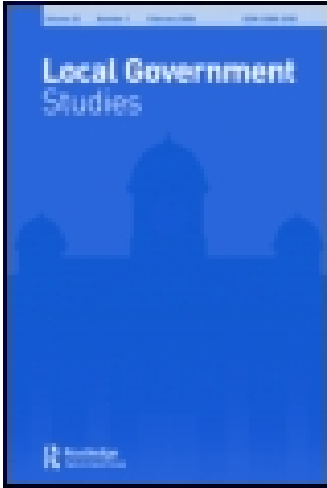


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Les élections communales de 2012 en Wallonie, by Régis Dandoy, Jérémy Dodeigne, Geoffroy Matagne, Min Reuchamps

Caroline Van Wynsberghe^a

^a Université catholique de Louvain (UCL)

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Book Review

Les élections communales de 2012 en Wallonie

Régis Dandoy, Jérémy Dodeigne, Geoffroy Matagne, Min Reuchamps (eds)
Brugge, Vanden Broele, 2013, ISBN 978 90 4960 941 2

Less than 1 year after the long and laborious formation (540 days) of a new federal government in Belgium, local elections were held on Sunday, 14 October 2012. These were the second local and provincial elections since the transfer to the Regions of the provincial and municipal law. This regionalisation allowed Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels to modify their electoral rules for municipal and provincial elections. Most places made minor changes like the date of the municipal board inauguration, and some enabled the council to elect its chair instead of automatically giving this responsibility to the mayor. But Wallonia went a step further than the two other Regions. According to the new Code for Local Democracy, the Mayor (Bourgmestre) is the candidate with the highest preferential score from the largest party of the coalition. This modification leads to new electoral strategies for local political parties.

This book constitutes one of the (too) few contributions to the study of local authorities in French-speaking Belgium. That explains why the four editors gathered a large (12) team of young researchers (young academics, as well as PhD students) from the major universities in Belgium. The editors also ensured that, with five women members, the research team was more gender balanced than many. Even if it is not strict parity, it is surely noticeable.

The editors take up two challenges: the first one is empirical and consists in analysing the results of the 2012 local and provincial elections, while the second is methodological as they have to collect data and to establish a brand new database. The keyword of their work is certainly 'milestone' as they pave the way for further researches. At this stage, they draw up typologies of electoral lists, but also formulate and start to test a series of hypothesis.

These local and provincial elections were held halfway between two general elections (June 2010 and May 2014). Even if the levels and the issues are totally different, some still consider a local election as a super 'full-size' poll. The research team took a longitudinal approach, they researched the parties before the campaign and focused on the preparation of the lists of candidates and the choices made by the parties before the elections. The editors start by outlining the context of this double election (local and provincial). They also develop a typology that enables them to classify the parties in the 1,012 lists covering the 262 Walloon municipalities. Using five ideal types, they organise the electoral lists along a continuum from totally national to totally local, or being an alliance between at least two parties, which could be either national or local. This classification allows them to show the domination of national parties on the Walloon local political landscape and to put a stress on the balance between the national actors at the municipal level.

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The five-type classification is also used to analyse the descriptions of the lists (the choice of name) and the parties' pre-electoral alliance strategies. Through a quali-quantitative approach, they assess the impact of several factors on the choice of the name. The parties' approach to naming the lists suggests a strategic process that is much more elaborate than simply opting for ideological reference. As the authors stress, this contribution constitutes an entry point for further surveys on electoral behaviour at the municipal level. Using the logic of political marketing, they hypothesise that the label used to name the list is seen as a brand that could influence the choice of a low-informed voter. The researchers focus on the pre-electoral alliances opens the door for further research combining an economic logic (cost-benefit analysis of alliance) and the study of electoral results.

The second part of the book deals with the composition of the electoral lists. The parties' internal processes and rules play a crucial role in the selection of the candidates and therefore on the finally elected representatives. The procedure varies according to the party and the level (local, regional, federal...). This preliminary analysis in political science shows that local elections in Wallonia are much more professionalised than perceived, especially when national representatives compete.

Paying attention to the candidates' selection also means consideration of the independent 'opening' candidates (candidates "d'ouverture") – local political leaders recruited to give 'local' credibility. By doing so, the researchers show that local elections are less compartmentalised than previously believed. They also underline the lack of attention paid so far to this electoral issue in Wallonia.

Finally, after an overview of local elections in the two other Regions, the research team provides a short analysis of the five provincial elections held simultaneously in Wallonia. One of the purposes of the project was of course to compare the local and the provincial results and to consider some evidences, trends and differences. Both ballots use a proportional representation formula, but D'Hondt is in application for provincial elections while local elections use the Imperiali formula. The two elections have slightly different constituencies: non-Belgian residents may register to vote for local election, but the provincial ballot is for Belgian citizens only.

In conclusion, the authors formulate a set of hypotheses that should give rise to further research. The hypotheses are based on an inventory of the issues, and the important variables and factors in the elections in Wallonia. They also recognise that further longitudinal studies are necessary to untangle some of the issues raised in this first piece of research.

Les élections communales de 2012 en Wallonie provides an appreciable and comprehensible state of the literature regarding local elections and places the Walloon specificities in the context of existing research and a future research agenda. This book certainly constitutes the cornerstone of the Walloon local election analysis and opens the way for more in-depth political science contributions.

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