

# **Why won't they join?**

## **An exploratory investigation of the Belgian government crisis of 2010**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Political Science

at the

University of Canterbury

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2013

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## Acknowledgements

I owe thanks to many people, without whom this thesis could have not been completed.

Firstly, huge thanks must go to my supervisor, Professor Alex Tan. Alex, you sparked my interest in political science in my undergraduate years and you have always encouraged and inspired me to develop this interest. I am ever-grateful for your constant guidance and support throughout writing this thesis. It has been such a pleasure and a privilege to work with you and I hope we can work together again one day.

To my fellow Political Science Masters and PhD students, thank you for the regular “thesis writers’ group” catch-ups and the great chats. I really appreciate the advice and support you all gave me before my move to Wellington when I was doubting myself. I hope I can return the favour – if anyone needs a proof-reader, give me a yell!

To Jill Dolby, you have been such a help and support throughout my studies and I am so grateful. Thank you for always having an answer to all my silly questions and for being the smiling face to welcome me every day.

I must extend thanks to my family for all their love and support, and for putting up with me. Special thanks to Mum and Dad for always supporting and encouraging me in my choice of study. Also, thank you Nana for always taking interest and asking lots of questions about my thesis topic.

Last, but not least, thanks to Dean. You have been such a solid support over the last 18 months and I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you for putting up with me in my times of stress and letting me ramble about the unique complexities of the Belgian political system to you. Your feedback has always been helpful and you’ve been the most diligent and dedicated proof-reader anyone could ask for. Your patience and love have been unwavering and I cannot thank you enough.

## **Abstract**

Belgium has recently undergone a 541-day period with no elected government following the 2010 general election. This has been called a government and cabinet crisis. This thesis aims to determine what is different about Belgium in 2010/11 compared to past years and what has contributed to Belgium's difficulty forming coalitions recently. By using coalition formation theory and investigating institutional and sociological aspects of Belgian politics, this research project has found an initial explanation for why the Belgian government crisis of 2010 occurred. Several institutional and sociological aspects are now working against each other and hindering cooperative behaviour among the Belgian political parties. Belgium has become the victim of its own well-adapted and unique political system.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Belgium, with its unique political system, has interested comparative political scientists for some time. It is a country with a markedly divided society and yet it has had a remarkably stable political system for most of the twentieth century. For this reason, Belgium is an intriguing case and one which has become the focus of much political research into how to govern divided societies and the most appropriate forms of democracy for such cases (e.g. Deschouwer 2009; Lijphart 1969,1981). Belgium's consociational form of democracy was seen as one of the best ways of dealing with intra-state conflict and Belgium was once claimed to be the best example of consociationalism (Lijphart 1981).

However, it appears that the strength and success of consociationalism in Belgium has declined in recent years. Belgium's ability to negotiate issues is arguably most needed when forming a coalition government; yet negotiations have recently become so difficult that the Belgian political parties have been unable to negotiate a coalition agreement, even when the alternative is a state without an elected government. After the general election on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2010 it took 541 days to swear in a new government in Belgium, which has now taken the world record for the longest period without an elected government. This was considered a 'political crisis' among the media (e.g. Gotev 2011; Robinson 2011) and yet the political parties were unable to speed up their negotiation processes and reach an agreement, so the crisis dragged on for almost 18 months. This calls into question the idea that Belgium is the best example of a functioning consociational democracy and raises a lot of questions. The obvious one would be what is so different about Belgium, compared to all other countries, that has allowed this to occur? There has been a lot of research (e.g. Deschouwer 2009; Fitzmaurice 1996; Lijphart 1981) that has addressed the "uniqueness" of Belgium and its politics, which includes its divided society and consociationalism. Belgium is also neighboured by similar divided and consociational states, such as Switzerland and the Netherlands. Therefore, the easy approach to answer the above question would be to look for the differences between Belgium and the

similar neighbouring states and determine that therein lie the reasons that Belgium has had difficulty forming elections.

However, this explanation for Belgium's crisis is inadequate and other possible explanatory factors must be considered. Although a lot of literature has discussed how Belgium differs from its neighbours and other countries over several decades (e.g. Dewachter 1987), one can observe that Belgium's difficulty in forming coalition governments has only increased in recent years. Therefore, the current literature is not sufficient to explain such a recent situation and it is necessary to investigate what may have changed *recently* within the Belgian political scene. This leads to two main research questions for this project:

- What is different about Belgium in 2010/2011 compared to past years?
- What has contributed to the extension of the coalition formation period and enabled the country to survive so long without a government?

In investigating and answering these questions, the aim of this research is very relevant due to the recent nature of Belgium's situation making it very a topical study. Yet, the true significance of this research lies in the hunt for what has changed within Belgium for this to be able to occur; furthermore, for it to occur without the country falling into chaos or without a significant impact on civil society. The Flemish and Francophone parties' inability to form a coalition agreement is a straightforward answer for why Belgium endured 541 days without an elected government. Consequently, one might 'blame' the linguistic cleavage, which is deeply entrenched and divides the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish, for the delay in government formation. Furthermore, the electoral system which allows so many parties into parliament (12 after the 2010 election) could be considered a contributing factor to the crisis as it necessitates the agreement of several Flemish and Francophone parties in order to form a government coalition. Therefore, one could claim that a simple explanation for the failure to form a government after the 2010 election involves the linguistic cleavage and the Belgian electoral system. Only recently, however, has it become such a long and arduous task to form a

coalition despite the fact these features of the Belgian political system have been present for a lot longer. In this thesis, I combine and extend the extant literature on coalition formation by discovering what may have changed in Belgium in recent years allowing such extreme difficulty in forming a coalition to occur.

In this chapter, I will introduce and explain the situation that occurred in Belgium after the 2010 general election. Observers have proposed some preliminary and rudimentary explanations as to how and why this occurred, which will be discussed, but these are not sufficient to explain the crisis. This will be followed by an outline of the chapters and the structure of the thesis.

## **The story of the case**

As mentioned above, Belgium has been considered a “unique” political system with some intriguing qualities, but perhaps it is even more so now that it has broken the world record for the longest time passed without an elected government. Some say this record was previously held by Iraq which took 289 days for a new government to take office, whereas other sources claim that Cambodia last held the record when it took 353 days to form a government (Mulvey 2011). No matter who held the record before, Belgium exceeded both when a record 541 days passed between the general election in 2010 and the swearing in of a new government the following year. This immediately raises questions since Iraq and Cambodia can be considered third world and developing countries compared to Belgium, a first world country that appears to have relative stability. It is also notable that Belgium survived this period without any great civil disruption or chaos, which might be expected of a country without a central governing body. These are some interesting initial observations, however if one delves deeper, it is clear that in Belgium there must be some other forces at play for this situation to have occurred in a traditionally stable country. This thesis will attempt to establish what they are and how they have affected Belgium’s ability to form a coalition government.

In April 2010 the government, led by Prime Minister Yves Leterme, collapsed leading to an early election in June. The election was not due to be held until the following year as Belgium follows four-yearly parliamentary terms. Following divisions within Leterme's cabinet, particularly on the controversial issue of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) constituency, the Flemish liberals (Open Vld) left the negotiations thereby forcing the resignation of the cabinet (Rihoux et al. 2011). This led to the general election on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010 and a new government was sworn in on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The results from the 2010 election are in Figure 1 below.

As one can see from these results, no party has a strong plurality with which to begin forming a coalition. The multiparty nature of Belgian politics is very evident here with the largest party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), taking only 27 of the 150 seats in parliament. This means to achieve a majority government several parties must coalesce and agree on coalition terms. This obviously makes coalition formation more difficult, since the more parties involved in the negotiations, the harder it is to find a common ground on which to develop a coalition agreement. To make matters more difficult, in Belgium the cabinet must have equal numbers of Francophone and Flemish MPs, although this may exclude the Prime Minister. This limits which parties can join the coalition. These are two aspects of Belgian politics that clearly make it more difficult to form coalitions than elsewhere, and yet such political crises as the recent situation have not occurred in Belgium to anywhere near this degree before. Why did it occur now?

**Figure 1. Elections to the House of Representatives (lower chamber)**

Date of election:	13 June 2010			
Total number of seats:	150			
Electorate:	7,767,552			
Total votes cast:	6,929,855 (89.2%)			
Total valid votes:	6,527,367 (94.2%)			
Party	Number and percentage of votes	Change since 2007	Number and percentage of seats	Change since 2007
<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> – New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Dutch-speaking	1,135,617 (17.4)	–	27 (18)	–
<i>Parti Socialiste</i> – Socialist Party (PS), French-speaking	894,543 (13.7)	2.8	26 (17.3)	+6
<i>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams</i> – Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V), Dutch-speaking	707,986 (10.9)	–	17 (11.3)	–
<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> – Reform Movement (MR), French-speaking	605,617 (9.3)	–3.2	18 (12)	–5
<i>Socialisten en Progressieven Anders Sociaal Progressief Alternatief</i> (SP.a), Dutch-speaking	602,867 (9.2)	–1.1	13 (8.7)	–1
<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> – Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), Dutch-speaking	563,873 (8.6)	–3.2	13 (8.7)	–5
<i>Vlaams Belang</i> – Flemish Interest (VB), Dutch-speaking	506,697 (7.8)	–4.2	12 (8)	–5
<i>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</i> – Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH), French-Speaking	360,441 (5.5)	–0.5	9 (6)	–1
<i>Ecolo</i> – Ecologists, French-speaking	313,047 (4.8)	–0.3	8 (5.3)	0
<i>Groen!</i> – Green!, Dutch-speaking	285,989 (4.4)	+0.4	5 (3.3)	+1
<i>Lijst De Decker</i> – De Decker's List (LDD), Dutch-speaking	150,577 (2.3)	–1.7	1 (0.7)	–4
<i>Parti Populaire</i> – People's Party (PP), French-speaking	84,005 (1.3)	–	1 (0.7)	–
<i>Front National</i> – National Front (FN), French-speaking	33,591 (0.5)	–1.5	0 (0.0)	–1
Others	282,517 (4.3)	+1.4	–	–

Notes: All parties with at least one seat in the Chamber or that used to have representation in the previous composition of the Chamber appear in the table. As the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) and the *Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams* (CD&V) formed an electoral cartel in 2007 (Rihoux et al. 2008: 918–919), their individual results in 2010 are therefore not compared to the 2007 results. The *Socialisten en Progressieven Anders* (SP.a), which used to be called *Sociaal Progressief Alternatief* (SP.a – the acronym did not change) until January 2009 (therefore SP.a refers to *Socialisten en Progressieven Anders* in Rihoux et al. 2010: 900), formed an electoral cartel in 2003 and 2007 with a much smaller partner, SPIRIT (which was, together with the N-VA, the other party that emerged out of the Flemish nationalist party *Volksunie* when the latter dissolved in 2001). SPIRIT was renamed successively *Vlaams Progressieven* (Flemish Progressists) and *Sociaal-Liberale Partij* (Social-Liberal Party) in 2008, and then merged with the Flemish Greens (*Groen!*) in December 2009. We therefore here compare SP.a's results with those of 2007 when this party formed an electoral cartel with SPIRIT (see Rihoux et al. 2008: 918).

Source: Rihoux et al. (2011, p.914)

To continue the story of the recent crisis, it appears that the main issue that halted progress in the negotiations is that of the BHV constituency. This constituency is made up of the 19 communes of the Brussels region, which is officially bilingual although practically it is mostly French-speaking, and 35 communes of the surrounding Flanders region of Flemish Brabant, which is officially monolingual and Flemish. Therefore, BHV does not follow Belgium's linguistic border. The Flemish want BHV to be split along this border so Halle-Vilvoorde would be included in the neighbouring province of Flemish Brabant and the bilingual Brussels region would make up its own electoral district (Deschouwer 2009, pp.107-108). In contrast, the Francophones want to keep BHV as it is. Deschouwer (2009, p.108) claims this is because they can potentially benefit by receiving votes from outside Brussels. Another reason for the Francophones to avoid splitting BHV is to protect the minority of French speakers living outside Brussels in Flemish-speaking areas. There are now many Francophones living in Flemish communes around Brussels, which has been termed the "Frenchification" of the Brussels periphery, and it is significant enough that the French-speaking parties can gain from this (Hope 2011). Yet, with the splitting of BHV, the French-speaking citizens would no longer be able to vote for the French-speaking parties as they would be in a monolingual Flemish constituency, rather than a bilingual constituency with Francophone and Flemish candidates.

As Dave Sinardet explains, for several decades the Flemish have desired a split of BHV, yet from the 1970s to the early 2000s it had not been a political priority, mostly due to the fact that "splitting BHV would have to be part of a much larger compromise on state reform and that it would mean a renegotiation of the delicate balance in linguistic matters around Brussels" (2010, p.357). Since 2003, it has become a salient political issue again and one which has been strongly contested between the French-speaking and Flemish politicians. BHV returned to political salience in the early 2000s following the electoral reform of the Verhofstadt I government. This reform involved increasing the size of the electoral districts so that they were based on the provinces of Belgium. The electoral districts of Leuven and BHV make up the province of Flemish Brabant. This becomes more complicated due to the bilingual nature of

Brussels, which is located within this province. A proposal was made by the Flemish parties in government to have a Dutch-speaking list for the provincial district of Flemish Brabant and a French-speaking list for only the BHV district. Essentially this meant that Flemish candidates could receive votes from the previous BHV and Leuven districts, while the French-speaking candidates could only receive votes from BHV. However the Constitutional Court determined this to be unconstitutional stating that the BHV constituency could not continue amid the new provincial electoral districts and it ordered that a solution must be found within four years after the 2003 elections (Sinardet 2010).

Yet the parties could not agree on a solution and eventually it was decided to put the BHV issue on the backburner until the next coalition negotiations following the 2007 election. The cartel of CD&V-N-VA became the largest party and the one to begin forming a coalition. Yves Leterme, who would become Prime Minister, set the split of BHV as a condition for entering into a governing coalition. This led to a very drawn out coalition negotiation process and an interim government was eventually formed six months after the election as a transition to a permanent government and it was to remain in place until the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2008 at the latest. The transition ended on the 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2008 as a permanent government was sworn in with Yves Leterme as the Prime Minister. Again it was agreed that the negotiations on BHV would continue at a later date.

The disputes over the splitting of BHV continued without a solution and they had an even bigger impact following the general election of 2010. The easiest explanation for the 541 days spent without an elected government is that a negotiated agreement on the BHV issue could not be reached, which was necessary for the formation of a government coalition. Although this is a straightforward explanation, it is not sufficient alone and other contributing factors should be considered. The BHV issue has been controversial and divisive for a long time in Belgium, and yet it has not led to such an extremely long political impasse before. Why is it causing such problems with negotiations today? Arguably, there are other factors affecting the

increase in coalition formation difficulty in Belgium. It is the aim of this research project to determine what these changes may be and how they have influenced the length of coalition formation periods in Belgium.

## **Outline of the chapters**

Before the potential influencing factors can be addressed, the theoretical framework of this research project, based around existing literature on coalition formation theory, must be developed. It is necessary to look at current coalition formation theory and what it can contribute to an explanation of Belgium's recent situation. This will be discussed in Chapter 2, followed by the methodology for this thesis.

The two subsequent chapters will analyse and examine potential factors that may have influenced Belgium's cabinet crisis between 2010 and 2011. Chapter 3 will be an investigation of the institutional factors that may be affecting Belgian coalition formation. This will include looking at the consociational and federal systems in Belgium, as well as the electoral institutions. Furthermore, the role of veto players, as determined by parliamentary and electoral institutions, in Belgium will be addressed. By looking for changes in these institutional features, it may become clear what has changed in recent years to increase the difficulty of coalition formation in Belgium.

Chapter 4 will address potential sociological influences: for example, the impact of the social and linguistic cleavages on Belgian politics. The influence of public opinion, party attitudes, parties' bargaining power and parties' past behaviour will also be examined. The salience of political issues will be explored as well. The salience of issues is determined by the people, public and politicians, and is therefore linked to sociological factors.

Chapter 5 will consist of combined findings from the two chapters on institutional and sociological factors and a discussion of the findings and their implications. This will be followed by a conclusion of the thesis.

## Chapter 2. Theory and Methodology

### Theoretical framework – coalition formation theory

At a glance, Belgium does not conform to many aspects of traditional coalition theory. The reasons for this strange behaviour may contribute towards an explanation for why Belgium has had so much difficulty forming government coalitions recently. In order to understand Belgium's difficulty in forming coalitions, one must first review the coalition formation theory and literature to understand the typical processes involved in coalition bargaining and formation. By looking at the factors that contribute to successful coalition negotiations and agreements, one can then see if these factors are playing a part in Belgium's recent dilemma.

Luebbert claims in his theoretical review that rationalist theory and closed minimal range theory are the "two basic types of coalition theory" (1983, p.236). The former theory is game-theoretic in that it is based around self-interest and the perceived balance between costs and benefits in terms of policy payoffs, which will influence politicians' decisions to coalesce or not (e.g. Gamson 1961; Riker 1962). The latter theory asserts that only parties adjacent to each other ideologically will coalesce, as this reduces the policy concessions they will need to make in forming the coalition (e.g. Axelrod 1970). There has also been much dispute among coalition formation literature regarding the main goals of the parties and whether they are office- or policy-seeking. The rationalist theories that Luebbert speaks of take an office-seeking approach for the most part, while the closed minimal range theories are more policy driven.

Riker's Size Principle derives from game theory and asserts that "in social situations similar to n-person, zero-sum games with side-payments, participants create coalitions just as large as they believe will ensure winning and no larger" (Riker 1962, p.32). He talks of *winning coalitions* as those that are as large as, or larger, than a predetermined size according to the *rules*, or electoral institutions (1962, p.40). Generally a winning coalition will make up a

majority in parliament. He compares this with *blocking coalitions* and *losing coalitions*. Two blocking coalitions will occur alongside each other, whereas a losing coalition will occur alongside a winning coalition. Therefore a *minimum winning coalition* exists when the removal of one party from the coalition produces either a blocking or losing coalition and this is what Riker's Size Principle represents.

Similarly, the application of William Gamson's general hypothesis suggests that political parties in coalition negotiations will expect the other parties to demand a share of the payoffs in proportion to the resources they will contribute to the coalition (Gamson 1961, p.382). Gamson also claims that each party will try to negotiate the best coalition combination and use a non-utilitarian strategy to ensure that their own payoffs are as high as possible (p.382).

Riker's and Gamson's theories take an office-seeking approach to coalition formation, which is based on the idea that a political party's goal over and above everything else is to get into office by entering a government coalition. These theories do not leave room for the parties' ideologies to play a part in coalition formation. Consequently, a second approach to coalition theory developed, which takes into consideration the impact of the parties' ideological positions on coalition formation and bargaining. This is the second basic type of coalition theory according to Luebbert and he refers to it as "closed minimal range theory", as mentioned above.

Axelrod, in his 1970 work *Conflict of Interest*, defined minimal connected winning coalitions as "a coalition that is connected (consists of adjacent members); is a winning coalition (can give cabinet a vote of confidence); and is minimal in the sense that it can lose no member party without ceasing to be connected and winning" (Axelrod 1970, p.170). He found empirical support for his hypotheses that minimal connected winning coalitions are more likely to form and more likely to last longer than other types of coalitions (p.171). Yet by looking at the ideological positions of the Belgian parties, it would appear that political parties in Belgium do not just form coalitions with ideologically adjacent parties. One can see in Table 1 the parties of the Belgian parliament after the 2010 election ranked from left to right according to their

ideological leaning. The values to determine the parties' ideologies were taken from and calculated by The Manifesto Data Collection (Volkens et al. 2012). If we then look at which parties formed the government coalition in 2011, we will see that the current coalition does not comprise ideologically adjacent parties. Therefore, Belgium is an exception to Axelrod's hypothesis. The ideological positions of the Belgian parties and those included in the two most recent coalitions are elaborated further in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Axelrod's approach certainly includes the impact that parties' ideologies and policy positions can have on coalition formation. However, Laver and Schofield (1990, p.97) put forward that Axelrod deems policy "a means to simplify office-bargaining", rather than considering that parties are entirely motivated by policy, and thereby he maintains the idea that gaining office is the primary goal and motivation of the politicians and parties.

However, De Swaan's work of 1973 places more of an emphasis on policy-seeking goals and motivations in coalition bargaining and formation. His "policy distance theory" asserts that parties wish to adopt policies as close as possible to their own preferences, therefore policy is the main focus of the parties and "the parliamentary game is...about the determination of major government policy" (1973, p.88). De Swaan continues that some coalitions are much more likely to form than others as a result of the interactions between the parties and the dominance of policy in the politicians' minds. De Swaan starts to introduce the idea of non-minimal winning coalitions stating that minimal coalitions will not necessarily occur with such a focus on policy; however, "policy distance minimization" can also fit the concepts presented in rationalist theory models which entail "utility maximization" (p.88). Although Belgium was described as an "office system" by Budge and Laver in 1986 (p.502), today we observe the difficulty in forming government coalitions, so perhaps policy-seeking models are now better suited to Belgium. Furthermore, the disagreement over the BHV policy issue has created major setbacks in coalition bargaining. If parties were purely office-seeking, they would push the BHV issue to one side and agree to a coalition just to get into office.

**Table 1. Belgian parties ranked from left to right, 2010 election**

Party	Ideology	Seats
ECOLO	-31.28	8
PS	-26.61	26
CdH	-24.61	9
Groen!	-21.57	5
N-VA	-7.58	27
SPA	-3.65	13
VB	-3	12
MR	-0.22	18
Open Vld	0.37	13
CD&V	1.87	17
PP*	---	1
LDD*	---	1

Source: Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012)

\* LDD's and PP's positions were determined based on ideological descriptions (Nordsieck 2010). Both LDD and PP are described as 'conservative liberal' parties. For this reason they have been positioned further right than the liberal parties (MR and Open Vld) and the Christian democrats (CD&V), which would normally fall to the left of the liberal parties. While their positioning may not be quite accurate, we can be sure they would fall in the rightist half of the political parties, and therefore have no impact on when the median legislator falls (it will still be 75 seats on each side between the N-VA and SPA).

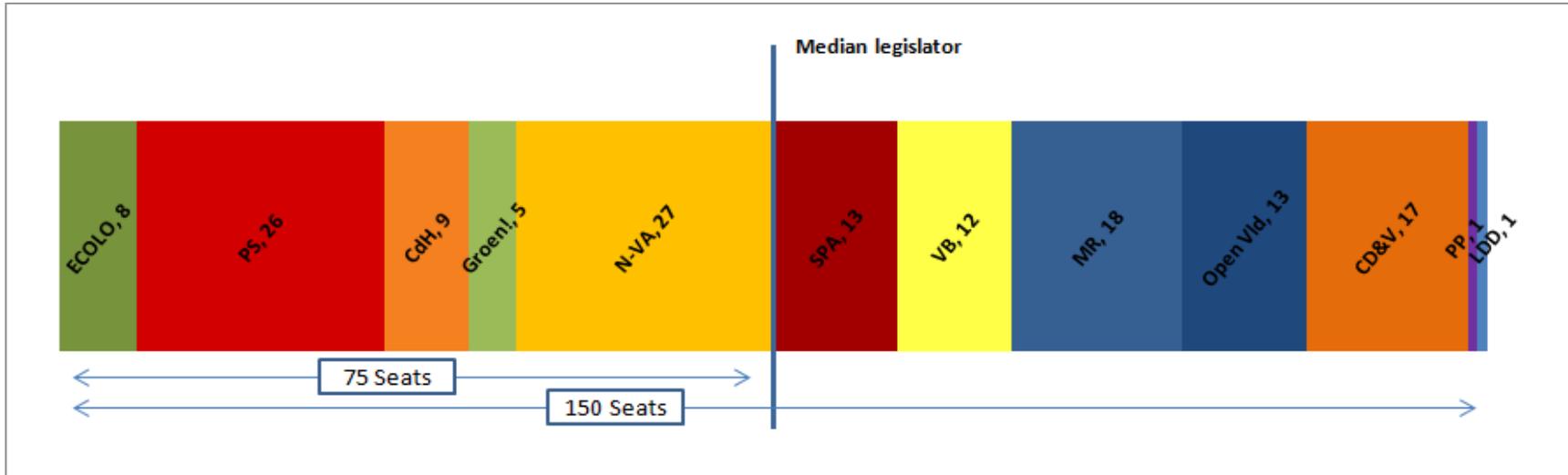
**Table 2. Belgian parties ranked from left to right, 2007 election**

Party	Ideology	Seats
PS	-32.24	20
CdH	-26.76	10
Groen!	-21.57	4
MR	-20.78	23
ECOLO	-20.46	8
SPA	-3.65	14
VB	-3	17
Open Vld	0.37	18
CD&V/N-VA	1.87	30
LDD	33.78	5
FN*	---	1

Source: Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012)

\*FN is considered a 'far-right' party (Nordsieck 2010), hence it has been placed at the far right end of the political parties. Although it may seem unlikely that it would receive an ideological value of higher than LDD's 33.78, it normally would be considered more rightist than LDD (conservative liberal) and this placing will not affect the placement of the median legislator.

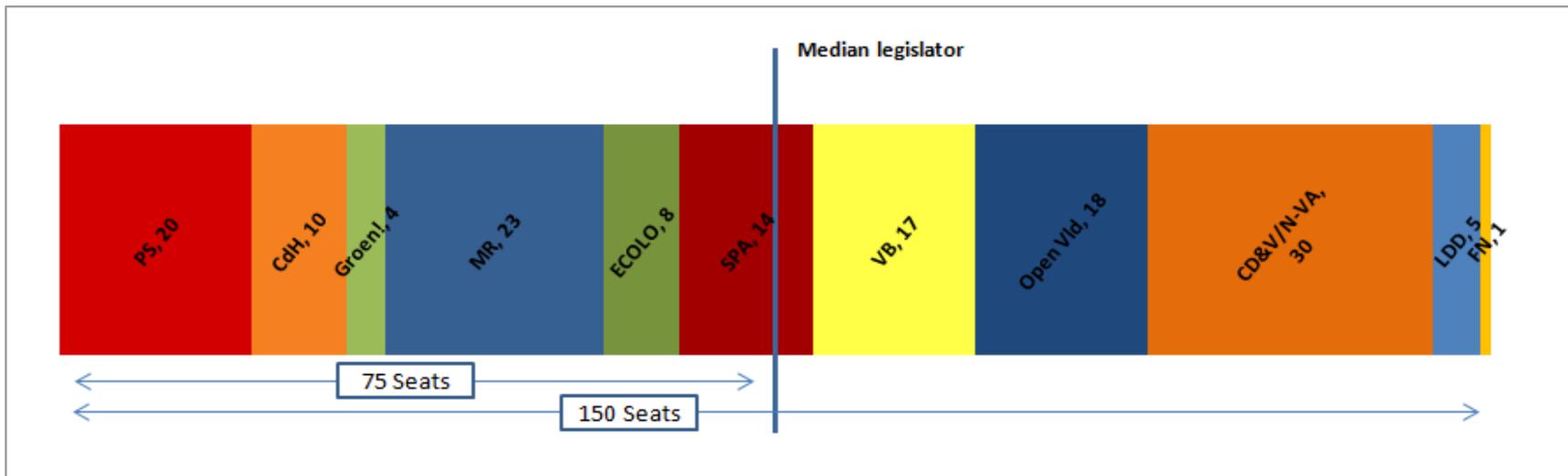
Figure 2. Belgian parties left to right showing the median legislator, 2010 election



Source: Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012); author's own calculation, based on the information in Table 1.

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Figure 3. Belgian parties left to right showing the median legislator, 2007 election



Source: Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012); author's own calculation, based on the information in Table 2.

Although Luebbert stated in 1983 that rational and closed minimal range theories are the two main focuses in coalition theory, this has certainly changed in recent years. It has become apparent that more often than not coalitions formed are in fact minority or oversized coalitions. As stated above, Belgium does not immediately appear to fit in with the aforementioned coalition theories. Belgian government coalitions are often oversized and often have many parties involved so that it is unlikely that all parties in the coalition are ideologically adjacent. There are now several theories as to why oversized coalitions may form.

In line with the policy-seeking approach to coalition formation, one can see how minority and surplus majority governments can form. Laver and Schofield (1990) put forward a one-dimensional, policy-based theory in which the party with the median legislator essentially holds a dictatorial position in coalition bargaining. If a party controls the centre-most position on policy on a left-right ideological scale, it should be able to enact its policies and either govern alone or in a minority, minimal winning, or oversized coalition (1990, p.111). Through their empirical research, Laver and Schofield found that 80% of coalitions they observed contained the median party or were supported by it, which led them to claim that a left-right scale carries significant weight when explaining coalition formation and that “one-dimensional representations of coalition bargaining capture many important elements of government formation” (1990, p.113).

Belgium is one of the coalition systems examined by Laver and Schofield and they found that the median party was present in almost every post-war government (1990, p.117) As Belgium most often has oversized coalitions today, this theory still appears to fit the Belgian case at a first glance, but it is necessary to explore whether or not the median legislator still holds this power in Belgium today and whether or not the left-right scale is still as useful in explaining coalition formation in the Belgian context. Table 1 and Figure 2 show the Belgian parties following the 2010 election ordered according to their ideological positioning from left to right. These values of ideology are based on the parties’ manifesto documents for the 2010

election and from these documents the values have been calculated as part of the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012). Table 2 and Figure 3 consist of the same information from the same source, but apply to the 2007 election in Belgium. There was an absence of an ideological value for PP and LDD in 2010 and FN in 2007 (more information beneath Tables 1 and 2).

Using the ideological positions determined by the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2012) for the 2010 election, it becomes apparent that the median legislator falls between the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) party and the Social Progressive Alternative (SPA or Flemish Socialists) party, as shown in Figure 2. It is interesting to note that the N-VA did not end up in the government coalition despite being next to the median position and also considering it is the largest party in parliament. The SPA, also next to the median legislator position, did become a member of the coalition formed in December 2011, but the French-speaking Socialist Party (PS) led the negotiations that resulted in the coalition. This is unusual as the PS is far from the median position and is the most leftist party except for ECOLO (French-speaking Greens). Even more unusual is that three of the most right-wing parties (MR, Open Vld and CD&V) also joined the coalition.

Similarly, Figure 3 shows that the party that holds the median legislator after the 2007 election (SPA) is not included in the subsequent coalition formed in 2008. The parties that entered the coalition agreement are PS, CdH, MR, Open Vld and CD&V/N-VA, which means the ideological spread of the coalition is across almost the entire party system and the coalition parties are not connected. Belgium is therefore an exception to Laver and Schofield's theory that the median voter will have the greatest influence over policy and government. Additionally, Belgium does not meet the expectations of minimum winning and minimal connected winning coalition theories.

Another approach to surplus majority coalitions is presented by Volden and Carrubba (2004), who empirically tested five theories for the occurrence oversized coalitions. Among those tested was Axelrod's (1970) theory that small centrist parties are included to make

oversized, but minimal connected winning coalitions. Another theory examined was Crombez's (1996) prediction that oversized coalitions will occur if the largest party is small and ideologically extreme to ensure a more stable government. Volden and Carrubba also put to the test Baron and Diermeier's theory (2001), which asserts that oversized coalition will come about only when the current policies are extreme. Finally, they address the logrolling theory of Carrubba and Volden (2000) and the bicameralism theory, put forward by Lijphart (1984) and Sjölin (1993), in which there is an incentive to have oversized coalition in the lower house as it can help with passing legislation in the upper house.

Volden and Carrubba (2004) did not find support for the bicameralism theory or for Baron and Diermeier's hypothesis. While they found some initial support for Axelrod's and Crombez's approaches, this lessened with further testing. Volden and Carrubba's testing most strongly backed the logrolling theoretical model. The logrolling model contends that, in order to pass bills, political parties or legislators will form logrolls, or coalitions (Carrubba and Volden, 2000, in Volden & Carrubba 2004). The crux of this idea is that the logroll group can push through legislation with a majority; however, some members of this logroll may not agree with the bill they are helping to pass and merely remain in the logroll group in order to benefit from being involved with future logrolls. Carrubba and Volden also claim that if an individual group within the logroll has their bill passed through the legislature early, then they may have an incentive to defect from the logroll group. This leads to their finding that "the stronger the individual incentive to defect from the logroll, the larger the logroll will be" (Volden & Carrubba 2004, p.525). Essentially, coalitions will form to be as large as necessary, so that if a party defects from the coalition, the remaining parties can continue with a majority as the government coalition.

Carrubba and Volden's logrolling theory could be a way to explain the high propensity for oversized coalitions in Belgium; yet some recent government coalitions have collapsed following a member pulling out of the agreement. For example, the Leterme II government

collapsed in 2010 after the Flemish liberals pulled out of the federal government over BHV disagreements. The Belgian federal government at the time was made up of a five party coalition which controlled 94 seats out of the 150-seat parliament. If the logrolling theory applied to this situation, the federal government should have been able to survive since Open Vld only contributed 18 seats to the coalition, meaning the coalition would still have a majority. Rihoux et al. state that “with no alternative, Prime Minister Yves Leterme was forced to submit the cabinet’s resignation to the King” (2011, p.916). This sparks the question: why is it that a cabinet in Belgium cannot survive a party defection, even with a majority in parliament?

From this and the theory discussed previously, it is clear that Belgian coalitions do not always conform to the current literature, so we must look for other explanations. For example, the institutional rule that Belgian cabinets must comprise the same numbers of Flemish and Francophone politicians means that even the defection of just one party can throw out the linguistic balance of the coalition and cabinet ministers. This can mean it is no longer viable as the government coalition.

However, although Belgium has had governments collapse in the past, the recent dilemma has been in the forming of a new one. Even though oversized coalitions are the most prevalent recently in Belgium, this time round the parties did not form an oversized coalition; rather they did not form one at all. There are multiple theories that address the incentives to form oversized coalitions (e.g. the theories discussed in Volden & Carrubba 2004), as discussed above, but are there incentives to have no government at all rather than have a large one? Is it possible that there were incentives involved and it was an active decision by the parties? Game theoretic politics would suggest that this is highly unlikely, as there are no benefits for any party in this situation. Political parties want to reap the benefits of being in executive office, but there are no benefits for anyone if no parties are in a government coalition. Therefore, current game theory and strategic politics would suggest that 541 days of no government cannot have been an active decision, but rather there must be other contributing factors at play to allow this to

occur. In this thesis, I will aim to establish what are the contributing factors to the Belgian crisis and in what way they have influenced it.

In order to do this, I will examine the relevance of the above theories in the context of the Belgian situation through two categories of possible influences: institutional factors and sociological factors. These will be investigated in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively along with their influence on Belgium's ability to form coalitions. Strøm, Müller and Bergman (2008) in their introductory chapter talk of six clusters of competing explanatory variables regarding coalition outcomes. Although we are looking at a case where there was *no* coalition outcome for 541 days, these variables are still important and most can be grouped into the two categories of influencing factors: institutional and sociological. *Structural attributes of cabinets and parliaments*, and *institutions* are two of the explanatory clusters that can be grouped into the chapter on institutional factors; while the *bargaining environment* and *preferences* can merge with sociological influences. Strøm et al.'s competing explanations toward coalition outcomes will be considered, along with other potential influencing factors and variables, in the following chapters.

Yet, there is another approach that should perhaps also be considered. Although game-theoretic approaches to politics would suggest it is unlikely that parties would actively choose to have no government over an oversized one, perhaps this is where Belgium differs and has thus broken all records for the length of their coalition formation periods. It is also possible that politicians in Belgium may have strategically chosen to have no government rather than have a government that would implement policies in an opposite direction to their desired outcome. The BHV issue is very divisive and controversial and it is likely that the Belgian parties would rather have no government at all and no one in power than concede power to the opposing political parties. In this way the status quo can be maintained, whereas if changes were made to this policy, no matter which direction it moves in, someone will be worse off. It is plausible to infer that strategically choosing no government could be a new approach to coalition bargaining

theory, which could tie into theory on veto players and maintain the status quo. Furthermore, this relates strongly to the idea that a large number of veto players within a political system will have an impact on policy stability (Tsebelis 2002). Tsebelis' claims that political systems have "a configuration of veto players...with specific ideological distances among them" and this affects the "set of outcomes", or policy options, that can replace the "status quo", or current policy (Tsebelis 2002, p.2). The principal idea Tsebelis presents is that the more veto players present in a political system and the farther apart they are ideologically, the smaller the set of outcomes that can replace the status quo. Therefore, policy stability is increased. These ideas and their relevance to the recent Belgian crisis will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

Much of the literature on coalition formation theory discussed above is based around a one-dimensional ideological scale of left to right policies. Consequently one can logically expect that ideologically close or adjacent parties will be more likely to form coalitions with each other. In Belgium, however, we see coalitions formed with a large ideological spread and they are not connected by parties in between. Similarly, Belgian government coalitions are unusual in that they collapse with the defection of just one party despite having a surplus majority. Following these observations, it appears that extant coalition formation theory is unable to sufficiently explain the situation in Belgium, which suggests there is a gap in the literature. It is the goal of this thesis to fill this gap and find a way to explain the "Belgian exception" through addressing the research questions stated in Chapter 1: What is different about Belgium in recent times compared to past years and what factors have contributed to the lengthening of the coalition formation period in Belgium?

## **Methodology**

This research project involves the analysis of institutional and sociological variables and therefore involves two methodological approaches that differ slightly. However, for the most part this study centres on single case study and qualitative methodologies. Odell (2001) discusses the merits and disadvantages of single case designs. He claims that single case studies

fall into a family of research designs and that there are many different types of single case designs. The ones that are most relevant to this research are *the descriptive case study* and *the deviant case study*. The former details an important event, in this case the government crisis in Belgium. The latter can suggest there may be shortcomings in a well-developed area of theory when a deviant case is studied; for example, Belgium does not conform to a lot of the current coalition formation literature, so studying this deviant case may either present some limitations to the extant theories or enlighten us as to why Belgium does not conform and what makes it a deviant case.

Although Belgium can be considered a deviant case having broken all records for the longest time without an elected government, the aim of this study is not to find holes in the existing literature. This area of political science is well-studied and there is a lot of evidence in support of the existing coalition formation theory discussed earlier in this chapter. The current theory can be generally applied to most cases, but not Belgium. However, the aim of this study is to find out why Belgium is a deviant case in the field of coalition formation rather than to dispute the current literature in this field.

Odell (2001, pp.169-173) also discusses several advantages and disadvantages of qualitative case study methods. For example, case studies can be good methods for documenting processes. In this study, there is the need to document many political processes in the Belgian system and how they work and interact to affect coalition formation. In addition, Odell claims that a thorough case study can present more information on the case than an equivalent statistical study, and furthermore, even if a case study does not present “explicit theoretical implications” (2001, p.171), it can always communicate a much better understanding of the case, its background information and context than a statistical study can. These are some advantages to qualitative case study methodologies. For these reasons, a single and in depth case study of Belgium is appropriate for this research project.

However, one must also be aware of the limitations of these methodologies. For instance, statistical methods can provide a more robust testing of theories, but it would be difficult to use statistics and quantitative methodologies for this case. The Belgian case is quite recent and unique, thus there is an unavailability of long time-series and quantitative data, which prevents the use of statistical methods. Nonetheless, the exploratory nature of this study allows us an opportunity to shed new light on coalition formation theory in the Belgian context using qualitative data. Consequently, we may observe why Belgium does not fit with the theories previously discussed and we can leave room for more in depth and statistical testing at a later date. Another drawback of qualitative case study methods is that they can be less accurate when making claims about the significance of the effects of variables than in a quantitative statistical study. Understandably, the qualitative nature of this study will not be able to provide strong statistical evidence for the significance of the influencing factors to determine those which have had the most impact on coalition formation in Belgium. With this caveat in mind, the aim of this study is to begin to gauge what factors may be at play in the Belgian political system to allow such a government crisis to occur. Once these have been determined at an initial level, there is then room to develop these ideas further and statistically investigate how significant the influence of certain factors is. In this way, this exploratory study will primarily lay out what appear to be the political aspects decelerating coalition formation in Belgium and leave room for future studies to test more robustly what this study finds.

With the above in mind, the following discusses more thoroughly the methodological processes for Chapters 3 and 4, which will respectively investigate institutional and sociological factors within the Belgian political system. The aim of Chapter 3 on institutional factors will be to look for political and electoral institutions in Belgium that may be affecting the ability to readily form coalitions. By analysing various institutional aspects of Belgian politics we will see whether they can affect coalition formation. Particularly, if there are any changes in the institutions of late, it is more likely they may be contributing to a recent increase in the difficulty around forming coalitions.

While the methodology for Chapter 3 will incorporate the single case study method discussed above, the analysis of the potentially contributing institutional factors will also be conducted according to an historical institutional approach. Greif (1998) refers to this methodological practice as “historical and comparative institutional analysis” or HCIA. He asserts that this method of analysis is historical, comparative and analytical given that it respectively explores the role of history in institutional change, uses comparative studies over space and time and relies on context for empirical analysis (p.80). Similar to Greif’s ideas, the methodological approach in Chapter 3 focuses on comparatively investigating institutional aspects of Belgian politics over time, and the role that history may have played in any changes over time will be addressed.

The institutional features of Belgium that will be considered in this chapter include consociationalism, federalism, the political veto players in Belgium and the composition of the cabinet as determined by the constitution. Consociationalism and federalism in Belgium appear to be constants at face value, so one may not expect them to have had an impact on the recent Belgian situation. However, the combined presence of consociationalism and federalism may be having an adverse effect on constructive coalition and policy negotiations. The veto players will be examined in the context of Tsebelis’ (2002) work and will focus on the multiparty nature of Belgian politics and the minority protection mechanisms included in the constitution. Finally, the institutional features of Belgian politics and how they relate to increasing bargaining complexity and uncertainty will be examined in the context of Golder’s research (2010).

Greif (1998, p.82) points out that a society’s institutions form a complex system with interrelations between informal and formal institutions. He continues that “the interrelations direct institutional change and cause this institutional complex to resist change more than its constituting parts would have done in isolation” (p.82). Hence it is necessary not only to look at the impact that individual political institutions may have had on Belgian coalition formation, but also to examine the combined effect of the institutions. It is likely that Belgium has got itself

stuck in a situation where some institutional change is required to avoid such a crisis recurring, but it is more resistant to change now due to the interrelations within the complex network of institutional features present in the Belgian political system.

Some theorists argue that an historical institutional approach does not lend itself to 'theory building' and that it consists of simply "stringing details together, merely telling stories" (Thelen 1999, p.372). Although this study will involve observing changes over time and, from them, 'telling a story', this is not all it can do. The historical stories and evidence presented in this study serve as qualitative, empirical data from which arises the basis for employing coalition theory to examine the context of the Belgian case. The qualitative analysis of Belgium's institutional features over time will allow us to perceive the impact they may be having on the longevity of coalition formation periods in Belgium.

Having explored the effect of institutional features on Belgian coalition formation in Chapter 3, in the following chapter sociological influences will be addressed. A similar method will be used in that we will observe sociological aspects of Belgian politics over time and look for any recent changes that may have contributed to the cabinet crisis. The combined effect of various sociological factors will also have to be considered. Furthermore, any interactions between them that may also have added to the lengthy process of coalition formation will be addressed.

Most of the sociological factors – such as social cleavages, the attitudes of the parties and politicians, and the parties' past behaviour – will be investigated simply through the observation of changes over time. The methods of prior research, however, show that some factors can be measured. For example, Laver (1989) comes up with some parameters to measure changes to the legislative party system. One of his parameters is "weights" (1989, p.304), or bargaining power, of political parties. Laver refers to the Shapley-Shubik index (Shapley & Shubik 1954), which measures power distribution among a group of people or parties. This could be used to measure changes in parties' bargaining power in Belgium over

time. Yet, due to the complexity of Belgium's multiparty system, there would be a large number of parties involved in the calculation and it would be very complicated to use the Shapley-Shubik index. Shapley and Shubik's main example of how their index works involves the United States, which does not have a multiparty system. Shapley and Shubik suggest that there will be five voting bodies to consider, as "it takes majorities of Senate and House, with the President, or two-thirds majorities of Senate and House without the President, to enact a bill" (Shapley & Shubik 1954, p.789). That is five voting bodies to consider when measuring their bargaining power.

In contrast, the current party system in Belgium contains twelve political parties, so it would be considerably more involved and difficult to use the Shapley-Shubik index. Therefore, I will use a simplified method to measure this concept. Instead, since the purpose of using such an index would be to discern changes in the bargaining power of the regionalist parties, we can simply look at whether or not parliamentary representation has changed for these parties. In a multiparty system like Belgium, an increase in representation will grant them higher bargaining power, because they will be considered more significant players in coalition negotiations. We can also observe whether more regional parties have been included in coalition negotiations recently. Moreover, Shapley and Shubik state that their definition for the power of a member "depends on the chance he has of being critical to the success of a winning coalition" (1954, p.787) and if regionalist parties are gaining more representation, they have more opportunity to negotiate joining a coalition and being critical to its success.

Similarly, an increase in representation for the regionalist and federalist parties will also indicate a higher level of salience of the linguistic policy dimension and will show, to some extent, that the public feel it is an important and salient policy area. While the best way to determine public opinion on the BHV issue and on the perceived importance of a federal government would be to interview and survey Belgian citizens from both sides of the linguistic border, this is beyond the current scope of this thesis. This means any findings on the influence

of public opinion may have some limitations. Nonetheless, this exploratory study can provide an indication of the influences at play while presenting opportunities for future research, which will be able to explore in more depth the factors that have impacted the government crisis in Belgium.

## **Chapter 3. Institutional Factors**

As discussed in Chapter 1, it is quite possible that some of the political and electoral institutions in place in Belgium are having an effect on the length of coalition formation periods. There are several unique institutional features in Belgian politics that could be increasing the difficulty of forming a coalition government. Some of the notable institutional features in Belgium are its unique consociational form of democracy (Deschouwer 2009; Lijphart 1981) and its “nonterritorial” federal system (Lijphart 1984, p.28). Another unique feature compared to other federal states is that Belgium no longer has any “national parties” since the splitting of the main parties in the 1960s and 1970s (Dewachter 1987). The lack of parties representing both sides of the linguistic border combines with the PR electoral system to produce a large number of parties in the Belgian parliament. The Belgian electoral institutions not only determine how votes from the public are turned into seats in parliament, but also the composition of the government, which must be made up of equal numbers of Flemish and French-speaking MPs according to the constitution. Belgium also has a complex veto system in parliament, which is institutionally determined. It is necessary to analyse these institutional features and look at how they may be affecting Belgium’s coalition formation.

### **Literature Review**

Arend Lijphart developed the theory of consociational democracy and asserted that “consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy” (1969, p.216). In other words, the political elites in a divided and fragmented society must overcome their differences through means of negotiation and cooperation to create a more stable political system. This is what Belgium did for many years. Its consociational form of democracy meant that negotiation and cooperation were used to achieve policy changes despite the embedded social cleavages of the country. In fact, Lijphart (1981, p.8) states unequivocally that “Belgium is not just a complete

example of consociational democracy: it is the most perfect, most convincing, and most impressive example of a consociation”.

Lijphart (1981, pp.4-8) goes on to explain eight characteristics of consociational democracy. These include executive power-sharing in the form of grand coalitions, multiparty system and multidimensional party system, proportional representation, decentralisation of government (or federalism) and minority veto. He also claims that executive-legislative relations should be balanced and Belgium has a “semi-separation of powers” to aid in this. Furthermore, “balanced bicameralism and minority representation” add to the characteristics of consociationalism. Lijphart clearly believes that Belgium is an example of the consociational model displaying all these characteristics, but this may no longer be the case. If Belgium is a perfect example of a functioning consociational democracy, how then has it had such problems overcoming disagreements in the coalition formation process in recent years? The purpose of a consociational democracy is to avoid stalemate and deadlocks between opposing sides on political issues by having processes of negotiation institutionalised into the political system; and yet it seems these may be starting to fail in Belgium.

Nonetheless, observers still agree that Belgium is a consociational democracy (Deschouwer 2006,2009; Peters 2006), even if it is no longer a steadily functioning example. Kris Deschouwer has stated that consociational democracy involves “a set of practices that allow divided and segmented societies to survive. The basic principles are *power sharing* between the elites of the segments and *segmental autonomy*” (2009, p.4). These practices may not be allowing the Belgian political system to operate as well as it has in the past. Despite this, there is no doubt that Belgium is indeed a segmented society due to the linguistic cleavage that separates Flanders and Wallonia. Moreover, these regions, or ‘segments’ of Belgian society, have a large degree of autonomy thanks to the federal system Belgium has adopted.

Belgium shifted towards federalism and decentralisation from 1970, but its multilevel system of geographically-defined regions and non-geographically-defined linguistic

communities gives it a “unique federalism” (Fitzmaurice 1996; Lijphart 1999). The three regions consist of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, whereas the three communities follow different borders and include the large Flemish and French-speaking areas and a small German-speaking community. Swenden and Jans (2006, pp.877-878) further claim that Belgium is a unique federation due to its formation process: rather than various states or groups “coming together”, the introduction of Belgium’s federal system stemmed from the divided nature of its society as a way of holding the different societal groups together. This has possibly been part of Belgium’s political problems in recent years. Its political systems are forcibly holding together groups with opposing views and some within these groups have no desire to maintain the federalism and consociationalism that helps keep Belgium functioning as a single state and they would rather see Belgium split into two countries (e.g. Born 2007; Fontanella-Khan 2012).

It is possible that the veto powers of minorities in Belgium have prevented this from happening so far, as constitutional policy changes are more difficult to implement. Tsebelis (2002, p.19) describes veto players as “individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo”. He argues that there are two types of veto players: *institutional*, where they are specified by a country’s constitution, and *partisan*, where they are determined by the political system. Both are present among Belgium’s veto players thanks to its multiparty system and the institutions that create means for minority protection. This institutionalised system of veto players in Belgium gives minorities the right to veto policies, such as splitting BHV. It therefore may have exacerbated the difficulty in coalition negotiations, because a party or group of parties could always veto a decision that could move them closer to the formation of a coalition government.

Tsebelis’ principal point is that the veto players in a political system will have an impact on policy stability. The various veto players in every political system will have certain ideological distances between them and the farther apart they are, the smaller the set of outcomes, or *winset*, that can replace the current policy, or *status quo*. When the winset of the

status quo is small, as a result of a large number of veto players and/or considerable ideological spread between them, “significant departures from the status quo are impossible”, which leads to policy stability (Tsebelis 2002, p.2). Tsebelis develops a second concept: the *unanimity core*. This is a set of policies that cannot be changed by unanimous decision, so the larger the unanimity core, the more policy stability (2002, p.21).

Tsebelis’ theory is relevant to the investigation of Belgium’s coalition formation difficulties. Belgium has institutional veto players, such as an upper house and minorities that have the constitutional right to veto policies that could threaten them. Partisan veto players, created by the large multiparty system and coalition governments, are present as well. Belgium’s federalism also increases its numbers of veto players, and consequently its policy stability, through the rules of bicameralism and qualified majorities (Tsebelis 2002, p.157). Government instability is associated with a large number of veto players (Tsebelis 2002, p.158). Belgium has experienced government instability and, despite many parties’ desire for change regarding the BHV constituency, there has been an extreme inability to move from the status quo on this policy. Therefore, Tsebelis’ theory on veto players is particularly relevant to Belgium and may be able to shed some light on how the recent government crisis occurred.

De Winter et al. (2000) write about three institutional bargaining constraints present in Belgium: coalition size, the formation process and cabinet composition and operational rules. They assert that many institutional constraints, such as positive investiture rules and the two thirds qualified majority required to make constitutional reforms, lead to the formation of large majority coalitions. Similarly, the institutions that determine the formation process for a government and the composition of cabinet impact on coalition bargaining. In this way, these factors can increase the bargaining complexity in the Belgian government formation process.

Martin and Vanberg (2003) find evidence that bargaining complexity in a political system should have an impact by increasing delays in government formation. In contrast, Diermeier and Van Roozendaal (1998) determine that the impact of uncertainty is more

significant and that bargaining complexity will not increase delays. Therefore, evidence had been found for both the impact of bargaining complexity and the impact of uncertainty on coalition formation delays, but there was no collective approach which combined the two thoughts. Golder (2010) has now developed a combined perspective: she finds that bargaining complexity will only have an effect on government bargaining delays when there is sufficient uncertainty, but that uncertainty alone will always lead to delays in the bargaining process. While bargaining complexity can refer to many institutional factors that contribute to complicating the bargaining process, uncertainty “refers to not knowing the preference over policy and office of all the political actors whose agreement might be necessary to form a government” (Golder 2010, p.9). Bargaining complexity can certainly be seen as a something impacted by the institutions of a political system and therefore it will be addressed in this chapter. Belgium is known for having high levels of bargaining complexity, mostly due to the institutional features of its political system, and it has been said that Belgium is “undoubtedly the Western European country with the most complex coalition bargaining system” (De Winter et al. 2000, p.351 in Müller & Strøm 2000). However, for bargaining complexity to have had an impact on the extreme delays in government formation in Belgium there must also be uncertainty present, according to Golder.

From the literature discussed here, some of Belgium’s institutional features present themselves to be investigated as to how they may have affected the delay in coalition formation after the 2010 election. Consociationalism is an institutional feature of Belgium’s political system and its influence on coalition formation should be examined. Yet, consociationalism is considered to be ideal for a “segmented society”, such as Belgium with its strong linguistic cleavage, as it institutionalises power sharing, negotiation and cooperative attitudes between the elites of the disparate groups to overcome their differences (Deschouwer 2009, p.4). Therefore, the initial expectation would be that the consociational system in Belgium should help, not hinder, coalition formation.

Similarly, federalism could be expected to prevent some of the difficulties in negotiations. Federalism has allowed the Flemish and Walloons to carry out their own regional wishes in some policy area and therefore it should also reduce the number of issues the parties need to negotiate in order to form a coalition agreement. Consequently, the theoretical expectation would be that the presence of consociational and federal institutions in Belgium is unlikely to have had an impact on the government crisis.

However, federalism has also been said to highlight the differences between the two regions in Belgium, because there are so few participants involved in the federal structure (Peters 2006, p.1083). Furthermore, there is the thought that consociationalism and federalism – both institutions that should ideally reduce Belgium’s regional conflict – have become “arenas in which conflict is played out” rather than functioning together to encourage cooperation between the regions (Peters 2006, p.1084). This means there is also a need to investigate the way consociationalism and federalism work together in Belgium, and one cannot assume that they are able to mitigate regional conflict simply because they are both considered means of encouraging cooperative behaviour. From Peters’ observations, one might predict that the interaction of consociationalism and federalism in Belgium has had the opposite effect these institutions generally intend and has had an influence on the length of Belgian coalition formation periods.

Another institutional feature to investigate is Belgium’s multiparty system. As Belgium has many parties in parliament, there are more parties that can potentially be involved in coalition negotiations. Subsequently, there are also more opportunities for disagreements between the parties involved. Logically, this might have the ability to slow down coalition formation, since the parties have to work harder to find a common ground that all parties can agree upon to form a coalition agreement. Therefore, one might expect the multiparty nature of the Belgian political system, as a result of its proportional representation (PR) electoral system, to have had an influence on the lengthening of coalition formation periods in Belgium recently.

The many parties also increase the number of partisan veto players (Tsebelis 2002) and with the institutional veto players also present in the system, there are more opportunities to slow down the formation of a coalition since the formation of coalition governments recently have involved negotiations to move away from the status quo on the BHV issue. As Tsebelis (2002) states, policy stability is increased when there are more veto players in a political system. The theoretical expectation then is that the number of veto players is likely to have had an impact on the delay in coalition formation.

The cabinet composition rule in Belgium is quite a unique institutional feature and it certainly adds to bargaining complexity, which some consider to increase delays in government formation (e.g. Martin & Vanberg 2003). However, as discussed above, Golder (2010) finds that this will not have an effect without sufficient uncertainty in the negotiating arena. Due to the conflicting theories presented here, it is difficult to predict what impact this rule and the subsequent bargaining complexity might have had on Belgium's government crisis. Nonetheless, following Golder's logic, one might expect that there are high levels of uncertainty in Belgium, as well as bargaining complexity, for the cabinet composition rule to have influenced the situation.

## **Observations & Analysis**

### ***Consociationalism and federalism***

Belgium has a complex network of institutional factors that could be interacting with each other to increase the difficulty in coalition formation. Firstly, one notes that it is both a consociational *and* a federal state. Consociationalism is considered the ideal institutional structure for a divided country to mitigate conflict and advance compromise and cooperation. On the other hand, federalism can also deal with a divided society, as it creates more independence for each group. Therefore, there is no need for negotiation on some issues, since each side can govern in its own way. However, the combination of these two systems in Belgium may mean they are working against each other. The federal attitudes, particularly among the

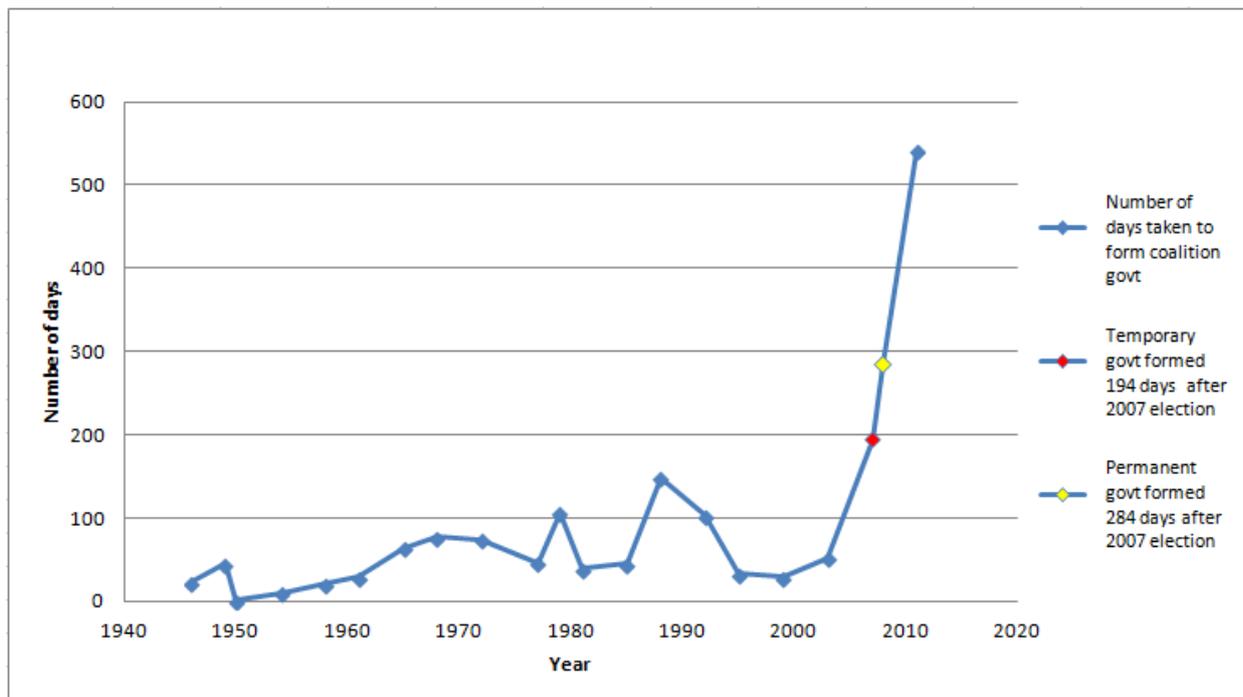
Flemish who have been constantly pushing for even more regional independence, may mean that both the Flemish and French-speaking groups want to govern in their own way at a regional level, but they are losing interest in the consociational approach at the federal level. For example, Sinardet (2010) argues that the Flemish political elites abandoned the consociational approach during the 2007 coalition negotiations and instead used a majoritarian logic to try to move the BHV policy in their desired direction. It is necessary to maintain the consociational approach to federal policies in order to make any changes, particularly those concerning controversial constitutional reforms that require two thirds of the parliament in support of the change. Federalism was finally officially introduced in Belgium in 1993 after decades of gradual shifts towards more powers for the regions, yet the crises associated with coalition formation have only occurred in the 2000s. Thus, the coexistence of consociationalism and federalism is inadequate to explain the recent Belgian crisis alone.

To continue Sinardet's discussion of the "majoritarian myth" that sprung up among the Flemish elites, he also points to consociationalism itself to explain the strange response of majoritarian logic. He claims that the combination of a strongly bipolar environment in Belgium and the consociational logic of segmentation leads to an "anti-consociational discourse". This is aggravated by the fact that the elites only represent their own language group and are therefore only accountable to them, creating the "illusion of majoritarianism" (2010, p.362). According to Sinardet, consociationalism determines that after elections coalition parties must compromise, but the opposition parties will oppose the compromise on controversial issues. Therefore, he asserts that with an issue like BHV, a paradox occurs in which consociationalism triggers majoritarian attitudes from the parties and subsequently creates pressure on the consociational mechanisms (p.363).

This majoritarian logic has clearly made it more difficult to reach a coalition agreement to form a government in Belgium. The question then is: why have the Flemish parties only recently (since 2004) begun to pursue this majoritarian logic? Sinardet claims the separation of

the regional and federal elections in 2003 has had an impact, as it changed the dynamic of multi-level politics, allowing the Flemish parties to pursue the BHV split with no sign of compromise in the regional campaigns, since they would not be present at the federal level where the compromise is required. The separation of the elections is a recent institutional change that may have contributed to Belgium's 541-day crisis.

**Figure 4. Days to form coalition governments in Belgium since 1946<sup>1</sup>**



Source: De Winter & Dumont 2006 (in Deschouwer 2009, pp.144-145)

Figure 4 shows the length of government formation in days after each election, and this way one can see the effect that changes in the Belgian political institutions may have brought about, such as the official introduction of federalism in 1993 or the separation of regional and federal elections in 2003. As shown by Figure 4, the official introduction of federalism in 1993

<sup>1</sup> Although De Winter & Dumont's (2006) data includes the formation time for any change in cabinet *between* elections, for this project only the formation times *after* elections will be included for analysis, because the concepts of bargaining complexity and uncertainty are also being examined in the Belgian context and, as Golder (2010) asserts, uncertainty is higher in post-election periods. Furthermore, although the number of changes in cabinet between elections in the past is rather high (particularly in the early post-WWII years), this research project is focused on the *formation* of government coalitions, not how stable they are or how long they survive after investiture. The days of formation for changes in government between elections is also a lot shorter on average than formation post-election, so including that data would have the potential to hide any government formation trend that may be occurring after elections.

does not appear to have had a noticeable effect of lengthening coalition formation periods. In fact, immediately after this change it took significantly fewer days (33) to form a coalition than the previous two elections (103 and 148). Since the election in 1999, after which it took 29 days to form a coalition, the length of coalition formation time has increased exponentially. Observing Figure 4, we can infer that the official introduction of federalism has not had a strong impact on coalition formation in and of itself, given that formation times were reduced for the first two elections after 1993.

Furthermore, Belgium had been becoming steadily more decentralised and evolving into a federal state through five state reforms between 1970 and 2001 (Portal belgium.be 2012). Belgium had been in the process of becoming a federal state for many years, so one might say that a sort of “*de facto* federalism” was already in place before 1993. As the adoption of federalism was a gradual change, its impact on the political system, including coalition formation, was perhaps not as significant as it might otherwise have been. If there had been a sudden switch to a federal system, it would have more potential to influence and affect other aspects of Belgian politics. Figure 4 supports this notion as the number of days of formation between 1970 and 1993 do not form any solid trend to suggest that the official introduction of federalism in 1993 has had a major impact. Moreover, there were several elections after the formal establishment of federalism before the periods of government formation became significantly longer. Consequently, we can reason that the introduction of federalism has not been an influencing factor on the length of recent coalition formation periods in Belgium, or on the occurrence of the government crisis.

However, Figure 4 does appear to support the idea that the separation of federal and regional elections in 2003 has had an impact on coalition formation periods. Formation times have rapidly increased since the 2003 election, after which Sinardet (2010) claims the majoritarian logic among the Flemish parties emerged. This majoritarian attitude has prevented

the consociational mechanisms working as they should to encourage negotiation and compromise and has instead led to repeated deadlocks in the coalition formation dialogue.

From this observation, we can infer that the separation of the elections has had a significant impact on Belgium's recent coalition formation crises. Yet, it can be argued that this change would not have had such an effect without the increased salience of the controversial issue of BHV since the Verhofstadt I reforms. That is to say, if the BHV issue were not so salient and divisive, the Flemish parties would have had no need to exert their majoritarian logic in the aim of achieving their desired outcome. Therefore, it is still necessary to look for other factors that allowed this policy to become so salient and divisive and also to investigate the other institutional features of the Belgian political system that may have had an effect.

### ***Multiparty system***

The Belgian electoral institutions, which follow a PR system, lead to a multiparty system, and accordingly can have an influence on coalition formation since more parties are involved in the bargaining (e.g. Browne & Rice 1979; Luebbert 1983). The more parties involved in negotiations, the more difficult it is to find a common ground on which to form a coalition agreement. To elaborate this point, if we think of coalition negotiations as similar to business negotiations we can apply the theory behind principal-agent models to Belgium's coalition formation. Principal-agent models apply to many hierarchical business structures, where there is a *principal* whose utility depends on one or more *agents*, or subordinates. In relation to coalition negotiations in Belgium, we can think of the principal as the formateur (the leader of the party managing the coalition negotiations) or the informateur (who negotiates with the parties to determine who the formateur should be). Furthermore, the parties he/she is negotiating with can be considered the agents. The multiparty system in Belgium leads to a more complicated principal-agent model (or formateur-party model), as there are more parties the formateur must negotiate with. This may be lengthening the coalition formation periods in Belgium.

Continuing the business approach, Güth et al. (2001) discuss that if a principal offers asymmetric contracts to different agents, and the agents are aware of this, then the worse off agent(s) may make less effort, thereby reducing the principal's benefit, or they may reject the contract altogether. However, the principal can initially offer more similar contracts if he anticipates these problems arising (Güth et al. 2001, p.84). One can apply this notion to policy discussions when trying to negotiate a coalition agreement. For example, if one replaces contracts with policy, asymmetric policy means some parties (or agents) are better off than others, but because coalition negotiations should be transparent to all parties involved, it is very evident to all who would receive the benefits of following through on certain policies. Therefore, the parties that would be disadvantaged can veto that policy idea, and subsequently prevent the coalition agreement that would have formed, taking coalition negotiations and bargaining back to square one.

In applying this theory to Belgium, the BHV policy is the equivalent of asymmetric contracts in that no solution could please all parties involved in the coalition negotiations, so the policy was *asymmetrically beneficial* to the Belgian political parties. While the informateur, Bart de Wever of N-VA, and the Flemish parties wished to split the BHV electorate, the French parties involved felt this went against their interests so they would veto that policy, which continually set back the dialogue for a coalition and lengthened the formation process. The same occurred with Elio di Rupo, in his roles as 'pre-formateur' and formateur, and the other mediators appointed by the King to aid the coalition discussions. Many informateurs, formateurs, mediators and negotiators were selected by the King to try to reach a coalition agreement and all resigned after their failed attempts as no agreement could be reached on constitutional reform, especially the *asymmetrical* BHV policy, between the seven parties involved. The large number of parties involved in coalition negotiations in Belgium increases the bargaining complexity. This results in this repetitive cycle of dialogue and veto and prevents swift coalition formation after elections, particularly when consensus on policies with unbalanced benefits for those concerned is required for an agreement.

### ***Cabinet composition rule***

Belgium's constitutional rule that cabinet must be made up of an equal number of Flemish and Walloon representatives (excluding the Prime Minister) adds another hurdle when forming a government coalition and increases the complexity of the bargaining environment. This rule, introduced during the constitutional reforms of 1970, limits the options for forming a government coalition, despite the multiparty system that would generally provide many different coalition options. One might expect a limited number of coalition options to make coalition formation easier, since the formateur would not have to engage in negotiations with so many other party leaders. Yet, in the Belgian context this limitation does not make coalition formation any easier; if anything, it makes it more difficult. This is because there has to be agreement between the parties of the different language groups.

Some political theory (e.g. Axelrod 1970) would suggest that the parties would form a connected coalition along a left-right spectrum, so you might expect to see the French and Flemish socialists and the French and Flemish greens in a coalition together, for instance. Nonetheless, when the different language groups are almost completely opposed on a policy, such as the BHV constituency, it becomes almost impossible to form an agreement solely along a left-right ideological spectrum. It is also necessary to find a compromise across the language groups. The N-VA won the most seats in parliament in the most recent election and, although it was far from a majority, it had the first attempts at forming a coalition. However, the N-VA party is strongly in favour of a BHV split and was not willing to negotiate or compromise on this issue, even with the Walloon parties that would normally sit near them ideologically. While these French-speaking parties might usually have similar views on policy to N-VA, on the BHV issue they are strongly opposed. It is therefore impossible to form a coalition without an agreement along both the linguistic dimension and the regular left-right ideological dimension. Eventually N-VA pulled out of the coalition negotiations completely.

This institutional rule adds to the bargaining complexity of the Belgian coalition formation process. This might suggest it has delayed coalition formation in Belgium, as theories have discussed the hindering effect of bargaining complexity on coalition formation (e.g. Golder 2010; Martin & Vanberg 2003). On the other hand, the cabinet composition rule has been in place since 1970, so it is unlikely to have triggered the recent crisis.

Furthermore, if Golder's theory is correct, then one can assume that the complex bargaining structures in Belgium could only have impacted coalition formation periods if uncertainty was also present; yet there is little evidence to suggest that levels of uncertainty are particularly high in Belgium in order to bring into play the effect of the bargaining complexity. The parties involved in negotiating a coalition agreement in Belgium were not at all reserved in expressing their desired policy direction for the BHV issue. Both the Flemish and French-speaking parties were quite clear about their opinions on BHV, which was the main point of discussion in the coalition negotiations. On the surface there does not appear to be any uncertainty about what the different parties want from the negotiations.

On the other hand, Golder (2010) considers uncertainty to be when parties do not know the preferences over policy or office of other parties. We saw the N-VA party leave the coalition negotiations, which might suggest policy was of more value to the N-VA than office. In this case perhaps there was some level of uncertainty about the N-VA's preferences, but it is unclear whether or not the other parties were aware of these preferences. However, the N-VA appeared to be very open with how strongly it felt about the BHV policy issue and this may have made its preference between policy and office clearer for the other parties involved in the coalition negotiations.

Uncertainty is a difficult concept to measure and this project has not attempted to operationalise it. This is because at face value it does not appear to be a significant factor, since the political parties were open about their desires regarding the BHV constituency and how strongly they felt about it as a policy issue. Moreover, the high levels of bargaining complexity

have been present in Belgium for quite some time without having a critical effect on coalition formation and it is unclear what could have changed to increase levels of uncertainty recently. It is possible that a recent rise in uncertainty levels could have affected the influence of the system's bargaining complexity on the crisis, but it seems unlikely at present, so this will be left for a later investigation.

### ***Veto players***

The veto players present in Belgian politics also create an obstacle to overcome when making shifts in policy and negotiating coalition agreements. The veto players being discussed here are considered according to Tsebelis' work. Firstly, due to the multiparty nature of Belgian politics, many partisan veto players are already present. The political institutions in Belgium also create veto players through minority protection mechanisms. Examples of these mechanisms are the special majority laws and the *alarm bell procedure* that give minority groups a lot of power to veto policy changes.

The special majority laws require two thirds of parliament and a majority of each language group in both houses to be in support of the policy for change to be made. This qualified majority is necessary when implementing or amending constitutional policies. The alarm bell procedure is used when at least three quarters of a language group determine that a bill will jeopardise the relationship between the linguistic communities and they can then 'ring the alarm bell', which introduces a motion and postpones the legislative processes for the bill for 30 days while the government ministers must search for a reconciliatory solution. However, such policies can be extremely divisive and if the ministers cannot agree on a solution, then the government can lose its majority and must step down. Negotiations regarding the bill or policy would then resume during the formation of the next government. This procedure for minority protection is considered to be at the core of the dilemma of the BHV constituency (Sinardet 2010, p.354). The threat of the alarm bell is generally enough to encourage consensus behaviour, as it threatens governmental stability and can lead to a new election. Yet, in April,

2010 the alarm bell procedure was used for the second time in Belgium since its introduction in 1970 amid the discussions of splitting the BHV constituency (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie 2012). As we know, the collapse of the Leterme's government and the early election in June, 2010 followed shortly after. According to Tsebelis, both these minority protection rules can be considered institutional veto players as they are specified by the constitution, while the multiparty system, determined by Belgium's PR electoral system, contributes partisan veto players to the mix.

It is certainly evident that the veto players in Belgium can drastically delay coalition formation. For example, the French-speaking linguistic minority could veto the split of the BHV constituency during the coalition negotiations. This has the same effect as the large number of parties discussed earlier – it prolongs the cycle of discourse and rejection when trying to form an agreement. However, while it is clear that the large number of veto players in Belgian politics slows down coalition formation, there is no evidence that the veto players alone have had a major bearing on the most recent delay of 541 days. The institutional veto players, such as the minority protection mechanisms, have not recently changed (nor are they likely to soon, since it would be a constitutional reform and would therefore require a two thirds majority in parliament). Additionally, although the partisan veto players can change every term depending on the makeup of parliament, there has not been much change between recent parliamentary terms. The term following the 2003 election had ten parties in parliament and there were eleven after the elections of 1995, 1999 and 2007. Twelve political parties received parliamentary representation following the 2010 election. Therefore, it is fair to say that the system of veto players in Belgian politics has not aided the search for a solution to the cabinet crisis and has probably made the situation hard to resolve; yet it does not appear to have directly impacted the Belgian cabinet crisis alone. So what has caused the delay in government formation? While the veto players system is not a direct cause, it is likely that the interaction, or clash, of the factors discussed in this chapter can help to explain Belgium's problem. It appears

that each factor is not sufficient to explain the crisis by itself, but the interaction of these factors may have played a contributory role in Belgium's government crisis.

## **Conclusion**

From the observations above, we can conclude that no institutional aspect of Belgian politics alone has triggered the recent cabinet crisis. Having considered several of the political institutions in Belgium, it is difficult to pinpoint one that has had a singular significant impact on government coalition formation periods. Since the difficulty in forming coalitions is a recent development in Belgian politics, one should look for a recent change in the institutional features to find variables that could have initiated the crisis. However, the majority of the political institutions in Belgium are constants, not variables. Consociationalism and federalism have been concurrently present in Belgium since 1993 officially, but even longer if one considers that Belgium began its shift towards federalism in the 1970s. Despite the fact their combined presence may be triggering some majoritarian attitudes and discouraging consociational logic, they have been a constant factor since well before the recent coalition difficulties arose.

The multiparty nature of the Belgian political system is also a constant. Belgium – with its PR electoral system, the splitting of the political parties along linguistic lines, and the emergence of regional parties – always has many parties represented in parliament, but this has been the case for decades. This raises the number of partisan veto players in the system and can make for a more complicated negotiation model between the formateur and the other parties, but again this cannot be considered a recent development that could have influenced the recent crisis alone. The institutional veto players in Belgian politics have also been constant for some time with no recent amendments; particularly the special majority laws and the 'alarm bell procedure', which have been in play since the reforms of 1970. While these also have the ability to slow down negotiations and policy change, thereby affecting the speed with which coalitions can be formed, there is no evidence that veto players have directly influenced the latest coalition formation process.

Furthermore, the constitutional rule regarding the cabinet composition in Belgium, which ensures linguistic parity between the Francophones and the Flemish, has been in place since 1970. For that reason it is unlikely that it has had a strong influence over the recent situation in Belgium; yet it is also fair to say that this rule adds difficulty to coalition formation due to the multi-dimensional aspect of Belgian politics. This institution determines that an agreement must be made along both a left-right dimension as well as a linguistic dimension in order to successfully form a coalition government. There is no doubt that this makes coalition formation more difficult in Belgium than in other more politically one-dimensional countries. However, these extremely long coalition formation periods have not been occurring since 1970 when this institutional rule was introduced, but rather only since the last two elections. Therefore, once again, one cannot point to this institutional aspect alone as an instigator of the recent crisis.

The only institutional change that has a timely connection with the crisis is the separation of the regional and federal elections in 2003. As Sinardet (2010) puts forward, the Flemish parties adopted a stronger majoritarian logic at this time, which made negotiations and coalition formation more difficult. However, it remains questionable whether the decoupling of the elections would have had the same effect if the salience of the BHV issue had not been so high on the political agenda and if there was not so much disagreement between the linguistic groups about the solution to the problem. If there had not been such a controversial policy involved, the Flemish parties may not have felt the need to abandon consociational practices and take on a majoritarian attitude, which would have made subsequent coalition negotiations much easier.

From the observations in this chapter, one can see that all these institutional features of Belgian politics have the ability to make coalition negotiations more difficult and prolonged, but there is little evidence that they have directly caused the crisis. This is because most of the Belgium's institutional features have been in place for a lot longer than the coalition formation

struggles experienced recently. The only institutional change that has a timely connection with the cabinet crisis – the separation of regional and federal elections – is unlikely to have had the same effect without the increased salience of the BHV issue following the reforms of the Verhofstadt I government. Therefore, it is arguably necessary to address how sociological influences may have affected the cabinet crisis. The following chapter will deal with the influence of sociological aspects of Belgian politics, such as the linguistic cleavage, the past behaviour and bargaining power of the political parties, public opinion and issue salience, as determined by the public and the politicians.

## Chapter 4. Sociological Factors

The previous chapter showed that institutional factors cannot solely explain the unusual coalition formation behaviour in Belgium. It is now necessary to investigate influences on coalition formation stemming from the political parties and politicians, the public and the interactions between them. In other words, influences from people rather than institutions. These influences will be referred to as *sociological factors*. The social cleavages are the first sociological factor that comes to mind in the Belgian political system. The social cleavages, especially the linguistic cleavage, have the ability to influence the policy directions of parties and therefore their behaviour. Furthermore, the high salience of the BHV issue, which splits parliament along the linguistic cleavage, has created opposite policy directions between parties that have to negotiate a coalition agreement. At a glance, and looking at what the media discussed during the 541 days of no elected government, this could be a simple explanation for the difficulty with forming a coalition: a particular issue splits opinion along the salient linguistic cleavage in parliament and then no one is willing to concede leading to a long period without an elected government. However, it is also necessary to investigate other potential sociological influences. For example, change to the legislative party system (see Laver 1989); parties' past behaviour and their bargaining power; the opinions of the public, not simply politicians; as well as issue salience and cleavages. These sociological factors and their influence on Belgian coalition formation will be addressed in this chapter.

### Literature Review

When one thinks of political and social cleavages, Lipset and Rokkan's frozen party system theory (1967) is one of the first things that comes to mind. They posited that since the 1920s four main cleavages represented by parties in parliamentary systems had remained the same or *frozen*. These cleavages came about from two revolutions: the *National Revolution*, which created the centre-periphery and the Church-state cleavages, and the *Industrial*

*Revolution*, which lead to the landed interests-entrepreneurs and the employers-workers cleavages. This certainly was the case in Belgium where there were three “pillars” in society (Deschouwer 2009; Dewachter 1987) represented by three main parties in parliament. These three pillars were represented by the three traditional parties: the Liberal Party, the Catholic Party, and the Belgian Workers’ Party. The latter two became known as the Christian People’s Party and the Belgian Socialist Party respectively after World War II. Although other smaller parties – such as the Communist Party, Green parties and regionalist parties – have appeared over the years, the three traditional parties maintained their representation in the Belgian parliament, suggesting that the party system in Belgium was indeed frozen. Across Belgium, the Church-state cleavage was represented by the Catholic party on one side and the liberals and socialists on the other. Similarly, the socioeconomic cleavages, like the employers-workers cleavage, pitted the socialists against the liberals with the Catholics falling in between.

However, Lipset and Rokkan (1967, p.42) claim that these cleavages, which were once represented across Belgium and cut across the linguistic division, then shifted to offer “a striking example of cleavage reinforcement”. The result was a more distinct division between “French-speaking, secular and industrial Wallonia and *Nederlands*-speaking, Catholic and agricultural Flanders” (Lipset & Rokkan 1967, p.42). This shift became noticeable during the 1950s – particularly with the ‘school war’ which pitted the Catholics against the liberals and socialists<sup>2</sup> – through to the splitting along linguistic lines of the three traditional parties in the 1960s and 1970s. Today the linguistic cleavage can be considered the most significant considering the rise of regional parties and the strength with which the Flemish and French parties continually oppose each other on state reform policies (most recently noticeable on the BHV issue). Although the cleavages that were once frozen in the Belgian party system are still

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘school war’ began when the Socialist-Liberal government after the 1954 election implemented policy to *neutralise* education and these policies punished private Catholic schools. The majority of the protest stemmed from Flanders. Finally, in following the 1958 election a compromise solution was found in the form of the ‘school pact’. See Witte (2009, pp.250-255) for a more in depth explanation of the school war and school pact.

present, they moved into line with the linguistic division and are now dominated and overpowered by the linguistic cleavage.

Interestingly, Frogner (1978) refers to the major difference between the linguistic and the other cleavages as their level of institutionalisation and he continues that the linguistic cleavage cannot yet be considered a base for a new pillar. However, he does say that “the linguistic cleavage is a potential pillar base and it is difficult to predict the future disruptive effect of the conflicts generated by it” (p.111). We are now seeing these disruptive effects in the form of a slowing down of coalition formation, and perhaps the linguistic cleavage is now institutionalised enough to the point it may be considered a new pillar base, or at least the most significant of the political cleavages in Belgium today. Urwin (1970, p.321) asserts that cleavage lines are institutionalised when “they form boundaries separating differing core bases of electoral support for the major political parties”. According to this description of institutionalisation, one can argue that the linguistic cleavage is now institutionalised since it separates two distinct core bases of electoral support – that is, the French-speakers and the Flemish. Furthermore, the major political parties are no longer solely based on the traditional pillars, but rather we see regional parties gaining more and more representation to the detriment of the traditional parties. For example, the N-VA, a regional federalist party has the highest number of MPs in the present parliament. This surely points to a higher level of institutionalisation for the linguistic cleavage nowadays.

However, Urwin also asserts that there are more opportunities to resolve conflicts when salient lines have become institutionalised, which poses some confusion with the Belgian case. We know that Belgium has encountered extreme difficulty with conflict resolution across the linguistic cleavage, which would suggest that the cleavage is not well institutionalised if we follow Urwin’s claim. On the other hand, Urwin also puts forward that in a multidimensional party system, like that of Belgium, the likelihood of conflict resolution fluctuates according to the attitudes and reactions of the party leaders. If this is the case, the linguistic cleavage could

still have undergone a process of institutionalisation, but the attitudes of the parties and party leaders are affecting their ability to resolve disagreements and make progress in coalition negotiations. The attitudes of the Flemish politicians towards the Francophones should perhaps be investigated further. The media, and the Flemish politicians themselves, show that there is a feeling that the Flemish are constantly subsidising the Walloons. This certainly could be having an impact on coalition formation, since it is evident that the Flemish, generally speaking, do not have a great desire to cooperate with the Walloons, whom they regard as freeloaders (e.g. see Morris 2012). The attitudes of the Flemish versus the French-speaking politicians will be examined and considered later in the chapter to determine whether or not the attitudes of parties and party leaders are impacting the ability to readily form a coalition government in Belgium.

On top of party attitudes, it is worth investigating parties' behaviour, particularly their past behaviour. Margit Tavits (2008) finds that parties' past actions and behaviour can have a significant impact on coalition formation. That is, if parties defect from a coalition they may be punished and not included when forming future coalitions. We know that the Open Vld party brought down the federal government in 2010 by defecting from the coalition. This led to the election that preceded the record-breaking 541-day period without an elected government. This is not the only time a government coalition has had to be dissolved in Belgium. If defecting parties are the cause of these dissolutions, then perhaps the past behaviour of some parties and the desire to punish them may be hindering coalition formation progress. However, Tavits (2008, p.506) also finds that "defecting parties do not necessarily become pariah parties; they lose credibility only in the eyes of their former partners". The influence of parties' past behaviour can be examined by looking at the track record in government coalitions of parties that have previously defected.

While the cleavages combined with the electoral institutions lead to what we generally consider 'the party system' in Belgium, Laver (1989) suggests that we must separate the ideas

of an *electoral party system* and a *legislative party system*. Laver specifies both party systems as “a set of parties, each of which has a legislative weight and a set of positions on salient policy dimensions”, but he also claims that there is no singular party system, but rather several that are similar but operate in different arenas (1989, p.303). For example, the electoral party system is where the politics of electoral competition occur, whereas the legislative party system is where day-to-day politics occur. Furthermore, the policy positions of the parties are much clearer in the legislative party system, since parties act in parliament to move in their desired policy direction; in the electoral party system they are only perceived positions (Laver 1989, p.302). The mechanical processes of electoral institutions connect the two systems, so that the competition produced by the electoral party system leads to the legislative party system in which parties have different legislative weights and policy decisions are subject to the will of the parties themselves. In this sense, the legislative party system could be considered a sociological product of the electoral institutions. For this reason, we can focus on legislative party system change in Belgium to look for sociological factors that may be contributing to difficulty forming coalition governments.

Laver (1989) observes a small number of parameters to determine party system change: the identity of the parties, their legislative weights, their positions on salient policy dimensions and the saliency of those policy dimensions. These parameters can be observed in the case of Belgium to determine whether or not change to the legislative party system may have influenced Belgium’s recent crisis. Given that we have so far established that institutional aspects of the Belgian political system were unlikely to have impacted the Belgian crisis alone, one might anticipate that sociological aspects will be shown to have had a greater influence. As Laver’s parameters can be considered to measure sociological aspects of Belgian politics, we can predict that these will show a greater correlation with Belgium’s coalition formation difficulties.

As discussed in the introduction, it is also necessary to investigate some other sociological factors including party behaviour, public opinion, issue salience and interparty

conflict. As these aspects all occur within the legislative party system, they also tie into the parameters Laver describes for the most part. For example, we can measure the legislative weights of the parties and see whether certain parties' bargaining power has changed in recent years. One way of measuring this would be to use the Shapley-Shubik index. This is a method developed by Shapley and Shubik (1954) to evaluate "the distribution of power in a committee system". This can also be used in a system of parliamentary parties. However, unfortunately due to the large  $n$ -value of the Belgian multiparty system, it is very complicated to use this index. For this reason, and as discussed in the methodology in Chapter 2, the changes in the representation of the regionalist parties in Belgium can indicate relevant changes in bargaining power for this research project.

Public opinion regarding the BHV issue is also relevant to the long coalition formation periods Belgium has seen recently. If this issue is particularly salient to the public, this may encourage the political parties to push even more for their desired policy direction knowing that it will gain them votes from the public at the next election. As Burstein (2003, p.29) states, most social scientists agree that public opinion will have an impact on public policy, and even more so if the issue is particularly salient to the public. Therefore, to know whether or not the public deems this issue to be of the same importance as the political parties could help us explain why coalition formation periods have lengthened so significantly recently.

## **Observations & Analysis**

### ***Cleavages***

The linguistic cleavage forms the most significant divide in Belgian politics and society. There is no doubt it has played a part in the recent crisis, as it pitted the Francophone and Flemish parties against each other throughout the long coalition negotiation period. Opinion on the solution for the controversial BHV issue has been almost completely divided along the linguistic division. Flemish parties desired a split along the language border of the BHV

constituency, while the French-speaking parties wished to keep the status quo in order to receive votes from francophone voters outside Brussels (Deschouwer 2009, pp.107-108)

It is easy to look at the conflict the linguistic cleavage creates in Belgium and the controversy of the BHV issue and presume that this is the major problem that has caused crises in cabinet formation processes lately. However, one cannot overlook the fact that this cleavage has been in play politically for decades and has not created this sort of crisis before. The cleavage has not changed significantly. It may be more institutionalised now, shown by the representation of regional parties in parliament and the splitting of the traditional parties along linguistic lines; yet, once again, this is not a recent occurrence. The salience of this cleavage also appears to have increased. We see that the issue of BHV reform – a linguistic issue – has become more strongly debated and opposed, but this means the saliency of the policy dimension (see Laver 1989) has changed more than the cleavage itself.

Arguably, the linguistic cleavage is such a significant divide that it is likely to play a part in any aspect of Belgian politics. Nonetheless, there is little evidence to suggest it has had a direct and exclusive impact towards causing the recent crisis. The linguistic cleavage has been around for a long time without such extreme coalition formation crises occurring. Therefore, we cannot claim that it has been a singular significant factor in contributing to the crisis. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the linguistic divide contributes to the two-dimensionality of the Belgian political system, which makes coalition negotiations more complicated, as previously discussed. If the linguistic divide did not exist in Belgium, we may not have seen such a crisis, as it would be much easier to negotiate a coalition agreement in a system with a single policy dimension. Accordingly, the linguistic cleavage is not a singular explanation for Belgium's government crisis, but one cannot deny that it has played a part in combination with other influencing factors. Consequently we must explore some other sociological factors.

### ***Parties' attitudes***

The attitudes of parties and party leaders could be having an impact on coalition formation, as they can make conflict resolution more difficult in a multiparty system (Urwin 1970). As already discussed, there is much conflict across the linguistic cleavage regarding the BHV constituency and whether or not it should be split. The attitudes of the Flemish and the French-speaking parties may be inhibiting conflict resolution on this issue. The attitude that is strongly put forward by the Flemish politicians is that they feel they are constantly subsidising the Walloons while they freeload off the Flemish economy. In an interview in November, 2007 – during the process of coalition negotiations following the 2007 election – Frank Vanhecke, the Chief of Vlaams Belang (VB – Flemish Interest), candidly put forward his opinion of the Flemish economic dominance (Born 2007):

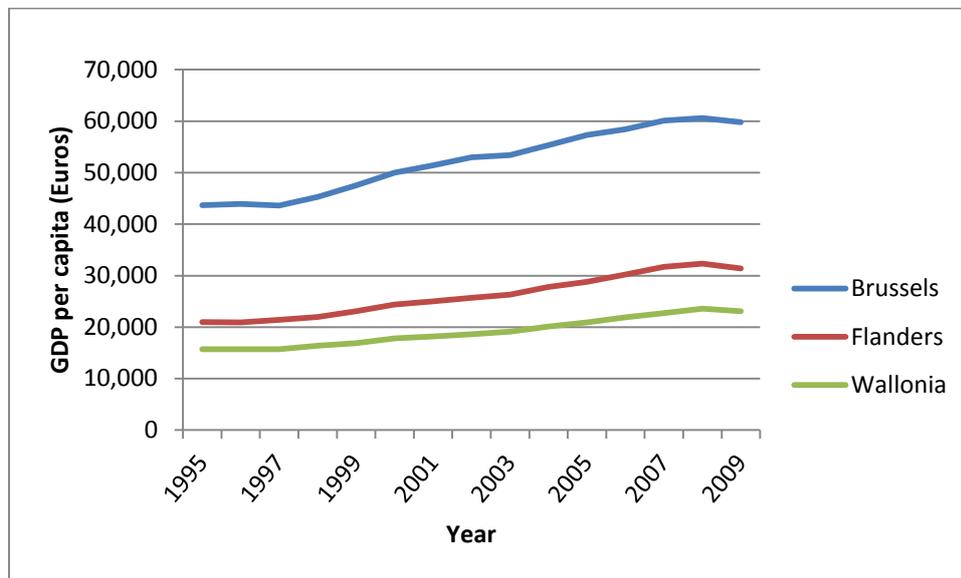
*We are six million Flemings – as opposed to four million Walloons – and we hold up the nation on our backs. We account for 86 percent of Belgian exports – and that is not information that an extremist politician is giving you, but it comes rather from the Flemish regional government and from Flemish universities and it has recently been confirmed by Wallonian universities. Every year between 7 and 12 billion euros flow from the Flemish to the Wallonian part of the country. And what do we get in return? We do not even get respect for our frontiers and our language.*

Whether or not these figures are exaggerated by Vanhecke is beside the point; the attitude of the regionalist VB party towards the Walloons is clearly and unequivocally expressed.

To see whether or not this attitude is justified, below are two graphs portraying the GDP per capita in Euros of the three political regions and the territories of Flanders and Wallonia. Figure 5 represents the three regions of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, which includes the German community. Brussels is included in both the French-speaking and Flemish communities, while the German-speaking population forms its own community. However, for the purposes of

Figure 6 – and to take into account Flemish attitudes towards the Francophones – Brussels has only been included in Flanders since it is located inside Flemish territory and the Flemish like to think of Brussels as a Flemish city.

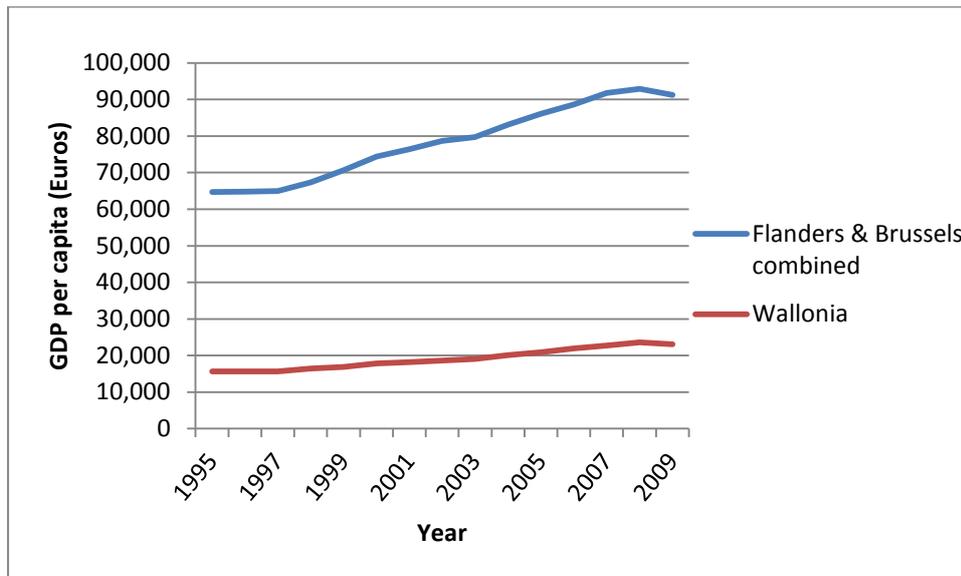
**Figure 5. Regional GDP per capita in Belgium**



Source: data taken from Eurostat (2012)

Figure 5 clearly shows that Wallonia does have a lower GDP per capita than Flanders, but the difference is not as great as one might think given the extremely negative attitudes of the Flemish towards the French-speaking population. However, Brussels is geographically situated inside Flanders and the Flemish would like to consider it a Flemish city (Govaert 1998), so if we combine the GDP per capita of the Flanders and Brussels regions in Figure 6, we see there is a large income gap between Flanders and Wallonia. This might be heightening the sense of subsidising Wallonia among the Flemish. Yet it may be a rather exaggerated view of the situation given that the majority of residents in Brussels are French-speaking and, moreover, that 51.41% of the jobs in the Brussels region are taken by people living outside of the region (FOD Economie - ADSEI 2009, figures taken from AmCham 2011), which obviously could include many from Wallonia.

**Figure 6. Community GDP per capita in Belgium**



Source: data taken from Eurostat (2012)

As well as the negative attitude of the Flemish towards the Walloons concerning the economy, there are also differing opinions and attitudes from both sides of the linguistic border regarding how the citizens and politicians identify with Belgium. Flanders has for a long time been looking for much more autonomy, and some people simply want Flanders to become its own country and secede from Belgium. Some even see the split of Belgium as inevitable:

*The process has already begun. Sooner or later, lucid reasonable politicians in reasonable parties will have to understand that there is no longer any possibility of finding a sensible compromise between the different parts of the country (Vanhecke interviewed, Born 2007).*

Furthermore, the Flemish appear to identify much more with Flanders than with Belgium. Vanhecke also put forward in his interview with Born (2007) that “Belgium means nothing to me. My children consider themselves to be Flemish and European. Belgium means nothing to them at all”. We can infer from statements like these that the attitudes of the different Belgian political parties have the ability to interfere with the coalition formation process, as it certainly indicates a lack of willingness to cooperate. However, we still cannot prove that the parties’ attitudes have individually been a significant influencing factor in Belgium’s

government crisis. Parties can base their views on what the public desires, as this is how they can try to gain more future votes. This might suggest that public opinion is also having an impact on the crisis.

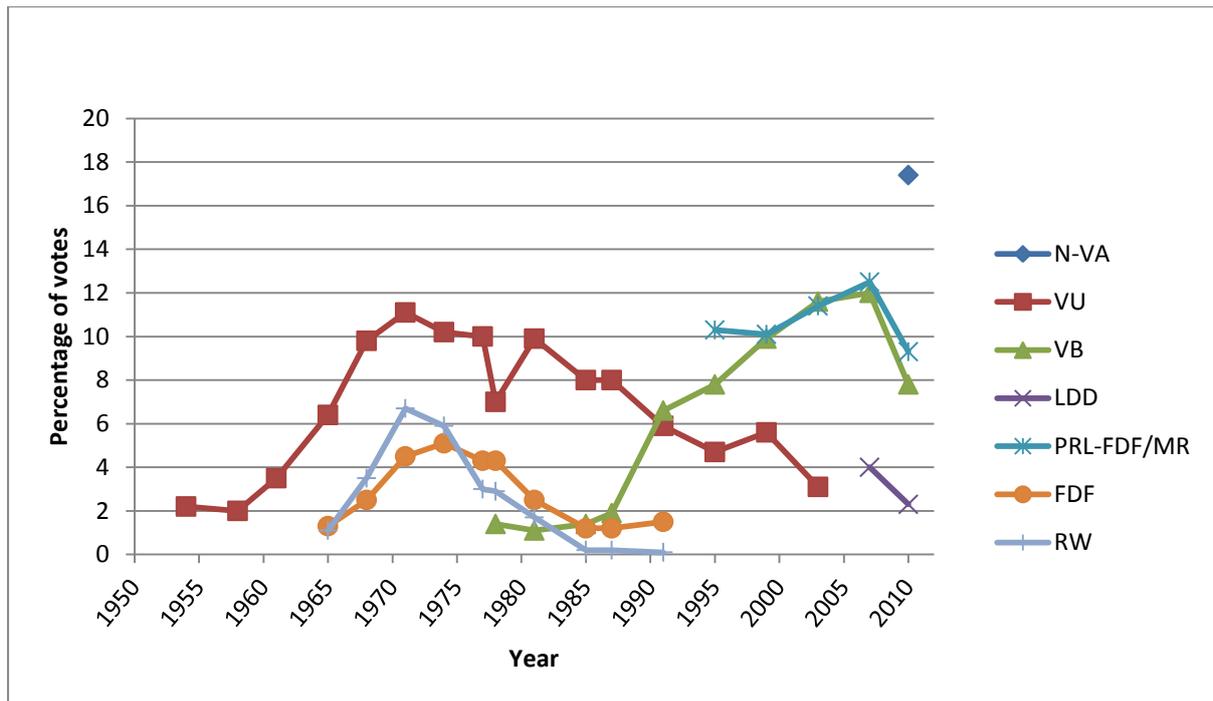
### ***Public Opinion***

Although Vanhecke's stance discussed above may be a radical view among the Flemish public and Vanhecke may be exaggerating how the average Flemish person really feels, one might also argue that the parties are expressing such viewpoints as they are following the desire of the public. Unfortunately, the best way to determine how the public feels regarding its identity and its opinion of the opposite language group is to perform surveys and interviews on the citizens of both Flanders and Wallonia; but as has been explained in the methodology (refer page 24), this is beyond the scope of this research project.

So while it is difficult to determine exactly where the public sits on the differences between Flanders and Wallonia, and therefore difficult to measure the impact public opinion may be having on coalition formation, we can address it in an indirect way to see if there may be a connection. We know the attitudes of the Flemish towards the Walloons from politicians' statements, and we also know that the Flemish have been pushing for more autonomy, particularly financial independence, for decades. In contrast, the Francophones do not want an increase in sub-national financial and fiscal autonomy, as it would advantage the Flemish and put them in an even stronger position than they are in now due to the economic competition that could emerge between the regions (Deschouwer 2009, p.64). This would give the Flemish more power to try to initiate the split of the country, or at least would mean that they would no longer have to subsidise or contribute to the Walloon economy. While we know this from the politicians' points of view, it does not necessarily mean the public feel the same way. However, by looking at the support of the parties that feel strongly about these regional issues, we can somewhat gauge whether the public believes these are important issues or not.

The regionalist parties are those that feel most strongly about the divide between the two language regions and believe that more separation is required. If we look at the percentage of votes received by the regionalist parties over time we can see whether or not their support has increased, and therefore whether or not the public is responding to a desire to increase autonomy of the regions by voting for these parties.

**Figure 7. Regionalist Parties' Representation in Belgian Parliament**



Source: Deschouwer (2009, p.125); Rihoux et al. (2011)

Figure 7 shows the support of regionalist parties, in percentage of votes received, since the post-war period. The parties included in this figure are determined by Deschouwer's description of the Belgian political parties (2009, pp.73-93). Among the Flemish parties, Deschouwer describes Volksunie (VU – the People's Union) and its official successor, Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA – New Flemish Alliance), as regionalist. Vlaams Belang (VB), previously known as Vlaams Bloc, is considered regionalist, but also a radical right party. Lijst Dedecker, now called Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD – Libertarian, Direct, Democratic), is considered a liberal Flemish party, but seeing as Dedecker founded LDD after leaving the N-VA and the Flemish liberals sit close to regionalist positions, it has also been included.

Deschouwer considers the Rassemblement Wallon (RW – Walloon Rally) a regionalist party. The Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF – Democratic Francophone Front) is a Brussels-based regionalist party, although since 1993 it has allied itself with the Francophone liberals (PRL – Parti Réformateur Libéral/Liberal Reform Party) and run on a common list. This alliance goes by the name of Mouvement Réformateur (MR – Reformist Movement), so the support of PRL-FDF/MR since 1993 is also included in Figure 7.

From Figure 7 we can see that support for purely regionalist parties has decreased in the French-speaking parts of Belgium since a peak in the early seventies. The votes received by FDF and RW decreased to the point that RW no longer has representation in parliament and FDF only has representation through the alliance with the French-speaking liberals. In contrast, the N-VA, which had previously been unable to get more than one MP into parliament without the alliance with CD&V, received more votes after it split. Between the years of 2003 and 2009, the VU successor ran as a “Flemish cartel” with CD&V (Noppe & Wauters 2002, cited in Deschouwer 2009) and in the 2007 election it received 18.5% of the votes. However, unlike the struggling Francophone regionalists, the N-VA managed to maintain 17.4% of the votes in the 2010 election while CD&V’s support dropped to 10.9%. Similarly, we can see in Figure 7 the rise in support of VB, widely considered a radical right party as well as a strong voice for Flemish independence (Deschouwer 2009).

So while support for the Flemish regionalist parties appears to be rising, the French regionalists can now only obtain representation by running with the Francophone liberals. Moreover, the FDF-PRL alliance has only won more votes than the Francophone socialists once since they joined in 1993. This suggests that the importance the French-speaking public gives to regionalist issues is not as high as that given by the Flemish public. The Walloon socialists often receive the most votes among the French-speaking voters, whereas the Flemish are now voting for purely regionalist parties making the N-VA the most well-represented party in federal parliament. Furthermore, the N-VA won the Flemish regional election of 2012 with a strong

victory, emphasising the fact that the Flemish public place importance on regional issues, such as that of BHV. This also suggests that a significant part of the Flemish public want to split from Wallonia, as the N-VA has no qualms about expressing that a national split is what it desires.

Political parties should take into account what the public wants if they wish to maintain or gain representation at the next election. Due to the increased support received by the regionalist parties after having expressed their regionalist goals, they had less incentive to compromise with the French-speaking parties in coalition negotiations, because they may lose some support from the public at the next election. Although the N-VA was in a position to have their leader as the Prime Minister and leading the coalition negotiations, they would not concede anything on the BHV reform issue and eventually they withdrew from the negotiations. This may have been a strategy to maintain the voter support, even though it meant they had to give up the opportunity of office (Budge & Laver 1986). This certainly suggests that the opinion of the public in Flanders is taken very seriously by the regionalist parties and therefore could have had an impact on the length of coalition formation. If the Flemish public did not appear to feel so strongly about BHV and regional issues, then the N-VA may have been more willing to compromise and speed up the coalition formation process.

We cannot prove that public opinion towards the linguistic cleavage and regional issues has had an effect on coalition formation in Belgium recently or suggest any causation. However, we can infer from the new strength of the Flemish regionalists that the Flemish public has regional issues on its mind, whereas the French speakers appear to be moving away from strong regionalist opinions, and this may be contributing to the unwillingness to compromise between the two linguistic groups.

Further to the public's view of regionalism and its attitudes towards the language groups, the importance that the public gives a federal government may have played a part. Belgium spent 541 days without an elected federal government, and one would perhaps expect a degree of protest from citizens for this. Although there were some protests during the 541

days in Belgium, they were few and some were almost more humorous than serious, such as the “beards for Belgium” protest in which a Belgian comedian asked men to refuse to shave until a government was formed (Ames 2011). A female Flemish senator also appealed to the wives of politicians to abstain in a “sex strike” until a new administration could be formed (Waterfield 2011). While this shows that part of the Belgian population was concerned about having no elected government for such a long time, there is no evidence that the whole Belgian population felt particularly concerned. Moreover, these protests occurred when the political deadlock had lasted around 250 days – not even halfway to the final total of 541 days. Clearly then the protests were not particularly effective at accelerating the negotiations for a new government.

On the other hand, one might argue that the majority of the public simply wasn't sufficiently concerned about government at the federal level due to the devolution of power that has occurred in Belgium. Government has undergone much devolution to regional governments in Belgium, so many things could continue as if there were a normal federal government, because the regional governments were still able to legislate at their level to prevent a complete breakdown of the political system. One might infer from this that the Belgian public perceive their regional governments as more important than the federal government, but unfortunately it is not possible at this time to survey the public to accurately gauge this perception. It would be interesting to explore this idea in more depth in future research.

While the limited protest about the government crisis and its ineffectiveness may point to a lack of public concern about the absence of a federal government, it is also possible that the public was troubled by the government crisis, but the politicians involved in negotiations simply ignored public's the attempts to express their anxiety. If the opportunity arises to survey the public in the future, it would be interesting to see if the public places more importance on government at the federal level or at the regional level, because this certainly has the potential to influence the politicians' desire to speed up coalition negotiations, but we can only speculate at present as to whether or not it has had an impact on the 2010 crisis.

### ***Bargaining power***

As discussed in the methodology and earlier in this chapter, the Belgian political system, with the representation of multiple parties, makes it very complex to use the Shapley-Shubik index (Shapley & Shubik 1954) to measure the bargaining power of the political parties over time. For this reason, we can simply look at changes in the representation of the regionalist parties. Although this may seem a crude substitute for a more technical index of power distribution, the aim here is to observe whether or not the regionalist parties now have more power, since these are the parties most likely to have held up coalition negotiations due to their stronger opposing positions on the BHV issue. Understandably, simply observing changes in their representation is not the best way to measure the power distribution among the parties. However, the more seats the regionalist parties have in parliament, the more opportunity they have to be involved in coalition negotiations and the more power they hold to exert their influence on the other parties involved.

We can refer to Figure 7 (page 56) again to see the representation of regionalist parties in Belgium and how it has changed recently. From this we can infer that the Flemish regionalist parties have been recently gaining more bargaining power in the Belgian parliament. In the case of the N-VA, this has also allowed the party to be more involved in coalition negotiations, as it won enough seats to be the largest party in parliament and to lead the initial discussions towards an agreement. The increase in bargaining power of the N-VA and VB in federal parliament has not been matched on the other side of the linguistic border. The socialists continue to be more popular in the south of the country and their support has not had any sudden changes like the N-VA. So while the Flemish regionalists are now experiencing more bargaining power in Belgian parliament, significant changes have not been noted among the Walloon parties. Therefore, any effects of bargaining power on coalition formation must stem from the Flemish side of the country. This aligns with the attitudes of the parties in Flanders, in particular those of the regionalist parties, and their newfound strength and support from the Flemish public. These are the parties that are pushing strongly for Flemish independence and

appear to have no interest in compromising with the Francophone parties on regional and state reform issues, like the BHV issue. They have been able to slow down coalition formation through their unwillingness to find the middle ground with the Walloons.

The combination of support among the public for the Flemish regionalists, their increased bargaining power in parliament and their barefaced attitudes towards the Walloons appears to have had an influence on the length of the recent coalition formation in Belgium. These are all relatively recent occurrences for these parties, which makes them more likely to have had a connection with the recent crisis. Although these appear to be factors influencing coalition formation, we cannot yet overlook some other potential factors.

### ***Parties' past behaviour***

It is also possible that the past behaviour of parties in coalitions and the desire to punish defectors has affected the efficiency with which parties can form coalition agreements. Many governments have been dissolved prematurely in Belgium. If this is due to defections by parties in the coalition government, this may reduce options for forming new coalitions if parties still retain some desire to punish the defectors by excluding them from new agreements.

We know that the defection of Open Vld from the government led to the early election in 2010. If Tavits' (2008) theory about punishing defectors applies to Belgium, then we would expect to see an attempt to punish Open Vld after the election. If the desire is strong enough to punish defectors in Belgium, then this could slow down coalition negotiations by reducing the possible options for coalition formation. However, Open Vld is now part of the current government formed in December 2011. Clearly there has been no immediate effort to punish the Flemish liberals by exclusion for their defection, so this cannot have contributed to the extension of the most recent coalition formation period. Furthermore, the past reports on Belgian elections from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2008) refer only to the 'dissolution' of several coalition governments between 1968 and 2008. They do not refer to the defection of particular parties that led to the dissolution, so the desire to punish parties for defections in

past years is unlikely to arise. There is no evidence to suggest that parties' past behaviour in coalitions and the subsequent wish to punish defectors has had an impact on length of coalition formation in Belgium.

### ***Issue salience and positions on salient policy***

As well as looking for changes in the bargaining power of the parties, their positions on salient policies are important. Since I have already discussed how salient the BHV constituency issue is, and how this ties into views on state reform and the linguistic cleavage, it would be worth noting whether parties have shifted their positions on this issue and on federalism in general. Furthermore, due to the very high salience of this issue of late, perhaps other parties that are not normally so focussed on BHV and federalism have started to show more interest in these policy areas. By looking at party manifestos, we may be able to discern some changes in parties' positions on the salient policy of BHV and, more generally, federalism and state reform. In this way, we can also address whether the salience of the linguistic policy dimension has changed. It certainly seems from what has appeared in the media and what the parties mostly disagreed about during coalition negotiations that the BHV issue has leapt ahead of other policies in terms of its saliency. However, by considering the two-dimensional nature of the Belgian party system and that extreme regionalist parties have gained representation recently, then by Laver's (1989) approach this would suggest that there has been an increase in the salience of the linguistic policy dimension – that is, the policy dimension that incorporates the BHV issue.

The way the Manifesto Project Database (Volkens et al. 2012) analyses the manifestos of different political parties is to sort the sentences and quasi-sentences of the manifesto into different policy areas. Among these policy areas we can pick out the ones that would relate to the BHV issue, state reform and the linguistic cleavage to analyse in the Belgian context. The policy categories that most relate to the Belgian case are:

➤ Per301 – Federalism:

*Support for federalism or decentralisation of political and/or economic power.*

*May include:*

*Favourable mentions of the territorial subsidiary principle;*

- *More autonomy for any sub-national level in policy making and/or economics;*
- *Support for the continuation and importance of local and regional customs and symbols and/or deference to local expertise;*
- *Favourable mentions of special consideration for sub-national areas.*

➤ Per303 – Governmental and Administrative Efficiency:

*Need for efficiency and economy in government and administration and/or the general appeal to make the process of government and administration cheaper and more efficient. May include:*

- *Restructuring the civil service;*
- *Cutting down on the civil service;*
- *Improving bureaucratic procedures.*

➤ Per607 – Multiculturalism: Positive:

*Favourable mentions of cultural diversity and cultural plurality within domestic societies. May include the preservation of autonomy of religious, linguistic heritages within the country including special educational provisions. (Volkens et al. 2012)*

'Federalism' and 'Governmental and Administrative Efficiency' tie into state reform and the restructuring of the BHV constituency, while positive attitudes towards multiculturalism can refer to the desire to keep and protect the cultural diversity between the Flemish and Walloons. As these also relate to the linguistic cleavage, one might expect the number of times these policy categories are mentioned in party manifestos to have increased recently if the saliency of the linguistic policy dimension has also increased.

Surprisingly, if one looks at the data on Belgian political parties from the Manifesto Project, there is no clear overall increase of the mentioning of these policies among the Belgian parties. However, as one might expect, the parties that feel most strongly about the need for change in these policy areas, the N-VA and VB, do have high percentages of their manifestos referencing some of these policy categories. For example, in 2003, 17.3% of the sentences in the N-VA manifesto were related to federalism. Similarly, VB's manifestos between 1999 and 2003

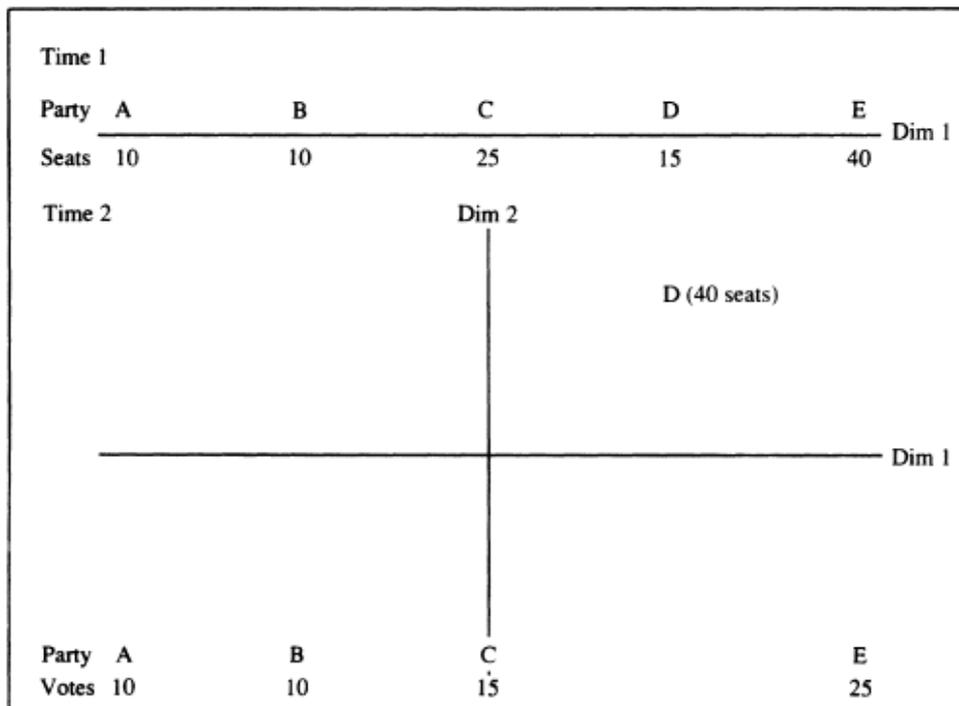
mentioned federalism in 10.9% of all sentences and governmental and administrative efficiency was brought up in 9.7% of sentences.

Although there is no overall pattern among the manifestos of all parties to suggest that the linguistic policy dimension has become more salient, if we focus on Laver's (1989) idea of the two-dimensionality of the party system, we can see the impact of issue saliency from another perspective. Laver states that in a one-dimensional party system, where parties are spread out ideologically along a single policy dimension (e.g. left-right), the salience of the policy dimension is not a relevant issue. However, when the system becomes two-dimensional, like in Belgium's case, the saliency of policy dimensions is something that must be considered. On one dimension in Belgium we have the parties spread along a left to right spectrum (refer Figure 2 & Figure 3, page 13), but on the second dimension we have parties spread between Flemish/federalist and French-speaking/unitarist. Laver also asserts that parties may manipulate the saliency of policy dimensions. This makes the relative salience of the issues an aspect of the party system that parties can change from within the system as part of their process of competition.

Figure 8 is a hypothetical party system put forward by Laver. We can apply this hypothetical situation to the Belgian party system after the last election in 2010, if we consider the N-VA to be like Party D. Referring back to Figure 2, we see that the N-VA falls next to the median legislator on a left to right policy dimension. This is like Party D in the figure below, which holds the median legislator in Time 1 and is therefore in a position of power. However, if we look at Dimension 2, Party D is quite isolated. The N-VA with its very strong federalist attitudes and desire for Flemish independence is like Party D in that it falls at the extreme end of the federalist-unitarist dimension. Laver (1989, p.321) suggests that a party in this situation might try to manipulate the electoral saliency of an issue in order to distinguish itself from other parties and move in a direction that will be favoured by a considerable section of voters. This also fits with the recent Belgian case, in which the N-VA made a clear gain among the voters

becoming the largest party in parliament with 27 seats. N-VA campaigned heavily on federalism and state reform as 17.3% of its manifesto was dedicated to these topics in the lead up to the 2003 election. Although we do not have any data for the N-VA's manifesto before the 2010 election, it appears that they have succeeded in increasing the saliency of the linguistic policy dimension, which essentially divides opinion on federalism versus unitarism.

**Figure 8. Change in the Saliency of Electoral Policy Dimensions**



Source: Figure taken from Laver (1989, p.320)

The N-VA has had a significant increase in support in federal parliament after the last election and is also now the most popular party in Flanders following the 2012 regional elections. Despite this, the N-VA was somewhat isolated in federal coalition negotiations, as it would not back down or compromise and it struggled to find common ground with the other parties involved in the negotiations. Most other Flemish parties do want more autonomy for Flanders, yet in the recent negotiations it appears that the other parties could see that compromise was required if they were to have any success in forming a coalition with the Francophone parties. The N-VA refused to concede anything. This led to them leaving the

negotiation table, and in doing so they handed the job of forming a government to the Francophone socialists.

One may conclude from these events that the saliency of the linguistic dimension has certainly increased recently. It also appears to be more important to the public (especially in Flanders) based on the changes in voting patterns in favour of the regionalist parties. The N-VA may have succeeded in emphasising this policy dimension to gain votes on the issues of BHV and more Flemish independence, and this had the result of slowing down the coalition negotiations as the power to form a government was in the hands of a party who refused to concede or compromise. However, by gaining votes along the federalist-unitarist dimension, the N-VA also isolated itself from many other parties within the legislature (like Party D in Laver's party system, see Figure 8), thereby reducing its bargaining power (Laver 1989, pp.320-321). This reinforces Laver's statement that the electoral and the legislative party systems are distinct from each other. The incongruence of these two party systems after the 2010 election in Belgium may go some way to explaining the long delay in forming a coalition government. While the N-VA held much bargaining power in the electoral system, and was therefore given the task of leading coalition talks, in the legislative system it had isolated itself and did not have the bargaining power to see the task through. This led to the task being passed on to another party, which essentially meant starting negotiations from scratch and causing a great delay in coalition formation.

## **Conclusion**

From investigating the influence of sociological factors on coalition formation in Belgium we can form some conclusions. The well-defined linguistic cleavage separating the Flemish and the Walloons certainly plays a part in all aspects of the political system in Belgium. It has the ability to slow down coalition negotiations as the Flemish and Francophone parties struggle to agree or find a common ground to form a coalition agreement. However, since this

cleavage has been manifest in Belgium for so long without causing a crisis like the recent 541-day period, we cannot expressly 'blame' the linguistic cleavage for the cabinet crisis.

A simplistic view of party attitudes in Belgium is that the Flemish want more independence and the French-speakers do not want any more devolution of power to the regions. With further examination of the stories in the media and statements from Flemish party leaders (namely radical regionalist parties like the VB), it becomes clear that the Flemish view the Walloons as freeloaders and have very negative attitudes towards them (e.g. Born 2007; Morris 2012). While this may be an unwarranted generalisation for the wider Flemish population, one might infer from the increased support for the Flemish regionalist parties in recent years that this attitude is held by a significant portion of Flemish society. The newfound support for the regionalist parties in Flanders has increased their bargaining power in parliament, so we saw the N-VA initially lead the coalition negotiations after the 2010 election. However, although the N-VA had gained support among the Flemish public, and subsequently increased its bargaining power in the electoral party system, in the legislative party system it became isolated along the federalist-unitarist spectrum despite being relatively centred on a left-right spectrum. This occurred due to the increased saliency of the linguistic policy dimension, which incorporates the issues involving federalism and state reform.

Essentially, from this chapter's investigation, we can conclude that a combination of sociological factors has had an influence on the length of coalition formation in Belgium. I have found no evidence to support the idea that parties' past behaviour may have played a part, but there are several other factors that appear to have had an influence. The new strength of the Flemish regionalists among the public, their increased bargaining power and their strongly negative attitudes towards the Walloons have combined to reduce the ease with which coalitions agreements can be negotiated and governments formed. The unwillingness of the Flemish regionalists to compromise with other parties to form an agreement stems from the parties' attitudes. This would not have a strong impact, however, if they did not have the

support from the public and the numbers in parliament, which allow them to exert their attitudes in the coalition negotiation process.

Therefore, we can see that party attitudes, public opinion and bargaining power are sociological political aspects that have the ability to influence the length of coalition formation in Belgium. However, without the increased salience of the BHV issue and the linguistic policy dimension these three aspects may not have had an impact at all. The heightened salience of the linguistic cleavage and issues of state reform has meant that the public has taken more note of the problem with the BHV constituency and given more power to the regionalist parties with the most extreme views on this issue. Similarly, the regionalists, namely the N-VA, have been able to separate themselves from other parties to attract votes on this salient issue. This has given the N-VA more power in parliament to negotiate a coalition on its own terms, but it also isolated itself in the process. With its refusal to compromise, the N-VA slowed down the coalition formation process. The process had to be started anew after the N-VA left the table, with the Francophone socialists (PS) leading discussions.

Finally we cannot deny that the linguistic cleavage has a huge impact on coalition formation in Belgium. While the factors just discussed have clearly had an influence, we cannot deny that they would not have this sort of impact without the presence of the well-institutionalised linguistic cleavage, from which the attitudes of the parties and the goals for state reform have developed. However, neither can the linguistic cleavage alone explain the long coalition formation process, as the cleavage has been present for much longer than the experience of government formation crises in Belgium. The most logical and evident explanation regarding the impact of sociological factors is that the linguistic cleavage, party attitudes, public opinion, bargaining power and the salience of issues and policy dimensions have all combined to have an effect on coalition formation in Belgium.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Combined discussion of institutional and sociological factors**

From the previous chapters, we have discovered that there are several sociological factors at play in Belgium that are able to slow down coalition formation. However, it appears that no institutional factors alone have the ability to delay the formation of government coalitions. So, at present, it seems that sociological factors have more impact on coalition formation in Belgium. To a degree this makes sense, as institutions are often constants in a political system, whereas sociological factors – such as the opinions and attitudes of the public and politicians and the salience of certain issues – are more changeable. As the coalition formation crisis in Belgium has been a recent occurrence, one would expect to find that variables that have undergone recent changes are the best explanatory factors. Consequently, the constant institutional aspects of the Belgian political system seem unlikely to have had an impact on the recent crisis. Still, it is arguably premature to completely rule out their impact without looking at how they interact with the sociological variables and what their combined effect may be.

Indeed, in all likelihood the constants and the variables of the Belgian political system have combined to have a unique effect on the ability to readily form coalitions. One can assert this because other countries with similar political institutions to Belgium have not encountered such difficulties when forming a government. Examples include Switzerland and the Netherlands, which can also be considered consociational states. Similarly, there are countries with one or many strong social cleavages – Switzerland is again an example with its linguistic and religious divisions – and yet no states have experienced such difficulty as Belgium has in recent years. What is more, this difficulty culminated in Belgium significantly exceeding the previous world record for the longest period without an elected government. During the political crisis, the media seemed to put forward that the disagreements between the Flemish

and the Francophones on the reform of the BHV constituency were the main culprit in delaying the formation of a government coalition. This suggests that they saw the linguistic cleavage and the political differences between the two linguistic groups in Belgium as the principal explanation for the crisis. Yet, as said above, many countries have strong cleavages that create a division in society and policy opinions, but they have not encountered the severe coalition formation difficulties that were witnessed in Belgium. Belgium is unique in that such a crisis has emerged from a social cleavage. This points to the fact that the sociological influences and the political institutions in Belgium have combined to have a significant impact on coalition formation. The presence of one or another of these groups of factors alone in other countries has not displayed a negative influence on forming coalitions.

From the analysis of institutional influences on Belgian coalition formation in Chapter 3, we found that the institutions alone would be unable to have a significant impact without sociological influences also playing a part. Many institutional features of the Belgian political system have been constant since well before these government crises began to occur, such as the veto players (both institutional and partisan), the multiparty nature of Belgian politics, the co-existence of consociationalism and federalism, and the rule determining cabinet composition. This makes them unlikely to have had a direct effect on the causation of the government crisis, because they have not undergone any recent changes that would give them a timely connection with the crisis. Nonetheless, many of these features appear to be able to hold back coalition formation; yet they would not have had an impact without the strong linguistic divide, the difference of opinion it causes between the Walloons and the Flemish, and the high salience of state reform issues like the BHV constituency. The only institutional change that occurred around the time coalition formation became more difficult was the separation of the regional and federal elections in 2003. This is also when the Flemish began to adopt a more majoritarian logic, rather than focusing on consociational practices, which obviously will slow down negotiations through the lack of compromise. However, once again, this would not have had such an impact on coalition formation without the increased salience of the BHV issue, which

made the Flemish (particularly the N-VA) more determined to push the policy in their desired direction rather than find a middle ground. Furthermore, although Sinardet (2010) claims that this is the time the Flemish started to act in a more majoritarian way, we do not know that this behaviour is connected with the separation of the elections. This behaviour can also be tied to many of the sociological factors investigated in Chapter 4, such as the newfound strength of the Flemish regionalists and their attitudes towards the Francophones. Therefore, while the institutions examined in this study have the ability to decelerate the coalition formation process, it seems that they will not have an effect without the presence of several sociological influences.

Contrastingly, Chapter 4 found that several sociological factors can influence the length of coalition formation in Belgium, and that is without considering the institutions. However, in reality, these sociological influences are also unlikely to have an impact without some of the institutional features of the Belgian political system. One of the most unique aspects of the Belgian political and electoral system is the rule that determines the composition of cabinet: the numbers of French-speaking and Flemish ministers must be equal (excluding the Prime Minister). This, as previously discussed, adds to the difficulty of forming a coalition, since the Flemish and Francophones tend to disagree on any policies regarding state reform, which have been particularly salient lately. It is necessary to overcome these differences and find compromise on these policies in order to form a cabinet involving both French-speaking and Flemish parties and it can take a long time to discover and adopt the middle ground or for one side to concede. This institutional feature of Belgian politics can certainly slow down coalition formation in this way. Furthermore, it is unlikely to change. In order to change this electoral rule, a two-thirds majority in parliament would have to vote for the change, as well as half of each linguistic group. The French-speaking and Walloon parties would have no incentive to vote for such a change because the Flemish have a majority population and would therefore be able to overrule the Francophones and pursue their own policy desires almost every electoral term. Effectively, this electoral rule for cabinet composition in Belgium is here to stay and if policies

regarding linguistic regions and state reform remain as topical and salient as they are now, this difficulty with forming government coalitions will not subside.

So while we found in Chapter 4 that sociological factors could have an influence on coalition formation in Belgium alone, one cannot deny that this cabinet composition rule has played a part. For example, the attitudes of the Flemish regionalists towards the Francophone parties are very negative and prevent productive negotiations to find an agreement between the parties of the two linguistic groups. Yet, if the institutions did not determine that an agreement must be found between the North and South of the country, then the Flemish, with their larger population, could simply form a government of solely Flemish parties.

However, even if this were the case, the Flemish government would be unable to make any significant changes regarding state reform due to the qualified majority votes required in parliament. In this way, it makes sense for the Belgian government to comprise both Francophone and Flemish politicians, because if agreements can be found among them, there stands much more chance of any legislative reform gaining the required majority in parliament and going ahead. These electoral and political institutions have been implemented over time to prevent further conflict between the linguistic groups and to continue their consociational approach to politics while protecting the minority groups. Unfortunately, it now seems to have reached a point where the complex political institutions in Belgium are causing more hindrance than help when it comes to having an effective and efficient political system. The complex combination of consociationalism alongside federalism, the presence of an ever-strengthening social cleavage, the attitudes of the political parties and the electoral institutions all seem to be working against each other creating obstacles against forming coalition governments readily and easily.

## **Return to the research questions**

The first main research question of this investigation was: *What is different about Belgium in 2010/2011 compared to past years?* The second research question that followed from this was: *What has contributed to the extension of the coalition formation period and enabled the country to survive so long without a government?* From the previous chapters and the above discussion, one can now form some answers to these questions.

Several sociological influences have undergone changes and shifts in recent years. The increased strength of the Flemish regionalists is a notable change and the strength of the N-VA in particular leapt up following the most recent election. This left them in a position of great power, as they were able to lead the initial coalition negotiations with Bart De Wever as informateur. It also gave the N-VA more bargaining power in the electoral party system, but in the legislative party system it had isolated itself along the federalist-unitarist policy dimension. This discrepancy between the two party systems can be placed on the increased salience of the linguistic policy dimension, which incorporates conflicts between the Francophones and the Flemish as well as between federalists and unitarists. This increase in the linguistic policy dimension has occurred among both the public and the politicians, as we see the Flemish regionalists gaining much more voter support in recent elections. Furthermore, the salience of the BHV constituency issue has increased with the linguistic policy dimension and the disagreements and discussions over this issue were considered the main culprit for crisis by the media. These are all recent changes that have occurred in Belgium and can be connected with the political crisis experienced between June 2010 and December 2011. Nonetheless, these changes are not the only factors that have contributed to the longer coalition periods of late.

In answer to the second research question posed in Chapter 1, these recent changes are not the only contributing factors to the crisis; rather, the unique combination of electoral and political institutions and sociological factors has created a system where coalition agreements and compromise are much harder to achieve than in previous years. Given the discussion above,

which details the way the institutional and sociological factors have combined to have an adverse effect on Belgian coalition formation, we can say that the combination of these factors has contributed to the extension of coalition formation periods in Belgium. However, then one must ask how Belgium survived so long without a government. The political institutions in Belgium can again provide some explanation for this.

Since the electoral reforms of 1970, Belgium has been moving more and more towards federalism. It is now officially a federal state, as well as consociational, but the Flemish parties are still pushing for more shifts towards federalism to keep providing more independence for the linguistic groups. While the Flemish parties have not achieved all their desired independence, Belgium has still become an extremely decentralised state with the three regions and the three communities that all have their own elections, parliaments, governments and power over many policy areas. Fortunately, due to the regional power structures, policy-making did not come to a complete standstill in Belgium during the crisis, because the regions and communities could continue to legislate in the areas over which they had power. This will have helped the country to survive without a central government for so long. In another country with a centralised political system, one can imagine that there would be much more urgency to find a coalition solution so that the country could continue to run and the government could legislate when necessary.

Despite the decentralised political system in Belgium, there are still areas of policy that are dealt with at the federal level, such as the national annual budget. Surprisingly, the temporary caretaker government, which had no mandate to the public and little legislative power, was able to push through the budget for 2011. The King asked Yves Leterme, the caretaker Prime Minister, to create a budget for 2011 as there did not appear to be any hope of finding a rapid government solution and, during a time of economic crisis in the European Union, it was important to establish a budget and lay out their plans to reduce the deficit. The caretaker government also managed to achieve parliamentary majorities to pass some other

legislation. This again made it easier to prolong the negotiations for a government coalition, as the urgency was reduced and the lack of an elected government had less of an effect on the lives of Belgian citizens (RTT News 2011).

Consequently, one may conclude that Belgium is different now through changes in several sociological factors. These changes, in combination with a complex and rather unique system of political institutions, have allowed the length of coalition formation periods in Belgium to greatly increase leading to the crisis after the 2010 election. The devolution of federal power that has occurred in Belgium reduced the urgency to find a rapid solution to the government crisis, as legislation could still be pushed through at a regional and community level. Furthermore, the caretaker government was given power by the King to implement the 2011 budget and it also received support from the parliament, so it was able to enact some legislation. Again, this took away some of the pressure to resolve the conflicts between the Flemish and Francophone parties and find a coalition government solution and allowed the country to survive without an elected government for such a long time.

### **Predictions for the future**

Most likely, many Belgian citizens hope that such a government crisis will not happen again after politicians took nine months to form a government in 2007 and 541 days to form the current government after the 2010 election. Unfortunately, given the findings for what has led to these situations, it is likely that a similar 'government-less' period could happen following the next election scheduled for 2014.

Although the BHV issue has been resolved for the moment with the agreement to split the constituency into Halle-Vilvoorde and Brussels, there is the potential for more issues of state reform to arise. The Flemish regionalists are gaining strength among the public and in both the regional and federal parliaments. They do not shy away from expressing their desire for more regional independence. With their increasing voter support, their push for independence may

become 'the new BHV issue'. By this I mean an issue of state reform like BHV, which would require the qualified majority support of two-thirds of parliament, half of both linguistic groups and probably an agreement within cabinet between the Flemish and French-speakers. The problem with state reform in Belgium is that the Walloons and the Flemish are almost completely at odds and their desired policy directions are incompatible.

The Flemish regionalists have been very open about their attitudes towards the Walloons, so it is clear to the public what they desire and what policies they will try to implement given the chance in parliament. If the Flemish regionalists retain or increase their newfound support among the public, they will have a greater mandate to try to implement further state reform and devolution of power to the regions. In addition, there has not been complete satisfaction with regard to the resolution of the BHV constituency dilemma. This may mean it will persist as a controversial issue and remain salient in the Belgian political arena. For example, Bart De Wever was quoted in *Flanders Today* (Hope 2011) saying that the N-VA "had expected a lot worse. It's not a good agreement, but it's not a nightmare either". Similarly, the Flemish parties involved in the negotiations described in a statement "an important breakthrough obtained at a reasonable price", but also claimed that "the work is far from being over" (quoted in Hope 2011).

Issues of state reform seem likely to remain high on the political agenda given these statements and the knowledge that the Flemish regionalists will continue to push for more devolution of power to the regions. These, no doubt, will cause more conflict between the French-speaking and the Flemish parties, as they have incompatible views on such policies. This will once again become a complicated situation with the presence of the Belgian political institutions. As has been discussed, the institutional rules of Belgian politics cannot change without a qualified majority in parliament, which is almost impossible to achieve, since any changes will leave one linguistic party in a worse position. For this reason, it is much easier to maintain the status quo concerning these political institutions. However, this also means that

there will continue to be a requirement for an evenly split cabinet composition between the Flemish and the Francophones. It will be difficult to form a coalition agreement between them if the agreement must include the resolution of a state reform issue, such as further decentralisation of the federal political system.

For these reasons I am not confident that Belgium has now overcome its difficulty with forming government coalitions. Indeed, the difficulty may still be increasing. We have seen the lengthening of coalition formation periods after elections from 2003 to 2007 and then a large increase from 2007 to 2010. This pattern may continue if the salience of state reform issues remains high and the Flemish and Walloons do not find more effective and efficient ways of dealing with their differences. However, one might hope that given the recent situation, the politicians may have discovered what is required to overcome such disagreements and this may reduce the uncertainty and complexity of the coalition negotiations next time round. Therefore, they may manage to form a government more quickly after the next election than the last, but it is still likely there will be some delay in the formation of a government coalition. It will be very interesting to see what will eventuate following the 2014 election.

### **Limitations and future research opportunities**

There are some limitations to this research, mainly due to time and resource constraints, so some may argue the reliability of the assertions made in this conclusion. This study is not meant to be a complete and thorough analysis of every potential influencing factor; rather, this is an exploratory investigation and initial study into a very recent political situation. Due to the recent nature of the Belgian government crisis, it has not been possible to use previous research specific to this study's focus. Furthermore, due to time and resource constraints it has not been possible to carry out surveys and investigatory analysis of some sociological variables in Belgium. This has limited the methodological options for carrying out this research. Nonetheless, the aim of this thesis is to provide an initial insight into the Belgian government crisis, how it occurred and what contributed to it. This has been achieved while

creating opportunities to explore further some of the observations made here. For example, future research could follow up some of the assertions of this study; for instance, the attitudes of the political parties and the public towards their opposing linguistic group. An opportunity to explore this in more depth through surveys and interviews of the public and politicians in Belgium would be valuable to have a better understanding of the effect that attitudes are able to have on coalition formation.

Additionally, some might argue that this study has limited external validity. This study is much more internally valid, as it focuses on the situation within Belgium in a lot of depth and does not explore comparisons with other states. As the purpose of this study was to carry out an individual case study of Belgium and to investigate a unique Belgian problem, this is appropriate; the study is not attempting to be strongly externally valid. However, this might also create some opportunities for future research. I have focused on internal factors in Belgium that have contributed to the government crisis, but it could be interesting in future to explore whether or not these factors are present in other countries and able to have an effect on their coalition formation as well.

Another area for future research is how to measure uncertainty. As discussed in Chapter 2, uncertainty and bargaining complexity have the ability to effect delays in coalition formation. Golder (2010, p.9) states that uncertainty is when the parties involved in coalition negotiations don't know each other's preference over policy and office. This is a complex concept to measure and this thesis has not tried to operationalise it at this stage. This would be an interesting concept to explore in more depth at a later date to assess the validity of Golder's theory and also to develop a more comprehensive definition and measure of uncertainty, which could aid future research. Bargaining complexity is also difficult to define and measure and, although several scholars (e.g. Diermeier & Van Roozendaal 1998; Golder 2010) have tried to define it, it is a concept that could benefit from more exploration and development. This would be particularly

helpful in order to determine with more validity whether or not bargaining complexity has had an effect on the coalition formation delays in Belgium.

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory investigation into the 541-day government crisis in Belgium has given some insight into what has influenced the extreme delay in coalition formation after the Belgian 2010 election. Having examined several institutional features of the Belgian political system, it appears that no institutional feature alone has triggered or directly influenced the occurrence of the crisis. The co-existence of consociationalism and federalism, the multiparty system, the many veto players and the cabinet composition rule in Belgium all have the ability to make coalition negotiations more difficult, but they are constants in Belgian politics, rather than variables with a timely connection to the crisis. The timing of the separation of the regional and federal elections in 2003 suggests it may have played a part in causing the government crisis, but this was unlikely to have had an impact without the high salience of the BHV issue.

Although institutional features of Belgian politics have not directly influenced the crisis, this thesis has found that a combination of sociological features have had an effect. The regionalist parties in Flanders have gained strength recently, which has increased their bargaining power. The increased support for the N-VA also signals rising popularity among the public for more Flemish independence, so public opinion has also played a part. The N-VA's augmented bargaining power combined with its negative attitudes towards the French-speaking parties and the salience of the divisive BHV issue made finding a coalition agreement between the Francophone and Flemish parties almost impossible. Furthermore, the linguistic policy dimension was accentuated by the BHV issue's salience, which meant that an agreement had to be found along the federalist-unitarist dimension *and* the regular left-right dimension. The N-VA may have attracted more voters by emphasising its stance on linguistic policies and Flemish independence and therefore raised its bargaining power. However, the N-VA

consequently isolated itself in parliament along the federalist-unitarist dimension and, with its refusal to compromise, coalition formation was delayed.

These sociological factors have undergone changes recently and thus are variables contributing to the government crisis in Belgium. Still, undeniably the linguistic cleavage is a sociological constant that has also been a factor in the crisis. The linguistic cleavage plays a part in all aspects of Belgian politics, but having been around so long, the crisis cannot be solely pinned on it. The cleavage has not undergone any recent changes, apart from possibly becoming even stronger and more salient, and therefore does not have a timely connection with the crisis. Nonetheless, if the linguistic cleavage was not such a feature of Belgian politics, the political system would be more one-dimensional and there would be less hostility between the French-speaking and Flemish political parties. This would make it a lot easier to find the middle ground in order to develop a coalition agreement. Therefore, a combination of sociological variables and the constant of the linguistic cleavage have been found to be influencing factors in the cause of the Belgian government crisis.

Considering constant features of the Belgian political system that allowed the sociological variables to have an influence on the crisis, there are also some from the institutional camp. While this research project has found that no institutional feature alone could have caused or directly impacted the crisis, without several institutional factors the sociological factors would not have had the same effect. For example, the increased political power of the regions may have reduced the urgency to find a federal government solution. As devolution of the federal power has occurred, the regions have gained the ability to legislate in several policy areas. This meant that there was not a complete legislative standstill during the period without an elected government. Moreover, the King charged the caretaker government with producing a budget, which is beyond its mandate and would not normally occur, but this also reduced the urgency to form an elected coalition government.

The cabinet composition rule is another example of an institutional factor combining with sociological factors to impact the crisis. Without the requirement to have a cabinet evenly composed of Flemish and Francophone politicians, there would have been no need for the Flemish and French-speaking parties to find the middle ground on the BHV issue and form a coalition agreement. The N-VA, as the initial leader in the negotiations, could simply have formed a majority Flemish government. However, the qualified majority rules for policies of state reform would still have prevented the Flemish majority from splitting BHV without a Francophone majority and a two-thirds majority in the House. For this reason, the cabinet composition rule is unlikely to change in the near future. The French-speaking parties would have no incentive to provide the required linguistic majority to change the cabinet composition and qualified majority rules, as this would likely only give the Flemish majority the ability to devolve more power to the regions and more independence to Flanders. Consequently, I predict that the days of coalition formation struggles in Belgium are not over as long as linguistic and state reform issues remain salient.

As has been discussed, there are limitations to this research, but it serves its purpose as an initial exploratory study of the 541-day Belgian government crisis of 2010. It is quite remarkable that a well-developed, first world country has broken all records for the period without an elected government, and therefore it is interesting to delve into what may have contributed to this phenomenon. Having explored the influence of institutional and sociological factors, both individually and combined, this thesis has drawn the initial conclusion that a combination of Belgium's unique political features has contributed to its inability to readily form a coalition. Over the years, Belgium has introduced and implemented some unique political features to cope with and to alleviate the conflict between its Flemish and French-speaking populations. Examples include the shift towards federalism while trying to maintain a consociational democracy, and the cabinet composition and qualified majority requirements. These contribute towards a complex web of political institutions in Belgium, which combine with the attitudes of the political parties, public opinion and the intense and divisive linguistic

cleavage. The complex network of institutions should help assuage the negative effects of the sociological factors, but rather the various features of Belgium's political system are all working against each other, thereby complicating and obstructing the path to forming government coalitions. Belgium has become the victim of its own unique, well-adapted and personalised political system.

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