Disagreements and conflicts over matters of public policy are one of the essential characteristics of what politics is. Policy conflicts implicitly lie at the heart of a great number of studies on politics and policy. Nevertheless, the concept is undertheorized in the literature. Although implicitly omnipresent in political and policy studies, the concept of policy conflict is typically kept in the background. It is usually assumed to exist, detached from explanations of its sources and effects. The literature tends to neglect the theorisation and methodological operationalization of the concept of policy conflict. Notwithstanding, a better understanding of policy conflict may aid to the resolution of intractable policy conflicts, and it may contribute to the understanding of policy making processes in general.

This dissertation will address the theoretical and methodological gap in the extant literature, by developing a theory and methodology as an instrument for the measurement of policy conflict. The approach is empirically validated by successfully applying it to the parliamentary debates surrounding one of the most salient policy problems in contemporary politics in Flanders: namely the debate on traffic mobility.

By developing a theoretical framework based on the analysis of discourse, this thesis addresses the question on how policy conflict can be theorized, and which concepts are indicative of its characteristics. In addition, a method is developed in which these concepts are operationalized. The method consists of a combination of qualitative content analysis, social network analysis and statistical analysis. The method is tried and validated by an empirical study of the debate on traffic mobility in the Flemish Parliament for the parliamentary periods 2004-2009 and 2009-2014. In recent decades, there has been considerable public and political debate on a broad range of issues pertaining to traffic mobility and traffic congestion. Although there has been a steady stream of research on these issues within the field of applied economics, public finance and engineering, there has been little research on these issues from the perspective of politics, and more specifically, policy making. In fact, there has been no research addressing the systematicity of the debate on traffic mobility as a policy conflict. The secondary focus of this dissertation is thus to address this absence of empirical knowledge by applying the measurement tool developed in this study. Simultaneously, the empirical study has been used to fine-tune the method. Furthermore, the empirical analysis of the debate on traffic mobility as a policy conflict containing a number of distinct (yet in some cases interrelated) sub-problems adds to the theorisation of and concept-building on policy conflict in general.

The theorisation developed in this thesis conceptualises policy conflict as a continuum between policy concordance and policy controversy. The latter is a policy conflict characterized by extreme conflict intensity and polarisation. In order
to gain empirical insight in this phenomenon, an empirical study was conducted on a well documented case of policy controversy, namely the historical abortion debate in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (1972-1990). The results of this analysis are used to interpret the results of the study of the debate on traffic mobility, and to aid comparative analysis.

The comparative analysis of the traffic mobility debates suggests that policy conflict of medium intensity on traffic mobility is associated with the presence of two conflicting paradigms with regard to economy and sustainability. In addition, the phenomenon of policy controversy is associated with the presence of these paradigms in combination with disagreements on the validity or interpretation of scientific knowledge on the issue at hand. In addition, the analysis suggests that the way in which conflict lines of disputes on traffic mobility issues are structured is dependent on whether the debate pertains to the demand side, or rather the supply side of the traffic economy.

The thesis concludes with the crystallization of the initial theorisation set out in the introduction and the empirical chapters, with the insights generated by the empirical validation of the method, and the presentation of two theorems that constitute the essential foundations of the discourse-based framework for the analysis of policy conflict developed in this study.