

Does Belgium still exist in Belgian Politics?

Conrad Meulewaeter, Benoît Rihoux
Université Catholique de Louvain
Stefaan Walgrave and Christophe Lesschaeve
Antwerp University
Translation: Chris Emery

The elections of 25 May 2014 may be seen as one of those special moments when political 'supply' and 'demand' meet each other. The supply is represented by the various parties, their programmes and their respective candidates, while the demand comes from the voters with their beliefs and preferences. There is a widespread belief that political parties in Belgium pursue a political agenda of their own which is very different from that of the electorate. In the following paragraphs we hope to find answers to three central questions: 1. Is there a single public opinion or are there two separate public opinions in Belgium? 2. Are they still 'families' of political parties on both sides of the language boundary? 3. Are the coalitions formed at regional level (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital Region) ideologically 'natural'?

25

INTRODUCTION

There are many who believe that there is a dislocation between the perceptions and priorities of political elites and the electorate. One example is the belief that many of the so-called 'community' problems are only kept alive by political elites and that there is essentially little difference between public opinion in the north and the south. Relatively recent research has indeed shown, for instance, that in the perception of identity and the agenda of the linguistic communities the gulf is greater between politicians than between the Flemish and Walloon public (Billiet, Maddens & Frogner 2006). This leads one to wonder on the one hand how great the ideological differences between Flemish and Walloon voters actually are, and on the other, how great the differences are between 'sister' parties, i.e. parties from the same political family.

Another widespread belief is that the ideological distance between the dominant parties in Belgium is fairly small which tends to favour middle of the road coalitions, fairly centrist policies and few major changes of direction. We can test this by looking at the ideological makeup of the ruling coalitions, i.e. the ideological distance between the parties which together form the various governments in this country.

Thanks to the PARTIREP project we have been able to collect a more complete range of simultaneous data from throughout the country which has allowed us to investigate these questions in a much more detailed fashion. By means of the Electoral Test (in both communities) and a representative random survey, we were able to collect a large amount of information about the participating political parties¹, as well as about the Belgian electorate. The former were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a list of over 200 propositions. For the voters we conducted a large-scale survey among 2000 Belgians (1000 Flemish, 1000 Walloons). It was carried out in two waves; the first wave was face-to-face before the elections; the second was by telephone after the elections. The data from the pre-electoral survey is used to answer the first question: are there two public opinions in Belgium?

ONE OR TWO PUBLIC OPINION(S) IN BELGIUM?

Many newspaper polls suggest that public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia takes opposing stand-points in respect of certain issues such as, for instance, the monarchy. On the other hand, some authorities argue that there is still a great deal of agreement among Belgians on values and issues regardless of the community to which they belong (Voyé et al, 1992). So is there a single public opinion or are there two public opinions in Belgium?

To answer that question we make use of the data collected during the large-scale, pre-electoral, face-to-face survey referred to above. This allowed us to present electors with 30 propositions taken from the Electoral Test. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each proposition. (They were also allowed not to give an answer.)

26

These thirty propositions, chosen from a much larger number, were selected on the basis of various criteria. The first and most obvious was comparability: the list had to be identical on both sides of the language boundary. The propositions had to be relevant to the two largest communities in the country. For that reason, most of them refer to the Federal government and Federal powers. However, we also added a number of propositions which relate to regional powers and are of importance to both Flemings and Walloons. The second criterion was that the propositions should discriminate between and divide the parties in both communities. Finally, they should also lead to divisions within the Flemish and the Walloon electorates. When only a small part of the population agreed or disagreed with a proposition it was not selected.

So we have a list of 30 propositions that are comparable, relevant and potentially 'divisive'. Table 1 shows the 30 propositions with the weighted percentages of Flemings and Walloons who agree with each proposition. They are presented in increasing order of difference between the answers given by the two communities.

Table 1: De 30 propositions and differences of opinion between Flemish and Walloon public opinion.

| Proposition | Flanders % | Wallonia % | Difference % | Category |
|---|------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Some nuclear power stations should be kept open | 59.2 | 58.8 | 0.4 | A (small) |
| Belgium should invest in a successor to the F-16 fighter aircraft. | 36.9 | 38.6 | 1.7 | A (small) |
| If there is a national rail strike, a minimum service should be provided | 92.7 | 90.6 | 2.1 | A (small) |
| A mother should be able to give up her child for adoption anonymously. | 65.1 | 67.3 | 2.2 | A (small) |
| The government should make contributing to a pension fund fiscally more attractive. | 85.6 | 82.8 | 2.8 | A (small) |
| Company cars should be taxed more heavily | 49.7 | 52.7 | 3 | A (small) |
| All nuclear weapons stored on Belgian territory must be removed. | 68.8 | 65.2 | 3.6 | A (small) |
| A member of parliament may not also be a burgo-master | 72.9 | 76.7 | 3.8 | A (small) |
| Schools should make halal meals available to Muslim pupils. | 29.2 | 33.3 | 4.1 | A (small) |
| Great wealth should be taxed more heavily. | 76.7 | 81.5 | 4.8 | A (small) |
| State expenditure should not increase in the next few years. | 86.8 | 81.5 | 5.3 | A (small) |
| People who invest rather than save their money should be rewarded fiscally. | 65.6 | 71.2 | 5.6 | B (moderate) |
| An asylum seeker who enters the country as a minor should never be sent back. | 43 | 49 | 6 | B (moderate) |
| Downloading internet material illegally should be punished more heavily. | 54.4 | 47.9 | 6.5 | B (moderate) |
| All condemned criminals should complete the full term of their sentence. | 77.8 | 70.9 | 6.9 | B (moderate) |
| The president of the European Commission should be elected directly by the European public. | 71.5 | 78.4 | 6.9 | B (moderate) |
| Young people should have the vote from the age of 16. | 21.6 | 13.8 | 7.8 | B (moderate) |
| Europe should be able to raise taxes directly to replace national contributions. | 37 | 29.1 | 7.9 | B (moderate) |
| The Federal government should sell its shares in state owned telecommunications company Belgacom. | 45.2 | 35.6 | 9.6 | B (moderate) |
| The speed limit on the Brussels ring road should be reduced to 100 km per hour. | 55 | 64.7 | 9.7 | B (moderate) |
| Those on social security should be obliged to do community work. | 82.2 | 71.9 | 10.3 | B (moderate) |
| Parents should be forbidden by law to strike their children. | 48.8 | 59.2 | 10.4 | B (moderate) |
| Flanders should become independent. | 21.4 | 10.6 | 10.8 | B (moderate) |
| Anyone who has never worked should not receive unemployment benefit. | 50.9 | 37.5 | 13.4 | C (large) |
| During a smog alert there should be stricter limits on the use of vehicles. | 64.8 | 78.2 | 13.4 | C (large) |
| The minimum age for the imposition of local fines should be higher than the present 14 years. | 58.2 | 43.5 | 14.7 | C (large) |

| | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|-----------|
| The right to strike should not be restricted. | 64.5 | 49.7 | 14.8 | C (large) |
| Belgium should allow immigrants from outside the EU to make up labour shortages. | 39.7 | 22.8 | 16.9 | C (large) |
| Surrogacy for same-sex couples should be allowed. | 70.9 | 49.5 | 21.4 | C (large) |
| Wages should be frozen if they rise faster than in neighbouring countries. | 48.7 | 24.5 | 24.2 | C (large) |

For this analysis, we used a statistically appropriate procedure² to divide the propositions into three categories (cf. Table 1). The first group A (11 propositions) consists of the propositions for which the difference between the Flemish and Walloon responses was less than 5.5%. Their answers to these propositions were the most Belgian in character. The second group B (12 propositions) is where the difference between the two communities is greater than 5.5% and less than 11.2%. Finally, for the third group C of 7 propositions the difference in the responses was greater than 11.2%. Here the Belgian element in the responses is at its lowest.

If we take a detailed look at Table 1, we see that, on the whole, electors from both regions hold fairly similar views on the various questions presented to them. Indeed they were closely in agreement (less than 5.5% difference) on 11 of the 30 propositions. That group of propositions included socio-economic (taxing company cars), ethical (adoption) and immigration-related issues (halal meals for Muslim pupils). Some issues of principle such as the minimum service to be offered during a rail strike attracted a high level of support from both the Flemish (92.7%) and the Walloons (90.6%).

28

Conversely we see that a number of other propositions, though related to the same issues, are received very differently on either side of the language boundary. The greatest difference between Flanders and Wallonia of 24.2% was in response to the important socio-economic question of a wage-freeze. It is interesting to observe that there can be close agreement as well as lively disagreement between voters from these two most important regions. The same applies to propositions on migration and ethical issues which appear in both categories of greatest and least agreement between the Walloons and the Flemish.

Flemish and Walloon voters, therefore, do not disagree systematically on important ideological questions nor along the great political fault lines such as left-right, unitarism-separatism, authoritarianism-libertarianism though they can certainly disagree on specific policy questions. For every major area of policy we encounter propositions on which there is agreement as well as profound disagreement between the two regions.

If we also look at propositions for which there is majority support within one language community, there are very few where a majority in the other community support the opposite standpoint. In only 6 of the 30 propositions, do Walloons and Flemings clearly want different things. They involve Local Authority Penalties, the right to strike and limits on unemployment benefits, three issues which had already been highlighted by the political parties and the media.

The data suggest that Flemings and Walloons hold congruent viewpoints on the great majority of the

propositions, even for instance on Flemish independence which only attracted 21.4% support in the north and 10.6% in the south.

We cannot therefore speak of two different public opinions in Belgium in the sense that Walloons and Flemings systematically hold opposing views on government policy. But they can certainly disagree on concrete propositions put forward by one or the other linguistic community.

ARE THERE STILL 'PARTY FAMILIES' THAT CROSS THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE?

With a few exceptions, such as the far left Party in Belgium (called PVDA+ in Flanders and PTB-GOI in Wallonia), there are no longer any unitary parties in Belgian politics. Most analysts agree that currently there are two largely different party systems consisting of Flemish and Francophone parties (Deschouwer, 2009).³ Nevertheless, are there still any meaningful 'families' of parties, sister parties on either side of the language boundary? Or are these families now disappearing, particularly since the careers of party leaders are growing increasingly apart and each within their own region?

To answer this question we shall use responses extracted from a sample survey of 262 propositions which were presented to the parties taking part in the Electoral Test. Of course, not every proposition which appeared on line was included in the Electoral Test, and this for three reasons. *Firstly*, it was simply not practical to include too many propositions in an Electoral Test. We had therefore to make a more limited selection based on the parties' responses. This leads on to the *second* reason: a proposition that does not differentiate between the parties taking part is not particularly interesting. If every party gave the same response to a proposition it was unlikely to be included in the final selection because such a proposition would not help to position the respondent in the party landscape. The *third* and last reason for omitting a number of propositions was if an issue had already been covered by others. Furthermore, we had to ensure that the propositions were spread fairly equally between all areas of policy.

29

For the analyses that follow, therefore, we have only used those propositions which differentiate between parties, whether Flemish or Walloon. Furthermore, we have only used propositions relating to the Brussels, Federal and European levels so that they would be comparable on either side of the linguistic frontier. Specifically Flemish or Walloon proposals were therefore excluded since they would only have had responses from their own side. The result was a sample of 124 propositions designed to compare the ideological profiles of political parties in Belgium. First of all, we compared the responses of the parties and counted the number of propositions to which two parties gave the same response. Table 2 shows the percentages (out of a total of 124) of every two-party combination.

If we read the table from left to right, we see for instance that the Flemish Greens (Groen) gave the same answer as the Socialist SP.A in 77% of the propositions, 64% were the same as the Christian democratic CD&V, 53% the same as the Liberal Open VLD and so on. In Table 2 the percentage agreement between parties of the same party-family is indicated in green: from high to low, Greens, Socialists, Christian Democrats/Humanists, Liberals and ethno-regional parties (N-VA and FDF).

Table 2: Distance between political parties on 124 propositions.

| Party | Groen | SP.A | CD&V | OVLD | N-VA | Ecolo | PS | cdH | MR | FDF |
|----------|-------|------|------|------|------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Groen | | 77% | 64% | 53% | 46% | 76% | 73% | 60% | 52% | 61% |
| SP.A | | | 65% | 50% | 52% | 68% | 69% | 69% | 55% | 65% |
| CD&V | | | | 60% | 68% | 54% | 64% | 58% | 60% | 56% |
| OPEN VLD | | | | | 67% | 45% | 55% | 59% | 66% | 53% |
| N-VA | | | | | | 40% | 46% | 58% | 59% | 51% |
| Ecolo | | | | | | | 76% | 69% | 60% | 66% |
| PS | | | | | | | | 73% | 65% | 65% |
| cdH | | | | | | | | | 77% | 75% |
| MR | | | | | | | | | | 66% |
| FDF | | | | | | | | | | |

The two sister parties that are closest are the Greens (the Walloon Ecolo and the Flemish Groen: 76%). This is not surprising since the two parties form a single grouping in the Federal parliament and maintain close ties with each other. At the same time we should also note that Ecolo is almost as close to the Walloon Socialist PS (73%) as it is to Groen, and that Groen is slightly closer to the Flemish Socialist SP.A at 77% than it is to Ecolo.

30

Conversely we see that despite their common historical roots, the distance between the Flemish Christian democratic CD&V and the Walloon Humanist democratic cdH is much greater (58%). But this is perhaps to be expected if take into account the way cdH has moved toward the centre left and CD&V to centre right. For the last six years the two parties have disagreed on issues involving the linguistic communities. But in spite of that, they are still closely aligned on ethical questions. Nevertheless, cdH is no longer the francophone party that is closest to the Flemish Christian Democrats. Nowadays, the Walloon Socialist PS (64%) and the Walloon Liberal MR (60%) are closer.

To some extent the relatively great distance between the regionalist parties, N-VA and FDF, is to be expected. It even seems rather odd that there is a 51% agreement. This is largely owing to their fairly close agreement on socio-economic issues.

As for the socialist parties, the Walloon PS and Flemish SP.A remain closely allied to each other (69%). SP.A, however, is also close to Walloon Christian democratic cdH (69%) and the Walloon Greens of Ecolo (68%) and is closest of all to the Flemish Greens of Groen (77%). Similarly, Walloon Socialist PS is closer to the Walloon Greens of Ecolo at 76% than their Flemish sister party, SP.A.

Among the Liberal parties, MR is the francophone party that is closest to Flemish Open VLD (66%) though N-VA is even closer at 67%.

The relevance of ‘party families’ to party manifestos has now become rather hazy. Most striking is that the two Christian democratic parties which for so long played a pivotal role in Belgian politics (PSC & CVP, now cdH & CD&V) have moved quite a long way apart in their policies. Nowadays it is fair to say that dividing up parties into ideological families is not particularly relevant. No longer is it the case that a particular party is automatically closer to its sister party on the other side of the language boundary.

ARE THE REGIONAL COALITIONS SINCE 25 MAY 2014 IDEOLOGICALLY LOGICAL?

Coalition formation is a classic problem for political scientists as well as intriguing subject for political commentators. Are some coalitions more ‘natural’ or more ‘logical’ than others?

Theories on coalition-forming accept the basic premise of the *minimum-winning coalition*. Put simply, it is in the interest of the parties negotiating a coalition (especially the largest party which usually takes the initiative) to find a coalition that (a) consists of the smallest possible number of parties since this simplifies negotiations and increases the number of government posts per partner; (b) has the smallest number of seats sufficient to provide it with a majority of parliamentary seats.⁴ A further premise of these theories is that of the *minimal distance coalition*. Party leaders will prefer to form a coalition with parties that have similar ideologies.

Have these considerations supplied the basis for coalition formation in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments in the wake of the elections of 25 May 2014? To answer that we shall turn to the parties’ responses to the Electoral Test. We have compared the answers given by every potential partner in every possible majority in the regional parliaments. To do this a list was drawn up with every possible *minimum-winning* coalition in the regional parliaments.⁵ We confined ourselves to the parliaments at regional level for two reasons. First and foremost, at the time of writing the coalition at Federal level⁶ had not yet been finalised. Secondly, the number of *minimum-winning* coalitions in the Federal parliament is much greater and it appears likely that this time the process could deviate from tradition and result in a coalition with a Francophone minority. Indeed, considering the way in which traditions are changing, it would be extremely difficult to list every potential *minimum-winning* coalition at the Federal level.

31

To calculate the ideological distance between the parties in every possible coalition at the regional level, we have only used the responses to propositions about the policies of the respective Flemish, Walloon and Brussels governments. We counted up all the propositions to which all the parties in a particular coalition gave the same response. By dividing that number by the total number of propositions we arrived at a ‘proximity percentage’ for every possible coalition. Parties that had not been included in the Election Test were ignored. In Flanders the far right Vlaams Belang was also ignored because of the *cordon sanitaire* which the other parties had imposed.

Tables 3 to 6 show the proximity percentages. In each table the coalitions are placed in descending order of proximity. The actual coalition is indicated in green.

Table 3: Coalition possibilities in the Walloon parliament (75 seats).

| Coalition | Total number of seats | Proximity (number of propositions) | Proximity (%) |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| PS/cdH | 43 | 44 | 78.57 |
| PS/MR | 55 | 36 | 64.29 |
| MR/cdH/ Ecolo | 42 | 31 | 55.36 |

In the Walloon parliament only three *minimum-winning* coalitions were possible which limits the possibilities open to the party taking the initiative (the Socialist PS in this case). The actual coalition (PS/cdH) is indeed the one with the greatest degree of ideological proximity. Furthermore, it has a fairly comfortable majority and is partly a continuation of the previous government, though now without the Greens (Ecolo) which lost too many votes to have any claim to be a member of the coalition. For these reasons the coalition between the Socialists and the Humanist Democrats (PS-cdH) is very logical.

Table 4: Coalition possibilities in the Flemish parliament (124 seats).

| Coalition | Total number of seats | Proximity (number of propositions) | Proximity (%) |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| N-VA/CD&V | 70 | 38 | 66.67 |
| N-VA/CD&V/OVLD | 89 | 26 | 45.61 |
| N-VA/OVLD/Groen | 72 | 17 | 29.82 |
| N-VA/OVLD/SP.A | 80 | 16 | 28.07 |
| OVLD/CD&V/SP.A/Groen | 74 | 15 | 26.32 |
| N-VA/SP.A/Groen | 71 | 4 | 7.02 |

There were many more possible coalitions in Flanders. The coalition that emerged (N-VA / CD&V / Open VLD) includes the Liberal Open VLD, even though mathematically it is not necessary. In contrast to Wallonia a *minimum-winning* coalition was not of primary concern. Nevertheless, this coalition is fairly harmonious, and certainly more so than coalitions with the Socialist SP.A and/or the Greens (Groen). Of course, in a truly confederal context a coalition between N-VA/CD&V would presumably have been sufficient and ideologically more homogeneous. But it is clear that the formation of a Federal coalition made it necessary to include Open VLD in the Flemish government. Ultimately, a coalition of three right-wing parties (or centre right in the case of CD&V) is the most logical, since mathematically a 'left' or 'centre left' majority was not possible.

Table 5: Coalition possibilities in the Brussels parliament (Francophone, 72 seats).

| Coalition | Total number of seats | Proximity (number of propositions) | Proximity (%) |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| PS/MR | 39 | 37 | 69.81 |
| MR/cdH/FDF | 39 | 35 | 66.04 |
| PS/cdH/FDF | 42 | 33 | 62.26 |
| PS/cdH/Ecolo | 38 | 30 | 56.60 |
| PS/Ecolo/FDF | 41 | 26 | 49.06 |
| MR/Ecolo/FDF | 38 | 24 | 45.28 |

In Brussels, on the Francophone side, the number of possible combinations was also quite high. The resulting coalition (PS / cdH / FDF) was the most logical for at least three reasons. In the *first* place the Socialist PS, as the largest party, had the right of initiative and a PS-cdH coalition had already been announced in Wallonia. It was therefore logical that PS should pursue this combination in Brussels. *Secondly*, a continuation of the previous coalition (PS-cdH-Ecolo) was mathematically possible but Ecolo had lost badly in the elections and had no claim to participation in government. *Thirdly*, in the circumstances, the inclusion of FDF as a third partner was ideologically the most homogeneous coalition without the Liberal MR.

Table 6: Coalition possibilities in the Brussels parliament (Dutch-speaking, 17 seats).

| Coalition | Total number of seats | Proximity (number of propositions) | Proximity (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| N-VA/CD&V/OVLD | 10 | 32 | 60,38 |
| N-VA/SP.A/Groen | 9 | 28 | 52,83 |
| OVLD/CD&V/Groen | 10 | 26 | 49,06 |
| OVLD/SP.A/Groen | 11 | 25 | 47,17 |
| N-VA/OVLD/Groen | 11 | 24 | 45,28 |
| CD&V/OVLD/SP.A | 10 | 24 | 45,28 |
| N-VA/OVLD/SP.A | 11 | 23 | 43,40 |

In Brussels, on the Dutch speaking side, the most striking feature is that centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA is not a member of the final coalition, even though it forms part of the two ideologically most congruent *minimum-winning* combinations. Nevertheless, the actual coalition is fairly logical, seeing that the francophone parties would presumably have vetoed the inclusion of N-VA in the Brussels government. Furthermore, the present coalition is a continuation of a coalition that had previously functioned well (though without the Greens who were no longer needed for a majority). Finally, the liberal-social and consensual profile of Guy Vanhengel (leader of the Liberal Open VLD in Brussels) made the inclusion of N-VA more difficult.

If we consider these four coalition formations, we can conclude that none of them is ‘unnatural’ but that only the Walloon coalition of PS and cdH is both *minimum-winning* and *minimal distance*.

CONCLUSION

These initial analyses, which require further research, enable us to indicate three key elements in Belgian politics. In the *first* place, there is no systematic divergence of public opinion in the north and the south although there are differences on specific issues which can be exploited by parties on either side at times of inter-community tension. *Secondly*, party ‘families’ still exist but they no longer play any structural or moderating role. *Finally*, even if every regional coalition in 2014 were entirely logical, each one is different. There can be no symmetry between the Federal government and all the regional governments. In short, it is clear that the diversity of political outcomes at the regional level has played an important role since 25 May 2014 and this will make consultation and negotiations between the different governments, including the Federal government, more difficult in the next few years.

Endnotes

1/ The parties involved in the Electoral Test were (for Flanders) CD&V (Christian Democrats), Groen (Green), N-VA (centre right Flemish Nationalist), Open VLD (Liberal), sp.a (Socialist) en Vlaams Belang (far right Flemish Nationalist) and (for Wallonia) cdH (Humanist Democrat), Ecolo (Green), FDF (Liberal Regionalist), MR (Liberal) and PS (Socialist).

2/ We started out from the average of the difference between the percentage of Flemish and Walloon respondents who agreed with the proposition. We then subtracted half the standard deviation from this average on the one hand, and added half the standard deviation on the other. This gave us our three categories.

3/ One should also not forget the German-speaking community which was not included in this research.

4/ E.g. in a parliament with 100 seats, if party A has 40 seats, party B 15 and party C 25, party A will opt for a coalition with party B giving it 55 seats rather than go into coalition with party C with 65 seats.

5/ For the Brussels-Capital Region account was taken of the requirement for a majority in both the Dutch and French speaking groups.

6/ We have likewise not looked at the German-language government.

Sources:

- Billiet, J., Maddens, B. & Frogner, A.-P. 2006. *Does Belgium (still) exist? Differences in political culture between Flemings and Walloons*. *West European Politics*, 29, 912-932.

- Deschouwer, K. 2009. *The politics of Belgium. Governing a divided society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Voyé, L., Kerkhofs, J., Bawin-Legros, B. & Dobbelaere, K. 1992. *Belges, heureux et satisfaits: les valeurs des Belges dans les années 90*, Bruxelles, Fondation Roi Baudouin.