

# The 2014 federal and European elections in Belgium



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 April 2015

Received in revised form 18 May 2015

Accepted 19 May 2015

Available online 27 May 2015

On 25 May 2014, some eight millions voters were called to the booths in Belgium for federal elections but also European and regional elections. No less than 463 parliamentarians were to be directly elected in these triple simultaneous elections, the second time in Belgian political history. But these tri-level elections were especially watched because of the 541-day period of federal government formation that the country experienced after the previous 2010 federal elections (Abts et al., 2012). The key question was therefore to what extent Belgium would go through a new period of high political instability and tensions between parties from the two main linguistic communities of the country. In this regard, the score of the Flemish Regionalists of the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) was under very close scrutiny. For this reason, this report focuses on the federal and European elections in Belgium and leaves regional elections aside (for more information on these elections, see Baudewyns et al., 2015). The first section sets the background of the 2014 elections before turning to the electoral campaign on both sides of the linguistic border. The results of the federal and European elections are then presented and discussed in light of their implications for government formation and political dynamics in Belgium in the coming years.

## 1. Background

On 6 December 2011, Elio Di Rupo from the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) took oath as Prime Minister of a government consisting, besides the PS, of the Flemish and Francophone Christian-Democrats (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* – CD&V, and *Centre Démocrate Humaniste* – cdH), the Liberals (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten – Open Vld, and *Mouvement Réformateur* – MR) and the Flemish Socialists (*Socialistische Partij Anders* – sp.a). This was the result of over one and a half years of negotiations that first led to the agreement on a large-scale sixth state reform, with the support of the two green parties (Ecolo and Groen) but

without the support of the Flemish Regionalists of the N-VA and of the Francophone Regionalists of the FDF (*Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones*). This new reform of the Belgian state brings about further devolution for the Regions and the Communities as well as increased fiscal autonomy (Reuchamps, 2013). It brought also important changes to the electoral system directly impacting the organization of the 2014 elections (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013).

First of all, the electoral district of Brussels-Halle/Hal-Vilvoorde/Vilvorde (BHV) that had been sources of contention since the 1960s was split in two: on the one hand, the 19 Brussels municipalities formed a bilingual district and, on the other hand, the remaining municipalities were merged with the municipalities of the Leuven district, forming a single district for the whole Flemish Brabant province. Francophones living in six municipalities – the so-called ‘municipalities with facilities’ – located in the Flemish Brabant, but bordering the Brussels Region, were granted the right to vote either for candidates in the Flemish Brabant or for candidates in Brussels. Second, the Senate was quite radically transformed from a directly elected assembly to an assembly indirectly composed of representatives from the Regions and Communities, signalling its new function as a chamber for the sub-national entities. Third, a re-synchronization of the federal and regional elections came along the sixth state reform. It was decided that the federal legislatures would from now on last *in principle* for five years with elections to be organized the same day as the regional elections, which match the European electoral calendar.

Beside these changes, the typical features of Belgian elections remain (Bouhon and Reuchamps, 2012): proportional electoral system with compulsory voting, via a semi-open party-list proportional representation. In each district, the parties need to reach a five per cent threshold to be eligible for the seats distribution that is performed under D'Hondt formula (Reuchamps et al., 2014). Given the split of the BHV district, each federal district follows now the boundaries of the provinces. For the European elections, there are three districts broadly based on language: Dutch-, French- and German-speaking districts. For the 2014 elections and in application of the Treaty of Lisbon,

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Belgium was to send 21 representatives to the European Parliament instead of 22 for the previous European elections. This seat was taken out from the Dutch-speaking district where voters were to elect 12 MEPs instead of 13. In the French-speaking district and the German-speaking district the number of MEPs to be elected remained the same, respectively 8 and 1. European citizens living in Belgium have the right to vote in European elections, while Belgians living abroad have the right to vote in federal elections. Last but not least, dual candidacies (for instance, for regional and federal elections) were not allowed anymore, making the business of list making somewhat harder but potentially clearer for the voters.

## 2. Parties, candidates and the campaign

Compared to the previous elections, no new political forces emerged in the two party systems. In Flanders, opinion polls predicted a short victory of the Regionalists of the N-VA and stable results for the three mainstream parties (Christian-democrats, Socialists and Liberals) and the Greens. The radical-right and populist parties were expected to lose heavily while the radical-left would hardly pass the electoral threshold. In the French-speaking party system, it was predicted the balance of power between the three mainstream parties would remain about the same as in 2010, but the Greens would suffer significant losses. Yet, the disappearance of a credible radical-right party created a vacuum that could be filled by alternative parties. The right-wing populist *Parti populaire* (PP) and the radical-left *Parti du travail de Belgique* (PTB) could pass the electoral threshold in some districts and emerge as the winners of the federal elections. In Brussels, the regionalist party FDF left the electoral alliance that they created with the Liberals since 1992. Even if the party presented lists in the three Regions of the country, it was expected that it would gain a few seats only in the Brussels Region. But none of these three parties can be interpreted as new parties as the PP and the FDF were already present in the federal parliament and the PTB decided to create an electoral alliance under the name PTB-GO! with other radical-left movements, among which the Communist Party that had in the past held seats in the parliament (and even participated to some governments in the post-war period).

Broadly speaking, parties selected their best candidates for the federal elections. Most of the party leaders, incumbent ministers and well-known candidates participated in these elections and only few of them contested in the regional elections, even if more seats were available at the regional level, or in the European elections. This may indicate that the federal elections are still considered as first-order, even after the sixth state reform that reinforced the power of the Regions. Other explanations are to be found in the fact that the Senate is no longer the arena of a popularity contest between the most popular candidates and that the size of the electoral districts in the Walloon Region for the federal elections are much larger than for the regional elections, urging parties to put their best candidates on the lists for the federal elections. With the exception of Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ADLE), on the list of the

Flemish Liberals, candidates for the European elections were mostly incumbent MEPs or second-order candidates.

The electoral campaign was structured around three main issues. The first one concerned the coalitions that will be formed after the elections and the name of the future prime minister. As federal elections were organised simultaneously with the regional ones, some parties indicated that they would favour congruent coalitions at both levels, meaning that the same parties have to be in the federal and regional coalitions. This is particularly relevant for the Flemish regionalist party as the party was expected to lead the Flemish regional cabinet and therefore should be included in the federal government. In addition, Bart De Wever, the charismatic leader of the Flemish Regionalists, announced three days before the elections that he was candidate for prime minister. This announcement aimed at reaffirming to the Flemish population that his party was willing to enter the regional and federal governments and that a vote for this party remained useful. Yet, the reappointment of the previous federal coalition (made of the Christian-democrats, the Socialists and the Liberals) remained the most obvious choice, especially as opinion polls confirmed that the voters would not sanction the incumbent parties. In addition, all French-speaking parties (that are necessary for the federal coalition building due to constitutional rules) declared during the campaign that they would not govern with the Flemish Regionalists of the N-VA.

Second, the question of the future of the Belgian state remained high on the agenda, indirectly because of these congruent coalition formation issues. All parties agreed that – on the short term – the priority should go to the implementation of the sixth state reform. On the longer term, the French-speaking parties were clearly opposed to a new state reform and a further regionalization of the country. Even if the Flemish Regionalists did no longer emphasize the end of Belgium in their manifesto, the party expressed clear demands in favour of a confederal system and more autonomy for Regions and Communities. These demands for further regionalization concern policy issues such as taxes, social protection (including unemployment and health), justice and home affairs. In parallel, the N-VA demands a limitation of the autonomy of the Brussels-Capital Region and a system of co-management of Brussels by the other two Regions. Even if they do not fully agree with these demands, mainstream Flemish parties do follow the lead of the N-VA on these issues, even if their priorities remain of a socio-economic nature.

Third, and above all, campaign debates and manifestos were primarily focused on socio-economic issues and a content analysis of the party manifestos of the main political parties demonstrate that they correspond to about one third of these documents. In the last weeks of the campaign, the debates in Flanders became deeply polarized on the socio-economic dimension and institutional issues were almost completely left aside. Issues such as the end of the automatic indexation of wages, the limitation in time of unemployment allowances, as well as the reduction of public expenditures sparked fierce tensions between the three mainstream Flemish parties and the Flemish Regionalists. On the French-speaking side, the traditional

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