

Town and Country. A Politico-geographical Faultline?

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Commenting on the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012, the outgoing mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens (Sp.a), remarked that they reflected a geographical fault line: 'The outcome of these elections is the creation of two large blocs in Antwerp. A fairly progressive urban bloc that did well and won a majority of votes mainly within the ring road. And a less urban, conservative bloc that has a majority outside the ring road'.¹ His comment was probably made in the context of exploratory coalition discussions rather than as an objective analysis. But Janssens' observation also fits into a long academic tradition of attempting to relate election results to social geography. Since then, in response to these remarks, several more analyses of Antwerp have appeared. But can this process of bloc-formation which he observed in Antwerp also be applied more widely to the rest of Flanders? This article discusses the political geography of Flanders after the elections of 14 October 2012.

INTRODUCTION

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The local elections of 14 October 2012 provide a good opportunity to map out the electoral geography of Flanders. In Belgium, the local elections choose councils in 10 provinces, 589 municipalities and 9 Antwerp city districts. For electoral geographers, the municipalities are the most interesting level because in Flanders alone it involves 308 electoral constituencies.

The geographical and sociological diversity within Flanders can most clearly be seen when individual municipalities can be compared with each other. However, at the municipal level there are a number of obstacles to tracing their electoral geography.² The traditional 'Flemish' parties sometimes campaign under different names or as part of a cartel or prospective coalition. Furthermore, the popularity (or otherwise) of local politicians often cuts across national political trends.

Between the municipalities and the federal and Flemish regional levels, the Flemish parties also compete for votes at the rather neglected provincial level. Nevertheless, the provincial council elections provide a much better basis for comparing electoral performance with the federal and Flemish regional results. At the provincial level the electoral bonus of a popular burgomaster is removed and the traditional parties generally campaign under their own names and not as cartels. The provincial elections form a good indicator of underlying national trends.

Furthermore, a recent revision of Flemish electoral law introduced an important change in the way provincial results are published. With the Local and Provincial Electoral Decree of 8 July 2011, the Flemish government replaced the electoral district by the municipality as the unit for counting votes and announcing results. Ballot boxes no longer have to be transported to district headquarters after polling.³ The intention of the legislation was certainly to simplify the logistics, but the decree has unintentionally made the provincial elections extremely interesting from the perspective of electoral cartography. Provincial council elections now offer the best of both worlds: a result for each of the 308 Flemish municipalities and a 'national' electoral battle without the confusion of municipal cartels or local lists.

THE ELECTIONS OF 14 OCTOBER 2012

The local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 had the appearance of a mid-term election in the federal parliamentary term of 2010-2014. The political issues in these elections were closely linked to the unprecedented political situation which arose after the federal elections of June 2010. The 2010 elections not only caused an electoral earthquake in Flanders, where for the first time in living memory the three traditional political parties together failed to attract 50% of the vote, and the Flemish nationalist N-VA became far and away the largest political formation, but the time taken subsequently to create a governing federal coalition broke all records. It finally resulted in Di Rupo's 'traditional' three-part coalition of the main parties (but excluding N-VA), though how 'traditional' it really is could be open to doubt, considering that on the Flemish side the coalition no longer represents the majority.

After 2010 it was clear that the main issue would be the N-VA's ability to anchor itself at the local and provincial levels. Would the N-VA be able to match its historic achievement of 2010 or even move beyond it towards 40%? Whatever the outcome, their results would inevitably be interpreted as a judgement on the Di Rupo government.

The political forces which fought the elections of 2010 were again in action in October 2012, but with a few differences. The Flemish right-wing liberal party, LDD, decided not to field any candidates for the provincial elections. It objects in principle to the provincial level of administration, but the poor state of its party organisation and a shortage of political personnel in the constituencies doubtless also played a part in the decision. Incidentally, the LDD fights elections in only a handful of municipalities even though it has no objections in principle to towns and municipalities. In the province of Limburg the Socialists (Sp.a) and Greens formed an alliance in every constituency which makes a comparison with previous elections more difficult. Finally, in a number of federal electoral districts there were no provincial elections. The Brussels Capital Region, which is not part of any province, contains 8 of the 208 electoral districts. In the following comparison of results for the Flemish parties from the 2006 (provincial), 2010 (federal) and 2012 (provincial) elections the 8 Brussels districts have been ignored. In other words, Table 1 only refers to the results of the five Flemish provinces.

Table 1⁴

Party	2006	%	2010	%	2012	%
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	*	*	1 125 798	27,79%	1 167 677	28,54%
CD&V/(N-VA) (Christian Democrats with N-VA)	1 232 506	30,21%	699 856	17,28%	877 253	21,44%
Sp.a (Socialist)	785 830	19,26%	592 860	14,64%	472 274	11,54%
VLD (liberal)	773 216	18,95%	552 214	13,63%	596 181	14,57%
VB (far right nationalist)	864 314	21,18%	498 700	12,31%	366 085	8,95%
Groen (Green)	312 056	7,65%	277 949	6,86%	314 953	7,70%
LDD (right wing liberal)	*	*	149 124	3,68%	*	*
PVDA (labour)	31 404	0,77%	54 955	1,36%	63 037	1,54%
Others	81 122	1,99%	99 196	2,45%	79 080	1,93%
Sp.a/Groen (Sp.a/Green cartel)	*	*	*	*	108 748	2,66%
Sp.a and Groen in total	1 097 886	26,91%	870 809	21,50%	895 975	21,90%

The overall picture of the electoral fortunes of the most important Flemish parties again illustrates the upward progress of N-VA. The party which emerged in the provincial elections of 2006 as the junior partner in a cartel with the Christian Democrats, was able to equal its performance of 2010 even

though it only managed to attract about 40,000 new voters. But even that is a result that the other Flemish parties can only dream of. However, the 40% which some commentators have suggested is possible remains a long way off.

Of the traditional parties, in comparison with 2010, the Christian Democrats and to a lesser degree the liberal Open VLD saw some improvement. Perhaps the difference for both parties lay in the fact that the 2012 elections were local and provincial. The CD&V in particular has traditionally been regarded as the party with local roots, the party which has by far the most burgomasters in its ranks. Among the parties on the left, Sp.a and Groen, comparisons are more difficult because in 2012 they formed an alliance in Limburg. The Greens on their own, in the four remaining provinces did better in 2012 than they had in the five Flemish provinces in 2006 and 2010. For the Socialists things are not going well. Sp.a and the Limburg sp.a-Green cartel together won 14.2% of Flemish votes in 2012 where only six years earlier the sp.a on its own had attracted over 19% of the vote. The more extreme nationalist party Vlaams Belang has even less reason to be satisfied but the change in its fortunes had already begun between 2006 and 2010. The far left Belgian Workers' Party (PVDA) received more media attention than usual during the elections of 2012 and its results in Antwerp were remarkable. However, Table 1 shows that this was merely a local phenomenon, though compared with 2010 it was still able to win another 8,000 votes. ⁵

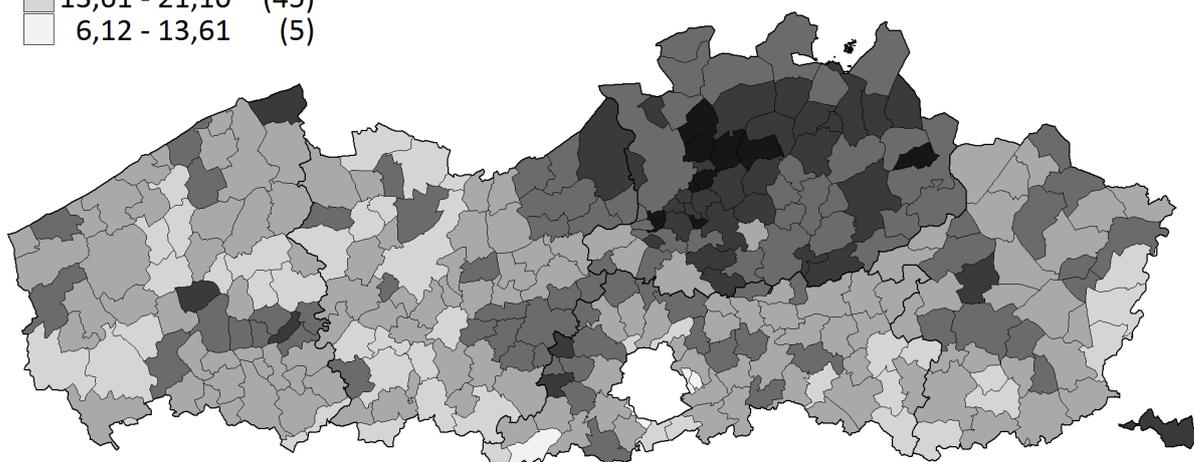
THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE FLEMISH PARTIES IN 2012

After the above global survey of the party landscape following the provincial elections of 2012, we shall consider the strengths and weaknesses of the individual parties, down to the level of the 308 Flemish municipalities. First on the list is the N-VA, the great unknown of the major parties during these elections.

Map 1: N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)

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N-VA		
43,57 - 51,04	(9)	
36,08 - 43,57	(36)	
28,59 - 36,08	(88)	
21,10 - 28,59	(125)	
13,61 - 21,10	(45)	
6,12 - 13,61	(5)	

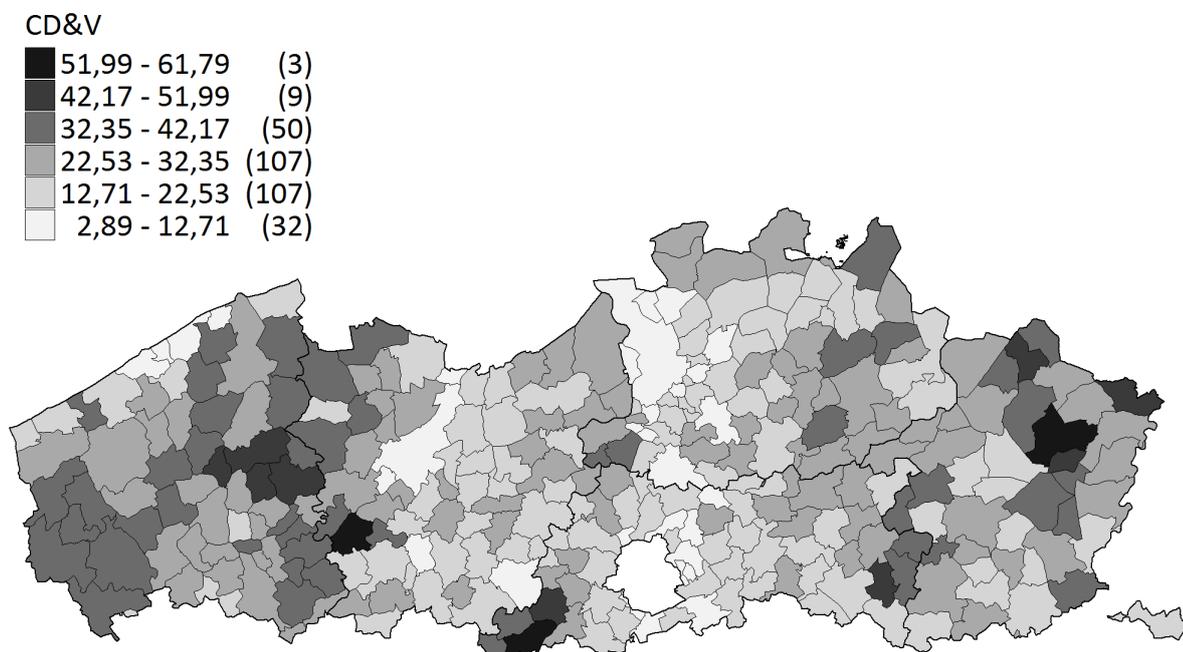


N-VA (Map 1) has broken through nationally as a major party in Flanders. In only about fifty (or 1 in 6) municipalities, did the party fail to reach the 20% mark. Its national success, however, should not conceal the regional differences. The party was most successful in Antwerp where results of over 30% were the rule rather than the exception. Its best scores were in the Antwerp municipality

of Dessel with 51% (its predecessor the People's Union [Volksunie] party had also always done well in this municipality) and in the outskirts of the city of Antwerp. There were other highlights in the Waasland, Halle-Vilvoorde and the area around Roeselare and Izegem. The party's worst results were in the rural areas, particularly in the provinces of West and East Flanders. But overall it goes without saying that the party made a quantum leap in the number of its local representatives.

The Christian Democrats had most to fear from the N-VA at the local level since it had most to lose. Table 1 shows that globally they did better than expected with 21% of Flemish votes. The geographical spread of the CD&V rank and file can be seen in Map 2. As always, CD&V is still strong in West Flanders, Limburg and Antwerpse Kempen. In 2012, the Christian Democrats also remained the party of rural Flanders though they no longer enjoy their former hegemony. All in all, the CD&V achieved 45% or more of the vote in 7 municipalities. But in the heavily populated Antwerp-Brussels axis and in the metropolitan areas of Ghent and especially Antwerp their results have been depressing. In the city of Antwerp the party has dropped to under 6% of the vote.

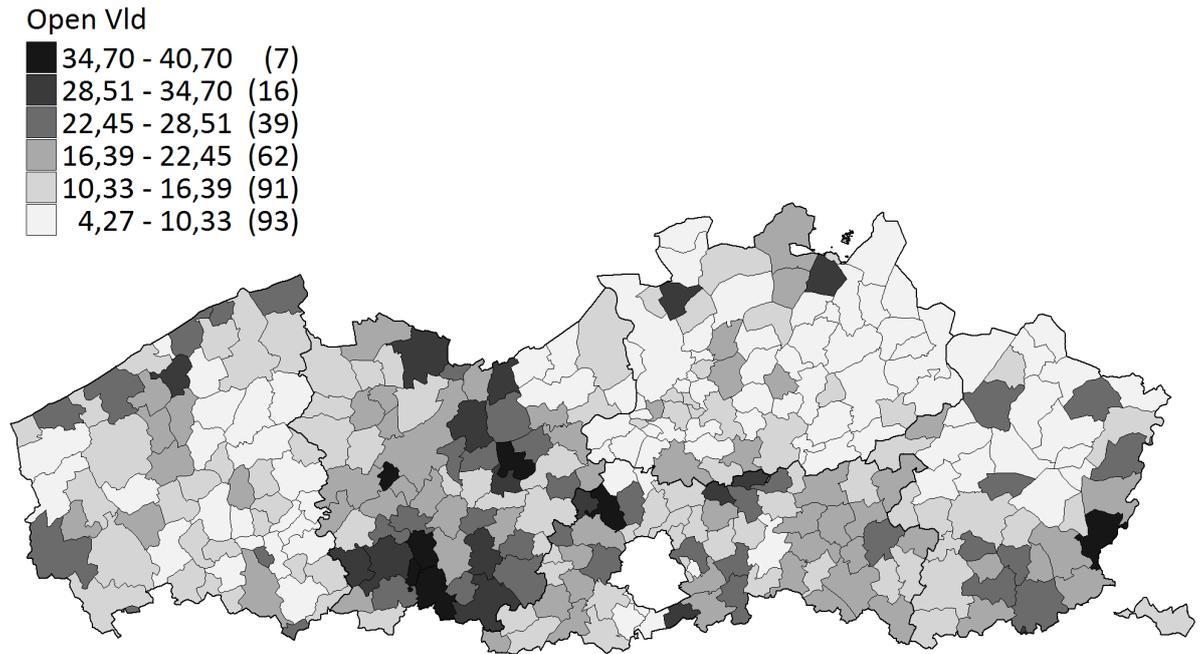
Map 2: CD&V (Christian Democrat)



The geography of the liberal Open Vld party (Map 3) is equally unsurprising. The party achieves its best results primarily in (the south of) East Flanders where it wins over 30% of the votes. It is also strong locally in Flemish-Brabant, on the coast and in the south of Limburg province. It often achieves local successes in municipalities with the help of well-known national figures such as the Minister for Asylum and Immigration Maggie De Block in Merchtem, or MP Marino Keulen in Lanaken. Their fortunes in the towns is mixed. Although the Open VLD portrays itself as an urban party, the map shows clearly that it does not find much support in the towns. Its best results are in municipalities such as Horebeke, Zwalm or Merksplas, places that are hardly urban.

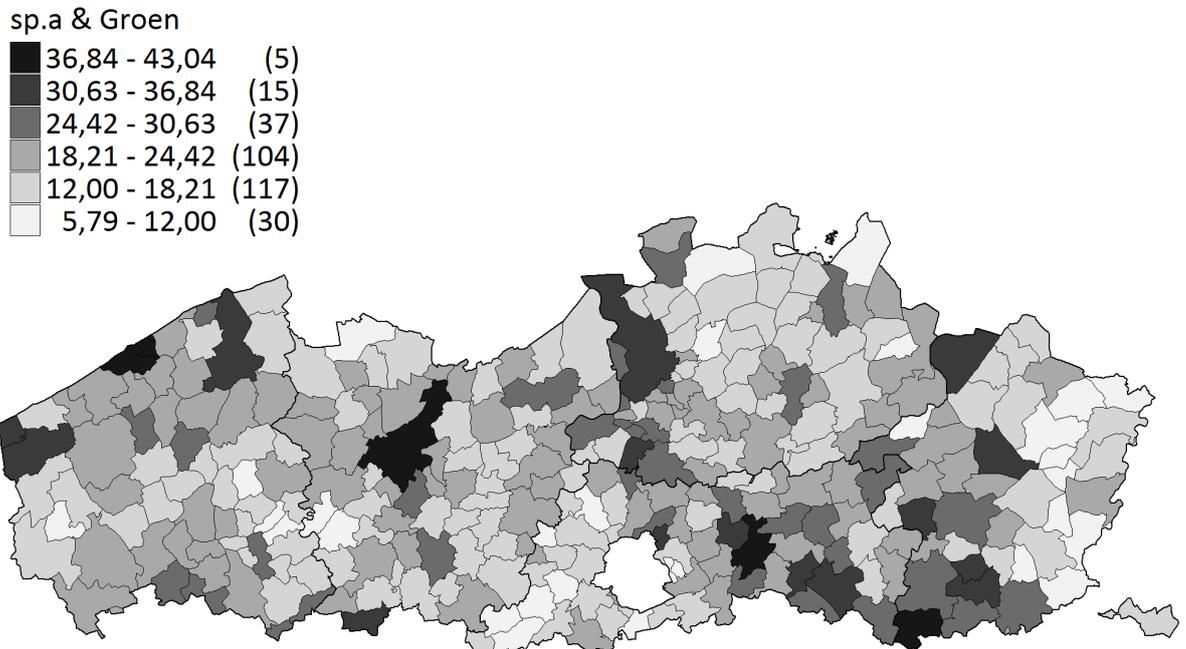
Because of the Limburg cartel, the results of sp.a and Groen in Map 4 have been combined. Electoral support for the two parties combined is geographically less widely spread than that of N-VA, CD&V or Open VLD. In 259 of the 308 (or 8 out of 10) Flemish municipalities the two parties together won less than 25% of the vote. Map 4 shows that support for the Sp.a and Groen combined is primarily metropolitan, with the addition of places like Leuven, Ostend and Ghent.

Map 3: Open VLD (Liberals).



Map 4: Sp.a & Groen (Sp.a & Green)

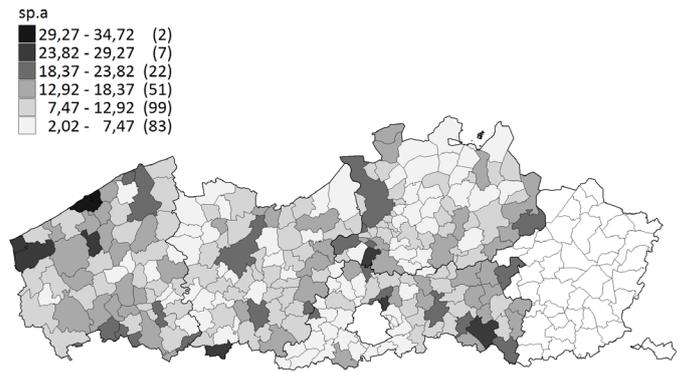
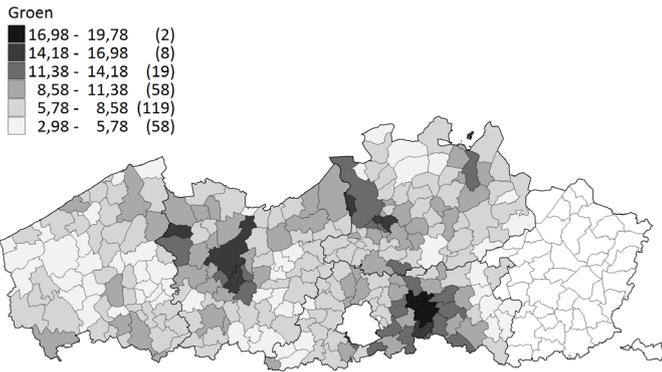
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The results in the four provinces where Groen and Sp.a campaigned separately give one a clearer idea of the geographical spread of their rank and file. Map 5 shows that the Greens are strong particularly near Ghent, Leuven and Antwerp (all of them university towns). This urban profile stands out even more clearly in the case of Sp.a (Map 6) which does relatively well in Ghent, Leuven or Antwerp but far less well in the surrounding municipalities.

Map 5: Groen

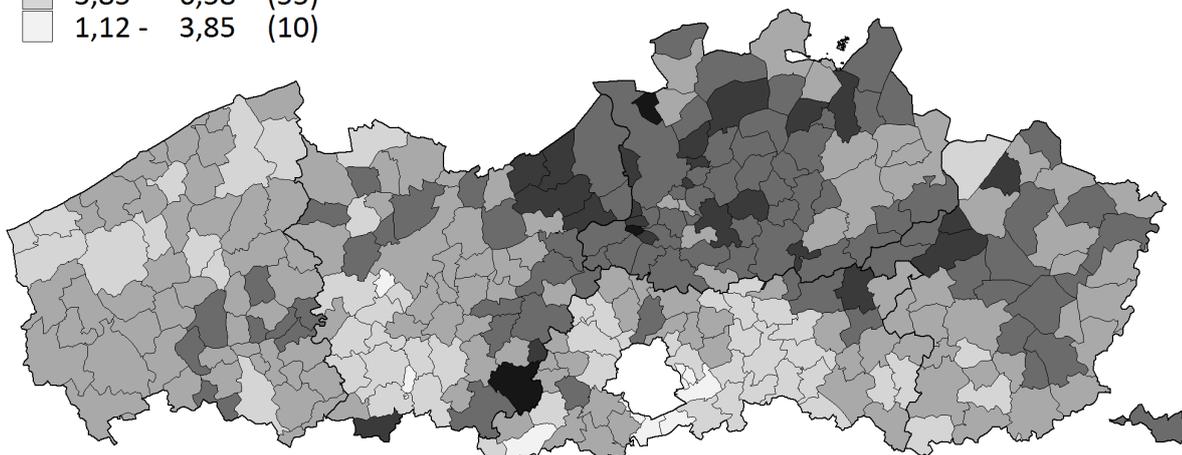
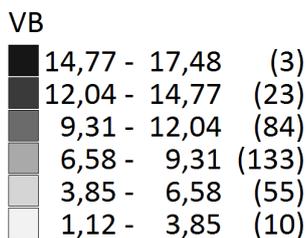
Map 6: Sp.a



The urban nature of the Greens' rank and file is not really surprising. This relatively young party is firmly associated with urban themes such as diversity and mobility. The key players in Agalev (Groen's predecessor) and Groen have as a rule come from Ghent or Antwerp. The predominantly urban character of Sp.a is possibly more problematical because the Socialists, as one of the three main traditional parties, once enjoyed much wider support. The narrowing of the socialist base to a purely urban party goes back some time. In 2006, commenting on the municipal elections, the political scientist Johan Ackaert remarked that the sp.a 'is becoming an urban party with little appeal for rural voters'.⁶ Just before the elections of 14 October 2012 a newspaper article put it even more bluntly: the Sp.a has 'never done well in the countryside and the Socialists are not doing much to change it'.⁷

At the Sp.a-Visie congress in early December 2012 the talk was all about the failure of the Antwerp 'City list' of Socialists and Christian Democrats and how the party was being forced to look for voters outside the towns.⁸ If until then the Sp.a had in effect an explicitly urban strategy in mind, it makes the failure of the Antwerp City List even more painful. In fact, the position of the Sp.a is now coming under pressure even in the cities. In Ghent and Antwerp, in the provincial elections, the party only attracted a fairly modest 22% and 19% respectively of the vote.

Map 7: Vlaams Belang (far right Flemish Interest)



The big loser in 2012 - certainly compared with the previous local elections of 2006 - has been Vlaams Belang. In three quarters of Flemish municipalities it could not rise above 10% of the vote and nowhere did it reach 20%. Its electoral decline seems to be driving the party back to its earlier core areas of support such as Antwerp, Waasland and Beringen. The geography of the VB is much like that of the Vlaams Blok in the mid 1990s. The most striking result was in Ninove where the party in the provincial elections possibly benefited from the panache of the municipal ticket 'Forza Ninove' with federal representative Guy D'haeseleer.

TOWN VERSUS COUNTRY

In the previous section, allusion was made to a possible contrast between town and country being reflected in the election results, with Sp.a and Groen clearly urban organisations and the Christian Democrats as the party of rural Flanders. Seeing a connection between electoral results and socio-economic areas is one of the classic dreams of political geography. Already various agencies of the Flemish administration have done a great deal of work breaking down the 308 Flemish municipalities into socio-economic categories. One study by the Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research into the demarcation of the Flemish countryside includes a survey of several socio-economic classifications.⁹ Until recently, however, this was not directly useful for electoral geography because the results were released by electoral district. However, some useful work has been published based on the domicile of standing and elected candidates.¹⁰

Table 2.

Area	CD&V	VLD	PvdA	N-VA	VB	Sp.a + groen
Metropolitan areas	7,01%	11,68%	6,50%	29,35%	10,24%	33,31%
Regional capital	20,07%	11,67%	1,59%	27,32%	8,73%	28,40%
Smaller towns	23,16%	15,79%	1,04%	26,56%	9,38%	21,54%
Suburbs	19,57%	12,92%	0,66%	29,85%	8,53%	20,03%
Outskirts	22,59%	15,09%	0,91%	31,82%	9,24%	18,11%
Countryside	29,01%	17,74%	0,84%	25,56%	7,69%	17,51%

But in October 2012 the results were published for the first time at the municipal level. That makes it much easier to correlate a party's results with a municipal typology. Table 2 does this on the basis of the classification described in the chapter 'New Urbanism' in the Flemish administration's survey of Flanders, *Vlaanderen gepeild [Flanders surveyed]* (2005).¹¹ Naturally, the categories employed do not all carry the same electoral weight. The first two categories, the major cities of Antwerp and Ghent (the Brussels municipalities have not been included) and the 11 other Flemish regional centres together represent 23% of the Flemish electorate. The last two categories together, the outskirts and the countryside represent 41%. So these 'outer areas' in fact carry far more weight than the cities.

Table 2 confirms a number of conjectures raised by Maps 1 to 7. CD&V is well ahead in the rural areas of Flanders with 29% of the vote. But in the two major cities, Antwerp and Ghent, the party hardly reached 7% in the last provincial elections. The Catholic element in politics has long been associated with an anti-urban mentality, partly because of its encouragement of property ownership in the countryside.¹² Nevertheless, during the local elections of 2012 the CD&V campaigned on a seriously urban manifesto which was tailored to the metropolitan and city voter.¹³ Its results in the regional centres and smaller towns was not nearly so bad as in the two metropolitan areas (20-23%). CD&V is certainly most effective in the countryside, though that does not make it a purely rural political party.

The figures for CD&V are as one would expect: weak in the large towns and strong in the countryside. Open VLD, however, follows a similar pattern and that is much less what one would expect. The Liberals picked up 17% in areas normally classified as rural but were stranded on 11% in the larger towns and cities. Open VLD is much less associated with the countryside than the Christian Democrats, if only because it presents itself as an urban organisation, as for instance in the series of books *Stadslucht maakt vrij* [*City air is liberating*] by Sven Gatz and Christian Leysen, who were the VLD representatives for the cities of Brussels and Antwerp. In 2005, in the framework of a liberal urban policy and charmed by the American sociologist Richard Florida, they appealed for the 'mental urbanisation' of Flanders.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in 2012 the party performed most strongly in the countryside.

The combined results of Sp.a and Groen (combined to take account of their alliance in the province of Limburg) were as expected. The two left-wing parties together are the most important political force in the large cities and regional centres, but in the suburbs and the rural areas they score significantly less well. But as we have seen, the larger towns and cities carry less electoral weight than the countryside and the outskirts of the towns. The two parties can perhaps console themselves by the expectation that demographic evolution is making the urban areas more important.

The results for N-VA show little variation by socio-economic area. The nationalists, in fact, score well everywhere. It is striking that their (relatively) poor results are in the rural areas, though still with about 25% of the votes. The electoral losses of the Vlaams Belang have driven it back to its roots as the Vlaams Blok whose first big successes were in the towns.¹⁵ With the electoral success of the party, which peaked in the years 2004-2006, the Vlaams Blok/Belang came increasingly to be seen as an anti-urban party with a focus on the suburban middle class.¹⁶ In 2012 the VB once again scored highest in the metropolitan areas.

IN CONCLUSION

Most attention before, during and after 14 October 2012, has been given to the municipalities, which are administratively far more important than the provinces. However, the results of the provincial elections also warrant attention because they closely approach those of the regional and federal elections. Simulations on the basis of the provincial elections will undoubtedly be scrutinised very closely.

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In Flanders the provincial elections offered the extra bonus that the results were announced at the municipal level for the first time. This now makes it possible to link the results of individual parties to the socio-economic profile of municipalities without the added complication of numerous electoral alliances and local electoral candidates' lists.

This exploratory analysis of the provincial elections has drawn a picture of the geographical diversity of the rank and file of the major Flemish parties. Although the differences between town and country in Flemish public debate is rarely made explicit (compared with the contrasts between left and right, Catholic and free thinkers, or for and against Flemish independence), some parties are nevertheless clearly associated with either town or country. The striking thing is that in 2012 this did not apply to the N-VA, the great newcomer in local politics. That party's impact has been felt almost everywhere.

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

- 1/ 'CD&V in Antwerp less attracted by opposition', www.deredactie.be, 18 October 2012.
- 2/ See also Ackaert, J., De gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006, *Res Publica*, 2007, p. 415.
- 3/ Craeghs, J., Wegwijs in het nieuw lokaal en provinciaal kiesdecreet, *Binnenband*, October 2011, 5-6.
- 4/ Results based on: <http://www.vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2006/index.html>, <http://www.verkiezingen2010.belgium.be> and <http://www.vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2012/index.html>. The Flemish results for 2012 which follow are based on the third website.
- 5/ In 2012, however, the PVDA did not compete in 10 provincial constituencies.
- 6/ '2006: De slag om 't Schoon Verdiep, toen en nu', www.deredactie.be, 3 October 2012.
- 7/ 'Sp.a zet alles op Antwerpen', *Het Nieuwsblad*, 10 October 2012.
- 8/ 'Buiten de steden zoeken naar kiezers', *De Standaard*, 3 December 2012.
- 9/ Lenders S., *Afbakening van het Vlaamse platteland*, ILVO, 2006, pp. 9-22. The various divisions of the land can be found on the Flemish government's website: http://aps.vlaanderen.be/lokaal/lokale_statistieken.htm.
- 10/ De Maesschalck F., 'Op weg naar een representatieve politieke vertegenwoordiging? De woonplaats van de Brusselse parlementsleden, 1989-2009', *Brussels Studies*, nr. 44, 2010. PUT, G-J. et.al., 'De geografische spreiding van kandidaten op de Vlaamse kieslijsten (2003-2010)', *Samenleving en Politiek*, 2011, 5, pp. 60-72.
- 11/ Van Geel H., 'Nieuwe stedelijkheid' in: *Vlaanderen gepeild*, Brussels, 2005, pp. 168-170.
- 12/ Kesteloot C., 'Verstedelijking in Vlaanderen: problemen, kansen en uitdagingen voor het beleid in de 21^e eeuw' in: *Witboek. De eeuw van de stad. Voorstudies*, Brussels, 2003, pp. 15-39.
- 13/ CD&V wil 'stadskorting'. 'Stedennota' moet de stad aantrekkelijker maken voor de middenklasse', *De Standaard*, 23 June, 2012.
- 14/ Gatz S., Van Rouveroy S. en Leysen C., 'Vlaanderen mentaal verstedelijken' in: *Stadslucht maakt vrij*, Brussel, 2005.
- 15/ De Maesschalck F., 'Electoral geografie van het Vlaams Blok. De ruimtelijke evolutie van de verkiezingsuitslagen van 1981 tot 1995', *De Aardrijkskunde*, 2000, no. 21, pp. 21-36.
- 16/ Kesteloot C., *op.cit.*, pp. 32-33.