

Editor's Choice: Featured Articles

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On the 25 May 2014 Belgium went to the polls in the Federal, regional and European elections. These elections were historic because they led to a drastic political turnaround: a centre right Federal government took office, with for the first time since 1988 no Socialists on board. In this publication you can read about the movements and motives that lay behind these landslide elections. For anyone wanting a guide through the labyrinth of Belgian politics this is an absolute must-read.¹

BEHIND THE LANDSLIDE ELECTIONS OF MAY 2014

What was the significance of this landslide? In Flanders the centre right Flemish nationalist N-VA emerged as the absolute winner. The N-VA tsunami decimated the far right Vlaams Belang, while the three traditional parties (Christian democrat, Socialist and Liberal) just about held their ground. In Francophone Belgium the liberal MR were the victors and the Socialist PS took a hard knock, losing a large number of votes to the far left PTB-GO! (though it recovered a little at the expense of the Greens of Ecolo who lost heavily).

It was an unusual poll. It is, therefore, interesting to probe the motives and movements underlying these landslide elections. In this publication we take a detailed look at them in three articles which present the results of an electoral study carried out by the inter-university consortium, PARTIREP. This e-book is full of interesting facts about shifts in voting patterns, the characteristics of the floating voter, the N-VA's success, political confidence in Flanders and Wallonia, the difference between public opinion and electoral results, what separates sister-parties, the level of ideological congruence within the resulting regional coalitions, and so on. Here, in short, are the most striking results of that research project. They provide a fresh perspective on a range of currently-held views on Belgian politics:

- ▶ Between 2010 and 2014, 41% of the electorate changed parties. That is an exceptionally large number;
- ▶ In Flanders, these shifts led to N-VA obtaining many votes from the far right and the centre right, and in Wallonia to a splintering of the left;
- ▶ Flemish and Walloon voters are equally satisfied with the functioning of democracy (democratic institutions) and the policies of the last Federal government Di Rupo I;
- ▶ Trust in the regional governments is declining and particularly in Wallonia is much less than trust in the Federal government. Trust in Europe is also much lower in Wallonia.
- ▶ Dissatisfied electors vote primarily for Vlaams Belang, N-VA en PVDA+ in Flanders and for PTB-GO! in Wallonia. The Francophone electorate is less satisfied than the Flemish, but there is actually

no way in which Walloon voters can express their dissatisfaction.

- ▶ Public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia does not differ systematically along the main lines of political debate. The two electorates gave similar responses to many of the propositions in the Electoral Test. However, on a number of others, including labour costs, they were deeply divided.
- ▶ In essence, we cannot say that ‘families’ of political parties across the language border are still meaningful. On the basis of their responses to the Electoral Test, parties of the same family are no longer obvious partners. The Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) appear to be closer to the N-VA than to the Walloon Christian Democrats (cdH). The Walloon Socialists (PS) have more in common with the Francophone Greens (Ecolo) than with the Flemish Socialists (SP.A).
- ▶ The three regional coalitions which were formed after 25 May 2014 are intrinsically coherent (cohesive). In that respect, the Walloon coalition (with the Walloon Socialists) is the best possible. The Flemish coalition (without the Flemish Socialists) is the second most coherent available. It would have been the best possible without the Liberal Open VLD (but they had to be included at the Flemish level to allow the negotiations on the Federal coalition to succeed).

INTERESTING TIMES AHEAD

The success of the centre right Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) and the losses of the Francophone Socialists (PS) created a complex and typically Belgian political puzzle in the summer of 2014. But at least the results excluded a repetition of the scenario of the ‘longest ever government formation’ in 2012 when the PS and N-VA could not reach any agreement and the N-VA ultimately chose to remain on the opposition benches. No, this time the PS quickly decided to make the best of a bad job and within ten days had agreed coalition terms with the Christian democratic cdH in Wallonia and Brussels. Subsequently, in Flanders the N-VA forged a centre right coalition with the Christian democratic CD&V and the Liberal Open VLD with the additional intention of also forming the Federal government with the same parties. After four months of negotiations agreement was reached in October 2014. By Belgian standards this was lightning fast.

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This new Federal coalition government, led by the francophone liberal Charles Michel, is unprecedented. It consists of only one Francophone party (the Liberal MR) and the three Flemish parties (N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD) which are also in power in Flanders. With the entire left in opposition and a very right wing coalition agreement we are facing a clear division between left and right. Furthermore, for the first time in many years there are no elections planned in the near future. In other words, a period of electoral peace lies ahead. At least in principle. Because also in Belgium (as in many other countries) a number of traditional certainties have fallen away, which makes the political situation rather unpredictable. At any rate, politically, the next few years promise to be extremely exciting.

In future volumes of ‘Belgian Society and Politics’ we shall continue to provide background information and analysis.

Endnotes

1/ This is the eighth yearbook ‘Belgian Society and Politics’. It is published by the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld, a Belgian study centre for social democracy and a think tank for innovative social-democratic analysis and policy.