

**POLS 3360**  
**Comparative Politics of Western Democracies**  
**Spring 2017**  
**Constitution Writing Group Assignment Description<sup>1</sup>**

### I. The Scenario

Belgian political leaders have attempted numerous times over the last two years to form a new government under the current constitution. However, the arcane rules of this constitution have made the task nearly impossible, leaving the operation of the country in the hands of a caretaker for nearly 24 months. Belgian elites have finally come to the conclusion that the only solution to their governance problems is to scrap the current system and write a new constitution. They have called on your group (as well as 5 other groups) to write a new constitution for Belgium. The new constitution will be chosen from the 6 options provided, or it is possible that all new constitutions are rejected in favor of the old constitution. Reluctantly, your group has taken on this thankless task.

Contrary to the bureaucratic fashion of most European politics, the Belgian political elites have given your group an immense amount of freedom in devising a new system, providing only three rules:

1. The country must remain in one piece (this means the constitutions cannot break up the country, and it should reduce the likelihood of secession from any group).
2. The new constitution must provide for streamlined government formation.
3. Once formed, governments must be somewhat stable.

Keep in mind, however, that in order for your constitution to be adopted it will have to pass a referendum. Importantly, this referendum will have mandatory voting for all Belgians, and a supermajority of 80% of the vote will be necessary for passage.

### II. The Groups

There will be 6 groups with 3 groups consisting of 4 individuals and 3 groups consisting of 5 individuals. Group memberships will be randomly assigned. Additionally, each group member will be assigned a nationality (Flemish, Walloon, Bruxellois, German-speaking) so that the class is as close to proportional, in terms of the actual Belgian population, as possible. These nationalities are assigned randomly.

### III. The Referendum

As discussed above, a referendum will be held in which the entire population of Belgium (all students in this class) must vote. Additionally, in order for a constitution to be adopted 80% of eligible voters must approve of it. The referendum employs an alternative vote system (aka, an instant runoff). If we end with no constitution receiving 80% of the vote, it will be determined that no constitution carries the referendum, and the old constitution will remain in place.

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<sup>1</sup> This project, its description, rules, and details are the intellectual property of Christopher J. Williams and should not be used or replicated without the express consent of Christopher J. Williams.

In order to ensure that all voters are informed regarding each constitutional arrangement, each group will be given 6-8 minutes to present their constitution to the Belgian population (all other students). After each presentation, voters will have 2-4 minutes to question the groups presenting each constitution. The order of the presentations will be randomly assigned.

After all presentations are given, the Belgian population (all students in the class) will be asked to vote on their preferred constitution. Unlike the common American style winner-take-all method, voters will be asked to rank their preferred constitutions from 1 through 6. Votes will be tallied using each individual's first choice. If no constitution carries with 80% of the vote in a particular round, the lowest vote getter in that round will be dropped, and the second preference of each voter who originally preferred the dropped constitution will be counted as the first preference. Importantly, you cannot cast a first ballot preference for your own group's constitution. If you do this, your group will be dropped to the last spot on your ballot.

When voting, it is important to keep in mind whether or not a particular constitution is beneficial for your national group, or whether it disadvantages your group relative to other groups within Belgium.

If the constitution of a particular group carries with 80% of the vote, each member of that group will receive 15 extra credit points on their final exam. This means if your constitution carries, you can receive an additional 5 points on your final grade. The winning constitution will also be sent to the Prime Minister of Belgium as a suggestion for governmental reform.

Importantly, if you are not in class on the day of the vote and do not cast a ballot, you will lose 20 points on your final grade for this project. This accounts for 6 points on your final grade.

#### IV. Details of Grading and Project

##### A. What should be included in the constitution?

In writing your constitution your group should apply the concepts and ideas discussed in class. This includes, but is not limited to the structures of the executive, legislative, judicial and bureaucratic systems, and how they interact, the specific form of the electoral system, and whether you will employ a centralized governmental structure or a multi-level system. You may also want to discuss the role of linkage groups, such as political parties, interest groups, and the media in the country. Further, you probably need to make decisions regarding civil rights and liberties.

When writing the constitution, it is important for each individual to keep in mind his/her specific nationality. That is, if someone in your group proposes a particular constitutional structure, you should think long and hard about how that structure might influence your group, and whether your particular national group would support that structure. Remember that these constitutions are going to have to carry support from different nationalities during the referendum.

The constitution should be between 3 and 6 pages long. It should be double spaced with 11 to 12 point Times New Roman font.

B. What you must turn in.

Each group member must turn in a copy of the constitution his/her group has written. These constitutions should be identical to one another. This will constitute 40% of your grade on this project. This section of the project will be graded based on whether all the important aspects of a constitution are included in the final document.

Each individual must also turn in a 3 to 6 page appendix attached to his/her constitution. These appendices should be written by each individual student (**i.e. do not work with any other person, including other members of your group on your appendix**). This appendix should provide a justification of each constitutional decision your group made. For example, if you choose to have a singular president as the executive, provide a justification regarding why your group did this and what the ramifications of this decision have on the prospects for government formation and stability in Belgium. This will constitute 40% of your grade on this project. This section will be graded based on whether your justifications fit with the existing research we have read and discussed in class.

Finally, you will be asked to fill out a report card on each of the other group members in which you will be asked to grade your fellow group member on their participation and performance. These questions will be on a scale from 0-4. This report card will account for 20% of your grade on this project. The average score for each report card will be determined, and the average scores for each individual from each group member will be determined to arrive at a final grade for this section of the project. For example, if an individual is in a group of 4 individuals, Person 1, Person 2, and Person 3 will each file a report card on Person 4. Each report card will consist of a battery of questions in which Person 4 is ranked on a scale of 0-4. The average for the battery for the report card of Person 1 will be taken. The average for the battery for the report card of Person 2 will be taken. The average for the battery for the report card of Person 3 will be taken. These three averages will then be averaged. If this average is 4, Person 4 will receive 20 points on this aspect of the project. If the average is 3, Person 4 will receive 16 points on this aspect of the project, etc.

Importantly, if you are not in class on the day of the vote (April 25), and/or do not cast a ballot, you will lose all 20 report card points possible. Additionally, it will be assumed that you score all other group members as a “4.”

## V. Some Sources Regarding Belgium

Below you will find a number of sources regarding Belgium that you may find useful in putting together your constitution. Of course, these sources are not exhaustive, and I expect you to reference additional sources beyond those below. I particularly encourage you to use Google Scholar to look for academic discussions of Belgian government and society. I have also included on Blackboard a

copy of the current Belgian constitution, and a piece I recently published with Prof. Marijke Breuning on Belgian national identity.

CIA World Fact Book:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/be.html>

Belgian Official Government Information and Services:

[http://www.belgium.be/en/about\\_belgium/government](http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government)

Research on Federalism in Belgium and Switzerland:

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2431193](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2431193)