

Belgian parties are under unprecedented pressure ahead of the 2014 elections, with defeat meaning five years in opposition at all levels of government

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On 25 May Belgium will hold simultaneous regional, federal and European elections. As [Carl Devos](#) writes, the decision to hold concurrent elections at all three levels was not simply a coincidence, but is instead a deliberate attempt to prevent short-term policies and the political instability that regularly accompanies elections in Belgium. However, the fact that defeated parties will face five years in opposition at all levels of government means they are facing an existential challenge, with unsuccessful party leaders and even individual parties unlikely to survive until the next elections in 2019.



On 25 May Belgium faces what national politicians and press have described as ‘the mother of all elections’. This rather bombastic title refers to the fact that, for the first time since 1999, Belgium will organise simultaneous multi-level elections: the regional, federal and European elections will all be held on the same day.

It is not only the number of elections that raises the stakes. As a result of the so called ‘Bow Tie Agreement’ on the sixth institutional reform of the federal state, finalised in October 2011, the federal legislative term will be extended from four to five years, starting from the 2014 elections. Beginning with the first direct election in 1995, regional parliaments in Belgium have had a legislative term of five years, so that all regional elections could be organised on the same day, together with European elections.

The change of the federal legislative term was needed because, as a result of the Bow Tie Agreement – named after a sartorial characteristic of Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo – all future elections need to take place on the same day. Belgium is the only federation in the world where horizontal (all regional) and vertical (regional and federal) elections are required by law to be held simultaneously and are not the result of sheer coincidence. Therefore, beginning in 2014, Belgium will only organise elections once every five years, with the exception of the local and provincial elections.

This contrasts highly with the election agenda of the past decade. After the coinciding elections of 1999, that agenda was quite busy: 2003 federal, 2004 regional and European, 2007 federal, 2009 regional and European, and 2010 early federal elections, due to the premature dissolution of the Yves Leterme government following a linguistic crisis. During the first decade of the 21st century Belgium faced regional or federal elections, on average, once every two years.

In normal federations, these separate and thus numerous elections are not considered an anomaly. But in the distinctive *sui generis* Belgian federation, without federal parties or federal media and with only a limited number of states, this high number of elections felt problematic. It was perceived as an institutional incentive for short term politics and instability.



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In Belgium, all political parties encourage their most important politicians to participate in each election, regardless of the level at which they used to be active: during regional elections, the majority of the federal government stands for the regional parliament and vice versa. Since there is no federal political arena and because the division of competences in the Belgian federal system is rather complex, an election at one policy level always deals with issues of the other level and even a government that is formally not being judged by the voter is thrown into the campaign. That makes governing a tough job. With elections every two years, state reformers therefore decided to limit the number of elections and concentrate them on the same day.

Importance of simultaneous elections

Why is this relevant in evaluating the stakes for May 25th? The simple reason is that parties have a great deal to lose and this makes them very nervous. The consequences of these electoral changes should not be underestimated. Parties that lose these elections or coalition formations – two quite different disciplines in a complex, fragmented proportional system – face five years in opposition.

During these five years, there will be no opportunity to enter government on another policy level to make up for losses in previous elections. Especially in the volatile, unsettled and fragmented Flemish political landscape, no one can even estimate what the political scene will look like in 2019. For some parties it is not simply a fight to get into government, it is an existential challenge: within five years, many of the current leaders will have to move aside and even the parties might need to rethink themselves.

There is also another side to this. Less frequent elections could mean less short term politics. If governments no longer need to present themselves to the voter every two years, but instead every five years, maybe some of the many structural reforms that are so often proclaimed urgent by Belgian politicians and prescribed by European institutions could finally be put into place. Being part of government seems more crucial than ever.

Simultaneous elections mean simultaneous cabinet formations. Because Belgium is a small, complex and collaborative federation with a high need for mutual cooperation, and in particular a strong 'partitocracy', most parties strive for 'homogeneous governments'. This means that these parties like to have the same coalitions at the federal and regional level. Parties control the cabinet formation on all levels, regardless of the potential divergent electoral results on the different policy levels. In a state with two quite separate political systems, one at each side of the language border, this makes politics even more complicated.

After the federal elections of 2007, Belgium broke its national record on cabinet formation: 194 days. After the 2010 elections, it broke the world record; it took 541 days to make the six party Di Rupo government, with Christian Democrats, socialists and liberals of both sides of the language border. Even then the government needed the support of both Green parties to establish the Bow Tie Agreement.

Policies at stake in the 2014 elections

So, losing the formation in 2014 means that a party could face a long exile from power, on all policy levels, until 2019. Just as important, however, are the decisions on the agendas. The new regional parliaments need to make new regional policy on the competences that are shifted from the federal to the regional level, thanks to the sixth reform of the state. These include powers that are very tangible in the lives of ordinary citizens: including family allowances, housing policy and elderly care. Since regional governments will not receive the same budget as the federal level used to spend when it was responsible for these policies – a decision that aims to refinance that federal level – the perpetuation of federal policy will not be an option.

The federal level is still in charge of some socio-economic key competences, such as the fiscal system, the large public social security system, including pensions and health care, important parts of the labour market policy and the industrial relations system. On all these fields, domestic and foreign specialists are advising reforms. The federal level will also need to decide on structural reforms of the judicial system.

This needs to be done against the background of severe budgetary challenges, as the European Union keeps Belgium under close surveillance. In 2013, Belgian debt amounted to 99.7 per cent of its GDP, while the budget deficit was limited to 2.7 per cent of GDP. In the next few years, austerity measures worth billions of euros need to be taken in order to meet European obligations.

The budgetary policy and debate on structural reforms are some of the major issues in the 2014 campaign. According to N-VA, the Flemish nationalists, voters need to choose between the political model of the French speaking socialist party (PS) and that of N-VA. The first only allows for modest modifications, with slow and limited reforms, while the second will change its course and take a U-turn towards smaller governments and more meritocracy. In Flanders, the centre-right and conservative N-VA depicts the current federal government as a 'socialist, French-speaking tax government'. In French speaking Belgium, the PS positions itself as the protector of the left against N-VA. However, both parties do not directly oppose each other, since – except from Brussels – they present themselves in different constituencies.

N-VA won in 2010 and became the biggest party in Flanders with 28.5 per cent of the vote. It first participated in elections in 2003. Seven years ago, N-VA only survived the electoral threshold in one constituency and was considered non-viable without an alliance. Today, it leads by itself in all polls, scoring around 30 per cent in Flanders. It is [expected](#) that on May 25th N-VA will stabilise or even grow further.

As the strongest party, it will probably be able to lead the Flemish regional government, assuming it survives the cabinet formation. Leading the federal government is tough, if only for symbolic reasons. But even joining the federal government will be difficult. N-VA wants to shift Belgium towards confederalism, or at least achieve notable socio-economic reforms. Both, but especially the first, will be a challenge.

Not only will N-VA experience resistance from political parties from the south, it is also only able and willing to join a centre-right coalition. On the other hand, the Flemish Christian Democrats, the second party (17.5 per cent in Flanders in 2010, 18.5 per cent in recent polls, but aiming at 20 per cent), has more options in the forthcoming coalition formation. It could make a government with N-VA, but it is also willing to enter a 'traditional tripartite' between Christen Democrats, socialists and liberals, the latter two reaching 13.5 per cent in recent polls in Flanders. Therefore, N-VA only has a limited amount of leverage in negotiations.

In French speaking Belgium, the PS will probably lose votes because of strong opposition on its left wing from the *Parti du Travail de Belgique* (PTB), the extreme left. The PS scores 28.5 per cent in recent polls, a decrease of more than 9 points compared to 2010. However, notwithstanding this setback, the PS will likely stay in charge of the coalition formation, as the French-speaking Liberals score 23.5 per cent, the Christian Democrats 12.5 per cent and the Greens 11.5 per cent. Its leading position is mainly grounded in the party's strength at the Walloon regional level. In Brussels, the PS and MR keep each other in balance, for the time being. Therefore, many think that at the French speaking side, a 'purple' liberal coalition of PS and MR is to be expected.

On the Flemish side, the N-VA will be the biggest party and the Flemish socialists and liberals will only be third and fourth. How, in this 'two country state', can both results be combined in a federal government? Will the formation of regional governments influence federal government formation and allow for more homogeneous governments?

It can be reasonably expected that 2014 will look a lot like 2010. The N-VA will be the strongest party in Flanders, while its ideological counterpart, the PS, will win in Wallonia. Since the 2010 elections, polls have showed more stability than change. The N-VA is significantly ahead of all competition, in Wallonia the PS loses some of its edge, but is still at the top.

Will Belgium break its own world record for the longest cabinet formation negotiations? No. Even if history repeats itself, it never does it identically. Belgian politicians have learned their lesson from the 2010 experience. The N-VA shows itself much more prepared for compromises, even lowering expectations for its voters on the implementation of confederalism.

Other parties will not lose that much time before deciding to make a government. After all, they all share the same objective: to govern. From May onwards parties will have the opportunity to accomplish this, ensuring their influence for a long time during a very interesting period in Belgian history.

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