

Public confidence in Flemish and Walloon politics

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Results of the 2014 elections in Belgium have often been perceived by the media as the logical outcome of the lack of public confidence in the traditional tripartite Di Rupo government. The prevailing view is that the latter only received lukewarm support in Flanders, which probably adds up to explaining these results. However, the question is whether this perception is correct. This article examines voters' confidence in politics and whether Flemish and Walloon respondents have provided different answers to our survey questions. Next, we try to find out whether satisfaction and confidence were determining factors in voters' choice for a particular party. While Flemish voters could express their dissatisfaction by casting their vote for N-VA, Walloon voters did not have a similar opportunity.

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PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

Public confidence in politics and political institutions is an extremely important building block of any democratic system. When politicians and governments enjoy public confidence, this is clear proof of the legitimacy of the political decision-making process. It shows that citizens take mostly positive attitudes towards politics and are confident that institutions will generally serve the common good. Moreover, the political scientist David Easton, who has recently passed away, says that political confidence, in turn, brings greater stability to the political system itself. The latter is working more effectively, as it has gained public recognition (Easton, 1965; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011).

With respect to public attitudes, confidence is much more important than pure satisfaction. It is, of course, important that citizens are generally satisfied with policies, but such assessments depend on a lot of factors, which is why levels of voter satisfaction can fall or increase much more rapidly. If governments implement or are forced to implement unpopular measures, many citizens will be 'dissatisfied', because they see them as contrary to their interests. But even under these circumstances, confidence can still be maintained, because political institutions are generally considered to be beneficial to society.

Basically, voters can express distrust and dissatisfaction in two ways. *First*, they can simply decide not to vote. Distrust is one of the main reasons for doing so in most countries. However, this is not an option for Belgian voters, as voting is compulsory in Belgium. Voter turnout was about 90% at the 25 May 2014 elections; it has not fallen since the previous elections, although offenders obviously go unpunished nowadays. *Second*, dissatisfied voters turn to opposition parties in great numbers, and to anti-system parties in particular. The latter reject the basic rules of the political system itself and are far less engaged in the usual party political game playing. Consequently, expectations are that mainly anti-system parties will benefit from low levels of public confidence in politics (Hooghe, Marien & Pauwels, 2010). However, the reasoning behind this can also be reversed: from a purely theoretical perspective, it is not always made sufficiently clear which parties are to be considered as ‘anti-system parties’ and which not. If, however, distrust in politics turns out to be the main reason why people prefer to vote for a particular party, one has a valid argument to speak about an anti-system party.

The May 2014 elections marked a crucial moment with respect to public confidence in politics and voters’ satisfaction. In fact, Belgium has been experiencing a political crisis since 2007, with long periods of political instability. Under these circumstances, citizens are indeed expected to have lost a lot of confidence in politics and to be generally dissatisfied with the functioning of political institutions. This PartiRep election analysis aims to verify this hypothesis and examine whether election results reflect these public attitudes.

HOW SATISFIED ARE CITIZENS?

Looking at satisfaction levels, our survey certainly reveals no widespread dissatisfaction with politics. On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), voters’ satisfaction scores 3 on average. In other words, the average voter is not really satisfied, but he is not dissatisfied either (Table 1).

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The Flemish are sometimes represented as being dissatisfied with the Di Rupo government (since the biggest Flemish party, N-VA, was in opposition). This presentation is simply not correct. The latter scores almost 3.1 (out of 5) in Flanders and Wallonia. There is no significant difference between both regions. Interestingly, our satisfaction survey results do not show that Walloon voters are more satisfied than Flemish ones, although for the first time in almost forty years the Federal government was presided by a francophone politician (Elio Di Rupo, PS). Contrary to the prevailing view, Flemish voters were just as satisfied with the Di Rupo government as Walloon voters.

Conversely, satisfaction results for the regional government do show a big difference. The Flemish government performs quite well, as its score is 3.4. The Walloon government, on the other hand, has a score which is even lower than the one for the federal government. Again, this a significant difference, contradicting regular media claims about dissatisfied Flemish voters. In fact, regions do not differ when it comes to assessing the federal government’s performance. The main difference is that Flemish voters are actually quite pleased with the performance of their regional government (and less pleased with the federal government by comparison), while this is certainly not the case with Wal-

loon voters vis-à-vis their regional government. Also, with respect to satisfaction levels regarding the proper functioning of democratic institutions in Belgium, there is no difference whatsoever between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians.

A similar pattern is discernible with respect to public confidence in politics. Scores are ranging between 0 and 10, and here too averages are around middle values. Again, scores of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians do not differ with respect to their confidence in federal institutions, such as parliament and government. But the former express much more confidence in the Flemish parliament and government, while the latter have far less confidence in their regional institutions. A similar picture emerges with respect to public confidence in political parties in general, with much higher scores in Flanders than in Wallonia. The latter also shows that respondents tended to interpret this question as one which was related to their own regional parties. Obviously, French-speaking Belgians have scant confidence in them, while the scores of Dutch-speaking Belgians are quite satisfying. For the Walloon region, this is really an alarming reality, as Walloon voters express so little confidence in their politicians that they see the Belgian federation as the only possible alternative. Furthermore, the police enjoys the highest confidence levels, which is quite extraordinary as it received a lot of criticism over its handling of the Dutroux case in 1996-1997. Two decades later, no institution enjoys more confidence than the police. Confidence in the European union, on the other hand, is rather low, especially in Wallonia.

Table 1: Voters' satisfaction and confidence survey results.

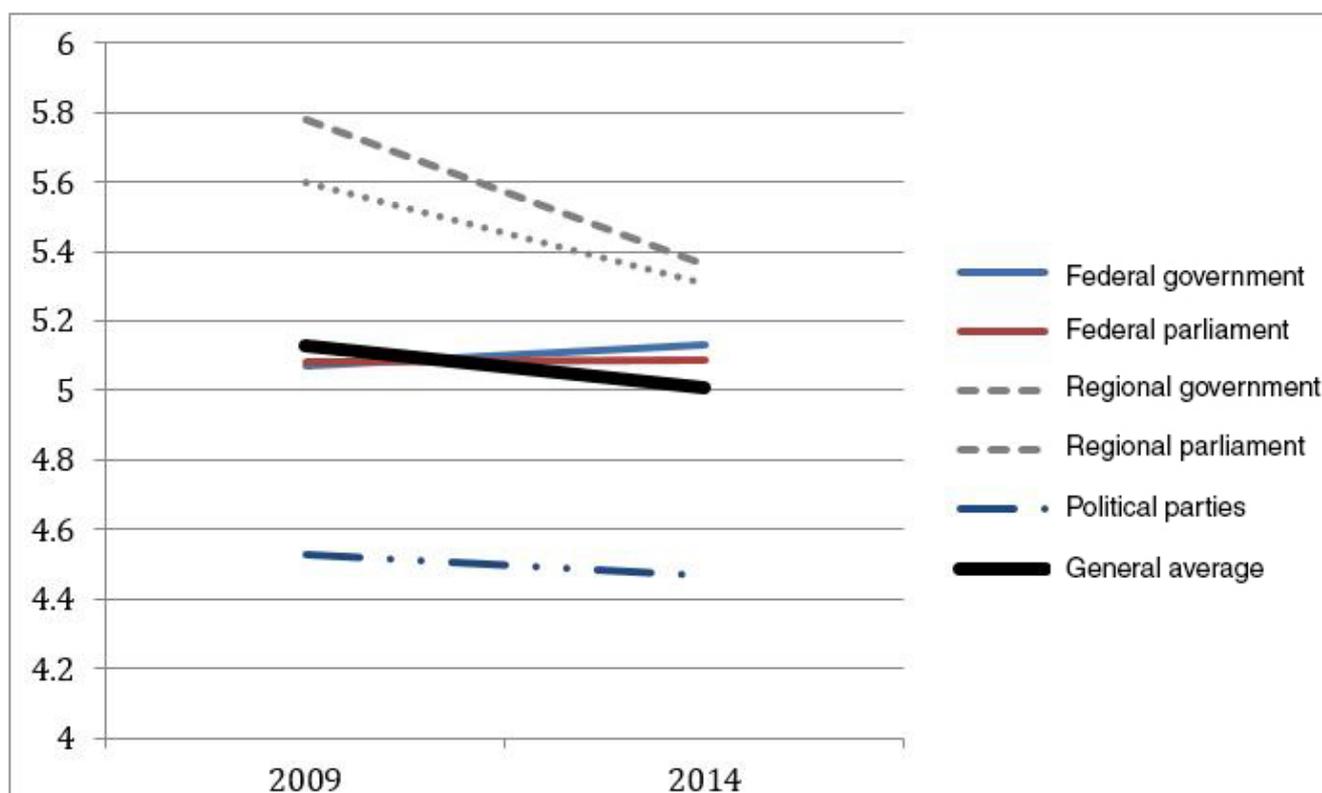
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		Belgium	Flanders	Wallonia	Signif.
Satisfied with... (Scale 1-5)	The regional government	3.21	3.40	3.02	***
	The Federal government	3.08	3.09	3.08	
	The European Union	2.83	2.99	2.67	***
	Average	3.04	3.16	2.92	***
	Cronbach's α	0.67	0.64	0.69	
	Democracy in general	2.86	2.85	2.86	
Confidence in... (Scale 0 tot 10)	The justice system	4.80	4.68	4.92	*
	The Police	5.75	5.87	5.63	**
	The media	4.32	4.47	4.17	*
	The political parties	4.47	4.71	4.24	***
	The regional government	5.36	5.69	5.04	***
	The regional parliament	5.31	5.61	5.02	***
	The Federal government	5.13	5.11	5.15	
	The Federal parliament	5.09	5.12	5.05	
	Social movements	5.38	5.59	5.16	***
	Politicians	4.57	4.59	4.54	
	The European Union	4.86	5.04	4.70	***
	Average	5.01	5.15	4.88	***
	Cronbach's α	0.91	0.91	0.92	

Thus, the picture that emerges from our survey results shows no vast differences between Flanders and Wallonia. In fact, Flemish and Walloon respondents hold very similar opinions about the Federal political institutions, and for the most part we see no difference at all. But there is one very clear distinction: the Flemish clearly have more confidence in their own regional institutions and more appreciation for them, while exactly the opposite is true for Walloon voters. Perhaps, this also provides an explanation for the different dynamics in both regions. Probably, the Flemish cherish the idea that they (will) benefit from any transfer of competences to the regional level, as confidence in the latter is relatively high. The reverse is true for Walloon voters: they do not perceive the benefits of regionalization, because confidence in their own regional institutions is actually very low. To put it simply: Walloon voters prefer to be governed by Federal ministers rather than by Walloon ones.

PartiRep researchers also took soundings among voters at the 2009 elections. Public confidence in politics was examined in exactly the same way, then. Comparison of the results of both soundings allows to verify how the latter has evolved over the last five years, given that Belgium has witnessed a protracted political crisis, followed by the policies of the Di Rupo government (Figure 1). Interestingly, the 2014 general average is quite similar to the 2009 one, which points to the conclusion that post-2009 political events have not resulted in a decline of public confidence in politics in Belgium. On the contrary, public confidence in Federal institutions (both government and parliament) is even slightly on the increase. On the other hand, public confidence in regional institutions (both government and parliament) has declined significantly. While regional institutions scored higher than Federal ones in 2009, i.e. more than half a point higher, half of this lead has been lost over the last five years. Again,

Figure 1: Fluctuations in public confidence in politics, 2009-2014.



Average scores public confidence in politics(0-10), PartiRep election analysis, 2009 and 2014

contrary to what has often been claimed by the media (i.e. declining public confidence in Federal institutions), public confidence in the regional institutions has been declining over the past years.

ELECTORATE PROFILES

If we look closely at the differences between parties and their electorates, it emerges that Flemish Socialist (SP.A), Christian democratic (CD&V) and Liberal (Open VLD) voters are the most satisfied with Federal policies. This comes as no surprise, since these parties were in government and consequently also co-responsible for these policies. Voters' satisfaction scores of the Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) are much lower, and those of the far left and far right parties (i.e. respectively Vlaams Belang and PVDA+) are the lowest. Differences are far less marked in Wallonia. Voters' satisfaction scores of the Liberals (MR) and the far left (PTB-GO!, the francophone equivalent to the Flemish PVDA+) are the lowest.

We see similar scores with respect to public confidence in politics. Flemish Christian democratic voters have the highest scores, while the Flemish far right (Vlaams Belang) and far left (PVDA+) parties have the lowest ones. But one can identify a clear-cut difference between the latter. Voters of both parties are clearly very dissatisfied with policies. But far right voters have also lost confidence in the political system itself, while far left voters continue to keep confidence in the democratic political system, despite to be as dissatisfied with policies as far right voters.

Walloon results show that distinctions between the parties are somewhat more marked. And far left voters have far less confidence in political institutions. As to that, opinions of the far left PTB-GO! voters are much more radical than those of their Flemish counterparts.

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN POLITICS AND PARTY CHOICE

The main question is, of course, whether satisfaction and confidence were determining factors in voters' choice for a particular party at the 2014 elections. We tried to establish such correlation using a 'multinomial logistic regression' model. Basically, it means that we are able to predict possible voters' party preferences on the basis of a number of factors. According to that model, voters are compared to another group, which is called the 'referential category'. With respect to the vote itself, the 'referential category' is the party whose views and ideas are most accepted in a particular region, i.e. the Christian democratic CD&V in Flanders and the Socialist PS in Wallonia. We used the same model to assess satisfaction and confidence levels. First, respondents are classified in three groups, according to high, average and low levels of satisfaction and confidence. The group with the highest levels, is the referential category. The easiest way to interpret the results, is to focus on the significance levels. If no asterisks are placed next to a coefficient, it means that the result is not significant, and possibly a coincidence. If asterisks are placed next to a coefficient, it means that differences are significant. The following example will make this clear: someone with a low satisfaction rating, is 2.8 times more likely to vote for the Flemish far right Vlaams Belang than someone with a high satisfaction rating. Three asterisks next to the result indicate that we deal with a significant difference.

Table 2: Average confidence per party

Party	Confidence (0-10)	Deviation from the average for the region	Satisfaction (1-5)	Deviation from the average for the region
Flanders				
CD&V	5.72	0.57	3.42	0.26
Groen	5.29	0.14	3.18	0.02
N-VA	5.00	-0.15	3.00	-0.16
SP.A	5.47	0.32	3.39	0.23
VB	4.40	-0.75	2.51	-0.65
Open VLD	5.24	0.09	3.25	0.09
PVDA+	5.01	-0.14	2.90	-0.26
Blank/Invalid	3.63	-1.52	2.67	-0.49
Wallonia				
PS	5.29	0.41	3.13	0.21
MR	4.76	-0.12	2.79	-0.13
cdH	5.21	0.33	3.08	0.16
Ecolo	5.38	0.50	2.98	0.06
FDF	5.18	0.30	3.03	0.11
PTB-GO!	4.34	-0.54	2.65	-0.27
PP	4.43	-0.45	2.56	-0.36
Blank/Invalid	3.10	-1.78	2.36	-0.56

Source: PartiRep 2014, average scores per electorate.

Flanders

It emerges from this survey that voters of particular parties do have distinctive characteristics. Let us first discuss the Flemish data (Table 3). Results for the green party (Groen) reveal no major differences, but we do note that this party still does not appeal to voters over 55 years old. Analysis of the results for the Flemish Socialists (SP.A) are even less revealing, as we can actually discern no specific characteristics defining voting behaviour with respect to SP.A. The centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA voters, on the other hand, have highly distinctive features, as they are mostly dissatisfied with present policies and confidence in political institutions is low among them. Clearly, N-VA is capable of channeling public discontent and attracting a wide range of voters. Far right Vlaams Belang voters are even more dissatisfied. The greater part of them are poorly qualified. And while N-VA does not manage to attract many of those voters, Vlaams Belang does. Finally, also far left PVDA+ voters are utterly dissatisfied. Public confidence in political institutions is the lowest among voters who cast blank or invalid votes.

Table 3: The influence of satisfaction and confidence on party choice (Flanders).

		Groen	N-VA	SP.A	VB	Open VLD	PVDA+	Blank/Invalid
Satisfaction	Low	0.951	1.288**	-0.263	2.819**	0.550	2.092**	2.306
	Average	0.415	1.046***	0.025	0.704	0.179	0.554	1.462
Confidence	Low	0.63	1.182**	0.745	0.742	1.093**	0.631	2.407**
	Average	0.135	0.512*	0.248	0.229	0.499	0.728	-0.420
Age	18-35	1.548***	0.732*	0.600	1.388*	1.230**	0.282	1.562
	36-54	1.442***	0.622*	0.775*	0.854	0.999**	0.731	1.145
Education	Low level	-0.889	0.297	0.555	2.625**	-0.170	-1.885	1.086
	Average level	-0.067	0.365	0.340	1.382	-0.300	-0.306	-0.165
Gender	Men	0.157	0.273	-0.089	0.029	0.312	0.119	-0.367

Source: Multinomial logistical regression, PartiRep 2014, N =1001, pseudo r...: .302. Referential category: CD&V vote.

Table 4: The influence of satisfaction and confidence on party choice (Wallonia).

		MR	cdH	Ecolo	FDf	PTB-GO!	PP
Satisfaction	Low	0.779	0.542	0.308	0.438	1.824*	1.669
	Average	0.066	0.254	1.168**	-0.614	1.034	0.877
Confidence	Low	0.683*	-0.055	-0.325	-0.236	0.798	1.228
	Average	0.636*	0.185	-0.11	0.676	0.407	1.183
Age	18-35	0.368	-0.454	0.243	-0.199	0.964	0.713
	36-54	-0.085	-0.696*	-0.335	-1.986	0.927*	0.998
Education	Low level	-1.306***	-0.749*	-2.232***	-2.470*	-0.195	-0.547
	Average level	-0.771**	-0.750*	-1.155**	-1.051	-0.181	-0.42
Gender	Men	0.339	-0.114	-0.228	-0.472	-0.421	-0.418

Source: Multinomial logistical regression, PartiRep 2014 – Wallonia. N=1018. Pseudo r...: .275. Referential category: PS vote.

Wallonia

A similar analysis of Walloon data (Table 4), using the same model and the Socialist PS as a referential category, yields more conclusive results. Party preferences in Wallonia are far less significantly influenced by confidence and satisfaction levels than in Flanders. To put it in a nutshell: Liberal MR captures a small part of the protest vote, while a relatively bigger part of it is captured by far left PTB-GO!. Unfortunately, our sample includes too few respondents who had cast a blank or invalid vote, which is why we could not include that option in our analysis. Again, we see the blatant contradiction between the two regions. The data clearly reveal that dissatisfaction and distrust are far larger issues for Wallonia than for Flanders. This divide has been brought to light before, in previous research. The main difference is that Flemish voters are offered ample opportunity to express their dissatisfaction by casting votes for centre right N-VA, far right Vlaams Belang or far left PVDA+. In other words, elections are providing a way out for Flemish voters who feel (somewhat) uneasy with the present

policies, while there is far less opportunity to cast a protest vote in Wallonia. Only far left PTB-GO! may actually be labeled as a protest party, or even an anti-system party. Obviously, Ecolo (Walloon greens) does not assume that role, while the political spectrum in Wallonia does not include a credible far right party. Again, we are faced with a widespread and recurring misconception about satisfaction levels in Flanders and Wallonia. Flemish voters are often represented as being more dissatisfied than Walloon ones, because they can make such feelings perfectly clear in the polling booths. In reality, the complete opposite is true: satisfaction levels are much lower in Wallonia. But Walloon voters have little opportunity to express their dissatisfaction through the ballot box. Indeed, Walloon politics offer a tremendous potential for a protest vote, as has also been made abundantly clear by previous research. The thing is that for historical reasons no solid political party capable of channeling this discontent, has emerged so far in Wallonia.

CONCLUSION

The Belgian political system has been severely put to the test over the past years, with the lengthy period of political deadlock - the formation of the Di Rupo government took 541 days - as the most striking feature. However, when comparing the results of the 2014 PartiRep election analysis with those of the previous one in 2009, we see that political developments have not led to a steep fall in public confidence in politics. The latter has remained quite steady over those years, and public confidence in federal institutions has even slightly increased. But, we do note a loss of confidence in regional institutions. While the latter were clearly still perceived as an alternative for the federal ones in 2009, scores for all institutions are much more similar in 2014. The dominant feature is stability. Also, when taking a long-term perspective (Marien, 2011), it is obvious that public confidence in Federal institutions has remained steady over the years. There is no marked downward trend.

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As has been shown by previous surveys, Walloon voters are much more dissatisfied than Flemish ones. A series of indicators systematically show lower scores in Wallonia. Walloon voters are fairly dissatisfied with the improper functioning of their own regional institutions. We could conclude from this that a democratic alternative is lacking, especially in the Walloon region. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the manner in which Francophone political parties are functioning and governing the region, but there is actually no way in which Walloon voters can express it. The far left PTB-GO!'s election success did not come unexpected: Walloon politics indeed offers a considerable potential for a quite radical protest vote. A left-wing party is now capturing the protest vote, but a party on the right of the political spectrum could manage to do so in the future as well.

In Flanders, on the other hand, several parties - centre right N-VA, far right Vlaams Belang en far left PVDA+ - give voice to popular discontent. Analysis of (intra party) vote transfers shows that many dissatisfied voters switched support to N-VA and PVDA+. It means that deep-seated distrust was indeed one of the main reasons why these protest parties were so successful. If the other parties want to win back voters from these protest parties, they will have to address the formidable challenge of falling levels of public confidence in politics.

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