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From a green high tide to government participation: the successes of ECOLO and GROEN in the 2019 Belgian elections

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A green high tide

On 26 May 2019, over 7 million voters went to the booths to elect 21 Members of the European Parliament, 150 Members of the Belgian (federal) Chamber of Representatives, 124 Members of the Flemish Parliament, 75 Members of the Walloon Parliament, 89 Members of the Parliament of the Region of Brussels-Capital and 25 Members of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community. Of the total of 484 MPs directly elected, 72 were from a green party, many more than the 41 greens elected in 2014 (Dandoy, 2015).

Despite the multi-level nature of these elections, the campaign was largely driven by national issues, even though with different flavours within language communities, as it is typically the case in Belgium (Baudewyns et al., 2015). These features can be explained by a twofold dynamic. On the one hand, the main political parties compete at all levels of government. On the other, the Belgian party system is split along language lines, meaning that the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking parties compete in different electoral districts (Dandoy, et al, 2015). The Belgian green parties are part of, but also somewhat apart from, these dynamics. ECOLO (the French- and German-speaking green party) and GROEN (the Dutch-speaking green party) came separately to life in the early 1980s but work closely together; both parties presented joint lists in local elections and included candidates from the other party on their lists. They also formed a joint parliamentary party group in the Chamber of Representatives, in contrast with the traditional parties that were once unitary and then split.

Since their creation, the green parties in Belgium have experienced tidal electoral results, with comparatively large electoral victories but also some heavy losses (Bouhon & Reuchamps, 2018). The 2014 elections marked a low tide, especially for ECOLO, which had been in government in Brussels and Wallonia for the previous five years. Because of its weak performance, ECOLO was left out government formation talks. For GROEN, the electoral results were relatively better but its leaders were also not involved in coalition negotiations.

In the run-up of the 2019 elections, a green wave was foreseen by opinion polls. The main driver of this popularity was the large pan-European movement around the challenges posed by global warming. More specifically, many youngsters demonstrated every week in different Belgian cities, which attracted considerable media and public attention, alongside the parties' agenda.

In this political context dominated by climate-related issues, the local and provincial elections of October 2018 were an indicator of the forthcoming electoral dynamics. The greens improved their electoral scores and secured the mayoralties in several municipalities, but their results were far from a landslide. In addition, while the traditional – socialist, Christian-democrat and liberal – parties were all struggling, both radical right and radical left were gaining support throughout the country. In the following months, polls early in the campaign showed signs that the greens would perform well in all the elections and possibly even become the leading political family at the federal level, and second in the regions. Some observers argued that the greens could enter all cabinets, obtain some important ministerial portfolios (such as Minister-president of the Brussels region) and even deliver the European commissioner (helped by a similar green wave at the EU level).

These predictions fostered bitter political competition, with the greens often becoming the target of the traditional parties. It is likely that this competition had a negative impact on the performance of the green parties. As the campaign went on, the electoral results were predicted to be tighter than expected, with the continuous rise of the radical right, in particular in Flanders, and radical left, in particular in French-speaking Belgium. These predictions came true on 26 May 2019.

Good results for the greens

In Belgium, the election that comes closest to a country-wide election is that for the European Parliament since there are only three constituencies, or electoral colleges: 12 seats in the Dutch-speaking electoral college, eight French-speaking seats and one German-speaking seat (Table 1). With a total of 1,018,238 votes (+4.07% compared to the 2014 European elections) and three seats, the greens became the third largest party family, just behind the liberals (four seats) and socialists (three seats). ECOLO performed better than GROEN, probably boosted by the presence on its list of Philippe Lamberts, the media-friendly co-president of the parliamentary group Greens–European Free Alliance – a role to which he was re-elected for the next parliamentary term.

Table 1. Green parties in the European elections in 2019 (compared to 2014)

Constituency	Party	% of votes	Seats
Dutch-speaking	Groen	12.37 (+1.75)	1 (0)
French-speaking	Ecolo	19.91 (+8.22)	2 (+1)
German-speaking	Ecolo	16.37 (-0.29)	0 (0)
Total for Belgium		15.12 (+4.07)	3 (+1)

Source: Federal Ministry of Interior (<https://elections2019.belgium.be>).

In the federal elections, the greens performed less well even though they obtained their highest ever number of seats – 21 – in the Chamber of Representatives (Table 2). They were behind only the socialists (29 seats), the liberals (26 seats) and the Flemish regionalists of the N-VA (25 seats), who all lost seven or eight seats. At the national level, both green parties performed almost equally with around 6% of the votes, but ECOLO obtained more seats as it competes in smaller electoral districts.

Table 2. Green parties in the federal elections in 2019 (compared to 2014)

Party	% of votes	Seats
Groen	6.10 (+0.78)	8 (+2)
Ecolo	6.14 (+2.84)	13 (+7)
Total for Belgium	12.24 (+3.62)	21 (+9)

Source: Federal Ministry of Interior (<https://elections2019.belgium.be>).

In the regional and community elections (Table 3), GROEN recorded a modest victory, still coming fifth, however, in the Flemish community elections (10.11% of the votes but an increase of four seats to 14) but managed to obtain the highest score for a Belgian green party in the Dutch-speaking group for the Brussels region (20.61% of the votes), securing the first position.

Table 3. Green parties in the regional/community elections in 2019 (compared to 2014)

Parliament	Party	% of votes	Seats
Flemish community	Groen	10.11 (+1.41)	14 (+4)
Walloon region	Ecolo	14.48 (+5.86)	12 (+8)
Brussels region – Dutch-speaking	Groen	20.61 (+2.72)	4 (+1)
Brussels region – French-speaking	Ecolo	19.12 (+9.01)	15 (+7)
German-speaking community	Ecolo	12.51 (+2.96)	3 (+1)
Total for Belgium		12.07 (+3.22)	48 (+21)

Source: Federal Ministry of Interior (<https://elections2019.belgium.be>).

The largest increase for the greens was for ECOLO in the French-speaking electorate in Brussels increasing 9.01% to reach 19.12%, securing 15 seats to come second, just behind the 17 (-4) French-speaking socialists. ECOLO was the clear ‘winner’ in Brussels, together with the radical-left party PTB, which obtained ten seats (having previously had no representation in the Brussels parliament, see Reuchamps et al., 2014). In Wallonia, the strongest performances were also by ECOLO (+5.86%) and PTB (+7.92%), with both winning eight extra seats. The three traditional parties all lost votes and seats.

In the small German-speaking community, too, the greens obtained good electoral results, gaining one seat in a tight competition. With 12.51%, they failed to achieve their ambition to remain ahead of the populist party Vivant (14.81%). Overall, these very good results created the potential to join government coalitions.

Government participations

At the federal level, the greens failed to become the first or even second largest party family. As a result, they did not become key actors in the negotiations, even if their leaders were often consulted by the individuals in charge of this formation. In October 2019, federal negotiations were still ongoing with two main possible scenarios (the first more plausible than the second). First, a coalition that would bring the largest Belgian party – the N-VA – together with the socialists and the liberals and possibly the Flemish Christian-democrats. The greens would be excluded from this coalition. The second scenario, the so-called ‘rainbow coalition’, would gather liberals, socialists, greens and possibly the Flemish Christian-democrats.

In Flanders, while the previous government maintained its majority in the assembly, coalition formation was difficult due to the rise of the Vlaams Belang. The N-VA did not exclude forming a government with this party and opened negotiations. Given the sharp polarization between the N-VA and the greens during the campaign, it was unlikely that the former would open the coalition to the latter, so Groen remained in opposition. Eventually, the N-VA opted to renew the cabinet with the Christian-democrats and liberals, which was installed on 2 October 2019.

In Brussels, by contrast, there were indications that socialists and greens would be likely to govern together. Negotiations led swiftly to the formation of a government made of six parties

in July 2019: the two socialists, the two greens, the regionalist party DéFi and the Dutch-speaking liberals. The greens managed to obtain three of the eight ministerial portfolios.

In the Walloon region and the French-speaking community (where the Parliament is made of the 75 Walloon MPs joined by 19 French-speaking MPs elected in the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital region), negotiations took longer than in Brussels. The first attempt initiated by the socialists tried to form a left-wing government of PS, ECOLO and PTB, but the latter pulled out as it feared that the government would not dare to renegotiate some of the European treaties imposing austerity policies. PS and ECOLO decided that, despite not having a majority in Parliament, they would still move forward and open up their reflections to the civil society that brought in many ideas that were compiled in a document that was presented to the Parliament. Finally, PS and ECOLO opened discussions with the liberals and after several weeks of negotiations reached an agreement, in September 2019, to govern together both in the Walloon Region (with two green ministers out of eight) and the French-speaking Community (with one green minister out of five).

In the German-speaking Community, on the very evening of the election, incumbent Minister-president Oliver Paasch announced that he would initiate talks to renew his coalition, as announced before the election, even though it would rely on a majority of just one seat (13 out of 25). The greens, invited to join the coalition, declined because they were invited at the end of the negotiations, were mathematically unnecessary and therefore felt their inclusion to be more of a legitimization of the coalition than a serious partnership. The Paasch II government was installed on 17 June 2019.

Belgium will now experience five years without any elections. After a green high tide that led to participation in several government coalitions, the question is whether this high tide will be followed by another successful wave in the elections of 2024.

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