

Role Conceptions of Parliamentary Party leaders in the Belgian ‘Partitocracy’: A Neo-Institutional Framework for Analysis

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Introduction

Political parties are central to modern democracy (Luther & Müller-Rommel, 2005; Müller & Narud, 2013). This particularly is the case in so-called ‘partitocracies’, like Belgium or Italy, where parties determine policy-making more than any other actor or institution (Deschouwer, De Winter, & Della Porta, 1996). Although they often appear to act as unitary structures, and it generally is easier to treat intra-party processes as if they occurred inside a ‘black box’ (Laver & Shepsle, 1999), Katz and Mair (1993) emphasise that parties are organisations with their own internal life and politics, consisting of multiple segments or ‘faces’ that interact with each other and do not necessarily pursue the same goals and interests. These faces of party organisation are: ‘the party on the ground’ (i.e. the party in relation to the general population), ‘the party in central office’ (i.e. the party’s central headquarters) and ‘the party in public office’ (i.e. the party in parliament and in government).

The past decades, research has mainly focused on the changing position of the ‘party on the ground’ which, due to various political and societal transformations, including (post-)modernisation, secularisation and individualisation, seems to be in crisis¹ (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). The other two faces, however, and particularly their interrelationships, have often been neglected.

To fully apprehend the delicate and reciprocal relationship between ‘the party in central office’ and ‘the party in parliament’ (as a part of the ‘party in public office’) in Belgium, the position of the parliamentary party group leader (PPG leader) is highly relevant. Unlike in other countries, this position does not coincide with that of the overall party leader, nor with that of the extra-parliamentary party chairman (Pilet & Cross, 2014). In Belgium, PPG leaders rather act as a ‘linking pin’ between the parliamentary party and the central party elite. He/she leads the party in parliament and participates in public debates on behalf of the parliamentary group, while at the same time he/she is a prominent member of the party’s executive committee and consults central party leaders on a regular basis in order to synchronise the (parliamentary) party’s policy positions (De Winter, 1992; De Winter & Dumont, 2000).

¹ Features of this crisis include declining membership figures (Dalton, McAllistar, & Wattenberg, 2005; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), increased electoral volatility (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2011; Drummond, 2006) and a loss of trust towards political parties (Dalton & Weldon, 2005).

Due to their specific intermediary intra-party position, Belgian PPG leaders can be seen as ‘agents’ with two ‘principals’ (Pitkin, 1967). On the one hand they may act on behalf of the central party elite by transmitting decisions of the latter to the backbenchers and ensuring party loyalty. On the other hand, they may also represent the PPG at the ‘party in central office’ by furthering MPs’ wishes and grievances towards central party leaders.

In this paper, we present a theoretical and analytical framework for our PhD research project, in which we aim to explore the role orientations of Belgian PPG leaders by investigating to which of the above-mentioned ‘principals’ they give priority, and what factors influence their choice. As such, we not only intend to analyse the functioning of Belgian parliamentary party leaders but also aim to add another piece to the puzzle regarding how the ‘party in central office’ and the ‘party in public office’ relate to each other in Belgium, as well as investigating the factors that enlarge or constrain the power of central party elites in the legislative sphere. In addition, we aim to demonstrate that the method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 1987), which is rather novel to the field of legislative studies, is highly suitable for studying parliamentary roles as ‘dependent variables’ and that applying this method will allow us to test the underlying premises of neo-institutional theoretical approaches on roles as put forward by, among others, Donald Searing (1991, 1994) and Kaare Strøm (1997, 2012) (see below).

In the first part, we review the literature on parliamentary party groups and place formal PPG leadership positions in comparative perspective. Then, as we will study PPG leaders’ *roles*, we will discuss the state of the art in parliamentary role theory by analysing how roles are constructed and how these intangible factors can be measured. The latter is further clarified in the methodological sections of this paper, in which we discuss our hypotheses, methods and case-selection.

The Study of Parliamentary Party Groups and Their Leaders

Parliamentary party leaders manage the parliamentary sections of their party, in the literature referred to as ‘parliamentary party groups’ (PPGs). These groups are predominantly composed of members of parliament that were elected under the same party label. They can, however, also comprise of legislators that belong to different parties but wish to collaborate in the parliamentary arena² (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Malová & Krause, 2000; Saalfeld, 2000). PPGs are nonetheless more than a mere gathering of like-minded legislators: ‘they are organised’ (Heidar & Koole, 2000, p. 253). Although they vary in terms of size, voting unity, staffing, financial resources and other organisational aspects, PPG are commonly characterised both by horizontal (i.e. a division of labour) and vertical differentiation (i.e. a division of power) (Brady & Bullock, 1985; Heidar, 2000; Heidar & Koole, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). The former is reflected by varying degrees of policy specialisation in parliamentary committees and internal working groups where individual MPs act as the PPG’s expert on a given topic. The latter becomes apparent by the fact that PPGs are structured hierarchically. At the top of the pecking order, they are headed by a single PPG leader or chairman. In larger PPGs, he or she is often assisted by a level of ‘middle-management’ (e.g. whips, deputy chairs) with the purpose of facilitating internal coordination and control (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014)

Parliamentary party groups, and by extension their leaders, take centre-stage in the day-to-day organisation of parliament and are therefore commonly renowned as ‘necessary instruments of

² Unless they do so for technical reasons only (e.g. obtaining financial support) (Heidar & Koole, 2000).

parliamentary business' (Heidar & Koole, 2000, p. 1). PPGs assist in preparing parliamentary activities, they promote decisional efficiency and allow individual MPs to weigh in on policy-making through the aggregation of policy preferences (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). Also from the perspective of representative democracy their importance can hardly be neglected. In parliamentary democracies, they constitute the linkage between voters, parties and parliaments and likewise contribute to a political system's stability, transparency, and the accountability and legitimacy of its leaders (Heidar, 2013).

Despite their importance, research on PPGs is scarce (Heidar, 2013). Scholars that do study PPGs mainly focus on normative issues regarding the emergence, role and purpose of parties in parliament (Daalder, 2001; Diamond & Gunther, 2001; Katz, 2014) as well as their shortcomings (Mair, 2008) and the alternatives for party government (Katz, 1987; Strøm, 2002), cohesion within PPGs (Bowler, Farrell, & Katz, 1999; Depauw, 2005; Hazan, 2011; Van Vonn et al., 2014), their strength and autonomy (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Helms, 2000) and their organisation in terms of staffing, financing etc. (Heidar, 2000, 2013). One aspect of PPGs that particularly seems neglected, is their leadership. Although their role is sometimes briefly reported, studies focused exclusively on PPG leaders can be highly interesting as their office does not only embody an important – if not the most important – aspect of internal PPG organisation, the part PPG leaders play in securing voting unity and liaising with other political actors or institutions, such as the EPO or the party in government, is anything but negligible.

Parliamentary Party Leadership in Comparative Perspective

In many legislatures and party organisations alike, parliamentary party leaders indeed are central actors that manage the PPG, monitor its member's activities, coordinate intra-party deliberation, safeguard political cohesion, enforce discipline if necessary and serve as the party's main spokesperson in important parliamentary debates. Still, much like PPGs (e.g. Heidar & Koole, 2000, pp. 16-21), cross-national varieties in the way PPG leadership is filled in exist. These differences predominantly relate to PPG leaders' formal intra-party positions and their main duties (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Pilet & Cross, 2014; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). Essential here is to acknowledge that PPGs and their leaders are not free-floating actors but are part of a broader, more complex party organisation (see above). Subsequently, PPGs (and their leaders) differ with regards to their relationship with other party segments³. In some cases the centre of power within parties is unmistakably situated at the level of the central or extra-parliamentary party organisation (EPO) (i.e. 'party organisation dominance'), in others it rests firmly with the PPG (i.e. 'parliamentary party dominance') and in some cases the parliamentary and central party (leadership) to a great extent overlap (i.e. 'integrative party leadership') (Helms, 2000). Most European countries fit in the two latter categories, while only a few countries (including Belgium) represent the category of 'party organisation dominance'.

Not surprisingly, the formal position and main duties of PPG leaders seem connected to the PPGs' position within the overall party organisation (see table 1). In some countries, including for instance Westminster democracies (e.g. Bale & Webb, 2014; Cross & Blais, 2012; Gauja, 2014) and the Netherlands (e.g. Andeweg, 2000; Andeweg & Irwin, 2009; Koekkoek, 1978), parliamentary party

³ See for instance the typologies of PPGs' relations with other party segments by Heidar and Koole (2000, pp. 11-15) and Helms (2000).

leaders are true political *leaders* that enjoy considerable autonomy in determining the parliamentary party's policies. In these countries, where parties would fall under the category of 'parliamentary party dominance', the PPG leader, rather than the EPO chairman (who is an organisational rather than a political leader) is generally seen as the overall party leader⁴ and the parties' electoral frontrunner. In other countries, where PPGs would correspond to Helms' (2000) category of 'integrative party leadership', the positions of PPG leader and EPO chairman are typically held by the same politician who thereby acts as the uncontested party leader and forms the centre of party authority⁵. Examples here can be found in Spain (Barberà et al., 2014; Sánchez de Dios, 1999), Austria (Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller, 2014; Müller & Steiniger, 2000) and Germany (Detterbeck & Rohlfing, 2014).

Table 1. PPG leadership, EPO chairmanship and party leadership in European democracies⁶

| | | Also party leader? | |
|--------------------|-----|--|-------------------|
| | | Yes | No |
| Also EPO chairman? | Yes | Spain ^(a) , Germany ^(a) , Austria ^(a) | 7 |
| | No | Westminster democracies, the Netherlands ^(a) , Hungary ^(b) , Norway ^(b) | Belgium, Portugal |

^(a) Unless the party leader becomes a member of government and resigns from parliament.

^(b) Although in some cases the EPO chairman, and not the PPG leader, is the party leader.

In a few cases⁸, PPG leaders neither are EPO chairman nor party leader but rather act as intermediaries between the central party elite and the parliamentary party. In Belgium, the parties' indisputable political leaders are the 'party presidents' (i.e. EPO chairman) (Fiers, 1998). These powerful actors have an important, in some cases predominant say in the selection of a PPG leader, who thereafter functions as a 'linking pin' between the central party leadership and the parliamentary party (Pilet & Wauters, 2014). Or as De Winter puts it: the most prominent member of the parliamentary party group is the group leader. He acts as the main liaison between the party executive and its parliamentary group [...] As a member of the national executive, he communicates the decisions of the latter to the backbenchers, while he can also inform the party executive about issues at stake at the level of the level of parliamentary decision-making, as well as warning the party executive of discontent amongst backbenchers' (De Winter, 1992, p. 18).

Due to their specific and rather unique intermediate intra-party position, Belgian PPG leaders perform a wide spectrum of duties, both political and organisational, of which only a fraction is stipulated in parliamentary constitutions and party statutes. Regarding the internal organisation of the PPG, they chair the weekly group meetings, appoint speaking time, divide intra-parliamentary offices and

⁴ In the Netherlands, this is the case unless the PPG leader becomes a cabinet member and musts resign from parliament, which is an important point of difference with Westminster's democracies fused executive.

⁵ Again, unless the party leader becomes a cabinet member and may not hold a parliamentary mandate.

⁶ Summary of J-B. Pilet & W. Cross (2012) (Eds.). *The selection of political party leaders in contemporary parliamentary democracies: a comparative study*. London: Routledge.

⁷ To our knowledge, no examples of PPG leaders who chair the party, but are not the party leader, exist.

⁸ Also in Portugal, the EPO chairman is the true party leader. He/she is responsible for appointing a PPG leader who thereafter functions as the link between the PPG and the EPO (Lisi & Freire, 2014).

committee membership, they coordinate discussions on which policy positions to defend, they secure party cohesion, impose disciplinary measures when required, they 'coach' PPG members, steer the PPG's staff and show newly elected MPs the parliamentary ropes. Related to the larger party organisation they attend and inform the powerful central executive committee, communicate the central party leadership's decisions to the backbenchers and keep close contact (both formal and informal) with the party-in-government and the other branches of the 'party-in-parliament' at the federal and regional levels. When in government, PPG leaders hold important responsibilities in securing a parliamentary majority, and therefore stay in close contact with cabinet members and coalition parties' PPG leaders. The latter is, amongst others, facilitated by their formal membership of 'Conference of Group Chairmen' a parliamentary governing body in which PPG leaders and the Speaker decide on the parliamentary agenda, the holding of interpellations, etc. Furthermore, PPG leaders remain MPs and subsequently have representational, legislative and controlling functions, they additionally act as the PPG's main spokesperson in important debates, and translate the party's standpoints to the parliamentary arena.

We are particularly interested in the task PPG leaders perform as 'liaison' between the PPG ('party in public office') and the central party elite ('party in central office'). On this subject, we have remarked that Belgian PPG leaders should be seen as 'agents' with two 'principals'. This principal-agent scheme, developed by economists and more recently adopted by political scientists, is a valuable tool when studying political representation, which in essence is the making present of someone who is not literally present (a 'principal') by someone authorized to act in his/her name (i.e. an 'agent') (Pitkin, 1967). According to Strøm, Müller, and Bergman (2003) the latter implies a 'democratic chain of delegation' from the electorate to those who govern: voters delegate to elected MPs, who in turn delegate to cabinet members, who thereafter delegate to civil servants etc. In political practice however, parties play a central role in this scheme. More particularly, EPO's may 'distort' this chain by making representatives more responsive to central party elites than to their voters (Strøm, 2003). Subsequently, with our project, we focus on the position of Belgian PPG leaders in this 'chain of delegation' by analysing who they consider their main 'principal', the central party elite or the PPG members (as elected voter delegates). To which tasks do they give priority? Which do they find less important? How do they see their own position? How does this affect their actions? In order to answer these questions, and to reconstruct the 'roles' of PPG leaders, an elaborate analytical framework is needed, which can be found in the re-emerging literature on legislative roles.

Parliamentary Roles and the New Wave of Neo-Institutionalism

How MPs, including PPG leaders, fill in their representative mandates and organise their activities can be understood using the concept of 'parliamentary roles' (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012). Studying roles is challenging given that the concept is multidimensional and complex (Fiers, 1998). This is illustrated, for example, by the abundance of definitions given to the concept by role theorists (Biddle, 1986). Here, we adhere to Donald Searing's conception of roles, who defines them as 'composite patterns of goals, attitudes and behaviours that are characteristic of people in particular positions' (Searing, 1994, p. 369). The primary purpose of studying roles then is 'to make sense of the uniformity and regularity of individual behaviour that results from a position in society and/or from the incorporation of collective norms' (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012, p. 8).

Although the number of studies on legislative roles has strongly been in decline since the 1980s⁹, and many political scientists still focus on the political institutions in which politicians operate rather than on the actors who conduct politics themselves (Searing, 1994), the study of individual politicians and the way they perceive their roles is experiencing an uprise (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012). More researchers now seem to acknowledge that ‘the roles of politicians are much too important to be overlooked. They are central concepts in the symbolic worlds of the people we study’ (Searing, 1994, p. 2). One of the main reasons for this ‘*role revival*’ can be found in the emergence of neo-institutional approaches, which form a synthesis of political-institutional/sociological¹⁰ perspectives (focusing on formal rules and informal norms and values) and economical perspectives on political behaviour (focusing on politicians as rational actors with a free will) (March & Olsen, 1989; Peters, 2000; Searing, 1994). By combining ‘*Homo Sociologicus*’ and ‘*Homo Economicus*’ neo-institutionalists emphasise the importance of both institutions and individual calculations on the way politicians perceive their roles, which congruently should be seen as ‘*the application of a particular institution’s ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March & Olsen, 1989) to the level of individual inmates of that institution (Andeweg, 2012, p. 66).* Two contributions that have been notably successful in joining the ‘new institutionalism’ and the concept of parliamentary roles are Donald Searing’s (1994) ‘*motivational approach*’ and Kaare Strøm’s (1997) ‘*strategic approach*’.

Searing’s Motivational Approach (1994)

In his ground-breaking work ‘*Westminster’s world. Understanding political roles*’ Searing (1994) presents a ‘*motivational approach*’ for studying legislative roles, which he later applies to parliamentary life in the British House of Commons. In his framework, Searing mixes ‘rules, roles and reasons’ (March & Olsen, 1989) by recognising that roles are embedded in institutional contexts, while still treating role players as purposive actors with a free will: politicians are not locked up in social cages of conformity, nor do they operate within an institutional vacuum. Accordingly, Searing suggests that parliamentary roles are created by (in)formal rules, norms and values, and by individual motivations, goals and attitudes. Moreover, he emphasises that researchers that try to reconstruct roles satisfactorily should try to understand them as they are understood by their players, ‘*as dynamic interactions between rules and reasons, between institutional constraints and individual preferences*’ (Searing, 1994, p. 12). By directing our concepts and measures towards roles as politicians themselves conceive them, he believes, we are the best possible position to explain the observable behaviour that originates from these role orientations, something earlier contributors often failed to do.

Subsequently, Searing makes a distinction between ‘position roles’ and ‘preference roles’. Position roles refer to (leadership) functions in parliament (e.g. Whips, Speaker, Ministers,...) that require the performance of many specific duties and responsibilities and are therefore, according to Searing, almost completely determined by formal and informal rules. Preference roles, on the contrary, are associated with parliamentary positions linked with fewer responsibilities (e.g. backbenchers) and are consequently less constrained by institutions, leaving more freedom for individual choice. In fact,

⁹ Mainly because of inconclusive results, conceptual confusion and early contributors’ difficulties in linking roles with observable behaviour, as well as the emergence of rational choice approaches which shifted the point of focus towards individual calculations, away from group norms and socialisation processes (Searing, 1994).

¹⁰ These include (1) *structuralist-functionalist* (emphasising the dominance of pre-existing rules and norms over individual choice) (e.g. Wahlke et al., 1962) and (2) *symbolic-interactionalist* perspectives (focusing on interaction and social expectations as strong forces shaping roles) (e.g. Mead, 1934) (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Müller & Saalfeld, 1997).

preference roles lend themselves better to applying the motivational approach on roles, since they allow more interplay between individual motivations and the institutional context.

Formal rules are relatively easy to analyse, as they are described in an organisation's constitutional code, 'which defines lines of authority and division of work by specifying the organisation's principal offices and their principle duties and responsibilities' (Searing, 1994, p. 4). More challenging to measure are informal rules, which refer 'to the relationships, attitudes and behaviours that are not fully specified in the formal scheme' (Searing, 1994, p. 4). These informal rules are largely created by expectations and attitudes towards certain positions. The relationship between formal rules and informal rules is 'reciprocal and complex', but most importantly formal rules determine the boundaries in which informal rules can be formed, 'thereby guiding informal relationships along lines that are appropriate for pursuing the organisations goals' (Searing, 1994, p. 4). Regarding the individual preferences as determinants of role conceptions, Searing distinguishes between 'career-goals' and 'emotional incentives'. The former are the rational calculations that are inevitably present in the thinking of politicians, while the latter are constituted by the desires and beliefs of role players. Although he acknowledges the importance of career goals, Searing asserts that 'emotional incentives are the principle energising forces in all parliamentary roles [...] The emotional incentives provide the 'passion'; they intensify the striving that is inherent in the career goals' (Searing, 1994, pp. 19-20).

Strøm's Strategic Approach (1997)

Kaare Strøm (1997) sees merit in Searing's attempt at marrying neo-institutional insights and role theory, and agrees that (in)formal rules as well as individual choices are important when analysing parliamentary roles. He too, believes that institutions are key determinants in role-taking, as they are the 'rules' that constrain 'reason' and they do so in a greater or lesser extent. He disagrees, however, with the limited role Searing contributes to 'reason' as a motivational drive for role orientations. Trying to accentuate the relevance of neo-institutional rational-choice theory for examining legislative roles, he claims that 'legislative roles can be viewed as behavioural strategies conditioned by the institutional framework in which parliamentarians operate' (Strøm, 1997, p. 157). In his view, 'roles are routines, regular patterns of behaviour' (1997, p. 158). These 'routines' are partially influenced by cultural expectations and personal traits, but above all by the rational and purposive goals legislators pursue. As such, a major difference with Searing is the distinction Strøm makes between preferences and roles as strategies. Preferences, according to Strøm, are the exogenous 'tastes' MPs have concerning their political fortune that may influence roles, but do not constitute roles *per se*¹¹. He identifies four distinct types of hierarchically ordered goal-related preferences, being: reselection, re-election, party office and legislative office. Roles, on the other hand, are actually better linked with strategies, which can be seen as 'game plans' or '*endogenous prescriptions as to how actors may most successfully and efficiently act to maximize the likelihood of whatever outcomes they favour*' (Strøm, 1997, p. 158). Role players repeat the same strategies day after day, so these strategies become routines, or systematic patterns of behaviour. An important aspect of these strategies, is the purposeful allocation of the scarce resources politicians possess (e.g. their time, media access, money and voting power) which is strongly guided by the demands of the goals they pursue. Different role orientations can therefore be seen as different allocations of resources. In sum, the strategic approach suggests that each objective MPs prioritise, requires a different strategy (which is enabled or constrained by institutions), resulting in

¹¹ In Searing's view, preferences are an intrinsic part of the roles itself (*cf. supra*).

different role orientations. For instance, MPs whose only ambition is to get re-nominated and re-elected for parliamentary office will, guided by the electoral system and existing rules on candidate selection processes, adapt their behaviour to please party leaders if selection processes are centralised, or to satisfy local party branches and/or their constituencies if selection processes are decentralised. Correspondingly, MPs who seek a higher party office will devote more time and effort to the desires of the party leaders and his peers, even if that includes fulfilling unrewarding tasks with low electoral payoff.

The Rigidity of 'Position Roles'

Both Searing and Strøm provide valuable analytical frameworks for reconstructing parliamentary roles and understanding legislative behaviour. While Searing focuses on emotional incentives as the main 'motivational drive' behind legislative roles, Strøm interprets roles as rational strategies, aimed at maximising the chance to achieve ones goals. Nonetheless, bot authors agree that legislative roles are shaped by both institutional and individual factors and that these role conceptions do have repercussions on observable parliamentary behaviour.

Both authors, however, direct their neo-institutional insights almost exclusively on backbenchers, and seem to neglect that MPs occupying a formal position, like PPG leaders, have some leeway in conceiving their role. In their view there is only one way to fill in this mandate, since the 'position roles' that are associated with these parliamentary leadership functions, are to a great extent determined by institutions. This, for instance, becomes apparent from the subcategorisation Searing makes in the role conceptions of British MPs: while he provides multiple categories for backbencher's preference roles (e.g. '*Ministerial Aspirants*' looking for a promotion or '*Constituency Members*' who prioritise redressing the grievances of their voters), the categories for position roles all coincide with their respective positions (e.g. '*Whips*', '*Ministers*', '*Junior Ministers*'). In addition, an important point of criticism Searing brings out towards role theory in the 1950s and 1960s is that by viewing roles as 'group facts', scholars neglected the considerable variety in politicians' roles across relatively similar institutional contexts, which suggests that roles are at least partially dependent on the individual choices legislators make (Searing, 1994, p. 25). Yet, this critique also holds for Searing's interpretation of parliamentary leadership roles, as he claims these 'position roles' are to a great extent shaped by formal and informal rules, thereby possibly overlooking the variety in role orientations among MPs holding these positions. Also Strøm (1997) sees little freedom for individual choices and rationally induced strategies for MPs holding formal position as he claims that institutions are the rules that constrain reason, whereby position roles (i.e. 'fully institutionally determined strategies') and preference roles (i.e. 'institutionally unconstrained strategies') are the polar points on a 'continuum of constraint'¹², meaning that position roles are largely determined by rules, thus leaving little room for individual interpretations.

We disagree with this rigid conception of parliamentary leadership roles, and believe that MPs occupying a formal position do have some leeway in defining their roles. When applied to the position of PPG leaders, it is perfectly plausible that group leaders who belong to governing parties act differently than their colleagues who belong to opposition parties, or that group leaders approaching the end of their political careers conceive their roles differently than someone who is new to the job.

¹² This is a continuum, since most real-life legislative roles lie somewhere in between (Strøm, 1997).

Applied to Belgium, which due to the intermediate position of PPG leaders and the dominance of central party elites over parliamentary parties (cf. supra) could be seen as a 'least-likely' case with regards to the weight of individual factors in the construction of PPG leaders' roles, we argue that depending on (1) personal motivations (either psychological or rational in nature), (2) the weight of formal and informal rules, (3) the presence of multiple actors exerting pressure on their functioning by creating multiple sets of informal rules based on their role expectations, and (4) the interplay between these factors, PPG leaders in Belgium could either bend more towards being an agent for the parliamentary party or towards being a representative of the 'party in central office'.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this research project, we aim to tackle to central research questions:

RQ1: *How do parliamentary party leaders in Belgium conceive their roles? Are they oriented more towards the central party elite or rather towards the PPG?*

PPG leaders will be placed on a continuum based on their roles, ranging from the parliamentary party at one pole, towards the central party at the other. After the description of PPG leader's parliamentary roles, which will be further concretised and operationalised in the methodological section of this paper, we proceed to our explanatory analysis:

RQ2: *Under what circumstances do Belgian parliamentary party leaders experience more leeway in defining their roles? What factors (individual or institutional) might explain role variations?*

Based on the literature, we have already identified a number of factors that might explain possible role variations among Belgian PPG leaders. In line with neo-institutional approaches on parliamentary roles, these explanatory variables are situated both at the individual (personal characteristics) and at the institutional level (party characteristics, selection procedures and evolutions over time).

We start at the **institutional level**. First of all, we expect that the political party a parliamentary group leader is affiliated to plays a decisive role in shaping the informal rules according to which he or she is expected to handle (Best & Vogel, 2012; Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012). A first distinction we make here is based on a parties' government status. When in government, PPG leaders are not only responsible for safeguarding the congruence with the parliamentary party's legislative work, the party program and the central executive's decisions, but are also ought to ensure the PPG's compliance with the coalition agreement and additional comprises reached between government parties (Depauw & Martin, 2008). Hence, we expect PPG leaders from government parties to be more oriented towards the central party which has an important role in coordinating policy-making and securing government stability, reducing the input of other actors, including individual MPs (e.g. De Winter & Dumont, 2003). Vice-versa, we expect that opposition PPG leaders may act more independently and can likewise operate more on behalf of the party's MPs.

H1: *PPG leaders from government parties are likely to be closer to the pole of the party elite.*

Secondly, one could presume that the (electoral) size of a (parliamentary) party affects the functioning of PPG leaders, as the sheer number of MPs generally can be linked to the organisational complexity, the degree of top-down decision-making and the political cohesion of parliamentary parties (Panbianco, 1988). Smaller sized PPGs tend to be more cohesive and need less elaborate

organisational and hierarchical structures in order to coordinate its members' activities (Heidar & Koole, 2000). We therefore expect that PPG leaders of larger PPGs tend to be more oriented towards the central party elite

H2: *PPG leaders from larger PPGs are likely to be closer to the pole of the party elite.*

Besides government status and electoral size – two relatively temporary features as they can alter with the earliest elections - we will also focus on more structural party characteristics that might stand out as decisive factors shaping a PPGs' organisational culture on the long term. Multiple factors here seem relevant, including party origin (e.g. Duverger, 1954, p. xiii; Panebianco, 1988, p. 50) and party ideology (e.g. Heidar & Koole, 2000, p. 21) but the extent to which these variables influence party organisation and the direction of these effects are often questioned (Heidar & Koole, 2000). More interesting is a party's experience in office. According to Barrling (2013), PPGs with a long history in government would adopt a more 'pragmatic' attitude than those in opposition. We however argue that – at least in the Belgian context – this logic needs to be turned upside down. We expect that PPGs of established governing parties generally will be more dominated by their central party organisations than PPGs that lack cabinet experience, because of the vital role Belgian EPOs play in coordinating decision-making and guaranteeing stability when in government, and possibly thereafter. Hence, we expect that parliamentary party leaders in seasoned governing parties are more restricted in their actions by the central party elite than PPG leaders in (newer) parties with little experience in office.

H3: *PPG leaders from parties with more 'experience in office' are more likely to be closer to the pole of the central party elite.*

We then turn to the selection procedures preceding the installation of a new PPG leader. This is crucial, since the composition of the selectorate and the criteria it uses to decide whom will be selected to a great extent shape the informal institutional framework according to which a politician is expected to fulfil his/her role (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). A central determinant in the behaviour and attitudes of politicians is their desire to be re(s)lected in a later phase of their career (e.g. Strøm, 1997, 2012). That is why, they are expected to be particularly responsive to the expectations, desires and grievances of their selectorate: "the composition of the selectorate is thus likely to influence the behavioural patterns of parliamentarians and of their organisation, the political party (Hazan & Rahat, 2006, p. 116). In theory, and as stipulated by the parliamentary constitutions in the federal House of Representatives, Senate and the Flemish parliament, Belgian PPG leaders are selected amongst and by the PPG members. In political practice, however, the central party elite play an important, if not predominant role in the selection of PPG leaders (De Winter & Dumont, 2000). Although both the EPO and the PPG are generally involved in this process, in some cases the central party elite decides practically sovereignly (i.e. an exclusive selectorate), whilst in others it grants considerable autonomy to the PPG in selecting their chairman (i.e. an inclusive selectorate). We expect that PPG leaders who were selected by a small central party elite are more prone to perceive their role as a representative of the 'party in central office', while PPG leader who were selected by the party's MPs, will act more as an agent of the PPG.

H4: *PPG leaders that were selected by an exclusive selectorate, consisting primarily of members of the 'party in central office', are more likely to be oriented towards the party elite.*

A final institutional explanatory variable concerns possible evolutions over time. When studying parliamentary roles, it is crucial to acknowledge the 'contextuality' and 'temporality' of roles (Best &

Vogel, 2012). Though often fairly stable, roles are not persistent but change over time. *Individual role changes* primarily stem from horizontal or vertical movements of MPs within the institutional context's positional grid¹³. *Collective role changes* on the other hand, result from changes in the 'rules of the game', or a modification of the social and/or political context itself which causes individuals to adapt or redefine their roles (Best & Vogel, 2012, p. 38). Applied to our project, it is reasonable that the role orientations of Belgian PPG leaders have evolved over time due to changes in the institutional framework in which they operate (i.e. collective changes). Because of their central position within the party organisation, we more precisely expect that intra-party transformations, affecting the internal balance of power, could have had an impact on PPG leaders' role orientations over time.

Some scholars argue that the gradual transformation of Duverger's 'mass party' (1954) into the electoral-professional 'catch-all party' and later into the 'cartel party' (Katz & Mair, 1995; Kirchheimer, 1966), which among others, involved a reduction of parties' ideological profiles, a wider electoral appeal aimed at vote maximisation and a centralisation of power (Krouwel, 2012), altered the internal balance of power within parties, primarily to the benefit of 'the party in public office' and the parliamentary party in particular. After all, they now have greater access to financial resources (due to an increase in state funding which is often directly accumulated at the level of the PPG) and are better equipped with professional staff that supports the PPG's activities (Heidar & Koole, 2000; Krouwel, 2012). It additionally is argued that the *de-ideologisation* of party competition weakens the position of the EPO, as pragmatism, and not ideology, becomes prevalent in decision-making (Helms, 2000). Evidence of PPGs gaining power vis-à-vis their respective EPOs can be found in, among others, The Netherlands (Andeweg, 2000) and Austria (Müller & Steiniger, 2000).

This evolution, however, does not seem to apply to Belgium. In sharp contrast to the powerful central party organisations, parliamentary parties are still seen as rather weak actors in the Belgian political system (De Winter & Dumont, 2003; Dewachter, 2014). In order to guarantee some stability in a system of rather unstable multiparty governments, intra-party policy making is concentrated in the hands of a small central party elite, whilst the interference of other actors, including MPs, is minimised: they are ought to abide by the party program, the coalition agreement (if relevant) and the decisions of the EPO (De Winter & Dumont, 2003). Moreover, it can be argued that the dominance of the Belgian central party elites has even expanded in the past decades. The emergence of new parties and the splitting of traditional parties along the linguistic cleavage contributed to the extreme fragmentation of the party system in the 1960s and 1970s¹⁴, amplifying the role of central party elites in coordinating political decision-making (De Winter & Dumont, 2003; De Winter et al., 2009). In addition, the constitutional reforms that turned Belgium into a federal state caused a 'proliferation of separate PPGs' since the first direct elections of regional parliaments in 1995¹⁵. This poses new challenges for intra-party policy coordination, causing the role of central party organisations in harmonizing the positions of their PPGs and securing support for the executives at the different levels to become even more vital and more complicated by the emergence of asymmetrical governments on the federal and regional level (De Winter & Dumont, 2003; Steyvers, 2014). Accordingly, we expect that central party

¹³ We will argue however, that they may not only result from individuals changing positions, but also from the same positions taken by other individuals, e.g. when an experienced PPG leader is replaced by an unexperienced PPG leader (cf. infra).

¹⁴ The degree of fragmentation effectively kept rising until 1999 (De Winter, Swyngedouw, & Dumont, 2009).

¹⁵ Before 1995, the regional/community parliaments were composed of federal representatives and senators (apart from Brussels and the German-speaking one) making coordination between federal and sub federal levels no issue.

elites now have greater control over parliamentary parties (including their leaders) than before, pushing the PPG leader towards the role of representative of the party elite.

H5: *More recent PPG leaders are more likely to be closer to the pole of party elite.*

Lastly, also individual preferences, whether based predominantly on emotional motivations (e.g. Searing, 1994) or on strategic calculations (e.g. Strøm, 1997), determine role attitudes and behaviours. As these personal considerations are partially shaped by previous experiences and influences that can be linked to a role-taker's social and political background (Best & Vogel, 2012), we will investigate the impact of personal characteristics on PPG leaders' role definitions. However, not all personal traits are equally good predictors of parliamentary behaviour and attitudes (Best & Vogel, 2012; Searing & Edinger, 1967) Research by Best & Vogel (2012) reveals that classic socio-demographic variables (such as gender, education, social origin, income, region of residence) only explain a limited part of variance in MPs' role conceptions. Political experience and age prove to be more relevant, which according to the authors indicates that 'legislative role taking is part of a process of secondary political socialisation that overrides deeper layers of representatives' social identities' (Best & Vogel, 2012, p. 61). In our project, two contradictory expectations on political experience and age as factors shaping roles are conceivable. On the one hand, PPG leaders with impressive parliamentary track records are more acquainted with (both parliamentary and intra-party) decision-making processes, which makes it easier to further the wishes and grievances of backbenchers. Furthermore, they are less dependent from the central party for their future careers, which could allow them to behave more independently, not being obliged to adhere to the preferences of their electorate (e.g. Hazan & Rahat, 2010). The other way around, party elites could also consciously rely on experienced PPG leaders who know the intricacies of parliamentary life, in order to keep control over their PPG and to ensure the loyalty of its members to the central party's policy positions. Additionally, seasoned MPs have undergone longer and more thorough socialisation processes, which could result in a more party-oriented role.

H6a: *Experienced PPG leaders are more likely to be closer to the pole of the parliamentary party*

H6b: *Experienced PPG leaders are more likely to be closer to the pole of the party elite*

Although several concrete expectations and hypotheses here are elaborated, during the process of data-gathering enough room will be given to the experiences of the respondents themselves and to possible other explanatory variables arising from our analysis. This is crucial, given the impact of personal goals and motivations on roles (see above).

Data & Methodology

Searing argues that 'the best way to understand the roles of politicians, is to understand them as they do' (1994, p. 10). Still, to operationalise the concept of roles and to go beyond a mere description of how politicians believe individuals in their specific position should act, remains challenging. Our analysis will consist of two main components. First, we aim to identify and describe the parliamentary role attitudes and behaviours of Belgian PPG leaders. Here, we opt for a broad interpretivist approach aimed at reconstructing the institutional environment in which Belgian PPG leaders function and identifying the relevant underlying individual goals and incentives that shape their roles. In a second phase, we proceed to our explanatory analysis and aim to test our hypotheses by analysing the factors, both individual and institutional, that can explain role variance among PPG leaders. Here, we will use

the method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is rather novel to the field of legislative studies, but seems exceedingly helpful when studying parliamentary roles, as it allows systemic cross-case comparison, while simultaneously acknowledging the need to pay close attention to the inherent complexity of each case (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009, p. xviii) which is indispensable when trying to understand how individuals construct their roles (Searing, 1994). Moreover, QCA will allow us to isolate the effects of ‘institutional’ and ‘personal’ explanatory variables and thus test the underlying premises of current – rather rigid – conceptions of parliamentary leadership roles.

Descriptive analysis of PPG leader’s role attitudes and behaviours

In a first phase we will investigate and describe the role attitudes and behaviours of PPG leaders inductively, using a qualitative interpretivist approach. We adhere to neo-institutional basic insights on how roles are constructed and congruently will provide an account of the relevant formal and informal rules, norms, values and expectations and identify the underlying goals and incentives, both emotional and career-related, that shape role orientations.

The **formal rules** specifying the functioning of PPG leaders can be found at multiple locations, as these actors operate at the intersect of multiple political arena’s, i.e. in parliament and in the party organisation. We have already analysed (1) the constitutions of the federal House of Representatives, the Senate and the Flemish Parliament as well as (2) the Flemish party statutes. A third possible source for formal guidelines can be found where political parties and the parliamentary sphere meet: in possible formal rules and guidelines formulated by the PPGs themselves. Given that these formal rules seem to be negligible, both in number and in scope, we will foremost have to seek for informal rules and individual preferences as determinants shaping the role orientations of Belgian PPG leaders. When trying to grasp such intangible factors, qualitative methods are recommended (Searing, 1994).

Despite a current reluctance for studying **informal rules**, due to an aversion of returning into former sociological habits (see above) (Searing, 1994), the common norms and values of an organisation are critical for it to run smoothly as they to a great extent determine its *modi operandi* by delineating the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March & Olsen, 1989) according to which politicians think and act, and thus define their roles (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Searing, 1994; Strøm, 1997). As the informal scheme is largely created by the attitudes and expectations towards certain positions, we will interview party elite members in the direct environment of PPG leaders (i.e. MP’s, PPG secretaries, members of the party executive committee, party leaders). How do they think parliamentary party leaders should act? These interviews will also allow us to contrast the reported experiences, attitudes and behaviours of PPG leaders themselves.

Next to the formal and informal institutional context, the third major category of factors influencing roles – whether predominantly based on underlying emotional beliefs and incentives (Searing, 1994) or on strategic, career-related considerations (Strøm, 1997) – are **personal preferences**. These will be examined by interviewing PPG leaders themselves. How do they perceive their own role within the party? Do they see themselves as an agent of the parliamentary group or as representative of the central party? Is there, if any, room for personal preferences? Are these preference roles dominated by career-related or by emotional incentives?

Apart from identifying personal preferences, the interviews will additionally serve to detect attitudes and actual role behaviour. A major point of criticism towards structuralist and interactionist

approaches on roles have been their limited success in finding positive relations between role-related attitudes and actual parliamentary behaviour. A central claim is that roles are insignificant unless they are clearly linked to decision-taking activities (Searing, 1994, p. 12). This seems to have altered with the 'neo-institutional wave', either by taking a more inductive stance when studying roles rather than imposing abstract academic concepts in the minds of politicians and by distinguishing between preference roles and position roles that can be translated in recognisable patterns of behaviour (Searing, 1994) or by incorporating behaviour in the roles themselves by seeing them as 'behavioural strategies' according to which legislators allocate their scarce resources and maximise the likelihood of their preferred outcome (Strøm, 1997). Yet, according to Blomgren and Rozenberg (2012, p. 30), these differences must not be overrated, as there seems to be a common agreement that roles – produced both by institutional and individual factors – have consequences for actual political behaviour. Nonetheless, it remains essential to distinguish between attitudes and behaviour as a comparison between 'opinion data' and 'behavioural data' contributes to test the robustness of our analysed legislative role categories (Jenny & Müller, 2012). Therefore, our approach will lean more towards that of Searing. Our interviews with parliamentary group leaders will include questions both about attitudes (e.g. what constitutes a good parliamentary leader in your view?) and behaviour (e.g. how much of your time in percentage do you spend on safeguarding party discipline?).

As roles often constitute a difference in degree, the risk exists of obtaining vague answers attaching equal importance to all actors. To avoid this, our questionnaire will contain (fictional) dilemma's (based on concrete situations) between which respondents have to make a clear choice, as well as concrete situations in which a conflict arose between the PPG and the party's central leadership (derived from media outlets). This will allow us to detect 'role primacy' (Best & Vogel, 2012). Answers about behaviour will be checked for their consistency in other interviews (with other party elite members and with other PPG leaders).

Explanatory Analysis using fsQCA: Studying Parliamentary Roles as Outcomes

In order to study the explanatory variables that shape roles and might clarify why some PPG leaders are more (or less) constrained in their functioning than others, we will use the method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). This method, which was first elaborated by Charles Ragin (1987), is exceedingly inspiring social scientists as it has proven to be useful tool when analysing complex causal relationships (i.e. *multiple conjunctural causations*) between *conditions* (\approx independent variables) and *outcomes* (\approx dependent variables).

The main strength of QCA, which both incorporates an epistemological approach and a concrete set of analytical techniques (Rihoux, 2006), is that it allows 'systemic cross-case comparison, while at the same time giving justice to within-case complexity' (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009, p. xviii). Hence, choosing QCA as a research strategy, often reflects researchers' intention to marry to contradictory goals: one, to gather in-depth insights in cases and to capture their complexity (for which small-N research designs are most suited) and two, to adopt a variable-oriented approach that produces some level of generalization (for which large-N research designs are best suited) (Rihoux, 2006).

QCA indeed incorporates key strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. First, it is a holistic, case-sensitive approach that considers each case under study as a complex entity throughout the analysis. In addition, it wields a conception of causality that acknowledges real-world complexity by using the concept of 'multiple conjunctural causations'. This implies that (1) a certain outcome is

often provoked by a combination of conditions, rather than by one single cause, (2) several different combinations of conditions may well produce the same outcome, and (3) depending on the context, a given condition may have a different impact on the outcome. Causality is thus context-sensitive, moving QCA away from simplistic causal reasoning (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009; Ragin, 1987; Rihoux, 2006). A key-asset of QCA that leans more towards quantitative approaches is that it allows to analyse more than just a handful of cases, which opens up the possibility to produce (modest¹⁶) generalizations for a given (sub-)population. Relying on Boolean algebra and minimization, QCA is an analytical tool that allows scholars to reduce the complex real-world cases to a series of variables (in terms of conditions and outcomes) and makes scientific replication possible: it is a particularly transparent technique in which analytical choices must be backed by theoretical and/or empirical arguments (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009). QCA indeed combines both deductive and inductive aspects, and is suited for testing and falsifying existing hypotheses and theories, as well as for elaborating new theoretical arguments (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009; Rihoux, 2006).

QCA enables systemic comparison of complex cases by breaking these cases down into 'configurations', which are specific combinations of explanatory variables or 'conditions' that produce a certain 'outcome'. The main question QCA attempts to address, is what conditions are 'sufficient' or 'necessary' for a certain outcome. A condition is necessary when it is always present when a certain outcome occurs: the outcome cannot occur without this condition (or a combination thereof). A condition is sufficient for an outcome if the outcome always occurs when the condition (or a combination thereof) is present (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).

In our research project, individual PPG leaders will be considered our cases, their respective role orientations (which will already be identified at this point) are the outcomes. Several possibly relevant 'conditions' have already been revealed based on our review of the literature (party characteristics, experience, time, selection) (see above). These can possibly be adjusted during the course of our data gathering and analysis - for instance when during the interviews becomes clear that a selected condition has no relevant impact on the outcome, when a new condition seems more appropriate, or when we encounter so-called 'contradictory configurations'¹⁷ (Rihoux & De Meur, 2009, pp. 48-49). For each case these attributes can then be measured (for example: *case 1* is an experienced PPG leader, who belongs to a small opposition party with little experience in office and perceives his role as a representative of the PPG). This segmentation into variables does, however, not affect the holistic perception of the case as a whole: the aim is to compare cases as whole units, each being defined as a configuration of conditions and outcomes (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009). Following the underlying logic of QCA, we can then investigate under what circumstances (or combinations of conditions) PPG leaders are more oriented towards a certain role (for instance, a 'central party delegate' or a 'parliamentary party delegate' if these roles were to exist) than others. Using QCA, and its analytical tools such as the truth table and Boolean minimizations, we could then identify the sufficient (combinations) of conditions and necessary (combinations of) conditions for a certain role as outcome.

Studying roles as 'dependent variables' using QCA yields multiple benefits and is innovative for a number of reasons. QCA has often been applied by social scientists who aim to analyse cases and

¹⁶ Trough systemic comparison of comparable cases, it is possible to formulate propositions, with proper caution, to other similar cases that share a reasonable number of characteristics with those that were the subject of the QCA (e.g. PPG leaders) (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009, p. 12).

¹⁷ I.e. a combination of the same conditions which lead to a negative outcome in some cases and a positive outcome in others.

outcomes that are situated at the macro- or meso-level, such as states, economies, policy fields or organisations. Only few scholars have applied QCA to micro-level data, like small groups or individuals, despite its potential to do so (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009; Rihoux et al., 2009). Additionally, we aim to demonstrate that QCA is highly useful for studying roles as 'dependent' variables as it is a transparent method that allows us to systematically compare 'role players' without neglecting the idiosyncrasies of each individual case. Moreover, applying QCA will not only allow us to identify and measure the importance of causal conditions influencing roles: it will also allow us to test the underlying assumptions of neo-institutional approaches on parliamentary roles, and particularly their rigid conception of parliamentary leadership roles (or 'position roles'). By using QCA, we will be able to distinguish between 'institutional conditions (for example: party characteristics) and 'personal conditions' (for example: political experience) and, to some extent, isolate the influence of these conditions on role orientations as outcome. Are parliamentary leadership roles truly completely determined by the institutional framework in which role players act? What is the importance of personal ambitions and motivations? Are they 'necessary' conditions for role variations?

Using QCA also brings some challenges. The most important challenge concerns the operationalization and dichotomization (csQCA) or calibration (fsQCA) of conditions and outcomes. Some conditions will be relatively easy to operationalize (e.g. government status: a party either is in government (1) or in opposition (0)), others will require more attention (e.g. roles as outcome – preferably calibrated using fuzzy-set QCA). Other analytical challenges foremost concern case-selection strategies.

Case and variable selection

In QCA, cases should be selected purposefully (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009). The population under study (i.e. Belgian PPG leaders) must be sufficiently homogenous: cases should share some characteristics that are constant throughout the analysis, making comparison possible. A second consideration concerns the extent of diversity within the research population. A basic rule here is that a maximum of heterogeneity over a minimum number of cases should be pursued. It is crucial to select cases (PPG leaders) that vary in the outcome of interest (roles), which should be clearly delineated in an early phase of the project. Moreover, the case-selection should be driven by preliminary hypotheses and should therefore address as much possible (combinations of) conditions that are expected to be 'sufficient' or 'necessary' to obtain a certain outcome. Hence, also the selection of conditions is essential, and their number should be kept reasonably low, between 4 and 8 conditions in intermediate-N analysis (10 to 40 cases). A large number of conditions tends to 'individualize' each case, making it difficult to find any regularity across the cases¹⁸ (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009). Currently we identified six (possibly) relevant conditions, five of which relate to the institutional level (party size, government status, experience in office, selection procedures, time) and one which relates to the personal level (political experience).

At this point, we have already compiled a dataset with all parliamentary group leaders (n=304) in the House of Representatives, the Senate and the Flemish Parliament from 1962 until June 2016. This dataset includes personal, party and career-related characteristics such as the starting and ending date of their mandates, their seniority as an MP, age, educational level, their parties government status. Based on this dataset our cases will be selected.

¹⁸ In addition, increasing the number of conditions increases the risk of obtaining 'logical remainders'.

We will only examine PPG leaders from 1995 onwards, for several reasons. In this year, the regional parliaments were directly elected for the first time, allowing parliamentary party leaders to focus exclusively on one parliament. Moreover, the constitutional reform of 1993 (which was fully employed in 1995) accelerated the regionalisation of policy domains and institutional reforms, increasing the power of central party organisations in coordinating between its multiple federal and regional PPGs (De Winter & Dumont, 2003). Exploratory research also indicates that 1995 would be a good cut-off point, since important elements of the political profiles of parliamentary group leaders (such as duration of the mandate and political experience) have significantly changed in that period (de Vet & Wauters, 2015). Finally, there is a pragmatic argument: since we will conduct in-depth interviews, it is essential that our interviewees are still alive and able to provide enough valuable insights.

In order to achieve a maximum of internal heterogeneity among the group of post-1995 PPG leaders, respondents will be selected based on the 'conditions' that are relevant for our hypotheses. Our case selection method will resemble a stratified purpose sampling strategy. Most party characteristics (size, experience in office, selection procedures) will be covered by analysing all six main Flemish parties represented in the federal and Flemish parliament from 1995 until 2016¹⁹. As a starting point, from each party four PPG leaders will be selected: two PPG leaders with little political experience when they started (i.e. no ministerial experience and less than four or five years of parliamentary experience) and two PPG leaders with a lot of political experience when they were selected (i.e. ministerial experience and/or more than 8 years in parliament, which is the average among our population). In addition, within each of these subcategories, we select one PPG leader that was appointed in an early phase of the research period (around 1995) and one PPG leaders that was more recently appointed, in order to be able to measure possible evolutions over time. Moreover, within each party, enough dispersion will be pursued based on the party's government status at the time the respondents were PPG leaders.

As such, as a start 24 PPG leaders will be selected. However, as QCA requires analytic iteration, additional cases (and conditions) may be included at a later stage of the research (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur, 2009; Rihoux, 2006). Based on the selection of PPG leaders, other party elite members (party leaders, MPs, PPG secretaries) will be contacted in order to investigate their (former) role expectations towards these PPG leaders. PPG leaders unwilling to participate will be replaced by respondents with similar characteristics.

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¹⁹ The selection of PPG leaders of both government and opposition parties will be ensured.

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