

The Vlaams Blok in Flanders

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The Vlaams Blok is the most blatantly racist and xenophobic of the extreme-right wing parties in Western Europe (Betz 1994). It is also a Flemish nationalist party and so does not compete for votes from the 30 per cent or more French speakers in Wallonia and Brussels. In the 1999 elections their national share of the vote was just under 10 per cent, but this masks a strong performance in the Flemish electorate. They were the third largest party in Flanders on 15.3 per cent of the vote, and the largest Flemish party in Brussels with 4.1 per cent.

The party was founded in 1978 by Karl Dillen who was previously a member of the Flemish nationalist Volksunie, but objected to their support of the Egmont pact. The pact defined the shape of the now federal Belgium with three regions, Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders. The Vlaams Blok believe that Flanders should be an independent nation and that Brussels is its capital. So the Volksunie split by the formation of the Vlaams Blok primarily over the issue of whether Brussels could be a separate region within a federal Belgium.

The Blok has a highly centralised structure which is thought to have contributed to its ability to organise successfully. The executive committee and its chair are appointed. So Dillen was the party chairman until he appointed Frank Vanhecke as his successor in 1996. The origin of the Vlaams Blok in the Flemish movement is seen as critical to its success (De Witte and Klandermans 2000). Although, the party tries to avoid any overt association with the extreme right organisations of the 1960s and wartime collaboration, the radical fringe of the Flemish movement provided a source of ideologically-trained activists and committed donors. Such groups are still active and controversial, as demonstrated in May 2001 when Johan Sauwens (Volksunie) was forced to resign as the interior minister of the Flemish government after being filmed in a meeting of a SS veteran support group.

After an initial surprise success in 1978 when the party gained one seat, it failed to win another until 1987. The major breakthrough for the Blok came in 1991 when it took 10.3 per cent of the Flemish vote. Since then its vote share in Flanders has increased to 15.3 per cent in the last national elections in June 1999. In the last municipal elections in October 2000, their share of the vote in Flanders was up 4 points from the 1994 local elections. They became the largest party in Mechelen, and the third largest in Ghent. In the largest city in Flanders, Antwerp, the Blok has been the largest party since 1991. But in 2000 it still managed to increase its vote there by 5 points to 33 per cent, taking 20 of the 55 seats.

There is a complex set of reasons for the success of the Vlaams Blok in Antwerp. Swyngedouw (2000) shows that demographic changes, economic decline, administrative and financial failure of the council and the restructuring of local government all combined to create an electoral opportunity. He also describes how the Vlaams Blok, and particularly Filip Dewinter, took that opportunity by creating small activist groups, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods. The activists organised local protests against the presence of immigrants and the growth of Muslim prayer houses and mosques. This strategy proved successful and by 1988 the Vlaams Blok was reaching out to more prosperous areas of Antwerp. In 1989 the Blok began to use its finances more widely for publishing, training activists and organising conferences and seminars, and by 1991 the party had made a breakthrough outside Antwerp.

Despite electoral success, the Blok has had no experience of government thanks to a *cordon sanitaire* imposed on them by the other parties. However it may be that the success of the Vlaams Blok is partly due to this boycott. Mudde (2000) argues that it has helped avoid a split; Gerolf Annemans (party leader in the Belgian chamber) is notably more moderate than the hardline Filip Dewinter (party leader in the Flemish parliament). More importantly, the Blok present themselves as victims of anti-democratic behaviour by self-interested, defunct and corrupt parties (Mudde 1996). Some of these accusations undoubtedly resonate after a variety of political scandals, most famously including Augusta (corruption in the contracting of helicopter manufacturing), Dutroux (paedophilia) and dioxin in chicken. Indeed, trust in the politicians and the political system is very low in Belgium by European standards and 14 per cent of Vlaams Blok voters expressed an anti-political sentiment as their reason for voting (Swyngedouw 2001). Whilst engagement with the Blok may help remove its status as a protest party and force it to compromise, it could simply legitimise their current position.

Whilst accusations of corruption are levelled at mainstream parties across Belgium, some of the most vehement criticism by the Vlaams Blok is targeted at the other Flemish parties who, they argue, have betrayed Flanders by making too many concessions to the French speakers. The Blok argue that French is still unacceptably dominant and that French speakers have too much power in government. They complain that schools in Wallonia fail to teach Dutch as a second language, while Flemish schools teach French as their second language, that provision of French administrative 'facilities' in Flanders exceeds those of Dutch facilities in Wallonia and that the Belgian royal family rarely speak Flemish (if at all) and do so badly. The Blok also believe that Belgium exists merely so that Flemish money can be used to subsidise the French speakers, adding injury to insult. Since Flanders is richer and has significantly lower unemployment than Wallonia, the Blok argue that they would be better off in a republic of Flanders (Van Hauthem and Verreycken 1991). The Volksunie share many of the same concerns regarding relations with the French speaking community, but they seek greater autonomy for Flanders within Belgium rather than independence.

It was not until the 1980s that Dewinter pushed immigration to the top of the Vlaams Blok agenda. The Blok argue that the 'Flemish people and culture' are in danger of being overwhelmed by growing legal and illegal immigration coupled with a decline in the birth rate of the Flemish. As a result they are against abortion and seek to promote childbearing by Flemish families. More significant, however, is their range of anti-immigrant policies. They have called for an immediate stop to new immigration including the reunification of families, the immediate expulsion of illegal immigrants and foreigners who have committed a crime, the return of unemployed foreigners after three months of unemployment, a tightening of asylum laws and immediate return of refugees whose applications have been rejected and the abolition of automatic citizenship to those born in Belgium to foreigners. Only if they 'adjust'

to Flemish language and culture are immigrants welcome by the Vlaams Blok to stay in Flanders.

In addition to policies designed to reduce the number of (coloured) immigrants in Flanders, the Vlaams Blok also have a set of policies to reduce their rights and privileges. They espouse welfare chauvinist policies including a separate health and social security system for 'foreigners' and a large reduction in family allowances to immigrants to encourage them to leave. They also see a threat from 'Islamic fundamentalism' and call for a reduction in the number of mosques, a ban on 'fundamentalist' organisations and an end to the recognition of Islamic services, because of the system of state financial support.

Following the failure to make any advance in 1995 after the European Parliament elections of 1994, the Blok began to emphasis law and order and social morality issues in addition to immigration which had become singularly dominant (De Witte and Scheepers 1997). However, by linking crime to immigration the Blok have actually used the issue to generate further anti-immigrant sentiment.

The latest ISPO election study (Billiet et al. 2001) shows that both the ideological and social structure of the Vlaams Blok vote has not much changed in the 1990s. Racism is the best predictor of voting for the Vlaams Blok, but the party also attracts protest votes and nationalist votes (Billet and De Witte 1995, Swyngedouw 2001). However, the fundamentally anti-immigrant character of the Vlaams Blok vote is clear when we note that after controlling for attitudes toward immigrants, those in favour of transferring power from Belgium to Flanders were more likely to vote for the Volksunie than the Blok. Also 33 per cent of those who voted for the Blok in 1995 said they did so because of their policies towards immigrants, whereas only 2 per cent mentioned the policies on the status of Flanders as a reason (Swyngedouw 2001). This is despite the fact that the Blok has more radical separatist policies than the Volksunie.

Flemish nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes are positively correlated, but this is a contingent fact and the opposite is true in Wallonia (Maddens et al. 2000). Even though the association between the two attitudes holds after controlling for Vlaams Blok voting, it may still be that the Blok has successfully managed to link the Flemish cause to anti-immigrant sentiment. As Swyngedouw (1995) shows, the discourse of the Vlaams Blok has helped construct the image of Muslim guest workers as 'threatening immigrants' in the 1980s, in much the same way as Jews became viewed as 'foreign' in the 1930s.

Vlaams Blok voters are also distinctive in that they are more likely than voters for other parties to pick law and order policies as a reason for their vote choice (Swyngedouw 2000). This answer, however, is often an expression of anti-immigrant sentiment in disguise. In terms of social attitudes, Blok voters are the most politically alienated, distrusting of others, socially disorientated, individualistic and ethnocentric. They are also to the left of the economic left-right dimension. Contrary to the Kitschelt (1995) hypothesis, the Blok neither campaigns on a neo-liberal economic agenda, nor do their voters have these views (Billiet et al. 2001).

In the 1999 general election young and much older voters, those with a lower level of education, manual workers, union members (but not active members) and those who do not attend church or do so only rarely, were all more likely to vote for the Blok. Note that although men are more likely to vote Vlaams Blok, the gender gap disappears after controlling for other variables. The social structure of the Vlaams Blok vote remains much the same as it was in 1991. If anything the contrasts between those with low and high education, and between the manual and non-manual classes are stronger now (Billiet et al. 2000).

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