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## The Impact of Third Party Presence in Survey Interviews on the Measurement of Political Knowledge

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### Abstract

This article evaluates whether and to what extent the presence of third parties during the survey interview biases the measurement of the respondent's political knowledge. Three specific hypotheses about the effect of third party presence on the measurement of political knowledge are formulated and tested on the data of the Flemish part of the Belgian general election study of 1991. The hypotheses are only supported for the female respondents (interviewed in the presence of a male third party) but not for the male respondents (interviewed in the presence of a female third party): female respondents interviewed in the presence of an interfering and informed third party gave more correct answers and less 'don't know' answers to 12 political knowledge questions than female respondents for whom such a third party was not present.

### 1 Introduction

According to usual survey interview rules the presence of third parties during an interview should be avoided at all times (e.g., Sudman & Bradburn 1974; Blair 1979). Although research results on the impact of third party presence on the respondents' answers are often inconclusive and even contradictory, three reasons can be given for this maxim (Hofhuis 1995). First of all, the presence of a third party could bias the measurement of the respondent's knowledge about certain issues. After all, two persons have more knowledge than one person. The measurement could, therefore, not only represent the knowledge of the respondent but also – or, in extreme cases, only – the knowledge of the third party present during the interview. Second, the presence of a third party is an encroachment on the privacy of the interview situation. This might lead the respondent to try to project a more positive image of him or herself to the interviewer and the third person. Therefore, the presence of third parties might cause respondents to give more socially desirable answers or answers that are desirable in the given situation (see, for instance, Taietz 1962; Aquilino 1993; Smith 1997). Finally, the presence of a third party could have an effect on the reference frame of the respondent, in

the sense that different types of third persons lead to the activation of different frames of reference in the respondent's mind and hence to different answers. This could explain why third party impact has also been demonstrated when questions were asked and answered on paper (i.e., during a face-to-face interview while the interviewer is present) (Reuband 1984; Aquilino 1993; Hofhuis 1995).

Most of the research on the impact of third party presence on respondents' answers has been devoted to the second kind of influence. Both other types of third party effects have received far less attention. The effects on the measurements of the respondent's knowledge have never even been explicitly covered in literature. However, it is plausible to assume that knowledge questions, because of their quiz-like nature, are most prone to third party effects. Moreover, taking into account that, despite the instructions to avoid third party presence, between 20 and 60 % of survey interviews are conducted in the presence of at least one third party, third party presence might be a major source of bias when measuring the respondents' knowledge about some issues (Koomen & Van Ravesteijn 1968; Lutynska 1969; Glasgow 1982; Reuband 1984, 1987, 1992; Allerbeck & Hoag 1985; Loosveldt 1985; Mohr 1986; Silver, Abramson & Anderson 1986; Hartmann 1991; Hoyt & Chaloupka 1994; Pollner & Adams 1994, 1997; Hofhuis 1995; Smith 1997; Vandenbulck 1999). Because virtually no research has been done on the impact of third party presence on respondents' answers to knowledge items, it will be the focus of this article.

In general, a contribution of knowledge by the third party can take place whenever two people know more than one. This can, for instance, be the case if the third party is able to remember certain events or the time of their occurrence more accurately than the respondent. The third person may realize that the respondent has misinterpreted a question, or he or she may possess knowledge that the respondent does not have. If the third person informs the respondent accordingly during the interview and if the respondent takes this information into consideration when answering the question, then a response effect due to the presence of the third party has occurred (Hofhuis 1995). From this definition one can justly conclude that a contribution of knowledge by the third party is not always undesirable. In some cases it can lead to a more reliable and valid report of the respondent's behaviour, e.g. the presence of the spouse might lead to a more accurate report of the occurrence of marital disputes. It can, however, also bias certain measurements. If, for instance, the researcher aims to measure the respondent's (and only the respondent's) knowledge about a certain topic (politics in this case), the contribution of knowledge by the third party is most unwelcome as it biases the measurement in a systematic way.

Hofhuis (1995) has formulated three necessary conditions for this kind of response effect to occur. The first is, of course, that a third person is present at the interview and able to hear the questions. Moreover, the third person has to interfere during the interview. This is the second condition. If the third person is not actively involved in the interview, he cannot transfer his knowledge to the respondent. Finally, the third person has to be informed about the subject at hand, otherwise there is no knowledge to be passed on.

Since it seems reasonable to assume that two persons know more than one, a third party bias would mean that respondents who were interviewed in the presence of an informed and interfering third party would, on average, give more correct answers to knowledge questions (in this case political knowledge questions) than the respondents for whom such a type of third party was not present. This statement, however, assumes that the information contributed by the third party is correct. This is not necessarily the case; the third party can also pass on wrong information to the respondent. From our point of view, however, it does not matter whether the information that is provided by the third party is correct or not. After all, it can lead to a bias in the measurement of the political knowledge of the respondent in both cases. However, it could well mean, that the number of correct answers to the political knowledge questions is not a good indicator for the measurement of the third person bias. The number of 'don't know' answers might be a more adequate way to measure the impact of third party presence on the political knowledge of respondents. If the third party provides the respondent with additional information, this should (on average) lead to a lower number of 'don't know' answers for respondents interviewed in the presence of an interfering and informed third party. The concept of an 'informed third party' then takes on a slightly different meaning. It no longer indicates that the third party is actually informed about the subject, but only that the respondent believes that the third party *could* know something about it and hence is willing to take that person's opinion into account when answering the questions. The operationalization of the concept, however, does not change. Both the number of correct answers and the number of 'don't know' answers will be taken into account here as indicators of political knowledge.

This leads to the following hypotheses, which provide a critical test of the conditions required for a knowledge contribution by the third party:

H1: Respondents who are interviewed in the presence of an informed and interfering third party give more correct answers and less 'don't know' answers to political knowledge questions than respondents who are interviewed alone. (None of the conditions for a knowledge contribution by the third party are satisfied for the latter respondents.)

H2: Respondents who are interviewed in the presence of an informed and interfering third party give more correct answers and less 'don't know' answers to political knowledge questions than respondents interviewed in the presence of an informed but not interfering third party. (The second condition is not satisfied for the latter group.)

H3: Respondents who are interviewed in the presence of an informed and interfering third party give more correct answers and less 'don't know' answers to political knowledge questions than respondents interviewed in the presence of an interfering but not informed third party. (The third condition is not satisfied for the latter respondents.)

In the evaluation of a possible third party effect on the measurement of political knowledge we also have to consider that respondents who are interviewed in the presence of a third party and respondents interviewed alone cannot be considered as two random samples from the same population. In other words, third party presence depends on certain respondent characteristics. Several authors have shown that the presence of a third party is related to gender ('t Hart 1978; Glasgow 1982; Reuband 1984, 1987; Mohr 1986; Hofhuis 1995); age (Blair 1979; Reuband 1984; Aquilino 1993); education (Lutynska 1969; Reuband 1984; Hofhuis 1995; Van den Bulck 1999); professional status (Lutynska 1969; Hartmann 1994, 1996); socio-economic status ('t Hart 1978; Blair 1979; Reuband 1984; Aquilino 1993); type and/or size of the respondent's residence (Podmore, Chaney & Golder 1975; Aquilino 1993); marital status and size of the respondent's household ('t Hart 1978; Reuband 1987, 1992; Hartmann 1996; Van den Bulck 1999); and race (Silver, Abramson & Anderson 1986; Aquilino 1993; Pollner & Adams 1994, 1997). Some of these respondent characteristics have also been shown to be associated with the degree of interference by the third party, namely gender (Mohr 1986; Reuband 1987), age ('t Hart 1978; Van den Bulck 1999) and education (Van den Bulck 1999). There is another aspect that has not been covered in literature, but which also seems important for the presence of and the interference by third parties: namely, the capacity of the respondents to comprehend the survey questions. It seems reasonable to assume that third parties are more likely to be present and that they are more likely to interfere if the respondent's capacity to understand the questions is limited. Such respondents are probably more likely to turn to others for help. Loosveldt (1993, 1995, 1997) refers to these kinds of respondents as 'difficult-to-interview' respondents.

In addition to the variables that have an effect on the presence of and the interference by third parties, variables influencing the dependent variable, political knowledge, also have to be controlled. Cambré, Billiet and Swyngedouw (1996) have shown that the political knowledge of respondents in a representative survey from the Flemish population was directly related to

gender, education, interest in politics and utilitarian individualism. Our analyses will also be based on a random sample from the same population

Because of the relationship between gender and political knowledge, the contribution of knowledge by the third party might also depend on the third party's gender. Because, in general, Flemish women are less informed about politics than Flemish men (Cambré, Billiet & Swyngedouw 1996), the impact of the presence of the third party on the measurement of the respondent's political knowledge might be greater for male than for female third parties. For this reason, the hypotheses will be tested in interaction with the third party's gender. It would also be interesting to test our hypotheses in interaction with the other variables reported to have an impact on political knowledge. Unfortunately, the current data only provides information about the gender of the third party.

## 2 Methods

The data for the analyses stems from the Flemish part of the 1991 Belgian general election survey (Carton et al. 1993; Swyngedouw et al. 1993).<sup>1</sup> This general election was held on 24 November 1991 and the data collection, which took about three months, started the day after the election. The data was collected through face-to-face-interviews, which were conducted by trained and experienced interviewers from the interviewer network of the Interuniversity Center for Political Opinion Research (ISPO). A two-stage sample with equal probabilities of selection of the elementary sampling units was used. In the first stage, the municipalities were selected at random. About 120 Flemish communities out of 316 were included in the sample. In the second stage, a random sample of respondents was selected from the national population register. Eventually, 2474 respondents were interviewed.<sup>2</sup> The response rate was 66.5%; in other words interviews were actually conducted with 66.5% of the originally selected respondents. The sample is representative of the enfranchised Flemish citizens between 18 and 65 years old (Carton et al. 1993).

The political knowledge of the respondents was measured using twelve questions. Respondents were given the name of twelve politicians and asked to name the party to which each politician belonged (see Appendix). On average 5.2 questions were answered correctly (sd=2.55). The average number of 'don't know' answers was equal to 4.45 (sd=3.00).<sup>3</sup> Information concerning the presence of third parties during the interview was registered by the interviewers. They had to note down whether there was anyone else within earshot during the interview, how the third party was related to the respondent, and whether that third party interfered during the interview (see Appendix). With respect to this last aspect of third party presence, the

interviewers had to denote whether the third party interfered constantly, only now and again, or never. 48.1 % (N=1159) of the interviews were conducted in the presence of a third party. In about two thirds (64.1 %, N=737) of the interviews, in which a third person was present, this person did not interfere with the interview. 29.7 % (N=342) of the third persons interfered now and then, and another 6.2 % (N=71) interfered constantly. With regard to the relationship of the third party, the following categories were distinguished: spouse/partner, child (children), parents (-in-law), brothers or sisters (-in-law), friends, spouse and children, others. In half (N=548) of the non-private interviews, the third party was the respondent's spouse. Almost 20 % (19.6 %, N=215) of these interviews were conducted in the presence of the respondent's spouse and child (children); 11.4 % (N=125) in the presence of only the children and 10.4 % (N=114) in the presence of the respondent's parents (-in-law).

To test our hypotheses, five groups of respondents (with respect to third party presence) will be distinguished. First of all, we need a group of respondents that was interviewed in the presence of an informed and interfering third party. They will serve as a sort of reference group, since they are involved in all three hypotheses. The respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse or partner will be selected for this purpose. There are three reasons for selecting this group of respondents. Firstly, it seems reasonable to assume that only adults are informed about the parties to which politicians belong. Respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a child are thereby omitted. Secondly, because the third party is required to have interfered, respondents who were interviewed in the presence of spouse and child can be discarded. For these respondents, we do not know whether the interfering third party was the spouse (informed third party) or the child (uninformed third party). This requirement also incites us to distinguish between respondents whose spouse interfered constantly and respondents whose spouse interfered only now and again. After all for the latter group, we are not sure whether the third party interfered with the questions of interest. The respondents whose spouse interfered only occasionally are treated as a separate group (second group) in the analysis. Thirdly, we would like to know whether third party effects differ for male and female third parties. We can easily deduce the gender of the third party from the respondent's gender for those who were interviewed in the presence of their spouses. This is not the case for the respondents in the other categories. Also, the respondents who were interviewed in the presence of constantly interfering parents (-in-law), brothers or sisters (-in-law), friends, or spouse and children are too few in number to be included in the analysis as separate categories (to make a valid comparison between different types of third parties, all other circumstances should be held constant; hence the condition of constant interference).

The first hypothesis compares the first group of respondents (informed and interfering third party present) to the respondents that were interviewed alone. This is the third group that needs to be distinguished. The fourth group of respondents are those who were interviewed in the presence of an informed but non-interfering third party. The respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a non-interfering spouse were selected for this purpose. This group has to be comparable with the first group and, therefore, only the degree of interference by the third party is allowed to differ between these groups. Finally, the fifth group of respondents consists of respondents who were interviewed in the presence of an interfering but uninformed third party. This group is formed by the respondents who were interviewed in the presence of an interfering child, because this is the only case where we can be sure that the interfering third party is uninformed about the subject at hand.

Hence, the respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse (group 1) will be compared to the respondents interviewed in the presence of an occasionally interfering spouse (group 2), respondents who were interviewed alone (group 3), those who were interviewed in the presence of a non-interfering spouse (group 4) and those interviewed in the presence of an interfering child (group 5).

Not all variables that, according to literature, could have an impact on third party presence and interference were measured in the 1991 general election survey. The survey does not include information about the nature and size of the respondent's residence, the size of the household and the respondent's race. Thus, the effect of these variables on the two aspects of third party presence cannot be evaluated. In fact the race of the respondents is of little importance for the Flemish population, because there are no major ethnic differences within this population. All other characteristics, except the socio-economic status of the respondent, are taken up in the analysis. This variable was not used because the professional status and education of the respondent account for most of the variation in the respondent's socio-economic status.

With respect to their education, the respondents had to provide the highest level of education or diploma they had obtained (see Appendix). To avoid having to use too many dummy variables in further analyses, three categories were distinguished with respect to the respondent's education: the respondents with a lower technical secondary education or less (low), respondents with at most a higher technical secondary education (moderate), and respondents with at least a higher general secondary education (high). With regard to the professional status, the subdivisions are as follows: white-collar workers and executives, self-employed persons, blue-collar workers, and people not currently working. The respondents' capacity to comprehend the questions and answer them meaningfully was evaluated by the interviewer after the interview. The original variable contained six categories (see Appendix), but

to avoid too many dummy variables, these were reorganized into three categories. Respondents were classified as having a low, moderate or high capacity to comprehend the questions.

In addition to these variables, two more respondent characteristics that influence the respondent's political knowledge were also taken into account; these being utilitarian individualism and political interest. Utilitarian individualism expresses an orientation towards materialistic self-interest, personal success and pleasure. People with this view think that one should first of all take care of oneself and defend one's own interests. This attitude leads to a low interest in what goes on in society, and hence also in politics. Utilitarian individualism also refers to an attitude of distrust towards others in general and politicians in particular (Billiet, Cambré & Swyngedouw 1997). This concept was constructed as an additive metric scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.75$ ) based on 4 'agree-disagree' items (see Appendix). The variable for political interest was constructed on the basis of three items: reading the political news in the paper; discussing politics among friends; and trying to convince others of one's own political opinions (see Appendix). The scores on these three items were added to obtain a scale for the respondent's interest in politics (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.64$ ).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Preliminary analyses

First we will evaluate which of the respondent characteristics mentioned above are related to the presence of and/or interference by the spouse/partner or the children of the respondent. Then we will investigate whether the variables that, according to literature, have an influence on political knowledge are also important in the current population. These first two steps will indicate which variables will have to be controlled when testing the hypotheses about knowledge contribution by third parties.

##### 3.1.1 Third party presence

To test the impact of respondents' characteristics on the presence of third parties, a logistic regression model was used. The dependent variable takes the value 1 if the respondent's spouse or child was present during the interview; in all other cases the value 0. The model, the results of which are shown in Table 1, estimates the probability that the dependent variable takes on the value 1. If necessary, dummy variables were used for the independent variables.

Table 1 Logit estimates of the effects of the presense of the spouse/partner or child(ren)

Variable	Standardized estimate
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	0,015
Age	0,081*
Education (baseline: 'low'):	
High education level (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,130**
Moderate education level (1=yes, 0=no)	0,010
Professional status (baseline: 'unemployed')	
White collar workers/executives (1=yes, 0=no)	0,054
Self-employed (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,055
Blue collar workers (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,002
Respondent's ability to comprehend questions (baseline: 'low')	
High ability (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,088
Moderate ability (1=yes, 0=no)	0,004
Living with permanent partner (1=yes, 0=no)	0,471***
Cases correctly predicted (%)	57,6
N	2408

\*  $<0.05$ , \*\* $<0.01$ , \*\*\* $<0.001$

Table 1 shows that the logit of having the spouse or a child present at the interview goes up as the respondent gets older and for respondents that live together with a permanent partner. The latter finding is quite trivial, but it is still important to control for this aspect when evaluating the impact of third party presence on the measurement of political knowledge. The positive effect of age on the presence of the spouse/children might be due, on the one hand, to the tendency of older couples to spend more time together at home than younger couples (Aquilino 1993) and, on the other hand, to the fact that very young couples do not usually have children. For respondents with a high education, the logit of having a spouse or child present during the interview is significantly lower than for respondents with a low education. There is no difference between respondents with a middle level education and respondents with a low education with respect to spouse or child presence. The respondent's professional status and the respondent's capacity to understand the questions does not seem to be important for the presence of the spouse or child. This finding is a bit surprising because unemployed respondents can be interviewed during the day when their spouse is at work and their children are at school, whereas employed respondents have to be interviewed in the evening.

### 3.1.2 Third party interference

To determine whether these characteristics also play a role with respect to the interference by the partner or child, the interference variable was dichotomised (1=interference, 0=no interference). Again, a logistic regression model was used for the analysis. As before, the probability that the dependent variable takes on the value 1 was modelled. Table 2 shows the results. Only the respondents that were interviewed in the presence of their spouse or a child were taken up in the analysis.

Table 2 *Logit estimates of the effects of the interference by the spouse/partner or child(ren)*

Variable	Standardized estimate
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	-0,044
Age	0,173**
Education (baseline: 'low'):	
High education level (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,053
Moderate education level (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,027
Professional status (baseline: 'unemployed')	
White collar workers/executives (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,090
Self-employed (1=yes, 0=no)	0,026
Blue collar workers (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,117
Respondent's ability to comprehend questions (baseline: 'low')	
High ability (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,522***
Moderate ability (1=yes, 0=no)	-0,392***
Living with permanent partner (1=yes, 0=no)	0,145*
Cases correctly predicted (%)	64,2
N	670

\* <.05, \*\*<.01, \*\*\*<.001

Table 2 shows that the logit for the interference of the spouse or a child increases with age and for the respondents that live together with a permanent partner. The latter is probably due to the fact that most of the respondents who did not live together with a permanent partner were interviewed in the presence of a child (30 out of 38). Children tend to interfere less during the interview than adults ('t Hart 1978). This might also explain why the interference is higher for older respondents. After all, 't Hart (1978) has found that older respondents tend to have older third parties present at the interview. The strongest effect is caused by the respondent's capacity to understand the

questions: the probability of an interfering spouse/partner or interfering child is much lower for the respondents with a high or moderate understanding of the questions than for respondents with a low capacity for understanding the questions. This seems to support our hypothesis that respondents who have difficulties in understanding the questions turn to others more easily for help.

### 3.1.3 Political knowledge

To determine whether gender, education, utilitarian individualism and interest in politics are also relevant explanatory variables for the political knowledge of the current population, regression analyses were used. The first analysis uses the number of correct answers as the dependent variable; in the second analysis the number of 'don't know' answers serves as the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 *Least squares estimates for the number of correct answers and the number of 'don't know' answers to 12 political knowledge questions.*

Variable	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized
	estimate	estimate	estimate	estimate
Gender (1=male, 0=female)	1,23***	0,24	-1,40***	-0,23
Education (baseline: 'low'):				
High education level (1=yes, 0=no)	1,21***	22,49	-1,18***	-0,19
Moderate education level (1=yes, 0=no)	0,13	0,02	-0,10	-0,01
Utilitarian individualism	-0,07***	-0,09	0,07***	0,08
Interest in politics	0,33***	0,35	-0,39***	-0,36
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0,3370		0,3133
N		2408		2408

\* <.05, \*\*<.01, \*\*\*<.001

These analyses confirm the findings of Cambré, Billiet and Swyngedouw (1996): the scores on both indicators for political knowledge depend on the respondent's gender, education, interest in politics, and degree of utilitarian individualism. Political knowledge is higher for male respondents, higher educated respondents, respondents with a greater interest in politics, and for

respondents with a lower degree of utilitarian individualism. The effects of education and interest in politics on the amount of political knowledge are not surprising. The gender effect is due to the fact that women, even when they have the same interest in politics as men, read the political news in the newspaper less often (Billiet, Cambré & Swyngedouw 1997). This is also the case for people with a high degree of utilitarian individualism and this effect is even fortified by their distrust in politicians (Billiet, Cambré & Swyngedouw 1997). These factors are also controlled in the next step of our analysis.

### 3.2 Hypothesis tests

To test our hypotheses, two analyses of variance were used. As before, the first analysis has the number of correct answers as the dependent variable; the second analysis involves the number of 'don't know' answers. The analyses were performed separately for male and female respondents to account for the possibility that the contribution of knowledge by female and male third parties, respectively, might be different because of the difference in political knowledge between males and females (see Table 3). However, hypothesis 3 could not be tested separately for the male respondents because too few (4) male respondents were interviewed in the presence of an interfering child. The analyses control for the relevant background variables (education, age, whether or not the respondent lives together with a permanent partner, the respondents capacity to understand the questions, utilitarian individualism and political interest).

Table 4 shows the results of the pairwise comparisons that were used to test for the main effect of third party presence as well as for the interaction with the respondent's gender. In each of these pairwise comparisons the respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse are compared to the respondents in one of the other categories of third party presence.<sup>4</sup> Because it concerns a priori contrasts, we do not use the Bonferroni correction: the significance level remains at 0.05. Since our hypotheses are one-sided, one-sided p-values were calculated to determine the significance of the pairwise comparisons. Table 4 shows the weighted means (i.e., the least square means when the covariates are controlled at their average value) of the number of correct and 'don't know' answers for each of the categories of third party presence as well as the weighted means for the interaction with gender.

With respect to the number of correct answers to the political knowledge questions, Table 4 shows that for the whole sample all hypotheses are supported: respondents who were interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse (informed and interfering third party) gave on average about one correct answer more than the respondents who were interviewed alone

Table 4 Weighted means for the number of correct answers and the number of 'don't know' answers to the political knowledge questions (N=1820; 881 males and 939 females)<sup>a</sup>

'Presence group'	Number of correct answers	Number of 'don't know' answers
<b>Main effect of third party presence</b>		
Constantly interfering partner (reference group, N=48)	5,73	4,29
Silent partner (N=320)	4,84**	5,18**
Alone (N=1247)	4,92**	4,92**
Interfering child (N=25)	4,64*	5,13
Occasionally interfering partner (N=180)	5,31	4,84
<b>Interaction effect between third party presence and gender</b>		
Men, constantly interfering partner (reference group, N=19) <sup>b</sup>	5,86	3,96
Men, silent partner (N=196)	5,27	4,61
Men, alone (N=626)	5,56	4,26
Men, occasionally interfering partner (N=94)	5,64	4,43
Women, constantly interfering partner (reference group, N=29)	5,61	4,62
Women, silent partner (N=124)	4,40**	5,75**
Women, alone (N=621)	4,26**	5,60*
Women, interfering child (N=21)	3,95**	6,42**
Women, occasionally interfering partner (N=86)	4,98	5,25

\* <.05, \*\*<.01, \*\*\*<.001

a This table compares the mean responses of respondents interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering partner to the respondents in each of the other 'presence' group, in general (upper part) as well as per gender (lower part)

b The numbers of the 4 groups of male respondents do not sum to 881, because the 4 male respondents who were interviewed in the presence of an interfering child were omitted here. The latter respondents were, however, included in the general analysis (upper part).

(H1), in the presence of a silent partner (informed but not interfering, H2) or in the presence of an interfering child (interfering but not informed, H3). The results of the hypothesis tests per gender group, however, show that the latter finding is only due to the female respondents. For the male respondents (interviewed in the presence of a female third party), none of the testable hypotheses is supported by the data, whereas all three hypotheses were

supported for the female respondents. Female respondents, who were interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering (male) spouse, gave up to 1.6 more correct answers to the political knowledge questions than female respondents who were interviewed alone (H1), in the presence of a silent partner (H2) or in the presence of an interfering child (uninformed but interfering third party, H3).

The analysis with respect to the number of 'don't know' answers shows similar results. Generally, the first two hypotheses are supported by the data: respondents interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse gave on average up to about 1 'don't know' answer less than those who were interviewed alone (H1) or in the presence of a silent partner (H2). Again, this effect is only due to the female respondents: none of the hypotheses are supported for the male respondents, whereas for the female respondents all hypotheses are supported by the data. Women interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering (male) spouse gave on average up to 1.8 'don't know' answers fewer than women who were interviewed alone (H1), in the presence of a silent spouse (H2), or in the presence of an interfering child (H3). Clearly, with respect to political knowledge, a knowledge contribution by the third party also depends on the third party's gender.

Table 4 also shows that there is no significant difference between respondents whose partner interfered constantly and respondents whose spouse interfered only now and again. We made a distinction between these two groups because of a practical problem in the administration of the interference by the third party. If the third party interfered only occasionally, then we do not know whether that third party interfered with the political knowledge questions. On the other hand, it seems plausible to assume that these kinds of questions are more prone to intervention by the third party than most other questions and that the occasional interference is most likely to occur with these knowledge questions. The fact that there is no difference between respondents for whom the spouse interfered constantly and respondents interviewed in the presence of an occasionally interfering spouse seems to support the latter idea.

#### 4 Summary and discussion

Although for decades avoiding third party presence has been considered one of the basic rules of survey interviewing, the results of studies on the matter are often inconclusive and contradictory. In our view this is due, to some degree, to the exploratory nature of most of these studies. Very few use or develop a theoretical framework for formulating and testing specific hypotheses about the impact of third party presence. The work of Hofhuis

(1995) was (one of) the first to set out such a theoretical framework. The current research is a critical test of that part of Hofhuis's framework that deals with the effects of a knowledge contribution by a third party. Hofhuis described three necessary conditions for such a knowledge contribution. The hypotheses that were tested here assess the necessity of each of these conditions. Two indicators of political knowledge, namely the number of correct and the number of 'don't know' answers, were used to test the hypotheses. Our results support Hofhuis's framework: if all three conditions are satisfied simultaneously, a knowledge contribution by the third party is very likely.

However, it has also become clear that the effect of third party presence on the measurement of political knowledge is more complex than was first assumed. Because of the relationship between political knowledge and gender, the hypotheses were tested in interaction with the gender of the respondent (and hence also of the third party). The hypotheses were supported for the female respondents but not for the male respondents (who were interviewed in the presence of a female third person). However, this should not necessarily be interpreted as a falsification of the hypotheses. One might also argue that, because women have less knowledge about politics (see Billiet, Cambré & Swyngedouw 1996 and Table 3), they cannot always be considered as informed third parties and hence that not all conditions for a knowledge contribution by the third party were met for the respondents in the male reference group.

For the female respondents (who had a male third party present) all three hypotheses were supported: female respondents interviewed in the presence of a constantly interfering spouse (informed and interfering third party) gave more correct answers and fewer 'don't know' answers to the political knowledge questions than respondents for whom such a third person was not present during the interview. The effects were always reasonably strong. Taking into account that the effect did not only occur when the spouse interfered constantly but also if he interfered only occasionally, this bias might have quite a large impact on the measurement of political knowledge. In Table 4, 115 women were interviewed in the presence of an interfering spouse. If we offset this against the number of women in the total sample (Table 4 does not include the entire sample, only specific groups), this would mean that for about 9.7% of the women in the sample the measurement of political knowledge is upwardly biased. This bias is even more problematic if we take into account that third party presence and interference are related to specific respondent characteristics such as education and age (Tables 1 and 2). Hence, this bias will probably distort correlations between political knowledge and other substantive variables such as propensity to vote, etc. Therefore, it is important to keep applying the common rule in survey interviewing that states that the presence of third parties should be avoided at all times.

## Appendix

## Wording of the questions (Carton et al. 1993)

**Political knowledge**

(At the time of the general election in 1991, there were 21 political parties in Belgium: 11 Flemish parties and 10 Walloon [Francophone] parties. In general, Flemish people [the population used in the analysis] are less familiar with the Walloon politicians than with the Flemish politicians.)

Do you know to which parties the following politicians belong?

1. Jean Gol (PRL, Liberals, Walloon)
2. Wilfried Martens (CVP, Christian Democrats, Flemish)
3. Guy Spitaels (PS, Socialist Party, Walloon)
4. Hugo Schiltz (VU-VVD, Free Democrats, Flemish)
5. Melchior Wathelet (PSC, Christian Democrats, Walloon)
6. Guy Verhofstadt (PVV, Party for Freedom and Progress, Liberals, Flemish)
7. Louis Tobback (SP, Socialist Party, Flemish)
8. Mieke Vogels (AGALEV, Ecologist Party, Flemish)
9. Paul Lannoye (ECOLO, Ecologist Party, Walloon)
10. Antoinette Spaak (FDF/PPW, Democratic Party, Walloon)
11. Filip Dewinter (Vlaams Blok, Extreme Right and Nationalist Party, Flemish)
12. José Happart (PS, Socialist Party, Walloon)

**Third party presence** (to be completed by the interviewer immediately after the interview)

Apart from the respondent and yourself, was anyone else present during the interview who could hear the questions and the answers?

Who was present?

Did this person / any of these people present interfere with the interview? Was there no interference / interference now and again / constant interference?

**Respondent's education**

On card number 2 are a number of diplomas and certificates. Take your time and read them through. What is the highest certificate or diploma that you have achieved? Just say the number that is written next to it.

(Ask the respondent to indicate the present study level if he/she still attends school.)

1. None
2. Primary education
3. Lower secondary vocational education
4. Lower secondary technical education
5. Lower general secondary education
6. Higher vocational education
7. Higher technical secondary education
8. Higher general secondary education
9. Non-university higher education
10. University education
11. Other or if doubtful

**The ability of the respondent to understand the questions**

How do you, in general, judge the capability of the respondent to understand the questions asked in the interview and to give answers that are meaningful to him or herself?

1. Very high
2. High
3. Adequate
4. Poor
5. Very poor
6. Totally inadequate

**Utilitarian individualism**

I am going to read to you a few statements that you will hear sometimes. Please tell me the degree to which you agree or disagree with them. Thus what you, personally, think about them. You may use card no. 7 to answer. However, if you do not have an opinion on the subject, please say so. (Factor loading in parentheses.)

1. Humanity, brotherhood, solidarity – all nonsense. Everybody has to take care of himself first and defend his own interests. (.65)
2. Because you always have to compromise when you deal with other people, it is best not to have too much to do with them. (.65)
3. What counts is money and power, the rest is just hot air. (.62)
4. Striving for personal success is more important than providing for good relations with your fellowmen. (.61)

**Interest in politics**

(Factor loading in parentheses.)

How often do you read the political news in the newspaper? (.56)

When you are among friends, do you ever discuss social and political problems? (.65)

When you have a clear, definite opinion about politics, do you try to convince your friends, the members of your family or your colleagues to agree with you? (.53)

**Notes**

1. The data/tabulations utilized in this article were made available by the ISPO and PIOP Interuniversity Centres for Political Opinion Research, sponsored by the Federal Services for Technical, Cultural and Scientific Affairs. The data was originally collected by Jaak Billiet, Marc Swyngedouw, Ann Carton and Roeland Beerten (ISPO). Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Centre bears any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

2. Another 217 interviews were conducted among the enfranchised citizens between 65 and 74 years old. However, these respondents did not have to answer the questions about political knowledge and are hence not included in the analysis.

3. The number of correct answers is, of course, negatively correlated with the number of 'don't know' answers: the more 'don't know' answers a respondent gives, the less correct answers he can give.

4. A direct comparison between respondents for whom the third party was male and those respondents interviewed in the presence of a female third party, does not make any sense in the current analysis. After all, there is not only a difference between the gender of the third parties, but also between the gender of the respondents.

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## Has Flanders Become Normal? The Importance of Left/Right in Flemish Politics

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### Abstract

Due to the multidimensional character of the Belgian party system, the left/right dimension has never been as dominant in Flanders as it is in other European countries. Consequently, electoral researchers in Flanders pay relatively little attention to the role of left/right distances in party choice, and questionnaires for Belgian election studies do not include items that measure left/right positions. This article argues that there are theoretical reasons to expect that the left/right dimension has become more important in Flanders, and it therefore takes a fresh look at the importance of left/right. It uses European Elections Studies of 1989, 1994 and 1999. The results are somewhat enigmatic. Unfolding analyses provide no support for the hypothesis that left/right has become more important, yet a causal model demonstrates that left/right did become a much stronger determinant of party preference in 1999 than it was in the preceding years. The implications of the results are discussed against the background of recent developments in Belgian politics. Given the strong effect of left/right distances on party choice, more research is needed to investigate the role of left/right in electoral behaviour and to pin down the substantive meaning of the left/right dimension. Therefore, the article recommends including direct measures of respondents' and parties' left/right positions in questionnaires for Belgian election studies.

### 1 Introduction

In most Western European countries, electoral decisions and social positions have become increasingly independent since the 1960s. Research shows that this decline in cleavage politics is largely compensated by an increase in policy voting (Franklin 1992: 400). Instead of relying on social positions as a 'cue' in deciding which party to vote for, the autonomous citizens vote largely on the basis of their policy preferences (e.g. Rose & McAllister 1986; Dalton 1996). Since left/right positions summarize positions on a large number of concrete issues in most European countries (e.g., Fuchs & Klingemann 1990), voters can express their policy preferences by voting on the basis of their position on the left/right dimension. Ample evidence exists that voters in various European