

# Editor's Choice: Featured Articles Belgian Society and Politics 2013 - As Ever, in Between Elections

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*If you are able to understand Belgium, then you should be able to understand any political system anywhere on the planet. Belgium is a multinational democracy, a bipolar state without federal parties, without federal elections, without federal media ...and in the heart of the EU. That makes things rather complicated. Analyzing the local and provincial elections of 2012 and looking forward to the federal, regional and European elections of 2014, this Yearbook provides you with the necessary tools to find your way through the somewhat surrealist Belgian politics. Welcome and enjoy.*

## DI RUPO I ADMINISTRATION

In earlier editions, we have called Belgium a no-man's land between fact and fiction, a cold turkey of pragmatism and the sophist's nirvana. Since 1970 there has been a succession of constitutional reforms, complicated operations that have, on several occasions, nevertheless proved useful. They have even officially rebuilt Belgium into a federal state. The last few years we witnessed a major breach between the linguistic regions. The federal elections of June 2010 caused an electoral earthquake in Flanders: for the first time in living memory the three traditional political parties together failed to attract 50% of the vote, and the Flemish nationalist N-VA became by far the largest political party. Only in December 2011 the Di Rupo I administration (a coalition of 6 parties of Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats on both sides of the linguistic frontier) took office, closing a deal on the sixth state reform and marking the end to the longest ever government formation. This coalition government does not include the biggest party in Flanders (N-VA) and does not have a majority on the Flemish side (usually the case). Even for a politically bizarre country like Belgium, it is an unfamiliar situation. But it seems to be working: in the past two years the Di Rupo administration has built a remarkable confidence. The three Flemish governing parties are hoping it will suffice to withstand the Flemish nationalist storm in the triple 2014 elections.

## NON-STOP ELECTION FEVER

The local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 were seen by some as a mid-term election in the federal parliamentary term of 2010-2014. In 2013, as ever, we find ourselves in between elections. The election fever continuously grips the nation. It led writer and historian David Van Reybrouck to write a provocative pamphlet about this democratic fatigue syndrom (*Tegen verkiezingen* [*Against Elections*], 2013). He lashes out against the paralyzing effect of the many elections we hold, which hamper, not facilitate, our system of representative democracy. He has a point. Ever since September 2011 we read the first reports in the media about the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012. And as of 15 October 2012, parties kicked off their campaign for the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014. It is needless to say it makes governing extremely difficult for the Flemish Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats (in power at the federal level). They are in a constant state of electoral nervousness.

For journalists and commentators, of course, these are interesting times. In this publication we have gathered articles of Belgium's finest political scientists, on both sides of the linguistic frontier, in which the big trends of the 2012 elections are outlined and the political divisions of the upcoming 2014 elections are examined. As in previous editions of this Yearbook, special attention will be paid to the Socialists of the Flemish Sp.a and the Francophone PS. Although both are partners in the government (the PS, for the first time since 1973 was even able to deliver the prime minister, Elio Di Rupo), their respective situation is beyond comparison: in Flanders the Sp.a has become a small party (which, through their ministers, punches above its electoral weight), whereas the PS has been the biggest player in Wallonia for decades.

## LOOKING BACK AT THE LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

What trends can we detect from the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012? **Koenraad De Ceuninck, Ellen Olislagers, Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers** and **Tony Valcke**, in *Politics is a Card Game*, analyse party per party how they performed. These elections 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 local elections as cartel partners but six years later campaigned separately in every province and in most of the municipalities. 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. In three of the five Flemish provinces N-VA succeeded in becoming the largest party. Only in Limburg and West Flanders it just failed to beat its former Christian-democrat partners. Liberal Open VLD lost votes in every province. Socialist Sp.a's downward trend was repeated across most of the Flemish municipalities. In 2006 the Socialists had achieved their best results since the merging of the municipalities (1976), but in 2012 the party could only do well in alliance with the Greens. The best-known example is Ghent. For the extreme right Vlaams Belang the 2012 elections were a bitter pill. Plagued by internal divisions and confronted with competition from the more moderate nationalists of the N-VA, the party suffered its heaviest losses ever. The Greens made a modest advance.

The most important swing was of course the breakthrough of the Flemish nationalist N-VA in the municipalities. **Ruth Dassonneville** and **Marc Hooghe** discuss where these new N-VA voters came from, why they chose N-VA and how they could be characterized. *Determinants of Electoral Volatility. Where Did the N-VA Find its Local Support?* argues that N-VA supporters fit the typical profile of the volatile voter: dissatisfied, with little interest in and distrustful of politics, including local government. National issues were barely mentioned by N-VA voters, but the latter were certainly dissatisfied with their local councils. Contrary to what is often assumed, the party also attracted support from the left side of the political spectrum. During the 2012 election campaign, the Flemish Nationalists announced that these elections would be a referendum on the performance of the Di Rupo tripartite government (of which N-VA is not a part). There is, however, no trace of this in the responses to the exit poll survey of Dassonneville and Hooghe.

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This 'referendum argument' was one of the reasons why such a huge amount of time and energy was spent on predicting the local 2012 elections. Looking back at it now, we can see that much of the excitement was quite unnecessary, claims **Marc Hooghe** in *Political Parties in the Trenches*. On the whole the local elections followed national trends. Despite the shaky start of the Di Rupo government, some sort of stability seems to have returned to Belgian politics, but this does not seem to have made the slightest impression on the voters who continued to cast their votes as they had in June 2010. Those who were then convinced that the N-VA would bring about change still believe so, while those who then believed that political parties would, at last, take responsibility for governing the country, also still do so. At present, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. In order to detect the real historical significance of the local 2012 elections, according to Hooghe, one should look at what happened in the smaller cities like Bruges and Kortrijk. These were the last genuine regional centres where the mayor was a Christian Democrat and where they lost city hall. Christian Democrats must recognise that they have lost touch with modern urban culture.

The electoral impact of the 2012 elections in Antwerp, Flanders biggest city and battlefield of N-VA chairman Bart De Wever, cannot be underestimated. Disregarding the WOII years, in 2012 Socialists have been a member of the ruling coalition for 91 years. Since 1932 (so for 80 years) they had served as mayor of Antwerp. The city elections of 2006 were a battle between the ruling Socialist mayor Patrick Janssens and Filip Dewinter from the extreme right party Vlaams Belang (former Vlaams Blok). Janssens and the Sp.a won the 2006 election by a margin. In 2012 the battle was between the so-called City List (of Socialists and Christian Democrats) and the Flemish nationalist right wing party N-VA, with respectively Patrick Janssens and Bart De Wever as mayoral candidates. De Wever has won.

**Marc Swyngedouw**, in his piece *Battlefield Antwerp. How Socialists Lost City Hall*, critically examined and found wanting some of the explanations for the Sp.a/CD&V City List's poor performance: the inner city is not left-wing; immigrant communities did not vote exclusively for the Left Party (PVDA+) and it is unlikely that an Sp.a/Green alliance would necessarily have defeated victor, and now Mayor, Bart De Wever of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. The Sp.a's current party model in Antwerp is under review. It no longer appears capable of conducting a grass-root campaign effectively. It is argued here that if the party is to win elections, its campaigns must target the grass roots and be marketing-driven.

The analysis of **Peter Van Aelst**, **Jonas Lefevere**, **Christophe Lesschaeve** and **Peter Thijssen**, in *Battlefield Antwerp. How Flemish Nationalists Conquered City Hall*, shows that the victory of the Flemish nationalist N-VA in Antwerp was established way before the start of the campaign and that mayor Patrick Janssens' City List (of Socialists and Christian Democrats) never posed a real threat to N-VA's lead. The N-VA not only grew at the expense of the extreme right VB party. Also supporters of the Liberal VLD-Vivant or the Sp.a-Spirit alliances in 2006 switched to N-VA in 2012. Furthermore, almost the entire rank and file of the then 'Flemish cartel' of N-VA and CD&V remained with N-VA, while only a small number of the CD&V voters dutifully supported the City List (Sp.a-CD&V). Sp.a lost supporters to the Greens and PVDA+, and the number of CD&V voters was too small to compensate for that loss on the left flank.

Janssens' centre strategy was unsuccessful in attracting many right-wing voters, while at the same time it probably alienated a proportion of his left-wing rank and file.

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Commenting on the 2012 local elections, the outgoing mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens (Sp.a), remarked that they reflected a geographical divisions: *'The outcome of these elections is the creation of two large blocs in Antwerp. A fairly progressive urban bloc that did well and won a majority of votes mainly within the ring road. And a less urban, conservative bloc that has a majority outside the ring road.'* Janssens' observation fits into a long academic tradition of attempting to relate election results to social geography. Can this process of bloc-formation which he observed in Antwerp also be applied more widely to the rest of Flanders? **Frederik Veleden**, in *Town and Country. A Politico-geographical Faultline?*, draws a picture of the geographical diversity of the rank and file of the major Flemish parties. Although the differences between town and country in Flemish public debate is rarely made explicit (compared with the contrasts between left and right, Catholic and free thinking, for and against Flemish independence), some parties are nevertheless clearly associated with either town or country. The striking thing is that in 2012 this did not apply to the N-VA, the great newcomer in local politics. That party's impact was felt almost everywhere.

Not only the Flemish Socialists (Sp.a), but also the French-speaking Socialists (PS) suffered at the 2012 elections, albeit of a different order of magnitude. PS remained the biggest party in Wallonia. **Pascal Delwit** outlines the disastrous six months following the 2012 elections. The PS was plunged into chaos for a few months after the polls. Party elites were panic-stricken, trying to defuse the crisis and giving militants their marching orders for the triple 2014 elections. The PS now pursues two objectives: on the one hand, to contribute as much as possible to ensure that N-VA loses ground to the Flemish parties championing the cause of a federal state; on the other, to avoid losing political power and influence by doing so. These are nothing less than irreconcilable objectives. Francophone Socialists are pursuing a dangerous path in the run-up to the 2014 elections.

## LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FEDERAL, REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS OF 2014

Anyone who thinks they can forecast the coming parliamentary 2014 elections 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. As early as September 2011 the media had already started to go on about the 'impending' local elections and it was striking that on the eve of the elections of 14 October 2012 it was already switching its attention to the elections of 25 May 2014. The 2012 elections meant the great local breakthrough of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. Chairman Bart De Wever aims to maintain this momentum until 2014. He speaks of historical elections, a referendum on the future of Belgium.

In recent years, mainstream media reporting as well as the dominant political discourse in Belgium have often given the impression that the conflict over institutional reform is being fought between two homogeneous blocs, the Flemish and the Francophones, with clear-cut and well-defined points of view. The idea has taken hold that on either side of the language boundary everyone is in agreement on the heart of the matter: the Flemish want as much autonomy as possible while the Francophones remain devoted to Belgium. In *Beyond the Myth of Unanimity. Opinions of Belgian MPs on Federalism and the Sixth Reform of the Belgian State*, **Dave Sinardet**, **Jérémy Dodeigne** and **Min Reuchamps** show that, as far as the Belgian MPs are concerned, this perception is far from the truth. Within the two main language groups, differences of opinion are sometimes very great, particularly on the Flemish side. Also the dominant perception of the internal homogeneity of political parties needs to be modified. Their research can be read as an incentive for political analysts and commentators to take greater account of the nuances and differences of opinion within the language groups and within the political parties.

The electoral fortunes of the Flemish Nationalists obliged the traditional parties to sharpen their ideological profile. Also the Flemish Socialists of Sp.a freshened up their 'Declaration in Principle'. In *Sp.a: Taking the Offensive*, **Carl Devos** analyses this ideological overhaul. As elsewhere in Europe, the Sp.a have been unable to frame the debates resulting from the economic collapse. That is not so much because of any intrinsic weakness in their analysis and remedies, but because they are haunted by the issue of legitimacy. The great challenge is not only or even mainly intellectual or communicative; it is emotional and, in particular, moral, claims Devos. In recent years, the Sp.a has not been losing out to the right, nor to the left. The party has lost out to itself. It became too much of everything and not enough of anything. The local and provincial 2012 elections were anything but a success for the party, and 2014 is likely to be another difficult year. But with its spruced up 'statement of principle' and the project 'Flanders of Tomorrow', adopted in June 2013, Sp.a finally choose for an offensive approach. For the first time since 2003, a path for electoral success has been mapped out.

The three final pieces in this Yearbook cast a preview on the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014, from a Flemish and French-speaking perspective. For some years now, and certainly since the start of the current Di Rupo I administration, they have been regarded as critical. On that day, seats of the Flemish, Brussels and Walloon Parliament, the Federal Chamber and the European Parliament will be redistributed.

For many years now the Flemish traditional parties have been in decline. In 2010 their electoral share fell below the symbolic 50% of the Flemish community. If they sink any further and are unable to turn the tide, not only their electoral share but also their role in government will be further eroded. That is why in the last few months they have all been giving their ideologies a thorough overhaul. It was undeniably the success of N-VA, Flanders' biggest party with a clear alternative, which was the catalyst for adopting a new profile. N-VA is under assault from all sides, but **Nicolas Bouteca** and **Carl Devos** claim, in *Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) versus the Rest ... and Themselves*, that the

greatest threat lays in the doubts that may arise about precisely where N-VA is going. In the 2014 campaign the party will be forced to indicate to what extent its 'necessary socio-economic reforms' are, or are not, dependent on a 'necessary constitutional reform'. The greatest challenge to N-VA will be itself. The crucial issue is whether the voters can be persuaded that things will be better and more efficient with N-VA. Dislike of the traditional parties will not give it a solid enough victory. N-VA will have to demonstrate voters that a 'force of change' exists and that it can work. It is a difficult balancing act.

The Francophone parties are also preparing for the triple 2014 elections. The Walloon context differs fundamentally from the Flemish, which has changed radically over 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. **Hugues Renard** and **Pierre Verjans** however unveil, in *The Francophone Parties in Unfamiliar Territory*, the emergence in 2012 of new political groupings in Wallonia which might be the harbinger of a more volatile political landscape. The four traditional parties are now not only competing against each other but also with newcomers who might possibly be successful in 2014. On the eve of these three simultaneous elections, the Francophone parties find themselves in unfamiliar 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.

In *Real European Elections at Last?*, **Hendrik Vos** looks ahead to the elections for the European Parliament. As elsewhere in Europe, European election campaigns in Flanders have seldom been dominated by European issues. It has been even more difficult than in most countries, because for a long time the political parties were largely in agreement. In essence, there was a consensus among the political elite in favour of more Europe. This could be different this time. Thanks to the euro crisis the EU is now frequently in the news. There is controversy over the decisions that have been made and the political parties have clearly differing viewpoints on cutbacks in public spending and solidarity, whether European regulation of day-to-day matters is desirable, the election of a President for the European Commission,... What position right wing, Flemish nationalist N-VA politicians will take in the debates on Europe is difficult to predict. Lately they are happy to be seen in the company of British Conservatives who are highly critical of European interference. If N-VA goes down that road, it will be the first time in Flanders that a major party will defend a programme that argues not only for a different Europe, but for a manifestly diminished Europe.

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Interesting times ahead!