

BELGIUM'S 2024 ELECTIONS: NAVIGATING FLEMISH NATIONALISM AMIDST EUROPEAN CHALLENGES

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Belgian citizens and politicians are gearing up for a marathon of election campaigns in 2024. Apart from the ever-present European Parliament elections which are scheduled for June 9, Belgian federal, and regional elections are also set to take place on the same day. While this approach is nothing new in the Belgian political scene - this method was already used in 2014 and 2019 - it is nonetheless a significant challenge for politicians and citizens who may lose focus on distinguishing between the three electoral campaigns. Moreover, this time, Belgium is also heading over the presidency of the Council of the European Union, with the challenging task of closing the legislation and preparing the next European mandate, thus questioning the Belgian government's capacity to tackle both European and Federal matters.

This dual responsibility of managing national elections during its presidency is not unique, as France and Sweden faced a comparable situation in 2022.

The confluence of the European Parliament elections with Belgium's national and regional polls however raises questions about the priorities of the Belgian government as it will have to focus on closing the five-year mandate legislation on the European level for the end of April 2024, leaving little space and limited capacities for the federal election campaign. Both sets of elections carry profound implications for the future of both Belgium and the European Union as far-right influence is stronger than ever.

The impending elections function as a looming deadline for the Belgian presidency, intensifying the focus on key issues such as Migration, Environment, EU Enlargement, Institutional Reform, and Foreign and Security policy. These topics, debated nationally, hold additional significance as they are concurrently being addressed within European Institutions. Moreover, Belgium will aim to adopt the priorities of the next Commission which adds further complexity on the government agenda.

(Over)complexity of the Belgian governmental system

The country's federal model, emphasizing coalition-building and compromise, has become a hallmark of Belgian governance. This cooperative approach, based on continual negotiation and compromise is very valued by other European Union member states, seen as an asset for the presidency of the Council of the European Union as these are key factors when sensitive topics will be discussed during the Belgian semester.

Belgium is well known for its difficult and intertwined organization, as it took 653 days to form a government after the 2019 federal elections. Indeed, the negotiation process in the country is endless as once the elections are held, parties need to form a coalition to gain a majority at the parliament, to then create a government. Thus, Belgium governments are very well representative of the population but also very fragile as the majority is composed by several parties such as the case of the current government, born with the "coalition Vivaldi," a grouping of 7 parties, from the socialist party to center right, representing 58% of the parliament. Indeed, the country's federalism is notably intricate due to its three official languages and three administrative regions. This complexity manifests in a federal structure balancing community-centric federalism, as proposed by the Flemish, and region-centric federalism, to comply with Walloons demands, each with its executive power and assembly.

In total, Belgium comprises seven entities, including three regions, three communities based on the language, and the federal state. Thus, on June 9th, Belgians will have to cast their vote for their region (and their community in the same vote), the federal state, and the European parliament. Complicating matters further, the federal elections are divided between the regions. In contrast to other countries, in Belgium, the three official languages add another difficulty and lead to regional party distinctions, with parties only running on specific regions, based

on their language and their values, rather than spanning the entire country. This fragmentation contributes to the challenge of understanding the overall political landscape.

Having parties competing regionally for federal seats in the Belgian parliament shows the crucial role of regional dynamics. Notably, we can notice the northern region of the Flanders is more right-wing driven and Wallonia has a more left-wing approach, even though the center-right party of the Mouvement Reformateur (MR) has been catching up and is even leading in Wallonia in the surveys of December 2023.

New developments also showed the general tendency observed in Europe, of parties sliding further to the right such as the MR in Wallonia. Indeed, Charles Michel's party has been following a more conservative approach throughout the year, by attacking "wokeism" and calling trade unions "mafias."

In Flanders, a region with close ties to the Netherlands given its linguistic and cultural proximity, the specter of another far-right majority is more than ever possible. This would reflect growing support for the far-right after the win of Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) at the Dutch parliamentary elections back in November 2023. Indeed, surveys are showing the far-right independentist party Vlaams Belang would be the leading party in the Flanders at 25% and even at the federal level, with twenty-five seats in the parliament (out of 150) as they also run in Brussels Region. This rise of nationalism and xenophobia in the Flanders follows the general European trend but differs in its willingness to separate from Wallonia, considered as the underdeveloped region with extensive Federal support as it is facing a difficult restart of its economy after its golden age with coal and textile industry. Just behind them in the polls with 22% in the Flanders and twenty-one seats at the federal level, the right-wing party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), with

strongly conservative views in the fields of migration and minorities, would share the majority the votes.

Is the future of the Belgian state in danger?

Flemish nationalism has been rising since 2014, gaining at each election votes and seats (see the graphs in detail [here](#)). Up to twenty-four seats in the parliament, it is however unlikely to get a coalition from this party as a majority. While using very strong rhetoric, Vlaams Belang is isolated from the other parties because of their strong nationalism and resentment of the Walloon region, making it difficult to find other parties to align with for a coalition, especially from Wallonia. Moreover, the currently leading president of the N-VA Bart De Wever stipulated his refusal for a possible governmental coalition with the far-right party after the result of the elections in June. However, these two parties constitute the current two main parties of opposition in the government with the most seats in the parliament with respectively 24 seats for N-VA and 18 seats for Vlaams Belang. If the last surveys give 25 seats to Vlaams Belang and 21 to N-VA, reaching 46 seats if an alliance is made, they would still need 30 seats, so approximately three other parties to join their coalition, which is unlikely, but possible.

In conclusion, the upcoming federal elections hold significance beyond Belgium, reflecting broader European trends such as the rise of far-right ideologies, extremism, xenophobia, and a growing disinterest in politics. Moreover, despite mandatory voting, with a sanction of 20 to 40 euros and up to 200 euros in case of recidivism, Belgium faced a notable 11% abstention rate in 2019, reaching 34% in the City of Brussels, which follows the European tendency of this continuous decrease of voter participation. While the Belgian presidency offers a platform to address national concerns within the next EU mandate, the challenge lies in balancing these responsibilities with the current federal and regional elections. With nationalist parties like Vlaams Belang leading the polls, the government's

ability to navigate this multifaceted agenda becomes a critical factor. A delayed government formation at the campaign's outset could potentially provide far-right parties with ample space to advance their agendas. Although the prospect of country separation has been largely dismissed by most journals and experts, the persistent growth in the voice and legitimacy of independentist parties poses a question mark over the potential for 2024 to serve as another opportunity for their ascension to becoming the leading party in the country.