

More or less regional autonomy? A qualitative analysis of citizen arguments towards (de)centralization in Belgium

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Abstract: Belgium is often portrayed as a textbook example of gradual federalization. Today, however, a rather new debate among political elites has emerged: whether to refederalize some of the powers that have been devolved to the substate entities. Yet, little is known about how citizens see the issue. The objective of this article is therefore to explore and compare citizens' arguments for more or less regional autonomy. To this end, three citizen forums focusing on federalism were organized in 2017-2018: one in French, a second one in Dutch and a third one in German. They were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Our results suggest that citizen opinions are justified based on two major argumentative themes: identity and efficiency. While one would expect the former to be of traditional importance, our analysis revealed that considerations about efficiency have taken the lead. This can above all be understood given the advanced stage of the Belgian federalization process, for which considerations of identity are still latently important but explicitly not sufficient enough anymore to justify further dynamics. Finally, our analysis also outlined the existence of additional argumentative frames related to path dependencies and the peculiar situation of Brussels.

Keywords: Decentralization, Federalization, Regional autonomy, Belgium, Citizen attitudes, Thematic analysis

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Introduction

What are the types of arguments that citizens use when discussing the federalization of their country? This is an important question when one wants to understand their attitudes towards decentralization. Yet, the value of citizens' discourse in politics has been long neglected, mainly because elite discourse is better documented and deemed more interesting due to its persuasive function (Perrez et al. 2019). However, when one considers citizens as both the initial determinant and the ultimate recipient of federalism, studying their opinion is of crucial importance.

In this regard, Hooghe and Marks (2016, p. 2) outline that to explain (territorial) governance, 'one must analyse how individuals think and act in relation to the communities to which they conceive themselves belonging'. More precisely, such a postfunctionalist theory of governance posits that governance should not only be conceived in terms of *functionally efficient governance* (i.e. whereby the scale at which a good is provided is determined by the features of that good only), but must also 'engage the feeling that people have about the communities in which they live' (Hooghe and Marks 2016, p. 17). However, beyond the European integration case (Börzel and Risse 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kuhn 2019), the postfunctionalist theory has yet to be applied using a citizen perspective.

This article analyses and compares an original qualitative dataset of citizens' opinions and arguments towards (de)centralization in Belgium. The Belgian case is particularly suited for this task. Indeed, this country is often portrayed as a textbook example of peaceful federalization (Deschouwer 2012; Lijphart 1981). While the country was for over a century a unitary state, it went through a deep process of federalization in a few decades of time to form a federal state where substate entities enjoy substantial autonomy (Fournier and Reuchamps 2009). Today, however, a rather new debate is emerging among political elites: whether to recentralize (or in Belgian jargon 'refederalize') some of the powers that have been devolved (in Belgian jargon '(de)federalize') to the Belgian substate entities, the Regions and Communities (Reuchamps et al. 2017). This ongoing debate offers a fruitful ground for exploring how citizens think of federalism and decentralization and what type of arguments they use when they justify their opinion.

So far, much of the literature analysing preferences towards (de)centralization is elite-focussed (Burgess 2012), and this is also the case for Belgium (Deschouwer 2013; Reuchamps et al. 2018). Yet, while (de)centralization processes might be mainly driven by elites, especially in a consociational and partitocratic country like Belgium, citizens are the initial determinants and the ultimate recipients of public policies and therefore key to be considered. Existing citizen-based studies are mainly quantitative (for one of the rare exceptions, see Winter et al. 2017) – also in Belgium (for instance, Deschouwer et al. 2015; Rimé et al. 2015; Sinardet et al. 2018; Swyngedouw et al. 2014), including the article by Verhaegen and colleagues in this special issue. They are valuable to capture citizens' aggregated positions. However, more qualitative data are needed to understand the arguments behind citizens' opinions towards federalization. In order to do so, we organized three *citizen forums* in each of the three Belgian language communities: the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking and the German-speaking (the latter being often excluded from the comparison because of their small population).

In the next section, we give an overview of the different state reforms that shaped the Belgian federalization process and we discuss what we know so far on citizens' preferences towards federalism in Belgium. The second section presents the citizen forums and the thematic discourse analysis we used to study them. On this basis, we describe our results in a third section and show how Belgian citizens think about (de)centralization. We conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of our results for the postfunctionalist theory of governance on the regional level.

Belgium: a textbook example of a decentralized multinational federation

Belgium has always been a linguistically divided country, even if this divide has not always been as salient as it is today. In Belgium, the population living in the north speaks Dutch, while the southern population speaks French. Furthermore, there is a tiny German-speaking territory which joined the country after being removed from Germany as war reparation following the First World War. Even though a majority of the population spoke Dutch from the country's very beginning, Belgium was created as a unitary state and French was chosen as the sole official language as well as the language of politics and public affairs (Deschouwer 2012; Mabilille 2011; Witte et al. 1997).

As a reaction, the inhabitants of the north, led by the so-called 'Flemish movement', gradually demanded equal recognition for the Dutch language – at least in the Dutch-speaking part of the country (i.e. Flanders). This issue was only fully addressed in the course of the 1950s and 1960s by opting for a territorial logic, building on the fact that the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking populations were all territorially concentrated – except in Brussels. Consequently, four language areas with enhanced linguistic rights were officially recognized from 1962–1963 onwards: a Dutch-speaking area in the north, a French-speaking area in the south, a German-speaking area in the east, and a bilingual area for the city of Brussels (McRae 1983; Witte and Van Velthoven 2000). Nonetheless, the territorial recognition did not entirely solve the language issue because Brussels and its surrounding area, initially Dutch-speaking, had become increasingly French-speaking. In parallel to this linguistic debate, the socio-economical context also evolved. While the French-speaking south, Wallonia, had been the economic engine of the country at its beginnings, it was hit by a structural economic decline in the turn of the 1960s. Meanwhile, the Flemish economy spearheaded. Therefore, claims in the south were made for more economic autonomy in order to protect their economic interests, while in the north, Flanders asked for cultural autonomy (Erk 2003; Reuchamps 2015). To pacify the linguistic and socio-economic tensions, a devolution process was set in motion in 1970, which is still going on today (Swenden and Jans 2006).

There has never been a blueprint for the Belgian state reforms, even if the process of transformation was called federalization and Belgium became officially a federal state in 1993 (Deschouwer 2005). The road towards the implementation of a federal state structure was lengthy and difficult, with long periods of high government turmoil and talks about a deep regime crisis. While the issue seemed settled around 2001, the identity politics resurfaced around 2007 as a result of the increasing governmental instability: it took almost 200 days to form a government that year and 541 days to agree on a major state reform following the 2010 elections. The main problem was that some elites in Flanders wanted a larger degree of

autonomy, especially in fiscal and social-security matters, while Francophone elites were opposed to it. After this major sixth state reform in 2014, inter-community tensions started to cool down again and some elites even went as far as envisioning the (re)centralization of some competences (i.e. back to the federal state) due to problems of political coordination.

In 2019, Belgium faced another major governmental crisis without a stable (majority) cabinet because left-wing parties, who are traditionally strong in Wallonia, and right-wing (regionalist) parties, who are traditionally strong in Flanders, did not want to govern together. In addition to this governmental deadlock, the political coordination difficulties coming with the country's heterogenous competence distributions have become particularly salient when environmental and sanitary policy have been at the top of the recent political agenda (Reuchamps et al. 2020). The latter was especially the case during the Corona crisis. Taken together, this has once more emphasized the debate about more or less regional autonomy in certain policy fields.

The short overview shows that the Belgian federalization process was determined by very different rationales. While the initial conferral was foremost motivated by interests played out along identity lines, things were more complex for the subsequent autonomy enlargements. In part, they continued to be motivated by questions of identity ('we want to do it ourselves because we are different'), but considerations of efficiency started to be of increasing importance ('we want to do it our-selves because we do it better') (Erk 2003). The latter concerned both reflections on subsidiarity and homogeneity of transferred competences (Swenden and Jans 2006). While these were the main drivers until around the fifth state reform in 2001, two new elements appeared afterwards.

First, Flemish elite discourses started to display inter-group differences not only along linguistic but also along socio-political lines. Since policy preferences in Wallonia tend to be more leftist and those in Flanders more rightist, they argued that both should decide themselves on most of their policies (Baudewyns et al. 2015; Dandoy et al. 2015). This reasoning can be regarded as an argument of identity insofar as group differences are concerned; it can be regarded as an argument of efficiency insofar as policy outputs are concerned. Second, the Belgian federalization process began to be increasingly driven by institutional effects (Deschouwer 2006, 2009). While the asymmetrical composition of coalitions at the regional and federal level allowed regional coalitions to blame the federal one and display itself as the only 'good government', the consociational features of the federal institutions lead to institutional deadlock (because of mutual vetoes) and created distinct political classes (because of distinct electoral constituencies and segmental autonomy).

While the bipolar nature of the Belgian federation combining federal institutions with consociational rules of governance (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2014, 2015, 2020) highlights the singularity of the Belgian case, its study is relevant for a broader universe of cases in that it constitutes a textbook example of a decentralized multinational federation.

Data and method: analysing citizen forums using qualitative thematic analysis

In this research, we adopted a theory-building perspective with a twofold objective. First, we aim at understanding what types of arguments were used by Belgian citizens from each language community to justify (re)federalization. Secondly, we examine what similarities and

differences exist between language communities and whether some arguments are mobilized by particular groups of citizens.

Collecting data: citizen forums on federalism

For studying Belgian citizen discourses, we organized three citizen forums using ‘focus-group conversations’ (Burgess 2012). We did so for three main reasons. First of all, the forums allowed participating citizens to deliberate, in small groups, about the complex issue of federalization and the future of Belgian federalism (Reuchamps 2013). Secondly, the technique allowed to control contextual elements, like the number of participants or the theme of the discussion. Thirdly, as Wodak et al. (2009, p. 108) put it, focus groups provide a ‘more realistic communicative situation, a more relaxed, informal atmosphere’ and group-discussions can help in the so-called co-construction of ‘paramount concepts’.

To study the deliberated opinion of citizens, three citizen forums were organized: one in Antwerp with 40 Dutch-speaking participants in March 2018, one in Liège with 41 French-speaking participants in September 2017 and one in Elsenborn with 25 German-speaking participants¹ in May 2018. To reach diversity within the forums, participants were selected² based on six criteria: gender, age, geographical origin,³ education, identity⁴ and previous political knowledge (see also “Appendix 1”). The last criterion was added in order to reach citizens beyond the ‘usual suspects’ interested in politics.⁵ All citizen forums had the same set-up, allowing participants to talk as freely as possible. In particular, citizens were presented with a video in which a political scientist briefly presented six different scenarios of (de)centralization in Belgium: (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. Discussions were guided by facilitators that were trained to allow a high quality of deliberation among all participants.

¹ The German-speaking forum was smaller because socio-demographic (and especially geographic) diversity was much easier to achieve than for the Dutch- and French-speakers.

² Upon inscription, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which allowed controlling their socio-demographics, identity and interest in politics. At the end of the three hours meeting, participants were also asked to fill in a post-questionnaire.

³ For the Dutch- and French-speaking groups, a diverse provincial geographic distribution was sought, including participants from Brussels who were invited to the Dutch-speaking or French-speaking one according to their mother tongue. For the German-speaking, an equal distribution between the northern and southern cantons was sought.

⁴ An equal distribution was sought between participants having a ‘Belgian identity only’, a ‘stronger Belgian than regional identity’, an ‘equally Belgian and regional identity’, a ‘stronger regional than Belgian identity’, and a ‘regional identity only’.

⁵ People known to have such varied backgrounds were recruited on invitation by the organizers for the forums in Liège and Elsenborn. In the absence of a similar network in Flanders, the online polling agency *iVox* was asked to compose a comparable panel for the forum in Antwerp, in which participants’ interest in politics was explicitly checked in advance.

The focus groups (eight in Dutch, eight in French and four in German) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The analysis was semi-inductive insofar as six scenarios had been proposed by the organizers, but arguments were explored by starting from the data only. While no pre-existing coding-frame was used, arguments mobilized in favour of and against centralization were later mirrored for decentralization (and vice versa) to obtain a coherent coding scheme. The analysis was semantic insofar as only explicitly verbalized statements were considered. It was explorative insofar as well-established theories on differences to be expected among citizens did not exist. We acknowledge that our prerequisite knowledge of the importance played by identity and efficiency arguments in Belgian political discourse on federalism might have framed our way of thinking as researchers. However, we were open for this classification to be proved wrong and alternative themes to emerge.

All transcriptions were analysed in four steps through a thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The corpus (245,086 words) was processed using the software *NVivo*. In a first step, we familiarized ourselves with the data and identified all sentences that participants associated positively or negatively with each of the six scenarios. In a second step, we were looking for arguments among these sentences. While argumentation can be defined as a ‘verbal activity oriented towards the realization of a goal’ (Habernal and Gurevych 2017, p. 126; Micheli 2012), we follow Amossy (2009, p. 2) in her view that argumentativity is also found in situations where there are no objectives of persuasion. Consequently, in this article, *we conceive an argument as the verbal activity of a participant aiming at justifying his/her opinion on the question of (de)centralization in Belgium*. In line with this, we grouped all similar propositions used by participants to justify their opinion in favour of or against one of the proposed decentralization scenarios and considered them as arguments. A coding scheme listing all arguments in favour of and against each scenario was composed. In a third step, the coding scheme was translated into *NVivo*. One *NVivo*-node was created for every argument and nodes were grouped based on the scenario to which they referred and whether they were used to argue in favour of or against it (see column one and three of “Appendix 2”). All text passages in the data corpus containing an argument were then coded into the respective argument-node. Every coding of each was proofed by two researchers. In a fourth step, arguments were grouped to form larger analytical themes (see column two of “Appendix 2”). The grouping followed the double criterion of internal homogeneity (i.e. identifying themes that are composed of meaningfully coherent arguments) and external heterogeneity (i.e. identifying themes that are clearly differentiable). While two major themes were identifiable for most scenarios – ‘identity’ and ‘efficiency’ – some arguments were distinctive and treated as such.

Our classification was driven by the following reasoning. The identity theme was established based on arguments in which participants pleaded in favour of or against a scenario based on the extent to which they saw themselves as belonging to a different socio-political group (or not). Thereby, considerations could explicitly mention ‘identity’ or relate more generally to cultural, linguistic or political inter-group differences. The efficiency theme, in turn, was established based on arguments in which participants were in favour of or against a scenario based on the extent to which they considered the current set-up of federal Belgium to work well or not. Considerations could again be explicit by mentioning ‘efficiency’ directly, or

they could relate to the (dis)functioning of the administration or the economy, public spending, complexity of governance, transparency, regional interconnection, policy heterogeneity and scale logics. What's more, a distinction is sometimes made between 'efficiency' and 'legibility' arguments. While the former refers to the performance of governance, the latter refers to the simplicity or readability of governance. The differentiation is made to distinguish between (federal) policies that are either efficient but not legible (e.g. when (federal) policy complexity is required to solve a political problem) or legible but not efficient (e.g. when (federal) policy simplification does not resolve a political problem). Given that the distinction was not made by the participants of our forums, it is not reflected in our analysis. But we draw future studies' attention to the issue in case the nuance should become relevant for them.

Based on this thematic analysis, we systematically compared which themes of arguments were mobilized by citizens to justify their opinion in favour of or against a particular (re)federalization scenario and if distinct patterns for the different language groups emerged. This comparison will be presented theme by theme in the next section and illustrated with quotes from the respective theme. The original wording in Dutch, French and German is presented in an "Online Appendix".

To centralize or to decentralize? Citizen perspectives on (de)centralization in Belgium

Overall, the results of our analysis indicate that across all six scenarios, citizen opinions in favour of or against (de)centralization are to a large extent supported using two main argumentative themes: efficiency and identity arguments. This is interesting insofar as it fits with the main assumption of the postfunctionalist theory (Hooghe and Marks 2016) used to explain political integration processes. While this is, on its own, not new, interesting perspectives appear once one looks at how the importance of both themes varies depending on the scenario of (re)federalization to which they refer.

Table 1 hereunder presents the distribution of arguments by theme, language group and scenario (see "Appendix 2" for the detailed arguments within each theme). In the following section, we present and discuss in detail the main argumentative frames identified in our analysis.

Efficiency: a 'Janus-faced' argument in favour of or against decentralization

The analysis of the three citizen forums reveals that today, efficiency is the main justification in the ongoing debate over (de)centralization in Belgium. Efficiency-related arguments were the most used arguments in the three citizen forums as well as for the six scenarios. That being said, the most striking finding of our analysis is the 'Janus-faced' role of the argument, in the sense that efficiency is used without major differences between linguistic groups to justify opinions that are both in favour of and against more decentralization, as well as in favour of more recentralization.

Table 1. Argumentative themes in favour of or against six scenarios of (de)centralization by language group

Theme	Group	Full recentr.		More recentr.		Status quo		More decentr.		Full decentr.		Mixed		Total
		Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	
<i>Main:</i>														
Identity	Dutch	2	0	2	1	0	0	7	1	0	8	5	0	20
	French	0	2	0	0	0	1	4	3	0	2	7	0	15
	German	0	5	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	5	0	9
Efficiency	Dutch	4	0	17	5	2	1	11	9	0	8	8	0	34
	French	1	0	19	1	1	7	2	15	0	8	9	0	32
	German	0	0	7	0	3	2	2	13	0	5	4	0	20
<i>Varia:</i>														
Path depend.	Dutch	0	4	0	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	7
	French	0	5	0	3	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	8
	German	0	7	0	3	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	11
Brussels	Dutch	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	6
	French	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	4
	German	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	4
Others*	Dutch	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0	6
	French	0	0	2	0	0	5	3	2	0	0	0	0	12
	German	0	0	3	1	3	3	1	1	0	1	1	0	10
Total		6	22	45	15	10	15	27	41	0	40	34	0	-

Note: Numbers correspond to the number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once (which makes that the total scores do not equal the sum of rows and columns). *See Appendix 2 for the detailed content.

In particular, while the full recentralization scenario seemed not to be a viable option for most participants and therefore was little debated,⁶ the scenario of more recentralization brought about much discussion. The rationale is: even if some sub-state entities might not be willing to give back some of their power, participants argue that some competences will be best dealt by the federal government. It would imply more transparency and simplification resulting in a clearer and more readable organization of the state. In turn, and to a lesser extent, some Dutch-speaking participants also emphasize efficiency arguments to go against more recentralization: doing your own business is important.

Bringing it back a little bit to the federal level, in fact to make the game clearer. Not for the principle of bringing it back to the federal level but simply so that there is some readability in the way it works and so that people can finally find their way around.

C1, French-speaking man over 55.

Even if we can decide the education system for our own, we still need to communicate with the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians. We all want to go to the same uni[versity], regardless of whether I have made my humanities in St. Vith, or in Visé, or in Leuven. But if I have three students with totally different levels at some point because they all got another education, I see a real problem there. And I

⁶ Surprisingly, among the participants in the Antwerp citizen forum, some participants spoke in favour of the ‘full recentralization’ scenario. Their rationale: mainly efficiency arguments and some identity arguments (see. infra). While survey research has shown that a significant portion of Dutch-speaking citizens are not opposed to the idea of going back to unitary Belgium, this finding is still surprising, as the federal dynamics in Belgium have largely been driven by the demands of the Flemish movement and par-ties for more autonomy (i.e. decentralization), even if the specific design of the system was incremental and quite erratic reform after reform.

see it in other domains as well. (...) Therefore, I would prefer a step back or getting back at the table in Brussels or Namur, rather than cooking my own soup here.

U4, German-speaking woman between 30 and 55.

Absolutely more transparency, simplification, absolutely.

K2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55.

I think so. If you have to take less into account and you don't have an over-arching scheme, you can do your own thing. I think that's easier anyway.

O4, Dutch-speaking man under 30.

Another way to change the Belgian system is to opt for more decentralization, a scenario which was heavily debated, especially by French- and German-speaking citizens. In particular, participants who speak against more decentralization are broadly in agreement: it is a matter of efficiency and we should not grant more autonomy to the Regions and Communities because it will be less efficient and costlier. As the quote of a participant of the German-speaking citizen forum illustrates, efficiency arguments can also go beyond the mere cost-efficiency argument. Indeed, it is not only consisting of considerations on the money that German-speakers spend for their administration, but even on the fact that the other communities pay for them. In addition, too much decentralization is also seen problematic when the power is too close to the people.

I'm afraid of too much fragmentation. (...) the more people, the more opinions there are. That is good, but who can reach consensus? There must be someone who says, who makes the decision and that's how we're going to do it.

N2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55.

Assess, to question oneself, get some competencies, but with the leitmotiv of unity, unity, and we should tell ourselves that the more we split up, the more we will create, on the one hand, the probabilities of problems, higher costs, uh differences, we will increase and exacerbate the difference in general.

F1, French-speaking man between 30 and 55.

If we get even more public servants or employees, etc. (...), then those employed in the private sector need to pay for it because those employed in the administration are paid by the state (...). I am a worker and (...) our company needs to pay for all this and I do not think it to be proportional. And I think that we are lucky that the Flemish do not yet say anything but I think that the biggest part of the cake lies with the Flemish. They create most of the wealth and when things are shared, we get a relatively big part of the cake, financially speaking... But if all this [administration] is blown up even more, I don't know if they don't say at some point: 'we help the Walloons I don't know how much and now even need to assist the German-speakers (...), just because we cannot afford what we spend.

U6, German-speaking man between 30-55.

To a lesser extent, efficiency arguments are also used in favour of more decentralization, but this is mostly done by Dutch-speaking participants. Indeed, the debate in the Dutch-speaking citizen forum varied pretty much on the continuum of more or less decentralization, which reveals a split among the participants. On the side of those who favour more decentralization, we find arguments of efficiency: splitting competences across governance level does not work, it leads to too much fragmentation. Even though some participants are in favour of more decentralization, the scenario of full decentralization (i.e. the independence of the substate entities) is rather consensual and is not supported by any participants of the citizen

forums. All participants argued against it, and in the continuation of the discussion we held previously, one of the core arguments used is efficiency.

Finally, we turn to the last two scenarios where efficiency-related arguments were mobilized: the status quo and the so-called ‘mixed scenario’ (i.e. recentralizing some competences while decentralizing others). The ‘status quo’ scenario is advocated by citizens who either think that things go well as they currently are and that a good balance was found (‘The current [system] is perhaps the best to preserve the community peace’ (M4, Dutch-speaking man between 30 and 55)) or that the recently received competences need to be implemented stably before carrying out further reforms. In turn, arguments against the status quo are self-reinforcing: the actual system lacks efficiency, and therefore, there is a need for changes.

What would it bring us to go back? (...) We need first to stabilize what we have.
T2, German-speaking man over 55.

That is true that regarding the complexity of Belgium, to make a mere decision, the number of ministers around the table to make a mere decision (...) Finally, I advocate for a simplification.
C4, French-speaking woman between 30–55.

A compromise position on the (de)centralization continuum could be the mixed scenario. Indeed, in all three groups, the participants who mentioned this scenario are in favour of it (no one arguing against it). Their main reason is efficiency, but we also find identity reasons as we will see below.

Identity: not sufficient anymore to drive additional decentralization

As indicated in Table 1, our analysis showed that identity arguments tend to be used less broadly and usually in combination with others. When they are mobilized, they justify positions against full recentralization, in favour of more decentralization, in favour of the mix scenario, and to a minor extent, against a full decentralization. On the contrary, the discussions on the ‘status quo’ and ‘more recentralization’ scenarios did not trigger important identity-related debates. Per se, this result is not surprising and in line with prior observations about the discourses of Belgian political elites. As developed earlier, the Belgian federalization process was, in its beginnings, framed by questions of identity (cultural demands from Flanders) or group specificity (territorial (economic) demands from Wallonia) before the gradual emergence of efficiency arguments. Now, does this mean that identities are no longer important to justify further devolution dynamics in Belgium? Probably not, it just means that the decentralization process went so far that inter-group differences and attachments are no longer sufficient to justify its evolution further down the path of decentralization.

When one looks at the way identity arguments have been mobilized towards the scenario of ‘full recentralization’ (i.e. going back unitary), one can see that it was mostly used by German-speaking citizens against a ‘full recentralization’ scenario. In particular, participants extensively used justifications related to considerations of identity as well as—and sometimes coupled with—considerations of path dependency (i.e. citizens not seeing a return to the central state as realistic given previous evolutions).

I think that, on the one hand, it is now not possible anymore [to return to the central state] because I cannot imagine such a radical scenario of return to happen. And I also think that (...) it is useful to have some competences. Above all concerning the language and culture.

U3, German-speaking man under 30.

On the other end of the centralization–decentralization continuum (i.e. split), the full decentralization scenario is not supported by anyone. Identity arguments – together with efficiency reasons and arguments related to the peculiar situation of Brussels – were mostly used by Dutch-speaking participants to justify positions against a full decentralization. As a participant explained, while it is important to consider the peculiarities of each of the Belgian communities, identity reasons are not sufficient enough to justify a move towards a full decentralization scenario.

People, the politicians, usually bring the division into our country, splitting it up, it is directly about splitting up between Flemings, Walloons, Germans, that is not spoken of, but actually that is not so important in the long term. The language, hence, we are not going to divide a country for the language, I think.

K2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55.

Interestingly, while identity arguments are used to justify positions against a ‘full decentralization’ in Belgium, this is the opposite for the ‘more decentralization’ scenario. Indeed, identity arguments are the second most used argumentative framing – after efficiency reasons – to justify an opinion in favour of more decentralization in Belgium. As the quotes illustrate, identity arguments are mainly used to outline the existing diversities between the communities. As a Dutch-speaking participant explains: ‘I don’t see more connections with a Walloon than with others (i.e. citizens of Germany, France or Luxembourg).

What bothers me and there is a difference in mentality and there are other differences, especially in the social policy field. Other accents are being laid in Wallonia or in French-speaking Belgium than in the North. *P5, Dutch-speaking man between 30–55.*

There are competences that are not working well regionalized, but there is a whole series of competences that need to be brought down, because I think that keeping them within the federal state is, given our Walloon-Flemish differences, well, I’m obviously at the regional level, that’s what poses a problem.

A2, French-speaking man between 30–55.

On the contrary, the weight of identity seems to be quite limited to justify a position against additional decentralization: only three citizens mention it. It is not necessarily an argument in favour of a Belgian identity but rather a willingness to avoid differences between language groups or a different treatment between them. Here, we see the relations between identity-based and efficiency-based reasons and the following quote from a participant is illustrative of this intertwining.

Assess, to question oneself, get some competencies, but with the leitmotiv of unity, unity, and we should tell ourselves that the more we split up, the more we will create, on the one hand, the probabilities of problems, higher costs, uh differences, we will increase and exacerbate the difference in general.

F1, French-speaking man between 30–55.

Finally, the idea of recentralizing some competences while decentralizing others was present in the discussion as well. As introduced in the previous section, all participants who discussed this scenario are in favour of it. Interesting enough is that while efficiency matters, identity does so too here. The following quotes illustrate this. On top of this, in some quotes, we also find the wish to have a flexible system, i.e. one that can be adapted over time.

And then indeed I think, yes, anyway, as a Belgian I want to go back to Belgium, but I think it should be a mix. That we should look at, as you say, environment, bring that up, other things, bring it back. (...) it is the intermediate scenario that they propose, actually from, see where it should belong best.

N3, Dutch-speaking man between 30–55.

Nothing is fixed uh, it is by the practice that one realizes if it is a good thing or not and if it is necessary to adapt again, to retransfer in a way or in the other, but that's also what we're talking about here at times uh now, uh here, if we realize that well it does not make sense to have regionalized or federalized competence, well here, for me, that it's my opinion, that's my opinion, we must not, it must never be all black or all white, it must never be fixed, it is, it is the practice that will show if yes or not, whether it works or not. Even though I know there may be some more cultural or linguistic demands or what do I know from one side or the other, depending on the moment, but uh, but uh, that I like to hear such discourse 'yes uh, there may be some competences that we might do better to refederalize because we realize that'.

F6, French-speaking man between 30–55.

Path dependency and the peculiar situation of Brussels

Beyond identity and efficiency arguments, our analysis also allowed to identify additional argumentative frames: the importance of path dependencies, the peculiar situation of Brussels, considerations of subsidiarity and democracy as well as arguments related to a need for change or consolidation.

First, the most frequent of the alternative arguments is the *path dependency argument*, which is mobilized by all three language communities to justify opinions against full (i.e. unitary) or more (re)centralization or in favour of more decentralization. This is, a priori, an intuitive argumentative pattern: the federalization process of Belgium is in motion and has already gone too far to step back and it is thus logical that this decentralization process continues further. A posteriori, however, this would either need to stop at some point or one ultimately ends-up with splitting the country. In case of a stop, the question is where and why. The present findings suggest that support might be found for competences that cannot be decentralized and/or should be re-centralized for reasons of efficiency.

We have set something in motion, it is difficult to set something in motion again but backwards. So, this dynamic of federalism, once this wave is in motion, I see almost no reversal. Well, I'll gladly be convinced, but I don't see it now

D6, German-speaking man under 30.

To believe that the competences the Regions have gained will go back to the federal level is completely absurd. It is not in the meaning of history. Flanders will never accept to give up their competencies. On the contrary, she wants even more, and Wallonia has no other choice but to follow.

H6, French-speaking man over 55.

I do not believe we will go back, of course, we won't, that is not possible as it is almost the opposite that is ahead of us, that Belgium is cut in two parts, that's the major risk, I think.

B1, French-speaking man over 55.

I think it is an illusion or a utopia to say we are going back to Belgium and with a parliament without regions and substates, but those regions and communities there must be a bit merged, I think. That can be simplified.

K2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55.

Second, the set of arguments related to the situation of the Brussels Capital-Region is interesting. As the following quotes illustrate, it comes up as a 'default' justification against the full decentralization (i.e. split) scenario. From a citizen's perspective, Brussels is thus perceived as a reasons that could prevent Belgium to be split in the future because the question prevails what should be done with Brussels. This suggests that some citizens have internalized the complexity of their political system with regard of the peculiar situation of the capital.

I feel Belgian, but what do I think holds Belgium together, or largely? That's Brussels. So the Walloons want Brussels, Flemings also want Brussels as the capital. If it wasn't there, I think it might already have been split.

N5, Dutch-speaking man over 55.

I think that what would lead, one of the big obstacles for which I think there will be no splits in any case, not in the next 50 years, is Brussels, it's because we cannot, the Flemings cannot part with it and we cannot separate from it either.

G3, French-speaking woman under 30.

Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore the preferences of citizens for more or less (de)centralization or, in Belgian terms, for further 'federalization' or 'refederalization' of competences. In order to capture these preferences, we organized three citizen forums, one in Dutch, one in French and one in German, gathering 106 participants who discussed the future of Belgian federalism for several hours. Such an approach allows to look finely at citizens' arguments in order make sense of their complex preferences towards (re)federalization.

Our results suggest that their opinions are justified based on two major argumentative themes: identity and efficiency. While one would expect the former to be of traditional importance, our analysis revealed that considerations about efficiency have taken the lead among the arguments that citizens use to justify their opinions towards most of the scenarios. This can above all be understood given the advanced stage of the Belgian federalization process, for which considerations of identity are still latently important but explicitly not sufficient enough anymore to justify further dynamics. Among these, the mixed scenario (i.e. decentralizing some competences, while recentralizing others) appears to be of particular importance for many of our participants, which is the case for all three language groups – also for many Flemings. This might surprise those who think of the opposing narratives by the majority of Flemish political elites (of the VB, N-VA and CD & V). It shows, however, that analysing citizen discourses is important – not only from a quantitative but also from qualitative point of view. This is even more true if one considers what these findings mean for the evolution

of the Belgian decentralization process. On the one hand, there seems to be persuasive ground for both the decentralization and recentralization of competences based on considerations that include both efficiency and, to some extent, identity considerations. On the other hand, however, the Belgian decentralized process remains elite-driven and one might wonder whether the antagonistic dynamics of this process are able to develop such a nuanced outcome.

While some of the interpretations above are only relevant for the Belgian case, two main lessons can be drawn for highly decentralized multinational federations in general. First, once a multinational state has reached an advanced level of decentralization, arguments of efficiency become of increasing importance compared to arguments of identity – knowing the latter remain important for the underlying debate and that arguments of efficiency can be played out along identarian lines. Secondly, once such an advanced stage of decentralization has been reached, path dependencies frame the way citizens think about possible (not to say desirable) institutional arrangements in an important manner.

While further research would, of course, be needed to consolidate these findings and test how they travel through countries, contexts and time, one could think of alternative research designs to explore further citizens' opinions on decentralization. For instance, a recent bibliometric analysis of – empirical – studies focusing on political discourse in linguistic research (Perrez et al. 2019; Randour et al. 2020) outlined the great variety of empirical data used to study citizens and more broadly, civil society actors' discourse on a political theme. Aside from traditional opinion surveys and focus group settings, several authors captured citizen's discourse by analysing social or online news media (i.e. Twitter, web forums, YouTube video comments, etc.). While these types of data also yield shortcomings, they might be less time consuming regarding the data collection and allow to study (the evolution of) citizen's discourse through time. An additional lead consists in consolidating these findings in a larger corpus of citizen discourse using, for example, natural language processing techniques.

Finally, our findings invite to reconsider the place that citizens do and should have in decentralization processes. In our forums, it was particularly interesting to observe how citizens did both acknowledge the difficulty of the task that elites need to perform, and deplore the unsatisfying outcomes that the antagonistic process brings about. Our citizen forums did not come-up with an ideal avenue for the future of the Belgian federation, nor was it their objective to do so. But their insights are interesting regarding both the content they produced and the way they did it – supporting attempts to use citizen deliberation as a tool for mediating political conflict in divided societies.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Socio-demographical composition of the three citizen forums

	Antwerp (in Dutch)	Liège (in French)	Elsenborn (in German)
<i>Total</i>	40	41	25
<hr/>			
<i>Gender</i>			
Men	26	25	13
Women	14	16	12
<hr/>			
<i>Age</i>			
-30	6	8	13
30-55	14	17	7
55+	20	16	5

Appendix 2. Detailed coding scheme comprising the argumentative themes in favour of or against six scenarios of (de)centralization grouped by language group

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Full centralization			9	7	11
(de facto: going back to the central state)	<i>In favour:</i>		5	1	0
	Efficiency		4	1	0
		Cost	4	1	0
	Identity		2	0	0
		Identity	2	0	0
	Varia		0	0	0
	<i>Against:</i>		5	6	11
	Efficiency		0	0	0
	Identity		0	2	5
		Diversity	0	2	4
		Share power	0	0	1
	Varia		5	5	7
		Path dependency	4	5	7
	Subsidiarity	1	0	0	

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
More centralization			22	22	13
	<i>In favour:</i>		17	19	9
	Efficiency		17	19	7
		Administration	1	1	2
		Complexity	5	4	2
		Costs	2	1	1
		Economy	0	2	0
		Efficiency	5	2	1
		Expertise	3	0	0
		Homogeneity	6	6	0
		Interconnection	1	1	1
		Scale	4	2	2
		Transparency	1	1	0
		Uniformity	8	12	3
	Identity		2	0	2
		Diversity	1	0	0
		Identity	0	0	2
		Political differences	1	0	0
	Varia		2	2	3
		Democracy	0	1	0
		Subsidiarity	2	1	3
	<i>Against:</i>		7	4	4
	Efficiency		5	1	0
		Administration	0	0	0
		Complexity	2	0	0
		Costs	1	0	0
		Efficiency	1	0	0
		Economy	0	0	0
		Expertise	0	0	0
		Homogeneity	0	1	0
		Interconnection	0	0	0
		Scale	0	0	0
		Transparency	0	0	0
		Uniformity	1	0	0
	Identity		1	0	0
		Diversity	0	0	0
		Identity	0	0	0
		Political differences	1	0	0
	Varia		3	3	4
		Democracy	0	0	0
		Path dependency	3	3	3
		Subsidiarity	0	0	1

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Status quo			3	11	10
	<i>In favour:</i>		2	2	6
	Efficiency		2	1	3
		Avoid new problems	1	1	0
		Avoid new tensions	1	0	0
		Things work well	0	0	3
	Identity		0	0	0
	Varia		0	1	4
		Consolidate	0	0	3
		Path dependency	0	1	1
	<i>Against:</i>		1	9	5
	Efficiency		1	7	2
		Complexity	0	5	2
		Costs	0	1	0
		Things do not work	1	1	0
	Identity		0	1	0
		Diversity	0	1	0
	Varia		0	5	3
		Need for changes	0	5	3
		Path dependency	0	1	0

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
More decentralization			19	24	18
	<i>In favour:</i>		<i>11</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>6</i>
	Efficiency		11	2	2
		Administration	0	1	1
		Complexity	1	0	1
		Costs	1	0	0
		Economy	2	0	0
		Efficiency	6	0	0
		Expertise	0	0	0
		Homogeneity	3	0	0
		Interconnection	1	0	0
		Scale	1	0	1
		Transparency	0	0	0
		Uniformity	1	1	0
	Identity		7	4	3
		Diversity	5	3	3
		Identity	4	3	1
		Political differences	0	1	0
	Varia		2	7	3
		Democracy	0	3	0
		Path dependency	2	4	2
		Subsidiarity	0	1	1

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
More decentralization	<i>Against:</i>		<i>10</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>13</i>
	Efficiency		9	15	13
		Administration	0	1	0
		Complexity	1	5	2
		Costs	1	1	6
		Economy	3	3	1
		Efficiency	3	1	2
		Expertise	0	0	3
		Homogeneity	0	2	0
		Interconnection	2	1	0
		Scale	4	0	4
		Transparency	0	1	3
		Uniformity	0	8	5
		Identity	1	3	0
		Diversity	1	2	0
		Identity	0	1	0
		Political differences	0	0	0
		Varia	1	2	1
		Democracy	0	1	1
		Subsidiarity	1	0	0
	Walloon economic difficulties	0	1	0	

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Full decentralization			18	13	9
(de facto: splitting the country)	<i>In favour:</i>		0	0	0
	Efficiency		0	0	0
	Identity		0	0	0
	Varia		0	0	0
	<i>Against:</i>		18	13	9
	Efficiency		8	8	5
		Complexity	0	1	0
		Scale	8	7	5
	Identity		8	2	0
		Diversity	3	1	0
		Language	6	1	0
	Varia		7	5	7
		Borders	2	0	0
		Brussels	6	4	4
		Europe	0	0	1
	Path dependency	0	0	2	
	Walloon economic difficulty	0	1	0	

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Mixed			12	14	8
(refederalize some competences while federalizing others)	<i>In favour:</i>		<i>12</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>8</i>
	Efficiency		8	9	4
		Efficiency	6	6	4
		Homogeneity	2	3	0
	Identity		5	7	5
		Diversity	5	7	5
	Varia		1	0	1
		Balanced	1	0	1
	<i>Against:</i>		<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>
		Efficiency	0	0	0
	Identity	0	0	0	
	Varia	0	0	0	

* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.