

The development of stable party preferences: Explaining individual-level stability among adolescents in Belgium

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Introduction

Within political science, the political development of adolescents has been a prevalent research topic over the past decades (Flanagan, 2013; Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968, 1981; Kroh & Selb, 2009; Nieuwbeerta & Wittebrood, 1995). On the one hand, these studies focus on the development of basic political attitudes among the younger age cohorts, such as political interest, participation and the development of political attitudes. On the other hand, a main focus within this strand of literature has been on the role of the parents, and more specifically, the transmission of political preferences from parents to children. In this paper, we focus on one particular aspect that has been put forward in a number of these studies, namely the development of stability of political preferences. Since adolescence is a phase in life in which political preferences are being developed, it is a very relevant phase in life to study to what extent preferences that are learned at this early stage tend to be strong and stable.

The main unit of analysis in this article is the *stability of party preferences*. A lot of research has focused on volatility or stability among voters in general (Dalton, McAllister, & Wattenberg, 2002; Dassonneville, 2012; Lachat, 2007). We argue that is important to focus on pre-voting age adolescents as well, since socialization research has shown that basic political attitudes, learned within adolescence, tend to be stable over time (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Furthermore – and more relevant to us – it has been clearly demonstrated that also the roots of party attachments are formed at a pre-political age (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Zuckerman, Dasović, & Fitzgerald, 2007). We analyze whether party preference stability can indeed be observed within adolescence. In other words, we investigate whether there are indications that adolescents are inclined to develop stable party preferences and, more importantly, which factors contribute to this stability.

We analyze the development of party preferences among adolescents using three main approaches. First, it is important to investigate whether the same mechanisms apply for adolescents than for the frequently studied adult voters. In this respect, we build further on the large number of studies on electoral stability, but shifting the focus on the very roots of party preferences (Wolak, 2009). Adolescents are the voters of the future, and if pre-adult preferences can indeed determine future political preferences (Campbell et al., 1960; Jennings & Markus, 1984), it is useful to analyze to what extent and in which social surroundings this stability is being developed. Furthermore, since volatility seems to be particularly apparent among younger age cohorts, these analyses can also be useful to show which mechanisms do contribute to party preference stability.

Second, since we are studying adolescents, it is desirable to incorporate the role of the parents in the development of party preference stability as well. Early adolescence is found to be a period in life in which parents have a strong influence on the development of political preferences, and one of the main arguments within socialization research is that attitudes learned through parental socialization tend to be stronger and more stable over time (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009).

Third, as research has shown that adolescents should not be analyzed as mere receivers of political stimuli of their parents (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002), it is also important to analyze to what extent their own attitudes contribute to the development of a stable preferences. Put differently, we analyze to what extent relevant issue preferences and social attitudes contribute to the formation of a stable party preference, expecting that adolescents with a stronger link between attitudes and party preference will develop a more stable preference.

Our contribution to the existing literature on party preference stability is threefold. First, although party preference stability has been investigated very thoroughly among adult voters, it is important to focus this research on a pre-adult age. In analyses on

stability/volatility, young people tend to be analyzed *starting* from the age of 18 onwards, but to fully understand the developmental patterns towards this stability, we argue that it is necessary to focus on young people before they reach the legal voting age. Second, we investigate this development within a very fragmented party system: Flanders (Belgium). This setting is a very stringent test for stability, as there are a large number of parties available. Therefore, particularly in this setting, stability is a meaningful attitude, since the pallet of possible parties is broader and chances on switching to another party are obviously a lot higher. Third, investigating the role of the family in the formation of stable party preferences has not been thoroughly investigated within a European multiparty context. In this sense, this paper provides us with more qualified and generalizable results on the development of stable preferences within the family.

For the analyses, we use a **preliminary dataset** of a recently administered representative two-year panel survey among 3,426 15-year old adolescents and their parents in the Flemish region of Belgium (Parent-Child Socialization Study, 2012-2013).

Literature

In the following paragraphs, we distinguish four main mechanisms which can influence party preference stability: socio-structural characteristics and political attitudes, strength of party preferences, parental socialization and attitude-vote consistency.

Socio-structural characteristics and political attitudes

One of the main strands in literature on stability of party preferences focuses on the role of *socio-structural characteristics* (Kuhn, 2009). Socio-economic status is one of the variables that has been frequently investigated in this respect, leading to diverging results. Educational level, for instance, has been found to increase party preference stability, whereas it could also lead to volatility, as highly educated persons rely less on political parties for guidance and change parties as a consequence of motivated reasoning (Schmitt-Beck, Weick, & Christoph, 2006). Within a phase of early development of political preferences, however, we could argue that stability of party preferences is more likely to be enhanced by a higher socio-economic status, as highly educated adolescents can be expected already to have more clearly demarcated political preferences (Flanagan, 2013; Sears & Funk, 1999).

Second, *political sophistication* has been a key concept in the literature on party preference stability or volatility (Lachat, 2007). As is the case for the above-mentioned socio-structural characteristics, approaches on the link between political sophistication and voter stability are mixed. On the one hand, political sophistication is believed to increase stability, because sophisticated voters tend to have stronger party attachments and make a more reasoned choice which they can hold on to (Marthaler, 2008). On the other hand, it is hypothesized that sophisticated voters tend to be more independent and have weaker ties with political parties (Dalton et al., 2002). One possible solution to these competing views, is to approach the link between sophistication and stability as non-linear (Lachat, 2007), or as

different for inter-election and inter-campaign stability (Dassonneville, 2012). Generally, it should be clear that the debate on the relation between political sophistication and party preference stability is not yet settled.

Thirdly, there are a number of political attitudes which are found to have an effect on party preference stability. A first one is *trust in political parties*. We can expect an effect of trust in political parties on stability, for instance because distrust in political parties enhances volatility (Dalton & Weldon, 2005). Closely related to trust in political parties, is a sense of external political efficacy, which is also found to influence stability (Dassonneville, 2012). If one has the feeling that a vote can make a difference, s/he will be more likely to be a stable voter (external efficacy).

These above mentioned mechanisms are a few of the dominant explanations for party preference stability. The bulk of the above mentioned literature is focused on stability or volatility among adult voters, but we investigate these mechanisms among a sample of adolescents who are still at an early stage of political development. This approach allows us to investigate a first trend towards the development of stable party preferences. Although we could expect that at least some political experience is a necessary condition for these mechanisms to take place on an individual level, we hypothesize that among adolescents, the same basic explanatory variables enhance party preference stability.

H1: Political sophistication, socio-economic status and trust in political parties enhance the stability of party preferences among adolescents.

Strength of party preference

Although a multiparty system traditionally does not lend itself to the development of strong party identities, there are number of other elements that can indicate the strength of one's preference towards a party. The number of possible different parties a voter is inclined ever to

vote for, is one of these elements. Particularly in a multiparty system, we should take into account the possibility of multiple parties appealing one potential voter at the same time (Garry, 2007; Rosema, 2006). Linked to this, it could also be useful to take into account the strength of one's decision. If an adolescent voter has already a strong preference for one (and only one) party, chances rise that s/he will stay loyal in the preference towards this party (Lachat, 2007). Therefore, we hypothesize that both the number of possible party preferences and the strength of the party preference are both related to the stability of one's preferences.

H2: Adolescents will be more inclined to have a stable party preference when their number of potential parties is smaller and when they have a stronger preference towards their preferred party.

Parental socialization

As has been mentioned earlier, adolescence is a phase in life in which political preferences are fully being developed (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Wattenberg, 2008). A main focus in this stream of literature is the importance of political socialization within the family, inspired by seminal works of (among others) Hyman (1959) and the Michigan Group (Campbell et al., 1960). One of the central claims is that political preferences and attitudes towards political parties are developed at a young, pre-political age and are strongly influenced by one's parents. Furthermore, preferences that are learned through political socialization are found to be more stable throughout life: "*Children who acquire political predispositions early in life from their parents are more stable in their early adulthood than are those who "leave home without it". Their predispositions, formed early, do persist.*" (Jennings et al., 2009, p. 796). Kroh and Selb (2009) came to a similar conclusion, confirming that attitudes and values that are transmitted from parents to children are less susceptible to change. Even within a revisionist perspective on partisanship, in which

voters have been found to adopt their party identification to their own issue preferences, parents can play a significant – though more limited – role in the partisan development of their children (Niemi & Jennings, 1991). This is exactly the pattern that one could expect in a European multiparty system, where the concept of party identification is found to be not directly applicable (Dassonneville, Hooghe, & Vanhoutte, 2012; Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). Therefore, we expect that, while attachments with political parties have decreased over the past decades and voters are more inclined to adopt their party preference to their own issue preferences, the preferences that are learned through parental socialization will be more stable than those that are acquired ‘spontaneously’, especially in early stages of political development.

H3: Adolescents who take over the party preference of their parents, will be more stable than adolescents who made their choice autonomously.

Attitude-vote consistency

The traditional approach to political socialization does not take into account possible effects of one’s own issue preferences. In this conceptualization, adolescents are often depicted as mere ‘receivers’ of political signals of their parents (i.c. party preferences), although some studies take into account child-initiated perspective of change in political attitudes in the family as well (e.g. McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002). In most political socialization studies, however, a party preference is traditionally handled ‘as such’, without taking into account the above described attitudes and issues that could shape this preference among adolescent voters as well (Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Kroh & Selb, 2009; Nieuwbeerta & Wittebrood, 1995; Zuckerman et al., 2007). However, recent studies on the development of adolescent party preferences have demonstrated the importance of investigating their own issue preferences

and political attitudes, as adolescents are indeed found to be already able to link their own political attitudes to a party preference (Bergh, 2013; Wagner, Johann, & Kritzinger, 2012; Wattenberg, 2008). Although these political attitudes can be learned through processes of socialization as well, we hypothesize that stability of party preferences will be stronger when the party preference itself is based on one's own attitudes and preferences. If adolescents do not merely pick a party they know, or pick the party their parents pick, but if they instead choose a particular party because it fits their own preferences, we expect that this will be a more stable choice.

H4: A substantive link between adolescent's own social attitudes and a party preference enhances the stability of party preferences among adolescents.

Data

Parent-Child Socialization Study (PCSS)

For the analysis, we use data from the Parent-Child Socialization Study (PCSS). This is a longitudinal two wave panel study, conducted in 2012 and 2013 among adolescents and their parents in Belgium (Hooghe, Quintelier, Verhaegen, Boonen & Meeusen, 2012). In the first wave of this survey, a representative sample of 3,426 adolescents was interviewed during school hours using a self-administered written questionnaire. At the same time, they received a questionnaire for both their parents, which could be filled out at home.

At the moment of the first survey, respondents were fifteen years old. The pupils were selected using a stratified random sample of 61 Dutch language schools in Belgium. The stratified sample was based both on location (province) and educational track offered at school. Parents who did not respond spontaneously were reminded one or two times by

telephone or mail. For 60.8 % of all adolescents, both parents sent a filled out questionnaire back to the university, for 72.7 % of the adolescents, at least one of both parents returned his/her survey. For gender and educational track, the sample closely resembles the distribution in the population and can be considered representative for this specific age group in the Flemish region of Belgium.

In a second wave, the same procedure was repeated. The researchers visited the same schools again, approximately one year after the first wave. Most of the adolescents could be reached again at school. Those who switched classes, switched schools or were not at school on the day of the survey, received a similar – shorter – survey which they could fill out at home¹. Again the adolescents who attended the school on the day of the survey were handed two questionnaires for their parents. Other parents were sent a questionnaire by mail.

At this time, approximately 60 per cent of the triads that were included in the first wave, are also available in the second wave. This means that from the original 3,426 adolescents, we have 2,085 triads. From these 2,085 triads, we currently have panel information on 1,250 (60.0 %) father-mother-child triads. Looking at the adolescent panel response only, we currently have a response rate of 72 %: from the original 3,426 adolescents in the first wave, 2,450 have responded again in the second wave. These are the respondents we will be using in our analyses. Again, these are **preliminary numbers**, as data are still being collected.

Party politics in Belgium

Data were collected in the Flemish part of Belgium. For the stability of party preference, the main dependent variable in our analyses, it is important to interpret these results within this setting, as the Belgian party system is one of the most divided, fragmented party systems in

¹ Final results of the response rates for wave 2 are not yet available, as data are still being collected at this moment.

Europe (Deschouwer, 2009a). The high level of fragmentation can be partially explained by the fact that the traditional parties split up into two regional parts during the 1960 and 1970s, leading to the formation of two fully segregated party systems, both for the Dutch-speaking part and the French-speaking part. In the Dutch-speaking part – Flanders – which we will be analyzing in this paper, the successful rise of a number of new parties, such as the Greens, the extreme-right wing party and the Flemish-Nationalist party, has led to an ongoing and stronger fragmentation in this part of the country.

Both waves of the PCSS were conducted among Dutch high school students in the Flemish part of Belgium. Therefore, they have only answered questions on the existing Flemish parties, as these are the only parties competing in the Flemish part of Belgium. In the survey, respondents were asked the following question: “If you could vote in an election for the Belgian parliament today, which party would you vote for?”. Options were the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), Greens (Groen), Flemish Nationalists (N-VA), Liberals (Open VLD), Socialists (Sp.a), the extreme rightist party (Vlaams Belang), Libertarians (LDD) and extreme leftist socialists (PvdA), with an additional open response category for ‘other party’. This question taps voting intentions as it most clearly captures electoral preferences in a highly fragmented party system such as Belgium (Dassonneville, 2012). Another specific characteristic of the Belgian party system is that there is a system of compulsory turnout, leading to a very high level of participation in elections (89.2 % in the most recent federal elections in 2010).

Measures

The dependent variable in our analyses is *party preference stability*. This is a recoded dummy variable, coded ‘1’ if the respondent prefers exactly the same party in both wave 1 and wave 2 and ‘0’ if this is not the case. We chose to use a strict measure for stability, and not use – for

instance – party resemblance or left-right resemblance. Due to the very fragmented party system in Flanders with several, cross-cutting cleavages, it is not easy nor advisable to group parties into a number of larger party blocs (Deschouwer, 2009a).

Socio-structural characteristics and political attitudes

Socioeconomic status is measured using two frequently used indicators. A first one is educational level. In the Flemish educational system, there are three main types of high school education. As a preliminary analysis suggested that vocational, art and technical training are closely related with regard to socioeconomic characteristics, these educational tracks were grouped. This results in a dummy variable ‘*general education*’, with general schooling coded ‘1’ and technical, art and vocational training coded ‘0’. A second, frequently used, indicator for socioeconomic status is the number of books at home, which is particularly useful for younger respondents (Dassonneville, Quintelier, Hooghe, & Claes, 2012; Flanagan, 2013).

Political sophistication is measured using a number of different indicators. Although this concept has been operationalized in a number of very different ways (Guo & Moy, 1998), there are a few indicators which have been used quite commonly. One of these indicators is political knowledge, one of the most informative indicators of political sophistication (Lachat, 2007), which has been a common thread in the variety of measures (Guo & Moy, 1998). Next to political knowledge, political interest and media use are often used as indicators, both in one-dimensional constructs as in multidimensional concepts with separate indicators (Guo & Moy, 1998). We use three of these indicators in our model separately. Political interest is measured using one indicator for the respondents’ self-reported level of political interest on a 1-4 Likert scale (from ‘not at all interested’ to ‘very interested’). Political knowledge is measured using four factual knowledge questions on contemporary Belgian politics

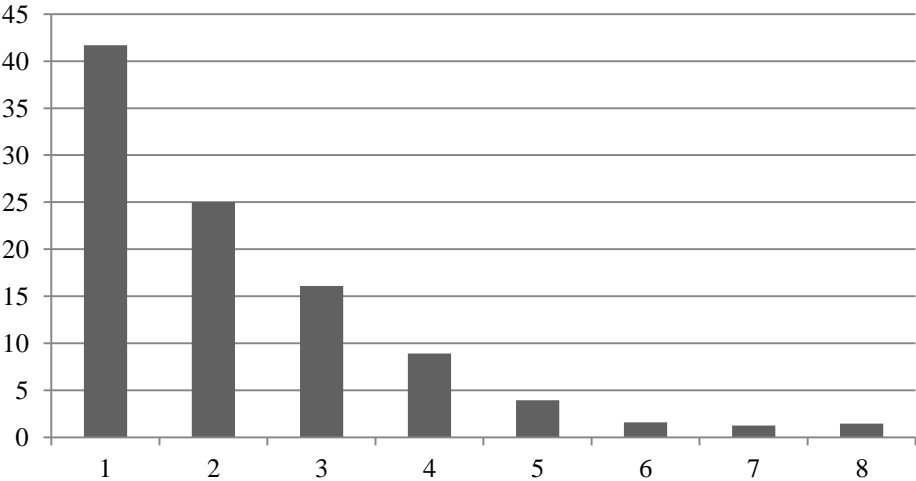
(Appendix C). Next to these two, we also included a measure for frequency of news consumption, tapping the frequency of watching the television news.

Trust in political parties is measured using a single item indicator. Respondents were asked on a 0-10 scale to what extent they trust political parties.

Strength of party preferences

The strength of party preferences is measured using a scale of voting propensities for all possible Flemish parties (Bochsler & Sciarini, 2010; van der Brug, 2010; van der Eijk, van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006). This can be a very informative measure, since it does not only allow us to introduce the score for the *propensity to vote for the preferred party* of the respondent, but primarily because it is a scale in which every party is scored. This way, we can also include a measure for the number of possible parties the respondent would ever vote for. We constructed an additional variable ‘*Number of possible parties*’, which is the sum of all parties with a higher score than 6 on the 0-10 propensity to vote scale. This variable ranges from 0 (none of the parties received a score above 6 on the propensity to vote scale) to 8 (all possible parties received a score above 6 on this scale).

Figure 1. Number of highly ranked parties (%)



Source: Adolescent sample PCSS 2012. Entries are valid percentages.

As is shown in Figure 1, 47.1 per cent of the adolescents scores only one party high on the propensity to vote scale. This means that the majority (58.3 %) would be inclined to vote for at least two different parties, highlighting the importance of multiple party preferences in the Flemish party system.

Parental socialization

When looking at the effects of parental socialization, we introduce two additional variables for the correspondence between parents and children. *Correspondence with mother* is coded 1 if the child prefers the same party as his/her mother and if the child is aware of this similarity. For this second condition, we used an additional measure of maternal party preference as perceived by the child. So only if mother and child share the same party preference *and* if the child perceives the party preference of the mother correctly and is therefore aware of this correspondence, this variable is coded 1. In all other cases, this is coded 0. The same procedure is applied for the second measure, *correspondence with father*.

Attitude-vote consistency

For the measure of consistency between issues, social attitudes and party preference, we use a number of indicators that are closely related to the party program of three of the major Flemish parties in the survey. It is quite difficult, however, to capture a political party into one main political idea or attitudes. Even for single-issue or nearly-single-issue parties one can find a number of very divergent but relevant issues or attitudes that could be substantively linked to the party program. One of the most reliable approaches to tap attitude-vote consistency is to select parties with a clear-cut profile. We selected three major parties in Flanders, with a nearly-single issue profile of which research has shown that basically one ideological element is key to their party program: the Green party (*Groen*), the extreme-rightist party (*Vlaams Belang*) and the Flemish Nationalist party (*N-VA*). These parties are

relevant to investigate, since we can state with ample certainty that for each of them, there is one basic attitude that forms the core of their party program.

The Green party (*Groen*) is self-evidently a party with a strong environmental profile. Although there are a number of other postmaterialist values (such as multiculturalism and ethical liberalism) determining their socioeconomic program, recent research has shown that the Flemish Green party is most clearly linked with environmental issues (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). To tap this methodologically, we used both issue salience of the environment (Likert scale of 1-4) and a measure for environmental concern. The latter is a latent construct, measured using a principal component factor scale of four items (See Appendix A. Cronbach's α : .708).

N-VA, the Flemish Nationalist party, is the largest political formation in the Flemish part of Belgium and has a strong focus on a far going power redistribution in Belgium, with an independent Flanders as a part of a stronger European Union as their main political goal (Boonen & Hooghe, 2014; Deschouwer, 2009b; N-VA, 2013). Flemish nationalism can be seen as the party's strongest ideological characteristic (Deschouwer, 2009b). Due to data limitations, we are bound to the limited measure of Flemish identity, which was measured using the question 'In the first place, I consider myself as being a Fleming', scored on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). As was the case for the Green party, we also incorporate a measure for issue salience, in this case issue salience of the state reform.

The third party we will be analyzing, *Vlaams Belang*, is an extreme right-wing party that strongly focuses on immigration issues. Although there are other main focus point in their party program, such as criminality and state reform, the main basis of its electoral strength lies in their approach to immigration (Breuning, 1997; Deschouwer, 2009b; Van Der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2000; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004). Ethnocentrism is measured using a

four item latent construct. (See Appendix B. Cronbach's α .841). As is the case for the other two parties, we also include a measure for issue salience, in this case immigration (1-4 Likert scale).

Analyses

Before moving on to multivariate analyses, we take a look at vote stability among adolescents in Flanders. Generally, 48.5 % of the adolescents intended to vote for exactly the same party in the two waves. As both waves were conducted only one year apart from each other, and there have not been federal or regional elections between the two measures, this is not a highly elevated number of stable voters. If we compare these results with earlier research, conducted in 2009, we find that in the general Belgian population, 67,4 % has a stable preference over a period *two* years (Dassonneville, 2012). This already indicates that this young sample of adolescents can be expected to be more volatile than the general Flemish public, which obviously corresponds with the above mentioned theories on volatility and the development of political attitudes during adolescence.

Comparing the major parties in a descriptive manner, we find some interesting differences. First, the Flemish Nationalist party (New Flemish Alliance), has the highest number of stable voters. At the moment, this is the biggest political formation in Flanders. In the first wave, the New Flemish Alliance was the second largest party in the sample. In 2013 it became the largest party, with 26.2 % of the adolescents intending to vote for this party. This explains the high level of stability between the two waves for this party. Other stable party preferences seem to be the Christian Democrats, Greens and Liberals. The extreme rightist *Vlaams Belang*, on the other hand, is the least stable party, as only 39,9 % of the respondents who intended to vote for this party in 2012, also do so in 2013.

Table 1. Party preference stability among Flemish adolescents

	Party preference 2012	Party preference 2013	Aggregate difference 2013-2012	Individual level stability (perc.)
Christian-Democrats (<i>CD&V</i>)	26.0	23.9	-2.1	52.7
Green party (<i>Groen</i>)	14.5	14.9	+0.4	52.8
Flemish Nationalist party (<i>N-VA</i>)	25.6	28.9	+3.3	63.0
Liberals (<i>Open VLD</i>)	7.2	8.9	+1.7	52.8
Socialists (<i>Sp.a</i>)	7.2	6.9	-0.3	45.6
Extreme-rightist party (<i>Vlaams Belang</i>)	11.5	9.3	-2.2	39.9
Libertarian party (<i>LDD</i>)	0.7	0.2	-0.5	14.3
Communist party (<i>PvdA</i>)	1.0	1.4	+0.4	47.8
Other/Blanc	6.3	5.7	-0.6	---
All parties	---	---	---	48.5
N	2,294	2,289	---	2,301

Source: PCSS 2012-2013. Entries are row percentages

Socio-structural characteristics and political attitudes

In a first multivariate analyses, we predict stability using a number of traditional indicators which have been found to have an effect on stability of party preferences among adults (Dassonneville, 2012; Lachat, 2007). We have hypothesized that the same mechanisms can be found among adolescents, albeit less straightforward.

Looking at the results in in the first column of Table 2 (Model I), it should be clear that we do not find any convincing evidence for our first hypothesis. Apart from educational level, we find no socio-structural, sophistication-related or attitudinal explanations for party preference stability among adolescents. Following Lachat (2007), we tested a non-linear relationship between political sophistication and party preference stability as well. However,

we did not find any indications for this in the models either. These results strongly differ from the results of – among others – Jennifer Wolak (2009), who found strong effects of cognitive engagement with political news and political interest to have a strong effect on adolescent party identification stability. One possible explanation for this difference could be found in the fact that the adolescents in this sample are quite young (fifteen years old), and still developing their own political attitudes (Chan & Clayton, 2006; Howe, 2010). Switching between parties can be seen as a process going on among all adolescents, whether they are interested, knowledgeable and trustful towards politics or not.

Strength of party preferences

We do find some explanatory power, however, in both the number of possible parties adolescents tend to choose from and the strength of their party preference in the first wave. Looking at the second model in Table 2, we find that those adolescents who score their preferred party higher on the propensity to vote scale for this party, tend to be more stable in their preference. The same goes for adolescents who indicate that they have less possible options to choose from in the first wave, since we find a negative significant effect between the number of possible parties and adolescent party preference stability. The fewer parties an adolescent gives a high score (more than 6) on the propensity to vote scale, the more likely s/he will be to stay with their first wave choice. Controlling for the other variables, in the models, this relationship seems to hold firmly (Model IV).

Parental socialization

A third main research question we put forward in this paper is whether transmission of party preferences from parents to children leads to stable preferences. While this relationship might have been demonstrated convincingly in stable two-party systems such as the United States

(Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Jennings et al., 2009), this is a particularly interesting research question in the Belgian setting, as the number of parties is obviously linked to the stability of party preferences. If the same mechanisms apply in this fragmented multiparty system, this would be strong evidence for the fact that political preferences that are learned within the family, tend to turn into stable preferences – although we obviously do not have information on the development of these preferences into adulthood. An additional methodological novelty in our approach is that we only use preferences that are transmitted from parents to children *consciously*: Only if children have the same preference as their mother or father and also know that they share the same preference, we have coded this as party preference correspondence.

Looking at the results in the third model in Table 2, we find strong support that this indeed seems to be the case. In a first step in the analyses, we estimate a relation between parent-child correspondence in wave 1 and stability of party preferences of the adolescents in two waves. In the limited model (Model III), both for correspondence with father and correspondence with mother this leads to very similar and quite strong results. If the adolescent adopts the party preference of one of his/her parents, the odds of holding on to this party preference increase significantly. We do not find a significant difference between paternal and maternal influence. Controlling for the above described variables, these relationships seem to hold firmly as well. Thus we find convincing evidence for our third hypothesis, stating that party preferences that are learned within the family, tend to stay stable over time – always keeping in mind that both time points are measured within an early phase of adolescence. While these results indicate how stable party preferences can be developed, we cannot assume that the same mechanisms would hold for further development into adulthood.

Table 2. Binomial logistic regression models predicting adolescent party preference stability

	Model I Socio-structural characteristics and political attitudes		Model II Strength of party preference		Model III Parental socialization		Model IV Full model	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>
<i>Female</i>	-.092ns	.912					-.176ns	.839
<i>SES</i>								
General education	.337***	1.401					.430**	1.537
Number of books at home	-.013ns	.987					-.062ns	.939
<i>Political sophistication</i>								
Political knowledge	.012ns	1.012					-.030ns	.970
Political interest	.109ns	1.115					.078ns	1.081
Watch television news	.069ns	1.071					.013ns	1.013
<i>Trust political parties</i>	.014ns	1.014					.028ns	1.029
<i>Strength of party preference</i>								
Number of possible parties			-.131***	.877			-.185***	.831
Propensity to vote for own party			.256***	1.292			.257***	1.292
<i>Parental socialization</i>								
Correspondence with mother					1.018***	2.767	.883***	2.419
Correspondence with father					1.030***	2.800	.927***	2.527
Nagelkerke R ²	.019		.042		.159		.202	
N	2,019		1,526		1,289		905	

Source: PCSS 2012-2013. Entries are regression coefficients – B-values and odds ratios (Exp(B)) - for four binary logistic regression models. P-values: *p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001

Attitude-vote consistency

In the models presented in Table 3, we predict a stable preference for these three parties, using the main social attitude we expect to explain party preference, together with the salience respondents attach to the issue most closely related to the party. The dependent variable is constructed slightly different than in the previous models: stable party choice is coded 1 if the respondent indicated to vote for this party both in the first and the second wave. Stable party choice is coded 0 if the respondent indicated to vote for this party in the first wave, but switched to another party in the second. This way, we do not predict stability in general, as we did in the first model, but focus on one party in general in the dependent variable, obviously leading to models with a lower N. Therefore, we also report the significance threshold of this model at the .10 level (†).

At first sight, without controlling for the traditional variables we used in the previous model, we indeed find some support for the hypothesis that well-reasoned party choices, related to one's own beliefs would lead to party preference stability among adolescents. Particularly the social attitudes seem to have the expected effects in the bivariate models (only for the Green party, issue salience of the environment seems to have an effect). Although the effects are in some cases only weakly significant, we do find an effect of ethnocentrism on a stable extreme-rightist preference, of Flemish identity on a stable Flemish Nationalist preference and of environmental concern on a stable Green party preference, even after controlling for parental influence. Therefore, we could state that there is evidence for the hypothesis that party preferences that resemble one's own attitudes are in a sense more rational and therefore more stable. Although some of the relations in these models may be rather weak, we should keep in mind that this is a small sample and that they nevertheless seem to hold after controlling for the variables described above, even when including the very strong predictors of parental socialization.

Table 3. Explaining stable adolescent voting for the Green, Flemish Nationalist and extreme rightist party

	Stable Green preference				Stable Flemish Nationalist preference				Stable extreme rightist preference			
	Model Ia		Model Ib		Model IIa		Model IIb		Model IIIa		Model IIIb	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>
<i>Attitude-vote consistency</i>												
Dominant social attitude	.410*	1.506	.487**	1.628	.350**	1.149	.304*	1.356	.416**	1.517	.373*	1.452
Issue salience core issue	.468†	1.596	.327ns	1.386	-.099ns	.906	.039ns	.830	.107ns	1.113	.118ns	1.125
<i>Female</i>			.205ns	1.228			-.406ns	.666			-.611†	.543
<i>SES</i>												
General education			.447ns	1.563			.952**	2.590			-.866*	.421
Number of books at home			-.163ns	.850			-.086ns	.918			-.128ns	.880
<i>Political sophistication</i>												
Political knowledge			-.038ns	.963			-.208ns	.812			-.093ns	.911
Political interest			.269ns	.1309			-.416†	.660			-.012ns	.988
Watch television news			-.140ns	.869			-.006ns	.994			.101ns	1.106
<i>Trust political parties</i>			-.062	.940			-.004ns	.996			-.148*	.862
<i>Parental socialization*</i>												
Correspondence with mother			1.407**	4.083			.914*	2.494			---	---
Correspondence with father			-.883ns	.414			1.773***	5.888			---	---
Nagelkerke R ²	.100		.175		.035		.331		.046		.160	
N	255				346				223			

Source: PCSS 2012-2013. Entries are regression coefficients – B-values and odds ratios (Exp(B)) - for eight binary logistic regression models. P-values:

†p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001

° These measures could not be included in the model with the extreme rightist preference, since at this time, for this particular party, there would be too few cases of which we have full information for both parents.

Discussion

The main research question in this article was how party preference stability among adolescents can be explained. We put forward a number of different explanatory mechanisms, but a first main conclusion should be that some of the traditional mechanisms that are found to (partially) explain stability in party preferences among adult voters, do not apply for younger adolescents. Political sophistication and trust in political parties do not relate to party preference stability among this age cohort, educational level does have a positive correlation with stability. This is an important finding, as it shows us a different perspective on the development of stable party preferences among adolescents. Jennifer Wolak (2009, p.581) did find a clear influence of cognitive engagement with news, political interest and attention to politics came to the conclusion that ‘young people are also responding to signals from outside the household when forming their partisan preferences’. Further, comparative research could be useful to investigate country differences, but an alternative explanation could be found in the fact that the adolescents in our sample are still at a phase in life in which they start to encounter politics for the first time and are developing their first ideas on political parties. Compared with the American high-school seniors in earlier research (Wolak, 2009), stability of preferences is equal among interested and less interested young people, those who follow the news and those who don’t and those who are knowledgeable and those who are not. Following the same line of argument, we could state that these younger adolescents are not yet that receptive to signals from outside the household and rely mainly on preferences expressed by their parents. This is indeed what we find in the analysis in which we introduce (conscious) political correspondence with the parents. Adolescents who know the party preferences of their parents and take it on themselves, are far more likely to have a stable preference than those who formed an initial party preference autonomously.

However, this does not imply that a stable party preference among adolescents cannot be rooted in their own preferences. That is shown by the subsequent analyses, in which we measured the relationship between adolescent's own attitudes (social attitudes and issue salience) and the stability of their party preference. If there is a strong ideological link between their own attitudes and their initial party preference, chances rise that this will turn into a stable preference. An important side-note to this finding is that this relationship still holds when we control for parent-child correspondence. Put otherwise, if an adolescent chooses a party close to his/her own attitudes, the likelihood increases that this party preference will be a stable party preference, whether it was acquired through parental socialization or not.

Generally, the main conclusion we could draw from the above described analyses, is that during early adolescence, in a phase of development of party preferences, parents clearly play the most important role. In the first place, our findings can be compared with those of – among others – Jennings, Stoker and Bowers (2009), who found that political preferences that are acquired through parental socialization tend to be more stable over time. Although this might not be a highly remarkable conclusion, it should be interpreted within the political landscape in which the data for these analyses were gathered. Unlike the numerous studies investigating these dynamics within the American two-party system, these analyses have been carried out in the very fragmented party system of Flanders (Belgium), where ties between voters and parties have strongly weakened over the past decades, and where there has been an increasing number of new political parties entering the political arena. Furthermore, unlike the United States, a strong identification with one political party is traditionally less common. Therefore, it is interesting to ascertain that also within a changeable party system with highly volatile voters, party-related cues acquired from parents are a clear impetus for party preference stability.

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Appendix A. Scale Environmental concern

I feel a sense of personal obligation to take action to stop the disposal of toxic substances in the air, water, and soil	.761
The government should introduce stronger measures to halt pollution since few people will regulate themselves	.658
If asked, I would contribute money to an organization that works to improve the quality of the environment	.772
I am prepared to contribute money for research on renewable energy	.728
<hr/>	
Cronbach's α	0.71
Eigenvalue	2.139
Explained variance	53.470

Source: Parent-Child Socialization Study 2012. Entries are factor loadings from a principal component factor analysis.

Appendix B. Scale Ethnocentrism

If a country wants to reduce tensions it should stop immigration	.790
The presence of too many immigrants is a threat to our way of life	.822
Immigrants come here to benefit from our wealth	.849
The presence of immigrants causes criminality to rise in our country	.831
<hr/>	
Cronbach's α	.841
Eigenvalue	2.711
Explained variance	67.773

Source: Parent-Child Socialization Study 2012. Entries are factor loadings from a principal component factor analysis.

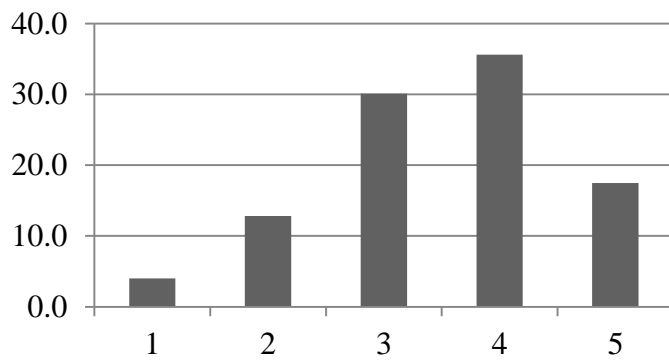
Appendix C. Political knowledge questions

Question wording

1. Who is Belgians Prime Minister?
2. Who is the Flemish Minister-President?
3. Who are the members of the Flemish government?

4. Who is the President of the European Council?

Frequency sum scale scores



Source: PCSS 2012