

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 33 THE EUROPEAN AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS OF 7 JUNE 2009 IN BELGIUM

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### **Key points**

- The 2009 European elections in Belgium and the regional elections in Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and the German-speaking community were held on the same day.
- The campaign was dull and lifeless. The European issue played a secondary role and was overshadowed by regional issues.
- The 22 Belgian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were elected in three electoral colleges: a Dutch-speaking college (Flanders + Brussels) sending 13 MEPs to Brussels/Strasbourg, a French-speaking college (Wallonia + Brussels) electing 8 MEPs and a German-speaking 1 designating one MEP. It means that Belgium lost two seats in the European Parliament compared to 2004-9.
- Voting is compulsory. 90.39% of the electorate cast a vote on June, 7 2009.
- The Belgian party system is highly fragmented with eight parties running in Flanders with chances of winning seats either at the European or regional levels. In Wallonia, five viable parties were running, and, in the German-speaking community, six viable parties were running.
- In the EP elections, in Flanders, the two main parties Christian Democrats and the liberals won three seats each. The extreme-right experienced a severe loss whereas the New Flemish Alliance and Dedecker List won 1 seat each.
- In the EP elections in the French-speaking College, the two main parties (liberals and socialists) lost 1 seat each while the Greens doubled its 2004 score. M. Grosch won a seat in the EP for the fourth time, representing the German-speaking Community.
- In the regional elections, the Flemish party system became even more fragmented, with seven parties gaining seats in the regional assembly. The main winners were the

Flemish Christian Democratic Party and the Flemish New Alliance. The extreme-right was the main loser.

- In the regional elections in the French-speaking college (Brussels and Wallonia), the Greens obtained a remarkable score while the battle between the socialists and the liberals was won by the former in Wallonia and the latter in Brussels. Despite a loss in voters' support, the Christian Social Party remains the first party in the German-speaking Community.
- High levels of support for European integration remained largely widespread both among political elites and the Belgian population.

To fully grasp the context of the 2009 European elections in Belgium, three elements need to be highlighted. First and foremost, EP elections are organised jointly with regional elections. The two terms correspond since the law states that regional elections are held every five years on the same day as elections for the European parliament. On June,7, Belgians voters had to cast two votes: one for EP elections and one for regional elections<sup>1</sup>. And five parliaments were directly elected on that single day: the European Parliament, the Flemish Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels regional Parliament and the German-speaking community Parliament. The main consequence of these joint elections is that EP elections are not very visible. In terms of media coverage and voters' attention, EU elections are very much 'second order', although this does not lead to a low turnout as voting is compulsory in Belgium.

The lack of visibility of EP elections is further reinforced by the positions of Belgian parties towards the EU and European integration. Indeed, except for the extreme right, they rank from Europhile to very Europhile and want more Europe rather than less. The only criticisms are limited to calling for a more 'social Europe', for a more 'federal Europe' or for a 'greener Europe'. Europe might be perfectible but in the sense that more Europe is needed rather than less Europe. The electoral niche for parties negative towards the EU is very low as Belgian citizens tend to display the same positive attitude towards European integration. The only party to play this card is the extreme-right party, the Flemish Interest, but even they do criticize the EU from a populist perspective, claiming that the EU is too bureaucratic and too elitist, without attacking EU policies as such.

The final background element to be mentioned is the very fragmented nature of the Belgian party system. First, there is no party system as such but one party system per linguistic group. Flemish parties only run for election in Dutch-speaking constituencies and in the bilingual Brussels; Francophone parties only run for elections in the Walloon districts and in Brussels (and its suburbs for EU elections). And there are even specific German-speaking parties for the German-speaking community elections and for the election of the one single MEP elected within the German-speaking electoral college.

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<sup>1</sup> Voters residing in the small German-speaking community would even have to cast three votes: one for EU elections, one for the Walloon regional elections and one for the German-speaking community elections. Flemish voters in Brussels also have to cast three votes: one for EU elections, one for the Brussels regional elections and one for the Flemish community parliament.

Yet fragmentation does not end there. Within each linguistic group, the proportionality of the electoral system and the almost even distribution of the votes among different parties strengthen the multi-partisan character of Belgian politics. In Flanders, before Election Day, there were in total eight parties represented at the federal or regional level: Flemish Christian Democratic Party (Christian-democrats), Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party (liberals), Socialist Party Different (social-democrats), Flemish Interest (extreme right), Green!, Dedecker List (neoliberal populists), New Flemish Alliance (conservative Flemish nationalists) and Social Liberal Party (left-wing libertarian Flemish nationalists). On the French-speaking side, there were five parties with some parliamentary representation: Reformist Movement (liberals), Socialist Party (social-democrats), Humanist Democratic Centre (Christian-democrats), Ecolo (greens) and National Front (extreme right). And finally, there were six parties represented within the German-speaking community assembly: Christian social Party (Christian-democrats), Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement (liberals), Socialist Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei*), Ecolo (greens), Party of the German-speaking Belgians (*Partei der Deutschsprachigen Belgier* - German-speaking regionalists) and Vivant (neoliberals). What makes it even more complex is that many of these parties are part of the executive at different levels of power. The Christian-democrats (Flemish Christian Democratic Party and Humanist Democratic Centre) were in power at the federal, Flemish, Walloon and Brussels levels. So were the Flemish liberals (Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party) as well as the French-speaking socialists (Socialist Party). Their Flemish counterparts were in power in Flanders and in Brussels but not at the federal level. Finally, the French-speaking liberals (Reformist Movement) were only present at the federal level. And finally, Ecolo was only part of the Brussels regional executive.

The very last element to mention is how Belgian parties are related to European parties.<sup>2</sup> Flemish Christian Democratic Party, Humanist Democratic Centre, Christian Social Party and New Flemish Alliance are members of the EPP. All the socialist parties are affiliated to the PES; Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party, Reformist Movement and Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement to ELDR, and Ecolo and Green! to the European Greens. The other parties (Flemish Interest, Socialist Liberal Party, Dedecker List, National Front, Party of the German-speaking Belgians and Vivant) are not members of any European party.

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<sup>2</sup> The full listing of Belgian EP party group affiliation is:

(1) Flemish Christian Democratic Party (*Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams- CD&V*), New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie – NVA*), Humanist Democratic Centre (*Centre Démocrate Humaniste – cdH*) and Christian Social Party (*Christlich Soziale Partei- CSP*): European People's Party (EPP)

(2) Flemish Socialist Party different (*Socialisten en Progressieven anders – SP.a*) and Francophone Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste- PS*): Party of European Socialists (PES)

(3) Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party (*Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten- Open VLD*), Reformist Movement (*Mouvement Réformateur –MR*) and Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement (*Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt–Mouvement Réformateur - PFF-MR*): European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR)

(4) The Francophone Greens (*Ecolo*) and the Flemish Greens (*Groen!*): European Green Party

(5) Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang- VB*) and National Front (*Front National- FN*): not affiliated

(6) Dedecker List (*Lijst Dedecker- LDD*): European Conservatives and Reformists

## The Electoral System

Regarding the electoral system for European Parliament elections in Belgium, five elements are worth being mentioned. First, Belgium cannot face any problem of low turnout since voting is compulsory. Every citizen having the right to vote is obliged to turn out on Election Day. More precisely, Belgian citizens above the age of 18 and registered in the list of inhabitants of one municipality are automatically registered to vote. Fifteen days before the election, a polling card is sent to all voters mentioning clearly that ‘voting is compulsory’. For EU nationals residing in Belgium, the system is slightly different. They can vote but they have first to register to be included in the list of voters. Once they are, they will also have the obligation to vote. Belgian voters and EU citizens registered on the electoral list that finally decide not to turn out on Election Day can be fined. After the election, the judiciary is in charge of contacting all citizens that did not respect the obligation to vote. They will receive a letter asking them to explain why they did not turn out. If the justification is considered to be invalid, a fine has to be paid: ranging from 25€ to 50€ for the first absence and rising up to 125€ for the second. A voter that did not vote four times in 15 years is not eligible to vote for the next 10 years and is not authorised to apply for any appointment or promotion in the civil service.

However, legal constraints are very rarely applied. For example, in 1985, only 62 out of 450,000 voters that did not respect the obligation to vote were sanctioned, which means only 0.015%<sup>3</sup>. Actually, the judiciary has so much work to do that those voters that did not turn out are certainly not on the top of the list of priorities. In other words, compulsory voting in Belgium is more a moral than a legal obligation in Belgium. Yet, the vast majority of voters do turn out on Election Day (see table 1).

**Table 1: Turnout for European elections in Belgium**

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>
1979	91.36
1984	92.09
1989	90.73
1994	90.66
1999	91.05
2004	90.81

Source: Belgian Ministry of Home Affairs

The second element of the electoral system to be mentioned is the division of the Belgian territory in three electoral colleges for the election of the 22 Belgian MEPs (two less than in 2004). In 1979, the decision taken by the Belgian legislator was to create two separate Electoral Colleges (Dutch-speaking and French-speaking). The Dutch-speaking one elects 13 members of the European Parliament (-1); eight other MEPs are to be chosen by the French-speaking College (-1). The word “Electoral College” was used instead of “constituencies” because the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking colleges overlap

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<sup>3</sup> See: L. Vanmaercke, ‘Vers une nouvelle démocratie’, *Cahiers du CEPES*, N°5, 1993.

territorially in Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde. In Wallonia and Flanders, voters can only choose among lists from one College. But in the bilingual constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde, voters have the choice among lists from both Colleges. In 1993, an amendment was passed to create a German-speaking district corresponding to the German-speaking community. Since 1995, one MEP is elected separately in this college.

In each Electoral College, seats are allocated among lists under proportional representation (D'Hondt formula). But to be eligible for the allocation of seats, a list must pass the 5% legal threshold in the college. The threshold was introduced in the Electoral Law in 2003. After the allocation of seats among lists, seats are also distributed within lists. In the Belgian case, a system of semi-open list is in use, meaning that candidates are elected taking into account both their score in terms of preference votes and their position on the list drafted by their party. In concrete terms, once they have decided for which party they would like to vote, voters in Belgium have two options: to cast a list vote or a preferential votes for one or several candidates on the list they support. The first option means that the voter is satisfied with the way candidates have been ranked on the list by the party. List votes would be transferred to candidates starting with the one being on the top on the list, followed by the second on the list, the third on the list, and so forth. If voters are not satisfied with the ranking order of candidates, they can cast a preferential vote. Most voters, about 65%, decide to cast a preferential vote<sup>4</sup>. Yet, preferential votes really play a role in the allocation of seats within lists when a list wins three seats or more. The first two seats of a list are usually gained by candidates on the top of the list since they can benefit from list votes. For EP elections, it means that most seats are allocated to the candidates on the top of the list since most parties won less than 4 seats.

A last element worth mentioning is the introduction of gender quotas. All lists in Belgium have to be perfectly balanced with 50% of men and 50% of women. Even the top two positions on the list have to be shared between one male and one female candidate. This legislation contributed to the presence of 29% women among Belgian MEPs in the 2004-9 legislature.

## **The Campaign**

As mentioned earlier, EP and regional elections are held on the same day in Belgium, and the latter is perceived as crucial by both the political actors and the public opinion. As a result of this simultaneity, the campaign and media coverage were dominated by first order regional topics. European issues were thus largely overshadowed by the regional agenda and no in-depth debates on the European Union took place.

There was no extensive media coverage on the EP elections or EU policies as regional issues made the headlines. The role of the media during the campaign was more informative, dealing with the importance of the EU in citizens' life, through specific policies such as energy and consumer protection. Some articles dealt more particularly

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<sup>4</sup> See: B. Wauters, K. Weekers and J-B. Pilet, 'Het gebruik van de voorkeurstem bij de regionale en Europese parlements-verkiezingen van 13 juni 2004', *Res Publica*, Vol. 46, N°2-3. 2004. pp.377-411.

with the concrete functioning of the EU and the EP but the outgoing candidates were not fully present in the media to explain or to promote their actions during the past legislature. The centre of attention was the formation and the composition of the new regional executives and its impact on the relation between Flemish and Francophones.

It must then be stressed that candidates for the EP were generally less present than their regional counterparts. This tendency was further reinforced by the relatively low interest of Belgians voters in EP elections: their interest grew as the elections approached but it remained within the EU average whereas contrary to most EU countries, voting is compulsory in Belgium (45% declared being interested in these elections in February 2009, Eurobarometer 71). The most visible actors during the campaign were the party leaders who tended to stress the regional stakes and the regional competition; European candidates tended to be either well-known personalities and leaders, who, mostly, did not have any intention of taking their seats in the EP or were low profile candidate hardly known by the voters.

Nevertheless, as in 2004, two particular candidates enjoyed a high media profile, particularly in Flanders: the former Prime Minister G. Verhofstadt (Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party) and the outgoing MEP and former Prime Minister J-L. Dehaene (Flemish Christian Democratic Party). Indeed, both of them are highly dedicated to Europe and have spent time promoting the EU: Verhofstadt during the Belgian EU presidency (2001) and through books and Dehaene through his EP mandate and his role during the Convention for a European Constitution. However, in contrast to 2004, they did not oppose or attack each other but rather try to complement each other by fighting against Euroscepticism in Europe and supporting a more democratic, federal EU. There was thus no competition as the two of them share the same Europhilia. As far as the French-speaking media arena was concerned, the EP elections went by almost unnoticed: all the attention was focused on good governance, on which party would be the first one in Wallonia and Brussels and finally, on the personal attacks between the Liberals and the Socialists.

Globally speaking, EU issues and EP elections remained largely overlooked and have not succeeded in creating any political debate or in attracting much attention from voters, media and political actors. Europe was not politicised in the Belgian political arena during the campaign and these elections remained very much second order in that respect.

## **The Results**

The issue of turnout is of less importance in the Belgian case. Since voting is compulsory, the problem of low electoral participation is not the first major concern on the evening of the elections for both politicians and political commentators. And rather logically, Belgium is, with Luxembourg, the member state showing the highest participation rate for EP elections with 90.39% of voters actually going to the polling station. For the other elections organised on the same day, the figures are logically approximately the same, though they are a bit higher in Flanders where 93.06% of the electorate turned out on June, 7<sup>th</sup> 2009.

**Table 2: Turnout for the 2009 elections in Belgium**

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>	<b>Blank and invalid votes</b>
EP elections	90.39 (-0.42)	6.31 (+0.94)
Flemish regional elections	93.06 (-0.73)	5.50 (+0.37)
Walloon Regional Elections	89.00 (-0.51)	7.68 (+1.04)
Brussels Regional Elections	84.33 (-1.25)	4.96 (+1.19)
German-speaking Community Elections	89.11 (+0.16)	11.39 (+0.16)

Note: Voting is compulsory. Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

In comparison with the average turnout for EP elections in the EU (43.24% in 2009), the Belgian figures are exceptionally high. Yet, about 10% of the electorate decided not to vote even though it is a legal obligation. As we noted earlier, sanctions in case of non-voting are rarely applied in Belgium. In the morning of June, 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, the Belgian federal minister of Justice, Stefaan De Clerck, publicly admitted on the radio that there was almost no risk of being sanctioned in case of non-voting and that solutions to this situation are currently under study (Le Soir, 7 June 2009). In other words, compulsory voting in Belgium is more a moral than a legal obligation in Belgium. Yet, the vast majority of voters do turn out on Election Day (see table 1).

A last element to point out is the significant proportion of voters casting a blank vote or an invalid vote. It ranges from 5.5% in Flanders to 11.39% in the German-speaking community elections. If we add these figures to the actual turnout, we end up with 84.68% of the electorate casting a valid vote (for EP elections), not very much for a system of compulsory voting.

Presenting the results of EP elections in Belgium is a three-step process.<sup>5</sup> As said earlier, the 22 seats in Strasbourg/Brussels are sent in three electoral colleges: a Dutch-speaking one, a French-speaking one and a German-speaking one. More importantly, as the campaign shows, the three colleges are actually three different elections, with three different party systems, three different dynamics and three different results on the evening of June, 7<sup>th</sup> 2009.

In the Dutch-speaking college, the result reveals two winners: the Flemish Christian Democratic Party and the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party with three seats each and more than 20% of the votes (see table 3). They are the only two Flemish parties in power at both the federal and the regional levels. And they were led for these EP elections by two former Prime ministers, Jean-Luc Dehaene for the Christian Democrat and Flemish Party and Guy Verhofstadt for the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party. The performance of Verhofstadt is impressive since he helped the liberals to secure more than 20% of the votes for EP elections while for regional elections they only received 15% of the votes (see table 6). This 5% surplus is a remarkable performance; all other

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<sup>5</sup> For more about the 2004 EU elections in Belgium, see: M. Van Assche, '2004 European Election Briefing. The European Parliamentary Elections in Belgium. June 13 2004', *EPERN Election Briefings*, N° 13. 2004. pp. 1-13.

Flemish parties (except the New Flemish Alliance) recorded comparable results for both EP and Flemish regional elections.

**Table 3: EP elections results in the Dutch-speaking electoral college**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Flemish Christian Democratic Party	23.26 (a)	3 (-1)
Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party	20.56 (-1.35)	3 (0)
Socialist Party Different	13.23 (b)	2 (-1)
Flemish Interest	15.88 (-7.28)	2 (-1)
New Flemish Alliance	9.88 (a)	1 (+1)
Green !	7.90 (-0.08)	1 (0)
Dedecker List	7.28 (+7.28)	1 (+1)
Others	2.01	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>13 (-1)</b>

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

**Notes:**

**a** The Christian Democrat and Flemish Party and the New Flemish Alliance formed a joint list in 2004. For the EP 2004 elections, the list Christian Democrat and Flemish Party-New Flemish Alliance received 28.15% of the votes and gained 4 seats.

**b** The Socialist Party Different formed a joint list with Spirit in 2004. For the EP 2004 elections, the list Socialist Party Different -Spirit received 17.83% of the votes and gained 3 seats.

Following the Flemish Christian Democratic Party and the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party, two parties (Flemish Interest and Socialist Party Different) scored around 15% and won two seats. For the extreme right, this was a severe loss with a drop by 7.28% points compared to their best performance ever in 2004. Finally, three parties (New Flemish Alliance, Dedecker List and Green!) were a bit below 10% and will each send one MEP to Strasbourg/Brussels. The most striking performance was the score of the New Flemish Alliance. The Flemish nationalists are the heirs of the former Volksunie that split in 2001. In 2003, they ran for the only time on their own and only just reached the 5% threshold. In 2004 and 2007, they were in a cartel (pre-electoral coalition) with the Christian Democrat and Flemish Party. For them, running alone in 2009 was a big risk but they did extremely well with almost 10% of the vote. They even did better for the Flemish regional elections with almost 15% of the vote.

**Table 4: EP elections results in the French-speaking electoral college**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Socialist Party	29.10 (-6.99)	3 (-1)
Reformist Movement	26.05 (-1.53)	2 (-1)
Ecolo	22.88 (+13.03)	2 (+1)
Humanist Democratic Centre	13.34 (-1.80)	1 (0)
National Front	3.57 (-3.88)	0 (0)
Others	5.06	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>8 (-1)</b>

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

Within the French-speaking Electoral College, the party system is less fragmented. Four parties (instead of five in 2004) share the eight mandates (see table 4). Though losing 7% points compared to 2004, the Socialist Party remained the first party, receiving 29.1% of the vote and gaining three seats. Then came two parties (Reformist Movement and Ecolo) above 20% of the votes and securing two seats. The performance of the Francophone greens is particularly remarkable. They more than doubled their score compared to 2004. Finally, the Humanist Democratic Centre almost maintained its 2004 performance with a bit less than 15% of the vote and one MEP.

Finally, one last Belgian MEP is elected by the German-speaking Electoral College. Traditionally, it is owned by the biggest party in this community, the Christian-democrats (Christian Social Party). And though they lost 10.23% points compared to 2004, they still remained by far the first party in 2009 and will send Mathieu Grosch for the fourth time to Strasburg/Brussels (see table 5).

**Table 5: EP elections results in the German-speaking electoral college**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Christian Social Party	32.25 (-10.23)	1 (0)
Social Party	14.63 (-0.31)	0 (0)
Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement	20.37 (-2.42)	0 (0)
Ecolo	15.58 (+5.09)	0 (0)
Party of German-speaking Belgians (ProDG)	10.07 (+0.77)	0 (0)
Vivant	6.25 (+6.25)	0 (0)
Europa de Weirte	0.85 (+0.85)	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>1 (0)</b>

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

As shown by our campaign analysis, the most salient issue in the weeks before June, 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 were not the EP elections but the regional elections. The results of the regional elections are therefore important. In Flanders, the polls predicted a transformation of the political landscape. First, the two cartels formed by the Flemish Christian Democratic Party and the New Flemish Alliance and by the Socialist Party Different and Spirit split. Second, the traditional parties (Flemish Christian Democratic Party, Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party and Socialist Party Different) were under attack from newcomers on the right end of the political spectrum: Dedecker List and New Flemish Alliance. All of this was expected to add to an even more fragmented Flemish party system, expectation that was confirmed to a certain extent.

Seven parties gained seats in the Flemish parliament but it is worth noting that the most successful one, the Flemish Christian Democratic Party, only attracted one quarter of the electorate (22.86%). Following the Christian-democrats, four parties gained about 15% of the votes and will send between 16 and 21 MPs to the Flemish Assembly: Flemish Interest, Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party, Socialist Party Different and the New Flemish Alliance. This last party is perceived to be, along with the Flemish Christian

Democratic Party, as the biggest winner of the regional elections. For the first time, the party was running independently for regional elections, and directly succeeded in seducing a significant share of the electorate (13.06%). While the Flemish Christian Democratic Party and the New Flemish Alliance were seen as the winners, the biggest loser was undoubtedly the Flemish Interest. In 2004, the extreme right recorded its best performance ever with 24% of the votes and 32 members of the Flemish Parliament. Five years later, the party lost 8.86% points and one third of its parliamentary representation.

**Table 6: Flemish Regional Elections Results**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Flemish Christian Democratic Party	22.86 (a)	31 (+3)
Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party	14.99 (-4.80)	21 (-4)
Socialist Party Different	15.27 (b)	19 (-3)
Flemish Interest	15.28 (-8.86)	21 (-11)
New Flemish Alliance	13.06 (a)	16 (+10)
Green !	6.77 (-0.83)	7 (+1)
Dedecker List	7.62 (+7.62)	8 (+8)
Others	4.15	0 (0)
Total	100.00	124

**Notes:**

**a** The Christian Democrat and Flemish Party and the New Flemish Alliance formed a joint list in 2004. For the 2004 Flemish elections, the list Christian Democrat and Flemish Party-New Flemish Alliance received 26.09% of the votes and gained 34 seats.

**b** The Socialist Party Different formed a joint list with Spirit in 2004. For the 2004 Flemish elections, the list Socialist Party Different -Spirit received 19.66% of the votes and gained 24 seats.

Finally, two parties maintained relatively stable results. The Flemish ecologists (Green!) were just below 7% of the votes, approximately the same performance as in 2004 and in 2007 for the federal elections. The new Dedecker List, founded in 2007, secured 7.62% of the electorate and will be for the first time represented by eight MPs within the Flemish parliament. This performance was close to the party's results during its first elections, the 2007 federal elections.

The direct implication of these results is that any ruling coalition would require at least three parties to secure a majority of seats within the Flemish parliament. The other element to underline is that the Flemish political arena confirmed, and to some extent accentuated, its right-wing leaning. The two left-wing parties (Socialist Party Different and Green!) only counted for less than one fifth of the Flemish Parliament (26 MRPs out of 124).

In Wallonia, four parties gained seats in the Walloon Parliament. The previous two elections were very peculiar. In 2004, the Socialist Party did exceptionally well in terms of seats won. With 34 seats for the socialists and 4 for the extreme right, no majority was possible without the Socialist Party unless the Reformist Movement, Humanist Democratic Centre and Ecolo decided to govern with the extreme right. In that sense, the Socialist Party knew its performance in 2009 was going to be less strong. This expectation was reinforced by the 2007 federal elections. For the first time since WWII,

the socialists were not the first party in Wallonia. The liberals (Reformist Movement) came first for the first time in history in the south of the country. Their hope was to reproduce this performance in 2009 and to lead a new coalition without the socialists (for the first time since the Walloon institutions are directly elected). But the results of the 2009 vote show that this goal was not been achieved by the Reformist Movement (see table 7).

The Socialist Party remained the first Walloon party with 32.77% of the votes and a 8.5% points lead over the Reformist Movement. In terms of seats, the Socialist Party was ten seats ahead. This performance is negative compared to the 2004 elections. Indeed, they lost 4.14 % points in votes and five seats, but the socialists did better than in 2007 (+ 3.29% points in votes).

**Table 7: Walloon Regional Elections Results**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Socialist Party	32.77 (-4.14)	29 (-5)
Reformist Movement	24.29 (-0.89)	19 (-1)
Ecolo	18.54 (+10.02)	14 (+11)
Humanist Democratic Centre	17.62 (-1.48)	13 (-1)
FN	2.86 (-5.26)	0 (-4)
Others	3.92	0 (0)
Total	100.00	75

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

The three other parties gaining seats can be divided into two groups. First, the Reformist Movement and the Humanist Democratic Centre were relatively stable. The liberals lost less than one percentage point compared to 2004 (but they lost 7.71% points compared to the 2007 federal elections) and they lost one seat. The Humanist Democratic Centre lost a bit more in terms of votes (-1.48 % points) and there will be 13 centrist members in the Walloon Parliament instead of 14.

As in the case the EP elections, the most remarkable performance of the 2009 Walloon Regional Elections was the big growth of the Greens. Ecolo secured 18.54% of the electorate and grew from 3 to 14 MRPs. They were the fifth Walloon party in 2004, they rank now third. Finally, the extreme right lost more than two thirds of its supporters, falling below the 5% threshold and losing all representation within the Walloon Parliament.

The Brussels regional elections were the only elections with both Francophone and Dutch-speaking parties running (see table 8). The Flemish parties were competing for 17 reserved seats and the French-speaking parties for 72 reserved seats. In 2004, the liberals lost their leadership for the first time since 1995 and the alliance between the Liberal Reformist Party (Parti Réformiste Libéral – PRL) and the Democratic Front of the Francophones (Front Démocratique des Francophones – FDF). They were beaten by the Socialist Party with one more seat for the socialists and less than one percentage point of advantage in votes. Five years later, the Reformist Movement was back on top. They

were the biggest party in Brussels both in terms of votes (29.82%) and of seats (24). But their return to the first position was more due to the loss of the Socialist Party than to their own good performance. The Reformist Movement lost 2.68% points and one seat compared to 2004.

The Socialist Party came second with 26.24% of the votes and 21 seats. This was a significant loss compared to 2004. The socialists lost 7.1% points and 5 seats. Yet, like in Wallonia, this defeat was softened by the comparison with the 2007 federal elections. Compared to 2007, the Socialist Party did better in Brussels in 2009. In two years, the party had gained 2.14% points in votes.

As in Wallonia, the Humanist Democratic Centre was stable and the biggest winner was Ecolo. The centrists gained a few votes (+ 0.72% points) and one seat. And the Greens doubled their 2004 score and gained nine more seats than in 2004. The ruling francophone parties in Brussels were the Socialist Party, Humanist Democratic Centre and Ecolo. The Socialist Party lost votes and seats while the two others did better in 2009 than in 2004. In total, the coalition parties had five more seats than in 2004. The Front National, as in Wallonia, lost all its parliamentary representation.

**Table 8: Brussels Regional Elections Results**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Flemish Christian Democratic Party	14.85 (a)	3 (0)
Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party	23.07 (+3.17)	4 (0)
Socialist Party Different	19.46 (b)	4 (+1)
Flemish Interest	17.51 (-16.56)	3 (-3)
New Flemish Alliance	4.99 (a)	1 (+1)
Green!	11.20 (+1.40)	2 (+1)
Dedecker List	3.78 (+7.62)	0 (0)
Others	5.14	0 (0)
<b>Total Flemish parties</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Socialist Party	26.24 (-7.10)	21 (-5)
Reformist Movement	29.82 (-2.68)	24 (-1)
Ecolo	20.22 (+10.53)	16 (+9)
Humanist Democratic Centre	14.80 (+0.72)	11 (+1)
National Front	1.91 (-3.51)	0 (-4)
Others	7.01	0 (0)
<b>Total French-speaking parties</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>72</b>

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

**Notes:**

**a** The Christian Democrat and Flemish Party and the New Flemish Alliance formed a joint list in 2004. For the 2004 Brussels elections, the list Christian Democrat and Flemish party-New Flemish Alliance received 16.77% of the votes and gained 3 seats.

**b** The Socialist Party Different formed a joint list with Spirit in 2004. For the 2004 Brussels elections, the list Socialist Party Different -Spirit received 17.68% of the votes and gained 3 seats.

When it comes to the Flemish parties in Brussels, the biggest change was the big loss of the Flemish Interest. For the last ten years, the extreme right had been by far the largest Flemish party in Brussels but in 2009, they lost half of their parliamentary representation, 16.56% points in votes and came third. The new leading Flemish party in Brussels was the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party with 23.07% of the votes and four seats. This performance is quite remarkable since the Flemish and Francophone liberals lost votes everywhere else in the country on June, 7<sup>th</sup> 2009. Another peculiarity of the Flemish results in Brussels was that, contrary to the situation in Flanders, the two left-wing parties made some progress (+ 1 seat for the Socialist Party Different, and + 1.4% points and + 1 seat for Green!). Their success was also related to the relatively poorer performance of the Flemish conservative parties (New Flemish Alliance and Dedecker List) in Brussels than in Flanders.

And finally, the very last results of the 2009 European and regional elections in Belgium to be mentioned are the votes for the German-speaking community Assembly (see table 9). The Christian Social Party remained the first party but lost in terms of votes and seats. The Christian-democrats were for the first time since the first direct election of this assembly in 1990 below 30% of vote. Then came the two other traditional parties: the socialists (SP) just below 20%, almost stable in votes (+0.29% points) and stable in seats on the one hand, and on the other hand the liberals (Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement) who, like (almost) everywhere else in the country did worse than in 2004 with 17.52% (-3.46% points and losing one seat).

**Table 9: German-speaking Community Elections Results**

<b>Parties</b>	<b>2009 (% votes)</b>	<b>2009 (seats)</b>
Christian Social Party	27.02 (-5.77)	7 (-1)
Social Party	19.30 (+0.29)	5 (0)
Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement	17.52 (-3.46)	4 (-1)
Ecolo	11.50 (+3.32)	3 (+1)
Party of German-speaking Belgians (ProDG)	17.49 (+5.80)	4 (+1)
Vivant	7.16 (-0.18)	2 (0)
Total	100.00	25

Source: Belgian Ministry of Interior, <http://elections2009.belgium.be/>

The two parties increasing their vote were the German-speaking regionalists of the Party of German-speaking Belgians (ProDG) and the ecologists. The party of German-speaking Belgians became almost as big as the Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement and the Social Party with 17.49% of the vote (+5.8% points) and 4 seats (+1). Ecolo was above 10% of vote (+3; 32% points and has three seats (+1)). Vivant, a small neoliberal party only running in the German-speaking community maintained its 2004 scores, both in terms of votes and seats.

Being stable in seats, the ruling coalition made of the Party for Freedom and Progress-Reformist Movement, the Social Party and the Party of German-speaking Belgians

already announced on the day after the elections that they would remain together in power for the next five years.

## **Conclusion and Future Prospects**

On June 7, 2009, regional and European polls were held in Belgium, in order to elect representatives for five parliaments. Regional elections are considered as crucial and as a result, EP elections can be considered, to a certain extent, as second order. Although it does not affect the turnout as voting is compulsory and despite the absence of a sanction dynamic towards governing parties as Belgium is governed by coalition executive, it still affects the visibility of EU issues and EP elections campaign.

Two others elements need to be mentioned to understand the low visibility of EP elections: the position of parties and the attitudes of citizens towards the EU. The EU or the agenda for European issues have never been the reason for any appreciable split in the Belgian political arena. Indeed, all mainstream parties, both Flemish and Francophone, share the same Europhilia. They all stress the importance of Europe, promote a further deepening of the integration and globally support EU policies and institutions. Even if some parties, especially on the left, have some criticisms vis-à-vis specific policies, they are directed towards the lack of Europe and the envisaged solution is more Europe in the concerned areas. For instance, the greens call for more attention at the supranational level for environmental issues and the socialists stress the need for a (more) social Europe. But the European framework or institutions are never questioned. This positive attitude is reflected in their position towards the treaties: although there are some elements that are seen as lacking, there are considered as steps forward and supported by all mainstream parties, both at the national (regional and federal chambers) and supranational (EP) levels. The same euroenthusiasm can be found in the debate between EU broadening and deepening: for all mainstream parties in Belgium, the trade-off is rather clear as they all support a further deepening of the integration process, even if that has to be at the expense of future enlargement. It is finally reflected in their choice of a EP political group: most Belgian parties sit in major federalist groups (EPP for the Flemish Christian Democratic Party, the New Flemish Alliance, the Humanist Democratic Centre and the Christian Social Party; PES for the Francophone Socialist Party and the Flemish Socialist Party Different; ALDE for the Reformist Movement and the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party; Greens/EFA for Ecolo and Green!), and some Belgian MEPs are very active within the assembly and its organs. Europe is thus rarely debated as there is a substantive consensus between parties in that respect.

There are two exceptions: extreme-right and the newcomer Dedecker List. First, the extreme-right Flemish Interest is the only party in Belgium that rejects the treaties and the transfer of any competences to a supranational EU. They opposed the idea of a federal Europe and defended a 'cooperation between the peoples of Europe' as well as the strict application of the subsidiarity principle. But at the same time, the Flemish Interest did not advocate overtly for a withdrawal of the country from the EU and it recognized the positive role played by the EU in terms of peace and welfare on the continent. It also favoured the common market and acknowledged its benefits for Belgium. Moreover,

European issues are not its core business and the party did not bring Europe forward during the electoral campaign. The Flemish Interest was first and foremost an extreme-right regionalist party: it incorporated Eurosceptic positions into its traditional anti-establishment and radical right stances. As such, the party can be considered as Eurosceptic, but in the sense of a “touchstone of dissent”<sup>6</sup>. Second, the Dedecker List considered itself as ‘Eurorealist’ as the party favoured a European Confederation that should tackle concrete problems, decrease the red tape and bureaucracy and increase its efficiency. But it never put into question the European integration or the supranationalism of the EU and the ‘Eurorealism’ of the Dedecker List can be considered as part of the populist style of the party.

Those two “EU-awkward” parties will send three MEPs in the newly elected European Parliament but it is expected they will not be able to play any significant role. Indeed, the two Flemish Interest MEPs will probably remain not affiliated and excluded de facto from the EP work. They will thus not benefit from resources allocated to political groups and continue to play a marginal role, delivering plenary speeches on their radical right key issues and arguing against Turkey’s potential entry into the EU. The single MEP from Dedecker List is part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (anti-federalists), the brand new EP political group dominated by the British Conservatives, the Law and Justice from Poland and the Czech Civic Democratic Party.

Finally, radical left parties with critical or negative stances towards the EU have never been successful in Belgium, and this was again confirmed by the results of the 2009 elections (see, for instance, the weak result of the Workers’ Party of Belgium, PvdA+).

A second element worth mentioning is that the Europhilia of Belgian mainstream parties is largely echoed in the population. Indeed, Belgium’s citizens have been known for their long-standing diffuse Europeanism. Indeed, broadly speaking, polls reveal a generalized acceptance of the EU: EU membership has been considered as a good thing by a majority of citizens over time. This trend was confirmed by recent Eurobarometers<sup>7</sup>, revealing that the Belgian population is always above the EU average: 65 % think the EU is a good thing and 68% think Belgium has benefited from its membership to the EU. Similarly, 65% of Belgians trust the EP and 60% are in favour of an increased role of this institution. A majority of citizens have a good knowledge of the EU and its functioning (63%) and would like the integration process to progress more quickly. Finally, a large majority of Belgians consider the EP as playing an important role in the EU (76%) and were more and more interested in EU elections as they approached.

To conclude, EP elections in Belgium did not receive much attention from the media, the voters or the political parties, who focused on the regional poll, perceived as first order elections. The simultaneity of these elections, combined with the widespread and unchallenged positive attitudes towards the EU and its evolution, led to an almost

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<sup>6</sup> See: P. Taggart, ‘A touchstone of dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems’, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, N°3. 1998. Pp. 363-388.

<sup>7</sup> See: Standard Eurobarometer 70 (2008), Special Eurobarometer 299 on the 2009 European elections, Special Eurobarometers ‘Europeans and the 2009 European elections’ (EB 69, EB 70, EB 71).

invisibility of EU elections and confirms the European issues are not politicized yet in Belgium.

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