

Introduction

The many gaps in Belgian politics

Kris Deschouwer

THE BELGIAN GAPS

Some elections are identified as ‘critical’ (Evans & Norris 1999). It means that their results are deviating from normal and predictable patterns. They show, for instance, high levels of volatility, contain important surprises like the sudden rise or sudden decline of one or a few parties, lead to innovative governmental coalitions and – very importantly – mark a turning point. Critical elections are landmarks in the electoral history of a country. The elections of 24 November 1991 were, for Belgium, without any doubt critical elections, and they were labelled as such as soon as the results came in. Election Day was referred to as ‘Black Sunday’, pointing in the very first place at the success of the radical right party Vlaams Blok, which had gathered almost 7 per cent of the votes with a programme that contained the typical ‘Le Pen’ cocktail of nationalism, law and order and xenophobia. A party called Rossem – after its founder and leader – polled 3 per cent of the votes with a strong anti-establishment discourse (and while Jean-Pierre Van Rossem himself was in jail after being accused of major fraud). The two largest party families of Belgium – Christian democrats and socialists – both lost heavily and for the first time their combined votes added up to merely 50 per cent, down from 58 per cent in 1987 (and still no less than 79 per cent in 1961). The two still had a majority of the seats in parliament and did again form a coalition, but only after difficult negotiations that took more than three months.

These were critical elections indeed, and all these electoral shifts were soon interpreted as one major call, as one loud and clear ‘signal of the voter’. That voter appeared to be unhappy and clearly willing to voice this feeling at the polls. There was a general consensus on the fact that there was a ‘gap’ between citizens and politicians, that their agendas did not match, that

representation was not functioning properly, that parties had lost the ability to keep in touch with the real problems of the people and that therefore action was needed. It triggered discussions about the way in which parties should be organised and about the way in which elections could better capture the will of the people. Some seized this opportunity to defend the abolishment of compulsory voting, others believed that an electoral threshold to keep smaller parties out of parliament might help and still others thought that preference voting should be encouraged to allow voters to really choose their representatives. A 'new political culture' was also needed that included, among others, a reduction of clientelist practices and of cumulating of political mandates.

These were critical elections for Belgium, but the centre of the post-election debate was actually not Belgium as a whole but mainly Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region in the north of the country. The radical right party Vlaams Blok did indeed only present candidates in Flanders, being originally a party defending the independence of Flanders. In Flanders it had polled 10 per cent of the votes. The party Rossem was also a Flemish phenomenon only, polling 5 per cent of the votes in the region. In the francophone south of Belgium, the Christian democrats and socialists had also lost votes, but together still controlled more than 60 per cent of the electorate. A small radical right party Front National (FN) had booked some success (2 per cent), but the major surprise came from the green party Ecolo that doubled its score to nearly 14 per cent.

These different electoral results in north and south were not at all new in 1991. They have been there ever since elections were held in Belgium. They are one of the indicators of a much older 'gap' in Belgium politics, that is, the gap between the two language groups, between the French speakers of the south (Wallonia and Brussels) and the Dutch speakers of the north (Flanders and Brussels) (McRae 1986). This gap had in the 1950s become so deep, putting north and south against each other both on preferred policy choices and on the institutional future of the country, that all major parties fell apart into two unilingual parties, presenting candidates only to voters in their own language group. It was exactly a conflict between north and south on the distribution of competencies between central state and regional authorities that brought down the government and led to early elections in November 1991.

The gap between north and south has been responsible for many political crises in Belgium. One that did not pass unnoticed to the world started after the federal elections of 2010. Once again a conflict on the institutional organisation of the country had ended the federal coalition and early elections were called. Parties in Flanders almost unanimously agreed that a new federal government could only be formed on the condition that a major constitutional reform granting more powers to the substates would be agreed on. Francophone parties, on the contrary, had promised their voters that they would not

yield to these demands and would not enter a coalition if that would involve agreeing on constitutional reforms. The result was a government formation process that lasted eighteen months – 541 days exactly – to form in the end a grand coalition of the three traditional party families: Christian democrats, socialists and liberals (six parties).

During these eighteen months, life in the country went on more or less as usual (Hooghe 2012). Substate governments installed after elections in 2009 kept on functioning, the outgoing coalition went on as a caretaker government and Belgium chaired the European Union (EU). Even more remarkable though was the almost complete absence of any popular discontent with what was happening. International media were showing concern about the viability of Belgium, asking even whether it would be worth the while trying to make it survive at all. And while the Belgian political leaders were angrily staring at each other across the language border and refused to move an inch away from their original electoral pledges, there was no sizeable mobilisation of the people to support their political leaders in their battle, and there were only some very friendly actions urging the political elites to become sensible and to just govern the country together. The regional 2009 and federal 2010 electoral campaign had focused a lot on these institutional matters, but electoral research afterwards showed that the institutional issue was not very salient for most of the citizens (Deschouwer et al. 2010). Even many supporters of parties defending in the short or longer term the full independence of Flanders were not in agreement with the radical proposals of the party platforms. This is yet another intriguing ‘gap’ in Belgian politics, which is quite similar to what can be seen at the European level. In matters of institutional reform the party elites hold much more radical views than their rank and file. Party elites have run ahead of their voters in defending European integration, and in Belgium they furthermore defend more devolution while their voters actually prefer the national status quo.

Belgium is not the only country that can now look back at almost three decades of discussions about the quality of representative democracy. Both in public debates and in political science the dominant tone in debates about democracy is currently one of concern (e.g. Alonso, Keane & Merkel 2011; Mair 2013; Hay 2007; Keane 2009). There are many now well-known indicators that all suggest that traditional patterns of political participation and representation are eroding. Electoral behaviour has become volatile, reflecting weakening ties between voters and parties; voter turnout gradually and sometimes even spectacularly declines; party membership numbers have been plummeting; trust in political parties and more generally in representative institutions is very low. Explanations for these changing patterns and low levels of legitimacy are, among others, the fading of the old cleavage lines, the increased complexity and differentiating of society, the speed of

communication and the blurring of the lines of representation and accountability in a world where power is no longer concentrated in the national state and at the central state level.

The thirteen chapters of this book all deal with topics that are related to this discussion about the evolution and the quality of democratic politics, from perceived norms of citizenship over multilevel politics to electoral personalisation. They all talk explicitly to the literature and explore the evolutions in the case of Belgium. The country is in many respects a very ‘normal’ country, displaying the classic features of a parliamentary democracy and witnessing the same evolutions in societal structure, electoral behaviour and party organisation as other modern democracies. Yet Belgium is also a country that displays a number of peculiar and even exceptional characteristics that make it interesting and often a strong ‘case in point’ for analysing specific developments. One of these peculiarities is the extreme complexity of the political institutions. Belgium is a federal country with two types of substates: three territorial regions (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia) and three language communities (Dutch, French and – a very small – German). These two types of substates partially but not completely overlap and relate in a different way to each other in each of the language communities (Deschouwer 2012). This transformation of the Belgian state was not a calm and smooth process since political elites from Flanders and from francophone Belgium thoroughly disagreed – and still do – on the internal boundaries and on what should be the building blocks of the federation. The disagreement broke the political parties in two unilingual pieces in the 1960s and the 1970s, leaving Belgium as a country with – very uniquely – a totally split party system. There are indeed no statewide parties in Belgium, except for a relatively small radical left party. And not only parties are split along the language divide but also all media and therefore also the public opinion. Belgium is a country with a divided demos and with political debates and political campaigns running in two different and separate spheres. If one adds to this the membership of the EU where important powers have been not only pooled but also remain shared with both the substate and the federal authorities, one can truly say that Belgium is a political system with a very low level of clarity. Tracing back the chains of representation and accountability is extremely difficult in this multilevel labyrinth.

The way in which the federal system functions is also rather peculiar. Decision-making at the federal level requires cooperation and a common agreement between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking community. The Belgian federation is a textbook example of a consensus democracy (Lijphart 2012) where powers are shared and where multiple veto players lead to either the absence of decision-making – which does happen regularly – or incredibly creative compromises that allow for a de-blocking of the system but that

leaves at the same time all major actors deeply dissatisfied and frustrated. The consensus logic is not new for Belgium. Actually, the institutional pacification of the language divide only built on a tradition of consociationalism that had already been present since the early twentieth century for the dealing with the class and religious conflicts (Huyse 1981). The long tradition of power-sharing, of package deals, of elite collusion that combined a high degree of autonomy for each of the societal *pillars* (Rokkan 1977) and of proportional allocation of the spoils has spilled over to the organisation of the federal state. It has left the political parties and their auxiliary organisations very much in control of all important sectors of policymaking and of all public organisations and authorities that are involved in delivering the state services to the citizens. This is called *partitocracy*, and Belgium certainly is a good example of it (De Winter & Van Wynsberghe 2015).

Zooming in on the electoral system also reveals a number of specific and again rather unique features of Belgium. Since 1893, voting is compulsory. That is, all voters have to present themselves at the polling station, although they can then decide to cast a blank vote. Debates on whether this compulsory voting should be kept alive do pop up once in a while, but the principle is written in the constitution and therefore requires a very broad consensus to remove it (Hooghe & Deschouwer 2011). Seats in the different parliaments at all levels are distributed in a proportional way. Belgium was actually the first country to introduce proportional representation (PR) in 1900. More important, however, is the ballot structure. The lists presented by the political parties are semi-open or 'flexible'. This means that voters can either cast a vote for the list as such or cast one or more preference votes within the list of the choice. The question of whether electoral politics have become more personalised can therefore nicely be analysed in the Belgian context.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book builds on one decade of collaborative work conducted by the PartiRep research programme, an inter-university network focussing on changing patterns of participation and representation in modern democracies. The programme has mobilised since 2007 several dozens of political science researchers from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the Université libre de Bruxelles, the KU Leuven, the Université catholique de Louvain and the Universiteit Antwerpen. The University of Leiden and the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research were associated with the network and also contributed actively to the research. A wide variety of aspects and dimensions of political participation and representation were scrutinised and reports were published widely. The thirteen chapters of this book present several

highlights of the findings and reflect on the way in which and the degree in which the overall developments in democratic government are visible in Belgium and, at the same time, raise the question to what extent the very specific and sometimes exceptional context of the Belgian political system has led to specifically or typically Belgian outcomes.

In the first four chapters the norms and expectations about democratic governance are central. In chapter 1, Jan W. van Deth searches for the way in which young adults support norms of citizenship. These are norms that define what a ‘good’ citizen in a democratic polity should be and should do, like being politically and socially active or obey the laws. Using a panel study that has followed young adults during five years (see later) he finds more than expected a strong support for law-and-order norms. The age of eighteen appears to be an important threshold making youngsters clearly more aware of the importance – and in the Belgian context the obligation – to turn out to vote. Overall, however, the attitudes towards citizenship norms do not evolve a lot between the age of sixteen and twenty-one, suggesting that these norms have already been internalised before reaching the age of adolescence.

In chapter 2, Camille Kelbel, Giulia Sandri and Emilie van Haute zoom in on the perception and the image of parties in Belgium. In modern democracy, in general, and in *partitocratic* Belgium, in particular, the political parties do not have a good press. The authors want to unravel these feelings by taking neither the public nor the party as single and unitary actors. They differentiate between different categories of the population (citizens, party activists, candidates and members of parliament [MPs]) and between the different faces of the parties. They do find a nuanced and varied picture, with actors in Flanders being less critical of parties than those in Wallonia and with citizens being more critical than elites candidates and MPs. Audrey André, Sam Depauw and Rudy B. Andeweg wonder in chapter 3 what citizens expect from their representatives, not so much in terms of policies, but with respect to how they fulfil their representational roles. They distinguish between local promoters, welfare officers, policy specialists and generalists and compare the preferences of the citizens with the preferences of the candidates at the 2014 elections. What they find is a profound mismatch – yet another gap – between the citizens’ and the elites’ views on how representation should work. Citizens rather prefer representatives who take care of the needs of their local area, while politicians prefer being policy specialists. This gap between the expectations of the citizens and the politicians is larger among the citizens who are less wealthy and who are less partisan and less politically sophisticated.

In chapter 4, Didier Caluwaerts, Benjamin Biard, Vincent Jacquet and Min Reuchamps further explore expectations about democratic governance by looking at models of democracy and at the degree in which citizens actually want more space for other than just the representative model. Citizens

with lower levels of education are generally more supportive of all types of democracy. Their much stronger support for other than the representative model suggests that they dislike the current situation most. Higher educated citizens, on the contrary, tend to trust the political institutions more and are indeed less likely to support alternative models. And while there is – as often – a gap between the higher and the lower educated citizens, there is also a gap between north and south: Flanders seems to prefer more elitist forms of democracy, while in Wallonia there is stronger support for deliberative democracy.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Belgian split parties and party system. The absence of one single-party system and of statewide parties that can engage in a dialogue with all the citizens is often mentioned as a shortcoming of Belgian democracy. Kris Deschouwer, Jean-Benoit Pilet and Emilie van Haute analyse to what extent the unilingual parties that have the same ideological label as a party in the other language group can truly (and still) be seen as members of the same party family. They do find quite some convergence on ideological positions and see that sister parties in north and south cater for very similar electorates. Yet at the same time they consciously behave as different parties, with different names and labels and with different strategies. An interesting similarity across the language border is that party elites appear to be much more in favour of institutional changes – both further decentralisation in Belgium and further integration at the European level – than their voters.

Dave Sinardet, Lieven De Winter, Jérémy Dodeigne and Min Reuchamps look in chapter 6 at these Belgian institutional debates and explore the way in which linguistic identities affect institutional preferences and voting behaviour. They find surprisingly little evolutions over time in the territorial identifications, in which the Belgian level continues to be on top. They also confirm the limited division of the public opinion on matters of state reform, unlike the divisions at the elite level. It is especially within Flanders – where some parties defend quite radical separatist solutions – that voters are divided. And those who favour much more autonomy for Flanders do tend to vote for the parties that mobilise for this institutional change.

The way in which citizens deal with different levels of government – the regional, the federal and the European – is analysed in chapter 7 by Soetkin Verhaegen, Louise Hoon, Camille Kelbel and Virginie van Ingelgom. They want to unravel the reasons why one level is for some policies preferred over the other. They compare utilitarian motivations, identity and trust in political institutions and find that the latter – the more emotional sources – play the most important role. Comparing systematically the three levels of government they are able to show how attachment to a Belgian identity enhances the reluctance to both internal devolution and European integration.

In this complex and multilevel system, the lines of representation and accountability are not easy to trace. Ruth Dassonneville, Marc Hooghe and Marc Debus therefore wonder in chapter 8 whether patterns of economic voting can be discerned in Belgium. And despite the low-clarity setting, their results suggest that the state of the economy and economic considerations are nevertheless affecting voting behaviour in Belgium, and that this is not restricted to the highly sophisticated voters. Belgium might be extremely complex and governed by parties that in electoral campaigns do not cross the language border, but the voters apparently are still able to see the forest for the trees.

This does not mean however that making a choice at the polls is an easy thing. Evident links between voters and parties have been loosened, and this increases the potential importance of electoral campaigns. In chapter 9, Stefaan Walgrave and Christophe Lesschaeve test whether people change and adapt their policy preferences during an electoral campaign. For the 2014 campaign, the results are quite clear: the campaign does matter and make people adapt their preferences to bring them more in line with the party of their choice. More sophisticated voters appear to be already closer to their party at the beginning of the campaign and stick to their choice more than voters with a lower level of education.

This hesitation during the electoral campaign is also at the centre of chapter 10, in which Ruth Dassonneville, Pierre Baudewyns, Marc Debus and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck focus on the timing of decision-making of the voters. Looking at figures going back to the 1990s they see that – like in other countries – the Belgian voters tend to gradually postpone their final decision. This is an indicator of declining partisanship, and voters who are less attached to a political party or less interested in politics decide later than others. And for these late deciders the classic theories for explaining voting behaviour explain less well how and why they make their final choice. Interestingly, voters casting a preference vote for one or more candidates are more numerous among the early deciders. Opting for a candidate rather than for a party is apparently not a quick late solution but a more conscious choice.

This option for choosing either for the party list or casting one or more preference votes for candidates is a peculiar aspect of the Belgian electoral system. The flexible list system offers different forms of voting and allows researchers to disentangle the personal from the partisan vote. The last three chapters all deal with preference voting and make use of the mock-ballot technique to analyse in detail the voting for parties and candidates. Silvia Erzeel, Sijfra de Leeuw, Sofie Marien and Benoît Rihoux in chapter 11 wonder whether voters are more likely to cast preference votes for candidates of their own gender. Party lists must in Belgium have an equal number of male and female candidates, which has increased the number of female MPs. Yet

since parties tend to place female candidates on less-eligible list positions, a preference vote for the female candidates might further increase their numbers. The results show, however, that gender-based voting by female voters is a limited phenomenon, and that same-gender voting is more frequent among male voters. The Belgian voters are clearly not very strategic in this respect and not very gender-conscious.

In chapter 12, Audrey André, Sam Depauw and Jean-Benoit Pilet investigate the degree in which a preference vote for candidates can also be interpreted as a truly *personal* vote that is more motivated by the candidate than by the party of that candidate. They show in the first place that assimilating preference votes to personal votes is not correct. For many voters, their choice for a candidate is well nested in their party choice. Those who do cast a personal vote are citizens with a weaker partisanship and late deciders with a high degree of sophistication. Overall, personal voting is rather limited. The share of the electorate that can be convinced to cross party lines for a specific candidate is very small.

In chapter 13, Peter Thijssen, Bram Wauters and Patrick van Erkel look at preferential voting at the regional level and at the local level, suggesting that different mechanisms are at work at different levels of government. At the local level, more preference votes are cast, and they are given more frequently to those other than the first candidate on the list. Voting for candidates further down on the list is less frequent at the regional level and is related to political sophistication, that is, it is a more demanding type of vote. Yet proximity makes up for a lack of political resources. In local elections, voters with less political knowledge can compensate for this with the fact that they know the local candidates better.

DATA

The chapters in this book use different sets of data that have been gathered by the PartiRep network. Present in almost all the chapters is the *2014 PartiRep Voter Survey*. This was a two-wave panel study based on a random sample of the voters in the regions of Flanders and Wallonia, who were interviewed, respectively, in Dutch and in French. For a number of practical and related financial reasons the bilingual Brussels region (with 7.5 per cent of the Belgian voters) was not included. The first wave consisted of a one-hour face-to-face interview and reached 1,008 respondents in Flanders and 1,011 in Wallonia. It was in the field during the two months preceding the federal, regional and European elections of June 2014. All respondents were at the end of the interview invited to participate in a second post-electoral interview in which we wanted to register among other things the exact voting

behaviour at the three levels of government. For measuring this in the most accurate way, and especially also for being able to trace back exactly the (multiple) preference votes cast for individual candidates, we have sent all participants three mock ballots. They all received three booklets reproducing exactly the lists and all the candidates for the electoral district in which there were voting. We have asked them to fill in the booklets immediately after casting their vote. When they were contacted again for the post-electoral wave, they could inform us about all the details of their voting behaviour. The second wave resulted in 826 Flemish and 702 Walloon interviews. All results using this *2014 PartiRep Voter Survey* have been weighted to recalibrate the sample for gender, age and level of education.

Next to this face to face and telephone survey in Flanders and Wallonia, the PartiRep team also joined in 2014 the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project. This involved the organisation of a two-wave pre-electoral and post-electoral online survey in Flanders, Wallonia and also Brussels, using the standard questionnaire of MEDW and adding several questions on the specific Belgian situation. The sample size was 1,026 and 755 in Flanders, 1,035 and 603 in Wallonia and 757 and 518 in Brussels. When these data are used, they are referred to as *MEDW 2014*.

A few chapters also use the *2009 PartiRep Voter Survey* that was organised for the regional and European elections of June 2009. This was a three-wave panel survey, with two pre-electoral waves – one face to face and one by telephone – and a third post-electoral telephone survey. It was also based on a random sample of the voting population in Flanders and Wallonia and reached 2,331 respondents in the first wave, 1,845 in the second and 1,698 in the third. Results reported are always weighted for gender, age and level of education. When older electoral survey data are reported, they refer to the data gathered by the Institute for Social and Political Opinion Research (ISPO) of the KU Leuven and by the Pole Interuniversitaire Opinion Publique et Politique (PIOP) of the Université catholique de Louvain.

On the occasion of the local elections in October 2012, the team was in the field with an exit poll. These data – referred to as the *2012 PartiRep Exit Poll* – were gathered in forty local municipalities, resulting in a sample of 4,591 local voters, representative of the Belgian voting population. The 2012 exit poll was used to try out – successfully – the technique of the mock ballot for registering exactly the way in which the people voted. Since many and multiple preference votes are cast in local elections (see also chapter 13), this mock ballot was a necessary and also very useful tool.

Researchers of the PartiRep team took care in 2014 of the Belgian part of the Comparative Candidate Survey. It has sent out questionnaires to all candidates on all lists for the elections at the federal level and at the regional level. This has resulted in 1,816 responses, of which 102 came from candidates

who were elected. Where these data are used, they are referred to as the *2014 Belgian Candidate Survey*.

One final dataset that is used in some chapters is the *PartiRep MP Survey*. This contains data based on interviews conducted between 2009 and 2011 with MPs at the statewide and substate level in fifteen countries and seventy-two assemblies (Deschouwer & Depauw 2014). This adds up to 2,096 MPs who responded to the questionnaire.

In the first chapter on norms of citizenship Jan van Deth uses the *Belgian Political Panel Survey 2006–2011* (BPPS). This is a survey in three waves among young people in Belgium, aiming at measuring a variety of political orientations and the way in which they develop. The respondents were interviewed at the age of sixteen in 2006, and then again at the age of eighteen and at the age of twenty-one. Of the 6,330 youngsters who participated in the first wave, 3,025 also participated in the third wave.

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