

Personalization of parliamentary behavior: conceptualization and empirical evidence from Belgium

Bram Wauters, Nicolas Bouteca & Benjamin de Vet

Research group GASPAR (www.gaspar.ugent.be)

Ghent University

Bram.wauters@ugent.be

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Abstract

Personalization of parliamentary behavior is an underexposed aspect of the broader personalization phenomenon. It is the aim of this paper to first clarify the concept of personalization in the parliamentary arena, followed by a more systematic investigation to what extent and under which circumstances this phenomenon takes place in the Belgian context. We develop four indicators that can be used to measure parliamentary personalization over time and across countries: an increase in activities that are conducted individually, an increase in single-authored initiatives for activities that could be conducted either individually or collectively, a change in the concentration of visible parliamentary activities among MPs, and an increase in MPs leaving their party or switching to another party. Our analysis, based on an original dataset of parliamentary activity in the Belgian House of Representatives (1995-2014) and on data from the ‘Pathways to power’ project reveals that for none of these indicators a trend of personalization could be noted in Belgium.

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1. Introduction

Several observers and politicians alike have the impression that politics in Western countries has become increasingly focused on individual politicians the last few decades. Personalization as a scientific concept refers in general to a shift over time in attention and/or power from collective actors (such as parties and institutions) to individuals (Karvonen 2010, McAllister 2007). This evolution can be linked to the socio-economic and technological modernization of society, diminishing the relevance of classic social structures and increasing the impact of media (Karvonen 2010). Still, although it is often stated that personalization is a core and undisputable trend in contemporary politics, scholars are highly divided on this topic. Scientific controversy around personalization in general has to do with two major problems: conceptual disagreement and lack of empirical evidence.

There is, first of all, a lack of **conceptual clarity** (Balmas et al. 2014, Rahat and Sheafer 2007, Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2012). Personalization is a broad and diffuse concept in which several distinctions can be made. Firstly, there is a distinction between institutional and behavioral personalization (Rahat and Sheafer 2007). *Institutional* personalization refers to the adoption of rules and procedures that put more emphasis on individual politicians rather than on political parties (such as electoral reforms). *Behavioral* personalization either focuses on the behavior of the public (and the increasing emphasis they put on individual actors) or politicians (and on the resources they spend on individual rather than party activities). Evidently, the focus of this paper is on the latter.

A second major distinction refers to the *kind of arena* (the locus) in which personalization takes place: in parties and government, in the media, among the electorate or in parliament. Diverse research questions such as whether media pay more attention to individual politicians than before (Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2012), whether voters rely more on leadership evaluation when casting a vote (Aarts and Blais 2011) and whether party leaders have become more powerful in their party (Cross and Blais 2012) have all been tackled under the broad umbrella of personalization. But personalization tendencies in one arena do not necessarily imply nor exclude the presence of this phenomenon in another arena.

A third distinction is based upon the *number of people* (the focus) the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general ('decentralized' personalization) or a handful of top politicians, typically party leaders and prime ministers ('centralized' personalization) (Balmas et al. 2014, Wauters et al. 2016). Here again: both kinds of personalization could occur simultaneously, apart from each other or not at all.

A second major problem is about the **empirical reality** of personalization tendencies. Studies are divided between those who prove that politics has been personalized over the last decades (Garzia 2012, McAllister 2007, Renwick and Pilet 2016, Wattenberg 1991), and those demonstrating that there is no clear evidence of such an evolution (Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2011, Karvonen 2010, Kriesi 2012).

This paper focuses on personalization of parliamentary behavior, which is an underexposed aspect of the broader personalization phenomenon. Up to now, most research attention on personalization has been given to three arenas: parties and government (Pilet and Cross 2014, Poguntke and Webb 2007); the media (Kriesi 2012, Van Aelst, Sheaffer, and Stanyer 2012); and the electorate (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987, Marsh 2007, Wattenberg 1991, Wauters et al. 2016). Parliaments have only occasionally been the research topic in studies on personalization.

As the occurrence of personalization in one arena does not necessarily imply personalization in another and since evolutions over time are questioned by many scholars, personalization of parliamentary behaviour merits specific research attention. Moreover, parliaments in Western democracies are generally dominated by parties (Mair 2008, Depauw and Martin 2009). As parliaments are considered as a parties' stronghold, they constitute a 'least likely' case for a shift to more individual behavior (at the expense of parties). Additionally, despite their limited role in law-making, parliaments fulfill a number of other crucial functions in a political system, including agenda-setting, airing grievances and controlling the government (Norton 1993). As such, evolutions in parliamentary behavior have repercussions for the functioning of the political system as a whole. Finally, by putting the focus on parliaments, this paper aims to bridge two distinct literatures that have largely been blind to each other, i.e. the literature on legislative studies and the literature on personalization.

The very limited number of studies on personalized parliamentary behaviour (Balmas et al. 2014, Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012, Louwerse and Otjes 2016, Rahat and Sheaffer 2007) have done useful work by exploring this topic, but they all fall short in one way or another: either they use ad hoc indicators tailored to the situation in one country, or they analyse only one point in time and/or they are not linked to the concept of personalization nor do they engage with the literature on it.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to first clarify the concept of personalization in the parliamentary arena, to develop a number of indicators to be used in cross-country perspective, and then to conduct a systematic investigation of to what extent this phenomenon takes place in the Belgian context. Our results, however, provide no evidence whatsoever for the assumption that parliamentary behavior has become increasingly personalized in the last few decades. We will give in the conclusion some indications why this is the case.

2. Parties versus individuals in a legislature

We start by sketching the dilemma between acting collectively and acting individually in parliament. Parliamentary government features indeed an inherent tension between legislators' personal goals and the collective aims of the party they belong to.

Modern democracy is representative democracy. Citizens (as 'principals') transfer decision-making powers to politicians (their 'agents') authorized to act on their behalf (Pitkin 1967). In parliamentary systems, this is not a singular step but an indirect chain of several representative relationships in which voters delegate to legislators; legislators to the prime minister; the prime minister to individual cabinet members; and cabinet members to civil servants (Strom, Müller, and Bergman 2003).

Delegation, however, has its pitfalls. Agents and principals might have diverging preferences and the latter might lack the information to choose the right agent in the beginning (i.e. adverse selection) or to keep him/her loyal afterwards (i.e. moral hazard) (Lupia 2003). Here parties come into play. Political parties align the preferences of their office-holders and place their actions under centralized control (Strom and Müller 2009). Parties are thus *useful for voters*. According to the responsible party model (Mair 2008, Thomassen 1994), they present voters a number of candidates who have been thoroughly screened and socialized, and whose policy preferences are clear, as they are written down in the party program. Once given an electoral mandate, parties make sure their office-holders execute these policies loyally. They likewise ensure the collective accountability of legislators towards the electorate. Moreover, the 'party label' of candidates also allows voters (who often lack the resources to screen and monitor politicians) to make informed judgements on how an agent will act once elected (McDermott 2009, Strom and Müller 2009).

Parties are also *useful for politicians*. They allow legislators to pursue their policy-related goals and office-related ambitions, as parties not only control the policy-making process but are also important recruitment gatekeepers that (co-)decide over the static and progressive career prospects of legislators (Aldrich 1995, Hazan and Rahat 2010, Strom and Müller 2009). Moreover, parties in the legislature reduce transaction costs (there is no constant need for ad hoc alliances) and resolve collective action problems which arise when individual party group members have incentives to behave in ways that lead to collectively inefficient outcomes¹ (Cox and McCubbins 1993, Strom and Müller 2009).

Political parties – or party groups – are thus central components in the organization of contemporary West European parliaments (Heidar, 2013; Heidar & Koole, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). They

¹ For example when legislators have incentives to only promote constituency interests that are detrimental for the general interest.

structure the actions of their legislators, likewise promote decisional efficiency, and they allow legislators to influence policies through preference aggregation.

Although the bulk of parliamentary work is party-related, MPs also have incentives to undertake a number of individual initiatives and building a personal reputation within the electorate. The last few years, reforms giving more weight to voters' preferences have occurred in several electoral systems across Europe including Belgium (Renwick and Pilet 2016). As a result, preference votes for candidates have become increasingly more important to become elected. This makes that individual candidates will do their best to build up a personal reputation, for instance by developing personal vote-earning attributes (e.g. Tavits 2010, Shugart, Valdini, and Suominen 2005). One kind of vote-earning attributes are activity-based attributes. Parliamentary activities are useful tools for signaling activity and claiming credit, and might as such help to improve one's individual reputation, which on its turn allows to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995). For instance, MPs can engage extensively in constituency service to increase their local political popularity (Lancaster and Patterson 1990) or behave more independently in parliament, either by voting more regularly against the party (Crisp et al. 2013) or by initiating more individual-based legislative proposals (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012, Däubler, Bräuninger, and Brunner 2016). It could be argued that undertaking parliamentary activities *individually* (for instance by initiating a single-authored legislative bill instead of a co-authored bill) allows MPs to claim all of the credit for himself/herself rather than sharing this with co-partisans or other colleagues. It helps MPs to improve their name recognition and to distinguish themselves from other MPs. Research among Belgian MPs had indeed demonstrated that MPs initiating single-authored bills in the wake of the general elections receive more preference votes on the occasion of these elections (Däubler, Bräuninger, and Brunner 2016)

Whether there has indeed been a shift from party-related activities in parliament towards more individual-based initiatives in the last decades and how this possible evolution can be measured empirically, will be discussed in the next sections of this paper.

3. Conceptualization: personalized parliamentary behavior

Before testing whether a trend of parliamentary personalization has indeed taken place (in Belgium), we need to elaborate on the different dimensions of this concept, and identify a number of indicators that can be used to measure them (in cross-national perspective). Our focus is on behavior in parliament, which means that we exclude from our analysis MPs' activities outside parliament, such as constituency work. Since the focus will not be on party leaders or prime ministers but on MPs, this constitutes a form of 'decentralized' personalization. The general idea is that also in parliaments individual politicians

increasingly do their best to build up a personal reputation rather than (only) contribute to the collective party reputation (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012, Crisp et al. 2013).

The most extensive attempt so far to grasp personalization of parliamentary behavior has been undertaken in the Israeli context (Balmas et al. 2014, Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). These authors put forward a number of indicators for personalized behavior in parliament: the ratio between the number of governmental positions and the total number of MPs, the number of (adopted) private members' bills, the use of roll-call voting, the number of petitions submitted to the High Court of Justice, the number of interjections in prime ministers' speeches and the use of the first person singular in prime ministers' speeches.

Although useful, this approach suffers from a number of weaknesses. First, an explanation of the broader rationale behind the choice of these indicators is missing. The choice for indicators of personalization should, however, be backed by theoretical choices as much as by the availability of data to measure them. Second, some of these indicators are tailored to the specific situation in Israel, but do not have much relevance beyond this country (or do not even exist in other countries). This applies e.g. to the increase in roll-call voting and petitions submitted to the High Court of Justice. And finally, the authors simultaneously take centralized and decentralized personalization into account by for instance looking at private members' bills (decentralized) and prime ministers' speeches (centralized). In order to obtain a more clear delineation of the concept of parliamentary personalization, we choose to limit our analyses to decentralized personalization (MPs) only (as explained above).

Apart from these two studies in Israel, there are a number of other studies that focus on one or more elements of personalization of parliamentary behaviour, but that do not necessarily adopt a personalization framework. Many studies have for instance already investigated MP's defecting behaviour from the party (most notably, voting against the party line) (Sieberer 2006, Depauw and Martin 2009, Van Vonnno et al. 2014). But most of these studies have come to the conclusion that this kind of behavior almost never occurs, except maybe for moral-ethical issues (Baumann, Debus, and Müller 2015) and/or that individual discontent (or defecting behavior) is often not expressed in public parliamentary settings but in internal meeting behind closed doors, and in the media. Furthermore, these studies are often not linked to personalization literature, which also applies to Pedersen's (2015) study of MPs' styles of representation, which furthermore analyses only one point in time.

Louwerse and Otjes (2016) study on Dutch MPs overcomes both disadvantages by conducting an analysis over time and by incorporating the personalization thesis in their article, but they only look at the general activity rate of MPs (without analysing shifts in the kind of activities or the number of initiators of activities).

In sum, we have the impression that there is a need for a set of indicators to capture personalized parliamentary behaviour. We put forward two requirements for these indicators: they should be easy to scrutinize in cross-country perspective, and it should be easy to acquire data from different time periods for these indicators. This of course restricts the range of potential indicators.

We posit that personalization in parliament can manifest itself in four different forms which are formulated in general terms (in order to allow cross-country comparison): by a change in the type of activities an MP undertakes, by a rise in the number of parliamentary activities initiated individually, by a concentration of activities in the hands of some MPs, and by an increase in MPs breaking with parties.

Table 1: Four indicators for personalized parliamentary behaviour and related expectations

Indicator	Expectation
Change in type of activities	Increase in individual activities
Change in number of initiators of activities	Increase in conducting activities on an individual basis
Concentration of (visible) parliamentary activities	Centralized: increase in concentration Decentralized: decrease in concentration
Dissent from the party	Increase in the number of MPs leaving their party

A first indicator refers to a **change in type of activities**. Some parliamentary activities provide more room for individual MPs to raise their profile than others. Control activities, and particularly parliamentary questions are more likely to be used to generate media attention and public interest, or to address specific constituency grievances, and are hence more likely to be used by MPs to build up a personal reputation (Martin 2011) than law-making activities. In addition, where legislative bills are in practice often co-authored (especially with MPs from other parties if they want to be successful) (Brunner 2012), parliamentary questions are on an individual basis, which allows individual MPs to highlight themselves instead of the party. Furthermore, even when legislative bills are single-authored, they are generally subject to party scrutiny (De Winter and Dumont 2006) while party leaders generally leave more leeway and autonomy to MPs when it comes to submitting parliamentary questions (Martin 2011). In order to control for evolutions in the total amount of parliamentary activities, it is necessary that one calculates the ratio of the number of parliamentary questions to the total number of parliamentary activities. In the case of personalization, we expect this ratio to increase.

A second indicator focuses on the expectation that any kind of parliamentary **activities** will be initiated **more on an individual basis**. Where a difference between individual and collective initiatives is possible (as in introducing legislative bills in Belgium), the personalization thesis expects a rise in individual initiatives. Especially since introducing legislative bills often serves other goals than law-making such as airing grievances of constituents and/or obtaining visibility for particular groups (Brunner 2012, Norton 1993), it can be expected that individual MPs willing to build up a personal reputation, prefer introducing single-authored bills as the benefits will come completely and exclusively to them (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012). This indicator would thus be a ratio, measured by dividing the number of single-authored bills by the total number of initiated bills.

A third indicator looks at the **concentration of parliamentary activities** in the hands of one MP. The use of some parliamentary instruments is (due to time constraints) not unlimited, and then a choice between different MPs (from the same party) have to be made. Oral questions during the highly mediatized prime minister's question time in plenary sessions, for instance, require some prior coordination within the party group as the amount of questions that can be asked is typically limited. The question is, especially for visible occasions to address grievances, how these opportunities are distributed between MPs of a party group. Does each member of parliament get an equal chance to ask oral questions in the plenary meeting, or are these instruments (increasingly) concentrated in the hands of some eloquent and mediagenic MPs? We will measure this by calculating the Gini coefficient based on a comparison of the cumulative share of interventions with the cumulative share of MPs (see below). When it comes to the interpretation of this indicator, we have to make a distinction between *centralized* and *decentralized* personalization. The former refers to an increase in the concentration of these visible activities in the hands of the parliamentary group leader. When centralized personalization has occurred, an increasing amount of interventions during the weekly question time will be done by party group leaders, which can be interesting to attract media attention. As for *decentralized* personalization, the expectation is that concentration will decline over time. All rank-and-file MPs want a place in the spotlight which leads to an increased competition among MPs to speak in topical debates. If more MPs than before take the word in this kind of debates, this could be interpreted as a sign of decentralized personalization.

A final indicator focuses on **dissent from the party**. Where the previous indicators focused on merely acting *apart from* the party, this indicator concentrates on acting *against* the party. So-called 'mavericks' defect from their party in order to increase their own visibility (Tavits 2009). Above, we already explained why it is difficult to grasp this phenomenon: it only happens rarely and it often occurs behind closed doors. Therefore, we will for instance not focus on defecting voting behaviour, but take another indicator for of dissent into account, which is at the same time also the most extreme form of dissent.

More in particular, we focus on party switchers, i.e. MPs leaving the party they were elected for, and becoming an independent MP or joining another party. O'Brien and Shomer (2013), who undertook a cross-country study, come to the conclusion that motivational factors (such as the chance on reelection and government status of the party) have a large impact while institutional factors (such as the electoral system) have only a weak direct effect on party switching. However, their units of analysis were parties (and whether or not they have been confronted with party switchers) and they did not compare party switching over time. In the light of the personalization literature, it remains relevant to examine whether individual MPs have increasingly left their parties the last few decades.

4. Methodology and case-selection

We will conduct a first test of these indicators by mapping the extent of personalization of parliamentary behavior over time in Belgium. As such, we engage in academic debates about whether personalization has taken place the last few decades or not (and if so, for what kind of indicators, see also above). Although individual MPs can have different incentives to engage in more personalized activities (e.g. individual variables such as security of one's seat and seniority, but also party-related variables such as government status) (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012), in this paper we are mainly interested in evolutions over time. The nature of our analyses will thus be descriptive rather than explanatory.

Before discussing the results of our analyses, we will first indicate how much leeway the Belgian parliamentary system leaves for individual action, and we will give more details about the operationalization of our indicators in the Belgian context.

The Belgian case

We first elaborate on the extent to which the electoral, parliamentary and party system in Belgium leaves room for individual initiatives of MPs in parliament. Based on the nature of Belgian political decision-making, the country can be seen as a least-likely case for the occurrence of personalized parliamentary behavior. Belgium is often described as a text-book example of a 'partitocracy' (De Winter and Dumont 2003, Deschouwer 2009). Enhanced by processes of extreme party fragmentation and the regionalization of competences, party headquarters (particularly central party leaders) keep tight control over policy-making at the federal and regional levels of government. In order to ensure government stability in this divided multilevel environment, the interference of other veto players, such as parliament, is minimized (De Winter and Dumont 2006). Party groups are highly disciplined in legislative voting (Depauw 2005) and legislators are seen as party agents by party statutes. MPs are furthermore poorly supported by individual staff compared to the central party research centers from which they are dependent, and in all parties, MPs must ask the permission of the party group (leader) in order to initiative bills, amendments,

hold interpellations or support proposals from other parties. Within the walls of parliament, the hands of individual members of parliament are thus strongly tied, often causing them to resort to (extra-parliamentary) non-policy related activities such as case work, constituency service or symbolic local representation (De Winter 1997).

From an electoral point of view, however, there are some incentives for personalized politics. Belgium is characterized by a flexible list PR system. Voters can either vote for one or more individual candidates (on the same list) or cast a single list vote endorsing the order of candidates on the list. All candidates reaching the eligibility number on the basis of their preference votes automatically earn one of the party seats. In general, however, only a few high ranked candidates reach that number. For all others, list votes are added to their personal preference votes until they reach the eligibility number, following the order of the candidate list. An electoral reform in 2002 reduced the number of transferable list votes from 100 % to 50 %, in order to enhance citizens' impact on the election of members of parliament, (providing a good example of institutional personalization, see: Rahat and Sheaffer (2007), Renwick and Pilet (2016)). This transfer of list votes is repeated until all seats for the list are allocated. When the number of list votes is exhausted before all seats have been assigned, the remaining seats go to the candidates with the largest number of preferential votes who are not yet elected. Although the order of candidate lists, as decided by the parties, can be changed if individual candidates reach the eligibility number on the basis of their preferential votes, this only happens sporadically in practice (André, Wauters, and Pilet 2012, Put, Smulders, and Maddens 2014). As a result, the Belgian system is sometimes characterized as a 'closed-list system in disguise' (Crisp et al. 2013, De Winter 2005). Voters generally only decide the number of seats a party wins, not which candidate takes a seat.

This does, however, not make the individual behavior of MPs irrelevant, since selectors often take a candidate's previous electoral performance into account when candidate lists are drafted (André et al. 2015) and when government positions are distributed. Party nomination strategies reward candidates with high numbers of preferential votes with better list positions in the next election increasing the chances of getting elected, and with minister portfolios. Hence, it still pays off for ambitious MPs to build up a personal reputation leading to a high number of preference votes. Indeed, Däubler, Bräuninger, and Brunner (2016) found that the number of single-authored legislative bills in the last year before the elections has an impact on the electoral score of Belgian MPs at these elections.

Measurements

For the analysis of the first three indicators, we rely on an original dataset (set up for the purposes of this paper) that contains information on the parliamentary activity (i.e. the amount of oral and written questions, bill proposals and questions in the plenary session) of all MPs of the Belgian House of

Representatives (n=942) between 1995 and 2014. All these data are collected by screening the official website of this parliament (www.kamer.be). All the data we use, are measured at the individual level of the MP.

As mentioned above, for our **first indicator** (a shift in the type of parliamentary activity) we look at whether MPs increasingly focus on parliamentary instruments that can be conducted on an individual basis (written questions and oral question posed in committees) compared to activities that have a more collective nature and are often subject to party scrutiny (legislative bills). We measure this indicator by calculating the ratio of the number of number of parliamentary questions to the total number of parliamentary activities (parliamentary questions + bills) for each MP.²

The characteristics of parliamentary questions varies between parliaments (Russo and Wiberg 2010). As it is the purpose of this research to design indicators that can be used in cross-national perspective, we must define the questions according to the four formal criteria³ that Russo & Wiberg (2010:218-219) developed. We include here both oral and written questions. All have to be submitted in advance. Oral questions are asked in parliamentary committees and no possibility for tabling a motion. Written questions are also without the possibility for a motion, but they are written instead of oral. We exclude here the questions in the plenary session (which will be captured by the third indicator): they also have to be submitted in advance, are oral, but still without a motion.

For the **second indicator**, i.e. parliamentary activities that are undertaken more on an individual basis, we examine whether the number of single-authored bills has increased over time. For this indicator we subtract the number of co-authored bills from the number of single-authored bills and divide this by the total number of bills (single- + co-authored bills) submitted by each MP and plot the mean ratio for all MPs in a given legislative term.

For the **third indicator**, i.e. the concentration of parliamentary activities in the hands of particular MPs, we look at the questions posed by MPs during the weekly plenary session (i.e. question time). In the House of Representatives, each party group (of at least 5 members) can ask two questions during the weekly question time. Party groups themselves decide who gets to take the floor on behalf of their party. In order to examine how these questions are divided among party group members (and if they are distributed equally or rather concentrated in the hands of some MPs), we calculate the Gini-coefficient of inequality (Gini 1921) for each party group within a given parliamentary year. The Gini-coefficient

² The first indicator was calculated with the use of the following formula:

$$\text{Indicator 1} = \frac{(\text{written questions} + \text{oral questions}) - \text{total amount of bill proposals}}{\text{written questions} + \text{oral questions} + \text{total amount of bill proposals}}$$

³ Form of the question (written or oral), timing of the questioning (submitted in advance or spontaneous), possibility to join the debate (can other members speak?), possibility to vote a motion.

is a widely-known measurement of inequality among units (in our case party group members and the number of plenary questions they get to ask). It is mostly used to measure the unequal wealth distribution among the population of a country, but has also been applied to other fields, including political science (see for instance Bochsler (2010) and Jones and Mainwaring (2003) on the uneven distribution of party's vote shares across territorial units). The Gini-coefficient is derived from the Lorenz curve which plots the cumulative share of the population (e.g. all party group members) (x-axis) to their cumulative share of certain resources (e.g. the number questions group members get to ask on behalf of their party (y-axis)) (see: Bochsler, 2010, pp. 160-161). The Gini-coefficient quantifies the area between this curve and the perfect equality line (i.e. the line that would indicate that each MP asks the same amount of plenary questions). It ranges from 0 (perfect equality among units as there is no difference between the curve and the perfect equality line) to the theoretical maximum of 1 (perfect inequality because the entire cumulative share is concentrated on a single unit). The main advantage of the Gini-coefficient is that it is easy to interpret and can be used to compare statistical dispersion among different units in different points of time. When all members of a given party group get to ask the same amount of plenary questions the Gini-coefficient will thus be 0. When only one group member gets to ask all plenary question the score is (close to) 1.⁴ In addition, in order to analyse whether we can find traces of centralized personalisation based on this indicator, we look at the relative proportion of plenary questions asked by the party group leader on behalf of his/her party group.

For the analysis of legislative party switching, our **last indicator**, we use another dataset, i.e. the Belgian part of the 'Pathways to power' dataset on MPs from 1990 until now (Van Hauwaert and Janssen 2017). This allows us to investigate whether party switching has increased over time. The dataset of the entire Pathways project contains data for all MPs from 1990 until now in Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. These data include socio-demographic variables (sex, ethnic origin, education, etc), career variables (data of entry and exit, parliamentary functions, party switching, etc), party variables (ideology, party organisation, etc) and institutional variables (electoral system, party system, etc). These data will first and foremost be analysed for the main purpose of the 'Pathways to power' project, i.e. mapping and explaining descriptive representation of citizens of

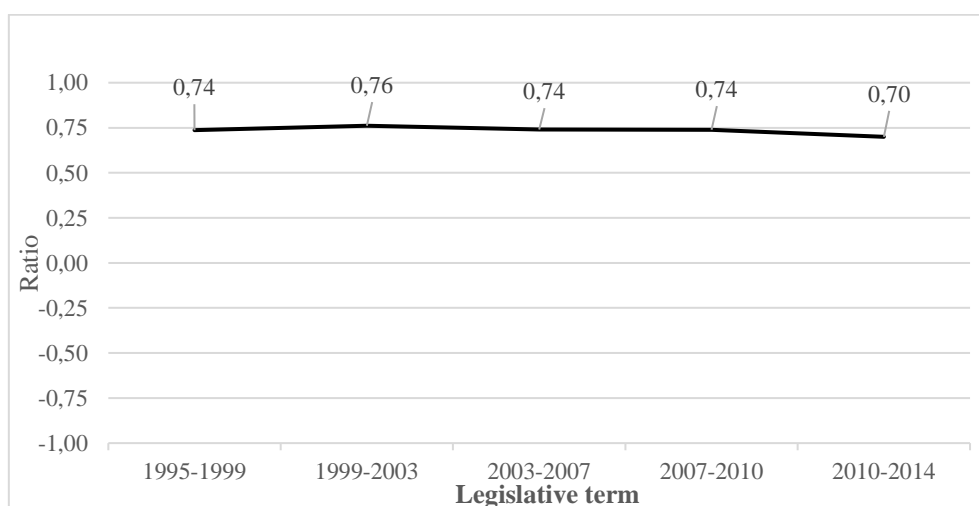
⁴ The theoretical maximum of 1 is reached when all units but one of an infinite large set of observations have the value of 0. The Gini-coefficient is thus sensitive for population size (i.e. party group size) which is logical: a party group of 20 members where one person asks all of the plenary questions is more unequal than a party group of 5 members where one person asks all the plenary questions.

immigrant origin. We use only the Belgian data. The total number of party switchers is calculated for each legislative term.⁵

5. Results

In this section, we present the results for the four indicators of parliamentary personalization that we have identified above. First, we will look at the extent to which individual types of parliamentary activities have increased over time. We expect to find a rise in activities that have a more individual nature and leave more leeway for MPs (i.e. oral and written questions) as expressed on the total number of parliamentary activities. Figure 1 clearly shows that this is not the case. The score of the ratio of individual activities is always somewhere between +1 (only individual parliamentary initiatives) and -1 (only collective parliamentary initiatives). Between the legislative term 1995-1999 and 2010-2014, the ratio of the number of parliamentary questions (oral and written) to the total number of parliamentary activities (oral and written questions + bill proposals) has varied between 0,70 and 0,74 with a (very small) peak of 0,76 in the period 1999-2003. This means two things: parliamentary questions outnumber legislative proposals to a large extent, and they have done so on an equal rate throughout the entire period of investigation. Hence there is no trend to personalization in the type of activities an MP undertakes. The total amount of oral and written questions have exploded since 1995, but the amount of bill proposals have increased with the same magnitude.

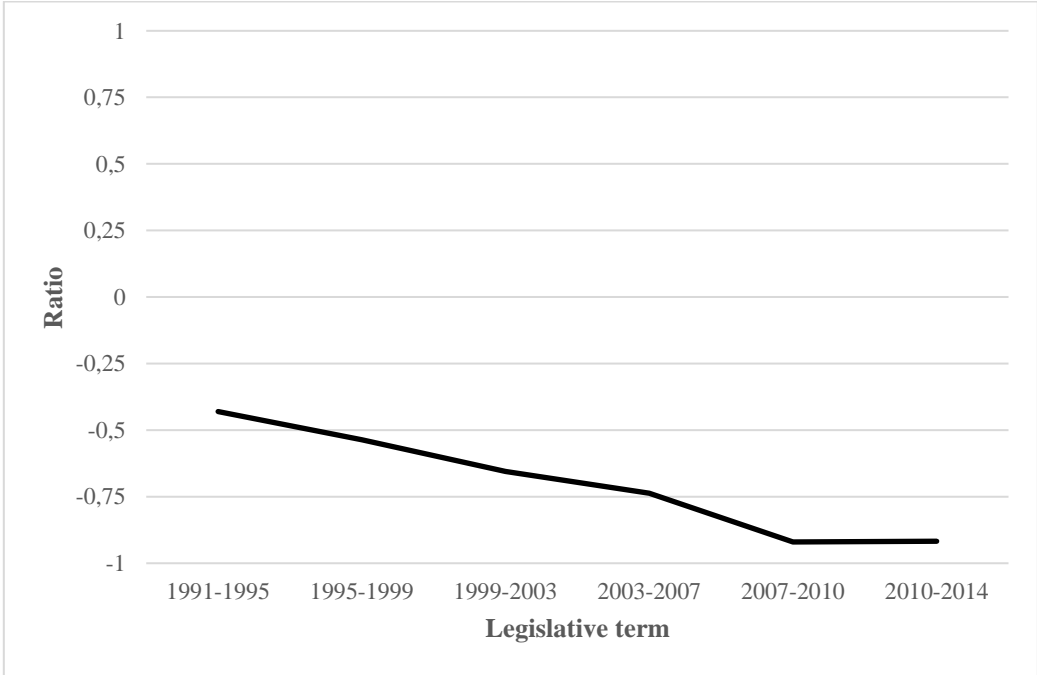
Figure 1. Ratio of usage of individual instruments (parliamentary questions) versus collective instruments (bill proposals) per MP (mean per legislative term)



⁵ Parliamentary parties that from the start of the legislative term onwards consisted of two parties and that fell apart into two separate parliamentary parties later in the legislative term (as was the case for CD&V and N-VA in the 2007-2010 legislative term) are not considered as party switching, nor are changes in the names of the parties (from SP to sp.a for instance) considered as new parties.

Secondly, we look only at the initiation of legislative bills, and calculate the ratio of proposals initiated by one MP versus proposals initiated by several MPs. This indicates the extent to which law-making activities are executed on an individual basis. The result is a score between +1 (all bills are single-authored) and -1 (all bills are co-authored). Again, based on the alleged trend to personalization of politics, we expect that the amount of individual initiatives will increase. Figure 2 shows that this is not the case. As the ratio never reaches above 0, this shows that co-authored bills have always been more popular than single-authored bills. The fact that legislators try to find support for their bills in order to succeed and pass it through the legislative process is of course rational and not uncommon. Still, single-authored bills provide legislators with interesting opportunities to signal activity and to claim all credit (Bräuninger, Brunner, and Däubler 2012). Single-authored bills have, however, become even more rare than in the past. The relative proportion of single-authored bills decreased ever since the 1990s. The ratio reaches an historical low of -0,92 between 2007 and 2014. Hence, also for this indicator, there is no trend towards more personalization of parliamentary behavior.

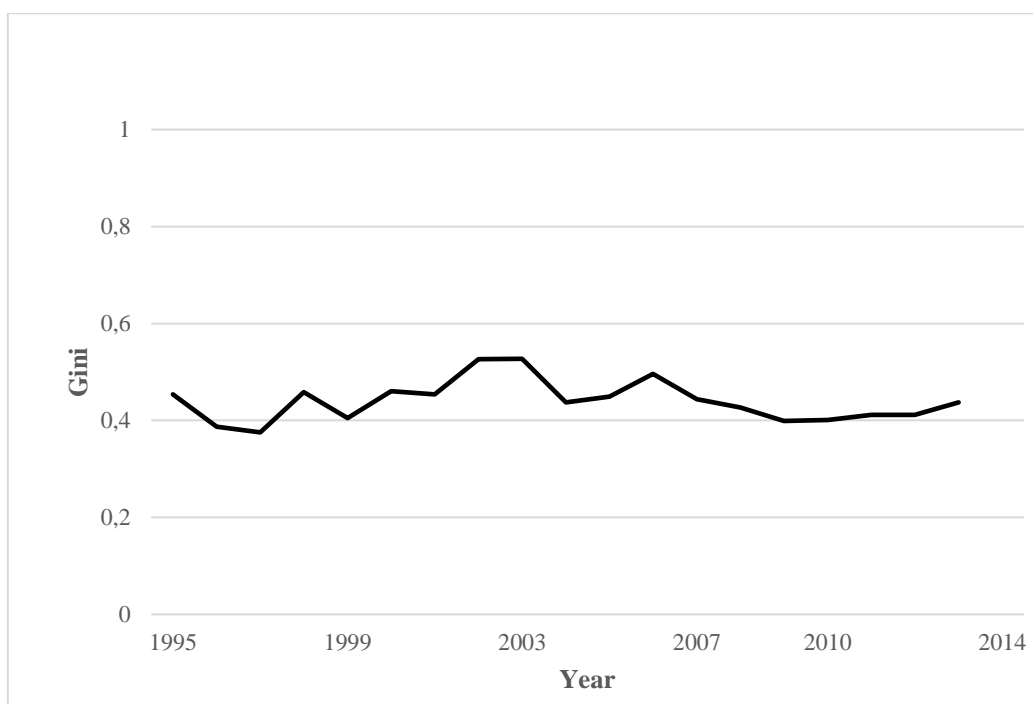
Figure 2. Ratio of single- versus co-authored bills per MP (mean per legislative term)



Thirdly, we look at the concentration of parliamentary activities in the hands of some MPs. We focus on oral questions during the prime minister’s question time in plenary sessions. These are highly visible and mediated occasions for MPs to take the floor and require prior coordination within the party group as the amount of questions that can be asked is typically limited.

First, we calculated the relative proportions of plenary questions asked by each member of a given party group. Based on this variable, which already shows to some extent how plenary questions are distributed among group members, we calculated the Gini-coefficient of inequality for each party group in a given legislative year. Party groups of below 5 members were excluded from the analyses. As mentioned, a Gini-coefficient of 0 means that there is perfect equality (each group member got to ask the same amount of questions), a Gini-coefficient of 1 means perfect inequality (one group member got to ask all of the questions). Figure 3 shows the evolutions of these Gini-coefficients. We report the mean values for all party groups (above 5 members) in a given parliamentary year. However, as the Gini-coefficient is a party-level indicator, a more detailed graph with the specific values for each party group can be found in Appendix 1.

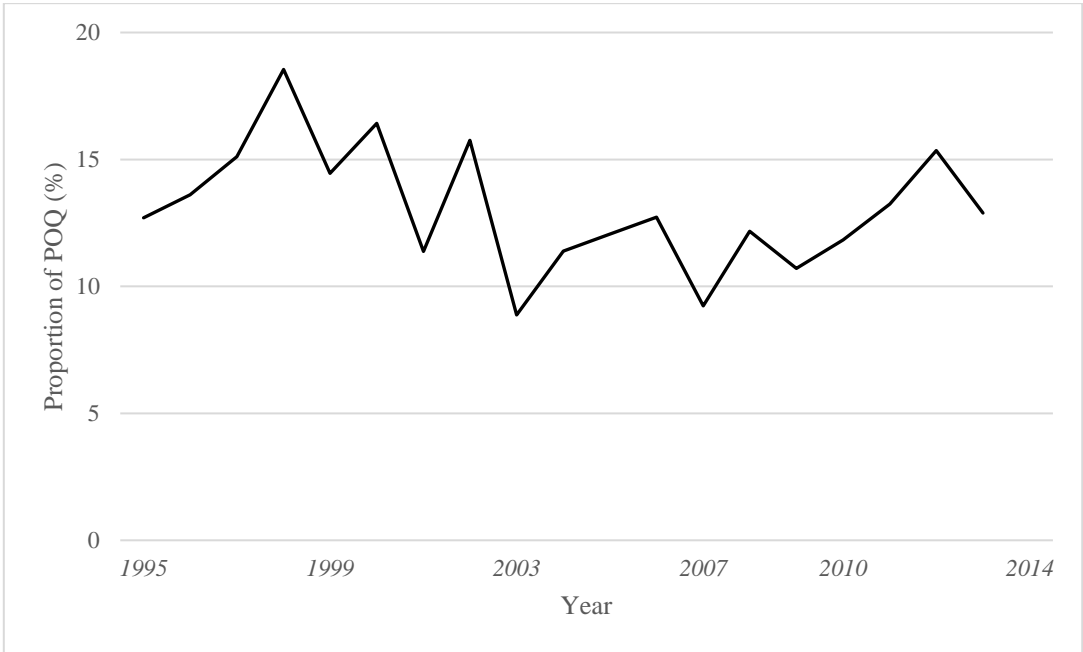
Figure 3. The distribution of plenary parliamentary questions among party group members (mean GINI-coefficients for all party groups per year)



The Gini-coefficients in Figure 3 show no clear evolutions throughout time. The average coefficients for all party groups generally fluctuate somewhere between 0.4 and 0.5. This indicates that a fair share of members of parliaments is rather inactive in asking plenary oral questions. There is a (slight) peak in 2002 and 2003 when the Gini-index rises above 0.5, but it drops straight away in the subsequent year. As an unequivocal evolution throughout time is missing, we cannot say that there are clear signs of personalization, neither for the decentralized variant nor for the centralized form.

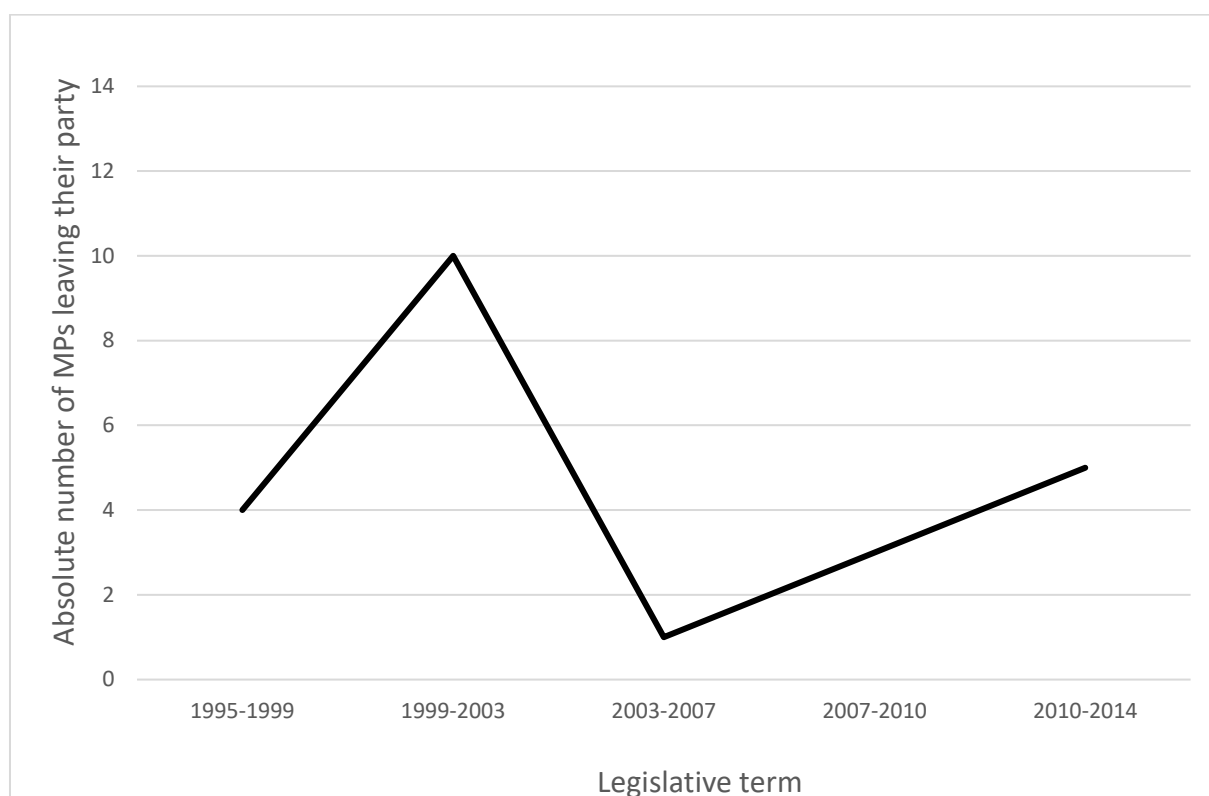
Figure 5 shows the proportion of plenary questions asked by party group leaders. In the case of centralized personalization, one would expect that an increasing share of plenary oral questions is posed by party group leaders. Figure 5, however, shows that this is not the case. The share of questions asked by party group leaders is on average around 13 per cent throughout the entire research period. By the end of the 1990s, it reaches up until 18 per cent, after which it drops to around 10 percent between 2003 and 2007. Since 2010, there is again a small increase in the proportion of questions asked by party group leaders, but not enough to reach the same height as in the 1990s. Again, we do not find a sign of (centralized) personalization.

Figure 4: Proportion of plenary questions asked by party group leaders (percentages, mean per year)



Finally, we look at the number of MPs that have left their party either to join another party or to become an independent MP. Figure 5 shows first of all that the absolute number of party switchers among MPs has been rather limited throughout the period of investigation: the highest number in the 1999-2003 legislative term (10) is still rather modest compared to the total number of MPs (150) and successors in that legislative term.

Figure 5: Absolute number of MPs leaving their party (per legislative term)



A second observation that strikes the eye is that although there are fluctuations in the absolute number of MPs who are leaving their parliamentary party, no clear trend over time can be distinguished. The number of the most recent term (2010-2014) is with 5 about at the same level as that of the 1995-1999 term (with 4). It seems that external party events (rather than MPs' individualistic aspirations) are mainly responsible for the number of party switchers. In the 1999-2003 term the Flemish-regionalist party VU fell apart in two parties (N-VA and Spirit), and in the 2010-2014 term, the francophone Brussels-based party FDF split off from the liberal-democratic party MR. Both events happened mainly outside parliament, but MPs from the according parties followed the choices made by their party elites, pushing the number of party switchers to a higher level. This external party influence is confirmed if we make a distinction between MPs who switch from one party to another and MPs who become independents. The latter category counts only 6 MPs throughout the whole period of analysis (1995-2014), which indicates that parties continue to be highly relevant actors, even for MPs leaving their party of origin. In sum, also for this indicator no trend of personalization could be observed.

6. Conclusions

This paper had two aims: establishing a set of indicators to measure personalization of parliamentary behaviour in cross-country perspective, and to operationalize and test these indicators for the first time in the Belgian context.

Although previous studies have done useful work by exploring this topic, they do not provide a clear set of indicators to measure personalization of parliamentary behaviour over time and across countries. We have proposed four indicators that overcome these weaknesses. By formulating them in general terms, it is quite easy to tailor these indicators to the country-specific peculiarities of each parliamentary system, and by focussing on indicators which can be measured on the basis of existing datasets, comparison through time is facilitated.

We posit that personalization of parliamentary behaviour can be measured by four indicators. A first indicator refers to the type of activities that MPs conduct. The personalization thesis expects here an increase in activities conducted on an individual basis and leaving leeway for individual accents. For the Belgian context, we expected to find an increase in parliamentary questions. Secondly, personalization can be measured by analysing all activities that either can be executed individually or collectively. We expected here to find that MPs are increasingly conducting these activities on an individual basis. A third indicator relates to visible parliamentary activities, in particular prime ministerial question time. In case of centralized personalization, we expected an increase in concentration of this kind of activities in the hands of the parliamentary group leader over time. If decentralized personalization would have occurred, we expected a decrease over time as competition between several MPs tend to become more fierce. Finally, we take party dissent into account. As defecting voting behaviour in parliament almost never happens and internal discussion often take place behind closed doors, we only take the most extreme form of dissent into account, i.e. leaving the party or switching to another party.

Our empirical results based on an analysis of Belgian MPs from 1995 until 2014 give a very coherent image: no single proof was found for an increasing trend of personalization in parliament. This is contrast with previous research on Israel (Balmas et al. 2014). We could point to a number of potential explanations for this lack of effect.

First, this could be related to the political arena this research focussed on, i.e. parliament. Since party cohesion is a central feature (and even a prerequisite) of European legislatures in order to keep (coalition) governments in power, parliaments provide a least likely case for personalized behaviour. Parties need to have a firmer grip on what MPs (who are elected on a party label and who are dependent

on the party for re(s)election) do in parliament than in the media or in election campaigns. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there is not much leeway (and especially no increase in it) for individual MPs.

Secondly, the lack of effect could be due to the kind of indicators that are used. Contrary to Balmas et al. (2014), we relied on a set of four general indicators focused on parliamentarians. As such, we neglect the (potentially more personalized) role of ministers and prime ministers in parliament and more informal aspects of personalization such as the more frequent use of personalized terms in parliamentary debates (the so-called 'discursive' personalization). It might be that personalized parliamentary behaviour occurs only for some people in parliament and for some kind of activities. Further research should clarify whether this is indeed the case.

A final explanation for the lack of effect refers to the country at stake. Although Belgium with its flexible list PR-system provides some incentives for MPs to cultivate a personal vote, it is generally characterized as a textbook example of a *partitocracy*, i.e. a political system highly dominated by political parties (De Winter and Dumont 2003, Deschouwer 2009). It remains to be seen whether personalized parliamentary behaviour does occur in other political systems where party control is less tight.

Nevertheless, we have fuelled the debate on personalization in parliament by the development of these four indicators, and we hope that this set of indicators can be inspiring for other scholars aspiring to tackle this underexposed aspect of the personalization phenomenon.

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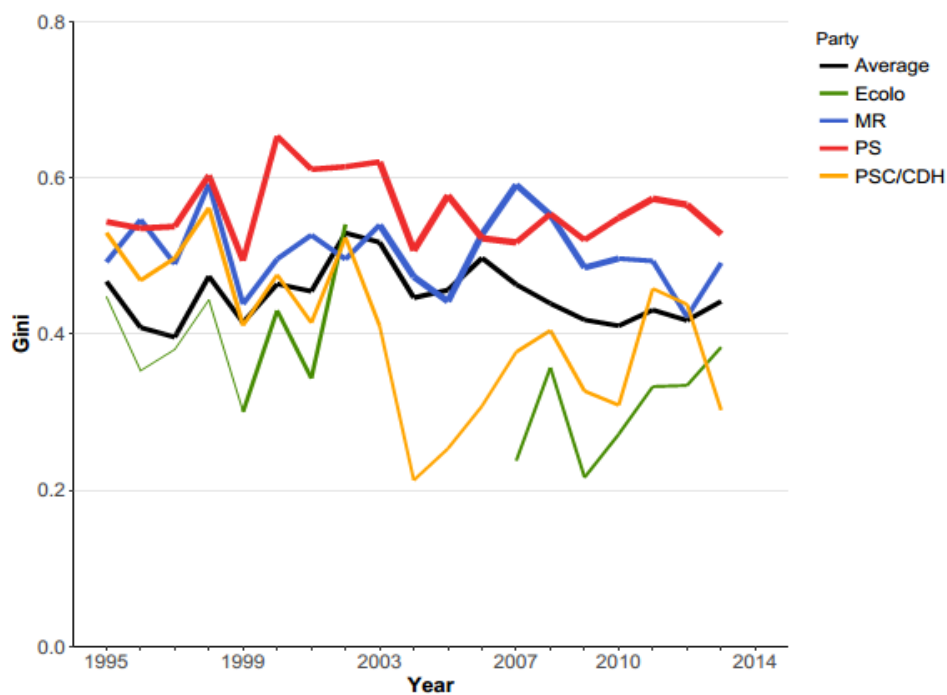
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Appendix 1: The distribution of plenary parliamentary questions among members of (Flemish and Francophone) party groups (GINI-coefficients for party groups per year)⁶



⁶ As the Gini-coefficient is to a certain degree sensitive for party group size (see above), the thickness of the lines in Figure 3 and 4 shows how large a party group was at that moment in time (thin line=small party group, thick line= large party group).

