

The 2024 Belgian Federal Elections: A Race to the Right

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Abstract

The Belgian federal elections held on 9 June 2024 marked a turning point in the country’s political history. As the first post-pandemic federal vote, they recorded the lowest turnout since compulsory voting was introduced in 1893. An unprecedented share of voters supported radical parties, reflecting increased polarization and a notable shift to the right. In Flanders, N-VA outperformed expectations, while VB’s anticipated breakthrough fell short. In French-speaking Belgium, the MR surged, while PS and Ecolo suffered historic defeats. These shifts led to the collapse of the incumbent Vivaldi coalition and a fragmented parliamentary outcome. Ultimately, a new Arizona coalition was formed, led by Bart De Wever, who became the first Belgian Prime Minister with a declared commitment to Flemish independence. This report provides an overview of the election campaign, the results that followed, voters’ underlying motivations, and the broader implications for federal governance in an increasingly divided political landscape.

Introduction

The year 2024 was exceptional for Belgian electoral democracy with not one but two sets of elections: on 9 June 2024, with the European, federal and regional elections and, on 13 October 2024, with the provincial and local elections. The elections of June 2024 proceeded to the direct election of 22 Belgian Members to the European Parliament, of 150 Members of the Federal House of Representatives, of 89 Members of the Brussels Regional Parliament, of 124 Members of the Flemish Parliament, of 75 Members of the Walloon Parliament, and of 25 Members of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

Belgian citizens voted under the country’s long-standing proportional representation system. Voters can cast their ballots for a party list or indicate preferences for individual candidates within that list, allowing for personal choice alongside party selection. A 5% electoral threshold at the district level prevents very small parties from gaining representation, aiming to balance representation with effective governance (Reuchamps et al., 2014). For the federal elections of 9 June 2024, which is the focus of this report, the electorate was made of 8 114 951 Belgian voters (out of a population of 11 763 650 inhabitants, as of 1 January

2024) and 253 078 voters of Belgian nationality residing abroad, making a total of 8 368 029 voters.

Background to the Election

Before the 2024 elections, the previous time Belgians were called to the voting booths was on 26 May 2019. For Belgian electoral standards, a period of five years between two elections is a very long period, in a country that has experienced no fewer than 12 elections since 2000, hence almost every second year (Dandoy et al., 2015). The period was notoriously shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic and Belgium was governed by a *caretaker government* since the 26 May 2019 elections that transformed into a *minority government* on 17 March 2020 with the support of the opposition to be able to take the necessary sanitary measures. It was only on 1 October 2020 that a *majority government* was sworn in, led by the Dutch-speaking Liberals Open Vld and composed with six other parties: the Dutch-speaking Socialists Vooruit and the French-speaking Socialists (PS), the French-speaking Liberals (MR), the Dutch-speaking Christian-Democrats (CD&V) and the Dutch-speaking Ecologists (Groen) and the French-speaking Ecologists (Ecolo). Hence, this so-called Vivaldi government – for the four seasons that reflected its composition of seven parties – had less than four years to enact the policies agreed upon in their coalition agreement (Reuchamps, 2023). The life of the government was shaped by internal tensions and by external pressure from the two largest (opposition) Flemish parties in Parliament: the regionalist N-VA and the radical-right Vlaams Belang (VB).

Unsurprisingly, the 2024 campaign was particularly shaped by the question of which party, between the N-VA and the VB, would be first in Flanders and therefore in the leading position to form the governing coalition. A subsequent question was whether these two parties would govern together. It was only two weeks prior to the elections' day that the leader of the N-VA, Bart De Wever, announced that his party would not form a government with the VB. The competition between the two Flemish right-wing parties set the tone of the campaign on right-leaning issues. The most prominent topics in party communication were indeed finance, employment, the economy, migration, crime, and justice (van Haute, 2024). Research indicates a stronger presence of these issues in Flanders, whereas French-speaking Belgium placed greater emphasis on energy policy, civil rights, and employment (Close et al., 2023). Foreign policy debates – including the Gaza and Ukraine conflicts – remained relatively marginal in the campaign.

The campaign was highly personalized. Bart De Wever (N-VA) presented himself as a statesman and leading candidate for Prime Minister. Tom Van Grieken (VB) ran a high-visibility campaign, aiming to normalize VB and position it as a government alternative. Georges-Louis Bouchez (MR) led a campaign focused on law and order, tax relief, and national unity. Conner Rousseau (Vooruit) remained a central media figure, combining populist communication with progressive themes. Paul Magnette (PS) maintained a more traditional left-wing campaign focused on social protection and anti-poverty policies. Finally, Maxime Prévot (Les Engagés) reaped the rewards of a long-term rebranding effort, positioning his party as a pragmatic, post-ideological alternative.

The 2024 elections also introduced some novelties in party competition. In an electoral system that provides no incentives for parties to compete beyond their linguistic region (Dodeigne et al., 2016), only the radical-left PTB-PvdA had previously run a truly national campaign. For the 2024 federal elections, however, the N-VA also presented candidates in all eleven electoral districts. This move signaled N-VA's intention to position itself as a

federal actor, and its leader's ambition to play a central role in government formation and become Prime Minister.

The campaign was also affected by two structural changes. The first was the rebranding of the French-speaking Christian Democrats (cdH) into Les Engagés. This shift involved shedding the party's religious identity and moving toward a citizen-centered, reformist image. A second change concerned the electoral system. Following a couple of other countries, Belgium lowered the voting age to 16 years in view of the 2024 European elections. The federal government initially decided that 16- and 17-years old voters would not be obliged to vote. The Constitutional Court, however, cancelled the law as it would be inconsistent with the country's compulsory voting. This forced the federal government to enforce compulsory voting for everyone no matter the age of the voter. In addition, the Flemish region decided to make voting no longer be compulsory for its 2024 local elections. It is with these blurry messages on compulsory voting that citizens went to the voting booths on 9 June 2024.

The Results

The 2024 Belgian federal elections marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape, leading to the defeat of the parties composing the Vivaldi coalition and altering the distribution of electoral support among key parties, especially in the French-speaking part of the country. Turnout was recorded at 87.42%, the lowest in Belgium's history since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1893, possibly influenced – as mentioned above – by the conflicting messages surrounding this issue in the months leading up to the election. Blank and invalid votes were 5,63% of the total, marking a slight decrease from 2019 (6,07%). This section provides a presentation of the election results, starting from an overview of pre-electoral forecasts and then of the actual results, followed by a tentative interpretation of voters' motivations.

Election Outcomes

The 2024 Belgian federal election resulted in a clear electoral shift to the right, particularly visible in French-speaking Belgium (Table 1). The MR emerged as the leading party among French-speaking voters, securing 10.26% of the national vote and 20 seats, a gain of 6 seats compared to 2019. Les Engagés, after a complete rebranding and repositioning toward the center-right, also made historic gains, rising from 5 to 14 seats with 6.77% of the vote – becoming the third-largest French-speaking party. In contrast, traditional left-wing forces suffered heavy losses, notably PS, which dropped 4 seats to 16 seats, losing its long-held dominant role in Wallonia. Although not all gains were captured by the right-leaning parties, the reshuffling of party strengths – combined with the collapse of several incumbent parties – marks a clear realignment in the electoral center of gravity.

In Flanders, the N-VA received over one million votes with a total of 1 167 061 (16.71%), adding 80 274 votes to its score of 2019 (0.68%) – half of them (40 716) coming from the five Walloon districts where the party presented a list for the first time. Yet, the N-VA lost 1 seat compared to 2019, because of a loss of vote shares in the Flemish Brabant (-2.56%) where it lost 1 of its 5 seats. By contrast, the VB registered modest, albeit significant, gains (from 11.95% to 13.77% of the total vote shares), increasing its representation (from 18 to 20 seats). Importantly, this outcome confirmed the N-VA's enduring ability to retain its core electorate, despite persistent speculation around VB's growing competition on the right (e.g., van Haute et al., 2018). Yet, in the meantime, this represents the best-ever result for VB,

which became the second-largest party in Flanders. Notably, also the PTB-PvdA, achieved its best national result ever, gaining 9.86% of the vote (+1.23%) and 15 seats, marking the best performance by a radical-left party since 1946. Important to note that, along with VB's success, PTB's growth came largely from Flemish voters – revealing a shared anti-establishment dynamic across ideological extremes. Overall, more than 30% of Flemish voters supported radical parties (VB or PTB-PvdA) in 2024, a remarkable and sobering statistic aligning with prior studies suggesting that Belgium is experiencing deepening socio-political polarisation (Fahey & Camatarri, 2021). In contrast, radical-right parties remain marginal in Wallonia, and PTB lost support there, but where it was much more established.

Notably, the election results also reflect a clear punishment of the Vivaldi government coalition. Most of the incumbent coalition parties experienced indeed losses, especially on the Flemish side. Open Vld, the party of the outgoing Prime Minister, lost nearly 200 000 votes to a historical low of 5.45% (-3.09%) and 7 seats (from 12). CD&V continued its long-term erosion to 7.98% (-0.91%) and 11 seats (-1), while Groen also declined to 4.65% (-1.46%), losing 2 seats (from 6 to 4). In French-speaking Belgium, Ecolo registered its worst federal result since its first participation in 1981, falling to below 3% (-3.22%) and 3 seats (from 13), a steep drop from their historic high in 2019 (Reuchamps et al., 2020). As already mentioned, the PS suffered a defeat, recording its worst result ever since the 1978 split of the national socialist party (8.04%). The only two governing parties to gain ground were Vooruit in Flanders, adding over 100 000 votes and increasing its seat count from 9 to 13, and the MR in French-speaking Belgium.

Table 1. Summary of 2024 Federal Elections Results

Parties	Number of votes	Percentage of votes	Number of seats*
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	1 167 061	16.71	24 (-1)
Flemish Interest (VB)	961 601	13.77	20 (+2)
Reformist Movement (MR)	716 934	10.26	20 (+6)
Socialist Party (PS)	561 602	8.04	16 (-4)
Labour Party of Belgium (PTB-PvdA)	688 369	9.86	15 (+3)
Les Engagés (formerly cdH)	472 755	6.77	14 (+9)
Vooruit	566 436	8.11	13 (+4)
Christian Democrat & Flemish (CD&V)	557 392	7.98	11 (-1)
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open Vld)	380 659	5.45	7 (-5)
Groen	324 608	4.65	6 (-2)
Ecolo	204 438	2.93	3 (-10)
Democrat Federalist Independent (DéFI)	84 024	1.20	1 (-1)
Others	299 027	4.28	0 (0)

Source: [Belgian Federal Public Services Home Affairs](#).

**Seat gains/losses compared to previous election in parentheses*

Overall, the 2024 election was marked by high levels of volatility, with significant fluctuations across party lines. While the Walloon electorate has traditionally been considered more stable than its Flemish counterpart, this trend was reversed in 2024. Volatility – measured using the Pedersen Index – dropped to average levels in Dutch-speaking Belgium (8.5), while remaining high in French-speaking Belgium (17.0), reflecting the rise of MR and Les Engagés and the sharp decline of PS and Ecolo (Walgrave et al., 2024).

This volatile context, shaped by high levels of voter indecision, has also been identified as a key factor behind the notable polling errors observed in this election. Throughout the campaign, most polls consistently placed Vlaams Belang (VB) ahead of N-VA by a few percentage points (see Mongrain & Soontjens, 2024). However, the election results told a different story: although VB gained nearly 150 000 additional votes, bringing to this party's best ever score, it fell short of expectations. In contrast, N-VA outperformed projections, consolidating its position as Belgium's leading party for the fourth federal election in a row. Similarly, polls largely failed to anticipate the scale of PS's collapse in French-speaking Belgium. Estimates suggest that around one in five voters remained undecided well into the final phase of the campaign (Pilet et al., 2024), with many making late decisions or turnout choices that polls struggled to capture – contributing to the gap between forecasts and final results.

Finally, a defining feature of the 2024 elections was the growing disconnection between regional counterparts within the same ideological families. While MR gained seats, its Flemish liberal counterpart Open Vld suffered significant losses. Similarly, Les Engagés surged following their rebranding, while CD&V continued to decline. On the left, Vooruit made gains, whereas PS experienced a historic collapse. This divergence suggests that regional leadership, strategic positioning, and issue framing now play a more decisive role than shared ideological heritage in shaping party fortunes across Belgium's linguistic communities.

Voters' Underlying Motivations

At present, comprehensive post-election surveys examining voter motivations in the 2024 Belgian federal election remain unavailable. However, preliminary analyses offer tentative insights into the factors that shaped voter behaviour, revealing distinct policy priorities across the different regions, and substantial policy divergence between party voter bases (Close et al., 2023).

In Flanders, VB has historically attracted voters primarily concerned with immigration and disaffected from the political system and the 2024 election seems to be no exception (Gallina et al., 2020; see also van Haute, 2024). Similarly, the N-VA emphasized right-leaning policy issues such as fiscal conservatism and pro-business policies, as well as a willingness to be seen as a potential partner in the forthcoming federal cabinet, to distinguish itself from the VB. Also, Bart De Wever, leader of the N-VA, during the latest stages of the campaign framed a vote for the VB as a lost vote, i.e., a cue to strategic voting that seems to have paid off (van Haute, 2024).

In Wallonia and Brussels, it is usually posited that different policy concerns shape voter preferences. Left-wing parties, PS and PTB-PvdA, generally gain the support of voters prioritizing social welfare, labour rights, and wealth redistribution (Pellegata & Visconti,

2024). Most recently, however, it was the latter to position itself on the issues that Walloon voters deemed as most important, i.e., civil rights and liberties (Close et al., 2023).

In the campaign, echoing right-leaning emphasis from Flanders, the MR and Les Engagés took a clear stance to the right for a twofold reason: closing the gap with the N-VA and distinguishing itself from the left-wing competitors. This move ultimately worked well for both parties (Baudewyns et al. 2024), most likely in the wake of growing dissatisfaction toward the most established leftist narratives in the region. The loss of Ecolo and Groen can partly be explained by a wave phenomenon that this party has experienced after each government participation since 1999 (Reuchamps et al., 2020), but also by the relatively marginal role of climate as campaign topics and voters' issue priorities (van Haute, 2024).

The New Government

In the immediate aftermath of the federal elections, incumbent Prime Minister Alexander De Croo resigned to the King, with the outgoing government remaining in caretaker mode. As the elections resulted in a fragmented parliament, the formation of a broad coalition was necessary. The renewal of the so-called Vivaldi coalition appeared difficult, since the outgoing parties would only hold a slim majority in parliament (76 seats out of 150). Moreover, the party of the outgoing Prime Minister, Open Vld, declared its intention in the days following the election to transition into opposition after a 25-year tenure in government. Ecolo, the party that suffered the greatest electoral defeat, also announced its move to the opposition, followed by Groen. A new coalition formula thus needed to be found.

The N-VA emerged from the federal elections as the largest party, and its leader, Bart De Wever, stated during the electoral campaign that he was ready to become Prime Minister, even without a new state reform. After a brief round of consultations after 9 June 2024, the King appointed Bart De Wever as *informateur* on 12 June. Given the election results, the most viable coalition appeared to be the so-called Arizona coalition, comprising N-VA, MR, Les Engagés, Vooruit, and CD&V. This coalition was so named because the representative colors of the involved parties align with those of the Arizona state flag. It is characterized by deep ideological and linguistic divides, bringing together a Flemish nationalist party, a French-speaking liberal party, a Dutch-speaking socialist party, and two Christian-democratic parties. As traditional, the radical-right party VB was excluded from the discussions due to a cordon sanitaire around its government participation (Biard, 2022).

By 26 June, Bart De Wever's role transitioned to that of *pre-formateur*. Despite initial optimism, significant obstacles arose, particularly concerning socio-economic policies. Vooruit advocated for the protection of social security spending, while the N-VA and the MR opposed additional taxes on wealth. Throughout the summer, negotiations oscillated between progress and stalemate. A tentative agreement on a budgetary framework requiring €28 billion in savings was reached, but deep divisions persisted over issues such as a proposed capital gains tax. These disagreements led to Bart De Wever offering his resignation as *formateur* on 22 August.

In response to the deadlock, the King appointed Maxime Prévot, leader of Les Engagés, as *mediator*. Maxime Prévot's efforts facilitated the resumption of dialogue among parties. By 2 September, Bart De Wever was reinstated as *formateur* by the King, with negotiations adopting a revised approach including thematic working groups focusing on specific policy areas. Despite these efforts, ideological divides between parties continued to pose

challenges. Bart De Wever once again submitted his resignation to the King on 4 November, but the N-VA leader was reappointed as *formateur* a few days later.

The turning point arrived in late January 2025. On 31 January, the five parties reached an agreement on socio-economic reforms, budgetary measures, and the structure of the new government. This agreement paved the way for Bart De Wever to present the coalition pact to King Philippe, setting the stage for the official formation of the new federal government. Bart De Wever was sworn in as Prime Minister on 3 February 2025, and the House of Representatives granted its confidence to the government the day after, with 81 votes in favor, 66 against, and 3 abstentions. Overall, the coalition formation process lasted 242 days, making it the third longest government formation process of the 21st century in Belgium, after those of 2010-2011 and 2019-2020 (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021). Interestingly, the federal coalition is now fully congruent with the regional cabinets as the exactly same parties has joined the federal, Flemish and Walloon governments, a phenomenon that has rarely been observed in 21st century Belgium (Dandoy, 2024).

Bart De Wever's cabinet, representing a right-leaning coalition, aims to address pressing issues such as budgetary constraints, migration policies, and energy reforms. The five coalition parties each receive ministerial portfolios, proportionate to their representation in the House of Representatives. As stipulated in the Constitution, the federal government is composed equally of Dutch- and French-speaking ministers, in addition to the Prime Minister. However, the new cabinet's composition has drawn criticism for its lack of gender balance, with only four women appointed as ministers (out of 15) and none of them included in the core cabinet. This contrasts sharply with the gender parity of the previous cabinet.

Conclusion

The 2024 Belgian federal elections markedly reconfigured the country's political landscape. Flanders strengthened its shift to the right, while Wallonia – long a stronghold of left-wing parties – saw unexpected gains for right-wing parties. Incumbent parties like Open Vld and Ecolo suffered important losses, while MR, Vooruit and Les Engagés experienced notable gains. Combined with the progress of both radical-right and radical-left parties, these shifts likely reflected voters' dissatisfaction, with many seeking alternatives to incumbent parties. These results made coalition-building unprecedentedly complex. At the same time, they are defining a new phase in Belgian politics, where electoral volatility is becoming the norm and unexpected alliances are turning out to be necessary to govern effectively.

Two paradoxes stand out from the results. The leader of the N-VA, a party committed to Flemish independence, became Belgium's Prime Minister. It is the first time that the Prime Minister does not belong to any of the three traditional party families. Moreover, despite the N-VA's long-standing claim that Belgium consists of two 'democracies' (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014; 2020), with a right-leaning Flanders and left-leaning Wallonia, this election saw French-speaking right-wing parties enter government alongside the N-VA, while Vooruit and CD&V, two centrist-to-left parties, joined from the Flemish side. This unusual mix reflects the growing complexity of Belgian politics. Whether parties will be able to meet their voters' expectations within this new configuration remains an open question that the next political cycle will answer in time.

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