

2 Party system change in Belgium

From stability to fragmentation?

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2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Institutional and political context

Through recent decades, Belgium has undergone an important process of territorial and political transformation. From a centralized state structure, Belgium gradually became a full-fledged federal state, with recurrent community and linguistic conflicts between Dutch and French speakers and an explosion of the number of political parties. Three regions (mostly based on economy and territory) and three communities (mostly based on language and culture) emerged between 1970 and 1988. In 1993, Belgium officially became a federation, as stated in the first article of its revised constitution. Parallel to the creation of subnational institutions, many powers were allocated to the regions and communities. Different state reforms (1970, 1980, 1988–1989, 1993, 2001, 2012–2014) empowered the subnational levels of government on policy issues like the economy, culture, education, agriculture or health, as well as on their financial and taxation powers. As a result, region and community elections and cabinets have increasingly become salient in shaping party strategies and have a clear impact on the format of the Belgian party system.

The gradual reforms of the composition of the Senate are probably among the most important institutional transformations of the Belgian state (Dandoy et al. 2015). The powers of the Senate were reduced by the 1993 and 2014 reforms and led to a radical weakening of Belgian bicameralism. Originally based on a system that combined directly elected senators and indirect designation based on provincial councils (as well as co-opted senators),¹ the “provincial” senators were replaced by “community” senators and the size of the senate was reduced. Since 2014, there are no longer directly elected senators and they are now designated by regional and community parliaments. This reform can be viewed as a clear-cut reinforcement of the weight of subnational parliaments and parties on national politics.

The Belgian electoral system is based on proportional arrangement and a D’hondt method of seat allocation, with a semi-open list system, meaning that voters can chose to vote for the party (list vote) or for one or several candidate(s)

on the same list (preference vote).² Voting is compulsory and – even if abstention is not sanctioned – turnout remains around 90 percent. There is no direct election of the members of the executives and no mechanism of direct democracy (except for the consultative initiatives at the local level).

Parallel to the territorial transformation of the Belgian state, the electoral system also underwent radical changes. Among the changes observed since the early 1990s, we note the possibility of emitting several preference votes and the reduction by half of the effect of the party vote;³ the introduction of an electoral threshold and the increase of the district magnitude for both federal and regional elections; the reduction of seats in both the chamber and the senate and the limitation of the number of federal ministers, while subnational parliaments increased their size and there are increasingly more regional ministers over time; several initiatives leading to better representation of women; and the split of the disputed electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde that constitutes the last step in the division of the electoral system into two independent language-based systems (Hooghe and Deschouwer 2011; Bouhon and Reuchamps 2012).

2.1.2 Main political trends and challenges

In this section, we address the main political trends and challenges that have characterized the Belgian political system during the last decades: the decreased importance of the traditional sociological pillars and religion on society, the democratization of political parties and the personalization of politics, together with an increased importance of gender. The impact of political scandals will also be briefly discussed in this section.

De-pillarization and secularization

Belgium is often considered as a textbook case of a “pillarized” country, i.e. it is divided into organized vertical pillars (*zuilen*) and based on political ideologies (Post 1989; Deschouwer 2001). Historically, the two main pillars are the catholic and the socialist ones, in addition to the smaller liberal pillar. Because of the increased importance of the linguistic cleavage in the second half of the twentieth century, pillars have split according to language (even labor unions are divided according to language, although some federal bodies remain). Together with the secularization of Belgian society and the appearance of new political movements, this linguistic division weakened the importance of pillars throughout the last decades, especially vis-à-vis the party system. For instance, the French-speaking Christian-democratic party gave up the historic reference to religion in its party name and adopted the label of “Democratic humanist center”. If de-pillarization is particularly remarkable with respect to the political system, it remains one of the most relevant elements in understanding labor unions or health institutions.

Traditionally, the catholic pillar was able to rally a relative majority of voters around the catholic parties. As a result, the catholic parties took part in almost all governments between 1945 and 1999 and provided the Prime Minister in most of



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them. Since the 1960s, religious identification declined and the number of regular churchgoers nowadays merely represents around 10 percent of the population. This secularization also affected voting behavior, leading to a decreasing role of the catholic parties in Belgian politics.

Personalization, internal democratization and representation of women

Personalization is generally considered to manifest itself through two developments among voters, politicians and media. The first one relates to the fact that voters increasingly focus on strong or otherwise remarkable candidates and less on their “loyalty” to a certain party. In Belgium, André et al. (2012) observed that most voters cast preferential votes over list votes (61.3 percent of voters cast more than one preferential vote). Moreover, voters reported that they supported individual candidates because they knew them, either personally or via the media.

Second, increasing voter volatility and the hugely fragmented party system has led to greater electoral uncertainty for politicians. As a response, many candidates can no longer simply rely on their party to get (re-)elected and need to raise their profile, both within and outside their own party. This has led many politicians to participate in mainstream non-political entertainment shows on television and it has brought almost all political parties to look for celebrities, like athletes, journalists or other heavily mediatized personalities and to include them on their electoral list, sometimes at the expense of hardworking backbenchers. Van Aelst et al. (2008) found that there was both a political and media logic at hand during the Belgian electoral campaign coverage of 2003: candidates receiving more media attention obtained more votes.

The internal democratization of Belgian parties is a fairly recent process, taking ground in the 1990s. Internal democratization generally refers to party leadership elections and electoral candidate selection procedures. While these used to be decided among the party elites, there has been a move towards transparency and inclusion of a wider selection of party members. With the exception of French-speaking Christian-democrats and liberals, who democratized their leadership elections in 1970 and 1989, respectively, most Belgian parties switched from electing their leaders through delegates at party congresses to more inclusive elections where all party members are allowed to vote. Contagion effects and declining party membership are the most important factors that account for this trend (Wauters 2014). Yet, candidate selection procedure has become less inclusive and more centralized over time (Put 2015).

Belgium has become one of the front-runners of women’s representation in the national parliament. This is in great deal thanks to its electoral gender quota system. Between 1994 and 2002 gender quotas have more than tripled women’s representation in the national assembly. While the Walloon and Brussels regional assemblies each have 40 percent women, Flanders is among Europe’s current front-runners with 44.35 percent women. However, despite this marked increase in women’s representation in national and regional assemblies, many political parties have never had a female president and women are systematically

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underrepresented in national and regional governments. Belgium has yet to have its first female prime minister. Hence, despite recent improvements for women in Belgian politics, there remain several glass ceilings to be broken.

Political scandals

Since the 1990s, a series of political scandals have lastingly marked the Belgian society and party systems and, in some cases, led to institutional reforms. Trust in mainstream political parties was at its lowest (especially for Flemish Christian-democrats and French-speaking socialists) during this period: 10.1 percent in 1999, 11.6 percent in 2003 and 14.4 percent in 2007 (see the PIOP-ISPO national election surveys). In the 2000s, a new series of scandals – for instance the SMAP and SOGETEC affairs – directly affected the leaders of the French-speaking socialist party. Finally, in 2017 a series of political scandals in the Walloon and Brussels regions (more particularly the Publifin and Samusocial affairs, respectively) involved a large series of local and provincial politicians not only from the French-speaking socialist party, but also from other mainstream parties. Trust in these parties again reached a low (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018), after these affairs and opinion polls indicated that the next elections will confirm the loss of the mainstream parties and the emergence of new political forces, like the radical-left party. Altogether, political scandals have had a substantial negative impact on party membership and party identification, but their impact on the success of populist parties remains unclear.

2.2 Electoral results and types of government

Election results and economic crisis

The longitudinal evolution of the party system is rather complex, especially after the linguistic split of the traditional parties in the 1960s and 1970s. If long-term evolutions within Belgian society (including cleavages) and the changing electoral system have had an impact on parties, election results have also led to significant changes of the electoral supply. For instance, the decreasing trends in the electoral results of the three main regionalist parties – Flemish Union (VU) in Flanders, Walloon Rally (RW) in Wallonia and Democratic Front of Francophones (FDF) in Brussels – pushed these parties to create alliances and/or to merge with larger mainstream political parties. Partly because of its successive electoral defeats, most of the leaders of the VU joined other parties such as the liberals, the Christian-democrats, the socialists and even the greens. The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) emerged from the ashes of the VU and joined the Christian-democrats between 2004 and 2008. In Wallonia, the bad electoral performance of the RW pushed most of its leaders into the arms of the socialist and liberal parties. In Brussels, the FDF secured its long-term survival by joining the liberal party between 1992 and 2011.

In the wake of the financial and economic crisis (2007–2009), political and societal reactions in Flanders and Wallonia were quite dissimilar. While Flanders

mostly focused on the large governmental debt and the reforms necessary to reduce it and become economically competitive again, French-speaking parties focused more on the heavy disparity between the lower and middle classes – whom they saw as the true victims of the financial crisis – and the economic elites whom had actually benefitted from the crisis. While the general perspective on how to deal with the economic crisis was quite different in Flanders and Wallonia, many citizens agreed that the (former) political elites had failed to serve the general interest and had, instead, been too heavily involved in what had caused the crisis in Belgium. Many citizens had lost large sums of money in stock market shares that were supposedly safe. The role played by the economic crisis on parties' electoral results is also difficult to assess, mostly because important political events and changes in the party system also occurred during this period. Yet, several key elections took place around the most relevant years of the crisis and the comparison of the federal elections of 2007 and 2010 and the regional elections of 2009 provides useful insights into these dynamics. Table 2.1 shows the electoral results and parliamentary seat distribution for all parties since 1991.

The Flemish party system underwent a radical change during the years of the economic crisis. Between 2007 and 2010, the three mainstream parties lost an important share of votes: the Christian-democrats (-12 percentage points), the liberals (-5.1) and the socialists (-1). The electoral defeat of the dominant Christian-democrats can be partly explained by its split with the Flemish regionalists in 2008. The latter party is considered as the clear winner of the 2010 elections, as it obtained no less than 28 percent of the votes (in the federal elections of 2003, this regionalist party obtained merely 4.9 percent). Yet, the party discourse was not focused on the economic crisis but rather in the so-called linguistic “conflict” between Dutch and French speakers. Interestingly, the Flemish regionalists seem to be the only party winning votes during the period of economic crisis: the greens barely won new votes, while the populist party List DeDecker (LDD – later Libertarian, Direct, Democratic) and the radical-right VB respectively lost 2.7 and 6.4 percentage points between 2007 and 2010.

In Wallonia, the socialist party seemed to have profited from the economic crisis – compared to its low electoral performance of 2007, marked by the political scandals that affected its leaders – but the regional elections of 2009 and the federal elections of 2010 only confirmed its comeback to more traditional results. Conversely, the liberal party appeared to be more affected by the crisis. Between 2007 and the 2010, the party lost 9 percentage points in the federal elections. The other two French-speaking parties appeared to have been poorly affected: the Christian-democrats only lost 1.2 percentage points while the greens lost 0.5. This crisis period was also marked by the emergence of two political forces on both sides of the left-right axis. The radical-left Belgian Workers' Party (PTB-PvdA) witnessed its first electoral breakthrough since the party's creation and obtained 1.9 percent of the votes in 2010. In 2009, a new radical-right party – the Popular Party (PP) – was created and obtained 3.1 percent of the votes in 2010 and a first seat in the federal Chamber. These trends are related to the decline and disappearance in 2012 of the radical-right Front National. Due to internal dissent and

Table 2.1 Election results in Belgium, 1991–2017; federal elections for the House of Representatives

	1991		1995		1999		2003		2007		2010		2014	
	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)	Votes %	Seats (%)
N-VA/ VU-ID/VU	5,9	10 (4,7)	4,7	5 (3,3)	5,6	8 (5,3)	3,1	1 (0,7)	–	–	17,4	27 (18)	20,3	33 (22)
PS	13,5	35 (16,5)	11,9	21 (14)	10,2	19 (12,7)	13	25 (16,7)	10,9	20 (13,3)	13,7	26 (17,3)	11,7	23 (15,3)
CD&V/ CVP	16,8	39 (18,4)	17,2	29 (19,3)	14,1	22 (14,7)	13,2	21 (14)	18,5	30 (20)	10,8	17 (11,3)	11,6	18 (12)
Open Vld/ VLD/PIV	12	26 (12,3)	13,1	21 (14)	14,2	23 (15,3)	15,4	25 (16,7)	11,8	18 (12)	8,6	13 (8,7)	9,8	14 (9,3)
MR/PRL/ PRL-FDF-MCC	8,1	20 (9,4)	10,3	18 (12)	10,1	18 (12)	11,4	24 (16)	12,5	23 (15,3)	9,3	18 (12)	9,6	20 (13,3)
sp.a/ sp.a-spirit/SP	12,9	28 (13,2)	12,6	20 (13,3)	9,6	14 (9,3)	14,9	23 (15,3)	10,3	14 (9,3)	9,2	13 (8,7)	8,8	13 (8,7)
Groen! Groen!/Agalev	4,9	7 (3,3)	4,4	5 (3,3)	7	9 (6)	2,5	0 (0,7)	4	4 (2,7)	4,4	5 (3,3)	5,3	6 (4)
cdH/PSC	7,7	18 (8,5)	7,7	12 (8)	5,9	10 (6,7)	5,5	8 (5,3)	6,1	10 (6,7)	5,5	9 (6)	5	9 (6)
PTB-PvdA	0,5	0 (1,4)	0,6	0 (0,7)	0,5	0 (0,7)	0,3	0 (0,7)	0,8	0 (0,7)	0,7	0 (0,7)	3,7	2 (1,3)
VB	6,6	12 (5,7)	7,8	11 (7,3)	9,9	15 (10)	11,6	18 (12)	12	17 (11,3)	7,8	12 (8)	3,7	3 (2)
Ecolo	5,1	10 (4,7)	4	6 (4)	7,4	11 (7,3)	3,1	4 (2,7)	5,1	8 (5,3)	4,8	8 (5,3)	3,3	6 (4)
FDF/ FDF-PPW	1,5	3 (1,4)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1,8	2 (1,3)
PP	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1,3	1 (0,7)	1,5	1 (0,7)

(Continued)

Table 2.1 (Continued)

	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2010	2014
LDD	–	–	–	–	4	5	1
						(3,3)	(0,7)
FN	1,1	1	1,5	1	2	1	0
		(0,5)		(0,7)		(0,7)	
Others	3,9	3	4,5	4,3	2,8	0	0
		(1,4)					

Source: Ministry of Interior. Former party names are in italic. Results for PTB and PvdA have been aggregated. In 2007, the N-VA was in electoral alliance with the CD&V.

judicial problems, this party was not able to mobilize a credible platform during the economic crisis.

Belgium recovered rather quickly from the financial and economic crisis and, by the end of 2009, most of the indicators were back to the level they were before 2008. But this period and the years that followed confirmed these observed trends. Mainstream parties continued to decline over the years (see Figure 2.1) and more particularly after 2007. 2017 opinion polls indicate that – altogether – they do not account for half of the votes in the three regions of the country. Overall, the Christian-democrats – that once dominated Belgian politics – witnessed their worst results since the creation of the party in 1936. The same applies to the socialists who are gradually losing votes to the emerging radical-left party and to the Flemish liberals. The French-speaking liberals are the only mainstream party that remained stable across the 2000s and 2010s.

The decline of the mainstream parties paved the way for new party families. Unlike in the 1990s, the green parties did not benefit from these trends, but three other party families emerged as the winners of the different crises and scandals witnessed in Belgium during the last two decades. First, the regionalist party family that almost disappeared from the political landscape became a leading force. After its divorce with the Christian-democrats, the regionalist N-VA became Belgium's largest party. In Brussels, the Democratic Federalist Independent party (DéFI – formerly known as FDF) split from the liberals and became a pivotal party in the coalition formation while, in the German-speaking community, the Pro German-speaking Community party (ProDG) took the lead in the regional cabinet.

Second, and similarly to the mainstream parties, the radical-right parties lost a lot of their vote shares after 2006. In Wallonia, the Front National completely disappeared from the political landscape and in Flanders the VB – who was the second largest party in the 2004 elections – was very close to the electoral threshold in 2014. In both regions, a right-wing populist party emerged during this period: the flash party LDD in Flanders and the PP in Wallonia. Even if the former disappeared from the Flemish party system and the latter only got a few seats in regional and federal parliaments, right-wing populist parties have had a significant impact on the overall political system.

The third party family that (re-)emerged from these times of crises was the radical-left one. Even if radical-left parties have been present in Belgium since WWII, they lost their parliamentary representation in the 1980s. Based on an anti-establishment discourse and a critique of the way the socialist parties dealt with the economic crisis, the unitary PTB-PvdA slowly but consistently won vote shares and managed to be the most popular party in Wallonia according to 2017 opinion polls. The success of the PTB-PvdA in Wallonia is clearly related to the decline of the socialist party and to the political scandals revealed in early 2017.

Coalition governments

Because of the fragmentation of the party system, coalition governments are the rule rather than the exception, including at the regional level. Since 1958, all

Belgian cabinets are made of coalitions and, at the regional level, all cabinets have been composed of at least two parties. Traditionally, the number of coalition partners at the federal level varies between four and six. Given the high number of potential coalition partners, several government formulas may be tested and the whole coalition formation process usually takes a few months, especially if it takes place in the context of an economic or political crisis (the federal formation process took 194 days in 2007 and 541 days in 2010–2011). During the process of coalition formation, most of the policies that will be implemented by the cabinet are being decided and drafted in a so-called “coalition agreement”. These agreements heavily determine and restrain the policies of the newly formed government (Joly et al. 2015).

Besides the large number of partners and necessity to discuss all policy issues in advance, several other elements contribute to the complexity of the coalition formation process. It concerns rules governing the confidence vote in the Parliament or the necessity to reach specific majorities (for instance for the revision of the constitution or linguistic laws where votes need to be gathered in the two linguistic communities). Combined with the linguistic parity of the cabinet (as many Dutch-speaking ministers as French-speaking ones), these crucial elements of the Belgian federal system led to another characteristic of the Belgian cabinets: their symmetry. Political parties tend to enter federal cabinets together with their sister party, creating symmetrical coalitions across the two-party system. After the linguistic split of parties, symmetry has always been respected until 2007. Since then (and with the exception of the 2011–2014 cabinet), mainstream party families have had one sister party in government while the other one remained in the opposition, mostly because of increasingly diverging ideologies and long-term strategies. The consequences of the demise of the sister party model might impact the stability of Belgian federalism.

Another important element is the intricacy of the different levels of government in the process of coalition formation. Especially when federal and regional elections are held simultaneously, the same coalitions tend to be created at the two levels of government (Deschouwer 2001). For instance, during the 1999 coalition formation processes, the French-speaking green party was integrated in the Walloon regional cabinet because it was already present in the federal cabinet. Until 2004, the rule of congruent coalitions was respected in the country’s largest regions but gradually abandoned afterwards.

In recent years, the fragmentation of the party system has increased the number of potential partners for building a cabinet coalition. Yet, not all parties have been considered as potential partners. The strategy of the “*cordon sanitaire*” implies that Belgian parties never invite the radical-right parties into a coalition, including at the local level. This strategy was rather easy to implement when there were only two parties – the VB and the FN – who could be considered as dangerous or non-democratic. With recent political developments and the electoral successes of radical-left and populist radical-right parties, the strategy of a *cordon sanitaire*



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may no longer be an option and certain parties at the extreme of the political axis may in the future be upgraded to potential coalition partners.

Given the complexity of coalition formations and the large number of partners, cabinet stability has often been an issue. Many cabinets did not manage to reach the end of their legislative terms, leading to either a change of the coalition formula or early elections. Between the 1960s and 1980s, most of this cabinet instability could be explained by political crises. More recently, the linguistic conflict was one of the reasons for the fall of the cabinet Leterme II in 2010. The fall of the cabinet Leterme I in December 2008 is particularly relevant and an indirect consequence of the economic crisis. The Fortis bank – the largest bank of Belgium – suffered heavily from the financial crisis over the years 2007–2008. Fortis shares lost almost 95% of their values on the stock market and, in September 2008, Fortis was on the edge of bankruptcy. The federal cabinet decided to save the Belgian bank and to split it into several pieces (the bulk of them having been sold to the French bank BNP-Paribas). However, the decision of the cabinet did not follow the regular procedures and shareholders claimed that their rights had not been respected. Soon, information, according to which the cabinet put pressure on the judges in order to validate the rescue of Fortis, was revealed to the media. Prime Minister Yves Leterme presented the resignation of its cabinet a few days later.⁴ Table 2.2 provides an overview of federal cabinets since 1999.

Table 2.2 Composition and duration of the federal cabinet (1999–2016)

Name	Years	Composition	Duration
Verhofstadt I	1999–2003	VLD – PS – PRL-FDF-MCC – SP – Ecolo – Agalev	1393 days
Verhofstadt I bis	2003	VLD – PS – MR – sp.a – Agalev	68 days
Verhofstadt II	2003–2007	VLD – PS – MR – sp.a-Spirit	1623 days
Verhofstadt III	2007–2008	Open Vld – MR – CD&V – PS – cdH	90 days
Leterme I	2008	CD&V – MR – PS – Open Vld – cdH	285 days
Van Rompuy	2008–2009	CD&V – MR – PS – Open Vld – cdH	330 days
Leterme II	2009–2011	CD&V – MR – PS – Open Vld – cdH	669 days
Leterme II bis	2011	CD&V – MR – PS – Open Vld – cdH – FDF	72 days
Di Rupo	2011–2014	PS – CD&V – MR – sp.a – Open Vld – cdH	1040 days
Michel	2014–	MR – N-VA – CD&V – Open Vld	

Note: Some parties changed names during the course of the cabinet: SP becomes sp.a in 2001, PRL-FDF-MCC becomes MR in 2002, and VLD becomes Open Vld in 2007.

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2.3 Party system format and dynamics

Two party systems

When comparing party systems across Western Europe, Belgium appears as an outlier. There is basically not one but two party systems: the Dutch-speaking party system and the French-speaking party system.⁵ Parties belonging to one system almost never compete with parties from the other system and are territorially concentrated. Put simply, Dutch-speaking voters elect Dutch-speaking politicians and French-speaking voters elect French-speaking politicians, making Dutch-speaking parties present only in the Flemish region while French-speaking parties are present in the Brussels and Walloon regions. Brussels remains the only territory where Dutch- and French-speaking parties compete, but exclusively for local, federal and European elections.

This co-existence of two parallel party systems was caused by a variety of political, institutional and socio-demographic factors. The historical split of the Belgian party system can be traced back to the 1970s. At the time, all three mainstream parties had been divided across linguistic lines and the only other relevant parties were the regionalist parties who were *de facto* mostly present in one region only. Only the communist party – and some ephemeral political movements, such as the Democratic Union for the Respect of Labor (UDRT-RAD) – could be still labeled as national parties. More interestingly, the emergence of new parties in the decades that followed, all confirmed this co-existence of two party systems. Even the green and the radical-right populist parties decided to be present in one part of the country only. More recently, the success of the radical left and national PTB-PvdA could lead to some form of renationalization of the Belgian party systems.

Two specific types of parties need to be mentioned when analyzing the Belgian party systems. The first one concerns the so-called “sister parties”. Before 1978, the three mainstream parties (Christian-democrats, socialists and liberals) displayed a nationwide structure. Born at a time when Belgium was a unitary country, these parties gradually adapted to the regionalized – then federal – institutional structure of the country. Their split into independent party units (for instance the Belgian socialist party split into one Dutch-speaking socialist party and one French-speaking socialist party) did not mean the end of their collaboration. Because of their common history and their ideological closeness, these sister parties shared the same political fate. They often won or lost the elections together, partook in government together and often faced the same sets of challenges and transformations. However, sister parties gradually grew apart and the last two decades marked an increase in differences in terms of electoral strategies, party organization, programmatic platforms and even cabinet participations. Nonetheless, the study of one party still remains the best way to predict the behavior of its sister party.

A second important type of party concerns the presence and strength of regionalist parties in each region of the country. Broadly speaking, regionalist parties



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defend the interests of “their” region and express demands for more territorial autonomy or even secession from the existing state structure. Different types of regionalist parties have had an important impact on the party systems: protectionist regionalist parties (such as DéFI in the Brussels region), autonomist regionalist parties (such as ProDG in the German-speaking community) or secessionist parties (such as VB in the Flemish region). Their electoral successes since the 1960s have brought them important parliamentary representation and even several government participations at the regional and national levels. However, they have also directly triggered radical reform of the Belgian state structure (that transformed from a unitary to a federal country in a few decades).

Two recent phenomena have had a significant impact on both party systems. From the late 1990s onwards, several political parties decided to create alliances between parties in a country where pillarization traditionally prevented such strategies. These alliances were rather diverse in terms of ambition, size or sustainability but were, generally, quite successful. Secondly, many parties decided to change their name and label, following the creation of alliances (as was the case for the French-speaking liberals), because of judicial problems (e.g. VB) or for ideological and strategic reasons (e.g. the French-speaking Christian-democrats). With very few exceptions, all Belgian parties have changed their name and label over the last two decades, rendering the analysis of the Belgian party systems more complex.

Fragmentation, volatility and polarization

The Belgian party system reached a high level of fragmentation during the last two decades, especially if we consider all parties together – i.e. independent of their linguistic role. Figure 2.2 provides a visual overview of the evolution of the political system in terms of fragmentation using Laakso and Taagepera’s index, which takes into account the number and size of all parties (effective number of electoral parties – ENEP) or those in Parliament (effective number of parliamentary parties – ENPP). This radical transformation of the party system is due to three waves since the 1960s (De Winter et al. 2006). First, the emergence of regionalist parties in each of the three main regions of the country. Second, the split of the national parties into Dutch-speaking and French-speaking branches (and then independent parties) doubled the number of parties between the late 1960s and the mid 1970s. Third, the creation and rise of new parties at the end of the 1970s: the green parties (Ecolo and Agalev) and the extreme right parties (VB and Front National – FN) on each side of the language border as well as the poujadist UDRT-RAD.

Fragmentation has remained high and relatively stable since the early 1990s. In fact, the mid 2000s saw a brief decline in fragmentation as a consequence of the numerous party alliances, most notably between the CD&V and the N-VA; the PRL, the MCC and the FDF; the VLD and Vivant; and the sp.a and Spirit. This was a direct consequence of the electoral threshold of 5 percent introduced at the

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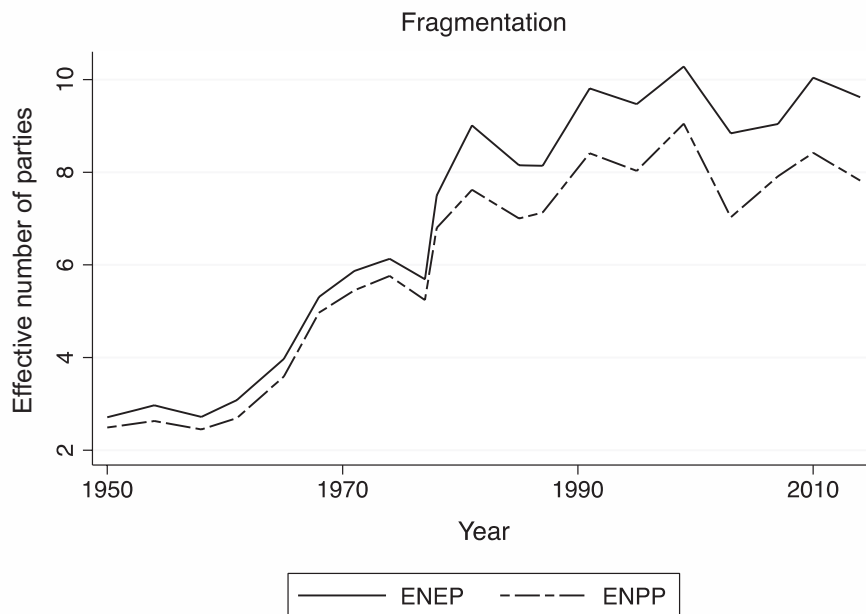


Figure 2.2 Laakso and Taagepera's index of effective number of electoral (ENEP) and parliamentary (ENPP) parties

Source: Adapted from Dassonneville (2015).

federal elections of 2003. The financial and economic crisis did not immediately lead to new emerging parties, but they created a fertile ground for the gradual success of populist radical right and the radical left, and also further boosted the success of the regionalist N-VA, who advanced a neo-liberal economic program. This success of fringe parties grew parallel to the decline of the mainstream parties.

The increasing fragmentation of the Belgian party system taken altogether does not go along with an increasing polarization. Dalton's index of polarization (2008) in Figure 2.3⁶ shows that, after years of decreasing and low ideological polarization, 2003 seems to have been a turning point with a renewed polarization reaching its peak during the elections of 2007. This increase in polarization is mostly due to the increasing linguistic tensions, the demands for increasing autonomy for Flanders, and an absolute refusal to constitutional reforms from the French-speaking parties. These community tensions caused certain parties from both sides of the linguistic border to take more extreme points of views on a number of issues to highlight their differences. The polarization score of 2010 does not indicate a further increase in the ideological polarization of the Belgian party system.⁷

Voter volatility and the decline of party membership are two evolutions that go hand in hand, and have been observed in most Western European democracies. Due to the de-pillarization of Belgian society, voters are no longer loyal to

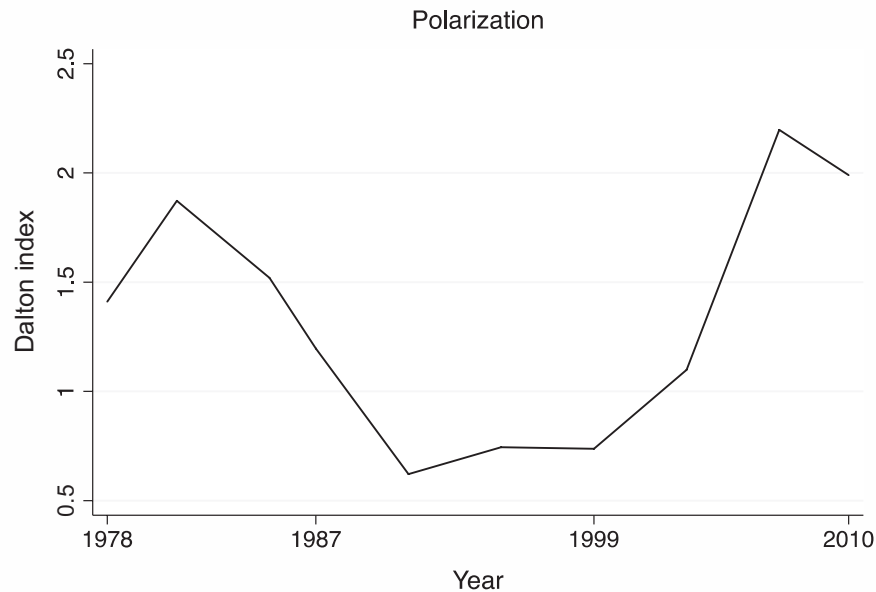


Figure 2.3 Dalton's polarization index

these pillars. Moreover, with the increasing fragmentation of the party system since the 1960s, voters can easily switch from one party to another without drastically having to change their ideological inclination or policy preferences. This has caused voters to become less attached or loyal and more volatile at the ballot box. Comparing different types of voter volatility across 20 Western countries between 1945 and 2006 (Mainwaring et al. 2017), Belgium displays a slightly higher average total volatility, which is mainly due to high extra-system volatility (3.4 percent compared to a mean of 2.2 percent). Figure 2.4 shows that voter volatility has slightly increased after the economic crises during the elections of 2010, and then dropped to prior levels of volatility for the 2014 elections.

Comparing the vote distribution of “stable” and “volatile” voters during the 2014 regional elections, Dassonneville and Stiers (2018) show that mainstream parties rely more on stable voters, while smaller parties like PTB/PvdA, DéFI and PP depend more on volatile votes. Furthermore, their study shows that switching parties is not related to (a lack of) political sophistication, political trust or dissatisfaction. Moreover, stable voters and those who switched parties could also not be distinguished in terms of political attitudes, involvement in politics or political disaffection, leading the authors to conclude that the motives for electoral volatility largely remain a black box. Comparing the determinants of voting behavior between both groups, they did find volatile voters to be ideologically close to the party they voted for, contrary to stable voters (2018). Naturally, stable voters were more attached to the party they voted for than volatile voters.

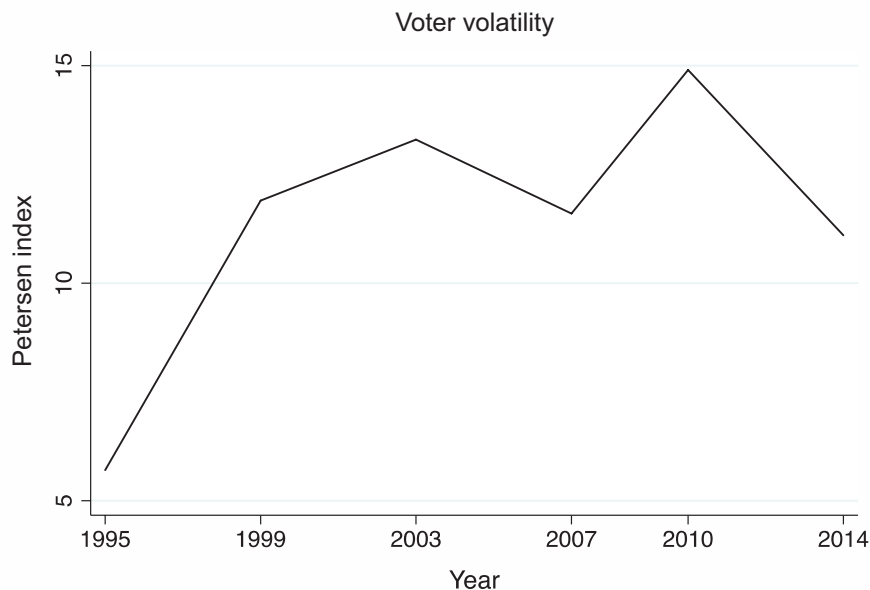


Figure 2.4 Pedersen's volatility index

2.4 Cleavages and main dimensions of competition

Traditional cleavages and issues

Party competition in the Belgian political system is structured along several main cleavages and a small set of key political issues. Of the four basic cleavages identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Belgium represents an ideal case study, as no less than three of them structured its party system(s) over the last century. The three mainstream parties originate from the church-state and the owners-workers cleavages, while the two other cleavages (urban-rural and center-periphery) led to the creation of other – sometimes successful – parties.

At the creation of Belgium, the Catholic Church was very dominant, especially because of its management of the majority of schools, combined with a lack of eagerness of the Belgian state to regulate and invest in education. This dominance was translated by the birth of a catholic party that ruled Belgium for decades before WWII. After the war, catholic parties remained the largest political force, participated in the majority of governments and delivered most of the Prime Ministers.

Yet, the gradual secularization of society pushed catholic parties to claim their independence from the church and to adapt their structure and their programmatic platforms. These parties became Christian-democratic parties and changed their name in the 2000s – the Democratic Humanist Center (cdH) even removed the reference to religion in its name. Their survival in the twenty-first century is not



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at stake. In Flanders, the Christian-democrats and Flemish (CD&V) remains a key political player, helped by its pivotal position at the center of the left-right cleavage and by its electoral alliance with the regionalist party N-VA during a few years. The cdH declined more rapidly and suffered several dissidences (a splinter party joined the liberal party in 1998, while another one tried to stand alone for elections), but still made it into several cabinet coalitions. More recently, the church-state cleavage regained some importance via the presence of Muslim parties in local elections in Brussels.

The two other mainstream parties were originally opposed to the catholic party on the church-state cleavage,⁸ but their most relevant positions concerned the owners-workers cleavage. Often summarized as “left-right” by the population and the media, this cleavage remains the most relevant cleavage in today’s politics in Belgium and mostly pertains to socio-economic issues (social policies, social security, housing, economic and industrial policy, employment, market regulation, taxes and salaries, etc.). The socialist party was created based on the workers movements and labor unions and the creation of the communist party followed in 1921. Both parties were rather electorally successful and participated to several governments but the communists declined rapidly after WWII and disappeared from Parliament between 1985 and 2014. Nowadays, the parties on the left of this cleavage are the Flemish Socialist Party Differently (sp.a), the francophone Socialist Party (PS) and the radical-left PTB-PvdA that entered Parliament after the 2014 elections.

On the other side of the cleavage, the liberals moved from an anti-clerical program to a socio-economic platform where priority was given to companies, independent workers and licensed professionals, and where it promoted economic growth, employment and low taxes. Being close to the owner’s unions and chambers of commerce, the liberal parties are the Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld) and the Reform Movement (MR). Ultra-liberal parties have also emerged (UDRT-RAD, Vivant, LDD, Liberal Democrat – LiDé), but have mostly been ephemeral.

The revival of the linguistic cleavage

In Belgium, the center-periphery cleavage identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) is best known as the community or linguistic cleavage. It finds its roots in the Flemish movement, a social and cultural movement aiming at the defense and promotion of the Dutch language in different spheres of society (education, administration, army, etc.). During the interbellum, this movement gradually transformed into political organizations. After WWII, a successful party emerged in Flanders: the regionalist VU, which managed to enter several national and regional cabinets. The radical-right secessionist VB later emerged from its ranks in the 1970s and its decline provoked a split in 2001 into several parties, such as the N-VA and the Spirit.

The other side of the cleavage is more difficult to identify, as there is no “center” in Belgium. For instance, the French-speaking minority of the population may

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similarly feel they belong to the periphery. In addition, French-speaking parties did not always oppose the autonomist demands of the Flemish regionalist parties and they often tried to accommodate them into the state structure. This position was helped by the presence of regionalist parties in the other regions of the country (RW in Wallonia, FDF – later DéFI – in Brussels, the Party of German-speaking Belgians (PDB) – later ProDG – in the German-speaking community) that also favored more subnational autonomy and a federal state structure. More recently, the absence of a regionalist party in Wallonia and the relative weakness of DéFI in Brussels pushed French-speaking mainstream parties to oppose further decentralization changes.

The center-periphery cleavage covers several key issues related to the autonomist demands of the regionalist parties: starting with language, culture and identity, they later moved to economy, budget and taxation. Yet, one of the most remarkable outcomes of the cleavage is undoubtedly the radical change of the Belgian institutions. Over several decades, Belgium underwent numerous state reforms, transforming from a centralized country to a full-fledged federation in 1993. The other relevant outcome relates to the organization of political parties, as all mainstream parties have split according to linguistic lines and as most new parties chose a linguistic role. There are nowadays only few national parties in Belgium.

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the decline and – in certain cases, the disappearance – of regionalist parties in Belgium. This was mainly because of their policy success in regionalizing and federalizing the country (Van Haute and Pilet 2006), as well as the strategy of mainstream parties to support certain demands of the regionalist parties and, in some cases, to join electoral alliances with them. As a consequence, regionalist parties became peripheral actors in the early 2000s and there was not a single independent regionalist party in 2004 in Belgium, except in the small German-speaking community.

However, the occurrence of important political crises related to the community conflict (see for instance the crises of 2007 and 2010–2011 around the government formation) and successful populist strategies regarding new politics, law and order and migration, led to a revival of the regionalist parties. In 2014, N-VA and ProDG became the largest parties in Flanders and in the German-speaking community, respectively, while DéFI managed to enter the Brussels regional cabinet and decided to compete in the neighboring region of Wallonia for the elections of 2018 and 2019. The demands of these successful regionalist parties concern a deeper decentralization of the country and confirm the comeback of the linguistic cleavage at the forefront of the political stage.

New issues and dimensions of competition

Following Ronald Inglehart's work (1977), a new type of cleavage has been identified in several West European countries. The materialist-post-materialist dimension (also called productivism-antiproduktivism) covers new issues appearing in the party competition and is often related to the emergence of new parties, such as green and/or radical-right parties. In Belgium, this cleavage has been identified

as the cosmopolitanism-identity cleavage (Frognier 2007; de Coorebyter 2008), or the universalist-particularist cleavage (Swyngedouw 1995). The concept of cosmopolitanism refers to the equality of rights of all individuals, the pluralism of cultures and values, and the importance of ethnic diversity for society, while identity refers to the priority to the nation and to Belgians, to national culture and the rejection of migrants.

In Belgium, the 1970s have been marked by the development of issues like the environment, development aid, peace or nuclear energy, mostly relayed by (new) social and environmental movements. These movements rapidly gave birth to the green parties: the French-speaking Ecolo in 1980 and the Dutch-speaking Agalev (later Green – Groen) in 1982. Besides environmental issues, those parties also stressed the importance of new politics and gender. On the other side of this cleavage, we observe the emergence of (populist) radical-right parties advocating the importance of law and order and opposition to migration. These parties are the VB and the FN, created in 1979 and 1985 respectively, as well as ephemeral right-wing populist parties such as the PP in Wallonia. Opposition to globalization and to the European Union is also an important issue for these parties on the cosmopolitanism-identity cleavage.

More generally, established parties have resiliently responded to the emergence and electoral success of new parties. First, by creating (temporary) electoral alliances with some of these new movements (see above). Second, by copying or adopting the policy platforms and proposals of successful parties (i.e. the so-called contamination hypothesis). Following the emergence of the green and radical-right parties, the established parties have increased attention to environmental and migration issues in their manifestos. The environment has become a valence issue in Belgian politics where established parties sometimes oppose each other, as in the case of nuclear energy or mobility, without necessarily including the green parties in the debate. After the start of the so-called refugee crisis in 2014, migration emerged as a major topic of opposition between established parties (mostly based on the left-right cleavage) who managed to exclude (populist) radical-right parties from the debate. Contrary to these issues, the European Union has never transformed into a salient issue for established parties, which can be explained by the relatively unquestioned pro-European position of the Belgian state, which also hosts the major EU institutions.

2.5 Conclusions

The Belgian political landscape underwent radical changes over the last few decades, namely in terms of de-pillarization, secularization, federalization and significant reforms of political parties (internal democratization, personalization, etc.). Yet, the most relevant changes pertain to the transformation of its party system. The Belgian party system became highly fragmented and even duplicated, as parties can be identified as belonging to one of the two main language groups, while the duration of the process of coalition formation has exploded.

The economic crisis revealed its first effects on the Belgian economy in 2008, mostly in the financial and banking sector. It further led to a significant drop in GDP and export and import figures in 2009. Even if Belgium recovered rather quickly from the financial and economic crisis, the political consequences for the party systems were important, not to mention the federal cabinet that fell over the rescue of Fortis bank in 2008. It took some years to observe the real impact of the crisis, especially when combined with other external events such as the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Flanders in 2016, the migration crisis at Europe's borders and the series of political scandals in 2017.

These consequences mainly consisted of the steady decline of the three mainstream parties who had dominated Belgium since its creation. These governing parties have failed to address the disappearance of traditional loyalties, the observed disaffection among the Belgian population and the growing demands for a renewed political system. Existing non-mainstream parties benefitted from this decline, particularly the regionalist, green and radical-right parties. New political actors have also emerged – often using populist strategies – based on grassroots movements and on existing socio-political structures (like the radical-left party PTB-PvdA).

The coming years may witness a further increase in voter volatility where important vote shares leave mainstream parties and oscillate between established and new alternative political forces. Electoral outcomes may become more unpredictable, but could, at the same time, lead to a revalorization of the parliamentary institutions. Combined with the increased difficulty of forming coalition cabinets, Belgium could see a revival of its representative democracy where governments and parties are no longer the key actors – particularly regarding the legislative process – and where political decisions are made based on parliamentary dynamics.

Notes

- 1 The co-opted senators are senators designated by their (directly or indirectly elected) peers. Since 2014, out of the 60 senators, 10 of them are co-opted.
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the Belgian electoral system, see Bouhon and Reuchamps (2012).
- 3 Before these changes, voters were allowed to express only a preference for one candidate only and the 'devolutive' effect of the party vote had a full effect on the seat distribution.
- 4 A parliamentary inquiry committee in March 2009 confirmed that several contacts between decision-makers and the justice officials made during this period were inappropriate. Yet, none of the members of the executive held any blame and were vindicated.
- 5 The German-speaking parties do not constitute a party system on their own, because they are mostly sub-regional branches of the French-speaking parties.
- 6 For visual purposes, Dalton's index of polarization was multiplied by 10.
- 7 Unfortunately, no polarization data is available for the federal elections of 2014.
- 8 Based on the freemasonry, the liberal party was partly created as an anti-church movement.

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