

Substantive representation of the working class in a
changing environment.

Historical evidence from Belgian Parliament.

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1. Introduction

Politicians and social scientists from all over the world devote increasing attention to the socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Phillips 1995). Research on the political representation of socially disadvantaged groups has in recent years strongly focused on women and ethnic minorities (e.g. Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Dahlerup 2007; Togeby 2008). The focus on these new social groups has put social class as main unit of analysis out of sight. Apart from the literature on intersectionality not investigating the representation of class per se but including it in the analysis in combination with gender and/or ethnic background (e.g. Anthias 2001, Liddle, Kanda & Kobayashi 2004), social classes have been underexposed in recent years. The political descriptive representation of social groups defined on the basis of class is only sparsely analysed (exceptions being Norris 1996; Costa and Kerrouche 2007), and analyses of substantive representation of these interests are almost completely non-existent.

Social class continues, however, to be relevant for political representation. Anne Phillips (1995: 178) wrote: *'The exclusion of working-class perspectives seems just as problematic for contemporary democracy as the exclusion of women or ethnic minorities – and, indeed, goes a long way towards explaining current dissatisfaction with the political process'*. And also Manza and Brooks (2008: 201) contend: *'Political institutions often favour some classes over other'*.

There are some good reasons for this underexposure: the declining relevance of class in modern society, the incorporation of class interests in political parties and the way researchers have been struggling with the operationalisation of the social class of parliamentarians. Elsewhere (Wauters, 2010a) it has been argued that all these objections can be countered, however. Empirical results showing that class is still of importance for social inequality in contemporary societies and the idea of class as being one of the multiple identities of a person underline the current relevance of class. Secondly, the presence of labourers in parliament seemed for a long time not to be relevant since there was at least one labour party (social

democrats, often also communists) whose main goal was voicing the interests of the working class. Owing to evolutions on the side of labour parties who are due to the catch-all process no longer exclusively focused on the working class, and to evolutions on the part of the working class itself whose members vote in decreasing numbers for these labour parties, this self-evident link has gradually disappeared. Individual representatives instead of parties come then to fore as representatives of the working class. Finally, classification systems facilitating comparative analyses of social class have been developed in European perspective.

The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent the interests of one particular social class, i.e. the working class, are defended in Parliament in historical perspective. The analysis will be about substantive representation: the representation of the interests of the working class. The focus will be upon the Belgian House of Representatives. Belgium is an interesting case to analyse since it is a textbook example of a society where democratically elected institutions aspire to be a correct and balanced reflection of diversity in society (Meier, 2000) and consequently some sensitivity towards the furthering of working class interests can be expected. We will analyse three periods in time: a period when the social-democratic party's main goal still was voicing the interests of the working class, a period when the social-democratic party had evolved already towards a catch-all profile, but still counted some working class parliamentarians in their parliamentary party and a period with a catch-all profile for the social-democratic party and without any blue collar workers in their parliamentary party. In this way, it will be possible to estimate the effect of the presence of descriptive representatives and of a party claiming to voice the interests of one particular class on the substantive representation of these interests.

Before formulating the research questions, the different dimensions of political representation and the importance of individual representatives in representing class interests need to be introduced.

2. Representation

Political representation is a central concept in political science. The concrete operationalisation of this concept has, however, been subject of fierce scientific discussion. The general meaning of political representation refers to making present in a political forum someone or something that is absent. How this should be translated in practice is less clear. The distinction between formal, descriptive and substantial representation, made for the first time by Pitkin in 1967, is still relevant today.

Formal representation focuses on the process of designating the representatives. It encompasses two aspects: authorization and accountability. These aspects refer to respectively the legitimacy of the process by which the represented give consent to the representatives to act in their name, and the ability of voters to sanction their representatives. It is evident that much research attention has gone to the institutional and party-related mechanisms influencing the recruitment and selection of the representatives.

According to the *descriptive* representation approach, the composition of parliament should be such that it corresponds to the composition of society. Parliament should in this vision be a mirror or a miniature version of society. A member of parliament (MP) represents someone by matching him or her on a relevant attribute or characteristic, such as gender, ethnic origin, religion or class. It matters in this approach what MPs are, rather than what they are doing. Scholarly attention in this vision has centred on the actual and historical composition of parliament: how many women, how many farmers etc. there are in parliament (Best and Cotta 2000), the barriers disadvantaged groups have to overcome (Norris 1996), and instruments to solve this unfavourable situation (Krook 2007).

Substantive representation focuses on what MPs are doing in parliament. This form of representation is seen as 'acting for others, an activity in behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else' (Pitkin 1967: 113). It is about acting in accordance with the interests and points of view of (a selected part of) the electorate. A member of parliament represents someone whose interests (s)he defends without necessarily having the same profile as those

who (s)he represents. For instance, a male MP who defends women's rights represents women in parliament in a substantive manner.

In this paper we will focus on substantive representation and its relation to descriptive representation. The division between descriptive and substantive representation is less sharp than suggested by the discussion above. In general, one expects that the role orientations and background characteristics of MPs correlate (Thomassen & Andeweg 2004). Research on the behaviour of female and black MPs has shown that they have a greater chance of devoting attention to issues that are important for resp. women and black people (Celis 2006 ; Owens 2005). This link can theoretically be explained by the theory of 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995). A common life experience and a common structural position in society are the central elements of this approach. By having experience with similar problems and phenomena and having suffered from a common disadvantaged structural position, people are more likely to devote attention to the issues of their social group. Life experience causes understanding of and familiarity with the specific needs and problems of a social group and with possible solutions. Therefore, the chance that an MP will defend the interests of the group to which he or she belongs is likely to be high. However, the link between both forms of representation continues to be one of the most hotly-disputed in political science (Mackay 2004). Intervening variables such as party discipline, institutional factors and positional power could hamper the opportunity to further the interests of their social group.

As already indicated in the introduction, most research and theory on representation has focused on women and ethnic minorities. We could, however, argue that aspects of political representation described above, could also be applied on social class, and on the working class in particular. Manza & Brooks (2008) identify three factors that could explain why class is linked to political behaviour: common economic interests, group consciousness (viewing themselves as member of a common group) and social networks such as neighbourhoods and occupational groups disseminating new ideas and/or reinforcing existing predispositions. Individuals who are confronted with comparable socio-economic conditions share a common position in the system

of social stratification, have similar economic and other interests, have a certain group feeling and are socialized and supported by their environment to further the interests of this group.

A final note about the significance of class in contemporary societies should be made. There has been - and still is - a fierce discussion about the current relevance of social class. It is stated that owing to a democratisation of society and an increase in education, class differences have lost much of their sharpness. In this view, identity is no longer dominated by class, which has only relevance in historical perspective (Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Despite some support for the idea of waning class relevance, this has been contradicted by two types of research. There are first of all empirical research results showing that people with a similar class background continue to encounter similar problems and drawbacks (e.g. Marshall 1990; Goldthorpe and McKnight 2004). Another opinion in recent class literature posits that people have multiple identities with no fixed hierarchy (Klandermans 2001). Since class is too diffuse and too broad a category for the development of a class identity, additional sources of identification, such as living in a working-class neighbourhood or working in the same company, are important (Strangleman 2001; MacKenzie et al. 2006). Additional identifiers have always been important in the past but some traditional additional sources of information (urban area, etc.) about class tend to be no longer as effective as they used to be. Such additional identities could serve as mechanisms through which class-based thinking and class-based identity are articulated. Identification with the smaller occupational community functions in this view as a useful stepping-stone for identification with the broader social class.

The current relevance of class and of class identity is confirmed by a study revealing that 89 per cent of employees estimate that a working class still exists in Belgium (De Weerd and De Witte 2004). The same study shows that more than 56 per cent of the respondents identify themselves with a particular social class.

3. Representation by party or by individuals?

For a long time, there has been an evident link between labour parties and blue collar workers, a.o. due to the positioning of social democratic parties in the cleavage structure as defender of the working class and to their structural linkage to trade unions. Two societal evolutions have, however, undermined this evident link. These evolutions underline the relevance of looking at individual representatives when analysing the substantive representation of the working class.

First of all, there is the shift of political parties in the direction of 'catch-all parties' (Kirchheimer 1966; Katz and Mair 1995). Parties are no longer exclusively tied to one particular social group, but aim to attract a broad range of voters ('the median voter') by adopting an ideologically more vague profile. In this way they seek to broaden their electoral potential. Although the catch-all thesis seems to be valid for all kinds of parties, it is striking that such analyses are mainly applied to social-democratic parties. Changes in the social-democratic party platforms, which started in the 1970s, are inevitable consequences of the parties' quest for more votes (in combination with the declining share of labourers in society). As a consequence of aiming at a broader pool of potential voters, social democratic parties were forced to de-emphasize their unique appeal which had made them the principal political expression of the working class (Przeworski & Sprague, 1988 ; Ilonszki, 2007). Social democratic parties have transformed themselves from class-based parties to parties that compete for voters from all classes. In an analysis of the election manifestos of social-democratic parties in a large number of European countries, Volkens (2004) found a clear shift over time to the right and an increasing attention for topics related to the 'Third Way' approach (decentralization, government efficiency, social justice, etc.). For the representation of labourers' interests, this shift could be a catastrophe: it implies that their guarantee on substantive representation diminishes since labour parties are no longer exclusively focused on their particular social group. Their interests come into competition with other interests. As a consequence, the presence of individual descriptive representatives in Parliament gains importance.

Secondly, also from the side of the labourers themselves, the link with social-democratic parties is questioned: labour parties seem to be less accepted by blue collar workers as a spokesperson for their interests than they used to be (Houtman et al. 2008). Studies show that people from the labour class tend to vote in declining numbers for labour parties. This phenomenon is denoted as the 'death of class voting' (e.g. Clark & Lipset, 1991), but recent research has revealed that reality is more subtle than this. It has been found that income continues to determine to a large extent the socio-economic viewpoints (opinions about the role of trade unions, organisation of social security system, etc.) of voters, but also that the level of education impacts upon the opinion about socio-cultural or left-libertarian topics (civil rights for ethnic minorities, etc.). Social class correlates strongly with both income and education (Van der Waal et al., 2007) and therefore labourers tend to take a rather authoritarian position on socio-cultural issues and a rather progressive position on socio-economic issues. Much earlier, a seminal study of Lipset (1959) already showed that the working class is progressive on economic topics and conservative on social or moral issues.

Over time, socio-cultural issues, on which the labour class tends to take a conservative stance, have become more important than socio-economic issues in determining voting behaviour. As a consequence, blue collar workers no longer recognise themselves in the viewpoints of the labour parties who often have a more progressive attitude on socio-cultural issues. On the contrary, blue collar workers vote more for conservative parties and even for extreme right parties, whose opinions in socio-cultural issues tend to be more in line with their own opinions. In his influential work on the extreme right, Kitschelt (1995) makes a distinction between supply and demand explanations for the success of extreme right parties. Several studies focussing on the demand side (who is attracted by the extreme right and why?) come to the conclusion that blue collar workers are more than average attracted by extreme right parties. This relates, in Kitschelt's view, to the new two-dimensional space (socialist–capitalist dimension and the libertarian–authoritarian dimension) where parties have to operate in. Extreme right parties that are positioning themselves on the authoritarian pole of the socio-cultural axis tend to be successful among blue collar workers. However, these parties often do not defend their interests in socio-economic issues.

4. Methodology

The substantive representation of working class interests will be scrutinized during three periods in the history of the Belgian House of Representatives: during a period when the main (and sometimes even the sole) aspiration of social-democratic parties was still the defence of labourers' interests and when still a number of blue collar MPs belonged to these parties (beginning of the 1950s), during a period when the 'catch all' process had already widened the scope of these parties but when there were still some blue collar MPs present in these parties (beginning of the 1980s) and during a period when there were no longer blue collar MPs on the social-democratic benches in Parliament but when they started to appear in extreme right parliamentary parties (end of the 1990s) (Wauters, 2010b). We analysed more in particular three complete parliamentary terms, which had also a different government composition: 1950-1954 (christian-democratic government), 1981-1985 (coalition of christian-democrats and liberal-democrats) and 1999-2003 (coalition of liberal-democrats, social-democrats and greens).¹

We expect to find a relationship between the presence of working class parliamentarians and the ideological focus of social-democratic parties on the one hand and the defence of working class interests in Parliament on the other hand. This expectation is based on the 'politics of presence' approach suggesting that working class MPs will be more likely to defend their own class interests, but also on the thesis that the presence of working class MPs will create an atmosphere in Parliament forcing non-working class MPs to take also care of working class interests. The ideological focus of the party (small group of labourers versus the whole population) also plays a role. Translated to our research: we hypothesize that the substantive representation of the working class will be better in the 1950s than in the 1980s, while the substantive representation at that time will in turn be better than at the end of the 1990s.

¹ More information about the government composition and the party and class composition of the House of Representatives is given in appendix

The analysis is restricted to an analysis of the annual budgetary debate. There are many parliamentary procedures that could have been scrutinized (plenary debates, oral and written questions, interpellations, etc.), but the budgetary debate appears to be most appropriate to analyse since it leaves room for every individual parliamentarian to tackle current topics that are in the interest of his/her supporters. Moreover, by choosing to analyse a fixed and important event that is repeated every year, comparison over time becomes possible. Both the representation of interests on socio-economic issues (which social-democratic parties are thought to defend), on socio-cultural issues (on which extreme-right parties pretend to speak on behalf of the labourers) and all other possible issues will be studied.

We follow Celis' (2006) approach, which is in turn inspired by Pitkin (1967), for the operationalisation of the substantive representation of working class interests. In her view, substantive representation includes three kinds of acts: acts that denounce a situation that is disadvantageous for labourers, acts formulating a proposal to improve the situation of labourers and acts claiming a right for labourers which is supposed to advance labourers' position. Our focus lies on explicit acts in the interest of the working class. In other words, there needs to be an explicit reference to the working class in one way or another in the intervention of an MP in order to classify it as an intervention in the interest of the working class. This reference can be traced by scanning the budgetary debates on the use of specific terms (working class, skilled/unskilled labour, labourers, blue collar workers, etc.) or reference to a specific sector (metal industry, mining industry, etc.). Implicit acts in favour of the working class are much harder to uncover and are hence left out of this analysis.

We adopt an open approach of working class interests, which means that we do not start our analysis with a fixed and limited list of working class interests. We leave it to the parliamentarians to define what is in the interest of labourers. If they refer explicitly to the working class in their interventions and make one of the three sorts of acts outlined above, their intervention can be labelled as acting in the interest of the labourers and the topic they raise can be classified as a working class interest. By investigating class interests in this way, a more neutral approach avoiding subjective personal interpretations is adopted. One drawback

of this approach, however, could be the gap between topics estimated by parliamentarians as class interests and what labourers themselves see as their interest.

The central question of this paper is whether the presence of individual labourer MPs and of a party almost exclusively focussed on the defence of labourers' interests does have a positive impact on the substantive representation of working class interests. The substantive representation will be measured both in quantitative (how many interventions?) and in qualitative terms. The quality of substantive representation is measured by looking at the diversity of the range of interests that is represented. The more diverse the interests that are put forward, the broader they are and thus the better the substantive representation takes place. An increase in the sorts of interests that are defended can be considered as an increase in the quality of substantive representation.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative analysis

In total exactly 100 interventions could be labelled as interventions defending the interests of the working class, either by denouncing a disadvantageous situation, by formulating a proposal or by claiming a right for blue collar workers. The legislative term of 1999-2003 with no working class MPs in the social-democratic parliamentary party exhibits the lowest number of interventions in favour of the labour class, while the 1981-1985 term slightly outnumbers the 1950-1954 term, although in the latter period the number of working class parliamentarians was historically high and the social-democratic party was still supposed to defend labourers' interests. The expectation that a parliament with a higher share of working class parliamentarians will lead to a higher number of interventions in favour of the working class is thus only partially confirmed.

If we take a closer look at the background characteristics of MPs that intervene to defend the working class interests then it strikes the eye that only in the 1950-1954 legislative term working class MPs have intervened to further the interests of their class (and immediately take more than one third of the interventions in that term on his expense). This again is a very weak confirmation of our expectation that working-class MPs would be the most committed defenders of working class interests. Possibly the budgetary debate in the plenary House is not as open to working class MPs than we thought it to be. Neither in the 1981-1985 term with a few working class MPs in the social-democratic party nor in the 1999-2003 term with working class MPs in extreme right parties, interventions are made by these blue collar MPs to further the interests of the working class.

Table 1: Number and percentages of interventions referring to the working class, in total and by working class MPs only

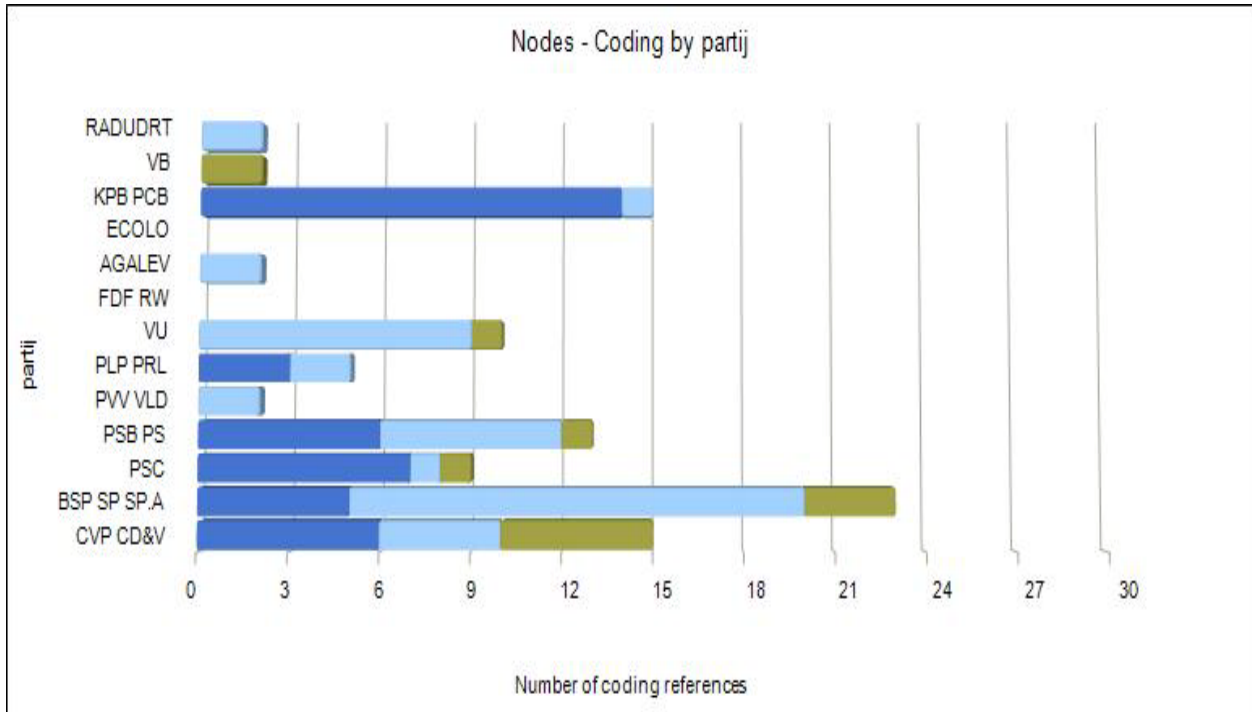
| Legislative term | Number of interventions referring to the working class | Number of interventions by working class MPs, referring to the working class | Percentage of interventions by working class MPs |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1999-2003 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| 1981-1985 | 46 | 0 | 0 |
| 1950-1954 | 41 | 15 | 36.6 |
| Total | 100 | 15 | 15.0 |

A next step in the analysis is the inclusion of the party affiliation of MPs intervening in favour of the working class.

From Figure 1 it appears that MPs from the Flemish social-democratic party (subsequently named BSP SP and SP.A) have most interventions defending working class interests at their record over the three periods under analysis. The gap between them and the other social-democrats (the French-speaking PSB PS) is quite large. There is no straightforward explanation for this difference, but earlier it has also been shown that the number of labourers on the candidate lists has been lower for the French-speaking social-democrats than for the Flemish

social-democrats (Wauters, 2010b), while the number of working class parliamentarians, however, is for both parties at a comparable level.

Figure 1: Number of interventions by party for the three parliamentary terms under analysis



The Flemish Christian-democrats and the Communists are the runners-up in terms of interventions defending labour interests. We should note, however, that for the Communists only 2 parliamentary terms are considered since for the 1999-2003 term they did no longer have seats in Parliament. The lion share of the Communists' interventions took place in the 1950s, a period where 4 MPs of their parliamentary party originated from the working class. This seems to suggest that their presence in a parliamentary party could stimulate the attention for these specific class interests.

Other remarkable high scores are obtained by the Flemish regionalists VU in the 1981-1985 term and by the Flemish Christian-democratic CVP/CD&V in the 1999-2003 term when they top the ranking as concerns interventions raising working class interests. The number of

interventions by the extreme right Vlaams Blok (VB) in the 1999-2003 is low, especially when taking into account that at that time some blue collar MPs belonged to that party.

These results show once again indications confirming of our expectations, but also signs of a negation of them. The high number of interventions of communists and social-democrats (both parties with some working class MPs in their parliamentary parties) and the decline in this number of interventions in the 1999-2003 term confirm our hypotheses that the presence of working class MPs and the ideological focus of a party matters. Also the high score of the Flemish regionalist party VU in the 1981-1985 term with the presence of one blue collar worker in their parliamentary party could still be seen as a confirmation of our hypotheses.

The results of the Christian-democratic CVP/CD&V, and especially their rather high number of interventions in the 1999-2003 term, are however at odds with our expectations: at that time there were no working class MPs on their benches and the party has always adopted a catch-all approach.

Intervening variables could be held accountable for this disruption of the link between descriptive and substantial representation. One such variable is government participation. It appears from our analysis that for each parliamentary term separately about 70 % of the interventions furthering working class interests are done by MPs from opposition parties. This constant percentage is remarkable since periods with different government compositions were selected for our analysis. Possibly, this could be an explanation for the relative high number of interventions of the Christian-democrats in the 1999-2003 term when they were in opposition.

5.2 Qualitative analysis

We are now going over to the qualitative analysis, in which it will be investigated what kind of topics are put forward when defending labourers' interests.

Table 2 shows, first of all, what kind of topics are put forward when parliamentarians are defending the interests of the working class. Topics directly related to the position of labourers

on the labour market top the list: fiscal policy imposing a (too heavy) burden on paid manual labour, employment policy not creating enough jobs and social security propositions not in favour of labourers leaving their job (unemployment benefits, pensions, etc.) are most often tackled in the Belgian House of Representatives. Other not-strictly work-related topics are also present, but they are raised less often: cost of living (including the price of bread and of cigarettes), housing, public transport and public health. All in all, the defence of the working class interests in parliament remains to a large extent limited to aspects that are directly related to the job of labourers.

Table 2: Number and percentages of interventions referring to the working class, by topic (in total and by working class MPs only)

| Topic | Number of interventions | Number of interventions by working class MPs | Percentage of interventions by working class MPs |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Fiscal policy | 31 | 6 | 19.4 |
| Employment policy | 21 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Social security | 17 | 3 | 17.6 |
| Cost of living | 7 | 4 | <u>57.1</u> |
| Wages | 5 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Flanders versus Wallonia | 4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Housing | 4 | 1 | <u>25.0</u> |
| Public transport | 4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Public health | 2 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Workers' solidarity | 2 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Working conditions | 2 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Savings | 2 | 1 | 50.0 |
| Cooperation with employers | 1 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Other | 2 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total ² | 104 | 15 | 14.4 |

² Since one intervention can be about more than one topic, the sum of the topics that are tackled is higher than 100.

As became apparent from the quantitative analysis, the number of interventions by working class MPs is not very extended. From Table 2, however, it appears that these working class MPs manage to pay disproportionate more attention to aspects not directly related to the job: 57 % of the interventions concerning the cost of living are done by them and 25 % of the interventions about housing. This indicates that working class MPs contribute to the broadening of the range of topics that are tackled. Their presence seems to constitute an added value for the diversity of working class interests that are raised. These non-work related issues are, however, also raised by non-working class MPs: there are no topics that are exclusively furthered by blue collar MPs only. But it remains true that blue collar MPs have more than other MPs an eye for all aspects of the working class.

In Table 3 the topics that are discussed in the House are split up by parliamentary term.

Table 3: Number and row percentages of interventions referring to the working class, by topic and by parliamentary term

| Topic | 1950-1954 | | 1981-1985 | | 1999-2003 | |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Fiscal policy | 12 | 38,7 | 19 | <u>61,3</u> | 0 | 0,0 |
| Employment policy | 8 | 38,1 | 10 | 47,6 | 3 | 14,3 |
| Social security | 7 | 41,2 | 5 | 29,4 | 5 | <u>29,4</u> |
| Cost of living | 5 | <u>71,4</u> | 2 | 28,6 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Wages | 1 | 20,0 | 2 | 40,0 | 2 | <u>40,0</u> |
| Flanders versus Wallonia | 1 | 0,0 | 2 | 50,0 | 1 | 25,0 |
| Housing | 2 | <u>50,0</u> | 2 | 50,0 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Public transport | 4 | <u>100,0</u> | 0 | 0,0 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Public health | 0 | 0,0 | 1 | 50,0 | 1 | 50,0 |
| Workers' solidarity | 0 | 0,0 | 2 | <u>100,0</u> | 0 | 0,0 |
| Working conditions | 0 | 0,0 | 1 | 50,0 | 1 | 50,0 |
| Savings | 1 | 50,0 | 1 | 50,0 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Cooperation with employers | 0 | 0,0 | 0 | 0,0 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Other | 1 | 50,0 | 1 | 50,0 | 0 | 0,0 |
| Total | | 39.4 | | 46.2 | | 12.5 |

A remarkable result of this analysis is the relative high percentage of non-job related topics in the 1950-1954 parliamentary term, a term with a relative high number of working class MPs and with social-democratic party positioning itself as voice of the working class. Interventions about the cost of living, housing and public transport are more numerous during that parliamentary term compared with the two other parliamentary terms analysed in this paper. These high percentages are in line with our results in Table 2, namely that working class MPs provide an added value in terms of the range of topics that are discussed in Parliament, either by tabling these themselves or by exerting influence in their parliamentary party to pay attention to them. In the 1981-1985 term and the 1999-2003 term, more strictly work-related, traditional concerns of the working class are discussed.

A final noticeable result from our analysis is the complete absence of socio-cultural topics in the table. Despite the attractiveness of extreme right parties and their viewpoints on socio-cultural topics for the working class, their interests in this kind of topics are not raised in class terms in parliament. This confirms our finding from the quantitative analysis that extreme right MPs do raise hardly any working class interests notwithstanding their electoral success among blue collar workers.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The representativeness of political institutions is currently a hot topic, both in policy making and in scientific research. Attention has focussed on gender and ethnic origin, neglecting social class almost completely. The aim of this paper was to enter social class in the discussion about substantive representation and more in particular, to examine to what extent the interests of one particular social class, i.e. the working class, are defended in Parliament in historical perspective.

Based on the 'politics of presence' approach, we expected to find a relationship between the presence of working class MPs and the ideological focus of social-democratic parties on the one hand and the substantive representation of working class interests in Parliament on the other hand. Three periods over time were analysed: a period when the social-democratic party's main

goal still was voicing the interests of the working class (1950-1954), a period when the social-democratic party had evolved already towards a catch-all profile, but still counted some working class parliamentarians in their parliamentary party (1981-1985) and a period with a catch-all profile for the social-democratic party and without any blue collar workers in their parliamentary party (1999-2003). The focus was on the House of Representatives in Belgium, a country known for its aspirations concerning correctly and balanced reflecting diversity in society.

Our results yield a mixed picture. Our expectations are confirmed when we take into account that most interventions mentioning working class interests are done in during parliamentary terms with some blue collar MPs in parliament (1950-1954, 1981-1985), that most interventions about working-class based interests originate the Flemish social-democratic party (and these tend to be lower when there are no blue collar workers of this party) and that in a term with many working class MPs (1950-1954) the most wide range of topics are discussed (and that blue collar MPs play a prominent, but not an exclusive role in raising less traditional working class interests such as housing and public transport).

There are, however, also results that refute our hypotheses: working class MPs only take a marginal part (15%) of the total number of working class interventions, some awkward scores in our party analysis (low score for French-speaking social-democrats, high score for Christian-democrats), the fact that there are no topics that are exclusively raised by working class MPs only and the low score of the extreme right Vlaams Belang MPs notwithstanding their appeal among blue collar workers and the presence of a few of them in their parliamentary party.

To sum up, it is difficult to give a straightforward answer on the question of the relationship between descriptive representation and a class-focused party on the one hand and the substantive representation of the working class on the other hand. There are indications that their presence could provide an added value for the consideration of working class interests, but this potential is not always put into practice nor does it seem that their presence is a necessary condition for taking these interests into account. Further analyses, including other

plenary debates and possibly also other periods of Belgian history, could shed more light on this discussion.

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Appendix

Table: Seat distribution in the Belgian House of Representatives in the periods under investigation in this paper

| 1950 | | number of seats | % of seats |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| CVP/PSC | christian-democrats | 108 | 50,94 |
| Socialistische Partij/Parti Socialiste | social-democrats | 73 | 34,43 |
| Liberaal Partij/Parti Liberale | liberal-democrats | 20 | 9,43 |
| KPB/PCB | Communists | 7 | 3,30 |
| Kartel Liberalen-Socialisten | cartel liberal- and social-democrats | 4 | 1,89 |
| | | 212 | 100,00 |
| 1981 | | | |
| CVP | Flemish christian-democrats | 43 | 20,28 |
| PSC | French-speaking christian-democrats | 18 | 8,49 |
| PVV | Flemish liberal-democrats | 28 | 13,21 |
| PRL | French-speaking liberal-democrats | 24 | 11,32 |
| SP | Flemish social-democrats | 26 | 12,26 |
| PS | French-speaking social-democrats | 35 | 16,51 |
| VU | Flemish regionalists | 20 | 9,43 |
| FDV-RW | French-speaking regionalists | 8 | 3,77 |
| Agalev | Flemish greens | 2 | 0,94 |
| Ecolo | French-speaking greens | 2 | 0,94 |
| UDRT/RAD | populist liberal-democratic party | 3 | 1,42 |
| Vlaams Blok | Flemish extreme right | 1 | 0,47 |
| KPB/PCB | Communists | 2 | 0,94 |
| | | 212 | 100,00 |
| 1999 | | | |
| CVP | Flemish christian-democrats | 22 | 14,67 |
| PSC | French-speaking christian-democrats | 10 | 6,67 |
| VLD | Flemish liberal-democrats | 23 | 15,33 |
| PRL-FDF | French-speaking liberal-democrats | 18 | 12,00 |
| SP | Flemish social-democrats | 14 | 9,33 |
| PS | French-speaking social-democrats | 19 | 12,67 |
| VU-ID | Flemish regionalists | 8 | 5,33 |
| Agalev | Flemish greens | 9 | 6,00 |
| Ecolo | French-speaking greens | 11 | 7,33 |
| Vlaams Blok | Flemish extreme right | 15 | 10,00 |
| FN | French-speaking extreme right | 1 | 0,67 |
| | | 150 | 100,00 |

Table: Number of working class MPs in the Belgian House of Representatives, by party in the periods under investigation in this paper

| 1950-1954 | | number of seats |
|--|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| CVP/PSC | christian-democrats | 4 |
| Socialistische Partij/Parti Socialiste | social-democrats | 7 |
| KPB/PCB | Communists | 4 |
| | | |
| 1981-1985 | | |
| SP | Flemish social-democrats | 1 |
| PS | French-speaking social-democrats | 1 |
| VU | Flemish regionalists | 1 |
| KPB/PCB | Communists | 1 |
| | | |
| 1999-2003 | | |
| Agalev | Flemish greens | 1 |
| Vlaams Blok | Flemish extreme right | 2 |
| | | |

Table: Composition of the Belgian government in the periods under investigation in this paper

| 1950-1954 | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| CVP/PSC | christian-democrats |
| | |
| 1981-1985 | |
| CVP | Flemish christian-democrats |
| PSC | French-speaking christian-democrats |
| PVV | Flemish liberal-democrats |
| PRL | French-speaking liberal-democrats |
| | |
| 1999-2003 | |
| VLD | Flemish liberal-democrats |
| PRL-FDF | French-speaking liberal-democrats |
| SP | Flemish social-democrats |
| PS | French-speaking social-democrats |
| Agalev | Flemish greens |
| Ecolo | French-speaking greens |