

The human capital of political parties

An exploratory analysis of Belgian party staff

Pieter Moens (UGent)

pmoens.moens@ugent.be

Jef Smulders (FWO / KU Leuven)

jef.smulders@kuleuven.be

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on the professionalization of parties often suffer from a lack of data. However, this analysis of Belgian parties' human capital is based on reliable data derived from annual financial statements and covers a sixteen-year period (1999 to 2014). Based on earlier studies, we tested five hypotheses addressing increasing professionalization and inter-party differences concerning staff size. The analysis shows that Belgian parties didn't grow more capital-intensive during the studied period but remained relatively stable. With the exception of the Green party family, left-oriented parties were more capital-intensive than parties on the right. Our data also show a positive relationship between electoral strength and organization: the larger a parties' vote share, the more it relies on human capital. New parties tend to rely less on human capital than traditional parties and they are more prone to organizational instability due to electoral change. Finally, the analysis suggests that the federalized Belgian party system has created separate environments for party organizations, as Francophone prove more capital-intensive than their Flemish counterparts.

1. Introduction

Scholars of party organizations label present-day political parties as capital-intensive electoral machines (Krouwel, 2012; Mair, Müller, & Plasser, 2004; Scarrow & Webb, 2013). This evolution towards electoral-professionalism has increased the importance of staff within the inner workings of party organizations (Mancini, 1999; Panebianco, 1988). Political officials and office-holders are assisted by a variety of political aids, ranging from strategists to fundraisers and policy advisors. This process of professionalization has been reinforced by the dropping membership rates of political parties: while party members could initially serve as volunteers supporting the party organization, these diminishing free labor forces were replaced by paid employees.

Yet despite the relevance of the subject, research on the staff of political parties remains scarce (Webb & Kolodny, 2006). A few notable exceptions aside (Katz & Mair, 1992; Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2016), gathering data on party staff has proven itself a difficult endeavor. Parties appear to be very reluctant towards sharing information about their human capital. In the Belgian case, however, the annual financial statements of the parties offer a unique opportunity: during a sixteen-year period, from 1999 to 2014, these statements contained reliable data on staff levels and staff expenses. Taking these data as a starting point, this paper deals with an often overlooked aspect of political parties' infrastructure. It offers a descriptive analysis of the trends that took place during the studied period and compares parties based on ideology, strength, age and party system. Our analysis

relies on absolute indicators (staff figures, staff expenses) and considers their relation with the organizational strength of parties (members, total expenditure).

In what follows, we first introduce the existing literature on political professionalism, followed by a discussion of the determinants of party staff levels. After focusing on our data and method, we turn towards our empirical analysis. First, we investigate whether general trends have taken place between 1999 and 2014. Second, our theoretical discussion is translated in a comparison based on party family, party strength, party age and party system. In doing so, we will address two research questions:

- Which trends characterize the evolution of political professionalism within Belgian parties between 1999 and 2014?
- Which differences in political professionalism can be observed between parties based on ideology, strength, age and party system?

2. Political professionalism: operationalization and determinants

Although the approach of this paper is mainly exploratory, we identify the relevant aspects to the study of political parties' human capital on the basis of previous research, both theoretical and empirical. In recent decades, literature on professionalization has gradually emerged and expanded. In this context, political party staff has also received some attention. We now address two central issues from the existing literature. First, we discuss how research on party staff relates to the concept of political professionalism. Second, we identify four key determinants that possibly explain differences between parties' staff data.

2.1. Party staff and the concept of professionalization

The study of party staff is inherently linked to the concept of political professionalism. Therefore, we first consider how political parties' human capital relates to this larger concept. Professionalization has been approached from several angles: from the remuneration and career patterns of political officials (Weber, 1921) to the diffusion of campaigning practices (Gibson, 2009). Yet our interest lies elsewhere: the importance of paid personnel within party organizations. For some authors, however, professionalism doesn't just concern any kind of staff. Panebianco (1988), whose seminal work distinguished between bureaucrats and professionals, assigned a specific meaning to 'the political professional'. In contrast to bureaucrats, the author envisioned professionals to have a higher economic status, have a better education, to serve as an expert within the organization and to be more

independent from political leadership. From this point of view, the process of increasing professionalism (cf. professionalization) is about a specific type of political employee becoming more central to the functioning of parties (Webb and Kolodny, 2006). Such a conceptual framework entails an aspect of quality: it addresses staff members through individual characteristics like expertise, seniority et cetera. In this study, we will not discriminate between different types of employees: such individual data are hard to obtain, even elementary staff data are often lacking. By relying on staff size, our analysis considers the quantitative aspect of party staff. This approach is in accordance with earlier international-comparative studies (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016). We acknowledge that staff size is only a robust indicator/proxy of political professionalism. Therefore, rather than equating staff with professionalism, we address the *capital intensity* and the *human capital* of parties when applying staff data as an empirical indicator. In this way, party staff can give us a better insight in the human capital of political parties, and hence in the degree of professionalism. Regardless of conceptual approaches, literature on party organization often assumes increasing professionalism (professionalization). Therefore, our first hypothesis states the following:

H1: Belgian political parties have grown more capital-intensive between 1999 and 2014.

2.2. Determinants of staff levels

Based on an international-comparative study, Poguntke et al. (2016) concluded that country effects are best at explaining variation in staff figures. Several elements might explain these effects. First, these systemic differences could be attributed to political finance regimes, as some nations might subsidize their political parties more generously than others. Second, international patterns might be connected to institutional characteristics (e.g. the electoral, political or media system), since they determine the structure of interparty competition. Such a hypothesis shows parallels to how Farrell (1996) theorized about differences in campaign professionalization: he expects the phenomenon to be the greatest in presidential and majoritarian systems with high popular access to a commercialized media market. Third, the observed national uniformity could also be linked to contagion effects within party systems, with parties copying each other's behavior or organizational structure. Similarly, existing models of party transformation (e.g. professionalization) argue that parties will adapt to innovations of others when they are perceived as a competitive advantage (Appleton & Ward, 1997; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988; Wilson, 1980).

In addition to the impact of systemic variables, scholars have observed an effect of party ideology (Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016; Smulders, 2016). On a theoretical level, the existing literature

offers an ambiguous picture. Gibson & Rommele's (2001) party-centered theory of campaign professionalized campaigning followed Epstein's idea of professionalization being a "contagion from the right" (1980). On the other hand, the electoral-professional party described by Panebianco (1988) was envisaged as the successor of mass parties from social- and Christian democratic traditions. Up to this point, empirical studies have shown leftist and Christian democratic parties to be more professionalized (Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016; Stromback, 2009; Tenscher & Mykkanen, 2014). Similarly, Smulders (2016) observed that communist, ecologist, social- and Christian democratic families spend a significantly higher share of their resources on staff. We follow this train of thought for our second hypothesis.

H2: Left-oriented parties have a more capital-intensive organization than parties on the right.

We argue that party strength is another potential explanatory variable. Since parties are generally subsidized on the basis of their electoral strength (Ohman, 2012), we argue that party strength (operationalized by vote share) might have an impact in nations where parties depend heavily on state funding, such as Belgium (Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). Moreover, stronger parties can probably rely on a larger sum of membership fees and donations. As political parties might employ staff in proportion to the resources available to them, this determinant could certainly have an effect on a parties' organizational infrastructure.

H3: Parties with strong electoral support are more capital-intensive than parties with less electoral support.

Our last potential determinant is party age. On this front, existing literature can be interpreted from two angles. The first approach is based on existing models of party transformation and assumes that older organizations are more elaborated. Moreover, this assumption is supported by empirical study on parties' staff expenses (Smulders, 2016). The underlying idea is that party age serves as a proxy for institutionalization, with older parties having a larger, more developed organizational infrastructure. For this reason, we expect traditional parties to be more capital-intensive when the quantitative aspect of professionalism (staff size) is concerned. The second approach relies on the qualitative aspect of professionalism within parties. It rather addresses the presence of certain practices and individual staff profiles, expecting newer parties to show a more professional infrastructure. For example, theories of party transformation argue that age results in a form of organizational inertia, with innovations (e.g. professionalization) meeting a wall of resistance (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Describing the business firm

party, Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) have argued that this does not apply to newer parties. Unimpeded by a stable party infrastructure, business firm parties embody “the electoral-professional model of party organisation (...) taken to its logical conclusion” (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999, p. 311). We therefore expect the staff of newer parties to show more qualitative aspects of professionalism, leading to higher remuneration.

H4: Traditional parties have a more capital-intensive organization than newer parties.

H5: Employees of newer parties have a more professional profile than those working for traditional parties, resulting in a higher cost per staff member.

3. Data and method

While studies on party staff generally suffer from a lack of data, our analysis is built upon reliable and up-to-date data on staff levels and staff expenses originating from the financial statements of the Belgian political parties. Since 1989, all parties represented in the Belgian federal Parliament are required to submit a yearly report on their finances, including revenues, expenses and assets. As a result, we have detailed data on the financial situation of Belgian political parties for a period of more than 25 years. However, only since 1999 these financial reports are comparable between parties and over time. Only at that time the legislator determined a fixed list of party units whose finances had to be included in the financial statements (e.g. study centers, regional or provincial branches), while previously parties could freely decide on which units to include (Maddens, Smulders, Wolfs, & Weekers, 2016) Moreover, party staff figures are only part of the statements from 1999 onwards.¹ Since 2015, however, revised legislation applies, as a result of which staff figures are currently no longer mentioned in the financial statements. We therefore have data on staff levels and staff expenses for a sixteen-year period (1999-2014). In this study, we only examine the ten parties which had to file a report annually during this complete time period.² This leads to a dataset containing 160 individual observations.

¹ These staff figures only include the staff members on the payroll of the party, i.e. party staff employed and paid for by the party itself. These figures do not include staff members provided and paid for by the different Parliaments (e.g. MPs' personal staff and party group staff) and external consultants.

² These parties are Agalev/Groen!/Groen, CVP/CD&V, Ecolo, PRL/MR, PS, PSC/CdH, SP/Sp.a(-spirit), Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang, VLD/Open Vld and VU/N-VA.

Based on these annual financial statements, we relied on five indicators for our analysis. First, there is staff size containing all employees who are directly on the party payroll. These staff members often include personnel working at the party headquarters, study center and regional branches. Note that staff members who are funded through indirect public resources (e.g. parliamentary or cabinet funding) are not included, neither are external consultants. Our second indicator is staff expenses, which represents the total amount of financial resources dedicated to staff on the party payroll. Exactly similar staff size, the same employees are included in this variable, while others are not counted. As these key indicators are derived from a source with a consistent format, we argue that they offer the best achievable data on the presence of human capital at Belgium's ten main parties. While staff size illustrates how much full time equivalents (from now on FTE) are employed through party means, staff expenses demonstrate how much a party spent on human capital in a given year.

Table 1: Description and operationalization of quantitative indicators for human capital of parties

	Description	Operationalization
Staff size	Degree of human capital intensity, measured by the absolute number of employees.	Number of full-time equivalents (FTE's) on party payroll.
Staff expenses	Degree of human capital intensity, measured by the absolute amount of financial resources dedicated to staff.	Financial resources spent on staff by party (expressed in €).
Staff/Members	The organizational balance between paid collaborators and volunteers.	Staff size divided by number of party members, multiplied by thousand.
Share of staff expenses	The percentage of financial resources spent on human capital.	Staff expenses divided by total expenses.
FTE cost	The average cost of one FTE.	Staff expenses divided by staff size.

Although most of our analysis will focus on our core indicators, we calculated three extra variables to support our analysis. To complement staff size, we weighed staff in relation to membership using a staff-member ratio. In concreto, we calculated how much staff are employed for every thousand

members that adhere to a certain party. Membership data for this indicator were derived from the MAPP project (van Haute, 2014; 2015). The interpretation of this indicator is connected to the evolution from labor-intensive to capital-intensive party organization. The higher the value of a party on this indicator, the further it is supposed to be removed from the ideal type of the mass membership party. From this point of view, the staff-member ratio, measures the distance between a party organization and its supposed social roots. As a result, this balance offers clues about the equilibrium (or lack thereof) between the day-to-day functioning of a party and its supporting members.

While the staff-member ratio clarifies an additional aspect of the organizational side of human capital, we rely on two extra indicators to make sense of the financial side to party staff. The share of staff expenses identifies the percentage of financial resources that are spent on staff by a given party. These values shed a light on the importance of the staff body for parties, regardless of the size of resources – allowing us to compare large and small parties. Our fifth and last indicator is cost per FTE, in which we combine the two key indicators: staff expenses and staff size. It registers how much a given party spent on average for every employee and allows us to observe which parties pay less or more. The motivation behind this indicator goes beyond the height of salaries, we aim to find out what kind of staff members are employed by the different parties. Indirectly, this indicator offers us information on the individual characteristics of professionals we discussed above. The higher the average cost per FTE, the more professionals (as opposed to bureaucrats) are active within a party organization. From that perspective, these data complement staff size (addressing the quantity of staff) by drawing attention to the quality of staff members.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1. General trends: rising professionalism?

How has political professionalism evolved in Belgium between 1999 and 2014? As political scientists often consider professionalism to be ever increasing, we start our empirical analysis by testing this basic assumption. We analyze potential trends along five indicators related to political professionalism. Two of these variables are absolute (staff figures, staff expenses³), while the other three are relative indicators (FTE/1000 members, share of staff expenses, cost per FTE). All values should be interpreted as aggregates representing the sum of all ten parties included in our analysis. As illustrated by the staff numbers (Table 2), the total amount of Belgian party staff remained relatively stable. The sum of political collaborators directly employed by Belgian parties fluctuated between 325 and 379, showing

³ All monetary values in our analysis are expressed in euro and indexed, expressed in prices of October 2016.

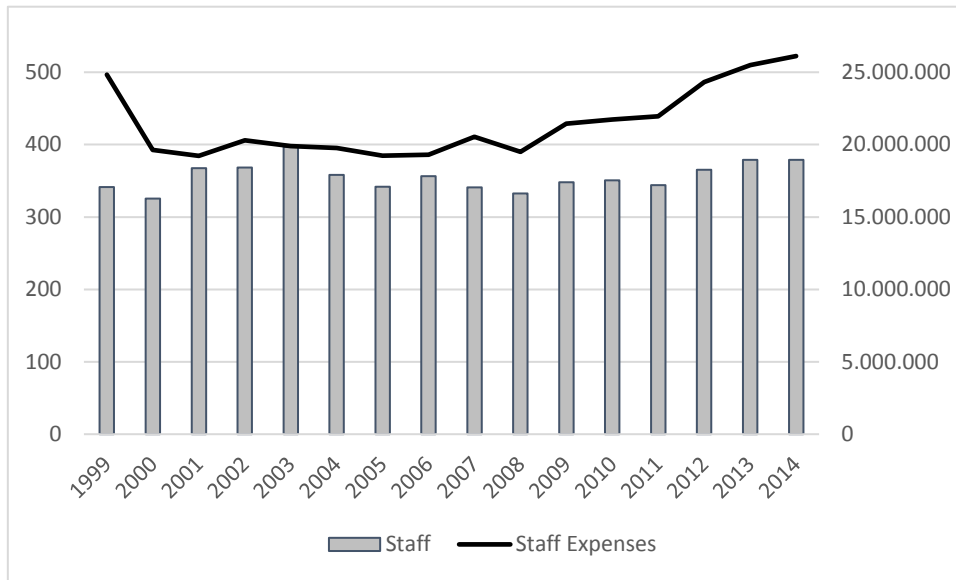
no clear overall trend of increase or decrease. These staff size data do not support our first hypothesis, as we anticipated that Belgian parties would have grown more capital-intensive between 1999 and 2014.

However, staff expenses (our second key indicator) did undergo considerable evolution. Intuitively, one would expect the evolution of staff expenses to follow the same pattern as staff figures. Although this parallel holds for the period between 2000 and 2008, staff costs start to break away from staff figures in 2009 and keep increasing. This decoupling between staff and staff expenses is illustrated in Graph 1. As the share of staff expenses suggests, parties were not necessarily compelled to dig deeper into their pockets. They constantly spent 25 to 30 percent of their expenses to personnel. An analysis of party-specific evolutions in staff expenses illustrated that the lion share of this trend was caused by evolutions within a single party (PS). Therefore, we argue that the increase in staff expenses should not be considered a general trend.

Table 2: Staff numbers, number of members, number of FTEs per 1000 members, staff expenses (indexed), share of staff expenses and cost per FTE (indexed); aggregate numbers for all ten parties, 1999-2014.

	Organization			Finance		
	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Staff / Members</i>	<i>Staff Expenses</i>	<i>Share of Staff Expenses</i>	<i>FTE cost</i>
1999	341	462.404	0,74	24.833.644	28	75.400
2000	325	455.392	0,71	19.637.274	29	65.551
2001	368	427.214	0,86	19.223.781	24	59.445
2002	368	405.026	0,91	20.302.476	25	66.853
2003	397	396.560	1,00	19.900.646	20	59.662
2004	358	390.422	0,92	19.773.401	22	62.100
2005	342	401.884	0,85	19.240.901	25	63.094
2006	357	411.141	0,87	19.298.687	21	55.598
2007	341	381.377	0,89	20.543.344	22	61.618
2008	332	374.359	0,89	19.506.120	23	74.815
2009	348	364.524	0,95	21.440.035	23	69.969
2010	351	368.480	0,95	21.732.297	23	74.064
2011	344	373.234	0,92	21.947.863	27	74.212
2012	365	382.752	0,95	24.320.665	27	74.424
2013	379	378.317	1,00	25.496.246	31	72.998
2014	379	380.817	1,00	26.116.082	28	73.933

Graph 1: Staff numbers (left axis) and staff expenses (indexed, right axis), aggregate numbers for all ten parties, 1999-2014.



Similar to staff expenses, staff-member ratios also went up despite staff sizes remaining stable. While parties only employed about 0,74 FTE for every 1000 members in 1999, that figure rose to 1,00 FTE for every 1000 members in 2014. This trend can be attributed to the continuing erosion of party membership, which amplified the weight of paid personnel within party organization. Again, this observation should not alter our interpretation of the first hypothesis, which was disconfirmed by the stability of general staff size during the studied period.

4.2. Exploring interparty differences

Until now, we have only examined the aggregate staff levels and expenses of all ten parties in our dataset. It can be expected, however, that substantial differences exist between the parties, not only with respect to the size of their staff numbers and expenses, but also regarding their evolution through time. Therefore, we now make a more in-depth assessment of the parties separately. On the basis of the insights discussed in the theoretic section, we now analyze whether certain party characteristics and systemic features influence the staff levels and staff expenses of the Belgian political parties.

Taking a first look at interparty differences, a wide range of variation stands out. As we observe the party averages for the period 1999-2014 for our key variables in Table 3, differences are generally quite large. As one compares the average staff size of Vlaams Belang (4,67 FTE) with PS (76,71 FTE), it is evident that the inner workings of these party organizations bear little resemblance. Based on these

nominal staff figures, we can observe three more or less separated categories of parties⁴. The first category, consisting of CdH and the socialist party family, employs the largest amount staff. The middle category harbors CD&V and the liberal party family, while the green party family, N-VA and Vlaams Belang have the smallest bodies of staff. Not surprisingly, these patterns largely correspond to differences between parties concerning staff expenses. Again, the category of ‘big spenders’ consists of socialists and Christian democrats, headed by PS. In the middle category, the liberal parties are joined by CdH and Ecolo. Groen, N-VA and Vlaams Belang spend the smallest amount of resources on staff.

Turning our attention towards evolutions between 1999 and 2014, we observe that most of these interparty differences are consistent through time (Graph 2). However, some parties took on new positions. CdH changed gear in 2001, joining the socialist party family in the upper category. N-VA followed a similar strategy following its landslide victory in 2010. The party headed towards joining the liberal party family and CD&V in the middle category. Ecolo is characterized by a slow but steady growth of its staff infrastructure. PS is a peculiar case: although the party retained a stable staff level, it invested quite heavily in staff remuneration after 2010. Sp.a carried out a gradual downsizing operation after 2001.

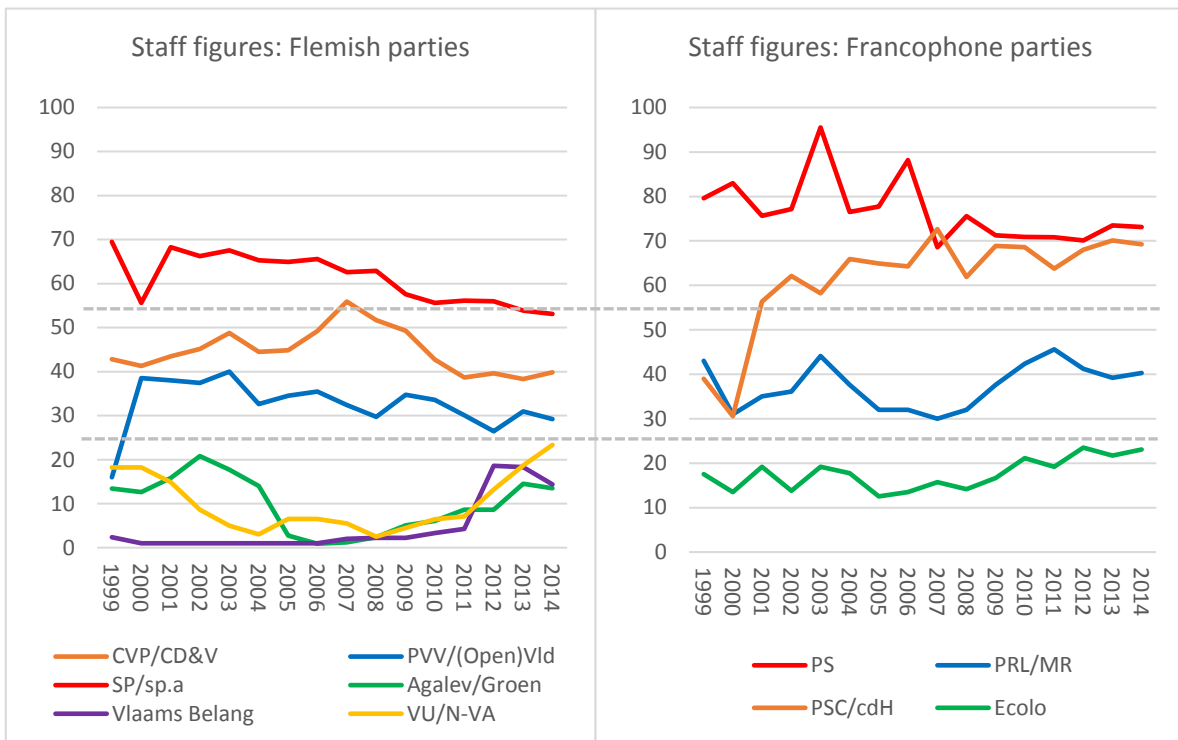
Table 3: Staff numbers, number of members, number of FTEs per 1000 members, staff expenses (indexed), share of staff expenses and cost per FTE (indexed), averages for all ten parties, 1999-2014.

	Organization			Finance		
	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Staff / Members</i>	<i>Staff Expenses</i>	<i>Share of Staff Expenses</i>	<i>FTE cost</i>
CVP/CD&V⁵	44	80.008	0,57	3.047.131	28	70.385
VLD/Open Vld	32	70.313	0,46	2.151.246	26	68.947
SP/Sp.a	61	58.571	1,06	3.005.902	30	48.921
Agalev/Groen!/Groen	10	5.888	1,67	819.779	19	77.412
Vlaams Blok/Belang	5	19.213	0,27	312.650	4	57.350
VU/N-VA	10	18.671	0,60	776.727	19	72.215
PS	77	87.773	0,88	4.952.229	36	65.234
PRL/MR	37	30.732	1,26	2.203.032	22	58.635
PSC/CdH	62	21.314	3,11	2.115.268	32	34.754
Ecolo	18	4.637	3,98	2.061.626	33	117.675

⁴ This is illustrated by the trimodal distribution of the histogram for this variable (see: appendix)

⁵ For the financial indicators, no party-specific data for CD&V and N-VA exist for 2007 and 2008. These parties submitted a combined annual account during this two-year period, since they formed an electoral cartel.

Graph 2: Staff figures, Flemish parties and Francophone parties separately, 1999-2014.



4.2.1. Ideology: left vs. right

Our observations support the idea that ideology has an impact on how parties deal with their human capital. Socialist and Christian democratic parties employ the largest number of staff. This corroborates with existing empirical studies (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Krouwel, 2012; Smulders, 2016) and Panebianco’s (1988) hypothesis. Moreover, the intensity of a party organization’s human capital drops as a party’s ideological position moves to the right. The liberal party family populates the middle category and N-VA and Vlaams Belang have a smaller staff infrastructure. These findings meet our expectations, as the second hypothesis stated that leftist parties would have a more capital-intensive organization than parties on the right. However, the greens seem to be an exception to this rule. Groen and Ecolo combine the most leftist position on the left-right continuum for our cases (Döring & Manow, 2016) with relatively small bodies of staff.

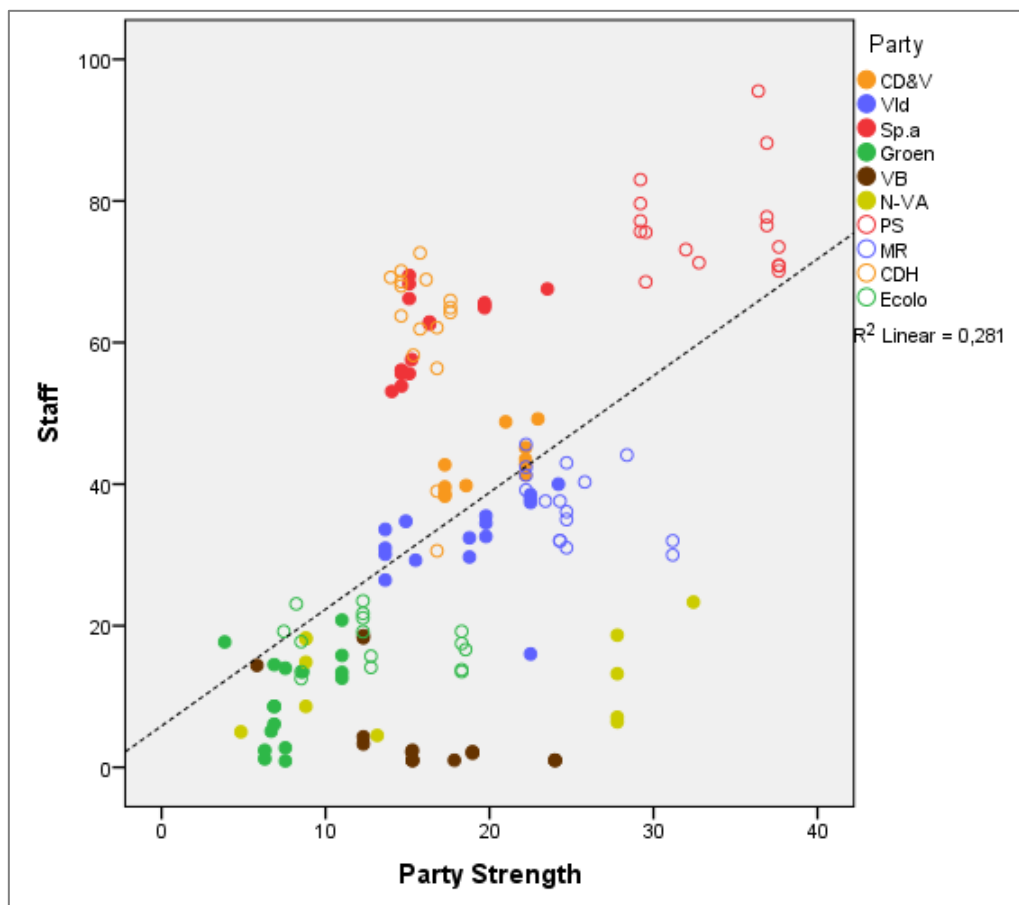
Since the position of the Green parties within their party system is far from dominant, we expected that this anomaly might disappear if one accounts for their smaller scale. For example, a different picture arises when we observe the share of staff expenses. Ecolo dedicated a third of its financial resources to staff, which is very similar to big spenders like PS and CdH. Such a spending pattern does correspond to what we might expect from the parties’ ideological outlook. However, Groen only spent a fifth of its resources on human capital (similar to N-VA and MR), which might be explained by the

severe cutbacks the party made after its electoral defeat in 2003. As this illustrates the interplay between electoral performance, resources and staff size, the influence of party strength will be analyzed in the next section. As for the impact of ideology on human capital, we argue that the second hypothesis is supported by our data, but only partially.

4.2.2. Party strength

From an international perspective, Belgian parties derive an exceptionally large share of their financial resources from public funding (Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). As a result, stronger parties have more financial resources at their disposal. They not only receive higher amounts of public funding, but they can also rely on financial support from members and donors. As a result, we expect that stronger parties have more financial leeway to employ staff members on the long term. We operationalize this variable by using a parties' electoral share, based on the most recent federal or regional elections. Graph 3 offers a view on the relationship between staff size and party strength.

Graph 3: Staff figures according to party strength and ideology, all parties separately, 1999-2014.



As one might expect, the relation is positive and significant: greater electoral weight clearly corresponds to a larger staff size (Pearson's $r = 0,53$, $p < 0,01$). Differences in electoral weight account for 28 percent of the variance in the staff size of the parties included in our analysis ($R^2 = 0,28$). As a result, the third hypothesis is supported by our findings. At the same time, the scatterplot illustrates the combined effect of electoral strength and ideology: parties and party families remain clustered in the same area. Furthermore, the three categories we described earlier (high, medium and low staff levels) maintain a distinct profile. The upper category of parties with a large staff size (PS, CdH and Sp.a) lies above the trend line, employing more staff than we would expect from their electoral strength. The middle category (MR, CD&V and Open Vld) sticks to the trend line. A few exceptions aside, parties with a smaller amount of employees (Groen, Ecolo, Vlaams Belang and N-VA) have even less staff than one can expect from their electoral weight.

In contrast to the other determinants we analyzed, party strength shows variation through time. Party age and party system are indisputably fixed attributes and we don't expect big ideological shifts to have taken place between 1999 and 2014. This allows us to assess the dynamic impact of electoral performance on staff size, since they both show variation throughout the studied period. How do parties adjust their human capital to changes brought by the electoral cycle?

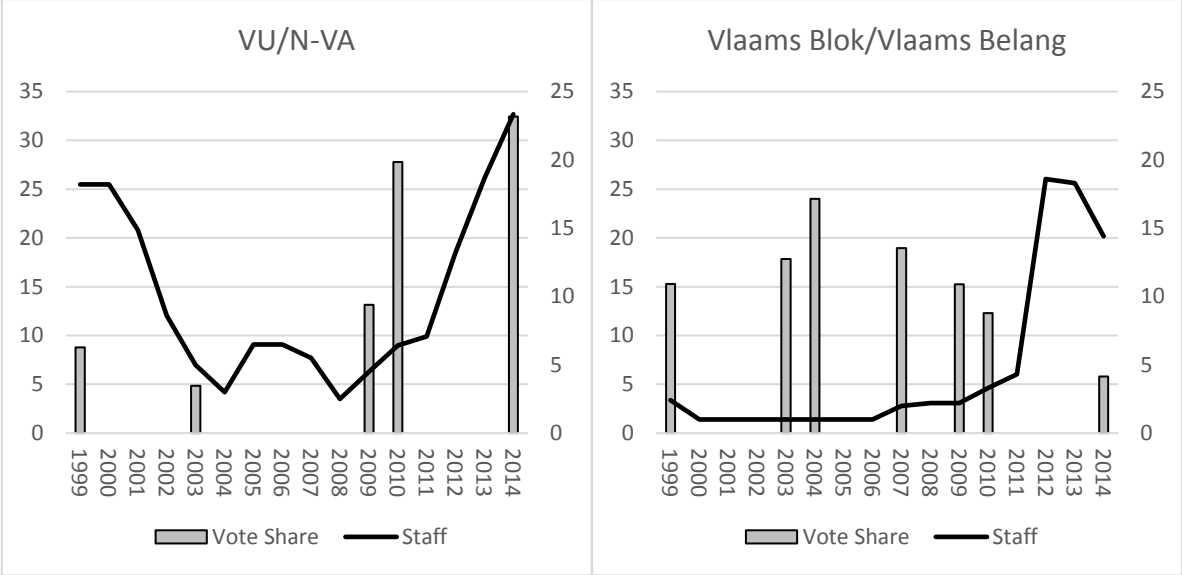
In theory, three different ideal type strategies can be distinguished:

- Procyclical: a party follows the ups and downs of its own electoral performance.
- Countercyclical: a party takes the opposite approach, limiting staff during electoral highs and investing extra during electoral lows.
- Stability: a party builds a stable staff infrastructure that is not prone to electoral shifts.

The staff evolutions in Graph 2 already offer indications: some parties retain a relatively stable staff size (Sp.a, CD&V, Open Vld, PS, and MR), while others do not (Groen, N-VA, Vlaams Belang, Ecolo and CdH). To assess these different reactions, we plotted staff size against electoral performance for all ten parties included in our study (only shown for N-VA and Vlaams Belang in Graph 4). The strategy of PS and MR seems to approach stability the best: fluctuations in their staff size do not follow an election-connected pattern. The behavior of Flemish traditional parties is mostly stable, although they gradually adjusted their staff size to shrinking electoral weights towards the end of our studied period. The rollercoaster-esque developments of N-VA (Graph 4) and Groen are unambiguous examples of the *procyclical* approach. Having absorbed staff on the party payroll that was previously employed through parliamentary resources, VB is the only clear-cut counterpart that opted for the *countercyclical* option. Although more stable, CdH and Ecolo also show signs of a *countercyclical* approach. Regardless of

electoral setbacks, both parties continued to grow their staff size. Especially CdH stands out, as it invested firmly in staff infrastructure after the 1999 electoral defeat.

Graph 4: Vote share (left axis) and staff figures (right axis) for N-VA (procyclical) and VB (countercyclical), 1999-2014.



We must be cautious not to present these different strategies as voluntary choices made by political parties. We rather argue that most parties prefer organizational stability but that not all of them have the luxury of resources to sustain such a staff infrastructure. From that point of view, interesting differences remain between the different party ages and party systems included in this analysis.

4.2.3. Party age: traditional vs. non-traditional

Our analysis distinguishes between traditional and non-traditional parties, based on the year in which the party organization was founded. While we recognize that other “degrees of newness” (Deschouwer, 2008) exist (e.g. ideology), we think that age is the best indicator for newness when analyzing party organizations. Whether we use 1950 (Beyens, Lucardie, & Deschouwer, 2016) or 1968 (Bolloyer, 2013) as a cut-off point, it results in the exact same classification between the traditional ideologies (Christian democratic, socialist and liberal) and the non-traditional parties (Ecolo, Groen, Vlaams Belang and N-VA). As the imperative of the mass party model looms large in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2012), we wanted to assess to what extent newer parties represent a distinct category.

Judging from our core indicators (staff size and staff expenses), strong organizational differences between the two groups remain. Traditional parties have a far more developed staff infrastructure (Table 4). On average, they spend three times as much resources on human capital and have staff

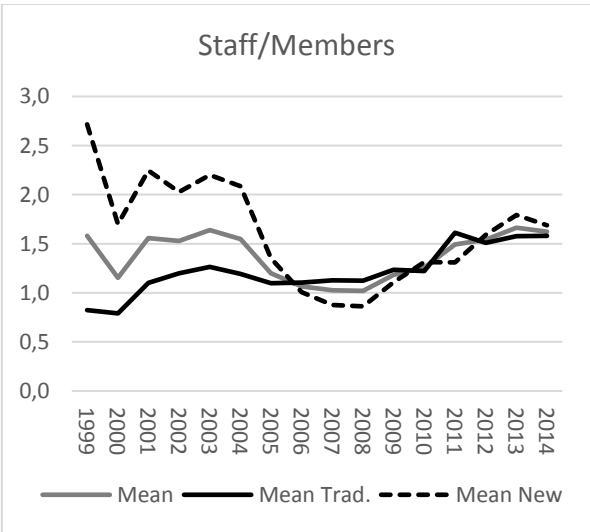
bodies four times the size of non-traditional parties. Those differences go beyond mere size or electoral strength: traditional parties also spend a bigger share of their resources on personnel. These observations are in line with our original expectations: data on both key indicators (staff size and staff expenses) support hypothesis four. Based on existing literature, our interpretation is that the organizational inertia of traditional parties results in a larger staff size, combining bureaucratic (mass party) staff with electoral-professional employees. In contrast, non-traditional parties exhibit a smaller, “lean and mean” organization, relying mostly on electoral-professional collaborators.

Table 4: Staff numbers, number of members, number of FTEs per 1000 members, staff expenses (indexed), share of staff expenses and cost per FTE (indexed), averages, 1999-2014.

	Organization			Finance		
	Staff	Members	Staff / Members	Staff Expenses	Share of Staff Expenses	FTE cost
Traditional	52	58.118	0,90	2.930.567	29	57.510
Non-traditional	11	12.102	0,87	968.423	19	81.135

Yet one indicator shows a peculiar parallel: traditional and non-traditional parties have a surprisingly similar staff-to-member ratio. We expected to find two different structural balances, reflecting a cleavage between labor-intensive (traditional) and capital-intensive (non-traditional) organizations. These anticipated differences in the role of mass membership and paid staff are not reflected in our data. In fact, the average staff-to-member ratio is very similar for both types of parties: about 0,9 FTE for every thousand members. However, this has not always been the case: the evolution of this indicator shows an interesting pattern that might help explain the apparent similarities (Graph 5).

Graph 5: Staff-to-member ratio, traditional and non-traditional parties and overall mean, 1999-2014.



At the start of the period included in our analysis, the staff/member ratio did actually meet expectations. In 1999, non-traditional parties employed on average 2,7 FTE for every thousand members, while this was only 0,8 FTE for traditional parties. This gap narrowed through time, until values for non-traditional and traditional parties reached the same level in 2006, staying intertwined for the rest of the period included in this study.

However, this does not imply that Belgian parties do not differ regarding the balance between staff and members. On the contrary: values range from 0,26 FTE (VB) for every thousand members to 3,98 FTE (Ecolo). Our observations indicate that interparty differences are more fine-grained than a division between traditional and non-traditional parties, as illustrated by Table 3. Most parties employ less than one FTE for every thousand members (CD&V, N-VA, PS, Open Vld and VB), with the balance of Open Vld (0,46) and Vlaams Belang (0,26) being notably low. While Sp.a remains still close to one FTE for every thousand members and Groen stays underneath two FTEs, CdH and Ecolo employ large amounts of staff in contrast to their membership figures. In addition to that, the outliers (Groen, CdH and Ecolo) have lived through significant shifts between 1999 and 2014. Note that for the green party family, these movements show big shifts as their membership bases are relatively small compared to other parties (less than 10.000 members). For Groen, most of this movement can be attributed to decrease and increase in staffing, while Ecolo retained a fairly stable staff throughout the studied period. The first shift for CdH can be connected to an increase in staff, while the second relates to membership figures, which plummeted after 2010.

In addition to staff and members, we also anticipated the average costs per FTE for traditional and non-traditional parties to differ significantly (H5). At first sight, Table 4 supports these predictions. It reports an average cost of 81.135 euro per FTE for non-traditional parties and a noticeably lower value for traditional parties (57.510 euro). Yet there are several reasons to interpret these figures with caution. First, party-specific averages show great discrepancies between the ten parties (Table 3). The majority of parties (CD&V, Open Vld, VB, N-VA, PS and MR) spent between 55.000 euro and 75.000 euro per FTE, but our cases include strong outliers. Sp.a spends tangibly less than others (48.921 euro) but CdH's average FTE only costs 34.754 euro. Although Groen's FTE cost is somewhat higher than most (77.412 euro), especially Ecolo's high average cost per FTE of 117.675 euro raises eyebrows. As a result, the values we obtained for traditional and non-traditional parties are influenced by their respective outliers. Second, the average cost per FTE cannot automatically be translated into salaries with corresponding staff profiles. For example, it is unclear whether parties make use of identical fiscal labor regimes. The low cost per FTE of some parties could be caused by employing staff through alternative mechanisms with lower fiscal contributions, aimed at stimulating employment. For

example, Sp.a consistently reported the use of such arrangements (GESCO and DAC) in previous studies (Noppe, 2001). In addition, party differences in salaries could still be explained by the generosity or wealth of specific parties and by the seniority of staff members. Based on these data, we wouldn't draw sharp conclusions about hypothesis five, which anticipated that average value of staff members working for their respective parties (qualitative aspect of professionalism) would be higher in new parties.

4.2.4. Party system: Flemish vs. Francophone

Do Flemish and Francophone parties approach their human capital differently? We conclude our empirical analysis by focusing on the two party systems that mark the Belgian political landscape. Table 5 offers a compilation of Flemish and Francophone averages for the different indicators. Regardless of what aspect we pick, the data show that Francophone parties invest more heavily in human capital. First of all, the absolute figures on organization and finance (staff size and staff expenses) are tangibly higher. Using measurements that relate human capital to membership and resources (staff/member and share of staff expenses) produces the same results. Flemish parties employ less personnel per member and dedicate a smaller share of their financial resources to human capital.

Table 5: Staff numbers, number of members, number of FTEs per 1000 members, staff expenses (indexed), share of staff expenses and cost per FTE (indexed), averages, 1999-2014.

	Organization			Finance		
	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Staff / Members</i>	<i>Staff Expenses</i>	<i>Share of Staff Expenses</i>	<i>FTE cost</i>
Flemish	27	42.111	0,64	1.687.489	21	65.233
Francophone	48	36.114	1,34	2.833.039	31	69.075

It remains unclear which factors lie beneath these apparent differences within the Belgian federalized party landscape. Determinants we discussed earlier, like ideology and party age, might play a role. The ideological outlook of the Francophone party system is more left-leaning and counts less non-traditional parties than Flanders. The interplay between electoral performance and human capital we discussed could also play a role. Throughout the period we studied (1999-2014), the electoral balance within the Flemish party system shifted several times, causing especially the non-traditional parties (Groen, Vlaams Belang and N-VA) to cut down or expand staff sizes. In comparison, the Francophone party system shows more organizational stability.

Is it possible that the more atomized Flemish party landscape produces more uncertainty for party organizations? This could mean that the struggle for resources and organizational stability is harder for newcomers in competitive party systems with a larger effective number of parties. Such an effect might explain why the Flemish non-traditional parties experienced more ups and downs than their counterpart within the Francophone party system (Ecolo). The potential effect of such party system effects should be elaborated more specifically and could in the future be tested through international-comparative analyses.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed the staff levels and staff expenses of political parties in Belgium from 1999 to 2014. The central focus was on the permanent staff of parties, i.e. personnel on the party payrolls, excluding party group staff (paid for by the parliaments) and external consultants. Our data were gathered from the parties' annual financial statements. The major advantage of this approach is that these are official data that are comparable over time and between parties, given several legal obligations, while data for previous empirical studies were generally gathered by means of surveys and party contacts (e.g. Katz & Mair, 1992). This latter method inevitably bears a risk with regard to reliability and comparability of data, as it often allows parties to decide autonomously which staff members to include in their staff figures (such as party group staff). Therefore, although the present study is highly descriptive, it can nevertheless be considered as a first systematic and reliable analysis of political party staff in Belgium.

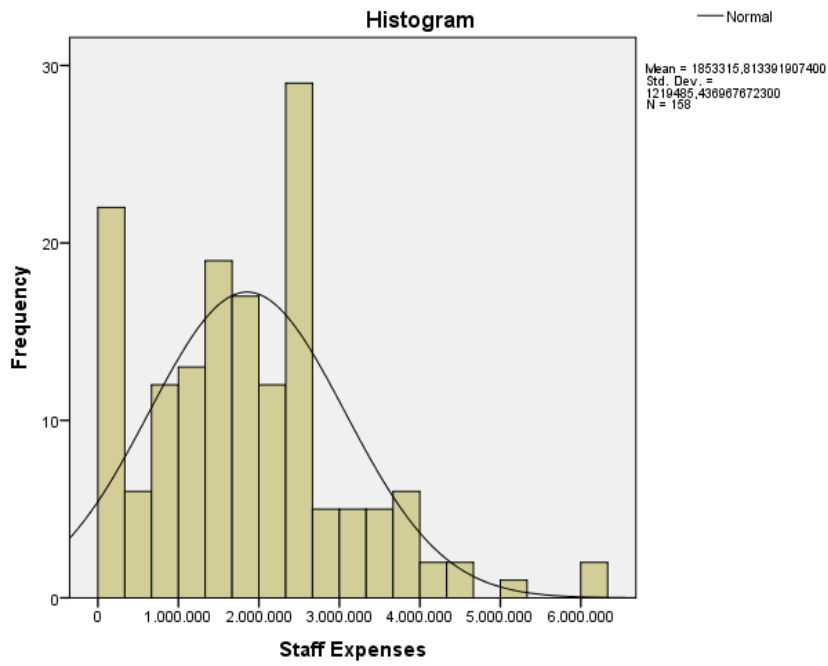
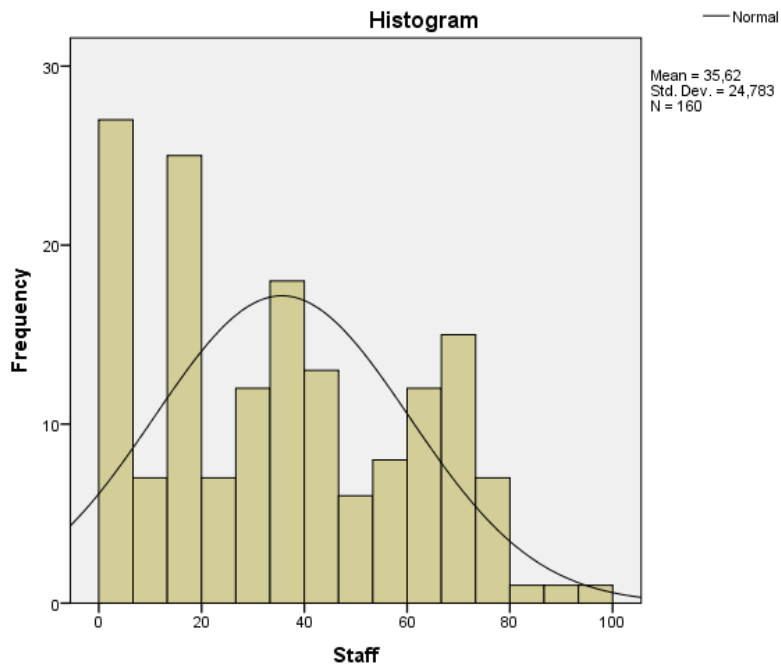
Our analysis showed that the volume of staff (quantitative aspect of professionalism) of extra-parliamentary parties isn't necessarily increasing constantly: the aggregate indicators of human capital didn't increase between 1999 and 2014 (H1). Although earlier empirical studies showed a clear increase from a historical perspective (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Krouwel, 2012), staff sizes might have (temporarily) reached a point of saturation in Belgium. It is unclear whether the same trend is applicable to parliamentary party staff in Belgium: these figures weren't recorded in the annual accounts.

The present study illustrated that substantial differences exist regarding staff between the ten parties under consideration. To start with, leftist parties did prove to have more capital-intensive organizations to parties on the right (H2), although this observations didn't apply to the Green party family. Moreover, we also observed an effect of party strength (H3). The vote share of parties does

correspond to their staff size. From a dynamic perspective, the evolution of staff tends to follow the evolution of the electoral results at least to some extent. If a party is confronted with an electoral defeat, this generally leads to a decrease of staff. More votes, on the other hand, rather result in a larger work force. However, this finding cannot be generalized completely, as the case of Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang clearly illustrated: this party hardly employed any staff members on its own payroll for years, but its recent electoral decline incited the party to hire more staff. We also found that staff levels and staff expenses are generally higher amongst the traditional parties, while the non-traditional parties are characterized by more limited figures (H4). This should not come as a complete surprise: traditional parties can be seen as former mass parties, not only typified by a highly developed party organization, but also by some degree of organizational inertia. As a result, these parties largely maintain their relatively high staff levels and expenses through time, while those of the non-traditional parties are more limited and also more prone to short-term fluctuations.

Measuring the exact impact of various determinants was beyond the scope of this study, as this would require more detailed explanatory research. To this end, we should ideally perform multivariate analyses to check the interplay between different independent variables. Given the limited number of individual observations in this study, however, we were unable to perform such an analysis. Moreover, the variation on our explanatory variables was too limited, especially with respect to the systemic factors. An explanatory study on party staff would therefore benefit from a higher number of observations from a wider range of countries. The main challenge then becomes to gather sufficient reliable and comparable cross-national data on staff members and expenses. Some recent initiatives in this direction already exist (e.g. Poguntke et al., 2016), but the results of these studies have yet to be seen at the moment. With this analysis of the human capital of political parties in Belgium, we nevertheless hope to have taken a first important step in the direction of more profound and in-depth research into the importance of political party staff.

Appendix



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