



Political distinction: searching for a structural similarity between class and politics in Flanders (Belgium)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate the logic behind lay people's ideological position taking and how this is determined by class position. I therefore examine to what extent there exists a similarity between the configuration of the political field and the structure of the space of social classes. The paper includes a brief description of the two most salient political alignments today, namely the old economic alignment and the new cultural alignment, and an explanation of how this two-dimensional political structure pertains to the rise of the new middle class. Directly related to this, I also present a discussion on the importance of the ethical habitus to understand the mechanism behind class determined political position taking. Subsequently, based on survey data and using multiple correspondence analysis, I empirically reproduce this political structure for Flanders (Belgium). Finally, relying on the visualized regression technique, I demonstrate that there exists a clear structural similarity between the political field and the space of social classes, which is a strong indication that the class-engendered ethical habitus is, in fact, the underlying factor that gives structure to the variations in political attitudes.

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Politics is the realm wherein group interests collide and beliefs are turned into policies, yet fully comprehending why certain interests and beliefs receive support from specific fractions of society and others do not remains a sociological challenge. Ever since Marx, class position has been understood as the most significant factor in determining variations in political attitudes. However, since the second half of the twentieth century, this understanding has been under continuous scrutiny,

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eventually leading several scholars to announce an end of class politics. The objective of this article is to revive this discussion by relying on an alternative understanding of class informed by the social space approach as devised by Bourdieu (1985, 2010 [1979]).

I begin with an overview of the role of political ideology and then continue by describing the two most salient political alignments, namely the economic left–right divide and the new cultural alignment between progressive liberals and conservative authoritarians. Subsequently, I explain how the transformation of the class structure eventually engendered this new political configuration. Following this, I expound on the role of ethical dispositions and moral habitus to fully grasp the logic behind class-determined political position taking.

To test these assumptions, I aim to reproduce both the class and political structure based on multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). In a last step, I finally explore the homology or structural similarity between the political field and the social space at large, in order to demonstrate how the ethical class habitus is actually an underlying factor that connects political practices to class positions. Methodologically, I rely primarily on the *visualized regression technique* to construct and compare different fields within society (see Rosenlund 2009).

Contemporary political field: end of class = end of ideology?

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, scholars have been claiming that the era of political ideology is coming to an end. The first to address the issue at great length was Aron (2002 [1955]). He predicted that the second half of the century would be marked by the decreasing popularity of ideology, as establishment of social support systems and an increasing economic affluence made many ideological issues outdated or less pressing. Others scholars, such as Bell (2000 [1962]), eventually followed Aron in terms of his predictions.

The cold war period, however, made it clear that ideological conflict was not a thing of the past, but still defined much of the national and international political debate. Yet, when the Iron Curtain fell, many authors again started to consider a ‘second’ end to ideology, actually recycling many of the older arguments (e.g. Gibbins 1989; Fukuyama 1992). According to them, the increasing affluence and economic security engendered an *embourgeoisement* of the working class, making class ideology and identification redundant. This *embourgeoisement* thesis appeared to be supported through the alleged demise of class politics (Clark and

Lipset 2001). Not only was there a decrease in traditional class voting (Brooks *et al.* 2006), but party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001) and political identification (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002) have also been declining, whereas electoral volatility (Drummond 2006) and issue voting (Mudde 1999) have increased. Hence, the conclusion that several scholars drew at the end of the twentieth century was that end of class also entailed an end of class politics and that therefore the traditional left–right alignment ultimately became obsolete for further political analyses.

Although convincing at first, this interpretation of the transformation of the political landscape is the result of somewhat superficial analysis. As many have contended and empirically established, this waning of class politics actually indicates a process of political realignment, i.e. the persistence of the old political dimension together with the coming of a new one (e.g. Inglehart and Flanagan 1987; Kriesi 1989; Flanagan and Lee 2003; Achterberg and Houtman 2006; Stubager 2010). The crux of the realignment argument is that the demise of the traditional ideological conflict does not entail a wholesale de-structuring of the political field – as was argued by Gibbins (1989) – but a bisection of the traditional political alignment into two separate ones. Inspired by the work of Flanagan (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987; Flanagan and Lee 2003), we can distinguish between, on the one hand, an old materialistic and mainly economically defined alignment and, on the other, a new and more culturally marked dimension.

The old economic alignment corresponds most to the political debate between socialists and liberals, with the Christian democrats often positioned in between these two. Those who position themselves on the left side of this dimension argue for greater governmental regulation and mechanisms of wealth distribution. The right side of this dimension is occupied by those who advocate a *laissez-faire* economy, minimal state interference, and self-reliance.

After the 1970s, a new political discussion emerged that revolved much more around cultural issues such as integration of migrants, tradition, lifestyle, and self-development. Flanagan suggests that all these ‘new’ attitudes can be grasped based on one value dimension: authoritarianism versus libertarianism. This libertarianism is essentially the same as Inglehart’s post-materialism, as both involve progressiveness, tolerance, personal autonomy, and a more aesthetic understanding of life. On the other side of the new political spectrum, we find people who hold authoritarian

attitudes. They endorse conservative values, have protectionist views on migration, and believe in strong leadership.

This new alignment also defines the ideological positions of many new parties that have entered the political arena since this period. On the progressive side of the cultural dimension, we find the new-left parties, which often originated from new social movements such as feminist groups, ecologists, sexual rights movements, or peace organizations (Kriesi 1989). Most of these parties are left-oriented with regard to economics, but what sets them apart from traditional leftists are their 'quality-of-life' politics, including environmental concerns, an appreciation of the multi-cultural society, and a non-materialistic view on societal progress.

The rise of the new right parties is more recent. Countries with no or low electoral thresholds witnessed during the 1990s a sharp rise of conservative, ethnocentric, and authoritarian parties (Ignazi 2003; Norris 2005). These new right parties can basically be described as anti-establishment, as they tend to proclaim that the interests of the 'common man' are rarely taken into account, seeing that they have hardly any representatives among the power elites.

The case of Flanders

This paper now focusses on the political field of the Belgian region of Flanders. Belgium is a Social Democratic welfare state that consists of three separate regions – Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders – that have all obtained high levels of political, cultural, and economic autonomy. This federalized structure is the institutional answer to three major sociocultural fault lines that have continuously marked the history of Belgium, namely the religious tension between Catholics and freethinkers, an ideological split between liberals and socialists and a linguistic conflict between French- and Dutch-speaking. Although granting autonomy to the regions partly pacified the conflicts, these traditional fault lines still influence the political field up until today. They have an enduring effect on the political narratives Belgians deploy in their everyday lives and thus form a fundamental part of the national habitus (X).

Because of the federalization of Belgium, no French-speaking parties are represented in Flanders (and vice versa), making it an autonomous political field that can be studied separately. Moreover, as a result of the low electoral threshold, political parties in Flanders are able to ideologically distinguish themselves by taking a clear stance on only one of these historical fault lines. For decades, mainly the religious and ideological conflict dominated

the political landscape as the political power was in the hands of the three traditional parties, i.e. the socialists *SP.a* (freethinking and economic left), the liberal *Open VLD* (freethinking and economic right), and the Christian democratic *CD&V* (Catholic and economic centrist).

For a long time, Flemish nationalist parties were largely excluded from direct political power. However, from the 1990s, the political landscape of Flanders was drastically reshuffled when *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) successfully revived the linguistic conflict by combining Flemish Nationalism with a new right and populist discourse on migration, tradition, and security. Later on, a second Flemish nationalist party successfully rose to power, called *N-VA* (New Flemish Alliance), which ideologically combined a Flemish nationalist discourse with economic liberalism, putting the linguistic conflict high on the political agenda. The left side of the political spectrum was mainly restructured by the rise of an ecologist party, now called *Groen* (Green). This party positioned itself firmly on the new leftist side of the political spectrum by politicizing issues such as well-being, ecology, and lifestyle.

Hence, the political field of Flanders is an arena wherein, partly because of the creation of a multiparty coalition system, many historical conflicts can politically manifest themselves simultaneously. This makes Flanders an excellent case to study a multidimensional political field and its relation to the overall class structure.

Class distinction and politics

Although a consensus now exists on the pertinence of this two-dimensional political configuration, there is still much disagreement on what exactly determines its structure and durability. Because if class is not relevant any more, what then is responsible for the configuration of the contemporary political field? According to some, we should focus on variations in status (Chan and Goldthorpe 2005), while others contend that we now need to look primarily at education (Van de Werfhorst and De Graaf 2004; Stubager 2010) or the differences in cultural competencies (Houtman 2001). Also, in Belgium, scholarly attention has shifted away from class and towards explaining variations in political attitudes by focusing on cultural preferences and education (Elchardus and Spruyt 2009; Elchardus *et al.* 2013).

However, the gist of the argument is that, instead of turning away from class analysis and looking for other types of explanations, we need to reformulate what we understand by 'class'. For this, I primarily draw on

a Bourdieusian understanding of class in terms of a social space. This essentially entails that we should not interpret class as solely an economic issue but that the societal structure is multidimensional as it is also determined by mechanism of cultural and symbolic distinction. Yet, I will also partly depart from Bourdieu by taking into account the importance of ethical dispositions as a way to comprehend how political distinction actually comes about. But before we come to this, I need to explain how the historical transformation of the class structure, i.e. the rise of a new middle class, actually relates to the contemporary political configuration.

New class structure = new political alignment

In many ways, the old political alignment between socialists and liberals mirrored the traditional power balance between the holders of labour and those that possess capital. However, this power balance shifted as a result of a dual process, in which both the decline (or rather, mutation) of the working class and the rise of a new middle class played a fundamental role (Boltanski 1987; Lash and Urry 1987). On the one hand, the transition from the production of goods to the provision of services, together with the relocation of traditional industries, drastically affected the demand for manual labour (see Lash and Urry 1987; Piore and Sabel 1984). In addition, both delocalization (the demise of traditional working-class neighbourhoods) and cultural fragmentation (a large influx of migrants into the manufacturing sector), strongly affected the homogeneity of the working class. This political and economic precarization of the uneducated working classes in post-industrial society ultimately produced a fertile breeding ground for populism and societal discontent which was appropriated by new right politicians (Houtman *et al.* 2008).

On the other hand, the new middle classes also contributed to this processes because they acted as a wedge between the labour force and capital elite. This new middle class exists out of people who are engaged in service work and, in contrast to the old middle class of self-employed or shop owners, do not hold means of production but are also not involved in physical labour. Hence, within the overall societal structure, they hold an intermediate position and in this way tempered the direct conflict by mediating between the two camps. Moreover, the new middle classes are also more liable to support a 'third way' policy, which eventually led to undermining the political defences of the labour class (Boltanski 1987; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 273–342).

That the impact of the new middle class on restructuring of the political field was so large, is mainly due to the fact that it grew dramatically in size as a result of some key processes such as the baby boom, the educational expansion, the shift in industrial production, and the reconfiguration of the household. In this way, it prompted an influx of new political consumers, characterized by new interests, aspirations, and ethics, and thus ordered a rearrangement of the ideological landscape. From the 1960s onwards, the labour market was affected by an invasion of newly educated job seekers who, in order to avoid down classing, tried to reconvert their social positions (Bourdieu 2010 [1979]: 153). This eventually also led towards a new political culture, first manifesting itself as a counter-culture picked up by students during the 1960s. According to Bourdieu, the popularity of this counter-culture among the first waves of baby boomer graduates can, instead of being viewed as a process of genuine cultural emancipation, be best understood as reaction on a (potential) social down classing. Their anti-institutional temperament and craving for permissiveness stemmed from an aspiration to be excluded from social classification. By renouncing traditional societal hierarchies and institutions, they hoped to '*defy the gravity of the social field*' (Bourdieu 2010 [1979]: 371). Hence, the ideology of self-actualization, well-being, and tolerance that these students or future new middle classes endorsed, was largely the outcome of a need for social distinction. A discourse that was eventually adapted, institutionalized, and further diffused by the new leftist parties.

Yet, seeing an analogy between the historical reconfiguration of the class and political structure is one thing. The question of which mechanism actually brings forth class-specific ideological position taking remains, however, open. Political position taking is more complex than simply an act of defining class interests, because it inevitably also involves mechanisms of social distinction. To understand this, we need to take into account the importance of ethical dispositions and moral boundaries.

Political distinction and ethical dispositions

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing body of literature concerning the moral dimension of class (e.g. Lamont 1992; Sayer 2005; Harrits 2013). According to Lamont (1992), class sociologists such as Bourdieu often overstate the power of cultural and economic boundaries while neglecting the importance of moral ones. People obtain access to class-specific and privileged resources not only because they value the same cultural style

or have a similar economic profile, but also for the reason that they share the same ethical ideas. Hence, class positions are always accompanied by normative preferences, both on a conscious and an unconscious level. This would mean that class is not only constitutive of the outer world of practice, but also shapes the inner world of opinions and judgements, i.e. ethical dispositions. It is these cultivated ethical dispositions that form the core of lay normativity (Sayer 2005).

This reasoning also opens up an avenue for investigating politics within the context of class distinction. Holding a certain political view can serve as a token of a particular cultural background or upbringing, which others can relate to and which can subsequently even lead to both opportunities and restrictions. Holding new leftist views, for example, might be an important personal asset for someone hoping to be employed within the cultural or social sector. Similarly, favouring a liberal view on self-responsibility can be seen as a sign of belonging to a particular economic class. The point is that by relying on a learnt moral repertoire, in this case specific political leanings and vocabulary, people distinguish themselves by drawing boundaries between them and others.

Consequently, we can expect a strong homology between, on the one hand, the class structure determined by economic aspects and cultural practices and, on the other, the political field, as they are structured according to the same logic. Within this logic, the ethical habitus should thus be seen as the mechanism that unifies class and politics. In summary, the structure of the political field can only be fully understood when placed in juxtaposition to the space of social classes. The purpose of the coming sections is therefore to empirically examine to what extent the field of political opinions is structured along the same lines as the space of social classes.

Analysis

Method and data

In order to empirically explore the above, I rely on the visualized regression (Rosenlund 2009) which is an application of MCA. The latter is a statistical technique, similar to a Principal Component Analysis but then with nominal variables, that sets out to reveal underlying structures within categorized data. The goal of MCA is to plot both respondents and their answers to questions within a multidimensional space, whereby the scale of axis is in the standard deviation. This involves two separate steps. Firstly, the cloud of active variables, i.e. the answer categories or modalities that determine the dimensions, needs to be interpreted. Answers that are

often selected together will appear close to each other in a geometrical space, whereas categories that are rarely picked together will be positioned far from each other. Secondly, we can plot into this space a number of passive or supplementary variables that did not affect the structure of the space. These supplementary categories then help to interpret and give more contextual meaning to the constructed space.

The visualized regression approach, repeats this procedure with two different sets of variables. In this way, two separate social spaces are created – in this case, one of social classes and one political – and compared with each other. This comparison will be done by plotting, as passive or supplementary variables, the modalities of one field into a diagram that is constructed based on indicators of the other field and vice versa (see also Harrits 2013; Flemmen 2012).

Applying this method has a double purpose. It is first used as a way to investigate and visually represent how political attitudes, voting preferences, and ideological stances relate to each other in Flanders and whether the structure the analysis renders can be interpreted based on the two political alignments described above. The second goal is to confirm Bourdieu's homology thesis (1985) or, more specifically, to investigate whether the variations in the amount and composition of capital are structuring principles for the universe of social classes in general, as well as for the political field in particular.

The data used for the analyses are taken from a survey conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population during the autumn of 2013. The sample included 4000 inhabitants of Flanders aged between 18 and 75, drawn at random from the National Register. The final net response rate was 41% (n : 1600). A weighting coefficient was calculated based only on education, as there was no significant deviation from the total Flemish population with regard to age and gender. For further details, I refer to the technical report of this study (X).

Constructing the space of social classes

To construct the social space, I subjected 13 variables to an MCA.¹ One of the most defining variables in order to reconstruct the space of social classes is certainly occupational status. Yet, in order to distinguish between different types of occupations in a sensible way, the taxonomy needs to reflect (1) the multidimensionality of the social structure, i.e.

¹All models were estimated using SPAD software for MCA.

discriminating between different types (cultural versus economic) and volumes of capital, and (2) the historical rise of the new middle classes. To accommodate these demands, this analysis relies on the adjusted Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero (EGP) schema as proposed by Güveli, Need, and Dirk de Graaf (2007). To their classification, I add a distinction in ‘front-stage’ and ‘backstage’ non-manual service workers. The former are involved in tasks of presentation and representation, while the latter are engaged in less publically visible administrative and office work. [Figure 1](#) represents this classification of occupational categories and gives the frequencies for every category.

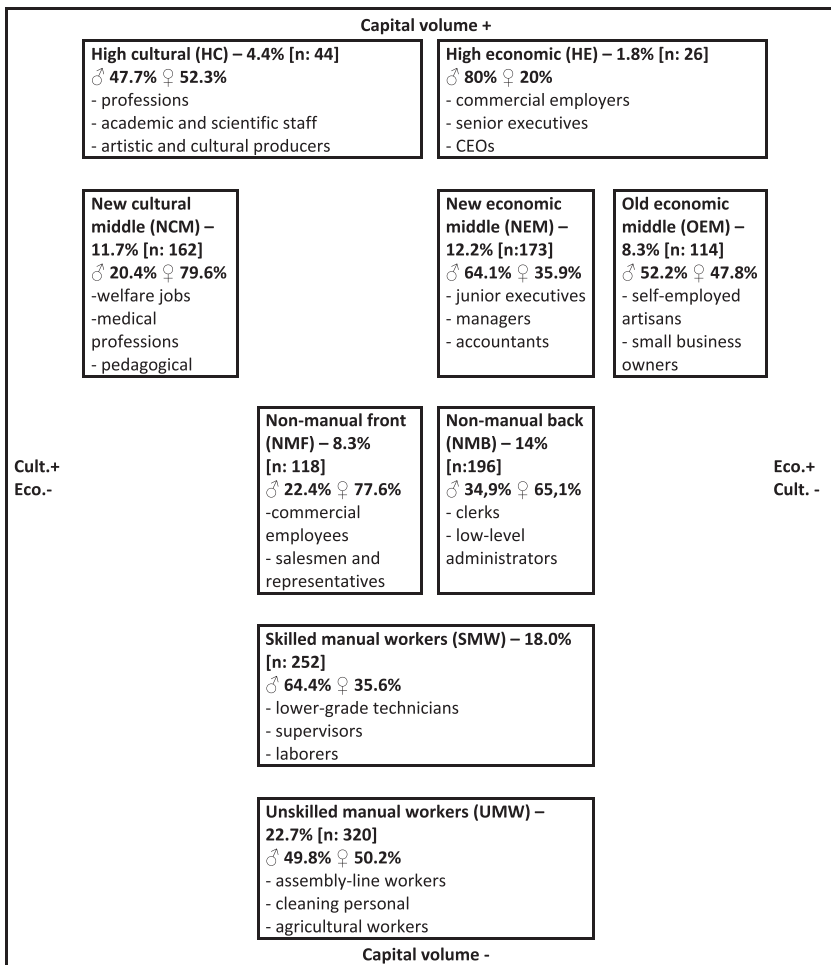


Figure 1. Adjusted Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero schema with occupational examples, weighted percentages, and gender proportion.

Besides people's occupational status, the sector of employment, i.e. public, private, or other, was also included in the analysis. Furthermore, the educational level combined with field of study was included in the analysis. Finally, I retained a series of variables on the basis of which we can gauge respondents' economic and cultural capital in greater detail (see [Appendix](#) for details). The operationalization of cultural capital is based on cultural participation and inherited cultural properties. The former is operationalized by asking respondents how often they, during the last six months, attended classical and roots music concerts, or went to sporting events, the theatre, and museums. Inherited cultural capital is measured using a principal component combining items that can indicate cultural upbringing (During childhood did your parents read books? Did you go to museums, the theatre, or the library? Did your parents read books to you?). To convert this scale into a categorical variable, it was separated into four equal parts. Economic capital is measured based on rudimentary variables such as family income, the length of time a person is or has been unemployed, the amount of money one is able to save each month, and whether they own a house, with or without a mortgage.

These 13 active variables (Q) – which together consist of 53 active categories² or modalities (J) – were included in the analyses, which eventually produced 16 dimensions with an eigenvalue (λ) higher than the mean ($\lambda_m = 1/13 = 0.077$) (Rouanet 2006). Together, these scales cover 55% of the inertia or variance (raw and unadjusted rate). Since the aim is to reproduce Bourdieu's social space, I only retained the two dimensions with the highest λ . [Table 1](#) illustrates the λ , the raw rate, and the modified rates of inertia for these two dimensions. As the raw rates are generally an underestimation of the explained variance, I also calculated the more optimistic Benzécri rate (Rouanet 2006).

All the variables have a contribution to at least one dimension that exceeds the average ($> \lambda_m = 1/13 = 0.077$), which indicates that all the variables are relevant for the model as a whole. The first axis sums up almost 66% of the total variance and at least one modality of every variable has a contribution higher than the mean ($> \lambda_m' = 1/53 = 0.019$). The second axis explains a lower but still substantial part of the variance (14%) and also here at least one modality of every variable exceeds the mean contribution. The first and strongest axis represents the total capital volume and is most determined by the variables income (12.39),

²The economic elite was included as a passive variable, as it only includes 30 cases and I use a threshold of 2%.

Table 1. Parameters multiple correspondence analysis: space of social classes eigenvalues, raw rates, and modified rates for the first two axes.

| | Axis 1 | Axis 2 |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|
| Eigenvalue (λ) | 0.256 | 0.152 |
| Raw rates of inertia | 7.86% | 4.93% |
| Benzécri's modified rates | 66.25% | 13.98% |

Note: N : 1521.
Source: P&S.

savings (9.07), museum visits (9.64), and theatre visits (7.57). The second axis reflects the differences in capital composition, with on the right-hand side respondents who possess more economic than cultural capital, and on the left, those whose cultural capital exceeds their economic capital.

The results presented in Figure 2 correspond to Bourdieu's description of the social space as being chiasmic, i.e. a rising importance of capital composition when moving up the volume axis (Bourdieu 2010 [1979]: 116). In

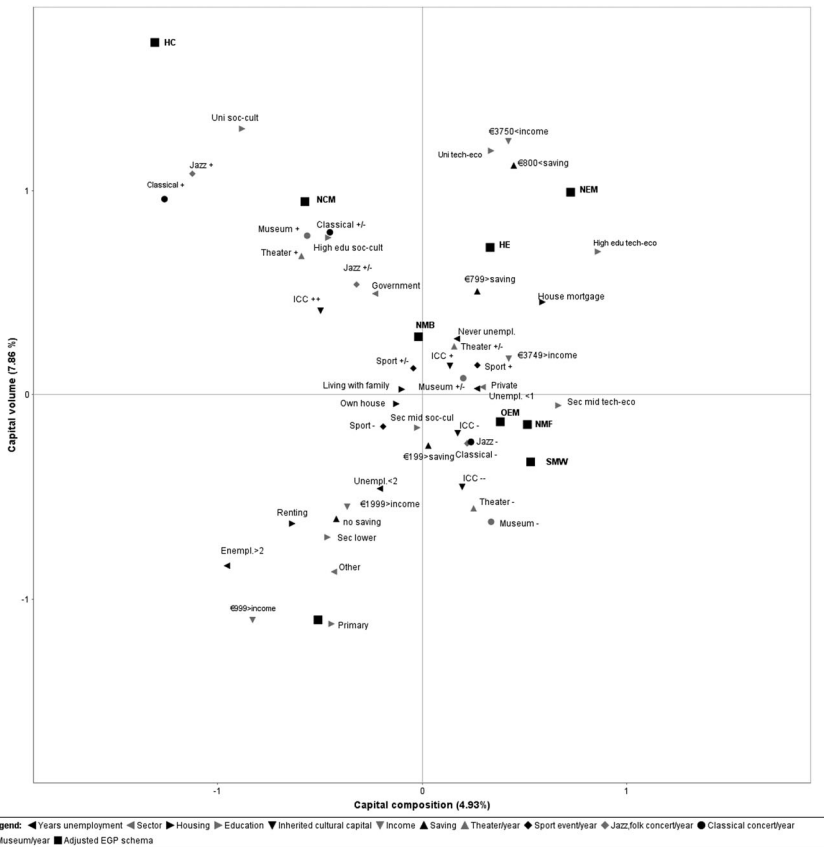


Figure 2. Multiple correspondence analysis: space of social classes (only active variables).

the upper right-hand side of the plot are those people who belong to the highest fraction of the economic field. Here are situated the executives and managers who obtained higher degrees in the economic or technical field, have a high income, and are able to save the most. On the upper left-hand side are the culturally high fractions, i.e. professionals (HC) and sociocultural workers (NCM), typified by highbrow cultural participation.

Looking at the base of the chart, we find respondents with a higher chance to have only completed primary education, those who carry out unskilled manual labour, have the lowest family income and savings, and have, during their life, been unemployed for at least two years. The skilled manual workers are positioned higher on the chart and are located closer to the economic pole. On the middle right-hand side are the old economic middle class, accompanied by people who completed secondary education in technical or economic studies, the non-manual front-stage workers, and people who work in the private sector. The non-manual administrative workers are located in the centre of the chart and, consequently, do not strongly discriminate on either of the two axes.

Constructing the political field

The respondents' ideological position was gauged by presenting them with a range of statements on economic, political, and cultural issues that have regularly been used in previous political opinion research (see [Table 2](#)). People's attitudes in terms of economic alignment can be assessed using their scores on five semantic differential scales, opposing laissez-faire economic with state interventionist options. These 10-point scales were later recoded into five categories (see [Table 2](#)). To measure the respondents' position concerning new cultural alignment, it was investigated to what extent they held anti-establishment, ethnocentric, and authoritarian attitudes. This was accomplished by presenting them with 15 statements on political representation, immigration, and authority, which they rated on 5-point Likert scales ([Table A1](#) in appendix). To reduce the number of categories, I included these variables in three separate principal component analyses, which yielded populist, authoritarian, and ethnocentric scales that were subsequently divided into four equal groups.

In addition to these attitudinal scales, I also included political party preferences in the analysis. Since Belgium has a multiparty system, respondents' voting behaviour can be used in order to examine their position within the multidimensional political field. In order to do this, the survey included the eight largest parties in Flanders, out of which the

Table 2. Variables used in the construction of the field of political consumption.

| Economic attitudes | Percentage | | | | | N |
|---|------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | -- | - | +/- | + | ++ | |
| Competition is good vs. bad for society (<i>Compet.</i>) | 9.5 | 9.5 | 22.1 | 28.0 | 30.9 | 1475 |
| Enterprises need more freedom vs. control from government (<i>Free enterp.</i>) | 26.1 | 16.1 | 26.8 | 14.0 | 15.1 | 1474 |
| For their livelihood, people need to rely on themselves vs. government should support them (<i>Self-reliance</i>) | 18.1 | 16.2 | 25.4 | 20.4 | 20.0 | 1481 |
| Differences in income stimulate people to work harder vs. need to be minimized (<i>Inc. dif.</i>) | 25.1 | 17.8 | 18.9 | 20.7 | 17.5 | 1476 |
| Every citizen is responsible for his or her own pension vs. government needs to provide pensions (<i>Pen. self</i>) | 44.8 | 17.1 | 18.2 | 9.9 | 10.0 | 1469 |
| <i>Cultural attitudes</i> | | -- | - | + | ++ | |
| Authoritarianism (<i>Autho.</i>) ^a | | 25 | 25.8 | 24.1 | 25.1 | 1577 |
| Populism (<i>Popul.</i>) ^a | | 25 | 25.2 | 25.4 | 24.5 | 1577 |
| Ethnocentrism (<i>Ethno.</i>) ^a | | 25 | 25.4 | 24.4 | 25.2 | 1577 |
| <i>Role of government</i> | | | | | | |
| Minimal (<i>Gov. minimum</i>) | | | | | 45.1 | 687 |
| Equality (<i>Gov. equality</i>) | | | | | 28.0 | 427 |
| Personal-development (<i>Gov. pers. develop.</i>) | | | | | 21.1 | 322 |
| Non-interference (<i>Gov.no.</i>) | | | | | 5.7 | 87 |
| <i>Party preference</i> | | | | | | |
| CD&V | | | | | 21.1 | 255 |
| Groen | | | | | 9.0 | 109 |
| N-VA | | | | | 28.3 | 343 |
| SP.a | | | | | 13.9 | 168 |
| Vlaams Belang | | | | | 5.7 | 69 |
| Open VLD | | | | | 10.5 | 127 |
| LDD ^b | | | | | .6 | 8 |
| PVDA | | | | | 2.2 | 27 |
| Blank vote | | | | | 8.7 | 106 |
| Missing ^c | | | | | | 366 |
| Total | | | | | 100 | 1577 |

^aBased on principal components see [Appendix Table A1](#) for the construction of the scales.

^bOnly seven parties were eventually used in the analyses because one party, the extreme right LDD, was preferred by less than 1% of the respondents. This corresponds to the position of the parties, as it had no representatives in parliament after the last elections.

^cThe high amount of missing values is due to refusals and respondents who chose more than one. It had only a small impact on the relative distribution compared with the elections of 2014.

respondents were asked to select the party they would most likely be voting for in the coming elections (see [Table 2](#)).

Last, the respondents were also presented with the question, ‘What needs to be the priority of the government?’ They were offered four answer options, inspired by the two political alignments, out of which they could only select one (see [Table 2](#)). One option represents the liberal ideal of the *minimal* or *night-watch* state, i.e. the government should be restricted to providing protection and safeguarding property (*Gov. min.*). The second option represents the socialist interventionist position, specifically that government should primarily focus on establishing financial and social equality among its civilians (*Gov. equal.*). The third option relates most to the cultural leftist position, as it entails that a government needs, first and foremost, to ensure personal self-

Table 3. Multiple correspondence analysis.

| | Axis 1 | Axis 2 |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|
| Eigenvalue (λ) | 0.274 | 0.241 |
| Raw rates of inertia | 7.10% | 6.26% |
| Benzécri's modified rates | 39.60% | 26.25% |

Source: P&S.

Notes: Political field: eigenvalues, raw, and modified rates for the first two axes. N : 1521.

development for every individual (*Gov. pers. dev.*). The final option is that government should not interfere in the life of its civilians (*Gov. anti.*). This anti-government option corresponds most with the anti-establishment discourse of many new right parties.

These 10 active variables (Q), which consist of 48 active modalities (J), were also subjected to MCA. As the purpose is to reproduce the two-dimensional political field, I only retain the two dimensions with the highest eigenvalue (λ).

This MCA yields two clear political dimensions, representing the older economic alignment contrasting *laissez-faire* with interventionist attitudes, and a newer cultural alignment opposing ethnocentrism and populism with tolerance and progressivism. The first dimension explains 40% of the variance, whereas the second explains about 26% (modified rates). Almost all modalities contribute more than average to at least one dimension ($>\lambda_m' = 1/48 = 0.021$), signifying that all variables and categories are relevant for the model as a whole (see Table 3).

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the two extracted dimensions and how the separate modalities relate to them. It can be seen that the three variables representing the cultural alignment are positioned along the first or vertical axis. When looking at the horizontal dimension, it is apparent that all the *laissez-faire* categories are situated on the right side, while on the left side are the categories indicating a preference for a regulated economy.

The chart further reveals that the electoral preferences variables are positioned coherently with regard to the above description of the two political alignments. On the bottom of the chart are the supporters of Vlaams Belang (VB), the populist and ethnocentric party that is characterized by a strong rightist position on the cultural dimension while being more or less neutral with regard to the economic alignment. The opposite holds for the partisans of Groen, the ecologist and new left party, which is positioned at the top of this chart. The adherents of the three traditional political groupings are located along the horizontal or economic axis, with on the left side the communist and social democratic parties, respectively PVDA and SP.a, the centralist Christian democrats or CD&V in the middle of the chart, and the liberal parties Open VLD and N-VA on the right side. The more central location of the – also regionalist – party N-VA can partly be explained by the fact

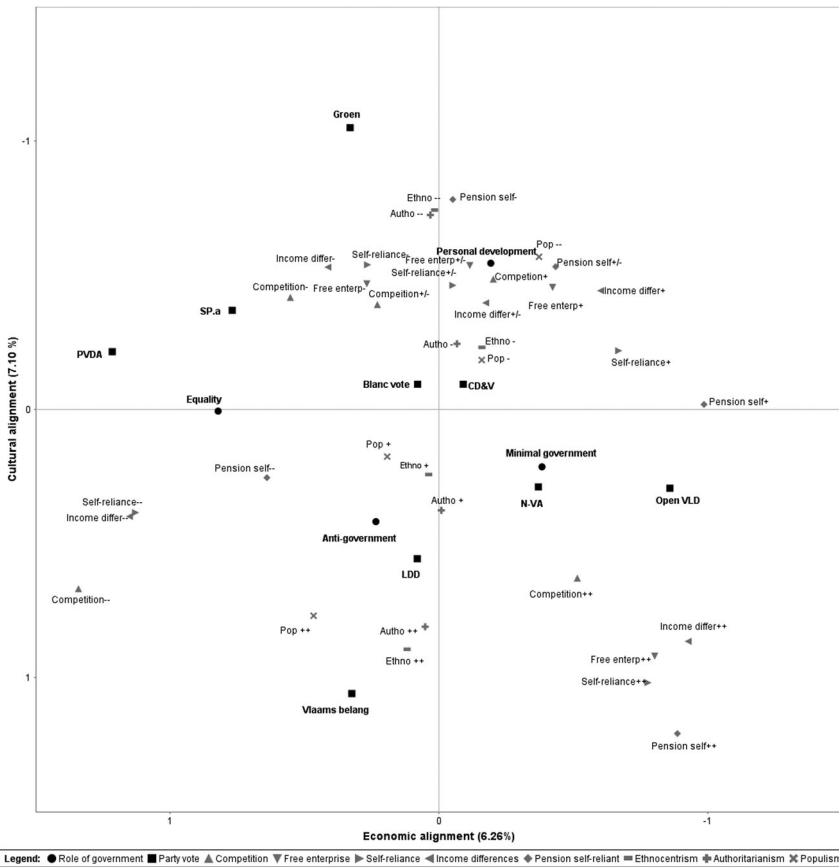


Figure 3. Multiple correspondence analysis: political field (only active variables).

that this party attracts almost a third of the population and larger categories will logically always tend to be located more towards the centre of a MCA map.

A similar structure can be discerned when looking at the four perspectives on the role of government. People who believe that government should primarily encourage personal self-development are positioned high on the cultural dimension, whereas those who have an anti-governmental attitude are situated on the opposite side and, moreover, neither group seems to have a distinct position on the horizontal axis. The two more traditional interpretations of the role of the government (minimal versus interventionist) are clearly positioned along the economic axis.

It is also noteworthy that the most radical positions on the economic alignment, regardless of whether they are left or right, are found at the lower part of the chart, whereas the more moderate categories can be found higher up the cultural axis. This implies that respondents who

are inclined towards extremist economic positions are more likely to score to the right on cultural dimensions. This further suggests that the new right is always typified by a sort of radicalism, regardless of whether it is economically left or right.

Searching for a homology

After having established the two-dimensional structure of both the space of social classes and the political field, the last step of the analysis entails a test of homology between these two fields. In order to do this, I first plot the political indicators as passive or supplementary variables into the social space as it was constructed, based on occupational, economic, and cultural indicators, before doing the reverse with a selection of class-condition indicators.

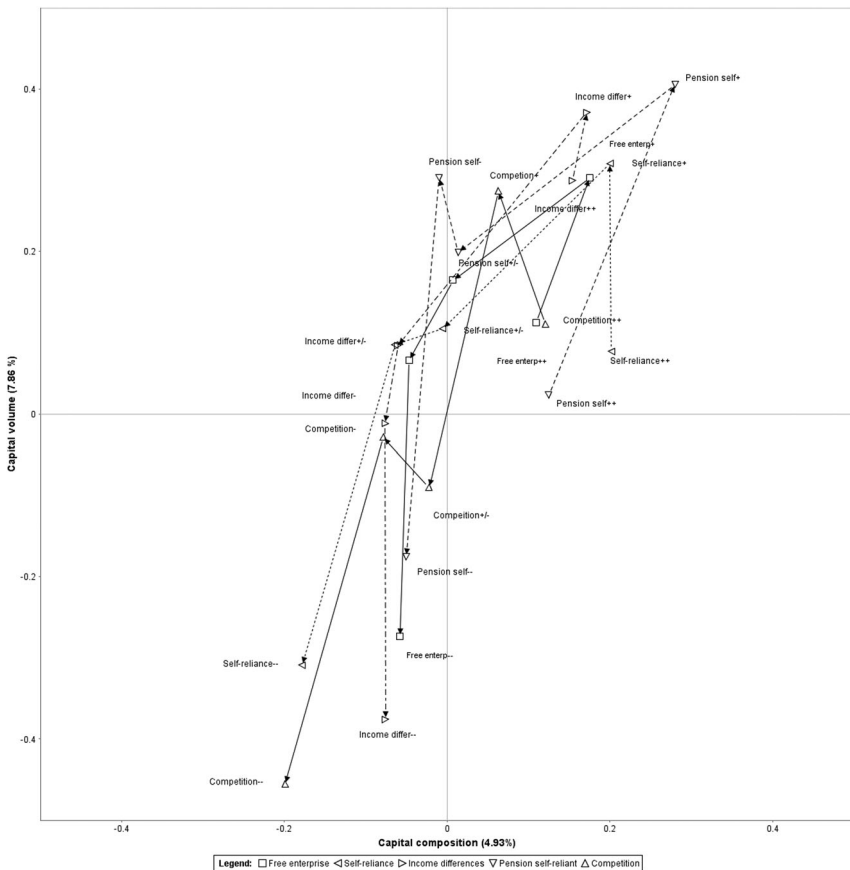


Figure 4. Multiple correspondence analysis: space of social classes with economic alignment indicators as passive variables.

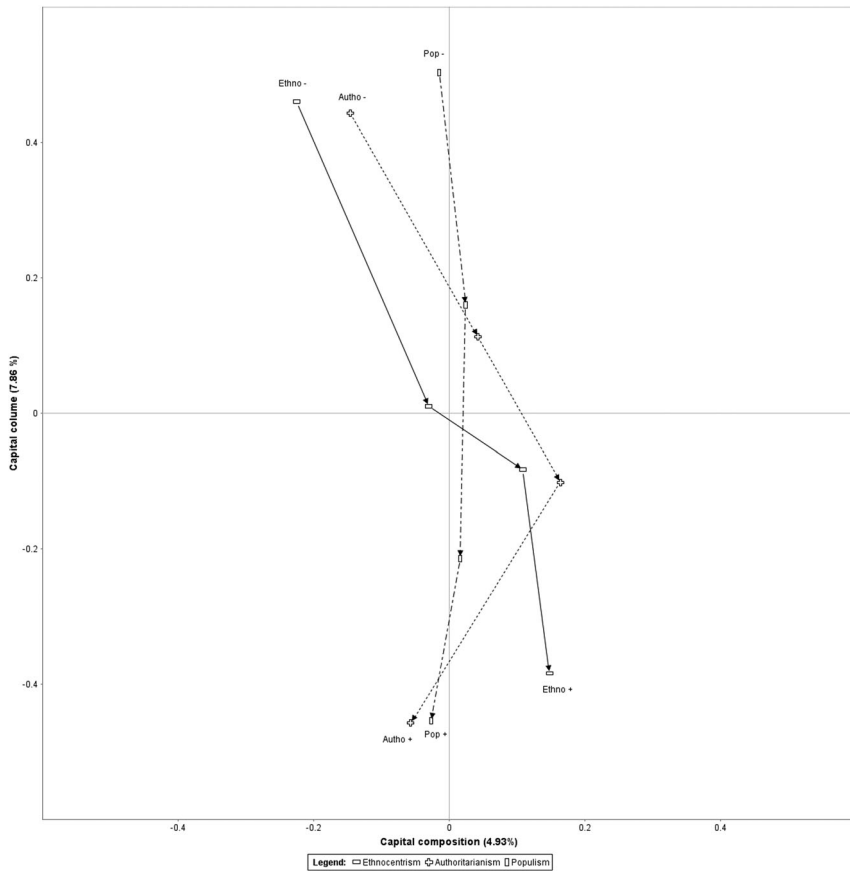


Figure 5. Multiple correspondence analysis: space of social classes with cultural alignment indicators as passive variables.

Figure 4 depicts the space of social classes shaped by the two fundamental capital dimensions, i.e. the capital volume (vertical axis) and composition (horizontal axis), wherein I placed political indicators. All of the modalities, except a few middle categories, surpass the threshold of a test value above 2.3 for at least one of the two axes, meaning that they all vary significantly from the mean.

The economic scale goes from the higher economic fractions, being economically more inclined to the right, to the lower cultural fractions, being more leftist. Overall, we see that the capital composition is most determining here. The cultural alignment runs relatively parallel to the capital volume axis, although it is somewhat diagonally tilted as it goes from the highest cultural fractions, which score most leftist, to the lower economic segments, which score predominantly to the right (see

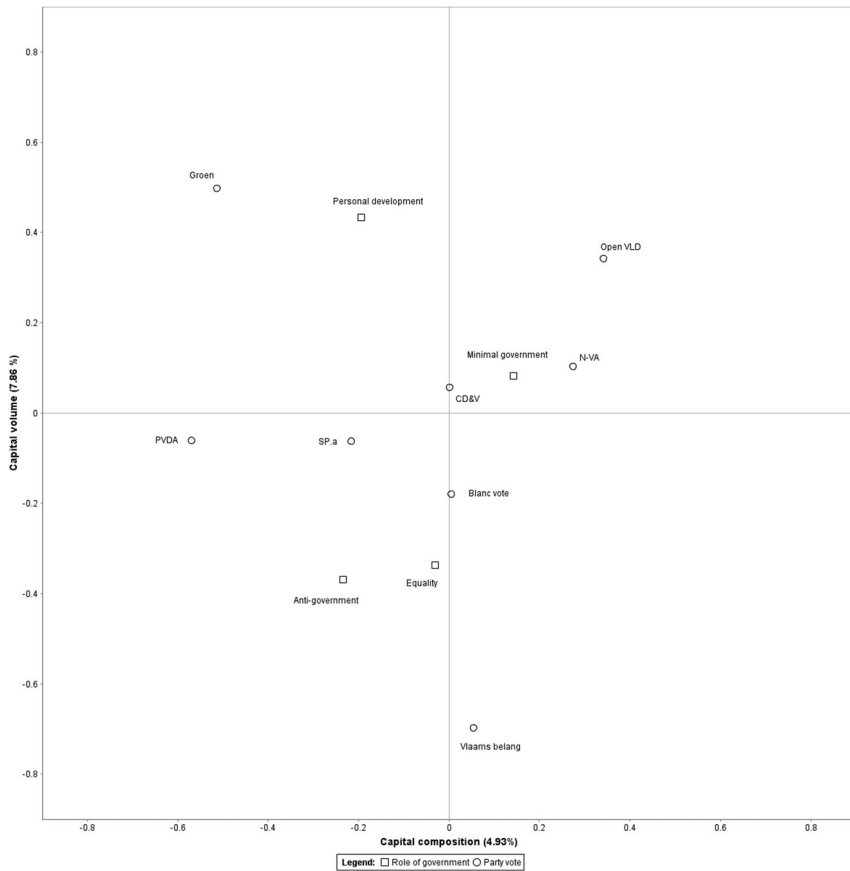


Figure 6. Multiple correspondence analysis: space of social classes with party preferences and view on government as passive variables.

Figure 5). Furthermore, Figure 6 reveals that those who are situated within the higher economic segments of society are also more likely to vote for liberalist parties (Open VLD and N-VA) and support a minimal state concept of government. The higher cultural fractions are mainly characterized by new leftists attitude, which also translated in a preference for Groen and a view of government as primarily instrumental to personal development. The lower parts of the social space are mainly characterized by cultural rightist attitudes. This is reconfirmed by the positioning of the Vlaams Belang and anti-government category at the bottom of the chart. The economic leftist voters (i.e. SP.a and PVDA adherents), are situated on the cultural side while holding a middle position on the capital volume axis. Overall, it can be concluded that the structure of the political field remains intact, the only difference is that it is slightly skewed

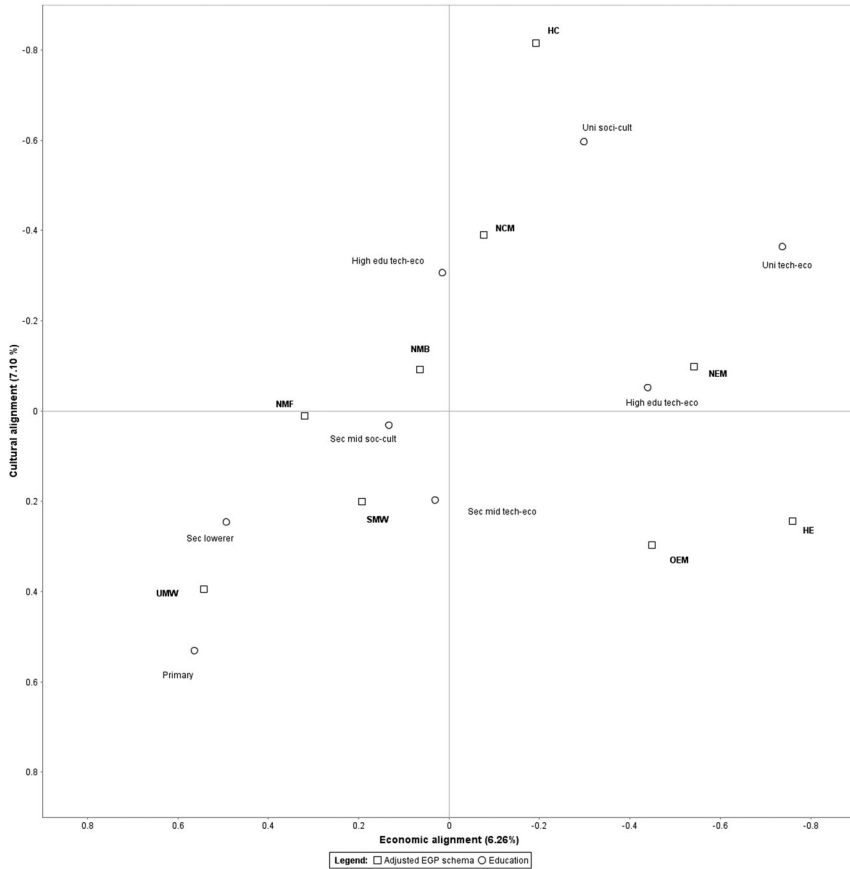


Figure 7. Multiple correspondence analysis: political field with class indicators as passive variables.

diagonally which means that it is always the combination of the two class dimensions that determines the political position.

However, to rigorously test this structural similarity, I also needed to explore how the class indicators are positioned within the political field. **Figure 7** shows how family income, inherited cultural capital, different occupational categories, and educational levels combined with field of study – all as proxies for class conditions – place themselves within the political field.

Overall, there are again many indices supporting the homology thesis. First, the configuration of the class variables this analysis yields demonstrates a strong resemblance to the chiasitic structure that characterizes the space of social classes, whereby the higher fractions are split-up in a cultural and economic fraction. Again, with the only difference that it is

diagonally skewed. Figure 7 reveals that the cultural class fractions are positioned primarily high up of the cultural alignment, whereas the economic segments – i.e. with high family income, the economic middle and higher classes – are located firmly on the right side of the economic alignment. The most dominated segments of society are located towards the right end of the cultural dimension and are, generally speaking, more economic leftist. These findings, furthermore, strongly correspond with the results of studies concerning the Scandinavian political field (Rosenlund 2009; Harrits 2013; Harrits *et al.* 2010; see also the paper of Magne Flemmen in this special issue).

Conclusion

These analyses lead us towards two main conclusions. First, the two-dimensionality of both the social space of classes and the political field can be empirically established for Flanders. An MCA of a diverse array of cultural and economic indicators revealed that capital composition and volume are together the most defining principles in determining the structure of the social space. This supports the case for a more multidimensional understanding of class, as was proposed by Bourdieu. That the political field in Flanders is structured according to two dimensions, i.e. an older economic and a newer cultural alignment, was also amply demonstrated here. However, the purpose of the analyses was not to simply reproduce these two societal fields but to examine whether there exists a structural similarity between them. This brings us to the second conclusion, namely that this homology between class and politics was empirically confirmed. When approached from a social space perspective, whereby the class structure is seen as the result of an interplay between different types of capitals, the linkage between class and politics appears to be strong. Hence, although previous research that relies on traditional linear regression techniques has demonstrated that in Flanders education and media-preferences play an important role in the formation of political attitudes (Elchardus and Spruyt 2009; Elchardus *et al.* 2013), this analysis now reveals that using a more relational approach, taking into account the overall class structure, allows us to fully understand the structure of the Flemish political field.

These conclusions shed new light on the discussion on the multidimensionality of the political field that has been carried on since the late 1950s. This established structural homology between politics and class demonstrates that in order to fully grasp the mechanisms that shape contemporary ideological position taking, we need not to focus on only one

factor – such as status, education, cultural competence, or economic differences – but we need to take into account the structure of the space of social classes in general and the dynamic between its cultural and economic fractions in particular. This is also why the coming of the new political alignment needs to be viewed as a direct and indirect consequence of the historical restructuring of class structure, i.e. the rise of new middle classes.

However, not only the discussion on what determines the configuration of the political realignment can be restated by relying on a social space approach, also the debate on the so-called value inconsistency that is allocated to the lower strata of society can be interpreted differently (Zaller and Feldman 1992; Achterberg and Houtman 2006, 2009). Because of searching for *internal*, i.e. from an ideological point of view, or *external*, i.e. considered in relation to one's class interests, consistency in political attitudes might entail a misapprehension of how variations in political attitudes actually come about. As was explained, to grasp the mechanism behind political position, one needs to understand the resemblance it bears to the process of cultural distinction. People's cultural dispositions are not the outcome of conscious deliberation but are a direct result of a habitus-induced attempt at social distinction. Hence, also political position taking is seldom the result of people consciously reflecting on their class interests, on which they then base their ideological stance, but is more often the consequence of following an intuitive class ethos. The ethical habitus people acquire through their lives makes them inclined towards particular moral discourses and attitudinal styles, and in this way, it ties political preferences to class structure.

To be more specific, parties appeal to voters, not because the latter exhaustively scrutinize all the party programmes, but because the parties tap into people's ethical dispositions by employing recognisable and identifiable discourses, vocabularies, and demeanours. This is also what Bourdieu suggested when he introduced the idea of political opinions through a 'two-stage choice' (Bourdieu 2010 [1979]: 421). People rarely follow abstract ideological guidelines, but can relate to politicians because what they say and the way they say it sounds familiar, and because they feel connected to the institutes represented (e.g. political party, civil organization, unions, church, etc.). In a footnote to *Distinction*, Bourdieu (2010 [1979]: 421, footnote 30) makes the bold yet interesting comparison between political parties and shops or radio stations. In the same way that consumers are drawn to familiar shops or radio stations and hence, in a second phase, determine their taste (through the products

they buy in these shops or the music they hear on these stations); people's political ideas are also pre-selected by the parties or representatives they are attracted to as a result of a practical recognition and, consequently, only take a specific ideological stance in a second stage.

This same mechanism might also lead people to reject parties, not solely because they see themselves positioned on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, but because they simply cannot connect to the vocabulary, style, and discourse these parties maintain. People from the working class, for example, might denounce new leftist parties because they experience their discourse as simply '*not for the likes of us*' instead of only on the basis of a disagreement with the proposed policies (from which they might even benefit). In fact, they might even turn to more radical attitudes as a way to oppose more accepted or 'politically correct' middle-class discourses. On the other hand, we can also expect the higher economic fractions of society to reject the cultural progressiveness of the cultural fractions as way of distinguishing themselves from the latter and vice versa. Hence, we must not fail to recognize the homology between the political field and the space of social classes as a result of a dynamic process of reciprocal attitudinal distinction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix

Operationalization of economic and cultural capital

The operationalization of cultural capital is based on cultural participation and inherited cultural properties. The former is operationalized by asking respondents how often they, during the last six months, attended classical and roots music concerts, or went to sporting events, the theatre and museums. Inherited cultural capital is measured using a principal component combining items that can indicate cultural upbringing (During childhood did your parents read books? Did you

go to museums, the theatre or the library? Did your parents read books to you?). To convert this scale into a categorical variable, it was separated into four equal parts.

Economic capital is measured based on rudimentary variables such as family income, the length of time a person is or has been unemployed, the amount of money one is able to save each month, and whether they own a house, with or without a mortgage.

Table A1. Principal component analyses – cultural alignment indicators.

| | | | | |
|------------------|--|------|-------|--------|
| Authoritarianism | Obedience and respect for authority are the two most important virtues children need to acquire. | .659 | 2.115 | 52.870 |
| | There are two types of people: weak and strong ones. | .772 | | |
| | We need strong leaders who dictate to us what to do. | .761 | | |
| | If people would chatter less and work harder, everything would be better. | .710 | | |
| Populism | Politicians should let themselves be guided by the opinions of the people. | .731 | 2.518 | 50.363 |
| | Important decisions need to be made by the people and not by politicians. | .789 | | |
| | The political disagreements between the elites and ordinary people are bigger than among the ordinary people themselves. | .577 | | |
| | I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than by a professional politician. | .736 | | |
| Ethnocentrism | Politicians talk too much and do too little. | .697 | | |
| | Immigrants in general are not to be trusted. | .810 | 4.158 | 69.306 |
| | Immigrants do not respect the difference between Church and state. | .798 | | |
| | Immigrants dominate their wives too much. | .759 | | |
| | If we want a peaceful society, we should not admit any more immigrants. | .864 | | |
| | Immigrants want to dominate everything. | .894 | | |
| | Immigrants come here to take advantage of social benefits. | .863 | | |

Note: *N*: 1521.

Source: P&S.