Flash and fade out?
Are participation rates in direct member votes in Belgium decreasing?

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Abstract

The focus of this paper lies on one kind of consequence of party leadership primaries, i.e. participation, and more in particular the relative participation rate (i.e. the number of effective participants divided by the number of potential participants).
Based on the mobilization theory, instrumental motivation theory and learning theory, we have put forward two hypotheses stating that the first time a party organizes a full member vote, participation rates will be higher and that they will decline gradually afterwards every time the party is holding a leadership primary.
We have focused on direct member votes for the selection of the party leader in Belgian parties. The focus on Belgium is justified, as almost all parties have been organizing direct votes for almost 20 years, which allows for a comparison over time. Both leadership votes at the local level and the national level are considered in two separate analyses.
We could not find any statistical significant effects of the number of times a direct member vote is held on turnout rates. This leads us to the rejection of both our hypotheses. Participation rates to full member votes are not so much influenced by how many times such a contest has already been held in a party, but mainly by how competitive the contest is.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of political parties have recently been changing their internal organization, more in particular by giving grassroots members a greater formal say in the selection of the party leader (Leduc, 2001; Denham, 2009 ; Kenig, 2009a ; Wauters, 2010 ; Cross and Blais, 2012). These developments vary across countries and across parties, but seem to constitute nevertheless a clear trend in Western political parties.

The most inclusive way to select a party leader is organizing party primaries in which all party members can participate. This phenomenon can be studied from different angles: by either focusing on the features, the causes or the consequences of it. In this paper, we will evaluate these direct member votes by looking at one type of consequences, i.e. their impact on participation. Participation is one of the crucial dimensions to evaluate the functioning of direct member votes. This dimension can be operationalized by looking either at absolute or relative numbers of participants. We focus here on the latter.

We hypothesize that participation rates in direct member votes will have declined over time in relative numbers. It has been demonstrated before that party elites see such internal elections predominantly as an element of political marketing (Cross & Blais, 2012 ; Wauters, forthcoming). Introducing full member votes is an asset used in electoral competition with other parties. This competitive advantage disappears after the first elections, and hence, we expect that party elites will pay fewer attention

to the functioning of direct members votes, which will have a negative effect on participation we expect. On top of that, party elites retain much power in their own hands when organizing full member votes. Following the instrumental motivation approach, party members are more likely to cast a vote when they can exert real influence (Wauters, 2010). Due to a greater awareness over time of limited members' influence (learning effect), we expect that participation rates over time will decline.

We focus on Belgium, a country in which intra-party democratic procedures have been developed very extensively: almost all parties use party primaries to designate their leader and they started with it already a few decades ago (Pilet & Wauters, forthcoming). This allows us to make a comparison over time, which could have predictive power for the evolution of direct members votes in other countries where they have been adopted only recently.

Both the participation rates to leadership elections at the national level as the participation to leadership contests at the local level will be scrutinized in this paper. For the latter, we will restrict ourselves to the liberal-democratic party, the only party in Belgium organizing direct member votes at that level.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we will sketch the development of direct member votes in contemporary Western political parties, and we will indicate how these developments can be studied. Next, we will highlight participation and we will indicate on which theoretical grounds we expect a decline in participation in these direct member votes. The next step is an empirical analysis based on Belgian data. We end with conclusions.

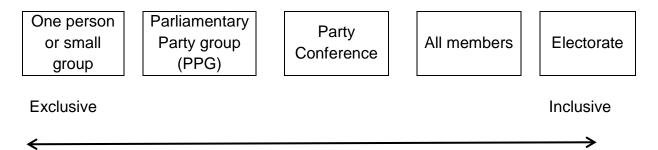## 2. Direct member votes and how to study them?

The main focus in this article will be on leadership elections in which all party members have one vote ('direct member vote', 'full member vote', 'closed primaries', 'leadership primaries', 'one member one vote elections' often abbreviated as 'OMOV', are all synonyms). Like candidate selection procedures, these can be studied from three different angles: either by focusing on the process leading to their introduction, or by directing the attention to particular features of these internal electoral procedures, or by concentrating on their effects (Rahat & Hazan, 2001).

Rahat & Hazan (2001) have pointed out that candidate selection methods can be classified according to four **features**: selectorate, candidacy, decentralization and voting system. Since the latter two dimensions are not relevant for leadership selection, i.e. the selection of one single person at the national level, we will only discuss selectorate and candidacy here.

The selectorate is the body that selects the party leader. More in particular, the degree of inclusiveness of the selectorate is important. Inclusiveness can be measured by looking at the size of the party agency responsible for the selection of the party leader. In order to grasp this variety, a continuum on which leadership selection methods are classified according to their degree of inclusiveness is

developed (Kenig, 2009a). On the one end point of the continuum, a small elite group decides who will become party leader, while at the other end all members, or even all (party) voters, are allowed to make this decision. The last few years, many parties have clearly moved in the direction of this latter point on the continuum, i.e. towards more inclusive methods of leadership selection (Leduc, 2001; Denham, 2009 ; Kenig, 2009a ; Wauters, 2010 ; Cross and Blais, 2012)

Figure 1: Inclusiveness of leadership selection rules (Kenig, 2009a)

One person or small group	Parliamentary Party group (PPG)	Party Conference	All members	Electorate

Exclusive   Inclusive

The second feature of leadership selection methods, i.e. candidacy, defines who is eligible for the post of party leader. Again an inclusiveness-exclusiveness continuum can be used. At the inclusive end of the continuum, all members without any further requirements could be candidate for the party leadership. At the more exclusive end, requirements such as membership seniority (in order to ensure party loyalty), internal support from a minimum number of members and/or from local or regional sections, or membership of a particular party committee, are imposed as conditions upon potential candidates. The higher the barriers imposed by these requirements, the more exclusive the leadership selection process will be.

A second way of analyzing leadership selection methods is studying the **introduction** of changes in selectorate and/or candidacy. Studies on the adoption of grassroots involvement in the selection of the party leader are scarce, but recently growing in number. Most studies provide (anecdotal) evidence about the introduction of party primaries in one particular party or country (e.g. Denham, 2009 ; Lisi, 2010) Exceptions are formed by the cross-country analysis of Cross & Blais (2012) who detect decision-makers and stimuli for the adoption of direct member votes in a large number of parties in Westminster countries (the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) and by the analysis of Wauters (forthcoming) who tries to infer a general pattern for consensus democracies from the analysis of Belgian parties.
A common finding of these studies is that party elites grant more involvement to party members when finding themselves in a weak position (electoral defeat, etc.). In order to reinforce the party's (electoral) performance (and/or their own position in the party), party leaders adopt more inclusive leadership methods.

A final area of research on leadership selection processes is constituted by the analysis of their **effects**. Broadly speaking, five types of effects can be distinguished: participation, competitiveness, responsiveness, performance and representation.

A first element on which particular leadership methods can have an impact is participation. This can be interpreted in a quantitative and a qualitative manner (Rahat & Hazan, 2006). The former approach focuses on the sheer number of participants, which will automatically be higher in procedures with more inclusive selectorates. The latter approach takes the quality of participation into consideration: the type of members that are participating (Scarrow, 1999 ; Wauters, 2010) or turnout rates (the number of actual participants divided by the number of potential participants) are analysed.

A second consequence that can be studied is the competitiveness of the process. Several indicators for competitiveness have been used: the number of candidates competing for leadership, the difference in vote shares between the winner and the runner up, incumbents' success rate, and the effective number of parties (Kenig, 2009b).

Thirdly, responsiveness is another aspect used to assess the consequences of leadership selection methods. Responsiveness refers to the agreement between members' opinions and these of the party leader. This aspect is perhaps more relevant when analyzing candidate selection methods since party leaders are supposed to be consensus builders who stand above internal party quarrels, especially if they also aspire to become prime minister (Kenig, 2009b).

The fourth dimension, on the other hand, i.e. performance, is more important for leadership selection than for candidate selection. More inclusive selection procedures are supposed to strengthen the legitimation of the party leader, both for internal and external purposes (Wauters, forthcoming). This increase in legitimation can be evaluated by looking at the length of time party leaders retain their position (Andrews & Jackman, 2008). Then the emphasis lies on the internal aspect of performance. When focusing more on the external aspect, the relationship between leadership selection method and electoral performance can be scrutinized: do party leaders that are selected by party members obtain more votes for the party in the next elections?

Finally, leadership selection procedures can be evaluated by looking at representation. A distinction can be made between descriptive representation (or 'representation as presence', e.g. representation of women) and substantive representation (or 'representation of ideas') (Pitkin, 1967 ; Rahat & Hazan, 2006).

As indicated above, the focus of this paper lies on participation. In the next section, we will set out what we understand by participation, why it is important to look at participation in leadership primaries, and what factors could influence participation rates. This leads us to hypotheses that will be tested in the next sections.

3. Participation, theoretical expectations and operationalization

Participation can be evaluated by looking at the absolute number of participants or by the relative number. The former approach is automatically connected to the formal rules about the inclusiveness of the selectorate. The sheer number of participants is evidently higher in full member votes than in a selection procedure decided by a small group at the top of the party. (For an analysis using this variable, see Kenig, 2009 b).
What is of interest here, however, is the relative number of participants in direct member votes: how many of the potential voters effectively cast a vote. We limit ourselves to one type of selectorate, i.e. party members, and analyse to what extent they make use of the possibility to have a say in the selection of the party leader. We will analyse this participation behavior at the aggregate level: the leadership contests are the units of analysis, not the individual party members.

Participation is in general seen as an important indicator to measure the democratic degree of elections: 'the health of democracy is often seen in terms of its level of turnout' (Franklin, 2002, p. 148). Electoral procedures are considered more democratic when the number of actual participants is high (Dahl, 1989 ; Reeve & Ware, 2001) This also applies to elections within political parties where selection procedures for party leadership with a high number of participants could be considered as more democratic.
On top of that, one of the official goals to make leadership selection procedures more inclusive (for instance by introducing full member votes) is to include a larger number of people into the decision-making process. Giving members more power and inciting them to become more active is indeed one of the objectives of the introduction of leadership primaries (Scarrow, 1999 ; Wauters, forthcoming). If only a few members make use of the opportunity to participate, then these goals are clearly not attained. Therefore, participation in leadership primaries is important.

We will now indicate from which factors it can be expected from a theoretical perspective that they have an impact on turnout levels in leadership primaries. Therefore, we rely on general theories about participation. We will also indicate the effects of these factors coming forward from analyses of participation in leadership primaries on the individual level (Wauters, 2010). Possibly, these findings could be inspiring for an analysis on the aggregate level.

A first theory that could be relevant is the mobilization theory. The underlying idea is that people who are motivated by others to vote, have a higher chance to cast a vote. Social networks (family, friends, neighbors, fellow party members, etc) can exert social pressure on individuals to behave as members of a community rather than as isolated individuals. People being part of a social environment where going to the polls is evaluated positively, will experience implicit or explicit pressure to do the

same. Mobilization efforts from party elites (both on the national, regional or local level) can incite rank and file members to participate in leadership primaries.

From an analysis on the individual level, however, it appeared that the local party section was not able to make a difference in mobilization: whether a minority of the local party members or a majority participates appeared to have no link with the participation behavior of individual party members (Wauters, 2010).

A second participation theory is the instrumental motivation theory (Franklin, 2002). This theory states that people will participate because they want to have an impact on the policy of a state or of an organization. The impression that going to the polls can make a difference in the outcome of the elections and in the subsequent policies that are pursued, has an influence upon the decision whether or not to cast a vote. Previous research on political parties has found out that there is a strong correlation between the degree of perceived influence and participation within political parties (Seyd & Whiteley, 1998 ; Hillebrand & Zielonka-Goei, 1990 ; Wauters, 2010). Members believing that their vote cannot have much influence are less likely to participate in leadership primaries.

On top of that, people who voted in the past are more likely to repeat this action in future elections, especially when voting in the past proved to be successful (Geys, 2006). This correlation is based on the psychological concept of 'adaptive' or 'reinforcement' learning (Kanazawa, 2000) that states that voters rather look backward instead of forward when making the decision to cast a vote. When they have positive experiences with casting a vote, they are more likely to repeat this action in the future. Tailored to our research focus here: members who have positive experiences with participation in full member votes will be more likely to participate in future internal elections.

A third explanatory factor for participation is the competitiveness of the contest. Research on parliamentary elections has revealed that there is a strong link with the participation rate (Cox & Munger, 1989 ; Fauvelle-Aymar & François, 2006) This link can be explained both by voter reactions and elite activity. When the distance between contenders is small, the chance that a voter will cast a decisive vote is higher, and hence, voters are more motivated to vote (voter reactions). This is reinforced by the extra efforts made by candidates to motivate people to vote for them (elite activity). Roots for this approach can be found in the rational choice theory (Downs, 1957).

Note that the relationship can also be studied in the reverse direction: Kenig (2009b) found that the absolute number of participants (i.e. the selectorate according to the formal rules) has a negative impact on the degree of competitiveness.

We will now argue that there are theoretical reasons to assume that these variables which are supportive for high participation rates have very high scores the first time a party organizes full member votes, but tend to decrease afterwards.

In order to come to this argument, we have to go back to the rationale for the introduction of direct member votes. Both Cross & Blais (2012) and Wauters (forthcoming) state that party elites open up the process of leadership selection when finding themselves in an awkward position (after an electoral defeat, after being involved in scandals, after being kicked out of government, etc.). The introduction of a full member vote is first and foremost a means to reverse the negative atmosphere around the party. Direct member votes clearly constitute an element of political marketing. Often, the aim is to generate media attention and to propagate via the media that the party has broken with the past and has transformed itself into an open and modern party. Owing to these goals, it is important to have visible leadership primaries which are evaluated positively by the outside world. The ideal scenario is large numbers of rank and file members casting a vote in a competitive, but not aggressive contest. Therefore, the party elite will do their utmost best to mobilize as many members as possible and at the same time they are expected to allow a handful of candidates. The first element can be linked to the first theory mentioned above: participation will be high when people are being mobilized. It is clear that the national party elite will do much effort to mobilize the rank and file the first time they organize full member votes. This is the first reason why we expect participation rates to be higher the first time.

Although there are a few examples of parties that have organized leadership primaries once and never again (Koole 2012), most of the time once direct member votes are introduced, they are there to stay. It is plausible that party elites cannot or are not willing to undertake each time as much effort as the first time to mobilize members. This element is reinforced by the observation that in reality the impact of the rank and file is limited by mechanisms controlled by the party elite. These mechanisms include adopting exclusive candidacy rules preventing candidates to run, putting forward one preferred candidate, persuading potential candidates not to run, etcetera. All these efforts have clearly bore fruit as in almost half of the leadership contests in Belgian parties decided by a full member vote, there was only one candidate (Pilet & Wauters, forthcoming) and when there were several candidates, the average margin between the winner and the runner-up was more than 30 %. In sum, the rank and file are offered *pro forma* involvement, but the real decision is often taken elsewhere. If we link this to the instrumental motivation theory (people participate if they can have influence) and the learning theory (people become gradually aware that their impact is limited), then it can be expected that participation will decline after the first direct member vote.

This leads us to two hypotheses.

H1: We expect that participation rates will be higher the first time a party organizes direct member votes

H2: We expect that participation rates will decline over time

The dependent variable is the relative degree of participation: the number of effective participants divided by the number of potential participants. The independent variables are, first of all, a dummy variable indicating whether or not it is the first time a party organizes a full member vote, and secondly, a variable indicating how many times a party has already organized such a vote.

In order to test these hypotheses, we also include control variables in the statistical models.

A first control variable refers to competitiveness. In line with the instrumental motivation theory, it can be expected that contests that are highly competitive tend to attract a larger number of participants. Therefore, it is important to take this variable along in the analysis. Competitiveness can be operationalized in different ways: the number of candidates competing for the leadership, the percentage of contests with more than one single candidate, and the difference in vote shares between the winner and the runner up (Kenig, 2009b) are the indicators we use here, together with the effective number of candidates (ENC). This indicator, inspired by Laakso & Taagepera's (1979) indicator to measure the effective number of parties and introduced to the study of leadership contests by Kenig (2009b), combines the absolute number of candidates and their relative strength in the electoral outcome. This is how it is calculated:

$$ENC = \frac{1}{\sum Vi^2}$$

Vi is the share of votes of candidate i.

Unlike Kenig, we do not divide this indicator by the number of candidates in order to obtain scores between 0 and 1. As indicated above, there are many leadership contests in Belgium with only one candidate. If we would divide the index by the number of candidates, this will result in scores above 1 for this kind of contests which would imply that these contests are the most competitive ones, which is clearly not correct.[1]

Another control variable which could be relevant is the party in which the leadership primaries are organized. Some parties are more able to mobilize their members than others, and some parties have members that are more eager to participate than others. More in particular, we include three party characteristics in our statistical analysis. A first one ('frontrunner') refers to the party that was the first in its region[2] to

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[1] This is also recognized by Kenig who excludes contests with only one candidate from his analysis of the ENC. Given the fact that contests with only one candidate makes up a large part of all contests in Belgium, we would lose a great part of our data if we would do that.

[2] Belgium is a federal country composed of regions and communities. In fact, there are two party systems: a Flemish one and a French-speaking one, who operate quite autonomously from each other. Except for the bilingual electoral district Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, parties from different party systems do not enter into competition with each other.

adopt direct member votes. We expect that parties who were frontrunner in their region attach more importance to leadership primaries and/or to their image as an open party who is able to mobilize a large number of members to cast a vote.

A second party element is the type of party: it can be expected that mass parties given their history, structures and networks are more able to mobilise a larger number of members. The archetype of a mass party is often constituted by social-democratic parties. Therefore, we include a dummy variable indicating whether or not the contest is held in a social-democratic party.

Finally, as a sort of general control variable, we include a dummy about the region to which the party belongs. As the parties in Flanders and Wallonia are operating in two rather distinct party systems, this could have also an effect on participation levels.

4. Leadership selection in Belgian political parties

Before starting the empirical analysis, we first give some facts about the position of the party leader and his selection process in Belgium.

The party leader is a crucial and powerful actor in Belgian politics that is characterised as a 'partitocracy', a democratic system dominated by political parties (Fiers, 1998 ; Deschouwer, 2009 ; Pilet & Wauters, forthcoming). The party leader is as leader of the organisation responsible for both the internal organisation of the party and the external relations and activities of the party, such as acting as spokesperson in negotiations and appointing ministers. He almost always coincides with the electoral leader, but not with the leader of the parliamentary party which is a separate function. When in opposition, the party leader of a major party is the candidate to become prime minister or, for smaller parties, to play a key role in a future government. For government parties, the incumbent prime minister, a function that is in practice never combined with a mandate as party leader, is in general the candidate for a new term, but the party leader also plays a prominent role in the electoral campaign. All in all, party leaders are powerful actors in Belgian politics, only overtrumped in power by the prime minister and deputy prime ministers (Dewachter, 2003).

In the 1970s and 1980s almost all Belgian parties designated their party leader at a party conference where delegates could vote. Only the Christian-democratic PSC (the predecessor of the CDH) organised at that time already elections with participation of all members. Nowadays, almost all parties give their members (and only them) the right to vote in party leadership elections. In the beginning of the 1990s, the radically transformed liberal party VLD introduced as first party in Flanders internal elections to designate the party leader (De Winter, 2000). This radical transformation including the introduction of far-reaching participatory procedures was an answer to the crisis of the political system, the loss of party members and the breakthrough of the extreme-right ('black Sunday' in 1991), but also a strategy to bypass the powerful middle-level elites in the party (including 'pillarized' organisations) (Wauters, forthcoming). Soon, most other parties followed and by now,

almost all Belgian parties use internal elections with member suffrage to assign their party leader. By the early 2000s, all democratic parties in Belgium had introduced the full members' vote in their party statutes. This method has become the norm. When a new party is created, the system is automatically adopted, as in the case of the new party Lijst Dedecker (LDD) which was created a few months before the 2007 federal elections.

The fact that full member votes are organized in virtually all Belgian parties and that they have been organized since several years, allows us to analyse a dataset with a high number of relevant cases.

We will conduct two empirical analyses.
The first analysis will be conducted on a dataset[3] with all local leadership contests in the Flemish liberal-democratic party OpenVLD. OpenVLD is the only party in Belgium that is organizing every four years full member votes for the selection of the local leader and for the local party executive board members. These local internal elections were held for the first time in 1993.
The second dataset contains data on all direct member votes in Belgian political parties. We included only those leadership primaries where members could cast a vote in a polling booth or by post or internet. Party congresses where all party members are granted the right to vote, are excluded from the analysis, as there members have to do much more effort to be able to participate. The average participation rate to the full member votes at stake here is 39,98 %.
When there were two rounds to come to a final decision (which is rather uncommon although most Belgian parties use a run-off system with a second round organized with the two highest scoring candidates if no one obtains an absolute majority in the first round (Pilet & Wauters, forthcoming)), only the results and turnout of the second round are taken into consideration.

5. Empirical analysis: local leadership contests in OpenVLD

We start with the analysis of the leadership contest held at the local level by the Flemish liberal-democratic party OpenVLD.

Table 1: Local OpenVLD sections organizing leadership contests at the local level

Year	Number of local section organizing a leadership contest	Percentage of local sections organizing a leadership contest	Percentage of local sections with contests with 2 or more candidates
1993	N/A	N/A	N/A

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[3] We would like to thank Geoffrey Vanderstraeten for gathering these data.

1997	N/A	N/A	N/A
2001	317	99,06	31,23
2004	311	96,58	22,83
2008	233	71,91	17,17
2010	101	30,98	30,69

Initially, local leadership elections were held together with internal elections for the national party leadership and for the national executive board. In all local sections, polling booths were installed in order to allow party members to cast their vote for all these elections together. After 2004, two changes to the statutory rules has had an impact on the practical functioning of local leadership contests.

A first change is the separation of national and local leadership contests. Local leadership contests are now held every three years: two years before the local elections in order to have a powerful leader who can manage with a strong hand the preparations for the local elections, and one year after the local elections which permits the local party to adapt itself following the results of the elections (local party leader becoming mayor, local party leader stepping down after an electoral defeat, etc). As a consequence, there were local leadership elections in 2008 still according to the old rules, and again in 2010, two years before the local elections.

Another change is that from 2008 onwards it is no longer compulsory for local sections to organize leadership contests when there is only one candidate. They can still organize them, but they are no longer obliged to. Before, even when there was only one candidate, internal elections were always held. The removal of this obligation could be seen as an indication of the waning interest of the party elite in having visible leadership contests.

As a consequence, local and national leadership contests are no longer organized together and not all local sections are obliged to organize them. This has had a dramatic negative effect on the percentage of local sections organizing such elections: in 2010 only 30% of all local OpenVLD sections organized such elections. This decrease is due to the removal of the obligation to hold elections, but the decline is so outspoken that it probably also reflects a sort of general gradual decline which started already earlier.

Apart from that, a decline in the competitiveness of the contests could be noted: while in 2001 still more than 30 % of the contests had two or more candidates, this has decreased to less than 17 % of all organized contests in 2008. In 2010, it increased again, but this could be explained by the fact that it was no longer compulsory to organize leadership contests if there was only one candidate.
This seems to confirm our thesis of a decline over time of the competitiveness of the contests.

Table 2: Participation to the OpenVLD leadership contests at the local level

Year	Number of members having the opportunity to participate	Number of members that participates	General participation rate[4]
1993	N/A	N/A	43,8
1997	N/A	N/A	40,6
2001	79 044	27 457	34,7
2004	70 061	28 126	40,2
2008	53 849	14 049	26,1
2010	29 790	7 318	24,6

Table 2 indicates that also the participation rates in the local sections that are still organizing local leadership contests is declining. While in 1993, the first time OpenVLD was organizing local party primaries, the general participation rate was 43,8 percent, this has decreased to 24,6 % in 2010. This means that over time, the turnout at local leadership elections has almost halved. Apart from 2004, when a very competitive contest was held at the national level, there is a gradual decline of turnout rates. So, not only the number of members that have the opportunity to cast a vote decreases (because fewer local sections are organizing leadership contests), but also the number of members effectively participating shrinks over time.

The results of the local leadership elections in OpenVLD seem to confirm our hypotheses: the first time a party is organizing direct member votes, competitiveness and participation tend to be higher compared to the direct member votes organized later on.

6. Empirical analysis: all leadership contests

We broaden now our scope by analyzing leadership contests of all parties at the national level.

We start by giving some general descriptive statistics about participation to these leadership contests.
From Table 3, it appears that the average turnout rate is (slightly) higher the first time a party organizes a leadership primary: 43,56 percent versus 39,39 percent. This seems to confirm our first hypothesis that the first time a direct member vote is held participation tends to be higher. The difference showed in Table 3 is, however, not statistically significant.

Table 3: Turnout indicators for direct member votes in Belgian parties, held for the first time and not for the first time

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[4] Both for 1993 and 1997 estimations based on the turnout rates for the national leadership contest that was held the same day and for which could be voted in the same polling booth as for the local leadership contest.

		Turnout
First time (N= 7)	Mean	43,56
	Std. Deviation	15,52
Not first time (N = 42)	Mean	39,39
	Std. Deviation	12,86

In the next table (Table 4), we have run several multiple regression models for explaining turnout rates. The central variables are 'first time', which indicates whether or not it is the first time that leadership primaries are held in that party, and 'nth time', which is how many times the primaries were already held in that party. We also include the control variables set out in section 4.

Table 4: Multiple linear regression models with participation rate as dependent variable (standardized beta regression coefficients)[5]

	Complete model	Model without first time	Complete model with sp.a	Complete model with limited nth time
TIME				
First time	,246		,246	,200
Nth time	,384**	,248*	,335**	
Nth time (limited to 5)				,185
PARTY				
Social-democratic party	,270*	,265*		
Sp.a			,416***	,418***
Flemish party	-,013	-,031	-,134	-,174
Frontrunner	-,185	-,191	-,174	-,129
COMPETITVENESS				
ENC	,462***	,484***	,472***	,462***
R²	0,27	0,23	0,35	0,30

*** p < 0.01 ** p < 0.05 * p > 0.1

The results of the first model ('Complete model' in Table 4) demonstrate that whether or not it is the first time that a party organizes a full member vote has an impact on the participation rate (beta of ,246), but this effect is not statistically significant. The effect of the other variable (nth time) is statistically significant, but the effect goes in

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[5] In each model, we tested for multicollinearity by using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). These were all far below the critical value of 5.

the opposite direction as expected: the participation rate tend to increase when the number of times a full member vote was already held increases. This is at odds with hypothesis 2.

From the party variables, only the type of party is significant: social-democratic parties are more able than other parties to mobilize party members to cast a vote. Finally, competiveness, and the effective number of candidates more in particular, has a strong positive effect on turnout rates: the more competitive contests are, the higher the number of participants.

The unexpected positive effect of the variable 'nth time' is puzzling. Perhaps, it functions as a sort of compensation effect for the (non-significant) effect of 'first time'. Therefore, we also ran a model without this latter variable, but as can be seen in Table 4 in the 3th column, 'nth time' continues to have a significant effect in the direction we did not expect.

In the third model ('Complete model with sp.a') we substitute the variable social-democratic party by only one particular social-democratic party, i.e. the social-democratic party in Flanders, sp.a. This party appears to be better in mobilizing its members than their French-speaking counterparts of the PS. The effect of this party variable is strong and highly significant.

We remain to grope in the dark as for the explanation of the unexpected effect of 'nth time'. A closer look at our data learns that there is one party, the French-speaking Christian-democratic CDH, with already a high number of full member votes, i.e. 11, while most other parties have had only around 5 contests. By accident or not, in the last CDH contests, a large number of members went to the polls, and this could maybe cause bias in our results. Therefore, we also tried to include a more limited version of the 'nth time' in our model. The highest score on the limited version of this variable is 5, meaning that the rank numbers above 5 of the leadership primaries were all reduced to 5. When we include this variable in the model (final column in Table 4), the effect of this new variable is still positive, but no longer statistically significant.[6]

In sum, based on the multiple regression analysis of all leadership primaries, we have to reject our two hypotheses. Participation rates are not statistically higher the first time a full member vote is held, nor do they decline as the number of times such a vote is held, increases. Competitiveness appears to be a far more stronger predictor for participation rates.

This throws up the question whether there is a link between competitiveness and whether or not it is the first time that full member votes are held. Possibly the correlation between these two is responsible for the lack of statistical effect of the variable 'first time'.

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[6] This is confirmed if we substitute this new variable by a variable referring to the year the leadership primary was held (linked to the idea that party members can also learn from experiences in other parties). This latter variable is not significant either.

In Table 5, we look at the average scores for a number of indicators of competitiveness. Both the number of candidates, the score of the winner and the effective number of candidates index show that direct member votes which are held for the first time are more competitive than contests organized later on. Moreover, contests with more than one candidate are more numerous the first time compared to contests that follow later: 71,4 percent of the first time contests had more than one candidate, compared to 45,2 percent of the contests organized later on.

However, none of the differences showed in Table 5 are statistically significant.

Table 5: Competitiveness indicators for direct member votes in Belgian parties, held for the first time and not for the first time

		Number of candidates	More than one candidate (%)	Score of the winner	Effective number of candidates (ENC)
First time (N= 7)	Mean	2,00	71,4	73,63	1,67
	Std. Deviation	1,00		12,20	0,32
Not first time (N = 42)	Mean	2,45	45,2	79,56	1,57
	Std. Deviation	2,86		18,22	0,57

This lack of statistically significant effect of 'first time' is confirmed if we run a linear regression analysis with effective number of candidates (ENC) as dependent variable (see Table 6). 'First time' nor 'nth time' have a statistical significant effect on this competitiveness indicator. This allows us to conclude that competitiveness is not significantly higher the first time a party organizes a direct member vote, nor that it decreases afterwards. Apparently, presenting and/or allowing many (competitive) candidates is not more common the first time party members are granted the opportunity to select the leader.[7]

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[7] This comes also forward when we added a centered interaction effect of first time and ENC to the models of Table 4. This interaction effect is clearly not significant.

Table 6: Multiple regression model with effective number of candidates (ENC) as dependent variable (standardized beta regression coefficients)

	Complete model
TIME	
First time	-,079
Nth time	-,092
PARTY	
Social-democratic party	,034
Flemish party	,091
Frontrunner	,655***
R²	0,39

*** p < 0.01 ** p < 0.05 * p > 0.1

Another element that comes forward here (but that is not particularly relevant for our research questions in this paper) is that a party that started as first in their region with direct member votes tend to have more competitive contests than parties that followed later.

7. Conclusion

The inclusion of party members in the selection of the party leader is a recent trend in contemporary party politics. This phenomenon can studied from different angles. We have focused in this paper on one kind of consequence, i.e. participation, and more particular on the relative participation rate (i.e. the number of effective participants divided by the number of potential participants) of full member votes.

Based on general participation theories, we have put forward two hypotheses stating that the first time a party organizes a full member vote, participation rates will be higher and that they will decline gradually afterwards every time the party is holding a leadership primary. These expectations are based on the mobilization theory (party elites are initially very eager to show to the outside world that they are organizing direct member votes and are hence doing much effort to mobilize the rank and file) and a combination of the instrumental motivation theory and the learning theory (members participate when they can have an impact, and they gradually become aware that their impact in leadership primaries is limited).

We have focused on direct member votes for the selection of the party leader in Belgian parties. The focus on Belgium is justified, as almost all parties have been organizing direct votes for almost 20 years, which allows for a comparison over time.

Both leadership votes at the local level and the national level are considered in two separate analyses.

At first glance, the results seem to confirm our hypotheses but only modestly: participation rates are (slightly) higher the first time a party organizes leadership primaries and tend to decrease afterwards. However, no statistical significant effects could be found. The multiple regression analyses that we have run show that the competitiveness of the contest has a large significant impact on the actual participation rate. The variables 'first time' and 'nth time' do not have such a significant impact, and for the latter variable even an opposite effect as expected could be observed.

This leads us to the rejection of both our hypotheses. Participation rates to full member votes are not so much influenced by how many times such a contest is already held in a party, but mainly by how competitive the contest is.
This might be a reassurance for party officials and party members supportive of full member votes. These are not threatened in their existence. They do not flash and fade out. It seems that once they are introduced and established in a party, they will continue to exist and to attract members willing to express their vote.

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