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Regional and European Election in Belgium: the Greens Still at Low Tide

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On the occasion of the federal, regional and European elections of 13th June 1999, the two Green parties in Belgium achieved wins that were exceptional by their own electoral standards and even more so in terms of Green party average results across Europe: 14.35% at the federal level and 16% at the European level. This remarkable election result enabled them to gain government positions in the Federal Executive and in several federalised entities. For four years, Ecolo (the French-speaking Green Party) and Agalev (its Dutch-speaking counterpart) together had eleven ministers in Belgian governments.

The Belgian Greens' experience in exercising power has already been analysed (Deschouwer & Buelens, 2003; Delwit & Hellings, 2004). In the federal elections of 18th May 2003, both Ecolo and Agalev suffered a severe election setback. Ecolo was left with only four seats and one senator, while Agalev lost all parliamentary representation at federal level (Hooghe & Rihoux, 2003; Delwit & van Haute, 2004).

Did the regional and European elections of 13th June 2004 confirm this spectacular voting decline, or did it on the contrary show a new change in voting patterns? This paper tries to answer that question, after first presenting the context.

A New Political Set-up

The new federal government was formed from the four parties that won the 2003 elections within a markedly equal balance of power between Socialists and Liberals. So the Greens returned to the opposition benches, at least at federal level. Indeed, both the French-speaking and the Dutch-speaking Greens chose to retain their participation in the governments of the federated entities.

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The federal government had the utmost difficulty in operating smoothly. There were at least three reasons for this:

1. The electoral calendar. Given the close overlap between federal political life and the federated bodies, it was clear that the federal executive would only be able to work at full capacity after the regional elections.
2. The coalition. The Socialists very much wanted to 'break away' from the first Verhofstadt government, given that the new electoral ratio was much more favourable to them. The Liberals, on the other hand, wanted to give the second Verhofstadt government the hallmark of continuity. These different viewpoints were a source of constant tensions between the two components of the federal coalition.
3. The economy. Belgium's economic situation was not particularly encouraging, and major choices had to be made. This was complicated further by the prospect of the regional and European elections.

How the Green Parties Adapted

In the months following the election of May 2003, the two Green parties were unable to react. A major reason for this was the fact that one of the first consequences of their election disaster was a substantial loss of funds (Hooghe, Maddens & Noppe, 2004). As is often the case following an electoral defeat, the two parties underwent changes in their leadership.

In Ecolo, the Federal Secretariat was slow to take the steps that were necessary. In July 2003, a new team of three secretaries – Jean-Michel Javaux, Evelyne Huytebroeck and Claude Brouir – was elected with 61.9% of the votes.

In Agalev, three party executives soon handed in their resignations: Jos Geysels (Political Secretary) and the two ministers from the Flemish regional government, Vera Dua and Mieke Vogels. The former was replaced by Dirk Holemans; the new ministers appointed were Ludo Sannen and Adelheid Byttebier. In November 2003, Holemans handed over to Vera Dua, who was promoted to chairperson. For his part, Ludo Sannen, who disagreed with the party's decision, gave up his minister's portfolio to the former Vice-Prime Minister, Jef Tavernier.

Agalev took the further step, on 14th November 2003, of changing its name to *Groen!* ('Green!'). With respect to positioning, Groen! refused at that time any form of agreement with the Flemish Socialist party – in particular, any prospect of an electoral coalition for the 18th May 2004 election. This decision led Ludo Sannen to resign from his position as minister; it also led to the departure of Senator Jacynta De Roeck, who decided to stand as an independent.

To a large extent, the results obtained by the Green parties in the regional and European elections confirmed the disastrous federal election result of 18th May 2004. However, several significant nuances should be underlined.

In the European elections, the Green parties' share of the vote fell from 16% in 1999 to 8.69% in 2004. This score was, however, higher than that recorded

by the Green parties in the previous year's national elections (5.53%). This slight gain – especially in the vote for Groen! – enabled the Green parties to retain two MEPs: Bart Staes (Groen!) and Pierre Jonckheer (Ecolo).

At the regional level, Ecolo experienced a particularly tough election in Wallonia. It won 8.52% of the vote, which was a slight improvement on the 2003 figure. But due to the electoral system, Ecolo emerged from the Walloon elections with only three MPs. (See Table 1.)

In Brussels, Ecolo won 8.35% of the vote and seven seats – which was a sharp drop from the 1999 level, even though there were a greater number of seats to be won. It was also a poorer result than in the legislative elections a year earlier.

Paradoxically, however, the party maintained a good political and media existence in Brussels. For instance, Ecolo was allowed to become part of the regional government within the 'Olivier' coalition (PS-CDH-Ecolo), while this was the only executive it had not belonged to in 1999! As a result, for public opinion and the media, the party appeared to be riding a positive trend in Brussels, even though it was there that Ecolo recorded its poorest results in 2004. (See Table 2.)

In Flanders, without achieving any notable results, Groen! did succeed in saving the essentials of its political presence. The Flemish Green party

Table 1. Electoral results in the Walloon Regional Election (2004)

	Votes	Percentage of votes	Seats	Percentage of seats
PS	727,781	36.9	34	45
MR	478,999	24.3	20	27
CDH	347,348	17.6	14	19
Ecolo	167,916	8.5	3	4
FN	160,130	8.1	4	5
Others	88,779	4.6		

Table 2. Electoral results in the Brussels Regional Election (2004)

	Votes	Percentage of votes	Seats	Percentage of seats
PS	130,462	28.8	26	29
MR	127,122	28.0	25	28
CDH	55,078	12.1	10	11
Ecolo	37,908	8.4	7	8
VI.Blok	21,297	4.7	6	7
FN	21,195	4.7	4	4
VLD-Vivant	12,443	2.7	4	4
SPA-Spirit	11,052	2.44	3	3
CD&V-NVA	10,482	2.3	3	3
Groen!	6,132	1.4	1	1
Others	19,883	4.5	0	0

Table 3. Electoral results in the Flanders Regional Election (2004)

	Votes	Percentage of votes	Seats	Percentage of seats
CD & V-NVA	1051,255	26.3	34	29
Vl. Blok	960,680	24.0	29	25
VLD-Vivant	791,974	19.8	24	20
SPA-Spirit	788,633	19.7	24	20
Groen!	302,162	7.6	6	5
UF	43,391	1.1	1	1
Others	65,359	1.6	0	0

succeeded in reaching the 5% threshold in four provinces, which meant having six MPs. (See Table 3.)

Groen! benefited from the shift of a proportion of left-wing voters, who did not want to see it disappear. Significantly, a series of prominent individuals from various political leanings urged people to vote for Groen! because of its value to the Flanders and Belgian party systems. The party itself had campaigned over this aspect: "It's up to you" (*De Bal ligt in uw kamp*) was one of the slogans of the campaign.

In Brussels, thanks to the mechanism of the list groupings, Groen! succeeded in keeping one regional deputy: the outgoing Community minister, Adelheid Bytebier.

The Ecolo and Groen! electoral map-out in the 2004 regional elections (see Figure 1) confirms some well-known demographic features. Ecolo and Groen! are mainly urban parties with major results in urban areas (especially university cities). On the other hand, its penetration into the semi-urban outer regions is much more complex, especially in the older and traditionally Catholic regions of Belgium. However, the former old industrial base resists the Green parties' advance.

In the Wake of the Election

In some respects, the Green position was of critical importance after the elections. In Flanders, given the tremendous gains made by the extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok, only Groen! participation in the Flemish government could prevent the formation of a traditional tripartite coalition between Liberals, Socialists and Christian Democrats.

However, very quickly and resolutely, the party turned down all opportunities to stay in power. The outcome was the formation of an executive from the three main political parties, with the danger that the alternative to this government would be primarily the Vlaams Blok rather than Groen!

In the Brussels region, despite its new setback, Ecolo agreed to enter into an executive that formed an alternative to that of the two last legislative periods, where the executive had brought together Liberals and Socialists on the French-speaking side. To form this alternative majority (called the 'Olivier' in

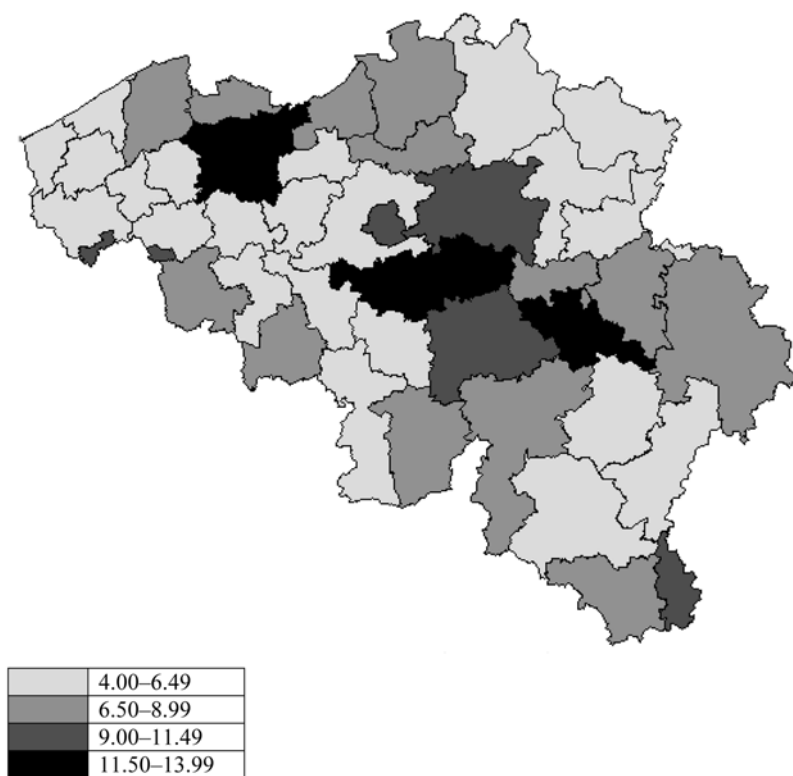


Figure 1. Green parties in Belgium (regional elections of June 2004)

reference to Italy), Ecolo was in a privileged position in spite of its weak electoral clout. Indeed, the French-speaking Greens were indispensable in setting up a coalition that could outweigh the opposition Liberals.

In Wallonia and in the French-speaking Community, the parliamentary insignificance of Ecolo and the weight of the Socialist party have kept the Greens from having any claims or influence in the make-up of the two executives. The Green party did not even secure enough votes to form a parliamentary group. As a result, the Ecolo representatives did not secure any voting rights in the various Walloon parliamentary committees.

Prospects

Over the last two years, the two Belgian Green parties have experienced two particularly trying elections. The May 2003 federal elections and the June 2004 regional elections led Ecolo and Groen! to the brink of collapse. Starting from the remarkable election results of 1999 and a hitherto unheard-of level of political influence (with participation in several different executives), Ecolo and

Groen! were placed in a difficult position by the decline in their share of the vote. The loss of a large number of parliamentary representatives and the almost complete ending of Green-run ministries led to a significant loss of professional political human capital. The notable collapse of public funding limited Ecolo's options – and worse still, those of Groen! – still further.

Nonetheless, even though the Greens were on the brink of dissolution, they did not descend that far. Ecolo and Groen! were able to retain a minimum of funds and influence in order to maintain their hope of bouncing back. Their more or less general return to the opposition benches at all levels of power ended up enabling Ecolo and Groen! to regain their liberty and find again the correct tone that they had lacked for five years.

However, this new status should not be allowed to conceal two vital and intimately connected questions that the Greens have to face: what do they want to do, and how do they intend to do it? For the Greens, identity and ambitions – most notably the relationship to political office – remain ambiguous issues and topics. Ecolo and Groen! will undoubtedly have to make conceptual progress in this area.

Moreover, the issue of resources is also crucial. Their constitution and operating methods have led the Greens first and foremost to prioritise 'internal survival', especially in the case of Ecolo. The first group of 'customers' to be satisfied is the assembly of members, despite their limited number. Even if this is part of the heritage of Green parties and, to some extent, is essential to their identity, such an approach does not fit the political goals of electoral success and power in a representative democracy, which is *a fortiori* a 'consociative' society (Lijphart 1969).

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