


# The demise of symmetry between 'sister parties' has opened up a new chapter in Belgian politics

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*Belgium's language divide between predominantly French-speaking Wallonia, and predominantly Dutch-speaking Flanders, is one of the key features underpinning the country's party system. Régis Dandoy notes that while the language issue continues to be a major part of Belgian politics, the country's political landscape has nevertheless undergone a significant change over the last decade, underlined by the outcome of the 2014 Belgian federal elections. He writes that the tendency to ensure symmetry in Belgian governments between 'sister parties' from the same party family has gradually become displaced by a new framework which has the potential to substantially alter the dynamics of Belgian politics.*



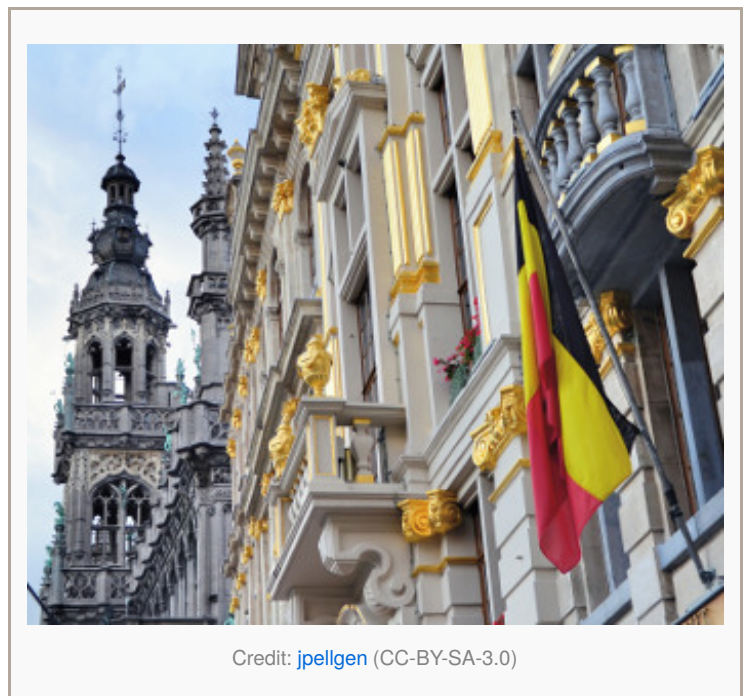
Belgium held federal elections in May 2014 and while the subsequent coalition negotiations did not match the record of 541 days of negotiations that followed the previous federal election in 2010, the outcome was significant for an altogether different reason. The 2014 vote constituted another blow to the principle of 'symmetry', whereby governing coalitions have typically contained a balance between 'sister parties' from either side of Belgium's language divide. Now approaching a year on from the elections, the country looks set to enter a new chapter of its political history, with the traditional rivalries between party families being replaced by new rivalries among political parties from within the same language group.

## Belgium's simultaneous elections

The 2014 elections were only the second time in the country's history that Belgium had organised European, federal, community and regional elections on the same day. One of the justifications for this simultaneous holding of elections related to financial cost. Organising elections requires a significant budget, so by holding all four elections on the same day, the country intended to reduce the financial burden.

The decision was also aimed at reducing the human cost, both in terms of cutting the workload for staff at the Ministry of Interior and for staff in each polling station. Voters similarly stood to benefit from the decision, which ensured they only had to vote twice in a five year period: once for the European, federal, community and regional elections and once for provincial and municipal elections (which are set for 2018). While Belgium's compulsory voting has an obvious impact on turnout, the relative scarcity of Belgian elections may also help encourage voters to head to the polls.

Yet the decision to hold simultaneous elections also had a political motivation. Some political parties viewed the process as a unique opportunity to maximise their electoral results and their participation in government. Research has shown that major (and governing) parties typically obtain poorer results in



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so-called ‘second-order’ elections: mainly European and sub-national elections. Organising these elections on the same day as the federal election was therefore anticipated to generate better outcomes for Belgium’s largest parties. And as the election results in each vote were likely to be fairly similar, it was expected to make it easier for the winners to enter coalitions at all levels of government, with the losers consigned to opposition.

### Symmetry: a Belgian trademark

The concept of sister parties has been central to the Belgian political system. Political parties are traditionally classified into ‘party families’, such as the Christian democrats, liberals, socialists, and green party families. The members of these families are political parties that have certain ideological traits in common and share some programmatic priorities. Since the end of the 1970s, the Belgian party system has in turn been split into two subsystems: Dutch-speaking and French-speaking. Within each language group, two political parties often coexist within each family. These parties are generally referred to as the ‘sister parties’ of each other.

The main sister parties in Belgium are the socialists ([Socialistische Partij Anders](#) and [Parti Socialiste](#)), Christian democrats ([Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams](#) and [Centre démocrate humaniste](#)), liberals ([Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten](#) and [Mouvement Réformateur](#)) and Greens ([Groen](#) and [Ecolo](#)). These sister parties have a key role in Belgian political life, especially in times of government formation. The table below illustrates this picture.

**Table: Sister parties in Belgian politics**

<i>Party Family</i>	<i>Flemish Party</i>	<i>Francophone Party</i>
<b>Socialist</b>	Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)	Parti Socialiste (PS)
<b>Christian Democrat</b>	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH)
<b>Liberal</b>	Open Vld	Mouvement Réformateur (MR)
<b>Green</b>	Groen	Ecolo

**Note:** For more information on the parties see: [Socialistische Partij Anders \(sp.a\)](#), [Parti Socialiste \(PS\)](#), [Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams \(CD&V\)](#), [Centre démocrate humaniste \(cdH\)](#), [Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten \(Open Vld\)](#), [Mouvement Réformateur \(MR\)](#), [Groen](#), [Ecolo](#).

In Belgium, the traditional form for federal and regional governments is the coalition. Absolute majorities at these levels of power are extremely rare (the last single-party government was in 1958) and all regional and federal executives are now composed of at least two parties. But the main feature of the federal government in Belgium is the ‘symmetry’ in the selection of political parties that enter the federal cabinet. A symmetric government means that sister parties are together in the government or together in opposition. Indeed, cabinets often include an ‘extra’ party, which is not mathematically required to establish a coalition, simply to ensure the linguistic balance is preserved.

Since the linguistic split of the party system, sister parties have always been together in government or in opposition at the federal level. Regionalist parties have occasionally participated in these governments without their counterpart on the other side of the linguistic border, but it is difficult to speak of sister parties when dealing with the regionalist party family given these parties advocate either greater autonomy or outright independence for the Flemish or Francophone parts of the country.

On the Flemish side, the most important regionalist parties have been [Volksunie \(VU\)](#), which split into the [New-Flemish Alliance \(N-VA\)](#) and ‘[Spirit](#)’ in 2001. On the French-speaking side, the [Fédéralistes Démocrates Francophones \(FDF\)](#) and [Rassemblement wallon \(RW – ‘Walloon Rally’\)](#) have been the most significant. Among the only other examples of sister parties not serving together in government is Ecolo leaving the federal government in

May 2003, abandoning its sister party Groen (then called 'Agalev') for two months. This was largely explained, however, by a short-term strategy of the French-speaking green party, rather than by a desire to break up with its partner.

The importance of sister parties remained intact until the formation of Guy Verhofstadt's (Open Vld) interim government in 2007. This cabinet – which ultimately survived until 2010 – incorporated, among others, the francophone PS, while the socialists' Flemish sister party, the sp.a, remained in opposition. Even if this event could be partly explained by the political crisis of 2007 and the six months it took to form a federal government, this exception to the symmetry rule was nevertheless notable.

### **2014: the end of symmetry?**

Since 2014, doubts are no longer permitted about the demise of the sister party model. While one of the main objectives of the decision to hold simultaneous elections was the formation of parallel regional and federal cabinets, the direct result has effectively been to bring about an end to the symmetry between sister parties that had for so long defined the Belgian party system.

The move to simultaneous elections has facilitated intergovernmental relations between the regional and federal levels by harmonising coalitions, rather than encouraging inter-community dialogue between sister parties on either side of the linguistic border within the federal government. The end of symmetry after the 2014 elections was underlined by the Christian democrat party family, which had participated in almost all Belgian governments in the post-war period, becoming divided over the idea of joining the federal cabinet for the first time in its history. In the end the CD&V took up the challenge to stay in the federal cabinet, while the cdH decided to go into opposition.

After the green parties (2003), the socialists (2007) and the Christian democrats (2014), the liberal parties are now the last party family to have consistently respected the symmetry rule in the federal government. In all likelihood a new chapter of Belgian political history began in 2014, replacing the traditional rivalry between party families with a rivalry between political parties from the same language group, particularly when they sit together in regional and federal cabinets. Recent tensions that have emerged between the Flemish governing parties at the federal level may soon become the rule rather than the exception.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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### **About the author**

**Régis Dandoy** – *University of Louvain*

Régis Dandoy is a Belgian political scientist and currently Marie Curie Researcher at the Department for Political Science at the University of Louvain (UCL – Belgium). He is also visiting lecturer at the University of Brussels (ULB – Belgium).

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