# Ecologists and Democracy in Belgium: An Analysis of Party Manifestos

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**Abstract**

An increasing gap characterizes the relationship between citizens and policy-makers in Europe. Citizens do not only lose confidence in their representatives but, more broadly so, in democracy and democratic functioning. Consequently, new political parties perform increasingly better during elections. New decision-making processes - rooted in participatory or deliberative democracy - are also gradually considered as means to revitalize and irrigate the representative system. This paper aims at developing a better understanding of the democratic preferences of the Belgian Green political parties. Traditionally, Flemish and French-speaking green parties have been the owners of democratic innovation issues in Belgium. Through the analysis of Belgian green parties' manifestos since 1995 regarding three types of democracy - representative, deliberative, and participatory democracy - this paper investigates and uncovers the evolution of the democratic preferences within these parties. The paper helps to shed light on how the greens perceive democracy in their programs.

**Keywords**

participatory democracy, Green parties, democratic innovations, party manifestos

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**Introduction[1]**

Democracy and the functioning of democracy are increasingly put under pressure. Many citizens indeed lose their confidence in democracy and, consequently, protest, abstain from voting or vote for newly emerged parties, such as populists or Greens (Meguid, 2005; Norris 2012; Hernandez, 2018). The later parties have often been considered as owning the democratic issue. Yet, because of the aforementioned reactions of citizens to that crisis of representative democracy, mainstream parties tend to co-opt the democratic issue, by also proposing to address the democratic issue and by proposing concrete solutions. Consequently, to that global shift in the political landscape, Green parties' discourse regarding democracy may have evolved over time in order to remain the issue-owner. This paper thus aims at answering to the following question: what form does the democratic issue take in Green parties' discourse over time?

Based on a qualitative data analysis, this paper aims at developing a better understanding of the democratic preferences of the Belgian Green political parties. In order to do so, Belgian Green parties' manifestos since 1995 have been collected and then analyzed using thematic analysis. This paper suggests that despite the fact that ecologists also propose new models of democracy (such as participatory and deliberative models of democracy), they mostly defend a representative view of democracy, by indicating that the quality of representative democracy should be improved in several respects.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework deals with Green parties and the democratic issue. Based on the literature, it sheds light on three major models of democracy – namely a representative democracy, a participatory democracy and a deliberative democracy. The next section provides information about the case, the data and the method. Then, the Belgian Green manifestos are examined, and the findings displayed. Finally, the findings are discussed and a conclusion is proposed.

**Green Parties and the Democratic Issue**

Since the end of the 20th century, representative democracy is increasingly questioned and challenged by citizens (Dalton, 2004; Webb, 2013; Klingemann, 2014; Bornand et al., 2017). They are indeed dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy because they perceive that public authorities do not take their preferences into account (Neblo, 2010). Norris (2011) establishes that this criticism is not oriented towards democracy as a principle but towards the institutions

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and the tools currently used to practice democracy. Consequently, new approaches of democracy are developed by scholars but also supported by some political parties. These approaches include participative democracy, as well as deliberative democracy (Caluwaerts et al., 2017).

Since their origins, Green parties have been known to call for more citizen participation and decentralization (Doherty, 2016). They have been the first to reform their internal organization in order to make their structures more inclusive (Frankland, Lucardie, & Rihoux, 2008). They have also been the first to suggest the implementation of democratic innovations on a larger scale (Sainteny, 1991). Broadly speaking, it has been argued that these parties are the owners of the democratic issue. It means that voters identify Green parties as the most competent - or credible - regarding the democratic issue (Frankland et al., 2008).

Yet, the democratic issue has been extensively co-opted by other parties since then. It is the case for mainstream parties but also for niche parties such as radical right populist parties (Biard & Dandoy, 2018). Indeed, those parties tend to integrate a form of qualitative improvement of democracy into their propositions and programs by promoting a more inclusive democracy. Public authorities increasingly adopt and implement such democratic innovations, for instance by organizing participatory budgets or mini-publics (Fung, 2006).

The European Green parties have all integrated claims to democratic changes in their manifestos. For instance, in their 2009 manifesto for the European elections, the German Green party (Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen) ranked democracy among several topics of uttermost importance, almost on par with ecology. The German Green party argued that political work should not be just confined to the representatives. Instead, it should also be considered as a citizens' job. In the same vein, the British Greens' manifesto of 2009 did put an emphasis on the decentralization of some competencies in order to let them closer to the citizens. The Greens acknowledged that local democracy is a crucial level of power in which citizens have the opportunity to be acquainted with the political arena. In 2009, the French Green party did plead for the organization of democratic processes such as citizen-led referendums (Price-Thomas, 2016).

However, how should we apprehend these calls for democratic innovation? Three main types of democracy are generally distinguished in the existing literature: representative, participative and deliberative (Jacquet et al., 2015). Representative democracy is the most famous and quasi only used model of democracy in the western world. In such a model of democracy, the power is given to and exercised by representative elected officials. The

connection between representatives and citizens is thus made by elections held at regular intervals. Elections (and plurality) are therefore also the main source of legitimization of this type of democracy. Despite its predominance, representative democracy is highly criticized by citizens (Caluwaerts et al., 2017). Indeed, a significant proportion of citizens do believe that the gap between them and their representatives is widening, which results in a gradual loss of confidence in that model. Consequently, these citizens may abstain from voting as a way to protest. However, they may also choose to vote for populist parties (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015), or choose to vote for parties who are not reluctant to change the representative democracy.

Because representative democracy is increasingly criticized, other models of democracy are developed and implemented. Participatory democracy is based on the idea according to which there is a need for more participatory institutions (Pateman, 2012). This model of democracy suggests that all citizens should take part in the *res publica*, for instance through referendums. Other researchers or activists argue for a deliberative democracy, i.e. a democracy where policies are based on the deliberation of citizens (Chambers, 2003). This model of democracy can be put into practice through different processes, such as deliberative polls, consensus conferences or constitutional assemblies (Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014). The aim of these initiatives is to allow citizens to take part in the policy-making process by discussing about a public problem. It can lead to agenda-setting but also to the adoption of binding decisions (Smith, 2009).

Some scholars have identified that most of the elected representatives in Belgium rely on the representative model of democracy (Jacquet, Schiffino, Reuchamps, & Latinis, 2015). Some may occasionally praise participatory democracy in order to use it as an electoral instrument (Goldfrank & Schneider, 2006). Participatory democracy could also be used by the representatives in order to modify the balance of power within a public policy sector (Fung, 2003).

**Case, Data and Method**

This paper aims at determining what form the democratic issue takes in Green parties' discourse over time. In order to do so, party manifestos are analyzed. Party manifestos are indeed relevant documents in order to better apprehend the saliency but also the position of political parties regarding an issue and, in our case, the democratic issue. These documents are written by party structures and ratified by their members during congresses. Therefore, they can be considered as official documents translating their policy preferences. Based on the analysis of party

manifestos, the saliency given by Green parties to the democratic issue as well as the position adopted towards that issue can be understood.

The saliency of the democratic issue can be uncovered by analyzing each manifesto and by assessing the positioning of said issue according to the different models of democracy developed in the theoretical framework of this paper. The position can be determined by analyzing which type of democracy - and associated pledges - are defended by Green parties in each of their manifestos. Consequently, evolutions but also continuities may be observed.

The analysis uses the manifestos of Green parties in Belgium, i.e. *Groen* (formerly AGALEV) and *Ecolo*. These parties are particularly relevant for the analysis since they are the traditional owners of the alternative democratic issues in Belgium. Belgium is a favorable case study because this Kingdom has always been firmly anchored in a representative model (Dumont, 2012). These parties We focused on the manifestos that were issued by Flemish and French-speaking Green parties on the occasion of six federal elections in Belgium (1995, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2010, and 2014). It has to be noted that, in some instances, several parties did issue the same manifestos for both federal and regional elections, as the elections were falling on the same date (1995, 1999, 2014).

The six manifestos have been analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. Two rounds of coding were implemented. The manifestos were coded independently two by two. The authors searched for statements and proposals related to democracy and citizens' participation in the political system. The coding process was semi-inductive. In line with the principles of thematic analysis, authors aimed at finding larger analytical categories or themes (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). At the end of the first round, all authors confronted their results based on which three larger categories were identified: (i) proposals linked to the improvement of the representative systems, (ii) proposals linked to the development of participatory democracy processes, and (iii) proposals linked to the development of deliberative democracy processes. A set of key indicators was then established for each of the aforementioned categories in accordance with the existing literature and the first exploratory results of our content analysis.

The proposals were divided over indicators which represent salient issues for the party. Considering the proposals linked to the improvement of the representative system, the indicators are allocated within three main categories: electoral reforms vis-à-vis the citizens, the politicians and political parties, and finally towards the institutions as such. Considering the proposals linked to participatory democracy, five indicators were used by the Green parties to report for the development of participatory democracy: (1) The implementation of referendums;

(2) The implementation of referendums on the grounds of *popular initiative*; (3) The implementation of popular consultations; (4) Petitioning; and finally, (5) Public policy assessments on the grounds of *popular initiative.*

Last but not least, two focal points were used to account for development of deliberative democracy processes: (1) The development of deliberative innovations such as citizen assemblies; (2) The will to reform the consultative councils that exist at different levels of power in Belgium in order to transform them in deliberative tools. During the second round of coding, the author independently crosschecked for occurrences of these indicators in each of the twelve manifestos. The results of this coding process are presented in the following section.

**Findings**

The findings are organized in three subsections corresponding to the themes found during the analysis: proposals to improve the representative system, proposals to develop participatory democracy and proposals to develop deliberative democracy.

*Representative democracy*

Throughout their manifestos ecologists do not hesitate to put the spotlight on representative democracy, as it remains the most salient form of democracy for the ecologists'. Indeed, they acknowledge the current crisis of the representative system but in doing so they argue that one does not have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Far from discarding representative democracy, both Flemish and French-speaking Green parties state their willingness to enhance the functioning of the representative system. This posture is expressed quite explicitly by a section title of Ecolo's 1999 manifesto *"la démocratie représentative, un modèle à rénover"* (Ecolo, 1999, fiche 1). Ultimately, the replacement of representative democracy by an alternative model is never voiced as a viable solution. Ecologists would rather work on improving of the current system while pushing for the implementation of parallel forms of democracies: "Groen! asks for a new State reform. But only if the latter leads to more solidarity, to a better functioning of our institutions and to more democracy" (Groen, 2007, p. 99).

The improvement of the representative process is intimately related to electoral reforms vis-à-vis the citizens, the politicians and political parties as well as the institutions. Here, the most salient electoral reform directly focuses on citizens' voting rights. The shared idea among Green parties is to extend the voting rights to new categories of citizens. More specifically, to citizens aged under 18 by lowering the legal voting age from 18 to 16 years old. This demand was first

voiced by both AGALEV and Ecolo as early as 1999. Since then, both Flemish and French-speaking Green parties have maintained this proposal in their manifestos. The desired threshold for voting rights also remained unchanged at 16 years old.

> We would like to send out a strong signal of confidence and recognition of the young citizen. Lowering the threshold for voting rights to 16 years, in all elected assemblies, from the commune to the House of Representatives and the Senate, would give an extremely concrete dimension to this civic awakening (Ecolo, 2003, p. 11).

Besides the lowering of the legal voting age, Belgian Green parties argue that voting rights should also be extended to non-nationals. This claim was issued without interruption by both parties since at least 1995. While it has always been a salient issue for both parties, there are, however, some differences over time about the extent to which voting rights should be given to foreigners. Should they be constrained to vote at the local level? Or should they also be allowed to vote at the regional, or even federal level? This diachronic evolution mainly results from an electoral reform that granted voting rights at the local level for non-Belgians (and non-European) in 2006. Both parties initially called for non-nationals' voting rights - usually at the local level - before 2004. In 2014, they now suggest granting voting rights to non-nationals for almost all the levels (sometimes the federal level is left out).

> Finally, all citizens must be able to participate in the municipal ballot. It is therefore necessary to grant voting rights to foreigners as long as they have been residing in the territory for 5 years (Ecolo, 1995, p. 39).
>
> [We want] to expand and facilitate voting rights for non-Belgians. We want to extend the voting rights to non-Belgians - just as they currently exist for the municipal elections - and expand them to the other levels (Groen, 2014, p. 261).

As it is the case for age, both parties seem to argue that the expansion of suffrage to new categories of citizens - citizens under 16 and non-nationals - is the logical evolution of voting rights. Indeed, major changes have already occurred over time. The voting rights were first extended by the universal male unique vote in 1919. They then got further extended with the universal vote for both genders in 1948, the lowering of the legal voting age to 18 years old in 1969 and, finally, the right for European (in 2003) and non-European citizens (2006) to vote during local elections. As voiced in their respective programs since at least 1995, the Belgian Green parties agree upon the common idea that the expansion of voting rights should carry on in the future.

Less salient - but still present in some programs - is the topic related to the inequalities generated by the current organization of elections. This issue is mainly tackled by Ecolo. They argue in their 1999, 2007, 2010 and 2014 manifestos that the current state of representative democracy does still put some citizens on the sideline when it comes to the exercise of voting rights. To that regard, they put forwards the difficulties encountered by some of the most vulnerable segments of society - such as the elderly and disabled people - in accessing the voting booths on election days. According to Ecolo, the access to voting booths should be made easier for the elderly, the blind or other people who suffer from mobility impairment.

> The modern representative democracy still has some non-democratic aspects [...] It must be acknowledged that the material (economic) conditions of democratic practice are far from being assured for everyone (Ecolo, 1999, p. 1).

> Ecolo also wants the voting right to be exercised by categories of people who are excluded from it in actual fact: logistical support for people with physical disabilities, preservation and enforcement of rights for people with intellectual disabilities, creation of a reference address - or an "electoral" legal address for homeless people (Ecolo, 2010, p. 27).

Voting obligation can be a way to ensure the inclusion of most citizens in the democratic game. Compulsory voting has always been a fact in Belgium but both parties do not share the same vision on at matter. While Groen favors the abolishment of compulsory voting, Ecolo seems to want to hold on to it and - to some degree - expand its range to new categories of citizens (non-nationals and citizens under 18) since 2003.

> We want to replace compulsory voting by a simple voting right (AGALEV, 1999, p. 49).

> Abolishment of compulsory voting. Groen attaches great importance to participation and active citizenship, but in a modern democracy this is not achieved by compulsory voting (which, incidentally, is barely controlled anyway). On the contrary: without compulsory voting you really force politicians to motivate citizens (Groen, 2010, p.75).

> Ecolo is in favor of maintaining compulsory voting, which must apply to all citizens (Ecolo, 2010, p. 285).

> Hence, this proposal is the most explicit measure in achieving a profound change in the conditions of youth involvement in the society. Let us precise that compulsory voting would also apply from the age of 16 (Ecolo, 2003, pp. 11-12).

The preceding points directly concern citizens. However, Belgian Green parties also bring to light issues related to the representativeness of politicians and political parties that need to be tackled. One of these is the need for a greater diversity inside parliaments. One way of doing so

is by deleting the electoral threshold that has been introduced in 2003. Since then, the parties need to gather at least 5 % of valid votes in a constituency. Consequently, the smallest parties who do not obtain those 5 % will receive no seats. The argument for introducing a threshold was done in order to counter the fragmentation of the party system. The ecologists being one of the smaller parties, have already seen some seats go to waste by failing to reach those 5 %. Their argument, however, is a representative one:

> A representative democracy is only truly representative if it gives room to the diverse points of views present in society, while also giving new currents of opinion a chance. That is why we want an electoral system that is as proportional as possible, in which direct and indirect electoral thresholds are eliminated as much as possible (Groen, 2007, p. 81; Groen, 2010, p. 75).

> By reducing the 5% eligibility threshold for the election of the House of Representatives (Ecolo, 2010, p. 28).

Conversely, while Belgian Green parties tend to plead for a greater diversity inside the parliament, there is still a major exception to this rule: liberticidal parties. Flemish and French-speaking Green parties simultaneously started to address this issue in 1999. To put things into context, in 1999 the Vlaams Blok – a Flemish radical right populist party – was already established as a serious electoral threat in Belgium since the so-called "Black Sunday" of 1991. The year 1999 was marked by the adoption of a new legislation regarding public party funding. A specific article (15ter) was introduced to suspend the public funding of liberticidal parties. The shared willingness among ecologists to fight liberticidal parties in 1999 is thus made clear in light of this specific context. However, it is worth noting that - since 1999 - proposals aiming at fighting against liberticidal parties remain present in French-speaking manifestos but not in the Flemish ones. For example. "The fight against racism and the extreme right is a top priority for us across all issues" (AGALEV, 1999, p. 83) or "Ecolo is in favor of the formulation of a general constitutional principle of forfeiture of democratic rights targeting liberticide parties" (Ecolo, 2007, p. 279).

Another way to increase diversity is by facilitating the access of women to the parliament. Gender quotas are legally defined in Belgium. Since 1999, a list could not exceed two thirds of candidates of the same gender at the federal level. In 2002 this was brought to half. At that time, quotas were also implemented at the level of the top positions: on the first three positions both genders needed to be present. This changed to the first two positions in 2007.

Also related to candidatures is the demand to end "false candidatures". Often, a political party will put a famous politician on their electoral lists, by knowing that the latter would never take the seat if they get elected. Indeed, it was almost a custom to put a regional minister on the federal lists, while knowing that she would remain minister at the regional level after the election. Truly, they are there only to attract as many preference votes as possible. They also want the end of the plurality of mandates, but also of candidatures (prohibited in 2014): "Strict limitation of the cumulation of public mandates and mandates or private professions for elected officials and the managers of public companies" (Ecolo, 2003, p. 21).

The reduction of campaign expenses constitutes a long-lasting cornerstone among Ecolo's claims (while this is less the case of Groen). In Belgium, campaign expenses are linked to the position one occupies on the list, the number of voters, the electoral district, and the total of seats the party obtained in the previous legislature. The ecologist parties mainly have a desire for more transparency.

> Ecolo also pledges to consolidate the applicable legislation on electoral campaign expenses and party financing by reducing the volume of authorized election expenses - in particular regarding lists and candidates (Ecolo, 2007, p. 285).

> Impose the budget and account transparency of all the components of political parties (Ecolo, 2003, p. 23).

> Decreasing the amount of election expenses that are authorized by the law to approximate the amounts of public subsidy (Ecolo, 1995, p. 41).

Finally, there is a requirement related to the institutional evolution: the reform or even abolishment of the senate. In Belgium, the federal level is composed out of an upper and lower house, namely the Senate and the Chamber. For the Senate, before 2014, 40 seats were filled by direct election, 21 elected by the regional and community parliaments, and the remaining 10 were co-opted by the parties. Besides those 71 elected members, there were also senators by right, namely the children of the King. After the sixth electoral reform it was decided to only keep – and increase the number of – senators elected by the communities and regional parliaments to 60, while removing all the other senators (thus also the ones who were directly elected by the citizens).

Considering the Senate we find another linguistic divide. Indeed in 2003 Groen wanted to transform the Senate in a think-thank – a chamber of reflection. Whereas from 2007 on, the

demand the abolishment as such. On the contrary, Ecolo, since 2007, want to transform Higher chamber in a chamber that represents the federal entities. It would be a place for cooperation.

> Abolition of the Senate. The Senate in its current form does not provide a more transparent and efficient form of governance and is not an added value for democracy (Groen, 2007, p.99).

*Participatory Democracy*

Ecologists place a great emphasis on participatory democracy. Already in 1995, both parties underlined that the gap between citizens and representatives was increasing. According to AGALEV (1995, p. 21), "citizens do not believe any more in politics, they choose anti-politics". In its following manifestos but also in Ecolo's manifestos, that observation is always present: "As citizens of our country, you have every right to be angry" (Groen, 2010, p. 72). If ecologists do not reject the representative model as such, they also underline its limits (as suggested in the previous section). They believe that citizens should not be only involved in politics during elections, by voting for representatives, but should also be involved in politics between elections. They consider citizens should participate in the policy-making process. They thus also argue for a participatory model of democracy. Again, they already pleaded for that model of democracy in 1995. There is thus nothing new in that proposal. Yet, participatory democracy may take various forms and these forms may have evolved over time (Smith, 2009).

First, a referendum is considered as a mean to increase the participation of citizens into policymaking. That proposal was already included in the AGALEV's manifesto in 1995 and has never disappeared since then. In 2010, for instance, Groen still suggested that proposal: "In addition, Groen! wants to increase the involvement of citizens by means of binding referendums" (Groen, 2010 p. 73).

In 1999, Ecolo started to be more precise by indicating that two forms of referendum should be distinguished: compulsory and non-compulsory referendum. Compulsory referendum should therefore be organized on every fundamental institutional reform while non-compulsory referendum could be organized on any other issue. Yet, while the referendum is classically perceived as a way to legitimate decisions adopted by representatives, both AGALEV and Ecolo go further – already in 1995 – by suggesting a referendum based on popular initiative. According to them, citizens should also receive the possibility to collect signatures in order to organize a referendum on a given issue, even without any public support: "For us, such a referendum is not an isolated event, but the logic next step after a public debate" (AGALEV, 1995, p. 22).

If the proposition to create a referendum based on popular initiative was already present in AGALEV's manifesto and Ecolo's manifesto in 1995, the way to operationalize it was still not detailed. In 1995, Ecolo only mentioned that such a referendum should not be possible regarding tax matters and human rights. For instance, in 1999, AGALEV suggested that a referendum based on popular initiative should be possible at each level of power. In the same manifesto, AGALEV also proposed a threshold for the organization of a referendum: the number of signatures should correspond to at least 10 % of the population in the smallest municipalities and to at least 3 % of the population at the Flemish or Belgian level. The referendum could thus be organized only if that number of signatures is collected. In 2003 and 2007, Ecolo also provided such information, for instance by indicating how to organize a referendum at the local level:

> This referendum on texts adopted by the local authorities is triggered by the collection of the signatures of one third of the elected members of the concerned council and at least 5% of the electorate, whether provincial or communal, within 60 days of the publication of the text in question (Ecolo, 2003, p. 13).

Despite their active advocacy regarding that proposal during the 1990s and the early 2000s, that proposal disappeared from the next manifestos, since 2007 for Groen and since 2010 for Ecolo. There is a double tendency regarding the proposition to create a referendum based on popular initiative. First, a tendency to provide a *modus operandi*, a way to operationalize the proposition, in the late 1990s. Second, a tendency towards the disappearance of that proposal in ecologists' manifestos in Belgium in the 2000s.

Beyond these propositions regarding the referendum, ecologists also wish to increase consultations with citizens. Despite the fact that AGALEV already addressed that proposition in 1995, both AGALEV and Ecolo started to seriously address the question in 1999 and always addressed the issue in their following manifestos. They indeed argued for a strengthened civil society, with strong associations active through traditional meetings with representatives but also through the Internet. In 2003, AGALEV still argued for the organization of platforms in order to gather citizens and to make them debate about specific issues. At the same time, Ecolo also wished to institutionalize such a consultation:

> Any major reform of a sector of public service must be the subject of prior deliberation involving all the relevant actors. [...] all consultation procedures must be proactive; the administration or the minister in charge should be able to demonstrate that all the identified stakeholders have been informed and invited (Ecolo, 2003, p. 4).

In 2003, AGALEV recognized that citizens had a responsibility to take through an active citizenship, i.e. by dialoguing with politicians. According to AGALEV, the logic is thus twofold: top-down but also bottom-up. Citizens should be more understood by representatives but citizens should also be more involved into civil society. That logic is also defended both by Groen and Ecolo in their next manifestos.

Between their propositions regarding consultations with citizens – which are not binding – and referendum – that should be binding, the Flemish ecologists propose to extend the possibilities for citizens to sign petitions. Such petitions would not be binding but should be set at the agenda if they gather enough signatures. That proposition was not addressed in 1995, but well in their following manifestos. Yet, contrary to the referendum based on popular initiative, AGALEV's 1999 manifesto did not include any details about the minimum number of signatures.

> (To) extend citizens' petitioning rights at all levels. When a certain number of inhabitants have signed a petition, the elected council should undertake an examination of the proposal and put the latter to the vote (AGALEV, 1999, p. 145).

No mention of petition was found in Groen in the following manifestos, nor in Ecolo's manifestos. In 2003 and 2007, Ecolo also suggested that citizens should be able to collect signatures in order to ask for a public policy evaluation. If such a petition would not be binding, the answer should be motivated. Based on this proposition, Ecolo thus wished to include citizens into the policy-making process. Yet, Flemish ecologists never integrated that proposal into their manifestos. There is thus a difference between Flemish and Walloon ecologists regarding that proposal. Moreover, the proposal was only proposed twice by Ecolo. It is thus an ephemeral proposal. Beyond these "classical" participatory tools, ecologists also propose other – more specific – types of participatory tools. In 1995, for instance, Ecolo proposed to give citizens the possibility to ask for a counter-expertise regarding projects having an impact on their quality of life.

*Deliberative Democracy*

Deliberative democracy is also present in the Green parties' manifestos but to a lesser extent than participatory democracy. The promotion of deliberative democracy within their manifestos can be synthetized in two aspects. The first is the Green parties' will to develop and to implement democratic innovations within the Belgian context. The second domain where they promote

deliberative democracy is their will to reform the many consultative councils that exist at different levels of power in Belgium in order to transform them in real deliberative tools.

The first aspect in which Green parties promote deliberative democracy is their will to develop and implement democratic innovations in order to *revitalize* and *irrigate* the representative system. Groen dedicate a great deal of their proposals related to deliberative innovations to the specific processes of citizens' jury (burgerjury*)* and, to a lesser extent to participatory budgets. Citizens jury already appeared in AGALEV's manifesto in 1999 and never disappeared since then. In its definition of the citizens jury, Groen specify that the advice formed by those juries should remain consultative.

> For instance, citizens' juries are a relatively new instrument. A civilian jury consists of a group of about twenty volunteers who form, as it were, a microcosm of their community. Such juries have an advisory function (Groen 2007, p. 80).

Ecologists also propose to implement participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is a process during which citizens deliberate in order to allocate a part of a public budget to a specific issue or project. Through that process, they thus gain control over public spending. This proposition is a fairly new issue for the Flemish greens. Ecolo indeed started to include that proposition in its manifesto in 1999, and Groen in 2010. Since the introduction of such a proposition into their manifesto, the proposition has never disappeared and has even became more detailed. For instance, in 2003, Ecolo defined participatory budgeting into its manifesto and proposed to promote it:

> Participatory budgeting is a democratic deliberation experiment at the level of a city or a municipality. It is based on the following principle: social needs and budgetary choices are discussed within the different city neighborhoods and are then decided upon by the public authorities based on a concertation. This method combines representative and deliberative democracy. It gives a special place to the citizen in a central but complex area, usually removed from public debate. The aim is to promote such methods of citizen participation, particularly at the municipal level (Ecolo, 2003, p. 6).

While Groen particularly focuses on those two specific processes, Ecolo mentions different deliberative processes that it wishes to promote, without describing it in detail. For instance, Ecolo mentions the G1000-process as an example of good practice to think about new processes of citizen deliberation. Sometimes, their proposals remain very generic.

> It is thus a matter of opening new forms of representation by combining knowledge from different field experiences, scientific expertise, and more traditional political representation.

> Within this framework, Ecolo intends […] to encourage the use of participatory budgets at the local level […] the development of citizens' conferences and deliberative panels (Ecolo 2014, pp. 585-586).

We notice evolution through time on this topic. In the older manifestos, few mention deliberative democracy, while they appear more often, and with more details in the latest manifestos. For instance, Ecolo adds in its 2014 manifesto that, specific resources, such as financial means or independent facilitation should be granted to those processes. Finally, Ecolo also suggests that a parliamentary committee should be created to think about those new tools to improve democracy. This committee would be composed of MPs, experts, as well as randomly selected citizens.

The second aspect in which Green parties promote deliberative democracy is related to their will to reform the numerous consultative assemblies in Belgium in order to create real local deliberative assemblies. Many consultative councils exist in Belgium: some are created by law, some are created by public authorities by their own will. The vast majority of those councils, composed out of voluntary citizens, create advices on specific questions for competent authorities. The Green parties explain that these councils are too numerous and, in some cases, dysfunctional for several reasons.

> There are also numerous advisory councils in Belgium […]. While this helps to broaden and enrich the decision-making process, this consultative dynamic seems however to be running out of steam: advisory councils are too numerous and not sufficiently hierarchically structured, they are added to one another without any overall logic with regard to the needs of the moment; their activity excessively focuses on examining draft decisions for which guidelines have already been adopted; they produce of advices that are not taken into account or even read, or which cannot be made public (Ecolo 2007, p.285).

They particularly note that, as they gather citizens on a voluntary basis, those consultative committees may be monopolized by specific lobbies. They advocate in favor of the creation of new rules in order to achieve a more diverse composition of those councils. While Ecolo addresses this question very specifically, Groen addresses it indirectly in different places of their manifestos.

> There is a need for a dialogue of cultures in order to regain trust in government. […] Continuous maintenance requires a dialogue with communities (<u>structural consultation channels</u>)[2] and with individual citizens (<u>deliberative democracy</u>) (Groen 2014, p.260).

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[2] Authors' emphasis (underlining).

**Discussion and concluding remarks**

As underlined by the literature (e.g. Webb, 2013), the functioning of democracy is questioned. This article suggests – as already indicated by previous research (Jacquet, Schiffino, Reuchamps & Latinis, 2015; Schiffino, Jacquet, Cogels & Reuchamps, 2019) – that not only citizens but also political parties and the political elite express concerns about democracy. Ecologists indeed provide a great amount of attention to the functioning of democracy, indicating that the gap between citizens and representatives is increasing. Therefore, the Green parties seem to be in demand for reforms in order to improve citizens' confidence towards democracy. That tendency is particularly present in each of their manifestos since 1995 – both in Flemish and Francophone ecologists' manifestos. Yet, if ecologists question the functioning of democracy, they do not put into question its evidence as such – as has been done by several extreme right parties (Ignazi, 2005). However, they still question the current functioning of its institutions and, more importantly, the tools that are currently used to practice democracy.

The analysis shows that ecologists are first and foremost providing proposals in order to improve the quality of representative democracy. Truly, while never in favor of a complete shift towards a new democratic model, they address how representative democracy could be improved. In order to do so, many proposals have been put forward by both parties. While some of them are ephemeral, such as the abolishment of the Senate, others have always been present in their manifestos since 1995. It is for example the case for the proposal granting voting rights for non-Belgians. That proposal has always been integrated into both Flemish and Francophone ecologists' manifestos. To some extent, however, some proposals are not shared on both sides of the linguistic border. For instance, we noted that Flemish and French speaking Green parties diverge about whether compulsory voting should be maintained or not in Belgium. However, it seems that this divergence primarily stems from competing narratives on how to appropriately revitalize democracy.

If ecologists make proposals aiming at improving the quality of representative democracy the most salient model of democracy in their manifestos, they also plead for other models of democracy. These models are however never supposed to replace representative democracy but are seen as complementary. In that sense, the Green parties thus reflect citizens' preferences, who do not ask for a specific model or another one, but who have simultaneous preferences (Caluwaerts et al., 2017). Hence, ecologists are willing to develop participatory and deliberative models of democracy, but seldom at the expense of the representative model.

When looking at new instruments of democracy, the greens predominantly opt for instruments located in the participatory model. Yet, the types of proposals may evolve over time, and are often hardly developed. Classical instruments - which can be attributed to participatory democracy - are often found, such as the use of referendum. Considering deliberative democracy, while there are definitely some mentions to some instruments (deliberative assemblies, participatory budgeting), those are often delegated downwards to the local level.

This study contributes to better apprehend Green political parties, as a party family. The paper also indicates that (new) parties are able to adapt their own preferences over time in order to keep their issue ownership. This paper paves the way for further research analyzing why the democratic preferences of Green parties evolve over time.

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