

# Determinants of Electoral Volatility

## Where Did the N-VA Find its Local Support?

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*The most important swing in the municipal elections of 14 October 2012 was the dramatic growth in local support for the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA. An initial analysis of the data from the PartiRep exit poll on 14 October 2012, indicates that the party attracted votes from both the left and the right. However, the N-VA supporters seem to fit the typical profile of the volatile voter: dissatisfied, with little interest in and distrustful of politics, including local government. National issues were barely mentioned by N-VA voters, but they were certainly dissatisfied with their local councils.*

### THE 2012 PARTIREP EXIT POLL

The local council elections of 14 October 2012 represented in many municipalities a partial breakthrough for the Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA. Whereas in 2006 the party was virtually absent at the local level, or only survived because of Christian democrat support, in 2012 it won a large number of seats and in some places even the Mayor's office. Although the local level in Belgium is where voting behaviour is fairly stable and national trends and swings are extremely slow to take effect, between 2006 and 2012 a large number of electors switched their allegiance to the nationalist N-VA. The questions this raises are: where did these new N-VA voters come from, why did they choose N-VA and how can we characterize these voters?

Those questions cannot be answered by a quick glance at the election results; they require proper analyses based on serious and methodologically sound scientific research. For this reason, the interuniversity research consortium PartiRep organised a nationwide survey of voters at the time of the municipal elections of 14 October. For this survey an exit poll format was chosen, in which voters were interviewed as they left the polling booth. In this way, they could be questioned about their voting behaviour and motivation before any results or media analysis could affect their responses. We know that once the outcome of an election is known, voters tend to adapt their answers to what they have heard in the media. Furthermore, surveying voters soon after the act of voting reduces the possibility of memory problems affecting their replies.

In designing the exit poll, strict scientific principles were followed and the results of the poll enable us to draw reliable conclusions about voting behaviour. This kind of research contains far more methodologically reliable information than unfounded speculation based solely on, for instance, press reports. For the PartiRep Exit Poll 2012, voters were interviewed in 40 randomly selected Belgian municipalities of which 23 were in the Flemish Region.

In the first stage of a two part selection process municipalities were chosen by applying the typology developed by the Dexia bank which specialises in the financing of local councils. This was used to ensure sufficient variation in terms of population, region and economic activity for the various municipalities. Subsequently a number of polling booths in each of the municipalities were selected randomly. The number of voting locations covered by the exit poll depended on the number of inhabitants. The purpose of this approach was to interview a representative sample of Belgian voters on 14 October 2012. Analysis shows that there was a slight over-representation of men, young people and Brussels voters in the data set. More information about the methodology and representativeness of the poll can be found in the technical report.

This article is the first to provide an analysis of voting behaviour in the elections of 14 October 2012. On the francophone side, the elections were relatively predictable without any big swings. The most important swing was of course the breakthrough of the Flemish-nationalist N-VA in the municipalities. Therefore, for this initial analysis we shall confine ourselves to the 2,557 voters who were questioned in one of the 23 Flemish municipalities. An encompassing analysis of the data from the exit poll was published in the autumn of 2013 by the VUB Press and the Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (PartiRep series).

## WHERE DO THE NEW N-VA VOTERS COME FROM?

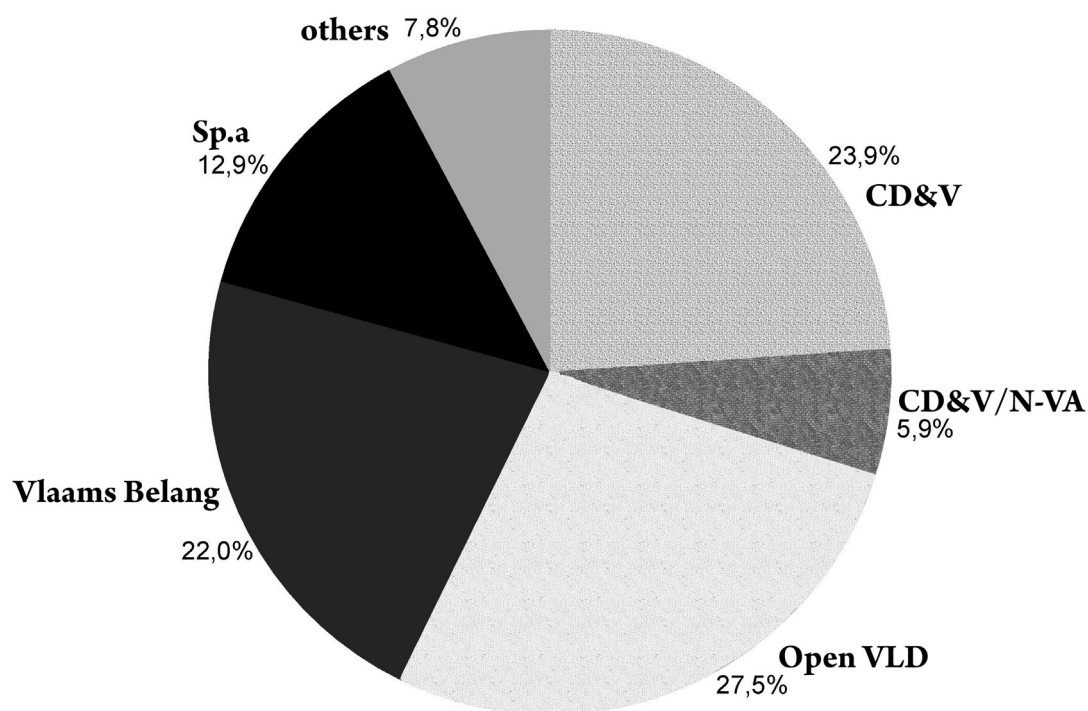
In many municipalities the N-VA campaigned on its own for the first time on 14 October 2012. Yet many electors cast their vote for this new local player. To obtain some insight into this voting pattern, the respondents in the PartiRep Exit Poll were asked which party they had voted for in the previous local elections of 2006.

This kind of 'recollection' naturally creates methodological problems. It is extremely difficult to remember which party one supported six years before, especially at the local level. Furthermore, in the intervening period three other elections had been held at different administrative levels in 2007, 2009 and 2010. In consequence, voters tended to exaggerate the degree to which they had voted for the same party in the previous municipal elections. Nevertheless, such a 'recall question' does tell us something about the nature of movements towards or away from different parties. In the media it is frequently claimed that N-VA voters come primarily from the far-right nationalist Vlaams Belang and the liberal Open VLD. The figures allow us to see whether this assumption is in fact true.

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The N-VA was the largest party among the Flemish respondents, 501 of whom said they had voted for it. Furthermore, the fact that a considerable number of them (255) remembered having voted for a different party in 2006 allowed us to study the N-VA's new support. A glance at Figure 1 shows clearly that the new N-VA voters come from across the ideological spectrum. About 30% of the new N-VA-voters stated that in 2006 they had voted for the Christian Democrats of CD&V or for the CD&V/N-VA cartel while over 25% had voted for the liberal Open VLD. The fact that N-VA is also an alternative for extreme right-wing electors is shown by the fact that over 20% of the new N-VA voters came over from Vlaams Belang. However, contrary to what is often assumed, the party also attracted support from the left side of the political spectrum. About 13% of the new N-VA supporters stated that six years earlier they had voted for the socialist sp.a. Voters who previously preferred a left-wing party therefore also showed that they were not impervious to the attractions of nationalism. The N-VA was the undisputed victor in these elections. On the one hand, the party could not lose any votes because six years earlier it hardly ran in the elections under its own name. On the other hand, the party attracted support from all sides, not only from the right and extreme right, but also from the centre and the left.

Figure 1. Voting behaviour in 2006 as recalled by the new N-VA voters in 2012.



Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012.

## VOTING MOTIVES

The great swings in voting behaviour between 2006 and 2012 and sizable vote flow towards N-VA raise the question of what voting behaviour on 14 October 2012 was based on. To answer this question we should turn to an open-ended question about voting motives included in the exit poll survey. Respondents were asked to explain in their own words what the most important reason was for voting for a particular political party. The answers were then coded in three voting motive categories.

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Analysing the answers clarifies that local issues predominated. (Table 1). Among the reasons given for voters' party choice, the most common were knowing the candidate personally, their opinion of the performance of the local administration during the previous 6 years, and various specifically local issues. The motives mentioned on 14 October 2012, therefore, confirmed the old saying: *all politics is local*. It is in the interests of every political party to bring out their strongest local candidates. National issues, such as the administrative scission of electoral district Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) or constitutional reform, were hardly mentioned as influences on voting on 14 October. Furthermore, attitudes towards the federal government or national politicians played a negligible role in the choices made by Flemish voters in the local elections. During the election campaign, some parties announced that these elections would be a referendum on the performance of the Di Rupo tripartite government (of which N-VA is not a part). There is not a trace of this in the responses to the exit poll survey.

The same pattern also applied to the N-VA itself, the party wanted to turn the local and provincial polls into a plebiscite on the federal government. If we focus solely on the N-VA voters, the picture of primarily local motives persists. Among N-VA voters the most common reason given for their vote choice referred to the local administration, with specifically local issues coming second. Knowing the candidates was considerably less important for supporters of the N-VA than for the other parties. Although the N-VA, as one of the successors to the People's Union [Volksunie], did have local roots

in some municipalities, the party's local presence is more limited than the average. National issues, national politicians and opinions about the federal government were mentioned by N-VA voters slightly more than the average, but they did not predominate. Local issues were clearly the most important reason for the vote choice on 14 October 2012, even for N-VA voters.

**Table 1. Most important reason for choice of vote by category.**

	All voters	Only N-VA voters
(I know) a local politician	20.2%	12.4%
Local government and opposition	17.9%	22.0%
Local issue	13.9%	15.5%
Party, general	8.7%	12.3%
Ideology of this party	8.1%	6.4%
Anti: against something or somebody	5.7%	6.1%
I am member of a particular organisation	5.6%	7.2%
Habit	4.7%	1.3%
Followed peers	3.7%	3.0%
Politician (general)	3.6%	2.2%
National issue	2.7%	4.0%
Constituency service	1.4%	0.2%
Size of the party (large or small)	1.2%	1.0%
Media influence	1.1%	1.6%
National government / opposition	0.9%	2.9%
Influence of a national politician	0.6%	2.1%

*Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012. Open question about voting motivation (more than one answer possible).*

## EXPLANATIONS FOR VOTE SWITCHING

The increase in volatility and the great electoral swings that have occurred in various western countries in recent years have received considerable attention from academics. A trio of possibilities have been given systematic attention as a potential breeding ground for electoral volatility: 1) dissatisfaction with government policy, 2) political interest (or lack of it), and 3) disenchantment with politics in general. We shall see whether these motives also played a role among those who switched party allegiance on 14 October 2012.

In many municipalities, compared with 2006, the swings were considerable. That this happened at the local level, where personal contacts with politicians are crucial and where national trends have trouble getting a foothold, is striking and theoretically relevant. Many voters changed parties between 2006 and 2012 and most of them moved towards the N-VA. Local issues were the dominant voting motive for all voters, including those who voted for the N-VA. If we want to understand electoral volatility and, in particular, why so many voters supported the N-VA for the first time, we must look first at the local level.

In the following paragraphs, we shall look in turn at each of the factors that have been seen in the literature as reasons for switching parties. We shall consider whether dissatisfaction, political interest or lack of it, or an aversion to politics at the local level can explain the shift to the N-VA. We shall do this by analysing voters' satisfaction with local government, their interest in local politics, and the level of political trust at the local level.

## DISSATISFACTION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The most common reason given for voting N-VA was the performance of the local council. Were most of these voters dissatisfied and did they vote for a new party at the local level because it campaigned for 'change'?

The exit poll survey attempted to gauge the respondents' level of satisfaction with the local policies. Respondents were asked to score their satisfaction with governance for nine policy areas on a scale of 0 to 10, in which 0 meant extremely dissatisfied and 10 extremely satisfied. These policy areas were traffic and mobility; road maintenance; safety; involvement and participation; taxes; social housing; immigration and integration; environment; youth policies. The information on the respondents' satisfaction with these nine issues can be combined on a single sum scale.<sup>1</sup> This gives us an idea of the overall level of voters' satisfaction with how the municipality is being run.

In Table 2 we can see the average level of satisfaction with local government on a scale of 0 to 10. It is shown for all the voters combined and for voters of each of the national parties, including the N-VA, separately.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2. Satisfaction with local government (on a scale of 0 to 10).**

All Voters	5.6
Open VLD (Liberal)	6.2
CD&V (Christian Democrat)	5,9
Groen (Green)	5,6
Sp.a (Socialist)	5,6
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	5,1
Vlaams Belang (Far right)	4,6

Source: *PartiRep Exit Poll 2012*.

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On average, Flemish voters give their municipalities a score of 5.6 out of 10 on the satisfaction scale. The most satisfied are voters from Open VLD (6.2) followed by CD&V with 5.9. For sp.a and Green voters, satisfaction equals the overall average (5.6). Those supporting N-VA on 14 October were considerably less satisfied with how their municipality was run. Their satisfaction rating of 5.1 out of 10 was well down the list; only the Vlaams Belang voters scored lower with 4.6. The N-VA voters therefore criticize the functioning not only of the national government but also of local government irrespective of its political make-up.

Academic research shows that especially voters who are dissatisfied with local policies and their administration are most likely to change parties from election to election.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on voter dissatisfaction is therefore a good strategy for parties looking to expand and hoping to attract new support. A glance at the satisfaction ratings of respondents to the exit poll suggests that taking advantage of, or even encouraging, dissatisfaction might help to explain the growth of the N-VA at the local level. Those who were persuaded to vote for the N-VA in the local elections of 14 October 2012 appear to have been considerably less satisfied with the way their municipality was being run.

## POLITICAL INTEREST

Researchers are not agreeing on the relationship between 'political sophistication' on the one hand and volatility on the other. Political sophistication can be interpreted as a combination of political

knowledge and interest, and staying abreast of political news. One group of researchers argue that a certain level of political literacy is required in order to acquire enough information before deciding to switch parties. This group assumes that voters who know absolutely nothing about politics will, from sheer force of habit, always vote for the same party.<sup>4</sup> A second group of researchers has a totally different view on the link between political sophistication and volatility. According to them, political sophistication is exactly what is needed to develop stable party preferences, and in contrast, it is the uninterested voters who are volatile because they are more easily seduced by media campaigns or a charismatic leader.<sup>5</sup>

How can we characterize the large group of electors who supported the N-VA on 14 October 2012? Are they voters with a deep interest in local politics who have made the informed decision that the local council needs a change? Or did the switch towards the N-VA reflect a lack of interest in local politics and weak loyalties to local political parties?

In the exit poll survey, voters were asked to give a score between 0 and 10 to rate their interest in local politics in their municipality. A score of 0 meant no interest at all while 10 meant a great deal of interest in local politics.

In Table 3 we compare the degree to which voters of various parties are interested in local politics. The average score for the Flemish Region was 5.7 out of 10. Open VLD voters have the highest level of interest in local politics (6.0), closely followed by voters of sp.a and Groen who also have a higher than average interest in local politics. CD&V voters have an average interest (5.7), but N-VA and more particularly Vlaams Belang supporters clearly have less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter.

**Table 3. Interest in local politics (on a scale from 0 to 10).**

All voters	5.7
Open VLD (Liberal)	6,0
Groen (Green)	5.9
Sp.a (Socialist)	5.9
CD&V (Christian democrat)	5.7
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	5.5
Vlaams Belang (far right)	5,1

Source: *PartiRep Exit Poll 2012*.

A comparison of the level at which voters of different political parties rate their interest in local politics shows that N-VA voters are less interested than the average. The results reflect no pattern at all of those with a strong interest in politics at the local level voting for the N-VA. On the contrary, those who supported N-VA show less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter.

### **POLITICAL TRUST**

A third political attitude often associated with changing parties from one election to another is a more general aversion to politics. Trust in politics can function as a useful indicator. In the literature, it is generally assumed that particularly those voters with little trust in the political system tend regularly to switch between different parties.<sup>6</sup> Particularly in a political system with compulsory voting and where a large proportion of the electors do cast their votes<sup>7</sup> a change of party from election to election is a potential way to express their mistrust of the political system.

To measure the level of trust in local politics, respondents to the exit poll survey were asked how much trust they had in a number of local institutions. They were asked how much they trusted the mayor and his cabinet; the mayor himself; the local council; the council administration and the local police, once more on a scale of 0 to 10. The respondents' level of trust in the five institutions proved quite consistent.<sup>8</sup> Consequently we can combine the scores into a single sum scale of political trust at the local level. It is important to note that it relates exclusively to the respondents' own municipality. In no way does the scale refer to regional or federal politics.

Flemish electors have a fairly high level of trust in local political institutions. The average was 6.3 on a scale of 0 to 10 (see Table 4). Similar to what we saw with satisfaction and political interest, levels of local trust varied considerably between the different parties. Open VLD voters have the highest level of trust (7.0) in local political institutions and the level of trust of CD&V voters (6.9) is also higher than average. For sp.a and Green voters the level of trust is about average. The most distrustful are voters of Vlaams Belang (4.9) but N-VA voters (5.8) are also lower than average.

**Table 4. Trust in local politics (on a scale from 0 to 10).**

All voters	6.3
Open VLD (Liberal)	7.0
CD&V (Christian democrat)	6.9
Sp.a (Socialist)	6.3
Groen (Green)	6.2
N-VA (Flemish nationalist)	5.8
Vlaams Belang (far right)	4.9

Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012.

The N-VA was supported by voters on 14 October who had less trust in local institutions than the average Flemish voter. Consequently, the supporters of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA are not only less satisfied with the way the municipality is governed, but this feeling goes deeper and is reflected in a lack of trust in local political institutions. The figures therefore suggest that the votes that the N-VA received on 14 October may be regarded as an expression of political distrust. The political distrust of N-VA voters, therefore, does not only relate to the federal government as is often thought but is also definitely observable at the local level.

### *THE VOLATILE PROFILE OF THE N-VA VOTERS*

Those who voted for the N-VA on 14 October 2012 fit perfectly the textbook profile of the volatile voter. In the first place they are dissatisfied with the way the municipality has been run during the past six years. Furthermore, they have less trust in local political institutions and are less interested in local politics. The N-VA was able to obtain support not only from voters who wanted to see changes in the local council, but from those whose dissatisfaction was even more profound. In the municipal elections the N-VA attracted the votes of those with an aversion to politics, with little trust in politics, and a limited interest in politics. This sense of dissatisfaction can be clearly observed at the local level.

## **CONCLUSION**

Somewhat surprisingly, on 14 October 2012 the N-VA broke through locally in many Flemish

municipalities. Given that the party wanted to declare the municipal elections a referendum on the federal tripartite Di Rupo government, the success of the Flemish nationalists was indeed interpreted as a national protest against the government, an interpretation that was eagerly taken up by journalists of all persuasions.

The data of the PartiRep Exit Poll 2012 show that such an interpretation is incorrect. Local motives dominated the choice of party among all voters. Even among N-VA voters, local arguments predominated. Those voters, incidentally, came from all sides of the political spectrum. But if the lurch towards the N-VA was not driven by national considerations, how should we interpret the party's break-through at the local level?

The N-VA voters are primarily dissatisfied voters. This sense of dissatisfaction, moreover, is not fed by a strong interest in, or great knowledge of, local politics. On the contrary, the N-VA's supporters have rather less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter. Their dissatisfaction is fairly fundamental, since their trust in the local institutions is also considerably lower than the average. It seems, therefore, that the N-VA on 14 October succeeded in winning over voters who were dissatisfied. They are dissatisfied with how they are governed and with the political system in general. That sense of dissatisfaction is observable at the local level and the N-VA cleverly exploited it with a campaign for change. The fact that the party attracted mainly dissatisfied voters also explains why the influx was so wide. Discontent is not limited to any particular ideological movement or group; it can be present across the whole ideological spectrum. Not only voters from the right and the centre, but also from the left, changed parties to the N-VA in 2012.

Taking advantage of local discontent has not done the N-VA any harm. The party has won a large number of seats on local councils. However, the sense of dissatisfaction of the N-VA voters could also be the party's weakness, because discontented voters are exceptionally volatile. The newly-elected N-VA council and committee members consequently face the difficult task of holding on to the support of their dissatisfied and mistrustful rank and file. It remains to be seen whether in six years

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that dissatisfied group is still dissatisfied and therefore susceptible to the attractions of a new challenger. The Leuven sociologist, Luc Huyse, claimed recently that elections are no longer used to reward good governance, but that we are moving towards a system of disposable elections. Dissatisfied voters use the polling booth to send their governors home, regardless of what they might have achieved. This first analysis of this PartiRep Exit Poll confirms that diagnosis of the 2012 municipal elections. The question is whether such disposable elections can contribute to better and more stable government at the local level.

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**Translation: Chris Emery.**

#### Endnotes

1/ Unidimensional: Self-evaluation: 4.45, Declared variance: 0.50, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : 0.87.

2/ We have only included those parties in the comparison that campaigned under their national party name and did so alone. The Antwerp City List, for instance, an alliance between the Sp.a and the CD&V, has not been included.

3/ Hooghe M., Marien S. & Pauwels T. (2011). Where do Distrusting Voters Turn to if there is no Viable Exit or Voice Option? The Impact of Political Trust on Electoral Behaviour in the Belgian Regional Elections of June, 2009. *Government and Opposition. International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 46(2), pp. 245-273.

4/ See e.g. Dalton, R. (2013). *The Apartisan American: Dealignment and Changing Electoral Politics*. Washington: CQ Press.

5/ The pioneers of this viewpoint are undoubtedly Berelson B., Lazarsfeld P. & McPhee W., 1963. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

6/ See e.g. Zelle C. (1995). Social Dealignment Versus Political Frustration: Contrasting Explanations of the Floating Vote in Germany. *European Journal of Political Research*, 27(3), pp. 319-345.

7/ In Flanders the turnout on 14 October was 91.5% ([www.vlaanderenkiest.be](http://www.vlaanderenkiest.be)).

8/ Unidimensional: Self-evaluation: 3.45, declared variance: 0.69, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : 0.88.