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PROFILE

The electoral performance of the Belgian Green parties in 2014

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Electoral and institutional context

The elections of 25 May 2014 in Belgium have been called the ‘mother of all elections’ by the media. On the same day, about 6.7 million voters elected their new representatives for the regional, community, federal, and European parliaments: depending on language and residence, each had three or four votes. The legislative term for the federal parliament changed from four to five years and now coincides with the five-yearly regional and European terms. The electoral system is based on proportional representation with semi-open lists; voters may vote either for their preferred candidate(s) or for the entire list. European citizens are allowed to vote in European elections, and Belgian citizens living abroad are allowed to vote in federal elections.

Since the previous regional (2009), federal (2010), and European (2009) elections, Belgium had undergone important changes in its structure and institutions. First, regions and communities have increased autonomy, receiving new competences, including family allowances, labour market regulation, health care, and road safety, as well as increased financing and more fiscal autonomy. The Brussels region received specific additional financing and constitutive autonomy (the region can now reform its own institutions). Second, the federal Senate has been profoundly reformed; its members are no longer directly elected, but are designated by the members of the regional parliaments. Consequently, regional elections have become more important.

Parties in Belgium are clustered in two separate party systems, according to language: the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) party system and the French-speaking party system, which broadly corresponds to the Walloon and Brussels regions. Each party family is represented on both sides of the linguistic border, and there are two Green parties: the Flemish Groen and the French-speaking Ecolo. Since their creation at the end of the 1970s, the two Belgian Green parties’ electoral performances have three characteristics. The first is symmetry: the Green parties experience a similar electoral fate and almost always win or lose elections together.¹ Second, the electoral results of the Green parties are characterised by considerable instability over time, important electoral successes being followed

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by severe defeats, hence their epithet: 'yo-yo parties'. Third, and despite their electoral symmetry, Ecolo always performed comparatively better than Groen.

The electoral campaign

Traditionally, the process of composing Green party lists is open and democratic. Any party member can apply for candidacy, and the lists are often open to candidates from civil society. Yet, there was a public struggle between incumbent MEPs Isabelle Durant and Philippe Lamberts to head the European list of Ecolo. The final decision regarding list composition was taken by party members at a party congress. Philippe Lamberts was chosen; Isabelle Durant declined the second position on the list and moved to the Brussels region where she was elected as a Brussels regional MP. Groen's European list was headed by incumbent MEP Bart Staes.

In other arenas, the Groen party leader, Wouter Vanbesien, stood for the Flemish parliament, and the only Groen minister, Bruno De Lille, stood for the Brussels regional parliament. However, the party decided to present new candidates who had strong connections with civil society. Few of the party's former leaders or former ministers were candidates. By contrast, almost all leading Ecolo figures were candidates, with the exception of the two co-leaders. The Walloon vice-minister president, Jean-Marc Nollet, stood for the federal parliament. Minister Philippe Henry and former party leader, Jean-Michel Javaux, stood for the Walloon parliament, and the two Brussels ministers, Evelyne Huytebroeck and Christos Doulkeridis, stood for the Brussels regional parliament. Finally, the Green parties presented a joint and bilingual list (under the name Ecolo) for the federal elections in the electoral district of Brussels.

Apart from a separate manifesto for the Brussels regional elections, each Green party drafted a common manifesto for the four elections. These common electoral platforms dealt with policy issues and pledges that concern their respective region and community, the federal and the European levels. As a result, the documents were particularly long: Groen's manifesto (317 pages) was the longest of any Flemish party, and Ecolo's (810 pages) was the longest party manifesto in Belgian history. Both manifestoes prioritised foreign affairs, social policy, companies, and banks (Piet *et al.* 2014), and compared to other parties, both focused more on environmental issues and energy.

At the European level, the first priority of both parties is harmonisation of social and fiscal policies and their wish to create a common European tax for companies and common social standards, including for salaries, on which issue Ecolo MEP Philippe Lamberts is a recognised expert. Second, both parties aim for a European renewable energy policy with a focus on solar and wind. Energy is also their priority at federal and regional levels, and their proposals include more efficient insulation of houses, increased production of renewable energy (including installation of wind turbines alongside highways) and closing nuclear plants.

On socio-economic issues, both parties adopt a left position, for example in favour of taxation on large fortunes, limitation of incomes of CEOs in the private sector, and reducing salaries of ministers and MPs. They are also against increasing the pension age and would allow illegal migrants from war-torn countries to stay in Belgium. Regarding the linguistic conflict between opposing Flemish and francophone parties, they are not in favour of another state reform that would grant more autonomy to regions and communities but instead wish to increase collaboration between the federated entities. Their joint list for the Brussels district in the federal elections and the creation of a joint parliamentary party group in the federal parliament are examples of this enhanced collaboration between linguistic communities.

Results

In 2014, the two Green parties obtained only two seats in the European parliament, one fewer than in 2009. If results are rather similar among linguistic groups of voters, the trends are completely different. In the Dutch electoral district, Groen obtained 10.6% of the votes and one seat, a gain of 2.7% since 2009. Groen finished fifth among the Flemish parties, as in most previous European elections. In the French electoral district, Ecolo suffered a clear defeat compared to 2009, losing almost half its voters and one of its two seats. Surprisingly, it remains the third-largest French-speaking party. Incumbents Philippe Lambert (Ecolo) and Bart Staes (Groen) finished seventh in popularity among their respective linguistic groups. Both MEPs joined the Greens/EFA parliamentary group and Philippe Lambert was elected its co-president for the first half of the legislative term (2014–2017) (Table 1).

In the federal elections, Green party results differed across the linguistic boundary. Among Flemish parties, the clear winners were the nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), but Groen also managed to increase its vote (+0.94%). The political landscape was very different among French-speaking parties. The losing parties were the three parties in government at the Walloon and Brussels regional levels – the Parti Socialiste (PS), the Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH), and Ecolo. For the first time since 1987, Groen obtained as many seats as Ecolo (Table 2).

Table 1. Green parties in the European elections in 2014 (compared to 2009).

	Party	% of Votes	Seats
Dutch electoral district	Groen	10.62 (+2.72)	1 (+0)
French electoral district	Ecolo	11.68 (-11.20)	1 (-1)
German electoral district	Ecolo	16.66 (+1.08)	0 (+0)
Belgium	Total	11.05 (-2.50)	2 (-1)

Table 2. Green parties in the federal elections in 2014 (compared to 2010).

Party	% of Votes	Seats
Groen	5.32 (+0.94)	6 (+1)
Ecolo	3.30 (-1.50)	6 (-2)
Total	8.62 (-0.56)	12 (-1)

Note: In Brussels, both Green parties competed on the same list (under the name 'Ecolo').

In the Flemish community, Groen gained 1.94% compared to 2009 to emerge, with N-VA, as a clear winner, obtaining three additional seats and 8.7% of the votes, its second-best results since 1995. Groen becomes Flanders' fifth-largest party, thanks mainly to the presence on the list of the party leader, Wouter Vanbesien, who obtained the third-largest number of preference votes in Antwerp; no lower profile Groen candidates finished in the top 10 in any other province.

In Wallonia, Ecolo lost even more votes than in European or national elections – more than half its voters, declining to 8.6%, almost matching its defeat in 2004. In 2014, Ecolo's representation in the Walloon parliament reduced to four seats, below the threshold to form a parliamentary group. Of the governing parties, Ecolo was the only loser.

Groen obtained its best results in Brussels since the creation of the region in 1989: it gained 17.9% of votes and three seats to become Brussels' third-largest Flemish party, an increase of one seat and 6.7% compared to the 2009 regional elections. Ecolo returned to its normal performances in the Brussels region, its 10.1% and eight seats broadly equalling its performances of 1989, 1995, and 2004. Yet the result was seen as an important defeat because Ecolo lost exactly half its voters (-10.1%) and seats (-8 seats) compared to 2009. Ecolo becomes the fifth French-speaking political force in Brussels, something that occurred only once before in that region. Among French-speaking candidates, the head of the Ecolo list finished eleventh (Table 3).

At first sight, the electoral results of Green parties in Belgium appear homogenous across regions and levels. The standard deviations per region (and per province) are low, except in Brussels where Green parties obtained their best

Table 3. Green parties in the regional elections in 2014 (compared to 2009).

	Party	% of Votes	Seats
Flemish community	Groen	8.7 (+1.9)	10 (+3)
Walloon region	Ecolo	8.6 (-9.9)	4 (-10)
Brussels region – Dutch group	Groen	17.9 (+6.7)	3 (+1)
Brussels region – French group	Ecolo	10.1 (-10.1)	8 (-8)
German-speaking community	Ecolo	9.5 (-2.0)	2 (-1)
Belgium	Total	8.8 (-2.4)	27 (-15)

results, and in the European elections where they obtained particularly good results compared to regional and federal elections. Overall, contrary to the traditional electoral gap between the two Green parties, their results converged significantly in 2014.

The victory of Groen is relatively easy to understand. The electoral context was favourable as the campaign in Flanders was largely dominated by the N-VA, which strongly supported further decentralisation of the Belgian state and emphasised right-wing socio-economic issues. By polarising the debate with its left-wing and pro-status quo stances, Groen appeared as the natural opponent of the N-VA. The defeat of Ecolo had multiple bases. After several years of charismatic leadership by Jean-Michel Javaux, the two new party leaders appeared particularly inexperienced, did not build upon the party's participation in the regional cabinets, and did not sufficiently stress environmental debates during the campaign. Furthermore, a significant part of its electorate, disappointed by the socio-economic situation of the Walloon region, voted for the far-left PTB-go!

The aftermath

The electoral defeat of Ecolo had important consequences for the party organisation. The two party leaders, Emily Hoyos and Olivier Deleuze, were heavily and publically criticised by party members and elites, including MEP Lambert. The defeat also means a significant decrease in public funding for the party, resulting in a 50% reduction of party staff. Groen, by contrast, slightly increased its number of seats – and therefore parliamentary and party staff – in the federal and regional assemblies, and its leader remains uncontested.

The most important consequences concern government participation. After five years in the Walloon and Brussels regional cabinets, Ecolo was not involved in government formation talks. The PS and the cdH (and the *Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones* in Brussels) formed regional governments without Ecolo. Despite its electoral success, Groen was also left outside the Flemish and Brussels regional governments. Both Green parties were excluded from talks about forming the federal government.

The only important environmental issues in any of those government formation talks concerned night flights from Brussels airport and nuclear energy. In September 2014, federal negotiators cancelled the decision of the previous government and reverted to the flight route used before February 2014. At the federal level, negotiators confirmed the previous decision that Belgium will exit nuclear energy in 2025, even if the construction of a new reactor is being considered. In the meantime, the development of alternative sources of energy will be investigated. Yet, due to structural problems, three of the seven Belgian nuclear reactors are no longer operating. As this may lead to serious shortages of electricity during the winter, plans for the dispersion of electricity cuts across the territory created serious political turmoil. There is no doubt that energy will remain high on the government's agenda for the forthcoming years.

Note

1. This electoral symmetry does not necessarily extend to governments. Often one party may be in government at national or regional level, while its sister party remains in opposition. Between 2009 and 2014, Ecolo participated in the Brussels and Walloon regional governments, with two ministers in the Walloon regional cabinet (with large portfolios that included environment, energy, mobility urban planning, research, public administration, and housing) and two ministers in the Brussels regional cabinet (with portfolios of environment, energy, and housing). In the same period, Groen stood in opposition to the Flemish regional government but participated in the Brussels regional cabinet with one junior minister (public administration, mobility, and equality). At federal level, Groen and Ecolo have been in opposition since 2003.

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