Chapter 2
The Socio-economic and Political Structure of Belgium

This chapter presents some background information on Belgium’s history, socio-economic development, state structure, electoral system, and political and multiparty structure. Moreover, extensive attention is paid to the Flemish Community and the Flemish region. This information is intended to facilitate the understanding of the conceptual model and the empirical results presented in subsequent chapters. It should be observed that most of the information presented below is directly relevant for the understanding of subsequent chapters; some other information only indirectly. The latter kind of information is presented to improve the coherence of the various parts that make up this chapter.

2.1 Brief History of Belgium

The name Belgium derives from a Celtic people known as the Belgae that originated from a region located in present day Belgium. They were conquered by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar in 57 BC. Later, Germanic elements mixed with the Romanized Celts. In the course of history, the Franks, the Burgundians, the Spaniards, the Austrians, and the French mixed with the original population.

The population of Belgium is 10,827,519 (2010 estimate Eurostat). The most populated region of Belgium is Flanders which makes up almost 60 percent of the entire national population. Only 3 percent of the population lives in rural areas while the other 97 percent lives in densely populated areas such as Brussels, Ghent, and Antwerp. Belgium is among the most densely populated countries in Europe reaching 886 people per square mile. Brussels makes up about 10 percent of the Belgium population and is home to many foreign employees (Blackmon, 2006).

Belgium, which earned its independence in 1830, has been an area of great importance for many years. Many skirmishes have been fought for rights to the land throughout history. The country is bordered by the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Luxembourg (see Figure 2.1). Due to easy access to the North Sea and central location, Belgium has been a highly significant trading point since the Dark Ages (Blackmon, 2006).

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1 This section is partly based on Blom and Lamberts (2006)
Table 2.1 Some socioeconomic characteristics of Belgium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Value/Estimate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>10,827,519 (2010 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>342 persons per sq km 886 persons per sq mi (2010 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban population</td>
<td>97 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural population</td>
<td>3 percent (2005 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official languages</td>
<td>Dutch, French, German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief religious affiliations</td>
<td>Roman Catholic, 47 percent Islam, 4 percent Protestant, 1.25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (in U.S.$)</td>
<td>$470.400 billion (2009 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita (U.S.$)</td>
<td>$43,533 (2009 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy</td>
<td>79.1 years (2008 estimate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td>99 percent (1995)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Belgium is divided into three regions, namely Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. The Flemish region consists of the Flemish provinces plus Hall and Vilvoorde. The Brussels region consists of the 19 communes of Brussels and the Walloon region of the Walloon provinces. The three federal regions are further subdivided into the ten provinces. Provinces in Flanders are Antwerpen, Flemish Brabant, Limbourg, East Flanders, and West Flanders, while provinces in Wallonia are Hainaut, Liège, Walloon Brabant, Luxembourg, and Namur.

There are two dominant groups (see Figure 2.2) mainly divided and defined by language. The section of the population that lives in Wallonia and speaks French are called Walloons whereas the Flanders inhabitants who mainly speak Dutch (Flemish) are known as the Flemings. The Brussels region has a mixture of the Flemings and Walloons. The small number of people who speak German lives mainly along the eastern border. Each region is fairly self-governed, but tension due to language, ethnicity, and national identity among the Flemings and Walloons still exists today (Blackmon, 2006).

“In 1993 these three ethno linguistic areas became official federal regions. In the country as a whole, strictly Dutch speakers make up about 56 percent, and French speakers 32 percent of the population. Only 1 percent of the people speaks German, while some 11 percent speak more than one language” (Blackmon, 2006).

International Religious Freedom Report 2006
Figure 2.1 Map of Belgium
Source: http://wwp.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/europe/european-union/belgium/map.htm

Figure 2.2 Flemish and Walloon Regions

French became the official language of government after the Revolution of 1830, which was directed against The Netherlands. In the following decades Belgian cultural life was influenced mainly by France. But this dominance, along with Walloon social and
economic domination, aroused a spirit of *nationalism* among the Flemings. They agitated for the equality of their language with French. A series of laws in the 1920s and 1930s was supposed to achieve this goal. However, antagonism between the two groups increased after World War II. (for details see the various contributions in Swenden et al., 2009; and Billiet et al., 2006). Politically, Belgium was definitely less than organized despite an improving economic state after the Second World War (Blackmon, 2006). This was undoubtedly due to political turmoil that caused a great divide resulting in the Socialists, Communists, and Liberals on one side and the Christian Democratic parties on the other. The Socialists Party called for a general strike in 1960 and violence erupted, particularly in the Walloon south. Although the strike was called off, the crisis of the nation had sharpened the differences between Flemings and Walloons. Socialist leaders proposed that the unitary state of Belgium be replaced by a loose federation of the three regions Flanders, Wallonia, and the area around Brussels.

“In 1971 a constitutional change was enacted giving political recognition to the three linguistic communities, providing cultural autonomy for them, and also revising the administrative status of Brussels” (Brans et al., 2009; Dunn, 1974). Despite this reversal of a long-standing policy of centralization, the federalist parties opposed the revisions on the grounds that they did not go far enough (Billiet et al, 2006). Moreover, repeated efforts to transfer actual legislative authority to regional bodies were blocked by disagreements about the geographical extent of the Brussels region. In 1980 agreement was finally reached on the question of autonomy for Flanders and Wallonia. The Belgian constitution was revised in 1971 and 1980 to provide Flemings with a greater degree of cultural and political autonomy (Brans et al, 2009).

During the 1990s, the central government’s granting of power to the three regions was of major importance as to strengthen ethnic and cultural autonomy. This was a result of granting self-rule to the Brussels, Flanders, and Wallonia regions in 1989. The different linguistic communities, cultural and political autonomy, and administrative status have surely shaped the Belgium political attitudes and behavior (O’Neill, 1998).

### 2.2 The Belgian Economy in a nutshell

“Although the service economy has grown rapidly in Belgium, the country remains heavily industrialized, importing raw materials that are processed mainly for export. With

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3 This section is based on Belgium Economic Statistics (1998-2010) and Belgium – Economic Outlook 87 Countries, (OECD, 2010).
about three-quarters of exports going to other European Union (EU) countries, Belgium’s economy is dependent upon its neighbors and the nation is a strong proponent of integrating European economies” (Blackmon, 2006).

In the early 1980s, Belgium was faced with a budget deficit that lasted for a decade. In addition to that, the country’s high unemployment rate heavily impacted and impeded economic development. As a remedy to the problem, the government reduced spending and raised taxes (Blackmon, 2006). By the early 2000s the government presented balanced budgets, and the economy was growing at a faster rate than the EU average. However, Belgium’s public debt remained huge, and unemployment remained high. The budget in 2006 anticipated revenues of $162.2 billion and expenditures of $163.1 billion. Gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 totaled $394 billion. Service industries account for 75 percent of Belgium’s GDP and employ 73 percent of the workers, including the immigrant workers. Trade and transport rank among the country’s leading service industries.

Brussels is home to many diplomats and foreigners. This is largely due to the fact that it is the Headquarters for NATO and the EU. Many firms and governments maintain offices in Brussels for access to European Community decision-makers, and the capital’s real estate, hotel, restaurant, and entertainment industries bring in sizable foreign earnings.

Belgium’s climate and agricultural roots play a significant role in the country’s foreign trade. Even to this day, nearly 30 percent of Belgium’s land mass is utilized agriculturally. Although Belgium is extremely agriculturally based, the farming industry only makes up about 2 percent of the labor force. 22 percent of Belgium is covered by wooded areas and is mainly used for recreational purposes. Although there is an abundance of trees, Belgium still imports timber for the paper mills. In addition to a heavy farming industry, Belgium’s fishing fleets take advantage of its easy access to the North Sea. The catch mainly consists of sole, cod, and plaice (Blackmon, 2006).

Belgium may very well be abundant in forested areas, but severely lacks in mineral resources. Natural resources such as coal and oil which used to be abundant were nearly non-existent by the 1950s and several coal mines were shutdown with the last mine closing in 1992. Just like timber, both coal and oil are imported today for various industries (Blackmon, 2006).

“Belgium was the first country on the European continent to industrialize. It remains one of the most highly industrialized countries of Europe, largely because of its geographical location and transport facilities. Industrial production increased steadily after World War II” (Blackmon, 2006), but began to decline in the 1970s, when recession and obsolescence began seriously to erode many traditional sectors. Wallonia, which had been the center of the country’s traditional industries, was hit hard, while newer, lighter industries such as electronics developed in Flanders.
Belgium is still a major producer of iron and steel, although production has fallen since the 1970s. About 11 million tons of steel were produced yearly in the early 2000s. Belgium also has an old and important nonferrous metal industry. It furnishes metallurgical, chemical, and other industries with copper, lead, tin, and uranium. The availability of steel and nonferrous metals has encouraged the manufacturing of heavy equipment, especially in Liège, Antwerp, and Brussels.

2.3 The political system

2.3.1 Belgium as a Constitutional Monarchy

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy, with a king as the head of state and prime minister as the head of government, and is also a member of the “Benelux Countries”. Belgium’s monarchy is representative, constitutional, and hereditary in nature. Changes of power are determined by birthright. Priority is given to the first son or the eldest male in the family. King Albert II took the thrown in 1993 and is still in power today. The Belgian constitution dates back to 1831 and has been revised eight times since then with the last revision made in 2001 (Blackmon, 2006). The reforms since the 1970s have gradually transformed Belgium into a federal state, giving the majority of essential governmental powers to the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels.

The 1831 Constitution called for the Judiciary, Executive, and Legislature powers to be separated. However, there is no rigid demarcation of an “exclusive sphere of each power”, and therefore it is more acceptable to speak of a division of powers rather than a separation of powers. “The principle of separation of powers has lost most of its significance regarding the Legislature and Executive. The present meaning of the separation of powers can mainly be seen with both the Legislature and Executive on one side and the Judiciary completely independent of both the Government and Parliament” (Blackmon, 2006).

As Belgium developed into a Federal State, the principle of the division of powers acquired an extra vertical dimension, with powers being further divided between the Legislature and the Executive at a national level, and between the Legislature and the Executive at the level of the federated entities: the Communities and the Regions (Hooghe, et al, 2008).

The King does have some executive power which can appoint judges, ministers of the cabinet, and the Prime Minister as well. Like the President of the United States, the King of

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4 This section is based on Blom and Lambert (2006).
Belgium is also the chief commander of the armed forces which means that he can declare war and determine treaties with parliamentary approval. As stated in the constitution, the King has the right to structure parliament, give titles of nobility, and grant pardons. In order for royal acts to be considered lawful, they must also be signed by the Prime Minister which in turn takes full responsibility.

Under constitutional changes that were implemented during the 1995 election, the Chamber of Representatives and Senate were drastically decreased in size. The Chamber of Representatives went from 212 to 150 members whilst the Senate was reduced by more than 100; 184 to 71 members to be exact. Voting is required of the citizens and those that choose not to do so can incur fines.

“The Belgian constitution provides for an independent judiciary with powers equal to those of the executive and legislative departments. The highest tribunals are the five courts of appeal, which sit at Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Liège, and Mons” and the Supreme Court of Justice at Brussels. “Most of cases are referred to the courts of appeal by the courts of assize, which review both civil and criminal matters. In the assize courts 12 jurors decide all cases by majority vote. A special court was established in 1989 to resolve constitutional conflicts arising from the transfer of power from the central government to regional authorities” (Blackmon, 2006). Belgium's Parliament in January approved the second of three phases of a group of measures designed to transfer power from the central government to the three regions of the country. The devolution plan was intended to ease the country's deep political conflicts, rooted in its linguistic divisions, by allowing authority over some governmental programs to conform more closely to the demographic distribution of the population.

2.3.2 The Federal Structure5

As previously mentioned, Belgium is organized according to three communities who are responsible for education, culture and personal matters and three regions. Thus in principle there are six governments and six councils.

Each of the three regions elects its own parliament, which in turn appoints a government that makes all decisions regarding development and planning, utilities, municipalities, and transportation. In 2001 the regions were given greater authority over taxation and expenditure (Brans et al., 2009). The German, French, and Dutch communities all have their very own language councils that are responsible for matters such as communications, healthcare, and education (Blackmon, 2006). However, the Flemish community and region have been integrated such that there is just one government and thus is a kind of sub state with one Flemish parliament and one executive which has authority over

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5 This section is based on Blom and Lambert (2006) and Swenden et al (2009) and the various papers therein.
both regional and community matters. In Brussels which originally was a Flemish city and which is located on Flemish territory, the Flemish are a minority. However, they have a disproportional number of seats in the region. Moreover, always one Flemish minister comes from the Flemish Community Commission. Finally there is a Flemish Community Commission in Brussels (Billiet et al., 2006).

“Each of the ten provinces has a council of 50 to 90 members who are chosen by direct vote. The provinces are subdivided into administrative districts, often based in cities and towns, called communes. Each commune is administered by a burgomaster” (Blackmon, 2006). There are three cultural communities: the Flemish Community (the inhabitants of the Flemish Region and the Dutch speaking inhabitants of Brussels); the French Community (the Walloon Region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels); and a small German-speaking Community (the Wallon Region). The Communities have powers in areas where public services are highly dependent on language use, such as education, health and culture. The communities and regions each have their own Parliament (legislative) and their own Government (Executive). Hence, there are:

- the Legislative and the Government of the Flemish-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the French-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the German-speaking Community,
- the Legislative and the Government of the Flemish Region,
- the Legislative and the Government of the Walloon Region, and
- the Legislative and the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region.

The town legislature (council) has an official term of 6 years. The members of the council are elected directly while the board of aldermen are elected by the council itself. A high level of autonomy exists in all forms of regional governments and is a tradition within itself that can be traced back to feudal times (Blackmon, 2006).

As previously mentioned, Dutch, French, and German were all established as official languages of Belgium by law in 1963. Nevertheless, the problem of discrimination based on ethnic origin and language was not so easily solved (Billiet et al, 2006). Both Flemish and Walloon workers protested discrimination in employment based on ethnic group and disturbances broke out at the universities of Brussels and Leuven, which caused the universities of Brussels and Leuven to be separated into French-speaking and Dutch-speaking institutions. Although during the 1960s the Christian Democratic Party and the Socialist party remained the major contenders for power, both Flemish and Walloon federalists continued to make gains in the general elections, principally at the expense of the Liberal Party. Eventually separate Flemish and Walloon ministries were created for education, culture, and
economic development. Finally, in 1971, the constitution was revised to prepare the way for regional autonomy in most economic and cultural affairs (Dunn, 1974).

During the 1980s the Christian Democratic parties normally with Wilfried Marten in control formed the cabinets. In January 1989 power was granted from the central government to the three ethnic regions. Even though the new law was in effect, the implementation was not so swift resulting in reduced influence for the Christian Democrats. Martens resigned shortly thereafter and Jean-Luc Dehaene filled the position and organized a new center-left wing government. 1991 elections resulted in reduced influence for the Christian Democrats. Martens resigned as party leader, and his successor, Jean-Luc Dehaene, formed a new center-left-wing government (Blackmon, 2006).

The final phase of the process intended to give the once unitary Kingdom of Belgium a federal structure, continued to be debated in Parliament. (Hessel, 2006) One controversial issue related to the drastic restructuring of the existing bicameral legislature: The upper house, or senate, would become either an appendix of the regional assemblies or an intermediary between them and the national legislature. Under a ‘single-mandate’ provision, deputies and senators would no longer be permitted to sit in both the national and a regional legislature. Another proposal was to make regional governments responsible for social security disbursements (Cantillon et al, 2009).

A new coalition, led by the Liberal parties, took office in July 1999, and Liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt of the Flemish Liberal Democrats became prime minister. The formation of the new government, which also included the left-leaning Socialist parties and the environmentalist Green parties, marked the first time since 1958 that the Christian Democrats had been excluded from government. Verhofstadt and his coalition remained in power following parliamentary elections in 2003. In local elections held in 2000 a right-wing party, Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block), achieved significant gains. The Vlaams Blok wants independence for the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders and an end to immigration. In 2004 the Vlaams Blok was declared racist, deprived of funding, and subsequently disbanded. In parliamentary elections in June 2007, Verhofstadt’s party suffered a crushing defeat, coming in fourth place, and Verhofstadt resigned as prime minister. The Flemish Christian Democrats emerged as the single largest party to form a coalition government. It led to the formation of a five-party coalition government.

2.4 The Electoral System and Multiparty Structure

The voting right in Belgium is a “one man, one vote” system: every Belgian national, male or female, who has reached the age of 18 has the right to cast one vote (unless this right

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6 This section is based on Swenden et al (2009)
has been suspended or the individual is ineligible for any reason). Voting in Belgium is compulsory and secret. Everyone is obliged to take part in the elections at the six different levels: the European level (members of the European Parliament), the Federal level (all members of the Chamber of Representatives and some members of the Senate), the Community level (members of the Councils), the Regional level (members of the Councils), the Provincial level (members of the Councils) and the Municipal (members of the Councils) level.

In Belgium, the principle by which the members of the Federal Parliament, the European Parliament, and the Councils at the different levels (Community, Region, Province, and Municipality) are elected is one of proportional representation. It is a system in which the seats in the legislative assemblies are allocated roughly in proportion to the number of votes each party receives within the electoral district or constituency, which form the territorial basis for the direct elections.

In Belgium, the Netherlands, and Western Europe generally, the political system and political parties have a variety of particular characteristics. There are usually more than two parties which are divided ideologically to a large extent, as indicated by their very nomenclature. They are also divided by ideological, regional, linguistic and cultural diversities. In Western Europe, most political parties are labeled either socialist (or social-democratic), liberal, conservative or Christian Democratic, with radical parties (Communists for example) on the extreme left and sometimes fascists or other such groups operating under various names on the right (as in Italy). The political culture offers Western European electorates an ideological frame of reference which is much more varied and broader than in the United States, for example.

The Chamber of Representatives has twenty constituencies. For the Senate, there are only three constituencies, geographically similar to the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.

Representation in the assemblies can be by individuals or political parties (see: André Allen: Treatise on Belgian Constitutional Law, 1992, p. 60-62). In Belgium, the votes in the legislature are divided and distributed among the political parties or groupings, each of which has the same proportion of the legislature as it does of the popular vote. In principle, proportional representation of the parties is combined with selection of the actual persons who sit in the assembly on behalf of the parties. Thus the voter in Belgium has several options: (1) he may simply cast his vote for a party list and thereby accept the priority list of the party in question. This is called a "top-of-the-list" vote; (2) if he is concerned about who will actually sit in the assembly, he may cast a preference vote by marking an individual candidate on his ballot sheet (Meersseman, et al, 1999). The proportional representation system in Belgium is closely linked to its multi-party system.
Today, the Belgian multi-party system is characterized by extreme fragmentation. Not only does it reflect the major political and social cleavages which have polarized and continue to polarize Belgian society. It also reflects the emergence of new conflict dimensions and new issues. One major cleavage along ethical-religious lines is the opposition between the Liberal Party and the Catholic Party. The importance of the socio-economic left-right cleavage appeared with the birth of the socialist movement, which led to the opposition between the Liberal and the Socialist parties.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the number of parties represented in Parliament rose dramatically. First there was the breakthrough of the regional parties as a direct result of the increasing linguistic-cultural cleavage between the Flemish and the French-speaking Belgians: the Volksunie (VU) in Flanders, the Rassemblement Walloon (RW) in Wallonia, and the Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF) in the Brussels Region. Moreover, each traditional party split into two branches, a Flemish and a French-speaking one, which are organizationally and programmatically independent.

At the end of the 1970s, the Belgian multi-party system expanded again with the emergence of the ultra-Flemish nationalist and anti-immigrant party, the "Vlaams Blok" (VB); the Francophone extreme right-wing party "Front National" and the Poujadist party. Other parties that emerged were the Green parties, AGALEV in Flanders and ECOLO in the French-speaking part of Belgium. By 1981, there were fourteen parties in Parliament. There was a reduction in the number of parties during the 1980's when the Communists and some other small parties lost their representatives. However, the 1991 election introduced some newcomers in Parliament, including the Front National and the populist libertarian van Rossem party.

Today, there are no longer national parties in Belgium, except for some small unionist parties. All parties are homogeneous Flemish or Francophone and present themselves either in the Flemish or in the French-speaking constituencies. That is, the parties are split into Francophone and Flemish parties such that the voters in Flanders cannot vote for Walloon politicians or candidates from Brussels. In addition, there is the undivided bilingual electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (see Figure 2.3). The Belgian multi-party system usually leads to a coalition government.

Figure 2.3 shows that Brussels- Halle -Vilvoorde is on Flemish territory. The six Flemish communities provide facilities for the French speaking population. Particularly, the French speaking inhabitants of Halle-Vilvoorde can vote for Francophone political parties while there are no such facilities for Flemish speaking inhabitants in Walloon. Attempts of various federal governments to bring Halle-Vilvoorde regulations in line with those of the Flemish region are strongly opposed by the Francophones. 7

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7 The Halle-Vilvoorde conflict was the reason why the Leterne governement fell in May 2010.
From the above it follows that there currently are two different political systems and cultures in Belgium. Moreover, the political reforms have led to the end of the consociational democracy, i.e. power sharing to sustain democracy in a segmented society like Belgium (Lijphart, 1968; 1977).

2.5 The Flemish Community and Flemish Region

Flanders or Flemish Region (Vlaanderen) is an administrative and language region in northern Belgium (see Figure 2.4). The Flanders region primarily consists of low coastal plains and plateaus, including areas of polders (lands reclaimed from the sea) along the coast. Most of the region is relatively flat.

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8 This section is based on Blom and Lambert (2006)
The Flemish region comprises 5 provinces (which contain a total of 308 municipalities):

1. Antwerp (Antwerpen)
2. Limburg (Limburg)
3. East Flanders (Oost-Vlaanderen)
4. Flemish Brabant (Vlaams-Brabant)
5. West Flanders (West-Vlaanderen)

Flanders contains a number of large cities, including Antwerp, Ghent (Gent), Kortrijk (Courtrai), and Brugge (Bruges). The city of Brussels, the capital of Belgium, is an enclave within the boundaries of Flanders. Brussels has separate regional status in Belgium, but also functions as the administrative capital of Flanders.

Flanders has long been one of Europe’s major economic centers. Brugge was an international trading and textile center as early as the 13th century, and Antwerp has been a major commercial center and port since the 15th century. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ghent, Antwerp, and Kortrijk became important industrial centers. Nonetheless, until World War II, the Belgian economy was centered in the Walloon region. During the second half of the 20th century, a surge of foreign investment in the corridor between Antwerp and Brussels led to significant growth in Flanders’ engineering and high-technology sectors, and to the explosive increase of the service sector. That corridor is now the economic heart not only of Flanders, but of Belgium as a whole. Agriculture remains important in Flanders as well, with principal crops including sugar beets, cereal grains, flax, potatoes, fruits, vegetables, flowers, and ornamental plants. Tourism is also of economic importance for Flanders, especially along the coastline and in the region's historic cities.
The historic Flanders region was an economic power during much of the Middle Ages, and included parts of what are now the Netherlands and France. When Belgium gained its independence in 1830, it retained from this historic region only the area that became the provinces of East and West Flanders. With the rise of disputes over language rights in Belgium in the 20th century, Flemish activists pressed for territorial autonomy for all of northern Belgium. The region of Flanders was formally recognized in the early 1960s, when the country was partitioned along historic language lines, with the exception of the city and suburbs of Brussels. Flanders is governed by the Flemish Council, which consists of members of the Flemish parliament elected by the inhabitants of Flanders and the Dutch-speaking residents of Brussels.

2.6 Racism in Flanders

Its long history of subordination and discrimination and its long struggle for emancipation have contributed to the development of nationalism, ethnocentrism and fascism in Flanders and the growth of the racist party Vlaams Blok in Flanders (Brans et al., 2009; Billet et al., 2005). Although Flanders has become the most prosperous region in Belgium and its social, cultural and political emancipation have virtually been completed (except the lingering Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde problem), the effects of its history of subordination and discrimination linger and even spread nationalism, ethnocentrism and fascism. Therefore, Flanders presents an excellent case for historical, sociological and political research on these important phenomena.

The topic of racism has been the focus of an extensive amount of research in the Flemish part of Belgium during the last few decades (Billiet and De Witte, 2008). The attitudes of the majority toward foreigners or immigrants and extreme right-wing voting behavior have been intensively studied. The right-wing Flemish assume that foreigners’ cultural habits are too deviant from those of the Belgians and that they represent economic competition. In the Flemish context, the extreme right-wing party Vlaams Blok is commonly referred to as a political racist party (Billiet and De Witte, 2008), but the Vlaams Blok people themselves indicate unwillingness that label. A core issue in the ideology of the Vlaams Blok is the preference for a monocultural and monoracial national state, in which “nation” is conceived as a “biologically defined ethnic community” (De Witte and Klandermans, 2000).

The General Election Studies by Billiet et al (1991, 1995, 1999) deal with party identification, party preferences, feelings of political efficacy, and the nature and extent of political participation. Perceptions of social class and (economic) well-being, authoritarian attitudes, attitudes to immigrant workers, political corruption and the environment are some of the other areas investigated in those studies.
2.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides some background information on Belgium, the country to which the case study relates. Belgium became independent country in 1830; it is divided into three federal regions, namely Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Each region is divided into provinces which in turn are divided into municipalities. To the west and north of Brussels is Flanders which mainly consists of Dutch-speakers. To the east and south of Brussels is Wallonia where the majority of the population speaks French. Due to the presence of both language groups in Brussels, both Dutch and French are official languages of the region. Along the eastern border, German is the official language of a small minority. There are also three cultural communities: the Flemish Community (the inhabitants of the Flemish Region and the Dutch speaking inhabitants of Brussels); the French Community (the Walloon Region and the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels); and the German-speaking Community. The Communities have powers in areas where public services are highly dependent on language use, such as education, health and culture. The communities and regions each have their own institutions: their own Parliament (Legislature) and their own Government (Executive). Although each region is self-governed, tension due to language, ethnicity, and national identity among the Flemings and Walloons still exists today.

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy in northwestern Europe, with a king as the head of state and prime minister as the head of government. Resulting from a number of reforms and the granting of power to the three regions, Belgium slowly became a federal state.

The voting right in Belgium is a “one man, one vote” system: every Belgian national, male or female, who has reached the age of 18 has the right and is obliged to cast one vote (unless this right has been suspended or the individual is ineligible for some reason) in the elections at the six different levels: the European level (members of the European Parliament), the Federal level (all members of the Chamber of Representatives and some members of the Senate), the Community level (members of the Councils), the Regional level (members of the Councils), the Provincial level (members of the Councils) and the Municipal (members of the Councils) level. In Belgium, the principle by which the members of the Federal Parliament, the European Parliament, and the Councils at the different levels (Community, Region, Province, and Municipality) are elected is one of proportional representation. Today, there basically are no longer national parties in Belgium, except for some small unionist parties. All parties are homogeneous Flemish or Francophone and are present in the Flemish or in the French-speaking constituencies, or else in the undivided bilingual electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. The Belgian multi-party system usually leads to a coalition government.

Racism has been a major political issue in Belgium; it has been the focus of extensive research in Vlaanderen during the last few decades (Billiet and De Witte, 2008). The right-wing Flemish assume that foreigners' cultural habits are too deviant from those of the Belgians and that they represent economic competition. In the Flemish context, the extreme
right-wing party Vlaams Blok is commonly referred to as a political racist party (Billiet and De Witte, 2008), but the Vlaams Blok people themselves indicate unwillingness to that label. A core issue in the ideology of the Vlaams Blok is the strive for a monocultural and monoracial national state, in which “nation” is conceived as a “biologically defined ethnic community” (De Witte and Klandermans, 2000).
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