

Citizens' Group Attitudes & Parties' Group Appeals: Investigating Group-Based Politics In Belgium

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Abstract

There is an ongoing debate about whether groups still shape how citizens think and act politically, or whether politics has become a matter of individual choice. For decades, the dominant academic story was one of dealignment, but a growing body of recent research – from cleavage studies to social identity theory – points to the continued relevance of groups in politics. This dissertation builds on these insights, yet turns to a distinct and underexplored piece of the puzzle: citizens' group attitudes. Group membership and identity, while important, do not fully account for the ways in which groups matter for citizens. People also form impressions of groups they have no personal stake in, and these impressions carry political weight of their own: citizens gravitate toward parties they associate with groups they like, and steer away from those linked to groups they dislike.

Whereas previous scholarship treats group attitudes as a given, focusing mostly on their potential consequences, this dissertation puts them centre stage, mapping them as well as understanding their meaning and origin. It argues that attitudes towards groups are not set in stone, but shaped by citizens themselves as well as by parties' political communication. This dissertation includes four empirical studies, divided into two parts, on the case of Belgium. Part 1 is focused on the citizen level: which groups citizens hold relevant political attitudes towards, and how these attitudes take shape in everyday life. Part 2 shifts the focus to the elite level, investigating the role of parties' communication strategies in (re)shaping citizens' attitudes towards groups – more specifically, parties' use of group appeals, which are statements in party communication that serve to associate the party with, or dissociate it from, a certain group.

The first study analyses an open-ended survey question asking citizens to name groups in society they like and dislike, addressing which groups citizens themselves consider meaningful. Results show that explicitly partisan groups are rarely mentioned. Instead, citizens overwhelmingly refer to social groups (e.g., working people, migrants), trait-based groups (e.g., responsible people, egoists), and ideology- or opinion-based groups (e.g., extremists, racists). Regression analyses also show that attitudes toward such groups are systematically linked to partisan identity, suggesting that the meaning of partisanship is rooted in broader, everyday group attitudes.

The second study uses focus group data to go beyond *who* citizens like and dislike to investigate *how* boundaries between groups are drawn, and how this gives rise to affective polarisation. In doing so, we question the seemingly mechanistic nature of intergroup relations and highlight the affective weight group boundaries hold. We find that affective polarisation does not always take the form of a simple two-sided conflict: the divide between two opposite groups, often rests on the implicit construction of a middle ground.

The third study then shifts its focus to the elite level. It establishes how political parties use group appeals in Belgium over time (1981-2024) and investigates the strategic incentives involved when parties choose who to (not) appeal to. We explain long-term stability and change in parties' group appeals by looking at the interaction between two sets of factors: party-group relations and contextual factors (e.g. electoral gain/loss). We find that parties devote significantly more attention to their historical 'core' groups than to non-core groups, and that these appeals exhibit greater stability across elections. At the same time, contextual factors interact with party-group relations to explain variation in group appeal strategies.

The fourth study connects Parts 1 & 2 by investigating the effect of parties' group appeals on citizens' group attitudes towards 'migrants', 'the unemployed', and 'business leaders'. We combine novel panel survey data (N = 3,083) tracking voters' group attitudes throughout the 2024 Belgian general election campaign, together with content analysis data on parties' group appeals on social media (X). We find that parties' negative appeals do have an effect: the more a party engages in negative appeals towards a given group, the more negatively that group is evaluated by its own electorate over the course of the campaign – suggesting negative appeals mainly reinforce existing attitudes among supporters.

Together, these empirical chapters show that citizens' group attitudes are broader and more varied than existing research assumes. The boundaries between groups are complex and continuously negotiated, and parties both draw on and actively reshape these attitudes through their communication.