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The Presence of Self-Employed People in Belgian Politics

Bram Wauters¹ & Johan Lambrecht²

ABSTRACT

It is, first of all, argued in this article that the self-employed constitute a professional category for which the descriptive representation in politics does make a difference. Parallels with the representation of women and ethnic minorities are drawn.

Next, it is investigated whether the political presence of self-employed is low in Belgium. We do find that self-employed are not underrepresented in Belgian Parliament in comparison with their share in the population nor compared with other European countries. Moreover, self-employed do not serve for a shorter period of time nor do they belong less to government parties. As for the entrepreneurs in Parliament, there has not been a decline. There has been, however, a decrease in the percentage of free and intellectual professions owing to processes of democratization, only slightly counter-balanced by processes of professionalisation. This downward trend can also be found in government, and also for entrepreneurs in government.

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KEYWORDS

representation, elections, Parliament, self-employed, employers' organisations

1. Introduction: Descriptive Representation

Representation is a central concept in the social sciences. The concrete operationalization of this concept has, however, been subject of fierce scientific discussion. The general meaning of political representation refers to presenting in a political forum someone or something that is absent. How this should be translated in practice is less clear. The distinction between descriptive and substantial representation, made for the first time by Pitkin in 1967, is still relevant today.

According to the *descriptive representation* approach, the composition of Parliament should be such that it corresponds to the composition of society. Parliament should in this vision be a mirror or a miniature version of society. A Member of Parliament (MP) represents someone by matching him or her on a relevant attribute or characteristic, such as gender, ethnic origin, religion or profession. It matters in this approach what MP's are, rather than what they are doing. Scholarly attention in this vision has centered on the actual and historical composition of Parliament: how many women, how many farmers, etc. are there in Parliament (Best and Cotta (2000)) and around the barriers disadvantaged groups have to overcome (Norris (1996)).

Substantive representation on the other hand focuses on what MP's are doing in Parliament. Representation is seen as "acting for others, an activity in behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else" (Pitkin (1967), p. 113). It is about acting in accordance with the interests and points of view of (a selected part of) the electorate. An MP represents someone whose interests (s)he defends without necessarily having the same profile as those who (s)he represents. For instance, a male MP who defends women rights represents women in Parliament in a substantive manner.

In this article, we will focus on the descriptive representation of self-employed people. Descriptive representation is important for two reasons. Firstly, the division between descriptive and substantial representation is less sharp than suggested by the discussion above. In general, one expects that role orientations and background characteristics of MPs correlate: women will be more likely to defend women's interests, parliamentarians who have been self-employed will be more likely to pay attention to the needs of this professional group, and so on (Thomassen and Andeweg (2004)). Empirical research on the behavior of female MPs has shown that they have indeed a greater chance to devote attention to issues that are important for women (Whip (1991); Celis (2006)). Owens (2005) demonstrated in his study on black MPs that also an increase in descriptive representation for ethnic minorities can lead to an improvement of their substantial representation.

This link can theoretically be explained by the theory of 'politics of presence' (Phillips (1995)). A common life experience and a common structural position in society are the central elements of this approach. By having experience with similar problems and having suffered from a common disadvantaged structural position, people are more likely to devote attention to the issues of their social group. Life experience causes understanding of and familiarity with specific needs and problems of a social group and with possible solutions. Therefore, the chance that an MP defends the interests of the group to whom he or she belongs, is likely to be high. However, the link between both forms of representation continues to be one of the most hotly disputes in political science (Mackay (2004)).

Secondly, descriptive representation is symbolically important. Research on representation of ethnic minorities has revealed that the presence of ethnic representa-

tives in Parliament improves the commitment to and the interest in this Parliament (Bobo and Gilliam (1990); Pantoja and Segura (2003)). The mere presence of MPs of the same gender, ethnic origin, religion, ... seems to be sufficient to increase the identification of certain population groups with Parliament. Consequently, the presence of self-employed in Parliament could enhance the level of political trust among the self-employed in society.

Recently, scholarly attention has strongly focused on the political representation of disadvantaged societal categories such as women and ethnic minorities (as has become apparent in the text hitherto). Their absence in Parliament is perceived as a democratic deficit. Increasing their representation in Parliament is seen as a means of improving their societal position and the general legitimacy of politics (Young (1990); Phillips (1995)). Social groups defined on the basis of a profession are less analyzed, and when they are analyzed, the attention has almost exclusively been on the underrepresentation of the labor class, again an underprivileged group (McAllister (1992); Ramsdell (1992); Norris and Lovenduski (1995)). We will argue in this article that for the self-employed a similar reasoning as for women and ethnic minorities can be built up, namely that their presence in Parliament matters for the defense of their interests and for enhancing the political trust of this professional category. Next, it will be investigated to what extent self-employed people are descriptively represented in Belgian politics. There are indications (low levels of political trust, efforts of employers' organisations to increase self-employed representatives, ...) that this professional category is underrepresented. It will be investigated whether this is indeed so.

Before formulating the research questions and starting the empirical analysis, the importance of the descriptive representation of the self-employed in Parliament must first be outlined.

II. The Self-Employed and Political Representation

Although self-employed are often in competition with each other, their interests are often similar and there is a strong common identity among them (Bowman (1989)). Self-employed people have thus specific interests to which other self-employed are more sensitive than employees for instance. Moreover, they are more familiar with specific problems the self-employed encounter in their professional life and with possible solutions. The interests of this group can, according to the above reasoning about descriptive representation, be best defended by parliamentarians who have experience as a self-employed themselves. As a consequence of being self-employed, they are familiar with needs, problems, points of view and relevant actors in the field.

Prominent business men are convinced of the value of a specific business background for MPs. Baron Paul Buysse (a prominent Belgian manager) for instance stressed that the daily experience of self-employed people can be an asset in political discussions:

“There are now discussions in politics about the way welfare should be divided in the long term. It is important to listen also to entrepreneurs who are creating this welfare. They are realising this welfare in practice, they feel the welfare creation to their fingertips. That’s why they merit involvement in this discussion.” (Desimpel (1999), p. 11)

There not only is a belief that self-employed people, due to their experience, are well-placed to participate in political decision-making, there also is a conviction that self-employed politicians do make a difference for the consideration of business interests. The latter argument is confirmed by Aimé Desimpel, a former self-employed MP:

“Bills granting benefits for entrepreneurs are very often rejected or delayed. (...) Maybe my judgment is too severe, but the only positive thing that rests is probably our presence, merely being there. I am convinced that we and our interests are still taken into account in debates and that now entrepreneurs are not too much offended. Without our presence in Parliament, it would probably be much worse.” (Desimpel (1999), p. 31-33)

Also organizations of the self-employed regularly express their concern about the presence of self-employed people in politics. On the one hand, Belgian employers’ organizations and organizations of the self-employed are convinced that there are too few self-employed in Belgian politics. They frequently criticize this low number and the limited policy support for entrepreneurship in Parliament (Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen (2007); Van Eetvelt (17 January 2008)). On the other hand, action is undertaken by these organizations to tackle this problem, i.e. to increase the number of self-employed people in politics. UNIZO, the major Flemish organization of the self-employed, organized training courses for self-employed people who want to become local councilor. UNIZO has also put forward a cross-party list of candidates at the local elections containing members of their organization and people who were thought to defend the interests of the self-employed (‘UNIZO steunt ondernemers, kandidaten op locale kieslijsten’, (7 July 2006), p. 9).

These considerations allow us to conclude that the descriptive representation of self-employed in Parliament is important. Self-employed can barely be seen as an oppressed social group, but they are nevertheless a relevant group to analyze since they have in general a very critical attitude towards politics (Van Mierlo (1991), Van de Walle (2004)), since self-employed MPs declare that their mere presence preserves Parliament from neglecting self-employed interests altogether and since this group has relevant organizations that are striving for a greater number of representatives of this group in Parliament.

III. Research Questions and Methodology

The descriptive representation of the self-employed will be scrutinized in this article. It will be more in particular investigated whether self-employed people are underrepresented in descriptive terms in Belgian politics. Whereas the presence of professional categories in Parliament has been analyzed in other European countries, Belgium has been a blind spot in this kind of analyses (Best and Cotta (2000); Celis, Wauters and Meier (2008)). This article aims at filling this gap partially: it is a first attempt to shed light on the representation by and for self-employed people in Parliament and in government.

We will investigate in particular whether the number of self-employed people in Belgian Parliament is low in comparison with their share in the population and whether it has changed over time. Explanations for these evolutions will be sought. We will also examine whether self-employed people can make a difference in Parliament: two factors that influence the political power of an MP (parliamentary experience and belonging to a government party) will be analysed. We will, finally, focus on the question whether self-employed politicians manage to become minister, one of the most powerful positions in Belgian politics.

We use in this article a broad definition of self-employed people. We make a distinction between entrepreneurs, farmers and people who do exercise an intellectual or liberal profession. We will analyze these three categories separately. The entrepreneurs under investigation range from large factory owners over directors of business firms to small shop-owners and self-employed writers. The intellectual and liberal professions include among others lawyers, doctors, architects and dentists. The farmers form a very small category. This distinction mirrors on the whole the distinction by industry made by the Belgian Social Security Services for the Self-Employed (RSVZ).

For this analysis, we utilized the biographic datasets of respectively the House of Representatives and the Senate in Belgium. These datasets are compiled by these institutions and contain data on variables such as gender, profession, education, local activity, etc. of members and former members.

The complete professional career of the parliamentarians is taken into account. About half of the members of the House and two thirds of the Senators already work in politics or in public service before becoming parliamentarian (De Winter and Brans (2003)). Focusing only on the last job before entering Parliament neglects professional experiences earlier in life. This is in line with the thesis of Phillips (1995) who says that policy priorities, areas of interest and points of view are influenced by life experiences. Someone who once has been self-employed continues to see the society, at least partially, through the eyes of a self-employed.

The analysis is run on a yearly-basis rather than on the basis of a parliamentary term. During the parliamentary terms after the Second World War, there were on

average 20 intermediate replacements in the House of Representatives (Fiers, Gerard and Van Uytven (2006)). By running a yearly analysis, these substitutions can be included in the analysis. The situation on 1st of January is taken as a reference.

As this paper will focus on the situation in Belgium, it is necessary to provide first some information concerning the Belgian parliamentary system.

IV. The Belgian Parliamentary System

Belgium has a bicameral legislature on the national level, consisting of the House of Representatives (150 members) and the Senate (71 members).

The Senate used to be an ‘aristocratic’ assembly: Senators had to be at least 40 years old (this was abandoned in 1995) and there were necessary qualifications needed to enter the Senate (a.o. having served in public office, having played a prominent role in socio-economic life or having produced ‘special proves of capability’). In practice, these necessary qualifications were interpreted quite freely (Fiers (2000)), but they had nevertheless as an effect that a more ‘aristocratic’ type of politician than in the House was attracted. The competences of the House and the Senate used to be the same and consequently each bill used to be treated twice: once in the House and once in the Senate.

There are three types of Senators: 40 directly elected Senators, 21 Senators designated by the Communities (formerly by the Provinces) and 10 co-opted Senators. The autonomy of the party is largest for the co-opted Senators which can be freely chosen from society without any interference of voters. Community Senators are selected from the representatives of the regional Parliaments (previously the provincial councils) and directly elected Senators are elected by the voters.

In 1995, due to a major state reform (the so-called *Sint-Michiels* agreement), both the Senate and (to a lesser extent) the House underwent radical changes. There was a drastic reform of the composition of the Senate: the electoral districts were enlarged (there are now two region-wide districts Flanders and Wallonia), provincial Senators were replaced by Community Senators, the number of Senators was reduced from 184 to 71, etc. Also the competences of the Senate were altered: whereas there used to be an equality between the Senate and the House, this now changed in favour of the House resulting in a subordinate role of the Senate vis-à-vis the House. Moreover, considerable competences were transferred from the national to regional level. Regional parliaments and governments now have substantial powers concerning for instance economic policy, about which the Senate nor the House no longer have an exclusive say. The number of members of the House of Representatives was reduced in 1995 from 212 to 150.

All in all, the Senate lost much of its powers in 1995, from which the House and the regional parliaments benefited. Owing to the region-wide electoral districts, the Senate attracted nevertheless a number of top party figures, whom the party wished to present to the voters in the entire region, either Flanders or Wallonia.

V. The Number of Self-Employed in Parliament

We will first discuss the number of self-employed in Parliament. The analysis will be split up according to the three sub-categories mentioned before: intellectual and liberal professions, entrepreneurs and farmers.

Figure 1 shows that there has been a sharp decline from the 1970s onwards in the number of free and liberal professions, both in the House and the Senate. At the end of the 1960s more than 30 percent of the MPs exercised such a profession. At the end of the 1970s this percentage dropped down to 20 percent and less. Since then, the share of free and liberal professions in Parliament has risen again without, however, reaching percentages of 30 percent again.

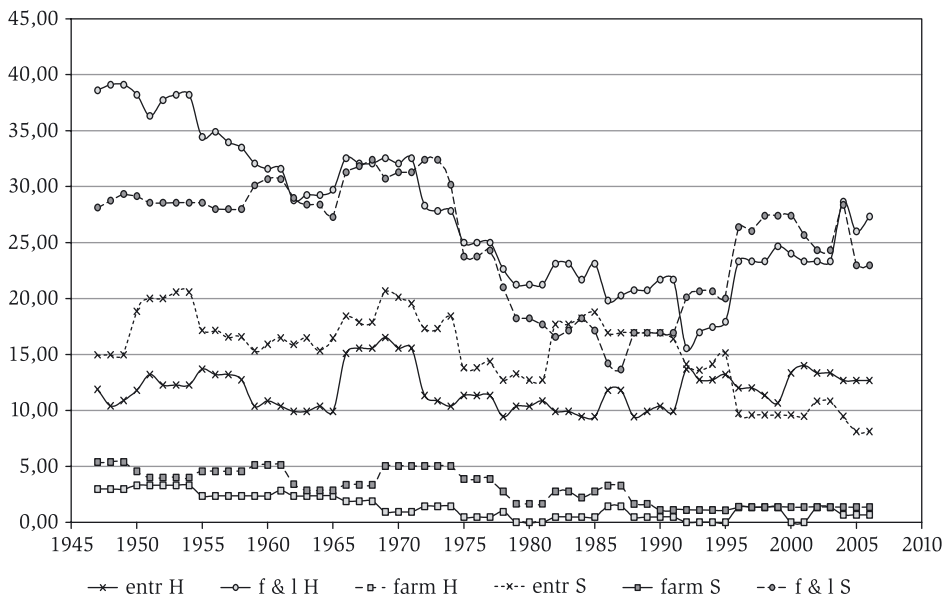


Figure 1. Percentages of free and liberal professions (f & l), entrepreneurs (entr) and farmers (farm) in the Belgian House of Representatives (H) and Senate (S), 1947-2006.

Source: Own calculations.

The percentage of entrepreneurs in the House and the Senate remains rather constant throughout the years. The Senate scores better than the House: on average 15 to 20 percent of the Senators were entrepreneurs, while for the House this was between 10 and 15 percent. The higher score of the Senate has to do with the ‘aristocratic’ character this assembly used to have (see above). The new way of composing the Senate after 1995 has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the percentage of entrepreneurs in the Senate.

The percentage of farmers in Parliament has always been low and has further slightly decreased since 1946 together with the shrinking share of farmers in society.

These figures seem to suggest that there is no general decline of the number of self-employed in Parliament, except maybe for the free and liberal professions in the 1970s.

As indicated above, when political representation is looked at in descriptive terms, Parliament should mirror the composition of society. It seems in that respect appropriate to compare the percentages of the self-employed in Parliament (the three subcategories taken together) with the number of self-employed in society. In Figure 2, an index of electoral bias (Norris and Lovenduski (1995)) is calculated.

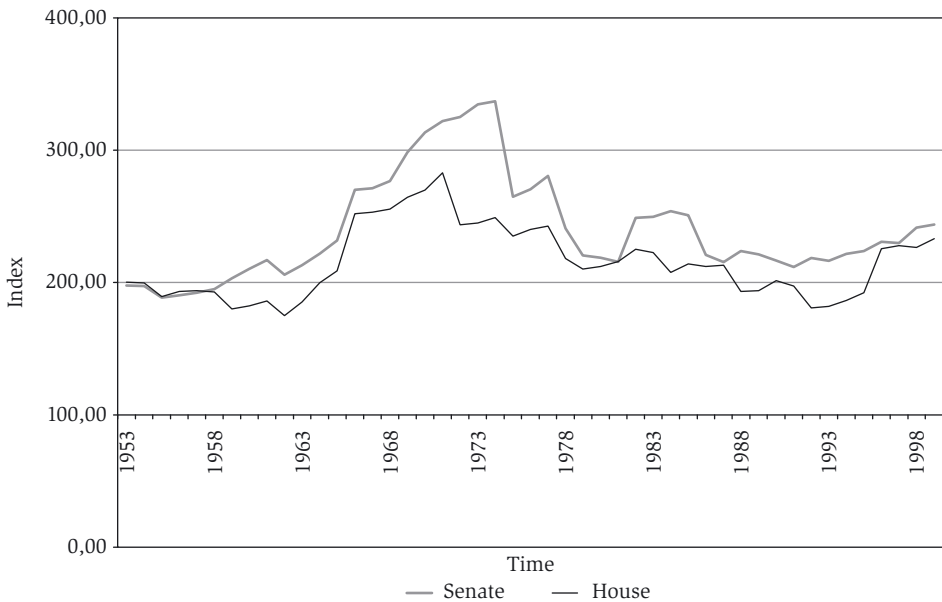


Figure 2. ‘Indices of electoral bias’ for the presence of self-employed people in the Belgian House and Senate (1953-1999) in relation to their presence in the labour force.

Source: The Central Planning Bureau and the Federal Public Service ‘Employment, Labor and Social Dialogue’.

This index divides the percentage of self-employed in Parliament with their percentage in the labor force. If the self-employed are overrepresented in Parliament, this index will be higher than 100.

Figure 2 shows that the self-employed are and always have been overrepresented in both the House and the Senate in comparison with their share in the labor force. Today the percentage of self-employed in Parliament is more than twice as high as the share of self-employed in the labor force (index higher than 200).

The work of Best and Cotta (2000) allows us to make a comparison in European perspective (see Figure 3). This comparison is limited, however, to the percentage of one sub-category of self-employed, namely the entrepreneurs (defined by Best and Cotta as ‘businessmen and managers’). Since we lack European data on the share of entrepreneurs in society, only the percentages in Parliament are presented in Figure 3. We do find that Belgium performs better than most other European countries, apart from the UK and France who have witnessed a strong entanglement between entrepreneurs on the one hand and parties and policy on the other hand (Best and Cotta (2000); Rush and Cromwell (2000); Ludlam and Taylor (2003)). The high score of Belgium in terms of the share of entrepreneurs in Parliament could be explained by the historical structural entangledness of one of the major organisations of the self-employed (NCMV, later Unizo) and the christian-

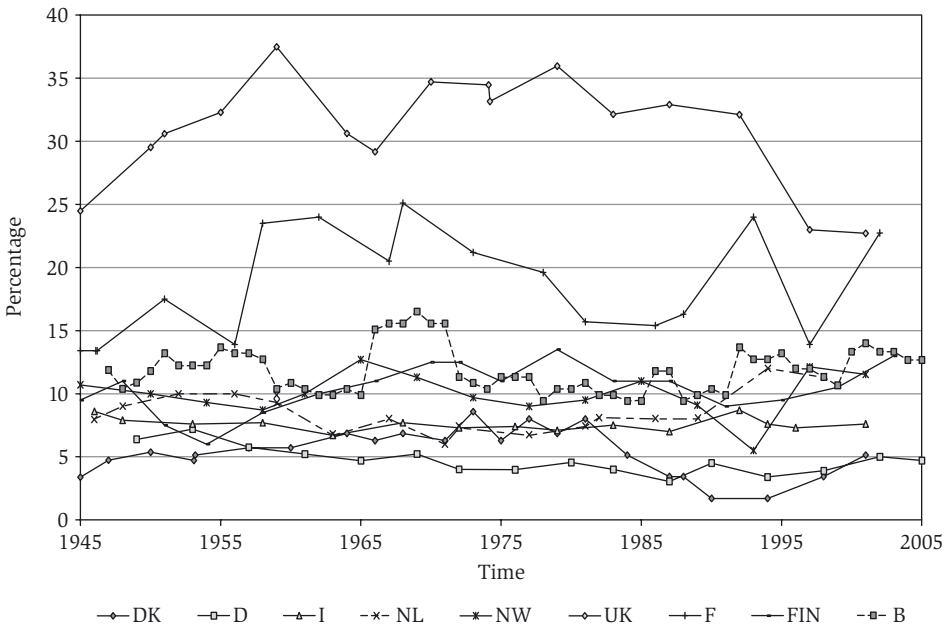


Figure 3. Percentage entrepreneurs in Parliaments of some European countries.

Source: Best and Cotta 2000, and own calculations for Belgium.

democratic party (Dejaeghere and Vansintjan (2005)), and by the competition on this aspect of the liberal party who always has been well disposed to the interest of the self-employed (De Winter (2000)).

A gradual decline in the percentage of entrepreneurs cannot be discerned in any European country.

To sum up, there has not been a dramatic decline in the percentage of self-employed in Belgian Parliament since the Second World War, nor are self-employed underrepresented in relation to their share in the population, nor is the percentage of entrepreneurs in the Belgian House lower than in other European countries.

There have been, however, three remarkable evolutions in the presence of the self-employed (or one of its sub-categories) in Belgian Parliament (see Figure 1). These include the substantial decline of the percentage of free and liberal professions in the 1970s, the slight increase of this percentage from the 1980s onwards, and the considerable drop in the percentage of entrepreneurs in the Senate in the second half of the 1990s. In the next section, we intend to give some tentative explanations for these three evolutions.

VI. Tentative Explanations: Democratization versus Professionalization

The last few decades, a process of modernization has characterized most Western societies. This development consisted of two conflicting trends for parliamentary representation: a process of democratization and one of professionalization (Best and Cotta (2000)).

A. Democratization

The process of democratization has been gradual but steady in most Western societies throughout the 20th century. This process of opening up political arenas for those who were formerly excluded, consists of several aspects, among others granting suffrage rights, granting political rights, mobilization and representation. These aspects did not develop simultaneously. For instance, women were first granted suffrage rights, and only some decades later their presence in Parliament increased considerably. If values and norms change in society, then the composition of Parliament will over time be affected by these evolutions.

Inglehart (1990) has shown that there has been a clear shift in the political culture and values in Western countries between 1970 and 1988. A substantial modification in the political values has taken place in industrialized modern societies,

where post-materialist values have taken the place of traditional materialist values. In this modernization process, the deepening of democratic values is an important element, which focuses, among others, on the improvement of the democratic functioning of political institutions, in particular in respect to political representation. It seems likely that such a societal evolution could result in a replacement of elites from aristocratic backgrounds in Parliament by representatives of lower and middle classes (besides efforts to increase the percentage of specific groups, such as women).

In concrete, this democratization is likely to have as an effect that the presence in Parliament of formerly privileged groups such as liberal professions and entrepreneurs will decline. This is confirmed by the sharp decline in the percentages of free and liberal professions in the 1970s. The percentage of entrepreneurs in Parliament remains, however, constant over time. The drop in the percentages of liberal and free professions coincides with a marked increase in the percentage of teachers, typically a profession from the intermediate level in society. In 1970 only 13.2 percent of the members of the House of Representatives had a previous professional career in education. At the end of the 1970s, this had almost doubled to 25.5 percent (not in Figure 1). This suggests that members with a higher class profession, such as lawyers and doctors, were replaced by teachers belonging to the middle class.

B. Professionalization

A second trend in society is the professionalization of politics (King (1981); Borchert (2003)).

“Political representation now appears to be a profession in itself, requiring much more than a simple mirroring of the features of those who are to be represented in order to be elected and act as representative.” (Cotta and Best (2000), p. 505).

The workload of parliamentarians has increased significantly the last decades. There has been a substantial increase in the number of committee meetings in Belgian Parliament from the mid-1980s onwards, while the number of plenary sessions remained constant (Dewachter, Thomas and Depauw (1997); Biondi, Dewachter, Fiers and Wauters (2000)). Moreover, owing to the reform of the House and the Senate, this workload had to be shared between fewer parliamentarians from 1995 onwards. This heavy workload renders the combination of a political mandate with a profession outside politics very difficult. In 1996, parliamentarians who weren't full-time politicians did spend only 12 hours a week on their job outside politics (De Winter and Brans (2003)). Thus, even parliamentarians with an external job are in practice almost full-time politicians.

There are jobs that can be more easily combined with a political career than others. These jobs also permit better than others to switch between the job and a political mandate, both before and after being a parliamentarian. Professions that facilitate this combination are called 'brokerage occupations' (Jacob (1962); Norris and Lovenduski (1995)). Jobs from this category include among others lawyers, journalists, teachers and trade union officials. These jobs combine among others flexibility in working hours, the possibility to interrupt temporarily the professional career, the presence of public networks, experience with policy and technical skills useful in politics.

Since neither entrepreneurs nor farmers can be classified as 'brokerage occupations', it seems likely that professionalization will result in a decrease in their presence in Parliament. Liberal and free professions, which allow for a combination of a political mandate and a professional career, are likely to benefit from this trend. The percentages from the 1980s onwards (the time when the work load of parliamentarians began to increase considerably) as presented in Figure 1 confirm the latter hypothesis, but reject the former.

C. The Role of the Selectorate and the Electorate

The composition of Parliament reflects society and its changing structure, but this is never a purely passive process of translation into parliamentary seats. The recruitment process is an important intermediary factor and consists of four elements: the contenders, the selectorate (those who compose the candidate lists), the electorate and the electoral rules (Norris (1996)). The social makeup of a Parliament can in the end be viewed as a result of norms, values, interests, and opportunities of all those who are involved in the recruitment process. The complex composition of the Senate (see above) allows us to assess the role of the political party (the selectorate) in helping the self-employed becoming elected in Parliament. The autonomy of the selectorate is largest for the co-opted Senators, then for the Community Senators (where the pool of the candidates is smaller than for the co-opted Senators) and smallest for the directly elected Senators (which must receive votes in order to become elected) (Fiers (2000); Wauters and Lambrecht (2007)). It is worthwhile to compare the situation before and after the reforms of 1995. Given the limited number of co-opted Senators, these figures have to be interpreted with some caution.

Table 1 shows that by type of Senator, the entrepreneurs had the highest share in the category of Provincial and Community Senators. After 1995, the percentage of entrepreneurs among directly elected Senators, and especially among co-opted Senators has witnessed as sharp decline. The marked drop in the percentage of entrepreneurs, which became apparent in Figure 1, is due to their decline in the directly

elected Senators (from 17.19 percent to 7.50 percent) and in the co-opted Senators (from 12.49 percent to 3.64 percent). It is not possible to determine whether the party or the electorate can be blamed for this evolution, since the evolution is manifest for Senators where the party has a very large impact (co-opted Senators) and where the party has a moderate impact (directly elected Senators). Probably, the use of region-wide electoral districts is detrimental for self-employed people.

The free and liberal professions took initially a large share of the directly elected and co-opted Senators. After the reforms of 1995, the shares of free and liberal professions by type of Senator are almost equal to each other.

All in all, it seems that both the electorate and the selectorate can be held accountable for the presence of the self-employed in Parliament. The reform of the Senate has had an important impact on their presence.

Table 1. Average of the percentages of entrepreneurs and free & intellectual professions in the Senate per year, by type of mandate.

	Entrepreneurs	Free & intellectual professions
Directly elected Senators (moderate impact of party)		
Before 1995 (N = 5179)	17.19	26.36
After 1995 (N = 440)	7.50	27.05
Provincial and Community Senators (large impact of party)		
Before 1995 (N = 2364)	17.81	19.26
After 1995 (N = 231)	17.32	25.97
Co-opted Senators (very large impact of party)		
Before 1995 (N = 1185)	12.49	30.49
After 1995 (N = 110)	3.64	26.36

Source: Own calculations.

In conclusion, the processes of democratization and professionalization appear to have influenced the percentage of free and intellectual professions in Parliament. The decline in the number of entrepreneurs at the end of the 1990s can be explained by the reform of the composition of the Senate. It is, however, difficult to distinguish between the effect of the electorate and the selectorate.

VII. Profile of the Self-Employed in Parliament

In this section, we shed more light on the profile of the self-employed active in Belgian Parliament. Possibly, this profile can serve as an additional explanation for the

perception of under-representation of the self-employed. We assume that parliamentarians lacking parliamentary experience and parliamentarians who do not belong to government parties, tend to have less political power, and hence a smaller policy impact than other parliamentarians.

Parliamentary experience and cumulative expertise in a particular policy domain are the sole instruments parliamentarians can use against the abundance of advisers a cabinet member can rely on (Depauw and Fiers (2008)).

As for belonging to a government party, it can be stated that in Belgium coalition partners settle most political disputes before a cabinet is formed. The reached agreement is formalized in a document which is to be endorsed (or rejected) as a whole by the government parties. As a consequence, parliamentarians of the government parties are expected to stick to this government agreement, which leaves little room for successful initiatives of members of the opposition parties (De Winter (1995)).

This lack of power, due to a lack of experience or due to belonging to an opposition party, could cause distrust among the rank and file of the self-employed parliamentarians.

A. Duration of a Parliamentary Mandate

Table 2. The average duration of a parliamentary mandate by profession.

	House	Senate
Entrepreneurs	9.1 (N = 175)	7.8 (N = 195)
Free and intellectual professions	11.5 (N = 137)	7.8 (N = 288)
General average	9.4 (N = 1074)	7.9 (N = 1084)

Source: Fiers (2000) and own calculations.

Although entrepreneurs enter Parliament at an older age than average (Wauters and Lambrecht (2007)), the duration of their mandate in the House is only slightly shorter than average: 9.1 years versus 9.4 years, while in the Senate it is approximately the same. We should note however that representatives of smaller parties tend to pull down the general average (Fiers (2000)), while they often do not count many entrepreneurs (see below).

For the free and intellectual professions, the duration of the mandate is much longer than average in the House, while it almost equals the general average in the Senate. As a consequence, the total number of MPs with a free and intellectual profession is lower, but they remain longer in Parliament.

It appears that the duration of the mandate cannot serve as an explanation for the critical attitude of self-employed in Belgian politics and for the efforts of organisations of the self-employed.

B. Party in Government or Opposition

Figure 4 shows that the percentages of entrepreneurs and free and intellectual professions belonging to a government party have fluctuated strongly over time. They have, however, never been lower than 20 percent in the House (the percentages for the Senate are quite similar and therefore not presented separately here). In the 1980s and the first years of 2000, even around 80 percent of the entrepreneurs in the House of Representatives belonged to a government party. There is a notable parallelism between the percentages of entrepreneurs and the percentages of free and intellectual professions.

The percentages of these specific groups in government parties in the House reflect to a great extent the party composition of the government. Studies have demonstrated that entrepreneurs and people with a free and intellectual profession can be mainly found in liberal and christian-democratic parties (Coninckx and Valcke (2006); Reynaert, Steyvers and Verlet (2006); Wauters and Lambrecht (2007)). Until 1965, the christian-democratic party counted a large share of the total number of entrepreneurs in its parliamentary party. At that time, this was the dominant party consisting of several socio-economic factions (usually called ‘standen’), of which

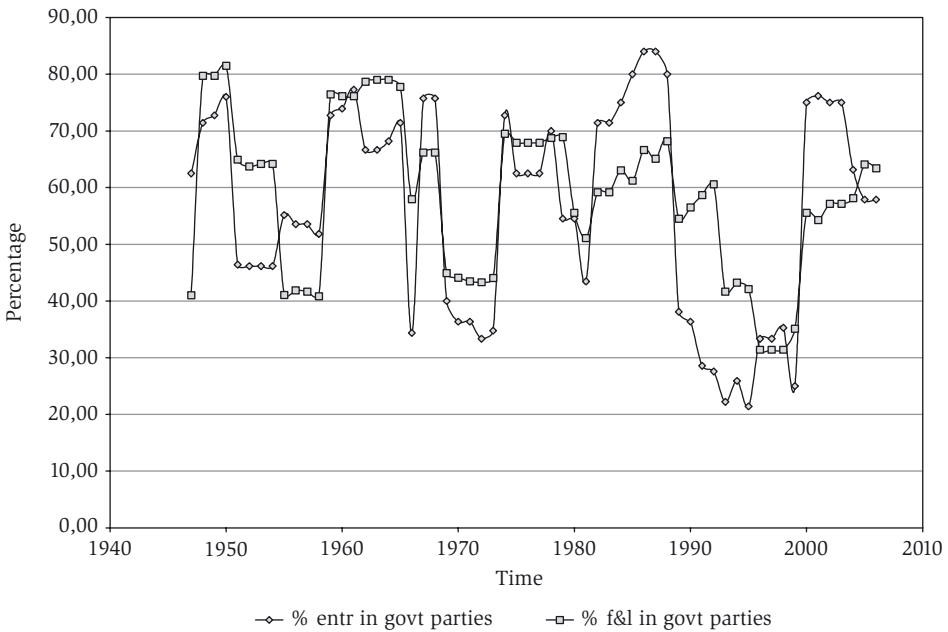


Figure 4. Percentages of entrepreneurs and free and intellectual professions in the Belgian House of Representatives that belong to a government party.

Source: Own calculations.

the middle class faction was an important one (Dejaeghere and Vansintjan (2005)). From 1965 and the electoral break-through of the liberal party onwards, the liberal party has become the major supplier of parliamentarians who have been an entrepreneur before. As a consequence, whether the liberal party is part of the government has an impact upon the percentages of entrepreneurs belonging to a government party: in the 1980s with christian-democratic – liberal coalition governments, this percentage is high, while in the 1990s with christian-democratic – social-democratic coalition governments, these percentages drop considerably. The percentages of free and liberal professions follow the percentages of the entrepreneurs, albeit the fluctuations are less marked.

Again, there is no evidence that entrepreneurs or free and intellectual professions are largely underrepresented in government parties in Parliament.

VIII. **The Self-Employed in Government**

Finally, we look at the presence of the self-employed in government. The most powerful positions in the Belgian political system are situated in the government (Dewachter (2001)): the underrepresentation of a social group in government could hamper the consideration of its interests when important policy decisions are taken.

Figure 5 shows a gradual, but straightforward decline over time for all the three sub-categories of the self-employed. There are, however, fluctuations due to the party composition of the government. The share of free and liberal professions in government tends to be higher when the liberal party and/or regionalist parties are part of it. Both types of parties counted a higher number of free and liberal professions than average (De Winter (1998); Wauters and Lambrecht (2007)). These professions are in historic perspective the natural supporters of the liberal party and as part of the regional cultural elite also, although to a lesser extent, of the regionalist parties.

Besides these variations due to the party composition of the government, some trends can be distinguished.

For the free and intellectual professions, there has been a sharp decline at the end of the 1970s, which is only partially compensated when the liberals re-enter the government in the 1980s. This decline mirrors the percentages in Parliament which also went down in about the same period. The overall trend line is nevertheless clearly negative, indicating a decline in the percentage of free and intellectual professions in government. As for the entrepreneurs, there have been variations over time in both directions. In the 1990s, when socialists and christian-democrats are part of the coalition government, entrepreneurs are no longer part of the gov-

ernment. There is a negative trend line for the presence of entrepreneurs in government, although this line is less steep than that of the free and intellectual professions. This decline in the percentage of entrepreneurs is remarkable given the fact that their presence in Parliament remained constant over time.

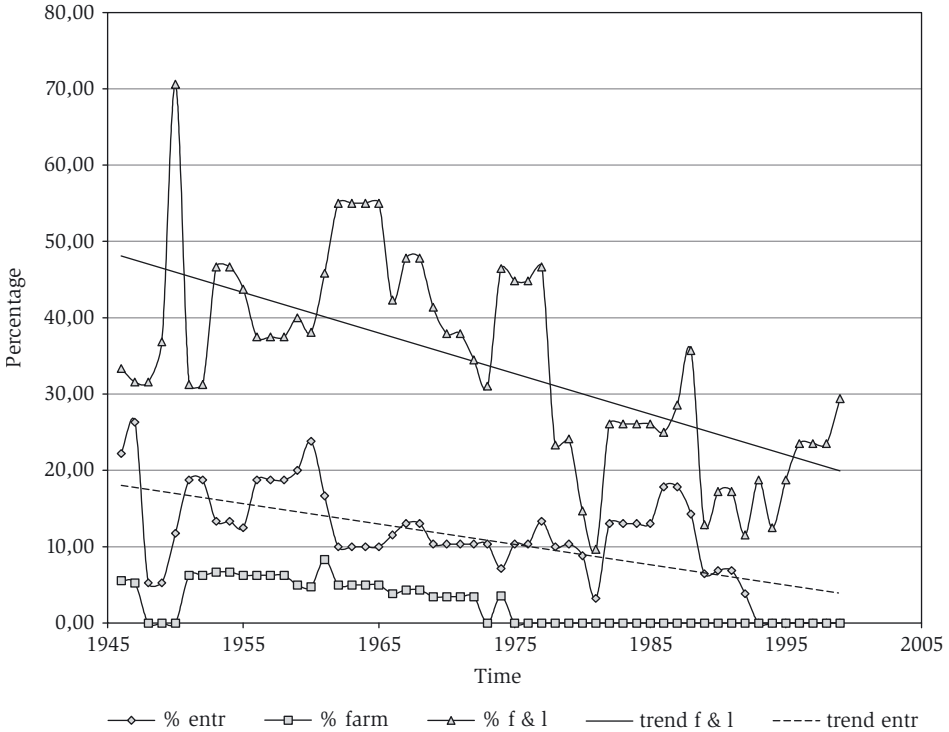


Figure 5. Percentages of farmers, entrepreneurs and free and intellectual professions in the Belgian Government (both ministers and secretaries of state) (1946-1999).

Source: Own calculations.

Notwithstanding the decline over time, the self-employed in general continue, apart from a few years, to be over represented in government in comparison with their share in the labor force (not in Figure 5).

IX. Conclusions

It has been argued in this article that the self-employed constitute a relevant group in society, for whom the descriptive representation in Parliament, i.e. their pres-

ence, is important. Self-employed MPs indicating that their presence in Parliament is a guarantee for the consideration of self-employed interests, organisations of the self-employed making every effort to increase the presence of self-employed in politics and a critical attitude among self-employed towards politics point us into that direction.

The efforts of the organisations of the self-employed suggest that self-employed are underrepresented in Belgian politics. We investigated in this article whether the underrepresentation thesis holds.

In our analysis, we do find that the self-employed are not underrepresented in Belgian Parliament in comparison with their share in the population nor compared with other European countries. Moreover, self-employed do not serve for a shorter period of time in Parliament nor do they belong significantly less to government parties.

As for the entrepreneurs, there has not been a marked decline in their percentages in Parliament. There has been, however, a sharp decrease in the percentage of free and intellectual professions in Parliament owing to processes of democratization, only slightly counter-balanced by an increase due to processes of professionalization. This downward trend can also be found in government, and also for entrepreneurs in government. However, even in government, self-employed continue to be overrepresented in comparison with their share in the labor force.

In conclusion, self-employed seem to be both in Parliament and in government proportionally represented, if not over represented. As concerns the comparison over time, we end up with a mixed picture: in Parliament, there has not been a downward trend, except maybe for the free and intellectual professions, while in government, the share of both entrepreneurs and free and intellectual professions has decreased enormously over time.

It appears that other factors, such as the performance of the government, the perception of underrepresentation and the lack of impact upon public policy, play also a role, and perhaps a more important role, in explaining the difficult relationship between self-employed and politics. Further research should clarify whether these factors do indeed make a difference in the Belgian context.

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