

# Beyond linguistic and party homogeneity: Determinants of Belgian MPs' preferences on federalism and state reform

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## Abstract

Political parties are often thought of as unitary actors that have consistent preferences. This 'hidden assumption' means that heterogeneity within parties, and therefore intra-party dynamics, are overlooked in explaining attitudes. When it comes to devolution and federalisation, parties or MPs belonging to the same region are also often implicitly considered to have homogeneous viewpoints and attitudes. Relying on an original survey of MPs carried out during the Belgian political gridlock of 2010–2011, this article uncovers some of the key dimensions of the intra-party dynamics through analysis of MPs' preferences towards institutional reform in Belgium. Far from being explained along party or community lines, our results demonstrate how MPs' political and sociological background, national/regional identity, political career, and inter-community relations strongly shape their preferences.

## Keywords

Belgium, devolution, elite respondents, federalism, intra-party dynamics

## Introduction

In political science research, political parties are often conceptualized as unitary actors with consistent preferences (Meyer, 2012: 485). This 'hidden assumption', albeit sometimes empirically observed, often means that heterogeneity within parties and, therefore, intra-party dynamics are overlooked (Bowler et al., 1999; Katz and Mair, 1992). A similar observation can be made concerning positions of parties and/or individual MPs in federal countries on issues related to devolution, where political actors belonging to the same region are often implicitly considered to have homogeneous viewpoints and attitudes. Moreover, research has shown how party politics shape the evolution of federal

and multi-level polities (Sinardet, 2012; Swenden and Maddens, 2009; Toubeau and Massetti, 2013) but much less attention has been devoted to uncovering the intra-party dynamics (Hopkin and van Houten, 2009), especially at the individual level.

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While the first intra-party studies were published in the 1960s, it is only since the 1990s that the intra-party dimension has received a significant interest that is still growing in legislative studies. So far, intra-party politics is mainly observed through MPs' behaviour with the analysis of voting unity in roll-cast votes (see Owens, 2003). Parliamentarians indeed constitute a privileged group for at least two reasons. Firstly, parliaments remain certainly a 'place of power' where intra-party dynamics really matter. Despite the decline of parliament thesis (Elgie and Stapleton, 2006), it is still in legislative assemblies that laws are passed and governments are held accountable. Secondly, parliamentarians constitute the 'nucleus of the political class' (Borchert and Golsch, 1995; p. 617), which is a key element in understanding regional and federal dynamics in divided polities (Stolz, 2001). Therefore, for those who seek to uncover intra-party dynamics, in particular in a regional and federal studies perspective, MPs form without a doubt a well-suited target group.

Relying on an original MPs survey carried out during the Belgian political gridlock of 2010–2011, this article seeks to uncover some of the critical dimensions of intra-party dynamics through analysis of MPs' preferences towards state reform in Belgium. To do so, we first go back to the literature on party politics in regional and federal studies before presenting the Belgian case and our hypotheses.

### Party politics in regional and federal studies

To explain the trend of decentralization in the last decades, especially in Western Europe, the role of regionalist and nationalist parties has been underlined (De Winter and Türsan, 1998). The emergence of these parties has brought to the fore an agenda of regionalization and federalization that shapes the political dynamics in their countries. Interest has therefore grown for the role of political parties in decentralization processes and particularly for the interests and rationales behind political parties' positions on territorial politics (Swenden and Maddens, 2009; Toubeau and Massetti, 2013). Indeed, parties – whether they are regionalist or state-wide – are not necessarily solely or primarily driven by deep convictions on nation and identity. While these may largely be the motivations of regionalist parties, traditional state-wide parties have often been known to adapt their positions on decentralization as a strategy to react to electoral threats of regionalist parties (Deschouwer, 2009; Hopkin and van Houten, 2009; Meguid 2008; Sinardet 2012).

This is more often the case for typical governing parties, who have a general tendency to adapt their positions to electoral evolutions, as well as for parties which have electorally most to fear from the success of sub-state nationalist parties and are ideologically closer to them (particularly on the left-right axis). For instance, the success of the right-

wing Lega Nord in 1990s Italy led mostly centre right parties to become more strongly in favour of decentralization (Mazzoleni, 2009), while the success of the left-wing Scottish National Party in the UK had a similar effect on the positions of the Labour Party, at first mostly in Scotland but increasingly also on the national level (Mitchell, 1998).

There is however another less analysed strategic reasoning that can determine parties' positions on territorial politics reform. As argued by O'Neill (2003), for parties whose electoral support at sub-state levels appears more secure than their prospects in national elections, decentralization can represent a desirable strategy, as it maximizes electoral possibilities. This is especially the case for parties with strong support in specific regions, low expectations to control power at the centre, and stable support over time. O'Neill (2003) showed the importance of such partisan political calculations as explanation for decentralization for Latin American democracies, but similar dynamics can be observed in Western European federations. At different times and in different contexts, national left-wing opposition parties have favoured decentralization so as to create new political institutions in which they would have more chance to be in power. This was for instance the case in Italy in the 1960s, France in the 1970s, and to a lesser extent also in Spain (Mazzoleni, 2009; Sorens, 2009). The nationalist turn of Labour in Scotland during the Thatcher years can also be explained by the fact that Labour's electoral situation in England – and thus in the UK – was very unpromising, while they kept on being the strongest party in Scotland.

Yet, in explaining these two types of party political strategies to favour decentralization – response to electoral threats and opportunity for political power at new levels, which are often linked – political parties are often taken as homogeneous sets (Caramani, 2004). Although political scientists have long acknowledged that '[p]arties cannot be, nor should they be, monolith' (Satori, 1976: 105–106), the systematic enquiry of intra-party dynamics remains hitherto an unexplored research area. This is not very surprising considering that the processes of regionalization and federalization in Western democracies have been studied primarily through the impact of structural factors whereas the shift towards the analysis of party politics is recent (Toubeau and Massetti, 2013). There are yet several studies that underlined intra-party dynamics – and most notably internal divisions between pro- and anti-devolution – within statewide parties (see for instance the comparative work of Alonso, 2012 and Stefuriuc, 2009). Some analyses also aimed to identify and explain internal divergences of regionalist parties in terms of positioning on the ideological spectrum (Masseti, 2009) or on the issue of devolution itself between independentist and autonomist strategies (Masseti and Schakel, 2013).

Despite those recent studies on intra-party dynamics, van Biezen and Hopkins (2006: 35) remain correct to state that:

decentralization does affect intra-party dynamics, and the way statewide parties deal with its consequences is essential to our understanding of the process of reform. The internal dynamics of parties are complex and often opaque, but there is no alternative but to integrate them into research on decentralization.

An interesting way to apprehend those intra-party dynamics is through the eyes of party members, and in particular ‘members in office’ who potentially have the power to influence party strategies and party positioning. Indeed, the individual dimension, which is often neglected, sheds light on the political preferences of the actors that have a say in the nature of territorial politics. This is the approach taken in this article as way to better understand constitutional reform when it is in the making.

For that purpose, MP surveys offer interesting data, especially when they are collected in a specific political context such as at the beginning of the legislative term. As Kam (2001: 96) argues:

the great advantage of this method is that MPs’ responses to surveys conducted just before the beginning of a parliament are clearly exogenous to their subsequent behaviour and to parliamentary and party institutions (including party discipline, agenda setting, log-rolls and the like).

Another advantage is that individual preferences are measured, while most studies still present macro findings measuring country and parliament as a whole and sometimes without even looking at inter-party divergences (Depauw and Martin, 2008). A final consideration is linked to the case study under examination in this research: the survey was conducted among Belgian MPs at a time when they were not bound by party ties on this specific question as no agreement had yet been reached.

Against this backdrop, this research investigates the causes of tensions that may threaten party unity and that ultimately contributes to determine the factors that explain their individual preferences. Politically divided and multi-level Belgium offers an interesting case to explore this key question because of its numerous parliaments (i.e. levels of governments), but above all because this long period of intense state reform negotiations is helpful for understanding regional and federal dynamics in divided politics, and in particular intra-party dynamics. Before presenting the theoretical argument and hypotheses, we explain why Belgium is a promising ground to investigate intra-party dynamics for regional and federal studies.

## Divided and multi-level Belgium

In five decades, Belgium has transformed from a unitary state into a multi-level federation. Despite its manifold political layers (local, provincial, regional and community, federal), the federal dynamic in Belgium is still largely bipolar, based on the two large communities of Dutch

speakers (approximately 6 million) and French speakers (approximately 4 million). The party system also follows the linguistic line. Since the split of the three traditional parties in the late 1960s and 1970s, there are no significant national parties. The new parties (greens, radical right, etc) also limited their action radius to one language community (Deschouwer, 2012).<sup>1</sup> At the level of the electoral system, for the European Parliament two electoral colleges were created and for the Chamber electoral districts do not cross the borders of the regions (Reuchamps et al., 2014a). This all leads to a situation where federal elections can in fact be considered as ‘community elections’: ‘community’ parties compete amongst each other for ‘community’ voters by conducting ‘community’ campaigns. After Election Day, however, two ‘community’ election results are the basis to form *one* federal government (Sinardet, 2008).

Because of this, in one single case Belgium offers a multiplicity of cases studies. The vertical and horizontal divisions of the country provide multiple grounds for investigation. In this article we not only focus on the two chambers of the federal Parliament but also on the four regional/community parliaments. Moreover, the linguistic split of political parties multiplies intra-case research. In Flanders, the party system is highly fragmented (Swenden et al., 2009) between the three traditional political parties (Christian Democrats (CD&V), Liberals (OpenVLD), and Socialists (Sp.a)), the Greens (Groen!), Flemish-nationalists (N-VA), the radical right (VB), and the right-wing populists (LDD). In the Francophone party system, four parties concentrate most of the votes (Bouhon and Reuchamps, 2012): Socialists (PS), Liberals (MR), Christian Democrats (cdH), and Greens (Ecolo), except in Brussels where the Francophone regionalist FDF has a significant electoral strength. The former Walloon regionalist party – Rassemblement Wallon – disappeared in the 1990s while some of its members integrated other parties, mostly the PS (Van Haute and Pilet, 2006).

In part, this complex set of interactions fostered stabilization but it was also one of the sources of the political crisis (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014a). The federal elections of 2010 led the country into a gridlock that was mostly caused by the failure to negotiate a new constitutional reform (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013; Devos and Sinardet, 2012). Of the 541 days it took before a new government was formed, 485 were largely taken up by this state reform, granting more autonomy to regions and communities. Even though the negotiations have many complex subplots, the main opposition between the two dominant players N-VA and PS can be summed up as follows: while N-VA wanted to make a huge stride toward Flemish autonomy and sought to transfer as many powers as possible from the federal state to the regions and linguistic communities, the PS was fighting to hold on to the solidarity mechanisms across the regions, specifically in social security and the financing law, as the less prosperous Walloon region relies much more on national solidarity than Flanders.

More generally, Flemish parties to a larger or lesser degree supported the idea of more regional autonomy, while French-speaking parties were to a larger or lesser degree reluctant. While media and many commentators often presented the conflict in terms of two united fronts, the Flemings vs the Francophones, this was a far too simplified account (Reuchamps, 2013a). During the crisis period, an increasing polarization also occurred within Flemish public opinion around the position of N-VA. Flanders itself was as divided as Belgium on the country's future. Also, on many issues it was not possible to reduce the viewpoints of parties to a division between the communities. In political and media discourse, however, the image of two homogenous blocks, divided by language, was strongly present (Sinardet, 2013).

During this unprecedented political crisis, the main actors were the political parties. But since the negotiations were stuck and no government could be formed, the federal MPs could enjoy some sort of freedom as long as an agreement on the state reform was not reached. We used this period to survey all federal and regional parliamentarians on their preferences towards the future of Belgian federalism. While such political situation is not the norm, it does occur from time to time in countries experiencing pressure for more devolution. These original data offer the opportunity to test the impact of several variables on MPs' preferences and thus to uncover intra-party dynamics.

### **Hypotheses on MPs' preferences on Belgian federalism**

In 1981, Lijphart (1981: 8) described Belgium as 'the most impressive example of a consociation', referring to the mechanisms that were implemented during the first reform of the Belgian state in 1970 to oblige consensus on linguistic issues and that are still relevant today (Deschouwer 2006; Reuchamps 2007; Sinardet 2010). Belgium is also considered as a partitocracy (Caluwaerts 2012; De Winter and Dumont, 2006) where, as was mentioned in the previous section, party politics prevail. Therefore, any attempt to analyze Belgian MPs' preferences should take into account both the so-called community dimension and the party politics dimension. Nonetheless, we hypothesize that other variables can explain – even more – MPs' preferences in Belgium. These are: identity, level of government, MPs' attributes, and inter-community relations. These four variables are likely to impact MPs and their preferences and we therefore need to study them in order to disentangle the dynamics of intra-party politics (Table 1).

#### *Identity (H1)*

Stating that linguistic identities are central to Belgian politics does not prevent us from analyzing individual self-identification. Similarly to the unitary actor assumption for

political parties, '[i]n the literature on ethnic representation, ethnic groups are often assumed to have homogeneous preferences and are dealt with as unified actors' (Bochsler, 2012: 216). Pattie et al. (1999: 309) are therefore right when they state there is nothing tautologous in using identity as an explanatory variable for state reform. Identity is indeed more than the mere belonging of individuals to a community (Reuchamps et al., 2014b), be it territorially-based or sharing common traits such as a culture or language. What matters is the 'personalized' perception of this identity and its consequences on MPs' attitudes (Druckman, 1994: 44). In this respect, we hypothesize that the stronger the regional identity feeling, the greater the likelihood to favour devolution. On the other hand, a strong national identity feeling will lead to favouring a powerful national state (or at least a limited desire for devolution).

Identities are measured through the Moreno question that enables the measurement of nested or dual nationalities in multinational societies (Moreno, 2006): individuals recognize exclusively or simultaneously a regional and/or a national identity. MPs were asked to respond to the question 'which of these propositions best describes how you regard yourself?' The five propositions were 1) only regional (be it only Flemish, only Walloon, or only Brussels), 2) more regional than Belgian, 3) equally regional and Belgian, 4) more Belgian than regional, and 5) only Belgian. For our hypothesis, the first and second propositions were grouped into a 'regional identity' dummy, the fourth and fifth were joined into the 'national identity' dummy, while the third response ('equally regional and Belgian') is used as the reference variable.

#### *Federal structure and career patterns (H2)*

Federal systems are conventionally considered to be a negative factor for party cohesion because of the impact of federalism on the structure of political parties (Carey, 2007). Multi-level organisation of political parties tends to enhance division at the national level. However, we have already mentioned that the Belgian party system is strongly divided horizontally (there are two party systems organised on a linguistic basis), but not vertically layered. Contrary to the situation in most of the newly regionalized states (Fabre, 2011), there is indeed a single party leader without division of authority based on regional and federal party branches at the federal and regional levels. In other words, the internal party division does not follow a 'federal organization' line but reflects a mere administrative division. Following Chandler (1987)'s classification of federalism, Belgium is thus a 'joint federalism' compared to 'dual federal' systems observed in established federations (such as Canada and Australia). This 'integrated' nature is both reflected in its party structure as well as its party careers (Vanlangenakker et al., 2010). At first glance, the level of government is thus expected to produce limited effects in Belgium.

Yet one should nevertheless expect differences among Belgian MPs' preferences as recent qualitative and quantitative research has indeed demonstrated the progressive development since 1995 of a regional and a federal political class of parliamentarians, in parallel to the 'integrated political elites' composed of regional and federal ministers (Dodeigne, 2014). As such, individual MPs become part of the 'political class' and begin to act for their common interest (Stolz, 2001: 82). Assuming that ambitious politicians seek to be elected at offices which are prestigious in terms of status and power, and secure their careers once they reach those positions (Schlesinger, 1966: 1), regionalization may be perceived as a negative trend for established national MPs – the national political class – as their current office would become less prestigious and have less authority. To some extent, regionalization for national MPs is like 'cutting off their nose to spite their face'. On the other hand, regionalization enhances the attractiveness of regional offices for MPs who belong to the regional political class. In the latter case, but on the party level, several studies already demonstrate the use of constitutional reform as a way to empower parties' positions where they already enjoy a stronger position (Mazzoleni, 2009; Mitchell, 1998; O'Neill, 2003; Sorens, 2009). Those distinct political classes tend to advance their own political agenda while they develop their own parliamentary formal rules and informal habits. For these reasons, regional and federal MPs are expected to share distinct preferences toward constitutional reform. This requires a closer look at MPs' political careers and experience. Federal careers and regional careers are operationalized as the number of elected offices at the federal and regional levels.

Nevertheless, the duration of career is only one clue of the regional and the federal ambition. New regional and national MPs may have a short political experience in Parliament but strong unitary or regionalist preferences. The latter are partly reflected by their actual office (MPs with regional/federal ambition aim to be elected at the regional/federal level). Besides, considering the specific political events when the survey was conducted at the federal level (no federal government, political gridlock, and state reform being negotiated), it is worth controlling for the level of government via a dummy, with the federal Parliament (the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate) coded 1 and all other assemblies coded 0.

### *MPs' attributes (H3)*

During the past century, there has been significant research interest in MPs' sociological and political backgrounds. The difficulty of linking MPs' backgrounds and legislative behaviour progressively led political scientists to neglect this area of research (see Best, 2007; Best and Cotta, 2000). We also integrate a sociological variable regarding political generation to control for a cohort effect: politicians who

experienced the early stages of the process of regionalization of the formerly unitary state are distinguished from the new political generation. The explanation for this hypothesis is that older MPs have witnessed more historical linguistic conflicts, such as in the 1960s when there were still massive demonstrations on the linguistic issue, while for the younger generation the linguistic cleavage can be considered less salient. To operationalize this, we have created two dummies to control for the impact of political generations: on the one hand, MPs born before 1960 who witnessed Belgian politics under the formerly unitary state and the devolution process and, on the other hand, MPs born after 1970 and who entered politics when Belgium had already adopted a federal structure.

### *Inter-community contacts (H4)*

Parliamentary socialization also matters in federal countries because of the inter-community contacts it favours at the federal level. Firstly, following the 'socialization hypothesis', the fact that 'parliamentary membership generally moderates radicalism cannot be doubted. The evidence is overwhelming' (Mughan et al., 1997: 94). Although these conclusions are certainly correct for moderation on socio-economic issues for which party and MPs' positions are displaceable, through socialization but also through discussion, bargaining, and negotiation, the moderate effects of parliaments are certainly more complex once they concern identity-related questions. However, Parliament may still produce a moderation effect by instituting contacts between groups. This is the so-called 'contact hypothesis' in ethnic relations: 'intergroup contact tends to produce better intergroup attitudes and relations' (Amir, 1969: 319). Political psychologists have furthermore demonstrated that moderation appears on high stake issues through a better inclusion of arguments and views in heterogeneous rather than in homogeneous groups (Caluwaerts and Deschouwer, 2014; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014b). In the former case, individuals are more open and respectful towards other's views. On the contrary, homogenous groups tend to reduce this cognitive awareness and self-reflexivity (Marcus et al., 2000).

This may be more obvious at the federal level where Flemish and French-speaking federal MPs are in contact on a regular basis, but also for MPs from other Parliaments who still have the possibility to meet for political and/or personal reasons. Consequently, we assume that MPs having more contact with colleagues from the other community would develop distinct preferences more than those who do not.

This fourth hypothesis is a dummy variable based on acknowledged regular contacts with MPs from the other language group (yes = 1; no = 0). On the one hand, there are intercommunity relations within the same political family (e.g. Flemish Socialists with Francophone Socialists); on

**Table 1.** Summary of the independent variables tested.

Independent variables	Operationalization
National identity	Dummy variable (Moreno question)
Regional identity	Dummy variable (Moreno question)
Level of government	Dummy variable (federal = 1)
Political generation	Dummy variable (MPs born $\leq$ 1960 = 1)
Political generation	Dummy variable (MPs born $\geq$ 1970 = 1)
Federal career	No. of offices at the federal level
Regional career	No. of offices at the regional level
Rel. political family	Dummy variable (if relations = 1)
Rel. other parties	Dummy variable (if relations = 1)
Media contact	Dummy variable ( $\leq$ 3 over the last 6 months = 1)

the other hand, there are intercommunity relations outside the political family (e.g. Flemish Christian Democrats with Francophone Liberals). Moreover, a binary measure of interactions of parliamentarians with media from the other community is also included based on the number of interviews given over the past six months ( $\leq$  3 interviews coded 1). It is of course a bit of a stretch to consider such interviews as inter-community contacts, but the data confirm that these interviews seldom take place and above all discriminate well between different types of MPs. These elements are also key to understanding the federal (or the lack of) dynamics.

## Data and methods

This article builds on empirical data from an MP survey on the future of Belgian federalism. Between June 2011 and October 2011, i.e. before an agreement was reached on a sixth reform of the Belgian state, we surveyed with a standardized questionnaire every representative of Belgium's six directly-elected legislative assemblies: the two assemblies at the federal Parliament (the House of Representatives and the Senate)<sup>2</sup> and the four assemblies at the regional and community level (the Flemish Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels-Capital Parliament, and the Parliament of the German-speaking Community). The MPs were asked to answer 26 questions on the future of Belgian federalism (including items on ethno-territorial and ethno-linguistic identities, electoral reforms, policy transfers to the regional levels, inter- and intra-community relations, and the political gridlock). Overall, 488 MPs were contacted and 243 participated in the survey, i.e. a response rate of 49.8 percent.<sup>3</sup> This rate however differs between the political parties (Table 2) and the six assemblies.<sup>4</sup> Considering the risk of bias regarding the differentiated response rates between parties, all observations were calculated with post-stratification weights of political parties – even though this did not alter the parameters' estimates or their statistical significance.

The dependent variable is MPs' preferences towards devolution, which is the question at the heart of state reform in Belgium. All MPs were asked to situate themselves on a

**Table 2.** Response rate by political party.

Parties	Flemish parties			French-speaking parties			
	N	MPs	%	Parties	N	MPs	%
Groen!	10	15	66.7	MLD	1	1	100
OpenVLD	29	44	65.9	Ecolo	33	41	79.6
Sp.a	21	41	51.2	cdH	22	35	62.9
N-VA	26	56	46.4	MR	28	66	50.0
VB	14	36	38.9	FDF	5	11	45.5
CD&V	20	56	35.7	PS	31	85	36.5
Indep.	1	3	33.3				
LDD	2	8	25.0				
Total n = 243; response rate = 49.8 percent							

Entries are the number of MPs who participated in the survey (N), the total number of MPs in Parliaments (MPs), and the response rate (%) in percentage by descending order.

10-point Likert scale where '0' means an exclusive regional self-rule situation ('the regional and community levels would have all the powers') while '10' implies that 'the federal Government would have all powers'. The value '5' explicitly indicates a preference for the status quo, i.e. 'being satisfied with the current situation' (that is the situation before the sixth state reform). Moreover, MPs only had the possibility to choose a single value on this scale to make them reveal their chief interest. A few MPs (N = 6) didn't provide an answer to the question. None selected a value higher than 8, while responses tended to reveal a dichotomized picture: those promoting devolution (values 0 to 4, N = 166) against those in favour of no further devolution (value 5, N = 32), or even re-nationalization of competences for a minority of MPs (values 6 to 8, N = 39). In this respect the dependent variable cannot be considered as a continuous variable, which excludes the use of a linear regression. Devolution is thus best operationalized as a binary variable in a binomial logistic regression where pro-devolution MPs are identified for the values 0 to 4 and MPs opposing devolution for the values equal and higher to 5. A third option, namely an ordered logistic regression, is available. In this case, the dependent variable would be sorted in three categories: pro-devolution (0–4), neutral (5), and anti-devolution (6–8). Although it is technically possible, the ordered nature of the dependent variable becomes questionable. It implies that moving from a pro-devolution position to neutral (and vice-versa) is the same as moving from neutral to anti-devolution. However, the re-nationalization of powers was hardly feasible in the Belgian political context, whereas the implementation of a new process of devolution seemed inevitable (although its magnitude was under negotiation). In addition, a three-way variable would lead to technical difficulties due to heavy imbalance between the three categories and small sample size for the neutral and anti-devolution MPs. Overall, the operationalization in a binary variable not only best reflects the debate about state reform in this country, it constitutes a wise choice from a statistical point of view.

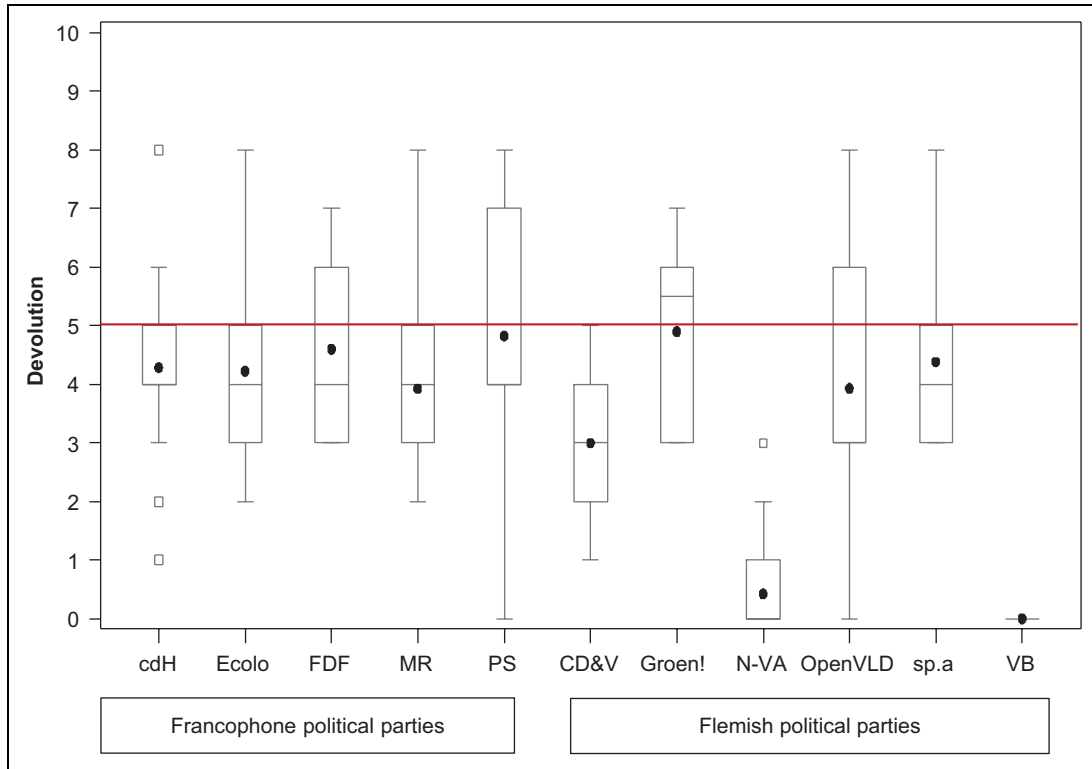


Figure 1. MPs' preferences towards devolution, by political party.

Table 3. Community effect on MPs' preferences towards devolution.

Community effect	N	Parameter significance	$e^\beta$ (odds ratio)	c.i. (95%)
All MPs	237	< 0.001	2.868	[1.597; 5.152]
All MPs but Nationalists	197	0.1266	1.608	[0.874; 2.959]

Entries are odds ratio and their 95% confidence interval values (c.i.) of a binary logistic regression. The dependent variables are the MPs' preferences towards constitutional reform where the event = pro-devolution.  
 \* $p \leq 0.10$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

### Findings

Figure 1 shows preliminary findings. On the left, the Francophone political parties (cdH, Ecolo, FDF, MR, and PS) are plotted and, on the right, the Flemish political parties (CD&V, Groen!, N-VA, OpenVLD, Sp.a, and VB).<sup>5</sup> The middle red line represents the status quo value that constitutes the borderline between pro- and anti-devolution.

First of all, the fact that the Belgian political gridlock is often presented as the result of two homogeneous communities with opposing demands is largely questionable when looking at individual MPs' positions. When comparing the positions of Flemish nationalist MPs with those of Francophone MPs on the regional autonomy question, a gap certainly separates both groups of parliamentarians. The Francophone MPs' average position is between 3.0 and 4.8 across parties while the mean of N-VA-MPs is 0.42 and VB-MPs opted unanimously for 0. Nonetheless, a very similar gap is observed between

Flemish Nationalists and the other Flemish parliamentarians. In fact, the third most regionalist party (CD&V) has an average MPs position of 3, which is clearly more distant from Flemish-nationalists than from the other Flemish parties. Actually, with the notorious exception of the CD&V MPs presenting a clearer and consistent regionalist position, Francophone parties and non-nationalist Flemish parties share on average similar positions, and this includes the Francophone regionalist party FDF whose MPs supported a status quo, rather than further devolution as in the past.

When we look at the odds ratio (Table 3), the community divide seems to be fairly more discriminant. It corresponds to the widespread assumption that Flemish political elites claim more devolution than their Francophone counterparts. Flemish MPs are indeed 2.9 times more likely to choose values between 0 and 4 – i.e. a pro-devolution attitude – than the French-speaking MPs. However, once nationalist MPs from

**Table 4.** Quality of fit of the models, ignoring and including political parties.

	N	-2 Log-likelihood	AIC	BIC	$\Delta$ AIC
Model 1: All MPs					-1.4
1.1 Ignoring political parties	237	173.0	195.0	231.4	
1.2 Including political parties	237	149.6	193.6	266.3	
Model 2: All MPs but Nationalists					+0.9
2.1 Ignoring political parties	197	166.7	188.7	223.0	
2.2 Including political parties	197	149.6	189.6	252.0	

Quality of fit of several models with as dependent variable the MPs' preferences towards constitutional reform where the event = pro-devolution. The independent variables include all variables detailed in Table 5, including (1.2 and 2.2) or excluding (1.1. and 2.1) party dummies.

AIC = Akaike's Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion (or Schwarz Criterion).

N-VA and VB, who are clear outliers, are excluded, the parameter estimate ceases to be statistically significant ( $p = 13$ ) while the confidence interval for the odds ratio (values below and above 1.0) proves that there is no effect of the community belonging towards a specific direction for non-nationalist MPs. In other words, in the latter case, knowing the community of MPs hardly permits us to predict their preferences towards state reform. This may appear a bit puzzling for many observers of Belgian politics in which everything is organized along this linguistic line: party systems, government composition, parliamentary groups, etc. This goes again the dominant account in Belgian and foreign media about two homogenous communities with radically opposed positions.

Nevertheless, to further take into account the extreme cases of nationalist positions on devolution in the observations, our model is doubled (Model 1 with nationalist MPs, and Model 2 without). In the second model, nationalist MPs from N-VA and VB are excluded which leads to the suppression of about 25 percent of our dataset. An alternative solution would have been to include a dummy variable for nationalists, but the problem is that estimates are not quantifiable because, following Albert and Anderson (1984: 3), 'there is a vector  $\alpha$  that correctly allocates all observations to their group'. Indeed, those MPs (almost unanimously) opt for the value 0. Thus, excluding nationalist MPs in Model 2 is the only solution for testing our hypothesis with and without nationalists.

The absence of linguistic explanatory power becomes yet more predictable when we look at the great variations of MPs' preferences within political parties. After all, the community division is based on the assumption that parties act as unitary actors. In the case of absence of intra-party cohesion, the community motive itself loses its explanatory power. Party cohesion differs quite greatly across party regarding their standard deviation. Similarly, there are several parties that cross the 'red line' of the status quo value ('5' on the Likert scale). While cdH, Ecolo, Sp.a, CD&V, N-VA, and VB have at least 75 percent of their MPs situated on the pro-devolution side, the lack of party cohesion for the PS, FDF, Groen!, and OpenVLD is more evident. In the latter case, a faction of the party supports a greater centralization of power at the federal level while another faction supports regionalization.

The integration of political parties in our models is nonetheless problematic due to the large number of political parties in the highly fragmented Belgian party systems (seven political parties in the Flemish party system and six in the Francophone party system). Including so many party dummies makes the interpretation of beta estimates complicated as the latter are greatly affected by the arbitrary choice of a reference party. For that reason, we do not report the beta estimates per party, but we control the global impact of integrating all party dummies by using the Akaike's information criterion (AIC). The AIC 'provides a simple, effective, and objective means for the selection of an estimated "best approximating model" for data analysis and inference' (Burnham and Anderson, 2002: 3). It measures a trade-off between the quality of fit and the number of parameters in the model, lower values indicating better models (Table 4).

In Model 1 (with nationalist MPs), we observe that the AIC is hardly improved by including parties, with a non-significant improvement of 1.4 ( $p$ -value 0.33). In Model 2 (without nationalist MPs), the inclusion of parties results in a non-significant, small deterioration of 0.9 in AIC ( $p$ -value 0.61). The Bayesian Information Criterion (aka the Schwarz Criterion, an alternative to AIC better suited to small sample sizes) is significantly deteriorated by the inclusion of party dummies in both models. This provides further evidence that political parties do not improve models based on our four hypotheses. Let us now turn to the impact of other variables. Table 5 presents their weights in the two models without political parties.

Unsurprisingly regarding the nature of the issue at stakes, identities (H1) appear to have a strong and constant impact across models. According to our first hypothesis, the odds of opting for devolution for MPs with regional identity are on average about 14 times higher, all else being equal. Although the odds ratios become considerably lower once nationalist MPs are excluded, they remain very large – 5.6 times higher on average. Although in both cases the 95% confidence intervals are particularly large (due to the limited sample size), they nevertheless encompass odds ratio greatly and constantly higher than 1. The effect of national identity also corresponds to our expectations with mean estimates indicating that the probability of opting for

**Table 5.** Models predicting MPs' preferences towards devolution.

	Model 1 (all MPs)					Model 2 (without Nationalist MPs)				
	$\beta$	Sign.	Std Err.	$e^\beta$	c.i. (95%)	$\beta$	Sign.	Std Err.	$e^\beta$	c.i. (95%)
National identity	-0.39	0.379	0.44	0.68	[0.288 ; 1.605]	-0.38	0.386	0.44	0.68	[0.288 ; 1.619]
Regional identity	<b>2.64</b>	<b>0.000 ***</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>14.04</b>	<b>[3.365 ; 58.553]</b>	<b>1.74</b>	<b>0.014 **</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>5.67</b>	<b>[1.421 ; 22.632]</b>
Political gen. < 1960	-0.45	0.453	0.60	0.64	[0.194 ; 2.079]	-0.55	0.356	0.60	0.58	[0.179 ; 1.858]
Political gen. > 1970	-0.64	0.322	0.64	0.53	[0.151 ; 1.863]	-0.88	0.181	0.65	0.42	[0.116 ; 1.501]
Federal career	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.032 **</b>	<b>0.29</b>	<b>1.86</b>	<b>[1.057 ; 3.282]</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.018 **</b>	<b>0.30</b>	<b>2.06</b>	<b>[1.134 ; 3.729]</b>
Regional career	<b>0.95</b>	<b>0.011 **</b>	<b>0.37</b>	<b>2.58</b>	<b>[1.244 ; 5.367]</b>	<b>0.97</b>	<b>0.012 **</b>	<b>0.39</b>	<b>2.64</b>	<b>[1.235 ; 5.633]</b>
Level of Gov. (Fed = 1)	-0.15	0.768	0.50	0.86	[0.326 ; 2.288]	-0.36	0.476	0.51	0.70	[0.257 ; 1.886]
Rel. political family	-1.00	0.138	0.67	0.37	[0.098 ; 1.378]	-0.55	0.413	0.67	0.58	[0.156 ; 2.145]
Rel. other parties	<b>1.06</b>	<b>0.048 **</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>2.89</b>	<b>[1.009 ; 8.277]</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>0.072 *</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>2.60</b>	<b>[0.917 ; 7.388]</b>
Media contacts	-0.34	0.495	0.50	0.71	[0.265 ; 1.899]	-0.43	0.390	0.50	0.65	[0.243 ; 1.738]
Constant	-0.21	0.84	1.04	-	-	-0.35	0.734	1.03	-	-
Model										
Likelihood ratio	60.15	< 0.0001 ***				39.06	<0.0001 ***			
Score	47.94	< 0.0001 ***				31.81	0.0004 ***			
Wald	32.82	0.0003 ***				24.80	0.0057 ***			
Nagelkerke's R <sup>2</sup>	0.38					0.29				
N			201					167		

Entries are parameter estimates ( $\beta$ ), their standard errors (Std Err.), odds ratio ( $e^\beta$ ), and their 95% confidence intervals (c.i.) of a binary logistic regression. The dependent variable is the MPs' preferences towards state reform where the event is pro-devolution.

\* $p \leq 0.10$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

devolution is 30 percent lower for MPs expressing a national identity. The latter might be explained by the centrifugal nature of Belgian federalism in which only a few political elites still defend the centre while more and more of them – from both communities – claim an extensive regional autonomy (Reuchamps, 2013b). Unlike for regional identity, parameter estimates are however not statistically significant, at  $p \leq 0.10$ .

The level of government (H2) also produces effects in the direction expected but these are not statistically significant. When the analysis is extended to political career (H3), and not merely MPs' current offices, findings also support this conclusion. Although all odds ratios of MPs with a federal career and a regional career are higher than 1, for each additional offices at the regional and federal levels the odds for federal MPs to opt for devolution are 58 to 72 percent lower than for regional MPs. In other words, the likelihood is constantly inferior for federal political elites than for regional political elites. The hypothesis that devolution for federal MPs is like 'cutting off their nose to spite their face' thus seems to hold. Regarding the results and those for the level of government, it is thus quite clear that MPs tend to act as genuine political classes that seek to maximize their own interest (Stolz, 2001). In this case, the interest of the regional class tends to increase the odds for further devolution. On the other hand, federal MPs tend to retain powers at the national level by opposing devolution.

For the other MPs' attributes, a slight cohort effect appears to be at work (although not statistically significant). There is a

difference of about 11 to 16 percent in odds ratio between MPs born before 1960 and those born after 1970. However, the direction of the expected effects seems inversed as the MPs from the former generation tend to be more inclined to opt for devolution while the new political generation tends to oppose it. The explanation for this could be that older MPs have witnessed more conflicts in Belgium's linguistic history, such as in the 1960s when there were big demonstrations on the linguistic issue, while for the younger generation the linguistic cleavage is considered less salient.

Finally, we observe strong effects of inter-community relations on MPs' preferences. While the odds ratios of MPs considering it very important to share links with a sister party decrease by 42 to 63 percent, MPs with links to parties from the other community are 2.6 to 2.9 times more likely to opt for devolution. Similarly, having regular contact with media from the other community also increases the odds ratio by 29 to 42 percent (however this is not statistically significant, at  $p \leq 0.10$ ). The causal link remains however to be elucidated: do MPs oppose devolution because of links with a sister party, i.e. parliamentary socialization effect, or alternatively do MPs with a strong opposition to devolution tend to be more in contact with a sister party? Considering the opposite results for the links with other parties, it is likely that a socialization effect is at work with the following plausible explanation: MPs who discover they still share values and interest in certain policy areas tend to favour the continuation on the current institutional status quo (effects links with sister party, *ceteris*

*paribus*). On the other hand, MPs who become aware that they have less and less in common across communities tend to favour devolution (links with other parties, *ceteris paribus*). That is to say ‘agree to disagree’.

## Conclusion

Intra-party politics is often a black box, especially in regional and federal studies where both identity and party lines tend to be strongly emphasized. Nonetheless, the assumption of political parties as unitary actors should be tested because even in a system with strong party discipline such as Belgium where MPs are supposed to follow the party line they may widely vary in their political preferences. This is perhaps even more so on a very controversial and fundamental question such as the institutional future of a country. In linguistically divided and partitocratic Belgium, political parties, as well as linguistic groups as a whole, are often considered to be homogeneous blocks with completely opposite positions, particularly concerning state reform and the federal system. It is assumed that Flemish politicians would all favor a strongly decentralized state if not independence, while Francophone politicians would be opposed to any form of further devolution. This is indeed the image that is dominant in political and media discourse. When a compromise is then reached between the different political parties, the perception of party homogeneity is reinforced by the votes in parliament, which nicely occur along the lines of majority and opposition, showing strong party discipline.

The results of the MP survey conducted during the 2010–2011 political crisis however forced us to look beyond this façade of community and party discipline and showed a surprisingly different picture. Not only can we see very important internal differences within language groups, there are also significant differences within parties. So doing, our research sheds a revealing light on the oft-overlooked phenomenon of intra-party heterogeneity in understanding devolution processes. The determinants of this heterogeneity in the case of the Belgian constitutional reform debate can be found in the political and sociological background of the MPs, their national/regional identity feelings, and their type of career. In this respect, if we observe that one’s own community has a real impact, it is not at the aggregate level but at the individual level: on the one hand, it impacts on MPs self-identity (and not the mere belonging to a community); on the other hand, community influences MPs’ preferences towards devolution – in both ways, i.e. becoming pro-devolution and anti-devolution – through inter-community socialization (and again not the mere belonging to a community).

We therefore conclude that intra-party dynamics are indeed to be taken into account, also concerning federalisation processes where they traditionally tend to be even more overlooked. There is no such thing as a unitary political party, even if it tries to act as if there is. Nonetheless,

several questions remain open. In this article, we have shown that MPs in divided and multi-level Belgium had different preferences for their country, within and between parties, according to a number of characteristics other than the language they speak or the party they belong to. But the potential impact of the nature of the issues at stake on intra-party politics and obviously the internal organization of the parties are two among the many questions that need to be further explored. These may be the next steps in the opening of the intra-party politics black box.

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## Notes

1. The green parties, however, have tried to transcend the language frontier, by always maintaining close relations and forming one parliamentary group in the federal Chamber.
2. The Belgian Senate was at the time composed of three types of Senators (directly elected, co-opted by political parties, and community senators selected by and among community MPs). Community senators with dual offices (Senate and Community Parliament) were not included for the Senate survey to exclude duplicate answers and to consider primarily their directly elected office at the regional level.
3. For the purpose of this article, the focus is on the two main linguistic communities, even though 12 out of 25 German-speaking MPs participated in the survey. Therefore, there are 513 MPs in total,  $n = 255$  in the survey, with a very similar response rate of 49.7 percent.
4. The lowest percentage was 39.3 percent at the Flemish Parliament, followed by the Walloon Parliament (42.7), the French-speaking group at the Brussels Parliament (45.8), the Parliament of the German-speaking Community (48.0), the Dutch-speaking group at the Senate (57.1), the Dutch-speaking group at the Chamber (59.2), the French-speaking group at the Chamber (67.3), the French-speaking group at the Senate (68.4), and the Dutch-speaking group at the Brussels Parliament (76.5).
5. Because of the limited number of responses for the LDD-MPs (2), the single MLD-MP (1), and the single independent MP (1), these answers are not presented here.

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