Ethnic minorities in local political parties

A case study of three Belgian Cities (Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven)

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1. Introduction

The under-representation of ethnic minorities as a political problem

Political elites in recent decades increasingly devote attention to the socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions (Bird 2003). The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is increasingly considered a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Phillips, 1995). Especially the political representation of ethnic minority people in contemporary Western democracies is topical given that migration is now a global phenomenon, newcomers feature increased diversity, the rate of naturalization of foreigners increases and many second generation immigrants reach the age for becoming politically active (Bird 2003: 10).

The current under-representation of ethnic minorities in most political system is has various sources. Citizenship models (general rules and norms of citizenship), characteristics and location of the interest groups (‘group constellation’) and the features of the electoral and political system all impact upon the political representation of ethnic minorities (Bird 2004; Caul and Tate 2004, Togeby 2008; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2011). First, citizenship regimes influence the political and cultural rights of ethnic minorities. If ethnic minorities are allowed to vote or easily obtain the nationality of the country of residence and if they are allowed to express their identity as in a multicultural citizenship model, political representation of ethnic minorities is enhanced, and vice versa (Koopmans, 2004). Secondly, the characteristics of the ethnic group and its degree of social capital are of importance. The size of the group, its geographical concentration, language skills, history, the level of intra- and cross group organization all influence the political representation of ethnic minorities (Bird, 2003). Finally, the features of the electoral and political system influence their level representation (Alonso & Ruiz-Rufino, 2007; Kostadinova, 2007; Spirova & Stefanova, 2009; Taagepera, 1994; Togeby, 2008). Three dimensions of the electoral system are relevant in this respect: the electoral formula (with the distinction between proportional, majority and plurality systems), the size of the district and the ballot structure (Rae, 1969). In general PR-systems,
open lists and high party magnitude are favourable conditions for numerical ethnic minority representation.

Given this complex and interrelated set of causes, it is not surprising that the sheer enfranchisement of ethnic minorities, thereby including them in the group of citizens that was able to vote, to run for office and to take a seat in representative assemblies and executives proved often to not to be a sufficient measure to reach equal representation. Enfranchisement did, for instance, not lead to equal presence on electoral lists and equal turnout during elections. Besides formal criteria for political participation, unwritten rules and normative assumptions about who is suited to be a representative determine the demand and supply side of ethnic minority representation. Also dominant views on which interests are truly political create barriers for the inclusion of ethnic groups. Public opinion and the dominant political culture of the political elite are gate keepers defining the content of the political agenda. These have proven to be persistent barriers for the inclusion of ethnic minorities’ interests such as cultural and religious rights, leading to non- or underrepresentation of these groups on a substantive level.

Enhancing the representation of ethnic minorities

In order to stimulate the level of representativeness of political institutions, many parties in several countries have undertaken action. In contrast to the representation of women, for which often quota have been introduced, measures to enhance the descriptive representation of ethnic minorities are mostly ‘soft measures’ aiming at increasing the opportunities for ethnic minorities albeit missing sanctions and strong guarantees. They include actively recruiting candidates, setting up advertising campaigns, and introducing internal numerical target figures for ethnic minorities on electoral lists (Zimmerman, 1994; Bird, 2003; Spirova & Stefanova 2009). Nevertheless, some countries opted for a formal system of reserved seats that
guarantee the presence of ethnic minorities in legislative bodies.¹ In other cases, ethnic minorities form their own parties and present ethnic lists during elections (Bird 2003). All these measures have indeed resulted in many countries in the influx of more descriptive representatives with an ethnic minority background than in the past.

The level of inclusion of ethnic minorities in representative bodies became an important indicator of minority rights in contemporary democracies (Spirova and Stefanova 2009; Caul and Tate 2004). Equal access to representation – voting rights, running for office, and presence in legislatures and governments - is seen as a sign of their full citizenship. Furthermore, their inclusion is a symbolic recognition of the political legitimacy of ethnic minorities’ desires, views or interests. In that sense, an enhancement in descriptive representation has the potential to increase political trust among ethnic minority groups (Pantoja and Segura 2003) and to create a sense of belonging to political institutions. It increases indeed ethnic minority citizens’ identification with the political system and lowers their political alienation (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Pantoja and Segura 2003; Zimmerman 1994).

The impact of the presence of ethnic minorities is not only symbolic, it can also be substantial. Theories on group representation contend that identity (belonging to a social group) has an influence on the potential to represent that group (Mansbridge 1998; Phillips 1995; Tamerius 1995; Williams 1998; Young 1997, 2000). This potential stems from different life experiences and structural positions in society. Given that representatives belonging to a group share their experiences at least punctually with that group, their presence increases the likelihood that the group’s needs, interests and perspectives are represented or their voice is heard.

The empirical research testing these hypotheses however points at the fact that not only identity, but a multitude of political, parliamentary, social and individual factors determine the attitudes and behaviour of ethnic minority representatives (Hero and Tolbert 1995; Barnello 1999). With regard to the parliamentary roles of ethnic minorities’ MPs, research reports a

¹ Croatia, Singapore, Slovenia, Jordan, Pakistan, West Samoa, Colombia, Palestinian Authority have reserved seats for minorities and some states also have reserved seats for indigenous communities (Bird 2003: 3)
specific dynamic whereby, on the one hand, they have personal preferences to represent their particular group, are convinced that their presence makes a difference, and are encouraged to behave as a group representative by parties, civil society organisations and the general public. On the other hand, however, since ethnic minority MPs estimate that this behaviour is not compatible with their personal career goals and interests, i.e. being a mainstream MP securing re-election, they often hesitate and even refrain from taking up the role of group representative (Celis and Wauters 2010, Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2011). Also research about the substantive representation of ethnic minorities concludes that there exists very little evidence to support the claim that minorities have been wedded to an overt racial issue agenda (Saggar and Geddes 2000: 37; McAllister and Studlar 1984; Studlar 1984; Bird 2004). Saggar and Geddes (2000) report a large degree of similarity in the issue-based concerns of ethnic minority and white groups in British parliament, resulting from the fact that especially ethnic minority candidates are supported that do not accentuate their ethnic origin. Such findings point to the fact that the political system, and more specifically parties, might apply strategies to address the request regarding diversity and inclusiveness but at the same time attempt to preserve existing power relations and limit the impact of the inclusion of ethnic minorities on the political agenda and decision-making processes (Celis and Wauters 2010).

**Political parties and the representation of ethnic minorities**

Parties are pivotal and versatile actors in most Western political systems and hence also crucial actors for the political representation of ethnic minorities. Although literature on the representation of ethnic minorities is mainly concerned with political institutions, and with the impact of electoral systems more in specific, it does recognize the important role of political parties in the representation of ethnic minorities. Party structures and operational cultures are reported to be key determinants for the representation of ethnic minorities (Caul and Tate 2004; Saggar and Geddes 2000; Bird 2004). Political parties can establish rules for party membership and leadership that create opportunities for ethnic minorities (Bird 2004), but can
also “embody indirect, non-intentional forms of discrimination and exclusion as any other public or private bodies” (Saggar and Geddes 2000: 31).

Notwithstanding the recognition of the importance of political parties, the research focus is often reduced to the parties’ role as selector determining the number of ethnic minority candidates on the list, the quality of these list positions and/or the districts in which they run for office (i.e. often electoral districts with a large ethnic minority population) (Saggar and Geddes 2000). Delivering political personnel is indeed one of the key functions of political parties (Lawson 1980) and as such they are important gate keepers in the political representation of ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, political parties fulfil more functions than only recruiting and selecting candidates for elections (Key, 1964 ; Gunther & Diamond, 2001).

Party functions can be classified into three large categories: functions vis-à-vis the society, functions towards the own organisation and functions for the political system. The first group of functions, those towards society, includes amongst others informing (simplifying complex information in order to facilitate its adoption), socialising (forming and structuring the opinions of their adherents) and mobilising people (inciting adherents to undertake action). The functions towards the own organisation comprises two subgroups, namely recruitment and selection of political personnel (already mentioned above), and the representation of interests. This latter subgroup includes interest articulation (raising interests of their adherents) and interest aggregation (bringing together and integrating interests from several groups). As such, parties play an important role in the process of political agenda setting. The functions vis-à-vis the political system refer to functioning of the parties for governing: they provide the necessary parliamentary majority for the formation of a coalition government, they deliver ministers, and they guarantee that the government can count on a stable and reliable majority in parliament during the whole term.

Recently, however, parties are thought to be more and more in decline (Mair, 1994 ; Whiteley, 2011): they are increasingly losing members, lose touch with society and score extremely low in trust indicators. In particular, the intermediary function of parties, i.e. linking citizens and government, appears to be under pressure. Parties seem to have become less attractive for
many people in the last few decades. It remains to be seen whether this applies to the same extent for people of particular social groups, and for ethnic minorities in particular.

The aim of this paper is to assess the degree to which parties incorporate ethnic minorities in their party structures. Its focus is not only on ethnic minorities as candidates and elected representatives, but also on their presence in and ties with political parties. Hence, we are not only concerned with the extent to which parties consider ethnic minorities of importance when performing their role of recruiting and selecting political personnel, but also when performing other core functions vis-à-vis society and especially concerning interest representation. Including ethnic minorities in the party structure is a sign of true power sharing and is furthermore a long-term engagement. We argue that, given the central role of parties and the functions they fulfill, it is even a stronger indicator of a commitment to the political representation of ethnic minorities than only offering access to electoral lists.

Ethnic minorities being members of the party and occupying leadership positions in the party, are first of all, a better and longer standing guarantee than having to rely on a homogeneous white selectorate. The latter might more easily move away from ethnic minority representation when, for instance, public opinion attaches less importance to the matter (cfr. research on women and political parties: Caul 1999, 2011; Darcy, Welsh and Clark 1991; Lovenduski and Norris 1993). Hence, structural inclusion of ethnic minorities in political parties escapes a more ad hoc inclusion of ethnic minorities on electoral lists due to contagion dynamics that move parties to include ethnic minority candidates only for competitive and image building advantages (Meier 2004). Secondly, the formal inclusion of ethnic minority people in the party structures might facilitate the functions of parties towards society, and more in particular towards the ethnic community. It might be an asset for a better fulfilment of the information, socialisation and mobilisation function. This will bring ethnic minority people closer to the political institutions, which might enhance their political trust, but improves at the same time also the position of ethnic minority people in the recruitment process and the representation of their interests. Ethnic minority people who are better informed, more accustomed with the
issues and values at stake and more ready to undertake action, will be more likely to be heard and will be more likely to obtain eventually a position on an electoral list.

A third reason why the inclusion of ethnic minority people in parties is of importance point to the expectation that it is a more solid basis for substantive representation of ethnic minorities’ interests. As described above, depending on descriptive representatives as an avenue to substantive representation has its limits, is fragile and conditional. The presence of ethnic minorities in the heart of political parties, for instance on key positions in the party or even as separate and specialised ‘wings’ or factions, and ties between parties and ethnic minority organisations builds in expertise concerning ethnic minority issues and interests. Moreover, it can have a ‘watchdog’-function assuring a follow up of the inclusion of these issues and interests in party and electoral programmes or in government agreements. Of course, like descriptive representatives, also these ethnic minority sub-sections and organisations can be reduced to a façade, not being truly empowered. We however assume that this is much harder to do, and thus less likely to occur, than marginalising or ‘neutralising’ descriptive representative because the latter are more dependent on the political parties for support and re-election.

As indicated above, parties encounter currently difficulties in linking themselves with society (attracting members, etc). This lack of connection with society could also be a problem for the inclusion of ethnic minorities. The most vulnerable groups in society, including ethnic minorities, could be the main victims of this de-alignment. The exclusion of these people from strategically interesting positions in the party is likely to be complemented by a lack of linkage with the (ethnic minority) population.
2. Case study: ethnic minority in local political parties in 3 Belgian cities (Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven)

This research is a study of the inclusion of ethnic minorities\(^2\) in local political parties in three Belgian cities (Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven). This research design is such that ‘optimal conditions’ are present for the presence of ethnic minorities: we expect to find a high level of inclusion of ethnic minorities because most of the enhancing conditions that the literature report are present.

First, our research is situated at the local level, which is considered to be the most permeable political level for ethnic minorities because foreigners have the right to vote for local elections in Belgium since 2004, participation at that level (for instance in advisory councils) is often based on residence rather than on formal membership (i.e. nationality) and the local level is often considered an experimental garden where failures are not very harmful and therefore tend to be more open for ‘newcomers’ (Jacobs, 1997; Bird 2003; Togeby 2008; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999). Hence, political parties have incentives to attract votes from ethnic minorities, which is less the case for national or sub-state elections. On top of that, a level a greater openness towards ethnic minorities can be noted at the local level and ethnic minorities are often active in the local community (Caul, 1999). This might encourage local parties to include ethnic minorities.

Secondly, we selected three cities with high proportions of ethnic minorities in the population. This increases the potential supply and demand of ethnic minority representatives, and hence is also favourable for their inclusion in local parties. The Antwerp population consists of 28% of people with an ethnic minority background, Ghent 20% and Leuven 15%. The Moroccan community is the largest non-Belgian community in Antwerp, followed by the Turkish community. In Ghent on the other hand, the Turkish community is most prominent. In Leuven the most present ethnic groups come from Asia (China, Nepal and India) and Morocco.

\(^2\) Ethnic minorities is in this paper defined as persons from which at least one of the parents is born abroad. I make a distinction between Western (Europe, North-America, Japan and Oceania) and non-Western ethnic minorities. The focus is on non-Western ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority candidates and council members are identified on the basis of skin colour and/or name recognition.
Thirdly, as described above, the Belgian electoral system - PR-system with an open-lists- is favourable for ethnic minority representation. Furthermore, Belgium is a textbook example of a society where democratically elected institutions aspire to be a correct and balanced reflection of diversity in society. It has a long-standing tradition of reserved seats for language groups (Pilet and Pauwels 2010) and gender quota for electoral lists (Meier 2000). This tradition of group representation increases the acceptance for representation of ethnic minorities (Bird 2004).

Given these three favourable conditions we expect the inclusion of ethnic minorities in Belgian local parties to be high. Nevertheless, local parties in Belgium are no exception when it comes to the general trend of party de-alignment, and this predicts difficulties with forming alliances with societal groups in general and hence also with ethnic minorities.

Belgium is typically known as a ‘partitocracy’, a political system dominated by political parties (De Winter, 1998 ; Deschouwer, 2009). Given the crucial role of parties on all levels of political decision-making in Belgium, the inclusion of ethnic minorities in parties is highly relevant. Although the literature mostly documents a linkage between ethnic minority representation and leftist parties marked by an egalitarian ideology (e.g. Labour in the UK and the Democrats in the US) (Caul and Tate 2004; Bird 2003; Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2011), our research is not limited to socialist or progressive parties. We include 4 parties in our research: the socialist party (Sp.a), the green party (Groen!), the liberal party (Open VLD) and the christian-democratic party (CD&V). We selected two rather ‘left’ parties (Sp.a and Groen!), but since research on voting behaviour of ethnic minorities in Belgium has shown that they tend also to vote for other parties (Jacobs and Teney 2010), two other ‘traditional’ or ‘established’ parties with a rather centre-right ideology (OpenVLD and CD&V) were selected. Furthermore, as described below, also liberal and christian-democratic parties present ethnic minority candidates on their lists and have elected representatives with an ethnic minority background (see also Jacobs and Teney 2010). Hence, we expect that also other parties than the left and progressive parties include ethnic minorities in their party structures.
In the next section of this paper, we report our findings. First, we conduct a quantitative analysis and discuss the findings concerning the numbers of ethnic minority members and their presence in leadership positions in the local parties in these three cities. By comparing these findings with the number of ethnic minority candidates and elected representatives (in the local council), we provide an answer to the question whether high electoral descriptive representation goes hand in hand with the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the party. Secondly, on the basis of a more qualitative analysis, we report on the efforts of the parties to support ethnic minority candidates, ethnic minorities’ participation within the party, and describe the parties’ efforts and openness towards creating ethnic minority subsections, ad hoc groups within the parties and ties with ethnic minority organizations outside of the party.

Data were gathered from the official websites of the local party sections and from telephone interviews with the party secretaries from the local parties.³

3. Results

3.1 Presence of ethnic minorities in local politics and in local political parties

We start with a comparison of percentages about the presence of ethnic minorities in local politics and in local political parties.

Table 1: Percentage ethnic minority people on a number of positions in local politics and of the local political party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidate list 2006</th>
<th>Local council (current)</th>
<th>Party members</th>
<th>Party executive</th>
<th>Responsible function⁴ in local party</th>
<th>Local party leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V Leuven</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ The data were gathered in May 2011. We would like to thank Magalie Verstraeten for gathering these data and bringing them together in electronic files.

⁴ Including deputy party leader, political secretary, treasurer and the person responsible for membership recruitment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Ethnic Minority Candidates</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
<th>Elected</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V</td>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>6,3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V</td>
<td>Antwerp</td>
<td>12,8</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenVLD</td>
<td>Leuven</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+2.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenVLD</td>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>9,1</td>
<td>+0.4</td>
<td>1,9</td>
<td>25,0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenVLD</td>
<td>Antwerp</td>
<td>9,1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.a</td>
<td>Leuven</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>23,5</td>
<td>9,0</td>
<td>6,0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.a</td>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>11,8</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>+15.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.a</td>
<td>Antwerp</td>
<td>10,1</td>
<td>23,8</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>9,1</td>
<td>25,0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groen!</td>
<td>Leuven</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>5,0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groen!</td>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>16,7</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groen!</td>
<td>Antwerp</td>
<td>14,5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>16,7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third column of the table shows that each party (and thus not only leftist parties) have put ethnic minority people on their candidate lists for the 2006 local elections. This kind of candidates appear in general slightly more on the electoral lists of social-democratic and green local parties. Furthermore, except for the social-democratic party in Antwerp, all Antwerp local parties perform better than in the two other cities, and all Ghent parties perform better than the Leuven ones. Hence, the level of ethnic minority candidates seems to follow the level of ethnic minorities in society rather well: the more substantial the ethnic minority in society, the more substantial the number of ethnic minority candidates.

This relation dissolves when taking the percentage of elected ethnic minority people into account. But the difference between left and (centre-)right parties becomes more outspoken. All social-democratic and green local parties manage to get ethnic minority people elected in the local council, with the exception of the green party in Antwerp which acquired only two seats in total. In every city always more than 20 % of the social-democratic council members...
comes from an ethnic minority group. As such, these percentages almost equal (and even outnumbers in the case of Leuven) the percentage of ethnic minorities in society. The christian-democratic and the liberal-democratic party, on the contrary, have ethnic minority representatives in only one of the three local councils included in this research: CD&V in Antwerp and OpenVLD in Ghent.

So far, our results confirm some general patterns that came forward for the literature: all parties have some attention for ethnic minorities and grant them a position on the list but leftist parties perform better and are in general also more successful in translating candidacies into mandates as local council member, and there seems to be positive relation between the proportion of ethnic minorities in society and the proportion on electoral lists (but not in the council).

Let us now turn to the key concern of this paper: the presence of ethnic minorities in the local party. The lowest level of participation in a party is being a party member. One striking observation is that local party secretaries are not very well informed about the presence of ethnic minority people among their members. Half of them could not give an answer to this question, while the others could only estimate how many there were. This indicates that ethnic background is not a feature that is catalogued in membership files, as sex and age are, nor that ethnic minority presence is a careful and well-considered target local party sections aim to achieve and monitor. The limited available data seem to suggest that people with an ethnic background are slightly more numerous among members of leftist parties (and more numerous in social-democratic parties than in green parties).

A second aspect of inclusion in parties, is the positional power in local parties. People who occupy a high position in the party or who are part of selected party organs determining the local party’s policy have a higher impact than ordinary members on the actual fulfilment of party functions, such as recruitment and selection of candidates, interest representation, mobilization, etc. We first turn to the presence of ethnic minorities in the party executive (or the party board). This is a meeting of a selected group of party members that in general assembles once a month to discuss the local political situation and the position of the local
political party. In Ghent and Leuven, a party executive does not exist in the green party Groen!. In the other party boards, the presence of ethnic minorities is limited and cannot keep pace with their presence on candidate lists and in local councils. In four of the local party executives (including the social-democratic party in Ghent) even none of the members do belong to an ethnic minority. The social-democratic party sections score better than christian-democratic and liberal-democratic parties, but the differences are minor. Moreover, ethnic minority people belonging to the party executive are also local council member or (to a lesser extent) they have been a (prominent) candidate at the previous local elections. Presence on the candidate lists and in the local councils is thus almost never complemented by presence of other ethnic minority people in the local party, as the same people are holding all these offices and functions simultaneously. Almost never could we distinguish ethnic minorities as volunteers in the higher ranks of the party, i.e. people not occupying an elected mandate, but nevertheless determining the policy of the local party section.

The situation worsens if we climb further up in the party hierarchy. Only in two local party sections someone belonging to an ethnic minority group occupies a leadership function (deputy party leader, treasurer, etc.): one of these people is occupying a local mandate and one is a volunteer. Among the local party leaders no-one originates from an ethnic minority. The difference between left and (centre-) right parties disappears completely for this high-rank party positions. Only for the inclusion in party executives, there is still some difference between left and (centre-) right parties.

In sum, this analysis shows that all parties are making efforts to include ethnic minority candidates on their electoral lists and in local councils (with leftist parties scoring better). Regarding the inclusion in the local party organization, however, a different picture arises. Having a balanced membership file does not appear to be a goal of local party sections as they are all ill-informed about the actual presence of ethnic minorities among their members. Moreover, presence of ethnic minorities in the higher ranks of the local party is low (in all parties, also in leftist parties) and this presence definitely falls behind their presence on candidate lists and in local councils. Finally, most often, ethnic minority people active in the
party combine a mandate as local council member with a function in the party, which does of course not extend the number of ethnic minority people involved in local party politics.

3.2 Party’s efforts to include ethnic minorities and to create networks

Numbers never tell the whole story. This section of the paper focuses on less visible steps parties can take to enhance the representation of ethnic minorities. These include the efforts of the local parties to support ethnic minority candidates, to further the involvement of ethnic minority people in internal party activities, to create or support ethnic minority networks within the parties and create ties with ethnic minority organizations outside of the party. As mentioned before, we consider these aspects as signs of a more long-term and deeper commitment to ethnic minority representation allowing them to participate in a broader spectrum of the party’s functions.

We asked local party representatives whether ethnic minority candidates receive special support during the elections or as council member. All parties assist their ethnic minority candidates, but stress that they do so to the same extent as they support other candidates. None of the parties provides any specific or supplementary support for ethnic minority candidates or council members. Several parties report that they include ethnic minority people on their list only when they are sufficiently integrated in society, have enough knowledge of the political system and master the Dutch language. If these requirements are fulfilled specific support is seen as superfluous. Only two parties (the social-democratic party in Ghent and the christian-democratic party in Antwerp) provide language assistance, which is of specific interest to ethnic minorities but not especially designed for them. Other parties provide assistance for new candidates in general, again not specifically for ethnic minorities. There was no difference between leftist and (centre-)right parties.

Concerning involving ethnic minority people in intra-party activities – e.g. writing the electoral program, composing the candidacy lists or preparing the council meetings- we discern a similar picture: parties claim to be supportive of them, but without giving a special treatment. Most
parties confirm that ethnic minorities are involved in writing the electoral program, but they stress that their involvement is not more substantial or more actively sought compared to other party members’ involvement. The only exception is the green party in Antwerp, which has a special diversity group to represent the interests of ethnic minorities. Similarly, ethnic minority council members are involved in the preparation of the council meetings, just like all other council members. There are no specific efforts to make sure that ethnic minorities’ interests are included, for instance when there are no council member with an ethnic minority background. In general, most parties claim that the involvement of ethnic minorities is the same as those of other members of the party. No special (structural) measures are taken to enhance their participation. Also, notwithstanding that most parties actively recruit ethnic minority candidates, the participation of ethnic minorities in composing the electoral list is limited to the use of their networks for recruiting new ethnic minority candidates. Only rarely ethnic minorities are a member of the selection committee. Leftist parties seem to attach greater importance to the involvement of the ethnic minorities. The only exception is the liberal party in Antwerp, which also stresses the active participation of ethnic minorities.

Next to individuals with an ethnic minority background, also ethnic minority networks, subsections of ad hoc workgroups within and outside of the party can contribute to the representation of ethnic minorities, and maybe even in a more structural way. They provide the party with expertise and supervise the inclusion of ethnic minority issues and interests. Two local parties out of twelve have a local ethnic minority subsection: the green party in Antwerp has a diversity group that focuses on the interests and problems of the ethnic minority community; and the Socialist Party in Antwerp also has a diversity work group. Most parties however do not have such groups and they also state that there are no formal or informal networks between of ethnic minority people within the party. Some parties even object to the existence of such subsections. They are convinced that it would be discriminatory and violating the equality principle if they would exist and prefer a full integration in the party above segregation. Others point to more practical objections like the ethnic minority community being
too divers to form one group and the existence of a subsection dealing with migration and diversity at the national party level.

However, most parties confirm that they have contact with ethnic minority organizations. This is especially true for the leftist parties (Sp.a and Groen!): in all three cities left parties report that they have good relations with ethnic minority organizations. These relations are mostly informal. The liberal and christian-democratic parties (OpenVLD and CD&V) have less contact with ethnic minority organisations outside the party, and this is especially true for Ghent and Leuven. In Antwerp these parties have more contact with ethnic minority organizations. For the liberal party this could be explained by its ideology that stresses the individual and opposes to thinking of citizens in terms of groups.

In sum, this section of the paper shows that most parties do not make special efforts to include ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities are treated the same way as other members of the party, they do not receive specific support and there are no structural measures to involve them in tasks such as the writing of the electoral program, the composition of the candidacy lists or the preparation of council meetings. There are some differences however between leftist and rightist parties, with the former emphasizing the involvement of ethnic minorities more. Furthermore, most parties do not have ethnic minority subsections or ad hoc groups. Only two leftist parties (Groen! and Sp.a in Antwerp) have a local subsection where they focus on diversity. All leftist parties have good relations with ethnic minority organizations though. This is only to a lesser extent the case for rightist parties, which have less contact with ethnic minority organizations.

4. Conclusion

The political representation of ethnic minorities is topical and will increasingly be so due to global and diversified migration flows and the coming to political age of ethnic minority populations. The inclusion of ethnic minorities is increasingly seen as a litmus test for democracies’ capacity to include ethnic minorities in political citizenship, and hence is of
importance to the ethnic minorities as well as to the political system as such. The central concern of this paper concerns how far political parties’ commitment to the inclusion of ethnic minority goes: are political parties open structures for ethnic minorities, do they actively include, involve and support them?

Our analysis shows that all four parties (social-democratic, christian-democratic, liberal and green) in all three cities (Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven) make efforts to put ethnic minority candidates on their lists and in local councils. There is however a marked discrepancy with the level of inclusion in the local party organization. Having a balanced membership file does not appear to be a goal of local party sections as they are all ill-informed about the actual presence of ethnic minorities among their members. Moreover, presence of ethnic minorities at the higher ranks of the local party is overall low in all parties and definitely falls behind their presence on candidate lists and in local councils. Hardly any party makes special efforts to include ethnic minorities. Furthermore, ethnic minorities do not get special support, there are no structural measures to enhance their participation and there are rarely any subsections or ad hoc groups of ethnic minorities.

Overall, leftist parties (social-democratic and green parties) and Antwerp parties perform better when it comes to ethnic minority representation. Although the level of inclusion in party leadership positions is as low as in other parties, leftist and Antwerp parties include relatively more ethnic minority people on the electoral lists, they seem to have stronger ties with ethnic minority civil society organisations and the only two parties with ethnic minority sub-sections are Antwerp based and leftist. This finding points at two possible explanations already documented in the literature on ethnic minority representation. Firstly, leftist ideologies attach more importance the inclusion to social groups that are discriminated against. It connects well to their key political aim of establishing social equality and the view of the active state in realising that equality. Secondly, Antwerp might perform better because the proportion of ethnic minorities in the total population is almost one third. This proportion approaches the ‘critical mass’ limit of 30% which according to Dahlerup (1988) is a tipping point beyond which dominant groups accept the presence of different groups to a higher extend. Similarly, this
proportion of ethnic minorities in the population might be the proportion that needs to be reached before parties are willing to open up to ethnic minorities, because their involvement is considered to be unavoidable and, importantly, electorally advantageous. There might also be something specific about the ‘group constellation’ of the ethnic minorities in Antwerp: are the Moroccan (the largest ethnic minority group in Antwerp) better organised, more politically aware and active than in the other cities?

A key finding of our analysis concerns the discrepancy between the relatively high level of inclusion of ethnic minorities on the electoral lists on the one hand, and the low level of inclusion within the party organisation on the other hand. As discussed above, we consider that as problematic for the full political empowerment of ethnic minorities since only though their presence and active participation in political parties they are able to structurally embed their concerns in all the key tasks political parties perform.

We see three possible explanations for this discrepancy. Firstly, it might be the case that the inclusion on electoral lists is the first step in the full political inclusion in the entire party organisation, which will follow automatically at a later stage. A second possible explanation refers to normative views on equality. Parties report to treat ethnic minorities no different than the other members of the party based on the normative belief that such equal treatment is just. Another normative view would however be that treating people with unequal conditions as equals enshrines inequality rather than dissolving it. However, the fact that all parties, notwithstanding their normative view on equality, include ethnic minority candidates on their electoral lists, and make special efforts to do so, gives rise to a third more opportunistic explanation. It could be the case that political parties only promote the presentation of ethnic minorities out of concern for their own electoral competitiveness, and not out of a real concern for a good representation of the ethnic minorities living in their constituencies.
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