

Belgium: Least salient, but very European

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INTRODUCTION

As happened five years ago, the 2019 Belgian elections to the European Parliament (EP) coincided with regional and federal elections. As voting is compulsory, the exceptional turnout of 88.5% is a bad indicator of the salience of the election. But from the near absence of European campaigns and candidates from public debate and media, as well as from the marginal differences in the election results between the three levels, we may read the EP election as being again overshadowed by national campaigns and candidates (Kelbel et al., 2016). Nevertheless, this competition had a European dimension, as it was dominated by two transnational issues: the climate and migration. Radical right, radical left and green parties that ‘own’ these issues were the winners of the election, at the cost of center parties (Van de Wardt et al., 2014). This development is not new to most EU member states. But it poses a new challenge to the Belgian federal system, as it exacerbates the long-standing divide between Flanders and Wallonia.

BELGIUM: A FEDERAL STATE OF COMMUNITIES AND REGIONS

To interpret the dynamics of this three-level election, some understanding of the Belgian political system is needed. Belgium is a federal state, with three competent levels: the federal, provincial and municipal levels. At the highest level, the federal state, the communities and the region are on an equal standing. The communities are groups of citizens with a shared culture and language: next to the main languages, Dutch and French, there is a tiny German-speaking community. The competences of the communities’ governments and parliaments focus on culture and education.¹

The regions are territorially defined and hold mainly socio-economic competences. The Northern, Flemish region covers the largest part of the country. Wallonia covers the Southern part, and the Brussels Capital region is situated at the heart of the country, near the language border, but entirely surrounded by Flemish territory. The Fle-

1. The German-speaking community counts about 76.000 citizens.

mish community and region institutionally overlap, as they are both represented by the Flemish Parliament. The Walloon region, the French-speaking community, the Brussels Capital region and the German-speaking community (located in the East of the Walloon region) have separate parliaments and governments.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Members of these six parliaments are selected through proportional elections, with a 5% threshold and different constituencies. The complex and asymmetrical political system results in a two largely separate party systems: a Flemish and a Walloon one. Debates, campaigns and awareness of candidates remain highly confined to the two main regions. In Brussels, voters get to choose between lists of French- or Dutch speaking candidates. By consequence, the two party systems co-exist in Brussels. As there is only a minority of Dutch-speaking citizens there, debate is dominated by the French-speaking parties.

The federal government is a coalition of parties from Flanders and Wallonia. For a long time, the center parties dominating the political landscape, the democrat CD&V and CdH, the social-democrat Sp.a and PS and the liberal OpenVld and MR were ready to compromise across the linguistic divide.

However, Flemish voters have long been more right-leaning, while socialists are stronger in Wallonia. In recent years, this divide has deepened, especially with the rapid growth of the conservative right Flemish nationalist N-VA, which has been the largest party in Flanders since 2010. The most outspoken case for Flemish independence is made by the radical right VB. Due to its racist and discriminatory discourse, the party has been excluded from government negotiations by the other Belgian parties, in a so-called *cordon sanitaire*.

RESULTS

The results of the European election are presented in Table 1. In Flanders the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) remains the largest party at all three levels. However, it loses a few percentage points at each election. The radical right Flemish Interest (VB) came in second, but is the clear winner, with an average increase of 12.5% over the three levels. On the Walloon side, this dynamic is mirrored on the left side of the political spectrum. The social-democrat PS remains the first party, but it lost between 3 and 5% over the three levels. Its radical challenger on the left, the communist Labour Party (PTB), increased its vote by about 9%, with results between 14 and 15% over the three levels. Scores for the Walloon green party Ecolo increased between 6 and 8%.

If we compare results over the three levels, differences are rather small. Comparing the regional² and the EP election results, the most remarkable difference is that green parties do better in the EP elections than in the regional and federal ones. The Flemish green party Groen took 2.3 percentage points more in the EP election, and

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Belgium

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Dutch-speaking constituency						
New-Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	EPP	954,048	22.4	3	-4.2	-1
Flemish Interest (VB)	ENL	811,169	19.1	3	12.5	+2
OpenVld	ALDE	678,051	16.0	2	-4.5	
Christian-Democrat & Flemish (CD&V)	EPP					
Christian-Democrat & Flemish (CD&V)	EPP	617,651	14.5	2	-5.4	-1
Green (Groen)	G-EFA	525,908	12.4	1	+1.8	
Socialist Party Different (Sp.a)	S&D	434,002	10.2	1	-3.0	
Labour Party (PVDA)	GUE-NGL	210,391	5.0		+2.6	
Total		4,231,220	99.6	12		
French-speaking constituency						
Socialist Party (PS)	S&D	651,157	26.7	2	-2.6	-1
Ecolo	G-EFA	485,655	19.9	2	+8.2	+1
Mouvement for Reform (MR)	ALDE	470,654	19.3	2	-7.8	-1
Belgian Labour Party (PTB)	GUE-NGL	355,883	14.6	1	+9.1	
Humanist democratic center (cdH)	EPP	218,078	8.9	1	-2.4	
Défi		144,555	5.9		+2,5	
Popular Party (PP)		113,793	4.7		-1.3	
Total		2,439,775	100	8		

(continued) Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Belgium						
PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
German-speaking constituency						
Christian-Social Party (CSP)	EPP	14,247	34.9	1	+4.6	
Ecolo		6,675	16.4		-0.3	
For German-speaking community (ProDG)		5,360	13.1		-0.1	
Party for Freedom and Progress (PFF-MR)		4,684	11.5		-4.6	
Socialist Party (SP)		4,655	11.4		-3.7	
Vivant		4,550	11.2		+2.6	
Animal Party (DierAnimal)		606	1.5			
Total		40,777	100	1		
Total		13,423,544		21		
Turnout (%)			88.5			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>			

the Walloon greens took 5.4%, with about 1.5 percentage points increase in the vote share.³ It suggests that the outspokenly transnational and pro-European programs these parties presented may have incentivized voters to make a particularly European choice.

This pattern could also be a consequence of the typical phenomenon of ‘sincere voting’ in second order elections, where voters opt for a smaller party they sympathize with, when the stakes in the election seem lower to them (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, with radical left and radical right challengers, we see no such effects. Results for PTB and VB are equally strong in Wallonia and Flanders, as they are in the EP election. Whereas research has shown that voters behave differently in European elections, coincidence and compulsory voting seem to mitigate these effects in Belgium (for example Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004; Hobolt et al., 2009).

ISSUES AND CANDIDATES: LEAST SALIENT, VERY 'EUROPEAN'

Despite the lack of attention to the EP election, the elections had a European dimension due to the two topics dominating the agenda: migration and the climate. The latter was especially debated in Flanders. Migration had been a hot topic over the departing government's term, as the federal state secretary for asylum and migration, Theo Francken (N-VA) had caused several incidents, taking a very tough stand on migration, and sharing controversial tweets about refugees and migrants. Eventually, the government fell over the issue, when coalition partner N-VA refused to back the United Nations Global Compact for Migration.

The climate had been at the center of public debate since the weekly protests of Belgian youngsters in the streets of Brussels. Following the example of the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, the youngsters held weekly 'strikes', taking to the streets instead of going to school. Shortly after the demonstration, the Flemish Christian-democrat minister for the environment, resigned after falsely claiming that the secret services informed her about radical forces orchestrating the protests.

The issue of European integration itself remained largely depoliticized. Despite a tough anti-migration agenda, both N-VA and VB refrain from placing hard Euroscepticism at the center of their programs. A possible explanation for this, is that they may see the EU as a vehicle, rather than an obstacle in that struggle. Contrary to what the strong position of the two Flemish nationalist parties may imply, the topic of state reform, or of a further redistribution of competences within Belgium, was barely discussed in the run-up to the election.

While national politicians took turns showing up in daily political shows on the Belgian national channels, there was little attention given to the EP candidates. On Flemish television, there was a rather low-profile debate between candidates, and there were two or three slightly more ambitious debates in Walloon media. There was no Belgian candidacy for the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. In 2014, the candidacy of Guy Verhofstadt for the Presidency of the Commission had attracted at least some attention to the European election (Kelbel et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Altogether, the EP election went by without much notice. For many Belgians, the European vote was just another box to be filled on an already complex ballot paper. Nevertheless, the salience of migration and climate, and the gains of parties that 'own' these issues, gave the election a European dimension. It seems that Belgium is catching up with a development that has been redrawing party systems elsewhere in Europe for quite some time now. But in the particular Belgian context, it results in a growing fracture between the two parts of the country. Without touching upon the issue, the Flemish nationalists may have succeeded in getting the issue of state reform on the table by means of the essentially European issue of migration.

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