

7 Belgium

Ups and downs of ministerial careers in a partitocratic federal state

Patrick Dumont, Stefaan Fiers and Régis Dandoy

Constitutional framework

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy. King Albert II succeeded his elder brother Baudouin (1951–1993) whose long reign followed difficult times for the royalty after the Second World War. Although the King is formally part of both the legislative and executive powers (but his acts are always since 1831 countersigned by a minister), his role in law-making and the day-to-day running of executives has at least since the Second World War been greatly reduced.¹ The King's political role in contemporary Belgium is confined to cabinet formation and termination, during which he is given more leeway to take action aimed at stimulating political representatives to find a solution acceptable to a parliamentary majority. Even in this limited – but eminently important for a society characterized by multiple divisions and policy dimensions with at times extreme cabinet instability – remit, the King has increasingly been constrained by political parties' strategies and agendas, as recently shown by the six-month-long cabinet formation of 2007. The current Constitution still stipulates that 'the King appoints and revokes his ministers', but since 1945 only the personality and longevity of King Baudouin made at times this formal power effective.

Belgian parliamentary democracy as defined in the 1831 Constitution rested on a symmetrical bicameral system which gave the House of Representatives and the Senate equal powers regarding the making and control of governments as well as in law-making. The 1993 constitutional reform, which transformed the unitary state into a complex federal system (see below) ended this symmetry. Since its implementation in 1995, federal governments are accountable only to the House of Representatives. First, after the debate over the governmental declaration read by the new PM, a confidence vote is taken through which the government must receive the support of a majority of MPs voting (blanks excluded);² whereas before 1995 this took place in both assemblies, since 1995 only the House of Representatives is asked to grant or not its confidence.³ Secondly, only members of the House can conduct interpellations that may lead to a vote on a no confidence motion targeted at an individual minister. Thirdly, only the House votes on motions of confidence and no confidence targeted at the government as a whole. Two innovations aimed at assuring greater stability to Belgian executives were introduced to prevent a few rebels from majority parties' ranks from 'accidentally' bringing

down a government on significant bills by voting against it. First, the adoption of a motion of no confidence by an absolute majority of Representatives, proposing at the same time the appointment of a new Prime Minister to the King, obliges the incumbent government to resign (constructive motion of no confidence). Secondly, when an absolute majority of the House rejects a motion of confidence introduced by the government and within three days passes a motion proposing a new PM, the government has to resign. Failing to find an alternative Prime Minister, Representatives may allow the incumbent government to continue or ask the monarch to dissolve Parliament and call for new elections. Through this constitutional reform the Senate has lost other important competencies as it is not involved in the approval or control of the budget and the House has the final say on most legislation.

The major 1993 constitutional reform marked the passage from a unitary state to a fully fledged federal system based on three linguistic Communities (Flemish, French-speaking, and German-speaking) and three Regions (Flanders, Brussels-capital and Wallonia). From 1970 onwards institutional changes had gradually led to the creation of an autonomous political class at the sub-national level (Fiers 2001). In 1971 the so-called Cultural Councils, composed of members of the House of Representatives and directly elected senators, categorised by their membership of one of the two main language Communities, were created. Contrary to the latter, for which MPs have constantly been indirectly elected, (coming either from the national parliament or since 1995 from the regional ones), the German-speaking Community directly elected its own councillors – with only an advisory consultative role and no legislative power until 1980 – from 1974 onwards. These Councils enjoyed only limited competencies on cultural affairs, language use and certain aspects of education. The installation of the Regions took ten more years, with a transitional phase starting in 1974 with consultative Regional Councils composed of senators of the three respective regions but also regional ministerial committees within the central (national) government. Starting in December 1981 autonomous regional and community governments were created following the second important constitutional reform. Since 1995 all regional parliaments are made up of directly elected MPs (for a five-year fixed term as opposed to federal MPs with four-year terms); the ‘dual mandate’ therefore no longer exists. By now there is therefore an autonomous sub-national political class passing legislation – and there is no hierarchy of norms between federal laws and regional or community decrees – in policy fields delimited in the Constitution (or in specific bills voted on by a qualified majority, see below)⁴ which altogether represent about one-third of overall public spending. Executives headed by Minister-Presidents are elected by their respective parliament, and have their own civil service. This process has also led to more opportunities for professional politicians, as in two decades (1980–99) the aggregate number of executive positions at the federal and regional level increased by half (from 36 to 54). Being awarded a ministerial post at the federal level may not be the highest reward for Belgian politicians anymore, as for many of them the federal level is no longer the main locus of power.

When cultural autonomy was granted to Communities to satisfy Flemish demands,⁵ protections for the French-speaking minority were constitutionally

introduced in 1970. Three measures were taken, necessitating defining linguistic groups in the House and the Senate. First, bills regarding the borders, competencies and statutes of the Communities and the Regions have to be voted on by a two-thirds majority of the valid votes cast, and a majority of valid votes of each linguistic group in each House (with a majority of members of each linguistic group present). Secondly, an 'alarm bell' procedure is set up to delay or block legislation threatening the interests of a linguistic community. In both Chambers, if three-quarters of the members of a linguistic group introduce such a motion after the committee report on a bill and before the final plenary vote, the legislative procedure is suspended and the issue dealt with by the Council of Ministers within thirty days. Thirdly, linguistic parity is imposed in the Council of Ministers with the Prime Minister possibly excepted from the counting.⁶ This was the first time, 140 years after Belgium's independence, that the position of Prime Minister was enshrined in the Constitution, together with the first reference to the main collective decision-making body, the Council of Ministers, which does not include junior ministers.

From 1995 ministers could not hold parliamentary seats though they may hold a 'sleeping mandate' (an MP promoted to the government may take her parliamentary seat back when her ministerial time is over). A clearer distinction between the executive and its controller, here the House of Representatives, is therefore introduced, following the principle of the separation of powers and intended at changing the image of an unaccountable political clique. Also the number of ministers is set at a maximum of 15,⁷ reflecting in part the loss of policy competencies to Regions and Communities but also ending the inflation in size of the cabinet according to the number of coalition parties (Frognier 1993; Mershon 2001).⁸

Since a 2002 constitutional amendment the Council of Ministers must include members of both sexes. There is no quota specified for Secretaries of State,⁹ nor for the members of the so-called *Kerncabinet*, an inner cabinet committee that meets regularly and has become the main locus of power at the federal level. It resolves major conflicts between the coalition parties but also takes all important decisions formally ratified by the full Council. The *Kerncabinet* is made up of the PM and the Vice-PMs who, as leaders of their party delegations in government, act as guardians of the coalition agreement and monitor the actions of ministers of the other parties.¹⁰

The process of cabinet formation is not spelled out in the Constitution, but strong customary practice has developed a ritual coming in successive phases. It starts with the King's consultations, usually on the day after elections, and the presentation of the government's resignation by the PM. The King usually accepts it and charges the incumbent government with the implementation of 'current' affairs. He then consults the Chairs of the two Chambers, the presidents of all democratic parliamentary parties and socio-economic corporatist organizations. Since 1831 the King then appoints a *formateur*, generally the leader of the largest party, with the mission of forming a cabinet. Since 1935 the King has sometimes appointed an *informateur* first, when the political situation is exceptionally difficult and a first round of talks between parties is needed to inform the King of the possible coalition

formulas.¹¹ When a *formateur* likely to be successful is finally found, party delegations of a specific coalition formula convene to negotiate and draft a usually quite comprehensive coalition policy programme, which since the 1960s is rendered public when signed by all partners and is for the life of the cabinet considered as the governmental bible (De Winter *et al.* 2003). If the negotiations collapse, the process starts again with the King's consultations and the appointment of an *informateur* or a new *formateur*. When eventually signed by the leaders of the partner parties, the governmental agreement is then presented to each of the coalition parties' congresses to be voted on by these sovereign party bodies, so that not only do party leaders commit to the negotiated deal but all intra-party components of each partner are bound by the contract. Portfolio distribution is the final stage in the formation process. Party leaders with the help of the *formateur* – the Prime Minister to be¹² – first distribute the portfolios amongst themselves, taking into account the constitutional constraints described earlier and within these constraints adopting a pure proportional key to allocate executive seats between parties, then the names of ministers are proposed to the King. Once the PM and ministers have been sworn in by the King, there is the customary parliamentary investiture won by all governments except one since 1945. On average it took 33 days to form the 37 governments of the the postwar period (from 1946 to 2003), but formation duration rises if we consider only post-electoral formations (52 days) or the post-1968 period where the number of parties required for a majority rose (the average number of coalition parties rose from 1.8 before 1968 to 4.4 after) and institutional concerns became more relevant (43 days and no fewer than 66 days for post-electoral governments). The 2007 government formation crisis set a new record of 193 days to form a tentative cabinet designed for only three months.¹³

Choosing ministers

The selection process

The influence of the Head of State in government formation has clearly decreased since 1831. Whereas King Leopold I drafted a governmental pact with the person he appointed *formateur* and sometimes suggested individuals as ministers and picked his Minister of War, his successors never had the same impact. Since the end of the nineteenth century ministers are not considered as mere servants of the King but as leaders of the parliamentary majority. During his long post-war reign Baudouin discreetly and sporadically influenced personnel selection.¹⁴ The atypical 2007 government formation process put royal preferences – supposed to be kept secret – in the limelight, causing press debate about the role of the monarch. Ironically, Albert II had previously been perceived as less interventionist than his predecessor.¹⁵

Since the Second World War Belgium has become a 'partitocracy' (Dewachter and De Winter 1981; De Winter *et al.* 1996; De Winter and Dumont 2006): a form of party government characterized by the overwhelming role and omnipresence of disciplined political parties. From the late 1950s onwards party executives have

increasingly dominated parliamentary groups and influenced cabinet decision-making, sometimes coming to decisions (political pacts) drafted outside of cabinet and parliament and amendable by neither of them. The detailed coalition agreements have not been voted down by any party congress in the postwar era (for potential reasons see De Winter and Dumont 2006: 960). Rather than being policy dictators (Laver and Shepsle 1996), cabinet ministers are reduced to pure party agents (De Winter and Dumont 2003; 2006) as they are supposed to follow scrupulously the coalition agreement and keep the party line for issues falling outside this document. They also report almost constantly to their party executive and more specifically to their party president, who often does not enter government, preferring to monitor (and, since the arrival of autonomous regional governments, increasingly co-ordinate) the activity of his ministers.

In practice, after the party congresses have voted on participation, the distribution of portfolios amongst coalition partners (the *formateur* and the party presidents) is decided first. From 1980 a weighting rule appears to have developed, aimed at compensating for the constitutionally required parity of ministers in the Council by awarding points to specific positions and enlarging the number of positions bargained over. The PM counts for three points, ministers and chairs of the two federal Chambers (as well as the position of European Commissioner) for two, and junior ministers only one. Applying the D'Hondt method to allocate points in proportion to the parliamentary seat contribution of each coalition partner, each party knows rather precisely the amount of office pay-offs it can claim. Each party leader is then invited to state her first portfolio preference, starting with the largest party (expected to claim the PM usually going to the *formateur*) and then every other partner in rank order of parliamentary strength. After this first round a second starts with the largest party, until all points have been allocated. After a first evaluation of the result, multilateral or bilateral talks may ensue until all partners are satisfied. More positions may enter the game (increasing the number of junior ministers or taking sub-national positions into account) or portfolio competencies alter. The *formateur* is the co-ordinator of this complex allocation process between parties. Although also responsible for presenting a list of ministers to the King, he does not have much leeway regarding names proposed by other coalition partners.¹⁶ Even with regard to his own party, the choices of the party president (if he is not the *formateur*) may prevail.

Size of government and political completion

Since the war most Belgian governments have been coalitions with as many as 36 members (the Leburton five-party coalition of 1973 and the Martens III six-party coalition of 1980). Since the Second World War 326 individuals have been ministers or junior ministers, filling a total of 965 ministerial appointments of which 882 were made at the start of a new government (thus 83 substitutions or new positions made during the course of governments).¹⁷ Almost half have been filled by politicians from the Christian Democratic parties, one third by Socialists, less than one-fifth from the Liberals. The dominance by the Christian Democrats is due to their electoral strength and position at the centre of the socio-economic

Table 7.1 Distribution of ministerial positions by party in Belgium (days) (percentages given in parenthesis), 1946–2007

	<i>All positions (%)</i>		<i>At start of the government (%)</i>		<i>Individuals (%)</i>		<i>Average duration per individual</i>
Christian Democrats	448	(46.4)	425	(48.2)	116	(35.3)	5.1
Socialists	296	(30.7)	263	(29.8)	104	(31.6)	4.0
Liberals	165	(17.1)	144	(16.3)	75	(22.8)	3.5
Flemish nationalists	11	(1.1)	10	(1.1)	8	(2.4)	2.3
French nationalists	14	(1.5)	12	(1.4)	8	(2.4)	2.2
Greens	5	(0.5)	4	(0.5)	5	(1.5)	3.1
Communists	8	(0.8)	8	(0.9)	4	(1.2)	1.4
Technicians	18	(1.9)	16	(1.8)	9	(2.7)	1.4
Total	965		882		329		

Note: 326 individuals have become minister or junior but three have served in cabinet for two different parties. They have been counted twice in this table, and therefore the number of individuals on party basis is 329 instead of 326.

divide permitting greater presence in power (in 31 governments, compared to 25 for Socialists and 17 for Liberals) and also dominance in cabinet (reflected usually in the PM but also in the number of ministerial positions). Christian Democratic ministers also stay longer in office whilst Liberals resign more frequently than ministers from the other two main party groups.

The difference materializes also in terms of cabinet rank: 70 per cent of the Socialist and Christian Democratic cabinet positions are ministers, 19 per cent junior ministers and 11 per cent PM and Vice-PM. Positions for the Liberals are respectively 64 per cent, 27 per cent and 8 per cent. Earlier governments did not have as many Vice-PMs, and Liberals remained out of office from 1987 to 1999. With the exception of technicians and Communists (all at minister rank) who were recruited early in the period, smaller parties have a smaller share of ministers (25–63 per cent), and a larger proportion of juniors (33–50 per cent). Only twice (Flemish Nationalists and Greens) has a Vice-PM not come from one of the three traditional parties.

The profile of Belgian ministers

Though party presidents have discretion over choice of ministers,¹⁸ they face intra-party constraints (Fiers 1998). Most visibly these come from internal factions, such as the *standen* (estates) in the Flemish Christian Democratic party, which has been in power from 1947 to 1954 and from 1958 to 1999. There, the leaders of the three main factions (trades unions, farmers' league and middle-class associations) hand in their list of ministrables in preference order so that the party president is charged with balancing the internal forces amongst factions and 'non-aligned' heavyweights. The balance has to reflect the overall strength of factions but sometimes leaders try to over-represent some factions to compensate choices made

in coalition partners. This helps appease potential internal turmoil and prevent the cabinet from being too leftist or rightist.¹⁹ Party presidents also have to balance experience (outgoing ministers, heavyweights) and new faces. The geographic representation of provinces, of powerful constituencies and the proportion of female ministers are also considered by party presidents, who also have face trade-offs in terms of expertise and more general profiles. Some form of balance between Representatives and Senators has generally been sought, although nowadays with new pools of ministrables at the sub-national level less attention is paid to this.

Four broad aspects of the profile of ministers will be empirically assessed. First, 55 per cent of the ministers in the 16 governments between 1946 and 1970 were French-speaking. The first postwar cabinet where Flemish ministers outnumbered French-speaking ones, thereby reflecting the demographic reality of the country, was led by Gaston Eyskens in 1958; cabinets formed during the 1960s were roughly based on linguistic parity. From 1970 to 2007 however, because most PMs were Flemish (and in the event of a French-speaking minister the latter was excluded from the computation of the parity in the Council), 53 per cent of the senior ministers appointed were Flemish.²⁰ The nomination of junior ministers has also been used to translate the dominance of Flemish population into a larger number of governmental positions: from the setting up of the parity rule in 1970, the proportion of Flemish junior ministers is 59 per cent, thereby clearly indicating the effectiveness of the compensation mechanism provided by the unconstrained nomination of junior ministers.²¹ Note that on several occasions the parity rule has led to ‘forced’ appointments or movements. For example in 1974, when the Walloon regionalists enlarged the Tindemans government, the nomination of a French-speaking newcomer in the Council of Ministers implied the appointment of a new Flemish minister; in 1977, when the French-speaking nationalists were revoked, two politicians of the remaining French-speaking partners had to be promoted minister.

Secondly, Belgian politics has always suffered from poor female representation. Women first stood for election in 1921, and have been heavily under-represented in parliament (Fiers and Gubin 2003). This striking under-representation particularly holds true for the executive positions. In the postwar period 30 women (9 per cent of all) have served as minister or junior minister. The first female minister was selected in 1965, when Marguerite De Riemacker-Legot (CVP) became minister of Family and Housing. In the first 40 years after the Second World War, only three women were appointed as full minister (Das 1987), the others being awarded only junior positions. Only three women have been made Vice-PM, and Laurette Onkelinx (PS) was the first in 2003 to keep this position for more than one term. Out of 85 appointments amongst these 30 individuals, 59 portfolios belonged to the ‘socio-cultural’ category (BEIS-categorization, see Berkmann, n.d.)²² whilst only 11 were in Infrastructure and 12 in Economy²³ and merely three in basic functions of the State (Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice and Defence). Yet we find a clear progress in the presence of female politicians in the cabinet. Following the 2002 obligation of appointing at least one woman in government, no fewer than one-third of the ministers appointed during Verhofstadt II (2003–7) were women.

The average age of cabinet members at their first appointment is 47.9 years, with an average parliamentary experience of exactly seven years; socialist parties traditionally select younger politicians (46.4 years on average) than Liberals (48.4) and Christian Democrats (48.5).²⁴ With the exception of the Communists (whose limited participation in government dates from shortly after the Second World War), smaller parties typically choose experienced heavyweights to enter the cabinet (for instance the average Flemish nationalist minister was first appointed at over 49, after 8.7 years spent in parliament). When we take into account every cabinet member at the start of a government, as in Table 7.2, the average age rises to 50.5 years. However, there is considerable variation in average age according to ministerial position, PMs typically being older and more experienced.

Over the years, the average age of members of cabinet remained stable until the 1990s (Figure 7.1) when the average age reduced, leading to a remarkably young Verhofstadt II cabinet in 2003, with an average age of 42.5 years. The two peaks of 'old' cabinets with numerous heavyweights in the 1950s can be related to the particular circumstances in which they were installed, with the King's crisis in 1949–50 and the first anti-Christian Democrats coalition in 1954. Other 'experienced' cabinets are mere temporary continuations of previous governments after one party left the coalition (in the 1980s).

Parliamentary experience remains as one of the necessary prerequisites to be selected for a governmental position (Blondel 1988; De Winter *et al.* 1996). After 1946, 81 per cent of ministers were federal MP at the time of their first appointment and overall 92 per cent of ministerial positions at the start of the cabinets were attributed to individuals with a federal parliamentary seat. Interestingly, throughout the period, ministers appointed during the lifetime of a government (in the context of a large reshuffle or to replace a resigning minister) on the other hand display a distinct profile, as no fewer than one-third of them did not come from the federal parliament. Party presidents often choose to launch the career of less experienced individuals as these new ministers are slightly younger and have less executive experience (one year as opposed to three for ministers chosen at the start of a government). We also notice a clear evolution in time:²⁵ overall, no fewer than 35 per cent of ministers and junior ministers selected since the beginning of the 1990s were not federal MPs at time of first appointment whilst at start of government the proportion of extra-federal parliamentarians has tripled with regard to the 1970–85 period. These changes include appointing both from regional assemblies

Table 7.2 Average age and experience per ministerial position in Belgium, 1946–2007

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Average age</i>	<i>Average parliamentary experience</i>	<i>Average ministerial experience</i>
Overall totals	882	50.5	10.6	2.7
Prime Minister	37	52.1	15.1	5.5
Vice-Prime Minister	58	48.2	13.0	4.1
Minister	611	50.7	10.5	2.7
Junior minister	176	50.3	9.0	1.6

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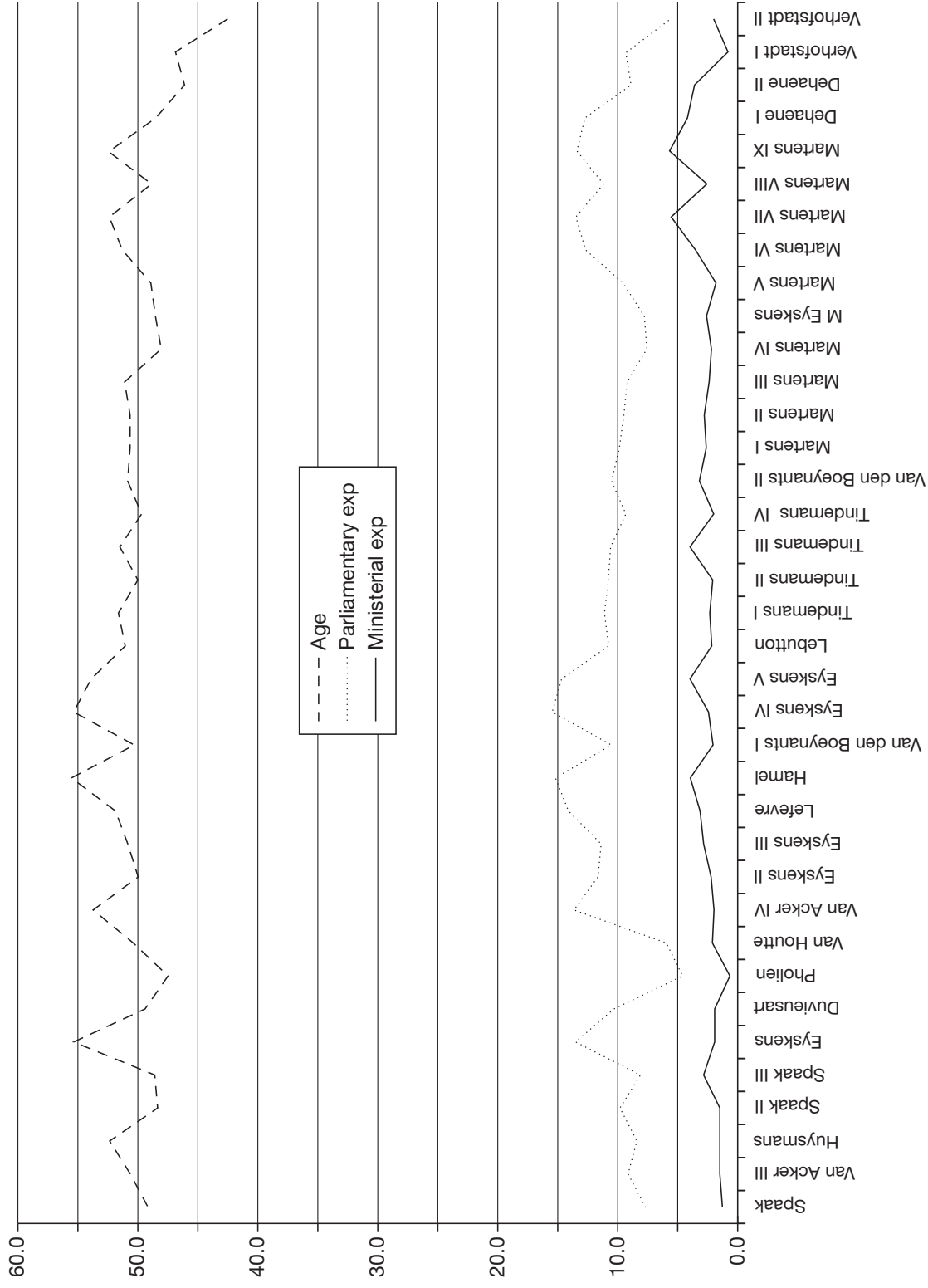


Figure 7.1 Average age and political experience at the start of each cabinet in Belgium, 1946–2007

(17 per cent of first appointments since 1999) and from outside (28 per cent in the same period, a rate more typical of the 1940s and 1950s).

In the eyes of their party president, MPs' qualities may lie in their knowledge of parliamentary routines, their capacities at handling multiple policy fields but also, in the context of coalition governments, their socialization amongst MPs of other parties. In the aftermath of the Second World War the appointment of extra-parliamentary specialists has been valued, for instance for the Ministries of Defence and Economic Recovery. With complex issues constrained by the European Union, party presidents are nowadays also tempted to recruit outside the parliamentary pool. Such ministers might be easier to control as they owe more to the party president in particular (Poguntke and Webb 2005) though their informational advantage might work in the opposite direction. Aside from specialists, party presidents may want to recruit outside MP ranks to impose the figure of a strong, independent-minded leadership to their party troops. This may also be a risky move, especially after an electoral defeat, triggering rebellion amongst party MPs, as experienced by the French-speaking Socialist party president in 2008.

Notwithstanding the informal rule that ministers are recruited from both the Senate and the House, the latter dominates (see Figure 7.2). On six occasions more than seven out of ten ministers stemmed from the House of Representatives whereas the highest share of senators in a cabinet (Martens III) was a moderate 44 per cent. This situation did not change dramatically after the institutional changes of 1995, which also enlarged the Senate electoral districts, making elections for this assembly a semi-direct election for the position of PM as each party list is pulled by its electoral heavyweight.

The level of experience required depends on the job. There is a clear hierarchy between the various ministerial departments, with Foreign Affairs, Justice, Defence and Social Affairs/Public Health being typically filled by professional politicians with long years of parliamentary and ministerial experience. Other departments (Culture, Commerce, Colonies, Regional Affairs, Co-operation and Development) serve as training grounds for relatively young and less experienced politicians or – as in the case of Colonies – are awarded to technicians without any parliamentary experience. Table 7.3 also includes 'regional affairs', which consisted of a large number of positions within the federal government in the 1970s but with only sub-national competencies. These portfolios typically went to less experienced ministers, some of whom remained in office once the regional governments became fully autonomous (from 1981 onwards). Rather than creating linear careers from regions to the national level, federal Belgium has triggered quite unpredictable courses, as an increasing number of individuals have moved back and forth between levels of government making ministerial lives full of ups and downs.

Finally, for an archetypical partitocracy, it is not surprising that, since the late 1970s, a majority of first appointees have been members of their party executive. A change of coalition partner typically provokes a rush of members of the party executive to the government, as the heavyweights of the junior party, who sometimes were ministers before their party went to opposition, enter cabinet (Martens V and Martens VIII are cases in point). In 1981 party presidents jointly

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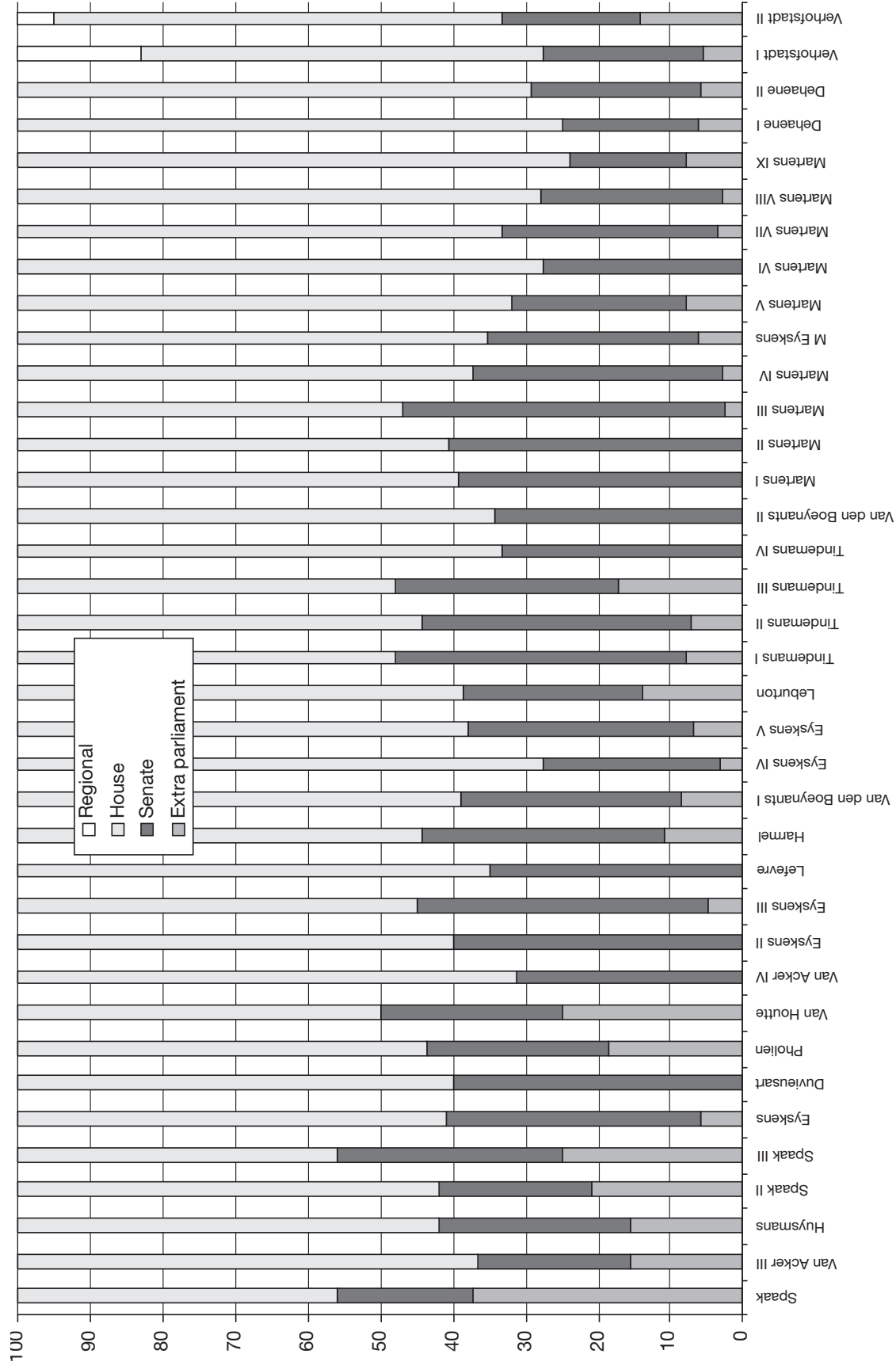


Figure 7.2 Parliamentary origin of ministers in Belgium, 1946–2007 1946–2007

Table 7.3 Average age and political experience of ministers in Belgium according to ministerial departments, 1946–2007

<i>Department</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Average age</i>	<i>Average parliamentary experience</i>	<i>Average ministerial experience</i>
Foreign affairs	37	53.9	17.2	7.3
Agriculture and fishing	31	57.1	14.8	3.5
Post telecom	14	49.3	13.9	2.6
Justice	37	52.2	13.2	3.5
Defence	38	51.9	12.3	3.6
Social/health/family	57	51.4	11.9	3.4
Public works	33	49.3	11.7	2.5
Interior	37	50.5	11.5	2.1
Education	46	50.3	11.1	1.7
Labour/employment	38	49.9	10.9	3.1
Economy	40	46.2	10.0	2.6
Civil service	15	49.2	9.9	1.7
Budget	20	46.5	9.5	2.5
Transport/marine	33	49.5	8.8	3.3
Finance/treasury	38	50.0	8.4	3.7
Foreign trade	25	51.0	8.2	2.3
Construction/housing	12	44.7	8.1	1.0
International aid	11	48.0	7.8	1.7
Regional affairs	30	48.4	7.4	1.8
Colonies & overseas	11	49.3	6.9	1.1
Commerce	15	49.8	6.8	0.4
Culture	15	49.2	6.6	1.8

Note: This table does not apply to junior ministers. We have listed only a selection of ministerial departments, and taken into account only the ministers at the start of the government.

decided to become cabinet ministers in order to maximize cabinet durability of Martens V after a period of instability (eight governments between 1977 and 1981). The unprecedented Liberal-Socialist-Green coalition of Verhofstadt I (1999–2003) was also almost exclusively composed of party executive members. Dejaeghere (2007) points out that the Socialists (especially the Flemish-speaking Socialists) heavily relied on their party executive as a pool of ministrables, though our own data show that over the years this phenomenon has become more widespread. By splitting traditional unitary parties, the number of party executive members has increased, opening their doors to lower-level party politicians, whilst the number of cabinet positions available for each party has been reduced by the greater number of coalition partners and the restriction of ministerial positions. Together with the need for selecting heavyweights able to defend party positions and assure cabinet stability, and notwithstanding the recent temptation to recruit outside the traditional parliamentary pools, these elements account for the fact that being member of the party executive has increasingly become an important prerequisite for selection.

Ministerial turnover

According to Höjer (1969: 315), interwar politics in Belgium has been characterized by governmental instability compensated by the fact that a high proportion of individual ministers remained in office over long periods, in part because there was no complete alternation in party composition of coalitions. Between 1946 and 2007, despite an average cabinet duration of 567 days,²⁶ complete ‘make-overs’, when no single minister of the preceding government remains in office, happened twice,²⁷ whilst three governments were composed of exactly the same people as at the start of the previous government, though all of these were interim governments.

In general, owing to the permanence of the Christian Democrats over 45 consecutive years and for the last 20 years the presence of the Socialists in power, more than half of the members of any new government (on average 56 per cent) had already been part of the ministerial team starting the preceding government. In only 16 out of 37 governments was this not the case. For the same reason, the average ministerial duration varies between parties, the overall cabinet experience of Christian Democratic politicians being 5.1 years, 4 for Socialists and 3.5 for Liberals. Altogether, the average duration of an individual in cabinet is 4.1 years. Compared to the data compiled in previous studies (Philippart 1962; CRISP 1972; Dewachter 1982; Blondel 1988; Frogner 1988; 1997), this average and sometimes discontinuous duration in government is slightly on the rise.

Given the weak alternation of parties in power and the often long-standing colonization of specific portfolios by some of them (for instance Agriculture and Health for the Christian Democrats who count on powerful Catholic organisations in these fields (De Winter and Dumont 2003)), the heavy rotation of ministerial posts amongst a core group of non-specialized ministers may seem puzzling, but this does not appear to have changed much either, though some ministers (for instance Finance) have kept their portfolio for more than two consecutive governments. Also, regardless of the specific portfolio, only 36 per cent of Belgian ministers are appointed only once in the federal government. Notwithstanding the progress made regarding gender balance, it is striking that female ministers have had a harder time building long careers in the government, as more than half of them do not return after first appointment.

Finally, we observe a negative correlation between the number of government positions and cabinet duration ($r = -0.29$ when computed with all positions and $r = -0.37$ with only senior ministers), suggesting that the larger the cabinet, the shorter its survival. These figures also reflect the fact that from 1995 to 2007 all cabinets have completed their four-year term in office (regardless of the number of junior ministers appointed), whilst the period of high instability of the 1970s corresponds to the fragmentation of the party system and the corresponding inflation of the number of offices.

Resigning

In Table 7.4 we distinguish seven different motives explaining the 128 individual resignations out of 882 appointments at start of government.²⁸ Death whilst in office only imposes minimal changes inside the cabinet (usually, only the deceased

Table 7.4 Reasons for resignation in Belgium, 1946–2007

<i>Reason for resignation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Specific reason</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Death or health reasons	9	7			
Incompatibility with other mandates	56	43.8	Local mandate	9	7.0
			Regional mandate	24	18.8
			International mandate	11	8.6
			Party executive mandate	8	6.3
			Others	4	3.1
Individual responsibility	19	14.8			
Cabinet disagreement	16	12.5	Protest resignation	10	7.8
			Revocation	6	4.7
Cabinet rebalancing	8	6.3			
Adaptation of the government	20	15.6			

minister is replaced). Throughout the period five members died in office, while ill-health forced another four to resign. Invoking health may conceal the real motives of a resignation as they might be an escape route for the minister and colleagues over some scandal.²⁹ Death and ill-health account for 7 per cent of all ministerial resignations.

The category ‘mandate incompatibility’ is by far the largest for several reasons (see also Dumont *et al.* 2001). First, Belgium is now a federal country, with fully fledged regional levels of governments. Secondly, the local level is considered as highly valuable by both politicians and citizens. Thirdly, in a small country that was amongst the founding fathers of several international organizations, national politicians have had a disproportional chance of being recruited for important international posts. Finally, in a partitocracy, giving up a ministerial seat in order to become party president is widely considered as a promotion in one’s career, especially in parties that rely on a strong party structure (eight cases, all Socialist and Christian Democratic ministers). Whilst there is no legal incompatibility, the key party role is not normally held by ministers. Ministerial resignations taking place just after local elections or to become province governor (often seen as a reward at the end of a political career) are slightly less frequent than those in order to occupy a position at the international or supra-national level.

But the different state reforms have paved the way for a new type of transfer: the departure of a federal minister towards federated entities. In July 2004 five ministers left their federal position to occupy executive mandates at the regional and community level. The overall amount of resignations due to incompatibility of the function between a federal ministerial mandate and another political mandate reaches more than two-fifths of the total. Within this category, transfers to a regional government account to almost 20 per cent of all resignations. Since late 1981, when regional governments became fully autonomous, 24 resignations occurred in order to occupy a position at the regional level, representing almost 38 per cent of the total between 1981 and 2007. Not all these can be seen as demotions, even though some may take it as an acceptable exit after difficult times at the federal level or for the party president to hide internal conflicts or sanctions.

In recent times, the formation of a government at any level had important repercussions on the composition of the cabinet of other levels. As parties are usually represented at both levels, the game of ministerial allocation, with its gender, geographical, experience and expertise constraints, is played with the whole number of ministerial positions that one party is allowed to fill. Hence, a resignation in one cabinet may imply several resignations in others in order to balance the representation of the party.

With the third reason for individual resignation we come to ministerial accountability. Although parliamentary control over individual ministers (interpellations and parliamentary investigation committees) have increased over the past two decades (De Winter and Dumont 2006; Nandrin 2003), formal votes or recommendations taking place in parliament have not led to ministerial resignations since the late 1940s. Parties, media and public opinion seem to have considerable influence in the 19 (14.8 per cent) resignations in the postwar period. Debate around ministers' political responsibility reappeared with the traumatic affairs – Dutroux, Adamu or dioxine – that emerged in the 1990s, leaving the country in a deep crisis (confidence in political institutions reached the lowest rates ever recorded in Eurobarometers). These affairs led to major policy changes like the police and justice reforms and impacted on the individual careers of some ministers. In these times of low trust in politicians, mistakes committed by a minister's services or subordinates, once public, make it difficult for the implicated minister to remain. It is worth underlining that the choice to resign or not still ultimately constitutes a personal choice of the minister, but for the 1990s cases the role of the PM appeared predominant. Although Prime Minister Dehaene was at the same time the undisputable leader of his party and therefore enjoyed considerable leeway with regard to his party's ministerial delegation, he was also the driving force behind three resignations of ministers who did not belong to his party by convincing his partners that the stability of the government and of the country was at stake.

Collective decisions are binding, ministers must 'submit or resign'. If unhappy with a decision of a fellow colleague or the Council of Ministers, a minister can either give in, protest through resignation or be forced to resign (revocations presented by the PM to the Head of State). Altogether 12.5 per cent of resignations were due to breaches of cabinet solidarity, with ten protest resignations and six revocations, the latter corresponding to the ousting of a small coalition party by the PM, in accordance with remaining partners, through the forced exit of all its ministers.

Owing to the coalitional nature and the constraints over the composition of Belgian cabinets, individual ministerial resignations often impose a rebalancing of the cabinet. The changes, mainly due to the application of the parity rule, that might trigger promotions of junior ministers to full minister account for 6.4 per cent of all individual resignations, whilst adaptations of the structure of the government to a changing environment (international event, institutional reform) represent another 15.6 per cent.

Between 1946 and 1972, we count only 29 resignations, that is more or less one resignation per year, before a short period of high instability with a five times

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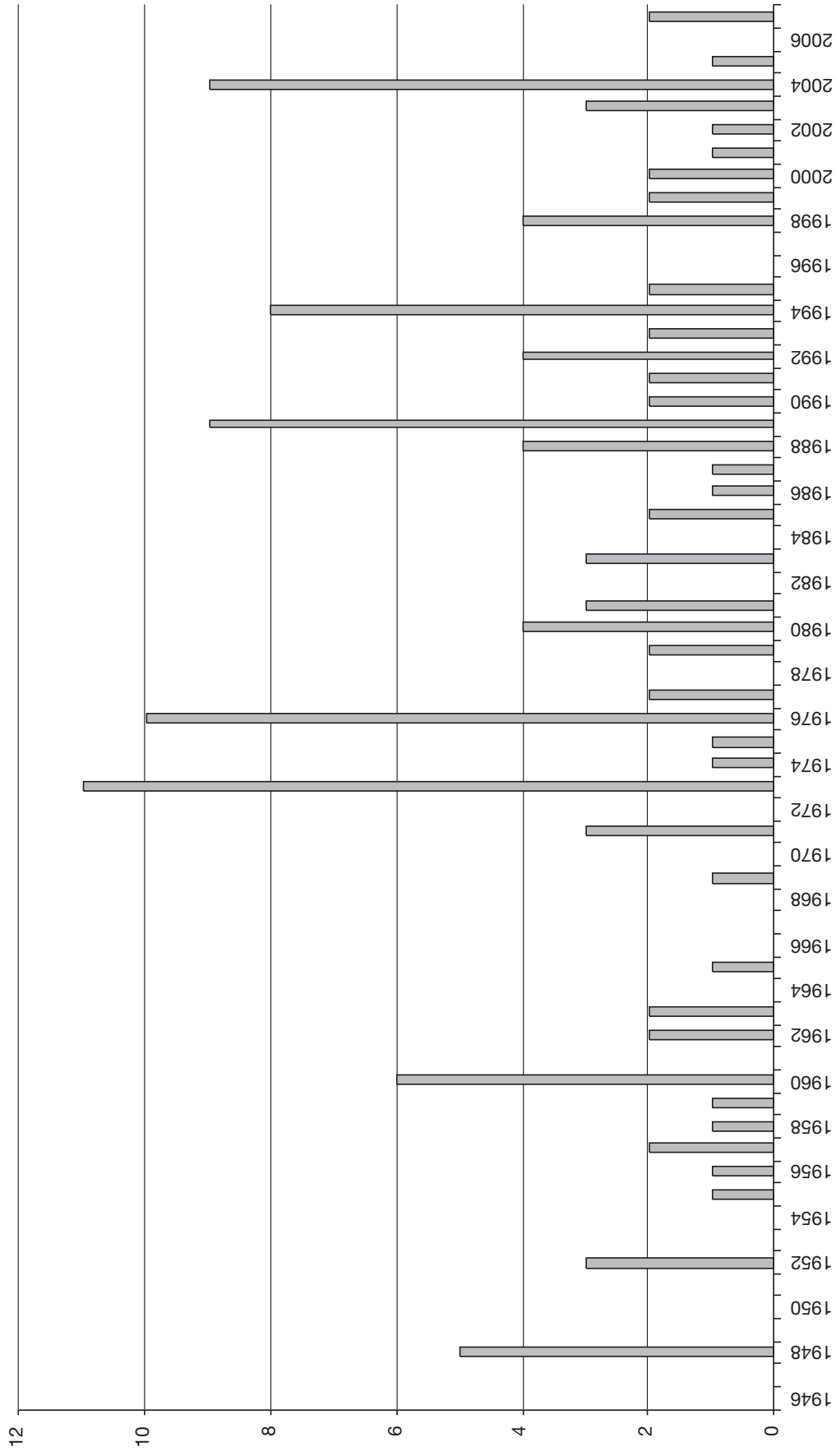


Figure 7.3 Number of resignations in Belgium, 1946–2007

greater annual rate (1973 and 1977), followed again by a more stable decade. Between 1988 and 2007, we however notice again an important increase in the number of ministerial resignations with an average rate of three resignations a year, mainly triggered by moves to the regional level and the revived question of the individual responsibility of ministers. Eighteen governments did not lead to any ministerial resignation, the 128 cases being therefore spread on the remaining 19 governments for an average of 3.5 resignations per government. Those where resignations were most frequent were coalition governments composed of five different parties,³⁰ whilst the few single-party cabinets in Belgium had the lowest number of resignations.

Contrary to what could be expected from the potential role of the Prime Minister, by far the smallest proportion of resignations during the course of a government is recorded amongst the Christian Democrats (both the Socialists and the Liberals had more than twice their rate). The PM's party may have protected its ministers in order to avoid threatening governmental stability not the least because of the factional character of the long-time party of the chief executive (the CVP): factions pressurize on both the PM and the party executive to keep their men in place, and this internal structure adds to the complexity of reshuffling the party team. Conversely, coalition partners may also refrain from calling for the resignation of ministers of the PM party for this same reason, as an internal crisis in the CVP might bring the cabinet down. In other traditional but junior parties, such as the Flemish Socialist Party, even heavyweights have had to resign at some point (and come back again later). As expected, smaller, single-issue and firmly policy-oriented parties reach the highest average of resignations per governmental participation and per number of positions held. In terms of portfolio, law and order positions appear to be less sensitive than those pertaining to the economy, international relations or the welfare state.

Conclusions

Over the postwar period, Belgium has arguably evolved into the most complex cabinet formation system, owing to the combined effects of the 'community/linguistic' divide on party system fragmentation and on the structure of the state. Strong disciplined parties have created an elaborate set of delegation control mechanisms over governmental action (De Winter *et al.* 2003; 2006; De Winter and Dumont 2006). Government formation is therefore characterized by long negotiations and detailed coalition agreements. The potential for governmental downfall in case of breaches of subtle coalition equilibriums reached at cabinet formation amongst up to six parties has for long accounted for the limited number of individual resignations. An attack on an individual party minister was often interpreted as an attack on her party as a whole, and led therefore to the resignation of all party ministers, triggering the downfall of the government. The factional character of the long-time dominant Christian Democratic party, and the fact that often PMs were outranked by their party presidents in the battle for true leadership over the party, has led to the CVP having a lower turnover rate.

Institutional constraints have had both a direct and an indirect impact on the selection and de-selection of ministers. Aside from specific rules such as the linguistic parity of ministerial personnel in the Council, the federalization of the country has also created a larger opportunity structure so that becoming minister at the federal policy level is not always seen as the ultimate prize of a political career actor. The room for strategic action of party presidents has been further enlarged as a result of their role in co-ordinating government action at the different levels. Depending on the internal state of the party and its electoral prospects, ministerial personnel may be moved from one level to another irrespective of their competencies or quality. However, the last two decades of governmental stability, probably sustained by the introduction of a constructive vote of confidence since 1995, have corresponded with a tremendous increase in individual resignations. The erratic character of current ministerial careers is not entirely due to the federalization of the country and/or party presidents' strategies but can be attributed also in some cases to the influence of the PM when questions over the individual responsibility of ministers threatened the stability of his government. The action of recent Prime Ministers who were undisputed leaders of their own party both at the time of their accession to the government and during their mandate however does not compensate for the overall image of the almost non-existent power of chief executives regarding ministerial appointment and de-selection in a partitocratic federal state.

Notes

- 1 An exception occurred in 1990, when moral preferences led King Baudouin to refuse to sign the bill liberalizing abortion. The government found a constitutional 'trick' by declaring (with his consent) Baudouin temporarily unable to exercise his powers for a few days to allow the Council of Ministers to sanction and promulgate the law.
- 2 This vote takes place after the formal appointment of a new government by the King and therefore is more a test of viability than a genuine parliamentary investiture prescribed by the Constitution, conditioning the coming to power of the new executive team. However, this vote on a confidence motion presented by the new PM, which is enshrined in the standing orders of the House, is customarily considered as an investiture vote as the newly appointed government is not supposed to govern without this explicit parliamentary assent. It has constrained the formation of all Belgian governments since 1919 when the combined effects of proportional representation (1899) and universal suffrage (for males aged over 20) made coalition cabinets the rule.
- 3 In March 1946 the cabinet of Prime Minister Spaak, made up of Socialist and non-partisan (technicians) ministers, which theoretically relied on only about one-third of all Belgian MPs, failed to gain parliamentary support only for one vote (there was a draw between supporters and opponents); a vote in the Senate was therefore unnecessary and Spaak presented the resignation of his government to the King. This need for majority support in both assemblies also constrained the formation of other cabinets: for instance in 1949 and 1958 the Christian Democrats had to form a coalition (and therefore enlarge their single-party transitory cabinet which was in minority in the House) despite relying on a majority in the Senate.
- 4 Or in bills implementing specific constitutional rules regarding the borders, competencies, statutes of the Communities and the Regions, which have to be voted on

by a two-thirds majority of the valid votes cast, and also by a majority of valid votes in each linguistic group in each House (with a majority of members of each linguistic group present).

- 5 From the creation of the state, French had been the language of the elite. Linguistic laws in the 1870s and the 1930s gradually recognized the usage of Flemish (Dutch), the language spoken by a majority of the population. In 1963 a bill instituting a 'linguistic border' was voted on, delimiting three unilingual regions (French-speaking, Dutch-speaking and German-speaking) and the bilingual (French and Dutch) region of Brussels (made up of 19 communes). This delimitation and the setting up of electoral constituencies still causes governmental crises. Regional parties were created and gained momentum throughout the 1960s and in 1968 the crisis over the transfer of the French-speaking section of the University of Louvain (situated in Flanders) caused a government breakdown and the split of the first traditional party group (Christian Democrats) into two (one French-speaking, one Dutch-speaking) autonomous parties. The Liberals (1972) and the Socialists (1978) split in turn so that the effective number of parties represented in the House rose from 2.7 in 1961 to 7.7 twenty years later.
- 6 The linguistic category of ministers without parliamentary background is inferred from official documents such as ID card or membership of unilingual organizations. Although the German-speaking area (71,500 out of more than 10,500,000) is recognized as an autonomous Community, with its own parliament and government, it is not recognized as a linguistic group at the national level.
- 7 The position of adjunct to a minister was created in 1960 but came under different names until the 1970 constitutional revision completed the existing article stipulating that the King, as for his ministers, also appoints and revokes the 'Secretaries of State'. These junior ministers are not part of the Council of Ministers (and therefore do not count for the 'parity rule'), though they are invited when issues falling into their sphere of competence are discussed and their decision-making autonomy can be relatively large (their remit and the limits of their power to countersign legislation are specified by a royal decree at the time of government formation).
- 8 For instance the Martens III 1980 coalition was made of six parties (both the French-speaking and Flemish sides of the three traditional parties) and counted 27 ministers plus 11 junior ministers. Only one year later but with a hard economic austerity mission ahead, the same PM composed a cabinet of four parties with only 15 ministers (and 10 junior ministers). Anticipating the constitutional reform in 1992, Dehaene formed his first cabinet also with only 15 ministers (and one junior minister). It is necessary to go back to the 1950s to find such a reduced form of government.
- 9 Nor for the holders of the honorary, permanent title of Minister of State who are generally former Prime Ministers or party leaders. These are not part of the government but may gather in a Council of the Crown to give advice to the King in times of international crises (this has happened only five times in Belgium's history).
- 10 The need for the appointment of the leader of the junior coalition party as deputy Prime Minister materialized in 1958 but the title of Vice-Prime Minister was first given to Spaak in 1961. From the 1980s onwards each coalition partner is awarded a Vice-PM and since 1988 usually the party of the PM also receives such a position allowing it to have two representatives in the *Kerncabinet*.
- 11 Other specific missions or titles for their holder have been given since the Second World War, when especially community conflicts made the formation of a cabinet quite complicated: 'mediators', 'negotiators' and in 2007 even an 'explorer' were appointed by the King.
- 12 There were exceptions in 1950 and in 1968, and in both 1979 and 1988 a successful *formateur* was replaced by the man who became PM a couple of days before the swearing-in ceremony of the new ministerial team.
- 13 Even though Verhofstadt III formed in late December 2007 was invested with full powers (unlike a dismissed cabinet) it had a limited coalition programme and an 'expiry date' specified, the Flemish Liberal PM Verhofstadt being committed to

handing his position over by the end of March 2008 to Flemish Christian Democrat Leterme.

- 14 Stengers (1996: 45–60) refers to at least four cases during Baudouin’s reign. He is also said to have been influential in the nomination of certain Prime Ministers, the last case being the appointment of Martens in 1988.
- 15 Albert II is said to have suggested Louis Michel as Foreign Affairs Minister (despite the latter’s preference for Interior) to improve Belgium’s image abroad after the scandals of the 1990s that made the small kingdom (in)famous on the international scene.
- 16 In 1999, the *formateur* Verhofstadt apparently pleaded for a feminized government and managed to have the French-speaking Socialist Party choose a female Vice-PM, whereas a male designate would normally have taken the position (Van Peteghem 2001).
- 17 Three people have served under two different parties, and 20 ministers served in cabinet before the first general elections of 1946.
- 18 Note however that in 1999 the French-speaking Greens (Ecolo) decided during the participation congress on the names of ministerial candidates to be presented to the *formateur*. This highly democratic exercise led to the exclusion of the main negotiator (and ‘leader’) of the party by the members from this Green ministerial delegation.
- 19 Interestingly, amongst the 14 ministers of the Verhofstadt III coalition based on a centre-right coalition to which was added the French-speaking Socialists, there were no fewer than five left or centre-left ministers, as in addition to the three PS ministers each of the Christian Democratic parties sent a former (Catholic) trade unionist to cabinet.
- 20 All these figures refer to raw numbers, no weighting of positions applied.
- 21 The agreement in 2008 to have five French-speaking and only two Flemish junior ministers in the cabinet Leterme I is in this respect unusual. So is the asymmetric party composition of the coalition (unlike a traditional tripartite coalition which would have counted six parties, the Flemish Socialists did not enter government, leaving it with five parties), inherited from the Verhofstadt interim government.
- 22 This includes Social Affairs, Health, Children’s Policy, Family, Housing, Education, Science, Culture, Labour and Sports.
- 23 ‘Infrastructure’ includes Transport, Communication, Environment, while ‘Economy’ includes Economy, Industry, Commerce and Agriculture.
- 24 These averages are calculated on the basis of 308 individuals who were appointed for the first time as minister or junior minister in the period after 13 March 1946. They do not include the additional 22 individuals who had their first ministerial appointment before this date.
- 25 When looking at aggregate parliamentary experience in the graph, one has to bear in mind that since 1995 ministers drawn from parliament have to give up their seat in parliament for as long as they remain in cabinet, thereby no longer accumulating experience.
- 26 High instability however mainly concerned the second half of the 1940s and the 1972–81 period.
- 27 The Van Acker IV government (1954–58) was an anti-clerical government formed by Socialists and Liberals after the Christian Democratic single party majority of 1950–54. The succeeding government, Eyskens II (1958), which was a short term minority cabinet aimed at being enlarged, consisted of only Christian Democrats.
- 28 These 128 individual resignations concern 98 ministers and 30 junior ministers.
- 29 For instance Edouard Anseele (Socialist) officially resigned for health reasons, but was also suspected in a financial scandal.
- 30 No fewer than 9.5 resignations per government. Instability of cabinets with an odd number of parties shows the importance of having party groups (re-)united in government, and to avoid as much as possible including an additional one without any counterpart in the other Community.

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