

# Politics is a Card Game

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*The municipal and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 are now behind us. What did we wake up to the following morning? Which parties saw their political fortunes wax or wane? The first part of this article offers an analysis of these 'historic' elections. However, winning elections is one matter; winning the ensuing negotiations is quite another. Losers, yet victorious. Victors, yet losers. This has happened to so many parties. In the second part we are looking into the numerous strategic decisions that forming coalitions involves.*

## POLITICS IS A CARD GAME

Lisa Del Bo represented Belgium in the 1996 Eurovision Song Contest with the song: *'Love is a card game with jokers and pokers; Love is a match of giving and taking; Love is a card game of queens and kings; Love is a game of chance for winners like you.'* That sounds very much like politics. The media tsunami created by the local and provincial elections has passed. The political lottery on 14 October 2012 received unprecedented media attention. The local and provincial elections promised to be extremely exciting as the political card game had been thoroughly reshuffled after the previous elections in 2006. Furthermore, the Flemish nationalist N-VA appeared to be uninterested in the municipal elections. The party's chairman, Bart De Wever, seemed to be targeting Di Rupo's federal government. The elections would be the first real test of its policies and popularity. It was a strategy that other parties had adopted in the past.

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Although provincial elections are the best indicator of national and Flemish electoral trends, since ideological beliefs play a more important role than in local elections, they nevertheless remained overshadowed by the municipal elections again. It has always been like that. Previously, they were outshone by the parliamentary elections but since 1994, when they were first held at the same time as the local elections, media interest has been drawn to the municipalities.

The big question was what would be the local impact of the breakup of the CD&V/N-VA (Christian-democrat/Nationalist) cartel. How well would the previously junior partner, N-VA, do on its own? The youthful giant had built up an impressive regional presence. Would Bart De Wever's party be able to win over the localities as well? Everyone waited anxiously for the results. What political skies would we wake up to? Which parties would see their political influence wax or wane? The tendency to stare obsessively at national averages often obscures changes at the local level. Furthermore, floating voters create a greater dynamic than one might expect from the global percentage variations between the parties. The first part of this article will present an analysis of these factors.

Once the cards had been shuffled, the politicians could start playing. The media duly transferred their interest to the formation of local coalitions. After all, in the absence of any absolute majority the parties have to sit down at the negotiating table. It is a delicate courtship dance and far from being a stroll in the park. It has to result in the creation of a majority administration. If there is a pre-election agreement - and the voters shuffle the cards in favour of the potential coalition partners - the business can be settled quickly. In fact, there is nothing essentially wrong with pre-election agreements. But an important condition is that the parties involved make everything clear to the

voters, something that they rarely do. Transparency is nevertheless essential. It would bring these pre-election agreements out of the murky atmosphere of back-room politics. It is a pity that parties and politicians shy away from such openness. It would be to their credit and it is, after all, no secret that pre-election discussions take place. In fact it would be extremely unfortunate if the different political parties were not on speaking terms before an election.

Winning elections is one thing; winning at the negotiating table is quite another. Losing but still winning. Winning, yet losing. It has happened to many parties; the so-called 'anti-coalitions'. But there is nothing new about it. It has been going on since time immemorial. All the parties do it. They all want to be the largest, or a part of it, even though there are not often many advantages. At most it means that it is now one's turn, not that one ought to be there. Is it anti-democratic? Not at all. The parties making up a coalition do, after all, enjoy a majority. Although many voters do not seem to understand that.

There are many strategic considerations in forming a coalition. In choosing a partner there will, fortunately, be points of agreement in their respective election programmes. One wants, as far as possible, to present a coherent 'narrative', although, quite frequently that narrative is irrelevant. As long as one achieves power. However one dresses it up, politics is about power. Good personal contacts between key figures in the parties involved are important, as are positive past experiences of being in the majority. In such circumstances the coalition will usually move forward. Unknown tends to mean unloved and understandably so. After all, taking the plunge with people who have little or no experience of government is undoubtedly risky. Another element in forming a coalition is that, where possible, one wants a direct line to the political centre, "Brussels". Very often there may be unsettled business. Perhaps party X once edged us out of the majority group and now is an opportunity to take revenge. It is only what they deserve ... Finally, mathematics also play a role. A coalition often enjoys only a small majority. The fewer the coalition partners, the less one has to share out. We shall go into this more deeply in part two of this article.

## ONLY WINNERS AND NO LOSERS?

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What trends can we detect from the election results of 14 October 2012?

To start with we should ask ourselves whether it makes any sense at all to talk about 'national' trends. Research shows that the motives of voters in the municipal elections are primarily 'local'. Much therefore depends on the importance attached to local issues or the relative appeal of local party leaders and so on. This explains, for instance, why different districts in Antwerp voted so differently.<sup>1</sup> But apart from the fact that winning parties always like to claim that their local victories have national significance, it is certainly possible to detect some wider trends. For those who are interested in national or Flemish trends, the provincial elections provide the best indicator.<sup>2</sup> In these elections, as already mentioned, not only is voting more ideological than in the municipal elections, but the technicalities of the voting system make comparisons easier. For this reason we shall begin our survey of the parties with their provincial results and we shall only discuss electoral results at the provincial level. Analysing the provincial districts would take too long and in any case comparisons are more difficult because of the redrawing of the 52 electoral districts in 2006 to the present 35 districts. In the analysis which follows we shall confine ourselves to the parties whose electoral support passed the provincial threshold.

### TURNOUT

Before discussing these results, let us first consider the turnout. In Belgium voting is compulsory. Failure to vote is manifested in two ways: failure to attend the polling station and a blank or spoiled ballot paper. In October 2012 absenteeism was higher than it had been during the previous 40 years.

The figures show that in Flanders 8.5% of the voters failed to vote, with some areas like Antwerp and Ostend reaching 15%.<sup>3</sup> In 2006, absenteeism in Flanders had been on average 5.6% for both the local and the provincial elections.<sup>4</sup> Judging from the number of voters who stayed away, one must conclude that political participation was significantly lower in 2012, an aspect that has not been given sufficient attention.

Although the figures for blank or spoiled ballot papers are less clear-cut, they give the same impression. The Flemish minister for the Interior revealed that where voting was with pencil and paper, 4.28% of the papers were either blank or spoiled.<sup>5</sup> That number was slightly higher than the 3.9% of the previous elections.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that in centres where voting was by computer there were far fewer blank votes (2.87%). Electronic voting does not allow spoiled or invalid votes. Nevertheless, in spite of a growing electorate, the total number of valid votes in 2012 was considerably lower than in 2006 because of absenteeism.

### *N-VA - 'NEW FLEMISH ALLIANCE' (RIGHT WING FLEMISH NATIONALIST)*

The local elections of 2012 were seen particularly as a test for the Flemish-Nationalist N-VA and the Christian-Democratic CD&V, the two parties that had fought the 2006 elections as cartel partners but six years later campaigned separately in every province and in most of the municipalities. In three of the five Flemish provinces the N-VA succeeded in becoming the largest party. Only in Limburg and West Flanders it just failed to beat its former Christian Democrat partners. With 28.5% of the votes it is now the largest party in the Flemish provinces equalling its results in the Federal elections of 2010. In 2012, they obtained at least 25% of the votes in every province, but the most sensational result was the province of Antwerp with 35.9%. Incidentally, it was only in Antwerp that it was rewarded by two cabinet seats. In the four other provinces it still ended up in opposition.

In the local elections the N-VA also made the largest gains. In Flanders as a whole, it scored an average of just under 23% of the votes. In contrast to the provincial elections, the party was therefore unable to overtake the CD&V which preserved its dominant position. Nevertheless, in 47 of the 308 Flemish towns and municipalities the N-VA became the largest political formation and in over a third of the municipalities it is a member of the governing coalition and in nearly half of them there is a N-VA mayor (see below).<sup>7</sup>

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In the heavily publicised duel for political dominance in Antwerp, N-VA chairman and national standard bearer, Bart De Wever, obtained 37.7% of the vote against 28.6% for the outgoing mayor Patrick Janssens, who headed the 'City list' (Sp.a and CD&V). De Wever has a firm hold on the mayor's office. The party also scored well in a number of urban districts in Antwerp where there are now 82 N-VA district councillors. In Hasselt, despite competition from the sp.a-led cartel, '*Helemaal Hasselt*' [Completely Hasselt], headed by outgoing Socialist mayor, Hilde Claes, and from the CD&V headed by MEP Ivo Belet, the N-VA was able to win the support of a quarter of the voters and become the second largest party. In Bruges, it was feared that they might pay heavily for the early withdrawal of their initial leading candidate, Pol Van den Driessche, but even there they achieved 19.79%. The worst performing N-VA list was in Ghent, headed by Siegfried Bracke, who scored 17.09%.

### *CD&V (CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS)*

The Christian Democratic party in Flanders traditionally dominated the local elections, but over the years it has gradually lost its monopoly and in 2012 even lost its position as the largest party. With 21.44% in the provincial elections it sank to an all-time low. In 2000 support for the party stood at 26.8%. Its score of 30.1% in 2006 (which was nearly as high as in 1996), was largely attributable to its cartel partner, the N-VA. In 2000, the N-VA's predecessor, the People's Union [*Volksunie*], won about 6% of the vote. So the cartel's gains in 2006 were in fact rather modest. On 14 October 2012 the CD&V held on to its leading position in the provinces of Limburg and West Flanders, which lived

up to their reputation as bastions of Christian Democracy, but even there they lost a lot of ground and only just stayed ahead of the N-VA.

The municipal elections were an important test for the Christian Democrats. It was, after all, the first time that the party had campaigned locally since its cartel with N-VA ended in 2008. In 2006 the cartel had worked well in the local and provincial elections. At both levels it emerged as the largest political grouping. The break up of the alliance at the provincial level was not always replicated locally. In some towns and municipalities (e.g. Ieper, Wielsbeke, Aalter, Overijse and Hoeilaart) collaboration between the parties continued and they again campaigned as a cartel. Possibly the presence of national leaders (Leterme in Ieper and De Crem in Aalter) also had some affect.

In Flanders, the party won 28% of the votes<sup>8</sup>, which was close to its score in 2000, before there was any talk of a cartel. In 2006, together with NV-A, it had won 32.5% of the votes. In 2012 it emerged from the elections as the largest party in 138 municipalities (45%) and in 52 of them (16.8%) it enjoyed an absolute majority, rather fewer than the 79 (25.6%) in 2006. Nevertheless, the Christian Democratic party, traditionally strong at the local level, is still holding its own fairly well. Its 134 mayors mean that no fewer than 43.5% of Flemish mayors are Christian Democrats.

In 205 of the 308 municipalities the CD&V is a member of the ruling coalition. But it is striking that the party continues to do better in the rural municipalities than in the regional urban centres where the picture is much more varied. Ghent is rock bottom at 9.1%. In Aalst, under mayor Ilse Uyttersprot, the party achieved 17.3% making the CD&V the second largest party after the NV-A. The party was more successful in Bruges, Dendermonde and Kortrijk. In Bruges, led by Dirk De Fauw, it won 26.6% while in Dendermonde the CD&V list headed by burgomaster Piet Buyse achieved 39.3%. An interesting exception was Kortrijk where burgomaster Stefaan De Clerck won 33% of the vote but was unable to cash in on this victory. Vincent Van Quickenborne of the Liberal Open VLD, De Clerck's main rival, was able to build up a majority in the council with a coalition of Liberals, Socialists and Flemish Nationalists. The Christian Democrats have been consigned to six years in opposition.

### *OPEN VLD (FLEMISH LIBERALS)*

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In most constituencies the liberal Open VLD conducted its election campaign, like the CD&V, without a cartel partner. In 2006, in many municipalities and provincial districts it was allied with Vivant, a small progressive liberal party. Vivant's electoral impact, however, was very limited and the break-up of this alliance is not particularly significant. A poor showing in the opinion polls was followed by disappointing election results.

In the provincial elections of 2012 Open VLD scored 14.5% compared with 18.9% in 2006. The party lost votes in every province. In East Flanders it narrowly lost the race for second place to CD&V. The fact that it again ended up as the third largest party in Flanders as a whole is mainly because the Socialists and the far right nationalist Vlaams Belang lost even more votes.

Open VLD also lost ground in the cities and municipalities. The party has 1,234 municipal councillors and 66 liberal mayors. In 128 (41.5%) municipalities the party is a member of the ruling coalition. In 16 municipalities Open VLD has an absolute majority.<sup>9</sup>

Then chairman, and now minister, Alexander De Croo admitted that the election results were not good, especially in those towns and municipalities where the party had previously done badly.<sup>10</sup> In the municipalities where it had previously been strong or had some influential members, the picture is more shaded. The electoral influence of individual party leaders did lead to favourable results at the local level. De Croo personally scored highly in his municipality Brakel (41.9%) and his predecessor as national chairman Bart Somers did the same in Mechelen (33.9%).

The electoral map of Flanders shows that the party is only holding up in East Flanders, traditionally

a liberal province. It did well in the south of that province (in for instance Oudenaarde, Wortegem-Petegem, Zwalm and Brakel) and the Waas region (Lokeren, Lochristi, Moerbeke). 25 of the 66 liberal mayors are in East Flanders where the party is part of 42 majority coalitions (out of 65 municipalities). Elsewhere in Flanders the picture is much less rosy, particularly in the city of Antwerp where Open VLD played no part of any importance in the duel between De Wever and Janssens. Heading their list was Annemie Turtelboom, a newcomer in the city and federal minister, who won a mere 5.5% of the votes.

### *SP.A (FLEMISH SOCIALIST PARTY)*

Like the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, the Socialists have lost a great deal of support over the years. In the provincial elections of 2006 (in alliance with Spirit) the party won 3% more seats than in 2000, but on 14 October 2012 it lost 5%, dropping from 19.2 to 14.2%. The party achieved its best results in Limburg in alliance with the Greens. But although they broke through the 20% barrier they were still only the third largest party, as opposed to second in 2006. The period of success under the chairmanship of Steve Stevaert (2003-2005) seems well and truly over.

Sp.a's downward trend was repeated across most of the Flemish municipalities. In 2006, at the local level, the Socialists had achieved their best results since the merging of the municipalities. In 2012 it was notable that the party continued to do well in alliance with the Greens. The best-known example is Ghent where their joint electoral list headed by mayor Daniël Termont almost won an absolute majority and in terms of actual seats effectively did so. In other places, the party lost votes (and sometimes its absolute majority) but remained the largest party. This occurred for instance in Ostend, Leuven and Hasselt, where the Sp.a won more than 30%. In Vilvoorde, Hans Bonte won the support of a quarter of the electorate. But in most of the towns and municipalities the party suffered losses. Outgoing mayor Patrick Janssens lost his duel with Bart De Wever in Antwerp where sp.a's cartel with CD&V collapsed after the election and the party found itself on the opposition benches. Bruges was a special case where the top name on the list, MP Renaat Landuyt, won a quarter of the votes and just managed to beat the CD&V, the party of outgoing mayor Patrick Moenaert, headed by Dirk de Fauw.

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### *GROEN! (GREEN)*

With the exception of the province of Limburg, Green campaigned on its own in the provincial elections. This makes it more difficult to interpret the provincial results for Flanders as a whole. If we ignore Limburg, Green only made a modest advance from 8.07% in 2006 to 8.87% in 2012. If we include Limburg, where in alliance with the sp.a and Spirit in 2006 they scored 30.1%, the cartel's results in 2012 were terrible, with a loss of exactly 10%. For the Limburg Socialists, their alliance with the Greens at provincial level was far from being a success story.

The municipal elections, however, paint a different picture. Green is traditionally less strongly represented at the local level but in 2012 it had better results in most of the places where it campaigned. In Antwerp and Bruges, and from Leuven and Ostend to Mechelen. Wouter Devriendt did well in Ostend (10.1% as against 4.7% in 2006). The party also enjoyed success in Antwerp where it achieved 7.9% as opposed to 4.7% in 2006. Its poor showing in 2006 was perhaps partly because the party fell between two stools, being overshadowed by the battle between Janssens (Sp.a) and De Winter (Vlaams Belang). In 2012, Green voters did not get caught up in the duel between Janssens (Sp.a-CD&V) and De Wever (N-VA). The success of its alliance with Sp.a in Ghent (45.5%) has already been mentioned. However, a look at the 2006 results shows that even separately the two parties achieved 43.7% which puts the 'monster score' of 2012 into a more realistic perspective. In Leuven, on its own, the party improved its results from 11.3% in 2006 to 15.5% in 2012. In Bruges the party produced a completely new list of candidates and improved from 6.5% to 8.8%. In Hasselt, the cartel with sp.a achieved a satisfactory score of 33% though this pales

somewhat when compared with the 48.3% which it had achieved six years earlier. Perhaps in 2012 Green simply managed to prevent further loss.

### **VLAAMS BELANG (FLEMISH INTEREST; FAR-RIGHT NATIONALIST)**

The elections of 14 October 2012 were a bitter pill for Vlaams Belang. The party, which had been plagued for some time by serious internal divisions, suffered its heaviest loss ever. Added to this, the competition from the more moderate nationalists, N-VA, did nothing to make its electoral fortunes any better.

The results in the provincial elections speak volumes: the party lost more than half its support and ended up with 8.9% of the vote compared with 21.5% in 2006. Only in the province of Antwerp Vlaams Belang was able to reach 10%. Losses were widespread both in rural Flanders and in the towns. In Ghent its support dropped from 18% in 2006 to 6.5%; in Bruges from 16.2% to 5.4%; and in Mechelen from 26.5% to 8.7%. Even its big names (many of whom were on the Antwerp list) were unable to limit the damage. Under its leader Filip Dewinter, the party suffered a particularly damaging decline from 33.5% in 2006 to 10.2% in 2012. In the city where the party has its roots, Vlaams Belang with five seats plays virtually no role of any significance. In many rural towns and municipalities (Maldegem, Diksmuide, Torhout) the party won no seats at all. The only bright spot came from Ninove in East Flanders where it campaigned under the name 'Forza Ninove' and won 26.5% of the votes, making it the largest party on the council.

## **BETWEEN BIDDING AND SCORING: FORMING A GOVERNING MAJORITY**

After the seats have been divided up and the results have been interpreted nationally, there comes the final stage in the municipal battle for power: the formation of a ruling majority. First of all, parties must look for a suitable partner and subsequently reach an understanding on policy (administrative agreement) and personnel (administrative team).<sup>11</sup> The importance of this proverbial 'round two' of the elections in a fragmented multiparty system like ours, can hardly be overstated: 'the voters deal the cards, the parties play them'.<sup>12</sup> It is even truer now that the CD&V-N-VA cartel with its many local variants has been abandoned and the N-VA has been locally so successful in its own right.

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The growth in the number of parties with seats on our local councils has naturally led to an increase in the number of different potential majorities.<sup>13</sup> The trend has been strengthened by the fact that the N-VA's success has largely been at the expense of Vlaams Belang (a party that has long been excluded from local government negotiations by a '*cordon sanitaire*' imposed by the other parties). Yet there have also always been some municipalities where a single party holds enough seats to form a majority and by-pass any negotiations. Currently, this is true for about one out of four of the Flemish municipalities. Nevertheless, that number is shrinking steadily; after the last elections almost a third of all constituencies had an absolute majority.<sup>14</sup> The decline of the Christian Democrats' electoral dominance and the emergence of cartels and new parties is largely responsible.

So in three quarters of elections a coalition has to be formed. The process of negotiation generally takes place in the period immediately following the elections. But even before that, the parties start to weigh up their options. Research into past practice shows that in at least three quarters of all the Flemish municipalities preliminary negotiations take place. Sometimes these discussions lead to formal agreements of principle even before the polling stations open. Statistics on municipal elections around the turn of the century, suggest that pre-election agreements were a regular feature in about two thirds of the municipalities<sup>15</sup>. In the run-up to 2012 too it was claimed that the practice was proliferating and its alleged victims again complained loudly. CD&V senator Schouppe estimated that pre-election agreements had been drawn up in as many as nine out of ten municipalities and

the N-VA in particular complained about being excluded from office in this way.<sup>16</sup> There are some who argue that the parties should be more open and willing to reveal such agreements to the voters. In any case, pre-election agreements can be viewed as a way of scouting out the land before the election though, in practice, events during and immediately after the election often mean they remain a dead letter. Frequently the proposed coalition simply does not win a majority of the seats.

In general, however, the search for a majority moves along quite quickly. The above-mentioned research showed that in over 70% of municipalities an agreement in principle was already reached during election night. In 2012 too coalitions were formed at a high tempo: four out of five municipalities were able to announce a majority coalition within four days of the election.<sup>17</sup> In most municipalities in the immediate aftermath of the elections there appears to be a clear-cut window of opportunity for coalition formation.

It is in that window that the choice of coalition partners takes place. Political scientists usually view this process from two perspectives. On the one hand, they regard the parties as players attempting to maximise their strength, based mainly on the number of seats but also on the negotiating power which their political ideology provides. Coalition formation is therefore a rational process of choice in which parties weigh up the costs and benefits of various combinations. Usually the final coalition will be one in which no partner is superfluous and/or one which comprises the minimum number of parties required for a majority. In 2012 the first situation occurred in 78% of the constituencies, the second in 64%. Given the splintering of the party landscape and bearing those conditions in mind, it is not surprising that the largest party in the chamber will usually be part of the coalition (slightly more than four out of five cases). An anti-coalition to keep the strongest party out of power is fairly exceptional, but it does happen. Coalitions of two parties are the most popular (slightly over 67%) but in a substantial number of municipalities a three party coalition is in control (just under 32%). Coalitions of four parties are very rare. In a minority of municipalities (slightly over a quarter) the coalition has only the minimum number of seats to form a majority. A larger surplus of seats is desirable for the coalition to be workable and remain stable.

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Incidentally, these figures continue a trend observable since the 1980s. It is striking that this type of 'rational' coalition is less exclusive in creating a majority.<sup>18</sup> Together with the decline of absolute majorities, it reflects the increased range of choice and perhaps the growing importance of other factors that contribute to the formation of coalitions, if only that in many places more combinations of parties are now practicable.

On the other hand, there is a more inductive explanatory model which sees the choice of partner as the interplay of a whole series of factors that extend beyond a simple maximising of power. They reflect, for instance, the history of a party and its experience of coalition government, the perceived inflexibility or otherwise of potential partners, the degree to which the upper echelons in a party attempt to keep control over the formation of specific local coalitions, and various characteristics of the local political landscape such as the politicisation of particular issues. The research referred to earlier shows that agreements in election manifestos, personal relationships and previous experience of a working majority were seen as the main basis for forming a coalition rather than simply the desire for political power or pressure from above.<sup>19</sup> Positive experiences of collaboration or failure to put together an alternative majority also seem to be important conditions for the continuation of an outgoing coalition. However, in Flanders an exact duplicate of an outgoing majority is exceptional (slightly over 8%). A completely new combination is also rare (only about 13% of coalitions are made up entirely of newcomers).<sup>20</sup> That is in line with the incremental dynamic of most multi-party systems. It is therefore striking that the Flemish-nationalist N-VA as a 'new' party has been so successful in joining ruling coalitions. According to its own figures, the party will be a member of more than a third of all municipal coalitions. This puts into perspective the belief that anti-N-VA coalitions would become the norm.<sup>21</sup>

The core agreements which coalition parties make with each other are recorded in a local administrative agreement. As a rule it is drawn up after the agreement in principle to collaborate, although research shows that in nearly 40% of all municipalities agreement is reached during election night.<sup>22</sup> As well as policy content, the administrative agreement usually includes an important section on personnel that may or not be a formal part of the agreement. After all, the coalition partners have to agree on who will make up the respective teams. That applies in particular to a number of key functions in the local administration such as the burgomaster, aldermen, chairman of the social services etc. A pilot study has shown that a number of executive functions are distributed among the coalition partners in proportion to their number of seats (though the largest party and/or the outgoing coalition tend to be rewarded by the mayoralty). The policies to be adopted appear to be of secondary, though not negligible, importance.<sup>23</sup>

Once the shares have been agreed, the mandates have to be allotted to specific individuals. The most common selection criteria are personal electoral support, perceived expertise, seniority and political experience, a balanced geographical spread of the executive councillors and a relatively balanced representation of different social groups in the administration.<sup>24</sup>

Participation in government is not without its dangers. Research shows that governing parties regularly experience electoral losses in the following election. However, the 'cost of ruling' is not exclusively local. Involvement in other levels of government will also be judged. Parties that are active in government at various levels (i.e. the traditional ruling parties) do not do significantly worse in local government than in opposition. The local 'cost of ruling' can often be compensated for by a kind of chancellor's bonus for the incumbent mayor's party.<sup>25</sup> Whether one can generalise about it, we will only know in October 2018.

## A BRIEF POST-MORTEM: CONCLUSIONS

Anyone who thinks they can forecast the coming parliamentary elections in 2014 on the basis of what happened in October 2012, should better think again. Local elections follow, in a diluted fashion, parliamentary elections, and not the other way round.

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The formation of ruling majorities is becoming steadily more important. Although the potential number of majorities has increased in step with the number of parties in our municipal councils, in the next six years a quarter of these councils will still be controlled by a single party. The remaining three quarters will tend to reflect the traditional image of a rational coalition of a few parties, with a small but practicable majority of seats. That picture, however, is less common than it used to be. Programmatic agreement, good personal relations and experience of coalition government complement or even overwrite the traditional criteria for the choice of partners. As a rule, administrative agreements are drawn up quickly and implemented by an administrative team. Party membership of a coalition depends on electoral weight. The choice of specific individuals continues to depend on the number of personal votes they receive. Whether government is rewarding or not, whether the house of cards will remain standing or collapse, we will find out in the next six years.

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***Translation: Chris Emery.***



## Endnotes

- 1/ Swyngedouw M. (2012), Over het verdriet van Janssens. *Samenleving en politiek*, 19, 10 (December), pp. 4-14.
- 2/ Valcke T., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Ackaert J. (2007). De provincieraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Electorale tendensen in Vlaanderen en Wallonië. *Res Publica*, 3, pp. 440-472.
- 3/ Steeds minder Belgen gaan stemmen. *De Morgen*, 8 November 2012, p.10.
- 4/ Valcke T., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Ackaert J. (2007). De provincieraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Electorale tendensen in Vlaanderen en Wallonië. *Res Publica*, 3, 443 ; Ackaert J., De Ceuninck K., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Valcke T. (2007). De gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Evolutie sinds 1976. *Res Publica*, 2-3, 412.
- 5/ Dobbelaere B. (2012). Minder blanco en ongeldige stemmen bij digitaal stemmen. *De Standaard*, 19 december 2012.
- 6/ In the provincial elections of 2006 5,9% of the ballot papers were blank or invalid.
- 7/ These figures come from the party itself and are published on its website. See [www.n-va.be/resultaten](http://www.n-va.be/resultaten), consulted on 18 December 2012.
- 8/ Figures from the party itself, published in *Ampersand*, November 2012.
- 9/ These figures cover local cross-party lists on which Open VLD candidates stood, as for instance in Ardoie (List Groep '82), Koksijde (List Burgemeester) en Kluisbergen (Lijst Gemeentebelangen [Local Interests]).
- 10/ Press announcement: 'Open VLD does an analysis of the local elections', 16 October 2012.
- 11/ Steyvers K. & Reynaert H. (2010). De gemeenteraadsverkiezingen als brandpunt van de lokale representatieve democratie. In Reynaert H. & Steyvers K. (Eds.), *De kerktorenpolitiek voorbij? Lokale politiek in Vlaanderen* (pp. 95-126). Brugge: Vanden Broele. This publication contains reference material and figures for local elections between 1976 en 2006.
- 12/ Ackaert J. (1996). The voters deal out the cards, the parties play them. In Buelens J. & Deschouwer K. (Eds.), *De dorpsstraat is de wetstraat niet* (pp. 49-74). Brussel: VUB Press.
- 13/ The information on the municipal elections of 2006 en 2012 is from the doctoral research of Ellen Olislagers (*Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak*) unless stated otherwise. Her research shows that after the 2012 elections in the 308 Flemish municipalities, 4885 possible majorities could have been formed compared with 3542 in 2006. At the time of completing this article, a majority had been constructed in 305 of the 308 Flemish municipalities. This has formed the basis for our analysis.
- 14/ It was not until the 1990s that the majority of Flemish municipalities had coalitions, see Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008). Hoe oude vormen en gedachten overleven: lokale coalitievorming. In Buelens J., Rihoux B. & Deschouwer K. (Eds.), *Tussen kiezer en hoofdkwartier. De lokale partijafdelingen en de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 2006* (pp. 111-138). Brussel: VUB Press. The percentages relate to those constituencies where a party with a potential absolute majority also effectively governs on its own. In a number of municipalities the majority party increases its majority by working with other partners. We have treated such situations with a 'surplus' majority as coalitions. In total therefore in 79 Flemish municipalities a single party has a majority, while in their 226 counterparts a majority of two or more parties are in power (calculated on the 305 known majorities; in the as yet unknown constituencies there have always been coalitions of two or more parties.).
- 15/ Ackaert J. (1996), *op.cit.*, pp. 53-54. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 115-122.
- 16/ Winckelmans W. & Brinckman B. (2012). Iedereen heeft voorakkoorden, ook N-VA, *De Standaard*, 26 September 2012.
- 17/ Kidr (2012). Ex-kartelpartners N-VA en CD&V laten elkaar vallen. *De Standaard*, 18 October 2012. Of course, the coalition is only definitive at the moment when the nominations are approved by the council. A number of announced coalitions never get that far, having meanwhile been scrapped, modified or replaced by another combination.
- 18/ Boute S. (1988). De vorming van coalities in de Belgische gemeenten. *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 1/2, pp. 138-179. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 124-128. In 2006 the number of coalitions without surplus partners, with the fewest possible parties, the smallest possible majority of seats, or where the largest party was a partner was repeatedly and systematically higher. The first two factors increased by between two and four times the chance that a potential coalition would become the effective one. Olislagers E. & Steyvers K. (2011). Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak. *Burger, Bestuur & Beleid*, 7(2), pp. 91-104.
- 19/ Pridham G. (1986). *Coalitional behaviour in theory and practice: an inductive model for Western Europe* (pp. 26-31). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 133-135. Pressure from above is certainly not absent. Deals are often made at the regional level. Nevertheless, the fact that only about 3% of local coalitions reflect those at the regional or federal level says much about its limitations.
- 20/ In 2006 the figure for the whole of Belgium was still around half and *incumbency* (together with the other *minimal* criteria) was the most accurate means of distinguishing actual from potential majorities. Olislagers E. (2012). Kiezen voor continuïteit? Waarom veel coalities een voortzetting zijn van hun voorgangers. *Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Overheidsmanagement*, 4, pp. 5-17. For Flanders alone the figure was 36,8%.
- 21/ See [www.n-va.be](http://www.n-va.be) state of affairs, 14 December 2012). In total 113 instances of power sharing are mentioned (or nearly 37%). The party calculates generously: also cartels and/or election lists with a local name are described as N-VA councils.
- 22/ Ackaert J., Dumont P., De Winter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 119-122.
- 23/ Doctoral research by Ellen Olislagers (*Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak*).
- 24/ Ackaert J., *op.cit.*, pp. 63-66.
- 25/ Vermeir J., Heyndels B. (2007), Loont besturen? Electorale voor- en nadelen van bestuursdeelname bij gemeenteraadsverkiezingen. *Res Publica*, 1, pp. 113-131.