

The 2012 Local and Provincial Elections in Flanders

Just like all elections, the 14th October 2012 local and provincial elections in Flanders were described as important – but this time more so than ever. Before they actually took place they were proclaimed by the principal challenger, the N-VA and its Flemish nationalists, as a referendum on the federal government. Political opponents, who refused to recognize the national dimension to the local elections, could not prevent the local elections from also being seen as a sort of mid-term election between the federal elections of 2010 and the general election of 2014, which is already being hailed as “the mother of all elections”. Because in 2014 the European, regional and federal parliaments will all be re-elected.

Seldom has there been more hype around elections than those of next year. In 2014, so certain analysts and quite a number of politicians dare to suggest (somewhat exaggeratedly), the Belgian model is at stake. That is why there was so much interest in the results of the October 2012 election: would N-VA be able to translate its electoral strength as the largest party in Belgium into local terms, or was it a question of the beginning of the decline of the party challenging the Belgian model? Would the traditional parties hold their ground, or would they fall further behind? The liberals of Open Vld were especially nervous, having seen a series of alarming opinion polls. The Christian Democrat CD&V wanted to maintain its position as the largest local party in Flanders. The Flemish socialists of sp.a were satisfied to remain stable, which would buck the

N-VA chairman Bart De Wever is the new mayor of Antwerp.
His party did well in the 2012 local and provincial elections in Belgium



trend of the continuing losses they had been suffering for years. In that respect it was also important how the other parties of the left, such as the Green party and the radical left PVDA+ would score locally. The far right Vlaams Belang wanted to avoid catastrophe. Following outright success in the local elections of 2006 the party started on a disastrous downward trend.

In addition, a handful of the major Flemish cities had the spotlight on them. During the campaign, which was given huge media attention, it seemed almost as if elections were only being organized in the ten major Flemish cities, there was relative silence over the remaining 307 municipalities. Above all, Antwerp, the principal city in Flanders, snatched an exceptional amount of attention, which meant the vote there was a kind of direct mayoral election between N-VA chairman Bart De Wever and the outgoing mayor, the socialist Patrick Janssens. In 2006 Janssens had defeated his great rival, Filip Dewinter, of Vlaams Belang, and in so doing had gathered a lot of "democratic forces" behind him. But with De Wever, and after six years in power, it was a different picture. People were watching for the N-VA score in a lot of other places, not just in Antwerp.

The 2012 local and provincial elections, as always, were about many varying questions, both local and national. In many cities and municipalities you could only explain the outcome by looking at the specific local context. This also explains why CD&V remained the largest local party. Yet these local elections also had a national dimension – local elections traditionally echo the national political trends. Without this it is difficult to explain why, frequently out of nowhere, N-VA suddenly broke through in so many cities. The party failed to reach the average figure that was predicted in national polls, but nonetheless took an enormous step forward and was the moral winner. Also because De Wever defeated Janssens convincingly in Antwerp, which meant that the Flemish socialists disappeared from the town hall of the biggest city in Flanders for the first time in ages.

Moreover, the provincial elections (second order elections in which voters show their naked preference, as it were, independently from what those elections are theoretically about) demonstrated that N-VA had lost none of its strength and is still on course for further growth in 2014. Although those same provincial elections also showed that CD&V are climbing out of the abyss. The battle for the centre is becoming unusually exciting in Flanders, which is so politically fragmented and volatile.

The predicted annihilation of Open Vld did not happen, so that they could be satisfied with a limited loss – although the score for the Flemish liberals remained below par. That was certainly the case for the Flemish socialists, the big loser in this election, together with Vlaams Belang. Vlaams Belang's defeat had already been announced beforehand and it was major too, which meant it attracted more attention than that of the sp.a. Compared with 2006, this party lost almost a quarter of its voters in the central Flemish cities that are so important to it. The gains in Ghent and Bruges were some consolation, but for sp.a this was the umpteenth defeat in a row. The Green party did relatively well, as indeed they did at the national level too, but they often had to form coalitions – sometimes of many hues – to get into power. It was not so easy under their own steam.

The surprise in these elections, which only came to light a few days later, was probably the strong score of the radical left PVDA+, in the small number of cities where the party had candidates. Although its success there was on a modest scale, symbolically it was significant: it cost sp.a in particular a lot of votes. PVDA+ was able to convince many voters in Antwerp with its active grassroots action – in those areas where the withdrawal of the socialists left the field open to politicians who were still prepared to appear on the street. Bart de Wever, for instance.

The local and provincial elections entailed no fundamental change compared with the federal

outcome for 2010. In itself this tells us a lot: “the power of change” (the N-VA slogan) has so far failed to oust the power of the federal government parties. The shifts, compared with 2006, are considerable, but that was no surprise, since 2012 had been seen above all as a midterm election on the way to 2014. The federal government had shut up shop for it, as had also been the case to a large extent in 2006, and after the local elections it found itself confronted with a huge budgetary task in a climate that had been polarised by the local elections, because the N-VA beast seemed still to be untamed. So it was with some trepidation that the Flemish parties – certainly CD&V and Open VLD who have the most to fear from it – approached the delayed start to the federal political year 2012-2013, the last full year before the important confrontation in 2014.

The 14th October 2012 made itself felt for a while, but everyone is already looking towards June 2014.

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Translated by Sheila M. Dale