The Historical Persistence of Far-Right Influence in Belgium

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How do contemporary far-right populist parties benefit from the legacy of past fascist parties? This dissertation uncovers a historical link between present-day far-right parties and interwar fascist parties. The argument comprises three key aspects. Firstly, the enduring historical influence plays a pivotal role in elucidating the achievements and setbacks of modern far-right parties. Secondly, the mechanism behind this historical continuity lies within far-right social organizations that have effectively preserved the fascist heritage. Thirdly, historical contexts, particularly the historical narrative, determine the capacity of far-right social organizations to thrive.

This dissertation employs a combination of quantitative spatial analysis and qualitative historical analysis to investigate the case of Belgium. Belgium is politically divided into Flanders and Wallonia, with far-right parties exerting significant influence in Flanders but remaining relatively weak in Wallonia. This study initially establishes the existence of historical persistence of far-right influence in Flanders, contrasting with its absence in Wallonia. Subsequently, this study identifies a critical disparity between Flanders and Wallonia—the flourishing far-right social organization in Flanders. This organization played a pivotal role in preserving the former fascist ideology and social networks.

Lastly, this study underscores the paramount significance of the post-World War II historical context in elucidating the evolution of far-right civil society. The post-war repression of collaborators, under the prevailing sentiment of victimization in Flanders, forged a favorable

historical narrative that facilitated the resurgence of former fascists and the emergence of far-right organizations.

In conclusion, this dissertation contributes significantly to our comprehension of the achievements and setbacks of far-right parties, offering a nuanced examination of the role of civil society in democracy and underscoring the importance of historical contexts.

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Preface

I have received so much support from my families, friends, and professors during my dissertation research. This dissertation would not be possible without the guidance from the members of my dissertation committee. First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to Prof. Jude Hays, for his unwavering support over the course of this project. He always patiently offered his helpful comments and never hesitated to help me when I needed. Most importantly, he always trusts my ability to finish this dissertation and my academic opinion on the research. This trust is the best thing I could receive from an academic advisor. My sincere gratitude also goes to Prof. Jae-Jae Spoon and Prof. Didier Caluwaerts, who have offered many helpful comments on party politics and Belgian politics. Finally, I want to thank Prof. Michael MacKenzie. He is not only my dissertation committee member, but a friend to me. Aside from offering very detailed advice on my dissertation, he also offered lots of emotional support, which is vital for me during the difficult times of this project.

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Lastly, I appreciate the company of my cat Duola. He is the loveliest cat in the world. I believe a PhD should always be like him: stay curious, stay cute.

1.0 Introduction

Far-right populism has been on the rise for some time, with far-right parties achieving various successes in numerous countries. Since Brexit and Donald Trump's electoral victory, current events bear a striking resemblance to the interwar period when the international order collapsed, and fascism ascended in many nations. While today's far-right populist parties and leaders may not be as successful as historical fascist parties, they are nonetheless emerging or gaining popularity in many Western democracies, reminiscent of the interwar period. Scholars have drawn analogies between the two periods, debating whether the same social groups or factors have produced both historical fascism and contemporary right-wing populism (Bromhead et al., 2013; Klapsis, 2014; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Therefore, a puzzle arises: How do contemporary far-right populist parties benefit from the legacy of past fascist parties?

This dissertation offers a historical perspective to explain the success and failure of far-right parties, demonstrating how the legacy of interwar fascist parties can still impact contemporary politics. I argue that fascist ideologies and social connections were preserved by social organizations, influencing both the demand and supply of contemporary far-right parties. The adverse effect of civil society on democracy and the persistence of far-right influence can be traced back to the end of World War II. When a society fails to address its past and does not purge the influence of former fascists, it creates a favorable historical narrative for the far-right. This narrative, in turn, fosters an environment conducive to the resurgence of far-right movements, promoting a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains the influence of interwar fascists. Therefore, the

success and failure of contemporary far-right parties can be traced back to a complex historical context from the distant past.

To illustrate my argument regarding the historical persistence of far-right influence, Belgium, a politically divided nation, serves as an ideal case study. Belgium comprises three regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and the bilingual region of Brussels. Both Flanders and Wallonia experienced the rise of fascist parties during the interwar period. However, only Flanders has an influential far-right populist party today, while contemporary far-right movements have failed to gain traction in Wallonia. The divergent trajectories of Belgian far-right movements in different regions provide an intriguing case study to help us understand not only the existence of historical influence but also its absence. By comparing how the far-right legacy persists and contributes to the success of far-right parties in Flanders but not in Wallonia, this research presents a comprehensive narrative about how the historical influence of interwar fascists shapes the success and failure of contemporary far-right parties.

In this chapter, I begin by introducing the literature on the study of far-right parties and historical persistence. Subsequently, I present my argument and explain how my theory complements existing literature. After outlining the theory, I provide a brief description of my methodology and a concise review of the case of Belgium. The final section discusses the contribution of this dissertation.

1.1 Puzzle: Why the Fates of Far-Right Parties are Divergent in Belgium?

The far-right parties in Belgium present an intriguing puzzle on multiple fronts. Belgium is divided into three regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and the

bilingual region of Brussels. Despite sharing similar political institutions, Flanders and Wallonia have their own parliaments and governments, each with considerable autonomy in areas such as education, culture, and social policy. Consequently, each region exhibits its own unique political and social environment.

The most significant puzzle in the case of Belgium pertains to the disparate performance of far-right parties in different regions. Although both Flanders and Wallonia experienced the rise of fascist parties during the interwar period, only Flanders has an influential far-right populist party today, while contemporary far-right movements have failed to make significant inroads in Wallonia. The Flemish far-right party Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang (VB, Flemish Bloc/Flemish Interest) has enjoyed long-term success and is currently the second-largest party in Flanders. Conversely, the most successful far-right parties in Wallonia, Front National Belge (FNb, National Front Belgium), and Parti Populaire (PP, People's party), could only garner around 5% of regional votes even at their peak. Furthermore, both FNb and PP have since disbanded.

Another intriguing puzzle is the contrast between the influence of far-right parties in Flanders today and during the interwar period. In the 1936 Belgian election, far-right parties made significant strides in both Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders, the fascist Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV, Flemish National Union) achieved substantial success in 1936, securing approximately 15% of the Flemish vote in the 1936 and 1939 elections. In Wallonia, the fascist party Parti Rexiste (Rex, Rexist Party) garnered 11% of the votes in the entirety of Belgium, a remarkable achievement for a new party.

Although VNV and Rex are historical relics, the Flemish far-right party VB has managed to attain electoral success in contemporary politics, while Walloon far-right parties have failed to replicate the achievements of their interwar counterparts. Furthermore, when comparing the

geographic patterns between contemporary far-right parties and interwar fascist parties, certain similarities emerge between the Flemish fascist party VNV and the far-right party VB.

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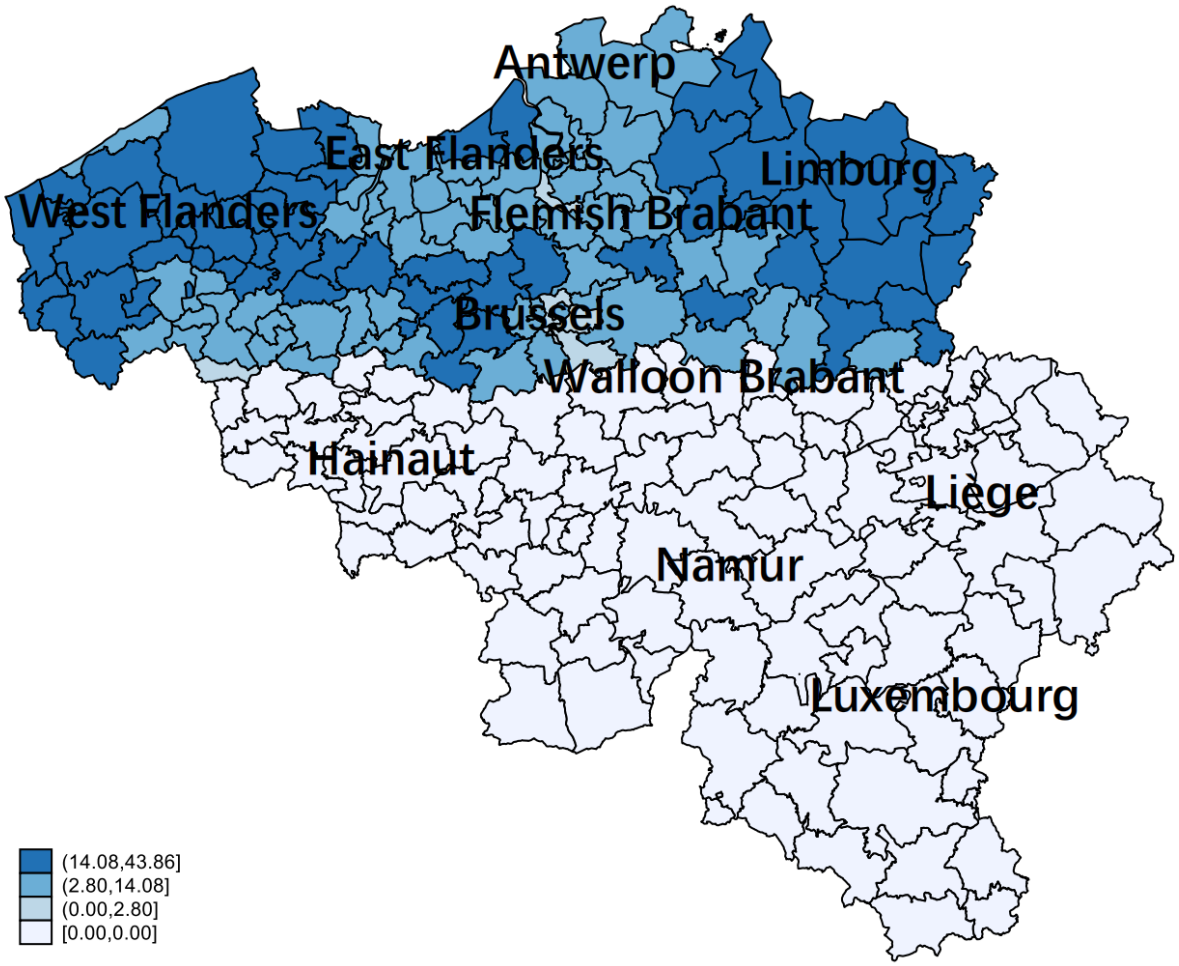

Figure 1.1 Geography of VNV Votes in 1936

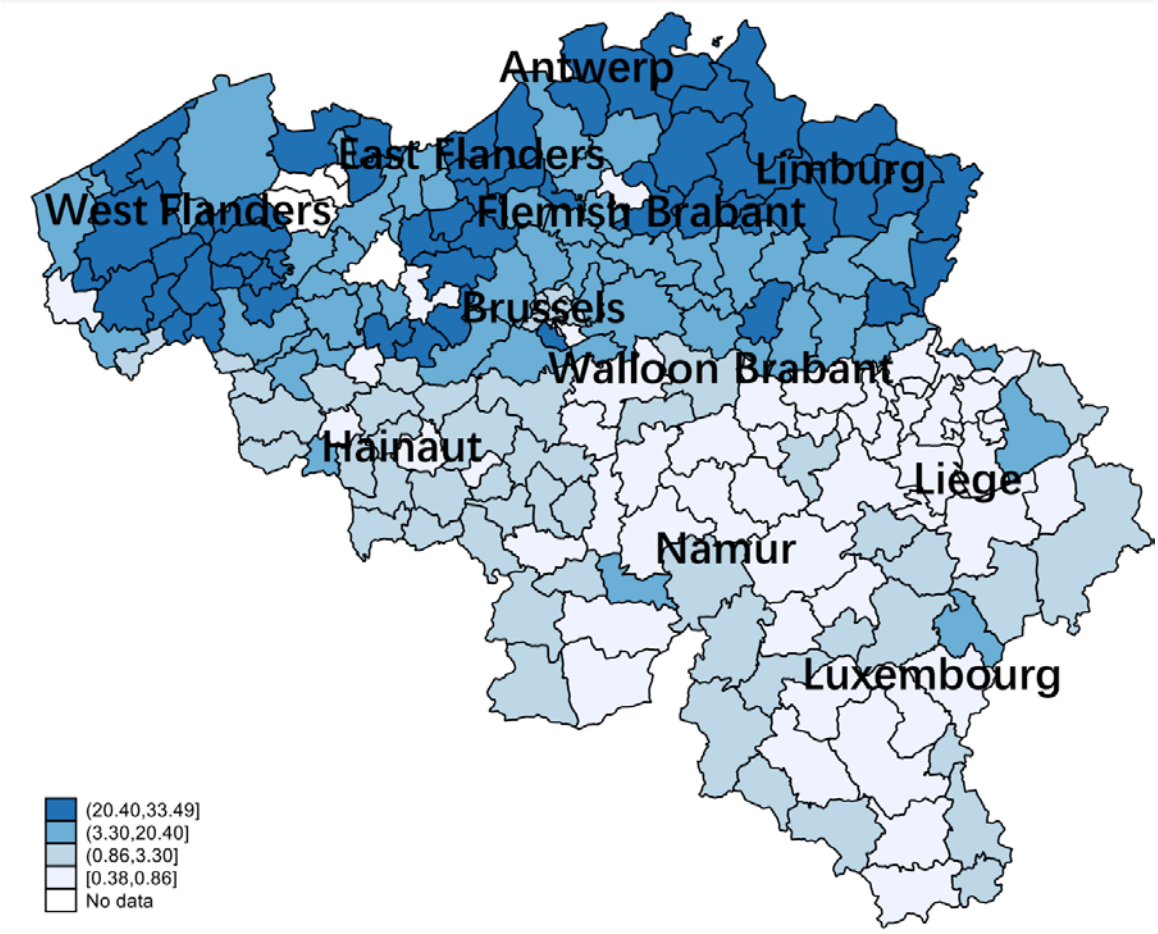

Figure 1.2 Geography of VB Votes in 2019

As demonstrated in the maps above, there are spatial clusters evident in the electoral geography of both VNV and VB, and these clustering patterns exhibit certain similarities. For instance, regions that were strongholds of the old VNV, such as Limburg and West Flanders, also exhibit strong support for VB in 2019. Consequently, many Flemish areas that leaned towards the political right in the 1930s continue to do so today. While the individual inhabitants of these areas may have changed over time, their political preferences have not.

What explains this intriguing geographic pattern of Belgian far-right parties? Why are far-right parties significantly more successful in Flanders compared to Wallonia? And why is the Flemish far-right party notably more successful in areas where the historical interwar fascist party

VNV also enjoyed success? The following section will elucidate why common explanations regarding far-right parties fall short and why it is essential to consider the historical persistence of interwar fascists and the intricate historical contexts following World War II.

1.2 The Insufficiency of Conventional Explanations

Although scholars have developed many explanations on the success and failure of far-right parties, they are not sufficient to explain the puzzle of Belgian far-right parties.

1.2.1 Literature on Far-Right Support

There is a plethora of studies by political scientists concerning the electoral success and failure of far-right parties, with most of them focusing on explanations from both the demand and supply sides. Demand-side explanations delve into conditions that influence the population's support for far-right parties, while supply-side explanations examine conditions that facilitate the emergence and development of these parties. Scholars recognize the interplay between both demand-side and supply-side factors, but studies typically structure their frameworks by separating these two aspects.

1.2.1.1 Demand Side Explanations

Regarding the demand side, scholars have identified economic and cultural grievances as factors related to support for far-right parties. One strand of research centers on economic grievances, suggesting that the appeal of far-right parties hinges on voters' economic

considerations. One prevalent theory in this regard posits that voters facing economic hardships or the potential threat of economic competition tend to attribute their economic grievances to immigration or globalization, consequently supporting far-right parties often characterized by anti-immigration agendas. Studies have found correlations between unemployment (Golder 2003; Algan et al. 2017) or trade shocks (Dippel et al. 2015; Colantone and Stanig 2018) and support for far-right parties, with these relationships sometimes interacting with other factors like immigration (Golder 2003).

Another line of research develops the theory of cultural grievances, asserting that support for far-right parties is driven not by material interests but by cultural values and identities that reject immigration and progressive values. A wealth of literature provides evidence for the connection between cultural grievances and far-right support. Inglehart and Norris (2016) contend that cultural values, in combination with certain social and demographic factors, possess more explanatory power than economic factors. They find that the primary supporters of populist parties are individuals who adhere to traditional values and reject prevailing progressive values. Gest et al. (2018) explain support for populist parties in terms of nostalgic deprivation, suggesting that those who perceive a loss of their previous social, political, or economic status are more likely to be drawn to populist appeals.

Recent studies on demand-side explanations typically combine both economic and cultural factors and focus on their interactions. Gidron and Hall (2017) suggest that economic and cultural factors can interact to reduce a certain group's subjective social status, ultimately leading to support for right-wing populism. Hays et al. (2019) find that trade shocks lead people to hold negative views on immigration, which, in turn, fosters support for right-wing populism. Furthermore, they reveal that individuals harbor cultural and social concerns about their community when facing

trade shocks, and their pessimistic sociotropic evaluations contribute to votes for right-wing populist parties. Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that the source of populist backlash lies in the long-term social structural changes in Western democracies. The "silent revolution" has made society more liberal, resulting in the formerly conservative majority gradually becoming a minority. This shift has led to a conservative backlash and authoritarian reflex, fueled by recent social and economic developments that have sparked fear of economic insecurity.

1.2.1.2 Supply Side Explanations

In addition to demand-side explanations, scholars have also identified several supply-side factors that could contribute to the success of far-right parties, including a favorable political opportunity structure, strong party organization, and a winning ideology (Golder 2016).

A favorable political opportunity structure involves conditions that affect the openness of a party system to other parties. It typically includes electoral rules, party competition, and political cleavage structure. Regarding electoral rules, the results are mixed. Majoritarian rules theoretically penalize small parties, suggesting that far-right parties should be less successful in disproportional systems as they tend to be smaller (Duverger 1954). Empirical results vary, with some studies showing that far-right parties benefit in proportional systems, while others find that proportional systems could hinder their electoral success. The impact of electoral rules depends on the characteristics of far-right parties.

Regarding party competition, numerous studies have demonstrated how different strategies of mainstream parties can affect their competition with far-right parties (e.g., Meguid 2005; Golder 2016). While some scholars argue that mainstream parties accommodating far-right issues could harm the electoral success of far-right parties (Downes and Loveless 2018), others believe this strategy may actually help far-right parties (Krause et al. 2023). Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020)

find that mainstream parties do try to move to the right in response to the success of far-right parties. Spoon and Klüver (2020) empirically test this accommodation strategy and find that mainstream parties usually cannot prevent the loss of votes by adopting a more anti-immigration stance. The different outcomes of the accommodation strategy may also be related to studies on issue salience and issue ownership. Petrocik (1996) argues that when parties are expected to perform better on certain issues, voters will support parties they believe can better handle the issues they care about.

Finally, with regard to the political cleavage structure, scholars have found that changes in political cleavages can provide opportunities for far-right parties. Some argue that the salience of economic cleavage has been reduced by societal changes in Western democracies, leading to a cultural backlash against post-materialism that has developed in recent decades (Ignazi 1992; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Consequently, while traditional parties may struggle to adapt to the transition of cleavages, far-right parties can emerge and benefit from the new cleavages (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Rydgren 2005).

Strong party organization is another important supply-side factor identified by scholars. A strong organization typically includes high-quality members, local networks, and professionalism. Strong organizations not only help far-right parties develop but also help them remain united. Scholars have found that far-right parties with strong party organizations perform better and last longer, whereas weak party organization often leads to failure and internal conflicts (Carter 2005; Art 2008; Art 2018).

Lastly, the winning ideology pertains to how a party's agenda attracts voters, and scholars argue that far-right parties are more likely to succeed with certain "winning ideologies." Some have found that far-right parties with extreme ideologies are less likely to succeed, and a less racist

and less antidemocratic version of nativism and populism is more appealing to voters (Ignazi 1992; Golder 2003; Rydgren 2005). Additionally, successful far-right parties today tend to blur their economic positions or even advocate for left-wing economic policies to attract voters across class (Mudde 2000; Rovny 2013).

1.2.2 The Inefficiency of Demand Side Explanations

It is insufficient to understand the divergence of far-right parties in Belgium with conventional demand-side and supply-side explanations. In terms of general socio-economic conditions, Flemish far-right parties do not enjoy more favorable conditions than their Walloon counterparts. After World War II, Flanders experienced better economic development and benefited significantly from foreign investment. Therefore, the general level of unemployment is lower in Flanders, and the economy is also more prosperous there (Mérenne-Schoumaker et al. 2014). Furthermore, despite the popularity of VB's anti-immigration agenda, historically there were actually more immigrants in Wallonia than in Flanders (Grimmeau et al. 2014).

According to the newest data from the Belgian statistical office, I created the following graphs on the average income, unemployment rates, and the proportion of non-European immigrants in electoral districts in Belgium. These graphs demonstrate that contemporary Flanders is wealthier, has a lower level of unemployment, and has fewer non-European immigrants:

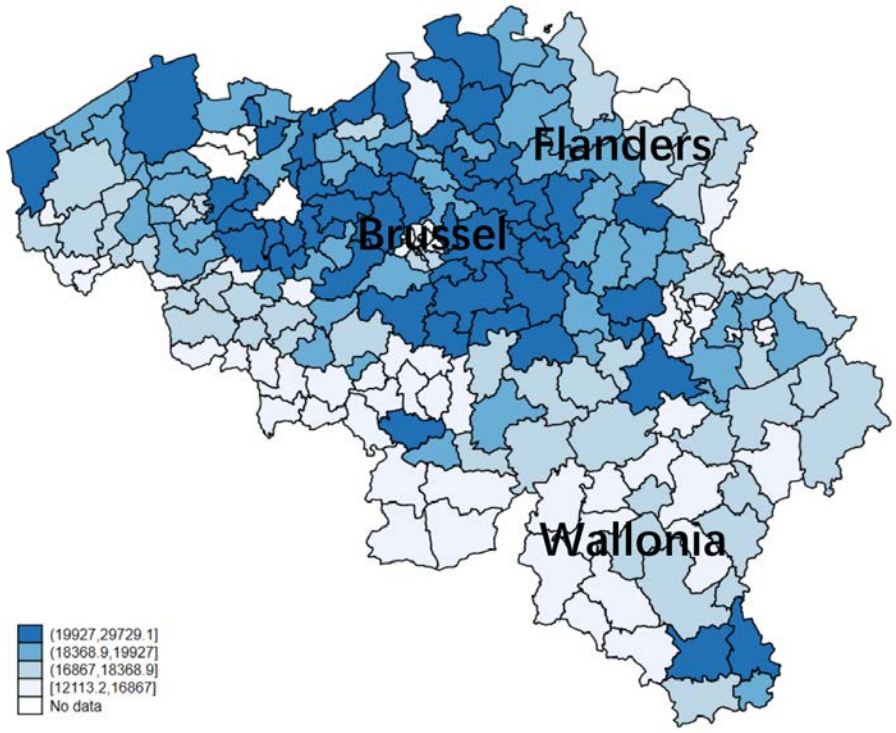

Figure 1.3 Average Income in 2017

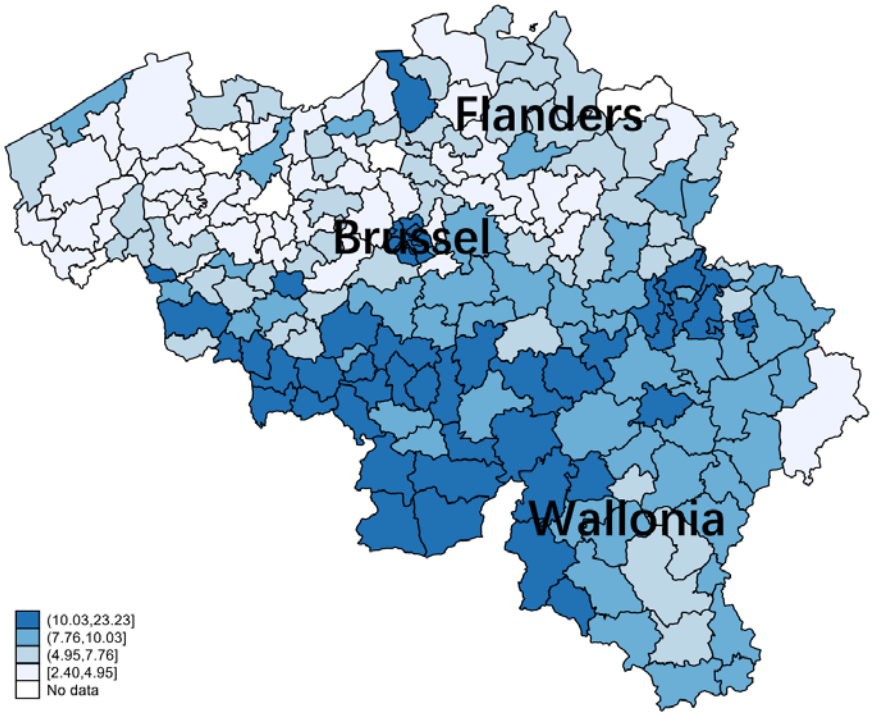

Figure 1.4 Unemployment in 2019

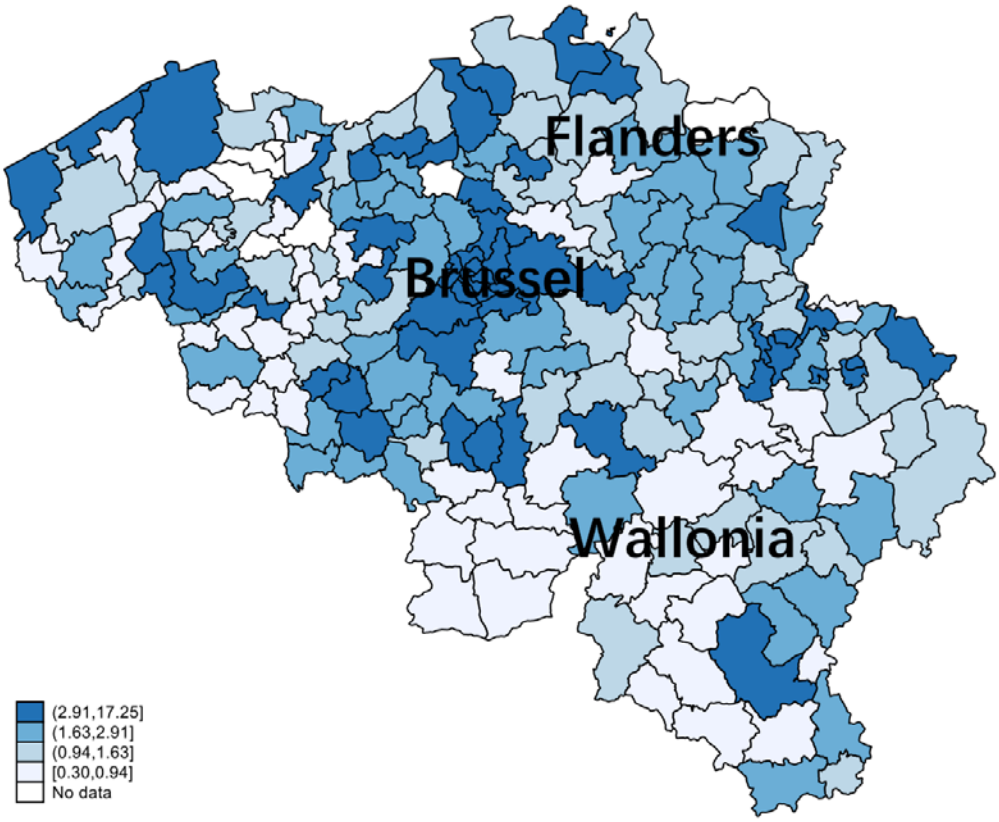

Figure 1.5 Proportion of Non-European Immigrants

Although the empirical studies on the relationship between far-right support and social and economic indicators yield mixed results, and immigration or unemployment does not automatically translate into increased support for far-right parties, the combination of a weaker economy and higher immigration still creates favorable conditions for the rise of far-right parties. Far-right parties can easily attribute economic hardship to immigration (Golder 2016).

Certainly, grievances related to immigration and economic hardship do not always need to be based on facts. Perceived grievances can still lead to support for far-right populism. However, this raises the question of what influences these perceptions among voters. What leads them to believe that there are too many immigrants or that the economy is in poor shape? These questions cannot be simply answered by conventional demand-side factors. Other factors must come into

play if we observe a region with a stronger economy and fewer immigrants having far more successful far-right parties than a region with a weaker economy and more immigrants.

1.2.3 The Inefficiency of Supply Side Explanations

While demand-side explanations are inadequate, some studies have attempted to explain the curious case of Belgium using supply-side factors. These studies examine party organization and winning ideology as factors contributing to the differences between Flemish and Walloon far-right parties. It has been pointed out that new parties tend to be more successful if they represent historical traditions and ideologies that have been neglected in recent years (Lucardie 2000). Additionally, parties formed from existing organizations are more likely to succeed (Bolleyer and Bytzek 2013). These findings are relevant to the case of Belgium, as both Hossay (2002) and Art (2008) argue that Flemish far-right parties are better organized than their Walloon counterparts. VB, for example, benefits from the resources of previous far-right organizations and can attract voters with a consistent radical Flemish nationalist ideology, while the far-right parties in Wallonia are often fragmented without a clear ideology.

Regarding the favorable political opportunity structure, scholars attribute the success and failure of far-right parties in Belgium to factors such as the cordon sanitaire and competition from mainstream parties. Walgrave and de Swert (2004) find that the media in Flanders indirectly helped the far-right party by covering issues related to its agenda. de Jonge (2021) also argues that Walloon mainstream parties and media have built an effective cordon sanitaire, which has greatly hindered the development of far-right parties. In contrast, Flemish parties and media are less interested in the idea of a cordon sanitaire and have a more open attitude toward far-right parties.

In the case of Belgium, Coffe (2008) argues that one factor explaining why far-right parties in Wallonia fail to compete with the mainstream party PS is the strategy of PS. PS consistently focuses on its traditional economic issues instead of accommodating immigration issues owned by far-right parties. This strategy is consistent with the issue ownership theory (Petrocik 1996), as PS focuses on issues in which it has a good reputation while avoiding direct competition with immigration issues, which are usually perceived as the specialties of far-right parties.

Apart from the strategy, another important factor in why PS can always electorally suppress far-right parties is its dominance in Walloon society. PS provides most services and has the most contact with their constituents compared to all other parties in Belgium (Coffe 2008). PS has established a somewhat clientelist local network that can distribute benefits such as health care or unemployment benefits to their constituents (de Jonge 2021). Therefore, PS can usually mitigate the grievances of the population by providing services and benefits. As Belgian journalist Guido Fonteyn describes, this system can make people who would otherwise vote for far-right parties "not feel abandoned" (Pültau 2006).

In contrast, there is no buffer like PS in Flanders that could attract potential voters for the far-right party. The rise of VB in the 1990s also coincided with the "depillarization" process in Flanders. Traditional Belgian society was supported by several "pillars." Each political faction had its own party and social organizations that formed a "pillar," and the population lived and worked within their own pillars and voted for a certain political party. These pillars, except the socialist pillar in Wallonia, had largely eroded in recent years (Marissal et al. 2014). Therefore, the Flemish far-right party could attract many voters from other pillars, while the Walloon far-right party still needed to face the competition of PS and the socialist pillar (Coffe 2008).

However, the existing literature on the factors of success and failure of far-right parties cannot fully explain the case in Belgium for two reasons. First, existing literature does not discuss much how these factors came into being in the first place. For example, it would be somewhat tautological to argue that Walloon far-right parties are weak because they are contained by the cordon sanitaire. The far-right parties in Wallonia were never strong in the first place, making it easier for mainstream parties in Wallonia to contain their influence.

In contrast, there are also cordon sanitaire and mainstream party competition in Flanders, but VB always maintained its influence despite all these obstacles. VB indeed experienced a decline during the 2010s, and some scholars are too quick to claim that the decline of VB is the consequence of the cordon sanitaire and the competition from the mainstream nationalist N-VA, which competes with VB on similar issues (Pauwels 2011; Lucardie et al.; Huysseune 2017). However, in the 2019 election, VB achieved another electoral victory despite all those adverse factors.

Hence, the crucial question arises: why are the cordon sanitaire and mainstream party competition effective in Wallonia but ineffective in Flanders? Why does the cordon sanitaire fail to contain VB, and why are mainstream parties in Flanders unable to attract sufficient VB voters? VB's electoral resilience cannot be simplistically attributed solely to a lack of competition or the cordon sanitaire, warranting further examination from different angles.

Secondly, the existing literature, particularly studies on the impact of the cordon sanitaire and party competition, fails to account for variations in far-right votes within each region. Even if the absence of a cordon sanitaire and weak competition from mainstream parties can explain why far-right parties are generally more successful in Flanders than in Wallonia, they do not explain why one district in Flanders may exhibit more success than another. The effects of the cordon

sanitaire and competition strategies of mainstream parties are nationwide in scope, resulting in limited variations at the local level. While some scholars touch upon the historical aspects of Flemish far-right parties (Hossay 2002; Art 2008), they do not establish a direct connection between VB's local-level success and the historical legacy of the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV), an interwar fascist party, which warrants further exploration.

1.3 A Historical Explanation on the Success and Failure of Far-Right Parties in Belgium

To address the puzzle of divergent outcomes for Belgian far-right parties, this dissertation presents a threefold argument. First, I argue that the historical persistence of far-right influence explains the success and failure of contemporary far-right parties. Second, I argue that the mechanism of social organization is important in explaining the historical persistence of far-right influence. Third, I argue that how a society reacts to history is a crucial context for historical persistence. Different historical narratives regarding historical far-right movements can create either a favorable or hostile environment for the development of far-right organizations, subsequently affecting the fate of contemporary far-right parties.

The curious case of Belgium can be understood using the above theory. First, the influence of interwar fascist parties has persisted in both Flanders and Wallonia, contributing to the success of contemporary far-right parties in Flanders and the failure of far-right movements in Wallonia. Second, the historical persistence in Flanders can be attributed to the post-war success of far-right social organizations in that region, in contrast to their struggles in Wallonia. Third, the varying responses to the historical context after World War II play a pivotal role. Flanders embraced a more favorable historical narrative for former VNV (Flemish National Union) members, creating

an environment conducive to the resurgence and reorganization of old far-right elements. In contrast, the Rexists were unequivocally condemned in Wallonia, leaving no room for their return.

How social organizations have preserved the legacy of interwar fascists in Belgium is a reversal of Putnam et al.'s (1993) narrative. While Putnam found that the civil society established under certain historical contexts could preserve values beneficial for democracy, this dissertation reveals that the civil society can transmit values, traditions, or other characteristics of a society that are unrelated or even harmful to democracy across generations.

Developed from above arguments, the whole process of historical persistence of far-right influence could be summarized as following:

How the society reacts to history → Dynamics of social organizations → Strength of far-right parties

Based on these causal mechanisms, a set of general hypotheses on the success and failure of contemporary far-right parties can be formulated:

1. In places where society did not fully condemn historical fascists or other far-right elements, far-right social organizations are more likely to thrive, and civil society is more likely to be mobilized for far-right movements due to the favorable narrative surrounding far-right ideologies.

2. In places where far-right social organizations thrive, the historical far-right legacy is more likely to be preserved, benefiting contemporary far-right parties.

3. Combining hypotheses 2) and 3), in general, far-right parties are more likely to be successful in places where historically strong far-right forces enjoyed a favorable historical narrative and less successful in places where historical far-right forces are fully condemned.

In this section, I first introduce the existing literature on the factors contributing to the success of far-right parties and explain how historical persistence complements these studies. Then, I review the literature on historical persistence and discuss how the mechanism of social organization can explain the differences in historical persistence observed in Belgium. Finally, I review the literature on civil society and present the theory explaining the importance of historical narratives in explaining the development of far-right social organizations.

1.3.1 First Argument: Historical Persistence and Far-Right Success

The first objective of this study is to underscore the significance of historical persistence in explaining the successes and failures of far-right parties. No political party arises in a vacuum, and whether a party can leverage its historical legacy is crucial to its establishment and development. One particularly relevant historical context is the rise of fascism and the end of World War II, which is not too distant from the present. Although fascists were largely purged after the war, their influence and the conditions that contributed to their success could still linger in many places.

1.3.1.1 How Historical Persistence Complements Existing Literature

Existing literature predominantly focuses on demand and supply factors, while historical persistence can impact many common factors on both the demand and supply sides. On the demand side, cultural grievances within the population can be linked to historical xenophobic sentiments. Despite the purges against fascists after the war, many fascist sympathizers and the broader base of fascist parties managed to escape punishment. The population that held far-right ideology and once voted for fascist parties might have remained in their original locations. Even though fascism

was banned after the war, individuals could still harbor radical nativist ideologies and pass them on to the next generation. These groups may be more receptive to the anti-immigration agenda of contemporary far-right parties, thereby contributing to their success.

On the supply side, historical persistence can explain the organizational strength and winning ideology of contemporary far-right parties. It is evident that a far-right party built upon existing organizations and historical ideologies is more likely to have better organizational strength and a coherent ideology. While most fascists faced punishment, many of them continued their activities after World War II. Some former fascists and their sympathizers operated underground, while others openly participated in politics and founded political organizations. If the ideologies and social connections of these former fascists and sympathizers were passed on to the next generations, contemporary far-right parties built on these historical legacies would find it easier to recruit members, establish organizational structures, possess skilled leadership, and remain united under a coherent ideology. Conversely, a brand new far-right party without such historical foundations could encounter numerous challenges in terms of organizational development and would be less likely to succeed.

The effect of historical persistence is not limited to the fascist past, as other historical traditions can similarly affect the demand and supply of far-right parties. However, the rise of fascism in the interwar period stands as the most influential historical event related to far-right ideology. Consequently, many contemporary far-right parties maintain connections with historical fascist ideologies or organizations. As many individuals are concerned about the recent rise of far-right populism sharing some similarities with the interwar period's fascism, it is imprudent to disregard the historical influence of fascism when discussing contemporary far-right parties.

1.3.1.2 Historical Persistence on Two Levels in Belgium

Regarding the puzzle in Belgium, I argue that historical persistence is one important factor in explaining the success and failure of far-right parties in Belgium. The influence of historical far-right parties persisted in Flanders but not in Wallonia, and this historical persistence is reflected on two levels:

One is local-level persistence, where historical persistence means that the interwar Flemish far-right party VNV could still influence the ideology and organizational strength of local far-right organizations. This explains why VB could be more successful in one district in Flanders.

The other is national-level persistence, where interwar far-right activists, their social connections, and their ideologies are well preserved in Flanders until today. This explains why far-right parties could be more successful in Flanders than in Wallonia.

Historical persistence, as defined by Cirone and Pepinsky (2022: 242), refers to "*causal effects that (a) operate over time scales of a decade or more and (b) explain spatial variation in political, economic, or social outcomes*." In this study, the causal effect is how the historical legacy of far-right parties (ideology, members, social connections) benefits contemporary far-right parties over time. The spatial variation is both how far-right parties receive more support in one district than another within a region and how far-right parties receive more support in one region than another. The local-level and national-level persistence could interact with each other. The aggregation of local success of a far-right party could translate into the national strength of the party, while the national strength of the party could also facilitate local success.

Historical persistence of far-right influence could interact with other factors from the demand and supply sides on both levels. Concerning the demand side, the historical far-right ideology preserved among the local population could explain why VB is more popular in certain

districts. Historical radical Flemish nationalism explains why Flemish population is more likely to be mobilized by VB on immigration issues and perceive immigrants as a threat, even though the number of immigrants may not be as high as they perceive. Regarding the supply side, the local far-right social networks maintained over time, along with the members and resources inherited by VB, explain why this far-right party could succeed both at the local and national levels. Historical persistence could also complement studies on winning ideology (Lucardie 2000) and party organization (Bolleyer and Bytzek 2013; Art 2018), explaining why far-right parties promote certain ideologies and where their organizational strength originates.

1.3.2 Literature on Historical Persistence

The long-term political impact of historical events has been studied across various disciplines. Many studies have explored how historical events affect today's economic and political development. For instance, Acemoglu et al. (2001) conducted a renowned study on the historical legacy of the colonial era. They found that local disease influenced the strategies of colonists, and the effects of colonial institutions persisted. Colonies with more inclusive institutions in the past tend to have better economic development today. Building upon this work, other scholars have emphasized the role of cultural persistence in shaping historical legacies. They argue that the beliefs and values introduced by colonists also influenced local culture, which in turn facilitated the persistence of institutions and economic development (Glaeser et al. 2004; Nunn 2012).

Several studies have investigated the electoral success and failure of far-right or fascist parties in relation to historical violence or disease. Voigtlaender and Voth (2011) proposed that support for the Nazis had deep historical origins, with anti-Semitic sentiment transmitted over time. They found that pogroms against Jews in medieval times could predict violence against Jews in

the 1920s and votes for the Nazis. Gingerich and Vogler (2021) discovered that the Black Death in medieval times could still affect votes for the Nazi party in the interwar period. They argued that areas severely impacted by the pandemic were more likely to adopt inclusive institutions, leading to more democratic local values and less support for the Nazi party.

Several studies have explored the effects of concentration camps from Nazi Germany on the electoral fortunes of contemporary far-right parties. Charnysh and Finkel (2017) studied concentration camps in Poland and found that the effects of death camps had persisted over time, leading to higher support for contemporary anti-Semitic parties in communities around the camps. They posited that property transfers from Jews who died in the camps to residents nearby had created a persistent psychological impact.

Hoerner et al. (2019) find that contemporary German voters residing closer to former concentration camps are more likely to vote for far-right parties. They argue that populations living near these camps are more likely to confront their historical past, and a "political satiation" effect makes them more susceptible to accepting revisionist narratives from far-right parties as a means to cope with this past. Homola et al. (2020) also observe a correlation between concentration camps and support for contemporary German far-right parties. They propose that an ideology of out-group intolerance has emerged due to cognitive dissonance among populations residing near concentration camps. This intolerance has endured over time, contributing to support for far-right parties. However, Pepinsky et al. (2023) recently found that the correlation identified by Homola et al. (2020) is not robust. They argue that their spatial correlation between concentration camps and far-right voting is confounded by regional-level factors.

A subset of studies specifically examines how the geographic patterns of past fascist parties persist. Cantoni et al. (2019) found that the German far-right party AfD performed better in regions

where the Nazi party had received higher support. They suggested the existence of "cultural persistence" in Germany, where political preferences for far-right ideologies were transmitted from parents to children. When AfD switched to the far right, this cultural persistence was “activated” and lead to the voting for AfD. Schulte-Cloos (2022) also discovered a connection between the geographic pattern of AfD and historical nativist and xenophobic sentiment, which was preserved by local far-right networks.

Haffert (2020) examined regions where AfD received fewer votes and found a correlation with Catholic regions where historical oppression had been intense. He suggested that historical oppression had created enduring social organizations that preserved historical legacies. The German Catholic milieu during oppression had developed a strong anti-authoritarian tendency, which discouraged support for authoritarian parties, including both the Nazi party and AfD.

The persistence of certain values or ideologies from the past to the present is typically attributed to two mechanisms. The first mechanism is intergenerational transmission, where parents pass down their ideologies to their children, whether these ideologies are general right-wing ones (Cantoni et al. 2019) or specific psychological factors (Charnysh and Finkel 2017; Hoerner et al. 2019; Homola et al. 2020). The second mechanism is the mechanism of social organizations, which preserves values and ideologies over time. These organizations could include the Catholic milieu promoting democratic values (Haffert 2020) or far-right networks promoting nativist and xenophobic attitudes (Schulte-Cloos 2022).

The mechanism of historical persistence is still an understudied area in the literature (Cirone and Pepinsky 2022). While many studies on historical persistence mention the mechanisms by which historical legacies persist, most of these mechanisms are assumed rather than tested rigorously. For example, Charnysh and Finkel (2017) propose a psychological

mechanism to explain the persistence of historical legacies but provide limited evidence to support their theory. They do not offer a detailed explanation of how historical persistence works but simply assert that intergenerational transmission occurs. While some scholars are proposing more mechanisms, these studies often lack comprehensive analyses of what transpires between the past and the present. Additionally, much of the evidence regarding mechanisms is indirect. For example, when Cantoni et al. (2019) propose intergenerational transmission as the mechanism preserving far-right ideology, they can only test this mechanism on the contemporary German population without investigating how this mechanism operated over an 80-year period.

Therefore, the existing studies on the mechanisms of far-right historical persistence face two challenges. First, regarding the mechanism of intergenerational transmission, these studies do not explain why this mechanism does not work uniformly everywhere. In the case of Belgium, where there has been no substantial population migration in either Flanders or Wallonia, intergenerational transmission alone cannot explain why far-right influence persists in Flanders but not in Wallonia. Other factors and mechanisms must interact with intergenerational transmission. Second, regarding the mechanism of social organizations, existing literature does not establish a direct connection between the past and the present. Consequently, it cannot explain how different social organizations across different time periods preserved the same ideology.

1.3.3 Second Argument: The Mechanism of Social Organizations

The second aim of this study is to emphasize the importance of the mechanism of social organizations and how this mechanism functions. As previously mentioned, there are not many studies on the mechanism of historical persistence, especially regarding the interactions between different mechanisms. While intergenerational transmission is a common mechanism mentioned

in studies on historical persistence, most studies simply assume that parents can always pass their ideas to the next generation. However, this mechanism does not explain variations in historical persistence without significant population movement. This research demonstrates that social organizations are a key mechanism that can either facilitate or hinder intergenerational transmission.

In their study on Italian democracy, Putnam et al. (1993:167) introduced the concept of "social capital," which includes "*features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*." Their analysis of how social organizations help preserve values across generations and facilitate today's democratic performance in Northern Italy provides an important example of the role of social organizations in historical persistence. However, civil society is not limited to preserving "good" qualities such as trust, as Putnam suggests. Social connections and members of social organizations can also be mobilized to transmit "bad" ideologies.

The transmission of ideas, social connections, or traditions is not confined to family members. People may pass away or relocate, but the social organizations they have created and participated in remain. In addition to learning from their parents, people also acquire ideas from society at large. What individuals learn from their families interacts with the information and practices they encounter in the broader society. Like-minded individuals who inherit ideas from their families may form or join social organizations that share similar ideas, and these social organizations, in turn, can assist families in transmitting their ideas. Therefore, far-right ideologies and social connections are more likely to persist or even thrive in places where such social organizations exist. Conversely, in places where these organizations are lacking, intergenerational

transmission can be challenging because the next generations may not receive feedback from the society.

1.3.4 Literature on "Good" and "Bad" Civil Society

How social organizations preserve far-right influence is connected to the debate on the role of civil society. Although Putnam's study on civil society claims that participating in social organizations is beneficial for the development of democracy, Berman's study on the Weimar Republic also finds that a strong civil society contributed to the rise of the Nazi party. Since then, scholars have found different evidence and developed different arguments regarding the relationship between civil society and democracy.

In their study on Italian democracy, Putnam et al. (1993) argue that social capital is the key to explaining better governance in the north of Italy, which, in turn, makes democracy work. In his work on U.S. society, Putnam (2000) further argues that the decline of social capital, reflected in the decline of bowling league membership and other forms of civil engagement, is harmful to American democracy. Guiso et al. (2008) confirm Putnam's findings by showing that social capital is related to the differential development between the north and south of Italy, attributing this difference to the free city-state experience in the Middle Ages.

The beneficial effects of social capital have also been found by other scholars. Grootaert and Bastelaer (2002) found that social capital could facilitate economic development in Mali and India by increasing trust among participants in economic programs. Knack and Keefer (1997) conducted a cross-country analysis of 29 countries to investigate social capital. They found that trust and civic cooperation were correlated with better economic development, and these

components of social capital were more pronounced in countries with greater equality and better institutions.

While many studies have revealed the positive effects of civil society, there is also research that identifies a negative role for social capital. Berman (1997) found that a strong civil society does not necessarily promote democracy, as the historical evidence suggests that civil society in the Weimar Republic contributed to the rise of the Nazi party and the collapse of German democracy. She argued that weak institutions could not satisfy the needs of the German population, who joined associations out of frustration with traditional politics. These social organizations subsequently undermined democratic governance and provided members and resources for the Nazi party. Therefore, civil society could be detrimental to democracy, and it is important to focus on the quality of associational life rather than just the quantity. With better data on the association density of the Weimar Republic, Satyanath et al. (2017) supported Berman's conclusion, finding a significant relationship between higher association density and the growth of local Nazi parties.

Scholars have also found that Putnam's case of Italy provides evidence that civil society could be harmful to democracy under weak institutions. Italian fascists also attracted members and infiltrated associations, benefiting from their resources. They came to power first in North and Central Italy, where associational life was vigorous (Kwon 2004; Riley 2010). Besides the cases of Germany and Italy, the adverse effects of social capital have also been observed in other contexts. Riley (2005) found that strong civic associations in Italy facilitated the rise of the Italian fascist party and the subsequent authoritarian regime, while the lack of associational development in Spain led to a more relaxed economic corporate dictatorship. Anderson et al. (2011) and Acemoglu et al. (2014) found that social capital could be used as a means to control and monitor society, as chiefs in Sierra Leone established a patron-client relationship in places with high social

capital. Chambers and Kopstein (2001) studied extremist groups and argued that the negative effects of "bad" civil society could be dangerous even in stable democracies like the U.S.

Some scholars have attempted to address the negative effects of civil society by categorizing different types of civil society. Putnam (2000) argues that it is important to differentiate between "bonding" social capital that reinforces existing identities, which could be used for malevolent purposes, and "bridging" social capital that makes connections across cleavages. However, Putnam still believes that bonding social capital is generally beneficial for democracy. Chambers and Kopstein (2001) argue that it is essential to examine the substance of civil society and that organizations promoting illiberal values at the expense of democratic civility are "bad" civil society. Kubik (2005) directly defines civil society as transparent organizations with tolerant practices, categorizing clandestine or illiberal organizations as "noncivil" society institutions.

Nevertheless, the classification of civil society as either good or bad remains subjective. Even if a clear definition of bad civil society is established to explain issues like patron-client relationships, as described by Acemoglu et al. (2014), or hate groups, as mentioned by Chambers and Kopstein (2001), it may still fall short in elucidating the adverse effects of seemingly innocuous social organizations, such as sports clubs, which facilitated the rise of the Nazi party, as studied by Berman (1997). Nazi Germany featured both fascist social organizations and ordinary social organizations that were later infiltrated by the Nazis. What constitutes "bad" civil society and why individuals join such organizations remains unclear. Many post-war far-right social organizations merely organize tourist events or commemorate historical events in Flemish history, and most participants in such organizations likely do not consider themselves anti-democratic extremists.

Even if a clear definition of bad civil society were established, there are few studies on why bad civil society could thrive in some cases but not in others. Berman (1997) posits that weak institutions are key to understanding how strong civil society in the Weimar Republic overthrew the democratic government instead of supporting it. Chambers and Kopstein (2001) believe that bad civil society remains a threat even under strong institutions when socioeconomic injustice produces a deprived population attracted to bad social organizations.

Existing studies primarily focus on the demand side of bad civil society, suggesting that people join such organizations because current institutions or socioeconomic conditions cannot satisfy them. While this argument might explain why far-right social organizations thrived in Belgium after the 1970s, when Belgian politics faced difficulties (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2020). The traditional organizations and parties are losing their influence, as what been called “depillarization”, while the federalization has made ethnolinguistic cleavages harder to be solved by traditional model of consociational democracy in Belgium.

However, this line of argument does not fully explain why far-right social organizations were already developing in the 1960s when Belgian institutions were stable and viewed as an example of consociational democracy by Lijphart (1968). It remains unclear why the seemingly stable Belgian institutions could not prevent the rise of far-right social organizations in Flanders. Given the same institutions between Flanders and Wallonia and better economic development in Flanders, there should be more reasons behind the much better development of far-right social organizations in Flanders.

In conclusion, the mechanism of social organization in historical persistence requires the persistence and development of far-right civil society. However, existing literature on civil society does not sufficiently explain why far-right social organizations in Flanders could thrive and

preserve the influence of old far-right ideologies or why social organizations in Wallonia could not develop further.

1.3.5 How the Mechanism of Social Organization Works in Belgium

This research argues that the key to understanding historical persistence in Belgium is the mechanism of social organization, which refers to various post-war organizations created by far-right activists with the aim of organizing and assisting like-minded people or spreading their ideologies. This mechanism of social organization, interacting with the mechanism of intergenerational transmission in a process of "preservation" and "activation," passes the far-right ideology from one generation to another.

1.3.5.1 The Continuation of Radical Flemish Nationalism

There is a direct historical connection between the contemporary far-right party VB and the interwar fascist party VNV. VNV members co-founded and participated in all the nationalist political parties and finally settled in VB. The former VNV members' influence and social connections played an important role in the development of those parties. Most founding members of VB are former VNV members or their descendants, who also formed the backbone of local VB branches. Therefore, VB is not a new far-right party, but a continuation of the tradition of radical Flemish nationalism. Although VB's contemporary success relies on the anti-immigration agenda, VB does not abandon the old tradition. Anti-immigration is not a deviation but a contemporary extension of Flemish nationalism, and the traditional anti-Francophone sentiment could be easily transformed into anti-immigration sentiment.

But the transmission of far-right influence from VNV to VB is not directly through the political parties. The Flemish far-right parties had been marginal for many years after the war and were unable to preserve the legacy. The true link between the old and new generations of Flemish far-rightists is the social organizations that serve the interests of local Flemish nationalists. When far-right political parties faced difficulties in their early years, far-right social organizations were expanding in Flanders and had preserved the most influence of interwar far-right activists.

1.3.5.2 “Preservation” and “Activation”

The transmission of political preferences from interwar fascist supporters to contemporary far-right supporters involves two essential processes: “preservation” and “activation”. Preservation entails the continuous maintenance and transmission of far-right ideologies from VNV supporters to subsequent generations, while activation involves the mobilization of local residents holding far-right ideologies by an influential far-right party that represents their interests. Social organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating both of these processes.

Regarding “preservation”, far-right social organizations play a crucial role in facilitating the intergenerational transmission of far-right ideologies. After the repression of the war, most former VNV members returned to their hometowns, while ordinary VNV voters remained in their respective locations. Local social organizations established by former VNV members assisted families in passing down their far-right ideologies to their children. These organizations continued to organize local events that attracted new generations of nationalists, thereby preserving nationalist identities among local residents, complementing the influence of nationalist families. Consequently, even before post-war nationalist parties could garner support from the old VNV constituency in an area, these potential supporters were already engaged by social organizations.

In terms of “activation”, these far-right organizations served as gathering points for former VNV members and provided the organizational foundation for subsequent political parties like VB. VB also collaborated with local organizations and utilized their resources for political campaigns. Consequently, as VB gradually expanded its influence throughout Flanders, local residents holding far-right ideologies could be readily mobilized. This activation process bears similarities to the one described by Cantoni et al. (2019).

VNV members and their sympathizers managed to regroup after the disruptions of war and repression and transferred their influence and social connections to VB through various far-right organizations. Consequently, in conjunction with the intergenerational transmission of far-right ideology among local residents, VB was able to replicate the success of VNV, resulting in the historical persistence of far-right ideologies in Flanders. In contrast, former Rex members were unable to re-enter politics due to multiple obstacles in Walloon society, preventing the passage of the historical legacy to the next generation of far-right parties.

This entire process of how social organizations preserved the far-right legacy can explain two aspects insufficiently studied in existing literature. Firstly, the interaction between the mechanisms of social organization and intergenerational transmission accounts for the divergence between Wallonia and Flanders. The intergenerational transmission mechanism is less effective in Wallonia due to the absence of social organizations that could facilitate this transmission. Secondly, the lineage of social organizations directly connecting VB and VNV elucidates the continuity of far-right influence over time. Despite social and political changes over the past 80 years, various far-right parties and social organizations have shared the same social connections and attracted the same group of members, which is why the influence of VNV has persisted throughout the years.

1.3.6 Third Argument: Different Historical Narrative, Different Civil Society

Why could far-right social organizations thrive in Flanders but not in Wallonia? What explains the adverse impact of civil society in Flanders? This dissertation aims to address the significance of historical context, particularly the historical narrative, in shaping the development of such "bad" civil society.

Can strong and stable democratic institutions, along with a healthy economy, prevent events similar to those in the Weimar Republic described by Berman? Not entirely. The key lies in comprehending both the attraction of "bad" ideology to civil society members and why society allows these organizations to flourish. A favorable narrative can elucidate both aspects. If society constructs a narrative that legitimizes far-right activists and their ideologies, it becomes easier for far-right groups to capture civil society, and the population is more likely to join them.

Historical contexts during the interwar period led many Germans to believe that fascism was the solution, creating a favorable narrative for fascists to capture civil society. However, this narrative doesn't necessarily require a crisis or weak institutions, as demonstrated by Belgium, where certain historical contexts can produce such narratives even in a seemingly stable democracy. These contexts could include crises, institutional weaknesses, political struggles, historical traditions, or a combination of historical events. In Putnam's study of civil society in Italy, a series of historical events led to the establishment of a civil society that preserved beneficial political culture for democracy. Similar developments occurred in Belgium, albeit in a different manner.

In Belgium, the key to understanding the difference in far-right social organizations between Wallonia and Flanders lies in "history" itself. The critical juncture occurred immediately after World War II. During this period, the same historical events related to the war and post-war repression were remembered and interpreted differently in Flanders and Wallonia. Flemish

collaborators were viewed as victims of repression rather than perpetrators working with the Nazis. These divergent collective memories created favorable conditions for the resurgence of far-right organizations in Flanders and a hostile environment for them in Wallonia. Subsequently, thriving far-right organizations shaped the historical narrative in Flanders, making it favorable for their development.

The victimization sentiment in Flanders plays a crucial role in understanding the path dependency of far-right influence. Scholars in psychology have studied collective memory of victimhood, showing that it can be self-perceived without direct harm and persist across generations (Volkan 2001; Noor et al. 2012). This sentiment can be constructed through rhetoric and group identities and self-reinforced under tensions and conflicts (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; McNeill and Vollhardt 2020).

In Belgium, the dominance of the French language and Francophone community since the country's independence gave rise to a sense of victimhood alongside the emergence of Flemish nationalism. While scholars have explored the post-war repression against Flemish collaborators as another trauma in Flemish society, they have not thoroughly examined the political impact of this collective memory. This sentiment extended beyond the collaborators directly affected by repression; a substantial portion of the Flemish population shared this sense of victimhood and transmitted it to subsequent generations. Consequently, a distinct collective memory regarding the war emerged in Flemish society (Rosoux and Ypersele, 2012; Heenen-Wolff et al., 2012; Aerts et al., 2021). This historical trauma created an opportunity for former collaborators to exploit the sense of victimhood and construct a favorable historical narrative. The sentiment of victimization still permeates Flemish society, and a segment of the Flemish population continues to advocate for amnesty for the collaborators (Rimé et al., 2015; Bouchat et al., 2020).

In Wallonia, the interwar far-right party Rex and collaboration with the Nazis have always been condemned, with repression against them consistently justified. Former Rexists have been marginalized, and their activities suppressed. There is no room for debate regarding amnesty for collaborators in Wallonia, making it challenging for former Rexists to regroup and pass on their ideas and social networks to the next generation of far-right activists.

In contrast, the historical narrative surrounding collaboration and repression has perpetually been contentious in Flanders. Flemish collaborators actively propagated a version of history depicting themselves as misguided Flemish patriots who collaborated with Nazi Germany solely for the benefit of the Flemish people. Amid the historical tension between the Belgian state and Flanders, repression against Flemish collaborators was viewed by many Flemish nationalists as repression against the Flemish population.

For various reasons, the historical narrative whitewashing collaborators was not suppressed in Flanders, and the former VNV leader Hendrik Elias himself could even write this part of history and receive official awards. For a long time, former VNV members and their sympathizers dominated the interpretation on this part of the history. Since the end of the World War II, the mainstream right-wing parties in Flanders have tolerated or even promoted the favorable historical narrative for Flemish collaborators. Even today, the mainstream Flemish nationalist party N-VA still shares a similar historical narrative with VB. And this favorable version of collective memory could in turn create a favorable social environment for the resurgence of the old generation of far-rights.

Flemish collaborators did not need to convince society of their innocence but only to downplay their crimes to a degree where society doesn't pay attention and gradually forgets or tolerates them. Without a consensus on the total condemnation of collaborators, Flemish society

cannot muster enough resources to contain the resurgence of far-right movements, as Walloon society did.

The historical narrative that ignores or whitewashes the crimes of former VNV members explains why far-right social organizations, often considered "bad" civil society, can attract a certain segment of the Flemish population. Participants in these organizations believe they are promoting Flemish nationalism and honoring those who fought for Flemish freedom, which they see as morally distinct from promoting far-right ideology and commemorating fascists. This narrative also explains why "bad" civil society can persist over time in Flanders but not in Wallonia. It is not only about favorable institutions or socioeconomic conditions but also about the historical narrative that either tolerates or condemns such organizations. The far-right social organizations are much more likely to thrive in a society where they are morally tolerated than in a society where they are constantly condemned. Belgian history offers examples of both types of societies, with far-right social organizations thriving in Flanders due to their higher moral standing compared to their Walloon counterparts.

1.3.7 The Historical Persistence and Non-Persistence in Belgium

This dissertation examines the presence and absence of historical persistence in Belgium and seeks to explain the reasons behind this divergence.

Historical events during World War II and the subsequent repression of collaborators (the older generation of far-right individuals) have had enduring effects on the development of far-right movements in both Wallonia and Flanders. In Wallonia, a historical narrative condemning former Rexists was firmly established, preventing the reorganization of the old far-right groups under societal pressure. Conversely, in Flanders, a historical narrative that downplayed the crimes of the

VNV was established, creating a conducive environment for the resurgence of far-right movements. This resurgence, in turn, influenced the historical narrative, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that bolstered far-right influence in Flanders. Consequently, these differing historical narratives have resulted in historical persistence at the national level, with far-right parties and organizations maintaining their strength in Flanders while becoming marginalized in Wallonia.

The favorable historical narrative in Flanders has provided an ideal setting for VNV members and sympathizers to regroup and establish various social organizations. These organizations have played a dual role: preserving far-right ideology among local populations with nationalist leanings and collaborating with far-right parties while mobilizing local support for them. Thus, the persistence of far-right influence at the local level is further sustained through the mechanism of social organizations. This phenomenon is exemplified by the geographic alignment between the contemporary far-right party VB and the interwar fascist party VNV.

In summary, the historical persistence of far-right influence is a crucial factor in understanding the success and failure of far-right parties in Belgium. The historical legacy of fascist parties from the interwar period endures through the mechanism of social organizations, while the favorable historical narrative in Flanders facilitates this mechanism. The development of contemporary far-right parties in Belgium is fundamentally shaped by the post-World War II historical events.

1.4 Methodology

Research Strategy in this dissertation involves a synergistic integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses. The initial part entails the application of quantitative analysis to examine the

presence of historical continuity in far-right influence within the regions of Flanders and Wallonia. Subsequently, the second part employs qualitative analysis to elucidate the historical evolution of far-right social entities in Belgium while discerning disparities between Flanders and Wallonia. Finally, the research delves into the historical backdrop underpinning the evolution of far-right politics in Belgium, elucidating the factors contributing to the divergent trajectories observed in Flanders and Wallonia.

1.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The empirical approach employed to assess the historical persistence of far-right influence involves a direct comparison between the geographic patterns of interwar fascist parties and contemporary far-right parties. This comparison is complemented by regression analysis, which aims to determine whether today's far-right parties garner more electoral support in districts where interwar fascist parties achieved success. Importantly, the stability of electoral districts in Belgium facilitates this direct comparison with minimal adjustments.

Given the inherent scarcity of data and increased contingencies during a party's early stages, it is pragmatically preferable to examine contemporary far-right parties and interwar fascist parties at the zenith of their influence, when their geographic patterns are more consistent. As for the comparison between VB and VNV, two years of Belgian general elections are examined in this dissertation, one is 1936 election and another the other is the 2019 election. As Minister-President of Wallonia Rudy Demotte observes, the rise of VB in 2019 is reminiscent of the year 1936: “We have not known in Belgium a movement of such magnitude since 1936.” (La Libre 2019)

Similarly, when comparing far-right parties in Wallonia, this study examines two critical years in Belgian general elections: 1936 and 2014. The former represents the peak of Rex, while

the latter signifies the zenith of Parti Populaire. Although Parti Populaire did not attain the same level of influence as Rex, it remains essential to scrutinize the disparities and commonalities in their geographic patterns during these high-water marks. The choice to focus on Parti Populaire over Front National is informed by the former's relatively recent emergence and greater organizational structure, rendering it a more apt comparison to VB and Rex.

1.4.1.1 Data

In the regression analysis, the dependent variable is the vote share in an electoral district of VB in 2019 and PP in 2014, while the independent variable is the electoral results of VNV in 1936 and PP in 1936. The geographic unit is electoral district (Canton). The Belgian electoral data are obtained from the official website of Federal Public Service Interior, and the electoral maps and several historical data are provided by Database LOKSTAT, Quetelet Center, Ghent University. As for other control variables, the contemporary social and economic data are gathered from the official website of Belgian statistical office, while the historical social and economic data are collected from the census book in 1930.

Regarding the control variables, contemporary socioeconomic data are extracted from the official website of the Belgian statistical office, while historical socioeconomic data are derived from the 1930 census records.

1.4.1.2 Spatial Dependence

Quantitative analysis of the geographic patterns of far-right parties may encounter issues related to spatial dependence. Voting behavior in one region can be influenced by voting patterns

in adjacent regions due to the clustering of party organizations, relevant socio-economic conditions, or the spill-over effects of party activities.

To address this potential spatial dependence, this dissertation employs a Spatial Autoregressive (SAR) model. SAR models account for spillover effects in observables, recognizing that outcomes in one area can be influenced by outcomes, covariates, and errors in nearby areas (Cook et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2022). The equation for the SAR model is as follows:

$$\mathbf{y} = \rho \mathbf{W}\mathbf{y} + \mathbf{X}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}$$

This model adds a spatial weighting matrix (W) in the regression. This matrix is the spatial lag of the dependent variable and would measure the potential spillover effects.

The utilization of a spatial model is justified by two primary considerations. Firstly, from a methodological perspective, the voting geography of interwar fascist parties exhibits discernible patterns of spatial clustering. Consequently, employing spatial analysis is essential to ascertain the presence of such clusters and gain insights into the existence of regional strongholds for fascist parties. Secondly, from a substantive standpoint, spatial clustering may facilitate the perpetuation of historical patterns. Proximity fosters ease of organization and communication, making it more likely for former fascists and their sympathizers to convene events and effectively promote their version of historical narratives when they are spatially concentrated. Moreover, individuals who previously supported fascist parties are more inclined to uphold far-right ideologies and embrace favorable historical narratives if they reside in areas characterized by a substantial presence of like-minded individuals. Thus, conducting spatial analysis is a valuable approach to investigating the potential impact of spatial clustering on historical persistence.

1.4.1.3 Hypothesis

Based on the previous arguments, it has been suggested that the historical persistence of far-right influence is present in Flanders but not in Wallonia. The quantitative analysis will aim to test two hypotheses:

H1: The vote share of VB in an electoral district during the 2019 election is positively correlated with the vote share of VNV in the same district during the 1936 election.

H2: There is no significant correlation between the vote share of Parti Populaire (PP) in an electoral district during the 2014 election and the vote share of Rex in the 1936 election.

1.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative study of historical persistence in Belgium utilizes a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). Flanders and Wallonia serve as two comparable cases, exhibiting initial similarities but differing significantly in terms of the dependent variable, which is the historical persistence of far-right influence.

Within the same country, both Flanders and Wallonia share similar institutional structures and numerous socio-economic conditions. Prior to World War II, fascist parties held sway in both regions, and they faced repression following the war due to their collaboration with Nazi Germany. Consequently, in the immediate post-World War II years, both regions exhibited relative similarity in terms of the initial conditions of far-right influence. However, despite these initial similarities, the contemporary landscape reveals a stark contrast between Flanders and Wallonia. While far-right parties remain marginal in Wallonia, they have achieved significant influence in Flanders, comparable to their interwar counterparts.

The divergence in outcomes despite similar beginnings in Belgium offers an ideal framework for comparison. It is acknowledged that there are historical background differences between Wallonia and Flanders. Nevertheless, it's important to note that these two regions within the same country already represent the most similar cases when compared to cases in other countries. Moreover, the disparities in historical context themselves constitute a significant aspect of this research.

This study compares the situations in Flanders and Wallonia to identify the distinct factors contributing to their divergent outcomes. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis will scrutinize these differing factors to ascertain why they originated in the first place.

1.4.2.1 Identifying the Mechanism of Social Organization

The first step is to identify the mechanisms that contribute to the different outcomes of historical persistence in Flanders and Wallonia. This dissertation employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore potential mechanisms and discern disparities. Through comprehensive comparisons, the study identifies a significant distinction between the two regions: the role of social organizations. A Most Similar Systems Design approach highlights the thriving social organizations in Flanders as a key factor explaining the differential historical persistence, contrasting with the absence of such organizations in Wallonia.

The second step involves tracing the evolution of far-right social organizations in Flanders and examining their impact on support for far-right parties. This research draws upon diverse historical documents, news reports, and relevant studies to establish the lineage of Flemish far-right social organizations, thereby establishing the historical connection between VB and VNV. Additionally, primary and secondary sources are used to analyze how these social organizations engage with sympathetic local residents and mobilize support for far-right parties. This

comprehensive exploration of social organizations' role in historical persistence reveals that the influence of the interwar fascist party VNV endured, albeit in altered forms.

The third step extends a similar methodology to investigate post-war far-right social organizations in Wallonia and compare them with their Flemish counterparts. The research traces the history of far-right social organizations in Wallonia, highlighting a generational disconnect between contemporary far-right groups and the interwar fascists. Unlike former VNV members who regrouped under social organizations and preserved the VNV legacy, former Rexists failed to establish influential organizations and encountered persistent obstacles. Consequently, the mechanism of far-right social organizations did not operate effectively in Wallonia to safeguard the Rex legacy.

The comparative analysis between Flanders and Wallonia concerning social organizations elucidates not only how these mechanisms facilitated historical persistence but also why they failed to do so. This historical analysis underscores the pivotal role of social organizations in local-level far-right historical persistence and explains the reasons behind the preservation of the geographic pattern of interwar fascist parties in Flanders but not in Wallonia.

1.4.2.2 Path Dependency and the Historical Context

This research not only uncovers the significance of social organizations in the historical persistence of far-right influence but also endeavors to elucidate the factors contributing to the divergent situations of far-right social organizations in Flanders and Wallonia. Through a comprehensive review of post-war Belgian history, an "equilibrium dependence" or "path dependence" phenomenon is identified, wherein the initial characteristics of Flemish and Walloon society in the immediate post-World War II years have enduringly shaped the equilibrium state of far-right influence in Belgium (Cirone and Pepinsky 2022). This study employs a historical

institutional approach to analyze two components of this path dependency: critical junctures and feedback effects (Thelen 1999).

The timing of the critical juncture becomes evident through prior historical comparisons of far-right social organizations in Belgium, as the divergence between Flemish and Walloon far-rights occurred shortly after World War II. Former VNV members rapidly regrouped and formed social organizations following post-war repression against collaborators, whereas former Rexists were thoroughly purged. Therefore, the critical juncture should be located among the historical events that transpired after the war. This research delves into the historical contexts during the post-war repression to illustrate the interactions among the Belgian state, mainstream parties, the population, and former fascists. These interactions resulted in differing outcomes for former VNV members and former Rexists, subsequently influencing the distinct trajectories of far-right social organizations in Flanders and Wallonia.

However, how has the consequence of this critical juncture endured? An examination of the varied historical developments of repression in Flanders and Wallonia and a retrospective analysis of the factors underpinning the stability of far-right influence in Flanders reveal the salience of historical narrative. The favorable historical narrative surrounding Flemish collaborators engendered a cascade of reinforcing feedback effects. This research scrutinizes the evolution of Flemish society's collective memory regarding interwar fascists and elucidates how this historical narrative created favorable conditions for the emergence of far-right social organizations and parties, consequently advancing their version of history.

The historical analysis of path dependency in far-right influence reveals the intricate causal relationships that have set the stage for the operation of social organizations. This analysis will

complement prior examinations of social organizations, providing a comprehensive understanding of how far-right influence can persist at both the local and national levels.

1.5 Brief Review on Belgian History and Politics

This section provides a concise overview of the historical and political context in Belgium. The first part delves into Belgium's political history, with a particular focus on its engagement with far-right politics. The second part offers insights into Belgium's political landscape, encompassing its distinctive model of consociational democracy and the contemporary political scenario.

1.5.1 Introduction on Belgian History

Belgian history has been marked by a tapestry of conflicts and compromises. Tensions stemming from language, religion, and regional differences have persisted since Belgium's inception as an independent nation. A significant milestone in this historical trajectory was the series of state reforms initiated in the 1970s, culminating in Belgium's ultimate federalization in 1993. These reforms were driven by a desire to alleviate interregional conflicts through carefully crafted compromises. However, it is worth noting that the federalization process also contributed to the deepening divisions within Belgium, presenting new challenges to its unity. Nevertheless, Belgian institutions and political parties have continually adapted to manage these tensions, successfully containing the divisions thus far (Deschouwer 2012).

1.5.1.1 Belgium before the First World War

The Belgian Revolution of 1830 marked the separation of the Southern Netherlands (now Belgium) from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, establishing Belgium as an independent nation. This revolt against Dutch rule was driven by religious and linguistic differences. Traditionally, the populations in Flanders and Wallonia were predominantly Catholic, while those in the northern Dutch regions were mainly Protestant. Furthermore, elites in Flanders and the population in Wallonia predominantly spoke French, while ordinary people in Flanders spoke a Dutch dialect instead of standard Dutch. Consequently, both regions were dissatisfied with Dutch religious and linguistic policies and felt unfairly treated by the Dutch state, including underrepresentation in parliament and government.

In 1831, the National Congress adopted a constitution establishing Belgium as a constitutional monarchy. The constitution aimed to protect minority rights and accommodate the country's linguistic divide, but French quickly became the dominant language in Belgium. The decision to make Brussels the capital, situated in Flanders, further fueled linguistic tensions, as French became the language of administration and Wallonian elites moved to Brussels. The linguistic situation in Brussels has remained a divisive issue in Belgium.

In the early decades of independence, Belgian politics were dominated by the Catholic Party and the Liberal Party, representing the clergy and bourgeoisie, respectively. The Liberal Party, advocating secularism and progress, won the 1847 elections and introduced reforms, including expanded voting rights and freedom of education. The 1879 School War erupted over education, with liberals seeking secularization and Catholics resisting. This crisis benefited the Catholic Party, leading to a conservative victory in the 1884 elections. Subsequently, the Education

Law provided state funding for Catholic schools, and religious education became compulsory in all schools in 1895.

The latter half of the 19th century saw the rise of the socialist movement due to poor conditions for a growing working-class population resulting from the industrial revolution. In 1885, the Belgian Labour Party was founded, advocating universal suffrage and improved working conditions. Strikes and protests, including the 1893 strike that forced the introduction of the 'plural vote,' marked their activism.

Simultaneously, the Flemish Movement emerged in the mid-19th century. Despite a significant Dutch-speaking population, French dominated elite circles, administration, education, and the courts, marginalizing Dutch speakers, especially in Flanders. Demands for equal status for the Dutch language and culture began, sparking protests and demands for recognition since the 1860s. Universal male suffrage introduced in 1893 boosted the political aspect of the Flemish Movement. By the turn of the century, it had gained considerable influence, leading to language laws establishing bilingualism in Belgium, though demands for greater autonomy in Flanders were not met (Deschouwer 2012).

In conclusion, before World War I, the cleavages and major political forces in Belgium were firmly established. Socialists, Catholics, liberals, and Flemish nationalists became dominant, reflecting the religious, linguistic, economic, and political tensions that persisted since Belgium's independence. Belgium became independent because of the religious and linguistic tensions with Dutch, but the cleavage on religion and language did not disappear after the independence of Belgium. The economic tension, the tension between secular liberals and the Catholics, and the tension between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia would become important themes in Belgian history. Belgium was deeply divided since its independence.

1.5.1.2 Through Two World Wars

Before World War I, Belgium experienced escalating internal political tensions among linguistic groups, ideologies, political parties, and regions. The external threat of invasion and occupation during World War I briefly united Belgians, fostering nationalism while also intensifying demands for further decentralization by Flemish activists. Consequently, the war both united and exacerbated divisions within Belgium, laying the foundation for the post-war political landscape.

Following the war, universal male suffrage for individuals aged 21 and over was introduced, leading to significant changes in the political landscape. This shift bolstered the political influence of the working class and gave rise to the Belgian Labour Party, which represented socialist interests. The previously dominant Catholic party faced challenges, reshaping the political landscape in Belgium. The interwar period saw a prevalence of coalition governments and frequent changes in leadership, resulting in a period of political uncertainty.

The German occupation of Belgium heightened ethnic tensions and prompted Flemish activists to advocate for greater autonomy post-war. While the majority of the Flemish population remained loyal to the Belgian state, German occupiers sought to exploit linguistic divisions by supporting Flemish separatists and promoting the Dutch language during the occupation.

After the war, Flemish veterans felt discriminated against and neglected by the Belgian state. The absence of official responses to postwar Flemish demands led to a rightward shift among Flemish populations. Radical Flemish nationalists began advocating for complete independence from Wallonia. The growth of far-right nationalist movements in Flanders further polarized Belgian politics. Despite several reforms and concessions on language issues in the 1930s, these

efforts failed to satisfy Flemish activists who sought full political autonomy and federalization (De Wever 1998).

The interwar period witnessed the rise of far-right and fascist movements in Belgium, mirroring similar developments across Europe. In the 1936 Belgian election, far-right parties made significant inroads in both Flanders and Wallonia.

In Flanders, the far-right party Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV, Flemish National Union) achieved substantial success in 1936. Founded in 1933 as an electoral cartel for Flemish nationalists, VNV initially held moderate views but later adopted a more fascist ideology and received funding from the Nazis (Wallef 1980). VNV's ideology combined elements of nationalism, authoritarianism, and Catholicism, and it even employed anti-Semitism for electoral purposes. Despite mainstream rejection, VNV garnered approximately 15% of the Flemish vote in the 1936 and 1939 elections.

In Wallonia, the Parti Rexiste (Rex, Rexist Party) emerged victorious in the 1936 election. Founded in 1935 by Léon Degrelle, a former member of the Catholic Party, Rex drew inspiration from fascism in Italy and aspired to establish a corporatist and authoritarian society in Belgium (De Wever 2007). While initially a movement of Catholic youth, Rex, propelled by Degrelle's charisma, attracted individuals dissatisfied with traditional parties and the government. In the 1936 election, Rex received 11% of the vote across Belgium, a significant achievement for a new party. This electoral success stirred Belgian politics and elevated Degrelle to national prominence, even garnering the interest of Belgian King Leopold III.

Despite the electoral success of fascist parties, traditional parties continued to form coalitions during the interwar period. Rex and VNV did not have the opportunity to enter the government as their Italian or German counterparts did. Although Rex and VNV initially formed

an alliance before World War II, divisions over Flemish nationalism ultimately led to its dissolution. When the war broke out, both Rex and VNV collaborated with Nazi Germany and were involved in various war crimes. After the war, both parties were punished for their collaboration with the Nazis in a process known as "Repressie" (Repression) (Conway 1996).

In summary, Belgian political history during the interwar period was marked by the country's struggle to address multiple political and economic crises. Far-right political parties gained influence in both Wallonia and Flanders, but traditional parties continued to maintain control over the government. Linguistic tensions between Flemings and Walloons intensified, although the unitary state structure largely persisted. The decentralization that did occur failed to satisfy Flemish demands for full autonomy, resulting in political divisions that would continue to shape Belgian politics for decades to come.

1.5.1.3 Belgium after World War II

At the conclusion of the war, Belgium confronted two significant challenges stemming from the conflict. The first challenge revolved around the handling of collaborators during the period known as the "Repressie" (Repression). Collaborators, particularly members of the Rexist and VNV parties, faced various forms of punishment for their collaboration with Nazi Germany. In the immediate aftermath of liberation, extrajudicial punishments characterized by violence and occasionally resulting in fatalities were meted out by resistance groups or civilian collectives. Subsequently, judicial purges were initiated in 1945, with Belgian courts commencing trials of suspected collaborators. These trials resulted in numerous convictions, with penalties ranging from fines and internments to the death penalty. Beyond those convicted, the families and sympathizers of collaborators also endured repercussions due to the repression.

The controversial nature of the repression has persisted as a subject of debate within Belgian society. Critics argue that the trials often relied on insufficient evidence and that punishments did not consistently align with the severity of the offenses. Flemish nationalists contend that the purges disproportionately targeted the Flemish community. Consequently, the repression has contributed to tensions between the Flemish and Walloon communities, with the issue of amnesty for collaborators remaining contentious in Flanders (Huyse et al. 2020).

Another challenge arising from the war was the "Royal Question." This was a significant political crisis centered on King Leopold III's conduct during World War II. King Leopold III's decision to surrender to Nazi Germany in 1940, without consulting his government, drew substantial criticism. Following the war, his return to the throne faced opposition from a significant portion of the Belgian population and the political establishment, leading to the "Royal Question" crisis. Ultimately, after a contentious referendum in 1950, Leopold III resumed the throne, but the ongoing controversy culminated in his abdication in favor of his son, Baudouin I, in 1951. This political crisis further deepened the regional divide between Flanders, which largely supported the King's return, and Brussels and Wallonia, where opposition predominated.

Linguistic divisions and tensions between Flanders and the Belgian state resurfaced in the 1960s. In the post-war period, economic power shifted from traditionally industrial Wallonia to Flanders, which experienced significant economic growth. This shift exacerbated linguistic divisions, resulting in heightened demands for autonomy within the Flemish community. The Flemish movement regained momentum, with the Flemish nationalist political party People’s Union (Volksunie) gradually gaining political influence.

A pivotal moment in the process of federalization occurred in 1970 with the introduction of the first state reform. This reform amended the constitution to formally recognize three cultural

and linguistic communities: the Dutch-speaking Flemish community, the French-speaking community, and the smaller German-speaking community. Each community received its own council and executive, with authority over cultural, language, and education matters.

Subsequent state reforms in the 1980s led to the establishment of three regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region. Each region gained its legislative assembly and executive. The fourth state reform in 1993 marked Belgium's formal transition from a unitary to a federal state, with regions assuming increased responsibilities and resources. Additionally, this reform facilitated direct elections for the parliaments of the communities and regions.

The federalization of Belgium precipitated a transformation in its political landscape. Since the 1970s, most Belgian political parties splintered along linguistic lines, with Dutch-speaking and French-speaking factions operating independently. Only in Brussels do parties from both language groups compete with one another. The social environment in Brussels bears closer resemblance to Wallonia, and the political landscape is dominated by Francophone parties.

As federalization gradually unfolded, Flemish nationalist parties assumed greater political significance. Volksunie entered the government in 1977, marking the first instance of a Flemish nationalist party's participation in the government. Subsequently, Volksunie evolved into a mainstream party representing Flemish nationalist interests and participated in coalition governments on several occasions. However, internal factional disputes led to Volksunie's dissolution in 2001. The party's right-wing faction reconstituted itself as the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) that same year. N-VA is presently the largest party in Flanders and has consistently held a position in the Flemish regional government since 2004.

While mainstream Flemish nationalist parties achieved success, radical nationalist parties also experienced a resurgence. In 1978, the radical faction of Volksunie split from the party and formed the far-right Vlaams Blok (VB) party. VB achieved its inaugural electoral breakthrough in 1991, a milestone often referred to as "Black Sunday." VB campaigned on both far-right and Flemish nationalist agendas, leading to complex interactions with mainstream nationalist parties such as Volksunie and N-VA. VB's electoral fortunes fluctuated after 1991, facing competition from N-VA. However, VB has witnessed a resurgence and currently ranks as the second-largest party in Flanders.

In summary, post-war Belgium grappled continuously with the tension between Flanders and Wallonia, a historical division with deep roots dating back to Belgium's independence. Belgium implemented multiple state reforms to address this challenge, yet federalization further cleaved the political landscape as parties aligned along linguistic lines. While federalization helped manage linguistic and cultural tensions, it did not fully appease Flemish nationalists and prevented the emergence of radical Flemish nationalism.

Throughout the post-war years, radical Flemish nationalists remained the sole influential and enduring far-right force in Flanders. VB's strength can be traced not only to the legacy of VNV but also to the broader Flemish independence movement. As such, historical Flemish far-right activists frequently also encompass former VNV members and radical Flemish nationalists. This amalgamation of far-right ideology and radical Flemish nationalism constitutes a pivotal characteristic in comprehending far-right politics in Flanders.

1.5.2 Introduction on Belgian Politics

Present-day Belgium operates as a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy, characterized by a multi-party system necessitating coalition governments due to its diverse political and linguistic groups. The electoral and governmental formation procedures are intricate. Federal elections are conducted every five years to elect representatives for the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the Federal Parliament. These members are chosen through proportional representation. Concurrently, regional and community elections are held, determining representatives for each of Belgium's three regions, with voting being compulsory.

Following the elections, the King designates an "informateur" to investigate potential coalitions based on the election results. Subsequently, a "formateur" is appointed, typically the prospective Prime Minister, whose role involves negotiating a coalition agreement that outlines the government's policy for the upcoming term. Once the coalition agreement is finalized, the proposed government undergoes a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Representatives, requiring a majority for approval. Upon successful validation, the King officially appoints the government. Similar processes occur at the regional levels to establish their respective governments.

1.5.2.1 Belgian Political Institutions: Consociationl Democracy?

Belgium's distinctive political structure has often been regarded as an exemplar of "Consociational Democracy" by scholars. The concept of consociational democracy, as elucidated by Arend Lijphart, entails "government by elite cartel to transform a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy" (Lijphart 1969).

The four key institutional features of consociational democracy encompass a grand coalition, proportionality, veto rights, and segmental autonomy, with citizen deference representing its cultural characteristics.

In the Belgian context, political parties commonly form comprehensive coalitions that encompass all significant parties to address linguistic tensions. The grand coalition spanning all segments is reinforced by proportional representation and resource allocation among the segments. Furthermore, the mutual veto rights are institutionalized in Belgium, enabling each linguistic group to veto potential abuses of power by the majority. Segmental autonomy has also been granted in Belgium, facilitated by the process of federalization, which has devolved more powers to each regional segment.

Citizen deference is maintained in Belgium through a process known as "pillarization." Traditionally, Catholics, socialists, and liberals formed distinct pillars with their own parties and social organizations. The population has traditionally demonstrated strong loyalty to their respective pillar and remained passive in political debates, creating space for elite negotiations.

However, the consociational democracy model has faced challenges in recent years. Traditional parties and organizations have seen a decline in influence during the "depillarization" process, accompanied by increased electoral volatility. Traditional religious and economic cleavages have diminished in significance since World War II, while the linguistic cleavage between Flanders and Wallonia has gained prominence, posing challenges within the traditional pillars of Catholics, socialists, and liberals. This shift has led to the emergence of new parties, particularly Flemish nationalist parties, reshaping Belgium's political landscape.

The consociational democracy system, which historically relied on forming broad coalitions with a majority of parliamentary votes from both language groups, has been increasingly

challenged since the 2007 election. The principle of proportionality has become problematic due to dwindling financial resources to mitigate conflicts. Mutual veto rights may take longer to activate in the future. Regarding segmental autonomy, fewer substantive competences remain at the federal level to grant autonomy after successive state reforms of federalization. Finally, the assumption that democracy could thrive in deeply divided societies only as long as the population remained deferent is being increasingly contested by the rise of deliberative and participatory models of democracy (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2020).

Despite recent challenges, Belgian democracy survives amid political and economic instabilities. A divided society continues to be managed by the fundamental tenets of consociational democracy, as the institutional framework still necessitates coalitions and consensus, allowing elites to find compromises to resolve conflicts (Deschouwer 2006).

1.5.2.2 Current Major Political Parties in Belgium

This section briefly introduces the current political parties and their positions in Belgium.

1.5.2.2.1 Mainstream Parties in Francophone Belgium

In Francophone Belgium, the preeminent political force is the social democratic party known as the Parti Socialiste (PS), or the Socialist Party. The PS consistently holds a prominent position as the most popular party in Francophone Belgium and frequently participates in coalition governments. The PS wields a significant influence over Francophone society, which will be further explored in subsequent discussions.

Other prominent mainstream political parties in Francophone Belgium encompass the Christian democratic party, Center Démocrate Humaniste (CDH), the liberal party, Mouvement

Réformateur (MR), and the green party, Écologistes Confédérés (Ecolo), which is known as the Confederate Environmentalists.

1.5.2.2.2 Mainstream Parties in Flanders

In Flanders, the prominent mainstream political parties include the social democratic party known as Socialistische Partij Anders (SP.A), which translates to Socialist Party Differently, the Christian democratic party named Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V), signifying Christian Democratic and Flemish, the liberal party Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open Vld), or Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats, the green party simply referred to as Groen (Green), and the Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), which stands for New Flemish Alliance.

Historically, CD&V held the position of the largest party in Flanders, reflecting the dominance of the Catholic party in the region. However, since the 2014 election, N-VA has surpassed CD&V in terms of political influence. N-VA was established in 2001, emerging from the right-wing faction of the former Flemish nationalist party, Volksunie (VU), which disbanded in 2001. While both N-VA and Volksunie advocate for Flanders' independence, they also engage in collaborations with mainstream parties and have participated in the government on multiple occasions.

1.5.2.2.3 Radical Parties in Belgium

In Francophone Belgium, the major far-right parties include the Front National Belge (FNb), which translates to National Front Belgium, and the Parti Populaire (PP), which means People’s Party. FNb was established in 1985 and dissolved in 2012, while the Parti Populaire was founded in 2009 and dissolved in 2019. Like many far-right parties in Europe, their popularity is primarily based on conservative and anti-immigration agendas. However, neither party has

garnered significant electoral support. FNb reached its peak in 1995, receiving only 5% of regional votes and securing 2 seats in the Chamber of Representatives. Similarly, the Parti Populaire reached its highest point in 2014, with 4% of regional votes and 1 seat in the Chamber of Representatives.

In Flanders, the dominant far-right party is the Vlaams Belang (VB), which was originally founded in 1978 by the radical faction of Volksunie. It later changed its name from Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang in 2004. VB not only emphasizes conservative and anti-immigration issues, like its Wallonian counterparts, but also advocates for a radical Flemish nationalist agenda. Consequently, VB has been in direct competition with mainstream Flemish nationalist parties for voters since its inception. In the 1990s, VB attracted a significant portion of Volksunie supporters, but it experienced a decline in votes to N-VA in the 2014 election. However, VB has since regained momentum and reached a new peak in the 2019 election, receiving over 18% of the votes and becoming the second-largest party in Flanders.

Lastly, there is the radical left party known as the Partij van de Arbeid van België/Parti du Travail de Belgique (PVDA-PTB), which translates to Worker's Party of Belgium. PVDA-PTB is the only bilingual party in Belgium and operates in both Flanders and Francophone Belgium. The party advocates for Marxist and socialist agendas but maintains a moderate relationship with mainstream parties. PVDA-PTB has also achieved some electoral success in recent elections, with better performance in Francophone Belgium compared to Flanders.

The votes and seats of the aforementioned parties after the 2019 election are presented in the following table:

Table 1.1 2019 Belgian Election Results

Region	Political Spectrum	Party	National Votes (%)	Regional Votes (%)	Seats in Chamber of Representatives	Seats in Flemish/Walloon Parliament
Wallonia	Radical Left	PVDA-PTB	8.62	13.7	12	4/10
	Mainstream Left	PS	9.46	26.2	20	23
		Ecolo	6.14	14.5	13	12
	Mainstream Right	MR	7.56	21.4	14	20
		CDH	3.70	11	5	10
	Radical Right	PP	1.11	3.67	0	0
Flanders	Radical Left	PVDA-PTB	8.62	5.3	12	4/10
	Mainstream Left	S.PA	6.71	10.1	9	12
		Groen	6.10	10.1	8	14
	Mainstream Right	N-VA	16.03	24.8	25	35
		CD&V	8.89	15.4	12	19
		Open Vld	8.54	13.1	12	16
	Radical Right	VB	11.95	18.5	18	23

The table presented above highlights the dominance of right-wing parties in Flanders, where the moderate nationalist party N-VA, far-right party VB, and center-right party CD&V received the majority of votes. In contrast, left-wing mainstream party S.PA and the green party Groen have a smaller share of the political landscape. Conversely, in Walloon politics, the left-wing mainstream party PS holds a dominant position, with strong performances from the mainstream green party Ecolo and the far-left party PVDA-PTB. The right-wing Francophone mainstream party MR remains the second largest party in Wallonia; however, when considering the overall performance of right-wing parties, they cannot rival the left-wing parties.

Notably, while the Flemish far-right party VB has become the second largest party in Flanders, the influence of Francophone far-right parties in Wallonia is minimal. Even at their peak, Francophone far-right parties only secured approximately 5% of the votes and one or two seats in parliament. This trend has persisted not only in the 2019 election but in every election since the 1990s. Flemish far-right parties consistently outperform their Walloon counterparts.

1.6 What Do We Learn from the Case of Belgium?

This dissertation makes three primary contributions to the field of far-right politics, historical persistence, and civil society.

First, this dissertation provides direct evidence on the existence of historical persistence in Belgium. While some scholars have mentioned the historical roots of contemporary Flemish far-right parties (Mudde 1995; Art 2008; de Jonge 2021), none have attempted to test the relationship between far-right voting patterns and historical far-right parties. This dissertation employs spatial analysis, considering both temporal and spatial dependencies, to demonstrate that the geographic patterns of contemporary far-right parties in Flanders are influenced by the interwar Flemish fascist party (Cook et al. 2022). Consequently, this research sheds light on the rise of far-right parties in Belgium and other nations, reintroducing historical factors into the discourse.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding the factors facilitating the emergence and success of contemporary right-wing populist parties (Golder 2016), particularly focusing on research into regional variations in far-right support (Dippel et al. 2015; Algan et al. 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Harteveld et al. 2021). It posits that historical legacy

serves as a key factor affecting both the supply and demand for far-right movements in specific areas.

Secondly, this dissertation delves into the mechanisms behind historical persistence. Existing studies on the persistence of far-right influence over time typically assume two mechanisms: intergenerational transmission (Cantoni et al. 2019; Homola et al. 2020) and social organizations (Haffert 2020). However, the current literature does not extensively explore the interactions between these mechanisms. A review of post-war history in Belgium reveals that intergenerational transmission and social organizations can reinforce each other. In Flanders, social organizations facilitated the transmission of far-right ideology from local activists to their children and others in their communities. This interplay between these two dynamics deepens our understanding of the mechanisms of historical persistence.

Additionally, this dissertation underscores the significance of historical narratives in understanding the mechanisms of historical persistence. It calls for increased attention to the historical contexts in which these mechanisms operate. Historical narratives, representing how a society remembers past events, can significantly influence the reactions of the population and mainstream political parties to the emergence of the next generation of far-right movements. Building on prior literature addressing the transmission of historical legacies, this research presents a more comprehensive mechanism for how historical legacies are preserved and suggests measures to mitigate their influence.

Finally, this dissertation offers a nuanced perspective on civil society. While one strand of civil society research argues that the development of civil society is always beneficial for democracy (Putnam et al. 1993), another focuses on how civil society can be co-opted by fascists to subvert democracy (Berman 1997). The case of Belgium provides a nuanced view of the role of

civil society, highlighting that whether civil society is captured and contributes to the rise of far-right movements depends on historical context.

In the case of Germany, as studied by Berman, weak political institutions and traditional parties created a gap between civil society and the political system, allowing fascists to capture civil society and support the Nazi party. In Belgium, however, strong democratic institutions and a consociational party system usually bridge the gap between society and the system, preventing far-right parties from seizing power in the same manner as interwar fascists in Germany.

The Belgian case demonstrates that civil society in a stable democracy is unlikely to be entirely captured, as occurred in the Weimar Republic. However, it also reveals that a segment of civil society can contribute to the rise of far-right movements even in a stable democracy, provided there is an unsatisfied demand that creates a gap between civil society and the political institution. The Belgian state missed opportunities to adequately address the division between Flanders and Wallonia after World War II, resulting in an unsatisfied demand for Flemish nationalism that made far-right social organizations appealing to a certain segment of the population.

Stable democracy and a robust party system in Belgium did prevent far-right parties from capturing civil society entirely and seizing power. Nevertheless, the Belgian case illustrates that social organizations can still have adverse effects on democratic regimes when an unsatisfied demand creates a gap between civil society and the political institution. The story of how far-right influence persisted after World War II in Belgium under complex historical contexts can be applied to many other countries. While the case of interwar Germany, an unstable nascent democracy within a unique historical context, may seem distant from today, the Belgian case shares similarities with many contemporary Western democracies.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, quantitative measures are employed to demonstrate that VB continues to receive more votes in areas where the interwar far-right party VNV had substantial support. Conversely, in Chapter 3, a similar analysis reveals that the contemporary Walloon far-right party PP exhibits no correlation with the interwar far-right party Rex.

The question arises: Why does the historical influence of interwar far-right parties persist in Flanders but not in Wallonia? Chapters 2 and 3 explore potential mechanisms of historical persistence and reveal that the pivotal distinction between Flanders and Wallonia lies in the development of social organizations. Flemish far-right social organizations reemerged swiftly after the war and have thrived to this day, while far-right social organizations in Wallonia have consistently remained marginalized and disjointed. Thus, far-right social organizations emerge as a significant explanatory mechanism for the disparities in historical persistence within Belgium.

But how did these social organizations preserve the influence of VNV, and why did this process not occur in Wallonia? In Chapter 4, an examination of post-war Belgian history unveils the continuity of the old generation of far-right activists. Additionally, a review of post-war Belgian history reveals that VNV members and their sympathizers managed to regroup after the disruptions of war and repression. They successfully transferred their influence and social connections to VB through various far-right organizations. Consequently, in conjunction with the intergenerational transmission of far-right ideology among local residents, VB ultimately replicated the success of VNV, leading to the historical persistence of far-right politics in Flanders. In contrast, former Rex members encountered insurmountable obstacles in Walloon society, preventing them from passing down the historical legacy to subsequent generations of far-right parties.

If Walloon society was able to impede the resurgence of the old generation of far-right activists and prevent historical persistence, why did Flemish society not do the same? The disparity lies in the attitudes of each society toward history. In Chapter 5, a further examination of post-war Belgian history reveals that the key factor is how Flemish and Walloon societies remember history.

The complex historical context following World War II gave rise to different historical narratives in Wallonia and Flanders. Walloon society remembers the far-right party Rex as a threat and justifies the rigorous repression against Rexists. Consequently, the old generation of far-right activists and their ideologies faced continuous containment from society as a whole. In contrast, controversies surrounding the history of collaboration and repression in Flanders have persisted. Post-war repression of Flemish collaborators could never be stringent enough because Flemish society lacked a consensus regarding the culpability of VNV. Former VNV members encountered far fewer obstacles when attempting to reorganize, and they even received support from mainstream parties and the population. The favorable environment for Flemish far-right movements did not emerge in contemporary times but rather has its roots in the post-war history.

2.0 The Historical Legacy of Far-Right in Flanders

In this chapter, I will employ the case of fascist and far-right parties in the Flanders region of Belgium as an illustrative example to elucidate how historical legacies influence the success and failure of contemporary far-right parties.

To begin, I will present quantitative evidence demonstrating that the support for the present-day Flemish far-right party, Vlaams Belang (VB), is indeed influenced by the historical legacy of the interwar fascist party, VNV. VB garners more votes in areas where VNV enjoyed success during the interwar period.

Subsequently, I will delve into the mechanisms by which the legacy of VNV has been preserved. Three potential mechanisms will be examined: 1) the common socio-economic conditions, 2) intergenerational transmission, and 3) transmission via social organizations.

Upon scrutinizing these three mechanisms, I will conclude that the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and social organizations play pivotal roles in understanding the legacy of Flemish far-right movements. However, it is important to note that this assessment, based solely on the case of Flanders, provides a preliminary conclusion. The impact of these two mechanisms will be further explored in subsequent chapters when the case of Wallonia is also considered.

2.1 Historical Background

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, Belgian society has historically been divided between Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and French-speaking Wallonia in the south. Following a protracted nationalist struggle and demands for increased autonomy, Belgium has evolved into a federalized state, with Flanders established as an autonomous region characterized by its distinct cultural and political identity. Consequently, Belgian political parties are divided along linguistic lines, with each party primarily operating within its respective region.

Vlaams Belang (VB) stands out as one of the most successful far-right populist parties in Europe. As a nationalist and anti-immigration party, VB has consistently faced rejection from mainstream political parties and has not been afforded the opportunity to participate in government coalitions. Nevertheless, this has not hindered VB's growth. In the 2019 Belgian election, VB secured more than 18% of the vote, making it the second-largest party in Flanders. Subsequently, VB's influence has continued to expand. According to recent polls, VB currently enjoys the highest popularity rating among Flanders' political parties and is projected to capture 24% of the vote in the upcoming election (Hope 2021).

VB's Chairman, Tom van Grieken, attributes the party's success to its focus on addressing the population's perceived need to protect "our culture." VB has effectively harnessed the power of social media, making it particularly appealing to young Belgian men who express concerns about immigration and advocate against cultural diversity (Cerulus 2019).

However, one aspect of VB's success that has received insufficient scholarly attention is the historical legacy inherited from Flemish far-right movements of the past. Although Vlaams Belang was formally established in 2004, its historical roots run much deeper. Vlaams Belang essentially evolved from Vlaams Blok, a Flemish far-right party founded in 1971, which, in turn,

splintered from the Flemish nationalist party Volksunie established in 1958. Importantly, many members of Volksunie were previously affiliated with the interwar fascist party Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond.

Flemish nationalism itself has deep historical roots, originating alongside the founding of the Belgian state. It experienced a significant upsurge during the interwar period when Flemish people believed that their wartime sacrifices were inadequately recognized by the Belgian government. Their aspiration for autonomy, previously granted by German occupiers during World War I, went unfulfilled post-war.

The Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV) was founded in 1933, evolving from the nationalist Frontpartij established in 1919. Initially moderate, the VNV adopted a more fascist orientation over time and received financial support from Germany (Wallef 1980). Its ideology combined elements of nationalism, authoritarianism, and Catholicism, with a later inclusion of anti-Semitism for electoral purposes, particularly as Jewish refugees arrived in Belgium.

Despite being marginalized by mainstream politics, the VNV achieved considerable electoral success prior to the war, securing around 15% of the Flemish vote in the 1936 and 1939 elections. It also formed a short-lived electoral alliance with the Walloon fascist party Rex. During the war, the VNV actively collaborated with Nazi Germany and participated in the persecution of Belgian Jews. Post-war, VNV members faced punishment for collaboration, but many eventually returned to political activities, some even joining the Volksunie after a few years.

A cursory examination of the histories of the VNV and VB reveals numerous ideological similarities, with VB representing the contemporary successor to the radical wing of Flemish nationalism. While it is plausible that VB benefits from a legacy left by the VNV, prior studies

have not confirmed the existence of this legacy or elucidated the mechanisms responsible for its preservation.

2.2 Empirical Analysis

The Belgian electoral data have been sourced from the official website of the Federal Public Service Interior, while contemporary social and economic data have been acquired from the official website of the Belgian statistical office. Historical social and economic data have been retrieved from the 1930 census records, and maps and other historical data have been provided by the Database LOKSTAT, Quetelet Center, Ghent University.

The original social and economic data are available at the municipality level, whereas electoral data are recorded at the electoral district level. For the purposes of our analysis, I have aggregated all the data at the electoral district level. Since the configuration of Belgian electoral districts has undergone minimal changes since the post-war period, I have opted for a straightforward approach by directly integrating historical data into the contemporary electoral map for comparative analysis.

This chapter investigates two general elections: the 1936 election and the 2019 election. As noted by Minister-President of Wallonia, Rudy Demotte, the surge of Vlaams Belang (VB) in 2019 draws parallels with the political landscape of 1936 (La Libre 2019). Given the paucity of data and increased uncertainty during the early stages of a political party's existence, it is more pragmatic to compare VB and VNV during their peak periods, when their geographic patterns exhibit greater stability.

2.2.1 VNV in 1936

Let's begin with a concise overview of the electoral strategy employed by VNV in 1936. In addition to championing Flemish nationalism, VNV's electoral campaign prominently featured the themes of "Order, Prosperity, and Peace." The party asserted its capacity to resolve Belgium's political and economic instability. VNV also launched vigorous attacks on the labor party, accusing it of collaborating with communists, and positioned itself as the sole party capable of safeguarding Belgium from the perceived communist threat (De Wever 1994). Furthermore, due to strong support for the Flemish Movement among the lower clergy in Flanders, VNV managed to secure votes from the Catholic Party (De Wever 2007).

It is noteworthy that VNV initially refrained from embracing anti-Semitism; however, during the 1936 electoral campaign, it progressively adopted xenophobic propaganda. The presence of Jewish refugees exacerbated anti-Semitic sentiments in Belgium, providing VNV with an opportunity to attribute economic crises and the communist threat to Jewish immigrants and other foreigners (Moskowitz 1940).

Although VNV predominantly drew support from the authoritarian and nationalist Flemish population, particularly those disenchanted with democracy and the Belgian state, it also made efforts to appeal to a wider spectrum of the populace, including the lower and middle classes, such as small business owners and farmers.

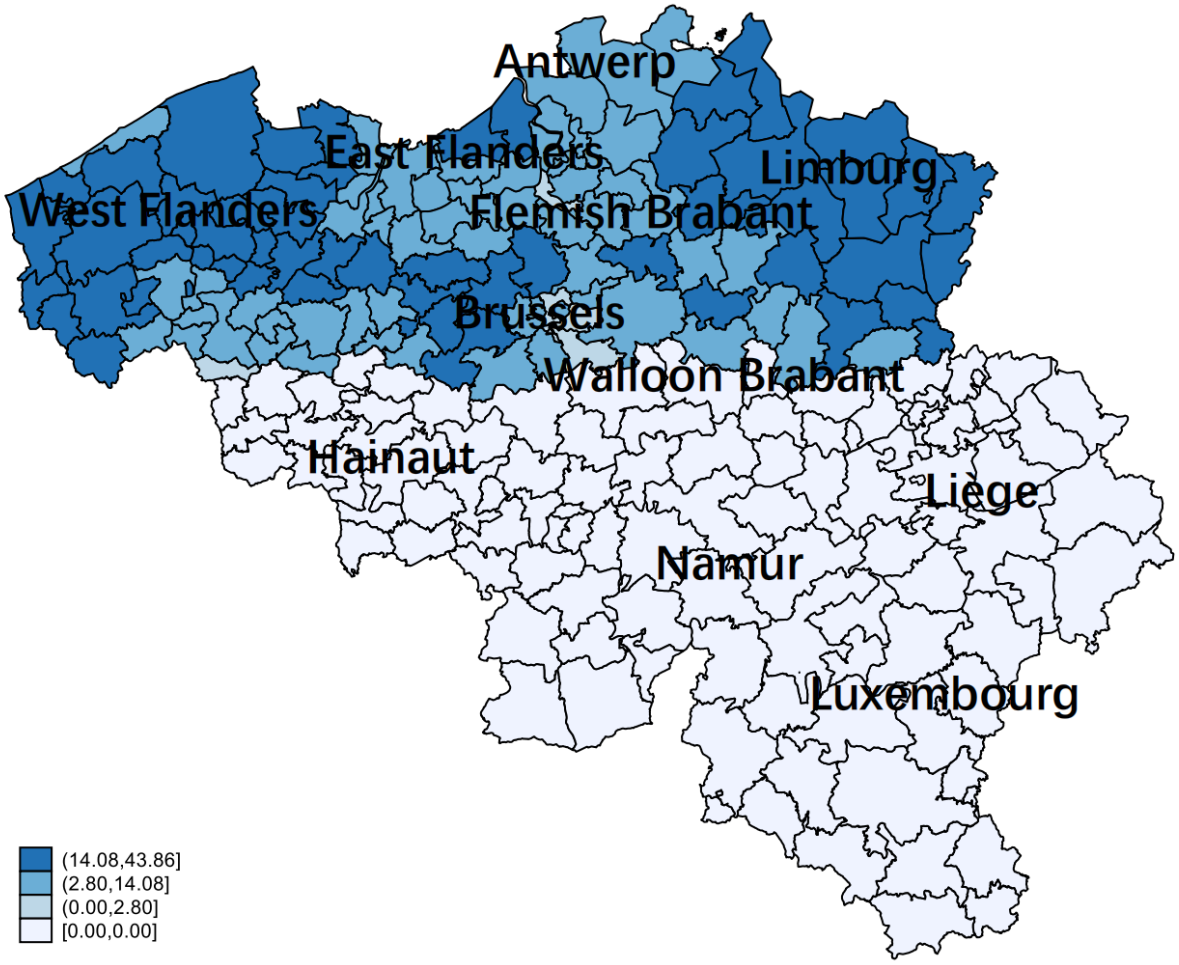

Figure 2.1 Geography of VNV Votes in 1936

By examining the electoral map (Figure 1), we observe that VNV achieved greater success in rural and peripheral areas, such as Limburg and West Flanders, while its performance was less favorable in major cities like Antwerp and Ghent.

Subsequently, I conducted a spatial regression analysis to gain deeper insights into the regional patterns of VNV support.

Table 2.1 VNV votes in 1936

	(1) VNV (%)
VNV (%)	
Unemployment1930	1.378*
	(2.18)
Mass Attendance	8.137*
	(1.96)
Average building income	-0.000172
	(-0.04)
Population mainly speaking French (%)	-0.0400
	(-1.39)
Flanders	2.128
	(0.96)
Family size	3.492*
	(2.01)
Communist Party of Belgium (%)	0.389**
	(2.59)
Type of municipality=1	0
	(.)
Type of municipality=2	-1.171
	(-0.32)
Type of municipality=3	-1.440
	(-0.39)
Type of municipality=4	0.931
	(0.23)
Type of municipality=5	2.505
	(0.57)
Constant	-17.67*
	(-2.08)
W	
VNV (%)	0.551***
	(8.23)
/	
var(e.vnv1936)	37.82***
	(10.16)
Observations	211

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

A closer examination of the variables reveals valuable insights. It appears that VNV indeed capitalized on grievances stemming from the economic crisis, performing better in areas with higher unemployment rates in 1930.

The mass attendance variable represents the percentage of people who attended weekly mass, serving as a measure of regional religiousness. The regression results indicate that VNV

garnered more support in regions where a greater number of people regularly attended mass, aligning with the expected outcome given the religiosity of Flemish nationalists.

The family size variable serves as a proxy for assessing the rural and conservative characteristics of an area. Typically, urbanization and individualism lead to smaller family sizes, while rural areas tend to have larger families. As anticipated, rural and conservative regions exhibited stronger support for VNV.

The average building income variable acts as a proxy for measuring an area's development since personal income or GDP statistics were not available at the time. Interestingly, there appears to be no significant correlation between building income and VNV support, suggesting that VNV's influence was not limited to impoverished or less developed areas.

The municipality type variable classifies municipalities into industrial, commercial, or agricultural categories, as determined by the Belgian government in 1938[1]. The regression results show that VNV support was unrelated to the type of municipality, consistent with some historians' observations that VNV's performance depended on local circumstances, making it challenging to draw general conclusions.

The results indicate that VNV received more votes in areas where the Communist Party also garnered higher support. Given VNV's campaign propaganda's focus on instigating fear of

[1] There are 5 categories of municipalities:

1: Brussels and Antwerp cities

2: Industrial or commercial agglomerations with at least 50,000 inhabitants

3: Industrial or commercial agglomerations with less than 50,000 inhabitants

4: Semi-industrial or commercial municipalities

5: Agricultural municipalities

communist threats, this outcome was expected. It aligns with the "Red Menace" theory that suggests fascist parties benefit from the bourgeoisie's fear of socialist revolution (Brustein 1991). This result also suggests that both far-left and far-right parties benefited from political polarization in an area.

Lastly, the spatial lag term is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, confirming the initial observation that VNV's electoral geography exhibited clusters and strongholds. Success in one district evidently influenced nearby areas. The inclusion of the spatial lag term rendered two variables insignificant: the Flanders variable (a dummy variable indicating regional affiliation) and the French-speaking variable (indicating the percentage of the population primarily speaking French in a district).

This dissertation contributes to the quantitative study of the electoral geography of historical fascist parties in Belgium. While previous research exists, this study stands out due to its extensive and comprehensive dataset. A recent study by Hooghe and Stiers (2023) explored a similar topic, finding that VNV performed better in industrial areas, with unemployment and ethnic diversity showing no significant correlation with VNV support (Table 1 in Hooghe and Stiers (2023)). It is important to highlight some differences between my analysis and theirs.

First, Hooghe and Stiers (2023) relied on data at the arrondissement level, resulting in a limited number of observations (approximately 20). In contrast, my analysis is based on municipality-level data, which can be aggregated to the canton level, providing a more detailed and expansive dataset.

Second, their analysis employed a basic OLS model, while my analysis incorporated spatial analysis, which is better suited for examining VNV support due to the evident spatial clustering on the electoral map. The high significance of the spatial lag term in my analysis underscores the

importance of spatial considerations, and not accounting for spatial clustering can lead to misleading results.

Third, their choice of control variables may not capture the full spectrum of interwar politics. Their use of non-Belgians as a proxy for ethnic diversity does not address the relevant factors of French-speakers and Jews, who were more pertinent in 1930s Belgium. Moreover, they overlooked the pivotal role of Catholicism, a significant factor in explaining far-right voting in 1936, as demonstrated in my analysis. The "reaction to the left" factor, common in interwar Europe for explaining fascist support, is also a critical element in the Belgian context, as evidenced by the strong correlation between religiosity, support for the Communist Party, and VNV support, which was not considered in Hooghe and Stiers (2023).

2.2.2 VB in 2019

Similar to the VNV, Vlaams Belang (VB) subscribes to Flemish nationalism as its core ideology and consistently advocates for Flanders' independence. However, during electoral campaigns, VB often tempers its radical stance and emphasizes more mainstream issues.

VB's campaign slogan, "Our People First," positions itself as the representative of the true interests of the Flemish population. In addition to Flemish nationalism, VB strongly opposes immigration, particularly from Islamic immigrants with distinct cultures and languages that may pose integration challenges. VB advocates for "law and order" to address immigration-related crime and aims to reverse what it perceives as the "mistake of multiculturalism" to safeguard traditional values.

Many analysts attribute VB's breakthrough to its anti-immigration agenda (Bouveroux 1998). During the 2019 election, VB capitalized on rising immigration levels in Flanders, which generated insecurity among many Flemish people (Brussels Bureau 2019).

According to one political survey (Abts et al. 2015), VB garners support primarily from middle-aged individuals with lower levels of education. The party receives fewer votes from university graduates and those in senior management positions. A significant portion of VB voters identifies as fringe Catholics, with many being trade union members. Ideologically, VB voters exhibit the strongest opposition to immigration, display authoritarian tendencies, emphasize ethnocentrism, and reject multiculturalism.

To delve further into the profile of individual VB voters in Flanders, I conducted an analysis using survey data from the "MEDW 2014 Belgian National Election Study." The dependent variable in this analysis is whether the respondent intends to vote for Vlaams Belang. Several independent variables were considered, encompassing various social and economic factors that might influence voting intentions, including the respondent's income level, residence in a major city, frequency of church attendance, self-identification with Walloon nationalism, education level, perception of unemployment as the most critical issue, and perception of immigration as the most significant issue.

It's important to note that due to limitations in accessing individual survey data for the 2019 election, I had to rely on data from the 2014 election to analyze the profile of VB voters. It's worth acknowledging that VB lost and subsequently regained many floating voters between 2014 and 2019, leading to some differences in the voter profile. Nonetheless, the survey data from the 2014 election can offer insights into the characteristics of more steadfast VB supporters.

Table 2.2 VB Voter Profile in 2014

	(1) Vlaams Belang
Income Level	-0.00156 (-0.27)
Living in Big City	0.0606* (2.28)
Church Attendance	-0.000206 (-0.02)
Regional Nationalism Self Placement	0.0142*** (4.38)
Highest Degree Obtained	0.00855 (1.22)
Unemployment is Most Important Issue	-0.0184 (-0.76)
Immigration is Most Important Issue	0.155*** (4.70)
Constant	-0.0879 (-1.93)
Observations	424

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As indicated by the regression results, factors such as unemployment, income level, and education level, which are often considered in assessing voting intentions for far-right parties, do not exhibit a significant correlation with support for Vlaams Belang (VB).

Among the variables analyzed, three emerge as strong predictors of voting for VB: urban residence, regional nationalism, and the immigration issue. As anticipated, respondents who prioritize the immigration issue are significantly more likely to vote for VB, with a notable correlation at the 0.001 level. This alignment aligns with VB's anti-immigration platform. Similarly, respondents with a stronger inclination toward regional nationalism are more prone to support VB, with this correlation again being statistically significant at the 0.001 level. This underscores the enduring significance of Flemish nationalism in VB's electoral success.

Notably, in contrast to VNV voters, who tend to reside in rural and peripheral areas, respondents residing in major cities exhibit a somewhat higher likelihood of voting for VB, albeit with significance at the 0.05 level. This observation could potentially be linked to the increased salience of the immigration issue in urban centers.

Another significant difference between VB and VNV supporters pertains to religiosity. While Catholicism holds considerable importance within the VNV's agenda, with church attendance being a strong predictor of support for VNV, VB no longer prioritizes religion, and respondents with higher levels of church activity are not inclined to vote for VB.

A close examination of individual voter profiles and campaign agendas reveals striking similarities between VB and VNV. Unlike many contemporary far-right parties that primarily emphasize the immigration issue, VB's focus on regional nationalism sets it apart and represents a continuation of the Flemish movement. Both parties prioritize cultural concerns over economic ones. VNV's ascent was accompanied by anti-Semitism and the influx of Jewish migration, whereas VB's rise coincided with the European refugee crisis. Both parties center their platforms on nationalism and xenophobic sentiments, effectively garnering support from across the social spectrum. Although VB adopts a less radical stance compared to VNV, both parties adeptly conceal their more extreme elements and employ democratic elections as a means to expand their influence.

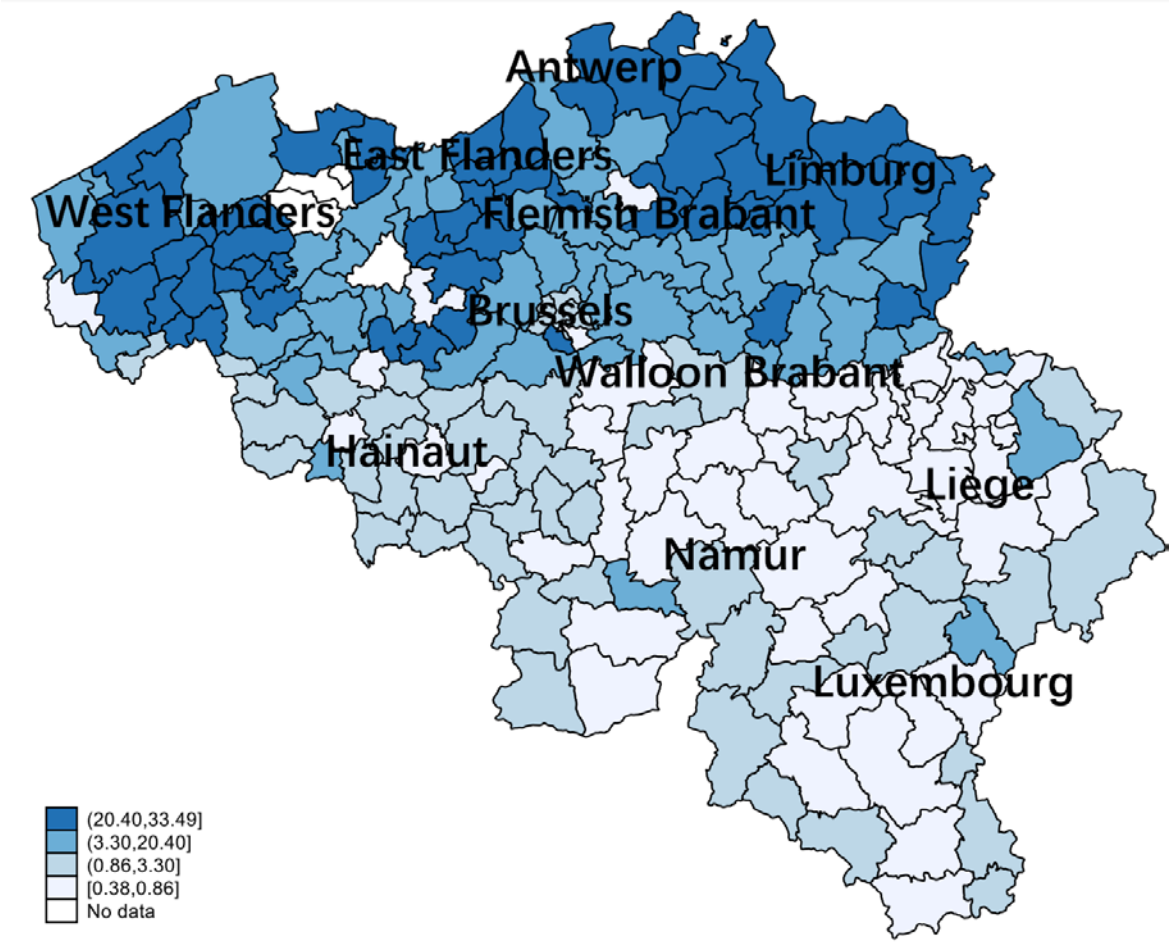

Figure 2.2 Geography of VB Votes in 2019

Let's examine the geographic distribution of VB. One notable distinction in the geographic patterns of VB and VNV is evident in the city of Antwerp. Due to a variety of historical factors, Antwerp has evolved into a bastion of Flemish nationalism, and VB achieved its initial electoral breakthrough in this city.

In the early years of VB's existence, its geographic distribution appeared distinct from that of VNV. VB enjoyed more significant success in Antwerp and urban areas, whereas VNV found stronger support in rural regions and struggled to gain substantial backing in Antwerp and other urban centers. This divergence is consistent with the profiles of individual voters.

However, as VB continued to expand its influence, it began to establish a presence in rural and peripheral areas. Examining the electoral map (Figure 2.2), we observe that traditional VNV strongholds like Limburg and West Flanders also exhibited robust support for VB in the 2019 elections. This shift suggests a growing resemblance in the geographic distribution patterns of VB and VNV over time.

Table 2.3 VB Votes in 2019

	(1) Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)
Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)	
2017 Average income	-0.0000352
	(-0.11)
Unemployment 2019	-1.358***
	(-3.61)
Higher education 2017 (%)	-0.640***
	(-3.31)
PVDA 2019 (%)	1.097***
	(4.13)
Non-European Foreigner 2019 (%)	-0.282
	(-0.70)
Divorce Rate 2019	0.195
	(0.85)
Constant	33.86***
	(6.40)
W_s001	
Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)	0.111
	(1.81)
/	
var(e.vb2019)	20.65***
	(6.96)
Observations	97

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Based on the regression analysis, the overall economic development in an area, as indicated by average income, exhibits no significant correlation with support for VB. Given that VB garners votes from both urban and rural areas, this finding is not particularly surprising.

However, it is noteworthy that VB tends to receive fewer votes in regions with high unemployment rates, and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. This is

somewhat unexpected, as economic grievances have traditionally been associated with the rise of far-right parties. Some studies have even suggested that regions experiencing more significant job losses are more inclined to vote for populist right-wing parties. This theory, however, does not seem to hold true for VB.

One plausible explanation for this result is that VB predominantly campaigns on cultural issues rather than economic ones. The narrative of "foreigners taking our jobs" is not widely embraced in Belgium, and VB's propaganda primarily revolves around concerns related to crime and cultural changes attributed to immigration. Although VB expressed support for social welfare during the 2019 election, its economic policies are still relatively right-leaning compared to other parties. In economically distressed areas, residents may lean toward mainstream parties.

The variable measuring higher education, which reflects the percentage of the population holding college degrees, is negatively correlated with VB votes. This aligns with the concept of cultural backlash. However, the earlier regression analysis on individual voter profiles did not reveal a strong correlation between education level and support for VB. The geographic pattern may reflect regional factors. Regions with a less educated population might be less progressive and less supportive of multiculturalism, which could make them more receptive to VB's message. Additionally, VB markets itself as a party for "common people," which may not resonate as strongly in elitist communities.

Another interesting finding is that VB tends to receive more votes in areas where the far-left party PVDA has a stronger presence. Unlike VNV's direct targeting of the communist party, VB does not see PVDA as a significant threat but rejects most progressive and left-wing ideologies. This result might also reflect cultural backlash in areas where conservative populations are reacting to progressive developments.

Surprisingly, the percentage of non-European foreigners in an area appears unrelated to support for VB. This contradicts expectations, as immigration is a top priority in VB's agenda, and VB supporters tend to be more anti-immigration. Similarly, the divorce rate, which serves as an indicator of religiosity in an area, shows no significant relationship with support for VB.

This 2019 result for VB differs from previous studies on Vlaams Blok in the 1990s. Rink et al. (2009) found that an increasing local immigrant population size was associated with greater support for Vlaams Blok, the predecessor of VB. However, given the substantial changes in VB's geographic patterns and voter base over the past two decades, such differences are not surprising.

It's plausible that the salience of the immigration issue is not solely linked to the actual presence of foreigners but is influenced by the perceived threat of immigration. For instance, in the case of Ninove, VB received 40% of the vote in municipal elections and over 30% in general elections, a significant success. Despite having few immigrants, Ninove experienced an influx of African-origin immigrants from Brussels, which rapidly transformed the neighborhood and contributed to a sense of insecurity, partly fueled by VB's propaganda. Even in areas with few immigrants, VB managed to attract substantial support through its anti-immigration agenda (Baert 2018). Therefore, simply comparing foreigner population data may not suffice to capture the effects of immigration, and alternative indicators are needed.

Once again, my findings on the geographic distribution of VB support differ somewhat from those of Hooghe and Stiers (2023), who found no significant relationship with unemployment. However, as previously mentioned in section 2.2.1, their analysis was limited to the arrondissement level, with only 22 observations and without employing spatial analysis. Their level of analysis may not provide substantial insights into the geography of VB.

2.3 The Historical Connection between VNV and VB

The regression results indicate that VB exhibits certain similarities with VNV in terms of voter profiles and geographic patterns. While VB has strongholds in urban areas, both VB and VNV garner more votes in conservative areas and benefit from the presence of far-left parties. Moreover, VB and VNV can attract support in areas characterized by varying levels of economic development and unemployment. In general, their geographic patterns suggest that their electoral success is more closely linked to cultural issues rather than economic grievances. The noteworthy historical pattern aligning with the contemporary voting trends raises intriguing questions about the connection between VNV's historical legacy and the similarities observed between VNV and VB. Further exploration is warranted.

2.3.1 The Geographic Similarity between VB and VNV

I initially perform a straightforward spatial regression analysis (Table 2.4, column 1) on VB's 2019 vote shares and VNV's 1936 vote shares, considering only samples from Flanders. The results reveal a significant correlation at the 0.05 level. Specifically, for every 1% increase in VNV's vote share in 1936, VB's vote share in 2019 rises by approximately 0.1%. Although the spatial lag term does not demonstrate significance, disentangling temporal and spatial dependencies poses a challenge.

Table 2.4 VB and VNV

	(1) Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)	(2) Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)	(3) Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)
Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)			
Flemish National Union (VNV) (%)	0.102*	0.0359	
	(2.21)	(0.88)	
Communist Party of Belgium(%)		-0.508*	
		(-2.03)	
Unemployment 2019		-0.779**	-0.774**
		(-2.87)	(-2.85)
Higher education 2017 (%)		-0.651***	-0.677***
		(-5.85)	(-6.29)
PVDA 2019 (%)		0.668**	0.663**
		(2.61)	(2.59)
Right Wing Share of Radical Votes 1936			6.540*
			(2.47)
Constant	17.93***	35.02***	29.88***
	(14.24)	(11.10)	(6.84)
W_s001			
Vlaams Belang 2019 (%)	-0.00123	0.0369	0.0273
	(-0.02)	(0.69)	(0.50)
/			
var(e.vb2019)	23.41***	14.58***	14.61***
	(6.96)	(6.96)	(6.96)
Observations	97	97	97

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

I begin by conducting a straightforward spatial regression analysis (Table 2.4, column 2), incorporating additional contemporary variables that have previously shown significance in our analyses. In this instance, the correlation between VNV and VB votes is less pronounced, with a p-value of approximately 0.15. The spatial lag term remains non-significant. Thus, while the influence of VNV persists today, it is less significant when compared to other contemporary factors.

One noteworthy discovery is that VB garners fewer votes in areas historically supportive of the Communist Party. This correlation is statistically significant. As demonstrated in earlier analyses, vote shares of far-right and far-left parties exhibit a robust correlation in both historical and contemporary contexts. Consequently, the historical persistence of one implies a degree of historical persistence of the other. Hence, it is essential to consider the effects of historical continuity for both far-right and far-left parties. Chapters 4 and 5 will delve into the persistence of

interwar far-right influence in Flanders, highlighting the favorable social environment for former fascists. In regions where the Communist Party thrived, resistance to the revisionist narrative of fascism and collaboration may have been stronger, impeding former VNV members' efforts to regroup and establish far-right organizations.

To further analyze the potential interaction between historical far-right and far-left forces, I introduce a variable representing the proportion of VNV votes in total votes for both the Communist Party and VNV. Empirical results (Table 2.4, column 3) demonstrate a significant positive correlation between VB support and the historical strength of the far-right relative to all radical forces in an electoral district. In areas where VNV historically secured all radical votes and the Communist Party received none, VB receives 6.5 percent more votes compared to areas where far-right received no radical votes while the Communist Party received some.

This finding underscores the interdependence between far-left and far-right vote shares. The historical continuity of far-right influence not only hinges on the historical strength of fascist parties in an area but also on the historical influence of their counterparts, the Communist Party. The Communists consistently opposed fascists historically and actively repressed former fascists after World War II. At a certain point following the war, Communist parties in many European countries gained substantial public support, enabling them to influence policies, enter local parliaments and governments. Fewer Communist supporters in an area imply less repression faced by former fascists from both society and the state, offering them a better chance to regroup and preserve their legacy.

We can envisage scenarios where areas have identical historical far-right party votes but differ in their far-left party votes. Previous studies on the historical persistence of far-right votes often disregard the impact of the far-left and assume that far-right votes persist to the same extent

regardless of far-left presence. This analysis demonstrates that the persistence of far-right legacy is indeed influenced by local far-left influence. Future studies should recognize this interplay between historical radical right and left.

My analysis of the historical connection between VB and VNV diverges somewhat from the empirical results of Hooghe and Stiers (2023), who contend that there is no historical continuity between VB and VNV. I respectfully disagree with their conclusion, believing they may overlook evidence from their own analysis due to a lack of comprehensive quantitative analysis and a nuanced understanding of the historical context.

Firstly, regarding their quantitative analysis, they neglect spatial analysis and display a perplexing number of observations, potentially contributing to the differing outcomes. They claim that 88 cantons experienced "substantial" changes, yet their number of observations when examining Flemish far-right parties is 93, with no clarification on the additional 5 cantons. The criteria for "substantial" change remains vague, and my analysis identifies 97 such cantons. Additionally, they report 80 observations when investigating radical left parties, leaving 13 cantons unaccounted for. A lack of details on the matching process between contemporary electoral cantons and historical cantons prevents replication of their analysis. The criteria for determining the number of observations in this dissertation are detailed in the Appendix (Chapter 1).

Secondly, Hooghe and Stiers (2023) appear too hasty in dismissing the evidence of historical far-right continuity in their own analysis. Despite differences in the number of observations, their results exhibit similarities to mine. In their first column of Table 2, they establish a correlation between 1936 and 2019 far-right votes at a significance level of 0.1, which aligns with the 0.05 significance level in my findings. Moreover, Hooghe and Stiers (2023)

themselves offer a reasonable explanation for the lack of significance, suggesting that Flemish radical right parties have "successfully spread outside its original strongholds…are no longer limited by their initial pattern of spatial diffusion." In this case, the absence of significant geographic similarity does not preclude historical persistence. It may be premature to dismiss historical continuity simply because significance is only at the 0.1 level.

Lastly, Hooghe and Stiers (2023) base their argument on an incomplete understanding of post-war Belgian history. Their contention that there is no connection between contemporary and interwar Flemish far-right parties relies on the premise that Flemish far-right members were targets of post-war punishment and, therefore, "there cannot be any form of historical continuity" at least concerning political leaders and parties. This represents a misunderstanding of post-war Flemish far-right history. In Chapters 4 and 5, this dissertation will provide historical evidence detailing how VNV politicians and party structures survived post-war repression and retained their political influence.

In fact, this dissertation agrees with part of Hooghe and Stiers' argument that post-war punishment could disrupt far-right historical continuity, but not in Flanders. Subsequent chapters will review the post-war history of fascism repression in both Flanders and Wallonia, illustrating that the absence of a connection between contemporary and interwar Walloon far-right parties results from effective post-war purging of Walloon fascist party influence. The varying effectiveness of post-war repression constitutes a significant factor in explaining the divergence of far-right movements in Flanders and Wallonia. While Hooghe and Stiers (2023) present a valid argument, they do not recognize that this argument may not apply to Flanders due to the radically different historical context. This dissertation contributes by shedding light on the complexities of post-war Flemish far-right history, which may be misunderstood by scholars lacking specialized

knowledge in this area. Only an interdisciplinary study combining quantitative analysis with rich data and qualitative analysis with historical insights can yield a comprehensive understanding of far-right development in Belgium, an objective this dissertation aims to accomplish.

2.3.2 The Mechanism of Socio-Economic Conditions

Table 2.4 presents evidence of a historical connection between VNV and VB. To understand how the influence of VNV has persisted, we consider three potential mechanisms: 1) common socio-economic conditions, 2) intergenerational transmission, and 3) transmission through social organizations. These possibilities will be examined in the following section.

The first possible mechanism suggests that the similar geographic patterns observed between VB and VNV today are a result of shared socio-economic conditions between contemporary Flanders and interwar Flanders. Belgium experienced relatively fewer social changes and disruptions during and after World War II. Consequently, many local social characteristics may have remained consistent, contributing to the resemblance in geographic patterns between VB and VNV. However, it is worth noting that the economic geography of Belgium underwent some shifts, with Flanders experiencing more significant post-war development compared to Wallonia, which faced a decline in its industrial sector. Therefore, changes in economic factors in Flanders after the war are also likely.

To investigate whether contemporary Flanders indeed shares similar socio-economic conditions with interwar Flanders, we compared three pairs of variables that could be related to support for far-right parties: 1) average building income in 1930 and average income in 2017; 2) unemployment rate in 1930 and unemployment rate in 2019; 3) church attendance in 1930 and divorce rate in 2019.

As previously highlighted, religiosity was a significant social factor in interwar Belgium. However, indicators of religiosity such as mass attendance are not collected in contemporary Belgium. Therefore, we employ divorce rate as a proxy variable to gauge the general level of religiosity in an area. While divorce rate is not a direct measure of mass attendance, it still reflects certain conservative ideologies among the population.

Table 2.5 Socio-Economic Conditions in Flanders

	(1) 2017 Average income	(2) Unemployment 2019	(3) Divorce Rate 2019
main			
Average Building Income 1930	-1.400 (-0.71)		
Unemployment 1930		-0.242 (-1.17)	
Mass Attendance			-0.216 (-0.15)
Constant	19978.4*** (53.85)	5.853*** (9.67)	8.891*** (8.64)
/			
var(e.income2017)	4801764.0*** (6.93)		
var(e.unemployment2019)		3.305*** (6.89)	
var(e.rdivorce2019)			4.381*** (6.86)
Observations	96	95	94

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The preceding regression analysis demonstrates the absence of a correlation between socio-economic conditions in the 1930s and analogous factors in the 2010s. Regarding economic conditions, this outcome aligns with expectations, considering the shift in Belgium's economic landscape. Following World War II, Flanders experienced economic growth due to foreign development investments and the expansion of industrial areas (Mérenne-Schoumaker et al., 2014). Consequently, the current prosperity and unemployment levels in an area are not linked to their historical counterparts.

Similarly, in terms of social factors, there is no observable correlation between historical church attendance and today's divorce rates. Thus, the religiosity exhibited in an area during the interwar period does not appear to influence its contemporary conservatism.

Moreover, our previous analysis indicates that VB and VNV's success relies on distinct economic factors. While VNV benefits from higher unemployment rates in an area, VB performs better in regions with lower unemployment. Therefore, the geographic similarity between VB and VNV is unlikely to be attributed to shared socio-economic conditions. In summary, there is limited evidence supporting the notion of a common socio-economic condition mechanism.

2.3.3 The Mechanism of Intergenerational Transmission

The second mechanism that may contribute to the preservation of VNV's legacy is the intergenerational transmission of ideology. The resemblance in geographic patterns between VB and VNV could be attributed to the transmission of similar political preferences from one generation to the next over the years.

Numerous studies have revealed that parents can pass on their ideologies to their children, particularly right-wing ideologies (Avdeenko and Siedler, 2017). Cantoni et al. (2019) have identified this mechanism as key to understanding the similarity in the geographic distribution of the AfD in Germany with that of the Nazi party.

In the case of Flanders, several studies provide evidence for the existence of such a mechanism. Meeusen and Dhont (2015) conducted a survey study on Belgian adolescents and their parents, finding that Belgian children often mirror their parents' prejudices and political attitudes, suggesting that far-right ideologies such as authoritarianism and xenophobia could be passed down through generations.

Hooghe and Boonen (2016) analyzed data from the Parent–Child Socialization Study and discovered that children in Flanders tend to vote for the same party as their parents. Notably, their study revealed that discussions about politics between parents and children have a significant impact, emphasizing the importance of direct socialization in transmitting voting intentions.

While prior research has identified the mechanism of intergenerational transmission among contemporary populations, there has been no direct study on the transmission from the interwar generation to the contemporary one. Qualitative studies indicate that many VB members come from what is known as the "black family," with a history of collaboration, and often have grandparents who were VNV members (De Witte 2005; Art 2008).

The TRANSMEMO project, a recent Belgian initiative focused on the historical memory of World War II, has collected interviews and survey data on families with collaboration histories. According to this project, scholars have found that political preferences can indeed be transmitted across multiple generations, with Flemish respondents from families with a collaboration history more likely to vote for Flemish nationalist parties (Aerts et al., 2021). When Meeusen and Dhont (2015) studied the intergenerational transmission of political preferences in contemporary Belgium, they found that the socialization mechanism played a crucial role, with political discussions facilitating this transmission. This finding aligns with historical studies on collaborator families, as many older radical nationalists engaged in political discussions with their children, thereby passing down their ideology to subsequent generations (Aerts 2018).

Hence, existing research suggests that the mechanism of intergenerational transmission could have a certain impact in Flanders. After World War II, while some Flemish collaborators faced punishment and relocation, most former VNV members and their families were able to remain or return to their original regions, preserving local right-wing cultural continuity. If the

geographic pattern of VNV supporters has not changed significantly, it is likely that the geographic distribution of their right-wing ideologies has also remained relatively consistent.

2.3.4 The Mechanism of Social Organizations

It's worth noting that former VNV members and their families were not passive after the war but actively engaged in local politics and social organizations, which represents another significant mechanism for preserving the legacy of the VNV.

Despite their collaboration with the Nazis during the war, radical Flemish nationalist organizations and political parties flourished in the post-war period. While many former VNV members faced consequences for their collaboration, some Flemish individuals regarded them as misguided patriots fighting for Flanders' independence. In this context, many former VNV members were able to participate politically in both radical nationalist and mainstream organizations (Art 2008).

For instance, former VNV member Bob Maes founded the Vlaamse Militanten Orde (VMO), a paramilitary organization that attracted numerous radical nationalists. Maes later joined the mainstream nationalist party Volksunie and became a senator. This trajectory illustrates how former VNV members re-entered politics after the war.

The VMO served as the action group of the political party Vlaamse Concentratie (VC), established by Flemish nationalists who opposed the punishment of collaborators in 1949. Many former VNV members joined VC, which was eventually absorbed by Volksunie. Founded in 1954, Volksunie was a moderate Flemish nationalist party that attracted members from both the left and the right, including many former VNV members.

After Volksunie entered the coalition government in 1977, radical members of the party formed a new party called Vlaams Blok, which is the predecessor of Vlaams Belang. Many former VNV members participated in Vlaams Blok, and the party's name was inspired by VNV, which used the name "Vlaamsh Blok" in the 1936 election (Ansari and Hafez 2012).

During the 1970s, numerous new Flemish social organizations were founded or joined by former VBV members. Apart from former VNV members, these nationalist organizations also provided opportunities for the next generation of radical nationalists. For example, the Nationalistische Studentenvereniging (Nationalist Student Association, NSV), a radical Flemish nationalist organization, groomed many future VB leaders, including the current VB president, Grieken.

Many Flemish individuals come from families that supported VNV, naturally growing up as Flemish nationalists. They often join local nationalist organizations during their youth and later become members of VB (Art 2008). For example, former VB senator Bart Laeremans' grandfather, Leo Wouters, was a VNV member and co-founder of Vlaams Blok. Bart Laeremans' father and brothers are also Flemish nationalists. He joined NSV as a student and eventually became a member of VB.

Even the mainstream Flemish party N-VA has connections with VNV and recruits many former radical nationalists (Belgische Unie 2017). N-VA leaders Geert Bourgeois and Bart De Wever both have family ties to individuals who participated in VNV or collaboration, highlighting the enduring influence of VNV and radical nationalist organizations.

Therefore, while VB may appear as a new party, it has inherited numerous local social connections and organizations from the extensive history of Flemish nationalism. This legacy

facilitates VB's efforts to establish local organizations and advocate its agenda, making it easier than starting from scratch.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter delves into the geographic patterns of VB and VNV, highlighting several striking similarities between the two. While ideological affinity alone cannot account for all these resemblances, it becomes evident that the historical legacy left by VNV plays a crucial role and necessitates further exploration.

This chapter investigates three mechanisms that may contribute to the preservation of this historical legacy. Although common socio-economic conditions appear unlikely to significantly affect Flanders, mechanisms such as intergenerational transmission and social organizations emerge as potentially pivotal factors in comprehending the historical legacy of Flemish nationalists.

A concise historical analysis reveals the existence of a right-wing cultural persistence in Flanders, with VB directly inheriting numerous social and organizational resources from the extensive history of the Flemish Movement.

In sharp contrast, Wallonia, the southern region of Belgium, exhibits no discernible traces of the historical legacy of far-right movements, a situation diametrically opposed to that of Flanders. Despite once sharing a strong presence with their counterparts in Flanders during the interwar period, far-right parties hold minimal sway in contemporary Wallonia.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying historical legacies, it is imperative to explore not only Flanders, where such legacies thrive, but also Wallonia, where they do not. The subsequent chapter will delve into the case of Wallonia, facilitating a

comparative analysis with Flanders to elucidate the factors that may impede the resurgence of far-right movements.

3.0 The Disappearance of Far-Right Legacy in Francophone Belgium

In the previous chapter, I established a historical connection between the far-right party VNV in the 1930s and the contemporary far-right party VB. This legacy of VNV has endured over time, and its influence can still be discerned in the geographic patterns of VB support.

I identified several potential cultural and organizational mechanisms responsible for preserving this legacy in Flanders. To further validate my findings, I have selected Francophone Belgium (Wallonia and Brussels) as a comparative case. Despite its geographical proximity to Flanders and similar political system, Wallonia exhibits a notably different scenario concerning far-right parties. The far-right party Rex enjoyed popularity in Francophone Belgium, akin to VNV in Flanders. However, Rex did not leave a substantial legacy, and no influential far-right party emerged in Francophone Belgium after the war.

The divergent circumstances in these two regions of Belgium offer a valuable opportunity to investigate why some historical legacies persist while others fade away. While conducting a true natural experiment is challenging due to numerous regional differences, the shared institutional structures and party systems in both regions enable a meaningful comparison. Consequently, this comparison can yield valuable insights into the factors that preserve or erode the legacy of the fascist past.

In this chapter, I will initially compare the contemporary far-right party Parti Populaire (PP) in Wallonia with the historical fascist party Rex, illustrating how PP fails to inherit the legacy of Rex. Subsequently, I will explore the reasons behind the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms that might have preserved the historical legacy in Francophone Belgium. I contend that the crucial

difference lies in the mechanism of social organization, which constitutes a major distinction between Flanders and Wallonia.

3.1 Historical Background

The most significant far-right party in Walloon history is the Rexist Party, founded by Léon Degrelle in 1935. While Belgium did not experience the same level of economic depression as Germany, it still faced a period of political and economic instability after World War I. Factors such as economic hardship, conflicts between the Catholic Church and secularization, and the rise of Flemish nationalism contributed to disillusionment with the Belgian government and the establishment during the interwar period.

Initially a member of the Catholic Party, Degrelle, a charismatic orator and devout Catholic, realized that his ambitions and radicalism could not find expression within the establishment party. He subsequently founded the Rexist movement, vowing to combat systemic corruption. Degrelle advocated for the creation of a Catholic state with comprehensive societal control while drawing inspiration from Italian fascism, aiming to establish a corporatist and authoritarian society in Belgium.

Although Rex primarily attracted Catholic youth, Degrelle's charisma also drew individuals dissatisfied with traditional parties and the government. In the 1936 election, Rex secured 11% of the votes across Belgium, marking a significant achievement for a new party. This electoral success propelled Degrelle to national prominence, even piquing the interest of Belgian King Leopold III.

However, the 1936 election also marked a turning point for Degrelle and Rex. Establishment parties swiftly united to boycott Rex, and the electoral triumph led Degrelle to overestimate his capabilities, resulting in numerous errors.

Firstly, Rex failed to garner support from the political elite. Despite targeting youth, Rex's reliance on the older generation, which held more power, was essential for political success. Consequently, unlike Italian and German fascists, Rexists lacked support from influential elites.

Secondly, Rex struggled to unite the fragmented right-wing factions in Belgium. Following the 1936 election, Rex and VNV briefly formed a fascist alliance to strengthen their position. However, Rex's advocacy for Belgian nationalism, coupled with the unpopular alliance with VNV advocating for Flemish independence, alienated many Rex supporters who sought a united Belgium.

Lastly, Degrelle's radical decisions backfired. Unlike VNV, which maintained a moderate stance to attract voters, Rex became increasingly radical after its initial success. While Degrelle aspired to follow in Mussolini's footsteps, his radicalism drove away potential supporters and political interests, ultimately diminishing Rex's popularity. Failed initiatives such as the "March on Brussels" and electoral challenges to the Prime Minister further eroded Rex's appeal and galvanized government and other parties against Rex.

Consequently, Rex's momentum quickly waned. While VNV and Flemish nationalists maintained their popularity in the 1939 election, Rex declined, receiving only 4% of the votes. Many former members withdrew their support, choosing to engage with the existing system rather than overthrow it.

During World War II, Rex collaborated with the Nazis following the occupation, similar to VNV in Flanders. Rex members faced post-war consequences, while Degrelle fled to Spain and

remained a neo-Nazi activist for the remainder of his life. Although Degrelle retained influence among European far-right circles, he failed to make an impact in Belgium. Unlike VNV and Flemish nationalists, the Rexist Party and Walloon far-right movements never experienced a resurgence after the war. Rex permanently lost its influence in Wallonia, and no other far-right parties achieved meaningful electoral success post-war.

While remnants of the Rexist parties attempted to form new organizations, most of these efforts proved futile. Only two far-right parties in Wallonia achieved some electoral success: Front National Belge (FNb) and Parti Populaire. FNb, established in 1985, dissolved in 2012, while Parti Populaire, founded in 2009, disbanded in 2019. Both parties had limited historical connections with old far-right movements and lacked organizational ties to each other.

FNb, led by Daniel Féret, aimed to create a "respectable" far-right party devoid of fascist or racist associations. Emulating France's Front National, FNb focused on anti-immigration agendas and ideology. Although FNb did not achieve the same level of influence as its French counterpart, it became the first Walloon far-right party to have a presence post-war. At its peak in 1995, FNb garnered 5% of regional votes and secured 2 seats in the Chamber of Representatives.

Nonetheless, FNb failed to achieve a breakthrough like VB and remained a marginal party until its dissolution in 2012. FNb also failed to garner significant international attention, even though it modeled itself after the French National Front.

Following FNb's dissolution, Parti Populaire emerged as the leading far-right party in Belgium. Founded by Rudy Aernoudt and Mischaël Modrikamen, individuals with limited ties to old far-right movements in Wallonia, the party underwent internal conflicts, with Modrikamen eventually assuming control and steering the party toward a more radical and populist stance. Parti

Populaire adopted nationalist, conservative, and anti-immigration agendas. Modrikamen and Parti Populaire engaged more actively in international far-right activities compared to FNb.

Despite greater international recognition, Parti Populaire struggled to make significant headway in domestic politics. At its peak in 2014, Parti Populaire secured only 4% of regional votes and 1 seat in the Chamber of Representatives. After losing its sole seat in the 2019 election, the party disbanded. Currently, there is no prominent far-right party in Francophone Belgium.

3.2 Empirical Analysis

The Belgian electoral data were obtained from the official website of the Federal Public Service Interior. Contemporary social and economic data were sourced from the official website of the Belgian statistical office. Historical social and economic data were extracted from the 1930 census book, with maps and other historical data provided by Ghent University's LOKSTAT database.

The original social and economic data were available at the municipality level, while the electoral data were at the electoral district level. To facilitate comparison, all data were aggregated at the electoral district level. Given that Belgian electoral districts remained relatively stable after the war, historical data were directly overlaid onto contemporary electoral maps for the sake of simplicity, as previously done in the analysis.

This chapter focuses on the examination of two Belgian general elections: 1936 and 2014. The 1936 election marked the zenith of Rex, while the 2014 election represented the peak of Parti Populaire. Although Parti Populaire did not attain the same level of influence as Rex, it is essential to analyze the differences and similarities in their geographic patterns during their respective peaks.

The choice of Parti Populaire as the subject of study, as opposed to Front National, is justified by its status as a more recent and organized far-right party, making it a more suitable comparative subject with VB.

3.2.1 Rexist Party in 1936

The 1936 campaign of the Rexist Party was a quintessential populist movement that capitalized on the political and economic turmoil in Belgium. Rex's core members consisted of Catholic youth who advocated for a "spiritual revolution." They drew inspiration from the Christus Rex (Christ the King) agenda and envisioned a political system governed by the monarchy and the Catholic Church. These young individuals attributed the crisis to the democratization and secularization of Belgian society and believed they were marginalized by the establishment. The fascist ideologies and practices in Italy and Germany offered a new direction for them (Gerard 2004).

Despite the core membership being educated religious youths, the Rexist Party's populist campaign successfully attracted two other voter groups. One group included the lower and middle classes who faced economic hardships during the crisis. Rex's economic policies aimed to safeguard small and medium-sized businesses and farms while laying blame on large corporations and landlords for the economic challenges (Brustein 1988). The other group comprised veterans who were drawn to Rex's nationalist agenda and social programs.

The 1936 Rex campaign was distinguished by innovative strategies. In addition to Léon Degrelle's oratorical prowess, Rexists extensively utilized mass media and public protests for their campaign. Given that many Rexist members were also journalists, they effectively leveraged the media to critique the establishment and propagate their ideology. Furthermore, they organized

protests where participants wielded brooms as a symbol of "sweeping away corruption," a tactic that significantly bolstered Rex's popularity (Conway 1993).

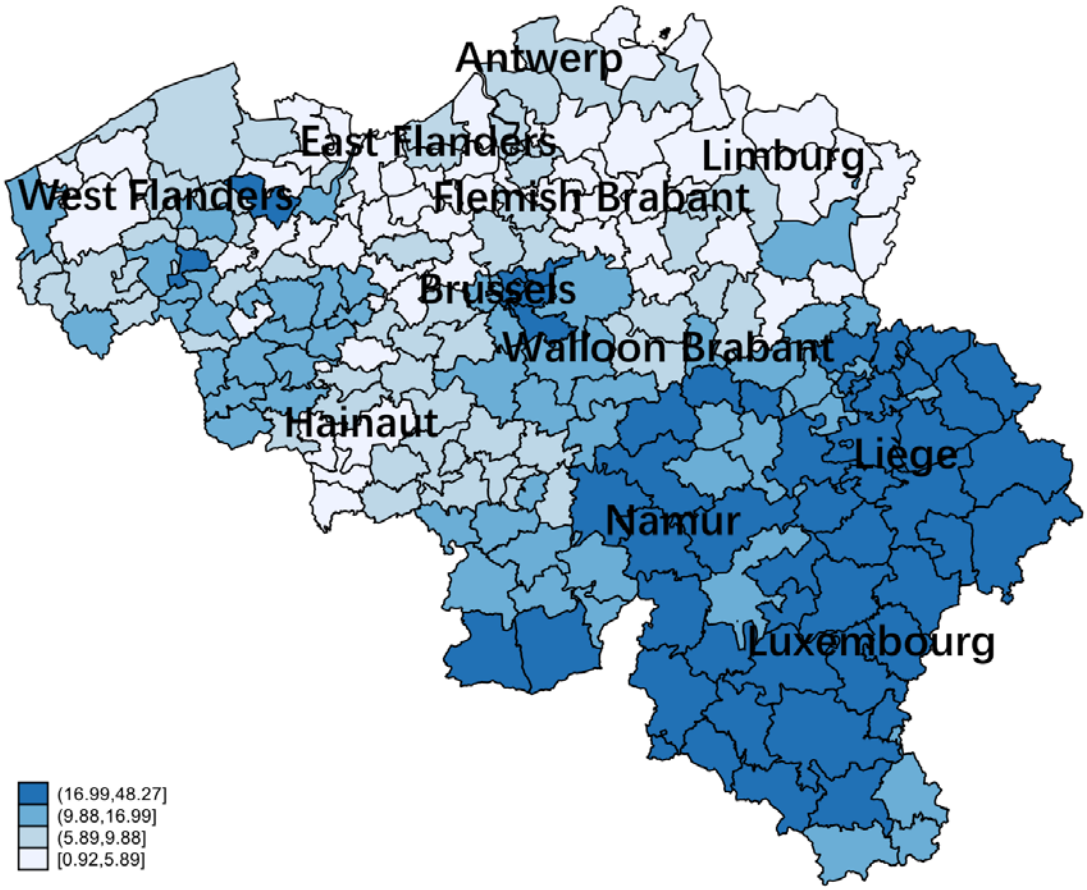

Figure 3.1 Geography of Rex Votes in 1936

As depicted in the electoral map (Figure 1), Rex demonstrated superior performance in primarily two regions. The first encompassed the southeastern part of Belgium, notably Luxembourg, where the Catholic tradition held significant influence. The second comprised urban areas like Brussels and Liège, where the urban petty bourgeoisie found Rex appealing. Additionally, Rex achieved success in specific Flemish cities characterized by a substantial Francophone voter presence.

Subsequently, a spatial regression analysis was conducted to delve deeper into the regional attributes associated with Rex's support.

Table 3.1 Rex Votes in 1936

	(1) Rexist Party (%)
Rexist Party (%)	
Unemployment1930	-0.367 (-0.78)
Mass Attendance	30.03*** (8.63)
Average building income	0.00346 (1.04)
Population mainly speaking French (%)	0.0842*** (3.83)
Flanders	-2.949 (-1.81)
Family size	-4.336*** (-3.34)
Communist Party of Belgium (%)	-0.0118 (-0.10)
Type of municipality=1	0 (.)
Type of municipality=2	-3.398 (-1.25)
Type of municipality=3	-5.596* (-2.03)
Type of municipality=4	-6.399* (-2.16)
Type of municipality=5	-5.711 (-1.76)
Constant	9.976 (1.58)
W	
Rexist Party (%)	0.377*** (6.32)
/	
var(e.rex1936)	20.84*** (10.24)
Observations	211

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Based on the results of the spatial analysis, it appears that Rex did not benefit significantly from economic grievances. A higher unemployment rate in an area does not appear to be correlated with Rex's electoral performance.

Regarding religiosity, Rex garnered more votes in areas where people were more likely to attend weekly Mass, and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Given that Rex originated from the Catholic Party and recruited members from the Catholic movement, it is expected that the religiosity of an area would have a substantial and significant impact on Rex's electoral performance. Additionally, the coefficient and significance of the Mass attendance variable are higher in the case of Rex compared to VNV, suggesting that Catholicism played a more influential role in Rex's rise.

The variable representing the French-speaking population indicates that Rex performed better in regions with a higher proportion of Francophone residents, while the Flanders variable is not statistically significant. Despite Rex's efforts to promote a unified Belgian nationalism that targeted both Flemish and Walloon populations, it did not attract many Dutch-speaking individuals.

Similar to VNV, the average building income variable is not statistically significant in the case of Rex, suggesting that Rex's influence was not closely tied to the local economic development of an area.

One notable difference between VNV and Rex is their performance in urban areas. As indicated by the family size variable, while rural and conservative areas tended to prefer VNV, Rex was more likely to receive votes from urban areas.

Another difference lies in how the type of municipality affected support for Rex. Unlike VNV, which showed no significant relationship with the type of municipality, Rex received more support from industrial, semi-industrial, or commercial municipalities (type=3, type=4). This finding aligns with the observations of Brustein (1988) that Rex's policies were attractive to small and medium-sized businesses and farms.

The local support for the Communist Party does not appear to be strongly associated with support for Rex in an area, which differs somewhat from the case of VNV. This result may suggest that Rex's support was driven more by a general anti-establishment sentiment among the population rather than its anti-communist agenda.

Finally, the spatial lag term is also statistically significant at the 0.001 level, indicating spatial clustering of support for Rex.

3.2.2 PP in 2014

Although both Rex and PP are populist far-right parties, they differ significantly in their core ideologies. While Catholicism and later fascism played decisive roles in shaping Rex's agenda, there is no such concrete ideology among PP members.

PP was founded as an alternative to the liberal party and advocated an economic liberal but socially conservative agenda. Most of PP's initial supporters came from previous voters of MR, the liberal party in Francophone Belgium (Delwit 2011).

While PP positioned itself within the far-right spectrum from the beginning, it adopted a more radical stance after the 2010 election. After Modrikamen assumed full control of the party, PP began to focus on stoking fears of crime and terrorism associated with refugees and immigration. PP proposed that only by rejecting Muslim immigration and political correctness could Belgium achieve "law and order" (de Jonge 2021).

Unlike VB, which combined its anti-immigration agenda with long-standing Flemish nationalism, PP's anti-immigration agenda had more connections with contemporary far-right movements in other countries, such as the French National Front (Delwit 2014). As an outspoken

supporter of Donald Trump, Modrikamen even attempted to cooperate with Steve Bannon to form a European far-right movement (Lewis and Rankin 2018).

Using survey data from the "MEDW 2014 Belgian National Election Study," I conducted a further examination of the profile of individual PP voters in Francophone Belgium.

The dependent variable is whether the respondent intends to vote for Parti Populaire. The independent variables include several indicators of social and economic status that may influence voters' intentions: the income level of the respondent, whether the respondent lives in a large city, how often the respondent attends church activities, self-identification with Walloon nationalism, education level, whether the respondent considers unemployment to be the most important issue, and whether the respondent considers immigration to be the most important issue.

Table 3.2 PP Voter Profile in 2014

	(1) Parti Populaire
Income Level	-0.00392 (-1.09)
Living in Big City	-0.00910 (-0.62)
Church Attendance	-0.00649 (-1.21)
Regional Nationalism Self Placement	0.00242 (0.97)
Highest Degree Obtained	-0.00987 (-1.82)
Unemployment is Most Important Issue	-0.0216 (-1.36)
Immigration is Most Important Issue	0.0969*** (4.23)
Constant	0.108** (3.19)
Observations	704

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As indicated by the regression analysis, most variables do not exhibit statistical significance in predicting voting intentions for PP. In contrast to Rex, economic conditions and

religiosity no longer exert a significant influence on support for PP. The sole significant variable is the immigration issue, with a significance level of 0.001. This outcome aligns with expectations, as the anti-immigration agenda constitutes a pivotal component of PP's electoral campaign.

Upon examining individual-level data, it becomes evident that contemporary far-right support in Francophone Belgium is predominantly driven by anti-immigration sentiments, largely independent of prevailing socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that voters are influenced not only by their individual social and economic circumstances but also by the prevailing conditions within their municipalities and neighboring areas. Consequently, I conducted further investigations into the geographical distribution of PP votes.

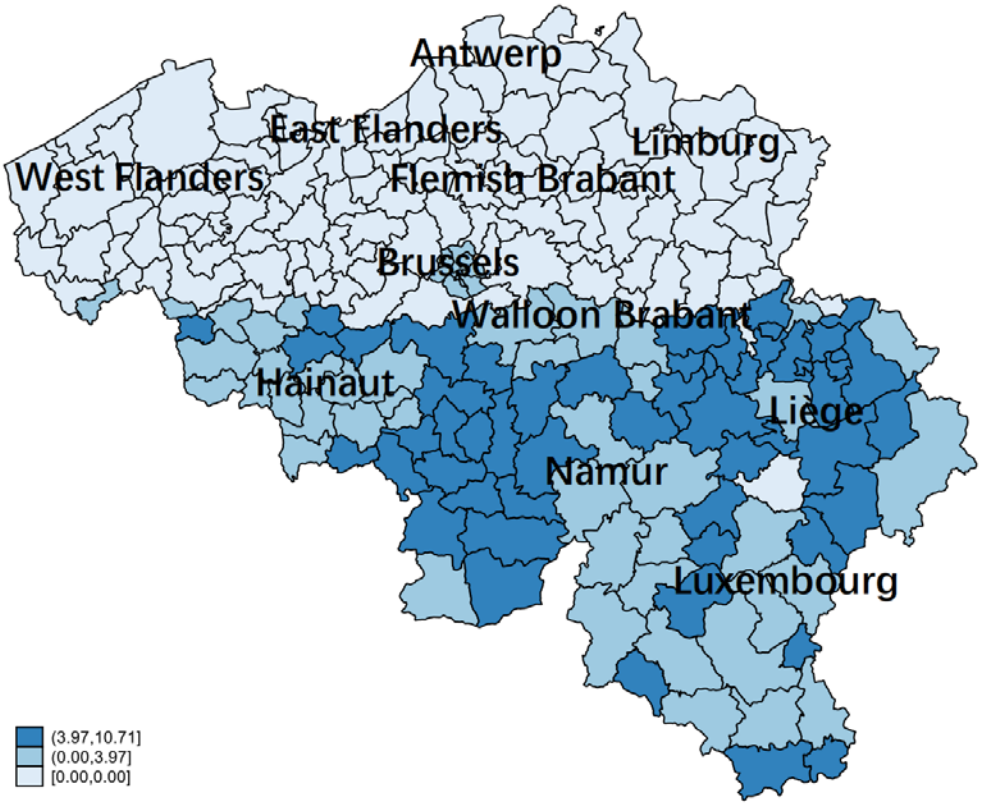

Figure 3.2 Geography of PP Votes in 2014

From the electoral map presented in Figure 2, it is evident that the geographic distribution of support for PP differs from that of Rex during the interwar period. In general, PP garnered

significantly less support compared to its historical counterpart. While Rex managed to secure votes from both rural and urban areas, PP's influence was predominantly concentrated in a limited number of peripheral regions.

Notably, PP did not garner substantial support in Brussels, in contrast to Rex, which enjoyed popularity in the city. This divergence can be attributed to the fact that PP's anti-immigration agenda did not resonate with the elites and globalists prevalent in Brussels. Additionally, PP found greater favor in the southwestern part of Belgium as opposed to the eastern provinces. While both PP and Rex achieved some level of success in the province of Liège, this appears to be the primary point of similarity in their respective geographic patterns.

Table 3.3 PP Votes in 2014

	(1) Parti Populaire 2014 (%)
Parti Populaire 2014 (%)	
2014 Average income	-0.0000297
	(-0.14)
Unemployment 2014	0.148*
	(1.97)
Higher education 2013 (%)	0.0556
	(0.69)
PTB/PVDA 2014 (%)	0.121
	(1.84)
Non-European Foreigner 2014 (%)	-0.396***
	(-3.43)
Divorce Rate 2014	-0.0102
	(-0.05)
Constant	1.866
	(0.63)
W_s001	
Parti Populaire 2014 (%)	0.00310
	(0.03)
/	
var(e.pp2014)	2.587***
	(7.18)
Observations	103

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The regression results reveal the electoral pattern of Parti Populaire (PP), which exhibits some differences compared to its Flemish counterpart, Vlaams Belang (VB). Notably, average

income and the divorce rate in an area do not display any significant correlation with the electoral performance of Parti Populaire, mirroring the situation observed with VB. Like VB, PP benefits from the presence of far-left parties and garners more votes in areas where these parties perform well.

However, a distinctive dissimilarity arises when examining the impact of unemployment rates. VB performs poorly in areas with higher unemployment rates, whereas PP fares better in such areas. This correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This finding suggests that PP's populist campaign might be more effective in regions with economic grievances. Interestingly, this is somewhat unexpected given that PP's economic policy is ultra-right and does not include provisions for social security. Nevertheless, this observation aligns with conventional demand-side theories, which posit that economic grievances play a pivotal role in the success of far-right parties. Thus, the support for PP may be rooted more in discontent with the establishment rather than alignment with PP's specific policies.

Another notable distinction between VB and PP is that the education level in an area does not appear to significantly impact PP's electoral performance. It is conceivable that PP can still attract votes from elitist communities due to its liberal origins and right-wing economic policy, notwithstanding its strong populist rhetoric.

Finally, an intriguing observation emerges regarding the percentage of non-European foreigners in an area. It appears that this factor is not significantly related to support for VB, whereas PP performs worse in areas with fewer foreigners. This finding is somewhat surprising, given that PP's campaign is built on anti-immigration sentiment. One possible explanation lies in the differing attitudes toward immigration between Flanders and Francophone Belgium.

In Flemish cities with a substantial immigrant population, such as Antwerp, residents tend to be more concerned about the social problems associated with immigration. Consequently, urban residents in Flanders are not averse to voting for VB. In contrast, in Francophone cities like Brussels, residents tend to be more open to globalization and hold a more positive attitude toward immigrants. Moreover, since many immigrants in Belgium originate from former French colonies, they often find it easier to integrate into Francophone Belgian society. Therefore, the effectiveness of PP's anti-immigration campaign may be diminished in cosmopolitan areas in Wallonia and Brussels. This cultural disparity between Flanders and Francophone Belgium also contributes to explaining the persistence of historical legacies in Belgium, a point that will be further elaborated upon in the next chapter.

3.3 The Historical Connection between Rex and PP

Overall, the connection between Parti Populaire (PP) and Rex appears to be tenuous. As demonstrated by the above comparison, PP exhibits a distinct electoral geography pattern when compared to Rex. Despite both parties focusing on populist agendas, only PP significantly benefits from economic grievances and political polarization. It becomes evident that Rex's support primarily emanates from religious regions, underscoring the significance of its Catholic ideology, whereas PP's popularity is more strongly influenced by local economic and political conditions.

Considering the absence of historical ties between PP and Rex, as well as the dissimilarity in their electoral geographic patterns, it seems unlikely that PP could derive any advantages from the legacy of Rex. To further substantiate this assertion, I conducted a statistical comparison between PP and Rex.

Table 3.4 PP and Rex

	(1) Parti Populaire 2014 (%)	(2) Parti Populaire 2014 (%)
Parti Populaire 2014 (%)		
Rexist Party (%)	-0.00789	0.00300
	(-0.44)	(0.17)
Unemployment 2014		0.126**
		(2.72)
PTB/PVDA 2014 (%)		0.115*
		(2.02)
Non-European Foreigner 2014 (%)		-0.353***
		(-4.37)
Constant	3.932***	2.389**
	(8.70)	(2.93)
W_s001		
Parti Populaire 2014 (%)	0.133	0.0232
	(1.38)	(0.24)
/		
var(e.pp2014)	3.194***	2.610***
	(7.17)	(7.18)
Observations	103	103

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

A simple regression analysis (Table 3, column 1) comparing PP's votes in 2014 with Rex's votes in 1936 reveals no significant correlation. This regression assesses the performance in the same electoral district at different time periods. Even when VNV's historical support is combined with other contemporary variables, the correlation remains insignificant (Table 3, column 2). The p-values in both columns are approximately 0.6, indicating that the votes Rex received in an area are unlikely to have an impact on PP's performance.

The question arises: why is the legacy of a fascist party preserved in Flanders but not in Wallonia? It is crucial to analyze the mechanisms of historical legacy that did not operate in Francophone Belgium. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are three potential ways through which legacy can be preserved: 1) common socio-economic conditions, 2) intergenerational transmission, and 3) transmission via social organizations.

3.3.1 The Mechanism of Socio-Economic Conditions

Regarding the first mechanism, to assess whether present-day Wallonia exhibits comparable socio-economic conditions to interwar Wallonia, I conducted a comparative analysis of three pairs of variables potentially linked to support for far-right parties: 1) average building income in 1930 and average income in 2014; 2) unemployment rate in 1930 and unemployment rate in 2014; 3) church attendance in 1930 and divorce rate in 2014.

Table 3.5 Socio-Economic Conditions in Wallonia

	(1) 2014 Average income	(2) Unemployment 2014	(3) Divorce Rate 2014
main			
Average Building Income 1930	-3.341***		
	(-4.87)		
Unemployment 1930		1.918**	
		(2.79)	
Mass Attendance			-2.483***
			(-5.59)
Constant	17524.2***	11.51***	10.48***
	(68.61)	(9.91)	(43.38)
/			
var(e.income2014)	3165528.8***		
	(7.18)		
var(e.unemployment2014)		23.52***	
		(7.18)	
var(e.rdivorce2014)			1.052***
			(7.18)
Observations	103	103	103

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The regression results reveal both similarities and differences between contemporary and interwar Wallonia. Firstly, areas that exhibited more significant development in 1930 tend to have lower average incomes in 2014, with this correlation being significant at the 0.001 level. This outcome can be attributed to the industrial decline in Wallonia and the shifting economic landscape, which aligns with expectations.

Secondly, areas with higher unemployment rates in 1930 still experience higher unemployment rates in 2014, indicating that unemployment remains a structural issue in Francophone Belgium. It is plausible that the decline of Walloon industrial regions began as early

as the 1930s, and this trend has persisted over the years. The majority of unemployed individuals in Wallonia and Brussels are immigrants and unskilled workers, and the growth of the high-skilled industry has not resolved their employment challenges (Mérenne-Schoumaker et al. 2014).

Thirdly, concerning social factors, areas where the population was more actively engaged in weekly mass during the interwar period tend to have lower divorce rates today. This correlation is also significant at the 0.001 level. Despite changes in economic geography, religious areas in Wallonia have maintained a more conservative character over time.

In conclusion, the regression analysis demonstrates that some socio-economic conditions exhibit similarities between the present and the interwar period in Wallonia. In comparison to the case in Flanders, the influence of common socio-economic conditions is more likely to impact Francophone Belgium.

However, the conditions that facilitated the rise of old fascist parties are unlikely to exert the same influence on contemporary far-right parties in Francophone Belgium. Despite both parties falling under the category of far-right populism, Rex and PP differ in ideology and agenda. The previous regression results suggest that PP and Rex rely on distinct social and economic conditions: Rex's support is concentrated in religious areas, while PP garners more votes in regions with high unemployment. Consequently, even if these conditions remain consistent over the years, it is improbable that PP will benefit from the legacy of Rex.

This discovery prompts an immediate question: why does the contemporary far-right party in Wallonia differ so significantly from its interwar counterpart? The answer may lie in the other two mechanisms that potentially preserve this legacy. It is essential to examine why Rex's ideology and agenda could not be transmitted through intergenerational means and social organizations.

3.3.2 The Mechanism of Intergenerational Transmission

Regarding the mechanism of intergenerational transmission, there are no fundamental differences between Flanders and Wallonia in contemporary times. However, assessing the impact of this mechanism throughout the entire post-war period is less certain due to data limitations.

Similar to the situation in Flanders, contemporary children in Francophone Belgium exhibit resemblances to their parents concerning prejudice and political attitudes (Meeusen and Dhont, 2015). Since Francophone Belgian society and its population have not undergone significant changes, it is likely that intergenerational transmission of political preferences has some effect, potentially resulting in the persistence of local right-wing cultural values in Francophone Wallonia.

Existing studies and surveys on the social and political opinions of Belgians suggest no fundamental differences between the populations in Flanders and Francophone Belgium (Coffé 2008; de Jonge 2021). Right-wing ideologies, including anti-immigration sentiment, are prevalent among the Walloon population, mirroring the situation in Flanders.

However, there is a lack of extensive research on intergenerational transmission between the interwar generation and the contemporary generation in Francophone Belgium. The Transmemo project provides some evidence that war memories and related opinions can endure through the years (Bouchat et al. 2020). Still, there is no concrete proof that political preferences have been similarly transmitted. A challenge lies in the fact that collaboration and the Rexist past have become somewhat taboo subjects in Walloon society, making it difficult to find enough families to study this issue (Aerts et al. 2021). The social pressure on families of collaborators is one factor that could weaken transmission, as will be discussed later.

In Flanders, there is a clear path illustrating how far-right ideology and political preferences have been transmitted across more than three generations, with families of Flemish nationalists

preserving the legacy. However, as the previous analysis indicates, contemporary far-right movements in Francophone Belgium neither inherit nor benefit from the legacy of Rex. It is possible that the mechanism of intergenerational transmission is not strong enough to preserve the legacy in Francophone Belgium, or other factors, such as the social pressures mentioned earlier, have disrupted this mechanism.

The mechanism of social organizations could also interact with intergenerational transmission. On one hand, the absence of social organizations could hinder transmission within families. As noted by Aerts et al. (2021), immediately after the war, the families of Degrelle's followers had established family solidarity networks comparable to those of Flemish nationalists, but these networks were not maintained by subsequent generations. This lack of political socialization outside of families could weaken the transmission of political preferences.

On the other hand, the absence of social organizations could prevent the translation of local right-wing cultural persistence into support for far-right parties in Wallonia. As argued by Cantoni et al. (2019), there could be a disconnection between far-right ideology and support for far-right parties. The mere existence of cultural persistence is insufficient for the rise of far-right parties; there must be a capable organization to "activate" latent ideologies among the population.

3.3.3 The Disappearance of Rexist Organizations

Given that the previous two mechanisms failed to fully elucidate the differences between Flanders and Wallonia, the third mechanism, transmission via social organizations, emerges as pivotal in understanding the fading far-right legacy in Francophone Belgium.

Despite both the VNV and Rex collaborating with Germany during the war, they encountered differing post-war fates. The suppression of Rexists and their legacy proved more

effective compared to the treatment of VNV members. Former VNV members could engage in political activities and sustain organizations within Belgium, while former Rexists were perpetually ostracized by mainstream society and wielded little influence.

Controversies still surround the history of post-war repression, making it challenging to assess whether Flemish or Walloon collaborators were treated unfairly. While there were more sanctions against collaborators in Flanders, Francophone Belgium witnessed a higher number of death sentences, executions, and life sentences (Witte et al. 2009). Several prominent Rexist figures, including José Streel, the leading philosopher of Rexism, faced execution or exile, exemplified by Degrelle. Conversely, many VNV figures, as previously discussed, would later establish organizations or join mainstream parties after serving their sentences.

While numerous former Rexists were also eventually granted clemency by the government, they faced rejection from both the public and the authorities. Their waning interest in political participation further diminished their presence in post-war Belgian politics. Only a handful remained in fragmented and marginal organizations. In contrast, former VNV members found representation in mainstream and radical parties and organizations, ensuring the continuity of their ideology and organization.

Attempts to reorganize Rexists and resurrect Rexism in Belgium all ended in failure. Despite Degrelle's persistent promotion of his ideology in Spain and his stature among European far-right circles, he did not wield the same influence in Belgium. Jean-Robert Debbaudt, one of Degrelle's staunchest followers in Belgium during the war, maintained contact with Degrelle after the war and faced legal repercussions for publishing and distributing Degrelle's pamphlets (Laporte 2003). Debbaudt also founded multiple far-right organizations since 1950. In 1974, his Rexist Front managed to secure 2,764 votes in the Brussels district, marking the most successful post-war

Rexist movement endeavor. The dire state of Rexism in Francophone Belgium even led Debbaudt to join Vlamms Blok in an effort to establish a "Walloon Blok" (Vaute 2003).

Ironically, the Flemish far-right party VB appears to have stronger connections with Rex than contemporary Walloon far-right parties. Koen Dillen, the son of VB's founder, along with other prominent VB members, reportedly had close ties with Degrelle (Vaes 2005). VB also incorporated Rex slogans like "Great Cleansing" and the famous broom symbol into its campaign propaganda (Geysels and Dijk 1996). Consequently, contemporary Belgians accuse VB of "emulating Rex" rather than other Walloon far-right organizations (De Man 1998).

In summary, a distinct generational disjuncture characterizes far-right organizations in Francophone Belgium after the war. Post-war Rexist groups remained fragmented and lacked a clear direction. The post-war repression significantly crippled Rexist organization, relegating Rexists to the fringes of the political stage. Some Rexist-origin organizations briefly aligned with the Front National before disbanding, while others dwindled into irrelevance (Brewaeys et al., 1992). The ideology of Degrelle and Rexism failed to pass down to contemporary Walloon far-right movements, which prioritize addressing contemporary grievances over adhering to old ideologies (Conway, 1993).

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I find that the contemporary Walloon party, PP, fails to derive any benefit from the legacy of the interwar fascist party, Rex, despite both being categorized as far-right populist parties. In contrast to the situation in Flanders, PP exhibits distinct ideological

characteristics and draws support from a different social base. Notably, it does not garner increased backing in areas historically favorable to Rex.

Subsequently, I scrutinize three mechanisms potentially responsible for preserving this legacy and draw comparisons between Francophone Belgium and Flanders. The mechanism centered on common socio-economic conditions appears unlikely to exert influence in Francophone Belgium, mirroring the situation in Flanders. The mechanism of intergenerational transmission does exist in Francophone Belgium, albeit with uncertain effects when compared to the same mechanism in Flanders.

The most pronounced disparity between Francophone Belgium and Flanders lies in the mechanism of social organizations. While Flemish far-right organizations thrived after the war and established direct connections with today's VB, their counterparts in Francophone Belgium perpetually faced repression and remained fragmented. The dearth of pertinent social organizations effectively thwarted the transmission of far-right legacy from former Rexists to contemporary far-right parties in Wallonia.

The summarized comparison is visually presented in the following chart:

Table 3.6 Different Mechanisms of Historical Persistence

Mechanism	Flanders	Francophone Belgium
Common Socio-economic Conditions	No	No
Intergenerational Transmission	Yes	Uncertain
Social Organizations	Yes	No
Presence of Historical Legacy	Yes	No

The absence of sustained organizational continuity within far-right politics has already been acknowledged by scholars, who consider it a contributing factor explaining the disparities in far-right politics between Flanders and Wallonia (Art 2008; de Jonge 2021). However, the existing

literature fails to elucidate why repression against far-right elements in Wallonia has been more efficacious than in Flanders, or why far-right organizations in Flanders managed to circumvent these constraints. The answers to these questions may lie in the divergent historical trajectories of Flanders and Wallonia, which will be examined in the forthcoming chapter. This analysis will provide valuable insights into what truly preserved or eradicated the fascist legacy in Belgium and how the lessons from Belgium can be applied to other nations.

4.0 The Different Developments of Far-Right Organizations in Belgium

In the preceding chapters, I have examined the distinct trajectories of far-right parties in Belgium. The ascendancy of far-right parties in Flanders and the decline of their counterparts in Wallonia present a compelling case for the study of far-right politics. Conventional explanations centered on economic woes or immigration fall short in comprehensively elucidating why far-right parties have found much greater success in Flanders, a region with a stronger economy and fewer immigrants compared to Wallonia.

Upon investigation, it becomes evident that the contemporary geographic support for the Flemish far-right party VB is intrinsically linked to the historical legacy of the fascist party VNV. In essence, VB garners more votes in areas where VNV once thrived. Conversely, contemporary far-right parties in Francophone Belgium derive limited benefits from the historical legacy of their interwar far-right counterparts, and the geographical patterns of their support markedly diverge from those of their interwar predecessors.

I have subsequently examined potential mechanisms that may account for the preservation of this legacy and compared their efficacy in Flanders and Francophone Belgium. Common socio-economic conditions do not appear to be the crux, as these conditions have undergone significant changes in Flanders. The mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and social organizations assume greater significance: the most conspicuous disparity between the two regions lies in the continuity and prosperity of far-right social organizations in Flanders, while such organizations are conspicuously absent in Francophone Belgium.

In Flanders, the influence of VNV has been sustained through a variety of post-war social organizations. The social networks of VNV and radical Flemish nationalism have endured. Former

VNV members and their sympathizers regrouped after the war, establishing various organizations to preserve their ideology and expand their membership. These organizations subsequently collaborated with Flemish nationalist parties, even constituting the backbone of their local branches. The members and social connections of VB can be directly traced back to VNV, which explains the similarities in their patterns of support despite VNV dissolving several decades ago.

Consistent with prior studies on intergenerational transmission and social organizations, I have found that these two mechanisms mutually reinforce each other in Flanders, thereby perpetuating the legacy of far-right ideology. When parents endeavor to impart their Flemish nationalist ideologies to their children, local social organizations offer various activities aimed at bolstering Flemish identity and facilitating the transmission of these ideologies within families.

In contrast, Rexists largely faded into obscurity in Wallonia after the war. Former Rexists failed to establish influential organizations, and their ideologies did not endure among the local population. The influential post-war far-right political parties and social organizations emerged as entirely new entities with no connections to Rex. Consequently, Rex's legacy was unable to persist over time, resulting in significant divergences between Walloon far-right parties and their interwar counterparts, with the former exhibiting not only distinct patterns but also considerably less influence.

In this chapter, I will delve deeper into the disparate trajectories of post-war far-right organizations in Flanders and Wallonia and elucidate how these differences have impacted the development of far-right parties in Belgium. The process through which far-right organizations have preserved the legacy of old fascist parties bears resemblance to the process by which Italian civil society preserved democratic legacies, as described by Putnam, albeit in a reversed manner.

Belgium serves as a particularly noteworthy case for examining the role of civil society. As part of the consociational democracy model, Belgian social organizations typically maintain close ties with the political system. Each traditional party in Belgium has its own affiliated social organizations that provide services to party members and form distinct "pillars" within society. Belgian citizens align themselves with these "pillars," organizing their lives in accordance with their chosen party's principles. Given the strong influence of traditional parties over civil society, one might expect Belgian civil society to be less susceptible to capture by far-right elements, similar to the capture of German civil society by the Nazi regime described by Berman (1997). However, in this chapter, I will illustrate how former VNV members infiltrated existing social organizations and established their own entities, effectively capturing a portion of civil society in Flanders to propagate and preserve far-right ideologies. The historical development of these far-right social organizations offers a nuanced case for the ongoing debate on the role of civil society, drawing parallels between the perspectives of Putnam and Berman.

4.1 The Lineage of Far-Right Organizations in Flanders

The fundamental premise underlying the preservation of the legacy of interwar fascists by civil society hinges on the ability of social organizations to evolve over time for the purpose of transmitting this legacy from the interwar period. To gain insight into how the ideologies, members, and social networks of the VNV have been transmitted to the present-day VB, it is essential to trace the historical lineage of far-right organizations in Flanders following World War II. The ensuing analysis illustrates that not only can various Flemish far-right social groups be traced back to their historical far-right counterparts, but post-war Flemish far-right political parties also

maintain connections to the interwar fascist party VNV. Remarkably, the punitive measures enacted after World War II failed to prevent the resurgence of former VNV members and their sympathizers.

4.1.1 1950s: The Failures of Radical Flemish Nationalist Parties: VC and CVV

Immediately following the war, VNV members and other radical Flemish nationalists faced suppression due to their collaboration, leading to the dissolution of their organizations. However, this situation proved to be short-lived. A few years later, former VNV members and their supporters were able to participate in politics and organize their own activities. Most of them stayed out of the radical activities and tried to merge with moderate nationalist movement. While some Flemish nationalists wanted to stay in the mainstream party Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP, Christian People's Party) and its affiliate organizations to further their agenda, others planned to build their own organizations (H.I. 1949; Deprez and Vos 2016).

Starting in 1947, Flemish nationalists from various political backgrounds began holding regular meetings in Antwerp to strategize the next steps for the Flemish Movement. These discussions were orchestrated by Walter Bouchery, a former VNV member who had previously been sentenced to death in absentia for collaboration but was later acquitted in 1946 (Wouters 1998). Bouchery resumed his Flemish nationalist activities and indirectly played a role in the establishment of two organizations: Vlaamse Concentratie (VC, Flemish Concentration) and Vlaamse Volksbeweging (VVB, Flemish People's Movement).

VC was founded in 1949 with the aim of participating in elections as a Flemish nationalist party and opposing the repression against collaborators (Art 2008). The chairman of VC was Alex Donckerwolcke, a moderate nationalist without a VNV background (Durnez 1998). Nevertheless,

VC also attracted numerous former VNV members. In addition to Bouchery, who assisted in its founding and collaborated with VC through his nationalist magazine, other former VNV members were directly involved in VC (De Wever 1998). For instance, Hector De Bruyne, one of VC's founders, had previously worked for VNV's newspaper and had been sentenced to ten years in prison after the war. Following his release on health grounds, he swiftly resumed his political activities and remained a prominent figure in Flemish politics in subsequent years (Seberechts 1998).

However, VC's electoral performance was underwhelming. In the 1949 election, VC secured only 2.07% of the votes, failing to win any parliamentary seats. In subsequent elections, VC continued to face electoral challenges and eventually had to join the Christelijke Vlaamse Volksunie (CVV, Christian Flemish People's Union) coalition to participate in the 1954 election (De Wever 1998).

CVV was a coalition of Flemish nationalists, the middle class, and farmers, advocating for the federalization of Belgium. CVV comprised various groups and cooperated with VC, which included many radical Flemish nationalists. Some CVV members also had ties to VNV. For instance, Frans Lambrechts, who played a role in organizing CVV, was the brother of Karel Lambrechts, the propaganda leader and a member of the Board of Directors of VNV (Steenhaut and De Wever 1998).

Despite the collaboration with VC, CVV also faced electoral disappointment, winning only 2.2% of the votes and one parliamentary seat in the 1954 election. The electoral setbacks of both VC and CVV, however, did not deter the political ambitions of Flemish nationalists. Members of VC and CVV would later contribute to the establishment of a more successful Flemish nationalist party, the Volksunie, which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

4.1.2 1950s: The Establishment of Radical Flemish Social Organizations during the Post-War Period：VVB，VMO，and Broederband

In the earlier post-war years, while most Flemish nationalist political parties faced failure and eventual dissolution, numerous nationalist social organizations achieved varying degrees of success and longevity. Some of these organizations, such as VVB, continue to exert influence in contemporary Flanders.

Following the war, many Flemish nationalists opted for a nationalist pressure group to influence traditional parties rather than establishing a new political party. The groundwork for VVB was laid concurrently with the founding of VC and CVV. When VC and CVV eventually faced setbacks, many Flemish nationalists from these parties turned to VVB as their next platform. VVB was formally established in 1956 under the leadership of Maurits Coppieters (VVB 2021).

Maurits Coppieters, a moderate Flemish nationalist with no previous ties to VNV, envisioned VVB as a pluralistic organization that could encompass individuals from across the political spectrum (Dedeurwaerder 1998). While efforts were made to attract members from traditional parties and the left-wing, VVB primarily drew radical Flemish nationalists and leaned towards the far-right.

From its inception, VVB counted many former VNV members and radical nationalists among its founding members. As previously mentioned, former VNV member Walter Bouchery played a role in the establishment of VVB and supported the organization through his nationalist magazine. Nearly half of VVB's founders were former VNV members, including individuals like Paul-Felix Beeckman (the first acting chairman of VVB), Marcel Boey (chairman of the West Flanders department and later vice-president-in-chief of VVB), Jaak van Waeg (who would

become VVB's chairman in 1980), and Leo Wouters, among others (De Wever 1998; Drabbe 2016; Pauwels 2021).

Initially, VVB's agenda focused on advocating for the federalization of Belgium and amnesty for Flemish collaborators. However, its stance evolved over time. In its early years, VVB attempted to position itself as a broad Flemish movement without a distinct political affiliation to attract left-liberal supporters. When this effort proved unsuccessful, VVB gradually shifted to a more radical stance and now pursues the goal of an independent Flanders (VVB 2021). While VVB does not align with specific political parties, it draws many members from VB and collaborates with VB on Flemish issues, as will be discussed later.

Another significant radical organization established in the post-war period was the Vlaamse Militanten Orde (VMO, Flemish Militants Order). Founded by former VNV member Bob Maes in 1950, VMO was later led by Wim Maes (who shared the same last name as Bob Maes but was unrelated), also a former VNV member from a Flemish nationalist family (Deckers 2018). VMO's agenda centered on organizing militants to protect Flemish nationalist gatherings and support the propaganda efforts of Flemish nationalist parties. Initially, VMO offered its services to VC and later became an action group within Volksunie. While VMO was briefly integrated into the Volksunie structure, tensions marred its relationship with the party (De Wever 1998).

After Wim Maes' death in 1968, VMO adopted an even more radical stance and became involved in a series of violent incidents. Founder Bob Maes attempted to dissolve VMO in 1971, and Volksunie distanced itself from the organization. Following Bob Maes' declaration, a new VMO was promptly established under the leadership of Bert Eriksson, a former member of Hitler Youth Flanders (Creve 1998). Notably, VMO organized "Operation Delta," a high-profile event in which its members exhumed and transferred the remains of former VNV leader Staf de Clercq,

hosting an official ceremony attended by Flemish nationalists from across the country (De Beule 2020). After a series of trials and convictions, VMO was found guilty of violating laws against forming private militias. The organization was outlawed in 1983 and gradually ceased operations in the late 1980s. Many former VMO members joined other far-right groups, such as Voorpost (Art 2008).

Another far-right organization established in the post-war years was Broederband, a loosely organized association for victims of post-war repression, primarily former VNV members. Broederband was established in the 1950s and officially founded in 1964 under the chairmanship of Arthur de Troyer, a former regional leader of VNV and a member of Volksunie after the war (Van Campenhout and Verdoodt 1998). Broederband convened meetings, campaigned for amnesty and rehabilitation for repression victims, and published its own magazine to promote Flemish nationalism. At its peak, Broederband boasted thousands of members, including former VNV members and their families, forging connections among influential figures in Flemish nationalism. Broederband was dedicated to legitimizing radical Flemish nationalism, including justifying VNV's wartime collaboration. Many Broederband members later joined VB when it was founded, and the organization continued to actively collaborate with VB and other radical nationalist groups until its dissolution in 1997 (Seberechts 1998; De Tijd 2001).

4.1.3 1950s-1970s: The Rise of Flemish Nationalist Parties: The Founding and Dividing of Volksunie, and the Born of Vlaams Blok

Following the initial setbacks faced by Flemish nationalist parties, the resolve to establish their own political party remained strong. In 1954, the Volksunie was founded, attracting Flemish nationalists from various ideological backgrounds. Volksunie would go on to become the

predominant Flemish nationalist party for the ensuing years, until its division in the 1970s and the subsequent formation of the VB in 1978.

The electoral defeat in 1954 marked the end of CVV and the inception of Volksunie. The remnants of CVV opted to create a more extensive political coalition that could accommodate nationalists from both the center and the left. In 1954, this new party emerged under the name Volksunie and inherited CVV's parliamentary seats. Volksunie's initial agenda closely resembled that of CVV and VC, advocating for the federalization of Belgium and opposing post-war repression (Mudde 1995; Seberechts 1998).

Although Volksunie did not garner significant support in its early electoral endeavors, it experienced a breakthrough in the 1965 election, securing 12 parliamentary seats with 6.7% of the total votes. Subsequently, Volksunie steadily expanded, capitalizing on tensions between Flanders and the Belgian state in the post-war era. In 1971, Volksunie reached its zenith, amassing 11.1% of the votes and 21 parliamentary seats, making it the third-largest party in Belgium. Volksunie briefly participated in the government on multiple occasions starting in 1977. However, Volksunie also faced a decline from the 1970s onward as radical nationalists began to splinter from the party.

Volksunie harbored a significant radical nationalist faction from its inception. While most of Volksunie's founders were CVV members with no history of radical nationalism or collaboration, many of them maintained strong ties with former VNV members. The first chairman of Volksunie, Walter Couvreur, a CVV founder, had a close relationship with Frans Lambrechts, the brother of a prominent VNV figure (Haeseryn 1998). The second chairman, Frans Van der Elst, who led Volksunie from 1955 to 1975, was a lawyer and friend of former VNV leader Hendrik Elias. Van der Elst also preserved and published Elias' intellectual works (De Wever 1998; Verdoodt 1998). Although the extent of Elias' influence on Van der Elst and Volksunie is

challenging to quantify, their exchange of ideas about Flemish nationalism through numerous letters and Elias' role in shaping Van der Elst's political path are well-documented (Dedeurwaerder 2005).

In addition to its founders, Volksunie incorporated numerous former VNV members from its inception. Volksunie did not shy away from embracing the participation of radical nationalists, who would go on to play pivotal roles in the party's development. In response to accusations of being the "party of blacks" (former collaborators), Volksunie even adopted this label as an honorary title in its own magazine. According to historian Koen Aerts' research, in 1965, approximately half of Volksunie's executives came from families associated with collaborators, and the Borgerhout department was entirely composed of former VNV members (Aerts 2018). These former VNV members within Volksunie would later form the core of the VB.

While the radical wing played a significant role in Volksunie's founding and early development, the new generation of Volksunie leaders progressively adopted more moderate positions during the 1960s. This shift created tensions between radical nationalists and moderates within the party (Mudde 2002).

Hugo Schiltz, who would assume the chairmanship of Volksunie in 1975, expanded the party's platform, making it more inclusive and mainstream (Hoflack 1998). Schiltz introduced many moderate and left-wing nationalists to Volksunie, including figures like Nelly Maes, who expressed progressive and feminist views. Radical nationalists derisively referred to her as "Red Nelly" due to her perceived left-wing stance (Seberechts 1998). Schiltz's goal was to position Volksunie as a party capable of participating in the government, and he was willing to compromise with the establishment to achieve this objective (Gijsels 1990). In 1977, Volksunie negotiated the Egmont Pact with traditional parties and entered the government. Although the Egmont Pact did

not materialize due to opposition, it laid the groundwork for the eventual federalization of Belgium (Witte 2005).

However, the decision to sign the Egmont Pact and join the government led to internal strife within Volksunie. Radical Flemish nationalists accused the party of conceding too much and betraying the Flemish movement. The longstanding divide between radicals and moderates within Volksunie reached a breaking point. Many radical Flemish nationalists had already departed from Volksunie before 1977, and the crisis surrounding the Egmont Pact expedited this process. In 1978, the radical wing of Volksunie separated from the party, forming their own radical political parties, and thus the Vlaams Blok was born.

The Vlaams Blok was established as an electoral coalition comprising two radical nationalist parties: the Vlaams-Nationale Partij (Flemish National Party, VNP) and the Vlaamse Volkspartij (Flemish People's Party, VVP). Both parties were founded by former Volksunie members and shared the common goal of opposing the Egmont Pact and Volksunie's compromises (Seberechts 1998).

The VVP was founded in 1977 by Lode Claes, a former Volksunie senator. Claes had sympathized with radical Flemish nationalists before the war and had collaborated closely with VNV, serving in various capacities during the German occupation. In 1944, Claes was convicted of collaboration and served five years in prison. After his release, he joined Volksunie and was elected as a senator in 1968. However, Claes lost the leadership contest against Hugo Schiltz in 1975, following Schiltz's perceived moderation and the adoption of the Egmont Pact. Disillusioned, Claes and like-minded Volksunie members formed the VVP in 1977, collaborating with the VNP under the banner of VB. Claes himself failed to secure a seat in the 1978 election, leading to a decline in VVP's influence. Consequently, Claes gradually withdrew from political activities, and

many radical nationalists within VVP transitioned to VNP, which would later transform into the Vlaams Blok in 1979 (Moyaert 1998; Ruys 1998; Mudde 2002).

The VNP (subsequently becoming the VB) was established by Karel Dillen in 1977 and remained under his control for several decades (Moyaert 1998). Dillen sympathized with VNV before the war but refrained from collaboration with the Nazi occupiers, thus avoiding post-war repression. Immediately after the war, Karel Dillen was actively involved in the circles of former VNV members, forming an underground youth group that idolized radical Flemish nationalists, particularly the VNV propaganda leader Reimond Tollenaere (Timmerman 2003).

Karel Dillen initially collaborated with VC and later joined Volksunie in 1957. Simultaneously, he maintained close ties with other radical social organizations like VMO. Dillen consistently criticized Volksunie for its moderation and ultimately resigned from the party in 1971. When Volksunie entered the government coalition and endorsed the Egmont Pact, Dillen founded the VNP as a new Flemish nationalist party that could represent the ideology of radical nationalists (Spruyt 1998). Many of VNP's founding members were former Volksunie members who had previously associated with VNV. For example, Leo Wouters, the vice-chairman of VNP, had been convicted for VNV membership after the war and participated in the establishment of Volksunie in 1954 (Verstraete 1998). In addition to former Volksunie members, VB also attracted radical Flemish nationalists and former collaborators from other organizations such as VVB and VMO. Prior to the formation of VB, radical Flemish nationalists lacked a dedicated political party and were compelled to join Volksunie or CVP, where they had to compromise with moderates. VB provided them with a platform to advance their radical agenda.

What bound the early members of VB was their opposition to the Egmont Pact and their commitment to radical Flemish nationalism. In view of the composition of its founding members

and its radical agenda, VB should be regarded as a continuation of the pre-war Flemish Movement's radical wing, rather than an entirely new party. VB itself did not shy away from acknowledging this historical connection, evident in its name "Vlaams Blok," which was the same name used by VNV for the electoral coalition in 1936 (Arnoudt 2017).

4.1.4 1960-1970s: The Booming of Far-Right Social organizations: Were Di, NSV, TAK, and Voorpost

During the same period as the establishment of VB, several far-right social organizations also came into existence. These organizations are integral to the resurgence of the radical Flemish Movement and have maintained close ties with VB. In the initial years of VB, these far-right social organizations even functioned as local branches of VB (Mudde 1995). This section will delve into several far-right social organizations established during the 1960s and 1970s due to their historical roots in the far-right movement and continued collaboration with VB. These organizations include Were Di, NSV, TAK, and Voorpost.

Were Di (Verbond van Nederlandse Werkgemeenschappen, Association of Dutch Working Communities) was established in 1964 under the leadership of Volksunie member Karel Delahaye. Delahaye, born into a Flemish nationalist family, became involved with the national socialist youth organization under the influence of VNV (Seberechts 1998). Were Di endorsed the concept of Greater Dutch, advocating for the merger of Flanders and the Netherlands—a concept also championed by VNV prior to World War II. Following the dissolution of VMO in 1971, Were Di attracted numerous former VMO members, including Bob Maes (Wouters 1998). Were Di also maintained a close relationship with VB. In the 1970s, VB's founder, Dillen, served as the chairman of Were Di before establishing VB in 1978 (Spruyt 1998). Many members of Were Di

subsequently joined Dillen's VNP in the 1978 elections, forming the initial core of VB members. However, Were Di experienced a gradual decline in the 1980s, with most of its members transitioning to VB and Voorpost (Mudde 1995).

Voorpost was founded in 1976 by Roeland Raes as a more action-oriented group for Were Di members. Voorpost shares a similar "Greater Dutch" ideology with Were Di and has consistently engaged in street actions such as nationalist demonstrations (Verlinden 1998; Voorpost 2022). Before establishing Voorpost, Raes served as the vice-chairman of Were Di and as the chairman of Volksunie's Ghent department. Raes co-founded VVP with Lode Claes in 1977 and facilitated the merger of VVP and VNP, leading to the formation of VB. Raes assumed the role of vice-chairman of VB and later was elected as a VB senator in 1991 (Spruyt 1998). Voorpost maintains a close association with VB and continues to collaborate to this day.

TAK (Taal Aktiekomitee, Language Action Committee) was founded in 1972 by several radical Flemish nationalists from Volksunie and Were Di. One of the co-founders, Flor Grammens, had a history of close collaboration with VNV and actively opposed the use of French in Flanders before World War II (Wils 1998). TAK primarily focuses on linguistic issues in Flanders and Brussels but also advocates other radical nationalist programs (De Wever 1998). TAK has organized numerous large demonstrations and continues to collaborate with other far-right organizations such as VVB and VB.

NSV (Nationalistische Studentenvereniging, Nationalist Student Association) was founded by Edwin Truyens in 1976 as a splinter group from KVHV (Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond, Catholic Flemish Student Union). KVHV, a Flemish nationalist student organization with a long history, was strongly influenced by VNV and other radical nationalist organizations before the war. KVHV was even dissolved during the war, and its members

collaborated with Germany. After the war, KVHV was reconstituted and collaborated with other Flemish nationalist organizations like Volksunie (Palinckx 1998; Weets 1998). Presently, KVHV is not affiliated with any political party, with its members joining various political parties. Despite the existence of the more radical organization NSV, KVHV still maintains certain connections with VB and other far-right organizations (Touriel 2022).

Edwin Truyens, a young radical nationalist and member of Were Di, consistently disagreed with the moderate stance of KVHV. In 1976, Truyen left KVHV and founded NSV as a platform for radical nationalist students. Truyen was also a co-founder of VB and served as a member of the party board (De Wever 1998). NSV actively collaborates with the aforementioned radical organizations and has undertaken numerous aggressive actions against left-leaning organizations. NSV maintains particularly close ties with VB, with many NSV activists eventually assuming leadership roles in VB, including figures such as Tom Van Grieken (VB chairman and former NSV chairman), Filip Dewinter (former VB chairman), and Frank Vanhecke (former VB chairman), among others (Verlinden 1998).

The lineage of various far-right organizations and their relationships with VNV/VB is presented in the following chart:

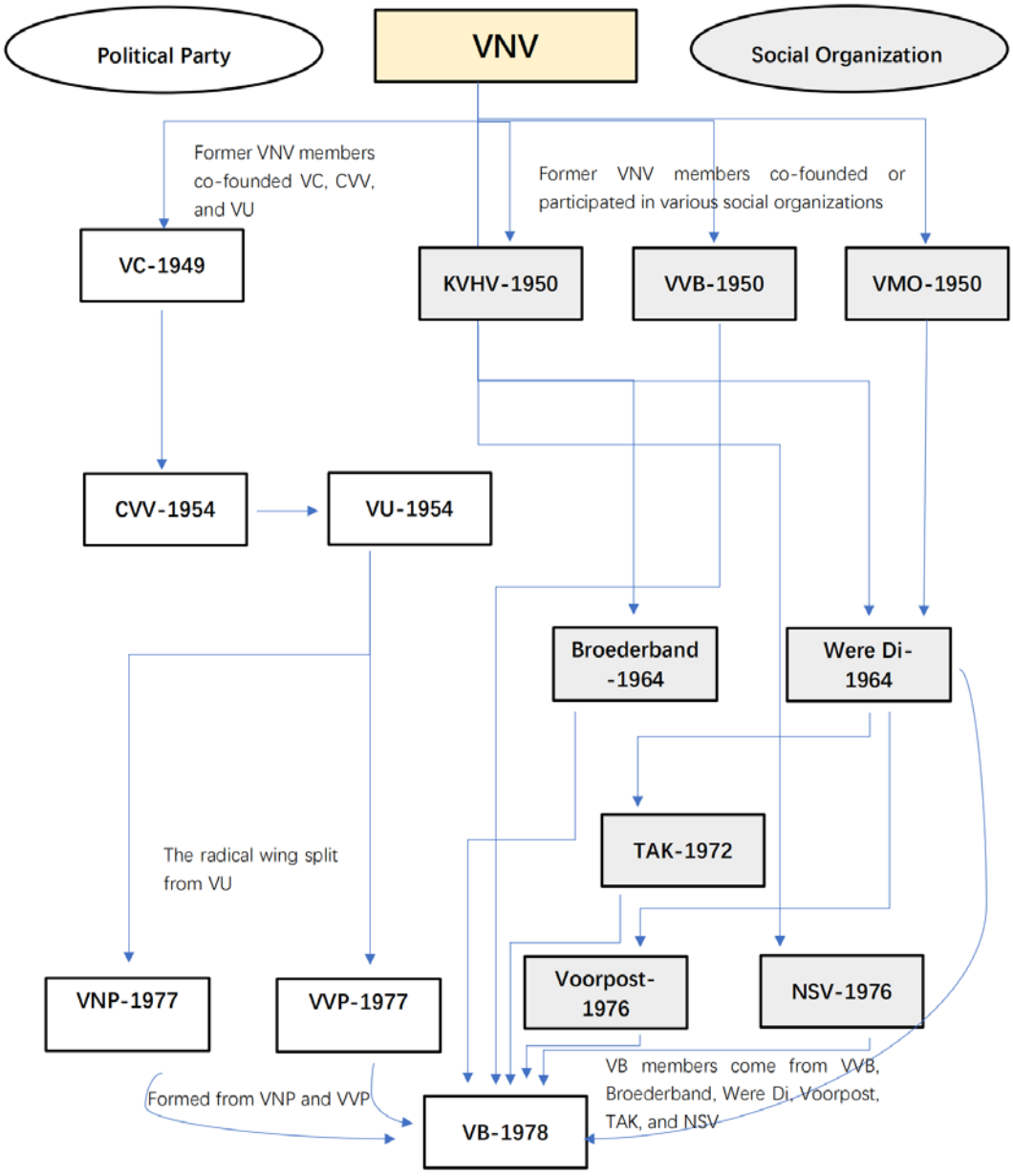

Figure 4.1 The Lineage of Flemish Far-Right Organization

In conclusion, the preceding analysis highlights that the foundation of interwar Flemish nationalist organizations, particularly the VNV, was not entirely dismantled by the post-war repression. Typically, we might expect that punitive measures against fascist elements would curtail their political prospects and thwart any potential resurgence. However, as we shall delve into in the subsequent chapter, this was not the case in Flanders. Hooghe and Stiers (2023) contend

that "there cannot be any form of historical continuity at least on the level of political leaders and parties." Nevertheless, a closer historical examination reveals that this assumption does not hold true. Political figures associated with the VNV seamlessly resumed their political activities and played pivotal roles in political parties and social organizations. Even the leader of the VNV, Hendrik Elias, maintained strong connections with Volksunie and exerted influence over Flemish politics.

Following World War II, while the VNV as a political party ceased to exist, its members continued their political endeavors as radical Flemish nationalists, preserving their political networks. Most former VNV members were released from prison and swiftly reengaged with the Flemish Movement. They went on to establish various political and social organizations, thereby safeguarding their political influence and social connections. When VB was ultimately founded in 1978, it was constructed upon the foundations laid by these organizations, and the previously disrupted radical Flemish Movement experienced a full resurgence.

Hence, the composition of VB's membership and its radical agenda can be directly traced back to the pre-war radical nationalist, and in some cases, fascist movement, notably the VNV. Moreover, several far-right social organizations established after the war also inherited the social networks of these radical Flemish nationalists. Through collaboration and the direct integration of members into VB, these social organizations, which upheld the legacy of the VNV, further transmitted this legacy to VB. VB also benefitted from the resources at the disposal of these organizations. In this context, VB can be regarded not as a new political entity, but as a contemporary heir to the longstanding radical wing of the Flemish Movement.

4.2 How the Far-Right Legacy Benefits VB

The preceding section has explored the contemporary associations between far-right organizations and their historical counterparts. In this section, we delve into how this historical connection influences the development of VB. There are primarily two avenues through which VB can leverage this historical legacy:

Firstly, from the demand side, these social organizations have preserved far-right ideologies and Flemish nationalism, rendering VB's agenda appealing to residents and fostering a more conducive environment for far-right parties like VB.

Secondly, from the supply side, VB is constructed upon the existing network of radical Flemish nationalist organizations, endowing it with greater resources and organizational structure compared to a newly established party. Local social organizations can also collaborate with VB in recruitment and propaganda efforts.

4.2.1 The Legacy on the Supply Side

The historical connection between VB and the old Flemish far-right movements provides immediate benefits, primarily in the form of a robust organizational foundation for VB. In stark contrast to many far-right organizations in Wallonia that commenced from scratch, VB enjoyed access to a wide array of resources inherited from the old radical Flemish nationalists, endowing it with a considerably stronger organizational infrastructure.

One significant legacy that VB inherited from VNV and other far-right organizations is its pool of experienced members. Most of the founding members hailed from Volksunie, Were Di, and other Flemish nationalist organizations, and many had been active in politics long before the

war. Consequently, VB's initial members were seasoned political activists and well-established politicians. While newly formed parties might struggle to find suitable candidates for parliamentary elections, VB, from its inception, had a roster of experienced politicians who could readily contribute to recruitment, propaganda efforts, and electoral campaigns.

Karel Dillen, a long-standing leader of VB, had already been deeply involved in various far-right organizations prior to founding VB. Dillen possessed the ability to mobilize resources from these organizations and exert his personal influence in political campaigns. Other VB founders also brought their own resources to the party. For instance, Leo Wouters, a former VNV figure and co-founder of Broederband, could easily garner support from former collaborators and radical nationalists. Wouters had previously held elected positions as a representative and senator of Volksunie, making him a readily available candidate for senatorial elections. He even extended his family's involvement in VB, with his grandson, Bart Laeremans, joining VB's youth organization and later becoming an elected VB representative.

Another vital legacy inherited by VB is the organizational structure of these nationalist organizations. VB did not have to construct an entirely new framework from scratch; instead, it could draw lessons from existing structures or directly adopt established ones. In its early stages, VB emulated the party structure of Volksunie and even utilized the local branches of far-right organizations such as VMO or Were Di as its own party branches. The foundation of these structures played a pivotal role in VB's formative years.

Though VB later developed its independent organizations, the close relationship between VB and far-right organizations continues to be a source of strength for VB. VB can mobilize not only its resources but also those of other organizations. Far-right organizations that share ideologies with VB naturally offer support and assist VB on various far-right issues. During

electoral campaigns, for instance, thousands of local far-right activists from organizations like Were Di or VMO would disseminate or post VB campaign materials throughout the city (Art 2008). During the annual radical nationalist event "IJzerwake (Yser Wake)," VB assumed a leading role, while Voorpost helped organize the event and provided security services (Kafka 2004; IJzerwake 2020).

Most of the time, VB openly collaborates with far-right organizations on issues of shared concern, particularly those related to xenophobia. For instance, VB and Voorpost jointly organized a demonstration protesting the emergency shelter for asylum seekers in Berlaar. While Voorpost rallied local activists, VB politicians, including Chairman Filip Dewinter, delivered speeches promoting VB's agenda (Nieuwsblad 2022). Sometimes, these far-right organizations engage in covert activities for VB. In 2021, a series of demonstrations protesting COVID measures in Belgium claimed to be "apolitical." However, subsequent investigations revealed that the organizers were members of several far-right organizations such as NSV and Voorpost, with a VB member of parliament also involved (Struys 2021).

The final legacy inherited by VB is the ideology of radical Flemish nationalism. VB does not need to develop its own ideology to attract followers; instead, it directly inherits a consistent and coherent ideology from the historical radical wing of the Flemish Movement. VB presents itself as the representative of the longstanding tradition of the Flemish Movement, with this shared radical nationalist goal serving as an ideological foundation to attract local members and unite diverse factions within VB.

As previously mentioned, VB's founders were former VNV members or sympathetic radical nationalists who aligned with VNV's cause. Thus, VB effortlessly adopted VNV's radical nationalism to garner support. VB's official party paper, "De Vlaams Nationalist (The Flemish

Nationalist)," and Dillen's choice of "and that's why we stand here to rebel" in homage to VNV propaganda leader Reimond Tollenaere exemplify this ideological continuity. VB's initial party program, "*Grondbeginselen* (Principles)," authored by Roeland Raes, the vice chairman of Were Di and founder of Voorpost, was a collection of traditional radical nationalist principles, bearing a resemblance to the program of Were Di, also written by Raes (Mudde 2000).

VB actively participates in radical nationalist events alongside other far-right organizations, altering the historical narrative of collaboration and honoring past radical nationalist leaders to establish common ground that unites radical nationalists across generations. For instance, when VMO exhumed and transferred the remains of many VNV leaders, VB played a role in these ceremonies. VB and other far-right organizations used to collaborate in the annual Flemish event "Yser Pilgrim (IJzerbedevaart)" to promote radical nationalism. When VB found "Yser Pilgrim" to be insufficiently radical, it organized its own event, "IJzerwake (Yser Wake)," in conjunction with Voorpost and NSV, commemorating the VNV leaders (IJzerwake 2020).

With a concret ideological basis, VB can secure the loyalty of its members and supporters, avoiding the internal conflicts and divisions that often plague far-right organizations in Wallonia. Despite undergoing several leadership changes and adopting anti-immigration strategies influenced by other contemporary far-right parties such as France's Front National, radical Flemish nationalism remains at the core of VB's ideology to this day. Anti-immigration is not a departure but rather a contemporary extension of Flemish nationalism, with the traditional anti-Francophone sentiment easily transformed into anti-immigration sentiment, as articulated by VB leader Filip Dewinter: "how can a party resist the Francification of Brussels without resisting its Moroccanization?" (Hossay 2002).

4.2.2 The Legacy on the Demand Side

The legacy of the old far-right movements not only bolstered VB's capabilities but also cultivated a steadfast group of nationalists who served as latent supporters for VB. The repression against collaboration only temporarily disrupted the development of the Flemish Movement without eradicating the ideology of radical Flemish nationalism. Before VB achieved a breakthrough and revived traditional radical Flemish nationalism, various social organizations had already preserved far-right ideologies among the local population.

The repression against former VNV members was harsh and widespread in the first few years after the war. Hundreds of thousands of Flemish collaborators and their families were convicted or faced certain government sanctions, while others experienced isolation and societal pressure. Instead of suppressing Flemish nationalism, this harsh punishment fomented more resentment toward the Belgian state, uniting many Flemish nationalists (Deprez and Vos 1998; Bouchat et al. 2020). Families and sympathizers of collaborators had to endure challenging circumstances, and most chose to stick together, forming a solidarity network to support each other.

For the families of Flemish nationalists, the intergenerational transmission of radical nationalism was greatly facilitated by the presence of thriving far-right organizations. For example, in interviews with VB members, many individuals discuss their trajectory, highlighting the interaction between nationalist family, nationalist social network, and nationalist organizations. For instance, Witte (2005) documents a detailed account from a VB member:

My grandfather was with the VNV. He was a teacher and pro-Flemish. And before that, certain branches of the family had also been pro-Flemish, not outspokenly so, but there was a reflex, at least. After the war, my grandfather spent seven years in prison, particularly because

he was a teacher, I think, because people felt greater resentment when the collaborator was an educator. My grandmother also did some time. So I more or less grew up in the Flemish Movement. My parents took us along to the bigger activities (the IJzer pilgrimage, song festivals). When I was 6, I became a member of the Extreme right-wing activism in Flanders VNJ. It's an ideological youth movement, and many children of Flemish nationalists are members. You are given certain values and a particular vision: the pan-Dutch and right-wing view in general. When I was 16, I joined the VNJ leaders' corps, and at 20 I became active within the Language Action Committee (TAK), of which my father was also an active member. Coordinating activities interested me especially, because you can achieve more when you have more people. In my region the TAK actions were performed together with Voorpost, because the viewpoints of both organizations overlapped. At a certain point, X asked me to become a member of Voorpost. I agreed, because ideologically I backed Voorpost, and because I had already participated before . . . It's assumed that someone from my background knows what Voorpost is about. In fact, not much has changed . . . I recently became a member of the Vlaams Blok.

From the preceding passages, we can readily discern a continuous life path in which children from nationalist families inherit the ideologies of their families. This ideology is further reinforced by the presence of far-right social organizations in their milieu. This pattern is corroborated by the Transmemo project on the history of post-war memory. Through systematic interviews with the offspring of collaborators, Aerts (2018) observes a lineage from the children of VNV families to VB members. Nationalist families typically resided in close proximity, and their children often interacted with one another and joined the same nationalist organizations. These children were already well-acquainted with organizations ranging from TAK to VMO, as

their families could be members of these organizations, and they often observed or even participated in their activities during their formative years. Subsequently, upon joining these social organizations, they naturally gravitated towards nationalist political parties such as Volksunie and VB.

Moreover, the far-right social organizations didn't solely attract former collaborators and their families; they also drew many Flemish nationalists from different backgrounds. As noted by Aerts (2018), various events organized by local social organizations encompassed nationalist demonstrations, festivals, short trips, or singing events. For some children from collaborator families, becoming part of far-right groups served as a means to collectively process the trauma of repression with individuals who had similar experiences. For others, membership in these organizations was simply an engaging pastime or a mode of socialization.

Witte (2005) additionally documents numerous accounts of how children from moderately nationalist families found their way into far-right organizations. For instance, a Voorpost member was deeply impressed by a VB pamphlet:

> *My grandfather was a moderate Fleming, but he was a leftist Fleming. During the war he was a fugitive and refused to work for the Germans…During the 1991 elections I read a Vlaams Blok pamphlet, which really appealed to me . . . It was mostly made up of short, slogan-like sentences. As a youngster of 13 I understood that well.*

There is also a VB member who talked about how she developed Flemish nationalism from her father, and how she later joined VB because of a friend:

The thing about wanting to be Flemish actually comes from home. Being Flemish had its importance in our house. If my father crossed the street and someone asked him the way in French, he would refuse, or he would have to be sure that it was a Frenchman… I met X when I was 18. He was at the beginning of his political career in the Vlaams Blok. It grew a little bit from there. He started up the Vlaams Blok in this municipality and because there weren't enough people I said yes, because I got more interested the more I heard about it.

Another NSV member from moderate family revealed how he became radical during youth movement:

We were Flemings and we wore a lion on our uniforms and the Flemish lion was displayed in the camp. And then we quietly started going to demonstrations, on the IJzer pilgrimage and to the Song festival . . . Yes, it was quite the tough thing to do, acting the Flemish radical and wearing a uniform.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing cases is that of VB leader Filip Dewinter. He maintains that his grandfather was a resistance fighter, and his father was arrested by the Germans during the war. Despite his family having no ties to collaboration, he nonetheless became involved in the radical nationalist movement during his student years (Vankerkhoven 2018):

My father did vote for the Volksunie, but contrary to what some people think, I don't come from a family of black collaborators. On the contrary! My grandmother on my mother's side was a Frenchwoman from Lille. My mom Micheline Mengé, who worked in the Inno in

Bruges, had a French name. Her father Frans Mengé was an active resistance fighter in Blankenberge. He was a police officer and took part in the actions of the white brigades…Together with some other students from the Frères, I founded the Flemish Schools Action Group (VSAG) when I was sixteen. Later on, the VSAG was expanded to include students from the VTI and OLVA, where Frank Vanhecke attended school. I subscribed to De Taktivist, the monthly magazine of the Language Action Committee (TAK). It was the period of Flemish walks in the Voer region and demonstrations in Schaerbeek. We were proud of our bruises after battles with the police. I even got a concussion jumping out of a combi.

From the above cases, we can observe that even though the families of these children were not involved in collaboration or were not active participants in far-right organizations, they still had a strong awareness of their Flemish identity. Consequently, they naturally socialized with other nationalists and participated in nationalist events organized by far-right organizations. In a manner similar to Putnam's case in Italy, where civil networks preserved the values and traditions of Italian republicans, these networks also upheld the radical Flemish nationalism and far-right ideologies of the VNV. When VB was established, a potential support base already existed among the local population from diverse backgrounds.

4.2.3 The Geographic Affinity between VNV and Post-war Organizations

The above analysis demonstrates the historical connection between VB (contemporary far-right) and VNV (historical far-right) through post-war far-right organizations, and how the activities of these organizations directly or indirectly benefited VB. This historical connection helps to explain the preservation of geographic support patterns over time.

Many convicted collaborators did indeed relocate during the post-war repression, with some moving to cities such as Antwerp. Consequently, several radical nationalist organizations were also established in these cities where collaborators congregated. This relocation could partly account for why contemporary far-right movements have been more successful in urban areas compared to their interwar counterparts.

However, it is essential not to overemphasize the impact of post-war repression on the geographic distribution of radical Flemish nationalists. Relocation affected only a small number of VNV members and sympathizers, with the majority either not moving at all or returning home after the repression period. As discussed in the previous section, the repression only temporarily disrupted the development of radical Flemish nationalism. Many individuals who were active in local politics before the war eventually resumed their political activities after a period of inactivity. For instance, VB co-founder Leo Wouters settled in Ghent and had been involved in politics before the war. Upon joining Volksunie and VB, he continued to participate in electoral campaigns in Ghent (Verstraete 1998).

The relocation and internment of collaborators also provided an opportunity for nationalists from different regions and backgrounds to interact during their internment period before returning home. When these radical nationalists returned to their hometowns, they played a role in establishing local branches of nationalist organizations, as reported in interviews with the children of collaborators (Aerts 2018).

While it is challenging to determine the precise number of VNV members and sympathizers who remained in their original locations and quantitatively assess their contributions to the resurgence of post-war far-right organizations, it is reasonable to assume that these organizations developed in places where VNV had a significant presence. As previously

demonstrated, the majority of radical nationalists, who supported both VNV and post-war far-right organizations, remained in their original locations and resumed their activities after the war. When organizations like VVB and VMO began establishing local branches, they naturally started in areas where VNV had a strong presence, allowing them to recruit former VNV members and leverage their social networks. Consequently, the radical nationalist organizations and their structures were not dismantled and relocated but rather sustained over time, preserving the pre-war geographic distribution pattern of VNV.

4.3 The Failure of Far-Right Organizations in Francophone Belgium

As demonstrated above, social organizations played an essential role in transmitting the historical legacy that benefits contemporary far-right parties in Flanders. However, why couldn't the Walloon far-right replicate the success of their Flemish counterparts? In comparison, far-right organizations in post-war Wallonia were consistently fragmented and marginalized. In this section, I will discuss why the attempts to revive far-right organizations in Francophone Belgium consistently failed after the war.

4.3.1 The Generational Disjuncture of Rexist Organizations

After the war, the repression against Rexist collaborators completely destroyed their organizations and structures, creating a generational disjuncture between the Rexist party before the war and the far-right organizations after the war. Several far-right and neo-Rexist organizations were indeed founded, but most of them were established by completely different groups of far-

right individuals who had no connections to the Rexists. Others were created by former Rexists who did not inherit any local structures from the pre-war Rexist party. Therefore, the geographic pattern of the Rexist Party is unlikely to be recreated in Francophone Belgium after the war, as my empirical analysis shows. In this section, we will first examine the Rexist organizations in Francophone Belgium after the war.

While former VNV members quickly resumed political activities and founded various organizations, most former Rexists did not attempt to revive Rexism or participate in politics. Only a few former Rexists remained enthusiastic supporters of Rexism. One of them is Jean-Robert Debbaudt, the most faithful follower of Degrelle and the founder of most Rexist organizations after the war.

In 1950, Jean-Robert Debbaudt founded the Belgian Social Movement (Mouvement Social Belge, MSB) as the Belgian branch of the European Social Movement (Mouvement Social Européen, MSE), a neo-fascist organization. MSB participated in many international neo-fascist activities. For example, Debbaudt attended the Italian neo-fascist party MSI's congress and served as the Belgian correspondent for one of the MSI periodicals, *L'Italiano*. However, MSB did not achieve anything significant domestically. MSB did try to join other Walloon parties and put its members on their lists, but no one gained political recognition. MSB remained a very marginal organization with little local influence (Verhoeyen 1974).

Aside from MSB, Debbaudt also founded or co-founded several far-right organizations, promoting neo-fascist ideology and advocating for the return of Degrelle. However, none of them gained political recognition. Not only Rexists, but also far-right forces in Francophone Belgium in general were almost non-existent before the 1970s, when the economic crisis hit Belgium and state reforms took place (Delwit 2007).

In 1971, Debbaudt attempted to form his own political party with Rexist ideology by establishing a new organization called the Rexist Movement (Mouvement Rexiste, MR). MR's goal was to revive Rexism and bring back Degrelle to solve Belgium's problems. MR claimed to represent the third version of "Rex," aiming to build a populist, secular, and federal state integrated into a European Nation that would protect "the white French-speaking ethnic groups."

In 1974, Debbaudt and other Rexists participated in the election under the name Rexist Front. The result was abysmal: Debbaudt's list received only 2,764 votes in the Brussels district, which is only 0.34% of the valid votes. This result was much more disappointing than any electoral result achieved by Flemish far-right parties. As mentioned in previous sections, in the 1970s, Flemish far-right parties had already formed many organizations with large memberships and political influence. In contrast, far-right and neo-Rexists in Flanders could only gather a few hundred supporters with little political influence in the 1970s (Hossay 2002).

After the failure of the Rexist Front, Debbaudt did not found any other political party. Instead, he and other Rexists tried to form alliances with other far-right parties as minor partners (Brewaeys et al. 1992). Although a few Rexists joined FNb, Debbaudt did not believe this Francophone far-right party could achieve his goals. Instead, he tried to cooperate with the Flemish far-right party VB. He not only called for voting for VB but also attempted to form a Walloon Blok as the Francophone version of VB. However, this cooperation with VB further exacerbated the split between neo-Rexists since VB's radical Flemish nationalism is not compatible with the Belgian nationalist ideology of the Rexists. In the 2019 election, neo-Rexists again tried to cooperate with another far-right party, Nouvelle Wallonie Alternative (New Wallonia Alternative, a small party split from Front National Belge), and once again achieved nothing (Lebourg 2019).

From the history of post-war Rexist organizations, we can see a clear generational disjuncture. Former VNV members preserved the social connections and local resources, allowing them to rebuild the far-right social organizations on the remains of the VNV network and membership. In contrast, only a few former Rexists without political influence were willing to return to politics, and their number was not large enough to rebuild the previous Rexist social network. The post-war Rexist organizations were always small and marginal, usually confined to Brussels without any local branches. Instead of focusing on domestic networks, they had more connections to foreign neo-fascist and far-right organizations, such as MSB being a Belgian branch of the European fascist organization MSE. As a result, these far-right organizations could not gather support from the local population and organize regular local events like far-right organizations in Flanders.

Therefore, when looking at contemporary far-right social organizations and political parties, none of them had any direct links with the Rexists from the interwar period. The founders of the two most influential far-right parties in Francophone Belgium (FNb and PP) had no connections to the Rexists. FNb's founder, Daniel Féret, did have a history of participating in far-right organizations, such as Jeune Europe (Young Europe), but he did not have relations with the Rexists and did not believe in Rexism. The same goes for PP's founders, Rudy Aernoudt and Mischaël Modrikamen. Aernoudt is a professor at Ghent University and a former chief of staff for Liberal ministers, while Modrikamen is a lawyer who gained a reputation for defending the interests of small shareholders. Both are closer to liberal parties and had few contacts with far-right organizations before founding PP (Delwit 2011). Some Rexists did participate in other far-right organizations, but they had no influence over the agenda of those organizations. Without the legacy of the old far-rights, the ideologies and agendas of PP and FNb also focus on contemporary

issues without mentioning the Catholic faith and corporatism, which are core components of Rexism (Conway 1996). Hence, PP and FNb do not have any concrete and coherent ideological framework on which to build, only fragments of contemporary sentiments. While VB could easily combine its anti-immigration agenda with long-term Flemish nationalism to appeal to the Flemish population, PP and FNb could not sell their xenophobic sentiment with their fragmented and nascent ideology (Zomersztajn 2022).

The disjuncture between contemporary far-rights and the old far-rights in Francophone Belgium is present on almost every dimension: the members and founders of PP and FNb have no relation with the Rexists, the ideology of PP and FNb is different from Rexism, there are no local Rexist organizations that could cooperate with PP and FNb, and there is no local population committed to the Rexist ideology and ready to support PP and FNb.

In contrast, as demonstrated before, the founders of far-right social organizations and political parties in Flanders are all connected with VNV. They are either the former VNV members and sympathizers, or the new generation of Flemish nationalists who were under VNV influence. The local networks of VNV are consistently maintained over time by various organizations, and the local radical nationalists and their sympathizers could be mobilized once VB and other new far-right organizations are founded.

This disjuncture is summarized in the following table:

Table 4.1 The Connections between Contemporary Far-Right Parties and Old Far-Right Parties

	VB	FNb/PP
Founders	Former VNV members and their sympathizers	No relation with Rexists
Initial Members	Radical Flemish nationalists	Activists from fringe far-right organizations that have no relation with Rexists
Ideology and Agenda	Consistent radical Flemish nationalism inherited from VNV	Focus on different current discontents and has no relation with Rexism
Local Branches	Built on the post-war far-right organizations created by former VNV members and their sympathizers	None

In summary, the far-right parties in post-war Francophone Belgium all started fresh without the foundation left by the old far-right movements, whereas the far-right parties in Flanders could build upon the consistent far-right organizations established by former VNV members and their sympathizers. This continuity in the VNV/Radical Flemish nationalist organizational structure could be a reason to explain the similarity in the geographic patterns between VNV and VB. In contrast, the generational disjuncture of Rexist organizations explains the lack of a historical geographic pattern for contemporary far-right parties in Francophone Belgium. Without the benefits of consistent far-right organizations, this disjuncture in Rexist organizations also partly explains why the once-strong Walloon far-right could never recover after the war, while the Flemish far-right has remained strong until today.

4.3.2 The Obstacles that Prevented the Resurgence of Rexist and Far-Right Organizations

The previous section illustrates the disjuncture among far-right organizations in Francophone Belgium. However, why were the Rexists unable to reorganize and regain their strength after the war? There must be factors that severed the ties between the old and new generations of far-right movements in Wallonia. On one hand, the Rexists were already weakened after the war. On the other hand, strict and enforced restrictions against far-right groups in Francophone Belgium prevented the resurgence of the old far-right movements and the emergence of new ones.

4.3.2.1 The Weakness of Rexists in Post-War Belgium

Before the post-war repression, the Rexists were already very weak in terms of both quality and quantity. As mentioned earlier, Degrelle and his Rexist movement were not built on an existing movement and had a poor relationship with elites. Most core Rexists were young men without political experience. This lack of experience was a problem that plagued Rex since its foundation and was exacerbated during its collaboration with the Nazis. While the Rexists in the 1930s represented certain popular discontent against the Belgian establishment, Degrelle's decision to collaborate with Nazi Germany was controversial even among Rexists, let alone the Walloon population. During the occupation, Degrelle transformed the Rexist Party from a Belgian populist party into a puppet of Nazi Germany, completely destroying its ideological coherence and political image. In the end, the only followers Degrelle could attract were a small group of radical fascists who had no reputation among the population. In contrast, many VNV members who collaborated with the occupiers were influential intellectuals and politicians who could gain a certain level of popular support before or after the war. For example, as mentioned before, many former VNV

members who formed post-war organizations were famous politicians before the war, while the only influential former Rexist, Jean-Robert Debbaudt, was just a young man who joined Rex during the war without any prior political experience (Conway 1996).

Not only were the Rexists weak in terms of the quality of their membership, but their sheer number was also smaller than their Flemish counterparts. Collaboration in Francophone Belgium was less political and more about common crimes (Huyse et al. 2020). According to some estimates, only about 10,000 Francophone Belgians (mostly Rexists and their sympathizers) collaborated with Nazi Germany militarily, while more than 30,000 VNV members and its affiliates cooperated with the occupiers militarily (Farhat and Rosoux 2018).

The lack of popular support and the internal ideological struggles made Rexists' morale already low during the war. When repression against collaboration started in Belgium, more Rexists expressed regrets about their actions than VNV members. Although many of those regrets were efforts to reduce their punishment, there was indeed a large group of Rexists who believed that collaboration was a total mistake (Becker 1970). Hence, without a moral conviction in Rexism, most former Rexists did not wish to return to politics even after they were released from prison. Most of them just wanted to hide their past and live a normal life (Conway 1996).

The post-war repression against Rexists is not only about government punishments such as imprisonment or deprivation of rights, which were not fundamentally different between Flanders and Wallonia (Witte et al. 2009). The real repression also came from the pressure of the whole society. Walloon society had a very consistent judgment and collective memory that showed no sympathy towards collaboration. The Walloon population viewed Rexists as traitors and even foreign entities that had nothing to do with the Walloon movement. It's interesting that the Encyclopedia of the Walloon Movement does not even include entries about Degrelle or Rexism,

despite Degrelle's efforts on Walloon nationalism (Kesteloot 1993; Huyse et al. 2020). Although the stereotype of "collaborating Flanders and resisting Wallonia" requires more historical analysis, the existence of such a stereotype reveals the different attitudes toward former collaborators in Flanders and Wallonia. Even today, former collaborators and their families in Francophone Belgium are still afraid of social pressure and usually refuse to reveal their identity during academic research (Huyse et al. 2020; Aerts et al. 2021).

Therefore, former Rexists were weak on many fronts due to their own problems and the post-war repression. They had little political experience, and their numbers were small. Among this small group of Rexists, most of them did not wish to return to politics due to their own regrets or the pressure from society. Even if some Rexists did not repent their actions and wanted to revive Rexism, society would treat them as political pariahs, making it difficult for them to gain support from the local population.

4.3.2.2 The Restrictions against Far-Rights in Francophone Belgium

The difficulties faced by post-war Francophone far-right movements were not only due to their own weaknesses but also a result of the strong restrictions in Francophone Belgium. Mainstream parties and the media in Francophone Belgium have consistently enforced a "cordon sanitaire" against potential far-right parties since the 1990s. This cordon sanitaire has effectively contained the influence of far-right activities and propaganda. Prior to the establishment of this cordon sanitaire, various government actions also limited far-right activities and prevented the resurgence of Rexist movements.

In response to the electoral breakthrough of VB in 1991, major parties in Francophone Belgium signed a "Charter of Democracy (Charte de la démocratie)," formalizing their commitment to defending democracy and containing the influence of far-right movements. This

charter was subsequently updated through negotiations involving more parties and outlined the relations between mainstream parties and far-right parties. One of the key features of the cordon sanitaire in Francophone Belgium is that it not only prohibits cooperation or negotiation with far-right parties but also forbids almost any interaction with far-right movements that would grant them publicity. Even debating with far-right representatives in the media is not allowed, as mainstream parties believe it would lend far-right parties a form of legitimacy (CPCP 1999; Le Soir 2022). While this cordon sanitaire is not legally binding, all Francophone mainstream parties have adhered to it until recently. The only breach occurred in April 2022 when MR president Georges-Louis Bouchez debated with VB president Tom Van Grieken in the media (La Libre 2022). However, no Francophone parties have breached the cordon sanitaire against far-right movements in Francophone Belgium, and neither FNb nor PP had the chance to interact with mainstream parties.

One of the most important aspects of the cordon sanitaire in Francophone Belgium is the involvement of the media. The media also refuse to provide any platform for far-right parties. In the 1990s, Francophone Belgian media began to implement a cordon sanitaire, aligning with the cordon sanitaire of political parties. This media cordon sanitaire was later formalized and became a legally binding regulation in 2012, approved by the government. According to the regulation of CSA (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, Superior Council of the Audio-visual), which oversees all radio stations and television channels in Francophone Belgium, all media platforms are required to deny access to anyone associated with non-democratic parties and movements (CSA 2018). This cordon sanitaire is supported by nearly all media practitioners in Francophone Belgium, with many of them taking pride in denying far-right access to the media to protect democracy (de Jonge 2021).

Before the establishment of the cordon sanitaire, FNb leader Daniel Féret could occasionally appear in the media and engage in debates with mainstream parties during the 1980s. However, after the 1990s, with both political parties and the media implementing the cordon sanitaire, FNb, PP, and other far-right groups in Francophone Belgium found it challenging to gain any publicity during elections (Zomersztajn 2022).

This stringent cordon sanitaire aligns with the historical tradition of restricting far-right movements in Francophone Belgium after World War II. As early as 1972, Belgian parties negotiated an agreement known as the "Cultural Pact," which was subsequently legalized in 1973. The Cultural Pact aimed to protect minority rights and prevent discrimination in the regulation of cultural issues. The Cultural Pact forms the basis for the media cordon sanitaire and is also referenced in the Charter of Democracy signed by political parties (CPCP 1999). When FNb sued Francophone media for denying access, the Council of State ruled that media indeed had the right to refuse undemocratic parties based on the Cultural Pact (De Coorebyter 2003).

In addition to the cordon sanitaire implemented by political parties and the media, there were also government interventions and legal actions against far-right movements. For example, FNb leader Daniel Féret faced multiple convictions for his far-right ideology. In 2006, the Belgian Supreme Court convicted Féret and barred him from holding office for publishing racist pamphlets (Belien 2006). Neo-Rexist leader Jean-Robert Debbaudt also faced numerous convictions. In 1975, Debbaudt was convicted for editing the works of Degrelle, and he was convicted twice for distributing Rexist pamphlets (Brewaeys et al. 1992; Laporte 2003). It's worth noting that while former Rexist leader Degrelle's works are permanently banned in Francophone Belgium, former VNV leader Elias' works can still be published. Although Elias' works do not contain outright fascist ideology, they still offer apologist narratives of collaboration (Huyse et al. 2020).

Degrelle, despite never setting foot on Belgian soil after the war, and Rexism have always been viewed as a special threat in Francophone Belgium. In 1945, just after the liberation of Belgium, Belgian Prime Minister Carton de Wiart delivered a speech vowing to prevent the "birth of new Rexism" (Belgian Chamber of Representatives 1945). Even today, "Rex" is a word with a negative connotation used to accuse political opponents (De Man 1998). To counter the threat of Degrelle and prevent him from further exerting influence in Belgium, the Belgian government repeatedly attempted to extradite him from Spain. In 1964, the Belgian parliament even passed a law preventing Degrelle and other collaborators of the same caliber from entering the territory with impunity. This law, known as the "Lex Degrelliana," was primarily motivated by concerns for "state security" (Aerts 2014). Furthermore, after Degrelle's death in 1994, a royal decree also prohibited the transfer of his remains to Belgium (Aerts and Bevernage 2008).

Apart from measures against Degrelle, the Belgian state also intervened multiple times to obstruct the organization of Rexist movements after the war. For example, in 1959, when MSB tried to organize a meeting for Rexists and fascists from other countries, the Belgian government swiftly banned the meeting and deported the foreign participants (Belgian Chamber of Representatives 1959). In a parliamentary record from 1964, a rumor about the return of Degrelle stirred Belgium, prompting the Minister of Justice to report on efforts to suppress Rexist movements. He mentioned that the government was closely monitoring the activities of Debbaudt and the "Degrelle Movement," despite the fact that there were only about ten members in this Rexist movement (Belgian Chamber of Representatives 1964).

In summary, the containment measures against far-right movements in Wallonia and Brussels have been powerful and successful. Post-war far-right movements in Francophone Belgium have consistently faced numerous obstacles in politics and society. If they seek to spread

their ideology and campaign in elections, they encounter resistance from political parties and the media, and sometimes even legal convictions. This containment in Francophone Belgium has hindered the resurgence of old far-right movements and the emergence of new far-right movements.

As a result, no far-right social organization has been able to persist over time in Wallonia to preserve the legacy of Rexist movements. The mechanism of social organization has not functioned effectively in Francophone Belgium. While far-right civil society thrived after the war in Flanders, it failed to develop at all in Francophone Belgium due to repression and restrictions imposed by both the Belgian state and society. This divergence in far-right social organizations is key to explaining the divergence in far-right historical persistence between Flanders and Wallonia.

5.0 The Historical Context behind the Persistence of Flemish Far-Right Organizations

After a thorough examination of the post-war repression and the measures implemented to prevent the resurgence of Rexists in Francophone Belgium, as well as their impact on severing ties between contemporary far-right movements and their historical counterparts, a fundamental question emerges: Why did similar strategies falter in Flanders? Despite the application of state suppression against Flemish far-right groups in the aftermath of the war, these organizations consistently found support among a segment of the Flemish population, allowing them to flourish in the face of significant obstacles. While the mechanism of social organization failed to take root in Wallonia, it functioned relatively undisturbed in Flanders.

When contrasting the efforts to curtail far-right movements in Francophone Belgium and Flanders, two distinct cycles become evident. In Francophone Belgium, the initial weakness of the Rexists hindered their ability to shape the narrative surrounding their contentious history, thereby exposing them to heightened social opposition. This, in turn, enhanced the effectiveness of containment measures targeting these far-right parties. Within this cycle, the older generation of far-right figures in Francophone Belgium could not successfully reorganize and pass on their legacy to the newer generation, effectively severing the link.

Conversely, the situation in Flanders deviated significantly. The initial strength of the VNV allowed them to influence the historical narrative and redefine their image within Flemish society. This favorable environment facilitated their reorganization and resurgence, rendering many containment measures ineffective. This vicious cycle enabled the older generation of far-right figures in Flanders to reconstitute themselves through various social organizations, thereby bequeathing their legacy to the new generation of far-right activists.

The effectiveness of Flemish far-right social organizations must be assessed in light of the post-war historical context in Belgium. Historical narrative plays a pivotal role in influencing the functionality of the social organization mechanism. In this chapter, I will illustrate a case of path dependency resulting from the post-World War II historical context. Analogous to Putnam's analysis of Italy, where the historical context of the Middle Ages led to divergent developments in civil society, ultimately impacting contemporary democracy, the divergence in the fortunes of far-right movements in Belgium is also shaped by specific historical circumstances. The post-war repression constitutes a critical juncture that engendered distinct reactions towards former fascists in Flanders and Wallonia, leaving a lasting imprint on the landscape of far-right politics in Belgium.

5.1 The Failure of the Containment in Flanders

While several measures aimed at curbing Francophone far-right movements proved highly effective, similar restrictions consistently failed in Flanders. Whenever mainstream political parties or the government attempted to limit the influence of far-right groups, these organizations found ways to circumvent the containment efforts. To comprehend why Flemish far-right social organizations flourished, it is essential to delve into the reasons behind the ineffectiveness of potential restrictions.

5.1.1 The Failed Cordon Sanitaire

To commence, there exists a significant restriction that theoretically should have been effective in Flanders but, in reality, proved ineffective: the cordon sanitaire. Many attribute the

failure of Walloon far-right movements to the success of the cordon sanitaire, a concept widely discussed in studies of far-right politics. Flanders also has a cordon sanitaire in place, but its effectiveness is notably lacking.

The concept of a cordon sanitaire in Belgium was initially proposed by Flemish mainstream parties to contain the electoral advances of VB. However, this cordon sanitaire was inherently weak from its inception. Unlike the cordon sanitaire in Francophone Belgium, the agreement among Flemish parties neither prohibits interactions between mainstream parties and far-right groups nor attempts to exclude far-right elements from the mainstream media. In essence, the cordon sanitaire in Flanders merely urges parties "not to establish political agreements or commitments with VB" (Geysels 1989). In this strict sense of a cordon sanitaire, it has been successful, as VB has never formed a government coalition with other parties. Nonetheless, this cordon sanitaire has failed to effectively contain VB's influence and has continually faced challenges.

In contrast to the cordon sanitaire in Francophone Belgium, which has garnered support from political parties and the media, the cordon sanitaire in Flanders has consistently been met with skepticism from members of mainstream parties. Shortly after the signing of the 1989 protocol, some signatories swiftly disavowed it. Despite its reaffirmation in 1991, many mainstream parties maintain ambivalent stances toward VB and occasionally engage in cooperation with the party (Mudde 2002; Biard 2021). As VB's share of votes and seats has continued to rise, it has become increasingly difficult for mainstream parties to completely reject VB. Many Flemish politicians also question whether excluding a party with significant popular support aligns with democratic principles, and some argue that incorporating VB into the government might be a more effective strategy for limiting its influence.

Given that the cordon sanitaire in Flanders is inherently weaker than its Francophone counterpart, it is unsurprising that VB has been able to persist in its political activities and propaganda with limited constraints. As mentioned earlier, even Francophone parties have engaged with VB, partially breaching their own cordon sanitaire (La Libre 2022). While measures have been taken against VB's overtly racist ideology, even a court ruling did not significantly diminish the party's influence. In 2004, a court convicted Vlaams Blok of violating anti-racism laws, but this did not terminate VB's far-right activities. In response, VB simply rebranded itself as Vlaams Belang and made superficial modifications to its policies (Erk 2007).

5.1.2 The Indifference towards the Threat of Flemish Far-Rights

One evident explanation for the failure to contain the influence of Vlaams Belang (VB) is the inadequacy and belatedness of the cordon sanitaire. The cordon sanitaire was established after VB had already achieved significant electoral success and was never rigorously enforced enough to effectively restrain VB's influence (de Jonge 2021). So, what would have happened if the cordon sanitaire had been implemented earlier and more rigorously? Would VB have been containable? Unlikely. This is because Flemish political parties and the general population have largely remained indifferent to the threat posed by far-right movements.

As previously demonstrated, VB should not be viewed as an isolated new party but rather as the continuation of the radical Flemish nationalist tradition and a rallying point for various post-war far-right organizations. As long as these radical nationalists and far-right groups continue to exist and thrive, there will always be a party to represent their interests, even if that party is not called VB. Therefore, the failure to contain VB's influence is not solely attributed to the weakness

of the cordon sanitaire against VB itself but also to the absence of a cordon sanitaire directed at the far-right organizations behind VB.

What actions did the Belgian state and Flemish parties take to restrict the development of post-war far-right organizations and the resurgence of radical nationalism? In comparison to what transpired in Francophone Belgium, not much. While far-right organizations were consistently suppressed, and Rexism remained banned in post-war Francophone Belgium, far-right organizations and radical Flemish nationalism were generally tolerated in Flanders. In some instances, mainstream parties even cooperated with far-rights for various reasons. These facts reflect a systematic inability and indifference in Flanders when it comes to dealing with far-right movements.

The inability to contain far-rights is exemplified by the fate of the VMO and its founder, Bob Maes. As previously mentioned, VMO was a militant far-right organization founded and led by former members of the VNV and had collaborated with the mainstream party Volksunie. When VMO became too radical, its founder Bob Maes dissolved it in 1971. However, VMO was swiftly reorganized by neo-fascist Bert Eriksson and continued its violent activities. Even after VMO was convicted by the court in 1983, it remained active for several years. When VMO finally ceased to function in the 1980s, the majority of former VMO members simply joined other far-right organizations such as Voorpost, and some even joined VB (DeMorgen 1999). The trajectory of VMO illustrates that banning individual far-right organizations is insufficient, as there are numerous far-right groups in Flanders ready to fill the void.

Furthermore, it is not just the persistence of far-right organizations that is concerning but also the connections between mainstream parties and far-right groups. As previously discussed, the mainstream party Volksunie had deep ties with both VNV and VB. While earlier sections

detailed how a substantial number of Volksunie founding members were former VNV members and how these radical Flemish nationalists influenced Volksunie, even after the radical wing split from Volksunie to establish VB, so-called moderate nationalists within Volksunie maintained connections with far-right organizations.

For instance, although VMO founder Bob Maes officially dissolved VMO in 1971, he never severed his ties with far-right groups. Maes does not express regret for his involvement with VNV and VMO. When the new VMO honored former VNV leaders, Maes was present. He also participated in the ceremony for the transfer of Staf de Clercq's remains (De Beule 2020). Maes' involvement in far-right activities did not hinder his political career; instead, he remained on the party board and represented Volksunie in the Senate from 1971 to 1985. When Volksunie gradually declined, Maes and his family joined another mainstream nationalist party, N-VA, where they remain today

Certainly, Bob Maes' far-right past has not been without controversy, but he has never faced formal sanctions for his actions. One notable controversy involving Bob Maes occurred in 2014 when several N-VA members participated in the celebration of Maes' birthday, including Flemish Minister of Mobility Ben Weyts and Federal Secretary of State Theo Francken. Several left-wing parties demanded Theo Francken's resignation, but no consequences followed (Arnoudt 2014). Connections with individuals like Bob Maes and other far-right figures did not harm Francken's political career; he remains a popular politician regularly reelected. Moreover, Francken has repeatedly expressed a desire for collaboration with VB and a willingness to breach the cordon sanitaire (Galindo 2019; Vanberlaer 2022). When asked about the cordon sanitaire, Francken's response is succinct: "We never signed the cordon sanitaire, did we?" (Nieuwsblad 2019).

The aforementioned examples paint a disconcerting political landscape in Flanders. Far-right organizations not only thrive but are also tolerated by many mainstream party politicians, particularly those from nationalist parties like Volksunie and N-VA. Connections with far-right groups are not penalized, and politicians with such ties continue to hold positions in government or parliament while enjoying popular support. In essence, the Flemish government, political parties, and the general population appear relatively apathetic about suppressing far-right movements. Remarkably, even Francophone parties express more concern about far-right movements in Flanders than mainstream Flemish parties themselves.

As the cases in Francophone Belgium illustrate, with sufficient effort to suppress far-right elements, the historical legacy of the Rexist Party can be eradicated, and a new generation of far-right parties and movements can be rendered weak and marginal. In contrast, the influence of VNV has never been purged in Flanders, as most far-right organizations are built upon the social networks and ideologies of VNV. The inability to contain far-right influence is a consequence of indifference to the threat posed by far-right movements.

5.2 The Changing Historical Narrative on Far-Rights

What has contributed to the divergence in attitudes toward far-right movements between Flanders and Wallonia? Why have the Flemish population and mainstream parties shown a higher level of tolerance towards far-right parties and movements? The answers lie within the context of post-war history. This indifference is not a recent phenomenon but rather a longstanding historical issue that has plagued post-war Flanders. The tolerance towards far-right elements is both the cause and the consequence of the evolving historical narrative surrounding Flemish far-right movements.

On one hand, the favorable narrative regarding collaboration allowed the old far-right members, primarily former VNV affiliates, to reengage in political activities, further expand their influence, and transmit their legacy to the subsequent generation. On the other hand, the influence of the old far-right members has also molded the historical narrative surrounding them, rendering their activities and ideologies more acceptable within society.

5.2.1 The Unfinished Post-War Repression

The repression of collaboration in Belgium exhibited similarities in both regions. Initially, collaborators faced severe punishment during the first few years, but later, the Belgian state adopted a more lenient approach, offering pardons and seeking to reintegrate them into society rather than solely punishing them. However, former VNV members and their sympathizers found a more favorable political environment in the following years, owing to a combination of their own strength and the post-war political landscape in Belgium.

Firstly, Flemish collaborators held a distinct advantage in terms of both quantity and quality. The Flemish collaborators consisted of individuals with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status, as the VNV had strong ties to local elites. Notably, a significantly higher percentage of convicted collaborators with public office were Flemish (69%) compared to those in Wallonia (24%) and Brussels (7%). Upon their release from prison or internment, these collaborators possessed a robust social and economic network to support one another (Aerts 2018). Moreover, there were substantial connections between VNV elites and mainstream political parties. Former Prime Minister of the CVP, Leo Tindemans, recounted an interesting anecdote in his memoir:

Hector De Bruyne, the editor of the VNV newspaper, attended the same school as Tindemans during the war. Following liberation, De Bruyne temporarily sought refuge in Tindemans' room, and Tindemans provided testimony in support of De Bruyne during his trial. Despite De Bruyne's conviction, he swiftly returned to politics and was elected as a senator for Volksunie. When Tindemans formed a government with Volksunie in 1977, De Bruyne was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Trade. Tindemans was aware of De Bruyne's collaboration during the war but chose to believe De Bruyne's account that they were simply misguided into collaborating with the Nazi occupiers (Tindemans 2002).

Furthermore, the repression in Belgium became intertwined with political struggles between left and right. The removal of voting rights for Flemish bourgeois and the purge of civil servants were not solely based on loyalty to the country but also linked to the left-wing parties' efforts to reduce the electoral support of the right-wing CVP. As the severe repression gradually eased, CVP saw an opportunity to expand its popular support and aimed to win the votes of the relatives of convicted Flemish nationalists (Witte et al. 2009). While the extent of political parties' influence on the repression process remains difficult to quantify, CVP advocated for leniency towards former VNV members for electoral purposes (Huyse and Dhondt 1991).

CVP not only supported the amnesty of collaborators but actively recruited Flemish nationalists, including many convicted former VNV members, into the party. For instance, Henry Borginon, one of the founders of VNV, was convicted after the war for collaborating with the German occupiers. He was released from prison a few years later and joined the mainstream CVP, co-founding VVB. Despite remaining in CVP until the end, Borginon continued to advocate for Flemish nationalism and defended the collaboration of VNV (Durnez and De Wever 1998).

Therefore, the repression against collaborators in Flanders was incomplete for various historical reasons. Punishments were imposed, but subsequent measures to prevent the resurgence of former collaborators were lacking. After a few years, most convicted former VNV members were released from prison, and they regained their political rights

5.2.2 The Controversies around the Repression

One of the most significant distinctions between Flemish and Francophone collaborators lies in the successful construction of a favorable historical narrative by the former, portraying them as victims of repression by the Belgian state rather than traitors to Belgium. This positive narrative was constructed amidst controversies surrounding the repression and was facilitated by the long-standing tension between Flanders and the Belgian state.

The severe repression against Flemish collaborators was undeniably influenced by political considerations and inflicted significant suffering upon the Flemish population. While the collaborators constituted a small portion of the Flemish populace, the repercussions of the repression extended to a much larger segment of society. Not only were VNV members who actively collaborated with Nazi Germany punished, but also those who assisted occupiers for various reasons and their families bore the brunt of the consequences. They faced legal penalties and the deprivation of various rights, in addition to indirect repercussions and immense societal pressures. Collaborators and their families experienced adverse effects on multiple aspects of their lives.

Moreover, the repression inevitably led to injustices, with some collaborators receiving harsher punishments while others evaded justice through favoritism and preferential treatment (Huyse and Dhondt 1991). As mentioned earlier, Flanders had a higher proportion of middle-class

and politically motivated collaborators, making them more likely to perceive their treatment as unjust and hold negative views of the repression (Aerts 2018). Although many Belgian historians, armed with data and documents, did not find evidence of particular injustices against the Flemish population during the repression, vivid anecdotes of wrongful executions resonated more strongly with the general public.

For instance, the execution of Irma Laplasse was widely regarded as proof of the Belgian state's injustice against the Flemish people. Irma Laplasse was sentenced to death and executed in 1945 for her role in denouncing resistance fighters, a case that sparked ongoing debates about the fairness of her trial. Not only did Flemish nationalists elevate her as a martyr of Belgian repression, but other Flemish individuals also believed in her innocence. These controversies led to the reopening of her case in 1995, posthumously changing her sentence to life imprisonment (De Tijd 1995; Aerts 2014).

Given the historical tension between Flanders and the Belgian state, the suffering endured during the repression was highly likely to fuel anger among the Flemish population. This was not the first time that many Flemish people perceived injustice in Belgian history. Repression against Flemish collaborators after World War I and the rejection of demands for Flemish autonomy had already cultivated a favorable sentiment for radical Flemish nationalism, ultimately contributing to the formation and success of the VNV during the interwar period (De Wever 1994). Following World War II, it was inevitable that many would believe the repression aimed to suppress the entire Flemish population, not just the collaborators. Some historians even argue that the legacy of repression is the primary driving force behind Flemish separatism (Huyse and Dhondt 1991; Aerts 2018; Huyse et al. 2020).

5.2.3 The Cycle of Historical Revisionism

Against the backdrop of Flemish nationalism's historical context, it became more feasible for Flemish collaborators to transform their image from perpetrators to victims. Given that Flemish collaborators comprised a larger proportion of elites who were politically committed to their choices, they possessed both the motivation and the means to rationalize their actions and shape the narrative. The repression, while severe enough to incite public anger, was not stringent enough to suppress the collaborators' historical revisionism. This dynamic created a reinforcing cycle wherein a favorable narrative for far-right movements and the influence of far-right ideologies strengthened each other.

At the local level, collaborator families, social networks of former VNV members, and post-war far-right organizations collectively propagated the innocence narrative. Far-right social organizations effectively integrated their ideologies with historical Flemish nationalism under this favorable historical narrative. Collaborators themselves directly felt the impact of repression, leading many to develop resentment against the Belgian state. Children from collaborator families also perceived the Belgian state's unfair treatment, learning the victim narrative from their parents and friends. As they grew up, they naturally gravitated towards various far-right organizations, further reinforcing their belief that collaboration was justified and repression was unjust. In many cases, social networks and local organizations attracted other Flemish individuals not involved in collaboration, influencing their opinions (Aerts 2018).

At the elite level, historical revisionism took root in Flanders. As many former VNV members reentered politics and even joined mainstream parties, they gradually shaped public opinion on collaboration within the context of Flemish nationalism. Public events commemorating the history of collaboration were organized by political elites, such as the Yser Pilgrimage (Aerts

2014). For example, in 1991, Volksunie chairman Hugo Schiltz, serving as Deputy Prime Minister, delivered a speech at an event organized by Sint-Maartensfonds, an organization consisting of former collaborators who joined the SS or fought for the Nazis on the Eastern Front. During this event, they memorialized the collaborators as fighters who had died for the "good cause" of defending Europe against Bolshevism, rather than as Nazi soldiers (DeMorgen 2001).

Academic studies on this period of history were also influenced by collaborators. For instance, former VNV leader Hendrik Elias authored numerous books on Flemish nationalism with apologetic narratives, and his works were supported by Volksunie founder Frans Van der Elst. Elias's book "The History of the Flemish Thought" (Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse Gedachte) even received the Prize of the Flemish Provinces and the Frans van Cauwelaert Prize (Dedeurwaerder 2005). One of the most notable instances of Flemish historical revisionism can be found in the initial version of the "Encyclopedia of the Flemish Movement" (Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging), where Hendrik Elias served as editor-in-chief, and several former VNV members participated in the writing. They portrayed many collaborators as idealists who had fought for Flanders but had made mistakes during collaboration (Huyse and Dhondt 1991).

For a considerable period, studies on the history of collaboration in Flanders were dominated by former collaborators, a situation that persisted until the 1980s when a new generation of historians began to reexamine this aspect of history (Huyse et al. 2020). However, despite these academic developments, the historical narrative among the general population and politicians remained resistant to change. Collective memories related to the history of collaboration and repression continue to divide Belgium. In Francophone Belgium, Rexists are unequivocally viewed as traitors, and there is no room for justifying their collaboration. In contrast, in Flanders, the justification for former VNV members endures.

Calls for amnesty and commemorations of former VNV members are recurring themes in Flemish political discourse. As mentioned earlier, both radical and mainstream nationalist parties have repeatedly raised the issue of amnesty with the intention of whitewashing collaboration. Even mainstream parties in Flanders do not outright reject this idea. For example, in 2011, Vlaams Belang (VB) proposed a bill calling for the amnesty of collaborators and compensation for their descendants. While the bill was rejected by all Francophone parties, all Flemish parties except the Green Party supported sending it for debate. Minister of Justice De Clerck, from the Christian Democratic Party, stated, "We should be able to discuss it and maybe we should also be able to forget. This is the past" (Ames 2011; VRT 2011)..

The differing responses to the amnesty bill highlight the existence of two divergent historical narratives in Belgium. In Francophone Belgium, collaboration is unequivocally condemned, with no room for debate. For instance, in 1996, mainstream Flemish parties from across the political spectrum proposed conditions for compensating the victims of repression, which met with fierce opposition from the Francophone side. The Parliament of the French Community explicitly stated that the proposal equated war victims with perpetrators, thereby "damaging the memory and dignity of the victims of war and repression organized by the occupier during World War II" (Sénat de Belgique 1998).

Although the narrative of "resisting Wallonia and collaborating Flanders" in Francophone Belgium distorts historical facts, it also absolves the Walloon society of any complicity in repressing collaborators and enables the complete condemnation of far-right ideology. Consequently, a consensus condemning collaborators could emerge in Francophone Belgium. If Rexists and their ideologies were treated as enemies of Belgian society, old far-right movements would find it challenging to recruit members and disseminate their ideology.

However, such a consensus against condemning collaboration did not materialize in Flanders. This is not to suggest that Flemish society supported collaboration or far-right ideology, but there was a lack of conviction in condemning the old far-right movements. The influence of former VNV members allowed them to gradually reshape the historical narrative, portraying themselves as victims. This historical narrative offers two advantages.

First, by elevating themselves as martyrs of Flemish nationalism, the collaborators could garner support from a stable group of radical nationalists within the Flemish population. For this group, the post-war repression merely affirmed their longstanding narrative of vengeful Belgium suppressing innocent Flemish nationalists. They consistently supported former collaborators and their organizations in the pursuit of Flemish independence. As demonstrated by the voter profiles of Vlaams Belang in the previous chapter, Flemish nationalism remains the core ideology of Vlaams Belang and other far-right organizations.

Second, by concealing their far-right activities and ideologies beneath the narrative of misguided Flemish nationalism, the collaborators mitigated societal hostility towards their resurgence. They did not need to convince the entire society of their innocence but merely to minimize their crimes to a degree where society would overlook them, gradually forget, or tolerate their presence.

Although De Clerck's words, "this is the past," drew criticism from Francophone parties, they encapsulate the prevailing attitude toward history in Flanders. The prominence of the collaboration issue waned in Flanders just a few years after the war, and the majority of the Flemish population ceased to attach significance to this dark chapter in history (Huyse and Dhondt 1991; Huyse et al. 2020). This attitude aligns with the desires of the old far-right movements, as their activities and ideologies became somewhat normalized. "Don't care about history" continues to

shape perspectives on history, implying that collaborating with the Nazis and perpetrating those crimes are not significant enough to warrant further attention. If even Nazi activities and ideologies are not deemed consequential, then post-war far-right ideologies are also regarded as unworthy of suppression. Consequently, even if there are pockets of opposition to far-right movements, they lack the potency to effectively counter them and prevent their resurgence, along with that of their organizations.

Therefore, in the case of Flanders, the persistence of far-right organizations and the failure to contain their influence may be explained by this cycle: Favorable historical narrative → Less effective containment → Strong far-right influence → Favorable historical narrative

5.3 Unresolved Historical Problems under the Consociational Democracy

The Belgian democracy has been lauded by scholars as an exemplary manifestation of consociational democracy capable of alleviating tensions within a divided society. Belgium, since its inception, has grappled with multifaceted divisions, and it is a testament to Belgian democracy's resilience that it has weathered numerous challenges while maintaining relative stability. The close nexus between civil society and traditional parties, a salient feature of consociational democracy, effectively shielded civil society from falling under the influence of fascists, as was witnessed in the Weimar Republic (Berman 1997). Remarkably, the democratic framework in Belgium has remained intact, even during periods of strength for Belgian fascists in the interwar era.

While it is reassuring that Flemish far-right groups could not replicate the interwar fascists' success in a stable democracy, the Belgian civil society has nonetheless contributed to the success of Flemish far-right parties. In recent years, the model of consociational democracy has faced

challenges, with traditional parties and their affiliated organizations losing sway while far-right parties gain popularity in Flanders (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2020). As this dissertation elucidates, the contemporary success of the far-right party VB has deep historical roots. Although VB's electoral breakthrough and the decline of traditional parties occurred in the 1970s, far-right social organizations were already thriving in the 1960s when institutions were robust, and traditional parties exercised control over civil society. So, why did the robust institutional framework fail to prevent the detrimental impact of civil society in Flanders?

The answer lies in a crucial similarity between the Belgian case and interwar Germany: the disconnect between party politics and civil society. In interwar Germany, this disconnect arose from the unmet demand for a robust party representing nationalist aspirations among the populace, enabling fascists to quickly garner support and seize control of civil society. In Belgium, while most demands could be addressed by traditional parties, one critical demand often received inadequate attention from the Belgian state: Flemish nationalism. Although divisions based on religion and class have largely receded, the schism between Flanders and Wallonia remains unresolved. It appears that the model of consociational democracy has its limitations, particularly when historical issues resist resolution through elite accommodation alone.

The Belgian state missed several opportunities to address the divide between Flanders and Wallonia, with language equality reforms and federalization coming belatedly. After World War II, the Belgian state's repression was neither severe enough to eradicate radical Flemish nationalism nor accommodating enough to embrace it. This unmet demand for Flemish nationalism created a rift between the Belgian state and the Flemish nationalist civil society, making far-right social organizations appealing to a segment of the population.

The history of far-right movements in Belgium presents a complex scenario regarding severing ties between old and new generations of far-right adherents. Flemish far-right groups have exhibited remarkable resilience against measures like the cordon sanitaire aimed at containing their influence. This persistence can be attributed to various historical factors, including the initial strength of Flemish far-right movements, the tradition of radical Flemish nationalism, and the post-war narrative surrounding collaborators. These factors mutually reinforce each other, allowing the old generation of far-right supporters (VNV) to pass down their legacy and bolster the new generation (VB). Consequently, VB emerged as a continuation of the radical Flemish tradition rather than a wholly new far-right party.

Hence, the legacy of old Flemish far-right movements has created a persistent demand for new far-right movements. As long as Flemish far-right groups remain intertwined with the long-standing Flemish Movement tradition, a segment of the population will continue to support far-right parties. Their demands for Flemish independence and immigration restrictions can only find expression through far-right party agendas like that of VB. Simply suppressing far-right organizations without addressing these demands proves ineffective. In the early post-war years, the Belgian state attempted to eradicate the entire Flemish Movement, but harsh repression only garnered sympathy for radical nationalists among the population. The Belgian state had already lost support from a portion of the Flemish population long ago, making it challenging for any government or mainstream party to meet their demands. This historical impasse constitutes a significant factor in the success of far-right organizations in Flanders.

In contrast, the demand for far-right agendas in the Francophone population can be more readily absorbed within the consociational democracy model. A new far-right party in Francophone areas usually emerges in response to political or economic crises, rather than an

intractable historical nationalist issue. As traditional parties collectively work to alleviate these crises, the demand for far-right parties naturally wanes. For example, Rex's substantial success in the 1936 election stemmed from multiple crises in Belgium and protest votes from the Francophone population. Mainstream parties united to confront the Rex challenge, implementing political and economic reforms to address the grievances of the middle class and rural areas. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Rex supporters' demands were satisfied, but Rex's appeal markedly declined in the 1939 election (Conway 1996).

However, the success of containing far-right movements in the interwar period is challenging to replicate in Flanders. The electoral triumph of N-VA in the 2014 election seems to suggest that the demand for far-right parties and organizations can also be channeled through a mainstream Flemish party. N-VA, as a rising Flemish nationalist party, advocates Flemish nationalism and stricter immigration regulations—core issues for VB. In the 2014 election, N-VA successfully attracted a segment of VB's voters and assumed the mantle of governing party in Flanders. Nevertheless, satisfying the demands of this group is no simple task. As N-VA transitioned towards a more mainstream and less radical stance, these voters swiftly returned to VB in the 2019 election (Bachryj-Krzywaźnia and Pacześniak 2021). Furthermore, as previously illustrated, N-VA maintains deep-rooted connections with far-right ideologies and separatism, despite its moderate image and mainstream positioning. The success of N-VA also poses a challenge to the consociational democracy model. A lasting solution for Flemish far-right movements remains elusive as long as the historical division between Flanders and the Belgian state remains unresolved.

In conclusion, the Belgian civil society case complements the findings of scholars like Berman who have studied interwar civil societies. Belgium's stable democracy and robust party

system have indeed prevented far-right movements from gaining control over civil society and seizing power. However, the Belgian case also demonstrates that social organizations can still exert an adverse influence on democratic regimes when a gap exists between civil society and the political institution due to unmet demands among the populace. If these demands are rooted in historical issues that defy resolution, as seen in Flanders, absorbing these demands and preventing the development of a far-right civil society can prove exceptionally challenging.

6.0 Conclusion

This dissertation seeks to enhance our comprehension of the success and failure of far-right parties. It underscores the significance of historical persistence in explaining why far-right parties can thrive in certain contexts while faltering in others. Belgium, a nation characterized by political division into two regions, Flanders and Wallonia, offers an ideal case for comparative analysis to identify the factors contributing to the ascent of far-right parties. Despite both regions witnessing the emergence of fascist parties during the interwar period, Flemish far-right party Vlaams Belang has flourished in Flanders, whereas Wallonia has not seen the emergence of influential far-right parties. Through an examination of Belgium's political history, this thesis demonstrates how the legacy of interwar fascist parties continues to influence contemporary far-right movements.

6.1 The Historical Argument

This dissertation offers valuable insights into the dynamics of success and failure among far-right political parties. It posits that historical continuity plays a pivotal role in understanding the divergent outcomes of far-right parties across different regions. Belgium, with its political division into Flanders and Wallonia, serves as an ideal case study for comparative analysis to elucidate the factors contributing to the rise of far-right parties. While both regions witnessed the emergence of fascist parties during the interwar period, only the Flemish far-right party Vlaams Belang has flourished in contemporary Flanders, in stark contrast to Wallonia, where no influential far-right party has emerged. By scrutinizing Belgium's political history, this thesis illustrates how

the legacy of an interwar fascist party in Flanders continues to exert influence on contemporary far-right movements in that region.

A comparative examination of Flanders and Wallonia reveals that common socio-economic conditions are insufficient to explain the observed historical persistence in Belgium, given the greater economic and social transformations experienced by Flanders over time. Conversely, intergenerational transmission of far-right ideologies exhibited no fundamental differences between the two regions. The critical differentiating factor lies in the development of social organizations. It is evident that Flemish far-right social organizations rapidly resurged after the war and have thrived to the present day. In contrast, far-right social organizations in Wallonia have remained fragmented and marginal. This discrepancy in the development and influence of social organizations emerges as a crucial mechanism in accounting for varying levels of historical persistence in Belgium.

The role of these social organizations in perpetuating far-right influence is further explored in this thesis. In Flanders, a direct lineage can be traced from the interwar fascist party VNV to the contemporary far-right party VB, with former VNV members co-founding and participating in all nationalist political parties that eventually led to the establishment of VB. This continuity of influence and social connections underscores VB as a continuation of the tradition of radical Flemish nationalism rather than an entirely new far-right party.

Conversely, the situation in Wallonia differs significantly from that of Flanders. Former Rexists never managed to regroup and establish influential organizations akin to the former VNV members. Furthermore, the Walloon government and society consistently maintained a cordon sanitaire, effectively preventing the resurgence of far-right elements. Consequently, the

mechanism of social organization failed to function in Wallonia, resulting in the absence of sustained Rex influence.

The thesis also highlights the critical role of historical narratives and societal attitudes towards collaboration and repression in shaping the persistence of far-right movements. In Wallonia, interwar far-right party Rex and collaboration are consistently condemned, with repression against them being justified. This steadfast societal stance impedes the resurgence of old-generation far-right activists. In contrast, Flanders has grappled with controversies surrounding the history of collaboration and repression. A favorable historical narrative in Flanders permits the resurgence of far-right organizations, and the absence of a consensus condemning collaborators creates an enabling environment for far-right mobilization and societal influence.

6.2 Contributions

Firstly, this dissertation presents direct evidence of historical persistence in far-right influence within Flanders. While previous scholarship on Belgian politics has acknowledged the historical roots of the contemporary Flemish far-right party, none have attempted to empirically examine the relationship between spatial variation in far-right voting and the historical far-right party (Art 2008; de Jonge 2021). This study employs spatial analysis, encompassing both temporal and spatial dependence, to establish that the geographic distribution of the contemporary far-right party in Flanders is indeed influenced by the interwar Flemish fascist party. The enduring legacy of the interwar fascist party in Flanders played a pivotal role in the success of contemporary far-right parties in the region. This historical continuty exerted a significant influence that molded the political landscape and provided fertile ground for the emergence of far-right populist movements.

This discovery not only advances our comprehension of the rise of far-right parties in Belgium and elsewhere but also underscores the importance of historical factors.

Secondly, this dissertation delves deeper into the mechanisms underpinning historical persistence. Existing literature has explored intergenerational transmission and social organizations as potential mechanisms (Cantoni et al. 2019; Haffert 2020). This study shows how local far-right social organizations functioned as carriers of ideology, memory, and mobilization, ensuring the perpetuation of far-right sentiments and facilitating the resurgence of far-right politics in the region. Additionally, this research reveals that in the context of Flanders, these two mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and social organizations are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing. These findings enhance our understanding of the precise mechanisms through which historical legacies are preserved and impact contemporary politics.

Thirdly, this dissertation underscores the significance of how a society responds to its history as a contextual factor for historical persistence. While most studies concentrate on the mechanisms themselves, this research illuminates the role of the context that enables these mechanisms to operate. The contrasting historical narratives surrounding interwar far-right parties in Flanders and Wallonia played a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary political landscape. Flanders benefited from a more favorable narrative that permitted the resurgence of far-right movements, whereas Wallonia exhibited strong condemnation of the interwar far-right, creating a less conducive environment for post-war far-right resurgence. While previous studies have primarily focused on the mechanisms themselves, this research underscores the importance of considering the historical narrative within which these mechanisms operate. Historical narratives, or how a society remembers past events, can strongly influence the reactions of the population and

mainstream parties to the rise of the next generation of far-right movements. This insight emphasizes the role of historical consensus in shaping the dynamics of far-right movements.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the debate on the role of civil society in a democracy. While Berman (1997) argues that weak institutions were the reason for the civil society in the Weimar Republic being co-opted by fascists, the case of Belgium demonstrates that a stable democracy with a strong party system is not immune to the adverse effects of civil society. Social organizations in Belgium collaborate closely with political parties and contribute to the model of consociational democracy, which can mitigate tensions and enhance the stability of the Belgian political institutions. This is the positive effect of Belgian civil society. However, simultaneously, while far-right groups were unable to infiltrate and seize control of the entire civil society as the Nazis did, many social organizations in Flanders are still influenced by far-right ideologies and contribute to the rise of VB. Flemish far-right groups have leveraged the post-World War II historical context to establish a network of far-right organizations and attract a portion of the population. This illustrates the dual impact of Belgian civil society, which can promote both beneficial and detrimental values to democracy, depending on the specific context.

In summary, this dissertation enriches our understanding of historical persistence in the context of far-right populist parties by highlighting the interplay between historical events, social organizations, and societal responses. By examining the case of Belgium, it offers insights into the intricate dynamics that shape contemporary political landscapes and sheds light on the factors influencing the success or failure of far-right populist movements in different regions. With a comprehensive grasp of how historical legacies are preserved and how their influence can be mitigated, this research aligns with previous studies on the transmission of historical legacies.

6.3 Future Research

First, as for the historical persistence and its mechanisms in Belgium, there are more details that could be explored. Although this dissertation establishes a connection between the historical legacy of the fascist party and contemporary far-right parties, quantitative analysis at the local level could reveal more about the mechanisms of historical persistence. Further historical investigations into the local membership of post-war far-right social organizations and the political activities of far-right activists could provide us with a better understanding of the geography of post-war far-right influence. Furthermore, analyzing the far-right politicians who were active both before and after the war could help assess how repression disrupted the social connections of far-right activists and how they managed to regain their influence.

Second, there is more to explore regarding the role of collective memory in historical persistence in Belgium. Due to historical reasons, studies on collective memory in Belgium began relatively late, and there is a lack of data on the connections between people's views of history and their political preferences. It is not only about how Belgians remember the past but also about how they forget or ignore it. The crimes of the fascists and the history of collaboration with the Nazis are distant past events for the Walloon and Flemish populations, yet they still hold different opinions or lack opinions about the fascist roots of far-right parties, even though they may not know much about that period of history. A more detailed survey analysis or survey experiment could provide further insights into how different historical narratives lead to varying opinions on far-right parties.

Third, the fascist legacy and the role of post-war historical narratives could explain the success of far-right parties in other countries. For example, Italy might be a case similar to the case of Flanders. Italian fascists were never truly repressed after the war, and they were not

unequivocally condemned in the historical narrative. Consequently, former fascists retained their social connections, and many of them regrouped under the banner of Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI). Although MSI had been marginal for a long time, it managed to maintain the far-right ideology and membership. For example, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, Fdl), the far-right party that won the 2022 election, has direct connections with MSI, and Fdl's leader Giorgia Meloni was a MSI militant when she was young (Winfield 2022). The historical persistence observed in Flanders could be key to explaining the success of far-right parties in Italy. Learning more about the continuation of the fascist tradition in Italy could reveal additional insights into the current rise of far-right parties in other countries.

The theories in this study could also extend to historical legacies other than interwar fascists. For example, in the US, the rise of far-right populism also has historical roots. It is not a coincidence that Trump receives more support in former Confederate states. The unfinished Reconstruction after the Civil War did not eradicate the influence of the Confederacy. Many sympathizers of the Confederacy in the South promoted a version of a historical narrative depicting them as victims, thus creating a favorable environment for their resurgence. They established various social organizations that preserved the racist ideology and social connections of former Confederates, and some such organizations still exist today, such as the KKK. In many Deep South states today, social organizations still commemorate the Confederacy and support far-right populism. There are also controversies regarding how to teach the history of the Civil War and slavery in the education system. Therefore, historical persistence and the role of civil society could be important factors in explaining the success of Trump in these states.

Appendix. Matching Flemish Electoral Districts across Time

The basic idea of comparing the historical support for fascist parties and contemporary support for far-right parties is to find a match between a historical electoral district (canton) and a contemporary one. The method is to use a map of contemporary Belgian cantons and assign each canton a historical counterpart. Because the boundaries of electoral cantons remain stable for most cantons in Belgium, this matching process is relatively straightforward and only requires minor adjustments for a few cantons.

One adjustment is related to the boundary changes that occurred in contemporary Belgium. There were some boundary changes for cantons during the 2010s, making it challenging to cover both the 2014 and 2019 elections on a single map. Since I only had access to an older version of the shapefile for Belgian cantons, several new electoral cantons are excluded from the analysis.

Three 2019 cantons have to be excluded due to recent boundary changes and their inability to match the old cantons on my map:

Aalter: This canton is excluded from the analysis because it is a new canton created after 2014. The electoral canton Nevele used to cover the municipalities of Nevele and Aalter. However, Nevele was later merged into nearby Deinze, while Aalter became an independent electoral canton. This omission should not significantly impact the historical comparison, as Aalter was only a small town in the 1930s. Aalter expanded significantly after the 1970s and recently established its own electoral canton. Therefore, it is not appropriate to match Aalter with any historical electoral canton in the 1930s. This change is noted in Hooghe and Stiers (2023).

Sint-Genesius-Rode: This canton is omitted from the analysis because it is a new canton created in 2014 and does not have historical connections with existing cantons. This omission

should not significantly affect the historical comparison between Flemish far-right parties because this canton's geographic location used to belong to Brussels instead of Flanders in the 1930s, and the municipalities within this canton experienced language border changes. These border changes are also mentioned in Hooghe and Stiers (2023), so it is not appropriate to compare Sint-Genesius-Rode with its historical geographic location.

Lievegem: Electoral canton Lievegem was created in 2018 and merged the old cantons Zomergem and Waarschoot. Therefore, it cannot be matched with the electoral results in Lievegem with any single old canton, and it has to be excluded from the analysis. This omission should not significantly impact the historical comparison because Lievegem covers multiple parts of historical cantons, making it difficult to match Lievegem with historical cantons.

Four cantons simply changed their names in 2019 and could be matched with old cantons:

Pelt: Electoral canton Pelt's boundary is exactly the same as the old canton Neerpelt. The name change is the result of the canton center Neerpelt merging with other municipalities and changing its name from Neerpelt to Pelt.

Puurs-Sint-Amands: Electoral canton Puurs-Sint-Amands' boundary is exactly the same as the old canton Puurs. The name change is the result of the canton center Puurs merging with other municipalities and changing its name from Puurs to Puurs-Sint-Amands.

Kruisem: Electoral canton Kruisem's boundary is exactly the same as the old canton Kruishoutem. The name change is the result of the canton center Kruisem merging with other municipalities and changing its name from Kruishoutem to Kruisem.

Merelbeke: Electoral canton Merelbeke's boundary is exactly the same as the old canton Oosterzele. The name change is the result of the center of this canton recently moving from Oosterzele to Merelbeke.

Another modification is related to the boundary changes from the 1930s to the 2010s. While most cantons remained the same, some boundary changes needed to be considered. Three types of changes typically occurred:

Expansion of a city, leading to mergers of nearby municipalities, which expanded the canton representing the city and contracted the cantons around it.

Municipalities changing from one region to another since the 1960s, which also affected the regional boundaries of corresponding cantons.

Small towns developing into larger cities, resulting in the creation of their own electoral cantons.

Regarding the first type of change, the analysis tends to match contemporary cantons with historical ones as long as the majority of their boundaries match, even if they are larger or smaller than their historical counterparts. This approach is taken to avoid discarding many cantons involving large cities and their surroundings, preserving important observations. Since the analysis primarily focuses on the historical connections between the cantons across time, boundary changes around the periphery of a canton should not significantly affect those connections.

Regarding the second type of change, the analysis tends to exclude contemporary cantons because the region to which a canton belongs is a critical characteristic, and changes in this aspect can drastically alter the population and politics within a canton.

Regarding the third type of change, the analysis also tends to exclude contemporary cantons because these new cantons lack historical connections with the cantons across time. The historical geographic locations of these new cantons are already matched by nearby cantons, leaving no matches for these new cantons.

Based on the rationale outlined above, three contemporary cantons are matched with historical cantons that have different names. These cantons are smaller than their historical counterparts but still share most boundaries:

Destelbergen: This canton covers most of the area of the old canton Ledeberg. In the old canton Ledeberg, the municipality of Ledeberg itself was merged into nearby Ghent, while the rest of the canton Ledeberg, Heusden, and Destelbergen, remained and formed the new canton Destelbergen. Therefore, this canton is matched with Ledeberg.

Kapellen: This canton covers most parts of the old canton Ekeren. The municipality of Ekeren itself was merged into Antwerp, but the rest of the municipalities in the canton Ekeren, Kapellen, Schoten, Stabroek, and Brasschaat, are all included in the new canton Kapellen. Therefore, this canton is matched with Ekeren.

Vleteren: This canton covers most parts of the old canton Roesbrugge-Haringe. Although the municipality Roesbrugge-Haringe itself was merged into Poperinge, Westvleteren, another part of the canton Roesbrugge-Haringe, merged with nearby municipalities and formed the new electoral canton Vleteren. Therefore, this canton is matched with Roesbrugge-Haringe.

Two cantons are excluded from the analysis because they belong to different regions across time:

Voeren: Voeren is an enclave of Flanders in Wallonia, and it belonged to the Walloon electoral canton Aubel in the 1930s. Voeren only transferred to Flanders after a series of municipality exchanges in the 1960s. Therefore, it cannot be matched with historical Flemish cantons.

Zaventem: Zaventem used to belong to the Brussels electoral canton Schaarbeek and was only transferred to Flanders after the state reforms. Therefore, the historical location of Zaventem

corresponds to a non-Flemish area, making it inappropriate to match Zaventem with any historical cantons.

One canton is excluded from the analysis because it is a brand-new canton:

Genk: Genk was only a small town within Limburg in the 1930s. Genk later rapidly grew into a city and established its own electoral canton. Therefore, it is inappropriate to compare Genk with any historical canton. The emergence of Genk is mentioned in Hooghe and Stiers (2023).

Two cantons are matched with historical cantons that have different names simply because of changes in municipalities within their boundaries:

Meise: This canton matches the old canton Wolvertem with minimal changes. The name change is simply due to the municipality of Meise merging with Wolvertem, a change that occurred within the borders of the electoral canton.

Riemst: This canton matches the old canton Zichem-Zussen-Bolder. The name change is a result of Zichem-Zussen-Bolder being merged into Riemst, a change that occurred within the borders of the electoral canton.

In conclusion, six cantons in the 2019 election are excluded from the analysis because they could not be matched with any historical canton: Aalter, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Lievegem, Voeren, Zaventem, and Genk. This leaves us with 97 cantons out of a total of 103 Flemish cantons in the analysis. Among the 97 cantons, nine cantons are matched with historical cantons that have different names.

Table A1 Matching Cantons between 2019 and 1936

2019 Canton	1936 Canton
Pelt	Neerpelt
Puurs-Sint-Amands	Puurs
Kruisem	Kruishoutem
Merelbeke	Oosterzele
Destelbergen	Ledeberg
Kapellen	Ekeren
Vleteren	Roesbrugge-Haringe
Meise	Wolvertem
Riemst	Zichem-Zussen-Bolder

The rest 88 cantons are matched with historical cantons with the same names.

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