

The Belgian Federal Elections, 18 May 2003: A First Step Towards Bipartism?

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The 2003 Federal elections in Belgium put paid to an innovative governmental experience by bringing the four-year term of the so-called 'Rainbow coalition' to an end.¹ The results seem to indicate that the coalition, bringing together Ecologists, Socialists and Liberals, did not work to the benefit of each party. While the Socialists and the Liberals recorded big gains in the elections the Flemish and the French-speaking Green parties were the main losers of the ballot.

The election confirmed two other very important trends. First, the Christian democrats, historically the main political party in Belgium, continue a downward drift in support which began in the 1950s. Secondly, once again we saw the improved performance by the extreme right. In Flanders, the Vlaams Blok continue to make progress at every election, and in the French-speaking area, the National Front (FN) has increased its parliamentary representation.

The suprising federal elections of 1999²

The 1999 general elections produced unusual events in Belgian politics. The 1995-99 period had been particularly difficult. Several factors had made the voters feel suspicious towards the State. The most notorious incidents were the 'Dutroux affair' in 1996,³ the death of Semira Adamu, an illegal refugee killed by Belgian police officers during the course of her repatriation, and the 'dioxin crisis' that exposed the contamination of most commercially produced chickens in the country. Uncommon circumstances resulted in uncommon elections.

After the eleven year rule by Socialist/Christian Democrat governments, both these political parties slumped to their lowest level of electoral support since the second world war. For the first time, the Liberals became the biggest political party. But the biggest winners were the two Green parties. In just one election, they progressed by 8% (to 18.3%) in Wallonia and by 5% (to 11.28%) in Flanders. The other party to have gained seats in 1999 was the Flemish extreme-right party, Vlaams Blok, with a substantial growth in voter support from 12.25% to 15.43% in Flanders (Blaise, 1999).

These out-of-the-ordinary results led to a new type of coalition. On the 12 July 1999, Guy Verhofstadt from the Flemish Liberals (VLD) was appointed as the new Belgian prime minister. The 'Rainbow coalition' was born. The first Verhofstadt administration (Verhofstadt I) was composed of his Flemish Liberals (VLD) and the

French-speaking Liberal group (Liberal Reformer Party (PRL)-Democratic Front (FDF)-Movement of Citizens for Change (MCC)); the Flemish and French-speaking socialists (the SP and PS) and the Flemish and French-speaking Greens (Agalev and Ecolo).

The campaign

Between 1999 and 2003, five out of the eleven parliamentary parties changed their names. The Flemish Christian Democrats of the CVP became the CD&V, their new name keeping the Christian label but with a clearer Flemish identity. The French-speaking Christian Democrats of the PSC got rid of the 'Christian' label in its new heading, CDH.

The Flemish Socialists (SP) added the single letter 'A', to become the SP.A; 'A' as in 'Alternative'. And finally, the federation of the PRL, the FDF and the small MCC was integrated into a united movement called the MR (see Appendix for details of party names).

These cosmetic changes happened at the same time as elections of new presidents for every party. Between 1999 and 2003, all nine parliamentary parties changed their leadership. The new leaders were Stefaan De Clerck (CD&V), Karel De Gucht (VLD), Patrick Janssens (SP.A until April 2003), Steve Stevaert (SP.A from April 2003), Jos Geysels (Agalev), Elio Di Rupo (PS), Daniel Ducarme (MR), Joëlle Milquet (CDH), the trio Bauduin – Ernst – Defeyt (Ecolo until September 2002) and the trio Defeyt – Huytebroeck – Hordies (Ecolo from September 2002).

But the deepest change came as a consequence of the collapse of the Flemish nationalist party, Volksunie (VU-ID21). Two factions emerged, a more conservative one and a more progressive one. The conservatives formed the NV-A with Geert Bourgeois as their new president. On the other hand, Bert Anciaux gathered the progressive faction within Spirit which is now in an alliance with the SP.A. Other members of the former VU left to go to the VLD (Vincent Van Quickenborne, Patrick van Krunkelsven, Sven Gatz, Fons Borginon), the CD&V (Johan Sauwens) or Agalev (Bart Staes and Freddy Willems).

In October 2002, Ecolo and the PS signed a pre-campaign agreement covering certain policy questions, and a commitment to campaign as partners for the next coalition. By taking this step Ecolo established its leftist profile more clearly; while the PS gained legitimacy from a close association with a party that had for a long time been seen as an alternative by left-leaning voters.

However, the war in Iraq delayed the proper start of the campaign. All Belgian parties were unanimously against the war. The Foreign Minister, Louis Michel (MR), was omnipresent in the media. Only in the last days did certain members of the CD&V distance themselves from the position defended by the government. The Flemish Christian Democrats insisted that maintaining this standpoint would weaken the Belgian role within NATO.

Due to the international situation, the election campaign began only a month before the election itself. Two main events triggered debates. Firstly, in Antwerp, a

financial scandal surfaced as the municipal executive was under suspicion of fraudulently using public money to cover personal expenses. The municipal coalition resigned. It took a month to agree on a new team. The Vlaams Blok, the biggest party in Antwerp and the quasi-sole opposition party in the city,⁴ seized this opportunity to portray itself as the only uncorrupted party.

The second crisis was about night flights over Brussels. A few weeks before election day, the two Ecolo ministers decided to refuse permission for any flights over the Belgian capital city. Opinion polls were predicting poor results for this party, and its strong reaction on this issue proved to be a breaking point. Ecolo resigned and the government was reduced to five parties. During this crisis, the French-speaking Green party was isolated. The Liberal group and the Flemish Christian Democrats declared that it was no longer possible to form a government with the two Green parties.

Apart from these two events, the campaign was mainly focused on the situation in Flanders. The northern part of the country had been under the domination of the CVP for decades. But for the first time in 1999, that party was overtaken by the VLD. Despite the small difference in votes separating the VLD and CVP (only 18,118) this new situation highlighted the fact that the CVP was not unbeatable. At the regional level, the CVP had kept an advantage of 1,865 votes and one seat over the VLD.

The struggle for leadership has been intense in the North of the country. This battle is particularly important. The first party in Flanders is usually the first party in the country. It traditionally leads the next government. And the prime minister rarely comes from outside this party. The fight between the CD&V and the VLD was especially brutal over the split VU-ID21 votes.

The CD&V hoped to regain its first place. If so, the Christian Democrats would be able to lead both at the federal and regional levels. But in the last weeks before the 18 May, the SPA-Spirit alliance was gaining ground significantly. In October 2002, the newspaper *De Standaard* published an opinion poll which showed the SPA to be 5.3% behind the leading party. In May 2003, just before the elections, the SPA was only 1.2% behind.

In Wallonia and Brussels, opinion polls showed substantial progress for the PS. The socialists seemed to have put a stop to their downward drift. The Liberals and the CDH were predicted to gain approximately the same results as in 1999. Ecolo, however, was expected to lose support.

In this context, the French-speaking campaign was mainly focused on Ecolo's attitude to night flights, as well as on the bad economic forecast for the coming years. In 1999, the Verhofstadt government enjoyed high economic growth. It was possible to agree to requests from each member of the coalition. The figures for the coming years were less optimistic. Hard choices were going to have to be made.

The two main parties, the PS and the MR, hoped to govern together after the elections. But they had different opinions on how to manage the poor economic prospects. The Socialists put social security problems first (health, unemployment,

etc.). The Liberals on the other hand, were trying to reap electoral benefits out of a tax reduction plan.

The Chamber of Deputies

The results of the 2003 elections

On the evening of the 18 May 2003, the results were clear. The Socialists were the big winners in all three regions. The two Green parties, especially Agalev, were facing a traumatic defeat.

Table 1: Belgian Chamber of Deputies by party (18 May 2003)⁵

Party	Votes	% of Votes⁶	Seats (150)
VLD	1 009 223	15.36 (+1.11)	25 (+2)
SPA-Spirit	979 950	14.91 (+5.34)	23 (+9)
CD&V	870 749	13.25 (-0.70)	21 (-1)
Vlaams Blok	761 407	11.68 (+1.88)	18 (+3)
PS	855 992	13.02 (+2.76)	25 (+6)
MR	748 952	11.40 (+1.17)	24 (+6)
CDH	359 660	5.47 (-0.46)	8 (-2)
NV-A	201 399	3.06 (-2.48)	1 (-7)
Ecolo	201 118	3.06 (-4.37)	4 (-7)
Agalev	162 205	2.47 (-4.43)	0 (-9)
FN	130 012	1.98 (+0.51)	1 (0)
Others	285 524	4.34 (+0.31)	0 (0)

Notes: Eligible voters: 7 570 637; Turnout: 91.62% (Compulsory vote)⁷

Source: The Belgian Ministry of the Interior, <http://elections2003.belgium.be>

The Flemish Socialists of SPA-Spirit had the biggest increase in votes. They were back to their strong 1987 results. They also gained nine new seats, up to 23 deputies. The PS had higher scores than in 1999 and 1995. For the first time, this party won an election after being part of the government. The Socialists became the biggest Belgian political family in terms of votes. But the Liberal group kept the pole position in terms of seats.

Therefore, the Liberals can also be considered to have won in 2003. Both Liberal parties reached their best score ever. The VLD was the biggest Flemish, and therefore Belgian, political party. But the second was now the SPA and no longer the CD&V.

Table 2: Belgian Chamber of Deputies by political family (18 May 2003)⁸

Political family	Votes	% of Votes ⁹	Seats (150)
SPA-Spirit / PS	1 835 942	27.93 (+8.10)	48 (+15)
VLD / MR	1 758 175	26.76 (+2.28)	49 (+8)
CD&V / CDH	1 230 409	18.82 (-1.16)	29 (-3)
Agalev / Ecolo	363 323	5.53 (-8.80)	4 (-16)
Extreme right (VB&FN)	891 419	13.66 (+2.39)	19 (+3)
NVA	201 399	3.06 (-2.48)	1 (-7)
Others	285 524	4.34 (+0.31)	0 (0)

Notes: Eligible voters: 7 570 637; Turnout: 91.62% (Mandatory vote).

Source: The Belgian Ministry of the Interior, <http://elections2003.belgium.be>.

The Christian Democrats continued to lose ground. They lost 3 seats and 1.16% of the vote countrywide. Previously 1999 had been their worst ever result, but 2003 was worse still. The CD&V had lost its first place in 1999, four years later they were third, and the gap between them and the first party had increased. Soon after the elections, their president Stefaan De Clerck resigned. For the CDH, the situation was no better. They lost two seats and 0.46%.

But the biggest decline was that of the Green family. In one election, they lost all the progress they had made over 20 years of existence. Agalev had slipped back to its results of 1981 and Ecolo to its results of 1987 and 1991. For Agalev, things were even worse. They were under the legal threshold of 5% in the districts of Antwerp and of East Flanders. In the four other districts where Agalev was present, they were under the effective threshold.¹⁰ The party lost all of its nine seats in the Chamber of Deputies and failed to gain any Senate seats.

Due to its poor showing, Agalev will not profit from the legal funding of parties. To be eligible for this financial assistance, a party must have at least one deputy and one senator. The N-VA with only one deputy is in the same situation as Agalev. In contrast, the FN now has two senators and one deputy. The French-speaking extreme right-wing party will therefore profit from public funding.¹¹

The 2003 parliamentary elections were a good result for the extreme right. The Vlaams Blok won three more seats. In Wallonia and Brussels, the FN had a good result without even campaigning. In 1999, a split between the FN and the New Front of Belgium (FNB) had lessened their impact. Now, the FN seems to gather most of the extreme-right votes. The threat from the extreme right is growing with their new access to public funding.

The Senate

The federal elections also selected the new Senate. The upper chamber is composed of 40 indirectly-elected senators, 21 senators from the parliaments of the three linguistic communities (10 Flemish, 10 French-speaking and 1 German-speaking) and 10 co-opted senators designated by the parties.

Table 3: Belgian Senate by party (18 May 2003)

Party	Votes	% of Votes ¹²	Elected senators (40)	Co-opted senators (10)	Indirect senators (21)
VLD	1 007 868	15.38 (+0.01)	7 (+1)	2	3
SP.A-Spirit	1 013 560	15.47 (+6.59)	7 (+3)	2	3
CD&V	832 849	12.71 (-2.30)	6 (0)	1	2
PS	840 908	12.84 (+3.19)	6 (+2)	2	2
VL.Blok	741 940	11.32 (+1.91)	5 (+1)	1	4
MR	795 757	12.15 (+1.58)	5 (0)	1	4
CDH	362 705	5.54 (-0.49)	2 (-1)	0	2
NV-A	200 273	3.06 (-2.07)	0 (-2)	0	0
Ecolo	208 868	3.19 (-4.21)	1 (-2)	0	1
Agalev	161 024	2.46 (-4.62)	0 (-3)	0	0
FN	147 305	2.25 (+0.75)	1 (+1)	1	0
Others	166 454	2.54 (-0.38)	0 (0)	0	0

Notes: Eligible voters: 7 570 637; Turnout: 91.6% (Mandatory vote).

Source: The Belgian Ministry of the Interior, <http://elections2003.belgium.be>

In the Senate, the SP.A is the strongest party electorally with a 5,692 vote lead over the VLD. But both parties have the same number of seats. As to the other parties there are no notable differences in comparison to the Chamber of Deputies.

The Flemish Ecologists (Agalev) have lost all access to Parliament. The SP.A chose a member of Agalev as one of its designated senators. This nomination can be seen as the first step towards an attempt by the SP.A to form an alliance with Agalev in the future.

Clearly, overall, the Socialists and Liberals were the winners. Discussions for a blue-red coalition got underway without delay. The King appointed Elio Di Rupo, the president of the PS, to sound out the parties. Subsequently, the outgoing prime minister was designated to direct the discussions.

The talks were longer and more complicated than in 1999. In 1999, the Rainbow coalition was set up after only 29 days. This was the swiftest coalition formation since 1966. The promptness can be explained by the desire to put the Christian Democrats on the opposition benches, as well as by the necessity to solve the dioxin crisis.

The average time needed to form a post-electoral government has been 67.7 days since 1966 (Dumont and De Winter, 1999). In 2003, the dire economic forecasts created a need for hard choices. The coalition agreement went into considerable details in order to avoid any further problems down the road. Finally, after nearly two months the result was Verhofstadt II, the second Socialist – Liberal government in Belgian history, and the first since 1958.

This government was already in the starting blocks for the 2004 regional and European elections. The coalition agreement postponed the difficult decisions such as

the possible transfer of some activities of the national railway company to the regions.

The Socialists and the Liberals were ready to walk a dangerous path leading to the next ballot. But while the government had to be cautious and avoid any public disputes in order to keep the lead for 2004, one wondered if the opposition parties were ready to challenge them. The Greens remained weak. Agalev (with Dua¹³) and Ecolo (with the trio Huytbroeck – Javaux – Brouir) both had new leaders but had not made headway. Agalev changed its name to Groen!. The Christian Democrats kept looking for a solution to their decline. In June 2003, Stefaan De Clerck, president of the CD&V resigned. Yves Leterme, former front-bencher of the party, was elected on the 30 June. In September 2003, the CDH re-elected Joëlle Milquet for a second term as president. Only the Vlaams Blok seemed able to mount a strong opposition.

One year later, the same questions on the stability of the 'purple coalition' remain relevant. The months leading up to the June 2004 regional (and European) elections were particularly quiet in terms of major governmental decisions. Most difficult debates were postponed until after the regional vote. Two issues illustrated perfectly this government's strategy. The first was the demand from the express mail company DHL to be authorised for more night flights over Brussels and its periphery. This enquiry was made in the second half of 2003. Yet, the federal government did not discuss the problem before September 2004. The second illustration could be found in the growing tensions between the Flemish and French-speaking communities. The new 'purple coalition' took the option to sideline such claims for one year, promising that a great forum was going to be held in October 2004.

This tactic was not successful, at least from an electoral point of view. Compared to their performances in 2003, the four governmental parties, apart from the PS (French-speaking Socialists), lost votes in the 2004 regional and European elections. Moreover, the Christian Democrats appeared to be back on track. They entered regional governments in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. In Flanders, the CD&V regained the leadership it lost in 1999. In Wallonia and Brussels, a coalition agreement was settled between the CDH and the PS leaving the MR and Ecolo on the opposition benches. As a consequence, the governing coalitions were made of different parties at regional and federal levels.

Such divergent coalitions are not infrequent in most federal states. Nevertheless, in Belgium, the national and regional governments normally were composed of the same major partners before 2004. These so-called asymmetric majorities seem to be threatening the survival of the 'purple coalition'. Tensions between Socialists and Liberals grew; all issues postponed since 2003 are now on the agenda, and the Christian Democrats are ready to enter a new federal cabinet. However, a last element must be taken into account, namely the extreme right threat. In 2004, the Vlaams Blok became the second biggest party in Flanders and the latest polls ranked

it first. For many analysts, this peril is a major obstacle to a call for early federal elections.

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Notes

- 1 The Rainbow coalition was still in office at the regional levels in Flanders, the French-speaking Community and Wallonia. The regional elections were held in June 2004.
- 2 For more details on voting patterns at the 1999 elections, see Frogner and Aish – Van Vaerenbergh (2003).
- 3 The discovery of the dead bodies of Julie Lejeune, Mélissa Russo, An Marchal, Eefje Lambrecks and Loubna Benaïssa gave rise to an emotional wave among the Belgian population. This traumatism was expressed in the 'White March' on 20 October 1996. 300,000 Belgians demonstrated in the streets of Brussels. This march had no particular claim but expressed the mistrust of the State and its representatives (Rihoux and Walgrave, 1997).
- 4 The opposition in Antwerp is also composed of one councillor from the Volksunie.
- 5 For electoral results in Belgium, see <http://www.ulb.ac.be/soco/cevipol/>, Cevipol, Centre d'étude de la vie politique, ULB. Most electoral results in Europe can also be found on this website.
- 6 Differences with 1999 are between brackets.
- 7 See list List of Parties in the Appendix
- 8 For electoral results in Belgium, see <http://www.ulb.ac.be/soco/cevipol/>, Cevipol, Centre d'étude de la vie politique, ULB. Most electoral results in Europe can also be found on this website.
- 9 Differences with 1999 are between brackets.
- 10 The legal threshold of 5% is only effective in the districts of Antwerpen and of East Flanders. In the other districts less than 20 seats are distributed. Therefore, a party must poll more than 5% to get one seat.
- 11 The Belgian legislature amended this law on 20 January 2005. From that point on, a party needs one deputy in the Chamber of Representatives or one senator instead of one in both chambers to receive state funding.
- 12 Differences with 1999 are between brackets.
- 13 In June 2003, two weeks after the defeat, Dirk Holemans was appointed as new Agalev's leader. Only six months later, he resigned. Vera Dua was appointed as new party's president.

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