

Political participation of ethnic minorities in Belgium: From enfranchisement to ethnic vote

The heavy influx of immigrants during the last few decades has transformed many Western societies, including Belgium. The presence of a considerable number of ethnic minority people in society has raised important questions about their incorporation in political institutions.

This debate about the political participation of ethnic minorities in Belgium has for a long time been dominated by the discussion about their enfranchisement. After giving some information about the presence of ethnic minorities in Belgian society, we describe this discussion in detail. In the next sections, we look at the effects and barriers of the enfranchisement of foreigners at the local level after its final implementation. Then, we consider the national and regional levels, focussing in particular on the presence and behavior of ethnic MPs and ministers. After looking at other political arenas in which the presence of allochtonous people could be relevant, we end with discussing challenges for the future.

The presence of ethnic minorities in Belgian society

At the moment, about 20% of the Belgian population is of foreign origin. Apart from people from other (often neighboring) EU countries, the largest groups of foreigners come from Morocco, Turkey and Congo (the latter being a former colony of Belgium).

The migration history of the Turkish and Moroccan people started after World War II, when Belgium needed coal for the reconstruction of the country. Owing to a shortage in the labor force, foreign workers were recruited to work in the coal mines. During the 'golden sixties', Belgium established several contracts with the Turkish and Moroccan authorities for the transfer of their workers to Belgium. In the 1970s however, a huge economic crisis occurred and subsequently, a migration stop was enforced. Notwithstanding this migration stop, the Turkish and Moroccan communities kept on growing during the next decades, mainly due to family reunification.

The Congolese migration to Belgium, on the other hand, only really began after independence of Con-

go/Zaire in 1960. Unlike the Turkish and Moroccan migrants, Congolese migrants were mostly students, diplomats, tourists and businessmen. After the migration stop in the 1970s, there were several peaks in the number of asylum requests (for instance in 1992 and in 2003) due to the precarious political situation in Congo.

It is difficult to find exact numbers of the Moroccan, Turkish and Congolese population in Belgium, but nowadays there are estimates of about 300,000 Moroccan people in Belgium, 200,000 Turkish people and 50,000 Congolese people. These people are not equally distributed within Belgium. Most foreigners are concentrated in big cities like Antwerp (39.7% of the population), Mechelen (27.3%), Leuven and Ghent (26.3%). Furthermore there is a concentration in the province of Limburg (19%) and in the Brussels region (67.9%).

The debate about enfranchisement

For a long time, Belgian legislation firmly connected the right to vote to nationality. Only Belgian citizens were allowed to vote. Having no right to vote constituted an important mechanism of political exclusion for foreign people in Belgium. The enfranchisement of foreigners was for the first time put on the political agenda by the trade unions in the early 1970s. Despite the efforts of action committees devoted to enfranchisement and despite the inclusion of this demand in a government agreement in the early 1980s, resistance time and again proved to be stronger and for a long period made change impossible. The introduction of suffrage for non-Belgians necessitated a change in the Constitution, which requires a two-third majority in the House of Representatives after a complex procedure (including new elections) is followed. This procedure rendered this introduction very complicated and as a consequence, proposals granting the right to vote to foreigners were often not even seriously considered.

There was yet another impeding factor: the lack of political will. From the beginning of the 1980s onwards, the presence of ethnic minority people in Belgian society became contested. Anti-migrant parties appeared on the political scene and obtained increasingly more success. In the 1980s, the francophone mayor Roger Nols

put the French-speaking liberal-democratic party under pressure on this issue. With his anti-migrant points of view, he attracted many voters from the right in the Brussels area, at the expense of the liberal-democratic party. As a reaction, the latter became more strict on the issue of immigration and refused granting additional rights to ethnic minority people. Later, the extreme right Flemish party Vlaams Blok increased the pressure on all parties by obtaining almost 25% of the votes in Flanders. The established parties feared that by introducing foreigners' enfranchisement they would play Vlaams Blok's game and make them even stronger. Therefore, in the 1990s, most parties refrained from even holding a debate on this issue.

Enfranchisement finally adopted

For a long time, not much changed in the legislation on the right to vote. An alternative path has, however, been followed to resolve the political exclusion of (some) foreigners. The nationality legislation was revised several times. In particular, the conditions to acquire the Belgian nationality were relaxed. As such, it has been made easier for ethnic minority people to obtain the Belgian nationality, and hence to obtain the right to vote in elections. By relaxing the nationality legislation, Belgian leading politicians also hoped to avoid the enfranchisement debate.

Evolutions at the European level in the course of the 1990s have given a new impetus to the debate about the enfranchisement of foreigners. Following the Treaty of Maastricht, member states were obliged to grant EU citizens the right to vote in local and European elections. After a long period of hesitation, Belgium finally amended its Constitution in 1998. This change disconnected nationality and the right to vote. Consequently, the enfranchisement of foreign citizens, both EU and non-EU citizens, could be adopted by an 'ordinary' law. For the EU citizens, such a law was, in line with the Maastricht Treaty, quickly adopted, allowing them in 2000 to participate in local elections for the first time.

For non-EU citizens, politicians were more reluctant, but pressure was increased by civil society and by parties of the left. The different treatment between EU citizens and non-EU citizens was considered incorrect by them. Finally, in 2004 a free vote was held in parliament. Although there was no majority on the Flemish side and a government crisis could only be avoided by a hair's breadth, the proposal was eventually adopted.

Effects of and barriers to electoral participation at the local level

People without the Belgian nationality are now included in the group of citizens that is allowed to vote, but only for local elections and they are neither allowed to run for office nor to take a seat in any representative assembly or government. On top of these restrictions, additional conditions to participate apply to foreigners as opposed to Belgian people: Foreigners have to be in the country for 5 years, they have to register themselves and they have to sign a declaration that they will respect the Belgian Constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Research has revealed that the ways in which local governments handle this new regulation and how and to what extent they inform their foreign population impacts upon the participation rate of foreign voters. Unlike for Belgian people, voting is not compulsory for EU-citizens and non-EU-citizens. At the local elections in 2006, a total of 17,065 foreign non-EU people registered themselves as voters. This constituted only 15.7% of the total number of potential foreign voters. Large differences between local communities could be discerned. The registration rate ranged from more than 40% (in Herentals and Lier) to less than 4% of the potential voters (in Zaventem, Ninove and Mechelen). In particular, smaller local municipalities and those with a mayor from the centre-right liberal-democratic party (which was opposed to the new regulation) exerted few efforts to inform the foreign voters. As a consequence, in these communities, electoral participation of these people tended to be low. For EU citizens, the participation rate was only slightly higher: 20.9% of them were registered as voters. This small difference is remarkable since it was already the second time (after 2000) that EU citizens could participate in local elections in Belgium. Apart from registered foreigners and EU citizens, ethnic minority people having obtained the Belgian nationality have the right (and even the duty) to cast a vote.

Representation in local councils

As indicated above, people without the Belgian nationality cannot figure on the candidate lists for elections. Only people who have acquired the Belgian nationality are allowed to do this.

The number of ethnic representatives (with the Belgian nationality) at the local level has increased in recent

years. This is particularly clear in Brussels. In 1994, only 14 of the 651 local councilors had an ethnic background, in 2000 already 90 of the 652 councilors were from an ethnic minority and in 2006 there were 138 ethnic councilors (of the 653). The situation in Brussels is quite unique however. In the Flemish part of Belgium, for example, the representation of ethnic minorities is not as high, but numbers also increased at the local

elections of 2006. In several Flemish cities, the representation of ethnic minorities in the local council matches their presence in the local population. We now look in more detail at the situation in three major Flemish cities. The analysis is limited to the three 'traditional' parties and the green party.

Table 1: Ethnic minority presence on candidate lists and in local councils in three major Flemish cities

Party	Ideology	City	Ethnic minority presence on candidate lists	Ethnic minority presence in the local council
CD&V	Christian-democratic	Leuven	4.4	0
		Ghent	7.8	0
		Antwerp	12.8	20.0
OpenVLD	Liberal-democratic	Leuven	2.2	0
		Ghent	7.8	9.1
		Antwerp	9.1	0
Sp.a	Social-democratic	Leuven	11.1	23.5
		Ghent	11.8	20.0
		Antwerp	10.1	23.8
Groen!	Green	Leuven	4.4	20.0
		Ghent	7.8	16.7
		Antwerp	14.5	0

We see that each party (and thus not only leftist parties) have put ethnic minority people on their candidate lists for the 2006 local elections. These candidates appear to a slightly higher percentage on the lists of social-democratic and green parties. This difference between left and (centre-)right parties becomes more pronounced when taking the percentage of elected ethnic minority people into account. All social-democratic and green local parties manage to get ethnic minority people elected to the local council, with the exception of the green party in Antwerp, which acquired only two seats in total. In every city always more than 20% of the social-democratic councilors comes from an ethnic minority. The Christian-democratic and the liberal-democratic party, in contrast, have ethnic minority representatives in only one of the three local councils at issue here: CD&V in Antwerp and OpenVLD in Ghent.

Explanations for the growth in numbers of ethnic local councilors

The relative success of ethnic local councilors can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the proportional electoral system (including the use of preferential votes for distributing seats) favors the representation of ethnic minorities. Research has shown that even if ethnic minorities are positioned in non-electable slots on the lists, they are likely to become elected anyway due to the large number of preferential votes they manage to obtain. These votes are the result of both ethnic and

symbolic voting. Ethnic voting refers to ethnic voters voting for ethnic candidates, a practice which is very common in Brussels and elsewhere. The right to vote for people without the Belgian nationality has reinforced this tendency and has increased the number of votes for ethnic candidates at the local level. This effect should not be overestimated, however. The effect of this enfranchisement appears to be quite small, as many ethnic minority people had already obtained the Belgian nationality thanks to changes in the naturalization laws. Symbolic votes on the other hand, come from autochthonous Belgian voters who want to send a signal that they support the presence of ethnic minority people in politics.

Secondly, politicians are in general devoting increasing attention to the socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is increasingly considered a democratic problem. To counter this lack of representativeness, many parties have taken action (including setting target figures and actively recruiting candidates belonging to under-represented groups). Parties put ethnic minorities on their candidate lists because of ideological reasons, but also because of pragmatic reasons: The new pool of (foreign) voters makes it worthwhile for them to have ethnic minority candidates.

A third factor explaining the success of ethnic representatives at the local level is the local level itself. As ethnic minorities are often active and visible in their local community, it is only a small step for them to enter local politics.

Representation in national and regional parliaments

At the regional and the national levels, barriers for representation tend to be higher, but ethnic minority representatives have still also managed to enter parliamentary assemblies at these policy levels.

The first ethnic representative entered the House of Representatives as late as 1999: Chokri Mahassine (Flemish social-democratic party), soon to be followed by Fauzaya Talhaoui (Flemish green party). Later, others followed. In the 2007-2010 legislative term, 5 out of 150 MPs (3.33 %) belonged to an ethnic minority, while in the current term 7 MPs have non-EU roots (4.66%). These figures are well below the proportion of ethnic minorities in society and below their presence in local councils. An analysis of the candidate lists by the Forum of Ethnic Minorities on the occasion of the 2010 elections revealed that French-speaking parties scored much better than Flemish parties as concerns the presence of ethnic minorities on their candidate lists: 13.84 % versus 3.82 %.

Let us now look at some of the regional parliaments. The representation of ethnic minorities in the Flemish parliament increased in 2009 from two to five ethnic representatives (4 %). According to a study of the Forum of Ethnic Minorities, only 4% of the effective candidates came from an ethnic minority in the Flemish regional elections in 2009. Most of them hailed from the Maghreb community (38%) or the Turkish community (29%) and were on the social-democratic list. The Walloon parliament scores slightly better. Seven representatives have an ethnic background, which amount to 9% of all representatives. This percentage almost matches their presence in the population. The Brussels regional parliament occupies an exceptional position: The presence of ethnic minority people in the Brussels regional parliament rose from 5% in 1995 to 25% in 2009 and in addition some government positions were allocated to them. This is not surprisingly given the high share of ethnic minorities in the Brussels population.

Government positions

At the government level, some politicians with an ethnic background have made their appearance the last few years, albeit most of the time in junior government positions (secretaries of state under supervision of a minister). Belgium has six governments (one federal and five of the regions and/or communities), and at the moment we find ethnic minorities only in the government of the Brussels Region and of the French community. In the government of the Brussels Region, there is one secretary of state of Turkish origin (Emir Kir) and one of Greek origin (Christos Doulkeridos) and in the government of the French community, Fadila Laanan, a woman of Moroccan origin, is minister of culture, the audiovisual sector, health and equal opportunities. For the moment, ethnic minorities remain absent in the national government, the Flemish government, the Walloon government and the government of the German-speaking community.

Parliamentary behavior

Representation is not only a matter of numbers and having people with varied backgrounds in the elected assemblies. It is also important that the different opinions and interests of society are voiced. We call this substantive representation. Substantive representation is realized when the elected officials represent the needs, interests, wishes and opinions of all groups that are present in society. It does not matter who represents these interests and demands (this can be done by both an autochthon and an ethnic minority representative), as long as they are represented. Some people believe however that only ethnic representatives can faithfully represent their own community. Ethnic representatives experience a lot of pressure to defend the wishes of their community. Research on Belgian representatives has revealed that MPs have personal preferences to represent their particular group and are also encouraged to behave as a representative of their group by parties, organisations and the general public. However, since MPs fear that this behaviour is not compatible with their career goal of being a mainstream MP securing re-election, they often hesitate and even refrain from taking up the role of group representative.

Representation in other political arenas

Finally, there are still other political arenas in which far-reaching decisions for the regulation of society are taken. Actors or institutions that play a crucial role in

these arenas include political parties, trade unions and advisory councils.

Political parties play an important role in Belgian politics, which is often characterized as a 'partitocracy'. They appear not to be very open towards ethnic minorities. There is a marked discrepancy between the number of ethnic minorities on candidate lists and their level of inclusion in the local party organization. Having a balanced membership does not appear to be a goal of local party sections as they are ill-informed about the actual presence of ethnic minorities among their members. Moreover, the presence of ethnic minorities among the higher ranks of the local party is overall low in all parties and definitely lags behind their presence on candidate lists and in local councils.

Trade unions have tried to incorporate ethnic minority people in their organisations from an early stage. Nationality is not a requirement to become a member and already in the early 1970s foreign workers and employees were granted the right to vote in so-called 'social elections', i.e. elections in which employees elect their representatives in works councils, in which employees' representatives negotiate with employers. Trade unions have also been major proponents of the enfranchisement of foreigners for political elections.

Another form of informal political participation which originated long before the enfranchisement of foreigners has taken place in, is to be found in advisory councils. Advisory councils consisting of representatives of immigrants were first set up in the 1970s in a number of municipalities, most notably in the mining area. As such, they have provided a forum for the informal political participation of ethnic minorities. The real impact has of course depended on how the local government has interacted with them, whether it has seen these councils only as a compulsory procedural partner or as an opportunity to truly grasp the concerns of the ethnic community.

Challenges for the future

Although ethnic minorities are now entitled to vote at the local level and local representation is growing, there is still room for improvement. Ethnic minorities remain underrepresented at the national level and in the regional parliaments (with the exception of the Brussels regional parliament). Furthermore, it seems difficult for ethnic minorities to obtain government positions.

In addition, the absence of ethnic minorities in political parties is striking. Hardly any party makes special efforts to include ethnic minorities. This is problematic for the full political empowerment of ethnic minorities, since only through their presence and active participation in political parties are they able to structurally embed their concerns in all the key tasks political parties perform (for instance putting forward people who are ready to occupy a political mandate and representing interests). Possibly, their inclusion on the candidate lists is a first step to their full political inclusion in the entire party organization.

A final challenge for the future is that ethnic representatives are not yet acting as group representatives. Ethnic representatives have a specific potential to represent their community, because they share certain experiences and structural positions with this community. However, as stated above, ethnic representatives often shy away from taking up the role of group representative because they fear that their political career would be adversely affected.

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