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**Compounding the Policy Platform of Independence:
Nationalist Party “Diffusion” in Quebec and Flanders**

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Abstract

The proliferation of nationalist political parties in the developed world continues to challenge the integrity of some of the world's most stable democracies. In Canada and Belgium, both countries have experienced the challenge of nationalist parties in the province of Quebec and region of Flanders respectively. However, in both cases, there are now at least two nationalist political parties that both support the idea of independence for both Quebec and Flanders. This nationalist party "diffusion" further challenges the integrity of the Canadian and Belgian states.

The Parti Quebecois has served as the main sponsor of nationalism in the province of Quebec. However, another nationalist party, Quebec solidaire, has also recently begun to win support in the National Assembly. Vlaams Belang (VB) has played a similar role in trying to obtain independence for Flanders. However, Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) also recently adopted the platform of independence and recently won the most votes (and seats) in the 2010 Belgian general election. This diffusion of nationalist parties has caused strains on the respective governments of Canada and Belgium respectively. In both cases this has not yet resulted in secession or the dissolution of the state, but challenges remain to the unity of both states.

Introduction

The structure of the state in both Canada and Belgium has long been challenged by supporters of secession in Quebec and Flanders respectively, but agitation to create new, sovereign states has been heightened in recent years with the creation of new political parties set up with the purpose of obtaining de jure independence. Secession can be defined as “the formal withdrawal from a central authority by a member unit” (Wood 1981, 110) and supporters of secession in Quebec and Flanders have created political parties to purport this platform in the political dialogue of their respective regions. Not only do both Quebec and Flanders have one major political party that advocates outright independence, but within the last decade, a second political party has also been created with the specific platform of independence, and both of these parties have risen in popularity such that they now regularly win seats in the regional legislature. There has been a diffusion of the secessionist idea that has spread to other people within Quebec and Flanders, especially with different ideological views on other matters related to the state such as social or economic issues.

From its founding in 1968, the Parti Québécois (PQ) has long contested the Canadian state by promoting independence for Quebec. The PQ has, at times, been quite popular in Quebec, even winning numerous provincial elections, governing the province, and holding two referendums on the possibility of Quebec independence. In 2006, Quebec Solidaire (QS) was founded to provide an alternative to the traditional framework of politics in Quebec, but the party also adopted the same platform as the PQ—to obtain independence for Quebec. In Belgium, the original Flemish nationalist party, Vlaams Belang (VB), was created in 1977 and has similarly served to contest the Belgian state. VB holds very different political views from the PQ and QS, but the *raison d’être* remains the same—independence. Unlike the PQ, VB has never governed

in Flanders, but the party often wins over 10 percent of the popular vote in the region, even within a crowded political field. In addition to VB, another political party, Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) was founded in 2001, but joined Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V) in a coalition. Only recently has N-VA disentangled itself from the coalition with CD&V and, in more explicit ways, the party has expressed support for independence, providing another case of nationalist/secessionist party diffusion.

In these two countries, existing nationalist parties have been joined by other nationalist parties as a means to contesting the Canadian and Belgian states.¹ There is no evidence yet that nationalist support has—or will—increase dramatically, but both Canada and Belgium face further contestation as a result of nationalist/secessionist party diffusion. This situation provokes two questions that will be considered in this paper: what policy platforms have been developed by the respective nationalist/secessionist parties in Quebec and Flanders as a means of diffusing the idea of secession? And, does the diffusion of nationalist/secessionist parties further threaten the existence of Canada and Belgium?

Secessionist political parties

In many countries throughout the world, secessionist movements exist as a means of lobbying for the creation of a new independent state. In free, democratic countries, secessionist political parties take on the role of lobby for the cause of independence; most nationalist/secessionist movements or political parties in free, democratic countries do not resort to violence, but violent outcomes have occurred in Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, and Corsica. For the most part, however, the goal of secession, in the developed world, is a peaceful

¹ The same is true of Catalonia in Spain with at least two different political parties supporting some form of independence or greater autonomy for the region. Further field research—tentatively scheduled for June 2013—could lead to the incorporation of Catalonia as a third case study in this research paper.

process especially where there are democratic opportunities to express dissatisfaction with the state.

Secession is extremely rare in the developed world (Dion 1996) and has not occurred since the creation of the Irish Free State as a dominion of the British Empire in 1921 (more formally as an independent state in 1937). However, secession has occurred on numerous occasions recently: South Sudan (2011), Montenegro (2006), East Timor (2002), Eritrea (1993), as well as the Eastern Europe break-ups of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. All of these cases, however, were outside of the context of a free ("Freedom in the World." (1991); "Freedom in the World" (2012)), democratic process wherein nationalist/secessionist political parties existed in the political spectrum, won or lost votes amongst the public, won seats in parliament, governed the region, and then advocated independence either through a referendum or a dissolution of the state. Secession was not easy in any of the aforementioned cases—some of the peoples suffered greatly—but the process was different and typically mandated or guided by the United Nations or the European Union.

One of the major factors in democratic politics in the developed world has been the lack of successful secessions through lobbying by nationalist/secessionist political parties. In a range of developed, democratic countries, political parties exist with the explicit (and sometimes implicit) desire to create an independent state. However, none of them have been successful in attaining their goal. Traditional nationalist/secessionist political parties have tried for decades to achieve their goal of independence, but all parties have thus far failed to achieve their maximalist goal. In reaction to this impasse, a new idea is beginning to emerge amongst supporters of secession, the diffusion—creation of two or more—secessionist political parties. Since secession has been so unsuccessful amongst nationalist political parties in developed states, two questions

arise, as noted in the introduction. This paper will investigate the diffusion of secessionist political parties and provide answers to the question of likelihood for independence.

Diffusion

As already noted, both Canada and Belgium, in recent years, have experienced nationalist/secessionist “diffusion” given the increased number of parties also utilizing the platform of independence. Diffusion has a range of different meanings and interpretations, but in the context of this paper, diffusion is taken to mean the transmission of one idea/policy platform: independence, to other political parties and other national contexts. There are two case studies in this paper: Quebec and Flanders, both of which had just one political party seeking independence, and now both regions have two. Not only has the idea of independence been diffused from one national context to another—and also to many other national contexts in the developed world—but multiple political parties with different ideological stances have also adopted the same idea. As a result, this diffusion of nationalist parties has caused strains on the respective governments of Canada and Belgium respectively and further complicates the political discussions and debates in Quebec and Flanders.

Diffusion does not mean that Quebec and/or Flanders will become independent. In fact, the diffusion of secessionist support may actually serve to undercut the independence movement in both regions. However, the diffusion of the idea of independence means that the concept is being implemented by more than one political party.

This paper seeks to add to the discussion on diffusion as part of the conference theme on diffusion helping to provide more answers to pressing questions on the diffusion of ideas, why diffusion is so difficult to predict, and what explains the different rates of diffusion across a

range of different cases. By providing information on two nationalist/secessionist political parties in two different national cases, comparison becomes possible as a means to interact with the broader questions posed on diffusion in this conference.

Methodology

This paper builds on previously completed dissertation research on secessionism in Flanders and Quebec by investigating new parties in both regions (Duerr 2012). Originally, the research examined the roles of the PQ and VB, but N-VA was also examined in the research as the party became more electorally successful. Since the completion of the research, N-VA has continued to gain support and recently had numerous successes in Belgian municipal elections in October 2012. An update on N-VA is necessary because the party has become the most popular party in Belgium and the party has played an important role (or lack thereof) in the life of recent Belgian politics. In Quebec, the development of QS has not yet been nearly as dramatic, but the party has grown into a more significant political force in Quebec politics winning a greater percentage of the votes and more seats in the National Assembly (as noted later in Table 1). QS is newer than N-VA and could serve to challenge the traditional political forces in the province in the future.

This paper employs a range of different qualitative methods in the investigation of case studies in Flanders and Quebec. The research is triangulated with elite political interviews, an investigation of primary, electronic source information from party websites, and a compilation of election results in which nationalist/secessionist parties competed. Using three different methods of data collection, the research was triangulated to provide greater validity and robustness

(Maykut and Morehouse 1994, 146). By taking several different views of a particular question, more nuances can be discovered in the research (Gibbs 2007, 94).

The original field research was completed in both Quebec and Flanders throughout 2010 inclusive of twenty-seven formal elite level interviews of members of the PQ (and also the Bloc Quebecois at the federal level), VB, and N-VA. At that time, QS was not a major force in Quebecois politics, but became more popular following the September 2012 provincial election. Further research is anticipated in both regions in the forthcoming years.

Further research for this paper utilizes primary research from the respective websites of each party in their discussions of secession from their respective states. The platform of independence effectively provides the overarching ambition for all parties studied here such that the thought of independence is ubiquitous throughout all political platforms and provides the basis from which policy platforms should be considered. A reading of each website provides a basic overview of what a political party considers important and the way independence is described (Quebecsolidaire.net; pq.org; blocquebecois.org; vlaamsbelang.org; n-va.be). A website also provides a sense of how a political party presents itself and the values that the party holds. Although the appearance and policy platforms on a website have major limitations, something more formal is presented about the party and their respective desires to lead their region to de jure international recognition and independence.

Finally, this paper also utilizes election results to show how support for nationalist/secessionist parties has changed over time, as noted in three tables depicting relevant national and/or regional election results. The results were collected from official elections sites in both Canada and Belgium to show the support gained for the various political parties. These

tables compare how the first (oldest) nationalist/secessionist party compares to the other (newer) party, and to show how nationalist diffusion has influenced politics in both regions.

There are weaknesses in each type of method of data collection, but in triangulating the data, this paper provides some verification through repeatability of investigation through different research methods (Stake 2008, 133). Interviews have many strengths since the opinion presented in this case is by an elite-level politician and policymaker (Gorden 2006); however, interviews are limited in the sense that a person has biases, and human capacities are limited in terms of memory. Primary research from websites is a very strong method of obtaining information, but there are limitations as to the depth of discussion surrounding policy platforms because parties rarely engage in in-depth discussions of policy on a website. Finally, survey data is strong because it provides descriptive statistics of the performance of different political parties. However, elections results do not show the nuances of what happened in a given election, or how polling fluctuated. With any election, there is a broader story that unfolds in front of the public and the results merely show the outcome of a long and, typically, hard fought campaign in which numerous political candidates had the opportunity to attract or dissuade voters from supporting their respective political parties.

Quebec

Quebec is one of Canada's ten provinces and is probably most renowned throughout the world for being the only major Francophone speaking region of North America. This fact speaks to an eclectic history through the French colonial period in North America, to language politics, and to the politics of federalism. Quebec has long had an uneasy relationship with the rest of Canada; for example, Quebec is the only province that has not signed onto the 1982 Charter of

Rights and Freedoms, most provinces in Canada are not officially bilingual, and nascent forms of violent protest has erupted through Les Patriotes in the 1830s and the Front du Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, many Quebecers also note the advantages of being within Canada, of respect and equality under the Constitution, and with the federal structure of the state providing some autonomy to the province and to the provincial government; in fact, Quebec has long enjoyed more autonomy than other similarly placed subnational units (Beland and Lecours 2005, 682). Canada is a wealthy country and the people of Quebec are not oppressed by the Canadian government, can work and succeed within the current national context, and are not discriminated against institutionally.

Quebec has a population of just over 8 million people and so comparisons with other small countries are rife amongst members of the PQ and QS. The province has become, sovereigntists² (supporters of independence) argue, a region that would resemble some of the most progressive—in terms of social welfare—countries in Western Europe and Scandinavia. Sovereigntists³ make the assertion that an independent Quebec would have an exceptionally high standard of living once it was allowed to dictate its own policies. Opponents of secession argue that Quebec would be significantly poorer and isolated from the rest of North America.

Quebec sovereigntists have publicly asserted a platform for independence for decades, and privately since the end of the Seven Years War. They argue that Canada has not given, and will not give, Quebec enough political autonomy, but measures for autonomy are difficult to operationalize. If substantial autonomy is given, then why does a region need a separate state (Ignatieff 2010)? Therefore, on the issue of autonomy, there is still an uneasy relationship in

² Members of the PQ and BQ describe themselves using this term, rather than as nationalists or as separatists, both of which they consider somewhat pejorative.

³ The discussion of views amongst supporters of an independent Quebec, at from the PQ (or BQ) is informed by formal interviews conducted in the province in 2010. A full list of interviewees can be seen in Appendix A at the end of the paper.

Quebec, which continues to foster some political animosity. Many sovereigntists want more autonomy, perhaps even a federacy model wherein Quebec would be more autonomous than all other provinces, but very few federalists are willing to concede any more autonomy to Quebec.

The PQ's creation in 1968 from two major Quebec independence promoting organizations provided a sense of formal contestation over the status of Quebec within Canada when the party first competed for political office in 1970. Despite being a new party in Quebec's political arena, the PQ quickly won support amongst the electorate, and that growing support led to victory at the 1976 provincial election. Party leader, Rene Levesque, and his relatively unknown group of candidates then had to govern the province and Levesque became the premier (premier ministre of Quebec).

The provincial election victory in 1976 was just one of several victories for the PQ in which the party gained a majority in the National Assembly. On two separate occasions—in both 1980 and 1995—the PQ was the majority party in the National Assembly and, as a result of their superior position, the party was able to enact a bill to hold a referendum. These referendums were used to decide the constitutional fate of Quebec and, by proxy, Canada. On both occasions, the voters of Quebec decided to vote against outright independence for the province. In 1980, the “yes” campaign, supported by Rene Levesque's PQ managed to obtain only 40 percent support from Quebecers. The vote was very close in 1995, however, with 49.4 percent of Quebecers casting a vote in favor of independence, a mere difference of 53,000 votes (Doran 1996, 99). Despite the referendum losses, the PQ has maintained a prominent position within the political system of Quebec that has proven durable and has lasted over the course of several decades. Even after the referendum-association loss in 1980, for example, the PQ won again the next year (Clarke 1983, 64).

In virtually every election, the PQ has finished either first or second (behind the Liberal Party of Quebec [the PLQ]) with the exception of the 2007 provincial election in which the PQ was roundly defeated by the PLQ and the upstart Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ). After arriving on the political scene in 1970, the PQ has retained a prominent position and despite not winning a referendum, the party has remained popular in the system. In some ways, this provides an ongoing challenge for both Quebec and Canada, a sense of being in limbo between two very different situations, support for an independent Quebec or support for the future of all people residing within Canada regardless of linguistic heritage.

The Union des Forces Progressives (UFP) was formed in 2002 as a left-wing alternative to politics in Canada. Supporters of UFP claimed that the other political parties in Quebec: PQ, PLQ, and ADQ were all supportive of free trade and a wider neoliberal economic model. UFP was, in part, created to provide an alternative for voters in Quebec. Support for the party was marginal in the beginning and the party was later superseded by the creation of QS in 2006. QS has attempted to create political space on the left of the political spectrum by similarly condemning the PQ, PLQ, and the Coalition Avenir du Québec (CAQ) (the successor party, essentially, for ADQ). QS promotes a range of different policy platforms juxtaposed on the idea of independence. The party supports what it claims are overlooked areas of policy such as environmentalism, feminism, anti-globalization, and immigration among others (Quebecsolidaire.net).

Despite the addition of the UFP in the 2003 provincial election—and QS for the 2007 provincial election—support for nationalist parties has declined from its zenith in 1981 when the PQ obtained just under 50 percent of the vote. Moreover, since the diffusion of nationalist/secessionist parties, the PQ and QS taken together have not won over 50 percent of

the votes in Quebec. Although the PQ now governs Quebec with a minority government—after winning the 2012 provincial election—the party is not in a position to hold a third referendum on independence without the support of the CAQ. Moreover, QS has not yet developed enough of an electoral presence to win enough seats in the National Assembly to constitute any real sense of support for policy platforms.

Table 1: Nationalist/Secessionist party votes in Quebec provincial elections, 1970-present

Year	PQ	QS	TOTAL
2012	31.95% (54) [^]	6.03% (2)	37.98%
2008	35.17% (51)	3.78% (1)	38.95%
2007	28.35% (36)	3.64% (0)	31.99%
2003	33.24% (45)	1.06% (0)	34.30%
1998	42.87% (76)*	-	42.87%
1994	44.75% (77)*	-	44.75%
1989	40.16% (29)	-	40.16%
1985	38.69% (23)	-	38.69%
1981	49.20% (80)*	-	49.20%
1976	41.37% (71)*	-	41.37%
1973	30.22% (6)	-	30.22%
1970	23.06% (7)	-	23.06%

*= formed majority provincial government

[^]= formed minority provincial government

Table One shows the changes in support with regards to Quebec's nationalist/secessionist political parties over time from results provided by Elections Quebec. The high point of support came in the 1981 provincial election when the PQ won almost 50 percent of the vote. However, it is noteworthy that the PQ won over 40 percent of the vote on five occasions—most recently in 1998. Since the emergence of Qs, however, total support for nationalist/secessionist political parties has not surpassed the 40 percent threshold suggesting that the diffusion of the idea of independence may be correlated to a decline in support. There is not enough evidence to statistically support this correlation, but the basic election results show descriptive statistics of a decline in nationalist/secessionist support even with the diffusion of the idea of independence to another political party.

It should be noted, however, that at the present time the PQ governs the province in a minority situation and, it should be further noted that QS has gained an inroad in the electorate winning more than 6 percent of the vote in 2012. Even though nationalists/secessionists technically have power in Quebec, it is unlikely, at the present time that this will lead to a referendum without a significant change in policy from either CAQ or PLQ. Table One does, however, provide evidence of increased support for QS and it will be important to follow the party into the future. If QS continues to gain more support as a percentage of overall voters, then another party/other parties will lose support. Much depends on where QS makes its gains. If support is gained from dissatisfied PQ voters, then the nationalist movement will remain as it is now. If, however, support for QS is gained from PLQ or CAQ voters, then the nationalist movement will grow and the challenge to the Canadian state will become more acute.

The emergence of QS is, in some ways, a surprise. The PQ occupies part of the center-left of the political spectrum in Quebec and QS has emerged to the left of the PQ. The other

aspect of QS's policies is that the party is difficult to pin down. QS is not a communist party and is further to the center on the political spectrum, but QS is still to the left of PQ, making the case that the PQ is just like the other parties in Quebec. This divide between the nationalist/secessionist parties will be interesting to watch over time, especially if both parties collectively constitute a majority in Quebec's National Assembly at some point in the future.

In summarizing the answers gained in this case study towards the two questions posed at the outset of this paper—what policy platforms have been developed by the respective nationalist/secessionist parties in Quebec and Flanders as a means of diffusing the idea of secession? And, does the diffusion of nationalist/secessionist parties further threaten the existence of Canada and Belgium?—some answers are clear and others less clear. To start with the second question, support for independence has decreased even with the diffusion of nationalist/secessionist political parties because combined electoral support has not surpassed 40 percent since 1998. For the first question, regarding specific policy platforms, QS has attempted to create political space on the left of the political spectrum by introducing, what it argues, are new and often overlooked questions. Given fairly tepid levels of support, this political space is not yet clear to most voters in Quebec, but this can change over time. For many people in Quebec, on a pragmatic level, the choice between the PQ and QS is simply left and further left; the nuance has not yet been fully developed by QS such that it has become entrenched in Quebec politics.

Flanders

The Flemish region in the north of Belgium is noteworthy for being Dutch-speaking as opposed to the southern Walloon region of Belgium, which is largely French speaking. Belgium became an independent state in 1831 after gaining independence from the Kingdom of the

Netherlands in a short-lived union that started in 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars. Language has long been a dividing issue in Belgium, but has become more acute in recent decades with five different state reforms and the rise of two nationalist parties in the region: VB and N-VA (O'Neill 2000). Since 1970, Belgium has transformed from a unitary state into a fairly loose federal state with several different subnational governments (Hooghe 2004, 55).

For Flemings, the greater autonomy granted to them is a major change from the past where the structure of the Belgian state was a unitary state (Beland and Lecours 2005, 682). In some ways, the changes in Belgium towards greater powers for Flemings has, ironically, made it more difficult to gain independence since there are numerous institutional blockages that can be implemented by the Belgium government, for example, no history or any known ability to hold a referendum on independence. Flemish nationalists often decry the work of Walloons for this. The changes to the structure of the state have provided Flemings with more autonomy, but, since there is no real option to hold a referendum, independence will remain difficult.

The recent rise of N-VA, in some ways, can be explained by the support for independence through the vehicle of a more extreme party, VB (often denoted as far right by many scholars and people in Belgium). Supporters of independence from other positions on the political spectrum had little choice historically but to vote for VB, or to vote another party that did not support independence. For N-VA, then, the ability to attract voters from across the political spectrum and to gain support from disaffected VB voters, has proven to be one reason for their recent electoral success.

Nationalism has become an important factor in Belgium, especially with the rise of Flanders as a distinct region with political support. It is also important to note, though, that nationalism as an ideology also allows the Belgian state to exist and provides a sense of

identification for the population of the country (Billig 1995, 15). Thus, nationalism is a double-edged sword. Nationalism is necessary for the creation and sustention of a state, but challenges to national identity can serve to make governance very difficult and undercut the stability of the state. In modern, democratic states, it is rare that a challenge to national identity will produce violence, or major instability, but the examples of Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, and Corsica all present warnings. It is highly unlikely that Belgium will follow any of the aforementioned examples, but political instability may cause more significant economic problems in Belgium, especially if further challenges to governance continue.

The rise of nationalist parties in Belgium shows that there is a major undercurrent of subnational sentiment opposed to the traditional state. In Table Two below, the regional elections in Belgium are shown from 1995 to the most recent 2009 regional elections in Belgium. The first column shows support for VB as a percentage of the total Flemish population, not the overall Belgian population. In parenthesis is the number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. (Senate results are slightly different, but closely resemble Chamber results. In the second column, the same statistics are shown for N-VA. Finally, a percentage total of all nationalist votes are summed in the final column. It is noteworthy that N-VA was in an ongoing coalition with CD&V through the 2004 election.

Table 2: Nationalist/secessionist party votes in Flemish regional elections, 1995-present

Year	VB	N-VA	Total
2009	15.3% (21)	13.1% (16)	28.4%
2004	24.2% (32)	Coalition with CD&V	24.2%
1999	15.5% (20)	-	15.5%
1995	12.3% (15)	-	12.3%

As shown in Table Two, support for nationalist parties has steadily increased through the mid-1990s into the 2000s in Flanders, culminating in 2009 with almost 30 percent of the vote. Polls suggest that nationalist support could further increase in 2014, but this is merely a polling statistic and not an actual election result. Although VB finished second in 2004, it is also important to note that neither VB or N-VA has won a regional election, not has either party governed the region. This presents a marked difference from the Quebec case.

In Flanders the diffusion of secessionist political parties at the regional level has increased as a percentage but does not yet threaten the stability of the Flemish regional government. The situation is different at the national level as noted in Table Three. At the regional level, N-VA has not yet gained significant support in the Flemish regional parliament in Brussels.

Table Three (shown below) is very similar to Table Two and presents many of the same statistical results, only from the vantage point of national, rather than regional, elections. Again, VB is shown in one column, N-VA in the next, and a sum total percentage of nationalist support in the final column. Table Three is longer than Table Two because voting at the regional level only started after the 1993 reform of the state (Hooghe 2004).

Table Three shows the history of VB in the Belgian political system and shows how the party grew from its nascent beginnings in 1977 to become a more popular, entrenched party in Belgium. Table Three also shows how VB declined significantly from the high point in 2004. VB's support has been cut in half since 2004 and some of this has happened as a result of N-VA's dramatic rise in the most recent 2010 national election. Nonetheless, when taken collectively, support for nationalist parties has continued to increase to over 40 percent.

Table 3: Nationalist/secessionist party votes in the Belgian elections, 1977-present

Year	VB	N-VA	Total
2010	12.30%	27.80%	40.10%
2007	19.22%	Coalition with CD&V	19.22%
2003	18.21%	4.91%	23.12%
1999	15.04%	-	15.04%
1995	7.83%	-	7.83%
1991	6.60%	-	6.60%
1987	1.90%	-	1.90%
1985	1.40%	-	1.40%
1981	1.12%	-	1.12%

Sources: elections.fgov.be; Vlaams Blok: 20 Jaar Rebel

Table Three shows the dramatic rise ascent of N-VA as a viable political party in the Belgian system. The recent federal election result in 2010 indicates significant support for N-VA and, potentially, for greater autonomy for Flanders if another reform of the state occurs in the near future. Support for N-VA cannot be assumed as support for independence, but, obviously, that decision depends on political elites within N-VA and their ability to debate and compromise with other political elites in Belgium. Taken practically, votes for N-VA ultimately translate into votes for independence, but only if Bart De Wever—the leader of N-VA—decides to formally lobby for Flemish independence.

Despite the rise of, N-VA, the new nationalist party in the Belgian political scene, VB remains a major political party in Belgian politics and continues to influence the policy platforms of other parties in the political system. Unless there is a dramatic change, VB is unlikely to serve in a coalition government, but the party has, over time, built a strong party infrastructure and regularly wins over half a million votes in Flanders. This level of support is noteworthy in a country of just over 10 million people. The presence of VB on the political right in Flanders, by virtue of its existence, changes the positions of all other parties, for better or worse.

VB was established in early 1977 as a means of revolting against the major Flemish party of the time, Volksunie—a party created with the specific intention of advocating for greater autonomy for the Flemish region. Support for VB in the beginning—especially in the period of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s—was minimal at best and VB did not play a substantial role in the politics of Belgium. Most often, VB would only win just one or two seats at the national level—in Belgium’s Chamber of Representatives and Senate (Hooghe 2004, 62; Vlaams Blok: 10 Jaar Rebel). In the beginning, VB was known as Vlaams Blok until the party lost a court case in 2004 on the ruling by the judge of inciting racial division. One of the rulings of the court case is that the party had to disband because the party violated Belgian laws on racism (Erk 2005). The old Vlaams Blok was reestablished in 2004 as Vlaams Belang. The new VB then had a significant success in the 2004 election winning almost one-quarter of the vote in Flanders. Since the zenith of 2004, support for VB has steadily declined, but the party has maintained a position in the electoral system of Belgium, which continues to affect other parties in Flanders, as well as the rest of the country.

N-VA is a new party, and in recent years joined in a coalition with CD&V, often forming the most powerful party in Flanders or Belgium. Since the division of the two parties in the late

2000s, N-VA has become very popular in Flanders. N-VA does not yet govern any major area, but party leader, Bart De Wever, recently became mayor of Antwerp, one of the largest cities in Belgium.

N-VA is a relatively new political party (formed in 2001) and has emerged recently as a viable political choice in Belgium. The party has been able fill the electoral space in the political spectrum when Volksunie, the preceding party that held similar political positions, declined, and then disappeared. Analysts from N-VA—noted in the interviews—argued that room existed between CD&V in the center/center-right of the political spectrum, and VB on the right/far-right; the political field in Flanders is crowded, but N-VA has been able to find space between these two parties and win votes. Entering the political spectrum in between CD&V and VB also meant that N-VA had to initiate policy platforms that were different enough from both parties, but that could attract votes. In many respects, N-VA borrowed key aspects of their rivals' policy platforms, and then changed the platforms to suit their electoral strategy. From VB, N-VA similarly adopted the platform of independence, albeit, as noted earlier, with the strategy of sovereignty (Interview with Jan Jambon, April 2010). From CD&V, N-VA adopted similar policies on the key questions in Belgian politics regarding the Flemish relationship with Walloons, immigration, and economics (Interview with Jan Jambon, April 2010).

Unlike Quebec, the Flemish nationalist parties occupy the right and center-right of the political spectrum. VB has long been viewed as the most conservative—and often extreme—party in Flanders, ranging from the right to the far-right depending on the source. N-VA, however, is typically viewed as a center-right party and often stakes out more moderate policy platforms as a means of distinguishing themselves from VB. This is not always true in practice, but members of N-VA are quick to cite the differences between the two parties.

In examining the role of diffusion in nationalist/secessionist politics in Belgium, there are answers to the two main questions posed in this paper—what policy platforms have been developed by the respective nationalist/secessionist parties in Quebec and Flanders as a means of diffusing the idea of secession? And, does the diffusion of nationalist/secessionist parties further threaten the existence of Canada and Belgium?—that can be gleaned from this assessment.

Despite the historic role of VB as supporters of Flemish independence, diffusion of the independence idea has led to a change in role for VB. As of 2010 general election, the results show that there is evidence that N-VA has become a much more popular option for supporters of independence, at least over VB. N-VA is a popular party right now, but a majority of Flemings still voted for other parties in the last election. However, if nationalist/secessionist political parties are directly compared given the issues of diffusion, the 2010 election results show that some support has moved from VB to N-VA (Duerr 2012).

On the second question of diffusion of nationalism/secessionism further threatening the stability of Belgium, there are a few noteworthy points. First, after the 2010 general election, it took 541 days, for example, to create a coalition government given the success of N-VA as the most popular party in Belgium; six other parties from Flanders and Wallonia formed a coalition government without N-VA. A similar situation arose after the 2007 national election, in which it took just under 200 days to form a coalition government, which provides some evidence that diffusion has caused greater stress to the Belgian state. N-VA did not have to govern the country after 2010 despite being the largest party in Belgium, but the burden remains with N-VA because the party will need to prove to the electorate that they can obtain greater powers for Flanders. An unsatisfactory state reform may cause significant problems for the party and could see a reversal of nationalist/secessionist support towards VB. Another element of N-VA's rise is that the party

has not ultimately gained independence and for voters that vehemently purport separation from Flanders, unless success comes, support could erode. However, taken cumulatively, the combined support of N-VA and VB is close to a majority in Flanders and the forthcoming elections—scheduled for 2014—will again present a sense of pressure on the Belgian political system.

On the first question on nationalist/secessionist party diffusion with regards to policy platforms, VB staked out a position as a more extreme party in favor of rights for ethnic Flemings and Dutch speakers. N-VA moved to the center with more moderate policy positions on a range of different issues. The platform of independence, then, was displayed in a political package much closer to the center of the political spectrum, than more towards the extreme as was the case historically with VB.

Conclusion

Although the diffusion of nationalist political parties in Flanders and Quebec has not yet created an independent state for either territory, the concept of diffusion presents a new challenge for the governments of Belgium and Canada. Support for nationalist/secessionist political parties in Quebec and Flanders is between 35 and 45 percent, which shows that the contestation of the state remains.

In Belgium, the growth of N-VA into the largest single political party in the country has led to significant challenges to the integrity of the state. Following the 2007 federal election, it took 196 days to form a government; following 2010, 541 days. Unless N-VA becomes less popular in Flanders, it may again be challenging to put forth another coalition government in Belgium post-2014 federal election results. This does not mean that Belgium will split into two

(or more) sections, but that there is pressure for such an outcome on the part of Flemish nationalists/secessionists from both VB and N-VA.

In Canada, the diffusion of nationalist parties has not yet dramatically affected politics in Quebec. However, the emergence of QS has decreased support for the traditional powers at the provincial level—the PQ and the PLQ—as well as the emergent third party—the CAQ, which followed the ADQ. QS is not yet a viable contender for power in Quebec, but members of the party argue that it presents an alternative to the traditional model of politics in Quebec. The PQ remains powerful in Quebec, but the party has declined from its historic high in 1981 and consistent support above 40 percent, typically obtained in elections before 1998.

Neither Canada nor Belgium is in any imminent threat of secession or dissolution, but the diffusion of nationalist parties presents a thought provoking twist for policymakers in Ottawa and Brussels who support the continuation of their respective states. If QS continues to grow in Quebec and the PQ maintains its current level of support, then federalist parties will see an erosion of votes. Likewise, if N-VA continues to grow or if VB increases back to its 2004 regional election level of almost one-quarter of Flemish voters, then Belgium will be similarly contested.

In both cases, it has become clear that political space within the political spectrum exists. In the parliamentary system, especially in systems that utilize proportional representation (Lijphart 1991) as in the case of Belgium, new parties emerge quite frequently. The case of Quebec in Canada shows that even in the parliamentary system where a plurality voting system is used, new parties can also emerge—although it has quite to be seen whether new parties can emerge and do well in a region or country, at least on a more regular basis. The diffusion of nationalist/secessionist political parties shows that the idea of independence is one that remains

highly important to the politics of the region, and that new nationalist/secessionist political parties have adopted a platform from an existing nationalist/secessionist political party.

Overall, there is evidence that the diffusion of secession as a policy platform has occurred in both Quebec and Flanders. This diffusion of the idea and policy platform continues to present challenges for Canada and Belgium respectively. However, given the results of a limited number of elections, there is mixed evidence that the diffusion of the idea further threatens the state; in Quebec, support for nationalist/secessionist parties has decreased since the emergence of a new political party, but in Flanders, support for nationalist/secessionist parties has increased. Support for the independence of Flanders has increased, but the Belgian state is not in an imminent state of danger. The 2014 general is approaching, though, which will provide further evidence as to the importance of diffusion to nationalism and secession in the developed world.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES AND LOCATIONS

January 6, 2010:

Richard Marceau (BQ), Ottawa, Ontario

January 7, 2010:

Jonathan Valois (PQ), Montreal, Quebec

Genevieve Mathieu (PQ), Montreal, Quebec (on phone in Quebec City, Quebec)

January 8, 2010:

Pierre Paquette (BQ), Montreal, Quebec

April 9, 2010:

Philip Claeys (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 13, 2010:

Jan Laeremans (VB), Grimbergen, Flemish Brabant

April 14, 2010:

Pieter Logghe (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 16, 2010:

Tomas Verachtert (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 20, 2010:

Jan Jambon (N-VA), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 22, 2010:

Jan Lievens (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 23, 2010:

Jan Peumans (N-VA), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 26, 2010:

Tanguy Veys (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 27, 2010:

Kris Van Dijck (N-VA), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

April 28, 2010:

Hagen Goyvaerts (VB), Leuven, Flemish Brabant

April 29, 2010:

Raf Liedts (VB), Antwerp, Antwerp

April 30, 2010:

Steven Utsi (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

Erik Bucquoye (VB), Leuven, Flemish Brabant

May 3, 2010:

Ludwig Caluwe (CD&V), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

May 6, 2010:

Erik Van In (N-VA), Brugge, West Flanders

May 12, 2010:

Karim Van Overmeire (VB), Brussels, Flemish Brabant

May 13, 2010:

Theo Francken (N-VA), Leuven, Flemish Brabant

June 21, 2010:

Richard Nadeau (BQ), Gatineau, Quebec

Carole Poirier (PQ), Montreal, Quebec

June 23, 2010:

Guy LaChapelle (BQ), Montreal, Quebec

Martin LeMay (PQ), Montreal, Quebec

June 24, 2010:

Daniel Turp (PQ), Montreal, Quebec

June 25, 2010:

Etienne-Alexis Boucher (PQ), Windsor, Quebec