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## **Exporting Ethnic Divisions? The Political Participation of Belgian Citizens Abroad**

The Belgian emigrants' political participation in home country politics is an issue that has undergone several important developments since the end of the 1990s but has surprisingly been subject to very little research. In comparison, the topic of the political participation of foreigners living in Belgium has been very well documented through different works on the socio-political mobilization of emigrants (Martiniello, 1992) the extension of franchise to non-citizens (Jacobs, 1999) and the development of ethnic politics in certain areas of the country (Martiniello, 1998).

How can we explain the discrepancy between the study of non-citizens' political participation and that of Belgian citizens residing abroad? One hypothesis is that Belgians abroad have never occupied a central position in the Belgian political agenda for two main reasons. First, Belgian authorities have expressed very little interest in reaching out to their citizens abroad despite the fact that Belgium has one of the highest emigration rate in Europe according to Eurostat data (4.7/1000) and has over 300,000 of its citizens currently residing abroad in a country that has barely more than 10,000,000 inhabitants. The absence of interest is visible in the absence of formal mechanism of consultation between the emigrants and the federal authorities, the lack of financial support to the few existing emigrant associations, the delays in the adoption of the external voting and the dual nationality laws and the lack of proper instruments to register efficiently citizens abroad until 2002. Second, the Belgian emigrants themselves have manifested limited interest in organizing themselves along national lines as demonstrated by the limited number of Belgian emigrants' associations. Also, the two main emigrant associations have traditionally focused their contacts with the home country authorities on requesting timidly legislative and administrative modifications to the benefits of citizens abroad in the field of taxation, social security, nationality law and access to voting rights.

The absence of the issue of emigration from the Belgian political agenda combined with the limited engagement of this population with the home country thus stands for the absence of research on the topic. The lack of academic interest, in turn, has favoured the development of two major stereotypes in Belgium with respect to the political preferences of citizens residing abroad. One is that the Belgian population abroad would tend to be more favourable to right-wing parties than the average Belgian citizens. This stereotype has long explained why the Francophone liberal party (PRL later called MR) has been most active in supporting the enfranchisement of citizens abroad for legislative elections. The second stereotype, to which we will devote most of our attention in this article, supposes that Belgians abroad would be unaffected by the political tensions opposing Flemish and Francophone political parties in Belgium over the past decade. These tensions have since World War II led to several reforms of the unitary state until the 1993 reform instituted the federal

organization of the state that grants significant autonomy to the regions in different policy areas. After the 2010 elections, the tensions between Flemings and Francophones has reached with the former's demand to further increase the autonomy of the regional entities facing the latter's resistance to engage in a new state's reform. This situation has prevented the formation of any government for a year and has forced the outgoing government to stay in power with limited power of initiative.

Despite the fact that over the past forty years Belgian politics have been increasingly dominated by the ethnic tension between Flemings and Francophones, the stereotype that Belgians abroad would be unaffected by these developments has remained. The idea that the evolution towards greater regional autonomy defended by political parties (with more intensity in Flanders than in French-speaking Belgium) would not find echo among Belgians abroad is thus very prevalent and is still frequently propagated by the press. In this article, I however question this idea that the political opinions of Belgians abroad would be unaffected by the evolution of the ethnic conflict between Flemings and Francophones and argue instead that the evolution of the ethnic conflict has led to the parallel division of the Belgian **political** opinion abroad. Belgian emigrants are not more supportive of the Belgian unitary state model than Belgian citizens residing in Belgium.

To support this argument, I will proceed to the following analysis. After a brief presentation of the socio-demographic profile of the Belgian emigrant population, I first proceed to a discussion on the creation of the two main Belgian emigrant associations to demonstrate how the tension between Flemings and Francophones was a crucial variable in the creation and development of these organizations. Second, I discuss the adoption of the two external voting laws to illustrate how the anticipated impact of emigrant voters has steered controversies on the territorial border between Flemish and French-speaking areas of Belgium. This situation, I argue, has contributed to further the distinction between Flemish and French-speaking Belgians abroad. Third, comparing the evolution of national legislative elections in 2003, 2007 and 2010, I argue that the success of Flemish nationalist parties in Flanders has followed a similar pattern among Flemish voters abroad.

In terms of methodology, this paper relied on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2011. It includes the analysis of the archives of the two main Belgian emigrant associations as well as semi-directed interviews with several of their leaders. With respect to the external voting debate, the analysis of the press and parliamentary minutes and the conduct of interviews with Belgian senators and MPs have shed light on the triangular connection between the external voting issue, the issue of the right to vote of foreigners residing in Belgium and the ethnic tension between Flemings and French-speakers. Finally, I analyse data of the Belgian Interior and Foreign Affairs ministries on the political participation of emigrants in the 2003, 2007 and 2011 legislative elections and illustrate the impact of the ethnic tensions on the emigrants political opinions with different quotes selected from the 23 interviews conducted with Belgian emigrants in New York City in the period immediately preceding and following the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010 election.

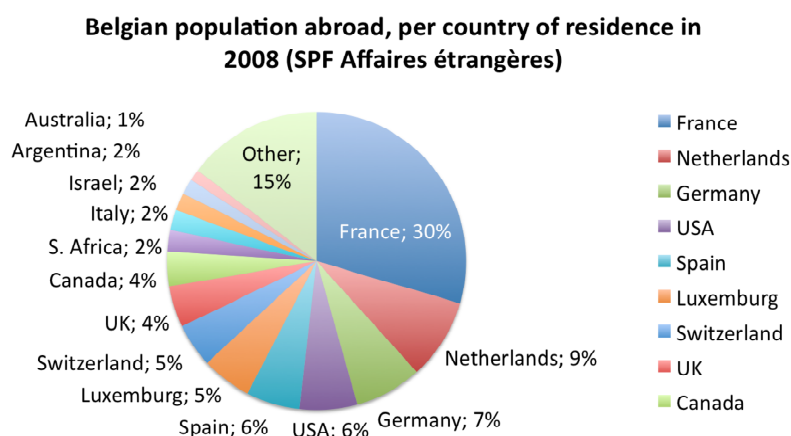
## **1. A socio-demographic description of contemporary Belgian emigration**

As underlined by Morelli (1998) in one of the few books that have touched upon this issue, emigration has been erased out of Belgian history. It appears that neither the Flemish nor the Walloon authorities find it relevant today to acknowledge the fact that, from the Belgian independence in 1830 until 1919, Belgium was facing more out-migration than in-migration. Nonetheless, the only official references to these old migration waves tend to glorify this past by referring to specific examples that are considered as “success stories” such as those of Walloons who migrated to Sweden or the Flemish who settled in South Africa. These examples obviously neglect the fact that the majority of Belgians who left the country during this period did so because they were forced to do so for socio-economic reasons (Petillon, 1998). The fact that around 500,000 Belgians were living in France in 1890 (working mainly in the textile industry) when the country only counted 6,000,000 inhabitants at the time is quite telling in this regard (Stengers, 1980). A similar malaise surrounds the history of the Belgian presence in the former colony of the Congo. Even though the Belgians had always considered Congo as a colony of exploitation rather than a colony of settlement, the authorities wanted white citizens to occupy key positions there. After a pro-active policy of the Belgian state to limit the influx of non-Belgian migrants into the colony, Belgian represented almost 80% of the 115,000 Whites living there on the eve of independence in 1960 (Foutry, 1998).

Whether or not the lack of interest of Belgian authorities for the country’s emigration is caused by its difficulty to deal with some darker chapters of its history, Belgium has long lacked the proper tools to collect data on its population abroad. Indeed, the statistics of the Belgian National Statistical Institute (INS) relying on municipal population registries have long suffered from the practice of many emigrants of not declaring to their municipality that they are leaving the country. Yet, this limited data inform us that around 10,000 Belgians have left the country yearly since World War II and this figure had almost doubled at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Out of these new Belgian emigrants population, a small majority were men (54.2%) and the modal age to leave Belgium is 26 years old. To our particular interest, we observe large regional discrepancies in terms of migration decisions for the emigration rate reaches 11/1000 in Brussels (a bilingual region that at least 70% francophone according to most conservative estimate), 5.7/1000 in Wallonia and 3.37/1000 in the most populated region that is Flanders. This data indicates that the Francophone population abroad has been growing faster than the Flemish one in the past years which, as we shall see, has had consequences on the perception of the emigrant population by political parties.

To determine where Belgian emigrants move, we can make use of the registries that each Belgian consulate is obliged to hold since 2002. While this registration facilitates administrative contacts and is a condition to register as a voter from abroad, the registration at the consulate is not an obligation for citizens abroad. As shown in Figure 1, around half of the 316,703 Belgians registered abroad in 2008 were living one of the six following destination countries: the four neighbouring countries (Netherlands, Luxemburg, Germany and France), Spain and the United States. In order to understand the significance of the Belgian presence in the neighbouring countries, we should also mention that a non-quantifiable number of Belgians commute to work in one of these countries every day.

Figure 1. Belgian emigrants' main countries of destination (1st July 2006)



Source: SPF Affaires étrangères (2006) Statistieken bevolking 2006 - 01/07/2006 (not published).

## 2. Belgian emigrants' associations: Ethnicity as a factor of mobilization abroad

Historically, Belgian migrants' associations were quite common in countries like France, Canada, the United States and the former Belgian Congo. These associations were usually concerned with maintaining their Belgian identity abroad and with questions of integration into the host country. They were organized on a local or national basis in the country of residence and, until the 1960s, they had little transnational connections and no strong presence in the home country. Nonetheless, some of these associations such as the "Confédération des sociétés belges et franco-belges de France" had sporadically addressed specific demands to Belgian authorities concerning the access of emigrants to social and political rights in Belgium.

The creation of *België in de Wereld* (BIW, or Belgium in the World) in 1963 marked a turning point in the representation of Belgian emigrants in the home country. The roots of this association lay in the former Belgian Congo, Flemish migrants created two magazines in Flemish (*Band* in 1942 and *Zuiderkruis* in 1955) to respond to the absence of publication in that language in the colony. These magazines, run by Flemish intellectuals started a dynamic of affirmation of the Flemish identity abroad. The political implications of those magazines were important considering that key positions in the colony, and more generally, most positions of power in Belgium were occupied by French speakers. Since the 19th century, Belgium had indeed been a country ruled administratively, economically and politically in French with little consideration for the Flemish culture. French speakers in the Congo accordingly did not see the creation of these magazines with a positive eye.

With the independence of the Congo in 1960 and the subsequent repatriation of thousands of Belgians, several founders of the two magazines decided to provide social and psychological support to the returnees. They subsequently set up their office in Brussels and expanded their goals to "the promotion of the social and

cultural interests of the Flemings spread all over the world and more precisely of those Flemings who have migrated abroad or who have returned to the home country, and on the other hand, helping to promote the Dutch culture in a broad sense” (translation mine, quoted in Goovaerts 1988: 8). After promoting the new associations extensively in different part of the world, they created the association *België in de Wereld* (Belgium in the World) in 1963.

It may sound surprising that an association whose origins and activities were so closely linked to the Flemish dimension of Belgian emigration chose to name itself “Belgium in the world”. Indeed, one of the major complaint reported by a Arthur Verthé, founder of BIW, is that Belgium did not care for its emigrants: “We [the Flemings in Belgium] had no motherland and the Flemings abroad had no motherland. (...). They have migrated out of misery and Belgium has done nothing for them” (Interview, 1 December 2006). In the 1960s the Flemish emancipation movement in Belgium had indeed grown stronger and, in this respect, the aspiration of some Flemings emigrants (and former emigrants) to promote their Flemish instead if their Belgian identity abroad was following the demands of Flemish leaders in Belgium. Nonetheless, the association chose to call itself Belgium in the world because it would appear less suspicious to political leaders in Belgium but the goal of the association was to support emigrants as well as conduct a cultural and social action for the spreading of our culture in the whole world (Interview with Arthur Verthé, 1 December 2006 and (Goovaerts, 1988: 12).

While BIW was originally open to all Belgian citizens, its strong emphasis on the Flemish culture and the attacks of the French-speaking press made it difficult for BIW to claim it could help all Belgians abroad. Therefore, the BIW leaders saw a solution in asking the French speakers to set up their own association. This assessment was clearly expressed by the president of the association:

“From the start, “Belgie in de Wereld” has been faced with the same problems as our French-speaking compatriots of the diaspora. BIW is, in fact, the offspring of a Flemish cultural association which was formed in Congo, which grew into the widespread organization we know today, but which has remained primarily a Flemish initiative. Although we have not restricted our social work to Flemish communities but have placed all our resources at the disposal of the Walloons as well, we realise that as Flemings it is well-nigh impossible for us to satisfy the cultural and psychological needs of the Walloon emigrants” (Ambassadeur, 1968: 2).

BIW’s cultural dimension quickly made it uncomfortable for the association to keep helping all Belgians abroad when they were constantly stressing the peculiarities of Flemings abroad. They thus decided to encourage the French speakers to set up their own association and, in 1967, *Belgique dans le Monde* (Belgium in the World) later renamed *Union des Belges à l'étranger* (UBE, or Union of Belgians Abroad) was born. Despite, the proximity of some UBE members to associations promoting the French language in Belgium, the francophone associations was less preoccupied with cultural and identity than its Flemish counterpart. Yet, it aimed primarily at representing the Belgians residing abroad before the public opinion and the Belgian authorities, especially those of the French-speaking region (*Les Belges à l'étranger*, 1970).

After the creation of UBE, the domestic political debate on the future of Belgium as a unitary state intensifies with the expulsion of Francophones from the Catholic University of Leuven in 1968 and the creation in 1970 of Linguistic communities whose authorities are granted prerogatives to conduct the cultural and education policies in place of the national government. As Belgium the institutional structure of Belgium is progressively granting more prerogatives to regional entities, BIW took a further step in the direction of stressing its Flemish identity when it changed its name to Vlamingen in de Wereld (VIW) in 1976. Founders of the association justified the name change by the following argument:

“In its first appellation, the association was named “Belgium in the World” and not “Belgians in the world”: “Belgium” is a concept that implies its cultural communities while “Belgian” is clearly not a concept related to culture. And now it is “Flemings in the World” and not “Flanders in the World”: because “Flanders” is a concept subjected to more historical and political interpretations, while the concept of “Flemish” describes our clearly our target: all the persons who due to their historical backgrounds or connections still bear their Flemish condition as it has grown from a millenary history” (Translation mine VIW Nieuws, 1977: 2).

UBE reacted two years after by changing its name to *Union Francophone des Belges à l'étranger* (UFBE, or Francophone Union of Belgians Abroad). While it appears that the association's members were reluctant to modify this name in a direction that would limit the scope of their intervention to a certain population, they changed it in order to be in phase with the institutional evolution of Belgium. As more prerogatives were given to the regional entities in Belgium, the association was indeed increasingly confronted to regional institutions for a variety of issues (e.g. issues of access of education of children of emigrants)(Les Belges à l'étranger, 1978: 2).

Changing the name into *Union francophone* rather than *Union des Belges francophones* is significant. Indeed, the idea was to keep offering services to all Belgians –independently of their regions of origin- but using only the French language. For founding member of the association, Hugues du Roy de Blicquy, the inclusion of the term “francophone” in the association's name was also a response to the demands of some politicians for greater emphasis on the francophone dimension of the association (Interview, 15 November 2006).

Belgian political parties and institutions will indeed take a progressively greater role in the two associations both in their financing and in their composition. Today, VIW receives an annual grant from the Flemish Ministry of external relations that covers a large share of its budget. Also, the association's priorities appear to have evolved through time. Historically, it was providing moral support to its members, allowing exchange of information and contributing to the diffusion of the Flemish culture abroad while not being active in Belgium. Today, the association has reshaped its priorities towards increasing its networking activities, helping Flemings who decide to leave Belgium, defending the interests of the Flemish emigrant as a group and promoting the role of Flemings abroad as an asset for the policies set up by the Flemish regional government.

As far as UFBE is concerned, public authorities have also supported the association by seconding some workers or contributing to the payment of the salaries of some staff. Also, the four largest Francophone political parties have a representative in the

association's Board of Directors. Despite the increased politicization of the association, UFBE remains primarily a service-oriented association that provides its members support to solve different sorts of administrative issues that expatriates may face and that concern Belgian authorities or the authorities of the country of destination (e.g. pensions, education, administrative status, visas...). Another important mission of the association is the defence of the right of the expatriate community by lobbying authorities and political parties for reforms on issues such as dual nationality or external voting. In this lobby function on issues concerning all Belgians abroad, cooperation between VIW and UFBE takes place by, for instance, discussing emigrants' issues with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **3. Enfranchising citizens abroad: The impact emigrants' ethnicity on domestic politics**

The main obstacle to the political participation of Belgian citizens residing abroad has been the provision of the electoral law of 1831, which stipulates that one can only vote if he is a resident of a Belgian municipality. In order to find a solution to a Walloon-Flemish ethnic conflict in a municipality located along the border of the two regions, legislators amended this rule in 1988. While the Government also mentioned that this reform could pave the way for external voting, its main concern was not the political rights of Belgians abroad. Once this constitutional obstacle was solved, the remaining legal hurdle was to pass the necessary legislation organizing the vote abroad.

As evidenced by the limited number of legislative proposals, there was little consensus among political parties regarding the need to allow Belgian emigrants to vote from abroad. Political parties in Belgium are not only divided along ideological lines, but also by language (Dutch and French). Within this complex political spectrum, only the French-speaking Liberals (PRL later called MR) repeatedly tabled legislative proposals in favour of external voting. This party's activism was based on the belief that Belgians abroad would vote for them because they had a similar socio-economic profile to liberal voters in Belgium (Interview with Daniel Ducarme, PRL MP, 30 November 2006). For similar reasons, both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Socialist parties strongly opposed it for decades. It turned out that they supported the right for foreigners to vote in local Belgian elections also partly because they thought it would be beneficial to left-wing parties.

While Liberals had long lacked the support of other parties to enable external voting legislation to pass, a change in Belgium's domestic politics played in their favour. This change was strongly pushed by a supranational actor: the European Union. With the creation of European citizenship by the Maastricht treaty in 1991, EU member states decided to explicitly recognize passive and active electoral rights in EU and local elections to EU nationals residing in another Member State than their own. In Belgium, such a right could only be granted if Article 8 of the Constitution, which stipulates that one must be a Belgian citizen in order to vote in Belgium, was changed. However, revising the Constitution required a two-thirds majority in Parliament, which the governing parties at the time did not have. The reason for a lack of consensus was that some Flemish parties were concerned that most EU-citizens residing in the Flemish municipalities around Brussels would vote for French-

speaking candidates, which would thus undermine the Flemish character of these towns. Furthermore, some parties also feared that the revision of the Constitution would open the door to larger reforms allowing third country nationals to vote in local elections. Instead of external voting, it is the question of non-citizens' political rights that became salient in Belgian politics as early as the beginning of the 1980s (Jacobs, 1998).

The increased prominence of the issue of EU residents' political rights also encouraged UFBE and VIW, to pressure Belgian authorities. They saw a window of opportunity and began to lobby Belgian political parties as a new Government formed in 1995. The associations' central argument was that it would be unfair to give foreigners political rights in Belgium when, at the same time, Belgians abroad were denied the ability to exercise such rights from abroad.

By 1998, the European pressure on Belgium became unbearable as the European Court of Justice found Belgium guilty of not complying with the obligation to allow EU citizens to vote in local elections. As Belgium is the host of several EU institutions and receives a large number of people from other EU Member States, this situation proved particularly uncomfortable for the Belgian government. One way for the governing parties to reach a two-thirds majority in Parliament was to convince parties outside of the governing coalition to vote in favour of the constitutional reform, which would allow EU residents to vote in local elections. The Catholic-Socialist coalition government had therefore to turn to opposition parties and ask for their support on this specific issue. The choice was thus made to call on the French-speaking Liberal Party (PRL) for help. A deal between the governing parties and the PRL sealed the common fate of Belgian emigrants' and EU citizens' political rights: a law allowing external voting was passed in exchange for their support of the revision of the Constitution.

Though changes in domestic politics created by the EU are crucial in explaining why the legislation eventually passed, the legislation's content is strongly determined by party competitions. The enfranchisement of new categories of voters (be they Belgian emigrants or EU and non-EU citizens residing in Belgium) necessarily leads to political parties' speculation on the impact of these voters on electoral results. Because it was firmly convinced that it would benefit from this vote, the French-speaking Liberal Party had traditionally supported the enfranchisement of emigrants. Other parties, and the French-speaking Socialist Party in particular, were on the contrary convinced that Belgians abroad could cost them seats and accordingly found ways to limit the impact of this emigrant vote. The restrictions contained in the December 18, 1998 law epitomize this situation as the extremely bureaucratic procedure put in place allowed only 18 electors to vote from abroad in the 1999 legislative elections. The costly, restrictive and extremely bureaucratic procedures put in place outraged emigrant associations and the PRL. On the Left, supporters of a limited form of emigrant participation were quietly pleased with the limited impact of the external vote.

The government formed after the 1999 elections included the Flemish and French speaking Socialists and Liberals, but not the Catholics. As they assumed power, new leaders from the French-speaking Liberals committed themselves to reform external voting to make it more inclusive. To facilitate the registration of voters abroad, a



consular registry has been created to identify more easily the voting population abroad before elections. Most importantly, the legislation on external voting was eventually modified by the law of 7 March 2002, which made it easier to vote from abroad by facilitating the registration procedure and giving emigrant the possibility to vote by mail, in person or by proxy. An essential point in this reform however is that emigrants would be able to choose the Belgian constituency in which they want to vote. In the registration form, they are indeed asked in which Belgian municipality they would like to register as external voters. This, in turn, determines the constituency in which the emigrant will cast his vote (e.g. in the case of the Senate's elections, it determines if the voter is attached to the Flemish, Walloon or Brussels constituency). The emigrants' liberty in the registration process is controversial for two reasons. First, voting is mandatory in Belgium and the Council of State (i.e. The Supreme Administrative Court of Belgium) found in a non-binding opinion that leaving the liberty to emigrants to register or not as voters was a breach of the Constitution. Neither the Government nor Parliament tried to address this issue for they found it materially impossible to enforce the obligation abroad and some parties feared the impact mandatory voting abroad on electoral results.

Second and most importantly, some Flemish politicians feared that the liberalization of the external voting regime would artificially increase the number of Francophone voters in the Flemish surroundings of Brussels. In the Brussels Region and some Flemish municipalities around it (where Francophones represent a large share of the population), voters have indeed the choice to vote for Flemish parties or Francophone parties. In the rest of the country, citizens do not have such option. The possibility to choose in the so-called Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde district is a major source of contention in Belgian politics. On the one hand, Flemish parties question the idea that one could live in Flanders while defining him/herself culturally and politically as a Francophone Belgian. For this reason, they argue that citizens living in Flanders should only be able to vote for Flemish parties. On the other hand, Francophone parties defend the right for Francophone minorities in Flanders to vote for parties of their linguistic groups.

With respect to emigrant voters, the issue is therefore partly symbolic because the potential influx of Francophone emigrants who register in those Flemish municipalities around Brussels would artificially increase the Francophone vote in the area. This increase in the Francophone vote in this area is also, and primarily, a strategic issue for Flemish parties who fear that the increase in the Francophone vote in this area where Flemish and Francophone parties compete could involve a loss of seats for Flemish parties in Parliament. For both of these reasons, some Flemish municipalities of the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency had decided to refuse to add the emigrant voters who fill their registration form in French. These emigrants have therefore been prevented from voting in the 2003 elections.

During the parliamentary debates on the reform of the external voting legislation after the 2003 elections, MP Vanpoucke from the Flemish Christian-Democratic Party (CD&V) summed up the concern of some Flemish politicians on the impact of Francophone external voters:

“ (...) the right to vote for Belgians abroad is a demand of the Francophones. The strict modalities of the 18th December 1998 Law did not satisfy the Francophone political parties. This is why this project, which is one more concession of [Prime

Minister] Verhofstad to the French speakers, is presented under the pretext that all Belgians who qualify as voters should be able to exercise their right. No democrat can indeed argue against this principle. This [extension of the] right to vote will principally create new French-speaking voters. Obviously, this is interesting in the Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde constituency because Francophone and Flemish parties compete with each other there”(1).

After the 2003 elections, accusations of instrumentalization of the external voting legislation to increase the Francophone vote in the disputed Brussels constituency are repeated by the Flemish nationalist and xenophobic party *Vlaams Belang* who consider that “it is proven that the [emigrants’] possibility to chose a Belgian municipality without restriction has been abused to influence electoral results. The Belgians residing abroad who have registered in the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency, have voted in majority in favour of Francophone political parties (...)”(2). To this end, they introduced a law proposal that aimed at obliging emigrants to register as voters in their last municipality of residence in Belgium. As I shall demonstrate below, the registration data in the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency provides no proof of a French-speaking “grand strategy” to increase artificially the presence of French speakers in this disputed constituency. Yet, the *Vlaams Belang* was more concerned with the symbolic impact of the influx of Francophone vote rather than its impact on the distribution of seats. As argued by MP Bart Laeremans during the interview, any increase of the French-speaking presence in the Flemish municipalities around Brussels is a threat to the Flemish character of these places (Interview, 23 November 2006).

Another development that followed the 2003 elections was the proposal made by some French-speaking Liberal MPs to extend external voting to regional elections. In a non-binding opinion on the constitutional character of this law proposal, the Council of State took the opportunity to criticize the possibility given to emigrants voters to vote chose the municipality where they want to register. It indeed found discriminatory that emigrants be given a choice other voters don’t have and considered that “[i]n extreme situations, it could also be envisaged that registration be dictated (...) by the sole desire to modify the electoral equilibrium”. In considering the extension of external voting to regional elections, the Council found this choice even less acceptable because in the election of the Brussels Regional Council, Flemish voters represent a minority that could be further diluted with the influx of Francophone emigrant voters (Opinion 36.229/2, Council of State). Stressing the theoretical possibility that emigrants use their liberty to register as voters wherever they want to purposefully influence equilibrium between Flemings and Francophone in Brussels, the Court was thus legitimizing the fears expressed by Flemish political parties. While none of the above-mentioned mentioned reforms passed, the Flemish concerns for manipulation were taken seriously. The Government eventually suggested that registration from abroad could only be made using the official language of the municipality where the emigrant wishes to register. Naturally, while this prevented Francophone emigrants to register in the disputed Flemish municipalities around in French, it could not prevent them from doing so in Dutch.

For several decades, the tension between Flemings and Francophones has occupied a growing place in Belgian politics to the point that most issues that are dealt by the Federal government today are inspected through the ethnic lens. In other words, most

political decisions are evaluated in terms of their respective impact on these two different populations. With the progressive reforms of the State, political parties, which for several decades are separated along linguistic lines in addition to ideological lines, have become increasingly concerned with the regional impact of decisions taken at the national level. The above discussion on the controversies surrounding the adoption of the external voting legislation confirms this trend.

I demonstrated that the anticipated impact of external voters is decisive in the adoption and the content of legislation. In the case of Belgium, the impact of external voters is two fold. First, external voters may modify electoral results by voting for a particular party in greater proportion than resident voters. The Francophone Liberal Party bet on this possibility and accordingly seized the opportunity to bargain for the adoption of such legislation when governing parties asked for its support for the constitutional reform. Second, and most importantly, external voters may theoretically modify the electoral equilibrium between Flemish and Francophone in the Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde constituency (which is the only one where they still compete against one another).

The recurring Flemish concern about a possible instrumentalization of external voting to increase the Francophone vote in this constituency is monopolizing the debate on external voting. Its most acute demonstration led to the exclusion from the voters' list of the emigrants who had tried to register with a French form in some Flemish municipalities. This concern however relies on two assumptions that are not supported by any data. First, there are no indications that Francophone Belgians abroad are a cohesive group that could be instrumentalized at the time of choosing where to register as voters. Despite its concentration in a limited number of destination countries, the absence of concentration in ethnic neighbourhoods abroad and the weak level of organizations abroad of Francophone and Flemish migrants alike do not favour their instrumentalization. Second, the use of external voting to influence the Flemish-Francophone conflict around Brussels supposes that emigrant voters consider the ethnic issue as their prime motivation to register as voters. As I shall demonstrate in the next section, electoral results abroad do not indicate that this issue occupies a smaller or greater place for emigrant voters compared to domestic voters. Accordingly, I argue that, despite the lack of hard data indicating elements of instrumentalization of the Belgian population abroad, fearful Flemish parties and the Council of State have raised concerns on the consequences of external voting on the Flemish-Francophone conflict because of the prevalence of this issue in contemporary Belgian politics. In this sense, they have exported the ethnic issue.

#### **4. Voting from abroad: The relevance of ethnic issues for emigrant voters**

In the first two sections of the article, I first discussed how the Flemish cultural and political emancipation movement stimulated the creation of emigrant associations abroad and showed that it was an elite-driven process following closely the institutional evolution (i.e. regionalisation) of the country. Then, I demonstrated how the tension between Flemings and Francophone, particularly in the surroundings of

Brussels, have conducted Flemish political parties but also the Council of State to look at the enfranchisement of citizens abroad with suspicion.

In the last part of this paper, I examine how the emigrants themselves react to the regional conflict opposing Flemish and Francophone political parties in Belgium. The absence of research on this population means that very little data is available on Belgians abroad. Nonetheless, different stereotypes have developed in Belgium on to the political orientation of this population. With respect to their political party preference, the Francophone Liberals have historically defended the idea that emigrants had a similar socio-political profile to that of their electorate despite the lack of empirical evidence. Concerning the attitude of emigrants towards the increasing tension between Flemings and Francophones, two opposite interpretations co-exist. On the one hand, Flemish political parties are convinced that Francophone emigrants could mobilize to register in Flemish municipalities around Brussels (or be instrumentalized by political parties to do) to increase the francophone vote in this disputed area. On the other hand, the Belgian media has traditionally promoted an image of Belgian abroad being more attached to Belgium as a unitary state and less interested in regional autonomy than Belgians who have not left the country.

To shed light on the positioning of Belgians abroad (both Flemings and Francophones) on the regional conflict and how it affects their voting behaviour, I suggest to look at the registration data and electoral results abroad of the 2003, 2007 and 2010 Federal legislative elections. First, by looking at the registration data, we can determine if there is a mobilization of Francophone voters to vote in the disputed area in order to influence the electoral equilibrium. Second, in the analysis of elections abroad, we can measure the importance of the regional issue by looking at the result of the Flemish nationalist parties.

#### *The registration behaviour of emigrant voters*

As the 1999 election revealed a fiasco in terms of participation from abroad, the government was eager to make it a success, at least at the administrative level, in 2003. To encourage Belgians abroad to register, consulates and embassies launched an information campaign by mailing invitations to vote that emigrants just had to return or by publishing advertisement in UFBE's newsletter (*Le journal des Belges à l'étranger* 2003a). UFBE and VIW too encouraged emigrants to participate by inviting them to send their form back to the administration and the former even gave political parties column inches to present their electoral program.

Out of the 215,701 Belgians residing abroad who were listed in the consular registry of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were considered as potential voters, 114,620 eventually sent the voter's registration form to the administration for the 2003 elections. Bearing in mind that voting is an obligation for the emigrants listed in the consular registry, it means that more than 100,000 did not comply with their obligation to vote.

Looking at the regional distribution compiled from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs data, 37.2% of the registered voters chose to register with a municipality belonging to a Flemish province, 37.8% chose to register with a municipality belonging to a

Walloon province and 25% registered in the Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde district. The fact that an equal number of Flemish and Walloon emigrants take part in the election confirms the idea that Francophones are over-represented in the emigrant population. Yet, contrarily to the fear of some Flemish politicians, Francophone emigrants did not massively register in Flemish municipalities of the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency. Indeed, only 3% of the total of Flemish and Francophone emigrant voters have registered in the disputed Flemish municipalities around Brussels. This is by no mean sufficient to indicate a strong desire of Francophone emigrants to take advantage of their liberty with regard to the municipality of registration in 2003.

Indeed, in the semi-directed interviews with emigrants and the informal interviews conducted during my own observation of the electoral process in Mexico City in 2007 and in New York in 2010, emigrants systematically mentioned one of these three elements to justify the municipality where they chose to register: place of birth, place last place of residence or the place where the emigrants' family is living.

The data of the 2007 show no substantial change with the 2003 elections. First, a total of 121,817 emigrants registered to vote (+ 7,197 in comparison with 2003). Second, the obligation to register in the official language of the municipality did not modify substantially the registration patter in the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency where 24% (-1%) of the Belgian emigrants voted. Third, the list of countries where most Belgian emigrants participated remained stable between 2003 and 2011 (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Spain, the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Canada and Italy).

In 2010, on the contrary, the registration data have changed dramatically due to the fact that these elections were anticipated after the dissolution of the Parliament. The anticipated elections were caused by the crisis between Flemish and Francophone governing parties after they failed to reform of the Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde constituency. In case of anticipated elections, the Ministry of the Interior only has forty days to organize the elections. Abroad, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had thus to work on the short schedule to inform emigrants and process their registration forms. The result is that only 42,489 emigrants managed to register for the 2010 election. In addition, the Flemish Regional Minister for the Interior subsequently erased from the voters' registry the emigrants who had registered in French in the disputed municipalities around Brussels. This last element confirms that, despite the fact that the date shows the absence of concerted action by Francophone emigrants to register in these municipalities, Francophone emigrants wishing to vote there remain suspicious. In this sense, emigrants are affected by the importance that these municipalities have on the domestic political scene: to establish the Flemish character of these towns, ought to be kept out of the electoral lists.

### *The electoral preferences of emigrant voters*

Presenting the results of the votes cast abroad involves two difficulties in the Belgian system. First, it is only possible to isolate the votes of those emigrants who voted in person or by proxy in an embassy or in a consulate. These votes are counted by the special counting stations set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which subsequently sends the results to the head counting station of each electoral college).

On the contrary, the emigrants who choose to vote by mail or in person or by proxy in Belgium see their votes mixed with those of domestic voters before the count. Accordingly, the results I'm presenting here represent around 14% of the total of the votes cast by emigrants. The second difficulty concerns the fact that legislative elections involve in reality to cast two votes on Election day –one for the House and one for the Senate- and the constituencies for these two election do not coincide. I choose to present the result of the senatorial elections because the three constituencies roughly coincide with the geographic borders of the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels). I shall thus present the results of the emigrant votes cast in the Flemish and Walloon constituency where Flemish and Francophone parties do not compete with one another. Doing so, we can compare the electoral preferences of Flemish and Walloon emigrant voters with those of domestic voters.

[INSERT TABLE 1&2 ABOUT HERE]

Looking at table 1 and 2, the first striking element is the confirmation of the Francophone liberal party's intuition that the electorate abroad would be favourable to them. During the interview, the head of the International Section of MR, Daniel Ducarme, explained the over-representation of Liberal Party voters among expatriates as such "[y]ou need to have a special psychological background to leave your country. Expatriates have a Liberal mindset that is the mentality of risk-takers" (Interview 30 November 2006). My interviews with Belgian emigrants in New York indeed confirmed the recurrence of the idea of looking for new professional challenges as a motivation for departure. While the causal link between having a risk-taking mentality and the vote for Liberal parties remains unclear, the Francophone MR and the Flemish VLD have both gathered at least 4% more votes abroad than at home in the three elections. The Flemish and Francophone Socialist parties, on the contrary, have systematically gathered a significantly smaller share of the votes abroad than at home.

Another notable data concerns the Flemish (GROEN) and Francophone (ECOLO) Green parties that are systematically performing better abroad than at home (even doing twice as good abroad in 2003). While we miss data on voters abroad to explain this phenomenon, Marie Nagy, MP for the Francophone Greens argues that citizens abroad are confused the name changes of Belgian political parties over the past decade. The Green parties, on the contrary, have gained international exposure with the growing importance of the climate change issue and offer a label that is understandable by all citizens wherever they are (Interview, 30 November 2006).

I have argued that two different interpretations co-exist in Belgium with respect to the emigrants' position on the ethnic conflict. On the one hand, the concern of some Flemish parties about the instrumentalization of the emigrant vote around Brussels supported the idea that emigrant voters are influenced by the ethnic conflict in their electoral behaviour. The registration data does not however support this view. On the one hand, the Belgian media depicts an image of Belgians abroad being attached to the unitary form of the state and insensible to the demands of more regional autonomy defended by some parties.

Looking at the success of Flemish nationalist parties abroad, this assessment must also be reconsidered. Indeed, in 2003 and 2007, Flemish nationalist and extreme-right

party Vlaams Blok has gathered over 15% of the Flemish emigrant votes (slightly less than its domestic result at home). The systematic xenophobic, anti-Belgium and anti-EU discourse of this party leaves no doubt that the emigrants voting for this party are not fitting the image depicted by the media. However, since the Vlaams Blok has progressively gained a status of legitimate political actor in the Flemish political arena, it is less surprising that, just like voters residing in Belgium, emigrant voters may be attracted to this party.

In 2010, the success of nationalist ideas among Flemish emigrant is even more blatant looking at the 26% of the emigrant votes obtained by the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). This party does not offer the same xenophobic discourse than the Vlaams Belang, but however wishes to establish an independent Flemish republic. Together, these two parties took one out of three Flemish votes cast abroad in 2010. Nonetheless, this data does not allow to conclude that Flemings abroad would be more or less nationalistic than those who reside in Belgium. What we can observe, on the contrary, is that the evolution of nationalist ideas among emigrant voters clearly follows its evolution on the national territory. Being a marginal and little known political party in 2003, the N-VA had performed poorly both at home and abroad. After it won the 2007 election on a joint list with the Christian-Democratic party, the party gained a notoriety that gave it enough confidence to present itself alone in 2010. In a context of strong tension between Flemings and Francophones, the nationalist hard-line defended by the N-VA took a bite at the Vlaams Belang electorate and became the biggest Flemish political party at home and abroad.

### **Conclusion: The parallel evolution of public opinion among Belgians at home and abroad**

I began the article wondering how Belgians abroad are affected by the political tensions between Flemish and Francophone political parties that have been growing for the past 50 years and culminated after the 2010 elections in the impossibility to form a government for a year. Responses to this query have traditionally been based on weak empirical data that led to two very different hypotheses. The first one, developed by the Belgian media, describes the emigrants as unaffected by regional issues and supposes that they are more attached to the unitary state than non-emigrants. The second one, developed by Flemish political parties, supposes that emigrants are closely following the political situation in Belgium and are willing to take sides for their region of origin from abroad (e.g. by registering as voters in a municipality where their vote can have the biggest impact). To verify these two hypotheses, I undertook the task of looking at the relation between the ethnic conflict in Belgium and the political participation of citizens abroad in three decisive moments.

First, looking at the creation of Belgian emigrant associations abroad, I have demonstrated how the first significant emigrant association –Belgium in the World– was connected to Flemish political and cultural emancipation movement in Belgium. Insisting on the specific cultural needs of the Flemings neglected by a Francophone elite at home, this association was indeed contributing to the creation and preservation of a Flemish identity abroad. The division of this association in two different associations (Flemish and Francophone) followed the institutional evolution of the country. This evolution also responded to the demands of political parties who saw in

these associations a way of making subnational identities exist at the international level. In this sense, the ethnic conflict has acted as a structuring factor for the emigrant community. This creation and evolution process of these associations is however largely an elite-driven process supported by a handful emigrant leaders and Belgian politicians.

In the second part of the paper, I look at the relevance of the ethnic conflict in the debate on the enfranchisement of Belgians abroad. When this debate took place at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Belgian political context has dramatically changed compared to the creation of the emigrant associations in the 1960s. With the regionalisation of the state, political parties are now primarily concerned with the consequences of any political decision on the linguistic group to which they belong. The use of this “ethnic lens” in the external voting debate creates important controversies on the possibility for Francophone emigrants to register in Flemish municipalities to symbolically increase the Francophone presence in this disputed area. This controversy took place without any indication that emigrants could act as a cohesive group that could mobilize on an ethnic basis. As the emigrant themselves were particularly quiet in the debate on their enfranchisement, this episode confirmed that political parties were projecting the home conflict abroad by suspecting the instrumentalization of Francophone emigrant voters.

The third part of the paper demonstrates that this suspicion is largely unfounded as there has not been any concerted effort by Francophone voters abroad to register in strategic municipalities. Yet, the analysis of electoral results does not support either the hypothesis that Belgians abroad would be less nationalistic and more attached to unitary Belgium than domestic voters. What it shows, on the contrary, is that the support of Flemish voters for nationalist parties have increased simultaneously at home and abroad. For this reason, I conclude that the political opinions of Belgians abroad on the future of the country are strongly connected with political opinions of Belgians residing in their home country. In this respect the ethnic character of their representative associations and the ethnic lens that political parties have applied to the population abroad seem to have had little impact on Belgian emigrants. On the contrary, the easy accessibility to Belgian press from abroad and the connections with relatives back home should be investigated as factors influencing the vote of emigrants.

## Endnotes

1. Chambre, *Annales*, 28 novembre 2001, p.57.
2. Chambre, *Doc. Parl.*, Proposition de loi visant à imposer l'inscription des électeurs résidant à l'étranger dans la commune de leur dernière résidence officielle, No.385-1 (2003-2004), 31 October 2003.

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