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Do political parties support  
participatory democracy? A  
comparative analysis of party  
manifestos in Belgium

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Laura Pascolo

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## **Abstract**

In recent decades, there has been an increase in participatory practices in public action. Such a steady increase in participatory democracy undermines the role of political parties, as greater participation risks blurring their current power. The question raised by this paper is whether political parties support participatory democracy. It is indeed relevant to know how political parties approach participatory democracy, as it is also their position on these new participatory arrangements that will determine the place these new practices will occupy in democracies. The paper is based on an analysis of all Belgian political parties that won at least one seat in the federal and regional elections from 2003 to 2019. In doing so, the paper will provide a better understanding of the perceptions and use of the tools of participatory democracy by political parties, which are the main guardians of most democracies.

## **Keywords**

Participatory democracy, political parties, participatory devices, party manifestos

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## Introduction

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Western democracies have been under stress due to the weak capacity of “traditional political bodies to respond to the challenges posed by the transformation of contemporary societies” (Blondiaux, 2007, p. 122). It is in this context that democratic theorists have proposed a “participatory turn” in the conduct of public action (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002). Political actors have integrated this participatory turn into their discourse and actions to varying degrees, favouring a more inclusive democracy and more widespread in participatory practices. Political science research indicates that these participatory ambitions be more of a priority amongst left-wing parties in Western Europe (Biard et al., 2020; Cohen & Fung, 2004; Geissel & Hess, 2017). For instance, studies on one of the most widely used participatory tools – participatory budgets – have shown that it is usually the elected representatives of left-wing parties who initiate participatory arrangements in Europe (Font & al., 2014; Sintomer & al., 2008). The positions of right-wing parties towards participatory democracy remain little studied to date. In order to enhance this field of research, this paper investigates the use of participatory democracy for the polity, examining the types of participatory tools political parties suggest, outside of their intra-party procedures.

Through a comparative analysis of party manifestos, this paper aims to answer two related questions: (1) How do political parties perceive and define participatory democracy? and (2) What types of participatory arrangements do political parties advocate or criticise, and how do they justify these views? Belgium offers a relevant focus of study to explore these questions for numerous reasons. Like other Western democracies, it has not escaped the discourse of a participatory shift in the conduct of public action and, for many years, participatory mechanisms have been set up at all levels of power (Van Damme & al., 2017; Reuchamps & al., 2017). Moreover, the Belgian peculiarity of having two party systems within the same political system (Deschouwer, 2012) offers the possibility to compare a diversified party program not only diachronically, but also synchronously between political parties in the north and south of the country. Indeed, amongst contemporary democracies, Belgium has one of the most fragmented party systems. This fragmentation is not due to a change in the electoral system, but rather to the emergence and rise of ethno-regionalist parties that have caused traditional parties to split along linguistic lines (Swenden & al., 2006). A particular feature of Belgian politics is the absence of national parties (Deschouwer & al., 2018). Political parties only advertise their program and present candidates on different sides of the language border (Dandoy & De Decker, 2009) or in the Brussels constituency (Deschouwer & al., 2018).

In this article, a comparative analysis of manifestos is carried out for all Belgian political parties that obtained at least one seat in at least half of the elections studied (2003, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2014 to 2019). The parties were selected on the basis of the representativeness criterion. They must have obtained at least one seat in the chamber of representatives of the Belgian federal parliament, or in the parliament of one of the entities in which the party is running, and in at least half of the federal and regional elections studied. All elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are therefore studied. Furthermore, the federal and regional elections – and not local elections – were chosen because these elections are held at the highest level of power in Belgium. In particular, they provide an insight into the political issues involved in the management of a country with a federal structure. Moreover, as the stakes are similar for all the political parties in contention, it allows a comparison between the different political parties. A total of 14 Belgian political parties (seven French-speaking and seven Dutch-speaking) were thus studied from the beginning of the century. Two types of hypotheses are used to analyse the visions and positions of political parties with regard to participatory democracy and its various participatory mechanisms through Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. A thematic and qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo software to understand how political parties make sense of participatory democracy. Through this comparative analysis of party manifestos in Belgium, the objective is to better understand the perception and use of participatory democracy tools by political parties, which are the main power-holders in most democracies.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section describes the different types of democratic innovations that are addressed in the political manifestos of the parties studied. This section also discusses the gradation of citizen power granted in these different participatory arrangements, according to Arnstein's (1969) scale of participation. The second section develops the main arguments and hypotheses of the article, according to the role of power and the ideology and values of the political parties studied. The paper then describes the data and the method used to test these hypotheses in the third section. The analyses and results are presented in the fourth section, showing the vision and position of the parties according to the variables of their support for participatory democracy and its mechanisms. The final section concludes and discusses the findings of the paper.

### **Mechanisms of participatory democracy**

Contemporary democracies have been under stress for two decades, marked in particular by a political paradox (Sintomer, 2016) in which citizens' confidence and satisfaction with

representative institutions is eroding (Dalton, 2004). Citizens identify less and less with political parties and there is evidence of disaffection and a more limited overall involvement of citizens in traditional forms of participation (Norris, 2011). In order to overcome the difficulties encountered by representative democracies, a participatory shift has gradually emerged as a complement to the mechanisms of representation at the heart of democratic institutions (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002).

This participatory shift has led to the emergence of diverse and varied forms of participatory mechanisms (Geissel & Newton, 2012; Smith, 2009). These mechanisms aim to enrich and broaden the participation of so-called “ordinary” citizens in public decision-making (Blondiaux, 2007; Reuchamps & al., 2017). Indeed, a whole range of participatory mechanisms exist, which enable citizens to participate in decision-making processes. They can be located on a scale that makes it possible to assess the degree of citizen involvement. At the beginning of work on citizen participation in public policy making in the 1960s, Arnstein (1969) highlighted a continuum in the involvement of citizens in public decisions. In the present article, the introduction of schemes will follow Arnstein's ladder, from the lowest rung of the ladder of participation (information meeting) to the top rung (referendum). As such, we will look at seven different types of participatory arrangements that are most often implemented or discussed: information meetings, consultative councils, citizens' panels, participatory budgets, popular consultations and referendums.

The scale of participation (Arnstein, 1969) is composed of eight levels corresponding to “the extent of citizens' power” (p. 216). These range from the highest level – control by citizens – to the lowest level – manipulation of citizens by public authorities. The levels are divided into categories: the two lower levels (manipulation and therapy) correspond to the levels of “non-participation”. The next three levels (information, consultation and dialogue) correspond to “symbolic” levels where citizens can receive information and be listened to, but they are not assured that their opinions and views will be taken into account by those in power. Finally, the last three levels (partnership, delegation of power and citizen control) correspond to a level where citizens are given broad powers of negotiation and management (Arnstein, 1969).

The first mechanism considered in this document is the information meeting. Before citizens can be consulted and participate in public decision-making, they have the opportunity to access information and documents produced by public authorities (Van Damme & al., 2016). On the scale of participation, these information meetings are at the third (information) level. Here, citizens can hear and inform themselves, but are not necessarily heard or listened to by political

authorities. In the framework of these meetings, citizens are observers; they do not have the opportunity to express their opinions on the subjects that concern the meetings.

A second type of participatory mechanism is the right to petition. Citizens can formulate their requests and opinions to the authorities through the petition process: “The petition can be considered an 'open' method of consultation – it provides a mechanism for citizens to raise issues directly with Parliament, the executive or their local authorities” (Smith, 2005, p. 34). In addition, the right of petition is a mechanism that, after collecting a certain number of signatures, allows the authorities to be questioned on a very specific subject, but the authorities are not obliged to follow the different opinions promulgated in the petitions. Like information meetings, this mechanism is at the lower end of the participation scale and concerns “symbolic” degrees of participation. It is at the levels of consultation and conciliation, where citizens can address and issue recommendations and opinions to the public authorities, but the power remains in the hands of the political decision-makers.

A third participatory mechanism is the advisory council. These councils offer citizens the opportunity to give their opinion and to be consulted on public policies. There are different types of advisory councils (e.g. advisory councils for the young or the elderly). In this type of arrangement, citizens can formulate opinions, but these opinions are not legally binding (Van Damme & al., 2016). On Arnstein's scale of participation, these councils are at the fourth level, i.e. consultation. Citizens are invited to give their opinions on particular projects or legislation, but the authorities are free to not follow them.

A fourth participatory mechanism is the citizens' panel, the objective of which is to involve citizens, particularly in the evaluation of specific policies (Smith, 2005). In addition, this type of arrangement aims to create spaces that provide opportunities for discussion among citizens on all policy areas. However, the final decision remains in the hands of the political authorities (Jacquet & al., 2015). On the scale of participation, this type of mechanism is at the fourth (consultation) and fifth (conciliation) levels. Indeed, citizens can issue opinions and advice, but they are not sure that their recommendations will be taken into account by the respective authorities.

A fifth mechanism discussed in this paper is participatory budgeting. This participatory mechanism originated in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. Participatory budgeting is a mechanism for involving citizens in the definition or allocation of public finances in a broad sense and offers significant power to the citizens who participate in it (Talpin, 2008). Finally, participatory budgeting tends to take place at the level closest to citizens, i.e. the local level. As far as

Arnstein's scale is concerned, the involvement of citizens in such an arrangement corresponds to the last major category of the different levels of participation, i.e. citizen power. Depending on the position of citizens and the decision-making power granted to them in a given participatory budget, citizens are either at the level of the partnership where they negotiate compromises with those in power, or at the level of the delegation of power from public authorities.

Finally, the last two mechanisms discussed in this paper are popular consultation and referendums. Both mechanisms aim to involve the population by means of a direct vote on one or more issues, in order to express a choice. However, in a popular consultation, citizens have no decision-making power as such, as the authorities are free to ignore the opinions expressed (Gaudin & al., 2018). In a referendum, on the other hand, citizens have decision-making power on a particular subject and the choice made by the majority of them is binding on the authorities. Moreover, the initiative to hold a popular consultation or referendum can come either from the authorities or from the population itself, in the form of a citizens' initiative plebiscite (Setälä & Schiller, 2012). In the scale of participation, popular consultations are at the level of delegation of power or control by citizens, depending on whether the authorities take into account the opinion expressed by citizens or not. Referendums, meanwhile, are at the top (citizen power) of the scale of participation.

Even though these democratic innovations were created to address the various imperfections of representative government (Aldrin & Hubé, 2016), these participatory mechanisms can have an impact on the ability of political parties to retain power and control over decision-making processes (Fagerholm, 2016). Political parties may thus see their role(s) weakened by the implementation of participatory arrangements. However, through democratic innovations, parties can also increase their legitimacy. The future of democratic innovations depends, among other things, on the attitudes and perceptions that such parties have towards these new arrangements.

Political parties, seen as key political actors in contemporary democracies, determine the legitimacy of democratic innovations in public discourse itself, as well as in the adoption of decisions in favour of their implementation (Gherghina & al., 2020). How do political parties support these innovations if they weaken their role(s)? This paradox has already been pointed out by many researchers (Bowler and al., 2002; Serra, 2011). Two main types of factors can explain the resistance or support of political parties to the implementation of democratic reforms: on the one hand, the position of political parties in government or in opposition can be



decisive in explaining the visions and opinions of political parties towards democratic innovations (Benoit, 2004; Nuñez & al., 2016). On the other hand, the ideology and values carried by political parties can also play a role (Bowler & al., 2006).

## **Hypotheses**

In this comparative analysis of political parties' manifestos, four hypotheses are proposed to understand the positions of political parties with respect to participatory democracy. The first two hypotheses concern the role of power for political parties with respect to their presence in government or in opposition, while the other two hypotheses focus on the ideology and values that political parties defend. These two main factors (the role of power, and ideology and values) are related to Arnstein's ladder of participation, which places the participatory devices on different rungs corresponding to the empowerment of the citizens in the public decision.

### *The role of power: in government or in opposition*

The issue of the democratisation of political parties has become a matter of intra- and inter-party struggle. In a context of discredited political parties (Close & al., 2017), organisations seek to be perceived externally as democratic in order to “re-legitimize themselves, improve their attractiveness and attest to their representativeness” (Lefebvre & Roger, 2009, p. 115). In this context, citizens' confidence in the system of representative democracy and in political parties continues to decline (Dalton & Weldon, 2005). To remain attractive, political parties can offer a variety of new participatory practices, both inside and outside the party itself (Lefebvre & Roger, 2009). At the strategic level, political parties can support the implementation of participatory mechanisms and arrangements to restore their image and legitimacy, and to attract new voters (Nuñez & al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the prominence of a “participatory turn” (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002) in public life can potentially disrupt the role of political parties. As a result, political parties may perceive participatory democracy and its mechanisms as a threat to their legitimacy. The inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes reduces the power and influence of elected representatives. Political parties may be negatively affected and feel threatened in their main role by the mechanisms developed to promote more participatory democracy (Mair, 2013). Traditional political parties, or so-called “governing” parties rooted in the representative tradition of liberal democracies, may thus be less inclined to support the development of more inclusive participatory mechanisms. This particularly relates to those at the top of the ladder of

participation (Arnstein, 1969) which could weaken their capacity to manage and control the decision-making process (Nuñez & al., 2016). On the contrary, opposition parties are more likely to support participatory mechanisms that offer more power to citizens because, on the one hand, the stakes of re-election are lower and, on the other hand, the establishment of such mechanisms may weaken the power of the parties in power.

H1a: Incumbent parties are more favourable to the introduction of participatory devices from the bottom of the ladder of participation.

H1b: Opposition parties are more favourable to the introduction of participatory devices from the top of the ladder of participation.

### *Ideology and values*

The different ideologies and values that political parties defend must also be taken into account in order to explain different attitudes and perceptions regarding participatory democracy and the inclusion of citizens in the development of public policies (Bowler & al., 2002; Michels, 2009; Nuñez & al., 2016).

In this respect, green and left-wing parties are rapidly emerging as advocates of the inclusion of all citizens in public decision-making. Indeed, participatory democracy and its mechanisms have been part of the demands of green parties since their genesis (Doherty, 2016; Biard et al., 2020). More broadly, the intention of a more participatory democracy has been widely deployed and implemented by left-wing parties (Font et al., 2014, Geissel & Hess, 2017). In addition, far-right parties are also more inclined to support the inclusion of citizens in public policy processes as a strategy to circumvent the existing power structure (Mudde, 2007). These parties are generally excluded from power (via the “cordon sanitaire” in Belgium) and have different perceptions and feelings about their role within the traditional institutions of representative democracy.

Bowler et al. (2002, 2006) showed that the positioning of political parties on the materialist/post-materialist (Inglehart, 1977) or liberal/authoritarian (Kitschelt, 1994) dimensions was a determining factor in the attitude of parties to support or not to support the implementation of a more inclusive democracy. Moreover, parties that share nationalist conceptions of the society are on a right/authoritarian/nationalist axis (Bakker et al., 2015), while parties supporting cosmopolitan conceptions are on a left/libertarian/cosmopolitan axis. Parties on the left/libertarian/cosmopolitan side of the axis emphasise more inclusive citizen

participation and are more inclined to support the implementation of participatory mechanisms, even if these mechanisms undermine their role and influence over public policy management (Bowler & al., 2006).

H2a: Parties with post-materialist/libertarian and cosmopolitan values are more inclined to support participatory devices at the top of the ladder of participation.

H2b: Parties with materialist/authoritarian and nationalist values are more inclined to support participatory devices at the bottom of the ladder of participation.

## **Data and methods**

In this section, the justification for the choice of the case (Belgium) and its political parties will be presented, as well as the variables used in the analysis of the political parties' positions regarding participatory democracy within their political manifestos. Finally, this section ends with the development of the method of analysis.

### *Case selection*

Belgium is a relevant case to study the place of participatory democracy and its mechanisms in the manifestos of political parties. Belgium can be seen as a classic example of partitocracy (Deschouwer, 2012; De Winter, 1998). In fact, there is a strong dominance of political parties in this political system, which, due in particular to linguistic and ideological fragmentation, is one of the most fragmented in Western Europe in terms of the number of parties (De Winter & Wolf, 2017).

However, Belgium is no stranger to participatory or even deliberative mechanisms. The country has had multiple experiences of participatory mechanisms at all levels of power. These initiatives have been introduced in both a top-down and bottom-up manner: the G1000 (Reuchamps & al., 2017) or citizens' panels have been organised by the country's various parliaments (such as Make yours Brussels Mobility, organised by the Brussels Parliament), while participatory budgets have been introduced in the cities of Mons and Brussels (Damay, 2013).

Moreover, Belgium is characterised by the importance of political families. In the Belgian political context, a political family is composed of two sister parties with similar ideologies and positions on the dividing lines, but which propagate their political offering on both sides of the language border (Dandoy & De Decker, 2009). The three traditional parties were all divided on a linguistic basis between 1968 and 1978, particularly following the conflicts that arose on the

centre-periphery demarcation line. This division “emerged as a strategic response to the success of the autonomist parties” (Frognier, 2007, p. 291). An essential element that distinguishes Belgium from other federal states is thus the absence of national parties since the late 1960s. The Parti du travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid (PTB-PVDA) is the only unitary party in Belgium.

### *Political parties*

The first variable concerns the position of the political parties in power. This variable determines whether the party is more of a government or opposition party. To determine this, data from all the elections studied were used to identify the place of each party in the different governments in which they ran for election.

Moreover, in order to measure the ideology of the parties studied, data from the Chapel Hill Survey of 2014 were mobilised (Bakker & al., 2015). Three variables (LRECON, GALTAN, NATIONALISM) allow us to classify the political parties studied according to their economic, moral and nationalist positions. The three variables represent the three cleavages that structure Belgian political life and the party system. The economic ideology variable (LRECON) allows us to position the parties according to whether they want the government to play an active role in the economy (left) or a limited role in the economy (right), while the moral ideology variable (GALTAN) ranks the parties according to their positions on democratic rights and freedoms (Bakker and al., 2015). So-called “libertarian” (Kitschelt, 1994) or “post-materialist” (Inglehart, 1977) parties support extended individual freedoms (Baker & al., 2015). Conversely, parties on the side of “traditional” or “authoritarian” parties (Kitschelt, 1994) often reject these ideas (Baker & al., 2015). Finally, the third variable from Chapel Hill's survey, the nationalism variable (NATIONALISM), classifies political parties according to whether they promote cosmopolitan conceptions of society or, on the contrary, nationalist conceptions of society.

The Belgian political parties are presented according to the four main variables (see Table 1). The first category of political parties includes political parties with a right-wing economic ideology, an authoritarian moral ideology and a nationalist vision of society. Finally, these parties do not exercise power and are opposition parties. At the level of Belgian political parties, we find the parties of the extreme right in this category. On the French-speaking side, the Parti Populaire is a party that bases its manifesto mainly on the strengthening of immigration and asylum policies. On the Dutch-speaking side, Lijst De Decker is a party that combines neo-liberal and populist ideologies (Pauwels, 2011). Moreover, Vlaams Belang is an extreme right-wing party

which, following the application of the "cordon sanitaire", is excluded from any political coalition, regardless of the level of power. The second category of political parties has the same ideological characteristics as the first one. The exception is that the only party in this category is a party that is often part of governmental coalitions. The NV-A is a Flemish nationalist party that defends a confederal vision with regard to the structure of the Belgian state.

**Table 1: Political parties and variables**

Political party	Partisan system	Opposition or government	Economy	Moral ideology	Nationalism
cdH	French	Incumbent	Center	Center	Cosmopolite
CD&V	Dutch	Incumbent	Right	Authoritarian	Cosmopolite
FDF / Défi	French	Opposition	Right	Center	Cosmopolite
Ecolo	French	Opposition	Left	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
Groen	Dutch	Opposition	Left	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
LDD	Dutch	Opposition	Right	Authoritarian	Nationalist
MR	French	Incumbent	Right	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
N-VA	Dutch	Incumbent	Right	Authoritarian	Nationalist
Open Vld	Dutch	Incumbent	Right	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
PP	French	Opposition	Right	Authoritarian	Nationalist
PS	French	Incumbent	Left	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
PTB / PVDA	French / Dutch	Opposition	Left	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
Sp.a	Dutch	Incumbent	Left	Libertarian	Cosmopolite
VB	Dutch	Opposition	Right	Authoritarian	Nationalist

\*Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH); Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V); FDF/Défi (Démocrate fédéraliste indépendant); Ecolo; Groen; Lijst De Decker (LDD); Mouvement réformateur (MR); Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA); Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open Vld); Parti Populaire (PP); Parti socialiste (PS); PTB/PVDA (Parti du travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid van België); Socialistische Partij Anders (Sp.a); Vlaams Belang (VB).

The third category of political parties includes the CD&V, which has a right-wing economic ideology, an authoritarian moral ideology and a cosmopolitan vision of society. The Flemish Social-Christian Party has its roots in the party that, until the 1970s, was a unitary political party "Christelijke Volkspartij (PSC-CVP)". Meanwhile, the French-speaking Christian Social Party (cdH), whose economic ideology is rather centralised and whose moral ideology is libertarian, belongs to the fourth category.

The fifth category of parties concerns those with a right-wing economic ideology, a libertarian moral ideology and a cosmopolitan vision of society. The two parties in this category very often hold power at all levels. These sister parties (the Open Vld on the Dutch-speaking side and the MR on the French-speaking side) emerged from the split of the unitary parties in 1972. However, the sixth category includes the French-speaking regionalist and centrist liberal party (Défi), which combines a right-wing economic ideology with a centrist moral ideology and a cosmopolitan vision of society.

The seventh category of parties includes parties with a left-wing economic ideology, a libertarian moral ideology and a cosmopolitan vision of society. The two parties in this category very often hold power at all levels. These two sister parties, the Socialist Party (PS) on the French-speaking side and the Socialistische Partij Anders (Sp.a) emerged from their split in the 1970s. The eighth category of political parties has the same ideological characteristics as the seventh category. However, the parties in this category are opposition parties. The two green parties, Ecolo for French-speakers and Groen for Dutch-speakers, form a single political group in the federal parliament, with the exception of discussions on community issues (Verjans & Matagne, 2018). Finally, the PTB-PVDA is a party of Maoist origin and is the only bilingual political party that is not linguistically divided (Van Haute & al., 2018).

### *The analysis of political manifestos*

A party's election manifesto is particularly relevant for assessing the importance devoted to a theme or specific issue by the political party in question. The political program is the reference document concerning the position of a party for a given electoral campaign (Pétry, 2014). In addition, the political manifesto has several functions: on the one hand, it serves as an official document that binds all party members during the election campaign, but on the other hand, it is also an essential source of information for voters and a guide for the actions of elected officials after the election (Biard and Dandoy, 2018). The analysis of electoral programs allows, among other things, a comparison in time and space between the parties on a theme or a specific political issue (Pétry 2014; Piet et al., 2015). However, even if the manifesto is a good indicator of a party's position, the electoral campaign and competition may require adjustments on the part of political parties with regard to the different positions adopted in their political manifestos (Reuchamps et al., 2015). In Belgium, the particularity of electoral manifestos is that they cover all campaign themes (Dandoy, 2007). In addition, the manifestos of Belgian parties quite often include competences belonging to another level of power.

The analysis of the political manifestos was carried out in two stages. In the first, the approach was exploratory and was conducted without software. This involved a thematic analysis of issues related to participatory democracy by identifying the different themes and sub-themes revolving around this issue within the political manifestos of the elections studied. The electoral manifestos were coded by a search for keywords related to participatory democracy and its processes. In a second step, the political manifestos of the parties were analysed using Nvivo software, which allowed the construction of different codes based in particular on the themes that had emerged during the thematic research. The first "vision" code brought together all the arguments used by political parties in relation to participatory democracy and was divided into two sub-codes (positive vision and negative vision). The second code included different types of participatory mechanisms included in the manifestos of the parties studied (participatory budget, right of petition, advisory council, citizens' panel, popular consultation and referendum). For each mechanism, a sub-code was created that included the vision and opinion of the political parties. On the basis of the analysis carried out with Nvivo, I systematically compared the codes, regrouping the arguments used by political parties to justify their opinion in favour or against participatory democracy and its mechanisms.

## Findings

The results of the comparative analysis of party manifestos are structured as follows: The first part tends to synthesise the main arguments used by political parties when discussing participatory democracy. Then, the second part highlights the arguments underlying the perceptions of political parties regarding the main participatory mechanisms. The two parts of the analysis will be conducted according to the two types of assumptions (the role of power, and ideology and values) and their relationship with participatory mechanisms.

### *Qualitative analysis*

The political parties (cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, MR, Open Vld , PS, Sp.a) sharing a positive vision of the implementation of participatory democracy particularly emphasise the fact that the increased participation of citizens in the processes of public policy-making favours an investment and a renewal of citizens' interest in politics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All the manifesto quotes provided in this paper were translated by the author from the original language.

For sp.a., participation is not only about involving people in decisions as early as possible, but also about encouraging everyone to participate in policy making. Participation is also a question of social activation of people, so that a policy can develop by really getting its impulses from the bottom up (Sp.a, 2019, p. 7).

The second argument put forward by two political parties (FDF/Défi and Groen) is for the strengthening and the re-establishment of links between citizens and the political authorities. Participatory democracy tends to fill the gap that exists between citizens and political decision-makers through greater involvement and participation of citizens through participatory mechanisms.

In the face of "democratic disenchantment", many voices are being raised to claim that the power of the people cannot be limited only to electoral deadlines. Participatory democracy is conceived as a possible remedy to the crisis of mistrust affecting the political sphere: it is a question of recreating links between civil society and the institutions of the state (FDF, 2019F, p. 167).

A third type of argument put forward by some political parties (cdH, Groen, MR, PS, Sp.a) when discussing the implementation of participatory democracy is the improvement of the legitimacy of public decisions. As a result, the increased participation of citizens in the making of public policies makes decisions more legitimate because they are "illuminated and supported" by citizens.

The PS therefore advocates a renewed participatory democracy that strengthens the credibility of our system of representation, develops a sense of belonging to a community and arouses the curiosity of today's generations to take an interest in tomorrow's world (PS, 2007, p. 157).

Finally, the third type of argument put forward by political parties to justify the promotion of participatory democracy is to guarantee citizens a significant share of influence and power in public management. That is to say, "it is the people who decide". This argument is put forward in particular by parties that support direct democracy. Moreover, the three parties using this argument (PP, PTB/PVDA, VB, LDD) are parties with anti-establishment political postures.



**Table 2: The perspectives of political parties**

Political Party	Perspective		
	Positive	Mixed	Negative
cdH	Interest and investment; Legitimacy		
CD&V			Power of control
Ecolo	Interest and investment		
FDF/Défi	Interest and investment; Links/Relationship	Role of political representatives;	
Groen	Interest and investment; Legitimacy; Links/Relationship		
LDD	Influence and power (direct democracy)		
MR	Interest and investment; Legitimacy	Role of political representatives	
N-VA			Strengthening the role of elected representatives and institutions
Open Vld	Interest and investment;		
PP	Influence and power (direct democracy)		
PS	Interest and investment; Legitimacy	Role of political representatives	
PTB-PVDA	Influence and power		
Sp.a	Interest and investment; Legitimacy		
VB	Influence and power (direct democracy)		

Nevertheless, three of the political parties (FDF/Défi, MR, PS) in favour of the implementation of participatory democracy qualified their views on one point, particularly with regard to the role

of political decision-makers. These political parties insist on maintaining the role of the political decision-maker, even within the framework of participatory democracy. Moreover, these three political parties recall that participatory democracy should not replace representative democracy, but rather be a complement or extension of the current model of democracy.

However, as in any democratic system, it will always be up to the governments subject to the control of parliaments, and therefore to the political leaders, to decide on definitive (MR, 2003, p. 68).

Finally, two parties (CD&V, N-VA) share the same position: namely, a negative vision of participatory democracy. Both parties are against the establishment of such a model of democracy. According to the N-VA, elected officials must “be able to assume their responsibilities and should therefore not pass the most burning issues to citizens” (N-VA, 2003). In a way, the regionalist party supports a strengthening of local democracy through the involvement of citizens via municipal councils. However, the party also supports a greater investment by elected officials in the fulfilment of their political responsibilities, while the CD&V formulates its attachment to the current model of democracy. According to the latter, it is not about including citizens in the policy making process but rather about strengthening the control over policy makers (CD&V, 2003).

A strong democracy instead of a weak parliament. It is not the direct election of the mayor or referendums, but the strengthening of the role of the city council and parliament that ensures a better democracy. Politicians are elected precisely to take responsibility and should therefore not pass the most burning issues on to the citizens again (N-VA, 2003, p. 4).

In a nutshell, the political parties (cdH, FDF, Ecolo, Groen, MR, Open Vld, PS, Sp.a) supporting the implementation of participatory democracy are all parties with post-materialist values who share a cosmopolitan vision of society. Among the seven parties, four of them are so-called “government” parties, while the other three are opposition parties.

In this second part of the analysis, it is worth highlighting the different types of mechanisms advocated by the political parties within their political manifestos. The presentation and analysis of the arguments used by all the parties studied to justify their support for the different levels is developed according to Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation, ranging from schemes at the lowest rungs of the ladder to those at the highest.

The first participatory mechanism is the information meeting, which is a mechanism to inform all citizens about one or more specific policies. Among the parties studied, eight of the 14 parties (CD&V, cdH, Ecolo, MR, PS, Sp.a, Open Vld, VB) advocate this system in their political manifestos. They justify the implementation of such a system through two main arguments. On the one hand, according to these parties (cdH, Ecolo, MR, PS, Sp.a, VB), the information meeting is an essential mechanism in the sense that it is a prerequisite for participation. On the other hand, access to information for all citizens is important in a democracy that promotes participation. According to these parties (CD&V, Ecolo, Open Vld), transparency is fundamental (“the foundation of a society of participation”) and citizens must have access to all information.

Proposal: Citizens’ access to information. A prerequisite for the development of citizen participation is that everyone should have free access to public decisions. In other words, in order to be able to participate in public decision making, one must have access to the information (Ecolo, 2014, p. 585).

The second type of participatory mechanism is the right of petition. This right, albeit enshrined in the Belgian Constitution (Articles 28 and 57), is nevertheless little-used (Van Damme & al., 2015). Among the parties studied, seven of them (cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, PS, MR, Open Vld) have included this mechanism in their political manifestos. Moreover, the parties put forward the possibility of strengthening (“modernising”) and extending the right of petition. According to these parties, the right to petition is a mechanism with the advantage of enabling questioning of the responsible authorities. Some parties (cdH, Ecolo, Groen, PS, Open Vld, FDF/Défi) also advocate the extension and the strengthening of the right of petition in the sense that the parliament that receives the petition in the sense that the parliament receiving the petition must be able to examine and discuss the content of the petition in plenary session, thus transforming this right of petition into “a right of direct interpellation and citizens’ initiative” (cdH, FDF/Défi, Ecolo, PS).

Modernise the right to petition. Today, the right to petition is devalued. Its decline is due to the multiplication of institutions allowing citizens to express their dissatisfaction, such as the press and the Council of State. The right to petition has many virtues, however, including the right to raise one’s voice and make one’s grievances known to those in power and to the representatives of the nation. These virtues are also particularly relevant in a society that is characterised by a growing lack of confidence in institutions (cdh, 2009w, p. 328).

**Table 3: Political parties and participatory mechanisms**

<b>Devices</b>	<b>Arguments</b>	<b>Political parties</b>
<b>Information</b>	Prerequisite for participation	cdH, Ecolo, MR, PS, Sp.a, VB.
<b>meeting</b>	Transparency	CD&V, Ecolo, Open Vld.
<b>The right to</b>	Expand and make mandatory	cdH, Ecolo, Groen, PS.
<b>petition</b>	Modernise	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, MR, Open Vld, PS.
<b>Advisory</b>	Opinions and advice	cdH, CD&V, Ecolo, MR, NV-A, Open Vld, PTB-PVDA, VB.
<b>council</b>	Involvement and commitment	cdH, CD&V, Ecolo, Groen, Open Vld, PS.
<b>Citizens' panel</b>	Opinions and advice	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, MR, PS.
	Citizens' Assemblies/house	cdH, Ecolo, PS.
	Involvement	Ecolo, Groen, MR.
<b>Participatory</b>	Decision making power	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, MR, Open Vld, PS.
<b>budgeting</b>		
<b>Popular</b>	Influence and power	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, LDD, MR, PP, PS, Sp.a, VB.
<b>consultation</b>		
	Citizens' initiatives	Ecolo, FDF/Défi, LDD, MR, PP, VB.
<b>Referendum</b>	Influence and power	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, LDD, MR, PP, PS, PTB-PVDA, Sp.a, VB.
	Citizens' initiatives	cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, LDD, Open Vld, PP, PS, PTB-PVDA, VB.

A third type of participatory mechanism is the advisory council. This participatory mechanism is present in the political manifestos of 10 of the 12 parties studied (cdh, CD&V, Ecolo, Groen, MR, N-VA, PS, PTB-PVDA, Open Vld, VB). The parties emphasise the importance of taking the opinions and recommendations issued by citizens into account, but also emphasise the importance of such councils in engaging and involving citizens in the management of public life.

A large number of advisory councils in Belgium have the task of advising governments at different levels of power on a range of sectoral policies. Their opinions must be taken into account, their rules must be clear for each of their members, and their functioning

must be free from partisan instrumentalisation. To these ends, Ecolo proposes in particular to simplify their functioning, to enlarge their composition in order to get them out of a logic of lobbies, to reinforce their autonomy and their capacity of opinion, to systematise the publicity of these opinions, and to put a ceiling on operating expenses (Ecolo, 2010, p. 26).

The last device belonging to the lower rungs of the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) is the citizens' panel (consultation and concertation). Among the political parties studied, six of them (cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, MR, PS) support the implementation of this type of mechanism. In these panels, citizens debate, deliberate and come up with opinions and recommendations which carry the added value, according to these parties, of enlightening political decision-makers in the development of public policies. Finally, three (cdH, Ecolo, PS) of the six parties mentioned the possibility of making the citizens' panels permanent in citizens' chambers (Senate in Belgium) or in mixed assemblies composed of elected representatives and citizens selected at random.

In particular, to set up a Citizens' Senate by organising twice yearly citizens' panels drawn by lot within this forum. This assembly will be made up of 100 citizens who will be able to submit a report to be presented to both the Senate and the House, which will be asked to consider it (cdH, 2019, p. 275).

Participatory budgeting is the first device at the top of the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) in the last two levels (from partnership to citizen power). Among the political parties studied, this mechanism is widely supported by six parties (PS, cdH, Ecolo, Groen, MR and open vld). The argument put forward by political parties to justify the establishment of such a mechanism is the greatest contribution of citizens to decision-making. However, political parties do not advocate the implementation of participatory budgeting at levels of government other than the local level.

Informing people is not the same as letting them participate in politics. Therefore, by analogy with the initiatives in cities such as Kortrijk and Mechelen and in certain districts of Antwerp, we want controlled experiments in participatory budgeting. This means that citizens have a say in the decision to spend taxpayers' money and to choose which policy areas should receive more or less funding (Open Vld, 2014, p. 48).

The penultimate mechanism is the popular consultation, which consists of a consultative plebiscite. This mechanism differs from a referendum in that it is non-binding (Gaudin & *al.*, 2018).

In Belgium, popular consultations at the local level have been possible since the end of the 1990s (Gaudin & *al.*, 2018), and at the regional level since the sixth reform of the State in 2012, with the exception of questions related to the budget (Van Damme & *al.*, 2015; Gaudin & *al.*, 2018).

Many of the political parties studied (cdH, Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen, LLD, MR, PP, PS, Sp.a and VB) in this paper support the organisation and implementation of such a system. The political parties highlight the possibility of greater influence and power for citizens in the development of public policies. The parties highlighted that certain themes could not be subject to popular consultation, such as fundamental rights and freedoms, and budgetary, fiscal and judicial issues (cdh, FDF/Défi). In addition, political parties called for the extension of popular consultation legislation at the federal level and for the improvement of legislation on this type of mechanism (cdH, Ecolo). Finally, some parties (Ecolo, FDF/Défi, LDD, MR, PP, VB) mention the possibility of organising popular consultations on the initiative of a sufficient number of citizens (“citizens’ initiative popular consultation”).

This can be done at the initiative of the government or citizens when they deliver 100,000 signatures in favour of a national consultation, and 40,000 when it is regional. During each of the popular consultations, common sense was made itself heard on a variety of subjects (PP, 2014, p. 61).

The final mechanism in this comparative analysis of political party manifestos is the referendum. In contrast to popular consultation, citizens have decision-making power on a particular subject in a referendum, and the choice made by the majority of them is binding for the authorities. In Belgium, the organisation of a binding referendum is prohibited (Gaudin & *al.*, 2018).

Among the political parties studied, almost all parties except CD&V and N-VA argue for the implementation of the referendum. As in the case of the popular consultation, the political parties put forward the influence and increased power of citizens in the making of public policy as their main argument, and they highlighted the fact that certain themes could not be submitted to a referendum (cdh, FDF/Défi, MR). Finally, as with the popular consultation, many parties (Ecolo, FDF/Défi, LDD, PP, PS, PTB-PVDA, VB) mentioned the possibility of holding the referendum on the initiative of a sufficient number of citizens (“citizens’ initiative referendum”).

In addition, the Greens want to increase citizen participation through binding and consultative referendums. For the time being, regulations already allow consultative plebiscites at the local and provincial levels. In addition, the sixth state reform has given the regions the power to make consultative plebiscites possible at the regional level. These referendums and plebiscites are not isolated events, but the culmination of a

broad public debate. We also want to provide opportunities for forms of "e-democracy" (use of new media) to complement more traditional instruments (Groen, 2014, p. 261).

However, a distinction must be made between extreme right-wing and other political parties. Indeed, far-right parties (LDD, PP, VB) with anti-establishment political positions are the parties that are most in favour of referendums and popular consultations. According to these parties, the aim of this is to put the citizen back at the center of politics, by means of binding referendums. These parties, which are generally excluded from power, have different perceptions and feelings about their role within the traditional institutions of representative democracy and, through this type of mechanism, try to exert influence outside of traditional institutional arenas.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Through a comparative analysis of the political manifestos of Belgian parties, the aim of this article was to better understand the perception and use of the tools of participatory democracy by political parties. The following question guided this research: do political parties support participatory democracy and its participatory devices?

The results provide some nuances with respect to the first hypothesis, concerning the role of power. In addition, the links with the second hypothesis, concerning ideology and values, are to be emphasized in order to bring out the different nuances. Indeed, political parties with post-materialist, libertarian and cosmopolitan values seem to be inclined to implement participatory devices at the top of the participation ladder, but also participatory devices at the bottom. This result concerns both opposition parties (Ecolo, FDF/Défi, Groen) and ruling parties (cdH, MR, Open Vld, PS, Sp.a). Indeed, the positions of the political parties with regard to the extent of participation and the place of their modalities of participation are similar, whether they are opposition parties or in power. However, some incumbents of these parties (MR, PS) distance themselves from participatory democracy and note that this model of democracy should be a complement to representative democracy, in which representatives retain the main role. For political parties with materialistic, authoritarian and nationalist values, the presence or absence in power seems to produce variations in the results. Parties with more materialistic, authoritarian and nationalist values tend to favour direct democracy, i.e. popular consultation and referendums'. Nevertheless, among these parties (LDD, PP, VB) are extreme right-wing parties that are often excluded from power (by way of the "cordon sanitaire", for example) and

tend to circumvent and exercise power through these mechanisms. On the other hand, two other parties (CD&V and NV-A) with materialistic, authoritarian and nationalist values indicate their support for the current form of representative democracy and a strengthening and maintenance of the role of representatives in this model of democracy.

Two other lines of research emerge from this paper. On the one hand, the comparative study in this paper focused on political manifestos for regional and federal elections. However, parties seem more inclined to advocate the use and implementation of participatory mechanisms at the regional and local levels. It would therefore be interesting to study not only declarations, but also initiatives (such as parliamentary initiatives), as well as to analyze the use of participatory democracy tools by political parties through their different experiences.

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