INTRODUCTION

Belgium: Why bother?

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0.1 A country on the edge

The idea of this book grew out of a common experience of its editors. At one time or another, the two of us were asked to ‘explain’ Belgium to a foreign audience. Invariably, all two of us struggled getting the message across about Belgium’s institutional idiosyncrasy, its political eccentricity and the inconceivable pragmatism of its people and elites. After all, how do you explain the political system of a country that self-deprecatingly prides itself on the fact that its institutional complexity is unexplainable? Belgian elites seem to hold the truth to be self-evident that as long as people are none the wiser about how Belgian politics works, no one is asking for it to be torn apart. Understandably, our international audiences were generally more confused after the lecture than before, and we had to save face by ending with the joke that the country has lasted as long as it did, arguably because of its population’s shared love for football, beer and chocolate, not to mention the overwhelming consensus among Belgians that French fries are actually *Belgian* fries.¹

Surrealism thus seems to be the glue that holds the country together, and common perceptions abroad that Belgium should not be taken too seriously on the political stage are, in all honesty, well justified. Not even its leaders seem to take the country seriously. During the ceremonies of the Belgian national holiday in 2007, then Prime Minister Yves Leterme began reciting the French *Marseillaise* when asked by a journalist whether he knew the lyrics to the Belgian national anthem (S.N. 2007). And in the same year, he also echoed a much-heard depiction that “Belgium is an accident of history” (Quatremer 2007). It is a country, he implied, that by all conventional standards never should have existed, but the great European powers of the early 19th century needed a field to wage their battles and drew a couple

of random lines on the European map. *Voilà*, a country was born, delineated by artificial borders, and no one in their right mind imagined the newly formed state would survive for another 190 years.

After being consecutively ruled by the Habsburgs, the Spanish, the Austrians, the Dutch, the French and once again the Dutch in the centuries before, Belgium declared independence in 1830. Paintings glorifying the Belgian revolution are scarce, potentially exemplifying doubts about its success in the long run. After all, the leaders of the revolution soon realized that the new state was fragile, and that disintegration constantly lurked beneath the surface. Belgium's borders transcended linguistic, cultural, political, religious and economic divides, soon giving rise to centrifugal politics (Deschouwer 2012). Cooperation between various religious, economic and linguistic groups (the so-called Monster Alliance) was necessary for the success of the revolution, but the common ground quickly disappeared after independence (Mabille 2011). This is why several tactics were used to unify the country, chief among which was the installation of French as the official language (Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen 2010). The idea was that imposing one single language would mean that state-building would soon turn into nation-building. Even though the 'one country, one language' policy appeared successful at first, demands for the linguistic recognition of Dutch soon followed, leading to several state reforms and a federalization of the country from the 1960s onward (Deschouwer 2012; Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen 2010). For a long time after the revolution, therefore, Belgian politics seemed an unlikely and inhospitable breeding ground for a stable democracy. To some, it still does.

Fast forward to the 1980s, an international group of scholars specializing in small state research started focusing on the so-called Belgian miracle. How is it possible, these scholars asked, that Belgian democracy has persevered despite all adverse circumstances (Lijphart 1981; McRae 1986; Peters 2006)? How can a country survive such deep divisions? The answer lies in its political institutions and the pragmatic, incremental nature of its leaders. Belgium, Arend Lijphart claimed, was "the most perfect example of a consociation" (Lijphart 1981: 8), a democracy in which divides between the linguistic groups are bridged by a prudent elite that recognizes that the costs of nonagreement would be detrimental in the long run. They therefore adopted consociational institutions (such as a grand coalition, proportionality, veto rights and granting autonomy) in the 1970 gridlock constitution to appease the conflicts (Deschouwer 2012).

Even though this type of conflict management has been relatively successful, the country still carries the weight of history on its shoulders. Despite 150 years of ethnolinguistic strife and 50 years of nonstop constitutional engineering, its divides have not yet fully been pacified, and its regionalist conflict still paralyzes political life every couple of years (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps 2014). Moreover, the consociational institutions and their smoke-filled rooms have given rise to high levels of partitocracy, civic apathy, long periods of government negotiations and political deadlock.

Because of these political crises, Belgium has drawn some dubious international attention in recent years. *The Economist* claimed that it was ‘Time to call it a day’ in 2007 (Economist 2007) and *The New York Times* called the country the ‘world’s wealthiest failed state’ in 2015 (Higgins 2015). At the same time, however, Belgium has also received praise on how to overcome deep national, economic and linguistic divides, and its model of conflict management has been exported to other violence-ridden countries. Moreover, Belgium serves as an example for Europe with former prime ministers Herman Van Rompuy and Charles Michel being two out of three European presidents. A remarkable achievement in that Belgium has only 11.5 million inhabitants and occupies a mere 30.689 km² (or 0.68 percent of the landmass of the European Union [EU]).

This very brief and unavoidably incomplete overview hopefully shows that Belgium is anything but an ordinary, middle of the road and rather an uninteresting country. Indeed, current-day Belgian politics is caught between political realism and surrealism and is both praised and despised for it. On the one hand, as the chapters of this book will show, Belgium seems to lead the way in voter turnout, e-voting, democratic innovations and gender equality. It is internationally praised as a laboratory for democracy and politics (Chwalisz 2019; Van Reybrouck 2019), as a leading example for other deeply divided, multinational and multilingual federations (Deschouwer 2012), and as a model for the future governance of the EU (Swenden 2005). On the other hand, its political system is characterized by severe government instability, ethnic strife, strong populist parties and historically long government negotiations (Devos & Sinardet 2012). In 2011, Belgium even broke Iraq’s world record when it took 541 days to form a government, and in 2019–2020, the country has been long without a formally endorsed government. Belgium is thus both an object of international ridicule and a source of inspiration.

To characterize Belgium’s unique position in terms of polity, politics and policy, Guy Peters (2006) aptly coined the appropriate term ‘Belgian exceptionalism’, and it is on Guy Peters’ shoulders we stand. This book aims to take stock of Belgium’s exceptional and – for some foreign observers – even schizophrenic position in the political world and attempts to explain its idiosyncrasy to a non-Belgian audience. The guiding questions throughout each of the chapters of this book are therefore as follows: is Belgium a political science enigma, and why is that the case? And along which axes is Belgium ‘exceptional’ compared to other countries?

To be sure, this book is not intended to be academic praise to Belgium’s perseverance, but a critical assessment of how Belgian politics stands out internationally. It offers insights into the good, the bad and the ludicrous, all the while trying to clarify to a broader audience which factors can explain Belgium’s exceptional position. It bundles a rich variety of chapters that deal with Belgian politics in a holistic manner by not only looking at political parties, elections and governments but also democratic innovations, federalism, colonialism, populism, gender equality policies and Belgium’s relations to the EU and the United Nations.

This book offers a broad and comprehensive analysis of Belgian politics based on cutting-edge research findings and an innovative approach. After all, this book is conceived as ‘cross-talks’. Most textbooks on Belgian politics have hitherto been written in Dutch or French and only incorporated the Dutch- or French-speaking perspective. Our aim is to have both Dutch and French speakers involved to approach the substantive issues from both sides of the linguistic divide. Contrary to other studies, it thereby stresses the multi-perspectivity of Belgian politics and highlights how different understandings and historical interpretations feed into current-day Belgian politics. We hope it will offer a good introduction to Belgian politics both for Belgian and foreign observers, as well as the broader public.

0.2 Structure of the book

The book is structured into three main parts. The first part, *Belgium on the barricades*, is grouped around four chapters and each highlights how Belgium – instead of following the pack – has led the way in implementing several institutional innovations that set it apart from most other European countries. First of all, Belgium has historically been an early adopter of electoral innovations. One of the defining characteristics of the Belgian electoral system is its continued reliance on compulsory voting. Not only was Belgium the first country to adopt compulsory voting in 1893 when the country adopted plural male suffrage but it is also one of the few democracies to maintain the system to the present day. To understand this particular position, Didier Caluwaerts, Sophie Devillers, Nino Junius, Joke Matthieu and Sarah Pauwels will reflect on Belgium’s experiences with compulsory voting ([Chapter 1](#)). Three questions are central to this aim: (1) why was compulsory voting adopted and why does it still exist, despite the regular ‘flaring up’ of voices asking for its abolishment?; (2) does Belgium do better or worse than comparable countries in terms of voter turnout?; and (3) how would abolishing compulsory voting affect turnout, voter equality and party strength? In their chapter, the authors show that the equality vs. liberty debate continues to guide political parties’ positions on the issue, and that the reason for adopting compulsory voting in 1893 – i.e. as a buffer against a radical electorate – is the same as the reason for abolishing it nowadays – i.e. as a way of reducing the electoral strength of radical parties. Moreover, the chapter shows that Belgium’s voter turnout – despite its decline over time – remains high, and that abolishing compulsory voting would increase voter inequality and reshuffle electoral power among political parties.

In [Chapter 2](#), Robin Devroe, Silvia Erzeel, Petra Meier and Bram Wauters reflect on the long-term consequences of another electoral innovation in Belgium, namely gender quotas. Compared to other countries in Europe (and beyond), Belgium is often considered to have evolved from a ‘laggard to a leader’ when it

comes to the promotion of gender equality in politics (Meier 2012). In the mid-1990s, Belgium was the first country to adopt legally binding gender quotas for all levels of government, and in the following decades, new quota acts were progressively adopted and implemented. The 2002 gender quota acts, requiring all Belgian parties to place an equal number of men and women on their candidate lists and among the top two positions of each list, were unparalleled both in terms of ambition and effectiveness. And more recently, the Walloon and Brussels regional governments adopted far-reaching ‘zipper quotas’ for all candidate lists in local and regional elections. This offers a unique opportunity to better understand the long-term effects of gender quotas on the political representation of women. [Chapter 2](#) therefore investigates four aspects of descriptive representation. It considers whether gender quotas have led to an increase in the number of women elected and also keeps them in politics. It furthermore assesses how gender quotas shape the level of diversity among women and men elected and whether quotas stimulate women’s access to positions of political power.

In [Chapter 3](#), Régis Dandoy shifts our attention to electronic voting. In 1991, Belgium was one of the first countries to test electronic voting (e-voting), and since then, it has continuously implemented e-voting in all of its elections (from the local to the European level). In addition, this implementation has been scattered around the country as some municipalities used e-voting, while other (sometimes neighboring) municipalities used paper voting. These three elements (continuity over almost 30 years, use for all elections at all levels, and implementation in only some municipalities) make the Belgian case of e-voting unique worldwide. The chapter first discusses the adoption and rollout of e-voting in Belgium, showing that it was not a smooth process. It retraces this history by focusing on the political arguments used for extending and limiting e-voting and the technical events (such as the 2014 bug) that led to radical changes. In addition, based on a quasi-experimental research design, [Chapter 3](#) tests whether voters alter their behavior and vote choice in response to different e-voting technologies. The analysis of legislative election results for the period 1991–2019 in two Belgian provinces concludes that turnout is lower in electoral districts using e-voting, while paper voting tends to lead to more invalid votes and more split-ticket votes.

Finally, [Chapter 4](#) turns to a non-electoral type of innovation. Julien Vrydagh, Sophie Devillers, Vincent Jacquet, David Talukder and Jehan Bottin analyze the spread of democratic innovations, and in particular deliberative minipublics, in Belgium. These forums gather groups of randomly selected lay citizens that deliberate in a structured setting and formulate recommendations for policymaking. They are becoming increasingly popular among policymakers and the citizenry and have recently been integrated into traditional institutions (e.g. permanent citizen dialogue in Ostbelgien). Since Belgium’s institutional setup has historically not proven to be conducive to

citizen participation, the seemingly warm embrace of minipublics raises questions as to the motives for their adoption. In that regard, the authors suggest two explanations. On the one hand, the chapter argues that minipublics have been adopted as a means of curbing growing public distrust and bridging the gap between citizens and elites. Minipublics thus constitute an instrument in fighting the legitimacy crisis, which has hit Belgium hard in recent decades. On the other hand, the authors emphasize the role of networks lobbying for minipublics. They find the presence of a strong advocacy coalition to be conducive to the adoption of these types of civic innovations.

Even though Belgium has been at the forefront in adopting several institutional innovations, the country's political system and its institutions also face fundamental problems. In the second part of the book, *Belgium, a democracy in trouble*, we focus on six of these challenges. In [Chapter 5](#), Benjamin Biard analyzes the rise of radical right populist parties (RRPPs), and the way Belgian elites have dealt with these challenger parties. While an increasing number of extreme right parties have recently gotten closer and closer to power, either by supporting a minority government – such as in the Netherlands or Denmark – or joining a coalition – such as in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia or Switzerland – Belgium remains an exception. Despite their electoral results, no RRPP has ever exercised power in Belgium. To explain this, [Chapter 5](#) takes stock of one of the most important strategies endorsed by mainstream parties toward RRPPs in Belgium, the *cordon sanitaire*, and questions how mainstream parties have dealt with it over the years. The analysis shows that the *cordon sanitaire* is often challenged by mainstream parties, particularly since the 2000s and suggests that extreme right parties have developed alternative ways to indirectly influence policymaking and fight the *cordon sanitaire* to gain access to power.

A second challenge facing Belgian democracy is related to its party system. In their contribution ([Chapter 6](#)), Audrey Vandeleene, Maximilien Cogels and Chloé Janssen discuss the high level of *partitocracy* on the Belgian political scene. Political parties are indeed dominant actors on all aspects of the social and political system, via patronage in parliament, public administration, the judiciary and even the civil society. Yet, given the decreasing legitimacy of political parties, one may wonder whether party organizations still manage to hold a strong control on their representatives or if the latter are nowadays allowed to behave more independently from their party. This chapter disentangles parties' grip on candidates to elected office. Drawing on the *Comparative Candidate Survey* data set, the authors first comparatively assess the leeway let to candidates in terms of campaigning and representational style in four *partitocratic* countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy and Portugal) and then strive to explain Belgian candidates' independence toward their party.

[Chapters 7 and 8](#) turn to recent trends in governments and government formation. In [Chapter 7](#), Lieven De Winter and Patrick Dumont focus on coalition dynamics, and specifically, how coalition formation in Belgium has become increasingly hard. Since the end of the 1980s, Belgium is truly an exceptionally

complex case. Skyrocketing party system fragmentation, due to a multitude of cleavages and high electoral volatility, makes government formation a time-consuming and failure-ridden bargaining process. Coalitions include a high number of parties that require comprehensive coalition agreements, containing expensive and ineffective policies. This chapter looks at all these aspects and their spillover effects on governance and economic indicators as well as trust in politics and satisfaction with democracy.

In the next contribution ([Chapter 8](#)), Régis Dandoy and Lorenzo Terrière focus on the flip side of the coin. Since coalition formation has become increasingly difficult, the importance of caretaker governments has steadily grown in recent years. Belgium holds the world record in the longest government formation (597 days in 2010–2011). Yet, this political deadlock was merely the tip of the iceberg, as each federal election as well as other major political crises in Belgium led to shorter or longer situations of a federal caretaker government. After all, Belgium was governed by a caretaker government for a total of more than four years between 2007 and 2020. Caretaker governments therefore seem to become the ‘new normal’ in Belgian politics. The authors investigate the main characteristics of caretaker governments and analyze the political consequences of having a long-lasting caretaker government. They explain how governmental decision-making continues even under these delicate political circumstances: how the federal state apparatus keeps functioning by adopting a temporary but guaranteed minimal budget line; how the parliament takes up a larger role by ad hoc coalition making in legislative proposals; and how the narrow definition of caretaker government is cautiously broadened over time, which allows the cabinet to take more proactive policy decisions.

No book on Belgian politics can bypass its consociational model of democracy. In [Chapter 9](#), Laura Pascolo, Daan Vermassen, Min Reuchamps and Didier Caluwaerts turn our attention to the process of federalization. To reduce ethno-linguistic tensions, Belgium has steadily transformed from a unitary into a federal state through several so-called state reforms. Nevertheless, the federal system has come under increasing threat. Even though it proved to be very capable of transforming conflict into cooperation in Belgian politics in the past, the authors wonder whether this will still be the case in the future. After all, it is widely claimed that Belgium is witnessing a paradox of federalism: the process of federalization has set in motion centrifugal calls for more autonomy. However, the authors claim that Belgium has started to experience a reversal of this paradox. Indeed, some political elites have increasingly advocated the ‘re-federalization’ of some competences. Their analysis does indeed discern the beginnings of a reversal of the paradox of federalism, a trend that has not yet been witnessed in other federal states.

The final chapter in the second part ([Chapter 10](#)) turns our attention to the special case of Brussels. Benjamin Blanckaert, Didier Caluwaerts and Silvia Erzeel focus on voting patterns in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). Unlike unilingual Flanders and Wallonia, the BCR is officially bilingual and both

Flemish and francophone parties can field candidates. Therefore, Brussels voters can vote for a party of the other ethnolinguistic group (i.e. cross-ethnic voting) if they so desire. However, very little is hitherto known about the extent to which cross-ethnic voting takes place in the Brussels region, and which parties benefit most from cross-ethnic voting. In [Chapter 10](#), the authors argue that cross-ethnic voting does indeed take place, contrary to all expectations because the political institutions incentivize co-ethnic voting. Moreover, they find that voters who engage in cross-ethnic voting are primarily ‘unserved’ voters, more precisely, francophone voters who vote for Flemish right-wing regionalist and radical right arguably due to a lack of ‘offer’ of such parties on the francophone side.

In the final part of the book, *Belgium and the world*, we examine Belgium’s embeddedness in the international scene. In [Chapter 11](#), Valérie Rosoux investigates how Belgium has coped with two of the most controversial episodes in its past, collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and the colonization of the Congo. The chapter emphasizes three main features: an ongoing federalization process, nationalist tendencies that underline particular narratives of the past to justify the need for independence and the relative indifference of the federal state, which does not provide a robust national counter-narrative. This chapter shows that drawing a line between the past and the present is more complex than it might look.

In [Chapter 12](#), Louise Hoon and Gilles Pittoors turn our attention to Europe. Since European institutions are largely based in Brussels, the EU has historically been strongly interwoven with Belgian politics. Belgium is both literally and figuratively at the heart of the EU. The process of European integration has also created strong incentives for political parties to reinvent and adapt themselves in different ways, both programmatically and organizationally – a process often referred to as Europeanization. Belgium, however, is an exceptional case. For Belgian parties, the EU is simultaneously ‘near’ in terms of geography, history and policymaking, and ‘far’ in terms of political and electoral relevance. EU-related issues have long been conspicuously absent in electoral competition; elections to the European Parliament have nearly always coincided with, and overshadowed by, other more salient elections. Eurobarometer surveys also consistently show that the Belgian population is among the least likely to discuss European affairs among family or friends. This chapter takes an in-depth look at this process of Europeanization for the Belgian parties: why, where and how do parties Europeanize, which incentives are at play and does the tendency to Europeanize vary across parties?

The final contribution of the book ([Chapter 13](#)) moves to the global scene and focuses on Belgium’s position in the UN. Having recently completed its sixth mandate, Belgium becomes one of the most elected members of the UN Security Council, and arguably the most elected small state in the world. It has been known for its ardent support of multilateralism and active policy inside the Security Council. Focusing on the last two mandates, this chapter aims to

explore the performance of Belgium inside the Security Council, particularly of its latest term. The analysis according to the five main success criteria supported by interviews with diplomats demonstrates that Belgium keeps being an influential member, sometimes punching above its weight. Belgium's policy in the United Nations Security Council can be defined as, first of all, pragmatic and realistic. Instead of always taking the high moral ground at the expense of depriving itself of meaningful influence on the outcome, Belgium has prioritized a result-driven approach. However, with the help of its high diplomatic skills, Belgium has frequently used its realistic approach to promote idealistic principles such as multilateralism, human security and protection of civilians, women and children. Its active and credible attitude has brought the trust and appreciation of international community that this chapter seeks to disentangle and explain.

Note

- 1 The editors are – of course – critically aware that this first paragraph might be considered self-deprecating as well.

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