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

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Abstract

Voting motives are one of the most studied but still much contested question in political science. There has been much less concern at the local level although two main tendencies can be discerned. Some consider local elections as second order political contests. Others emphasize place-bound patterns in voting motives. Still, more research beyond those theoretical presumptions is needed to empirically determine motives for the local vote. Therefore, this paper aims to address two questions: (RQ1) Which types of motives do voters attribute to their choice in local elections? (RQ2) What explains similarities and differences in RQ1? To answer these questions, we draw on the data of the Belgian Local Elections Study 2018 in which respondents were invited to answer an open-ended question about their voting motives for the local elections. Voting in local elections does not appear to be of second order: voters predominantly have general and specific place-bound reasons.

Zusammenfassung

Wahlgründe stellen eine der meist untersuchten, aber auch umstrittensten Fragen in der politikwissenschaftlichen Forschung dar. In Bezug auf die kommunale Ebene hat die Frage weit weniger Aufmerksamkeit erfahren, obgleich zwei Tendenzen unterschieden werden können: Auf der einen Seite werden kommunale Urnengänge als nachrangig (second-order elections) angesehen. Auf der anderen Seite wird auf ortsgebundene Wahlgründe

abgestellt. Dennoch ist weitere Forschung vonnöten, um ein systematischeres Verständnis lokaler Wahlgründe zu erreichen. In diesem Zusammenhang widmet sich dieser Aufsatz zwei Forschungsfragen: Erstens, welche Art von Begründungen geben Wählerinnen und Wähler an, um ihre Wahlentscheidungen zu erklären? Welche Faktoren erklären Unterschiede zwischen verschiedenen Typen angegebener Wahlgründen? Um diese Fragen zu beantworten, stützen wir uns auf die Belgian Local Election Study 2018, in deren Zusammenhang Teilnehmer in einer offenen Frage nach ihren Wahlgründen befragt wurden. Demnach erscheint die kommunale Stimmabgabe eher von ortsgebundenen Wahlgründen dominiert zu sein.

Résumé

Les motivations du vote constituent l'une des questions les plus étudiées mais toujours très contestées en science politique. La recherche s'est beaucoup moins intéressée au niveau local où l'on peut identifier deux tendances principales. Tandis que certains considèrent les élections locales comme des élections de second ordre, d'autres mettent l'accent sur les dynamiques locales pour comprendre les motivations du vote. Au-delà de ces postulats théoriques, des recherches sont nécessaires pour capturer empiriquement les motivations du vote local. Cet article vise à répondre à deux questions: (Q1) Quels types de motivations les électeurs attribuent-ils à leur vote lors des élections locales? (Q2) Qu'est-ce qui explique les similarités et les différences? Nous nous appuyons sur les données de la Belgian Local Elections Study 2018, dans laquelle les personnes interrogées étaient invitées à répondre à une question ouverte sur leurs motivations de vote aux élections locales. Le vote au niveau local ne semble pas être de second ordre: les électeurs ont majoritairement des raisons locales à la fois générales et spécifiques.

KEYWORDS

Belgium, Local politics, Open-ended questions, Voting motives

INTRODUCTION

Every political candidate or party dreams of knowing the motives for the electoral choices that voters make. Collecting these reasons is also key to understanding the results of

elections. Nevertheless, voting motives often appear inscrutable. Justifications can indeed 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 (Arzheimer & Evans, 2007; Heath, 2009). Contemporary assertions point to the interaction between predisposition and information affected by – contextual – factors with various time perspectives. Given this complex decisional environment, attention should be given to how voters explain their own electoral choice. This also refers to the subjective perception and expression of the vote. For long, scholarship has shown this is a mixture of knowledge and judgement, attitude and conviction, perception and intuition (Campbell et al., 1964: 15). Some voting patterns are general and deeply engrained, others focus on specific events preceding the elections. At least, these are the voting motives often described for national elections (LeDuc & Niemi, 2014; Fisher et al., 2018; Suhay et al., 2020).

There has been much less concern with voting motives at the local level, as the means to scrutinize them are less readily available (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). Nonetheless, three main theoretical stances are generally put forward to explain local voting behavior. The first one considers local elections as second order national elections. In this line of thinking, voters mainly hold national motives. By contrast, the second one emphasizes place-bound patterns and dynamics in local voting motives. The third one combines the former two denoting local elections and voting as the second tier. However, more empirical research beyond those presumptions is needed to capture actual motives for the local vote. Moreover, existing insights are often limited to given answers to close-ended questions predetermining (the range of) local voting motives. This is why open-ended questions have sometimes been used. This approach lets voters reflect in their own words about their electoral choice. It thereby draws on the methodological advantages of using such open-ended questions to outline the heuristic grid voters use to make their choice. Therefore, this article aims to fill a gap by addressing two research questions through open-ended data collection and analysis: (RQ1) Which types of motives do voters attribute to their choice at local elections? (RQ2) What explains similarities and differences in the voting motives identified in RQ1?

By scrutinizing *local* voting motives via the voters' answers to *open-ended* questions, this research aims to be both substantially and methodologically novel. In this respect, the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018* (*BLES2018*) is particularly valuable (Dandoy et al., 2020). 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 more than 4000 individual voters. In this survey, respondents were invited to answer an open-ended question on their voting motives for the local elections (RQ1). The choice of Belgium as a research context is first and foremost due to the availability of qualitative data thanks to the *BLES2018*. The study, furthermore, allows to explore both individual (voters) as well as aggregate (municipalities) explanatory features (RQ2). Additionally, by answering RQ1 and RQ2, it offers a good case to explore 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 observers and actors expected a strong nationalization of the local elections. Yet, as we will see, the results indicate that national motives remained limited while local motives predominated, even in a context of – allegedly – nationalized local elections.

In order to finely grasp local voting motives and interpret them correctly, an appropriate conceptual and methodological framework is needed. Hence, this article first presents the lessons that can be drawn from extant research on voting behavior specifically at local elections. Against this background, we discuss the research design that is primarily inductive in a 'logic of discovery' in search of local voting motives. Yet, from the existing research on local vote choice, we also derive expectations in a 'logic of validation'. These will be tested via further statistical analysis shedding light from a different angle on pieces of evidence in the localization/

nationalization puzzle. We conclude that overall voters tend to be predominantly driven by local motives, in which aspects of local trust play a chief role.

VOTING MOTIVES AT LOCAL ELECTIONS

How voters decide on their electoral choice is a long-standing question in political science. The pioneers in the field established that voting motives were multiple and articulated rational, emotional, and experiential elements (Campbell et al., 1964). 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 is made of objective and subjective dimensions (Swyngedouw, 2001). In order to capture such a map, open-ended questions have often been used to allow voters to reflect on their choice within their own frame of reference. These are then their electoral motives as usually described in national voter surveys (e.g. Klingenmann, 2012). Much less is known, however, about voting motives for the local level often deemed closest to the citizens. In what follows, we go deeper into these. We argue that existing research is predominantly theoretical and/or based on closed-ended questions. Additional insights are expected from more empirical open-ended work.

Voting motives in local elections can primarily be inferred from different stances on their nature and implications in theory. The literature denotes these elections as of lower rank, different kind, or a missing link (Gendźwiłł & Steyvers, 2021). All suggest a different answer to RQ1: Which types of motives do voters attribute to their choice at local elections? However, these stances should not be considered as segregated schools of thought. Rather, they point to different degrees of nationalization of local elections and voting and what explains variation therein.

In the first instance, local elections are 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; Warshaw, 2019).

A second stance emphasizes 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; Warsaw, 2019). Subsequently, specific features of the municipality can explain voting behavior: the smaller the municipality, the more local lists (Jacquet et al., 2020); the larger socio-economic inequalities, the more national dynamics (Dodeigne et al., 2020b). Alternatively, in more urban settings, we may expect national parties and organized interests to mobilize on their programmatic positions (Oliver et al., 2012).

A third reading considers local voting as a missing link in the study of multilevel elections. The conception of local elections as second-tier elections and voting is a case in point (Kjær & Steyvers, 2019). This denomination combines the vertical integration of the local into the national political system ('*second*') with acknowledging horizontal variation in the place-bound patterns and dynamics of elections and voting ('*tier*'). Therefore, the stakes vary on a continuum between local and national whereas the exact position differs between individuals, localities and countries. Aggregate factors (e.g. municipal size or the scope of local authority, the degree of local party politicization and system nationalization or the mode of local democracy) but also individual features and attitudes of the local electorate might all affect what is at stake where and how. This ultimately influences why people choose and the motives expressed for the vote. Apart from soliciting for a more accurate cartography of voting motives, these assumptions evoke enquires into the explanation of similarities and differences therein between people and places, which leads to our RQ2: What explains similarities and differences in voting motives at local elections?

To date, scarce empirical evidence exists addressing these theoretical claims. This is the first gap this article aims to help fill. Few endeavors actually probe into the voting motives in local elections (as individual surveys on that level are rare anyway). Those that do are often based on answers to closed questions scrutinizing a limited set of given motives. This is the second gap addressed. Therein, many are concerned with local versus national considerations and how these affect a straight or a split vote in multiple levels of elections. They thus take the perceived importance of certain predefined voting motives as one of a larger set of explanatory features. In this respect, recent insights for Denmark and Sweden emphasize localized voting (Kjær, 2020; Lidström, 2021). Two thirds or more of all voters contemplate to some (or the full) extent about local candidates and issues when casting a local vote even if this might coincide with their national choice. Equally, splits might follow from national incentives (punishing those in government) or out of local impetus.

Earlier research in Belgium yields similar findings (Marien et al., 2015). Herein, self-explanations of voting for a particular party or candidate were manually categorized. The results indicate about 62% of all respondents explicitly referred to the local level: (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 seldomly 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. Determining motives (with local and national components) was thus mainly informative to understand interlevel voting. In this article, we not only seek to capture voting motives at local elections (RQ1) but also to bring this approach one step further in order to explain different types of motives (RQ2).

From the existing research, voters appear to be led by a political map with cognitive and affective directions. To capture it, RQ1 calls for an inductive approach in the logic of discovery by discerning the breadth of motives through a computer-assisted coding of voter reflections on the most recent local elections. This will yield several categories (classes) that can be summarized along overarching dimensions appealing to specific groups of voters and/or local contexts. We expect to find an opposition between *retrospective* motives and *prospective* motives. The former refers to some forms of evaluation of political actors or policies at the local level and/or at the national level. Trust should play a chief role in retrospective motives, and it could be directly linked with a desire of change or lack thereof. This links with the conception of local elections as more managerial than existential. Therein, such elections are considered as a referendum on the performance of the local incumbents (Oliver et al., 2012). The latter likely

taps on a person-based versus a program-based approach in the voting motives. It is prospective as it relates to whom – and why – is favored to act for a given polity.

While RQ1 is based on an inductive approach, RQ2 seeks to explain differences in the answer to RQ1 following a logic of validation. First, the general localization versus nationalization of voting motives is explored, linking these with potential correlates such as the perceived importance of, interest and trust in (actors at) the different levels. Second, more specific voting motives (i.e. classes) will be explained. The existing research does not account for these voting motives yet. However, we can derive expectations from previous research on what explains the eventual vote choice (Hajnal & Trounstine, 2014; Harris et al., 2016; Dandoy et al., 2020). Here, both individual-level and municipality-level variables should play a role. These can be linked to the tentative classes suggested above.

At the individual level, age and education may matter: younger people tend to be more prone to change and voters with higher education likely emphasize the program of the candidate over their personality or proximity. To these sociodemographic features, we add attitudes. First, the left–right self-positioning of the voter. The choice for the extremes of the ideological spectrum are likely to indicate programmatic motives (those at the fringes are more policy-driven) and the will to change (aspiring for radical alterations). By contrast, those at the center are likely to explain their vote by referring to persons and a desire for continuity. Second, the satisfaction with local democracy. Voters who are more satisfied probably declare a desire for continuity. Those who are less will prefer change. A third group of attitudinal factors will consist of the variables explored above having a significant effect on the general localization versus nationalization of the voting motives (at least in one of the language groups).

At the municipality level, we expect an opposition between the motives of rural and urban voters. Candidates in rural areas can enjoy the effect of proximity and notoriety. Here, municipalities are also smaller in size and can rely on a spirit of parochialism (Reuchamps et al., 2013; Jacquet et al., 2020). Larger municipalities experience more national and ideological dynamics. Between levels, trust could be a chief variable as it relies on both an assessment of individual actors and of one's municipality, especially if there have been political scandals (Close et al., 2020). We will also include a number of controls at both levels; at the individual level, the vote for a party of the outgoing majority or for a protest party, and at the municipal level, the region in which the locality is situated and a robustness check for potential municipal effects.

In order to capture these potential dynamics, the subsequent analyses will be performed on an original dataset collected in the specific research context of multilevel Belgium that we now outline.

RESEARCH CONTEXT, DATA AND METHODS

Research context: local elections in multilevel Belgium

Belgium has a two-tier local government system with 581 municipalities (the focus of this article) and 10 provinces. This 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 (Dodeigne, 2014). Intra-governmental relations are commonly termed collective. Only the municipal council is directly elected. The collegiate executive is 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 remained (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 (Bouhon & Reuchamps, 2018). 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), whereas in Flanders and Brussels, it is based 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, 2022).

With their longer cycle (i.e., six years vs. five years 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 et al., 2017). Apart from the regionalist and the radical right parties, all party families have Dutch- and French-speaking siblings (Baudewyns et al., 2015). 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. In all regions, non-national lists complement the local electoral offer (Dodeigne et al., 2020a).

Data: an open-ended question in a countrywide exit-poll

For the purpose of this article, we draw on the data of the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018* (*BLES2018*), which is a non-predictive exit-poll conducted on the day of the 2018 local elections. This paragraph describes it briefly; Online Appendix 1 presents the data in detail that can also be found in an edited volume (Dandoy et al., 2020). The exit-poll has been conducted in 45 purposely selected municipalities throughout the country. In each municipality, one or more polling stations were targeted (according to the number of inhabitants with a total of 114). There, a random selection of voters was invited to partake in a questionnaire and a mock-ballot. 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.

Next to typical close-ended questions as well as a mock ballot, we included an open-ended question to map out voting motives. The use of such questions remains debated in electoral research (Converse, 1984; Silber et al., 2020). Indeed, there are disadvantages to working with them. Open questions assume respondents with sufficient (language) skills to express their motives. There is a risk that voters give irrelevant information, let quickly accessible or plausible answers dominate, or overlook certain (unconscious) mental processes. The alleged motive might thus be a post-hoc rationalization and/or partially omit reasons the voter is not fully aware of. Interpretation by the interviewer may also play a role as well as wider coding issues (Swyngedouw et al., 1996; Swyngedouw et al., 2001).

At the same time, the approach has advantages when the aim is to determine the heuristic map voters use to make their choice. 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. A less guiding approach also allows highlighting new or remarkable reasons; this is particularly suited to explore voting motives in less chartered environments such as local elections (Lefevere, 2011, 2018).

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?*'.[1] Interviewers entered the answers as literally as possible 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 article, we start with the latter technique, also because this takes the bilingual nature of our data into consideration. As we will describe below, we indeed analyze the Dutch and French data separately.

Methods: from motives to classes

In order to analyze the large bulk of open-ended answers, we use *IRaMuTeQ* to find out more about voting motives and their distribution. 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) and implemented in as well as distributed via the proprietary *Alceste* software package. Similarly as *topic models* (e.g., Roberts et al., 2014), the technique can be counted to the class of unsupervised methods, i.e. researchers are not required to ex-ante define codes or train the algorithm on a subset of the data. It hence works in an inductive manner that fits the *logic of discovery* pursued in this article since the technique allows us to observe which classes of shared motivations emerge from the open questions in the absence of researcher-imposed categories on the respondent on the time of the survey.

In a nutshell, the method assigns a non-predetermined number of classes representing co-occurring sets of words, the meaning of which must be interpreted afterwards by the researchers. The method has been used in various political science applications in recent years (Duchesne & Van Ingelgom, 2008; Bailey & Schonhardt-Bailey, 2008; Weal et al., 2012; Ratinaud & Marchand, 2015; Sanders et al., 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-ended 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 provided to allow interpretations of 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

[1]This question was not posed to respondents who voted blanc or invalid in the mock-ballot.

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 their answer through 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. Hence, while – used on longer texts – the *Reinert algorithm* can potentially unveil more than one argument or theme from a sufficiently rich textual basis and be part of a more in-depth qualitative content analysis, we limit our use of the technique to produce an inductive, unbiased, and reliable text classification.

In order to achieve meaningful results, we have taken several steps. First, we excluded all statements containing fewer than three entries from the computational analysis. This left 1087 French and 1124 Dutch statements on which the *IRaMuTeQ* was performed. As will be discussed in the next section, these computational analyses produced the five distinct classes of voting motives that are the basis for our substantive analyses. In a second step, especially in the light of the limited length of the original statements, we carefully examined the outcome of the model in order to assess its validity. Third and if possible, we manually classified statements that the algorithm could not assign and those containing less than three entries, into the five classes previously produced by the algorithm to improve our inferences about the distribution of the classes among the respondents. Two of the co-authors performed this procedure. Especially for the bulk of very short statements, containing one or two entries, this exercise often came down to classify statements into classes to which the particular entry was strongly associated according to the computational analysis, such as for instance in the case of the one-word statement "change" (in French "changement", in Dutch "verandering"). In the remaining cases, we classified statements if the statement could be easily associated by a human reader to a class even without the choice of a particular vocabulary, e.g. by classifying the statement "fresh wind" (NL: "nieuwe wind") into the "change" class (see below). Comparing the agreement between coders on a subset of 100 statements, we reached a solid level of intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa of .8).

This method leads to five classes for each language group respectively. 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.

RQ1: FIVE CLASSES OF VOTING MOTIVES

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, using a 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 a 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 article.

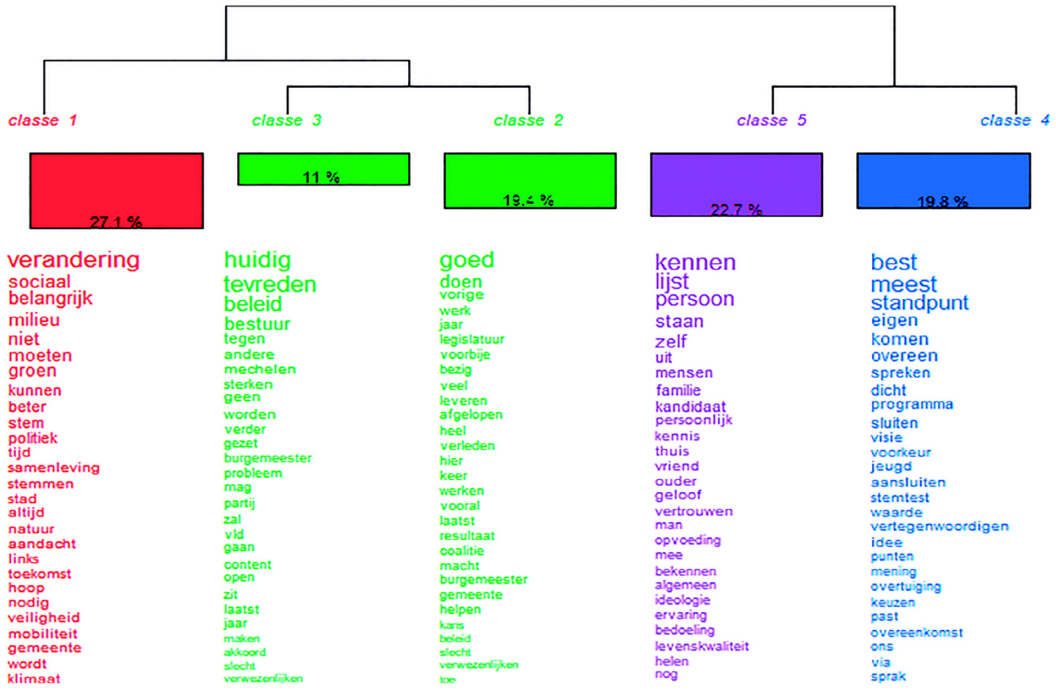

FIGURE 1 Descending hierarchical classification in *IRaMUTeQ* of statements in Dutch

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: 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.[2]

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 graphical representation (via the factorial map) of the same classes resulting from the correspondence analysis. This highlights the main difference between classes 4 and 5 (on the left side of the factorial map) and the three other classes. Respondents on the right side tend to stress motivations linked to (demands for) change (class 1, red) or satisfaction with the status quo (classes 2 and 3, green). They correspond to the evaluation of a given situation, the actors deemed accountable and their political work. On the left side of this main dimension, we find general statements that do not put forward evaluation judgments. On the one hand, we find statements that explicitly refer to the importance of voters' ideological or programmatic preferences (class 4, blue in the upper left). On the other hand, statements belonging to class 5 (purple, lower left) are

[2]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).

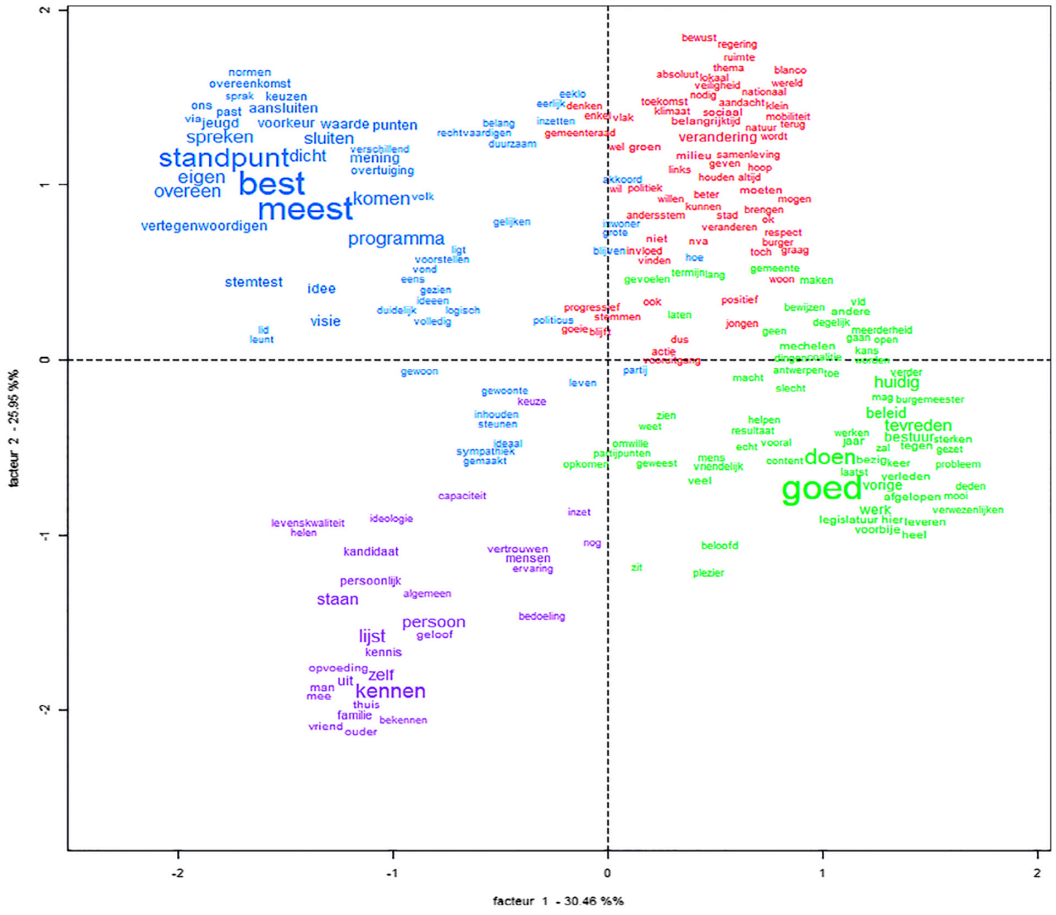

FIGURE 2 Word cloud generated by correspondence analysis in *IRaMuTeQ* of statements in Dutch

linked to candidates, their notoriety and the voters' closeness to them, personally or through family and friends (class 5).

If we concentrate on the second, vertical dimension, it is observable that, on the left side, the purple class (lower half) is clearly distinct from the blue one (upper half). Likewise, on the right side, the 'change' and the 'satisfaction' classes oppose each other on the vertical dimension, albeit less clearly. While the red and green classes might describe different sides of a same coin, i.e. positive and less positive evaluations, the opposition between the distinct positioning of the purple class points to the importance of personalization for a segment of voters. This classification will also allow us to make a comparison with the statements in French.

In the statements in French (Figure 3), class 5 stands out, based on terms referring to change and improvements to the current situation. This represents a fifth of the corpus (against one fourth in Dutch). The rest of the statements in French are divided into four other classes. Class 1 is the largest with about 35% of the statements making reference to the knowledge of lists and candidates and the notion of 'trust'. The following answer testifies to this: '*I know the candidate for which I voted personally and I trust him*'. As in Dutch, we find a juxtaposition between proximity and personal familiarity with candidates, on the one hand, and motives based on substantive and program elements (classes 2 and 3 in French), on the other hand. The latter two classes are less easy to distinguish. They belong to the same set, as can be seen in the dendrogram. However, we can distinguish between an emphasis on values and belief ('*list that*

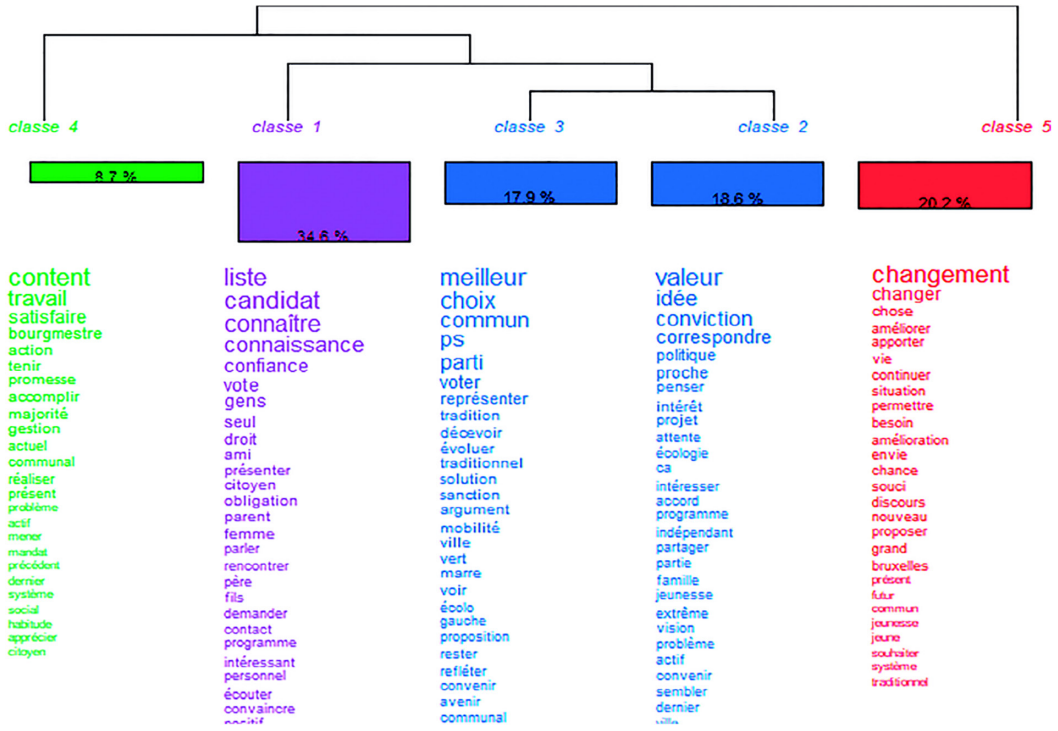

FIGURE 3 Descending hierarchical classification in *IRaMUTeQ* of statements in French

corresponds best with my values' – class 2) and a more factual dimension or connection to a party ('*it is best (not) to vote for the Socialist Party*' – class 3). The emphasis on satisfaction with the mayor's work and action (the French equivalent of '*satisfied*' is the first term that characterizes this class) distinguishes class 4 from classes 1, 2 and 3 but also from class 5.[3]

The factorial map of the correspondence analysis (Figure 4) demonstrates this even better. Two classes clearly stand out with respect to their distance to the others on the two dimensions. First, the word cloud highlights the distance, in particular on the vertical dimension, between class 4 (the top right part, green) and all others. Second, class 5 (red) that is related to the will to change can be found on a distinct position on the left of the horizontal dimension. In the center, we find classes 2 and 3 (blue) linked 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*'.

If we compare the graphical representation to the factorial map of the Dutch-speaking voters, we see first that the contrast between the programmatic (blue) and personalization (purple) classes is less structuring for the French-speaking respondents. Instead, the first dimension is driven by the distinction between those justifying their decision with 'change' against the others. On the vertical dimension it is the 'satisfied' that are markedly different from the rest. The two classes that distinguish themselves most markedly in these first two dimensions are those that imply some kind of positive (green) or negative (red) evaluation of the situation.

In sum, the answer to RQ1 comes with a number of classes summarized along two dimensions. The first is relatively general and juxtaposes continuity to change. It can be determined

[3]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).

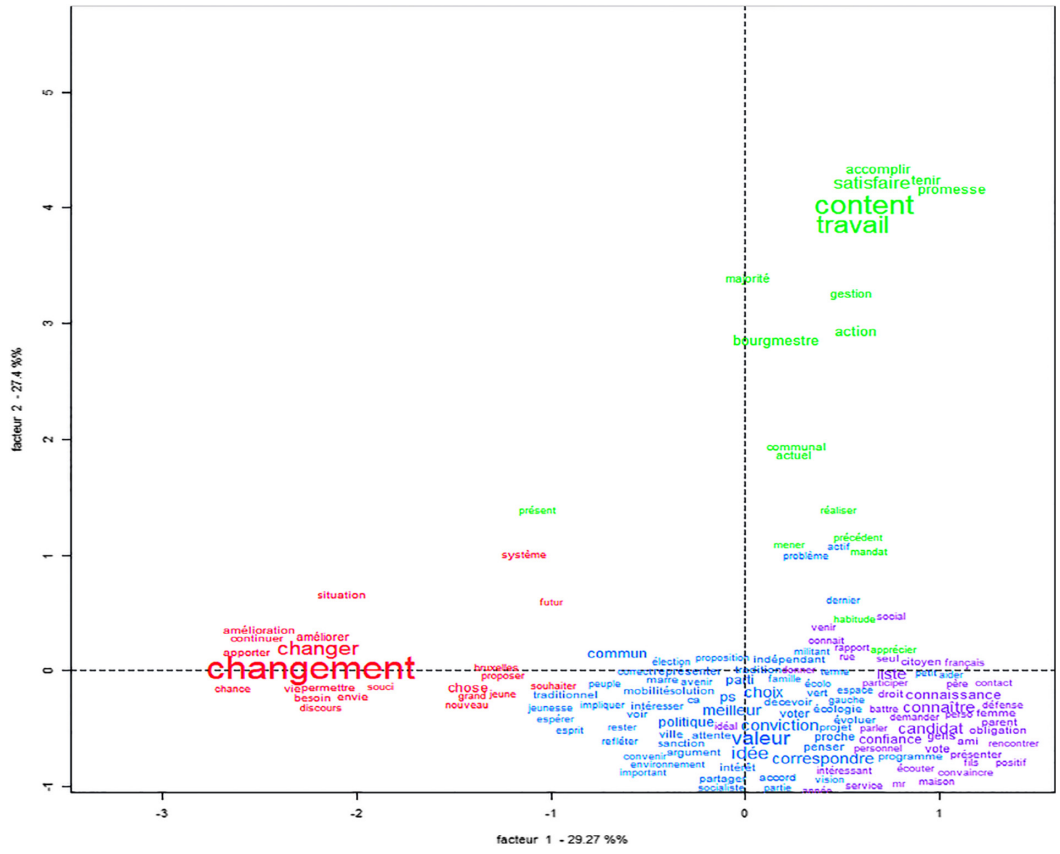

FIGURE 4 Word cloud generated by correspondence analysis in *IRaMuTeQ* of statements in French

as more retrospective evaluation, bringing into the picture elements of evaluation and/or satisfaction. The second is more specific and concerns personal notoriety and proximity vis-à-vis program and substance. It reflects a more prospective kind of justification. As expected, we have found a twofold dynamic of retrospective and prospective appraisal by the voters. We now to determine whether these motives refer to distinct voter profiles, i.e., whether they allow to delineate different groups of voters.

RQ2: DIFFERENT PROFILES BEHIND VOTING MOTIVES

Since the existing scholarship highlighted a debate regarding the localization and/or the nationalization of local elections (Dandoy et al., 2020), the first stage of our analysis of what is behind the voting motives is to look at the correlation between the classes discerned and some key variables: trust in mayors, local, regional and federal government; municipal importance in the vote; interest in local and national politics. The descriptive statistics show that, in both linguistic communities, the class 'change' is strongly associated with lower trust in the local governing majority and mayors, whereas it is the opposite for the class 'continuity'. Trust in the regional and federal governments do not present clear differences. There is a slightly greater national interest found for Dutch-speaking voters justifying their vote in terms of substance and program (classes 2 and 3). Also, we observe that voters justifying their vote through personalization lenses present lower level of interest, irrespective of the electoral arenas (local or

national). In other words, lower interest in politics converts into focusing on individuals rather than on parties or lists, as acknowledged in the personalization literature (e.g., Renwick & Pilet, 2016).

These first analyses reveal some general pieces of evidence that voters tend to be predominantly driven by local motives, but they need to be complemented by analyses that include variables considered to affect electoral behavior investigated in earlier examinations of these data (Dandoy et al., 2020). To this end, we developed multinomial regression models as the political phenomenon we seek to explain are the voters' classes of motives described above, i.e. nominal – and not ordered – categories (Table 1a and Table 1b). The models are constructed in four different steps. First, we consider the effect of two variables pertaining to the sociodemographic profile of the voter – education and age (both categorized as in the table) – as well as their left–right positioning. Second, we also probe into some of their other key political attitudes (all 0–10 scales): democratic satisfaction, importance attached to the local level, interest in national politics, trust in local governing majority and in mayor. Third, we scrutinize municipality and list characteristics. For the former, degree of urbanization and regions (both categorized) as well as the presence of political scandals during the legislature are included.[4] For the latter, we account for electoral behavior in two ways: vote for one of the parties of the outgoing majority, and vote for protest parties (radical left and radical right).[5] These models allow to test the effect of several factors at a time. The fourth model includes a municipality robustness checks to take into account that voters are nested in a given municipality. In summary:

Model 1: voters' education, age and left-right positioning

Model 2: Model 1 + variables on satisfaction with democracy, interest and trust in local and/or national politics

Model 3: Model 2 + variables on municipalities' and lists' variables

Model 4: Model 3 + municipality robustness checks to take into account voters nested in municipality

Overall, we observe that the sociodemographic variables are weak predicators (model 1) of voting justification. On the opposite, attitudinal variables seem to play a more decisive role as the effects observed in model 2 remain robust in model 3 (when including variables connected to the type of list supported as well as the type of municipality). In model 4, we observe the presence of almost all of the same effects (coefficient and standard errors remain very similar) even when controlling for the nested structure of our dataset. The only exceptions are – unsurprisingly – the variables related to municipalities' characteristics which become more systematically significant. However, model 4 presents a slightly inferior AIC score compared to model 3 in both linguistic communities while model 3 definitively presents a better goodness of fit than models 1 and 2. In the remainder of the article, we, therefore, only discuss the results for model 3.

[4]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.

[5]This is *Partij van de Arbeid* or *Parti du Travail de Belgique* (radical left) and *Vlaams Belang* or *Parti Populaire* (radical right).

TABLE 1A Multinomial regression analyses of voting motives (Dutch-speaking voters)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
Education (ref. cat: no/primary)												
Lower secondary	−0.47	0.14	−0.45	−0.22	0.27	−0.41	−0.26	0.33	−0.46	0.09	0.54	−0.32
	(0.49)	(0.47)	(0.46)	(0.59)	(0.63)	(0.58)	(0.60)	(0.64)	(0.59)	(0.62)	(0.66)	(0.61)
Higher secondary	−0.65	−0.19	−0.23	−0.38	0.10	−0.20	−0.41	0.23	−0.24	−0.17	0.36	−0.06
	(0.41)	(0.42)	(0.39)	(0.52)	(0.57)	(0.50)	(0.53)	(0.57)	(0.51)	(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.53)
Higher non-university	−0.47	−0.31	−0.55	−0.42	0.06	−0.45	−0.46	0.22	−0.46	−0.26	0.38	−0.31
	(0.41)	(0.42)	(0.39)	(0.52)	(0.57)	(0.50)	(0.53)	(0.58)	(0.52)	(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.53)
University	**−0.84****	−0.51	**−0.74***	−0.71	−0.11	−0.53	−0.72	0.01	−0.52	−0.57	0.17	−0.32
	(0.42)	(0.43)	(0.40)	(0.54)	(0.58)	(0.52)	(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.53)	(0.56)	(0.60)	(0.55)
Age (ref. cat. =45–54)												
18–34	−0.32	**−0.63*****	−0.28	−0.30	**−0.62****	−0.34	−0.29	**−0.64****	−0.30	−0.25	**−0.60****	−0.27
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.25)	(0.28)	(0.29)	(0.26)
35–44	−0.30	−0.33	**−0.53****	−0.24	−0.29	**−0.63****	−0.25	−0.25	**−0.56***	−0.15	−0.23	**−0.53***
	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.31)
55–64	−0.16	−0.31	−0.35	−0.13	−0.20	−0.34	−0.14	−0.24	−0.33	−0.15	−0.22	−0.26
	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.29)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.29)	(0.32)	(0.31)	(0.30)
65+	−0.38	−0.38	−0.32	−0.25	−0.35	−0.44	−0.25	−0.30	−0.35	−0.36	−0.36	−0.34
	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.32)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.32)	(0.32)	(0.30)	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.31)

(Continues)

TABLE 1A (Continued)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
Ideological voters (ref. cat: centrist voters)												
Left-wing ideological voters	−0.03	**−0.67****	**−0.54*****	0.05	**−0.78***	−0.35	0.04	**−0.69****	−0.17	0.03	**−0.82****	−0.16
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.23)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.23)	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.24)
Right-wing ideological voters	−0.22	**−0.31***	−0.22	−0.11	−0.31	−0.05	−0.08	**−0.40***	−0.04	−0.12	**−0.50****	−0.04
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.22)
Democratic satisfaction				0.04	0.01	0.06	0.04	−0.02	0.04	0.05	−0.003	0.03
				(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Importance municipal level				0.06	0.07	0.01	0.06	0.07	0.02	0.08	0.07	0.03
				(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
National interest				**−0.10****	**−0.07***	**−0.15*****	**−0.10*****	**−0.06**	**−0.14*****	**−0.11*****	**−0.06**	**−0.14*****
				(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Trust in local governing majority				−0.05	**0.16****	**0.14****	−0.05	**0.15***	**0.12***	−0.05	**0.15***	**0.13***
				(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Trust in mayor				−0.01	**0.09***	−0.06	0.01	0.03	**−0.09***	0.01	0.01	**−0.09***
				(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)

TABLE 1A (Continued)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
Degree of urbanization (ref. cat. = rural)												
Towns/suburbs							−0.31	**−0.86****	**−0.60***	**−8.96*****	**−9.68*****	**−10.50*****
							(0.41)	(0.37)	(0.35)	(0.84)	(0.70)	(0.60)
Cities							−0.31	−0.29	**−1.46*****	**−7.80*****	**−6.61*****	**−6.28*****
							(0.49)	(0.45)	(0.47)	(0.62)	(0.51)	(0.44)
Region: Wallonia and Brussels							−0.54	1.27	−1.05	0.67	**10.64*****	**8.51*****
							(0.68)	(1.15)	(0.71)	(0.49)	(0.55)	(0.44)
Political scandal							−0.19	−0.24	−0.27	**1.17*****	**−0.77****	**−3.06*****
							(0.30)	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.35)	(0.31)	(0.31)
Vote for party of outgoing majority							**−0.41****	**0.99*****	0.33*	**−0.51****	**0.99*****	**0.34***
							(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.19)
Protest parties							0.56	−0.59	−0.63	0.55	−0.59	−0.58
							(0.46)	(0.81)	(0.81)	(0.47)	(0.82)	(0.82)
Municipalities	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Constant	0.46	0.61	**0.81***	0.61	**−1.43***	0.78	1.48	−2.07	**2.48****	**6.17*****	**−4.65*****	0.42
	(0.45)	(0.45)	(0.42)	(0.71)	(0.78)	(0.68)	(1.06)	(1.44)	(1.04)	(0.81)	(0.72)	(0.65)
Number of observations	1 471			1 073			1 073			1 073		
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4 034.84			2 922,79			2 867,82			2 898,24		

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

TABLE 1B Multinomial regression analyses of voting motives (French-speaking voters)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
Education (ref. cat: no/primary)	−0.56	0.15	−0.01	−0.41	0.47	0.28	−0.09	0.38	0.28	−0.24	0.36	0.23
Lower secondary	(0.47)	(0.65)	(0.43)	(0.59)	(0.88)	(0.56)	(0.61)	(0.93)	(0.58)	(0.62)	(0.96)	(0.60)
	−0.56	−0.26	0.11	−0.45	−0.17	0.28	−0.13	−0.55	0.14	−0.18	−0.45	0.26
Higher secondary	(0.41)	(0.60)	(0.39)	(0.53)	(0.84)	(0.51)	(0.55)	(0.88)	(0.53)	(0.56)	(0.90)	(0.55)
	−0.81*	−0.27	0.02	**−0.92***	−0.14	0.17	−0.61	−0.55	−0.02	−0.70	−0.42	−0.05
Higher non-university	(0.43)	(0.61)	(0.40)	(0.55)	(0.84)	(0.52)	(0.57)	(0.89)	(0.54)	(0.58)	(0.91)	(0.56)
	−1.00**	−0.10	−0.51	**−1.05***	−0.08	−0.37	−0.61	−0.35	−0.50	−0.65	−0.14	−0.46
University	(0.43)	(0.61)	(0.41)	(0.55)	(0.84)	(0.53)	(0.58)	(0.89)	(0.55)	(0.60)	(0.92)	(0.57)
Age (ref. cat. =45–54)												
18–34	**−0.47***	**−0.78****	−0.12	−0.37	−0.49	−0.19	−0.33	−0.48	−0.14	−0.32	−0.47	−0.09
	(0.25)	(0.35)	(0.21)	(0.30)	(0.42)	(0.24)	(0.30)	(0.44)	(0.25)	(0.31)	(0.45)	(0.26)
35–44	−0.45	−0.23	−0.26	−0.10	0.24	−0.12	0.06	0.16	−0.03	0.08	0.35	−0.04
	(0.29)	(0.36)	(0.24)	(0.34)	(0.44)	(0.28)	(0.35)	(0.46)	(0.28)	(0.36)	(0.48)	(0.30)
55–64	−0.13	0.22	−0.19	−0.09	0.54	−0.28	−0.14	0.66	−0.28	−0.10	0.62	−0.23
	(0.28)	(0.35)	(0.25)	(0.33)	(0.42)	(0.28)	(0.34)	(0.44)	(0.29)	(0.35)	(0.46)	(0.30)
65+	**−0.55***	0.10	−0.32	−0.32	0.45	−0.27	−0.37	0.48	−0.25	−0.40	0.62	−0.21
	(0.32)	(0.38)	(0.27)	(0.37)	(0.45)	(0.30)	(0.38)	(0.47)	(0.31)	(0.40)	(0.50)	(0.33)
Ideological voters (ref. cat: centrist voters)												
Left-wing ideological voters	**−0.35***	−0.25	**−0.53*****	−0.15	0.01	**−0.53*****	−0.17	0.07	**−0.50****	−0.23	−0.05	**−0.43****

TABLE 1B (Continued)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
	(0.20)	(0.27)	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.32)	(0.19)	(0.25)	(0.34)	(0.20)	(0.26)	(0.35)	(0.21)
Right-wing ideological voters	−0.04	0.06	−0.26	0.03	0.35	−0.27	0.12	0.29	−0.35	0.07	0.05	−0.39
	(0.22)	(0.29)	(0.18)	(0.27)	(0.34)	(0.22)	(0.28)	(0.36)	(0.23)	(0.29)	(0.38)	(0.24)
Democratic satisfaction				−0.01	0.09	0.07	0.01	0.09	0.05	0.002	0.13	0.04
				(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Importance municipal level				−0.06	**−0.16****	−0.003	−0.06	**−0.17****	−0.003	−0.08	**−0.16****	−0.03
				(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.04)
National interest				−0.02	−0.05	**−0.07****	−0.02	−0.02	**−0.06***	−0.02	−0.04	−0.05
				(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Trust in local governing majority				0.03	0.13	−0.01	0.04	0.11	−0.01	0.06	0.07	0.01
				(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.07)
Trust in mayor				−0.08	0.11	−0.01	−0.03	−0.01	−0.03	−0.04	−0.003	−0.04
				(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Degree of urbanization (ref. cat. = rural)												
Towns/suburbs							−0.16	**−0.90****	−0.34	**−1.63*****	**−8.82*****	0.10
							(0.31)	(0.42)	(0.25)	(0.33)	(0.38)	(0.29)

(Continues)

TABLE 1B (Continued)

	Model 1			**Model 2**			**Model 3**			**Model 4**		
	Change vs. Program	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**	**Change vs. Program**	**Continuity vs. Program**	**Personal vs. Program**
Cities							0.39	0.97*	−0.31	**1.10*****	0.49	**−3.11*****
							(0.35)	(0.51)	(0.31)	(0.27)	(0.33)	(0.25)
Region: Wallonia and Brussels							**1.07*****	**1.47*****	0.38	**3.41*****	**3.75*****	**−2.71*****
							(0.33)	(0.49)	(0.28)	(0.33)	(0.36)	(0.32)
Political scandal							−0.34	**−1.22*****	**−0.52*****	−0.29	**−1.66*****	**−0.87*****
							(0.25)	(0.38)	(0.19)	(0.22)	(0.29)	(0.19)
Vote for party of outgoing majority							**−1.14*****	**1.52*****	−0.04	**−1.07*****	**1.41*****	−0.14
							(0.25)	(0.42)	(0.19)	(0.27)	(0.44)	(0.21)
Protest parties							−0.18	−1.37	**−1.34*****	−0.08	−1.70	**−1.25*****
							(0.30)	(1.09)	(0.37)	(0.32)	(1.11)	(0.38)
Municipalities	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Constant	0.22	**−1.18***	0.20	0.85	**−2.22****	0.25	−0.16	**−2.86****	0.86	**−1.94*****	**−3.33*****	**5.60*****
	(0.44)	(0.63)	(0.42)	(0.67)	(1.01)	(0.63)	(0.82)	(1.22)	(0.75)	(0.61)	(0.83)	(0.59)
Number of observations	1154			850			850			850		
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2 856,14			2 124,35			2 031,91			2 054,26		

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

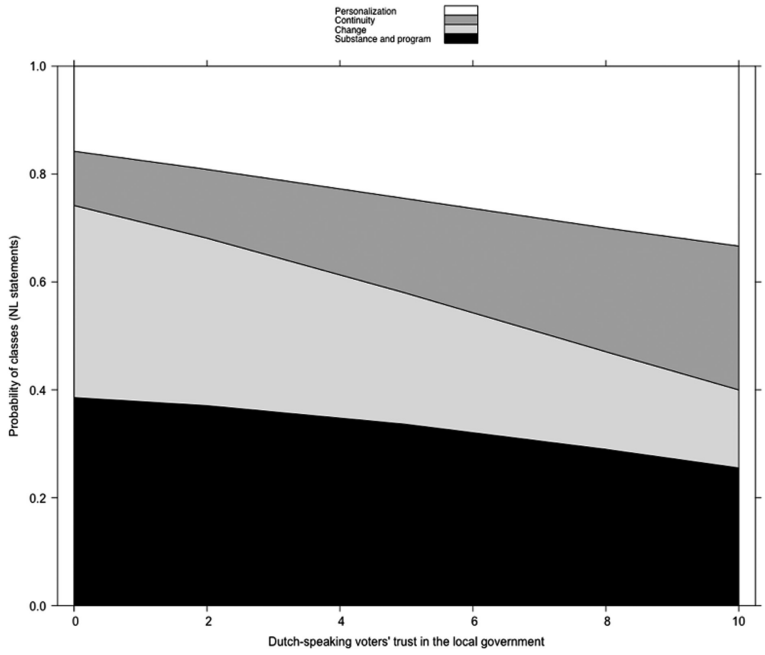

FIGURE 5 Effect of trust in the local governing majority among Dutch speakers

The results of these regressions are displayed in Table 1a for the Dutch-speaking voters (first three columns) and in Table 1b for the French-speaking voters (last three columns). The results reflect the effects of the different variables by systematically comparing respondents with a voting motive referring to (1) change, (2) continuity, or (3) personalization in comparison to the reference category, namely (4) content and program. Regression coefficients for the independent variables on the first three voting motives must, therefore, be interpreted relatively *vis-à-vis* this baseline category. Since the reading of the coefficients from multinomial regressions is less straightforward, we also provide figures of marginal effects per independent variable that show the probability of finding the respective voting motive (all other things being equal).

First, among the Dutch speakers (Table 1a), significant effects for social profiles can only be found in certain age categories: in comparison to middle age voters (45–64), the youngest voters (18–34) are less inclined to vote out of continuity motives while the second-youngest voters (35–44) are less driven by personalization motives. For the French speakers (Table 1b), this socio-demographic variable has no statistically significant effects in model 3.

Second, as for voters' political attitudes *vis-à-vis* local politics, trust in the local government has significant effects, but only for Dutch-speaking voters. Figure 5 depicts the marginal effect of trust in the local governing majority and should be read in the following way: a bar corresponds to a probability distribution for the four identified voting motives (white for 'personalization', light gray for 'change', dark gray for 'continuity', and black for 'program'). If one of the classes covers a tenth of the bar, this corresponds to a probability of 10%, and so on for each voting motive. 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).

As Figure 5 shows, greater trust in the local government substantially increases the probability of 'continuity' and 'personalization' as voting motives. On the trust scale from 0 to 10, probabilities of finding certain voting justifications evolve quite clearly. Hence, Dutch-speaking voters with the strongest trust in their local government are less likely to justify a vote by 'change' motives (those with scores of 8 and above on the 0–10 trust scale have a probability

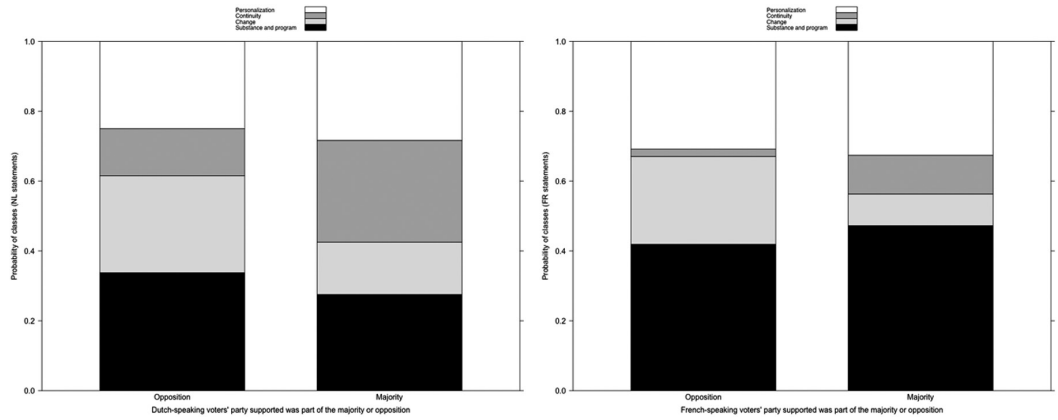

FIGURE 6 Effect of vote for a party list part of the incumbent local majority for Dutch (left) and French (right) speakers

between 14 and 18 percent to declare change as a voting motive). Inversely, those with the lowest trust are substantially more likely to justify their vote by a motive of 'changes' (scores of 2 and below on the 0–10 trust scale present 31–36 percent of probability).

Third, voters' ideological positioning matters – albeit differently in both linguistic groups. In Flanders, the overall variable is marginally significant ($p = 0.11$) and only specific voting motives are fully significant ($p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.10$). In comparison to centrist voters,[6] ideological voters present a slightly higher probability of declaring a voting justification in terms of substance and program whereas centrist voters are more likely to advance continuity voting statements. French-speaking voters present, however, a distinctive stronger pattern. Whereas centrist voters have about the same probability to declare personalization and programmatic voting justifications (respectively 40 and 42 percent of probabilities), left-wing ideological voters present a significant difference of 21 points of probability between programmatic statements (50 percent) that predominate over personalization statements (29 percent). Although the gap is smaller (14 points of probability) and only marginally significant, the same pattern is observed for right-wing ideological voters: programmatic (45 percent) are more likely to be put forward than personalization justifications (31 percent).

Fourth, voting motives significantly differ according to the type of list supported, even though the effects vary between the Dutch- and French-speaking respondents. Voting for a party list that was part of the incumbent majority is strongly associated with voting motives in terms of 'continuity'; whereas voters having supported a list from the opposition presents a greater probability to justify their vote by a rationale of breakaway momentum for 'change'. Hence, Figure 6 shows that French-speaking voters supporting a list of the opposition are five times less likely to justify their vote in terms 'continuity' and almost three times more likely to indicate a motive of 'change'. Difference in probabilities for Dutch-speaking voters are about twice as big for these two categories. While these results might be tautological to some readers, they remain of paramount importance as they clearly indicate that the *local* political dynamics are key driving determinants of local voting behavior.

[6]Amongst Dutch-speaking voters, centrist voters (with a score of 5 on the 0–10 self-positioning left–right scale) represent 29,8 percent of all voters; left-wing ideological voters (score of 0–4) represent 28,2 percent; and right-wing ideological voters (score of 6–10) represent 41,2 percent. Amongst French-speaking voters, centrist voters (with a score of 5 on the 0–10 self-positioning left–right scale) represent 34,5 percent of all voters; left-wing ideological voters (score of 0–4) represent 38,6 percent and right-wing ideological voters (score of 6–10) represent 26,9 percent.

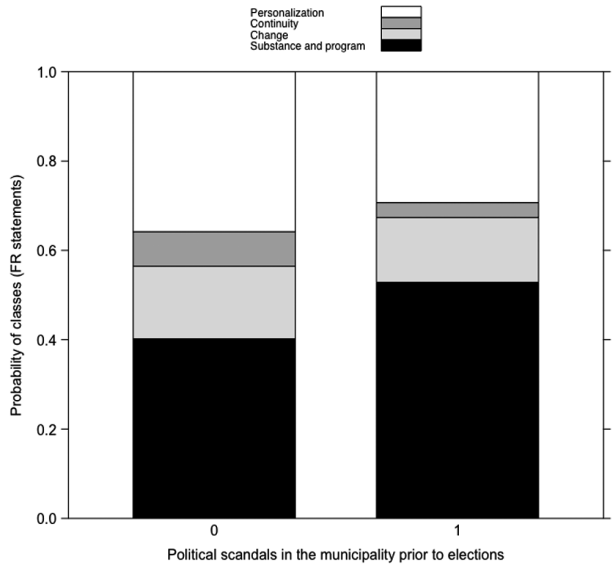

FIGURE 7 Effect of municipal context (political scandals) among French speakers

Another indication of this local importance is the presence of local scandals in a municipality.

The 2012–2018 local legislatures were 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 7). 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. In this context, we furthermore control voters' support for a protest party. The latter makes a substantive difference in terms of support driven by personalization justification (at the expense of change and content-wise evolution sought by voters). These parties' candidates are often less anchored at the local level while putting forward key radical items in their program (migration stops, redistribution of wealth, etc.) that seem to appeal to the voters (albeit only for French-speaking voters).

Fifth, our results validate the effect of the municipal context where the degree of urbanization strongly determines electoral competition (Dandoy et al., 2013). Flemish rural municipal environment seems to favor a 'friends-and-neighbor' approach reflected in personalized voting motives. On the opposite, in more urbanized areas, where the municipalities are larger and sociologically more diverse, voting motives related to content and program are more frequent. Hence, Figure 8 shows that Dutch-speaking voters in cities are half as likely to be driven by personal voting motives in comparison to their counter-part in rural municipalities (respectively, 14 and 36 percent of probability). On the opposite, the latter are substantially less likely to be guided by programmatic cues in comparison to urban voters (respectively, 20 and 34 percent of probability). Although differences are more limited, we also observe similar effects amongst French-speaking voters. This is an important finding that matches previous research regarding the electoral success of lists at the local level (Dodeigne et al., 2020b).

Finally, the multivariate regression confirms that local electoral behavior is not merely driven by local factors, but also fueled by some national considerations. On Figure 9, we observe that Dutch-speaking voters declaring the lowest interest in national politics have a probability of 18 and 39 percent respectively to justify their vote in terms of 'programmatic' and

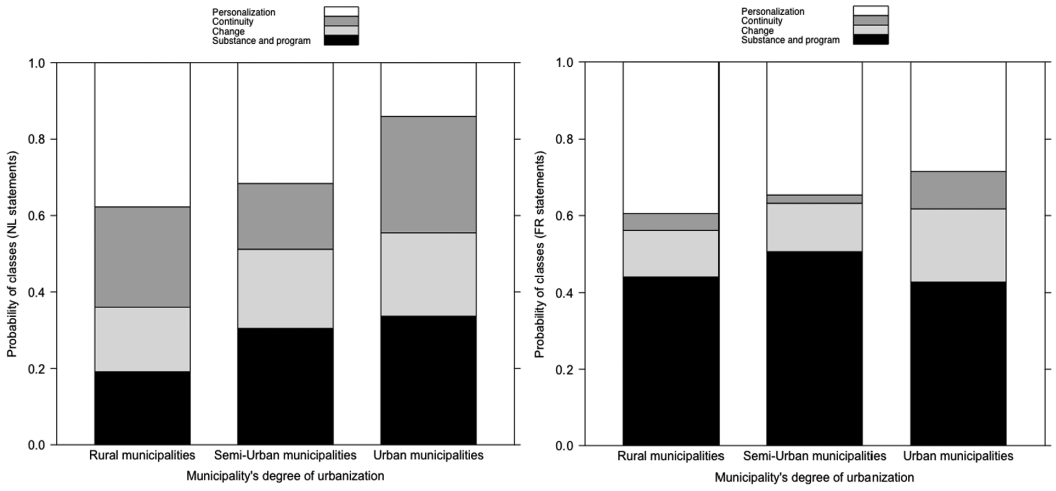

FIGURE 8 Effect of urbanization for Dutch (left) and French (right) speakers

'personal' voting motives (i.e., voters with scores of 2 and below on the 0–10 scale of national interest). These percentages change substantially as voters' interest in national politics increases: they are almost reversed in a mirror perspective for voters with the greatest interest in national politics. These voters have a probability of respectively 41 and 22 percent to justify their vote in terms of 'programmatic' and 'personal' voting motives (voters with scores of 8 and above on the 0–10 scale of national interest). In the meantime, the motives continuity and change – closely connected to local voting considerations as discussed above – remain largely insensitive to the voters' interest in national politics. Likewise, albeit with lower effects, French-speaking respondents with a greater interest in national politics are associated with greater probability of justifying their votes in terms of programmatic than personalization (which is more often associated with voters having lower interest in national politics).

Overall, these results thus confirm that national politics do not predominate over local considerations amongst voters. Both should be understood as two faces of the same electoral coin rather than as a divide: they are distinct motivations shaping electoral behavior for distinct profiles of voters. Dutch- and French-speaking voters share similar determinants of voting motives – interest in national politics, support for lists from the incumbent majority, and the degree of urbanization of the municipality – albeit not always with the same intensity. In addition, Dutch-speaking voters' motivations are also driven by their trust in the local government while the presence of scandal in a municipality frames French-speaking voters' choices.

CONCLUSION: LOCAL VOTERS, PATTERNED 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. This is true for the local level, where such motives remain largely understudied. Likewise, too often analysts tend to impose their own interpretation categories. Therefore, following an alternative stream of previous electoral research, we asked an open-ended question in the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018*. Starting from the statements of the respondents, this article has attempted to develop a cartography of local 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

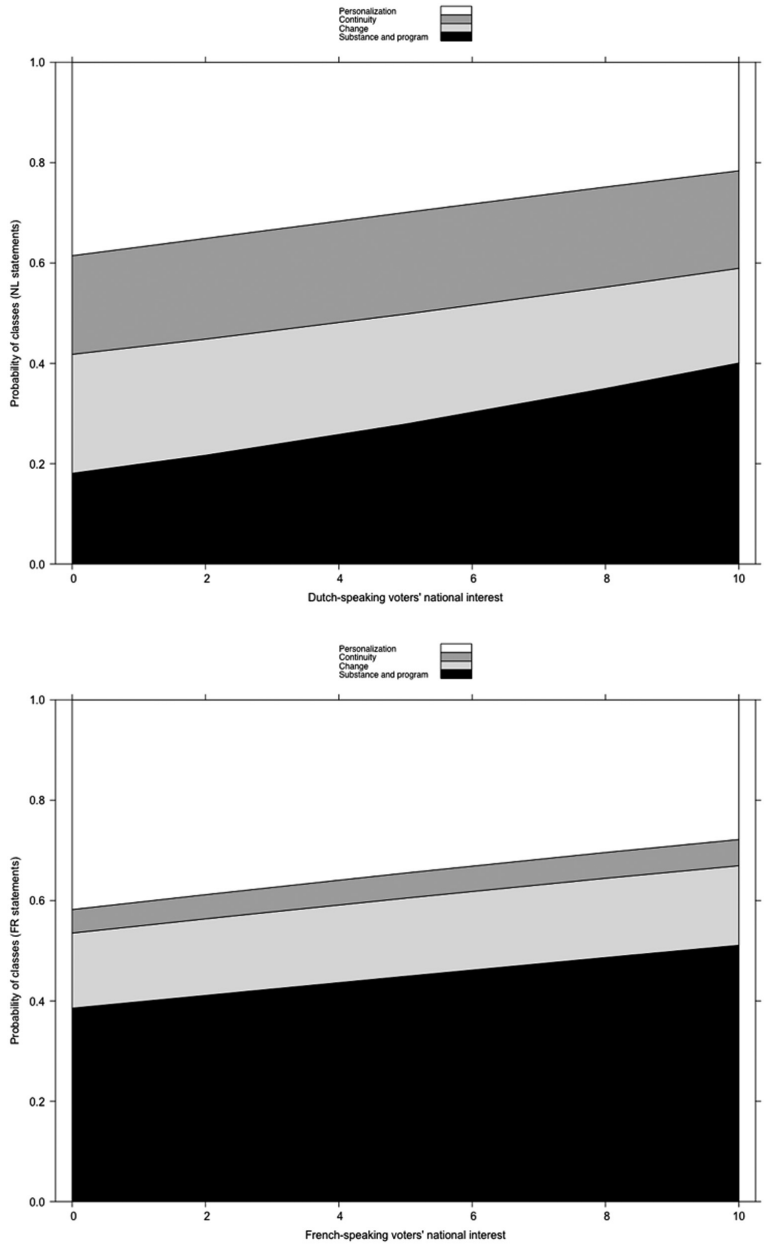

FIGURE 9 Effect of interest in national politics among Dutch (top) and French (bottom) speakers

sets of lexical fields. However, the researchers still have to give meaning to those classes (RQ1). The other data from the questionnaire make it possible to better understand the five classes and, above all, the voters. Pertinent associations between voting motives and characteristics of the voters can be discerned. Some voters are indeed more likely to hold some motives than others (RQ2). 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 a party of the outgoing local majority and the vote for it (continuity), vis-à-vis the distrust in it and 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. It confirms that for a substantial part of the voters, local elections are to a certain extent more managerial than existential. Such elections are considered as a retrospective referendum on the performance of local incumbents. At the local level, voters are not guided by broad partisan or ideological visions but by their perception of how pertinently tasks are administered and where those in office stand on community-specific issues (Oliver et al., 2012). 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). Unsurprisingly, 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 other prospective one related to content and program is mainly found among voters with a higher education level as well as in more urbanized municipalities. The difference between rural and urban areas shows striking similarities with evidence from the US. In the former, personal connections with civic-minded politicians dominate. In the latter, national parties and organized interests mobilize key supporters around core positions (Oliver et al., 2012).

These elements confirm earlier research results, but with a different approach (Marien et al., 2015): local elections only show a limited national dimension in the stated electoral motives, but mainly follow local dynamics. Even in a context of strong nationalization, the Belgian local elections of 2018 are not explicitly of a second order in terms of proclaimed voting motives. As the explorative inspection of the raw statements suggests, very little explicit reference was made to punishing or rewarding national (federal or regional) governments, positions on supralocal issues, or national politicians. This is confirmed by some of the findings after the categorization. For continuity versus change, the correlational analysis demonstrated an association with *local* variables (such as trust in the mayor and/or the governing majority) as was also found in the regression. For persons versus program, the correlational evidence appeared less straightforward (and more interest-related). However (and apart from education), the effect of urbanization in the regression on these motives again emphasizes the importance of *place-bound* characteristics to explain them. In any case, 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). This likely 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 local voters have their *local* reasons, although they may differ and some are more general and others more specific. Further research could draw on these insights, for instance, by including the identified classes as independent variables to estimate vote switching between national and local levels or to explain voting for a (specific) national or a local list. This would help to corroborate the evidence on localization versus nationalization. From a more refined map, clearer directions can thus be derived. This applies to both voters and researchers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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