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Behind the Landslide Elections of May 2014

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Contents

Wim VERMEERSCH

Editor's Choice: Featured Articles

p.4

A PARTIREP ELECTION STUDY: THE ELECTIONS OF 25 MAY 2014

Ruth DASSONNEVILLE, Pierre BAUDEWYNS

Volatility: much movement but no earthquake

p.5

Marc HOOGHE, Emilie VAN HAUTE

Public confidence in Flemish and Walloon politics

p.16

Conrad MEULEWAETER, Benoît RIHOUX, Stefaan WALGRAVE, Christophe LESSCHAEVE

Does Belgium still exist in Belgian politics?

p.25

Design cover: Patricia Martin. In Flanders each political party is characterized by a colour: red is Socialist (SP.A), green is Green (Groen), orange is Christian democratic (CD&V), blue is Liberal (Open VLD), and yellow is Flemish Nationalist (N-VA)

Editor's Choice: Featured Articles

Wim Vermeersch

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.

4

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.

Volatility: much movement but no earthquake

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As the 2014 elections approached it seemed as if the stage was set for large-scale swings in which the parties in the Federal government on both sides of the language boundary would lose out to challengers from the left and the right. But all in all, a glance at the election results of 25 May suggests that any upheaval was limited. Although the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA took another quantum leap forward, in comparison with the Federal elections of 2010 the major parties were more or less able to maintain the status quo and together even win an extra seat in the Federal parliament.¹ But was the voting behaviour of the Belgian voters between 2010 and 2014 really so stable? Were there in fact important shifts of allegiance lurking behind the limited swings of the overall election results?

5

The number of gains and losses in the distribution of votes between the parties do not tell the whole story. We must also investigate to what extent individual voters switched parties between 2010 and 2014. In doing so, we shall pay particular attention to the flow of voters between the various parties. Finally, we shall probe more deeply into the characteristics of volatile electors. Do voters who change parties from one election to the next have a great interest or little interest in politics? Do they have confidence in politics? Are they dissatisfied with government policies? To answer these questions we shall make use of the PartiRep² study of the elections of 2014. In the process of that study a representative cross-section of 2,019 voters in Flanders and Wallonia was interviewed during the run-up to 25 May 2014. Of those respondents, 1,532 also took part in a follow-up telephone interview immediately after the elections.

NET VOLATILITY

Although election results do not tell the whole story they do give some indication of the degree to which voters switch parties between elections. In order to quantify such movements, Mogens Pedersen³ proposed a measure of electoral volatility in party systems which is known in the literature as an index of 'net volatility'. To obtain this index one simply calculates the absolute difference of each participating party's share of the votes compared with the previous election. These differences are added together

but then divided by two because otherwise a voter who changed parties would be counted twice, once when leaving party X and once when voting for party Y. On the basis of that indicator we can assess how volatile the elections of 25 May 2014 were.

Table 1 shows each party's share of the votes in 2014 and whether it won or lost votes compared with the 2010 elections. To make use of the data on individuals in our comparisons we have also broken down the share of votes by region.⁴ We have also added together the share of the francophone FDF and MR of the votes in 2014 because in 2010 they were still working together. The comparison shows that any swings were limited. From Table 1 it can be seen that the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA was the biggest winner in Flanders (+4.4%). In Wallonia the victors were the Liberal MR and the Liberal, regionalist FDF who together gained six percentage points compared with 2010 while the net losers were the Socialist PS (-5.6 percentage points). In Flanders the net losers were the far right, Flemish Nationalist Vlaams Belang (-6.8 percentage points).

Table 1. Net swings between the Federal elections of 2010 and 2014.

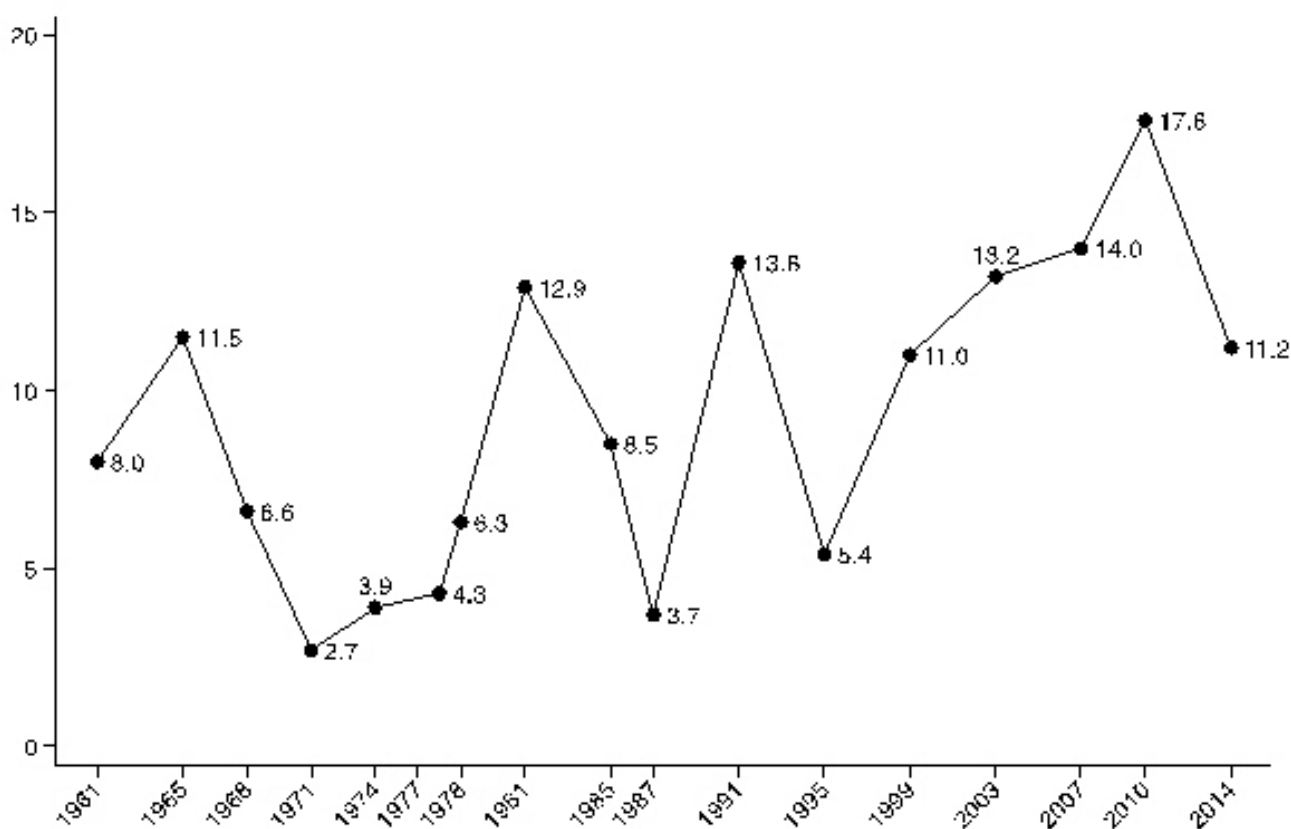
	Result 2010	Result 2014	Δ 2010-2014 (percentage points)	$ \Delta$ 2010-2014 (percentage points)
<i>Flanders</i>				
CD&V	17.6%	18.6%	+1.0	1.0
Groen	7.1%	8.6%	+1.5	1.5
Lijst Dedecker	3.8%	0.7%	-3.1	3.1
N-VA	28.0	32.4	+4.4	4.4
Open VLD	13.7	15.5	+1.8	1.8
PvdA+	1.4%	2.8%	+1.4	1.4
SP.A	15.3%	14.0%	-1.3	1.3
Vlaams Belang	12.6%	5.8%	-6.8	6.8
Other parties	0.5%	1.6%	+1.1	1.1
Total	100%	100%		22.4
Net volatility				11.2
<i>Wallonia</i>				
cdH	14.6%	14.0%	-0.6	0.6
Ecolo	12.3%	8.2%	-4.1	4.1
FDF		2.4%	+6.0	6.0
MR	22.2%	25.8%	+3.6	3.6
Parti Populaire	3.1%	4.5%	+1.4	1.4
PS	37.6%	32.0%	-5.6	5.6
PTB-GO!		5.5%	+3.6	3.6
PTB+	1.9%			
Other parties	8.3%	7.6%	-0.7	0.7
Total	100%	100%		22.0
Net volatility				11.0

Source: <http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

The final column of Table 1 shows the absolute value of all the shifts in the Belgian Federal elections of 2014. Adding them all up and dividing them by two provides a net volatility index of 11.2 in Flanders and a somewhat higher index of 14.1 in Wallonia. To place these values in perspective, Figures 1 and 2 show the evolution of the index for Federal elections since 1961.

Net volatility in Belgium has evolved as a series of peaks and troughs. Figure 1 shows some striking peaks in Flanders in 1965, 1981, 1991 and 2010. Since 1995, however, the index has been constant at a rather higher level, and elections with a net indicator of around five seem to be a thing of the past. However, in 2014 there was a notable fall compared with the Federal elections of 2010. But a volatility index of 11.2 is relatively high and 2014 is still at exactly the same level as, for instance, the elections of 1999 which put an end to the Dehaene governments.

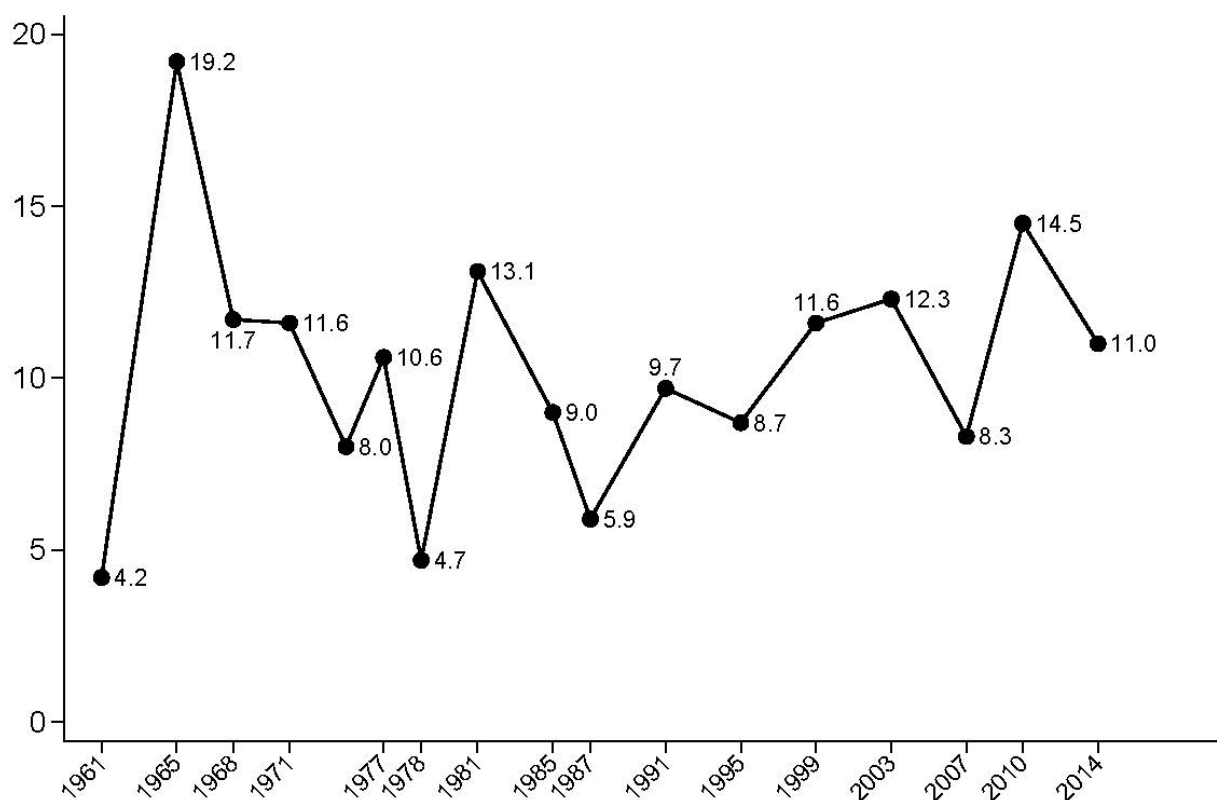
Figure 1. Net volatility (Pedersen index) in Belgian Federal elections (1961-2014) in Flanders.



Source: Deschouwer (2009) and supplemented for the most recent elections from: <http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

In Wallonia too we see high peaks in 1965, 1981 and 2010 (see Figure 2). For the elections of 25 May 2014, the Pedersen index is about as high as the index for 2010, which makes it the third most volatile Federal election in Wallonia since 1961. The body of Walloon electors in 2014 was therefore exceptionally volatile.

Figure 2. Net volatility (Pedersen index) in Belgian federal elections (1961-2014) in Wallonia.



Source: Deschouwer (2009) supplemented for the most recent elections from: <http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

However, judging from the election results and the index of net volatility, the elections of 25 May 2014 cannot be regarded as a political earthquake. For Flanders in particular the net swings between 2010 and 2014 were not especially great; despite the leap forward by centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA.

8

INDIVIDUAL 'SWITCHERS'

The great advantage of a net volatility index is that it provides a fairly simple means of making comparisons over periods of time or between countries or regions. Equally important however are its disadvantages.⁵ A significant minus point is undoubtedly that an index of net volatility does not reflect all the individual shifts. The index can be seen as a record of the minimum number of voters who switch parties, but in all probability the actual number of 'switchers' will be considerably higher. If 1000 voters move from party A to party B and the same number of voters move in the opposite direction, it will not show up in the index.

To track exactly how many voters switch parties from election to election, data on individuals is needed. Ideally, panel (or longitudinal) data should be used whereby the same voters take part in an electoral survey in successive elections. However, because a panel design is quite expensive, most researchers make use of cross-sectional studies. The degree to which voters switch parties is then tracked by asking voters if they remember which party they voted for in the previous election. Because some vot-

ers cannot remember which party they voted for, or because they might want to give the impression of being consistent in their voting, it is generally accepted that this approach also underestimates the scale of individual volatility among the electorate.⁶ Bearing that in mind, we set out to discover how far voters in the elections of 25 May 2014 were prepared to state whether they switched parties after the Federal elections of 2010.

In the PartiRep Electoral Study all the respondents were asked before the elections which party they had voted for in June 2010. Fewer than 5% of them said that they could not remember which party they had supported while a further 2.5% refused to answer the question. All the other respondents indicated which party they had voted for in the 2010 Federal elections. We set this information against their answers after the elections to the question which party they had supported on 25 May 2014. This provided some insight into the way in which voting behaviour had developed between 2010 and 2014.

On the basis of this individual data we found that about 41% of Belgian voters switched parties between the Federal elections of 2010 and 2014. Moreover, Table 2 makes it clear that although voting patterns are traditionally different on either side of the language boundary, the degree of volatility among French-speaking and Dutch-speaking voters was about the same.

Table 2. Stability and party-switching 2010-2014.

	Dutch-speaking	Francophone	Total
Stable	58.3%	60.5%	59.3%
Switched party	41.7%	39.5%	40.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters who had the vote in 2010 (over 18 years old).

Is the figure of 41% for 'party-switchers' a high one? A similar project in the 1980s indicated that fewer than 15% switched parties. In the 1990s it was slightly more than one voter in three.⁷ Finally, a PartiRep election study in 2009 showed that 41% of the voters voted for a different party than they had in 2005.⁸ The number of *switchers* in 2014 has therefore remained stable in respect of what was observed in 2009, but viewed historically and in absolute terms it is a very high level. It is noteworthy that on the basis of this personal data we can see a clear increase in volatility, whereas the net figures conceal this trend.

VOTER FLOWS

Although the actual election results of May 2014 suggest a high level of stability when compared with 2010, the personal data reveal that more than 4 out of 10 voters switched parties between elections. The implication of these contradictory findings is that the shifts could not have been one-way movements but that the extra votes won by some parties were largely neutralised by losses to other parties. The next step, therefore, must be to probe more deeply for an insight into the flow of voters between the various parties.

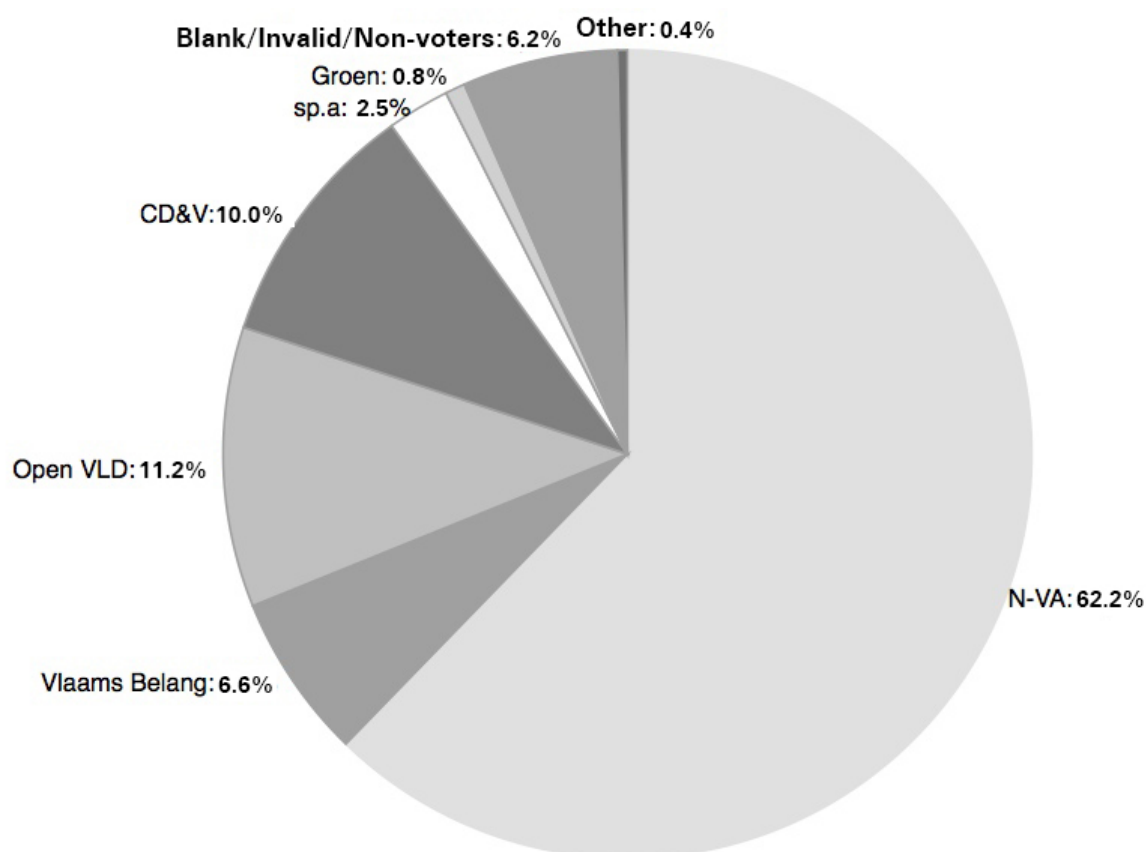
Let us first consider the shifts between the Dutch-language parties between 2010 and 2014. In Table 3 we show in matrix form the electoral support for the different parties since 2010. The figures on the main diagonal indicate the percentage of consistent supporters for each party. Along that diagonal there are two peaks; a large proportion (73%) of the voters who supported the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA in 2010 remained loyal and voted for N-VA in 2014. In contrast, the support for far right Vlaams Belang as much less loyal. Only 31% of those who voted for it in 2010 did so again in 2014 and an even greater proportion (44%) of far right Vlaams Belang support in 2010 moved over to the centre right N-VA. No other party lost voters so clearly to another single party. Only the Liberal Open VLD came close: 30% of its support in 2010 also migrated to the N-VA. A further point to be noted from the matrix is that nearly half the respondents who stated either that their votes were blank/invalid or that they did not vote in 2010, voted for the centre right N-VA in 2014. The party was therefore able not only to attract supporters from other parties but also a considerable number of the 2010 non-voters. If we continue to focus on the N-VA the table makes it clear that the party attracted voters primarily from the right. Only a fraction of Green (Groen) and Socialist SP.A voters in 2010 shifted to the N-VA in 2014. In respect of 2010, therefore, the N-VA built up a grouping of voters on the right of the ideological spectrum. That can be seen in Figure 3 where we show the origins of N-VA supporters in graphical form. More than 60% of them stated that they had also voted for the N-VA in 2010. The majority of the new N-VA voters had voted in 2010 for the far right Vlaams Belang, the Liberal Open VLD or the Christian democratic CD&V. In previous elections the N-VA had grown by attracting support from both left and right.⁹ Now, the party's continued growth in 2014 was chiefly due to the fact that it attracted voters from the right. The personal data shows that 'the right' should be interpreted in a broad sense. Contrary to many assumptions made immediately after the elections, the centre right N-VA did not only attract voters from the far right. Even more centre-party voters switched to N-VA in 2014.

Table 3. Transition matrix - voting flows in Flanders.

	2014								
	CD&V	Groen	N-VA	SP.A	Vlaams Belang	Open VLD	Other	Blank-Invalid-None	N
<i>2010</i>									
CD&V	58.9%	2.2%	17.5%	5.1%	0.0%	11.7%	1.5%	2.2%	137
Groen	8.3%	62.5%	4.2%	6.3%	0.0%	6.3%	12.5%	0.0%	48
N-VA	9.2%	1.9%	72.8%	4.4%	1.5%	7.8%	1.9%	0.5%	206
SP.A	7.3%	10.4%	6.3%	59.4%	2.1%	4.2%	9.4%	1.0%	96
Vlaams Belang	2.8%	0.0%	44.4%	2.8%	30.6%	11.1%	0.0%	8.3%	36
Open VLD	3.3%	5.5%	29.7%	4.4%	1.1%	52.8%	3.3%	0.0%	91
Other	28.6%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	28.6%	14.3%	7
Blank-Invalid-None	6.1%	6.1%	45.5%	6.1%	3.0%	15.2%	6.1%	12.1%	33
Total	18.3%	8.3%	36.9%	12.7%	2.8%	14.8%	4.7%	1.5%	654

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 jaar).

Figure 3. Voting behaviour in 2010 as remembered by N-VA-voters in 2014.



Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 jaar). N = 241.

Table 4 shows the shifts in party support in Wallonia between 2010 and 2014. Here too we see two peaks on the main diagonal. The Green Party, Ecolo, is the party with the least loyal electorate: only slightly more than half (53%) of those who voted for it in 2010 also did so in 2014. Ecolo voters shifted mainly in the direction of the Socialist PS (15%) and the Christian democratic cdH (10%); hardly any of them moved across to the right. Also interesting were the fortunes of the far left PTB-GO! The limited number of respondents who stated that they had voted for the party in 2010 suggests that any claims to party loyalty should be taken with a pinch of salt. However, what is striking is that nearly 10% of the Socialist PS's supporters in 2010 were persuaded to vote for the far left PTB-GO! in 2014.

Tabel 4. Transition matrix - voting flows in Wallonia.

	2014								
	cdH	Ecolo	FDF	MR	PS	PTB-GO!	Andere	Blank - Invalid - None	N
<i>2010</i>									
cdH	68.3%	3.7%	2.4%	13.4%	8.5%	0.0%	2.4%	1.2%	82
Ecolo	10.3%	52.6%	3.8%	5.1%	15.4%	6.4%	5.1%	1.3%	78
MR	14.4%	1.5%	2.3%	65.2%	5.3%	3.8%	7.6%	0.0%	132
PS	6.6%	2.5%	1.0%	5.1%	69.2%	9.6%	5.1%	1.0%	198
PTB-GO!	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	22.2%	0.0%	77.8%	0.0%	0.0%	9
Others	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	21.2%	3.0%	9.1%	60.6%	3.0%	33
Blank - Invalid - None	13.2%	5.3%	2.6%	21.1%	31.6%	2.6%	10.5%	13.2%	38
Total	17.7%	9.3%	2.1%	22.5%	30.9%	7.0%	8.8%	1.8%	570

Source: PartiRep electoral survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters with the vote in 2010 (+18 jaar). Note that the number of FN-voters was too small for individual analysis. FN voters have been included in the 'Others' category.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VOLATILE VOTERS

12

Among academics, there is great interest in how best to define volatile voters. This focus on 'party switchers' is partly driven by a concern about the functioning of democracy. After all, it is the voters who switch parties from election to election who determine which parties will win or lose. It is therefore the volatile voters who decide whether the parties should continue in government or whether a new majority will have to be formed.¹⁰

The variables which determine volatility can be roughly divided into two groups. *Firstly*, there are such factors as an individual's political interest and political knowledge and the crucial question whether their decision to change parties is well-considered or not.¹¹ *Secondly*, researchers want to know whether switching parties expresses a general sense of dissatisfaction with policies, or with a previously supported party, or with politics in general.¹² The data from the PartiRep Election Study allow us to ascertain how far each of these factors characterise the volatile voters who switched party between 2010 and 2014.

Political knowledge and interest

The first question is whether volatile voters are more interested or less interested in politics than those who voted for the same party in two successive elections. To measure the level of political interest of respondents in the PartiRep Election Study they were asked to indicate on a scale of 0 to 10 how much interest they had in politics in general. 0 represented absolutely no interest in politics while 10 stood for a great deal of interest. On average, the respondents gave themselves a value of 4.8. Table 5 shows that voters who switched party between 2010 and 2014 were in general significantly less interested in politics (4.8) than the voters who remained loyal to the party they had voted for in 2010 (5.5).

Furthermore, volatile voters are significantly less knowledgeable about politics. Whereas loyal voters scored an average of 2.5 out of 5 on the knowledge questions in the PartiRep election survey¹³, voters who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 only scored 2.2 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Interest in politics and political knowledge among consistent and volatile voters.

	Interest in politics (0-10)	Political knowledge (0-5)
Average consistent voters	5.50	2.48
Average volatile voters	4.84	2.23
<i>t-value</i>	4.19***	2.85**
N	1.223	1.224

Source: PartiRep election survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 years). Significance level: ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$.

In the election for the Chamber of Representatives in 2014 an exceptionally large number of voters voted for a different party than they had supported in 2010. A simple analysis of the level of political interest and knowledge suggests that this high level of volatility can certainly not be interpreted as the result of interested and well-informed voters making a considered decision to change parties.

Political trust and political satisfaction

It seems very unlikely that those who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 did so on the basis of information about the parties or the candidates. How then can one explain the large swings in party support which in fact occurred? Some researchers believe that party switching might be an expression of dissatisfaction or even an aversion to politics in general. We shall consider that possibility more closely in the light of information provided by respondents to the PartiRep election study about the level of dissatisfaction with the policies of the Federal government¹⁴, political confidence¹⁵ and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy.¹⁶

From the results in Table 6 we can see that volatile voters are indeed dissatisfied. The voters who voted for a different party in 2014 than in 2010 are significantly less satisfied with both the Federal government and the functioning of democracy in general. Furthermore, the average level of political confidence of volatile voters is lower than that of those who remained loyal to their chosen party of 2010.

Table 6. Satisfaction and political confidence.

	Satisfaction with the policies of the Federal government (1-5)	Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (1-4)	Political confidence (0-10)
Average of consistent voters	3.15	2.76	5.25
Average of volatile voters	3.00	2.65	4.89
<i>t-value</i>	3.01**	3.18**	4.47***
N	1.207	1.219	1.191

Source: PartiRep election survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 years). Significance level: ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the emphasis on the potential impact of floating voters in the final weeks before the elections, the net swings between 2010 and 2014 turned out to be fairly limited. Particularly in Flanders the elections of 25 May 2014 cannot in any way be labelled as exceptionally unstable. In Wallonia the index of net volatility was historically fairly high, but here too the shifts were less than the Federal elections of 2010.

Beneath that relative stability, however, there were big swings between parties. More than 4 out of 10 voters stated that they had voted for a different party in 2014 than in the elections of 2010. From previous research, this figure which is based on the recollections of voters is probably an underestimate of the actual degree to which voters shifted between parties.

A more detailed analysis of these shifts makes it clear that election results alone do not tell the full story. Although the Flemish Liberal Open VLD made a net advance, we should note that a third of its supporters in 2010 voted for the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA in 2014. This makes it very obvious that the N-VA not only attracted voters away from far right Vlaams Belang but that its new support came from all parties of the centre and right. In this way the N-VA succeeded in building up a political force on the right which could not be matched by any party on the left.

In Wallonia the swings appear at first sight to have been less one-way. But it is still striking that far left PTB-GO! managed to attract no less than 10% of the socialist PS's numerous supporters. The loss of support for the PS was partly compensated for by an influx of voters who had voted for the Green Party (Ecolo) in 2010.

14 Although the great majority of voters who switch parties move to a party with a similar ideology, switching itself does not appear to be driven by a high level of interest in or knowledge of politics. However, the large group of voters who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 can certainly be characterised as dissatisfied. The 'winners' of 2014 will be faced with the difficult task of making and keeping their new supporters satisfied.

Four months after the elections, a centre right coalition for the Federal government was constructed. This turn-around at government level is not the result of a swing from the left to the right. At the level of individuals we certainly see a concentration of voters on the right especially in Flanders. And on the left, by contrast, there is fragmentation. As a result of these two tendencies there is a perception that the (centre) right won the elections. But in fact, there were few voters who made the leap from a party on the left to one on the right.

Endnotes

1/ http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/nl/cha/results/results_start.html.

2/ PartiRep ('Participation & Representation') is a network of excellence consisting of the leading departments of political science in the country. Since 2007, the network has been subsidised by the Federal Science Policy Office and from 2009 it has been responsible for electoral research in Belgium. The participating institutions are VU Brussels (Kris Deschouwer), KU Leuven (Marc Hooghe), University of Antwerp (Stefaan Walgrave), UL Brussels (Pascal Delwit) en UC Louvain (Benoit Rihoux).

3/ Pedersen, M. (1979). The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility. *European Journal of Political Research* 7(1): 1-26.

4/ For Flanders we have taken account of all the votes in the provinces of Antwerp, Limburg, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant and West Flanders. For the Walloon region we include all the votes in Hainault, Limburg, Luxemburg, Namur and Walloon Brabant.

5/ For a survey of the advantages and disadvantages of the 'Pedersen index' see Pedersen, M., Katz, R. & Rattinger, H. (1997). Nominations and Reflections. The Dynamics of European Party Systems. *European Journal of Political Research* 31(1): 83-97

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13/ Respondents were asked about the composition of the Federal parliament, the president of the Chamber of Representatives, the make-up of the regional government, the number of member states of the European Union and the composition of the Federal government.

14/ Respondents were asked how far they were satisfied with the policies of the Federal government. The categories of response were: Very dissatisfied; Rather dissatisfied; Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied; Fairly satisfied; Very satisfied.

15/ We look at the score which respondents gave in 11 different areas, on a scale of 0 to 10 in which 0 stands of 'No confidence at all' and 10 stands for 'Complete confidence'. The institutions are Justice, Police, the Media, political parties, the Regional (Flemish/Walloon) government, the Regional parliament, the Federal government, the Federal parliament, social movements, politicians and the European Union. Because confidence in each of these institutions hangs together well (own value: 6.05; Cronbach's α 0.91) they were merged into a overall scale of 'political confidence'.

16/ The question was: 'In general, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or very dissatisfied with the way in which democracy operates in Belgium?'

Public confidence in Flemish and Walloon politics

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Results of the 2014 elections in Belgium have often been perceived by the media as the logical outcome of the lack of public confidence in the traditional tripartite Di Rupo government. The prevailing view is that the latter only received lukewarm support in Flanders, which probably adds up to explaining these results. However, the question is whether this perception is correct. This article examines voters' confidence in politics and whether Flemish and Walloon respondents have provided different answers to our survey questions. Next, we try to find out whether satisfaction and confidence were determining factors in voters' choice for a particular party. While Flemish voters could express their dissatisfaction by casting their vote for N-VA, Walloon voters did not have a similar opportunity.

16

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

Public confidence in politics and political institutions is an extremely important building block of any democratic system. When politicians and governments enjoy public confidence, this is clear proof of the legitimacy of the political decision-making process. It shows that citizens take mostly positive attitudes towards politics and are confident that institutions will generally serve the common good. Moreover, the political scientist David Easton, who has recently passed away, says that political confidence, in turn, brings greater stability to the political system itself. The latter is working more effectively, as it has gained public recognition (Easton, 1965; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011).

With respect to public attitudes, confidence is much more important than pure satisfaction. It is, of course, important that citizens are generally satisfied with policies, but such assessments depend on a lot of factors, which is why levels of voter satisfaction can fall or increase much more rapidly. If governments implement or are forced to implement unpopular measures, many citizens will be 'dissatisfied', because they see them as contrary to their interests. But even under these circumstances, confidence can still be maintained, because political institutions are generally considered to be beneficial to society.

Basically, voters can express distrust and dissatisfaction in two ways. *First*, they can simply decide not to vote. Distrust is one of the main reasons for doing so in most countries. However, this is not an option for Belgian voters, as voting is compulsory in Belgium. Voter turnout was about 90% at the 25 May 2014 elections; it has not fallen since the previous elections, although offenders obviously go unpunished nowadays. *Second*, dissatisfied voters turn to opposition parties in great numbers, and to anti-system parties in particular. The latter reject the basic rules of the political system itself and are far less engaged in the usual party political game playing. Consequently, expectations are that mainly anti-system parties will benefit from low levels of public confidence in politics (Hooghe, Marien & Pauwels, 2010). However, the reasoning behind this can also be reversed: from a purely theoretical perspective, it is not always made sufficiently clear which parties are to be considered as ‘anti-system parties’ and which not. If, however, distrust in politics turns out to be the main reason why people prefer to vote for a particular party, one has a valid argument to speak about an anti-system party.

The May 2014 elections marked a crucial moment with respect to public confidence in politics and voters’ satisfaction. In fact, Belgium has been experiencing a political crisis since 2007, with long periods of political instability. Under these circumstances, citizens are indeed expected to have lost a lot of confidence in politics and to be generally dissatisfied with the functioning of political institutions. This PartiRep election analysis aims to verify this hypothesis and examine whether election results reflect these public attitudes.

HOW SATISFIED ARE CITIZENS?

Looking at satisfaction levels, our survey certainly reveals no widespread dissatisfaction with politics. On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), voters’ satisfaction scores 3 on average. In other words, the average voter is not really satisfied, but he is not dissatisfied either (Table 1).

17

The Flemish are sometimes represented as being dissatisfied with the Di Rupo government (since the biggest Flemish party, N-VA, was in opposition). This presentation is simply not correct. The latter scores almost 3.1 (out of 5) in Flanders and Wallonia. There is no significant difference between both regions. Interestingly, our satisfaction survey results do not show that Walloon voters are more satisfied than Flemish ones, although for the first time in almost forty years the Federal government was presided by a francophone politician (Elio Di Rupo, PS). Contrary to the prevailing view, Flemish voters were just as satisfied with the Di Rupo government as Walloon voters.

Conversely, satisfaction results for the regional government do show a big difference. The Flemish government performs quite well, as its score is 3.4. The Walloon government, on the other hand, has a score which is even lower than the one for the federal government. Again, this a significant difference, contradicting regular media claims about dissatisfied Flemish voters. In fact, regions do not differ when it comes to assessing the federal government’s performance. The main difference is that Flemish voters are actually quite pleased with the performance of their regional government (and less pleased with the federal government by comparison), while this is certainly not the case with Wal-

loon voters vis-à-vis their regional government. Also, with respect to satisfaction levels regarding the proper functioning of democratic institutions in Belgium, there is no difference whatsoever between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians.

A similar pattern is discernible with respect to public confidence in politics. Scores are ranging between 0 and 10, and here too averages are around middle values. Again, scores of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians do not differ with respect to their confidence in federal institutions, such as parliament and government. But the former express much more confidence in the Flemish parliament and government, while the latter have far less confidence in their regional institutions. A similar picture emerges with respect to public confidence in political parties in general, with much higher scores in Flanders than in Wallonia. The latter also shows that respondents tended to interpret this question as one which was related to their own regional parties. Obviously, French-speaking Belgians have scant confidence in them, while the scores of Dutch-speaking Belgians are quite satisfying. For the Walloon region, this is really an alarming reality, as Walloon voters express so little confidence in their politicians that they see the Belgian federation as the only possible alternative. Furthermore, the police enjoys the highest confidence levels, which is quite extraordinary as it received a lot of criticism over its handling of the Dutroux case in 1996-1997. Two decades later, no institution enjoys more confidence than the police. Confidence in the European union, on the other hand, is rather low, especially in Wallonia.

Table 1: Voters' satisfaction and confidence survey results.

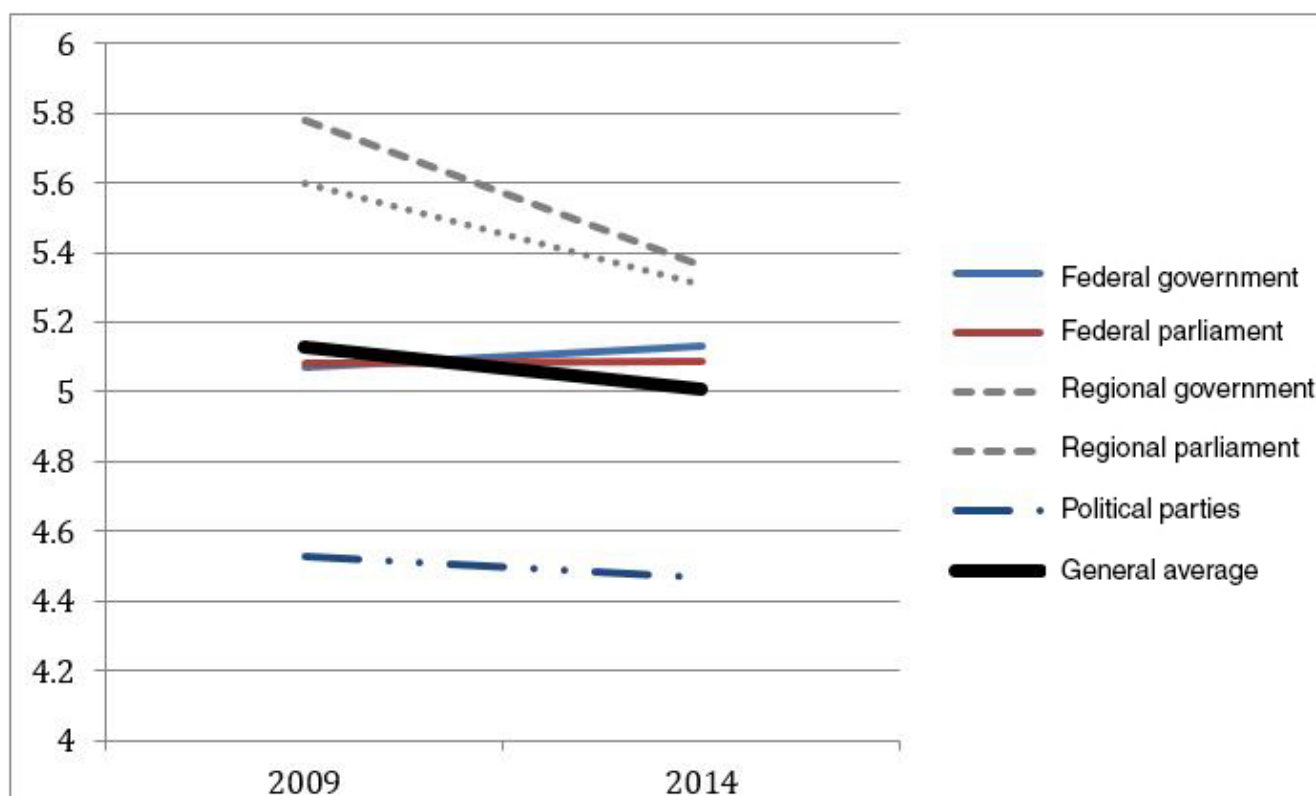
18

		Belgium	Flanders	Wallonia	Signif.
Satisfied with... (Scale 1-5)	The regional government	3.21	3.40	3.02	***
	The Federal government	3.08	3.09	3.08	
	The European Union	2.83	2.99	2.67	***
	Average	3.04	3.16	2.92	***
	Cronbach's α	0.67	0.64	0.69	
	Democracy in general	2.86	2.85	2.86	
Confidence in... (Scale 0 tot 10)	The justice system	4.80	4.68	4.92	*
	The Police	5.75	5.87	5.63	**
	The media	4.32	4.47	4.17	*
	The political parties	4.47	4.71	4.24	***
	The regional government	5.36	5.69	5.04	***
	The regional parliament	5.31	5.61	5.02	***
	The Federal government	5.13	5.11	5.15	
	The Federal parliament	5.09	5.12	5.05	
	Social movements	5.38	5.59	5.16	***
	Politicians	4.57	4.59	4.54	
	The European Union	4.86	5.04	4.70	***
	Average	5.01	5.15	4.88	***
	Cronbach's α	0.91	0.91	0.92	

Thus, the picture that emerges from our survey results shows no vast differences between Flanders and Wallonia. In fact, Flemish and Walloon respondents hold very similar opinions about the Federal political institutions, and for the most part we see no difference at all. But there is one very clear distinction: the Flemish clearly have more confidence in their own regional institutions and more appreciation for them, while exactly the opposite is true for Walloon voters. Perhaps, this also provides an explanation for the different dynamics in both regions. Probably, the Flemish cherish the idea that they (will) benefit from any transfer of competences to the regional level, as confidence in the latter is relatively high. The reverse is true for Walloon voters: they do not perceive the benefits of regionalization, because confidence in their own regional institutions is actually very low. To put it simply: Walloon voters prefer to be governed by Federal ministers rather than by Walloon ones.

PartiRep researchers also took soundings among voters at the 2009 elections. Public confidence in politics was examined in exactly the same way, then. Comparison of the results of both soundings allows to verify how the latter has evolved over the last five years, given that Belgium has witnessed a protracted political crisis, followed by the policies of the Di Rupo government (Figure 1). Interestingly, the 2014 general average is quite similar to the 2009 one, which points to the conclusion that post-2009 political events have not resulted in a decline of public confidence in politics in Belgium. On the contrary, public confidence in Federal institutions (both government and parliament) is even slightly on the increase. On the other hand, public confidence in regional institutions (both government and parliament) has declined significantly. While regional institutions scored higher than Federal ones in 2009, i.e. more than half a point higher, half of this lead has been lost over the last five years. Again,

Figure 1: Fluctuations in public confidence in politics, 2009-2014.



Average scores public confidence in politics(0-10), PartiRep election analysis, 2009 and 2014

contrary to what has often been claimed by the media (i.e. declining public confidence in Federal institutions), public confidence in the regional institutions has been declining over the past years.

ELECTORATE PROFILES

If we look closely at the differences between parties and their electorates, it emerges that Flemish Socialist (SP.A), Christian democratic (CD&V) and Liberal (Open VLD) voters are the most satisfied with Federal policies. This comes as no surprise, since these parties were in government and consequently also co-responsible for these policies. Voters' satisfaction scores of the Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) are much lower, and those of the far left and far right parties (i.e. respectively Vlaams Belang and PVDA+) are the lowest. Differences are far less marked in Wallonia. Voters' satisfaction scores of the Liberals (MR) and the far left (PTB-GO!, the francophone equivalent to the Flemish PVDA+) are the lowest.

We see similar scores with respect to public confidence in politics. Flemish Christian democratic voters have the highest scores, while the Flemish far right (Vlaams Belang) and far left (PVDA+) parties have the lowest ones. But one can identify a clear-cut difference between the latter. Voters of both parties are clearly very dissatisfied with policies. But far right voters have also lost confidence in the political system itself, while far left voters continue to keep confidence in the democratic political system, despite to be as dissatisfied with policies as far right voters.

Walloon results show that distinctions between the parties are somewhat more marked. And far left voters have far less confidence in political institutions. As to that, opinions of the far left PTB-GO! voters are much more radical than those of their Flemish counterparts.

20

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN POLITICS AND PARTY CHOICE

The main question is, of course, whether satisfaction and confidence were determining factors in voters' choice for a particular party at the 2014 elections. We tried to establish such correlation using a 'multinomial logistic regression' model. Basically, it means that we are able to predict possible voters' party preferences on the basis of a number of factors. According to that model, voters are compared to another group, which is called the 'referential category'. With respect to the vote itself, the 'referential category' is the party whose views and ideas are most accepted in a particular region, i.e. the Christian democratic CD&V in Flanders and the Socialist PS in Wallonia. We used the same model to assess satisfaction and confidence levels. First, respondents are classified in three groups, according to high, average and low levels of satisfaction and confidence. The group with the highest levels, is the referential category. The easiest way to interpret the results, is to focus on the significance levels. If no asterisks are placed next to a coefficient, it means that the result is not significant, and possibly a coincidence. If asterisks are placed next to a coefficient, it means that differences are significant. The following example will make this clear: someone with a low satisfaction rating, is 2.8 times more likely to vote for the Flemish far right Vlaams Belang than someone with a high satisfaction rating. Three asterisks next to the result indicate that we deal with a significant difference.

Table 2: Average confidence per party

Party	Confidence (0-10)	Deviation from the average for the region	Satisfaction (1-5)	Deviation from the average for the region
Flanders				
CD&V	5.72	0.57	3.42	0.26
Groen	5.29	0.14	3.18	0.02
N-VA	5.00	-0.15	3.00	-0.16
SP.A	5.47	0.32	3.39	0.23
VB	4.40	-0.75	2.51	-0.65
Open VLD	5.24	0.09	3.25	0.09
PVDA+	5.01	-0.14	2.90	-0.26
Blank/Invalid	3.63	-1.52	2.67	-0.49
Wallonia				
PS	5.29	0.41	3.13	0.21
MR	4.76	-0.12	2.79	-0.13
cdH	5.21	0.33	3.08	0.16
Ecolo	5.38	0.50	2.98	0.06
FDF	5.18	0.30	3.03	0.11
PTB-GO!	4.34	-0.54	2.65	-0.27
PP	4.43	-0.45	2.56	-0.36
Blank/Invalid	3.10	-1.78	2.36	-0.56

Source: PartiRep 2014, average scores per electorate.

Flanders

It emerges from this survey that voters of particular parties do have distinctive characteristics. Let us first discuss the Flemish data (Table 3). Results for the green party (Groen) reveal no major differences, but we do note that this party still does not appeal to voters over 55 years old. Analysis of the results for the Flemish Socialists (SP.A) are even less revealing, as we can actually discern no specific characteristics defining voting behaviour with respect to SP.A. The centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA voters, on the other hand, have highly distinctive features, as they are mostly dissatisfied with present policies and confidence in political institutions is low among them. Clearly, N-VA is capable of channeling public discontent and attracting a wide range of voters. Far right Vlaams Belang voters are even more dissatisfied. The greater part of them are poorly qualified. And while N-VA does not manage to attract many of those voters, Vlaams Belang does. Finally, also far left PVDA+ voters are utterly dissatisfied. Public confidence in political institutions is the lowest among voters who cast blank or invalid votes.

Table 3: The influence of satisfaction and confidence on party choice (Flanders).

		Groen	N-VA	SP.A	VB	Open VLD	PVDA+	Blank/Invalid
Satisfaction	Low	0.951	1.288**	-0.263	2.819**	0.550	2.092**	2.306
	Average	0.415	1.046***	0.025	0.704	0.179	0.554	1.462
Confidence	Low	0.63	1.182**	0.745	0.742	1.093**	0.631	2.407**
	Average	0.135	0.512*	0.248	0.229	0.499	0.728	-0.420
Age	18-35	1.548***	0.732*	0.600	1.388*	1.230**	0.282	1.562
	36-54	1.442***	0.622*	0.775*	0.854	0.999**	0.731	1.145
Education	Low level	-0.889	0.297	0.555	2.625**	-0.170	-1.885	1.086
	Average level	-0.067	0.365	0.340	1.382	-0.300	-0.306	-0.165
Gender	Men	0.157	0.273	-0.089	0.029	0.312	0.119	-0.367

Source: Multinomial logistical regression, PartiRep 2014, N =1001, pseudo r...: .302. Referential category: CD&V vote.

Table 4: The influence of satisfaction and confidence on party choice (Wallonia).

		MR	cdH	Ecolo	FDf	PTB-GO!	PP
Satisfaction	Low	0.779	0.542	0.308	0.438	1.824*	1.669
	Average	0.066	0.254	1.168**	-0.614	1.034	0.877
Confidence	Low	0.683*	-0.055	-0.325	-0.236	0.798	1.228
	Average	0.636*	0.185	-0.11	0.676	0.407	1.183
Age	18-35	0.368	-0.454	0.243	-0.199	0.964	0.713
	36-54	-0.085	-0.696*	-0.335	-1.986	0.927*	0.998
Education	Low level	-1.306***	-0.749*	-2.232***	-2.470*	-0.195	-0.547
	Average level	-0.771**	-0.750*	-1.155**	-1.051	-0.181	-0.42
Gender	Men	0.339	-0.114	-0.228	-0.472	-0.421	-0.418

Source: Multinomial logistical regression, PartiRep 2014 – Wallonia. N=1018. Pseudo r...: .275. Referential category: PS vote.

Wallonia

A similar analysis of Walloon data (Table 4), using the same model and the Socialist PS as a referential category, yields more conclusive results. Party preferences in Wallonia are far less significantly influenced by confidence and satisfaction levels than in Flanders. To put it in a nutshell: Liberal MR captures a small part of the protest vote, while a relatively bigger part of it is captured by far left PTB-GO!. Unfortunately, our sample includes too few respondents who had cast a blank or invalid vote, which is why we could not include that option in our analysis. Again, we see the blatant contradiction between the two regions. The data clearly reveal that dissatisfaction and distrust are far larger issues for Wallonia than for Flanders. This divide has been brought to light before, in previous research. The main difference is that Flemish voters are offered ample opportunity to express their dissatisfaction by casting votes for centre right N-VA, far right Vlaams Belang or far left PVDA+. In other words, elections are providing a way out for Flemish voters who feel (somewhat) uneasy with the present

policies, while there is far less opportunity to cast a protest vote in Wallonia. Only far left PTB-GO! may actually be labeled as a protest party, or even an anti-system party. Obviously, Ecolo (Walloon greens) does not assume that role, while the political spectrum in Wallonia does not include a credible far right party. Again, we are faced with a widespread and recurring misconception about satisfaction levels in Flanders and Wallonia. Flemish voters are often represented as being more dissatisfied than Walloon ones, because they can make such feelings perfectly clear in the polling booths. In reality, the complete opposite is true: satisfaction levels are much lower in Wallonia. But Walloon voters have little opportunity to express their dissatisfaction through the ballot box. Indeed, Walloon politics offer a tremendous potential for a protest vote, as has also been made abundantly clear by previous research. The thing is that for historical reasons no solid political party capable of channeling this discontent, has emerged so far in Wallonia.

CONCLUSION

The Belgian political system has been severely put to the test over the past years, with the lengthy period of political deadlock - the formation of the Di Rupo government took 541 days - as the most striking feature. However, when comparing the results of the 2014 PartiRep election analysis with those of the previous one in 2009, we see that political developments have not led to a steep fall in public confidence in politics. The latter has remained quite steady over those years, and public confidence in federal institutions has even slightly increased. But, we do note a loss of confidence in regional institutions. While the latter were clearly still perceived as an alternative for the federal ones in 2009, scores for all institutions are much more similar in 2014. The dominant feature is stability. Also, when taking a long-term perspective (Marien, 2011), it is obvious that public confidence in Federal institutions has remained steady over the years. There is no marked downward trend.

23

As has been shown by previous surveys, Walloon voters are much more dissatisfied than Flemish ones. A series of indicators systematically show lower scores in Wallonia. Walloon voters are fairly dissatisfied with the improper functioning of their own regional institutions. We could conclude from this that a democratic alternative is lacking, especially in the Walloon region. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the manner in which Francophone political parties are functioning and governing the region, but there is actually no way in which Walloon voters can express it. The far left PTB-GO!'s election success did not come unexpected: Walloon politics indeed offers a considerable potential for a quite radical protest vote. A left-wing party is now capturing the protest vote, but a party on the right of the political spectrum could manage to do so in the future as well.

In Flanders, on the other hand, several parties - centre right N-VA, far right Vlaams Belang en far left PVDA+ - give voice to popular discontent. Analysis of (intra party) vote transfers shows that many dissatisfied voters switched support to N-VA and PVDA+. It means that deep-seated distrust was indeed one of the main reasons why these protest parties were so successful. If the other parties want to win back voters from these protest parties, they will have to address the formidable challenge of falling levels of public confidence in politics.

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Does Belgium still exist in Belgian Politics?

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The elections of 25 May 2014 may be seen as one of those special moments when political 'supply' and 'demand' meet each other. The supply is represented by the various parties, their programmes and their respective candidates, while the demand comes from the voters with their beliefs and preferences. There is a widespread belief that political parties in Belgium pursue a political agenda of their own which is very different from that of the electorate. In the following paragraphs we hope to find answers to three central questions: 1. Is there a single public opinion or are there two separate public opinions in Belgium? 2. Are there still 'families' of political parties on both sides of the language boundary? 3. Are the coalitions formed at regional level (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital Region) ideologically 'natural'?

25

INTRODUCTION

There are many who believe that there is a dislocation between the perceptions and priorities of political elites and the electorate. One example is the belief that many of the so-called 'community' problems are only kept alive by political elites and that there is essentially little difference between public opinion in the north and the south. Relatively recent research has indeed shown, for instance, that in the perception of identity and the agenda of the linguistic communities the gulf is greater between politicians than between the Flemish and Walloon public (Billiet, Maddens & Frogner 2006). This leads one to wonder on the one hand how great the ideological differences between Flemish and Walloon voters actually are, and on the other, how great the differences are between 'sister' parties, i.e. parties from the same political family.

Another widespread belief is that the ideological distance between the dominant parties in Belgium is fairly small which tends to favour middle of the road coalitions, fairly centrist policies and few major changes of direction. We can test this by looking at the ideological makeup of the ruling coalitions, i.e. the ideological distance between the parties which together form the various governments in this country.

Thanks to the PARTIREP project we have been able to collect a more complete range of simultaneous data from throughout the country which has allowed us to investigate these questions in a much more detailed fashion. By means of the Electoral Test (in both communities) and a representative random survey, we were able to collect a large amount of information about the participating political parties¹, as well as about the Belgian electorate. The former were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a list of over 200 propositions. For the voters we conducted a large-scale survey among 2000 Belgians (1000 Flemish, 1000 Walloons). It was carried out in two waves; the first wave was face-to-face before the elections; the second was by telephone after the elections. The data from the pre-electoral survey is used to answer the first question: are there two public opinions in Belgium?

ONE OR TWO PUBLIC OPINION(S) IN BELGIUM?

Many newspaper polls suggest that public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia takes opposing stand-points in respect of certain issues such as, for instance, the monarchy. On the other hand, some authorities argue that there is still a great deal of agreement among Belgians on values and issues regardless of the community to which they belong (Voyé et al, 1992). So is there a single public opinion or are there two public opinions in Belgium?

To answer that question we make use of the data collected during the large-scale, pre-electoral, face-to-face survey referred to above. This allowed us to present electors with 30 propositions taken from the Electoral Test. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each proposition. (They were also allowed not to give an answer.)

26

These thirty propositions, chosen from a much larger number, were selected on the basis of various criteria. The first and most obvious was comparability: the list had to be identical on both sides of the language boundary. The propositions had to be relevant to the two largest communities in the country. For that reason, most of them refer to the Federal government and Federal powers. However, we also added a number of propositions which relate to regional powers and are of importance to both Flemings and Walloons. The second criterion was that the propositions should discriminate between and divide the parties in both communities. Finally, they should also lead to divisions within the Flemish and the Walloon electorates. When only a small part of the population agreed or disagreed with a proposition it was not selected.

So we have a list of 30 propositions that are comparable, relevant and potentially 'divisive'. Table 1 shows the 30 propositions with the weighted percentages of Flemings and Walloons who agree with each proposition. They are presented in increasing order of difference between the answers given by the two communities.

Table 1: De 30 propositions and differences of opinion between Flemish and Walloon public opinion.

Proposition	Flanders %	Wallonia %	Difference %	Category
Some nuclear power stations should be kept open	59.2	58.8	0.4	A (small)
Belgium should invest in a successor to the F-16 fighter aircraft.	36.9	38.6	1.7	A (small)
If there is a national rail strike, a minimum service should be provided	92.7	90.6	2.1	A (small)
A mother should be able to give up her child for adoption anonymously.	65.1	67.3	2.2	A (small)
The government should make contributing to a pension fund fiscally more attractive.	85.6	82.8	2.8	A (small)
Company cars should be taxed more heavily	49.7	52.7	3	A (small)
All nuclear weapons stored on Belgian territory must be removed.	68.8	65.2	3.6	A (small)
A member of parliament may not also be a burgo-master	72.9	76.7	3.8	A (small)
Schools should make halal meals available to Muslim pupils.	29.2	33.3	4.1	A (small)
Great wealth should be taxed more heavily.	76.7	81.5	4.8	A (small)
State expenditure should not increase in the next few years.	86.8	81.5	5.3	A (small)
People who invest rather than save their money should be rewarded fiscally.	65.6	71.2	5.6	B (moderate)
An asylum seeker who enters the country as a minor should never be sent back.	43	49	6	B (moderate)
Downloading internet material illegally should be punished more heavily.	54.4	47.9	6.5	B (moderate)
All condemned criminals should complete the full term of their sentence.	77.8	70.9	6.9	B (moderate)
The president of the European Commission should be elected directly by the European public.	71.5	78.4	6.9	B (moderate)
Young people should have the vote from the age of 16.	21.6	13.8	7.8	B (moderate)
Europe should be able to raise taxes directly to replace national contributions.	37	29.1	7.9	B (moderate)
The Federal government should sell its shares in state owned telecommunications company Belgacom.	45.2	35.6	9.6	B (moderate)
The speed limit on the Brussels ring road should be reduced to 100 km per hour.	55	64.7	9.7	B (moderate)
Those on social security should be obliged to do community work.	82.2	71.9	10.3	B (moderate)
Parents should be forbidden by law to strike their children.	48.8	59.2	10.4	B (moderate)
Flanders should become independent.	21.4	10.6	10.8	B (moderate)
Anyone who has never worked should not receive unemployment benefit.	50.9	37.5	13.4	C (large)
During a smog alert there should be stricter limits on the use of vehicles.	64.8	78.2	13.4	C (large)
The minimum age for the imposition of local fines should be higher than the present 14 years.	58.2	43.5	14.7	C (large)

The right to strike should not be restricted.	64.5	49.7	14.8	C (large)
Belgium should allow immigrants from outside the EU to make up labour shortages.	39.7	22.8	16.9	C (large)
Surrogacy for same-sex couples should be allowed.	70.9	49.5	21.4	C (large)
Wages should be frozen if they rise faster than in neighbouring countries.	48.7	24.5	24.2	C (large)

For this analysis, we used a statistically appropriate procedure² to divide the propositions into three categories (cf. Table 1). The first group A (11 propositions) consists of the propositions for which the difference between the Flemish and Walloon responses was less than 5.5%. Their answers to these propositions were the most Belgian in character. The second group B (12 propositions) is where the difference between the two communities is greater than 5.5% and less than 11.2%. Finally, for the third group C of 7 propositions the difference in the responses was greater than 11.2%. Here the Belgian element in the responses is at its lowest.

If we take a detailed look at Table 1, we see that, on the whole, electors from both regions hold fairly similar views on the various questions presented to them. Indeed they were closely in agreement (less than 5.5% difference) on 11 of the 30 propositions. That group of propositions included socio-economic (taxing company cars), ethical (adoption) and immigration-related issues (halal meals for Muslim pupils). Some issues of principle such as the minimum service to be offered during a rail strike attracted a high level of support from both the Flemish (92.7%) and the Walloons (90.6%).

28

Conversely we see that a number of other propositions, though related to the same issues, are received very differently on either side of the language boundary. The greatest difference between Flanders and Wallonia of 24.2% was in response to the important socio-economic question of a wage-freeze. It is interesting to observe that there can be close agreement as well as lively disagreement between voters from these two most important regions. The same applies to propositions on migration and ethical issues which appear in both categories of greatest and least agreement between the Walloons and the Flemish.

Flemish and Walloon voters, therefore, do not disagree systematically on important ideological questions nor along the great political fault lines such as left-right, unitarism-separatism, authoritarianism-libertarianism though they can certainly disagree on specific policy questions. For every major area of policy we encounter propositions on which there is agreement as well as profound disagreement between the two regions.

If we also look at propositions for which there is majority support within one language community, there are very few where a majority in the other community support the opposite standpoint. In only 6 of the 30 propositions, do Walloons and Flemings clearly want different things. They involve Local Authority Penalties, the right to strike and limits on unemployment benefits, three issues which had already been highlighted by the political parties and the media.

The data suggest that Flemings and Walloons hold congruent viewpoints on the great majority of the

propositions, even for instance on Flemish independence which only attracted 21.4% support in the north and 10.6% in the south.

We cannot therefore speak of two different public opinions in Belgium in the sense that Walloons and Flemings systematically hold opposing views on government policy. But they can certainly disagree on concrete propositions put forward by one or the other linguistic community.

ARE THERE STILL 'PARTY FAMILIES' THAT CROSS THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE?

With a few exceptions, such as the far left Party in Belgium (called PVDA+ in Flanders and PTB-GOI in Wallonia), there are no longer any unitary parties in Belgian politics. Most analysts agree that currently there are two largely different party systems consisting of Flemish and Francophone parties (Deschouwer, 2009).³ Nevertheless, are there still any meaningful 'families' of parties, sister parties on either side of the language boundary? Or are these families now disappearing, particularly since the careers of party leaders are growing increasingly apart and each within their own region?

To answer this question we shall use responses extracted from a sample survey of 262 propositions which were presented to the parties taking part in the Electoral Test. Of course, not every proposition which appeared on line was included in the Electoral Test, and this for three reasons. *Firstly*, it was simply not practical to include too many propositions in an Electoral Test. We had therefore to make a more limited selection based on the parties' responses. This leads on to the *second* reason: a proposition that does not differentiate between the parties taking part is not particularly interesting. If every party gave the same response to a proposition it was unlikely to be included in the final selection because such a proposition would not help to position the respondent in the party landscape. The *third* and last reason for omitting a number of propositions was if an issue had already been covered by others. Furthermore, we had to ensure that the propositions were spread fairly equally between all areas of policy.

29

For the analyses that follow, therefore, we have only used those propositions which differentiate between parties, whether Flemish or Walloon. Furthermore, we have only used propositions relating to the Brussels, Federal and European levels so that they would be comparable on either side of the linguistic frontier. Specifically Flemish or Walloon proposals were therefore excluded since they would only have had responses from their own side. The result was a sample of 124 propositions designed to compare the ideological profiles of political parties in Belgium. First of all, we compared the responses of the parties and counted the number of propositions to which two parties gave the same response. Table 2 shows the percentages (out of a total of 124) of every two-party combination.

If we read the table from left to right, we see for instance that the Flemish Greens (Groen) gave the same answer as the Socialist SP.A in 77% of the propositions, 64% were the same as the Christian democratic CD&V, 53% the same as the Liberal Open VLD and so on. In Table 2 the percentage agreement between parties of the same party-family is indicated in green: from high to low, Greens, Socialists, Christian Democrats/Humanists, Liberals and ethno-regional parties (N-VA and FDF).

Table 2: Distance between political parties on 124 propositions.

Party	Groen	SP.A	CD&V	OVLD	N-VA	Ecolo	PS	cdH	MR	FDF
Groen		77%	64%	53%	46%	76%	73%	60%	52%	61%
SP.A			65%	50%	52%	68%	69%	69%	55%	65%
CD&V				60%	68%	54%	64%	58%	60%	56%
OPEN VLD					67%	45%	55%	59%	66%	53%
N-VA						40%	46%	58%	59%	51%
Ecolo							76%	69%	60%	66%
PS								73%	65%	65%
cdH									77%	75%
MR										66%
FDF										

The two sister parties that are closest are the Greens (the Walloon Ecolo and the Flemish Groen: 76%). This is not surprising since the two parties form a single grouping in the Federal parliament and maintain close ties with each other. At the same time we should also note that Ecolo is almost as close to the Walloon Socialist PS (73%) as it is to Groen, and that Groen is slightly closer to the Flemish Socialist SP.A at 77% than it is to Ecolo.

30

Conversely we see that despite their common historical roots, the distance between the Flemish Christian democratic CD&V and the Walloon Humanist democratic cdH is much greater (58%). But this is perhaps to be expected if take into account the way cdH has moved toward the centre left and CD&V to centre right. For the last six years the two parties have disagreed on issues involving the linguistic communities. But in spite of that, they are still closely aligned on ethical questions. Nevertheless, cdH is no longer the francophone party that is closest to the Flemish Christian Democrats. Nowadays, the Walloon Socialist PS (64%) and the Walloon Liberal MR (60%) are closer.

To some extent the relatively great distance between the regionalist parties, N-VA and FDF, is to be expected. It even seems rather odd that there is a 51% agreement. This is largely owing to their fairly close agreement on socio-economic issues.

As for the socialist parties, the Walloon PS and Flemish SP.A remain closely allied to each other (69%). SP.A, however, is also close to Walloon Christian democratic cdH (69%) and the Walloon Greens of Ecolo (68%) and is closest of all to the Flemish Greens of Groen (77%). Similarly, Walloon Socialist PS is closer to the Walloon Greens of Ecolo at 76% than their Flemish sister party, SP.A.

Among the Liberal parties, MR is the francophone party that is closest to Flemish Open VLD (66%) though N-VA is even closer at 67%.

The relevance of ‘party families’ to party manifestos has now become rather hazy. Most striking is that the two Christian democratic parties which for so long played a pivotal role in Belgian politics (PSC & CVP, now cdH & CD&V) have moved quite a long way apart in their policies. Nowadays it is fair to say that dividing up parties into ideological families is not particularly relevant. No longer is it the case that a particular party is automatically closer to its sister party on the other side of the language boundary.

ARE THE REGIONAL COALITIONS SINCE 25 MAY 2014 IDEOLOGICALLY LOGICAL?

Coalition formation is a classic problem for political scientists as well as intriguing subject for political commentators. Are some coalitions more ‘natural’ or more ‘logical’ than others?

Theories on coalition-forming accept the basic premise of the *minimum-winning coalition*. Put simply, it is in the interest of the parties negotiating a coalition (especially the largest party which usually takes the initiative) to find a coalition that (a) consists of the smallest possible number of parties since this simplifies negotiations and increases the number of government posts per partner; (b) has the smallest number of seats sufficient to provide it with a majority of parliamentary seats.⁴ A further premise of these theories is that of the *minimal distance coalition*. Party leaders will prefer to form a coalition with parties that have similar ideologies.

Have these considerations supplied the basis for coalition formation in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments in the wake of the elections of 25 May 2014? To answer that we shall turn to the parties’ responses to the Electoral Test. We have compared the answers given by every potential partner in every possible majority in the regional parliaments. To do this a list was drawn up with every possible *minimum-winning* coalition in the regional parliaments.⁵ We confined ourselves to the parliaments at regional level for two reasons. First and foremost, at the time of writing the coalition at Federal level⁶ had not yet been finalised. Secondly, the number of *minimum-winning* coalitions in the Federal parliament is much greater and it appears likely that this time the process could deviate from tradition and result in a coalition with a Francophone minority. Indeed, considering the way in which traditions are changing, it would be extremely difficult to list every potential *minimum-winning* coalition at the Federal level.

To calculate the ideological distance between the parties in every possible coalition at the regional level, we have only used the responses to propositions about the policies of the respective Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments. We counted up all the propositions to which all the parties in a particular coalition gave the same response. By dividing that number by the total number of propositions we arrived at a ‘proximity percentage’ for every possible coalition. Parties that had not been included in the Election Test were ignored. In Flanders the far right Vlaams Belang was also ignored because of the *cordon sanitaire* which the other parties had imposed.

Tables 3 to 6 show the proximity percentages. In each table the coalitions are placed in descending order of proximity. The actual coalition is indicated in green.

Table 3: Coalition possibilities in the Walloon parliament (75 seats).

Coalition	Total number of seats	Proximity (number of propositions)	Proximity (%)
PS/cdH	43	44	78.57
PS/MR	55	36	64.29
MR/cdH/ Ecolo	42	31	55.36

In the Walloon parliament only three *minimum-winning* coalitions were possible which limits the possibilities open to the party taking the initiative (the Socialist PS in this case). The actual coalition (PS/cdH) is indeed the one with the greatest degree of ideological proximity. Furthermore, it has a fairly comfortable majority and is partly a continuation of the previous government, though now without the Greens (Ecolo) which lost too many votes to have any claim to be a member of the coalition. For these reasons the coalition between the Socialists and the Humanist Democrats (PS-cdH) is very logical.

Table 4: Coalition possibilities in the Flemish parliament (124 seats).

Coalition	Total number of seats	Proximity (number of propositions)	Proximity (%)
N-VA/CD&V	70	38	66.67
N-VA/CD&V/OVLD	89	26	45.61
N-VA/OVLD/Groen	72	17	29.82
N-VA/OVLD/SP.A	80	16	28.07
OVL/D/CD&V/SP.A/Groen	74	15	26.32
N-VA/SP.A/Groen	71	4	7.02

There were many more possible coalitions in Flanders. The coalition that emerged (N-VA / CD&V / Open VLD) includes the Liberal Open VLD, even though mathematically it is not necessary. In contrast to Wallonia a *minimum-winning* coalition was not of primary concern. Nevertheless, this coalition is fairly harmonious, and certainly more so than coalitions with the Socialist SP.A and/or the Greens (Groen). Of course, in a truly confederal context a coalition between N-VA/CD&V would presumably have been sufficient and ideologically more homogeneous. But it is clear that the formation of a Federal coalition made it necessary to include Open VLD in the Flemish government. Ultimately, a coalition of three right-wing parties (or centre right in the case of CD&V) is the most logical, since mathematically a 'left' or 'centre left' majority was not possible.

Table 5: Coalition possibilities in the Brussels parliament (Francophone, 72 seats).

Coalition	Total number of seats	Proximity (number of propositions)	Proximity (%)
PS/MR	39	37	69.81
MR/cdH/FDF	39	35	66.04
PS/cdH/FDF	42	33	62.26
PS/cdH/Ecolo	38	30	56.60
PS/Ecolo/FDF	41	26	49.06
MR/Ecolo/FDF	38	24	45.28

In Brussels, on the Francophone side, the number of possible combinations was also quite high. The resulting coalition (PS / cdH / FDF) was the most logical for at least three reasons. In the *first* place the Socialist PS, as the largest party, had the right of initiative and a PS-cdH coalition had already been announced in Wallonia. It was therefore logical that PS should pursue this combination in Brussels. *Secondly*, a continuation of the previous coalition (PS-cdH-Ecolo) was mathematically possible but Ecolo had lost badly in the elections and had no claim to participation in government. *Thirdly*, in the circumstances, the inclusion of FDF as a third partner was ideologically the most homogeneous coalition without the Liberal MR.

Table 6: Coalition possibilities in the Brussels parliament (Dutch-speaking, 17 seats).

Coalition	Total number of seats	Proximity (number of propositions)	Proximity (%)
N-VA/CD&V/OVLD	10	32	60,38
N-VA/SP.A/Groen	9	28	52,83
OVLD/CD&V/Groen	10	26	49,06
OVLD/SP.A/Groen	11	25	47,17
N-VA/OVLD/Groen	11	24	45,28
CD&V/OVLD/SP.A	10	24	45,28
N-VA/OVLD/SP.A	11	23	43,40

In Brussels, on the Dutch speaking side, the most striking feature is that centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA is not a member of the final coalition, even though it forms part of the two ideologically most congruent *minimum-winning* combinations. Nevertheless, the actual coalition is fairly logical, seeing that the francophone parties would presumably have vetoed the inclusion of N-VA in the Brussels government. Furthermore, the present coalition is a continuation of a coalition that had previously functioned well (though without the Greens who were no longer needed for a majority). Finally, the liberal-social and consensual profile of Guy Vanhengel (leader of the Liberal Open VLD in Brussels) made the inclusion of N-VA more difficult.

If we consider these four coalition formations, we can conclude that none of them is ‘unnatural’ but that only the Walloon coalition of PS and cdH is both *minimum-winning* and *minimal distance*.

CONCLUSION

These initial analyses, which require further research, enable us to indicate three key elements in Belgian politics. In the *first* place, there is no systematic divergence of public opinion in the north and the south although there are differences on specific issues which can be exploited by parties on either side at times of inter-community tension. *Secondly*, party ‘families’ still exist but they no longer play any structural or moderating role. *Finally*, even if every regional coalition in 2014 were entirely logical, each one is different. There can be no symmetry between the Federal government and all the regional governments. In short, it is clear that the diversity of political outcomes at the regional level has played an important role since 25 May 2014 and this will make consultation and negotiations between the different governments, including the Federal government, more difficult in the next few years.

Endnotes

1/ The parties involved in the Electoral Test were (for Flanders) CD&V (Christian Democrats), Groen (Green), N-VA (centre right Flemish Nationalist), Open VLD (Liberal), sp.a (Socialist) en Vlaams Belang (far right Flemish Nationalist) and (for Wallonia) cdH (Humanist Democrat), Ecolo (Green), FDF (Liberal Regionalist), MR (Liberal) and PS (Socialist).

2/ We started out from the average of the difference between the percentage of Flemish and Walloon respondents who agreed with the proposition. We then subtracted half the standard deviation from this average on the one hand, and added half the standard deviation on the other. This gave us our three categories.

3/ One should also not forget the German-speaking community which was not included in this research.

4/ E.g. in a parliament with 100 seats, if party A has 40 seats, party B 15 and party C 25, party A will opt for a coalition with party B giving it 55 seats rather than go into coalition with party C with 65 seats.

5/ For the Brussels-Capital Region account was taken of the requirement for a majority in both the Dutch and French speaking groups.

6/ We have likewise not looked at the German-language government.

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- Billiet, J., Maddens, B. & Frogner, A.-P. 2006. *Does Belgium (still) exist? Differences in political culture between Flemings and Walloons*. *West European Politics*, 29, 912-932.

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