

The European elections in Belgium

A third-order ballot

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The political context: a vote held at the same time as the regional and federal elections

The 2024 European elections in Belgium coincided with the federal and regional elections, marking the end of the legislative term for all levels of government in the Kingdom, except for local government. The simultaneous nature of the elections helped erase European issues from the electoral campaign, in favour of federal political matters, despite Belgium holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from January to June, 2024, a period that went relatively unnoticed by the public.

Since May 2020, the Belgian federal government led by Dutch-speaking liberal Alexander De Croo (Open VLD) was supported by a broad coalition commonly known as ‘Vivaldi’. This coalition brought together seven parties from the country’s four main political families (represented by the French and Dutch-speaking ‘sister parties’): the Socialists (PS and *Vooruit*), the Liberals

(MR and Open VLD), the Ecologists (Ecolo and *Groen*) and the Christian Democrats (represented solely by the CD&V; the cdH, the French-speaking party, which has since become Les Engagés, chose to be in opposition after a heavy electoral defeat in 2019). However, popular support for this coalition has shown signs of weakening since 2023, particularly in Flanders where the nationalist N-VA party has been highly critical of the federal coalition; its campaign is partly based on a rejection of a potential renewal of the Vivaldi coalition. Polls also indicate that radical parties are growing in strength, with a predicted victory for the radical right in Flanders (*Vlaams Belang*) and a national upsurge in support for the radical left (Parti du Travail de Belgique/*Partij van de Arbeid*, PTB/PvdA).

A change in the electoral system that heralds a younger electorate

Registered voters in Belgium are now represented by 22 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), an increase of one seat compared to the 2019 elections (which was allocated to the Dutch electoral college). European representatives are elected in three separate constituencies via a multi-member proportional representation system. The Dutch electoral college elects thirteen representatives, the French electoral college elects eight, and the German-speaking electoral college elects a single representative (making this a de facto first-past-the-post system). The seats to be filled are allocated using the d'Hondt system, with no electoral threshold required.

Nine lists were submitted for the Dutch electoral college, seven for the French electoral college and six for the German-speaking college. The vast majority of these lists were submitted by the national parties mentioned above. The Volt party, a pro-European and federalist party active in other member states, also submitted lists for all three levels of government. For the European elections, some parties chose to put forward prominent figures from the national political landscape, such as Sophie Wilmès for the MR, a former federal prime minister; or Johan Van Overtveldt for the N-VA, a former federal minister.

In order to promote parity, it should be noted that on each list submitted for the election of Belgium's representatives to the European Parliament (EP), the number of candidates of each gender must not differ by more than one. In addition, the first two candidates must be of different genders. Compulsory

voting in Belgium generally results in a lower abstention rate than in most other EU member states.

All European citizens registered on electoral rolls in Belgium are eligible to vote. For the first time, citizens aged 16 were also able to take part in the European ballot, as the voting age for European elections was lowered from 18 to 16 on June 1, 2022. An estimated 835,000 young people voted for the first time in the European elections on June 9, 2024 (Istasse and Sägesser, 2024).

A campaign that doesn't feature Europe?

Since 2014, European elections have coincided with federal, regional and community ballots, making Belgium unique in the European landscape (Istasse and Sägesser, 2024). While this practice lowers the cost of election campaigns, it has a clear downside for the European ballot: it obscures the issues at stake in the different elections and places European issues in third place, behind federal and regional concerns. This arrangement also has the indirect consequence—given Belgium's triple party system—of several election campaigns unfolding simultaneously.

The campaign for the 2024 European elections follows in the footsteps of previous campaigns. Between 2009 and 2019, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) showed that the relative salience of European integration in the positioning of the various Belgian parties was quite weak - about 5 on a scale of 1 to 10 (Chiru, *et al.*, 2022) - with no marked difference between the north and south of the country or among party families. Much like the campaigns for the 2014 and 2019 elections, the 2024 campaign was therefore characterised by the very low salience of European issues, both in the north and south of the country (De Ville, 2024). Some, albeit not very noticeable, European issues did appear in the debates, notably around migration and budgetary issues, where Europe was either criticised (by radical parties) or presented as a solution (by federal majority parties). The effort to confuse the electorate by blurring responsibilities was further accentuated by the parties' game of musical chairs, as they shifted candidates from one level to another between two elections and sometimes during the campaign.

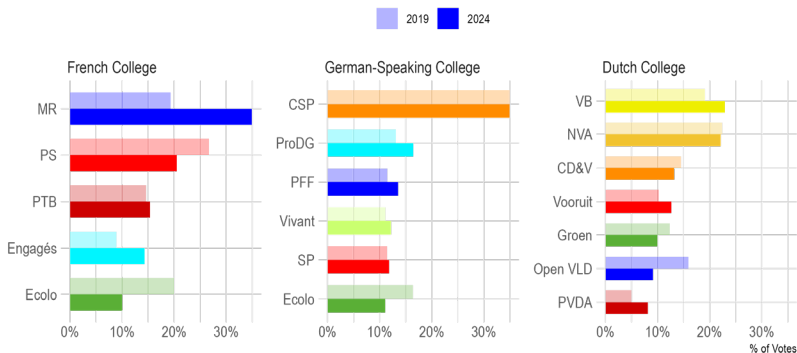
From the electorate's point of view (Close, Biesemans and Lefevere, 2024), European integration and the issues directly associated with it seemed either insignificant

or not directly connected to Europe. In Wallonia, the most important issues to voters were the economy, political representation and migration; in Flanders, the budget/finance, migration and political representation. Flemish right-wing parties tended to highlight the budgetary constraints imposed by the European Union as a framework for the formation of a future government, using the EU as a tool to advance their economic reform agenda. With regard to migration, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration (CD&V) defended her record by focusing on the European Migration Pact, while the nationalist right and radical right parties criticised the plan. However, it did not emerge as a key issue in the campaign.

The results: victory for the right and defeat for the Ecologists

On 9 June 2024, voter turnout rose slightly compared with 2019, from 88.5% to 89%, although it was still the second lowest recorded for a European election. In addition, 5.46% of eligible voters cast a blank or invalid vote (representing 6.1% of those who turned out to vote), which meant that the proportion of the electorate who voted for a party in the running was 83%. Turnout was slightly higher in the Flemish population (91.37%) than in the other communities. Turnout was only 82% in the Brussels-Capital region, compared with 86% in Wallonia and 87% in the German-speaking community. Graph 1 details, for each electoral college, the results of the elections in terms of percentage of votes, while Graph 2 illustrates these results in terms of number of seats in the EP (see also Table 1 in the appendix, which summarises the results).

Graph 1. Percentage of votes for each party within the three electoral colleges



Source : <https://elections2024.belgium.be/>

In the French electoral college, the MR (Liberals) was the big winner in these elections, with a 15% increase in votes, enabling it to become the leading French-speaking party at this level of government (with 35%) and to secure three seats, one more than in 2019. The PS (Socialists), despite a 6% drop, retained its two seats, but lost its position as the leading party. The final three seats were won by the PTB (Labour Party), Les Engagés (centrists, Christian Democrats) and Ecolo, each reflecting different trends: Les Engagés gained 6%, reaching 15% of the vote, while the PTB remained stable at 15%. Ecolo, however, was the clear loser in these elections, experiencing a substantial decline of 9% and the loss of one seat.

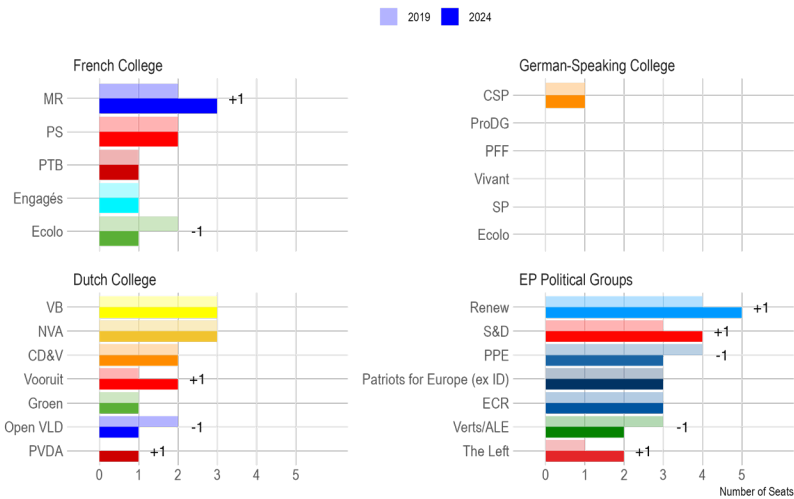
In the Dutch electoral college, *Vlaams Belang* maintained its progress, but at a slower pace. It became the leading party with 22.9% of the vote (+3.8%), closely followed by the N-VA, whose score remained stable at 22.1% (-0.3%). Both parties retained their three seats. At EP level, *Vlaams Belang*, a classic radical right-wing party with a Eurosceptic and anti-migration stance, now has a seat among the *Patriots for Europe*. The N-VA, a conservative nationalist party that is economically right-wing and anti-federalist regarding Europe, was one of the founding members of the ECR group in the EP in 2009 (it previously sat with the regionalists). The CD&V (Christian Democrats) and Vooruit (Socialists) each won two seats, gaining 13.2% (-1.3%) and 12.6% (+2.44%) of the vote respectively, with the latter acquiring one more seat than in 2019. *GROEN* and the Open VLD (liberals) each gained a seat, despite a slight decrease for *GROEN* (-2.4%) and a more significant decrease for the Open VLD (-6.8%), which lost a seat. Finally, the PvdA (Labour Party) increased its share by 3.2% and won a seat for the first time, capturing 8.1% of the vote.

In the German-speaking electoral college, as has been the case since 1999, the CSP (*Christlich Soziale Partei*, Christian Democrats) attained the only seat available with 34.9% of the vote, a score almost identical to that of 2019 (-0.01%). It remains well ahead of its competitors, with its closest rival ProDG (*Pro Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft*, a regionalist party) obtaining 16.4% of the vote.

The results were broadly similar (by a margin of 1 to 2%) to the federal election results held on the same day, the most notable difference being the better performance of the N-VA in the federal ballot, which, unlike in the European elections, overtook *Vlaams Belang* and remains the leading party in Flanders.

As far as the political groups in the EP are concerned, the ECR group retained its three seats with the N-VA. Similarly, the new *Patriots for Europe* group took over the three seats held by Vlaams Belang, which was affiliated with its predecessor (ID) during the 9th parliamentary term. Despite Open VLD losing one seat, the Renew Europe group gained an additional seat compared to 2019, thanks to the Engagés leaving the EPP group to join them, making Renew Europe the largest group in Belgium with five seats. This defection consequently reduced the EPP’s Belgian representation, which was now limited to the CD&V and the CSP, to three seats, compared with four previously. The S&D (4 seats) and GUE/NGL (2 seats) each gained one seat due to the rise of *Vooruit* and PVDA respectively. Finally, Ecolo’s poor performance reduced the representation of the Greens/EFA group to two seats.

Graph 2. Distribution of seats within the three electoral colleges and political groups in the European Parliament



Source : <https://elections2024.belgium.be/>

The consequences: Europe remains in the background

Both European integration and European policies remain poorly politicised in Belgium, and the fact that three elections were held simultaneously on 9 June 2024 did nothing to raise the profile of supranational issues. Despite the Belgian Presidency of the Council and the efforts of both the French- and Dutch-speaking media, European candidates and policies received minimal

visibility during the campaign in Belgium, with the spotlight primarily on federal issues and, to a lesser degree, regional ones. While, similar to many other countries on the continent, radical parties were gaining traction in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, this represented not so much a signal to the EU as a protest and anti-establishment vote on a national scale.

However, issues regarding Europe did carry weight in this election. For instance, the migration pact regularly featured in debates, particularly in Flanders, in response to public concerns about migration, and was discussed along the majority/opposition divide. The topic of defence within a European framework was also discussed against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the upcoming American elections in November 2024. Environmental issues and the many facets of the *Green Deal* also gave rise to strong tensions within the two main Belgian regions. While the mobilisation of the farming community also led to the politicisation of the associated European regulations, this did not become a major campaign issue. Finally, the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and the new budgetary regulations continue to weigh heavily on Belgian politics. The budget and the national debt were central to the campaign of the leading party in Flanders and they remain crucial in the negotiations for forming a federal government. These issues will continue to stifle Belgian political figures' room for manoeuvre over the next five years, even though European matters are not viewed or portrayed as significant by those involved.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Party vote share and representation in the European Parliament: 2019 vs. 2024

Political party*	Political group in the European Parliament	Results			
		Vote share (%)	Change compared to 2019	Seats	Change compared to 2019
<i>Dutch electoral college</i>					
CD&V - Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams	EPP - The European People's Party Group (Christian Democrats)	8.34%	-0.83	2	=
<i>Groen</i>	Greens/EFA - The Greens/European Free Alliance Group	6.32%	-1.49	1	=
N-VA - <i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i>	ECR - The European Conservatives and Reformists Group	13.96%	-0.21	3	=
Open VLD- Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	Renew Europe	5,76%	-4,31	1	-1
PVDA - <i>Partij van de Arbeid van België</i>	The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL	5,13%	+2	1	+1
VB - <i>Vlaams Belang</i>	PfE - Patriots for Europe	14.50%	+2.45	3	=
Volt		0.54%	+0.24	0	=
Voor U		0,66%	-	0	-
Vooruit	S&D - The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament	7.99%	+1.54	2	+1
<i>French electoral college</i>					
DéFI – Démocrate fédéraliste indépendant	S&D - The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament	1.05%	-1.1	0	=

Ecolo	Greens/EFA - The Greens/European Free Alliance Group	3.71%	-3.6	1	-1
Les Engagés	Renew Europe	5.38%	+1.93	2	=
MR – Mouvement réformateur	Renew Europe	12.70%	+5.64	3	+1
PS – Parti socialiste	S&D - The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament	7.50%	-2.24	2	=
PTB – Parti du travail de Belgique	The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL	5.67%	+0.39	1	=
<i>German-speaking electoral college</i>					
CSP – <i>Christlich Soziale Partei</i>	EPP - The European People's Party Group (Christian Democrats)	0.21%	0	1	=
Ecolo		0,07%	-0,03	0	=
PFF – <i>Partei für Freiheit und Fortschritt</i>		0,08%	+0,01	0	=
ProDG – <i>Pro Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft</i>		0,10%	+0.02	0	=
SP – <i>Sozialistische Partei Regionalverband Ostbelgien</i>		0,07%	0	0	=
Vivant		0,07%	0	0	=

Source : <https://elections2024.belgium.be/> - *Parties in government are in bold.