

## **Belgium and its Green Parties at the Crossroads**

**Article by Luc Barbé**

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On May 26 2019, Belgians voted in national, regional and European elections and the results spoke to a country divided along regional and political lines. In the Flemish north, the right-wing forces dominated. In Brussels and the Walloon south, progressive parties made gains, leaving Belgium at an impasse at the federal level. One month after the vote, Luc Barbé surveys the political terrain to ask where Belgium's Green parties now stand. From momentum brought by street movements to the challenge posed by "ecorealism", Barbé picks apart the threads to explain the how the Greens fared, why they did not do better, and the roads that lie open from here.

There are two Green parties in Belgium, one Dutch-speaking, Groen, and one French-speaking, Ecolo, which also has a small German-speaking section. The two parties work together closely, form a single political group in the federal Chamber of Representatives, and submit joint lists to the local elections in Brussels. But the results of Belgium's Green parties often diverge. At the federal, regional and European elections that took place in Belgium on May 26 2019, Ecolo scored higher than Groen, as was the case in past elections.

Groen received 9.8 per cent of Flemish votes for the federal Chamber of Representatives, an increase of 1.2 per cent. The result makes Groen the sixth largest party in Flanders, disappointing for a party that was polling at 15 per cent in the months running up May 26. Groen became the largest force in the cities of Ghent and Leuven, as well as among Dutch-speaking voters in the Brussels Region. In Wallonia, Ecolo ended with 14.9 per cent in the Chamber, an increase of 6 per cent, making it the third biggest party. In Brussels, Ecolo-Groen combined became the largest party, receiving a total of 21.6 per cent in the federal elections. The Greens will most likely form part of the next Brussels Regional Government. Whether or not they will also enter other governments is not yet clear.

Understanding the fortunes of parties requires scientific research on why voters voted how they did and why voters switched parties. This research currently does not exist, except for one [small early study](#). Explaining the results of the 26 May elections for now depends on a pragmatic analysis of the figures, the campaign, and the context, together with political intuition. Three factors are important to consider in relation to a party's results: the social and economic context, its electoral competition, and the strength of the party itself understood as its programme, strategy, and campaign, as well as its candidates and inner workings.

### **Favourable winds for Ecolo**

Months of public attention around the climate crisis and the prominence of democracy and participation over the year prior helped Ecolo at the polls. Its political rivals have been going through tough times in recent years. The Socialist Party is plagued by scandals, the Liberals lost their credibility by governing with the New Flemish Alliance (NVA), a Flemish nationalist party, for four years, and the Christian Democrats are going through an existential crisis. In the previous term, the federal government pursued policies seen in the eyes of many potential Ecolo voters as hard right. On its left, the Worker's Party of Belgium has been on the rise (in French-speaking Belgium, the party is called PTB). Despite its Marxist-Leninist matrix, the PTB presents itself as a modern, radical

left-wing party. It scores particularly well with lower-skilled people and performs less well among the highly educated Ecolo electorate. The PTB received 13.8 per cent of the vote in Wallonia, a figure that could include a few percentage points from former Ecolo voters.

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Ecolo has been at political cruising speed over the past two years: a clear political and outreach strategy, strong spokespeople, and an effective internal organisation. The party achieved major progress in the local elections of October 14 2018, when it became the largest party in various Brussels municipalities and entered many majorities in Brussels and Wallonia. This success had caused some journalists and party members to expect better results in the May elections. However, the Liberals launched a campaign offensive portraying Ecolo as a party that would raise taxes, including a fictitious “green” levy on meat, in a move that might have cost the Greens a few percentage points.

## **Greens in the sights**

In Flanders as in Wallonia, the climate was a dominant topic in the months running up to the election. Students were taking to the streets every Thursday to call for real climate action. But towards the end of the campaign, climate lost its importance and “environment” followed migration, social security, and tax among voter concerns. Climate, energy, planning, and transport have received much attention in the Flemish press in recent years, often from a green perspective. Unlike in French-speaking Belgium, Flemish journalists largely agree that radical measures are necessary to stop further development in Flanders and that road pricing should be introduced.

As far as Groen’s electoral competition is concerned, the picture is mixed. The Flemish Socialists have been in crisis for years and their election results, an all-time low, only confirmed their troubles. The Flemish Christian Democrats, one of Groen’s secondary rivals, made a bad showing in the voting for the federal government. The Workers’ Party of Belgium (whose Dutch acronym is PDVA, rather than the French PTB) could have cost Groen a few percentage points.

With social movements pushing their agenda and the Socialists struggling, the press expected strong results for Groen. Assessing the precise reasons for their disappointing result will again depend on research on voter motivations and flows between parties, but the press pointed to three elements in their immediate analysis. First, Groen proposed to reform the company car system (whereby some employees receive a car as part of their salary package) as a climate and mobility measure. The proposal received serious criticism from other parties, particularly when Groen continuously refused to answer the question of by how much employees would lose out. According to various journalists, Groen’s lack of clarity on this proposal damaged its credibility.

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Another proposal that met much criticism was Groen’s proposal for taxing wealth. The proposal also appeared to affect the middle class, and Groen’s explanation of the measure was not always clear. A third point, according to

some journalists, is the fact that the president of the NVA warned that one of the two figureheads of Groen could become prime minister. This comment was based on an opinion poll showing that Ecolo-Groen could be the largest group in the federal Chamber. No Groen leader ever pushed for prime minister's office, but the NVA's framing cut through. The campaign became less about Groen's vision and more about "posts" and the party's perceived hunger for power. The shift may well have scared off some potential voters.

Groen was on the defensive during the last two months before the election and had a hard time communicating its story to the voters in an appealing way. Some members of Groen feel that the Flemish Greens, despite the difficult political context and competition from the left-wing PTB/PVDA, achieved a victory, albeit a small one. Other members say that the party, given the favourable moment due to the mobilisation around climate action, missed a historic opportunity to grow into a medium-sized party that could attract 14-15 per cent of the Flemish voters. The success of "climate reassurers" deserves close attention too and will be looked at extensively below, as their approach might have cost Groen a few percentage points.

## **The offensive of the climate reassurers**

Belgium shares common patterns with some other European Union member states: modest economic growth, an aging population, the threat of a hard Brexit and a US-China trade war, and the use (and abuse?) of social media during election campaigns, to name a few. But Belgium also has its particularities: the large national debt, the (albeit decreased) importance of pillarisation whereby social institutions are organised along religious or political lines, weak authorities (except sometimes at the local level), and a powerful party system. Moreover, economic activity, employment opportunities, and party preferences are very different in Flanders and Wallonia.

Extrapolating lessons from these elections also relevant to other Green parties is therefore not easy, except on climate, which right-wing parties instrumentalised to their advantage and the detriment of Groen and Ecolo.

The Flemish nationalist and radical right-wing NVA party and the extreme right-wing Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang) are the two biggest parties in Flanders since May 26 (with 25.5 per cent and 18.6 per cent respectively in the House). In terms of climate policy, their stance represents the opposite of that demanded by tens of thousands of people on the streets throughout 2018 and 2019. How is this possible? Their result is due to many factors, but here the assessment is limited to climate issues and is inspired by the analysis of the French philosopher Bruno Latour. [1]

On December 12 2005, the 150 countries gathered in Paris acknowledged that the earth is under threat. They agreed to seek joint solutions together so everyone could enjoy a good life within the limits of the planet. On July 1 2017, Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, thus signaling that he did not recognise the physical boundaries of the earth and that everyone should look out for themselves. He kept firmly on the same flight path, ignoring those who insist that every escape route constructed by humans is an illusion.

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Bruno Latour uses these two dates to clarify what today's discussion should be about. He suggests that the earth has become an actor and is making itself heard. Just look at the hurricanes and droughts of recent years, or the whales that wash up on our shores with their stomachs full of plastic. The earth speaks, says Latour, also through people who take action and make themselves heard, such as the young people on the streets demanding a fully fledged climate policy. For some people, it is obvious that the facts should be recognised. Others cannot accept the principle of limits. It is inconceivable that the earth can encourage them to reconsider their conception of the good

life.

During the Flemish election campaign, some parties adopted a local version of Trump's climate story: implicitly denying the scientific evidence, claiming that climate policy will lead to a wave of taxes, and telling people that "the party can go on". These are not climate deniers but "climate reassurers". They argue that our country is responsible for less than one per cent of the world's total emissions, so even strict measures will hardly have any effect. Moreover, they claim, scientists will find solutions, just like in the past. Road pricing or higher taxes on air travel are not needed, and forget about reduced meat consumption. This "ecorealism" is music to the ears. We do not have to feel guilty; we can continue to live as we please. The climate reassurers forget that many people have never been able to attend this so-called party, that the next generations will pay for our party, and that widespread depression and burnout should make us wonder whether this is even a party at all. In French-speaking Belgium, the climate reassurance discourse was less offensive, although it might have caused some voters to doubt their voting behaviour.

How do you deal with this rebuttal of climate reality? Latour deliberately does not come up with ready-made solutions. Addressing those who justly feel abandoned by the "historical betrayal" of the leading classes is crucial for him. By "betrayal", Latour refers the fact that for decades the elite told people that the current model of production and consumption could continue indefinitely, whilst knowing that the earth could not support it. The approach Latour endorses recalls that of the Luxembourgish and German Greens, who in recent years have not only presented themselves as defenders of the earth but also explicitly profile themselves as defenders of their country and the world of their compatriots. Have they given a sort of Latourian answer and made a positive connection to people threatened by globalisation and a changing society? Have they managed to convince people that a climate-friendly way of life can lead to a better and happier existence? And that the climate transition will be social?

Before working on new proposals, two overarching questions must be considered. First, how should we deal with the paradox that climate policy must be radical and yet have broad support? Building support takes time, which is lacking, and is even harder in times of fake news and social media when people live in bubbles that only reinforce their own opinions. Second, how can we motivate people to believe in a better future, with green reforms that are socially just and provide more welfare? For, rightly or wrongly, many perceive quite the opposite and sense that they live in a time of social decline.

## **The roads ahead**

From the green point of view, the results of the 26 May elections in Flanders were a disappointment. Nearly two thirds of voters opted for parties that continue to believe in neoliberal economic policies. Almost half of Flemish voters opted for nationalist parties with radical or even extreme right-wing views on diversity and migration. Groen did not become a medium-sized party. Nothing can be expected from the two largest Flemish parties, NVA and Flemish Interest, in the field of climate policy. They, like Trump, manifestly ignore the physical limits of the planet. Ecolo scored better in Brussels and Wallonia and could improve climate policy in the coming years. With regard to social and economic policy, Brussels and Wallonia have preferred a more left-wing politics for years, but nevertheless an approach that remains anchored in 20th-century productivism, far from the green programme. The two largest parties in Flanders want an independent or quasi-independent Flanders, while other Flemish parties and all French-speaking parties want nothing of the sort. This disagreement naturally causes serious political tensions that make the formation of a federal government difficult.

It appears once again that facts – from heat waves to severe storms – and scientific reports are not enough to convince Belgian political parties to recognise the seriousness of the climate crisis and act accordingly. 27 years after the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, basic insights into environment, climate, and sustainable development have not been internalised in the Belgian political class (except

the Green parties and, to a certain extent, the Flemish Socialists). The green transition requires allies, making this a particularly painful realisation. This election campaign and its results showed that the Green parties in Belgium will be in a lonely position over the coming years and will face serious challenges. Belgium will struggle to become a leader in the transition in the near future, except for some cities where the Greens are strong. This juncture has important strategic implications for the Greens in Belgium, and may be relevant elsewhere in Europe too.

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One strategy would see the Greens stay out of the federal government and the Flemish and Walloon regional governments and focus on the cities where they are in power (and the Brussels Region where they are more than likely to govern). Their concrete achievements there can act as illustrations of the green story: they are both reassuring and appealing. In recent years, the green leaders in Ghent have made extensive progress on mobility, which strengthened Groen across Flanders. In this scenario, the Green parties would invest in raising awareness and in the development of a climate discourse coalition. It is regrettable that, in this option, our governments are pursuing non-climate and even anti-climate policies, but the Green parties will form a strong opposition. And, in the meantime, the European Union will force our country to take a number of measures. In conjunction with the climate story, opposition to neoliberalism and the development of a green, socio-economic story are part of this path.

There is a different approach open too. Rather than only targeting the cities where they are strong, the Greens could try to join the federal, Walloon and Flemish governments to work as productively as possible on climate policy. But taking this route, it must be recognised that power relations and the budgetary situation may well hamper attempts at major green economic reform. The risk is that you seriously disappoint your voters whilst maintaining the current productivist system. But you may make some progress on climate policy.

These options are consciously presented in black and white terms, but there are many shades in between. These questions are not new; they were around thirty years ago and there will never be definitive answers. Since the May elections and in view of the urgent challenges that society faces, these questions have become more serious than ever. Within a few months it will become clear how Groen and Ecolo will respond to them. In the towns and cities of Brussels, Flanders, and Wallonia, there will be interesting achievements in the coming years that will motivate and inspire citizens, movements, and parties elsewhere in Europe. At the European elections, the Greens/European Free Alliance group has strengthened its position in the European Parliament. The question therefore seems to be how can Greens with a strong position in cities and regions cooperate with the Green Group in the European Parliament. The question of how they can work together, and handle the intermediate level, requires reflection, discussion, and political creativity.

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[1] Bruno Latour. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Polity Press: 2018.



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