INTRODUCTION

Extreme right parties are often referred to as protest parties and their voters are often described as protest voters (Stouthuysen, 1993). It is assumed that extreme right voters have specific, cynical attitudes towards politics. They do not vote in favour of extreme right parties, but against all other parties and the political institutions. Their voting behaviour is in other words inspired by dissatisfaction and not by the party’s ideology. They want to show discontent with ‘the’ political elite by voting for a party that is perceived as an outcast in the political arena. This role as outsider is not only based on the extreme right parties’ discourse against the established parties, but is also influenced by the criticism of the political establishment towards extreme right parties. Because of the stigmatisation of the extreme right parties by the established parties, they are potentially attractive for voters who wish to cast a protest vote.

In this article, we address the question if votes for the Vlaams Blok, by Kitschelt (1995) described as a master case of the new radical right, can be considered as protest votes. In the first paragraph, we introduce some research on the research question of an extreme right vote as a protest or ideological one\(^1\). We present our criticism on the research and do some methodological suggestions. The second paragraph of this article contains our analyses. After presenting in a first part the main ideological lines of the Vlaams Blok, we analyse the motives of the Vlaams Blok electorate to vote for the extreme right party. Besides, we inquire into the agreement of the electorate with the party’s positions.

\(^1\) It is without saying that in the scope of this paper, we cannot give an exhaustive overview of the research on this topic. We try however to give in a brief outline of the research the general ideas and concepts.
MODELS TO EXPLAIN EXTREME RIGHT SUPPORT

Research on the question whether an extreme right vote is an ideological one, generally starts from two different hypotheses (Billiet & De Witte, 1995). What we refer to as the ideological voting hypothesis states that the voter’s choice for an extreme right party is inspired by substantive consideration about the party’s programme. This model is attributable to Downs (1957) study An economic theory of democracy: voters are assumed to know the extreme right party’s position on a number of issues and to support these. Hence, ideological voters agree with the points of view of the party. The second approach explains right-wing voting mainly as an expression of protest. In this view, a vote for the extreme right-wing expresses disagreement with the way politics is conducted and discontent about the political institutions. According to this hypothesis, the programme and the ideas of the right-wing party are not so important, rather an aversion to politics and the political institutions is the main reason for extreme right voting. Protest voters cast their vote to express disenchantment with the political system or with the political elite.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of conceptual framework about our research subject. Different authors use different terms and definitions for the different models. Billiet and De Witte (1995) for instance distinguish the protest voting hypothesis from the rational choice hypothesis. The former assumes that extreme right voters do not support the party as such, but are simply against the other parties ‘which are making a mess of politics’. The latter presumes that the voter’s choice is inspired by substantive considerations about the programme of the party. Van der Brug e.a. (2000) on the other hand, see the protest voter as a rational voter whose objective is to demonstrate rejection of all other parties. Hence, they mix the distinction made by Billiet and De Witte (1995).

Besides, only little thought has been given to the theoretical elaboration and the operationalisation of the two models that may be distinguished. Most studies analyse the tenability of the models by taking attitudes as predictors. The hypothesis of an extreme right-vote as a protest vote, is then researched by the relation between support of a right-wing populist party and feelings of political powerlessness (Billiet & De Witte, 1995). Respondents with an high score on this attitude are convinced that voting has no sense because political parties impose their own will and politicians never listen to the people’s needs. To test the protest voting hypothesis, Billiet and De Witte select besides political powerlessness two more scales as predictors, both related to Srole’s (1956) concept of anomie: utilitarian individualism and social isolation. Next to feelings of political powerlessness, Elchardus and Smits (2002) distinguish the rejection of the principle of representation as predictors. They find however that both anti-political and anti-democratic feelings are part of a broad cluster of opinions that forms

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2 More hypotheses on voting behaviour can be distinguished. Voters may have the most diverse reasons for voting for a particular party. One can for instance decide to give a strategic vote or to give a vote to a party because of the charisma of a person on the party list. Regarding our research question however, particularly the two hypotheses stated here are distinguished.
the so-called *new socio-cultural cleavage*. Hence, the sentiments exceed according to them the level of a protest and are part of an ideological and political aspect.

Thijssen (2001) argues that a distinction should be made between *external political powerlessness* and *feelings of distrust towards the political elite*. According to Thijssen, one should specify to which political referent(s) the feelings of political alienation are related: the political regime or the political elite. Yet, due to a lack of items in the survey he used and his lack of operationalisation of the feelings of distrust towards the political elite, his distinction is not very clear. Contrary to most research, Thijssen also argues that feelings of political powerlessness do not cause a vote for the Vlaams Blok, but are an effect of it. Voting for the Vlaams Blok leads to the development of feelings of political powerlessness. This corresponds with the work of van der Brug (2003). Van der Brug defines *political efficacy* and *political cynicism* as variables that stem from the protest voting model. While the first refers to the voter and his lack of influence, the second has to do with the politicians and their work.

Just like Thijssen (2001), van der Brug (2003) finds that both feelings of cynicism and feelings of a lack of influence are correlated with the LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn) vote. Yet, he rejects the models that assume an effect of cynicism and efficacy onto voting for the LPF. Preferences for the LPF are not caused by discontent, but the effect is reversed.

In their study on the Republikaner, Lubbers and Scheepers (2000) confirm the hypotheses with respect to protest voting on the conclusion that people who perceive deprivation in present situation or expect to do so in the future are more likely to vote for the extreme right party they believe that the political system is *dysfunctional*.

So, different authors use different predictors to test the protest voting hypothesis. The same holds for the testing of the hypothesis that states that an extreme right vote is an ideological one. Generally, a set of attitudes associated with issues that are part of the extreme right party’s programme are used. Besides a *negative attitude towards immigrants*, Billiet and De Witte (1995) use amongst others the following variables: *authoritarianism*, *materialism*, *an aversion towards free expression of opinions in public* and a *positive attitude towards a power division in favour of Flanders*. They conclude that a negative attitude towards immigrants is the best predictor for the likelihood of voting for the Vlaams Blok and contrast the Vlaams Blok electorate of the voters of all other parties. Hence they confirm the ideological voting hypothesis.

In addition to attitudes towards immigrants, van der Brug e.a. (2000) include in their comparative analysis of seven extreme right parties the *subjectively perceived distance between a voter and the party on a left-right continuum*. This is the proximity between the position of the party on the one hand and the position of the respondent on the other hand. Ideological voting then implies that the closer a party is situated to someone’s own position in terms of left-right, the more attractive this party will be for the voter concerned. This is exactly the conclusion the authors make in their comparative international study: policy preferences exert a strong effect on preferences for extreme right parties.
According to us, it is however obvious that the self-position of the respondents on the left-right scale, corresponds with the position of their preferred party and hence correlates with the electoral attractiveness of a party. Such a scale seems like an incorrect measurement for policy preferences.

Our main criticism on the studies mentioned above, is their use of attitudes as predictors of voting behaviour. According to us, it is erroneous to conclude from these studies that voters of extreme right parties are expressing their full approval with the party’s programme or ideology, as assumed by the ideological voting model. A correlation between for instance anti-immigrant sentiments and an extreme right vote is no evidence for an ideological vote. After all, it does not prove that this attitude is decisive for an extreme right vote. The same holds for a correlation between an attitude as political powerlessness and an extreme right vote. The presence of feelings of political powerlessness does not mean that a voter gives his/her vote to extreme right out of protest. Vice versa, a lack of this attitude does not indicate that an extreme right vote is not motivated by protest. Billiet and De Witte (1995) for instance found that while political inefficacy was irrelevant in discriminating the Vlaams Blok voters from all other electorates in a logistic regression analysis, at least a substantial minority of the Vlaams Blok voters expressed feelings of powerlessness and protest in an open question about motives.

Above that, feelings of political powerlessness (an attitude that is taken as predictor to evaluate the protest voting hypothesis) and a negative attitude towards immigrants (an attitude that is taken as predictor to evaluate the ideological voting hypothesis) often coincide. It appears that negative attitudes towards immigrants correlate with feelings of political powerlessness (Coffé, 2002a). Billiet e.a. (1993) conclude that for the Vlaams Blok voters, powerlessness often has a clear face, namely the immigrants and the migration policy. They think that politicians are more concerned about the immigrants than for them. This convergence of feelings of political powerlessness and negative attitudes towards immigrants, makes it difficult to distinguish the policy voting model from the ideological voting model.

We argue that both the ideological voting model and the protest voting model should be conceptualised in terms of the motives underlying electoral choices and not in terms of the attitudes of the electorate. We will examine the arguments that the voters mention themselves for their electoral behaviour. It is only on the basis of the question to motives that one can know whether people vote for a party out of protest or out of ideological considerations. This method however has also some disadvantages. Sometimes, respondents are not able to put into words why they vote for a party. Above that, it is a rough procedure that only leads to ordinal classifications. Yet, these disadvantages do not weigh upon the knowledge on the reason of the voting behaviour that the question to motives gives us. Hence, we distinguish both the ideological and protest voting model clearly from what may be referred to as a sociological model. The latter is the point of departure in much (extreme right)
electoral analyses on voting behaviour. It focuses on the socio-demographic and socio-cultural variables that correlate with an extreme right vote. Starting from the motives of the voters, we argue that protest voters do not choose in favour of the extreme right party, but against all other parties. Their dissatisfaction with political institutions and actors makes them vote for the extreme right. They also motivate their electoral behaviour as such. Ideological voters choose the party for their ideology or the policy they pursue. Voters motivate in that case their party choice with items from the party’s programme. Although we can clearly distinguish both models theoretically, the data regarding the motives only have a relative value: they learn us which motives have played more or less when considering an extreme right party choice. This means that possibly both ideological and protest motives play. Moreover, the distinction between the two models is partly a false one since opposition to the political regime belongs to the core of the new extreme right parties’ ideology (Stouthuysen, 1994). Hence, motivating a vote for an extreme right party as protest corresponds with the populist discourse of the extreme right and may thus partly be seen as an ideological vote since it is in correspondence with the party’s ideology. An alternative manner to investigate whether an extreme right vote is an ideological one, is to look at the correlation between the electorate’s viewpoint regarding some matters of policy and the party’s programme. In that case, we need to know the electorate’s opinion about concrete policy propositions of the party. The disadvantage of such a survey is however the lack of direct indicator of a protest vote. Supposed is then that if votes for extreme right parties are largely protest votes, one must find a weak effect of ideology, although in case that such a weak effect is found, other explanations may exist. But one conceivable finding is without ambiguity: if the effect of ideology is strong for the electoral attractiveness of extreme right parties, votes for these parties cannot be considered protest votes.

**THE CASE OF THE VLAAMS BLOK**

In this paragraph, we investigate which of the two models presented above holds with regard to the electorate of the Vlaams Blok. Before turning to our analyses, we give a description of the Vlaams Blok and its main ideological viewpoints. This description is mainly based on existing literature. As the Vlaams Blok is a successful extreme right party, an extensive quantity of research about the party is available. Next to the existing literature, we look at the party’s election programmes. Most studies on party ideology use election programmes as data for analyses (Mudde, 2000). Programmes have the advantage that they are, in general, officially endorsed by the members of the party and, consequently, can be considered to represent and express the policy collectively adopted by the party. Nevertheless,
some authors take the view that election programmes are not satisfactory, because out of tactical considerations they do not show the true face of the parties. Election programmes of political parties are aimed at, among other things, the attraction of voters and the enhancement of the profile of the party. One method to determine the ‘real’ ideology of (extreme right) parties has been to focus on attention on the ‘political origins’ of the party leaders and officials instead of on the party programmes (van Donselaar, 1991). To overcome the danger of being stuck with only the front stage of the extreme right parties, Mudde (2000) has chosen to analyse not only primarily externally oriented party literature, but also party material whose primary orientation is internal: party papers. Using both internal and external literature, the (more radical) back-stage as well as the front-stage of a party can be shown.

THE VLAAMS BLOK’S IDEOLOGY

The Vlaams Blok participated in elections for the first time in 1978. In its first years, the Vlaams Blok remained a small splinter party that recruited its members from the ranks of activists in Flemish nationalist organizations with which it was in close contact. The party set out to operate as a zweepartij (literally ‘whip party’) of the Volksunie (VU). Its aim was to put other parties, in particular the Volksunie, under electoral pressure to adjust their policies to ‘the people’s wishes’ (Mudde, 2000). At that time, the VU was the dominant Flemish nationalist party and, in the eyes of the Vlaams Blok, it was making too many concessions to French-speakers. The Vlaams Blok strove primarily for the independence of Flanders. This nationalist programme gave the party the stable but small support of between one and two per cent of voters.

In the mid 1980s the Vlaams Blok began to change. New members, leaders of nationalist youth and student organizations such as the present member of the Flemish Parliament Filip Dewinter, entered the party leadership and the Vlaams Blok organized its first conference devoted to the migration issue. The success of the Dutch Centrumpartij and the French Front National in mobilizing people against foreign workers provided a model that the Vlaams Blok was keen to imitate. In addition, the link between nationalist Flemish separatism and a tough stance on migration is obvious when the ethnic nationalism is considered.

The party conducted a fierce anti-immigrant campaign in the 1987 parliamentary elections. The Vlaams Blok doubled its number of seats in Parliament – from one to two – and won for the first time in its history a seat in the Belgian Senate by using a new slogan, ‘Our own people first!’. This slogan was based on the catchphrase of the French Front National, ‘Les Français d’abord’. At the same time, tension began to grow over the choice between prioritizing the migration issue, which was electorally rewarding, and the original Flemish-nationalist ideology. Those who wanted to focus on Flemish nationalism accused Dewinter and others of being Lepenists (supporters of the French Front National leader Le Pen) and of having sidelined the Flemish question in favour of the anti-immigrant issue
(Mudde, 1995). In the end, the Vlaams Blok chose to follow the more electorally rewarding strategy, but it combined it with the original nationalism (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002).

In recent years, the Vlaams Blok has presented itself in a populist way on racism and anti-establishment issues, and this has obviously been a success. At the latest federal elections in 2003, the party gained about 18 per cent of the Flemish votes.

Hereafter, we look at the main topics of the Vlaams Blok programme.

**Nationalism**

Striving for the independence of Flanders, is a central topic in the party’s ideology. Consequently, this theme gets most attention (counted in the number of pages as well as in the number of texts) (Spruyt, 1995), both in externally and internally oriented literature (Mudde, 2000). The party strives for an independent Flemish state with Brussels as capital. For a long time, the independent Flemish state was only considered but a first step in the process of creating a Dutch Federation. The party programme of 1991 states that the independence of Flanders is not the end point: “Flanders and the Netherlands should aim for a further integration via a network of conventions.” (Vlaams Blok, 1991, p.10).

**Migration**

The party considers the ethnic community to be the main organizational unit for groups of people, which means that it rejects a multicultural Belgian state. It has a xenophobic attitude to foreigners, who are regarded as a threat. During the nineties, the so-called 70 points programme, analogous with the Cinquante mesures contribuant à régler le problème des immigrés of Le Pen, was the guidebook of the Vlaams Blok to solve the so-called migration problem. In this plan, the party devoted itself to the complete closure of borders for non-European immigrants and the application of the ‘own people first’-principle in all policy domains. Above that, an operational and immediately performable plan was worked out for the repatriation of non-European foreigners to their country of origin. The 70 points programme was revised in 1996 and the option of assimilation of non-European immigrants was introduced (Mudde, 2000). In 2000, the party moved the 70 points plan aside without taking distance of its content (Deweerdt, 2001).

In the party programme of the 2003 elections, the Vlaams Blok states that only those who are not eligible for asylum or stay illegal in our country, should be repatriated. Criminal foreigners should get deported. Regarding the migration issue, we also read in the party programme that the migration stop should be watertight; that the system of reuniting of the family should be revised and that the criminality of immigrants should get researched.

Contrary to Kitschelts (1995) definition of the new radical right party, we argue that the market liberalism is not a main issue in the extreme right parties’ programmes and particularly in the Vlaams Blok discourse. Hence, we do not discuss the economical viewpoints of the Vlaams Blok as we limit ourselves to the main themes that the Vlaams Blok claims. Above that, their economical discourse is rather economical nationalist than neoliberal as Kitschelts states (Coffé, 2004).
Security and criminality

According to the Vlaams Blok, driving back criminality should be the top priority of every government. The party demands a severe policy. To make the cities liveable, a policy of zero tolerance is essential for the party. This would mean that the society would always and immediately act against every form of criminality, but also against vandalism, illegal dumping, unoccupied dwellings and roaming youngsters.

The party makes a connection between crime and migration: “Street crime, drug trafficking, car theft, prostitution, burglaries and homejackings can often be blamed on foreign youngsters and gangs. The number of second- and third-generation Eastern European and Islamic immigrants involved in crime is alarming” (Vlaams Blok, 2003, p.28).

Ethical values

The Vlaams Blok supports the family, has a negative attitude towards homosexuality and rejects abortion and euthanasia. It likes to present itself as the only defender of traditional values: “[…] Besides, we defeat the Christian democrats in a consequent defence of some values; values that we consider as the pillars of a healthy society.” (Vlaams Blok, 2003, p.34).

In search for a softer image in order to attract more voters, the Vlaams Blok presented itself as the family party (Lubbers, 2001). That the family is very dear to the party, should be shown by the family friendly climate that it wants to create, for instance in its claims for a pay for the housewife or family father.

Populist anti-party sentiments

The Vlaams Blok attacks the immoral behaviour of the established Flemish parties. It accuses them of furthering only their own party interests and of betraying the interests of the Flemish people. No distinction is made between the various Flemish parties; all of them have ‘dirt on their hands’ and all of them are inimical to the Vlaams Blok. Above that, the established parties are being criticized for being ‘anti-Flemish’. Flemish politicians are presented as the lackeys of Walloon parties and are accused of ignoring Flemish interests and only serving Belgian, i.e. Walloon, interests.

While the other parties purportedly pursue only their own egocentric interests, the Vlaams Blok claims to present the vox populi: “We say what you think.”. According to the Vlaams Blok, the people should take part in decision making (Vlaams Blok, 2003). The party chooses for more participation of the population by organising binding referenda about important issues.

Although the issue of foreign immigration is the main issue in the Vlaams Blok propaganda, it is not a single-issue party. In its programme, the Vlaams Blok combines various important issues, such as nationalism, criticism on the (established) parties, the family and criminality. The Vlaams Blok uses
the different issues in order to woo different groups of voters. Ultimately, nationalism remains at the heart of the party’s ideology: it is the destruction of Belgium and the creation of an independent Flanders that is the party’s pre-eminent goal (Mudde, 1995).

**DOES THE VLAAMS BLOK ELECTORATE VOTE IDEOLOGICALLY?**

To answer our research question, two different analyses are presented. The first takes the motives of the electorate as a starting point, while the second looks at the agreement of the electorate with the party’s standpoints. Hence, we use the two methods which are in our point of view, as discussed above, the two most appropriate ways to answer our question whether a vote for extreme right is an ideological one.

**MOTIVES**

For our first analysis, we rely on the report *Motives for party choice* of Swyngedouw e.a. (2001) and on the overview of research about the Vlaams Blok of Van Craen and Swyngedouw (2002). Both papers content data of voters’ subjective motivations which are collected in exit-polls organized at the elections of 1995 and 1999. The advantage of these data is that they are collected at the moment of the voting act itself. As a result, memory distortion is small if not non-existent. At the moment of questioning, the respondents do not know the results of the elections and are not influenced by comments or explanations by politicians, journalists or scientists. Nor do exit polls leave the possibility for a reinterpretation of the motives of voting behaviour in function of the party’s progress, loss or status-quo compared to previous elections. Yet, the most important advantage for our research question is that in the exit poll surveys, respondents are explicitly asked to motivate their vote, which is not the case in the general Belgian election surveys, except from the election survey of 1991. Open questions were used in the surveys and the respondents were able to give different motives.

We will investigate the Vlaams Blok voters’ motives for their voting behaviour and compare these to all voters.

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4 We would have preferred to perform our own analyses, but unfortunately we did not get the data of the exit polls of the ISPO (Institute for Social and Political Opinion Research) to do so.
5 In 1991, no exit poll was organized. Hence, the data of 1991 mentioned in table 1 stem from the post-electoral survey in which an open-ended question to motivations of the voting behaviour was asked. Note that there was a time span of three to eight months between the elections and the inquiry.
Table 1: Motives for voting behaviour (percentages)\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>1991 Vlaams Blok</th>
<th>1995 Vlaams Blok</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>1999 Vlaams Blok</th>
<th>Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migrants and illegal people</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-politics (protest)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemish nationalism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communitarian issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall programme</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal of policy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Ideological voting model**

In 1999, 27 per cent of the Vlaams Blok electorate motivated its party choice by the migration theme. The migration issue is the most important motive for people to vote for the Vlaams Blok and it distinguishes the Vlaams Blok electorate clearly from the total Flemish electorate. It is an important selling point for the party. Although the party itself does not want to be referred to as such, the label anti-immigrant party proves well chosen. During the nineties, the importance of the migration issue as a motive for a vote for the Vlaams Blok however decreased. While almost half of the Vlaams Blok electorate chose for the Vlaams Blok because of the migration issue in 1991, the portion for this motive decreased to a little more than a quarter in 1999. The importance of the criminality theme on the other hand increased during the nineties. Initially, almost no extreme right voter was concerned with this topic, but the importance of the issue grew and became an important pool of attraction for the party. It also distinguishes the extreme right electorate from the other electorates, since only one per cent of the Flemish voters motivates his/her electoral behaviour on the basis of the issue of criminality. The growing importance of the criminality theme for the extreme right voters, is in line with the growing attention that the party gave to this topic during the nineties. The importance of the overall programme also increased. Since the middle of the nineties, almost one out of ten Vlaams Blok voters motivates his/her choice by referring to the general party programme. According to Swyngedouw (2000) the programme support may come from the hard line supporters of the party, as well as from people who prefer for reasons of social desirability to refer to the vaguer and more neutral programme than the hotly ‘disputed’ migrant issue. Regarding the elections of 1995, Swyngedouw e.a. (1997) assume that the importance of the general programme as a motive for a vote for the Vlaams Blok is due to the fact that the issues belonging to the core-business of the Vlaams Blok, did not get many attention during the elections campaign. Hence, the voters based themselves on the general image that

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\(^6\) We do not have the percentages of the total population for 1991.
they had of the party. However, the attention that the media gave to extreme right themes grew during the nineties (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004), while the importance of the overall programme as a motive kept about the same. We argue that the increased importance of the general programme in 1995 and 1999 compared to 1999 is due to the way the party introduces itself more and more. The party rejects the name one issue-party and the term programme-party frequently appears in recent party literature (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002).

Significantly more voters of the Vlaams Blok than average motivate their party choice on the basis of the community question or on the theme of Flemish-nationalism. The Vlaams Blok voters who motivate their party choice on these issues are however only a small minority of the electorate. Even though it is a central topic in the ideology of the Vlaams Blok, it only plays a minor role as motive for an extreme right vote. The number of electors of the Flemish-nationalist party Volksunie mentioning Flemish nationalism as a reason for their vote, is higher (11 per cent in 1999, compared to 4 per cent of the Vlaams Blok electorate). It seems that the VU was the leading nationalist party in 1999. Yet, we found that on the meso and macro level, the Flemish-nationalism has been of great importance for the success of the Vlaams Blok (Coffé, 2004). From its origin, the party could build on the radical right wing within the Flemish-nationalism and consequently had an ideological formed basis and structure. On a social macro level, the strong regional feelings in Flanders and the historical breeding ground of the Flemish-nationalism, are important aspects in the success of the Vlaams Blok. Through the connection with an existing political-cultural tradition, extreme right could profile itself with themes that are accepted by a large public.

Self interest as a reason for voting is also a reason common to Vlaams Blok voters, whereas the total number of electors mentioning this as a reason is limited. The high percentage is probably due to the high number of Vlaams Blok voters motivating their voting behaviour with varieties on the ‘Our own people first’-slogan and which are included in the self-interest category (Swyngedouw, 2001). The interpretation would than be that they vote for the party for their own interest or benefit as a member of the own population.

We can conclude that in general, the extreme right electorate motivates its election behaviour by the themes that belong to the core-business of the party, namely migration and criminality. Furthermore, the main thematic motives of the Vlaams Blok voters, migrants and criminality, are of no importance for the electorate of other parties. There are specific reasons to vote for the Vlaams Blok. These are the party’s exclusive selling points.

These findings correspond with the conclusion of Billiet e.a. (2001) that a negative attitude towards immigrants and a strong repressive attitude towards criminals are characteristic of the Vlaams Blok electorate (Billiet e.a., 2001).
Protest voting model

After the migration issue, protest is the most important motive for the Vlaams Blok electorate (17 per cent). These voters want to protest against the way politics is handled or against the political class. They do not explicitly opt for a non-democratic system, but it is merely an indication of an emotional rejection, disappointment, revenge and protest against the existing system and its political organizations (Swyngedouw, 2001). Some of them believe that they can hit the established parties by voting for these parties. An extreme right voter who voted for the liberal party before, motivated his extreme right vote as follows: “Especially to make the others open their eyes and to scare them.” (Billiet e.a., 1993, p.226). Others do not explicitly refer to protest, but state that a general disappointment in politics is their motive to vote for the Vlaams Blok. Hence, because of the used coding scheme, it is not clear if we need to interpret the anti-politics vote as voting for the Vlaams Blok because it is an anti-system party (i.e. its politics will completely change the system) or just as an anti-politics act (i.e. what the Vlaams Blok does is not important, the symbolic act of voting for it is what counts) (Swyngedouw, 2001). This indicates our remark that a protest vote can partly be seen as an ideological vote, since the Vlaams Blok, as well as other extreme right parties throughout Western Europe (Betz, 1994), has consistently profiled itself as being ‘anti-party’.

Although protest is an important motive for the Vlaams Blok electorate, the importance of it declined during the nineties. This corresponds with Betz’ (2002) assumption that voters will initially vote for extreme right out of protest or curiosity, but eventually this curiosity will decline and protest will particularly be expressed by staying absent at elections. In the long run, voters only support a new party when it shows a certain efficiency. Betz’ thesis indicates the importance to take the success of an extreme right party in account when explaining its electoral results. Hence, we argue that research on the success of extreme right should make a distinction between the growth of an extreme right party and the persistence of it. In our study on the Vlaams Blok and the Belgian Front National (Coffé, 2004), we conclude that at a different stage in their success, different elements explain the electoral results of the parties.

Regarding protest voting, it should be noted that anti-politics is also an important motive for the electorate of the green party Agalev (meanwhile with the new name Groen!). In 1999, nine per cent of the electorate of Agalev, motivated its choice as a protest vote. It is true that green parties may also be regarded as political outsiders. They are critical about the way politics is conducted. They plead for more chances for the individual citizens to express their political opinions and to participate directly in the process of political decision making. As such, they oppose themselves against the more traditional parties and are thus an attractive alternative for voters who wish to cast a protest vote. Hence, while extreme right and green parties are each others mirror image, both put themselves in the opposite of the old, established politics and cast protest votes. However, while the protest motive is directly linked with a vote for the Vlaams Blok, it goes via the party choice as a strategic one for Agalev (Swyngedouw e.a., 2001). Indeed, the electorate of Agalev is the one that motivates its party choice.
more than average by a strategic consideration (5.2 per cent). It is of lesser importance for the Vlaams Blok electorate (3.9 per cent).

Furthermore, contrary to the electorate of the Vlaams Blok, the Agalev voters do not feel political powerlessness (Billet e.a., 2001). While both the extreme right and the green voters are overrepresented in the electorate that motivates its party choice by protest, the latter do not have feelings of political powerlessness. This conclusion confirms our argument that feelings of political powerlessness may not be seen as an indicator of a protest vote.

The importance of the aspect *renewal of policy* grew over the years. In 1999, 15 per cent of the Vlaams Blok voters voted for the party because they wanted a new policy. This may also refer to a protest vote. After all, it shows that they vote for the party because they are in favour of another policy and thus against the parties who pursue the policy. Yet, this may rather refer to a vote for an opposition party, than to a real protest vote. The results show that voters of other opposition parties in 1999 motivated their choice more than average by this aspect. Almost 20 per cent of the liberal VLD electorate, in that time in the opposition, motivated its party choice by the need for a new policy. Of the Volksunie and Agalev, respectively 14 and 11 per cent of the electorate did so.

The growing percentage of the Vlaams Blok voters who motivate their voting behaviour by a demand for a new policy, may indicate that a growing part of the electorate sees the extreme right party as an acceptable policy party. The party also presents itself more and more as such. Over the years, the party’s discourse became milder and govern became a target (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002). The previous president and founder of the party, Karel Dillen, argued that the Vlaams Blok was a radical party that did not want to make any concession (Verstraete, 1992). In 1991, the party got offered a minister post in the proportionally composed Flemish government, but it refused (Deschouwer, 2001).

Meanwhile, leading figures of the Vlaams Blok state that the party is ready to take policy responsibility (Buelens & Deschouwer, 2002).

In general, we can conclude that the information about the motives supports each of the two hypotheses. One of the central issues of the right-wing party’s campaign, the migration theme, plays a major role in the voters’ motives. Besides, a smaller but significant part of the voters expresses a protest motive. The Vlaams Blok appears to be the party of the *negative* selling propositions. In correspondence with the party’s discourse, the Vlaams Blok voter is particularly *against* something: against immigrants, against (rising) criminality and against the political system. And if the voter is in favour of something, then it is his/her self interest. The extreme right voter is This corresponds with the finding of Mayer and Perrineau (1992) regarding the French FN electorate. They conclude: “The Lepenist vote of 1988 appears not to be a vote for the National Front, nor a vote for its leader, nor a vote for the extreme right. It is more a vote *against* things: against immigrants and delinquents who
are but the scapegoats of their fears, against the political establishment and the parties of government.” (p.134).

POLICY ISSUES

Our second analysis is based on a survey conducted during the campaign of the 2003 elections by the Flemish public broadcaster (VRT) in cooperation with the research bureau TNS Media and the Free University of Brussels (VUB) and the University of Antwerp (UA). The survey was used in a television programme *Do the voting test*. By giving their opinion on 36 statements (mostly yes or no-questions\(^7\)), television viewers could examine which party was ideologically closest to their ideas. Beforehand, a telephone inquiry was conducted by a representative sample of 1022 Flemish respondents. The answers of that sample are used in this paper. The presidents of the different parties gave their opinion on the different statements. Weight coefficients were attributed to the different topics for the different parties according to the attention that the different issues got in the party programmes.

Relying on this survey, we cannot analyse whether a vote for the Vlaams Blok is based on feelings of protest or rather because the electorate agrees with the party’s programme points. We lack a direct indicator of protest voting and can only investigate whether the electorate agrees with the party’s opinions. In order to put the results of the Vlaams Blok in a perspective, we compare the results of the extreme right electorate with those of the total sample. In addition to this, we present the correlation between the electorate of Agalev and the green party’s main programme points. As mentioned above, green parties may, as well as the extreme right parties, be regarded as political outsiders and a part of their electorate motivates its party choice by protest (Swyngedouw e.a., 2001). Yet, these protest votes are different from the extreme right ones. Contrary to the extreme right protest vote, the green protest vote is not seen as an anti-system vote and the question whether the green voter votes ideologically is hardly put. A green protest vote is rather seen as a protest against the social consensus and economical ideas. This corresponds with the green parties’ discourse for more chances for the individual citizens to express their political opinion and to participate directly in the process of political decision-making. They want a better democracy and another economy. Moreover, some studies on the greens in single European countries have shown that green party voters are both highly interested and very active in politics (Müller-Rommel, 1989). The opposite is true for the extreme right voters (Coffé, 2002b).

The dependent variable of our analysis is the party preference and not the party choice as in the analyses of the exit polls. We preferred this variable above party choice, since the survey was

\(^7\) These answering possibilities leave no place for nuance for the respondents. Yet, the parties also have to put clear standpoints in their programmes.
conducted during the campaign of the 2003 elections, while the party choice went back to the voting behaviour in 1999.

In table 2, the nine policy issues that distinguish the Vlaams Blok most from the other parties, are presented. For this selection, we rely on the weight coefficients that were attributed to the different issues and which reflect the attention that the parties give to different themes. The themes where the Vlaams Blok sticks to in its programme are criminality, Flemish independence, migration and ethics. The percentage of the Vlaams Blok electorate that agrees with the party’s viewpoints, is put in bold.

[Insert here table 2]

Table 2 shows that on different topics, the electorate of the Vlaams Blok agrees with the party’s viewpoint. On six of the nine items, more than 70 per cent of the Vlaams Blok electorate agrees with the party’s opinion. This is most clearly the case with regard to the migration topics. About 90 per cent of the electorate agrees with the party’s opinion that new Belgian citizens who commit a crime should loose their Belgian nationality when they commit a criminal offence and more than 85 per cent is against communal voting right for everyone who lives since more than five years in Belgium. The part of the Vlaams Blok electorate that agrees with party’s standpoint on different issues regarding criminality is also large.

Yet, on certain points, the electorate does not agree with the party’s opinion. This is most clearly the case regarding the party’s striving for Flemish independence. Although the independence of Flanders is the main ideological topic of the Vlaams Blok (Mudde, 2000), only 54,6 per cent of the Vlaams Blok electorate states that Flanders should become independent. This corresponds with the conclusion mentioned above that only a small minority of the Vlaams Blok electorate motivates its party choice with this topic. Even more striking is the low agreement of the Vlaams Blok voters with the party’s ethical standpoints, for instance the one towards homosexuality. Whereas the party states in its programme that homosexuals cannot get married, only 20,8 per cent of the voters agrees with this viewpoint. With regard to ethical topics, the electorate does not seem to follow the ideas of the party. For instance, only 41,8 per cent of the electorate agrees with the party’s vision that secondary schools should not have condom machines.

On different points, the Vlaams Blok voters distinguish themselves significantly from the total electorate. This is the case for the independence of Flanders. Although the agreement of the extreme right electorate with the party’s position is rather low (54,5 per cent), the percentage of the total Flemish electorate that is positive towards an independent Flemish region, is significantly lower. With regard to immigrants (conditions to become a Belgian citizen, the communal voting right and the wearing of a headscarf), the Vlaams Blok electorate is also different from the total Flemish electorate.
That the Vlaams Blok voters clearly have a different view with regard to the issue of immigrants, confirms the importance of this theme for the success of the party.

As introduced above, we finally look at the electorate of Agalev and its agreement with the party’s programme. It is assumed that the electorate of green parties generally agrees with the party’s programme. Hence, if the percentages of agreement of the Agalev voters are in the same order as for the extreme right electorate, we can conclude that the extreme right electorate votes ideologically. For the electorate of Agalev\(^8\), we present the four items on immigrants that were also mentioned in table 2. Agalev is positive towards a multicultural society, and we know that regarding attitudes towards immigrants the electorate of Agalev opposes itself to the Vlaams Blok voters (Billiet e.a., 2001). It is however on items regarding the environment, that the green party distinguishes itself most from the other parties. Hence, we add different items about the environment and agriculture. Besides, we look at a programme point concerning development cooperation and the ethical question about the marriage between homosexual persons.

[Insert here table 3]

On six of the ten items, more than 70 per cent of the electorate agrees with the party’s viewpoint. On the \textit{environmental} items, the electorate’s opinion corresponds most with the party’s programme. More than 90 per cent of the voters states that atomic power stations should close and that biological agricultural should get extra funding. The latter also distinguishes the green electorate significantly from the other electorates, since not even 70 present of the Flemish voters is positive towards an increase of the funding for biological agriculture. Regarding Agalev’s \textit{pro-integration stance} and its positive view towards the multicultural society, the agreement of the party’s electorate is rather limited. However, the percentages of the Agalev electorate are significantly different from the ones of the total electorate.

On the \textit{law and order} issues the electorate’s viewpoint is significantly different from the party’s one. For instance, only 22,7 per cent agrees with the statement that under certain circumstances heavy criminals should be able to get released early; 48,7 per cent disagrees with the statement that minors who get in trouble several times should as punishment get confined in a prison for youth. However, these are not main points in Agalev’s programme.

On the overall, the electorate of Agalev agrees to a lesser degree with its party’s programme points than the voters of the Vlaams Blok. Compared to an electorate that is described as an ideological one,

\(^8\) It should be noted that the number of respondents who stated Agalev as their preferred party is rather small.
the voters of extreme right agree more with their party’s viewpoints. Hence, we may confirm our conclusion that a vote for the extreme right party is an ideological one. It should however be noted that the electorate of Agalev distinguishes itself more significantly from the other voters than the extreme right electorate. It seems that the viewpoints of the Vlaams Blok are more common to the Flemish voters than those of Agalev.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we set out to answer the question whether a vote for the Vlaams Blok is an ideological one. We distinguished an ideological voting model from a protest voting one. The former assumes that voters choose for extreme right because they agree with the party’s ideological viewpoints while the latter presumes that extreme right voters particularly express disagreement with the way politics is conducted and discontent about the political institutions. A distinction between these two models is however partly a false one. After all, protest against the political class and institutions, is a central topic in the discourse of extreme right parties. Hence, motivating an extreme right choice by protest corresponds with the ideology of the party.

To answer our question, both surveys about the motives of the electorate and an inquiry on parties’ programme points and the agreement of the party electorates with these viewpoints, were used. Given that most electoral research takes the voting behaviour in terms of values as a starting point, we think that the surveys used in our analyses, are the unique quality of this paper. The survey to motives gives us an idea of the voters’ arguments to choose for a party. The second survey makes it possible to analyse to what extent the electorate agrees with the party’s standpoints. According to us, both surveys are more appropriate to answer our research question than the election studies that measure attitudes and which are used in most analyses.

We found evidence that the ideological voting model holds with regard to a Vlaams Blok vote. Voters often refer to main issues of the Vlaams Blok programme to motivate their electoral behaviour. The strongest determinant of voting for the Vlaams Blok, is the migration theme. Although the importance of the migration matter decreased during the nineties, more than a quarter of the electorate motivates its choice by this theme in 1999. Besides, a high majority of the Vlaams Blok electorate agrees with the party’s position on migration issues. The label anti-immigrant party seems correct for the Vlaams Blok, even if the party claims to have a more central, separatist, issue on their political agenda. Yet, the Flemish nationalism and independence of Flanders only put a minority on to voting for the party. Above that, only 55 per cent of the electorate agrees with the party’s demand for the independence of Flanders.
Besides the migration issue, the topic of criminality is an important motive to vote for the Vlaams Blok. Both the party and its electorate ask for a severe policy towards criminality. While the importance of the migration issue decreased during the nineties, more and more voters motivated their party choice by the topic of criminality. This corresponds with the growing attention that the party gave during the nineties to the criminality theme and underlines the need to distinguish different stages in time when explaining the success of a party. The same holds for the growing importance of the renewal of policy as a motive for a vote for the Vlaams Blok. While the party held a radical discourse at its origin and did not want govern, it introduces itself today as an alternative for the government parties.

The thematic motives given for the Vlaams Blok vote are in accordance with the well-known attitudes of the extreme right electorate (negative sentiments towards immigrants and authoritarianism) and are centred on the Vlaams Blok’s main campaign themes. Above that, they only predict preferences for the extreme right party. Hence, they are unique selling points for the extreme right party.

The study however equally supports the protest voting model. After the migration issue, it is protest that predicts best a preference for the Vlaams Blok. The suggestion that people only vote for the extreme right out of protest however does not hold, as the electorate is likely to support the ideological lines of the party’s programme. Above that, the importance of this motive clearly decreased over the years. The larger the party became, the least important protest became as a motive for a vote for the Vlaams Blok.

To conclude, one can say that the extreme right electorate, as well as the party itself, is a negative one: it is against immigrants, against criminality, against the established parties. Both protest and the party’s ideology explain the success of the Vlaams Blok. That the electorate of Agalev, which is seen as an ideological one, does not agree more with its party’s viewpoints than the Vlaams Blok electorate with the ideas of extreme right, confirms our conclusion that an extreme right vote is not merely a protest one.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Walgrave, S. & De Swert, K. (2004). The making of the (issues of the) Vlaams Blok. On the contribution of the news media to the electoral success of the Belgian extreme-right party. [Accepted for publication in *Political Communication*].
Table 2: Main policy issues of the Vlaams Blok (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy issue</th>
<th>Vlaams Blok electorate</th>
<th>Total electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flanders should become independent. Under certain circumstances, heavy criminals should be able to get released. Minors who get into trouble several times, should as punishment get confined in a prison for youth. You may not only defend your life but also your property with violence. New Belgian citizens who commit a criminal offence may loose their Belgian nationality. A Muslim girl may wear her headscarf in class. Everyone who lives in Belgium since more than five years, should get communal voting right.</td>
<td>Disagree 45,4 Agree 54,6 N 119</td>
<td>Disagree 65,0 Agree 35,0 N 886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>94,2 5,8 N 120</td>
<td>88,8 11,2 N 886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35,6 64,4 N 118</td>
<td>39,3 60,7 N 887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should be able to become Belgian citizen without them doing something special for that.</td>
<td>Naturalization course is needed Yes 11,0 N 118</td>
<td>Naturalization course is needed Yes 28,1 N 8,9 876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>82,2 6,8 N 122</td>
<td>63,0 8,9 N 876</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Continuation table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy issue</th>
<th>Yes, and adoption of children</th>
<th>Yes, but no adoption of children</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Yes, and adoption of children</th>
<th>Yes, but no adoption of children</th>
<th>No</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual couples should be able to get married.</td>
<td>43,3</td>
<td>35,8</td>
<td><strong>20,8</strong></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>47,3</td>
<td>35,0</td>
<td>17,8</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: VRT, TNS Media (2003)
Table 3: Main policy issues of Agalev (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy issue</th>
<th>Agalev electorate</th>
<th>Total electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological agriculture should get extra funding.</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td><strong>96,2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atomic power stations should close.</td>
<td>6,4</td>
<td><strong>93,6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The construction of a wind park in the North Sea is a good idea.</td>
<td>13,0</td>
<td><strong>87,0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should drive less with their car and therefore petrol and diesel should become more expensive.</td>
<td>75,6</td>
<td><strong>24,4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium should spend more money on development cooperation.</td>
<td>26,7</td>
<td><strong>73,3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Belgian citizens who commit a criminal offence may loose their Belgian nationality.</td>
<td><strong>49,4</strong></td>
<td>50,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Muslim girl may wear her headscarf in class.</td>
<td>27,3</td>
<td><strong>72,7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone who lives in Belgium since five years, should get communal voting right.</td>
<td>37,2</td>
<td><strong>62,8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization course is needed and one should succeed for the test.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should be able to become Belgian citizen without them doing something special for that.</td>
<td>36,7</td>
<td><strong>39,2</strong></td>
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Continuation of table 3

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<th>Policy issue</th>
<th>Yes, and adoption of children</th>
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<th>N</th>
<th>Yes, and adoption of children</th>
<th>Yes, but no adoption of children</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual couples should be able to get married.</td>
<td>79,7</td>
<td>15,2</td>
<td>5,1</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>47,3</td>
<td>35,0</td>
<td>17,8</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: VRT, TNS Media (2003)</td>
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