



Belgium is a **law-based state** and a **democracy**, which guarantees

human rights and civil rights for all.

The State guarantees the **rule of law**. The State may act only if the **Constitution** or the law authorizes it to act. It is organized on the principle of separation of powers. In particular, the legal system is independent from the government.

Belgium is a state that functions with rules and **procedures**.

Belgium is a **secular state**; in other words, government authority is separate from religious authority. Government agencies must remain neutral.

The State ensures that the rights of citizens are respected. If any decisions cause damage to them, they may challenge these decisions in the law courts.

Belgium is a **constitutional and parliamentary monarchy**...

...that operates on the principle of **representative democracy**

Power is shared by the King and Parliament.

- **Parliament** has legislative power, which consists of drafting and voting on laws.
- **Executive power**, in other words enforcement of the laws passed by Parliament, is in the hands of the King and the cabinet of ministers.
- These powers are defined by the **Constitution**.

In a **representative democracy**, the people elect representatives who exercise power on their behalf.

Elections are the first level of citizens' participation in public life.

- There are elections for the different levels of power in Belgium: European, federal, community and regional, provincial and municipal.
- Belgian citizens aged 18 and over must vote in these elections.
- Citizens of member states of the European Union (EU) may vote in European and municipal elections. To vote, they must register with their municipality.
- Citizens of non-EU countries may vote in municipal elections if they have been legal residents of Belgium for at least five years. To vote, they must register with their municipality.

These rights include, for example, the right to life and the prohibition of torture, slavery and forced labour. These rights are absolute (the State may not change them).

Democracy is based on the active participation of citizens in public life in all its forms: political institutions and judicial institutions, social dialogue, the press, associations and participation in local life.

Belgium is a **democracy founded on pluralism**.

Pluralism is not only about opinions and beliefs existing side by side. It is also about **dialogue** and **debate** between these opinions and beliefs.

Everyone has the **right to participate in an association** in order to try to change society, help other citizens or influence political decisions.

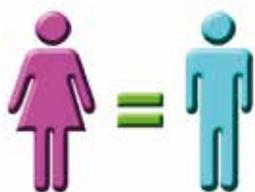


Citizens have the **right to strike**, to **demonstrate** and to sign petitions.





All citizens are equal in rights and in dignity.



Men and women are equal.

Men and women have the same rights and the same duties, in particular:

- to work and Social Security,
- to vote,
- to have a bank account,
- to make decisions about where they reside,
- concerning their children, or
- in case of divorce or separation.

Any and all forms of **discrimination**  are forbidden. In particular, this applies to:

- jobs,
- housing,
- government services, and
- private-sector services.

All people have the right to equal protection under the law. Any foreigner who is present in Belgium enjoys the protection accorded to people and property, except as established otherwise by law.

There are basic freedoms that are protected by the State:

- individual freedom,
- the right to privacy,
- the right to choose one's lifestyle and profession.

Everyone has freedom of speech, assembly, association and religion.

The law recognizes and protects:

- the right to life,
- the right to marry,
- the right to die with dignity,
- the right to abortion.

Individual rights and freedoms shall be exercised while respecting those of others and general welfare. So the State may provide a framework for these rights and freedoms. For example, freedom of belief cannot be used as a reason to disobey laws about the schooling of children. Similarly, freedom of expression does not give anyone the right to insult another person or group of people.



See glossary on page 67

Everyone has the right to human dignity, in particular:

- fair compensation for work,
- Social Security,
- health care,
- social, medical and legal assistance,
- acceptable housing,
- a healthy environment, and
- cultural and social fulfilment.



To ensure that these rights can be exercised, there is a system based on solidarity: solidarity between the actively employed and pensioners, between the employed and the unemployed, between those who have children and those who do not, between the healthy and the infirm.

This system also serves to help people who are disabled or those who have no means of support (**guaranteed minimum income and social aid** .

