

Belgium

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Introduction

After the defeat of Napoleon, the period of French control over Belgium that had prevailed since 1795 ended. The country was assigned to the Netherlands in the process of reorganizing European borders at the Congress of Vienna to serve as a buffer for the northern European countries against France (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: 55). In 1828, an alliance of Catholics and Liberals formed against Dutch rule under King William I, which both groups experienced as politically, religiously, and economically discriminating. The so-called ‘Unionism’ led to the secession from the Netherlands on October 4, 1830, and a collectively adopted constitution, that organized Belgium as a de facto parliamentary monarchy. This constitution established ministerial responsibility vis-à-vis parliament and a bicameral system in form of the House of Representatives and the Senate (Wende, 1981: 9).

Belgian society is multiethnic: French-speakers live in Wallonia in the south of the country, and is the more industrialized part of Belgium. Dutch-speakers settled in the more rural north, and tend to be more conservative than their French-speaking compatriots (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 270).

Elections

In the period from November 1919 to April 1939, there were seven elections for the "lower house" of the Belgian Parliament – *Chambre des Représentants*.

The parliament is elected upon a direct system of proportional representation with electoral districts on the levels of constituency and provinces. Parties can combine votes from different lists. This so-called “apparentment” was introduced in an electoral law in 1919 in reaction to protests against the previously existing electoral system that favored parties with regionally strong structures of support as the Catholics in Flanders or the Industrial Areas for the Socialists. The possibility to link the lists of a party in a province improved the proportionality of the electoral system and decreased the chances of one-party majorities, which is why coalitions of two or three of the major parties became the

rule. Because the relation of the parties' election results barely changed in the interwar years, the bargaining process after the election determined which of the parties formed a coalition. The electoral law of 1919 also introduced universal and equal suffrage for male citizens over 21 Years. Suffrage did not include women until 1949. The House of Representatives had 186 seats in 1919 and 1921 until it gained one seat in 1925. In 1936 the size of parliament was extended to 202 seats (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 272).

16 November 1919

In the first election after World War I nine parties took part. The **Catholic Party** won the election with 73 seats. It formed a government with the **Belgian Labour Party** (70 seats) and the **Liberal Party** (34 seats). Compared to elections before the electoral reform, the Belgian Labour Party profited as the biggest relative winner of votes and seats.

20 November 1921

Nine parties contested the following election. The three traditional large parties lost slightly to the smaller parties, but without a significant change in the majority. The **Catholic Party** remained the strongest with 70 seats, followed by the **Belgian Labour Party** with 68 seats and the **Liberal Party** with 33 seats. Constitutional reforms in 1921 enabled the Catholic and Liberal Party to dispense with the Belgian Labour Party in forming this governing coalition.

05 April 1925

In the legislative period following the election of the House of Representatives in 1925, several successive governments were formed. Of the six parties in the election, the **Belgian Labour Party** won the most seats with 78. The **Catholic Party** won 75 seats and the **Liberal Party** 23. After the election, a Catholic minority government was formed, which was soon replaced by a Catholic-Labour coalition due to the lack of confidence

of the other parties. This in turn was replaced in 1926 by a coalition of the three major Belgian parties, before a Catholic-Liberal government took over in November 1927. The frequent government formations were a consequence of the Labour Party's election victory, after which no coalition received the majority support of parliament.

25 May 1929

The Catholic-Liberal government remained in place after the following election, in which the **Catholic Party** regained most seats with 71 seats. The **Belgian Labour Party** followed only closely behind with 70 seats. The **Liberal Party** received 28 seats.

27 November 1932

The 1932 election was brought forward from May 1933 as the last government lost parliamentary confidence due to rising unemployment, derailing public finances, and strikes in the context of the global financial crisis. In order to avoid losses in the election during the economic crisis, the **Catholic Party** placed the issue of education at the center of the election campaign and was successful in doing so. Of the five parties running, the Catholic party won the most seats, 79. The **Belgian Labour Party** and the **Liberal Party** followed with 73 and 24 seats respectively. Since the Labour Party refused to form a government after the election, a coalition of Liberals and Catholics formed until 1935, at which time the Labor Party joined the government.

24 May 1936

In the 1936 election, eight parties ran. Despite the increase in representation of far-right and far-left parties in the Parliament, the coalition of Catholics, Liberals and Labour Party was maintained. The **Belgian Labour Party** won 70 seats, while the **Catholic Party** took only 61 seats and the **Liberal Party** 23 seats.

02 April 1939

The last election of the House of Representatives before the beginning of World War II was a snap election, in response to a government crisis. Of the 10 parties that contested, the **Catholic Party** won the most seats (67), followed by the **Belgian Labour Party** with 64 seats and the **Liberal Party** with 33 seats. After the election, Catholics and Labor formed a government, which was replaced by a Catholic-Liberal government in September of the same year. This, too, lasted only a year before a government of Catholics, Liberals and Labour took over.

Parties

The three defining social cleavages of Belgium were (1) church-state, (2) economic class divisions, and (3) center-periphery.

(1) At the center of the **church-state** cleavage was the question of the role of the Catholic Church in society and education. Both the Liberal and the Catholic party were formed along this line of conflict. The union between Liberals and Catholics made the independence from the Dutch king possible and created the constitution of 1831, which allowed freedom of religion and education. After achieving independence, the Catholics and Liberals grew more distant from each other over differences in education. The electoral victory of the Catholics ended the “school war” (1879-1884) and allowed the party to hold the majority in parliament until 1919.

(2) The Democratic Socialist Party, combined with a strong trade union movement, was formed through the struggle for universal suffrage and the strengthening of workers’ rights. The interest of democratically minded politicians in the working class was awakened in the context of the first signs of industrialization, which appeared relatively early in Belgium. On the one hand, this led to a weakening of the liberals, as they were unable to reach agreement on the issue of the universal suffrage, thus enabling the Catholics to become the strongest force. On the other hand, universal suffrage for men over 25 enabled the Belgian Labour Party to establish itself as the second strongest force in the

interwar period.

(3) The **center-periphery** conflict line has been a long-standing element in Belgian history. However, it became politically relevant especially in the period between the world wars when Flemish national parties took up the long-standing protests against Francophone domination. The socio-political dominance of French culture despite the Flemish-speaking majority is explained in terms of the French-speaking upper class of the Flemish community and the economic gap between the wealthy, industrialized Waloonia and the poor agricultural Flanders. (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: 56).

The small number of Belgian parties, despite strong intra-party differences, can be explained by the strong social and subcultural anchoring of the traditional parties.

Catholic Party

The Catholic Party was officially formed in 1884 and held the majority in parliament until 1919. During the early years of Belgian independence, the term was used for politically relevant supporters of the Catholic Church. It united the interests of Catholic groups such as the Federation of Catholic Circles and Associations, the League of Christian Workers, the Flemish Farmers Association and the League of the Middle Classes. Therefore, it was renamed “the Catholic Union” in 1921 and again in 1936 as “Bloc of Catholics”, when it was divided into Flemish and French linguistic wings.

Original Name	Katholieke Partij, Parti Catholique
Other Names	
Abbreviation	KP, PC
Factions	

Belgian Labour Party

The Belgian Labour Party, founded in 1885, was the main democratic representation of the Belgian workers. In the beginning, the party focused mainly on gaining universal suffrage and improving social services. After the electoral reform in 1919, the party became the second strongest party in parliament and remained there until 1940. Its aim

was to fight for changes in the system rather than to overthrow it by force. The German occupiers ordered its dissolution in 1940.

Original Name	Parti Ouvrier Belge, Belgische Werkliedenpartij
Other Names	
Abbreviation	POB, BWP
Factions	

Liberal Party

The third relevant party was the Liberal Party, which organized itself in 1846 as Belgium's first formal political party. As such, it aimed to secularize the Belgian state, but especially the education system. The party became highly relevant in this form during the "school war" (1878 – 1884) against the influence of the Catholic Church on the education system. Lack of unity on issues as universal suffrage, as well as the rise of the Belgian Labour Party, led to declining political success for the Liberal Party. Its relevance remained in the 20th Century as a coalition partner of the major parties.

Original Name	Parti Libéral, Liberaal Partij
Other Names	
Abbreviation	PL, LP
Factions	

Copy and paste list of parties from party notes (example to be shown).

References

McHale, Vincent E and Sharon Skowronski. 1983. *Political Parties of Europe*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

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