The Extreme Right and Political Alienation: A Causality Riddle

The case of the Vlaams Blok in Belgium

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Abstract:
Since the upsurge of the so-called 'third wave' of right-wing extremism many researchers have addressed the question to what extent the success of these kind of parties is grounded in diffuse feelings of political alienation. Unfortunately these inquiries did not produce an unequivocal answer. As a matter of fact some of the findings are clearly contradictory. In the first part of this article we will argue that these divergences are largely attributable to alternative conceptualisations and operationalisations. In the second part of the article we will question the validity of the conventional causal direction, namely from 'feelings of alienation' to 'voting for an extreme-right wing party'. We will show that it might be very fruitful to reverse this relationship. In this respect we will test to what extent repeated voting for an extreme-right wing party such as the Vlaams Blok actually produces feelings of 'external political powerlessness'.

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Introduction

In 1992 an expert in this field of research (De Witte, 1992:189) could still safely state that investigations of the phenomenon of the extreme right had been few and far between in Belgium. Things have clearly changed since then. As a result of the electoral rise of the Vlaams Blok a groundswell of scientific and essayist writings has been devoted to this theme. Those who want to venture in this by now well-trodden research domain should therefore hear the lessons to be drawn from earlier explorations, not only from their empirical results, but also (and more importantly) from the methods and the concepts that have led to these results. This is necessary to explain the inconsistencies which plague the results already obtained and to map the areas of terra incognita left by results not yet obtained. Some of these inconsistencies follow from differences in the operationalisation of key concepts such as “racism”, “ethnocentrism”, “protest”, “alienation”, “extremist vote” etcetera, to give just one example of what can go wrong.

Not to arouse too grandiose expectations we hasten to fence off the parcel of the research domain we want to till. First we have to distinguish between the principal approaches in the study of the success of the extreme right. The first approach could be termed a supply-side approach, the other a demand-side approach.

The supply-side approach focuses on the ideological and programmatic characteristics of extreme-right wing parties and on the political biographies of their elites (e.g. Gijsels, 1989, 1992; Ignazi, 1992; De Witte, 1994; Mudde, 1995; Spruyt, 1995; Van Den Brink, 1999). These research themes seem to have forced the investigators to resort to “qualitative” research methods only. Here we will make a modest effort to deviate from this well-established tradition.

With respect to the Vlaams Blok in Flanders the research efforts thus far have led to the conclusion that this party is indeed a party of the extreme right but that this ideological core discourse is more used in the inner circle of the party activists than in the latter’s communication with the public at large. It is thus not quite clear what kind of political message is actually supplied by the party to the voters, nor how the voters perceive the party.
This puzzle is, to a large extent, what makes the research effort of the demand siders so appealing and complementary. Here the contributions focus on the perceptions, the motives and the values of the electorate of the extreme right in general and the Vlaams Blok in particular (Kitschelt, 1995; Billiet en De Witte, 1995; Scheepers, Billiet en De Witte, 1995, Swyngedouw en Beerten, 1998, Derks en Deschouwer, 1998, Van der Brug et al., 2000). In this domain the use of quantitative methods has been established very firmly. The explanation of the meteoric rise of the Vlaams Blok has made use of a host of variables: demographic ones such as urbanisation, unemployment, social class, age, church participation, and cultural ones such as religion, nationalism, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism and political alienation. However, this demand side tradition has been annoyed by the troublesome fact that factors tend to appear significant in one research report and to fade away in the other. Here too we hope to make a modest contribution, at the risk of making things more complicated before being able to simplify them.

Since we intend to focus on the relationship between “political alienation” and “vote for the extreme right” one might expect that our contribution belongs to the demand side tradition, which tends to view alienation as an explanatory factor of extremist voting. This is not entirely correct, though, since we wish to question the causal direction between both variables. If there is a statistical relationship between both, is it beyond any doubt that “political alienation” should be the cause and “extreme right vote” the consequence? Could it not be the other way around? The latter, rather unconventional hypothesis pertains more to the supply side tradition and is not without some social relevance. If adhering to the extreme right reinforces the tendency to political alienation this is a problem with considerable importance of its own. And one should wonder why this would be the case.

As supply-siders we should be mindful of the fact that a party such as the Vlaams Blok does not present itself to the general public with its full programme (De Witte, 1997:268). Citizens and voters are therefore tempted to perceive what the party wants them to perceive and to add something of their own interpretation to this perceived image. Of course such is the case with all parties but even more so with the Vlaams Blok which is still a rather new party whose programme has never been tested in actual policy making. The image supplied by the party is
therefore intentionally vague and the study of how its voters tend to complete this image can be quite surprising, as we intend show. Amongst other things the party seems to foster an attitude of political powerlessness amongst its loyalists, partly intentionally, partly unintentionally.

**A methodological question mark**

As already mentioned earlier, this contribution hinges on the relationship between “extreme right” and “political alienation”. A first question is being forced on the demand side researchers by some perplexing empirical results. Some of them come to the conclusion that the Vlaams Blok obtains more than its average electoral success among “individuals who view the political system from a very negative perspective” (Swyngedouw, Beerten, 1998:18), while others contend that the electorate of the Vlaams Blok is not being motivated “by feelings of protest or alienation” (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2000, 99).

In the first part of this contribution we want to show that the opposition between this results is more apparent than real because they are actually answers to different questions. More specifically we intend to show why and how different questions have been asked and why therefore the results had to be less than mutually reinforcing. What exactly opposes the “believers”, who view political alienation as a significant factor to explain the vote for the extreme right, to the non-believers, who fail to find a significant connection between both variables?

The importance of the answer to this methodological question is not to be underestimated. An easy way out would be to surmise that different results have been obtained at different times because they are sensitive to historical-conjunctural circumstances, e.g. political scandals and disturbing social tragedies. And one could more specifically point to the fact that believers such as Swyngedouw and Beerten have used ISPO-data (cf. footnote 1) collected in 1995/96, while non believers such as Van der Brug *et al.* have used data from the European Elections Study (EES) of June 1995. In between the country had been shocked by the Agusta scandal, hence the higher salience of political alienation in the research data of 1996. On closer inspection, however, the impact of such events on electoral behaviour (Swyngedouw and
Beerten, 1998: 25) and on different modes of political alienation (Thijssen: 1999:501) seems to be rather modest. Moreover, a replication of the research of Van der Brug et al., based on more recent and different data (ESS, 1999), yields results similar to the earlier ones. One has therefore to look out for an explanation which is valid for a longer time period and which therefore has more social and scientific relevance.

The social relevance of this methodological question can hardly be doubted since the Vlaams Blok is by now one of the most successful parties of the extreme right in Europe and since it obtained no less than a third of the votes in the recent communal elections in Antwerp of October 2000. The conceptual and methodological refinements needed to solve the empirical puzzle created by the opposition between believers and non-believers have also a more general, scientific importance. More refinement is needed, to start with, when one wants to operationalise our independent (?) and dependent(?) variables.

**The independent variable: political alienation**

Defining “political alienation” is a delicate undertaking since the concept has been used by all kinds of social scientists, from philosophers over psychologists to sociologists (Schacht, 1994). Because it builds mainly on the achievements of electoral and public opinion research, we have to start from the definitions proposed by social-psychologists (cf. Seeman, 1959, 1989; Finifter, 1970). Political alienation is then a negative attitude expressing an individual’s belief that his/her relationship with one or several aspects of the political system has become fundamentally flawed (Thijssen, 1999: 119-120).

What is meant by “one or several aspects of the political system”? Is a person to be viewed as alienated when he/she feels dissociated from the entire political system or is it sufficient that he/she feels dissociated from one of its aspects? One has to assume that the level of alienation can vary according to the political reference group the person has in mind. These political reference group, or “referents”, can be classified according to the phases of the decision making process (Almond, Verba, 1965; Gamson, 1968; Geyer, 1990, 1996) As a result political alienation can appear as feelings of powerlessness (or inefficacy), which refer to the
input phase of the political system, but also as feelings of distrust, which refer to the output phase.

The level of alienation can also vary according to the degree of aggregation of the political reference group (Easton, 1975; Norris, 1999:9-13). Clearly, an attitude of distrust vis-à-vis the political authorities should not be assimilated to an attitude of distrust vis-à-vis the political regime.

These theoretical distinctions have proved to be empirically useful and, moreover, to have yielded modes of alienation that are to some extent but not completely interrelated. The concept of political alienation is therefore less than a single, empirically univocal concept and more than a container concept. It is, defined in this way, a multidimensional concept. This entails that researchers have to be aware of exactly which dimension of the concept they are working with, something they have often failed to do. In the case of the relationship between political alienation and the extreme right it may thus be crucial to specify which dimension of alienation does or does not have an effect on the votes for parties of the extreme right.

**Proposition 1.** If one uses political alienation as an (in)dependent variable, it is mandatory to specify which mode or dimension one is using.

The multidimensionality of the concept of political alienation has meanwhile been widely accepted among specialists. However, this subtlety is only the first hurdle a researcher has to take. The different modes of alienation can be measured in either a direct or an indirect way. The direct measurement intends to operationalise a mode of alienation through a number of evaluative propositions, which should eventually form the items of an attitude scale. The indirect measurement does not measure the mode directly but estimates its impact (e.g. on electoral behaviour) by deducing the latter from the lack of impact of other, complementary variables.

An indirect measurement procedure is followed by Van der Brug et al.. The first step of his reasoning consists in proposing a classification of factors, which can explain voting behaviour. Voters are inspired either by ideological, pragmatic, or protest motives. Since these categories are, as befits a good classification, mutually exclusive one is tempted to
deduce from the easily ascertainable fact that some voters are neither inspired by ideological, nor by pragmatic motives that they are therefore motivated by protest, a fact which is harder to ascertain. If then the predictive value of ideological and pragmatic factors is smaller among the extreme rightist electorate, it should follow that the protest vote is more important among them. The empirical data, however, force Van der Brug et al. to reject this hypothesis. Among rightist the salience of ideological and pragmatic motives is a strong as among other voters. Therefore he feels he can draw the conclusion: “no evidence was found that voters for anti-immigrant parties are motivated by feelings of protest or alienation, more so than the voters of other parties” (2000:94).

The problem with this indirect measurement of political alienation is of course that his classification does not really consist of mutually exclusive categories. The semantic content of their “protest” motive is unduly limited since it should not overlap with pragmatic or ideological considerations. We would like to argue that pragmatic and ideological considerations can be an expression of a slightly disguised attitude of political protest. Let us take the example of the most important pragmatic variable, the position taken on the immigration issue. It is well known that individuals with feelings of diffuse (political) discontent tend to rationalise these feelings by seeking a scapegoat. Is it therefore not plausible that feelings of political alienation tend to foster negative attitudes towards immigrants (Billiet, De Witte, 1995: 194)? If an individual votes for the Vlaams Blok because he/she sympathises with its anti-immigrant position, this can be interpreted as expressive of his/her political protest.

An analogous argument can be made about the relationship involving the ideological factor, more specifically the ideological distance between the left/right position of the voters and that of the parties. Van der Brug et al. discover that the electoral supporters of the parties on the extreme right are themselves ideologically close to these parties. The Vlaams Blok, for instance, recruits its voters mainly from citizens with rightist ideological positions. However, does this indisputable fact exclude the hypothesis that political alienation plays a role as well? As we shall argue later, such statistical relationships are open to different causal interpretations. One we cannot rule out is the following. Parties such as the Vlaams Blok are generally and incessantly being labelled as “extreme right”, an objective fact which can
hardly escape the perception of the respondents of the surveys. Because individuals want to
avoid cognitive dissonance they will tend to accept the label of the party they adhere to as
their own. After a while they will harmonise their self-identification on the left-right scale
with the public definition of the party they originally preferred because of other
considerations, e.g. their attitude of political protest.

Thus far we have argued that the indirect measurement of the factor “political protest” lacks
validity when it is not a clearly distinct category among a set of mutually exclusive
categories. We should also argue that it should be a category among an exhaustive set of
categories. Is the set proposed by Van der Brug et al., which consists of “protest
considerations”, “pragmatic considerations” and “ideological considerations”, such an
exhaustive set? This assumption is difficult to argue. What shall we do with the many voters
who are attracted by the personality characteristics of a candidate and neither by the ideology,
nor by the interests he/she stands for (Dierickx, 1999: 153)? Of course personality traits often
do intermingle with programmatic considerations in the perception of the voter (Popkin,
1991: 213). However, this need not always be the case. Indeed, it is a moot question whether
in this era of mass media communication the market share of “personality voting” is not on
the rise over “issue and ideology voting”.

If then some voters are sensitive to “personality” rather than to “issues” we return once again
to the exclusivity question: is a “personality” vote incompatible with a protest vote”? Our
guess is that it is even more compatible with a protest vote than the pragmatic and the
ideological vote discussed earlier. Voters can go for a candidate because he/she looks and
acts differently than the others, and actually because he/she appears to reject the other, more
conventional candidates. This educated guess can be illustrated by examining the electoral
slogans chosen by candidates. Recently a Flemish candidate (not an extremist one!) presented
himself with the catch phrase: “I participate in politics, but I am not a politician”. Many
candidates of the extreme right have tried to project an image promising to clean up the mess
created by conventional candidates and by traditional parties.

The most fundamental objection against indirect measuring of political alienation questions
the assumption that a protest vote, a behavioural variable, is a valid proxy for political
alienation, an attitudinal variable. Van der Brug et al. and other students of political extremism tend to view protest and alienation as one and the same concept. This is a baffling simplification because social psychologists have long established that the link between “affective” and conative” orientations can be a very tenuous one. An individual who feels powerless or distrustful towards politics will not necessarily choose the strategy of protest behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein). As conventional wisdom has it, there is a wide gap between dream and deed.

Research has shown that many of the political alienated tend to resort not to the strategy of protest but to the strategy of self-pity and apathy (Dalton, 1996: 79). Rosenau speaks here about “alienated apathy”, a strategy he defines as “a studied inaction and detachment because their orientation is to follow the course of events and derive therefrom reinforcement of alienation” (1997: 240).

One could hypothesise that the link between alienation and protest behaviour will be stronger when alienation more intense and protest less costly. Since protest as expressed in voting, more specifically in voting for clearly recognisable political “antiheroes” is not really costly, one could gather that protest voting is not such a bad proxy after all. This would certainly apply to Belgium were citizens are under a legal obligation to vote and were parties of the extreme right are clearly stigmatised as political outsiders. The opportunity to express political alienation in a protest vote is therefore very much available.

However, the link between alienation and electoral protest also depends on the intensity of alienation (Converse, 1995: XI). Ajzen refers here to the weight of an attitude. The trouble is, then, that the indirect measurement of political alienation only takes into account those feelings of political alienation that are deemed so salient to the alienated individual that they lead directly to a protest vote. Evidently, this is only the tip of the iceberg. It is plausible to assume that most individuals will not deem it very important and that therefore they will not be persuaded to invest much effort in protest behaviour, not even in electoral protest behaviour. With the Beatles they will prefer the strategy of “Let it be”. We intend to argue momentarily that researchers opting for direct measurement have also failed in this respect.
We can summarise our discussion of the indirect measurement of “political alienation” in two additional propositions.

**Proposition 2.** When the politically alienated all choose the strategy of political protest and when the political protest is the only motive to vote for the extreme-right, political protest is indeed a good proxy for establishing a causal relationship between political alienation and the extremist vote…

**Proposition 2a.** However, one risks a fatal loss of validity when one equates political protest with political alienation. Political protest can be a strategy chosen by the politically alienated but by no means the only one. Political protest is therefore not a good proxy of political alienation.

**Proposition 2b.** However, the political protest voting strategy does not always occur in a pure form. Quite often it is disguised as personality, issue and ideological voting strategies. Political protest voting in its pure form is therefore not a good proxy of political alienation.

These negative conclusions about indirect measurement invite us to adopt a rather positive prejudice about direct measurement. Admittedly, direct measurement is costly in terms of survey research. It requires many items to construct the valid and reliable scale one needs and, before that, it requires a clear conceptual analysis of the various aspects and dimensions of the concept. Researchers have struggled to discover the right instruments of measurement. However, the prospects of direct measurement are not hopeless, far from it. This we hope to demonstrate in the next paragraphs.

**What causes what?**

Let us assume that, after having constructed a valid instrument for the direct measurement of political alienation, we discover a significant statistical relationship between political alienation and voting for the extreme right. That this relationship actually exists will be demonstrated in a later paragraph. Here, however, we have to deal with the primordial question how we would interpret such a finding in the perspective of causal modelling.
Observers tend to be eager to view one causal interpretation as the obvious one and to disregard the other possibilities. As Blalock (1979: 469) has reminded us, it is tempting but not allowed to superimpose a causal interpretation on significant effect parameters. Such an operation is only warranted by theoretical argument, not by statistical data only.

In the case of the Vlaams Blok one can observe a significant relationship between (certain modes of) political alienation and electoral support for this party. Does this have to mean that alienation was the motive to vote for the Vlaams Blok?

This question could be answered by explicitly asking the voters about the motives for their electoral choice. The results of such a qualitative procedure, however, can only be disappointing. Such open questioning presumes, incorrectly, that voters are able to articulate exhaustively why they voted the way they did. To some extent this procedure can be useful for the external validation of the statistical relationship obtained by closed, direct measurement items, but it cannot suffice to transform the relationship into a causal explanation.

In what follows we will argue that political alienation can be viewed as a consequence of Vlaams Blok voting and not only as its cause. To make this argument we had to make the right choice of variables, both with respect to alienation and to electoral choice.

The choice for a party can be operationalized as a dichotomous variable: some voters have voted for the Vlaams Blok at a particular point in time and others have not. Of course, such a dichotomization is not the only alternative. Some researchers prefer a probabilistic operationalization in which the parties are rankordered according to their attractiveness to the individual voter: "When only taking into account the party one voted for, and not the electoral attractiveness of those parties one did not vote for, the relative weights of factors that affect party choices cannot be estimated in a valid way (Van der Brug et al., 2000: 85). This implies that every respondent will give information about the probability that he/she will ever vote for each of the parties."
Recent studies suggest that such a rankordering can have an added value in studies of an incompletely informed electorate (Burden, 1997: 1166). Nevertheless we will not adopt this operationalization here. For our theoretical purposes we want a variable which can function both as a dependent and independent variable. Our question is indeed whether voting for the Vlaams Blok, and not for any other party, can lead to subsequent political alienation, while for many others the only relevant question is whether the level of political alienation fosters the electoral success of that specific, threatening party, the VB, at the expense of all the other, less threatening parties.

What about the other variable, political alienation? For theoretical reasons we focus on the mode usually termed "external political powerlessness" (or "external inefficacy"). This mode refers to the diffuse feeling that one's political powerlessness is caused by the unwillingness of political authorities (parties, politicians ...) to respond to one's justified demands. Its semantic content depends on a hermeneutic exercise which takes into account the pattern of all modes of alienation to which this mode belongs. "External political powerlessness" is indeed rather strongly related both to "internal political powerlessness" and "distrust of the political authorities". Therefore one can gather that external political powerlessness combines something of the meaning of both these other modes: an assessment of the subject's own political input abilities and also of the output capabilities of the political decision-makers. Used as an independent variable one could view it as the expression of a political inferiority complex. Used as a dependent variable it could be the result of the disappointing experience with real rather than imaginary political actors. This last face of the concept makes it attractive for our theoretical purposes.

Because of theoretical and practical purposes this variable will be used here in a dichotomous format: the very powerless will be opposed to all the other scores on the direct measurement scale. Earlier research (Thijssen, 1999: 291-317) has suggested that the extreme negative scores are more stable over time than the moderate and the extreme positive scores. If stability points to the intensity of an attitude it follows that empirical research can only gain by incorporating this aspect into the operationalization of the concept. Moreover many observers are worried, and correctly so, by the emergence of a category of citizens who are
not a little but highly alienated and who might be a reservoir of inconsiderate, anti-democratic activities (such as supporting a party of the extreme right).

Which one of these two variables shall we use as the dependent variable? A long tradition of electoral research naturally prefers to use the party vote as the "explanandum". This is the case in the "funnel of causality", proposed in The American Voter (1960), in the “Theory of Action” of Parsons and Shils (1951), in Fishbein's “Theory of Reasoned Action” (1980, 1987). This causal scheme sees the attitudes as the causes of behaviour. Evident as this may seem, it is not the only possibility.

Harking back to Hume's discussion of the concept of causality one is reminded of the condition of temporal priority. The cause should precede the effect in time. What is then the basic fact in most survey research? Electoral behaviour is investigated by asking retrospective questions about choices made in the last elections, i.e. several or many months before the actual interview. Attitudes (e.g. of political alienation), on the other hand, are investigated by stimuli, which elicit reactions at the time of the interview. It is therefore not wholly unwarranted to explore the possibility that the earlier (electoral) facts would explain the later (attitudinal) facts.

Many will immediately object to this line of reasoning by pointing out that attitudes are by definition supposed to remain stable over time and more especially the more intensive ones. To this we can only agree, as should have become clear from our discussion in an earlier paragraph. However, attitudes should not be regarded as stable "by definition". Rather, they are to be regarded as more or less stable and one should reckon with the possibility of "attitude shifts" (cf. Eiser, 1994: 182-184; van Ginneken, 1999: 271-272). Experimental inquiries about attitude shifts emphasise the crucial importance of personal and direct confrontations with disturbing experiences (Perloff, 1993: 85). One of such confrontations in a democracy is the electoral process and its aftermath. Indeed, for some citizens the electoral process is more than a trip to the polling booth. Some are anxious to see what is actually being done with their vote. If they subsequently feel very disappointed this could well lead to an intensification of latent feelings of external political alienation.
It makes good sense to apply this hypothesis more specifically to the voters of the Vlaams Blok in Flanders. The other parties having formed "a cordon sanitaire" around and against the Vlaams Blok, denying it any access to policy making positions, and this regardless of its growing electoral support, it is plausible that many of these voters would react to this state of affairs with frustration and alienation. This kind of negative feedback to the electoral process is kindled and reinforced by the leaders of the Vlaams Blok who take advantage of every opportunity to pose as victims of the irresponsible political establishment.

In the following paragraphs the basic hypothesis will therefore be that external political powerlessness can be seen as a consequence rather than as a cause of Vlaams Blok voting. Empirical caution leads to the assumption that there exists such thing as a cyclical relationship between these two variables. Or should we refer to this cycle as to a vicious circle?

To make our point more convincingly we will focus mainly on the feedforwardloop between electoral behaviour and external political powerlessness. And because repetition of such postelectoral experiences is likely to reinforce the attitude shifts and external political powerlessness, we will make use of panel data which cover a time period long enough to include several elections. The working hypothesis will then be that the longer Vlaams Blok voters have stayed loyal to their party, the more they tend to develop an attitude of external political powerlessness (and probably other attitudes of political alienation as well, but this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this contribution).

Methodology and data

To test the hypothesis just mentioned, we will use data from the first two waves of a major survey-research about political attitudes and behaviour in Belgium. These datasets were collected by the research teams of the ISPO\(^1\) and PIOP\(^2\). Because the electoral support for

\(^1\) The “Interuniversitair Steunpunt Politieke-Opinieonderzoek” (ISPO) is a division of the Sociology Department of the Catholic University of Leuven. ISPO is responsible for questioning the Flemish respondents.

\(^2\) The “Point d’appui Interuniversitaire sur l’Opinion Publique et la Politique” (PIOP), which is a division of the department of Political and Social Sciences at the Catholic University of Leuven (Louvain-La-Neuve), is responsible for questioning the French-speaking respondents. Both ISPO and PIOP receive financial support from the federal service for scientific, technical and cultural issues (DWTC), of the national ministry of science.
Vlaams Blok comes (for the time being) mainly from the Flemish region, we focus here on the Flemish ISPO-data. These are based on oral interviews, which were conducted on a two-stage sample of the Flemish population at two moments in time (after the parliamentary elections of 1991 and 1995 respectively). The first wave included 2491 respondents, the second wave 2099. Of these, 1762 (respectively 70.7% and 83.9%) participated both in the first and in the second wave. These respondents are the panel respondents we need for our analyses. For more information concerning the datasets, we refer to the source books.

Unfortunately, the items which express political alienation can only be compared partly. The questionnaire of 1991 contains 5 relevant items, while the questionnaire used in 1995, contained no less than 15 items. However, only 3 items were used in both questionnaires. Fortunately, the item sets were balanced and the item all had 5 answering categories. Based on a meticulous semantic analyses and a number of confirmatory factor analyses (Thijssen, 1999: 213-290), we finally concluded that 2 of these 3 common items were valid and reliable indicators for “external political powerlessness” (Table 1).

Table 1: Items of “External Political Powerlessness” ISPO/PIOP 1991-95

We realise that for the construction of a valid survey scale 2 indicators is just the minimum that is required. However we can assert that this survey scale was not made ad hoc. On the contrary, it is nested in a global dimensional analysis, which resulted in well fitted

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3 We realise that our data are relatively old. Unfortunately the data of the third wave are not yet available. Additionally, we hope that the relevance of our findings surpasses the particularity of a specific time frame.

4 This means that the Flemish response ratio is 68%. If we subtract the “natural fall-out” (cf. those who died, ...), it rises to 72 %.

measurement models. In addition, we checked the data obtained by this survey scale on the two time points through a longitudinal multi-sample analysis. This analysis yielded a (standardised) stability coefficient of 0.68 (Thijssen, 1999: 239). In comparison with similar analyses, this is a very high score (Aish et al., 1989: 16).

However, since our main goal was to get reliable and valid scores for “external political powerlessness”, we had to reckon with the fact that not all the scores of the quasi-continuous scale, used in the previous technical analysis, were equally (socially) relevant and stable. Consequently we chose to dichotomise these quasi-metrical scores (Thijssen, 2000). This means that we want to consider the intense and extreme category of the “external political powerless” as our target group, which we want to contrast with all the other categories. The best way to do this would be to use an a posteriori dichotomisation, based on the results of a simultaneous latent class analysis of the dichotomised items\(^6\). However, since we only have 2 items, which are highly correlated\(^7\), we resorted to an a priori dichotomisation. We view the respondents who (completely) agree on both item formulations as subject to “external political powerlessness” and compare them with all the others.

This operationalisation of “external political powerlessness” will be used as the dependent variable and related to that other crucial variable “(extreme-right) voting behaviour”, which will here appear as an independent variable. Obviously a full-fledged verification of the hypothesis requires a multivariate model. Our final models will therefore not be limited to the discussion of the bivariate relation between “voting behaviour” and “external political powerlessness”. Nevertheless these bivariate associations are a good starting point for our empirical verification.

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\(^6\) Individuals who chose the answering categories “completely agree” or “agree” versus all the others (if the items are formulated negatively, the answering categories have been reversed) are assumed to be “alienated”.

\(^7\) This was shown based on the results of a MSP-analysis (Molenaar et al., 1994). For the exact results we refer to Thijssen, 1999: 302-305.
Empirical verification

a) A bivariate exploration

Our panel data provide us with some information about the retrospective voting behaviour in three subsequent parliamentary elections. Indeed both surveys not only contain information about electoral behaviour in the most recent election, but also in the preceding ones. Actually we have data about the national elections of November 13, 1987, of November 24, 1991, and of May 21, 1995. Since we focus on the question whether the respondents have or have not voted for the Vlaams Blok, we can construct two transition tables, each with four different types of voters (Table 2).

It is interesting to see in which cell of these transition tables we find the highest number of 'external politically powerless'. Table 3 displays the percentages of each of the eight cells in the transition tables. In accordance with our earlier hypothesis we do indeed find that the most loyal Vlaams Blok-voters gradually adopt more feelings of 'external political powerlessness'. While in 1991 we find only 27.3% powerless individuals in the group of the party loyalists (those that voted for this party before 1991), this proportion has risen to 40.9% (+13.6%) in 1995. This increase is even more pronounced among those who only recently (from 1991 on) became party loyalists. After the elections of 1991 50% of this group felt 'external politically powerless'. Four years and one election later this proportion had increased to 70.6% (+ 20.6%).
**Table 3: TYPOLOGY PANEL RESPONDENTS**

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<tr>
<td>Vlaams Blok</td>
<td>very loyal VB voter</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>recent drop out</td>
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**Table 4: **% *External political powerless*
in the surveys of 1991 (EPM ’91) and 1995 (EPM ’95)

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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Vlaams Blok</td>
<td>’91: 47,8%; ’95: 52,2% (n= 67)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>’91: 54,2%; ’95: 56,3% (n= 48)</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>’91: 60,0%; ’95: 20,0% (n= 5)</td>
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<td>Vlaams Blok</td>
<td>’91: 37,4%; ’95: 39,2% (n= 1356)</td>
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These findings are only relevant if they are compared with the evolution of a benchmark category. Thus we notice that the amount of 'external politically powerless' among those that never vote(d) for Vlaams Blok remains fairly stable the two elections. (1991: 37,4% and 1995: 39,2% => + 2,2%). Another interesting finding pertains to the new voters -those who voted Vlaams Blok for the first time in 1995-. In this group too there is no significant increase in the number of 'external politically powerless' (1991: 54,2% and 1995: 56,3% => + 2,1%). We cannot deny however that the initial proportion was fairly high from the start. In this respect these new voters clearly differ from the loyalist traditional Vlaams Blok voters who initially had a very small proportion of 'external politically powerless'. This could point to the fact that the other hypothesis (in recent years political alienation made many vote for the Vlaams Blok) is not entirely wrong either.

In short, our longitudinal bivariate exploration confirms the hypothesis that extreme-right voting behaviour, at least in the Flemish setting, is conductive to the development of feelings of powerlessness.

6.2 A multivariate verification

However appealing this confirmation of our central hypothesis, it is based on a bivariate analysis only. Therefore the final piece of this contribution has to consist of a number of multivariate analyses. The choice of the explanatory variables was strongly inspired by the explanatory model of Ajzen and Fishbein (1987). In this model a specific attitude is the result of social-demographic variables, general (not domain-specific) attitudes and value orientations. This structure is similar to the famous 'funnel of causality' so essential in the electoral research launched by the University of Michigan. Nonetheless, we will add a fourth category of variables to this explanatory model, namely past (e.g. retrospective) political behaviour.

After a thorough analysis of previous studies we selected 17 independent variables for our explanatory models: 10 social-demographic variables, 1 general attitude, 4 value orientations.

---

8 With regard to the former Vlaams Blok voters we should be very careful because of the small number of cases. If we lump every category of dropouts together we again see a substantial rise of political alienation (from 41,6% in 1991 to 49,3% in 1995 => + 7,7%). After closer investigation this finding could be explained by the fact that a large number of these former Vlaams Blok voters switched to blank or invalid voting in the last elections. As we know this type of voting is closely linked to feelings of political powerlessness.
and 2 retrospective political behaviour variables (see appendix). Because of the scope of our explanatory model a full report of the analyses might distract the attention from what is really important here. Therefore we will present optimised and purified models which consist only of the variables which have a significant effect (at least at the 95% confidence level) on the dependent variable in the complete models.

Because our dependent variable 'external political powerlessness' is dichotomous, we will use a logit model or a logistic regression (Menard, 1995). This implies that the conditional probability that an individual is powerless, as conditioned by the different combinations of values for the independent variables, is a realisation of the cumulative logistic probability distribution:

\[ E(Y = 1/X) = P(Y = 1) = \frac{l}{1 + e^{-XB}} \]

The regression coefficients of these logistic regressions are suggestive of the influence different variables have on the chance that an individual feels politically powerless. We prefer to consider all variables as categorical (if necessary we have recoded them). Subsequently we transform theses categorical variables in dummy variables. This approach enables a more uniform interpretation of the regression coefficients, gives credit to the non-metric (sometimes nominal) measurement of many variables and finally does not force us to take into account the unstable neutral scale scores. This procedure also enables us to take into account the impact of the rest categories (such as 'don't know') of the independent variables. To give just one example: instead of treating the individuals unable to position themselves on a left/right scale as missing data, we prefer to assign them to a separate category. This category appears to manifest the lack

\[ P(Y = 1/X) = e^{XB} \]

\[ \frac{l}{1 - P(Y = 1/X)} = e^{XB} \]

The dependent variable in this transformed equation, which corresponds to the odds ratio will be called the Logit \( L_e \). This is the ratio of the chance that an individual is politically powerless to the chance that an individual is not politically powerless. If \( L_e \) equals 0.8 this means that the odds are 4 to one that an individual with certain given characteristics feels politically powerless. In the equation above the parameters still are not linear. But by logarithmically transforming the odds ratio of the Logit \( L_e \), they do become linear. In other words:

\[ \ln\left(\frac{P(Y = 1/X)}{1 - P(Y = 1/X)}\right) = XB \]
of the most elementary 'ideological literacy' and could therefore be a relevant characteristic of a distinct segment of the electorate that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

The influence of a specific category of the variable under scrutiny must always be compared to the reference category of the same variable, which has always zero as a regression coefficient. Suppose we find a statistically significant negative regression coefficient\(^{10}\) for a specific category of an independent variable. This means that the probability that an individual in that category will consider him/herself as politically powerless is smaller than that of individuals belonging to the reference category of the same variable. The R-coefficients\(^{11}\) in the tables can be interpreted as partial correlation coefficients, reflecting the strength of the effect of the corresponding independent variable on the dependent variable after controlling for the influence of all the other variables in the equation.

The independent variable which is of central interest to us is of course “voting behaviour”. In contrast to the bivariate explorations, in which this variable was always dichotomous, we prefer a more diversified operationalisation in the multivariate models. Those who do not vote for Vlaams Blok are now divided into three subcategories: first the voters of the three traditional political families (Socialists (SP), Christian Democrats (CVP), and Liberals (VLD)), second the supporters of the newer parties (Greens (AGALEV) and Flemish Nationalists (VU)) and third those who voted blank/invalid or could not/did not answer.

Looking at the results in Tables 4 and 5, we immediately notice that the multivariate analysis also yields a remarkable difference between the situation in 1991 and that in 1995. While the voters of Vlaams Blok in 1991 are not significantly more subject to 'external political powerlessness' than the electorate of the traditional parties (B= 0.1023; sig.= 0.5238), four years later the situation has completely changed. In 1995 significantly more supporters of the Vlaams Blok feel politically powerless than the voters of the traditional parties, the reference category

\(^{10}\) The coefficients of a logistic regression are estimated by an iterative maximum likelihood procedure. To obtain those estimations we use the 'advanced statistics' module of SPSS. They vary between –1 and +1.

\(^{11}\) \[\text{Waldstatistic} = -2 \times \frac{(B/\text{standard error } B)^2}{-2.LL_0}\] in which the Wald statistic= \((B/\text{standard error } B)^2\), \(v\) = number of parameter to be estimated and \(LL_0\) = loglikelihood of the reference model which contains only the intercept. Since the formula
(B = 0.7057; sig. = 0.0002). Since other research has pointed out that loyalty to Vlaams Blok is extremely strong and given that panel respondents have participated in both surveys we can again conclude that voting for an extreme-right wing party, such as the Vlaams Blok, gradually produces feelings of external political powerlessness, at least in the Flemish situation.

mentioned above by definition yields a positive sign, the R value will get the same sign as the corresponding logistic regression coefficient.
Variables in the Flemish logistic regression equation ISPO-1991 (indicator contrast)

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Pseudo $R^2 = 0.17$

Table 4: Results of the logistic regression model for 'external political powerlessness' (ISPO 1991 - indicator contrast)
Table 5: Results of the logistic regression model for 'external political powerlessness' (ISPO 1995 - indicator contrast)

Variables in the Flemish logistic regression equation ISPO-1995 (indicator contrast)

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<td>1666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTANT</td>
<td>-1.6973</td>
<td>.0000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R² = 0.16
Conclusion

After a critical evaluation of the existing research concerning the relation between political alienation and extreme-right voting behaviour, we found that there is a great need for clarification of the premises which underlie the attempts to operationalise both variables and to establish a causal link between both.

With respect to the operationalisation, we came to the conclusion that the multidimensionality of the notion “political alienation” is often overlooked or treated without due caution. Recent research shows, for example, that attitudes regarding political authorities do evolve more rapidly than attitudes regarding the democratic regime (Inglehart, 1999: 255). Also some authors fail to make a distinction between the attitude of alienation and its conative or behavioural consequences, in spite of the fact that this insight was already widespread in the sixties and seventies (Finiftel, 1972).

As far as the causal direction is concerned, we have to question a prevailing consensus. Almost all researchers use alienation to predict extreme-right voting behaviour. This is less than obvious because reversing the relationship would be more in accordance with Hume’s temporal condition of causality. We show that both a bivariate and a multivariate (longitudinal) analysis of Flemish panel data support the hypothesis that Vlaams Blok-voters gradually develop feeling of political powerlessness. This finding casts some doubt on the effectiveness of the policy of isolation (cf. ‘cordon sanitaire’) which the Belgian political establishment pursue with respect to the Vlaams Blok.
Bibliografie

- Thijssen, P. (2000) Political powerlessness is not the reverse of political efficacy, paper presented at the XVIIIth World Congress of Political Science, Québec City, August 1-5.
APPENDIX

1) SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES (ISPO-PIOP, 1998; Thijssen, 1999: 326)

- LEVEL OF FORMAL EDUCATION
  1: lower - lower secondary
  2: higher secondary
  3: higher

- OCCUPATIONAL STATUS
  1: retired
  2: unemployed
  3: housewife
  4: other non-active
  5: salaried
  6: self-employed without personnel
  7: self-employed with personnel
  8: other active

- CHURCH INVOLVEMENT
  1: not religious
  2: Free-thinking
  3: other religion (other than Christian)
  4: marginal Christian
  5: irregular churchgoing Christian
  6: Regular churchgoing Christian

- MEMBERSHIP OF LABOUR UNION
  1: yes
  2: no

- OCCUPATIONAL STATUS
  1: retired
  2: unemployed
  3: housewife
  4: other non-active
  5: salaried
  6: self-employed without personnel
  7: self-employed with personnel
  8: other active

- AGE
  1: < 25
  2: 26-35
  3: 36-45
  4: 46-55
  5: 56-65
  6: > 65

- VERENIGINGSLIDMAATSCHAP
  1: ja
  2: neen

- AGE
  1: < 25
  2: 26-35
  3: 36-45
  4: 46-55
  5: 56-65
  6: > 65

- GENDER
  1: male
  2: female

- NET MONTHLY FAMILY INCOME
  1: < 60,000
  2: 60,000-100,000
  3: > 100,000

  missings imputed
  'nearest neighbor hot-deck approach'

- VERENIGINGSLIDMAATSCHAP
  1: ja
  2: neen

- PROVINCE OF RESIDENCE
  (FLANDERS)
  1: Antwerpen
  2: Vlaams-Brabant
  3: Limburg
  4: Oost-Vlaanderen
  5: West-Vlaanderen
  6: Waals-Brabant

- SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL CLASS
  1: Working class
  2: Lower middle class
  3: Upper middle class
  4: Upper class
2) GENERAL ATTITUDE

- COGNITIVE DEPRIVATION (Thijssen, 1999: 595-602)

- These days, things are so complicated I don't know what to do.
- Nowadays I don't understand what is happening anymore.
- Nowadays everything is changing so fast, I don't know how to behave anymore.
- Everything is so confused these days, I really don't know how to handle things.

FL: Cronbach's alpha=.89
confirmatory factor analysis based on polychorics:
  factor loadings: .85; .83; .81; .89
  fit: $\chi^2$ (2 df.)= 7.46 (p=.02); RMSEA=.04

3) VALUE ORIENTATIONS

- UTILITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM (Thijssen, 1999: 603-609)

- Humanity, brotherhood, solidarity are all nonsense. Everybody has to take care of themselves first and defend their own interests.
- Because you always have to compromise when you deal with other people, it is best not to have too much to do with them.
- What counts is money and power, the rest is just hot air.
- Striving for personal success is more important than providing for good relations with your fellowman.

FL: Cronbach's alpha=.77
confirmatory factor analysis based on polychorics:
  factor loadings: .77; .77; .72; .69
  fit: $\chi^2$ (2 df.)= 3.26 (p=.20); RMSEA=.02

- AUTHORITARIANISM (Thijssen, 1999: 610-616)

- Obedience and respect for authority are the two most important virtues children have to learn.
- Young people are often rebellious, but they will have to adapt to society as they get older.
- What we need the most, more than laws and institutions, is a few courageous and devoted leaders in whom the people can trust.
- People can be divided into two distinct classes; the weak and the strong.
- Most of our social problems would be solved, if we could somehow get rid of the immoral, crooked people.
- Everybody would be better off, if people would talk less and work harder.

FL: Cronbach's alpha=.73
confirmatory factor analysis based on polychorics:
  factor loadings: .59; .58; .69; .70; .65