**The federal dynamics: the attitudes of citizens towards federalism in Belgium**

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**Introduction**

In multinational federations, federal dynamics seem to be guided by the congruence between the ethno-linguistic differences in society and institutions (Gagnon and Tully, 2001; Burgess and Pinder, 2007). As a result, institutions have been gradually modified over the course of various institutional arrangements to accommodate the diversities of these federations. However, citizens as the ‘raison d’être’ of federalism tend to have a rather passive role in the processes of federalization that shape these federal dynamics. This role is even more limited in consociational systems where citizens are perceived to be more radical than political elites in their political preferences and identities (Huyse, 1970; Lijphart, 1977). However, even if citizens are not the main designers of federalism, they are nonetheless the main receptors of policies. Hence, the study of their perceptions and attitudes towards federalism are crucial to identify the contours of issues and dynamics within multinational federations. Belgium is a particularly relevant case because the historically centrifugal federal dynamics of decentralization of competences is highly debated and a reversal of the federal dynamics could be at play (Pascolo and *al*., 2021). Indeed, recent studies have shown that the political elites are increasingly advocating the ‘re-centralisation’ of some competences in the name of efficiency (Dodeigne and *al*., 2016; Reuchamps and *al*., 2017). The question is therefore whether citizens follow and support this trend or not. Yet, there is little research on citizens’ preferences except for quantitative surveys of voters and their votes (Devillers and *al*., 2019; Deschouwer and *al*., 2010).

The objective of this paper is to explore and compare longitudinally the preferences of citizens for the future of Belgian federalism based on a qualitative analysis of citizens’ forums. Such analysis is performed on four citizens’ forums on the future of federalism that were organized in two waves (2007/2008 and 2017/2018) in Flanders and Wallonia (Reuchamps, 2010; Reuchamps and *al*., 2021). Five profiles emerge from the analysis of the first round of citizens’ forums 2007/2008: unitarist, unionist, federalist, regionalist and independentist. Ten years later, the same types of citizens’ forums were organized again, using the same procedure. It is therefore appropriate to compare the data from these two rounds of citizens ‘forums and to analyze the evolution of citizens’ preferences through their typical profiles, so that we can capture the possible evolution of their scope and nature. In order to do so, the next section looks at the literature about citizens and federalism with a focus on Belgian federalism. On this background, the methodological design is presented before turning to the description of the five main ‘profiles’ of citizens that leads to the discussion of their evolution through time.

**1. Citizens and federalism**

The focus of sociological theories in federalism studies is on the analysis of the interactions and relationships between societal diversity and institutions. These sociological theories tend to orient studies of federalism towards the diversity of social determinants and identity markers within a society as the ‘raison d’être’ for the adoption of federal institutional structures. The main pioneer of sociological approaches in federalism studies is Livingston (1952). Livingston emphasized the importance of focusing on social determinants and markers rather than on institutional and formal aspects of federations: “The essence of federalism lies not in the institutional or constitutional structure but in the society itself. Federal government is a device by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected” (Livingston, 1952, pp. 83-84). Moreover, according to Erk (2008), federalism is both an institutional and a social phenomenon. From an institutional point of view, federalism refers to the division of institutions among several orders of government and the distribution of powers and responsibilities, as well as to the various processes of reconciliation and coordination for the proper management of relations within the federation. From a social point of view, federalism refers to the diversities and different socio-cultural, linguistic, or ethnic cleavages that are territorially or non-territorially distributed within the federation. This structuralist distinction between the social base and institutions refers to various works on the congruence between society and institutional structures (Almond and Verba, 1963; Eckstein, 1961). To study institutional dynamics and change in federal states, Erk (2004, 2008) has also mobilized such a structuralist approach to congruence between society and institutions. In his study, Erk (2008) shows that political institutions in several federal states (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland) have gradually evolved to adjust to the ethnolinguistic social structure. As a result, the ethnolinguistic social structure tends to influence and shape the choices of political actors. According to this approach, the federal dynamics driving institutional change in federations are guided by the social base. Indeed, political institutions change to adapt and become congruent with society (Erk, 2008; Erk and Koning, 2010). Moreover, federations with territorial heterogeneity in terms of language, culture or religion move towards a trajectory of decentralization of their competences, while homogeneous federations move towards a trajectory of centralization. Thus, the ethno-linguistic social structure tends to influence and shape the choices of political actors. However, as Erk (2008) has pointed out, while political elites can take advantage of this heterogeneity, they do not have absolute control over these deeply entrenched cleavage lines, which cannot be the sole result of manipulation by political elites.

Studies of citizens’ attitudes and preferences toward federalism are few and far between (Henderson and Medeiros, 2021). However, as highlighted earlier, federalism theorists (notably Livingston, 1952; Erk, 2008) take a more sociological approach and emphasize the importance of studying public opinion and social forces on the adoption of public policies and federal dynamics (Kincaid and Cole, 2010).

Moreover, a fundamental feature of consociationalism is the crucial role of elites as the primary peacemakers and gatekeepers in maintaining the political stability of society. The consociational model is like a system of ‘elite accommodation’ in which elites adopt moderate behaviour, cautious leadership (Lijphart, 1975, p. 75), and a willingness to accept and respect the interests of others. In a consociational democracy, the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society are counteracted by “the cooperative attitudes and behavior of the leaders of the different segments of the population” (Lijphart, 1977, p.1). Simultaneously with this assumption emphasizing the primary role of political elites, mobilization and interaction at the citizen level is limited. Indeed, according to the consociational model, citizens are considered more radical in their identities and preferences and are therefore less competent to foster consensus and a ‘spirit of accommodation’ (Lijphart, 1968, 1977) as advocated and promoted by elites. Therefore, the consociational model advocates a politically passive and deferential role for citizens (Lijphart, 1968; Bogaards, 1998). Indeed, according to theorists of consociationalism, mass participation would tend to undermine the stability of compromise and consensus in these divided societies (Huyse, 1970).

Indeed, the consociational model recommends the sidelining of citizens, who would be too radical in their identities and could potentially jeopardize the stability of the society (Huyse, 1970, Caluwaerts, 2012). Paradoxically, recent studies (Devillers and *al*., 2019) in Belgium have shown that the citizens of both communities, both in their identities and in their attitudes towards institutional reforms (Reuchamps and *al*., 2017), seem to be less radical and divergent than their representatives. Herein lies the paradox of consociationalism: “Instead of having a highly polarized population and peacemaking elites, the opposite seems to be the case” (Sinardet, 2009, p. 215). Moreover, numerous deliberative experiments organized on the Belgian territory have demonstrated that citizens from different communities can talk to each other and find compromises together regarding the future of the country (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014; Reuchamps and *al*., 2021).Other studies have shown that the creation of sub-state entities and institutions shapes and strengthens the political identities of these constituent entities (Nagel, 1994) by providing them with sufficient resources and political means to reinforce their actions (Roeder, 2009). The socialization of citizens within institutional arrangements according to the logic of path-dependency determines and reinforces their support for sub-state institutions and thus for the autonomy of these entities (Dupuy and *al*., 2021). However, it has been shown in a recent study that in Belgium “the sense of regional belonging seems indeed to be less and less prevalent among citizens in the north as well as in the south of the country” (Devillers, 2020, p. 95: our translation). Moreover, the divergent discourses concerning the transfer of competences and de-federalization since “the first reforms of the State are rather of varying degrees and scales between Flemish and French-speaking political elites” (Dupuy and *al*., 2021, p. 62). Indeed, there is a greater divergence in identities and preferences among political elites, and this divergence is less marked among citizens in the north and south of the country. From then on, political elites can be considered historically more radical than their citizens, contrary to what theories on consociationalism try to demonstrate (Devillers and *al*., 2019; Devillers, 2020).

The case study of the Belgian federation is particularly relevant to this type of research because Belgium “combines federal institutions with consociational rules of governance” (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2014, 2015, 2020; Reuchamps and *al*., 2021, p. 228). However, as Belgium is considered as “a textbook example of a decentralized multinational federation”, the results and analysis from this study may be useful for other, broader case studies. Belgium “incrementally developed consociational federalism” (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 278). In fact, Lijphart (1981, p. 8) considered Belgium as “the most impressive example of a consociation” that corresponds to the process and mechanisms that were used during the first state reform of the initially Belgian state in the 1970 (Deschouwer 2006; Reuchamps 2007; Sinardet 2010). One other particularity of Belgium is that this state is also considered as partitocracy (Caluwaerts 2012; De Winter and Dumont, 2006) where party politics and their members prevailin the discussion and designing of institutional reforms (Reuchamps and *al*., 2017).

Furthermore, in Belgium, the federal dynamics underlying the transfer of powers between the federal and federated levels is a particularly relevant key to understanding the issues at stake in the evolution of federalism. Since the 1970s, Belgium has so far undergone six state reforms that have gradually changed the Belgian federation. Negotiations and various conflicts between the elites of the two large communities have been both a cause and a consequence of Belgium’s federalization. In fact, each reform of the state seems to have increased demands for further regionalization, known in Belgium as ‘de-federalization’ of powers. Indeed, while historically the dynamic was that of a de-federalization of competences (from the unitary level, now federal, to the federated level), since the adoption of the sixth reform of the state in 2011, but also because of the importance of cross-cutting issues such as climate change and the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are calls for a ‘re-federalization’ of certain competences (from the federated level to the federal level).

However, the distribution of powers and responsibilities among the federated entities may reflect conflicts due to the divergent interests of the institutional demands of the different constituent units. The resulting institutional reforms very often give rise to new institutional reforms, and it is here that the paradox of Belgian federalism lies. Belgian federalism in the management of divergent identities has made it possible to manage ethno-linguistic conflicts and induced constitutional reforms and institutional arrangements that generate additional demands for autonomy and decentralization and thus conflicts between the interests and demands of the federated entities. Indeed, as argued by (Erk and Anderson, 2009): Federalism has characteristics that both induce and prevent secession.

The paradox of Belgian federalism or the Belgian federal system is also highlighted by the fact that the demands between the two large communities have opposite ends (Reuchamps, 2014). Moreover, the transformation of the Belgian state and the gradual de-federalization of powers from the former unitary state to the federated entities required much negotiation and compromise between politicians. Belgian federalism in the management of divergent identities made it possible to manage ethno-linguistic conflicts and induced constitutional reforms and institutional arrangements that generated additional demands for autonomy and de-federalization and thus conflicts between the interests and demands of the different federated entities and of the two large communities.

However, in recent years, the Belgian federal model seems to be experiencing a reversal of its centrifugal dynamics. Indeed, in response to the immobility and inefficiency of Belgian politics, not only political parties but also political elites have increasingly advocated the ‘re-federalization’ of certain competences (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2020; Pascolo and *al*., 2021). To understand the evolution of these federal dynamics, it is essential to study also the preferences of the Belgian citizens as crucial. Indeed, even if citizens are not included in the State reform processes that establish the distribution of competences, their positions, and the opinions they mobilize concerning the distribution of competences must also be considered, because it is ultimately the citizens who benefit from the content of these reforms (Reuchamps, 2013; Reuchamps and *al*., 2021).

Finally, in the discussion and conclusion of this paper, it is appropriate to compare, based on the results of several studies (Dodeigne and *al*. 2015; Reuchamps and *al*., 2017; Pascolo and *al*., 2021), the positions of citizens and those of elected officials. This is indeed relevant in the framework of the system of representative democracy - or, more precisely, in the Belgian consociative system (Deschouwer, 2012) -, where it is the elected officials who are delegated in the assemblies to represent the citizens. This analysis and comparison will help to understand the extent to which the preferences of political parties and their members are more or less congruent with those of citizens on the major issues of Belgian federalism.

**2. Data and method**

To study the preferences of Belgian citizens on the future of Belgian federalism, four citizens’forums were organized in 2007-2008 (Reuchamps, 2010; Reuchamps, 2013) and in 2017-2018 (Reuchamps et *al*., 2021). Indeed, these citizen forums[[1]](#footnote-1) were organized in Liege (for French-speaking Belgium) and Antwerp (for Dutch-speaking Belgium) in 2007 and again in Liege and Antwerp in 2017-2018. These citizen forums were organized in the format of focus group conversations. A focus group corresponds to “a set of discussions (in the form of successive exchanges of various arguments) focused by a semi-directive interaction” (Davila and Domínguez Sánchez-Pinilla, 2010, p. 56). In focus groups, participants are asked to discuss a specific topic, to react and to generate debate in front of the different opinions and ideas of the other participants. The purpose of theses citizens forums was to allow participants to learn about and reflect on Belgian federalism and more specifically on its future (Reuchamps, 2013; Reuchamps et *al*., 2021). Furthermore, the participants for the different citizen forums were selected according to different criteria: geographical, gender, age, education, identity, and level of political knowledge. Furthermore, “the sample of citizens was therefore neither statistically random nor representative. Participants included both young and old, some were interested in politics and others not, some were university graduates, the individuals held dramatically different political beliefs” (Reuchamps, 2008, p. 16).

Moreover, these two rounds of citizens’ forums were generally structured in the same way, allowing all participants to be free to speak and share their opinions. One part of the focus groups was reserved for the screening of a video by a political academic who presented six main scenarios for the future of Belgian federalism : (1) transferring all competences to the substate entities (i.e. splitting the country), (2) transferring more competences to the substate entities, (3) maintaining the ‘status quo’ (i.e. the current competence division), (4) transferring competences back to the federal (central) state, (5) transferring all competences back to the federal (central) state, and (6) transferring some competences to the substate entities, while others are transferred back to the federal (central) state. The video ended with the question: ‘And you? How do you see the future of Belgian federalism?’, thereby initiating a discussion in which the participants were asked to explain which scenario they preferred and why (Reuchamps and *al*., 2021, p. 230).

These two rounds of citizens’ forums took place just after two moments that can be considered as institutional and political crises in Belgium. First, the first round of citizens’ encounters (2007-2008) took place during the establishment of a federal socialist and liberal government in which the Flemish political parties, especially the center-right ones, made discussions about a new state reform central to their election campaigns (Sinardet and Morsink, 2011). Moreover, the political environment is seen as a “tense climate between communities” (Kesteloot, 2009, p. 277). This institutional and political crisis was prolonged for over 196 days (Dupuy and *al*., 2020). While the second round of citizen encounters (2017-2018) occurred a few years after the second institutional and political crisis (of more than 541 days in 2010-2011) that resulted in the implementation of the sixth and currently last state reform (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). The citizens forums were recorded and transcribed, so that what has been said by each participant can be qualitatively analyzed. On this basis, several citizen profiles that are presented in the following section.

**3. Profiles of citizens**

Based on the first round of citizens’ forums (2007-2008), five different profiles (four in Wallonia and five in Flanders) can be identified: unitarist, unionist, federalist, regionalist and independentist.

The first profile is the one of unitarist. This profile has “a dual unitary vision: on the one hand, the unity of the Belgians and, on the other hand, the unity of Belgium – since Belgians are united, Belgium should also be united (…). For the future of Belgium, the unitarist wants ideally the return to the unitary state. However, the participation to the panel makes her understand such a return is impossible in Belgium. Therefore, this profile favours a reinforcement of the federal state, i.e. a reduction of the autonomy of the Communities and the Regions” (Reuchamps, 2013, p. 357).

The second profile, the unionist. This profile “shares with the unitarist the will for a united Belgium, but their approaches and lines of argument diverge. While the latter is guided by an ideal of unity, the former wishes the union of the two main communities of the country. Above all, the unionist fears demand for more regional autonomy, especially for Flanders. It is not that she does not recognize a dual identity – she herself feels both Belgian and Flemish or Belgian and francophone, with a preference for the Belgian identity – but she rejects demands for more regional autonomy because this might lead to the division of the country. In order to prevent the dislocation of Belgium, the unionist wants a reinforcement of the federal state which has the role to keep the union of Belgium” (p. 358).

Moreover, the third ideal type (the federalist one) “relies on a true federal vision of Belgium. While the federal system has very positive elements, its complexity and the conflicts which paralyze it are important drawbacks. Therefore, the federalist wants to remain within a federal system but wants to make it stronger. To do so there should be transfers of power from the federal level to the regional and community level, but also from the latter to the former. Above all, what matters for the federalist is that the federal system works well because that’s the best solution for Belgium. Finally, one should note that the evolution of the system is of crucial importance for the federalist. Should it remained stuck as it is now, the federalist might turn into a regionalist” (p. 359). This profile is close to the one highlighted in the second round of citizen forums (2017-2018), the ‘status quo’ type (*see below*).

The regionalist “wishes to remain within a federal framework – which is currently very problematic – but with a quite bigger autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. In addition to this will for efficiency, the Flemish regionalist shows a strong Flemish identity, which is more important than her Belgian identity, which however still exists. This is not so much the case for the Walloon regionalist whose position is mainly explained by a will for – more – efficiency. Finally, should further autonomy be given to the Regions and the Communities, a regionalist is likely to turn into a federalist; on the contrary, should it not be given, a regionalist is likely to turn into an independentist” (p. 359).

Finally, the last profile of citizens is the independentist one. “It is mainly found in Flanders – even though it is not the most widespread profile, as surveys demonstrate (Deschouwer and Sinardet, 2010; Swyngedouw and Rink, 2008). The independentist wishes the independence of Flanders; that is the scission of Belgium. This objective takes its foundations in a specific set of perceptions and identities which distinguishes the independentist from the other profiles. There are two main reasons behind the will for separation – they are different, but they reinforced each other. On the one hand, the independentist anchors her identity in a Flemish nation, distinct of Belgium. On the other hand, according to her, the federal system is totally inefficient and the reason why it is inefficient is because the whole system relies on agreements which bring more problems than solutions. Thus, the independentist does not see any future for Belgian federalism in the long run. However, on the short term, she accepts any reform which would allow for more autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. It is the first step toward the separation. Above all, she believes the separation is the best solution for all the Belgians, including the Walloons, because the new states will be more efficient than the current federal system” (Reuchamps, 2013, p. 359).

In a nutshell, these profiles of citizens are quite different from one another even though some of them share similar features. At the core of each of them, was the relationship between federal perceptions and preferences which animate the federal dynamics. Ten years later, two additional profiles have been identified: status quo and mixed profile.

The status quo profile indicates a preference for maintaining the current situation and not specially for further de-federalization or the beginning of a (re)federalization of certain areas of competences. Furthermore, this profile, which was not present during the first round of citizens’ forums, is quite similar to that of a federalist. Moreover, as highlighted by Min Reuchamps, this profile is almost absent because this first round of citizens’ forums took place during the crisis of 2007-2008 and “the scenario of the status quo has become very unlikely” (Reuchamps and Charlier, 2011, p. 6). While this profile is quite widespread among the participants of the second round of citizens’ forums. Indeed, this second round of citizens’ forums comes 7 years after the second institutional crisis and in the aftermath of the implementation of the 6th and currently last state reform.

While the mixed profile corresponds to preferences that emphasize both centrifugal dynamics of de-federalization of certain competences and the possibility of re-federalization of specific competences. This scenario therefore highlights a trajectory not yet envisaged in previous State reforms, which would consist of a mixed trajectory between a centrifugal and centripetal approach to the transfer of competences. This so-called “mixed” scenario was therefore not really discussed during the first round of citizens’ forums. In fact, this mixed scenario seems to have appeared in the manifestos of the political parties and in media discourses during the 2007 federal election campaign (Pascolo and *al*., 2021). Moreover, this scenario was the one shared by the vast majority of participants in the second round of citizens’ forums.

**4. Conclusion**

In the study of federal dynamics, citizens’ preferences are often left out, especially in consociational democracies because of the fear that citizens may be more radical than political elites. Belgium is a typical example of such divided society where the opinion of citizens has often been left out. In this research, we have sought to collect citizen’s preferences regarding the future of federalism in this country in a qualitative manner. We have asked their opinion by inviting them to citizen forums. In total four have been organized: two in each main linguistic community in an interval of ten years so that we can look at the evolution.

Five profiles have been identified: unitarist, unionist, federalist, regionalist and independentist. Ten years later, the same profiles are still to be found but two have arisen: status quo and mixed. Both profiles reflect the current federal dynamics. On the one hand, we find voices, especially in Flanders, that call for a further de-federalization (i.e. more powers to Flanders) and as a reaction voices that call for the status quo. On the other hand, the challenges facing Belgium make some citizens (and politicians) that the federal system should evolve in a system that allows powers to come back to the federal level (from the regional one). Such an idea was hardly imaginable a couple of years.

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1. In 2007 in Liege, there were 64 French-speaking participants. For 2008 in Antwerp, there were 23 participants and ten years after, there were 41 French-speaking participants in Liege and 40 Dutch-speaking participants in Antwerp. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)