

The socio economic and political structure of belgium



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Chapter 2

This chapter presents some background information on Belgium's history, socio-economic development, state structure, electoral system, and political and multiparty structure. Moreover, extensive attention is paid to the Flemish Community and the Flemish region. This information is intended to facilitate the understanding of the conceptual model and the empirical results presented in subsequent chapters. It should be observed that most of the information presented below is directly relevant for the understanding of subsequent chapters; some other information only indirectly. The latter kind of information is presented to improve the coherence of the various parts that make up this chapter.

2. 1 Brief History of Belgium[1]

The name Belgium comes from the Belgae, a Celtic people who originally lived in the region of the present Belgium. They were conquered by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar in 57 BC. Later, Germanic elements mixed with the Romanized Celts. In the course of history, the Franks, the Burgundians, the Spaniards, the Austrians, and the French mixed with the original population.

The population of Belgium is 10, 827, 519 (2010 estimate Eurostat). Nearly 60 percent lives in the Flanders region. The overall population density, one of the highest in Europe, is 342 persons per sq km (886 per sq mi). The largest concentrations are in the Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, and Ghent (Gent) metropolitan areas, as well as in the industrial region between Mons and Charleroi. In recent decades the Limbourg city region has increased in

population because of industrial expansion in that area and also by immigration. Almost 10 percent of all Belgians live in Brussels, which is also home to vast numbers of foreign employees, employed by amongst others EU institutions. Some 97 percent of the population is classified as urban in 2004 (Belgium Statistics 1998-2010).

Table 2. 1 Some socioeconomic characteristics of Belgium

Population

10, 827, 519 (2010 estimate)

Population density

342 persons per sq km

886 persons per sq mi (2010 estimate)

Urban population

97 percent

Rural population

3 percent (2005 estimate)

Official languages

Dutch, French, German

Chief religious affiliations[2]

Roman Catholic, 47 percent

Islam, 4 percent

Protestant, 1. 25 percent

GDP (in U. S.\$)

\$470. 400 billion (2009 estimate)

GDP per capita (U. S.\$)

\$43, 533 (2009 estimate)

Life expectancy

79. 1 years (2008 estimate)

Literacy rate

99 percent (1995)

Source: Belgium Statistics 1998-2010, and Eurostat (2010)

Belgium is roughly triangular in shape. It is bounded on the north by The Netherlands and the North Sea, on the east by Germany and Luxembourg, and on the south and southwest by France (see Figure 2. 1). Belgium has an area of 30, 528 sq km (11, 787 sq mi). The country is about 280 km (about 175 mi) long, measured in a southeast-northwest direction, and about 145 km (about 90 mi) wide. Because of its geographical position as a crossroads of Europe, Belgium has been a major commercial center since the Middle Ages. The North Sea has been the country's outlet for trade with the rest of the world. Belgium's geographical location has also given it strategic importance, and many battles have been fought for control of the area. Belgium became an independent country in 1830.

Belgium is divided into three regions, namely Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. The Flemish region consists of the Flemish provinces plus Hall and Vilvoorde. The Brussels region consists of the 19 communes of Brussels and the Walloon region of the Walloon provinces. The three federal regions are further subdivided into the ten provinces. Provinces in Flanders are Antwerpen, Flemish Brabant, Limbourg, East Flanders, and West Flanders, while provinces in Wallonia are Hainaut, Liège, Walloon Brabant, Luxembourg, and Namur

In Flanders, (see Figure 2. 2), most of the people speak Dutch (Flemish) and are known as Flemings. In Wallonia most of the people speak French and are known as Walloons. The population of the Brussels region comes from both language groups. The people who speak German live mainly along the eastern border. Each region has a great deal of autonomy (self-rule), but friction about language, ethnicity, and national identity between Flemings and Walloons continues to the present day.

Figure 2. 1 Map of Belgium

Source: [://www. greenwichmeantime. com/time-zone/europe/european-union/belgium/map. htm](http://www.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/europe/european-union/belgium/map.htm)

Figure 2. 2 Flemish and Walloon Regions

Source: Belgium Statistics, 1998-2010.

In 1993 these three ethnolinguistic areas became official federal regions. In the country as a whole, strictly Dutch speakers make up about 56 percent, and French speakers 32 percent of the population. Only 1 percent of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-socio-economic-and-political-structure-of-belgium/>

people speaks German, while some 11 percent speak more than one language.

French became the official language of government after the Revolution of 1830, which was directed against The Netherlands. In the following decades Belgian cultural life was influenced mainly by France. But this dominance, along with Walloon social and economic domination, aroused a spirit of nationalism among the Flemings. They agitated for the equality of their language with French. A series of laws in the 1920s and 1930s was supposed to achieve this goal. However, antagonism between the two groups increased after World War II. (for details see the various contributions in Swenden et al., 2009; and Billiet et al., 2006). Although Belgium was in better economic condition after World War II than after World War I, it was politically disorganized because of a conflict between the Christian Democrat parties and a coalition of Liberals, Socialists, and Communists. The Socialists Party called for a general strike in 1960 and violence erupted, particularly in the Walloon south. Although the strike was called off, the crisis of the nation had sharpened the differences between Flemings and Walloons. Socialist leaders proposed that the unitary state of Belgium be replaced by a loose federation of three region Flanders, Wallonia, and the area around Brussels.

In 1971 a constitutional change was enacted giving political recognition to the three linguistic communities, providing cultural autonomy for them, and also revising the administrative status of Brussels (Brans et al., 2009); Dunn, 1974). Despite this reversal of a long-standing policy of centralization, the federalist parties opposed the revisions on the grounds that they did not go far enough (Billiet et al, 2006). Moreover, repeated efforts to transfer actual

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legislative authority to regional bodies were blocked by disagreements about the geographical extent of the Brussels region. In 1980 agreement was finally reached on the question of autonomy for Flanders and Wallonia. The Belgian constitution was revised in 1971 and 1980 to provide Flemings with a greater degree of cultural and political autonomy (Brans et al (2009).

Devolution of authority from the central government to the regions continued to be a major concern during the 1990s. In 1989 a bilingual, self-governing Brussels region, on a par with Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and French-speaking Wallonia in the south, had been established, as part of the move toward greater ethnic and cultural autonomy. The different linguistic communities, cultural and political autonomy, and administrative status have shaped the Belgian general political attitudes and behavior (O'Neill, 1998).

2. 2 The Belgian Economy in a nutshell[3]

Although the service economy has grown rapidly in Belgium, the country remains heavily industrialized, importing raw materials that are processed mainly for export. With about three-quarters of exports going to other European Union (EU) countries, Belgium's economy is dependent upon its neighbors and the nation is a strong proponent of integrating European economies.

In the early 1980s and early 1990s a growing budget deficit, combined with high unemployment rates, hindered Belgium's overall economic growth. To reduce its deficit, the government initiated an austerity program in the 1980s that cut spending while raising taxes, as well as beginning a program

to transfer some state-owned enterprises to the private sector. By the early 2000s the government presented balanced budgets, and the economy was growing at a faster rate than the EU average. However, Belgium's public debt remained huge, and unemployment remained high. The budget in 2006 anticipated revenues of \$162. 2 billion and expenditures of \$163. 1 billion. Gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 totaled \$394 billion. Service industries account for 75 percent of Belgium's GDP and employ 73 percent of the workers, including the immigrant workers. Trade and transport rank among the country's leading service industries.

Brussels is the headquarters of the European Union and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and therefore home to many diplomats and foreign residents. Many firms and governments maintain offices in Brussels for access to European Community decision-makers, and the capital's real estate, hotel, restaurant, and entertainment industries bring in sizable foreign earnings.

Belgium has favorable conditions for agriculture: moderate temperatures, evenly distributed precipitation, and a long growing season. For centuries much of Belgium, especially the Flanders plain, was an area of intensive cultivation. Today, about 28 percent of the country is under cultivation. Farming engages only 2 percent of the total labor force, but it produces sufficient quantities to make Belgium a net food exporter. Forests cover 22 percent of the area of Belgium, and wooded areas are used primarily for recreational purposes. In recent years, stands of conifers have been planted, and forestry activity has increased. Timber, however, is still imported for the country's paper industry. The main fishing port of Belgium is Oostende. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-socio-economic-and-political-structure-of-belgium/>

fishing fleet exploits the North Atlantic Ocean fisheries from the North Sea to Iceland. Most of it consisted of plaice, sole, and cod.

Belgium has limited mineral resources. Coal was the chief mining product for much of the 20th century, but deposits were severely depleted by the 1950s. In the 1980s many of the mines were closed, and the last remaining coal mine was shut down in 1992. Coal and oil must now be imported for steelmaking and other industries.

Belgium was the first country on the European continent to industrialize, following the lead of Britain in the industrial revolution. It remains one of the most highly industrialized countries of Europe, largely because of its geographical location and transport facilities. Industrial production increased steadily after World War II (1939-1945) but began to decline in the 1970s, when recession and obsolescence began seriously to erode many traditional sectors. Wallonia, which had been the center of the country's traditional industries, was hit hard, while newer, lighter industries such as electronics developed in Flanders.

Belgium is still a major producer of iron and steel, although production has fallen since the 1970s. About 11 million metric tons of crude steel were produced annually in the early 2000s. Belgium also has an old and important nonferrous metal industry. Belgium also furnishes metallurgical, chemical, and other industries with copper, lead, tin, and uranium. The availability of steel and nonferrous metals has encouraged the manufacture of heavy equipment, especially at Liège, Antwerp, and Brussels.

2. 3 The political system[4]

2. 3. 1 Belgium as a Constitutional Monarchy

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy in northwestern Europe, with a king as the head of state and prime minister as the head of government. Together with the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Belgium forms the Benelux Countries. As stated above, Belgium is a constitutional, representative, and hereditary monarchy. Succession to the throne is determined by primogeniture. The present ruler is King Albert II, who came to the throne in 1993. The Belgian constitution was promulgated in 1831 and revised in 1893, 1921, 1970, 1971, 1980, 1989, 1993, and 2001. The reforms since the 1970s have gradually transformed Belgium into a federal state, giving the majority of essential governmental powers to the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels.

The 1831 Constitution provided for a separation of powers between the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. However, there is no rigid demarcation of an “ exclusive sphere of each power”, and therefore it is more acceptable to speak of a division of powers rather than a separation of powers. The principle of separation of powers has lost most of its importance as far as the relationship between the Legislature and the Executive is concerned. The present meaning of the separation of powers should mainly be seen in the relationship between the Legislature and the Executive, on the one hand, and the Judiciary, on the other. The Judiciary is independent of both the Government and Parliament (see: André Allen: Treatise on Belgian Constitutional Law, 1992, p. 60-62) Folmer2010-08-20T23: 31: 00

Toni: Alen is an edited book. That means that there are several papers in it. You need to indicate which chapter you're referring to. If you don't know which chapter, refer to the Introduction. Here you mention the author, in the references the author, title and then : In: Alen (ed) title etc.

As Belgium developed into a Federal State, the principle of the division of powers acquired an extra vertical dimension, with powers being further divided between the Legislature and the Executive at a national level, and between the Legislature and the Executive at the level of the federated entities: the Communities and the Regions. (see: André Allen: Treatise on Belgian Constitutional Law, 1992, p. 117 et seq and 145 et seq).

Some executive power is vested in the king, who appoints the prime minister, cabinet ministers, and judges. The king is the commander in chief of the armed forces and, with the approval of parliament, has the power to declare war and conclude treaties. The rights of the king, according to the constitution, include convening and dissolving parliament, conferring titles of nobility, and granting pardons. All royal acts, however, must be countersigned by a minister, who in turn assumes responsibility for those acts before parliament. Cabinets are generally multiparty coalitions.

Under constitutional changes that took effect with the parliamentary elections of 1995, both houses of the Belgian parliament were reduced in size. The Senate was scaled back from 184 members to 71, while the Chamber of Representatives dropped from 212 members to 150. All members of the Chamber of Representatives are directly elected, while the Senate's membership is elected through a combination of direct and indirect

methods. All citizens more than 18 years of age are required to vote in parliamentary elections and may be fined for not doing so.

The Belgian constitution provides for an independent judiciary with powers equal to those of the executive and legislative departments. The highest tribunals are the five courts of appeal, which sit at Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Liège, and Mons and the Supreme Court of Justice at Brussels. Most of cases are referred to the courts of appeal by the courts of assize, which review both civil and criminal matters. In the assize courts 12 jurors decide all cases by majority vote. A special court was established in 1989 to resolve constitutional conflicts arising from the transfer of power from the central government to regional authorities. Belgium's Parliament in January approved the second of three phases of a group of measures designed to transfer power from the central government to the three regions of the country. The devolution plan was intended to ease the country's deep political conflicts, rooted in its linguistic divisions, by allowing authority over some governmental programs to conform more closely to the demographic distribution of the population.

2. 3. 2 The Federal Structure[5]

As mentioned above, Belgium is organized according to three communities who are responsible for education, culture and personal matters and three regions. Thus in principle there are six governments and six councils.

Each of the three regions elects its own parliament, which in its turn appoints a government which is responsible for territorial matters such as planning, transportation, water, energy, municipalities, and regional development. In

2001 the regions were given greater authority over taxation and expenditure (Brans et al. , 2009). There are also independent language councils for the Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking communities. These councils are in charge of education, health care, and communications (such as broadcasting) for the communities. However, the Flemish community and region have been integrated such that there is just one government and thus is a kind of substate with one Flemish parliament and one executive which has authority over both regional and community matters. In Brussels which originally was a Flemish city and which is located on Flemish territory, the Flemish are a minority. However, they have a disproportional number of seats in the region. Moreover, always one Flemish minister comes from the Flemish Community Commission. Finally there is a Flemish Community Commission in Brussels (Billiet et al., 2006).

Each of the ten provinces has a council of 50 to 90 members who are chosen by direct vote. The provinces are subdivided into administrative districts, often based in cities and towns, called communes. Each commune is administered by a burgomaster. There are three cultural communities: the Flemish Community (the inhabitants of the Flemish Region and the Dutch speaking inhabitants of Brussels); the French Community (the Walloon Region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels); and a small German-speaking Community (the Wallon Region). The Communities have powers in areas where public services are highly dependent on language use, such as education, health and culture. The communities and regions each have their own Parliament (legislative) and their own Government (Executive). Hence, there are:

- the Legislative and the Government of the Flemish-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the French-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the German-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the Flemish Region,
- the Legislative and the Government of the Walloon Region, and
- the Legislative and the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region.

The town legislative (council) is directly elected to six-year terms. The council elects an executive body called the board of aldermen. Local government on all levels possesses a large degree of autonomy, a tradition that originated in feudal times.

As mentioned above, a law passed in 1963 established three official languages within Belgium: Dutch was recognized as the official language in the north, French in the south, and German along the eastern border.

Nevertheless, the problem was not that easily solved (Billiet et al, 2006).

Both Flemish and Walloon workers protested discrimination in employment based on ethnic group and disturbances broke out at the universities of Brussels and Leuven, which eventually split into separate Dutch-speaking and French-speaking institutions. Although during the 1960s the Christian Democratic party and the Socialist party remained the major contenders for power, both Flemish and Walloon federalists continued to make gains in the general elections, principally at the expense of the Liberal Party. Eventually separate Flemish and Walloon ministries were created for education, culture,

and economic development. Finally, in 1971, the constitution was revised to prepare the way for regional autonomy in most economic and cultural affairs (Dunn, 1974).

During the 1980s the Christian Democrat parties formed the cabinets, usually under the leadership of Wilfried Martens. In January 1989 parliament passed a devolution bill designed to transfer power from the central government to the three ethnolinguistic federal regions. Implementation of this law moved slowly, and the 1991 elections resulted in reduced influence for the Christian Democrats. Martens resigned as party leader, and his successor, Jean-Luc Dehaene, formed a new center-left-wing government.

The final phase of the process intended to give the once unitary Kingdom of Belgium a federal structure, continued to be debated in Parliament. (Hessel, 2006) One controversial issue related to the drastic restructuring of the existing bicameral legislature: The upper house, or senate, would become either an appendix of the regional assemblies or an intermediary between them and the national legislature. Under a 'single-mandate' provision, deputies and senators would no longer be permitted to sit in both the national and a regional legislature. Another proposal was to make regional governments responsible for social security disbursements (Cantillon et al, 2009).

A new coalition, led by the Liberal parties, took office in July 1999, and Liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt of the Flemish Liberal Democrats became prime minister. The formation of the new government, which also included the left-leaning Socialist parties and the environmentalist Green parties,

marked the first time since 1958 that the Christian Democrats had been excluded from government. Verhofstadt and his coalition remained in power following parliamentary elections in 2003. In local elections held in 2000 a right-wing party, Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block), achieved significant gains. The Vlaams Blok wants independence for the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders and an end to immigration. In 2004 the Vlaams Blok was declared racist, deprived of funding, and subsequently disbanded. In parliamentary elections in June 2007, Verhofstadt's party suffered a crushing defeat, coming in fourth place, and Verhofstadt resigned as prime minister. The Flemish Christian Democrats emerged as the single largest party to form a coalition government. It led to the formation of a five-party coalition government.

2. 4 The Electoral System and Multiparty Structure[6]

The voting right in Belgium is a “one man, one vote” system: every Belgian national, male or female, who has reached the age of 18 has the right to cast one vote (unless this right has been suspended or the individual is ineligible for any reason). Voting in Belgium is compulsory and secret. Everyone is obliged to take part in the elections at the six different levels: the European level (members of the European Parliament), the Federal level (all members of the Chamber of Representatives and some members of the Senate), the Community level (members of the Councils), the Regional level (members of the Councils), the Provincial level (members of the Councils) and the Municipal (members of the Councils) level.

In Belgium, the principle by which the members of the Federal Parliament, the European Parliament, and the Councils at the different levels

(Community, Region, Province, Municipality) are elected is one of <https://assignbuster.com/the-socio-economic-and-political-structure-of-belgium/>

proportional representation. It is a system in which the seats in the legislative assemblies are allocated roughly in proportion to the number of votes each party receives within the electoral district or constituency, which form the territorial basis for the direct elections.

In Belgium, the Netherlands, and Western Europe generally, the political system and political parties have a variety of particular characteristics. There are usually more than two parties which are divided ideologically to a large extent, as indicated by their very nomenclature. They are also divided by ideological, regional, linguistic and cultural diversities. In Western Europe, most political parties are labeled either socialist (or social-democratic), liberal, conservative or Christian Democratic, with radical parties (Communists for example) on the extreme left and sometimes fascists or other such groups operating under various names on the right (as in Italy). The political culture offers Western European electorates an ideological frame of reference which is much more varied and broader than in the United States, for example.

The Chamber of Representatives has twenty constituencies. For the Senate, there are only three constituencies, geographically similar to the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.

Representation in the assemblies can be by individuals or political parties (see: André Allen: Treatise on Belgian Constitutional Law, 1992, p. 60-62). In Belgium, the votes in the legislature are divided and distributed among the political parties or groupings, each of which has the same proportion of the legislature as it does of the popular vote. In principle, proportional

representation of the parties is combined with selection of the actual persons who sit in the assembly on behalf of the parties. Thus the voter in Belgium has several options: (1) he may simply cast his vote for a party list and thereby accept the priority list of the party in question. This is called a “top-of-the-list” vote; (2) if he is concerned about who will actually sit in the assembly, he may cast a preference vote by marking an individual candidate on his ballot sheet (Meersseman, et al, 1999). The proportional representation system in Belgium is closely linked to its multi-party system.

Today, the Belgian multi-party system is characterized by extreme fragmentation. Not only does it reflect the major political and social cleavages which have polarized and continue to polarize Belgian society. It also reflects the emergence of new conflict dimensions and new issues. One major cleavage along ethical-religious lines is the opposition between the Liberal Party and the Catholic Party. The importance of the socio-economic left-right cleavage appeared with the birth of the socialist movement, which led to the opposition between the Liberal and the Socialist parties.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the number of parties represented in Parliament rose dramatically. First there was the breakthrough of the regional parties as a direct result of the increasing linguistic-cultural cleavage between the Flemish and the French-speaking Belgians: the Volksunie (VU) in Flanders, the Rassemblement Wallon (RW) in Wallonia, and the Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF) in the Brussels Region. Moreover, each traditional party split into two branches, a Flemish and a French-speaking one, which are organizationally and programmatically independent.

At the end of the 1970s, the Belgian multi-party system expanded again with the emergence of the ultra-Flemish nationalist and anti-immigrant party, the “Vlaams Blok” (VB); the Francophone extreme right-wing party “Front National” and the Poujadist party. Other parties that emerged were the Green parties, AGALEV in Flanders and ECOLO in the French-speaking part of Belgium. By 1981, there were fourteen parties in Parliament. There was a reduction in the number of parties during the 1980’s when the Communists, and some other small parties lost their representatives. However, the 1991 election introduced some newcomers in Parliament, including the Front National and the populist libertarian van Rossem party.

Today, there are no longer national parties in Belgium, except for some small unionist parties. All parties are homogeneous Flemish or Francophone and present themselves either in the Flemish or in the French-speaking constituencies. That is, the parties are split into Francophone and Flemish parties such that the voters in Flandres cannot vote for Walloon politicians or candidates from Brussels. Similarly for Walloons. In addition, there is the undivided bilingual electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (see Figure 2. 3). The Belgian multi-party system usually leads to a coalition government.

Figure 2. 3 shows that Brussels- Halle -Vilvoorde is on Flemish territory. The six Flemish communities provide facilities for the French speaking population. Particularly, the French speaking inhabitants of Halle- Vilvoorde can vote for Francophone political parties while there are no such facilities for Flemish speaking inhabitants in Walloon. Attempts of various federal governments to bring Halle-Vilvoorde regulations in line with those of the Flemish region are strongly opposed by the Francophones.[7]

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From the above it follows that there currently are two different political systems and cultures in Belgium. Moreover, the political reforms have led to the end of the consociational democracy, i. e. power sharing to sustain democracy in a segmented society like Belgium (Lijphart, 1968; 1977).

Figure 2. 3 Map of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde.svg>

2. 5 The Flemish Community and Flemish Region[8]

Flanders or Flemish Region (Vlaanderen) is an administrative and language region in northern Belgium (see Figure 2. 4). The Flanders region primarily consists of low coastal plains and plateaus, including areas of polders (lands reclaimed from the sea) along the coast. Most of the region is relatively flat.

The Flemish region comprises 5 provinces (which contain a total of 308 municipalities):

Antwerp (Antwerpen)

Limburg (Limburg)

East Flanders (Oost-Vlaanderen)

Flemish Brabant (Vlaams-Brabant)

West Flanders (West-Vlaanderen)

Flanders contains a number of large cities, including Antwerp, Ghent (Gent), Kortrijk (Courtrai), and Brugge (Bruges). The city of Brussels, the capital of

Belgium, is an enclave within the boundaries of Flanders. Brussels has separate regional status in Belgium, but also functions as the administrative capital of Flanders.

Figure 2. 4. Map of the Flemish Region

Source: Statistics Belgium 1998- 2010

Flanders has long been one of Europe's major economic centers. Brugge was an international trading and textile center as early as the 13th century, and Antwerp has been a major commercial center and port since the 15th century. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ghent, Antwerp, and Kortrijk became important industrial centers. Nonetheless, until World War II, the Belgian economy was centered in the Walloon region. During the second half of the 20th century, a surge of foreign investment in the corridor between Antwerp and Brussels led to significant growth in Flanders' engineering and high-technol