

Identities or good governance: What shapes citizens' attitudes towards federalism in Belgium?

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Hitherto identities have been one the main driving forces of the federal dynamics in Belgium and they have played an active role in the transformation of the country from a unitary state to a federal state. More recently, while discussions – and tensions – have been continuously very hot about the reform of the federal state, the autonomist discourse has been – at least to some extent – denationalized and the emphasis on identities has been replaced by a more rational discourse, i.e. a discourse of good governance. That is to say, the partisans of more autonomy for the regions make their case not on the basis of identity differences between Flemings and Walloons but rather on differences about economic and political governance between Flemings and Walloons. On the other hand, while partisans of the status quo still hold a strong – albeit not exclusive – Belgian identity, they also put forward a discourse of good governance but based on a well-balanced federal system where both the federal government and the regions/communities have strong powers. Therefore, one might wonder whether these – new – discourses have a real impact on the citizens (and on their electoral behaviour) and above all what shape their attitudes towards federalism in Belgium; i.e. whether identities, good governance or a combination of both are the main explaining variables of preferences for the future of Belgium. Using the PARTIREP 2009 Election survey, we seek to disentangle this complex puzzle and shed light on citizens' preferences for the future of their country. In a time when the Belgian federation is stuck in a deep crisis, such endeavour should bring interesting insights on the federal dynamics from a citizen's perspective.

Federalism; Belgium; Identities; Good governance; Citizens; Preferences

Introduction

Since 2007, a long crisis political crisis has put tremendous pressure on Belgian federalism. While the discussion has been conducted mainly been at the level of elites – as it has almost always been the case in this country (Deschouwer, 2009) – one might wonder and ask: what about the citizens? In other words, what shapes citizens' attitudes towards federalism in Belgium? Hitherto identities have been one the main driving forces of the federal dynamics in Belgium and they played an active role in the transformation of the country from a unitary state to a federal state (Erk, 2008). The assumption is that citizens increasingly identify with the substate level, and that, as a consequence, they develop a preference for a federal system with a large degree of autonomy for the regions and communities in the country. More recently, while discussions and tensions have been continuously very hot about the reform of the federal state, the autonomist discourse has been – at least to some extent – denationalized (Sinardet, 2009) and the emphasis on identities has been replaced by a more rational discourse, i.e. a discourse of good governance (Reuchamps, 2011). That is to say, the partisans of more autonomy for the regions make their case not on the basis of alleged identity differences between Flemings and Walloons but rather on differences about economic and political governance between Flemings and Walloons. On the other hand, while partisans of the status quo still hold on to a strong – albeit not exclusive – Belgian identity, they also put forward a discourse of good governance but based on a well-balanced federal system where both the federal government and the regions/communities have strong powers. Therefore, one might wonder whether these – new – discourses have a real impact on the citizens (and on their electoral behaviour) and above all what shape their attitudes towards federalism in Belgium. Our main research question therefore is whether identities, good governance or a combination of both are the main explaining variables of preferences for the future of Belgium.

In this paper we want to address a number of research questions. First of all, we want to assess how strong substate identities actually are among the Belgian population, and whether they are more dominant than the identification with the federal state level. Second, we assess whether this feeling of a national or regional identity has an effect on the preference for a specific form of federalism. To address these questions, we use the first wave of the PARTIREP 2009 election survey which was conducted (in a face-to-face manner) in the

beginning of the electoral campaign (from February through May) for the 2009 regional election in Belgium (N = 2331)¹.

Belgian federalism, identities, language and preferences

In a first question we assess whether citizens identify most strongly with the national or regional level. Despite the fact that at the moment of the survey, the political crisis about the future of the Belgian state already dragged on for two years, it is striking to note that the national level of identification clearly is still the strongest. Half of the respondents claim that they, first of all, identify with the level of the federal state. This percentage, however, is higher among French speaking respondents (55.6 per cent) than among Dutch speaking respondents (44.5 per cent). Another obvious difference is that the regional identity is more prevalent among the Dutch language group (26 per cent) than among the French language group (16 per cent). Mirroring this trend, it can be noted that the identification with the European level is stronger in the French language area, than in the Dutch language area. These results are in line with previous research on identities based on a similar question (De Winter, 2007).

Table 1. Identification according to language group

First identification with...	French	Dutch	All
Europe	16.7	9.5	12.9
Belgium	55.6	44.5	49.8
Region	15.7	26.2	21.2
Local	12.0	19.8	16.0
n	1121	1204	2325

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2009

To assess citizens' attitudes towards federalism, we have to bring into the picture a second question: the question of their policy preference. Respondents could indicate on a 0 to 10 scale what solution they preferred for the constitutional problems of the Belgium federation. On one extreme side of this scale we find an option to give all political powers to the substates, thus effectively ending the Belgian federation. This radical option, that is favoured

¹. For more information about the survey we can refer to the books that were published based on the results of the PartiRep survey (Deschouwer *et al.*, 2010a; 2010b). PATIREP is an Interuniversity Attraction Pole (IAP) funded by the Belgian Science Policy. It involves the universities of Antwerp (UA), Brussels (VUB and ULB), Leiden (Universiteit Leiden), and Leuven (KULeuven). For more information about PARTIREP: <http://www.partirep.eu/>.

by the Flemish parties Vlaams Belang and N-VA, however, does not receive all that much popular support. Only five per cent of all respondents favour this solution, and what is striking is that in this respect there is not a difference between the Dutch and the French speaking respondents. The position that more powers should be devolved toward the regional governments, however, is far more popular in the Flemish region than it is in the Walloon region. A small minority of four per cent on the Flemish side and nine per cent on the French side would opt for a return to a unitary state. This variable will serve as the main dependent variable in our hypothesis: do respondent favour a further devolution toward the regions, or rather a return to a unitary state?

Table 2. Policy preference by region

	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 federal state (score 6-9)	20.3	29.6
All powers for the federal state (score 10)	3.5	8.9

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2009

Looking at the relations between these two important questions, Sinardet and Deschouwer have shown there are slight differences between the regions but also within the regions (Deschouwer et Sinardet, 2010). In Flanders, where the regional identity is stronger, we find – not surprisingly – a stronger support for full autonomy and more powers for the substates (68 per cent vs. a mean of 41.5 per cent). On the other hand, those who have Belgium as a first identification do not necessarily lean towards a stronger support for the federal state; they are evenly distributed. In Wallonia, the support for more power for the substates is also – but less strongly– related to the regional identity. As in Flanders, the Walloons who identify with Belgium first do not necessarily demonstrate a centralist/federalist stance. In other words, there is quite some variation in all the variables of interest. The quite counterintuitive finding is that there is actually a strong support for the current federal system, even among those who identify first of all with the region (in Flanders: 31.8 per cent favour a position from status quo to full powers to federal government). There is obviously a puzzle to solve².

² Students of federalism (and of elections) in Belgium have also showed the low salience of this question among the population/electorate (Frogner *et al.*, 2008; Swyngedouw et Rink, 2008; Deschouwer et Sinardet, 2010). We therefore need to expand the scope of the exploration because we still have to explain de – quite small – difference between the two language groups. So we do not investigate salience, but rather policy preferences.

What shapes citizens' attitudes towards federalism in Belgium?

Using the PARTIREP 2009 election survey, we seek to disentangle this complex puzzle and shed light on citizens' attitudes towards federalism in Belgium. To do so we use the question of policy preferences as a dependent variable in a linear regression³. In order to grasp a fuller range of attitudes than identities only, we have computed a model including socio-demographics, identities (which we recoded in four dummies – European, national, regional and local identity), political knowledge (we made an index out of the five questions tapping political knowledge), political interest, left-right scale, satisfaction with the regional government, and last but not least a series of indicators of trust. We aimed at including all the relevant variables, but at the same time we sought to avoid an overspecified model – all the variables that do not do anything are taken out. Given the fact that we might expect different relations in the Dutch speaking part of the country compared with the French speaking part of Belgium, we will conduct two different analysis for each language group.

First we investigate the preferences of the Dutch language respondents (Table 3). It can be noted that we were able to develop a quite powerful model, with an explained variance of 35 per cent (and as we shall see in Table 4, this is clearly higher than among the French language respondents). It can be noted that in the Dutch language community, those with a higher education level on average are in favour of more autonomy for the regions. It is quite striking, however, to note that none of the identity variables even comes close to significance. This means that whether one identifies as a Belgian, or as a Flemish citizen, does not have any consequences at all with regard for the preferences with regard to the federal structure of

³ Its exact phrasing in Dutch and in French is respectively:

Er is momenteel discussie over de juiste verdeling van bevoegdheden tussen de regionale en nationale beleidsniveaus. Sommigen zijn van mening dat de gemeenschappen en gewesten meer bevoegdheden zouden moeten krijgen, anderen denken dat de federale staat meer bevoegdheden zou moeten krijgen.

Waar zou u uw eigen opvattingen plaatsen op een schaal van 0 tot 10, waarbij 0 betekent dat de gemeenschappen en gewesten alle bevoegdheden zouden moeten krijgen en 10 betekent dat alle bevoegdheden voorbehouden blijven voor de federale staat?

Met score 5 geeft u aan dat de situatie voor u goed is zoals ze is.

On discute beaucoup, pour le moment, du juste équilibre entre les compétences des niveaux fédéral et régional. Certains estiment que les Régions et Communautés devraient avoir plus de compétences, tandis que d'autres affirment que c'est le l'Etat fédéral qui devrait voir ses compétences renforcées.

Où vous situeriez-vous sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie que les Régions et Communautés devraient avoir toutes les compétences, et où 10 signifie que toutes les compétences devraient être attribuées à l'Etat fédéral ? La valeur 5 signifie que vous êtes satisfait de la situation telle qu'elle est.

Belgium. This by itself seems to suggest that the current wave of discussions about the structure of the country is not related to feelings of (national) identity. It can be observed on the other hand, that the strongest determinants are the level of trust in the federal political institutions and in the police (which is also a federal institution). Those who have higher levels of trust in the Belgian federal government and Parliament are much more likely to expression a preference for more authorities for the federal level. On the other hand, distrust in the federal institutions seems to be the main driving force with regard to a preference for more autonomy for the regions. Somewhat surprisingly, the level of satisfaction with the regional government in Flanders is not significantly related to the point of view with regard to more or less federalism in the country.

Table 3. Regression results for Dutch language respondents

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	28,611	27,880		0,305
Gender	0,858	0,472	0,044	0,070
Year of birth	-0,012	0,014	-0,023	0,377
Education level	-0,289	0,104	-0,075	0,006
European Identity	0,524	1,168	0,035	0,654
National Identity	0,306	1,119	0,026	0,785
Regional Identity	-0,220	1,139	-0,019	0,847
Local Identity	0,570	1,241	0,047	0,646
Political Knowledge	-0,228	0,175	-0,037	0,193
Political Interest	-0,144	0,106	-0,039	0,176
Left-Right Scale	0,007	0,021	0,008	0,741
Satisfaction with Flemish government	-0,145	0,231	-0,016	0,531
Trust in the police	-0,259	0,054	-0,116	0,000
Trust in Flemish government	-0,091	0,047	-0,064	0,053
Trust in Flemish arlement	0,034	0,049	0,024	0,489
Trust in federal government	0,049	0,074	0,026	0,503
Trust in federal parlement	0,203	0,036	0,154	0,000
Trust in social movements	0,145	0,027	0,130	0,000

Adj R2 = 0,352

If we investigate the results of the French language respondents, on the other hand (Table 4), we do observe a different pattern. Here we do find a strong impact of the feeling of identity, but all indicators are negative, implying that no matter what kind of identity respondents prefer, this is associated with a preference for more autonomy for the regions in Belgium. Within the French language community, one can observe that the trust variables too have an impact, but this effect is much less outspoken than in the Dutch language community. In fact, we only observe a significant effect for trust in the federal government and no longer for trust in the federal parliament.

Table 4. Regression results for French language respondents

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	119,273	59,071		0,044
Gender	1,700	1,047	0,045	0,105
Year of birth	-0,054	0,030	-0,050	0,071
Education level	0,126	0,138	0,025	0,360
European Identity	-4,246	1,729	-0,171	0,014
National Identity	-3,899	1,643	-0,164	0,018
Regional Identity	-4,358	1,813	-0,170	0,016
Local Identity	-4,100	1,856	-0,150	0,027
Political Knowledge	-1,302	0,368	-0,101	0,000
Political Interest	-0,132	0,114	-0,033	0,245
Left-Right Scale	0,110	0,027	0,116	0,000
Satisfaction with Walloon government	0,483	0,420	0,034	0,250
Trust in the police	-0,016	0,097	-0,006	0,870
Trust in Walloon government	-0,094	0,067	-0,067	0,160
Trust in Walloon parlement	0,075	0,063	0,058	0,235
Trust in federal government	0,158	0,043	0,133	0,000
Trust in federal parlement	0,004	0,036	0,004	0,917
Trust in social movements	0,000	0,038	0,000	0,996

Adj R2 = 0,201

Conclusion

Does identity still matter (in shaping attitudes towards federalism in Belgium)? The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that a preference with regard to the constitutional structure of Belgium is not a result of feelings of identity. It is rather feelings of discontent with regard to the functioning of the federal government that explains a preference for devolution. In a way this might be called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since the Belgian federal government has been in turmoil since 2007, it is almost self-evident that confidence in the federal government has continued to decline. If this has an effect that the population increasingly prefers a further devolution, however, this renders it even more difficult for a federal government to function. What is quite telling, however, is that this relation can be found mainly among the Dutch language respondents. This poses a kind of challenge if we want to explain the current political situation in Belgium. Mostly, the Dutch language political parties have put forward demands for a larger degree of autonomy for the regions in Belgium. However, most specifically in the Flemish region it can be noted that a preference for a stronger degree of federalism cannot be explained by feelings of identity. Maybe somewhat surprisingly for the proponents of more autonomy for the Flemish regional government, it has to be noted that approval for the Flemish regional authorities does not lead to more support for autonomy. Although the first prime minister of the Flemish region famously proclaimed “what we do ourselves, we will do better”, this slogan apparently does not lead to different attitudes among the Flemish population. A preference for more autonomy rather reflects a negative attitude, i.e. a strong distrust toward the federal political institutions. Earlier research has already demonstrated that distrust toward the federal political system can be associated with a vote for nationalist and extremist parties (Hooghe, Marien & Pauwels, 2011). The current analysis supplements this finding, and suggests that, at least in the Flemish region, the main driving force for more autonomy for the regions is not nationalist identity, but rather distrust toward the Belgian federal government and political institutions. This might imply that the longer the current political crisis drags on, the more distrust toward the federal level most likely will develop, and the larger the support for more regional autonomy.

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