

“The federal dynamics in Belgium: the points of views of political parties and their members”.

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1. Introduction

The changing dynamics and trajectories of power sharing and distribution within a federation is a crucial issue in the study of federalism. In this regard, the study of political actors' positions and the underlying frames justifying the distribution of competences within federal states are essential to understanding the dynamics shaping the transformation and evolution of federations. In Belgium, the dynamics underlying the transfer of competencies between the federal and federated levels is a particularly relevant key to understanding 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, very little is hitherto known so far about the arguments in favour of de- or re-federalization, or about which parties are taking which positions in this debate.

The aim of this research is to capture and explain the underlying frames of the justifications mobilized by Belgian political parties and their members on the main issues of 'de-/re-federalization' during the federalization process in Belgium from the end of 1990s until the last regional and federal elections in May 2019. This research is carried out through a frame and longitudinal analysis on the electoral manifestos of Belgian political parties, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on the interventions of political elites in the written press from the end of 1990s until today. Moreover, this article assumes that the evolutions and changes within the Belgian federalization dynamics can be explained by intrinsic motivations of the actors (in this case the political parties, their main members) between efficiency and identity. The preferences of political actors (political parties and their core members) are confronted with each other and within the political parties regarding de-/re-federalization throughout the federalization process in Belgium.

The main frames analyzed through the discourse of political parties and their members for this paper are developed a priori on the basis of the main theories of decentralization and federal

dynamics. These include sociological (Erk, 2008; Livingston, 1952), economic (Keating, 2013) and institutional (Hall and Taylor, 1996) theories, but also (post)functionalist theories (Hooghe and Marks, 2016).

Furthermore, this research examines the case of Belgium in which its federal system 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 politicians have increasingly advocated the “re-federalization” of certain competences (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2020; Pascolo and *al.*, 2021). In order to understand the evolution of these federal dynamics, it is essential to study the positions of political parties with regard to the transfer of competences, as they play a major role in negotiations on institutional reforms (Swenden and Jans, 2006; Toubreau and Massetti, 2013). But also, Belgium can be considered as a typical example of a *partitocracy* dominated by political parties (de Winter and *al.* 1996; de Winter and Dumont 2003). Indeed, “Belgian parties are the main political actors - both issue entrepreneurs and veto players - who determine government policy” (Walgrave and Lefevre, 2010, p. 45).

However, political parties are not necessarily monolithic blocs, as not all their members agree on the same line (Alonso, 2012; Caramani, 2004). Indeed, it is important, given the place and weight of parties in the Belgian political system (De Winter and Dumont, 2006), to also study the attitudes and preferences of political representatives on federalism. This approach also makes it possible to analyze the differences and similarities that exist both between and within parties.

This paper is structured as follows. The first part presents the main theories in the literature of federal dynamics which are considered in this paper as the main foundations and factors of the frames mobilized by political parties and their members when justifying their positions in the debate on de-/re-federalization. The second part exhibit the collection of the two corpora mobilized as well as the application of the frame analysis methodology to this research. Then, the main analyses of the frames are presented, highlighting the main claims of the political parties and their representatives according to the proposals and underlying de- and re-federalization. A final section concludes and discusses the findings of the paper.

2. The federal dynamics

The question of the distribution of powers within a federation, between the federal authority and the constituent entities lies at the heart of federalism. Indeed, as highlighted by Livingston (1956): “The real key to the nature of the federation is in the distribution of powers” (p. 10). Moreover, the evolution of the dynamics and trajectories of power sharing and distribution within a federation is a crucial issue in the study of federalism. Moreover, the very essence of federalism is enshrined in the division of powers between self-rule and shared-rule. De facto, federal dynamics tend to be shifting. Indeed, the distribution of powers within a federation is never fixed and tends to evolve towards more or less (de)centralization (Dardanelli and *al.*, 2019). Different factors or determinants can explain this evolution towards more or less decentralization.

Furthermore, federations are “multidimensional and multidirectional” (Romainville, 2015, p. 227). Federal dynamics are therefore subject to a multitude of sources of change and various factors that stimulate the demand for such change through different mechanisms that are intrinsically linked to the causes and consequences of the changes that are attributed to the underlying federation. Moreover, federations evolve and are confronted with sources and tensions that propel change or rather maintain the status quo. The underlying federal dynamics vary in their trajectory, alternation and in the extent of change they bring about in the different dimensions of a federation (Benz and Colino, 2011; Benz and Broschek, 2013).

Therefore, a federal dynamic can be defined as “an ongoing process simultaneously comprising features of continuity and change” (Benz and Broschek, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, the process of change lies in the capacity of federations to adapt, to juggle with their environment: “the idea of change relates to the capacity of federations to adapt, that is to their ability to deal with an ever-changing environment that may challenge the structural setup of the federal system” (Braum and Schnabel, 2019, p. 100). Theorists of federalism distinguish two types of trajectories in federal dynamics between centripetal and centrifugal dynamics (Burgess, 2006; Niessen, 2021). This distinction refers in particular to the motives that favoured the creation of the federation in question, i.e. between, on the one hand, the coming-together or aggregation of former independent states, which is referred to as coming-together or centripetal federalism, and, on the other hand, the disintegration or splitting up of a formerly unitary state, which is referred to as holding-together or centrifugal federalism (Burgess, 2006; Stepan, 1999). The driving forces inherent in these federal dynamics are present through the different layers (social, institutional, and ideational/normative), which form a federation and are driven by a multitude of actors (Benz and Broschek, 2013). These different driving forces (between centrifugal and centripetal) enshrine divergent logics and are inherent to the factors that have historically erected the federation. Indeed, centrifugal forces are seen as being able to generate demands that propel institutional change, but also tend towards instability and put the federation under stress. In contrast, centripetal forces tend to moderate this change and maintain the institutional status quo.

However, within each federation, the drivers and underpinnings of these forces may evolve through interactions and tensions between different levels of power. Therefore, the character of the division and the division of competences are the result of interactions between different actors with divergent demands whose foundations evolve through multiple negotiations and political compromises that mark the changes that federations have undergone since their creation. As a result, federations face an imperative that “requires a rebalancing of centralization and non-centralization and of collaborative and competitive federalism” (Watts, 2006, p. 323). Some federations have undergone institutional changes in the form of centralization of their competences to the Federal Authority while other federations have instead decentralized their institutional arrangements in response to pressures from federated entities for increased autonomy in many areas of competence (Erk, 2008; Watts, 2006; Burgess, 2006).

To study federal dynamics, it is relevant to look at the discourses of political actors (political parties and party members) that shape the trajectories of the dynamics inherent in each federation. Indeed, political actors “need to justify their actions and decisions, and discourse is an essential instrument to pursue this goal”. The arguments underlying the frames used by political actors “convey a justificatory logic which, in turn, reveals their policy preferences” (Closa and Maatsch, 2014, p. 830). De facto, studying federal dynamics through the lens of political actors' discourse allows us to understand and analyze the ins and outs of a federation's evolution. Therefore, in the context of this paper, it is appropriate to analyze the demands for change via the frames underlying the justifications provided by political parties and their members for de-/re-federalization. These frames and underlying arguments find their foundations and main factors in the five major theoretical currents which have made it possible to study institutional changes and de facto federal dynamics inherent in the evolution of federations towards more or less decentralization.

First, sociological theories focus their analysis on the interactions and relationships between societal diversity and institutions. The studies underlying these theories take into consideration the identity factors and the differences between the groups that shape federations. According to the authors of sociological theories, federalism is both an institutional and a social phenomenon (Erk, 2008). According to this approach, the federal dynamics propelling institutional changes in federations are socially driven. Indeed, political institutions change to adapt and become congruent with society (Erk, 2008; Erk and Koning, 2010).

In addition, economic theories also adopt a structuralist perspective like sociological theories by focusing on macro-social factors (Laitin, 1998; Erk and Koning, 2010). In addition, economic theories emphasize the relative redistribution of wealth within different entities. According to these theories, sociological or identity attributes are therefore intrinsically linked to demands for economic autonomy (Keating, 2013). Moreover, some studies on federal dynamics have highlighted that so-called sociological (ethnocultural and linguistic) autonomy demands can be supplanted by so-called 'economic' demands (Álvarez Pereira and *al.*, 2018).

While institutional theories focus on and study the impacts and influences of institutional arrangements on the preferences and positions of different actors in a federation (Hall and Taylor, 1996). In addition, studies based on these theories state that the level at which MPs are active today, as well as socialization processes based on the level of their past activities could play a role in explaining their institutional preferences (Deschouwer and Depauw, 2014; Dodeigne and *al.*, 2021).

Finally, (post)functionalist theories (Hooghe and Marks, 2016) postulate that decentralization must be understood in terms of both community and scale. De facto, the distribution of competences is determined by communities of individuals with their own identities. Therefore, competences must be devolved taking into account considerations of scale or rather a so-called functional logic, but also considering the social heterogeneity, structural and identity differences existing within a society.

Therefore, in Belgium, the study of federal dynamics through the frames mobilized by political actors (political parties and their members) is particularly relevant. Indeed, 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 in particular of the two large communities.

3. Data and method

The following two subsections present both the collection and the content of the two corpora as well as the methodology adapted by this paper, namely the method of frame analysis and the main frames and arguments studied through a so-called longitudinal analysis.

3.1 Two corpora

In order to analyze the frames and arguments using by the Belgian political parties in the debate about de-federalization or re-federalization, this paper performs a frame analysis on two types of corpora: the electoral manifestos of 13 Belgian political parties, and the interventions of members of political parties in the French- and Dutch-language print media from 1999 until 2019. First, analyzing party manifestos is particularly relevant to assess the importance dedicated to a theme, a specific issue for the political party in question. The electoral manifesto is in fact the reference document regarding the position of a political party for a given electoral campaign (Reuchamps, 2015). Such document serves several functions: it is an official document that unites all party members during the election campaign, but also an essential source of information for voters and a guide for the actions of elected officials after the election (Biard and Dandoy, 2018).

The electoral manifestos of Belgian political parties have been coded and analyzed since 1999 for federal and regional elections until the last elections in May 2019. In addition, the parties studied were chosen on the basis of two criteria: having obtained at least one seat in at least half of the elections studied. A total of 13 Belgian political parties (six French-speaking, six Dutch-speaking parties and one unitary party) were analyzed in this way in 12 elections. In years with simultaneous (regional and federal) elections, political parties may file multiple electoral manifestos, so it is no fewer than 115 manifestos that have been coded and analyzed in this research.

Table 1: Political parties and the electoral manifestos

		1999 Federal and regional	2003 Federal	2004 Regional	2007 Federal	2009 Regional	2010 Federal and regional	2014 Federal and regional	2019 Federal and regional
Christian democrat.	cdH	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
	CD&V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Ecologist	Ecolo	/	V	V	V	V	V	V	V

	Groen	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Liberal	MR	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
	Open VLD	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Flemish nationalist.	VU/N-VA	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Socialist	PS	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
	SP.A	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Radical right	PP	/	/	/	/	/	V	V	V
	LDD	/	/	/	V	V	V	/	/
	VB	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
	FDF/Défi	V	V	/	V	V	V	V	V
Unitary party	PTB/PVDA	/	/	/	/	/	V	V	V

In addition to electoral manifestos, the second corpus concern the media interventions by members of political parties in the Belgian written press, i.e. in French and Dutch-speaking daily newspapers. After all, even if the manifesto is a good indicator of a party's position, the electoral campaign and competition may require adjustments on the part of political parties about the different positions adopted in their electoral manifesto (Reuchamps, 2015; Walgrave and Lefevre,). The use of this corpus provides a broader view of the positions of political parties and politicians through their interventions on issues and captures the possible evolution of their positions across time.

The collection of this second corpus is carried out on the same period studied by political manifestos (since 1999 for federal and regional elections until the last elections in May 2019). In addition, the data collection in the press archives platform (Gopress) is carried out for the entire election year (i.e. 1 January to 31 December), so that it includes the pre-campaign period, the election campaign, as well as the formation of coalitions and the underlying negotiations during the constitution of the executives in Belgium. To narrow down the corpus, a keyword search was conducted in the newspaper archives (table 2). The selection has been carried out on the most relevant articles containing interventions by policy makers, excluding opinions pieces, political columns and interventions and analyses by experts in the broadest sense.

Table 2: Keywords

Regionalisering & Regionaliseren	Régionalisation & Régionaliser
Federalisering & Federaliseren	Fédéralisation & Fédéraliser Défédéralisation & Défédéraliser
Refederalisering & Refederaliseren Herfederalisering & Herfederaliseren	Fédéraliser & Refédéraliser

Finally, after a keyword search in the press archive and the selection of the most relevant articles for this search. No less than 278 press articles were coded and analyzed (Table 3) as part of this longitudinal research on the positions of the members of political parties through their media interventions in the numerous Belgian daily newspapers throughout the electoral years from the end of 1990's to the last federal and regional elections, actual of 2019.

Table 3: The number of articles coded by daily newspaper

<i>Dutch-speaking press</i>	Number of articles coded	<i>French-speaking press</i>	Number of articles coded
<i>De Standaard</i>	48	<i>L'Avenir</i>	16
<i>De Morgen</i>	41	<i>L'Echo</i>	28
<i>De Tijd</i>	17	<i>La Dernière Heure</i>	20
<i>Het Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	6	<i>La Libre Belgique</i>	37
<i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>	7	<i>Le Soir</i>	29
<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	9	<i>Sud presse</i>	6
<i>Het Laaste Nieuws</i>	14		
<i>Tot.</i>	142		136

3.2 Frame analysis

The qualitative method employed by this research combines content analysis with frame analysis. Rather than studying a party at a given point in time, the analysis focuses on the use of frames over time to identify instances of change. This allows us to explore the relationship between intrinsic motivations, institutional incentives or contexts, and the ways in which political parties and their members justify their positions. By examining the framing of their positions, or to put it another way, how they justify those positions, it is possible to identify the factors that shape federal dynamics toward more or less de-/re-federalization. Moreover, the study of frames is essential to understanding the evolution of federal dynamics. Indeed, as highlighted by Brown (2017, p. 62): “Framing allows us to capture some of the strategy inherent in political communication as actors attempt to justify and bolster support for their claims through their interpretation of external events.”

Furthermore, the heart of the analyses in this paper lies in understanding the importance of the articulation of frames and arguments by actors. By examining the framing of actors' positions, or rather the way in which they define the problems related to the distribution of competences, it is possible to identify the considerations and motives underlying the frames and arguments mobilized by actors to justify their positions concerning the distribution of competences and which de facto shape federal dynamics. Frames, as highlighted by Goffman (1974, p. 614), are intended to “locate, perceive, identify and label” the ideas of the actors. Furthermore, a frame contains the definition of a problem and a possible solution to the problem (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614; Entman, 1993, p. 52). Furthermore, frames can be defined as “values, beliefs, goals, rhetoric, ideological elements... slogans, tactics, motivations, portraits of ‘us’ and ‘them’, prognoses and diagnoses” (Johnston and Noakes, 2005, p. 12).

The study of frames has long been mobilized in studies of social movements or in communication studies of the media and the impact of framing on public opinion. Discussions about the distribution of power and policy in general, and de facto about the frames they mobilize, are mainly focused on elites because the latter “intentionally and necessarily emphasize different messages and arguments in a policy debate” (Schaffner & Sellers, 2010:

1). Different studies have mobilized this frame analysis to investigate the justifications underlying political parties' positions about European integration (Heibling and *al.*, 2010) or about immigration policy (Helbling, 2014; Fiřtová, 2021). Various works and studies have also examined the use of underlying frameworks and arguments regarding territorial restructuring policies and de facto political party positions on de/centralization (Basile, 2016, 2019; Chaney, 2013; Field and Hamann, 2015; Moufahim and *al.*, 2015; Sinardet and Morinsk, 2011).

These different studies attempt to study the mobilization and justification through frames, on de/centralization issues according to one type of actor, usually political parties. In the framework of this paper, it is appropriate to study the underlying frames and arguments mobilized by several types of actors (political parties but also their members) in a longitudinal way and based on different corpora (through electoral manifestos and the written press). The different analyses will allow comparisons to be made between and within political parties and their members. Furthermore, the analysis of frames in this paper focuses mainly on the articulation of frames by actors through the various state reforms in Belgium since the early 2000s.

In addition, this paper adopts a longitudinal approach that allows for highlighting changes in the mobilization of political party cadres and positions and their members by focusing on the related context and evolution of Belgium's federalization over the course of the various state reforms. This longitudinal approach is well suited to the analyses in this paper. Indeed, as highlighted by Berg-Schlosser, (2012, p. 207): the longitudinal approach allows “looking at the developments over time taking into account both structure- and actor-related aspects. But this approach is also “much better suited to disentangle processes of change and causal relationships which operate over time”.

The coding process and the underlying codebook mobilized are concerned with the mobilization and basis of the frames and arguments of political actors (political parties and their members) by drawing on the various studies (Sinardet and Morsink, 2011; Chaney, 2013; Basile, 2016, 2019; Reuchamps and *al.*, 2021) based on one or more major theories concerned with federal dynamics and power-sharing in federal states (*see below*): sociological theories, economic theories, functionalist theories and finally neo-institutionalist theories. Moreover, the coding process used in this research is a combination of a deductive and inductive approach to frame formulation. Indeed, a preliminary codebook was developed. This coding method is also open-ended in the sense that the different frames were expanded during the coding process and therefore specific sub-frames (arguments) were included in the analysis. In addition, in this research, a frame includes different arguments to the theme and dimension definition to which that frame refers. This unit of analysis, in this study, the frame, refers to the structure of the argumentative justification and its associated justifications. Finally, here, an argument is considered as “one or more sentences in which a position is defended” (Sinardet and Morsink, 2011, p. 5).

Table 4: Dimensions and related frames

Trajectory: de-federalization or re-federalization			
Dimension	Economic	Cultural	Institutional
Frames	Identity	Identity	Identity
	Efficiency	Efficiency	Efficiency
	Other(s)	Other(s)	Other(s)

The two main frames between identity and efficiency are grouped into three main dimensions (Wonka, 2016; Kriesi and *al.* 2012; Helbling and *al.* 2010) referring to major theories of federal dynamics. Furthermore, as highlighted in Table 4, above, in the so-called economic dimension, the efficiency frame is rather emphasized but this can also be coupled with elements referring to group differences and identities. Furthermore, in the cultural dimension, the identity frame and its relative arguments take the ascendancy, however, arguments from the identity frame can be accommodated with so-called efficiency arguments in a discourse. Finally, an 'other(s)' frame has been added to the set of dimensions, in order to group arguments underlying frameworks that do not fit directly into the main frames presented in the table (Table 4) above.

The economic dimension here refers to issues of so-called economic efficiency: i.e. that de-/re-federalization is a guarantee of efficiency of the underlying policies and competences. Furthermore, as presented in economic theories, so-called 'macro-social' factors may play a role in the economic demands and grievances of territorial restructuring (Keating, 2013). While the cultural or, to put it differently, identity dimension refers to aspects and factors related to group differences and group identity. Finally, the institutional or rather functional dimension is more concerned with factors relating to the different institutions and the current institutional structure as well as the way in which the different policies, areas of competence are managed. Therefore, this dimension includes all the arguments underlying the so-called functional efficiency frame and presupposes those subsequent transfers of competences must be consistent with previous arrangements (state reforms). De facto, the overriding frames and arguments in this dimension emphasize that competences must be devolved to allow for efficient and coherent management of the different underlying public policies.

4. Findings

The following two subsections present a sample of initial results of this research concerning the frame and arguments of political actors (political parties and their members) about the de-/re-federalization. The analyses are presented in relation to the three main dimensions (economic, cultural, and institutional), the main frames and the underlying arguments.

As seen earlier in the introduction, the demands for de-federalization are notably carried by political parties and representatives from the north of the country, the Dutch-speaking

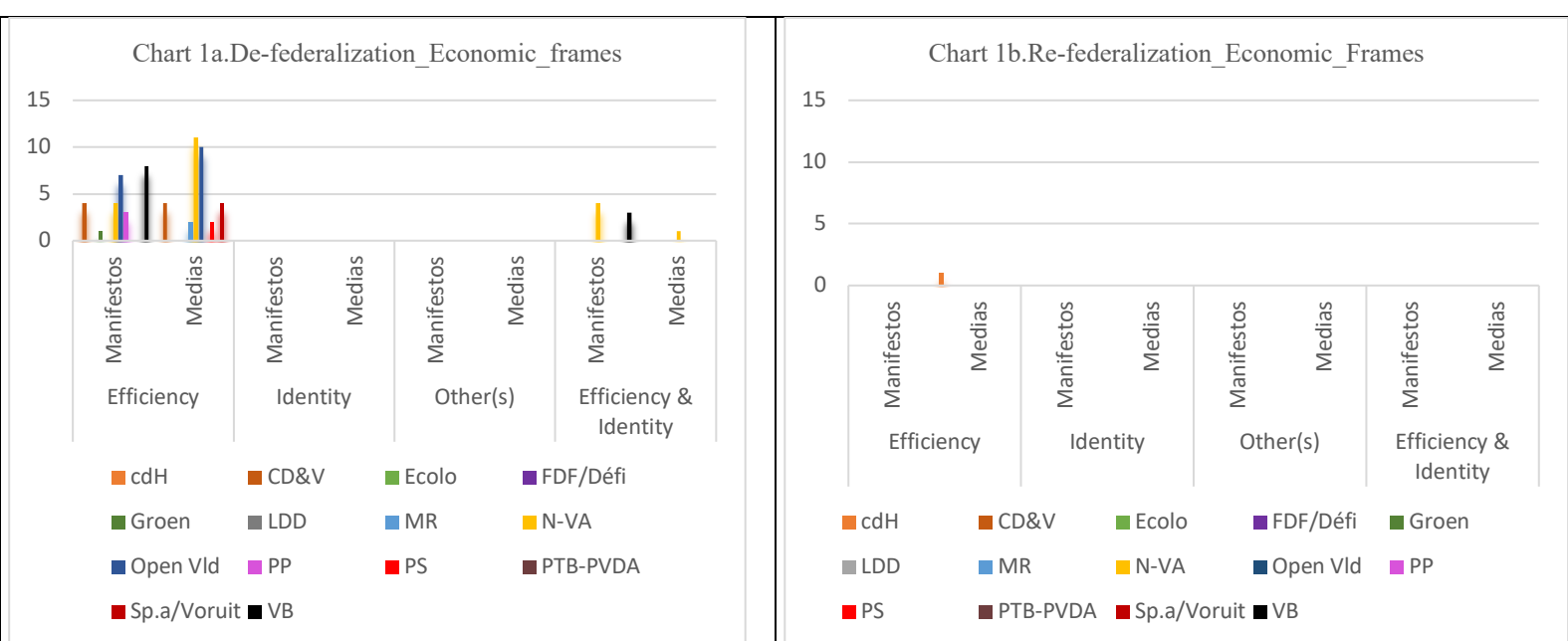
political parties. However, the demands for de-federalization are not shared and released in the same way by all these parties. In addition, political parties from the south of the country, the French-speaking political parties, also propose and put on the agenda demands of a centrifugal type of distribution of competences and responsibilities. Moreover, even though previous state reforms have historically and systematically generated centrifugal transfers of competences. Since the federal elections of 2007, important demands for re-federalization have been on the political agenda of political parties and representatives, although most of them are French-speaking, even though Dutch-speaking political parties also highlight certain demands, claims of a centripetal type in their manifestos and more recently in their media interventions.

Political parties and their member define, and construct problems related to management and competences' transfer according to different frames. Indeed, to justify their claims in favour of or against re/de-federalization, they highlight in their discourse and through different arguments, various dysfunctions underlying the practices and modalities at the heart of the Belgian federal political system which are both perceived as causes and consequences of the federal dynamics that have shaped the Belgian federation. In this research, these frames are analyzed through three main dimensions (Economic, cultural, and institutional).

a. Economic dimension

The economic dimension is concerned with justifications based on considerations related to the economic or fiscal performance of the federation and the sub-entities. This dimension finds its theoretical significance in the rather economic theories of federalism (Keating, 2013). Arguments arising from this dimension, from the efficiency framework, point to the economic gains or transparency that a transfer of competences to the sub-entities can generate. Furthermore, proponents of de-federalization of competences argue that a transfer of competences to the federated entities leads to greater economic prosperity. The identity framework in this dimension is also supported by arguments from the efficiency framework. Indeed, this echoes the theoretical considerations highlighted above as well as the conclusions of a study (Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008) on several regionalist movements which highlights that if historically the claims of these parties are motivated by identity considerations, these are gradually fading away in favour of a primacy of economic and functional efficiency frameworks and arguments or are therefore coupled with this type of framework and argument. In Belgium, this complementarity can be found in the discourses of regionalist parties in arguments such as “Wat we zelf doen, doen we beter” (Erk, 2003, p. 201). They can indeed highlight differences between regions by underlining divergences in terms of identity, ideology or politics and thus couple these so-called political differences with arguments of economic or functional efficiency. These considerations can be highlighted in the following extract.

Als er één zaak duidelijk is geworden het afgelopen jaar dan is het wel dat een verdere staatshervorming een noodzakelijk instrument is voor de sociaal-economische ontwikkeling van het ganse land. Belangrijke en niet veel langer uit te stellen – want daarvoor zijn de uitdagingen te groot – sociaal-economische maatregelen vereisen ook een grondige staatshervorming; vereisen meer verantwoordelijkheid, ook op financieel gebied van de deelstaten (CD&V, 2009, p.110).



The charts above highlight that the use of the efficiency frame was notably mobilized in their demands for de-federalization by the Flemish regionalist party N-VA, but also by the Flemish right-wing party Open-Vld through their members' interventions in the press. Furthermore, the combination of arguments combining an identity and efficiency frames are highlighted in the demands of the manifestos of the N-VA and the Flemish far-right party Vlaams Belang. Finally, the only party, the French centre-left party (cdH), which mobilized an efficiency framework from this dimension for a demand for re-federalization tends to emphasize in its discourse the importance of maintaining the so-called solidarity mechanisms in the financial transfers between the sub-entities.

b. Cultural dimension

The cultural dimension refers to sociological theories of federalism, which consider federalism to be not only institutional but also social (Erk, 2008). The arguments representing the identity frame and resulting from this cultural dimension have their source in the linguistic, structural, and ideological differences between the groups. Through this dimension, and particularly the theories through which it is derived, federal dynamics propelling institutional change in federations are socially driven. Indeed, political institutions change to adapt and become congruent with society (Erk, 2008; Erk and Koning, 2010). In Belgium, even though the first steps of federalization were mainly justified by the actors according to arguments underlying an identity-based framework. As the state reforms progressed, other frameworks and numerous arguments were mobilized. As highlighted in previous studies (Reuchamps and *al.*, 2021) in Belgium but also in other countries (Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008) and through the results of this research. It can be observed today that efficiency-type frameworks and arguments referring to the economic, functional, or institutional dimensions seem to take precedence in the justifications of actors wishing to take a position on the future of the Belgian

federal structure. However, the identity-type framework, although much less present, does not disappear completely but is associated in the other dimensions with a framework of efficiency and its underlying arguments.

In their speeches, political parties and their members mobilize a so-called 'cultural' dimension and rather an identity frame, underline the intrinsic differences in ideological, political, or even cultural visions between the two communities, the Flemish and the Walloons. Indeed, the construction and highlighting of problems through this frame are sometimes mobilized around what the political parties and representatives point to as fundamental differences in points of view and visions between the two communities. The following extract highlights the arguments underlying this frame as the requirements of diversity and the linguistic, cultural, and historical identity specific to each community and, on the other hand, underline rather political differences linked to divergent characteristics, economic and ideological visions.

Vlaanderen en Wallonië hebben elk hun eigen rechtscultuur. Vlaanderen leunt veel sterker aan bij de zakelijke en pragmatische aanpak van Nederland, terwijl Wallonië duidelijk georiënteerd is op de traditionele rechtscultuur van Frankrijk (VB, 2004, p.32).

Chart 2a. De-federalization_Cultural_Frames

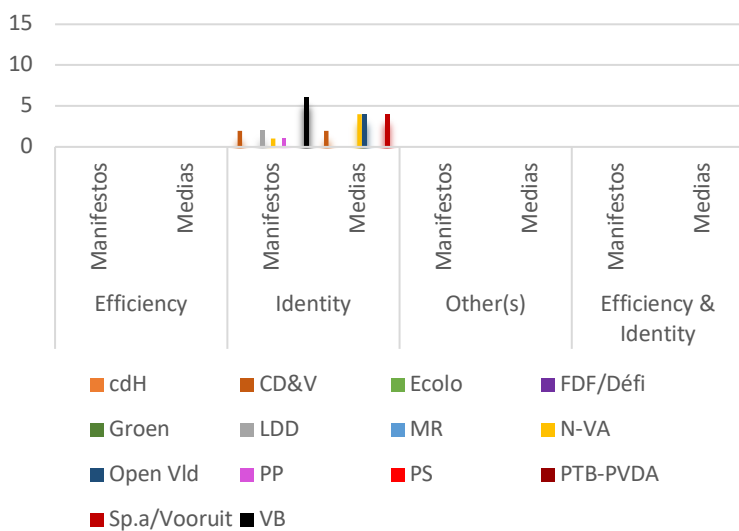
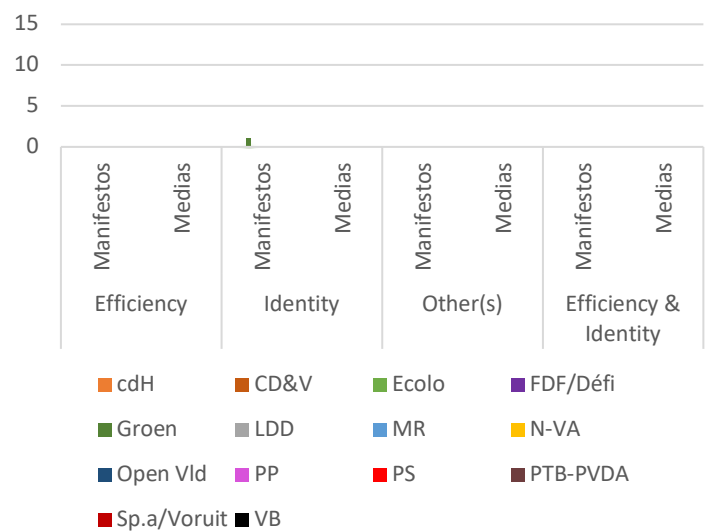


Chart 2b. Re-federalization_Cultural_Frames



Furthermore, the charts (Chart 2a and Chart 2b) above allow us to highlight the use of this frame and argument by the political parties and their members according to the two main trajectories. As far as de-federalization is concerned, this frame is notably used by the Flemish far-right party, Vlaams Belang, through its various manifestos. While the right-wing party, Open Vld, or the Flemish left-wing party, Vooruit, make little use of this framework, it seems to be used by some of their members in the written press. Finally, as far as re-federalization is concerned, this frame is not used except for the MR in one of its electoral manifestos.

C. Institutional dimension

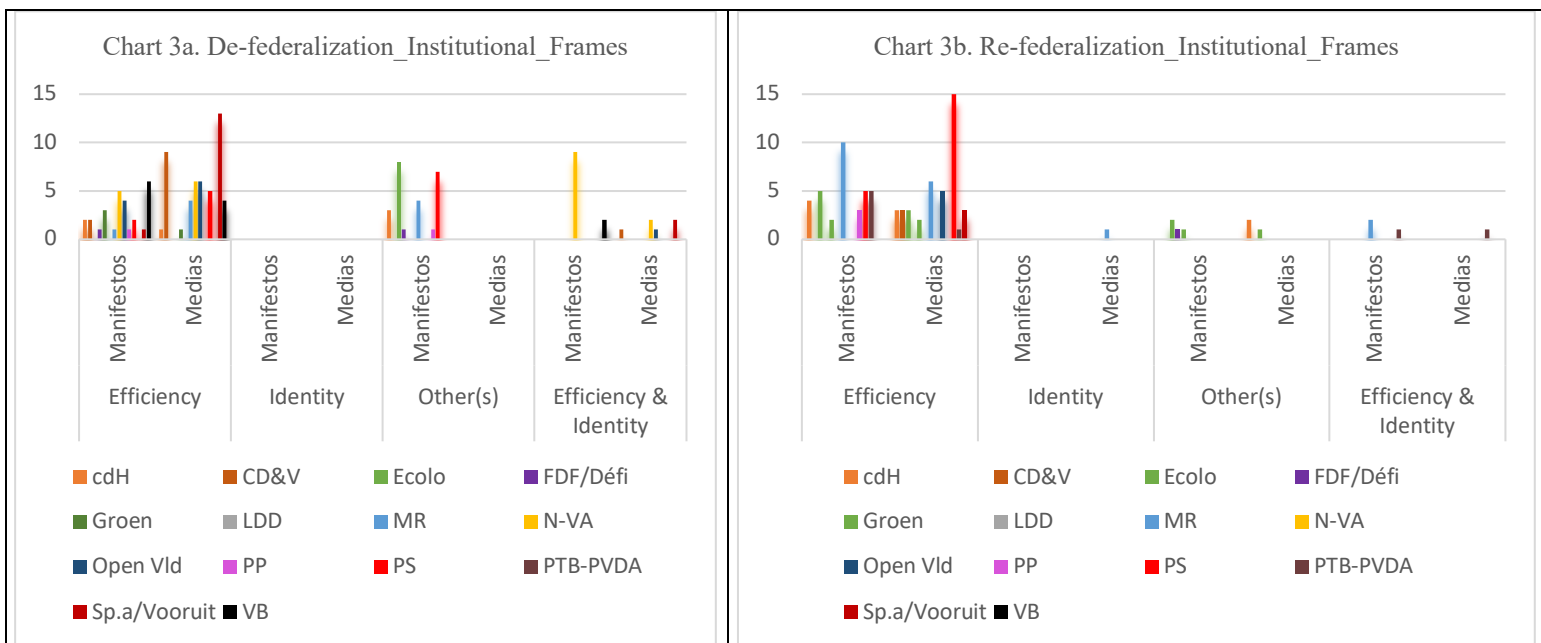
This institutional dimension emphasizes, among other things, justifications related to governance and the consequences and functioning of the system. Neo-institutional theories have emphasized the different effects of institutions on political actors, their ideas but also their behaviour. Furthermore, the post-functionalist (Hooghe and Marks, 2016) point out the importance of taking into consideration that the territorial structure of governance must be conceived as both the consequence of a functional logic, but also the consequence of an identity logic. These considerations are illustrated in the more intensive use throughout this category of arguments stemming from a mix of the two frames (of identity and efficiency).

In addition, political parties and their members mobilizing arguments from the frames of this dimension, highlight the lack of coherence from the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and dispersion of competences. Indeed, policy areas have been devolved to different political entities but not following a guideline in the sharing of powers and responsibilities. As a result, they point to a lack of coherence in the management of a particular policy area due to a non-homogeneous distribution of competences from the same policy area.

For example, in the example below, the lack of coherence is highlighted by the French-speaking socialist party PS. The party points out that effective policies in this field of public health cannot be effectively completed, due to the fragmentation of competences and responsibilities between the different levels of government.

Le PS propose de refédéraliser la politique de prévention en matière de santé (...). La refédéralisation de cette compétence serait de nature à mettre fin à la situation actuelle ambiguë où la limite qui sépare les compétences fédérales et communautaires est parfois très floue (PS, 2007, p.152).

Moreover, through this dimension, we also find justifications pointing out the dysfunctions of the system, and in particular the dysfunctions and complexity of the Belgian federal institutional architecture. The main causes and origins of this complex institutional architecture stem from the different institutional reforms that have successively taken place during arrangements and negotiations. The institutional mechanisms inherent in this architecture, which is considered complex, are highlighted by the political elites to underline, and justify a solution whose objectives aim to overcome the various institutional dysfunctions. Furthermore, the political parties and their representatives who support re-federalization point also to the lack of coordination underline on cross-cutting issues that require a unity of command to manage and coordinate policies in these areas of competence.



This institutional dimension and the underlying efficiency frame were strongly mobilized by political parties, particularly French speaking (PS, MR, Ecolo) but also Flemish, who want to re-federate certain competences (Groen, Open Vld). These parties point to the dysfunctions of the institutional architecture through the need for more coherence and coordination. They also point to the French-speaking ecologist party (Ecolo) through the frame (others) with arguments as the responsibility of the political representatives, the equality of the constituent entities or the modernity of the Belgian institutional system.

In addition, the political parties seeking a de-federalization of competences have also made extensive use of this dimension and the underlying frameworks. Indeed, the Flemish Socialist Party (Vooruit) has largely pointed out the dysfunctions and the lack of coherence and transparency of the Belgian federal system through the media interventions of its members.

Finally, as highlighted through the theoretical considerations of post-functionalism, the mobilization of arguments from both frameworks (of identity and efficiency) is particularly mobilized here in this dimension. Indeed, it is the regionalist party N-VA that makes use of it in its electoral manifestos. The party points to both the incorrectness of the management and management of competences by a particular level of power that the political and ideological differences between the two large communities to justify a de-federalization of competences.

5. Conclusion

This research, through a longitudinal study using frame analysis, highlights the frameworks and arguments underlying the discourses of the main political actors (political parties and their members) about federal dynamics. Furthermore, this research, to construct the main dimensions and frames that can be found in the discourses of these actors, is based on the theoretical considerations of the main currents of federalism and territorial restructuring. The case of

Belgium is particularly relevant in this type of research because of its history and federalization based on a centrifugal historical dynamic but also because of its two-party systems.

The breakdown of the analyses of this research through the three dimensions and the two main trajectories (centrifugal and centripetal) has made it possible to highlight different findings regarding the use of the underlying frames and arguments by the political parties and their members. Indeed, it seems that political parties wishing to re-federalize competences strongly mobilize arguments through an efficiency frame derived from the institutional dimension. Moreover, it was noticed through the analyses that the parties wishing to de-federalize, and the main protagonists such as the N-VA or the Vlaams Belang, tend to use a mix in their arguments by coupling arguments from an identity frame with other arguments from an efficiency frame.

Finally, other analyses can also be highlighted through this study. Indeed, for a future study, it would be interesting to focus on the evolution and use of frames and arguments over time but also within and between political parties in the north and south of the country.

6. References

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