

Regional and Community Elections in Belgium

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1. The Regions and Communities in the Belgian Federal System

Since the constitutional reform of 1993, Belgium is a federal state. It uniquely includes both regions and communities. This institutional set-up reflects the political history of the country, in which the relations between the language communities have often taken a central place. Especially because of Flemish insistence on community self-government, the Belgian system hence includes both territorial entities – the three regions, Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Capital Region – and communities representing the country's language groups - the Flemish, the Francophone, and the small German-speaking one. Regions and communities partly overlap. The German-speaking community is located within the Walloon region, while the two other communities both include the Brussels Capital Region.

The Belgian federal system is horizontal, without a hierarchy between the federal, the regional and the community level, each level having its own separate, exclusive competencies. The essential federal competencies concern justice, defence, police, taxation, as well as social security. The regions have as their main competences the economy, employment, and territorial management. The communities have competencies concerning cultural matters and in particular education and the use of language (Blaise 2024, p. 68).

The Belgian federal system is also asymmetrical. The Flemish regional and community authorities (including their representative body) have been integrated. On the Francophone side, region (Wallonia), and community (the Brussels-Wallonia Federation) remain separate entities. With the exception of the parliament of the Brussels-Wallonia Federation, all the regional and community parliaments are elected directly. However, since the Flemish

community includes Brussels, but the Flemish region does not, the six members of the Flemish parliament elected in Brussels can only vote for community matters and abstain themselves for regional matters.

2. The Regional Electoral System

Elections for the regional and community parliaments are held every five years, concurring with federal and European elections. Seats are divided according to the D'Hondt method. The system is hence proportional with a 5% threshold within each electoral college. There are nevertheless differences between the various parliaments. In Flanders, the electoral colleges correspond with the five provinces, with an addition college formed by the voters for the Flemish parliament in Brussels. In Wallonia the colleges correspond with the eleven arrondissements (subdivisions of the five provinces), while the German community consists of only one electoral college. The Brussels Region consists of a Dutch-speaking and a Francophone electoral college, the former electing 17 MPs, the latter 72 (and the electoral threshold applies within each college)¹. Inhabitants of Brussels who vote for the Dutch-speaking electoral college can also vote for the Flemish parliament². The parliament of the Brussels-Wallonia Federation is not elected directly: it consists of the 75 elected members of the Wallonian parliament, and of 19 members elected in the Francophone electoral college of the Brussels parliament³. If one of the elected members of the Walloon parliament belongs to the German-speaking community, he/she is replaced by a Francophone member of the same party.

Both list and preference voting are possible, and multiple preferences within the same list may be given. To determine which candidates within a list are elected, for each party a party threshold is calculated by dividing the numbers of votes obtained by the number of seats plus one. Each candidate on the list starts with the preference votes given to her or him. The list votes

¹ In Wallonia, to obtain seats a party must obtain 5% both at the level of the electoral college and in the province in which the college is situated (Biard et al., 2024, p. 7 n. 2). In the Brussels Capital Region, there exists the possibility of *apparentement* or list combination: lists can make an agreement of list combination, and if the combined vote of these lists reach the threshold, they can also obtain seats (the seats being divided proportionally among the lists involved).

² Since voting in Brussels is electronic, the computer system only allows voters who vote for the Dutch-speaking college of the Brussels parliament to vote for the Flemish parliament (Biard et al., 2024, p. 72).

³ These 19 seats are divided proportionally according to the results in the Francophone College of the Brussels parliament. The parties then choose which of their elected members will also be a member of the parliament of the Brussels-Wallonia Federation (Biard et al., 2024, p. 68).

(reduced by half) are then divided, starting from the first candidate on the list, until the list votes added to the preference votes allow a candidate to reach the party threshold. This process is continued until the (halved) list votes are exhausted. The candidates are then ranked according to their combined votes (preferences and attributed list votes), and the ones with most votes are elected.

The members of the regional and community parliaments are also responsible for electing 50 senators (the other ten senators are co-opted, in proportion to the results of the elections for the federal chamber of representatives). The Flemish parliament elects 29 senators, the French community parliament 10, the Walloon parliament 8, the Francophone representatives of the Brussels parliament 2, the German-speaking community parliament 1 (Belgische Senaat, s.d.).

3. Regional Political Competition and Campaign

A particularity of the Belgian party system is that all parties, except the left-wing Partij van de Arbeid/Parti du Travail (PVDA/PTB) are community-based. Therefore, and taking into account the important competencies of sub-national authorities, regional and community elections are as important for them as the federal ones. Additionally, parties may be part of the government at one level, in opposition at another one. Coalition-formation at the federal level has increasingly become protracted, because of the centre-right predominance in Flanders combined with a strong presence of (right-wing) Flemish nationalists, that contrasts with a Francophone centre-left dominance. After the 2019 elections and a long period of negotiations, the federal government was formed as a coalition of seven parties led by the Flemish liberal Alexander De Croo. This so-called *Vivaldi coalition* included the Flemish Christian democrats (CD&V), the Flemish and Francophone liberals, Open VLD and Mouvement Réformateur (MR), the Flemish and Francophone socialists, Vooruit and the Parti Socialiste (PS), and the Flemish and Francophone green parties (Groen and Ecolo)⁴. As an uneasy coalition between parties with quite diverging ideological profiles and policy preferences, the Vivaldi government became increasingly confronted with immobility.

At the regional level, Flanders has been governed by a centre-right coalition of the Flemish nationalist N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), liberals and Christian democrats, Wallonia and the Francophone community by one

⁴ The name Vivaldi was coined because, as an equivalent of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the coalition included four political families, thus Christian democratic, socialist, liberal and green ones.

of liberals, socialists and greens. The consociational nature of the Brussels Region requires that its government consists of a Francophone Prime Minister, and two ministers from each community, as well as three secretaries of state, with one of them Flemish. The coalition formed after the 2019 elections included from the Francophone side the socialists, the greens and Défi (the party of the Francophones in Brussels), from the Flemish side the greens, the liberals and the socialists. The government of the German-speaking community consisted of an alliance of the Party of the German community ProDG, socialists (SP) and liberals (PFF).

Since elections at all levels with the exception of the local ones concur, electoral campaigns tackle both federal, regional, and community issues. Separating federal from regional and community concerns in the electoral campaign is not straightforward. In general, the results at the different levels (community, regional, federal, European) tend to be similar. The exception is the German-speaking community, where community-specific parties that do not propose lists at other levels play an important role. On the other hand, recent elections have revealed a decreasing national homogeneity: voting patterns in the Flemish and the Francophone communities tend to be increasingly differentiated (Russo et al., 2019). Brussels is a separate case. On the Francophone side, results tend to resemble those in Wallonia, but with the specificity of the presence of a party traditionally representing the Francophones in Brussels, Défi. Results in the Dutch-speaking college in Brussels are more markedly different from Flanders. This does not only express the preferences of Flemish-speakers in Brussels, but also the fact that it is relatively easy to get elected in this college. In 2019, the electoral threshold in this college was in fact exactly 3.500 votes, in the Francophone college 19.257 votes. There has therefore been a tendency for tactical voting for this college. Notably the radical right Vlaams Belang (VB) has also reached out to Francophone voters who have no credible radical right offer in the Francophone college. In addition, new parties may assume that their chances of getting representatives in this college are larger, as happened in the 2019 elections with the Agora party, a party in favour of direct democracy that obtained one seat.

The campaign undoubtedly took place in a climate of crisis, in the aftermath of Covid, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the insecurity caused by inflation, rising energy prices, and other social problems that have generated a climate of anxiety and wariness of politics (Messina, 2024). An important issue was the fear of mainstream parties, particularly on the Francophone side, concerning the probability (predicted by all polls) of an important progress of the radical right Vlaams Belang (VB) party in Flanders, as well as of the possibility of a Flemish nationalist (VB and N-VA)

majority in the Flemish parliament, which could put the entire federal system at risk and could also form a more hard-core right-wing government in Flanders. Other electoral themes were more region- or community-centred. In Flanders, protests of farmers against the government nitrogen plan, albeit less important than those in the Netherlands took place (cf. Huysseune, 2023). The Flemish government was also criticized on a number of other issues, such as the long waiting lists for social housing and the dramatic lack of teachers, both fields where it failed to realize serious improvements (Arnoudt, 2024). In the Brussels Capital Region, the Good Move plan to reduce traffic caused a lot of controversy and it polarized public opinion during the electoral campaign (albeit the modalities of its implementation are decided at municipal, not regional level). The approach of the elections also caused increasing tensions between coalition partners within most governments (both at the federal, regional and community level) that often weakened or even paralyzed their action.

The electoral campaign was also marked by the presence in Flanders and in the Flemish electoral college in Brussels of dissident lists that split off from mainstream parties. One of the representatives of the Flemish socialists in the Brussels parliament, Fouad Ahidar, left the party over recurring issues concerning the position of Islam in society including what was perceived as his pro-Hamas statement after October 7th. He campaigned in Brussels, both for the Dutch-speaking college of the Brussels parliament and the Flemish parliament, with his own list, *Team Fouad Ahidar*. In the Dutch-speaking college of Brussels, the Belgo-Lebanese activist and writer Dyab Abou Jayah submitted another list, *Viva Palestina*⁵. On the other side of the political spectrum, the list *Voor U*, a right-wing libertarian dissidence of the liberal party, also proposed lists in Flanders and the Dutch-speaking college of Brussels. In Wallonia and the Francophone college of Brussels many smaller lists that participated in the 2019 elections disappeared, on the Walloon side the only significant novelty was the list *Chez Nous*, with an extreme right profile and sponsored by *Vlaams Belang*.

4. Turnout and Electoral Results of the September 26th, 2024 Election

Electoral participation in Belgium is mandatory for Belgian citizens, guaranteeing high levels of participation, namely over 80% (see table 1). Parti-

⁵ Dyab Abou Jayah is a well-known public figure in Flanders. Although himself agnostic, he has several times attempted to create political organizations of the Muslim community in Flanders, starting from the Arab European League founded in 2000.

pation at the various regional and community levels was slightly higher than in 2019, and except for Wallonia, there was also a slight decrease of blank and invalid votes⁶. Participation in Flanders, the richest region, is slightly higher than in the other regions.

In Flanders (see table 2), the two Flemish nationalist parties VB and N-VA finally obtained exactly half of the seats (62 out of 124), rendering the formation of a Flemish nationalist coalition government unlikely. The VB progressed, but somewhat less than the polls had predicted, while the N-VA resisted well and remained the largest party. However, the outgoing government coalition (N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD) overall lost 14 seats and its majority (obtaining 56 out of 124 seats), since especially the liberal party suffered heavy losses. The left-wing opposition overall fared well, the losses of Groen more than compensated by the gains of Vooruit and the PVDA. In general, the left did well in large cities, while the VB obtained its best results in small towns and rural cantons.

Table 1. Participation in 2024 regional and community elections⁷

Entity	Inscribed	Total votes	Votes %	Valid	Blank/ invalid	Blank/ invalid %
Flanders	4.913.718	4.506.900	91,7%	4.300.478	206.422	4,6%
Wallonia	2.604.084	2.260.689	86,8%	2.068.766	191.923	8,5%
Brussels Capital Region	597.149	500.759	83,9%	470.140	30.619	6,1%
German-speaking community	49.652	43.393	87,4%	40.047	3.346	7,7%

Source: <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en>

The results of the 2024 elections confirmed the trend towards their regional differentiation.

⁶ Changes remained very limited: only in Flanders and the German-speaking community participation increased with more than 1%, the changes in blank and invalid votes were never higher than 1%.

⁷ Since voters of the so-called Eastern cantons in Wallonia also vote for the parliament in the German-speaking community, these dates cannot be summed up. For the calculation of the participation grade for the elections of the Flemish parliament, we excluded the voters from Brussels, since they only represent one section of the Brussels voters.

Table 2. Electoral results in Flanders (source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=VL&id=VLR00000>)⁸

Party	Votes	%	+/- (%)	Seats	+/-
N-VA	1.045.950	23,9	-0,9	31	-4
VB	992.504	22,7	4,2	31	8
Vooruit ⁹	606.406	13,9	3,7	18	6
CD&V	571.137	13,0	-2,4	16	-3
Open VLD	364.609	8,3	-4,8	9	-7
PVDA	364.070	8,3	3	9	5
Groen	319.396	7,3	-2,8	9	-5
Voor U	45.196	1,0	1	0	=
UF ¹⁰	20.452	0,5	-0,2	0	=
Team Fouad Ahidar	14.187	0,3	0,3	1	1
Others	35.533	0,8	-1,1	0	-1
Total	4.379.440			124	

Source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=VL&id=VLR00000>

⁸ The results for the Flemish parliament include the Brussels votes, and hence concern the community level. Since the Brussels votes (78.962) represent less than 2% of the votes for the Flemish parliament, the results at the level of the Flemish region (without Brussels) are very similar. In terms of seats, the Brussels results nevertheless did have an impact: the Flemish nationalist parties VB (1) and N-VA (1) only obtained two of the six Brussels seats -the four other seats going to Groen (2), Vooruit (1), and Team Fouad Ahidar (1)-, and thereby missed obtaining a majority in the Flemish parliament.

⁹ In 2019 the Flemish socialists in Brussels campaigned under another name, Sp.a – One Brussels, obtaining 8.958 votes (0,21%) and also one seat in the Flemish parliament. In this table, this list is represented amongst “others”. The real gain of seats for Vooruit is hence 5, not 6.

¹⁰ UF: Union des Francophones, the party of the French-speakers in Flanders.

Table 3. Electoral results in Wallonia

Party	Votes	%	+/- (%)	Seats	+/-
MR	612.490	29,6	8,2	26	6
PS	480.418	23,2	-2,9	19	-4
Les Engagés	427.479	20,7	9,7	17	7
PTB	250.361	12,1	-1,6	8	-2
Ecolo	144.189	7,0	-7,5	5	-7
Chez Nous	58.565	2,8	2,8	0	=
Défi	55.794	2,7	-1,4	0	=
Others	39.470	1,9	-7,2	0	=
Total	2.068.766			75	

Source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=WL&id=WLR00000>

Wallonia witnessed an outright victory of the centre-right parties and a defeat of the left. The largest victory was for Les Engagés, the former Christian democrat centrist party, which presumably took over votes from the biggest loser, Ecolo. The president of the liberal centre-right party MR oriented it to the right, and successfully absorbed the vote of the small right-wing parties present in 2019. All left-wing parties suffered losses, relatively contained for the PTB, somewhat larger for the PS, and very heavy for Ecolo (Pollet, 2024). Other parties, including the new radical right list Chez Nous, did not obtain seats (see table 3).

Elections in Brussels showed yet another pattern. Firstly, confirming a tendency visible already in 2019, while the number of votes in the Francophone electoral college remained stable, there was a noticeable increase of voting in the Flemish electoral college, both in absolute numbers (+ 10.383) and in percentage (from 15,3% to 17,1%).

The results in the Francophone electoral college in Brussels differ from the ones in Wallonia (see table 4). While the MR equally progressed and Ecolo equally suffered heavy losses, the results of the other parties are different. Les Engagés only made moderate progress, the socialists remained stable while the PTB, contrary to Wallonia, emerged as a clear winner. The party of the Brussels Francophones, Défi, suffered an important loss.

Table 4. Electoral results in Brussels, Francophone electoral college

Party	Votes	%	+/- (%)	Seats	+/-
MR	101.157	26,0	9,1	20	7
PS	85.929	22,1	0,02	16	-1
PTB	81.542	20,9	7,5	15	5
Les Engagés	41.640	10,7	3,1	8	2
Ecolo	38.386	9,9	- 9,3	7	-8
Défi	31.614	8,1	-5,7	6	-4
Others	9.493	2,4	-4,7	0	-1
Total	389.761			72	

Source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=BR&id=BRR00000>

Table 5. Electoral results in Brussels, Dutch-speaking electoral college (source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=BR&id=BRR00000>)

Party	Votes	%	+/- (%)	Seats	+/-
Groen	18.345	22,8	2,2	4	=
Team Fouad Ahidar	13.242	16,5	16,5	3	3
N-VA	9.571	11,9	-6,1	2	-1
Open VLD	8.537	10,6	-5,2	2	-1
VB	8.475	10,5	2,2	2	1
Vooruit	8.045	10,0	-5,1	2	-1
PVDA	5.619	7,0	2,7	1	=
CD&V	5.102	6,4	-1,1	1	=
Viva Palestina	1.944	2,4	2,4	0	=
Voor U	930	1,2	1,2	0	=
Others	569	0,7	-9,8	0	-1
Total	80.379			17	

Source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=BR&id=BRR00000>

The results for the Dutch-speaking electoral college in Brussels were markedly different from those in Flanders (see table 5). While the greens suffered heavy losses elsewhere, Groen managed to progress and remains the largest party in this college, possibly because green voters in the region tactically votes for Groen rather than for Ecolo. The most important surprise, however, was the success of the dissident socialist list of Fouad Ahidar, which obtained the second-best result and three seats, while the Vooruit list (contrary to Flanders) regressed and lost a seat. The liberals and the N-VA equally lost a seat, while the VB won one. The important progress of VB predicted by some polls did not materialize, and tactical voting for this party seems to have remained limited.

Table 6. Electoral results in the German-speaking community

Party	Votes	%	+/- (%)	Seats	+/-
ProDG	11.654	29,1	5,8	8	2
CSP	7.920	19,8	-3,4	5	-1
Vivant ¹¹	5.700	14,2	-0,6	4	1
SP	5.473	13,7	-1,2	3	-1
PFF-MR	4.817	12,0	0,7	3	=
Ecolo	3.644	9,1	-3,4	2	-1
Others	839	2,1	2,1	0	=
Total	40.047			25	

Source: Belgian Government 2024, at <https://elections2024.belgium.be/en/results-figures?el=BR&id=BRR00000>

The elections for the parliament of the German-speaking community saw the victory of the Party of the German-speakers ProDG, mainly at the detriment of the Christian democrats (CSP) and Ecolo. All other parties remained stable (see table 6).

5. Conclusion

The German-speaking community has been the fastest in reaching a new government agreement. On July 1st, the outgoing Minister-President Oliver Paasch (ProDG) presented his third government. The coalition also includes the liberal PFF and the CSP, the local Christian democrats who replace the socialists now relegated to the opposition. This change in coalition reflects what occurred in Wallonia, where MR and Les Engagés have negotiated the formation of a centre-right government. On July 11th, the programme of this coalition was officially announced. It was followed by the formation of the same coalition for the Brussels-Wallonia Federation. In Flanders, where the

¹¹ Vivant is a social liberal party that originated in Flanders but was only successful in the elections for the German-speaking community, the only region where the party still exists.

centre-right government coalition lost its majority, negotiations are taking place between the N-VA, the Flemish Christian-democrats and socialists.

Government negotiations promise to be most complex in the Brussels region. Such negotiations take place both at the level of the two communities and between them. They are certainly not facilitated by the fact that, since traditionally the largest party in each community takes the respective lead, the winners in the two colleges, Groen and MR, have widely diverging programmes, especially on the controversial Good Move plan. Additionally, there is no centre-right majority in the region, while on the Flemish side coalition-formation is rendered more difficult by the reluctance of most parties to work with the list of Fouad Ahidar.

All party families obtained markedly different results according to the region. The liberals, the winners in Wallonia and the Francophone electoral college of Brussels, suffered huge losses in Flanders. The Christian democrats won in Wallonia and lost in Flanders, while the socialist obtained the opposite result. The PVDA-PTB scored well in Flanders and Brussels but lost slightly in Wallonia. Even the greens, losers practically everywhere, did well in the Flemish college of Brussels. Overall, the results confirm the tendency towards decreasing national homogeneity observed by Russo et al. (2019), which in 2024 also affects the Francophone electoral college in Brussels. This increasing differentiation of electoral results in the various regions and communities therefore confirms the centrifugal dynamics present in the Belgian political system.

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