

Local voters have their reasons. Mapping voting motives in local elections in Belgium

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Introduction

Every political candidate dreams of knowing the motives for the electoral choices that voters make. Being such a candidate or not, collecting these grounds is important to understand the results of the elections. Nevertheless, the ways of the voter often appear inscrutable. Justifications can be multiple and combine explanatory elements at different levels. How the electorate determines its vote undoubtedly remains one of the most studied but still much contested questions in political science.

Contemporary assertions point to the interaction between predisposition and information affected by long and short-term (contextual) factors. Given this complex decisional environment, due attention should be given to how voters ultimately interpret their own electoral choice. This refers to the subjective perception and expression of the vote. Existing research shows this is a mixture of knowledge and judgement, attitude and conviction, perception and intuition. This approach has often been used to let voters reflect in their own words about their electoral choice. To determine their choice, voters appear to be led by a political map with cognitive and affective directions. Some voting patterns are general and deeply engrained, others focused on specific events preceding the elections. These are the voting motives often described in national electoral research.

There has been much less concern with such motives at the local level as the means to scrutinize them are often less available. Nevertheless, two main tendencies can be discerned. Some consider local elections as second order national elections. In this line of thinking, voters will mainly hold national motives. Others emphasize place-bound patterns and dynamics in local voting motives. Still, more research is needed beyond those theoretical presumptions to empirically determine motives for the local vote. Therefore, this paper aims to address two questions:

1. Which types of motives do voters attribute to their choice at local elections?
2. What explains similarities and differences in (1)?

To answer these, the data of the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018 (BLES2018)* are particularly valuable. Designed as a non-predictive exit poll conducted in a stratified sample of 45 municipalities on Election Day, the study contains nationally representative data of a bit less than 4000 individual voters. In the related survey, respondents were invited to answer an open-ended question on their voting motives for the local elections. The choice of Belgium as a research context is first and foremost due to the availability of fine-grained qualitative data thanks to the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018*. Heuristically, this study offers furthermore a good case to test the local or national nature of electoral motives at local elections. As the 2018 local elections were organized a few months before the 2019 national and regional elections, various political observers and political actors expected a strong nationalization of the local elections. Yet, the results indicate that national motives remain limited while local motives predominate, even in a context of 'allegedly' nationalized local elections.

To outline a map of voting motives and interpret them correctly an appropriate conceptual framework is needed. Therefore, this paper first presents the lessons that can be drawn from research on voting motives and voting behavior in national elections before dwelling on knowledge about those at the local level. After that, the research context and the design, methods and data of the *BLES2018* are discussed (with a keen eye on the voting motives question). In the subsequent empirical analysis, the answers to the voting motives question are coded through the *IRaMuTEQ* software and via the *Alceste*-method. This categorical approach allows to regroup the voting motives of voters and cross them with their features. It ultimately produced a number of classes summarized along two dimensions. The first is relatively general and juxtaposes continuity to change. Trust in and support for a list of the departing majority or distrust and support for a list of the opposition divide the concomitant voter groups. The desire for change also appears to be stronger in municipalities confronted with a political scandal. The second is more specific and concerns personal notoriety and proximity vis-à-vis program and substance. It distinguishes voters in rural municipalities from those in more urban ones. Also, those higher educated indicate more often programmatic or substantial motives. We conclude that the map thus has little national directions. Voting in local elections does not appear as of second order. Hence, local voters predominantly have general and specific place-bound reasons.

Voting motives and voting behavior

The question how voters decide on their electoral choice is one of the most essential ones in political science. Still, there is no conclusive or unanimous answer. Some perceive this choice as a deep-rooted psychological process in which voters develop political identities through partisan attachment or ideological positioning. Others in turn depart from the structural social position of voters and emphasize mobilization along cleavages such as religion or class. Yet others rationalize the choice as utility maximalization driven by self-interest. In this conception, topical (economic) issues, campaigns and the alleged performance of politicians play a decisive role for voters. Contemporary overviews derive insights out of each of these models. They discern an interaction between predisposition and information affected by factors with a variegated time perspective (long, middle and short term), the electoral context (e.g. in terms of the number and nature of parties partaking) and the meaning that voters give to their choice (LeDuc & Niemi, 2014; Fisher et al., 2018). The explanation for choice behavior is thus layered and dynamic differing according to the voter or the election. Often the subjective perception of the voter is therefore taken as the starting point for further insight.

The importance of how these experiences influence their own voting behavior has already been emphasized by the pioneers in the field: *'if we are to understand what leads the voter in his decision at the polls, we must know how he sees the things to which his decision relates. In casting a vote the individual acts towards a world of politics in which he perceives the personalities, issues and the parties and other groupings of a (...) contest'* (Campbell et al., 1964: 15). In particular, it is the subjective nature of this view that matters since *'... his behavior makes sense (...) in terms of the way in which these political objects appear to him'* (ibid). It is shaped and weighed at the same time and thus involves a mixture of knowledge and judgment, attitude and conviction, perception and feeling. In determining their choice voters are guided, as it were, by a political map. We can see this as a scheme for assessing certain parties and/or their candidates. The map contains cognitive and affective directions (or heuristics). It can consist of relatively general images formed long ago or focus on concrete events shortly before the elections. It usually contains rational and emotional elements (Swyngedouw, 2001).

This approach is often used to allow voters to reflect on their vote choice within their own frame of reference. These are then their electoral motives as described in national voter surveys. It also exists in Belgium. Post-electoral research into the federal elections of 2014, for example, showed a multitude of self-declared voting motives (Abts, Swyngedouw & Meuleman, 2015). Abts and his colleagues also took advantage of an open-ended question showing that 30% of their respondents explained their vote with programmatic or issue-related reasons. This category groups voters who refer to a party's program in general or more specifically to certain themes such as employment, health care or safety. In addition, 25% refers to party organizational motives (identification, image, leader, etc.). A similar part mentions values or socialization. Slightly more than 10% of the voters surveyed were motivated by the desire for political change. The same share is said to vote out of political disinterest or anti-politicalⁱⁱ. The distribution of a number of electoral motives differs significantly depending on the party electorate. For example, voters for traditional pillar parties (socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals) are more likely to refer to motives such as socialization or identification, whilst the electorate of their newer counterparts seems to be more driven by the program or certain positions of the party. Those who vote blank or invalid often do so out of disinterest or anti-politics. There are also outliers in motives for specific parties such as values (greens) or the desire for political change (regionalists).

Thus in Belgium, we have a relatively good empirical view of the subjective motives in casting a national vote, even if these are often diverse and changeable depending on the groups examined or the specific election cycle (for comparison with the previous elections since the early 21st century, see Abts, Swyngedouw & Billiet, 2014; Deschouwer et al., 2015). In what follows, we will go deeper into voting motives in the (Belgian) local context. Are they comparable to the national voting motifs or very different?

Voting motives in local elections

Local elections are sometimes regarded as second-order national elections. These would not only make voters less inclined to participate but also affect their motives when they do. After all, these voters would be guided more by so-called expressive considerations. They then vote blank or invalid (to express their dissatisfaction with or mistrust of the political system), give new or smaller parties a chance or convey their opinion on the national majority parties (the local elections then become a barometer for the popularity of the government, with voters tending to punish the latter). Moreover, supralocal voting motives run through these considerations. National party identification (i.e. long-term attachment) and ideological considerations thereby equally guide local electoral behavior. This is reinforced by the presence of national parties and politicians and the increasing (national) media attention for the local electoral strive (Clark & Krebs, 2012; Golder et al., 2017).

Others emphasize place-specific patterns and dynamics in the motives for voting behavior. After all, local elections have their own characteristics and evolution. For example, familiarity with specific candidates (the so-called 'friends and neighbors' effect), the importance of (less ideologically colored) views on local issues (especially due to the greater proximity or the visibility of local themes for citizens) or the positive or negative assessment of the local majority, supplement, compensate or override the above national considerations. In that view, mainly local voting motives weight. The continued

relevance of non-national lists and candidates (and the predominance of personal preference votes) at the local level reinforces this (Oliver et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2016; Kjær & Steyvers, 2019).

Research into the 2012 local elections in Belgium mainly confirmed the latter interpretation (Marien, Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2013). Voters were then asked to explain in their own words the main reason for voting for a specific political party. The answers to this open question were coded considering the possible distinction between local or national motives. The analyzes appeared to consider the former. Nearly 62% of the reasons quoted for voting in the council elections explicitly referred to the local level. In doing so, (knowing) a local politician, the opinion on the local government (i.e. majority) or the opposition or a specific local theme were most often mentioned (each by about one in five voters). National politicians, themes or government versus opposition were rarely mentioned explicitly. Together they accounted for less than 5% of the reasons given. Slightly more than one in five voters generally referred to (the ideology of) a party. In addition, an anti-vote (against someone or something), belonging to a social group or habit were also mentioned by at least 5% of the respondents. These motives are more diffuse and therefore less easy to assign to a specific government level. Local voting motives also favored split ticket voting. Those who indicated that they were led by a local issue, policy, candidate(s) or office-holder(s) in the local elections were significantly more likely to have a different intended party preference at federal level (Marien, Dasonneville & Hooghe, 2015).

Voting motives in the 2018 local elections

Design, methods and data

Research context: Belgium

Belgium has a two-tier local government system with 581 municipalities (the focus of this paper) and 10 provinces. The local government system is often situated in the Southern European state tradition of intergovernmental relations. Here, a limited range of municipal functions and a low level of discretion are mediated by direct access of local decision makers to the national center through dual mandate-holding or party political networks (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010). Intra-governmental relations are commonly termed collective. Only the municipal council is directly elected. The collegiate executive either indirectly (aldermen) or (formally) appointed (mayor). Its members thus come from and remain among the councilors. These parliamentary institutions are part of a wider consensual mode of governance. Although local government is now largely within the constitutional orbit of the Regions, most of these features sustained (Wayenberg et al., 2012; Wayenberg et al., 2017).

Local elections are conducted with compulsory voting. They are held at large and via a (semi-)open list variant of proportional representation with candidates presented in a designated order. Voters have to remain with one list (or vote blank or invalid). They can opt to cast a list vote and/or one or more preference votes (to the extent of the number of candidates). Seats are distributed via the Imperiali-method. After the number of seats for each list has been determined, these are allocated to the designated candidates. In Wallonia, this is solely based on the number of preference votes (open). In Flanders and Brussels on a combination of transferred list and preference votes (semi-open). The proportional formula implies a relatively fragmented local party system, especially in Flanders and Brussels (Steyvers, forthcoming).

With their longer cycle (i.e. 6 years vis-à-vis 5 in regional or federal elections), local elections often display barometric trends. This comes with different degrees of local party system nationalization. Thereby, Belgium is noteworthy for its partitocracy and split party systems (Deschouwer, Pilet & Van Haute, 2017). Apart from the regionalists and the radical right, all party families have Dutch- and French-speaking siblings. Strictly speaking, there are thus only regional parties (but we will use the more common national denominator). These parties are also locally anchored remaining within their own linguistic sphere apart from Brussels, where (joint) lists of both language groups appear. National political parties dominate in local elections in Flanders and Brussels, but to a lesser extent in Wallonia (Reuchamps, 2015). In all regions, non-national lists complement the local electoral offer (Dodeigne et al., 2020).

The Belgian Local Elections Study 2018

For the purpose of this paper, we draw on the data of the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018 (BLES2018)*. This is an interuniversity project probing into local patterns and dynamics of individual voting behavior and motives. A more extensive discussion of its design, method and data can be found elsewhere (Dandoy et al., 2020). Here, we summarize the main features.

The *BLES2018* has been conceived as a non-predictive exit-poll on the day of the 2018 local elections. Compared to the time-lag in traditional post-electoral surveys, approaching voters immediately after leaving the polling station is preferable to diminish mistaken or biased memories. The exit-poll has been conducted in 45 purposely selected municipalities throughout the country. In each municipality, one or more polling stations were targeted. There, a random selection of voters was invited to partake in a questionnaire and a mock-ballot.

These instruments served complementary purposes. The mock-ballot is a way of mimicking the vote very shortly after it was effectively cast. This allows us to probe into the choice for a certain list and/or one or more of its candidates. The questionnaire (in Dutch and French) mainly concerned the sociodemographic profile of the respondent, his or her voting behavior and motives, potential preference voting and a number of other political attitudes and characteristics (like political interest, importance attached to different levels, party identification, issue identification and importance for the vote, and motives (not) to vote for a candidate).

Our sampling procedure built on previous efforts for the 2012 local elections (Dassonneville et al., 2013). We replicated (almost all of) the municipalities selected back then in two steps: first stratified by region and type, and second within each type at random. To better capture potential statistical differences between the types, we added a number of rural and small-sized semi-urban municipalities to arrive at a final number of 45. Within each of those, we focused on 1 to 6 polling stations (according to the number of inhabitants with a total of 114). These again replicated those of 2012 when possible or added new ones where necessary (equally based on random selection).

Before the actual fieldwork, an app was developed for data collection. We also obtained the informed consent of the municipal authorities where the exit-poll would take place. The fieldwork was carried out by job students recruited and trained by each of the partners in the project. All students worked

in teams of two. Each team was present during the whole of the opening hours of the polling stations. They approached every fifth voter leaving the polling station by means of a standardized protocol. After the closing of the collection, data were subject to anonymization and quality control. Also, the overall response was determined (with a rate at 44%) and checked against a number of representativeness criteria. Ultimately, this produced a nationally representative sample of 4087 voters. For the analyses, the sample was weighted by gender, age (categories) and region.

Voting motives

In the questionnaire discussed above, we also opted for an open-ended question to map out voting motives. This approach is usually preferred to determine the heuristic map that voters use to make their choice. After all, when answering an open question, voters engage in a quick form of introspection and giving meaning: they try to articulate the causes of their voting behavior out of their own experience. These causes can in principle have a wide range and cover a multitude of motives. Voters are not forced to fit their answer into one of the pre-imposed categories that invariably come with a closed question (Lefevre, 2011; 2018)ⁱⁱⁱ.

A less guiding approach also allows to highlight new or remarkable reasons. At the same time, there are also disadvantages to working with open questions. For example, they assume respondents with sufficient (language) skills to express these. There is a risk that voters give irrelevant information, let quickly accessible or plausible answers dominate, or overlook certain (unconscious) mental processes. Interpretation by the interviewer may also play a role. In general, however, open questions are considered more valid and reliable for determining electoral motives (Swyngedouw et al., 1996; Swyngedouw, Meersseman & Billiet, 2001).

Therefore, we asked voters the following question: *'You have just voted for the municipal council, can you explain in your own words why you voted for that list?'*^{iv}. The answers were entered as literally as possible by the interviewers in the data collection application. However, converting the text parts (individual answers) into valid and reliable codes (categories of motives) requires a lot of time and energy (often the analytical downside of working with open questions in surveys). This pertains to a complete categorization and mutually exclusive assignment (without too many residual words or an excessive concentration in one or more codes) that includes the most important theories of voting behavior (Swyngedouw et al., 1996). Assigning concrete motives to scientifically useful categories can be done manually or with the help of computer software for text analysis. In this paper, we start with the latter technique. This takes the bilingual nature of our data into consideration. We analyze the Dutch and French data separately.

More specifically, we use *IRaMuTeQ* to find out more about voting motives and their distribution in the 2018 local elections. This is an R-based software package that allows researchers to analyze the content of text data. One of the main features of this package is an application of a non-directed text formatting algorithm originally developed by Max Reinert (1983; 1990). It is also used by the *Alceste* software package that owns it. The method assigns a non-predetermined number of classes representing co-occurring sets of words, the meaning of which must be interpreted by the researchers afterwards. The method has been used in recent years in various political science studies (Duchesne & Van Ingelgom, 2008; Bailey & Schonhardt-Bailey, 2008; Weale, Biquelet & Bara, 2012; Ratinaud &

Marchand, 2015; Sanders, Lisi & Schonhardt-Bailey, 2017). In this regard, the contribution of Defacqz et al. (2019) is similar to the approach chosen here as the authors also analyzed the answers to an open question posed to voters and candidates in the 2014 regional, federal and European elections in Belgium.

The core of the method is a descending hierarchical classification technique that is performed on a dichotomous matrix indicating the presence or absence of a term in a document. In our case, documents refer respectively to the answers of the Dutch- and French-speaking voters to the question about their voting motives. Terms pertain to words in lemma form. By using correspondence analysis, the matrix is iteratively divided into two sub-partitions at a time. The goal is to obtain homogeneous classes that are as different as possible. To grasp the substantive meaning of the resulting classes, both characteristic lemmas and the degree of association with certain contextual variables (such as the degree of voter satisfaction with democracy) are calculated using chi-squared values for each class. Finally, a comparable correspondence analysis is made to discover the (spatial) relationships between classes, used lemmas and/or contextual variables.

The text data on which we run the algorithm shows a number of characteristics that require some additional explanation. For example, most coded voter statements are relatively short with an average length of 4.6 words in Dutch and 5.7 in French. In addition, 648 Dutch and 368 French statements contain only one or two words. This observation is not surprising in itself because the respondents were quite spontaneously questioned when leaving the polling station without being able to think through their answer on beforehand. In addition, the answers were inserted with the aim of summarizing their content without any intended endeavor to reproduce them literally. However, because the Reinert algorithm relies on the co-occurrence of words, short texts limit the chance of this emerging.

In order to achieve meaningful results nevertheless, we have taken several steps. First, we excluded all statements containing fewer than three entries from the analysis. This left 1087 French and 1124 Dutch statements. Second, we carefully analyzed the outcome of the model to assess its validity. Third and to the extent possible, we used this outcome to manually classify the statements consisting out of fewer than three words the algorithm previously could not assign to make inferences about the distribution of the classes among the respondents. This method leads to five classes for each language group. Around 70% of the French statements with three entries or more (N = 769) and 88% of the Dutch (N = 990) could be classified by the algorithm. Supplemented with the manual classification and including the statements with fewer than three entries, 92% of all Dutch statements (N = 1635) and 91% of all French statements (N = 1324) could ultimately be classified.

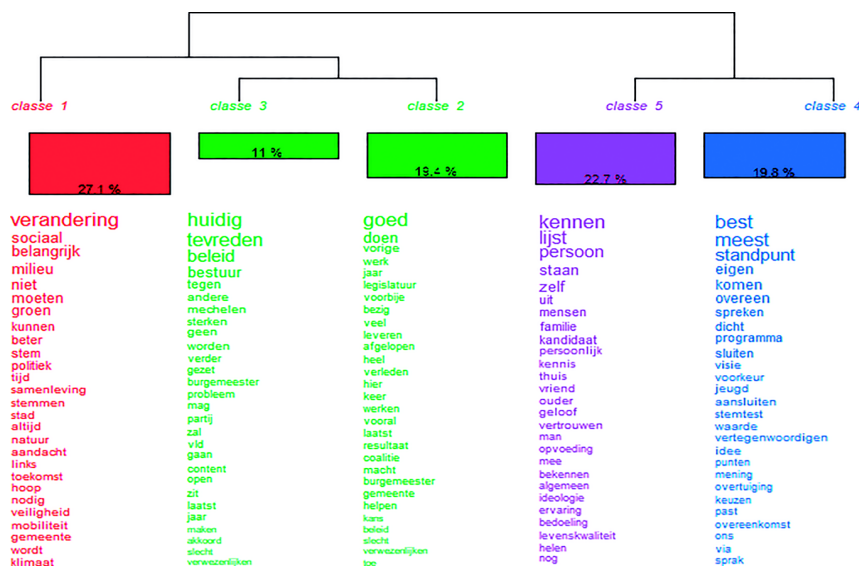
Presentation of the classes

The descending hierarchical classification of the statements produces five classes, both in Dutch and in French, even if their ranking (and thus their numbering) differs between the two language groups. We can establish for both groups that continuity based on satisfaction with the current situation is opposed to the will to change. We also find a juxtaposition between proximity and personal notoriety and substantive motivations based on the proposed program. We can illustrate this classification in two ways. First, by the dendrogram that represents the descending hierarchical format, i.e. a figure in

the form of a tree that clarifies the construction of the classes. Second, through the presentation of the correspondence analysis on a factorial map allowing to determine which terms form the basis of the design of the classes and how they relate to each other. We discuss these two visual representations in detail for each of the languages. Whilst maintaining them in their original formulation in the figures, we will exemplify them in English in this paper.

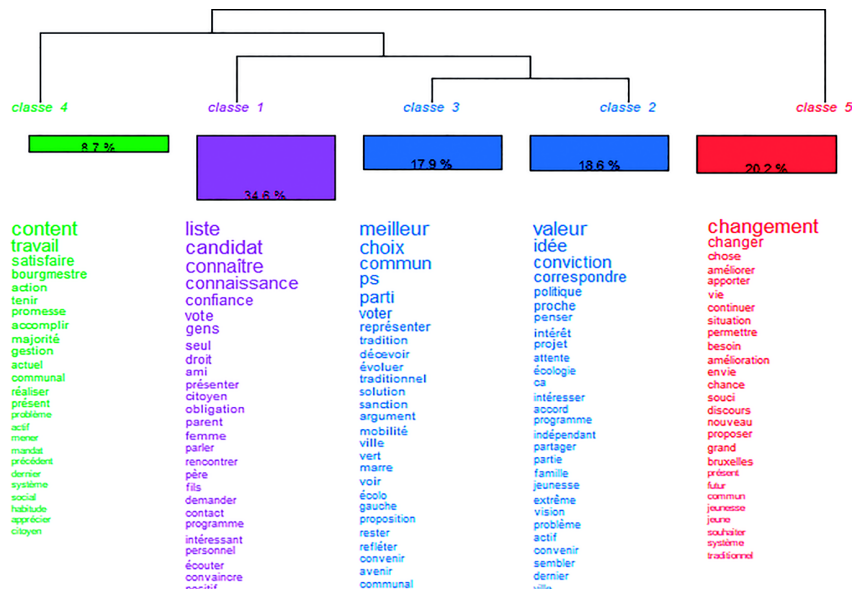
In Dutch, five classes of relatively equivalent size appear (from 11% to 27%). As mentioned, each class represents a co-occurrence of terms in the statements. Figure 1 displays the related dendrogram. Below the classes, we can read a list of terms strongly associated with each of these (thus distinguishing one from the other). Class 1 is structured around changes in e.g. social affairs or the environment, illustrated by an excerpt from the response of a Dutch-speaking voter: '(...) *changes in mobility are needed*'. Classes 2 and 3 share a common trunk and conversely refer to satisfaction with the current situation, with Class 2 emphasizing the quality of the work done ('*because they are doing their job well over here*'). Class 4 in turn links with another dimension: that of the content, the program of the candidates and the parties. On the other hand, the motives of proximity and familiarity with certain candidates are grouped in class 5^v.

Figure 1. Descending hierarchical classification in *IRaMUTEQ* of statements in Dutch



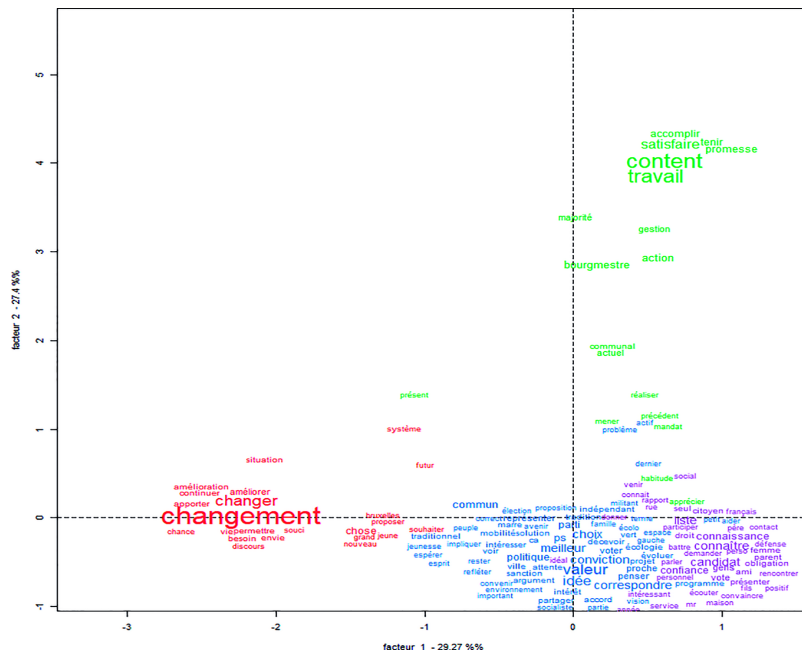
It is also revealing to look at the classes represented on a factorial map showing the words significantly associated with each of the classes. In figure 2 we thus find the five classes described, while at the same time we can observe the distance or the proximity between them. This highlights the difference between the classes 4 and 5 (on the left side of the factorial map) and the three other classes, as well as the contrast between class 4 (top left section) and 5 (bottom left section). This double distance confirms the clearly distinguished character of the motives that recur in both classes. On the one hand, those that are associated with the program (class 4). On the other hand, those that are linked with candidates, their notoriety and the closeness of the voter to them, personally or through family and friends (class 5). The other side of the factorial map shows that class 1 (top right section) is distinguished by the emphasis on change as opposed to classes 2 and 3 (bottom right section) which

Figure 3. Descending hierarchical classification in IRaMUTEQ of statements in French



The factorial map of the correspondence analysis (figure 4) demonstrates this even better. The word cloud highlights the distance between class 4 (the top right part) and all others. These are concentrated in the lower part of the factorial map. Class 5 on the left is related to the will to change. The middle classes 2 and 3 to the programmatic motives. In the lower right part (close to 2 and 3), class 1 can be found with terms like 'candidate' or related to 'knowing' and a little higher 'list'. Based on this presentation of the classes, the next stage of our analysis is to determine whether these refer to distinct voter profiles. In other words, we wonder whether the motives allow to delineate different groups of voters.

Figure 4. Word cloud generated by correspondence analysis in IRaMuTeQ of statements in French



Profile of voters within classes

In this section, we aim to determine the individual and contextual explanatory factors for voting motives. To this end, we developed so-called multinomial regression models. Their purpose is to determine which variables explain the observed differences between voting motives (i.e. the classes described above). Given the exploratory nature of our research into classes of local voting motives, we included explanatory variables generally considered to affect electoral behavior and investigated in earlier examinations with these data (Dandoy et al., 2020). Hence, we have no specific hypotheses as to how these impact on the likelihood of voters falling into one or the other class.

First, we consider the effect of variables pertaining to the sociodemographic profile of the voter: gender, age, education (all categorized as in the table). Second, we also probe into some of their key political attitudes (all 0-10 scales): left-right positioning, democratic satisfaction, importance attached to the local level, trust in the municipal majority and trust in the mayor. Third, electoral behavior refers to a vote for one of the parties of the outgoing majority. Fourth and in terms of context, urbanization and regions (both categorized) as well as the presence of political scandals during the legislature were included^{vii}. These models allow to test the effect of several factors at a time. Hence, to determine to what extent the social profile, political attitudes and electoral behavior of the individual voter as well as the municipal context explain differences in motives.

The results of these regressions are displayed in Table 1 for the Dutch (first three columns) and the French (last three columns) respondents. These results reflect the effect of the different variables by systematically comparing respondents with a voting motive referring to 1) change, 2) continuity or 3) personalization with respondents with such a motive based on 4) content and program. The latter group of respondents is thus the reference category (and effects should therefore be interpreted relatively vis-à-vis this category).

Table 1. Multinomial regression analyses of voting motives

	Dutch-speaking electorate			French-speaking electorate		
	Change	Continuity	Personalization	Change	Continuity	Personalization
	vs. Program	vs. Program	vs. Program	vs. Program	vs. Program	vs. Program
Gender: female	-0.28 (0.18)	-0.07 (0.18)	0.17 (0.16)	-0.30 (0.20)	-0.37 (0.26)	-0.23 (0.17)
<i>Age (ref. cat. = 45-54)</i>						
18-34	-0.15 (0.27)	-0.64** (0.27)	-0.30 (0.24)	-0.28 (0.29)	-0.38 (0.42)	-0.09 (0.24)
35-44	-0.07 (0.30)	-0.20 (0.30)	-0.50* (0.29)	-0.10 (0.33)	0.11 (0.44)	-0.12 (0.27)
55-64	-0.16 (0.30)	-0.28 (0.29)	-0.41 (0.28)	-0.16 (0.33)	0.61 (0.42)	-0.22 (0.28)
65+	-0.15 (0.31)	-0.28 (0.31)	-0.34 (0.29)	-0.32 (0.36)	0.54 (0.45)	-0.23 (0.30)
<i>Education (ref. cat: no/primary)</i>						
Lower secondary	-0.17 (0.56)	0.34 (0.62)	-0.55 (0.55)	0.06 (0.58)	0.57 (0.89)	0.32 (0.55)
Higher secondary	-0.38	0.20	-0.33	-0.18	-0.26	0.11

	(0.49)	(0.55)	(0.47)	(0.52)	(0.84)	(0.50)
Higher non-university	-0.40	0.19	-0.65	-0.55	-0.32	0.05
	(0.49)	(0.55)	(0.47)	(0.54)	(0.86)	(0.51)
University	-0.76	-0.09	-0.77	-0.59	-0.15	-0.58
	(0.50)	(0.56)	(0.48)	(0.54)	(0.85)	(0.52)
Left-right positioning	-0.03	0.03	0.003	0.07*	0.02	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)
Democratic satisfaction	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Importance municipal level	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Trust in local governing majority	-0.06	0.16**	0.11*	0.01	0.06	-0.03
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.06)
Trust in mayor	0.02	0.04	-0.07	-0.01	0.01	-0.01
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Vote for party of outgoing majority	-0.35*	1.00***	0.36**	-1.03***	1.91***	0.19
	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.40)	(0.18)
<i>Degree of urbanization (ref. cat. = rural)</i>						
Towns/suburbs	-0.28	-0.87**	-0.62*	-0.31	-0.79*	-0.29
	(0.41)	(0.36)	(0.34)	(0.30)	(0.41)	(0.24)
Cities	-0.29	-0.38	-1.52***	0.13	0.63	-0.54*
	(0.47)	(0.44)	(0.45)	(0.34)	(0.49)	(0.31)
<i>Region (ref. cat. = Flemish)</i>						
Walloon	5.43	-0.74	-1.89	1.28	12.41***	0.95
	(14.05)	(1.77)	(2.19)	(0.81)	(0.39)	(0.62)
Brussels	0.78	-1.10	1.20*	0.32	11.32***	0.82
	(0.65)	(1.14)	(0.70)	(0.86)	(0.47)	(0.67)
Political scandal	-0.13	-0.36	-0.28	-0.37	-1.07***	-0.50***
	(0.29)	(0.30)	(0.29)	(0.24)	(0.35)	(0.19)
Constant	0.82	-1.35*	0.76	-0.82	-15.07***	-0.54
	(0.73)	(0.78)	(0.69)	(1.09)	(0.73)	(0.90)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,021.23	3,021.23	3,021.23	2,165.14	2,165.14	2,165.14

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

Among the Dutch speakers, significant effects for social profile can only be found in certain age categories (the youngest voters are less inclined to vote out of continuity motives, the second but youngest to personalization motives). Similarly, only trust in the local majority appears to be significant attitude. More trust goes hand in hand with continuity and personalization as voting motives. Electoral behavior matters more often. A vote for one of the parties of the outgoing majority is more often explained in terms of continuity and personalization and less by a desire for change. Urbanization entails less continuity and/or personalization (compare towns/suburbs with cities). In Brussels, personalization is more likely as a voting motive (which can probably be linked to the smaller Dutch-speaking community).

For the French speakers, significant effects only appear from political attitudes onwards and even there just for one: the more right-wing, the more likely change as a motive. A vote for one of the parties of the outgoing majority shows a desire for change less likely and one for continuity more likely. In turn, the latter is less likely in towns or suburbs whilst personalization is less of a voting motive for

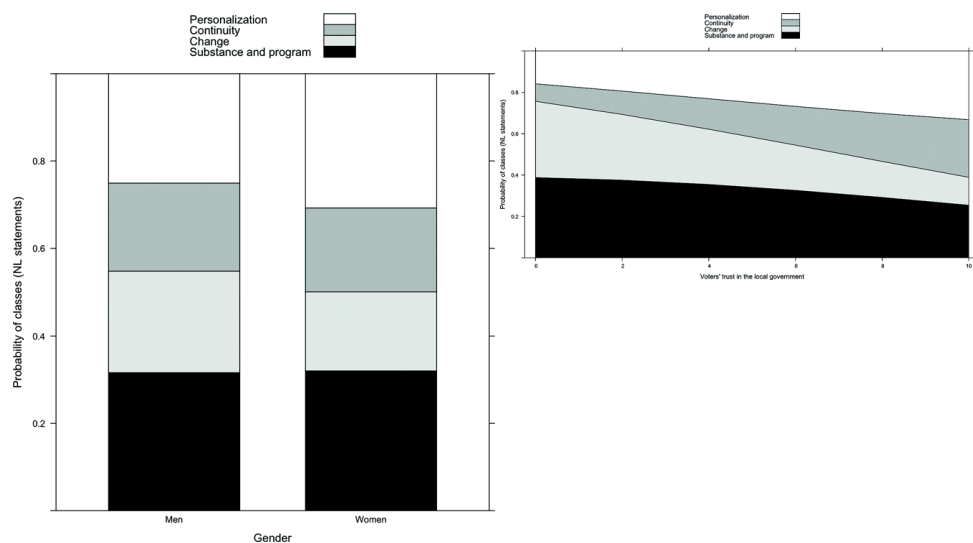
respondents in cities. French speakers in Wallonia and Brussels (the two regions where they are predominantly living) more often explain their vote in terms of continuity^{viii}. The presence of a political scandal in turn decreases the likelihood of continuity and personalization as a voting motive.

The downside of this method is that an intuitive reading of the results based on the regression table is less straightforward. That is why we also made histograms per independent variable that show the probability of finding the respective voting motive (all other things being equal). In discussing the subsequent results, only the variables that have a statistically significant effect on the type of motive will be discussed. As can be noted, these are not necessarily the same as in the regression table. That is because in these histograms, the effect of a designated variable is displayed in all categories of voting motives (and not taking one as a reference).

For the justifications of the Dutch-speaking voters, we find significant effects for one sociodemographic variable (gender), one attitudinal and behavioral (trust in the local governing majority and a vote for a party of the outgoing majority) and one related to the municipal context (the degree of urbanization). Regarding the French-speaking voters, we discern effect for one sociodemographic variable (the level of education) as well as for the factor related to the voting behavior (a vote for a party of the outgoing majority). For the remaining, it concerns differences related to the municipal context (the presence of a political scandal and variation between French-speaking voters in Wallonia and Brussels).

Figure 5 depicts the effect of gender (left) and of trust in the local governing majority (right) for Dutch-speaking respondents. These figures should be read in the following way: a bar corresponds to a probability distribution for finding the four identified classes (white, light gray, dark gray and black) according to the variable studied. If one of the classes covers a tenth of the bar, this corresponds to a probability of 10% and so on for each class. To facilitate reading, the scale on the left of the figures shows the calibration points 0% (base of the bar), 20%, 40%, 60%, 80% and 100% (top of the bar).

Figure 5. Effect of sociodemographic profile (gender) and political attitudes (trust in the local governing majority) among Dutch speakers

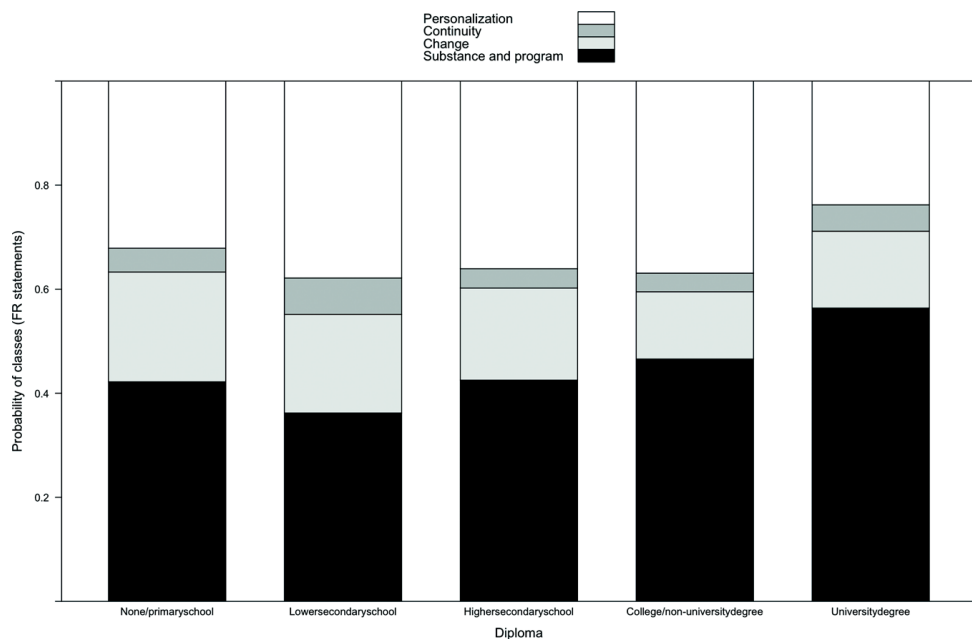


Concerning gender, we discern that personalization (knowledge and proximity of candidates – in white) comprises about 30% of the justifications for women and only around 25% for men. Conversely, referring to continuity is a bit more probable for men. Finally, we see that the classes related to content and program (in black) and change are almost perfectly the same for male and female respondents. In the Dutch responses, gender therefore plays a role in differences between voting motives, even though these are fairly limited.

The effects with regard to trust in the local governing majority are clearly more important (figure 5 on the right). On a scale from 0 to 10, we see that the probabilities of finding certain justifications are evolving quite clearly. The more voters trust the majority, the more they justify their choice in terms of continuity and personalization. The white and the dark gray surfaces take up more and more space as we move to the maximum value of the scale (10). Conversely, voters with weak trust are more likely to develop justifications in terms of change. It thus appears that trust plays an important role in determining voting motives among Dutch-speaking voters.

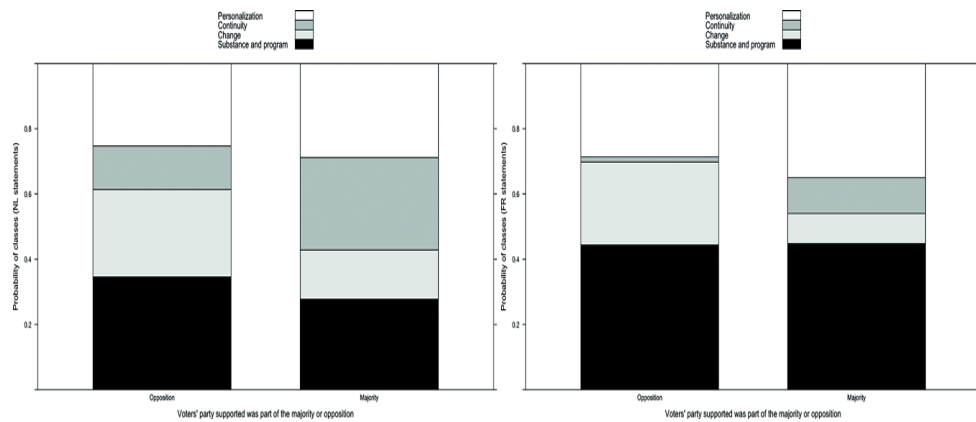
For the French-speaking respondents (Figure 6), only the level of education is a determining characteristic among the sociodemographic ones. The more educated the respondents, the more often they justify their votes in terms of content and program (in black) to the detriment of justifications in terms of personalization (in white).

Figure 6. Effect of sociodemographic profile (education) among French speakers



We subsequently analyze the effects of the electoral behavior of the respondents in figure 7, more specifically their vote for a party of the outgoing majority (or alternatively the opposition). It is interesting to note that the justification of the vote is strongly determined by this factor, both for the Dutch- and French-speaking respondents (although the specific effects vary between these two groups of voters).

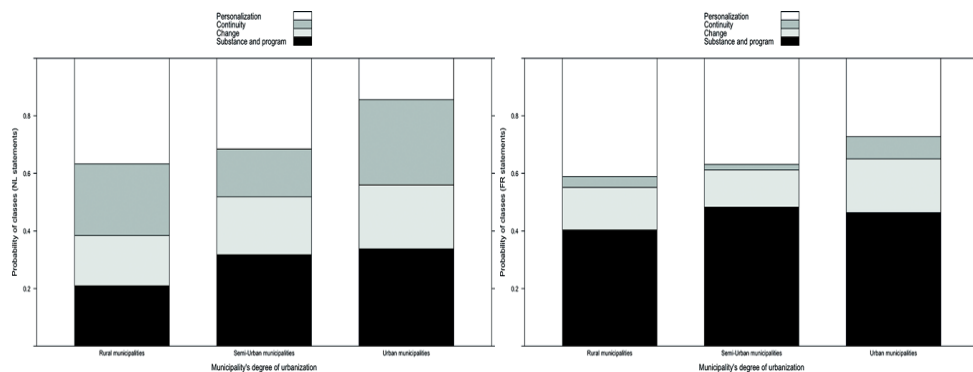
Figure 7. Effect of electoral behavior (vote for party outgoing local majority) among Dutch (left) and French (right) speakers



In both language groups, we logically see that voters who supported an opposition party justify their vote with a rationale of breakaway momentum and change. Conversely, the justification continuity is more important for those who voted for an outgoing majority party. In both groups, we also notice that the majority parties enjoy a strategic advantage in occupying powerful and visible positions: the argument of proximity and awareness of representatives as a motive for the vote increases. However, this effect is clearly more pronounced on the French-speaking side.

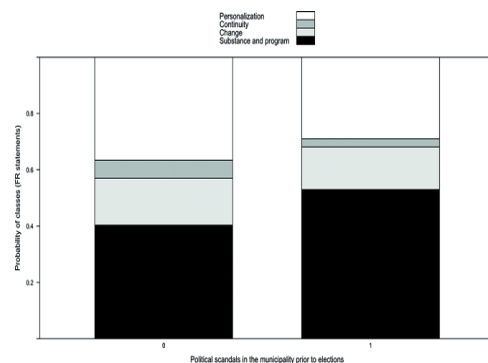
We also probe into the effect of the municipal context. To begin with, it is evidenced that the degree of urbanization (see figure 8) strongly determines electoral competition (Dandoy et al., 2013). More specifically, we know that candidates in rural areas can enjoy the effect of proximity and notoriety. Here, municipalities are smaller in size and can rely on a spirit of parochialism (Reuchamps et al., 2013; Jacquet et al., 2020)). The opposite likely holds in more urbanized areas (where the size of municipalities is larger whilst also housing a sociologically more diverse population). Here, the motives related to content and program are more present. This is an interesting finding and has also been found in other research regarding the electoral success of lists at the local level (Dodeigne et al., 2019).

Figure 8. Effect of municipal context (urbanization) among Dutch (left) and French (right) speakers



Finally, the past legislature was characterized by numerous political scandals, particularly important in the regions of Wallonia and Brussels, but also in Flanders. It was already established that these scandals had an impact on the election results of the parties involved (Close et al., 2020). This is also confirmed in the voting motives (figure 9). French-speaking respondents in municipalities that have experienced a scandal are more likely to justify their votes in terms of reversal and change as well as content and program to the detriment of continuity or proximity and familiarity.

Figure 9. Effect of municipal context (political scandals) among French speakers



Conclusion and discussion: local voters, local reasons

There is a large variety of specific voting motives, perhaps as many as there are voters. Still, understanding the general patterns in these motives is a crucial question in any electoral account. Too often, analysts tend to impose their own interpretation categories. That is why we asked an open-ended question in the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018*, following an alternative stream of previous electoral research. Starting from the statements of the respondents, this article has attempted to map out a cartography of voting motives. We have been able to regroup the wide variety of motives into some major categories that we find in both language communities. This classification was made using the *IRaMuTeQ* software and reflects similar sets of lexical fields. However, the researchers still have to give meaning to those classes. The other data from the questionnaire make it possible to better understand the five classes and, above all, the voters. Pertinent associations between the motivation of the voter and the characteristics of the voters can be discerned. This contradicts the idea of a random vote. Ultimately, we find a number of key dimensions.

A first major juxtaposition is continuity versus change. The main source therefore is found in the trust in and a vote for a party of the outgoing local majority (continuity) vis-à-vis the distrust in it and in the vote for an opposition party (change). The latter also holds for the presence of a political scandal in the municipality. This dimension appears stronger at the local level than earlier research has established at the national level (Abts, Swyngedouw & Meuleman, 2015). It also emphasizes that the map of motives of a substantial part of the electorate relies mainly on general considerations rather than on very specific provisions. Having trust (estimating that those in power generally do the right thing most of the time) then implies a sense or conviction that there is a need for continuity, while mistrust sparks the desire for change (votes for opposition parties). As can be expected, scandals deteriorate trust and thus also influence the vote. Nevertheless, also for these voters the elections serve as a key moment to hold their representatives to account. This approach may appear too binary

but is nuanced by the fact that participation in the governing majority, with the visibility that goes with it, also evokes the idea of proximity and notoriety. We also find this class more strongly among voters in rural municipalities. The one related to content and program is mainly found among voters with a higher education level as well as in more urbanized municipalities.

These elements confirm earlier research results, but with a different approach (Marien et al., 2015): the local elections only show a limited national dimension in the electoral motives, but mainly follow their own local dynamics. Even in a context of strong nationalization as the 2018 local contests, The Belgian local elections of 2018 are not explicitly of a second order in terms of voting motives. On the opposite, very little reference was made to punishing or rewarding national governments (federal or regional), positions on supralocal issues or national politicians. However, the layered character of Belgian politics prevents any too strict distinction or clear-cut interpretation. Numerous local politicians are also active in national politics and vice versa (Van de Voorde, 2019). It is not unlikely this affects the familiarity with or evaluation of certain candidates (such as MP-Mayors or other national figureheads looking for local anchorage). Since national political parties also dominate the local electoral arena, the reference to the program and its content may also go beyond strictly place-based assertions. Overall, the predominant conclusion of this article is that the local voters have their *local* reasons, even though they may differ and some are more general and others more specific.

From a comparative point of view, this research on Belgium already offers an internal comparison between the two main language groups. Within one political system, the regionalization allows interesting comparisons. Strikingly, the classes of motives that came out the analysis largely overlap between the language groups. Indeed, the same underlying dynamics are to be found and it is likely that comparative research in other countries would also reveal similar patterns. Whereas the classes of motives are shared, the specific variables that influence them differ. Yet, it can be observed that sociodemographic as well as behavioral variables matter, along with the municipal context. Above all, in both language groups, the vote for a party of the outgoing majority is a key variable. In this light, if local elections are not a replication of national elections, they definitely reflect real power politics.

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ⁱⁱ Authors synthesis of 16 withheld answering categories based on an original of 130 motive classifications.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this type of questions, respondents usually have to make out of the alternatives offered, rank them or indicate their importance on a given scale.

^{iv} This question was not posed to respondents who voted blanc or invalid in the mock-ballot.

^v Including the manually classified answers, the distribution becomes: 19.8% (class 1; change), 21.6% (class 2 and 3; continuity), 31.1% (class 4; content and program) and 27.6% (class 5; personalization).

^{vi} Including the manually classified answers, the distribution becomes: 32% (class 1; personalization), 41.5% (class 2 and 3; content and program), 8.8% (class 4; continuity) and 17.7% (class 5; change).

^{vii} In Belgium, a number political scandals related (but not confined) to the local level came about during the last legislature. These mainly concerned – allegedly – excessive and – occasionally – unjustified earnings and expenses by politicians and were often salient in the public debate. The identification of municipalities with such a scandal occurred in another earlier examination of the data (Close et al., 2020). The authors thereto conducted a print media analysis (via the database *Go Press Academic*) and discerned 9 municipalities (out of the 45 included in the sample) where such a scandal occurred.

^{viii} Although the effects appears strong, particularly these should be read with due caution and in their proper relative meaning (as opposed to opting for programmatic motives and the small minority French speakers included in our sample living in Flemish region).