Edited by Didier Caluwaerts
and Min Reuchamps

Belgian Exceptionalism

Belgian Politics between Realism and Surrealism

"The Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte wrote, 'This is not a pipe', under his famous painting of a pipe. One might also write, 'This is not a country', under a picture of Belgium, playing like Magritte, little games with the eyes of the beholder. The picture of Belgium that is drawn in this book is, however, not an exercise in irony, but a first-rate analysis of the country and its sometimes puzzling and intriguing political institutions and practices. Belgium does combine a number of features that makes it at first sight quite unique and maybe impossible, but the solid political science presented by the contributions in this book explains convincingly why and how this is a real country indeed".

Kris Deschouwer, *Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium*.

BELGIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

This book takes stock of Belgium's exceptional and – for some foreign observers – schizophrenic position in the political world and explains its idiosyncrasy to a non-Belgian audience.

Offering a broad and comprehensive analysis of Belgian politics, the guiding questions throughout each of the chapters of this book are: Is Belgium a political enigma, and why? Along which axes is Belgium "exceptional" compared to other countries? And what insights does a comparative study of Belgian politics have to offer? The book therefore provides a critical assessment of how Belgian politics "stands out" internationally, both in good and bad ways – including consociationalism, federalism, democratic innovations, Euroscepticism, government formation, gender equality, among others – and which factors can explain Belgium's exceptional position.

Based on cutting-edge research findings, the book will be of wide interest to scholars and students of Belgian, European and comparative politics.

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BELGIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Belgian Politics between Realism and Surrealism

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Belgium is generally considered to be a middle of the road, small, rather uninteresting country. Not out of the ordinary in any way. However, a closer look reveals that Belgium is actually quite unique. Much like in the early 1980s, when democracy scholars around the world characterized the state of our nation as *the Belgian Miracle*, nowadays we witness Belgium's political surrealism both in good and bad ways. On the one hand, it seems to lead the way in democratic innovations and in gender equality in politics, but at the same time, it is characterized by severe government instability and historically long government negotiations. To characterize Belgium's unique position in terms of politics and policy, Guy Peters in 2007 coined the term "Belgian Exceptionalism". This book aims to take stock of Belgium's exceptional, unusual, unique and perhaps schizophrenic position in the political world.

The very idea of the book was not only inspired by Guy Peters but also and above all by Silvia Erzeel who suggested that each chapter could set up "cross-talks" between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking scholars, in particular from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Université catholique de Louvain. Most chapters have been written by coauthors from both sides of the language border, which makes the book unique thanks to this multiplicity of perspectives. A word of thanks therefore goes to all the chapter authors for their valuable contributions and for sticking with the timeframe.

Finally, since the initial idea, Routledge has provided a highly professional support. Special thanks go to Sophie Iddamalgoda for her support throughout the publication process. It is now to the readers to dig into Belgium's exceptionalism, between realism and surrealism.

INTRODUCTION

Belgium: Why bother?

Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps

0.1 A country on the edge

The idea of this book grew out of a common experience of its editors. At one time or another, the two of us were asked to 'explain' Belgium to a foreign audience. Invariably, all two of us struggled getting the message across about Belgium's institutional idiosyncrasy, its political eccentricity and the inconceivable pragmatism of its people and elites. After all, how do you explain the political system of a country that self-deprecatingly prides itself on the fact that its institutional complexity is unexplainable? Belgian elites seem to hold the truth to be self-evident that as long as people are none the wiser about how Belgian politics works, no one is asking for it to be torn apart. Understandably, our international audiences were generally more confused after the lecture than before, and we had to save face by ending with the joke that the country has lasted as long as it did, arguably because of its population's shared love for football, beer and chocolate, not to mention the overwhelming consensus among Belgians that French fries are actually *Belgian* fries.[1]

Surrealism thus seems to be the glue that holds the country together, and common perceptions abroad that Belgium should not be taken too seriously on the political stage are, in all honesty, well justified. Not even its leaders seem to take the country seriously. During the ceremonies of the Belgian national holiday in 2007, then Prime Minister Yves Leterme began reciting the French *Marseillaise* when asked by a journalist whether he knew the lyrics to the Belgian national anthem (S.N. 2007). And in the same year, he also echoed a much-heard depiction that "Belgium is an accident of history" (Quatremer 2007). It is a country, he implied, that by all conventional standards never should have existed, but the great European powers of the early 19th century needed a field to wage their battles and drew a couple

of random lines on the European map. *Voilà*, a country was born, delineated by artificial borders, and no one in their right mind imagined the newly formed state would survive for another 190 years.

After being consecutively ruled by the Habsburgs, the Spanish, the Austrians, the Dutch, the French and once again the Dutch in the centuries before, Belgium declared independence in 1830. Paintings glorifying the Belgian revolution are scarce, potentially exemplifying doubts about its success in the long run. After all, the leaders of the revolution soon realized that the new state was fragile, and that disintegration constantly lurked beneath the surface. Belgium's borders transcended linguistic, cultural, political, religious and economic divides, soon giving rise to centrifugal politics (Deschouwer 2012). Cooperation between various religious, economic and linguistic groups (the so-called Monster Alliance) was necessary for the success of the revolution, but the common ground quickly disappeared after independence (Mabille 2011). This is why several tactics were used to unify the country, chief among which was the installation of French as the official language (Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen 2010). The idea was that imposing one single language would mean that state-building would soon turn into nation-building. Even though the 'one country, one language' policy appeared successful at first, demands for the linguistic recognition of Dutch soon followed, leading to several state reforms and a federalization of the country from the 1960s onward (Deschouwer 2012; Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen 2010). For a long time after the revolution, therefore, Belgian politics seemed an unlikely and inhospitable breeding ground for a stable democracy. To some, it still does.

Fast forward to the 1980s, an international group of scholars specializing in small state research started focusing on the so-called Belgian miracle. How is it possible, these scholars asked, that Belgian democracy has persevered despite all adverse circumstances (Lijphart 1981; McRae 1986; Peters 2006)? How can a country survive such deep divisions? The answer lies in its political institutions and the pragmatic, incremental nature of its leaders. Belgium, Arend Lijphart claimed, was "the most perfect example of a consociation" (Lijphart 1981: 8), a democracy in which divides between the linguistic groups are bridged by a prudent elite that recognizes that the costs of nonagreement would be detrimental in the long run. They therefore adopted consociational institutions (such as a grand coalition, proportionality, veto rights and granting autonomy) in the 1970 gridlock constitution to appease the conflicts (Deschouwer 2012).

Even though this type of conflict management has been relatively successful, the country still carries the weight of history on its shoulders. Despite 150 years of ethnolinguistic strife and 50 years of nonstop constitutional engineering, its divides have not yet fully been pacified, and its regionalist conflict still paralyzes political life every couple of years (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps 2014). Moreover, the consociational institutions and their smoke-filled rooms have given rise to high levels of partitocracy, civic apathy, long periods of government negotiations and political deadlock.

Because of these political crises, Belgium has drawn some dubious international attention in recent years. *The Economist* claimed that it was 'Time to call it a day' in 2007 (Economist 2007) and *The New York Times* called the country the 'world's wealthiest failed state' in 2015 (Higgins 2015). At the same time, however, Belgium has also received praise on how to overcome deep national, economic and linguistic divides, and its model of conflict management has been exported to other violence-ridden countries. Moreover, Belgium serves as an example for Europe with former prime ministers Herman Van Rompuy and Charles Michel being two out of three European presidents. A remarkable achievement in that Belgium has only 11.5 million inhabitants and occupies a mere 30.689 km² (or 0.68 percent of the landmass of the European Union [EU]).

This very brief and unavoidably incomplete overview hopefully shows that Belgium is anything but an ordinary, middle of the road and rather an uninteresting country. Indeed, current-day Belgian politics is caught between political realism and surrealism and is both praised and despised for it. On the one hand, as the chapters of this book will show, Belgium seems to lead the way in voter turnout, e-voting, democratic innovations and gender equality. It is internationally praised as a laboratory for democracy and politics (Chwalisz 2019; Van Reybrouck 2019), as a leading example for other deeply divided, multinational and multilingual federations (Deschouwer 2012), and as a model for the future governance of the EU (Swenden 2005). On the other hand, its political system is characterized by severe government instability, ethnic strife, strong populist parties and historically long government negotiations (Devos & Sinardet 2012). In 2011, Belgium even broke Iraq's world record when it took 541 days to form a government, and in 2019–2020, the country has been long without a formally endorsed government. Belgium is thus both an object of international ridicule and a source of inspiration.

To characterize Belgium's unique position in terms of polity, politics and policy, Guy Peters (2006) aptly coined the appropriate term 'Belgian exceptionalism', and it is on Guy Peters' shoulders we stand. This book aims to take stock of Belgium's exceptional and – for some foreign observers – even schizophrenic position in the political world and attempts to explain its idiosyncrasy to a non-Belgian audience. The guiding questions throughout each of the chapters of this book are therefore as follows: is Belgium a political science enigma, and why is that the case? And along which axes is Belgium 'exceptional' compared to other countries?

To be sure, this book is not intended to be academic praise to Belgium's perseverance, but a critical assessment of how Belgian politics stands out internationally. It offers insights into the good, the bad and the ludicrous, all the while trying to clarify to a broader audience which factors can explain Belgium's exceptional position. It bundles a rich variety of chapters that deal with Belgian politics in a holistic manner by not only looking at political parties, elections and governments but also democratic innovations, federalism, colonialism, populism, gender equality policies and Belgium's relations to the EU and the United Nations.

This book offers a broad and comprehensive analysis of Belgian politics based on cutting-edge research findings and an innovative approach. After all, this book is conceived as 'cross-talks'. Most textbooks on Belgian politics have hitherto been written in Dutch or French and only incorporated the Dutch- or French-speaking perspective. Our aim is to have both Dutch and French speakers involved to approach the substantive issues from both sides of the linguistic divide. Contrary to other studies, it thereby stresses the multi-perspectivity of Belgian politics and highlights how different understandings and historical interpretations feed into current-day Belgian politics. We hope it will offer a good introduction to Belgian politics both for Belgian and foreign observers, as well as the broader public.

0.2 Structure of the book

The book is structured into three main parts. The first part, *Belgium on the barricades*, is grouped around four chapters and each highlights how Belgium – instead of following the pack – has led the way in implementing several institutional innovations that set it apart from most other European countries. First of all, Belgium has historically been an early adopter of electoral innovations. One of the defining characteristics of the Belgian electoral system is its continued reliance on compulsory voting. Not only was Belgium the first country to adopt compulsory voting in 1893 when the country adopted plural male suffrage but it is also one of the few democracies to maintain the system to the present day. To understand this particular position, Didier Caluwaerts, Sophie Devillers, Nino Junius, Joke Matthieu and Sarah Pauwels will reflect on Belgium's experiences with compulsory voting (Chapter 1). Three questions are central to this aim: (1) why was compulsory voting adopted and why does it still exist, despite the regular 'flaring up' of voices asking for its abolishment?; (2) does Belgium do better or worse than comparable countries in terms of voter turnout?; and (3) how would abolishing compulsory voting affect turnout, voter equality and party strength? In their chapter, the authors show that the equality vs. liberty debate continues to guide political parties' positions on the issue, and that the reason for adopting compulsory voting in 1893 – i.e. as a buffer against a radical electorate – is the same as the reason for abolishing it nowadays – i.e. as a way of reducing the electoral strength of radical parties. Moreover, the chapter shows that Belgium's voter turnout – despite its decline over time – remains high, and that abolishing compulsory voting would increase voter inequality and reshuffle electoral power among political parties.

In Chapter 2, Robin Devroe, Silvia Erzeel, Petra Meier and Bram Wauters reflect on the long-term consequences of another electoral innovation in Belgium, namely gender quotas. Compared to other countries in Europe (and beyond), Belgium is often considered to have evolved from a 'laggard to a leader' when it

comes to the promotion of gender equality in politics (Meier 2012). In the mid–1990s, Belgium was the first country to adopt legally binding gender quotas for all levels of government, and in the following decades, new quota acts were progressively adopted and implemented. The 2002 gender quota acts, requiring all Belgian parties to place an equal number of men and women on their candidate lists and among the top two positions of each list, were unparalleled both in terms of ambition and effectiveness. And more recently, the Walloon and Brussels regional governments adopted far-reaching 'zipper quotas' for all candidate lists in local and regional elections. This offers a unique opportunity to better understand the long-term effects of gender quotas on the political representation of women. Chapter 2 therefore investigates four aspects of descriptive representation. It considers whether gender quotas have led to an increase in the number of women elected and also keeps them in politics. It furthermore assesses how gender quotas shape the level of diversity among women and men elected and whether quotas stimulate women's access to positions of political power.

In Chapter 3, Régis Dandoy shifts our attention to electronic voting. In 1991, Belgium was one of the first countries to test electronic voting (e-voting), and since then, it has continuously implemented e-voting in all of its elections (from the local to the European level). In addition, this implementation has been scattered around the country as some municipalities used e-voting, while other (sometimes neighboring) municipalities used paper voting. These three elements (continuity over almost 30 years, use for all elections at all levels, and implementation in only some municipalities) make the Belgian case of e-voting unique worldwide. The chapter first discusses the adoption and rollout of e-voting in Belgium, showing that it was not a smooth process. It retraces this history by focusing on the political arguments used for extending and limiting e-voting and the technical events (such as the 2014 bug) that led to radical changes. In addition, based on a quasi-experimental research design, Chapter 3 tests whether voters alter their behavior and vote choice in response to different e-voting technologies. The analysis of legislative election results for the period 1991–2019 in two Belgian provinces concludes that turnout is lower in electoral districts using e-voting, while paper voting tends to lead to more invalid votes and more split-ticket votes.

Finally, Chapter 4 turns to a non-electoral type of innovation. Julien Vrydagh, Sophie Devillers, Vincent Jacquet, David Talukder and Jehan Bottin analyze the spread of democratic innovations, and in particular deliberative minipublics, in Belgium. These forums gather groups of randomly selected lay citizens that deliberate in a structured setting and formulate recommendations for policymaking. They are becoming increasingly popular among policymakers and the citizenry and have recently been integrated into traditional institutions (e.g. permanent citizen dialogue in Ostbelgien). Since Belgium's institutional setup has historically not proven to be conducive to

citizen participation, the seemingly warm embrace of minipublics raises questions as to the motives for their adoption. In that regard, the authors suggest two explanations. On the one hand, the chapter argues that minipublics have been adopted as a means of curbing growing public distrust and bridging the gap between citizens and elites. Minipublics thus constitute an instrument in fighting the legitimacy crisis, which has hit Belgium hard in recent decades. On the other hand, the authors emphasize the role of networks lobbying for minipublics. They find the presence of a strong advocacy coalition to be conducive to the adoption of these types of civic innovations.

Even though Belgium has been at the forefront in adopting several institutional innovations, the country's political system and its institutions also face fundamental problems. In the second part of the book, *Belgium, a democracy in trouble*, we focus on six of these challenges. In Chapter 5, Benjamin Biard analyzes the rise of radical right populist parties (RRPPs), and the way Belgian elites have dealt with these challenger parties. While an increasing number of extreme right parties have recently gotten closer and closer to power, either by supporting a minority government – such as in the Netherlands or Denmark – or joining a coalition – such as in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia or Switzerland – Belgium remains an exception. Despite their electoral results, no RRPP has ever exercised power in Belgium. To explain this, Chapter 5 takes stock of one of the most important strategies endorsed by mainstream parties toward RRPPs in Belgium, the cordon sanitaire, and questions how mainstream parties have dealt with it over the years. The analysis shows that the cordon sanitaire is often challenged by mainstream parties, particularly since the 2000s and suggests that extreme right parties have developed alternative ways to indirectly influence policymaking and fight the cordon sanitaire to gain access to power.

A second challenge facing Belgian democracy is related to its party system. In their contribution (Chapter 6), Audrey Vandeleene, Maximilien Cogels and Chloé Janssen discuss the high level of partitocracy on the Belgian political scene. Political parties are indeed dominant actors on all aspects of the social and political system, via patronage in parliament, public administration, the judiciary and even the civil society. Yet, given the decreasing legitimacy of political parties, one may wonder whether party organizations still manage to hold a strong control on their representatives or if the latter are nowadays allowed to behave more independently from their party. This chapter disentangles parties' grip on candidates to elected office. Drawing on the *Comparative Candidate Survey* data set, the authors first comparatively assess the leeway let to candidates in terms of campaigning and representational style in four partitocratic countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy and Portugal) and then strive to explain Belgian candidates' independence toward their party.

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to recent trends in governments and government formation. In Chapter 7, Lieven De Winter and Patrick Dumont focus on coalition dynamics, and specifically, how coalition formation in Belgium has become increasingly hard. Since the end of the 1980s, Belgium is truly an exceptionally

complex case. Skyrocketing party system fragmentation, due to a multitude of cleavages and high electoral volatility, makes government formation a time-consuming and failure-ridden bargaining process. Coalitions include a high number of parties that require comprehensive coalition agreements, containing expensive and ineffective policies. This chapter looks at all these aspects and their spillover effects on governance and economic indicators as well as trust in politics and satisfaction with democracy.

In the next contribution (Chapter 8), Régis Dandoy and Lorenzo Terrière focus on the flip side of the coin. Since coalition formation has become increasingly difficult, the importance of caretaker governments has steadily grown in recent years. Belgium holds the world record in the longest government formation (597 days in 2010–2011). Yet, this political deadlock was merely the tip of the iceberg, as each federal election as well as other major political crises in Belgium led to shorter or longer situations of a federal caretaker government. After all, Belgium was governed by a caretaker government for a total of more than four years between 2007 and 2020. Caretaker governments therefore seem to become the 'new normal' in Belgian politics. The authors investigate the main characteristics of caretaker governments and analyze the political consequences of having a long-lasting caretaker government. They explain how governmental decision-making continues even under these delicate political circumstances: how the federal state apparatus keeps functioning by adopting a temporary but guaranteed minimal budget line; how the parliament takes up a larger role by ad hoc coalition making in legislative proposals; and how the narrow definition of caretaker government is cautiously broadened over time, which allows the cabinet to take more proactive policy decisions.

No book on Belgian politics can bypass its consociational model of democracy. In Chapter 9, Laura Pascolo, Daan Vermassen, Min Reuchamps and Didier Caluwaerts turn our attention to the process of federalization. To reduce ethno-linguistic tensions, Belgium has steadily transformed from a unitary into a federal state through several so-called state reforms. Nevertheless, the federal system has come under increasing threat. Even though it proved to be very capable of transforming conflict into cooperation in Belgian politics in the past, the authors wonder whether this will still be the case in the future. After all, it is widely claimed that Belgium is witnessing a paradox of federalism: the process of federalization has set in motion centrifugal calls for more autonomy. However, the authors claim that Belgium has started to experience a reversal of this paradox. Indeed, some political elites have increasingly advocated the 're-federalization' of some competences. Their analysis does indeed discern the beginnings of a reversal of the paradox of federalism, a trend that has not yet been witnessed in other federal states.

The final chapter in the second part (Chapter 10) turns our attention to the special case of Brussels. Benjamin Blanckaert, Didier Caluwaerts and Silvia Erzeel focus on voting patterns in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). Unlike unilingual Flanders and Wallonia, the BCR is officially bilingual and both

Flemish and francophone parties can field candidates. Therefore, Brussels voters can vote for a party of the other ethnolinguistic group (i.e. cross-ethnic voting) if they so desire. However, very little is hitherto known about the extent to which cross-ethnic voting takes place in the Brussels region, and which parties benefit most from cross-ethnic voting. In Chapter 10, the authors argue that cross-ethnic voting does indeed take place, contrary to all expectations because the political institutions incentivize co-ethnic voting. Moreover, they find that voters who engage in cross-ethnic voting are primarily 'unserved' voters, more precisely, francophone voters who vote for Flemish right-wing regionalist and radical right arguably due to a lack of 'offer' of such parties on the francophone side.

In the final part of the book, *Belgium and the world*, we examine Belgium's embeddedness in the international scene. In Chapter 11, Valérie Rosoux investigates how Belgium has coped with two of the most controversial episodes in its past, collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and the colonization of the Congo. The chapter emphasizes three main features: an ongoing federalization process, nationalist tendencies that underline particular narratives of the past to justify the need for independence and the relative indifference of the federal state, which does not provide a robust national counter-narrative. This chapter shows that drawing a line between the past and the present is more complex than it might look.

In Chapter 12, Louise Hoon and Gilles Pittoors turn our attention to Europe. Since European institutions are largely based in Brussels, the EU has historically been strongly interwoven with Belgian politics. Belgium is both literally and figuratively at the heart of the EU. The process of European integration has also created strong incentives for political parties to reinvent and adapt themselves in different ways, both programmatically and organizationally – a process often referred to as Europeanization. Belgium, however, is an exceptional case. For Belgian parties, the EU is simultaneously 'near' in terms of geography, history and policymaking, and 'far' in terms of political and electoral relevance. EU-related issues have long been conspicuously absent in electoral competition; elections to the European Parliament have nearly always coincided with, and overshadowed by, other more salient elections. Eurobarometer surveys also consistently show that the Belgian population is among the least likely to discuss European affairs among family or friends. This chapter takes an in-depth look at this process of Europeanization for the Belgian parties: why, where and how do parties Europeanize, which incentives are at play and does the tendency to Europeanize vary across parties?

The final contribution of the book (Chapter 13) moves to the global scene and focuses on Belgium's position in the UN. Having recently completed its sixth mandate, Belgium becomes one of the most elected members of the UN Security Council, and arguably the most elected small state in the world. It has been known for its ardent support of multilateralism and active policy inside the Security Council. Focusing on the last two mandates, this chapter aims to

explore the performance of Belgium inside the Security Council, particularly of its latest term. The analysis according to the five main success criteria supported by interviews with diplomats demonstrates that Belgium keeps being an influential member, sometimes punching above its weight. Belgium's policy in the United Nations Security Council can be defined as, first of all, pragmatic and realistic. Instead of always taking the high moral ground at the expense of depriving itself of meaningful influence on the outcome, Belgium has prioritized a result-driven approach. However, with the help of its high diplomatic skills, Belgium has frequently used its realistic approach to promote idealistic principles such as multilateralism, human security and protection of civilians, women and children. Its active and credible attitude has brought the trust and appreciation of international community that this chapter seeks to disentangle and explain.

Note

1 The editors are – of course – critically aware that this first paragraph might be considered self-deprecating as well.

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PART 1
Belgium on the barricades

1

COMPULSORY VOTING

Anachronism or avant-garde?

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1.1 Introduction

As several of the other contributions in this book will show, Belgium's electoral system is idiosyncratic in many ways but one of its defining characteristics is its reliance on compulsory voting (CV). Not only was Belgium the first country in the world to adopt CV in 1893 but it is also one of the few democracies to maintain the system to the present day. To understand this particular (and even peculiar) position, this chapter will reflect on Belgium's experiences with CV. We focus on three central questions: first, why was CV adopted and why does it still exist, despite the regular 'flaring up' of voices asking for its abolishment? Here, we discuss the historical conditions and party-strategic considerations that have led to the adoption and endurance of CV, as well as the arguments in favor of or against CV. Second, we focus on how voter turnout in Belgium compares to other countries with and without CV. Does Belgium do better or worse than comparable countries? A third and final question focuses on the potential effects of abolishment. Would we see a drop in turnout if CV were abolished? How would it affect political equality? And would it electorally benefit some parties more than others?

In the remainder of this chapter, we first discuss the historical roots of CV in Belgium, before turning to current debates on CV. The third section puts Belgium in a comparative perspective and determines whether CV actually leads to high levels of voter turnout. Finally, we discuss the consequences of CV on individuals' voting behavior, on voter equality, and on party political strength.

1.2 The historical roots of compulsory voting in Belgium

Belgium adopted CV in 1893 as the first country in the world. Nevertheless, this electoral innovation had been the object of a long and challenging ideological battle between conservative liberals on the one hand and the Catholics

and the more progressive liberals on the other. The debate essentially boiled down to different opinions on citizens' capacities to participate politically. The conservative forces claimed that citizens were not interested in politics and should ideally be kept away from participating in elections. After all, it was believed that politics was too complex for ordinary citizens and was best left to those who had the knowledge and skills to engage with political issues. The more progressive voices, on the other hand, advocated the introduction of CV as a way of elevating the masses. They agreed that citizens were not necessarily politically interested, but they believed that CV could act as a catalyst for citizens' political engagement. By forcing citizens to vote, CV could fuel voter turnout, political interest, and political knowledge (Malkopoulou, 2016; Pilet, 2011, p. 127). This would in turn lead to a better reflection of the 'volonté nationale' in parliament according to Prime Minister Beernaert (Pilet, 2011, pp. 127–128).

Despite this ongoing debate, CV was finally embraced in 1893. Its approval can be explained by the other changes that were proposed to the electoral system. Under pressure of the 'radical' Socialist Workers Party (the Belgische Werkliedenpartij), a system of universal male suffrage and plural voting was adopted. This meant that every man over 25 years of age could cast at least one vote, but supplementary votes were given to men who paid at least five Belgian francs in taxes, who received higher education, or who were heads of families. The conservatives' fear was, however, that especially men belonging to the lower classes, concentrated in urban areas, would turn out to vote and that they would support the socialist party. As such, CV was considered an antidote to radicalization among the electorate: it would oblige moderate voters to go to the polling station, which in turn would limit the electoral strength of the more radical voters who would vote for the workers party (Pilet, 2011, p. 127). In addition, there were also leftist MPs who were in favor of CV, since it would discourage employers and industrial leaders to dissuade their employees to vote (Kużelewska, 2016, p. 40; Malkopoulou, 2011, pp. 138–140; Pilet, 2011, p. 128). CV was therefore also a device ensuring the integrity of the elections.

One of the more contentious issues in the adoption process concerned the sanctions that could be implemented (Malkopoulou, 2016, pp. 20–22). Some proposed financial punishments. Others proposed to deprive citizens of their political rights if they did not turn out. And the Catholic party advocated 'moral' penalties, such as publishing the names of those citizens who stayed away from the polling station. In the end, the decision was made to combine all three: fines were imposed, absentees would lose their voting rights, and their names would be published. Moreover, it was decided that if voters abstain four times, they were unable to apply for employment or promotion in the public sector (Nerincx, 1901, p. 277; Reed, 1925, p. 335). These severe sanctions did not miss their effect since voter turnout rose from 73% in 1890 to 93.5% in the 1894 elections (Mabille, 2011; Witte et al., 2009).

1.3 Enduring debates on compulsory voting

Even though CV was adopted in 1893, it continued to propel fierce political debates, even to this very day. Some political parties remain strong advocates of the system, whereas others seek to abolish it. However, our analysis of press articles and party manifestos from the 1970s to present day demonstrates great stability in parties' framing of CV (see Table 1.1).

Ever since 1893, the socialist parties have always been staunch advocates of the measure as a way of politically empowering the urban proletariat, and CV was also supported by the Christian democratic parties for most of their existence. Regionalist and nationalist parties are historical opponents, and this remains true in the cases of Flemish radical right and regionalist parties (Vlaams Belang and N-VA) today. The liberal family continues to be divided. While the Flemish Open VLD is the most vocal critic of CV, claiming that the system limits citizens' fundamental freedom to choose whether or not to vote, the Francophone Mouvement Réformateur (MR) has officially favored the rule since the late 1980s. However, the newly elected party president (2020), Georges-Louis Bouchez, seems determined to shift that position and to support abolishing CV. Finally, the Green parties have witnessed changes in position over time: both the French-speaking Ecolo and the Dutch-speaking Groen were against CV in the 1980s and 1990s but are now supporters. Support for CV therefore does not follow the traditional linguistic cleavage with Flemish and Walloon parties opposing each other on the issue. The debate rather follows an ideological rationale.

Most parties' positions have not fundamentally changed over time, and neither have their arguments (Pilet, 2011). Three main arguments persist in support of CV. First, advocates argue that only CV can guarantee a representative political system that is appropriately legitimized by all voters. CV thus increases the legitimacy of the political system by involving all affected citizens. A second claim is that a well-functioning democracy can only work when individual liberties are linked to collective duties. The right to vote therefore implies the moral and democratic duty to enter the voting booth. Third, proponents worry

TABLE 1.1 Political parties' positions on compulsory voting

	Pro CV	Contra CV
1893	Progressive liberals, BWP, catholic progressive	Doctrinal liberals, catholic conservatives
1970–2000	Flemish and Walloon socialists, Flemish and Walloon Christian democrats, Walloon liberals	Flemish liberals, Walloon regionalists, Flemish radical right, Flemish regionalists, Flemish and Walloon Greens
2000–2020	Flemish and Walloon socialists, Flemish and Walloon Christian democrats, Flemish and Walloon Greens, Walloon radical left, Brussels' regionalists	Flemish liberals, Flemish regionalists, Flemish radical right

that the abolition of CV will raise political inequality among citizens. After all, citizens with less economic and political capital risk losing their political voice. This would then lead to policies at the disadvantage of the less well-off. At present, these are still the most widely used arguments invoked to defend CV. Arguments reminding citizens of the historical struggle for universal suffrage and the need to mobilize party's voters for the progressive cause have steadily faded from the debate over the years.

On the opponent's side, much hasn't changed either. The argument that CV restrains citizens' individual liberties resounds as loud today as it did in 1893. According to its most vocal representatives, CV takes away citizens' fundamental freedom to decide whether or not they want to vote. Additionally, some parties critique the sanctions to enforce CV. From the outset, the efficient imposition of sanctions has been problematic. The argument then goes that an unenforced CV law is an absurdity.

Even though the arguments and positions are characterized by stability, the debate on CV regained momentum since the 1990s. This can best be understood in the light of two broader societal evolutions: the alleged crisis of representative democracy and the increased mobilization of the linguistic cleavage. In the early 1990s, democracy allegedly went through a crisis in Western European countries, and Belgium was no exception (De Koster et al., 2010). The electoral victories of anti-establishment parties (Vlaams Blok and Rossem) during the 1991 federal election confirmed the increasingly large gap between citizens and politicians. In the wake of this election, a group of parties consisting of the Green parties, the regionalist parties, and the Flemish liberal party called for democratic renewal with CV spearheading the debate. It was believed that abolishing CV would require politicians to be more sensitive to citizens' demands and could bring politicians and the people closer together. Moreover, they believed that abolishment would prevent frustrated citizens from casting an anti-political vote for the radical right populist parties. The recent repositioning of the Green parties builds on this democratic renewal frame. Stepping away from the idea that CV is an obstacle for citizen participation, they now claim that it can stimulate democratic renewal. After all, voting is a first important step to deeper and more meaningful citizen participation.

A second societal evolution that influenced the contemporary debate to a lesser extent is the increased mobilization of the linguistic cleavage. Flemish nationalists and federalist voices in French-speaking Belgium increasingly invoke identity arguments in the CV debate, bringing new arguments into the discussion. For instance, Walloon Christian democrats and the Brussels' regionalist party (CDH and DEFI) have explicitly referred to Belgium's unity in their defense of CV. In the press, CDH states that "lifting the obligation to participate in the choice of representatives is a democratic step backwards, a measure that goes completely against what the National Union is demanding".[1] Flemish nationalists in contrast refer to CV as an antiquated Belgian absurdity. The abolishment of the rule would lead to low turnout, thereby confirming that Belgium is a dysfunctional democracy. Even though these are novel arguments, they are not that salient in the current debate.

1.4 Compulsory voting and voter turnout

CV is evidently closely related to voter turnout, which is often considered a thermometer for a healthy democracy. Low electoral turnout is considered dangerous because when the election results do not represent the will of the people, this could result in inegalitarian and illegitimate policies (Franklin, 2004). A citizenry that shows up at the polling booth and casts a valid and well-informed vote is seen as a sign of a strong democracy. In contrast, a dis-engaged citizenry with low political trust indicates the hollowing out of our democratic norms (Hooghe et al., 2011; Norris, 2004).

Not surprisingly, then, there is much concern about the drop in voter turnout especially in established democracies around the world (see Figure 1.1). We see
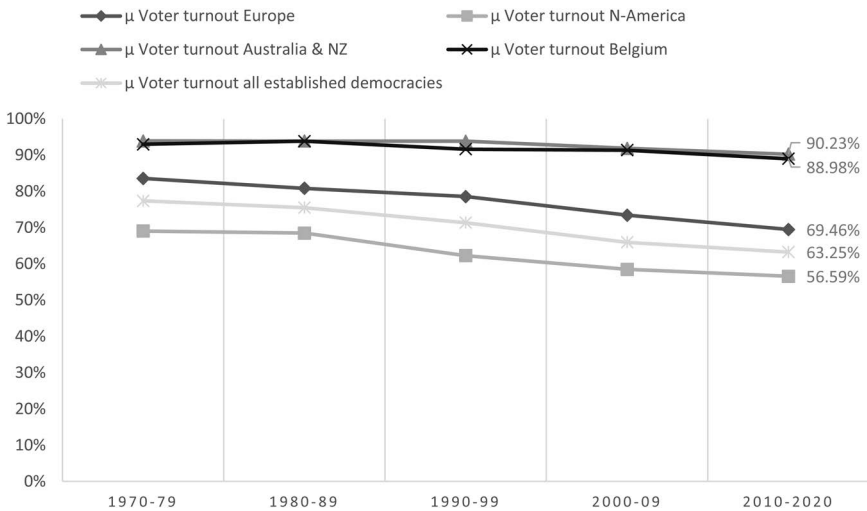
FIGURE 1.1   Voter turnout in established democracies between 1970 and 2019 by region

Notes: μ vote is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the registered electorate of the regions that held parliamentary elections from the time period 1970 until 2019. The shown percentage points are the mean by decade. We used the absolute number to show weighted averages. Hence, small countries don't bias the trend. We only selected established democracies, since newer democracies can bias the trend and this has no added value for the purpose of this chapter. We included the following countries: Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), Northern America (Canada and the United States), and Australia and New Zealand. Be cautious when interpreting the numbers for Northern America. The voting-age population (VAP) turnout is in the United States a better representation of reality; however, this is not the case in Europe. Since our research focus is on Belgium, we decided to show the proportion of registered voters.

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Solijonov, 2016).

the largest drop in voter turnout in Europe and Northern America, with 14% and 12.5%, respectively, for the period between 1970 and 2019. Europe's drop is situated mostly in the 2000s until 2019 with almost 9%. The decline in Northern America is more gradual. Although Belgium's voter turnout remains stable, we do see in the 1990s and between 2010 and 2019 a drop of over 2%. Nonetheless, Belgium remains one of the countries with the highest turnout rate of all established democracies.

Looking more closely at different countries, it is obvious that CV laws have a strong impact on voter turnout (see Table 1.2). The CV countries – Australia, Luxembourg, and Belgium – stand out in comparison with the other established democracies. However, the strength of this effect is highly dependent on how these laws are implemented (Franklin, 1999; Hirczy, 1994; Norris, 2004): Greece which has no sanctions to enforce its CV laws has a very low average turnout in comparison with other non-CV countries. Hence, laws de jure are not enough to guarantee high turnout. The differences between the other CV countries are quite small. Only the VAP turnout in Luxembourg is quite remarkable but this may be explained by its very large expat community.

As explained previously, electoral turnout is directly associated with democratic legitimacy. Whereas the turnout levels in non-CV countries give an indication of the citizens' political trust, this exit option is blocked in CV countries. Nonetheless, citizens can express their dissatisfaction by casting an invalid vote. We do see in CV countries that the number of invalid votes is on average 4% points higher (Table 1.2). However, on average only 6% of the voters cast an invalid vote. In comparison with the often-lower voter turnout rates in the other established democracies, Belgium and the other CV countries still show high numbers.

1.5 What if compulsory voting were abolished?

As mentioned previously, CV has been a favorite subject of normative debates on how to improve democracy. A system of CV is claimed to impart a strong moral imperative to citizens, a signal that voting is an essential part of being a good citizen. As such, it generates a sense of moral and civic duty. The question then becomes whether abolishing CV would lead to a reduction in turnout, an increase in voter inequality, and whether it would benefit some parties more than others.

Since there are no naturalistic data on voter turnout in Belgium in the absence of CV, we have to determine its effect through hypothetical survey questions. This means that to determine whether CV actually increases voter turnout, we have to rely on the hypothetical question whether citizens would still go to vote if they were no longer obliged to. This question was taken up in the

TABLE 1.2 Compulsory voting, electoral turnout, and invalid votes by country

CV countries	Vote/Registration (%)	Vote/VAP (%)	μ Invalid votes (%)
Australia	93.33	81.23	5.15
Luxembourg	90.86	53.25	6.52
Belgium	89.94	84.34	5.42
Greece (no sanctions)	68.71	77.01	2.08
Non-CV countries			
Denmark	86.09	81.24	0.93
Sweden	83.94	81.19	1.25
Iceland	83.04	82.84	2.04
Italy	78.74	75.94	4.40
Austria	78.68	70.89	1.58
The Netherlands	78.56	75.22	0.49
New Zealand	77.94	74.68	0.72
Norway	77.15	74.66	0.55
Germany	75.04	69.05	1.41
Spain	71.92	67.57	1.64
Finland	66.94	70.70	0.65
Ireland	65.47	62.87	0.93
The United Kingdom	64.92	60.45	n.a.
Canada	63.33	57.28	n.a.
Portugal	58.20	65.25	3.43
The United States	56.75	45.41	n.a.
France	56.56	46.45	2.89
Total CV countries (not weighted)	91.37	72.94	5.70
Total non- CV countries (not weighted)	71.96	68.33	1.64
Δ (not weighted)	19.42	4.60	4.06
Total CV countries (weighted)	92.28	81.62	5.25
Total non- CV countries (weighted)	63.36	54.27	2.18
Δ (weighted)	28.91	27.35	3.06

Notes: The voter turnout is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the registered electorate and the VAP turnout is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the voting-age population. We included the parliamentary elections from 2000 to 2019. The shown percentage points are the mean for these two decades. When looking at the CV countries and non-CV countries, we show both the weighted averages and non-weighted averages. For the United Kingdom, Canada, and United States, there were too many missing values to calculate the invalid votes.

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Solijonov, 2016).

2009 Partirep Election Survey (Partirep, 2009) and in the 2019 EOS RepResent Election Survey (Walgrave et al., 2020).

In the literature, it is generally assumed that voter turnout rates would decrease by as much as 25% if the system of CV in Belgium were abolished, as this would be in line with the decline in the Netherlands after CV was abandoned in the early 1970s (Quintelier et al., 2011). However, the data (Table 1.3) show that this might be an underestimation. Even though the figures

TABLE 1.3 Percentage of respondents that would always turn out if compulsory voting were abolished

		2009 (%)	2019 (%)
Flanders	Federal	/	56.4
	Regional	44.6	56
Wallonia	Federal	/	52
	Regional	48.4	51.6

Source: Own calculations based on Partirep (2009) and Walgrave et al. (2020).

fluctuate over time, we find that about 45%–55% of the respondents to the surveys indicated that they would no longer show up. The results also show that there are only limited regional variations, and that there would be no differences between turnout for regional and federal elections. Interestingly, there is some variation over time. In 2019, we witness a bump of over 10 percentage points in Flanders compared to the 2009 elections. This would indicate that turnout could increase when the electoral stakes are high. After all, in Flanders the 2019 campaign was hard-fought and more polarizing than the 2009 campaign and led to the revival of the right-wing populist Vlaams Belang as Flanders' second-largest party (Pilet, 2021).

Whereas the increasing voter turnout is a first-order effect, CV is also claimed to have a number of important second-order consequences. Increasing the number of people that show up to vote is normatively appealing but it is also claimed to reduce inequalities in electoral participation (Lijphart, 1997). In systems based on voluntary voting, a steady segment of the population (mostly lower socio-economic status groups) was found to systematically abstain from voting (Keaney & Rogers, 2006). CV forces those less privileged groups to make their party preferences known, and thereby reduces inequalities. CV is therefore claimed to have important egalitarian qualities.

Empirically, however, the assumption that CV increases equality is contested. For instance, in an internationally comparative study of 36 countries, Quintelier et al. (2011) find no positive effects of CV on electoral equality, and nor does the formal model developed by Jakee and Sun (2006). In contrast, Hooghe and Pelleriaux (1998, p. 421) argue that "abolishment of CV would lead to more inequality in political participation". Our data support this argument. As Table 1.4 shows, inequality would increase if voting were no longer compulsory. Abolishing CV in Belgium would strengthen the political say of those who already have a political say. Especially the effects of education are strong and significant: over both elections, we find that lower educated citizens would be significantly less likely than higher educated citizens to turn out to vote. In addition, we find significant gender effects with women being less likely to turn out than men, and some age effects, with younger generations

TABLE 1.4 Percentage of respondents per sociodemographic group that would always turn out for the regional elections if compulsory voting were abolished by region

		2009		2019	
		Flanders	*Wallonia*	*Flanders*	*Wallonia*
Gender	Male	48.0	49.1	59.9	55.4
	Female	41.1**	47.9 (ns)	51.6***	48.8*
Education	Low	32.0	39.5	46.9	30.5
	Middle	41.5	46.4	49.0	47.2
	High	60.1***	61.5***	64.9***	60.7***
Age	18–34	39.1	44.7	47.6	47.4
	35–55	47.2	48.1	49.6	49.8
	55+	45.7 (ns)	51.5 (ns)	64.3***	58.8**

Sign.: ***$p = 0.001$; **$p = 0.01$; *$p = 0.05$.

Source: Own calculations based on Partirep (2009) and Walgrave et al. (2020).

taking up their voting rights less often than older generations in 2019. The paradox of abolishing CV would thus be that everyone would be given the equal right and liberty to cast their vote but only the politically advantaged would take up that right.

Another potential consequence that has drawn considerable interest is whether CV has so-called directional or partisan effects. Some parties are assumed to have an electorate that is more prone to not go voting, so that non–participation always has ideological ramifications. Some parties have a much weaker electoral support and under voluntary voting systems, they would get significantly fewer votes. CV therefore has partisan effects: some parties benefit greatly from CV because their electorate is forced to come and vote. Empirical evidence on this issue, however, points in the other direction and states that the effect of CV would be negligible (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998, p. 423).

A competing hypothesis is not that CV benefits certain parties but rather that CV leads to random voting. CV forces people who would otherwise abstain to go to the ballot, but the compulsion does not force them to cast a well-considered vote. They will thus vote based on coincidence rather than conviction, and this has several negative consequences. First is the increasing number of 'donkey ballots', where those that are high on the ballot lists have a better chance of being elected (Keaney & Rogers, 2006). Second, when voting occurs randomly, the consistent link between having certain political preferences and choosing the best party is lost (Selb & Lachat, 2009). If people are forced to vote without the willingness to get informed, they will choose randomly, and their political preferences will be inconsistent with their party choice. As such, voting would be reduced to empty ritual rather than the strengthening of democracy, which it originally envisaged. And finally, when CV leads to random voting by politically disinterested citizens, the

TABLE 1.5 Difference in electoral outcome for each political party in the 2009 and the 2019 election (Flanders)

| | 2009 | | | 2019 | | | | | |
| | Regional elections | | | Federal elections | | | Regional elections | | |
	With CV	Without CV	Diff.[a]	With CV	Without CV	Diff.	With CV	Without CV	Diff.
N-VA	16.6	20.5	3.9	26.3	30.7	4.4	26.5	31.9	5.4
CD&V	28.1	28.2	0.1	10.2	11.3	1.1	10.4	11.3	0.9
Open VLD	12.1	12.2	0.1	8.7	8.3	−0.4	8.3	8.2	−0.1
sp.a	15.2	17.7	2.5	10.5	10.9	0.4	10.4	10.5	0.1
Groen	5.5	7.2	1.7	8.8	10.6	1.8	8.7	10.2	1.5
Vlaams Belang	7.4	5	−2.4	19.9	17.3	−2.6	20.2	17.2	−3
PVDA	0.6	0.5	−0.1	6.8	7.7	0.9	6.7	7.5	0.8
LDD	5.6	3.6	−2						
SLP	0.9	1.2	0.3						
Blanc/ invalid/ other	8	4	−4	8.7	3.2	−5.5	8.8	3.2	−5.6
Total	100	100.1		99.9	100		100	100	

[a]Diff. indicates the number of percentage points a party would lose (negative score) or gain (positive score) from abolishing CV.

representative claims of the system would be undermined. Since the outcomes of the elections do not necessarily represent the preferences of the voters, government cannot claim to represent the will of the population, which once again leads to a lack of input legitimacy.

The results in Tables 1.5 and 1.6 support the assumption that the abolition of CV would lead to partisan effects. A first finding is that many of the respondents who voted blanc or invalid would stay at home. These are usually the politically uninterested and cynical voters, and especially in 2019, we witness strong effects with over two-thirds of the blanc voters dropping out. Most strikingly, in Wallonia in 2019, the vote share of blanc/invalid voters would drop by more than 12 percentage points, which could lead to a fundamental redistribution of seats in parliament. This suggests that – in line with political discourse on CV since the 1990s – dropout would be highest among the politically disengaged.

A second finding is that the overall partisan effects are concentrated in a limited number of parties. Based on the survey results, we can conclude that in Flanders the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA would stand to gain from abolition of CV, and that the right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang would lose some support. The results are sufficiently strong to cause a redistribution

TABLE 1.6 Difference in electoral outcome for each political party in the 2009 and the 2019 election (Wallonia)

| | 2009 | | | 2019 | | | | | |
| | Regional elections | | | Federal elections | | | Regional elections | | |
	With CV	Without CV	Diff.[a]	With CV	Without CV	Diff.	With CV	Without CV	Diff.
PS	26.5	24.2	−2.3	19.9	23.2	3.3	19.4	22.3	2.9
MR	19.1	19.1	0	17.2	22	4.8	16.9	21.2	4.3
cdH	14.1	19.4	5.3	6.3	8.5	2.2	7.3	10	2.7
Ecolo	24.7	28.2	3.5	15.4	18.7	3.3	15.1	19	3.9
FDF/ DéFI			0	6	6.9	0.9	5.2	5.7	0.5
PP			0	4.2	3	−1.2	3.9	3.1	−0.8
PTB-GO	0.4	0.3	−0.1	13.3	12.3	−1	13.8	12.7	−1.1
FN	0.9	0.5	−0.4						
Blanc/ invalid/ other	14.3	8.3	−6	17.9	5.3	−12.6	18.3	5.9	−12.4
Total	100	100		100.2	99.9		99.9	99.9	

[a]Diff. indicates the number of percentage points a party would lose (negative score) or gain (positive score) from abolishing CV.

of seats in parliament. The effect on the other parties is fairly limited. This is somewhat surprising as the party that is ideologically most in favor of abolishing CV (Open VLD) is also the one that stands to gain the least from it. In Wallonia, the effects are more outspoken with the main contenders, i.e. the socialist Parti Socialiste (PS), the liberal MR, and the green Ecolo being the most to gain or lose from the abolition of CV. Abolishing CV would even bring these parties closer together and would thus intensify electoral competition for political market leadership.

A third conclusion we can draw from the tables is that there are no differences in directional effects between the federal and regional levels. Parties that would lose or gain in the federal elections would lose or gain approximately the same at the regional level. This could indicate that the regional level is not considered to be a second-order election, but it could also be due to the fact that the electoral cycles have been coinciding in Belgium since 2014. In other words, if voters turn up to cast a vote for the regional elections, they might as well stay and vote for the federal elections.

The final conclusion from the tables is that electoral and campaign contexts matter. In line with the results from Table 1.3, we find that the partisan effects are more outspoken in the fierce 2019 election compared to the 2009 elections.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to demonstrate how 'exceptional' CV is in Belgium. Not only was Belgium the first country to adopt CV for national elections, it is also one of the few countries to have retained the system. Moreover, what this chapter has also highlighted is that party political polarization on the issue remains fierce: very few parties have switched sides over time, and most of them remain committed to supporting or abolishing the system. Also, the arguments that these parties use have barely changed over time. Proponents argue that CV boosts legitimacy, increases egalitarian decision-making, and symbolizes citizens' civic duty to go and vote. Opponents argue that CV limits individuals' freedom and that the system is difficult to enforce in a meaningful manner. Whatever the theoretical arguments may be, our analysis has shown that CV actually does make a difference: even though CV is hardly enforced in practice, voter turnout remains at a very high level.

Two other interesting findings stand out from our analysis. On the one hand, we found that the arguments why CV was adopted in the first place, as a buffer against the electoral gain of 'extremist parties', are the same arguments that are used to abolish it. After all, CV was adopted in 1893 to limit the electoral strength of the 'radical' socialist party, but nowadays, we increasingly hear that CV should be abolished because it would reduce the electoral power of radical right-wing parties. Radical right-wing parties are thought to attract more politically disinterested voters, who would be less likely to turn out. However, our results show that the directional effects, especially for radical right-wing parties, would be fairly limited. On the other hand, our analysis has shown that abolishing CV will have a large effect in terms of voter inequality (and input legitimacy). Abolishing the system would benefit male, higher educated, and older voters.

The question what will happen to CV in the foreseeable future remains difficult to assess. At present (2021), the debate is especially salient in Flanders. In Wallonia, a consensus seems to have crystallized in favor of CV which has silenced the debate in the region. Ecolo and PS are the only parties taking an explicit position in their manifestos. Additionally, no Walloon party made any proposal to maintain or abolish CV in any Parliament. On the Flemish side, the debate has been much more active, with a total of 19 law proposals or constitutional revisions proposed by the liberal Open VLD and Flemish-nationalist N-VA in the Federal Parliament since 2000. Moreover, both parties successfully negotiated the abolishment of CV for local and provincial elections in Flanders into the 2019 government agreement with CD&V. Even though the issue of CV has been on the political agenda ever since the 1890s, it thus remains salient and fundamentally contested to this very day.

Note

1 La Libre, August 25, 2016, Voici pourquoi le CDH 'refuse catégoriquement' la fin du vote obligatoire.

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2

THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF GENDER QUOTAS IN BELGIUM

Leading by example?

Robin Devroe, Silvia Erzeel, Petra Meier and Bram Wauters

2.1 Introduction

Although many international studies might credit Scandinavian countries for their good practices in promoting gender equality in politics, Belgium undoubtedly features as a close second. Indeed, while the country initially took a slow start in granting women political rights (the adoption of universal suffrage for women, for instance, came rather late [Meier, 2012a]), it succeeded in building an international reputation for itself from the mid-1990s onward (Meier, 2012a). This reputation is closely intertwined with Belgium's extensive experiences with gender quotas. In 1994, Belgium became the first country in the world to adopt legislative gender quotas for all parties competing in elections and on all levels of government. In the following decades, new quotas acts were progressively adopted and implemented. The 2002 gender quotas acts, which required all Belgian parties to place an equal number of men and women on candidate lists and among the top two positions of each list, were unparalleled both in terms of ambition and effectiveness. More recently, the Brussels and Walloon regional governments adopted the zipper principle demanding the alternation of men and women across the entire candidate lists in local and regional elections.

This chapter analyzes the effects of gender quotas since they have first been adopted a quarter century ago. International scholarship on gender quotas has boomed in recent years, and many scholars have devoted time and attention to understanding the effects of these rules (Krook, Piscopo, & Franceschet, 2012). Gender quotas may improve the descriptive and substantive representation of women, provide for female role models in politics and increase trust in political institutions. One key remaining question, however, is what kind of *long-term* effects, if any, gender quotas generate. By design, quotas have the potential to remove structural barriers for women and lead to a sustainable

gender transformation in politics (Lang, Meier, & Sauer, Forthcoming). In practice, quotas seem to generate mixed effects (Krook & Zetterberg, 2017). Gender quotas, like other institutional reforms, may need time to achieve the desired outcome, but because they are relatively new reforms, we know little about their long-term impact. In this sense, Belgium presents itself as a unique case. Due to its quarter century of quotas experience, it offers a unique opportunity to assess the long-term effects of gender quotas and provides a good starting point for comparative research.

In a first instance, gender quotas target descriptive representation. To that end, most studies look at the increase of the number of women candidates and women elected. This chapter will take a more nuanced look at descriptive representation, by addressing four different aspects of it, more precisely: (1) the numerical effect, (2) the turnover effect, (3) the diversity effect and (4) the power effect. First, we consider whether gender quotas have led to an increase in the number of women elected in Belgium, an indicator that has received most scholarly attention so far. Quotas are often considered a 'fast track' to women's political representation but the question is whether they lead to both direct change and continued growth over the years. Related to this is a second expected effect, namely, on gendered turnover. Quotas are structural measures aimed at removing barriers for women in politics. While their key goal is to bring more women in politics, we ask whether they also keep women in politics. Third, we consider how gender quotas shape the level of diversity (in terms of age and level of education) within the group of women and men elected. Some scholars have argued that quotas might (re)produce within-group inequalities and support the selection of some groups of women more than others (Hughes, 2011). We consider whether this is the case in Belgium. Finally, we discuss whether quotas stimulate women's access to positions of political power and, hence, whether they help women shatter the highest glass ceilings in politics: those of executive office and parliamentary party leadership. Addressing these four different aspects over a long time span will allow for understanding more precisely the effects of gender quotas on the descriptive representation of women.

2.2 Gender quotas in Belgium: a quarter century experience

The literature puts forward a number of explanations for the adoption of gender quotas, such as female/feminist agency (Dahlerup, 2006), the electoral system in place (Tremblay, 2012) and party competition (Kittilson, 2006), often linking the issue to changes in institutions such as power relations or structures (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). The Belgian case is no exception in this respect, as the highly proportional list system facilitated the adoption of gender quotas, and the women/feminist activists and party competition largely contributed to this achievement (Meier, 2012a).

However, one important explanation for the early adoption of gender quotas in Belgium is exceptional, at least within the European context. As Dahlerup (2006) argues, especially in Western Europe gender quotas tend to be a breach in the political system based on an abstract concept of equality and merit. Indeed, in countries such as France or Italy the adoption of gender quotas involved fierce debates on how they would violate or not concepts such as citizenship and equality. However, in Belgium they simply extended the dominant system ensuring salient sociodemographic groups with positions in political (and other) decision-making processes. Gender quotas tend to get adopted in countries characterized by egalitarian political cultures (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993) and consociational or corporatist notions of group representation, especially where such measures exist for other groups (Dahlerup, 2006). While Belgium was not a very egalitarian society, the Belgian understanding of representation is intimately related to its consociational conception of citizenship and corporatist notions of group representation, which, in turn, are connected to the specific history of the Belgian state.

Belgium is a consociational democracy à la Lijphart (2012) that integrates social groups into processes of decision-making and the balanced representation of key social groups is an essential legitimizing feature of the political system. The federalization of Belgium from the early 1970s onward led to an increased institutionalized representation of the main language groups in the European Parliament, in the federal Senate and in the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region. Similar arrangements were made for the federal government and for the government of the Brussels Capital Region (Pilet & Pauwels, 2010). In sum, facilitating or guaranteeing descriptive representation is a common feature of the Belgian political system.

Whereas French or Italian protagonists of parity democracy and/or gender quotas had to question the basic model of citizenship and/or equality, Belgian activists mainly had to demonstrate that gender quotas fitted with the Belgian concept of representing citizens so as to extend existing measures to gender. The adoption of these rules can be seen as an extension of the prevailing model of citizenship, defining citizens in collective rather than individual terms and underlining the importance of group representation. Even though there was opposition to gender quotas, there were no valid arguments against them as the only possible argument – 'sex does not matter' – no longer held in the 1990s (Meier, 2012a). While Belgium is an exception within Europe in this respect, it shows similarities with other systems across the globe, where dispositions for gender go hand in hand with those for ethnic, racial or religious groups.

While this particular feature of the Belgian political system definitely helps to explain the adoption of gender quotas in 1994 and 2002, it does not explain why only Brussels and Wallonia adopted more far-reaching gender quotas for their regional and local elections than did Flanders. However, here again, the features

of the political system are important. Belgium is a small–scale highly competitive federal system. Wanting to play out their progressive character compared to a more conservative right-wing Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia could make a difference by adopting the most egalitarian type of gender quotas, a zipper principle applying to the entire list of candidates.

2.3 The numerical effect: do gender quotas increase the number of women elected?

After gaining more insight into the unique history of Belgium's electoral gender quotas, let us now consider their (long-term) effects, starting with the numerical effects and the question whether gender quotas have led to an increase in the number of women elected.

Before the adoption of the first gender quotas acts in 1994, Belgium scored rather poorly in international rankings of gender equality in political decision-making. Especially compared to other countries in Western Europe,[1] the country lagged behind in respect to women's political representation (see also Figure 2.1(a) and (b) below). In 1991, 9% of the elected representatives in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (i.e. the Lower House) were women. This percentage was (much) lower compared to some of its neighboring countries with proportional representation or mixed-member electoral systems, including the Netherlands (21%), Germany (21%) and Luxembourg (13%). It was higher than the percentage of women in two other neighboring countries, France and the United Kingdom, but these two countries apply majority rule which is known to be overall less conducive to a gender-balanced representation (Norris, 2004).

From the mid-1990s onward, women's presence in Belgian politics began to increase, and significantly so over time, as shown both in Figure 2.1(a) and (b) and in Table 2.1. Today, Belgium constitutes one of the frontrunners in women's numerical representation in Europe. Most elected assemblies at the national and regional level have more than 40% of women elected in the current period. In addition, Belgium also features among the countries that have made most *progress* since 1991. In the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, the largest elected assembly in the country, the number of women grew from a meager 9% in 1991 to 41% in 2019. This comes down to a growth rate of 304%[3]. When we compare this to the growth rates in the other 17 countries in Figure 2.1(a) and (b), Belgium 'performs' quite well: the average growth rate of women elected is 104% in countries without legally binding gender quotas (following a so–called incremental path) and 269% in (so–called fast track) countries with such quotas. Belgium also 'outperforms' most 'fast-track' countries, with the exception of France (475% growth rate) and Portugal (310% growth rate), but the percentage of women in the starting year of 1991 in those countries was lower than that in Belgium.

However, the question of whether gender quotas have *directly caused* this numerical change in women's representation in Belgian politics does not have
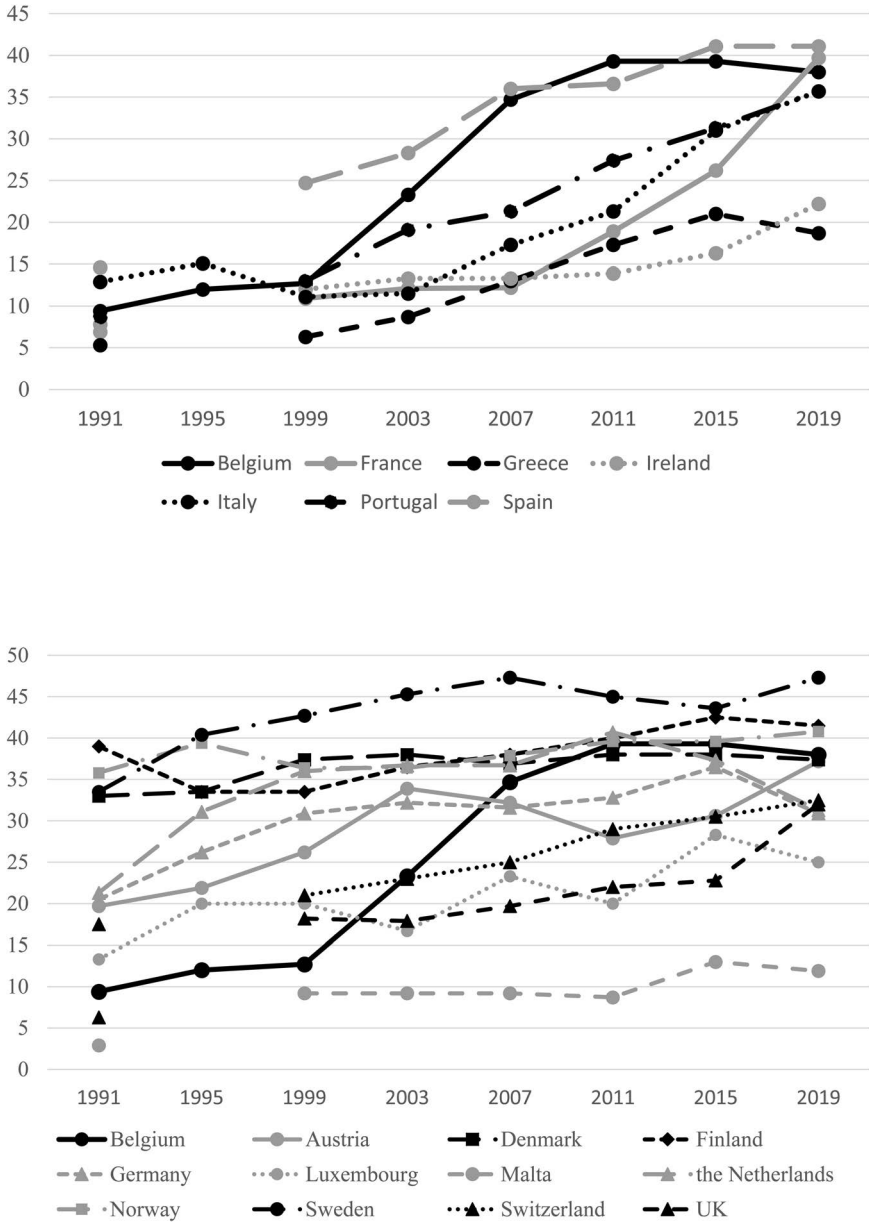
FIGURE 2.1   Percentage of women in national/federal lower houses in Western Europe (1991–2019) countries (a) *with* and (b) *without* legally binding gender quotas

TABLE 2.1 Percentage of women elected at the federal and regional level in Belgium (1991–2019)

	1991	1995	1999	2003	2004	2007	2009	2010	2014	2019
Federal level										
Chamber of Representatives	9%	12%	19%	35%		37%		39%	39%	41%
Senate★	11%	30%	30%	38%		30%		43%	/	/
Regional level										
Flemish Parliament		18%	20%		32%		41%		44%	47%
Walloon Parliament		8%	11%		19%		35%		40%	41%
Parliament of the Brussels–Capital Region		27%	35%		46%		44%		40%	44%
Parliament of the German-speaking Community		20%	24%		24%		32%		36%	36%

★ *This only concerns the directly elected senators. Since 2014, senators are no longer directly elected.*

Source: Celis and Meier (2006); https://igvm–iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/politiek/cijfers (accessed on 16 July 2020).

an easy answer. Previous studies have shown that both the design of quotas and the 'fit' with the institutional context have moderated the effects of the gender quotas (Meier, 2012b). The adoption of the first gender quotas in 1994 did not immediately trigger a large shift in women's numerical representation at the 1995 elections, as shown in Table 2.1. The main problem resided in the design features of the 1994 quotas: although strict sanctions applied, the relatively low quotas percentage stipulated at 33% and especially the absence of placement mandates limited any strong effects (Meier, 2012b). Women's presence in the Senate did increase more substantially in 1995 but this had less to do with the effective implementation of the gender quotas and more with the institutional changes that took place at the same time. In 1993, an institutional and electoral reform stipulated that senators would be elected in two larger, rather than 21 smaller, electoral districts. It was this increase in district/party magnitude that created new opportunities for women's representation (Meier, 2012b).

The 2002 gender quotas generated more effects, but here too, the success of the gender quotas interacted with a changing institutional context. The enlargement of the electoral districts and increasing party magnitude in the Federal Chamber of Representatives and the Flemish parliament, which was adopted in parallel in 2002, created an additional boost for women's political representation in these two assemblies (Meier, 2012b). District and party magnitude in the Walloon parliament remained smaller and the percentage of women increased more slowly, which suggests that the net effect of the gender quotas was perhaps

more limited than initially hoped for. The additional 'zipper quota' rules, which were applied for the first time at the regional and federal level in 2019, also generated an overall limited effect, as party magnitude is very small in Wallonia.

One reason why effects of gender quotas are not always detected is because effects might only become more visible over time. Indeed, the overview in Table 2.1 shows that women's presence in most elected assemblies has continued to grow after 2003/2004, even in the absence of new quotas. This increase in the longer run speaks to recent studies showing that political actors (parties, candidates or voters) need time to adapt to new rules. Parties need time to develop new recruitment and selection strategies, female candidates need time to 'become known' and voters need time to get acquainted with unfamiliar faces (Wauters, Maddens, & Put, 2014). These changes generally do not happen overnight and inevitably encounter opposition (Devroe, Erzeel, & Meier, 2020). For instance, in the absence of legally imposed 'horizontal' quotas which take gender relations across all lists into account, it took some time for parties to select more women at the head of the list (Vandeleene, 2014) and for voters to cast more preference votes for women (Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015). Both are, however, crucial steps in the election of women. In addition, some parties still report encountering difficulties with the recruitment of female candidates, in particular right-wing parties (Devroe et al., 2020). If anything, 25 years of quotas experience has gone some way in changing the way the main political gatekeepers think about gender equality in politics. Most, if not all, democratic parties underline the importance of guaranteeing a gender balance on candidate lists (Vandeleene, 2014). These changes in social norms have arguably also contributed to the increase in women's presence and to the effective implementation of gender quotas.

2.4 The turnover effect: do gender quotas keep women in politics?

Bringing in (more) women in parliament is a first crucial step to gender equality in politics but keeping them in parliament is equally important. After all, politicians who serve for a longer period of time in parliament have a higher chance of being promoted to senior positions and/or weighing heavily on the decision-making process (van de Wardt, Van Witteloostuijn, Chambers, & Wauters, 2020). Gender quotas, in turn, do not only influence the election of women and men but (potentially) also their *re*election. After all, they are part of a wider set of context factors that influence parties' strategic calculations about which candidates to support and reselect at the next election (Bacchi, 2006), and that inform candidates' reelection strategies and their decision whether or not to run again. Previous studies already show that women are more likely than men to be 'de-selected' by parties and to leave parliament involuntarily (Vanlangenakker, Wauters, & Maddens, 2013). The question is whether quotas can remediate this gender bias. To assess this, we compare the reelection rates between men and women in Figure 2.2.
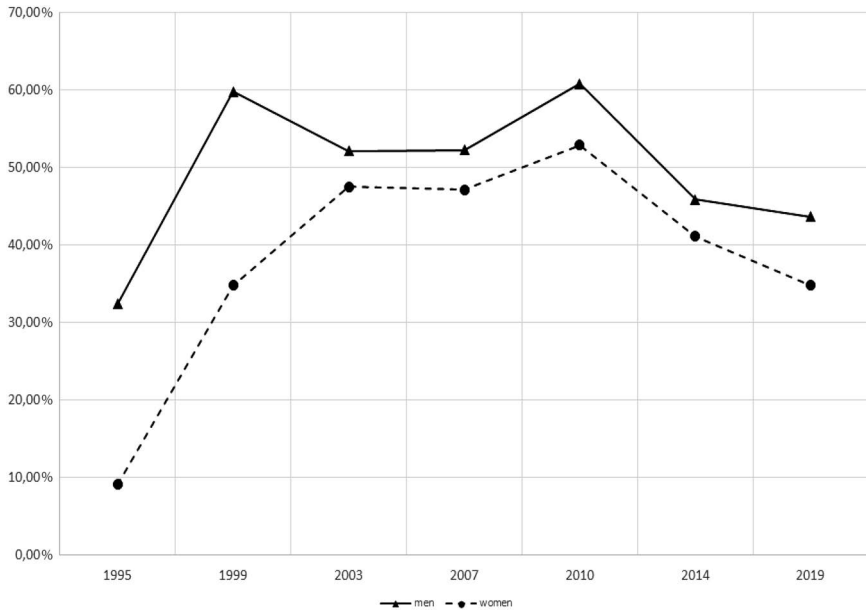
FIGURE 2.2 Reelection rate of incumbent MPs in the Federal Chamber of Representatives (1995–2019)

Source: Own calculations based on BE-Pathways data (Van Hauwaert & Janssen, 2017) complemented with recent data from the official website of the Federal Chamber of Representatives (www.dekamer.be).

Reelection rates refer to the percentage of incumbent MPs that are also present in the next parliament. Figure 2.2 shows that before the introduction of the gender quotas, the reelection rate of women in the Federal Chamber of Representatives was extremely low. Only 9% of women MPs that served during the 1991–1995 legislative term reentered the Federal Chamber in 1995. There are some reasons for this low reelection rate: due to a state reform, the total number of seats in the Federal Chamber was reduced from 212 to 150, and the regional parliaments were for the first time separately elected.[2] Nevertheless, these elements also played for male MPs, and there, we see a reelection rate of more than 30%, which is much higher than the percentage of women. This indicates that women suffered from a large turnover when quotas were used for the first time. Factors such as a male-dominated parliamentary and party culture and outgroup effects among male party selectors could be held accountable for this large turnover (Niven, 1998; van de Wardt et al., 2020). Indeed, some parties were ill - prepared to deal with the increased demand for women and did little to rethink their recruitment and selection procedures to keep women in (Erzeel, Meier, & Vandeleene, Forthcoming).

Despite this initial gender gap, we could expect that the initial outgroup effects disappear over time and that the reelection chances of women improve as

party elites, voters and aspirant candidates become accustomed with women in politics (Wauters et al., 2014). This expectation is, however, not entirely met in Figure 2.2.

Furthermore, we do not witness a negative effect of quotas on reelection rates, even on the contrary. Both after the 1995–1999 term and after the 2003–2007 term (two terms when, respectively, the first quotas and more stringent ones were for the first time applied), we see an increase or a stabilization of the reelection rate of women, but definitely not a decrease. One could have expected that many women who were only put on the candidate lists to comply with the quota laws (as was common practice in some parties shortly after the introduction of quotas), would soon be leaving politics again but that is not what we see here. In other words, we do not find confirmation for 'quota women' being pushed toward the exit.

Over time, some fluctuations occur in the reelection rates of both men and women but these run remarkably parallel with each other. When new(er) parties obtain electoral success (such as in the last decade, which is characterized as increasingly volatile), reelection rates of both men and women MPs decrease. Two remarks can be made here: the large difference in reelection rates between men and women witnessed in the 1990s became smaller over time, but reelection rates of women continue to be systematically lower than those of men until today.

In sum, it seems that gender quotas did not create an important turnover effect. There is, however, still a gender gap in terms of turnover and this to the detriment of women.

2.5 The diversity effect: do gender quotas increase diversity in politics?

Another question is *which* women (and men) have entered parliament as a result of the introduction of gender quotas. Do gender quotas mainly benefit the representation of specific subgroups of (highly educated, young) women, or do quotas also help to diversify the population of women MPs? This is the question of intersectionality (Celis, Erzeel, Mügge, & Damstra, 2014), which refers to the idea that experiences of inclusion and exclusion are not only gendered but also interact with other identity markers such as age, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, ability, etc. Disadvantages can accumulate, e.g. lower educated women in politics might experience specific thresholds as women and as lower educated persons in politics, and these can further interlock when being combined. At the same time, the combination of identity markers adds to the relevance of their representation, as lower educated women might have specific interests that require specific representation, as they do not simply coincide with those of women nor of lower educated people. The question is whether quotas only bring more women into parliament, or whether they also encourage the (s)election of a more diverse group of women.
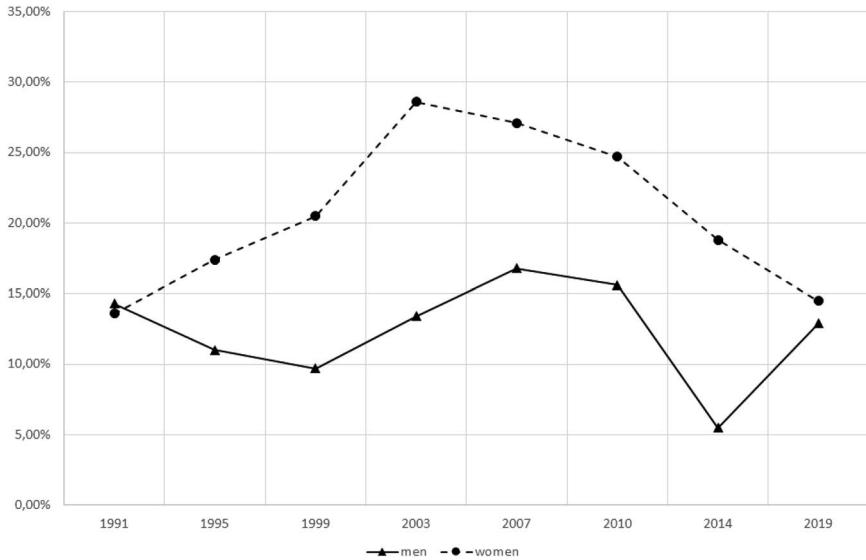
FIGURE 2.3 Share of MPs younger than 35 years by sex (Federal Chamber of Representatives, 1991–2019)

Source: Own calculations based on BE-Pathways data (Van Hauwaert & Janssen, 2017) complemented with recent data from the official website of the Federal Chamber of Representatives (www.dekamer.be).

Figures 2.3 and 2.4 study the intersection between gender and age, and gender and education respectively. We focus on age and education in combination with gender for mostly pragmatic reasons: data on these characteristics are relatively straightforward to gather over time, while the intersection between gender and ethnicity has already been investigated elsewhere (Celis et al., 2014).

As for age, rather than looking at the average age, we investigate how well the youngest (below 35 years old) and the oldest age group (above 55 years old) are represented, whether this differs by sex, and how the introduction of quotas has impacted on this difference.

Figure 2.3 clearly illustrates that the introduction of quotas has granted more chances to young women aspiring a career in politics. While in 1991 (before the introduction of gender quotas), the share of young MPs was almost equal between men and women (about 15%), the share of young women started to rise after the introduction of quotas. Especially in the 2003 elections, when the more stringent quotas were for the first time applied, the percentage of young women was high: about 30% of the women MPs were 35 years or younger. Although the percentage of young women MPs has slowly declined since then, the gap between men and women continued to be large and statistically significant (until 2019). Because we cannot find the same evolutions for male MPs, we can state quite safely that quotas have helped younger women to cross the parliamentary threshold.
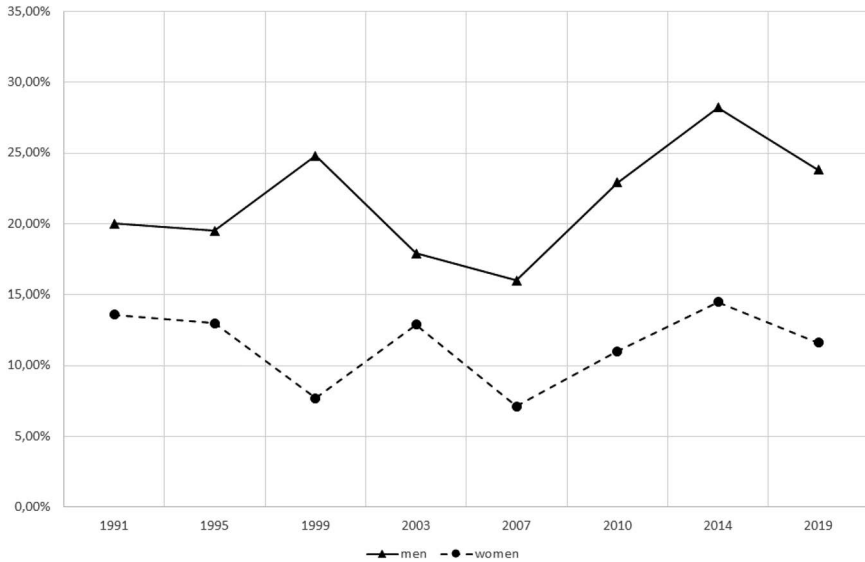
FIGURE 2.4 Share of MPs older than 55 years by sex (Federal Chamber of Representatives 1991–2019)

Source: Own calculations based on BE-Pathways data (Van Hauwaert & Janssen, 2017) complemented with recent data from the official website of the Federal Chamber of Representatives (www.dekamer.be).

It is furthermore remarkable that since the first application of the quotas in 1995, the percentages of young MPs have differed between men and women but have become similar in the most recent elections (as it was in 1991 before the introduction of quotas). It remains yet to be seen whether the same picture will emerge in the next elections.

While quotas have facilitated the influx of young women into parliament, this is not the case for older women (aged 55 years and older). This becomes apparent from Figure 2.4. The share of older people among women MPs has always been lower than among men MPs, and this continues to be the case over the last 25 years. There are some fluctuations (which remarkably coincide between men and women) but no general (upward) trend can be noted. This leads to the conclusion that while quotas might have helped younger women, this is not the case for older women. This could be explained by the so-called complementarity advantage (see also Celis et al., 2014): when party selectors want to launch new faces on the candidate lists, it is an attractive option to select a candidate that is both young and female, as it simultaneously realizes rejuvenation and feminization of the candidate lists.

When it comes to educational attainment, we distinguish between MPs with and without a degree of higher academic education. This distinction is most relevant in a parliamentary system which is increasingly described as a 'diploma democracy' (Bovens & Wille, 2017) in which MPs with a university degree increasingly prevail.
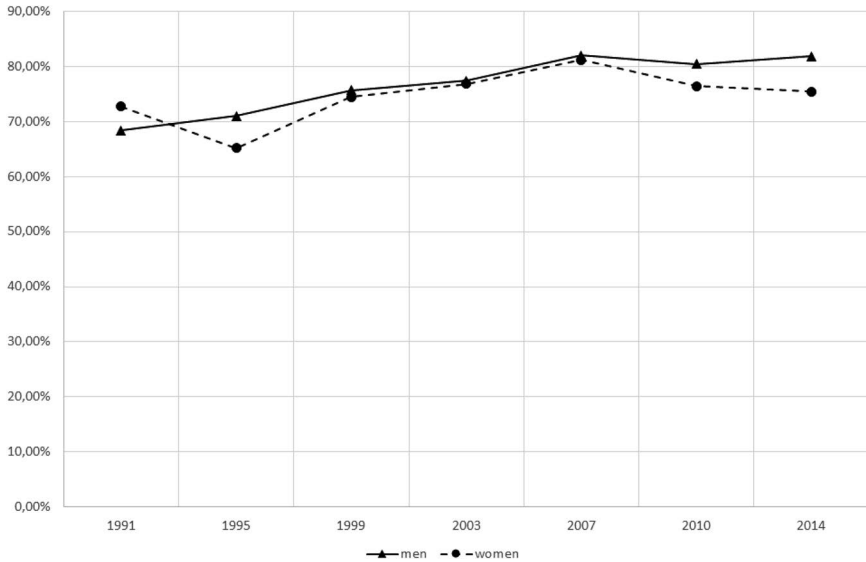
FIGURE 2.5   Share of MPs with a degree of higher academic education by sex (Federal
Chamber of Representatives 1991–2014)[4]

Source: Own calculations based on BE-Pathways data (Van Hauwaert & Janssen, 2017)
complemented with recent data from the official website of the Federal Chamber of
Representatives (www.dekamer.be).

Figure 2.5 shows a small but steady increase of MPs with a university degree,
both among men and women. The absolute percentages between men and
women do not differ significantly, and this is the case throughout the whole
period of analysis. Although there are slightly more fluctuations among women
MPs, the general conclusion is that the introduction of gender quotas did not
have an impact on the educational profile of MPs. Nor were lower educated MPs
more selected due to a lack of other candidates (just after the introduction of
quotas), neither did quotas bring a more balanced group of women (in terms of
educational profile) into parliament (in the long run).

In sum, it appears that quotas did not lead to a more diverse group of women
represented in parliament, with the notable exception of young women who
enjoyed more opportunities to start a national political career.

2.6 The power effect: do gender quotas bring more women in political power?

The final question that remains is whether gender quotas, and the consequent
rise in the number of women MPs they encouraged, also increased women's
access to positions of power. Focusing on two specific positions of power, this
section considers the evolution in the number of female parliamentary party
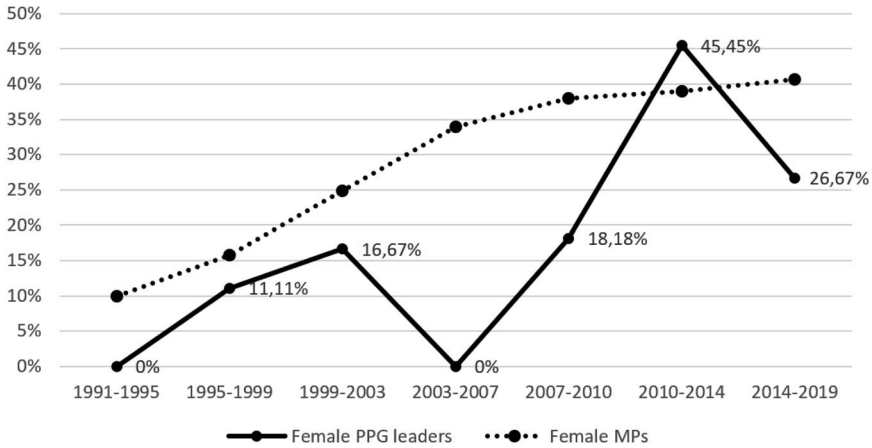
group leaders (PPG leaders) in the Federal Chamber of Representatives and the number of female ministers in the Federal government since 1991.

First, PPG leaders are pivotal players in parliament. They not only manage parties' legislative branches, coordinate backbenchers' specialized activities and ensure group unity, but they also promote political stability, decisional efficiency and parties' collective accountability to the electorate (de Vet, 2019). Figure 2.6 presents the evolution in the percentage of female PPG leaders per legislative term in the Federal Chamber of Representatives from 1991 onward. The dotted line presents the percentage of female MPs. As becomes clear from this figure, women are highly underrepresented among the PPG leaders. The historical underrepresentation of women in parliament logically also reduces the recruit-ment pool from which female PPG leaders could be selected. Yet, the percentage of female PPG leaders is in all cases but one far below the level of female MPs. This seems to point toward an additional funnel hampering the progression of women to leadership positions. The percentage of female PPG leaders peaked in 2010 with 45% but never reaches the 50% threshold and keeps showing distinct trends downwards in recent years.

Second, being a cabinet member is among the most powerful political posi-tions. On top of the electoral gender quotas, it is also stipulated in law that all governments, both federal and regional, must include at least one woman. However, women have traditionally also been underrepresented among gov-ernment ministers. Figure 2.7 presents the evolution in the percentage of female members of the federal government from 1991 onward, compared to the per-centage of female MPs. In the 1990s, female members of Cabinet were rather exceptional but this number has steadily increased over the years. Yet, the share
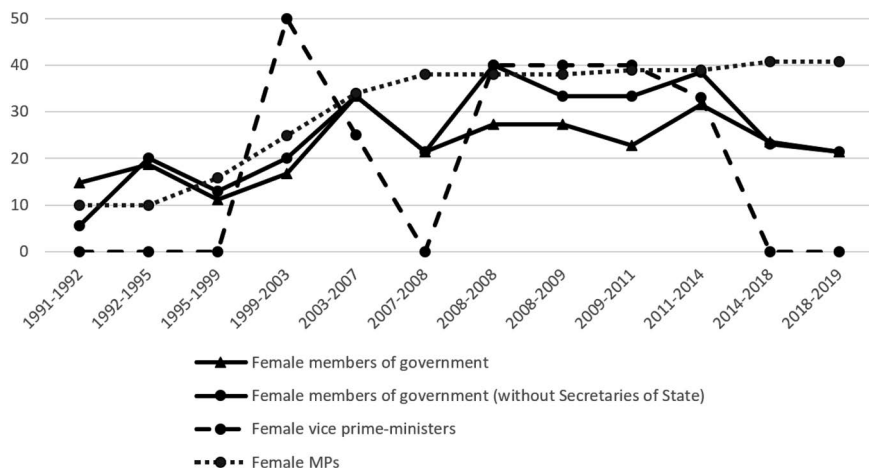
FIGURE 2.7 Female members of the Federal government (1991–2019)

of female ministers has never exceeded the 33% percentage level and remains far below the level of female MPs. Looking at the number of female deputy prime ministers, a large fluctuation over time can be noted. The positive figures displayed between 2008 and 2014 are strongly linked to two female members of government (Laurette Onkelinx [PS] and Joëlle Milquet [cdH]) who served as deputy prime minister in several successive governments. However, here again a downward trend can be noted in recent years.

Taken together, these analyses clearly highlight that although women's numerical presence has increased over the years, this does not automatically result in high-level political positions being more open to or easier to reach for women. Despite the positive evolution observed in the number of female elected representatives, the highest echelons of power remain largely reserved for male politicians.

2.7 Conclusion

Belgium played a frontrunner role in the adoption of electoral gender quotas. By offering a reflection on Belgium's quarter century experiences with these gender quotas and considering their long-term effects, this chapter laid bare the extent to which the provision of electoral gender quotas has actually contributed to the descriptive representation of women.

A first part of our analyses focused on the numerical effect by assessing whether gender quotas have led to an increase in the number of women elected. Our results point out that from the mid-1990s onward, women's presence in the Federal Chamber of Representatives has significantly increased over time. In

terms of growth rates, Belgium outperforms most other 'fast-track' countries. However, establishing a causal link between the implementation of gender quotas and this remarkable increase in women's numerical presence remains difficult as both the design of the quotas and the fit with the institutional context are found to have a moderating effect in this regard (Meier, 2012b).

Although the key goal of gender quotas might be to bring more women in politics, keeping them in parliament is an equally important target. We therefore also considered the turnover effect. Our results show that the 'revolving door' idea (according to which selectors select women only to comply with quotas increasing the likelihood of an early departure) does not hold. A comparison of the reelection rates of female and male MPs does not point to a negative effect of quotas on reelection rates, even on the contrary. Quotas helped to keep more women in politics over time, although female MPs are still more likely to exit than men.

By investigating what kind of women have entered parliament, we shed light on the diversity effect. Our analyses reveal that the introduction of quotas has helped younger women to cross the parliamentary threshold. A different picture, however, arises when looking at older women. They are still largely underrepresented (especially in comparison to their male colleagues). Also, in terms of education, the introduction of gender quotas did not have an impact on the profile of MPs: almost all male and female MPs have a university degree. This makes us conclude that quotas tend to reproduce within-group inequalities.

We finally investigated whether gender quotas brought more women in political power. Focusing on PPG leadership and executive office, our results point out that the introduction of gender quotas did not help women in shattering the highest glass ceiling in politics. The fact that men continue to occupy the most 'visible' positions is not only unequal in itself but also enables them to generate more (media) attention. This in turn increases their chances of being reelected (Hooghe, Jacobs, & Claes, 2015) and ultimately results in the preservation of the systematic underrepresentation of women in politics.

Taken together, this chapter shows that although gender quotas generate certain beneficial long-term effects for the descriptive representation of women, it remains questionable whether they truly lead to a sustainable gender transformation in politics (Lang et al., Forthcoming). An important question prevails whether the existing gender quotas will lead to a continued growth in women's presence in politics and to the removal of structural barriers for women's representation. This is not an easy prediction. While quotas do offer 'fast track' solutions, they do not guarantee linear and steady growth. In that sense, 'fast track' patterns resemble 'incremental' patterns to women's representation (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). From a comparative perspective, we are currently witnessing a 'flattening' curve in countries that had relatively high percentages of women in 1991, such as the Scandinavian countries. Dahlerup and Leyenaar (2013) have described this phenomenon as 'saturation without parity': the percentage of women fluctuates at a relatively high level of elected women but never

reaches a fully equal number to men. The question is whether gender quotas are capable of pushing the number of women behind this point of saturation. In most countries with gender quotas, the curve is still on the rise but Belgium might be an exception to this rule. Since 2011, the percentage of women in most elected assemblies at the federal and regional level has saturated around 40%. It is difficult to predict whether the percentage of women will continue to level off or whether it will push to a higher level in the foreseeable future. However, there is a distinct possibility that gender quotas too lead to 'saturation without parity', even if they are effectively designed as is the case in Belgium.

Notes

1 Looking at Western Europe allows for comparing similar systems (i.e. established democracies with consolidated party systems).
2 The continuation of a political mandate in a regional parliament was not considered as a reelection in our analysis.
3 The growth rate was calculated as follows: ((proportion of women 2019 - proportion of women 1991)/proportion of women 1991) ⋆ 100.
4 The Chamber of Representatives no longer systematically mentions the educational degree of MPs from the 2019 term onward. Therefore, our analysis for education ends in 2014.

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3

AN ANALYSIS OF ELECTRONIC VOTING IN BELGIUM

Do voters behave differently when facing a machine?

Régis Dandoy

3.1 Introduction

In 1991, Belgium was one of the first countries to test on-site electronic voting (e-voting) for political elections.[1] Since then, the country has continuously used e-voting in all of its binding elections (from the local to the European ones). In addition, this implementation has been scattered around the country as some municipalities used e-voting while other (sometimes neighboring) municipalities used paper voting. These three elements – continuity over almost 30 years, use for all binding elections and implementation in only some municipalities – make the Belgian case of e-voting unique worldwide.

The Belgian e-voting experience is not only unique but also constitutes an original field study. The use of paper voting in some municipalities and of e-voting in others – as well as their variation over time – allows a comparison between voting modalities while keeping constant most of the features of the electoral system. This kind of analysis is not possible in countries such as Brazil where e-voting has been implemented in all municipalities. Since municipalities were not systematically selected (e.g. based on certain criteria), we could consider this a natural experiment, in which some municipalities (rather by chance) use electronic voting and others not. One exception to this pattern is that e-voting was abolished in 2017 for the elections in the Walloon region, while it is still used in (some) municipalities in the rest of the country.

Building on the uniqueness of the Belgian case, this chapter aims at investigating the impact of e-voting on voting behavior. Political scientists are generally aware that the design of the ballot or the electoral system has potentially an impact on voting behavior (see for instance Kimball & Kropf, 2005), but we know less about the consequences for the voters of the decision of using voting machines rather than paper ballots (Conrad et al., 2009; Roth, 1998;

Wang et al., 2017). E-voting is still a recent phenomenon and remains limited to a small number of countries (mostly Brazil, India and the United States), where it often remains peripheral (for instance in Canada, France, Japan or Peru). Most prior works tend to focus on specific countries and elections and there are few comparative studies (see van den Besselaar et al., 2003 for an exception). This chapter aims to contribute to the emerging literature on the impact of voting machines on voters' behavior by digging into the Belgian case.

In Section 3.2, this chapter investigates scholarly literature regarding the impact of e-voting on several dimensions of the voting decision. Empirical studies from several countries and from previous works on Belgium will lead to draw three hypotheses regarding turnout, invalid votes and split-ticket voting. Section 3.3 presents an overview of the use of e-voting in Belgian elections and its evolution over the last three decades. In Section 3.4, I empirically investigate the impact of e-voting on voting behavior by comparing electoral districts using e-voting with the ones using paper voting regarding electoral participation (i.e. turnout), the share of invalid votes as well as split-ticket voting. This section relies on legislative election results for the period 1991–2019 in two Belgian provinces and confirms that turnout is lower in electoral districts using e-voting, while paper voting tends to lead to more invalid votes and to more split-ticket votes.

3.2 E-voting and structure of the vote

Political scientists generally agree that any change regarding the organization of an election – be it the polling place, the design of the ballot or the electoral system – has potentially an impact on voting behavior (see for instance Kimball & Kropf, 2005; Miller & Krosnick, 1998; Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006 on the impact of ballot design on election results). The introduction of e-voting is similarly considered a disruptive element. For instance, it is literally impossible to replicate exactly the paper ballot on the screen: for a series of technical reasons (screen size, color, font size, etc.), the ballot needs to be adapted to fit the screen. The literature teaches us that e-voting supposedly has an impact on the propensity to cast a vote and on voting behavior.

To assess the impact of e-voting on voting behavior, researchers investigate its usability (Conrad et al., 2009; Roth, 1998; Wang et al., 2017). Usability is often understood as the degree to which individuals find it easy and satisfying to use systems and to perform the expected tasks accurately and within a reasonable amount of time (Herrnson et al., 2008). Ensuring usability is important for consolidating representative democracy in the digital age. First, universal suffrage guarantees that every citizen should not only be allowed to vote but s(he) should also be able to vote electronically. It is therefore important to ensure that the usability of e-voting leads to a greater equality among voters. Voters should be equal when facing the voting machine, independent of their

gender, age, voting experience or digital skills. Second, usability is particularly important concerning the will of the voters. E-voting equipment or interface should not have an influence on the decision of the voter or cause her to make mistakes (for instance by unintentionally invalidating her vote and by selecting the next candidate on the list). E-voting systems need to make sure that citizens accurately vote for their preferred party or candidate.

The literature on electoral studies has indicated to us that seemingly minor changes in the electoral system may have major consequences for how citizens cast their vote. These findings are confirmed in the case of e-voting systems: voters alter their behavior and their vote choice in response to different e-voting technologies, which, in turn, may lead to different electoral outcomes across voting systems (Calvo et al., 2008; Katz et al., 2008). According to Conrad et al. (2009), "in a close election, even rare usability problems can distort the outcome, particularly if they lead to systematic, as opposed to randomly distributed, errors". The impact of the (poor) usability of e-voting systems is therefore to be found for three different types of voting behavior: turnout, invalid voting and split-ticket voting.

First, even if voters ultimately vote the way they intend to, they may find the experience unsatisfying and it might lead them to avoid future elections (Conrad et al., 2009). Based on field experiments in four European countries, van den Besselaar and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that a poor e-voting system design, and in particular an insufficient voter usability, may decrease turnout in future elections. Yet, an analysis of aggregate local election results in Japan demonstrated that turnout is higher in districts using e-voting compared to districts using paper voting (Tsukiyama, 2018). Other studies indicate a lower turnout in e-voting districts, such as in India (Debnath et al., 2017) and the United States (Card & Moretti, 2007; Roseman & Stephenson, 2005). Finally, scholars find no statistically significant effect of on-site e-voting on turnout in Brazil (Fujiwara, 2015), India (Desai & Lee, 2019) and the Netherlands (Allers & Kooreman, 2009).

Concerning the Belgian case, it is interesting to notice that – even if voting is compulsory – there are significant variations of turnout across the territory and over time. Several studies demonstrated the negative impact of electronic voting on turnout in local elections: in Flanders in 2006 (Ackaert et al., 2011), in Wallonia in 1994–2012 (Dandoy, 2014) and in all municipalities in 2006–2012 (Dejaeghere & Vanhoutte, 2016). The conclusions of the BeVoting (2007) study are more mixed as the researchers observed a drop of turnout in the Flemish cantons but not in Brussels and one of the two analyzed elections in Wallonia. As a result, the first hypothesis (H1) tested in this chapter implies that a lower turnout should be observed in cantons using e-voting.

Second, a poor usability of e-voting systems can also directly contribute to an increase of voter errors (Conrad et al., 2009; Herrnson et al., 2008) and lead to an increase of the share of invalid votes (Stein et al., 2008). However, e-voting presents the advantage of preventing the unintentional expression invalid votes:

in most of the cases, the software and/or the equipment does not allow voters to cast null votes. Voting behaviors such as writing comments on the ballot, over-voting or voting for candidates from different lists (except systems allowing *panachage*) are technically not possible with e-voting and one can expect to observe a decrease of the share of invalid votes. For instance, Nicolau (2015), Fujiwara (2015) and Katz and Levin (2018) showed that the introduction of electronic voting machines greatly reduced the quantity of null votes in Brazilian elections. In the United States, the introduction of on-site e-voting elections significantly reduced the number of residual votes (Kimball et al., 2004; Stewart, 2006) and the number of over- and under-votes (Frisina et al., 2008).[2] The same findings are reflected in the Dutch (Allers & Kooreman, 2009), Indian (Debnath et al., 2017; Desai & Lee, 2019) and Japanese cases (Tsukiyama, 2018).

In Belgium, it is important to notice that, while invalid voting is virtually impossible,[3] the e-voting machine displays a 'blank vote' button on the bottom right-hand of the party menu. As the official election statistics do not allow to distinguish between blank from null votes, the share of invalid votes in paper districts represents both types of votes, while it accounts only for blank votes in the case of e-voting municipalities. Several studies indicated that e-voting helped reduce the share of invalid votes for the 2009 European elections (Pion, 2010) and for the local elections in 1994–2012 (Dandoy, 2014) and in 2006–2012 (Dejaeghere & Vanhoutte, 2016). In their study of local elections in Flanders in 2006, Ackaert and colleagues (2011) observed the opposite phenomenon: more blank votes in e-voting municipalities compared to paper-based municipalities. A second hypothesis (H2) will test whether a smaller share of invalid votes is observed in cantons using e-voting.

Finally, e-voting may have a direct impact on the vote for candidates or political parties.[4] The first set of works investigating this question look at vote differences across elections held on the same day. Analyzing the 2011 elections in Argentina, Barnes and colleagues (2017) found out that voters using e-voting systems display a significantly higher rate of ballot splitting than voters using the paper vote. Comparing different types of e-voting systems in the same country, Calvo and colleagues (2008) observed a significant variation of split-ticket rates depending on whether the system reinforces candidate-centric or party-centric cues (the rate of ballot splitting being lower in the latter case).

Another set of scholarly studies observes whether e-voting had an impact on the vote share of specific political parties. Katz and colleagues (2008) found significant differences in party vote shares depending on the e-voting technology used by the voter and several authors investigated the parties and candidates that benefited from the implementation of e-voting. For instance, Card and Moretti (2007) analyzed the effects of touch-screen e-voting during the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections and observed a small but statistically significant positive effect on electoral support for George Bush. Similarly, Debnath and colleagues (2017) found out that candidates associated with corruption and criminal activities receive relatively less votes than other candidates in e-voting

polling stations in India, while Desai and Lee (2019) conclude that e-voting is associated with an increase of vote shares for minor parties. In the Brazilian case, Fujiwara (2015) indicated that e-voting caused a large enfranchisement of less educated voters, which led to the election of more left-wing state legislators. Yet, another piece of literature on the impact of e-voting on party vote shares leads to less articulate conclusions. Little effect on partisan votes is, for instance, observed in the case of a regional referendum in Brazil (Mellon et al., 2017), of local elections in Japan (Tsukiyama, 2018) and of local and national elections in the Netherlands (Allers & Kooreman, 2009).

Admittedly, the effect of electronic voting equipment on voting behavior may be of an indirect nature. For instance, the impact of e-voting could be mediated by turnout: the categories of voters that decide not to go to the polling station because e-voting is used are also the ones that are more likely to vote for specific parties (Geser, 2004). As result, e-voting punishes parties whose voters do not trust this new form of voting or are less familiar with new technologies. In India, the positive effect of e-voting on the vote share of minor parties was moderated by the share of invalid rates: the votes that were previously discarded as invalid are being funneled instead to minor parties (Desai & Lee, 2019). In addition, e-voting equipment may lead to a larger number of split-ticket votes and Barnes and colleagues (2017) observed that this voting behavior leads to a small increase in the vote shares obtained by minor parties in Argentina. They calculated that e-voting and ballot splitting would enable some of these parties to win a seat in the assembly. In the framework of this chapter, I will test a third hypothesis (H3) according to which the share of split-ticket votes is higher in cantons using e-voting.

3.3 Overview of e-voting in Belgium

In 1991, Belgium decided to introduce on-site electronic voting in its elections. The arguments behind this decision were that it would help reducing the cost of elections (for instance, the costs related to the ballot papers and to the payment of polling station staff), accelerate the publication of the results, increase the reliability of the results and reduce the number of staff in each polling station. Two different e-voting systems were tested in two cantons (Verlaine and Waarschoot) at the occasion of the 1991 legislative elections and it was decided to implement e-voting at a larger scale.[5]

The Law of 11 April 1994 regulates the implementation and use of e-voting in Belgium. About 20% of the Belgian voters were allowed to use e-voting in 76 municipalities at the occasion of the European elections of June 1994 and of the local and provincial elections in October 1994. All types of political elections were concerned, and e-voting has been used in all local, provincial, regional, national and European elections organized in Belgium since 1994. E-voting occurs on-site (on election day in the polling stations) while anticipated voting and internet voting are not allowed. Each polling station is equipped with at

least one voting machine. The voting process is quite simple: the voter receives a smart card that s(he) introduces in the machine; the voter indicates his/her preferences for parties and the candidates on the screen (using a light pen or a touchscreen); the voter confirms his/her votes (blank votes are allowed) and the voter gets the smart card back and introduces it into the ballot box.

While the 1994 law regulates the use of e-voting, the lists of cantons using the system are managed by royal arrests. It means that the enlargement of e-voting to other cantons is rather simple and does not require a heavy legislative effort. E-voting has consequently been enlarged to about half of the cantons in the provinces of Antwerp and Liège and in Brussels, and from 1999 to 2014, about 44% of the Belgian voters have been using e-voting. The situation varied territorially as all municipalities in the Brussels region and German-speaking community use e-voting, while it nearly concerns half of the voters in Flanders and only 22% of the voting population in French-speaking Wallonia. With the 5th state reform, the regions received in 2001 the oversight on provinces and municipalities, implying that the regions can now choose themselves the voting modalities for local and provincial elections on their territory.

The e-voting also evolved over time, partly following the evolution of the technology. For instance, a system of e-voting with paper trail (or paper record) has been tested in 2003 in two cantons (Verlaine and Waarschoot) and, partly based on the recommendations of the interuniversity report BeVoting, gradually enlarged to all Brussels, Flemish and German-speaking municipalities. Since 2014, the light pen system has been gradually replaced by a touch-screen system. In 2019, a system allowing the visually impaired or blind voter to cast their vote independently (by following the voice instructions emitted by the voting software, via a headset) has been tested in two municipalities (Aalst and Mechelen).

The use of e-voting in Belgium has not been without debate and without problems. The equipment used since 1994 became relatively obsolete by the mid-2000s but their life span was extended (resulting in additional costs for the maintenance of the equipment). In some Brussels and Walloon municipalities, the old e-voting system has been used until the 2014 elections, creating an increasing number of small-scale incidents. Among those incidents, I can cite the 2003 problem in the municipality of Schaerbeek where a candidate received more than 4000 additional preference votes, or the 2004 problem in the municipality of Antwerp where a defective floppy disk created counting errors. In 2018, in one Brussels (Saint-Josse-ten-Noode) and six Flemish municipalities, a recount of the paper trails had to be carried out after aberrant results were observed because of software issues.

The 2014 elections witnessed a problem of another magnitude: a programming error in the software used in 39 Walloon and 17 Brussels municipalities implied that the ballots of some of the voters who changed their mind during the voting process were not recorded. This problem delayed the publication of the results for three days in Brussels and it was estimated that the votes of

2250 voters have been lost. In the days that followed, several political leaders in Brussels and Wallonia declared that they were in favor of returning to paper voting. In June 2015, the Walloon Parliament confirmed the abandonment of electronic voting in this region and this decision will be extended to regional, federal and European elections. The software problem had the opposite impact in Brussels and in the German-speaking community: these two entities decided to completely renew their old e-voting equipment and replace it with an e-voting system with paper trail. Since the 2018 elections, e-voting with paper evidence is used in all Brussels and German-speaking municipalities, as well as in a majority of Flemish municipalities. The other Flemish municipalities and all the French-speaking Walloon municipalities exclusively use paper voting.

Overall, the Belgian e-voting case presents a profile based on three main characteristics that is unique worldwide. First, it has been used for all binding elections organized in the country. Many other countries implemented e-voting only for local (and/or regional) elections, such as Australia, Canada or Japan. Second, it presents a continuity over almost 30 years, unlike countries such as Bulgaria, Ecuador, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom. Third, it has been implemented in a varying number of municipalities, contrary to countries such as Brazil or Venezuela. This last characteristic of a 'moving target' implies that researchers can compare between municipalities using e-voting and neighboring municipalities using paper voting, as well as comparing one municipality over time as it may oscillate between paper and e-voting.

3.4 E-voting and voting behavior in Belgium

As indicated in Section 3.3, e-voting is a widespread phenomenon in Belgium. In this chapter, I focused on a limited geographical subset of elections using e-voting and I provide a detailed analysis of the e-voting phenomenon in all the municipalities and cantons from the provinces of Liège in Wallonia and of Limburg in Flanders. The choice of these provinces is rather logical. Unlike other provinces, there have been no changes over time in the list of municipalities that used e-voting in these two provinces until 2014. Probably more importantly, there is a relatively equal number of municipalities and cantons using e-voting and paper voting in the provinces of Liège and Limburg.[6] Out of the 84 municipalities in the Liège province, 34 of them used e-voting for every single election between 1995 and 2014, which correspond to 12 electoral cantons out of 26 and about 62.75% of the voting population of the province. In the Limburg province, exactly half of the municipalities used e-voting between 1999 and 2014, i.e. 7 cantons out of 15 and 60.61% of the voting population.[7] This occurrence of municipalities using e-voting next to municipalities using paper voting in the same province for all elections and over a larger period of time constitutes a rather unique quasi-experiment.

For the analyses of the impact of e-voting on voting behavior, I focused on the national (federal) elections (House of Representatives). The advantage of these elections is that the electoral district is provincial-wide, meaning that the same set of parties and candidates are presented to all the voters in the province, independent of the voting modality in their canton. Given their specific voting behavior (particularly in terms of turnout and invalid votes shares – see Dandoy, 2014; Dejaeghere & Vanhoutte, 2016; Istasse, 2020), I excluded the German-speaking municipalities from the analyses. In addition, and unlike the other Walloon municipalities, these municipalities kept the e-voting modality for their elections after 2014. The data consist of national election results at the canton level for the provinces of Liège (1995–2014) and of Limburg (1999–2019).

The analyses indicate that the first hypothesis is confirmed: turnout is lower in cantons using e-voting compared to cantons with paper voting in both provinces. On average, during the period 1995–2014, turnout reached 90.35% in the Liège cantons using paper voting while we observe a turnout of 87.56% in the e-voting cantons. In the Limburg province, cantons using paper voting display an average turnout of 94.07% while this figure drops to 92.61% on the cantons with e-voting. Overall, the turnout difference between the two voting modalities is of 2.79% in the Liège province and of 1.46% in the Limburg one. These differences are quite important when one remembers that there is less variance in turnout figures in countries where voting is compulsory. Figure 3.1 shows that these differences in turnout are present in all election years, independent of the overall decline of turnout over the period under investigation.

In the Liège province, the difference in turnout between the two types of voting modalities seems to decrease over time. The difference in turnout between cantons using paper voting and e-voting was 3.60% in 1995 while it declined and reached a difference of only 2.17% in 2014. This evolution is not due to the fact that voters using e-voting tend to participate proportionally more over time but rather the consequence of the overall decline of turnout
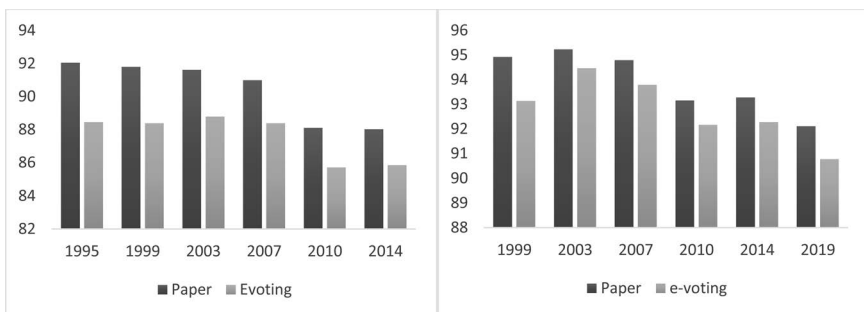
FIGURE 3.1 Turnout in national elections (Liège province, 1995–2014; Limburg province, 1999–2019)

in the province that affects more particularly the cantons using paper voting. In the Limburg province, the difference in turnout between cantons using paper voting and using e-voting remains fairly stable over time. In any case, it is interesting to notice that we do not observe that the negative impact of e-voting on turnout diminished over time in parallel with voters' increasing familiarity with e-voting and increasing digital skills.

Yet, the differences in turnout cannot be fully attributed to different types of voting modalities and several other factors may come into play. For instance, Dejaeghere and Vanhoutte (2016) indicated that sociodemographic variables measured at the municipal level such as age, marital status or migration had an impact on turnout in Belgian local elections besides e-voting, while Dandoy (2014) stressed out the importance of party competition, the presence of protest parties and urbanization for the same type of elections. Yet, these works have in common that they also put forward the importance of the size of the electoral districts, confirming the numerous studies that investigated the impact of the size of communities on turnout since Dahl and Tufte (1973). There is indeed an important bias in the sample of cantons that used e-voting in our two provinces and the average number of voters is significantly higher in cantons using e-voting compared to cantons using paper voting.

Concerning the second hypothesis, our data suggests that it is also confirmed. Cantons using paper voting display a larger share of invalid votes compared to cantons using e-voting. On average, during the period 1995–2014, the share of invalid votes is larger by 2.42% in cantons using paper voting (7.71%) compared to cantons using e-voting (5.29%) in the Liège province. Those figures reach, respectively, 6.06% and 5.13% in the Limburg province, indicating a difference of 0.93% between the cantons using different voting modalities. Our data based on national election results indicate important differences in the share of invalid votes between cantons using different voting modalities, confirming previous findings for local elections in Flanders (Dejaeghere & Vanhoutte, 2016).[8] Overall, the observed difference in invalid vote share is rather important and somehow compensates the difference in turnout observed above: turnout is lower in cantons using e-voting but voters from these cantons express a larger share of valid votes.

Figure 3.2 displays the share of invalid votes across election years for both types of cantons in both provinces. Over the whole period, the share of invalid votes is always higher in cantons using paper voting compared to cantons using e-voting. Yet, there seems to be no clear time-related patterns in the Liège province: the largest difference between cantons using paper voting and using e-voting was in 2003 (3.01%) while the smallest was observed in 1995 (1.53%). On the contrary, the share of invalid votes in the Limburg province clearly declines over time: from a difference of 1.34% in 1999 to a mere difference of 0.22% in the 2019 elections. In any case, we do not observe a clear relation between turnout and the share of invalid votes as the decrease of turnout over time is not followed by a similar pattern concerning the share of invalid votes in the cantons using e-voting.
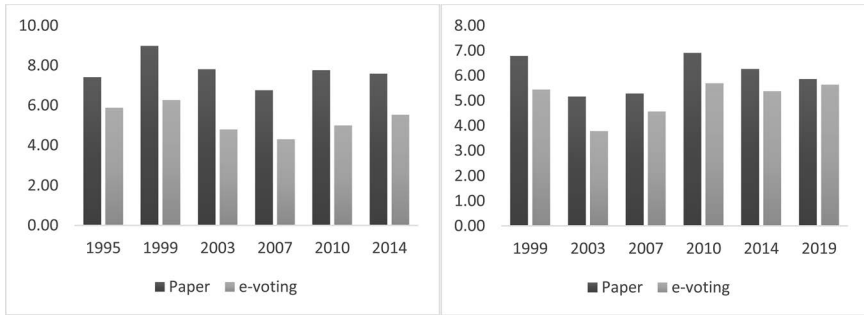
FIGURE 3.2   Share of invalid votes in national elections (Liège province, 1995–2014; Limburg province, 1999–2019)

Once again, several sociodemographic factors may in parallel have an impact on the share of invalid votes in these two provinces. Similar to their findings concerning turnout, Dejaeghere and Vanhoutte (2016) observed that invalid votes in local elections in Belgium are − besides e-voting − statistically related to age and migration, as well as to unemployment. In his study, Dandoy (2014) found out that turnout, municipality size and the patterns of competition (number of lists and presence of national parties) are similarly associated with the share of invalid votes in local elections in Wallonia.

Finally, this chapter aimed at observing the impact of e-voting on party vote shares. Given the specificity of the cantons in the Liège and Limburg provinces and the geographical grouping of the cantons using paper voting and using e-voting, observed differences regarding party vote shares are mostly explained by sociodemographic variables rather than by the voting modality.[9] For instance, e-voting cantons in the Liège province include left-leaning cantons such as Herstal, Saint-Nicolas or Seraing that bias the comparison between e-voting and paper cantons. However, the split-ticket voting hypothesis can be tested at the occasion of the 2014 elections. On the same day, voters had to choose their representatives in the federal parliament, the Walloon and Flemish regional parliaments and the European parliament. We therefore can compare whether e-voters tend to split their votes more often than voters using paper ballots (H3). German-speaking municipalities − where voters could emit an additional vote concerning the election of the German-speaking community parliament − are excluded from the calculations for the Liège province.

Table 3.1 presents the share of voters voting for different parties between the three combinations of elections. For instance, the figure of 3.91% for the province of Liège means that 3.91% of the voters in the cantons voting with paper did vote for two different parties in the federal elections compared to the regional elections. Overall, we observe that the share of split-ticket voting remains quite modest when using aggregate data,[10] in contrast with the 34.5% of the survey respondents that report having divided their votes among

TABLE 3.1 Share of split-ticket votes in the 2014 elections (Liège and Limburg provinces)

	Liège province		Limburg province	
	Paper voting (%)	E-voting (%)	Paper voting (%)	E-voting (%)
Federal – Regional	3.91	1.50	2.37	1.63
Federal – European	6.42	5.17	7.90	7.40
Regional – European	4.15	4.87	9.07	7.08

different parties at the 2014 simultaneous elections (Willocq & Kelbel, 2018). Figures are slightly higher for the Limburg province due to the 'Verhofstadt effect' in the European elections, meaning that an important share of Flemish voters decided to vote for the party of former prime minister Guy Verhofstadt in the European elections while voting for their preferred party in the other two elections.

Nonetheless, the data allow us to investigate trends across cantons with different voting modalities. Contrary to the third hypothesis, the share of split-ticket voters is larger in cantons using paper voting in both provinces. This is in particular true when looking at the differences between the federal elections and the regional and European elections in the Liège provinces and when looking at differences between the regional and European elections in the Limburg province. In our data, the only couple of elections that display a higher share of split-ticket voting in e-voting cantons concern the difference between the regional and European elections in the Liège province. We can conclude from these analyses that there seems to be more impact of voting for different elections on different paper ballots than voting on different successive computer screens.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter aimed at investigating whether voters alter their behavior and their vote choice in response to different voting technologies. Given the varying usability of paper voting and electronic voting (e-voting), I assessed the impact of e-voting on voting behavior by focusing on three distinct phenomena: turnout, invalid voting and split-ticket voting. Building on the uniqueness of the Belgian e-voting system, this chapter relied on a quasi-experimental research design. Patterns of voting behavior have been empirically studied by comparing national legislative election results in cantons using e-voting with cantons voting with paper ballots in two Belgian provinces for the period 1995–2019.

This chapter confirmed previous findings reported in other countries. A lower turnout is observed in cantons using e-voting compared to cantons using paper voting. In a country where voting is compulsory, and where voting

participation remains very stable across election years, a difference of turnout of about 2% is an important phenomenon. It is also interesting to notice that we do not observe that the negative impact of e-voting on turnout diminished over time in parallel with voters' increasing familiarity with e-voting and increasing digital skills. Turnout remains lower in cantons using e-voting in recent election years.

In parallel, this chapter also acknowledges that – in line with a second hypothesis – a smaller share of invalid votes is observed in cantons using e-voting. Even if this is explained by the fact that the voting machine does not allow voters to express a null vote (only blank votes are allowed), the impact of e-voting is stronger than the indirect effect of compulsory voting, i.e. a large share of invalid votes in observed in countries using this voting feature. In a next step, a comparison with countries presenting similar characteristics (i.e. e-voting and compulsory voting) such as Ecuador or Peru would help us validate these findings for the Belgian case.

Contrary to the first two hypotheses, we do not witness a higher share of split-ticket votes in cantons using e-voting. On the contrary, there are proportionally more split-ticket voters in cantons using paper voting, probably due to the fact that these voters had separate paper ballots in hand while e-voters faced different screens on the same voting machine. More work is needed to investigate this issue and a comparative study of the impact of unified vs. separate ballots and e-voting is welcome. Finally, as the number of split-ticket votes has a direct consequence on election results and on party vote shares, the indirect impact on e-voting needs to be further investigated. Differences in party vote shares may not only be the consequence of the cantons' sociodemographic features but also on the (higher) incentive for voters to express split-ticket votes in cantons using paper voting.

Notes

1 The first trials took place in the United States in 1974 and in India in 1982.
2 In their study of US elections, Ansolabehere and Steward III (2005) found out that the variation of the share of residual votes depends not only on the type of voting technology but also on the type of elections (presidential, gubernatorial or senatorial).
3 Even if it is possible to manipulate the system in a specific way to cancel the vote (see the complex procedure in Pilet et al., 2019).
4 To my knowledge, there are no works investigating the impact of e-voting on voting behavior in Belgium.
5 A system of optic scanning of paper ballots was also tested in two cantons (Chimay and Zonneke) between 1999 and 2003, while a system of computer-assisted counting system of the paper ballots has been used in 35 Flemish and Walloon cantons between 2012 and 2018.
6 In Brussels, all municipalities use e-voting and a large majority of municipalities use it in the Antwerp and Flemish Brabant provinces. In the other provinces, the e-voting is not used (provinces of Namur and Walloon Brabant) or used in only a handful of municipalities (provinces of Hainaut, Luxembourg and East- and West-Flanders).

7 For the 2019 legislative elections, six additional municipalities decided to move to e-voting, while four other municipalities merged, slightly skewing the balance in favor of e-voting for these elections.

8 On the contrary, past analysis of invalid voting in local elections in Wallonia indicated no significant differences between paper voting and e-voting (Dandoy, 2014). This is probably related to the political offer (i.e. there are many more parties and candidates in national elections compared to the local ones) and *de facto* to the size of the ballot paper.

9 For instance, for the 2014 federal elections in the Liège province, the parties PTB and PS scored better in e-voting cantons (+5.6% and 4.76%, respectively) while the parties MR and cdH obtained a lower vote share in these e-voting cantons (−6.06% and −3.75%, respectively).

10 The share of split-ticket voting has been calculated in a conservative way by summing the vote share differences between two elections for all parties, divided by two.

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4

THRIVING IN AN UNFRIENDLY TERRITORY

The peculiar rise of minipublics in consociational Belgium

Julien Vrydagh, Sophie Devillers, Vincent Jacquet, David Talukder and Jehan Bottin

4.1 Introduction

Representative democracies are under huge pressures due to the growing disillusion toward their institutions and their main actors. Belgium is not an exception to this general trend in industrialized countries. To face this challenge, several scholars and political actors propose to bring citizens back into political systems. They intend to foster opportunities for unorganized citizens to take part in deliberation about public goods and to influence decision-making beyond electoral periods (Dryzek et al., 2019). One of the most popular deliberative and participatory innovations is the deliberative minipublic, a generic appellation for citizens' juries, consensus conferences, or citizens' assemblies (Smith, 2009). These forums bring together a group of citizens that deliberate on a political issue, listen to stakeholders' and experts' testimonies, and subsequently formulate a set of policy recommendations. Minipublic participants are recruited through a process of random selection to establish a sample of citizens with diversified backgrounds (Carson & Martin, 1999).

For decades, Belgium has been described as a copybook example of a consociational State (Deschouwer, 2012; Lijphart, 2012). Elites of each subgroup monopolized the governmental decision-making that inhibited the development of more direct citizen participation. For ten years, we are nevertheless witnessing a remarkable increase of democratic innovations, especially deliberative minipublics. Some pundits have even presented the country at the forefront of the spread of participatory and deliberative mechanisms (OECD, 2020). A couple of initiatives have attracted a lot of academic and media attention as the grassroot G1000 which aimed to gather a thousand people during the political crisis of 2011 (Reuchamps et al., 2017) or the Parliament of the German-speaking community that established a permanent randomly selected assembly

(Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019). But is Belgium really exceptional? And if so, what makes it exceptional?

This chapter first presents an overview of minipublics that took place in Belgium between 2001 and 2019 and discusses the particularities of Belgium with respect to deliberative minipublics. We demonstrate that, while Belgian minipublics share many common traits with the rest of the world, they are atypical for two reasons. On the one hand, they tend to be convened at higher levels of authority. On the other hand, several cases have recently been institutionalized. Next, we suggest explanations that account for this new trend of institutionalization, especially the structural elements and the action of specific groups campaigning in favor of the implementation of minipublics.

4.2 An overview of minipublics in Belgium between 2001 and 2019

To capture Belgian particularities regarding deliberative minipublics, we rely on an innovative data collection project—the Belgian Minipublics Project (BMP)—which documents 43 minipublics that took place in Belgium between 2001 and 2019 (Vrydagh et al., 2020).[1] Although there exist international data collection projects on minipublics (OECD, 2020; see also the website Participedia), none has successfully mapped cases to a certain completeness.[2] Therefore, we do not have access to data allowing us to compare all the BMP's listed characteristics. The BMP database counts 43 deliberative minipublics for the 2001–2019 period. We provide a complete overview of these cases in the appendix (Table A.4.1). Our selection criteria, including a minipublic in the database, were threefold: (1) participants should be randomly selected, (2) the participatory process must feature a deliberative dimension, and (3) participants must exclusively be inhabitants of Belgium.[3]

4.2.1 The design characteristics of minipublics

Minipublics can take different forms with respect to the number of participants and the length. Regarding the former, minipublics are often subject to criticisms for involving only a very limited number of participants, thereby not constituting a truly participatory process (Chambers, 2009; Lafont, 2019). As shown in Figure 4.1, Belgian minipublics do not escape this criticism as only 2634 people in total have fully participated, that is an average of 61.2 participants per process (45.9 without the G1000 extreme value). A large majority of minipublics (28 cases, 65.1%) gather fewer than 41 citizens. Only ten cases (23.2%) have seen between 41 and 100 people deliberate, while only five cases (11.6%) count more than 101 participants. A quick comparison with the OECD database seems to indicate that Belgium organizes more frequently smaller minipublics (fewer than 40 participants), but this difference is more likely to be the result of the data collection process.[4] However, one Belgian minipublic stands out due to its attendance:

>20	6
20-40	22
41-100	10
101-200	3
<201	2
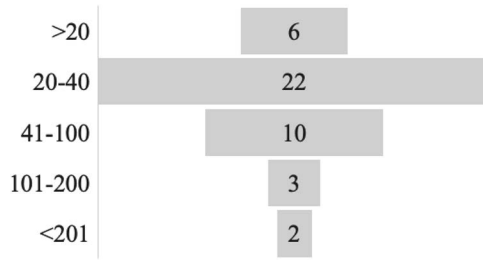
FIGURE 4.1   The number of participants of Belgian minipublics between 2001 and 2019

the G1000. With 704 participants, this minipublic has generated a lot of public attention and put in the spotlight the ideas of citizen deliberation and random selection. Its design was innovative, and, to date, no other cases were implemented on a similar scale. The literature even has created a category in their typology of minipublics to capture the G1000 (Setälä & Smith, 2018). As we will explain next, this singular case has played a substantial role in making Belgium an exceptional country with respect to its minipublics.

Regarding the length, Belgian minipublics do not seem to show exceptional characteristics. The literature indicates that the length can vary between one and ten days, and even up to 20–30 for Citizens' Assemblies (Elstub, 2014; OECD, 2020; Setälä & Smith, 2018). The Belgian case features a similar diversity as illustrated by Figure 4.2. Almost half of them (21 cases; 48.8%) last less than three days. Whereas minipublics lasting four or five days are less common (five cases; 11.6%), those lasting six or seven days (i.e. roughly three weekends) are more frequent with twelve cases (27.9%). Finally, we count four minipublics that last
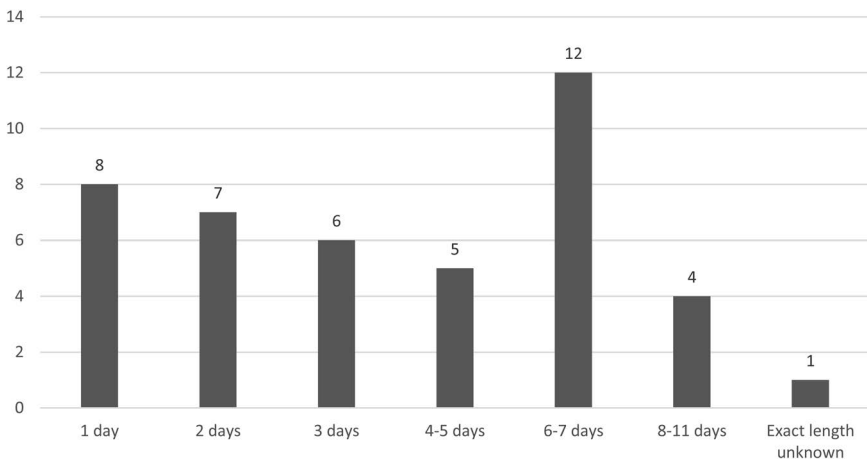
FIGURE 4.2   The length of Belgian minipublics between 2001 and 2019

between eight and eleven days (9.3%), while we did not find the precise length of a minipublic that lasted around ten days.

4.2.2 Minipublics' themes

Minipublics deal with a great variety of topics (OECD, 2020, pp. 73–77), and Belgian minipublics make no exception. Figure 4.3 shows a series of broad categories in which we classified the topics they discussed. The most common topic is the territory with 18.6%, followed by the environment with 13.9% and health-related issues with 11.6%. Other popular topics consist of generational issues[5] and mobility (four cases, 9.6% each), the education, and the European Union (three cases, 7% each). Three minipublics also feature an open agenda (7%). Finally, we see a great diversity (25.3%) of themes ranging from science and research or radicalization to consumption and social cohesion.

4.2.3 Level of government

The implementation of minipublics beyond the local level seems at first sight unlikely in Belgium. As previously mentioned, the Belgian federal level tends to function as an exclusive arena for political elites, wherein the citizens' direct involvement is scarce and discouraged (Deschouwer, 2012). Moreover, the academic literature points out that minipublics—and other processes of citizen participation—tend to be initiated at the local level (Dahl, 1994; Font et al., 2018, p. 629; for an exception, see Pogrebinschi, 2013). The OECD report confirms
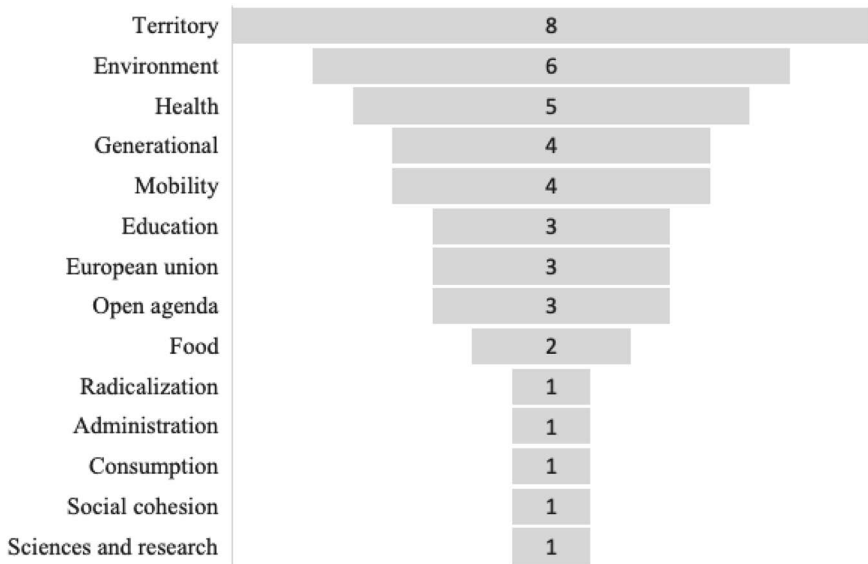
FIGURE 4.3 The themes of Belgian minipublics between 2001 and 2019
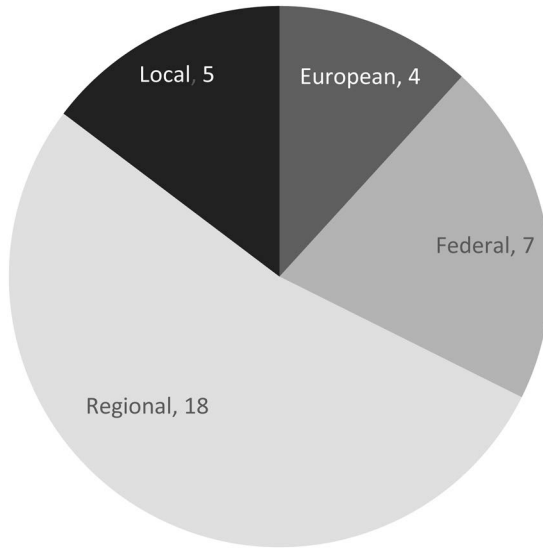
FIGURE 4.4   The level of government of Belgian minipublics' initiators between 2001 and 2019

this general trend, as a majority of minipublics tend to be carried out at the local level: 52% were implemented at the local level, 30% at the regional level, 15% at the national or federal level, and 3% at the international level (OECD, 2020, pp. 69–70).[6] Yet, despite these international findings, our data demonstrate the opposite. Figure 4.4 shows most Belgian minipublics are organized at the regional or federal level and deal with competencies belonging to these levels of authority.

We distinguish here two variables: the level of government of a minipublic's initiator and the level of authority to which the minipublic's issue relates.[7] Our data indicate that only a minority of minipublics involved local authorities or issues. Regarding the initiators' level of authority,[8] most minipublics were either organized at the regional[9] (18 cases, 41.9%) or federal level (7 cases, 16.3%), whereas local authorities only convene five minipublics (11.6%). The European Union has also organized a few minipublics (four cases, 9.3%), but this finding is more likely to be the result of our selection criteria rather than a confirmation of our theoretical expectations.[10]

In addition, most of the issues under deliberation (18 cases, 41.9%) also relate to a regional level of authority. The federal level is the second most common one with ten cases (23.2%), followed by the local level with seven cases (16.3%). Figure 4.5 suggests that Belgian minipublics seem to depart from the general trends identified in the academic literature and the OECD's large comparative study: minipublics are not in majority organized at the local level but at the regional level and they regularly deal with federal and—sometimes—European issues.
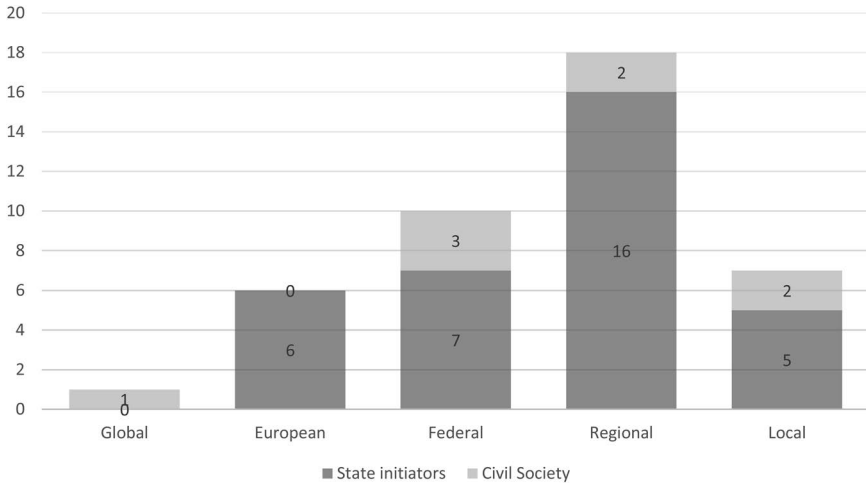
FIGURE 4.5 The level of authority of minipublics' issues in Belgium between 2001 and 2019

4.2.4 Evolution of minipublics

When we look at the evolution of minipublics in Belgium in Figure 4.6, we can distinguish two phases. First, we see a steady rise of minipublics between 2001 and 2016. The annual number of minipublics oscillates between zero and four and yields an average of 1.6. The second phase—between 2017 and 2019—is shorter but features a considerable increase in cases, almost half of the entire database (18 cases, 41.9%). The annual average scores 6.5 and reaches a maximum of eight cases in 2017 and a minimum of five occurrences. This two-step evolution is difficult to put in a comparative perspective, but the general trend identified in the OECD report tends to follow a similar dynamic (OECD, 2020, p. 69).

If Belgium does not seem to depart from the main trends of the OECD report regarding the evolution of the number of minipublics organized over the years, why is Belgium presented at the forefront of this movement (OECD, 2020)? The answer does not lie here in the numbers but in the kinds of minipublics that have been implemented since 2019. Indeed, while it is complex to categorize minipublics based on ancient original designs, such as citizen juries, consensus conference, or planning cells (Elstub, 2014; Setälä & Smith, 2018; see Vrydagh et al., 2020 for an example of categorization of these models on cases), we are witnessing in Belgium a trend of institutionalizing minipublics.

On February 25th, the Parliament of the German Community of Belgium is the first Parliament to institutionalize a 'Permanent Citizen Dialogue' (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019). Next, on December 13th, the Parliament of the Region of Brussels Capital and of the Common Assembly of the Common Community
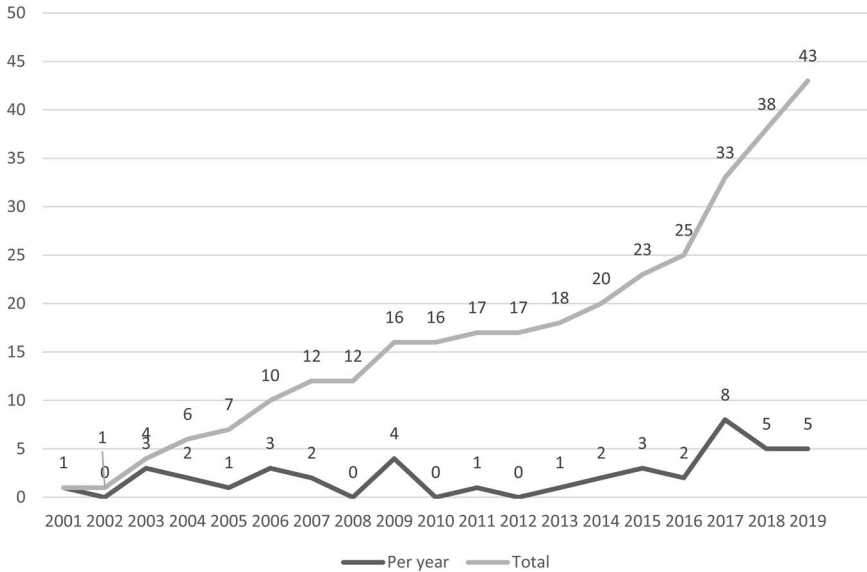
FIGURE 4.6 Evolution of minipublics in Belgium between 2001 and 2019

Commission modified their internal regulation to create the Deliberative Citizens' Commissions composed of randomly selected citizens and elected representatives (Vrydagh et al., 2021). Finally, the Parliament of the Walloon Region has also integrated a Deliberative Citizens' Commission in their internal regulation.[11]

Besides these initiatives at the regional level, we observe that institutionalized minipublics are mushrooming at the local level too, especially in urban areas. In the region of Brussels, the municipalities of Auderghem, Brussels City, Etterbeek, and Saint-Gilles have institutionalized minipublics in the form of Neighborhood Councils that provide advice to the elected council and/or comanage processes of participatory budgets. In Flanders, the municipality of Mechelen has also institutionalized a Citizens' Cabinet that provides the city council with recommendations.

Belgium is of course not the only place where minipublics are institutionalized. The city of Madrid institutionalized an Observatorio de la Ciudad in which 49 randomly Madrilenian citizens deliberated to send citizen proposals on a referendum and to monitor the municipality's actions (Smith, 2020).[12] Nevertheless, what makes Belgium exceptional is the speed and the range of this institutionalizing trend. Whereas other cases of institutionalization tend to be singular and isolated, Belgium has seen multiple cases of institutionalization at different levels of government in less than three years. Starting from this exceptional characteristic, the next section suggests explanations accounting for this sudden and broad rise of minipublics.

4.3 Dynamics fostering or hindering the rise of minipublics in Belgium

At first glance, the development of democratic innovations in Belgium might appear surprising. Indeed, citizen participation has been very marginal until the beginning of the 21st century due to the consociational nature of the Belgian State and the Royal Question trauma. Belgium is typically described as a textbook example of a consociational State (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020; Deschouwer, 2012; Lijphart, 1968). This kind of political system, relying on compromises between elites of all segments of society, has emerged to maintain the country united and peaceful, despite its religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic divides. This system is said to be able to secure the State stability as long as citizens remain passive and elites govern on their own (Huyse, 1970). A greater involvement of citizens would therefore severely complicate the consensus-building process and undermine the political stability (O'Leary, 2005). Furthermore, the consultation on the return of the King (called The Royal Question) after World War II dramatically divided the country between Flemish and Walloon citizens, almost leading to a civil war (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020).

Despite this context, we are currently observing the spread of minipublics, and even some cases of institutionalization at the local and regional levels. Two crucial elements seem to have shaped the growth of deliberative minipublics in the Belgian political system: the progressive construction of a network of advocates for democratic innovations and the development of a political offer on participatory democracy.

4.3.1 A network of advocates

A network of actors progressively acted as a lobby in favor of opening up the political system to new forms of citizen participation. Although this network has no formal structure, it grew stronger and larger and contributed to setting the issue of participatory and deliberative democracy on the Belgian political agenda. A key actor is the G1000 platform, which brings together activists and academic researchers that are committed to deliberative democracy (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018). In 2011, this grassroots organization set up a minipublic as a response to the political crisis that led Belgium to break the length record of a State without a functioning government. Thanks to an important communication campaign, with famous public figures as spokespersons such as David Van Reybrouck—author of the book 'Against the elections' (2013), the G1000 succeeded in attracting a lot of political and media attention on the virtues of citizen deliberation and sortition. It acted as a catalyst for a group of actors who later formed a network committed to the implementation of democratic innovations in Belgium. The platform also counts among its ranks important foundations, like the Foundation for Future Generations or the King Baudouin Foundation.

Other foundations and associations are also campaigning for advancing the use of minipublics, as *La Maison du Peuple d'Europe, Periferia, Présence et Action Culturelles, and Reboot Democracy/Agora*. Despite the heterogeneous nature of the various innovations they promote,[13] they contributed to put the notions of public participation, random selection, and deliberation on the political agenda. Most of these organizations are 'deliberative activists', but a blurry line distinguishes those that lobby with a benevolent purpose from those that canvass to generate revenue. For the last ten years, we are indeed witnessing a significant increase of operators (such as *Particitiz, CitizenLab, Fluicity, Atanor, Tree company or Tr@me*) that are specialized in the design and implementation of citizen deliberation and are developing a 'participatory democracy market' (Lee, 2015; Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2018). These businesses' services entail proposals for organizing a one-shot process (e.g. minipublics on a specific issue) and longer processes (e.g. participatory budgets of a neighborhood), or for setting up an online platform. These informal networks of advocates have played an important role in convincing a growing number of actors that minipublics are an appropriate solution to the malaise affecting representative democracies. They also helped popularize in Belgium some international minipublics, such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly (Farrell & Suiter, 2019).

4.3.2 The political offer regarding participatory and deliberative democracy

As suggested in our comparative overview, public authorities are the main organizers of minipublics. Some political actors and political parties have indeed accompanied the development of democratic innovations, including deliberative minipublics. This suggests that, despite Belgium's consociational tradition, political leaders have progressively endorsed the development of citizen deliberation and participation. As a matter of fact, whereas there were only a few mentions of democratic innovations in party manifestos for the 2010 elections, the subsequent manifestos contained significantly more calls for implementing deliberative and participatory processes (Jacquet et al., 2016). This trend was further amplified in the 2019 elections, with almost all parties developing proposals to increase citizens' participation in decision-making (Pascolo, 2020). How can we explain this evolution?

First, the political system's consociational nature is declining because the Belgian classical segmental divisions (*pilarisation/verzuiling*) seem increasingly less relevant (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). Belgian citizens seem less faithful to these segments and their traditional intermediate institutions, e.g. the Church (Papadopoulos, 2013). Some citizens claim for other models of democracy in which they could be politically active without intermediate institutions (Blondiaux, 2008).

Along the same line, political leaders increasingly feel that the electoral model of democracy experiences a malaise. Levels of party affiliation are at

an all-time low (van Haute & Gauja, 2015), and we observea rise of abstention and blank and null votes (Biard et al., 2019; Pilet et al., 2019), as well as vote switching (Talukder et al., 2021), while trust in elected representatives is plummeting (Goovaerts et al., 2019). Overall, more citizens are becoming dissatisfied with the current system of representative democracy and are calling for alternatives (Caluwaerts et al., 2017). Political elites seem to be aware of this dissent and are therefore increasingly seeking to reform the political system to create new participation channels (Bedock, 2017). In 1994, popular consultations were allowed at the local and provincial level and, since 2019, at the regional level. The mushrooming of minipublics also seems to be a way for political elites to address citizens' dissatisfaction. They often evoke the crisis of representative democracy as a motive of their organization. As suggested by Macq and Jacquet (2020), the leaders of the German-Speaking community that established Belgium's first permanent minipublic fundamentally conceive the new institution as a way to restore the broken link between elected representatives and the population. They hope that discussions with randomly elected citizens will show that making public decision is a complex enterprise subject to many constraints, which they think ordinary citizens often fail to understand. Accordingly, German-speaking political leaders hope that this new assembly will help to restore trust in traditional representative institutions and actors.

However, all parties do not have the same attitudes toward randomly selected assemblies. In general, left-wing parties tend to be more supportive of these reforms (Gourgues, 2013; Herzog, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2009; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Scarrow, 1999). In the Belgian context, the two green parties were among the first to integrate the notion of citizens' participation into their manifestos, as early as the 1990s (Biard et al., 2020). They have since then pushed an agenda for democratic reforms through, *inter alia*, minipublics. They were notably the two main advocates for the mixed parliamentary committee in the Brussels and the Walloon Regions and they successfully implemented these reforms when they joined the government of these two federal entities. In regard of these experiences, the multiple institutional reforms toward more federalism seem to have opened new avenues for citizen participation and minipublics, because it is easier for smaller political parties to join governmental coalition where they can implement their political programs. In Flanders, the green political party Groen also tried in 2017 to institutionalize minipublics with a Citizens' Assembly bill, but it was the only party that voted in favor of the bill. The lack of support from other political parties does not mean that they all, at least explicitly, oppose minipublics. Actually, the whole Flemish Parliament voted the same day in favor of a nonbinding resolution asking the Flemish Government to engage "in 'participatory experiments' and to actively include citizens in policy discussion" (Van Crombrugge, 2020, p. 68).

More generally, it is important to underline that contemporary Belgian political leaders remain balanced toward the development of democratic innovations.

Both qualitative and quantitative research shows that members of the different parliaments (MPs) of the country support consultative minipublics (Jacquet et al., 2020; Rangoni et al., 2021). They view these deliberative participatory processes to enrich the representative linkage. However, when it comes to decision-making power, MPs are much less supportive. The very large majority of MPs considers randomly selected assemblies should not receive the authority to make binding decision. To put it simply, democratic innovations are valuable as long as they do not interfere with the power of current decision makers and citizens' voice remains consultative.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter intended to explain the rise of minipublics in Belgium. We first described the state of minipublics to identify what makes Belgium exceptional. Our comparative overview of 43 minipublics shows that Belgian minipublics are similar to the international trends with respect to its design and its topics, but they feature exceptional characteristics regarding the level of government where they are convened. Despite an unlikely institutional context and the assumptions in the literature, only a minority of minipublics were convened at the local level, while a majority was organized at the regional and federal levels. The most uncommon characteristic is, however, the recent series of institutionalization of minipublics, which followed an increase in the number of minipublics starting in 2017. Almost half of all Belgian minipublics were implemented between 2017 and 2019. The institutionalization trend started in 2018 and has seen several institutionalized minipublics at the local and regional levels.

The second part of the chapter aimed to explain this exceptional growth of (institutionalized) minipublics. First, we suggest that Belgium has a strong informal network of diverse actors that lobby in favor of minipublics. Second, we analyzed the public offer of political parties and public authorities. Although Belgium is known for its consociationalist system that initially seems incompatible with citizen participation, we propound different factors explaining the success of minipublics in this unlikely setting. The declining relevance of consociationalism in parallel with declining levels of trust toward institutions and politics correlate with the development of a political offer for citizens' participation. Furthermore, the recent institutional reforms toward more federalism seem to open new venues for minipublics, especially at the regional level.

This chapter primarily sought to open a reflection rather than provide definitive answers. Future research is necessary not only to test empirically these hypotheses but also to formulate others. Indeed, we have just scratched the surface of the explanations of the rise of minipublics in Belgium. Among other potentially relevant explanations, we could have mentioned the role of public officials who were involved in a minipublic organization and became convinced by the process and are now canvassing in their own administration and political cabinets. The notorieties of international minipublics, like the Irish Citizens'

Assembly or the recent French Climate Convention on the Climate, have shown Belgian leaders and citizens that minipublics could be implemented on salient and sensitive political issues at a high level of government. Finally, while we welcome projects of cross-country data collections, we also want to call for data collection projects that seek to list exhaustively minipublics in one country. Such databases are crucial if we aspire to conduct more in-depth comparative analysis between countries and to explore in more detail how different countries contribute to the global rise of minipublics.

Notes

1 We adopt a three-level methodological approach to identify minipublics. First, we searched on the Web and in the national, regional, and local media with a series of terms related to minipublics. Second, we sent a list with our cases to Belgian municipalities, practitioners, and scholars specialized in participatory and deliberative democracy to consolidate our list and find other cases that we may have missed. Finally, we sent our cases' descriptions to minipublics' organizers and initiators in order to be sure that everything was well reported. The database of Vrydagh et al. (2020) ends in 2018, so we completed it with the data of 2019 for this chapter. We do not include cases from 2020 because the COVID-19 prevented the start or the continuation of several minipublics.

2 For instance, the impressive OECD data collection has identified only four cases of minipublics in Belgium between 2001 and 2019, whereas the BMP project has listed 35 cases matching the OECD's selection criteria.

3 As a consequence, we do not consider deliberative minipublics organized by international organizations, such as the European Union, that involve citizens from other countries.

4 During our data collection process (Vrydagh et al., 2020), we have realized that small and—often local—minipublics tend to go under the radar. It is thus likely that a larger cross-countries data collection project does not have the resources or the local knowledge necessary to spot these less reachable minipublics.

5 Generational entails issues such as the youth or the elderly.

6 As we previously pointed out, the proportion of minipublics at the local level is likely to be larger because it is more difficult to find them.

7 For instance, the Walloon regional Parliament initiated the minipublic 'Quelle Europe pour demain' (2017) during which citizens deliberated on the European Union. This case thus belongs to the European category.

8 This thus excludes the eight minipublics initiated by the civil society. The percentage displayed in this section is based on the entire population of the database.

9 Regional authority consists of the regional authorities of Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels, the communitarian authorities of the French- and German-speaking communities, and the provinces.

10 We selected minipublics whose participants were exclusively inhabitants of Belgium.

11 Walloon Parliament, "Modification du Règlement du Parlement de Wallonie visant à consacrer la constitution de commissions délibératives entre députés et citoyens tirés au sort", approved on October 28 2020.

12 The Observatorio de la Ciudad has, however, been dismantled in early 2020 by the next right-wing local government (La Vanguardia, 2020).

13 Some organizations, such as Kayoux, promote the random selection of candidates on local elections lists and the organization of citizen panels at the local level, while others, such as the political party Agora, organize regional minipublics to address recommendations to the Brussels Parliament. There are also organizations, like the Burgerlobby, that advocate for the institutionalization of minipublics and the end of the Belgian coalition system.

14   The first round of the permanent Bürgerrat had 10 meetings. The handover to the new one happened on the tenth encounter, and the new Bürgerrat is now meeting again.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A.4.1 An overview of minipublics in Belgium (2001–2019)

Minipublic	Date	Level of authority	Participants	Length	Theme
Quel Brabant Wallon pour demain	2001	Regional	62	3	Territory
Lire dans mes genes	2003	Federal	30	7	Health
Des OGM au champ	2003	Federal	17	2	Environment
Publiek forum—GMOs	2003	Regional	16	9	Environment
Sécurité alimentaire: à quel prix?	2004	Federal	30	2	Food
Panel Citoyen sur les droits des consommateurs	2004	Federal	30	2	Consumption
Meeting of minds	2005–2006	European	21	6	Health
Panel citoyen—Plan IRIS II	2006	Regional	30	4	Mobility
J'inspire ma Ville… Bruxelles Capital Santé	2006	Regional	21	10	Environment
Nos campagnes, demain en Europe	2006	Regional	35	6	Territory
Citizens' perspectives on the Future of Europe	2007	European	132	3	European Union
Burgerconventie—Auto en gezondheid	2007	Regional	224	1	Mobility
World Wide Views	2009	International	100	1	Environment
European Citizens' Consultation in Belgium	2009	European	49	2	European Union
Citizen Visions on Science, Technology and Innovation	2009–2010	European	11	2	Sciences and technology
Radioactive Waste Management Plan	2009–2010	Federal	32	6	Environment
G1000	2011–2012	Federal	704	9	Open agenda
Notre future	2013	Federal	24	6	Generational
Labocitoyen	2014	Federal	32	9	Health
G100 Grez-Doiceau	2014	Local	50	1	Open agenda
Parlement Citoyen Climat	2015	Provincial	33	6	Environment
Ouderpanel	2015–2016	Regional	22	6	Education
Climacteurs	2015	Regional	55	1	Environment
Excellence de l'enseignement en débat citoyen	2016	Regional	24	6	Education
Canal Citoyen	2016	Local	30	1	Territory

We are Molenbeek	2017	Local	112	1	Radicalization
Panel citoyen sur les enjeux de vieillissement	2017	Regional	27	3	Generational
Panel Citoyen sur l'extension de l'Esplanade	2017	Local	98	1	Territory
Gents Burgerkabinet—mobiliteitsplan	2017–2018	Local	@50	3	Mobility
Fabrique de liens Citoyens—Verviers	2017–2019	Local	1	5	Social cohesion
Quelle Europe pour demain	2017	Regional	83	2	European Union
Panel Citoyen sur la petite enfance	2017	Regional	22	3	Generational
Make Your Brussels Mobility	2017	Regional	38	4	Mobility
Conférence du Consensus—Pacte D'excellence	2018	Regional	116	1	Education
Panel Citoyen sur les jeunes en Wallonie	2018	Regional	27	4	Generational
Panel Citoyen sur la propreté publique—Enghien	2018	Local	15	3	Territory
Mon ADN: tous concernés	2018	Federal	29	6	Health
Make My administration	2018	Federal	46	2	Administration
Agora—Assemblée citoyenne sur le logement	2019–2020	Regional	60	7	Housing
Panel Citoyen—SOL Louvain La Neuve	2019	Local	25	7	Territory
Ostbelgien—Bürgerrat	2019–2020	Regional	24	10[14]	Open agenda
Ostbelgien—Bürgerversalmmungen—Health	2019–2020	Regional	16	4	Health
Agora citoyenne sur la forêt	2019–2020	Provincial	31	6	Territory

PART 2

Belgium, a democracy in trouble

5

CHALLENGING THE CORDON SANITAIRE IN BELGIUM

A diachronic analysis

Benjamin Biard

5.1 Introduction

An increasing number of radical right populist parties (RRPPs) got closer to power in the last few decades (Biard, 2019a, 2019b; Jamin, 2016). In some cases, these parties support or have supported a minority government, such as in the Netherlands or Denmark. In other cases, they directly participate or have participated in government coalitions, such as in Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Norway, Poland, Slovakia or Switzerland. Yet, Belgium remains an exception. Even though they have been a strong electoral and political force ever since the early 1990s, no RRPP has ever exercised power in Belgium, neither directly nor indirectly, from the local to the national level. This situation is particularly striking regarding Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB), which succeeded in becoming one of the dominant parties in Flanders (Rihoux et al., 2020). This paradox between electoral strength and the lack of government participation may be explained by the strategies adopted by mainstream parties toward RRPPs. In particular, the so-called cordon sanitaire, i.e. the deliberate decision of most mainstream parties not to govern with the VB, explain why RRPPs' electoral power has not translated into executive power.

The aim of this chapter is to take stock of the arguments used by mainstream parties to justify the cordon sanitaire and question how mainstream parties have dealt with RRPPs over the years. Our analysis suggests that Belgian mainstream parties are strongly defending the cordon sanitaire principle, based on three main types of arguments: value-based, ideology-based and association-based arguments. However, the chapter also indicates that the cordon sanitaire faces great challenges that lead to questions about the durability of the cordon sanitaire in Belgium over time and, more generally, the durability of disengagement strategies toward RRPPs.

To this end, the chapter first defines the notion of radical right populism and proposes a state of the art of the mainstream parties' strategies adopted toward RRPPs. After some methodological considerations, the chapter develops the analysis based on a set of 36 interviews conducted with elected representatives and party officials and media archives. Finally, a discussion and some concluding remarks are formulated.

5.2 Radical right populist parties (RRPPs) and mainstream parties' strategies toward them

While Kitschelt (1997) wrote in 1997 that RRPPs were politically marginalized, RRPPs have since entered a new phase in their development. Today, they not only achieve significant electoral performance but they also manage to move ever closer to power. After all, in an increasing number of cases, they enter into a government and yield executive power, whether at the local, the regional or the national level. Moreover, recent research has shown that RRPPs in power are not necessarily doomed to failure since they are sometimes able to stay in power for several consecutive legislatures (Zaslove, 2012).

The literature has extensively studied the factors of RRPPs' success (e.g. Moffitt, 2016), the history of these parties (e.g. Betz, 2013), their leaders (e.g. Pappas, 2016), electorate (Norris, 2005) or policy influence (e.g. Biard, 2020) but scholars have paid less attention to the reactions of mainstream parties to RRPPs. Because these parties mobilize populism and defend a restrictive position on both immigration and law and order issues (Mudde, 2013), they are generally not considered to be 'classical parties'. As such, it would be interesting to study how mainstream parties' position themselves toward these RRPPs.

RRPPs are often considered a threat to liberal democracy (Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2014) because they disregard the separation of powers or the rights of minorities (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013). In spite of the perceived threat RRPPs represent, these parties perform well during elections at each level of government (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Rensmann et al., 2017) and become able to – directly or indirectly – influence policymaking (Biard et al., 2019; Biard, 2021). Even if they do not access power or perform well in a general election, they also become a real electoral threat to mainstream parties, and particularly to right-wing mainstream parties (Bale, 2008; Van Kersbergen & Krouwel, 2008), because of their anti-establishment stances. Therefore, mainstream parties tend to strategize against RRPPs.

Different political strategies toward RRPPs have been developed by mainstream parties (Grabow & Hartleb, 2013; Meguid, 2005). These strategies might be explicitly adopted in reaction to the parties (such as by using legal tools in order to ban a party) and their ideas/policies (such as when mainstream parties co-opt RRPP policies). Mainstream parties can either engage or disengage with RRPPs (Downs, 2001) (Table 5.1). This means they can co-opt some of their policy proposals and collaborate with them, or they can ignore them, block coalitions and adopt legal restrictions (Downs, 2001; Heinze, 2018; Minkenberg, 2006).

TABLE 5.1 Strategies of mainstream parties toward RRPPs (adapted from Downs, 2001; Heinze, 2018)

Disengage strategies	*Engage strategies*
Ignore RRPPs and their policies	Co-opt RRPPs' policies
Cordon sanitaire	Collaborate with RRPPs
Legal restrictions	

With a 'disengage strategy', mainstream parties can first ignore RRPPs. By ignoring them, they wish to diminish their legitimacy, making them less attractive to voters (Downs, 2001). They can either ignore the parties themselves or the issues they raise and the positions they take on those issues. Second, they can establish a *cordon sanitaire*, which is an agreement between political parties to exclude any form of collaboration with a specific party (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This means that mainstream parties refuse to govern with RRPPs, they refuse to form a minority government with the external support of an RRPP or they refuse to cooperate at the legislative level, for example by passing legislation thanks to the support of the RRPPs. Traditionally, a *cordon sanitaire* is decided concomitantly with the demonization of RRPPs (Taguieff, 2014). This demonization discourse helps to justify the *cordon sanitaire* by framing RRPPs as a threat to liberal democracy. Finally, they can enact legal restrictions against them to limit their power and influence. For instance, mainstream parties may ask for the suspension of the public funding of RRPPs (Cadranel & Ludmer, 2008) or RRPPs' bans (Bale, 2007; Bourne & Casal Bértoa, 2017).

The literature underlines that the electoral consequences of a disengagement strategy for RRPPs can be particularly important (Minkenberg, 2006). Such a strategy can indeed create an exhaustion effect for the RRPPs' electorate, leading it to vote for another party or abstain (Pauwels, 2011).

However, mainstream parties do not just disengage RRPPs. Since the end of the 1990s, the presence of RRPPs in Europe has gained acceptance (Widfeldt, 2010), and mainstream parties have increasingly adopted strategies of engagement toward them as a result. This means they collaborate with them by integrating them into the executive or gaining their support from outside (in the case of a minority government). This was or still is the case in Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Poland or Bulgaria. Beyond the fact that mainstream parties can collaborate with RRPPs, they can also be 'contaminated' by them (Norris, 2005: 266). This means mainstream parties can co-opt RRPPs' policies without collaborating with them. This contagion effect seems to affect parties in opposition more than parties in government (van Spanje, 2010). In addition, Han (2015: 571) has shown that mainstream parties "adjust their positions only when they feel an immediate and direct threat to their status in party competition".

Previous studies have also addressed the consequences of an engagement strategy toward RRPPs and suggest that this can diminish the confidence or

hope of the RRPP electorate. Indeed, RRPPs traditionally have a weak bargaining position because of their extreme position on the left-right continuum (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). Therefore, such a strategy can also lead to an electoral decline for RRPPs. For instance, the integration of the Greek LAOS (*Laïkos Orthodoxos Synagermos*) into the national government in 2011 provoked the electoral decline of the party and the development of another RRPP: Golden Dawn (Deleersnijder, 2016). Yet, an engagement strategy can also have consequences for mainstream parties, affecting their internal dynamics (Goodwin, 2011).

Research has shown that the strategies outlined previously are not unique and not static: several types of strategies can be adopted, and these strategies can evolve (Heinze, 2018). Yet, generally, mainstream parties tend to shift from a 'disengage strategy' toward an 'engage strategy'. They hardly ever shift from an 'engage strategy' toward a 'disengage strategy'. Mainstream parties can also engage with RRPPs for several reasons, including accessing power or adopting and fulfilling their own pledges for electoral purposes, in short, for office-seeking, policy-seeking and vote-seeking (De Lange, 2012). Mainstream parties thus carry out a cost-benefit analysis (van Heerden et al., 2014).

5.3 Belgium: an atypical case

From this state of the art, it is clear that mainstream parties have dealt with the cordon sanitaire in many ways. However, Belgium remains an exception in several regards when studying strategies adopted by mainstream parties toward RRPPs. First of all, Belgium is characterized by a split party system and Flemish RRPPs are different from Walloon RRPPs (Istasse, 2019; Pilet et al., 2009). Moreover, RRPPs have various electoral destinies in Belgium depending on the region in which they develop (Biard & Faniel, 2019; De Jonge, 2020). While they achieve important electoral performances in Flanders, they are struggling to take off in Wallonia or Brussels. In Flanders, the VB – which is the most significant RRPP for several decades – indeed became the second largest party in the elections of 26 May 2019 (see Figure 5.1).[1] On the contrary, Walloon RRPP such as the Front national (FN) or the Parti Populaire (PP) remained marginalized for a long time, before disappearing. For its part, Nation (which still exists) has always been marginal and has never succeeded in obtaining a seat in a parliamentary assembly (Dohet et al., 2014: 62–64). This is the reason why this chapter focuses on strategies adopted by mainstream parties toward the VB.

The Belgian case is also an exception with regard to the relationship between RRPP and power. Contrary to almost all other European countries, no Belgian radical right populist party has exercised executive power at any level over years, in spite of the fact that the VB performs particularly well in Flanders. It is a paradox that is maintained over time – even if the VB has been in significant decline for a period of ten years until 2019.[2]
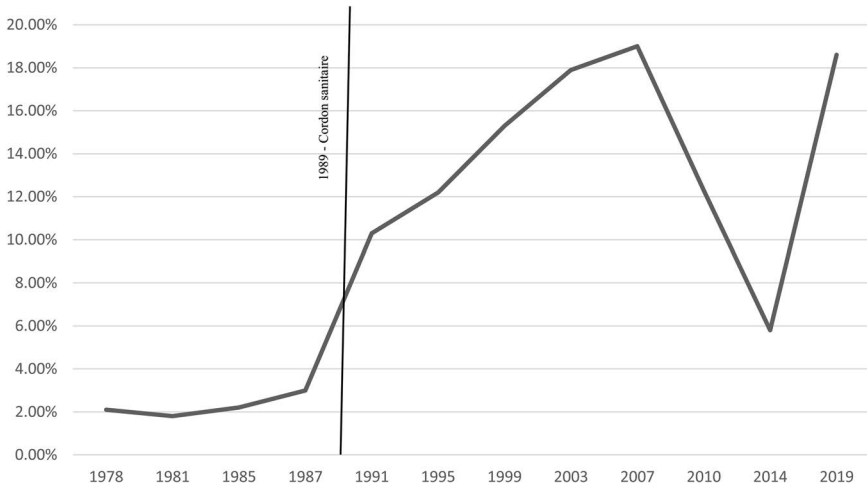
FIGURE 5.1   Results of Vlaams Belang in the federal elections (Flemish cantons) from 1978 to 2019

Such a paradox can be explained by the exceptionally high level of formalization of the *cordon sanitaire* in Belgium. Set up in the wake of the municipal elections of 9 October 1988, during which the Vlaams Blok (the previous name of the VB) made a significant electoral breakthrough, the cordon sanitaire was born in Belgium on 10 May 1989, on the initiative of Jos Geysels, Member of Parliament and National Secretary of the Dutch-speaking Green Party (Agalev). He urged all the mainstream parties to reject any alliance with the VB, at all levels of power. The protocol signed at that time specifies that:

> The signatories commit their party not to enter into political agreements or commitments with the Vlaams Blok, either within the framework of democratically elected assemblies at municipal, provincial, regional, national and European level, or in the framework of elections at these same levels of power.

Even if several of its signatories quickly deny it, the cordon sanitaire will be concluded again between the Flemish parties and later between the French-speaking parties, especially after the elections of 24 November 1991, described as 'Black Sunday' as a consequence of the important electoral performances made by the VB. Based on the same text, the cordon sanitaire is deemed to have been maintained until today.

Even though the cordon sanitaire has been an active strategy in Belgium for over 30 years, very little is hitherto known about why mainstream parties support this strategy. Based on a qualitative method, this research aims at better understanding how mainstream parties have dealt with the cordon sanitaire over years.

For this purpose, data are collected both through interviews conducted with 36 elected representatives and party officials between May 2017 and January 2018 and the collection of media archives. These data are then subject to a thematic analysis after categories and subcategories have been created (Miles et al., 2013). The latter make it possible, in particular, to distinguish three types of arguments relating to the willingness of political actors to maintain the cordon sanitaire.

5.4 Empirical findings

This section analyzes the extent to which the cordon sanitaire strategy is being maintained in Belgium, and what tensions the cordon sanitaire has been facing since its adoption. The ultimate goal of this section is to better apprehend how mainstream parties behave regarding RRPPs in Belgium, and particularly regarding VB (Section 5.4.1), and how their strategies have evolved over time (Section 5.4.2).

5.4.1 The attitude of mainstream parties regarding VB today

The absence of VB from power since its foundation in 1979 can be understood in the light of the cordon sanitaire strategy adopted by mainstream parties more than 30 years ago (Pauwels, 2011). Today, the cordon sanitaire still exists to prevent RRPPs from exercising power. The interviews we conducted highlight three major reasons why mainstream parties – not only from the north (Flemish-speaking; FL) but also from the south (French-speaking; FR) of the country – adopt a disengage strategy toward RRPP, and particularly toward the VB.

First – and maybe the most important one – they deny any collaboration and even refuse to acknowledge the proposals made by RRPPs because they consider that the latter are a danger for liberal democracy. These are value-based arguments: mainstream parties refuse to engage with the policies proposed by VB because they believe these will a priori violate liberal democratic principles. It should be noted that one N-VA interviewee (cf. later) recognizes the importance of the cordon sanitaire because of the undemocratic nature of VB, although this is not the official position of his party. For instance, another interviewee from the N-VA states, "in my opinion the cordon sanitaire is undemocratic" (N-VA MP [FL], interviewed 12 July 2017). All the positions of the interviewees from other parties reflect the official positions of the party to which they belong.

> Alinea I am not familiar with these law proposals. I have not read them.
> *(CD&V MP [FL], interviewed 13 June 2017)*

> We never vote on a text or amendment of the Vlaams Belang. And I don't speak with them. No contacts.
> *(Groen MP [FL], interviewed 6 July 2017)*

It is not a democratic party. And those who deny human rights in favor of a well-found but completely obscure rule like *eigen volk eerst* are not correct. And therefore I will not make any agreement with a party that, in my opinion, does not belong to democracy.

(N-VA MP [FL], interviewed 4 July 2017)

We have never worked with Vlaams Belang. The MR is a democratic party and Vlaams Belang has always been regarded by my party as unacceptable. So we have never… We don't discuss with them. So let's be clear. We greet them because we are polite, but that is all. So there is absolutely no contact, and certainly not on the substance of the subjects.

(MR MP [FR], interviewed 18 May 2017)

Our relations with Vlaams Belang are inexistant. We even do not say hello to each other's. I do not want any contact with Vlaams Belang. No contact, even no respect. It is an absolute principle. I do not pay any attention to their proposals.

(Défi MP [FR], interviewed 1 June 2017)

When they [Vlaams Belang's elected officials] propose something, it is an automatic reject. Because it comes from them. When we receive law proposals, my assistant provides me an analysis project by project. He says "that party proposes that, that other parties are against, etc.". However, when it comes to the proposals by Vlaams Belang he only says "no comment, we will vote against anyway". I thus even not receive the analysis by my assistant.

(PS MP [FR], interviewed 16 June 2017)

Second, mainstream parties claim that they often refuse any collaboration with VB because they consider that their ideas are globally too far from their own ideas. Support for the cordon sanitaire is thus also based on ideological concerns.

I have never voted for Vlaams Belang and I do not have any sympathy for that party. For me it has always been clear that I wanted to be involved first in the Volksunie and, later, in the NVA. I have never been attracted by the discourse of the Vlaams Belang. They are too provocative and too racist. They go too further.

(N-VA MP [FL], interviewed 15 September 2017)

Third, mainstream parties may agree with VB's proposal at some occasions or, to some extent, their ideas may converge. Yet, they are afraid to be associated with that RRPP if they defend a similar proposal. Therefore, on such occasions, they refuse to strive for the adoption of that proposal. It results from the fact that they fear electors' reactions. Nevertheless, that third option is usually found in

right-wing or center-right political discourse, more than in left-wing political discourse. They believe that too close an association with VB might legitimize RRPPs claims or might be electorally disadvantageous. Such fears have already led to the exclusion of several representatives from their party, such as Jean-Marie Dedecker or Hugo Coveliers from VLD (the previous name of the Open VLD) between 2004 and 2006. Globally, that third element thus has a less strong explanatory strength than the first since it concerns a smaller number of parties and elected representatives.

> Alinea. It is clear that, in some cases, obtaining the support of a RRPP is problematic for the adoption of a text because we refuse, of course, any assimilation or comparison with them. Therefore if someone says "you know, the Vlaams Belang has the same position than you", it is negative for us and, *in fine*, for the text.
>
> *(MR MP [FR], interviewed 18 May 2017)*

> I think that if the Vlaams Belang proposes a text himself, it is an obstacle for us. We cannot defend a proposal made by that party. It is never a pleasure to admit that adopted measures come from the Vlaams Belang. The cordon sanitaire still exists.
>
> *(CD&V MP [FR], interviewed 8 June 2017)*

> In some cases, certain issues were never discussed externally precisely because they were carried by Vlaams Belang.
>
> *(CDH MP [FR], interviewed 29 June 2017)*

> If the Vlaams Belang addresses an interesting issue, it kills the issue. Even if it says the truth. We cannot be aligned to the Vlaams Belang because they are considered as lepers.
>
> *(previous LDD MP [FL], interviewed 25 July 2017)*

The interviews demonstrate that these factors explain why mainstream parties still adopt disengage strategies toward VB. Even more, they ardently defend the cordon sanitaire principle. Among the parties represented in Parliament and apart from RRPPs, only the N-VA does not officially defend the maintenance of the cordon sanitaire, even if some of its elected representatives admit that they want it to be maintained. Three main types of rationales can be distinguished on the basis of the thematic analysis: value-based, ideology-based and association-based arguments.

5.4.2 An ever-increasing challenge to the cordon sanitaire

Despite overwhelming support for the cordon sanitaire, it has been put under pressure several times, particularly since the early 2000s and in Flanders. At that moment, the VB achieved what was then its best electoral performance,

particularly on the occasion of the 2004 regional elections (with 24.0% of the votes in Flanders – which remains the best electoral result of its history). In 2004, the VB was also convicted by a court on the basis of the law aiming at punishing certain acts inspired by racism and xenophobia, as a result of which it decided to dissolve and refound itself based on an apparently more smooth and less radical discourse.

Four main kinds of pressures – which some consider to be real breaches of the cordon sanitaire – emerge from the qualitative analysis of the media corpus. These pressures are provoked by different actors, from various parties (including among those who officially support the cordon sanitaire), concerning different levels of power and intensify over time.

First, while the cordon sanitaire implies not only governing with RRPPs but also not passing laws with the support of these parties, some reforms would not have been possible without the contribution of VB's votes. For instance, it is the case with the adoption of the special law of 30 January 2004, modifying the size of the Flemish electoral districts for the renewal of the Flemish Parliament. On this occasion, a majority of two-thirds of the members of parliament was required. Despite the abstention of several members of the majority, the text managed to obtain a two-thirds majority and was adopted thanks to the indispensable support of both the N-VA and the VB. More recently, in December 2019, a VB law proposal was passed in the parliamentary Defense Committee, thanks to the support of N-VA and CD&V. The law proposal considered requiring the Minister of Defense to append a report on the use of languages in the army to his annual policy note. This vote was made possible due to the absence of several MPs. Even if the law proposal was then rejected in a plenary session, on 19 December 2019, many observers and politicians consider this to be a break of the cordon sanitaire.

The second type of tension experienced by the cordon sanitaire relates to the formation of electoral alliances with the radical right populist party. In 2006, in view of the local elections, VB entered into an alliance with another party for the first time. This led to the formation of a joint list between the VB and VLOTT (which was a splinter group of the VLD) in almost ten Flemish municipalities. Also in 2006, the VCD (which was a split from the CD&V) also entered into a joint list with the VB in the municipality of Bree. Although these electoral alliances performed well in the areas where they run, the VB did not manage to join a coalition in any municipality. Moreover, the formations that formed an alliance with the VB are particularly marginal. No party with representation in a regional or federal parliamentary assembly ever constituted a joint list with the VB.

Third, several attempts to involve the VB in the formation of a government coalition have been made for more than 15 years. For example, following the regional elections of 13 June 2004 – in which the VB achieved a historically high score of 24.0% of the cast votes for the election of the Flemish Parliament – the VB officials were invited by the informateur Yves Leterme (CD&V) during

his consultations in order to form a Flemish government. Although the aim of the meeting was more 'to respect VB voters'[3] than negotiate a real government agreement with the VB, it marks an important turning point in the relationship between the VB and the largest party in Flanders (at that time in a cartel with the N-VA). Following the elections of 7 June 2009 and 25 May 2014, the VB officials were again consulted by the informateurs, namely Kris Peeters (CD&V) and Bart De Wever (N-VA). However, any possibility of cooperation with the VB was quickly ruled out.

The breaking of the cordon sanitaire seemed most likely to occur in Flanders after the municipal elections of 14 October 2018. During this election, a local VB list (Forza Ninove), led by a Flemish MP and senator (VB), obtained 40.0% of the votes (15 seats out of 33). The day after the election, Bart De Wever (the leader of the Right-wing N-VA) announced that he intended to examine internally the possibility of forming a coalition with Forza Ninove. However, De Wever quickly indicated "that the chances of a successful negotiation between Forza Ninove and the local N-VA, after seeing a racist photo circulated by the leader of Forza Ninove, were below zero".[4] While the N-VA finally opted for the opposition, a coalition without the radical right list was finally formed. The cordon sanitaire was then maintained.

During the regional and community elections of 26 May 2019, the question of maintaining the cordon sanitaire reappeared. In the aftermath of these elections, the VB was invited to take part in several rounds of negotiations with the aim of forming a Flemish government. Although a coalition between the N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD was eventually formed, a coalition involving the VB was actually considered. According to Gwendolyn Rutten – then president of the Open VLD – the N-VA explicitly proposed to the Open VLD and the CD&V to govern together, with the VB.[5] Although the liberal's statements are not confirmed within the N-VA, the fact remains that the break of the cordon sanitaire never seems to have been so imminent at the Flemish regional level.

Finally, more and more elected representatives or officials from mainstream parties are questioning the very idea of maintaining the cordon sanitaire. Beyond the N-VA that, officially, has never been in favor of maintaining the cordon sanitaire, several voices are indeed being raised within different mainstream parties to question it. For instance, on 5 June 2020, MP Hendrik Bogaert (CD&V) stated that it was time to get rid of the cordon sanitaire as a result of the electoral importance of extremes. According to him, allowing VB to participate in a coalition would be the best way to counter extremism: "When a party joins a coalition, it is obliged to bring nuances, to put water in its wine and to take others into account".[6] Such a discourse can also be found on the left of the political spectrum. On 30 August 2020, MP Melissa Depraetere (SP.A) indeed said, "For me, the cordon sanitaire should disappear; It is a stupid invention".[7] Nevertheless, no party (beyond the N-VA) has officially questioned the very existence of the cordon sanitaire.

5.5 Conclusion

Among the many available strategies to deal with RRPPs, Belgian mainstream parties have proven to be ardent advocates of disengagement through a cordon sanitaire. Even though this strategy has been in effect for over 30 years, the analysis indicates that support among mainstream parties remains strong for three reasons: most Belgian parties refuse any collaboration with VB because they consider that this RRPP is a threat for liberal democracy (value-based argument), because VB' ideas are too far from their own ideas (ideology-based argument) and because they are afraid to be associated with VB (association-based argument).

However, despite the apparent support for the cordon sanitaire, our analysis has also shown that it is increasingly challenged in Flanders. Four types of challenges have been detected over time. First, some reforms have been made possible thanks to the contribution of VB's votes. Second, several electoral alliances with VB have emerged. Third, and most importantly, numerous and serious attempts to integrate VB within a coalition are multiplying. Finally, the very idea of maintaining the cordon sanitaire is increasingly questioned, despite the difficulties outlined earlier, both by right-wing and left-wing politicians.

Our analysis thus indicates that Belgium is at a nodal point: as long as the cordon sanitaire is being challenged, we can expect changes in the strategy adopted by mainstream parties toward RRPPs. The argument made by Heinze (2018) according to which mainstream parties tend to shift from a 'disengage strategy' toward an 'engage strategy' is thus not contradicted since the trend seems to be moving in that direction. The author indeed indicated that many Scandinavian parties not only increasingly adopt RRPPs' positions but also engage in collaboration with them over time. If this is not the case in Belgium today, the developments identified through the analysis suggest that this is a stage that could also be observed in Belgium in the next few years.

Moving forward, this chapter opens up a double research agenda. On the one hand, future research should be devoted, more broadly, to the analysis of engage and disengage strategies, with a specific focus on the co-optation of RRPPs' policies by mainstream parties in order to draw up a more complete picture of the evolution of the strategies adopted by mainstream parties toward RRPPs. This could be done by studying the evolution of parties' manifestos over time. Mainstream parties may indeed copy entire sections of RRPPs' manifestos for electoral purposes without, however, calling into question the very foundations of the cordon sanitaire. On the other hand, reactions to RRPPs not only come from mainstream parties but are also expressed through civil society (Lundberg, 2021). Yet, as underlined by Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), too little research has been done to better apprehend how civil society reacts to RRPPs and, more specifically, how their reactions evolve over time in Belgium.

Notes

1 Born on the occasion of the national elections of 17 December 1978, the Vlaams Blok is an electoral cartel bringing together two parties (the *Vlaams Nationale Partij* and the *Vlaamse Volkspartij*). That cartel officially became a party in 1979.
2 In fact, the VB takes a positive turn in 2018, on the occasion of both the municipal and provincial elections. Cf. Blaise and Sägesser (2018) and Blaise et al. (2018).
3 *La Libre Belgique*, 17 June 2004.
4 *RTBF INFO*, 16 October 2018.
5 *Le Soir*, 26 June 2020.
6 *De krant van West-Vlaanderen*, 5 June 2020.
7 *De Zondag*, 30 August 2020.

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6

BREAKING FREE FROM PARTITOCRACY

Do Belgian candidates stand out?

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6.1 Introduction

Belgium is said to be a textbook example of a partitocracy, that is an extreme
case of dominance of political parties on all aspects of the social and political
system (Dewachter 2002; De Winter, della Porta, and Deschouwer 1996a;
Steyvers 2014). This happens through patronage in parliament, public admin-
istration, the judiciary, and even in civil society (de Visscher 2004; De Winter
2002; De Winter and Dumont 2000, 2006). Hence, one can assert that Belgian
exceptionalism resides among others in her strong partitocratic nature. Belgian
parties are powerful actors, if not the most powerful actors of the system (De
Winter, della Porta, and Deschouwer 1996b). But is it exceptional compared to
other partitocratic countries?

Scholars point at the decreasing legitimacy of the partitocratic system, and
of political parties in general (Mair 2013; Rahat and Kenig 2018), as attested by
declining trends in party membership (van Haute et al. 2013), higher levels of
electoral volatility (Dassonneville 2018), and the rise of parties with renewed
organizational structures or ideology (Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Mazzoleni and
Voerman 2016). One may then wonder whether these weakened party organiza-
tions still manage to hold a strong control on their representatives or if politicians
are nowadays more often allowed to break with their party line. Building on the
(contested) personalization thesis (Balmas et al. 2014; Karvonen 2010), this chap-
ter proposes to disentangle parties' grip on a particular group of political elites,
the candidates to elected office.

Candidates are key political actors, first during the campaign, then as rep-
resentatives once elected (André et al. 2017). Electoral candidates embody the
party (Katz 2001) from the moment they have been officially selected by party
selectorates (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Yet this is not to presume that candidates

are left loose in the wilderness, free of their acts and speech. What we want to unpack in this chapter is the extent to which candidates report being free from their party grip, to highlight the exceptional nature of Belgian partitocracy. This chapter assesses the leeway let to Belgian candidates in terms of campaigning and representational style compared to three other partitocratic regimes: Italy, Greece, and Portugal. We conduct our research using the large longitudinal data set of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS).

We proceed as follows. The first section reflects on the candidate-party linkage and presents our research question: (when) do candidates in partitocratic regimes break free from their party? We then build several hypotheses based on the literature. Thereafter, we present our large data set and discuss the operation-alization of our variables. We continue with a comparative descriptive analysis across countries before studying the determinants of Belgian candidates' inde-pendence more specifically in a multivariate fashion. We conclude by discussing Belgium's presumed exceptionalism regarding its partitocratic nature.

6.2 Theoretical framework

It has been demonstrated that the idealistic view of a political party as a unitary actor does not hold (Tavits 2009). Parties strive to reach and maintain cohesion but they remain a collection of individuals, be them MPs, party members, or electoral candidates, who may sometimes be hard to discipline (Carey 2007). To avoid disunity, parties may ask their folks to sign a pledge where they commit to the party ideology and rules, for instance, a charter for members to sign upon reception of their party card, or when selected as candidates (Aylott, Blomgren, and Bergman 2013; Cordero and Coller 2015; Gauja 2010).

But still, party headquarters cannot avoid individualistic behaviors from their candidates. At campaign time, candidates meet "potential voters face-to-face on market squares, through visits to companies, at social events, or simply through knocking on their front doors" (Zittel and Gschwend 2008, 978). Parties simply cannot control whether all candidates stay neatly on the party line. Nonetheless, candidates might have incentives to follow the party line to fulfill their political ambitions. Different goals mark politicians' parliamentary career. In this regard, (re)selection and (re)election are crucial because they directly pave their way to elected assemblies (Hazan 2014; Strøm 1997). These goals shape to some extent candidates' incentives to please (or not) the party leadership. Hence, the question we ask is: *(when) do candidates in partitocratic regimes break free from their party?*

Primary explanations for candidates' role conception have been found in macro-level variables and notably the electoral system (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). The latter strongly determines the incentives for candidates to culti-vate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995). For instance, contexts of intra-party competition where candidates need to distinguish themselves from their co-partisans to get elected generate greater incentives for candidates to play the

personal rather than the party card toward voters. Since electoral success can be measured individually, candidates will make their best to garner the most personal votes.

The Belgian electoral system both hinders and stimulates candidates' independence toward their party. On the one hand, the flexible list system is nor a candidate nor a party-centered system. Contrary to single-member district (SMD) systems where a single candidacy per party per district puts these at the forefront as the sole figure of the party (Grofman 2005), group-based behaviors are more common in list systems. But on the other hand, the preferential voting system allows voters to assess candidates on an individual basis (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). Belgian voters can convey an individual preference for one or several candidates, which encourages candidates to cultivate a personal vote as opposed to PR closed list systems where candidates are assessed *en bloc* (Carey 2007; Cordero and Coller 2015).

However, scholars report that macro-level variables do not have a causal effect on candidates' independence toward their party but form the setting allowing candidates to break more or less free from it (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). Candidates' independence is rather determined by parties' or individuals' characteristics. Hence, large variations are expected even within partitocratic regimes.

This chapter investigates the factors affecting candidates' incentives to break free from their party within a partitocratic context. Although our overarching hypothesis is that Belgian candidates stand out in a limited way given the strong party control, we still expect to find differences between candidates based on several party- and individual-level variables.

At the party level, *party ideology* is expected to favor or hinder candidates' independence and this for two main reasons. First, an ideology encompasses a set of values and principles which may impact candidates' role conception and behavior during the campaign (Close 2018). Second, it often shapes how the party is structured: the dispersion of power within the organization and the degree of freedom let to candidates are likely to vary along with ideology. Regarding values, rightist candidates are expected to cherish the values of individualism and reject any form of regulation, and leftist candidates would favor collectivism and group-based solutions (Coffé and Reiser 2018). Importantly, Close and Nuñez (2016) argue that one cannot reason linearly along the left-right spectrum since major differences have to be pinpointed in the organizational traditions of parties that do not follow this logic. They encourage party families-based studies to investigate party cohesion.

Liberal parties are expected to favor candidates' independence due to their lighter organizations and their lack of strong guidelines (Enyedi and Linek 2008). At the opposite, radical right parties are expected to have very few independent candidates due to their strong hierarchical organizations favoring order and discipline (Mudde 2007). Green parties are said to offer a weakly hierarchical structure and promote values of self-fulfillment and self-affirmation, encouraging

candidates' independence (Close 2018). Yet their stances against individualism and their collective decision-making mode of functioning downplay the expectation that Green candidates would show independence (Rihoux and Frankland 2008; Talshir 2002). This implies that leftist party families are expected to apply a stronger grip on their candidates, as opposed to rightist families, with the exception of the radical right parties. Our first hypothesis therefore stipulates that:

> H1: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party in rightist party families, except for radical right families.

A second party-factor refers to *candidate selection procedure*. Considering that candidates aim to get (re)selected (Strøm 1997), they need to please the selectorate (i.e. those who decide who gets selected). In a partitocratic context, we expect party headquarters not to value independent lone wolves but rather to prefer group-players who they can easily coordinate (Hazan 2014). Accordingly, when candidate selection is organized at the central party level (e.g. the party board), candidates would have stronger incentives to play collective than when the decisions are taken at the constituency level where party selectorates would not be able to ensure party discipline as much (Cordero and Coller 2015; Zittel and Gschwend 2008). In the same vein, candidate selection procedures involving many selectors, i.e. inclusive selectorates, are expected to stimulate candidates' independence, as opposed to exclusive selectorates (a small group of selectors like a list committee) who are more able to guarantee cohesion and discipline (Key 1964; Kristjánsson 1998). Building up on this, we hypothesize that:

> H2: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party when candidate selection procedures are decentralized and inclusive.

Third, the *size of the party* in the constituency is likely to influence candidates' independence from their party. In constituencies with a large district magnitude (i.e. the number of seats at stake in the district), candidates face many contenders within their party and party magnitudes (i.e. the number of seats won by the party) are likely to be higher. As Renwick and Pilet (2016) indicated, one expects preference votes to be more determinant for candidates' election as party magnitude increases, because the system gets more 'open'. Candidates are therefore more likely to cultivate a personal vote as district (and, thus, party) magnitude increases (Shugart, Valdini, and Suominen 2005). Yet, we know that very few candidates manage to break the rank order in the Belgian national context (Vandeleene, Dodeigne, and De Winter 2016). Nevertheless, beyond determining who is getting elected, attracting a large share of preference votes is a signal to selectorates that the candidate may be entitled to climb the ladder of the electoral list in the next election (André et al. 2017). When party magnitude is smaller, on the contrary, preference votes may signal popularity to the selectorates but are not likely to help candidates be elected. Research has

demonstrated that when party magnitude is low, voters are less keen on casting a preference vote as opposed to a list vote (André, Wauters, and Pilet 2012). Given the effect of preference votes on candidates' reselection and election, we expect a mechanism according to which when party size in the district increases, the likelihood of receiving preference votes follow suits, as well as the chances that preference votes will boost electoral success. The incentives for candidates to break free from their party are therefore greater when party size is larger. Based on this, we hypothesize that:

> H3: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party when party size in the district is large.

Next to party-level variables, we expect independency to be encouraged by individual-level factors, i.e. the characteristics of the candidates themselves. First, their *political experience* and the subsequent linkage to the party matter. We expect incumbent MPs to be more likely to behave independently from their party. As detailed by Zittel and Gschwend (2008), incumbents can indeed rely on critical resources to organize their campaign, like their personal staff or network. We also expect them to be more confident in their capacities to be popular among voters. On top of that, incumbents are *de facto* more well-known by voters given their ongoing political career and their access to the media. These elements lead us to assume that incumbents will be keener on playing their individual card.

Yet political experience has not always been flagged as influential in determining independence (Cordero and Coller 2015). Tavits (2009) argues that it is not parliamentary experience that matters but rather local experience. Local incumbents (e.g. mayors) enjoy a strong local base, making them less dependent on the party for their local political career. If they are active at the local level only, they may be less socialized with the functioning of the party at the national level and, henceforth, be less likely to follow the national party's guidelines. In the same line, we may expect incumbent MPs not to deviate from their party rules since they are often themselves part of the party elite and set these rules (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). Hence, although incumbent MPs have the means to break free, they do not *per se* wish to do so because of a greater sense of loyalty toward their party. This mechanism is likely to be similar for candidates who are involved in the party as an organization. We expect that holding a mandate within the party increases candidates' loyalty and reduces independence. These considerations lead us to a twofold hypothesis covering the party–candidate linkage.

> H4a: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party when they hold an elected mandate at the local level.

> H4b: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party when they do not hold a party office.

Electoral popularity and even more *electoral security* are important incentives for candidates to free themselves from the party. If candidates believe that their chances to get elected are high, they will be more likely to enter in a personal relationship with voters. As argued by Zittel and Gschwend (2008), this would especially be the case when the victory margin is narrow, similar to a horse race "which engages everyone involved to an increasing degree the closer it gets" (p. 984). To mobilize the small percentage of votes who could secure their election, these candidates will behave more independently. At the opposite, when candidates know that the battle is lost, their incentives are rather to be loyal to the party to please the selectorate for reselection.

> H5: Candidates on a hopeful list position are more likely to break free from their party.

Finally, we assume that candidates' *ideological preferences* may also be predictors of their independence. Candidates who are more distant ideologically from their party are expected to be more independent than candidates more in line with the party ideology (Zittel and Gschwend 2008). The loyalty to the party is indeed likely to be influenced by the degree of agreement between the candidates and their party's policy preferences, or the ideological congruence (Lesschaeve 2017).

> H6: Candidates are more likely to break free from their party when they are ideologically incongruent with their party.

6.3 Empirical strategy: data and method

6.3.1 The candidate surveys

Our analyses rely on the CCS, a large international project surveying legislative candidates just after the elections on matters of campaigning, policy issues, representation, or their political and personal background. Extracting a subset of this extensive database, we grouped four partitocratic countries: Belgium, Greece, Italy, and Portugal (De Winter, della Porta, and Deschouwer 1996a). Other countries that could be considered partitocratic (e.g. Spain or Austria) have not been included due to data availability. Our data set covers one election in each country, and 1.789 candidates in total (see Table 6.1).

6.3.2 Variable operationalization

6.3.2.1 Dependent variable

To capture the independence of candidates toward their party, we selected three variables accounting for candidates' campaigning and representational style. We propose two dependent variables to measure the former. The first variable

TABLE 6.1 Number of candidates by country

Countries	Election year	Candidates (N)
Belgium	2014	665
Greece	2009	195
Italy	2013	672
Portugal	2011	257

concerns the personal campaigning resources (i.e. tools that aim to promote the candidate rather than the party) used by the candidates. This allows us to grasp the extent to which the party allowed the candidate to run a personal campaign. Our variable *personal campaign resources* has been constructed by taking the sum of the personal campaigning tools used by candidates. This includes personal campaigning posters, personal ads in the newspapers, personal flyers, personal website, and having individual meetings at home or drop-in offices. The variable ranges from 0 (i.e. the candidate did not use any of these tools) to 5 (i.e. the candidate used all of them).

Further than the practice of the campaign, the CCS also asked candidates more theoretically about the *primary aim of their campaign*. The question takes the form of a scale ranging between 0 (which depicts that candidates wanted to attract as much attention as possible to them selves as candidates) and 10 (which refers to candidates who tried to attract as much attention as possible to their party).

Candidates' *representational style* is determined based on three questions asking how MPs should vote (1) if their opinion diverges from the opinion of their voters; (2) if the opinion of their voters diverges from their party's position; and (3) if their opinion diverges from their party's position. We built a dichotomous variable where 1 represents the party delegates, i.e. candidates whose choice is to follow the party in any case (Janssen, Chiru, and De Winter 2018).

6.3.2.2 Independent variables

We expect first party-level variables to affect the propensity of candidates to be independent from their party. The variable *party ideology* has been constructed based on how candidates position their party on the left–right scale. We consider the average position of all candidates from the same party. We added a dummy for the radical right parties, based on the party brand. Second, the degree of inclusiveness of the *candidate selection process* has been operationalized to keep two categories: exclusive (e.g. party leader) vs. non-exclusive (including nomination by party delegates or all members of the party). For the degree of centralization, we built two categories (centralized for a decision at the party level and decentralized for the constituency level). Third, the *party magnitude* refers to the number of MPs elected within the

party list in a given district. This accounts for the size of the party within the district.

We also include individual-level variables. Candidates' *local experience* is a dummy variable, with 1 indicating that the candidate holds a local office at the moment of the election or held it in the past. The *party mandate* variable flags candidates who have ever worked for the party (at the local, regional, or national level, for instance, as a chair or a secretary of a party's section). The *hopeful list position*, a position on the list with high chances of being elected, has been calculated based on the current election (t). It can indeed be argued that most candidates, who were elected in an election, were located on a hopeful list position. We finally measure the *ideological congruence* between candidates and their party on the 0–10 left–right scale. We computed the absolute difference (own position minus party position) of both scales to create a new variable. A value close to zero means that the candidate and the party are perfectly aligned. In each model, we control for candidates' gender, education (university degree vs. no university degree), and age.

6.4 Empirical analyses

6.4.1 Bivariate analyses: do Belgian candidates stand out?

Do candidates in partitocratic countries stand out from their party? We aim to compare Belgian candidates to their counterparts in other partitocratic regimes. We start by comparing the means for the first two dependent variables to investigate potential differences in candidates' campaigning style (see Table 6.2).

In Belgium, candidates use on average about three personal campaigning resources, which is relatively similar to Greek candidates. However, the mean is considerably lower in Italy and especially in Portugal. Hence, Belgian (and Greek) candidates tend to be more likely than Italian or Portuguese candidates to promote their own person during the campaign. Differences in the means are significant ($p = 0.00$).

We now turn to the primary aim candidates give to their campaign. The higher the score, the greater their aim to attract attention to the party rather than to themselves. Here, candidates in general assert their aim is to give more

TABLE 6.2 Description of candidates' campaigning style across countries (μ (N))

	Personal campaign resources	*Primary aim of campaign*
Belgium	3.07 (595)	7.18 (641)
Greece	3.30 (175)	5.84 (175)
Italy	2.17 (573)	6.60 (651)
Portugal	0.92 (185)	8.53 (188)
Total	2.50 (1528)	6.96 (1655)

attention to the party (with a general average of 6.96 out of 10). Belgian candidates stand above this general average (7.18) but below Portuguese candidates. While Greek and Belgian candidates had a similar use of campaigning resources, we find stronger differences here as Greek candidates are less likely to assert that the aim of their campaign is to promote the party. Here again, differences across means are significant ($p = 0.00$).

Our third dependent variable is an indicator of candidates' representational style. Table 6.3 shows the distribution of this variable across countries. Belgium is the only country for which the proportion of party delegates (34.8) is greater than the total proportion of party delegates for all countries (26.3). This points that Belgian candidates are more likely to assert that they will follow their party's opinion within parliament than candidates in Greece, Italy, or Portugal. We note that the proportion of party delegates is particularly low in the latter (17.5). Hence, expected party discipline within the parliament appears to be particularly strong in Belgium compared to other countries.

To summarize our descriptive findings, we can say that Belgian candidates do not seem to stand out as such compared to their counterparts in other partitocratic countries when it comes to their campaigning style. However, we see that they strongly differ to other candidates when it comes to their representational style, as they are more likely to act loyally to their party in the deliberative process within parliament.

6.4.2 Multivariate analyses: (when) do Belgian candidates break free?

We now focus on the Belgian candidates and build explanatory models to uncover why they may break free from their party. The models depicted in Table 6.4 are based on the dependent variables related to candidates' campaigning style. The first model uses candidates' personal campaign resources as dependent variable while the second uses the primary aim of the campaign. Since the dependent variables are continuous, we ran linear regressions.

Our first model captures the personal focus (vs. party focus) of the campaign resources used by candidates. The underlying assumption is that the more diverse the set of personal campaigning resources, the more likely it is that candidates put

TABLE 6.3 Distribution of party delegates across countries, N (%)

	Party delegates		
	No	*Yes*	*N*
Belgium	302 (65.2)	161 (34.8)	463 (100.0)
Greece	148 (75.9)	47 (24.1)	195 (100.0)
Italy	507 (75.5)	165 (24.5)	672 (100.0)
Portugal	212 (82.5)	45 (17.5)	257 (100.0)
Total	1.169 (73.7)	418 (26.3)	1.587 (100.0)

Note: Pearson chi^2 (3) = 28.9091, $p = 0.000$.

TABLE 6.4 The determinants of Belgian candidates' campaigning style, B(se)[sig]

	(1)	(2)
	Personal campaign resources	*Primary aim of campaign*
Party-level variables		
Party ideology	0.117 (0.032)**	−0.146 (0.091)
Far–right party	−0.955 (0.404)*	1.014 (0.674)
Inclusiveness: non–exclusive	0.035 (0.106)	0.276 (0.204)
Centralization: centralized	0.306 (0.234)	0.453 (0.390)
Party magnitude	0.106 (0.023)***	−0.201 (0.069)*
Individual-level variables		
Incumbency local office	0.270 (0.185)	−0.434 (0.405)
Incumbency party office	−0.013 (0.192)	−0.890 (0.531)
Eligible list position	1.055 (0.242)***	−0.575 (0.611)
Ideological congruence	0.115 (0.088)	−0.159 (0.165)
Control variables		
Gender: male	0.096 (0.080)	−0.285 (0.261)
Education: university degree	0.000 (0.146)	−0.792 (0.259)**
Age	−0.004 (0.011)	0.019 (0.010)^
_cons	1.981 (0.523)**	8.242 (0.503)***
N	172	178
R²	0.301	0.256

Note: Standard errors are clustered at the party level. $^p < 0.1$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

the focus on their own image rather than the party's. Results indicate that several party–level variables have an influence on candidates' campaign resources. The more rightist the ideology of candidates' party, the more personal campaigning tools candidates use. However, candidates running for a far–right party are less likely to use several personal campaigning resources compared to other candidates. This is neatly in line with our expectations (H1), and the effect is particularly important when it comes to a far–right party ideology. Then we do not find a significant impact of candidate selection methods on the outcome variable (H2). Our third hypothesis (H3) suggested a link between party size and candidates' independence that seems to be confirmed: the higher the number of seats won by the party in the constituency, the more likely it is that candidates used a larger set of personal campaigning resources.

Considering individual–level variables, we see that incumbency either in local or party office does not significantly affect candidates' use of personal campaign resources. We need to reject our fourth hypotheses (H4a and H4b). Our results then show that candidates occupying a hopeful list position are more likely to use a diverse set of personal campaigning resources than other candidates, which is in line with our fifth hypothesis (H5). Finally, we do not see any significant relationship between candidates' congruence with their party and their likelihood to break free from the party in terms of personal campaign resources (H6).

The second linear regression model uses candidates' primary aim of the campaign as dependent variable. Higher values on the dependent variable indicate that candidates aimed to attract more attention to the party than to themselves during the campaign. This model somehow brings similar results as the first model when we analyze the direction of the coefficients; however, only a few of our independent variables show to have a statistically significant effect on the outcome variable. At the party level, only party magnitude appears to have a statistically significant effect on candidates' conception of the primary aim of the campaign. Results indicate that the higher the party magnitude, the less likely it is that candidates conceive the aim of the campaign as promoting the party. This confirms our third hypothesis (H3). None of our individual-level variables seem to significantly explain candidates' conception of the primary aim of the campaign. Considering the control variables, the level of education and candidates' age do, however, matter for the aim of the campaign. The less educated and the older candidates favored the party more than themselves during their campaign.

We now turn to the determinants of candidates' representational style. Results depicted in Table 6.5 highlight the determinants of candidates' likelihood to conceive their role as that of a party delegate. Results of this model are, however, disappointing in terms of statistical significance since none of our independent variables have a statistically significant relationship with the outcome variable. Besides, the pseudo R^2 indicates that the proportion of the variance explained by the model is really low (about 4%).

6.5 Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to assess whether Belgian candidates stand out in the partitocratic context of Belgian politics. Given the supremacy of Belgian political parties on a variety of matters, one would expect electoral candidates not to be able or entitled to break free from their own party. Are candidates allowed to portray themselves individually by using personal campaign resources like a personal website or conducting individual meetings at home? To what extent do candidates report having run a campaign centered on themselves rather than on their party? Do they expect to always follow the party official position when acting as representatives? Based on a large international candidate survey (CCS), we investigated these questions and mapped out two main elements.

First, we compared Belgian candidates and their counterparts in other partitocratic regimes to evaluate Belgium's exceptionalism. We assessed that Belgian candidates differ from their Greek, Italian, and Portuguese counterparts but not always in the same direction. The party grip in terms of the forecasted loyalism in parliament is stronger in Belgium compared to the other partitocratic countries, while the leeway for Belgian candidates is relatively large when it comes to campaigning style. Belgium thus appears to be exceptional among

TABLE 6.5 The determinants of Belgian candidates' representational style, B(se)[sig]

	Representational style: party delegate
Party-level variables	
Party ideology	−0.097 (0.138)
Far–right party	0.930 (1.212)
Inclusiveness: nonexclusive	−0.045 (0.408)
Centralization: centralized	−0.583 (0.436)
Party magnitude	0.114 (0.070)
Individual-level variables	
Incumbency local office	−0.056 (0.286)
Incumbency party office	1.462 (0.896)
Eligible list position	0.416 (0.555)
Ideological congruence	0.124 (0.197)
Control variables	
Gender: male	0.060 (0.270)
Education: university degree	−0.110 (0.331)
Age	−0.014 (0.011)
_cons	−0.116 (0.824)
N	175
Pseudo R²	0.045

Note: Standard errors are clustered at the party level. $^p < 0.1$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

partitocratic regimes when it comes to behavior in parliament but not in terms of campaigning style. Party discipline is deeply entrenched in would-be politicians' minds.

Second, we strived to explain the determinants of Belgian candidates' independence toward their party. Our regression models show that a series of party and individual variables matter to explain whether a given candidate will stand out. Yet, we find explanations for campaign-related models and not so much for the model uncovering representational style. Our findings demonstrate a propensity to behave independently in rightist parties (but not in radical right ones), when the party is more successful in terms of number of seats in a constituency, and also among candidates on hopeful list positions.

What our results display is a certain degree of heterogeneity, both between and within countries. There are clearly cross-country variations, so that we cannot say that all partitocratic regimes function the same. Every country is kind of exceptional in its own way. The partitocratic power might translate differently from one partitocracy to the other. In Belgium, it is party discipline in parliament that seems to be prevalent over a party-driven mode of campaign. We also conclude that within Belgium, the story varies. Although Belgium is considered a system where parties are extremely powerful, the same mechanisms do not play in all contexts. We importantly uncover party differences along their ideology and size. We also find differences between

the candidates depending on their electoral security. One therefore cannot assert that all parties in a partitocratic regime hold a strong control over their folks, and not all candidates are in the same boat. Some take or receive more freedom to cultivate a personal vote while others remain under the thumb of their party.

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7

COALITION FORMATION IN BELGIUM

From exceptional complexity to regime breakdown?

Lieven De Winter and Patrick Dumont

7.1 Introduction

The New York Times reported that on Sunday January 23, 2011, 34,000 Belgians marched the streets of Brussels under the banner "Shame. No government, great country" (Castle, 2011). Defying the normal conventions of protest politics to try to get rid of a government, this was a public outcry to the political class to finally form a government, 255 days after the May 13, 2010 general elections. Belgium was well on the way to break the world record of government formation duration, with 354 days record hitherto held by Cambodia. Eventually, with 541 days, that record was pulverized by the installation of the Di Rupo government on December 5, 2011.

In West European comparative perspective, Belgium is indeed an exceptional case in terms of coalition formation: high or even record values are reached regarding the classic determinants of government formation complexity (such as number of players, uncertainty and information scarcity), the structure and features of the cabinet formation process (e.g. institutional constraints, long formation duration) and its outcomes ("irrational" coalition composition, extensive coalition agreements). These core features of the bargaining process affect the life of coalitions, in terms of government duration, intra-cabinet conflictuality, policy inertia and ineffectiveness.

This chapter presents the Belgian case on all these coalition formation and functioning core variables in comparative West European perspective. We find that on most of these independent and dependent variables of the chain of coalition formation (see Figure 7.1), Belgium scores record-breaking values, or at least is one of the top three "performers".

Our theoretical framework draws on the comparative projects of Strøm, Müller & Bergman that by now empirically embrace the 1945–2019 period in
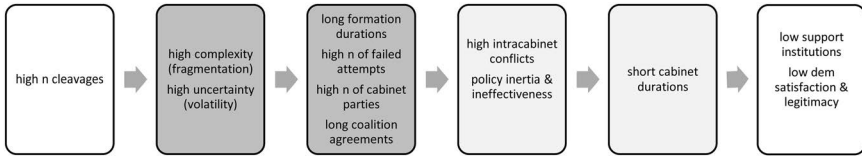
FIGURE 7.1 Cabinet formation, determinants and effects

Western as well as Eastern and Central Europe (hereafter C1, C2, C3 and C4)[1] and updates and extends our previous work on the Belgian case. We also investigate whether these exceptional government formation features impact citizens' trust in politics and satisfaction with democracy, eroding the legitimacy of the wider political system and fostering its disintegration.

7.2 Bargaining complexity and information uncertainty, causes and consequences

We define *bargaining complexity* as the difficulty of finding a coalition of parties that would make a viable coalition government. Complexity increases when actors involved in the formation of a government face a high number of viable coalition outcome "resolutions". These outcomes comprise (1) the partisan composition of the coalition; (2) the results of policy negotiations, usually contained in a coalition policy agreement and (3) the distribution of ministerial portfolios and other key positions (e.g. chairpersons for the assemblies, EU Commissioner). Obviously, *ceteris paribus*, the fragmentation of the parliamentary party system boosts bargaining complexity, in an exponential manner.[2]

After the 1999 elections, which led to a new peak in the fragmentation of seats among parties in parliament, no less than nine different coalitions were at the same time clearing the following formal and informal constraints: (1) winning more than 50% of seats in the federal parliament; (2) based on a majority of MPs in each language group and (3) symmetrically composed, i.e. each linguistic component of a "party family" was part of the potential coalition (Dumont, 2011). However, some of these informal composition constraints have been relaxed in most of the governments formed since 1999. Thus, in 2019, with 4,095 coalitions numerically possible given the parliamentary seat distribution (2,021 of which are winning), bargaining complexity has probably never been higher.

Research on coalition bargaining has highlighted a second factor which is likely to delay cabinet formation duration: *information uncertainty*. Rather than being involved in a bargaining game where all players have complete information over the preferences and strategies of the others, in practice, party leaders face a much messier reality. These actors are often not transparent in their preferences, and change their preferences during the formation. Elections are being particularly disruptive in terms of vital information (Diermeier & van Roozendaal, 1998); whereas party leaders gradually learn about preferences and

strategies of government partners and opposition parties in day-to-day legislative work, parties come to elections with new platforms and demands; furthermore, they undergo changes in size in accordance to their electoral performance; in addition, the heat of the campaign may have polarized positions and (internal) rivalries and disappointing results may also provoke a change of leader to represent the party in government formation talks.

Especially after high-volatility elections, uncertainty would plausibly be high. In periods of high electoral stability, a party can be more easily be persuaded to enter a coalition (Strøm, 1990): all else equal, the less party leaders have to worry about possible repercussions in future elections, the more willing they will be to reach an (coalition) agreement, which under other circumstances would have appeared too risky. In periods of high electoral competitiveness, the bargaining situation is made more complex by the fact that the ratio of instant office rewards to deferred electoral costs may be lower or more uncertain, given the long-term trend that governing parties increasingly tend to lose more votes than opposition parties (Narud & Valen, 2008). Thus, when parties tend to focus on vote-seeking rather than office-seeking strategies (Strøm & Müller, 1999), one would expect more bargaining rounds and longer periods of negotiation. Finally, Strøm (1994) also argues that party preferences and strategies may also not be stable throughout the formation process. Thus, although a longer formation process may be needed to gather new information, its very length may also bring new uncertainty by causing preference changes within and across parties at the bargaining table.

Information uncertainty is thus conceptualized separately from bargaining complexity. In a three-party system where any two-party coalition is a winning formula, it will be more difficult, *ceteris paribus*, to form a government right after an election than midway in the legislative term.

The interaction of *high* bargaining complexity and *high* information uncertainty leads to the most difficult circumstances in which coalition governments are to be formed. In this chapter, we analyze whether this core relationship is true, concentrating on the Belgian case in comparative perspective. Figure 7.1 depicts how we extend our analysis from this initial link between complexity and uncertainty with coalition formation (in dark grey) to the study of coalition governance and stability (in light grey), and to the likely societal causes and consequences (in white) of the often assumed exceptionally difficult job of forming and maintaining governments in Belgium.

Our expectations are, in line with the existing literature, that high party fragmentation results from a high number of societal cleavages. Combined with the uncertainty of (especially disruptive) elections, this bargaining complexity would lead to more failed attempts to reach the final coalition solution and thus require longer formation durations (De Winter & Dumont, 2008). In turn, we expect that high complexity due to party system fragmentation will also be associated with a high number of coalition parties that end up governing. The more parties in government, the more likely these will have different policy preferences

and incentives to deviate from what was discussed at the time of government formation or even to leave the coalition once their preferred legislation has been passed. To avoid such "opportunistic" behavior, formateurs will seek to build credible commitments among parties in the form of comprehensive coalition agreements. The comprehensiveness of these documents, and therefore also their size, is likely to increase with the level of distrust among actors involved. Since distrust is linked to information uncertainty, we thus expect that in terms of the functioning of coalition, both high bargaining complexity and uncertainty will also lead to, *ceteris paribus*, longer coalition agreements (see Müller & Strøm, 2008). We document these links in the following section of the chapter.

Moving to the right hand side of Figure 7.1, and to the third section of this chapter, we argue that, because even comprehensive coalition agreements are "incomplete contracts" and because exogenous events may force coalition partners to take decisions on issues that were not anticipated at the time of government formation, the large number of coalition parties – and its related greater array of policy preferences – will lead to higher intra-cabinet conflictuality and/ or policy inertia and ineffectiveness, eventually making for shorter cabinet duration. Finally, in the conclusion, we investigate whether these latter three dysfunctions in particular could spill over into the political culture, producing low trust in political institutions, dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, erosion of the legitimacy of the entire political system, fostering its instability and even potentially triggering its breakdown.

7.3 Cleavages, party fragmentation, multilevel politics and electoral volatility

Our empirical analysis puts the Belgian case in comparative perspective, focusing on Western Europe.[3] Given that party system fragmentation is a crucial determinant of bargaining complexity, the period under study starts in 1978, with the split of the last traditional unitary party, the Belgian socialists (PSB-BSP). It ends with the formation of the (exceptional) De Croo seven-party coalition on October 1, 2020. Throughout the chapter, our empirical analyses mostly draw on the data that was collected with the framework of not only C1, C2 and C4 (2021) but also other comparative datasets, some of which may refer to a longer time period or, on the contrary, not cover the full 1978–2020 time span.

As seen earlier, the distribution of seats between parties has a direct effect on the total number and the number of potential coalitions that would reach more than 50% of seats in parliament and thus make for a viable, majority-supported government. Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) is the operationalization most often used in comparative politics to measure party system fragmentation. It takes into account the number and the size of parliamentary parties and thus reflects the bargaining complexity concept introduced earlier. In the period under consideration, Belgium is the record holder of the average party system fragmentation measured by

Laakso-Taagepera's ENPP (in the Chamber of Representatives). It also holds the highest level of fragmentation ever recorded in Western Europe: after the 2019 elections its ENPP peaked at 9.7.[4]

Another way of looking at the difficulty of forming a coalition is to look at the relative size of the largest party in parliament. Across Western Europe, that party is indeed expected to play a prime role in coalition formation. Sometimes the constitution recognizes the leader of that party the right to "make the first move" (Bäck & Dumont, 2008), that is, to invite other parties to negotiate a coalition together. The smaller the largest party, the more contested its status as first formateur, and the more partners it will need to coalesce with to reach a majority, thereby making coalition formation more difficult. Throughout the period 1978–2014, Belgium was the Western European country with the lowest average number of parties that received more than 15% of the vote in an election and thus had the smallest number of "major parties" (Siaroff, 2019: Table 2.1), and that in 1999, even its largest party had not reached that 15% threshold.[5]

What brings about this high level of party system fragmentation? Aside from the effect of electoral systems (Duverger, 1950), the most pertinent determinant of the format of party systems is the number of cleavages in society, as defined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Unfortunately, to our knowledge, there is no authoritative comparative research on the number of relevant cleavages in West European democracies. According to Lijphart's (1999) subjective and unsystematic attempt, Belgium is one of the very few plural, in the sense of deeply divided, West European countries. However, Taagepera and Grofman (1985) claim that there does exist a direct and simple mathematical link between the number of cleavages and the ENPP. The formula would be *ENPP = n cleavages* + 1. If they are right, with an ENPP fluctuating between 6.8 (1978) and 9.7 (2019), no less than six to eight cleavages would have been relevant in Belgium in the last 40 years.

This seems hard to reconcile with common ways of counting cleavages in the Belgian polity (De Coorebyter, 2008), which records three traditional cleavages: the first being religious (Church/State), the second socioeconomic (left–right) and the third linguistic (Flemish vs francophones). The different components of what makes for a more recent cleavage in Western Europe, summarized as the Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs Traditionalist-Authoritarian-Nationalist divide by Hooghe et al. (2002), do also need to be taken into account. And, rather than counting the linguistic cleavage as one of those present in the Belgian party system as a whole, one could consider the latter as made of two different party systems (one Flemish and one Francophone one), each with its own cleavage constellations. In the Francophone party system, we would find the Church/State (or liberal vs traditional values opposition of the GAL-TAN cleavage), the economic left–right and the environment vs productivism cleavages. The cosmopolitan vs nativism cleavage is not politicized given the absence of a successful far right francophone party, nor the Flemish vs francophone divide as all francophone parties endorse the institutional status quo regarding devolution. In the Flemish party system, we find the same cleavages as in the South but we need

to add the Flemish vs francophones cleavage (ranging from moderates to separatists, which can also be seen as a "super cleavage" over the "Belgian system", see below) and the cosmopolitan vs nativism divide politicized mostly by the Vlaams Belang. Altogether then we would arrive at eight cleavages politicized in the Belgian party systems: five in Flanders and three in Wallonia.

In addition to its effect on the number of cleavages that are pertinent for the representation of parties in the federal parliament, Belgium's linguistic community divide has also led to the construction of a multilevel political system. The latter has not only increased complexity of reaching an agreement at the bargaining table through the higher number of parties that is necessary to build a federal government (at least four) but has also increased information uncertainty. Through constitutional reforms since the 1970s, leading to the regionalization of most federal competences and the transfer of most public resources, the lack of hierarchy of norms and the holding of direct elections to regional parliaments, the regional and community level is now considered at least as important as the federal level (Reuchamps et al., 2017).

The addition of elections at the regional level, the territorial unit where parties are organized, with the formation of regional and community executives at stake, has triggered more information uncertainty for cabinet formation and maintenance at the federal level. First, in those regional elections, the main parties in each linguistic community have from 1995 onwards waged a fierce competition to become the largest party in seats in their regional parliament. Contrary to the federal level, the King plays no constitutional role in regional government formation; hence, the largest party is the natural formateur at that level. This battle for regional leadership has enhanced volatility, especially in Flanders where no less than four parties have become the leader in seats in one decade. Second, party leaders who negotiate for their party at both the regional and federal level have by now been socialized in this new, regionalized context where a political career in one's own region is equally prestigious as one at the federal level. The gradual emergence of this new generation caused misunderstandings and mistrust among long-standing coalition negotiators in the 2007 government formation. Third, the empowerment of regional institutions and actors have contributed to the drifting apart of the Flemish and Francophone civil societies allowing the Flemish nationalists to transform the nebulous thesis of segmented pluralism (Lorwin, 1971) into the deception of "two democracies", two nations growing apart but held prisoner in an artificial state.[6] Fourth, regional elections have not only contributed to building regional identities but have also tended to radicalize party positions on the linguistic/community divide as leaders only appeal to voters from their community. The 2007 government formation was again a case in point but, by the 2019 elections nearly half of the Flemish voters opted for the two parties (N-VA and VB) that strive for Flemish independence, and thus the demise of the Belgian political system/state. When anti-Belgium-system parties become relevant in coalition bargaining at the federal level, uncertainty is bound to rise as mainstream parties are unlikely to know their true objectives and strategies. For instance, the N-VA, considered by about all other Flemish parties as

"coalitionable",[7] could in principle profit from at least two diverging strategies: either joining a federal coalition in exchange for major institutional concessions toward more Flemish autonomy, or, sabotaging for months the formation of a coalition without them, thus showing that the Belgian (federal) system is ungovernable and thus should be abandoned all together.

In addition to increased uncertainty at the federal bargaining table when regional elections have been organized on the same day as the federal elections (1995, 1999 and 2019) and government formation at different levels were interrelated, regional elections also made federal coalition maintenance (and following federal coalition formation) more difficult when the elections were not synchronized: heated campaigns among parties at one level affected the internal cohesion and work of coalition governments at another level, and the formation of coalitions with different partners across levels both accentuated coordination problems between interregional and federal decision-making (Deschouwer, 2012), eventually also blurring responsibility given that often all parties were in power at least at one level, a point we come back to later when exploring the consequences of Belgium's complex governance system on public opinion.

In terms of information uncertainty then, even though overall electoral volatility in Belgium was lower in the period than where the old party regime was blown away by newcomers, it has been higher than the West European average (Caramani, 2015; Siaroff, 2019) with peaks in 1981, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2010 (and 2019) followed by elections with greater stability. Also, even if it was not as abrupt as in some other countries, the electoral decline of mainstream parties (Christian democrats, socialists and liberals) was dramatic, from a combined share of votes of 78% in 1978 to 45% in 2019. This means that especially for those parties, which were still the core actors of all coalition governments in the period, government participation has increasingly become a serious electoral risk, often paid cash in votes at the next elections. As a result, mainstream parties have become ever more cautious when underwriting compromises in the bargaining process.

Finally, in addition to party leaders becoming increasingly socialized and politicized in separate arenas, information certainty increased due to changes of party leaders during periods of government negotiations. Comparative research shows that short experience as a party leader results in lengthier and more failure-ridden bargaining periods (Ecker & Meyer, 2020). For instance, at the time of formation of the De Croo government in 2020, only two of the eight party leaders who signed the coalition agreement had led their party in the 2019 electoral campaign.[8]

7.4 Formation process and outcomes features

The previous section has shown that Belgium was exceptional in terms of bargaining complexity in the period under study, and that information uncertainty had also been high because of the relevance of the linguistic/community divide and the need to form federal coalitions with parties that compete (mostly) within their own community. A first consequence of the combined effect of those

characteristics is its record-long government formation duration: for postelection cabinets in Western Europe 1945–2016, it took on average 104 days, a record held together with the Netherlands. However, the 2019–2020 government formation lasted 493 days, so Belgium would hold the European record of average duration of formation, as the Rutte III cabinet of 2017 took "only" 225 days to form. In any case, the European record of the longest single formation is also Belgian, with the infamous 541 days to form the Di Rupo government (2010–2011).

Simply put, this exceptionally long formation process is due to the large number of failed bargaining attempts. Often a set of parties start bargaining, but after some weeks or months, they realize that no coalition policy compromise is possible. Belgium holds the West European record in this regard as well, with close to three failed attempts before succeeding in forming a government in the 12 post-electoral formations since 1978. It took for instance no less than eight attempts to arrive at a viable coalition formula and coalition agreement for the Di Rupo coalition (2011–2014), and even 13 attempts for the 2019–2020 formation (Sägesser, 2020).

Belgium is the record holder on those two features reflecting the difficulty of the formation process because the combined effect of the bargaining complexity and information uncertainty factors described earlier largely determine the types of formation outcomes those processes would lead to. One of those outcomes is the size of the cabinet in terms of number of coalition partners, for which again Belgium scores highest in Western Europe: considering coalition cabinets only, the average number of cabinet parties in Belgium since 1970 sits at 4.54, the highest, with Italy and Finland coming second and third, with, respectively, 4.32 and 4.07 cabinet parties.

Another outcome, and additional cause for long formation duration, is the level of care that partners give to the policy agreement that seals their deal. Coalition agreements are the result of negotiations where each partner comes with its own policy demands and are likely to require several sessions to arrive at compromises, especially when a large number of sometimes quite ideologically distant parties are at the bargaining table. In the 1945–1998 period, Belgium had the longest government agreement (Martens VII in 1988 – known as Martens VIII in Belgium's usual counting – 43,600 words), and also the highest average in Western Europe (14,180 words). Even though the Di Rupo and Michel agreement surpassed that earlier record (53,000 and 57,100 words, respectively), in the following period some countries started drawing even longer agreements, and Belgium had some surprising short ones. Taking this period as a whole, Belgium would now rank third in Western Europe with over 20,000 words for 24,000 words for Germany the new record holder.[9]

7.5 Government formation, outputs, outcomes and their effectiveness

Coalitions that contain many parties are delicate constructions that take a long time to form but can be easily be destroyed. Despite comprehensive agreements, programmatic disputes between parties are usually at the heart of intra-cabinet

conflicts during the life of government (Damgaard, 2008). Also in Belgium the main reason for cabinet termination is conflicts between coalition parties (19 out of 43 governments in the 1946–2019 period). In terms of actual government duration, Siaroff's (2019) data put Belgium second after Italy (with 13 months and 17 months, respectively), while C4-data rank Finland second and Belgium third.

Long formation durations and short-lived governments do not give much time for government to prepare, pass and implement effective policies. Dandoy and Terrière, in this book, investigate the growing occurrence and length of caretaker cabinets in Belgium, which are (or at least are expected to be) relatively impotent governments given their restricted decision-making capacity (Ecker & Meyer, 2020). But even for fully empowered and thus viable governments, the need to contain coalition conflicts and the difficulty to change the policy status quo have had consequences for effective decision-making and policy innovation.

The high number of coalition partners has led to the adoption of a wide variety of conflict solving mechanisms, some of which are time consuming (Kerncabinet, confessionals, party summits, cabinet committees and inter-cabinet working groups, etc., see De Winter, Timmermans, & Dumont, 2000; De Winter & Dumont, 2021) and slow down decision-making. Sometimes compromises are only found by paying off the conflicting demands of all coalition parties, by awarding extra expenditures to each party "clientele" (cfr. the mega deals, "pacts" concluded on the denominational, economic and institutional divide). This method became burdensome for public finances since the economic recession of the late 1970s.

Coalitions counting usually four to six parties tend to write coalition policy agreements in which, for each and every policy issue, a coalition compromise position is formulated that is situated somewhere close to the average positions of coalition parties. In Belgium, this has often resulted in a position that is close to the one of the median position of parties represented in parliament: that of the (Flemish) Christian democrats (De Winter & Dumont, 1999). An exception was the Verhofstadt I six-party coalition that adopted a different, generalized exchange (*uitruil*) strategy, due to the large programmatic heterogeneity of the liberal, socialist and Green party families (Dumont, 2011). The parties followed the logic of "policy territories", where liberal views were mostly reflected in the tax reform plans, socialists influenced mostly the social policy areas, and Greens could make their imprint on transportation and energy, and each party family received ministerial remits accordingly. Overall, the much more usual logic was to find a median compromise for an overall centrist coalition, which led to policies that were not only close to the Christian democrats' habitual positions but also to those of the previous governments, thus barely moving from a status quo position. On the one hand, this logic assured policy stability, but on the other hand, it led to policy inertia, and thus suboptimal effectiveness.

In fact, the difficulties of forming and maintaining Belgian coalition governments have affected the effectiveness of their policy outputs and outcomes. A general longitudinal and comprehensive indicator of good governance is a state of healthy public finance, in terms of the size of the national public debt (Tarek & Ahmed, 2017). In 1993, in the run up to the Maastricht Treaty conversion norms, Belgium public debt reached an unedited Eurozone record of nearly 140% of GDP, beating even Italy. Its public debt to the 1989–2019 period stands at 110%, behind Italy (113%) and Greece (121%).[10] Regarding the size of the shadow economy (undeclared economy in percentage of GDP), Belgium was bypassed in 2000 and 2016 by only three West European countries: Portugal, Italy and Greece.[11] Finally, rankings provided by Transparency International on the perception of (political) corruption show that until 2000, Belgium was perceived to be among the most corrupt country in the EU, and clearly the most corrupt amongst countries that do not belong to Southern Europe (De Winter, 2002). However, since 2001 the country's position gradually improved. In 2011 and 2019, Belgium was surpassed by not only Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece but also by Ireland and France.

A contemporary sectorial snapshot indicator of good governance is the success of a country fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. There is some discussion about the validity of the figures published by national governments in terms of cases detected, successfully treated and mortal casualties. One of the most comprehensive measure is the "excess deaths" or "excess mortality rates",[12] i.e. the number of deaths per 1,000 inhabitants *from all causes* during a crisis above and beyond what we would have expected to see under "normal" conditions (Checchi & Roberts, 2005). Regarding the peak months (March and April) of the first wave of the pandemic, Belgium had the highest excess rates after Spain and Italy, compared to the 2016–2019 averages.[13] Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Belgians were little satisfied (57%) with the measures the government had taken so far (end of April 2020): only Italians, Frenchmen and Spaniards were less satisfied.[14]

Regarding citizens classic political support attitudes (van Ham & Thomassen, 2017), however, generally Belgium scores around West European averages. The nine European Social Surveys (2002–2018) indicate that Belgians have comparatively (EU) a bit more than average trust in politicians and in political parties but a bit less trust in parliament, the legal system, the police and the national government. Also satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's country is below average. Thus, we do not find really "exceptional" averages in the longitudinal comparative perspective. However, this does not exclude extreme low values for some indicators at a particular moment. For instance, in the aftermath of the Dutroux and dioxin affairs, satisfaction with democracy had dived under the traditionally pathologically low score of 20% of Italy. But it fully and swiftly recuperated toward a more average position in Western Europe.[15]

Finally, support for political actors, institutions, processes, policies, principles, ideas and values, etc., are all components of the overarching but fuzzy concept of "political legitimacy", the degree of how power is used in ways that

citizens consciously accept. There is a general presumption that a legitimacy crisis may trigger the replacement of a dysfunctional regime by an unaccepting society (van Ham & Thomassen, 2017). The concept is, however, hard to measure (Weatherford, 1992). To our knowledge, only Gilley (2006) made an empirical, multidimensional study of state legitimacy in the late 1990s and early 2000s for 72 states. Gilley (2006, p. 501) defines legitimacy as a degree: "a state is more legitimate the more that it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power". Amongst West European democracies, Belgium enjoys the lowest degree of state legitimacy except for Italy and Greece (Gilley, 2006, p. 514).

Thus, overall, we do not find much of a link between the levels of institutional performance and popular political support in Belgium (Magalhães, 2017). Conjecturing that this lack of an expected relationship is part and parcel of Belgian exceptionalism would probably go a bridge too far however.

7.6 Discussion and conclusion: a truly exceptional and explosive case

Despite truly exceptional and potentially explosive societal characteristics (number of cleavages and the linguistic/community divide in particular) that lead to extremely difficult cabinet formations and maintenance of governing coalitions, the degree of the Belgian "malgoverno" (Heylen & Van Hecke, 2008) as reflected by political instability or policy outputs and outcomes need to be relativized when compared with other West European countries. Some Belgian political personnel "genie" might be credited for that better-than-expected performance given preexisting conditions. But the state of domestic politics and the economic performance of other European countries obviously also affect the relative ranking of Belgium on corresponding indicators. In addition, Belgium also had some "lucky" episodes where policy inertia turned out to be preferable to actual choices due to international economy circumstances (Albalate & Bel, 2020).[16] But those rare episodes could only be seen as positive in retrospect.

Whether because the Belgian "political genie" is also efficient in terms of communication, because of low clarity of responsibility triggered by the lack of transparency of a complex system or out of mass public resignation and apathy, we do not find much of a relationship between the less than optimal governance indicators, trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy and legitimacy.

Up until now, the blatant legitimacy deficit has not spilled over into citizen behavioral revolt, by a vote empowering antiestablishment parties or mass demonstrations. However, it may just become impossible to form a federal government in the near future. At the time of writing this chapter, most Flemish parties call for further devolution after the 2024 elections, while most francophone parties prefer the status quo. In addition to this institutional agenda already anchored on the 2024 political agenda, formulating a coalition compromise on the unavoidable austerity policies for restoring the economy costs

of the anti-Covid emergency measures may be an unsurmountable hurdle for any coalition formula. In addition, it is not unlikely that at the 2024 federal and regional elections, the separatists parties (VB, N-VA) win a majority of the seats in the Flemish parliament, forming an independence-seeking Flemish government, while at the same time being able to sabotage the formation of a federal government. A new prolonged formation impasse may show that the centrifugal Belgian federal system does not function anymore as a régime capable of legitimately governing "two separate democracies", and should be dumped all together.

Notes

1 C1 = Müller W.C. & Strøm, K. (Eds.). (2000). *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; C2 = Strøm, K., Müller, W. C., & Bergman, T. (Eds.). (2008). *Cabinets and coalition bargaining: the democratic life cycle in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; C3 = Bergman, T., Ilonszki, G., & Müller, W. C. (Eds.) (2020). *Coalition Governance in Central Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; C4 = Bergman, T., Bäck, H., & Hellström, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Coalition Governance in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2 The number of solutions equals $2^n - 1$, where n stands for the number of parties represented in parliament.

3 We exclude East and Central European democracies given their still unconsolidated party system. Also, we exclude Malta (for its lack of coalition cabinets), France (semi-presidential system), Cyprus (presidential system) and European microstates. We further exclude Switzerland, a country where the four main parties agreed in 1959 on a more or less proportional "magic formula" that would include them all in subsequent governments.

4 See: https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf.

5 Putting those two indicators together, Siaroff (2019) developed an *Index of Coalition Difficulty* (ICD) that combines the ENPP with the size in seats of the largest party. The higher this value, the assumed greater the challenge of forming a government. Again, Belgium has the highest average for Western Europe in the period under study.

6 Most intra-Belgian comparisons actually do not reveal sharp differences in social and political attitudes between Flemish and Walloons (Billiet, Maddens & Frognier, 2006).

7 And the latter increasingly considers the Vlaams Belang as a potential government partner: in 2019, the formateur party N-VA invited first the Vlaams Belang for coalition talks that lasted two months in the regional government formation process before turning to the mainstream parties.

8 The coalition is made of seven parties but Ecolo has two co-presidents.

9 The Prodi II agreement in 2006 in Italy and the Bettel II in 2018 in Luxembourg counted more than 80,000 words. Regarding the average size of the coalition agreements, Germany is now the record holder (the latest two Merkel governments had much longer agreements than earlier ones, topping each at more than 60,000 words), followed by Austria (the 2017 Kurtz agreement also had close to 60,000 words).

10 See: https://tradingeconomics.com/portugal/government-debt-to-gdp

11 See: https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2019/12/13/Explaining-the-Shadow-Economy-in-Europe-Size-Causes-and-Policy-Options-48821

12 Each demise in pensioners homes (the largest sector of casualties) is usually counted as a COVID-19 victim, which is certainly an overestimation and more inclusive than the way casualties are counted in most other West European countries.

13 See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/5/5c/Table_1_Excess_mortality_indicator_Jan21_update2.png

14 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/public-opinion-in-the-eu-in-time-of-coronavirus-crisis
15 See: https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/eb-trends-trend-files/list-of-trends/democracy-satisf
16 Albalate and Bel (2020) show that the long 2010–2011 formation period led to better GDP per capita growth than what would otherwise have been expected.

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8

CARETAKER GOVERNMENTS IN BELGIUM

The new normal?

Régis Dandoy and Lorenzo Terrière

8.1 Introduction

Yves Leterme took oath as prime minister of Belgium on 20 March 2008, concluding a political crisis that started almost one year earlier. But the Christian democratic leader is not remembered for being the prime minister who managed to handle the financial crisis or who failed to reach an agreement on the sixth Belgian state reform. He will rather be remembered for an odd record: out of his 1026 days as Belgian prime minister, Leterme spent more than half of it (59.55%) as chief of a caretaker government (cabinets Leterme I and II). This remarkable statistic illustrates that caretaker governments are not an extraordinary phenomenon in Belgian politics. Instead, they are becoming an integral part of the political dynamics in this country.

Caretaker periods mark the transition between the termination of one government and the start of another. If the end of a cabinet and the kickoff of a new one are considered goldmines for political scientists working on elections, executives and ministerial careers, these intermediary periods did not receive the same research attention, however. Literature on caretaker governments is particularly scarce (Boston et al., 1998; Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010; Schleiter & Belu, 2015) and comparative works are lacking. Yet, many West European countries have witnessed more or less long periods of caretaker governments, mostly in-between elections or in relation to government formation. Think, for instance, about the political and institutional relevance of caretaker governments in Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain in recent years.

But compared to Belgium, these countries compete in the featherweight or lightweight categories. Belgium is without any doubt the most famous player of the heavyweight category of caretaker cabinets. Between 2007 and 2020, Belgium was governed for no less than 1485 days by a caretaker government,

which equals to more than four full calendar years. In comparison, Poland experienced 414 days without a duly mandated government in office between 1991 and 2008 (Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010). The longest episode of caretaker government is spread over 597 days (in 2010–2011) in Belgium while the record in the Netherlands is 'only' of 208 days without a full-powered government in 1977 (Diermeier & Van Roozendaal, 1998). During this period, Belgium coped with the financial crisis and even nationalized banks, went to war with Libya, sent humanitarian support to other countries and successfully presided over the European council for half a year.

Given its importance in contemporary politics, it is not surprising that political science in Belgium is interested in the study of this recurring phenomenon. The root causes leading to lengthy caretaker governments are well known and covered in the relevant literature. In fact, we are now fully capable of explaining why Belgian fights alone in its own category. Yet, we know surprisingly little about the actual consequences of these caretaker governments when we look at the international scholarly literature. Most comparative datasets simply ignore caretaker governments and prefer to focus on the political and policy impacts of the 'normal' governments. Therefore, in this chapter, we open the black box of caretaker governments by investigating their political and policy consequences in the Belgian context.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 8.2 sets out the definition and main characteristics of caretaker governments and gives a brief quantitative account of the importance of this political phenomenon in the last two decades in Belgium. Section 8.3 investigates the consequences a caretaker government generates for the stability and popularity of the sitting cabinet. Section 8.4 analyzes the types of actions that caretaker governments can undertake and tests whether the scope of actions tends to increase over time. Finally, and based on the detailed analysis of the Belgian caretaker cabinets between 2007 and 2020, Section 8.5 discusses the main empirical findings that we have brought forward in this chapter.

8.2 Definition and measurement of caretaker governments in Belgium

After its resignation or its removal by parliament, an executive is supposed to cease its activities immediately. The rationale behind this is that the dismissed cabinet cannot take any further decisions or actions that would compromise the future responsibilities of the next cabinet. In parliamentary regimes (and in consociational democracies in particular), a new full-fledged cabinet only takes power after its investiture vote in parliament; after new elections; after a transitory government[1]; and/or after an agreement between the main political actors (Boston et al., 1998). These events often take weeks, if not months. In the meantime, the sitting government remains in power until it has been replaced and is henceforth labeled as 'caretaker'. Using the words of Hooghe (2012b), "no matter how long that might take, the earlier government simply has to soldier on".

The comparative international literature investigated caretaker governments and identified a shared set of key characteristics. A first characteristic of a caretaker government is that it ensures continuity. Indeed, it is necessary to avoid a complete absence of the executive power since this could be detrimental to the country and the population. Therefore, the resigning or removed cabinet cannot immediately leave office but instead needs to remain in power until its successor is appointed (Schleiter & Belu, 2015). In that way, caretaker governments fulfill a 'bridging role' between the duly mandated governments (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014).

The second characteristic of a caretaker government concerns its limited scope and range of political actions. Such a government is only 'taking care' of those cabinet functions and duties for which continuity seems essential. The government refrains from taking any further decisions that may burden the incoming government, whereby it restricts itself to preserving the 'policy status quo' (Boston et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2001; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Thus, a caretaker government does not undertake new political initiatives and postpones all significant decisions until the new government takes over.

A third and last characteristic deals with the fact that caretaker governments do not enjoy large political legitimacy. The sitting cabinet may have lost a vote of confidence in parliament without new legislative elections and/or a new vote of confidence in parliament took place. This conflicts with the principle of the political accountability of the executive branch vis-à-vis the legislative branch. Since the former government has resigned or is removed, its actions can no longer be controlled by the parliament. The legislative power cannot cast another vote on a motion of no confidence against an – already – removed executive.[2]

Given their high presence throughout the last two decades, caretaker governments have become relevant political phenomena in Belgium. This uprising has not gone unnoticed by political scientists: important pieces of literature on federal politics in Belgium investigate caretaker governments. Scholarly works explored the problems of public governance at the federal level and discussed reasons why caretaker governments emerge. Several structural explanations have been put forward such as the consociational system of decision-making, the electoral system, the fragmented party system, the absence of national parties and the linguistic and territorial conflicts, as well as conjunctural explanations such as the success of a nonmainstream party, the disagreement on territorial reforms, the ideological distance between the mainstream parties or even the chicken game during the negotiation talks (Albalate & Bel, 2020; Brans et al., 2016; Deschouwer, 2012; Golder, 2010; Hooghe, 2012a; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). Works in the Belgian academia also question the robustness and the resilience of the political system and scholars have tried to explain how a complex country such as Belgium can continue to function even when a caretaker government is in the driving seat (Albalate & Bel, 2020; Bouckaert & Brans, 2012; Brans, 2012; Brans et al., 2016; Deschouwer, 2012; Devos & Sinardet, 2012; Hooghe, 2012a,b; Pilet, 2012).

As for the specific Belgian context, there is no tailor-made definition for what resembles a caretaker government. Like in many other parliamentary regimes (Boston et al., 1998), the political phenomenon of a caretaker government is absent from the legal constitutional framework. Caretaker governments are only briefly mentioned in the special Law on Institutional Reforms of 8 August 1980, where it is stipulated that "as long as it has not been replaced, the demissionary cabinet remains caretaker". Instead, the definition of a caretaker cabinet is determined by customary law and practice (Bernard, 2020; Rigaux, 2020), which has been confirmed by the Council of State in 2016 (decision 234.747 on 17 May 2016). In that respect, a common standard acceptance is that caretaker governments in Belgium limit themselves to just certain types of actions, like daily matters, ongoing matters (i.e. policy continuity) and urgent matters. However, there is little consensus among scholars about that the exact list of these actions (see Section 8.3).

For sure, there have been various types of cabinets in Belgium over the last decades: coalition cabinets, minority cabinets, transitory cabinets, etc. To distinguish caretaker governments from these other types, we define a caretaker period as the time interval during which either one of the two political branches (executive or legislative) does not enjoy its full powers (Bernard, 2020; Dandoy & Terrière, 2021; Rigaux, 2020).

Following this straightforward definition of a caretaker government, we can measure the exact length of caretaker periods for the last decades in Belgian political history. The three longest caretaker governments are all in recent years: 235 days in 2007, 457 days in 2018–2020 and 597 days in 2010–2011. When adding the other (shorter) caretaker governments in recent history, we account that Belgium was ruled by a caretaker government for no less than 1485 days between 2007 and 2020. This corresponds to 29.04% of the total period between the 1st January 2007 and the 31 August 2020, or more than four (!) full calendar years.[3]

8.3 The political consequences of a caretaker regimen

A caretaker cabinet does not only affect the capacity of the executive but also of other political institutions. We highlighted in the first section that issues related to democratic legitimacy are crucial in the context of caretaker governments – who cannot be held accountable by their parliaments. In that respect, the nature of the relationship between the legislative and the executive branch has been at the center of attention of the specific scholarly literature on caretaker governments (e.g. Devos & Sinardet, 2012). Since the cabinet is already dismissed, a caretaker government cannot be sanctioned once again by parliament. This eliminates a major instrument of political power held by the members of parliament in a normal democratic system.

In a parliamentary democracy such as Belgium, the executive is controlled by the legislative branch but it surely dominates the overall lawmaking process. Prior works on caretaker cabinets in Belgium investigated this institutional

relationship and tested whether parliament has larger influence on the legisla-
tive process in caretaker periods (cf. Brans et al., 2016; Pilet, 2012; Van Aelst &
Louwerse, 2014). Empirical analyses of the 2007–2011 period show a nuanced
picture. If the parliament took more legal initiatives than in normal times, care-
taker periods did not lead to drastic changes in the legislative–executive relation-
ship but rather permitted a modest correction to the extremely weak position of
the Belgian parliament (Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014).

In Belgium, MPs are constrained by partisanship and party discipline.
Scholars have investigated whether MPs enjoy more freedom in caretaker peri-
ods since one would expect that there is less party discipline. Empirical analyses
of the 2010–2011 caretaker period have demonstrated that, despite the caretaker
regime, parties have remained extremely cohesive, party discipline has remained
strong and vote dissention was still exceptional (Brans et al., 2016; Pilet, 2012).
Moreover, Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) observed that, in times of institutional
crisis, parties are even more coherent in terms of voting than in regular peri-
ods. The government-opposition divide still leads to clustered legislative party
positions, and this even if alternative majorities sometimes emerge – especially
between parties negotiating for the formation of a next federal cabinet (Baeselen
et al., 2014; Pilet, 2012; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014).

While caretaker periods might affect the functioning of federal entities (e.g.
parliament or administration[4] and their relationship vis-à-vis the executive), the
relevant literature on caretaker cabinets in Belgium overlooks its impact on the
sitting government itself. Therefore, in this section, we investigate the political
consequences for those parties that take part in the caretaker cabinet. First, we
investigate whether cabinets are more stable during caretaker periods. Since one
of the main characteristics of a caretaker government is that it ensures continuity
and that the country should never be without a functioning executive, the same
reasoning applies to individual ministers. Similarly to what we expect from the
cabinet as a whole, ministers should remain in power until their successor is
appointed.

We test this hypothesis of ministerial stability by a detailed analysis of the
eight episodes of a caretaker cabinet between the 12 July 2003 and 31 August
2020 and compare these with periods of 'normal' cabinets. Ministerial instability
is an important phenomenon in Belgian politics: there are three resignations per
year on average in recent decades (Dumont et al., 2008). From 2003 till 2020,
this figure is slightly lower with just over two resignations per year on average.
We observe in Table 8.1 that there are generally more ministerial resignations
during caretaker periods than in normal periods. Specifically, a caretaker cabinet
that lasts for one year witnesses no less than 2.46 resignations, which is signif-
icantly more than in a cabinet with full powers (i.e. 1.9 resignations per year).
Hence, our hypothesis of higher ministerial stability in case of caretaker govern-
ment is rejected.

A detailed analysis of the rationales behind these resignations reveals an inter-
esting pattern. None of the ten ministerial resignations during caretaker periods

TABLE 8.1 Ministerial stability in the federal cabinet

Years	Type of cabinet	Period (N days)	Ministerial resignations*	Resignations (per year)
2003–2007	Full powers	1390	11	
2007	Caretaker	235	2	
2007–2008	Full powers	88	0	
2008	Caretaker	3	0	
2008	Full powers	114	1	
2008	Caretaker	3	0	
2008	Full powers	155	0	
2008–2009	Caretaker	14	0	
2009	Full powers	327	4	
2009	Caretaker	3	0	
2009–2010	Full powers	146	0	
2010–2011	Caretaker	597	1	
2011–2014	Full powers	866	3	
2014	Caretaker	175	4	
2014–2018	Full powers	1524	6	
2018–2020	Caretaker	457	3	
2020	Full powers	165	0	
Total	Full powers	4775	25	1.91
Total	Caretaker	1485	10	2.46

*Prime ministers excluded.

are due to political motives or scandals. Rather, all of these ten ministers or state secretaries resigned to occupy an alternative position in another institution, as, for instance, Didier Reynders who entered the European commission in 2019. In other words, it seems that caretaker ministers chose to boost their future political career when opportunities arise rather than to ensure the continuity of the federal cabinet. Similar observations are made when it comes to cabinet staff members, of whom a high proportion left the cabinet services well before the end of the caretaker period (Brans, 2012).

Until 2019, no Belgian prime minister ever resigned during a caretaker period. For instance, in 2011, Prime Minister Yves Leterme kept his future leadership position within the OECD on hold until the Di Rupo cabinet finally took office. Yet, in October 2019, Prime Minister Charles Michel left the federal cabinet to prepare for a new international role as president of the European Council. Sophie Wilmès was appointed on the same day as Michel's resignation. She confirmed that the rest of the cabinet's composition would remain unchanged, and it kept in a caretaker mode until a new full-fledged coalition government would take office.

Next to the analysis of ministerial stability in caretaker governments, this section also investigates the effect of caretaker periods on election results and on party popularity. As one can imagine, these delicate moments in political history did not remain unnoticed by the population. For example, during the 2010–2011 caretaker episodes, there were frequent marches on the streets of

Brussels, combined with public initiatives to start direct dialogues between the linguistic communities (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012). The question is then whether parties who participate in such caretaker governments are punished or rewarded by the population and the electorate.

First, we assess the electoral performance of parties in caretaker governments. We know from prior works that Belgian governing parties tend to lose the elections that follow their cabinet participation (Dandoy, 2018; Dumont & De Winter, 1999). With the exception of the Verhofstadt I cabinet in 2003, governing parties have always lost an important share of votes in the consecutive elections since 1999. Governments in a long caretaker period before the elections are no exception to these findings. For instance, while the coalition parties of Michel II were in caretaker mode for already more than five months, they suffered a combined loss of 6.04% vote shares in the 2019 elections. This is not significantly different from the electoral losses of governing parties in shorter caretaker periods. Thus, the fact that a cabinet resigns (long) before the end of the legislative term does not impact its electoral performance.

Second, we measure the popularity of parties in the caretaker government. In a caretaker cabinet, the classic divide between government and opposition does not apply. Voters may want to reward parties for holding up the country during a political crisis or, on the contrary, may want to punish these same parties for not finding a proper solution to this crisis. Analyzing opinion polls for the period 2008–2013, we observe that a caretaker period does not generate an important impact on the popularity of governing parties. In general, political parties in government become more unpopular over time, and this independent from the nature of the cabinet, i.e. a caretaker one or one operating in its full capacity.

8.4 Caretaker governments and actual policymaking

The absence of a democratic mandate to operate in its full capacity limits the political maneuvering space of any caretaker government. Deprived of the required electoral legitimacy and parliamentary support, these cabinets will need to thread with caution. Yet, public governance and decision-making need to continue, even under these inconvenient circumstances, to safeguard the vital interests of the country and its inhabitants. This third section investigates the broad academic consensus that lives under both legal experts and political scientists about which specific policy initiatives a caretaker government can (not) undertake. In what follows, we bring together the current scholarly literature by drafting an own typology of six different actions that fall under the scope of caretaker governments.

In addition, we hypothesize that there is a strong tendency to stretch the political range of action – for each of these six types of actions – the longer the caretaker cabinet remains in executive office. Previous scholars (Boston et al., 1998; Bouckaert & Brans, 2012; Pastorella, 2016) have suggested that such a dynamic may exist for some specific governmental acts. Yet, if such a renewed political

assertiveness appears as an overall and reoccurring phenomenon, one may argue that it is actually deliberate strategy of a caretaker government to regain its former political maneuvering space.

Most prior works (e.g. Bouckaert & Brans, 2012; Devos & Sinardet, 2012; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014) investigating the impact of caretaker governments on actual policymaking in Belgium have focused on the long-lasting political crisis of 2010–2011. Instead, we opt to turn the spotlight on the more recent political stalemate of 2018–2020, which started with the downfall of the full-fledged coalition government Michel I. Interestingly, legislative elections were organized halfway through this long-lasting crisis (May 2019), after which the caretaker period simply continued to drag on. Since the occurrence of elections in the middle of a caretaker period is highly unusual, we test whether this event had an impact on the kind and the nature of the decisions taken by the caretaker cabinet *before* and *after* the elections – and thus also: before and after the installation of a new parliament. Inserting this reference point enables us to get more insight in a caretaker cabinet's (increasing) range of actions over time, and whether such specific events generate an impact here. Also, we compare our findings with those from the 2010–2011 crisis (597 days) to better understand the 2018–2020 stalemate (457 days).

This section relies on the analysis of the minutes of the weekly cabinet decisions taken between 9 December 2018 (i.e. the downfall of the Michel I cabinet) and 19 March 2020 (i.e. when the Wilmès II cabinet obtained the vote of confidence in Parliament). In Belgium, joint cabinet meetings are organized once a week, usually on Friday mornings. It is during these recurring key moments that most political decisions are taken for the various federal departments: ministers present and defend their policy proposals to their colleagues and this is followed by a discussion and bargaining procedure. Afterward, a brief report of the outcome is published on the website of the Belgian government. These weekly summaries of the main policy decisions are a transparent and reliable instrument to measure the evolving policy scope of the sitting government.

Mapping these documents provides us with empirical evidence to test both hypotheses: can we speak of (a) an increasing range of actions and if so, is it (b) a reoccurring phenomenon throughout the six different types of political actions? We expect that in an early stage, the resigning executive is cautious not to spread its operational wings too much. This initial self-restraint is likely to be eased as time progresses, however. In this respect, earlier authors (e.g. Hooghe, 2012a) refer to situations where negotiations kept dragging on, leading to unprecedented lengths of a caretaker period.

In a belated stage, the caretaker cabinet may take up a more proactive stance and even initiate new political initiatives (Schleiter & Belu, 2015). We concur with this reasoning and hypothesize that, once new elections took place and a new parliament is installed, a more expansive approach from the caretaker government vis-à-vis actual policymaking becomes visible. In addition, we may also expect a larger scope of actions when there is a change in the position of prime minister.

Namely, a new PM means new dynamics and he/she may not feel bound to the cautious behavior of her/his predecessor. Applied to this study, it means that after 26 October 2019, we may expect the caretaker government to display a significant (quantitative and qualitative) increase in its range of political actions, since from that moment onward, Sophie Wilmès took over from Charles Michel, who became President of the European Council. Last but not least, we might see a larger scope of action at the end of the calendar year since many legal initiatives and government programs are supposed to end on the 31 December – e.g. the annual budget laws. We investigate whether these expectations are true for key federal policy domains such as budget, defense, asylum and migration and social security.

Underneath, we aim to summarize the academic consensus among legal experts and political scientists about which specific policy initiatives a caretaker government can (not) undertake. We distinguish no less than six different types of policy actions. Classic studies about caretaker cabinets in Belgium focus on the first three types (e.g. Brans et al., 2016; Devos & Sinardet, 2012; Hooghe, 2012b) but more recent ones also add several others to these first categories (e.g. Schleiter & Belu, 2015; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). The latter also focus on international obligations (4), new initiatives from parliament (5) and even new initiatives from the government itself (6). Especially the prominence of this last category makes Belgium an exceptional and deviant case from other countries (Davis et al., 2001; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2014; Tiernan & Menzies, 2007).

A *first* type of action of a Belgian government during a caretaker period concerns the 'daily management' of the state (e.g. Baeselen et al., 2014). These decisions generally do not concern political sensitive topics – take, for instance, the salary payments of civil servants or paying the energy bills of public buildings. Important nominations within the human resources management department fall outside of this scope. Initially, when looking at the political stalemate of 2018–2020, new appointments in the administration, military and judiciary are put on hold. However, once the new PM Wilmès took office, the cabinet started to resolve high-level personnel matters, among which several appointments of key management positions within the public administration. For example, it renewed the executive mandates for the sitting administrator-general of the Social Security e-services (approved on 24 January 2020) and Real Estate administrator of the Federal Government (approved on 31 January 2020) for another six (!) years.

A *second* type of actions constitutes issues that were approved and initiated in the past when the government still enjoyed its full powers (e.g. Baeselen et al., 2014). Similar to the first type, the necessity of this category is based on the argument that the public governance of the country requires continuity. Taken together, these first two types of actions are often described by the notion of 'current affairs' (e.g. Devos & Sinardet, 2012). Throughout the 2018–2020 caretaker period, the federal administration continued to function thanks to the guaranteed but temporary budget laws that were adopted – the so-called provisionary twelfths. These budget proposals were still initiated by the caretaker cabinet and

had to be formally approved by the Parliament every three months. At first, the budgetary framework was accepted without any further amendments. Yet, the version that was laid down in March 2020 was only approved after no less than 27 plenary amendments from various political parties were put to the vote as well. In this last budget bill under the regime of a caretaker government, the initial path of 'provisionary twelfths' was diverted at several programs, among which the health-care budget was increased with several hundred million euros. After the new PM Wilmès took office, the initial restraint and continuity is swapped for a more extensive range of political actions. Take, for example, the cabinet decision to start building a new prison in the municipality of Dendermonde. This long-awaited ruling by the Minister of Justice was finally taken on 14 February 2020. It is somewhat paradoxical that this highly delicate political decision – due to many years of continued international pressure to improve the facilities for prisoners as well as domestic arm-wrestling about where this extra capacity would be allocated – was taken by a caretaker government in its final days.

A *third* type of actions entails 'urgent matters' (e.g. Hooghe, 2012a). A caretaker government may need to take measures because any delay or nonaction could cause damage to the state or its inhabitants. Just like in other categories, this concept is a 'moving target': its interpretation is susceptible to evolutions in the context and circumstances (Baeselen et al., 2014). During the 2018–2020 period, the caretaker government was confronted with the upcoming deadline of the 'Brexit'. Yet, it was only on 17 January 2020 (i.e. again after the appointment of a new PM) that a series of important fiscal transition measures were taken by the caretaker government to prevent important economic and financial losses. Furthermore, the unexpected outbreak of the Covid-19 forced the caretaker cabinet Wilmès I to introduce drastic sanitary and safety measures to contain the spreading of the virus. They did this even before 19 March 2020 – i.e. the day when the cabinet actually proceeded again under its full powers.

Fulfilling the international commitments and obligations (incl. EU and NATO) is a *fourth* type of actions that a caretaker government needs to cover. This includes, for example, also the speedily transposition of EU directives in Belgian legislation. When discussing the 2010–2011 period, scholars often refer to the decisions of the Leterme II cabinet to go to war with Libya (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012; Schleiter & Belu, 2015) and to participate in the EU programs to save the euro (Devos & Sinardet, 2012; Hooghe, 2012a). Likewise, during the 2018–2020 period, the Belgian caretaker government lived up to its international obligations. But it was only after Wilmès took over as PM that important new initiatives were undertaken such as the nomination of Didier Reynders as European Commissioner. On 7 February 2020, a series of measures were decided to prevent money laundering and the financing of international terrorism – as this was requested by several international organizations. Also, on 14 February 2020, Belgium decided to send out a mission to Albania to provide immediate help and assistance after an earthquake had hit the region and to Bolivia where forest fires destroyed many people's houses (20 December 2019).

A *fifth* task that caretaker cabinets have to deal with is legal initiatives decided by parliament. Indeed, a resigning cabinet may open up opportunities for parliament to step in and to take up a larger role in policymaking, hereby creating ad-hoc coalitions for all kinds of legislative proposals. This happened in 2018–2020 as parliamentary initiatives were passed that even amended existing royal decrees and ministerial decrees. Bear in mind that, when adopting such detailed legislation, parliament actually treads on governments' territory. Three vivid examples were the decisions (a) to improve the social tariffs on gas and electricity; (b) to grant a financial compensation to employees who go to work by making use of the e-bike and (c) and to increase the pensions for underground mine workers.

A *sixth* and last type are new initiatives that the caretaker government initiates by itself (Schleiter & Belu, 2015). This is actually a controversial category that many scholars do not even consider falling within the scope of a caretaker cabinet. Yet, it is surely present in Belgian political practice. The apparent switch in the function of PM also generates actions for this last type if we take a closer look at the 2018–2020 caretaker period. Only in a belated stage, the caretaker cabinet began to initiate own and far-reaching policies that are a clear departure from the status quo. For example, the cabinet decided to change what kind of personal information needs to be mentioned on a citizens' identity card (14 February 2020); obliged the registration of a person's fingerprints on every identity card (12 December 2019) and approved a 'national emergency plan' in case of a terrorist attack including the erection of new surveillance structures and response procedures (24 January 2020).

Now that we have identified six types of actions, we add two important observations. These underline the strong tendency to increase the range of political actions over time. First, it is only in the few weeks before and after an election, during which parliament is not in its full powers that we see a significant increase in the number of royal and ministerial decrees undertaken by the caretaker cabinet. Surely, since it is temporarily more difficult to realize new legislation through the legislative branch because the cabinet is not supported by a parliamentary majority, the caretaker government may try to fulfill its agenda through alternative means within the executive branch.

Second, if parliament enjoys more leeway during a caretaker period, ministers may feed parliamentarians even more with ready-made bills. By making use of this institutional shortcut, individual ministers (even in a caretaker mode) try to speed up the decision-making process and complete some of their initial projects. For parliamentarians, it means an opportunity to score publicly without the effort of having to write a complex legal piece. A good example from the 2018–2020 period is the legal proposal in Parliament to lower the costs of anti-conception for younger women approved on 16 July 2020 after this measure was agreed in principle during a prior meeting of the caretaker cabinet (21 February 2020).

This section has identified and discussed different types of actions that fall under the scope of a 'caretaker cabinet'. Most of them enjoy broad academic consensus among political scientist and lawyers. Through an assessment of the 2018–2020 caretaker period in Belgium, we have demonstrated that long transition

periods trigger caretaker executives to expand their range of political actions over time. We provided empirical evidence for this expansive behavior for every different type of action. It actually seems a broad and general trend, which renders omnipresent in every type of action. Given this constituent and reoccurring pattern, one may argue that this is a deliberate strategy. More than a year after the downfall of the government, the remaining members of the executive branch will still have a longing desire to realize their initial agenda and the projects they had mind. This continued policy ambition could be an important explanation for this increasing range of political actions over time that we have observed.

8.5 Conclusion

Belgium is famous for the length of its government formation processes. During these periods, the former federal coalition government keeps acting as a caretaker cabinet but it operates with limited political and policy powers. Yet, political deadlocks are merely the tip of the iceberg, as federal elections and other major political crises have led to shorter or longer situations of a federal caretaker government. With a focus on the last two decades, this chapter observes that Belgium was ruled by a caretaker government for no less than 1485 days between 2007 and 2020, corresponding to more than four full calendar years. In many ways, this situation is unique in contemporary politics around the world.

Rather than investigating the origins of caretaker governments and the factors behind such lengthy episodes, this chapter aimed at exploring the political and policy consequences of caretaker governments in Belgium. A first set of findings indicates that caretaker periods do alter the balance of power between federal institutions and political actors: the parliament is not significantly empowered and partitocracy still dominates federal politics. At the same time, our analyses show that the cabinet becomes slightly more unstable (in particular when looking at ministerial turnover) and that parties in government are not particularly rewarded or sanctioned by the voters and the public opinion. Even if these periods saw the emergence of demands for more deliberative and/or direct democracy, the way representative democracy is functioning in Belgium seems to remain largely unchanged, and we observe that the main traditional political actors and institutional dynamics are not affected by caretaker governments.

From the scholarly literature, we derive no less than six different types of actions that fall under the scope of a caretaker government. Belgium is a deviant case from other countries since its caretaker governments even set up new initiatives on its own (type six). Through an exploration of the 2018–2020 caretaker period in Belgium, we have demonstrated that long transition periods trigger cabinets to expand their range of political actions over time. We provided empirical evidence for a constituent and reoccurring pattern for this expansion for every different type of action, indicating a deliberate strategy.

The way ahead is undoubtedly comparative. The analysis of political and policy consequences of caretaker governments apart from the exceptional Belgian case

may be challenging but will ultimately improve our comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. Are long periods of a caretaker government similarly not affecting the political and party systems in other West European countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands or Spain? It would also be interesting to include technocratic and partisan caretaker governments in the comparative analysis, such as the ones we observe in Finland, Portugal, Sweden or in Central European countries. We particularly call for closer collaboration between researchers studying parties and governments and those analyzing public policies.

Another future field of comparative analysis is related to the impact of the global context and external pressures on the performance of caretaker governments. We know from the Italian case that international actors such as the EU or the IMF have contributed to the thankless implementation of socially difficult reforms. The underlying idea is that, in an extraordinary situation, decision-makers may appreciate a temporary 'relief' of responsibilities for unpopular decisions to a caretaker government (Hloušek & Kopeček 2014). Even if the financial and economic crisis proved to have only little effect on the Belgian caretaker government in 2010–2011, it would for instance be interesting to observe the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the politics and policies of the respective caretaker governments. In Belgium, the exceptional sanitary situation led to a sudden end of the Wilmès I caretaker cabinet and triggered the establishment of a temporary minority cabinet.

Notes

1 Caretaker governments have to be distinguished from interim or transitory governments. This latter kind of cabinets is specifically appointed to make the transition between two governments that benefit from full powers. Alternatively, their sole purpose is to bring the country to (early) elections. Examples of such transitory cabinets can be found in countries such as Italy, Finland, Portugal or Sweden (Beckman, 2007; Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2014; Larsson, 1994; Magone, 2000; McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014; Zafarullah & Yeahia Akhter, 2000).
2 Even if parliament cannot sanction the caretaker government as such, it can still control it in principle. For instance, it is not rare to see their ministers being questioned publicly during plenary or committee meetings. Parliamentary consent is also still needed to pass any new legislation.
3 For more information about how to measure caretaker periods and the types of caretaker governments, see Dandoy and Terrière (2021).
4 Devos and Sinardet (2012) observed no increase in the power of the bureaucracy even in times of crises and limited powers. Although the public administration was indispensable in the daily management of current affairs and during the EU presidency in 2011, the authors conclude that bureaucrats did not take over from politicians.

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9

THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF BELGIAN FEDERALISM

Is there a reversal of the paradox of federalism?

Laura Pascolo, Daan Vermassen, Min Reuchamps and Didier Caluwaerts

9.1 Introduction

Ever since the 1970s, Belgium has witnessed a process of constitutional reform. This transformation of Belgium from a unitary state into a federal state was propelled by the paradox of federalism (Erk & Anderson, 2009). After all, granting autonomy to the linguistic groups was initially considered a means of pacifying ethnolinguistic tensions, but at the same time it also legitimized and exacerbated the underlying identity conflicts. The decentralization, known in Belgium as 'defederalization' of competences, thus, seems to have increased demands for further regionalization and set in motion fundamental institutional reforms.

However, in recent years, the country seems to be experiencing a reversal of the paradox of federalism (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). In response to the ethnolinguistic stalemate and perceived inefficiency of Belgian politics, politicians have increasingly started advocating the 'refederalization' of certain competences. Federalism, they argue, has not delivered on its promise of efficiency and effectiveness, so the aim should be to lift competences back to the federal level. Yet very little is known so far about the positions and arguments in favor of de- or refederalization, or about the political elites' position in this debate. To map this increased attention to refederalization, this chapter aims to take stock of the positions of political elites in favor of defederalization or refederalization in Belgium. The objective is to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the argumentative logics mobilized by the political elites to justify their positions. The longitudinal analysis is carried out, on the one hand, on the electoral manifestos of the Belgian political parties and, on the other hand, on the interventions of the political elites in the written press from the end of 1990 until the last federal and regional elections of 2019.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 9.2 looks at Belgium's process of federalization, more specifically as a conflict management technique from the perspective of consociational democracy. Section 9.3 includes a theoretical discussion of the paradox of federalism. Then comes the methodological part including the presentation of the two corpus and the methodological considerations. In Section 9.5, the analyses are presented, showing the main claims of the parties according to defederalization and refederalization propositions and arguments. Section 9.6 concludes and discusses the findings of the chapter.

9.2 Consociational democracy in Belgium: from conflict to compromise and back?

Belgium has long been considered a divided society because of its deep, coinciding cleavages. Ever since its foundation in 1830, economic, social, religious and linguistic fault lines have mutually reinforced each other. However, "[w]hat is remarkable about Belgium, is not that it is a culturally divided society – most of the countries in the contemporary world are divided into separate and distinct cultural, religious, or ethnic communities – but that its cultural communities coexist peacefully and democratically" (Lijphart, 1981, p. 1). What the Belgian case clearly shows is that deep divisions among the population need not necessarily lead to democratic disintegration. A deeply divided society can, thus, be governed in a relatively stable manner.

However, the question that has always attracted academic scrutiny is how the Belgian political system withstood the lure of centrifugalism. How come the Belgian state did not disintegrate, even though its societal structure was conflict-ridden? To understand this seemingly paradoxical finding, we need to take a closer look at the country's institutional set-up. Belgian political institutions are set up in such a way as to reduce tensions and facilitate power-sharing between the conflicting groups. In this sense, it is a prime example of what scholars of ethnic conflict call the *consociational* model of democracy.

The idea of consociational democracy was first developed by the Dutch academic Arend Lijphart (1968, 1981), who stated that "[d]ivided societies [need] a democratic regime which emphasizes consensus instead of opposition and which includes rather than excludes all the disparate components" (Lijphart, 1981, pp. 3–4). The accommodation of ethnolinguistic tensions in a conflict-ridden nation such as Belgium, thus, requires institutions that accommodate, rather than exacerbate, conflicts. They require institutions that force the elites to sit together and work out their differences. Lijphart identifies four of such power-sharing institutions.

First of all, deeply divided societies require *grand coalitions*. All societal groups, i.e. both majority and minority groups, should be included in executive power sharing. Consociational systems, thus, rarely settle for minimal-winning or one-party cabinets, which exclude minorities. In Belgium, this principle is implemented by the constitutional requirement that the federal government consists

of members of both linguistic groups, and that there is an equal number of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking cabinet members (i.e. the linguistic parity requirement). In practice, this often results in significantly oversized government coalitions consisting of five or more political parties which have to engage in consensual decision-making.

Second, the grand coalition is complemented by the principle of *proportionality*. Proportionality can be implemented first of all through the electoral system. Electoral proportionality allows "all groups [to] influence a decision in proportion to their numerical strength" (Steiner, 1971, p. 63; see also Lijphart, 1977, p. 39). However, proportionality has to be interpreted in a much more fundamental way: it is an impartial procedural device capable of redistributing government resources (financial means, appointments to public office…) among all societal segments (Huyse, 1970, p. 154; Steiner, 1971, p. 63). As such, it is an effective means of removing potentially explosive issues from the government agenda ensuring that "the essence of political action has shifted from strife to distribution" (Daalder, 1964, p. 24). Examples of proportionality are numerous in Belgian politics. Not only is about 60% of the seats in the federal parliament reserved for Flemish parties and 40% for Francophone parties, but proportionality is also at the basis of Belgium's infamous waffle iron politics: every investment in Flanders has to be proportionally matched by investments in Wallonia and vice versa.

Even though their representation in grand coalitions and the application of proportionality offer minority segments a good chance of influencing policies, minority segments should also have the *right to veto* any decision they consider to be disadvantageous to their interests. Because the very stability of the system is at stake, the decision-making rule should approach unanimity. This gives minorities a de facto veto right, which is a far-reaching protection mechanism, that is needed to maintain the balance and avert democratic disintegration. In Belgium, this is implemented by requiring a double majority for constitutional reforms (i.e. a two-thirds majority in each assembly of the federal parliament and a simple majority within each linguistic group) and by installing a so-called alarm bell procedure. When one of the linguistic groups is convinced that a law violates its interests, that group can ring the alarm bell and suspend the parliamentary procedure. The federal government, which is composed of an equal number of French and Dutch speakers, then has to find a compromise.

The final institution aimed at reducing ethnolinguistic tensions is the *granting of autonomy*. When issues spark fierce debate and conflict at the national level, decision-power should ideally be delegated to the segments themselves. The aim of granting self-rule is therefore "not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognize them explicitly and to turn the segments into constructive elements of stable democracy" (Lijphart, 1977, p. 42). Belgium has implemented this final institution by evolving from a unitary state into a federal state through six state reforms since 1970. Because the initial demands from the north and the south of the country were so different, a unique bipolar federation was created.

Flanders primarily wanted cultural and linguistic autonomy, and protection from the francophone cultural dominance. Wallonia, on the other hand, witnessed a severe economic decline and wanted economic control. The institutional architecture of Belgian federalism was modeled after these dual demands, which led to two types of federalized entities: communities, which met Flemish demands and received cultural, linguistic and person-related competences, and regions, which would focus on economic policy (Witte & Meynen, 2006, p. 103).

9.3 The paradox of federalism

These four institutional innovations foster prudent leadership and a 'spirit of accommodation' (Lijphart, 1975). They made it virtually impossible for the Flemish demographic and political majority to impose its will on the French-speaking segment, and they persuaded the elites of the linguistic subgroups to sit together and resolve the matters at hand (Deschouwer, 2006, p. 902). Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out that there are inherent dangers to power-sharing democracy, chief among which is the 'paradox of federalism' (Erk & Anderson, 2009; Nordlinger, 1972). It is after all claimed that federalism removes contentious issues from the agenda, but at the same time, it sets in motion demands for more autonomy. As such, segmental autonomy, which is initially aimed at weakening centrifugal forces, actually reinforces them and could lead to separation in the long run (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015).

One of the explanations for this paradox is that federalism strengthens regional identities instead of creating overlapping ones (Tierney, 2009, p. 246). In their early works, consociational scholars claimed that power-sharing institutions would force the elites to create overarching loyalties: by working together in the search of accommodation and compromise, the elites would over time come to trust each other, and initial segmental identities would become less salient (Jarrett, 2016). This would in turn trickle down to the general population and the initial dividing lines would become less relevant. However, rather than reduce identity salience, consociation was found to strengthen identities (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). On the one hand, this is because granting autonomy implicitly recognizes the validity of the underlying identity claims. Federalizing competences on culture, language and identity to the level of the communities has implicitly recognized that identity claims based on language and culture were valid. As such, further claims for autonomy and recognition were legitimized as well. On the other hand, federalism also enables the passing of legislation that promotes the development of specific regional cultures and identities (Bunce, 1999; Roeder, 1991). "[F]ederalism [thus] entrenches, perpetuates, and institutionalizes the very divisions it has designed to manage" (Simeon, 1995, p. 257).

Even though a cursory look at the Belgian state reforms in the last 50 years, with its ever-increasing levels of defederalization, seems to suggest that the paradox of federalism is unfolding, we know surprisingly little about the dynamics

of this process. Previous studies on Belgium have not yet validated the claim that federalization led to more demands for federalization, or whether there were actually counterclaims to refederalize competences. In the next sections of this chapter, we will map the debate by identifying claims made by politicians to defederalize and refederalize competences in Belgium over time. Moreover, we will also analyze the underlying motives for de- or refederalizing competences.

9.4 Data and methods

9.4.1 Two types of corpora

To make a map of the argumentative logics supporting Belgian political parties' positions in the debate about defederalization or refederalization, this chapter performs a critical frame analysis on two types of corpora: the electoral manifestos of 13 Belgian political parties and the interventions of political decision-makers in the French- and Dutch-speaking print media from 1999 until 2019.

Analyzing electoral manifestos is particularly relevant to assess the importance dedicated to a theme or specific issue for the political party in question. The electoral manifesto is in fact the ultimate reference document regarding the position of a political party for a given electoral campaign (Reuchamps, 2015). Furthermore, it serves several functions: it is an official document that unites all party members during the election campaign, it outlines the party's position on a number of salient issues and it is an essential source of information for voters and a guide for the actions of elected officials after the election (Biard & Dandoy, 2018).

The electoral manifestos of Belgian political parties have been coded and analyzed, beginning from the federal election in 1999 to the last federal and regional elections in May 2019. In addition, only those parties were chosen that had obtained at least one seat in at least half of the considered elections. A total of 13 Belgian political parties[1] (6 French-speaking, 6 Dutch-speaking parties and 1 unitary party) were analyzed in this way in 12 elections. In years with simultaneous (regional and federal) elections, political parties may file multiple electoral manifestos, so no fewer than 115 manifestos have been coded and analyzed in this research.

In addition to electoral manifestos, the second corpus consists of the media interventions by political decision-makers in the Belgian written press, i.e. in French and Dutch-speaking daily newspapers.[2] After all, even if the manifesto is a good indicator of a party's position, the electoral campaign and competition may require adjustments on the part of political parties with regard to the different positions adopted in their electoral manifesto (Reuchamps, 2015). The use of this corpus provides a broader view of the positions of political elites through their interventions on issues and captures of the possible evolution of their positions across time.

The collection of this second corpus is carried out over the same period (from 1999 to 2019). In addition, the data collection is carried out for the entire election year (i.e. 1 January to 31 December), so that it includes the pre-campaign period, the election campaign, as well as the formation of coalitions and the underlying negotiations during the constitution of the executives. The selection resulted in 278 press articles that contained directly quoted interventions by political elites and were subsequently coded. Opinion pieces, political columns and interventions and analyses by experts in the broadest sense were excluded.

9.4.2 Critical frame analysis

To identify the arguments surrounding the defederalization or refederalization debate in Belgium, we conducted a critical frame analysis (Verloo, 2005). Critical frame analyses allow implicit or explicit interpretations of the political problem to emerge by highlighting how political actors think about the problem and present solutions (Meier, 2008). Indeed, this approach makes it possible to draw up an in-depth study of the diagnostic and prognostic dimensions by insisting on the implicit or explicit representations of the actors, causes, consequences and actions to be undertaken.

For the purposes of this chapter, electoral proposals and media interventions have been coded according to a two-fold scheme. On the one hand, we have coded the diagnostic frames that seek to highlight the diagnosis of the problem (what is the problem?), its justification (why is it a problem?), causality (what caused the problem?) and attribution (who is responsible for the problem?). On the other hand, we also coded the prognostic frames concerning the prognosis (what is defined as the solution?), the actions (how can we solve the problem?) but also the different objectives, values and highlighted norms. These two types of frames make it possible, on the one hand, to look at how political parties and their elites define de- and refederalization and, on the other hand, to understand why they support the de- and refederalization of competences and responsibilities. Finally, by understanding the diagnostic and prognostic frames, it is possible to highlight the argumentative logics mobilized by political elites to justify such transfers of competences (toward a centrifugal of defederalization or centripetal of refederalization trajectory).

9.5 Findings

9.5.1 The evolution of the debate

Before presenting and elaborating on the different frames and arguments used by political elites to justify their positions for or against de- and refederalization, it is necessary to determine the extent to which these two issues have been actively discussed through the manifestos of political parties and in the interventions of their representatives in the print media. Figure 9.1 shows the evolution of the debate on the distribution of competences over time. The general trends
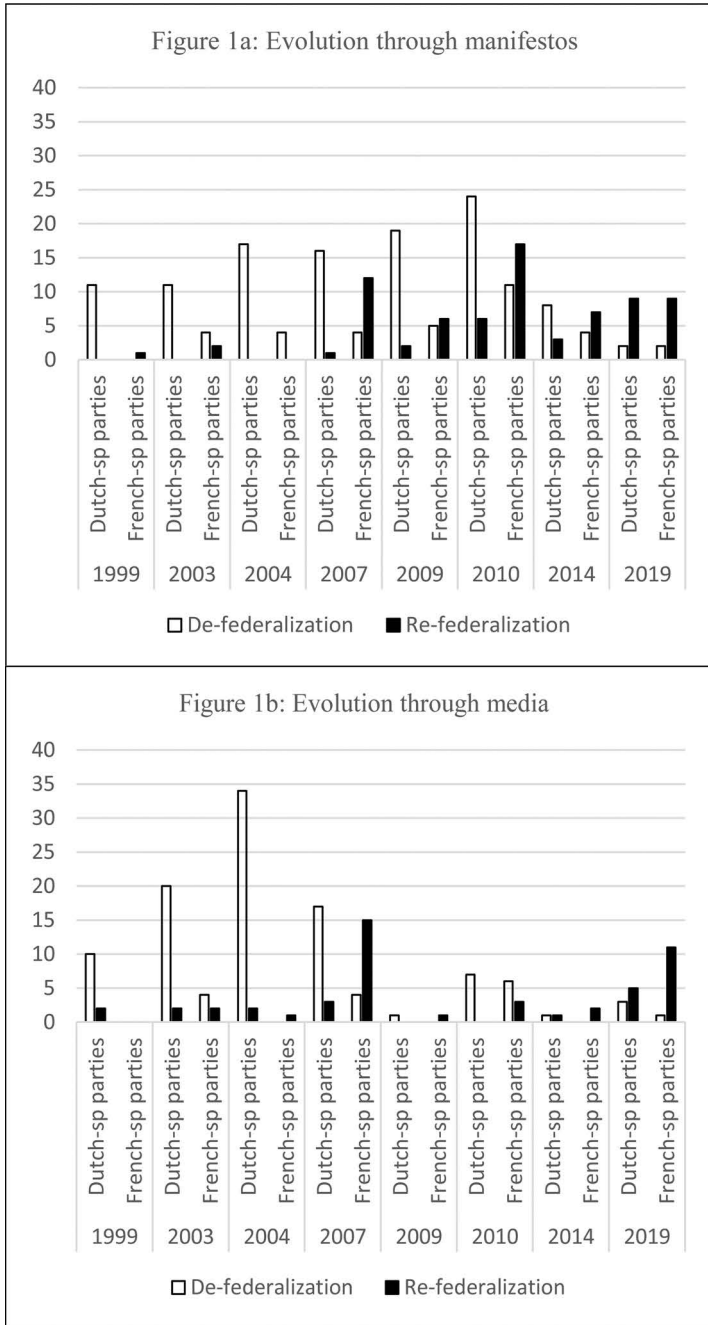
FIGURE 9.1 Evolution of the debate on de– and refederalization over time for Dutch–speaking parties and French–speaking parties (claims in absolute occurrences)

show that demands for defederalization of competences are more numerous in the earlier elections. Moreover, a peak of these demands is observed in the 2010 elections and in the first phase of the 6th and currently last reform of the state in 2012–2014. However, in the last two federal and regional elections (2014 and 2019), there was a decrease in these claims for defederalization. The constitutional reforms agreed upon during the last state reform seem to have satisfied some of parties' appetite for further decentralization of competences.

However, although previous state reforms have historically and systematically generated centrifugal transfers of competences, we also observe that demands for refederalization have increased since the 2007 federal elections. However, it is during the regional and federal elections of 2010 and 2019 but also after the last state reform finished in 2014, that the demands for refederalization of competences were the most important.

A number of additional observations should also be highlighted. First of all, even if the demands for refederalization seemed to be more important in the last two election years, they are not shared in the same way by the political parties in the north and south of the country. Indeed, the Dutch-speaking political parties have almost systematically made more demands for defederalization both in their electoral manifestos and in the interventions of the political elites. However, in the federal and regional elections of 2019, demands for the refederalization of competences have become more prominent in the speeches of these political elites (see Table 9.1). In addition, the demands for the defederalization of competences are, among others, mainly and predominantly driven by Dutch-speaking parties, including the N-VA and the VB. In contrast, representatives of the so-called traditional political parties such as the liberal Open VLD, Christian-democratic CD&V and socialist SP.A have formulated multiple demands with a high relative weight through their interventions in the media. However, media analyses show that representatives of the three traditional Dutch-speaking political parties (CD&V, Open VLD, SP.A) also put forward positions and demands for the refederalization of competences and responsibilities. The only Dutch-speaking party that has included demands of refederalization in the interventions of its political elites in print media but also in its electoral manifestos is the green party, Groen.

Demands for defederalization have also been formulated on the other side of the language border. The traditional French-speaking parties (cdH, MR, PS) formulate them both in their electoral manifestos and in their media interventions. However, starting with the 2007 federal elections, French-speaking parties almost systematically made more demands for refederalization than defederalization. The two parties with a large share of claims referring to the refederalization of competences in their electoral manifestos are, on the one hand, the French-speaking liberal party, MR and, on the other hand, the only Belgian unitary party, the far-left party PTB/PVDA.

Before closing this section presenting the evolution of the debate, it is interesting to highlight a consideration about an intermediate position, a balance between defederalization and refederalization observed during the analysis of

TABLE 9.1 Claims on de-/refederalization by political parties (in absolute and relative occurrences)

		Defederalization		Refederalization	
		Manifestos	*Media*	*Manifestos*	*Media*
Christian-democrat	cdH	3.40% (*N* = 5)	0.97% (*N* = 1)	7.14% (*N* = 4)	10.64% (*N* = 5)
	CD&V	6.12% (*N* = 9)	16.50% (*N* = 17)	0% (*N* = 0)	6.38% (*N* = 3)
Ecologist	Groen	3.40% (*N* = 5)	0.97% (*N* = 1)	12.50% (*N* = 7)	4.26% (*N* = 2)
	Ecolo	5.44% (*N* = 8)	0% (*N* = 0)	14.29% (*N* = 8)	8.51% (*N* = 4)
Liberal	Open VLD	8.84% (*N* = 13)	20.39% (*N* = 21)	0% (*N* = 0)	10.64% (*N* = 5)
	MR	3.40% (*N* = 5)	5.83% (*N* = 6)	23.21% (*N* = 13)	17.02% (*N* = 8)
Regionalist	N-VA	23.81% (*N* = 35)	23.30% (*N* = 24)	0% (*N* = 0)	0% (*N* = 0)
	FDF/Défi	2.04% (*N* = 3)	0% (*N* = 0)	5.36% (*N* = 3)	0% (*N* = 0)
Radical right	VB	28.57% (*N* = 42)	1.94% (*N* = 2)	0% (*N* = 0)	0% (*N* = 0)
	PP	4.08% (*N* = 6)	0% (*N* = 0)	7.14% (*N* = 4)	0% (*N* = 0)
	LDD	1.36% (*N* = 2)	0% (*N* = 0)	0% (*N* = 0)	0% (*N* = 0)
Socialist	PS	7.48% (*N* = 11)	7.77% (*N* = 8)	8.93% (*N* = 5)	31.25% (*N* = 15)
	SP.A	2.04% (*N* = 3)	23.30% (*N* = 24)	0% (*N* = 0)	6.38% (*N* = 3)
Radical left	PTB/PVDA	0% (*N* = 0)	0% (*N* = 0)	21.43% (*N* = 12)	4.26% (*N* = 2)

media interventions for the last federal and regional elections. During the 2019 election year, and particularly in the debates and discussions concerning a possible 7th reform of the state, intermediate positions on the trajectory to be taken by the transfer of competences and responsibilities emerged.

The political elites in this 'in-between' position stressed that a future reform of the State should encompass both a defederalization of competences and a refederalization of particular competences. These political elites highlight a trajectory not yet planned in previous state reforms, which would consist of a mixed trajectory between a centrifugal and a centripetal approach to the transfer of competences. These 'intermediate' positions were advocated by various political representatives from political parties in both the north and the south of the country. However, such a hybrid trajectory is far from being shared by all political elites and also tends to reflect rather individual positions of the elites within their political parties. However, this intermediate position is mentioned in the latest government agreement (30 September 2020), which indicates in particular the bases for a possible 7th reform of the State. The government agreement seems to address a new way of distributing competences and powers, presenting, on the one hand, an increase in the competences and autonomy of the federated entities and, on the other hand, a strengthening of the powers of the Federal Authority.

9.5.2 Critical frame analysis on de-/refederalization

Now that we have mapped the debate on de- and refederalization over the last 20 years, we should identify the argumentative logics underlying the debate. Political elites are after all actively engaging in defining and constructing problems related to management and competences transfer according to different diagnostic frames. Indeed, to justify their claims for or against re/defederalization, they highlight various dysfunctions underlying the practices and modalities at the heart of the Belgian federal political system which are both perceived as causes and consequences of the federal dynamics that have shaped the Belgian federation. Furthermore, the different frames mobilized by the political elites to justify centrifugal or centripetal responses have highlighted different argumentative logics adopted by the political elites in their demands in favor of or against the re-/defederalization of competences. The different argumentative logics can be divided into two main types of argument categories: on the one hand, identity-based arguments highlighting the differences between communities in terms of language, culture and politics and, on the other hand, functional, efficiency-based arguments which focus on considerations of economic efficiency, homogeneity of competences or cost reduction (see Table 9.2).

Two diagnostic frames are used by proponents of defederalization, as well as by proponents of refederalization, although the arguments differ. The first frame concerns the lack of coherence which refers to the heterogeneity, fragmentation and dispersion of competences. Indeed, policy areas have been devolved to different political entities, but powers and responsibilities have not been devolved

TABLE 9.2 The main diagnostic frames and related arguments

Diagnostic frames	Defederalization		Diagnostic frames	Refederalization	
	Arguments			Arguments	
	Efficiency	Identity		Efficiency	Identity
Lack of coherence	Coherence Homogeneity Economy		Lack of coherence	Coherence Homogeneity Economy	
The institutional architecture	Democracy Modernity Equality		The institutional architecture	Responsibility Modernity Simplification	Common history/ culture
Lack of autonomy	Subsidiarity Coordination	Common history, language, culture	Lack of coordination	Cohesion Coordination Unity	
Flemish–Walloon differences	Economy	Political differences Diversity	Partisans for defederalization	Solidarity	
The power and competences of the federal level	Expertise Subsidiarity Transparency	Share power Division	The management of the political domain	Transparency Uniformity	

to the same extent. As a result, they point out a lack of coherence in the management of a particular policy area due to a nonhomogeneous distribution of competences from the same policy area. This lack of coherence is illustrated in different policy areas subject to de-/refederalization. In fact, in the field of public health, different parts of competences and responsibilities are dispersed between the different levels of government. Moreover, the solutions proposed to resolve of this lack of coherence can go in completely opposite ways according to political elites. Some claim that coherence can be solved by further devolving competences; others claim that the solution lies in refederalization. Nevertheless, the centrifugal or centripetal response addressed to this diagnostic frame is justified by the political elites through the use of argumentative logics of efficiency, highlighting economic prosperity, homogeneity and coherence in the transfer of competences. The political elites favoring the refederalization of competences have largely mobilized this diagnostic frame in their manifestos.

The institutional architecture is the second frame shared by the political parties, which propose different trajectories concerning the distribution of competences. The main causes and origins of this complex institutional architecture stem from the different institutional reforms that have successively taken place in the course of arrangements and negotiations. The institutional mechanisms, which is considered complex, are highlighted by the political elites to underline and justify a solution whose objectives aim to overcome various institutional dysfunctions. In reality, the dysfunctions highlighted by the political elites differ according to the prognostic

frameworks, between the two trajectories advocated by the political elites. The advocates of a defederalization of competences emphasize the difficulties and dysfunctions linked to asymmetrical principles and instruments of so-called cooperative federalism such as solidarity mechanisms, veto rights inherent in the principles of consociational democracy or other measures requiring coordination at the level of the federal authority. These political elites justify the resolution of these dysfunctions through the defederalization by highlighting arguments such as the strengthening of the equality of the constituent entities but also of the democracy and the modernity of Belgian institutional system. This diagnostic frame underlines the dysfunction of institutional instruments and mechanisms and has been strongly mobilized by political elites in favor of defederalization in their manifestos.

Meanwhile, the political elites advocating refederalization argue that the electoral system underlying this institutional architecture does not allow the election of a part of the political representatives over the entire political territory via, in particular, a federal constituency. In fact, some political elites mobilize argumentative logics of identity but also of efficiency that underline a common historical and cultural identity which, due to the divided and complex institutional architecture, seems to be broken down. They also highlight the fact that within this federal system, there is a multiplication of levels of power that generates numerous costs and dysfunctions of governance while exacerbating a competitive federalism and a competition between levels of power. They therefore propose to resolve various dysfunctions through refederalization of competences by emphasizing democratic but also functional considerations of simplification and modernization. Moreover, this frame seems to be close with the frame 'lack of coherence'. However, they differ in the sense that the institutional architecture frame rather emphasizes the institutional processes and mechanisms while the lack of coherence frame points to fragmentation in the distribution of competences.

However, if we look at the other diagnostic frames that were used by the political elite, the frames used by the proponents of defederalization and the advocates of refederalization are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, the political elites who stress the lack of coordination emphasize the concern to obtain a uniform policy to the detriment, for example, of Belgium's representation on the international scene. On the other hand, this need for coordination is also stressed in relation to more cross-cutting issues which advocate a unity of command to manage and coordinate policies in these areas of competence. This diagnostic frame that highlights the lack of coordination in the management of common policies is particularly emphasized by the political elites who favor centripetal solutions. On the other hand, the political elites arguing for a defederalization of competences do not favor policy coordination but rather express a desire for greater autonomy in the representation of their interests at the level of international institutions and also in the management of more cross-cutting issues. These political elites advocating a centrifugal trajectory juggle with different argumentative logics by coupling and underlining their justifications with identity-based arguments that protect their own interests and

identity, but also with arguments of efficiency highlighting considerations of subsidiarity and coordination of their specific competences.

Furthermore, by considering these opposing diagnostic frames, political elites who seek a centrifugal or centripetal response construct and attribute the underlying difficulties to their justifications around frames that can be understood as frames of responsibility. That is between, on the one hand, the intrinsic differences in ideological, political or even cultural visions between the two communities and, on the other hand, the centrifugal pressures and demands fed by political elites with ever-increasing demands for the defederalization of competences. Indeed, the problems are sometimes construed around the idea that there are fundamental differences in points of view and visions between the two communities. According to the political elites who mobilize this frame, political, economic and cultural differences do not allow for effective cooperation and work on common policies. In contrast, the political elites supporting the refederalization attribute responsibility for competence management problems to the protagonists who have shaped federal dynamics and previous state reforms in a centrifugal movement of defederalization of responsibilities and competences. They propose the refederalization of competences by supporting, among other things, considerations of solidarity between different communities.

Finally, the last two frames underline the difficulties and problems concerning the management of particular competences and responsibilities at the level of power where they reside. On the one hand, supporters of defederalization argue that many competences and powers are still exercised by the federal authority and that, as a result, federalism is not yet fully achieved. This frame concerns the main diagnostic frame underlying the distribution of competences and powers mobilized by political elites in their media interventions to justify a defederalization of competences. These political elites mobilize argumentative logics of efficiency, emphasizing that the substate levels are more qualified in terms of expertise and transparency but are also closer to the citizens to manage the competences still devolved to the federal authority. On the other hand, supporters of refederalization point out that certain competences, responsibilities that were devolved during previous state reforms, do not function properly at the level of power where they are exercised and therefore justify a refederalization of these competences. Moreover, the political elites who point out these dysfunctions justify that a transfer of competences and responsibilities following a centripetal trajectory will allow for simplification but also for greater transparency and uniformity in the management of these institutions.

9.6 Conclusion

In recent years, the dynamics of Belgian federalism seem to have changed and highlight a reversal of the paradox of federalism. Through this chapter, the objective of this longitudinal analysis of the critical frame was to draw up and explore the positions and underlying argumentative logics mobilized by the political elites

to justify their centripetal or centrifugal positions regarding the distribution of powers and competences. The critical frame analysis has made it possible to highlight various similar but also divergent diagnostic frames mobilized by political elites to correct dysfunctions in the distribution of powers and responsibilities along diametrically opposed trajectories (de-/refederalization). The political elites particularly mobilize argumentative logics of efficiency to justify their positions.

Moreover, this research highlighted the fact that the Belgian federal dynamics are being transformed. Indeed, although all six institutional reforms have systematically been driven by a centrifugal dynamic, the demands for defederalization still seem to be important, particularly with regard to the Dutch-speaking political parties. However, since the last federal and regional elections in 2019, centripetal demands for refederalization of competences have become more prominent. These centripetal demands are particularly highlighted in the interventions in the written press of representatives of various political parties in the north of the country. However, the French-speaking parties have given greater support to these refederalization demands at least since the 2007 federal elections. In addition, during the 2019 election year, intermediate positions proposing a combination of the centrifugal and centripetal approaches appeared in the discourse of some political representatives from the north and south of the country. However, it is important to point out that these demands for refederalization or a hybrid trajectory are not shared by all political elites. However, the increasingly widespread demands by French- and Dutch-speaking political parties and elites for the refederalization of competences and the advent of this hybrid trajectory seem to indicate that a reversal of the paradox of federalism could prove probable and take shape in a possible future 7th reform of the state, the agreement sealing the current legislature of which seems to have laid the foundations for future discussions and talks.

Notes

1 The French Christian-democrats (cdH), the Dutch Christian-democrats (CD&V), the French ecologist party (ECOLO), the French regionalist party (FDF/Défi), the Dutch ecologist party (Groen), the Dutch radical right party (LDD), the French liberal party (MR), the Dutch nationalist party (N-VA), the Dutch liberal party (Open VLD), the French radical right party (PP), the French socialist party (PS), the single unitary and radical left party (PTB/PVDA), the Dutch socialist party (sp.a), and the Dutch radical right party (VB).
2 The main dailies selected for this research are for the Dutch-speaking press: *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *De Tijd*, *Het Gazet van Antewpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Het Laaste Nieuws*. For the French-speaking press: *L'Avenir*, *L'Echo*, *La Dernière Heure*, *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Soir*, *Sud presse*.

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10

VOTING FOR 'THE OTHER SIDE'? THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE BRUSSELS CAPITAL REGION

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10.1 Introduction

How should democracy be organized in countries that are deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic or religious lines? For decades, this question has sparked a fierce debate between two camps of constitutional engineers. Scholars following Lijphart's consociational model argue that deeply divided societies require a political system that institutionalizes conflict lines and turns ethnic, linguistic or religious identities into "constructive elements of a stable democracy" (Lijphart, 1977: 42). Consociational democrats therefore follow a logic of separation in which voters, as bearers of ascriptive (ethnic, religious, linguistic…) identities, are supposed to support a party of their own ethnic bloc (so-called *co*-ethnic voting) and political parties are expected to seek votes among co-ethnic voters ('co-ethnic vote-seeking'). The traditional examples are Northern Ireland, Burundi, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Belgium.

Centripetal democrats, in contrast, claim that divided societies are best served by electoral institutions that bring groups together and foster overarching identities (Horowitz, 1985, 1991; Reilly, 2001). They advocate institutions that encourage "inter-communal moderation by promoting multi-ethnic political parties, cross-cutting electoral incentives and intergroup accommodation" (Reilly, 2012: 260). Ethnic conflict management is thus achieved by building institutions that foster *cross*-ethnic voting and require political candidates to seek cross-community support, i.e. *cross*-ethnic vote-seeking (Horowitz, 1997; McCulloch, 2013). This model can be found amongst others in Fiji, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and South Tyrol.

In this enduring debate between consociational and centripetal democrats, the case of the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) in Belgium constitutes an interesting anomaly. After all, contrary to Flanders and Wallonia, it is possible in

the BCR to engage in cross-ethnic voting[1]. In the officially bilingual region of Brussels, both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties field candidates, and voters are able to cast votes for parties from the other ethnolinguistic group. Hence, the BCR constitutes an interesting case to explore cross-ethnic voting in "the most perfect example of a consociation" (Lijphart, 1981: 8).

However, despite the theoretical possibility of Brussels voters to engage in cross-ethnic voting, little is known empirically about whether they actually do so. Our central question is therefore to what extent voters in the BCR cast votes for parties of the other linguistic group. In this chapter, we show that a fair number of voters do vote for 'the other side'. More specifically, we find that French-speaking voters in Brussels find their way to right-wing conservative Flemish parties, and that this is due to the party offer within their linguistic group. Right-wing francophone voters, who arguably feel 'unserved' by the parties on their side of the linguistic divide, cross-linguistic boundaries to vote for Flemish right-wing parties.

In the remainder of this chapter, we first discuss the consociational nature of the Brussels political system. Then we focus on the previous literature on cross-ethnic voting, before outlining the methods and the results.

10.2 Consociationalism in the BCR: *Compromis à la belge*

In Belgium's consociational structure[2], the BCR—officially created in 1989—has always occupied a particular position and status. The Brussels political model is based on the pacification of conflicts between the Flemish and the French language community (Janssens, 2018b). Language is an ethnic marker but unlike the two other unilingual regions in Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), the Brussels region is officially bilingual (and, in reality, even multilingual). The French speakers currently constitute a majority (80–85%) in the Brussels region, but before its 'Frenchification', Brussels has always been a primarily Dutch-speaking region (Janssens, 2018a; Witte & Van Velthoven, 2010). In Brussels (and Belgium), the ethnolinguistic cleavage mainly dominated the political scene from the 1950s to the 1980s. Nevertheless, the Brussels consociational model has largely managed to capture and absorb the tensions between both language communities, and frictions did never really turn violent.[3]

The BCR should not only be understood as a constituent region but also as a microcosm of the federal consociational system (Cochrane et al., 2018: 53). Exemplary of consociational power-sharing in Belgium, the Brussels Parliament consists of two linguistic groups (Dutch/French) and reserves 17 out of its 89 seats for Dutch-speaking politicians. Moreover, the double majority rule and the 'alarm bell' procedure also protect the Dutch-speaking minority. At government level, the Dutch speakers are entitled to at least two ministerial positions and have *de facto* veto power (Coffé, 2006: 101). Central to its decision-making procedure are the principles of collegiality and consensus. All these mechanisms of minority protection, however, have substantially modified proportional representation

in the Brussels region (Bodson & Loizides, 2017). Hence, the Dutch-speaking minority in Brussels is overrepresented at parliamentary and governmental levels (so-called protective disproportional representation) (Bodson & Loizides, 2017: 87, Cochrane et al., 2018: 69).

This Dutch overrepresentation at the Brussels regional level, however, cannot be separated from the protective mechanisms granted to the French-speaking minority at the federal level. Furthermore, the Brussels' system combines a proportional list design with flexible lists, optional preferential voting and legally binding gender quotas. Voters can cast a vote for an entire party list or give one or more preferential votes to candidates on a list, but voting for (candidates on) different lists is not allowed.

Contrary to the two other regions in Belgium, both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parties can field candidates in Brussels.[4] This means that it is the only region in Belgium where cross-ethnic voting and vote-seeking are theoretically possible.[5] Dutch-speaking voters in Brussels can vote for French-speaking parties if they so desire, and vice versa. The language group to which voters belong is, moreover, not fixed. Since there is no sub-nationality or linguistic nationality, voters are free to choose their language group at each election (Deschouwer, 2012; Pilet, 2005). Voters first have to indicate whether they want to vote for a Flemish or francophone list and only thereafter can they cast their vote for a specific party (Janssens, 2018b).

For candidates on party lists, the language choice is more stringent: candidates have to register on a list for either the Dutch or the French language group. The language in which the elected candidate takes the oath defines his or her language group and this choice is irreversible (Deschouwer, 2012). However, the oath has been broken several times in the past (Witte & Van Velthoven, 2010). In 1971, for instance, Rassemblement Bruxellois placed candidates with a Dutch identity card that supported the FDF program on the Dutch-speaking list. These so-called faux Flamands or Flamands modérés were thus able to block the protection mechanisms for the Dutch-speaking minority.[6] Furthermore, newly formed political parties also need to register as belonging to either the Dutch-speaking or French-speaking language group. This means that, despite the bilingual nature of the region, 'bilingual parties' do not exist[7], but voting for a party of the other linguistic group is possible. Therefore, we will describe 'cross-ethnic voting' in greater detail in the next section.

10.3 Cross-ethnic voting

Cross-ethnic voting refers to the process whereby voters in deeply divided societies electorally support parties from other ethnic (or in Belgium: ethnolinguistic) groups (Reilly, 2020: 2–3). It is believed that such cross-ethnic voting would incentivize politicians to adopt moderate positions and policies and would as a result induce political stability. However, theory and empirical results on cross-ethnic voting are often contradictory. After all, the theoretical assumption

that parties in systems that allow for cross-ethnic voting and vote-seeking, will moderate their position to attract voters from the other ethnic groups (Horowitz, 1985, 1991; Reilly, 2001, 2020), is widely discussed. Hulsey (2010) and Touquet (2011), for instance, demonstrated that cross-ethnic appeals and moderation toward voters from the other ethnic group(s) can be costly strategies for political parties. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the majority of voters in deeply divided societies cast votes for co-ethnic, rather than cross-ethnic, parties and candidates (Chauchard, 2016; Coakley & Fraenkel, 2017; Horowitz, 2000, Lijphart, 2004; O'Leary, 2013).

Although some voters do support parties from other ethnic groups, this cross-ethnic voting most likely occurs in majoritarian elections where voters are left with fewer parties on each side of the ethnic divide, and where crossing the ethnic divide increases party offer and choice (Horowitz, 1991; Stojanović & Strijbis, 2019). Proportional elections, in contrast, favor co-ethnic voting because there is much party offer on voter's own side of the ethnic cleavage (Horowitz, 1991; Reilly, 2012). Moreover, voters who do cross the ethnic divide in the electoral arena are more likely to do so when parties have consistently held moderate positions (Garry, 2014). A party that previously presented itself as a defender of its ethnic group's interests but now moderates its position might win more votes within its own ethnic bloc (McGlinchey, 2019) but might be less credible as an ethnic catch-all party for the voters of the rival group (Garry, 2014). Garry (2014) further argues that voters' tendency to support parties from 'the other side' is based on the perceived ability to perform well in terms of representing all groups in society. In that sense, ethnic catch-all parties, i.e. parties that explicitly adopt moderate positions on ethnic issues, would benefit more from cross-ethnic voting than their radical counterparts. Whereas the former moderate their policies (and avoid extreme positions) to appeal to a broad array of interests, the latter appeal to voters on the basis of their ethnic identification and maximize votes by adopting more extreme positions than their co-ethnic competitors (Horowitz, 1985).

10.4 The 2019 elections in Brussels

In this chapter, we study patterns of cross-ethnic voting in the regional elections of May 26, 2019 in Brussels. Regional elections are held every five years in Belgium, and since 2014, they have been concurrently organized with federal and European elections.

One of the main characteristics of the party system in Brussels is that it is highly fragmented. In the parliament of the BCR, 14 parties are represented. They belong to several party families, including the radical left (PTB, PVDA), greens (Ecolo, Groen), social democrats (PS, one.brussels-sp.a), Christian democrats (cdH, CD&V), liberals (MR, Open VLD), regionalists (DéFI, N-VA) and the radical right (Vlaams Belang). In addition, two single-issue parties, DierAnimal and Agora, also each won one seat in 2019. The strength of the different parties varies, as shown in Table 10.1. Socialist and liberal parties in

both language groups and the regionalist party FDF in the French-speaking group, have been traditionally strong in the Brussels region, and continue to be. However, the 'clear winners' in the Brussels elections of 2019 were the green parties (especially Ecolo which obtained 15 seats in 2019 compared to 8 seats in 2014, but also Groen) and the radical left party PTB in the French-speaking group (Reuchamps et al., 2020: 346). The major losses were shared by the traditional parties on both sides of the left–right spectrum, including the socialist, liberal and Christian democratic parties. These results mirror trends found at the federal level in Belgium and in other regions as well (Pilet, 2021; van Erkel et al., 2020). After the election, a center-left coalition government was formed in Brussels, consisting of PS, Ecolo, DéFI, Groen, Open VLD and one.brussels-sp.a.

Of the 14 parties that are represented in the Brussels parliament, 3 most clearly articulate the interests of their own ethnolinguistic bloc: DéFI, N-VA and Vlaams Belang. DéFI and N-VA are 'regionalist' parties in the sense that they originated on the center-periphery and organize to represent "geographically concentrated peripheral minorities (…) by demanding recognition of their cultural identity" (Türsan, 1998: 19). DéFI (before: FDF) grew out of the movement of francophones in Brussels, which defended the French language and the rights of French speakers in Brussels (van Haute & Pilet, 2006). The party competed for the first time in the 1965 general elections and quickly became, and remained, an important electoral player in Brussels. The party does not argue in favor of secession but supports a federal structure with a strong status for Brussels (van Haute & Pilet, 2006). Ideologically speaking, it is considered to be center-right on socioeconomic issues, but center-left on cultural 'new politics' issues such as lifestyle politics, identity and migration (Pilet, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2020b).

TABLE 10.1 Percentage of seats in the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, by party

Language group	Party	Number of seats	Percentage of seats
French-speaking	PS	17	19.1
	Ecolo	15	16.9
	MR	13	14.6
	PTB	10	11.2
	DéFI	10	11.2
	cdH	6	6.7
Dutch-speaking	Groen	4	4.5
	Open VLD	3	3.4
	One.brussels-sp.a	3	3.4
	N-VA	3	3.4
	CD&V	1	1.1
	Vlaams Belang	1	1.1
	Agora	1	1.1
	PVDA	1	1.1
	DierAnimal	1	1.1
Total		89	100

Note: Percentages reflect the distribution at the start of the legislative term in 2019.

The Dutch-speaking N-VA was created in 2001. It is linked with the Flemish movement and articulates the political interests of Flanders and the Flemish language. N-VA initially struggled to meet the 5% electoral threshold in Belgium but recovered and became one of the major parties in Flanders, although its success in Brussels remains somewhat more limited (van Haute & Pilet, 2006; van Haute et al., 2018). The party aims to establish an "independent republic of Flanders", which should develop as a result of "a gradual process of disappearance of the Belgian state" (van Haute et al., 2018: 959). N-VA is furthermore a right-wing conservative party on both the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions (Pilet, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2020b).

Vlaams Belang, finally, is a populist radical right party that combines elements of nativism, authoritarianism and populism in its ideological program (Mudde, 2007). The party promotes Flemish secession and the immediate creation of an independent Flemish state (van Haute et al., 2018). Despite its electoral successes in Flanders, the party is weaker in Brussels. As a result of the *cordon sanitaire* (see Chapter 5 in this volume), the party is never invited to become part of a coalition government.

10.5 Data and methods

For our exploration of cross-ethnic voting in the BCR, we rely on the EOS RepResent voter survey organized in Brussels at the occasion of the 2019 regional elections (Walgrave et al., 2020a). The EOS RepResent survey is a panel survey that was conducted among a representative sample of citizens in the Brussels, Flemish and Walloon regions at the occasion of the 2019 regional, federal and European elections. The organizing body of the survey was EOS RepResent, a research consortium funded by the FWO/FNRS Excellence of Science program, involving the Universiteit Antwerpen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Université libre de Bruxelles, KULeuven and Université catholique de Louvain. The EOS RepResent interuniversity team was responsible for the development, organization, and supervision of the survey.

The survey consisted of one pre-electoral and one post-electoral wave organized around the elections of May 26, 2019. The first wave involved 7,351 online interviews with eligible voters, of which 1,028 were in Brussels. The sample was intended to be representative of the voting-age population in terms of gender, education, age and party choice. In the final sample, higher educated voters, and age-groups between 45 and 65, were slightly overrepresented (van Erkel et al., 2020), and as is often the case in Brussels surveys, Dutch speakers were underrepresented due to difficult sampling conditions. Respondents who were successfully contacted in the first wave were asked to participate in the follow-up online survey conducted immediately after the elections. The second wave included a sample of 3,971 respondents, of which 510 in Brussels. The response rate for this second wave was 53.3% in total and 49.6% in the Brussels region specifically. The two consecutive waves ran from April 5, 2019 until June 18, 2019. The pre-electoral waves

gathered information on voters' sociodemographic background, their political resources, political engagement, ideological viewpoints, attitudes toward representation and democratic resentment, voting intentions etc. The data gathered in the weeks following the election focused on respondents' actual voting behavior (Walgrave et al., 2020a).

Our main interest in this chapter is voters' support for parties on the other side of the ethnolinguistic divide; hence, French-speaking voters' support for Flemish parties and Dutch-speaking voters' support for francophone parties in Brussels. In order to measure party support, we rely on two survey questions. The first question asked voters to indicate their vote intentions in the pre-electoral wave: "If there were elections for the Parliament of Brussels today, for which party would you vote?". The second question asked voters to indicate their actual vote choice in the post-electoral wave: "For which party did you vote for the Parliament of Brussels during the regional elections of 26th May 2019?". The answer categories were the same for both questions. Respondents could indicate their preferred party from a list of 14 parties and a general category of 'other parties', or they could indicate that they voted 'blank or invalid', 'did not vote', 'cannot vote' or 'do not remember'. The Flemish parties included CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Open VLD, PVDA, one.brussels-sp.a and Vlaams Belang. The francophone parties included cdH, DéFI, Ecolo, MR, Parti Populaire, PS and PTB. Although both survey questions are widely used in voter survey research, each question also comes with some limitations. Voting intentions do not measure actual voting behavior, whereas questions on vote choice suffer from recall problems (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017). By considering the answers of voters on both survey questions, we conduct a mutual robustness check.

In our measurement of cross-ethnic voting, respondents' voting intentions and vote choice are linked to their own language. The latter is measured by looking at the language respondents used to complete the survey. At the start of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their preferred language (either Dutch or French). We consider this survey question to be a proxy for the language voters are most fluent in. Ideally, we would have used a more informative question with a more direct measurement of the language(s) voters speak on a regular basis and/or their linguistic identities, but unfortunately, such a question was not available in the survey. We also cannot rely on official language registration data because voters do not have to register in advance, and they can change language groups at each election.

Later in the chapter, we will also run multivariate analyses to explain cross-ethnic voting patterns in Brussels. For these analyses, we included two explanatory variables, out-group attitudes and left–right self-placement. Voters' out-group feelings are measured on a 0–100 scale using the following survey question: "Could you use the scale below to indicate how you feel about the [*other ethnolinguistic group*]? (0–50 = not very favorable, 50 = neutral, 50–100 = very favorable)". Left–right placement is measured on a continuous 0–10 scale by considering respondents' answers to the following question: "In politics, people

often talk of 'left' or 'right'. Can you place your own convictions on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning 'left', 5 'in the centre' and 10 'right'?".

Finally, the multivariate models include control variables. Age is measured as a continuous variable. Respondents' sex (female = 1) and educational attainment (recoded to three categories: 'no or lower education', 'secondary education/high school' and 'higher education') control for sociological vote determinants. Three scale variables (political interest, political trust and satisfaction with policy) control for differences in political attitudes and opinions. Political interest is measured by asking respondents how interested they are in politics in general with a scale ranging from 0 ('not interested at all') to 10 ('extremely interested'). Political trust was measured by asking respondents to indicate on a scale ranging from 0 ('absolutely no confidence') to 10 ('complete confidence') how much trust they had in four institutions: political parties, the federal parliament, politicians and the European Union (sum scale with Cronbach's alpha = .927). Finally, political satisfaction is measured by considering to what extent they are satisfied with the policies implemented by the government of Brussels on a scale ranging from 0 ('very unsatisfied') to 10 ('very satisfied').

10.6 Cross-ethnic voting in Brussels

Even though Brussels voters have the opportunity to cast a vote for a party from the other ethnolinguistic group, the BCR's proportional representation (PR list) electoral system does not give them a lot of institutional incentives to do so. After all, its system is predominantly based on an electoral logic of separation, whereby Brussels voters are supposed to vote for a party of their own ethnolinguistic bloc.[8]

Despite the lack of institutional incentives, and despite the consociational nature of Brussels electoral institutions, we see that a fair number of voters do indeed cross the linguistic divide. Table 10.2 shows that about 11.6% of all French-speaking respondents intended to vote for a Dutch-speaking party (wave 1 of the EOS survey), and that about 10.4% actually did so in the voting booth (wave 2). Moreover, and even though we should be careful drawing conclusions on the Dutch-speaking side due to the low N, we find that 28% of the Dutch speakers had a pre-electoral intention to vote for French-speaking parties, and in the end, about 15.8% actually did cast a cross-ethnic vote. Even though Table 10.2 supports previous studies' findings that cross-ethnic voting is rare compared to co-ethnic voting, the result that cross-ethnic voting does take place is strong and statistically significant. The conclusion is therefore that cross-ethnic voting not only theoretically *can* but also empirically *does* take place in the BCR, even if the political infrastructure is conducive to institutionalizing ethnolinguistic differences, rather than mitigating them.

The willingness to engage in cross-ethnic voting might be surprising, but we should bear in mind that voting across linguistic lines has been made 'costless' in Brussels. Due to the system of fixed allocation of seats between both language groups (17 seats are reserved for Dutch speakers, 72 for French speakers),

TABLE 10.2 Number and percentage of Brussels voters engaging in cross–ethnic compared to co–ethnic voting

	Wave 1 (pre-electoral intention to vote)		Wave 2 (post-electoral actual vote)	
	Dutch-speaking voter	French-speaking voter	Dutch-speaking voter	French-speaking voter
Dutch-speaking party	36 (72.0%)	89 (11.6%)	16 (84.2%)	41 (10.4%)
French-speaking party	14 (28.0%)	679 (88.4%)	3 (15.8%)	352 (89.6%)
Total	50 (100%)	768 (100%)	19 (100%)	393 (100%)
	$N = 818$; $Chi^2 = 132.337$; $DF = 1$; Cramer's $V = .402$; $p > .001$		$N = 412$; $Chi^2 = 82.755$; $DF = 1$; Cramer's $V = .448$; $p > .001$	

Note: Gray shades indicate cross-ethnic voting.

voting for a party of the other group does not come at an electoral cost for one's own group. This might explain why some—often highly educated—voters have voted for the other linguistic group, especially when there was a fear that radical parties could block the institutions.

Table 10.2 only gives us an indication of whether cross–ethnic voting takes place, but it does not give us a conclusive answer to the question of which parties benefit most from it. Previous literature would have us expect that ethnically (or ethnolinguistically) moderate parties would benefit most from cross–ethnic votes, whereas parties that explicitly claim to represent their linguistic group's interest will be less successful in attracting votes from the other side. We therefore also disaggregated the results by parties (Table 10.3).

Because of the low number of respondents, the results for Dutch-speaking voters are not conclusive. The results on the francophone side, however, are much more interesting. Table 10.3 shows that few voters (intend to) cast a vote for ethnic catch–all parties, such as the socialist party one.brussels-sp.a, the liberal party Open VLD or the Christian democratic party CD&V. However, and most interestingly, the table also reports that 6.4% ($n = 49$) of the French-speaking respondents intended to vote for the Flemish N-VA and Vlaams Belang in the months before the election, and that 6.9% actually did so in the voting booth. Most French speakers who engage in cross–ethnic voting thus vote for right-wing Flemish nationalist parties. This disconfirms previous findings (Chauchard 2016; Horowitz, 2000) that voters who engage in cross–ethnic voting will support parties that explicitly position themselves as ethnic catch–all parties, or in the absence thereof, will support parties that do not explicitly present themselves as ethnic outbidders. We rather find that they vote for parties that position themselves as defenders of the other linguistic group's interests.

The paradoxical finding that a significant number of French-speaking voters support parties that explicitly aim to undermine francophone interests begs the question of *why* French-speaking voters in Brussels decide to vote for these parties.

TABLE 10.3 Number and percentage of Brussels voters engaging in cross–ethnic voting by party

		Wave 1 (pre-electoral intention to vote)		Wave 2 (post-electoral actual vote)	
		Dutch-speaking voter	French-speaking voter	Dutch-speaking voter	French-speaking voter
French–speaking parties	cdH	3 (6.0%)	29 (3.8%)	1 (5.3%)	21 (5.3%)
	DeFI	2 (4.0%)	133 (17.3%)	1 (5.3%)	79 (20.1%)
	Ecolo	5 (10.0%)	189 (24.6%)	0 (0%)	74 (18.8%)
	MR	2 (4.0%)	149 (19.4%)	0 (0%)	71 (18.1%)
	PP	1 (2.0%)	25 (3.3%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.5%)
	PS	1 (2.0%)	90 (11.7%)	1 (5.3%)	57 (14.5%)
	PTB	0 (0%)	64 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	44 (11.2%)
Dutch–speaking parties	CD&V	9 (18.0%)	9 (1.2%)	4 (21.1%)	3 (.8%)
	Groen	6 (12.0%)	14 (1.8%)	2 (10.5%)	3 (.8%)
	N-VA	10 (20.0%)	37 (4.8%)	4 (21.1%)	18 (4.6%)
	Open VLD	2 (4.0%)	9 (1.2%)	1 (5.3%)	4 (1.0%)
	PVDA	0 (0%)	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	one. brussels–sp.a	7 (14.0%)	7 (.9%)	4 (21.1%)	4 (1.0%)
	Vlaams Belang	2 (4.0%)	12 (1.6%)	1 (5.3%)	9 (2.3%)
Total		50 (100%)	768 (100%)	19 (100%)	393 (100%)
		N = 818; Chi² = 174.886; df = 13; Cramer's V = .462; p = .000		N = 412; Chi² = 120.760; df = 12; Cramer's V = .541; p = .000	

Note: Gray shades indicate cross-ethnic voting.

One potential explanation is out-group attitudes. We can expect evaluations of the other linguistic group (and their leaders) to shape voters' choices in the polling booth (McNicholl, 2018). The more voters trust 'the other side' and their representatives, the less hesitation they will demonstrate to support cross-ethnic parties and candidates. As such, more *positive out-group evaluations* can be expected to increase the propensity to engage in cross-ethnic voting.

The second potential explanation is party offer. In a context of partisan dealignment (Dalton, 2019), it is likely that some French-speaking voters are unsatisfied with the party offer within their own ethnic bloc and that such 'unserved' voters consider voting for a party from the other group. For instance, a francophone right-wing voter in Brussels might consider voting for a Flemish right-wing party because there simply is no right-wing party at offer within the French-speaking group. Even though no less than seven French-speaking parties compete for the support of the voter, the ideological variation on the right side of the political spectrum is relatively limited. The only party that explicitly positions itself on the right side of the center is MR, but this party is only right-wing on economic issues, and much less on cultural, 'new politics' issues such as lifestyle politics, identity and migration. Since there is no real culturally right-wing party on offer on the French-speaking list,

right-wing Flemish N-VA and Vlaams Belang, despite their anti-francophone and secessionist stance, seem to benefit the most from campaigning in both languages in Brussels.

Both expectations are confirmed by Table 10.4. The table analyses the determinants for a cross-ethnic vote among French-speaking voters in Brussels. The results confirm that cross-ethnic voting among French-speaking voters is inspired by ethnolinguistic considerations, but only to a limited extent. French-speaking voters with positive attitudes about Dutch speakers tend to vote significantly more often for Flemish nationalist parties. However, the table also shows that ideological concerns (in particular left–right self-placement) are much more strongly related to a vote for Flemish nationalist parties. Voters' choice is rather inspired by the ideological fault line, as is clear from the fact that left–right self-placement is the determining factor of a vote for N-VA or Vlaams Belang. These results suggest that right-wing francophone voters find their way to right-wing Flemish parties because of their ideological stance.

A final explanation, which the data do not allow us to test empirically, could also be that Brussels voters can also cast a cross-ethnic vote for strategic reasons, for instance, to keep a party from the other bloc out of power (Verthé et al., 2017). The Brussels coalition is often a coalition of moderates. It can be expected that other Flemish parties will seek cross-ethnic votes to stop right-wing Flemish parties from becoming all too powerful in the small Dutch-speaking group. They can do so by convincing francophone voters of their own program or conducting a campaign *against* the right-wing Flemish parties by trying to get votes from francophone voters who *fear* the electoral success of such parties within the Flemish college (Pilet, 2005). In that sense, they would encourage strategic voting on behalf of the

TABLE 10.4 Binomial logistic regression model predicting a francophone cross-ethnic vote for Flemish nationalist parties (N-VA and Vlaams Belang)

		B(SE)	*Sign.*
Constant		−6.236 (1.555)	.000
Sex	Male	REF	
	Female	−.715 (.612)	.243
Education	None or lower education	REF	
	Secondary education	−1.361 (.911)	.135
	Higher education	−.311 (.729)	.669
Age		−.014 (.016)	.392
Political interest		.110 (.114)	.334
Political trust		.069 (.133)	.605
Satisfaction with Brussels government policies		−.122 (.118)	.304
Attitude toward other linguistic group		.021 (.011)	.046
Left–right self-placement		.452 (.131)	.001
Nagelkerke R2		25.7%	
		N = 768	

francophone voters to diminish the risk of an electoral victory for right-wing par-
ties within the small Flemish college. Furthermore, voters should be more willing
to express support for a non–co-ethnic candidate who is endorsed by one of their
own co-ethnic politicians (Arriola et al., 2017).

10.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we focused on voting patterns in the BCR, an institutional anom-
aly in the Belgian political structure. Politics in Brussels is organized around the
recognition of two linguistic groups, even though both voters and politicians
are given the opportunity to engage in cross-ethnic voting and vote-seeking.
Our results show that voters do indeed use this opportunity: about 10–11% of all
voters do cast a vote for a candidate of the other linguistic group, and the parties
most benefiting from cross-ethnic votes are Flemish right-wing conservative
parties. Moreover, our data find that a francophone vote for a Flemish nationalist
party is primarily driven by out-group attitudes and ideological self-placement.
French speakers voting for the other side are generally more positive about the
out-group and are generally more right-wing. The latter finding suggests that
at least part of the francophone electorate feels 'unserved' by the francophone
parties in Brussels. Even though this finding is interesting, qualitative follow-up
research should reveal why French-speaking voters feel attracted to parties that
explicitly defend the Dutch speakers' interests.

Even though the motivations of voters are still unclear, what our results do
show, however, is that a logic of separation (members from one segment must
be represented by MPs belonging to the same segment) is not a *conditio sine qua
non* to turn a divided society into a stable democracy. Even though cross-ethnic
voting does take place, the BCR is quite stable. After all, it has a balanced gov-
ernment, the coalition is rather stable and there are relatively few protests against
the Brussels government. Despite its complex institutional setup, the Brussels
system is sustainable and well functioning.

Notes

1 Throughout the chapter, we systematically use the term 'cross-ethnic voting' since it is a
reference concept in the international literature on ethnic conflict management. How-
ever, in the context of Brussels, it is important to point out that cross-ethnic voting refers
to the process whereby voters electorally support parties from other *ethnolinguistic* groups.
2 For a more in-depth review of Belgium as a consociational democracy, see Chapter 9.
3 Except maybe for the grim atmosphere during the Marsen op Brussel in 1961 and 1962,
and the Louvain crisis in May 1968.
4 That is why in Brussels, most candidates campaign and publish manifestos in both official
(and sometimes even other) languages (Jarrett, 2016; Pilet, 2005). Given that roughly 80%
of voters in Brussels are francophone, cross-ethnic campaign strategies are particularly
interesting for Flemish parties. Even a small share of cross-ethnic votes can thus hugely
impact the electoral results within the Dutch-speaking college. Flemish parties therefore
make specific appeals to the francophone and other (non-Belgian) communities (Jarrett,
2016).

5 In the past, cross-ethnic vote-pooling has sometimes been seen as controversial. Before 2011, the Brussels Capital Region did not constitute a separate electoral district but formed the central electoral district of 'Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde' (BHV) that was composed of 19 communes of the bilingual Brussels region and 35 communes of the province of Flemish Brabant in the unilingual Flemish region. This district crossed the language border and led to recurring conflicts between both language groups (Deschouwer, 2012; Sinardet, 2010), putting pressure on the country's stability. An agreement was only found in 2011. The agreement included the splitting of the BHV district into a unilingual Dutch-speaking district of Flemish Brabant and a bilingual Brussels Capital district, as well as 'special modalities' for the French-speaking citizens in the six municipalities with language facilities surrounding Brussels (Goossens, 2017). Hence, since 2011, the possibility for cross-ethnic vote-pooling remains only possible in the Brussels region.

6 Eleven of them got elected in the 'Agglomeratieraad' in 1971.

7 However, the party Pro Bruxsel, founded in 2008, claims to be Belgium's first translinguistic party (Euractiv, 2009; Jarrett, 2016). During the 2009 and 2014 regional elections in Brussels, the party submitted both French and Dutch language group lists, but no one was ever elected at the regional level. A list needs to gather at least 5% of the votes within its language group (Cochrane et al., 2018: 78).

8 Other institutions, such as Alternative Vote and Single Transferable Vote, are generally believed to foster more cross-ethnic voting.

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PART 3

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11

FEDERALIZATION OF THE BELGIAN NATIONAL PAST

Do collaboration and colonization still matter?

Valérie Rosoux

11.1 Introduction

Is Belgium exceptional in terms of memory issues? To address this question, this chapter focuses on Belgian authorities' attitudes (whether at the federal or regional level) toward two controversial episodes in the national past, the collaboration with Germany during WWII and the colonization of Congo. Both episodes are comparable in terms of their demographic importance, as they had an undeniable impact on society while only concerning a tiny portion of the citizens.[1] Moreover, these two events are particularly salient with regard to the crucial question of how groups with diverging memories coexist.

The current situation in Belgium reflects one of the critical questions that arise at a national level in numerous countries: how can communities digest "a past that is hard to swallow" (Conan & Rousso, 1994)? No Western state has been spared controversies relating to WWII (Mink & Neumayer, 2007). As for the colonial past, no country has found it easy to take on board a part of history that many people, especially young people, see as a mistake or failure (Spencer & Valassopoulos, 2021). However, there is one factor specific to Belgium: the language tensions gradually tearing apart the nation's fabric. As this chapter suggests, the increasingly frequent doubts voiced as to how long the country will survive have influenced representations of Belgium's history. After observing the 'federalization' of memories of WWII (Labio, 2002), can we detect the same process regarding memories of the country's colonial legacy?

The aim of the chapter is not to present a thorough historiographical study of these two periods. Instead, it focuses on the ways in which they have been represented, and how these portrayals have evolved over time. To detect potential Belgian specificities, it is worth exploring the attitudes of other European

authorities toward collaboration and colonization.[2] The limited scope of this chapter does not allow for a systematic comparative analysis. Nonetheless, it underlines some major similarities and contrasts with two neighboring countries, France and the Netherlands. France is one of the most emblematic cases in memory politics, as the evolution of the official representations of the Vichy regime and the colonization of Algeria demonstrates.[3] The added value of the Dutch case results from a common feature with Belgium: the existence of a monarchy. In the three cases (Belgium, France, and the Netherlands), the same fundamental trend can be observed: the gradual fragmentation of a supposedly smooth and reliable national version of history. However, beyond this common trend, the shift in the two narrative templates indicates the existence of some Belgian specificities. The guiding question throughout the analysis concerns the origins of these specificities: are they all related to the fact that Belgium is a "deeply divided society" (Guelke, 2012)? If so, does this characteristic impact the official representation of collaborationism and colonialism in the same way?

The analysis is divided into three parts. The first underlines the research posture adopted in the study. The second looks at the gradual polarization of the representations of collaboration during WWII. The third stresses the references – or the lack thereof – made to the colonization of the Congo. From a methodological perspective, the chapter combines two main approaches. The first is based on a corpus of official speeches, parliamentary documents, news articles, and commemorative monuments. The second results from interviews with families affected by the repression of collaborators during WWII or the return of colonists in 1960.[4] These interviews were conducted three generations from both sides of the linguistic border. Research on the intergenerational transmission of narratives and emotions reminds us that drawing a line between the past and the present is a far more complex process than it appears at first glance. The Belgian case indicates that this complexity is further increased in a context characterized by three main features: an ongoing federalization process, nationalist tendencies that emphasize particular narratives of the past to justify the need for independence, and relative indifference of the federal State, which does not provide a strong national counter-narrative (Hirst & Fineberg, 2012).

11.2 Research posture: broadening the approach

Human memory makes it possible to encode, preserve, transform, and restore lived and transmitted experiences. It refers to a set of psychological functions by which humans can update past impressions or information. In this regard, memory cannot be an exact and perfect reflection of the past: it is only its evocation or trace (Kensinger, 2009; Lavabre, 1994). Memories are not literally preserved but are reconstructed according to the present context. It is from this perspective that Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory during the interwar years. Contesting the notion of isolated individual memory,

the French sociologist emphasized the influence of the social on the content of individual memories (1997: 52). In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, he demonstrated that, over the course of an era, it is a group's shared beliefs and its collective experiences that shape the meaning of individual memories, and not the other way around (1994). When the notion of collective memory resurfaced at the end of the 1970s, it was in the realm of history, not sociology. As Nora argued, collective memory is "what remains of the past in the groups' experiences, or rather what these groups do with the past" (1978: 401). Since then, this notion has gradually spread throughout the humanities and social sciences (Kurze & Lamont, 2019; Olick, 2007; Olick *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the wealth of existing literature, there remain two major limitations to collective memory studies. The first concerns the relatively partial nature of studies devoted to the management of conflicting memories. These generally focus on only one of the two dimensions that constitute the subject under examination. The first of these is the choice of the past, referring to how memory agents strategically mobilize the past (Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Langenbacher & Shain, 2010; Ricoeur, 2000). The second is the weight of the past: this aspect is more concerned with the traces or imprints left by the past on individuals and groups (Bell, 2010; Davoine & Gaudillière, 2006; Rosenblum, 2009). The aim of this chapter is to better understand the articulation between the macro level, most often reduced to the strategic dimension, and the micro level, which has been almost exclusively analyzed through the prism of 'trauma' (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011). It is thus critical to examine the intertwining mechanisms operating at the official and individual levels. In this regard, the Belgian case study is exemplary because political adversaries continually activate both dimensions (choice/weight of the past).

The second limitation of collective memory studies relates to the temporal dimension of the research conducted to date. Understanding the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission necessarily implies a broadening of the timescale. Rather than limiting itself to studying one generation of actors, this chapter is based on research projects that consider three generations within each family studied. This ambition is demanding, but it is a *sine qua non* condition for identifying tensions, gaps, and even contradictions between one linguistic community and another and from one generation to the next.

One of the main questions that arise throughout the study concerns the degree of compatibility of the observed representations of the past. Do the various accounts of collaborationism and colonialism result from a series of different viewpoints or do they reveal fundamental contradictions, whereby one version of events is systematically denied by another? Addressing this question in the Belgian case is particularly stimulating since it allows us to combine two main variables: the linguistic community (French-speakers versus Dutch-speakers) and the generational dimension (G1: one of the children of the collaborator/colonist, G2: one of their grandchildren, G3: one of their great-grandchildren). Potential overlaps between G3 narratives on both sides

of the linguistic border would indicate the significance of a generational effect beyond the stories emphasized by each community's representatives. Conversely, repetition of the same diverging narratives across generations on each side would indicate the depth of the divide between communities, independently of the generational effect. Accordingly, Belgian exceptionalism allows us to analyze closely the articulation between variables relevant in several countries in Europe.

11.3 Collaboration: long-lasting divisive memories

11.3.1 Historical context

During WWI, three categories of Belgians were classified as traitors: Flemish and Walloon activists, those who had made their fortune from the war, and spies paid by the occupying authorities. Reprisals against these traitors lasted a relatively short time. Between 1919 and 1922, 3900 cases were brought to court; a few dozen death sentences were pronounced, and none of them were ever carried out. The nationalist wing of the Flemish Movement would, however, during the interwar period and even beyond, preserve the memory of Flemish activists and portray these events as an injustice committed by the Belgian State against the Flemish cause. In January 1921, two Flemish Socialists put a question to the Belgian government concerning the severity of the judicial measures taken against certain activists who 'committed a political error in good faith', and asked whether it might not be appropriate to extend clemency to them. The French–speaking press in Flanders reacted violently and equated the whole Flemish Movement with the shameful memory of a few activists. The stereotypical portrayal of a pro-German Flanders spread rapidly throughout the Francophone press and continued to grow stronger throughout the interwar period. Over a period of approximately 10 years, Belgian memories of the WWI became fragmented: Flemish and French–speaking historical versions began to diverge (Beyen, 2002; Rosoux and van Ypersele, 2012; Warland, 2019).

This fragmented memory of WWI had an undeniable impact on how people acted in the WWII (Kesteloot, 2013). Thus, the VNV (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond, a Flemish nationalist party, 15% in the 1939 elections) collaborated with the German occupiers with a view to obtaining independence. This hope explains why collaboration was less contested in Flanders than in Wallonia, where there were also collaboration movements. One of the most famous examples is the extensive collaboration of the far-right party 'Rex', led by the French speaker Léon Degrelle.[5]

By 1945, some voices in Flanders demanded the consideration of mitigating circumstances for Flemish collaborators (again, citing the traitors' idealism to mask their antidemocratic tendencies). On the Francophone side, there was a unanimous demand to strike uncompromisingly against traitors. This attitude explains why any proposed amnesty was systematically rejected. In short,

repression crystallized new memory conflicts: the French intransigence once more gave the impression that the Belgian State was unduly harsh vis-à-vis the Flemings. However, this time, this impression was not only experienced in nationalist circles but also reached a large segment of Flemish public opinion (De Guissmé *et al.*, 2017).

Today, in a context where the memory of the Holocaust has acquired a central place, Flemish historiography has stopped idealizing Flemish collaboration with the Nazi regime. Yet, current memories of the collaboration remain highly divergent (De Guissmé *et al.*, 2017). A survey conducted in 2018 confirms that, overall, Dutch speakers perceive collaboration as more morally acceptable, and more of them support an amnesty for former collaborators, than their Francophone counterparts (Bouchat *et al.*, 2020). These findings indicate that, 75 years after its end, the issue of collaboration during WWII still divides Belgian society.

11.3.2 Belgian specificities: the absence of amnesty and the royal question

Beyond this divide, we can observe the same trend in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands: a shift from denial of the collaboration with Nazi Germans (thanks to a strong emphasis on resistance against them – see Lagrou, 2007) to acknowledgment (the collaboration was more than a simple blip). In 2007, the report *Docile Belgium*, commissioned by the Belgian Parliament, presented Belgium's collaboration with the Nazis in detail (explaining its 'economic, ideological and legal-administrative' dimensions). In France, the 1995 speech by then-President Jacques Chirac acknowledging French responsibility for a major roundup of Jews in 1942, the 'Vel d'Hiv' roundup can be considered a turning point in terms of strategic narratives. Since then, except for some negationists, no one can decently deny the repressive, anti-Semitic, and pro-German collaboration that was official policy under Vichy. The deconstruction of the resistantialist myth started later in the Netherlands, where for a long time the official narrative focused on the collective opposition of Dutch society to German occupying forces. It was only in January 2020 that Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte apologized for the first time on behalf of the government for the wartime persecution of Jews, saying that too many Dutch civil servants "carried out the orders of the occupiers".

Another common feature between the three countries is that the passage of time has not fully exorcised the ghosts of the past. To the Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse, the swift and severe purge option chosen after the war in the three countries[6] resulted in a problematic relationship with the past: "In the Netherlands, the emotion reappears like malaria: years of silence alternate with periods of high tension. Belgium is a case of chronic fever. Discussions on what happened during and shortly after the war are never far away. In France, this element of the past is […] the source of an almost incurable neurosis" (Huyse, 1995: 77).

In the three countries, memories of humiliation, scorn, and unfair treatment have been transmitted down through the generations. The fact that collaborators were amnestied in France and the Netherlands, and not in Belgium, did not alleviate the memories related to the clampdown on collaborators. However, the absence of amnesty in Belgium explains to some extent the ongoing dimension of the debate between the two sides of the linguistic borders. All demands to rehabilitate collaborators or compensate "victims of postwar repression or their descendants" (to take the words used in a motion supported by Flemish-speaking far-right parties in 2011) have been systematically rejected by the Walloon Socialist Party (PS).[7]

Besides the issue of amnesty, one key aspect of Belgian exceptionalism is a result of one of the most serious crises faced by the monarchy: the Royal Question. From 1945 to 1951, there was significant tension between the Belgian government and King Leopold III about his role during the war. While the government went into exile in France, Leopold III remained in Belgium and was taken into captivity in 1944. After his liberation by the Allies in May 1945, the government suspected him of authoritarian sympathies and refused to allow the King to return to his functions. The popular consultation organized in 1950 deeply divided the country. The narrow majority (57%) who called for the King's return were mainly Flemish citizens, whereas citizens from Brussels and Wallonia generally opposed it. The King's return to Belgium led to widespread demonstrations in Wallonia and a general strike. The deterioration of the situation led to Leopold III's abdication in favor of his son Baudouin in July 1951. The Royal Question – for which there is no equivalent event in French or Dutch history – crystallized the linguistic question.

Since then, Belgian politicians from both communities have regularly exploited the issues of collaboration and amnesty for political purposes. In October 2014, for instance, criticism of the coalition between Liberals and Flemish nationalists of the N-VA party provoked a heated debate in the Belgian Parliament. Evoking the 'noise of the boots' that resonated within the Belgian government, one of the leading socialist MPs emphasized the links between some N-VA members and former WWII collaborators. Five years later, the same comment was made in the aftermath of the federal elections. In January 2021, to give a final example, the inclusion of two Nazi collaborators in a profile of historical figures who were significant in the founding of Flanders as a legislative region immediately led to national and even international controversy.[8]

All these elements show that political exploitation of the legacy of WWII has increasingly fueled tensions between the two linguistic communities and contributed to their disunity. This fragmentation is also noticeable if we consider the way in which families affected by reprisals against collaborators refer – or choose not to refer – to this traumatic event. Admittedly, we can hardly categorize all Belgian citizens based only on their linguistic community. The case of bilingual families or German speakers, for instance, not to mention the case of refugees who recently migrated to Belgium, rapidly shows the limits of the exercise.

Nonetheless, it is striking that most Dutch-speaking families actively discuss collaboration, while French-speaking families still perceive this phenomenon as particularly stigmatizing. To take only one concrete example, several French-speaking interviewees asked for their testimonies to remain anonymous because they were 'afraid' that their grandchildren 'could lose their jobs'. Others expressed intense emotions, explaining that there was nobody to whom they could talk about this story. We have not, to date, observed these reactions among Flemish families. Similarly, the number of explicit references to 'secrets', 'unspeakable realities', and 'unspoken words' reveals that this past is still perceived as a burden in Wallonia.

In this respect, one interview was particularly telling. After speaking at length without any interruption, a woman concluded with the following words: "My father became very rich – millions [sic]. We had seven servants at home. But he did not know anything. He did not know that the Germans made lampshades from the skin of the Jews. He did not know that". She then started crying before explaining that she never wanted to have children but that she had been a pediatrician all her life - to help as many children as possible" (Brussels, October 3, 2019). Interestingly, interviews also showed that family members who decided to talk about their experience during the war were mostly condemned for it by their siblings. Once again, the reaction of the granddaughter of a French-speaking collaborator is emblematic. Speaking to her sister, who wanted to further explore their ancestor's responsibility for roundups of Jews during the war, she said, "We already organized a mass for the family 15 years ago. Stop that now" (Louvain-la-Neuve, October 28, 2019).

Do these reactions illustrate any Belgian specificity? Probably not. French and Dutch descendants of collaborators are also deeply affected (Venken & Röger, 2015). However, what is specific to Belgium is the contrast between the reactions in the different communities. The dividing effect of these memory discrepancies is reinforced by two key elements: the weakness or even inexistence of any unifying national memory of the war and the mutual ignorance of the other side's media coverage. Since the news in the different parts of the country rarely coincides, this mutual ignorance favors the multiplication of misunderstandings between communities, stereotypes, and simplified visions of the other (Klein *et al.*, 2012).

11.4 Colonization: consensual silence and memory resurgence

11.4.1 Historical context

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Belgian authorities represented the colonial past in such a way as to glorify the country's achievements. Belgian school textbooks were remarkably similar to the equally uncritical *Petit Lavisse* schoolbook used by schoolchildren in France. All emphasis was placed on the

benefits of colonization since the concept of national identity made it inconceivable for crimes to be committed on behalf of the State. In the view of the Belgian authorities, Belgium's administration of a territory 80 times its size gave the impression to the outside world of the workings of a 'model colony'.

Following independence and the shedding of some illusions, Belgium's colonial history was scarcely referred to in official addresses. State representatives systematically erased the bitter criticisms that had been leveled for decades against colonization. This concealment policy was excused either by the need to 'normalize' relations with the former colony, or by the slogan 'Africa for the Africans'. Far from the *Belgium caput mundi* approach (Demoulin, 2000: 14), the Belgian authorities tried to avoid even the slightest accusation of neocolonialism. Within just a few decades, aspirations had changed completely. Henceforth, the aim would be to cease all involvement in the former colony's affairs and respect a critical partner's national sovereignty.

In 1999, the new government of Guy Verhofstadt would change this approach and encourage a critical acceptance of the country's colonial heritage. The aim of Louis Michel, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, was clear: to promote 'adult relations' with the African Great Lakes Region (Liège, February 28, 2003). To do so, he would acknowledge that "former colonial powers, such as Belgium, owe a large part of their development to their former colonies", and "it was thanks to 'these colonies' that we were able, in part, to create the country we are today, the twelfth richest country in the world – the fourth, if we follow the UN classification system" (Liège, February 28, 2003). This kind of acknowledgment became one of the spearheads of the 'ethical diplomacy' policy advocated by the minister.

This approach was again overturned in July 2004 with the appointment of a new Foreign Minister, Karel De Gucht. His attitude was far from apologetic, and he took an admonishing tone in his speeches. During his official visits to Central Africa, Karel De Gucht stirred up intense controversies by referring explicitly to the devastating effects of corruption, impunity, and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Rather than stressing Belgium's 'responsibility' toward its former colony, the talk was now of the need to stop being 'indulgent' (Kinshasa, April 21, 2008). Karel De Gucht wished to put aside any 'misplaced' feelings of guilt. By way of response to accusations of paternalism, he recalled that colonization also involved 'mass literacy campaigns', 'the setting up of an educational system', and 'generalized health coverage' (Tervuren, February 3, 2005).

From a radically different perspective, Belgian representatives launched a Parliamentary Commission in 2000 to determine the exact circumstances of the murder of Patrice Lumumba and the possible implications of Belgian political responsibility therein. In 2019, former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel apologized for the kidnapping, segregation, and forced adoption of thousands of mixed-race children throughout Belgian colonial Africa. One year later, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent 'Black Lives Matter'

movement impacted the Belgian political scene. In the aftermath of a demonstration that brought together more than 10,000 protesters in Brussels, the Belgian Parliament established a special Commission to confront its colonial past. At approximately the same time, King Philippe marked the 60th anniversary of the independence of the DRC, expressing his 'deepest regrets' for acts of violence and brutality inflicted during his country's rule over the Congo (June 30, 2020).

11.4.2 Belgian specificities: Leopold II and political interference

This progressive acknowledgment of the colonial past is indeed also noticeable in France and the Netherlands. The ongoing debates concerning the Algerian war in France or the mass violence at the end of the Dutch colonial empire in Indonesia illustrate a common trend. Descendants of the victims living in the three countries denounce long-lasting stereotypes and share common expectations, i.e., public apologies and reparations. In Paris, questions about the appropriateness of these gestures are at the core of the report written by Benjamin Stora on the Algerian colonization and war.[9] In Brussels, they are initially being addressed by the panel of experts selected by the Belgian Parliament. In Amsterdam, the government is considering an apology for slavery in Suriname. In the three capitals, advocates and opponents of reparations emphasize contrasting arguments.

Official authorities in the three countries also commissioned reports on the return of looted art to their former colonies. In France, the Sarr-Savoy Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage was presented to French President Emmanuel Macron in November 2018.[10] Two years later, a report written by experts from the *Raad voor cultuur* for the Dutch Ministry of Culture recommended that the Netherlands return looted artifacts to the countries from which they were stolen.[11] At the same time, the 'restitution policy' of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) recognized that its collections were acquired in the context of a policy of legal inequality: people were forced or placed under pressure to abandon objects, and they were too weak to negotiate the price when they wished to sell objects.[12] Thus, in the three countries, the coming to power of a new generation favored the gradual acknowledgment of its historical responsibility vis-à-vis the colonial past. This evolution was reinforced by the arrival of a new generation of historians and descendants in the respective diasporas, and by the progressive opening of the archives.

Besides this common contextual variable, two major Belgian specificities are also worth mentioning. First, unlike French and Dutch colonization, the creation of the Congo was "one man's personal adventure" (Stengers, 2007: 45). Between 1885 and 1908, the Etat Indépendant du Congo (EIC – Congo Free State) was in fact the personal property of King Leopold II. Whereas in Belgium, his constitutional role prevented him from taking any public action without a

minister's approval, in the colony, the King enjoyed power often described as absolute. Only in 1908, mainly due to international pressure, did the Congo officially become a Belgian colony. Since then, Leopold II has become one of the most emblematic symbols of colonial brutality. Unsurprisingly, his statues were systematically targeted by recent protests against racism.

The second specificity results from the systematic political use of the past to deny the legitimacy of the federal State. The questioning of the country's colonial past thus enabled certain Flemish nationalists to criticize the role of the monarchy and the influence of the former French-speaking élite. One draft piece of legislation tabled by a Vlaams Blok (a far-right and secessionist party) parliamentarian in 2002 illustrated this clearly. It proposed to discontinue several allowances paid to the royal family, using the argument that the Saxe-Cobourg family fortune originated from the Congo: "The royal family owes its fortune to the Congo, and the scandalous way in which it was acquired is a historical fact".[13] Militant nationalists are not alone in referring to the colonial past to disqualify 'the other'. We need only to think of the controversy related to Karel De Gucht's comments concerning the DRC. The diplomatic crisis provoked by the Foreign Minister stirred up criticism from all the French-speaking political parties belonging to the government coalition. Isabelle Durant, a member of the Green Party, condemned what she referred to as a 'politics of scorn'. The Liberal MP Armand De Decker spoke of a counterproductive approach. Elio Di Rupo, President of the PS, reminded Parliament that "the colonial era, characterized by unilateralism, paternalism and arrogance, is now a thing of the past". Minister De Gucht responded quickly, declaring that he had the impression that "French-speakers still seem to see the Congo as the tenth Belgian province, about which no critical comments can be made". All these reactions confirm that the tensions between communities have undermined the national account of the past associated with the 'Belgique de Papa' – a unitary Belgium with power largely in the hands of French speakers. As one NV-A ('New Flemish Alliance', Flemish nationalist party) representative told me, "in Flanders, we have nothing to do with the Congo".[14] The sentence resonated with the idea often heard that "in Wallonia, we have nothing to do with collaboration".

11.5 Conclusion

Admittedly, this mirror image is a caricature of the Belgian memory landscape. Yet it reminds us that in the absence of a coherent *roman national* of the type which exists in France or in the Netherlands, the federalization of the State has two major consequences. First, it strengthens the fragmentation of national memories in a binary way. However, research carried out among Belgian families does not show two homogeneous narratives. It reveals tensions and inconsistencies within each community and a dynamic set of palimpsestic narratives (Silverman, 2013). For instance, how could we understand the wealth of vivid

memories related to WWII without considering the often-tragic narratives transmitted in German-speaking families, not to mention Jewish families? Likewise, how could we grasp the memories related to colonization without listening to the stories of Congolese, Burundian, and Rwandan ancestors of Belgian Afro-descendants? None of these specific trajectories can be reduced to the oversimplified representations that dominate the political scene and the media. Additionally, the arrival of new waves of migrants reinforces the diversity and sometimes divisiveness of the past experiences that are remembered. How would the Turkish/Kurdish remembrances of the past fit into the 'us versus them' boxes emphasized on the political stage? The same comment could be made regarding the memories of the war in the Balkans or the Rwandan genocide. From this perspective, the interactions between vivid memories resemble a crisscross of tensions rather than two homogeneous fields separated by a linguistic border.

Second, the fragmentation of memories along oversimplified lines prevents most citizens from making any reflexive effort. If the other community is collectively responsible for the past violence that was committed on behalf of the State, there is no need for introspection. Weighing up past crimes is not on the agenda. The objective of this chapter is neither to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad', 'sound', and 'unsound' narratives nor to regret the lack of a so-called common narrative for all. The dissemination of a sole, monolithic historical interpretation cannot be imposed from above. Citizens exposed to official discourses are not merely empty vessels waiting to imbibe state-sponsored narratives without hesitation. Instead, they co-construct the messages conveyed to them. Moreover, not even a negotiated narrative based on common ground would resonate with the diversity of experiences and emotions privately expressed by Belgian families. Experiences associated with scorn, humiliation, grief, anger, resentment, shame, and/or guilt leave long-lasting traces that cannot be replaced by an external narrative, however nuanced and balanced it might be. What makes Belgium exceptional is not the selective and teleological character of memory, but the myriad of variables that come into play: cultural belongings anchored in distinct emotional experiences, systematic use of the past to support a parochial political agenda, institutional fragility, recurrent questions about the responsibility of the royal family, successive waves of migration. The intertwining of these elements matters since it directly impacts the context that shapes political negotiations. The question is then: do the approaches adopted toward the national past enable the parties to move on, or do they reinforce the deadlock? Do they open citizens' minds, or do they, rather, close them?

Notes

1 At the end of WWII, 53,000 Belgian citizens were convicted of collaboration. On the eve of Congolese independence in 1960, around 88,000 Belgian colonists lived in the Congo.

2 This study was written as part of a larger research project initially anchored in COST Action IS 1205 on 'Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union' (2012–2016), and in the 'Shared Society Project' based at the University of Koblenz. This project brings together practitioners and scholars from seven countries (Germany, Israel, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Norway, Macedonia, and Belgium).

3 On the French propensity for commemorations, see Johnston (1991), Nora (1994), and Mathy (2011).

4 These interviews result from two main research projects: the TRANSMEMO project ('The Sorrows of Belgium: WWII memories and family transmission', Brain Belspo, 2018–2020), and the RE-MEMBER project ('The transmission of memories related to stigmatization', ARC UCLouvain, 2020–2025).

5 In Belgium, collaboration took many forms: political (Wouters, 2006), military and repressive (De Wever, 2003), economic (Nefors, 2006), and artistic and intellectual (Devillez, 2003). In the aftermath of WWII, 0.64% of Belgians were condemned for collaboration: 0.73% of Flemings and 0.56% of Francophones (see Van den Wijngaert *et al.*, 2015).

6 The number of prison sentences was about 53,000 in Belgium, 49,000 in the Netherlands, and 40,000 in France (Huyse, 1995: 67). In terms of severity, the level of repression of collaboration in the three countries is comparable (Kossmann, 1986; Huyse et al., 1991).

7 The former socialist MP Philippe Moureaux explicitly highlights the 'taboo' dimension of this issue within the PS (see Brems *et al.*, 2020: 75–79).

8 The profiles were part of a special edition of the Belgian edition of *Newsweek* to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Flemish Parliament. They initially included well-known Nazi collaborators August Borms (who was sentenced to death) and Staf De Clercq (leader of the pro-Nazi Flemish National League, VNV). After a succession of adverse reactions, the Flemish Parliament apologized and excluded these two controversial names from the list of noble contributors to the Flemish cause.

9 Stora, B., *Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie*, January 20, 2021, XXX.

10 Sarr, F., & Savoy, B., *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, November 2018, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_fr.pdf

11 Raad voor Cultuur, *Advies Koloniale Collecties en Erkenning van Onrecht*, October 7, 2020, www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/adviezen/2020/10/07/advies-koloniale-collecties-en-erkenning-van-onrecht

12 RMCA, *Restitution Policy*, January 31, 2020, www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/restitution. In 2020, the Federation Wallonia-Brussels commissioned an expert report by the Belgian Royal Academy on the same issue (*L'avenir des collections extra-européennes*, to be published in 2021).

13 *Annales parlementaires*, Chambre des Représentants, June 11, 2002.

14 Brussels, September 14, 2020.

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12

THE EUROPEANIZATION OF BELGIAN PARTIES

Both near and far?

Louise Hoon and Gilles Pittoors

12.1 Introduction

The process of European integration has forced political parties to reinvent and adapt themselves in different ways. Presenting them with a new level of competition and governance, national party politicians take part in European decision-making and compete in European Parliament elections. Over the past two decades, the politicization of European integration and the rise of Euroscepticism have forced political parties to take a clear stance on Europe and adapt their organizations to the new multilevel context. This adjustment of party programs and organizations to the European Union (EU) can be defined as the 'Europeanization' of political parties. This process presents us with many interesting questions. Why, where and how do parties Europeanize, which incentives are at play and does the tendency to Europeanize vary across parties?

These questions are even more interesting in the exceptional case of Belgium, where Europe is both near and far. The country may rightfully be described as the historical, geographical and institutional heart of the EU. Belgium was the main battlefield of two world wars that incited political elites to seek integration. High-profile Belgian politicians have taken up leading roles in the EU's history and institutions. And obviously, its political capital of Brussels physically hosts the European institutions and its community of public officials, civil society representatives and other expats from all over the EU.

At the same time, the EU remains remarkably depoliticized. The deep polarization between pro- and anti-European parties that can be observed in most other member states, long remained surprisingly absent in Belgium (Brack & Hoon, 2017). Whereas both the radical left and right are voicing more critical positions toward the EU today, Euroscepticism is still not the warhorse it is for ideologically similar parties in other member states.

Against that background, this chapter studies the organizational and programmatic Europeanization of Belgian political parties. Through qualitative analysis of Belgian party statutes and manifestos, we show how challenger and mainstream parties show different patterns to Europeanize in different ways, the former showing more programmatic and the latter more organizational Europeanization. At the same time, we find patterns of Europeanization specific to party family and ideology and to the particular context of Belgium.

The chapter first outlines the literature on party Europeanization, highlighting historical differences in challenger and mainstream parties' interactions with Europe. The second part presents data and methods, followed by the analysis that addresses organizational Europeanization before moving on to the party programs. The chapter ends with a discussion of our findings, identifying a path for further research as well as the shortcomings of the study.

12.2 The Europeanization of political parties

Europeanization is understood as domestic adaptation to European integration (Caporaso, 2008; Ladrech, 1994; Olsen, 2002; Radaelli & Pasquier, 2008; Risse et al., 2001). Featherstone and Radaelli (2003) convincingly argued that Europeanization refers to the incorporation of European "ways of doings things" in "the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies" (p. 30). Focusing on the Europeanization of political parties, Ladrech (2002) laid out a robust research agenda, outlining five arenas in which national parties could feel an impact of European integration—programs, organization, competition, government and transnational relations.

On the one hand, most scholarly attention went to the extent to which parties incorporated the EU in their party programs and competitive positions (*programmatic Europeanization*). It is well established that so-called challenger parties initiated and drive EU politicization. Emphasizing a topic that mainstream parties long ignored proved a highly effective strategy to restructure domestic party competition (Braun et al., 2016; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Grande & Kriesi, 2016; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Mair, 2000, 2007). Especially those opposing the EU by means of Euroscepticism reaped the electoral benefits of this challenger strategy (Meijers & Rauh, 2016). Over the past two decades, Eurosceptic parties became the first or second competitors in all but a few member states and entered government in Austria, Italy, Greece and a number of Eastern European countries (Brack & Startin, 2015).

On the other hand, although there is a long and extensive literature on national parties' engagement in European party federations (Bomberg, 2002; Cole, 2001; Daniels, 1998; Hanley, 2002, 2008; Pridham, 2001; Pridham & Pridham, 1981; Van Hecke, 2009, 2010), comparatively little attention was given to the extent to which political parties organizationally adapt to the EU (*organizational Europeanization*). Most of the earlier studies on organizational

Europeanization presented rather sobering conclusions that parties adapt very little to the EU, and that organizational change can hardly be attributed to the EU as an external cause (Ladrech, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2007; Raunio, 2000, 2002). Recent studies slightly alter that image, highlighting variation in the way parties organize in the EU context (Mühlböck, 2017; Pittoors, 2020). This variation may be explained by contextual factors, such as the degree to which national institutions and political practices 'fit' the EU's political structures or the extent to which the EU is politicized within a country, although the jury is still out on what exactly explains this variation (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003; Green Cowles et al., 2001; Mastenbroek & Kaeding, 2006; Schmidt, 2006).

Therefore, we take the opportunity of closely studying the exceptional case of Belgium to gain deeper understanding of within-country variation in party Europeanization, whereby we expect variation to depend on a party's status as challenger or mainstream party. For one, mainstream and challenger parties are presented with different incentives for organizational Europeanization. Parties from the three traditional party families (liberal, socialist and Christian democrat) have been the main initiators and entrepreneurs of European integration. They thus have long-standing traditions of cooperation in European party federations and European Parliament groups. In the tradition of Duverger (1954) and Panebianco (1988), we assume this historical interlacing with European politics is bound to show in mainstream parties' contemporary organization.

Not only do these politicians inhabit the European institutions and drive the EU's decision-making process, but also given how "decisions made at the EU level increasingly shape national policies, and hence directly mold the environment within which national parties operate" (Poguntke et al., 2007, p. 2), domestic politics also requires attention for the European level. To be efficient at navigating this multilevel institutional environment and pursuing their party goals—be it votes, offices or policy (Harmel & Janda, 1994)—these parties are required to acquire dedicated personnel and to engage in transnational bargaining, cooperation and consensus-seeking.

By contrast, both by choice and by the institutional design and political practice of the EU, challengers have historically been sidelined from European integration and decision-making processes. This is even true for the European Parliament, where about a third of the seats are now taken by Eurosceptic or challenger parties. For instance, despite some indications that radical rights are increasingly organizing transnationally (McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Startin & Brack, 2018), this is still a far cry away from the decades experience with transnational cooperation known to the Christian democrats and the EPP, nor have they been at the center of politico-institutional power in Europe, with all the organizational consequences this entails. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that challenger parties will exhibit much less organizational Europeanization than mainstream parties.

> H1: We expect organizational Europeanization to be more prominent with mainstream parties, and less with challengers

When it comes to programmatic Europeanization, we follow the literature in our expectation that challenger parties will be more likely to politicize the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). However, our qualitative approach allows us to add a meaningful and often overlooked dimension to programmatic Europeanization. EU politicization is generally understood and measured as the contestation of the EU *as such*. The contestation of its overall existence, foundations and workings has been at focus of EU politicization. In contrast to this politicization of *constitutional* issues, there is less attention for the politicization of *substantial* issues, i.e. the content, direction and political nature of European policy (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012).

For better understanding, we may align this distinction between constitutional and substantial issues to Dahl's (1969) concepts of polity opposition and policy opposition. Whereas polity opposition rejects the political system and its legitimacy as a whole, policy opposition is aimed at the content or direction of European policy, the division of funds or at EU-level politicians.

The distinction between *constitutional* and *substantial* EU politicization allows us to nuance the established image of challenger-led EU politicization and of mainstream parties anxiously keeping the EU off the political agenda (Kriesi, 2016; Mair, 2007). Considering their active and prominent role in the European integration and decision-making process, mainstream parties seem more likely to engage in the politicization of *substantial* European issues. For example, their proposals in a particular policy area or the achievements of their EP party group. For challengers, on the other hand, it seems more convenient and effective to treat the EU as a monolithic entity that one either entirely rejects or entirely supports and is thus a complicit part of.

> H2: When it comes to programmatic Europeanization, we expect challenger parties to stress constitutional issues, and mainstream parties to stress substantial issues

12.3 Measuring party Europeanization

Our understanding of *programmatic* Europeanization predominantly relies on large-scale, European wide quantitative survey research. It focuses on voters' and parties' positions on binary opinion and expert survey scales, most notably the ten- or seven-point pro- and anti-EU integration scale introduced by Leonard Ray (1999). Inevitably, this approach has favored a focus on polarization on constitutional issues or the pro-/anti-European integration scale (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, 2018; Jackson & Jolly, 2021; Kriesi, 2016).

In the party organization literature, we find a much wider arrange of qualitative and quantitative methods and approaches to Europeanization. This strand of

the literature, however, has so far paid less attention to how parties' mainstream or challenger status may present parties with different incentives for Europeanization. Combining methods and insights from both strands of the literature, we aim to present a more nuanced and understanding of interparty variation in Europeanization.

The corpus consists of party statutes and party manifestos from the relevant parties participating in the election. To measure organizational Europeanization, we check the latest party statutes for mentions of the EU, European integration or EU mandatories. Building on previous work on party statutes (Deschouwer & Van Assche, 2003), the statutes are analyzed by looking at four indicators: (1) references to Europe in the preambles; (2) reference to the representation of EU mandatories in relevant party bodies (e.g. party board or council); (3) reference to specific bodies or functions dealing with European affairs (e.g. a European secretary or interparliamentary format) and (4) references to the Europarty the national party is a member of.

This data are gathered in an 'old school' way, meaning not through coding but through actual reading and interpreting. The reason for using this method is that the aim of this study is not to study the number of 'mentions' of Europe in the statutes but rather to qualify the concrete organization of a political party. It should be noted, however, that statutes do not always fully reflect the practical reality of parties' organization. Still, these documents suggest the way a party thinks about itself and one can, hence, assume that if a party "makes the effort to mention Europe in its statutes, it is any case, an indication that the European level has consequences for the way a party works" (Deschouwer & Van Assche, 2003, pp. 122–123, own translation).

To identify programmatic Europeanization, election manifestos are the most adequate source of information. We use Nvivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software to scout references to the EU (using the terms 'EU', 'Europese' and 'Eur★') and code them according to their substantial or constitutive nature. For each reference, we also indicate whether it supports (positively refers to) or opposes (negatively refers to) the EU. N-vivo allows us to quantitatively compare the different types of references to EU and to closely compare them for each party. The election manifestos under study were all presented in the run-up to the 2019 regional, federal and European Parliament elections. Some parties presented separate manifestos for the different levels. But because 'Europeanization' refers to domestic adaptation to European integration, we choose to include only the 'main' or federal election manifesto for each party.

Following Hobolt and De Vries (2016), we define challengers as parties that, in their style, organization and program, explicitly differentiate themselves from the established political elites and/or have never taken part in government before and/or 'own' political issues that do not belong to the dominant dimension of political competition. All three criteria apply to the Flemish radical-left PTB-PVDA and to the radical-right VB. The Greens and the Flemish nationalist N-VA have taken part in government and currently govern either

TABLE 12.1 List of parties under study

Party	Full name	Status	Ideology
CD&V	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams	Mainstream	Christian democrat
CDh	Centre Démocrate Humaniste	Mainstream	Christian democrat
OVLD	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	Mainstream	Liberal
MR	Mouvement Réformateur	Mainstream	Liberal
sp.a	Socialistische Partij Anders	Mainstream	Social democrat
PS	Parti Socialiste	Mainstream	Social democrat
Groen	Groen	Challenger	Green
Ecolo	Ecologistes Confédérés pour l'Organisation de Luttes Originales	Challenger	Green
N-VA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie	Challenger	Nationalist
Défi	Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant	Challenger	Regionalist
PTB-PVDA	Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de Arbeid van België	Challenger	Radical left
VB	Vlaams Belang	Challenger	Radical right

at federal or regional level. N-VA, in addition, has been the largest party of Flanders since the 2014 elections. Nevertheless, looking from the federal level, these parties also clearly hold a challenger status: N-VA because of its expressed Flemish nationalism and overt opposition to the Belgian federal state, and the Greens for their adherence to issues alternative to the dominant left–right dimension. DéFi, lastly, is a small party that—in reaction to Flemish nationalism—defends the interests of francophone citizens in and around Brussels, and thus, despite being in the Brussels regional government, also challenges the Belgian political status quo. Table 12.1 lists all parties under study.

12.4 Analysis of party Europeanization

12.4.1 Organizational Europeanization

Assessing the results of the qualitative study of party statutes (Table 12.2), we see clear differences between mainstream and challenger parties, with the latter on average paying less attention to Europe in their statutes. At the same time, significant differences exist within each of these groups; e.g. between the Greens and the radical right within the challenger group, or between the mainstream social democrats and liberals. This could indicate that organizational differences between parties has more to do with their (historical) development and party family (Duverger, 1954; Panebianco, 1988), rather than their status as mainstream or challenger party.

Generally, most Belgian parties make some kind of reference to Europe in their preambles. Even the radical right VB refers to the "European peoples,

TABLE 12.2 Organizational Europeanization of Belgian parties

	CD&V	N-VA	OVLD	sp.a	Groen	VB	PTB-PVDA	CDH	MR	PS	Ecolo	Défi
A. Representation of EU mandataries in party governing bodies												
Ex officio members of the party board	×	×			×			×		×	×	×
Ex officio advisory members of the party board; can be elected to gain voting rights			×	×								
Ex officio advisory members of the party board												
Not *ex officio* members of party board; can be elected									×			
Ex officio members of the party council, not of the party board						×						
Not statutorily represented/No mention							×					
B. Mention of Europe/EU in party statute preambles												
Explicit mention of EU and Europarty	×				×						×	
General reference to European cooperation				×			×	×		×		×
General reference to Europe as a cultural and/or geographic area		×				×						
Reference only to Europarty membership			×									
No reference to Europe									×			
C. Mention of bodies specifically dedicated to EU affairs												
Specific body exists to manage EU affairs and coordination + explicit involvement of party board/president				×						×		
Specific body exists to manage EU affairs and coordination	×		×					×	×			
Coordination is responsibility of nonspecific body (e.g. EU mandataries themselves)		×										×
No mention					×	×	×				×	
D. Mention of Europarty												
Explicit mention of Europarty and ways of interacting	×			×	×					×		
General mention of Europarty			×								×	
No mention		×				×	×	×	×			×

civilization and cultural community" (own translation) to which it belongs. Surprisingly, the liberal parties—Belgium's most outspoken pro-EU family— mention Europe least in their preambles, with OVLD only mentioning their ALDE membership and MR not mentioning Europe at all. There are also clear differences in the references to Europarty membership, although not particularly along the mainstream/challenger axis: while the Greens make references to the EGP, none of the other challenger parties mention Europarties but neither does the mainstream MR or CDH.

The statutes for the most part also provide ample details about the representation of EU mandataries in their party bodies. In most parties, MEPs (or the EP delegation leader) are *ex officio* members of an executive body—usually the party board or bureau. Parties vary in terms of voting rights for these mandataries: in some parties, they have them automatically (e.g. the Green and Christian democrat parties), while in others, only advisory membership is guaranteed and they need to get elected to attain voting rights (e.g. the Flemish liberals). Here, the radical left and right somewhat stand out. Whereas VB MEPs are only *ex officio* welcome in the party council (and not the party board), PTB-PVDA even remains silent on the representation of EU mandatories in its bodies.

The differences between challenger and mainstream parties are most obvious, however, regarding the internal management of European affairs by specific bodies or people. With the exception of the N-VA, none the of the challenger parties make any reference to them at all (although these do exist in reality, particularly in the Green parties). By contrast, all mainstream parties mention such people or bodies in various forms. For example, the MR statutes describe an "intergroupe parlementaire" to organize relations between the party's national and European parliamentarians, while the PS has a whole section dedicated solely to how and by whom relations with the PES are managed. Challenger parties thus elaborate much less on their organizational ties with the European level than mainstream parties.

That the difference between challenger and mainstream parties is most obvious in their organizational linking of the national and European levels, but much less so in their framing of their own activities in European terms, highlights how the 'proximity' of Belgium to the EU, i.e. being its historical and political heart, seems to seep through to party organizations in the sense that most Belgian parties cannot seriously claim to act in a purely Belgian context. Indeed, it cannot be denied that also the liberal parties, if not in their statutes, regularly refer to Europe in their public communication. This particularity of Belgium of course requires more comparative study but a quick look at their Dutch counterparts already shows a striking difference: with the exception of the Europhile D66, not a single Dutch party makes any reference to Europe at all in their statutes' preambles.

Moreover, these findings also support our argument for the importance of the historical development of parties and their organizations. Indeed, that the main difference between the two should be located in the extent to which they

created specific bodies for connecting the national and European governance levels falls entirely in line with the idea that mainstream parties historically had both more resources and incentives to do so, given their long-term involvement in European cooperation and EU decision-making.

That being said, however, one must also recognize that there is significant variation within each group, suggesting that (further) differences might be based on ideological family. For example, the Greens are just as similar/different to the Christian democrats as they are to the radical left and right. Moreover, the liberal parties stand out, providing little detail on their parties' organization regarding the EU—in fact doing less so than the Greens. The difference with particularly the social democrat parties could not be greater. Indeed, no other party family has statutes that address the EU in such detail; from their EU mandatories' *ex officio* representation in party bodies, to extensively referring to their Europarty membership and multilevel coordination bodies (e.g. the PS' "Conseil des Représentants des Socialistes européens") and the explicit involvement of the party leadership.

These findings qualify the differences between challenger and mainstream parties, hinting at the notion that the organization of political parties and their Europeanization has to do with their (historical) development and party family (Panebianco, 1988), rather than their status as mainstream or challenger party. Of course, given how statutes give a distorted view of reality, one should remain cautious about such conclusions.

12.4.2 Programmatic Europeanization

As we have coded all text referring to the EU as supportive or opposing and as focused either on substantial or constitutional issues, Nvivo allows us to calculate the total amount of text that each party attributes to the EU, for each one of those categories. For each manifesto, these numbers are presented as a percentage of the total length of the manifesto in Table 12.3. In Table 12.4,

TABLE 12.3 Programmatic Europeanization of Belgian parties

	PTB-PVDA	Groen	Ecolo	N-VA	Defi	VB	sp.a	PS	OVLD	MR	CD&V	CDH
Constitutional												
Positive	0.14	0.06	0.19	1.33	0.20	0	0.29	0.49	0.35	0.11	0.06 (7)	0.15
	(5)	(3)	(3)	(21)	(12)		(8)	(35)	(7)	(5)		(10)
Negative	0.31	0.01	0.16	1.33	0.01	1.27	0.16	0.16	0.20	0	0	0.06
	(11)	(1)	(2)	(16)	(1)	(5)	(4)	(11)	(2)			(2)
Substantial												
Positive	0.71	1.18	1.90	1.15	1.14	0.20	2.44	2.58	1.77	1.34	1.45	1.26
	(36)	(40)	(42)	(47)	(101)	(4)	(99)	(380)	(26)	(78)	(140)	(85)
Negative	0.31	0.01	0.16	1.03	0.01	1.27	0.16	0.16	0.20	0	0.05 (4)	0.25
	(13)	(1)	(3)	(23)	(1)	(9)	(4)	(14)	(3)			(12)

TABLE 12.4 Average programmatic Europeanization per party family

	Constitutional		Substantial		
	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Total
Mainstream	0.10	0.24	0.14	1.81	2.29
Christian democrat	0.03	0.11	0.15	1.35	1.64
Social democrat	0.16	0.18	0.16	2.51	3.01
Liberal	0.10	0.39	0.10	1.54	2.13
Challenger	0.52	0.32	0.52	1.05	2.41
Radical left	0.31	0.14	0.31	0.71	1.47
Radical right	**1.27**	0	1.27	0.20	2.74
Green	0.09	0.13	0.09	1.54	1.85
Regionalist	0.67	0.77	0.64	0.67	2.75

the average percentage for each party family is calculated, which allows us to compare the patterns of programmatic Europeanization with mainstream and challenger parties.

First, the amount and detail of the references that we find in the manifestos contradicts the idea that Europe would be a nonissue in Belgium. In total, 2.29% of mainstream parties' manifestos refer to the EU or to European policy. Contrary to what we might expect from the literature on EU politicization by challenger parties, that number is a little lower for challenger parties: 2.41%. This programmatic Europeanization is overwhelmingly substantial and positive. Most references are supportive of specific EU policies and action in particular domains. Repeatedly, parties argue for compliance with one or another EU regulation, directive or recommendation, or justify their domestic policy proposals by mentioning how the EU is already prioritizing them.

The debate over European integration and the EU as a whole (constitutional Europeanization) appears less prominent in Belgian manifestos. Overall, it is only slightly more negative than positive. It is also remarkable that none of the Belgian parties argues for an 'exit' from the EU, nor for a referendum on EU membership. The low level of polarization on pro-/anti-EU issues might explain why Belgium is often (wrongly) perceived as a country where Europe 'does not matter'.

Second, and in line with H2, challenger parties stress constitutional issues more than mainstream parties. On average, about 0.85% of the text in challenger party programs is dedicated to opposition to the EU as a whole. Radical right parties clearly voice the more negative tone of these references, whereas Green parties are not outspokenly more positive than the mainstream.

As we expected, mainstream parties spend about two and a half times less text on constitutional European issues (0.35%) than challenger parties do. Instead, they write about twice as much about substantial European issues (about 3% to 1.6%), and overwhelmingly in a supportive tone. However, the pattern of programmatic Europeanization on constitutional issues within the challenger group

is less outspoken than expected. In fact, once we exclude the radical right, challenger parties are not that different from the mainstream. The regionalist N-VA shows a striking number of positive references to the EU as a whole.

Considering the transnational nature of ecological issues and the established idea that GAL or Green-Alternative-Liberal parties are generally outspokenly pro-European, we would expect Green parties to express more support for the EU as a whole. But the mainstream, social democratic parties spend more text on supporting the EU. Taking part in government at several levels, Belgian Green parties may not fit the 'challenger' category well. But the finding also indicates that, beyond mainstream or challenger status, party family and institutional history matter for Europeanization.

A close reading of all coded references to Europe allows us to identify some additional patterns. First, what stands out from a close reading of all negative, constitutional references is that especially the challenger parties tend to add suggestions for (radically) alternative models of European integration to their opposition to the EU. The N-VA program especially contains plenty of equivocal references to the EU, combining support for the general idea of EU integration with critical remarks about its practice and proposals for improvement regarding its efficiency and democratic legitimacy. But this type of reference can also be found with the most Eurosceptic parties in our study, the extreme-left PTB and the radical right VB. Both parties praise the Belgian and—for VB—Flemish economic, cultural and political interconnectedness in the European context.

Second, the regionalist parties in our study (VB, N-VA and Défi) tend to use the European context to discard the federal level. VB and N-VA emphasize Flemish and European culture and identity in these references. For Défi, the focus is on institutions and policy. The party repeatedly describes regional policies and institutions and their direct interaction with the European context, somewhat 'skipping stresses the embedding of regional policies in their European context, as well as the role of Brussels as a European (rather than Belgian) capital. Regionalist Euroskepticism appears to balance between opposing Europe and supporting it as a vehicle for regional independence.

12.5 Conclusion

This chapter addresses the Europeanization of political parties in the exceptional context of Belgium, where Europe is both near and far. Whereas the jury is still out on whether the EU is a politicized topic at the national level or not, there is no doubt that it is exceptionally low in Belgium (Braun & Grande, 2021; Braun et al., 2020; Green-Pedersen, 2019). At the same time, however, there is no other EU member state for which Europe is so close by, given the proximity of Brussels and the EU institutions. Ever so strikingly, therefore, at the historic and political heart of the EU, political parties seem to refrain from competition over European integration.

However, our study shows that this image of EU depoliticization in Belgium is incomplete. Our analysis of party statutes and manifestos shows that there is definitely domestic adjustment to Europe with Belgian parties. Mainstream parties exhibit more organizational Europeanization and are more likely to incorporate Europe in a substantial and positive way in their manifestos. Challenger parties, by contrast, Europeanize less organizationally, while they are slightly more inclined to reject the EU as a whole on the programmatic level. However, we also found that there is variation in Europeanization *within* challenger and mainstream categories, highlighting the importance of their ideological, party family and historic background (Duverger, 1954; Koskimaa, 2020; Panebianco, 1988).

As such, despite being often considered a country where Europe doesn't matter, our study highlights that Belgium shows very particular patterns of party Europeanization, further supporting the claim of its exceptional status in Europe. On the one hand, Belgian parties have adapted markedly to the EU, arguably more so than parties in other (Western European) member states. For instance, a quick look at the Dutch statutes shows that, with the exception of D66, not a single Dutch party refers to the EU in its statute preambles and very rarely mentions their Europarty. On the other hand, whereas Belgian parties do not compete so much about the EU as a whole, they do integrate substantial European issues in their party programs, voicing not only support but also substantial opposition. Associating our findings to the literature, the Belgian pattern seems quite exceptional. Existing studies of party positioning and EU politicization predominantly show a pattern of polarization on the (constitutional) pro-/anti-European integration dimension in the EU as a whole (Jackson & Jolly, 2021), as well as for particular countries and regions (Charalambous et al., 2018; Vachudova, 2019). Comparing these patterns of Europeanization to those of other countries provides a path for further research.

Finally, a few shortcomings of this study must be addressed. First, whereas Europeanization is a complex and multidimensional process, we have only looked at its organizational and programmatic aspects here, leaving other ways in which parties can Europeanize, such as their transnational relations and behavior in government, unaddressed (Ladrech, 2002). Second, we have only analyzed official documents (party statutes and manifestos), which do not necessarily reflect the behavior of party officials, or the reality of party competition and internal organization. Third, our focus on variation between parties in Belgium prevents us from explicitly generalizing our findings for mainstream and challenger parties in the EU. Future research is thus encouraged to engage in a comparative study of programmatic and organizational Europeanization in several member states.

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13

BELGIUM IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Still an active player?

Michel Liégeois and Murat Caliskan

13.1 Introduction

Before the Second World War, most of the 'small states'[1] in Europe—including Belgium—pursued a hiding strategy. They preferred staying neutral to stay out of trouble in the hostile international environment, which was largely in line with the realist mindset. Once the two world wars proved that this strategy did not work out, the small states turned to the binding strategy, which aims to prevent conflict by supporting international rules and multilateral institutions that limit the action space of the great powers (Steinmetz & Wivel, 2010). The binding strategy was boosted by the international context that, after the Second World War, has increasingly given small states the option to expand their influence over the great powers mainly through international organizations (Thorhallsson, 2019). International norms, rules and institutions have played a greater role in determining a state's behavior.

In many regards, Belgium has been a prominent example of a small state that has employed a binding strategy. It was not only a founding member of most of the basic international organizations such as the United Nations, the EU and NATO but it has also been a staunch supporter of multilateralism. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated, multilateralism is in the DNA of Belgian foreign policy (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020a). The fact that Belgium hosts both the NATO headquarters and the main bodies of the EU can be considered the symbol of the importance it has placed on international organizations.

Although other European small states have adopted a similar binding approach, Belgian policy, particularly in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), distinguishes itself from other states of similar size. In 2018, Belgium was elected as a nonpermanent member (NPM) to the UNSC for the sixth time in its history,

which makes it one of the most elected states in the world. Furthermore, it has been frequently praised for its active policy instead of being a niche player in the Council (Drieskens & Wouters, 2009; Liégeois, 1993, 2009; Zeebroek, 2009). Indeed, despite the protracted regional dispute inside the country and its negative impact on the political life, Belgium appears to have consistently carried out an active policy in the UNSC, which merits further research. Focusing on the last two terms, this chapter aims to examine the performance of Belgium in the Security Council and explore whether Belgium maintains its active policy in its latest term (2019–20) as well. While it builds on various sources, it is supported by interviews with eight diplomats (four Belgian diplomats and four foreign diplomats) who experienced the Belgian presence in the Council. This chapter opens with a short description of being an elected member in the Security Council. In the following section, five features of successful small states are applied to the Belgian case to examine its performance of the last two terms. In conclusion, a short assessment of Belgium, as well as what makes Belgium different from other states, is discussed.

13.2 Being an elected member in the UN Security Council

The UN Security Council is a "world's cockpit where the decisions are binding upon all member states and are extremely important for those countries in crisis" (Simoens, 2019, A seat in the cockpit). This means that being in the Council gives an NPM a voice in the international system. However, for an NPM, it is like entering a theatrical stage as an actor in which both the script and its choreography have already been outlined by others (Wouters et al., 2009). There is an indisputable dominance of permanent members (PM) because, on top of the veto power, they also benefit from an institutional memory that has been accumulated throughout decades of practical experience. Such comprehensive knowledge allows PMs to enjoy a clear advantage over elected members, particularly in long-lasting diplomatic processes. In this respect, the real power of PMs not only stems from preventing things from being said but also from the power over what is going to be said (Xavier do Monte, 2016). As Johan Verbeke—Belgian permanent representative to the United Nations between 2004 and 2008—noted, "it is the PMs who will decide about your fate in the Security Council, and make or break your reputation" (Verbeke, 2018).

Yet, despite this dominance, there is still a leeway for NPMs to exercise influence in the UNSC. First, the veto is only a negative power; it does not help the PMs in any way when they want the UNSC to adopt a resolution. They need the votes of at least four elected members as nine affirmative votes are required for any resolution to be passed. One should remember that it was the lack of these necessary nine votes rather than the threat of French veto that prevented the draft US-UK resolution from being endorsed in the lead-up to the Iraq War (Conley Tyler & Pahlow, 2014). Second, as the variety and volume of the Council's tasks

have widened since the end of the Cold War, the opportunities and tools that elected numbers can use also have increased. Third, small- and middle-sized countries have some advantages over PMs resulting from their smallness. For instance, they are free from hegemonic baggage and therefore less limited in their actions. In some cases, a proposal by an NPM has a greater chance of being considered as it allows to avoid biased reaction that would have been triggered by a PM. Additionally, small size usually means a much easier process of internal consultation, thus much greater flexibility (Liégeois, 2009).

The history of the Security Council confirms that small states can deliver a successful performance in the Council when they have certain characteristics. For instance, Melissa Conley Tyler and Eleanor Pahlow (2014) identified five key factors based on the case studies of New Zealand (1993–94) and Mexico (2009–10) memberships. They found that "active participation", "coalition building", "strong leadership skills", "confidence-building" and "engagement of organizations with real interests" are important factors that determine the ability of elected members to be influential in the UNSC. Andrea Ó Súilleabháin (2014) found seven good practices of effective small states in a report written for the International Peace Institute (IPI). His findings that are based on the interviews and roundtables with 54 small-state UN missions can be paraphrased as the following: "coalition building", "prioritization", "diplomatic skills and high-quality personnel" and "innovative and creative leadership". Baldur Thorhallsson (2012) suggests that the qualitative variables such as "diplomatic skills", "knowledge and initiatives", "image or reputation", "strong leadership", "excellent coalition-building skills" and "an ability to prioritize heavy workloads" are important factors to explain their accomplishments within the UNSC. Based on these case studies and wider literature (see also Langmore & Farrall, 2016; Langmore & Thakur, 2016; Liégeois, 2009; Schrijver & Blokker, 2020; Verbeke, 2018), we have identified five key factors that explain the success of an NPM, "a commitment to the active participation", "positive image", "competence", "coalition-building skills" and "a balanced idealistic pragmatic approach". In the following sections, these five characteristics are applied to Belgium in order to evaluate its performance during its last two terms.

Nonetheless, as all interviewees noted, the successful performance of an elected member, especially of a small power, does not necessarily translate to a substantial impact on the overall policy of the UNSC. One can find numerous cases where elected members cannot make any meaningful contribution to the resolution of regional crises, as it occurred in the cases of Syria, Ukraine or Libya. For instance, it would not be reasonable to expect Belgium to initiate a fundamental solution to the Syrian crisis, given that the PMs also have a stake in these crises. However, it can be considered a successful bid of Belgium—as a penholder of humanitarian issues in Syria—when it paved the way for a Security Council Resolution on humanitarian border crossings despite the clear opposition of Russia and China. That is why this chapter has evaluated Belgium based on the premise that an elected member has inherently limited ability to influence the overall policy of the Security Council.

13.3 Belgium as an elected member of the UN Security Council

13.3.1 Active participation

First and foremost, the government of an NPM has to have an ambition and the political will to play an active role in the Council. The meticulous preparation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the special sessions of the Parliament and the strong support of the high-level leadership signal the ambition that Belgium has for the membership (Liégeois, 2009). In both mandates, the visits of high-level leaders, namely the Belgian King, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Council and their active participation in the debates, demonstrate the political will for active participation. Another sign of Belgian determination for being inside the Council is the fact that immediately after the completion of its last two mandates, Belgium announced its candidacy for the next mandate. For instance, just one month after 2019–20 term ended, Sophie Wilmès, Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced Belgian candidacy for the term 2037–38 (Wilmès, 2021). Furthermore, a closer look at its performance in the Council reveals that Belgium uses every tool that is important for an NPM, such as the chairmanship of subcommittees, the penholder role, the informal meetings and the presidency, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

   The chairmanship of a subsidiary body is an important instrument for an NPM as it allows to increase its visibility and make progress in the existing practices of the United Nations. This, of course, requires considerable effort as the efficiency of subsidiary bodies mainly relies on the input of the chairs. Belgium has always been ambitious in terms of engaging in the work of subsidiary bodies. In its previous term (2007–08), it chaired three sanctions committees, Al Qaeda/Taliban, Ivory Coast and Iran. It also presided over one Informal Working Group on International Tribunals. Its commitment and qualitative work, particularly in the chairmanship of the very technical Al Qaida/Taliban Sanctions Committee as well as the Informal Working Group on International Tribunals, made Belgium a respected member of the UNSC (Vandervelden, 2009). During the last term, Belgium assumed the chairmanship of the Somalia Sanctions Committee and the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group (CACWG). It also served as a facilitator for the issue of Iran's nuclear program implementation. The significant progress achieved in each subsidiary body indicates its active participation. For instance, as the chair of CACWG, Belgium managed to have a record number of 13 conclusions adopted on specific geographical issues, including Myanmar, Yemen and Syria, out of 14 files in total. No NPM in the Council has ever achieved as many conclusions as Belgium in the course of its mandate (Interview with a Belgian diplomat, January 05, 2021).

   Another instrument that can be utilized by an NPM is the penholder system. The penholder role refers to a member of the Council that leads the negotiations and drafts the text of an outcome, whether it is a resolution or a presidential statement. It goes beyond "drafting" a text, which has been a regular practice

since the inception of the Council. "The penholder takes the initiative on all Council activities concerning that situation, such as holding emergency meetings, organizing open debates, and leading visiting missions" (Security Council Report, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, in contrast with the chairmanships of the subsidiary bodies, the penholder system has been the domain of the PMs, particularly the P3 (United States, United Kingdom and France). In theory, "any member of the Security Council may be a penholder" (Security Council Report, 2020a, para. 2); however, in practice, few elected members can assume this role. It usually requires an NPM to take initiative in order to grab a penholder role (Security Council Report, 2018). As a diplomat of an NPM stated, "an elected member needs to fight and convince other members of the fact that it is capable for this role" (Interview with a Foreign Diplomat3, February 03, 2021). Figure 13.1 demonstrates the number of penholder roles that is carried out by each NPM in 2020 (Security Council Report, 2020a). Acting as a penholder on three topics can be regarded as a sign of Belgian active participation in the Council.

Informal meetings are also important tools for NPMs to influence the work of the UNSC. These meetings are usually held when there is no Council agreement for a formal meeting. In some cases, they may become an opportunity for NPMs to advance their own policies as they usually serve as a preparation for further debates in the Council. The most notable forms of informal meetings are "informal interactive dialogues" and "Arria–Formula Meetings". While both forms are informal with no official records and outcomes, informal interactive meetings host high-level participants of non-Council members, whereas Arria–Formula Meetings are more flexible meetings convened to hear
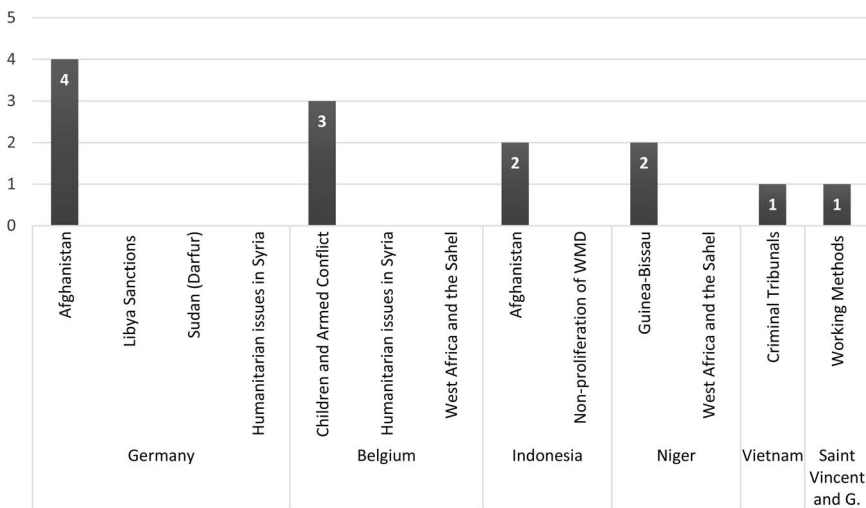
FIGURE 13.1 The number of penholder tasks of NPMs (2020)
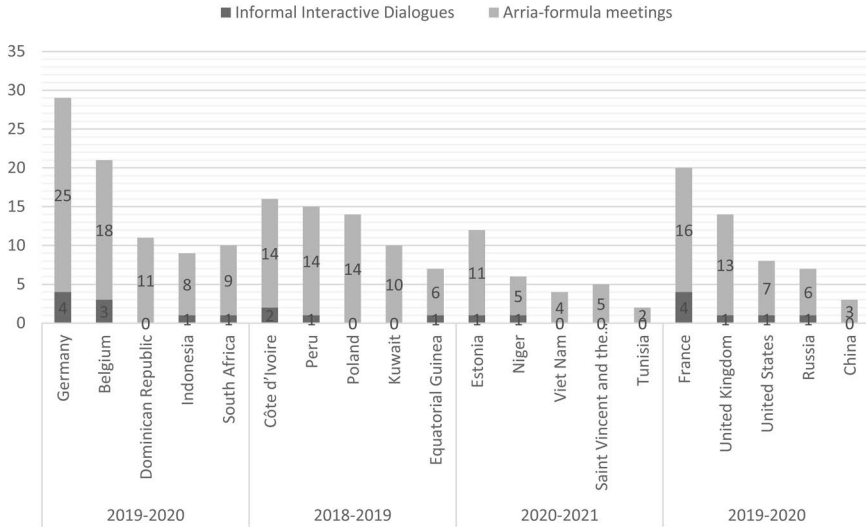
FIGURE 13.2   The number of informal meetings initiated by Council members

the views of experts and organizations (Daws & Sievers, 2020; Security Council Report, 2020b). These meetings usually reflect a member state's endeavor in order to take initiative or contribute to the United Nations' work. Therefore, the number of informal meetings initiated by an NPM can be regarded as an aspect of its active performance. As seen in Figure 13.2, Belgium is the NPM that has requested the greatest number of informal meetings after Germany, which can be seen as another aspect of Belgian active policy.[2]

The most notable opportunity for the elected members is the presidency. According to a foreign diplomat, "elected members pay a lot of attention to the presidency. It can be considered as a measure of success for the elected members" (Interview, February 1, 2021). Indeed, an NPM can use the presidency to shape the program of the month and present a theme that is not formally on the agenda. Belgium has been good at using its presidency effectively in terms of putting its own stamp on proceedings. As described by a foreign diplomat, "everyone accepted that Belgian presidency was very well-planned and organized. If you compare it to the other months, they had a lot of external briefers. All their key topics, including children and armed conflict, are reflected very well during their presidency" (Interview, February 01, 2021).

This can also be recognized by the new themes that Belgium has brought into the attention of the Council during its presidencies. For instance, in its previous term, in June 2007, Belgium introduced a debate for the first time in the Council on the delicate topic, "the role of natural resources in conflict areas", which led to a consensus and the adoption of a presidential statement (Wouters, Demeyere, et al., 2009). In its second presidency, in August 2008, Belgium organized a thematic debate on the "UNSC's working methods", which

had not been debated since 1994 in the Council (Grauls & Verbeke, 2009). In its current term, in February 2020, Belgium introduced another important theme that has not been discussed in the Security Council. It convened an open debate on "Transitional justice in conflict and post–conflict situations" as one of the signature events of its presidency, which eventually received a major support from the members of the Council (Security Council Report, 2020c). This can be seen as a success in terms of setting the Council's agenda, given the difficulty of introducing thematic debates in the UNSC, where the day-to-day business usually focuses on geographic areas of work. This review shows that Belgium strives to use every instrument possible to actively participate and influence the Council.

13.3.2 Positive image

A positive image is also an important source for success and one of the key factors that enables an NPM to play a meaningful role in the Council. Belgium has been generally known as a "reliable" and "predictable" country as confirmed by all interviewees talked in this study, if not a "bridge builder" as claimed by Ministry of Affairs (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020a). Being aware of its own image, Belgium chose an official slogan—"Fostering Consensus. Acting for Peace"—during the last election campaign (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). The high rate of vote obtained in the elections shows not only the success of this strategy but also the international community's trust in Belgium. A foreign diplomat who was in the Council during 2018–19 also confirms Belgian role as a bridge builder:

> There are few countries that have this image. But I can confirm that a common perception in the Council is that Belgium is a bridge-builder. It was not only good in its relations with NPMs, but it was also instrumental in Middle East issues. It was also very successful to articulate our position to Europeans. Belgium achieved a tremendous job in Syrian humanitarian issues due to its good relations with other countries. They had ability to reach out every actor around the globe, not necessarily to the EU, sometimes they reach out even to Latin America.
>
> *(Interview, October 28, 2020)*

Having no particular stance on sensitive issues, lack of vested interests in most of the current international conflicts, its role as an honest broker and the very smallness of Belgium contribute to this positive image (Liégeois, 2009). Yet, the positive image and credibility cannot be gained in one day. It is the result of years of endeavor and the investment in the United Nations' work. As one senior Belgian diplomat stated, "Belgium is a congenital multilateralist", which supports the interest of the international community and the rule of law since the

foundation of the United Nations. This plays an important role for having a good standing in the United Nations (Interview, February 06, 2021).

13.3.3 Competence

The competence simply means having the required knowledge and diplomatic skills. Belgium traditionally has knowledge and expertise in Central Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), that is acknowledged by the international community (Grauls & Verbeke, 2009). It is regularly consulted on DRC by the PM even at times when it is not a member of the UNSC (Zeebroek, 2009). However, in addition to its vast knowledge in DRC and Central Africa, Belgium's active involvement in the UNSC over the years appears to have brought expertise on multiple themes. For instance, Belgium acted as the chairman of the newly established Iran Sanctions Committee during its previous term, for which it was widely praised by other states (Sauer, 2009), while in the current term, it acts as a facilitator on the issue of the Iran nuclear program. As another example, Belgium has always paid particular attention to the independence and the efficient functioning of international tribunals. That is why "fighting against impunity" through International Criminal Court (ICC) was one of its priorities in the previous term (Grauls & Verbeke, 2009). It now acts as a focal point for the ICC and continues to use its expertise on the same theme. Another theme that Belgium has gained expertise in is the "protection of civilians", especially women and children, in the conflicts. During the previous term, an active performance on the subject already allowed Belgium to distinguish itself; yet in the 2019–20 term, it assumed the chairmanship of Children and Armed Conflict Working Group.

Besides the expertise on thematic issues, it is essential to demonstrate diplomatic skills and capabilities to master ongoing themes in the Council's agenda. Previous terms confirmed that Belgium can feed its representative in the Council with information about the most recent developments (Grauls & Verbeke, 2009) through a well-established diplomatic network that is spanning all five continents (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020c). Furthermore, the high quality of Belgian diplomats is also an important factor that makes them competent enough to deliver a successful performance. According to a political coordinator of an NPM, Belgian diplomats are "exceptionally good". He describes his counterpart from Belgium as the following:

> He was always ready to listen to you, he was very good at articulating delicate matters, he was always well-prepared, he knew everybody's position, he even knew what we voted before on the subject. It is not only limited to my area of responsibility, what I heard from my colleagues, all Belgium team was exceptional.
>
> *(Interview, October 28, 2020)*

13.3.4 Coalition building

Competency is not enough on its own to become influential in the Council. Since a degree of consensus is essential for the UNSC to function well, collaborations with both PMs and NPMs inside the Council, or with other groups outside the Council, are crucial to achieve the desired outcomes. Of course, this also requires enormous time and effort. Small states, with their limited resources, need to strike the right balance between conducting an efficient daily work and building coalitions for future outcomes.

In this regard, Belgium benefits from its long-standing partnerships. Brussels can lean on its close ties with Benelux countries to the degree that they have seconded diplomats in the Council (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020b). Belgium is also a member of the EU and enjoys certain benefits of EU membership, especially in terms of access to inner circle information (Wouters et al., 2009). Yet, its endeavor for building coalitions is not limited to the inner circle of traditional partners. For instance, it is a member of an informal group of "Like-Minded States on Targeted Sanctions"[3], which advocates fair and clear procedures for a more effective UN sanctions system, which is a theme that Belgium has always placed value on. Being part of such a group, which has consistently been active at the level of the Security Council, clearly provides leverage for the implementation of Belgian policies on sanctions.

Belgium has also been active in strengthening cooperation among the elected members. One notable example of this effort was the organization of a meeting of elected members (E-10) in Brussels, which was called "Brussels Dialogue", at the end of 2019 (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). It is difficult to measure the impact of such a meeting on the subsequent activities of the Council. However, as the Belgian permanent representative Pecsteen indicated, consensus among NPMs could lead to a resolution even on a delicate matter such as Syria. He further explained the role of cooperation with the following example: "A proposed resolution for a cease-fire around Idlib (Syria) was struck down by a *nyet* ('no' in Russian) from Russia and China. Nonetheless, as non-permanent members, we were able to exert a certain pressure on those two countries. No-one likes to feel isolated. Ultimately, we even had an effect on the ground: Syria announced a unilateral cease-fire" (Simoens, 2019, Right to veto).

13.3.5 A balanced approach

The UNSC certainly does not fully meet its primary responsibility that is to "maintain international peace and security", especially when the interests of PMs are at stake. However, the UNSC does matter on many occasions. As Wouters et al. (2009) noted, "aside from the symbolism inherent in having a UNSC decision on a particular matter, actions that range from mere recommendations up until the use of armed force have an impact on the ground". Thus, an

NPM should consider the constraints and power struggles within the Council and strike a right balance between taking always the high moral ground and achieving some tangible outcomes that can make the difference for people in conflict-affected areas.

Belgium appears to have adopted an astute balance between an idealistic and a pragmatic approach during its terms in the Council. In the words of Grauls and Verbeke, former permanent representatives to the Security Council, Belgium has chosen a moderate rather than a staunch stance (Grauls & Verbeke, 2009). One prominent example of Belgium's moderate stance is its approach toward the Security Council reform. It was one of the countries advocating a restriction in the range and the use of the veto power at the foundation of the United Nations (Loridan, 1946). Since then, it has traditionally supported a reform of the UNSC in terms of both its composition and working methods. However, knowing that a debate on UNSC reform implies investing one's political capital, it prefers an action in small steps and consultation with other members rather than one big reform package (Vandervelden, 2009). According to Ambassador Pecsteen, abolishing the veto power, for instance, is a too radical demand because "without the right to veto, some of the major powers might withdraw from the Security Council, but it's of the utmost importance that all the major powers do stay around the table". Instead, Belgium advocates a limited veto power that would be a more feasible approach (Simoens, 2019, Right to veto). In short, one can claim that Belgium adopts a balanced approach in the Council, which can be summarized as a "principled pragmatism" (Rodiles, 2013) or the "use of pragmatism to achieve ideals".

13.4 Conclusion

Belgium takes a particular role on the international stage. Even though it is generally considered a minor player, our analysis of the last two mandates in the UNSC reveals that Belgium has been using its terms—including its last term—to be influential in the Council, instead of being a niche player. Supported by its leadership, Brussels developed a clear policy of being active in the Security Council. An image of "reliable partner" that has been gained throughout the decades together with diplomatic and coalition-building skills has enabled Belgium to play a meaningful role inside the Council. On top of this, a pragmatic approach based on the sober assessment of its own position made Belgium influential, sometimes even disproportional to its size in power politics.

What is more, even though most small states pursue a similar binding strategy, Belgian policy in the UNSC distinguishes it from other states of similar size in several aspects. First of all, being active inside the Council appears to have become "a state policy" of Belgium rather than a particular government's policy. Starting from the first delegation of Belgium at San Francisco, which was headed by Mr. Paul-Henri Spaak, then Minister of Foreign Affairs,

particular importance has been attached to the UN mission. At its foundation, supporting United Nations was regarded as a *long-standing interest* of Belgium due to the geographic, economic and political reasons (Loridan, 1946). Furthermore, the active participation of Mr. Spaak during the foundation of the United Nations made him the president of the first General Assembly (Loridan, 1946). This notion of being active in the United Nations in general and the Security Council in particular has not changed to date.

The consistency of Belgian active policy has been best tested during the world's longest governmental crisis, which coincided with the last two terms in the Council. In the aftermath of both 2007 and 2018 elections, Belgium found itself in a political crisis that mainly arises from the growing political gulf between two main regions (Chini, 2020). The political parties could not form a new government over six months following the elections. Despite a temporary government formed in March 2008, the crisis continued until the end of 2011 ("Le nouveau gouvernement belge", 2011). A similar government crisis in the same decade began at the end of 2018, which this time took more than 16 months for political parties to form a new government (Messoudi, 2020). In spite of these two political crises at home, Belgium succeeded in delivering an active performance in the Council, which confirms that active policy has become a Belgian state policy. This can be better understood when compared with other elected members, even with the ones praised for their successful membership in the Council such as Australia (2013–14), in which political parties support quite different views on the membership and a government change might cause serious impact on its policies in the Council (Langmore & Farrall, 2016).

A reflection of having a constant policy of being active can also be seen in the number of mandates. Belgium has been quite ambitious to be inside the Security Council as many times as possible. Having completed its sixth mandate, Belgium is one of the most elected countries in the world, and arguably, it is the most elected small state.[4] As a small power, it has thus accumulated the highest level of experience of diplomacy inside the UNSC (Liégeois, 2009). Another aspect that distinguishes Belgium from other states is the high number of votes it has received in the elections of the Security Council. Belgium won all elections in the first round and obtained 43 votes out of 51 in 1946, 52 votes out of 58 in 1954, 104 votes out of 113 in 1970, 142 votes out of 154 in 1990, 180 votes out of 189 in 2006 and 181 votes out of 193 in 2018 (Security Council Report, 2020d). This is a remarkable history of vote rate when compared with other most elected countries like Canada[5] or the Netherlands, which could win some of their elections in the following rounds at a narrow margin. Although it was an unopposed candidate of its regional group in the last two terms, this consistent high rate of the vote obtained in the General Assembly can be regarded as a sign of the international community's trust in Belgium.

All in all, given its performance in the last two mandates, it appears that Belgium maintains its ambition and active policy in the UNSC as part of its broader policy of multilateralism. The aforementioned elements tend to support the argument that alongside multilateralism, engaging in the Security Council has also become part of Belgian diplomatic DNA. However, one should note that it would be illusory to infer from the last two mandates that a lasting political crisis does not affect Belgian capacity to weigh on the international stage. What makes Belgium exceptional now is the paradox between the success in foreign policy and the fragility in domestic policy. However, this paradox also cast a shadow on the future of Belgium on the international stage in general and as part of the UNSC in particular.

Notes

1 There is not a common definition of "a small state" in the studies of international relations. Traditionally, smallness has been measured with quantitative factors such as the size of population, territory, economy or military. For the population size, which is the single most common feature, the threshold ranges from 1 million to 30 million, with the most common threshold at 10 million. However, smallness is contextual and may depend on where the state is located, how it is perceived by itself and other states and its relative power to other states. In this respect, while it is not easy to make an absolute categorization, Belgium can be considered a small state that partially shows middle power state characteristics. For the purpose of this chapter, it is classified as a small power.

2 The numbers for the previous five elected members belong to the same period of their own term. The numbers for the following five elected members, the period is only one year (2020). *Source:* "Annex 2018 Highlights of Security Council Practice", accessed December 21, 2020, https://unite.un.org/sites/unite.un.org/files/app-schighlights-2018/doc/Highlights%20Paper%202018%20Annex.pdf; "Annex 2019 Highlights of Security Council Practice", accessed December 21, 2020, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/highlights_2019_annex.pdf#page=3; "Arria-Formula Meetings", Security Council Report Website, accessed December 17, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/working_methods_arria_formula_meetings.pdf; "Informal Interactive Dialogues", Security Council Report Website, accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/working_methods_informal_interactive_dialogue.pdf.

3 The group consists of Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. See for instance "the Statement delivered by Ambassador Olof Skoog of Sweden on behalf of the Group of Like-Minded States on Targeted Sanctions at the UN Security Council open debate on working methods of the Security Council", June 6, 2019, available at https://www.government.se/speeches/20192/06/statement-by-ambassador-olof-skoog-of-sweden-on-behalf-of-the-group-of-likeminded-states-on-targeted-sanctions/.

4 Here are the most elected countries: Japan 11; Brazil 10; Argentina 9; Colombia, India, Pakistan and Italy 7; Belgium, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland 6 times. Among these countries, Belgium is the smallest country, both in terms of population and size. The Netherlands can be considered the next smallest country, which is frequently regarded as a middle power as well.

5 Canada even experienced the political humiliation of not being elected two times in a row (2010 and 2020) despite expensive campaigns and heavy political support.

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