

STATE OF THE PROFESSION

A brief presentation of *The Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics*

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Abstract

While the idea of a comprehensive volume on Belgian politics, in English, had been floating for quite some time among political scientists in Belgium, the spark for this *Handbook of Belgian Politics* came from our neighbours to the North. Indeed, when we heard that a *Handbook of Dutch Politics* was in preparation (t Hart et al., 2024), we immediately thought: why not Belgium?

Why – not – Belgium?

At the heart of Western Europe, Belgium is a comparatively small country, covering some 30.000 square kilometres, and relatively young, as a state that will celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2030. Arguably artificial, from its creation as a buffer state to France after the Napoleonic Wars until today, it faces the enduring question of its long-term existence (Witte et al., 2009). Given these features, according to one of the most internationally renowned experts on Belgian politics, the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart (1981), such a country would not even exist in many other instances. Yet, despite these characteristics, Belgium has been disproportionately influential both in the political sphere and in the field of political science (Swenden et al., 2009).

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- 1 The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Research Foundation - Flanders Scientific Research Community, specifically the Executive Triangle WOG W003120N, for their invaluable support.
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Trying to explain Belgian politics means trying to explain its idiosyncratic institutional architecture and its surrealism, not only in painting, but also in the way polity, politics and policies function in this country (Deschouwer, 2012). In fact, Belgium is anything but an ordinary, middle-of-the-road case of study for political science (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2022). Its political dynamics and features are often outliers in a comparative perspective. Some characteristics of Belgian politics can be seen at the *avant-garde* of more global phenomena, whereas other political features lag behind and foster the sense of witnessing a laggard. In short, there is, in many ways, a “Belgian exceptionalism”, as coined by the American political scientist, B. Guy Peters (2006), another international expert on Belgium.

The aim of *The Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics* is not only to serve as an authoritative volume on most facets of Belgian politics, but also to be an agenda-setting work that opens new avenues of research for the coming decades in various fields. Each chapter performs a twofold function: offering a comprehensive overview of the literature on a given topic, and proposing future lines of research.

Most featured chapters are co-authored, sometimes by teams with a long tradition of collaboration but more often by teams assembled specifically for this volume. Such co-authorship fosters greater diversity in terms of institutional affiliation, gender, language, or field of expertise. Linguistically, any scientific endeavour aiming to explore Belgian politics comprehensively is significantly strengthened when it encompasses both Dutch- and French-speaking approaches. Yet, the study of Belgian politics ought not be reduced to two ontological linguistic solitudes, as there is as much variation within as between linguistic communities. Disciplinary perspectives matter as well. While most contributors would define themselves as political scientists, several do not, and thus bring in valuable insights from other disciplines. Sub-disciplines also co-exist within political science, and this *Handbook of Belgian Politics* seeks to foreground that diversity. The core idea behind the *Handbook* is to bring together scholars with many different perspectives, acknowledging that each author is embedded in their own field and shaped by their own context. This manifold diversity is, in fact, essential to investigate Belgian polity, politics, and policies.

A Handbook on Belgian Polity, Politics, and Policies

To meet this twofold challenge – providing both a state of the art and identifying avenues for future research across many aspects of Belgian politics, the *Handbook* comprises 40 chapters, written by a carefully curated mix of established and emerging scholars. The volume achieves gender-balance and emphasises diversity and inclusion among its contributors, featuring authors based both within and beyond Belgium. All contributors, however, share a special bond with the study of Belgian politics and with Belgium itself. This line-up of authors also reflects a diversity

of disciplines and a variety of traditions and approaches to the study of the issues at stake: some fields are more abstract and theoretical, some more data-driven, some more policy-oriented. Thanks to this diversity, no two chapters of the *Handbook* are alike, even though they all follow the same guidelines. This set-up allows for both a linear reading of the volume and a pick-and-choose approach to individual chapters. Whichever path readers take, the structure of *The Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics*, organised into five sections, is intended to guide their journey through the volume.

Historical background and core features

The first section delves into the historical background of Belgium in order to flesh out the core features that have intrinsically shaped its polity, politics, and policies over time. This section is composed of nine chapters. Unsurprisingly, it opens with a short account of the history of the state formation, written by two historians, Sébastien Dubois and Catherine Lanneau. Building on this foundation, the eight subsequent chapters each dig into one core political feature. While all can rightfully be considered core features, their sequence tells a specific story that this *Handbook* seeks to offer to national and international readers, even if many other chapter orderings were considered and discussed. It is therefore no coincidence that the section begins with two chapters that situate Belgium in a global context: one that places Belgium in the world (with a focus on the United Nations), by Edith Drieskens, and another that brings the world into Belgium (examining the crucial question of its decolonization), by Bambi Ceuppens and Scott Brenton. The five chapters that follow explore Belgium's inner features in depth, deciphering its cleavages and party systems (with Pascal Delwit), consociationalism (with Matthijs Bogaards), partitocracy (with Lieven De Winter), corporatism and welfare state (with Ive Marx and Ninke Mussche), and federalism (with Christoph Niessen and Patricia Popelier). The final chapter of the opening section seeks to bring all these threads together through the lens of democracy, authored by Silvia Erzeel, Petra Meier, and Eline Severs.

Institutions

Institutions matter, and in a country that is known for its paradoxical capacity to be both strongly conservative and reformist, the second section of the *Handbook* focuses on a careful analysis of Belgium's main institutions. Since they all ultimately stem from the Constitution, the section opens with a chapter on the constitutional framework, including the judiciary, written by two legal scholars, Frédéric Bouhon and Yseult Marique. To provide a full overview of the *trias politica*, two chapters are dedicated to the Parliaments (with Robin Devroe and Wouter Wolfs) and the Governments (with Régis Dandoy and Patrick Dumont). Preceding this twofold account is a chapter on the electoral system and elections in Belgium, authored by an interdisciplinary duo of a legal scholar, Anne-Emmanuelle Bourgaux, and a political scientist,

Jean-Benoit Pilet. The fifth chapter deepens the understanding of the executive branch through a comprehensive review of the Civil service and public administrations, contributed by Christian de Visscher, Catherine Fallon, Damien Piron, and Frankie Schram. The section concludes with a chapter devoted to Local governments in Belgium, written by Sofie Hennau and Kristof Steyvers.

Actors

Like other representative democracies, Belgium is characterised by a diverse array of actors engaged in politics and policy-making, both formally and informally. These actors include individuals, as well as collective entities or intermediary agencies. At the core of representative democracy lies the demos. In Belgium, and particularly in Brussels, the issue of citizenship is especially pressing: Kenza Amara-Hammou, Scott Brenton, Lise Frehen, and Laura Uyttendaele open this section by examining citizens and non-citizens. At the other end of the spectrum, concluding this third section, are political elites (by Gert-Jan Put, Jérémy Dodeigne, and Audrey Vandeleene) and ministerial advisers (by Arthur Meert, Marie Goransson, Tom Bellens and Marleen Brans) who are central to the decision-making process. Between these two poles, various collective actors serve as crucial connectors between citizens and the state. These collective actors are deeply embedded in Belgium's political culture and institutional structures, particularly its traditions of consociationalism and corporatism. They include social movements (by Nicolas Bocquet and Louise Knops), interest groups (by Bert Fraussen and Evelien Willems), trade unions (by Jean Faniel and Kurt Vandaele), political parties (by Thomas Legein, Emilie van Haute and Bram Wauters), and media and social media (by Laura Jacobs and Cato Waeterloos).

Political and social challenges

The chapters in this fourth section present eight political and/or social challenges that Belgian politics grapple with today, many of which are far from unique to Belgium. Instead, they reflect broader issues faced by many European and other societies. Some of these challenges also echo topics covered in earlier sections. However, whereas previous chapters focused on foundational features, institutions, or key actors, the chapters in this section engage more directly and in-depth with the challenges themselves. Five of these challenges relate to the diversity that characterises Belgian society. These include how Belgium deals with matters of migration, immigration, and integration (by Catherine Xhardez and Ilke Adam); (sub)national identities and identifications (by Ann-Mireille Sautter, Coline Rondiat, Bart Meuleman and Pierre Baudewyns); gender and LGBTQI+ equality (by Karen Celis and David Paternotte); religious diversity, particularly in relation to Muslim citizens (by Samira Azabar, Sami Zemni and Corinne Torrekens); and Belgium's colonial past (by Valérie Rosoux and Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu). The remaining three chapters address political

and/or social challenges: polarisation within Belgian politics and public opinion (by Ruth Dassonneville); the nexus between science and policy in Belgian politics and policy advisory systems (by David Aubin, Marleen Brans, Ellen Fobé, Stéphane Jacobzone and Valérie Pattyn); and how Belgium promotes and implements democratic innovation (by Didier Caluwaerts, Vincent Jacquet, Elisa Minsart, Nino Junius, Léon Acar and Trui Steen). Together, these chapters position Belgium as a compelling case for understanding the types of challenges that contemporary societies face and a rich source of insights for both existing scholarship and future research venues.

Public policies

The final section is devoted to the study of public policies, which is arguably the most recent sub-discipline in Belgium. Public policy studies encompass three main approaches: substantive policy analysis, applied policy analysis, and academic policy analysis. Substantive policy analysis, which examines policy problems, policy content and policy's effects, is well-developed in Belgium across many policy domains. Academic policy analysis, or *analysis of policy*, focuses on the political, social, and institutional processes that shape policymaking. While relatively young as a discipline in Belgium, it has become increasingly institutionalised over the past 25 years (Brans & Aubin, 2017). Applied policy analysis, or *analysis for policy*, is less common as a standalone subdiscipline. It typically emerges as a secondary outcome of substantive or academic research, with the goal of providing actionable insights, recommendations, and evaluations to inform and improve policymaking.

The chapters in this fifth section present substantive policy analyses across a selection of Belgian policy domains. While these chapters primarily focus on policy problems, content and effects of a selection of policies, most also offer guidance on how to improve policies and draw on academic policy analysis to understand the broader institutional and political processes, many of which are presented in earlier sections of this *Handbook* – that shape those policies. Together, these chapters advance Belgium as a fascinating case for the study of public policies, due to its complex multilevel governance structure (by Damien Pennetreau, Claire Dupuy and Virginie Van Ingelgom) and complicated public finance (by Benoit Bayenet and Willem Sas). The section also addresses how policymakers confront evolving challenges, including social (by Bea Cantillon, Daniel Dumont and Yannick Vanderborght), environmental (by Aurore Fransolet and Anaïs Augé), mobility (by Cathy Macharis, Dirk Lauwers and Imre Keseru), energy (by Mathias Sabbe, Sacha Frenay and Céline Parotte), and security (by Alexander Mattelaer). Additionally, Belgian foreign policy (by Fanny Hockers and Tanguy de Wilde) and development policy (by Emmanuel Klimis, Elisabeth Paul and Dimitri Renmans) are discussed in the context of global interdependence. In sum, public policy research remains vital, not only for understanding how the policymaking process unfolds, but also for informing debates and guiding policy change.

A journey through the past, present and future of Belgium

The Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics seeks to take stock of the research conducted to understand Belgium, across the many dimensions of its polity, politics, and policies, structured around the five sections of this volume. In doing so, renowned scholars provide a comprehensive review of the key features of Belgian politics and the challenges involved in understanding them from a comparative perspective. This broad overview lays the foundation for a future research agenda on Belgian politics.

Belgium's politics are as complex as they are fascinating – both a subject of admiration and critique, a model of democratic experimentation, and a case study in political fragmentation. As this *Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics* demonstrates, Belgium serves as a rich laboratory for scholars of politics and governance, offering both historical depth and contemporary relevance. This volume not only compiles a comprehensive review of Belgian polity, politics, and policies but also sets an ambitious agenda for future research. Each of the forty chapters highlights the intricate dynamics of Belgium's political system, from its foundational historical developments to its evolving institutional structures, key political actors, pressing socio-political challenges, and policy responses. The study of Belgian politics is not merely about understanding a small European state. It also offers lessons for broader theoretical debates in political science – on federalism, consociationalism, partitocracy, democratic innovation, and more.

As Belgium approaches its bicentennial, its political future remains uncertain. *The Oxford Handbook of Belgian Politics* stands as both a reflection of where we are today and an invitation to deepen and expand our understanding of the country's political landscape in the years to come. The next chapter is now in the hands of the readers.

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