

The 2014 federal and European elections in Belgium



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On 25 May 2014, some eight millions voters were called to the booths in Belgium for federal elections but also European and regional elections. No less than 463 parliamentarians were to be directly elected in these triple simultaneous elections, the second time in Belgian political history. But these tri-level elections were especially watched because of the 541-day period of federal government formation that the country experienced after the previous 2010 federal elections (Abts et al., 2012). The key question was therefore to what extent Belgium would go through a new period of high political instability and tensions between parties from the two main linguistic communities of the country. In this regard, the score of the Flemish Regionalists of the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) was under very close scrutiny. For this reason, this report focuses on the federal and European elections in Belgium and leaves regional elections aside (for more information on these elections, see Baudewyns et al., 2015). The first section sets the background of the 2014 elections before turning to the electoral campaign on both sides of the linguistic border. The results of the federal and European elections are then presented and discussed in light of their implications for government formation and political dynamics in Belgium in the coming years.

1. Background

On 6 December 2011, Elio Di Rupo from the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) took oath as Prime Minister of a government consisting, besides the PS, of the Flemish and Francophone Christian-Democrats (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* – CD&V, and *Centre Démocrate Humaniste* – cdH), the Liberals (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten – Open Vld, and *Mouvement Réformateur* – MR) and the Flemish Socialists (*Socialistische Partij Anders* – sp.a). This was the result of over one and a half years of negotiations that first led to the agreement on a large-scale sixth state reform, with the support of the two green parties (Ecolo and Groen) but

without the support of the Flemish Regionalists of the N-VA and of the Francophone Regionalists of the FDF (*Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones*). This new reform of the Belgian state brings about further devolution for the Regions and the Communities as well as increased fiscal autonomy (Reuchamps, 2013). It brought also important changes to the electoral system directly impacting the organization of the 2014 elections (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013).

First of all, the electoral district of Brussels-Halle/Hal-Vilvoorde/Vilvorde (BHV) that had been sources of contention since the 1960s was split in two: on the one hand, the 19 Brussels municipalities formed a bilingual district and, on the other hand, the remaining municipalities were merged with the municipalities of the Leuven district, forming a single district for the whole Flemish Brabant province. Francophones living in six municipalities – the so-called ‘municipalities with facilities’ – located in the Flemish Brabant, but bordering the Brussels Region, were granted the right to vote either for candidates in the Flemish Brabant or for candidates in Brussels. Second, the Senate was quite radically transformed from a directly elected assembly to an assembly indirectly composed of representatives from the Regions and Communities, signalling its new function as a chamber for the sub-national entities. Third, a re-synchronization of the federal and regional elections came along the sixth state reform. It was decided that the federal legislatures would from now on last *in principle* for five years with elections to be organized the same day as the regional elections, which match the European electoral calendar.

Beside these changes, the typical features of Belgian elections remain (Bouhon and Reuchamps, 2012): proportional electoral system with compulsory voting, via a semi-open party-list proportional representation. In each district, the parties need to reach a five per cent threshold to be eligible for the seats distribution that is performed under D’Hondt formula (Reuchamps et al., 2014). Given the split of the BHV district, each federal district follows now the boundaries of the provinces. For the European elections, there are three districts broadly based on language: Dutch-, French- and German-speaking districts. For the 2014 elections and in application of the Treaty of Lisbon,

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Belgium was to send 21 representatives to the European Parliament instead of 22 for the previous European elections. This seat was taken out from the Dutch-speaking district where voters were to elect 12 MEPs instead of 13. In the French-speaking district and the German-speaking district the number of MEPs to be elected remained the same, respectively 8 and 1. European citizens living in Belgium have the right to vote in European elections, while Belgians living abroad have the right to vote in federal elections. Last but not least, dual candidacies (for instance, for regional and federal elections) were not allowed anymore, making the business of list making somewhat harder but potentially clearer for the voters.

2. Parties, candidates and the campaign

Compared to the previous elections, no new political forces emerged in the two party systems. In Flanders, opinion polls predicted a short victory of the Regionalists of the N-VA and stable results for the three mainstream parties (Christian-democrats, Socialists and Liberals) and the Greens. The radical-right and populist parties were expected to lose heavily while the radical-left would hardly pass the electoral threshold. In the French-speaking party system, it was predicted the balance of power between the three mainstream parties would remain about the same as in 2010, but the Greens would suffer significant losses. Yet, the disappearance of a credible radical-right party created a vacuum that could be filled by alternative parties. The right-wing populist *Parti populaire* (PP) and the radical-left *Parti du travail de Belgique* (PTB) could pass the electoral threshold in some districts and emerge as the winners of the federal elections. In Brussels, the regionalist party FDF left the electoral alliance that they created with the Liberals since 1992. Even if the party presented lists in the three Regions of the country, it was expected that it would gain a few seats only in the Brussels Region. But none of these three parties can be interpreted as new parties as the PP and the FDF were already present in the federal parliament and the PTB decided to create an electoral alliance under the name PTB-GO! with other radical-left movements, among which the Communist Party that had in the past held seats in the parliament (and even participated to some governments in the post-war period).

Broadly speaking, parties selected their best candidates for the federal elections. Most of the party leaders, incumbent ministers and well-known candidates participated in these elections and only few of them contested in the regional elections, even if more seats were available at the regional level, or in the European elections. This may indicate that the federal elections are still considered as first-order, even after the sixth state reform that reinforced the power of the Regions. Other explanations are to be found in the fact that the Senate is no longer the arena of a popularity contest between the most popular candidates and that the size of the electoral districts in the Walloon Region for the federal elections are much larger than for the regional elections, urging parties to put their best candidates on the lists for the federal elections. With the exception of Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ADLE), on the list of the

Flemish Liberals, candidates for the European elections were mostly incumbent MEPs or second-order candidates.

The electoral campaign was structured around three main issues. The first one concerned the coalitions that will be formed after the elections and the name of the future prime minister. As federal elections were organised simultaneously with the regional ones, some parties indicated that they would favour congruent coalitions at both levels, meaning that the same parties have to be in the federal and regional coalitions. This is particularly relevant for the Flemish regionalist party as the party was expected to lead the Flemish regional cabinet and therefore should be included in the federal government. In addition, Bart De Wever, the charismatic leader of the Flemish Regionalists, announced three days before the elections that he was candidate for prime minister. This announcement aimed at reaffirming to the Flemish population that his party was willing to enter the regional and federal governments and that a vote for this party remained useful. Yet, the reappointment of the previous federal coalition (made of the Christian-democrats, the Socialists and the Liberals) remained the most obvious choice, especially as opinion polls confirmed that the voters would not sanction the incumbent parties. In addition, all French-speaking parties (that are necessary for the federal coalition building due to constitutional rules) declared during the campaign that they would not govern with the Flemish Regionalists of the N-VA.

Second, the question of the future of the Belgian state remained high on the agenda, indirectly because of these congruent coalition formation issues. All parties agreed that – on the short term – the priority should go to the implementation of the sixth state reform. On the longer term, the French-speaking parties were clearly opposed to a new state reform and a further regionalization of the country. Even if the Flemish Regionalists did no longer emphasize the end of Belgium in their 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 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. Even if they do not fully agree with these demands, mainstream Flemish parties do follow the lead of the N-VA on these issues, even if their priorities remain of a socio-economic nature.

Third, and above all, campaign debates and manifestos were primarily focused on socio-economic issues and a content analysis of the party manifestos of the main political parties demonstrate that they correspond to about one third of these documents. In the last weeks of the campaign, the debates in Flanders became deeply polarized on the socio-economic dimension and institutional issues were almost completely left aside. Issues such as the end of the automatic indexation of wages, the limitation in time of unemployment allowances, as well as the reduction of public expenditures sparked fierce tensions between the three mainstream Flemish parties and the Flemish Regionalists. On the French-speaking side, the traditional

opposition between left- and right-wing parties concerned the importance of public debt and the ways to strengthen the economy in the country's poorest Regions.

3. Federal elections

The regionalist party N-VA is the clear winner of the federal elections of May 2014. They obtained 6 additional seats and represent 22.2% of the seats in the Chamber. The Regionalists managed to attract voters from all other Flemish parties (especially among Vlaams Belang, Open Vld and CD&V, see [Dassonneville and Baudewyns, 2014](#)) and confirmed their position as the largest party of Belgium. Despite the success of the N-VA, the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), the Liberals (Open Vld) and the Greens (Groen) gained also one seat. CD&V remained the second largest party in Flanders and the Liberals came third. The socialist party (sp.a) lost some vote shares compared to the 2010 elections but kept the same amount of seats. All together, the three Flemish parties in the federal government managed to increase both their votes (+1.49%) and their seats (+2).

This paradoxical situation – a clear success of the regionalist parties while incumbent parties slightly increased their vote shares – is to be explained by the collapse of both radical-right and populist parties. The radical-right party (VB) lost more than half of its voters and no less than 9 seats while the right-wing populist party (LDD) lost its last seat and completely disappeared from the political landscape (see: [Table 1](#)). One of the consequences for those parties is the important reduction of public funding as it directly depends of the electoral performance.

Among French-speaking parties, the magnitude of the vote share changes is smaller than among their Flemish counterparts but had however important consequences. The socialist party (PS) remained the largest party in the South of the country even if it lost three seats. The PS is the only incumbent party that lost seats as the other five parties increased or stabilized their representation in the federal parliament. This defeat can partly be explained by the good performance of the radical-left party (PTB-GO!) which was the main challenger of the PS in Wallonia (about 10% of the PS electorate moved to PTB-GO!, see [Dassonneville and Baudewyns, 2014](#)). With two seats, it is the first time since 1985 that a radical-left party enters the federal assembly. The Greens (Ecolo) also suffered from this radical-left competition (about 6% of its electorate moved to the PTB-GO!, [Dassonneville and Baudewyns, 2014](#)) and lost one-third of its voters ([Dandoy, 2015](#)).

For the first time since 1994, the Liberals (MR) and the Brussels Regionalists (FDF) presented separate lists in Brussels and in Wallonia. Their divorce had no negative impact on their electoral performance. On the contrary, with two additional seats the Liberals remained the second largest party in Wallonia and in Brussels. The FDF also managed to gain two seats and its votes mainly come from the cdH and Ecolo ([Dassonneville and Baudewyns, 2014](#)). Taken together, the two parties performed much better in 2014 compared to the previous elections: +2.16% and four additional seats. The two remaining parties – the Christian-

Table 1

Results for the Chamber of Representatives, May 2014 and June 2010.

Parties	2014		2010	
	Vote %	Seats	Vote %	Seats
Dutch-speaking parties				
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	20.26	33	17.40	27
Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (CD&V)	11.61	18	10.85	17
Open Vlaams Liberalen en Democraten (Open Vld)	9.78	14	8.64	13
Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)	8.83	13	9.24	13
Groen	5.32	6	4.38	5
Vlaams Belang (VB)	3.67	3	7.76	12
Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD)	0.42	0	2.31	1
French-speaking parties				
Parti Socialiste (PS)	11.67	23	13.70	26
Mouvement Réformateur (MR)	9.64	20	9.28	18
Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH)	4.98	9	5.52	9
Ecolo	3.30	6	4.80	8
PTB-GO!	1.97	2	0.60	0
Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones (FDF)	1.80	2	–	–
Parti Populaire (PP)	1.52	1	1.2	1
Turnout	89.68		89.28	

Source: Ministry of Interior – Official elections results. <http://elections2014.belgium.be/fr/>.

democrats (cdH) and the right-wing Populists (PP) – did not witness any significant changes in their vote shares.

4. European elections

Compared to 2009, Belgium lost one seat in the European Parliament. The remaining 21 seats are allocated according to three 'colleges': 12 seats are devoted to the Dutch-speaking college, eight to the French-speaking and finally one to the German-speaking college. Given the small amount of seats at stake, there are barely any noticeable changes compared to previous European elections. In addition, due to the simultaneity of the elections and the lack of interest for European issues in the Belgian political arena, election results are fairly similar at both policy levels. There are no real traces of split-ticket voting, except for the Open Vld that scored better in the European elections, mainly due to the presence of former Prime minister and ALDE 'spitzenkandidat' Guy Verhofstadt on the liberal list (see: [Table 2](#)).

In the French-speaking electoral college, the Liberals won one additional seat at the expenses of the Greens while the German-speaking seat still remains in the hands of the Christian-democrats. Similarly to the federal elections, the regionalist party NV-A can be considered as the winner of European elections in Flanders. With three additional seats, the party becomes the largest Belgian party in the European assembly. All other Flemish parties lost one seat (the Christian-democrat CD&V, the radical-right VB, the socialist sp.a and the populist LDD) or did not witness a change in their representation (the Liberals and the Greens). The right-wing populist LDD did not participated in the European elections.

Belgian parties joined the political groups that fit best with their ideology: the six Liberals joined the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); the four

Table 2
Results for the European parliament, May 2014 and June 2009.

Parties	2014		2009	
	Vote %	Seats	Vote %	Seats
Dutch-speaking parties				
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	16.79	4	6.13	1
Open Vlaams Liberalen en Democraten (Open Vld)	12.84	3	12.75	3
Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (CD&V)	12.57	2	14.43	3
Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)	8.30	1	8.21	2
Groen	6.69	1	4.90	1
Vlaams Belang (VB)	4.26	1	9.85	2
Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD)	–	–	4.51	1
French-speaking parties				
Parti Socialiste (PS)	10.68	3	10.88	3
Mouvement Réformateur (MR)	9.88	3	9.74	2
Centre Démocrate Humaniste (cdH)	4.14	1	4.99	1
Ecolo	4.26	1	8.55	2
German-speaking parties				
Christlich Soziale Partei (CSP)	0.18	1	0.19	1
Turnout	89.64		90.39	

Source: Ministry of Interior – Official elections results. <http://elections2014.belgium.be/fr/>.

Christian-democrats joined the European People's Party (EPP); the four Socialists joined the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); the two Greens joined the Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens–EFA); and the radical-right MEPs remained *Non-Inscrit*. More surprisingly was the membership of the four Flemish Regionalists to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). In the previous legislature, the N-VA was member of the Greens–EFA.

5. Assessment and implications

The 2014 elections in Wallonia and Brussels were marked by technical problems with computer-based voting that was used in some municipalities of the two Regions (Flanders used other devices and softwares). In Brussels, election results were only available more than 48 hours after the elections because of these problems. The bug occurred when a voter changed his/her mind during the voting process and wanted to change his/her previous vote. As there were different elections on the same day, voters had to move from one election to another, as well as back and forth. As a consequence, the votes of about 2000 voters were declared invalid by the system and therefore not taken into account for the results. But these votes potentially had an important impact on the results as only a few votes demarcated parties or different candidates in some districts. A consensus between the main French-speaking political parties was reached and it is most likely that computer-based voting will no longer be used for the next elections in the two Regions.

The elections also had consequences for the internal organisation of some parties, mainly among parties that were not satisfied with their electoral results. Ecolo, the clear loser of the 2014 elections on the French-speaking side, decided to organise early internal elections (they

were originally expected in 2016) and none of the two co-leaders at the time of the elections presented their candidacy. The regionalist party FDF decided to change its structure: it has now created three distinct leadership positions (in Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia), partly as a consequence of the disappointing results in Wallonia. The French-speaking Christian-democrats and the Flemish Socialists initiated a process of internal brainstorming, aiming at a full renewal of the parties' brands and strategies. Finally, and despite its relative success, the electoral alliance of the PTB with other radical-left parties collapsed a few months after the elections.

Because the elections were organized simultaneously, the government formation processes at both federal and regional levels were deeply intertwined. In 1995 and in 1999, parties opted for congruent coalitions based on the federal coalition formula. In 2014, the process was reversed and the federal coalition was largely influenced by the regional coalitions. Rapidly after the elections, an agreement was reached by the Socialists and the Christian-democrats concerning the Walloon government, as well as with the Regionalists from the FDF concerning the Brussels government. In Flanders, the N-VA and the Christian-democrats started to negotiate. Liberal parties were initially kicked out of the regional coalition formation. The most important consequence of these dynamics at the regional level was that the reappointment of the previous federal coalition became impossible, mainly as the French-speaking Liberals felt betrayed by the Socialists.

Under the leadership of the Flemish Regionalists, the federal talks led to the proposal of a centre-right coalition, uniting the N-VA, both Christian-democrats parties and both liberal parties, which was however rejected by the French-speaking Christian-democrats. After additional weeks of negotiations, a final agreement was reached under the co-leadership of the MR and the CD&V: the federal cabinet ultimately gathers the Flemish Regionalists (N-VA), the Flemish Christian-democrats (CD&V) and the two liberal parties. The Flemish Liberals managed to be included in the regional coalition in exchange for their essential participation in the federal cabinet. Altogether the federal coalition is quite unique in the Belgian political history. Not because of the participation of the Flemish Regionalists (that participated in the cabinets of 1977–78 and 1988–91) but because of the break of the symmetry that traditionally characterizes federal cabinets (Dandoy, 2011). For the first time, the pivotal Flemish Christian-democrat party participates in the government while its French-speaking sister-party remains in the opposition. What's more, there is only one French-speaking political party in the federal government.

Besides the composition of the parties in the coalition, the identity of the new prime minister remained an important debate. The largest party in the coalition, the N-VA could claim the position, but had too few candidates to offer after its leader decided not to join the cabinet and to remain mayor of Antwerp. Observers believed that the Christian-democrats would inherit the position but decided to exchange it against the position of EU commissioner for their party member, Marianne Thyssen who was designated as representative of Belgium in the EU

commission and received the portfolios of Employment, Social Affairs and Labour Mobility. Eventually, the French-speaking Liberals received the prime ministership and appointed Charles Michel, its party leader and son of Louis Michel, a former EU commissioner (2004–2009).

The new federal cabinet took oath on 11 October 2014, i.e. less than five months after the May elections. Because of the contrast with the previous elections in 2007 and 2010 that required six and eighteen months respectively to form the federal government, many observers believe that Belgium entered a period of 'political peace'. Yet, the presence of the Flemish Regionalists in the federal cabinet created other problems. Two of the newly appointed N-VA ministers made early controversial declarations on the collaboration during the Nazi regime and on immigration issues. As a reaction, opposition parties heckled the prime minister during his opening speech in the parliament, opening a period of fierce opposition. Since the federal government is composed of three Flemish parties and only one French-speaking party, most of the parliamentary opposition is expected to come from this side of the linguistic border.

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The 2015 presidential election in Togo



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The 2015 presidential election followed multiple street protests against the regime, including demonstrations supporting constitutional amendments to limit presidential tenure to no more than two terms. Just prior to the election, Togolese teachers and health care workers went on strike demanding better salaries and working conditions, and a couple of these strikes were met with violence (*Raleigh et al., 2010*). Though they thought it unlikely, analysts raised questions as to whether Togo would follow the example of its neighbor Burkina Faso, in which long-ruling Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign from office after protesters called for his departure in late 2014 (*Noyes, 2015*). As Togo's election results were being tallied,

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