

# BATTLEFIELD ANTWERP

## How Flemish Nationalists Conquered City Hall

Peter Van Aelst, Jonas Lefevere, Christophe Lesschaeve and Peter Thijssen  
Research group 'Media, Civil Society and Politics' (M2P),  
University of Antwerp

*In the wake of the local elections of 14 October 2012 there has been no shortage of analyses and speculations about what happened. They often rest on personal impressions of the campaign and the election results. In this contribution we should like to supplement these analyses with some empirical research in which the same group of voters was interrogated three times. Over 700 respondents took part in two surveys which were conducted before the local elections of 14 October 2012 and a third one in the weeks following. We hope that the results, will provide a clearer insight into the opinions and final party choice of Antwerp voters, and where possible how they developed in the course of the campaign.<sup>1</sup> We shall first look at changes in voting patterns and then more closely at the importance of the 'list leader', the main candidate on a party's electoral list, and the policy preferences of different groups. Our analyses shows that the victory of the Flemish nationalist N-VA was established way before the start of the campaign and that Mayor Patrick Janssens' City List (Sp.a-CD&V) never posed a real threat to the N-VA's lead.*

31

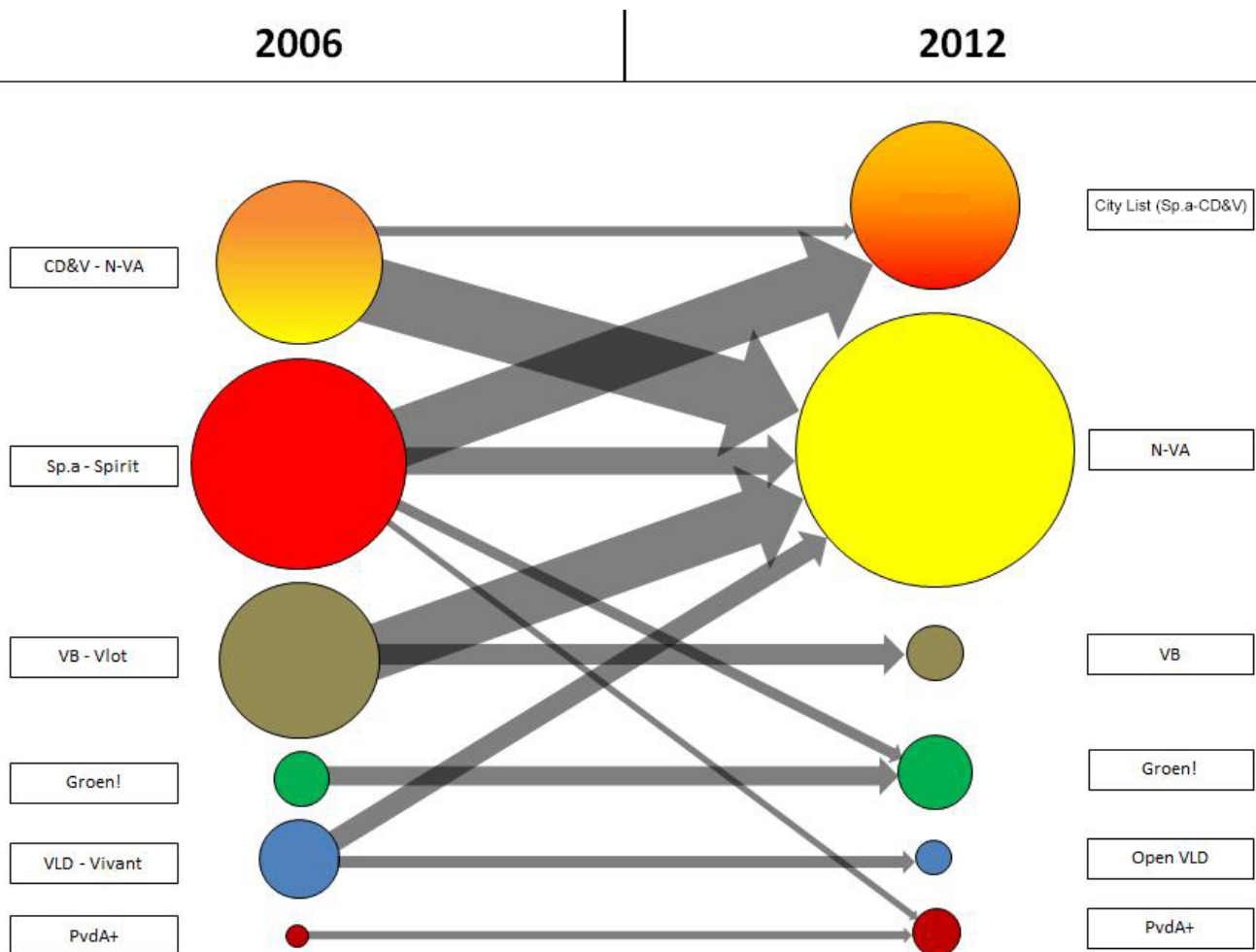
### SHIFTING VOTING PATTERNS IN THE ANTWERP LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Antwerp results soon made it clear that, since the land slide victory for the Antwerp Socialists in 2006, many voters had changed their allegiance. The main question was where the support in 2012 for the moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA had come from? The panel structure of our research project provides a good insight into the way voters changed their party loyalties. We shall begin by comparing voting behaviour in 2006 and 2012 and then analyse the changes in voting preferences between the first survey in early September 2012 and the actual results on polling day.

#### *Long term changes: 2006 – 2012*

In the first survey, in September 2012, we asked our respondents which party they had voted for in 2006. We had to bear in mind that six years had passed since the last local elections and that three other elections had been held in the meantime, in 2007 (federal), 2009 (regional and European) and 2010 (federal), which would make it much more difficult to remember clearly. But it was the only possibility of creating a point of comparison with the previous local elections. In Figure 1 we show the changes in party support. The size of the circles reflects the relative size of the parties in our sample.<sup>2</sup> The thickness of the arrows reflects the size of the shift: the thicker the arrow the greater the number of voters who changed parties. To reduce the margin of error we only include significant moves of more than ten respondents. Where there is no significant shift from one party to another, there is no arrow.

**Figure 1: Shifts in voting between 2006 and 2012 in Antwerp.**



32

Figure 1 allows us to evaluate the main trends. Firstly, the Flemish nationalist N-VA held on to most of the former supporters of its cartel with Christian-democratic CD&V, while relatively few followed the CD&V to support its alliance with the Social Democrats of Sp.a. The second major movement was away from the right-wing nationalist Flemish Interest (VB), traditionally strongly represented in Antwerp. Within our panel of respondents the VB's leader Filip De Winter and his team lost more supporters to the N-VA than they were able to hold on to. This also applied to the Open VLD Liberals, who in Antwerp have now been reduced to a 'mini-party'. Political scientist Marc Swyngedouw notes in this publication that 'it was almost inevitable that a proportion of the centre-right voters who supported Janssens (Sp.a) against Dewinter (VB) in 2006, would go over to De Wever and the N-VA in 2012'. That appears to be confirmed by our figures: the Social-democratic Sp.a also lost a large number of votes to the N-VA between 2006 and 2012.

A second trend seems to be the 'left-wing' outflow from the Sp.a-Spirit list: although a large number of voters transferred to the City List of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, there are also arrows pointing to the Greens and the Left party (PVDA+). Seeing that Sp.a-Spirit had an enormously high score in 2006, some drop in support was to be expected, but it is quite clear that whereas Mayor Patrick Janssens had been supported by the bulk of progressive voters in 2006, by 2012 some of them had switched to other left-wing parties (Groen and PVDA+).

### *Shifts during the campaign*

When we look at the number of voters who switched parties during the last six weeks before the 2012 elections, it is striking how small that number is. From our sample, it appears that the race had

been run before it had even started. N-VA's position was already extremely strong at the time of the first survey and it remained so during the final six weeks before the elections. At the start of the campaign 7 out of 10 respondents were certain that they would vote for N-VA, 2 out of 10 had a slight preference for the party. Scarcely 1 out of 10 voters who opted for N-VA at the start of the campaign, hesitated between other parties. The City List (Sp.a-CD&V) too had a large number of committed supporters. The undecided voters in our sample were mainly to be found among those who voted for the Greens, Open VLD (Liberals) and PVDA+ (Left). That does not mean that there were no significant shifts in our sample during the campaign. There were substantial movements in both directions between the moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA and the extreme right Flemish nationalist VB, but because they were evenly balanced the net effect was virtually nil. It again shows that the N-VA provided an alternative for the VB voter, and vice-versa. One notable feature is that during the last weeks of the campaign, about 5% of voters in our sample switched from the N-VA to the City List. The Greens also lost a number of voters to the City List on polling day. These movements were comparable to 2006 when the Sp.a enjoyed a massive following among left-wing voters. But since the gap between the Sp.a and N-VA was already so great these shifts in voting behaviour were not enough to turn the tide. In short, the election campaign never became really exciting because the N-VA had built up such a head start before it even began.

## MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS VERSUS DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTIONS

In Antwerp, the voters not only elect the municipal council but also, at the sub-local level, the so-called district councils. The districts have limited powers to deal with such things as roads, youth and culture. Elections for district councils are regarded by political scientists as 'second order' or, less respectfully, 'second class' elections where the results tend to be dictated by what happens in the 'first order' elections, in this case the municipality. Most voters vote for the same party at both levels. But there are exceptions: sometimes for strategic reasons voters do not vote for their first choice at the higher level, as for example when it becomes obvious that it has become a contest between two parties. In such a situation, voters often vote for one of them even when it is not their first choice. The second-order elections then become particularly interesting because voters are more inclined to vote for their real preferences. In the recent Antwerp elections we found evidence of this kind of strategic voting behaviour. Furthermore, voters are sometimes faced with different combinations of parties at the district level which can also affect voting behaviour. As this tends to make an exact comparison between municipal and district council elections rather difficult we shall limit ourselves to the more striking differences.

33

One in four of those who voted for the Sp.a-CD&V City List at the municipal level, where you elect the Mayor, voted for the Greens at the district level. From the district perspective (Antwerp, Ekeren and Wilrijk), where Green had a separate list of candidates, half its supporters voted for the City List at the municipal level. This indicates that the duel between (then Mayor) Janssens and (now Mayor) De Wever exerted a strong influence on the voting behaviour of a large number of left-wing voters. Moreover, this number appears to have grown steadily in the course of the election campaign, especially in the final weeks. In early September, only 15% of those who intended to vote for the City List said that they would vote Green at the district level. By October this percentage had risen to 17% and rose still further to 27% by the actual elections. This also involved voters who previously would have voted Green at the municipal level. Many voters resolved the dilemma of Janssens (and therefore against De Wever as Mayor) or Green by 'splitting' their votes at the two levels.

The comparison with the districts also reveals that the Christian-democrat contribution to the City List (Sp.a-CD&V) was extremely modest. Overall only 16% of those who voted for the City List voted for CD&V at the district level (in 8 of the 9 districts the party campaigned independently). So proportionately fewer supporters of the City List voted for them than for the Greens. Sp.a did significantly better with 60% (in three districts it campaigned alone).

With the N-VA there was a strong uniformity of voting patterns in the city and the districts. No less than 85% of supporters at the city level also voted for the party at the district level. The Liberal Open VLD and extreme right Vlaams Belang were also stable at 82% and 86% respectively, but in absolute terms they lost voters at both levels and were reduced largely to a small hard-core of support.

## LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS VERSUS FEDERAL ELECTIONS

The above results are also reflected in the choices that the Antwerp voters said they would make if, at the end of October 2012, federal elections were to be held. Here too those who voted for N-VA at the city level would vote for them again *en masse* (91%) at the federal level. No other party achieved this level of consistency. Only the Greens at 84% could be similarly confident in a federal election. The City List (Sp.a-CD&V), which has since fallen apart, in the end consisted mainly of Sp.a supporters, since at this time hardly 1 in 10 electors would vote for CD&V. Just as in the district elections, we see that the City List at the municipal level managed to attract a considerable number of Green voters. Finally, we should note that the liberal Open VLD supporters, a very small party in Antwerp, did not automatically vote for their party at the national level.

**For which party would you vote if federal elections were held today (October 2012)?  
Divided by party choice for the municipal council (3<sup>rd</sup> Sample).**

Final vote in local election	Hypothetical party choice for federal Elections								
	Green	Open VLD	CD&V	Sp.a	N-VA	PVDA+	VB	Other	
Green	<b>84%</b>	8%		2%	2%	2%		2%	100%
Open VLD	5%	<b>71%</b>	10%		14%				100%
City List (Sp.a-CD&V)	20%	4%	<b>10%</b>	<b>55%</b>	4%	4%		3%	100%
N-VA		3%	2%	1%	<b>91%</b>		1%	2%	100%
PvdA+	6%			12%	2%	<b>68%</b>	4%	8%	100%
VB		2%		2%	15%		<b>78%</b>	4%	100%

34

## THE LIST LEADERS

The importance of the names at the head of each list of candidates is beyond dispute, but their precise importance can vary considerably between the parties. For all the parties, between just under half (the Left PVDA+ and the Liberal Open VLD) and three-quarters of the voters gave the list leader their preference vote. Moreover, it turns out that for the City List in particular the list leader was the decisive factor in the choice of party. At least two thirds of the City List voters would have followed list leader and then Mayor Patrick Janssens to another party, probably in part because of his non-party style as burgomaster. We cannot exclude the possibility that some of the City List voters in our sample would consider the Sp.a and CD&V as a different party if they were not in alliance. Furthermore, it is striking that half of the N-VA voters would also have followed list leader and now Mayor Bart De Wever to another party. That indicates that he is clearly more important to the N-VA than the list leaders for the Open VLD, PVDA+ and the Greens.

## Would you still vote for the list leader if he stood for a different party? Divided by final vote.

Final vote	Did you vote for the list leader?	Would you still vote for the list leader if s/he was on a different list?	
		Yes	No
Open VLD	48%	30%	70%
N-VA	78%	50%	50%
VB	58%	45%	55%
City List (Sp.a-CD&V)	75%	65%	35%
Green	61%	10%	90%
PvdA+	45%	24%	76%

The precise reasons for supporting a list leader also varies between the parties. Not surprisingly supporters of all parties thought their list leader's programme was important. Those who voted for ex-burgomaster Patrick Janssens did so mainly because of his administrative qualities: he has done a great deal for the city and is obviously a good candidate for the position of burgomaster. A remarkable number of voters also indicated that their vote for Janssens was partly to prevent another list leader from receiving more preference votes. In De Wever's case, it was his closer links with the voters that were more important: he understands their concerns and is able to explain things clearly. The campaign once again does not seem to have shown up any great differences between the various candidates, although it seems that Janssens' campaign had less impact than in 2006. Our research showed that Janssens' supporters mentioned 'the campaign' much more often than the supporters of other list leaders.<sup>3</sup>

## How important were particular characteristics of a list leader important in giving a preference vote? (1 = very unimportant - 5 = very important)

List leader (party)	Reasons to give preference vote to list leader			
	Good mayoral candidate	Has done much for Antwerp	Waged a strong campaign	Aware of people's concerns
Meyrem Almaci (Green)	3.6	3.6	3.6	4.1
Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD)	3.7	2.9	3.3	3.9
Patrick Janssens (City List)	4.7	4.8	3.4	4.2
Bart De Wever (N-VA)	4.6	3.6	3.9	4.4
Peter Mertens (PVDA+)	3.0	3.3	3.8	4.4
Filip Dewinter (VB)	4.3	4.2	3.8	4.6

List leader (party)	Explains things well	The political programme	Prevent another list leader from getting more preference votes
Meyrem Almaci (Green)	4.0	4.3	2.4
Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD)	3.8	4.3	2.7
Patrick Janssens (City List)	3.8	4.3	4.3
Bart De Wever (N-VA)	4.2	4.3	3.6
Peter Mertens (PVDA+)	3.5	4.0	3.0
Filip Dewinter (VB)	4.4	4.2	3.4



## THEMES AND POINTS OF VIEW

After many decades of a more or less centre-left administration, a centre-right coalition with Bart De Wever as Mayor has come to power in Antwerp. The three majority parties – the Flemish nationalist N-VA, the Liberal Open VLD and the Christian-democratic CD&V (which, after the elections, split from the City List with Sp.a) - have based their coalition agreement as much as possible on their own programmes, hoping in this way to reflect the preferences of their voters and ensure their continued support in the next election. Although there is an unequivocal centre-right administration, we got a much more complex picture from our respondents who revealed a number of contradictions within each party. Neither were the rank and file of the opposition parties always of one mind.

What are the views of our sample's N-VA voters on a number of important issues? The extension of Local Authority Sanctions [GAS boetes], fines that the local authority can impose for minor infringements of local regulations, is supported by most N-VA voters. About 65% were in favour; 14% were against. More uniforms on the street are also very popular. Over 80% of N-VA supporters in our sample wanted more police officers in Antwerp and hardly anyone wanted fewer.

### To what extent are you for or against the following proposals? (Scale of 1 to 5)

Proposal	Open VLD		N-VA		VB		Sp.a-CD&V		Green		PvdA+	
	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against
Extension of Local Authority Sanctions	50%	31%	65%	14%	60%	21%	45%	23%	26%	51%	33%	49%
More uniformed police on the street	75%	13%	82%	3%	95%	0%	40%	1%	25%	10%	39%	11%
Extension of 30kph zones	19%	44%	23%	53%	29%	45%	47%	30%	62%	18%	51%	30%
More social housing	38%	31%	43%	18%	54%	7%	68%	4%	70%	3%	79%	5%

*The percentages do not add up to 100%; the remainder represents those who are neutral. The questions are treated more fully in the appendix.*

These results certainly reflect a preference for a more right-wing administration and so coincide with the coalition agreement that was reached in Antwerp. On the question of security we reach similar conclusions when we look at the preferences of all the Antwerp voters: a majority is in favour of extending Local Authority Sanctions [GAS boetes] and expanding the police force. Only among the supporters of Green and PVDA+ do those who oppose extending the Local Authority Sanctions outnumber those who are in favour. Also on the question of extending the 30 kph zones, the coalition agreement was narrowly in accord with the majority of N-VA voters. More than half of them do not want any expansion, while a quarter of them are in favour. Also within the Liberal Open VLD and the extreme right VB, there is greater opposition to extending these zones than before. Among the left-wing parties a majority is in favour of extending these 'Zones 30'. Nevertheless, among most of the parties opinion remains divided.

On social housing, the coalition agreement seems to go against majority opinion. Left-wing voters, not surprisingly, are in favour of more social housing but in our sample a majority of N-VA supporters were also in favour. But in the coalition's administrative agreement the proportion of social housing is to remain constant for the next six years. Our results indicate that a substantial number of respondents, including the VB supporters, do not agree with this.

## CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATION

Since the elections in 2006, large numbers of Antwerp voters have switched party allegiance. However, it appears to have happened mainly before the actual election campaign. It is difficult to say exactly when it took place, but it looks as if support for the N-VA grew strongly during the regional and federal elections of 2008 and 2010 and that this trend continued in the course of the Antwerp local elections of 2012. Our data indicate that the N-VA not only grew at the expense of the extreme right VB party. Also supporters of the Liberal VLD-Vivant or the Sp.a-Spirit alliances in 2006 switched to the N-VA in 2012. Furthermore, almost the entire rank and file of the then 'Flemish cartel' of N-VA and CD&V remained with the N-VA, while only a small number of the CD&V dutifully supported the City List (Sp.a-CD&V) in Antwerp.

According to our data, then Mayor Patrick Janssens' City List never posed a threat to the N-VA's lead. The sp.a lost supporters to the Greens and PVDA+, and the number of CD&V voters was too small to compensate for that loss on the left flank. In the final weeks, the City List did get some support from Green voters who voted specifically for Janssens, but it was too little and too late. This time there was no inspirational campaign able to win over undecided voters. Janssens' defeat, however, was more than a campaign effect or the consequence of the wrong cartel partner. Two other more fundamental factors were involved. Firstly, Janssens and his team were unable to attract the extreme right VB voters who had made up a third of the Antwerp electorate in 2006. Although they gave their policies a more right-wing emphasis, such as the head-scarf ban, it was not enough. Neither was Janssens' conciliatory and non-partisan style able to change much. The second factor is closely linked to the first. For the first time, right-wing voters were offered an attractive alternative. The N-VA was in full flight at the national level and the most popular politician in Flanders, Bart De Wever, threw himself wholeheartedly into the contest. The VB supporters who had remained remarkably loyal even though they were excluded from power by the '*cordon sanitaire*', were finally given a chance to be represented in Antwerp's city hall. Janssens' centre strategy was not enough to attract many right-wing voters, while at the same time it probably alienated a proportion of his left-wing rank and file.

37

There are many who wonder if Bart De Wever as Mayor will be able to live up to the high expectations. Our data indicate clearly that his supporters stand solidly behind the party. The respondents in our panel who voted for N-VA in the council elections also did so at the district level. At the national level hardly anybody would have voted differently, and no other party scored particularly well when we asked who else they might have voted for. This suggests that the party's success is more than merely a De Wever effect. Obviously, the list leader is extremely important and 80% of N-VA voters gave him their preference vote, but for many it was not the only reason for voting N-VA. Nevertheless, half of them would follow De Wever to another party. That is a high proportion but still considerably fewer than among the supporters of the City List Sp.a-CD&V, where the figure of Patrick Janssens had become more important than his party. The N-VA also appears to have largely met the demands of its rank and file in the coalition's administrative agreement. On matters such as public nuisance, crime and mobility it looks as if their preferences will become council policy. The question still remains whether this will be enough to impress the former, and current, rank and file of the extreme right VB. For the past twenty years they have systematically opposed the local councillors in City Hall; could they now within a couple of years begin to identify with Antwerp's city council?

***A Dutch version of this article was published in the January 2013 issue of Samenleving en politiek.***

***Translation: Chris Emery.***

## Endnotes

1/ This initial analysis should, as with any electoral research, be interpreted with the usual caution. We are basing it on a sample from the internet panel that had been set up by Ivox (see the commentary below). That does not remove the chance of distortions. In terms of political preference, our panel contained an over-representation of N-VA voters and an under-representation of supporters of the Antwerp City List (Sp.a and CD&V). On the other hand, the size of a small party like the PVDA+ was correctly assessed.

2/ The graph shows that N-VA voters were over-represented in the sample and City List (Stadslijst) voters were under-represented.

3/ Van Aelst P. & Nuytemans M., 2007, 'Het Succes Van Patrick. Op zoek naar bewijzen en verklaringen van het Janssens-effect in Antwerpen', *Res Publica*: pp. 150-172.

## Method

Use was made of an online questionnaire. The respondents were contacted by an external company (Ivox), and the actual research was controlled by the Antwerp research group 'Media, Civil Society and Politics' (www.M2P.be). The respondents were selected at random from the panel of Ivox respondents and contacted with a request to take part. There was a 22% response for the first survey which amounted to a sample size of 1077. For the second and third questionnaire only those who had taken part in the first were contacted. 788 respondents took part in the second survey, a response of 73%. For the third, there were 746 respondents, a response of 69%. Because some respondents do not answer every question, the final value of N in the analyses is sometimes lower. Although the N-VA was over-represented in the sample it was decided against any further weighting. Firstly, evaluating the population as a whole is impossible since only 85% actually voted. Consequently, the division of diverse socio-demographic characteristics across the actual electorate is uncertain since we have no data on it. Secondly, because it was an internet survey, re-weighting could not take into account the absence of respondents who have no internet access.

## Appendix: formulating the questions on policy implementation

### Social Housing

Affordable housing is not available to everyone which is why the city council provides social housing. Some parties argue that under the present city council there should be less social housing, while other parties argue that there should be more. Where do you stand on this issue? Would you prefer less or more social housing? (scale of 5).

### Criminality

The parties have different views on how to deal with public nuisance and crime in Antwerp. Some parties argue that the number of police officers should be reduced while others argue that it should be increased. Where do you stand on this issue? Would you prefer to see more or fewer police officers? (scale of 5 points)

### Local Authority Sanctions and 30 kph zones

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements below? (5 point scale from totally in favour to completely against)

- The system of Local Authority Sanctions should be extended.
- The 30 kph zones should be extended