

《Research Note》

The Consociational Democracy of Belgium at a Time of New Challenger Parties:

Taking the Cases of Flemish Interest (VB) and
New-Flemish Alliance (N-VA) as a Case Study

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Abstract

This research note discusses the transformation of consociational democracy in contemporary Belgium. The consociational democracy as one of the models of political systems, has become known widely mainly through the work of political scientist Arend Lijphart. Belgium, like the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria, has been regarded as a typical case of consociational democracy in empirical research of political science. Currently, however, the nature of Belgium's consociational democracy may be changing rapidly. In the first section of this article, the theoretical framework and current situation of academic research on consociational democracy are described. This section suggests that the study of consociational democracy has to be reexamined in terms of its contemporary effectiveness. The next section introduces previous research on the consociational democracy of Belgium. This section focuses specifically on the emergence of new challenger parties and the federalization of Belgium. Finally, this research note presumes the potential of two new challenger parties in Flanders, Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*: VB) and New-Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*: N-VA), to transform the consociational democracy of Belgium, which stands at a crossroads after the 2024 federal election.

Introduction

This research note examines the transformation of consociational democracy in contemporary Belgium. In particular, this article focuses on the new challenger parties, Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*: VB) and New-Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*: N-VA). As mentioned below, Belgium was considered by the political scientist Arend Lijphart to be a typical case of consociational democracy. However, based on observations of the party system in recent years, it can be inferred that the form of consociational democracy in Belgium is changing.

This article is structured as follows: the first section will summarize the current academic situation regarding consociational democracy. Second, we will examine the consociational democracy of Belgium as a political model, based on previous research. The final section of this article will review the political process of Belgium in recent years, including the 2024 federal election, and propose that new challenger parties may be transforming the consociational democracy of Belgium.

Consociational democracy: its present effectiveness as a political theory

“Consociational democracy” is one of the models of political systems. The term consociational democracy (or “consociationalism”) was publicized widely by the political scientist Arend Lijphart. This political system is characterized by four conditions—a grand coalition, a mutual veto rule, the proportionality of political benefits, and a high degree of internal autonomy for each social segment (Lijphart 1977: 25). In particular, the coordination between the elites of each segment plays a major role in this system (Lijphart 1977: 53). The notable point of consociational democracy, as Richard S. Katz explained is to “solve the problem of majority exploitation by abandoning the majority principle altogether, and replacing it with a system of mutual vetoes” (Katz 2006: 38). Furthermore, according to Henry Jarret, the function of consociationalism is not to form a common identity in one society but to manage conflict by bringing recognition and accommodation between all groups in a divided society (Jarret 2018: 51).

Consociational democracies have been transformed or have, more or less, rescinded their features. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria, for example, have been described as typical cases of consociational democracy (Lijphart

1977: 2). In recent years, however, a “de-pillarization” and/or the rise of anti-elitist right-wing populist parties have occurred in these countries (Andeweg et al. 2008: 107-108; Vatter 2016: 71). These political and social changes have made it difficult for mutual recognition and accommodation among elites to be maintained.

The consociational democracy of Belgium

From a Belgian political perspective, consociational democracy is considered to have been built on the interrelationship of political culture and institutions. In Belgium, parties corresponding to three “pillars” based on cleavage structures of society (cf. Lipset and Rokkan 1967) have long been at the center of politics—Christian, socialist, and liberal. Belgium is also characterized by the coexistence of groups using different languages—Dutch in the Flemish region, French in the Walloon region, both languages in Brussels, and a small German-speaking community. Kris Deschouwer argued that the consociationalism of Belgium is “*not a constant feature* [italics in original] of Belgian post-war politics,” but the political decisions adopted pragmatically by political elites whenever political crises deepened¹ (Deschouwer 2006: 898). As Yuusuke Miyauchi described it, the consensus among elites as a reflection of the political culture of Belgium has formed unique legal and political institutions. Furthermore, these institutions have also underpinned the political culture of Belgium (Miyauchi 2024a: 60).

In the space of a few decades, however, the consociational democracy of Belgium has also undergone continuous transformation. According to Emilie van Haute and Bram Wauters, although the mainstream (“pillar”) parties of Belgium still exercise mobilization from social segments as the base of their support in an electorate, these segments have tended to become smaller and they are struggling to extend it. In contrast, new challenger parties² have succeeded in maintaining or expanding their

¹ Deschouwer specifically pointed to the constitutional reform of 1970 as an important turning point in the political history of Belgium. This reform established Special Majority Laws and an “alarm bell procedure.” The former requires a two-thirds majority of all MPs and a majority of each language group to amend the Constitution. The latter is a legal provision whereby bills that are potentially harmful to the interests of each language group can be mutually suspended (Deschouwer 2006: 901-902).

² New challenger parties are several types of parties that have risen since the postwar period, mainly in Western Europe (Hino 2012; Van de Wardt et al. 2014). Airo Hino (2012) treats the new political parties, extreme right parties, and ethno-regionalist parties as new challenger parties. This article also discusses

party membership, and except for the Flemish regionalist New-Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*: N-VA, mentioned later), party activism tends to be strong (van Haute and Wauters 2019:22). Furthermore, Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps highlighted that the institutional and cultural foundations of Belgian consociational democracy had been hollowed out in social, economic, and political aspects (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2020: 44).

A significant context considered responsible for the previously mentioned points is the escalation of regional and linguistic conflicts and the federalization of Belgium. As Rudy B. Andeweg explained, the linguistic cleavage in Belgium has always been there and gradually became salient, leading to major political conflicts in the late twentieth century (Andeweg 2019: 417). After World War II, Flanders turned Wallonia around economically and grew more confident, while Wallonia became concerned about the weakening of its position (Deschouwer 2012: 39-40). After multiple rounds of negotiations, Belgium finally transitioned to a federal state in 1993, but there was no end to the conflict. Rather, from the perspective of the “paradox of federalism,” the federalization of Belgium further stimulated demands from autonomists (cf. Erk and Anderson 2010). Caluwaerts and Reuchamps argued that although the consociational democracy of Belgium, with federalism, has achieved conflict management, it has also made it difficult to reach an agreement for the future (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015: 291).

New challenger parties and the consociational democracy

While the consociationalism of Belgium has been in a difficult phase, the radical right Flemish Interest (the former Flemish Block [*Vlaams Blok*]) and regionalist N-VA (former People’s Union [*Volksumie*]: VU) have grown in successive years in Flanders since the 1990s. The separatist and populist party VB, which was officially formed in 1979, went on to promote its racist agenda in the 1980s, with the slogan “*eigen volk eerst!*” (own people first). Almost all other Belgian parties refused to cooperate politically with VB due to the 1993 “cordon sanitaire”³ (Dézé 2017: 570). However,

new challenger parties according to Hino’s typology.

³ Matthijs Boggards points to this as a historical aspect of the “militant democracy” against fascism and xenophobia in Belgium. Boggards calls Belgium the “militant consociational democracy.” (Boggards 2020: 189-190)

some researchers have pointed out that this “cordon sanitaire” is instead “ostracism” that has led to voter mobilization through VB (ex. Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009: 373).

N-VA is the most successful regionalist party over VB in Flanders and has secured the most seats at the federal level in Belgium from the 2010 federal election to the present day. N-VA has its origins in the right wing of VU, which was dissolved after losing voters’ support in the 1990s⁴. One of its most notable features is its insistence on the realization of “confederalism” in Belgium (van Haute 2019: 132). In its election manifestos since 2010, N-VA has been calling for the confederalization of Belgium⁵. However, N-VA has been limited to expressing ambiguous positions on immigration and refugee issues that VB is pushing to the forefront⁶ (Miyauchi 2024a: 142). The party is also not currently cooperating politically with VB in principle (van Haute 2019: 134). The nature of N-VA is a matter of debate among researchers, with some calling it the “successor party” of VU (Beyens et al. 2017), and others calling it “scientific” nationalism (Maly 2016).

It is important to consider the nature of N-VA. Miyauchi argues that N-VA is a “regional populist party”⁷. According to Miyauchi, N-VA did not deny communication with the mainstream parties and attempted to make a full-spectrum territorial demand

⁴ VU lost support from voters in inverse proportion to the rise of VB after “Black Sunday” in 1991. Miyauchi recounted that one of the important factors was that immigration and refugee issue, which VB strongly advocates, had the effect of being a “wedge issue” for VU (Miyauchi 2024a: 89-90). A wedge issue is an issue used to create inconsistency in an electoral platform of competitors (see also: Hillygus and Shields 2008; Van de Wardt et al. 2014).

⁵ Since 2010, N-VA has continued to demand in its election manifesto that the Belgian federal government adopt confederalism (N-VA 2010: 64-70; N-VA 2014: 73; N-VA 2019: 84-87). In the latest 2024 federal election manifesto, as in the past, N-VA made demands for the transfer of powers to confederal entities of Belgium (N-VA 2024: 46). In contrast to the view of N-VA, VB has been consistently negative about the adoption of confederalism in Belgium (ex. VB 2010: 6).

⁶ N-VA does not necessarily adopt an appeasement stance toward immigrants and refugees, as evidenced by its opposition to the participation of Belgium in the “Global Compact on Refugees.” (“Hoe de ‘Kamikazeregering’ op de Valreep dan toch nog Struikelde.” *Het Nieuwsblad*, December 19th, 2018, https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20181218_04044175. last visited: September 27th, 2024)

⁷ Other cases of regionalist movements and parties adopting populist strategies have been identified besides Flanders. For example, there are case studies on regionalist movements and parties of Catalonia (ex. Ruiz Casado 2020) and Northern Italy (ex. Tarchi 2002). There is, however, a more mainstream view among experts that finds a populist strategy or style in N-VA but does not treat it as a populist party (ex. Pauwels 2014; De Cleen and Van Aelst 2016; van Haute et al. 2018).

to them to adopt confederalism since the 2010 federal election. The party has also adopted an ambiguous stance on the immigration issues mentioned above while criticizing the mainstream parties and Wallonia harshly. This led N-VA to develop a distinctive counter-establishment strategy of setting up “enemies” but not ruling out the possibility of negotiating with those “enemies,” which Miyauchi refers to as “inter-elitism,” in contrast to VB, which adopts an anti-elitist strategy (Miyauchi 2024a: 141-144).

It can be presumed that the consociational democracy of Belgium is transforming with the rise of new challenger parties, VB and N-VA. Miyauchi, based on the election results of N-VA and VB up to the 2019 federal election, postulates that the consociational democracy of Belgium may have transformed into a three-way conflict between the mainstream parties, an anti-elitist VB, and the regional populist N-VA that seeks to become the “true” representative by using the opposition structure of both of these parties (Miyauchi 2024a: 147-149). As discussed above, the emergence

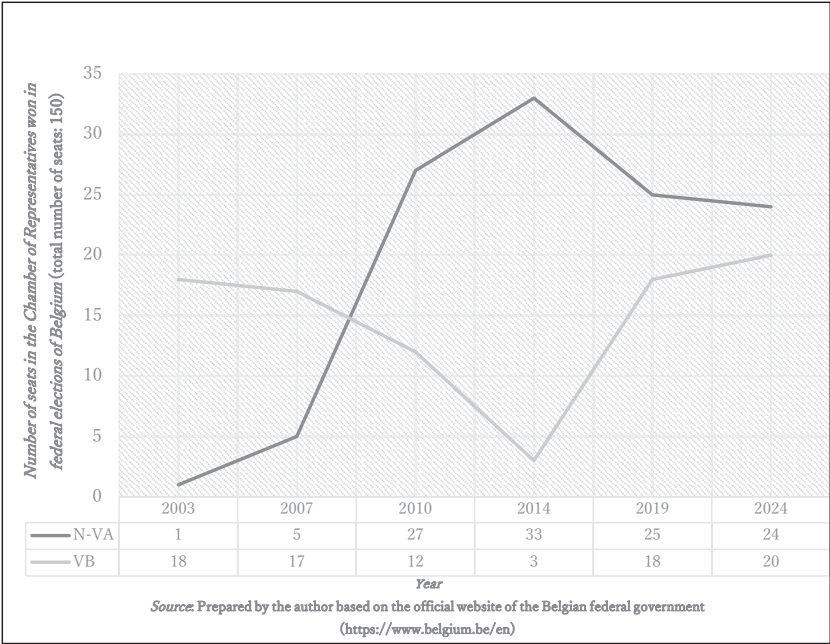


Figure 1: Seats won by N-VA and VB (since the 2003 federal election)

of new challenger parties has likely changed the nature of the consociational democracy of Belgium.

Despite the above discussion, it is very difficult to predict whether N-VA will remain the third political force of the Belgian consociational democracy after the 2024 federal election. Indeed, N-VA became the leading party in the 2024 federal election. However, the gap between N-VA and VB in the number of seats in the Chamber of Representatives has been closing gradually since the 2019 federal election (see Figure 1), partly because the sixth state reform and the 2016 Brussels bombing have changed the priorities among political issues (Miyauchi 2024b: 292). Negotiations after the 2024 federal election between the Francophone Catholics and liberals, the Flemish Catholics and social democrats, and N-VA, which have been considered candidates for the ruling coalition, have been extremely difficult⁸. In addition, according to the political scientist Bart Maddens, even if a coalition government led by N-VA were to be formed, it would be difficult to achieve the state reforms that N-VA desires⁹. Although the future of consociational democracy in Belgium is uncertain, there is no doubt that two of the new challenger parties will continue to play a major role in determining its fate.

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⁸ "Élections fédérales 2024: la fin de la coalition Arizona? 'Il n'y a pas d'alternative viable.'" *RTBF Actus*, August 23rd, 2024, <https://www.rtbf.be/article/elections-federales-2024-la-fin-de-la-coalition-arizona-il-n-y-a-pas-d-alternative-viable-11423880>, last visited: September 27th, 2024.

⁹ "Federal coalition puzzle can be solved quickly, but N-VA will have to make choices." *VRT NWS*, June 11th, 2024, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2024/06/11/_federal-coalition-puzzle-can-be-solved-quickly-but-n-va-will-h/, last visited: September 27th, 2024.

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