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BELGIUM

Against the Government and Its Parties, (Not So Much) with the People

Judith Sijstermans and Steven M. Van Hauwaert

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on Belgium. While its case fatality rate is in line with that of most West European countries ($\pm 2.2\%$), in the summer of 2020 Belgium holds the record for the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population in Western Europe (± 220) (Johns Hopkins 2021).¹ An intricate sequence of government responses followed the first reported cases in February 2020, alongside an ongoing complex government formation process throughout 2020. This chapter highlights the role of Belgium's only populist party, the Vlaams Belang (VB), throughout this period: How did it respond to the pandemic and how can we understand/explain its responses?

Ever since the late 1970s, the VB has been the principal right-wing populist force in Belgian politics. While its history has been rather eventful and its electoral parkour one of relative ups and downs, its ideological core has remained relatively stable. The VB's rhetoric and political stances have always been primarily embedded in Flemish nationalism, social conservatism, and a rejection of immigration. The party's ideational changes over time are ones of degree and style rather than substance. Under the current leadership of Tom Van Grieken, the VB has moderated its communication strategy and nuanced its stances in key policy areas, such as social welfare, as part of what we can describe as a mainstreaming process.

This chapter primarily argues that, reflecting this recent moderation in its image, many of the VB's responses to COVID-19 resemble a more typical anti-government position rather than a populist one. The two are close conceptual cousins, but the latter includes a clear and homogeneous reference to the people. This is something we see much less in the VB's responses to the pandemic. Similar to the *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France, the VB opportunistically

links the COVID-19 crisis to its key rhetorical frames (see Chapter 20). The party conflates various crises to portray the COVID-19 pandemic as part of a long-standing crisis of the Belgian state and to discredit democratic functioning. This response illustrates the tension within the party: between more moderate traditional opposition politics and the crisis-driven rhetoric seen as typical of right-wing populism.

Overview of the VB's response to COVID-19

While the VB has been represented in Belgium's Chamber of Representatives since 1981, it has always been in opposition. In large part, this is due to the so-called *cordon sanitaire*, an agreement between (mainstream) parties to systematically exclude the VB from any coalition formations. Together with the state structure in Belgium, these coalition formation processes are often quite complicated. This complexity can be neatly illustrated by Belgium's political situation throughout the pandemic. Figure 22.1 gives a concise overview of some of the more important political events since the May 2019 federal election as well as the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium.

More than the other countries in this volume, the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium was preceded and accompanied by a political crisis, as shown in Figure 22.1. This kind of political standstill and complexity is becoming ever more common in Belgian politics, with the previous three government formations lasting 494 days, 139 days, and 589 days, respectively. Naturally, this affects the responses of political outsiders, like the VB, to governmental measures to deal with the pandemic. In Figure 22.2, we summarize how the VB responded to COVID-19 and the government's handling of it.

The VB predominantly and regularly opposed the government's choices related to lockdown policies, at first the slow implementation of the measures and then the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies (Van Overbeke and Stadig 2020, 311). The VB also supported stricter border policies, testing, face masks, and sanitary measures, lockdown policies, and vaccine uptake and criticized the Belgian government's handling of each of these issues. By July 2020, the party had produced a Coronavirus "Blunder Book," enumerating the numerous failures of the Belgian government in its response to the pandemic. The party proposed that it would serve as an "archive" of VB opposition against the Belgian government (VB Magazine July 2020, 14).

Over time, the party began to emphasize the economic effect of lockdown and to call for more support for small businesses, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors. On this basis, the party suggested that corona measures had become disproportionate and that they unfairly targeted specific layers of society. This is typified by the campaigns against the curfew led by the VB Youth. The party's discourse during this time increasingly moved toward calls that it was now "time for freedom" (VB Magazine May 2021, June 2021).

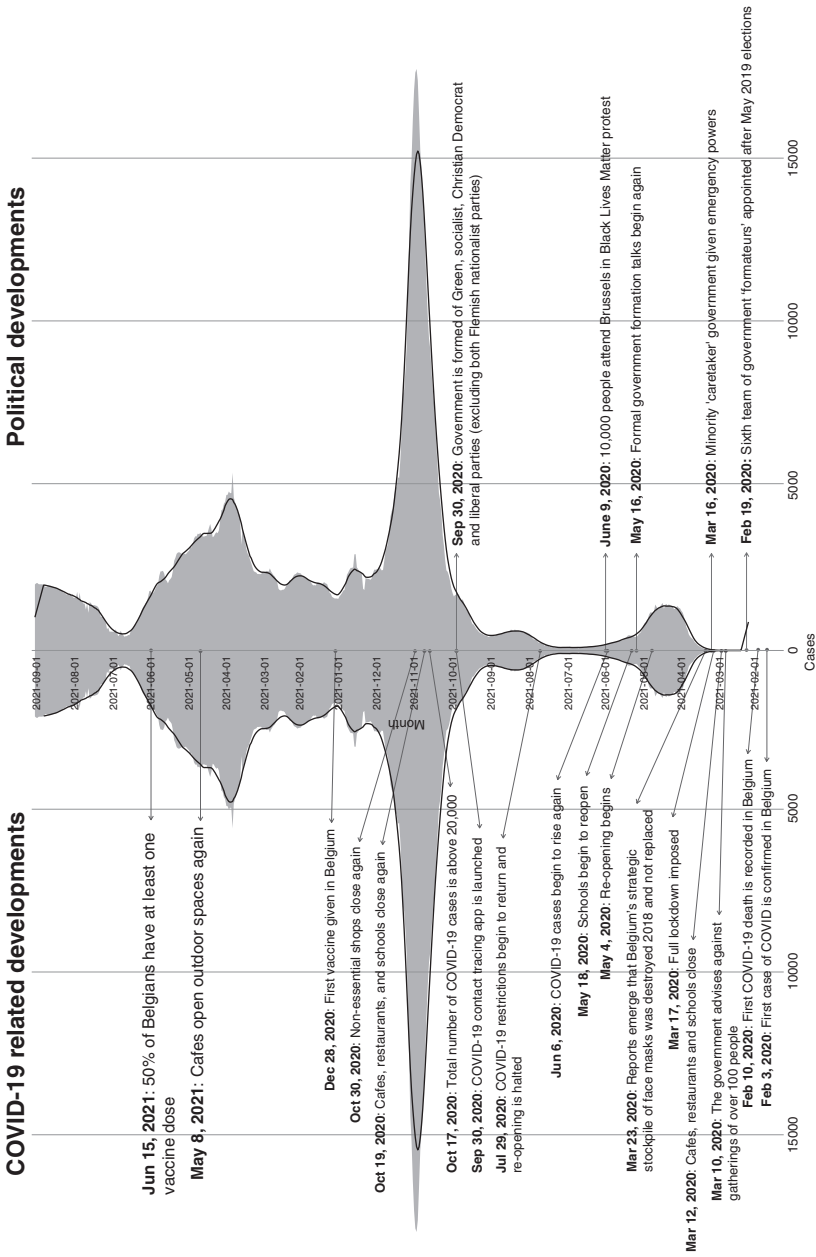


FIGURE 22.1 Timeline of political events and COVID-19 in Belgium (2020–2021).

Source: Our World in Data (<https://ourworldindata.org>) and authors' own data.

Note: The shaded area represents a rolling seven-day average of the daily new confirmed cases of COVID-19. The actual violin (black line) represents a 14-day rolling average. Both sides of the zero line are mirror images of each other.

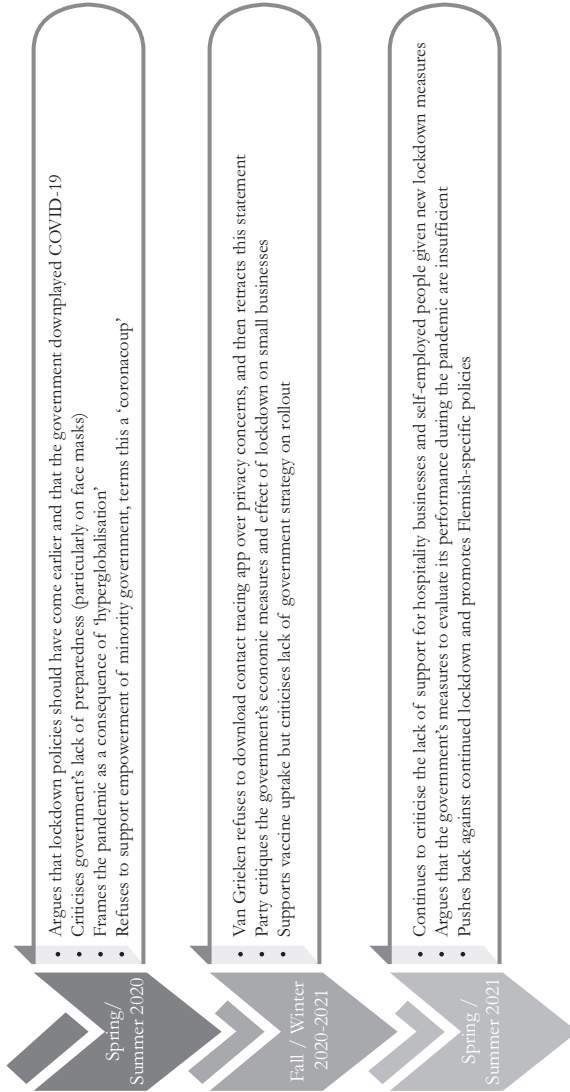


FIGURE 22.2 Timeline of VB's position on COVID-19 (2020–2021).

Source: VB's monthly magazines and press releases: <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/vbmagazine/>; <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/category/nieuws/>.

Understanding the VB's response and framing

The VB frequently argues that the ongoing political crisis, that is, the perceived failure of Belgian government in handling COVID-19, is the direct consequence of a wider crisis of representation in the country. Crisis can be exploited by political actors since its disruption provides space for more radical, non-incremental change; this happens, in part, through a process of blaming and taking responsibility (Boin et al. 2009). Moffitt (2015, 195) further claims that the propagation of crisis is internal to populism and that “populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis.” Kriesi and Pappas (2015) similarly argue that crises can serve as catalysts for populism. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in the sense that it is an external crisis largely beyond the control of traditional political actors. That is, it was never a crisis fully perpetuated by populists.

We find no clear evidence that the VB has *prolonged* attention to the pandemic or that it has *sensationalized* the ensuing health crisis. Rather than discussing the pandemic as a health crisis, the party frequently and fluently employs crisis language to *conflate* the COVID-19 crisis with those crises traditionally called upon by their more ideological stances. As such, the VB exploits the pandemic to emphasize its key messages. In the following sections, we show that these messages provide frames for interpreting the new challenges of COVID-19.

To a large extent, the VB's responses and framing are in line with those of populist radical right or far right parties. That is, the VB frames the pandemic and the corresponding health crisis in terms that align with its main ideological stances: opposition to immigration, (Flemish) nationalism, strong law and order, and populism (Mudde 2007). While we cannot be all-comprehensive in this chapter, we briefly illustrate in the following chapter how the party intertwines these frames into its responses to COVID-19.

Opposition to immigration and (to a lesser extent) law and order framing

The VB's 2019 electoral manifesto was infused with anti-immigration positions, often framing other positions around hardline opposition to immigration (e.g., welfare chauvinism). This is something we also see throughout the pandemic. For example, in May 2020, the VB highlighted the “double standards” of some of the government's regulations, referring to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, where “immigrant youth” rioted without consequences, whereas Flemish elders who gathered in smaller groups received fines. Van Grieken noted: “This country can apparently work efficiently, but only when it's against our people” (VB Magazine May 2020, 3). The VB argues that BLM protests and the political actors allowing them to happen betray the “hardworking people,” framing the issue in terms of the defense of the natives. The BLM protests were seen as:

a slap in the face to the thousands of people who have worked in recent months to keep our country running and to the people in care, as well as all citizens who have been complying with the strict rules for months.

(VB press release, 7 June 2020)

The party's promotion of law and order was less obvious, but most noticeable during the BLM protests which drew thousands of attendees to Brussels. This allowed the VB to criticize the government's supposed lack of enforcement of the COVID-19 measures. Yet, overall, law and order policies were difficult to mobilize in this environment. The principal goal of the VB remained opposing the supposedly corrupt and incompetent parties and the government's handling of the crisis. Encouraging strict enforcement of that government's rules was not strategically advantageous.

Flemish nationalist framing

The VB has its roots in the Flemish nationalist movement and the party continues to call for greater regional autonomy and a reformed state structure. The COVID-19 pandemic and the supposed government failures in handling the pandemic were seen as emblematic of a "broken" Belgian state which has been unable to deal with the (health) crisis. The disproportionate number of Intensive Care admissions and deaths in Belgium as well as regional differences served as fuel for substate nationalist demands.

Building on this fundamental demand for state reform, the VB's quest for more regional autonomy came early in the pandemic. An article in the party's members' magazine in April 2020 argued: "The federal level must act decisively now. But when the crisis is over, Flanders must finally be given powers so that the mess of the last few days cannot be repeated" (VB Magazine April 2020, 16). The VB leader in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives Barbara Pas called the distribution and fragmentation of powers "the Belgian disease" and called for Flanders to be given maximum powers in advance of claims for full self-government (VB Magazine July 2020, 17).

The VB systematically blames Belgium's disintegrated power structure for the government's impotence and indecisiveness in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis is thus entirely conflated with a wider state crisis, which forms the core of the VB's platform. As the VB's magazine proclaimed: "Flanders not only needs a well-considered exit plan from the corona crisis, Flanders also needs an exit plan for the minority government Wilmès [II], and even more: an exit plan from Belgium!" (VB Magazine June 2020, 7).

Populist framing?

While the VB criticizes various elites (e.g., virologists) and international actors (e.g., China, the World Health Organization [WHO]), its principal focus when

critiquing the “corrupt” elite is on Belgian political parties. Much like in the UK, political parties have been portrayed as corrupt and the VB has long decried Belgium’s “particracy” (see Chapter 6). As early as March 2020, the VB warned that the government would exploit the pandemic to execute a “coronacoup,” that is, an opportunistic grab for power by mainstream parties. The VB noted, “When one of the greatest crises of this century—the human, economic and social consequences of which we cannot even fully understand yet—is insufficient to place the people’s interests above party interests, it will never end” (VB Magazine April 2020, 2).

The failure of mainstream parties has been seen as one component of a wider broken state. The party noted: “Anyone who thought that the highest tax burden in the world was synonymous with a well-functioning welfare state will be disappointed” (VB Magazine June 2020, 6). Simultaneously, Belgian political elites were seen as exploiting the crisis to “open the tap even further” and to create a “new world order with more [financial] solidarity from north to south [Flanders to Wallonia]” (VB Magazine May 2020, 2).

While similar parties in other countries tend to dismiss (epidemiological) experts because they are part of a distant elite, the VB’s main target throughout the pandemic has always been and remains the Belgian government. For example, the VB has criticized prominent virologist Marc Van Ranst. However, the animosity does not explicitly target Van Ranst’s role as an expert. Rather, it stems from before the pandemic started, when Van Ranst was quoted as saying he was “simply allergic to the extreme-right” (Moens 2021; Winckelmans 2021).

The VB actively sought to unite and mobilize sections of the Flemish people, especially those from societal sectors facing economic difficulties, around this anti-elitist or anti-government frame. In that regard, VB leader Tom Van Grieken noted:

Lockdown after lockdown, Flemish people continued to work in sometimes very difficult circumstances... The list of Flemish people who made a difference in their own way last year is endless. One thing binds them all: they could not count on the government.

(VB Magazine January 2021, 3)

At the same time, the VB portrays itself as a “social people’s party” that recognized the importance of small businesses, including hospitality and tourism, and called for further support for these small businesses (VB Magazine July 2020, 8). Statements in support of the ordinary businessman and specific groups negatively impacted by the lockdowns have increased over time. In this sense, the VB takes part in an “invocation of the people” (Moffitt 2015). Yet, while the VB has clearly targeted the government, they have less frequently called upon general images of the “ordinary” Flemish citizen.

From the outset of the pandemic, the VB has also blamed ruling EU elites, accusing them of being unable to deal with a multifaceted health crisis. It notably

highlighted that the EU's economic, budgetary, and financial responses to the pandemic were a failure, which, in turn, was emblematic of a broader crisis within the EU and its institutions. In past crises, populist parties across Europe have made similar appeals to the (il)legitimacy of the EU and used the crisis to "lend credence to their dismissal of the EU as a malfunctioning apparatus" (Pirro and van Kessel 2018, 338).

This type of anti-elitist framing makes frequent reference to a large-scale crisis of representation and democratic functioning. The conflation of a perceived political crisis and a perceived economic crisis is common among populist actors. Kriesi and Pappas (2015, 324) found that when there is a convergence between political and economic crisis, populism unsurprisingly becomes more intense. However, this is not exactly what we observe. The VB's responses to the pandemic are embedded in a systemic anti-government rationale that is amplified by the increasing hostility and fragmentation in Belgian politics. The intensification of political rhetoric in Belgium preceded and accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic rather than being caused by it. In that sense, the VB's critiques and responses to government inertia and incompetence can—to a large extent—be interpreted as traditional opposition stances.

Drawing on the distinction made by Stavrakakis et al. (2018), we see that the VB constructs COVID-19 as a *crisis* "of" the Belgian system rather than a *crisis* "within" the system. Van Grieken wrote in the June 2020 edition of the party's magazine: "One would like to forget it, but Belgium was also a country in crisis before the corona crisis...The total mismanagement of the corona crisis has confirmed that mistrust of the people" (VB Magazine June 2020, 3). In other words, for the VB, the crisis is (yet another) vehicle to illustrate and amplify its opposition. However, as we mentioned before, the party does not *prolong* the COVID-19 crisis, as Moffitt (2015) suggests would be typical of a populist actor. Rather, the party's attention to the issue dropped off considerably after July 2020.

While the party's response is founded in its primary ideological constructs, it closely resembles traditional anti-elite or opposition politics. The question that remains is how to explain these responses.

Explaining the VB's response

The VB opposes the Belgian government's responses to the pandemic, allowing the party to emphasize the wider crises and democratic challenges they perceive in Belgium, namely the corrupt elite/s and the Belgian state structures. This balance between conflation of crisis narratives and relatively ordinary opposition politics reflects the VB's dual purpose. The party aims to serve as the unmoderated voice of the man in the street, outbidding its main political competitor, the conservative Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), while simultaneously focusing on moderation and increasing its viability as a governmental partner (see also chapter on France).

Moderation and governance: breaking through the cordon sanitaire

Since the late 1980s, Belgian parties have refused to enter any coalition with the VB. This so-called *cordon sanitaire*, while deemed undemocratic by many (both within and beyond the party), means the VB remains in a position of permanent opposition. In some ways, the VB has grown comfortable in this role. Abts (2015) posits that the *cordon* is truly incorporated into the organizational and ideological ethos of the VB. Filip De Winter argues that:

(...) as a protest party, we have a strong discourse, that isn't always nuanced, and it can't be, because you have to create an opening for yourself. You don't do that with a lot of difficult nuanced and balanced stories. You do that by getting the ramrod out and breaking the door down, it's that simple.

The party's early and unrelenting criticisms of the government illustrates this ramming rod approach (see Figure 22.2).

At the same time, permanent opposition was a key cause of the VB's loss of support in the mid-2000s (Pauwels 2011). With that in mind, the current leadership explicitly states its goal of breaking the *cordon sanitaire*. Both Flemish nationalist parties came close to a Flemish majority following the 2019 election and their projected vote share has grown since. A national study from May 2021 indicates more than 46% of Flemish respondents intend to vote for either the N-VA or the VB, with the leaders of both parties ranking second and third most popular Flemish politicians, respectively.² To capture this electoral potential, key VB strategies heading toward the 2024 election are rhetorical moderation and party professionalization.

These two dynamics shape the party's more traditional and ordinary opposition approach to COVID-19. Ongoing research provides some insights into this perspective.³ For example, a VB representative highlights the party's moderation as follows: "We are on the way, in 2024, to a sort of more right-wing N-VA. I think that old period is totally behind us under Tom van Grieken." Another representative confirms, "it doesn't always have to be about immigration and security, however important those issues are to us. We also have to put our party on the map with the 'softer' themes."

Rhetorical moderation is paired with a focus on office-seeking behavior. One party staff member explained:

If I look back five to ten years ago, there was not as much support, not as much training...but now we are busy with building up towards 2024. For that we want to ensure that all the people on that [electoral] list are people who can govern.

A party representative further highlights: “In the last few years, especially with Tom in the lead, there is a professionalization going on. One good example I think, is that there is media training given. That is happening now.”

The party’s strategic plan is typified by a new way of communicating, one that is “softer” and more professional. This softer style can be seen in the party’s early support of COVID-19 measures. Despite trends elsewhere in the world, the party did not engage in denying the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor does it align with the typical anti-vaxxer positions we observe at the far ends of the political spectrum. This approach, paired with the party’s consistent role in opposition, contributes to the strong anti-elite message and simultaneously more moderately populist response to COVID-19.

Party competition and permanent crisis

We identified that the VB used crisis language to conflate the pandemic with other crises, particularly those for which the VB has *clear issue ownership*. This may be part of the party’s competition with fellow Flemish nationalist party N-VA, which competes for ownership of substate nationalist, socially conservative, and anti-migration issues.

Throughout the pandemic, the VB has consistently polled as the largest party in Flanders, which suggests it may unseat the N-VA as the largest Flemish party following the 2024 election. While the VB initially lost many voters to the N-VA, contributing to its electoral low in 2014, the reverse movement is now not uncommon, with even traditional party voters considering either the N-VA or the VB as viable options for 2024. A recent study claims that nearly three out of four voters from other parties stated they would consider voting for either the N-VA or the VB.⁴ Throughout the pandemic, VB leaders called on the N-VA to consider forming a joint government with them after the next elections as part of the party’s “Mission 2024.” Competition with and pressure on the N-VA is thus crucial to break through the *cordon*.

As noted in the previous section, the VB linked COVID-19 and the substate nationalist issue, arguing that the pandemic illustrates a clear need for greater Flemish autonomy. They thus contested the default framing of traditional parties that solidarity—within Belgium and within the EU—would help combat COVID-19. Framing contests may particularly emerge during crises because political actors may make use of “the disruption of ‘governance as usual’ that emergencies and disturbances entail” (Boin et al. 2009, 82). The pandemic, therefore, provided an opening for the VB to restart the conversation about and obtain ownership of Flemish nationalism, using this to “outflank” the N-VA (Huyseune 2017). Emphasizing the crisis “of” the Belgian state and how this has (negatively) affected the government’s handling of the pandemic is thus imperative to the VB’s party competition strategy.

Final thoughts

The VB's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in many ways has reflected its strategic plan since its 2014 electoral defeat. This strategy is two-sided. On the one hand, the party has sought to outflank its conservative party competitors and act as the main opposition force. This led the VB to vehemently oppose the government's approach to the pandemic. It heavily relied on traditional populist radical right framing in its response to COVID-19, portraying this latest health crisis as simply a part of an ongoing institutional, democratic, and political crisis. On the other hand, the party perceived permanent opposition and the *cordon sanitaire* as key hindrances to its image as a potential governmental partner. As such, more moderate or traditional forms of anti-government positioning became more common in the party's political approach.

It is not surprising that the response to COVID-19 is part of a longer-term strategic plan—namely “Mission 2024,” devised by leader Tom Van Grieken, which will be tested in the 2024 election. It is likely that COVID-19 will play a part in this election, as the VB will highlight this as just one of many crises highlighting the lack of representation by traditional parties and the government. They will set themselves up as the only legitimate choice to contend with these *conflated* crises.

In many ways, the VB's office-seeking behavior and relatively moderate strategy places it within the center of a wider European approach to COVID-19 by populist parties. In interviews, the VB leadership named Austrian populist leader Sebastian Kurz as an inspiration and also referred to close friends Thierry Baudet, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini. The latter gave a speech to a crowd of VB members just prior to the pandemic, while Dries van Langenhove disregarded travel restrictions to protest alongside identitarian groups in Paris. Throughout these countries, as their respective chapters in this book highlight, Europe's populists have walked a careful tightrope. They have balanced an exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis and use of crisis language, emphasizing the crisis of representation that is so fundamental to their platforms, with an overarching need to perform competence, either in government or as aspiring governing parties. In this sense, the populist response of the VB—or rather the lack thereof—should not be all that surprising.

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Notes

- 1 It is important to note that, in part, the elevated numbers can partially be explained by the nature of reporting in Belgium (Desson et al. 2020, 438).
- 2 This is based on *De Stemming 2021* (The Vote 2021) by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) and Jonas Lefevere (VUB, Free University Brussels) commissioned by the VRT and the Standaard.

- 3 Interviews were conducted in 2020–2021 with VB representatives, staff, and activists. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1).
- 4 This is based on “*De Stemming 2021*” (The Vote 2021) by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) and Jonas Lefevere (VUB, Free University Brussels), commissioned by the VRT and the Standaard.

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