Hard times for governing parties: the 2019 federal elections in Belgium

Jean-Benoit Pilet

Published online: 30 Apr 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 63

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

Hard times for governing parties: the 2019 federal elections in Belgium

Jean-Benoit Pilet

Department of Political Science, Cevipol Research Center, Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Bruxelles, Belgium

ABSTRACT
On 26 May 2019, European, federal and regional elections in Belgium were held. The main electoral results showed the decline of ruling parties (N-VA, MR, Open VLD, CD&V) and the rise of radical parties on the right (Vlaams Belang) and left (PVDA-PTB). These results have opened a period of deep government instability with very long negotiations to form coalitions at the regional level, and even more so at the federal level. It eventually took the COVID-19 crisis outbreak for a new government to be formed. However, the new minority government obtained external support from six parties for a period of six months only. Over the last decade, forming a coalition has proven itself to be more and more difficult in Belgium. The rise of extreme parties and the decline of mainstream parties are making it even harder. If the trend holds, one might have to question the future capacity of Belgium to form sustainable coalitions.

On 26 May 2019, three elections were organised in Belgium: federal elections, regional elections in the three regions of the country (plus in the small German-speaking community) and EU elections.[1] These elections were the first elections since 2014, except for the local elections of October 2018. It was the longest period without any parliamentary elections in the post-war period because federal elections were held at least every four years.

The report will present how this triple vote has translated into a real reconfiguration of the Belgian political landscape. Governing parties have all lost significantly. The erosion of traditional parties (liberals, socialists and Christian-democrats) has continued. Opposition parties have all gained votes, but the most significant electoral gains have been for the radical parties both on the left (PTB-PVDA) and on the right (Vlaams Belang). The new political landscape is extremely dispersed and more

polarised. It is making the formation of government coalitions extremely complicated at the federal level – which is not unusual – but also at regional levels. Following the 2019 election, the records for the longest government formation period have been broken both in Wallonia and in Flanders. At the federal level, it eventually took about 300 days (from the 26 May2019 elections) to form a new government in the extraordinary context of the COVID-19 health crisis.

This election note is divided into four parts. The first one reviews the political situation before the 2019 elections. The second presents the dynamics of the electoral campaign. The third part discusses the results of the elections. Finally, the fourth elaborates on the long process of trying to form new governments at the federal and regional levels.

Background to the 2019 elections

The Belgian party system is characterised, first, by a strong fragmentation. In total, 13 parties are represented in the federal parliament. This fragmentation is, however, primarily due to the co-existence of two parallel party systems – a Flemish one and a Francophone one – that for a large part mirror each other. On each side of the linguistic border, we find parties belonging to seven party families. The parties range from the most left wing to the most right wing, there are those at the radical left (PVDA in Flanders and PTB in Francophone Belgium), social-democrats (SP.a and PS), Greens (Groen and Ecolo), Christian-democrats (CD&V and CDH), liberals (Open VLD and MR), regionalists (N-VA and Défi[2]), and radical right parties (Vlaams Belang in Flanders and Parti populaire in Francophone Belgium).

The strengths of the party families, however, diverge quite significantly in the two language areas. Flanders leans to the right. The largest party is N-VA, followed by CD&V and Open VLD. On the Francophone side, the largest party is PS, followed by MR, CDH and Ecolo. The two party systems also diverge on the extreme right. The radical left won a few seats in Francophone Belgium but none in Flanders. The Flemish radical right (Vlaams Belang) won only three seats in the federal parliament but was historically stronger (around 10–15 per cent of Flemish votes). On the Francophone side, Parti populaire only gained one seat and its predecessor (Front national) never acquired much more than 5 per cent of the Francophone vote.

This difference between a right-leaning Flanders and a left-leaning Francophone Belgium used to translate into broad coalitions uniting centre-left and centre-right parties in federal government for most of the post-war period. The government formed to govern Belgium in 2014 was in that respect very unique. It was led by a Francophone Prime Minister, Charles Michel, coming from the centre-right Mouvement réformateur

(MR). MR was associated with three Flemish parties, all leaning to the right: N-VA, Open VLD and CD&V. The coalition was probably the most right-wing in Belgium post-war history. Moreover, it was based upon a solid majority on the Flemish side (65 out of 87 Flemish MPs in the federal Chamber of Representatives) but upon a clear minority among Francophone federal MPs (20 out of 63).

At the regional level, a centre-right coalition made of N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD was formed in Flanders. In the Brussels-Capital Region, a centre-left coalition formed, consisting of PS, CDH, Défi, SP.A, Open VLD and CD&V. In Wallonia, initially a centre-left government led by PS (in association with CDH) was formed. However, this government was brought down in June 2017 and was replaced for the last two years of the legislative term by the centre-right coalition of MR and CDH.[3]

The right-leaning coalition at federal level was extremely polarising during its five years of existence. It raised very strong opposition, especially in Francophone Belgium, from leftist parties (PS, SP.a, Groen, Ecolo, PTB-PVDA). Tensions were also quite high among the three Flemish parties of the ruling coalition. In particular, debates on immigration were strong due to many claims and tweets from the State Secretary on Immigration, Theo Francken (N-VA) and from the president of the N-VA, Bart De Wever. These tensions eventually led in December 2018 to a decision from N-VA (see also next section) to leave the ruling coalition because the party was refusing to endorse the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (also referred to as the UN Marrakech Pact) that the three other parties of the government were supporting. This clash led the Prime minister, Charles Michel, to resign on 21 December 2018. From that moment, until the federal vote of 26 May 2019, Belgium was governed by a minority caretaker government still led by Charles Michel and composed of MR, CD&V and Open VLD.

The campaign

The electoral campaign preceding the federal, regional and European elections of 2019 was a very long one. It actually started just after the local elections of 14 October 2018. These elections were characterised by electoral gains for three party families: the Greens (in the entire country), the radical left (mostly in Wallonia and Brussels) and the radical right (mostly in Flanders). In parallel, liberals, social democrats, Christian democrats, but also the Flemish nationalists of N-VA, lost votes in most municipalities.

From that moment onwards, the losing parties opened the electoral campaign with the clear intention to win back votes from those parties that had gained in the local elections. In Francophone Belgium, PS was

mainly targeting the radical left PTB and, though to a lesser extent, Ecolo. Ecolo was also a target for MR and CDH. They had observed that the Francophone Greens had also done very well in several municipalities that used to be dominated by both parties. The interpretation was that Ecolo was able to attract both centre-left and centre-right voters. In Flanders, following the same interpretation of the local elections, Groen was also a target both for SP.a on the left and for Open VLD and CD&V, but also N-VA on the right. Yet, N-VA was also greatly concerned by the threat it faced from Vlaams Belang. In 2014, N-VA had won many voters from Vlaams Belang by adopting a hard stance on immigration (Deschouwer *et al.* 2015). The fear of the Flemish nationalists was that these voters would go back to Vlaams Belang. And the gains of the later party in the local elections was interpreted as a confirmation of these shifts from N-VA to VB.

With these elements of interpretation of the local elections in mind, the campaign was animated by three main lines of conflict. The PS, chronologically, led the first. The Francophone social democrats tried to demonstrate that a vote for the radical left was a lost vote, as PTB was not really willing to govern. PS opened negotiations with PTB in a few municipalities but the coalition formation attempts between the two failed. PS tried to frame it as evidence of PTB's incapacity to govern. In Flanders, however, the radical left (PVDA) eventually entered into coalition with SP.a in one municipality (Zelzate).

The second line of conflict in the campaign was centred on the Greens. In addition to their electoral gains in the local elections, Ecolo and Groen were pushed by several large demonstrations of Belgian citizens calling for more ambition in fighting climate change. Several marches were organised in Brussels between November and February, gathering more than 50,000 participants in December and January. In addition, high-school students went on school-strike every Thursday between January and May 2019, with gatherings of over 30,000 students marching in various cities in January. In order to avoid these mobilizations translating into major electoral gains for Ecolo and Groen, the two parties came under strong attack from the other parties, and especially from MR (and later CDH) in Francophone Belgium, and from N-VA in Flanders. Right-wing parties were claiming that they stood for eco-realism with efforts to fight climate change that would be less costly economically and based more upon technological developments. According to these parties, proposals to fight climate change by Groen and Ecolo would lead to economic recession and to major tax increases.

Finally, the third conflict in the campaign centred on immigration. N-VA had won many votes from Vlaams Belang in 2014 and was capitalising on that by framing itself as the party really willing to reduce immigration flows towards Belgium. The party was in charge of immigration in the

federal government with State Secretary Theo Francken. Francken was one of the most prominent figures in the public debate, communicating his punch-line on the need for harder immigration policies in many tweets and interviews with the news media. However, the results of the local elections gave the impression that it was not paying off and that voters were going back to Vlaams Belang. N-VA then decided to re-affirm its strict views on immigration by blocking the support of the Belgian government for the UN Marrakech Pact. Their decision was badly received by their coalition partners who insisted that Belgium should sign this UN pact. It eventually led, as explained above, to N-VA quitting the federal government and to the end of that coalition.

The election results

The election results are characterised by four main trends that, to a large extent, confirmed what had been observed for the local elections of October 2018 (see Table 1). The first is the electoral defeat of all four parties that were part of the federal government (N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD and MR). Altogether, they lost 22 seats in the federal parliament. They also lost their parliamentary majority and hence could not renew their coalition after the 2019 elections.

Parties in opposition at federal level, but in government at regional level (such as PS and CDH) also lost votes and seats. Yet their losses, as well as the losses of MR, CD&V and Open VLD, could also be read within another framework: the downward trend of the three traditional party families (liberals, social democrats and Christian democrats) over

Table 1. Election results for the Belgian federal elections (Chamber of Representatives) in 2019 and 2014.

	2019			2014		
	Seats	Votes	% votes	Seats	Votes	% votes
N-VA	25	1,086,787	16.03	33	1,366,397	20.26
PS	20	641,623	9.46	23	787,058	11.67
CD&V	12	602,520	8.89	18	783,040	11.61
OpenVLD	12	579,334	8.54	14	659,571	9.78
MR	14	512,825	7.56	20	650,260	9.64
SP.a	9	455,034	6.71	13	595,466	8.83
Groen	8	413,836	6.10	6	358,947	5.32
CDH	5	250,861	3.70	9	336,184	4.98
PTB-PVDA	12	584,621	8.62	2	251,276	3.72
Vlaams Belang	18	810,177	11.95	3	247,738	3.67
Ecolo	13	416,452	6.14	6	222,524	3.30
Défi	2	150,394	2.22	2	121,384	1.80
Parti populaire	0	75,096	1.11	1	102,581	1.52
Others	0	201,382	2.97	0	263,037	3.90
Turnout			88.70			89.68

Source: Official election results, https://elections2019.belgium.be/en.

the last decades. In total, the six parties of these three traditional party families lost 25 seats, and won less than 50 per cent of all valid votes (44.9%) for the first time since WWII.

The decline of traditional parties, but also of N-VA, benefited all parties that were on the opposition benches at federal and regional levels. The only exception is the Francophone radical-right Parti populaire, which lost its single seat. Together, Vlaams Belang, Ecolo, Groen and PTB-PVDA gained 30 extra seats in the federal Chamber of Representatives compared to 2014.

The gains were more significant for radical parties on both ends of the left–right cleavage. Vlaams Belang has been the party that made the most substantive progress in the 2019 federal elections. It more than tripled its share of votes and won 18 seats, 15 more than 5 years earlier. Vlaams Belang became the second largest party in Belgium in terms of votes, and the fourth (second in Flanders) in terms of seats. The radical-left party PTB-PVDA[4] made a significant breakthrough. While winning 2 seats in two Walloon provinces in 2014, five years later, they won 12 seats, in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. And they more than doubled their vote share.

Finally, the two Green parties, Groen and Ecolo, also did quite well in 2019. They won 21 seats (+9) and increased their vote share significantly (+3.58 percentage points). However, these results, especially in Flanders, were below their electoral performance in the 2018 local elections and below what the last pre-election polls had suggested. In the weeks following the elections, the lagging-behind expectations led to debates within the two parties, and especially within Groen.

A few weeks after the election, two studies were issued presenting some preliminary analyses based upon post-election surveys. The first covered Wallonia and Flanders (not Brussels) and was produced by the interuniversity consortium, Represent.[5] In Flanders, it confirmed that the main vote transfers were from N-VA to Vlaams Belang (18.5% of 2014 N-VA voters went to VB in 2019). PVDA made gains from SP.a and Groen, but also from N-VA. Finally, Groen gained mostly from SP.a. For the Flemish Greens, their limited progress in 2019 appears to be explained by two factors. First, they lost a good number of voters to PVDA. Second, the Represent study also analyses changes in voter intentions between one month before the vote (April) and Election Day. It appears from such analyses that Groen lost a third of potential voters during the last month of the campaign. And these voters went primarily to SP.a. Moreover, Groen attracted few voters that were undecided as to which party to vote for when they were asked in April 2019.

In Wallonia, the main vote transfers were from PS to PTB. PTB also won a few voters from Ecolo. The gains of Ecolo were more dispersed. The Greens gained voters from PS but also from MR and CDH. It confirms Ecolo's capacity to attract voters across the left–right cleavage. Yet, like for Groen, Ecolo lost a good share of those voters during the campaign, who had previously declared one month before the election that they had the intention to vote for this party (26.5%), while it gained very few new voters in the last weeks before Election Day (13.2%). The main beneficiaries of this process were PS and MR. Ecolo also attracted rather few voters who had declared themselves undecided in April 2019.

Finally, regarding Brussels, an exit-poll study conducted by the Cevipol research centre of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) delivers some insights based upon a sample of respondents.[6] It confirms the main elements observed in Wallonia regarding Francophone parties. Ecolo made significant electoral gains in Brussels because it was able to attract voters from across the board, from PTB, PS, CDH and MR. PTB won mostly from PS, and a bit from Ecolo. There is also a significant shift from MR to Défi. Figures regarding Dutch-speaking parties are not robust statistically as they attract few voters in Brussels.[7]

In addition to these insights into vote transfers, the research projects referred to provide some information on the main policy preferences and priorities of Belgian voters on the occasion of the 2019 elections. In terms of policy preferences, Flemish voters lean to the centre-right, while Walloon voters lean to the centre-left, but the gap is much smaller than is often claimed. The real differences are in terms of specific policy priorities. Immigration comes first in Flanders, followed by social security, taxation and the environment. In Wallonia, employment comes first, followed by the environment, social security, taxation and immigration. It appears that the strengths of N-VA and Vlaams Belang in Flanders could rather be explained by the salience of immigration among Flemish voters. By contrast, in Wallonia it is lower on the agenda and anti-immigration parties won no seats at all. Socio-economic issues and the environment are more salient, which could explain that PS remains the largest Francophone party, and that Ecolo and PTB made the most significant electoral gains. Finally, it is interesting to note that a new constitutional reform is a top priority for 6.1% of Flemish voters and for 4.7% of Walloon voters.

Government formation

The first consequence of the 2019 elections was a very fragmented party system, with great differences in party strength between Flanders and

Francophone Belgium. In the North of the Country, N-VA came first followed by Vlaams Belang. In Francophone Belgium, PS came first followed by MR but with the most significant electoral gains recorded by Ecolo and PTB. Moreover, during the campaign, several parties took clear positions regarding which other party they were not prepared to govern with. All francophone parties, and all Flemish parties except N-VA confirmed the 'cordon sanitaire' around Vlaams Belang. Since the early 1990s, all parties have rejected any coalition being formed with the radical right. All centre and centre-right parties (N-VA, Open VLD, CD&V, MR and CDH) also declared that they refused any coalition with the radical left. N-VA declared that it would not enter into any federal government with PS and Ecolo, except to negotiate a new constitutional reform in order to transfer most policy competences to the regional level. Ecolo and PS also declared that they would not enter any coalition with N-VA.

In this complex situation, two main potential coalitions emerged. The first would be a coalition composed of the largest party in each of the two language groups (N-VA in Flanders, PS in Francophone Belgium). Around that core, a few other parties would join. The most likely were MR, CD&V, Open VLD, or SP.A. This coalition was strongly supported by Flemish parties, and especially by N-VA and CD&V that were calling for a coalition based upon a majority of parliamentary seats in both language groups, something that can only be achieved with both N-VA and PS on board. The other coalition that was discussed would be composed of OpenVLD, CD&V, SP.a and Groen on the Flemish side, and of PS, MR, Ecolo and CDH on the Francophone side. Yet, there are two problems with this coalition. First, it would hold a minority among Flemish MPs and would exclude the two largest parties in Flanders, N-VA and Vlaams Belang. It is not legally impossible but very hard politically. Second, one party, CDH, had already publicly announced a few days after the 2019 elections that the party would stay in the opposition.

Over several months, up until March 2020, all negotiations were blocked with respect to both formulas. PS always rejected any government with N-VA. CD&V and parts of Open VLD rejected a coalition that would not hold a majority of seats in the Flemish language group, which would be the case without N-VA (knowing that neither Vlaams Belang, nor PVDA would be considered as possible coalition partners). The coalition formation process was not only very slow, it was also quite unusual because parties never really started to negotiate on a government programme. Several government *informateurs* were nominated by the King of Belgium, but they were never able to convince enough parties to start negotiations to form a government. Eventually, the COVID-19 crisis

forced political parties to form a government. The incumbent minority government composed of MR, Open VLD and CD&V, led by Sophie Wilmes, obtained external support from PS, SP.A, Groen, Ecolo CDH and Défi. N-VA, PTB-PVDA and Vlaams Belang did not provide their support. The new government was appointed on 17 March 2020, and obtained the support of a majority in parliament on 19 March 2020. However, the agreement between the nine parties backing this government was that its programme should only deal with the emergency situation of the COVI-19 crisis. No other policy or reform should be initiated. Moreover, the coalition led by Sophie Wilmes was only installed for six months. New negotiations and a new vote in parliament have been planned for September 2020.

The formation of regional coalitions was also much more complex than has been the case in the past, or at least it has turned out to be more complex in the two largest regions of the country, Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders, N-VA opened negotiations with Vlaams Belang. However, the two parties do not hold a parliamentary majority and all other Flemish parties confirmed that they would not govern with Vlaams Belang. As a consequence, at the end of the summer, N-VA publicly announced that a government with Vlaams Belang could not be formed. Negotiations to renew the incumbent Flemish regional government were then launched. Finally, on 30 September 2019, N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD reached an agreement to form a new regional government led by Minister-President Jan Jambon (N-VA). It took them 127 days, beating by far what used to be the record for the longest period to form a government in Flanders (61 days).

In Wallonia, things were also complicated. PS as the largest party took the lead. It first tried to open negotiations with Ecolo and PTB to form a left-wing majority coalition but PTB quickly decided to reject any coalition that would still comply with EU budgetary rules. PTB's demand was not acceptable for PS and Ecolo. PS and Ecolo then tried to form a minority government but failed after all other parties (MR, CDH and PTB) rejected their proposal. Eventually, on 11 July 2019, PS, MR and Ecolo started negotiations to form a government but discussions were very complicated. Finally, on 13 September, a new Walloon government composed of PS, MR and Ecolo, and led by Minister-President Elio Di Rupo, was formed. In Wallonia as well, the record for the longest period to form a regional government was broken. It took 110 days in 2019, while the previous record was set at 58 days.

By contrast, forming a regional government was relatively swift in the two smallest regional entities of the country. First, in the tiny German-speaking community of Belgium (ca. 75,000 inhabitants), the incumbent

coalition composed of ProDG, PFF and SP was renewed. Second, in Brussels-Capital Region, talks to form a coalition between PS, Ecolo, Défi, Groen, OpenVLD and SP.a started in late June and led to a new government being installed already on 18 July 2019.

As discussed above, except for these two regional entities, government formation had turned out to be extremely complicated. The records for the longest period without a government were broken in Flanders and in Wallonia. Although at the federal level, the record of 541 days from 2010–2011 was not beaten, taking about 300 days to form a government and with a caretaker government already being in place since the end of 2018, the period was also very irregular. More importantly, having a caretaker government is becoming a frequent feature of Belgian politics with definitely more political science research needed to examine its consequences (see Pilet 2012).

Notes

1. For other recent reports in the Elections in Context series see Aylott and Bolin 2019; Durovic 2019; Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019; and Garzia 2019.
2. Défi and N-VA are both historically regionalist parties but they have diverged significantly over the last decades. N-VA is calling for the independence of Flanders in the long run, while Défi stands mostly for the defence of the rights of French speakers in Brussels, but also in the Flemish areas around Brussels and is trying to settle in Wallonia. The two parties also diverge greatly on the other cleavages and salient issues. N-VA is a right-wing conservative party with quite a hard stance on immigration. Défi is a centre-right liberal party with a relatively open stance on immigration.
3. For the sake of completeness, there are also separate institutions for the language communities: the government of the French-speaking community was led by a coalition between PS and CDH while the one of the Dutch-speaking community was a coalition of ProDG (regionalists), PFF (liberals) and SP (social-democrats).
4. PTB-PVDA is the last nation-wide party in Belgium. Its Flemish (PVDA) and Francophone (PTB) wings form a single parliamentary party group and have a single party headquarters and party leader (Peter Mertens).
5. Represent is composed of political scientists from the University of Antwerp (Stefaan Walgrave), Université libre de Bruxelles (Emilie van Haute and Jean-Benoit Pilet), KU Leuven (Sofie Marien), Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Karen Celis and Kris Deschouwer), and UC Louvain (Benoît Rihoux, Virginie van Ingelgom, and Pierre Baudewyns).
6. The Cevipol study has been coordinated by Pascal Delwit. http://cevipol.ulb. ac.be/fr/premieres-pieces-du-puzzle-electoral-bruxelles-le-26-mai-2019-analyses-liminaires-des-donnees-issues
7. In the electoral district of Brussels, Groen and SP.a were presenting a few candidates on the list of Ecolo and PS, and PVDA ran jointly with PTB. N-

VA, CD&V, Vlaams Belang and OpenVLD ran independently and together attracted 8.36 per cent of all valid votes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Jean-Benoit Pilet is Professor of Political Science at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). He studies Belgian politics, elections, electoral systems, democratic innovations and party politics. He has published *Faces on the Ballot. The Personalization of Electoral Systems in Europe* (with Alan Renwick, OUP, 2016) and *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-national Perspective* (edited, with William Cross, OUP, 2016). [jpilet@ulb.ac.be]

References

Aylott, N. and Bolin, N. (2019). 'A Party System in Flux: The Swedish Parliamentary Election of September 2018', *West European Politics*, 42:7, 1504–15.

Deschouwer, Kris, Pascal Delwit, Marc Hooghe, Pierre Baudweyns, and Stefaan Walgrave, eds. (2015). *De Kiezer Ontcijferd. Over stemgedrag en stemmotivaties.* Leuven: Lanoo.

Durovic, A. (2019). 'The French Elections of 2017: Shaking the Disease?', *West European Politics*, 42:7, 1487–1503.

Faas, T. and Klingelhöfer, T. (2019). 'The More Things Change, the More they Stay the Same? The German Federal Election of 2017 and its Consequences', *West European Politics*, 42:4, 914–26.

Garzia, D. (2019). 'The Italian Election of 2018 and the First Populist Government of Western Europe', *West European Politics*, 42:3, 670–80.

Pilet, Jean-Benoit (2012). 'Executive–Legislative Relations without a Government', *European Political Science*, 11:1, 96–101.