Can you Turn Tomorrow Regionalist if you were Yesterday Federalist? A Qualitative Assessment of Federal Preferences' Changes in Francophone Belgium

Min Reuchamps
Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS
Université de Liège
Belgium

Nathan Charlier
Université de Liège
Belgium

Introduction

To say the least, Belgium is currently a quite deeply divided society. In fact, the country is stuck in its longest period without government ever. In this turmoil, citizens can't really play an active role – beside street demonstrations or online actions. Nevertheless, most of them do not feel indifferent to the question of the future of federalism, or to put it more bluntly to the question of the future of Belgium. However, hitherto only elections results and survey data may give us a hint about citizens' federal preferences (Delwit & van Haute, 2008; Deschouwer, Delwit, Hooghe, & Walgrave, 2010; Frognier, De Winter, & Baudewyns, 2007; Swyngedouw, Billiet, & Goeminne, 2007). That's the reason why we tried to explore citizens' attitudes and opinions vis-à-vis Belgian federalism through the organization of mini-publics. In this paper, we focus mainly on a one-day deliberative event which gathered 64 "ordinary" French-speaking Belgian citizens – i.e. it was a linguistically homogenous group, albeit politically heterogeneous (Reuchamps, 2008, 2010) – but we also refer in the first of the paper to the mini-public held in Flanders. More specifically, the paper tackles an interesting puzzle: while half of the participants kept the same preference for the future of Belgian federalism (before and after the event), the other half changed their mind. To assess these federal preferences' (un)changes, we provide a thorough qualitative analysis of the group discussions. For over four hours, the 64 participants discussed their views on the future of Belgium in small groups. This very rich data offer insights on citizens' political preferences in a divided society and their potential evolution through a deliberative process. It can thus shed light on such a question as: can one turn tomorrow regionalist if she was yesterday federalist (or vice-versa)? And above all why?

To set the stage, the first part of the paper presents five profiles of citizens (from both sides of the linguistic border) which came out the analysis of both answers to pre- and post-questionnaires and group discussions. These profiles illuminate different perceptions and preferences for the future of their country. On this basis, we can dig deeper to the understanding of federal preferences and look more closely at the preferences of the participants in Liège. To do so, we first explore the results of a question from the questionnaire about their ideal scenario for Belgium. Then, we analyze the group discussions in order to try to understand why some participants changed their preferences and why some other participants did not change their preferences. Although a quantitative research would be needed to offer a greater leverage in terms of generalisations, such a qualitative study offer a deeper look into the federal preferences of the citizens, which fuel the dynamics at the heart of Belgium's federalism.

6th European Consortium for Political Research General Conference
University of Iceland, Reykjavik
August 25–27, 2011

Can you Turn Tomorrow Regionalist if you were Yesterday Federalist? A Qualitative Assessment of Federal Preferences' Changes in Francophone Belgium – *First Draft*

1. Federal Perceptions and Preferences in Belgium

Five different profiles may qualitatively be identified among citizens in Belgium: four in Wallonia – i.e. French-speaking Belgium – and five in Flanders – i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgium[1]. Four of the five profiles – unitarist, unionist, federalist and regionalist – are quite similar on both sides of the linguistic border, yet with some differences. The profile of the independentist has been mainly identified in the Flemish fieldwork.

A first profile is the profile of the unitarist. She has a dual unitary vision: on the one hand, the unity of the Belgians and, on the other hand, the unity of Belgium – since Belgians are united, Belgium should also be united. This dual vision is at the core of the profile of the unitarist. She is very unhappy with the functioning of the federal state because it exacerbates the conflicts, instead of reducing them; and, she also believes the federal system creates conflicts that would not exist on a more unitary system. On top of that, for the unitarist, the federal system is way too complex in Belgium. Moreover, politicians as well the media are seen to be responsible for the tensions between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians. Nonetheless, for the unitarist, these tensions are quite artificial – the product of the politicians – since Belgians are or at least should be united and above all a solidarity should unite them. Therefore, she fiercely opposes those who believe Flanders pays too much for Wallonia. To sum up, the unitarist has a – very – negative vision of federalism because it perpetuates the conflicts, and even creates them. In fact, she argues only the language distinguishes Flemings and Walloons. This vision is quite unusual in Belgium since it goes again the usual claim that Belgium is deeply divided. But the unitarist believes Belgians are united and formed one nation. It is therefore easier to understand why she sees federalism conflicting with her own vision of Belgium and of Belgians. Nonetheless, while the Walloon unitarist rejects the possibility of dual senses of belongings (for instance Walloon and Belgian or Flemish and Belgian), the Flemish unitarist accepts this idea, even though she feels only Belgian. For the future of Belgium, the unitarist wants ideally the return to the unitary state. However, the participation to the panel makes her understand such a return is definitely impossible in Belgium. Therefore, she favours a reinforcement of the federal state, i.e. a reduction of the autonomy of the Communities and the Regions.

The unionist shares with the unitarist the will for a united Belgium, but their approaches and lines of argument diverge. While the latter is guided by an ideal of unity, the former wishes the union of the two main communities of the country. For the unionist, there are definitely differences between Flemings and Walloons but they should not lead to the division of Belgium. In fact, they call for a peaceful coexistence. In this perspective, the federal system seems to be the best solution, even though its functioning is far to be optimal, especially because the politicians perpetuate the conflicts. Therefore, according to the unionist, the politicians should be distinguished from the citizens. Above all, the unionist fears demands for more regional autonomy, especially for Flanders. It is not that she does not recognize a dual identity – she herself feels both Belgian and Flemish or Belgian and francophone, with a preference for the Belgian identity – but she rejects demands for more regional autonomy because this might lead to the division of the country. In order to prevent the dislocation of Belgium, the unionist wants a reinforcement of the federal state which has the role to keep the union of Belgium. Nonetheless, the unionist is quite pessimistic because she sees an ever-increasing division of Belgium and Belgians. The French-speaking unionist

[1] For the sake of concision, in this section, we only present here the main elements of each profile without any quotations from citizens' discourses.

is even more pessimistic because she fears federalism will inevitably lead to the end of the country. We find here the so-called "paradox of federalism" (Anderson, 2004; Bakke & Wibbels, 2006; Balthazar, 1999; Buchanan, 1991; Cameron, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2009; Sinardet, 2009b): "[t]he fundamental question, then, is whether federalism provides a stable, long-lasting solution to the management of conflict in divided societies or is, instead, a temporary stop on a continuum leading to secession and independence. A federal arrangement that formally recognizes ethno-linguistic diversity to help manage the political system can also set this newly—or increasingly—federal state on a path to eventual disintegration" (Erk & Anderson, 2009, p. 192).

By contrast with the two previous profiles, this third ideal-type relies on a true federal vision of Belgium. Not only does the Belgian federal system ensures a peaceful coexistence between Dutch-speaking Belgians and French-speaking Belgians but also it recognizes the differences between the two groups and therefore enables them to implement distinct policies, more in line with each community's preferences. The federalist understands federalism in its classical definition: a mix of shared rule and self-rule (Burgess, 2006; Elazar, 1987). In fact, according to her, federalism is a try (*poging* in Dutch, *essai* in French) to share fairly the resources of the country and above all to ensure the country is viable on a long term. Nevertheless, federalism might perpetuate the tensions between the communities and especially between politicians of each side of the linguistic border (and this is also due to the lack of inter-community knowledge). But federalism is the best solution to ensure a pacific coexistence between the Dutch-speaking Belgians and the French-speaking Belgians. In fact, the federalist has a strong dual identity both Flemish and Belgian or francophone and Belgian. It does not mean she minimizes the differences between the two communities, to the contrary she very much acknowledges them; they are at the heart of Belgium's federalism. The federal system came into existence to accommodate these differences. The federalist's view of the system is not naïve, however. While the federal system has very positive elements, its complexity and the conflicts which paralyze it are important drawbacks. This is why the federalist wants to remain within a federal system but wants to make it stronger. To do so there should be transfers of power from the federal level to the regional and community level, but also from the latter to the former. Above all, what matters for the federalist is that the federal system works well because that's the best solution for Belgium. Finally, one should note that the evolution of the system is of crucial importance for the federalist. Should it remained stuck as it is now, the federalist might turn into a regionalist.

The regionalist wishes to remain within a federal framework – which is currently very problematic – but with a quite bigger autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. So regionalism is a matter of efficiency. In addition to this will for efficiency, the Flemish regionalist shows a strong Flemish identity, which is more important than her Belgian identity, which however still exists. This is not so much the case for the Walloon regionalist whose position is mainly explained by a will for – more – efficiency. Indeed, the regionalist from both side of the linguistic border is very dissatisfied with the functioning of the federal system. Federalism exacerbates conflicts instead of reducing it. The conflicts arise because of the differences between the two communities and therefore Regions and Communities should be allowed to follow separate paths, which will also accommodate the different identities to be found in Belgium. This is particularly relevant for the Flemish regionalist who feels Flanders pays too much for the other Regions. Yet, it does not mean she rejects every aspect related to Belgium; she feels Belgian to some extent. In fact, she believes stronger autonomy for Flanders would be the way to keep Belgium working. Finally, should further autonomy be

given to the Regions and the Communities, a regionalist is likely to turn into a federalist; on the contrary, should it not be given, a regionalist is likely to turn into an independentist.

The independentist is the fifth and last profile of citizens. It is mainly found in Flanders – even though it is not the most widespread profile, as surveys demonstrate (Deschouwer & Sinardet, 2010b; Swyngedouw & Rink, 2008). The independentist wishes the independence of Flanders; that is the scission of Belgium. This objective takes its foundations in a specific set of perceptions and identities which distinguishes the independentist from the other profiles. There are two main reasons behind the will for separation – they are different but they reinforced each other. On the one hand, the independentist anchors her identity in a Flemish nation, distinct of Belgium. The Flemish are in a fact a nation without state, as it also the case for other nations such as the Basques or the Québécois (Guibernau, 1999; Keating, 1997, 2001). She feels exclusively Flemish and Belgian identity and Flemish identity are incompatible. Walloons or francophones and Flemish are very different; so different that a common living-together is not justified. On the other hand, according to her, the federal system is totally inefficient and the reason why it is inefficient is because the whole system relies on agreements which bring more problems than solutions. The deadlocks are also the results of the Walloon vetos. Therefore is not only a matter of identity but also a matter of efficiency. Lately this second strand of the argument has been more emphasized. The Flemish nationalist discourses have been "denationalized" (Sinardet, 2009a); the division of Belgium is justified on the basis of rationality – the manifesto of the group in De Warande is a perfect example of such a discourse (Denkgreop In de Warande, 2005) even though the figures it relies on can be contested (Pagano, Verbeke, & Accaputo, 2006). Thus, the independentist does not see any future for Belgian federalism in the long run. However, on the short term, she accepts any reform which would allow for more autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. It is the first step toward the separation. Above all, she believes the separation is the best solution for all the Belgians, including the Walloons, because the new states will be more efficient than the current federal system.

The five profiles which were found in the citizens' panel are quite different from one another even though some of them share similar features. At the core of each of them, was the relationship between federal perceptions and preferences which animate the federal dynamics. Moreover, we have shown why some profiles might be more volatile than others. We now need to dig deeper in the federal preferences' changes or non-changes (among French-speaking citizens in order to focus on the differences within a linguistic group rather than between the linguistic groups). To do so, in the next section, we focus on one question from the questionnaire and in the last section, on the basis of the group discussions, we seek to understand the (non)changes.

2. French-speaking Citizens and the Future of Belgium

The pre- and post-questionnaire was made of 120 questions about a large variety of topics related to the federalism in Belgium (as well as usual socio-demographics)[2]. Most of them were multiple-choice questions. As of the Future of Belgium *per se*, the question 104 (Q104) was especially important because in one question it taped the whole dynamics of the future of Belgium. It read "Quelle politique souhaitez-vous pour la Belgique ?", which can be translated as "Which policy (in terms of future) do you wish for Belgium?". Five scenarios

[2] Of course, the design of this research does not – at all – allow us to undertake proper inferential statistical analyses. Therefore, we are being very careful in the quantitative analyses we are doing, which are mere descriptive analyses. In fact, the aim of the event was to yield mainly qualitative data.

were given – and they have been the same for almost 20 years (Frognier & Aish, 1994, 1999, 2003; Frognier, et al., 2007):

A) Davantage de compétences pour les Régions et les Communautés
= More power to the Regions and the Communities
B) Le rétablissement de l'État belge unitaire
= Return to the unitary state
C) Le statu quo de l'État fédéral actuel
= Status quo of the current federal state
D) Moins de compétences pour les Régions et les Communautés
= Less power for the Regions and the Communities
E) La scission de la Belgique
= Division of Belgium
F) Je ne sais pas
= I don't know (only in the pre-questionnaire)

Table 1 Question 104 T1 (rows) and T2 (columns)

Items	More power	Return to unitary state	Status quo	Less power	Division	Total (T1)
More power	5	0	5	0	0	10
Return to unitary state	1	4	7	3	0	15
Status quo	6	0	19	2	0	27
Less power	1	0	0	2	0	3
Division	0	0	0	1	1	2
D.K.	0	1	1	3	0	5
Total (T2)	13	5	32	11	1	62

N = 62.

To follow the evolution between T1 and T2, one should first read the row (for instance, in T1, 10 participants wanted "more power") then the column (for instance, in T2, 13 participants wanted "more power", among them 5 already wanted "more power" in T1, but 1 "return to unitary state", 6 "status quo", and 1 "less power").

In light of Table 1, 31 participants did change favoured future for Belgium and 31 participants did not[3]. Among the latter group, the scenario of the status quo was dominant (19 participants). 5 participants favoured in T1 and in T2 more preferences for the Regions and the Communities, 4 the return to unitary state, and 2 less powers for the Regions and the Communities, i.e. more powers for the federal state. 1 Participant was in favour of the division of the country in T1 and in T2. Among the former group (those who changed opinion), the changes are of different nature.

First, there are the changes which might be seen as congruent in regard to a learning process:
- 6 participants moved from the status quo to less power to the Regions and the Communities;
- 7 participants moved from the return to unitary state to status quo;

[3] The participants C9 and H4 did not answer question 104 respectively in T1 and T2 were excluded from the table.

- 3 participants moved from the return to unitary state to less power to the Regions and the Communities;
- 1 participant moved from the return to unitary state to more power to the Regions and the Communities;
- 1 participant moved from less power to the Regions and the Communities to more power to the Regions and the Communities.

These changes seem to be an adjustment of the preferences following the learning process that occurred during the day. Indeed, much of the discussion was about the complexity of the political situation in Belgium, the impossible return to the unitary state and the unlikely status quo. Therefore, participants have developed more realist preferences, more in line with the dynamics of federalism in Belgium. This adjustment results in a change of preference which may be more or less important (in terms of the political distance between two scenarios). Indeed, the two last participants mentioned above moved from a quite national stance (return to unitary state and less power to the Regions and the Communities) to a regional stance (more power to the Regions and the Communities); that's quite a leap between the two stances.

Next to these "congruent" changes, there are changes which are more surprising, i.e. the direction of the change goes against the federal dynamics in Belgium (towards more autonomy to the Regions and the Communities). It should be emphasised here that there is no value judgment in our enterprise (we do not seek to be normative and to tell how participants ought to think; it's rather the contrary, we endeavour to understand their preferences' change).
- among the D.K. in T1, 1 went for the status quo, 3 less power and 1 the return to unitary state (in this case, we should not speak of changes *per se*, but we should notice their new preferences go against more power to the Regions and the Communities; in addition, already in T1, 4 of them did not agree with the division of Belgium (Q92));
- 5 participants moved from more power to the Regions and the Communities to the status quo (to explain this more federal stance, we can posit these two scenarios are in fact not that distant from each other, compared to the others: the division of Belgium, on the one hand, and the return to unitary state or less power for the Regions and the Communities);
- 2 participants moved from the status quo to less power for the Regions and the Communities;
- 1 participant moved from the division of Belgium to less power for the Regions and the Communities at the end of the day (this quite extreme change is surprising: yet, when we look at her answers to other questions of preferences (Q88 through Q92), she did not agree with the scenario less power for the Regions and the Communities (Q91); how we should treat such phenomenon is still a unanswered question).

So far, we have distinguished between congruent changes (i.e. changes in line with the federal dynamics) and more surprising changes, i.e. changes which are incongruent with the federal dynamics. We also have noticed that there are changes for scenarios which are quite close to the previous choice (for instance, from return to unitary state to less power) but there are also more distant changes (for instance, from return to unitary state to more power). So, to answer the first question of this paper – can one turn tomorrow regionalist if she was yesterday federalist (or vice-versa)? –, we may give a tentative yes and no answer. Indeed, there are changes from a federalist stance to a more regionalist stance (or vice-versa), but it is not because someone moves from what we could consider a regionalist stance (more power) to a more federalist stance (status quo) that it means this person is a regionalist or a federalist. To be able to give such a label, we should consider a wide variety of indicators (it is what we

have done to establish the different profiles presented in the first section). In addition, if theoretically there is a real difference between the scenarios of the question 104, for some participants this difference might not be that important, and this might explain some changes. Moreover, changes may also be explained by the interpretation of the question itself. Indeed, as the group discussions will show (see section 3), this question may be understood in two ways: either what is your ideal scenario (and, on this regard, one can wish the return to the unitary state even though it is not in line with the current federal dynamics – ideally the same person might which a different federal dynamics) or how do you think the future of Belgium will look like (on this regard, it is likely that a participant who would have chosen in T1 an ideal scenario goes for a scenario more in line with the different dynamics even though ideally he does not wish it). Therefore, participants may have given a different interpretation to the question between T1 and T2. Our analysis of the group discussions will confirm this explanation for some changes.

Before going into a qualitative analysis, we should analyze the changes through bivariate analyses to look for correlations[4]. To do so, we use the two groups: those who did change and those who did not change. First of all, are there differences in terms of socio-demographics between the two members of the two groups? In terms of gender, there are 19 men and 12 women in the group who did not change and 15 men and 16 women in the group who did change. But this difference is not explained by gender but by political interest. We merged the three indicators of political interest into one single index. Unsurprisingly, we find a correlation between political interest and non-change. This trend is confirmed by the indicators of political knowledge – and we know from previous research that political interest and political knowledge is correlated (Deschouwer & Sinardet, 2010a). Indeed, there were five questions of political knowledge in the questionnaire (merged together in order to have an index): the participants who had a weak political knowledge in T1 changed opinion. However, some participants (16) with a high index of political knowledge also changed their preference – the other 25 participants with a high political knowledge did not change their preference. Thus, to understand more thoroughly the changes, we should go beyond the simple measure of political interest and political knowledge – even though these variables do play a role. The last questions of the questionnaire T2 confirmed this (Table 2). At the end of the day, when we asked the participants whether their knowledge, perception and preferences changed, the results were similar to both groups. Above all, from these questions, we can assume the participation to the deliberative event had an impact. We now have to explore qualitatively how this experience had an impact – or not – on the question 104.

Table 2 At the end of the day…

At the end of the day, you have...		Group "did not change"	Group "did change"
Higher knowledge about federalism in Belgium	Agree	29	27
	Did not agree	2	3
Change of perception toward federal system	Agree	25	23
	Did not agree	6	7
Change of preferences vis-à-vis the future of Belgium	Agree	19	19
	Did not agree	12	11

N = 61.

[4] In the conclusion, we shall suggest to use multivariate analyses using the DQI.

3. A Qualitative Assessment of Federal Preferences' Changes and Non-changes

The first two sections showed how some 64 French-speaking citizens think about Belgium and her federalism. There are different visions competing for the future of Belgium. And these visions are not necessarily static. After one day of discussions, half of the participants changed their ideal preference for the future of Belgium. In the previous section, we showed political interest and political knowledge have an impact in this dynamics. We want to go further and dig into the group discussions where we might find hints to explain the federal preferences' changes and non-changes. Before doing so, it is important to explain the design of the group discussions. In total, the participants met four times in focus groups. Each group was made of 6 to 9 participants and was moderated by a facilitator. Above all, the objective of the group discussions was not to reach a consensus; i.e. there was no decision-making process. Rather, the group was designed to be an avenue to express one's ideas and opinions about Belgium's federalism and listen' to other participants' views. This is important to keep in mind in our qualitative assessment of changes and non-changes.

Between the focus groups, participants were gathered in plenary sessions where they met two "experts" of federalism: in the morning, Prof. Christian Behrendt (a constitutional lawyer) and, in the afternoon, Paul Piret, journalist in one the main daily newspaper in francophone Belgium. Around lunchtime, they met with two politicians: Yvan Ylieff, a francophone socialist and Jaak Gabriels, a Flemish liberal. Our hypothesis to explain some of the changes is the impact of these lectures. To test this hypothesis, we went through each group discussions to look for hints of a potential impact. We did find an impact. The lecture of Paul Piret in particular seems to have had a strong impact on the perceptions and preferences of the participants. In his 30-minute lecture he explained the causes of the institutional crisis in Belgium and the different scenarios for her future. Notably, he argued the division of Belgium was unlikely because of the major problems to be resolved in this scenario (for instance, Brussels), the idea of a "coquille vide", an empty shell is possible but not a good solution for the francophones, the return to unitary state is a mere utopia. Therefore, he argued for a "refonte" or a "statu quo amélioré", an improved status quo. To do so, some competences should be given back to the federal state and other should be devolved to the Regions and the Communities. In the group discussions, we find references to these different elements and they shed light on the changes and non-changes on the question 104.

In the group G, the discussions were much influenced by the lecture of Paul Piret. *In fine*, 7 out of the 8 participants in this group chose the status quo as their ideal scenario, especially if it's an improved status quo, as Paul Piret has recommended. In the other groups, the influence of Paul Piret's lecture could also be felt. Quite a few of the group members refered to him and above all chose the status quo in T2 – in T1, they were more prone to the return of unitary state or more power to the federal state. The following quotes are good examples of the dynamics of the group discussion (emphasis is ours).

> B6 : Et après, revenir en arrière, refédéraliser *comme disait le journaliste*, c'est peut-être plus possible vraiment. Ce serait peut-être plus simple mais ce ne serait pas simple d'y repasser. Donc, *comme il disait, un statu quo amélioré* mais je ne sais pas vraiment qu'est-ce qu'on pourrait vraiment améliorer.

> B9 : Moi je crois que je fais confiance à la solution qu'ils trouveront qui sera une *refonte*, qui sera une refédéralisation mais qui ne sera sûrement pas une sécession.

> B1 : Il est certain que certaines compétences sont à […] fédéraliser, et d'autres, à replacer au niveau communauté, région, etc. Donc, je vois très bien qu'il y a un chiasme pour certaines compétences qui quittent l'État fédéral pour les régions et communautés et inversement. Donc, *c'est que le journaliste a appelé tout à l'heure une refonte. J'ai trouvé cela... la meilleure solution* à laquelle je tiens par, un peu, sentimentalisme belge, mais je crois que par pragmatisme, c'est la seule solution pour évoluer et d'envisager un avenir serein, donc qui soit dépourvu de crises ou de crisettes, de réformes et de réformettes, avoir une bonne mouture définitive qui permette une sorte de pacification. Je crois que c'est vers ce but là qu'il faudrait se diriger.
>
> B3 : Ah ben moi, globalement comme tout le monde. Je pense que le mieux c'est de rester sur notre fédéralisme mais on peut modifier quelques *refontes*.
>
> C5 : […] Je pense qu'on a un peu petit peu entendu ça dans l'intervention de monsieur ici qui parle finalement, qui *conclut c'est une réforme du fédéralisme vers quoi on va, de toute façon l'État unitaire, on n'y retournera pas*. Ben oui ça... mais voilà cette refonte là, je trouve que finalement comme tout le monde peut-être, c'est vers ça qu'on va mais *à choisir, c'est peut-être une moins... simplement fait moins peur qu'un confédéralisme* qu'on peut craindre, comme une scission comme on l'entend pour le moment.
>
> D1 : En fait, quand je pensais à la fin de la Belgique, c'est parce que je n'avais pas d'autre formulation. En réalité, ce que je crois le plus, c'est la *coquille*. Moi je pense plutôt qu'on va vers la coquille, une coquille vidée de la totalité de sa substance à peu de choses près, avec juste la carte de visite.
>
> D3 : […] Donc, pour quelle politique adopter, bien, pour moi, le mieux ce serait peut-être de *garder le statu quo qu'on connaît maintenant, mais en l'améliorant un petit peu*, donc il faudrait relancer le débat, comme vous disiez avant, des compétences, donc peut-être modifier à ce niveau là […]
>
> D6 : […] Pour ce qui est d'une *refonte des compétences*, à mon avis, c'est ce qu'il faudra aussi, mais ça implique de *pouvoir aussi effectivement refédéraliser* parfois des compétences […]

In other groups, we also found this dynamics and it confirms the influence of experts on subsequent group discussions. Therefore the question is: what would have happened with a different – set of – expert(s)? Would the "results" of the day be different? The experts were asked to give an objective account of the federal dynamics in Belgium – what, to our view, they did. The impossible return and the unlikely division of Belgium are indeed no big revelations about Belgian politics. Nonetheless, it was important someone, like Paul Piret, explained the participants why some scenarios are more likely than others, because without this information – and it was the goal of this event to provide such information – several citizens think they are all likely. This is very much the case with the scenario of the return to unitary state. Indeed, surveys show one third of the francophones – it's decreasing, however – would like this to happen (Frognier, De Winter, & Baudewyns, 2008). Above all, it seemed he did not appear as being too subjective. Most of the participants perceived Paul Piret as being objective: his task was to present different scenarios and to leave the participants choose. It is what he did.

> C2: En fait, j'ai trouvé Monsieur Piret très pratique dans ses explications, dans sa façon d'aborder le sujet. Disons, dans la façon de synthétiser [inaudible]. Autrement dit, j'ai franchement apprécié cette façon de faire, d'exposer les choses qui étaient vues du côté pratique de l'ornière. Et donc, je suis quelque part assez modéré dans ma façon de dire les

> choses, *je le rejoins pratiquement sur tous les points, je le trouve assez modéré également*, peut-être dans ses conclusions. *Je le crois prudent mais modéré, ça me convient assez bien, je me retrouve.*
>
> D5 : J'aurais voulu lui (Paul Piret) demander, "pour quelle solution êtes-vous ?", mais je crois qu'il penchait pour la dernière, la refonte du fédéral. *Toute réflexion faite, je pense à l'heure actuelle qu'il a raison*. Je crois qu'à l'heure actuelle, on devrait essayer d'aller vers la refonte la meilleure possible.
>
> C5 : […] Je pense qu'on a un peu petit peu entendu ça dans l'intervention de monsieur ici qui parle finalement, qui *conclut c'est une réforme du fédéralisme vers quoi on va, de toute façon l'État unitaire, on n'y retournera pas*. Ben oui ça... mais voilà cette refonte là, je trouve que finalement comme tout le monde peut-être, c'est vers ça qu'on va mais *à choisir, c'est peut-être une moins... simplement fait moins peur qu'un confédéralisme* qu'on peut craindre, comme une scission comme on l'entend pour le moment.

The other speakers did also have an impact on the participants, but not so much on their preferences. It was rather on the ground of their perceptions. For instance, from the lecture of Christian Behrendt, the participants kept the high complexity of the federal system – even more complex than what they thought. The two politicians gave a different image of the politicians, especially different from the traditional image: French-speaking politicians refusing more power to the Regions and the Communities and Dutch-speaking politicians demanding more autonomy for Flanders. Yvan Ylieff and Jaak Gabriels gave more nuanced portrait of the – sometimes uneasy – relations between the two main communities in Belgium. Above all, the combination of the perceptions and the preferences were studied in the first section and gave birth to the five different profiles. As of the changes and non-changes, one last element should be emphasized (it has already been mentioned): the interpretation of the question 104 was understood in different ways. Moreover, the scenarios themselves could be understood slightly differently. The following quotes illustrate these differences.

> D3 : […] Donc, pour quelle politique adopter, bien, pour moi, le mieux ce serait peut-être de garder le statu quo qu'on connaît maintenant, mais en l'améliorant un petit peu, donc il faudrait relancer le débat, comme vous disiez avant, des compétences, donc peut-être modifier à ce niveau là […]
>
> B6 : Et après, revenir en arrière, refédéraliser comme disait le journaliste, c'est peut-être plus possible vraiment. Ce serait peut-être plus simple mais ce ne serait pas simple d'y repasser. Donc, comme il disait, un statu quo amélioré mais je ne sais pas vraiment qu'est-ce qu'on pourrait vraiment améliorer. Mais c'est sûr que vu la complexité des régimes que l'on a vue le matin, on ne pourrait que améliorer, mais bon, je ne sais pas exactement quoi.
> A : D'accord, donc plutôt statu quo amélioré et ce qu'il disait je pense, corrigez-moi si ce n'est pas vrai, c'est que le retour à l'État unitaire était plutôt impensable, que la réfédéralisation on pouvait y penser pour des matières...
> B6 : Oui, si l'on prend depuis le début. Mais si l'on prend la situation où elle en est... il faudrait tout supprimer pour repartir sur de nouvelles bases mais ce n'était pas dans les propositions...
>
> B1 : […] Donc, je vois très bien qu'il y a un chiasme pour certaines compétences qui quittent l'État fédéral pour les régions et communautés et inversement. Donc, c'est que le journaliste a appelé tout à l'heure une refonte. J'ai trouvé cela... la meilleure solution à laquelle je tiens par, un peu, sentimentalisme belge, mais je crois que par pragmatisme, c'est la seule solution pour évoluer et d'envisager un

> avenir serein, donc qui soit dépourvu de crises ou de crisettes, de réformes et de réformettes, avoir une bonne mouture définitive qui permette une sorte de pacification. Je crois que c'est vers ce but là qu'il faudrait se diriger. […]
>
> B9 : Moi, ce qui me fait rire, c'est que quand j'ai entendu Monsieur Gabriels, il a dit qu'il fallait espérer et que comme cela que, espérance comme disait Jean-Paul II... Il disait qu'il espérait qu'ils arrivent à un consensus entre eux. Moi je crois que je fais confiance à la solution qu'ils trouveront qui sera une refonte, qui sera une refédéralisation mais qui ne sera sûrement pas une sécession.

4. Conclusion

Finally, the changes are usually the results of evolution of preferences but the nature of these changes are different. Some of the participants experienced a learning process: they did not know enough about Belgian politics to have their own opinion – the participation to this mini-public helped them to make their own decision about the future of Belgium. Others had an opinion – sometimes a strong opinion – but this opinion was not in line with the current federal dynamics. Their change of preference was thus the result of the confrontation with reality. It was a form of realism or pragmatism. There were also changes which were not really changes because, for instance, for these participants more power or the status quo is in fact the same scenario; it is an improved status quo. On this regard, our qualitative assessment is insightful. It is complementary with a more quantitative – descriptive – analysis. Nonetheless, as a next step, in the wake of the work of Didier Caluwaerts, we shall use the discourse quality index, designed by a group of scholars studying deliberation in legislatures (Bächtiger, Rosenberg, Pedrini, Ryser, & Steenbergen, 2009; Bächtiger, Spörndli, Steenbergen, & Steiner, 2005, 2007; Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004) to verify whether the quality of deliberation may explain changes and non-changes.

One last remark, the data presented here was collected in the autumn of 2007. At the time, Belgium was – already – experiencing a political crisis. Four years later, the crisis is still with us and the scenario of the status quo has become very unlikely. Therefore, it would be interesting to organize a similar event with the same participants. It is definitely a promising avenue of research: collecting longitudinal deliberative data…

References

Anderson, L. M. (2004). Exploring the paradox of autonomy: federalism and secession in North America. *Regional & Federal Studies, 14*(1), 89-112.

Bächtiger, A., Rosenberg, S., Pedrini, S., Ryser, M., & Steenbergen, M. R. (2009). *Discourse Quality Index 2: An updated measurement instrument for deliberative processes*. Paper presented at the 5th ECPR General Conference.

Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., Steenbergen, M. R., & Steiner, J. (2005). The Deliberative Dimensions of Legislatures. *Acta Politica, 40*(2), 225-238.

Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., Steenbergen, M. R., & Steiner, J. (2007). Deliberation in Legislatures: Antecedents and Outcomes. In S. Rosenberg (Ed.), *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy : Can the People Govern?* (pp. 82-100). Basingstoke ; New York Palgrave Macmillan.

Bakke, K. M., & Wibbels, E. (2006). Diversity, Disparity, and Civil Conflict in Federal States. *World Politics, 59*(1), 1-50.

Balthazar, L. (1999). The Quebec experience: Success or failure? *Regional & Federal Studies, 9*(1), 153-169.

Buchanan, A. E. (1991). *Secession : the morality of political divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Burgess, M. (2006). *Comparative Federalism: Theory and practice*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Cameron, D. (2009). The Paradox of Federalism: Some Practical Reflections. *Regional & Federal Studies, 19*(2), 309- 319.

Delwit, P., & van Haute, E. (Eds.). (2008). *Le vote des Belges (Bruxelles - Wallonie, 10 juin 2007)*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Denkgreop In de Warande. (2005). *Manifest. Voor een zelfstandig Vlaanderen in Europa*. Brussel: Denkgreop In de Warande.

Deschouwer, K., Delwit, P., Hooghe, M., & Walgrave, S. (Eds.). (2010). *Les voix du peuple. Le comportement électoral au scrutin du 10 juin 2009*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Deschouwer, K., & Sinardet, D. (2010a). Langue, identité et comportement électoral. In K. Deschouwer, P. Delwit, M. Hooghe & S. Walgrave (Eds.), *Les voix du peuple. Le comportement électoral au scrutin du 10 juin 2009* (pp. 61-79). Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Deschouwer, K., & Sinardet, D. (2010b). Taal, identiteit en stemgedrag. In K. Deschouwer, P. Delwit, M. Hooghe & S. Walgrave (Eds.), *De stemmen van het volk. Een analyse van het kiesgedag in Vlaanderen en Wallonië op 7 juni 2009*. Bruxelles: VUB Press.

Elazar, D. J. (1987). *Exploring Federalism*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Erk, J., & Anderson, L. (2009). The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions? *Regional & Federal Studies, 19*(2), 191 -202.

Frognier, A.-P., & Aish, A.-M. (Eds.). (1994). *Élections : la fêlure ? Enquête sur le comportement électoral des Wallons et des Francophones*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.

Frognier, A.-P., & Aish, A.-M. (Eds.). (1999). *Des élections en trompe-l'oeil. Enquête sur le comportement électoral des Wallons et des Francophones*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.

Frognier, A.-P., & Aish, A.-M. (Eds.). (2003). *Élections : la rupture ? Le comportement des Belges face aux élections de 1999.* Bruxelles: De Boeck.

Frognier, A.-P., De Winter, L., & Baudewyns, P. (2008). Les Wallons et la réforme de l'Etat. Une analyse sur la base de l'enquête post-électorale de 2007. Pôle Interuniversitaire sur l'Opinion publique et la Politique, Université catholique de Louvain.

Frognier, A.-P., De Winter, L., & Baudewyns, P. (Eds.). (2007). *Élections : le reflux ? Comportements et attitudes lors des élections en Belgique*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.

Guibernau, M. (1999). *Nations without States. Political Communities in a Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Keating, M. (1997). Stateless Nation-Building: Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland in the Changing State System. *Nations and Nationalism, 3*(4), 689-717.

Keating, M. (2001). *Plurinational Democracy : Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Pagano, G., Verbeke, M., & Accaputo, A. (2006). Le manifeste du groupe In de Warande. *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*(1913-1914).

Reuchamps, M. (2008). Les Belges francophones et le fédéralisme. À la découverte de leurs perceptions et de leurs préférences fédérales. *Fédéralisme Régionalisme, 8*(2).

Reuchamps, M. (2010). *Les citoyens et le fédéralisme. Perceptions et préférences fédérales en Belgique et au Canada.* Université de Liège, Liège.

Sinardet, D. (2009a, 5 octobre). De natie versus de cijfers. *De Standaard*.

Sinardet, D. (2009b). Futur(s) de la fédération belge : paradoxes fédéraux et paradoxes belges. In B. Fournier & M. Reuchamps (Eds.), *Le fédéralisme en Belgique et au Canada. Comparaison sociopolitique* (pp. 209-230). Bruxelles: De Boeck Université.

Steiner, J., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., & Steenbergen, M. R. (2004). *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Swyngedouw, M., Billiet, J., & Goeminne, B. (Eds.). (2007). *De Kiezer Onderzocht. De verkiezingen van 2003 en 2004 in Vlaanderen*. Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven.

Swyngedouw, M., & Rink, N. (2008). *Hoe Vlaams-Belgischgezind zijn de Vlamingen? Een analyse op basis van het postelectorale verkiezingsonderzoek 2007*. Leuven: Instituut voor Sociaal en Politiek Opinieonderzoek (ISPO).