Left-wing populist discourse in Belgium:

The effect of the rise of the *Parti du Travail de Belgique* on mainstream parties

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ABSTRACT

Since 2009, the rise of the most important Belgian Francophone left-wing populist party, i.e. the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB), has been increasingly seen as a challenge for mainstream parties. Given the lack of research on Belgium within the field of political left-populist discourse, this paper analyses the effect of the growing popularity of the left-populist party on mainstream parties' discourse. To investigate this issue, a discourse analysis has been conducted following the Modified Spatial Theory which argues that, when triggered, mainstream parties choose between three different strategies (accommodative, dismissive, or adversarial) to respond to the rise of populism. The findings show that, the rise of the PTB has had more effect on the Socialist Party's discourse, which has accommodated and converged with the PTB on several typically populist issues, while the other two mainstream parties have rather dismissed and tried to discredit the political discourse of the PTB.

1. Introduction

Populism is on the rise worldwide, be it on the left or the right of the political spectrum. Generally, the success of populism is explained as the result of crises (e.g., Mudde, 2010; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). This sudden rise in such a tense political and economic global atmosphere is a continuous challenge for mainstream parties which now have to compete against an untypical but successful adversary political party. Belgium is no exception to this phenomenon. The country has already been confronted for several years with successful radical right-wing separatism in Flanders represented by the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and the Vlaams Belang (VB - previously Vlaams Blok). Although the radical right has proven its popularity in Belgium, left-wing populism has also successfully emerged during the last decade. The Parti du Travail de Belgique [Workers' Party of Belgium] (PTB) qualifies itself as a "communist party of the modern times" (PTB, 2008, p. 1) and has been increasingly regarded as a left-wing populist party (e.g., Delwit, 2014). It has also been winning in the polls, especially in Wallonia, as the regional election of May 26, 2019 shows (+7.9% in Wallonia; "PTB: Tous les Résultats", 2019).

In response to this rise, several newspaper articles have claimed that the PTB has become a challenge for Belgian, especially Walloon, mainstream parties (Cerulus, 2017; Dardel, 2018; Gillard, 2018). "The PTB is charging traditional parties from the left, threatening the once-almighty Socialist Party and disrupting the country's politics that, until today, were drifting slowly to the right" (Cerulus, 2017, para. 2). The rise of PTB means that Belgian traditional parties are facing the dilemma of respecting PTB voters and acknowledging their claims, in order to keep as many voters as possible, but

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also nurture a moral distance with the populist party and its political positions. In general, this dilemma has pushed scholars to find explanations to mainstream parties' responses to the rise of a populist challenger (Down, 1957; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Hellström, Nilsson & Stoltz, 2012; Meguid, 2005). One of the main responses identified is the change in discourse. However, a relatively large part of scholars studying this type of rhetorical change have only focused on cases where radical right parties were influential (Bale, 2010; Boréus, 2010; Meguid, 2005; Odmalm & Super, 2014). Therefore, there is a lack of case studies on left-populist impact. Additionally, the case of Belgium particularly lacks research conducted within the field of discourse analysis and party influence. Even though a few scholars have studied Belgian mainstream parties' discourse, they did so by analysing the saliency of issues for each party (Dandoy, 2007; Dandoy & Museur, 2014). Thus, by shedding light on the question: "How and to what extent has the rise of the PTB affected the discourse of the main Belgian Francophone mainstream parties?", this paper addresses this gap in uncovering and analysing the change in discourse of three mainstream Walloon parties in response to the success of left-populism.

In order to explore this research question, two theories are used. First, the Party Change Theory highlights that external stimuli can lead mainstream parties to change their political position on certain issues (Harmel & Janda, 1994). This theory is used to identify the rise of the PTB as an external stimulus affecting Walloon parties' discourse. Second, the analysis is based on the Modified Spatial Theory which shows that mainstream parties, when triggered by a populist party, will choose between three different strategies (accommodative, dismissive, or adversarial) to respond to the rise of populism (Meguid, 2005). To apply this last theory, a discourse analysis of the parties' manifestos for the Walloon regional elections of 2014 and 2019 is conducted in order to observe the different rhetorical changes of the three mainstream parties. This analysis reveals that only the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste - PS) sees the rise of the left-populist PTB as a serious challenge and follows the accommodative strategy which leads it to modify its discourse and agree with the PTB on certain political issues. On the contrary, the liberal (Mouvement Réformateur - MR) and centre (centre démocrate Humaniste - cdH) parties dismiss the PTB. This research therefore adds credibility to the Modified Spatial Theory by showing that, even though it has mostly been tested on cases with far-right party's influence, it is also reliable to analyse the effects of left-wing populism.

This paper begins with an explanation of Walloon politics and left-populism. This is followed by a short history of the PTB and its classification as a left-wing populist party. Afterwards, the two theories used in this paper are explained and operationalised to the specific issue at hand. Next, the ideological and political positions in the 2009 elections of the four parties under examination are developed and scrutinised. This serves as the basis for the discourse analysis of the same parties' manifestos for the two following regional parliamentary elections (2014 and 2019). Finally, a discussion of the observations and the pertinence of the theories is offered before the conclusion.

2. Belgian Politics, Populism and the PTB

Even if populism is usually studied at the national level, the study of left-wing populism in Belgium requires shifting the focus to the regional level, in particular to the Southern region of Belgium, i.e. Wallonia. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the success of radical left has only been noticed in that particular region while Flanders is still largely influenced by far-right politics. First, it is important to acknowledge that regions in Belgium are particularly powerful. Indeed, since 1970, three constitutional

revisions (in 1970, 1988, and 2000) have been carried out and have considerably extended the regional competencies (ISPO/PIOP, pp. 13-14).

To justify this paper's focus on Wallonia, it is essential to understand the fragmentation of Belgium and the resultant different political orientations. Erk (2005) argues that only historical critical junctures can explain the left-right political divide in contemporary Belgium. In particular, the year 1894 when male universal suffrage was introduced in the country is considered one of the most important junctures in Belgian political history. In brief, Erk's research highlights that the role of the Catholic Church influenced the left-right divide that still sticks today. Indeed, from 1894 on, Flemish nationalism and Christian Democracy became intertwined, and thus moved the politics of Flanders to the right. On the other hand, in Francophone Wallonia, as French evolved as the language of the secular world-view, nationalism became associated with socialist labour movements and the main political ideology moved further to the left. Therefore, "language … set the world-views on paths of no return" (Erk, 2005, p. 566) in Belgium, and fixed Walloon nationalism on the left of the political spectrum and Flemish nationalism on the right. Additionally, Hooghe (2012) outlines that "the [Belgian] electoral system provides political parties with incentives to pay only attention to their own language group during electoral campaigns, and there is no provision at all to ensure federal loyalty" (2012, p. 136), thus, keeping the fragmentation between the two regions.

In sum, the focus of this paper is only on the region of Wallonia and not on Belgium as a whole because of two main reasons. First, regions in Belgium have relatively important powers and analysing regional politics is as relevant as analysing the federal level. Second, Wallonia has a long history of left-wing political tendencies and, thus, is more prone to left-wing populism.

2.1. What Does Populism Mean?

Before delving into the effects of left-wing populism, it is necessary to explain what exactly this phenomenon is. First of all, populism is a highly debated concept given its "chameleonic aspect" and its "lack of core values" (Taggart, 2004, p. 275). Numerous scholars have therefore attempted to provide their own definition of the concept. In this work, populism is understood as Mudde defines it:

> [Populism is] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; original emphasis)

Kriesi & Pappas (2005) clarify Mudde's definition by outlining the four central features of populism: the existence of two homogenous groups, the people and the elite; the antagonistic relation between them; the idea of popular sovereignty; and the valorisation of the people at the expense of the elite (p. 4).

While this definition helps understand populism as a whole, left- and right-wing populist ideologies still differ from one another. Usually, key features associated to populist radical right are nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2010). This type of populism is rather exclusionary. Conversely, left-wing populists are "populist[s] in that the moral 'people versus the corrupt elite dichotomy' is central to their ideology" (March, 2007, p. 66). March claims that their organisational features are the same as for right-wing populism since they also promote their charismatic leader skilful

in communication on anti-establishment and in direct relations with 'his people' (2007, p. 66). What makes them of the left, however, is their emphasis on egalitarianism, and their identification of economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements. They combine a democratic socialist ideology with a strong populist discourse and their principal agenda consists of collective economic and social rights for their chosen people, usually the working class. In short, one can attribute three specific features to left-wing populism (March, 2017, p. 286): it is primarily inclusionary, predominantly focused on socio-economic issues, and ideologically populist first and socialist second.

2.2. The Emergence of the Parti du Travail de Belgique

To conduct a proper analysis of the PTB and its impact on mainstream parties, it is necessary to understand the party and its rise. The party was founded in 1979, as a Maoist party and an alternative to the socialist and communist parties in Wallonia (Delwit, 2014, p. 132). After decades of low success rates in parliament and a deep internal crisis in 2003, the PTB underwent a reorganisation in 2008. Their new tactic focuses on a double strategy and is metaphorically represented by the work "in the kitchen and in the restaurant room" (Delwit, 2014, p. 261). This means that, internally, i.e. *in the kitchen*, the party still focuses on the advent of socialism and confirms that it belongs to the international communist movement of Marxism-Leninism, but externally, i.e. *in the restaurant room,* the PTB tries to appear more social-democratic in order to appeal to the largest audience possible (Delwit, 2014, pp. 8-9).

The PTB can be qualified as a left-populist party, since its discourse fits the categorisation by March who outlines that radical left parties are anti-capitalist, favour direct democracy and want to include the rights of the marginalised in the political system (2008, p. 126). Indeed, one can read in the party's statute that "the PTB is a modern communist party. Its ultimate goal is to build a society in which exploitation of man by man is non-existent and the community as a whole governs society" (PTB, 2008, p. 1). Moreover, even if, since its 2008 reorganisation, the PTB has curbed "its hard-left flank to appeal to a broader range of voters" (Cerulus, 2017, para. 23), Peter Mertens, the president of the party, said in an interview (Garcia & Segantini, 2017) that "we [the PTB] want to retain our Marxist identity" (para. 11). He added that this helps to counter far-right populism and, for this purpose, "a strong anti-establishment discourse is needed from the Left" (para. 59) as well as "concrete actions" (para. 61) that the PTB is putting into practice.

Since its reorganisation, the party has been growing electorally, politically as well as in the media. This can be understood as one of the consequences of the party's restructuration in the midst of two important crises in Belgium: the domestic political crisis and the international financial crisis. The most visible effect of the latter, in Europe as a whole, is the rise of challenger parties, including the PTB. Hobolt & Tilley (2016) outline that this rise is caused by: first, the sanction mechanism employed by voters to punish their current, and usually mainstream, government for bad economic performance; and second, voters' attraction to challenger parties because of their stances on issues such as European integration, austerity, and immigration. As an anti-establishment and populist party, PTB has benefited from this protestation. The domestic political crisis, from 2007 to 2011, somewhat ensues from the economic crisis. Overall, it has further emphasised the difficulty of governing in Belgium. Indeed the two language communities grew further apart in politics, far-right in the North and left in the South, and made forming a coalition at the federal level an ordeal. The outcome of negotiations has provided a form of economic stability, by implementing European politics, but has also provoked questions about

democratic legitimacy and accountability (Hooghe, 2012). The PTB has taken some advantages from this situation by criticising the current establishment in Belgium as well as by presenting itself as one of the few national and uniting parties of the country.

3. The Academic Debate on Populist Discourse Influence

The literature on discourse influence lacks research on left-wing populism since the majority of articles focuses on the effects of right-wing populism on mainstream political discourse. The general observation of that literature is that far-right parties, which have won seats in the parliament, affect mainstream parties to a certain extent. In particular, traditional parties rhetorically shift their discourse closer to that of populism. For instance, Boréus (2010) investigates the rhetorical shift of Swedish mainstreams parties between 1994 and 2006 and links it to the accession to parliament of New Democracy and its far-right discourse. To analyse her data, she uses the methodology designed by Meguid (2005) which describes three types of strategies (dismissive, accommodative, and adversarial) available for mainstream parties when confronted with a populist party. Her main finding is that the "long-time presence of a right-wing populist party has an effect on the degree of exclusiveness on the rhetorical aspect of immigration politics" (Boréus, 2010, p. 154). Therefore, it proves that mainstream parties can accommodate to populist policies when they become challenging.

These findings are, however, still valid for left-wing populism. Indeed, March (2007) claims that populism is a thin-centred ideology which "may be either of the left or the right, but it is inherently of neither" (p. 65). Additionally, Canovan (1999) argues that any populism is a perceptive critique that can emerge as a result of the constant tension between the 'pragmatic' and 'redemptive' faces of contemporary democracy. Thus, arguments about a certain type of populism are possibly valid for any populism. However, some might argue that only populist parties with long presence in parliament can affect mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, Meguid (2005) finds that "even when niche parties have failed to attain many or any seats, their electoral strength has influenced the fortunes of others" (p. 347). Therefore, it is once again worth testing these claims on a case study on left-populism, such as the PTB.

Additionally, Walloon political parties' manifestos have already recently been studied by Dandoy & Museur (2014) and Dandoy (2007) who qualifies party's programmes as "political bibles" (Dandoy, 2007, p. 127). The particularity of Belgian parties' manifestos is that they "cover almost all the themes of a political campaign", making them quite substantial to analyse (Dandoy, 2007, p. 128). Both analyses evaluated the saliency of every political theme in manifestos to uncover what parties consider the most important for their campaign. After analysing programmes for the 2003 elections, Dandoy (2007) comes to the conclusion that, even though parties mention a large range of themes in their manifesto, the saliency of specific issues seems to differ from party to party (e.g. the Socialist Party favours social security and welfare state, the Green Party focuses more on the environment, and all parties share the same importance for international relations). Dandoy & Museur (2014) confirm this claim by analysing the manifestos for the 2007 and 2010 elections. They find a "thematic regularity across time and between parties" (p. 96). Nevertheless, the authors have not conducted a discourse analysis, but highlight that "the quantitative analysis must be combined with an analysis of the discourse or the semantics in order to complete the findings" (Dandoy, 2007, p. 137). Therefore, the discourse

analysis that is conducted in this paper is relevant to the study of Walloon political parties since it can serve as a complement to the quantitative study of issue saliency.

Overall, even though the impact of populism on mainstream parties' discourse has been proved and credited by scholars, there is a gap in the study of left-wing populist effect as well as discourse analysis in Belgium. This is the gap this paper aims to fill by investigating the question: "How and to what extent has the rise of the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB) affected the discourse of the main Belgian Francophone mainstream parties?"

4. Relevant Data for Analysing Discourse in Wallonia

The main primary sources useful to this paper are the parties' political programmes. Manifestos are "the most important political document for a party" (Dandoy & Museur, 2014, p. 85) as they are used by parties to signal a change in priorities or a re-positioning. Since they inform electors on parties' priorities and serve as political propaganda, they are considered valid indicators of parties' position on specific issues at a certain time (Dandoy, 2007, p. 129). Therefore, scrutinising them over a certain period reveals the changes in priorities and discourse.

The document officially issued by the PTB after the 8th Congress of the party in 2008 is also a relevant primary source. Published after the PTB's reorganisation, the report declares the new official status of the party, its new organisation, future actions, responsibilities, and more importantly, its principles and ideologies. In this document, one can learn about the changes made after the internal crisis the party went through in 2003. It is valuable to this research because it allows for the selection of topics that are central to the PTB's ideology and is used to evaluate the effect of the left-populist party on mainstream discourse.

Additionally, Delwit's (2014) in-depth analysis of the evolution of the PTB, from the students' movement which started the party in 1979, to the internal organisational crisis of 2003 and finally the 2008 reorganisation, scrutinises the party's ideological changes and progress during 40 years. Also focusing on most recent developments, Delwit explains the sudden rise of the PTB in politics and the media since 2010. This secondary source is relevant to this research as it provides basic information on the party, useful to understand the left-populist phenomenon in Wallonia.

Information on other parties is also relevant and can be found in the articles by Tréfois & Faniel (2007) and Blaise et al. (2014) which examine the evolution of five Belgian Francophone parties, including the MR, PS, and cdH, between 2002-2007 and from 2007-2013 respectively. The internal evolutions, the main political positions, and the electoral progress of each party as well as the rapprochements between them are tackled. These secondary sources are relevant since they provide valuable information on parties' positions before 2014 and allow identifying the changes that occurred with the rise of the PTB in Wallonia.

5. Analytical Framework

5.1. The Theories

Harmel & Janda (1994) establish the *Party Change Theory*. They argue that change in parties' ideologies is due to a change in leadership, a change of dominant faction within the party, and/or external stimuli. The latter factor is especially compatible with the topic at hand. External stimuli refer to 'environmental changes', which broadly relate to stimuli that are directly related to the performance of a party. One of

the most important is the change "in the proportions of votes and seats received by the party" (Harmel & Janda, 1994, p. 267). If a new populist party is on the rise, voters will move from the mainstream parties to this new organisation. As a consequence, the new party represents a trigger for mainstream parties which will tend to change, notably in regards to their positions and ideologies. Harmel & Svåsand (1997) corroborate this claim by arguing that an established party is likely to change its policy positions in a new party's direction when two conditions are met: first, the new party is winning a significant number of votes and/or seats and, second the established party experiences bad results in elections.

In order to explain how the change in discourse is made by mainstream parties, the *Modified Spatial Theory* developed by Meguid (2005) is used. She claims that mainstream parties choose between three different strategies (accommodative, dismissive, or adversarial) when triggered by the rise of a niche party. Meguid takes inspiration from and improves Downs' (1957) 'Spatial Theory of Party and Voter Behaviour'. Downs claims that "rational parties choose policy positions to minimise the distance between themselves and the voters" (as cited in Meguid, 2005, p. 348). This means that if voters tend to adopt a populist discourse, there is a high chance that parties will do the same, in order not to lose voters. According to Downs' framework, parties competing for votes are faced with two possible options or strategies: movement toward, i.e. policy convergence or *accommodative* strategy, or a movement away from, i.e. policy divergence or *adversarial* strategy, a specific competitor party. Meguid (2005) adds a third strategy: the *dismissive* strategy, used to define non-action as a deliberate tactic that indicates mainstream parties ignoring the success of and voters' interest in populist ideologies (p. 349). All these strategies have different impacts, in particular on the electoral support for the populist or 'niche' party. While the dismissive strategy discredits the issues of the niche party and leads to a decrease in populist electoral support, both the accommodative and adversarial strategy increase the salience of populist issues. However, with the accommodative strategy, the support for niche party will decrease because mainstream parties benefit from their legislative legitimacy and therefore will keep their voters, whereas when a mainstream party adopts the adversarial strategy, it will lose voters to the populist party since it does not take voters' preferences into account (Meguid, 2005, pp. 349-350).

Deducting from this discussion, I make the hypothesis that regarding the rise and the recent success of the PTB in Wallonia, only the Socialist Party, closer to the left-populists, sees them as a serious competitor, and therefore follows the accommodative strategy and adopts ideologies closer to those of the PTB by modifying its discourse. The other parties focus on dismissing and discrediting the PTB's issues.

5.2. Method

In order to analyse which strategy mainstream parties decide to adopt, a discourse analysis of the parties' manifestos for the Walloon regional elections of 2014 and 2019 is conducted. The analysis starts with the 2014 regional election, the results of which allowed the PTB to take seats in the Walloon Parliament for the first time since the party's reorganisation in 2008. Previous studies are used to get information on ideologies prior to 2014 (Dandoy, 2007, Dandoy & Museur, 2014; Tréfois & Faniel, 2007).

The parties examined are the PTB, the Mouvement Réformateur (MR), The Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH), and the Parti Socialiste (PS). The PTB is currently the only influential Belgian left-populist party. MR, cdH, and PS are relevant to the research because they represent the left, or

socialism (PS), and right or liberalism (MR), as well as the centre (cdH – Christian Democrats) of the political spectrum. It is necessary to analyse different political ideologies in order to identify which ideology the PTB affects more. The PS is currently the most important party in the Walloon parliament with 30 seats (out of 75 seats), followed by the MR (25 seats), than the cdH (13 seats). But the MR and the cdH form the majority, while the PS is, with the PTB and other smaller parties, in the opposition.

It is important to emphasise that this paper aims at analysing parties' positions through their discourse and not their actual behaviour in parliament. Thus, manifestos serve as the main sources for this discourse analysis. There is however an exception. As the PS manifesto for 2014 was not accessible, debates and interviews by the state-owned and trustworthy media RTBF and La Première are used to analyse the party's position for that year. Political programmes or manifestos are important to scrutinise because they are key data sources for parties. They inform the electorate about the course of action the party will pursue if elected, therefore reflecting the party's opinions on issues that are important to them. Since the research is based on discourse analysis, Jaworski & Coupland (2006) claim that discourse "offers a means of exposing or deconstructing the social practices that constitute 'social structure' and […] the conventional meaning structures of social life" (p. 5). In other words, discourse analysis is about the study of the language and how it constructs phenomena. It enables to understand how the way one makes discourse shapes how another perceives reality. In the case at hand, the PTB discourse shapes voters' reality, by providing them with policy ideas that correspond to their ideologies; hence, it also forces other parties to change their discourse in order to fit voters' new reality.

5.3. Operationalisation

Parties' manifestos are scrutinised according to their dismissiveness, accommodation or adversarial position toward the PTB's ideologies. The Workers' Party of Belgium can be classified as a 'populist socialist party', according to March's classification (2008). This means that the party has a "democratic socialist ideological core overlaid with a stronger anti-elite, anti-establishment appeal, greater ideological eclecticism and emphasis on identity" (March, 2008, p. 129). Thus, the issues examined in the manifestos are: very limited privatisation; generous social benefits; direct democracy; less and better Europe; anti-globalisation; and focus on the 'common people', i.e. egalitarianism.

In order to identify the different strategies adopted by mainstream parties, holistic grading, as exemplified by Hawkins (2009), is employed. This method is used to evaluate compositions, here manifestos, based on their overall quality. "Holistic grading asks readers to interpret whole texts rather than count content at the level of words or sentences" (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1049). Thus, judgments are made based on criteria that have previously been agreed upon. In this analysis, the criteria are the three strategies developed by Meguid: accommodative, dismissive, and adversarial. They serve as the 'final grade' for mainstream parties' response to the PTB populist discourse, which is represented by the six themes established in the above paragraph. The 'grading' of manifestos is conducted as such: Walloon mainstream parties' strategies towards populist discourse are qualified as *accommodative* when they politically converge and adopt the more or less same stance as the PTB on an essentially populist issue. Parties are attributed a *dismissive* strategy if they see one of the PTB's issues as unimportant and do not express their stance on it. In other words, it is when they take no action and signal to voters that the issue lacks merit; hence ultimately discrediting it. The last option is for parties to follow the *adversarial* strategy, that is, publicly oppose populist issues and diverge from the PTB discourse in the risk of losing voters to that new party.

6. Measuring the PTB's effects on Mainstream Discourse

In order to observe a change in discourse, it is necessary to analyse parties' manifestos over a certain period of time. This section is therefore dedicated to the analysis of parties' positions from 2009 to 2019 on the issues of: very limited privatisation; generous social benefits; direct democracy; less, or a better, Europe; anti-globalisation; and egalitarianism. These policy issues are derived from March's (2008) analysis of left-populist parties.

As the task of scrutinising political programmes is rather substantial and lengthy, only the manifestos of the 2014 and 2019 regional elections are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it is also essential to acknowledge the political situation and parties' ideologies of 2009 in order to study a longer timeframe and better identify the changes in discourse.

6.1. Political Situation in 2009

As Blaise et al. note, the 2009 regional elections were particularly complex (2009, p. 10). Indeed, the political crisis which started in 2007 and the 2008 financial crisis hit and disrupted Belgian politics. This influenced the election results. For every party, economic issues and international relations became especially important (Dandoy & Museur, 2014). Social policies, and in particular social security and welfare state, became the most prominent issues in the campaign for the 2009 regional elections (Dandoy & Museur, 2014, p. 92).

As a consequence of both crises, most parties decided to reaffirm their original ideological positions in view of the 2009 elections. The PS, after remarkably failing in 2007, started criticising big banks (Tréfois & Faniel, 2007). It also denounced liberalism which allegedly caused the financial and economic crises that hurt the innocent common people. The socialist party also focused on equality, capitalism, ecology and teaching (Blaise et al., 2014, p. 11). In contrast, the MR criticised and opposed the PS by qualifying it as archaic. The party's central targets for 2009 were reduced unemployment benefits, education, and more privatisation, especially in road maintenance (Blaise et al., 2014, p. 46). Lastly, the cdH, which had previously focused on issues concerning ethics (Tréfois & Faniel, 2007, p. 32), updated its programme, including more about the environment, finding social solutions to the economic crisis, excluding more privatisation of public utilities, and concentrating on reducing unemployment among youth (Blaise et al, 2014, pp. 70-71).

As it has already been highlighted, the PTB has been growing in the media as well as electorally and politically since its structural reorganisation and ideological realignment following its 8th Congress in 2008. In the campaign for the 2009 regional elections, members of the party emphasised the anti-establishment feature of the PTB, notably by denouncing the "political circus" caused by mainstream parties in their run for public office (Delwit, 2014, p. 279). Moreover, the party, acting as a classical populist party, has increasingly put emphasis on two personalities, i.e. the spokesperson Raoul Hedebouw in Wallonia and the president Peter Mertens in Flanders. The personification of the party through them has eased the mediatisation of the PTB and its consequent electoral success (Delwit, 2014, p. 281). The party has therefore meticulously reorganised and built up its image in order to get voters' attention.

The outcome of the 2009 regional elections is particularly interesting. All traditional Walloon parties saw their vote percentage diminish in comparison to 2004 (Blaise et al, 2009, p16). The PS lost

4.14%, the MR's electorate diminished by 0.89% and the CDH received 1.48% less votes (IBZ, 2009). The big winner was ECOLO (i.e. the Green Party) which more than doubled its score by growing from 8.52% to 18.54% (IBZ, 2009). The PTB also doubled its score, with now 1,2%. As Delwit (2014) points out, it also captured almost the entirety of left radical votes (p. 310). The new coalition in the Walloon Parliament in 2009 united the PS, the cdH, and the Green Party, with a total of 56 seats out of 75 (Blaise et al., 2009, p. 38). The MR was reduced as the only party in opposition.

To sum up, the 2009 regional elections happened in a very particular international and national context. Therefore, some of the Belgian Francophone voters started showing their discontent by moving away from the centre and voting for parties positioned further on the left of the political spectrum, i.e. the Green Party and the PTB. The left-populist party actually saw its breakthrough in 2009 and has only been growing since then (Delwit, 2014, p. 310). Thus, the conditions for the *Party Change Theory* were present after the elections in 2009. Indeed, traditional parties, experiencing electoral results worse than in 2004, were challenged by 'external stimuli', i.e. the rise, at their expense, of parties positioned farther on the left of the political spectrum. One could therefore expect mainstream parties to change their ideological positions in order not to lose voters. The cdH actually exemplified to some extent this tendency in the 2009 elections as they focused more than usually on environmental issues because they knew they would compete with the Green Party for the third place in Parliament (Blaise et al, 2014, p. 71).

6.2. Analysis of the Manifestos for the 2014 Regional Election

In the first regional elections following the Belgian political crisis which ended in 2011, each party tried to regain voters' trust. The PTB, also bolstered by its breakthrough, published an ambitious and optimistic political programme whereas the traditional parties offered more realistic manifestos.

To begin with, the analysis of the PTB's radical-socialist manifesto for the 2014 elections clearly confirms the populist stances of the party. Logically, the PTB put forward the "focus on the people, and not on the profit" (PTB, 2014, p. 4), even going as far as to say that "liberalism contaminated leftist governing parties" (PTB, 2014, p. 6). Thus, the party presented itself as a true and viable alternative. The PTB's stances on *very limited privatisation* outlined the communist origins of the party. Notably, the party wished to "put an end to the privatisation of public services" (p. 12) because it only causes "less services, costlier and more complicated services, but also more profit for private businesses" (p. 67). The party proceeded to list a series of services and sectors that should be in the hands of the state (p. 72). In regards to *generous social benefits*, the promises were to considerably raise them over the poverty line (pp. 12, 48), stop the system of degression in unemployment benefits (p. 12), and reduce the standard early retirement age to 58 instead of 60 (p. 20). Then, concerning *direct democracy*, the PTB put forward the use of referenda for important decisions (p. 95), including at the European level (p. 65), as well as when "hundreds of citizens demand a referendum" (p. 95). This confirms the central focus accorded to the population. Regarding *less Europe*, the populist party stressed the need for solidarity and cooperation at the European level (p. 57) but also announced its will to repeal the Lisbon Treaty, revise the other European treaties and suppress the TSCG, or European Fiscal Compact. Additionally, the PTB emphasised the economic and social danger the TTIP represented (p. 63), and asked for authorities not to sign it; hence emphasising its *anti-globalist* position. Finally, *egalitarianism* was very much put forward in the manifesto. As mentioned above, the PTB emphasised the central place

of the people but also established a few policies in that regard, for instance, by proposing to tax millionaires (p. 35).

Next, having been in power since the political crisis, the PS focused on stability and prosperity. True to its socialist beliefs, the party favoured *limited privatisation* and *generous social benefits.* The party emphasised the possible need to bring certain services (e.g., distribution of pensions, mobility) together under the same public interest organisation. It also put forward raising the minimum pension level to 1300 €/month ("Odette, 40 Années de Travail", 2014, para. 3) and all social benefits, as well as offering more training to reduce unemployment ("Elections 2014", 2014). It did not, however, propose to stop the degression of pensions ("Paul Magnette", 2014, para. 54-55). *Direct democracy* was also important to the party. It favoured public debates, notably through citizens' panels and initiatives ("Le Grand Débat", 2014, 8:16). On matters concerning Europe, the PS argued for a socialist Union, notably with the establishment of a common minimum salary, and the integration of other social objectives regarding jobs, in addition to budgetary concerns. It also asked for more Europe by, for instance, emphasising the importance of Eurobonds to tackle crises ("Elections 2014", 2014). Thus, the party dismissed PTB's stances on *less Europe*. As regards *anti-globalisation*, the PS did not want the ratification of the TTIP and condemned liberalism and globalisation as having harmful effects on national businesses and the citizens ("Le Grand Débat", 2014, 17:07). Nevertheless, regarding *egalitarianism,* the socialist party was in accordance with the PTB. Indeed, it focused on representing the people, in particular the workers, and proposed a wealth tax ("Elections 2014", 2014). Overall, the PS's 2014 manifesto reflected the party's original socialist ideologies and, when some of its propositions were compared to those of the PTB, the party simply presented the far-left as outdated and non-threatening ("Paul Magnette", 2014, para. 57).

Next, the cdH confirmed its adherence to the centre of the political spectrum. As regards *limited privatisation*, even though it emphasised the role of public investment (e.g., cdH, 2014, p. 16) and the limitation of private businesses in some sectors (pp. 73, 121), the party very much encouraged public-private partnerships in mobility, energy, housing, and other services (e.g., pp. 57, 154, 226). The cdH thus dismissed the position of the PTB on that topic. On matters concerning *generous social benefits*, the centre party put forward issues which were adversarial to the populist stances. Indeed, the cdH only proposed to increase the lowest pensions (p. 187), and rather suggested, for instance, raising the age of early retirement (p. 187), better accompanying the unemployed (p. 102), increasing the number of older workers (p. 92), and inciting unemployed people to realise services of general interest to compensate the degression of pensions (p. 180). When it came to *direct democracy*, the cdH also did not agree with the PTB. Even if it put forward the use of public consultation (pp. 219, 269) and citizens' panels (p. 268), the party did not mention putting referenda in place. Contrary to the PTB, the centre party wanted a federalist Europe (p. 285). It dismissed the idea of *less Europe* by arguing for a common European defence (p. 291), the harmonisation of taxes (pp. 174, 378), and the completion of the economic and monetary Union (p. 392). Concerning *anti-globalisation*, the cdH also disagreed with the PTB. It wished to develop a transatlantic partnership in free-trade and pushed for more bilateral agreements. Lastly, the cdH affirmed its humanist facet; hence putting much emphasis on *egalitarianism*. However, it did not address the workers, the lower and middle classes as much as the PTB did.

Finally, the MR, very much sticking to its rightist ideologies and reflecting on the performances of the previous socialist regional parliament, distributed a political programme titled "C'est l'heure du bon sens" [It is time for common sense]. In regard to *privatisation*, the party recognised the role of public management and called for "profound reforms" (MR, 2014, p. 7), but more importantly encouraged public-private partnerships in different sectors (e.g., pp. 19, 28, 111). In regard to *generous social benefits*, the MR expressed the wish to raise the lowest pensions (pp. 61-62) but not the unemployment benefits. Rather, the party promoted a better guidance and (re)training of the unemployed (p. 37). However, the party agreed with the PTB in regards to *direct democracy* by also wanting to establish the practice of referenda (pp. 7, 105). On the contrary, as regards *less Europe*, the MR drifted away from the populist issue and asserted the want for "more and better Europe" (p. 120), notably by accelerating European integration, harmonising taxes, establishing the use of Eurobonds, having a common European defence, and a more integrated international diplomacy (pp. 120-121). Furthermore, the liberal party encouraged trade agreements (p. 145), such as the TTIP, under certain conditions; hence it also disagreed with the PTB on *anti-globalisation* matters. As for *egalitarianism*, the MR did not directly address the people and only mentioned the middle-class on rare occasions (e.g., p. 32).

In sum, even if the PTB was growing and winning support before 2014, the traditional Walloon parties did not see it as a dangerous challenger. Therefore, their strategies were mostly dismissive and sometimes adversarial. They all preferred sticking to their original political positions than taking into account the issues of the PTB.

6.3. Analysis of the Manifestos for the 2019 Regional Election

The Walloon Region has now been governed for 5 years by a majority of centre-right (majority formed by the MR and cdH) but the largest party is the PS. Moreover, the PTB is now in Parliament, has more than ever participated in public debates, appeared in the media but also supported people that were demonstrating in the street (e.g. by joining the Students4Climate movement). Thus, the external stimulus having moved from the political and economic crises to the presence of an increasingly popular left-populist party in Parliament, one might expect more acknowledgment of the PTB's ideas and issues by Francophone traditional parties.

Today, the PTB is still standing firm on its demand for an ever more radical socialist Belgium. To that end, the party continues to condemn privatisation which "transforms public needs into a lucrative business" (PTB, 2019, p. 110). Thus, in regard to *very limited privatisation*, the PTB wants to develop public services, including at the EU level (p. 221), more public investment (pp. 97, 104, 128, 130, 221), and the creation of a new big public bank that would be under the democratic control of the population (p. 130). As in 2014, the party puts forward *generous social benefits*, notably, by linking benefits to well-being, i.e. increasing all sorts of benefits (p. 41). In particular, it proposes to increase the minimum pension to 1500€/month (pp. 3, 25), to allow people to retire earlier (p. 25), suppress the degression of unemployment benefits (p. 41), and offer better training and accompanying of the unemployed. Additionally, the populist party is still very much in favour of *direct democracy*. It continues to ask for more transparency in politics (pp. 163-164) and a considerable increase of citizens' participation through referenda and public consultations (p. 170). It also wants the EU to be more democratic, including with the introduction of Union-wide referenda. Moreover, regarding the EU, the PTB emphasises the importance of cooperation within the Union but wants this cooperation to be radically different (p. 221).

It still proposes to abandon the Lisbon Treaty, the Stability and Growth Pact and the TSCG, and wants to reform the other treaties because they are "stuck in a logic of austerity" (p. 128) and only "push toward liberalism and privatisation" (p. 221). They therefore argue for a *less* but more importantly *better Europe*, "a Europe of the people, not of the money" (p. 221)*.* As regards *anti-globalisation*, the PTB wants to reverse the politics of foreign trade by promoting a transparent and democratic trade policy, especially because, today, multinationals are unmanageable (p. 228). In the party's manifesto for the 2019 elections, *egalitarianism* rhymes with anti-establishment. The PTB still wants to tax millionaires (pp. 30, 153), and "stop the profiteers" (p. 162) but now also wishes to "abolish the privileges of the political caste" and "put an end to the domination by traditional parties" (p. 163). Overall, the manifesto follows the lines drawn in 2014 and is even more ambitious and concrete.

Currently in the opposition with the PTB in the Walloon Parliament, the PS presents a very social manifesto. While the socialist party puts forward public-private partnerships in some sectors, for instance, mobility (PS, 2019, p. 419) and urban planning (p. 334), it wants to "stop any new privatisation of public services" and "bring every state participation together under one institution" (p. 495). It also argues for the welfare-state to come back to the centre of European policies. Thus, the party fairly agrees with the PTB on *very limited privatisation.* The PS also accommodates to some extent with the PTB regarding *generous social benefits*. In particular, the party proposes to introduce the progressive increase of unemployment and pension benefits over the poverty line (pp. 26, 105), to allocate 1500 €/month for the lowest pensions (pp. 8, 115), to suppress the degression of unemployment benefits (p. 40), and to allow unemployed people to receive allocations that are unlimited in time (p. 41). As far as *direct democracy* is concerned, the PS agrees with the PTB. According to both, referenda should be established, next to public consultations (p. 652), the right to petition, and citizens' initiatives (p. 655). The socialist party somewhat accommodates with the PTB on *less, or better, Europe*. It wants the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and the TSCG as well as "the fundamental revision of the EU approach towards commercial agreements" (p. 701). Nevertheless, the PS is in favour of a European fiscal convergence (p. 701), finishing the banking Union (p. 719) and a common European defence (pp. 750, 774, 781). The PS also condemns globalisation and neoliberalism, and argues that there is a need to break with this model (pp. 14, 222). Additionally, the party claims that globalisation increased at the expense of the people (p. 653) and hence, it wants to "reject austerity policies" (p. 727). It also counts on the EU the act against globalisation's harmful effects (pp. 750), notably by having common bases for taxing multinationals, tech giants, and financial transactions (pp. 625, 701). *Anti-globalisation* is thus clearly perceived. Finally, the socialist manifesto is directed towards *egalitarianism* and the people at large, in particular in the section on regulating the economy (pp. 220-266). The PS talks about "following the public interest" (p. 221), "improving consumer power vis-à-vis big companies" (p. 222), and "finding solutions that benefit the community" (p. 223).

The cdH starts off its political programme with adversarial comments implicitly directed toward the PTB. It claims that "new models need to be more mature" (cdH, 2019a, p. 3) and that "the citizens' interest is more important than high-sounding statements which never translate into actions" (p. 5). Then, the cdH disagrees with *very limited privatisation* by claiming that "the public service should only be focused on the tasks in which it is the most useful" (p. 282). Public-private partnerships are essential to the cdH's idea of investment (pp. 57, 64, 108, 132, 240, 261). However, one can observe a subtle accommodation with the PTB on the issue of *generous social benefits*. For instance, the centre party

proposes to "freeze the degression of unemployment benefits for people who undertake technical training" and the "progressive increase of all social benefits to at least meet the poverty line" (p. 167), as well as easing the access to several social benefits (e.g., pp. 148, 161, 168). Yet increasing the number of working seniors is still on the table (p. 159). In regard to *direct democracy*, citizens' initiatives and panels (pp. 274-275) are preferred to referenda. On another note, the centre party dedicates a specific programme, titled "Vouloir l'Europe!" [Wanting Europe], on European matters. By reading this programme, one can observe that the party's stances are not in accordance with the populist idea of *less Europe.* Indeed, the cdH wants, notably, "a stronger integration of the Eurozone and deepening of the single market" (cdH, 2019b, p. 5), a strengthening of the economic and monetary Union (p. 28), a common fiscal policy (pp. 30) as well as a common European defence (p. 47). Most of these elements were already put forward in 2014. The cdH recognises the benefits but also the disadvantages of *globalisation*. That is why, such as the PTB, it wants a reorientation of trade policies (cdH, 2019b, p. 16) and the "total transparency of multinationals' activities" (cdH, 2019a, p. 90). Nevertheless, the party supports "the creation of tech giants" (cdH, 2019b, p. 15) and the reform of the WTO (cdH, 2019a, p. 292). Lastly, as regards *egalitarianism*, the cdH takes part in ethical debates and wants to "build a strong social consensus" (cdH, 2019a, p. 338) to respect every citizen's dignity.

Having been in power for five years, the MR assesses its performance in its 2019 manifesto and builds on that to make new political propositions. The liberal party still disagrees with the PTB on the issue of *very limited privatisation*. It proposes to increase private investments and public-private partnerships (e.g., MR, 2019a, pp. 62, 74, 168, 172, and 241) even in matters that are normally managed by the state, for instance public transports (p. 18) and public dwelling (p. 82). Then, the party's position on *generous social benefits* has not really changed since 2014. While it talks about increasing the allocated amount for the lowest pensions (pp. 225-226, 229), the party believes that having the legal retirement age at 67, instead of 65, is beneficial for society (pp. 227-228) and wants to offer more pension benefits to people who keep working after the retirement age (pp. 228, 232). The MR also favours training and higher minimum salary instead of increasing unemployment benefits (pp. 8, 35, 41). Regarding *direct democracy*, the liberals want to "reinforce participatory democracy" (p. 149) through public consultation (p. 141), citizens' panels and initiatives (pp. 142, 149) as well as rights to petition (p. 149), but do not mention referenda anymore. Just like the cdH, the MR has designed a programme dedicated to European issues. In it, the self-qualified "pro-European party" (MR, 2019b, p. 2) argues for "more and better Europe" (p. 4) and more cooperation, including in defence (p. 30), and harmonisation, notably of fiscal policies (pp. 22-26), at the EU level (pp. 2, 6). Thus, the MR does not want *less* Europe, and even clearly expresses that "Treaties revision is not considered in the short or medium term" (p. 38); hence adopting an adversarial strategy. Then, as a liberal party, the MR is not in favour of *anti-globalisation*. It wants to make Belgium more attractive to investors (MR, 2019a, p. 38), in addition to developing free-trade and reinforcing multilateralism, notably through global agreements (pp. 236, 239). Concerning *egalitarianism*, the party believes in equal opportunity and wants every citizen to share the same liberal values (p. 177).

In sum, the effects of the PTB on mainstream parties are mixed. On the one hand, the left seems to have moved further left by accommodating to a number of the PTB's issues while, on the other hand, the centre and the right have openly disregarded or dismissed populist positions, with only a few exceptions.

7. Observations and Discussion

Analysing manifestos is a lengthy but instructive task. This analysis uncovers the relationship between Walloon parties and, in particular, traditional parties' response to the rise of the PTB. The *Modified Spatial Theory*, which outlines that only mainstream parties triggered by a niche party adopt specific rhetorical strategies, is well-fitted the analysis and helped 'grade' parties' responses. The *Party Change Theory* has shown that, over the years, the external stimulus for rhetorical change moved from the crises to the rise in popularity and success of the PTB. As multiple responses have been observed, it is necessary to analyse them case by case. Before scrutinising the observations, one must remember that the discourse analysis and grading have been conducted as objectively as possible but some elements might have been misreported due to the writer's own interpretation.

To begin with, the evident observation, as regards the MR's position and strategies, is its *dismissiveness* towards left-populist issues. Even though, in 2014, the party was in agreement with the PTB in terms of direct democracy and the use of referenda, this does not mean that the party accommodated. Indeed, in 2019, the liberal party's position has changed and it now favours public consultation and different types of panels and initiatives. The only *adversarial* comment was made about the EU, in emphasising that the revision of Treaties, advocated by the PTB, is not of the MR's concern and will not be anytime soon. In brief, the MR chose to undermine the PTB's popularity by not taking action and not expressing its viewpoint on populist issues. Their tactic of *dismissing* the PTB has the aim to not give more attention to the party and discredit it to the eyes of the voters.

Then, even if *dismissiveness* qualifies better the response of the cdH, it is worth noting that the party still indirectly addressed the PTB and ventured *adversarial* comments toward the populist party. Indeed, in its manifesto for the 2019 elections, the cdH emphasises the immaturity of new political models, such as the PTB, and insists that it will concretely act in citizens' interest. The centre party has more propositions similar to the PTB in 2019 than in 2014, for instance the freezing of degression of unemployment benefit under conditions in the category generous social benefit, and more transparency and democracy in globalisation. Yet these propositions are part of the cdH's ideology, hence cannot be entirely qualified as an accommodation to PTB's issues. Overall, the *dismissive* tactics of the cdH have the same purpose as the MR's, but by commenting on the PTB in 2019, the cdH opposes more explicitly populist issues and tries to portray the PTB as an irrelevant challenger despite its rise.

Finally, the PS shows a greater *accommodation* to the PTB's problematics than the two other mainstream parties. Indeed, as the PTB, the socialist party wants to increase the lowest pensions to 1500€/month, stop the degression of all pension benefits, stop any new privatisation of public services, institute the use of referenda, and reform certain EU Pacts and treaties. The PS has also the same opinion as the PTB on anti-globalisation and egalitarianism but this is rather due to its socialist ideology than an accommodation. In brief, the PS has mostly followed the *accommodation* strategy which means that it politically converged and adopted more or less the same viewpoint as the PTB on several issues. This strategy might have been followed because the socialist party sees the PTB as a serious challenger and wants to keep its voters. Nevertheless, it is important to remind that the PS's 2014 manifesto was not accessed; hence the accuracy of the discourse analysis for this election might have been lessened.

These observations allow for the evaluation of the theories used in this paper. First, *Modified Spatial Theory* was relevant and fitted well the case at hand. Even if previous research using this theory

rather focused on analysing the effect of right-wing populist parties, the observations made here prove that Meguid's theory (2005) can be used for any niche party, including of the far-left. Second, *Party Change Theory* has only been proven right for the PS. The external stimulus of the rise of the PTB was not strong enough for the cdH and the MR, notably because both parties have not yet lost a lot of voters to the PTB. Polls attributed almost 15% of the votes to the populist party (Walkowiak, 2019, para. 3), and actually turned out to be true as the PTB gained 13.7% of the votes ("PTB: Tous les Résultats", 2019). Therefore, the PS, as the closest party to the radical left, might have worried more about a potential loss of its electorate (7% according to polls; Walkowiak, 2019, para. 3) and accommodate with the PTB. This confirms Harmel & Svåsand's observations (1997) that two conditions can force an established party to change its positions in the new party's direction: first, the new party is winning a significant number of votes and/or seats and, second the established party experiences bad results in elections.

8. Conclusion

This research shows that left-wing populist parties can, just as right-wing populist parties, affect mainstream discourse. Since the PTB's breakthrough in 2009, the party has been seen, in newspapers, as a challenge for mainstream Walloon parties. By analysing the PTB and three traditional parties' manifestos for the 2014 and 2019 regional elections, this paper reveals that the Workers' Party of Belgium has particularly affected the rhetoric of the mainstream left.

The analysis has revealed that the three Walloon mainstream parties have adopted different discourse strategies (accommodative, dismissive, or adversarial) as a response to the rise of the PTB. The general observation is that, out of the three traditional parties investigated, only the party ideologically closer to the PTB, i.e. the Socialist Party (PS), has opted for the accommodative strategy and has, between 2014 and 2019, converged with the PTB on several typically populist issues. The reason for this accommodation can be identified with the *Party Change Theory*'s claim that an external stimulus, e.g. the rise of a challenger party, triggers established parties to change their political positions in order to keep as many voters as possible. As regards the MR and the cdH' strategies, one can observe few adversarial comments, but, overall, dismissiveness was used more by both parties in an attempt to discredit the PTB's issues. All of this confirms the previously-stated hypothesis that only the Socialist Party (PS) sees the rise of the left-populist PTB as a serious competition and follows the accommodative strategy. The party, thus, modifies its discourse and agrees with the PTB on certain political issues. It also confirms that, on the contrary, the two other parties dismiss the PTB, hence revealing that the impact of left-wing populism is not as strong as right-wing populism.

Testing the *Modified Spatial Theory* and the *Party Change Theory* in this paper has, to some extent, added credibility to both theories. It has been shown that "rational parties choose policy positions to minimise the distance between themselves and the voters" (Downs as cited in Meguid, 2005, p. 348), even in Belgium. As the PTB gained momentum among voters, mainstream Walloon parties adopted different strategies to either discredit or accommodate with the left-wing populist party. Therefore, even if the *Modified Spatial Theory* is usually tested on right-wing populism, this paper demonstrates that the theory is also valid for cases dealing with a successful left-wing populist party. It was also shown that the 'external stimulus' outlined by the *Party Change Theory* is valid for some mainstream parties, in particular the Socialist Party. A longer successful presence in Walloon politics

might add further credibility to this theory. Thus, this analysis implicates that, as shown with the PTB, left-wing populist parties are as prone as far-right parties to affect mainstream discourse, yet differently. Thus, this paper contributes to the field of niche parties' impact.

Lastly, even if this paper faces limitations, i.e. the time period analysed in this paper is rather short, conducting the research prior to 2014 would not be as relevant since the PTB was not in the Walloon Parliament yet and thus did not represent a trigger for the other parties. It is also important to recognise that the strategies adopted by mainstreams parties could also be explained by other external stimuli or outside events, such as the economic and political crises. Yet the rhetorical changes are particularly observable in 2019, ten years after the crises and the only election after the accession of the PTB to the Walloon Parliament. Thus, identifying the left-populist party as having affected mainstream discourse is valid.

Studying the topic in a few years from now would confirm, or not, this paper's findings and add more credibility to the theories. Additionally, the effect of populist parties is a subject that is still under-researched in Belgium. As the last elections were beneficial for the PTB and coalition negotiations will include the populist party, it would be interesting to analyse further the effects of the PTB in the Walloon Parliament. In particular, an investigation of the parties' behaviour in Parliament would confirm of the impact of the far-left on mainstream politics, essentially the left-wing, in Belgium.