To federalize or to refederalize: exploring citizen preferences towards more or less self-rule autonomy in federal Belgium

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Abstract: Belgium is often portrayed as a textbook example of peaceful federalization. Indeed, 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. 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, the Regions and Communities. Such an idea has long been a taboo in federal Belgium, especially among Flemish elites, but the debate seems now more open than ever. In this context, however, little is known about how citizens see this question. Of course, there is a long tradition of surveys including questions on federalism and autonomy devolution. Yet, more qualitative data are needed to understand what motivates citizens' preferences for more or less autonomy devolution in federal Belgium. The objective of this paper is to explore and compare citizens' preferences on the Belgian federalization process. In particular, we analyse what motivates the opinion of Belgian citizens in favour of more or less autonomy devolution. To this end, three citizen forums focusing on federalism and democracy were organized in 2017-2018: one in Liège in French, a second one in Antwerp in Dutch and a third one in Elsenborn in German. Their aim was to collect data on all three language communities with an original research design. These forums were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. 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 over 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.

Keywords: (re)federalization, Belgium, citizen attitudes, thematic analysis.

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Introduction

Belgium is often portrayed as a textbook example of peaceful federalization (Deschouwer, 2012; Lijphart, 1981). Indeed, 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 sub-state entities enjoy substantial autonomy. Today, however, a rather new debate among political elites has emerged: whether to refederalize some of the powers that have been devolved to the Belgian sub-state entities, the so-called Regions and Communities (Reuchamps, Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Caluwaerts, 2017). Such an idea had long been a taboo in federal Belgium, especially among Flemish parties (Sinardet, 2009a), but the debate seems now more open than ever. Remarkably, this is not a singular phenomenon. There exist supports towards opening the 'refederalisation debate' among political actors across all Belgian political parties (at the exception of the N-VA, Vlaams Belang and the Parti Populaire).

In particular since 2015, this question appeared on a regular basis in Belgian media, mainly driven by executive actors as well as political 'youth' movements (e.g. young French-speaking liberals and young Dutch-speaking Christian democrats). For instance, minister Alexander de Croo (Open VLD) stated in December 2017 that: *'In some areas where the interests are not purely regional or city interests, but rather interests of a country or even beyond a country, we do not manage to take decisions anymore. (…) I think that for some competences, either it is necessary to refederalize them or it would be necessary to establish a sort of hierarchy* (between the governance levels)*'* (RTBF info, 2017). This debate often stems from a political failure or gridlock (e.g. having a uniform climate policy; building of a new national football stadium; regulating the degree of noise of the national airport etc.) and touches upon various policy fields such as energy, climate and environment, mobility, health care, sports, and external commerce.

In this debate, much of the literature analysing preferences towards (re)federalization in Belgium is elite-focused (Reuchamps, 2013b). Yet, while the federalization process might be mainly driven by elites and parties (especially in a consociational and partitocratic country like Belgium), citizens are still both the initial determinant and the ultimate recipient of federal policies and therefore important to be considered. When citizen-based studies exist (Deschouwer, De Winter, Reuchamps, Sinardet, & Dodeigne, 2015; Reuchamps, Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Caluwaerts, 2015), they are mainly quantitative. This is valuable to capture citizens' aggregated positions on the Belgian federalization process. For example, we learnthat a gap exists between

the preferences of citizens and MPs regarding the reform of Belgium's federalism, the latter having more radical positions regarding devolution (Reuchamps et al., 2017). However, more qualitative data is needed to understand the arguments behind citizens' opinions towards the question of more or less autonomy devolution in federal Belgium. This is important when one considers that opinions in favour or against various federal (competence) arrangements may have very different motivations and, in turn, very different consequences for the future of the Belgian federalization process.

To analyse and compare the opinions and arguments of Belgian citizens towards (re)federalization, we used data gathered through three citizen forums (CF) organized in 2017-2018 in all three Belgian language communities. In a first 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. In section two, we present the three citizen forums on federalism as well as how we analysed the data gathered through them. In section three, we describe the results of our analysis and show what and how Dutch-, French- and German-speaking citizens think about (re)federalization in Belgium. Our findings 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 over 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. In section four, we discuss these results in light of the dynamics of the Belgian federalization process. Eventually, we conclude with a consideration on the added-value of studying and having deliberative citizens forums for federalism research and processes.

1. The federalization of Belgium and citizen preferences

As of today, Belgium went through a federalization process with six major state reforms between 1970 and 2014. In this section, we first give an overview of the Belgian federalization process, as well as on the main political, linguistic and socio-economic divisions that drove it. Secondly, we present what we know so far about citizen preferences towards (re)federalization in Belgium.

1.1 The federalization of Belgium: political, linguistic and socio-economic divides

Belgium has always been a linguistically divided country, even if this divide has not always been as salient as it is today. Indeed, since her independence in 1831, Belgium is crossed by the same linguistic line that separates Europe in two: while Germanic languages are spoken north of the line, the languages south of the line have Latin origins. In Belgium, the population living in the north speaks Dutch, while the population living in the south speaks French. Furthermore, there is even a tiny German-speaking territory which joined the country after being removed from the German Reich as reparation following the First World War. Even though a majority of the population spoke Dutch already from the country's very beginning, Belgium was created as unitary and unilingual French-speaking state. Elites spoke French, from north to south and from east to west, and made it not only the sole official language but also the language of politics and public affairs (Deschouwer, 2012; Mabille, 2011; Witte, Craeybeckx, & Meynen, 1997).

As a reaction to this French-speaking dominance in the Belgian State, the inhabitants of the north, led by the so-called 'Flemish movement', gradually demanded the recognition of an equal statute for the Dutch language – at least in the Dutch-speaking part of the country, Flanders. Given the reluctance of public authorities over decades to accept these demands (only some linguistic facilities were granted from 1873-1910), the issue was only fully addressed in the course of the 1950s and 60s 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: a Dutch-speaking in the north, a French-speaking in the south, a German-speaking in the east and a bilingual territory in the centre for the city of Brussels (McRae, 1983; Witte & Van Velthoven, 2000). Nonetheless, the territorial recognition did not entirely solve the language issue because Brussels and its surrounding (officially Dutch-speaking) area had become increasingly French-speaking so that the statute of the capital and its periphery remained contested.

More importantly, demands for cultural and economic autonomy were issued and met, for the first time, the approval of both Dutch- and French-speaking parties. While the French-speaking south, Wallonia, had always been the economic engine of the country, it was hit by a

structural economic decline in the turn of the 1960's. Meanwhile, the Flemish economy took over the lead. Therefore, the fear of the Walloon minority was to be left out financially by the central government, which would rather invest in Flanders and Brussels. Claims in the south were made for more economic autonomy in order to better protect the economic interests of Wallonia. In the north, in turn, claims for cultural autonomy aimed at entrenching the administrative division of the country and prevent the increasing number of French-speakers from demanding linguistic rights on Flemish territory (mainly around Brussels) (Erk, 2003; Reuchamps, 2015). The German-speaking minority in the east of the country was equally recognized. While its claims were at first only concerned with autonomy in the field of culture and education (mainly to protect its language and ensure equal opportunities), demands rose with the federalization process and later also contained economic matters (mainly to guarantee and pursue its regional development) (Bouhon, Niessen, & Reuchamps, 2015).

To pacify all these linguistic and socio-economic tensions, a devolution process was set in motion in 1970, which is still going on today (Swenden & Jans, 2006). There has never been a blueprint, even if the process of state 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 turnover and talks about a deep regime crisis. After 1995, the tensions cooled down and for the first time since 1965, four parliaments and their government went to the very end of their four years term. The Belgian federation seemed to work. Yet, from 2003 onwards, the identity politics resurfaced, leading to an increasing governmental instability. After the 2007 federal elections, it took almost 200 days to put together a new coalition, which was only a transition government that needed to prepare further talks about state reform (Sinardet, 2008). The bank crisis of 2008 allowed for a temporary freezing of the conflict. But in 2010, early elections were called after the government had collapsed over the possible splitting of the Brussels 'BHV' constituency ('Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde') (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). In Flanders, the new (re)born Flemish nationalist party N-VA polled just under 30% of the votes and became the largest party of the country. Talks to form a new government took 541 days to finally agree on a state reform (with major competence transfers, which contained for the first time also social security matters).

The problem was mainly 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. Given that Flanders is now the richer part of the country, several elites believe that its development is curtailed by the lagging behind of Wallonia (and increasingly also by that of Brussels). Some political parties in Flanders, like Vlaams Belang and N-VA, defend nothing less, on paper, than an independent Flanders. On the Francophone side, Flemish demands are perceived as an attempt to undermine the principles of solidarity in the country and they fear that more devolution will be a further step towards the full dislocation of the country (Reuchamps, 2008, 2013a). Due to the consociational set-up of the federal institutions, however, both language groups must agree on the formation of a federal government and possible constitutional reforms. Unsurprisingly, the result was deadlock for the longest period of time in Belgian political history (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). Finally, a compromise was reached in negotiations that took place without the regionalist parties of both language groups (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). After this major sixth state reform, inter-community tensions started to cool down again and some elites even went as far as envisioning the (re)federalisation of some competences (i.e. back to the federal state) due to problems of political coordination.

This short overview on the logic of the Belgian federalization process shows that its advancement was determined by very different rationales. While the initial conferral was foremost motivated by interests played out along lines of identity (both major groups wanting to preserve their statute in their part of the country at least), 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 ourselves because we do it better') (Erk, 2003). The latter concerned both reflections on subsidiarity and homogeneity of transferred competences (Swenden & 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 tended to be more leftist and those in Flanders more rightist, they argued that both should decide themselves on most of their policies (Sinardet, 2009b). This reasoning can be regarded as an argument of identity insofar as group-differences are concerned, it can be regarded as an argument of efficacy insofar as policy-outputs are

concerned. Secondly, the Belgian federalization process began to be increasingly driven by institutional effects. While the asymmetrical composition of coalitions on 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) (Deschouwer, 2006, 2009). Taken together, these factors are a case-book illustration of the 'paradox of federalism' (Erk & Anderson, 2009) because instead of alleviating group tensions, they lead to their exacerbation and fuelled further autonomy demands from the Flemish side. An exception to this largely pessimistic presentation of inter-community relations can probably only be found among the German-speaking Community, which benefited from the autonomy devolution that were negotiated by the two other major language groups and stably implemented them without attracting much attention (Bouhon et al., 2015).

While all these developments were above all elite-driven, they did not leave public opinion without a trace. Major demonstrations against political deadlock took place in Brussels during the 541-day long government crisis and civil society organization started to launch major grass-root events to discuss the future of Belgian politics (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018). Despite its importance in this respect, citizen opinions have received much less attention than that of elites. Yet this is of critical importance for a broader understanding of federalization processes and how these are received by the very people in which name they are advocated.

1.2 Preferences of Belgian citizens towards federalism: what we know so far

Existing studies focusing on citizen preferences towards the (re)federalization of Belgium are above all public opinion surveys. These studies show how citizen preferences towards state reforms have evolved over time (Swyngedouw, Abts, & Galle, 2014), what their preferred political evolution of the country is (Rimé, Bouchat, Klein, & Licata, 2015), and which kind of citizens are most likely to favour more or less devolution (Deschouwer et al., 2015). What comes out of these studies is that state reforms are seen as a second-order issue for most voters (Swyngedouw, Abts, Baute, Galle, & Meuleman, 2015), that preferences in favour of more devolution are slightly higher among Flemish voters than among French-speaking ones

(Reuchamps et al., 2017), although this difference remains much smaller than that between elites (Baudewyns, 2014). Finally, Rimé et al. (2015) also found that older generations tend to be more in favour of additional autonomy than younger ones.

While they are precious for better understanding citizens' aggregated preferences about state reforms, these studies do not tell us what motivates these preferences, i.e. why citizens support one scenario of (re)federalization rather than another. 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 & Reuchamps, 2012, p. 14). However, when one considers that citizens as the both the initial determinant and the ultimate recipient of federal policies, studying their opinion is of crucial importance. The documentation gap, in turn, is to be overcome by an original data collection methodology.

2. Data and method: analysing citizen forums using qualitative thematic analysis

In this research, we adopt a theory-developing approach whose objective is twofold. First, it aims at understanding which types of arguments were used by ordinary Belgian citizens from each language community in favour or against different scenarios of (re)federalization. Secondly, it examines what similarities and differences exist between language communities and whether some arguments and discourses are mobilized by particular groups of citizens. In this section, we present how we gathered and analysed the necessary data for fulfilling these objectives. First, we explain how we organized three citizen forums on Belgian federalism. Secondly, we introduce how the discussions of these forums were analysed.

2.1 Collecting data: citizen forums on federalism

For studying citizen discourse, two main data collection methods exist (Bougher, 2012): 'recorded real conversations' (discussions on online forums for instance) and 'focus-group conversations' (discussions led by a moderator which interviews five to twelve well-selected persons on a specific topic). We opted for the second method for two reasons. On the one hand, the present research focuses on deliberated citizen opinion. On the other hand, the technique allows to control for contextual elements, like the number of participants or the theme of the

discussion. In addition, as Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (2009) 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'. Risks of this technique are potential group pressures or the impossibility to ask more in-depth questions (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 108) but these can be alleviated by well-trained facilitators.

To study the deliberated opinion of citizens on different scenarios of (re)federalization, three citizen forums were organized: one in Antwerp with 40 Dutch-speaking participants, one in Liège with 41 French-speaking participants, and one in Elsenborn with 25 German-speaking participants.[1] To reach diversity within the forums, participants were selected based on six criteria (see also Appendix 1): gender, age, geographical origin,[2] education, identity[3] and previous political knowledge. The last criterion was added in order to reach citizens beyond the 'usual suspects' interested in politics.[4]

In practice, the focus groups were composed of five to six participants while trying to achieve the most diversified possible composition.[5] All citizen forums had the same set-up, allowing participants to talk as freely and deeply as possible about Belgian federalism during two hours. In particular, citizens were presented with a video in which a political scientist briefly presented six different scenarios of (re)federalization in Belgium: (1) transferring all competences to the sub-state entities (i.e. splitting the country), (2) transferring more competences to the sub-state 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 sub-state 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

[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] For the Dutch- and French-speaking groups, an equal distribution between eastern and western provinces was sought. For the German-speaking, an equal distribution between the northern and southern cantons was sought.

[3] 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'.

[4] 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 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.

[5] Upon inscription, participants were asked to fill-in a questionnaire, which allowed controlling for their socio-demographics, identity and interest in politics.

which the participants were asked to explain which scenario they preferred and why. Discussions were guided by facilitators that were trained to guarantee freedom of speech and incite for in-depth discussions by asking participants to gives arguments supporting their opinions. Finally, before and after the discussions, participants filled-in a questionnaire gauging information on their political knowledge, opinions and identity.

2.2 Analysing citizen forums with a thematic discourse analysis

The focus groups (eight in Dutch, eight in French and four in German) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a secretary who had been present during the discussions. 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 and against federalization were later mirrored for refederalization (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.

In practice, all transcriptions were anonymized and analysed in four steps through a thematic discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The large data corpus (245 086 words) was treated with the help of the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo*.[6] In a first step, we familiarized ourselves with the data and identified sentences that participants associated positively or negatively with each of the six scenarios. In a second step, we identified different arguments used by citizen on the basis of these sentences. While, argumentation can be defined as a 'verbal activity oriented towards the realization of a goal' (Habernal & 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: 'in all cases, and even when there is no overt controversy, discourse is pervaded by a general argumentativity'. Consequently, in this paper we considered an argument as the verbal activity of a participant aiming at justifying his·her opinion on the evolution of federalism in Belgium. On this basis, a coding scheme listing all arguments in favour and against each scenario was composed (see column three of the detailed coding scheme in Appendix 2). To obtain a comprehensive coding scheme, we mirrored

[6] QSR International, United Kingdom.

arguments in favour and against federalization and refederalization, knowing that in later codings, some would remain unused if participants did not mobilize them.

In a third step, the coding-scheme was translated into *NVivo* and one so called 'node' (a kind of folder in the program) was created for every identified argument. The entire data corpus was read once more to code text passages containing an argument into the respective argument-node. Every coding was proofed by another researcher. 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. one theme should be composed of meaningfully coherent arguments) and external heterogeneity (i.e. themes should be clearly differentiable). While two major themes were identifiable for most scenarios ('identity' and 'efficiency'), some arguments were distinctive and treated as such. The classification was thoroughly discussed among the researchers. In *NVivo*, argument-nodes were grouped into larger thematic-nodes to allow further comparisons on this basis.

On the basis of this thematic analysis, we systematically compared which themes of arguments were mobilized by citizens to justify their opinion in favour or against a particular (re)federalization scenario. This comparison was done both within and between the language groups and is presented accordingly in the next section.

Finally, when possible, we created citizen profiles based on the arguments that citizens used in the discussions vis-à-vis the different scenarios. Depending on the combination of their arguments, we considered a citizen to have a 'unitarist', 'federalist', 'status quo', 'regionalist', 'secessionist', or 'mixed' profile (see Table 1 for details based on which arguments profiles were attributed). When arguments were not consistent or sufficient enough for constituting one of the aforementioned profiles, we classified the citizen profile as respectively 'indefinable' or 'unspecified'. Based on this classification, we explored whether some profiles were associated with particular individual characteristics of the citizens in the second part of the following section.

Table 1. Overview on the constitution of citizen profiles based on the arguments they mobilized

Citizen profile	Argument used											
	Full refederalisation		More refederalisation		Status quo		More federalisation		Full federalisation		Mixed	
	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con
Unitarist	●	⊗	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-
Federalist	⊗	-	●	⊗	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-
Status quo	⊗	-	⊗	-	●	⊗	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-
Regionalist	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	●	⊗	⊗	-	⊗	-
Secessionist	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	●	⊗	⊗	-
Mixed*	⊗	-	●/-	●/-	⊗	-	●/-	●/-	⊗	-	●/-	⊗
Indefinable**	●	●	-	-	●	●	-	-	●	●	●	●
Unspecified	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-	⊗	-

● = present, ⊗ = absent, - = either present or absent. * Can be used in different combinations. To qualify, at least one 'mixed' argument or two (re)federalization arguments needed to be present. ** Can be used in different combinations. To qualify, arguments for and against the same scenario needed to be present at least once.

3. Citizen perspectives on (re)federalization in Belgium

3.1 Citizen opinions on (re)federalization: between identity and efficiency

The results of our thematic analysis suggest that citizen perspectives on (re)federalization rely on opinions that are motivated by arguments related to two major themes: identity and efficiency. 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 and on the language of the citizen by whom they are issued. Table 2 hereunder presents the distribution of arguments by theme and language group (see Appendix 2 for the detailed arguments within each theme). In this subsection, we first present and comment these for each of the three language groups and draw parallels between them throughout the presentation.

Table 2. Argumentative themes in favor or against six scenarios of (re)federalization by language group

Scenario	Theme	Frequency by language group*		
		Dutch	French	German
Full refederalization		**9**	**7**	**11**
(de facto: going back to the central state)	*In favor:*	*5*	*1*	*0*
	Efficiency	4	1	0
	Identity	2	0	0
	Varia	0	0	0
	Against:	*5*	*6*	*11*
	Efficiency	0	0	0
	Identity	0	2	5
	Varia:	5	5	7
	Path dependency	4	5	7
	Subsidiarity	1	0	0
More refederalization		**22**	**22**	**13**
	In favor:	*17*	*19*	*9*
	Efficiency	17	19	7
	Identity	2	0	2
	Varia:	2	2	3
	Democracy	0	1	0
	Subsidiarity	2	1	3
	Against:	*7*	*4*	*4*
	Efficiency	5	1	0
	Identity	1	0	0
	Varia:	3	3	4
	Democracy	0	0	0
	Path dependency	3	3	3
	Subsidiarity	0	0	1
Status quo		**3**	**11**	**10**
	In favor:	*2*	*2*	*6*
	Efficiency	2	1	3
	Identity	0	0	0
	Varia:	0	1	4
	Consolidate	0	0	3
	Path dependency	0	1	1
	Against:	*1*	*9*	*5*
	Efficiency	1	7	2
	Identity	0	1	0
	Varia:	0	5	3
	Need for changes	0	5	3
	Path dependency	0	1	0
More federalization		**19**	**24**	**18**
	In favor:	*11*	*10*	*6*
	Efficiency	11	2	2

	Identity	7	4	3
	Varia:	2	7	3
	Democracy	0	3	0
	Path dependency	2	4	2
	Subsidiarity	0	1	1
	Against:	*10*	*18*	*13*
	Efficiency	9	15	13
	Identity	1	3	0
	Varia:	1	2	1
	Democracy	0	1	1
	Subsidiarity	1	0	0
	Walloon economic difficulties	0	1	0
Full federalization		**18**	**13**	**9**
(de facto: splitting the country)	*In favor:*	*0*	*0*	*0*
	Efficiency	0	0	0
	Identity	0	0	0
	Varia	0	0	0
	Against:	*18*	*13*	*9*
	Efficiency	8	8	5
	Identity	8	2	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
Mixed		**12**	**14**	**8**
(refederalize some competences while federalizing others)	*In favor:*	*12*	*14*	*8*
	Efficiency	8	9	4
	Identity	5	7	5
	Varia:	1	0	1
	Balanced	1	0	1
	Against:	*0*	*0*	*0*
	Efficiency	0	0	0
	Identity	0	0	0
	Varia	0	0	0

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

a) (Re)federalization through the eyes of Dutch-speaking citizens

The federal dynamics in Belgium has largely been driven by the demands of the Flemish movement and parties for more autonomy, i.e. federalization, even if the specific design of the system was incremental and quite erratic reform after reform. In this light, we could consider that

the scenario of full refederalization is unlikely to find support in Flanders. Yet, survey research has for long shown that a not insignificant portion of Dutch-speaking citizens are not opposed to the idea of going back to unitary Belgium. This contrast is found in our analysis. Among the participants in the Antwerp citizen forum, no less than five of them spoke in favour of this scenario. Their rationale: mainly efficiency arguments with some identity. By contrast, five other participants believe Belgium will not go back unitary. This is 'wishful thinking' as participant argues in English. We find the same arguments in the two other language groups: path dependency.

> Ma, yes, as we said earlier, huh. Simplification of course, just returning to one overarching scheme and all the rest, all those divisive things off, all those in-between solutions, intermediate scenarios just continue to be part of a complicated system, so better at once for simplification.[7] *K6, Dutch-speaking man between 30-55*.

What is perhaps even more surprising is that many Dutch-speaking participants gave arguments supporting more refederalization, which is typically seen as a French-speaking position. They hold this view not because of their identity, but again because of efficiency reasons. Some competences, according to them, will be best dealt by the federal government, which would imply more transparency and simplification. For example, a participant argues that the sub-state entities might not be willing to give back some of their power but a simplification is needed. In turn, some participants emphasize more efficiency arguments to go against more refederalization: doing your own business is important. For others, it is again the path dependency argument, that is also to be found in the other language groups.

> Absolutely more transparency, simplification, absolutely. I think it is an illusion or an 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.[8] *K2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55*.

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[7] 'Ma, ja, zoals we straks ook zeiden, hé. Vereenvoudiging natuurlijk, gewoon terugkeren naar een overkoepelende en al de rest, al die verdeeldheiddingetjes eraf, al die tussen oplossingen, tussenscenario's blijft gewoon deel uitmaken van een ingewikkeld systeem, dus dan beter in een keer naar vereenvoudiging.'

[8] 'Absoluut meer transparantie, vereenvoudiging, absoluut. Ik denk dat het een illusie is of een utopie van te zeggen we gaan terug naar België en met een parlement zonder gewesten en deelstaten maar die gewesten en gemeenschappen daar moet een beetje samengevoegd, lijkt mij. Dat kan vereenvoudigd worden.'

> I think so. If you have to take less into account and you don't have an overarching scheme, you can do your own thing. I think that's easier anyway.[9] *O4, Dutch-speaking man under 30*.

Almost no Dutch-speaking participant (3) mentioned the status quo. Two gave arguments in favour, again for efficiency reason. They think that we cannot go back and that we have found somewhat a good balance: 'The current [system] is perhaps the best to preserve the community peace'[10] (M4, Dutch-speaking man between 30-55). Another participant argued the contrary, also for efficiency reason: the Belgian federal system is too complex, it needs to be changed. In this light, the debate in the Dutch-speaking citizen forum varied thus pretty much on the continuum more or less federalization, which reveals a split among the participants. On the side of those who favour more federalization, we find arguments of both efficiency and identity. By contrast, on the side of those who are against this scenario, efficiency is the main reason. We thus observe that different types of arguments are mobilized depending on the position (if favour or against) this scenario.

> As many competences as possible to the regions, to the substates. But the big problem at the moment with the state reform in Belgium is the fragmentation of competences. There is a part that is also at the federal level and another part, of the same competence, is at the Flemish level. That does not work. If you transfer a competence, you must fully give out that package.[11] *M5, Dutch-speaking man over 55*.

> 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.[12] *P5, Dutch-speaking man between 30-55*.

> 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.[13] *N2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55*.

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[9] 'Dat denk ik wel. Als ge minder rekening moet houden en ge hebt geen overkoepelend, ge kunt uw eigen ding doen. Ik denk dat dat sowieso gemakkelijker is.'

[10] 'Het huidige is misschien nog het beste te houden met communautaire vrede'.

[11] 'Zoveel mogelijk bevoegdheden naar de gewesten, naar de deelstaten. Maar de grote probleem op dit moment met de staatshervorming in België is het versnipperen van de bevoegdheden. Er is een deel dat ook op federaal niveau zit en een andere deel, van dezelfde materie, zit op Vlaams niveau. Dat werkt niet. Als je een bevoegdheid overhevelt moet je dat volledig dat pakket overleveren.'

[12] 'Wat dat mij wel stoort en daar is een verschil in mentaliteit en er liggen andere accenten, vooral op sociaal vlak. Er worden in Wallonië of Franstalig België toch ander accenten gelegd dan in het Noorden.'

The full federalization is not explicitly supported by anyone. However, implicit arguments in this sense were made by participants in favour of more federalization – in light of what we discussed previously. The arguments against full federalization come back on a variety of arguments: efficiency, identity but also concern regarding the peculiar situation of Brussels.

> There is already fragmentation in itself, I think. We are already now so small in the world.[14] *P1, Dutch-speaking woman under 30.*

> 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.[15] *K2, Dutch-speaking woman over 55.*

> 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. All right, that's my thought.[16] *N5, Dutch-speaking man over 55.*

Finally, the idea of refederalizing some competences while federalizing others was present in the discussion. As in all three groups, the participants who mentioned this scenario are in favour of it. Their main reason is efficiency, but we also find identity reasons. The following quote shows that the support for the 'mix' scenario can be made of both efficiency and identity:

> 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.

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[13] 'Ik ben bang voor een te zere versnippering. (…) hoe meer mensen, hoe meer meningen er zijn. Dat is goed, maar wie kan tot de consensus komen? Er moet iemand zijn die zegt, die de knoop doorhakt en zo gaan we het doen.'
[14] 'Er is al versnippering op zich, vind ik. We zijn nu al zo klein op wereldvlak.'
[15] 'Men, de politiekers, brengen meestal de verdeling in ons land, het opsplitsen, het gaat direct over opsplitsen tussen Vlamingen, Walen, Duitsen, daar wordt niet van gesproken, maar eigenlijk is dat niet zo belangrijk, op termijn. De taal, daarom, we gaan toch voor de taal geen land verdelen, vind ik.'
[16] 'Ik voel mij Belg, maar wat houdt er België samen volgens mij, of grotendeels? Das Brussel. Dus de Walen willen Brussel, Vlamingen willen ook Brussel als hoofdstad. Moest er dat niet zijn hé, ik denk dat het al misschien gesplitst was. Allez, das mijn gedacht hé.'

(…) it is the intermediate scenario that they propose, actually from, see where it should belong best.[17] *N3, Dutch-speaking man between 30-55.*

In the federalization process of Belgium, identity has historically played a key role in public discourse in Flanders. The data from the Dutch-speaking citizen forum held in Antwerp reveal that today, efficiency is the main justification in the on-going debate over more of less federalization in Belgium. However, identity has not disappeared, especially in justifications of more autonomy for Flanders. We still find here a mix of identity and efficiency as the motto of the Flemish movement heralded 'Wat we zelf doen, doen we beter' (what we do ourselves, we do better) for many years.

b) (Re)federalization through the eyes of French-speaking citizens

By contrast to Dutch-speaking citizens, based on the historical dynamics of federalism in Belgium, it could be expected that French-speaking citizens are more inclined not to demand any – further – federalization, because it would mean that Belgium – to which most feel strongly attached – would lose power. Nonetheless, the first striking finding of the citizen forum is that no one wants to go back to unitary Belgium. In fact, few citizens mention this scenario (we find the lowest number compared to the two other language groups), and when they do so, they are against it. The main reason is: path dependency, i.e. we can't go back.

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.[18] *B1, French-speaking man over 55.*

The rupture is too important in both communities to restore it anyway. Perhaps as we could undo it, maybe it's possible do it again over the years, it could be possible but really too hard, I think.[19] *G2, French-speaking man under 30.*

[17] 'En dan denk ik inderdaad, het, ja, enfin, als Belg wil ik wel terug richting België gaan, maar ik denk eerder dat het een mix moet zijn. Dat we moeten kijken van, zoals je aanhaalt, milieu, haal dat naar boven, andere dingen, doe dat terug naar onder. (…) het is het tussenscenario dat ze voorstellen, eigenlijk van, zie waar hoort het beste thuis.'
[18] 'Moi je crois qu'on ne reviendra pas, évidemment, on ne sera plus, ça c'est pas possible puisque c'est presque l'inverse qui nous pend au nez, c'est que la Belgique soit coupée en deux, ça c'est le risque majeur, je pense.'
[19] 'Trop grande rupture dans les deux communautés, pour la rétablir comme ça en tout cas. Peut-être comme on a pu la défaire, peut-être la refaire au fil des années, ça doit être possible mais vraiment trop dur je pense.'

If going back to unitary Belgium is seen as impossible and therefore little discussed by the participants, the scenario of more refederalization brought about much more discussion. Indeed, half of the participants do talk about it. Most are in favour, which also means that while French-speaking participants are not in favour of full refederalization, several are in favour of more refederalization. What is more surprising is that identity reasons could have been expected among them (one favours this scenario because it gives more power the level of government to which one identifies most), but on contrary, efficiency reasons are used. There is little Belgian consideration in the argumentation.

> It is like we said earlier, if we want to go in the same direction there is a need for the whole country to make the same kind of, that the decisions are made at the federal level.[20] *B4, French-speaking woman under 30*.

> 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.[21] *C1, French-speaking man over 55.*

Some are against this scenario of more refederalization, and we observe again the path dependency argument: we cannot go back. The following excerpt shows that it is related to the dynamics between the two main communities that are seen as two blocks: Flanders willing for more, and Wallonia forced to follow. Such a reading of the federal dynamics in Belgium echoes the paradox of federalism: granting autonomy calls for more. The conclusion of one of the participants is that a movement of refederalization is merely impossible.

> 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

[20] 'C'est comme on le disait tantôt, si on veut aller dans la même direction il faut que tout le pays, prenne le même genre de, que les décisions soient prises au niveau fédéral.'
[21] 'Ramener un petit peu au niveau fédéral, en fait pour rendre le jeu plus clair. Pas pour le principe de ramener au fédéral mais simplement pour qu'il y ait une lisibilité dans le fonctionnement et qu'enfin les gens puissent s'y retrouver.'

competencies. On the contrary she wants even more and Wallonia has no other choice but to follow.[22] *H6, French-speaking man over 55.*

Given the fact that the scenario of – full or more – federalization is excluded by quite a few French-speaking citizens, one could posit that the status quo would receive lots of support. This scenario was highly debated in the French-speaking citizen forum. In comparison with the two other language groups, the forum where it was discussed by the most people, in absolute terms, was the one held in Liège. Yet, perhaps counterintuitively, those who mention this scenario are rather against it. The main reason is complexity. In fact the reason why French-speaking citizens do not want the status quo is self-reinforcing: efficiency and need for changes. It is not working properly today, so we need it to be changed.

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 decisions (…) Finally I advocate for a simplification.[23] *C4, French-speaking woman between 30-55.*

One way to change the system is to opt for more federalization: French-speaking participants are those who speak the most about it (in absolute terms, as German-speaking citizens almost all discussed this scenario). Still, they are also divided on this scenario, though. When they are in favour of more federalization, they do so for various reasons: identity, path dependency, democracy, efficiency, subsidiarity. By contrast, those who speak against it are more 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, costlier and yield more problems because it is not dealt with by a single authority. This finding is quite counterintuitive and is not the one that most observers would imagine for the French-speaking side. On the contrary, it is a 'typical' Flemish argument. Here again, the weight of identity seems to be quite limited: only three citizens mention it. When it is related to identity matters, it is not necessarily an argument in favour of a Belgian identity but rather a willingness to avoid creating difference between language groups or a different treatment between them. We see here the inter-relations between

[22] 'Croire que les compétences que les Régions ont acquises retournerons au fédéral, ça c'est tout à fait insensé. Ce n'est pas dans le sens de l'Histoire. La Flandre n'acceptera jamais de redémobiliser ses compétences. Au contraire elle en veut toujours plus et la Wallonie est obligée de suivre.'

[23] 'C'est vrai que vu la complexité de la Belgique, pour prendre une simple décision, le nombre de ministres qui doivent être autour de la table pour prendre une simple décision (…) Enfin moi je prône une simplification.'

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.[24] *F1, French-speaking man between 30-55*.

The scenario of full federalization, i.e. the independence of the sub-state entities, is rather consensual among French-speaking participants. Several of them mention this scenario, but all are against it. The reason is efficiency, but also the peculiar situation of Brussels. This is common to all three language groups. Identity seems not to be a key variable here neither.

> 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.[25] *G3, French-speaking woman under 30*.

Finally, quite a few participants mention the mixed scenario, with some competences going back to the federal level while other should be granted to the Regions and Communities. No one is against this scenario. What is interesting is that while efficiency matters, identity matters here to (and this is basically one of the rare instances where it pops up). The two following quotes illustrate well this intertwining of efficiency and identity arguments. 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.

> If they are better in the Flemish side, why would we split education when in the end, except for language, teaching, the education level of children, etc. must be the same.[26] *D4, French-speaking woman between 30-55*.

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[24] 'Évaluer, se remettre en question, revoir certaines compétences, mais avec le leitmotiv euh unité, unicité, et se dire que plus on va fractionner et plus on va créer de d'une part des probabilités de problèmes, des coûts supérieurs, euh des différences, on va accentuer et exacerber la différence en général.'

[25] 'Je pense que ce qui mènerait, un des grands obstacles pour lesquels je pense qu' il y a aura pas de scissions en tout cas, pas dans les 50 ans à venir, c'est Bruxelles, c'est parce que on peut pas, 'fin les Flamands ne peuvent pas s'en séparer et nous, on ne peut pas non plus s'en séparer.'

[26] 'S'ils sont plus forts du côté flamand, pourquoi est-ce que on scinderait l'enseignement alors que pour finir, à part la langue, l'enseignement, le niveau des enfants etcetera il doit être le même.'

> 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 re-transfer 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 a 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 re-federalize because we realize that'.[27] *F6, French-speaking man between 30-55*.

The federalization of Belgium has historically been influenced by so-called community relations where identity matters play a key role. More recently, especially in the discourse of Flemish political parties, efficiency was emphasized in the negotiations for more autonomy. The citizen forum held in Liège revealed that efficiency is now the core concern of French-speaking participants. It is used to argue for both more or less federalization. It is much more present in the discourse than identity. This is not say that identity has disappeared but few positions are solely justified on its basis. This is an important insight in our understanding of citizens' preferences from the (larger) minority. Which leads us to turn to the German-speaking citizen forum in order to see whether identity still plays a role among the smallest sub-state entity.

c) (Re)federalization through the eyes of German-speaking citizens

After a glance at the results for the two main language groups, analysing those for the German-speakers is particular in several respects. First, they are in a minority position, something they have in common with French-speaking citizens, but there are only 77.000 German-speakers in Belgium which corresponds to less than 1% of the population. Secondly, most of them have a strong territorial identity, which they have in common with Flemish-speaking citizens, but it is coupled most of the time to a Belgian identity so that most of them would refer to themselves as

[27] 'Rien n'est fixe euh, c'est c'est par la pratique qu'on se rend compte si c'est une bonne chose ou pas et s'il faut encore adapter, pour re-transférer dans un sens ou dans l'autre, mais c'est aussi ce dont on parle ici par moments euh actuellement, euh voilà, si on se rend compte que ben ça n'a pas de sens d'avoir régionalisé ou fédéralisé une compétence, ben voilà, pour moi, ça c'est mon avis, ça c'est mon avis, on ne doit pas, ça ne doit jamais être tout noir ou tout blanc, ça ne doit jamais être figé, c'est, c'est la pratique qui va montrer si oui ou non, ça fonctionne ou pas. Même si je sais qu'il y aura peut-être des revendications euh plus culturelles ou plus linguistiques ou que sais-je d'un côté ou de l'autre, en fonction du moment, mais euh, mais euh, ça j'aime bien d'entendre ce discours-là 'oui euh là, il y a peut-être certaines compétences qu'on ferait peut-être mieux de re-fédéraliser parce qu'on se rend compte que'.

German-speaking Belgians. Finally, they have often been described as the 'last' and most patriotic Belgians, although it remains largely unknown what this entails precisely (Thomas, 2006).

When one looks at the arguments that German-speakers mobilized towards the scenario of 'full refederalization', one can see that no one argued in favour. This is not surprising when one considers the minority position of the German-speakers that have long claimed special rights in the field of culture and education to protect their linguistic distinctiveness. For those who spoke out against 'full refederalization', justifications related to considerations of identity – which confirms the interpretation above – and to considerations of path dependency, i.e. citizens not seeing a return to the central state as realistic given previous evolutions are dominant.

> I think that, on the one hand, that 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.[28] *U3, German-speaking man under 30.*

While full refederalization seemed not to be a viable option for most German-speaking participants, many of them argued in favour of the 'more refederalization' scenario. Their justifications were above all linked to considerations of efficiency (like the two other groups). Some identity arguments are mentioned but seem minor compared to the others. Among the varia, arguments of subsidiarity appear, which can be expected to be in line with arguments of efficiency rather than of identity as for as refederalization is concerned.

> 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 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.[29] *U4, German-speaking woman between 30 and 55.*

[28] 'Ehm, ich glaube einerseits, dass es nicht, mittlerweile nicht mehr möglich ist [zum Einheitsstaat zurückzukehren], weil kann ich mir nicht vorstellen kan, dass dann ein krasses Szenario kommt. Und ich denke auch, dass (…) es eben auch nützlich ist, gewissen Kompetenzen zu haben. Sei es die Sprache, die Kultur, vor allem.'

[29] 'Wenn wir auch das Unterrichtswesen selbst bestimmen können bei uns, müssen wir trotzdem kommunizieren mit den französischsprachigen und den niederländischsprachigen Belgiern. Wir wollen danach alle an die selbe

When it comes to citizens arguing against 'more refederalization', their motivations are exclusively related to considerations of path dependency, i.e. they do not imagine it to be possible, independently of whether they see it as desirable or not.

Reasonings of path dependency also exist among citizens arguing in favour of 'more federalization', but here arguments of efficiency and identity exist as well. While identity arguments could be expected to be found in such a small group, efficiency arguments might seem untypical at a first glance. In the discussions, however, citizens motivated this mostly with opportunities of administrative simplification in small communities.

> When you think logically, when having a small region, you do not need 100 or 150 people doing administrative tasks for such a small region. 50 would do it too. (…) I am certainly not someone who claims to have the perfect system, no one does, but it would be worth trying.[30] *S7, German-speaking man under 30.*

Despite frequencies cannot be considered representative, one should note that there were much more German-speaking citizens arguing against 'more federalization' than in favour. Thereby, the main argumentative theme was efficiency. Interestingly, it did not only consist of considerations on the money that German-speakers spend for their administration but even on the fact that the other communities pay for them. Furthermore, scale benefits were perceived as problematic when the power is too close to the people and vice-versa.

> She [the community] is too small. Everyone knows each other (…) and the relationships are far too close. Everyone having connections [can say] 'I will do it for you', and this is how things go.[31] *S1, German-speaking woman over 55.*

Uni[versität] gehen, ob ich in St. Vith mein Abi gemacht hab, oder in Visé, oder in Leuven. Wenn ich da aber drei Studenten habe, die ein völlig verschiedenes Niveau haben irgendwann, weil die [ei]ne ganz andere Ausbildung haben. Dann sehe ich da echt ein Problem. Und das sehe ich auch auf anderen Ebenen. (…) Deswegen denk[e] ich mir, lieber e[i]n[en] Schritt zurück gehen oder nochmal sich an den Tisch in Brüssel setzten, oder in Namur, als nur nicht hier unsere Suppe kochen.'

[30] 'Wenn du doch eigentlich rein logisch gesehen, du hast ne kleine Region, was brauchst du da 100 oder 150 Leute die wirklich Behördenarbeit machen für diese kleine Region da. Da würden es genauso gut 50 tun. (…) Ich bin bestimmt keiner, der sagt, ich hab das perfekte System so, das hat bestimmt keiner, aber das wäre zu probieren.'

[31] 'Die [Gemeinschaft] ist zu klein. Jeder kennt jeden (…) und die Beziehungslage ist viel zu groß. Jeder, der Beziehungen hat, [kann sagen :] komm, ich mach dir das schon und so läuft Vieles.'

> 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 payed 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.[32] *U6, German-speaking man between 30-55.*

When one looks at arguments that German-speakers mobilized on the 'full federalization' scenario, one can see that no one argued in favour. This is not surprising when one considers that it would be difficult (not to say impossible) for German-speakers to become independent, and that belonging to an independent Wallonia or Germany are both largely contested. Arguments against 'full federalization', in turn, are solely concerned with efficiency or reasons for the practical impossibility of splitting the country.

> In case of a split [of the country], I cannot imagine a viable form to emerge [for the German-speakers].[33] *V4, German-speaking woman under 30.*

As for the 'mixed scenario' consisting in some competences being federalized while others are refederalized, all arguments related to it were used to support it and concerned both identity and efficiency considerations. More specifically, while identity considerations were largely used to justify which competences should be federalized and efficiency considerations to justify which competences should be refederalized, some also appealed to a Belgian identity as applying to all

[32] 'Wenn wir jetzt noch mehr Beamte haben oder Angestellte und so weiter (…), die Bürger, die jetzt im Privatsektor beschäftigt sind, die müssen das dann aufbringen, weil die, die da beschäftigt sind in der Verwaltung, ja, die werden ja bezahlt vom Staat. (…) Ich bin Arbeiter, (…) und unsere Betrieben müssen das alles aufbringen und das ist in keinem Verhältnis find ich. Ich meine wir haben jetzt Glück, die Flamen, die sagen noch nichts aber ich denke, dass der größte Anteil von dem Kuchen bei den Flamen liegt. Die haben, die erwirtschaften am meisten und dann ja, wird das ja aufgeteilt und dann kriegen wir da ein großes, schon ein relatives Stück von dem Kuchen, also finanziell sag ich jetzt mal… Aber wenn das [die Verwalrung] jetzt noch mehr aufgeblasen wird, ich weiß nicht, ob die dann nicht irgendwann sagen: ich weiß nicht, wie viel den Wallonen helfen und jetzt müssen wir den Deutschsprachigen auch nicht ständig unter de Arme greifen, nur (…) weil die das gar nicht erwirtschaften können, was [die]se ausgeben.'

[33] 'Bei einer Spaltung [des Landes] kann ich mir nicht vorstellen, dass da irgendeine überlebensfähige Form bei rauskommt [für die Deutschsprachigen].'

areas that are irrelevant for regional specificities. It remains unclear, however, which these areas are.

> I think that it is important to separate above all things for the education, media and cultures. And yet there are some general decisions that can be thrown in one pot and (…) then it is irrelevant whether one speaks German or French or so, we all remain Belgians.[34] *S4, German-speaking woman under 30.*

Finally, the 'status quo' scenario is advocated by citizens who either think that things go well as they currently are or that the recently received competences need to be implemented stably before carrying out further reforms. One should note that the German-speakers were the only community in which some citizens at all actually said that they were satisfied with the current working of federal Belgium. Furthermore, the sixth state reform of 2014 had just considerably enlarged the autonomy statute of the German-speaking community. In turn, arguments against the status quo were concerned with lacking efficiency and with the perception that the current working of federal Belgium is not satisfying.

> What would it bring us to go back? (…) We need first to stabilize what we have.[35] *T2, German-speaking man over 55.*

> According to me, the system needs to be simplified. It would need to be clearer so that the citizen can understand it.[36] *V3, German-speaking man between 30 and 55.*

Taken together, one can see that the participants of the German-speaking citizen forum in Elsenborn were concerned at least as much with the efficiency of their autonomy statute in light of their small group size, than with the distinctiveness of their identity. Probably because the current autonomy statute they obtained seems quite comfortable to most of them. Identity arguments are used (mostly against 'full refederalization' and in favour of 'federalization') but never exclusively. The absence of identity arguments in other scenarios is interesting insofar as

[34] 'Ich find das schon wichtig, dass das vor allem für die Bildung und auch und für die Medien, für Kulturen getrennt wird. Aber trotzdem gibt' [e]s so in Belgien so generelle Entscheidungen, das kann mehr in einen Pott geworfen werden und dann (…) ist es egal wer Deutsch spricht oder Französisch spricht oder so, wir bleiben aber alle Belgier.'
[35] Zurückfahren, was haben wir davon? (…) Wir müssen mal das stabil machen was wir haben.'
[36] 'Für mich müsste das System vereinfacht werden. Es müsste klarer werden, damit sich die Bürger mehr darunter vorstellen können.'

one could wonder which place the allegedly important partial Belgian identity has for German-speakers when they think about federalism. If it is important at all, does it only become relevant for domains that are irrelevant for their regional identity? And/or could their understanding be qualified as a form of 'efficient patriotism' where being Belgian is a default in the absence of viable alternatives?

3.2 Citizen profiles on (re)federalization

After considering which argument themes were mobilized by the participants vis-à-vis the different scenarios, we also tried to understand whether particular types of participants tended to be more in favour of certain scenarios than others. For doing so, we grouped participants into different 'profiles' according to the scenario in favour of which they argued in the discussion (as described in the methodological section). We then compared these profiles with the socio-demographical and opinion data we collected through the pre-forum questionnaire. Table 3, hereunder, summarizes the results. Illustrative plots are provided in Appendix 3.

Table 3. Citizen profiles on (re)federalization by language, age, gender, identity and political knowledge

	Citizen profiles (main)						Sub-total	Citizen profiles (other)		Total
	Unitarist	Federalist	Status quo	Regionalist	Separatist	Mixed		Indefin.	Unspec.	
Total	**1**	**20**	**4**	**11**	**0**	**33**	**69**	**12**	**25**	**106**
Language										
Dutch	1	6	0	6	0	15	28	6	6	40
French	0	9	1	4	0	11	25	2	14	41
German	0	5	3	1	0	7	16	4	5	25
Age										
-33	0	7	2	3	0	9	21	3	3	27
30-55	0	6	1	3	0	13	23	5	10	38
55+	1	7	1	5	0	11	25	4	12	41
Gender										
Men	1	6	2	9	0	21	39	11	14	64
Women	0	14	2	2	0	12	30	1	11	42
Identity										
Excl. Regional	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	0	1	4
More Regional	0	2	1	6	0	10	19	1	2	22
Mixed	0	8	3	2	0	11	24	5	10	39
More Belgian	1	5	0	0	0	6	12	4	10	26
Excl. Belgian	0	4	0	2	0	5	11	2	2	15

Political knowledge										
Very low	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	3
Low	0	2	2	0	0	3	7	0	6	13
Rather low	0	1	0	1	0	2	4	1	4	9
Rather high	1	5	2	3	0	4	15	2	5	22
Very high	0	7	0	3	0	11	21	5	2	28
Very high	0	5	0	3	0	13	21	4	6	31

A glance at the raw distribution of the scenarios shows that the vast majority of participants argued in favour of the mixed scenario, with no one advocating for splitting the country. While the former is in line with a majority of the current public and media discourses on the topic, it is surprising not to find any advocate of the later. This led us to go through the data corpus once more and, more specifically, to check carefully the arguments in favour of more regionalization. Thereby, we really did not find explicitly secessionist arguments, not even among the participants that had declared themselves in favour of it in the pre-forum questionnaire. By reading carefully through the latter's arguments, though, one could see that instead of explicitly mentioning a split of the country, they argued in favour of a far-reaching autonomy devolution coming close if not corresponding to the 'confederal' ideas that Flemish nationalist parties tend to speak of. One can hence see how heterogenous the 'regionalist' profile is in terms of opinions because arguing in favour of splitting the country is either not 'presentable' or not desirable in its fully-fledged manner. As for the unitarist option, it was present although only advocated by a single participant. Most other participants argued either in favour of more refederalization (20) or federalization (11). In absolute terms, these results are not interesting because they cannot be extrapolated to the overall population (nor should they because this is the job of the precited quantitative data). Comparing them to citizens individual characteristics and opinions, though, is interesting in four respects.

First, when considering participants' language, one can see, beyond all groups' preference for the mixed scenario, that Dutch-speaking participants were as much regionalist than federalist, while among both French- and German-speaking participants, there were more federalists than regionalists. The status quo, moreover, was mostly argued for by the latter – which is in line with previous considerations about the considerable scope of the sixth state reform for the smallest federal sub-state entity.

Secondly, while there seem not to be many differences based on participants' age, there are differences based on their gender. Female participants were indeed much more often federalist, while male were more often regionalist – not to say in favour of the mixed scenario. The latter receives even less advocates among women in the forums than the federalist option.

Thirdly, participants' identity seems to play an important role for their stance on (re)federalization – in line with most quantitative research on the matter. Interestingly and in addition to what the latter show, however, arguments in favour of the mixed scenario do not only stem from participants with a mixed or more Belgian identity but also from those with a more regional identity. Which shows that the latter does not prevent the former.

Fourthly, when considering participants' political knowledge, one can see that those with a low political knowledge tended not to specify their position or argue in favour of the status quo. Those with a higher political knowledge, in turn, were federalist, regionalist or, especially, in favour of the mixed scenario. This is in line with the complexity of the latter compared to the former. Furthermore, a substantive share of participants with a high political knowledge were as 'talkative' as to argue in favour of as many scenarios as to render their position 'indefinable'.

4. To federalize or to refederalize: argumentative framings of Belgian citizen

Overall, the results of our analysis indicate that, across all six scenarios, citizen opinions in favour or against (re)federalisation are to a large extent supported by the use of efficiency arguments. In comparison, identity arguments are less frequently mentioned and limited to three specific scenarios: in favour or against full federalization, more federalization or regarding the mix scenario. *Per se*, this result is not surprising and in line with prior observations about the discourses of political elites. As developed earlier, the Belgian federalization process was at its beginnings framed by question of identity (cultural demands from Flanders) or group specificity (territorial (economic) demands from Wallonia). Throughout the subsequent developments, things evolved and considerations of efficiency became of increasing importance. Hence, while citizen and elite opinions might different quantitatively (elites being overly more regionalist), the qualitative patterns behind their arguments seem to rely on similar ground – with different consequences though.

Indeed, the efficiency argument, more generally, can be considered 'Janus-faced'. It is used without major differences between linguistic groups to justify opinions that are (1) in favour of more refederalisation and (2) both in favour and against more federalisation. Several observations can be drawn from these results. First, the argumentative framing used by Belgian political elites (i.e. efficiency arguments to justify more federalization) is not absent among Belgian citizens, but is far less pronounced than expected. While Belgian citizens use efficiency arguments, they do so also to justify opinions that are opposite to the rationale used by political elites. This observation could be explained by the fact that, while the Belgian federalization process is now more and more driven by institutional effects (i.e. asymmetrical composition of coalitions between governance levels, institutional deadlocks on mediatized issues (climate policy, the national football stadium), etc.), political elites and citizens have a different appraisal of what should be done to tackle these issues. From a citizen perspective, such deadlock situations could be avoided if Belgium favoured a path towards refederalisation of certain policies. On the contrary, for political elites, and most specifically nationalist and regionalist parties, these institutional deadlocks demonstrate that the 'Belgian house' does not work anymore, and that more federalization is needed. Taking this one (tentative) step further, it could explain in part why previous quantitative survey (Reuchamps et al, 2017) find a gap between citizens and political elites' preferences regarding the Belgian federalisation process.

As for the use of identity arguments, our analysis showed that they tend to be used less broadly and usually in combination with others. When they are mobilized, however, they justify positions in favour of more federalization and, more generally, in favour of the mixed scenario. This suggests that identity arguments tend not to be considered as sufficient enough to motivate further federalization on its own, but that they are still used in combination with others. In the mixed scenario, they tend to play the 'federal' role, while the 'refederal' role are mostly taken by efficiency arguments. For German-speakers, they are unsurprisingly important to motivate an opposition to the unitary scenario. Now, does this mean that identities are no longer important in Belgium? Probably not. It just means that the federalization process went so far that inter-group differences and attachments are no longer sufficient to drive its evolution.

Beyond identity and efficiency arguments, our analysis allowed to identity additional argumentative framings: 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. Two of them deserve particular attention. First, the set of arguments related to the special situation of the Brussels Capital-Region interestingly comes up as a 'default' justification against the full federalization (i.e. split) scenario. From a citizen's perspective, Brussels is thus perceived as one (if not the main) reasons that could prevent Belgium to be split in the future. Secondly, the most frequent of the alternative arguments is the path dependency argument, which is mobilised to justify opinions against full or more refederalisation or in favour of more federalisation. This is, *a priori*, an intuitive argumentative pattern: the federalization process of Belgium has already gone too far to step back and it is thus logical that this federalization process continues further. *A posteriori*, however, this would either need to stop at some point or one ultimately end-up with splitting of 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 federalized and/or should be refederalised for reasons of efficiency.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to explore the preferences of citizens for more or less – regional – self-rule autonomy 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 all together 106 participants who discussed the future of Belgian federalism for several hours. The analysis of this paper is based on the transcriptions of all these discussions and the arguments that were used to justify citizens' opinion towards six scenarios of (re)federalization. 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 over 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. federalizing some

competences, while refederalizing others) appears to be of particular importance for many of our participants, which is the case for all the three language groups – also for many Flemings. This might surprise those who think at 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 federalization process. On the one hand, there seems to be persuasive ground for both the federalization and refederalization of competences based on considerations that include both efficiency and, to some extent, identity considerations. On the other hand, however, the Belgian federalization process remains elite-driven and one might wonder whether the antagonistic dynamics of this process are able to develop such a nuanced outcome.

More generally, this invites to reconsider the place that citizens do and should have in federalization 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 citizens forum 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 the produced and the way they did it.

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 federalism. For instance, a recent bibliometric analysis of (empirical) studies focusing on political discourse in linguistic research (Perrez, Randour, Reuchamps, forthcoming) outlined the great variety of empirical data used to study citizen 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 analyzing social or online news media (i.e. Twitter, web forums and YouTube videos comments etc.). While these types of data also yield shortcomings, they might be less time consuming regarding the data collection and could also allow to study (the evolution of) citizen's discourse through time. One additional lead could also consist in consolidating these findings on a larger corpora of citizen discourse using, for example, natural language processing techniques.

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Appendices

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

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

Appendix 2. Detailed coding scheme comprising the argumentative themes in favor or against six scenarios of (re)federalization grouped by language group

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Full refederalization			**9**	**7**	**11**
(de facto: going back to the central state)	*In favor:*		*5*	*1*	*0*
	Efficiency		4	1	0
		Cost	4	1	0
	Identity		2	0	0
		Identity	2	0	0
	Varia		0	0	0
	Against:		*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

Table to be continued on the next pages.

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
More refederalization			**22**	**22**	**13**
	In favor:		*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
	Against:		*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

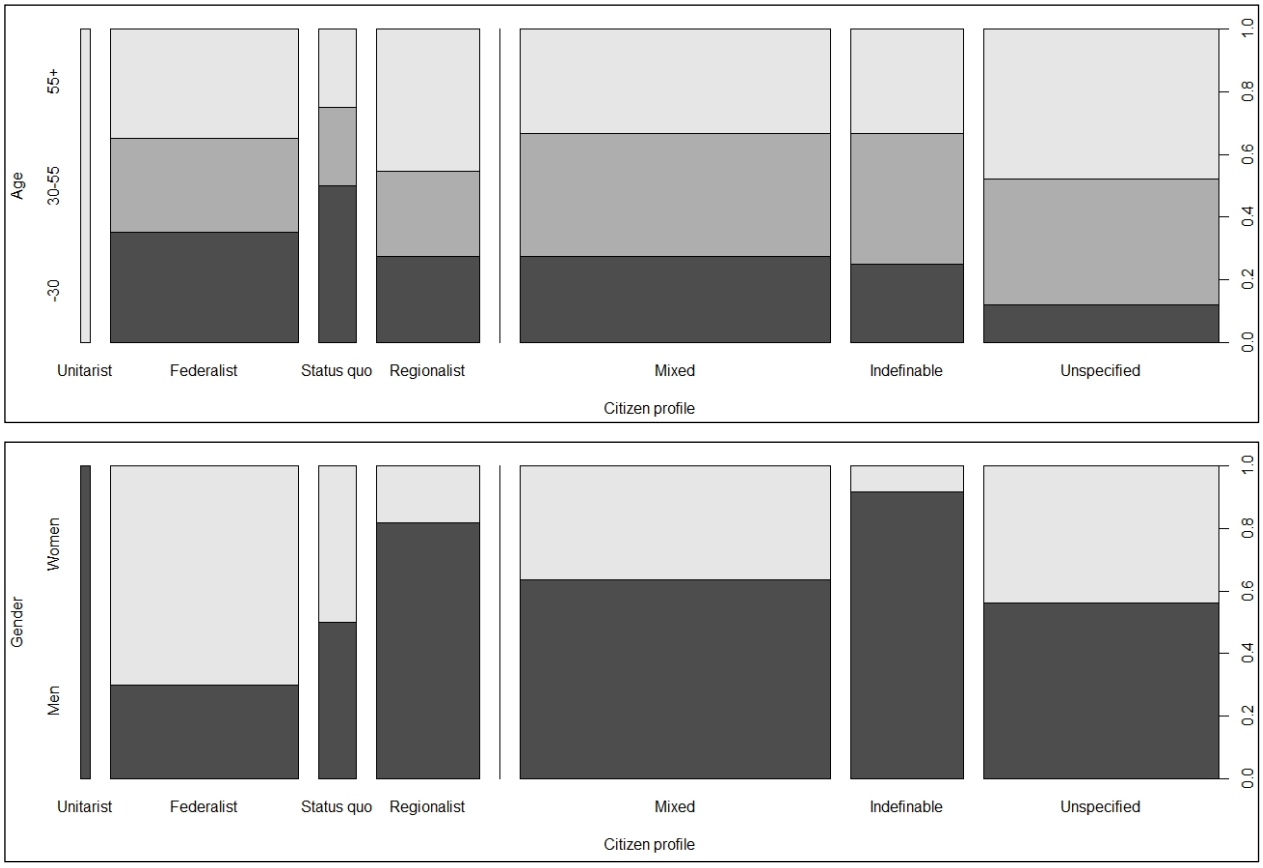
Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Status quo			**3**	**11**	**10**
	In favor:		*2*	*2*	*6*
	Efficiency		2	1	3
		Avoid new problems	1	1	0
		Avoid new tensions	1	0	0
		Things work well	0	0	3
	Identity		0	0	0
	Varia		0	1	4
		Consolidate	0	0	3
		Path dependency	0	1	1
	Against:		*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
More federalization			**19**	**24**	**18**
	In favor:		*11*	*10*	*6*
	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

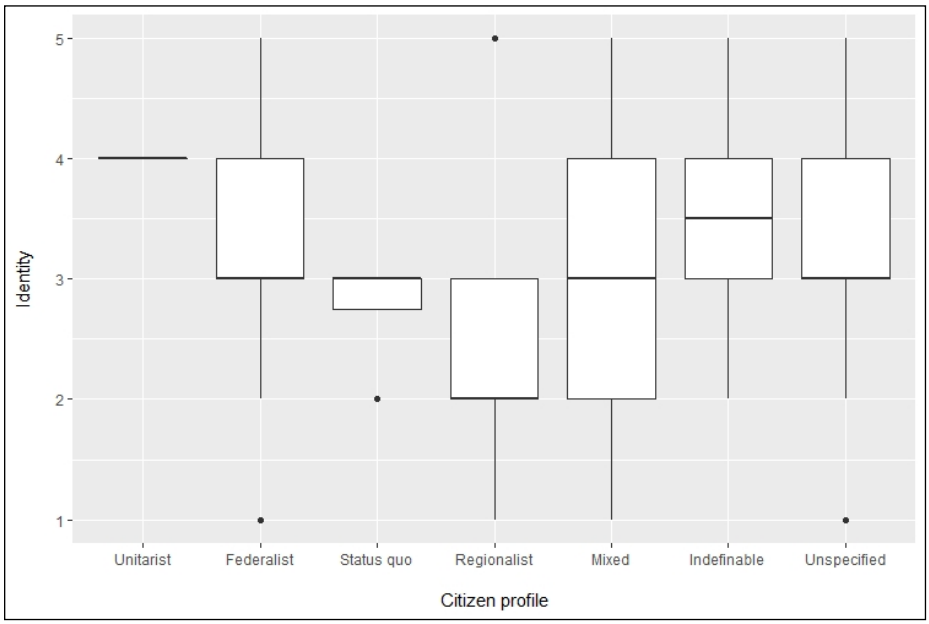
Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
	Against:		*10*	*18*	*13*
	Efficiency		9	15	13
		Administration	0	1	0
		Complexity	1	5	2
		Costs	1	1	6
		Economy	3	3	1
		Efficiency	3	1	2
		Expertise	0	0	3
		Homogeneity	0	2	0
		Interconnection	2	1	0
		Scale	4	0	4
		Transparency	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
Full federalization			**18**	**13**	**9**
	In favor:		*0*	*0*	*0*
(de facto: splitting the country)	Efficiency		0	0	0
	Identity		0	0	0
	Varia		0	0	0
	Against:		*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

Scenario	Theme	Argument	Frequency by language group*		
			Flemish	French	German
Mixed			**12**	**14**	**8**
(refederalize some competences while federalizing others)	*In favor:*		*12*	*14*	*8*
	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
	Against:		*0*	*0*	*0*
	Efficiency		0	0	0
	Identity		0	0	0
	Varia		0	0	0

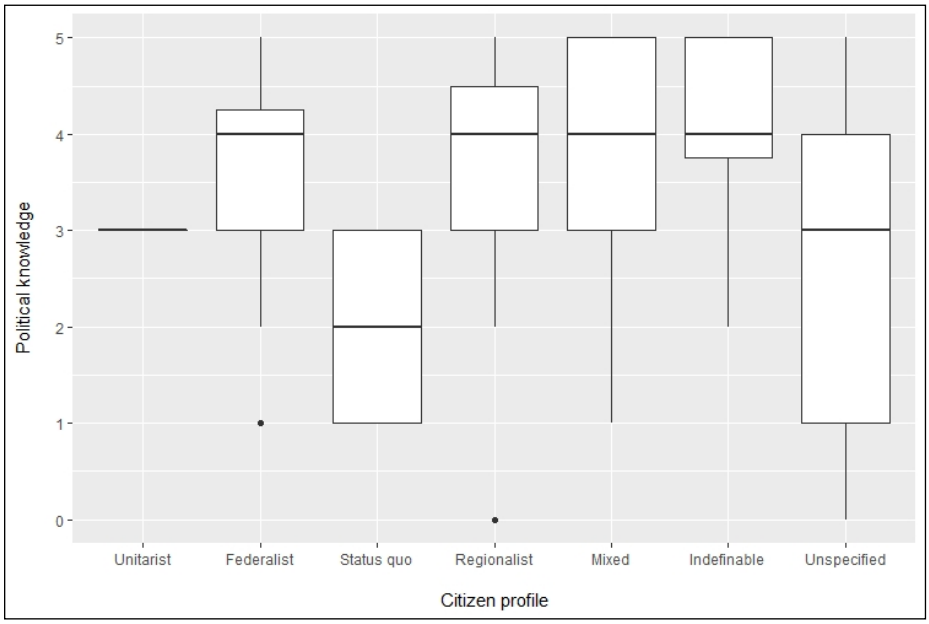
* Number of participants by whom the argument is at least mobilized once.

Appendix 3. Representation of citizen profiles by age, gender, identity and political knowledge





* Excl. Belgian = 5, More Belgian = 4, Equally both = 3, More Regional = 2, Excl. Regional = 1.



* Very high = 5, High = 4, Rather high = 3, Rather low = 2, Low = 1, Very low = 0.