Territorial Politics in inter and intra-party competition.

Insights from Belgium

Min Reuchamps, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, Min.Reuchamps@uclouvain.be

Jérémy Dodeigne, Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS/Université de Liège, Belgium, j.dodeigne@ulg.ac.be

Dave Sinardet, Universiteit Antwerpen/Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium, dave.sinardet@ua.ac.be

Pierre Gramme, BIside, Belgium, p.gramme@free.fr

I. Introduction

In territorial politics, political parties are key actors – be it state-wide or regionalist parties – for constitutional reforms underlying regionalisation or federalisation processes. From the agenda-setting to the implementation of the reforms, they aggregate and catalyse territorial/national interest in order (not) to enable institutional reforms. In most representative democracies under such regionalist pressures, it is however individual MPs that ultimately *vote* the constitutional reforms. Of course, party discipline strongly constrains MPs' freedom and frames parliamentary behaviour. The literature thus often explores territorial politics from a macro-perspective – political parties' positions – rather than at a micro level – individual MPs. Yet, exploring MPs' views on constitutional reforms bring interesting perspectives on intra-party dynamics complementing inter-party approaches. What explains MPs' preferences on constitutional reforms? To explore this question, we surveyed every representative of Belgium's legislative assemblies with a standardized questionnaire in the middle of the longest period without federal government (Summer 2011). We hypothesize that ethno-linguistic identity and party affiliation are strong variables explaining MPs' preferences but that candidates' attributes – be it (multi-level) former political experience, gender, political generation – should also be taken into account. Based on the Belgian case study, this research will help us apprehend the rationale behind political elites' attitudes negotiating the new boundaries of the state and above all shed light on territorial politics in Europe.

II. Territorial politics in Belgium

Belgium has always been a linguistically divided country. Indeed, since her independence Belgium is cut in two by the same – language – line that cuts Europe in two: north of the line Germanic languages are spoken and south of the line Latin languages. In Belgium, the population living in the north speaks Dutch related dialects while the population living in the south speaks Walloon related dialects. Nonetheless, even though already a majority of her population spoke Dutch from her very beginning, Belgium was created as unitary and unilingual French-speaking state where the elites, from north to south and from east to west spoke French and above all made French not only the sole official language but also the language of politics and all public affairs. As a reaction to this French-speaking Belgian State, the inhabitants of the north, led by the so-called Flemish movement, gradually demanded the recognition of Dutch as a second language, at least in the Dutch-speaking part of the country – Flanders. Given the reluctance of the public authorities to accept Dutch as an official language and thus as a language of administration and education, it took several decades to settle the language issue. It was finally settled in the course of the 20th century by opting for a territorial logic, building on the fact that the population speaking either French or Dutch is territorially concentrated. Four language regions were officially recognized: a Dutch-speaking in the north, a French speaking in the south, a German-speaking in the east and a bilingual territory in the centre of the country for the city of Brussels (McRae, 1987; Murphy, 1988; Witte & Van Velthoven, 2000; Deschouwer, 2009).

Nonetheless the territorial solution did not entirely solve the language issue because Brussels and its surrounding – officially Dutch-speaking – area became increasingly more French-speaking as French-speakers spread out. On top of this, a socio-economic issue added the burden of Belgian politics. Indeed, while Wallonia had always been the economic engine of the country, it was hit by a structural economic decline in the turn of the 1960's and meanwhile the Flemish economy took over the lead. Therefore the fear of the Walloon minority was to be left out financially by the central government, which would rather invest in Flanders and in Brussels. Claims in the south were made for more regional autonomy in order to – better – protect the economic interests of Wallonia, while in the north claims were made to entrenched the territorial internal division of the country in order to protect Flanders from the increasing number of French-speakers demanding linguistic – French-speaking – rights on Flemish territory.

To pacify these – both linguistic and socio-economic – tensions, a devolution process was set in motion in the late 1960's, which is still going on today (Swenden and Jans 2006). There was never a blueprint, however, even if the process of state's transformation was called federalization and Belgium became officially a federal state in 1993 (Deschouwer 2005). This process of federalization was thus quite erratic and came about step-by-step or better crisis after crisis. To cope with the language divisions, both shared-rule and self-rule were implemented, in line with the old consociational techniques (Deschouwer 2006). The former came with power sharing mechanism in the centre with a linguistic parity in the federal government (Reuchamps 2007) and above all veto powers to each partner through different techniques – special majority laws and alarm bell procedure – in order to force joint decision-making. The latter was translated into – increasingly larger – substate autonomy to newly created Communities and Regions.

The road towards the implementation of a federal state structure was long, difficult and painful, with long periods of very high government turnover and talks about a deep regime crisis. Yet after 1995 the tensions cooled down and for the first time since 1965 four parliaments and their government went to the very end of their four years term. The Belgian federation seemed to work. Yet, as from 2003 the identity politics resurfaced, leading to an increasing governmental instability. After the 2007 federal elections it took almost 200 days to put together a new coalition, which was only a transition government that needed to prepare further talks about state reform. The bank crisis of 2008 allowed for a temporary freezing of the conflict. But in 2010 early elections were called after the government had collapsed over the possible splitting along the language border of the central Brussels electoral constituency. In Flanders the reborn Flemish nationalist party N-VA polled just under 30% of the votes and became the largest party of the country. Talks to form a new government took over 500 days.

The problem is basically that Flanders would like a larger degree of autonomy, especially also in financial and fiscal matters. Flanders is the richer part of the country and believes that its further development is being curtailed by the lagging behind of Wallonia and increasingly also of Brussels. Some political parties in Flanders – like Vlaams Belang and N-VA – defend nothing less than an independent Flanders. On the Francophone side there is a strong reluctance to move towards further autonomy. The Flemish demands are perceived as an attempt to undermine the mechanisms and principles of solidarity in the country and they fear that further devolution will only be a further step towards the full dislocation of the

country. Both language groups do however need to find a common ground for the formation of a federal government and for possible constitutional reforms. The result was unsurprisingly deadlock.

Political scientists have provided a number of explanations for the difficulties. Probably the most powerful element working against a smooth functioning of the Belgian state is the fully split party system (Sinardet 2010). There are indeed no statewide parties and all parties only compete in their own language group (that is to say, in a federal election – i.e. statewide elections – a Dutch-speaking voter may only vote for a Dutch-speaking party and vice-versa, corollary it means federal politicians are only accountable before their own language group). The media are fully separated along language lines and there are therefore two separate and distinct public opinions (Sinardet and Hooghe 2009; Sinardet 2012). For the political elite there are no incentives for moderation since they do not need to win votes outside their own language group. The fear to be sanctioned at the next elections makes them all quite reluctant to engage into negotiations and to reach a compromise (Deschouwer 2009). Daniel Horowitz has claimed that in divided societies one rather needs pre-electoral devices to bring about a sufficient degree of integration, because post-electoral obligations to compromise are unlikely when elites can only be sanctioned by the voters of their own identity group (Horowitz 1985). Above all, Belgium might face the paradox of federalism (Erk and Anderson 2009). That is to say while formally recognizing identity groups and granting them autonomy and political institutions of their own can be a way to ease the tensions, this formal recognition of identity groups can also make them even stronger and more legitimate. Thus federalism may be tensions reducing but also tensions inducing. In Belgium, the federal dynamics is tainted of this paradox of federalism.

These reasonings actually assume two things about politics in Belgium. The first is that for the Belgian population the issue of state reform and future nature of the federation is a salient one. The second assumption is that opinions – both of citizens and politicians – about the future of the Belgian state are very different in the north and in the south. These assumptions have been tested by using survey data. For the first assumption – the salience of the problem – the evidence is however rather poor. In surveys conducted on several occasions, the results showed that only a minority of voters, in both language groups, declared that the state reform was an important issue for their electoral behaviour (Frognier et al. 2008; Swyngedouw and Rink 2008; Swyngedouw and Abts 2011). The 2009 regional elections survey (PartiRep) confirmed these results: in Flanders 20% and in Wallonia 22% of the voters

said the state reform was an important issue for their party choice, far behind socio-economic issues. That becomes even clearer when looking at the percentage of the voters saying that this issue was the most important one: only 8% in Flanders and 5% in Wallonia (Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010).

For the second assumption – the difference between the language groups –, survey data reveal there is an agreement on the direction of the reform – more substate autonomy – but a difference of degree between the Dutch-speakers who want more autonomy than the French-speakers. In the 2009 regional elections survey, the respondents were asked to position themselves on a scale running from 'all powers to the substates' (score 0) to 'all powers to the federal state' (score 10). The average score in Flanders is 4.3, in Wallonia 5.1 (Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010). That is a first indicator of the fact that – as expected – Flemish voters are keener to see powers further devolved. Yet this also shows that the difference is not dramatic. The same can be concluded from a closer look at the distribution of the answers in Flanders and Wallonia, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The preferences for the distribution of competencies in Belgium (percentages in Flanders and Wallonia) – PartiRep data

	Flanders	**Wallonia**
All powers for the substates (score 0)	4,9	5,5
More powers for the substates (score 1-4)	47,0	33,5
It is OK as it is now (score 5)	24,2	22,5
More powers for the central state (score 6-9)	20,3	29,6
All powers for the central state (score 10)	3,5	8,9

In both regions there is a hard core of some 5% wanting Belgium to give away all its powers to the substates. There is also a small group of some 4% in Flanders and some 9% in Wallonia that would prefer a return to the unitary state with all the powers concentrated at the central level. A bit less than one quarter of the respondents is happy with the status quo. A group of almost half of the Flemish voters would like to see some change in the direction of

more substate autonomy, while only 20% prefer more power to be given to the central state. The Walloon public opinion is less convinced of the need for further devolution, but the 33% agreeing with further devolution is a bit larger than the 30% wanting more powers for Belgium. The conclusion is quite clear. More voters in Flanders want further devolution. But a substantial number of Walloons agree with that. And a sizable group in Flanders wants less substate autonomy, while a bit more Walloon voters agree with that position. The positions of Flemish and Walloon voters are thus not radically different, but only show a degree in preferences for more or for less substate autonomy.

What these survey data show quite convincingly is that there is a paradox in the Belgian system. The political elite has been spending a lot of energy in trying to find a reorganization of the state that is acceptable for both language groups. Parties of each language group defend positions that are radically different and hardly compatible. They seem to do so because they are convinced of the fact that they are being loyal to their voters and to their electoral promises. On the side of the population though the issue has a very low salience and they preferences are not extremely far away from each other. To explore this paradox in the Belgian political system, a closer look at the opinions of the MPs may be insightful because MPs don't negotiate the agreements but vote them and above all they are the intermediate actors between citizens and typical political elites (i.e. those who really negotiate). This will help us to disentangle the complex puzzle of Belgian territorial politics and possibly its future.

III. Data and Method

The 6th Belgian constitutional reform constitutes an interesting case to test this hypothesis. Since the federal elections of June 2010, Belgium has been stuck in a deep political gridlock leading to the world record of the longest period (541 days) without the formation of a government democratically elected on December, 6th 2011 (Devos and Sinardet 2012). During this period, many political analysts agreed on the fact that the political crisis was largely due to the deeply opposed visions between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking political parties. As such, political elites of each ethno-linguistic group appeared to behave as monolithic blocks, standing against each other along ethno-linguistic lines. Media and political observers often analysed the debate on the 6th Belgian constitutional reform along this ethno-linguistic division. If federalism is defined as the balance between *self-rule* and *shared-rule* (Elazar 1987), the Dutch-speaking parties is, on the one hand, often

portrayed as a united actor (the 'Flemish') seeking to increase autonomy (more self-rule) while, on the other hand, the French-speaking parties (the 'Francophones') aims all at preserving a strong federal centre (more or at least preserving shared-rule). In such analysis of Belgian federalism, the linguistic division predominates while party politics is systematically perceived as primarily based on the linguistic line. In fact Belgian consociationalism that created two public spheres – with the split of the national radio and television broadcasters since the 1960s and the creation of two distinct media spheres (Sinardet 2009) – as well as two political spheres – with the split of the national parties at the same period and the creation of two regional party systems – favours this kind of rhetoric. Yet, as noticed for the former process of regionalisation and federalisation, one may wonder to what extent the predominance of the linguistic division hold true for the MPs? What explain their preferences for the future of Belgium?

To explore this question, this paper relies on empirical data, which come from a MPs survey on the future of Belgian federalism and related topics. Between June 2011 and October 2011, i.e. before an agreement was reached on the state reform, we surveyed with a standardized questionnaire every representative of Belgium's six legislative assemblies: the two assemblies of the federal Parliament (the House of Representatives and the Senate) and the five assemblies of the regional and community level (the Flemish Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels-Capital Parliament, and the Parliaments of the French-speaking Community and of the German-speaking Community). The MPs were asked to fill in a 26 questions web-based survey on the future of Belgian federalism (including questions on ethno-territorial and ethno-linguistic identities, electoral reforms, policy transfers to the regional levels, inter and intra-community relations, and the political gridlock). 486 MPs were contacted by mails, e-mails or telephone and 255 participated to the survey, i.e. a response rate of 52.47 percent. This rate however differs between political parties[1] and the six assemblies[2]. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the two main Belgian linguistic communities, even though 12 German-speaking MPs participated to the survey.

[1] For Dutch-speaking parties: VB (38.9), CD&V (40.8), N-VA (46.3), sp.a (52.5), Groen (66.7), OpenVLD (76.3). For the French-speaking parties: PS (36.5), MR (50.0), cdH (60.0), Ecolo (72.3).

[2] The lowest percentage starts from 39.3 percent at the Flemish Parliament and follow the Walloon Parliament (42.7), French-speaking group at the Brussels Parliament (45.8), the Parliament of the German-speaking Community (48.0), Dutch-speaking group at the Senate (57.1), Dutch-speaking group at the Chamber (59.2), French-speaking group at the Chamber (67.3), French-speaking group at the Senate (68.4), Dutch-speaking group at the Brussels Parliament (76.5).

Our analysis is twofold. On the one hand, we check for the correlations between the three most often assumed independent variables – language (Dutch-speaking vs. French-speaking), level of power (federal vs. regional) and political party – and the position of the MPs vis-à-vis the reform of the state – our dependent variable. In addition to classic correlations tests, we visualize these complex interrelations with parallel coordinates, which show the position of each single MPs on these different dimensions. Such visual presentation can be complemented by more usual analysis measuring the distance between individuals given their opinion on the state reform within each independent variable. These analyses reveal there is quite much variation on both independent and dependent variables. On the other hand, given this variation, we develop several logistic regression models to tap on the explaining powers of the main variables: language (Dutch-speaking vs. French-speaking), level of power (federal vs. regional) and political party as well as individual characteristics. To do so, we use as dependent variable the position of the MPs on the state reform (scale from 0 to 10) but also to refine our analyses we use the position of the MPs on two specific questions: the regionalisation of job market and of defence because on the former only strong partisans for the reinforcement of the federal government oppose its regionalisation and on the latter only strong partisans of substate autonomy want its regionalisation.

IV. Diversity in unity or unity in diversity?

On the topic of the future of Belgium, and in particular on the nature of the state reform, one might assume that there should be correlations between the main independent variables and also on questions (used here as dependent variables) about the nature and the scope of the state reform. That is the language of the MPs, their level of government and their political party on the side of explanatory variables; and the questions on the nature of the state reform and those on the specific policy transfers on the side of the dependent variables. Correlations tests show there are indeed correlations between these variables. To have a better grasp of the dynamics at stake, we have used parallel coordinates to visualize the relationship between each variable for each individual MP. Thus in the same graphic, we show the position of each MP on the following variables (from left to right): language, level of government, political party, position on the 0 to 10 state reform scale (where 0 means all powers to the substates and 10 means all power to the federal government), the average position on the specific transfers and then the position of each specific transfer on a three scale position federal government only (top), shared (middle) and regional and community government only (bottom). The competences are unemployment benefits, family allowances,

noise regulation, development cooperation policies, defence, job market, foreign trade, justice, pensions, healthcare policies, scientific cooperation, and road safety). Each line of the figure is one MP, so one can follow the position of each MP on each variable. Above all, and here is the added value of such visualization, one can look at the parallel coordinates in a more comprehensive way: the thicker the lines, the strongest the correlation. In other words, if all the MPs share the same opinion, they will follow the same "path" on the figure.

The first two figures (Figure 1a and 1b) show the positions of MPs by language groups. At first sight, the comparison confirms what was already known: Dutch-speaking MPs lean more toward substate autonomy, French-speaking MPs lean more toward federal power (which is a bit paradoxical since at the federal level, French-speakings MPs are a minority). Nonetheless, a closer look at the figures show a quite strong diversity among Dutch-speaking MPs, with even a majority of MPs willing to keep at the federal level development cooperation policies, defence, justice and pensions. On the other hand, almost all Dutch-speaking MPs favour the regionalisation of family allowances, scientific cooperation, road safety and above all job market. On the French-speaking side, we also find a similar trend: most MPs favour a strong federal position except for job market and in a lesser extent road safety. So beside a difference in the general stance on the direction and degree of the state reform between the language groups, there is a common ground for negotiation on specific transfer, which explains how the last state reform could eventually be successful.

Figure 1a: Dutch-speaking MPs

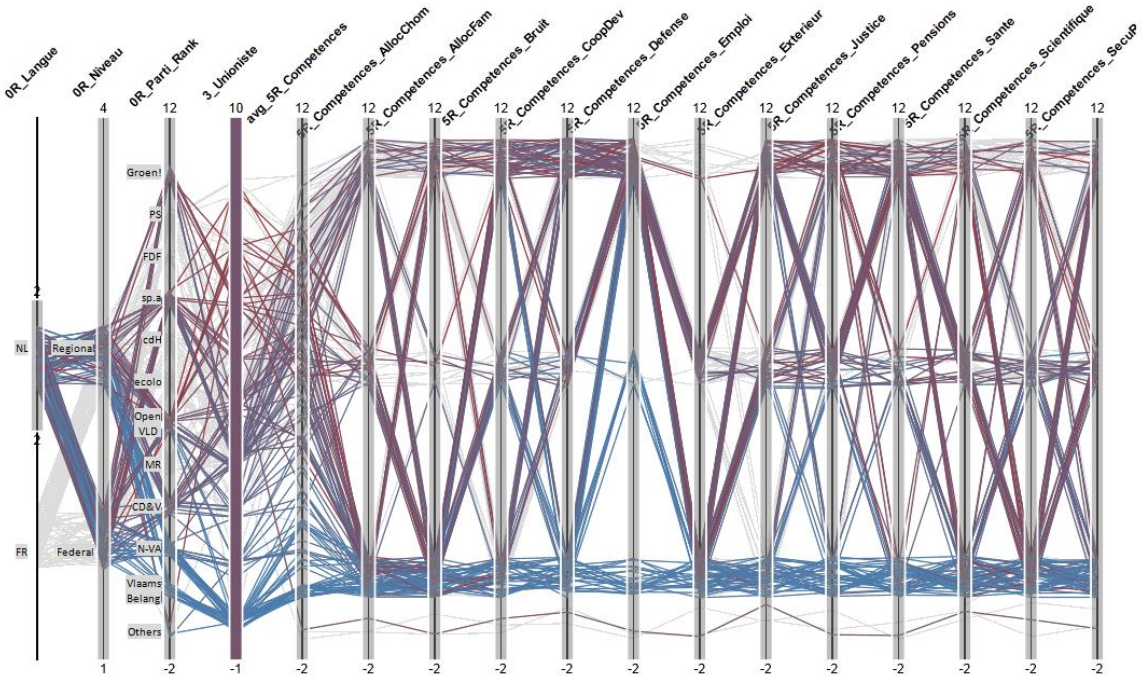


Figure 1b: French-speaking MPs

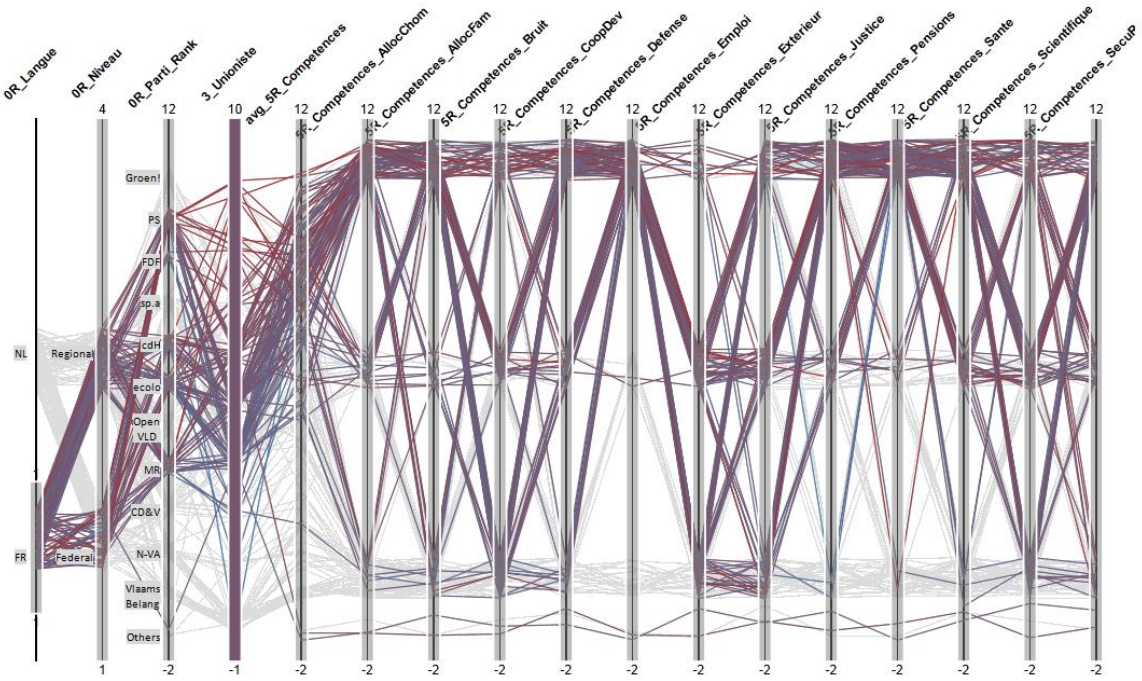


Figure 2a and 2b dig into the difference between levels of government: federal MPs versus regional MPs. While the overall picture remains quite similar, the comparison does not reveal as striking results as the comparison by language groups. In fact, it seems to follow the language divide, and also possibly the political party lines. To explore this third variable, we use the parallel coordinates to compare the two main political parties in Belgium: the Flemish regionalists of the N-VA and the Francophone socialists of the PS (Figures 3a and 3b).

Figure 2a: Federal MPs

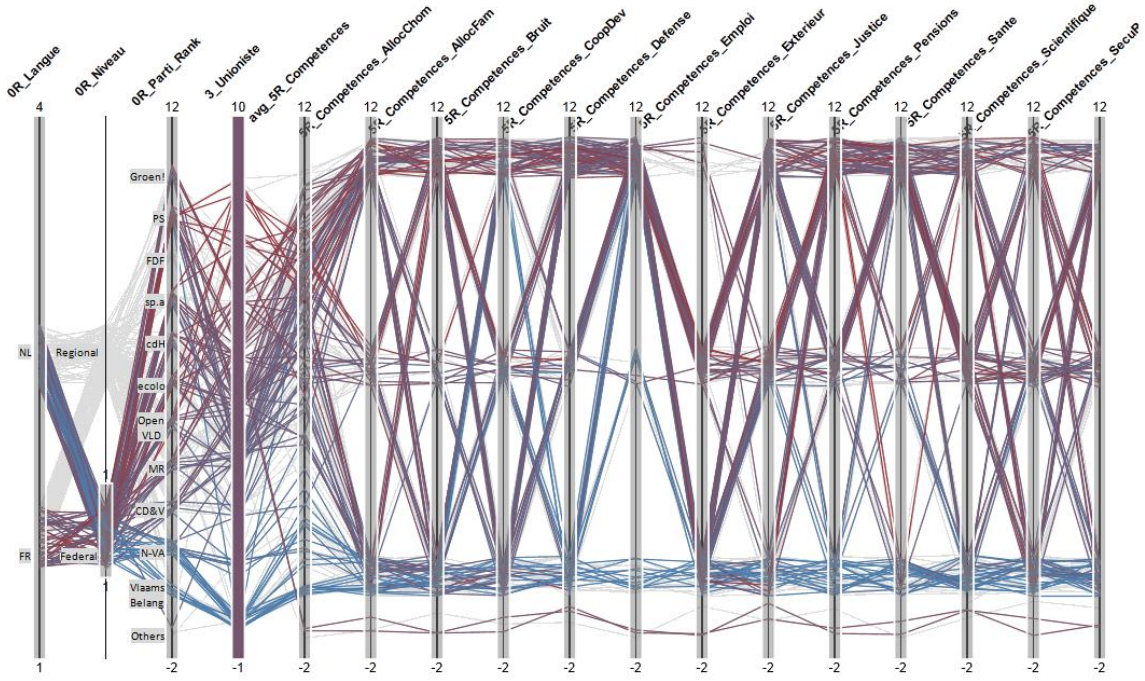
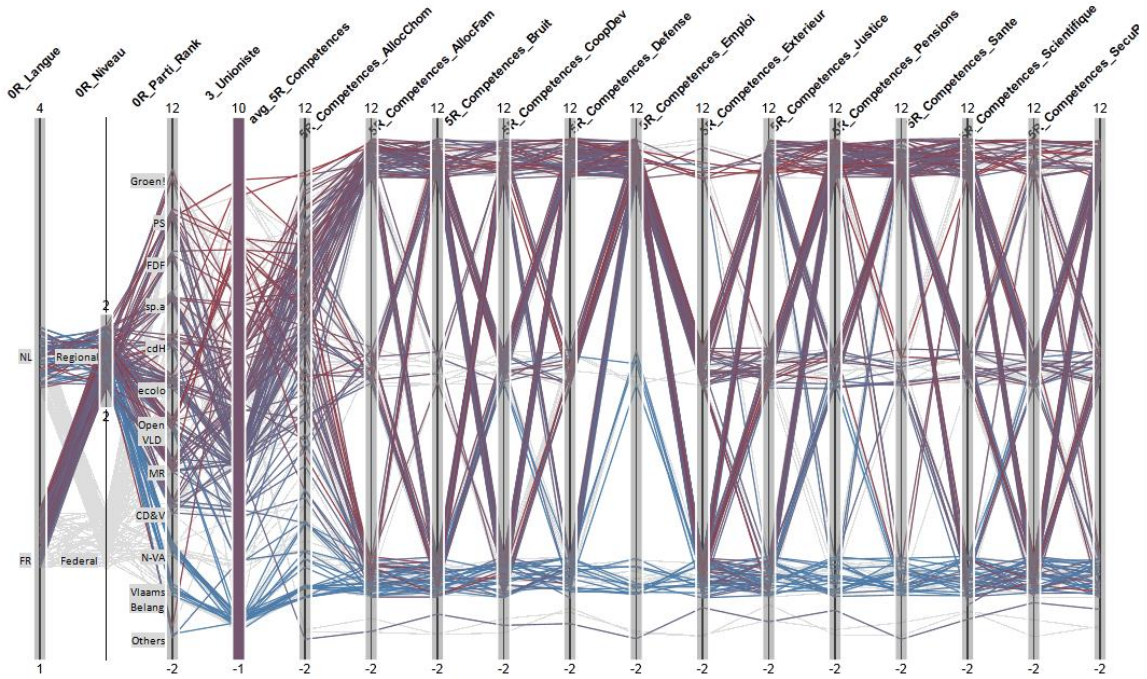


Figure 2b: Regional MPs



Figures 3a and 3b confirm the wide gap between the positions of Flemish regionalists of the N-VA and the Francophone Socialists of the PS. This is not much of a surprise. What is more interesting to note, however, is that the path is not completely straightforward: there are competences where the positions of both groups of MPs come closer to each other. This is the case of noise regulation, defence, job market justice, scientific cooperation and road safety. So, if at first sight (for instance on the general state reform scale) the demands of the NV-A MPs and of the PS MPs are quite incompatible, when we dig deeper into the business of the policy transfers, common grounds appear on some policy transfers, even if their vision of the future of Belgium is dramatically different.

Figure 3a: N-VA MPs

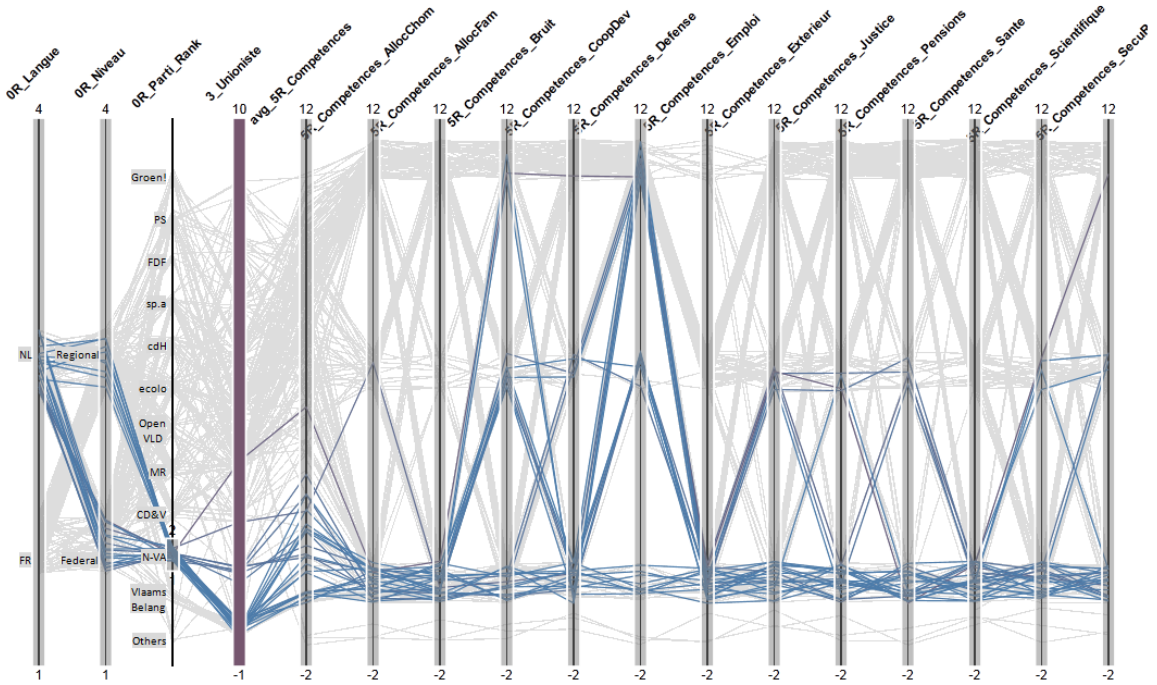
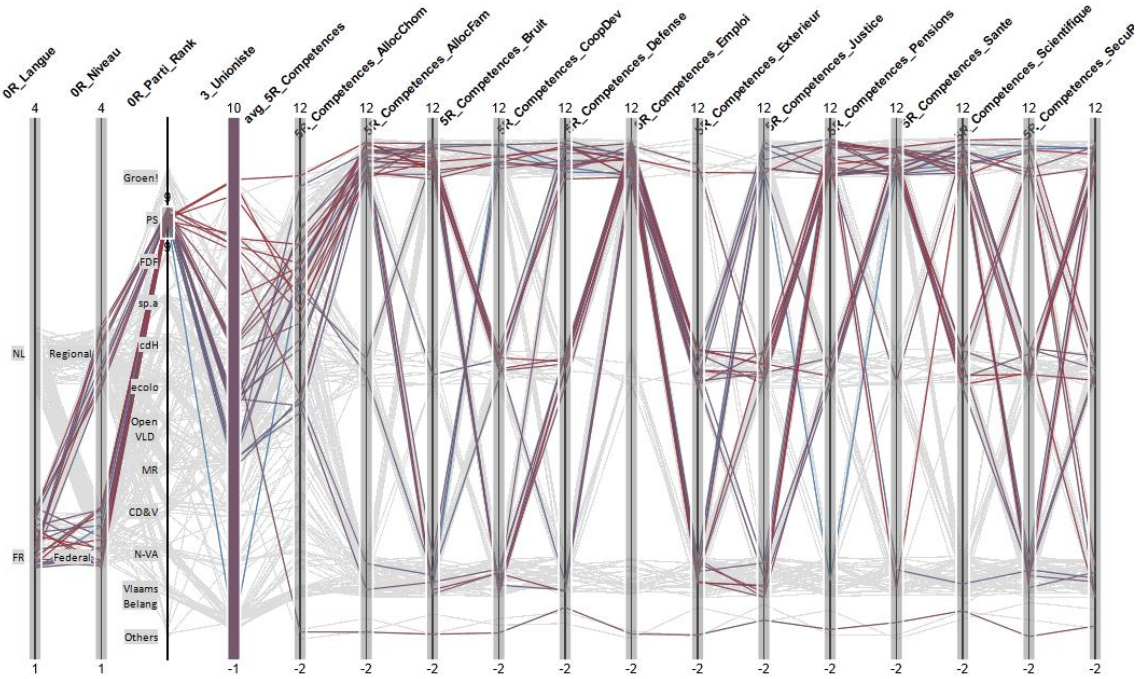


Figure 3b: PS MPs



Parallel coordinates of the MPs demonstrate (or at least confirm) two things. On the one hand, language does indeed matter, and much more than the level of governments. Being

a French-speaking MP or a Dutch-speaking MP is likely to be reflected in a different path. On the other hand, within one language group, there are also quite some variations. And between language groups, there are some convergences, especially when one looks at specific policy transfers rather than at the general question of the nature of the state reform. So the question that still needs to be answered is what really matters.

V. What does really matter?

It is often assumed language is the chief variable in Belgian politics, especially when it comes to the reform of the state. But it is also argued Belgium is a partitocracy, where parties are chief actors of Belgian politics. As a consequence, federal dynamics is Belgium could be summed up as an opposition between Dutch-speaking parties and French-speaking parties. Our research on MPs' positions vis-à-vis the future of Belgian federalism can help disentangle this complex puzzle: is it the language, the level of government, the political party or the individual that matter? To explore this question, we have done several logistic regression models with the language, level of government, political party and individual characteristics as explanatory variables. For the latter variable (individual characteristics), we have included in our models: genre, whether the MP is or has been candidate in Brussels or BHV district, primo MP (in her first mandate), MP with alternative federal career (at least two full mandates in federal assemblies), MP with alternative regional career (at least two full mandates in regional assemblies), MP with an integrated career (MP has been elected in federal and regional assemblies), length of federal experience (number of mandates in federal assemblies), length of regional experience (number of mandates in regional assemblies), length of parliamentary experience (number of MP mandates in total), MP who has been federal minister, MP who has been regional minister and MP who has been minister (addition of experience(s) as federal and regional minister).

The first logistic regression models (Table 2) look at the MPs' positions on the state reform (scale from 0 to 10) and compare the effect of the four main different variables. As Table 2 (where we report mainly the adjusted R^2 of the regression models and not the beta's which are not so useful here because of the interaction between the variables) strikingly shows language matters (adjusted R^2 of 13,3%) but above all political party (49% of the variance is explained by political party alone); and individual characteristics have a low impact (3,4%), while the level of government where the MP works has not effect at all (-0,8%). To refine the analysis we have run logistic regression models by language (not

reported here) and the results show that the important effect of the political party variable accounts in fact only for the Dutch-speaking party. In other words, knowing the party of a French-speaking MP does not help to explain her position vis-à-vis the state reform, but it does indeed very much help for Dutch-speaking MPs. Of course, one might argue this is so because of the presence within Dutch-speaking parties of strong regionalist, who are absent in French-speaking parties. To control for this, we have done the same logistic regression models, but excluding this time the MPs who answered 0, that is all powers to the Regions and Communities. The results are quite interesting: the effect of political party decreases (from 49% to 15,6%) but above all the effect of language almost disappears (from 13,3% to 1,8%).

Table 2: Logistic regressions: MPs' positions on the state reform

Dep. var: state reform	On all data (N=237)			Ignoring Q3=0 (N=201)		
Explanatory variables	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Level of government	2	0,0%	-0,8%	2	0,0%	-1,0%
Language	2	14,0%	13,3%	2	2,8%	1,8%
Political party	14	52,0%	49,0%	12	20,7%	15,6%
All three	16	52,5%	49,1%	14	21,4%	15,5%
Individual only	13	8,7%	3,4%	13	7,4%	1,0%
All four	28	55,7%	49,7%	26	27,7%	16,9%

Nonetheless, the general question on the nature (or the direction) of the state reform could be seen as too broad to reflect really the federal dynamics in Belgium, where the difficult compromise to reach is not so much about the direction of the state reform but rather about its scope. In this perspective, using the same techniques, we have run different logistic regressions models to apprehend the effect of the four main explanatory variables on the specific transfer of job market regulation (Table 3) and of defence (Table 4).

Table 3: Logistic regressions: MPs' positions on the transfer of job market regulation

Dep. var: Q5-Job market	On all data (N=237)			Ignoring Q3=0 (N=201)		
Explanatory variables	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Level of government	2	0,3%	-0,5%	2	0,4%	-0,6%
Language	2	16,3%	15,6%	2	10,6%	9,6%
Political party	14	27,2%	22,6%	12	19,9%	14,7%
All three	16	27,2%	21,9%	14	20,0%	13,9%
Individual only	13	16,6%	11,7%	13	14,9%	8,9%
All four	28	35,9%	27,2%	26	31,0%	20,5%

Table 3 shows a similar pattern (political party matters more than language), but on the transfer of job market regulation, language plays much of a role (15,6% on all data and 9,6% when full regionalists are ignored). The reason seems to be that the only MPs opposed to this regionalisation are French-speakers. All the Dutch-speaking MPs and a large group of French-speaking MPs are in favour of the regionalisation of job market policies. Nonetheless, on this specific question, individual characteristics do play a role (11,7% in the full sample, 8,9% when we exclude full regionalists). When we dig further we find that the main individual characteristic that accounts for this is Brussels (not reported on the table). MPs who are (or have been) elected in Brussels or in BHV district are more reluctant to regionalize job market regulation. Of course, it is partially related to language (there are two-thirds of them who are French-speaking) but this also has to do with the special status of Brussels related to its the specific political position (squeezed between the two main Regions) and to the specific patterns of its economy (which attracts a lot of Flemish and Walloon workers, but also has a very high rate of unemployment).

Table 4: Logistic regressions: MPs' positions on the transfer of defence

Dep. var: Q5-Defence	On all data (N=237)			Ignoring Q3=0 (N=201)		
Explanatory variables	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**df**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Level of government	2	0,0%	-0,8%	2	3,0%	2,1%
Language	2	12,4%	11,6%	2	0,3%	-0,8%
Political party	14	68,2%	66,2%	12	24,4%	19,5%
All three	16	68,5%	66,2%	14	25,1%	19,4%
Individual only	13	10,1%	4,8%	13	0,4%	-6,6%
All four	28	70,3%	66,3%	26	26,3%	15,1%

Table 4 with the question of the regionalisation of defence as dependent variable confirms political parties matter (66,2%), but not language (11,6%). This is even clearer when we ignore pure regionalists in the logistics regression models: language has no impact anymore (and individual characteristics neither). The parallel coordinates showed defence is the competence, which only very strong regionalists would like to see regionalized. All other MPs want to keep it federal. The logistic regressions demonstrate that it is indeed not the language divide that matters but the division between parties. That is the opposition between VB and N-VA, on the one hand, and the other parties (regardless of their language), on the other hand. This is not a totally astonishing finding, but in contrast to usual accounts of Belgian federal dynamics, it brings a more nuanced picture of the language divide in Belgium, even at the level of political elites.

VI. Conclusion

Belgian territorial politics is often summarized as a Dutch-speakers-French-speakers divide. All politics seems to be bind by this overarching cleavage. This is assumed to be true for both elites and citizens. Nonetheless, survey research has already shown the difference between Belgian citizens is rather a matter of degree than direction. Thus the language opposition seems to be more a matter of politicians than citizens. To explore this question, we have surveyed MPs. Our research shows that if we analyse the MPs' preferences for the future of Belgium, it is basically mainly the political party variable (and not so much the language variable, let alone the individual characteristics of the MPs and their level of government) that explain their preferences. This holds true when we survey them on the direction of the state reform but also when we survey them on specific policy transfers, which is closer to the real federal dynamics in Belgium. In fact, our findings confirm that the absence of the N-VA made possible an agreement on the 6th state reform between Dutch-speaking parties and French-speaking parties. The main opposition in Belgium rests on party politics rather than on language politics.

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