

# The Social Study Kick-off conference

9 December 2025

Hoek 38, Rue de Louvain 38, Brussels

## PROGRAMME

9:00 Welcome and coffee/tea

9:30 Introduction

Marc Swyngedouw (KU Leuven)

9:45 Building a probability panel. Accomplishments and challenges

Amelie Van Pottelberge (UGent) and Audrey Vandeleene (ULB)

10:00 **Session 1 : Core Study Questionnaire research**

Chair: Ellen Van Droogenbroeck (VUB)

1. Cultural Participation in Belgium. Trends, Regional Divides, and the Value of Participation as Cultural Capital, using TSS data – John Lievens and Jessy Siongers (UGent)
2. The Labour Market in Focus: A Social Study Perspective – Sarah Botterman (Department Work, Economy, Science, Innovation, Agriculture and Social Economy, Flemish government)
3. Financial Satisfaction and Housing Choices Among Singles – Gert Thielemans and Dimitri Mortelmans (UAntwerpen)

11:00 Coffee break

11:30 **Session 2 : Commissioned Questionnaires research**

Chair: Guillaume Périlleux (UMONS)

1. The Fragile Habit of Participation: Evidence from A Natural Experiment on the End of Compulsory Voting – Jérémy Dodeigne (UNamur), Jean-Benoit Pilet (ULB) and David Talukder (VUB)
2. Regional Affective Polarisation: The Roles of Territorial Identities and Political Preferences – Emma Collet (ULB), Alberto Stefanelli (Yale University), Pauline Grippa (ULB) and Emilie van Haute (ULB)

12:15 Lunch break

13:30 **Session 3 : Commissioned Questionnaires research**

Chair: Liesbeth Bruckers (UHasselt)

1. How are you? Exploring subjective well-being and its safeguards based on The Social Study – Dries Verlet and Ann Carton (Statistics Flanders)
2. What factors determine the preference for family involvement in medical decision-making in Belgium? – Amina Yakhlaif (UAntwerpen), Veerle Buffel (VUB) and Sarah Van de Velde (UAntwerpen)

14:15 **Session 4 : TSS Early-stage researcher award winners**

Chairs: Sarah Van de Velde (UAntwerpen) and Koen Declercq (UCLouvain)

1. Junior award winner: What is the relationship between perceived and measurable features of the lived environment ? – Benoît Lebrin, Olena Holubowska, Céline Van Migerode and Juliette Le Corguillé (KU Leuven)
2. Senior award winner: Developing the SeDeS: A CARIN-Based Scale of Sex Work Deservingness for The Social Study – David De Coninck (KU Leuven)

15:00 Coffee break

15:30 **Roundtable: the role of research infrastructures in Belgium's data landscape**

Moderation: Bart Meuleman (KU Leuven)

Roundtable participants : Sébastien Brunet (IWEPS), Ann Carton (Statistics Flanders), Marcel Das (LISS), Patrick Lusyne (Statbel)

16:30 What's next?

Jean-Benoit Pilet (ULB)

16:45 Reception and networking

**More information and registration:**

<https://thesocialstudy.be/2025/09/16/tss-kick-off-conference-registration-is-open/>



## ABSTRACTS

### **Cultural Participation in Belgium. Trends, Regional Divides, and the Value of Participation as Cultural Capital, using TSS data**

*John Lievens and Jessy Siongers (UGent)*

The aim of this presentation is twofold. First, based on TSS data, we will provide an up-to-date overview of the state of cultural participation in Belgium, both in general and across broad categories of the cultural offer. For the Flemish region, this analysis extends the longitudinal data series established by the Participation Survey over the past two decades, the most recent edition of which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Core Study Questionnaire (CSQ) of TSS, which measures participation using the same instruments as the Participation Survey, allows us to extend the trend series and shed light on the current state of cultural participation in Flanders. The TSS data, moreover, provides an unprecedented opportunity for reliable inter-regional comparisons of cultural participation within Belgium. Beyond comparing participation rates in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, we will also control for regional variations by accounting for differences in population composition (e.g. age, educational attainment, level of urbanization, ...). In the second part of the presentation, we will demonstrate the utility of the cultural participation questions as indicators of cultural capital. A key rationale for including these questions in the TSS CSQ is the growing recognition in recent scientific literature that cultural capital can serve as an important explanatory factor for differences in other domains. As an initial exploration, we will investigate the additional explanatory power of cultural capital in relation to mental and physical health, as well as political attitudes. In doing so, we will also highlight the unique potential of TSS to analyse relationships that cannot be investigated through separate surveys.

### **The Labour Market in Focus: A Social Study Perspective**

*Sarah Botterman (Department Work, Economy, Science, Innovation, Agriculture and Social Economy, Flemish government)*

This study investigates the position of various sociodemographic groups within the labour market, leveraging the comprehensive data provided by The Social Study. Unlike international Labour Force Surveys, which primarily focus on employment indicators, The Social Study enriches the analysis by incorporating social and attitudinal dimensions. This broader approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of labour market dynamics by moving beyond conventional metrics.

### **Financial Satisfaction and Housing Choices Among Singles**

*Gert Thielemans and Dimitri Mortelmans (UAntwerpen)*

This study explores how financial satisfaction influences housing decisions among single-person households. Using TSS data, we examine the links between perceived financial well-being and housing tenure, quality, and location. Results show that singles with higher financial satisfaction are more likely to own homes and choose better-quality housing. Subjective financial well-being plays a stronger role than income in shaping choices. These findings highlight the unique economic dynamics of solo living. Understanding these patterns can inform housing policy. The study underscores the importance of perception in financial decision-making. Singles emerge as a distinct group in housing market behavior.

### **The Fragile Habit of Participation: Evidence from A Natural Experiment on the End of Compulsory Voting**

*Jérémy Dodeigne (UNamur), Jean-Benoît Pilet (ULB) and David Talukder (VUB)*

Scholarship long demonstrated that compulsory voting remains a central mechanism in fostering high electoral turnout. Recent reforms, such as its abolition in Chile (2017) and Belgium (2024), offer rare opportunities to assess its causal effects on electoral participation. This article exploits a natural experiment in Belgium, where 2024 national elections were held under compulsory voting, but became optional voting in 2024 for local elections in Flanders. This resulted in a 30-point decline in electoral turnout. Using a panel survey, this study tests four theoretical models explaining new abstention when compulsory voting is abolished. While voters' socio-economic and political inequalities explain abstention, norms and habits formed under compulsory voting – especially civic duty – are key moderating factors. Voters who consider voting as a duty are more likely to participate, particularly older cohorts socialized under compulsory regime. These findings provide key insights about the long-term sustainability of electoral participation in post-compulsory voting democracies.

## Regional Affective Polarisation: The Roles of Territorial Identities and Political Preferences

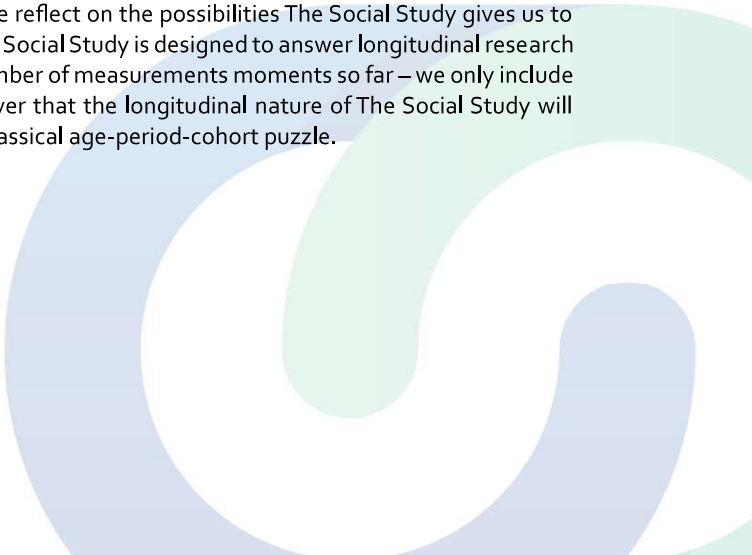
*Emma Collet (ULB), Alberto Stefanelli (Yale University), Pauline Grippa (ULB) and Emilie van Haute (ULB)*

Affective polarization can foster intergroup conflict and undermine pro-democratic attitudes and behaviors (Iyengar et al., 2019; Orhan, 2022). In Belgium, polarization is not only partisan but also regional (Bettarelli et al., 2022). This project examines how territorial identities (i.e., regional and national identities) and political preferences shape regional affective polarization—defined as the extent to which citizens express warmth toward residents of their own region and hostility toward those of other regions. First, drawing on Levendusky (2018), who showed that salient national identity moments (e.g., the 4th of July, the 2008 Summer Olympics) can reduce partisan bias and polarization, we test whether a shared national identity is linked with less regional affective polarization in Belgium compared to a regional identity. Second, following research on partisan affective polarization (Dias & Lelkes, 2022), which highlights the joint influence of identity and ideology, we investigate whether regional identification and support for greater regional autonomy predict regional affective polarization. In a correlational study conducted in Flanders (N = 765) and Wallonia (N = 328), we observed that greater identification with the region was linked to higher affective polarization, whereas identification with the nation was linked to lower polarization. Interestingly, a dual identity—an equal identification with both the region and the nation—was linked to polarization levels comparable to those of a predominantly regional identity. This finding can be understood through the lens of ingroup projection (Wenzel et al., 2008): individuals may project their regional characteristics onto the national identity, leading to disliking of outgroups that do not fit this prototypical image. Furthermore, in both Flanders and Wallonia, the relationship between identification and regional affective polarization was partly mediated by the belief that one's region would be better off if it were separate from the others. Overall, these findings suggest that both regional and dual identities can fuel regional affective polarization—partly through separatist beliefs—while a shared national identity may help reduce such polarization, particularly among citizens less strongly attached to their region.

## How are you? Exploring subjective well-being and its safeguards based on The Social Study

*Dries Verlet and Ann Carton (Statistics Flanders)*

"How are you?" is not only a popular sentence in our efforts being polite and during small talk. It is also a conventional question to measure subjective well-being on a large scale. However, there are possible problems with this way to depict the perceived quality of life of people. In a way, we can question the trivialization of the response, the proximate/peer relativity, possible cultural bias and there is the Easterlin paradox. That is why we also included Anamnestic Comparative Self-Assessment (ACSA) as a self-anchoring rating scale to assess overall subjective well-being (SWB). ACSA's distinguishing feature is the use of extreme scale anchors that refer to real experienced life situations: the reminisced best and worst periods in the respondent's life. These are internal standards, thus less prone to relativity biases. We applied the ACSA-scale and the scale on general life-satisfaction in the December 2024 wave (first yearly financed module of Statistics Flanders) of The Social Study. In our analysis, we describe the metrics of the ACSA-scale and correlate ACSA ratings with the general life satisfaction scale as a measure of subjective well-being. Next to the measurement of subjective well-being, we also examine the relationship with a number of central covariates (proverbial "determinants") of subjective well-being. In addition to several classic background characteristics, we incorporate a diversity of internal buffers (such as the feeling of having control over time, engagement, the subjective socio-economic positioning) and external buffers (such as social support, connectedness and (social) optimism). Those buffers can be important safeguards of subjective well-being. In this paper, we highlight the richness of The Social Study. This survey allows us to link variables in our thematic survey to a wide range of other background characteristics from the recruitment and the core questionnaire. In addition, we reflect on the possibilities The Social Study gives us to conduct longitudinal research using a panel design. The Social Study is designed to answer longitudinal research questions. However, at present – due to the limited number of measurements moments so far – we only include cross-sectional analyses in this paper. It is clear however that the longitudinal nature of The Social Study will open interesting new ways to tackle for example the classical age-period-cohort puzzle.



### **What factors determine the preference for family involvement in medical decision-making in Belgium?**

*Amina Yakhlaif (UAntwerpen), Veerle Buffel (VUB) and Sarah Van de Velde (UAntwerpen)*

Family involvement (FI) in medical decision-making (MDM) is increasingly recognized as a crucial dimension of patient-centered care; however, patient preferences for FI vary across different contexts. In Belgium, where healthcare emphasizes autonomy and direct physician–patient communication, little is known about how socio-demographic and cultural characteristics shape FI preferences. Methods: We analyzed data from a nationally representative online probability panel (The Social Study, N = 1174) collected in 2024. Using a vignette-based experimental design, respondents evaluated hypothetical scenarios describing cancer, minor depression, and major depression. Preferences for FI were measured with an adapted Likert scale and dichotomized. Logistic regression models assessed associations between FI preferences and socio-demographic, socioeconomic, and religious factors. Results: Fewer than one-third of respondents preferred FI overall. Preferences varied significantly by disease type and severity: FI was lowest in cancer (22.5%), highest in major depression (29.0%), and intermediate in minor depression (19.0%). Migration background strongly predicted FI preferences, with EU- and non-EU-born respondents showing significantly higher odds than Belgian-born individuals, particularly for cancer and minor depression. Living with a partner increased the likelihood of preferring FI, while higher education was associated with stronger preferences for autonomy in cancer. Religious affiliation, especially Christianity, was linked to greater FI preference in cancer and major depression. No consistent associations were observed for gender, age, employment status, or financial difficulties. Conclusions: The preferences of Belgian adults for FI in MDM are influenced by disease type, severity, and social context. Migration background, household composition, education, and religion emerged as key predictors. These findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive, flexible MDM models that move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and integrate patients' social realities into clinical practice.

### **What is the relationship between perceived and measurable features of the lived environment ?**

*Benoît Lebrin, Olena Holubowska, Céline Van Migerode and Juliette Lecorquillé (KU Leuven)*

This project investigates the relationship between measured and perceived characteristics of local environments. Using survey data from The Social Study, we capture people's subjective perceptions of their neighborhood's urban–rural character, diversity, and accessibility to destinations of daily activities and spaces of social interaction, and compare these with GIS-based indicators. By analyzing where and for whom these perceptions diverge from measured values, we aim to identify systematic mismatches across socio-economic groups and locations. Methodologically, the study contributes to innovation by integrating subjective experience into spatial analysis. Theoretically, it examines to what extent perceived environments shape attitudes and behaviors more directly than technical classifications do. Ultimately, the project advances a more inclusive approach to spatial research and policymaking that values residents' lived experiences alongside expert data.

### **Developing the SeDeS: A CARIN-Based Scale of Sex Work Deservingness for The Social Study**

*David De Coninck (KU Leuven)*

This study introduces and preliminarily tests a new multidimensional scale capturing how the public evaluates sex workers' deservingness of social support - the SEx work DEservingness Scale. Building on the CARIN framework -Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity, and Need - the scale adapts established welfare deservingness criteria to the context of sex work, a domain where moral judgments, legality, and vulnerability intersect. Using items designed for inclusion in The Social Study (TSS), the scale will yield data on how respondents weigh factors such as voluntariness, gratitude, contributions, value conformity, and vulnerability when assessing whether sex workers merit assistance and protection. In doing so, the scale provides conceptual and empirical groundwork for understanding conditional solidarity beyond traditional welfare populations, highlighting how notions of responsibility, morality, and care are applied to stigmatized and diverse groups within the sex work sector.

