

# Electoral Reform and electoral Behaviour in Belgium: Change within Continuity... or conversely<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The November 1991 general elections, which saw the breakthrough of the Flemish ultra-nationalist Vlaams Blok and the significant progress of the French-speaking Greens, were generally considered as a "political upheaval", especially in Flanders. Since then, it has become a common statement to argue that Belgium has entered a more changing, more unstable, more uncertain period. Indeed, since the 1991 elections, most traditional parties have performed their own house-style *aggiornamento*, some of them have been struck by corruption scandals, and there is a widely shared belief that a broadening gap is opening up between the average citizen/voter and the political sphere.

The aim of this article is to test this widely agreed-upon "diagnosis" of change and instability: to what extent can it be confirmed or contradicted? The analysis shall revolve around three basic components of the Belgian political system: the electoral system, the behaviour of the citizen/voters, and the behaviour of the political decision-makers. As shall be demonstrated, these three components can hardly be isolated from one another. The main focus of the analysis shall be placed on the first two elements, but the third element of the triad will often be referred to as well. Indeed, the political elites design and/or challenge the electoral system and continuously attempt to anticipate and orientate the behaviour of the individual voters. Hence, the political elites shall be considered as a kind of "independent" variable. It is assuredly not fully independent, as the behaviour of the political decision-makers is also influenced both by the expected or actual electoral results and by the institutional-legal framework -including the electoral system- which they (or their peers or predecessors) have designed.

The central underlying question which shall be addressed can thus be stated as follows: to what extent has the Belgian electoral arena of the first half of the

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1990s been more unstable -or more stable- than it was in earlier periods? Building upon that, what are the implications for the future of the Belgian political system <sup>2</sup>: is it more or less "stabilised" or on the brink of collapse? Hopefully, this contribution shall complement other contributions in this volume (especially Deschouwer; Elchardus & Derks; Van Dyck) which address quite similar questions.

The analysis will mainly centre on the post-World War II period, more particularly from the 1960s to the current situation. However, some earlier developments -especially regarding the evolution of the electoral system- are also worth considering, as they deliver interesting keys to understand more recent trends. The focus will mainly be placed on the national(federal) elections, but the other institutional levels will be analysed as well whenever it is judged appropriate.

## I. Evolution of the electoral system: reforms and "non-reforms"

In order to understand the current electoral system, one needs to examine its origins. Indeed, some significant changes did take place in a longer time perspective. The technical aspects of the reforms which were implemented will not be discussed in great detail. The emphasis will rather be placed on the political causes and consequences of these reforms. On the other hand, from an analytical viewpoint, it is perhaps even more interesting to investigate the reasons why some reforms did *not* materialise since the introduction of male universal suffrage in 1919, even though some of these reforms reached the agenda at one point.

### A. 1831-1949: the long road towards PR and full universal suffrage <sup>3</sup>

During the 19th century, from the creation of Belgium as an independent state to 1899, Belgium had a majority electoral system for the House and the Senate, based on the British system. It was basically the same system for the two Houses, at least for the main features. The main differences were constituency size, the age of eligibility and the presence of indirectly elected senators (Fitzmaurice, 1988: 26). It was initially a male system based on strict property qualification (about 2 voters per 100 inhabitants). In 1877, vote secrecy was introduced. In 1893, male universal suffrage, still moderated by a plural vote (about 22 voters per 100 inhabitants; some voters could cast two or three ballots), was introduced, as well as compulsory voting.

In 1899, PR was adopted, but with elements of disproportionality. The D'Hondt seat allocation system was chosen. <sup>4</sup> The electoral districts differed sometimes markedly in size. From then on, the plurality preferential vote was abolished: one could only vote for the party as a whole ("head-of-the-list"), for a candidate and/or a substitute, or for both. <sup>5</sup> Furthermore, one could not vote anymore for more than one party. In Rae's terms, the ballot structure was hence transformed from an ordinal to a categorical one (Rae, 1971: 126). <sup>6</sup> As a result of these reforms,

2 Or political systems, as it were (see herebelow).

3 For further analyses and more detailed information, cfr. Stengers, 1990; Witte, 1990, as well as other sources quoted in this section.

4 At the local level, the Imperiali system was chosen. In the Belgian case, the Imperiali formula which was chosen is more favourable to larger parties than the D'Hondt system.

5 The plurality preferential vote was maintained at the local elections.

6 The possibility to cast a vote for candidates of different parties ("*panachage*") was maintained at the local elections until 1976.

the ranking of the candidates on the lists as decided by the parties became increasingly important (see herebelow).

In 1919, genuine male universal suffrage was introduced, as well as a system of provincial second tier allocation (*apparentement*)<sup>7</sup>. A rather low legal threshold was adopted as well: 66% of the electoral divider ([total number of votes]/[number of seats]), both for the House and the Senate.

The reasons why the majority system was transformed into a PR system are quite straightforward. The conjunction of the previous majority/plural systems had two direct impacts: an increase in the differences between the electoral results in the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking parts of the country, and a very strong negative effect on the Liberals. This was rapidly leading towards the predominance of the Catholics in Flanders and of the Socialists in Wallonia, whereas the Liberals suffered from an enormous distortion between their electoral scores and the number of elected MPs (about twice as many votes as the Socialists, but twice less seats). The introduction of PR and universal suffrage was a means to attenuate these differences: it favoured the Catholics on the French-speaking side, the Socialists on the Flemish side, and the Liberals in both areas. Hence, these reforms allowed some Catholic leaders to open up the possibility of Catholic-Liberal coalitions against the rapidly developing Socialists. Conversely, the continuation of the majority system could have durably pushed the Catholics back in the opposition, just after they had conquered the absolute majority of seats in 1884. In fact, the Catholics remained unchallenged for the 30 next years, even after the PR was introduced.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the changes in the electoral system which were introduced at the turn of the century clearly modified the balance of power between the main existing parties (Catholics, Liberals and Socialists) and also affected their relationships. This also had a clear impact on coalition formation (Mabille 1986: 196). Furthermore, the successive reforms almost put an end to absolute majorities in parliament, and thus also to single-party governments.<sup>9</sup> This situation can be compared with the Italian case in 1994, where one observes exactly the same evolution, but in the opposite direction. In Italy, the adoption of a majority system (even in an attenuated form) has generated the effect one was precisely trying to avoid in Belgium in the 1890s: the creation of electoral zones in which one single party would clearly be predominant (the North, the South and the Centre). Of course, these zones do not coincide in the Italian case with an ethnic differentiation, but they do coincide -as in Belgium- with different levels of economic development and prosperity.

As far as the 1919 reforms are concerned, the introduction of the (male) universal suffrage was basically the result of the development of the Socialist party and of the support of most Liberals and some Catholics to that principle. The second-tier seat allocation was adopted following pressures by the Liberals, whereas the legal threshold was supported by the larger parties (Catholics and Socialists). The three components of the 1919 reforms can thus be considered as bits of a global compromise agreement (Dewachter, 1983: 97).

7 For a more detailed description and technical discussion of the Belgian PR electoral system, see Gassner, 1993.

8 Hence, it looks as though the Catholic leaders modified an electoral system which seemed to favour them in the short term in order to avoid possible (or even probable) disadvantages in the longer term.

9 Only one exception: the Catholic majority from 1950 to 1954.

Finally, after another minor reform in 1947<sup>10</sup>, the universal suffrage was extended to women in 1948. It was first implemented in 1949. This reform does not seem to have had any significant impact in terms of the electoral results of the different parties, as it has been estimated that the women's vote only affected about 2% of the results.

### B. 1949-1980s: extension and stabilisation

Before turning to the more recent debates, one has to mention the discussions around the referendum, which date back to 1950. The Belgian Constitution does not permit referendums. A *consultative* referendum was however organised in 1950, in order to try and settle the extremely conflict-laden "royal question" which virtually brought the country on the brink of civil war. The issue was whether or not King Leopold III should remain on the throne following his attitude towards the Nazis during WW II, as he ordered the surrender in 1940, personally and without consulting his government, and as he remained captive during the war while a government in exile was formed in London. Eventually, the results in the North and the South of the country differed significantly, as a majority of Flemings (72%) voted in favour of the King, but only 42% of Walloons did so. Overall, 57.6% voted in favour of the King. After violent outbursts of protest, Leopold was eventually forced to abdicate in favour of his son Baudouin.<sup>11</sup>

The 1950 referendum has left profound wounds during the following decades, as it not only revealed significant differences between the North and South of the country, but also left a deep feeling of frustration in Flanders, as the (Flemish) voters' majority vote was not followed. Hence, the effect of the 1950 referendum was so devastating that this particular instrument was completely wiped off the agenda (and the party programmes) for many years.

However, from the early 1980s on, the Greens tried to put the referendum back on the agenda. They advocated the introduction of *decisional* referenda at the local level, and consultative referenda at the higher levels. From 1992 onwards, the Liberals also advocated the introduction of referenda at all levels. In 1993, the French-speaking Liberals put forward a referendum to settle the reform of the state. This proposal was rejected by the Christian-democrat/Socialist coalition. Eventually, a *consultative* referendum was introduced in 1994, but only at the local level.<sup>12</sup>

In the post-World War II period, discussions on the electoral system have been taking place periodically. In the course of the 1960s, smaller parties advocated the creation of a single electoral district. In the course of the 1970s, PM Tindemans advocated the creation of a single district for the first universal suffrage European parliamentary elections in 1979, and the larger (pillarised) parties contemplated -amongst other things- the suppression of provincial second-tier seat allocation (Dewachter 1983: 98-99). In the course of the 1980s, the Greens attempted to bring the electoral system back on the agenda, e.g. by advocating the

10 The threshold was lowered from 66% to 33% of the electoral divider for the Senate.

11 About the "royal question", see Fitzmaurice, 1988: 42-47; Luykx, 1977: 441-552; CRISP, 1974; Mesnil, 1978; Theunissen, 1986.

12 In fact, the designation "popular consultation" (*consultation populaire*) was chosen instead of "referendum". The initiative is left either to the local council, or to 10% of the electorate. A few *communes* implemented it already in 1995, generally obtaining quite satisfactory results.

duction of a "pure" PR system. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, on the Liberals and Greens' side, proposals were made to suppress compulsory voting.

None of these proposals were directly transformed into a concrete reform. In this respect, it is quite remarkable to note that the first stages of the gradual federalisation process (from 1970 onwards) did not lead to significant changes in the electoral system, as the existing system -i.e. the system which prevailed in unitary Belgium- was basically "transposed" to the newly formed entities (Regions and Communities), with few modifications. Furthermore, from 1970 to the 1991-1995 legislature, the Regions and Communities did not have their own directly elected representatives<sup>13</sup>, as the national MPs were also present in the regional and community assemblies (they "changed hats"). This was a sign that the decision-makers did not want to urge the evolution towards more autonomy for the new entities.

Some reforms were however implemented in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but only one of these affected the legislative elections.<sup>14</sup> In 1981, the voting age was lowered from 21 years to 18 years. This reform was not so much the result of long political debates, but was rather considered like an harmonisation with other elections<sup>15</sup> and with the general trend towards a lowering of the age of legal majority. It did however have quite significant political consequences, as it clearly constituted a facilitating factor for the first electoral breakthrough and consecutive entry into Parliament of the Greens, who were the first party choice amongst the 18-25 age category (Bouillin-Dartevelle, 1984: 134-137).

### *C. The early 1990s: many debates, a few reforms*

From 1992 to 1995, the electoral system stood once again on the legislative agenda. Indeed, during the 1992/93, 1993/94 and 1994/95 parliamentary sessions, about 150 legislative proposals<sup>16</sup> were introduced in the House or in the Senate. As most of these proposals were introduced by the opposition parties, only a few bills were actually voted. Only some of the main proposals and the debates which eventually lead to the passing of bills will be mentioned here.

All parliamentary parties intervened in the debate. Actually, it was not only initiated by the opposition parties (mainly the Liberals and the Greens), but also by PM Dehaene himself, self-admittedly to counter the progress of the extreme-right wing parties who had made much progress from 1991 on, at all levels. He notably advocated the suppression of compulsory voting<sup>17</sup> in order to generate

13 Except for the Brussels Region from 1989 on, and the German-speaking Community from 1986 on.

14 Two other significant reforms deserve attention. At the local level, the *communes* were merged into larger entities in 1976, and *panachage* was abolished. Needless to say, these two changes had significant political consequences. At the first universal suffrage elections of the European Parliament (1979), two "electoral bodies" (*collèges électoraux*: French-speaking and Flemish-speaking) were created, as well as three electoral districts (see note 20).

15 At the local elections, the voting age was lowered from 21 years to 18 years in 1970. From 1979 onwards, the voting age for the European elections was also 18 years.

16 Own computation, relying on a computer listing provided by the CEPESS (Study centre of the PSC and CVP).

17 The suppression of compulsory voting had already been put forward by other parties: Ecolo, Agalev, the PVV (then the VLD) and the Vlaams Blok.

a more "responsible" vote, and the introduction of a threshold for access in Parliament. However, most reactions were negative and the PM's proposals were rapidly dismissed. Eventually, only one reform was introduced: the extension of preferential voting (see herebelow). From 1992 onwards, the French-speaking Liberals also advocated the suppression of the head-of-the-list vote, unsuccessfully so far.<sup>18</sup>

Some significant electoral reforms were however introduced in the wake of the 1993 institutional reforms which finally transformed Belgium into a fully-fledged "federal" state.<sup>19</sup> They were implemented for the first time at the 21 May 1995 legislative elections. The three main modifications were:

- the strong decrease of the number of MPs at the federal (former national) level
- from 212 to 150 in the House and from 184 to 71 in the Senate- and the creation of directly elected regional parliaments. This also implied the suppression of "double mandates" at the regional/community levels, on one hand, and the federal level, on the other hand;
- the creation of three electoral districts and two "electoral bodies" (*colleges électoraux*) for the Senate, identical with those of the European elections since 1979<sup>20</sup>;
- the extension of preferential voting, i.e. the possibility to vote for several candidates on the same list (as was already the case for the local elections).<sup>21</sup>

The timing of the elections was also significantly modified by the 1993 reforms. Beforehand, only the local and European elections were characterised by a guaranteed fixed term (respectively six and five years), whereas the legislative and provincial elections had a theoretical four-year term which was hardly ever put in practise. In October 1994, for the first time, the local and provincial elections coincided. This will become a fixed feature, as they will both have a six-year term. The regional elections will also have a fixed term of five years, and will coincide with the European elections from 1999 onwards. Finally, at the federal level, the theoretical four-year term has not been modified. Although anticipated elections will still be theoretically possible, they will be much less likely to occur, since the dissolution of Parliament will require a constructive motion of defiance ("*motion de défiance constructive*"). In any event, the 1993 reforms have instituted a new "electoral cycle" (Mabille, 1994: 25; Lentzen et.al., 1995) which will only be fully established for the first time in the 1999-2000 period.

It is still too early to draw any conclusions on the impact of the 1993 reforms. As far as the single constituency for the Senate is concerned, two points can be made. On one hand, this system is presumably more favourable to smaller parties, quite similarly with the European elections. On the other hand, the 1995 experience has shown that the party "heavyweights" concentrated on the Senate

18 From 1994 on, they also advocated the direct election of mayors at the local elections.

19 For a detailed presentation of the 1993 institutional reforms, see e.g. Brassinne, 1994.

20 To put it simply, the three districts correspond to the Flanders Region except the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement*, the Walloon Region, and the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde *arrondissement* (that includes notably the Brussels Region). The third district is "mixed".

21 For a detailed presentation of the electoral aspects of the 1993 institutional reforms, see Brassinne, 1994.



list, in order to drain votes in the whole constituency, once again quite similarly with the European elections. Furthermore, there are indications that the single constituency lead to a sharp increase in the proportion of preferential votes (see note 47).

Another issue which raised intense debates from 1994 on was the extension of the political rights (including voting and eligibility rights) to non-Belgian EU citizens. Until then, there was little doubt that the right to vote and to be elected was linked with the Belgian nationality. Following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the member states are due to extend the voting and eligibility rights to EU citizens for the local and European elections. This reform was implemented for the first time at the June 1994 European elections<sup>22</sup>. Accordingly, most political parties included candidates which were labelled "European" on their lists, but they were never in standing order on the ballot. Eventually, the electoral turnout of EU citizens turned out to be quite low, as only 5.1% of the potential EU voters actually registered on the electoral lists<sup>23</sup>.

At the local level, Belgium finally accepted to extend the voting and eligibility rights to EU citizens from the year 2000 on. However, this reform met much resistance in Flanders (Blaise & Martens, 1992: 62-63), notably in the Brussels periphery where most Flemish parties fear that the balance of power will be changed to the detriment of Flemish interests. As a result of this, Belgium was granted a "favour" by the European council: for the October 2000 local elections, Belgium will have the *possibility* to restrict the voting and eligibility rights to the EU citizens with at least six years of residence in Belgium, in a limited number of *communes*. This will only be possible in *communes* with more than 20% non-Belgian EU citizens. Furthermore, Belgium will have to justify this request by an "exceptional" situation. The debate remains latent, and will most likely resume in the pre-electoral period of the October 2000 local elections.

One also has to mention the extension of the voting right to non-EU citizens (i.e. non-EU immigrants). From the 1960s onwards, several legislative proposals were introduced in order to grant the voting right to non-EC citizens, at the local level and sometimes at higher levels as well (Mabille, 1990; Blaise & Martens, 1992: 61-63). The voting right for non-EC citizens at the local level was even included in the government agreement of the Martens I cabinet (1979-1980; PSC, CVP, PS, SP and FDF coalition), but it never reached the decision-making agenda (Mabille, 1990; 1994: 21). Amongst the current parliamentary parties, only the Greens still openly -and unsuccessfully- advocate such a reform.

The introduction of gender quotas on the electoral lists was also a passionately debated issue. Some radical proposals were issued, such as the obligation of a 50/50 quota on the electoral lists, or the obligation to alternate male and female candidates on the lists. Eventually, a bill passed in 1994 introduced a gender quota at all levels (local, provincial, community/regional, federal, European). According to the new rules, an electoral list cannot count more than two-thirds of

22 Which saw two reforms compared with the 1979, 1984 and 1989 elections: the proportion of seats allocated respectively in the Flemish and French-speaking districts was changed from 13/11 to 14/10, and a new district was created, which covers the German-speaking community (only one seat to be allocated). Hence, in the German-speaking community, a *de facto* majority system was introduced for the European elections!

23 I.e. 23,999 votes out of 471,277. The Italians reached the highest percentage (8.1%), and the French reached the lowest percentage (0.3%) (for comprehensive data, cfr. press release of the Ministry of Interior, 6 June 1994).

candidates <sup>24</sup> of the same gender. In practise, this means a *de facto* one-third female quota in most cases.

This reform will only be fully applicable from 1999 onwards. At the 1994 local and provincial elections, a transitory lower quota was fixed (three-quarters/one quarter). The same quota will be applicable at any election which would take place between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 1998. No compulsory quotas - only a "recommendation" - were set for the elections which took place in 1995 (European, federal, regional).

There are indications that this reform already brought about a significant increase in the actual proportion of women in the various elected bodies. At the 1994 local elections, the percentage of female candidates reached about 32% <sup>25</sup>, i.e. way above the 25% quota, and the percentage of elected female councillors reached 20%, i.e. an increase of more than 6% since 1988. <sup>26</sup> At the 1995 legislative elections, the percentage of female MPs increased in all the elected bodies: from 11% to 27.5% in the Senate, from 9% to 11% in the House, from 10% to 18% in the Flemish Council and from 7 to 9% in the Walloon Council (Cabinet du Ministre de l'Emploi (...), 1995). The increase was thus much more significant in the Senate and in the Flemish Council. As far as the House is concerned, this does not seem to constitute a significant breakthrough, especially if one considers that the 1970s and 1980s were already characterised by a gradual increase of female representation. <sup>27</sup>

Finally, a recent reform of a technical kind is worth mentioning: the gradual introduction of the "electronic vote" since 1991, i.e. the replacement of paper ballots by computers. It is still too early to judge whether or not such a technical modification will have a significant impact on electoral behaviour. However, two possible induced effects were already observed in 1995 in the constituencies in which the computers were introduced. On one hand, one observed a decrease of the blank/invalid vote. Indeed, the computer programmes do not allow one to choose more than one list, to include alien documents or to write outside the spaces (i.e. the three most common types of invalid vote). They only give the possibility to select a "blank vote" icon at one point of the procedure. On the other hand, one has observed an increase of absenteeism in some cases. The causes of this phenomenon have not been systematically investigated so far. One may assume that some categories of voters (such as elderly persons or less educated publics) are more reluctant to use the computers instead of paper ballots. Furthermore, the fact that the new procedure brought about longer queues in some polling stations as a result of technical problems <sup>28</sup> probably deterred some potential voters.

<sup>24</sup> I.e. effective and substitute candidates.

<sup>25</sup> More than 40% in the 19 Brussels *communes*. Every individual party stood above the 25% quota; the highest percentages were reached by the Agalev (43%), Ecolo (44%) and the FDF (53%) (Cabinet du Ministre de l'Emploi (...), 1994/1).

<sup>26</sup> 28% in the 19 Brussels *communes*. The highest percentages were reached by Ecolo (32%), Agalev (35%) and the FDF (39%), whereas the "traditional" parties hovered around the 20% mark (Cabinet du Ministre de l'Emploi (...), 1994/2).

<sup>27</sup> Between 1949 and 1971, the proportion of female MPs stagnated between 2% and 4%. In 1978, it already stood at 7.5% (De Winter, 1995: 33).

<sup>28</sup> Mainly an insufficient number of computers terminals, as well as technical failures.



### D. *Diagnosis: continuity in spite of recent reforms*

Looking at the post-World War II period, what can be said about the evolution of the Belgian electoral system(s)? Does one observe more continuity or more change?

Let us first look at the 1946-1991 period, and resort to the four main dimensions put forward by Lijphart to characterise an "electoral system", i.e. "*sets of essentially unchanged election rules under which one or more elections are conducted*" (Lijphart, 1994: 7): electoral formula, district magnitude, electoral threshold and assembly size (Lijphart, 1994: 10-14). If one applies the criteria of "*electoral system change*" used by Lijphart (Lijphart, 1994: 13 ff.), one can confirm the conclusion Lijphart himself reaches about the Belgian case in the 1946-1987 period and extend it to the 1991 legislative elections: Belgium stands amongst the countries in which the electoral system for the legislative elections has remained basically unchanged. The only significant change was the adoption of a (partly) new system for the European Parliament elections from 1979 onwards (Lijphart, 1994: 53).<sup>29</sup> The 1948 and 1981 extensions of the universal suffrage (see hereabove) should of course not be overlooked, but they did not modify the core characteristics of the prevailing electoral system.

However, still using Lijphart's criteria, the 1993 institutional reforms did bring about significant changes on two dimensions: district magnitude (for the Senate only) and assembly size (both for the House and the Senate). One could perhaps add a third element: the extension of the preferential vote. However, one should also stress that the two other key dimensions -arguably the most crucial ones in terms of proportionality-, i.e. the electoral formula and the legal threshold have *not* been modified.<sup>30</sup>

All things considered, the overriding conclusion is that, in spite of the Second World War, in spite of the successive political crises and the cyclical discussions revolving around the electoral system, in spite of the major institutional reforms which have been implemented from the 1970s to 1995, and in spite of the introduction of recent electoral reforms -most of them deriving from the institutional reforms-, the Belgian electoral system has not been radically modified since 1919 (or 1948, if one takes into account the extension of the vote to women). One of the main points is that the core characteristics of the electoral formula (list PR system, d'Hondt) have remained basically unchanged since 1899.

## II. *A modus vivendi around the electoral system(s)?*

How could one account for the relative stability of the Belgian electoral system(s) so far? For one thing, this should not be considered as an exceptional feat. Indeed, "*(...) one of the best-known generalizations about electoral systems is that they tend to be very stable and to resist change. (...) Fundamental changes are rare and arise only in extraordinary historical situations.*" (Lijphart, 1994: 52; Nohlen, 1984: 218, quoted in Lijphart, 1994: 52). In the Belgian case, one should look at the political decision-makers. Why did they not implement more radical reforms?

29 Possibly with one exception: the lowering of the legal threshold from 66% to 33% of the electoral divider for the Senate in 1947 (see hereabove).

30 Ibid.

### A. *Elites from the pillarised parties: cautious reformism*

This relative stability is mainly the result of the consensus of the main established parties not to significantly change the system from which they have all benefited, and indeed still benefit. Let us examine this argument.

It is an established fact that, amongst the variety of PR electoral systems, the d'Hondt systems range amongst the least proportional and systematically favour larger parties (Lijphart, 1994: 23-24).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, one could argue that the different district sizes constitute an additional element of disproportionality.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the prevailing electoral system (PR, electoral formula and "head-of-the-list" vote) gives much control to the party headquarters on the selection of actually elected MPs. This is confirmed by several empirical analyses. From 1919 to 1958, the voters "confirmed" 2378 (i.e. 99.62%) of the elected MPs out of the 2387 candidates in standing order on the ballot (Stengers, 1990). Hence, only 9 candidates which were not in standing order were actually elected! From 1919 to 1991, only 31 MPs (30 representatives and one senator, i.e. 0.43% of the total number of elected MPs) which were not in standing order managed to obtain a seat on the basis of their preferential votes (Das, 1992: 155). In fact, it has been estimated that the suppression of the head-of-the-list vote would have modified the election of about 15% MPs from 1919 to 1977 (Dewachter, 1983). Interestingly, the creation of much larger constituencies at the European (since 1979) and Senate (since 1995) elections has reinforced the hold of the party apparatus on candidate selection, as it has transferred much of the decision-making from the constituency parties (usually at the *arrondissement* level) to the central party headquarters (Mabille, 1994: 24).

Not surprisingly, whenever one of the three "family" of pillarised parties is pushed on the opposition benches (e.g. the Liberals from 1988 onwards), it tends to take a somewhat more radical stance. But the experience has shown that, once it returns in office, it tends to return to the usual compromise agreements as well.

To sum up, one may argue that the established parties have designed an electoral system which has generally proved favourable to them. Hence, they have never had any serious reason to significantly modify that system.

### B. *Elites of smaller and non-governmental parties: cautious radicalism?*

To start with, it looks as though the successive "waves" of newly-emerged parties (regionalists, Greens, extreme-right) have not been able to exert a durable pressure on the pillarised parties -e.g. through participation in coalitions- and to promote new political practises. Some of these more recent parties did achieve significant electoral successes (successive "peaks" from 1971 to 1991). However, for some of these parties, these successes were followed by much less favourable results, and eventually to crisis and dissolution. For instance, the regionalist parties did play an important role in the transition towards federalisation, but even-

<sup>31</sup> Along with the LR Imperiali systems, one variant of which is also used at the local level in Belgium.

<sup>32</sup> However, the larger parties are only favoured in smaller constituencies, whereas the smaller parties are favoured in larger constituencies (Dewachter, 1983: 97).

tually they could not withstand the pressure of the pillarised parties <sup>33</sup>, as the latter have been able to largely "incorporate" their themes by achieving the full federalisation of the country. In other cases, they have managed to become quite "institutionalised" and durable parliamentary parties, but they have not been able to achieve further electoral successes (e.g. the Greens and the Vlaams Blok).

Hence, one could argue that the pillarised parties were sometimes challenged, but never really put in danger, as they have been able to keep a sufficiently broad electoral *clientele*. This is assuredly linked with the permanence of the pillars and to the still extensive range of patronage products at the disposal of the political personnel of the "traditional" parties (De Winter, this volume). These ingredients are also there at the more recent regional and community levels. Even though there are some indications that pillarisation and consociational practises are declining, they still act very much as "system stabilisers" (Deschouwer, this volume).

Besides, although the new parties - whether predominantly "reformist" or "anti-system" - initially demanded modifications of the electoral system, these demands became less insisting through time. This constitutes a major difference with the Italian case: in Belgium, *the critique of the political system has not coincided so far with the radical critique of the electoral system*. Why has this been the case?

One could argue that, although it is not purely proportional, the current PR system has on the whole largely benefited the smaller parties. Let us consider the *effective* threshold of representation, which provides an important indication on the degree of "openness" of a given electoral system towards smaller parties. Lijphart computes a figure of 4.8% <sup>34</sup> for the 1946-1987 period (Lijphart, 1994: 34). This places Belgium in an intermediate position amongst the 52 post-World War II PR electoral systems identified by Lijphart: 24 electoral systems produce higher effective thresholds, but 27 electoral systems produce lower effective thresholds (sometimes much lower; i.e. the Netherlands from 1956 onwards: 0.67%). <sup>35</sup> Furthermore, if one considers the 57 PR (and assimilated) electoral systems, Belgium stands below the average effective threshold of 6.6% (Lijphart, 1994: 51). Besides, the provincial second-tier seat allocation system basically benefits smaller parties. Hence, it comes as no surprise that, amongst the d'Hondt and Imperiali systems, the Belgian effective threshold also stands below the average of 6.5% (Lijphart, 1994: 51).

Hence, the prevailing electoral system has allowed smaller parties with *some* electoral potential - not the very small parties <sup>36</sup> - to gain access to parliamentary representation. Even a more episodic phenomenon such as the political "entrepreneur" Van Rossem obtained parliamentary seats at the 1991 elections. If one also considers the considerable increase of the public financing of parties since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Van Bunder, 1993) - primarily based on the num-

33 The Walloon RW disappeared, the Brussels FDF is being "integrated" into the PRL in order to survive, and the VU now stands in a difficult position between the radical Vlaams Blok and the increasingly determined SP, VLD and CVP (Dewachter, 1987; Deschouwer, 1994; Deschouwer, this volume).

34 Taagepera and Shugart have computed another estimate of 4.2% (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989: 127-128).

35 Figures compiled from tables 2.2. to 2.5. (Lijphart, 1994: 22-35).

36 Such as the PFU in the seventies, the declining Communist party, "small Left" parties such as the PTB-PVDA from the 1980s onwards, various unitarist lists such as BEB, UNIE, etc...

ber of parliamentary seats-, one could argue that the current system is quite favourable to the smaller (or mid-size) political parties which have acquired some political relevance.

All things considered, it seems plausible to argue that most strategists of the smaller parties who have gained parliamentary seats (currently: Ecolo, Agalev, VU, FDF, VB and FN at the federal level) have been increasingly reluctant to put forward a radical electoral reform as one of their top-priority objectives, as most modification scenarios (majority system, threshold) -which, eventually, would be set up by the governmental parties- would probably run against their interest.

### III. Electoral results and behaviour: looking for change

#### A. *Limitations of the analysis*

One can rely on numerous indicators to assess the changes or the continuities in electoral behaviour. In this section, some of these indicators will be used to try and see whether or not the most recent period (particularly the early '90s) has seen more changes than the previous periods. At this point, two major limitations of the following enquiry must clearly be stated.

On one hand, the focus shall mainly be placed on the legislative (national/federal) elections. This constitutes of course a major limitation, as post-unitary Belgium possesses not one, but two political and party systems (Flanders and Walonia), not to mention the "mixed" Brussels Region and the German-speaking Community (Dewachter, 1987; Deschouwer, 1994; this volume; De Winter & Dumont, 1996). For any given election, the main differences between these sub-systems would deserve a systematic investigation. So would the electoral results at the different levels: local, provincial, regional/community, national/federal and European. This will not be the case here, although a few obvious points will be made in that respect.

The second limitation has to do with the available data. Aggregate data are quite easy to come by and allow one to compare the data from different periods quite easily as well. However, as aggregate data show clear limits both in descriptive and explanatory terms, one needs to resort to individual (voter) level data, i.e. survey data. The problem is that very few data sets permit satisfactory comparison through time. The most recent period is quite well covered, but one is unable to really systematically compare the trends of the 1990s with, say, that of the mid-1960s.

Hence, this section should be considered as an overview of the various indicators of continuity and change, both at the aggregate and at the individual levels, rather than an in-depth investigation of each individual indicator. Hopefully, each indicator contributes to some extent to a better assessment of the relative amplitude of change.

#### B. *Pillarised versus non-pillarised parties*

A first way to assess the amplitude of electoral change is to look at the share of valid votes for "pillarised" versus "non-pillarised" parties (see table 1). The "pillarised" character of Belgian society, the central role the large established parties play in that context, and the "consociational" character of the Belgian polity have

Table 1

House of representatives 1961-1995. Indicators of stability and change

	% pillarized parties <sup>1</sup> (% v.v.)	% other parties (% v.v.)	Index of electoral fragmentation (Rae) <sup>2</sup>	% Total volatility without Others <sup>3</sup>	Number of parties in parliament	E.N.P. <sup>4</sup>	% Abstent. <sup>5</sup>	% Blank/ invalid <sup>6</sup>	% Total non-vote	% Preferential vote <sup>7</sup>
1961	90.5	9.5	.63	9.9	6	2.69	4.9	4.8	9.7	33.0
1965	84.4	15.6	.72	31.6	6	3.60	5.4	6.0	11.4	39.0
1968	80.6	19.4	.80	11.9	7	4.97	5.4	5.6	11.0	41.6
1971	74.0	26.0	.83	13.7	7	5.85	4.5	6.8	11.3	45.7
1974	75.5	24.5	.83	6.5	8	5.76	5.3	7.9	13.2	49.8
1977	79.3	20.7	.81	12.7	8	5.21	4.7	7.2	11.9	50.3
1978	78.0	22.0	.85	12.4	11	6.77	6.0	8.4	14.4	51.9
1981	73.0	27.0	.87	28.7	14	7.71	5.5	7.3	12.8	48.4
1985	78.6	21.4	.86	19.5	11	7.00	6.4	7.5	13.9	48.5
1987	79.0	21.0	.86	8.6	10	7.17	6.6	6.6	13.2	48.9
1991	70.1	29.9	.88	24.7	13	8.41	7.3	7.0	14.3	48.3
1995	72.8	27.2	.88	13.4	11	8.06	8.9	6.8	15.7	55.9 <sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Socialists (currently PS and SP), Christian-democrats (currently PSC and CVP), Liberals (currently PRL and VLD). See Deschouwer, 1992, 1994 and this volume for more details on the evolution (particularly the linguistic split) of parties from the 1960s on.

<sup>2</sup> Computations by P. Dumont (De Winter & Dumont, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Bartolini & Mair formula (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 20). The figures should be read as follows: from 1958 to 1961: 9.9% total volatility; from 1961 to 1965: 31.6% total volatility, etc... Computations by P. Dumont (De Winter & Dumont, 1996). The following parties have been considered for the computation: PSC, CVP, SP, PS, VLD, PRL, FDF, RW, PCB, VU, Agalev, Ecolo, VB, UDRT, FN, Rossem (and their forerunners, when that is the case).

<sup>4</sup> Laakso & Taagepera formula (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979). Computations by P. Dumont (De Winter & Dumont, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Sources: De Winter et.al., 1991; Mabilie et.al. 1991; Lentzen & Blaise 1995. Until 1977, in the official statistics, the total number of non-voters was considerably over-estimated. The figures from 1961 to 1977 have been computed accordingly by De Winter (1978).

<sup>6</sup> Sources: De Winter et.al., 1991; Mabilie et.al. 1991; Lentzen & Blaise 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Source from 1961 to 1991: Das, 1992: 158.

<sup>8</sup> Rough estimate based on preliminary computations regarding the PSC (+10.2% preferential votes from 1991 to 1995), the PS (+7.4%) and the PRL (+5.5%).

been vastly documented and discussed elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> From a strictly electoral viewpoint, are there indications that the pillarised parties are losing ground?

The picture is mitigated. On one hand, throughout the whole period, the three (then six) "traditional" parties have been able to mobilise more than 70% of the

<sup>37</sup> On the body of growing literature on "pillarisation" and (especially) "de-pillarisation", see e.g. Lorwin, 1974; Lijphart, 1981; Huyse, 1981; 1987; Dewachter, 1987; Deschouwer, 1994; this volume).

valid vote, in spite of the increasing number of "non-pillar" parties. On the other hand, their share of the vote has clearly dropped since the early '60s. But this process has not been a linear one. The three clearest peaks in the aggregated results of "non-pillar" parties were observed in 1971-1974, 1981 and 1991. They were basically the result of different -though partly overlapping- phenomena: respectively the rise of the regionalist/linguistic parties (FDF, RW and VU), the Green parties (Ecolo and Agalev) and the extreme-right parties (Front National, AGIR, and especially the Vlaams Blok)<sup>38</sup>. The historical low so far was reached in 1991. And yet, in purely quantitative and electoral terms, the pillarised parties taken together are not significantly weaker in 1995 than they were in 1971 or 1981, for instance. This is not to say that the electoral balance of power *between* the pillarised parties did not evolve through time, quite the contrary (see herebelow).

### C. Electoral fragmentation

Rae's index of electoral fragmentation does not only provide information on the number and relative electoral strength of the various political parties. It also gives an indirect assessment of the relative electoral predominance of the pillarised parties.

The figures from table 1 indicate that the general trend is one of an increase of fragmentation, i.e. a decrease in the predominance of the pillarised parties. This trend was much clearer in the 1960s. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the Belgian party system has undergone dramatic changes: it has been transformed from a three-party system (Catholics, Liberals, Socialists) to an extremely fragmented multiparty system, following the linguistic split of the pillarised parties and the creation of new parties (see hereabove). Hence, it comes as no surprise that, amongst the thirteen countries investigated by Bartolini & Mair, only Switzerland comes durably close to post-unitary Belgium in terms of electoral fragmentation.<sup>39</sup> Actually, most Belgian figures from 1978 onwards constitute "records" in terms of electoral fragmentation.

The evolution of the number of parties in parliament and of the effective number of parties (see table 1) provide additional evidence of this trend. By combining the three indicators, the 1981 and 1991 elections stand out as the elections which have produced the highest level of fragmentation.

### D. Volatility and individual electoral shifts

Let us first consider volatility at the aggregate level, and particularly total volatility (table 1), i.e. the sum of changes in the aggregate vote for the different parties (the sum of individual party volatilities) divided by two in order to avoid double-counting of the same electoral shifts (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 20). These figures should be considered as an indicator of the *minimum* proportion of voters who did change their electoral behaviour between two given elections (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 21). For sure, aggregate volatility only constitutes an indirect indi-

38 Other smaller or more ephemeral parties also intervened in the process (such as the UDRT-RAD, the "Rossem" list, etc...). See also Deschouwer, 1994; this volume; De Winter & Dumont, 1996.

39 Data gathered from the Bartolini & Mair database (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 323-358). As well as the Netherlands in the early '70s. One could also mention other countries, but only during more ancient periods (such as Weimar Germany).



cator of actual shifts at the individual (voter) level, but it is still a useful and valid indication (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 34).<sup>40</sup>

The figures from table 1 deliver clear indications that the three most volatile periods were 1961-1965, 1978-1981 and 1987-1991. In 1965, this coincided with the breakthrough of the VU, the first electoral successes of the RW and FDF, the strong gains of the newly reformed Liberal party, and losses for the Socialists and the Christian-democrats (Delruelle et.al., 1970). The 1965 changes appeared to be so dramatic then that some authors argued that this was the first major electoral rupture since the establishment of male universal suffrage in 1919 (Delruelle et.al., 1970).

This claim deserves closer attention, by considering a longer time perspective, i.e. since 1919. Delruelle et.al. used a somewhat different operationalisation of volatility ("external mobility ratio": *taux de mobilité externe*), by differentiating clusters of parties (based on ideological criteria) rather than individual parties.<sup>41</sup> The results of these computations are presented in table 2.

Table 2

## House of representatives 1919-1977. External mobility ratio

Elections	External mobility ratio (%)
1919-1921	3.18
1921-1925	7.04
1925-1929	4.65
1929-1932	2.65
1932-1936	16.85
1936-1939	9.87
1939-1946	21.60
1946-1949	8.99
1949-1950	9.81
1950-1954	6.82
1954-1958	4.55
1958-1961	4.61
1961-1965	16.94
1965-1968	6.45
1968-1971	6.69
1971-1974	3.50
1974-1977	4.76

Sources: from 1919 to 1968: Delruelle et.al., 1970: 11-12. From 1968 to 1977: Dewachter, 1983: 102. Eight clusters of parties have been defined as follows: communists, socialists (including dissident lists), liberals (including dissident lists), Rex (1936 and 1939), Flemish lists (VNV, frontists, then VU, etc...), catholics (including dissident lists), Walloon and French-speaking regionalist lists, and "others".

<sup>40</sup> "Although it is not entirely satisfactory, using aggregate figures to discuss trends in electoral volatility does not (...) seem to be an unreasonable procedure" (Denver, in Crewe & Denver, 1985: 406, quoted in Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 30). For further developments, see Bartolini & Mair, 1990: 27-34).

<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, the figures from 1961 to 1977 in table 2 are lower than the corresponding figures in table 1.

There is indeed evidence that the 1919-1961 period was characterised by low levels of volatility, with two notable exceptions directly linked with the events of World War II. In 1936, the new *Rex* list (French-speaking nationalists) achieved a major breakthrough (11.5%), along with the Flemish nationalists. In 1946, all nationalist lists (French-speaking and Flemish) disappeared, and the communists reached their historical high. Hence, if one puts aside the exceptionality of the 1936-1946 period, one may confirm the statement that, until 1965, the Belgian electorate was quite stable (Delruelle et.al., 1970: 9-31).

Finally, still in an aggregate perspective, let us mention an alternative operationalisation. By distinguishing two basic "blocks" of parties, the pillarised and the non-pillarised ones<sup>42</sup>, one observes that the 1961-1965 and 1978-1981 peaks are better explained in terms of volatility *between* the pillarised parties, and that the 1987-1991 peak is better explained in terms of volatility *between* the pillarised and non-pillarised parties (Lago, 1995).

As a provisional conclusion, relying solely on these aggregate figures, it looks as though the 1978-1981 and 1987-1991 shifts were quite significant, but not so exceptional in a longer-term perspective. Of course, this diagnosis has a quite relative value, as one should consider the -sometimes quite dissimilar- trends at the sub-national level as well.

Evidently, the aggregate measurements of electoral change show clear limits, as they do not measure the actual electoral shifts which take place at the level of the individual voters. Unfortunately, one can only rely on a few solid estimates. A first set of figures was computed by Delruelle for the 1961-1965-1968 legislative elections. She estimated that about 76% voters could be considered as "*stable*" voters -who never modified their voting behaviour-, 17% as "*changing*" voters -who only changed once, and possibly returned to their 1961 choice in 1968- and 7% as "*floating*" voters -who modified their voting behaviour twice- (Delruelle et.al., 1970: 97-108).

More recent survey data provide more precise estimates, and allow one to assess the proportion of "*stayers*", i.e. voters who stick to the same party between two elections (or to the same electoral behaviour, e.g. non-vote), as opposed to "*movers*". Both in Flanders and Wallonia, measures at the individual level confirm the importance of electoral mobility. For instance, between the 1987 and 1991 general elections (House), some 32.5% Flemish voters and 27% Walloon voters modified their electoral behaviour (Swyngedouw et.al., 1992: 24, Aish & Swyngedouw 1994: 62). In the Flemish case, these figures were much higher than in the previous period: between the 1981, 1985 and 1987 elections, the equivalent figures respectively amounted to 20% and 14.5% (Swyngedouw, 1986; Swyngedouw & Billiet, 1988).

Still in the Flemish context, between 1991 and 1995, even though the aggregate results of the main parties did not change as dramatically as they did between 1987 and 1991, the percentage of "*movers*" was still estimated at 32% (Swyngedouw, 1995).<sup>43</sup> The fact that the partly equivalent figures<sup>44</sup> at the aggregate level (total volatility; see table 1) were significantly lower between 1991 and 1995

42 I.e. a definition of "blocks" which differs from the classical "block volatility" model.

43 Cfr. the different sources quoted in the two paragraphs hereabove for more precise analyses of vote transfers between parties.

44 Only partly equivalent, as the figures in table 1 are computed at the national/federal level.

than between 1987 and 1991 illustrates once again the minimalist character of such aggregate computations, and demonstrates the need to look at individual-level estimates as well.

Hence, the proportion of "movers" has been quite high in the more recent period, especially since 1991. Arguably, on the basis of the lacunary available data, this constitutes a significant element of change as compared with the earlier period.

### E. *Absenteeism, blank vote and invalid vote*

Although one does observe a general trend towards more "non-voting", this trend is not a linear one (see table 1). Obviously, the level of electoral participation remains very high, way above the 80% line. This is of course largely linked with compulsory voting. Thus, in a nutshell, one does not observe a spectacular increase of the non-vote in the last three decades.

However, one does observe a stronger increase during the last few elections, especially absenteeism which reached record heights in 1991 and 1995. The total non-vote figures reached a historical high in 1995, especially due to the ever-increasing percentage of absentees from 1981 onwards. The total number of individuals who do not cast a valid vote now stands at about 1 million. Interestingly, since 1977, the figures have always been higher in Brussels than in Wallonia, and higher in Wallonia than in Flanders.<sup>45</sup>

How could one account for these trends? As far as absenteeism is concerned, demographic factors such as the ageing process of the population should not be minimised, as elderly individuals tend to be less socially integrated and tend to have more mobility problems, and as these two phenomena obviously hinder electoral participation (Ackaert et.al., 1992: 211; De Winter, 1990: 7). The recurrent differences which are observed between the three Regions -which also happen to have different age structures- provide additional support to this hypothesis. If one looks at the individual voters, it has also been demonstrated that absenteeism is a more occasional, less "structural" (i.e. stable through time) behaviour than the invalid or blank vote (De Winter et.al., 1991; Ackaert et.al., 1992: 221-222). All things considered, absentees are politically alienated citizens, who are either indifferent or hostile towards politics.

That is also the case for non valid and blank voters, who also display more specific negative attitudes towards the political institutions and identifiable actors, such as the political parties and political personnel (Ackaert et.al., 1992: 224). Hence, the strong increase of blank and invalid votes in Wallonia between the 1987 and 1991 legislative elections (as compared with a slight decrease in Flanders) comes as no surprise. Indeed, in Wallonia -as opposed to Flanders with the Vlaams Blok and Rossem lists-, there were fewer alternatives for the alienated voters willing to cast a "protest" vote (Ackaert et.al., 1992: 218).

Besides, there is a strong *potential* absenteeism: according to survey data, if the compulsory vote was abolished, only 45% to 55% voters (according to the

<sup>45</sup> One also observes notable differences between the types of elections (local, provincial, House, Senate, European). As far as blank and invalid votes are concerned, this can be accounted for by factors pertaining to the (subjective) importance and proximity of the elected body, the social distance between the candidates and citizens, and the main issues of the elections (Ackaert et.al., 1992: 217-220).

type of election) would still cast a vote (De Winter et.al., 1991: 128 ff.).<sup>46</sup> It has also been demonstrated that the suppression of the compulsory vote would clearly advantage some parties and disadvantage other parties (Ackaert & De Winter, 1993: 76-77; De Winter, 1994), and that the compulsory vote has played a "social correction" role, i.e. it has compensated some negative effects of socio-economic status on electoral participation (Ackaert & De Winter, 1993: 81; De Winter, 1994).

### *F. Head-of-the-list versus preferential vote*

One observes a strong increase of the preferential vote in the course of the 1960s and early 1970s. This was mainly a consequence of the growing importance of the mass-media (especially television) coverage of campaigns and the expansion of personal propaganda (Dewachter 1987: 305-307), as well as the growing level of cognitive mobilisation connected with the increasing proportion of more educated publics. There is also evidence that the growing clientelistic relations between MPs and their constituents from the 1960s on has played an additional role (Dewachter 1987: 310, De Winter, this volume).

However, the picture differs quite a lot between parties and types of elections, and also of course from one electoral district to the other (Dewachter 1987: 307-309; Das, 1992). From the mid-1970s to 1991, no further increase of preferential voting has been observed. However, at the 1995 elections, there are indications that the proportion of preferential votes increased significantly (see table 1).<sup>47</sup> One may assume that this was a direct consequence of the 1993 electoral reform (see hereabove).

### *H. Evolution of the determinants of voting behaviour*

Until the 1950s and early 1960s, there was little doubt that electoral behaviour could largely be explained by variables linked with the two main cleavages which had become institutionalised in the Belgian society and polity: the left-right cleavage and the denominational cleavage. Indeed, by combining these two dimensions (social class/ professional status and religiousness/religious attendance), one could predict a large part of the actual voting behaviour (De Smet & Evalenko, 1956). In the course of the 1960s, in spite of major electoral shifts (see hereabove), four "classical" variables still constituted important predicting factors of electoral behaviour: religious affiliation (PSC/CVP versus PSB and Liberals), professional status (PSB, PSC-CVP), as well as age (PSC/CVP, PSB; Liberals) and gender (PSC-CVP) (Delruelle et.al., 1970: 76-88; 199-222).

However, as is all other Western European nations, societal changes gradually took place -or accelerated- from then on: secularisation, development of the service sector, development of the educational opportunities, development of the mass-media, general increase of welfare,... This also generated new political/electoral behaviour. In 1965 already, no significant relationships could be found between the first two above-mentioned variables and the vote for the newly emer-

<sup>46</sup> According to a nation-wide survey research conducted in 1992, about 41% Flemish and 36% Walloon voters would "sometimes" or "never" cast a vote if compulsory voting was suppressed. (ISPO/PIOP, 1995: 84).

<sup>47</sup> The 1991-1995 increase has been even sharper at the Senate elections, where the single constituency was installed: + 16.6% for the PS, + 8.8% for the PSC and + 13.6% for the PRL (preliminary computations).

ging regionalist parties (RW, FDF and Volksunie). The only clear indication was that younger voters were significantly over-represented in the electorate of these parties (Delruelle et.al, 1970: 76-88).

At the 1981 elections, one observed that social class and professional status played a less predominant role than in the 1961-1968 period. The importance of religious affiliation declined as well, although it remained more important than social class in Flanders (Delruelle-Vosswinkel, 1983: 169-171). Moreover, and for the first time, there were indications that women (especially in non-rural areas) were not anymore more "traditional" and stable in their voting behaviour than male voters, quite the contrary (Delruelle-Vosswinkel, 1983: 155-156).

At the 1991 elections, classical variables related to the two above-mentioned cleavages (i.e. religious affiliation and social class/professional status) still played a predominant role in Wallonia, at least for the three "traditional" parties. Indeed, these variables were still the main predictors of the vote for the PRL, the PS and the PSC (Frognier, 1994: 56). That was also the case in Flanders, where professional status, age, gender, religious affiliation and level of education still discriminated the different electoral publics (Swyngedouw et.al., 1993: 19-23).

However, quite a few elements of change have also been observed. This is mainly linked with the development of different types of electoral behaviour, especially "issue voting" and "protest vote". These phenomena clearly provide a key explanation of the substantial proportion of "floating" or "changing" voters (see hereabove).

At the peak of the linguistic/community struggle, i.e. the 1968-1978 period, it is an undisputed fact that the success of the regionalist parties was basically the result of massive vote transfers from the traditional parties to these "new" parties, as well as a surge of new voters which supported the regionalist claims of these new parties (Delruelle, 1970; 1983). It can also be assumed that these parties received "system-critical" votes, as they also carried a "new politics" agenda. Identically, one may assume that the same combination of issue-voting (environment and quality of life in that case) and protest vote was the key to the breakthrough of the Green parties.

Recent survey evidence confirm these assumptions for the 1991 elections, and allow one to extend this explanatory model to the extreme-right parties, especially the Flemish Vlaams Blok. In the Flemish case, it is confirmed that electoral support for the VU, Agalev and the Vlaams Blok is primarily based on issue-voting (on specific issues: respectively community conflicts, environment and immigration) and protest vote (Billiet et.al., 1992a; 1992b; Maddens, 1993: 52-55). The same conclusion can be drawn for the French-speaking Greens (Rihoux, 1994: 111-116). Political protest, as well as a general feeling of political helplessness, is a key to the understanding of the success of these more recent parties (Elchar-dus et.al., 1993: 27-31; this volume; Swyngedouw et.al., 1993: 24).

## I. Anything new in the 1990s?

Do all the above-mentioned indicators suggest that the more recent period -especially the first half of the 1990s- have been characterised by more change, more instability than previous periods? It seems that three different stories are told. To start with, as far as *head-of-the-list versus preferential voting* is concerned, the answer is negative, as no significant trends have been observed since the late 1970s, at least if one restricts the analysis to the global figures until 1991.

As far as most other indicators are concerned, this is room for discussion:

- *pillarised versus non-pillarised parties*: the record low of the pillarised parties was reached in 1991, but it was not much lower than in 1971 or 1981;
- *index of electoral fragmentation, number of parties in Parliament, effective number of parties*: the most recent figures have reached record heights, but not markedly higher than throughout the 1980s;
- *volatility at the aggregate level*: the 1987-1991 shifts were indeed considerable, but they were quite comparable with the 1961-1965 and 1978-1981 shifts;
- *absenteeism, blank and invalid vote*: there is a general trend towards more non-voting (especially absenteeism), but this trend is not so spectacular in a longer-term perspective;
- *determinants of voting behaviour*: "protest vote" and "issue-voting" have become significant phenomena, but similar mechanisms were arguably already there in the 1970s and 1980s. Besides, the socio-economic and denominational cleavages are still the main determinants for a majority of voters.

Finally, only for one indicator is there reasonable evidence to suggest that the early 1990s have been characterised by more change. Indeed, if one examines *vote shifts at the individual levels*, the proportion of "movers" does seem to be significantly higher than in previous periods.

All things considered, looking at the different indicators individually, one cannot conclude that the amplitude of change or instability in the first half of the 1990s has been "exceptional" or "unprecedented". However, this conclusion should be moderated for three reasons.

To start with, if one puts aside head-of-the-list versus preferential voting, one *does* observe that all the indicators of change and instability are there *simultaneously*. Secondly, one should certainly not play down the discrepancies between the different political "sub-systems" of the country. A more detailed enquiry of the various indicators would probably deliver a significantly more changing picture in the Flemish case<sup>48</sup> than in Wallonia or Brussels. Thirdly, it is now an clearly established fact that a significant proportion of voters (or potential voters) operate outside the realm of the "classical" determinants of voting behaviour and/or are significantly disconnected and alienated from the political sphere.

#### IV. Provisional conclusion: continuity within change so far...for much longer?

##### A. An ambiguous diagnosis

As far as the electoral system is concerned, the overriding conclusion is that no radical modifications have been introduced in the post-World War II period, in spite of profound institutional reforms and numerous political crises. In a nutshell, one may argue that the prevailing electoral system (including the successive reforms which have not dramatically changed it) has been considered as a fairly reasonable system by most relevant political parties. The successive reforms were basically the result of compromises between the "traditional" governmental parties. Their cautious initiatives conform quite well with the "fine-tuning" of elec-

<sup>48</sup> Where more changes have taken place at the level of the political parties as well (Deschouwer, 1994; this volume).



toral systems observed by Lijphart (Lijphart, 1994: 139). At the other end of the spectrum, the attitude the "non-traditional" parties, be they more reformist or more anti-system, has been one of "cautious radicalism" in terms of electoral reform, as they would have more chance of being "losers" than "winners" in the event of a significant reform. And still, it would be somewhat overstated to contend that all parliamentary parties totally agree on the prevailing electoral rules.

As far as electoral behaviour is concerned, the picture is much more ambiguous: the early 1990s were assuredly characterised by change and transformation, but we have found no evidence that the amplitude of these changes are "unprecedented" since the 1960s.

In their disputed essay, Bartolini and Mair argue that political scientists are often tempted to prefer the "(...) *spectre of instability*" to the "(...) *empirical reality of persistence*" (Bartolini & Mair, 1990: xvii). Indeed, even though there was much talk of "breakdown" and "rupture" e.g. after the 1965 and 1981 elections (e.g. Delruelle et.al., 1970; Thoveron et.al., 1983), the breakdown failed to materialise so far: a majority of voters still vote for the pillarised parties, the older cleavages still "structure" the electoral behaviour of a majority of voters, and one observes little change in terms of coalition formation and decision-making. Besides, the existence of a sizeable proportion of "protest voters" is not a phenomenon which suddenly appeared in 1991. The potential "reservoir" of protest vote has shifted through time, first from the regionalist parties to the Green and other smaller parties, and then to the extreme-right parties, not to mention the different forms of non-voting. Protest has thus become a stable feature of the Belgian electoral scene (Elchardus et.al., 1993: 31).

And yet, the indicators of change should not be minimised, although they concern a smaller proportion of voters: i.e. transfers towards "new" parties, the increase of "issue-voting" and "protest voting", the increase of "non-voting" behaviour (especially absenteeism). For one thing, these changes have brought about a dramatic transformation of the party system (Deschouwer, 1994; this volume; De Winter & Dumont, 1996). Furthermore, from an analytical viewpoint, factors of change deserve a priority attention, as they often provide clues to predict future trends (Frogner, 1994b: 261). Indeed, there are increasing indications that a new cleavage is currently developing in the Belgian society and polity.<sup>49</sup> If that is the case -and provided that this new cleavage really corresponds to a genuine societal cleavage (see e.g. Elchardus, this volume)- what will be the practical consequences in terms of stability or instability of the Belgian political system(s)? Will it bring about not only an electoral "dealignment", but also a durable "realignment"? A detailed discussion of this question goes beyond the scope of this article.

Finally, it is quite clear that the changes in electoral behaviour have *not* been brought about by changes in the electoral system, as the significant electoral changes did not coincide with electoral reforms. This is one more confirmation that electoral systems explain far from everything about electoral behaviour and party systems (Lijphart, 1994: 151). Indeed, one should not look for a direct causal relationship between the electoral system and electoral behaviour. It may very

49 A detailed discussion of this point goes beyond the scope of this article. On the "new cleavage(s)" discussion in the Belgian context, see e.g. Swyngedouw, 1993; 1994; 1995; Billiet & Swyngedouw, 1995; Frogner 1994c; Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990: 34-41; Elchardus, this volume.

well be that causality should be inverted, i.e. that electoral reforms are often implemented because of (actual or anticipated) electoral shifts.

### B. *What next? Approaching the breaking-down point?*

So far, no "system breakdown" has taken place. But how long will that state of fact remain unchanged in post-unitary Belgium? The argument shall not be restricted to the electoral system and electoral behaviour, as they both (at least partly) depend on other factors. Indeed, one observes numerous factors of potential instability which could lead to more significant changes. For the sake of the argument, four questions will be addressed separately, but it is quite clear that they are tightly linked together.

#### a. *Different electoral rules at the regional level?*

So far, it has been demonstrated that electoral reforms have been the result of political compromise agreements. What will happen if different balances of power between the *regierungsfähig* parties at the regional level lead to the formation of different coalitions, especially in Flanders and in Wallonia? The Regions have been granted the right to modify the electoral districts as well as the assembly size -only as far as the regional elections are concerned-, whereas all the other rules (including the all-important electoral formula) remain a federal prerogative. Hence, it may well be that a significant reform will be implemented only in one region, which would for instance lead to a increase or (less probably) a decrease of the *effective* threshold of representation. This could lead to an even more "disjointed" political system. For instance, some Flemish parties (Agalev, VU, SP) have already put forward the introduction of a single district for the Flemish regional elections. Besides, some issues related to the electoral system which are now "buried" are bound to come back on the agenda in the 1999-2000 period, i.e. when the new "electoral cycle" (see hereabove) is really installed for the first time. For instance, at the 2000 local elections, how will one apply the voting obligation to non-Belgian EU citizens, who are most often not bound by such an obligation in their country?

#### b. *A broadening gap between the voter and the political sphere?*

As far as electoral behaviour is concerned, one should not underestimate possible additional destabilising factors which would be impossible to counter by "electoral engineering". As in pre-Berlusconian Italy, one observes growing pressures and frustrations vis-à-vis the political system: problems of "governability", political alienation, crisis of confidence *vis-à-vis* politics and low levels of political satisfaction (Frogner & Aish-Van Vaerenbergh, 1994: 13-14; ISPO-PIOP 1995)<sup>50</sup>. One also observes party-political fragmentation, political corruption, and there are indications that the patronage resources of the political personnel are declining (De Winter, this volume). Besides, the non-negligible proportion of "movers" does not constitute a homogeneous category, and it becomes increasingly difficult for the mainstream political parties to effectively mobilise the vote of the more detached and alienated individuals.

<sup>50</sup> This argument would deserve a more detailed enquiry. Actually, according to survey evidence, it looks as though the current level of political dissatisfaction is not lower (or even a but higher) than it was e.g. in the early 1980s (see. e.g. Eurobarometer data).

And yet, a broadening gap between the citizens/voters and the political sphere would not automatically bring about more protest and more instability: alternatively, it could lead to more apathy and more passive modes of electoral behaviour.

### *c. Less checks and balances in federal Belgium?*

So far, coalition mechanisms have constituted an important element of checks and balances, both at the national/federal and regional/community levels. Indeed, Belgian multipartism has been moderated so far by two mechanisms. On the one hand, at the national/federal level, coalitions always brought together whole party "families" (i.e. PS and SP, PSC and CVP, PRL and PVV). So far, these mechanisms have ensured the protection of the weaker partner (Socialists in Flanders, Catholics in Wallonia). On the other hand, one observes that the regional/community coalitions have always brought together the same parties (i.e. Socialists/Christian-democrats or Liberals/Christian-democrats), with the notable exception of the recently formed executive of the Brussels Region (Liberals/FDF and Socialists) (see also Deschouwer, this volume). It remains to be seen what the (centrifugal?) effects of the new Brussels case will be, whether it constitutes a prefiguration of similar developments from 1999 on, and whether this will have direct or indirect implications on the evolution of the electoral legislation (see hereabove).

Furthermore, the potential political consequences of the disjointment of the regional and federal elections from 1999 onwards should not be minimised. This could produce even more "disjointed" regional political systems.

### *d. Towards a more disjointed political discourse?*

An important consequence of the gradual formation of separate political systems (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) is the fact that -except in the Brussels case-, there is no constituency in which Flemish or French-speaking politicians can be held "accountable" by the voters of the other community. Hence, a non-cooperative and aggressive attitude by a politician from one community cannot be "punished" by the other community, e.g. in electoral terms. This state of fact reinforces the centrifugal trends, as politicians can easily resort to "double language", i.e. change their discourse when they are addressing their own constituency or the other linguistic community.

### *e. Towards a real-scale breakdown (for once)?*

Most of the issues and uncertainties which have been stressed hereabove will be on the agenda in the 1999-2000 period which will be characterised by a succession of elections: regional and European (1999), federal (1999), provincial and local (2000). At the end of this new electoral cycle, one will be able to judge whether or not the famed ability of Belgian political decision-makers to "muddle through" difficult situations still holds true... It is becoming increasingly doubtful that all major political parties from the different regions are still willing to "play the Belgian game". Besides, one cannot exclude a "system overload" in the 1999-2000 period, i.e. an accumulation of conflicts pertaining to each one of the main cleavages of Belgian society: socio-economic (e.g. around social benefits, employment,...), denominational (e.g. around the education system, ethical issues,...), linguistic (e.g. federalism versus confederalism or separation,...) and even uni-

versalistic/libertarian versus particularistic/authoritarian (e.g. immigration, minority issues,...).

This could mean the final explosion (cfr. *"the big one"*, Deschouwer, this volume)... or just another package deal *"à la belge"* -probably the most inventive one so far. Will the Belgian political decision-makers be willing and/or able to perform one more "miracle"? At this point, nothing can be taken for granted, and no scenario can be excluded.

### Abstract

*Since the November 1991 elections, it has become a common statement to argue that Belgium has entered a -possibly unprecedented- period of change and instability. This article focuses on the evolution of the electoral system and electoral behaviour, in order to test this widely agreed-upon judgement.*

*All things considered, one observes that the electoral system has not been radically modified since World War II. In spite of the transformation of the country into a federal state and several severe conflicts, political decision-makers have opted for the "fine-tuning" of the electoral system instead of radical reforms.*

*As far as electoral behaviour is concerned, the picture is less clear. On one hand, relying on various indicators, one does observe that the early 1990s were characterised by change and transformation. On the other hand, one cannot conclude that the amplitude of change or instability in the early 1990s has been "exceptional" or "unprecedented" as compared with earlier periods.*

*Building upon this ambiguous diagnosis, the author speculates on the probability of a major breakdown of the Belgian political system at the turn of the century.*