

# Attitudes in the Flemish Political Climate Debate: A Linguistic Analysis

Wout Van Praet\*

## Abstract

*This study investigates the climate communication by the main political parties in Flanders. Its aim is to describe explicit and implicit evaluations that parties make about climate change and climate-related policies in the communication on their websites. To analyse parties' opinions on climate action, the study uses the system of Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005), which provides a framework for interpreting expressions of attitude as a social tool to engage with others. The results show that the climate communication by Flemish political parties strikes an overall positive note. Differences in emphases aside (e.g., on quality of life vs. financial profitability), there seems to be a consensus on the need for, and value of, climate action. The communication by Vlaams Belang stood out as an exception: its negative tone, and critical content, gives signs of climate scepticism, forming a counterposition in the political climate change debate.*

**Keywords:** climate communication, Flemish political parties, appraisal, climate scepticism.

## 1 Introduction

Despite the scientific consensus about climate change, public debate continues about the ways to address climate change and how much climate policies should be prioritised on the political agenda. Politically, the Paris Climate Accord, at the 21st United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties aka COP21 (2015), marked a turning point in global climate politics, strengthening international ambitions to limit global warming. Recent years have proven that upholding these ambitions and, crucially, translating them into concrete policies is a challenge in and of itself. And while outright climate denial seems past its heyday, new forms of counterproductive discourse emerge that may threaten the necessary progress still to be made. With the consequences of climate change being increasingly hard to ignore, 'climate sceptics' no longer deny the existence of climate change but try to minimise the threat climate change poses and cast doubt on the effectiveness of proposed solutions while stressing the potential of other 'miracle' solutions (e.g., solar geoengineering) (e.g., Forchtner & Lubarda, 2023). Alternatively, it tries to feed into a public sense of despair by presenting the climate crisis as insurmountable

\* Wout Van Praet, PostDoc researcher, Université catholique de Louvain.

and climate action as useless (e.g., Van Rensburg, 2015; Van Boussemaere, 2021). That there is a breeding ground for feelings of ‘climate anxiety’ is evidenced by a number of recent studies that found, for instance, that more than two-thirds of the American people experienced at least some climate anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2020) or that 59% of children and young adults reported being very to extremely worried about climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). In the light of these trends, any kind of climate change communication should pay careful attention to its message and tone, not playing into feelings of anxiety but motivating politicians, stakeholders and citizens to encourage effective climate action.

This contribution seeks to monitor the constructiveness of the climate change communication by the main political parties in Flanders, i.e. the northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Belgium is a federal state with three language communities (i.e., Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking) and three regions (i.e., Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), each with its own executive and legislative body. Belgian climate and energy policy is split among the federal and regional levels, and national targets for emission reduction can only be achieved through burden sharing between federal and regional institutions (Klimaat.be, 2024). Compared with other countries of the European Union (EU), Belgium underperforms on climate policy: it ranks as the 11th largest carbon polluter (in absolute numbers), despite its small size, and has one of the largest carbon footprints (based on carbon production per capita) in the EU (Tiseo, 2023). Based on per capita carbon consumption, recent findings suggest that Belgium is one of the biggest emitters in the world, taking 9th place, and in Europe, where it comes in second place after Malta (van der Schoor, 2024). According to EU standards, Belgium should reach a 47% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (compared to 2005) by 2030. While the Walloon and Brussels regions endorse the 47% emission reduction target, Flanders does not commit to reducing its emissions by more than 40% (NECP, 2023), even though it is the region with the biggest population and the highest carbon footprint in Belgium (Géal & Michel, 2023). Because of this, the European Commission estimates that Belgium will not reach its emission reduction target based on current projections (European Commission, 2023). The Commission has assessed Belgium’s climate action plans as lacking ambition and points specifically to the lack of coherence between the plans by the different regions as a roadblock to achieving the desired targets (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). Flanders’ position is pivotal in that regard, with its reluctance to comply with EU emission reduction standards as a case in point. This position contrasts with the overall acceptance of the necessity of climate action among the Flemish electorate: 66% of Flemish voters indicate that they worry about ‘damage to the climate’ (De Vadder & Callebaut, 2020, p. 58), 93% think that climate action should be a medium to top priority for policymakers (*ibid.*, p. 68), and 62% are willing to change their lifestyle to improve the environment (*ibid.*, p. 93). This discrepancy between public opinion and the government’s policies, in addition to Flanders’ critical position for climate policy within Belgium and the EU, make Flanders an interesting case study. It raises the question how Flemish political parties communicate their positions on climate

Wout Van Praet

policy – which is judged to be lacking compared both to EU standards and to other Belgian regions – to an audience that is generally in favour of climate action.

The aim of this contribution is to describe the explicit and implicit evaluations that Flemish political parties make about climate policies and the actors involved (e.g., citizens, companies, (other) politicians). It specifically examines the following research questions.

- i How constructive or positive are the evaluations different parties make when communicating about climate change and climate policies?
- ii What aspects do the parties focus on when appraising climate change and climate policies (e.g., ambition, attainability, financial cost, environmental impact)?
- iii Do the parameters studied in (i) and (ii) differ between the parties, specifically in terms of their progressive versus conservative ideology, on the one hand, and/or in terms of their role as a government versus opposition party, on the other hand?

Answering these questions will offer insight into the opinions that dominate the political climate debate in Flanders and the image that political parties present of themselves to engage with citizens. To investigate, from a linguistic perspective, the evaluations Flemish political parties make within the climate debate, the study is structured around an ‘Appraisal’ analysis, a framework for examining evaluative language.

The structure of this contribution is as follows. Section 2 offers a brief background to the linguistic study of climate communication and how the Appraisal system can serve as a tool for such research. Section 3 describes the materials and methods used in this study. Section 4 presents and discusses the results, offering both a quantitative overview of the findings and a qualitative exploration of specific representative examples. The main take-aways and meaningful generalisations that can be drawn from these results are outlined in a concluding discussion in Section 5.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 *The Linguistic Study of Climate Change Communication*

While climate change communication has been a growing research field, specifically in discourse and media studies, since the late 1990s (e.g., Nerlich et al., 2010; Koteyko & Atanasova, 2016), linguistic analyses of climate change communication have developed, in particular in the 2010s (Fløttum, 2010, 2013, 2016). Complementary to the macrolevel perspective in discourse and communication studies – e.g. framing of climate change in print and social media (e.g., Bertolotti & Catellani, 2015; Schäfer & O’Neill, 2017; Moernaut et al., 2020) or in science and policy communication (Nisbet, 2009) – linguistic analyses typically take a more microlevel perspective, focusing on linguistic phenomena such as word choice, negation, modality, etc. (e.g., Wild et al., 2013; Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Fløttum, 2016; Pool & Hayes, 2022; Commerçon et al., 2023). Such analyses tell us something

about the ways in which meanings are realised in forms that serve specific purposes to convey the speaker's or writer's message (Davidse & Simon-Vandenberg, In Press). Metaphors about climate change can, for instance, ground complex abstract phenomena in concrete experience and, hence, be a powerful tool for persuasion (see, for instance, Nerlich, 2010). Grammatical choices (e.g. active vs. passive voice) may foreground or background responsibilities of the actors involved. Modality can reflect certainties and uncertainties (e.g., Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Pool & Hayes, 2022). or emphasise moral and/or legal obligations. Lexical choices may further present different conceptions of situations (for instance, 'global warming', 'climate disruption', 'climate hysteria'), which reflect and shape our experiences of these situations (e.g., Wild et al., 2013; Commerçon et al., 2023).

In Flanders and Belgium, the study of climate change communication is a relatively new research field. Most existing studies have taken a more macrolevel perspective (e.g., Moernaut et al., 2020; Moernaut & Mast, 2018; Pepermans & Maesele, 2017). The linguistic approach has only recently gained more track, and mostly so in the French-speaking part of Belgium (e.g., Catellani, 2022; Pizarro Pedraza et al., 2022; Anciaux et al., 2023). In Flanders, it is only since, and largely because of, a recent thinkers cycle on the language in the Flemish climate change' debate (Fløttum & Schäfer, 2022) that the topic has become the subject of linguistic research (for an overview, see Davidse & Simon-Vandenberg, In Press). This study contributes to this budding line of research, building further on previous linguistic studies of the emotions and judgements voiced in the Flemish climate debate (Van Praet et al., 2024; Van Praet et al., In Press). Van Praet et al. (In Press) found, for instance, that citizens often comment negatively on Facebook posts by Flemish political parties that talk about climate change and climate policy. Their evaluations often focus on attacks on politicians, as well as on the financial costs of climate policies. This was particularly the case for citizens commenting on right-wing and far-right parties, not necessarily because these citizens take a negative stance towards these parties but because they intend to signal solidarity with these parties by criticising their opponents and their policies. The question is, however, to what extent such negative appraisals align with the political parties' actual climate change policies. More specifically, what are the attitudes political parties express in their climate policy proposals, i.e., how positive and negative are they, and what do they focus on (e.g., negative judgement of opponents, financial costs)?

Studying the emotions and opinions in political parties' climate communication is meaningful, as research in behavioural sciences has demonstrated that our affective responses ('emotions') to climate change are major predictors of climate perception and action (Brosch, 2021). The affective and evaluative language used by different actors, such as politicians, within the climate debate reflects these affective responses (including to climate policies and other actors). By communicating them to citizens, the emotions and opinions expressed by political parties may influence public attitudes towards climate change and towards climate action. The analytical framework that will be used to study these emotions and opinions will be described in the following section.

## 2.2 *The System of Appraisal*

A useful linguistic framework to study affective and evaluative language is the system of 'Appraisal'.<sup>1</sup> This system was developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g., Halliday, 1994; Martin, 2003) to describe evaluations speakers make of phenomena (i.e. entities, processes and states of affairs) and propositions about phenomena and, in doing so, engage with others. It is understood as an essentially interpersonal resource, in that speakers express opinions to present a particular social image of themselves and/or elicit a response (ideally of solidarity) from the addressee (Martin, 2000, p. 143). Through evaluations, speakers negotiate their values and those of the communities that define their identity, and they align or disalign with other voices (Oteiza, 2017, p. 458).

In their seminal work, Martin & White (2005) offer the most thorough discussion of the Appraisal system to date, and their model still stands as the approach adopted by other studies (e.g., Bednarek, 2008, 2009; Hood, 2010; Read & Carroll, 2012; Oteiza, 2017; Van Praet, Bries & Huygens, 2024; Van Praet, Simon-Vanbergen & Davidse, In Press). The model distinguishes three subsystems, namely Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. Central to the Appraisal model are expressions of attitude, whereby speakers voice their emotions and opinions. Engagement is concerned with the sources of the attitudes (Oteiza, 2017, p. 464) and with whether the speaker opens or closes the discourse for alternative viewpoints (Martin & White, 2005, p. 100). Graduation deals with the sharpening (amplifying) and softening (diminishing) of evaluations (Read & Carroll, 2012, p. 429), e.g. *That must really be nice vs That might be sort of nice*, I guess. While analyses of engagement and graduation are useful, this contribution will, for lack of time and space, focus only on expressions of attitude, since the primary concern is with the emotions and opinions that dominate the political climate communication. In the remainder of this section, I will, therefore, outline the system of Attitude in more detail, leaving the discussion of engagement and graduation for future research.

The system of Attitude can be divided into three areas of personal feeling, i.e., affect (emotion), judgement (of people and their behaviour), and appreciation (of 'things' and their value) (e.g. Martin & White, 2005, 35-36). According to Martin (2003, 173-174), affect, or emotion, is the basic system of attitude, and the other two systems are "institutionalizations of affect which have evolved to socialize individuals into various uncommon sense communities of feeling" (*ibid.*). In this regard, judgements are 'institutionalised' feelings about behaviour (i.e. what we should and should not do); appreciation has to do with socialised evaluations concerning 'taste' (i.e., what things are 'worth', or how they are 'valued') (*ibid.*).

The systems of affect, judgement and appreciation can be divided into more specific subcategories which are relevant to attitudes expressed in the party programmes (based on the approach taken in Van Praet et al., In Press). *Affect* will be simply categorised as positive or negative, as expressions of affect were not sufficiently frequent to allow for further meaningful subclassification.

*Judgements* centre around 'social esteem' and 'sanction' (Martin & White, 2005, p. 52). Judgements of esteem involve expressions of admiration or contempt, based on qualities we appreciate in people (for instance, how capable, resolute or

remarkable they are). Judgements of sanction, on the other hand, have to do with socially expected behaviour (i.e. how ethical and truthful people are).

The third subsystem of attitude, *appreciation*, deals with evaluations of ‘things’, interpreted broadly as “things we make and performances we give, but also including natural phenomena” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 56). In the context of the climate debate, this may include climate-related phenomena and events, climate policies (actual or proposed), etc. Appreciation can be divided into assessments of our ‘reaction’ to things (i.e., their impact on us – ‘does it grab me?’ – or their quality – ‘do I like it?’), of their ‘composition’ (in terms of balance – ‘does it hang together?’ – or complexity – ‘is it hard to follow?’), and, finally, of their ‘value’ (‘is it worthwhile?’) (Martin & White, 2005, 56).

Expressions of attitude can be inscribed or invoked (Martin & White, 2005, 67). Inscribed affect, judgement or appreciation make use of explicit appraisal vocabulary, as in *I felt unhappy at the time*. The emotion of unhappiness is invoked in a statement such as *I couldn’t eat or sleep at the time*. Invoked attitude requires more context to be interpreted and is less objectively identifiable than inscribed attitude. The focus in this article will, therefore, be on inscribed attitude. Invoked attitude will not be included in the quantitative analysis.

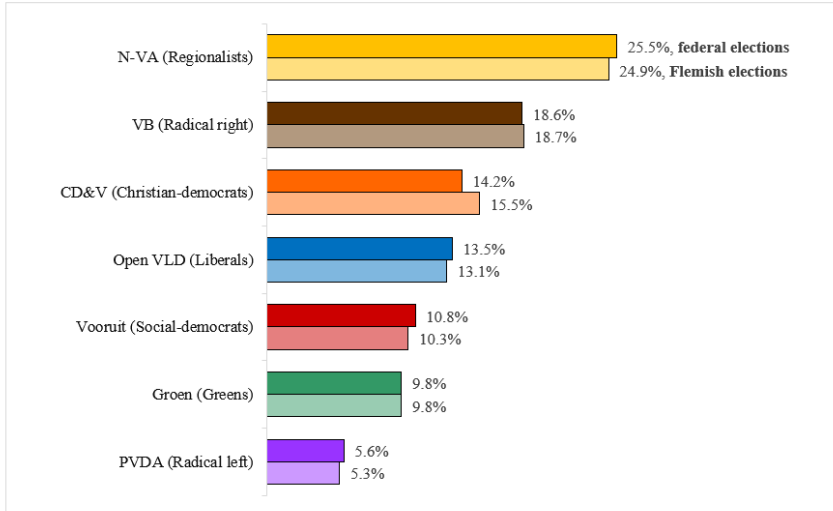
The variables described in this section feed into the coding systems that were used to analyse how political parties communicate their attitudes on climate change. In the next section, I will outline how the data for the study were gathered and how they were analysed.

### 3 Materials and Methods

The linguistic analysis of political climate change communication in this study focuses on the seven ‘main’ political parties in Flanders, that is, the ones that are represented in the Flemish regional parliament and in the Belgian federal parliament. These are listed in Figure 1, according to their popularity in the latest elections (in 2019) for the federal parliament (top bar) and the Flemish parliament (bottom bar).

Wout Van Praet

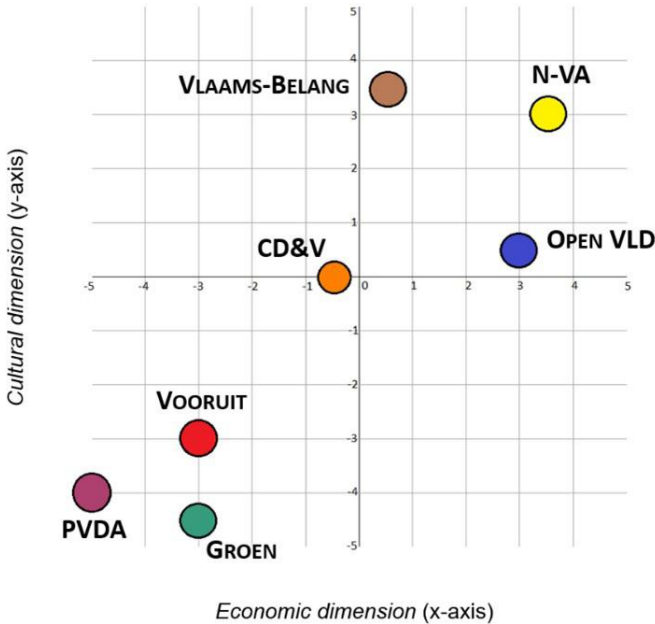
**Figure 1** *Election results for the federal and Flemish parliament (in % of Flemish votes, excluding Brussels) (Pilet et al., 2020, p. 12) (labels between brackets based on Pilet, 2020)*



Despite similar distributions of the votes for the federal and the Flemish parliament, the outcomes of the government formations were different: the Flemish government is formed by a centre-right coalition between N-VA, CD&V and OpenVLD, whereas the federal government consists of a broad coalition of centrists, centre-rightist and centre-leftist parties, which, on the Flemish side, includes CD&V, OpenVLD, Groen and Vooruit. In other words, only two parties are exclusively opposition parties (VB and PVDA), and only two exclusively government parties (CD&V and Open-VLD); the other parties (N-VA, Vooruit, Groen) combine an executive role at one level with an opposition role at the other level. The dynamics of these combinations of roles can be expected to influence the stances the parties take in their climate communication.

Walgrave et al. (2020, 111) position the parties on a political spectrum from left-wing to right-wing along two dimensions, i.e., the ‘traditional’ economic dimension and a cultural dimension (cf. the progressive-conservative dimension) (Figure 2). (See Walgrave et al. (2020) for a description of their methodology.)

Figure 2 Political landscape in Flanders (Walgrave et al., 2020, p. 111)



As Walgrave et al. (2020) point out, climate change as a policy priority is associated with a more ‘progressive’ position on the cultural dimension (i.e., the lower end of y-axis in Figure 2). For that reason, it can be hypothesised that more progressive parties will focus more on this issue, commenting more negatively on the problems at the root of climate change while giving more positive appraisals of climate action and policy (e.g., pointing out their importance and urgency).

To gather the data, I selected all texts posted under the header of party positions or programme that were explicitly indexed by the party as related to climate change and/or the environment. This procedure was deliberately chosen to examine how political parties talk about climate-related and environmental issues and possible solutions. It also means that the topics covered are more expansive for some parties than for others. For instance, while the green party ‘Groen’ takes a comprehensive view of climate-related policies (which are presented as also including energy, mobility, food and agriculture and sustainable economy), the regionalist party ‘N-VA’ has opted for a more diversified approach, with environmental and climate-related policies presented as a separate category from energy, mobility, agriculture, etc. Despite its limitations, this procedure ensured that the analysis of the stances political parties take on climate change are, indeed, explicitly understood by the parties themselves as related to climate change.

The resulting dataset totals 1,725 sentences or 22,052 words. The left-wing parties PVDA and Groen talk most extensively about climate-related issues, which, as mentioned, is partly due to their comprehensive take on what is considered as climate-related. By contrast, the centre-right to right-wing parties are much more



Wout Van Praet

concise in their climate communication. This can again be attributed to a difference in the choice to list different policy areas rather than grouping them together. But it also has to do with different communicative strategies concerning the degree of detail with which policy plans are set out. (Especially N-VA appears to opt for succinctness, not just for climate-related policies but for all policy areas.) A special case among the seven parties is VB. Unlike the other parties, VB does not list climate change as one of the policy areas that figure in their party positions. This, in and of itself, is meaningful, as it implies that climate change is not a focus of the party. Still, the webpage also includes a link to the party's 2019 election programme, in which climate change is discussed, albeit in covert terms (namely under the header 'realising a healthy living environment'). Though this again signals a preoccupation with the local environment rather than global climate change, the decision was made to include these data in the analysis, which otherwise would not allow for an examination of VB's stance on climate change. The data distribution for all parties is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** *Climate change coverage in policy proposals by Flemish political parties*

<b>Political party</b>	<b>Title of section on climate change</b>	<b>Sentence total</b>	<b>Word total</b>
N-VA	Climate and environment	64	821
VB	Creating a healthy living environment	169	2,638
CD&V	Sustainability	271	4,439
OpenVLD	Climate & energy; Nature & environment	108	1,605
Vooruit	Climate	301	3,783
Groen	Good for the planet	331	4,136
PVDA	The social climate revolution	481	4,360
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,725</b>	<b>22,052</b>

The data were annotated according to the Appraisal framework described in Section 2.2, yielding the coding system summarised in Table 2. For each parameter in the coding system, a distinction is made between positive versus negative appraisal. For the resulting categories, all attestations for each party were counted and then converted to normalised frequencies: in other words, the absolute (raw) frequency for each category was divided by the total number of words in the datasets per party and then multiplied by one million. Using normalised frequencies allows for a more reliable comparison of the general tone of the climate discussion across the different parties. In a first instance, the quantitative analysis will allow us to chart the overall constructiveness and openness of the climate communication on the parties' websites. In a second instance, a qualitative analysis will offer a more in-depth meaningful interpretation of these numbers, describing how positive and negative appraisals are used by parties to position themselves in the climate debate and appeal to voters.

**Table 2** *The system of Attitude, based on Martin and White (2005)*

Attitude	<b>Affect</b>	(e.g., happiness, anger, hope, despair)
	<b>Judgement</b>	– Esteem (e.g., capacity, resolve) – Sanction (e.g., ethics, truthfulness)
	<b>Appreciation</b>	– Reaction – Composition – Value

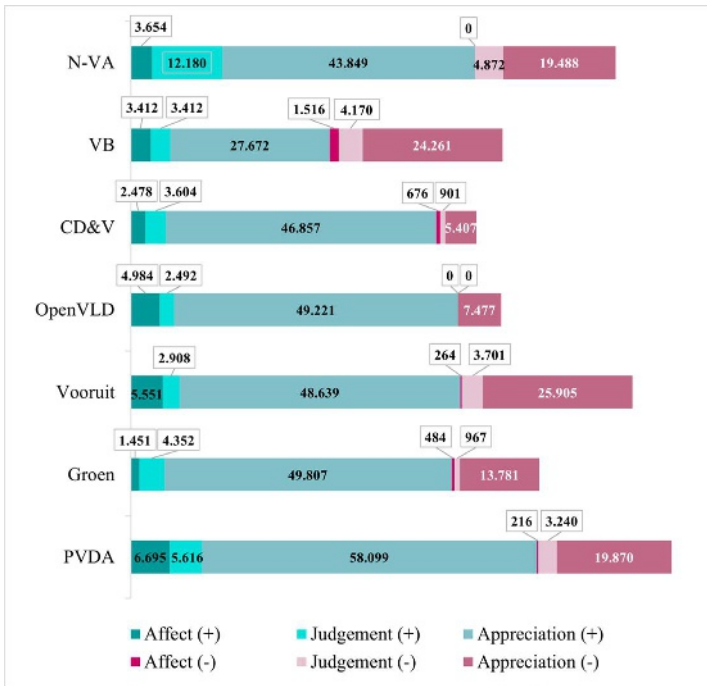
#### 4 Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

This section presents the findings from the Appraisal analysis of the climate communication by Flemish political parties in the positions and programmes published on their websites, specifically the attitudes they express vis-à-vis climate change and climate change policies. The quantitative results will be supplemented with a more in-depth qualitative analysis, illustrated with representative examples. This allows for a meaningful interpretation of the quantitative analysis and its implications.

In the description of the materials in Section 3, I described how much, in number of words, the Flemish political parties communicate, in their party programmes, about climate change. This gave us a first tentative indication of how much the parties profile themselves on the issue of climate change and what stance they take on the importance of the topic. Figure 3 offers a more nuanced picture in terms, by visualising the (normalised) frequencies of positive and negative attitudes (i.e. affect, judgement and appreciation) expressed by the parties.

Wout Van Praet

**Figure 3** Positive and negative attitudes (in fpmw)



Overall, PVDA, Vooruit and N-VA use evaluative language most often; CD&V, OpenVLD and VB are least likely to do so. When it comes to positivity versus negativity, the seven parties differ significantly ( $\chi^2(6) = 92.891, p < 0.001$ ; Cramer’s V: 0.236).<sup>2</sup> Most negative is VB, which expresses negative attitude in 46% of their evaluations. Least negative are CD&V and OpenVLD, with only 12% of their evaluations being negative. The other parties too tend to maintain a generally positive tone. Table 3 shows a one-to-one comparison between the different parties in terms of their ‘positivity rate’ (i.e., how many of their evaluations are positive on a scale from 0 to 1).

**Table 3** One-to-one comparison of differences in overall positivity rate between the parties

		N-VA	VB	CD&V	OpenVLD	Vooruit	Groen	PVDA
		<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.75</b>
N-VA	0.71	-	*	***	**			
VB	0.54	*	-	***	***	*	***	***
CD&V	0.88	***	***	-		***	*	***
OpenVLD	0.88	**	***		-	***	*	**

**Table 3** (Continued)

	<b>N-VA</b>	<b>VB</b>	<b>CD&amp;V</b>	<b>OpenVLD</b>	<b>Vooruit</b>	<b>Groen</b>	<b>PVDA</b>
	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.75</b>
Vooruit	0.66	*	***	***	-	***	**
Groen	0.78	***	**	**	***	-	
PVDA	0.75	***	***	**	**		-

$p < 0.05$ : \* ;  $p < 0.01$ : \*\* ;  $p < 0.001$ : \*\*\*

Individual chi-square tests show that VB differs significantly from all other parties in its negativity. By contrast, CD&V and OpenVLD stand out from all other parties for their positivity. Among the other parties, the only significant differences are between Vooruit, on the one hand, and Groen and PVDA, on the other hand, with Vooruit striking a more negative tone than the other two left-wing parties.

On a finer level of detail, all seven parties can be seen to focus, in their attitudes, on expressions of appreciation (of things) and much less on expressions of affect or judgement. In fact, affect, firstly, is uncommon in all party programmes, with especially negative affect being rare (so rare, in fact, that the numbers for affect do not allow for a reliable statistical comparison between the parties) Moreover, the attestations of positive affect mostly come in the form of expressions of what the parties 'want', e.g. (1).<sup>3</sup> Through such 'wishes', parties voice, strictly speaking, feelings of desire but they do not typically express strong affect, neither positive nor negative.

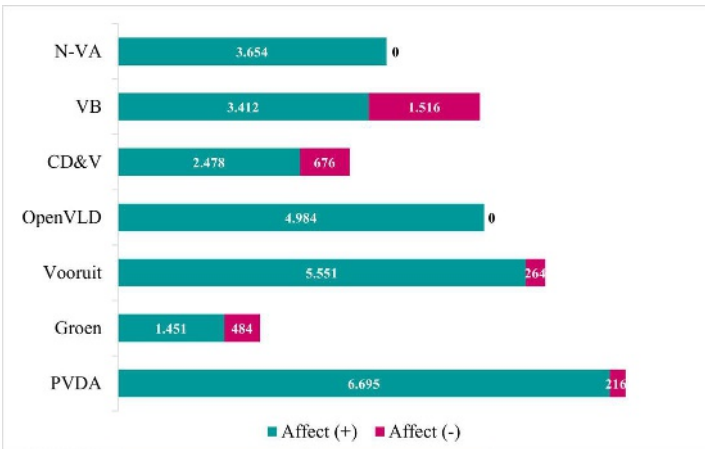
(1) *Vooruit*

Vooruit wants to make an end to the standstill in the agricultural policy.

Therefore, the relative differences for affect between the parties (Figure 4) are mostly attributable to how often the different parties express such 'wishes'.

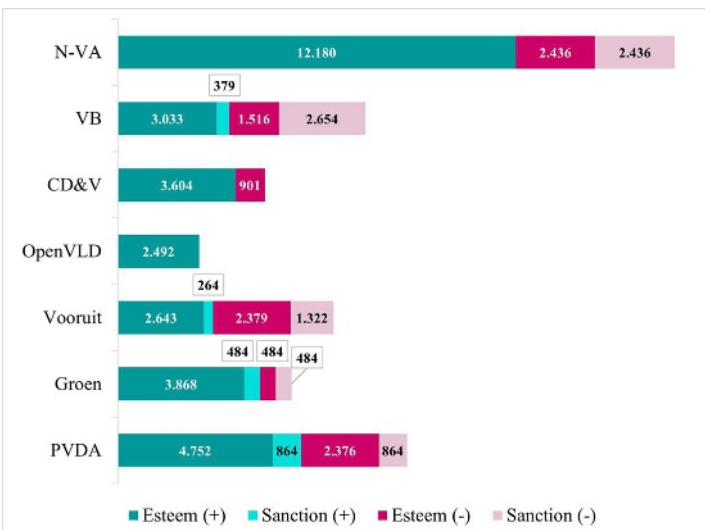
Wout Van Praet

**Figure 4** Positive and negative affect (in fpmw)



Secondly, judgements, of people and their behaviour, are expressed somewhat more frequently than emotions, though they are by no means the focus of the climate discussions. The only (minor) exception is N-VA, for which judgements (in total) amount to 20% of the expressions of attitude, compared to only 4% to 11% for the other parties. This is reflected in the fpmw of judgements in the party programmes (Figure 5), which, for N-VA (17,052 fpmw), is almost double that of the ‘runner-up’, PVDA (8,856 fpmw), and almost seven times that of OpenVLD, which expresses judgement the least (2,492 fpmw).

**Figure 5** Positive and negative judgements (in fpmw)



Most of the judgements by N-VA are positive (71%) and focus on esteem. In (2), for example, the party praises Flanders as a 'sorting champion' and 'our country' as a 'global example' for 'smart' waste collection and recycling. Both households and entrepreneurs are lauded for their 'great efforts' in making this possible.

(2) N-VA

Flanders is sorting champion. Our country is a global example for smart selective household waste collection and recycling. Millions of households and entrepreneurs make great efforts to recycle their waste and reduce residual waste.

Overall, OpenVLD (100%), CD&V (80%) and Groen (82%) judge people most positively, while Vooruit (44%) and VB (45%) are most negative. One-to-one comparisons between the different parties point to significant differences between CD&V and Groen, on the one hand, and Vooruit and VB, on the other hand (Table 4). (The absolute numbers for N-VA and OpenVLD were too low to allow for reliable chi-square tests.)

**Table 4** *One-to-one comparison of the positive rate in the parties' judgements of people*

	<b>N-VA</b>	<b>VB</b>	<b>CD&amp;V</b>	<b>OpenVLD</b>	<b>Vooruit</b>	<b>Groen</b>	<b>PVDA</b>
	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>0.80</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>0.63</b>
N-VA	0.71	-	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
VB	0.45	NA	-	*	NA	*	
CD&V	0.80	NA	*	-	NA	*	
OpenVLD	1.00	NA	NA	NA	-	NA	NA
Vooruit	0.44	NA		*	NA	-	*
Groen	0.82	NA	*		NA	*	-
PVDA	0.63	NA			NA		-

$p < 0.05$ : \* ;  $p < 0.01$ : \*\* ;  $p < 0.001$ : \*\*\*

However, the quantitative similarities between VB and Vooruit (i.e., relative prevalence of negative judgements) hide the qualitative differences in the target and contents of the parties' judgements. Being an opposition party at the Flemish level, most of Vooruit's criticism targets the current and past Flemish governments: the main line of attack is that these governments have done too little and/or do not have their priorities straight. In (3), for example, Vooruit criticises the failure of the Flemish government to protect the health of its citizens (in the context of soil contamination by big companies), contrasting the implied carelessness with an eagerness to please big companies.

Wout Van Praet

### (3) *Vooruit*

The Flemish government does not succeed in protecting the health of its citizens, but it does like to pamper big companies.

By contrast, despite also being an opposition party, VB is concerned less with attacking the government, focusing more on cracking down on misbehaviour by individuals. This ties in with the fact that VB talks very little about actual climate-related policies, concentrating more on environmental issues, with a more local and immediate impact. Littering and stealth dumping, for instance, are a recurrent theme, with VB condemning “persistent offenders”, e.g. (4).

### (4) *VB*

Trying to tackle the litter problem with only awareness campaigns and citizen clean-ups is over. Persistent offenders don't listen to campaigns.... The chances of catching illegal dumping must be increased ... and offenders must be dealt with firmly.

But most criticism by far is directed at animal abusers, a topic that accounts for one fifth (21%) of the section on ‘creating a healthy living environment’ in VB’s programme, e.g. (5).

### (5) *VB*

Where people mistreat animals, harsh action must be taken.... There should be stricter penalties and higher fines for animal abuse and neglect.

As Steurs (2021) suggests, the point of highlighting such issues, and proposing firm action against them, is not to persuade voters – people are already persuaded that it is wrong to abuse animals – but to see that VB wants firm action against animal abuse creates a connection between the party and potential voters. This is meant to make voters more sympathetic to VB and, eventually, to their other policy positions.

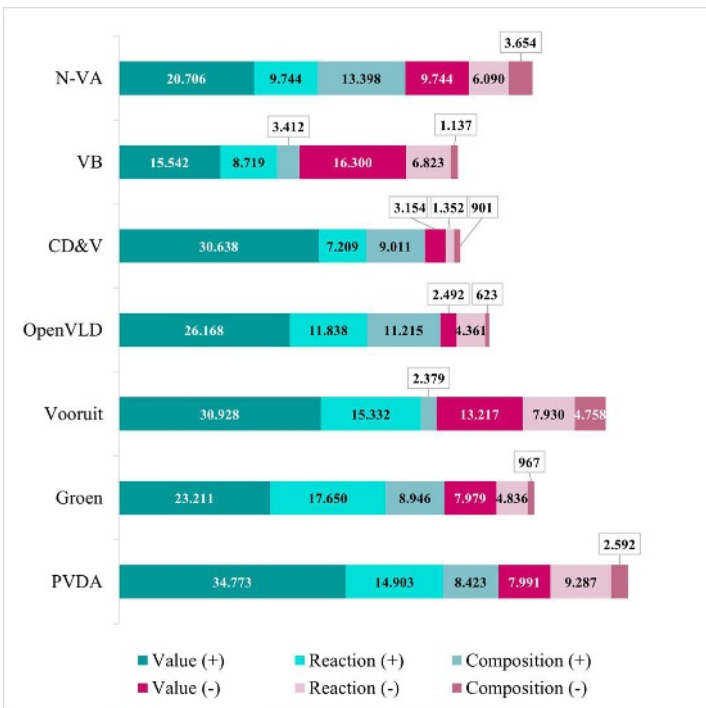
Another party that was relatively negative in its judgements of people is PVDA. As the party that discusses climate change in most depth and detail, PVDA takes a much clearer and firmer stance in the climate debate. When it criticises people, it is mainly aimed at those who deny human-induced climate change, slow down climate action or ignore the issue altogether, e.g., (6). They particularly spotlight politicians, all sides of the political spectrum, and ‘big business’. The negligence of politicians and big business is contrasted with the engagement of ‘the citizens’, who do take action for the climate.

(6) PVDA

Even here, there are still politicians who question the human share in global warming.... There are also parties that realise the seriousness of climate change but still blindly trust the market to tackle the problem. By continuing to look for ways out within the failing market system, politicians on the left have also made us waste an awful lot of time.... While citizens take action for the climate, big business continues to do what it wants, and Belgian emissions are decreasing by barely one per cent a year.

Thirdly, the major focus, across parties, is their appreciation, or lack thereof, of ‘things’, which includes climate-related phenomena, climate policies and policy proposals (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Positive and negative expressions of Appreciation across parties



In line with the findings for attitude, in general, the parties differ significantly in their positive versus negative appreciation of ‘things’ ( $\chi^2(6)=83.043, p < 0.001$ ; Cramer’s: 0.242). One-to-one comparisons between the parties (Table 5) confirm the tendency that the centre-right parties CD&V and OpenVLD are overwhelmingly positive (i.e., in 90% and 87% of the cases, respectively). These two parties happen to also be the only parties that are part of the government at both the federal and the Flemish levels. They contrast, in their positivity, most evidently with the



Wout Van Praet

far-right opposition party VB, which is the most negative of all parties (i.e., in 47% of their ‘appreciations’). Among the remaining four parties, the only significant differences are, again, between Vooruit, on the one hand, and the other two left-wing parties, Groen and PVDA, on the other. N-VA takes a middle position in the debate, differing only from CD&V and OpenVLD.

**Table 5** *One-to-one comparison of the positive rate in the parties’ appreciation of things*

	<b>N-VA</b>	<b>VB</b>	<b>CD&amp;V</b>	<b>OpenVLD</b>	<b>Vooruit</b>	<b>Groen</b>	<b>PVDA</b>
	<b>0.69</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>0.87</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.75</b>
N-VA	0.69	-	***	*			
VB	0.53	-	***	***	*	***	***
CD&V	0.90	***	***	-	***	**	***
OpenVLD	0.87	*	***	-	***		*
Vooruit	0.65	*	***	***	-	**	*
Groen	0.78	***	**		**	-	
PVDA	0.75	***	***	*	*		-

$p < 0.05$ : \* ;  $p < 0.01$ : \*\* ;  $p < 0.001$ : \*\*\*

Moreover, in their expression of appreciation, the parties also differ considerably in terms of their focus on ‘value’, ‘reaction’ or ‘composition’. These differences are significant ( $\chi^2(12)=44.508$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramer’s V: 0.125),<sup>4</sup> even if the effect size is fairly small. This is because all parties do comment mostly on the ‘value’ of things (i.e. ‘Are they worthwhile, important?’) and, therefore, differ mostly regarding how much they also concentrate on ‘reaction’ (i.e., ‘Is something agreeable? Does it grab me?’) and ‘composition’ (i.e. ‘Is it balanced? Complex?’).

First, as shown in Figure 6, evaluations of ‘reaction’ are more common in the communication by left-wing parties, especially Groen, and, among these three, Vooruit and PVDA are more negative than Groen. Second, comments on the ‘composition’ of things (e.g. stability, complexity, attainability) feature more prominently in the evaluations by the (centre-)right-wing parties N-VA, CD&V and OpenVLD – the three parties that form the Flemish government. They contrast as such most evidently with the opposition party VB, which rarely comments on composition: VB’s focus is mostly on value and (less so) on reaction, both of which they evaluate more negatively than all other parties do.

Having outlined the quantitative results from the analysis of ‘attitude’, I will, in the remainder of this section, discuss the content, and targets, of these evaluations, particularly of appreciation, in more depth. Illustrative examples will demonstrate how the parties differ not only in quantitative but also in qualitative terms in their appraisals of climate issues and climate policies.

Firstly, in their evaluations, all parties are mostly concerned with the ‘value’ of things. Most commonly, this pertains to comments on what the parties find

‘important’, ‘necessary’ or ‘essential’. For N-VA, for instance, “a healthy environment” is considered “essential for our society”, e.g., (7). Environmental issues take up a significant share (82%) of N-VA’s communication. N-VA shares this preoccupation with environmental issues, often over climate issues, with VB. Example (7) tells us why: as a nationalist party, N-VA “cherishes” nature, and the environment, as “ecological heritage”, alongside the “cultural” heritage. The environment thereby becomes a contributing factor to the fabric of “our society”, that is, an instrument for nation-building.

(7) N-VA

A healthy environment is essential for our society. The N-VA cherishes not only our cultural but also our ecological heritage.

Also part of the explanation why both N-VA and VB communicate more readily about the ‘local’ environment than the ‘global’ climate is that environmental policies (e.g., “restoring animal and plant life”, N-VA) resonate more with a conservative ideology, which favours continuity and stability over radical change (Minogue et al., 2023). Such radical change, often advocated for in the context of climate change, is absent in N-VA’s communication. Instead, they call for “ambitious but realistic” climate policies. Ambitious in the sense that “global emissions of greenhouse gasses have to *eventually* reach zero” (italics mine). Realistic in that a climate policy cannot be financially detrimental to “the ordinary citizen” or “our industry”, e.g. (8).

(8) N-VA

A realistic climate policy is affordable for the ordinary citizen and does not compromise the competitiveness of our industry.

The plea for ‘realism’ means, for N-VA, that climate goals should be “attainable”, that is, attainable within the limits of the criteria set out in (8). The emphasis on ‘realism’ and ‘attainability’ is reflected in the relatively high frequency of expressions of positive ‘composition’ (i.e. balance and complexity). While the language used by N-VA suggests a contradiction between ‘realism’ and ‘ambition’ (cf. “ambitious *but* realistic”, italics mine), their proposed way to overcome this contradiction is to rely on technological advances, as described in (9).

(9) N-VA

Innovation and progress optimism are the key to an ambitious climate policy. Through research, we develop more efficient and environmentally friendly technologies.

Though the use of the present tense of ‘develop’ suggests immediacy, it is not specified, when these technologies will be ready for use. Nor is it explained which

Wout Van Praet

technologies are hinted at. This vagueness allows readers to interpret the statement as they see fit, without N-VA having to commit to a specific proposal.

In contrast with N-VA's ambiguous position, VB takes a more radical stance, effectively showing hostility to fundamental climate action. Example (10) is emblematic of their view.

(10)VB

Vlaams Belang is by no means taking part in the climate hysteria forced on us by certain left-wing parties and professional agitators ... [H]ysterical climate alarmism threatens to lead to ill-considered measures that will make energy bills unaffordable and burden us budget-wise, but will ultimately prove to have little or no impact on our environment and climate.... Against the political recuperation of apocalyptic scaremongering, Vlaams Belang puts forward an optimistic climate realism that wants to encourage young people to think about the problems with our environment and look for solutions to make our surroundings cleaner and healthier.

Not only is climate action valued negatively in (10) – both in financial terms (e.g. “unaffordable”, “burden us budget-wise”) and in environmental terms (e.g. “little or no impact on our environment and climate”) – but the “optimistic climate realism” VB puts forward is essentially environmental policy, not climate policy (*viz.* “to make our surroundings cleaner and healthier”). Also telling is that the call for “realism” – which VB shares with N-VA – is not coupled with “ambition” by VB: in fact, VB is the only party not to mention “ambition”, or “ambitiousness”, in their communication. Moreover, the framing of other voices in the climate debate as “climate hysteria”, “hysterical climate alarmism” and “apocalyptic scaremongering” invoke negative judgement, denouncing those who call for substantial climate action as irrational and extreme. The high share of negative evaluations of value – particularly negative financial impact – in VB's communication, together with the invoked negative judgements, qualify the communication by VB as a form of climate scepticism, aimed at minimising the threat of climate change and casting doubt on the intentions of those who do seek climate action.

Diametrically opposed to such views is the stance taken by the far-left opposition party PVDA, whose climate positions unfold under the header of “the social climate revolution”. Like N-VA and VB, PVDA calls for an “ambitious” climate policy, but rather than making it contingent on ‘realism’, the party puts forward ‘justness’ as an important condition, e.g. (11).

(11)PVDA

Change now, before the climate changes everything! That is the challenge we face in the coming years. We go for the social climate revolution. One that is ambitious and just. Ambitious, with binding targets and large-scale investments to ensure a sustainable future. Just, ... so that the strongest shoulders bear the heaviest burden.

Evaluative language like “binding” and “large-scale” suggest a more radical, or consequential, interpretation of what an ‘ambitious’ climate policy should be – namely, nothing less than a “revolution”. The fact that PVDA has never held executive office and is an opposition party at both the federal and the Flemish levels is, hence, reflected in their plea for a radical departure from the status quo. Equally important to PVDA, the efforts to achieve the ambitions should be “just”, that is, borne by “the strongest shoulders” (i.e., the well-off). No contradiction is implied between ‘ambition’ and ‘justness’, which, instead, have to go hand in hand: the core of the problem, for PVDA, is capitalism, which harms both the climate and social equality, as illustrated in (12).

(12)PVDA

The core of the problem lies with the relationships in social production and consumption, with capitalism with its short-termism, its competitive logic, its profit as mammon.

To some extent, Groen – which combines an opposition role at the Flemish level with a governmental role at the federal level – seems to follow a similar logic as PVDA. But while Groen identifies “infinite growth” in “the old economic model” as a driver of climate change, it does not explicitly advocate for ‘degrowth’ but only for a shift from “the throwaway economy” (or so-called ‘linear economy’) to a “circular economy”, e.g. (13).

(13)Groen

Not growth, but well-being is our most important benchmark.... The old economic model, addicted to oil, gas, coal and infinite growth, has reached its limits. It is high time to leave the throwaway economy behind and opt for a circular economy without delay.

In their criticism on the economic profit model, Groen and PVDA differ from the other left-wing party, Vooruit. The social-democratic party is vehemently against “panic pleas for degrowth” and sees more benefits in “a way to produce, make profit, and realise growth for everyone, in a way that is sustainable and therefore good for a liveable planet”. Example (14) illustrates this.

(14)Vooruit

Vooruit wants to turn the necessary ecological transition into an economic win-win, an opportunity for green growth. And good new jobs.

The three left-wing parties also differ in the responsibility they attribute to the different actors to achieve the climate goals. As a social-democratic party, Vooruit sees a preeminent role for a ‘strong government’, since “leaving the task to private companies or individuals is not going to solve things” and “only governments have

Wout Van Praet

the necessary clout for the climate challenge”. The way forward, therefore, is for “us all – companies, individuals and governments to work together under the direction of a strong government.” The notion of a strong government is more implicit in the communication by PVDA and Groen (e.g. ‘binding norms’, ‘privatisation is out of the question’). For the far-left party PVDA, a crucial prerequisite for a strong government is that all its branches should “operate transparently, under the control of citizens and civil society”, which reflects their communist ideology. Hence, while the language used by Vooruit suggests a top-down model in which the government ‘directs’ individuals (and other actors), PVDA shifts that power balance from the government to ‘the people’, e.g. (15).

(15)PVDA

Power to the people. We take our energy into our own hands. Instead of Engie, EDF and other energy multinationals we want a public energy sector, in the hands of society and under democratic control.

The communication by the ecological party Groen, on the other hand, suggests a view of the government less as a driver of climate action and more as a facilitator and regulator: the government is there to help and support citizens, associations and businesses, providing a framework (e.g. “contracts”) for climate action, e.g., (16).

(16)Groen

We roll out climate contracts to support municipalities, associations and companies in their climate efforts. We also help them with climate adaptation measures.

The real drivers of climate action, it is implied, are citizens, cooperatives and (small) businesses, e.g., (17) and (18).

(17)Groen

Citizens and energy cooperatives form the foundations of our energy production.

(18)Groen

We give wind to sharing initiatives, learning networks and pilot projects that operatesocially,ecologicallyanddemocratically.Weencourageentrepreneurship ... We reduce red tape for the self-employed and SMEs [i.e., small and medium-sized enterprises].

Despite the different nuances that the three left-wing parties place on how climate action should be achieved, they agree on the goals. ‘Liveability’ – i.e. quality of life

and work – and the role of climate policy in it runs a common thread through their communication. We saw this was reflected in the high frequency of positive ‘reactions’ (Figure 6). Example (19) illustrates this (e.g., *quality jobs, healthy/healthier, more humane*).

(19) *Groen*

Fair and ambitious climate measures ensure quality jobs, energy-efficient homes, local and healthy food, investment in new technologies, good products that last and a healthier, more humane society.

Finally, based on the quantitative and qualitative similarities and differences between parties, CD&V and OpenVLD also appear to branch together: both strike an outspokenly positive tone, and both insist, in their evaluations, relatively often on the ‘composition’ of things (something they also share with other Flemish government party N-VA). Like N-VA, both CD&V and OpenVLD argue for “attainable”, and “affordable”, climate policies, e.g. (20).

(20) *OpenVLD*

Eco-optimism for an attainable and affordable climate and energy transition.

The two parties differ from N-VA, however, in how they frame ‘attainability’. In the communication by N-VA, there is little to no explanation of which climate actions are viewed as attainable (aside from ‘developing new technologies’). By immediately coupling ‘attainability’ with ‘realism’, the implication arises that attainable climate goals are ‘within reason’, that is, moderate. In the communication by CD&V and OpenVLD, on the other hand, mention of attainability is often made not to downplay ambitions but to convince readers that ambitious climate goals are in fact attainable, e.g., (21) and (22).

(21) *CD&V*

Energyville calculated that onshore wind capacity could cost-effectively double to 5 GW by 2030 in Belgium. For solar panels, capacity could even quadruple to 20 GW. This is ambitious, but achievable.

(22) *OpenVLD*

In the North Sea, we double the capacity of wind turbines that could cover 20% of our electricity demand in a few years’ time. Through an auction system, we want these farms to be built without subsidies. Examples abroad show that this is possible.

Both parties explicitly present themselves as ‘positive’ about the possible benefits of climate action. Their positivity, or optimism, is an implicit criticism of, on the

Wout Van Praet

one hand, sceptics who question the benefits of climate action and, on the other hand, of those who worry that our economic system, as it stands, cannot lead to effective change, e.g., (23) and (24).

(23) *CD&V*

We have a positive view of the future, supporting economic growth and new technologies that contribute to everyone's prosperity. Even more, we oppose an energy policy driven by a desire for economic decline.

(24) *OpenVLD*

We are eco-optimists. For us, this transition is accompanied by new opportunities, jobs and growth. This is how we turn the climate story into a positive one, because that is what is needed to get all citizens and businesses on board.

Hence, while left-wing parties, and especially Groen, highlighted quality of life (e.g. health, comfort, enjoyment) as rewards of climate action, the emphasis for CD&V and OpenVLD is much more on economic profit as an argument to build a support base for climate action.

Moreover, the comments on 'composition' also give insight into the road map CD&V and OpenVLD see for reaching the climate goals. CD&V highlights a "smart green" approach, that is, one that is well considered and methodical. While 'smartness', like 'realism', invokes notions of 'reasonableness', the emphasis in CD&V's communication is more on careful planning and considering of all possible effects (e.g., "energy policy is susceptible to so-called Matthew effects"). CD&V puts this into practice by offering a detailed and balanced discussion of the pros and cons of their own proposals (including potential risks, the reliability of proposed solutions). This 'reasoned' stance also means that CD&V mostly pushes for strengthening existing plans – which is not surprising, given its executive role in both governments – and for taking a "diversified" approach to spread risk. They want to achieve this via "strengthened cooperation" between partners and "harmonisation of legislation between different [EU] member states". Hence, while "technological innovation" and "new breakthroughs" are also explored as a possible piece of the puzzle (as they were in N-VA's communication), CD&V explicitly points out that they are careful not to vest too much hope in as-of-yet non-existing, or underdeveloped, technologies (e.g., "SMRs"). The fact that energy production is a responsibility of the federal government, of which CD&V but not N-VA is part, may explain why CD&V takes more caution when appraising the importance of future technological breakthroughs for current climate policies.

Similarly, while OpenVLD – also a government party at both federal and Flemish level – "fully commits to innovation and science", its proposals centre on tried and tested climate policies. Innovation is understood as a key to further improvement of existing technologies (e.g., solar panels, windmills, cogeneration, electric cars) and achieving efficiency gains (e.g., "smart and efficient use of

materials”). OpenVLD strikes a more forceful tone than CD&V (e.g. “a *thorough* renovation of our building stock”, “we need to *radically* change our energy system”, italics mine). In that respect, OpenVLD shares similarities with Groen: both parties propose a shift to a ‘circular economy’, with an important role for citizens and businesses. For OpenVLD, this fits in with their liberal ideology, valuing individual responsibility and entrepreneurship, e.g. (25).

(25) *OpenVLD*

We go for maximally sharing generated energy by citizens and businesses, who can thus benefit from sustainable investments. [...] The keyword [in the energy transition] is decentralisation. Through smart networks, everyone gets the chance to produce their own energy and put it back on the market.

For Groen, however, the focus seems to be more on “citizens and energy cooperatives” and “families and SMEs” (see [18] above), while “big companies” are met with suspicion. For OpenVLD, “it is important to get *all* citizens and businesses on board” (italics mine). These subtle differences also appear in how the two parties weigh ecological and economic interests against each other. For Groen, the economy should always “care for people and nature” and, in that sense, is subordinate to them (see also [13] above). For OpenVLD, however, “environmental, social and economic criteria” appear to be on an equal footing (*viz.* they will be “integrated”).

To conclude this section, the quantitative and qualitative analyses of climate attitudes communicated by political parties in their policy proposals showed that the parties take an overall positive stance towards climate action. The degree of positivity was found to differ according to the role of the parties as government versus opposition party or combinations thereof. The focus of the appraisals (e.g., well-being, financial costs and gains, attainability) was found to vary with the ideological positions of the parties on the political spectrum. Finally, along the progressive-conservative dimension, a cline was found in how much parties advocate for radical change (progressive left) and, by contrast, for ‘realism’ and moderation (conservative right). In the case of the far-right party VB, this position shaded into climate delay.

## 5 Concluding Discussion

This contribution studied the evaluations Flemish political parties make about climate change, and climate change policies, in the party positions posted on their websites. Through the system of ‘Appraisal’, we saw that all elected parties are mostly positive in their attitudes towards climate action. In that regard, their evaluations correspond with the generally positive attitudes the Flemish electorate appears to have vis-à-vis climate action (see Section 1). Still, the degree of positivity, as well as the content of the evaluations, differs significantly from one party to another. These evaluations were found to vary according to both the ideological



position of the parties on the progressive-conservative dimension, as long as according to their role as government and/or opposition party.

Firstly, in their expressions of attitude, all elected political parties in Flanders focus mostly on evaluations of ‘things’ – which include climate-related phenomena and climate policies. Expressions of emotion, or judgements of people, were, by contrast, relatively rare. Compared to the online climate debate in Flanders (Van Praet, Simon-Vandenbergen & Davidse, In Press), the official communication by the political parties seems to be less emotional and less *ad hominem* than their posts on social media and the reactions to them. When emotions and judgements are expressed, they are largely positive (e.g. praising the Flemish as ‘sorting champions’). This adds to the contrast with social media communication, where the tone was markedly more negative (*ibid.*).

In their expressions of Appreciation (or lack thereof), all parties focus mostly on the ‘value’ of things. Often, this took the form of evaluating climate action as ‘necessary’ or policies as ‘ambitious’. Still, significant differences were found, largely running along the left-wing versus right-wing divide. Left-wing progressive parties, especially Groen, alluded more to quality of life and quality of work as benefits of climate policies. The centre-right-wing parties, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on financial profitability as their leading argument to get citizens and companies on board. Moreover, right-wing parties were also found to comment more often on the ‘balance’ and ‘complexity’ of climate policies, suggesting, for instance, that policies should be ambitious ‘but attainable’ or that they should be “diversified” and “harmonised between countries”. In the communication by the right-wing conservative party N-VA, the emphasis on ‘realism’ was argued to imply a downtoning of climate efforts, which should be ‘reasonable’ and, hence, within moderation. This is reflected in the policy measures they have taken as part of the Flemish government, since it was largely under the influence of the Flemish Minister for Energy and the Environment, Zuhair Demir (N-VA), that Flanders opted for a lower (‘ambitious but realistic’) emission reduction target of 40%, rather than the EU standard of 47% (see Section 1). Calls for ‘realism’ were absent in the communication by CD&V and OpenVLD (the other two parties in the Flemish government), and while they did reference ‘attainability’, both did so to assert, rather than question, that proposed climate actions are attainable. This positive ‘can-do’ stance was further evidenced by the high degree of positivity in the climate communication by both CD&V and OpenVLD. This was linked to the fact that these two parties are the only ones that are part of the government at both the federal and Flemish levels, whereas all other parties played an opposition role at one or both levels of government.

One party stood out in its climate communication. In the party positions published on their website, the radical-right-wing party Vlaams Belang did not mention climate change at all. Only in their 2019 election programme was the topic covered, together with the party’s positions on environmental policies. The focus, however, was much more on the latter, signalling a preoccupation with the ‘local’ environment over the ‘global’ climate. Moreover, when climate change policies were discussed, VB struck a significantly more negative tone than the other parties. This was attributed not just to the double opposition role that the party

plays but, more importantly, to the ideological profile of the party. Calls for climate action were denounced as ‘climate hysteria’ and ‘scaremongering’, and climate policies criticised as a financial burden to ‘the common people’. Against this, VB proposed a ‘realistic’ approach, echoing the appraisal by N-VA. Unlike N-VA, and all other parties, VB did not call for ‘ambitiousness’ in climate policymaking. A telling omission, especially given the fact that the ‘realistic climate policies’ they did propose were, in effect, environmental policies. All this qualifies VB’s climate communication as feeding into climate scepticism, casting doubt on the value of climate policies and deflecting from ambitious climate policies by proposing ‘miracle solutions’ (e.g., thorium plants). Even though VB’s stance is an aberrant one in the political climate debate, the recently increasing popularity of the party could have a ripple effect on the positivity and constructiveness of the debate. The vagueness and ambiguity in N-VA’s climate communication could, in that respect, be a warning sign.

In conclusion, this contribution found that the climate communication by political parties in Flanders is overall positive and constructive. All parties but one presented themselves as committed to getting people on board with climate policies. In general, government parties were shown to be more positive than opposition parties, which was especially the case for CD&V and OpenVLD, which are the only parties to be in government at both the federal or the Flemish levels. Moreover, the issues as well as the solutions that the parties put forward in their appraisals differ according to their ideological profile. The emphasis of left-wing parties on quality of life and work, in contrast with the right-wing parties’ focus on financial gains and costs, was a clear case in point. But also the differences among left-wing parties in terms of the economic solutions they propose (e.g., green growth vs. degrowth), as well as the preoccupation of conservative nationalist parties N-VA and VB with environmental issues over climate issues reflects ideological divides within the climate debate. In conclusion, this contribution highlights that overall positive attitudes expressed by Flemish political parties reflects the overall positive attitudes in the public opinion vis-à-vis climate action (see Section 1). To make progress regarding the actual adoption and implementation of climate policies, it is crucial, however, that the ‘ambition’ advocated by all but one party is not just rhetoric to engage with the Flemish electorate but leads to real results.

**Data repository:** <https://doi.org/10.48804/NTRU1I>.

## Notes

- 1 Following the conventions of the linguistic framework within which the ‘Appraisal’ model was developed, names for linguistic systems, such as Appraisal, are written in capital letters. Specific instantiations, i.e. expressions, of the systems are written in lowercase, e.g. a specific ‘attitude’ someone has towards something (as opposed to the system of Attitude).

Wout Van Praet

- 2 The chi-square test compares the absolute frequencies of positive versus negative attitude, in general, without distinguishing between Affect, Judgment and Appreciation.
- 3 For lack of space, the cited examples offer only the English translations of the Dutch source material. The translations are mine. They stay as close as possible to the original text (to accurately reflect the different shades of meaning), sometimes at the cost of idiomaticity.
- 4 The chi-square test takes together positive and negative evaluations, thus comparing the focus on 'value', 'reaction' and 'composition', regardless of the orientation of the evaluations.

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Wout Van Praet

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