

# (Political) Belgium for dummies

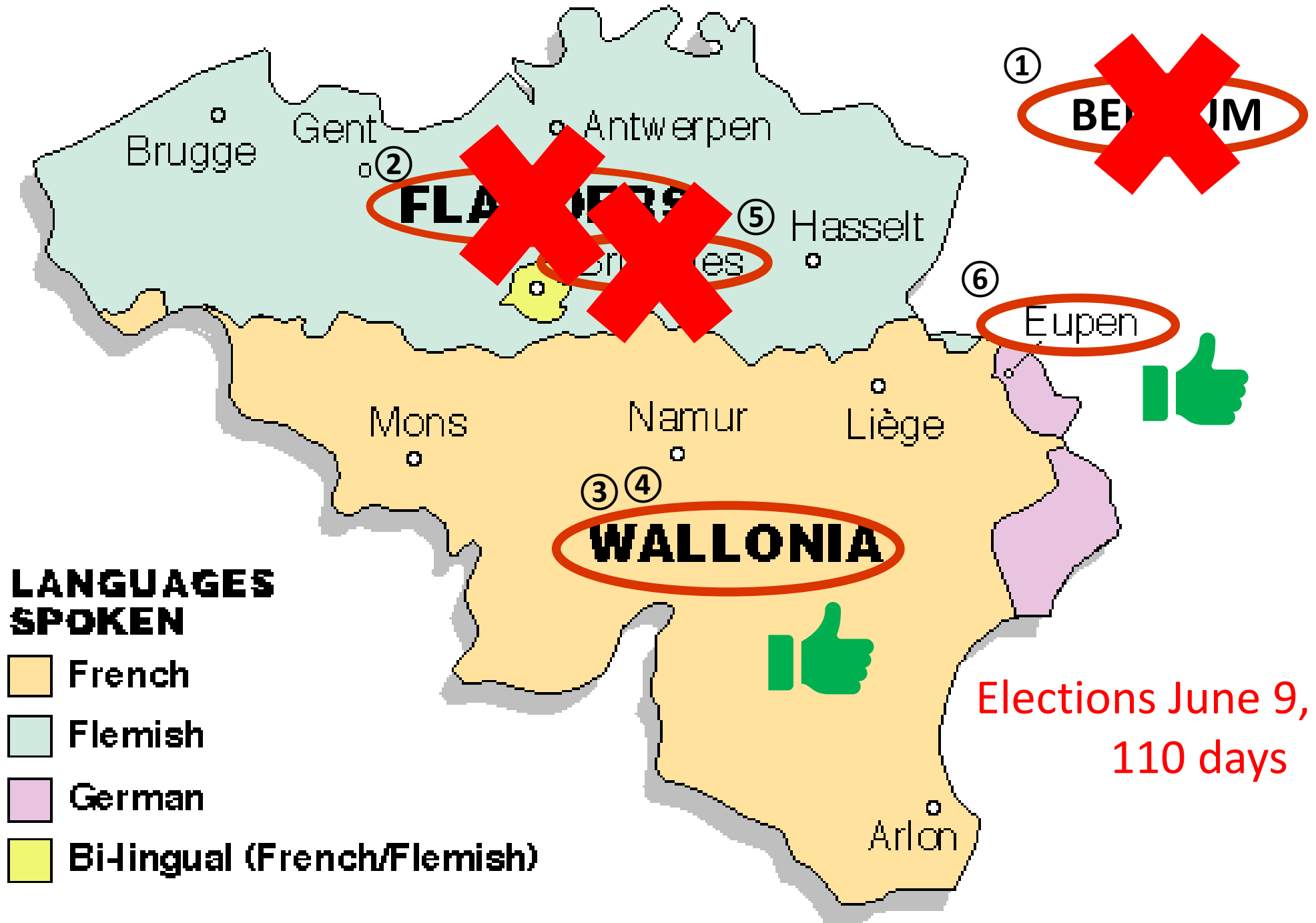
FEFPEB conference

September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Ostend



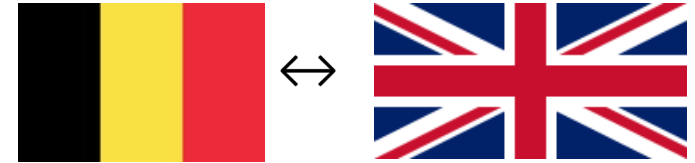
Stefaan Walgrave





Elections June 9, 2024  
110 days

# 'Consociational' (vs. majoritarian)



- Most different system from Belgium: U.K.
  - Power is divided over many parties/layers/governments
  - Many features of the system imply power sharing:
    - Strong parliament (in principle but in reality 90% of government laws)
    - Proportional electoral system
    - Coalition governments
    - Federalism
    - Constitution with high change threshold
- > Moderate (incremental) policies (stability)
- > Broad inclusion but limited accountability

# Partitocracy

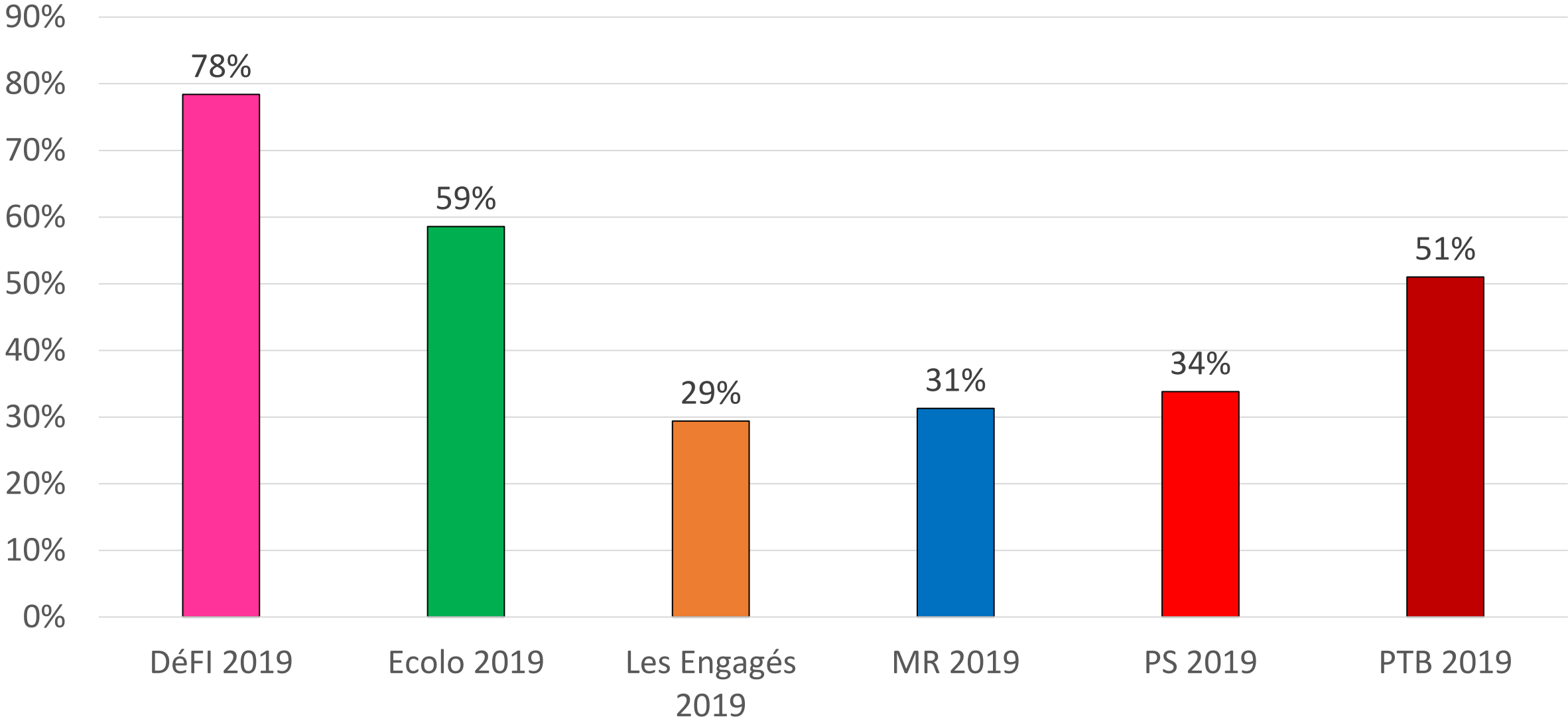
Belgium has (very) strong parties

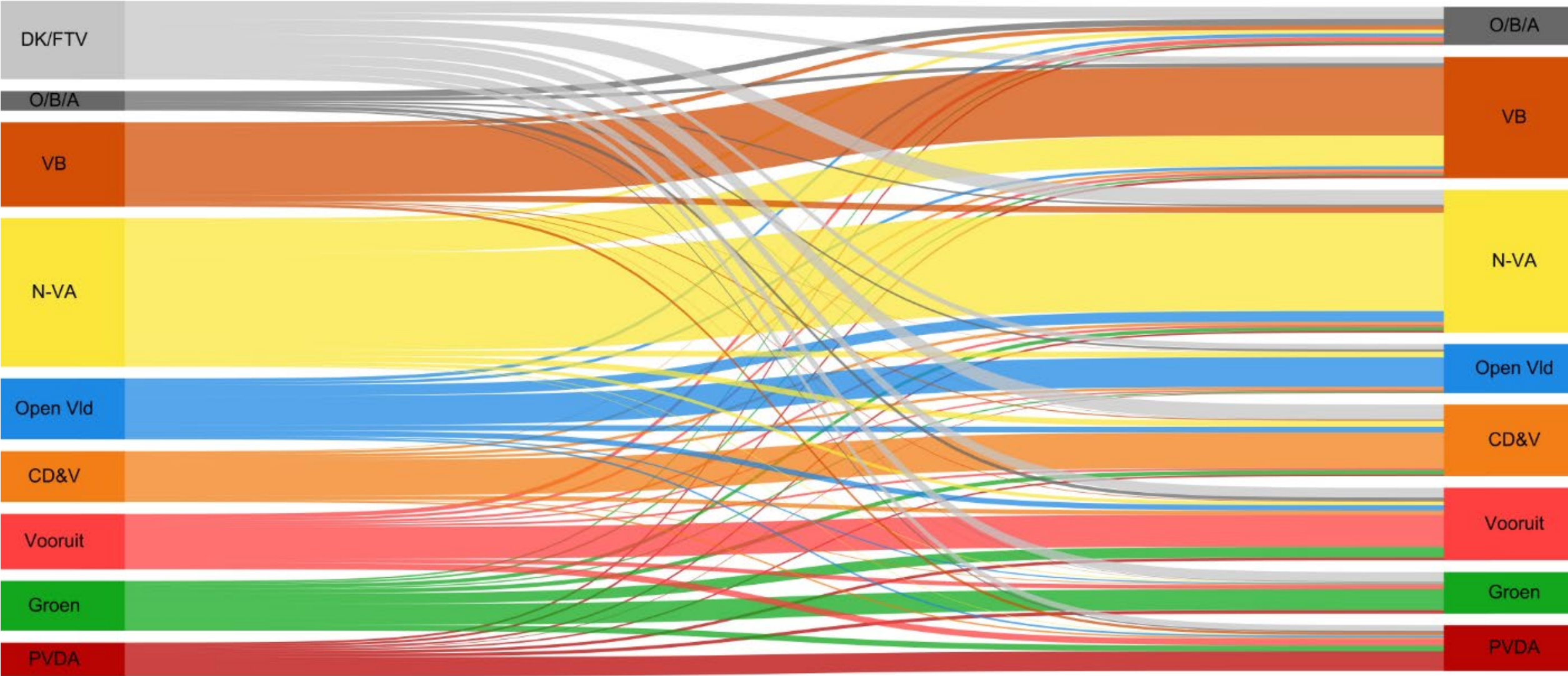
1. Politicization of the state (administration, judiciary, military...)
2. Internally disciplined (voting in parliament, list decisions...)
3. Strong grip on policies (parties dominate government, government negotiations, party discipline...)
4. (+ power concentrated in party leaders; 'junta')

# Electoral volatility and fragmentation

- Strong parties (power) are electorally weak: they are small and have few loyal voters
- *Very* volatile and fragmented party system (one of the most fragmented in the world)
- Do fragmentation and volatility reinforce each other?
- Hence: fierce party competition

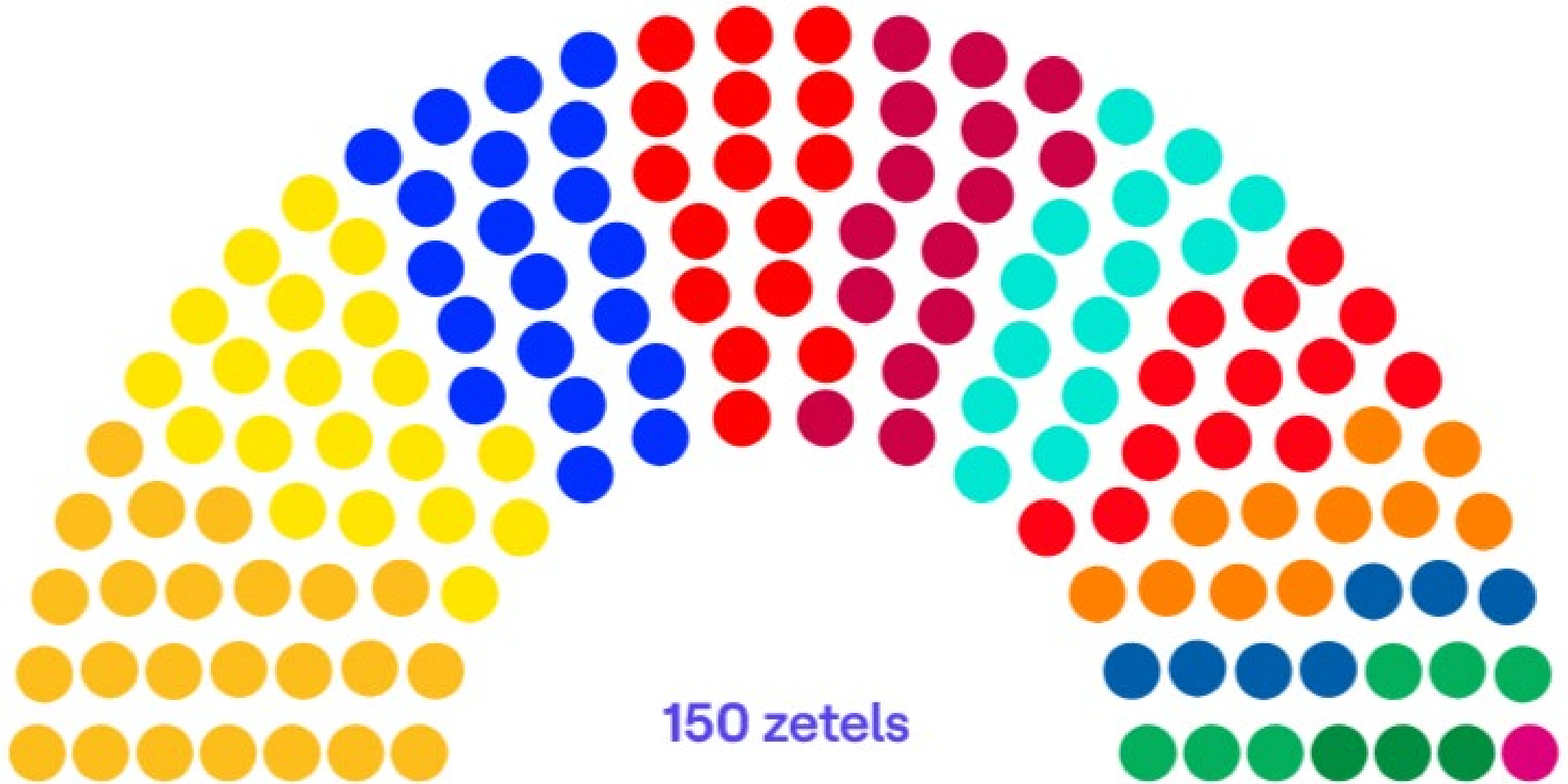
# % voters of 2019 who left the party in 2024 (lost voters) - Wallonia





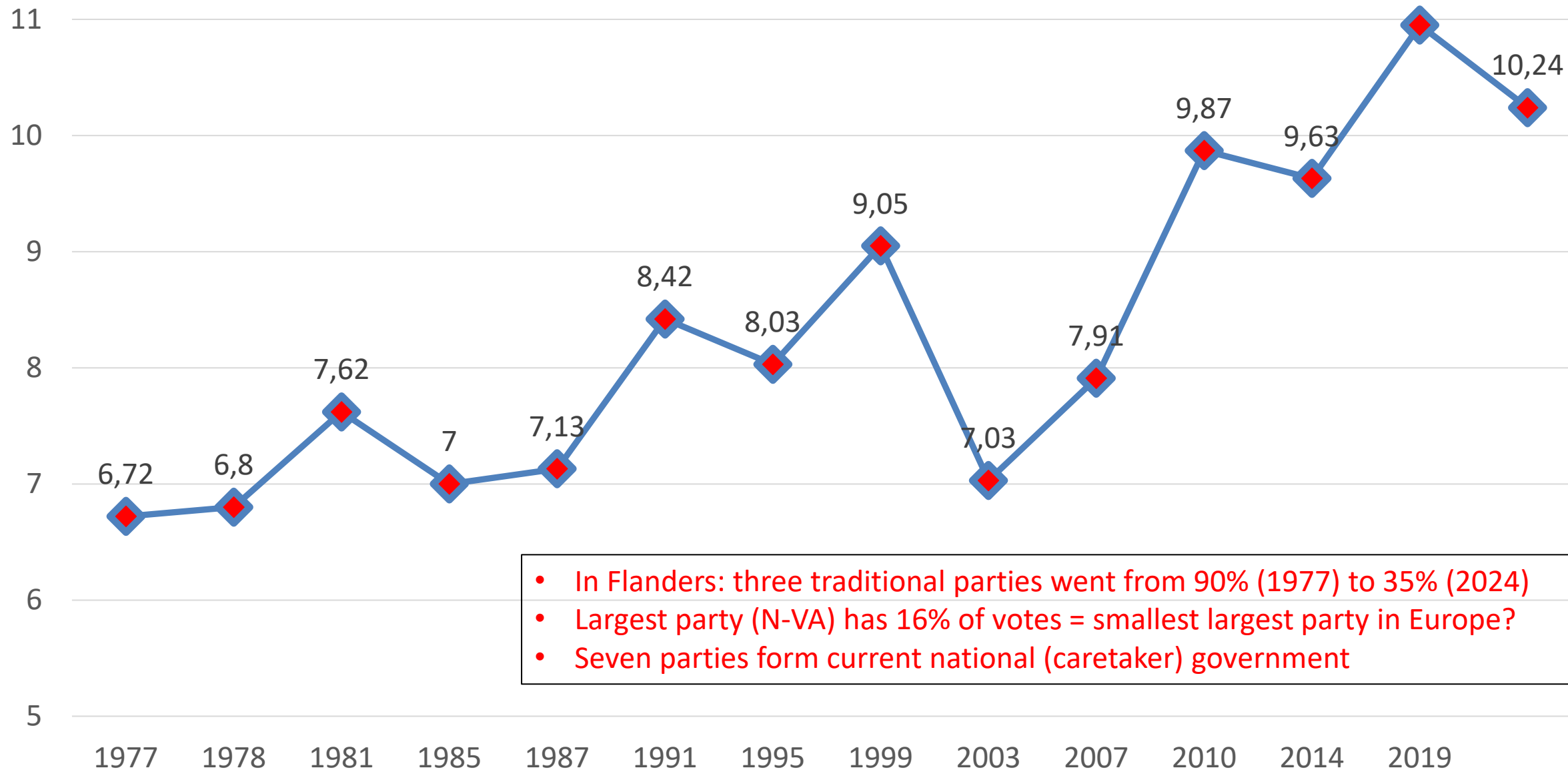
2019

2024



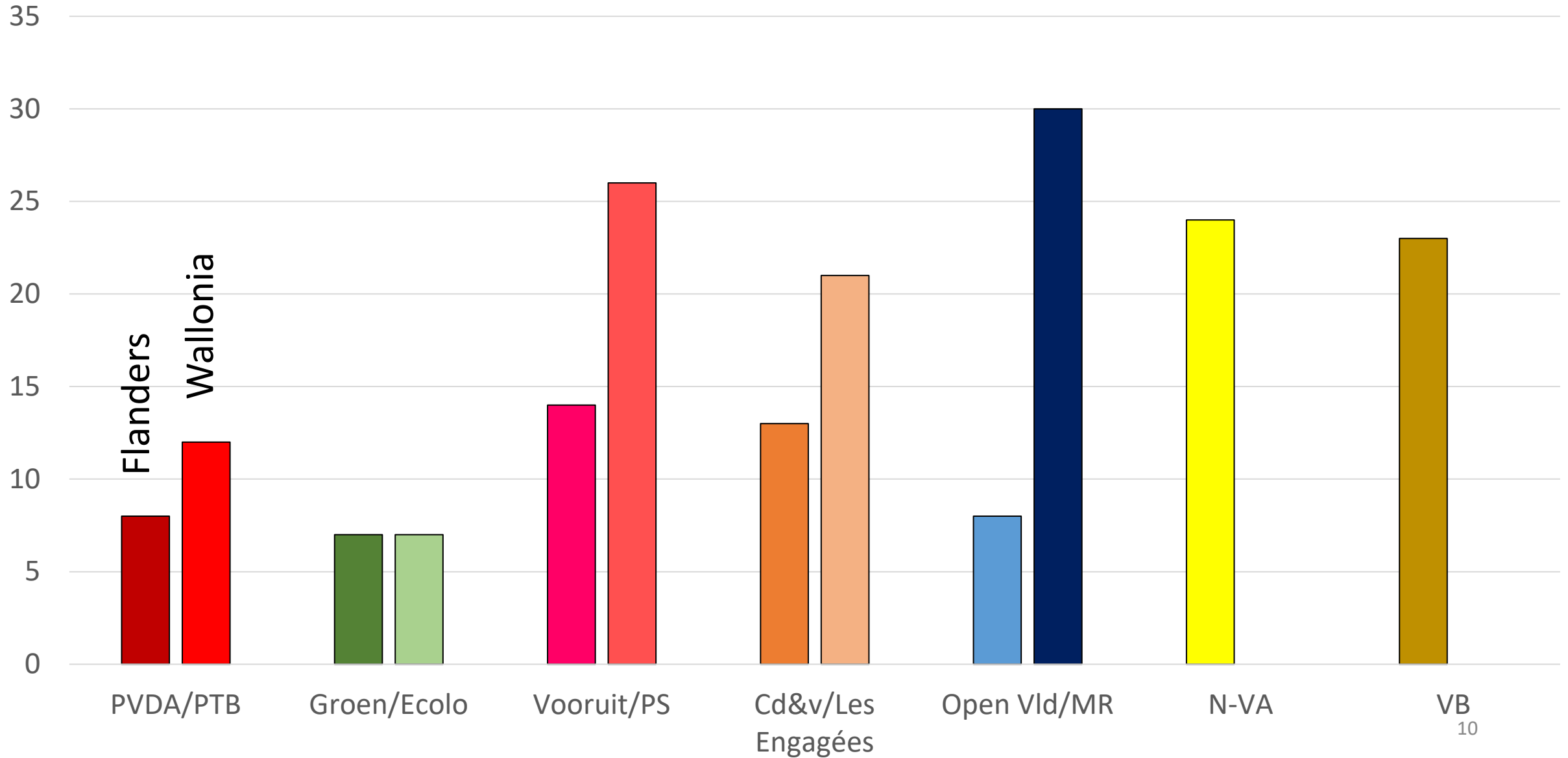


# Number of 'effective' parties (Chamber)

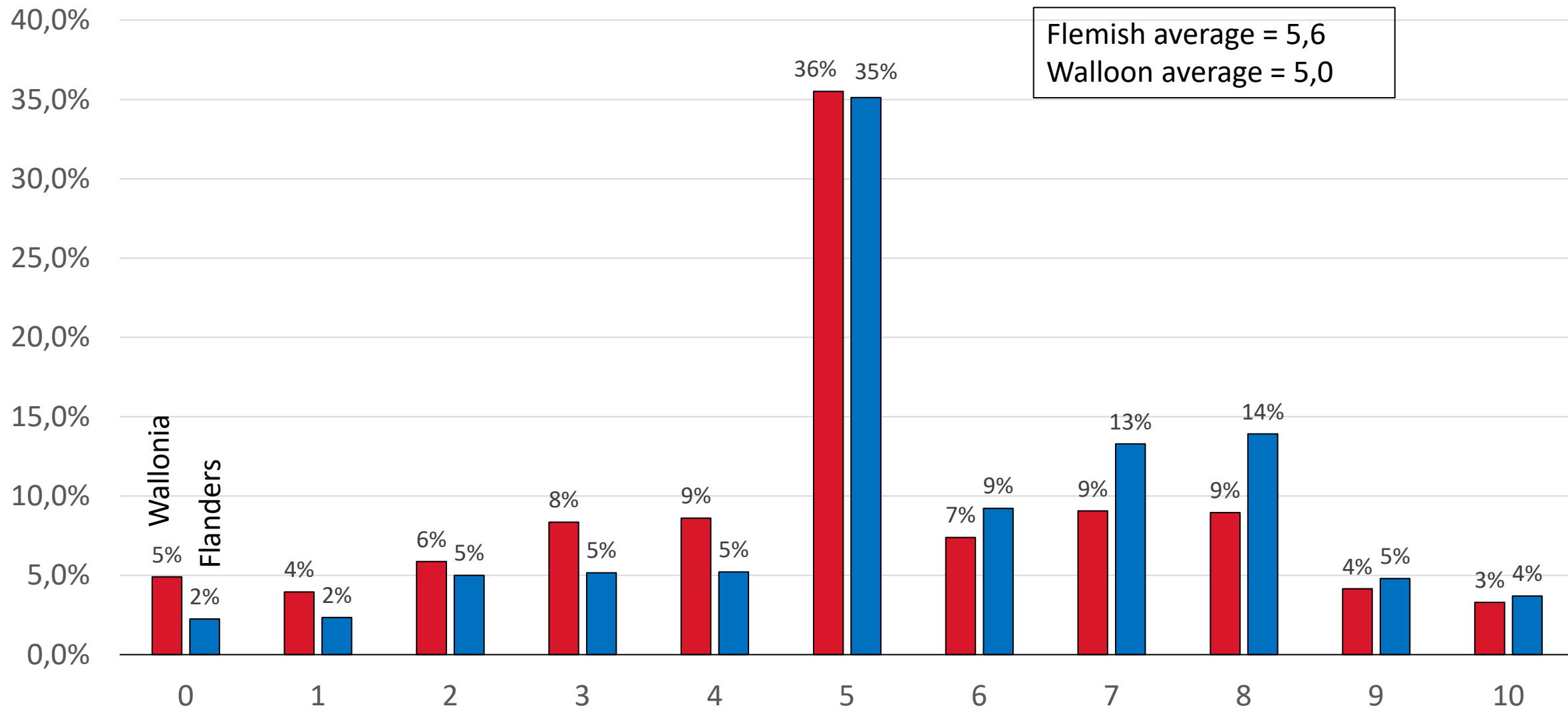


- In Flanders: three traditional parties went from 90% (1977) to 35% (2024)
- Largest party (N-VA) has 16% of votes = smallest largest party in Europe?
- Seven parties form current national (caretaker) government

# Different electoral score in Flanders vs. Francophone Belgium



# But: left-right placement Flemings vs. Walloons

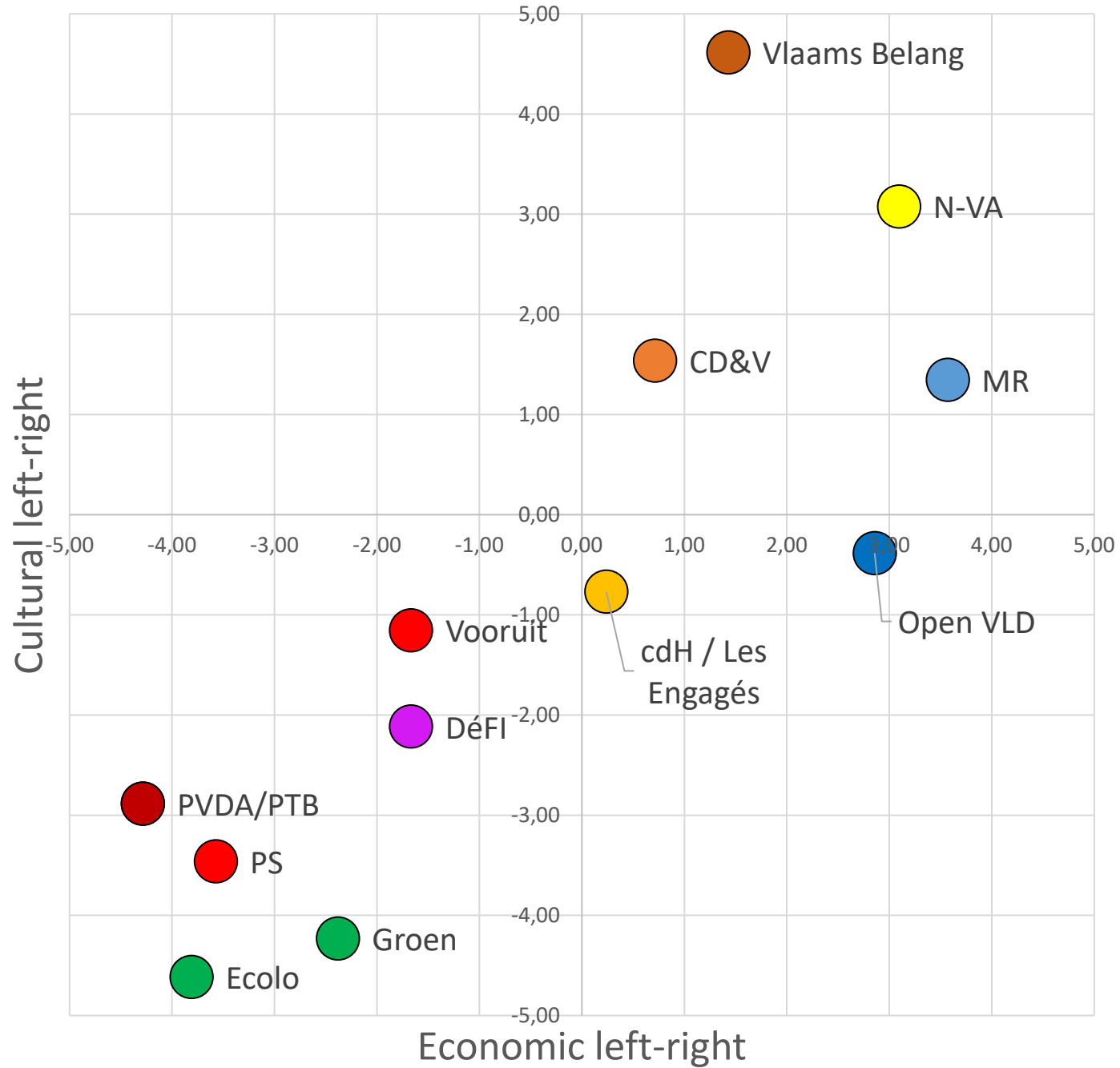


# Many cleavages

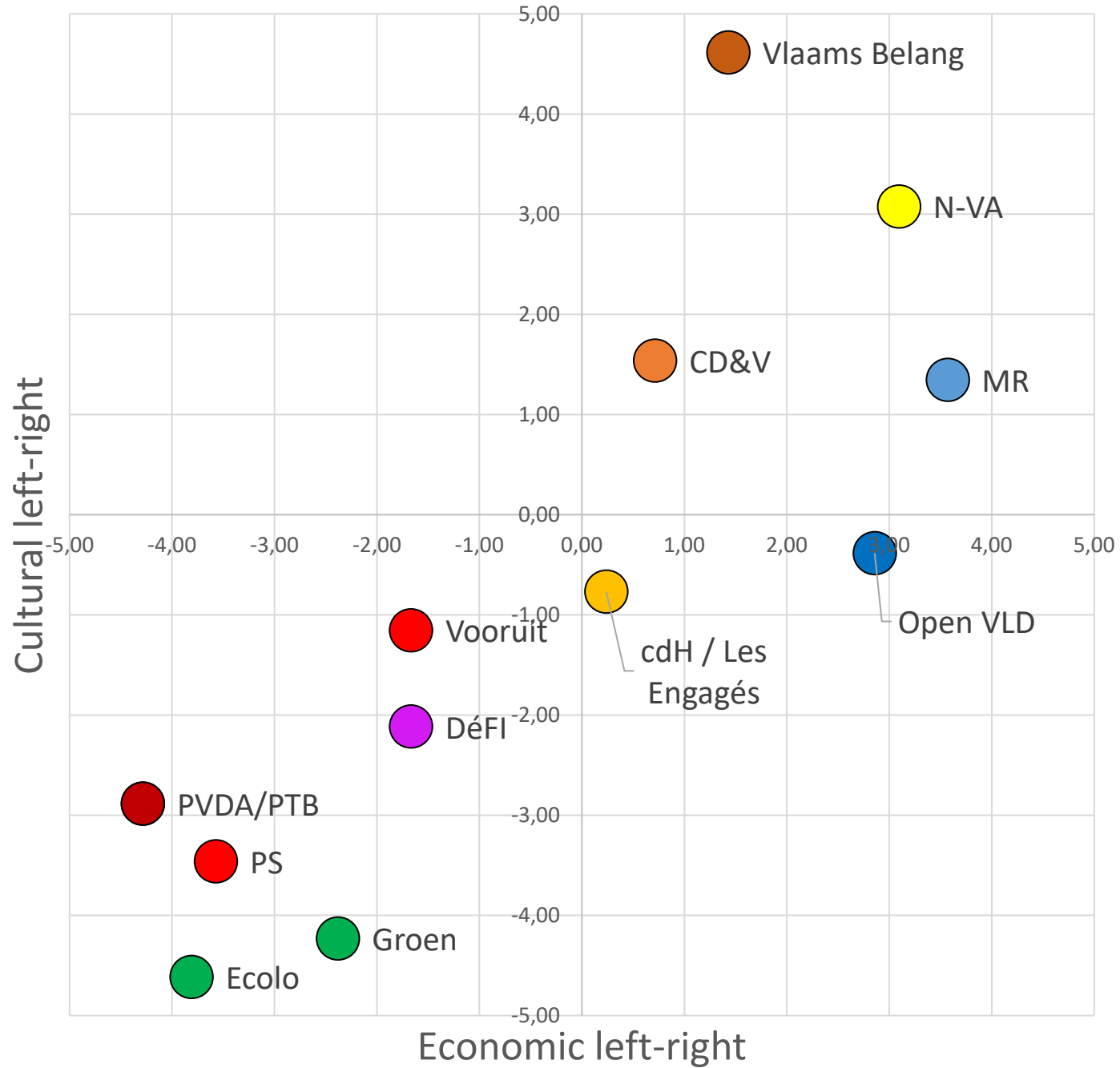
- Traditionally:
  1. Socio-economic: left-right
  2. Linguistic: Flemings vs. Francophones
  3. Religious: Catholic vs. 'free thinkers' (withered)
- New cleavage (many names)
  - Socio-cultural left-right
  - Conservative-progressive
  - 'Identitarian'
  - New left vs. new right
  - 'Winners' vs. 'losers' of globalization

= *Migration, climate (environment), crime, gender equality, EU...*

**→ Thorough change in Belgian politics (also elsewhere)**



Previous 'Vivaldi'  
government 2019-2024



Upcoming 'Arizona' government 2014-2029

# Consequences of Belgian particularities



- Long government negotiations
  - Slow transition from campaign to government logic
  - World record! 2010-2011: 541 days of negotiations (better than Iraq)
  - Almost new record after 2019 (493 days)
  - 589 days with caretaker government in 2018-2019
  - 110 days after June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024 elections now...
- Policy consequences
  - Many 'veto-players'
  - Any type of policy requires compromise
  - Major reforms almost impossible (pensions, tax, climate...)
- BUT
  - No direct proof that policies are generally worse than elsewhere
  - Sometimes good policies (e.g. COVID, vaccination, inequality...)
  - Not exceptionally high political dissatisfaction among citizens
  - Not a lot of polarization, disinformation, political violence ('gentle' political system)



# Conclusion

- Complex political system
  - Many partially overlapping governments
  - Consociational (power sharing)
  - Partitocracy
  - Electoral volatility and fragmentation
  - North and South vote differently
  - Troublesome government negotiations
  - Slow and incremental policymaking
- EU in a miniature version?
  - Specialists of multi-level politics
  - Expert compromise builders

**Presidents of the  
European Council**

