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**The debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium.**  
**Absence of the ethnic minority voice?**

## **1. Introduction**

The anomalous situation that foreign residents, as a significant part of the population, are excluded from regular politics, poses a challenge to all European democracies which claim that policy-making should be done by people who represent the whole population (Rath, 1990: 127). Individual European countries have reacted differently to this challenge. In this paper the focus will be on the cases of Belgium and the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, two countries with similar laws on acquisition of nationality<sup>2</sup>. In both countries there has been (parliamentary) debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents since the early seventies. The political debates led to different policy outcomes in the two countries. In the Netherlands all foreign residents, residing more than five years in the country, can since 1985 vote in municipal elections. In accordance with the Treaty of Maastricht, European citizens can since 1996 immediately vote in local Dutch elections. Belgium has been more reluctant to enfranchise EU-citizens on the municipal level. It took till early 1999 before Belgium implemented its European obligations. Non-EU-foreigners still have no local voting rights and this will at best only be the case in 2006. Neither in Belgium nor in the Netherlands, non-nationals can vote in supra-local or national elections.

In my PhD-research (Jacobs, 1998b) I have studied how the issue of voting rights for non-nationals has been addressed in parliament in the Netherlands and Belgium between the early seventies and the late 1990s. The corpus of data analysed in this endeavour was constituted by all officially published documents relating to the issue of voting rights for foreign residents, published in the period 1970-1997 by the different bodies of Parliament in the Netherlands and Belgium. Elaborating on that research, I want to focus in this paper on the presence (or absence) and importance of the ethnic minority voice in the debates over enfranchisement of foreign residents

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<sup>1</sup> In 1995 approximately 4,6% of the adult Dutch population and 9,2% of the adult Belgian population did not possess respectively Dutch or Belgian state-citizenship (Jacobs, 1998b: 54).

<sup>2</sup> In the mid eighties both countries strengthened the importance of *ius soli* in their nationality legislations in response to the permanent presence of significant groups of foreign residents. Although there are of course differences, the nationality legislations of both countries are in broad lines very similar (see Jacobs, 1998b: chapter 3).

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in Belgium and the Netherlands. In addition, I want to discuss the implications of the reality of competing discourses (on citizenship) within the logic of the political field. In my opinion the phenomenon of (non-)polarisation in coalition-bargaining has had a crucial influence on the policy outcome of the debates about enfranchisement.

## **2. Finding the ethnic minority voice in parliamentary debate?**

Appenzeller (Switzerland) has a peculiar form of direct democracy: every year at the end of April all entitled inhabitants gather in open air and make political decisions by raising their hand (or not). Some might recall the famous televised images of a square filled with Appenzeller men voting against enfranchisement of women. Indeed, it took until 1991 before women in Appenzeller were allowed to vote. When discussing the importance of non-nationals in the political debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents, the image of the Appenzeller curiosity comes to mind. Since non-nationals (often<sup>3</sup>) have no formal political rights on the national level, they self-evidently have no say in the decision making over their own enfranchisement. In parliamentary debate foreign residents are in a literal way voiceless. As a consequence, there is little point in wanting to assess the direct importance of non-nationals in parliamentary debate and decision making; There simply is none.

If, however, members of ethnic minority groups have acquired state citizenship and are elected into parliament, they can have a direct influence on the parliamentary debate, possibly even as spokespersons for the disenfranchised. This has up till now not been the case in Belgium. Only very recently - and noteworthy a few months before new elections - the first<sup>4</sup> politician of immigrant descent, Chokri Mahassine (of Moroccan origin), became a member of (national) Belgian parliament. In the Netherlands socialist politician Lilipaly (of Moluccan descent) was elected in 1986 as the first non-white Dutch MP. He became an important actor in the debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals. In later elections several other politicians from immigrant descent were elected into parliament and particularly the socialist politician Apostolou (of Greek origin) and the ecologist politicians Oedayraj Singh Varma (of Hindu-Surinamese descent) and Rabbae (of Moroccan origin) did substantial effort to put enfranchisement (back) on the parliamentary agenda. There is, however, little interest in discussing the personal influence of specific - in this case only Dutch - politicians of immigrant descent on the debate over enfranchisement. Firstly, because major developments in the (Dutch) debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents happened before politicians of immigrant descent entered the parliamentary arena. Secondly, because the positions they took in parliament were merely a continuation of already existing official party views. Thirdly, because they were not appointed by their parties as, and did not define themselves explicitly or solely as, representatives of all immigrants nor of their respective ethnic communities.

It is far more interesting to focus on the influence of collective claims making of ethnic minorities (and their supporters) in the debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals. I should immediately stress that I have in my research only been able to systematically and exhaustively reconstruct the parliamentary debate. It might seem a bit odd that I want to discuss the importance of collective claims making by immigrants (and their supporters) over enfranchisement by relying on a study of parliamentary debates. Indeed, collective claims making has in essence been an extra-parliamentary political activity. I want to stress, however, that it would hardly be a self-evident endeavour to also analyse the extra-parliamentary 'public debate' in an exhaustive manner. On the one hand, there is, of course, the practical (time-management related) matter that it is a tremendous task to gather and analyse all available material (given the quantity) through every possible channel (or even only the written media). On the other hand, there are the intertwined methodological problems of how to define the exact boundaries of the

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<sup>3</sup> In New Zealand and Chili foreign residents (under certain conditions) have national voting rights.

<sup>4</sup> That is, if we do not count Elio Di Rupo, vice-prime minister in the federal government, who is of Italian descent and has hardly been regarded to be an immigrant or a member of an ethnic minority by the general public and the press.

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'wider public debate'<sup>5</sup>, of how to assess the discursive and political importance of contributions to the 'wider public debate' and of what material should be included (and on what grounds this should happen). Another research strategy could be to trace and contact all immigrant associations possibly involved in the struggle for enfranchisement in order to reconstruct their side of the story. Again, however, this is inhibited by practical and methodological constraints. Firstly, it is very time consuming. Secondly, we are confronted with the issue how to exactly trace all possibly relevant organisations, when a substantial number of them has ceased to exist. The fact that I have to rely on parliamentary data is, however, for our objectives less problematic than it might seem. Firstly, in the decision making process, parliament is what one could call a veto-point (Immergut, 1992) or an obligatory point of passage (Callon, 1986). Parliament has the final say in the matter of enfranchisement and in the end all 'public debate' and extra-parliamentary activity is aimed at influencing parliamentary debate and its decision making. As such, parliamentary debate is a funnel for the wider societal debate and extra-parliamentary events. Given the large number of competing political factions and their divergent interests, chances are that most (and certainly the most influential) extra-parliamentary activities and contributions in the extra-parliamentary debate will be echoed in parliament. In this way, these activities and contributions can then be traced and further investigated by the researcher. At the same time, the problem of selectivity and assessment of importance of activities and contributions is (partly) solved; Indeed, what is being discussed or referred to in parliament is to be taken into account as significant events to be included in the research. Consultation of experts and directly involved actors of the main immigrant associations in addition functioned as a safety net to check if no crucial events were missed by relying in first instance on the data furnished through parliamentary debate.

### 3. Bringing debate and politics back in

It is tempting to analyse and 'explain' the choices made in the Netherlands and Belgium on enfranchisement of foreign residents by using grand historical narratives about political cultures. For example, a lot of (Dutch) people assume that the enfranchisement of non-nationals at the municipal level has been a result of the Dutch 'tradition' of tolerance, which is lacking in Belgium. Holland would be and would always have been a 'tolerant' country, combining a system of pillarisation with openness for other communities (see Zahn, 1989; Van Thijn, 1997). Tolerance would be the main characteristic of Dutch culture and this would be dating back to the 17th Century. Precisely the tolerant Dutch cultural idiom<sup>6</sup> would have led to the current Dutch 'multicultural' regime for incorporating migrants (Van Thijn, 1997) and would have made local enfranchisement of foreign residents possible (Hisschemöller, 1988: 43). Belgium, in contrast, would always have had a very intolerant political culture, distrustful of other communities and limiting itself to rigid pillarisation and clientelism. In addition, the multi-national character of the state would limit the possibilities for consensus between the constituting cultures on the issue of integration of foreigners. This would have led to a hybrid, rather messy and uncoordinated policy combining an exclusionist and assimilationist regime for incorporation of immigrants. Hence, enfranchisement of non-nationals would be unthinkable here. These grand narratives on Dutch and Belgian political culture are fashionable and intriguing, seem to make sense and it is surely tempting to use them to explain the different policies on enfranchisement of foreign residents. One should take care, however, not to assume *a priori* that there is such a thing as a clear cut cultural idiom or incorporation regime in the first place and that these have a direct translation in

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<sup>5</sup> It is very problematic to define a political or public debate if it is not clearly linked to particular settings (defineable in time and space). In order to do a systematic and representative analysis of a debate a strict delimitation is essential. If this is not the case, there can be no control of selection and representativity, given that an exhaustive collection of material is often impossible. This is often a serious flaw in research claiming to analyse 'the public debate' on a particular issue.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers Brubaker (1992) used the term 'cultural idiom' to refer to a (historically rooted) dominant national style of thought on nationhood and citizenship in a country. This cultural idiom would also deeply structure the debate on immigration- and integration policy.

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all policy outcomes. Claiming that a particular policy is the resultant of a noble tradition, a typical national incorporation regime or a malign cultural idiom is one thing, giving clear empirical evidence for a causal link between a (postulated) political-cultural tradition and policy outcomes is a completely different story. Postulating a political-cultural tradition leads to an obvious danger of reproducing national stereotypes or prejudices. With these comments I do not want to claim that the idea of the existence of national citizenship regimes for incorporating migrants (inspired by Brubaker) is wrong - even on the contrary, I think it is a very sensible perspective. What I do want to stress, however, is that it is dangerous to postulate in advance what the particular incorporation regimes look like, relying on general ideas about national political cultures, but without having actually empirically investigated the incorporation regimes and the conditions of their production. Clearly some countries like Germany and France have relatively stable and straightforward incorporation regimes which can be historically linked to long standing traditions and idioms of nationhood (Brubaker, 1992). This does, however, not imply that this will automatically be the case as well in all other European countries. In addition, it is not self-evident that all aspects of incorporation policy of immigrants (civil, socio-economic, political) necessarily are connected to one and the same regime which is stable over time. Grand narratives on the importance of incorporation regimes only make sense if they can stand the test of historicist analysis of particular aspects of incorporation policy of immigrants. As far as the issue of local voting rights in the Netherlands is concerned, I would like to stress that the major political breakthrough in the debate over enfranchisement took place before the multicultural ethnic minorities policy was set up (Jacobs, 1998a). An 'explanation' of local enfranchisement of foreign residents which refers to the typical Dutch ethnic minorities policy is therefor blatantly insufficient.

Another approach in studying the matter has been put forward by postnational writers such as Yasemin Soysal (1994). As is well known, foreign residents have in post-war Europe been increasingly granted the same social, economic and civic rights which state citizens are entitled to. Tomas Hammar (1990) and Rogers Brubaker (1989) have depicted these changes as an expansion of scope of citizenship on a territorial basis: in entitlement to rights the principle of residence has augmented the principle of membership. As a result, the legal status of foreign residents and nationals has become more and more equal all over Europe. Heisler & Heisler (1991) have suggested this process has been the result of the internal logic of expansion of the developing welfare state; social and economic rights have been granted to non-nationals following the development of the welfare system as an universalistic system redistributing social goods (within territorial boundaries). Indeed, the welfare state, in order to be successful as a means towards social stability, must treat every inhabitant equally regardless of nationality. According to political sociologist Yasemin Soysal (1994), however, the transformation of citizenship has been of a much more profound nature than a mere expansion on territorial basis. She rejects the explanation which attributes the changes in citizenship to the emergence of the welfare apparatuses. In her opinion "there is nothing inherent about the logic of the welfare state that would dictate the incorporation of foreigners into its system of privileges" (Soysal, 1994: 138). Soysal instead claims the expansion of rights of immigrants is the result of the more profound rise of the narrative of universal personhood. In her opinion universal human rights have over the years 'replaced' national rights, as the basis of legitimacy for individual rights in the post-war era. Soysal claims the justifications for the state's obligations to foreigners have moved beyond the scope of the nation-state itself (Soysal, 1994: 142). 'Personhood' has become a central legitimating category over 'nationhood'. This discursive revolution is accounted for by Soysal by referring to two interrelated lines of historical development; On the one hand there has been increasing globalisation and an emergence of transnational political structures which has complicated nation-state sovereignty and jurisdiction (1994: 144). On the other hand, there has been the emergence of universalistic rules and conceptions, which are formalised and legitimated by a multitude of international codes and laws, and have ascribed universal rights to individuals regardless of their nationality (1994: 145). In sum, citizenship has obtained a totally new 'postnational' character. Soysal stresses this "postnational citizenship confers upon every person the right and duty of participation in the authority structures and public life of a polity, regardless of their historical and cultural ties to that community" (Soysal, 1994: 3). According to Soysal, the rise of this postnational narrative led to the rapid expansion of rights of immigrants. Foreign

Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. residents are thus increasingly granted access to civil, social, economic and political rights. The acquisition of political rights is, however, somewhat more problematic. Reversing the Marshallian sequence, political rights are only given to foreign residents after civil and social rights have been granted. Furthermore, only local voting rights are extended to non-nationals. Soysal claims this is due to the symbolic meaning which the right to vote carries in terms of popular sovereignty and the fact that political rights were codified at a time when the nation-state was at its ideological apex (1994: 131). Nevertheless, Soysal concludes that all over Western Europe "rights, participation and representation in a polity, are increasingly matters beyond the vocabulary of national citizenship" (1994: 165). She is eager to claim that "in a world within which rights, and identities as rights, derive their legitimacy from discourses of universalistic personhood, the limits of nationness, or of national citizenship, for that matter, become inventively irrelevant" (1994: 162). In view of this conclusion it seems that Soysal relies on the inevitability of voting rights being granted to immigrants in due time (Klopp, 1995: 781). According to this perspective, the granting of (local) voting rights is only a matter of time and the Netherlands were just a bit quicker than other countries in changing their conception of (political) membership in postnational terms. Unfortunately, there is no proof of any increased importance of reference to 'personhood' or to human rights, nor proof of a major influence of a postnational narrative in Dutch political discourse in the debate leading up to local enfranchisement of foreign residents (Jacobs, 1997a).

In both the framework referring to cultural idioms as in the postnational approach, actual debate and politics seem to be of no real significance. I think this is a serious flaw and that the nitty-gritty politics (amongst other things connected to electoral competition) should far from be neglected as a topic for study. I argue that the explanation of the outcome of political debates must first be sought on a more modest level in the dynamics of party competition and coalition formation. In this, 'discourse' plays a fundamental role. It is essential to analyse the political and discursive dimensions of the policy process in their own right, before falling back on all encompassing cultural or historical explanations. Debate and politics should be brought back in the analysis and interpretation. Instead of *a priori* only looking for one idiom (or regime) and one ('the') dominant discourse affecting policy outcomes, one should reconstruct the debate as a struggle with different discourses and look into what discourse coalitions were at the basis of policy outcomes.

#### **4. Analysing the parliamentary debates**

Both the Dutch as the Belgian constitution stipulate that in principle possession of state citizenship is a prerequisite to enjoy voting rights. Hence, enfranchisement of foreign residents necessitates both a simple legislative change and a more complex constitutional change and is a very time consuming process. The procedure for changing the constitution entails two phases. Firstly, both Chambers must pass a bill proposing constitutional amendment by a simple majority. When this has been passed parliament is dissolved and new elections are held. The new parliament must then adopt the amendment by a two-thirds majority. As a result, there is considerable inertia in effecting constitutional changes: the major political parties are de facto 'held hostage' by the necessity to create a broad consensus on the principles stipulated in the Constitution. In the Low countries the Parliament traditionally consists of a relatively large number of different political parties and only coalition governments can obtain a comfortable majority. In recent Dutch and Belgian history the governmental parties never held a two-thirds majority in Parliament. This means that in practice extension of voting rights to non-nationals (indeed, any other measure necessitating a constitutional amendment) would only be possible if all mainstream political parties (both those in government and in opposition) can reach an agreement on this matter. Depending on the exact composition of Parliament, at least all major traditional political groupings (christian-democrats, right-liberals and social-democrats) and, preferably also some of the more peripheral parties (left-liberals and leftist parties) would have to grant their support to enfranchisement. Both left-wing and right-wing political actors have to be willing and able to combine their political interests and ideological narratives into one story line propagating the enfranchisement of foreign residents.

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To understand the success or failure of attempts to enfranchise foreign residents, the study of (the use of) discourses is crucial. Accepting the numerical strength of parties - the result of elections - as a given fact and one source of the 'power' of politicians to set policy, 'power' must from then on be considered as an effect of the successful composition of alliances around discourses, rather than as the explanation of the composition of those alliances (see Rose & Miller, 1992: 183; Latour, 1986). Of course, stabilised networks (for example a coalition between governing parties) are a potent influence on the tactical composition of alliances between particular parties on specific issues. But on issues where broad majorities are obligatory, the creation of alliances around discourses entails an ongoing process of enrolment and mobilisation in its own right. As such, discourses (and especially the extent of their ability to have alliances being built around them) are important in causing and, concomitantly, in helping us to understand the outcome of debates.

A discourse (in its non-abstract significance, as a 'count noun') can be defined as a relatively bounded set of claims, images and tropes through which meaning is given to reality (see Ellingson, 1995: 107; Hajer, 1993: 45). Discourses are specific ways of "signifying experience from a particular perspective" (Fairclough, 1995: 135). They are "situated in a field of debate wherein speakers struggle with one another to establish, meaning, earn legitimacy, and mobilize consensus on belief and action" (Ellingson, 1995: 107). Because discourses are created in reference and opposition to each other, they tend to be organized around certain fundamental oppositions (Ellingson, 1995: 108; Bourdieu, 1991: 185) and are to a great extent interrelated in contents and use.

Discourses structure perception by focusing on particular elements of 'the real world'. Obviously this process of constructing and framing reality is a highly significant element in debate and the overall political process (Hajer, 1993: 45; Rose & Miller, 1992: 175). Policy is, indeed, the result of the creation of networks (of politicians) around discourses which make certain phenomena understandable in a similar language and logic, construing goals and fate in a similar direction (Rose & Miller, 1992: 184). In this process some interests are formed and others are liquidated in the very process of formulating them through and in political discourses, persuasions, negotiations and bargains (Rose & Miller, 1992: 184).

A particular discourse is used by a politician or a political faction to enforce a specific standpoint on the issue being discussed. This normally happens in order to influence policy in accordance with their own political opinions, although one should not rule out that there can also be more pragmatic-electoral motives involved: sometimes a politician merely wants to profile herself to her electorate, hoping to gain or keep support from certain groups of voters. However, in order to study the dynamics of the debate it is far more important to study the importance and significance of a discourse, rather than focusing on the intentions - which are not traceable anyhow - of those persons using the discourse. One can state that the importance of a discourse depends on the extent to which a politician can gain support within the parliamentary arena for her specific perspective on reality. In the Dutch and Belgian cases no single political faction - due to the lack of a majority - is able to dominate parliament, and the different parties must therefore cooperate and attune their respective discourses. In such a situation, the importance of a discourse is assessed by looking at the way in which the political actors try and build 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer, 1993) which consist of a set of actors who share and defend (or seem to do so) the same social construct(s) as the basis for policy. The sharing of deep values or societal insights is not necessary in the creation of such a discourse coalition; merely the partial orchestration and coordination of discursive elements in one seemingly coherent narrative is what matters here. At moments of decision making, policy (changes) will, of course, be the result of the narrative in the discourse coalition in which the central political actors participate at that moment.

In my research (Jacobs, 1998b) I have empirically traced the discourses in the debate over enfranchisement of aliens by using the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) as a procedure for qualitative text-analysis, combined with insights from linguistic pragmatics (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1994). The corpus of texts was systematically analysed on two levels: the explicit argumentative layer was charted using the grounded theory method, while the implicit argumentative layer (linguistic transformations) was analyzed using the discourse analytical toolkit. The argumentative clusters (of statements) which resulted from this double-layered analysis were considered to be discourses.

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Use of the grounded theory method in exploring the data led to the observation that both the Dutch and the Belgian debate on voting rights for foreign residents can best be reconstructed in a similar two-dimensional space. The first dimension is the question of whether the fact that foreign residents are not entitled to vote and stand as a candidate in elections is a 'democratic deficit'. The second dimension is the question whether or not certain conditions need to be fulfilled to have a viable multicultural society in which immigrants politically participate (if possible or desirable at all) and whether or not this necessitates certain demands towards foreign residents (and/or nationals of ethnic minorities). The answers given to these two basic imaginary questions constitute the most important discursive fields in the course of the debate on political integration of foreigners in the Netherlands and Belgium. Indeed, using these two dimensions nearly all statements in the debates can be confronted with each other in one (imaginary) space, thus providing an adequate means of compressing the debate. One can postulate that in the development of parliamentary debate these two dimensions are at the threshold of the argumentative struggle over the issue of enfranchisement of foreign residents. It is at the intersection of these two dimensions that four distinct discourses have been created concerning the issue of enfranchisement of non-nationals. It is striking and somewhat surprising that these same basic discourses were at the heart of the political debate in both countries. I will not elaborate on this issue here, but I do want to stress that this can be explained *post facto* when focusing on parallel historical developments influencing the formation of the discourses (see Jacobs, 1998b: 268-269).

Four major discourses were analytically and empirically distinguished, which - inspired by the labels Stephen Castles (Castles, 1994: 21-22) gave to specific models of citizenship - I have labelled assimilationist exclusionary, assimilationist inclusionary, pluralist inclusionary and segregationist exclusionary. These discourses are specific ways of defining and handling the issue of enfranchisement for foreign residents. Albeit that they can be clearly distinguished from one another both analytically and empirically from an argumentative perspective, it should be noted that it is not impossible to see them being used alternatively by the same actors in short episodes of discussion. Although they are not exclusively linked to certain (clusters of) political parties, they are in general clearly connected to specific positions in the political spectrum. The segregationist exclusionary discourse is used by extreme right-wing parties, the pluralist inclusionary discourse is foremost used by left-wing parties, while the assimilationist exclusionary discourse is primarily used by right-wing parties. The assimilationist inclusionary discourse is used by both left-wing and right-wing parties, although more often by the latter.

In the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*, the fact that non-nationals are disenfranchised is not seen as a democratic deficit. The fact that non-nationals are not enfranchised is regarded to be self-evident in the system of nation-states and those foreign residents who wish voting rights, should opt for naturalisation. However, naturalisation is in this discourse only possible after sufficient assimilation. In its most radical form, the newcomer is only allowed to adopt state citizenship if this equals 'melting' into the receiving nation (postulated to be a community of common culture) to the point of indistinction (Feher and Heller, 1994: 135). The fact that present-day society is *de facto* multicultural is accepted, but is only considered to be a temporary phase. To have a viable co-existence of different ethnicized groups a set of conditions must be fulfilled and foreign residents should comply to specific demands, which all boils down to adjustment to the (proclaimed) 'national' (or 'Western') culture. Relying on the ideology (as a worldview) of homogeneity (see Blommaert and Verschueren, 1994) on the implicit level, the ideal society is presumed to be as homogeneous as possible. To this purpose the conditions to which the foreigner has to comply in order to acquire state citizenship should be (or should remain) quite strict. Franchise for foreign residents is out of the question since this would only inhibit (the deemed necessary) cultural assimilation of non-nationals. Assimilation is foremost an individual responsibility.

In contrast, in the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*, the fact that (large) parts of the population do not have voting rights is regarded to be a democratic deficit. Foreign residents should obtain or be granted state citizenship to the largest extent possible in order to decrease or avoid this democratic deficit. However, at the same time certain conditions required to make the *de facto* multicultural society (in which immigrants can politically participate) viable should be taken into account. A minimum level of cultural assimilation is obligatory. The state has an

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In the *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, the fact that (large) parts of the population do not have voting rights is also regarded to be a democratic deficit. In addition, it is believed that no specific demands are required from foreign residents in order to have a viable multicultural society in which immigrants politically participate. The responsibility of society in fighting racism and the societal (and legal) arrears of immigrants is stressed, while (possibly hidden) objectives to assimilate and deliberately 'acculturalise' immigrants are explicitly rejected. Political rights for foreign residents are seen as unconditional rights, which should be granted without any restrictive measures. It is argued that it is self-evident that a modern democracy should enfranchise foreign residents on every level, regardless of nationality. Enfranchisement of non-nationals is presented as the next 'logical' - and even 'natural' - step in the 'history of democracy' (after enfranchisement of women). In this discourse, immigrants are admitted to the political community, while the maintenance of cultural differences which are not seen to be problematic is accepted.

In the *segregationist exclusionary discourse*, the fact that non-nationals are disenfranchised is not seen as a democratic deficit. The creation of a viable multicultural society is seen as an impossibility. Ethnicised groups should at best be segregated and 'foreign elements' should in the worst case scenario be expelled or destroyed. This discourse has a clear ethno-centrist and racist tenet.

So far, for the presentation of the four major discourses in the debate. The same basic discourses may have been at the heart of the political debate in both countries, the outcomes were very different due to the possibility or impossibility to build up discourse coalitions in favour of enfranchisement within the respective political fields at specific strategic moments of the debate. Let us now have a look at the broad lines of the Dutch and Belgian parliamentary debates over enfranchisement and the importance of the ethnic minority voice therein. I wish to stress that the main aim here is to present a brief reconstruction of the dynamics of the debate, with special attention to the possible influence of collective claims making by immigrant groups in the course of that debate. I cannot discuss all the juridical and procedural aspects of the debate (see Jacobs, 1998b). As far as Belgium is concerned, I cannot elaborate on the importance of the internal flemish-francophone divide for the debate (see Jacobs, 1998b; Bousetta & Swyngedouw, 1999).

## 5. Reconstruction of the debates

Both in the Netherlands as in Belgium, the issue of enfranchisement of foreign residents was in the early seventies put on the political agenda by leftist politicians. Throughout the next two decades it remained foremost a 'left-wing' political demand. This is probably so because left-wing parties expect electoral progress due to immigrant votes, but it is equally a result of the leftist ideology of international solidarity in which both native and immigrant workers are seen as a part of a common working-class suppressed by a dominant capitalist class (Rath, 1990: 142)<sup>7</sup>. It is worth underlining that the support for enfranchisement by left-wing politicians was in first instance not the result of a suffragist movement among foreign residents themselves - such a movement in fact did not exist at the time. In the Netherlands the issue was launched in 1970 by socialist politicians in the margin of a debate on the position of migrant workers. It was in the

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that franchise of foreign residents is not always automatically advocated in leftist political narratives. Sometimes, and especially when anti-immigrant parties are winning support as was the case in the late 1980s and 1990s in France, Belgium and Germany, leftist parties object to extending voting rights to non-nationals out of fear for a 'white backlash' from the white working-class. Another motive for left-wing parties to oppose enfranchisement of foreigners has been the wish to counter the influence of extremist (right-wing) political groups among foreigners. In the Netherlands, Bakker, a parliamentarian of the Communist Party Netherlands (CPN), articulated the fear that Turkish fascist political groupings would be given the possibility to increase their political influence (Hand. II, 1978-1979, p. 3702).



Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. same period more or less coincidentally picked up by a group of jurists, appointed by the government to prepare a modernisation of the Constitution and the electoral laws, in a discussion on the importance of the principle of residence for voting rights of nationals. While discussing the issue of voting rights for nationals with references to philosophy of law, the question of voting rights for non-nationals was raised during the debate. In Belgium individual socialist and communist politicians took on the issue in parliament in 1971 after it had been launched by the trade unions. The unions demanded enfranchisement of non-nationals after they had in 1969 and 1970 experienced some severe incidents in which police and employers had tried to break major strikes by bullying migrant workers. In short, in both countries the topic of enfranchisement of foreign residents was not raised by foreign residents themselves, but was put on the political agenda by self-appointed advocates and left-wing politicians.

### 5.1. Reconstruction of the debate in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands the left-wing government Den Uyl (christian-democrats, socialists, left-liberals, radical left) after some years of left-wing pressure in 1976 proposed a bill to change the constitution in order to be able to enfranchise foreign residents on the local level. This had still nothing whatsoever to do with demands from migrant associations or a suffragist movement - there were no such demands - but was the result of internal competition of left-wing parties within the government. Only enfranchisement of non-nationals on the municipal level was demanded by the left-wing government, using both a *pluralist inclusionary* as an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. To succeed in changing the constitution support of all major political parties was necessary. The right-wing parties (especially the right-wing liberals) strongly objected local enfranchisement, clutching on to an *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the leadership of the right-liberals changed their positions on the issue when they came in government in 1978 and started using an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*, which could (and would) be combined with the *pluralist inclusionary discourse* leftist parties had been using on the issue. This turn-around was an unintended consequence of the painful terrorist activities of Moluccan youngsters<sup>8</sup>. It should be noted that the Moluccan terrorists did not ask for voting rights at all. The Moluccan violence had, however, for the first time placed the wider ethnic issue on the national agenda and all parties agreed to start thinking about developing an integrated policy regarding ethnic minorities. In the meanwhile, the central right-wing political actors decided to support enfranchisement as a quick symbolic means to show that the government was doing something with regard to the societal position of non-nationals (especially Moluccans) (see Jacobs, 1998a). Gradually the right-wing leadership pressured and convinced their party members to agree to possible local enfranchisement.

At first, migrant associations in this period still did not demand or even support this enfranchisement. The *Komitee Marokkaanse Arbeiders in Nederland* (KMAN), one of the largest and most important migrant associations, was even very sceptical about voting rights - without, however, stating this publicly. The KMAN thought there were more pressing issues, especially related to residence permits and the overall legal position of immigrants, to be tackled first. In addition, KMAN was displeased about the fact that migrant associations had never been consulted and thought local enfranchisement was merely a malign assimilationist strategy, part of a monocultural policy (Van der Valk, 1997: 170-171). Only after a while migrant associations - the coordinating *Nederlands Centrum Buitenlanders* (NCB) and the Moroccan (KMAN), Turkish (HTIB) and Italian (FILEF) leftist migrant associations - did take over the demand for voting rights and started to lobby for unconditional enfranchisement. They, however, decided to limit their pressure to low-profile lobbying and to not undertake public actions such as demonstrations.

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<sup>8</sup> After Indonesian independence from Holland, the Netherlands had to take Moluccans (and their families) in who had fought alongside the Dutch in the colonial army against the nationalist rebels. For a long period of time the Moluccan community had to live their exile in quite unfavorable conditions (despite a lot of promises from the Dutch governments). This led to serious tensions and, in the end, to terrorism. The most spectacular terrorist activities were the highjackings of a train and of a primary school during the election period of 1977 (see Steijlen, 1997: 161-165).

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This was done in order to avoid upsetting the ongoing process of reconciliation on the issue within the centre and right-wing parties. It is worth noting that not only within the political parties but also in the coordinating NCB the silent suffragist struggle was still foremost pushed by non-immigrant self-appointed advocates (generally activists in the anti-racism movement). The migrant associations had other priorities, both related to socio-economic positions in the Netherlands as to home-land politics.

In the early eighties both right-wing as left-wing political actors kept on supporting local enfranchisement, respectively using an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* and a *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, and made an effort to avoid open conflict over its modalities. The Dutch politicians were able to uphold a (temporary) 'hybrid' discourse containing elements from their different political narratives into one discourse coalition, eventually<sup>9</sup> leading to both a change of the constitution as of the electoral laws. As a result, non-nationals residing in the country for five years<sup>10</sup> could vote in local elections in 1985. At the same time, a significant extension of *ius soli* was introduced in the Dutch nationality legislation. It has to be stressed that in the last phases of the process leading up to local enfranchisement of foreign residents, progress was in an important way stimulated by the (secret) agreement between all traditional parties not to fight too overtly over the issue in order to avoid stimulating the popularity of extreme-right-wing politicians, using a *segregationist exclusionary discourse*, in an indirect manner<sup>11</sup>.

Once the voting rights on the municipal level were granted, both the Dutch government as several major migrant associations called upon the foreign residents to use their newly gained voting rights. Migrant associations never explicitly supported particular political parties but did incite their members to vote for 'ethnic candidates' and 'friendly' political parties. Hardly any migrant parties were set up - let alone elected. In the 1986 local elections, the first in which non-nationals could participate, several parties gave ethnic minority members (in majority all possessing Dutch citizenship) better (eligible) positions on their lists. This led to an increase of the number of ethnic minority politicians in municipal councils of 500% in comparison to the 1982 local elections. The total number of elected local politicians was, however, still only one sixth of the amount needed to obtain a proportional reflection of the ethnic minority population in the Netherlands.

Once foreign residents had been enfranchised on the local level, the debate came to a halt in the second half of the eighties. Most leftist parties officially kept supporting further enfranchisement of foreign residents by using the *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, but the centre and right-wing parties, who were in government, strongly opposed to seriously discussing the issue. The centre and right-wing parties increasingly turned from the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* to the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*. The normative tradition of the nation-state and the idea of the Dutch polity as a culturally homogeneous entity gradually resurfaced in the discourse of the right-wing parties. As a result, an official demand of the *Landelijk Advies- en Overlegstructuur voor het Minderhedenbeleid* (LAO), the national advisory committee of representatives of ethnic minorities, remained unsuccessful. It should also be noted that ethnic minority associations did not organise rallies to pressure politicians.

With the return of the socialist party to government in 1989, the issue of enfranchisement shortly returned on the parliamentary agenda. The topic, however, soon dropped in the background due to a political deal the socialists made with the christian-democrats to stop focussing on enfranchisement if the naturalisation procedure would be made more liberal. In 1994 the issue, however, reappeared in discussions concerning a reform of the structures of regional and local governments. Some major cities and their peripheries would be transformed into provinces and this would lead to a *de facto* (partial) loss of voting rights for non-nationals.

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<sup>9</sup> The entire process took nearly eight years since any modification of the constitution is a time-consuming activity. Inertia is institutionally assured (see Jacobs, 1998a; Jacobs, 1998b: 354-355).

<sup>10</sup> The condition of five years residence was a demand of the right-wing parties and reflects the importance of the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. The right-wing parties insisted on having some kind of guarantee that non-nationals were sufficiently 'integrated' in the country.

<sup>11</sup> In 1982 the extreme-right-wing and racist politician Hans Janmaat had been elected into parliament.

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The socialists - confronted on this issue by Rotterdam migrant associations and the national advisory committee of ethnic minorities - insisted that the constitution would be altered to be able to enfranchise foreign residents at the provincial level, before wanting to support the reform. The proposals for reform aroused such an amount of public debate, that a referendum on the matter was organised in the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. An overwhelming majority (90%) of voters objected to the proposals. In the debates leading up to the referendum considerable attention was given to the issue of partial loss of voting rights for foreign residents and the Amsterdam migrant associations had collectively summoned to vote against the reform. As a result of the referendum, the plans for structural reforms of local and regional government were postponed. To be on the safe side, several leftist politicians (socialists, ecologists and left-liberals), supported by their parties, nevertheless issued a bill in 1996 to change the constitution in order to enfranchise foreign residents on the provincial level. Although they also support national enfranchisement, using the *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, they limited their demand to provincial elections. This limitation was explicitly defended as a realistic strategy; christian-democrats and liberals objected to any further enfranchisement and the bill would definitely stand no change at all if enfranchisement on all political levels were to be demanded. At the current moment the bill is still being discussed.

Strangely enough, there has been no debate whatsoever on the recent introduction of a distinction between EU- and non-EU-foreigners in the electoral law. In order to abide to a European directive resulting out of the Maastricht Treaty, the Dutch parliament in 1996 accepted a government bill - without deliberation nor vote - to strike the condition of five year residence for EU-citizens to vote in local elections. No one in parliament nor any migrant or anti-racism associations demanded a debate on the issue. Such a debate would have had relevance, for instance to equally strike or diminish the residence condition for non-EU-foreigners (Jacobs, 1997b). The change of the electoral law had, however, apparently by all been regarded to be a mere technical matter in preparation of the next 1998 local elections. In several rallies the strongest national antiracism movement *Nederland Bekent Kleur* (NBK), closely related to the KMAN, did stress the demand of further enfranchisement of foreign residents in general terms. They did, however, not (wish to) react to the distinction introduced between EU- and non-EU-foreigners, even though it was specifically pointed out to them and they had on earlier occasions raised objections to other forms of differential legal treatment of EU- and non-EU-foreigners.

## **5.2. Reconstruction of the debate in Belgium**

Unlike in the Netherlands, only individual leftist politicians in the early seventies supported the idea of (local) enfranchisement of foreign residents. On party level, the socialists and christian-democrats limited themselves to supporting enfranchisement of EC-citizens but only if this would happen simultaneously in the entire European Community. Overall, most politicians objected to enfranchisement using an *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*. After several failures by individual MP's to firmly establish the issue on the parliamentary agenda, 33 Belgian associations (trade-unions and antiracism movements) and 35 immigrant associations in 1976 launched a suffragist struggle. The movement was called '*Objective 82*' referring to the demand of enfranchising foreign residents on the local level in the elections of 1982. Franchise was, however, not the only demand. Improvement of the legal position of immigrants, especially concerning residence permits, was another main issue. Pressured by the movement, using a *pluralist inclusionary discourse*, an increasing number of individual - albeit not very prominent - politicians from centre and left-wing parties supported the demand for local franchise of foreign residents. As a partial result of the lobbying, the francophone socialist party took on unilateral franchise for EU-citizens as an official party position. Due to pressure and rallies of *Objective 82* the issue of voting rights even played a (minor) role in the electoral campaign at the end of 1978. As a result, the centre-leftist governments Martens-I and Martens-II in 1979 and 1980 included local enfranchisement of all foreign residents in the government statement. The left-wing government using an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* promised to take up the issue, while the right-wing political parties in general opposed the idea of enfranchisement using an *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*.

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Due to political instability the issue could, however, not be tackled and soon thereafter the consecutive left-wing governments favouring enfranchisement (and an intermediary tripartite government Martens-III and left-wing government Martens-IV) were replaced by a newly elected right-wing government Martens-V in 1981. Hoping to attract votes in competition with extreme-right-wing parties and a militant francophone party in the city of Brussels, the francophone right-liberals at this time had turned from the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse* to implicit anti-immigrant discourses (flirting with the *segregationist exclusionary discourse*). They forced the other parties of the right-wing government to drop the issue of enfranchising foreign residents even if they were still in doubt. This blocked the possibility to set up a discourse coalition in favour of enfranchisement. Instead, in a discourse coalition combining the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse* and the *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*, *ius soli* was introduced in Belgian nationality legislation, partly in order to counter demands for enfranchisement of non-nationals. At the same time new restrictive measures regarding immigrants were introduced, as the result of coalition-bargaining. It is important to note that it was in the same bill introducing *ius soli*, that limitations for residence of foreigners in the city of Brussels were installed. Thus a highly debated illegal practice of Nols, who was the mayor of the Brussels' municipality Schaarbeek and who had been spreading overt racist and populist propaganda in order to gain votes, was no longer merely condoned but even institutionalised; Nols had been refusing non-EC-immigrants to officially be registered in his municipality. This illegal practice had now been transformed into official policy for a number of Brussels' municipalities.

In this climate, the trade unions and migrant associations in 1985 reinstalled their suffragist movement and named it Objective 88, referring to the next local elections to be held in 1988. This time, however, gradually, most politicians from traditional parties (the left-wing included) backed down in defending policies in favour of immigrants in fear of a (postulated) growing electoral appeal of extreme right-wing parties. Only the ecologists firmly kept supporting enfranchisement of all foreign residents using a *pluralist inclusionary discourse*. The views of the extreme right-wing parties had been rendered some credibility and *salonfähigkeit* due to the fact that the right-wing liberals in government had taken over some of their positions and had installed several immigrant-unfriendly policies. This in turn led to an extension of the process of (negative) polarisation around the immigrant issue and at the same time gradually shifted the spectrum of positions on immigrants to the side of restriction. In the long run these processes (amongst other factors) caused further electoral success of the extreme right (especially the *Vlaams Blok* in Flanders). As such, the fear for the 'white backlash' turned into a self fulfilling prophecy (compare Bourdieu, 1998: 23).

The *Vlaams Blok* enjoyed its first major success in the national elections of 1987 and in 1988 were able to get 18% of the votes in the local elections in Antwerp. The unexpected success of the *Vlaams Blok* promptly transformed the 'immigrant issue' into a major flemish concern, where it earlier had mainly been a francophone topic in Brussels. The new left-wing government Martens-VIII decided to create the *Koninklijk Commissariaat voor het Migrantenbeleid* (KCM), which would coordinate the development of a new and for the first time systematic policy towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. It was, however, for the start made clear that enfranchisement of foreign residents would be out of the question, given the electoral success of the extreme-right. A bill, supported by use of the *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*, was, however, introduced to further strengthen the importance of *ius soli* in nationality legislation.

In the national elections of 1991 the *Vlaams Blok* gained a tremendous electoral result, increasing its number of MP's in Chamber and Senate with 15 seats. The francophone extreme right party *Front National* gained one parliamentary seat. Some months before, the centre-left government had signed the Treaty of Maastricht, in which Belgium agreed to create a European citizenship, implying unconditional local franchise for EU-citizens. The new centre-left government Dehaene-I decided to postpone the constitutional change, which was necessary to make this enfranchisement possible, in order not to threaten ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. In addition, the government hoped to avoid a flemish-francophone conflict over the flemish fear - fueled by some influential journalists - that enfranchisement of EU-citizens would weaken the political position of the flemish in the bilingual city of Brussels and its periphery. Given the enormous electoral success of the extreme-right, any reference to enfranchisement of all foreign residents had become a taboo within the traditional political parties more than ever

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 before. In response to the triumph of the *Vlaams Blok*, several competing antiracism movements - in which migrant associations had only minor influence - were created. On the one hand, a rally was organised by the movement *Objective 479.917*<sup>12</sup>, having strong links with the extreme-leftist party PvdA-PTB, in support of a bill which automatically wanted to grant all foreigners residing in the country for over five years the Belgian nationality. On the other hand, there was the movement *Hand-in-Hand*, a conglomerate of trade unions and a wide range of new social movements, who organised a very successful antiracism demonstration in 1992. As long as *Hand-in-Hand* limited itself to a general and soft antiracist stance, the movement was openly supported by the centre-left parties in government. When the movement, however, in 1994 decided to focus its rallies on the demand of enfranchisement of foreign residents, the Flemish parties withdrew their support. The antiracism movements were in any event clearly unable to effectively influence the political debate about enfranchisement.

In the local elections of 1994 the *Vlaams Blok* was able to attract 25% of the votes of the Antwerp electorate, thus becoming the largest party in city council. All other parties were forced to jointly enter a coalition to keep the extreme-right party from local power. Later that year the Belgian government was secretly able to obtain an exceptional clause in the European directive regulating enfranchisement of EU-citizens, allowing to temporarily reserve the right to vote to nationals in municipalities with more than 20% potential European voters. This was done in order to soothe Flemish politicians who feared a loss of Flemish political power in the Brussels periphery. Contrary to the objective this, however, only fueled the internal Flemish-francophone conflict and complicated the objective to change the constitution and enfranchise EU-citizens for years to come.

In the 1995 elections the extreme-right was able to consolidate its position on the national level, even gaining an additional seat on the francophone side. Secret negotiations of the trade unions with the centre left government Dehaene-II in 1996, demanded by the antiracism movement *Hand-in-Hand*, could still not stimulate progress on the issue of enfranchisement of all foreign residents. Discontented with this situation, several individuals from different migrant associations created the *Nationaal Comité voor Algemeen Stemrecht* (NCAS), a national movement pro enfranchisement. In the movement explicitly only immigrants could take part. This was done in order to show that immigrants do have an interest in the matter and thus counter the argument of opponents of enfranchisement that foreign residents did not want voting rights and it was simply a topic put forward by extreme-leftist non-immigrant agitators. Their initiatives did enjoy a lot of media attention but could not influence the centre-left political parties to reopen the debate.

In March 1997, a dramatic event suddenly revived support for the idea of enfranchisement of all foreign residents. In the aftermath of the Dutroux-affair, the body of the nine-year old kidnapped and abused Moroccan girl Loubna Benaïssa was discovered in Brussels. The funeral of Loubna triggered a state of national mourning, as had happened earlier on the funerals of the other victims of pedosexual crimes. The press and all commentators agreed on the fact that a special bond between the different (ethnic) communities in Belgium had been created, as had already been the case during the *White March*. Shortly after the funeral, prime minister Dehaene, as so many politicians, during an interview in a live television programme held a discourse on the positive eve of interethnic relations which apparently had started and which would create new political possibilities. He thereupon was more or less forced by the interviewer to speak positively of possible enfranchisement of all non-nationals. Soon all traditional political parties almost stumbled over each other to equally state that they were in the process of partially revising their positions on enfranchisement. Suddenly, enfranchisement of all foreign residents became an option again since everyone was using either a *pluralist inclusionary discourse* or an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. The *assimilationist exclusionary discourse*, which had so long dominated the debate, was pushed to the background and even the extreme-right had

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<sup>12</sup> The number refers to the total amount of votes for extreme-right parties in the 1991 elections. The objective was to collect the same number of signatures in a petition within one year. The movement collected over 750.000 signatures.

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difficulty to keep using its *segregationist inclusionary discourse*<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, it seemed a new discursive phase had come about in which mutual respect and solidarity of Belgians and immigrants was being stressed, totally in contradiction to the earlier negative polarisation on the immigrant issue. Special reference in this respect should be made to an earlier remarkable public appearance of Loubna's sister Nabela Benaïssa, an 18-year old veiled muslim girl, which had completely contradicted the stereotype of the non-integrated muslim immigrant; at the peak of the first Dutroux-crisis when an infuriated crowd threatened to raid the Brussels Palace of Justice, Nabela had been able to calm down the protesters.

As a result, gradually a compromise between the major political parties came into effect to change the constitution in order to grant EU-citizens local voting rights in 2000 and enfranchise the other non-nationals in 2006, combining a *pluralist inclusionary* and an *assimilationist inclusionary discourse*. Most remarkable was the radical change of position of the francophone right-liberals who in a few months time had become one of the champions of enfranchisement of non-nationals. The internal flemish-francophone conflict, however, still slowed down the actual constitutional change. A significant part of the flemish politicians (from all kinds of political parties) stressed the demand of guaranteed political representation for the flemish in Brussels and denounced the new position of the francophone right-liberals as an electoral strategy towards the new potential electorate and a plot to weaken the flemish. It finally took till december 1998 before the constitution was adapted and till february 1999 before the electoral law was changed in order to enfranchise EU-citizens. On flemish (mainly christian-democrat) demand, a transitory article was included in the constitution in which it was stipulated that non-EU-nationals can only be enfranchised after the year 2001.

### 5.3. Assessing the importance of the ethnic minority voice

All in all, one must conclude that collective claims making by immigrant associations (and their supporters) had only limited importance in the political and parliamentary debate about enfranchisement in Belgium and the Netherlands. Immigrant associations were merely able to pressure leftist politicians at certain stages of the debate but were unable to influence the actors in the political debate in a more general way. Anyway, it should immediately be stressed that one cannot limit the attention to collective claims making by ethnic minority groups alone; Immigrant associations, the antiracism movement and/or self-appointed non-immigrant advocates almost always joined forces. The enfranchisement issue has in this sense not led to 'genuine' ethnic mobilisation - if this is to be seen as political mobilisation based mainly on an ethnic identity. This does not really come as a surprise. The topic of voting rights for foreign residents is one which by definition concerns different ethnic minority groups. In fact, in countries with a diverse immigrant population, a potential suffragist struggle of foreign residents has to bridge several ethnic identities and in this way is even contradictory to ethnic mobilisation. The antiracism struggle is the most obvious common denominator, equally involving non-immigrant actors.

Clearly, the involvement of immigrant associations and their supporters was a lot bigger in Belgium than in the Netherlands. A plausible explanation for this could be that the proactive position of the Dutch political parties made a suffragist movement obsolete and merely led to low-profile lobbying, while the negative attitude of the Belgian political establishment proved to be the best incentive for immigrant and antiracist action. One could, indeed, interpret the different involvement of migrant associations (and their supporters) - but also the different importance of right-wing politics - in both countries as connected to the divergent development of reactions of the political establishment to the new challenges posed by the presence of ethnic minority groups. The explanation of different involvement should therefore in my opinion not

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Frank Van Hecke, the president of the Vlaams Blok, in a radio-interview refused to answer the question if according to their program the family Benaïssa should be forced to leave the country. Since all Turkish and Moroccan families should leave the country according to the official Vlaams Blok views, this is indeed the case. Van Hecke, however, refused to confirm this. He on the contrary stressed that if Belgium had been tough on crime, the murder would not have occurred.

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be linked to the differences of *established* incorporation regimes, but to the different dynamics of the elite-driven domestic debates in which the policies towards immigrants - the *establishing of* incorporation regimes - were gradually developed and adapted. Contingency and elite voluntarism were important factors in this process.

In the Netherlands the Moluccan violence had incited the political establishment to develop a multicultural policy that would encapsulate the ethnic minorities by officially recognising them and, in a parallel development, incited consensus-seeking on the granting of voting rights to non-nationals. At the same time, the political establishment decided not to polarise the immigrant issue as a means to prevent success of the extreme-right. The Dutch policy seems to have developed into one of controlling conflict and avoiding polarisation related to the ethnic minorities issue, thus avoiding public debate and its wake pro- or anti-immigrant mobilisation.

In Belgium, however, for short term electoral reasons polarisation on the immigrant issue was given leeway and steps in developing an immigrant policy were only taken in negative response to success of the extreme-right. In contrast to the Netherlands, the political establishment did not chose to develop a proactive policy towards immigrants and firmly counter extreme-right ideas. As in France and Germany, mainstream Belgian left backed down in their defence of immigrants and thus de-legitimised their original immigrant-friendly positions (Guiraudon, 1997: 284). Because the spectrum of positions on immigrants gradually shifted to the side of restriction, immigrant associations and the antiracism movement were consistently 'encouraged' to react and fill the ideological gap. Their ideas and demands were, however, systematically pushed to the margins of the political field and were depicted as being unrealistic and only leading to a white back-lash.

In both cases, as well in the Netherlands as in Belgium, there was no real direct influence of or negotiation with ethnic minority groups or the antiracist movement in the debate over enfranchisement, nor in the more general debate on ethnic minorities policy. The decisions were made, and the policy was set out, by the existing political establishment. In this there was hardly any direct (positive) influence of direct lobbying or rallies by immigrant associations or the wider suffragist movement. The non-existing direct communication and negotiation of the political elite with migrant associations and the antiracist movement, reduced the role of ethnic minority groups to being mere subjects of discourse in elite driven domestic politics. In this perspective, it is striking that in both countries some important changes in the debate did come about when unexpected dramatic events (in which immigrants played a prominent role) happened which had no direct link with the issue of enfranchisement. A funeral of a murdered 9-year old Moroccan girl in Belgium and a train hi-jack by Moluccan youngsters in the Netherlands, had more impact on the debate than migrant mobilisation and antiracist rallies. These dramatic events triggered changes in existing patterns of discursive construction of the social reality and facilitated new discourse-coalitions on enfranchisement, while ethnic minority and antiracist rallying had failed to do so.

## **6. Explaining the different importance of polarisation in the debate over enfranchisement**

In the previous section, I have stressed the crucial difference between the debates in the two countries, stating that in the Netherlands there was an explicit effort made not to polarise regarding the issue (thus keeping the ideas of the extreme-right wing parties out of the debate), while in Belgium there *was* polarisation. This had a crucial effect on the process of formation of discourse coalitions leading to the respective policies of both countries.

It is now, of course, a challenge to try and explain this difference of importance of polarisation around the immigrant issue affecting the policy outcomes regarding enfranchisement of foreign residents. In this last section I will try to develop a tentative explanation of why the political elite in both countries acted in divergent ways. In this endeavour, I will focus on the situation in the eighties.

In order to develop my argument, I will first turn to one aspect of Freeman's classic structural-cyclical approach to debate and policy on immigrants. At first sight it is plausible to state that a long history of immigration and a large proportion of foreign residents is the best



Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. stimulus for the development of a debate on immigration and integration and in its wake a debate over voting rights for non-nationals and perhaps even the enfranchisement of foreign residents as such. The democratic deficit (the gap between the enfranchised and the actual adult population) indeed becomes more visible and poses itself increasingly as a problem of legitimacy. As far as Belgium and the Netherlands are concerned, this hypothesis does certainly not hold. In the Netherlands local voting rights have been granted when there still was a relatively limited number of foreign residents, especially compared to Belgium. The number of non-nationals is no stimulus for enfranchisement in itself. It is furthermore striking to see that those European countries (Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway) which have already for some time granted non-nationals the right to vote, have a fairly modest immigrant population. The fact that Belgium has, in contrast to the Netherlands, had important cycles of immigration starting directly after the Second World War cannot be seen as a differential stimulus for the debate over enfranchisement. A structural-cyclic explanation of policy formation on the immigrant issue – as defended by the American political scientist Gary Freeman (1995) – which would support such a perspective, is clearly insufficient. Freeman claimed that in all liberal-democratic states that are not traditional immigration countries, there is a strong consensus among the political elites to neutralise the issue of immigration in politics and exclude anti-immigrant or racist positions of the main-stream political forum. According to Freeman the elite has an anti-populist ethos and is much more sensitive to interests and perspectives of groups that profit from immigration – these are groups that largely overlap with existing lobbies – than to interests and perspectives of those who see immigration as a threat. The former would be better organised and have a bigger capacity for mobilisation and are key discussion partners in developing new policy. Those who favour immigration will be able to organise themselves quicker and in a more efficient way precisely because immigration leads to a number of advantages which are more or less concentrated (what stimulates quick mobilisation) while the costs are better spread and of a diffuse character. Combined with the inherent inclusionary logic of liberal-democracy, states will adopt liberal policies towards foreign residents despite the apparent resistance of the general public. The history of immigration is crucial in this event: the longer (quantitative important) immigration has taken place, the further the process of inclusion of immigrants will be. The different outcomes of policy formation in the Netherlands and Belgium on the issue of political rights of immigrants, however, completely contradict this approach of Freeman.

An approach as the one of Freeman does not take into account the actual importance of electoral (and ideological) competition on the immigration issue nor the discursive struggle in the debate on integration (compare Brubaker, 1995). As Rath (1990: 142) has pointed out, there are only perspectives for enfranchisement of non-nationals if the major political parties do not clash on the issue of equal rights for foreigners. Once anti-immigrant parties become stronger and/or traditional parties engage in competition to conquer the anti-immigrant vote, the chances for enfranchisement diminish steadily. This statement seems to be correct to a large extent. In contradiction to Freeman's vision the political elite is not at all reluctant to engage in populist rhetoric and polarisation around the immigrant issue, as was clearly the case in Belgium. A though question is here why traditional parties allow themselves to engage in this kind of malign strategies (or not).

In my opinion, electoral competition and polarisation around the immigrant issue has not so much to do with the length of history of immigration or the quantity of immigrants present. I claim the simple idea of a threshold of tolerance is incorrect. There is a more plausible link to the *voluntarist* choice politicians make to play with latent xenophobia in the general public (which has a structural foundation in socio-economic competition and has a historic-cultural link with the inertia of the construction of a national identity) or not. In the Netherlands traditional political parties have chosen not to engage in a populist-xenophobic adventure from the explicit wish to counter the growth potential of extreme right-wing political parties. In Belgium a different attitude was adopted. In the early eighties the right-wing liberals chose to use anti-immigrant topics in the electoral struggle in Brussels. In stead of counter-attacking extreme right-wing ideas, xenophobic positions were normalised what in turn created a fertile basis for further extreme right-wing growth.

I claim this has less to do with cultural idioms but - on a level of explanation that exceeds voluntarism but doesn't exclude it either - has a link with the influence of the character of



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immigration on the debate over integration. I specifically want to draw attention to the importance of the colonial history and its relations to ideas on national identity and state-citizenship for the debate over integration and especially the debate over enfranchisement in the eighties<sup>14</sup>.

Belgium has had a relatively short but very intensive period of colonial history. There is little evidence of this on the Belgian streets. During and after the colonial period it was made almost impossible for autochthonous inhabitants of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi to come and live in Belgium. In addition, the former black Belgian subjects were simply refused to be granted Belgian citizenship. Using a legally anchored racial distinction between Belgian citizens on the one hand and Belgian subjects on the other hand, blacks were not allowed to be part of the Belgian nation. This was different in the Netherlands. In the Dutch-East-Indies (Indonesia) there was since 1892 a similar racial distinction in citizenship between Dutch citizens and Dutch subjects. Due to the modest population a similar distinction was deemed unnecessary in the Dutch-West-Indies (Antilles) and Surinam. After the independence of Indonesia, the racial differentiation in citizenship between citizens and subjects was abolished. Black inhabitants of the Antilles and Surinam, as Dutch citizens, could without any legal restrictions move to the Netherlands where they were entitled to all rights as autochthonous white Dutch people. When Surinam was given its independence in 1975, its inhabitants were given the option to keep their Dutch state citizenship if they moved to the Netherlands before the actual day of independence. Immigration to Holland (and the linked maintenance of Dutch citizenship) was far from promoted for black citizens, but was equally not blocked. Indeed, there were no legal grounds anymore to allow a distinction on racial basis to only allow white inhabitants of Surinam to 'return' to Holland and keep their state citizenship. This led to a situation in which the Dutch nation (in Europe) became increasingly 'coloured' despite the fact that *ius sanguinis* remained the basic principle for acquisition of nationality.

As a result, before *ius soli* was introduced in both countries in the mid eighties, it still made some sense in Belgium to discursively present the nation as being in essence a ethnic-homogeneous white community, but it far less made sense to do so in the Netherlands. Dutch people of Antillian or Surinamese black descent were *de jure* Dutch state citizens. *Ius sanguinis* as the basic principle of Dutch nationality law, did not justify an overlap between the legal distinction of citizens and foreigners on the one hand and racial categorisations on the other hand as was the case in Belgium. This had the consequence for the debate over integration (and in particular the debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents) that the topics of racism, antiracism and discrimination would have a different political importance in both countries. Racism posed an immediate threat for an important part of the Dutch nation, i.e. the immigrant electorate. This enhanced the sensitivity of the political elite for the problem of discrimination. Racism and discrimination were much quicker experienced as an internal and shared problem than was the case in Belgium. In addition, this stimulated the strive towards an inclusive immigration policy. Indeed, immigration affected the very heart of the fiction of the Dutch nation. This process had as spin-off that it prevented the formation of qua-racist positions in the debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals. The distinction between citizens and foreigners could hardly be seen synonymous to ethnic differences. If a postulated ethnic difference between Dutch and foreign people would be used as an argument against enfranchisement of foreigners, this could easily be countered by referring to the Dutch people of Surinamese or Antillian descent who already had voting rights. Anti-racism and anti-discrimination in this way became topics that could quickly be mobilised in the debate over integration in general and the debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals in particular. Xenophobia and extreme right-wing politics were seen as a shared internal threat. In Belgium, on the contrary, racism was more an issue linked to relations between Belgians and foreigners than an internal Belgian problem that affected a part of the electorate or questioned the Belgian nation. Anti-racism and anti-discrimination were less-functional in questioning argumentations raised on the ethnic difference between state citizens

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<sup>14</sup> I merely want to discuss the situation in the eighties. It should be noted that the processes leading to polarisation (or not) in the Netherlands and Belgium around the immigration issue are quite different in the nineties (see Jacobs, 1998a: 250-253).

Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. and foreigners. For a long period of time, one could assume there were no 'coloured' Belgians suffering from racism; only foreigners could be 'coloured' and could be the potential victims of racism. One could, taking into account the bi-cultural character of Belgian society, wonder why discrimination did not evolve into a political topic. Indeed, one could argue the linguistic conflict within Belgium and the multinational character of the Belgian state would lead to a strong sensibility for anti-discrimination and anti-racism. It could be argued that Flemish and Walloons would very well know what discrimination is (due to the inner-Belgian conflict) and that out of this experience a solidarity of both communities with foreigners could be created. One should, however, keep in mind that the linguistic conflict in Belgium has hardly been identified by the concerned actors as a clear issue of ethnic tensions or racism. The *de facto* - albeit decreasing - bilingualism of the population, the specific position of Brussels and the extensive (historic) internal migration has prevented the *Belgo-Belgian* conflict to be easily translated into ethnic terms. One should not forget that for instance a lot (if not the majority) of francophone inhabitants of Brussels in their conflict with the Flemish community refuse to identify themselves as being Walloons; Walloons live in Wallonia, not in Brussels. Racism has not been and is not seen as an 'internal' Belgian issue.

In a nutshell, one can state that the different history of immigration of both countries has affected the debate over enfranchisement of non-nationals in the eighties an *indirect* way due to the different importance of the issue of racism, linked to the differential incorporation of non-white people in the nation. For the Dutch case, specific attention must furthermore be drawn to the particular case of the Moluccans. As noted earlier, the historical debt of honour Dutch society has towards the Moluccans, has enhanced the debate over voting rights for non-nationals. Due to historical and moral reasons it could not be demanded of the Moluccans to take up Dutch nationality although at the same time one did think Moluccans should have equal rights to the largest extent possible. The Moluccan terrorism has only strengthened this idea. As an unintended consequence the difference between state citizens and non-nationals was of a much more gradual character in the Netherlands than could be the case in Belgium. In addition, the specific situation of the Moluccan community was the direct cause for an integration policy based on a multi-cultural model in which cultural differences were excepted as a fact and seen as a potential basis for emancipation<sup>15</sup>, despite the fact that the Dutch polity was at the same time portrayed as a cultural-homogeneous entity.

Using the specific situation of the Moluccans one can also explain the difference between the situation in the Netherlands on the one hand and the situation in France on the other hand. One could state that France, just like the Netherlands, due to the possession of state-citizenship by inhabitants of (former) colonial areas as Algeria and the DOM/TOM has experienced 'colouring' of its nation. There are, however, some important differences to be noted which explain why this has not prevented polarisation on the immigration issue in France in the seventies and eighties.

First of all, France for historical reasons of course has a specific republican vision on state-citizenship in which assimilation as virtue and goal is a central element and in which *ius soli*, at least in theory, is the basic principle of nationality legislation (see Brubaker, 1992). This has made it possible to assess the legitimacy of the possession of state citizenship with the criterion of adaptation, which has led to the discussion over the difference between *Français de souche* and *Français de papier*, the questioning of *ius soli* and, hence, to polarisation over the integration-policy without the necessity to have that debate framed *explicitly* in racial terms. In the Netherlands only *ius sanguinis* had in a clear way led to the 'colouring' of the nation. If one would have wanted to question that, one could only have criticised in retrospect the choice made in 1892 to introduce *ius sanguinis* in Surinam and the Antilles. This would only have been possible in explicit racial terms, on which, keeping the excesses of Nazism in mind, there was a

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<sup>15</sup> It is often claimed that the system of pillarisation is the cause for the categorical policy for ethnic minorities and the Dutch multi-cultural model (Entzinger, 1994: 404; Bousetta, 1997: 219). I want to stress that the 'Moluccan factor' is an important intermediary link. Indeed, Belgium has also had (and to a certain extent still does have) a system of pillarisation, but this did not lead to the creation of a multi-cultural model for incorporation of immigrants.

Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. tremendous taboo. In addition, one should not forget that Surinam had been given independence precisely because the leftist government Den Uyl wanted to get rid of the stain of colonialism (Eppink, 1998: 234). The image of progressiveness of the Dutch leftist government and the hopes for a model decolonisation left no room for anything that even slightly could resemble racism.

Secondly, in France the republican differentiation between French citizens and foreigners had and has absolute priority, what does not allow room for gradual distinctions between *citoyens* and foreigners. Racism should as an internal problem within the nation be strongly fought against, but this could not stimulate a more moderate view on the division and difference between state citizens and non-nationals. In France there was no specific group one could not force to take up French citizenship for historic reasons but at the same time would want to see as a full part of the nation. The exceptional position of the Moluccans in the Netherlands and their particular history in relation to the Dutch state, led to the recognition of a special kind of foreigner, a hybrid category in between the category of national and the category of the genuine foreigner. This facilitated a moderated perspective on the division between nationals and foreigners and made it possible to install a multi-cultural integration policy without at the same time having to give up the fiction that the political community was ideally a cultural-homogeneous entity.

## 7. Conclusion

I have argued that the debate over enfranchisement should not be studied by looking for one ('the') dominant discourse affecting policy outcomes, but that one should reconstruct the debate as a struggle with different discourses and look into what discourse coalitions were at the basis of policy outcomes. Policy is seen as the result of the creation of networks (of politicians) around specific discourses which make certain phenomena understandable in a similar language and logic and are strategically used by political actors. When comparing Belgium and the Netherlands, it was striking that although the same basic discourses were used, the dynamics of the debate were different. I have stressed the crucial difference between the debates in the two countries, stating that in the Netherlands there was an explicit effort made not to polarise regarding the issue (thus keeping the ideas of the extreme-right wing parties out of the debate), while in Belgium there *was* polarisation. In this way, stances that could legitimise or strengthen (latent) racism and ethnocentrism were consciously avoided in the Dutch debate, while the Belgian debate was partly transformed into an electoral struggle over the anti-immigrant vote. This had a crucial effect on the process of formation of discourse coalitions leading to the respective policies of both countries. I have formulated a tentative explanation of how the divergent developments of polarisation around the enfranchisement issue can be understood if we look at the indirect (discursive) influence of the colonial history and its relations to ideas on national identity and state-citizenship upon collective voluntarist political elite strategies. Although this tentative explanation wants to interpret the developments in the debate in a wider theoretical context, the stress in this paper has been on the importance of short term domestic politics, discursive struggle, electoral-competition and coalition-bargaining in understanding the divergent developments in the Netherlands and Belgium. In my opinion, the different outcomes should not be related to differences of *established* incorporation regimes, but should be linked to the different *dynamics* of the elite-driven domestic debates in which the policies towards immigrants - the *establishing of* incorporation regimes - were gradually developed and adapted. Contingency and elite voluntarism were important factors in this process.

The debate was mainly elite-driven. In both the Netherlands as Belgium, there was no real direct influence of or negotiation with ethnic minority groups or the antiracist movement in the debate over enfranchisement. Although without significant effect, the involvement of immigrant associations and their supporters was clearly a lot bigger in Belgium than in the Netherlands. A plausible explanation for this could be that the proactive position of the Dutch political parties made a suffragist movement obsolete and merely led to low-profile lobbying, while the negative attitude of the Belgian political establishment proved to be the best incentive for immigrant and antiracist action.

The decisions were made, and the policy was set out, by the existing political establishment. In this there was hardly any direct (positive) influence of direct lobbying or rallies

Jacobs Dirk – The Debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in the Netherlands and Belgium. by immigrant associations or the wider suffragist movement. The non-existing direct communication and negotiation of the political elite with migrant associations and the antiracist movement, reduced the role of ethnic minority groups to being mere subjects of discourse in elite driven domestic politics.

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