

Polity IV Country Report 2007: Belgium

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2006</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2007</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>10</td> <td>8</td> <td>-2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>10</td> <td>8</td> <td>-2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>63</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2006	2007	Change	Polity:	10	8	-2	Democ:	10	8	-2	Autoc:	0	0	0	Durable:		63		Tentative:		Yes		<p style="text-align: center;">Authority Trends, 1946-2007: Belgium</p>
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SCODE	BEL	CCODE	211	Date of Report	1 November 2008																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	3	4	7	2	3																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date	30 June 1853		Begin Date	1 July 1853																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1831 (1971, 1993)																								
Executive(s)	Prime Minister Yves Leterme (CDV), appointed as head of coalition government, 20 March 2008																								
Legislature	<p>Bicameral:</p> <p>Chamber of People's Representatives (150 seats; proportionally elected; most recent elections, 10 June 2007)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christian Democrats and Flemish (CDV): 30 Reformist Movement (MR): 23 Socialist Party (PS): 20 Open VLD: 18 Flemish Interest (VB): 17 Socialist Progressive Alternative-Spirit (SPA-Spirit): 14 Democratic and Humanist Centre (CHD): 10 Other parties: 18 <p>Senate (71 seats; 40 directly elected, 31 indirectly elected; most recent elections, 10 June 2007)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CDV: 9 MR: 6 VB: 5 Open VLD: 5 SPA-Spirit: 4 PS: 4 Other parties: 7 																								
Judiciary	Supreme Court of Justice																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Competitive Elections (8)

Belgium is a parliamentary system in which the king, Albert II, is the nominal head of state. The prime minister is appointed from among the leaders of the ruling party, or coalition, in the parliament. The parliament is formed through transparent and fair competitive elections, and a system of proportional representation assures a coalition rule. Following legislative elections on 18 May 2003, and nearly two months of difficult negotiations, a coalition government was finally sworn in on 14 July (coalition partners include VLD, PS, MR, and SPA/Spirit parties). Prime Minister Verhofstadt announced in February 2004 that he was taking over leadership of the VLD, following the threat by party president De Gucht's to withdraw the party from the ruling coalition in protest over plans to allow non-EU foreign residents to vote in local elections. De Gucht was subsequently replaced as party president by Dirk Sterckx. Verhofstadt's coalition government resigned on 11 June 2007 following their defeat in legislative elections. The leader of the largest party, Yves Leterme of the Christian Democrats and Flemish (CDV) remained unable to form a ruling coalition through mid-December 2007, leaving Belgium without a government for more than six months.

Executive Constraints: Executive Parity or Subordination (7)

The Council of Ministers (Cabinet), led by the Prime Minister, holds office as long as it retains the confidence of the lower house of the Parliament. Parliament exercises a considerable degree of authority over the executive branch, mainly through directly elected committees that exercise the final review of all proposed legislation. However, the Cabinet may use the king's power of dissolution to force elections if Parliament proves too obstructive. Either house, or both, may be dissolved by the executive branch. The judiciary is independent.

Political Participation: Factional Competition (7)

Despite the deep cultural fragmentation of Belgian society, Belgium has a long history of institutionalized democratic political competition. Belgian political parties have traditionally split along linguistic and cultural lines: the Dutch-speaking Flemish in the north of the country (6 million); the French-speaking Walloons in the south (3.5 million); and the largely Francophone citizens residing in Brussels (1 million). During the 1960s and 1970s, the nation was beset by disagreements between the French- and Dutch-speaking populations that were founded in part on the conservatism of Flanders and the predominantly socialist outlook of Wallonia. The differences were eased greatly by the adoption of amendments in 1993 to the Constitution that divided power among Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. However, the Dutch-speaking parties in Flanders, home of the country's traditional middle class, continue to demand wider political and economic powers for their region. While the French-speaking Walloons have indicated that are prepared to enter a "dialogue" with the Flemish parties on devolution of power, they have insisted that the federal state must remain intact. The French-speaking Walloons, and a small cohort of German-speakers, in the economically less prosperous south of the country, are afraid that devolution will lead to Belgium breaking up along its linguistic fault lines, leaving the Walloons isolated and economically vulnerable. Tensions between the groups increased through 2006 in parallel with rising racial tensions centered on immigration, naturalization, and the "Islamisation of Europe." On 13 December 2006 the tensions were dramatized in a fake news report on French-language RTBF television that claimed Flanders had declared independence and were forcing French-speakers out of the "country."

The factional nature of modern Belgium politics became increasingly noticeable in the aftermath of the June 2007 legislative elections. In these elections, held on 10 June, the centrist coalition government led by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt was soundly defeated as the Flemish secessionist party, Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interests), saw a marked increase in its popularity. Vlaams Belang's predecessor party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block), was dissolved in 2004 after being condemned as "extremist" and "racist" by a Belgium court. In its new political incarnation, Vlaam Belang has become the third largest party in Belgium and the second largest in Flanders, where it enjoys the support of 20% of the population. In the wake of these ethnically charged elections, the leader of the largest of eleven parties that won seats in the

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

Chamber of Representatives, Yves Leterme of the Christian Democrats and Flanders (CDV), was charged with forming a ruling coalition but, given the widening ethnic and linguistic divisions in society, remained unable to do so. In effect, the debate over regional political autonomy produced a six month political crisis in which Belgium was left without a functioning cabinet. The main dispute was over the devolution of central political authority in the country – a move broadly favored by the Dutch-speaking Flanders region in the north of the country but opposed by the French-speaking Walloons of the south. The government crisis emerged when the country's Christian Democrats and Liberals won a legislative majority to form a coalition government. However, both parties then split into Dutch and French-speaking factions with the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats and Liberals demanding more autonomy for the northern Flanders region. The growing polarization of Belgian politics was also symbolized by the November 7 committee motion to vote on the so-called Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) issue seeking to abolish bi-lingual rights in Flemish suburbs of Brussels. Language issues have flared in recent years as French-speaking people from Brussels have moved into the Flemish suburbs around the city. This motion was viewed as a violation of the decades-old "Belgian pact" under which the two languages groups avoided holding straight sectarian votes. In December 2007 a three-month caretaker government was finally formed under the leadership of Guy Verhofstadt.

In March 2008, Verhofstadt's five-party interim government handed power over Yves Leterme's Flemish Christian Democrats, the winner of the June 2007 elections. Leterme, who was a deputy prime minister in the 14-member interim government, remained determined to fulfill his election pledge to devolve more power to the regions. While nearly 50% of the Flemish population want the country to officially split along ethnic lines, most of the Flemish political elite simply favor a more decentralized form of governance for the country. In July 2008 Prime Minister Leterme offered to resign after failing to reach agreement on a power-sharing deal between the Dutch- and French-speaking regions of the country. King Albert II refused to accept his resignation.