

## **Who do you feel and what future do you want for Belgium?**

### *A comparison of candidates and voters' identities and institutional preferences*

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Since representative democracies are supposed to be based on a close relationship between the mass and the political elite, the congruence (or lack of) between the represented and their representatives' strata is key to the understanding of democratic dynamics in the long run. Democratic theory stipulates that political elites, as agents of the citizenry, act in accordance with the preferences of their ultimate principal, their voters (Andeweg 2011). Classic theoretical approaches conceive the link between masses and elites in two distinct ways (Jensen and Thomsen 2013): a top-down approach (Lewis 2001, Higley and Burton 2006) and a bottom-up approach (May 1973). Top-down scholars consider that elites, and in particular political parties, are gatekeepers for putting social claims on the agenda of the political system (Cohen 2003, Bullock 2011) and hence there should be high congruence. On the contrary, principal-agent theory acknowledges that huge differences may occur (agency loss), because agents may abuse the power their principals have delegated to them and pursue their own preferences (Lupia 2003, 53). In any case, the congruence or the lack thereof taps directly into the legitimacy of the special relationship between mass and elite in democracies. This issue becomes even more important in federal states where such relationship can be highly intricate given the coexistence of multiple identities and different visions on the structure of the state.

Belgium offers an interesting case of investigation for the study of congruence in a country where the future of the state is hotly debated (De Winter and Baudewyns 2009, Reuchamps 2011). As a "textbook example" (Lijphart 1981, 1) of a consociational democracy where two main language groups choose their own elites who are only responsible in front of

their own mass (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015). In such context, by contrast to most research on congruence that focuses on *ideological* congruence (Andeweg 2011), the purpose of this chapter is therefore to shed light on a different dimension of congruence, that is the degree of congruence between masses and elites regarding their *ethno-territorial identities* (the way people identify with their state and/or their sub-state), and procedural competencies, that is their *institutional preferences* (what future people want for their country). These two dimensions are often ignored by principal agent theory and the broader delegation and accountability framework. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, we will rather use the concepts of mass (voters, the ultimate principal) and elites (their political agents). Before trying to disentangle the congruence between elites and masses, we need to define the contours of both groups. On the one hand, “Who are the elites?” is always a tricky question in Belgium, where politics is largely driven by political parties (De Winter and Van Wynsberghe 2015). In this chapter, the elites’ position will be assessed through the views of *candidates* rather than those of elected MPs or party leaders. Because parties are far from being monolithic blocks (Dodeigne et al. 2016, Sinardet et al. 2013), studying candidates offers a broader picture of the nuances that may exist within elites. Moreover, the increasing personalization of campaigns and the weakening of partisan ties further put the candidates at the heart of the democratic delegation chain between citizens and political institutions (Deschouwer 2012, De Winter and Dumont 2006). On the other hand, the *voters*, and not the whole citizenry, will be used as paragon of the masses. In representative democracies based on elections, voters are the key actors for deciding who should govern (Dahl 1998).

This chapter will first explore the feelings of identity expressed by the candidates – based on BCS – in comparison to the voters – based on Belgian voter surveys. In a divided society such as Belgium, identities are often defined in ethno-territorial terms since they rely on both ethnic (in particular cultural and linguistic) and territorial dimensions. Starting from this

perspective, the second step compares the institutional preferences of candidates and voters regarding the future they want for their country. What is distinctive with this approach is that it relies on a *longitudinal* perspective, covering over twenty years of Belgian politics (1991 through 2014).

## THE STUDY OF CONGRUENCE IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

In divided societies, the question of congruence is not only vertical, that is *between* mass (in this case the voters) and elites (in this case the candidates), but also horizontal, that is that divisions may exist *within* mass and *within* elites. In societies with strong subnational identities, inter-community tensions may jeopardize the legitimacy and the integrity of the whole state as well as its decision-making capacity (Deschouwer and Reuchamps 2013). Each community may indeed claim its rightful part of the “state cake”, be it money, policies or even symbols, and plead for more autonomy of the subnational unit, thereby weakening the “national” state (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2014). This potentially highly conflictual situation can hinder the efficiency of the state when its agenda gets more and more predominated by state reforms and re-allocation of policy competencies rather than with substantial policy reforms (Reuchamps and Dodeigne 2009, Reuchamps 2013a). This lack of efficiency in turn may undermine the democratic legitimacy of the state. The democratic deficit can further be fueled by a lack of congruence between the elites and the masses when their feelings of identity diverge. Indeed, evidence from European Union studies stresses the importance of identity for the legitimacy of a political structure (Sinardet and Bursens 2014). Theories pertaining the democratic deficit in the EU indeed consider the incongruence between the masses and the elites concerning European identity in comparison to national and regional identities, as an important, albeit not only, determining factor in the loss of legitimacy of the European Union after the era of permissive consensus (Majone 1998, Bellucci et al. 2012).

In such a situation, the state can only remain efficient and legitimate if compromises can be reached to ease the conflicts between the sub-national units, allowing them to cohabitate peacefully. This appeasement is particularly fostered by the consociational design of some divided societies (Lijphart 1969), of which Belgium has often been considered a good example (Lijphart 1981). According to consociational theory, peaceful cohabitation in divided societies

can be explained by the attitudes and strategies of political elites. They show a stronger “spirit of accommodation” than the groups they represent, and thus prudent leadership by elites explains why divided societies hold together (Bogaards 1998, Lijphart 1977). However, this relatively peaceful accommodation of linguistic conflicts does not mean that Belgian elites’ actions are not inspired by identity claims (Dassargues et al. 2014, Perrez and Reuchamps 2012). As representatives of their group or community, they have to put group interests on the political agenda, often accompanied by identity claims (Horowitz 2000, Lijphart 1977). The literature on ethno-linguistic politics considers these identity-based cues to be the most prevalent motivators for elites to engage in institutional reform (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2018, 10-22). That is why many divided societies are institutionally designed to reflect the identity-based divisions of the country. However, this design often reinforces these divisions themselves (Erk 2008) and offer elites electoral incentives to pursue an identity-based agenda. In this context of inter-community competition, it is exactly the elites’ spirit of moderation vis-à-vis their electorate that permits stability as elites “make deliberate efforts to counteract the immobilizing and stabilizing effects of cultural segmentation” (Lijphart 1969).

Two elements therefore seem crucial for the state to acquire and maintain legitimacy. On the one hand, elites have to share the same political identities and the same institutional preferences as their electorate in order to be considered representative of the people. On the other hand, elites have to show more moderate feelings of identity and institutional preferences than their electorates in order to allow a peaceful cohabitation of the different sub-national entities inside a well-functioning central state.

Given this background, this chapter seeks to compare and assess to what extent political identities and institutional preferences have evolved over the last decades and whether or not elites’ preferences tend to be less radical than those of citizens, which is what the literature presented hitherto is suggesting. Therefore, our *first hypothesis* is that candidates tend to be

less radical than voters. However, other studies (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, Barrio and Rodriguez-Teruel 2016) point in the exact opposite direction, showing that divided societies are likely to produce more radical elites than masses and a more polarized party competition. Consequently, the question remains as to whether this radicalization of elites, in terms of political identities and institutional preferences, comes from a radicalization of their electorate or rather from themselves. From the theory of votes, offices and policies, we could infer that elites may be driven towards more radical positions for two reasons: either to respond to a radicalization of their electorate (Adams et al. 2004) in order to secure their electoral basis, success in future elections and office holding, or, to adapt to uncertain circumstances, political instability and to cope with strategic dilemmas. Indeed, as Müller and Strøm (1999) have shown, party elites can make choices based on ideological grounds rather than on expected electoral gains.

A *second hypothesis* is directly based on this assumption: in a society divided along ethno-linguistic lines, candidates rather than voters may be the active force driving the radicalization of parties in terms of political identities and institutional preferences. If there is a trend towards greater polarization driven by the elites, it might create a similar radicalization on the masses' side. In fact, theorists adopting a more top-down approach, argue that political elites and especially political parties are crucial to set the agenda and act as agents of political mobilization, as masses tend to adopt the messages and positions of their party (Cohen 2003, Bullock 2011). Consequently, the radicalization of the elites might lead to a radicalization of the masses and thereby paradoxically reduce the gap between masses and elites. The purpose of this chapter is to empirically assess this radicalization using longitudinal data on both candidates and voters from Belgium.

## ETHNO-TERRITORIAL IDENTITIES

Extant studies of identity in Belgium do not find empirical evidence of regional identities gaining importance, in spite of the increasingly strong community tensions in recent years (Deschouwer et al. 2015). There have been discussions on the linguistic border and perimeters of Brussels, the competencies and funding of Communities and Regions and the splitting of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde where Flemish and French-speaking political arenas used to overlap (Bouhon and Reuchamps 2012). In 2010, the N-VA, a Flemish separatist political party that aims to obtain the independence of Flanders, became the country's largest party, a position further reinforced in 2014. Given the post-2010 electoral long government formation (541 days) generated by Flanders's demand for more autonomy and Wallonia's desire for the federal system to remain unchanged, one could have expected that Flemish identity in Flanders and Belgian identity in Wallonia would have been reinforced (Reuchamps 2013b).

In table 9.1<sup>1</sup>, we show the evolution of Flemish or Walloon, and Belgian identities among voters from 1995 to 2014, using the so-called Linz-Moreno question (Linz 1975, Moreno 1986, Moreno 2006) that offers five possible responses: only X, more X than Y, as X as Y, more Y than X, only Y, to the question "Which of the following propositions match the most your vision of yourself?". In Belgium, the propositions were the following (with a variation between the two main language groups):

- I feel only Flemish/Walloon;
- I feel more Flemish/Walloon than Belgian;
- I feel as Flemish/Walloon as Belgian;

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the chapter, the voter data is weighted by age, gender, education and vote. The data for 1991-2007 comes from the *Belgian National Election Study* as well as the data for 2010 in Wallonia. For Flanders, the data for 2007 and 2010 was published by Swyngedouw et al. (2014). The data for 2014 comes from the *PartiRep Election Study – European, Federal and Regional 2014*: <http://www.partirep.eu/> The candidate data is weighted by age, gender and party. The data comes from the *Belgian Candidate Survey 2007, 2010, 2014*.

- I feel more Belgian than Flemish/Walloon;
- I feel only Belgian.

### **INSERT TABLE 9.1 HERE**

Over the last 20 years, all data yielded by the Linz-Moreno question does not display any increase of regional identities in Belgian public opinion. In Flanders, the “only Flemish” category, which expresses the strongest the exclusive Flemish identity, hovered around 7% between 1999 and 2007, and rose to 8% in 2010 and 8.7% in 2014. This evolution is not statistically significant. This answer category is the least chosen during the entire period (except 2014). The third category “as Flemish as Belgian” is the most frequently selected by Flemish respondents, on average. During the 1995-2014 period, 49.6% chose this answer category. This situation has remained unchanged in spite of the increasing inter-community tensions in 2007 and in 2010-2011. We do observe two evolutions: in 2014, many more Flemish voters felt, on the one hand “only Belgian” (23%, the double of 2010) and on the other hand, we find clearly fewer respondents in the category “more Flemish than Belgian” (which decreased from 27% to 18%), suggesting a pro-Belgium trend.

On the Walloon side, Belgian identity is also largely prominent compared to the regional identity, although the trends are less linear. In 2014, 37% of the Walloon respondents felt “only Belgian”, and 12% felt “more Walloon than Belgian”. The middle category had always been (except in 2010) the most favored option (43% in 2014), whereas those who feel “more Walloon than Belgian” or “only Walloon” constituted a very small minority (7% and 2% respectively).

However, when comparing the answers of the Walloon and Flemish candidates, the picture appears to be more contrasted. The Flemish candidates, i.e. the candidates running in the federal and regional elections, opt more markedly than the voters do for the “only Flemish”



political identity (22.1% in 2007, 32.1% in 2010 and 15.6% in 2014). The difference in percentages between the candidates and the voters indicates a gap that has widened between 2007 and 2010, and narrowed between 2010 and 2014. This difference is easily explained by the 2007 and 2010 political context, in which the N-VA gained predominance in electoral and political terms within the Flemish party system. The identity of N-VA candidates is very clear, as the party advocates for a very strong Flemish identity. The candidates also choose the “as Flemish as Belgian” answer category, but to a lesser extent than voters. This is also the case for the “only Belgian” answer category. Generally, the evolution of Flemish identities exhibits a paradoxical trend: on the voters’ side, respondents feel “more Flemish than Belgian”, “as Flemish as Belgian”, or “only Belgian” whereas candidates identify themselves as “only Flemish” or “as Flemish as Belgian”. Despite the “Flemishification” trend in public discourse of Flemish parties and media (Sinardet 2013), this phenomenon is mainly observed on the candidates’ side, rather than amongst voters.

Walloon candidates and voters clearly identify themselves differently than their Flemish counterparts. One can notice a “Belgification” trend. In fact, the majority of candidates and voters fall under the “Belgian” pole, declaring themselves as either “as Walloon as Belgian”, “more Belgian than Walloon”, or even as “only Belgian”. Only about 5% of them declared themselves as “only Walloon” in 2007 and 2010, with a slightly lower score in 2014.

Generally, these results suggest a genuine stability of the relative weight of different entities amongst the public’s feelings about identity. Changes over time, if any, do not seem to boost regional identities. This confirms all previous research results, regardless of how the question is asked (De Winter and Frogner 1999, Frogner and De Winter 2013). These results are thus not the product of surveys of strongly volatile attitudes, which vary according to intensive outburst of specific community issues. When parties that strongly mobilize on this

identity issue, lose votes (as was the case of the Flemish *Volksumie* until 2001, or earlier in the case of the *Rassemblement Wallon*) or, on the contrary, win votes (as the *Vlaams Belang* after 1991, or the N-VA after 2007), this cannot be considered as the result of “identities adrift”. These are visibly more stable than what high electoral volatility levels would suggest (Baudewyns et al. 2015, Dandoy et al. 2015). The stability of identities does not mean that voters’ opinions are not varying on other matters indirectly related to identity, such as the future of Belgium’s institutional configuration, or even the saliency they attribute to the issue of relations between linguistic communities in Belgium, as we will discuss in the next section. Before turning to this question, table 9.2 compares voters with candidates per party.

#### **INSERT TABLE 9.2 HERE**

Table 9.2 shows, on the one hand, that the candidates from Flemish traditional parties (CD&V, Open VLD, sp.a) and from Groen declare themselves as “more Belgian than Flemish” to a greater extent than their respective electorates: the differences in percentages are all negative. On the other hand, N-VA and *Vlaams Belang* candidates declare themselves either as “only Flemish”, or as “more Flemish than Belgian”. The most striking difference is between VB voters and candidates for the “only Flemish” category with almost 40% of difference. Whereas VB candidates differ more on “only Flemish”, N-VA candidates differ from their voters on the category “more Flemish”. If we look with care – because of the low number of respondents both among voters and candidates – to PVDA, we can observe that their candidates never choose Flemish options while their voters do so to a small extent. The difference between candidates and voters are quite high, candidates being much more Belgian, which could be related to the fact that the party is organized at the Belgian level and not at the community level as in other parties.

In Wallonia, some party elites opt more for a regional identity than others do. It is particularly the case of the PS where a “regionalist tendency” exists amongst a minority of the candidates, whereas their voters are more “Belgicist”. In fact, both the PS and the PTB are incongruent on the regionalist side, with candidates being more regionalist. But the far-left party does not have any candidates who chose a regionalist option. In general, the candidates tend to position themselves more into the “more Belgian than Walloon” category (the differences are negative), while the voters have a tendency to identify themselves as “only Belgian” (the differences are positive). Hence, this means that candidates are more moderate and seldom choose the extreme option. This confirms the hypothesis that elites harbor more moderate views because they have to negotiate and ensure a peaceful cohabitation. Finally, regarding the “as Walloon as Belgian” category, only the Ecolo’s electorate stands out. This may be attributed to the party’s peculiar positioning: on the one hand, it has a pro-Belgium stance as for instance exemplified by its common parliamentary group with Groen whereas the other parties have distinct parliamentary groups between Dutch- and French-parliamentarians. On the other hand, by a proximity to all matters related to the environment, which are regionally located. Ecolo voters therefore defend both a Belgian and a Walloon identity.

What can we conclude from this longitudinal overview of the feelings of identities among both candidates and voters? Three findings are striking. First, the differences, between the two main language groups are not as deep as expected from the repeated political tensions between elites. Second, when we dig deeper into the data and compare parties, there is nor a generalized congruence neither a generalized incongruence. It varies from party to party, with a diversity that subsumes the typical cleavages such as the left-right divide. Third, the main driving question of this chapter, about whether candidates are more radical than their voters, finds a nuanced answer: in some instances, such as for the VB and the N-VA, candidates have a stronger Flemish identity than their voters, but in others, such as the PS, candidates are more

Belgian than their voters. The following step in our inquiry is to explore whether these identities find an echo in the institutional preferences for the future of Belgium.

## **INSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES**

The first empirical assessment in this chapter was to uncover, over a 20-years period, the evolution and more specifically the (in)congruence between the identities of candidates and of voters. In countries where different identities coexist, the structure of the state has usually be – more or less – adapted to accommodate these diverging identities (Reuchamps 2015). Over a period of 40 years, Belgium has gone through several major reforms of its constitution, transforming the unitary state into a federal and, in some aspects, confederal architecture. The question that remains is how do both candidates and voters have seen and see the future for Belgium. In order to explore this issue, we distinguish between the so-called devolution preferences, which concerns the general question of the distribution of power between the federal authority and the substate, and the preferred level for decision-making jurisdiction by jurisdiction.

### **Devolution preferences**

Since 1991, institutional preferences regarding the potential reform of the Belgian state towards more or less devolution has been tapped by a question asking respondents to position themselves on a so-called devolution scale (Reuchamps et al. 2018). In the 2010 voter survey, the question read as follows: “The form that state should have in our country is still discussed. On this regard, some think that ‘regions and communities (Walloon region, Brussels region, French-speaking community and German-speaking community) should make all decisions’, while others in contrary think that ‘Belgium should make all the decisions’. Where would you position yourself?”. On this basis, respondents are asked to situate their preferences for Belgian federalism on a Likert scale where “0” means a preference for an exclusive regional self-rule

situation (“Regions and Communities should make all the decisions”) while “10” implies that “Belgium should make all the decisions”. The point “5” means that respondents are satisfied with the *status quo*.

For the sake of clarity and parsimony, we summarize the answers on this scale into three categories: “pro region”, *status quo* and “pro Belgium”. Figure 9.1 presents the results for Flanders. The proportion of Flemish voters in favor of a transfer of competencies towards the Regions and Communities has increased steadily from 1991 to 2014, while the positioning in favor of Belgium has diminished. The middle category, that prefers the institutional *status quo*, also increases over time for voters. The comparison with the candidates shows noteworthy differences, of which the biggest is observed in 2010 (and in 2007, to a lesser extent but following the same pattern) regarding the positions on the regionalization of competencies, that is more power for the Regions and Communities, with two-thirds of the candidates demanding more autonomy versus “only” a bit more than one-third of the voters. For that year, we also find a large difference between the positioning of voters and candidates concerning the position “Belgium should make all the decisions” with twice as many voters (34.5%) as candidates (16.5%) supporting this claim. Taking a step back, it is quite clear that the large differences between candidates and voters in 2007 and 2010 should be understood in light of the ongoing political tensions between the elites of the two main language groups in the period 2007-2011. In this period, Flemish candidates were demanding regional autonomy more than their voters, who seemed to remain somewhat distant from these political tensions and negotiations.

**INSERT FIGURE 9.1 HERE**

**(Figure 9.1 Institutional preferences in Flanders among political candidates and voters from 1991 to 2014 (%))**

Table 9.3 allows digging further into these institutional preferences, with the distribution by political parties. The data resonates with the N-VA discourse relating strong Flemish identity with further regionalization of competencies. The difference between the N-VA's electorate and candidates in the "pro region" categories (0-4) is substantial (-39.6) but not as large as the one found between the voters and the candidates of the *Vlaams Belang* (-58.8). For the "*status quo*" and "pro Belgium" categories (5 and 6-10 respectively), the majority of the differences are rather positive, suggesting a more "Belgicist" electorate than their respective candidates, with the exception of the left-wing parties (Groen, sp.a and particularly PvdA), and another share of the electorate who is more inclined to the *status quo* than the candidates, with the exception of voters and candidates from the centrist CD&V and the right-wing Open VLD.

#### **INSERT TABLE 9.3 HERE**

Figure 9.2 offers the figures for Walloon side. There, differences between the opinions of candidates and voters are less important. On the 0-4 positions ("pro region"), the proportions of candidates and voters are relatively identical and increase in the same direction. The proportions of the *status quo* category (position 5) are also similar, with the exception of 2010 where the difference is larger. That year, it is interesting to compare Flemish and Walloon candidates because their respective position reveals where the political negotiations were at an impasse: Flemish candidates wanted more autonomy and Walloon candidates were defending the *status quo*. No wonder then why it took a year and a half to reach an agreement between both langue groups (Deschouwer and Reuchamps 2013).

#### **INSERT FIGURE 9.2 HERE**

**(Figure 9.2 Institutional preferences in Wallonia among candidates and voters from 1991 to 2014 (%))**

Table 9.4 presents the institutional preferences by political party. The preferences of Walloon candidates reflect the classic picture of the Walloon party system on this dimension (Dodeigne et al. 2013, Dodeigne 2014, Dodeigne et al. 2015). A part of the Socialist Party's candidates shows a "regionalist" inclination and thus an important difference with socialist voters, as well as a marked difference with other parties. In the *status quo* category (position 5), the right-wing MR displays the most notable difference between the candidates and voters. This may be explained by the fact that this party is part of the governing coalition of 2014 and defends a government program in which the community issues are not a priority, hence de facto pleading for the institutional *status quo*. Concerning "pro Belgium" positions regarding regionalization, we find as expected the opposite tendency within the Socialist Party: a more "Belgicist" electorate, and more "regionalist" candidates. The voters and candidates of Ecolo and cdH are relatively in tune on this issue. Finally, if we look with prudence – because of the small number of respondents – to the elites of the PP and PTB, are not congruent with their voters at all: elites being the most pro Belgium and voters being the most pro region.

#### **INSERT TABLE 9.4 HERE**

The longitudinal analyses of institutional preferences indicate congruence between candidates and voters throughout the years, despite the country's divided nature. However, during the period 2007-2011, infested by severe inter-community tensions, incongruence reached a peak, both between Dutch- and French-speakers as well as between candidates and voters. In the years before and after, congruence was rather business as usual. Nonetheless, because the devolution scale seeks to offer a comprehensive vision of the general federal dynamics, we need to offer a more specific assessment by looking at the preferred level of decision-making for specific policy domains.

## **Preferred level of decision-making**

Preferences on a scale that only offers the federal and federated (i.e. regional and community) levels as levels of decision-making do not allow for expressing difference according to various public policy sectors. Furthermore, the issue on regional versus federal empowerment analyzed above includes only two options, while within the current multi-level system of governance not only do regional levels co-decide with the federal level, but most importantly also with the European level. In order to determine the variation of preferred levels of decision-making by policy sector, the data collected in 2014 allows for a comparison between candidates and voters (which will also be used in Chapter 10 of this volume). Candidates and voters were asked: “According to you, at which level of power should the following issues be treated? At the regional level, the federal level or the European level?”. The issues cover eight policy sectors: criminality (currently mostly dealt at the federal level), defense (currently mostly dealt at the federal level), economy (currently dealt at the three levels), employment (currently mostly dealt at the regional level, but with intervention of federal and European levels), environment (currently dealt at the three levels), immigration (currently mostly dealt at the federal level), state reform (currently mostly dealt at the federal level) and taxes (currently dealt at the federal and regional levels).

Tables 9.5 indicates that there is an overall congruence about the preferred level of decision-making among voters in Flanders and Wallonia. There is thus nothing like a divide between voters of both language groups. They share a similar view of which level should decide. For instance and not surprisingly, regarding trans-border problems as environment and immigration, a majority of Flemings and Walloons consider Europe as the most appropriate level. What’s more, the Belgian state emerges as the preferred level of decision-making for the economy and the fight against unemployment and crime. Above all, for none of the eight policy



sectors, voters favor the regional level, even though this level t holds already some important decision-making capacity regarding the economy, employment and the environment. It is therefore useful to compare the views of voters with those of candidates.

### **INSERT TABLE 9.5 HERE**

While voters were largely congruent across the language border, candidates are also quite congruent between language groups. There is however quite a discrepancy between voters and candidates. On the Walloon side, voters and their candidates differ specifically in terms employment and to a lesser extent environment and immigration. Whereas voters favor Belgium, the candidates favor the regional level. On the Flemish side, we find only a very weak relation between level preference of representatives and of represented: differences of more than 10% can be found on every public policy sector, except for crime and defense, where the Flemish candidates do not consider the Belgian level as the most appropriate. In sum, the largest discrepancies appear between Flemish voters and candidates, which is confirmed when analyzing this data party by party (table 9.6). In Flanders, the largest incongruence between voters and candidates is found in the far right *Vlaams Belang*, as well as the N-VA, with candidates favoring more the regional level (i.e. Flanders) over the Belgian one. By contrast, the incongruence is the smallest between the electorates and the candidates of the Open VLD, sp.a, and Ecolo, where voters prefer the Belgian level to the European level.

### **INSERT TABLE 9.6 HERE**

The existence of rather weak associations between voter and candidate preferences is a phenomenon witnessed in several studies on this subject, especially concerning the desired role of the European Union (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999, De Winter and Swyngedouw 1999, De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Goeminne 2009). However, associations as weak as the ones we have demonstrated in Flanders are rather exceptional, which could constitute a problem for

representation and political legitimacy. As argued by Swyngedouw and Rink (2008) based on earlier data in line with the data presented here for 2014, an important “Belgicist” part of the Flemish electorate is not represented by the existing political parties in terms of institutional preferences.

## CONCLUSION

Since the mid-1970s, ethno-territorial identities of voters have been subject to survey research (Deschouwer et al. 2015). Triggered by the first state reforms (language laws of 1962-1963, the creation of Cultural Communities in 1970), the creation of the Brussels urban agglomeration in 1971, and also the *Leuven Vlaams/Walen Buiten* crisis are the result of the advent of autonomist parties with strong regional/linguistic identity ideologies. The Walloon autonomist claims were more socio-economic and led to the “provisional regionalization” of 1974. Six constitutional state reforms have gradually transferred from the central state level to the regions and community competences that by now command the largest bulk of public expenditures.

This transfer of competencies has often been associated with, or even presented as an institutional response to the development of strong regional identities. In the minds of certain candidates, this identification with a region or community should find its political materialization in a constitutionally guaranteed autonomy and decision-making powers of regions and/or communities. And, in turn, the creation of institutions of Communities and Regions were expected to strengthen sub-national identities (Choudry 2008, Erk 2008). Considering the successive institutional reforms, we could have expected increasingly stronger regional political identities.

However, there has not been a rise in regional identity in Flanders nor Wallonia that would supplant the Belgian national political identity. The research category “as

Flemish/Walloon as Belgian”, i.e. the category balancing both identities, remains the population’s most favored option. In other words, voters does not consider identity as the unavoidable choice of one identity over another, but rather as complementary, which does not prevent that occasionally one takes the upper hand. In this context, what this chapter brings about is the identities and views from the elites, and more specifically from candidates. Somewhat counterintuitively to the usual presentation of Belgium as a country divided by the languages groups, the findings show that the divide can be larger between voters and candidates than between language groups.

As a result, how can we explain that there have been institutional reforms favoring Regions and Communities in Belgium despite the voters in each community not feeling more Flemish or Walloon than Belgian? The answer comes, partially, from the political parties’ strategy and the positioning of their candidates (Sinardet 2012, Toubeau and Massetti 2013, Deschouwer 2013, De Winter and Van Wynsberghe 2015, Reuchamps et al. 2017). Indeed, in some parties, candidates have a much more pronounced political identity and regional preferences than their electorates. This runs counter to what was expected from the literature: elites having to be more consensual because they have to cooperate with the other community. In fact, the differences are sometimes large, and this is especially the case in Flanders. Flemish candidates do not identify first and foremost to Belgium and but primarily with their Flemish identity. This strong identity related to the Flemish Region and Community leads them to demand more regional autonomy and favor the regional level as the preferred level of decision-making. In Wallonia, candidates and voters are relatively in tune, since both strata identify primarily with Belgium and thus prefer the institutional *status quo*.

This lack of congruence among the majority group in Belgium is a key ingredient to understand the political dynamics in divided societies and it is in this direction that further

research should be directed. More specifically, it calls for research on the link between congruence and the legitimacy of the political system of its actors and the central role played by elites in shaping public opinion and thereby in achieving congruence (Barrio and Rodriguez-Teruel 2016), especially in divided polities. In the longer run, incongruence may exert an increasingly strong pressure on the representative system, which might lead to changes in the way democracy works in such polities. Second, while institutional preferences can change quite rapidly, the political identities are rather slow to change. In such context, political discourse has the potential to initiate changes of opinions among the population (Perrez and Reuchamps 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Therefore, further research should focus on how discourse does bring about changes and in under which circumstances, in an era of massive load of discourse that circulates via multiple channels – print media, audiovisual media and social media. Hence, the issue of congruence or lack thereof between voters and candidates should remain high on our research agenda but enlarging the canals – not only the vote – through which such congruence can take place will be key to understand the political dynamics in divided democracies.

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