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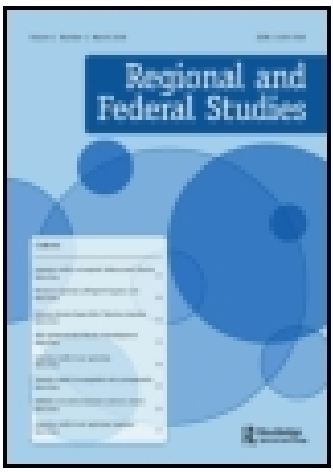

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The Success of the Regionalist Parties in the 2014 Elections in Belgium

Pierre Baudewyns[a], Régis Dandoy[a] & Min Reuchamps[a]
[a] Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

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The Success of the Regionalist Parties in the 2014 Elections in Belgium

PIERRE BAUDEWYNS, RÉGIS DANDOY & MIN REUCHAMPS

Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

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ABSTRACT In May 2014, and for the second time in her political history, regional, federal and European elections were organized simultaneously in Belgium. In the direct follow-up of the sixth state reform, which increased the powers and autonomy of the Belgian Regions and Communities, these elections were crucial for the future of the country and for the multi-level coalition formation at the regional and federal levels. The political campaign was dominated by socioeconomic issues and demands for further autonomy, particularly in the Flemish region. Regional electoral results confirmed the success of the regionalist parties in Flanders, but also in Brussels and in the German-speaking Community. These successes allowed regionalist parties to enter all regional and federal governments—often as the dominant party—with the exception of the Walloon and the French-speaking Community cabinets.

KEY WORDS: Regional elections, federal election, regionalist parties, coalition formation, Belgium, Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels, German-speaking Community

Introduction

The elections of 25 May 2014 in Belgium have been labelled as the "mother of all elections" by the media and political observers. On the same day, all regional, community, federal and European assemblies were directly or indirectly renewed. But, besides a complete renewal of the political representatives at all policy levels, these elections were also important for the stability and future of the country. The last federal elections of 2010 led the country into a political standstill of more than a year and fuelled the tensions between the parties from the two main language groups: Dutch- and French-speaking. The negotiations for the formation of a federal coalition also concerned the implementation of a sixth state reform, which gave more autonomy to the Regions and the Communities. This report focuses on the elections for regional and community assemblies in Belgium but at the same time explores their multi-level dimensions because the national and subnational governments are closely connected in the Belgian case. After an overview of the institutional context, the main campaign issues and the party strategies, the election results for each individual

Correspondence Address: Dr Pierre Baudewyns, Université catholique de Louvain, ISPOLE, Place Montesquieu 1/L02.08.07, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1348 Belgium. Email: pierre.baudewyns@uclouvain.be

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region and community are discussed and integrated into a larger analysis focusing on the multi-level dynamics of coalition formation.

Regional Institutions and Elections

In Belgium, since the last regional elections in 2009 (see Pilet and Brack, 2010), some major elements of the institutional architecture of the country have changed in the wake of the sixth state reform (2012–2014). First, Regions and Communities enjoy increased autonomy, with new competences such as family allowances, labour market regulation, health care and road safety, as well as increased financing and more fiscal autonomy (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). Second, two sub-state entities received particular attention. The Brussels-Capital Region obtained specific additional financing and so-called constitutive autonomy (i.e. the right to reform its own institutions). The German-speaking community also obtained similar rights, as well as additional competences transferred from the Walloon Region and from the French-speaking Community. Third, the Senate has been profoundly reformed. The members of the federal upper house are no longer directly elected, but are designated by the regional parliaments. For all these reasons, regional elections in Belgium have become more important than ever before.

Regional elections in Belgium display specific features (Dandoy, 2013a). Although the Belgian state is constitutionally composed of six sub-state entities, regional elections only concern four of them: the Flemish community, the German-speaking community, the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region. In two specific cases, voters participate in two regional elections: citizens living in the German-speaking community elect their representatives in their community parliament as well as for the Walloon Parliament; citizens living in Brussels vote for the regional parliament, but those who chose to vote for a Dutch-speaking list or candidate in the regional election may also vote for representatives in the parliament of the Flemish community. Regional elections take place every five years and are organized simultaneously with European elections (Bouhon and Reuchamps, 2012). In 2014, it also coincided with the end of the federal legislature. Moreover, following the sixth state reform, the federal legislature has been shortened to five years, if no anticipated dissolution. From now on, federal, regional and European elections may be held on the same day.

Like other elections in Belgium, voting is compulsory for regional elections (Reuchamps et al., 2012). The electoral system is based on proportional representation with semi-open lists. Voters may either cast their ballot for their preferred candidate(s) or cast a vote for the entire list. Computer-based voting is used in 209 municipalities out of 589. Even if they take place on the same day, only Belgians living in Belgium itself are allowed to vote for regional elections, contrary to European and federal elections. There is also a 5% threshold at the district level. Yet in the Brussels-Capital Parliament, lists can create groups that potentially ease the passage of parties through the electoral threshold (Reuchamps et al., 2014).

Voters elect the 124 members of the Flemish Parliament, based on six electoral districts that correspond to the five Flemish provinces and to the Brussels region; the 75 members of the Walloon Parliament based on 13 electoral districts; and the 25 members of the German-speaking Community Parliament, in a single electoral district.

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The election of the Brussels-Capital Parliament is a bit more complex because it comprises two electoral colleges based on the language of the voter. French-speaking voters elect their 72 representatives, while Dutch-speaking voters elect their 17 representatives. Finally, the French-speaking Community Parliament is not directly elected but comprises the 75 members of the Walloon Parliament and 19 French-speaking members of the Brussels-Capital Parliament.

Campaign Issues

Due to the simultaneity of the regional elections with federal and European elections, it is difficult to identify specific regional campaign issues. Most of the regional policy issues, such as economic or environmental policies, are in fact shared with the federal level. Due to the complexity of the distribution of competences between the federal and regional levels, voters find it hard to identify which parliament is responsible for each individual policy domain: the regional and/or the community and/or the federal parliaments. Moreover, political parties also tend to blur policy levels in their discourses and electoral platforms. For example, most of the French-speaking parties and all of the Flemish parties decided to draft a common party manifesto for the three simultaneous elections. While European issues are often the subject of a separate chapter in these manifestos, it is impossible to disentangle regional issues from federal issues.

However, the campaign focused primarily on socioeconomic issues. A content analysis of the main political party manifestos demonstrates that it corresponded to about one-third of these documents (Figure 1). Overall, French-speaking parties paid more attention to these issues (35.36%) than Flemish parties (30.59%). Yet, the campaign debates in Flanders were more polarized on these issues in the last weeks of the campaign (while the manifestos were released a few months before the elections). Indeed, the main Flemish party, Nieuwe-Vlaams Alliantie (N-VA), changed its strategy and decided to focus on socioeconomic issues rather than on linguistic and institutional ones. During these last weeks of the campaign, the N-VA was strongly

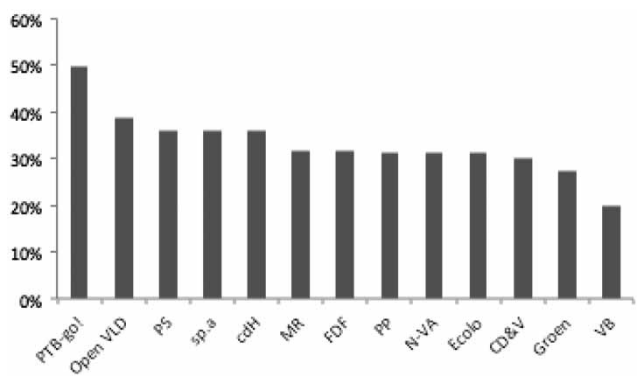

Figure 1. Salience of socioeconomic issues in party manifestos.
Source: Joly et al., 2014; Piet et al., 2014.

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criticized by the three mainstream Flemish parties—Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V), Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD) and Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)—mainly because of its position on ending the automatic indexation of salaries, its critiques of unemployed people and the limitation in time of unemployment allowances, as well as its demands for large reduction of public expenditures.

Apart from socioeconomic issues, the question of the future of the Belgian state remained high on the agenda, mainly because of the dominance of the Flemish regionalist party N-VA (Dandoy, 2013b; Dandoy et al., 2013). While all French-speaking parties are opposed to a new state reform or a deeper regionalization of the country, this is not the case among Flemish parties (Dodeigne et al., 2014). Although the N-VA no longer emphasizes the end of Belgium in its manifesto, the party expressed clear demands in favour of a confederal system and more autonomy for Regions and Communities. These demands for further regionalization concern policy issues such as taxes, social protection (including pensions, unemployment and health), justice and home affairs. In parallel, the N-VA demands a limitation of the autonomy of the Brussels-Capital Region and a system of co-management of Brussels by the other two Regions. For their social protection, inhabitants of Brussels would have to choose between one of the two regimes (Flemish or Walloon). Although they do not fully agree with these demands, the mainstream Flemish parties do follow the lead of the N-VA on these issues, but their priorities remain socioeconomic.

However, an unexpected event occurred two weeks before the election. The Flemish Christian Democrat politician, Jean-Luc Dehaene, died on 15 May. The organization of his funeral two days before the elections and their mediatization have potentially had an impact on the election results. This former prime minister was indeed a respected politician on both sides of the linguistic border and was opposed to radical Flemish nationalism. The CD&V honoured the memory of its former leader during the last days of the campaign and stressed the importance of the collaboration of the three regions in order to enhance the country's economy.

In Wallonia, the economy also remained the key campaign issue. Although the Walloon economy shows encouraging trends (economic growth, exportations, and foreign investment), it remains a poor region in comparison with the regional average in the Eurozone and suffers from significant levels of public debt. Most of the proposals made by Walloon parties were directed at these problems. In the Brussels region, the main issues were diverse, mostly given the challenges the region has to face in the near future: mobility (traffic jams, train network in and around Brussels, taxation of cars entering Brussels), housing (forecast increase of the city's population in the next decades), unemployment (about 20% of unemployment in the region and 35% among young citizens) and education.

Even if not directly elected, one policy issue attached to the French-speaking Community came high on the agenda of French-speaking parties. Much of the campaign debate evolved around the way shools are organized and more particularly, the so-called 'inscription' decree. This decree aimed at greater social diversity within schools but created serious problems for the enrolment of pupils at the beginning of secondary schooling. The campaign opposed the parties in government that defended the decree (with some adaptations) and the main opposition parties.

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Another issue which emerges regularly in Belgian politics disturbed the campaign: night flight traffic above Brussels. A few months before the elections, the federal government decided to move the routes taken by night flights above Brussels and to distribute them above a larger number of municipalities. As a direct consequence, a larger share of the Brussels population became affected by flight noises and started to blame Melchior Wathelet (Centre Démocrate Humaniste, cdH), the state secretary in charge of this issue, for the decision. In the following weeks, the cdH became under fire from the opposition parties Ecolo and Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones (FDF), which found in the night flights an easy topic to blame the action of the government, but also from the governing parties Parti Socialiste (PS) and Mouvement Réformateur (MR), which did not openly express cabinet solidarity with their colleague. This federal decision was much discussed in the debates for the Brussels regional elections.

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Candidates and Party Strategies

A new rule regarding candidacy was introduced for the first time in the simultaneous regional, federal and European elections of 2014. It stipulates that an individual can only be a candidate at one level. In other words, it is no longer possible to be at the same time a candidate for the federal elections and for the regional elections. When composing their lists, parties now need to decide strategically where each candidate would perform best or best serve the objectives of the party. We observe that the main candidates and most of the party leaders decided to run in the federal elections. This was true of the incumbent prime minister, Elio Di Rupo (PS), the popular minister Maggie De Blok (Open VLD) and the party leaders Bart De Wever (N-VA), Wouter Beke (CD&V), Charles Michel (MR), Benoit Lutgen (cdH) and Olivier Maingain (FDF). The few exceptions were to be found in the candidacies of Paul Magnette (leader of the PS) in the Walloon Parliament and of Gwendolyn Rutten, Bruno Tobback and Wouter Vanbesien (respectively leaders of the Open VLD, sp.a and Groen) in the Flemish Parliament.

Obviously, when composing their lists, parties think about entering future governmental coalitions and about the future appointment of ministers. Parts of the electoral campaign were therefore focused on the future coalitions as well as the individuals that would lead them. In the media and in the debates, there was competition between party heavyweights for the positions of regional prime minister (not to mention the position of federal prime minister): between Kris Peeters (CD&V) and Liesbeth Homans (N-VA) in Flanders; between Rudy Demotte (PS) and Jean-Claude Marcourt (PS) in Wallonia; and between Didier Reynders (MR), Vincent De Wolf (MR) and Rudi Vervoort (PS) in Brussels.

A last element concerns the ambiguity of the future of Bart De Wever. Since 2012 the leader of the N-VA had claimed that he would focus on the mayorship of Antwerp, the largest city in Flanders, and leave the presidency of the N-VA in 2014. However, three days before the elections, he announced that he was a candidate for prime minister. This announcement was intended to reaffirm to the Flemish population that the N-VA was willing to enter the regional and federal governments and that a vote for this party remained useful. Yet, as a minister may not combine this role with a mayorship, this announcement might have alienated him from the Antwerp voters who now

had evidence that he might not fulfil his pledge to concentrate his actions on the municipality.

Results

As explained above, the simultaneity of the 2014 regional elections with the federal and European ones renders the analysis of the election results rather complex. In this report, we will focus on regional election results, but important elements from the federal elections will be introduced in the comments.

Given the fact that voting is compulsory, turnout has never been an important issue when discussing Belgian elections. However, two trends have to be noticed (see Table 1). First, the differences that can be observed across regions are increasing. Flanders displays a higher turnout than other regions of the country, particularly when compared to the Brussels region. Second, turnout is decreasing in all regions, probably as a consequence of the lack of sanctions for non-voting and because the political crises that occurred at the federal level may have had a negative impact on voters' trust of institutions and political parties. Ultimately, one needs to remark on the specificity of the German-speaking Community, which displays a much higher rate of invalid votes than in other regions.

As for the federal elections where it obtained 32.44% of the votes in the Flemish constituencies, the N-VA was undisputedly the winner of the Flemish regional elections. The Flemish regionalists obtained almost one-third of the votes in Flanders (Table 2). With an unusual—for Belgium—increase of 18.83% of votes between 2009 and 2014, they gathered no fewer than 43 seats (out of 124). In the previous elections of 2009, the N-VA and the Vlaams Belang (VB) were on almost an equal footing, separated by less than 3% votes in favour of VB. Since then, the radical-right party has suffered a significant decrease by 9.36% of the votes, the largest defeat ever recorded by this party. The relationship between the electoral fates of the two parties is rather evident and confirmed by the analysis of the vote transfers at the individual level (Dassonneville and Baudewyns, 2014). The populist Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD) was the other clear loser of the 2014 regional elections in Flanders and also saw most of its voters move to the N-VA, losing its eight seats in the regional parliament and almost disappearing from the Belgian political landscape.

The two parties, CD&V and sp.a, which were in coalition with the N-VA in the regional cabinet, as well as the Open VLD, which was in the federal cabinet, all lost

Table 1. Turnout and valid votes—regional elections of 2014 (compared to 2009)

	Voters	% turnout	% invalid votes
Flanders	4779144	92.53 (−0.53)	4.97 (−0.53)
Wallonia	2516420	87.88 (−1.12)	7.41 (−0.27)
Brussels	584310	83.62 (−0.71)	5.35 (+0.39)
German-speaking Community	49000	86.38 (−2.73)	11.13 (−0.26)

Source: Official election results—SPF Intérieur. http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/en/

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Table 2. Flanders—regional elections of 2014 (compared to 2009)

	% votes	Seats
Nieuwe − Vlaams Alliantie (N-VA)	31.88 (+18.83)	43 (+27)
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	20.48 (−2.37)	27 (−4)
Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD)	14.15 (−0.85)	19 (−2)
Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)	13.99 (−1.28)	18 (−1)
Groen	8.70 (+1.94)	10 (+3)
Vlaams Belang (VB)	5.92 (−9.36)	6 (−15)
Partij van de Arbeid van België (PVDA+)	2.53 (+1.48)	0 (=)
Union des Francophones (UF)	0.83 (−0.32)	1 (=)
Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD)	0 (−7.62)	0 (−8)
Others	1.52 (−0.45)	0
Total	100	124

Source: Official election results—SPF Intérieur. http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/en/

votes and seats. More particularly, the CD&V lost its first place to the N-VA, as the Christian Democrat party witnessed a decrease of 2.37% of the votes. Altogether, the three traditional Flemish parties accounted for less than 50% of the votes for the first time in the political history of Belgium (Reuchamps 2013). With the exception of the green party, all Flemish parties lost votes and seats to the N-VA, which rendered the presence of the Flemish regionalists in the Flemish government inevitable.

The trends were completely different in Wallonia (Table 3). Unlike in Flanders, there is no dominant regionalist party. The FDF participated in its first Walloon regional elections since its divorce from the MR in 2011 and only gathered 2.53% of the votes. Contrary to the relative success of Groen in Flanders, the French-speaking green party was clearly the loser in Wallonia: Ecolo lost more than half of its voters and 10 seats compared to 2009. It is likely that Ecolo paid the price of its government participation at the regional level. The same applies to its two partners in the Walloon cabinet—the PS and the cdH—which also lost votes, even if their decline was not as dramatic as for the green party.

The winning parties are to be found in the opposition. The main opposition party at the regional level, the liberal MR, increased its vote share by 3.28% and, more

Table 3. Wallonia—regional elections of 2014 (compared to 2009)

	% votes	Seats
Parti Socialiste (PS)	30.90 (−1.87)	30 (+1)
Mouvement Réformateur (MR)	26.69 (+3.28)	25 (+6)
Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH)	15.17 (−0.98)	13 (=)
Ecolo	8.62 (−9.92)	4 (−10)
Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB-go!)	5.76 (+4.52)	2 (+2)
Parti Populaire (PP)	4.86	1 (+1)
Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones (FDF)	2.53	0
Others	5.45 (−2.47)	0
Total	100	75

Source: Official election results—SPF Intérieur. http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/en/

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importantly, gained six additional seats. However, this victory was not sufficient to secure a coalition without the PS. The smaller parties can also be considered as winners of the Walloon regional elections. The radical-left Part du Travail de Belgique (PTB-go!) and the right-populist Parti Populaire (PP) managed to obtain their first ever seats in the regional parliament.

In Brussels (Table 4), Dutch- and French-speaking parties do not compete for votes because there is a guaranteed representation of parties from both linguistic groups (17 and 72 seats respectively). Among French-speaking parties, there was a real contest between the socialist and liberal parties for which would become the largest party in the city-region. This position is not only symbolically important but usually allows the largest party to lead the negotiations for the regional government formation. Although it did not gain additional seats, the PS was one of the winners of the regional elections in Brussels. It witnessed a slight increase in its share of votes and came first at the polling booths. Besides the PS, the French-speaking regionalist party, FDF, was also on the winning side. This party, which presented a list on its own (i.e. without the liberal party) for the first time since 1989, came third, with 12 seats. Like in Wallonia, the PTB-go! did pretty well and secured four seats. Thanks to their good electoral results both in Wallonia and in Brussels, the three small parties, PTB-go!, FDF and PP, also entered the French-speaking Community Parliament, which is composed of regional MPs from Wallonia and Brussels.

The other parties in Brussels did actually lose the elections. The defeat of the MR is obviously explained by the departure of the FDF. Taken together, the two parties actually performed much better than the electoral alliance they formed for the previous elections (37.84% in 2014 compared to 29.82% in 2009), meaning that the defeat of the MR was not as large as one might have expected. The cdH, which was in

Table 4. Brussels—regional elections of 2014 (compared to 2009)

	% votes	Seats
Parti Socialiste (PS)	26.59 (+0.34)	21 (=)
Mouvement Réformateur (MR)	23.04 (−6.78)	18 (−6)
Fédéralistes démocrates francophones (FDF)	14.80	12
Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH)	11.74 (−3.07)	9 (−2)
Ecolo	10.11 (−10.11)	8 (−8)
PTB*PVDA-go!	3.86 (+3.02)	4 (+4)
Others	9.85 (+1.78)	0
Total French-speaking parties	100	72
Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD)	26.70 (+3.62)	5 (+1)
Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)	19.57 (+0.11)	3 (−1)
Groen	17.89 (+6.69)	3 (+1)
Nieuwe Vlaams Alliantie (N-VA)	17.00 (+12.01)	3 (+2)
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	11.43 (−3.42)	2 (−1)
Vlaams Belang (VB)	5.6 (−11.91)	1 (−2)
Others	1.81 (−4.74)	0
Total Dutch-speaking parties	100	17

Source: Official election results—SPF Intérieur. http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/en/

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government with the PS and Ecolo, also lost votes and seats. But the party that clearly lost the Brussels regional elections was Ecolo as the green party lost exactly half of its voters and half of its seats.

On the Dutch-speaking side, the N-VA did not perform as well as in Flanders. Even if it significantly increased its vote share (+12.01%), it came fourth, behind the Open VLD, the sp.a and Groen. Next to the N-VA, the green party also managed to increase its vote shares. But more surprising was the position of the incumbent party CD&V (fifth), which lost votes and seats. Like in the Flemish region, the VB was heavily defeated and lost more than two-thirds of its voters and seats. The LDD did not even participate in the Brussels regional elections.

Finally, the elections for the German-speaking Community Parliament confirmed the success of the regionalist parties, which has been observed in the Flemish and Brussels regions (Table 5). Pro Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft (ProDG), the German-speaking regionalist party, became the second largest party and scored 22.21%—its best election result ever. The other winner was the populist party, Vivant, which increased its vote share by 3.45% and became the Community's fifth largest party. All three traditional parties (Christian democrats, socialists and liberals) lost votes compared to the previous elections. The defeat of Ecolo was not as great as in Brussels and Wallonia, but the green party is traditionally weaker in this community.

Multi-Level Coalition Formation

Immediately after the elections, political parties started to negotiate the formation of the new coalitions. The first cabinet to be formed was the government of the German-speaking community with the reappointment of a coalition comprising the regionalists of ProDG, the socialists of the Socialistische Partei (SP) and the liberals of the Parti für Freiheit und Fortschritt (PFF). This coalition was followed by the nomination of a new minister-president: the ProDG Oliver Paasch replacing the socialist Karl-Heinz Lambertz who had been in power since 1999. The German-speaking government is the only region where the largest party (CSP) is rejected in the opposition . Given its size and the independence of its party system, the German-speaking cabinet was barely influenced by negotiations occurring elsewhere—where negotiations take

Table 5. Regional elections in the German-speaking Community in 2014 (compared to 2009)

	% votes	Seats
Christlich Soziale Partei (CSP)	24.86 (−2.16)	7 (=)
Pro Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft (ProDG)	22.21 (+4.71)	6 (+2)
Socialistische Partei (SP)	16.08 (−3.23)	4 (−1)
Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt (PFF)	15.55 (−1.97)	4 (=)
Vivant	10.62 (+3.45)	2 (=)
Ecolo	9.54 (−1.96)	2 (−1)
Others	1.15	0 (=)
Total	100	25

Source: Official election results—SPF Intérieur. http://www.verkiezingen.fgov.be/index.php?id=1622.

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longer as the coalition building is strongly intertwined between regional and federal governments.

Two days after the elections, King Philippe nominated Bart De Wever, president of the political party that came first in the federal elections, as *informateur* with the mission to explore the possible federal coalitions. Given the new power relations between parties, two alternative coalitions could possibly be formed at the federal level: on the one hand, a reappointment of the previous federal coalition uniting six parties (the two socialists, the two Christian democrats and the two liberals) and, on the other hand, a centre-right coalition of five parties (the N-VA, the two Christian democrats and the two liberals), which was the favourite option for the leader of the N-VA, as this formula would exclude the socialists.

Partly in reaction to these talks, and in order to secure their position in the south of the country (i.e. in the Walloon and in the French-speaking Community governments), the French-speaking socialists decided to start negotiations with the cdH before the mission of federal *informateur* came to an end. These moves were immediately followed by the opening of negotiations between the N-VA and the CD&V in order to form the Flemish government.

In parallel, the PS started negotiations with the FDF and the French-speaking Christian democrats in Brussels. On the Dutch-speaking side, the leading political party, the Open VLD was joined by the sp.a and the CD&V. On 14 July 2014, these six parties announced a coalition agreement and the formation of a government led by the incumbent minister-president, the socialist Rudi Vervoort. The government intends to create a youth employment guarantee by awarding tax supports to companies that create jobs for young people. The new regional government also plans to launch a deep governance reform in order to reduce unnecessary expenses. This programme should lead to a large tax reform by 2017.

Forty days after the elections and a few days after Brussels, an agreement was announced by the PS and the cdH for the Walloon Region and the French-speaking Community with two socialists as minister-presidents: Paul Magnette and Rudy Demotte respectively. The Walloon cabinet is now composed of seven ministers (four PS and three cdH ministers) and the French-speaking Community government consists of four PS ministers and two cdH ministers. PS and cdH have been in power at these policy levels since 2004, this time without Ecolo. Both the Walloon and the French-speaking Community governments aim to pursue the work achieved during the previous legislature and to implement the sixth state reform.

The Flemish coalition agreement was announced on 22 July 2014. Initially, the N-VA and the CD&V negotiated to form the regional government, since these two parties together hold a majority in the Flemish Parliament. Nonetheless, a few days before an agreement was reached, they opened negotiations with the Open VLD in order to increase the chances of success of a centre-right coalition at the federal level. It was actually an explicit demand of the French-speaking liberals to have their Dutch-speaking counterpart in the federal government. The three Flemish parties quickly struck a deal and agreed upon a government of nine ministers led by the N-VA Geert Bourgeois, together with three ministers from the N-VA, three from the CD&V and two from the Open VLD. One of the main objectives of the Flemish government is to achieve a balanced budget without increasing taxes. From that perspective, structural

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savings are foreseen in many areas such as in the public administration in order to invest in priority fields. Implementation of the state reform as well as changes in social benefits are also planned.

The federal coalition formation was thus largely influenced by the regional coalitions. The quick move of the PS and the cdH in Wallonia and in Brussels, followed by the decision of the N-VA and the CD&V to negotiate for their respective regional government without the liberals hindered the project of re-conduction of the incumbent cabinet. It also directly put pressure on the mission of the *informateur* Bart De Wever. After almost a month of negotiations, his written proposal intended to be the basis for a centre-right coalition consisting of N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD, MR and cdH was rejected by the cdH, which put an the end to his mission. After a few days of consultations, King Philippe named Charles Michel, president of the MR, as the new *informateur*. Several options were explored: in particular either a traditional tripartite or a so-called 'Swedish' coalition. This option, based on a coalition between three Dutch-speaking parties (N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD) and only one French-speaking party (MR), was chosen by the end of July as the basis of a future federal cabinet. Ten weeks of negotiations between these four parties led to the formation of a new federal government led by the liberal Charles Michel on 11 October 2014. Despite his announcement during the campaign that he was a candidate for prime minister, Bart De Wever never claimed this position during the negotiations and did not even enter the cabinet as minister, preferring to remain party leader of the N-VA and mayor of Antwerp.

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Conclusion

In the wake of the political crises of 2007 and of 2010–2011 and of the sixth state reform, which reshaped power relations between the federal and sub-state levels, the elections of 2014 were feared to fuel political tensions in Belgium. Yet, to the surprise of some observers, the country seemed to revert to a more 'normal' political atmosphere. Indeed, positive signs are emerging from these elections. First, the radical-right parties almost disappeared from the Belgian political landscape and the VB became electorally insignificant in Flanders and in Brussels. Second, the coalition formation process was relatively quick by Belgian standards. 'Only' five months were needed to form all six Belgian federal and regional governments. Third, coalition agreements mostly focused on socioeconomic issues and not on institutional reforms, even if all governments will have to implement the sixth state reform.

However, there are also reasons for doubts about a long-term political stabilization of the country. First, the regionalist parties performed particularly well in Flanders, Brussels and the German-speaking Community, allowing these parties to enter all regional and federal governments—often as the dominant party—with the exception of the Walloon and the French-speaking Community cabinets. There is little doubt that such parties will gradually reintroduce autonomy-related issues in the political debates. Second, and with the exception of Flanders, populist parties and radical-left parties are now present in the federal and regional parliaments, putting pressure on mainstream parties from within the assemblies. Third, the last election results also confirmed the growing ideological differences between Flanders, on the one hand, and

Wallonia and Brussels, on the other hand. But the question is whether this is due to differences in the electorates' demands or differences in the political offer. Fourth, and this is related to this ideological gap, incongruence between coalitions is now the norm rather than the exception. While some hoped that holding federal and regional elections at the same time—which will theoretically happen every five years—would lead to congruent governments, asymmetry is in motion both vertically between regional and federal governments but also horizontally within the federal government. The 2014 elections in Belgium have perpetuated a federal dynamics that is more regional than ever.

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