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Belgium

Despite the relative scarcity of polls, political polling becomes more and more important in Belgium. Reasons for this increase are threefold: The foremost reason is the occurrence of a number of crises, which are said to have made politicians more sensitive to public opinion: a 300.000-people protest march against the malfunctioning of the justice system in the aftermath of the Dutroux paedophilia scandal, and the occurrence of a food safety crisis just before the 1999 election which had a deep impact on election results and led to the ousting from power of the christian-democrats for the first time since 1958. In general, the traditional party-landscape has undergone profound changes, which is threatening the dominance of the traditional parties (liberals, socialist, christian-democrats), and makes voting behaviour very volatile and unpredictable. Finally, the present government (Verhofstadt I) devotes more attention to communication and image.

In this essay, we will first outline the legal framework regulating the publication of polls. Following an overview of the main polls in Belgium we will discuss political parties' attitudes towards opinion polling. Some attention will be given to other sources for information on public opinion, as well as to methodological problems with polling. We will finish by presenting the main issues in current political and public opinion.

Legal framework

The publication of polling results is regulated by the law of the 18th of July 1985 on the publication of opinion polls. It has been modified by the law of the 21st of June 1991. Concerns for the quality of polling were at the basis of both laws. Apart from other measures they also provide for the founding of a Commission on opinion polls, which should engage in drafting quality criteria for polling and a code of ethics for polling institutes, and in supervising the practice of polling. A parliamentary question in 1995 criticised the fact that the Commission still hadn't been composed, and no sign has been heard on this Commission up to this day (Handelingen Kamer, 1995).

Article 5 of the 1985 law should be considered as the most important one in the law: it forbids the publication and diffusion of polling results and their discussion or explanation in a period of 30 days prior to elections, in order to protect the voter from dishonest practices and to avoid manipulation. The most important innovation in the 1991 law is the abolition of this restriction. In changing this requirement, the parliament recognised the considerations of those who wrote the 1985 law, but it were mainly legal and practical requirements that lead to the abolition. First of all, there was growing concern on the constitutionality of the law: a prohibition of the publications of polls was said to be against the freedom of the press. Even if there would be no contradiction between the Constitution and the law on opinion polls, it would have been very difficult to sue media who have published results prior to elections because of the heavy procedure to sue against press crimes. In daily practice, there had been several cases in which the publication prohibition was not honoured,

but no action was taken because the Commission was never installed, and because there was a conviction that the accused would win his/her case anyway on the ground of the unconstitutionality of the law. Furthermore, a prohibition on publication was judged as unnecessary since scientific research still hadn't proved that publication of polling results prior to elections does actually influence voting intentions. It was therefore decided to take the prohibition on publication prior to elections out of the law. In 1992 an attempt was made to re-introduce such a buffer period (Parlementaire Stukken van de Kamer, 1991-1992).

Instead, the 1991 law put more emphasis on technical requirements for polling and provided for a restriction of the use of the title 'opinion polling institute' to these persons and institutes respecting the quality criteria and code of ethics, a title which can be granted by decision of the Minister of Economic Affairs. Manipulations of polls can lead to a cancellation of the homologation of the institute and the Commission can order a public rectification of these manipulations. The inactivity of the Commission however makes that the law has no real deterrent effect.

The law stipulates a number of conditions for the publication of the polls. When a poll is published, the aforementioned Commission should be informed about:

- a) Name and nature of the commissioner of the poll and of
- b) The person or institute that did the polling
- c) Aim and subject of the poll, and the targeted population
- d) The period in which the interviewing was done
- e) The method of interviewing
- f) the number of interviewers

- g) the method of sampling
- h) the size of the original sample and the number of interviews that have been realised
- i) a distribution of the sample according to the size of the municipality in which interviews have been done, and the number of municipalities
- j) the composition of the respondents according to sex, age, income, class, profession, and any other characteristic that may influence the answer, both before and after weighing the sample, as far as these data are available
- k) general information on the confidence interval in relation to sample size
- l) General information in the methods of extrapolation
- m) The questions that have been asked, as well as the answer categories
- n) Frequency distribution of the answers, as well as the number of missings.

The publication itself (e.g. in a newspapers) should contain the information under *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *h*, *m* and *n*. The publication should respect the anonymity of the respondents. The preconditions on the publication itself are in general respected very well.

General political polls

The leading political opinion poll in Belgium is a three-monthly poll by the French-speaking newspaper “La Libre Belgique”. Since the beginning of the 80’s, this reputed newspaper orders every three months a poll for its ‘political barometer’. For this poll, 2000 Belgians are interrogated: 750 in Flanders and Wallonia, and 500 in the Brussels Region. This is exceptional, since it does not happen frequently that polling is done in both French and Dutch-speaking parts of the country. Questions deal with trust in federal and regional governments to solve topical problems, voting intentions,

and the popularity of individual politicians (“would you like to see the following politicians to play an important role in the coming months”).

Practically every Belgian newspaper gives some attention to the results of this poll, which makes it by far the most influential poll. It has become a point of reference for legitimising one’s party or policy. Publication of the result is also an important moment for politicians because of the popularity rankings of politicians, where it is often a matter of prestige to be ranked very high. This poll is a very good illustration that “*polls have become a symbolic weapon in the political game*” (Billiet 1993, own translation).

However, every publication of polling result engenders criticisms on the reliability of polls, and discussions on their use in democracies. Criticism deal with methodology (mainly from academics), and with the fact that political parties in most cases make a very selective use of the results.

In the months and weeks prior to elections, many newspapers, magazines and TV-stations order polls to accompany their election-related articles. On election-days, exit-polls are being organised to garner information on vote changes: how did someone vote in the present elections compared to last election? This allows for making tables showing which party lost to which party, something which is very relevant in a multi-party landscape.

In 1991, partly as a result of the so-called ‘Black Sunday’, the election day showing a breakthrough of the extreme-right and populist Vlaams Blok, the initiative was taken to organise a post-election voting motivation General Election Study, as it existed

already in e.g. the USA and neighbouring Netherlands. The main aim of these studies is to probe for voting motivations: What is the profile of those voting for party X, both socio-demographic and sociologically (individualism, ethnocentrism, ...), and what could be the reason why people have switched parties or have remained loyal to their party. Originally, the GES was a panel study, for which a number of people were questioned after every parliamentary election.

Other polls

One of the best-known recent polls in Belgium is at the same time the most disputed one. In June 2000, liberal politicians in the Federal government insisted on sending a questionnaire to all Belgians over 16 on the reform of the public administration. Sending and handling the 8.2 million 2-page questionnaires turned out to be a multi-million enterprise, and many Belgians still remember the initiative. Immediately after sending the questionnaire, criticism on the methodology started: nobody ever thought it possible to make so many mistakes in such a small questionnaire: confusing answering categories, steering responses by the answering categories themselves, loaded questions, several topics in one single question etc. The number of methodological mistakes made this 'Copernicus'-poll a grateful subject for undergraduate exam tasks. Poor methodology, absence of socio-demographics and a response rate of 9.2 % (still more than 750.000) made the results of the poll as good as useless. However, the 'right' answer on every question was in most cases very obvious, which resulted in massive support for government plans. In this case, a poll was in fact used as a marketing instrument for government policy, and the results could be used to counter resistance in the administrative reforms. Initially, government planned to hold a referendum on the reform of the public administration,

but bad experiences with referenda and thus numerous objections by political actors, lead to the plan of a poll, which in fact resembled a referendum by mail (Tegenbos, 2000).

Interest groups do use polls to support their actions, but their impact is in most cases limited. The best known example is the magazine of the general practitioners, which invites its readers on a regular basis to fill out questionnaires on medical issues. These polls normally receive considerable attention. Other examples are a poll on the future of Belgium by the anti-separatist movement B-Plus, polls on numerous issues by opinion magazines as Knack and le Vif/l'Express, ...

Polls and political parties

There is an very uneasy relationship between polls and political parties. Opinion polls owe part of their bad reputation to the UNIOP/INUSOP affair in the 80's. The UNIOP/UNISOP scandal, in which the reputed UNIOP/UNISOP polling agency was used for illegal election campaign financing raised concerns on the close relations between political parties and polling institutes. The size of the country makes that political parties only have limited budgets. Ordering polls is therefore no daily practice. Parties often rely on generally available surveys and open sources (analysis of polls published in the media, studies by universities-e.g. on voting motivation-, ...)

The Flemish Liberal Party VLD took a somewhat different approach: in May 2002, it ordered a poll on topical issues (crime, voting rights for immigrants, ideological neutrality of education) to help the party determine the possibilities for new strategic party-alliances. The VLD is one of the few parties ordering their own polls. In 1995 its initiative to invite the entire Flemish population to fill out a 10-question

questionnaire on policy issues provoked many commentaries on the methodology (e.g. answers on the question ‘can the next government, according to you, increase taxes?’ were not very surprising, and it was possible for respondents to mail back more than 1 questionnaire). The initiative should be categorised as a publicity stunt (questionnaire was sent in the running-up towards the elections) and not as a poll. Massive participation (414.00 questionnaires were sent back) caused the party a financial headache.

The Flemish Socialists attribute part of their reservation towards polling to the difficulty to keep the outcomes of the poll secret. In this way, financial efforts by one party benefit other parties as well (Lombaert, 1991:66). If a party does opinion research, it tends to keep the results secret, since these are considered as strategic information.

Polls: surveys

As we have mentioned, polls are not widely used. Instead, there are a number of scientific surveys with considerable influence. The absence of political polling tradition gives *administrative polls* and *surveys* more importance, such as the yearly general survey by the Administration of Planning and Statistics, part of the ministry of the Flemish Community. Since 1996, this administration organises a large-scale survey on socio-cultural changes in Flanders. Many questions deal with politics, and the results are used for policy-making and –planning. The APS-survey is now in its 7th year, which makes it a very good and popular source for both the administration, politicians and political parties.

Results of numerous scientific surveys make it to the headlines of newspapers, not at least because many surveys are ordered by government. This makes them difficult to

neglect. One good example is the research by the Brussels Free University (VUB) on social capital in Flanders (e.g. Elchardus et. al. 2001): within a very short time the results and recommendations of the study had permeated political discourse and policy.

Methodology

Distortions in the reporting of voting intentions is one of the recurrent themes in political polls in Belgium. Polls underestimate the support for the extreme-right 'Vlaams Blok', since answers are being influenced by social desirability. Unfortunately, users of polls seem to forget this phenomenon every time a new poll is published, by triumphing about the end of the rise of the extreme right (e.g. liberal party chairman Karel De Gucht in the 'De Standaard' newspaper on June 5, 2002). The much-published election show of the commercial television VTM on the 2000 municipal elections is a good example: results of exit polls became available almost immediately after the closure of polling stations, and predicted a loss of the extreme-right in the city of Antwerp, a traditional stronghold of this party. The election results themselves however showed an increase in votes for the extreme right. Other predictions also proved not to be very correct.

In Belgium, discussions on polls and referenda are related. Both in (the discussion on) referenda and in polls, considerable attention is given to minimal response rates (legally, the votes in a municipal referendum can only be counted when there is a minimum response rate of 40 %) and representativity. Criticism on both initiatives are similar: one-sentence questions are a simplification of reality, participation is not always representative, ...

The influence of university social science and methodology departments in survey-research is in most cases rather strong, which makes that a lot of attention is given to reliability, field-work quality etc. This impact is absent when it concerns political polls or initiatives by parties and news media, except when the polls deal with the interpretation of voting intentions in electoral periods. As for commercial polling, there are no companies with political polling as sole specialisation because of the limited demand.

Academic research tries to avoid underrepresentation of certain groups by using samples taken from the civil registry, which contains all inhabitants, and in most cases a recent address. Commercial polling companies do not have the possibility to use this registry because of legal and privacy concerns.

Polls, the issues

Belgian politics is generally approached as consisting of three cross-cutting cleavages: a socio-economic one, an ideological one (catholic-liberal) and a cultural-linguistic one (French- vs. Dutch-speaking). These three classic cleavages are now said to be fading away, but they took and still take an important place in the interpretation of polling results: is the so-called depillarization, the process in which ideological adherence to one single party throughout one's life by membership of trade-unions, mutual insurance, etc. liaised with the party or its ideology, disappearing, leading to a decline of the 3 traditionally 'big' parties (socialists, Christian-democrats, liberals)? Are there any differences to be found between the opinions of Dutch and French-speakers? ...

Many heated political discussions in Belgium deal with so-called ‘communitarian issues’: issues in which conflicts of interest between the language communities are (supposed to be) at stake. At the same time, Belgium has slowly evolved from a central state to a federal state via a long process of state reforms which started in 1970. Language issues were responsible for the fall of several governments, and gave rise to the birth of political parties with nationalistic programmes. In its early period, nationalism was also one of the core issues in the rise of the extreme right. Despite the perceived importance of language-related and nationalist issues, polls show that in fact Belgians are at best indifferent towards these issues. Actually, when asked about their first group affiliation, in 1996 the number of people identifying themselves as Belgian was about equal as the number of people identifying as Flemish. In a similar survey in 2002, the 42.2% identified themselves as Belgian, compared to 28.4% as Flemish (APS surveys, 1996-2000). Despite the several stages in the federalisation of the country, polls never showed majorities in favour of it, which makes the federalisation process very elite-centred. While a recent study revealed that a transfer of competences to the regional level is supported by 46.5%, only 9.2% actually spoke out in favour of Flemish independence (Meersseman & Depickere, 2002).

Recently, a number of new issues have popped up. Since the beginning of the 90’s, especially since the election results of ‘Black Sunday’ (24/11/1991) the so-called ‘kloof met de burger’ (cleavage between citizen and government) came to be at the core of politicians’ concerns, not at least because of the rise of the extreme right. The latter phenomenon has also increased attention for safety issues and immigration. Dramatic events forced politicians to become more sensitive of public opinion: On 20 October 1996, 300.000 Belgians participated in the White March, a demonstration in

remembrance of the victims of Marc Dutroux, a paedophile/murderer, responsible for the death of several small children. The demonstration called for drastic changes in the way courts and police functioned in Belgium, and was at the basis of a reform of the police. The events and the accompanying political discourse has increased the number of people concerned with safety issues. Safety, together with immigration, both at the core of the programme of the extreme-right, has become one of the prime issues for mobilisation in periods of elections.

Some months before the 1999 parliamentary elections, a food safety scandal came to the front: it became known that harmful substances had been mixed with fodder, and had in this way entered the food chain. The issue was at first ignored by government, but it soon had to take the blame for the malfunctioning food inspection agencies. Public sensitivity for all food-related issues increased in Belgium (and indeed in the whole of Europe), and led to a triumph for the green parties in the elections and to the ousting of the Christian-democrats from government for the first time since 1958. The purple coalition (Liberals, Socialists, Greens) which came to power in 1999 is devoting more attention to communication with the public, and is thus more sensitive to public opinion. This should not come as a surprise since we have in this essay mentioned the liberals several times as key actors in innovations in polling and as protagonists in the promotion of referenda. This government was also the first one to engage a spin-doctor.

Conclusion

There is a limited polling tradition in Belgium, but one can say the importance of polls is increasing. Parties' financial abilities makes that polling by political parties is not very common. In the event of a poll organised by government or a political party,

data-gathering is often confused with marketing. As a result, scientific surveys and some media polls often attract a considerable amount of attention.

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Key concepts

Publication requirements

Belgium

Legal framework

Marketing

Voting motivation

Administrative reforms – modernisation of the administration

Federalisation

Regionalisation

Extreme-right

Referendum