

Open Forum

The General Elections in Belgium in June 1999: A Real Breakthrough for Women Politicians?

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In 1948, as one of the last West European countries to achieve full emancipation, Belgian female citizens got the right to vote for the federal parliament. For the two decades between 1949 and 1971, women accounted for between 2 and 4 percent of the federal parliament. At this rate, it would take a very long time before equal representation was reached. Given the background of the second wave feminist movement, for some women it was time for action. In 1974, the first all-women party (Verenigde Feministische Partij) presented its list of candidates for the national elections. However, they failed to win a single seat. Other strategies were more successful. In the 1970s, 'Vote for a Woman' campaigns were launched. After the elections of 1974 the percentage of women elected grew from 3 to 6.6 percent. Another effective strategy was the establishment of women's groups within the different political parties. These women's groups aimed for a better integration of women in the political parties in particular, and for a better integration of women in political and socioeconomical life in general. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s women still accounted for only 10–11 percent of parliamentary seats. 'Vote for a Woman' campaigns and cooperation between political women's groups were no longer effective strategies for getting more

women into parliament. It was time for a legal initiative. In 1992, Ministers Louis Tobback and Miet Smet introduced a law to promote equal distribution of men and women on the lists of electoral candidates. In May 1994, the law was passed by the federal parliament. However, the law adopted was only a mere shadow of the original proposal, which now includes the progressive introduction of a quota system, the abandonment of the eligible places system and only one kind of sanction applied to parties who flouted the law. But despite its shortcomings, Belgium is one of the few European countries where a legal measure exists to achieve a better representation of women in politics.

As the law was fully enacted by the time of the elections of June 1999, it is now possible to evaluate what influence the law has had on the representation of women in Belgian politics. Can more women be found on the lists of candidates? What place on the list do they hold? How many women are elected? These are some of the questions we wish to address in this article.

In 1998, the celebration of 50 years of women's suffrage was an important event in Belgium. There were various symposia, exhibitions and publications to remind people time and again that the ultimate democratic aim of balanced representation between men and women in the various parliaments in the country had by no means been achieved. Following the elections of May 1995, women accounted for 16 percent of the federal parliament (Chamber of Representatives and Senate), and in regional parliaments an average of 19 percent of the representatives were women. At the end of the celebratory year, expectations were consequently high. Norway, for example, is known to have one of the most women-friendly political systems. But it was only about 50 years after women got full emancipation that things really started to happen. In political systems, newcomers need time to familiarize themselves. Would the same happen in Belgium? The next elections were to be held on 13 June 1999. On that day, every Belgian national who had reached the age of 18 had the right to cast one vote. Voting in Belgium is compulsory and by secret ballot. These elections were being referred to as 'the mother of all elections' as everyone would be having to vote for the European Parliament, the Chamber, the Senate and their regional parliaments. So for all the political parties these elections created an important opportunity to increase the representation of women in politics significantly.

The positions on the lists of candidates were determined in the spring. For the first time, parties had to take into account the law of May 1994 relating to balanced representation of men and women on the lists of candidates. The law stipulates that a maximum of two-thirds of all candidates (effective candidates and successors combined)¹ be of the same sex. An examination of the lists of candidates shows that all parties had upheld the law. In fact, the lists of candidates for the European Parliament, the

Senate and the council of the region of Brussels city amply complied with the law, with an average of two out of every five candidates being women. There were some noticeable differences between parties (see Appendix for a list of the parties). Agalev had the highest number of women candidates (48 percent) on its lists, while the PS came in last with an average of 35 percent (see Tables 1 and 2).

However, one-third of women candidates – as the law stipulates – does not necessarily guarantee that women will account for a third of the seats in the different parliaments. This is because in the Belgian electoral system, it is vitally important what position a candidate occupies on the list. Research has shown that for the period 1919–91, only 0.64 percent of the candidates for the Chamber and 0.04 percent of the candidates for the Senate were able to break through the order of the list. This means that only the candidates who have an eligible place on the list have a fair chance of winning a seat. So, it is not only important to count how many women there are on the different lists, but also to look closely at their positions. On the basis of the hypothesis that the parties would win the same number of seats in the various elections as the last time the people went to the polls, it was possible to calculate for every party how many seats would be taken up by women. To avoid making the matter unnecessarily complex, we used as a basis the total number of seats won per party for the European (June 1994), federal and regional parliaments together (May 1995) (see Table 2).

The Green parties had the best opportunity of getting their women candidates elected (Ecolo, with 37 percent women eligible for safe seats; Agalev, with 33.3 percent) alongside CVP (with 34.6 percent). The ‘zipper principle’, alternating a man and a woman, at least for the first two seats, was applied in more than six out of ten of the Agalev, CVP and Ecolo lists. Furthermore, in more than one in three of the Agalev and Ecolo lists, the first position was occupied by a woman. In the VLD, the PSC and the PRL/FDF/MCC coalition, approximately 22 percent of the safe seats were reserved for women. This was followed by the VU-ID with 17 percent, the PS with 16 percent, the SP with 14 percent and the Vlaams Blok with only 6 percent.

Consequently, if the political parties had neither increased nor decreased their percentage of the overall vote on 13 June, hypothetically 24 percent of the Belgian delegation for the European Parliament would have consisted of women, which would have meant a decrease compared to the actual 32 percent Belgian women representatives. In the Chamber and the Senate together, there would have been approximately 22 percent women (an increase of 6 percent) and in the regional councils, 23 percent (an increase of almost 4 percent). In short, given a status quo in the election results, there would have been a marginal increase in female representation overall, both at federal and regional levels (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
For Each Parliament the Percentage of Women

	European Parliament	Chamber of Representatives	Senate	Flemish regional council	Council of the Walloon region	Council of the Brussels city region	Council of the German- speaking community	Total
Elections of 1995								
Directly elected	32.0	12.0	30.0	17.8	12.0	26.7	20.0	18.3
Elections of 1999								
Candidates	44.0	39.2	41.5	38.6	36.0	40.5	37.6	39.2
Eligible seats ^a	24.0	17.3	37.5	19.5	16.0	32.0	28.0	22.2
Directly elected	32.0	19.3	30.0	19.5	10.7	34.7	24.0	22.0
Effective composition ^b	32.0	23.3	28.2	20.2	10.7	37.3	32.0	24.0

^a Hypothesis: ballot of 1999 is identical to ballot of 1995 (federal and regional) and 1994 (Europe).

^b Situation as of February 2000.

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Elections of 13 June 1999: Own calculations.

TABLE 2
For Each Party the Percentage of Women

	Ecolo	PRI/FDF/MCC	PS	PSC	Agalev	SP	VLD	Vlaams Blok	VU-ID	CVP
Elections of 1995										
Directly elected	25.9	21.8	16.3	18.0	28.6	16.1	17.2	6.1	11.1	23.1
Elections of 1999										
Candidates	43.1	37.3	35.4	35.6	47.8	39.4	38.2	36.1	38.8	38.2
Eligible seats ^a	37.0	21.8	16.3	24.0	33.3	14.5	22.4	6.1	16.7	34.6
First position	37.0	18.5	7.4	11.1	37.5	0.0	20.0	4.0	16.7	20.0
Directly elected	40.0	23.0	12.5	17.6	44.4	7.5	20.0	13.3	25.0	27.4
Effective composition ^b	41.2	27.4	13.5	17.8	44.8	14.0	20.0	12.2	23.1	30.9

^a Hypothesis: ballot of 1999 is identical to ballot of 1995 (federal and regional) and of 1994 (Europe).

^b Situation as of February 2000.

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Elections of 13 June 1999: Own calculations.

In certain parties, there could be more far-reaching changes. By way of illustration, a list of the percentage of women elected from each party in the last European and legislative elections is presented in Table 2. The percentages must be compared with those arising from the hypothesis that each party would win the same number of seats.

According to some political observers, the electoral campaign got off to a rather laborious start, a few weeks before the electors went to the polls. As in previous elections, a campaign was launched to advocate a better balance between men and women in politics, on the initiative of the federal and Flemish ministers for equal opportunities, this time under the slogan, 'There is Only One Woman in Politics for Every Six Men'. People in the street could not miss the slogan 'stem vrouw, votez femme', the campaign message of the Coordination of Political Women's Groups: it was plastered on trams, buses, etc. To focus attention on their female candidates, political women's groups also campaigned on particular issues.

However, the 1999 elections will probably go down in history as the 'dioxin elections'. In the beginning of 1999 there had been problems with dioxin in chickens, but only many months (and many consumed chickens) later were people told of the problem. The Ministers of Agriculture (Pinxten, CVP) and of Public Health (Colla, SP) were forced to resign barely two weeks before going to the polls. Prime Minister Dehaene withdrew as the front-runner of the CVP campaign. Everyone's attention was focused on the electorate. Once the first results came in, the trend was soon established. The parties in government – the CVP, SP, PSC and PS – received a severe punishment at the hands of the voters. The VLD and the PRL/FDF/MCC made marginal increases. The parties that gained most were the Greens, and, to a lesser extent, the VU-ID. Once again, the Vlaams Blok improved its position in Flanders and Brussels. On the French-language side, the Front National lost ground.

As far as directly elected seats are concerned, 32 percent of the Belgian representatives in the European Parliament are female, 21.6 percent in the Chamber and Senate combined and 21.5 percent in the regional councils (see Table 1). This may represent an increase, but only as much as could be reasonably expected; it cannot be considered spectacular. Following the co-option of the senators, the designation of community senators and the installation of replacements, both for those members of parliament who were elected to more than one parliament and for the federal and regional members of the government who were elected directly, the percentages were expected to be even slightly higher. In fact, this was not always the case. In the European Parliament the proportion dropped initially to 28 percent, which is the same as in 1994, but rose again to 32 percent after the resignation of a male (SP Party) in favour of a female candidate. In the federal parliament, 25 percent of the seats are occupied by women – a slight increase which indicates that in many cases successors were women

– and in the regional councils the percentage remains around 22 percent. This indicates that in the regional councils there were equal numbers of men and women among the successors. But, in fact, there are some big differences between regional councils. In descending order, the picture is as follows: the council of the region of Brussels city has 37 percent women representatives, the council of the German-speaking community has 32 percent, the Flemish council, 20 percent and the council of the Walloon region, 11 percent.

The difference between parties is also striking. Given the favourable starting position for women in Agalev and Ecolo, it is not surprising that the gains made by women candidates are equally favourable. In the new parliaments, 45 percent of the Agalev seats and 41 percent of the Ecolo seats are held by women. In the CVP, 31 percent of the seats are occupied by women, an increase of about 8 percent compared with the last elections, although still not completely achieving the target of one-third representation set by the party leader. The VU-ID counts almost one woman in four among its representatives, more than doubling the percentage of 1995. The percentage of female seats also doubled for the Vlaams Blok (12 percent). The VLD gained about 3 percent and now stands at 20 percent. But, finally, in the SP the situation was not so good. The women candidates did not face a very good starting position. With the loss of seats suffered by the party overall, the SP achieved barely 7.5 percent female representation among its directly elected members to the various parliaments, a loss of 8 percent compared to 1995. With the exception of Ecolo, there were some slight changes on the French-language side. The PSC fell by 2 percent and ended up with 18 percent; the PRL/FDF/MCC coalition, however, gained 4 percent and now 27 percent of its representatives are women. The percentage of female members of parliament in the PS fell to 13 percent, a loss of 4 percent.

Now that the sense of euphoria among the winners has abated, and the losers are licking their wounds, we can start to think about the future. The elections of 13 June represented no real breakthrough for women politicians, despite the application of a law stipulating that a maximum of two-thirds of all candidates on the lists should be of the same sex. But various strategies are available.

First, changes could be made to the electoral system. Given the large number of preferential votes for women, and the fact that women often gain more votes than the men just above them on the list, there should be an even greater demand to abandon the list vote. However, it should not be forgotten that the electoral campaign might then be conducted in a totally different way. Another legal alternative might be to amend the balance of representation of men and women on the lists of candidates. In this respect, it is important not merely to change the ratio one-third/two-thirds. Male and female candidates should be listed alternately for the

safe seats, and in addition, the 'zipper principle' should be applied consistently to the top of the list. It is the only way to avoid the worst case scenario effectively. After all, with regard to the positions of candidates on the lists, it is necessary to take into account not only the safe seats and the unpredictable seats, but also the possibility of losing a seat.

Obviously, the future will reveal to what extent these electoral reforms may be politically tenable. However, there is nothing to stop the parties from making a start on the situation today. The number of seats gained by their female candidates could be a reason for parties to continue down the same old path, or it could be an opportunity to overhaul the party in terms of the political personnel.

So much for the participation of women in the legislative assemblies. What about the executive power of women after the last elections? At the end of the previous period of government, the federal government had 12 percent women and the regional governments 10 percent. In the newly constituted governments the situation *did* improve. At federal level, Belgium now has three women ministers out of 18 (17 percent), and at regional level eight out of 37 (22 percent). However, one regional government (the Walloon) remains just as it was before the elections, all male. However, this situation changed when one minister took up the leadership of his party and was replaced by a woman. The women ministers are in charge of a wide range of policies. At the federal level, employment, consumer interests, health and environment are under the control of women. At the regional level, they are in charge of education, agriculture, welfare, health, social affairs, employment and finance. Two women ministers are explicitly in charge of equal opportunities policy. However, scrutinizing the different government policy statements reveals very little on equal opportunities policy. Now it is up to the women's movement, the political women's groups and everyone who is concerned about the position and opportunities for women in Belgium to judge the different ministers – men and women alike – by their actions.

APPENDIX

The major political parties in Belgium:

Agalev: Flemish Ecologists

Ecolo: Francophone Ecologists

CVP: Flemish Christian-Democrats

PSC: Francophone Christian-Democrats

SP: Flemish Socialist Party

PS: Francophone Socialist Party

VLD: Flemish Liberals and Democrats

PRL: Francophone Liberal Party
VU-ID: Flemish Communitarian Party
FDF: Francophone Communitarian Party
Vlaams Blok: Flemish Extreme-Right and Nationalist Party
Front National: Francophone Extreme-Right Party

NOTE

1. In Belgian politics there exists a difference between effective candidates and successors. A successor can only take up a seat in parliament when an effective elected candidate resigns, becomes minister or when the effective candidate has deceased.

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