The organizational strength of non-national lists in Flanders.

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1. Introduction

Local party systems in Western democracies are often characterized by the presence of so-called independent local lists, which compete with the local branches of national parties in local elections (Aars & Ringkjob, 2005; Holtmann & Reiser, 2006; Steyvers et al, 2008). These lists have long been considered as relicts of an old-style political system in which a non-political, harmonic conception of local self-government prevailed (Rokkan, 1966). Hence, they were often neglected or merely treated as a residual category in research on the party political offer in local elections (Hjellum, 1967). More recently however, independent local lists are given some more academic consideration as they seem to remain a characterizing feature of local party systems in Western democracies and their persistent presence and success is increasingly considered as an indication for the incompleteness of the party politicization process as envisaged by Rokkan (Aars & Ringkjob, 2005; Back, 2003; Kjaer & Elklit, 2010b; M. Reiser & Holtmann, 2008).

These independent lists are often considered as functional equivalents of local party branches for they occur in the same competitive electoral context (M. Reiser & Holtmann, 2008). Yet, empirical evidence to support this functional equation is lacking as the extent to which independent lists actually behave like political parties is generally left nebulous. We could even suppose that independent local lists have a different understanding of local politics and behave differently than their national counterparts, as they are often associated with a non-partisan conception of local self-government (Saiz & Geser, 1999; Steyvers, Reynaert, Ceuninck, Valcke, & Verhelst, 2008).

Moreover, comparing the functional behavior of independent local lists and local party branches is further complicated by the altering role of local parties. Political parties have changed considerably in recent decades - both at systemic and organizational level – evolving
towards stratarchical organizations with a professionalized party center close to the state and increasingly autonomous local subunits (Bolleyer, 2012; Carty, 2004; Katz & Mair, 1994). As several authors have pointed to the occurrence of pseudo-local lists (Dudzinska, 2008; Göhlert, Holtmann, Krappidel, & Reiser, 2008; Steyvers et al., 2008), the presence of independent lists might be related to this general evolution towards stratarchical party structures.

This paper aims to contribute to our academic understanding of the partisan character of independent lists in local politics by analyzing their organizational characteristics in the Flemish region of Belgium. Based on a convergent mixed methods design, I will assess the organizational complexity and organizational capacity of different types of non-national lists to develop a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the organizational strength of non-national lists in Flanders.

In the following sections, I will first outline the theoretical context of this research objective and then elaborate on the presence of non-national lists in Flanders. The methodological section illuminates the adopted mixed methods research design. The subsequent qualitative empirical part explores the organizational complexity of different types of non-national lists in Flanders and the co-occurrence of formal and informal organizational arrangements. A quantitative section analyzes the organizational capacity of these different types of non-national lists. In a concluding section, the research findings are interpreted from a theoretical perspective and some suggestions for further research are formulated.

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1 This paper is part of a broader research project which aims to establish the partisan character of non-national lists by analyzing to extend to which they assume the functions traditionally associated with local parties.
2. Local party organizations and the decline of parties

While national party organization has attracted growing academic attention in recent decades, the organizational features of local parties have received far less academic interest. If considered at all, local parties are commonly interpreted as mere sub-units of national parties, forming the gateway for new party members to enter the party. Hence, local party branches geographically organize the national party-on-the-ground. In recent decades however, the role of this party on the ground has changed drastically in developing party organizations. Katz and Mair first introduced the cartel party thesis, claiming that parties have increasingly alienated from society and migrated towards the state (Katz & Mair, 1994). In many countries, the levels of affiliation with political parties have declined significantly and membership figures have dropped. This has led to heated debates in political science literature on the assumed crisis or even redundancy of political parties. Several authors have argued that political parties have alienated from the citizens and are no longer able to fulfill their representative and legitimizing function (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Mair & Van Biezen, 2001; Scarrow, 1996; Webb, 1995; Whiteley & Seyd, 1998).

Local party branches are strongly affected by these evolutions as they suffer first from the declining membership figures and the alleged crisis of parties. Hence, several authors consider local party branches as increasingly irrelevant in contemporary - highly centralized and professionalized - cartel parties (Mair & Van Biezen, 2001; Webb, 1995). Other authors however, stress that local parties continue to play a central role in linking the citizens with the process of government. They provide the national party with legitimacy and the impression of a large rank and file; they organize campaign activities for supra-local elections which cannot be replaced by a professional headquarter and media specialists (producing and delivering leaflets, canvass voters, …). In between elections, they provide party members with benefits and incentives to encourage political participation and intra-party democracy. Moreover, local
party sections socialize party members into the parties’ values and organizational structures and allow them to gain political experience and test their motivation and aptitude for higher-level office functions (Clark, 2004; Copus & Erlingsson, 2013).

These opposing views on the relevance of local parties reflect their janus-faced character. Local parties assume two distinct political roles for which they need to look in opposite directions (Clark, 2004; Geser, 1999). They not only constitute the party on the ground of national parties - implementing a range of tasks to serve the national party goals – but also engage in local politics, which entails different - locally-oriented tasks. Local parties also recruit candidates to participate in local elections, aim to provide politicians for local government and engage in local policy-making. It can be assumed that the former role of party agency is in decline as the position of the party on the ground has altered in favor of the central party leadership, yet, no indications point to a decline in local parties’ latter role as participants in local politics. On the contrary, the relevance of local parties in this latter role remains pertinent and is even argued to increase as institutional reforms, combined with a shift towards governance networks, have increasingly politicized the local policy level (Geser, 1999). Moreover, the recent cartelization tendency has been associated with an increasingly autonomous position of local parties. Yet, Copus and Erlingsson (2012) take a more critical stance and consider elitism and power concentration in local party groups as the local counterpart of the national party crisis. They argue that party members and citizens are gradually excluded from effective input to local politics and ‘local political power becomes concentrated in the hands of fewer party members and ultimately in the local elite of councilors’ (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012).

By analyzing the organizational strength of local lists in Flanders in comparison to their national competitors in local election, this paper aims to contribute to our academic comprehension of the partisan character of these lists. Deschouwer & Rihoux (2008) have
examined how local party branches in Belgium are organized and their findings confirmed the general erosion of local party branches as foundations of national parties. Most local party branches in Belgium maintain a highly formalized party structure, but are equally confronted with declining membership figures and demonstrate a decreasing activity rate. The authors argue that formal party structures subsist for they are inherited from the past, but that local parties are less and less the local fundaments of national parties and instead develop their own local political logic, often focused on local elections. Furthermore, they established loosening statutory relationships between local party branches and national party centers, confirming the evolution towards stratarchical party structures (Deschouwer & Rihoux, 2008).

These findings also confirm that the de facto modus operandi of local parties can deviate significantly from the formal arrangements as provided by the national party, which are complemented with informal rules (Fabre, 2010; M. Reiser & Vetter, 2011). The subsequent analysis aims to benchmark the organizational features of local candidate lists with these findings.

3. The institutional context of Flanders

In comparative literature, Belgium is considered as representative for the southern/Franco tradition and local government is generally conceived as the eminence of local community (inducing territorial fragmentation) with a rather limited role in public service and direct access to central power. (Copus, C., Wingfield, M., Steyvers, S. & Reynaert, H.; 2012). Local elections are held every 6 years and are typified by a high permissiveness in terms of candidacy. Although there is no formal electoral threshold, the proportional Imperiali formula for seat distribution slightly increases the factual threshold (Van der Kolk, 2007). Belgium is also an example of consensual local democracy from a wider perspective (De Rynck, Wayenberg, Steyvers & Pilet, 2010). Proportional representation leads to a multiparty system,
usually with various parties in government as well as in opposition and executive power is often shared in coalitions of different parties. Whereas local elections compose the council, monistic relations exist with an executive of the collegiate type (college of mayor and alderman).

As in other Western democracies, national regional parties\(^2\) play an important role in Flanders’ local politics, but local lists continue to give a distinct place-bound flavor to local politics (Wille & Deschouwer; 2007). Ever since the municipal mergers in 1976, local candidate lists are found in approximately 70% of the Flemish communalities, with peaks of 80% after the turn of the century. These peaks are attributed to the arrival of new parties and the fragmentation of the political landscape stimulating additional cartels\(^{iii}\) (Steyvers & De Ceuninck, 2013). Additionally, Heyerick & Steyvers (2013) established that less than half of all the candidate lists in Flanders that participated under a non-national name at the communal elections of 2006 and 2012 were actually independent from national parties. The majority was found to have partial or implicit links to national parties in the form of pre-electoral alliances involving national party branches or extended and supported candidate lists with a local(ized) profile but with explicit or implicit references to a national party.

**4. Non-national actors in local politics**

Despite the recent awareness of the continued relevance of non-national actors in local elections, academic insights on their role in local politics - and their organizational characteristics - remains confined. While traditional local party branches are generally considered as institutionalized long-term organizations with a stable organizational structure (Saiz & Geser, 1999), the organizational strength of non-national lists is subject of academic

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\(^2\) Due to the emergence of regionalist parties and the proceeding reform of the Belgian state towards a federal polity, former unitary national parties split into a Flemish and French faction, implying a regionalized space of party competition in Flanders and Wallonia.
discord. On the one hand; independent local lists have been criticized for being short-term, weakly structured political groups with little representative accountability (Soos, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2008), while other authors have argued that this traditional perception of independent local lists as parochial or folkloristic occurrences is erroneous as these lists have evolved over time and diverge less from their national counterparts than previously assumed (M. Reiser & Holtmann, 2008; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2004; Van Tilburg & Tops, 1990). Empirical evidence to substantiate any of these assumptions is scarce and distorted by the unsatisfactory dichotomous distinction between national party lists and ‘independent’ candidate lists. Scholars agree that the general label of independent local lists covers a highly varied content, but methodological concerns (comparability, lack of practical classification models, aggregated perspective) often impel them to apply imperfect nominal or juridical criteria to juxtapose independent local lists to national party lists. Yet, several scholars have referred to the occurrence of pseudo-local lists, hidden party lists or other concealed sub-species which can neither be considered as independent, nor as fully national lists (Dudzinska, 2008; Göhlert et al., 2008; Heyerick & Steyvers, 2013; Steyvers et al., 2008). Moreover, the presence of local lists in Belgium has been attributed to the increased attractiveness of pre-electoral alliances and localized party branches (Heyerick & Steyvers, 2013; Verthé & Deschouwer, 2011). Hence, the simplified binary distinction between (independent) local lists and national (party) lists neglects a variety of border cases and hampers academic knowledge-building on the differentiated meaning of non-national lists for local politics.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the partisan character of local candidate lists and avoid any conceptual confusion, I will further use the term ‘non-national lists’ to refer to ‘all candidate lists that participate in local elections with a label deviating from the labels used by nationally organized parties’. The prefix ‘non-national’ refers to their nominal dissociation from national parties without a priori assuming independence from national
parties, while he term ‘lists’ likewise makes no a priori assumptions about the extent to which these lists behave like political parties. Moreover, I will distinguish between associated candidate lists, cartel lists and independent candidate lists.

- **Associated candidate lists** (extended party lists and supported lists) have been initiated by local party branches in their aim to involve independent candidates and attract additional votes. Their local(ized) label reflects some distance towards the party, but these lists maintain explicit or implicit links with the national party.

- **Local cartel lists** are pre-electoral alliances between different local political actors. They contain at least one, but mostly two or even more local party branches, often supplemented with several independent candidates.

- **Independent local lists** have no explicit nor implicit links to the national party level and have no liabilities as subunit of a national party.

### 5. Research design

This paper aims to assess the extent to which non-national lists in Flanders assume the organizational functions generally attributed to local parties by analyzing the organizational strength of the different types of non-national lists. Following Gibson et al., I will conceptual distinguish between **organizational complexity** and **organizational capacity** as two main components of organizational strength. Organizational complexity denotes the formalized nature of the procedures for interaction between the different components of the organization to engage in sustainable party activity, while organizational capacity\(^3\) refers to the activity level of the party organization or the stability and frequency of political activities (Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, & Huckshorn, 1985).

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\(^3\) Identified as programmatic capacity by Gibson et al., but I prefer the term organizational capacity to avoid confusion with the programmatic functions of local parties, referring to their policy preferences.
To empirically assess both components of organizational strength, a mixed methods-approach is adopted. In recent decades, mixed methods research - combining elements of qualitative and quantitative research designs - is increasingly popular and has even been considered as a ‘third methodological movement’ (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Traditionally, qualitative and quantitative research have been linked to distinct, incompatible paradigms based on philosophical assumptions concerning ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. More recently however, ‘pragmatism’ has been put forward as additional research paradigm (Morgan, 2007), which values both objective and subjective knowledge and uses diverse methodological approaches based on ‘what works’ to address specific research questions. Rather than by ontological and epistemological positions, pragmatists are guided by practical and applied research philosophy to make methodological decisions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This analysis of the organizational strength of non-national lists in Flanders can be situated in this pragmatist paradigm, combining qualitative and quantitative methods as the two components of organizational strength demand for different methodological approaches. We have argued above that local party organizations are often characterized by the co-occurrence of formal and informal organizational arrangements and procedures. In-depth qualitative analysis seems most appropriate to analyze such complex organizational structures, while the nature and frequency of party activity can best be established based on survey data. Both approaches offer different but complementary data on the organizational strength of non-national candidate lists in Flanders. Different mixed methods designs can be distinguished in literature, but a parallel convergent design is most appropriate for the current research objective. In a parallel convergent design, qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis occurs
concurrently but independent from one another and the results are merged into an overall interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

The qualitative analysis of the organizational complexity of the three types of non-national lists in Flanders is based on in-depth interviews with list headers of a selection of 22 non-national lists in Flanders, spread over different types of non-national lists, involving local cartel lists, associated lists and independent candidate lists. Two independent series of data collection occurred. A first wave of interviews took place by the end of 2010 with a focus on independent local lists that have participated at the 2006 local elections. The second phase of data collection took place by the end of 2012 focusing more on pseudo-local lists in the 2012 local elections. These in-depth interviews provided us with ‘thick descriptions’ concerning a variety of partisan characteristics of the cases, including their organizational structure and the co-occurrence of formal and informal arrangements. The software program NVivo provided a helpful tool to reduce, organize and analyse this enormous amount of qualitative data.

The quantitative analysis of the organizational capacity of non-national lists is based on survey data, collected in 2014 for the purpose of a PhD research project on the role of non-national lists in Flanders. An electronic questionnaire was send to all leading candidates of non-national lists in Flanders which have participated in the municipal election of October 2012. After several monitoring processes, the data collection was closed with a final response rate of 53,6%. Table 1 demonstrates how this response rate is distributed over the different types of non-national lists.

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4 The theoretical sample is based on data from previous research on the horizontal and vertical decisional autonomy of non-national lists. As the interviews allowed a longitudinal approach and horizontal and vertical decisional autonomy is subject to change, the cases cannot be categorized into these different sub-types, but can evolve from one type to another.
In the following sections, I will first elaborate on the empirical results of the qualitative analysis of the organizational complexity of the different types of non-national lists before turning to the quantitative analysis of their organizational capacity.

### 6. Organizational complexity

To analyze if and how different types of non-national lists combine traditional local party structures with specific organizational arrangements, this sections turns to the organizational reality of associated lists, local cartel lists and independent local lists.

Deschouwer and rihoux (2008) have established that local party branches are organized by formal party structures, which are inherited from the traditional mass party model with a formal demarcation between the local party-on-the-ground (nationally registered members), the local party-in-central-office (formally elected board of governors) and the local party-in-public-office (council group) and statutory defined interaction procedures. We can assume that associated lists and local cartel lists equally carry the organizational imprint of national parties, but that the traditional local party structures have been supplemented with specific organizational arrangements to structure the specific local partnerships concerned (with independent candidates or with other local parties). Independent candidate lists have no links to any national party and need to develop their organizational structures autonomously. Yet, they might equally be inspired by traditional party templates as local parties are also found to copy each other’s organizational practices (Deschouwer & Rihoux, 2008).
6.1 Associated lists

The sample contains 7 associated lists\(^5\), all involving a number of independent candidates in addition to the party members on the list. The interviews revealed that most of these associated lists indeed combine traditional local party structures with informal organizational arrangements to integrate the independent candidates into the party organization. Only one case did not adapt its traditional organizational structure and maintained a formal demarcation between the different organizational faces of the local party (members, board, council group):

‘Council meetings take place every fourth Thursday of the month. We have a council group meeting on the preceding Monday and on Tuesday we present our plans to the board of governors which is composed of representatives of the local associations of the party. […] The regular members are mainly involved through festivities’ (case 20). The independent candidates on the list mainly served to attract some additional votes, but showed no further interest to remain involved in the party. They had no prominent place on the list and did not get elected and quickly disappeared from the scene after the elections.

The other five analyzed associated lists did adapt their party structures to accommodate independent candidates after the elections. These independent candidates are only interested in one of the two faces assumed by local parties as they are willing to engage for the local political project of a local party branch, but are reluctant to affiliate with a national party. The data reveal that disconnecting these two party faces enables local party branches to involve independent candidates in their local role, while supra-local party activities remain confined to party members. Two organizational strategies can be distinguished to disconnect these two local party faces: *assimilation* and *differentiation*.

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\(^5\) One case was an extended party list of the VU in 2000, but with the disappearance of the VU, they molted in an independent group. This list was eliminated from this analysis for the data mainly concerns the later independent organization.
Two cases in the sample have adopted the first strategy and assimilated the independent candidates by unlocking the formal party organs and shifting attention to local policy issues. Their role as agency of the national party has been put on the backburner. Supra-local party-political issues are rarely discussed in the local group, but the party members in the group remain involved in national party activities through direct communication, without intermediation of the local branch. The national party is considered the ‘sugar aunt’ of the list for their local activities remain supported by the national party center.

Both cases are organized on a traditional basis, with registered party members and a formal board of governors, but these established party organs have been unlocked to accommodate the independent candidates and other interested sympathizers: ‘If people are interested, they can come by and join the board. But what’s in a name, the board is just a group of people’ (case 10). Similarly, local party activities have been opened up to non-party members. One case even set up a parallel membership structure of the list in addition to the nationally registered party members, although with a less formal character: ‘Last meeting we realized that we forgot to ask a membership fee, but normally we have about 30 paying members and several non-paying members who regularly attend our meetings’. Both cases seem to highly value openness and transparency in the local policy debate and aim to maximize the involvement of involved citizens to formulate local policy preferences. Hence, in these cases, the assimilation of non-party members into the conventional local party structures resulted in informal organizational structures - grafted upon the traditional party structures - in which the party-on-the-ground, the party-in-central-office and the party in public office have been unlocked and coalesce into one single group of people with a joint political project for the locality: ‘Our representatives do not meet separately. We are an open group, we hope that as many people are present to raise questions and hear our agenda and participate in the decisions’ (case 10).
The three other associated lists adopted a different strategy to accommodate the independent candidates. Instead of unlocking the traditional party structures and focusing on local policy issues, these cases have split up the two party roles and assigned them to two separate organizational structures. A clear functional and organizational differentiation is made between the local party and the list, notwithstanding a substantial overlap in people. The local party concentrates on its role as agency of the national party with a focus on member activities and supra-local party issues, while the group of candidates (party-members and independent) is exclusively concerned with local policy issues, as illustrated by the following quote:

‘Interviewer: So there is a difference between the work of the list and that of the party?

Respondent: Yes, and we try to keep that strictly separated [...]. The [local] party will never assume a party-political stance on local policy issues but gave its mandate to the list [...]. The [local] party rather considers strategic, long-term issues and organizes socio-cultural activities for the members’ (case 14).’

The local party has a formal and closed organizational structure with a paying membership, an elected board of governors and regular general meetings. The list on the other hand assembles independents and party-members on the list and concerns an informal organization without members nor a board of governors. In two cases the list coincides with the council group, as all candidates on the list received some office function (mayor, aldermen, councilors, social welfare councilors). In the other case with less office functions, the council group equally forms the nucleus of the list with monthly meetings to prepare council meetings. Additionally, the non-elected candidates are invited on a regular basis to discuss past and future council work and provide their input.
Notwithstanding this clear organizational and functional distinction between the local party and the list, these two organizational entities are interlinked through considerable personnel overlap as the local party’s board contains several candidates / office holders. Yet, the list – and particularly the council group - seems to assume a dominant and autonomous position.

The local party is mainly considered as a source of input and support for the council group:

‘Some of the candidates on the list, like myself, are also part of the local party board, but there are also people who are not interested to join the party board [...]. If the local party perceives any problems, these are passed on to us. The party doesn’t take any decisions. [...] We (the list) take the decisions because we contain alderman and councilors’ (case 21).

Moreover, the list has a separate budget – fed by the local party – which enhances its autonomous position.

Remarkably, the respondents indicate that independent candidates often affiliate to the party after some time: ‘we started out with about 50% independent candidates on the list, but elected or appointed candidates soon become party members’ (case 14). Although the involvement of independent candidates is the initial argument for a functional distinction between the local party and the list, this differentiation strategy mainly seems to increase the autonomy of the party council group to take local policy decisions without the formal checks and balances provided in traditional local party structures.

### 6.2 Local cartel list

The organizational analysis of local cartel lists is based on 7 cases that have formed a pre-electoral alliance in 2006⁶. The interviews reveal that these cases equally combine traditional local party structures with specific organizational arrangements to organize the cooperation

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⁶ The sample contains 10 cases which have (at least once) engaged in a pre-electoral alliance during the period analyzed (2000-2012). Three of these cartels were only just starting up when the interviews took place in 2012. These interviews contained insufficient information concerning the organizational features of the cartel and were omitted from this analysis.
between the different cartel partners. The individual party branches maintain their traditional organizational structure with a formal board of governors, registered party members and formal, statutory procedures for interaction to assume both their role as party agency and as local political actor. Most cartel lists also contain some independent candidates but these have no separate formal organizational structure: ‘We actually consist of three parties in one cartel and two of them have a separate board and mandatories and members paying their membership fees, ... Only the independents are not organized like that’. Only in one case, the independents on the cartel list form a distinct organization, but without any formal structure: ‘We are a small group of about 8 people and meet monthly. We have no formal board nor anything like that, only a president, a secretary and a treasurer, but that’s more an informal matter’ (case 15).

In addition to these distinct party organizations, the cooperation between the individual cartel partners occurs in an overarching organizational cartel structure, which alters with the electoral cycle. Before the elections, the terms and conditions of the alliance are negotiated in a temporary organizational structure with representatives from the different (potential) cartel partners. Local party leaders and top candidates of the individual cartel partners play a prominent role in these temporary negotiating structures. In two cases, this working group also involved representatives of the national party centers(s) to strengthen the position of unexperienced local party representatives: ‘The top candidate of our cartel partner was an incumbent councilor but with limited political experience. He was assisted in the cartel negotiations by a Flemish MP and the vice-president of his national party’ (case 11). These temporary working group have no formal structure nor formal procedures for interaction, but the resulting cartel agreements receive a formal status and are perceived as binding.

After the elections, the organizational arrangements to structure the collaboration within the alliance alters. Only one cartel list in the sample merely concerned a joint candidate list with
no engagements for further collaboration after the elections. Hence, the privileged relationship between the cartel partners ended and each party refocused on its own role in council. The other alliances in the sample received a more permanent character but both the focus and the locus of the collaboration shifted. Once the electoral dice has been thrown and the elected and appointed officials are identified, the collaboration refocuses on a joint council strategy – instead of a joint electoral strategy – led by the joint council group.

For governing cartels, this further collaboration closely resembles conventional coalition practices and becomes concentrated in the group of executive officials in the College of Mayor and Aldermen. This is especially true for the two cartel lists in the sample with a single majority with no other coalition partners to consider. The Mayor and Aldermen meet weekly to decide on local policy measures, which are then brought to the council. The cartel councilors form a joint council group and gather prior to the council meetings to take notice of the council agenda and receive ‘voting instructions’. Hence, the collaboration between councilors from the different cartel parties is limited for they have little political levers and are mainly expected to support the decisions of the College. In one case the separate council group meetings have even been omitted during the course of the legislature and the cooperation between the cartel / coalition partners became exclusively located in the College.

Similarly, the post-electoral collaboration between cartel partners in a larger coalitions - with more parties than only those involved in the cartel – differs little from conventional coalition work and is concentrated in the College. One respondent clearly states that his relationship with the cartel partner does not differ from his relationship with the other coalition partner for a coalition works ‘in collegiality’: ‘In a coalition government, all partners support the policy decisions. You only bring consensual issues on the council agenda and in the absence of consensus the agenda item is postponed’ (case 11). In another case, the executive officers of the cartel partners do form a distinctive group and convene separately to prepare the College
meetings and align their position towards the other coalition partner in government. Although the joint council work of governing cartel partners is centered in the College, the local party organizations keep a close eye on this collaboration. They attend the joint council group meetings and the local party presidents are often consulted informally if no consensus is found within the college on specific issues. In one case the cartel partners even organize occasional joint board meetings to discuss specific policy issues.

For local cartel list with a legislative role in council, the post-electoral cartel collaboration is concentrated in the council group and determined by the decisions of the local government: ‘Council meetings take place every third Tuesday of the month and the agenda is made available 10 days before, so we meet on Wednesdays to determine our position and additional agenda items’ (case 22). Again, these council group meetings are attended by the respective party presidents. They are also accessible to the non-elected candidates of the lists, although these show limited interest (except in the prospect of upcoming elections when new people come forward).

We can conclude that local cartel lists contain a multilayered organizational structure with a clear distinction between the local party branches involved in these lists and the alliance. The local party branches maintain their own formal organizational structure to assume their twofold role as national party agency and as local political actor. Yet this latter role is shared with other local political actors in an umbrella structure with a more informal character, without members, nor a formal board of governors, nor formal procedures for interaction. Before the elections, the operation of the alliance is focused on a joint electoral strategy with a prominent role for the local party organizations. After the elections, the focus of the collaboration shifts towards a joint council strategy and the joint council group assumes a more prominent position in the collaboration, although the local party leadership remains closely involved. Hence, the council group in local cartel lists assume a less autonomous
position than has been established above for the associated lists as the functional distinction between the list and the party organizations is less clear.

### 6.3 Independent candidate lists

In contrast to the other list types discussed above, independent candidate lists assume only one of the two roles generally ascribed to local parties. They participate in local political life but are not concerned with supra-local party politics. The organizational analysis of independent lists is based on 8 cases. Most of these cases have an informal organizational structure without clear distinction between members, party leaders and councilors. Most respondents do not conceive their independent lists as a local ‘party’, but rather as a ‘local political association’ with an active core group of engaged citizens. These lists maintain an open character with little formal procedures for interaction. Two cases did mention a formal membership structure, but membership is less closed and sympathizers are welcome to join the core group meetings or any other activities of the list.

The organizational structure of these independent list seems influenced by the size of the core group of activists and their position in council. Three of the analyzed cases only contain about a handful of people and have no representatives elected in council. These lists have no active council role, but maintain a limited activity level to monitor local policy and sustain some visibility in the municipality: ‘You could say that we are a movement with four people in the core and then several sympathizers, readers of our pamphlets’ (case 8). The small scale of these cases seems to make any organizational arrangements to structure internal interaction redundant.

Independent lists with an active role in council generate more enthusiasm and involves a larger core group of activists. These lists assume a more comprehensive political role and

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7 One case concerns a one man’s list and hence involves only one person without any interaction.
engage in a broader range of political activities. Several cases have created some formal positions to organize and structure their activities (chairman, treasurer, secretary), yet the allocation of these positions is not formalized and the councilors, party leaders and members / sympathizers form one single group with no separate meetings or activities: ‘We only have a governing board to take care of financial management and to implement actions, yet there is no elected board of governors for there are no party members. We are not a party, we are a team, an anarchist collective and anyone interested can join us’ (case 18).

One list in the sample however more closely resembles a local party organization for it does organizationally differentiate between the party in public office and the party in central office: ‘We do have an organigram, with a core group - or an executive committee - of seven people, which considers the general strategy of the list. This group contains a president and the two council group chairpersons and some non-elected persons. Additionally we have a broader policy group involving all councilors and some other sympathizers which gathers monthly to prepare the council meetings’ (case 3). The first group can be considered as a closed party-in-central-office, while the latter group concerns an open party-in-public-office. A formal party-on-the-ground is lacking for the list has no members, but they can rely on a large informal rank and file. It concerns a longstanding list with substantial governing experience.

We can conclude that the independent lists in our sample in general have less complex and less formal organizational structures than associated or cartel lists which are organized at multiple levels, combining their role as party agency with their role in local politics. Independent lists are only concerned with local politics and do not require any organizational arrangements to combine these two roles. Some independent lists have no organizational structure at all, while others have merely a simple informal structure and still others have adopted some traditional organizational characteristics. The organizational complexity of independent lists seems to vary according to their size and position in council.
7. Organizational capacity

To further assess the organizational strength of non-national lists in Flanders and establish whether these lists should be considered as short-term, underactive and weakly structured political groups or as durable and active institutionalized political organizations, this section considers the organizational capacity the different types of non-national lists. The survey data allow to analyze their ability to maintain a stable activity level and sustainably engage in political activities beyond elections. Two indications of the organizational capacity of non-national lists will be considered: the age of the organization and their activity level.

7.1 Age of the organization

The list headers of non-national lists were asked to indicate when their list first participated in municipal elections with their current name. Table 2 (left part) summarizes the results and indicates that a majority of the three types of non-national lists participated for the first time with their current name in the most recent municipal elections of 2012. Only a small minority of all non-national lists (12.9%) has been electorally active for more than three successive elections. The differences between associated lists, local cartel lists and independent lists are limited and proved statistically not significant. At first sight these figures seem to confirm that non-national lists in Flanders are predominantly short-term and unstable organizations. However, an additional question inquired if a related predecessor of the lists has participated in prior municipal elections under a different name. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that this was indeed the case, which offers a different image of the organizational stability of these lists. Including these precursors decreases the share of actually novel lists to about one third (33.7%), while nearly 35% have been participating in elections since before 2000, as illustrated in the right side of table x. Independent lists contain slightly more novel organizations, while supported lists most often concern older organizations which have been electorally active since before 2000. The majority of the cartel lists have been established in
2000 or 2006. Although these differences in age between cartel lists, associated lists and independent lists are limited, they are statistically significant and indicate that independent lists more often concern unstable organizations ($V = 0.157^*$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With current name</th>
<th>forerunners incl.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-national lists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated lists</td>
<td>61,2%</td>
<td>25,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartel lists</td>
<td>67,2%</td>
<td>21,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent lists</td>
<td>57,7%</td>
<td>23,1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: first electoral participation of Flemish non-national lists*

### 7.2 Activity level

In addition to their first electoral participation, the activity level of non-national lists indicates their organizational capacity. Non-national lists – as local party branches - can engage in a wide variety of political activities, addressing different target audiences. Some activities only involve a limited group of active core members, while other activities address a more inclusive group of (active and passive) members or an even wider public of sympathizers or interested citizens (political debates, festivities, social events, …). Moreover, local parties often keep their rank and file informed about political realizations and upcoming activities through diverse communication channels.

The survey results show that not all non-national lists engage in party activities beyond election periods. They turn to a non-active state after elections and can therefore be considered as *latent* parties. One out of five of the non-national lists in Flanders can be as such identified. Although the differences between different types of non-national lists proved not significant, table 3 shows that associated lists least often concern latent lists, while independent lists most often indicated that they do not engage in any party activity beyond elections.
Hence, the majority of non-national lists do maintain a certain activity level in between elections. The respondents were asked to indicate how frequently their list organized 1) board or core group meetings to prepare council work or organize other party activities; 2) a general meeting for all (active and passive) members / sympathizers; 3) communication with their members through a members magazine; and 4) public activities for members or sympathizers. Based on these results, the share of lists which engage in these activities on a regular basis could be identified.

Table 4 summarizes the results and demonstrates that a majority of all non-national lists regularly (at least once a month) organizes core group meetings and regularly (at least several times a year) communicates with members/sympathizers. Nearly half of all non-national lists regularly organize general meetings for all members (at least once a year), also about half have at least two public activities a year (49,6%). The differences between associated lists, cartel lists and independent lists are statistically not significant, but as illustrated in table 4, the share of independent lists with a high activity level is substantially lower in all four activity types (table 3).
To establish the overall organizational activity level of the different types of non-national lists, these four activity domains have been integrated, allowing to distinguish - in addition to the previously identified latent organizations - between dynamic organizations with a high and stable activity level (regular activities in at least three of the above mentioned activity fields) and indolent organizations which do engage in some party activities in between electoral periods, but in a less comprehensive and rigorous manner. The distribution of non-national lists between these three organizational types is illustrated in table 5, demonstrating that slightly more than half of all non-national lists can be identified as dynamic. Independent lists contain the least dynamic lists, although these differences again proved not statistically significant. About 27% of non-national lists in Flanders are identified as indolent lists with only a limited level of party activity in between election periods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>latent</th>
<th>indolent</th>
<th>dynamic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-national lists</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>20,6%</td>
<td>27,4%</td>
<td>52,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supported lists</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15,3%</td>
<td>27,1%</td>
<td>57,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cartel lists</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>18,2%</td>
<td>26,1%</td>
<td>55,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent lists</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>25,7%</td>
<td>28,7%</td>
<td>45,5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: Organizational capacity of different types of local candidate lists*

It can be assume that the organizational capacity of non-national lists is influenced by their electoral performance and their role in council. Council work is generally considered a priority for local party organizations and most party activities relate to the work in council. The more extensive this role in council, the broader the range of possible council-related activities (involving members, informing the public, aligning internally, …). Without any representatives in council, party life risks to fade away together with the lack of tangible political leverage. Table 6 confirms that non-national lists which have passed the representation threshold more often have a high activity level, while non-national lists without representatives in council more often concern dormant or indolent lists (Cramer’s
V=0.259***. The difference between lists in opposition and governing lists is less obvious (table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>non-national lists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in government</td>
<td>13,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in opposition</td>
<td>18,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not represented</td>
<td>38,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cramer's V</td>
<td>0,256***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6: organizational capacity and role in council of non-national lists*

The direction of this correlation between role in council and programmatic activity however is not quite clear. It can also be assumed that non-national lists with a low activity level are less rooted in the community and might therefore attract less voters and encounter more difficulties to surpass the representation threshold. More research is needed to delve into the specific causes of the low activity levels of non-national lists.

**8. Conclusions**

Based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, this paper has assessed the organizational strength of non-national lists in Flanders to establish whether these lists can be considered as short-term, weakly structured political groups or rather as durable and institutionalized political organizations. The results show that both organizational complexity and organizational capacity differ between and within the different types of non-national lists and we can conclude that non-national lists in local elections represent a miscellaneous phenomenon in local politics with diverging organizational features.

Local cartel lists and associated lists can be considered organizational derivatives of local party branches, while independent lists show less overlap with traditional local party organizations. Associated lists and local cartel lists are found to have a complex, multilayered
organizational structure, both containing pieces of traditional local party structures, which have been excavated or supplemented with informal customized organizational arrangements to combine their role as party agency with their role as participants in local politics. Compared to traditional local parties the organizational distinction between members, councilors and party leadership is less prominent, while the distinction between local and supra-local competences is strongly anchored in the adapted organizational structures. Supra-local and party political issues remain the exclusive competence of the traditional party structures, while local policy issues are largely detached from the national party and assigned to additional - less formalized - organizational structures. Especially for associated lists, these customized organizations structures seem to allow local party branches to circumnavigate the statutory link with the national party and assume a more autonomous position in local politics with a dominant role for the council groups. Cartel structures also attribute a dominant role to the council group although the local party branches remain involved in the council strategy. Hence, these findings confirm the general evolution towards stratarchical party structures and associated lists can be considered as an extension of this evolution (Bolleyer, 2012). Moreover, the findings equally confirm the increased concentration of local powers in local council groups as established by Copus and Erlingsson (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012).

Independent local lists proved weaker organizations. Their organizational structure is less formal and less complex and they demonstrate lower activity levels. Hence, both organizational complexity and organizational capacity of independent lists are weaker. Yet, a substantial part of the independent lists equally indicate stable activity levels and can be identified as dynamic organizations, depending on their electoral success and position in council. Without representatives in council, the commitment of activists to engage in political activities in between elections is restricted and the limited scope of non-represented lists does not entail any (complex) organizational structures nor a broad activity level. Moreover,
previous research revealed that independent lists in Flanders more often fail to surpass the electoral threshold and enter local council, while local cartel lists and associated lists have more electoral guarantees when entering the electoral arena. Hence, independent lists more often lack the political need to organize on a more stable basis.

This paper has focused on the organizational characteristics of non-national lists as a crucial civic party function. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the partisan character of (different types of) non-national lists, further examination of other traditional party functions is required.


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1 Anyone can propose a list with one or more candidates, which then has to be submitted by a resigning councillor or by a certain (limited) number of voters.

2 This electoral threshold depends on the amount of council seats to be distributed. In the smallest communalities this threshold can reach 20% of the votes, while in the big cities in Belgium the threshold is a about 1%.

3 Although the term ‘cartel’ generally has another connotation in political science (cfr the cartel party of Katz & Mair, 2006), the concept of ‘cartel lists’ is very familiar in Belgium (Flanders as well as Wallonia), referring to pre-electoral alliances in the form of joint candidate lists.