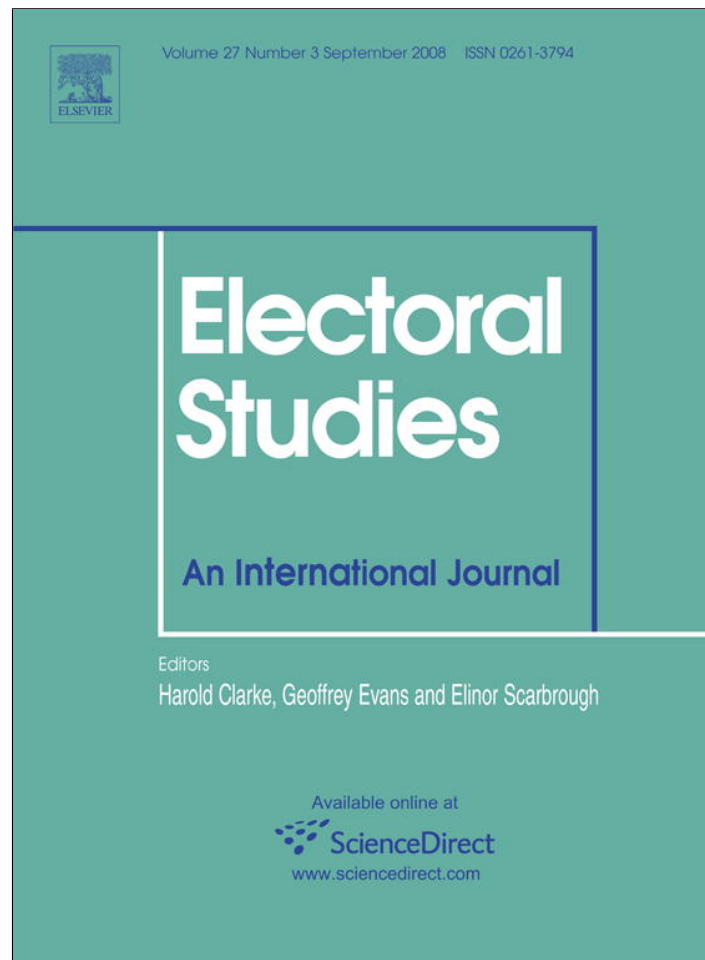


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Notes on Recent Elections

The federal elections in Belgium, June 2007

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The June 2007 federal elections in Belgium was a disaster for the incumbent socialist-liberal 'purple' coalition, composed of the French-speaking *Parti Socialiste* (PS), the Flemish *Socialistische Partij anders* (SP.a-Spirit),¹ the Flemish *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (OpenVLD),² and the French-speaking *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR).³ Only the MR increased its vote share (but lost one seat) whereas the other three parties were severely punished by voters, losing some 20–30% of their support in the 2003 federal election.

The 2007 federal elections were the start of a critical period for Belgium. For 6 months after the election the Francophone and Flemish parties failed to form a government agreed upon a new constitutional reform. Instead, a temporary 'oversized' coalition was formed in mid-December to manage the country's affairs until the end of March, to pave the way for a permanent government, and to settle the constitutional dispute between the Flemish and Francophone communities.

1. Electoral context

The 2007 federal elections in Belgium were held after 8 years of the 'purple' coalition, with Guy Verhofstadt (*Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*, VLD) as prime minister. During the 1999–2003 legislature, the socialist and liberal parties had been in power along with the green parties in a 'rainbow coalition'. In 2003, the 'purple coalition' – made up of the same parties minus the greens (*Ecolo*)⁴

and Groen!) – came to power (Swyngedouw, 2004). In total, the coalition held about two-thirds of all seats in the Chamber of Representatives (*Chambre des représentants/Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers*).

The last years of the 'purple' coalition were not easy for the four partners. In particular, as with all governments since the 1960s, tensions were high between the Flemish and French-speaking parties. The two Flemish parties in the governing coalition (VLD and SP.a-Spirit) pushed for further constitutional reform, the sixth in 40 years, to give Flanders greater autonomy. The Flemish opposition – the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) in cartel with a small Flemish separatist party (N-VA)⁵ and the Flemish extreme-right (*Vlaams Belang*)⁶ – was even tougher about autonomy for Flanders than VLD and SP.A. All the French-speaking parties opposed constitutional reform that would give greater autonomy to the regions.

The purple coalition experienced two electoral campaigns: in June 2004, for regional and European elections; in October 2006, for local elections. On both occasions, the biggest opposition parties, the Christian Democrats (CD&V and CDH) and *Vlaams Belang*, increased their vote, whilst most governing parties, except the PS in 2004, lost support. Moreover, and significantly, the 2004 regional elections led, for the first time, to regional coalitions radically different from the coalition of the federal government. In Flanders, the CD&V–N-VA cartel became the lead political group, heading up a coalition with VLD and SP.a-Spirit since 2004. In Wallonia and Brussels, the PS formed a coalition with the CDH (*Centre démocrate humaniste*),⁷ leaving MR – its federal partner – on the opposition benches. In other words, for the first time, Belgium was ruled by incongruent coalitions.

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¹ The Flemish Social Democratic Party was called *Socialist Partij* until 2002 and has been in cartel with SPIRIT (Progressive Flemish Nationalists) since 2003.

² The Flemish Liberals went into the 2007 election together with *Vivant* as OpenVLD.

³ As *Parti réformateur libéral*, *Front démocratique francophone*, and *Mouvement des citoyens pour le changement* (PRL-FDF-MCC) until 2002.

⁴ *Ecolo*'s full name is *Ecologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes organiques*.

⁵ The Flemish Christian Democratic Party was called *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP) until 2001, and then called *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V). The *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) is successor to *Volkswijzen*, the former ethno-regionalist party that split in 2001 into *Spirit* and N-VA. The CD&V and N-VA formed a cartel for the 2004 regional elections.

⁶ *Vlaams Blok* until 2004.

⁷ Along with *Ecolo* in Brussels.

This called for a new political dynamic between the layers of power and competences of federal, regional, and community bodies (Deschouwer, 2006).

2. Electoral system

The federal elections were held on 10 June 2007, with voting compulsory. Both chambers of parliament – the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate – are elected on the same day via a semi-open list system of proportional representation (D'Hondt) with a 5% threshold at the constituency level (Hooghe et al., 2005). Every voter has two votes: one for the Chamber of Representatives and one for the Senate. Voters have to choose one list for each chamber. Within the list, voters can exercise a preferential vote, which counts towards the allocation of seats within each list, not for the allocation of seats among lists.

The electoral system for the two chambers differs in terms of constituencies. For the 150 seats in the Chamber, Belgium is divided into 11 constituencies, with the district magnitude varying between 4 and 25. Of the 11 constituencies, 10 are unilingual (either Flemish- or French-speaking). The sole exception is the district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde where both Flemish- and French-speaking parties compete for 22 seats. The federal government is answerable to the Chamber.

The 71-seat Senate consists of 40 elected senators, 21 'indirect' senators from the parliaments of the three linguistic communities (10 Flemish-, 10 French-, and 1 German-speaking), and 10 co-opted senators designated by the parties. For the 40 elected senators, Belgium is divided into two 'electoral colleges'⁸: one Flemish (25 senators), one French-speaking (15 senators). In Wallonia and Flanders, voters can only choose among lists from one college, either Flemish or French-speaking, but in the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde bilingual constituency voters can choose among the lists of both colleges (Pilet, 2005).

3. Electoral campaign

The campaign concentrated less on policy issues than on the parties forming the new government. The defeat of the ruling parties in the 2004 regional elections and 2006 local elections had paved the way for a new coalition, so the pre-election debate focused on who would be the next federal prime minister.

In Flanders, polls predicted a victory for the CD&V–N–VA, but, for the most part, the campaign in Flanders was very much a "horse race between the leaders of the largest parties" (Fiers and Krouwel, 2004: p. 143). Three party leaders competed to become the next Belgian prime minister: Yves Leterme (CD&V–N–VA), Guy Verhofstadt (OpenVLD), and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.a–Spirit). Among the Francophone parties, the campaign centred more on which party would emerge as the largest. Traditionally, politics in the French-speaking community has been

dominated by PS, but it faced prosecutions for fraud among its leaders in two of the biggest Walloon cities (Charleroi and Namur) in the months before the election. Hence, the PS was expected to lose votes, and its main opponent, the MR, campaigned aggressively for the leadership in French-speaking Belgium.

The main policy issue at stake was a new constitutional reform, pushed by all the Flemish parties. They demanded the transfer of most social and employment policies to the regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) as well as splitting the last bilingual constituency (Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde). Francophone parties opposed both demands. On both sides of the linguistic divide, parties tried to appear as the strongest promoter of the its community's interests. Their positions were easily defended: French-speaking politicians rarely take part in Flemish television debates; Flemish politicians seldom appear on French-speaking television channels. When they do, they do not worry about the impact of their message on their electorate since Flemish-speaking politicians are elected in Flemish districts and French-speaking politicians in French-speaking districts.

4. Election results

The results reported in Table 1 (Chamber of representatives) and Table 2 (Senate) were surprising in many ways. The biggest surprise was the defeat of the Flemish socialists (SP.a–Spirit). They lost about seven percentage points in Flanders, and nine of its seats in the Chamber of Representatives. Hence, SP.a–Spirit became the fourth-ranking Flemish party (and the sixth-ranking at federal level), which led to Johan Vande Lanotte, its leader, to resign. The party also decided not to take part in discussions about forming the new federal government. The Francophone socialists were not much better off: the party lost 6.9 percentage points in Wallonia, 3.2 points in Brussels, and five of its Chamber seats. But the party's biggest defeat is symbolic; it became the second Francophone party after the MR, and lost its political leadership in Wallonia for the first time in 60 years.

The victory of the MR was the second surprise. The Francophone liberals did not progress significantly in vote share (+2.7 percentage points in Wallonia), and the party lost one seat. The MR's biggest victory was that it became the first-ranked Francophone party and the first-ranked party in Wallonia for the first time in its history.

In terms of votes and seats, the victory of the Flemish Christian Democrats was the most impressive. In 1999, the party lost with a historically poor result and was relegated to the opposition benches for the first time in 40 years. Nor did the party's position improve in the 2003 federal elections. After the formation of the CD&V–N–VA cartel, the Christian Democrats won in the 2004 regional and the 2006 local elections. In the 2007 federal elections, the CD&V–N–VA increased its vote share by 8.6 percentage points in Flanders and gained eight MPs to reach 30 seats.⁹ On the French-speaking side, the CDH was less successful; its vote share increased by only 0.9 points in Wallonia, 4.8

⁸ The term 'electoral college' is used instead of 'constituency' because the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking territories overlap in Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde.

⁹ Note, however, that in the 2003 federal election the N–VA won 4.8% of all Flemish votes and won one seat.

Table 1

Results of the Chamber of Representatives election, Belgium, 10 June 2007

	Belgium		Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Vote (%)	Vote (%)
Flemish parties					
<i>Christen Democratisch & Vlaams/Nieuw Vlaams Alliantie</i> (CD&V–N–VA)	18.5 (+2.2)	30 (+8)	29.6 (+8.6)	–	2.1 (+0.3)
<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	12.0 (+0.4)	17 (–1)	18.9 (+1.0)	–	3.1 (–2.8)
<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (VLD)	11.8 (–3.5)	18 (–7)	18.8 (–5.4)	–	2.9 (–0.2)
<i>Socialistische Partij.Anders</i> (SP.a–Spirit)	10.3 (–4.6)	14 (–9)	16.3 (–7.2)	–	1.9 (–0.8)
<i>Lijst Dedecker</i>	4.0 (+4.0)	5 (+5)	6.4 (+6.4)	–	0.4 (+0.4)
<i>Groen!</i>	4.0 (+1.5)	4 (+4)	6.3 (+2.4)	–	1.2 (+0.4)
Francophone parties					
<i>Mouvement réformateur</i> (MR)	12.5 (+1.1)	23 (–1)	–	31.1 (+2.7)	31.9 (+1.0)
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> (PS)	10.9 (–2.2)	20 (–5)	–	29.5 (–6.9)	21.3 (–3.2)
<i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (CDH)	6.1 (+0.6)	10 (+2)	–	16.3 (+0.9)	14.3 (+4.8)
<i>Ecolo</i>	5.1 (+2.0)	8 (+4)	–	12.2 (+4.7)	14.0 (+4.5)
<i>Front National</i>	2.0 (–0.1)	1 (=)	–	2.0 (–2.2)	2.8 (–0.7)

Electorate – 7,720,796 (Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde – 1,018,715; Flanders – 4,249,032; Wallonia – 2,453,049); turnout – 91.3%; invalid/wasted votes – 5.1%.

Source: <http://elections2007.belgium.be>.

points in Brussels, and nationwide the party only won an additional two seats.

The green parties were also big winners in the election. Their first experience in government had ended in a severe defeat in the 2003 federal elections: in Flanders, Agalev (now Groen!) lost its entire parliamentary representation; its Francophone counterpart, Ecolo, only saved four seats out of 11 (Delwit and Pilet, 2005). Four years later, Ecolo won 13.3% (+4.7 percentage points) in Wallonia and eight seats; Groen! regained four seats with 6.3% of the Flemish vote.

The newly formed *Lijst Dedecker* was also a winner. The party was formed in the months before the elections by Jean-Marie Dedecker, a former VLD representative expelled from the party in October 2006. His list adopted very right-wing positions on socio-economic issues, developed a fairly populist discourse, and strongly promoted autonomy for Flanders. Surprisingly, the list reached the 5% threshold (calculated at constituency level), winning five seats with 6.4% of the Flemish vote.

The VLD may be one of the main victims of *Lijst Dedecker's* success. The party suffered a major loss: 5.4 points in

Flanders and seven of its 25 MPs. The Prime Minister and informal leader of the VLD, Guy Verhofstadt, publicly admitted defeat on the evening of the election and announced he was unwilling to participate in the new federal government.

Finally, the results for *Vlaams Belang* in Flanders and the *Front National* in Wallonia were relatively stable. The *Vlaams Belang* lost one seat but its vote share was stable (+1.0 percentage point); the FN lost some votes (–0.1 point) but kept its only MP. Yet, compared with the 2004 regional elections, both extreme-right parties weakened to some extent: *Vlaams Belang* lost about five points in Flanders; FN lost 2.5 points in Wallonia and about 2 points in Brussels.

5. Implications

Two main lessons can be drawn from the 2007 federal elections. First, the Belgian electorate moved slightly to the right in partisan terms. This is mainly evidenced in the defeat of the socialists, and only partially counter-balanced by the success of the green parties. The total share

Table 2

Results of the Senate election, Belgium, 10 June 2007

	Belgium		Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Vote (%)	Vote (%)
Flemish parties					
<i>Christen Democratisch & Vlaams/Nieuw Vlaams Alliantie</i> (CD&V–N–VA)	19.4 (+6.7)	9 (+3)	31.6 (+11.0)	–	12.2 (+4.0)
<i>Vlaams Belang</i>	11.9 (+0.6)	5 (=)	19.0 (+1.0)	–	9.0 (+0.1)
<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (VLD)	12.4 (–3.0)	5 (–2)	19.6 (–4.8)	–	10.5 (–1.7)
<i>Socialistische Partij.Anders</i> (SP.a–Spirit)	10.0 (–5.4)	4 (–3)	16.7 (–8.9)	–	4.8 (–3.2)
<i>Lijst Dedecker</i>	3.4 (+3.4)	1 (+1)	5.6 (+5.6)	–	1.8 (+1.8)
<i>Groen!</i>	3.6 (+1.2)	1 (+1)	5.9 (+1.9)	–	2.5 (+0.8)
Francophone parties					
<i>Mouvement réformateur</i> (MR)	12.3 (+0.2)	6 (+1)	–	30.8 (+0.5)	22.5 (–0.4)
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> (PS)	10.2 (–2.6)	4 (–2)	–	27.9 (–7.7)	13.2 (–2.5)
<i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (CDH)	5.9 (+0.4)	2 (=)	–	15.6 (+0.1)	8.7 (+2.3)
<i>Ecolo</i>	5.8 (+2.6)	2 (+1)	–	14.7 (+7.0)	10.2 (+3.6)
<i>Front National</i>	2.3 (+0.0)	1 (=)	–	6.5 (+0.4)	2.2 (–1.0)

For electorate and turnout see Table 1; invalid/wasted votes – 5.7%.

Source: <http://elections2007.belgium.be>.

of the vote for left parties (socialists and greens) only reached 30.3%; in Flanders, support stagnates at around 22%. Although the left has been declining since the mid-1980s, this was concealed before 2007 by the electoral supremacy of PS in Wallonia and the constant presence of the socialist parties in government since 1988. Both are now challenged. The MR turned out to be the first-ranked party in Wallonia. And the first attempt to form a new coalition was undertaken by centre-right parties: VLD, MR, CD&V–N–VA, and CDH.

Secondly, the election demonstrated that Belgium is increasingly made up of two very different political landscapes. Flanders is dominated by right-wing parties such as CD&V–N–VA, VLD, *Vlaams Belang*, and *Lijst Dedecker*. In French-speaking Wallonia, MR is the largest party, the CDH is a relatively small party and considered less right-wing than the CD&V. The socialists and the green parties are both stronger in Wallonia than in Flanders. The question is therefore how, with these two very different political landscapes, to form a government in a federal country within the tradition of congruent coalitions.

These divergences between Flanders and Wallonia are even more problematic since parties winning the elections in the two communities adopted contradictory positions about constitutional reform during the campaign. The Flemish parties, especially the CD&V–N–VA cartel declared that no government was to be formed without strong developments towards greater autonomy for Flanders in various policy areas (tax system, employment, social security). The Francophone parties campaigned to reject any new state settlement in the new legislature. Very quickly, the two positions appeared extremely difficult to reconcile when it came to form the new government.

6. Government formation

In the days after the election, it became clear that an 'orange-blue' coalition was favoured by the winning parties,¹⁰ made up of CD&V–N–VA, MR, VLD, and CDH under the leadership of Yves Leterme (CD&V–N–VA) and Didier Reynders (MR). But it also rapidly became clear that this coalition was not easily formed.

First, it brought together parties with very different positions on reforming the Belgian federal system. All Flemish and Francophone parties have divergent views on the issue but in the hypothetical 'orange blue' coalition, two of the most extreme parties were involved: the Flemish nationalists of the N–VA (in cartel with CD&V) and the FDF (*Front Democratique des Francophones*). The N–VA conspicuously supported independence for Flanders; the FDF was a component of the MR federation, which defended the rights of

Francophones and opposed more strongly than any other party every move towards a new constitutional settlement.

Second, the French-speaking Christian Democratic Party (CDH) was very reluctant to enter a centre-right coalition. For personal reasons, the CDH (and its president, Joëlle Milquet) has difficulties with the MR and its leader, Didier Reynders. Moreover, on policy issues such as immigration, taxation, and unemployment, the CDH was more comfortable with a centre-left position whereas the three other parties favoured right-wing solutions.

Many putative coalitions face such obstacles, but, in this instance, the problems could not be resolved by the 'orange blue' negotiators even after 6 months. In particular, any attempt to agree on constitutional reform was blocked by some of the parties, most often by the N–VA and the CDH. Finally, in the early days of December, former prime minister Verhofstadt was appointed by King Albert II to form a provisional government to deal with any urgent issues. Verhofstadt brought together the four 'orange blue' partners (CD&V–N–VA, CDH, MR, and VLD) and the French-speaking socialists (PS) to make up an oversized coalition. Verhofstadt has already announced that he will withdraw on 23 March 2008 in favour of Yves Leterme (CD&V–N–VA). He has also announced that the socio-economic programme of the provisional government was yet to be drafted, and that the constitutional question was yet to be solved.

Six months after the 2007 federal elections, Belgium had a new government. However, its life expectancy was only 3 months and nothing was settled on the most conflictual issue of all: further reform of the Belgian federal state to grant fuller autonomy to Flanders. That was an unusually long period for Belgium to be without a government, especially as the coalition negotiations had little to show by way of results.

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doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2008.02.005

¹⁰ Orange being the Christian democrats' colour and blue the liberals.