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PRESENTATION METROPOLIS CONFERENCE 27/11/2001
(session on political participation)

Changing patterns of political participation of immigrants in the Brussels Capital Region. The October 2000 elections.

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INTRODUCTION

- My name is Dirk Jacobs, I'm a researcher at the Institute of Political Sociology and Methodology (IPSoM) at the Catholic University of Brussels
- I would like to discuss the October 2000 municipal elections in the Brussels Capital Region, and more particularly the changing patterns with regard to immigrant participation. Indeed, a number of interesting developments have occurred, some of which are quite puzzling.
- Marco Martiniello (University of Liège), Andrea Rea (Université Libre de Bruxelles) and myself (Catholic University of Brussels) are jointly working on an article with regard to this topic. The presentation I will hold here today is related to our joint research efforts.
- The research is an extension of collaboration in the MOST / MPMC-framework

THE OCTOBER 2000 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

A number of things have struck us as being remarkable about the results of the October 2000 municipal elections in the Brussels Capital Region.

For the first time there was the possibility of participation of EU-citizens in the local elections. Since adult foreign residents from EU-member states make up 15% of the adult population, this electorate is not without potential importance. However, only few of the EU-citizens actually registered to vote and participated in the local elections. Hardly any foreign EU-citizens got elected in the municipal councils.

At the same time there was a remarkable increase of elected Belgian politicians of non-EU origin. A large majority of them were of Moroccan origin. In a number of municipalities this had as a result that there was almost 'mirror-representation' of third country nationals and Belgians of non-EU-origin to be found. (That is, if we are allowed to say these politicians of foreign origin represent particular 'ethnic' communities, which is far from self-evident). This mirror-representation appeared, in spite of the fact that non-EU foreign residents were still not enfranchised.

Before discussing these phenomena, I shall first shortly recapitulate a number of basic data on the Brussels Capital Region

BASIC DATA ON BRUSSELS CAPITAL REGION

SHOW MAPS SLIDE ONE

- Belgium is a federal state, constituted by 3 COMMUNITIES (language groups) and 3 REGIONS (territorial areas).
- the three regions are: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels
- Brussels is a bilingual region and it consists out of 19 municipalities

- approx. 29% of the inhabitants of the region are non-Belgians
- 15% are EU-citizens
- 14% are non-EU foreign residents, without franchise (figures 1999)
- the two largest non-EU groups are the Moroccans (70.000) and Turks (30.000)

- there exist NO data on ethnicity (only on nationality)
- but estimates are that there are 53.000 Belgians of foreign non-EU descent and 30.000 Belgians of foreign EU-descent (calculations Martiniello)
- the number of inhabitants of Brussels of foreign descent (non-nationals plus nationals of immigrant origin) is estimated at 38%

(my estimates are that the Belgian population of immigrant origin in Brussels is circa 9%)

- Martiniello has estimated that the Belgian voters of non-EU foreign origin constitute for 6,6% of the Belgian electorate (1996). It is probably now over 7% (2000).

VOTING RIGHTS AND CITIZENSHIP LAW

(I have left out this part in the presentation, to save time)

[- reluctance in enfranchising foreign residents

- Belgium was particularly late in implementing the European directive on EU voting rights (1999)

- debate on enfranchisement of non-EU foreign residents is still ongoing (at this very moment there is a debate taking place in the Belgian Senate on the issue and last tuesday myself, co-author Marco Martiniello and Meindert Fennema, who is also present here, were invited to the Senate to talk about experiences with enfranchisement abroad).

- this difficulty surrounding the issue of enfranchisement is due to:

- 1) polarisation and electoral struggle over the anti-immigrant vote in the 1980s and early 1990s
- 2) the disruptive effect of the Flemish-Francophone cleavage in the second half of the 1990s (Jacobs, 1998)

- local (!) franchise for non-nationals is a very symbolic issue in Belgian politics, constituting one of the central issues around which the new political cleavage ethnocentrism vs. multiculturalism is being constructed

- in exchange for not having to agree on local enfranchisement in the government programme, the current purple-green government further liberalised the procedures for nationality acquisition, further implementing ius soli (Belgium has now one of the most liberal nationality laws, with the possibility to opt for the nationality after 7 years of legal residence and a permanent residence status and possibility to apply for naturalization after 3 years of residence)]

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION

[- given the demographic situation of Brussels, with a majority of the youngsters being of foreign descent, it is to be foreseen that the importance of Belgians of non-EU foreign origin will keep increasing in the future

- due to a process of suburbanisation in the sixties, seventies and eighties, a lot of Belgians have moved out of the inner city, while foreign residents took their places and now mainly live in the 19th

century workers' neighbourhoods] *I have left this out of the presentation, to save time*

- a significant segment of the foreign population of non-EU origin is socio-economically marginalised
- Moroccans and Turkish, the two largest non-EU-groups tend to live concentrated in a number of disfavoured neighbourhoods with high unemployment figures and little hope for short term socio-economic revival (as Marc Swyngedouw and myself have shown in earlier research, Jacobs & Swyngedouw, 2000)

SHOW SLIDE 2 (link unemployment and residential concentration of non-Belgians with Moroccan or Turkish nationality)

Local politicians have tended to disregard these neighbourhoods since they were electorally unimportant (given the high numbers of non-Belgian inhabitants)

EU-citizens mainly live in the more up-scale parts of town, where also the richer Belgians live, although there are a number of residential pockets where working class Southern European immigrants are to be found.

PARTICIPATION OF EU-CITIZENS

- franchise is obligatory for Belgian nationals
- franchise has to be voluntary for EU-citizens due to European directive
- EU-citizens had to register to vote, but once registered were under the obligation to actually use their right to vote (as Belgians are)
- as I mentioned at the beginning, only a small minority of the EU foreign residents did actually take the effort to register to vote.
- In the entire Region a mere 9.6% of the EU-citizens registered to vote.
- It is quite remarkable that mainly those municipalities which host important EU institutions (as the Commission, the Parliament, Council of Ministers) on their territory - Brussels, Elsene, Etterbeek
- had the lowest participation rates.

SHOW SLIDE THREE (TABLE)

- The potential strength of the EU-electorate on the total electorate is quite considerable.
- However, in most municipalities, the importance of the EU-foreign residents in the electorate is rather small due to the limited

participation rate. The overall percentage of EU-citizens in the electorate is a mere 2% in the entire region.

- In municipalities as Brussels and Elsene, for instance, the electoral strength of the EU citizens is remarkably limited (1.7 and 2.5%), although there is a much larger potential. If they would all have registered to vote, the EU foreign residents could stand for 19.6% of the total electorate in Brussels city, while they could even stand for 28.5% in Elsene.

- Partly as a result of the low EU participation rate, not a single non-Belgian EU citizen got elected in Brussels city, the capital of the European Union, or Elsene, the municipality with most European institutions on its territory. In neighbouring Etterbeek, however, a Dutch citizen did get elected on the ecologist list. It is, however, unlikely that this is particularly due to EU votes. It is more probable his election is due to support of Flemish Belgians.

- With regard to electoral importance of the registered EU voters, Saint-Gilles is a notable exception within the Brussels Region. In Saint-Gilles the registered EU foreign residents accounted for 7.2% of the total electorate and thus constituted a considerable electoral force. The EU potential is, however, no less than 35% of the electorate. Only a fraction of this potential had been mobilised. It is nevertheless worth noting that the electoral importance of this group was anticipated. There is a significant Spanish *working class* community in Saint-Gilles. They were actively enrolled. Candidates of Spanish origin figured prominently on the list of the socialist mayor Charles Picqué and of opposition party Ecolo.

- Overall one must conclude the political participation of EU foreign residents in the municipal elections of October 2000 was very modest. There was a very low participation rate and hardly a non-Belgian EU-citizen got elected into a municipal council of the Brussels Capital Region.

- Only in Saint-Gilles there was an instrumentalisation of the EU-electorate.

- There can only be one conclusion: although the demographic importance of the EU residents is significant in the Brussels Capital Region, on the local political level they are of minor importance.

Electoral success of immigrant Belgians of non-EU origin

At the same time there was a remarkable increase of elected Belgian politicians of non-EU origin.

- In the municipal elections of 1994, the participation and success of Belgians of non-EU foreign origin was still modest. On 650 councillors there were only 14 immigrants elected.

- Those who got elected achieved this due to their own personal votes.

SHOW SHEET 4

- This effect of preferential voting, most probably to be seen as a mixture of ethnic voting and symbolic voting, was repeated in the 1995 and 1999 regional elections
- In fact, during the 1999 elections, it was partly anticipated, in the struggle for the 'immigrant vote'
- This led in 1999, to the election of 8 Belgians of foreign non-EU origin, on 75 MP's in the regional parliament

SHOW SHEET 5

- note that the preferential voting does not manifeste itself to the same degree for the right-liberal candidates

In the 2000 municipal elections, the struggle for the 'immigrant vote' was even more apparent and important.

[In fact, parties were not very selective in recruiting immigrant would be politicians, in a number of cases, much to the dislike of immigrant associations (as shown in 31 interviews with leaders of immigrant associations in Brussels, conducted in the course of 2001)] *I did not mention this after all, to win time.*

- The phenomenon of success of preferential voting for immigrant candidates reappeared and even shattered all expectations. Out of 653 municipal councillors, now 90 are of non-EU immigrant background.

- The success of immigrant candidates due to preferential voting is most probably the result of a combination of ethnic voting (votes of Belgians of immigrant origin) and symbolic voting (votes by white Belgians who want to support immigrant candidates as a symbolic gesture in favour of immigrant representation). Probably ethnic voting alone can - even mathematically - not explain all preference votes for immigrant candidates.

SHOW SHEET 6

- In a number of municipalities this had as a result that there was almost 'mirror-representation' of third country nationals and Belgians of non-EU-origin to be found. This, in spite of the fact that non-EU foreign residents were still not enfranchised.

Please compare % of seats in the table with population figures of non-Belgians of non-EU origin:

- BRUSSELS 18,4% non-EU residents
- SINT-JOOST 35,5% non-EU residents

- MOLENBEEK 23,24% non-EU residents
 - SCHAARBEEK 22,17% non-EU residents
 - SINT-GILLIS 17,4% non-EU residents
 - KOEKELBERG 14,5% non-EU residents
 - ANDERLECHT 13% non-EU residents
 - ELSENE 13% non-EU residents
- (figures 1999)

- what is further remarkable is that a lot of the elected are of Maghreb, and more precisely Moroccan, origin. We had already seen this pattern in the 1999 regional elections, and it reappears albeit less radically in the 2000 municipal elections. Now Moroccans do constitute the largest group of foreigners in Brussels, but it is still a remarkable result.

- Fennema and Tillie would explain this in their model they have used for the Netherlands by referring to the strength of ethnic civic community among these groups.

- It would be interesting to test this for Brussels, (and I hope to do this in the future), since at first sight, this does not seem to be the case in Brussels.

- Paradoxically, in data collected by Swyngedouw, Phalet and Deschouwer, it has been found that participation levels in associational life of Turks are much higher than those of Moroccans.

SHOW SHEET 7 (figure on p. 161 of Swyngedouw, Phalet & Deschouwer, 1999, *Minderheden in Brussel*)

- Equally, most observers claim social cohesion and social networks are stronger amongst Turks than amongst Moroccans (this would be linked to differential migration histories: there was predominantly chain-migration among Turks, while migration patterns among the Moroccans were much more diverse).

- We would thus expect more (successful) political participation of Turks than of Moroccans, in the logic of Fennema and Tillie, but we actually find the inverse. The reasons why this is the case, still have to be explored.

The effects?

- What does increased success of immigrant Belgians of non-EU origin lead to? What are the effects?

- It is still too soon to judge any effects in policy changes

- The large success of immigrant politicians (some really 'fresh') creates tensions within local party sections, cfr. PS - Brussels example.

- What is equally clear, is that immigrant politicians do have power or venues to power, especially at the moment of coalition formation
 - a number have become aldermen (symbolically but also *de facto* quite important!)
 - a number have played a decisive role in coalition formation since in a number of cases, with a few seats one can make the difference between alternative majorities (notable example in Vorst-Forest)

[- It is to be seen what the effect of enfranchisement of non-EU nationals will be in Brussels. I would claim it will remain rather limited, because we already have an extra-ordinary situation of representation at the moment. Probably the political parties will become more selective again in their choice of candidates.] *I did not mention this in my presentation, to save time*

Concluding remarks

We have a new era in Brussels politics. Identity politics has always been important in the Belgian capital. Up till now Brussels politics was dominated by the linguistic divide between Flemings and Francophones. Now there is the additional pluri-ethnic dimension, with Belgians of Moroccan origin in the spotlight. Strangely enough, the EU-citizens do not join in the power struggle. Have they nothing to defend?

We observed the low EU-participation and the large success of Belgian immigrant politicians of non-EU origin. Is this to be interpreted as a good or a bad sign? One could argue in both directions. On the one hand, it might be preferable that those groups who need emancipation the most, are most successful in having representatives. From this perspective, it is a good thing that politicians who are closest to the disfavoured neighbourhoods (and their partly disenfranchised population) are (over)represented. On the other hand, the fact that socio-economically well-off groups, as the EU-citizens (making abstraction of the South-European working class communities) do not politically participate might be a sign – but this is just a hypothesis - that local politics and local political representation is somehow losing its importance and that these groups have other means of power and venues at their disposal to defend their interests (more effectively).