Belgium

Toward a Regionalization of National Elections?

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3.1. Introduction

Regional elections are not a new political phenomenon in Belgium. This small European country witnessed its first regional elections in 1974, two decades before the transformation of the unitary state into a federal state. Despite the early introduction of regional elections, the study of elections at this policy level remains up to now relatively rare. The exceptions are mainly to be found in the election reports published by the journal *Regional & Federal Studies* (e.g. Versmessen, 1995; Deschouwer, 2000; Coffé, 2006; Brack and Pilet, 2010). The reasons for ignorance about the political science literature on this topic are threefold.

First, between 1974 and 1989, only a very small portion of the Belgian electorate could actually vote in subnational elections beyond local and provincial elections. The German-speaking community contains only 0.7 per cent of the total Belgian electorate and is, therefore, politically not relevant. As a consequence, the elections to the German-speaking community did not attract much attention from scholars. The federalization of the rest of Belgium is a relatively recent process and, even though regions and communities were created in 1970 and 1980, and the Brussels region in 1989, the first direct elections for these entities occurred as late as 1995 (1989 for Brussels).

Second, decentralization in Belgium was, before 1970, limited to the provinces (in addition to the local level – the *communes*). This subnational territorial organization of Belgium was inherited from the French and Dutch regimes before Belgian independence in 1830. Most of the literature on subnational elections dealt with the provincial level. Provincial elections remained in the shadow of the national elections,

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and election results were strongly similar. This is due not only to the fact that provinces have long been perceived as a pure administrative level (Coninckx and Valcke, 2006, p.59) and not considered by the parties, the media and the public to be as important as the national institutions (Costard, 1974; Toelen, 1986, p.307; Toelen, 1988, p.99; Coninckx and Valcke, 2006, p.59; Valcke et al., 2008, p.246) but also because the provincial elections were organized on the same day as national elections up to 1991.[1]

These studies find that provincial turnout equals national turnout (Costard, 1974, p.548), that the national and provincial vote are by and large the same (Toelen, 1988, p.113–117), and that the composition of provincial coalitions mirror that of the coalitions at the national level (Costard, 1972, p.669; Toelen, 1986, p.321; Coninckx and Valcke, 2006, p.79). Since the gradual federalization of the Belgian state, provinces have lost most of their symbolic and political powers, and many political actors now question the usefulness and mere existence of the provincial level.

Third, given its bipolar characteristics, the Belgian political system can be easily understood via the dynamics between the two main linguistic communities. Since all of the major political parties from these communities meet and discuss at the federal level, Belgian politics is often analyzed by observing political events occurring at that level. In this chapter I discuss the general characteristics of regional and community institutions and elections in Belgium. Sections 3.3 and 3.4, respectively, analyze congruence between regional and national elections and explore second-order election effects. I discuss the question of whether we can observe a regionalization of the vote in Section 3.5. In the final section I summarize the main findings of this chapter and consider some additional variables that may contribute to the understanding of the regionalization of regional and national elections.

3.2. Regional government and regional elections

Compared with that of other European countries, the Belgian political system displays several particularities. Following the framework outlined by Burgess (2006, p.136) for comparing federations, I focus on two main elements: the institutions and the party system of a federal country. To this I add the analysis of political cleavages because Belgian election scholars have indicated the importance of several cleavages in electoral dynamics (Deschouwer, 1990; De Winter et al., 2006).

The establishment of political cleavages brings us back to the origin of the Belgian state. When Belgium was created in 1830, its society

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was predominantly ruled by a French-speaking elite, even though the majority of the population was Dutch-speaking. This elite concentrated the economic, political and cultural powers in its hands. It was only after decades of repeated claims and political conflicts that the Flemish movement accomplished the recognition of the Dutch language as an official language, which meant that Dutch was allowed to be used in the education system, justice, administration and so forth. However, the Dutch-speaking movement did not immediately organize itself into a political party; this happened only in the 1950s with the creation of the first Flemish nationalist political party.

Although the linguistic cleavage – opposing Dutch- and French-speakers – is one of the dominant features of today's political landscape in Belgium, two other historical cleavages are still important (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Deschouwer, 1990, 2009b; de Coorebyter, 2008). First, there is the church–state cleavage which opposes catholics vis-à-vis liberals. The other is the 'classic' left–right dimension which consists of owners of capital competing with workers on socioeconomic issues.

All together, these three cleavages largely shape Belgian society. Indeed, the political parties constitute the 'tip of the iceberg' of each cleavage. A series of intermediary organizations (such as labor unions, newspapers, hospitals, schools, youth movements and mutual insurance companies) are divided according to their cleavage and 'pillar', and they are represented by one of the three traditional parties. These pillars cover many aspects of the life of each Belgian citizen and are organized in order to accompany its members 'from the cradle to the grave'.

Arend Lijphart understood the importance of the consociational organization of Belgian society, meaning that each of its segments is autonomous and enjoys independent decision-making powers within its sphere of competences. At the same time, these organizations are forced to collaborate with each other across the pillars. This consociational system corresponds to a form of 'functional decentralization'. In other words, each pillar has significant powers in various policy domains, such as the payment of unemployment allowances (labor unions) or the refund of health care (mutual insurance companies). The main decisions of the government are taken in coordination with the socioeconomic actors of each pillar.

The language cleavage was translated into competition on territorial decentralization issues in the second half of the twentieth century, and this cleavage lay at the basis of the gradual transformation of the unitary Belgian state into a federal state composed of relatively autonomous

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regions and communities. Even if the previous form of decentralization and state organization into the pillar structure remain significant today, since the 1960s, the linguistic cleavage progressively began to dominate political contestation. Between 1968 and 1978, the three main statewide political parties split according to linguistic lines – that is, they split into separate and completely independent Flemish- and French-speaking parties (Verleden, 2008). As a result, the linguistic cleavage no longer opposes regionalist parties to the statewide parties but all parties tend to compete on language and federalization issues.

The cleavage structure informs to a large extent the elements which Burgess (2006) proposes to compare federations – that is, the institutions and party system of Belgium. Since the very beginning of the decentralization process in the 1960s, two diverging opinions have divided the political actors. In the north of the country, the Flemish actors aim to defend their culture and language based on a person-based federalism embodied in the principle of a community, while in the South, the French-speakers defend their industries and economy, which implies a territorial principle of federal institutions. These two contrasting visions of the appropriate base for the organization of Belgium's federal state – community or territory – still exist today. Actually, the Belgian compromise consists of the creation of a federation based on two different kinds of subnational entities.

Belgium is nowadays composed of six territorially overlapping federated entities: three regions and three communities (article 1 of the constitution). Belgian federalism is unique not only because it comprises two different kinds of (competing) subnational entities but also because the decentralization of competences was carried out gradually via six successive state reforms. In 1970 both concepts of 'communities' and 'regions' were introduced into the constitution but only the French- and Flemish-speaking communities were set up in 1971, followed by the German-speaking community in 1973. The communities obtained responsibility for culture, education and language, they were financed through central government transfers and they were given the revenues of radio and television taxes. In 1980 the Walloon and Flemish regions were formally installed. Each federal entity has its own assembly and executive. At the same time, a special court, called the Court of Arbitration, was set up to regulate conflict between federal law and regional or community decrees. Regions received competencies in regional development, environmental policy, water policy and infrastructure, while the competencies of the communities were expanded to include welfare policy, vocational training and education.

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In 1989 the Brussels region and its region-specific institutions, such as the community commissions in which representatives from the French- and Dutch-speaking communities meet to decide on Brussels affairs, were created. In addition, more competencies were delegated to the communities (education) and to the regions (transport, public works and financing of local authorities), and a new fiscal system was established to finance the entities. Regions obtained authority over eight regional taxes (e.g. gambling, inheritance and registration fees on property transfer) and communities were financed through a tax-sharing arrangement whereby the central government refunds a proportion of value-added tax and income tax.

In 1993, Belgium officially became a federal state and the regions and communities received residual competencies.[2] In addition, the members of almost all regional and community assemblies were now directly elected. In 1999 and 2001 the regions and communities received more competencies (mainly agriculture, foreign trade, oversight on local authorities and development aid), regional taxes were increased from 8 to 12, and the distribution of VAT and income tax to the communities was based on contributions to the shared tax. These reforms constituted a fundamental step toward fiscal autonomy for the regions. In the online appendix of this book, the fiscal figures indicate that most of the subnational revenue comes from the regions' own taxes. The latest state reform was negotiated in 2012 and includes changes which imply more financial and fiscal autonomy (mainly some liberties in defining the progressivity of income and taxes) and a further decentralization of competencies (including health care, employment policy and family allowances) to the regions and communities.

Overall, the main competencies of the communities are education, cultural matters and social affairs, while the main ones of the regions are town and spatial planning, environment, agriculture, housing, public works, transport, foreign trade, employment policy, organization and supervision of the local authorities, property belonging to the various religious groups, and regional aspects of the economic policy, energy policy, scientific research and international relations.

The Belgian federal system relies on two principles. The first consists of a loyalty principle (all institutions and norms must remain loyal to the federation) and the second relies on the absence of hierarchy between the norms: a federal law has the same value as a regional or community law (decree or ordinance). Still, responsibility for many of the policies is shared across government tiers, creating an important need for cooperation and agreement between institutions. This

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has resulted in an increasing number of interministerial conferences modeled on the German *Politikverflechtung* and a formal arbitration system.

One of the outstanding features of the Belgian federation is its degree of asymmetry. The only commonality between the regions and the communities is that each of them has a parliament and a government. Beyond this, there lies great diversity. The subnational entities do not enjoy the same legal status and extent of autonomy, and they are responsible for different sets of competencies. One can even argue that the Belgian institutional system is fully asymmetrical, meaning that all subnational entities are unique with regard to their powers and competencies.

The asymmetry between the entities goes beyond the institutions. For example, regions and communities are not equal in size. One of them (Flanders) gathers the majority of the Belgian population[3] rendering the Belgian case even more unique since in no other country in the world is the (absolute) majority of its population concentrated into a single region.[4]

However, regions and communities are also not equal regarding their constitutional status. The Flemish region and community were merged, meaning that the Flemish parliament, government and public administration exercise all the of competencies delegated to both types of subnational entity. In the south of the country, Wallonia consists of one region but two communities (the French- and the German-speaking communities). However, adding to the complexity of the institutional landscape, a significant number of regional competencies have been transferred from the Walloon region to the German-speaking community (monuments and sites, employment policy, police and the supervision of local authorities) and from the French-speaking community to the Walloon region (cultural and education matters, sports infrastructure, tourism, social promotion, health policy, family policy, social welfare and integration).

Although the Brussels region was constitutionally recognized in 1980, it was not until 1989, nine years after the two other regions, before it was established. In addition, the Brussels region faces certain limits on its autonomy. Similar to the German-speaking community, the Brussels region does not dispose of a constitutional autonomy. Moreover, due to its bilingual status, both Dutch- and French-speaking communities are competent for policy domains pertaining to the Dutch- and French-speaking populations residing in the Brussels regional territory. These community policies are coordinated by language-based community

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committees and by a joint community committee. The Dutch- and French-speaking communities delegated some of their competencies (mainly related to education and culture) to these committees.

In sum, an analysis of subnational elections in Belgium is complex since they occur in only four of the six subnational entities: the Flemish- and German-speaking communities and the Walloon and Brussels regions. The parliament of the French-speaking community is indirectly elected as it is composed of the French-speaking parliamentarians from the Walloon region and 19 French-speaking parliamentarians from the Brussels region, while the parliamentarians elected for the Flemish community are at the same time representatives of the Flemish region but the representatives from the Brussels constituency are excluded when dealing with regional issues.

The second element proposed by Burgess (2006) to analyze federal countries concerns the party system. Keating (2001) observes that the Belgian party system presents one typical characteristic when compared with other federations: there are no federal (or statewide) parties. Since the split of the three major statewide parties between 1968 and 1978 (the Christian-democrats, the socialists and the liberals), not one statewide party managed to win elections and to obtain a majority of seats in the federal parliament. All of the political parties that were created after 1978 – the two extreme-right parties (Vlaams Belang (VB) and Front National (FN)), the two green parties (Groen and Ecolo) and the two populist parties (Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD) and Parti Populaire (PP)) – are organized at the community level and explicitly represent the interests of only part of the Belgian population. Due to the split of the statewide parties and the creation of new parties in each linguistic community, the Belgian party system is highly fragmented; the effective number of parties in the federal parliament was 8.42 in 2010 (the effective number of parties is an index that measures the number of parties existing in a party system and weighted by their size).

It might be better to speak of two party systems rather than of one party system in Belgium. Even in the bilingual electoral constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, parties are organized and compete along linguistic lines. Few lists provide candidates from both language groups for the federal elections (House), and bilingual lists are forbidden for the Brussels regional elections.

Although the regional party systems across the entities contain different parties, at the party family level we can observe similar characteristics and structures. For example, each party system was in 2011 composed of one Christian-democrat (Christen-Democratisch

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& Vlaams (CD&V) in Flanders and Centre Démocrate Humaniste (CDH) in French-speaking Belgium), one socialist (Socialistische Partij Anders (SP.A) and Parti Socialiste (PS)), one liberal (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD) and Mouvement Réformateur (MR)), one regionalist (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones (FDF)), one extreme-right (VB and FN), one green (Groen and Ecolo) and one populist party (LDD and PP).

In addition, unlike the two other communities, the German-speaking community does not display a separated (and third) party system. Apart from the regionalist Pro deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft (ProDG) (and, to a lesser extent, Vivant), all parties that participate in these regional elections are subregional branches of French-speaking parties. For example, the liberal Partei Fur Freiheit und Fortschritt is officially a member of the French-speaking MR federation, while the Christian-democrat Christlich Soziale Partei and the socialist Socialistische Partei are, respectively, branches of the CDH and PS.[5] In the analyses presented below, these parties are considered to be part of their French-speaking sister parties and are not treated as independent parties.

The similarity of party systems at the party family level is also apparent in the composition of governmental coalitions at the federal level. As a result of the two quasisymmetrical party systems and due to the declining but persistent pillarization of the society, parties tend to build symmetric coalitions – that is, coalitions that gather parties from the same party families in the federal cabinet (and to a lesser extent in the bilingual Brussels cabinet). With the exception of the 2007–2011 period,[6] the parties belonging to the same party family (Christian-democrats, socialists, liberals, greens) have always been together in government or in opposition at the federal level.

Although there are no statewide parties in Belgium (i.e. a party competing in all regions), none of the parties compete in one region only. In other words, all Flemish- and French-speaking parties – including the regionalist ones – can be considered multiregional since they compete in their language-based community (Flanders or Wallonia), which always includes bilingual Brussels.[7]

A proportional electoral system is applied to federal, regional and community elections, and the seat allocation is based on the D'Hondt formula. Since 2003 (federal elections) and 2004 (regional and community elections), a threshold of 5 per cent of the votes has been implemented but it barely had an effect on electoral results and party strategies (Onclin, Reuchamps, 2011).[8] Voting is compulsory for all elections, including European ones.

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Since 1995 all subnational parliaments have been made up of directly elected MPs for a five-year fixed term with the exception of the French-speaking community. The parliament of this community is composed of the directly elected French-speaking members of the Walloon regional parliament as well as 19 members chosen among the directly elected French-speaking members of the Brussels regional parliament.

Before 1995 two electoral systems coexisted. For most of the Belgian territory, a system of 'double mandate' was set up, meaning that national MPs acted at the same time as regional MPs based on a four-year national term. As a result, between 1971 and 1981 the community parliaments (which were called 'cultural community councils' at that time) were composed of all of the national MPs (in both the House and the Senate) from the same language group, meaning that Flemish national MPs also had a seat in the Flemish parliament and similarly the French-speaking national MPs occupied a seat in the parliament of the Walloon region. Between 1981 and 1995 the community parliaments were composed of all directly elected national MPs from the same language group (the co-opted senators were excluded). Two subnational entities held direct regional elections before 1995: the German-speaking community since 1974 (with a consultative status until 1986), which followed the four-year term of the national elections, and the Brussels region since 1989, with one six-year term for regional representatives.

Just like the institutional landscape, the Belgian electoral calendar is rather peculiar. Since 1999 the regional and community elections have been held on the same day as the European elections (article 117 of the constitution). The first two regional and community elections occurred simultaneously with the federal elections in 1995 and in 1999. As a result the country has four completely different election groups with regard to electoral cycles. The first group contains elections held between 1986 and 1990 when the elections to the German-speaking community were held independently. A second group includes elections from 1974 to 1981 and the 1995 elections, which were held on the same date as the national ones. In addition, the provincial elections took place on the same day as the national elections during the 1974–1991 period. A third group of elections – those held in 1989, 2004 and 2009 – were held together with the European elections. Finally, in 1999, subnational elections were held together with the national and European elections.

In contrast with subnational parliaments in other countries, the number of MPs does not relate to the size of the entity. For example, the Walloon regional parliament is composed of 75 members

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(i.e. 32,569 voters per MP in 2009) while the Brussels regional parliament is composed of 89 members (i.e. 6,458 voters per MP). The Flemish community parliament is composed of 124 members (i.e. 39,631 voters per MP for the Flemish region (118 members and the Brussels region (six members)), while the German-speaking community parliament is composed of 25 members (i.e. 1,898 voters per MP).

In sum, an analysis of Belgian regional elections basically boils down to an analysis of the elections to four subnational parliaments, which are the parliaments of the Flemish- and the German-speaking communities and the Walloon and Brussels regions. Once the French-speaking community is not taken into account, there is hardly any overlap between the electorates, the only exceptions being the 53,942 Flemish-speaking voters in Brussels in 2009 (who voted for both the Brussels regional and the Flemish community elections)[9] and the 47,446 voters in the German-speaking community in 2009 (who voted in both the Walloon regional and the German-speaking community elections).

In the analysis presented below, I focus on the elections held since 1995 because before then there were only elections for the German community (since 1974) and Brussels (since 1989), which can hardly be considered as representative for Belgium as a whole.

3.3. Congruence of the vote

As explained in Chapter 1, we may differentiate between three operationalizations of congruence of the vote. Electorate congruence (*NN–NR*) compares the national vote at the national level with the national vote in a particular region. Election congruence (*NR–RR*) compares the national vote in particular region with the regional vote for that region. Finally, party-system congruence (*NN–RR*) contrasts the vote for a national election to a particular regional election. Scores on each of the three indicators are shown in Figure 3.1.

We observe for the Belgian case that the indicator for electorate congruence (*NN–NR*) remains stable for 15 years (1946–1961). National elections held in these years demonstrate a strong similarity across territories since the observed scores remain around 20 per cent. From 1961 onwards the electoral growth of the regionalist parties in Flanders, and later in Wallonia and Brussels, led to a gradual increase in dissimilarity. But the turning point was in 1977. Electorate congruence almost doubles in size and reaches 55 per cent. In three years the Belgian party system was drastically transformed, due to the split of each of the three mainstream Belgian parties into two independent parties:

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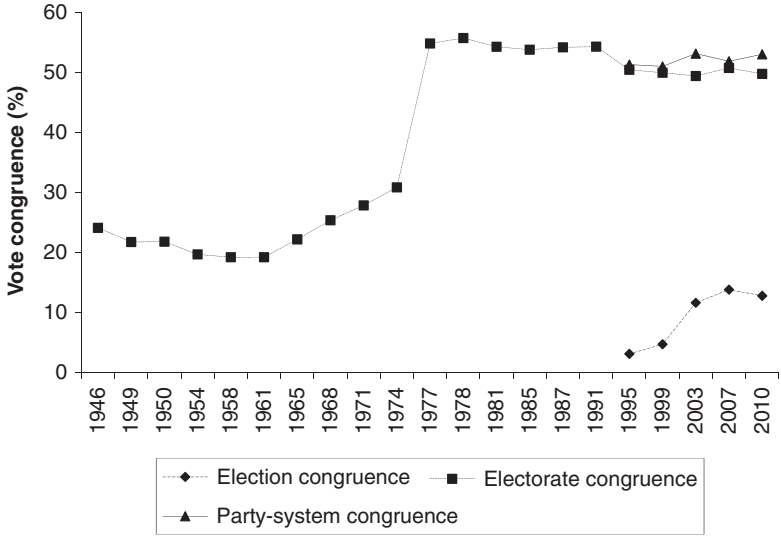

Figure 3.1 Congruence between the national and the regional vote
Notes: Shown are average dissimilarity scores. See Chapter 1 for the formula. More details can be found in the Belgian country Excel file.

the Christian-democrats into the Flemish Christelijke Volkspartij and the French-speaking Parti Social Chrétien; the liberals into the Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang and the Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès; and the socialists into the Belgische Socialistische Partij and the Parti Socialiste Belge. Even if the Christian-democrats split in 1968, the party mainly presented joint lists until 1974. Together with the successes of the regionalist parties, this split of the three main Belgian parties explains most of the increase in dissimilarity between the national and the regional vote.

If one tracks the scores concerning party-system congruence (*NN–RR*), it confirms previous observations about the absence of statewide parties: the vote for parties is concentrated in particular regions. Looking at the figures by region confirms that the difference between the national and regional vote is lower for the largest region (Flanders). Dissimilarity reaches 36 per cent in Flanders but is 47.1 per cent for the bilingual region of Brussels, where parties from both communities compete. Figures for the two other subnational entities (Wallonia and German-speaking community) are more than 60 per cent. When analyzing dissimilarity scores over time, the German-speaking community sees its score for the *NN–RR* measure gradually declining from 77 per cent

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in 1974 to 63.9 per cent for the federal elections of 2010. The scores for the other regions are fairly stable over time.

The third measurement of congruence of the vote compares different types of elections but keeps the electorate constant – that is, the index compares the vote between the national and the regional election for the same region (*NR–RR*). Figures for this index remain relatively modest, meaning that voters vote for the same parties in national and regional elections. The average figures per region range from 5 to 10 per cent. More significantly, the figures are not stable over time. Indeed, the electoral calendar for regional elections – that is, whether these elections are organized simultaneously with the national elections or whether they are held independently – has a significant impact on election congruence. When regional and national elections are held simultaneously, the index remains less than 5 per cent, while it increases to 11–13 per cent in the case of non-simultaneous elections. Overall, dissimilarity of the vote in Belgium is mainly to be found in the case of party-system congruence while election congruence remains low, which means that voters from a region tend to express the same vote independent of the type of election (national or regional), while they tend to express a vote that is different from those of voters in other regions of the country.

3.4. Second-order election effects

The measurement of turnout is crucial when one wants to test the second-order election model. This model implies that second-order elections are characterized by lower turnout as well as witness gains for the opposition, new and small parties but losses for the governing parties. Since voting is compulsory in Belgium, one does not expect to observe different turnouts according to the type of election. Figure 3.2 shows that turnout is very stable not only over time but also across types of election. In other words, voters do not participate more in national than in regional elections, and the figures fluctuate between 88 per cent and 94 per cent of electoral participation, with the exception of the federal elections of 2010 (86 per cent).

Comparing turnout across regions, one does not observe significant differences with the exception of the Brussels region. Here, regional turnout is lower for national elections, and both regional and national turnout is lower than for the other regions. For the period 1987–2010, turnout for national elections averages 89.8 per cent in Brussels while it reaches 91.7 per cent in the other three regions. For the period 1995–2009, the average turnout for Brussels elections drops to 83.2 per cent

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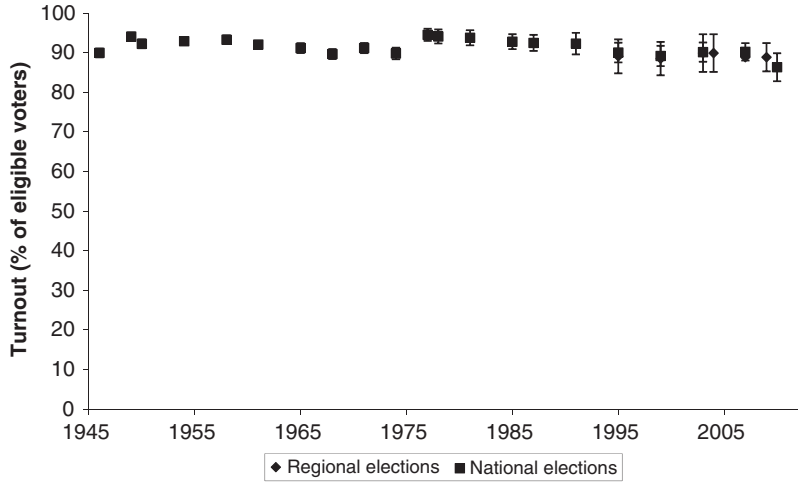

Figure 3.2 Turnout in regional and national elections
Notes: Shown are average turnout rates and their standard deviations per national and regional election. More details can be found in the Belgian country Excel file.

while it remains high in all of the other regions (91 per cent). The differentiated turnout for Brussels may be linked to the urban character of the city region – turnout is proved to be lower in territories with higher population density (Geys and Heyndel, 2006) – and in the presence of numerous migrants.

Differences in turnout across time can be related to whether regional elections were organized simultaneously with national elections, as happened in 1995 and 1999. More than 3.5 per cent of the Brussels electorate participated in national elections but not in regional elections despite the fact that they took place on the same day. However, these differences are not observed for the other regions. Overall, the second-order election hypothesis of lower regional turnout is not confirmed in the Belgian case taken as a whole, but it might still contribute to an understanding of the low regional turnout in the Brussels region although the difference with national turnout is not that significant. In sum, due to compulsory voting, turnout in regional and national elections do not differ in Belgium.

Another expectation deriving from the second-order model is that governing parties should lose vote share in regional elections when compared with the previous national election, whereas opposition, new and small parties should win vote share (see Chapter 1). Figure 3.3 displays

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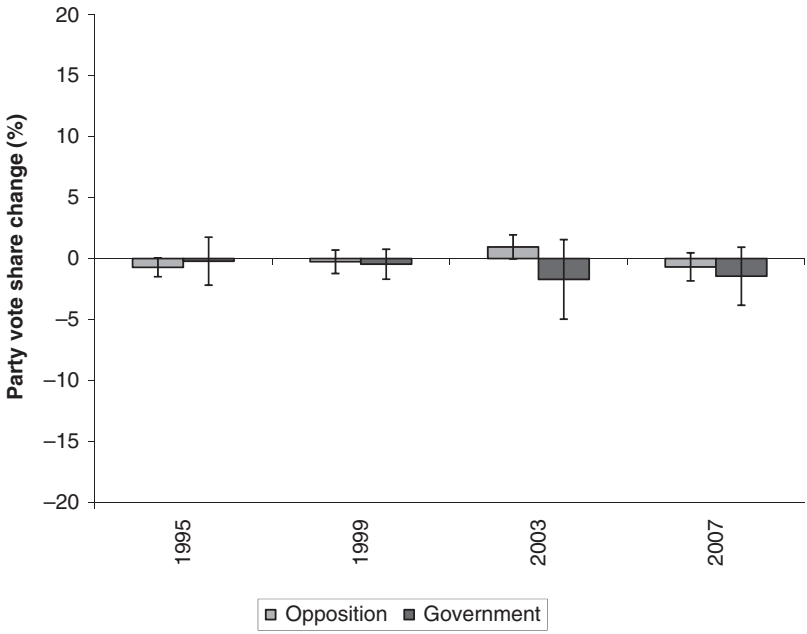

Figure 3.3 Change in party vote shares between regional and previous national elections

Notes: The figure displays changes in total vote share for parties in national government and opposition. Shown are regional averages and their standard deviations. More details can be found in the Belgian country Excel file.

vote share changes for parties in national government and opposition at the time when the regional election was held. In general, government parties lose vote share while, at the same time, opposition parties barely increase their vote share, with one exception (in 2003). Overall, vote share gains or losses are rather modest and never exceed 2 per cent of the vote. This is probably due to the relative stability alongside the important fragmentation of the Belgian party system. An interesting effect of this behavior is to be found in the absence of dual voting or split-ticket voting. Voters tend to vote for the same party at the national and regional level and therefore do not punish national parties in regional elections.

Interestingly, the decoupling of the electoral calendars of the national and regional elections, combined with the depillarization of the society, produces another effect. Indeed, as indicated by the large standard deviations, we observe important differences across regions regarding

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the vote shares of governing and opposition parties, and more particularly when compared with the national elections of 2003 and 2007. The phenomenon of symmetrical coalitions across government tiers is an important feature of the Belgian political system. This kind of symmetry has been described by the concepts of 'double symmetry' (Dumont and Dewinter, 1999) or 'congruent coalitions' (Roberts, 1989; Swenden, 2002; De Winter et al., 2006; Deschouwer, 2009a), according to which the composition of the coalitions of the subnational entities replicate the federal coalition. This practice was particularly well entrenched until the elections of the federal and subnational assemblies became non-simultaneous in 2003. Since then the rule of the congruent coalitions across levels of the state has not always been followed (Dandoy et al., 2010). In other words, the large standard deviations that we observe for the years 2003 and 2007 can be explained by the fact that, for the first time in Belgium, some parties may have been in government at the regional level while in the opposition at the national level, and vice versa. The patterns in turnout and vote-share changes for parties in federal government and the opposition do not indicate that Belgian regional elections can be conceived as second-order elections. The next question to ask is whether that means that subnational elections in Belgium are regionalized.

3.5. Regionalization of the vote

Government congruence scores indicate whether the composition of the coalition at the national level is congruent with that observed at the regional level. The results for Belgium indicate that government congruence is fairly stable over time and across regions and all figures are to be found between 50 and 58 per cent. These high dissimilarity scores can easily be explained by the fact that the government of the Flemish community only comprises Flemish parties and that the Walloon regional cabinet only comprises French-speaking parties, while the federal cabinet is constitutionally composed of parties from both linguistic communities.[10]

Leaving aside the measurements before 1995 that only concern the Brussels region and the German-speaking community, we also observe relatively lower dissimilarity scores when regional and national elections are organized simultaneously (in 1995 and 1999). The fact that these elections are held on the same day contribute to the installation of more congruent coalitions – that is, the same parties in the government at the regional and national levels.

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As stated above, the Belgian party system is basically composed of two separate and impervious systems. In today's Belgium, all parties may be considered as regional and not one party competes in all four regions. Non-statewide party strength in regional and national elections since 1978 almost equals 100 per cent. In part, the dual-party system can be explained by the linguistic cleavage present in Belgian society: political parties are organized according to linguistic lines which are sustained and even aggravated by a political debate on the autonomy or even independence of Flanders.

Another important explanation for the split-party systems concerns the electoral system. At the federal level, the electoral constituencies for the elections for the Senate are the three linguistic electoral districts (Dutch-, French- and German-speaking) while the electoral constituencies for the elections for the House are based on provincial districts. The only place where Flemish- and French-speaking parties compete with each other is the electoral district of Brussels and its surroundings (BHV). However, the recent state reform of 2012 splits the BHV electoral district into a Brussels district (dominated by the French-speaking parties) and a Flemish Brabant district (dominated by the Flemish parties), which will contribute to further separation of the two party systems.

At the regional level the electoral system also reinforces the development of two separated party systems. The electoral districts for these entities cover mostly only unilingual territories, and therefore only Dutch-, French- and German-speaking parties compete in elections in Flanders, Wallonia and in the German-speaking community, respectively.[11] In the bilingual Brussels region, both Flemish- and French-speaking parties participate in elections but, as the number of seats for each linguistic group is fixed in the Brussels regional parliament (17 seats for the Dutch-speaking parties and 72 for the French-speaking parties), they do not compete for the same electorate after all.

A final aspect which contributes to the split-party system or, at least, did not foster the maintenance of a national party system concerns the federal institutions. In the federal parliament (just as in the Brussels regional parliament), seats are allocated according to language group and special legislation, and revision of the constitution needs the support of a majority in each linguistic group. In addition, parity is the rule for the composition of the federal cabinet, meaning that each linguistic group delivers the same number of ministers. A similar rule applies to the Brussels regional government, where two ministers come from the Dutch-speaking community and two from the French-speaking

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community. The French-speaking parties usually deliver the minister-president. In sum, these rules for the composition of federal and regional governments and parliaments entail that Flemish- and French-speaking parties in practice do not compete against each other for votes in elections seats in assemblies or even portfolios in cabinets.

For an answer to the question whether regional elections are regionalized or not, electoral scores for regionalist parties are of prime importance (see Chapter 1). The monster success of the Flemish regionalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) in the 2010 national elections is atypical for the electoral success of regionalist parties in Belgium since 1945. Basically, each Belgian region has one or two regionalist parties: the Volskunie (VU)[12] and the Vlaams Blok/Belang (VB)[13] in Flanders, the Rassemblement Wallon (RW) in Wallonia, the Front des Démocrates Francophones (FDF)[14] in Brussels and the Partei der Deutschprachigen Belgier (PDB)/ProDG in the German-speaking community. These received significant vote shares in the 1960s and 1970s, and they participated in several regional and national cabinets. In addition, numerous political parties intended to defend the interests of specific regions as in the case of ProBruxsel and Rassemblement Wallonie-France (RWF) in the Brussels and Walloon regions, respectively.

Despite the large number of regionalist and regional parties, and cabinet participation of regionalist parties, the representation of territorial interests is a relatively recent phenomenon. Between 1946 and 1961, regionalist parties mainly remained as marginal actors in the Belgian party system. In the 1965 election, the Flemish (VU) and Brussels (FDF) regionalist parties obtained their first significant electoral successes, which were soon followed by the Walloon regionalist party (RW) in 1968. The vote shares for regionalist parties increase more or less linearly with the national election of 1974, when they accounted for 27.1 per cent of the votes.

The first regional election for the German-speaking community was held in 1974 and the PDB obtained rather similar results (25.5 per cent). This party remained the second largest in the region until 1986. However, the other regionalist parties were not as successful since they gradually lost most of their vote share after 1974. In 1985 these parties represented only 11.4 per cent of the national vote and their vote share oscillated around 10 per cent until 2010, mainly due to the performances of the VB. The Walloon regionalist (RW) suffered the largest number of electoral defeats and basically disappeared in 1985. The

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two other parties (VU and FDF) had to create electoral alliances with mainstream parties (the CD&V and the Parti Réformateur Libéral (PRL), respectively) in order to secure their survival.

Two factors may explain the declining results for regionalist parties. The first is related to party competition. Not only do regionalist parties face competition from other regionalist parties but the 'mainstream' parties emphasize the issue of decentralization in their party manifestos in a successful attempt to seduce the voter. In Wallonia it was mainly the PS which won back the support of regionalist party supporters and in Flanders it was the Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) in the 1980s and the liberal VLD and PRL in the 1990s which attracted the voter in favor of decentralization. The second factor is related to the territorial accommodation of the regionalist demands. The successive state reforms and steps toward federalization of the country lead to the fulfillment of most of the demands made by the regionalist party (creation of regions/communities, allocation of competencies and fiscal autonomy, etc.) diminishing the policy importance of a vote for such parties (De Winter, 2006; van Haute and Pilet, 2006).

However, some regionalist parties increased in electoral strength despite the fierce competition of the mainstream parties on the decentralization issue. For example, the Vlaams Blok/Belang (VB) has experienced a linear electoral success since 1991. However, one can easily explain this by arguing that the party took over the votes of the Volksunie (VU). Indeed, in the 1971–2003 period the combined vote share of the regionalist parties in Flanders for national elections remained rather stable. It is only since 2007 that Flemish regionalist parties have seen their aggregated vote share increasing for both regional and national elections.

Interestingly, the first regional elections in Wallonia and Flanders in 1995 were not rewarded by the voter in the form of electoral success for the regionalist parties. During the 1995–2009 period, regionalist parties obtained quite similar vote shares – in other words, regionalist parties do not perform better in regional elections when compared with national elections.

3.6. Discussion

Belgium is fascinating for those who want to understand how a country can move, in a few decades, from a unitary state structure where national elections are clearly first-order elections to a federal structure that not only divides the country into regions and communities but

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also produces a regionally divided party system. But for any student of the Belgian case, the fascination is rapidly replaced by the perplexity induced by the complexity of the country's political system.

Indeed, Belgium is the only country in Western Europe where the subnational level is composed of two types of overlapping entities: the regions and the communities. These have the same constitutional status but nevertheless differ in the extent of autonomy they enjoy, the competencies they have received and the financial responsibility they have. In that sense, Belgium is – together with the UK – also the only country that is fully asymmetrical, meaning that all subnational entities are unique regarding their power and competencies. This asymmetry is extended to the electoral process since not all of these entities hold elections and, for those that do, the observed electoral outcomes are hugely different.

A quick interpretation of regional election results may be quite misleading. There are two findings which might support a nationalized interpretation of regional elections. First, the election congruence measurement (*NR – RR*) demonstrates that voters broadly vote for the same parties in regional and national elections, even when the elections are held non-simultaneously. Second, regionalist parties do not perform better in regional elections compared with national elections, and they tend to lose in electoral strength over time.

However, one can barely talk of a nationalization of regional elections. On the contrary, the high election congruence may equally indicate that national elections are regionalized. In addition, the losses incurred by regionalist parties are easily counterbalanced (and even explained) by the fact that all parties in Belgium have become regional parties. In today's Belgium there are no statewide parties which participate across the whole territory, not even in national elections, and the traditional political parties – those created at the end of the nineteenth century – split according to linguistic cleavages. As a result, the party systems at the national level became completely split into a Flemish- and a French-speaking party system, which resulted in a party-system incongruence (*NN – NR*) of almost 50 per cent of the vote shares.

If one cannot talk about a nationalization of the regional elections, one can barely speak of second-order election effects in Belgium, even though Van Aelst and Lefevere argued that in 1995 and 1999, regional elections had a clear second-order character as they were held concurrently with the national ones (2012, p.9). With the exception of Brussels, turnout is not higher for national than for regional elections, and when governing parties lose in regional elections, those losses tend

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to be limited, and opposition parties also lose vote share. This electoral behavior can be explained by congruent government coalitions and the simultaneity of elections.

Going a step further, one can even argue that regional elections in Belgium are first-order elections and that, instead of a process of nationalization of regional elections, we observe a gradual regionalization of national elections (Deschouwer, 2008). In fact, the regionalization of national elections in Belgium started long before the introduction of the first statewide regional elections in 1995. The regionalization basically started in the 1960s with the establishment of a so-called linguistic border in 1962–1963, and it was fostered by the change to the electoral system and by the creation of regional parliaments and communities in 1970 and 1980.

However, federal institutions are not the only factors contributing to the increasing regionalization of national elections. From the 1960s onward, the Belgian media landscape also became gradually split between the Flemish- and the French-speaking communities. That process did not only involve the press but also radio and TV, including public television. Nowadays, the Belgian media landscape is completely split according to the linguistic divide and very few Belgians follow the media (TV, radio, newspaper) from the other side of the linguistic border (Sinardet et al., 2004). Political parties communicate with their voters within the language communities and the split up of the complete Belgian political arena might even result in a further radicalization of the party system.

The results of the regional elections of 2004 and 2009, which were held non-simultaneous with national elections, showed that these could be considered as first-order elections (Van Aelst and Lefevere, 2012). The organization of the next regional elections in 2014 will be held together with the national and European elections and this will provide for a unique opportunity to test – via for example the collection of individual level data – the rank order of the various elections in Belgium.

Notes

1. From 1995 onward, provincial elections were organized on the same day as the local elections based on a six-year term.
2. This rule has never been applied. Nowadays, the Federal government remains responsible for the matters not attributed to the regions and communities and its competences, which are explicitly stated in the special legislation, comprise justice, defence and law and order, social security, foreign policy, communications, religion and significant parts of the migration policy.

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3. In addition, Wallonia comprises the majority of the Belgian territory.
4. In comparison, the size of the German-speaking community (about 70,000 inhabitants) is very small.
5. The German-speaking green party (Ecolo) has exactly the same name as the French-speaking green party.
6. This period witnesses for the first time a non-symmetrical federal cabinet since the French-speaking socialist party (PS) joined the cabinet while the Flemish socialist (SP.A) party remained in opposition. In 2003 another cabinet was also non-symmetrical for two months when all the French-speaking green (Ecolo) ministers resigned but the Flemish green party (Agalev) remained in the government.
7. The Flemish extreme-right party Vlaams Belang presented electoral lists in the three regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) in 2003 and 2007 but its results in Wallonia were marginal.
8. The exceptions are the representation of the Flemish green (Agalev) and regionalist (N-VA) parties in 2003 for the federal elections and of the extreme-right (FN) and regionalist parties (ProBruxsel) in 2009 for the Brussels regional elections (French-speaking group). For these parties the introduction of the threshold meant a loss of their seat in those electoral districts.
9. Estimation based on the number of casted votes, since the absolute number of Flemish voters in Brussels is not known.
10. Article 99 of the Constitution states that the federal cabinet contains the same number of Dutch- and French-speaking ministers.
11. In a few instances, French-speaking political parties participate in Flemish regional elections by creating a joint list and these parties often manage to obtain one seat. In the Flemish regional assembly, six seats are also allocated to the Flemish voters living in the Brussels region.
12. The Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) – established in 2001 – considers itself as the heir of the VU (N-VA website: www.n-va.be/over-n-va/geschiedenis consulted 8 November 2012).
13. Even if the Vlaams Blok/Belang can be primarily considered as an extreme-right party, an analysis of its party manifesto demonstrates that this party strongly focuses on decentralization issues (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004). I therefore include this party in the analysis of regionalist parties.
14. Which name was changed into Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones in 2010.

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