

The Effect of Institutional Affiliation and Career Patterns on (De)centralization Preferences in Advanced Multi-Level States: Parliamentarians' Support for (De)centralization in Belgium

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Abstract:

The decentralization of political power towards subnational entities is one of the major contemporary processes of territorial transformation in European democracies. Traditionally, research has focused on arguments related to nationalism and identities. Later, the strategic agency of political parties has been integrated as they typically play a major role in negotiating constitutional reforms. We investigate two institutionalist factors to explain why political Parliamentarians (MPs) favour decentralization while others oppose it: their parliamentary institutional affiliation and their career pattern (as well as the interaction between both). The importance of these factors is studied based on a large-scale survey among Belgian MPs from all federal and regional parliaments. Our results indicate that MPs' preferences for decentralization significantly differ depending on their institutional affiliation (regional MPs being more decentralist than national MPs). This difference is moderated by MPs' career pattern, but only for national MPs (who are more decentralist when they have a regional career pattern).

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Introduction

The decentralization of political power towards subnational entities is one of the major contemporary processes of territorial transformation in European democracies (Hooghe and Marks 2016). While regionalist claims have been at the top of the political agenda for decades in countries like Belgium, Spain, or the United Kingdom, we still do not fully understand all the determinants of pressures towards more or less decentralization. Traditionally, research has focused on arguments related to nationalism and identities. Later, the strategic agency of political parties has been integrated as they typically play a major role in negotiating constitutional reforms. However, political parties are not necessarily monolithic blocks with all their members having uniform (de)centralization preferences.

Following this, recent research has shown that two institutionalist factors explain why some members of parliament (MPs)—individually—favour decentralization while others oppose it (Pilet et al. 2014; León 2017): (a) their *institutional affiliation*, i.e., the parliamentary level at which MPs currently serve and (b) their *career pattern*, i.e., the parliamentary level at which MPs have served for most of their career. The former expectation is based on rational-choice institutionalist reasoning—focusing on MPs’ strategic interest to maximize the utility of their current office by trying to increase the scope of their authority in the short term (H_1). The latter expectation is based on a sociological institutionalist reasoning—focusing on MPs’ socialization in the parliamentary arena where specific identities and loyalties can be developed in the long term (H_2). The effects of both factors can even be envisioned interactively when MPs’ career pattern moderates the importance of their current institutional affiliation (H_3).

While existing research has studied the importance of the first two factors with aggregated evidence from a set of countries with quite heterogeneous multi-level contexts (Pilet et al. 2014), we propose to re-examine the effects of institutional affiliation and career patterns with evidence from a single but typical case for frequent “level-hopping” between regional and national political arenas—Belgium. Furthermore, we complement the existing research by studying a third factor, namely that of the interaction between MPs’ current institutional affiliation and their career pattern.

These hypotheses are tested with data from a large-scale survey conducted in 2014–2015 among MPs of all parliaments of the different political levels of the Belgian multi-level state. In addition to being a typical case of advanced regionalization with frequent level-hopping movements, Belgium has the heuristic merit of not presenting statewide parties anymore, which limits noise that can stem from varying degrees of autonomy in regional branches of political parties. Furthermore, the debate on (de)centralisation in Belgium being quasi-continuously salient, MPs views are generally clear and outspoken.

Overall, our results indicate that MPs’ preferences for decentralization significantly differ depending on their institutional affiliation (regional MPs being more decentralist than national MPs). This difference is moderated by MPs’ career pattern, but only for national MPs (who are more decentralist when they have a regional career pattern).

In this article, we start by reviewing the literature on political elites’ preferences on constitutional reform in political multi-level systems, from which we then derive our three main hypotheses regarding the effects of MPs’ institutional affiliation, their career pattern, and the interaction of both. After introducing the Belgian case study and further detailing the scope of

its suitability, we present the collected data and our method of analysis. Eventually, we present the results and discuss their broader implications for constitutional dynamics in multi-level states.

MPs' preferences for more or less decentralization in multi-level states

While structural factors (like regional identities and economics) have traditionally been highlighted to explain demands for decentralization, there is an increasing scholarship in recent years that takes into account the importance of party political dynamics (Sinardet 2012; Toubeau and Massetti 2013; Toubeau 2018). This latter strand of research has been particularly concerned with the interests and rationales behind parties' positions on territorial politics (Swenden and Jans 2009; Sinardet 2012; Toubeau and Massetti 2013), showing that parties' positions are not always solely (and not even primarily) driven by mere convictions on nation and identity. While these may largely be the motivations of regionalist parties, traditional (i.e., statewide) parties have often strategically adopted their positions on decentralization in reaction to electoral threats from regionalist parties (Deschouwer 2009; Houten 2009; Meguid 2008; Toubeau 2018). O'Neill (2003) argued, for instance, that parties' positions on territorial reform can be explained by electoral calculations. For political parties whose electoral support at sub-state levels appears more secure than their prospects in national elections, decentralization can represent a desirable strategy since it maximizes their electoral possibilities. This is especially the case for parties with strong support in specific regions, low expectations to control power at the centre, and stable support over time (Mazzoleni 2009; Sorens 2009; Sinardet 2012).

However, in explaining these types of strategies, political parties are often taken as a homogeneous set of actors (Caramani 2004). Yet even in the most centralized party organizations, parties are composed of a diversity of individuals whose preferences on constitutional reforms vary. Several studies have underlined intra-party dynamics within statewide parties and pointed to the oppositions between pro- and anti-devolutionists (Alonso 2012; Ștefuriuc 2009; Dodeigne et al. 2016). Except for regionalist parties where decentralization is the defining identity of the organization, their *raison d'être*, statewide parties compete primarily on other issues. Intra-party heterogeneity of preferences has, therefore, regularly been observed by previous research (Pilet et al. 2014; León 2017; Reuchamps et al. 2017; Sinardet, Dodeigne, and Reuchamps 2013).

In this line of research, increasing literature suggests analysing the repercussions of the emergence of regional and national elites for the development of regional claims (Stolz 2001). Distinct regional and national political elites develop indeed differently across multi-level democracies as they reflect the territorial balance of power between tiers of government. This is the idea at the core of Schlesinger's (1966) seminal work on politicians' "progressive ambition" to move from regional to national politics, or what Squire (2014) called a "springboard model". In the U.S. federation, for example, a large proportion of state legislators use their office as a "springboard" to the Congress. In new regionalized democracies, however, this model is rarely encountered. While the U.S. is a "coming-together" federation, most newly regionalized countries are "holding-together" states (Stepan 1999). As a consequence, career patterns vary and reflect the importance of regional electoral arenas. Research on political career patterns in newly regionalized European democracies (Fiers 2001; Stolz 2003, 2001;

Pilet et al. 2007; Botella et al. 2010; Real-Dato, Rodríguez-Teruel, and Jerez-Mir 2011; Rodríguez-Teruel 2011; Vanlangenakker, Maddens, and Put 2013)—but also in more established federations, notably in Canada (Borchert and Stolz 2011; Docherty 2011)—has shown that regional ambition matters equally or can even prevail over national ambition (Stolz 2003). In countries such as Belgium, Spain, or the UK, this favoured the emergence of a regional political class alongside the (pre-existing) national political class. Once such a career pattern develops, it subsequently impacts the democratic functioning of multi-level systems.

After the establishment of regional institutions, regional political elites play a prominent role in promoting further devolution. If a career pattern emerges showing stable prospects for conducting professionalized regional political careers, regional elites are inclined to defend and reinforce the institution in which they evolve. According to Stolz (2003, 224), a regional political class can “try to form and reform democratic institutions according to their class interest”, while “such an interest in institutional autonomy may go hand in hand with demands for autonomous competencies in the policy-making process (increasing the power and prestige of regional positions)”.

Hitherto, two studies have researched to what extent elites’ position in decentralized institutions affect their individual preferences about decentralization. By drawing on survey-data collected among 460 Spanish MPs between 2009-2011, León (2017) showed that MPs elected at the regional level are significantly more in favour of decentralization than their national counterparts. This is especially true for those coming from one of the historical Spanish regions. With the PartiRep data collected from 2009-2012, Pilet et al. (2014) tested differences in decentralization preferences depending on MPs current political level and their career patterns (where they had served most of the time) for 1,175 MPs from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. They found that the institutional level where MPs currently serve systematically explains differences between their decentralization preferences (regional MPs being more decentralist), whereas the impact of career trajectories received no confirmatory evidence—not even when controlling for newcomers. The authors, therefore, conclude that institutionalist effects in the short term prevail over those in the long term.

While this comparative research has made an important contribution to the field, the results are obtained by aggregating MPs from a set of countries with quite heterogeneous multi-level contexts. In the United Kingdom, regional and national electoral arenas are highly ‘compartmentalized’ and politicians develop their entire career either at Westminster, at Holyrood, in the Senedd, or at Stormont (in the PartiRep data, only 1/64 MPs from the UK had served in another assembly). In Austria, France, Germany and Italy, most MPs have unidirectional ‘moving-up’ career patterns and only a few move back down to the regional level (in the PartiRep data, 23 percent of national MPs from these countries had regional experience, but only 3 percent of regional MPs had a national one). Finally, Belgium and Spain are the only countries where ‘level-hopping’ career patterns emerged (in the PartiRep data, 17 percent of national MPs from both countries had regional experience, while 14 percent of regional MPs had a national one—for Belgium alone, the shares are even higher).

In the wake of this contribution, we propose to re-examine the effects of institutional affiliation and career patterns with evidence from the Belgian case. This country has observed the development of substantive political classes in both the regional and national arenas. Yet,

frequent movements between levels remain (*cf.* below). Furthermore, we complement the existing research by studying a third dimension, namely that of the interaction between MPs' current institutional affiliation and their career pattern. In the next section, we go into more detail on these three factors and the hypotheses we develop around them.

MPs' institutional affiliation, MPs' career patterns and their interaction: hypotheses

The first main factor under investigation in this research is '*MPs' institutional affiliation*', i.e., the political level – national or regional – at which they currently serve in parliament. It relies on a rational-choice institutionalist reasoning expecting that MPs will adapt their decentralization preference depending on the interests that come with the electoral, parliamentary, and territorial contexts in which they serve. When trying to realize their policy goals (and thereby potentially their re-election), they will try to maximize their power and resources and, consequently, that of the assembly in which they serve (Borchert 2011, Stolz 2001). We therefore expect that MPs who currently serve in the regional parliament will have a more decentralist position than those serving in the national parliament (H_1).

Despite the neat theoretical foundation of this approach, two caveats deserve mention. First, there are MPs serving in assemblies that they would ideally want to abolish—e.g., MPs from regionalist parties in the national parliament or Eurosceptic MPs in the European parliament. As they contest the legitimacy of the institutions where they serve, one would not expect institutional affiliations to alter their preference. We therefore control for this aspect in our analysis (*cf.* below). Second, MPs' political ambition, i.e., them knowing that they will (or want) to serve in another assembly later on, may change their interest calculus and consequently their preference for the political level at which they want power to be located. However, Belgian political parties largely determine MPs' fate, which renders prediction about career trajectories quite difficult to anticipate. Even the “big fish” of Belgian politics must serve where they are called. Therefore, the importance of the caveat should be limited in our analysis.

The second main factor under investigation is “*MPs' career pattern*,” i.e., the political level—regional or national—at which they have served for most of the time in their parliamentary career. It draws on sociological institutionalist reasoning expecting that MPs' decentralization preferences are formed over time in office. This covers the political experience they have been exposed to, through the contacts, memories, usages, and attachments to their former workplace that prevail; and through a certain “role” (as regional or national representatives) that MPs have endorsed in their party and/or constituency. Based on eighty-three narrative interviews conducted with regional and national MPs, Dodeigne (2017) distinctively showed for example how this parliamentary socialization fosters a “sense of belonging” for parliamentarians feeling part of the political class of the territory where they served. If career institutional socialization matters, MPs that have served most of their career at one level should remember their regional experience, keep their attachments, and maintain their role—even after switching political levels. We therefore expect that MPs who have served most of their career at the regional level will have a more decentralist position than those who have served most of their career at the national level (H_2).

Finally, one can even envision both factors as interactive. The career pattern of an MP could moderate the effect of their current institutional affiliation. According to this hypothesis,

MPs currently serving in the political arena where they have already developed a strong experience throughout their career should have the strongest attitudes towards (de)centralization—most in favour for regional elites, most against for national elites—while the attitudes of those who switched political arenas should be situated in between, and depend on which of both factors had the greatest impact. If MPs that predominantly served at one level keep their attitude even after moving to another level, long-term institutional socialization prevails over short-term institutional interest calculations. If not, it is the short-term institutional interest calculation that predominates. In this respect, the attitudes of newly elected MPs have to be analysed separately. Those MPs have not yet undergone major institutional socialization processes and only entered the dynamics of their political level recently. When comparing them to others, they can serve as a quasi-control group.

Following the developments in this section, our three main hypotheses read as follows:

- *H₁–MPs’ institutional affiliation*: MPs who currently serve at the regional level of government are more in favour of decentralizing political powers than politicians that currently serve at the national level.
- *H₂–MPs’ career pattern*: MPs who have served for most of their career at the regional level of government are more in favour of decentralizing political power than politicians that have served most of their career at the national level.
- *H₃–Interaction*: The difference of MPs’ preferences for decentralization depending on their current institutional affiliation decreases if they have served most of their career at another political level.

Regional and national political classes in Belgium

We test our hypotheses on the Belgian case, which is typical for advanced regionalization with frequent level-hopping movements between regional and national political arenas. While structural factors such as regional identities and economic differences were originally the key driving force of regionalist demands in the country, regional institutions have contributed to the development of differentiated political arenas since the mid-1990s (with the direct election of regional assemblies). As in Spain (in the 1980s) and the UK (in the late 1990s), a process of territorial differentiation of political elites started along the development of a regional political life in its own right.

Heuristically, three features make the Belgian case particularly relevant for the present research. First, the country has a distinctive party system, characterized by the quasi-absence of statewide political parties since 1968–1978 (Deschouwer 2009). Only the radical left party, present in the Belgian chamber since 2014, is organized on a statewide basis. This means that all other Flemish and French-speaking parties only have “regional” branches, contrary to parties in other multi-level systems that are divided between “regional” and “national” party branches (Fabre 2011; Reuchamps 2015). This comes with the existence of two quite separate public spheres in which the political debate is conducted (Sinardet 2013). While this aspect of the Belgian system may have an impact on MPs’ preferences about decentralization in absolute terms because they are evolving in a more decentralized environment, the present research investigates their position in relative terms—i.e., vis-à-vis the current *status quo*. More importantly, this Belgian specificity offers the analytical benefit of limiting the “noise” that

may come with the varying degrees of autonomy of regional party branches and allows us to assess more accurately the impact of MPs' institutional affiliation and career patterns on their preferences about decentralization.

Second, while most studies on Belgian MPs' career patterns would unmistakably depict the "integrated" nature of the regional and federal electoral arenas (Fiers 2001; Vanlangenakker, Maddens, and Put 2010), level-hopping movements—from and towards regional and federal electoral arenas – have been regularly observed over time. When excluding the first regional elections, which always constitute very specific cases,¹ we observe forty-seven movements towards the national level in the Walloon region and fifty-eight movements in the Flemish region (Dodeigne 2018). Meanwhile, there are respectively sixty-six and seventy-seven former federal parliamentarians and/or members of the federal cabinet who shifted towards the Walloon/Flemish regional level (Dodeigne 2018). In comparison with regions from other regionalized countries and federations, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, Belgium presents a high ratio of level-hopping movements, comparable to other "integrated polities" such as Spain (Stolz 2010; Dodeigne 2014).

That being said, while level-hopping is frequent, level-hoppers themselves should not be overestimated because they constitute a minority of all political careers. The high number of movements is substantially caused by the repetition of a few politicians who switch levels regularly. They are the "big fish" of the political parties who often turned out to be members of the regional and federal cabinets (Dodeigne 2014). In this respect, a large number of level-hopping movements originates from the formation of the regional and federal governments. The latter implies frequent "multi-level reshuffles" in which ministers are called to another level, depending on the electoral and political context of the moment (Dandoy and Dumont 2012). Their motivations can either be party *internal* incentives (e.g., geographic repartition, diversity purposes, factional disputes, etc.) or party *external* electoral goals in terms of office and vote-seeking strategies (e.g., placing popular candidates on strategic electoral list positions, irrespective of the level of government). Hence, with 71.9 percent (Flanders) and 76.8 percent (Wallonia) of regional and federal politicians who have served at a single level of government, empirical evidence points to the distinction of a regional and a national electoral arena (Dodeigne 2018), despite strong features of integration.

Thirdly, Belgium is a relevant case to study because of the continuous political saliency of constitutional reform. The distribution of competences between the federal level and the federated levels of government is a quasi-continuously contentious issue, which means that MPs will tend to have a more clear and outspoken view on the question than in multi-level settings where this is less the case.

These three features underline the exceptionalism of the Belgian case comprising important regional political arenas and frequent level-hopping movements, but they also highlight its suitability for the present research that comes with them. More importantly, while the results should be interpreted accordingly, the findings drawn from this study inform a broader universe of cases in that they (1) can be compared directly to the existing results that rely predominantly on countries with less multi-level movement and (2) show which

¹ The first regional legislative term is very specific because of the high ratio of transfers of national MPs to the newly elected regional assemblies.

perspectives the latter might encounter when following the path of further decentralization and division of regional and national political arenas.

Data and methods

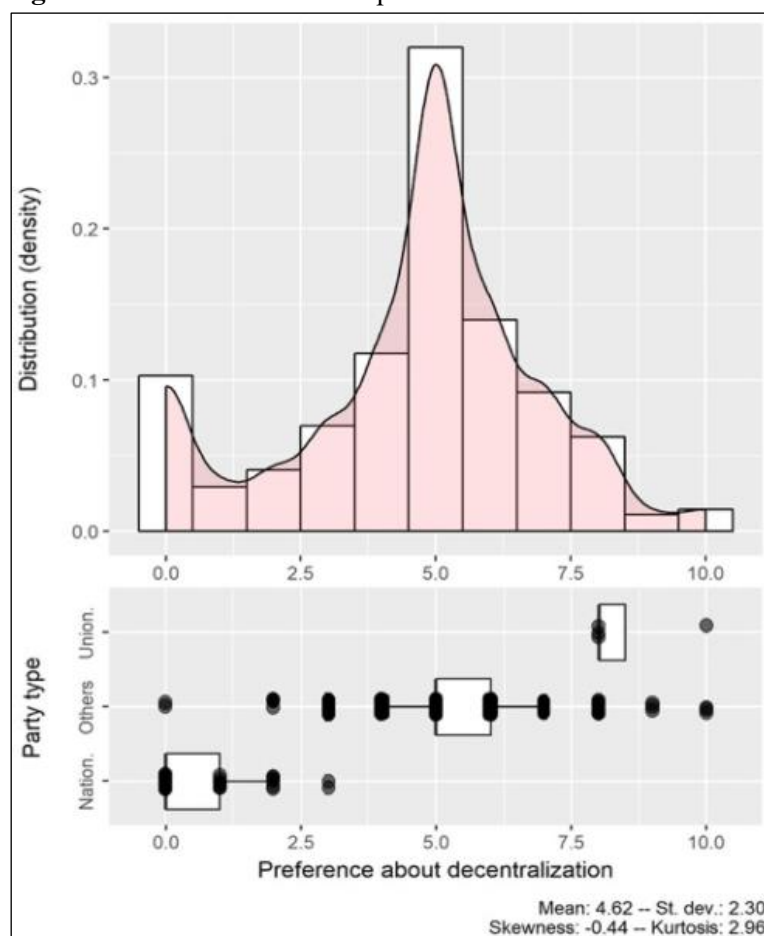
To test these hypotheses, we gathered original data on Belgian MPs serving in all regional and national parliaments. The survey took place between November 2014 and February 2015. To avoid periods with major political events (such as a government formation or a political crisis), the data were collected at the beginning of the legislature but after the formation of regional and community governments in June–July 2014, and after the formation of the federal government in October 2014 (Baudewyns, Dandoy, and Reuchamps 2015, Dandoy, Reuchamps, and Baudewyns 2015). MPs were contacted by e-mail and asked to fill in an online questionnaire (on request, the questionnaire was completed by mail or via phone). To increase the response rate and ensure reliable responses, a confidential treatment was guaranteed. The questionnaire was divided into four parts and comprised twenty-five main questions (with seventy-three sub-questions). A total of 272 out of 438 regional, community, and federal MPs participated.² This corresponds to a response rate of 62.1 percent, which can be deemed very high by international standards (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). Furthermore, respondents came from all political parties, from both major language groups and were well distributed across the surveyed assemblies (*cf.* Supplementary Appendix A1 and A2 for an overview of the detailed response rates and distribution).

The dependent variable of our analysis, MPs individual preferences about decentralization, was measured with a ten-point Likert scale in line with the practice of the field and Belgian scholarly heritage. MPs were asked to situate themselves on the scale between “zero”, which meant that “the regional and community levels should exercise all the competences”, and “ten”, which meant that “the federal level should exercise all competences”. “Five” was explicitly referred to as a preference for the *status quo*, i.e., “being satisfied with the current situation”. The advantage of this operationalization is that three qualitative anchors are clearly defined and that the two extreme choices are located at equal distances from the neutral *status quo* option. While Belgium is already highly decentralized and the five-point option on our scale corresponds to the *status quo* after the sixth constitutional reform, one should note that even in recent federal dynamics in Belgium, this position continues to be debated. While most Francophone parties were indeed precisely demanding for preserving the *status quo*, some Flemish parties claimed more decentralization. At the same time, there have been voices in both language groups calling for refederalising some competences (i.e., transferring them back to the central state—a longstanding taboo in Belgian federal politics). Taken together with the varying distribution of respondents’ answers (*cf.* below), it underlines the suitability of the scale and the 5-point as an important qualitative anchor of the political debate.

² The twenty-five MPs from the German-speaking community were not included because they form a very small and compartmentalized political arena with few movements between the national and regional level. The sixty members of the Senate, the Belgian upper house, were not included either because since 2014, a very large part of the Senate it is composed of members of the regional and community parliaments.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of MPs' preferences on decentralization, which is noteworthy in two respects. First, one can see that about 32 percent of all MPs opted for the *status quo*. This is not surprising given that our survey was conducted relatively soon after the sixth state reform, which entered into force in June 2014 and had just transferred a substantive amount of competences from the federal state to the sub-state entities (Deschouwer and Reuchamps 2013; Reuchamps 2013). At the same time, 36 percent still favour greater decentralization, while almost the same proportion (35 percent) would prefer to take a step back and instead “refederalise” some competences. There is thus still interesting variability. Secondly, despite responses that can be deemed normally distributed (skewness and kurtosis fall within the conventional thresholds), a notable number of MPs opted for the 0-score. Unsurprisingly, these came from the Flemish nationalist parties N-VA and VB, which respectively support a “confederal” autonomy statute for Flanders or its independence. The ten-score, in turn, was chosen by fewer parliamentarians, which came either from the outspokenly ‘unionist’ workers party (PTB-PVDA)—also the only statewide party—or from other parties. The latter are otherwise quite diversely distributed over the entire scale, which supports our starting point: preferences on decentralization vary greatly among most traditional parties (*cf.* Supplementary Appendix A3 for an overview of all parties’ distribution).

Figure 1. Distribution of MPs' preferences about decentralization



To explain this variability, our two main covariates of interest are (*H1*) MPs' current institutional affiliation, and (*H2*) MPs' career pattern, i.e., at which level they have served for

most of the time. To test our third hypothesis (*H3*), an interactive term is created between both factors. Table 1 provides an overview of their distribution. The former is operationalized as a dummy variable distinguishing MPs serving in the federal (i.e., national) parliament and MPs serving in the regional parliaments.³ For MPs' career pattern, we distinguish between three categories: newly elected MPs without previous parliamentary experience (i.e., “newbies,” the control category), MPs who served exclusively or most of their time at the federal level (either as an MP or cabinet member), and MPs who served exclusively or most of their time at the regional level (again, either as an MP or cabinet member).

Table 1. Distribution of MPs current institutional level and career patterns

Current institutional level	Career patterns						Total
	Newly elected		Federal career pattern		Regional career pattern		
Federal parliament	23	26.1%	53	60.3%	12	13.6%	88
Regional parliament	54	29.3%	29	15.8%	101	54.9%	184

Although level-hopping movements are quite common in Belgium, it has been observed that—apart from a few individuals who are “big names” in Belgian politics—most level-hoppers switch electoral arenas only once (Dodeigne 2018). The descriptive statistics of our data confirm this trend for the participants of our survey. Most parliamentarians with an extensive federal experience (average: 2.6 federal mandates) only served briefly in a regional legislature (average: 23 months—i.e., four times less than on the federal level). Likewise, established regional parliamentarians also present four times more experience (average: 115 months in regional politics and less than a complete federal legislative term—i.e., 30 months). In fact, the majority of all regional and federal parliamentarians who made level-hopping movements did so at the most recent legislative term (when the survey was conducted). Individuals with extensive experience in both assemblies are thus rare. Most of them are ministers who are elected in different arenas. The formation of the regional and national governments implies indeed frequent “multi-level reshuffles,” calling ministers to another level. To conclude, even though our operationalization limits the diversity of career paths, it permits analysis of MPs who served almost their entire career at one level—be they regional or national parliaments—and recently moved to another office. Furthermore, this type of simpler operationalization—albeit empirically accurate—offers some statistical advantage, including statistical leverage with a sufficient number of observations per category of career pattern.

We analysed the potential association between these three factors and our dependent variable with an *Ordinary Least Squares regression* (OLS). In our model, we included three more variables as controls. First, as illustrated above, MPs' preferences vary more or less greatly depending on whether (de)centralization is their core business or not. We therefore added a variable with three categories that considers whether an MP comes from a nationalist, unionist, or another party.⁴ Second, we controlled for MPs' identity, which has traditionally been acknowledged as one of the driving factors behind preferences for regional autonomy—

³ For the sake of parsimony, by regional level, we mean all MPs serving in subnational assemblies—be they regional or community parliaments.

⁴ We considered the Vlaams Belang (VB) and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) as nationalist, and the Workers' Party (PTB-PVDA) as unionist.

especially in Belgium (Deschouwer et al. 2015; Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010; Sinardet et al. 2017). We expect MPs with a more regional than Belgian identity to show greater support for decentralization, while we expect MPs that are more inclined towards a Belgian identity to favour less decentralization or at least the *status quo*. Some might argue that this is a very intuitive (not to say tautological) expectation. Nevertheless, there are two good reasons for including it. On the one hand, from a statistical point of view, it is precisely because it has potentially a strong impact that we need to account for it if we want to test the relevance of the institutional affiliation and career patterns appropriately (León 2017). On the other hand, from an empirical point of view, it is always important to test intuitions rather than taking them for granted. Some MPs might indeed feel strongly Flemish or Walloon and yet strongly reject decentralization. Similarly, an MP can feel mostly Belgian and still support further decentralization for reasons of efficiency or subsidiarity. Consequently, the link between identity and preferences on decentralization is not tautological at all and needs to be assessed empirically (Pattie et al. 1999). We approached MPs' identity with the Linz–Moreno question that accounts for nested and dual identities through five categories (Moreno 2006). Respondents were asked whether they identified as “only Flemish/Walloon/Brusselian”, “more Flemish/Walloon/Brusselian than Belgian”, “equally Flemish/Walloon/Brusselian and Belgian”, “more Belgian than Flemish/Walloon/Brusselian”, or “only Belgian”. Finally, because Flemish political MPs generally tend to be more regionalist than Francophone MPs, we add a dummy variable controlling for MPs' language (Sinardet, Reuchamps, and Dodeigne 2014).

Results

The results of the OLS regression analysis indicate with at least 95 percent confidence that both the institutional affiliation and the career pattern of MPs have a statistically significant association with their preference for decentralization (*cf.* table 2). MPs who currently serve at the regional level are more in favour of decentralizing competences than their counterparts at the national level (on average, it makes 0.8 points difference on the scale). Similarly, MPs who have served most of their career at the regional level are more in favour of decentralizing competences than those who have served mostly at the national level. One should note that both MPs with a regional and with a federal career pattern are more in favour of decentralization than newly elected MPs (respectively 0.82 and 1.47 points on the scale). As for the interaction term, it is significant as well but only for MPs who currently serve at the federal level. This means that, as expected, career patterns moderate the effect of institutional affiliation, but only at the federal level.

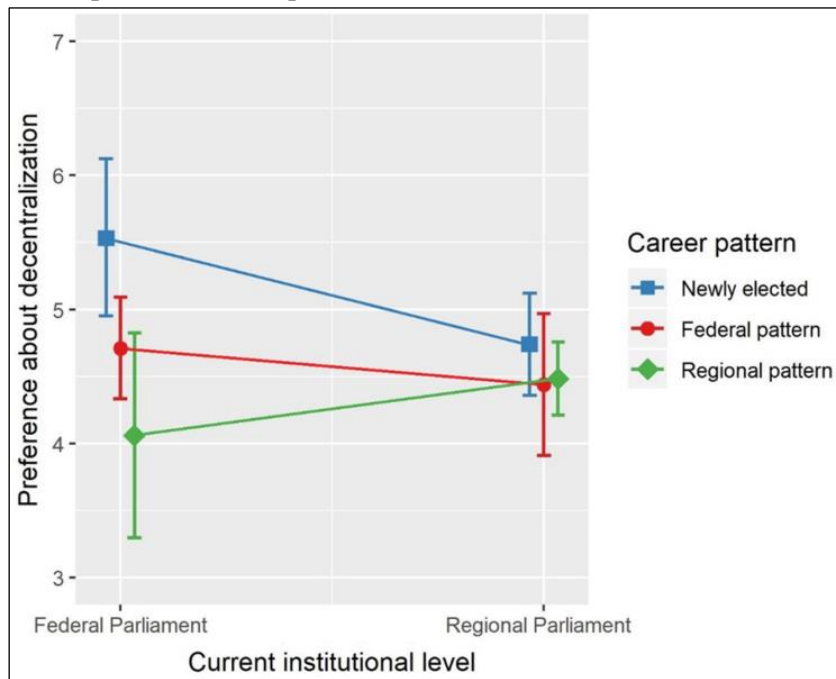
Table 2. OLS Regression results for MPs preference for decentralization

	Estimate	Stand. error
Intercept	6.08 ***	0.35
Current institutional level (ref. = national parliament)	-0.80 *	0.36
Career pattern (ref. = newly elected MPs)		
Federal career pattern	-0.82 *	0.36
Regional career pattern	-1.47 **	0.49
Interaction (ref. = national parliament)		
Regional parliament • Federal pattern	0.52	0.48
Regional parliament • Regional pattern	1.22 *	0.54
Party type (ref. = other parties)		
Unionists	2.00 **	0.60
Nationalists	-3.00 ***	0.71
Identity (ref. = equally Belgian and Fl./Wa./Br.)		
Only Belgian	0.94 *	0.39
More Belgian than Fl./Wa./Br.	0.68 **	0.22
More Fl./Wa./Br. than Belgian	-1.03 ***	0.27
Only Fl./Wa./Br.	-1.70 *	0.66
Language (ref. = Dutch)	0.13	0.19
	R ²	0.68 (adj. = 0.66)
	Residual standard error	1.33 (df = 238)
	F-statistic	42.15*** (df = 12, 238)

p-values (>|t|): * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001.

To fully assess the impact of the two factors and their interaction, we plotted their marginal effects (discrete predictors held constant) in figure 2. While the X-axis distinguishes between MPs' current institutional affiliation, their career pattern is plotted according to their preference about decentralization on the Y-axis. The plot is enlightening in four respects. First, as predicted by the coefficients, we can easily see to what extent the career pattern effect moderates the effect of institutional affiliation for MPs that currently serve at the federal level. Newly elected politicians are on average less in favour of decentralization than are MPs with a federal or, even more so, with a regional career. More importantly, however, we see that newly elected federal MPs are situated on average above the qualitative *status quo* anchor (5), while MPs with both federal and regional careers are situated below. This can mean that when entering the federal parliament MPs tend to favour less decentralization, but once in office for at least one legislature they become in favour of decentralization no matter the level at which they serve. Second, MPs that currently serve at the regional level are on average in favour of decentralization independently of their career background. For them, institutional affiliation prevails over career patterns. Thirdly, among all types of MP, those most in favour of decentralization tend not to be regional MPs with a regional career background but federal MPs with a regional career background. While the fairly large confidence interval calls for some caution over the substantive interpretation, the overall tendency seems clear. Finally, one should note that in substantive terms, we are talking about average preferences within a rather small range of 4.1–5.6 on the decentralization scale.

Figure 2. Marginal effects for MPs current institutional level and their career pattern (discrete predictors held constant).



*Confidence intervals cover to 95 percent of the observations in the category.

Among the control variables, MPs' language—all other things being equal—did not make a statistically significant difference, whereas MPs' party type and their identity were significantly associated with their preference for decentralization. Concerning identity, MPs with a solely Belgian or more Belgian than regional identity situated themselves on average 0.68–0.94 points higher on the decentralization scale than MPs with an equally Belgian and regional identity. MPs with a more regional than Belgian identity, in turn, situated themselves 1.03–1.70 points lower than the latter (*cf.* Supplementary Appendix A4 for a plot of the marginal effects). As for the party type, MPs from the unionist party situated themselves on average 2.00 points higher on the decentralization scale than MPs from traditional parties, while MPs from nationalist parties situated themselves on average 3.00 points lower than the latter.

The magnitude of the effects of MPs' party affiliation led us to test the robustness of our previous findings across different types of parties. (*cf.* Supplementary Appendix A5 for the detailed plot). The overall tendencies remain identical. Career patterns moderate the effect of institutional affiliation but only for MPs serving at the federal level. Also, newly elected MPs at the federal level are on average the least in favour of decentralization and MPs with a regional career elected at the federal level are the most. However, for all parties that are neither nationalist nor unionist, MPs elected at the federal level with a federal career background are on average not situated below the status quo anchor, neither are newly elected MPs at the regional level. For traditional parties, it seems hence that the main difference at the federal level is to be found between MPs with a regional career background and the others. On the regional level, newcomers seem to be on average not immediately in favour of greater decentralization but variation across career type is overly low.

In fine, the model has a high fit with 67 percent ($adj.-R^2$) of the variability in the dependent variable being explained by the covariates. Based on the considerations above, H_1 and H_2 are

confirmed. H_3 is confirmed for MPs serving at the federal level, but rejected for MPs serving at the regional level.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we tried to shed new light on the determinants explaining MPs' preferences for (de)centralization—a key question in many multi-level democracies. In the literature, it has traditionally received an identity-based answer and our research confirms that identities still play an important role in explaining MPs' position on the distribution of competences between federal and regional levels of government. The objective of this article, however, was to go further by investigating the possible role of two other variables: MPs' current institutional affiliation and their career patterns, reflecting respectively rational-choice institutionalist and sociological institutionalist theoretical approaches.

Our findings confirm the importance of both MPs' institutional affiliation and MPs' career pattern. An intriguing finding is that the moderating interactive effect of career patterns is limited to MPs who currently serve on the federal level. Regional MPs that have been socialized at the federal level do not seem to be impacted by career pattern moderation—i.e., they defend *more* decentralization despite their longer federal career.

A reason for this could probably be found in the fact that despite the advanced regional decentralization of the Belgian state, the federal (i.e., national) parliament remains the place where decentralization reforms are negotiated. Thereby, even federal MPs become decentralist after some time in light of the complex and harsh discussions on constitutional reform (in Belgium, state reforms have been taking place every seven years in average). This tendency remains when formerly federal MPs move to the regional level and is even enforced by the effect of their current institutional affiliation. The position of newly elected MPs confirms the described dynamic. They are at first less in favour of decentralization than their more experienced counterparts and become more regionalist after entering parliament—even at the federal level. As a matter of caution, this dynamic should however be observed over a longer period to exclude the potential impact of generational differences.

When looking at our results in substantive terms, one sees that preferences vary on average between 4.1 and 5.6 on the 10-point scale. Mathematically, this could be seen as a rather small range. Politically however, given the already advanced decentralization of the Belgian federation, it is within this range that we tap into the core of the current constitutional negotiations in Belgium. In this light, an interesting finding is that, despite having long been a political taboo, a significant number of MPs in both language groups show not only support for decentralization but also for recentralization—pointing to differentiated future prospects.

A final point of discussion comes with the effect direction of the discovered correlations. Does one favor decentralization because one is (or was) active at the regional political arena, or could it also be that one went to the regional level because one favours decentralization? The latter does not directly seem to be the case in Belgium, as the positioning of candidates on electoral lists is generally determined by strategic party choices and also by regional and other balances within the party. Furthermore, it is possible in Belgium to be a candidate on the regional list and to still become a federal minister and *vice versa*, as has often been the case in the past.

While these features appear at first to underline the exceptionalism of the Belgian case, it is important to remember, as stated earlier, that they offer in fact ideal ground for analysing the respective importance MPs' institutional affiliation and their career patterns for decentralization preferences. More importantly, our results inform existing studies in that they (a) confirm the importance of MPs' institutional affiliation—as found by previous research, and (b) underline the moderating importance of career patterns for countries with advanced regional political arenas and frequent level-hopping movements—which had so far not enjoyed distinctive investigation.

A question that remains is the evolution of the interaction between career patterns and institutional affiliations over time. In order to investigate these, we would call for longitudinal survey data, as well as for fine-grained qualitative accounts of both micro and macro dynamics in multi-level democracies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Response rates by parliamentary assembly and language group

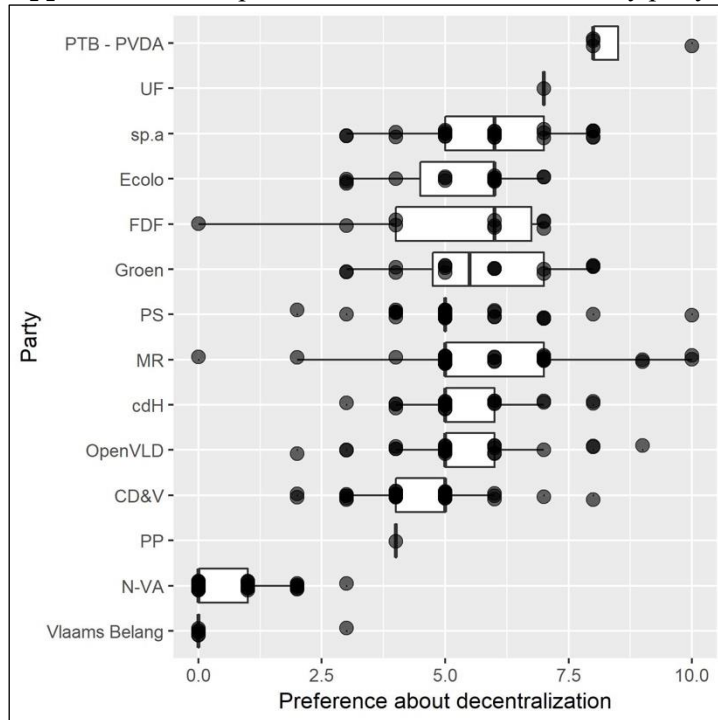
Language group	Parliament	Respondents (n)	MPs in office (N)	Response rate
French-speaking	Chamber of representatives	43	63	68.3
	Walloon Parliament	42	75	56.0
	Brussels Parliament	40	72	55.6
	<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>59.5</i>
Dutch-speaking	Chamber of representatives	45	87	51.7
	Flemish Parliament	90	124	72.6
	Brussels Parliament	12	17	70.6
	<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>147</i>	<i>228</i>	<i>64.5</i>
Total		272	438	62.1

Appendix 2. Response rates by political party and language group

Language group	Parliament	Respondents (n)	MPs in office (N)	Response rate
French-speaking	PS	38	74	51.4
	MR	37	63	58.7
	cdH	20	31	64.5
	Écolo	15	18	83.3
	FDf	10	14	71.4
	PTB*	4	8	50.0
	PP	1	2	50.0
	<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>59.5</i>
Dutch-speaking	N-VA	35	81	44.3
	CD&V	38	48	80.8
	Open VLD	26	39	68.4
	SP.A	24	35	70.6
	Groen	16	20	84.2
	VB	7	10	70.0
	UF	1	1	100.0
	<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>147</i>	<i>228</i>	<i>64.5</i>
Total		272	438	62.1

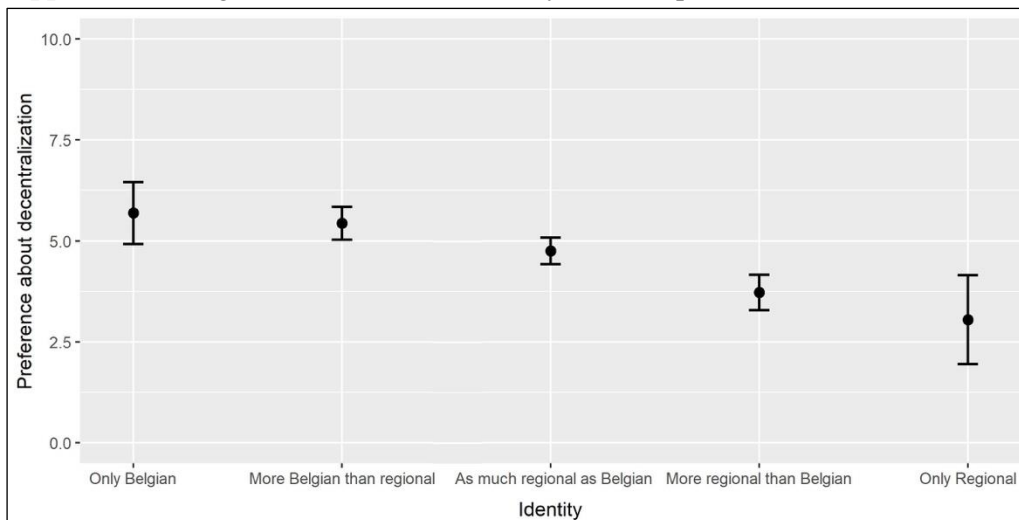
* This is a state-wide party but we classified as French-speaking here because all its current representatives are French-speaking.

Appendix 3. MPs' preferences on decentralization by party



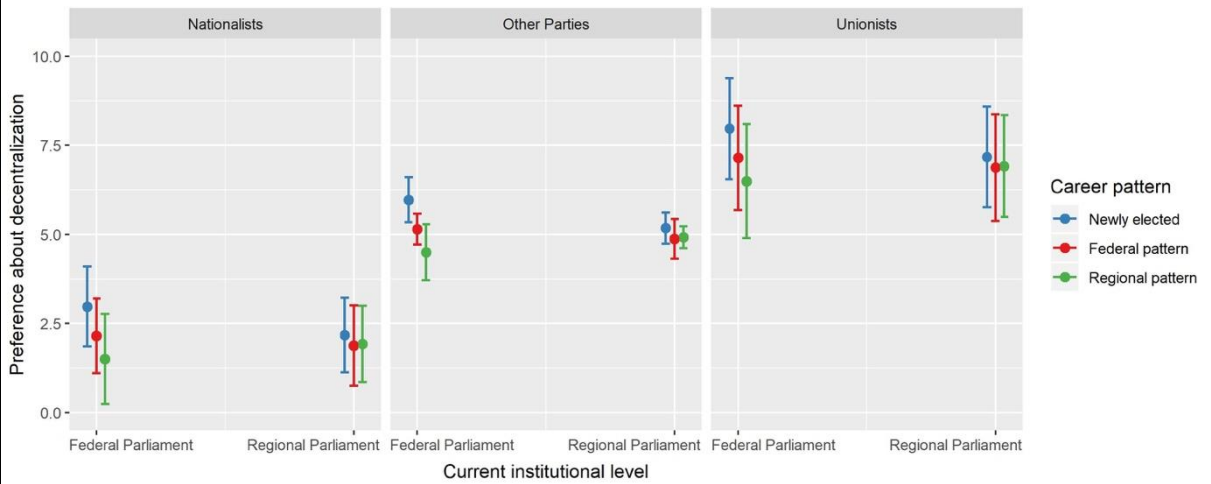
*Ordered on the median.

Appendix 4. Marginal effects for MPs identity (discrete predictors held constant)



* Confidence intervals cover to 95 percent of the observations in the category.

Appendix 5. Marginal effects for MPs current institutional level and their career pattern (discrete predictors held constant) by party type



* Confidence intervals cover to 95 percent of the observations in the category.