Holding together or falling apart?
Electoral politics across the linguistic divide in the Brussels-Capital Region

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To foster peaceful cohabitation between the French-speaking majority and the Dutch-speaking minority within its territory, the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) has adopted consociational power-sharing institutions. Although these institutions presuppose strict electoral segmentation, Brussels voters remain free to choose lists associated with either their own or the other language group. Confronted with this paradox, this PhD dissertation investigates whether and why Brussels voters support parties from the other side, and how and why politicians reach out to voters beyond their core constituencies. It does so through five in-depth case studies of the Brussels regional elections (2019 and 2024) and the representative actions of members of the Brussels Parliament (2009 to 2019).

Based on a quantitative analysis of the 2019 EOS voter survey, the first study finds that a small but significant portion of the Francophone electorate crosses the divide, mainly in support of Flemish right-wing conservative parties. French-speaking voters who support these parties tend to hold more positive views of the Dutch-speaking community and identify as more right-wing.

The second study further explores the motives behind such cross-ethnolinguistic voting. Drawing on a thematic analysis of 25 interviews with Brussels voters, I argue that this behavior is driven by both instrumental calculations and expressive considerations. Instrumentally, voters aim to maximize their electoral impact, influence coalitions and policies, and secure specific benefits. Expressively, they vote across linguistic lines to align ideologically, support particular candidates, or affirm a broader sense of belonging.

The third study shifts focus to the supply side, examining how and why political parties in the BCR seek support across ethnolinguistic lines. A thematic analysis of 30 interviews with Brussels MPs reveals that both strategic and principled considerations underpin the logic of parties appealing to the other language group. I identify six outreach strategies, as well as formal, informal, and practical barriers that limit their effectiveness. Moreover, the incentives to engage with voters from the other side are not equally distributed. Dutch-speaking parties, because of their guaranteed representation in parliament due to their minority position in the region, expect to benefit the most from electoral shopping in the larger Francophone electorate.

The fourth study considers politicians' parliamentary interventions on behalf of their own or the other language group. A quantitative analysis of representative claims in parliamentary documents (2009–

2019) shows that representation occurs primarily along, rather than across, the politico-linguistic divide. This suggests that political parties may strategically target a wider electorate during electoral campaigning without substantively representing the group whose votes are being courted.

The fifth and final study examines whether and how political parties appeal to shared identities. Using a quantitative analysis of party manifestos and 30 interviews with Brussels MPs, I show that parties do invoke identities spanning the divide, particularly on issues of low ethnolinguistic salience, but retreat to segmental defense when group stakes are high.

These findings have important implications for research on consociationalism, party politics, and representative democracy. The overall conclusion is that, despite institutional constraints, both voters and politicians retain limited agency to mitigate ethnolinguistic segmentation. This casts serious doubt on the long-term viability and societal appropriateness of a political system premised on hermetically sealed communities.

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