The nationalization of local elections: disentangling effects of voters' demand and party's organizational capacity

Introduction

The nationalization of politics is a hotly debated issue in electoral studies. In this on-going debate, the question of the nationalization (or the lack thereof) of local elections had stayed until recently somewhat apart because of the specific nature of this level of government. Local lists remain indeed a distinctive feature of local politics in most European countries. In the seminal volume, *Farewell to the Party Model?* (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008), comparing twelve East and West European countries, Reiser (2008) concludes that empirical evidence is strong to claim the persistence of local lists. They have been a distinctive feature of local politics – albeit with some cross-time variation – in Norway, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and West Germany over the last two decades. Nevertheless, back in the 1960's, Rokkan (1966, 251) already discussed the nationalization of local politics as an incremental process until "full nationalization of politics". Yet far from declining under a process of modernization, local lists have even been growing in importance in several countries (Bäck, 2003; Wille and Deschouwer, 2007; Steyvers et al., 2008; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010b; Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013) and recent scholarship has shown there is an interest in voters' behaviour *for* the local and not only *against* the national (Marien et al., 2015).

This importance of local lists calls for a closer study of the potential nationalization of local elections. Such endeavour is key for three reasons. First, in a multi-level perspective of politics, scholars have observed a "growing consolidation of the position of local government in the respective states. (…) municipalities enjoy more freedom to take on new tasks, are legally protected and have more directly the possibility to make themselves heard when it comes to decisions on higher levels" (Ladner et al., 2016, 347). Second, following the motto "all politics is local", local elections are often seen as the start of all upper levels objectives for political parties, due to the interconnectedness and even interdependency between levels (Deschouwer, 2003, 2006; Thorlakson, 2006). Winning local elections can be a springboard to win next elections at upper levels Pedahzur and Brichta (2000). Third, on a more methodological note and as stated by several electoral scholars (Laver and Schofield, 1998; Wolinetz, 2006), the local level is a great field of research to test hypotheses as it offers the largest number of observations in contrast with the number of national elections – and to

some extent – regional elections.

The combination of these theoretical and methodological reasons urges researchers to question the nationalization of local elections. Such process could be explained by two – complementary – mechanisms. On the one hand, it may result from the widening political market taking place at the local level due to voters' demand to elect representatives – others than the 'old notables' – more congruent with the increasing *socio-economic diversity* of modern local societies (voters' demand for ideological alternatives). On the other hand, the penetration of national parties at the local level could further be explained by the *resources* these parties enjoy in local competition (party's organizational capacity). As it reflects an impact of the scale of resources available but also the socio-economic diversity of a given municipality, nationalization would directly vary according to the *size* of a municipality.

The purpose of this article is to test these hypotheses on an original dataset made of the coding of each list (N = 1.012) that competed in the 2012 local elections in Wallonia where a large number of local lists competed and almost equal number of national lists officially supported by well established and deeply rooted national parties. We first lay the theoretical foundations of this research before depicting the hypotheses that are then tested on the empirical data and discussed in light of the literature on the nationalization of local elections.

1. The nationalization of local elections

The study of the nationalization of elections is a growing industry but the study of party systems has tended to focus almost exclusively on the national level (Caramani, 2004). The theoretical foundations of the nationalization of local elections can however be traced back to Rokkan (1966)'s contribution on *Electoral mobilization, party competition, and national integration*. Based on a historic analysis, Rokkan argued that the process of nationalization of local politics is a direct and inevitable consequence of the process of modernization taking place since the late 18th century. With the French Revolution European political systems encountered an extension of the universal suffrage, a development of mass party membership and the emergence of state-wide party organizations competing on functional cleavages. The latter have been incrementally cross-cutting the old local and provincial cleavages characterizing pre-modern societies[1]. While this process of modernization initially started at

[1] Territorial politics did not however fully disappear as the centre-periphery cleavage is one the four cleavages in the Lipset and Rokkan's theory (1967).

the national level – the key locus of power in modern polities of that time – it extended its effects on local politics.

Taking Norway as a case study, Rokkan analysed this process of nationalization ("politicisation" in his own words) of the local political arena, that is: "the breakdown of the traditional systems of local rule through the entry of nationally organized parties into municipal elections" (1966, 244). He argued that the industrialization of economy – and the conflicts it triggered between different groups of voters in a given municipality – developed a 'natural' electoral ground for national political parties. They offered electoral alternatives to the 'old' politics of notables while, competing on the new political cleavages, they better represented the distinct segments of societies. The urban areas – given their rapid economic growth and the societal conflicts it triggered – were the first to be affected by the process of nationalization of local politics. Later, the incremental economisation of rural municipalities as well as the spread of socialists and worker unions' ideas to the countryside ultimately resulted in a similar nationalization of the peripheral areas. Overall, the process of modernization "intensified the conflicts within the communes and made it impossible to retain the traditional system of single-list voting for purely local lists" (Rokkan, 1966, 251). At almost the same time, Hjellum (1967) developed the same argument, also on Norway. He emphasized the effects of modernization of economy – and the socio-economic diversity it caused – as a perquisite for the penetration of national parties into the realm of local politics. Studying the nationalization of the British local party systems, Ashford (1975) also referred to the process of industrialisation as one of the main factors explaining the presence and increasing electoral strength of the Labour party and the Conservatives in British councils.

A second trend in the literature further focused on the relationship between municipality size and democracy discussing – albeit more indirectly – the effect of the former on the nationalization of local party systems. According to Dahl and Tufte (1973), there is a correlation between municipality size and the number of parties competing as well as the type of lists present in a polity. First, the diversity and complexity of issues at stake increases with municipality size as the inhabitants are socio-economically more heterogeneous than in smaller municipalities (Dahl and Tufte, 1973, 101). Consequently, in greater municipalities there is a greater electoral market for additional parties. Second, because the type of political discussion at stake fits better the political nature and ideology of the local branches of national parties, this is the latter that mostly compete in the largest cities while local lists best fit in the less conflictual electoral arena of smaller municipalities (Dahl and Tufte, 1973, 98). In this respect, Copus and Erlingsson (2012) have discussed two rival models about the role

of local and national political parties about local pattern of conflict perception and resolution (see also Holtmann, 2008). On the one hand, local lists tend to promote a localism doctrine which emphasised 'factual politics' and harmonic local governance outside partisan affairs. According to Copus and Erlingsson (2012), this non-partisan conception of local politics is more present in smaller municipalities – with lower partisan conflictual interests – where local lists are seen "natural born loudspeakers" of factual politics (Holtmann, 2008, 14). On the opposite, with the increasing diversity of interests in greater municipalities, there is a need for national parties to compete and represent specific rival interests, i.e. parties as aggregators of segments of society instead of representing the society as a whole. In the same kind of reasoning, Newton (1982, 201) stated that "in that the larger and more urban the authority the more likely it is to have not just a party system, but also a developed and competitive party system", i.e. a nationalized party system. Directly inspired form Dahl and Tufte and Newton's theory, Kjaer and Elklit (2010a) recently tested and confirmed that the greater the municipality, the greater the nationalization of the local party system in Denmark. As explicitly acknowledged by these scholars, municipality size is not the causal factor *per se*, but is a proxy indicator of the municipality's socio-economic diversity and the conception of roles attached to local and national lists.

Finally, a third type of research agenda focused on the strategic positioning of national party as well as their organizational capacity to explain their electoral presence in local party systems. In addition to voters' demand for electoral alternatives in congruence with the socio-economic mutation of municipalities (i.e. pressures from 'below'), Hjellum (1967) posited the establishment of local branches of national parties as a vote-seeking strategy for national elections (i.e. pressures from 'above'):

> 'National parties also found it to their advantage to establish themselves at the local level. This is the other basic reason why the parties established themselves at the local level. By establishing local organization machinery it seemed possible to use the voter potential to better advantage in sorting elections. At the beginning, this motive proved strongest within the Labor Party, but little by little the other parties also began to give high priority to representation at the local level' (Hjellum, 1967, 75).

Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen (2013) extended the analysis of the strategic *presence* of national parties by analysing how the *electoral* success of this strategic positioning depends upon the party's organizational capacity. They analysed the evolution of the Austrian local party systems from 1985 to 2009 and found that when local branches of national parties have greater resources in terms of partisan membership, they are more likely to succeed. As a

consequence, they restrict electoral opportunities for local lists. Besides, their results were also conclusive controlling for municipality size. The authors hence concluded that from, an organizational perspective, "municipalities offer to independents the chance of succeeding at the polls through the effective use of personal networks and door-to-door campaigning, contesting elections in larger political entities requires a greater amount of infrastructure, bigger financial resources, and more personnel at one's disposal. Whereas local branches of national parties can rely on support from the federal or regional level, independent lists suffer from a competitive disadvantage in this respect" (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013, 788-789).

Overall, nationalization of local elections can be explained by two – complementary – mechanisms. On the one hand, it resulted from the widening of the local electoral market taking place due to the voter's demand to elect representatives – others than the 'old notables' – more congruent with the increasing *socio-economic diversity* of modern local societies (i.e. voters' demand). Various scholars have, however, used municipalize size as a proxy for the socio-economic heterogeneousness of a local society. On the other hand, the penetration of national parties can further be explained by the resources that parties enjoy in local competition (party's organizational capacity). As it reflects an impact of a scale of resources available, nationalization directly vary according to the *size* of a municipality. This distinction refers to two causal mechanisms at work and, therefore, we argue that nationalization of local elections should be operationalized and tested along the two causal mechanisms identified in the literature, namely the ideological signal sent to the voters (voters' *nominal* recognition of local and national lists) and the party organizational capacity (party's *organic* resources of local and national lists). The next section discusses this distinction in details.

2. Hypotheses: Distinguishing nominal and organizational effects

In order to test the nominal and organizational effects of nationalization of local elections, we must first discuss the identification of local and national lists from these two perspectives. From the viewpoint of the *organic* identification there is a rather large consensus in the literature. Hence, Geser (1999, 3) defined local lists as "groupings that seek formal power within communities or municipalities by nominating candidates for local public offices (...) [They] have no formal ties to supralocal party organisations". At the conceptual level, most authors agree with this distinction between purely local initiatives and lists supported by

established state-wide parties (see review in Reiser, 2008) – albeit with some variation. Hence, Steyvers et al. (2008) have argued that this dichotomy should be replaced by a continuum which better capture specificities of local party politics: they distinguish local, pseudo-local, pseudo-national, and national lists. The latter are thus the (quasi) local branches of national parties while the former are the (quasi) typical local lists without formal or informal lists with a national party organization. In some countries, the local and national lists labels are legally organized and even protected by the electoral laws (e.g. Croatia, Czech Republic and Germany). Using the labels of the lists is thus a straightforward operationalization of the organic definition of the local party system. However, in many other countries, this strategy is not without problems as they are local lists in name that are actually sponsored by national parties, i.e. "hidden parties" (Holtmann, 2008, 12). For instance, in Belgium national lists are protected at local elections – i.e. independent local lists cannot use existing national labels – but there is no specific obligation to force local branches of national parties to use them. This is why it often requires time-consuming resources to identify lists that are *organically* connected to national parties in all but in name (Reiser, 2008). While acknowledging this issue, several authors have nevertheless used list labels to identify local from national party organizations (e.g. Steyvers et al., 2008; Heyerick, 2016).

Even though this strategy is acceptable for the research objectives of many of these authors, it has blurred the distinction between *nominal* and *organic* identification as well as the two distinct causal mechanisms behind them. Our argument is that labels should be taken seriously in their own right as signals sent to the voters, irrespective of the organic proximity with the lists. In other words, as the *organic* definition of local lists should be used for analysing the effect of party's organizational features on nationalization of local politics; labels should be used as distinct dynamic of nationalization When local branches of national parties make all efforts to distinguish themselves from national labels, they make a strategic choice in sending a non-partisan signal to the voters during the campaign.

The literature has clearly established that the choice of a list label is nothing but neutral. The emphasis on this vote-seeking strategy goes back at least to the works of Downs (1957), who already pointed out that parties should provide information shortcuts to voters since they have little incentive to acquire costly information about candidates. List labels – one of the primary shortcut that political parties offer to voters (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Kam, 2005) – provide them with information about their identity (Raymond and Overby, 2014) and their ideology (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Aldrich, 1995; Snyder and Ting, 2002). In fact, Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008) have shown that party labels serve an

informative purpose for voters and such labels should therefore be the result of a meaningful choice from candidates.

Recent works have already offered greater insights about the variety list labels used at local elections (Boogers, 2008; Soós, 2008; Boogers and Voerman, 2010). Based on two surveys of Dutch local parties in 2005 and 2006, Boogers (2008, 160-161) builds up a typology of local party names. Beside local sections of national parties, he distinguishes several types of local party labels with among them: "name of the municipality", "citizenship", "ideological profile" and "person-based group". Despite this diversity of list labels, two main patterns emerge: on the one hand, nationalization – that is, labels that are taken from the realm of national politics and, on the other hand, localism – that is, labels that refer to local politics.

Because of the primary effect of label on voters' perception, we argue that the nationalization of local party systems is also translated into the very name of a list. We argue that the nationalization of local politics as a response to voter's demand is best analysed from the viewpoint of list labels (i.e. the ideological cognitive shortcut sent to the voters via *nominal* recognition) while nationalization as a cause of party capacity is a factor of party *organizational* features. Bridging the literature on list labels and theories of nationalization, we develop the following hypotheses to test the electoral success of national labels and national party's organizational capacity.

In line with scholars analysing the impact of socio-economic diversity on nationalization, we firstly hypothesize that in municipalities with low socio-economic diversity, local labels will perform better than lists with national labels. As mentioned by Holtmann (2008, 14), the way citizen conceive the local political arena is t is based an ardent desire for social harmony of one local communities with dense and intensive interaction. This conception is also connected with emotional identification with 'our village' and 'our community'. These different meanings attached to municipal politics may increase the attractiveness on list labels referring to the harmony and the homogeneity of the local community instead of ideological and agonistic cleavages. On the opposite, as mediator between society and its political system, national lists labels will become increasingly successful when socio-economic diversity increases and would prevail over local labels when inequality scores the highest. National lists labels are perceived beyond the mere local interest but reflect greater trans-municipal issues. In that case, voters appeal to national parties that are moreover already familiar 'political party' dealing with problems alike those discussed during regional and national elections (Schaffner et al., 2001; Schaffner and Streb, 2002; Garlick,

2015). Finally, one can expect that lists containing a reference to both the local level and a national party could take the best of two 'worlds' and perform better, irrespective of the degree of diversity. As previous research distinctively stressed that nationalization is conditional to the level of inequality of in a municipality, our first set of hypotheses explicitly refers to an interactive effect of the socio-economic equality of society on the success of list labels and its electoral success:

> **H1a:** Local list labels will perform better than national labels when a municipality's socio-economic inequality is at its lowest score. This electoral advantage will, however, decrease when inequality increases. At the maximum value of inequality, national labels perform better than local lists.
>
> **H1b:** Lists with mixed labels perform better than other labels, irrespective of the degree of inequality.

The second hypothesis tests the impact of organizational capacity on list performance, through effective campaign means. In the smallest municipalities, there is no reason to expect difference between purely local lists and local branches of national parties. Although candidates from national parties arguably have greater resources at disposal (Heyerick, 2016), independent candidates can rely on the personal network they have built in their community. They can conduct door-to-door campaign, relying on the "friends-and-neighbours" effects (Jennings and Niemi, 1966, 89) which would counterbalance the local branches' financial, human, and organizational capacity (Saiz and Geser, 1999). However, the scale of resources necessary to conduct an efficient campaign expands as the municipality size increases. Beyond small to medium-size municipalities, the "friends-and-neighbours" effects do not serve anymore local lists' candidates while local branches enjoy a greater organizational capacity, which constitutes a decisive electoral advantage as already underlined in the literature (Deschouwer and Rihoux, 2008). This gives ground to the second hypothesis:

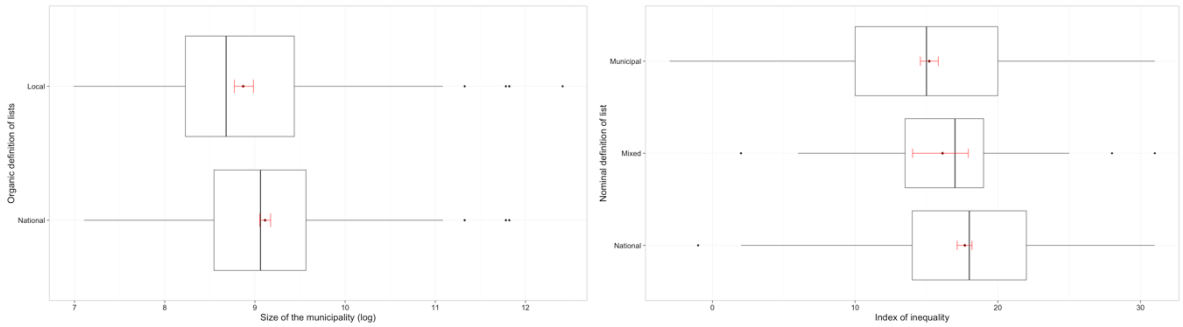
> **H2:** In smaller municipalities, there is no electoral advantage between local lists and local branches national parties. However, as the municipality size increases, national parties gradually benefit from their larger organization capacity at the expense of purely local lists.

3. Data and methods

Case study: Wallonia in Belgium

This article analyses the 2012 Walloon local elections. Belgium, and Wallonia in particular, is one of the countries presenting the highest presence and success of local lists (Reiser, 2008, 288). It can therefore be considered as an "extreme case" in Europe which is of particular interest to test causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2001). Indeed, Wallonia presents a large number of local lists despite well-established and deeply rooted national parties at the local level (Deschouwer, 2012). On the nominal dimension, there were actually more list with a local label (n=494) or a mixed label (i.e. national labels associated with local labels, n=40) than with a national party label (n=478). Form the organic viewpoint, even though local party systems were dominated by (quasi) local branches of national parties (n=691), local lists were noticeably present at the 2012 Walloon local elections (n=321). Representing 31.7 percent of all lists, local lists were highly implemented in Wallonia in comparison to less than 10 percent in countries such as Sweden, England or Portugal (see Reiser and Holtmann, 2008). Furthermore, Wallonia presents interesting variance on our main variables of interest. First, the size of the 262 municipalities as well as their index of inequality vary greatly while the following boxplots clearly show that lists – for both the organic and nominal definitions – are present on the whole spectrum of municipalities' size and their index of inequality. Second, the four main Walloon national parties were all in government at elections time either at the regional (the Socialists, Christian Democrats and the Greens) or at the national levels (the Liberals). The absence of national parties in the opposition limits the potential of second-order effects (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) where voters tend to sanction government parties and favour opposition parties. This specific political context permits to better test our hypotheses while limiting 'noise' from other causal factors.

Figure 1. Boxplots of lists presence (both nominal and organic definition) according to municipality size and index of inequality



Before moving to the presentation of data, we briefly discuss some of the Walloon features of local governments and its local party systems. First of all, the 'Code of local democracy and decentralization' (that regulates local politics and elections in Wallonia) stipulates that lists are identified by one acronym. The latter is composed of maximum 12 letters or figures. According to article L4112-5§2 of the Code, the acronym is formed of initials of all or some of the words that compose the full denomination of the list. Furthermore, political parties represented in the Walloon regional parliament may request to forbid the use of some names. As in the previous elections, national political parties have asked to protect the use of their previous names such *POB* ("Belgian Worker Party"), which is the former name of the socialist party. Names as *Ecolo-Vert* ("Ecolo-Green") were also forbidden because it is ambiguous with the current name of the green party, *Ecolo*. Beside these limitations, local lists have much freedom for choosing their names, contributing to the observed large diversity in the names of the lists. The electoral system is the same for all municipalities: i.e. a proportional system with semi-open lists where the voter can either vote for the list or one or several candidates on the same list. The attribution of seats is based on the *Imperiali formulae* while there is a single electoral district that corresponds to the limits of the municipality. The number of seats to be elected in each municipality is proportional to the size of the municipality.

Data collection and operationalization

We gathered an original dataset on the 2012 local elections in Wallonia. Our dataset is comprehensive and includes all the 1.012 lists that presented a valid list of candidates in the 262 Walloon municipalities in 2012 (i.e. not sample)[2]. The dataset includes variables at both the list and the municipality levels (list label, composition of list, presence at the previous 2006 local elections, amateurism of the list, incumbent local majority, degree of urbanisation, size of the municipality, and type of party competition – including absolute majority). Data collection combined official information available online as well as data collected by interviews with the leader of the lists (Authors 2013). In this section, we present the operationalization of these variables as well as the descriptive statistics of our main variables of interests.

Our dependent variable is thus the electorate performance of list labels that we measure in terms of the percentage of votes obtained by a list at the 2012 local elections.

[2] The final model is however restricted to 987 observations after having excluding outlier lists, based on model diagnosis.

Kjaer and Elklit (2010a) have developed an indicator of nationalization of the local party system as a whole (taking into account the electoral strength *and* absence of national parties). Although their indicator presents the clear advantage of assessing how local party system mirror or deviates from the national party system, its main disadvantage is that it only permits to account for variation at the municipality-level, excluding explanatory factors at the list-level. For instance, the presence of the Mayor or other highly visible political figures such as regional/national MPs, the degree of professionalization of candidates, or the newly established nature of the list are key factors explaining the electoral success of a list. To test our hypotheses, we need to empirically control for these variables at the list-level. This is why we use the list's electoral success as the dependent variable[3]. The latter has a large variance with a minimum of 0.3 percent and a maximum of 100 percent. The mean for the 1.012 lists is of 25.9 percent with a standard deviation of 19.9 percent. Considering the continuous quality of our dependent variables, the models are multivariate OLS[4].

*2012 electoral performance = List Label + Inequality + Label * Inequality + Party organization + Municipality Size + Party organization * Municipality Size + Controls + Constant + Error*

Our main variables of interest are lists labels (nominal) and party organization and how the former interacts with inequality and how the latter interacts with municipality size. List labels are easy to identify. All local labels are labels that do not use national labels while national labels are one of the labels used (and legally protected) by the main political parties represented in the Walloon regional or the federal parliaments. We also included a mix category which adopt national labels that is combined with a reference to local politics (such as the name of the municipality or a reference to local issues). We decided to extend the coding of national labels to the *The Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB)* because, even though they did not have parliamentary representation in 2012, they were receiving increasing national media attention reflecting their performance in electoral surveys. As a matter of fact,

[3] We preferred this operationalized over a lagged dependent variable (difference in vote shares since previous local elections) because of the volatility of the party systems at the local level. Since the 2006 elections, many new local parties have appeared, many have disappeared and a very large number of those remaining have changed their list labels, have formed new electoral alliances or have given birth to splinter lists. Altogether, the use of a lagged dependent variable would reduce our N to a non-representative sample of local lists while biasing our dataset because stability of the party system is greater in larger municipalities.

[4] The 1.012 electoral lists being in competition in specific municipality contexts, both heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation are likely to be present in the residuals at the mere lists level. We therefore replicated our models with clustered standard errors by municipality. It did not improve the efficiency of T and F tests nor estimators at a substantially meaningful level.

the PTB did obtain both regional and federal parliamentary representation at the 2014 joint elections.

A more difficult task is to identify organically local branches of national parties. For parties that used a legally protected national list numbers, this is not a problem. The real challenge is to identify local branches of national parties that decided *not* this national list number. They are "quasi-national parties" (Steyvers et al., 2008) showing greater openness to civil society including non-partisan candidates and abandoning their national names. We developed an in-depth analysis of list composition and (in)formal links with national party' organizations surveying all list leaders. They were asked about their relation with national party organizations as well as their list composition. We decided to code a list as a local branch of national parties when list leaders confirmed explicitly their ties or when a majority of the lists was composed of party members. Other lists are considered as 'independent' local lists from an organic viewpoint. Arguably, this dichotomisation of party organization restricts the variance of a list's organizational capacity existing in real campaign time. Some local branches have greater support than other. However, our main argument is that lists linked to national parties should overall present higher organizational capacity during an electoral campaign than local lists. Even though some of them cannot always rely on national parties' financial support, they can at least enjoy key 'soft power' in terms of how to run a campaign, in-depth analysis of the electoral context built by party research centres, or 'standardized campaign starting kit' as confirmed during the survey of list leaders. Even though there is a correlation between both the nominal and organic types of lists, a substantial percentage of them decided to use a local or a mixed label (i.e. 220 local branches out of 690 or 31 percent). An example is the list "*Together*" directly and officially supported by the Christian democrats in Nivelles, a medium city of 26.843 inhabitants.

The two other main independent variables are the conditional effects of list labels and party organization according to the index of inequality and the municipality size. In this article we opted for a direct measure of inequality, instead of relying on a proxy (such as municipality size which correlates weakly with the index of inequality: 0.56). The main reason is that it directly tackles Rokkan's explanation of nationalization of local politics: "[i]n the more equalitarian primary economy communities of the South and the West the forces of territorial defense remained strong and vigorous and resisted effectively the pressures toward a polarization of local political life" (1966, 254). We use the index of income asymmetry published by the Federal Public Service Economy where lower values indicates greater equality between habitants and vice-and-versa for greatest values. The index of socio-

economic inequality oscillates between 0 and 34, mean being of 16.5 while the standard deviation equals 6.5. For the municipality size, we use the number of voters registered at elections time. Municipality size varies importantly from 1.098 up to 245.701 inhabitants (mean: 13.979 and standard deviation: 22.586). Because of the larger number of small to medium-size municipalities, the variable is strongly skewed to the left. The variable was thus log transformed[5].

Finally, our models control for variables considered as influential in the list's electoral success: incumbency effects, scope of inter-party competition, degree of urbanization, size of the municipality and professionalism of the list. First, we control for the incumbency effects at two levels. On the one hand, at the municipality level, we control whether or not the list was part of the incumbent majority (either as a single-party majority or as part of a majority coalition) at the time of the elections in 2012. A dummy variable is created where the 354 lists in office at the moment of the 2012 elections. On the other hand, at the individual level, a dummy variable that distinguishes lists where the mayor was present as candidate from other lists. Out of 262 mayors, 242 were once again candidates in the local elections, i.e. about one quarter of all lists (23.9 percent). We also controlled for the presence of elected officials at another level of government. A dummy variable distinguishes the presence on the lists of MPs as well as members of cabinets from other tiers of government (regional, federal and European.

Second, we also control for the degree of inter-party competition which has direct mechanical effect on list's electoral performance: the larger the number of lists in competition, the lower the percentage of votes each of them can obtained. This effect is however directly connected to the electoral strength of electoral lists. In this respect, a traditional way to measure inter-party competition is the effective number of parties, based on Laakso and Taagepera (1979)'s formula. Although it constitutes a post-electoral indicator, in the absence of local surveys in all 262 municipalities, it is the only reliable measure available. Besides, it is furthermore fair to assume that in most municipalities electoral results reflect the perceived electoral strength during the electoral campaign in the eyes of the voters and the parties. This trade-off is anyway much better than relying on the absolute number of parties. Indeed, whereas the mean of the 'absolute' number of lists per municipality is 4.5 lists, there is on average 2.9 'effective' lists. Therefore, a great proportion of 'absolute' number of lists perform extremely poorly not representing genuine electoral competitors.

[5] The interpretation of the results for log-transformed variable can be summed up as a municipality twice bigger is associated with (beta of the municipality size variable*ln(200/100)) change in electoral performance.

Third, the models control for the degree of professionalism of the list based on two indicators. A first very direct indicator is the completeness of the list in terms of candidates. A dummy variable is created to distinguish lists presenting as many candidates as the number of available seats (complete lists are coded 1 and incomplete lists are coded 0). A recent study on Wallonia (Vandeleene et al., 2013) has demonstrated that most independent local lists are complete lists (n=827) while incomplete (n=185) lists present always a significant proportion of vacancy of candidates (two thirds of the incomplete lists have less than 50 percent of candidates). Therefore, this dummy can be used as a proxy to control for minor and 'folkloric' lists that do not seriously compete with office-seeking goals but rather because of the low legal prerequisites. It distinguishes therefore more 'professionalized' lists that genuinely aim – at least in a formal way by presenting a list full of candidates – to obtain or increase their representation in the council after the elections. Another indicator is the presence of the list at the latest 2006 elections. It is correct that to assume that new lists are not necessarily amateurs because a lot of lists are reconfiguration of former distinct list and past alliances. A dummy variable is created to distinguish list that were not remotely present in 2006 (even after the change of name or through new alliances). This was possible thanks to data collected via interviews with leaders of the lists.

Table 1. Summary of the operationalization of the variables

Variables	**Operationalization**	**Details**
Dependent variable	Continuous variable	List's share of votes (in percentages)
Electoral performance at elections		
Main covariate of interest		
List label	Categorical variable	Ref. = national list label
List organization	Dummy variable	Ref. = local branches of national parties
Municipality size	Continuous variable	Log-transformed number of voters
Index of inequality	Continuous variable	Asymmetry of income by municipality
Control variables		
Incumbency		
Presence of the mayor on the list	Dummy variable	Ref. = List without mayor
List part of the incumbent local majority	Dummy variable	Ref. = List part of the incumbent majority
Personalization		
Presence of elected officials from another tier of government	Dummy variable	Ref. = List without elected officials
Professionalism		
Presence in 2006	Dummy variable	Ref. = List not present in 2006
Complete list of candidates	Dummy variable	Ref. = List without a complete list of candidates

4. Results

The results of the OLS are presented in Table 2 that assessed jointly our two hypotheses (i.e. controlling the impact of both list labels and party organizational capacity on a lists' electoral performance). The model has a very high model fit with an adjusted R^2 of 0.76 percent, most of independent variables of interest as well as the control variables are highly significant with often limited standard errors attesting precision in their effect.

Table 2. OLS model

Variables	
Party organization	3.69
	(8.36)
Muncipality size	-2.65***
	(0.64)
Municipal list label (ref= national)	12.45***
	(1.96)
Mixed list label	9.59**
	(4.58)
Index of inequality	0.23***
	(0.09)
Effective number of parties	-5.52***
	(0.55)
Municipalities with absolute majoirty	-4.39***
	(0.88)
Incumbent majority	0.35
	(1.09)
Complete lists	12.54***
	(0.92)
List present at the 2006 former elections	0.12
	(0.69)
Mayor present on the list	18.26***
	(1.11)
Presence of elected officials from other tiers	6.45***
	(1.05)
Party organization * Muncipality size	-0.97
	(0.96)
Municipal list label * Index of inequality	-0.37***
	(0.11)
Mixed list label * Index of inequality	-0.24
	(0.26)
Municipalities with absolute majoirty * Incumbent majority	13.67***
	(1.38)
Constant	44.34***
	(5.31)
Observations	987

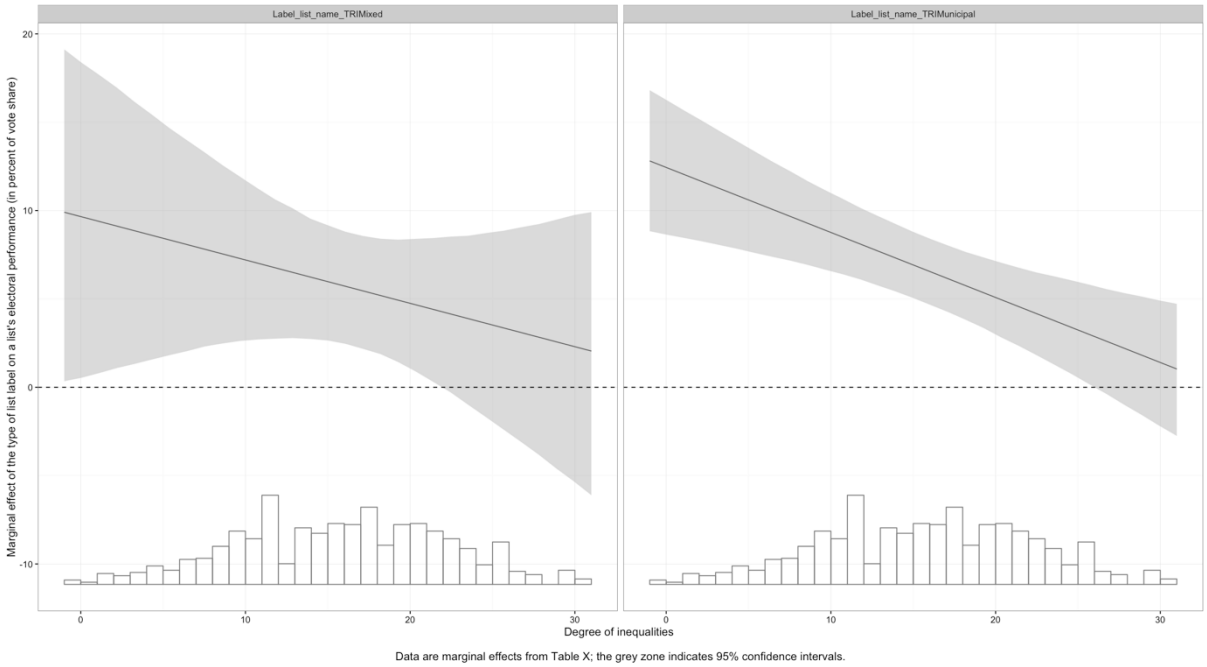
R^2	0.76
Adjusted R^2	0.76
Residual Std. Error	9.76 (df = 970)
F Statistic	194.41*** (df = 16; 970)

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

Regarding our first hypothesis (list label's effects on voters' demand), both the individual and interactive terms are significant. As predicted, the local and mixed labels have a statistically significant enhancing effect on a list's electoral performance vis-à-vis national list labels. The interaction of local labels with the index of inequality being negative, the enhancing electoral performance of these local labels (vis-à-vis national labels) declines, however, in magnitude as the inequality increases. On the opposite, the interactive term of mixed labels is not significant confirming that the positive effect of this label is always present, irrespective of the degree of inequality. This validates our hypothesis H1.a and H1.b.

However, to truly appreciate the conditional effects of one variable on the other, we plot the interaction and marginal effects following the procedure recommended by Brambor et al. (2006, 74). Figure 2 shows how the marginal effect of the list labels on a list's electoral performance varies with the index of inequalities. The X-axis displays variation in the index of inequality, the Y-axis presents electoral advantage respectively for the mixed labels (on the left) and for the local labels (on the right) vis-à-vis national list labels in percent. The histogram at the bottom of the figure shows the distribution of observations along the axis while the dotted line indicates a zero-sum gain electoral advantage.

Figure 2. Marginal effect of list labels on a list's electoral performance (in percent of vote share), according to index of inequality



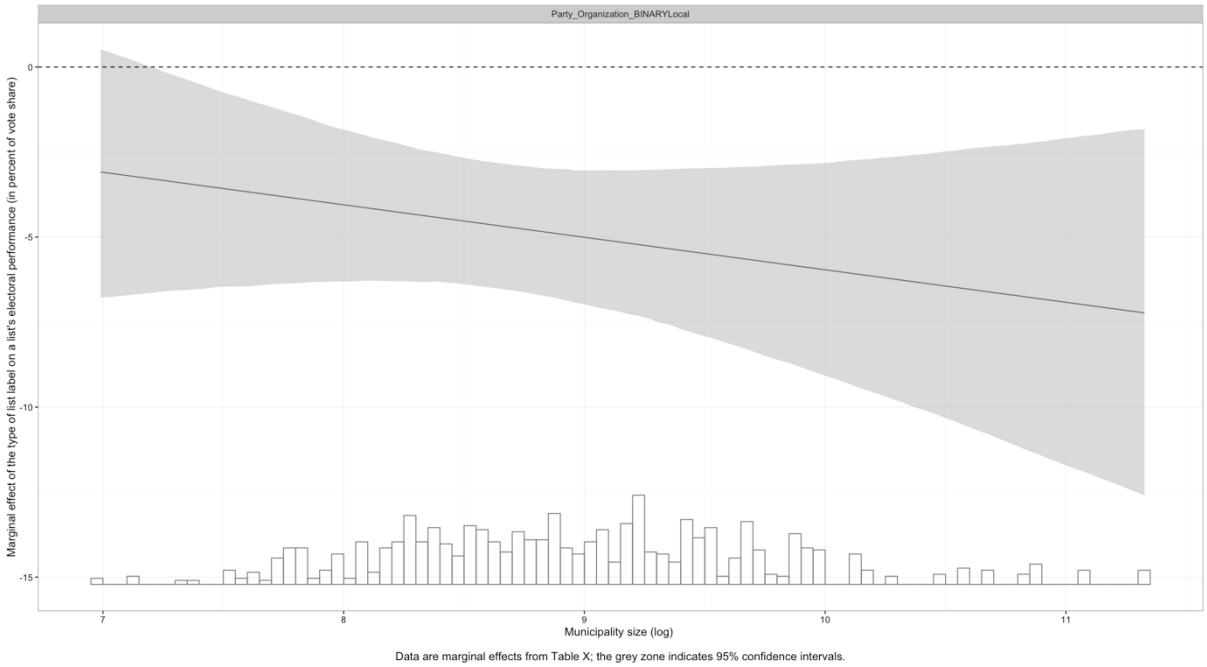
First of all, it confirms that the mixed label does have a positive effect on a list's electoral performance (vis-à-vis national labels). Considering the large confidence intervals, it confirms that its effects are constant and do not decrease (nor increase) when the inequality differs. Yet, the confidence intervals crossed the zero dotted line when the index of inequality is greater than 22.0, the mixed labels ceased then to be an electoral assent. In other words, H1.b is almost fully verified: the choice of a mixed label does provide a positive effect vis-à-vis national label, irrespective of changes in municipalize size. However, it does not provide such positive effect where inequality is particularly high (i.e. higher than 22.0), beyond this limit there are no significant differences observed with national labels. Secondly, Figure 2 also clearly shows that local list labels also have a strong enhancing effect on a list's electoral when inequality is the lowest. Hence, for the more equalitarian municipality, the electoral performance of local label list has a mean effect of 14 percent (8 - 17 percent in the 95% confidence interval). Yet, as expected in H1.a, this electoral advantage declines once local lists compete in municipalities where socio-economic diversity increases. Where the index reaches 26.0, local list labels no longer have a significant enhancing impact on electoral performance vis-à-vis national label lists (i.e. the confidence intervals covering the null effect on the graph). Contrary to our expectations, national list labels never obtain an electoral advantage even in the most inequalitarian municipalities (i.e. the marginal effects never become negative outside confidence intervals).

In order to fully grasp the substantive implication of the findings, Berry et al. (2012)

suggested to analyse the number of observations that falls under the observed marginal effects (based on the histogram of observations indicated at the bottom of the graph). In this respect, 75 percent of the mixed labels and 80 percent of local labels in competition at the 2012 Walloon elections fall in the range covered by the positive marginal effects (respectively index of inequality smaller than 22 and 28 points). This empirical reality strongly confirms that both mixed and local lists are first and foremost a winning vote-seeking strategy in a context of stronger equality while these enhancing effects vis-à-vis national list labels decreases when inequality increases. Yet, contrary to expectations it never becomes a losing strategy even when inequality is the highest.

In light of the second hypothesis, we tested the effect of party organizational capacity on the electoral performance conditioning municipality size. The individual party organization term as well as the interactive term with municipality size are not significant (Table 2). Nonetheless, as stated by Brambor et al. (2006, 74): "it is perfectly possible for the marginal effect of X on Y to be significant for substantively relevant values of the modifying variable Z even if the coefficient on the interaction term is insignificant". Figure 3 confirms that the marginal effect of the party organization does not vary along municipality size (because of the large confidence intervals). Nevertheless, this is also clear that a local party organization has an overall negative impact on a list's electoral strength. This leads us to partially reject H.2: local branches of national parties perform better than independent local lists, irrespective of the municipality size. In fact, whereas we expected that, as the municipality size increases, national parties would gradually benefit from their larger organization capacity at the expense of purely local lists, we find they have this advantage regardless of the size of the municipality. H2 is however fully met in two instances: in very small municipalities, on the one hand, and for small national parties in very large municipalities (that is above 60.000 inhabitants), on the other hand.

Figure 3. Marginal effect of party organization on a list's electoral performance (in percent of vote share), according to municipality size (log)



Finally, we also had to check for possible differentiating effects by party. Once we take into account individual – national – parties (as a categorical variable in the model), the results are a little bit more contrasted: in case of greater inequality, the use of the national label of left-wing parties (Ecolo, PS, PTB) performs better than in municipalities with lower inequality. Given the ideological stance and possibly actions of these parties on inequalities, this finding is not really surprising, and confirms the role of the – choice of the – label of a given list. Voters seem to adapt their list's choice according to the context in which they vote: while in municipalities with a high level of inequality voters opt for – left-wing – lists supported by a national party as they see them the most able to fight this, in municipalities that do not face as much inequality voters prefer local lists as they see them most appropriate to take care of the local governing. There is therefore a nuancing effect by party but that follows an important effect of the list label.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we sought to address the dynamics behind a possible nationalization of local elections and in order to so we argued that such nationalization at the local level would be translated into the very name of a list, because of the primary effect of label on voters' perception. Our underlying question was to disentangle the influence of two main mechanisms: on the one hand, the effect of the list label as a *nominal* recognition to be understood as an ideological cognitive shortcut and, on the other hand, the role of party

organizational features that would give local branches of national parties more capacities. The wide diversity of Wallonia both in terms of socio-economic and size differences and in terms of the variety of lists competing at the local level (basically one third with local labels, one third with mixed labels and one third with national labels) offered a fertile ground of investigation.

Even though national parties are still strongly established and benefit from a strong organizational capacity, list using national parties' label attract less voters in comparison with lists that display a local label. How can this be explained? One line of explanation is that since national parties are decreasingly popular, the use of the national name may frighten potential voters (Steyvers et al., 2008, 173). In recent decades, Western democracies have been characterized by a decline of party identification and a growing distrust towards professional politicians (Wattenberg, 2000; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Holmberg, 2007; Dalton and Welzel, 2014). Disaffection from partisan politics is a general trend observed in most comparative studies (Papadopoulos, 2013). In this critical environment, lists with local labels may attract more votes because they appear as alternatives to national parties that are increasingly rejected.

Another – complementary – explanation is the local nature of the local elections both for lists and voters. From the lists' perspective, going for a local label may help integrate candidates whose ideological preferences do not fit with the national party's official position on certain policy issues (Vandeleene et al., 2013). Similarly, a list that chooses a non-partisan list name, and more specifically a local label, may also indicate other policy priorities. The distance from the national party also provides more flexibility and independence for the list leadership, especially when conflicts occurred between national party leaders and local leaders (Carty, 2004). Above all, and this turns to look from the voters' perspective, going for a local label puts the emphasis on the local context and its specific needs. In this respect, works on local elections have showed that local lists performed well, but not as much in political environment seen as less familiar for local lists (Reiser, 2008). This probably explains why local lists ceased to present a notorious advantage only under case of strong inequality. Although there is no 'magic' threshold, it is clearly a sign of anti-partisan lists. However, not all parties are affected in a similar way, with left-wing parties in municipalities with high socio-economic differences.

To go for a local label or not is a decision of a group of candidates who want to compete in local elections. This article shows nevertheless that it is an important decision. While this work focused on the electoral performance at elections of list labels via the

analysis of their share of votes with a within-case cross-comparison controlling for the diversity of the municipalities, further research is needed both in times before the elections and in times after the elections. Before the elections, works should attempt to grasp more finely how and why the choice of a label is made and how this choice evolves over time. After the elections, the consequences of this choice should be assessed not only on the electoral performance as this paper sought to achieve, but also on politics, namely coalition formation, and on policies, whether actions undertaken by lists with local labels differ from list with national labels. Such endeavour will help us to shed light on the complex process of nationalization. It seems so far, however, that there is not a full nationalization of local elections and politics.

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