

The Francophone Parties in Unfamiliar Territory

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The francophone parties are preparing themselves for the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014. Three simultaneous elections, like those of 1999 and referred to by the Flemish as 'the mother of all elections'. The Walloon context differs fundamentally from the Flemish, which has changed radically during the past ten years. In Wallonia the political landscape has been surprisingly stable, more so even than in Brussels. In both these French-speaking regions the four major parties (Socialist PS, Liberal MR, Christian-democratic cdH and Green Ecolo) continue to dominate the political scene. Unless something very unexpected occurs, such as the Dioxine Affair of 1999, the 'second round' of the elections, the negotiations and the formation of the governing coalitions, will remain in the hands of these parties.

LOOKING BACK ON EARLIER ELECTIONS

To illustrate this we shall survey the recent elections in Wallonia and Brussels.

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Wallonia

Here we shall sketch the electoral balance of power in Wallonia, bearing in mind a category that is seldom considered in election statistics, namely those people who are disqualified, or have disqualified themselves from the poll. They are those whose votes are blank or void, or registered voters who fail to turn up even though voting in Belgium is compulsory. Some of them will be sick or incapable, people who are not in a position to register a valid vote. That is a group that one can assume will remain relatively stable from election to election. But there is another group of registered voters who simply stay away or spoil their votes. This group varies from election to election and is politically significant.

In Wallonia the highest number of disqualifications since universal male suffrage was introduced in 1919 was recorded in 1999, but this record was surpassed in the elections of 2010 when the French-speaking parties stated in advance that they would consider the demands of the Flemish parties, instead of systematically opposing them like they had done in 2007 (the four francophone parties had said that they were '*demandeurs de rien*'), and the record was again broken in 2012. This trend shows that something important is afoot in our political system.

If we look at the electoral relationships between the francophone parties, we can detect the following trends: (Note that the percentages are of all registered voters, and not just of those who actually went voting)

- The Socialist PS (Parti Socialiste), in the lead since 1919, achieved an average of 32.3% of registered voters between 1981 and 1995 but since 1999 has dropped to an average of 27.8%.

Table 1: Election results in the Walloon region since 1999.

%	Fed. 99	Prov. 2000	Fed. 03	Wall. 04	Prov. 2006	Fed. 07	Wall.09	Fed.10	Prov. 2012
PS	23,8%	30,5%	30,4%	30,8%	27,3%	24,8%	26,9%	30,6%	25,4%
cdH	13,7%	16,1%	12,8%	14,7%	16,0%	13,2%	13,3%	11,9%	13,5%
MR	20,2%	20,1%	23,7%	20,3%	23,1%	26,2%	19,2%	18,1%	22,0%
Ecolo	14,9%	12,2%	6,2%	7,1%	10,4%	10,7%	15,2%	10,0%	10,5%
Far right	4,4%	2,4%	5,3%	7,3%	4,7%	5,3%	3,7%	3,0%	1,3%
Other	4,5%	4,0%	5,1%	3,3%	2,8%	3,7%	3,8%	7,8%	6,8%
'Off side'	18,5%	14,9%	16,4%	16,4%	15,6%	15,3%	17,8%	18,7%	20,5%

- In second place is the Liberal MR (Mouvement réformateur) with averages of 18.4% and 21.4% for the same periods. In other words, whereas PS has declined in the last thirty years, the trend for MR has been upward.

- The Christian-democratic cdH (Centre démocrate humaniste; formerly the Christian Social Party) has declined from an average of 19.4% in the 1980s and 1990s to 13.9% in the past 13 years.

- The Green Party, Ecolo, has been more stable than one might expect of a party which is scarcely 30 years old. Between 1981 and 1995 it scored an average of 7.9%, but since 1999 has risen to 10.8%.

- The 'disqualified' category was the fourth highest numerically between 1981 and 1985 when it stood at 15.1%. Since 1999 it has risen to third place with an average of 17.1%.

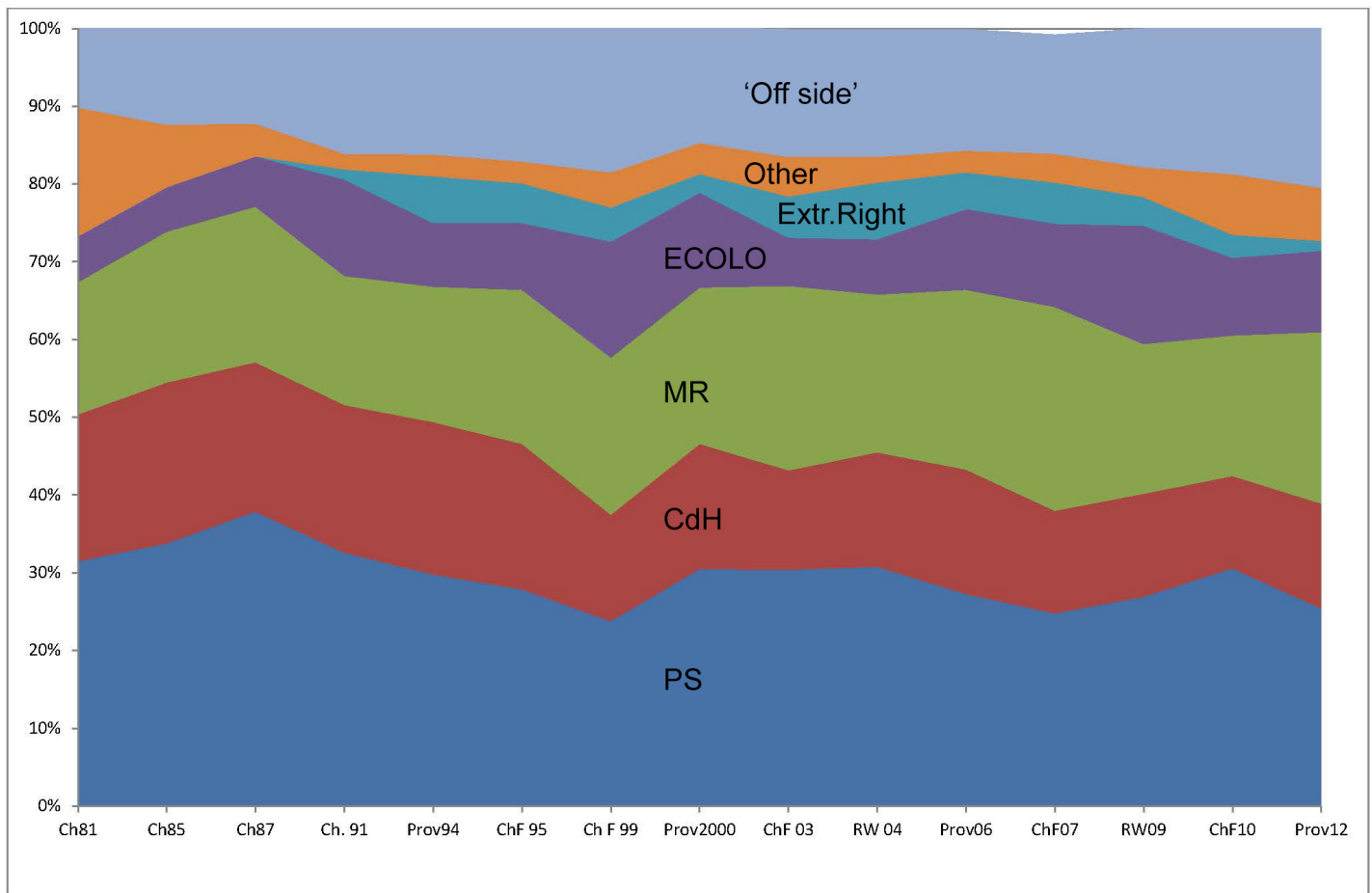
- The various extreme right-wing lists remained below the threshold of 5% of registered voters during both periods, while the other small parties achieved 6.1% (mainly because the Walloon Rally and the Belgian Communist Party lost their parliamentary representation) and 4.7% for the two periods.

The provincial elections of 2012

Table 1 provides more information than just the averages. One can clearly see that the provincial elections, which political scientist Vincent de Coorebyter described as 'chemically pure' because of their lack of any obvious conflict issues, any well-known leaders or any specific programme, serve as a warning or as a transition between two elections where much more is at stake. So the provincial elections of 2000 show that the PS had recovered from its defeat in 1999, and that Ecolo had again lost some support. 2006 shows that the PS is in decline and that the MR is gaining support, as is Ecolo. The provincial elections of 2012, as yet insufficiently analysed, show that the PS and MR are separated by a mere 3% (as happened in the mid-2000s), that the cdH still trail Ecolo by 3%, and that disqualified voters are back in third place (they had been second in 2010!).

Moreover, a closer look at the 2012 provincial elections also shows the emergence of new political groupings in Wallonia which might, who knows, be the harbinger of a more volatile political landscape. The Pirate Party attracted 69,764 votes (or 2.8% of registered voters) which is a very respectable result for a first election. The Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB), left of the PS, won 54,932 votes, or 2.2% of registered voters, while the FDF (Francophone Democratic Federalists, FDF, once an ally of the MR) was relatively successful in establishing its presence with 47,782 votes, or 1.9% of registered voters. The four traditional parties in Wallonia are now not only competing against each other but also with newcomers who might possibly break through in 2014.

Graph 1: Election results in Wallonia since the creation of the region.



In Table 2 one can trace the electoral behaviour of voters in Brussels since the formation of the Brussels Capital Region in 1989. Here disqualified voters averaged 21.1% which is higher than in Wallonia.¹ The most important party in the past thirty years has been the MR, between 1995 and 2011 in alliance with the FDF. The original PRL-FDF cartel, which was succeeded by the MR, averaged 22.8%. Behind them is the Socialist PS with 18%, the Green party Ecolo with 10.1% and the Christian-democratic cdH with 9.2%. The average for the combined Flemish lists in the Brussels Capital Region was 10.5% while the remaining francophone lists were below 8.3%.

The overview provided by Table 2 cannot disguise the developments of the past few years. In 2004 the PS succeeded in overthrowing the MR, which won back its dominant position in 2007 after a campaign that also gave them the leadership of the walloon region. The 2010 elections narrowed the gap between the two main parties, and heightened their rivalry. The battle for third place throughout this period was between the Christian Democrats on the one side and the Green party Ecolo on the other. Electoral competition in Brussels is fierce and the results uncertain, especially since the FDF and MR broke up in 2011.

At the federal level between 2007 and 2010, support for the PS rose from 724,787 to 894,543 votes (from 20 to 26 seats), whereas the MR moved in the opposite direction from 835,073 to 605,617 votes, or from 23 to 18 seats. During the same period, both the cdH and Ecolo lost votes, though Ecolo retained its 8 seats while cdH dropped from 10 seats to 9. During this time the number of disqualified voters in Belgium as a whole rose by 269,304 (from 12.4% to 15.7%).

Table 2: Voting behaviour in Brussels since the region was created.

%	R° 1989	R° 1995	R° 1999	R° 2004	2007 Fed	R° 2009	2010 Fed
PS	16,5%	16,4%	12,6%	23,1%	17,5%	18,7%	21,2%
cdH	8,9%	7,1%	6,2%	9,8%	11,8%	10,5%	9,7%
MR	14,2%	26,9%	27,0%	22,5%	26,0%	21,2%	21,6%
Ecolo	7,7%	6,9%	14,3%	6,7%	11,3%	14,4%	9,5%
Flemish lists	11,5%	11,3%	11,1%	11,1%	9,5%	9,0%	9,8%
Other Francophone	16,3%	8,1%	7,2%	7,2%	5,3%	6,3%	7,9%
'Disqualified'	24,8%	23,2%	21,6%	19,6%	18,6%	19,9%	20,3%

THE LONG RUN-UP TO 2014

The vulnerability of the political parties in the face of an increasingly volatile voting public does nothing to simplify their electoral preparations. But that is the context in which the francophone parties have to ready themselves in 2014 to redistribute the balance of power in the regions and municipalities, to participate in the formation of a federal government and to have some input at the European level, however little that may be.

In a system of proportional representation practically every party has to accept that the elections themselves are a kind of 'first round' which establishes the new distribution of seats in the various parliaments. The 'second round' is the formation of a governing majority based on the results of the first round. An excessively aggressive election campaign can raise barriers to participation in the coalition negotiations nevertheless absolute vetoes rarely occur. Politicians are conflict professionals who know that they will often have to make alliances with erstwhile opponents either within their own party or in government. Even before the campaign starts, discrete pre-election agreements are made. And it regularly happens that parties make alliances with different partners, which then depend on the outcome of the elections.

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The political programmes

The party programmes for these elections have not yet been fully worked out at the different levels. The procedures will be decided before the end of 2013. Depending on the degree of transparency, party members will be called upon, either individually or collectively, locally or through federations, to work on the draft versions to be put to the party's executive committee. In most parties, drawing up the programme is considered to be a fundamentally democratic occasion, important for the internal workings of the party and the motivation of activists and officials.² In other parties, these procedures may be regarded as a formality designed primarily to attract voters. Here one can see the difference between mass parties and cadre parties such as the Liberal MR, which since its formation in 1846 has never concerned itself greatly with strict procedures and detailed programmes.

These programmes will be subject to the politics of budgetary consolidation to which all the parties have subscribed at every level. To reject financial restraint, which has been imposed externally, would be too provocative a denial of the political realities facing society since the banking crisis of 2008. Those who want to reduce the role of the state will be most insistent on continued restraint. Those who are closest to the workers' organisations will argue that it is time to bring this period of financial constraint to a close. In the election campaign, reference will be made either to the ultra-liberal economists who dominate the international institutions, or to Social Democrats who are popular among supporters of the Rhineland Model of the social market economy.

Another common characteristic of the francophone parties is that they have replaced their executive committees. In some parties this signifies a break with the previous leadership, while with others there is continuity and the retention of leading political officers. These differences in degrees of internal tension within the parties are not always easy to gauge. Naturally, every chairman has his own style, but in some parties there is a strong desire to monopolise the levers of internal power in order to prevent the return of one's predecessors.

One more characteristic shared by the francophone parties, which has been a feature of the Flemish parties for some years now, is the use of new technology and social networking by candidates. The down-side of this interactivity will soon become apparent. This means of communication hampers the practice of discrete negotiation for the medium term. The pressure from voters who have no special education in Belgian political economy, increases the difficulties of managing the system in a coherent fashion.

The federal level

If we ignore the separate role of the European Parliament, seeing that their delegates in Brussels and Strasbourg will have little influence, the francophone parties are preparing for elections and power-sharing at two levels in 2014: the federal level, and the level of the regions and municipalities.

At the federal level, the basic principle of the francophone parties, with the exception of the Liberal MR, is to form a government without the Flemish nationalist N-VA of Bart De Wever if at all possible, but with them if necessary. The three francophone parties (PS, cdH, Ecolo) who together, if not always harmoniously, form the governing coalition in Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region are less separated from each other on socio-economic matters than any of them are from the MR (which is a member of the federal coalition). This ideological affinity is not *a priori* exclusive, but it makes it easier to reach agreements and make government decisions. It also enables them to oppose the N-VA and show the voters the political excesses from which they have been rescued.

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As for the MR, as in 2006 its leader Didier Reynders can use the N-VA's anti-Socialist views to back up his own message and breathe new life into his desire to shift the political balance of power in Wallonia to the right. However, the dynamic has changed. In the period when political favouritism and corruption in some Hainault constituencies led to the electoral defeat of the PS, the MR had the wind in its sails and its alliance with the FDF seemed very secure. But the bickering between the FDF and MR during the Brussels municipal council elections in 2012 inevitably raised questions about the Brussels branch of the MR. During the summer months, the francophone press regularly reported contacts between supporters of the MR and the N-VA, though that does not necessarily imply an alliance at any cost. Smoothing the rough edges off political programmes, moderating the 'belgianism' of some leading francophone politicians on the one hand and the more extreme urge for independence on the other in order to achieve some degree of socio-economic agreement, building a common desire for neo-liberal policies that favour employers more than the trade unions: all take time. Furthermore, it does not necessarily lead to a successful political programme nor to a place in government.

The other francophone parties who are more inclined to defend existing social achievements, are apprehensive about the election results in Flanders. On the one hand, they try to remain neutral in Flemish debates where the N-VA calls the tune, but on the other they need to counter the N-VA when it moves on to federal matters. At this moment, the various political groupings do not see a need to re-establish an explicit francophone front. In fact, as in 2010, the francophone parties do not seem to be able to agree on a common approach. But neither do they give the impression of wanting to make clear to the voters or their future partners how far they are prepared to negotiate over confederalism. It is understandable that they are reluctant to provide opponents with ammunition, but it does not

help the cause of democratic transparency. The four francophone parties are trying to hurry along voting on their agreements in order to hold up the N-VA and also to show that they have made more concessions to their Flemish coalition partners than could ever have been expected from the N-VA in 2010. Nevertheless, Flemish public opinion, under the persuasive influence of the N-VA who dismiss the achievements of others as worthless, might still be critical of the institutional and socio-economic compromises reached. Although in the fall of 2013 the N-VA seems to have lost some momentum. Furthermore, consultation between the sister-parties across the language divide has been much less regular since 2007.

The regional level

At the regional level all coalitions seem to be possible, from the renewal of the 'olive tree coalitions' of PS, Ecolo and cdH on the left, to the centrist-Blue of MR and cdH on the centre right, with every conceivable combination in between. Since Ecolo has become a party to various coalitions, one thing is obvious: the four major parties have made it quite clear that they want to participate in the 'second round'. Suggestions from some big names and activists that a spell in opposition would do no harm are declared out of order. One does not (yet) hear any call to return to one's roots or to the party's core values. The leaders of the francophone political parties want to have a say at every level. At the federal level, to prevent any further dismantling of what remains of the welfare state, and in the regions, to manage the new and important powers which the sixth constitutional reform has transferred to these entities.

FINALLY

On the eve of these three simultaneous elections, the francophone parties find themselves in unknown territory. Where previously it used to be the victorious Flemish party that led government negotiations and the federal government, since the rise of the N-VA this is no longer inevitable. At the federal level no-one is certain about what game is being played. However, at the regional and municipal levels the roles are more firmly established and the parties can claim those roles by virtue of the voters' verdict, even though the latest constitutional reform might require a couple of new chapters. And that leaves the European level, but there the demographic balance recommends a degree of (Belgian) modestness.

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Endnotes

1/ From 1919 to 2007 the average number of disqualified voters averaged 12% in Flanders, 13.5% in Wallonia and 15% in Brussels. See Pierre Verjans, 'Mutation des systèmes partisans et résultats électoraux. Proportion congrue et gouvernabilité' in Beaufays, Matagne, *La Belgique en mutation. Systèmes politiques et politiques publiques (1968-2008)*, Bruylant, 2009, pp. 56-58. This category has been growing in recent decades.

2/ The statutes of the PS and Ecolo, both mass parties, are to be found on their websites together with their procedures for the run-up to elections.