detailed categories within social security we see that the categories ‘general statements on social security’, ‘health service’ and ‘pensions’ evolve in the same way as social security in its entirety which means that these are the categories that cause the convergence. On matters of child support and support for the unemployed positions stay very much the same during the period under research. On the first matter both parties almost always take a left position while the support of unemployed leads to totally opposite positions until 2007. In that year the social democrats for the first time agreed on a strict policy towards the unemployed but they emphasized it a lot less than the liberal party did.

Figure 6: Evolution of the positions on social security

Finally we would like to draw the attention to the fact that the positioning of both parties on social security as well as on taxes shows a similar course in both graphs. It looks like the parties don’t like to change their position on the issues they ‘own’ and that the occurring convergence is mainly the result of the other party, that is not seen as the owner of that issue, changing its position. In concrete this means that the liberal party which is often associated with the taxes does not feel the urge to change its position on an issue where it possesses a large credibility. The social democrats seem to have less difficulties to change their position on this issue. Probably because they are not automatically associated with taxes and therefore their core identity is not threatened if they shift positions on this issue. The same conclusion may count for social security but then the other way around with the social democrats in the role of the party holding on to its core identity and the liberal party as convergence facilitator.

Conclusion
Our analysis of the party manifestoes of the Flemish liberal and social democratic party between 1978 and 2007 reveals that parties even converge on those issues where they are each other antipodes. The ideological distance between SP.a and Open VLD on the socio-economic cleavage has continuously decreased since 1981. But in 1978 the distance was bigger than in 2007. This means that periods of convergence alternate with periods of divergence. Anyhow we see that the liberal party adjusts to the international context of neoliberalism and then slowly shifts back to the ideological centre. The position of the social democratic party on the other hand is less dynamic. Sp.a keeps a stable position on the left and seems to experience minimal influence of the third way ideology. But when we look more into detail we can see that the social democrats are also moving and tend to take a more right position on taxes and social security since 1999.

This immediately brings us to the finding that parties even converge in policy areas that are typically ascribed to one party such as taxes and social security. But this convergence is limited in a sense that that the positional shift of the issue owners themselves is not big but it are particularly their opponents who facilitate the convergence.

To conclude we would like to join Budge (2001:90) who said that “specialized investigations may well need their own specialized codings”. Apart from the concrete research question we hope to have proved that it stays interesting to analyze manifestoes with alternative coding schemes and methods instead of always relying on the traditional methods. In that sense we would even like to fine-tune the coding scheme of Laver and Garry by introducing a weight for some quasi sentences because “an intention to introduce an annual Wealth Tax, has different implications from a promise to raise old age pensions.” (Rallings 1987:3). Rallings says this in the context of research on electoral promises. Hij asserts that a controversial promise is more difficult to realize than an ordinary promise that is done in a party manifesto. Thus the degree of controversy should have an influence on the realisation score. This same conclusion can also be made in the context of the method that Laver and Garry use to calculate the positions of parties on the left-right scale. Are all proposals or quasi sentences of a program of the same weight if we want determine the position of a party? Is a party that wants to invest more tax money into education not less left than a party that wants to introduce a Wealth Tax?

Bibliography


\[1\] Open VLD is formally known as PVV and VLD. SP.a is formally known as SP.a-Spirit and SP.

\[2\] Expression taken from Thomas (1980).

\[3\] For a more detailed description of this researching method see Volkens (2002).

\[4\] The result is a score between +1 (extreme right) and -1 (extreme left).

\[5\] We become the ideological distance by making the sum of absolute values of the left-right position of both parties.