

Second edition of the Conference
Belgium: The State of the Federation
Louvain-la-Neuve, 18 October 2013

New Rules, New Political Class?

*Analysis of the Impact of the Electoral Reforms in Belgium
on the 2014 Elections and Aftermath.*

Abstract

At the eve of the 2014 “mammoth elections”, the Belgian electoral systems are in question. According to the eight parties having contributed to the sixth State reform, it is time for a “political renewal”. The agreement of October 2011 plans that the Senate will cease to be a permanent institution composed of directly elected senators. The latter will be instead replaced by regional MPs with dual offices. The agreement also provides the (principle of) vertical simultaneity between the regional, federal and European elections while it bans dual candidature and forces candidates to seat where they get elected. In the meantime, the Walloon Parliament has adopted the “anti-cumul” Decree, which limits the accumulation of local and parliamentary offices. This research note proposes therefore a global reflexion on the potential consequences resulting from these electoral reforms on the Belgian political class. We proceed in two steps. First, we detail which reforms could affect the political class. Second, we seek to evaluate which impact the reforms may have on the political class. We argue that the electoral reforms adopted for the 6th State reforms but also by the Walloon Parliament confirm and furthermore enhance an already pre-existing trend towards a territorial distinctiveness between the federal and the regional levels. The 2014 elections might become one of the key points of crystallization when political actors become aware of the existence of two distinct political arenas. Overall, the article anticipates the reshaping of Belgian politics in the run-up to 2014 and aftermath.

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Introduction

At the eve of the 2014 general elections, the Belgian electoral systems are in question. According to the eight parties having contributed to the sixth State reform, it is time for a 'political renewal'. Many measures aiming at reforming the electoral system will come into force at the occasion of the triple election of May 2014. The bicameral structure of the federal Parliament is modified, making way to a new Senate playing the role of the meeting point between the federated entities. The organisation of elections is also affected through changes in terms of timing of elections, possibilities to become simultaneously candidate at regional and federal elections as well as regarding the obligation to abandon one's office if elected at another level of government. Another major reform only concerns Wallonia where no more than 25 percent of the MPs of the Walloon Parliament will be allowed to combine their parliamentary office with a local executive office.

Looking at these reforms, one may wonder whether they could lead to a differentiated political class in Belgium. In this research note analysing the potential effects in the run-up and in aftermath of the 'mother of all elections', we argue that, even though the rules of the game have change, no major changes will happen as far as the characteristics of the Belgian political class are concerned. Despite the integrated Belgian political system, the trend is already towards a territorial distinctiveness between a regional and a federal political class. We consider that the reforms will lead to a reinforcement of those already pre-existing dynamics. In this respect, the strongest changes may actually occur at the cognitive level, when actors will integrate the idea of two separated political arenas.

The paper is structured as follows. We first introduce the concepts used in our research: what does 'political class' mean and how does it look like in Belgium? Then we describe concretely which reforms are to come into force in 2014, focusing on the measures potentially impacting on the political class. After having sketched the new rules, we elaborate on the impact we think these reforms may have on the Belgian political class.

1. Political class in Belgium

In Belgium, as in many advanced democracies, most representatives are professional politicians who belong to the political class. Mostly developed by Italian scholars at the end of the nineteenth century (see review of Von Beyme 1996), the concept of political class has subsequently gained significant conceptual and empirical status in political science thanks to German-speaking academics (Borchert and Golsch 1995; Herzog 1993; Von Beyme 1996)¹. This

¹ Until very recently, the term of political class was often substituted with the concept of political elites in political science (for the analytical distinction between these two

concept is linked to the process of professionalization described by (Weber 1946): traditional politicians who entered politics to 'live for politics' were gradually replaced by professionalized politicians who also 'live off politics'. In the latter case, political offices become jobs that provide a source of income, job security (career maintenance) and prospects for further promotion (career advancement on the political ladder). Following Borchert and Golsch (1995) translated by Stolz (2001: 82), it is "this collective interest of a regular income and the maintenance of the chosen professional career, that constitutes the political class". In addition to the existence of a common interest (structure), the notion of class furthermore requires the 'cognitive' and 'habitual' dimensions by which politicians start to *act* in favour of their common interest (agency) (Stolz 2001), irrespective of political parties, ideology, and social background (Burdeau 1975: 258). According to Borchert (2003: 4): "[t]his points back to Marx' distinction between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself', the former being 'objectively' defined, while the latter is a real actor (also cf. Beyme 1993: 156)".

Transposed to the context of multi-level systems, it remains to be assessed whether regionalism impacts the development of a political class and, if so, how. Along with the classic assumption of *social distinctiveness* by which professionalized politicians start to 'live off politics', we have to assess the impact of the *territorial distinctiveness* on the political class. The latter relates to the "homogeneity and autonomy of regional politicians, in relation to their national counterparts and to national institutions" (Stolz 2001: 84). In other words, assuming the professionalization of regional politics (social distinctiveness), do national institutions constitute the main target for regional politicians? If so, regional professionalized politicians form the 'regional part of national political class'. Alternatively, do politicians endeavour to pursue a regional professionalized career as a goal in itself? If this is the case then this particular career pattern leads towards the development of a genuine 'regional political class' separate from its national counterpart.

What is the structure of the political class in Belgium? Since the 1960s, the formerly Belgian unitary state has evolved into a federation. While the political class had mainly a national focus during until the 1990s the establishment of regional Parliament in 1995 with directly elected regional representatives introduced a new level for professional politics. Although local and European levels already presented some opportunities, they were barely seen as genuine spaces for professional careers while the national level was without a doubt the center of politics at that period. On the contrary, the introduction of regional Parliaments had the impact to challenge the territorial homogeneity of the Belgian Political class. Indeed, the latter were established under the pressure of strong Walloon regionalist and Flemish nationalist

concepts see K. Von Beyme, 'The Concept of Political Class: A New Dimension of Research on Elites?', *West European Politics*, 19/1 (1996), 68-87. 19 (1), 68-87.

movements. Ambitious candidates originated from those movements had therefore new structural opportunities to conduct professional careers at the level of government they fought to establish. On the other hand, candidates who still see the federal level Parliament and government as the center of Belgian politics could pursue a different political path. These two examples briefly mentioned illustrate the potential territorial distinctiveness upon the political class. The latter evolves now in multi-level structure of opportunity. At present, it is largely recognized that “professional political careers are no longer restricted to the federal (or national) level” (Borchert and Stolz 2011c: 108). Researchers have demonstrated that political trajectories are far from merely goal-oriented to the national level. Political careers develop in political systems where the distinct levels of government can be hermetic in relation to one another (the “alternative career pattern” in Quebec and Scotland), interconnected (the “integrated career pattern” in several Spanish and Belgian regions), dominated by the national level (the “classic springboard” in the US) or by the regional level (the “inverse springboard” for which empirical evidence is more ambiguous) (Stolz 2003). Until the first direct elections of the regional Parliaments in 1995, political careers and political class were understudied topics in the Belgian political literature (see De Winter and Brans 2003). Since the 2000s, there is however quite an enthusiastic interest in the Belgian research community for the study of political careers: (Fiers 2001; Pilet et al. 2007; Pilet and Fiers 2013; Vanlangenakker et al. 2013). A recent publication confirms the most salient feature of Belgian political careers: “there is a lot of mobility between the regional and the national parliaments, in both directions. Therefore, the integrated model fits the Belgian case best” (Vanlangenakker et al. 2013: 364). At this level of the research, we focus on Wallonia before extending our analysis to Flemish political careers.

Since 1999, 78 additional level-hopping movements are observed: 31 were conducted by MPs who left the Walloon Parliament to take a seat in the federal Parliament while 47 representatives moved in the opposite direction. Yet, many of those movements were conducted by a restricted number of politicians, namely 50 level-hoppers². Therefore, only a minority of them conducted most of the movements: 46 level-hopping movements (59.7 percent) are due to only 18 politicians (36 percent). Unsurprisingly, the remaining 18 individuals with multi-level careers are the ‘big names’ of politics. Except for three parliamentarians, they are ministers. In Belgium, the formation of the regional and national Governments implies indeed frequent ‘multi-level reshuffle’ and ministers are called at another level, depending on the electoral and political context of the moment (Dandoy and Dumont 2012). Therefore, even though Belgium has a strong integrated structure, the multi-level career pattern accounts for a minority of the overall Walloon politicians. On the opposite, we observe many politicians pursuing professionals career at a single level of government, be it the

² If we also include representatives with a former experience, but who did not resign their seat to move to another level, there are 55 politicians who moved only one time in total.

regional or the national career pattern. For this, not only level-hopping movements between political arenas has to be examined (vertical dynamics) but also movements within political arenas (horizontal movements) (Dodeigne, 2012).

In this regard, 115 politicians have spent their entire political career at single level of government for (at least) two legislative terms: there are 65 politicians with national careers and 50 politicians with regional careers. Two aspects of the duration of political careers can be controlled: the number of successful elections (or designations as government members) and the duration spent in office. An overwhelming majority of politicians with a national career (86.1 percent) presents at least three successful elections, and even half of them were elected after four electoral campaigns. The duration in office is however slightly shorter but does not cast doubt on the robustness of the national career pattern: on average, parliamentarians and government members stay in office for 13.4 years.

Similarly to their national colleagues, most of the 50 politicians who pursued a regional career were quite successful at the regional elections. A large majority of them were on average elected at least three times and they were in office during 12.8 years in Namur. The multi-level career pattern concerns only 19.6 percent of all the Walloon politicians examined. In this respect, the proportions of politicians with regional and national career patterns are very similar, namely 23.2 and 17.9 percent.

Coming back to Von Beyme's conceptualization of political class and political elites, career patterns in Wallonia tend to point towards the identification of a regional and a national (parliamentary) political class while there is a strong integrated political elites (government members and their collaborators are the key actors of the Belgian decision-making process). Our question is therefore: *do the new electoral reforms oppose, enhance or have simply no impact upon this trend?* To assess the structure of the political class in Belgium and the (potential) effects of the electoral reforms, we first review the major changes that will come into force for the 2014 elections.

2. New rules...

In December 2010 the Walloon government decided to narrow the entry door to the Walloon Parliament. By introducing a new decree³, they aimed at reducing the share of deputies holding concurrently their regional mandate and a local executive mandate.

In October 2011 eight parties – the six parties from the federal coalition and both green parties – managed to come to an agreement on the sixth State

³ *Décret limitant le cumul de mandats dans le chef des députés du Parlement wallon*, M.B., 22 December 2010, p. 81413

reform⁴. They agreed on some measures aiming at a more efficient federal State and at more autonomous federated entities. This necessitated revising the Constitution. The formal authorisation to revise the text has been published in the Monitor in April 2012⁵. Along the devolution of powers, the agreement also states that the bicameral structure of the federal Parliament will be reformed. Other measures relate to the organisation of both regional and federal elections.

These two reforms – launched in 2010 and 2011 – will be implemented for the first time at the occasion of the general elections of 2014. On 25 May 2014 three elections will indeed be held together. Seven⁶ assemblies will be renewed at the same time: the European Parliament, the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, the Walloon Parliament, the Flemish Parliament, the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community and the Parliament of the French-speaking Community. The mother of all elections is in herself a major political event, but adding the fact that important electoral reforms will be put in force from these elections onwards, makes this event even more interesting. The new measures presented above all potentially impact on the Belgian political class. We expect new dynamics to emerge. Before going deeper into the consequences of the reforms, we detail them in the next paragraphs.

2.1 Reforming the Senate: towards a Chamber of federated entities

Since 1831 and the Belgian independence the Belgian Parliament is made of two chambers: the Chamber of Representatives – the Lower House – and the Senate – the Upper House. Through the years the Senate's composition has been democratised, going from a House that was reserved in practice to notables towards a House almost only composed by directly elected MPs having to meet few requirements (being Belgian, enjoying his civil and political rights, being 21 years old and domiciled in Belgium)⁷.

The transformation of the Senate will thoroughly remould the political landscape of Belgium. The reform of bicameralism impinges all elected assemblies – at the federal level as well as at the level of the federated entities. On the one hand, the Chamber of Representatives is affected through the new distribution of competencies between both Chambers. On the other hand, the federated entities' assemblies will almost all have to send a – sometimes larger than before – part of their members to the Upper House.

⁴ *Accord institutionnel pour la sixième réforme de l'Etat : un Etat fédéral plus efficace et des entités plus autonomes*, 11 October 2011.

⁵ *Révision de l'article 195 de la Constitution*, M.B., 6 April 2012, p. 22095

⁶ In practice, three other assemblies will also be renewed: the Parliament of the COCOF (Commission communautaire française), the VGC (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie) and of the COCON (Commission communautaire commune).

⁷ Art. 69, Constitution

First and foremost, the reform intends to redistribute the federal competencies and the Senate will lose its permanent character⁸. There will no longer permanently be plenary sessions of the Senate. Rules of the Senate have to determine the number and the hypotheses when the Senate will have to gather. Accordingly, the Chamber will gain competencies since the normative role of the Senate will be restrained – i.e. some competencies will become unicameral while the Upper House will only hold an evocation right for some competencies in place of being equal to the Chamber. Because this paper aspires to focus on the political class, we do not go deeper in this dimension of the reform.

Second, the sixth State reform intends to reinforce the federalisation by modifying the Senate’s composition. Hence, the Senate has to evolve in order to cope with the traditional function of an Upper House, namely being the meeting point between the federated entities. Regions and Communities will get a reinforced access to participate in the political life at the federal level. Concretely the composition of the Senate is modified, decreasing its size from 71 to 60 senators while removing the 40 directly elected senators. As a consequence, the senators are differently categorised. Before the reform, there were three types of senators: directly elected senators, Community senators and co-opted senators. From the 2014 elections onwards, only two types of senators will be distinguished: senators of federated entities (new terminology for the previous ‘Community senators’) and co-opted senators. Besides the formal membership of ex officio senators (namely the King’s children) is removed.

Table 1: New composition of the Senate

Dutch-speaking group (35 senators)	
29	appointed by the Flemish Parliament within its members <i>at least 1 domiciled in the Brussels Capital Region</i>
6	co-opted by the Dutch-speaking senators
French-speaking group (24 senators)	
10	appointed by the Parliament of the French-speaking Community within its members <i>included 3 members of the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region among which 1 not member of the Parliament of the French-speaking Community</i>
8	appointed by the Walloon Parliament within its members
2	appointed by the French-speaking group of the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region within its members
4	co-opted by the French-speaking senators
German-speaking group (1 senator)	
1	appointed by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community within its members
Total	
60	

⁸ Modifications to the 44th article of the Constitution (12 July 2012)

A great deal of the Senate (five out of six, 83.3 percent) will be made of senators holding *de facto* concurrently a seat in their federated entity Parliament and in the federal Upper House. Before the reform, only a small third (29.6 percent) was in this situation. Regarding the co-opted senators, the situation remains the same as before the reform. If we take the perspective of the Parliaments of the federated entities, almost all will see a great difference in terms of the share of deputies sent to the Senate. About one fourth (23 percent) of the Flemish Parliament will be designated to seat in the Senate (against 8 percent before the Reform). The Parliaments of the Walloon Region as well as of the Brussels Capital Region did previously formally not send deputies to the Senate⁹. Further to the reform, 10 percent of the Walloon deputies and 4 percent of the Brussels deputies will seat in the Upper House. However, the Parliament of the French-speaking Community and these of the German-speaking Community will send the same proportion of deputies than before the reform (respectively about 10 percent and 4 percent)¹⁰.

Because of this deep reform of the Senate's composition, the legislation had to be adapted. We explain first how this has changed for the senators from the federated entities and next for the co-opted senators. We then detail how rules regarding gender have to be adapted to the new situation.

First of all changes are made to rules concerning the senators from the federated entities – with respect to incompatibilities and distribution. Rules regarding incompatibilities between some functions are thus modified. From 2014 elections onwards the function of member of a Community or Region Parliament is incompatible with a seat in the federal Chamber. Moreover these deputies cannot be co-opted by the senators. This limits the presence of deputies from the federated entities' Parliaments at the federal level to 50 senators. Next, the distribution of seats across political parties is calculated on the basis of the results of the federated entities' elections – apart from the German-speaking senator, elected by his Parliament at the absolute majority of expressed votes. For the Dutch-speaking group, seats are allocated according to the Flemish Parliament elections. An electoral threshold of one seat minimum in the Flemish Parliament is established to enter the Senate. The calculation is more sophisticated for the French-speaking group given the several Parliaments involved. The lists' electoral numbers at the elections for the Walloon Parliament

⁹ In practice however some members of the regional Parliaments were sent to the Senate thanks to their affiliation to the Parliament of the French-speaking Community.

¹⁰ As far as the linguistic groups are concerned, no large difference is to be notified. The Dutch-speaking (+0.59 percent) and German-speaking (+0.26 percent) groups, as well as the senators from Brussels (+0.14 percent), slightly win in terms of percentages whereas the French-speaking group loses a little share of the Senate's seats (-0.85 percent). However, an interesting change resulting from the reform is that the German-speaking senator will not anymore be taken into account when calculating the quorum in each linguistic group. This senator will not belong to any linguistic group whereas before the reform he was sometimes taken into account, and sometimes not.

and for the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region are added up. A party can enter the Senate if he has obtained at least one seat in the Walloon Parliament, in the French-Community Parliament and in the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region within its French-speaking group.

The legislation regarding co-opted senators is also modified to cope with the reform of the bicameralism. The senators from the federated entities, within each linguistic group, designate 10 co-opted senators (the same number of candidates has to be presented, not more). Seats are allocated according to results at the federal elections (i.e. the Chamber)¹¹. The 6 Dutch-speaking senators are divided up among political parties on the basis of the results in Flanders and in Brussels. The 4 French-speaking senators are designated with respect to votes' results in Wallonia, in Brussels as well as in the administrative arrondissement of Hal-Vilvorde (so as to take into account the French-speaking citizens living in this area). Political parties' electoral results are calculated thanks to the so-called correspondence statements – on which parties have to declare that lists presented in different electoral constituencies belong to them.

The law has also to adapt regarding the equal representation of women and men in the Parliament. As senators will not anymore be elected as candidates on a list, it is not anymore possible to introduce a gender quota, as it is the case for the other elections (where half of the list has to be from each sex and where the first two positions must be allocated to persons from different sexes). Accordingly the reform introduces reserved seats instead of legislative quotas (see Krook, 2009). The law proposal stipulates that the Senate cannot count more than two-thirds of senators from the same gender. However the implementation of this article seems to be complicated without further specification of the working plan. The legislative section of the Council of State¹² (the body consulted in the law-making process to provide legal advices to the Legislator) emphasized this problem in its advice. The State Councillors argue that the law proposal does not contain measures aiming at guaranteeing or at favouring the proper execution of the rule. They suggest setting up a consultation mechanism between the assemblies and linguistic groups so as to respect the gender equilibrium.

By way of wrap-up, the reform of the bicameralism in Belgium mainly impacts the Senate. Not only does the Upper House lose most of its current powers to the benefit of the Chamber of representatives but its permanent character also disappears. The most visible change is the suppression of directly elected senators. Senators will be either designated by the Parliaments of the

¹¹ This leads to the fact that senators will differ financially speaking. The senators from the federated entities will financially depend on the federated entity level that will also hold the power to determine the level of the allowance. Co-opted senators will remain paid by the Senate's allowance. This could lead to differentiated allowances depending on the type of senator.

¹² 'Avis du Conseil d'Etat', 52.268/AG to 52.272/AG (20 November 2012)

federated entities (all send deputies to the Senate) or co-opted by the senators from their linguistic group. The allocation of seats across parties is made on the basis of the results at the regional elections. Besides, a one-third quota is introduced thanks to the method of reserved seats.

2.2 Reforming the organisation of regional and federal elections

Next to the reform of the Upper House, some other measures included in the sixth State reform will affect the organisation of elections. The duration of the federal legislative term is modified – what induces impact upon the vertical and horizontal concurrences of elections in Belgium (Fabre, 2010). Next, dual candidacy is forbidden: a candidate cannot run at different elections at the same time. Further, candidates will have to strictly respect the results of elections because they will be forced to seat where they have been elected the last time.

Timing of elections

Until now legislative terms are not harmonised in Belgium¹³. Therefore, there is a systematic horizontal occurrence (regional and European elections are held on the same day) but a rare vertical concurrence (when federal and regional elections occur on the same day). Nowadays, the federal legislative term lasts four years while the regional/Community term is of five years – the same duration as the European Parliament. The sixth State reform aims at bringing the federal legislative term up to five years – allowing vertical simultaneity. Moreover the legislator intends to link the elections for the Chamber with the election of the European Parliament. In case of anticipated elections, the duration of the new legislature cannot last beyond the first election of the European Parliament. In other words, federal and European elections will always occur on the same day. On 25 May 2014 the three levels will hold elections simultaneously. Given the harmonisation of the legislative terms, the simultaneity of elections could occur each time from 2014 onwards. However the reform provides an opportunity not to have the recurrence of simultaneous elections. An exemption can be made for the simultaneity of the regional and European elections and, therefore, of the federal elections. That is to say that the regional level can decide to modify the legislative term and the timing of elections – letting open the possibility of electoral dissimilarity, distinct regional elections and/or regional and federal elections being organized at different dates.

¹³ Another measure aims at harmonizing the different levels. Until 2014, the federal level indeed differs from the others by the minimal age to be entitled to enter the assembly. The federal deputies cannot be younger than 21 years old whereas at other levels the limit is at 18 years old – i.e. the voting age. From the next elections onwards, most of the senators will come from the assemblies of the regional and community level. The reform aims therefore to copy the age limit from the federated entities level on the Senate and – in order to harmonize both Chambers of the federal Parliament – on the Chamber.

Dual candidacy

A major aspect of the reform relates to the interdiction of dual candidacy. Concretely, candidates faced until the reform two restrictions in terms of candidacy. They could not run on different lists in a same constituency and they could not run in different constituencies for the same electoral level. Now rules regarding the accumulation of candidatures go one step further¹⁴. First, candidates cannot be at the same time on the effective and on the substitute candidates' lists. Second and more importantly, candidates cannot run for regional elections if they already run for the federal elections. This measure applies *de facto* only if elections are held on the same day. These two measures involve that a single candidate's name will only be on one ballot paper: at the regional or at the national (or European) level and either on the main or on the substitute list.

'Seat where you get elected'

Candidates' possibilities in terms of candidacy will also be constrained by a new rule¹⁵ involving the obligation to seat in the last assembly where they have been elected. In other words, a regional MP that runs at the federal elections will have to, if elected, abandon his regional seat to take the federal one instead. There will no longer be the possibility for a regional MP to be replaced by a substitute candidate at the federal level. The measure applies also to regional MPs that did not seat anymore because of an executive mandate either at the regional or at the federal level. They will also lose their regional seat if elected at the federal level. Nevertheless, in the hypothesis of vertical concurrence (regional and federal elections occurring the same day), this measure serves of course no purpose.

2.3 Reforming the regional office in Wallonia: anti-cumul Decree

Another reform that will impact upon the structure of the political class from May 2014 onwards concerns the anti-cumul Decree passed by the Walloon Parliament. At the moment this is the only Parliament having introduced such a legal provision. Concretely, the new regulation forbids three quarters of each political group to combine the mandate of Walloon deputy with an executive mandate at the local level (mayor, alderman or CPAS/OCMW chairman). In practice, that is to say that no more than 25 percent of all Walloon deputies of each political group will be authorised to hold concurrently a local mandate and their regional mandate.

¹⁴ 'Projet de loi spéciale modifiant la législation électorale en vue de renforcer la démocratie et la crédibilité du politique', 9 July 2012, art. 4

¹⁵ *Idem*, art. 3

The Decree foresees how to allocate the authorisations to hold concurrently both mandates. In each political group (i.e. political party) it applies to the first quarter of elected candidates in terms of ‘electoral penetration rate’. The latter is obtained by dividing the number of nominative votes obtained by the candidate by the number of valid votes in the electoral constituency. In other words accumulation of local and regional offices will be granted to the candidates being the most strongly supported by voters. These measures are effective throughout the whole legislative term – i.e. if a deputy takes an oath as mayor/alderman during the legislature, he has to give up his Walloon seat.

Even though the decree has been published in 2010, it will only come into force at the first renewal of the Walloon Parliament – i.e. May 25, 2014. Besides a provisional measure applies for the period between the first regional elections and the next local elections – from May 2014 until October 2018. Deputies having a local executive mandate can declare being impeded for one of the two mandates. If he decides to keep the local mandate, the first candidate on the substitute list takes up the place until the elected candidate stops the local mandate.

3. New rules, new political class?

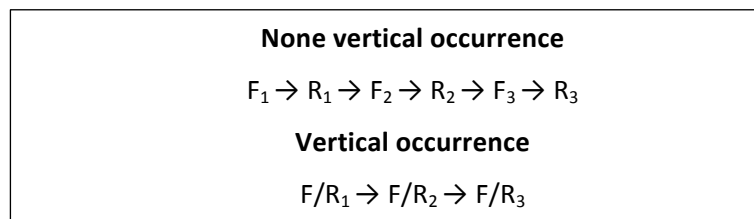
These changes in the Belgian institutional and electoral systems may not be without consequences for the development of political class in Belgium. The next sections provide some reflexions about the potential consequences reforms coming into force in 2014. We carry out our analysis along three main measures. We first explore the impact of the vertical simultaneity of elections arguing that this will reinforce the distinctiveness between the federal and regional political arenas. Then we elaborate on the consequences of the interdiction of dual candidacy and of the measure ‘seat where you get elected’. These rules will force political actors to strictly choose between levels of government. Finally we analyse the influence of the reforms on the assemblies. We expect the Chamber to face great pressure while the Senate to become less attractive.

3.1 Timing of elections

Timing of elections is not just a matter of mere dates and calendars in multi-level systems. Vertical co-occurrence of regional and federal elections “may contribute to either encouraging symmetry between the state-wide and regional party systems and the stability of electoral cycles or, on the contrary, facilitating the divergence between state-wide and regional electoral cycles and politics” (Fabre, 2010:175). As such, electoral cycle has a direct potential impact upon the territorial distinctiveness of professional careers. At first glance, when regional and federal elections are synchronized, it tends to facilitate convergence between regional and national elections. Some may thus assume that the simultaneity of both elections reinforces the integrated structure of the Belgian political system. For some aspects, it is indeed very likely that we observe a coordination of

candidates' recruitment, the development of an 'integrated' electoral campaign, etc. Yet, in terms of development of professional careers and political class, the simultaneity of elections may on the contrary reinforce the distinction between two distinct regional and federal political arenas. Indeed, when regional and federal elections take place at different days in time, it multiplies the possibility of moving from a level to another. While level-hopping movements also appear when elections are synchronized, the number of possibilities to move between levels is far more limited. This is illustrated in the below figure.

Figure 1 : Inter-territorial 'doors' in the case of (none-) vertical occurrence



Key: *F1= first Federal elections; R2= second regional elections, etc.*

When three regional and national elections take place at distinct dates, we observe already five inter-territorial corridors that account for as much possibilities for level-hopping movements. On the other hand, there are only two inter-territorial corridors if regional and federal elections occur on the same date. Of course, when regional and federal elections are synchronized, regional MPs still have the possibility to become candidates at the next national elections and vice-and versa for national MPs. Yet, as we previously observed, most parliamentarians in Belgium conduct national and regional careers at a single level of government. This is mostly minister who move between two elections. Besides, parliamentarians who actually moved do not seek to move at each election: they just started at the level of government where an office was accessible. In the intra-party Belgian competitive environment, where the highest and safest places on the list have to be seized when the opportunity arises, it is less vital for candidates to start their parliamentary life where they aim to stay but where they can enter first¹⁶. After 2014, with the introduction of occurrence between regional and national elections, we expect that it would be 'easier' for candidates to directly start at the desired position, be it regional or federal office¹⁷. Counter-intuitively, the direct consequence of the co-occurrence of elections is that the division between political arenas will be enhanced for the future (in terms of career patterns).

¹⁶ As long as these candidates have the favour of their selectorate, it remains always possible to move later on to another level of government

¹⁷ Due to intra-party competition, it is nonetheless likely that several candidates do not obtain a safe place on the list for the level of government they applied for.

3.2 ‘Seat where you get elected’

The new electoral rules provide that incumbents who are candidates and get elected at another level of government automatically step down from their last office. In other words, it entails that ‘you must take the office where you get elected’ or you simply become out of office. As double candidacy (being simultaneously candidates for the regional and federal elections) will be forbidden, this nonetheless applies only in the case of non-vertical simultaneity between regional and federal elections¹⁸. Still, this rule has potential key effects on the choice of incumbents MPs to become candidates at another level of government. Since the introduction of direct regional elections in 1995, it is indeed common to observe national MPs who are candidates at the regional elections and vice-and-versa for regional MPs at national elections. According to (Vanlangenakker et al. 2010), 42.7 to 77.4 percent of regional Flemish MPs were candidates at the national elections since 2003 whilst there were 38.7 to 49.3 percent of regional Walloon MPs running for national elections over the same period. As regional MPs can be electoral candidates at national elections without having to resign first, they constitute a strategic asset for the party’s electoral campaign. This becomes obvious when we look at the actual number of candidates moving from a level to another: only a small proportion of these national MPs who were actually elected at the regional level actually decided to take up their regional office. After the 2007 federal elections, up to nine Flemish regional MPs decided – or the political parties decided for them – not to move where they get elected¹⁹.

With the introduction of the new electoral regulation, such multi-level candidacy will become more risky. Indeed, regional/national MPs who seek to pursue a regional/national career would find hazardous to lose their current office by becoming candidates at the federal elections. As the goal of such candidacy is to attract more party’ votes with popular candidates, there is always a probability (because of preferences votes) to get elected even if they are positioned lower on the party list. Although it will certainly affect only a small proportion of MPs and candidates, overall this rules enhances the territorial distinctiveness of the Belgian electoral competition. From now, candidates are not just candidates to increase party’s vote at any other level. This new regulation underlines the fact that the regional and the federal levels become a little more two separate political arenas.

3.3 Anti-cumul Decree at the Walloon Parliament

So far, we focused on the territorial distinctiveness of political careers between the federal and the regional political arenas. In Wallonia, this territorial

¹⁸ And this non-vertical occurrence would be the exception, not the norm after 2014 (see above).

¹⁹ A *substitute* candidate took their office instead.

distinctiveness goes one step further by drawing another territorial division – this time between the local and the regional political arenas. Despite the increasing score of regional authority since the process of devolution started, the Walloon Parliament remained long negatively perceived as a second-order division and described by some as a large ‘municipal’ or ‘provincial’ assembly (where the local and sub-regional interests often prevail on the regional interest). As collected during interviews, many regional MPs who accumulated a local office do not hide the fact that their personal ambition is to represent their municipalities’ interest in Parliament. This has to be explained by a combination of several factors. Firstly, the scope of the regional powers covers primarily local and daily powers very similar to mayor and alderman’s political interest: environment, urbanization, etc. Secondly, a large amount of resources allocated to finance local public policies are granted by regional administration and Walloon MPs can influence the amount of resources granted to their municipalities. Finally, political parties largely rely on those local popular regional MPs to increase their votes. At the Walloon elections, electoral districts are geographically restricted while the semi-open system is used permitting individual votes. The last two aspects favour candidates with a pork-barrel propensity.

The introduction of the new regulation directly and strongly impact the kind of candidates recruited for the Walloon regional elections. Due to the reform, the Walloon Parliament will be composed by no more than 25 percent of popular Walloon MPs having strong local ties (because of their local executive mandate) and of 75 percent of deputies holding no executive local mandate. Since the Walloon Parliament will be mainly made of deputies holding no local executive mandate, in theory they will be 100 percent devoted to their work within this assembly²⁰. Only one fourth of the Parliament will have another major political mandate. Even though deputies may still have other professional activities than their mandate of deputy, we foresee the reform to limit activities diverting deputies from their work – thus in turn increasing the professionalization of the Walloon Parliament.

3.4 New Senate and greater candidacies on the Chamber

In terms of political careers, the first and most important change is the drastic reduction of federal offices: not less than 40 directly elected senatorial seats will disappear. Therefore, for incumbent senators who spent mostly their political life at the federal level and who still want to conduct a federal career, the choice is twofold. Firstly, they could get elected at the regional level and seek to be designated as senators of the federated entities in the new Senate. This scenario is yet little realistic for two reasons: One the one hand, the new composition of

²⁰ Yet, Walloon regional MPs are also members of the French-speaking Community Parliament. We here underline that they will be devoted 100 percent at the regional/community level in contrast to regional MPs with additional local offices.

the Senate introduces, or at least enhances, some of the confederal features that already exist in the Belgian consociational federalism. For incumbent federal MPs fuelled by a Belgian-federal spirit, this might refrain their ambition to pursue their career in the Upper House. On the other hand, ambitious candidates may see this Senate as a not very professional assembly regarding the scope of competences (much fewer after 2014). We thus expect that most of federal senators who seek to get reelected will either be regional candidates or candidates at the Chamber of representatives.

In this respect, the reduction of senatorial offices combined to the effects the anti-cumul Decree might put the candidacies for the Chamber under great pressures for Walloon candidates. Given the two measures, candidates may evaluate pros and cons of both levels – and a certain type of candidates may opt for the federal level. This is especially the case for candidates willing to keep their local executive mandate. A seat in the Chamber will remain allowed for the *cumulards* whereas only one fourth of the Walloon Parliament will be authorised to keep a local mandate along their regional mandate. But the federal level will in particular be attractive for local executive office holders traditionally gathering less personal votes than other candidates. These candidates may want to choose to run at federal elections because there is at this level no rule involving the specific counting of personal votes. They therefore run no risk to be forbidden to seat because of the one-fourth quota. The federal level will thus be potentially more attractive for not so popular *cumulards*.

Conclusion

In this research note, we aimed at presenting and discussing the potential effects of the electoral reforms upon the territorial development of political class in Belgium. First, we argued that despite the current integrated Belgian political arena, there is already a trend towards a split between two separate political regional and federal arenas. Indeed, level-hopping movements are strongly limited to a specific kind of professional politicians (namely, ministers) whereas there is clear distinction between regional and federal professional careers of parliamentarians at these two levels.

In this respect, we consider that the electoral reforms adopted for the 6th State reforms but also by the Walloon Parliament confirm and furthermore enhance this trend towards a territorial distinctiveness. In particular, the synchronization of regional, federal (and European) elections will limit in the future the possibilities of level-hopping movements while the interdiction of dual candidacy make a clear distinction between levels of government. Although the absence of co-occurrence of regional and federal elections remain possible (regional Parliaments have the legal authority to modify the regional legislative term), the introduction of the new rule ‘seat where you get elected’ limits and prevents multi-level candidacy for incumbents MPs. Finally, the anti-cumul

Decree in Wallonia furthermore draw an additional boundary between the local and the regional levels by introducing a limit of 25 percent of regional Walloon MPs authorized to accumulate their local executive office (be it Mayor, alderman or CPAS/OCMW chairman) with their parliamentary mandate.

Of course, the integrated nature of the Belgian system will not suddenly vanish and it is very likely that coordinated candidates' recruitment or a single electoral campaign will be observed in the case of simultaneous regional and federal elections. Yet, all these new electoral rules confirm and enhance the territorial division of professional careers in Belgium. This of course has to be explained by the larger process of devolution that aims at giving more autonomy to Regions and Communities. But this process might also be observed in terms of career patterns. Especially, we consider that the introduction of the new regulations communicate key information to political actors in terms of boundaries between levels. As Borchert and Stolz say, this is "actors' perception and interpretation of specific institutional configurations that shape career patterns rather than individual features of the polity" (Borchert and Stolz 2011: 282). In the future, the 2014 elections might become one of the key point of crystallization when political actors recognize and reproduce career patterns according to which regional and federal levels constitute increasingly two distinct political arenas.

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