

Federalism as a ‘problem’ in the social imaginary of Flemish citizens

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1. Introduction

Citizen's perspectives have recently re-emerged as a central topic of research in the field of federal studies (Henderson and Medeiros, 2021). However, across these studies, while citizens' preferences on federalisation are discussed, citizens' own conceptions of what federalism is, or what it *should be*, still remain under-explored. Given the important role played by citizens in legitimising and participating in processes of state organisation and federalisation, understanding how citizens themselves imagine federalism to be and what their expectations are towards federal states represents an important question, both empirically and normatively speaking. In addition, and following the increasing interest for citizens' own perceptions and preferences towards federalism (see for example Dupuy et al.; Guinjoan and Rondon, 2014; Henderson and Medeiros, 2014; 2020, Reuchamps et al., 2021, Verhaegen et al., 2021) this creates an opportunity from a re-conceptualization of federalism that takes its roots in how citizens themselves define, imagine and articulate federalism in their own words.

This is what I aim to do in this paper. In particular, I attempt to fill this gap by taking an explorative and bottom-up approach on citizens' understanding of federalism in a particularly contentious case, namely the Belgian region of Flanders. Drawing on focus groups data collected in 2008 and 2018 (Reuchamps, 2013; Reuchamps et al., 2021), and combining thematic analysis and critical frame analysis, I study the 'social imaginaries' that underpin citizens' conceptions of federalism in Flanders. The concept of 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2002; Van Wessel, 2010) is useful here as it allows to study both how citizens imagine federalism to be, what kinds of problems they associate with it, but also what their ideal vision of federalism may be.

The findings reveal that federalism is, indeed, understood as a form of governance in which power is separated vertically between different levels of authority. However, the understanding of federalism by citizens is marked by a pre-dominantly negative value judgment. Coloured by the experiences of a political conflict, federalism appears to be perceived as a counterproductive means and as damaging for a constructive cohabitation between subnational groups in Belgium. The paper is structured as follows. I first review the field of federal studies, outlining where the research gap lies in relation to citizens' conceptions of federalism. After the introduction of the 'social imaginary', the paper proceeds with the development of a multi-modal qualitative methodology. Finally, the results of the thematic and critical frame analysis will be presented.

2. The study of federalism

The following section introduces the general, theoretical understanding of 'federalism'. Here, it should be noted that different definitions in literature acknowledge the importance of citizens as constituting and legitimacy-generating. Within recent years, a growing scholarship has given particular attention to the preferences and attitudes of citizens towards the organisation of the state. However, and maybe also because of the lack of a uniform definition of federalism, citizens' actual understanding of federalism has not yet been investigated.

The 'federal principle', or 'federalism', stands for an idea with which divers societies imagine the organization of community. It is a way of associating "free people...to achieve common ends and protect certain rights while preserving their respective integrities" (Elzar, 1987, 33). Federalism thus represents an ideal type in which ethnic diversity is enabled through the allocation and protection of political authority of the constituent group, while at the same time these groups promote their goals as part of a larger overall community (Kymlicka, 2005). Federalisation, the translation of this idea into a political reality, constitutionally recognises these diversities and

vertically separates political spheres in which subunits can autonomously exercise their political power and responsibilities (Erk, 2008). Short, in their institutional core, federal states reflect a social reality that gives legitimacy to the existence of a specific state design (Burgess, 2006). Nevertheless, a comprehensive study of federal states cannot limit itself to the study of state institutions. In fact, if we were attempting to understand the true nature of the federal system that we wish to study, we cannot refrain from an analysis of the deeper societal divergences that gave rise to a design itself and the societal trends that can challenge it (Livingston, 1952).

On the basis of Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) Centre-Periphery cleavage, which holds that society is structured into a minority and a majority group that compete over political power, a series of meso-level studies have focused on the sociological drivers behind regionalisation (Niessen, 2021). Here the focus lies on change agents who claim issue authority on channelling societal demands towards the state (Massetti and Schakel, 2015; Türsan, 1998) or pressuring mainstream counterparts to embrace or advance these regionalist claims (Toubeau and Massetti, 2013; Toubeau, 2018). While these branches of literature have a crucial importance to our understanding of origin, design and change of a federal state, federal studies cannot limit itself to this approach for two reasons. Firstly, if the state organisation is derived from the underlying society, then any demand formulated by intermediaries ought to originate in the individual sphere. While intermediaries channel this demands towards state institutions (Satori, 1976) literature has shown that significant differences between elite and citizens' attitude can be observed. Some argue that the political elite is more moderate than its constituency, as Lijphart (1968) in his theorisation on deeply divided societies. Others, as for example Devillers and colleagues (2019), have also illustrated that this relation can be reverse and that voters might allocate a lower salience to issues of power devolutions than their elected representatives. Secondly, state organization has an important impact on citizens' everyday life. As it allocates power and resources to lower levels of governance, any form of state reorganisation can have an impact on their identity, on the political possibilities to realize projects or to exercise scrutiny over government (Henderson and Medeiros, 2021).

Often left out despite their crucial importance to the vitality and legitimacy of the federal system, citizens have only recently re-emerged as a centre point of federal studies. A series of studies has investigated the attitudes of citizens towards federalism and the sociological drivers behind it. One of the first studies was published by Hamann (1999), where the author argues that regionalisation influences regional identity and voting behaviour. She finds that voters with strong regionalist identity are more likely to vote for a regionalist party. Yet, this regional identity is relative, as the identity finds more expression in regional than in national or supranational elections. In a study of Welsh and Scottish citizens, Henderson and colleagues (2014) build further on this idea, but instead of voting behaviour they analyse citizens' attitudes, meaning their support or opposition to further regionalisation. They find that respondents with strong regional identity favour, indeed, the devolution of further competences towards the regional subunits. Others have shown that the formation of preferences on federalism is not only dependent on identity, but on the coming-of-age period, for example. In two consecutive, quantitative studies on how institutional regionalisation feeds back into citizens' support or opposition to regionalisation, Dupuy and colleagues (2020) and Verhaegen and colleagues (2021) find that in the Belgian case of gradual decentralisation citizens' attitudes dependent on when they came off age. If a cohort came off age before the first state reforms, thus before 1970, they had lower preferences for further federalisation than citizens who came of age in federalised Belgium (1993 and later). Other elements identified by literature as contributing to citizens' attitudes and preferences are trust and performance of a specific governmental level, the clarity of competences (Kincaid and Cole, 2011), and a region's wealth (Henderson and Medeiros, 2014).

All these studies provide illuminating insights into citizens' attitudes on federalisation. However, while citizens' preferences towards federalisation are discussed, it is not clear what citizens interpret "federalism" to be. Even in the literature, "federalism" is a fuzzy term that gives rise to divergent definitions and approaches; to cite just one example, the unresolved question on the integration of territoriality into the definition (Hueglin, 2013). So, how can we be sure that what we observe, the criticism on central and regional governments or the wish for further regional autonomy on the basis of identarian claims, is what we think it is without investigating the true understanding of the concept of federalism as expressed by citizens? How can we analyse and interpret citizens' attitude on a concept that we ourselves have difficulties making sense of? The aim of this study is precisely to zoom into this lack of conceptualisation by taking on an explorative and bottom-up approach on citizens' understanding of federalism in a particularly contentious case, namely Flanders. I attempt to shift the focus towards the meaning of federalism as both an institutional status quo and an ideal. Existing literature on federalism will be discussed throughout my interpretation and I will use two techniques, thematic analysis and critical frame analysis, to make sense of the general associations with the term and the problems and the solutions citizens present.

3. Social Imaginaries

Yet, how should we study citizens' understanding of "federalism"? Clearly, one cannot expect them to recite federalist theory or to trace back the philosophical and factual origins of their community when we ask them why the country is federal and what benefits for their society they expect from this state organization. Instead, they are more likely to reflect on their experiences and confrontations with the federal state throughout their lives, the shortcomings they see and the solutions they suggest. However, the philosopher Charles Taylor provides us with a tool to interlink these individual experiences and problematizations with a broader ideal, which he calls *Social Imaginaries*. The *imaginary* is a notion that has a long-standing tradition in social philosophy and psychoanalysis. It is based on the understanding that the reality of the individual does not exist as such, and instead exists through the ideas the individual creates of its surroundings, and hence how it perceives itself in a wider context (Lacan, 1966). Lacan relies on the logic that individuals make meaning of their identity and appreciate themselves only through the eyes of others. The intermediated reflection of the self (through the eyes of the other) is reciprocal and thus provides meaning to the other through the same mechanism. This fundamentally intertwined, social aspect of an imaginary is thus constitutive for the self-image of a society, which ultimately is also reflected in the institutions it gives rise to (Castoriadis, 1987). Charles Taylor (2003) develops further on this idea. Drawing from social contract theory, for Taylor any society is built around common ideals - a shared moral order - which provides a normative foundation that enables peaceful cohabitation. As for Castoriadis, for Taylor the social imaginary provides not only an image of the self, but also an insight into the social existence of the individual: the expectations of others, how he or she wants to be treated, his or her rights and duties in a social context. When a dominant shared understanding of these expectations emerges, the social imaginary represents how a society is ought to work, which behaviours are deemed appropriate, what rules and norms apply in what context (Taylor, 2002). In short, a social imaginary is an imagination of a society that is shared by a larger community which reveals "common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2003, p. 23). Once the underlying, shared understanding is identified, it does not *only* capture a picture of what citizens' strive for - a normative element - but their interpretation of the status quo (Van Wessel, 2010). It would thus reveal whether practices are problematized and seen as out of line with the imagined ideal. For example, if the citizens present an ideal of federalism that is framed as a criticism of the current status quo, their reasoning would reflect the current fallacies of a system in light of the ideal they imagine.

More importantly, however, the social self-understanding that is intrinsic to the social imaginary. "It describes a social phenomenon that is tacit and unconscious, and is adhered to by a group of people in an un-reflexive manner" (Rizvi, 2011, p. 228). Instead of being directly expressed and prescribed, it is wrapped in legends, myths and narratives (Taylor, 2003). While these myths and narratives can originate in the sphere of the political and intellectual elite, the social imaginary is not a blind validation of elite thought and behaviour, but can be used as a tool to detect when political behaviour is out of line with the moral order (Van Wessel, 2010) due to, for example, social change (James, 2019). As much as legends change, social imaginaries do too. In his seminal work, Taylor (2003) uses the example of the social contract and how power has evolved from 'God-given' to 'continuously renewed'. The goal of this study is to identify citizens' understanding of federalism from the bottom-up. Considering the social imaginary and the relevance of citizens as legitimacy-generating, their imagination appears to be a crucial indicator of the current status quo. If federalisation is considered as contributing to the benefit of a society, the emerging picture would be largely positive. However, when a vertical separation of power is no longer accepted as legitimate, it could also be possible that practices of gradual devolution of power are no longer perceived as a contribution to the well-being of the society.

4. Flanders

In Flanders, federalism is a highly contentious and politicised concept. Flanders is a region in the North of Belgium, in which the majority of Belgian citizens reside. Belgium is marked by deep societal divisions along a linguistic line between the Flemish- and the French-speaking community. Since the Belgian independence of the United Dutch States in 1830/1831, political life in Belgium was mainly directed by a French-speaking political elite and thus the Flemish language was largely absent from the Belgian political reality during the 19th century (Delwit, 2011). Yet, with the enlargement of suffrage rights, a new Flemish-speaking political elite emerged that carried a movement fighting for cultural recognition. The movement gradually gained strength throughout the 19th and 20th century and ultimately did not only transform Belgian cultural life. It also led to the accommodation of regionalist demands through state reorganisation (Deschouwer, 2012).

With the official demarcation of the language border in 1962 between the Flemish and French-speaking linguistic territories, a process was triggered that continues to this day, namely the gradual devolution of the former Belgian unitary state. Further steps would later consist of the establishment of the cultural subunits, the language communities, in 1970, the territorial subunits, the three regions, in 1980 and 1988, the official denomination as federation in 1993/95, and a significant reshuffling of competences in 2001 and 2014. The Belgian institutional design established a series of checks and balances that would guarantee a wide range of institutional safeguards to protect the linguistic and cultural interests of the language communities (Lijphart, 1995).

Nevertheless, the conflict between Flemish- and French-speakers persists. It englobes not only issue about language, but aligns questions about culture, history, and economy (Euwema & Verbeke, 2009). The debates are coupled with political demands for further regional autonomy (or secession) in the Flemish-speaking community. In fact, Sinardet (2008) argues that decentralization generated the possibility for Flemish regionalists to produce a politicised identity that aims at the full emancipation of Flemish culture. The act of providing regional autonomy thus realized a territorial reference of a non-territorial identity - a dynamic that inscribes into what is today known as the Paradox of Federalism (Erk and Anderson, 2010). At the same time, it allowed to 'other' French-speakers, turning it into a building block of the collective Flemish identity (Meuleman et al., 2017; Sinardet, 2008). In his analysis of the mediatic sphere in Belgium, Sinardet (2008) describes how these tensions find entrance into the

vulgarization of politics, where Flanders is depicted as an entity that needs to be protected from 'self-serving' French-speaking interests. Yet, despite the high salience of regionalist demands within the Flemish public sphere, there is no shared understanding regarding the future of the Belgian state. In a study on voters' issue position on regionalisation, Medeiros and colleagues (2020) find that preferences differ widely depending on a voter's partisan identity. Voters of the regionalist parties, indeed, favour further devolution of power towards the subnational constituent units. Voters' for mainstream parties, however, favour recentralisation. Overall, Flanders therefore appears to be an interesting case for further analysis, in order to understand how Flemish citizens imagine federalism and the Belgian state and whether a divergence arises from practice and imagination.

5. Methodology

The objective of this paper is to build a bottom-up understanding of how Flemish citizens perceive federalism and federalisation today. To do so, I analyse focus group data that was collected in 2008 and 2018. As outlined by the organizers, the population comprised 40 citizens who were selected based on age, gender, residence, education, identity and political knowledge and subsequently divided into three sub-groups (labelled K, L and M) in each observation year (Reuchamps, 2013; Reuchamps et al., 2021). The focus groups were accompanied by a moderator who asked a series of prepared questions throughout the discussion, yet his or her main task was to prevent the participants from straying too far off from the topic. Finally, the different conversations were recorded and transcribed and made available for analysis.

Alternative data sources to uncover the social imaginary could have been classic semi-structured in-depth interviews (Van Wessel, 2010). However, contrary to an individualised setting, the group-setting allows to verify whether individual opinions find resonance and are therefore 'shared', or are extreme outliers (Blackburn, 2020). For the case of the 'social imaginary' focus groups might therefore be more advantageous despite their large organizational effort (Guest et al., 2017). The data set is also insofar unique as it organized two rounds of data collection. While participants are not the same, and thus the observation is not longitudinal, the same questions and tasks were organized and provide an interesting insight into the evolution of the social reality. It also generated a much more natural, conversational exchange where Flemish citizens were debating on Belgian politics with a small amount of prepared questions (Reuchamps et al., 2021). What should be noted is that the first focus group took place in a context of a long lasting constitutional crisis (Pascolo and Reuchamps, 2021). In 2007, after a significant electoral victory of the Flemish Christian Democrats and the right-winged New Flemish Alliance, who supported a electoral and constitutional reform of the Belgian state, a political crisis broke out with regard to the future of the bilingual electoral district *Brussel-Hale-Vilvoorde* situated in the Flemish region (Sinardet and Morsink, 2011). The Leterme II government (25 Nov 2009 – 26 April 2010) ultimately fell due to the issue. The political stalemate, which was additionally accompanied by the economic crisis of 2008 and the bankruptcy of the Belgian bank Fortis, led to an inability to form a government in 2010. Subsequently, the country was without government for 541 days.

In a first step, a thematic analysis is carried out to determine the pre-dominant general perceptions in both 2008 and 2018. In doing so, I rely exclusively on the warm-up task that was proposed to the participants at the beginning of the discussion. Participants were asked to write down different words that they immediately associated with the word "federalism". They were then asked to present and reflect on what they had written down. Subsequently, all participants engaged in a moderated discussion on the topic of federalism, identity and democracy. Although associations with federalism continued to emerge in the further course of the discussion, these do not fall within the scope of the thematic analysis. The reason for this restrictive approach is that the discussion concentrates on specific areas, some of which are even highly politicised in

the Flemish context, e.g., the future of the Belgian federal state or the political relations between the French and Flemish language group. These issues are highly polarising and thus may have influenced the content of the debate and the different associations citizens' had with the term of 'federalism' (Blackburn, 2020). Moreover, certain opinions may be generally affected the content and quality of the debate, making it difficult to disentangle individual associations. Instead, I focus exclusively on the spontaneous and individual associations with the term. Every association mentioned by the participants before the end of the warm-up exchange was comprised in the analysis. Then, the different terms were inductively coded into reoccurring themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and compared between years. For an unknown reason, there was no warm-up task in sub-group M of 2008. Therefore, the sub-group is not comprised in the thematic analysis. As the sheets were no longer available, it also remains unknown whether all associations were mentioned throughout the warm-up.

In a second step, I used critical frame analysis (CFA). Frames, as described by Goffman (1974), are used by an individual to categorise and organise his or her experiences and thereby allocate meaning to them. The analysis of these frames offer insights into the perception of different events by the individual. While a classical frame analysis would certainly be apt to uncover the perceived shortcomings of Belgian Federalism, the analysis of the social imaginary of the federal system is also a quest for understanding the underlying moral order. In fact, frames can have an 'in-built' understanding of society (Walker et al., 2020). CFA is thus a useful tool, as it does not only capture the linkage between problem and solution but allows to analyse the roles and power positions that an individual allocates within a wider societal context (Verloo, 2005; Walker et al., 2020). For the CFA, I sampled any reference made by participants throughout the discussion to the institutional functioning of the Belgian federal system (N=49). For the coding categories I rely on the 'diagnosis' of what is perceived as a problem and the underlying reasoning ('justification'), the perceived 'causality' and agency behind the problem, the 'prognosis' on suggested solutions, and, finally, 'normative elements' in which a categorization between good and bad is captured.

6. Results

In the following section I will describe and interpret the results of my analysis. In a first section, the thematic analysis will be looked at. Although many of the associations are descriptive or philosophical in nature, it is noticeable that Flemish citizens predominantly use negative as opposed to positive associations. It can also be observed that this ratio between negative and positive connotations increases in 2018, but changes in character. In the second section, I am presenting the results of the CFA that appear to indicate that, indeed, a divergence between practice and social imaginary with regard to the federal state can be observed.

a. Federalism as defined from the perspective of citizens

Based on the thematic analysis I attribute 146 associations of 74 out of 80 participants to eight wider themes (Table 1). Despite one group being left out in the analysis (Group M of 2008 with six participants), the total amount of associations mentioned in 2008 (72) is nearly as high as in 2018 (74) and thus participants voiced much more associations on average. The predominant theme in the data analysis across both observation periods is 'Descriptive', which captures institutions of Belgian federalism (e.g., the regions, the communities, the government, etc.), different norm categories (e.g., decrees), competences (e.g., tasks of the welfare state), or historical events (e.g., 6th state reform). The philosophical theme, capturing more theoretical characteristics of federalism, such as autonomy, flexibility etc., is mentioned eleven times in 2008, but only seven times in 2018. Despite the decrease in philosophical associations, a significant increase of value-neutral associations can be observed between 2008 and 2018, as the amount of descriptive elements more than doubles. In 2018, most of the associations are thus not

connotated with a specific value. At the same time we can observe a decrease in value-judgement between 2008 and 2018.

Theme	2008	2018	Total
Descriptive	18	39	57
Philosophical	11	7	18
Conflict	14	5	19
'A bad thing'	9	11	20
Construct	5	4	9
Creating community	8	3	11
"L'Union fait la force"	6	6	12
'A good thing'	1	0	1
Total	72	74	146

Table 1. Summary of the results of the thematic analysis by year and in total

Yet, value judgments (n=43 in 2008 and n=29 in 2018) are mostly negative. The ratio of negative to positive associations also increases between the observation years. Within the group of negative connotations, the theme of 'Conflict' predominates in 2008 capturing associations that immediately refer to dispute, tensions and confrontation between identities. In 2018, the number of times when this theme is mentioned halves. Instead, we can observe an increase of associations that describe federalism as 'A bad thing', as "undemocratic" (18-M5; 08-L6), "chaotic" (08-K1), or inefficient (18-M2; 08-L1). A third, negative theme comprises any element that understands federalism as a construct that is "artificial" (08-L6) and seen as a tool for politicians or the media outside of the sphere of the people. Among the positive associations, the theme of federalism as "creating community" was predominant in 2008, combining elements such as conflict resolution, security and solidarity. In addition, the theme 'L'Union fait la force' is consistently relevant, capturing the view that only through federalism Belgium is able to represent interests internationally and that it offers citizens greater opportunities. Federalism as generally 'A good thing' ("future", 08-L3) is only mentioned once.

The descriptive theme provides an insight into what participants generally associate with a federal state organisation without an evaluation from their side. Federalism is, for example, widely understood as multi-level. Many of the participants mention different levels of state organization (n=26, 45.6%), such as the municipalities, the regions, the communities, the federal government and so forth. In near to all groups there is a shared understanding of federalism being linked to the separation of power and the allocation of competences to different levels of authority (n=16, 28.1%) – yet these elements are more predominant in 2018 than in 2008. In any case, however, a raw and neutral citizens' understanding of federalism aligns, indeed, with a simple definition of federalism as a vertical separation of power between different levels of authority (Watts, 2008).

Moreover, the philosophical elements largely align with arguments that we can also find in federal studies. For example, federalism is associated with cultural autonomy, efficiency or 'good governance'. In federal studies, we can often find these notions with regard to the question *why* federal states emerged over time. The devolution of power, for example, is argued to allow for the accommodation of cultural autonomy (see already Mill, 1993 [1859] and Proudhon, 2012 [1863]; Lijphart, 1968). Furthermore, the neofunctional theorization on Type-II Multi-level governance, as developed by Hooghe and Marks (2003), have also inspired a wider and more systematic

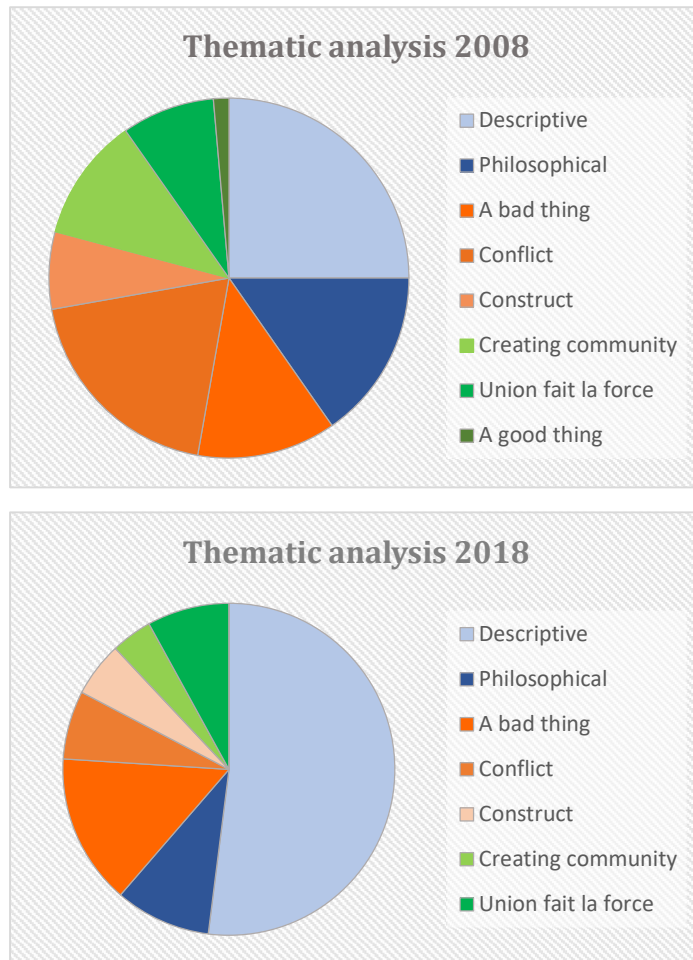


Figure 1. Thematic analysis by year

governance, of cultural differences and cost-efficiency (Sinardet and Morsink, 2011). It could thus be possible that through the exposure to this partisan discourse, citizens have adopted and given meaning to what they perceive as ideals for a good state order, namely that it is accountable to its citizens and recognises their diversity.

Interestingly, while we could expect that many neutral elements centre around the different identities and the language communities, often depicted as the key characteristics of the institutional design of the Belgian regime (Deschouwer, 2012), they only appear four times within the descriptive theme. Yet, language identity is all but absent in the warm-up discussion. Instead of a neutral understanding, the element of language is associated in a more evaluating (and more negative) fashion. Some participants explicitly mention “communitarian tensions” (K2-08) or “identity conflict” (L2-18). One participant (K6-08) even associates federalism with conflict-constituting differences in political culture. These statements illustrate that citizens’ do perceive the political conflict between Flemish- and French-speakers as an confrontational divide (Lijphart, 1968). However, what is interesting to note is that contrary to a wider understanding in literature, which sees federalism as a tool of conflict resolution (Lijphart, 1995; Keil, 2012), the association is largely different for citizens. Instead, federalism appears to be a synonym for conflict rather than a solution. Nevertheless, the historical setting of the focus group may have influenced what citizens noticed most. In the context of the 2007-2011 constitutional crisis and the political stalemate they were witnessing in everyday politics, it seems natural that conflict is

research into the drivers of decentralisation by focusing on precisely elements of good governance, such as subsidiarity, and cost-efficiency. The same is true for the positively connotated theme of ‘L’Union fait la force’ that resonates with the now seen as somewhat outdated theorization of Riker (Burgess, 2006). The mobilisation of these arguments by citizens could be an indication for a social imaginary as triggered by intellectual elites. The example of the social contract that Taylor (2003) uses in his seminal work is precisely this: if we were to ask a citizen for their understanding of government today, there is a tendency to illustrate it as an entity of power in the service of the people (Van Wessel, 2010). However, this instrumental paradigm originates in the philosophy of Locke, was propagated by elites and finally trickled down into the moral order of citizens. The same could be true for the understanding of federalism. While the idea originates in theory, Belgian political parties have used these elements of good

a more present theme than in 2018, where the dominance of 'Conflict' is rather overlaid by a general, non-conflict associated, negative perception.

The most striking finding of the thematic analysis, however, is that federalism appears to be rather negatively connotated in the Flemish context. Even in 2018, when value-neutral elements constitute the majority of associations, it is evident that participants voice much more negative associations than positive ones. Additionally, negative comments are expressed not only by those who later identify as exclusively Flemish and favouring confederalism or separatism as a solution for the Belgian state. Negative associations are widely shared. In 2008, ten out of twelve, and in 2018, eleven out of fifteen participants voice diverse, but negative associations with the word federalism. The wordings they use are, as discussed above, conflict, democratic shortcomings, but most interestingly also formulations that depict federalism as a tool of politics that is not reflective of the interest of the people (K6-18; M5-18; K4-08; L4-08). This dominance of negative connotations indicates that 'something is going wrong'. What we might be seeing here, is that, in fact, the federalist practice in Belgium is out of line with the moral order of citizens; that the social imaginary of how a federalised society is ought to be differs strongly from what is currently happening in the Belgian political sphere. Yet, to get a better understanding for this potential shortcoming in practice, we have to analyse how problems are actually framed.

b. Citizens' problematisation of Belgian federalism

In the different discussions, participants were asked to give their opinion on a wide variety of issues. When asked to evaluate the current political situation in Belgium or how citizens envision the future of the Belgian state, then it becomes apparent that federalism as a state organisation is widely problematised by citizens. Many critical remarks on state functioning emerge within the context of the separation of competences or the identity conflict. Some citizens draw links to immediate experiences they made throughout their life that they often deem absurd or illustrative for a mal-functioning of the state. Interestingly, many narratives persist throughout the years, while new nuances emerge. The predominant theme of these narratives is the complexity, yet the framing differs widely with regard to 'causality' and impact of the problem ('justification').

Throughout the years, the functioning of the Belgian state is widely seen as too complex, which appears to have contributed to a vision of inefficient structures.

"M1-18: I notice already at work that it leads to too many difficulties. I think that many people also don't really know how [the federal state] works. If you aren't super into this...

Moderator: Because it's too complex?

M1-18: Because it's too complex, voilà."

"M4-08: The problem of today's federalism is, in my eyes, that laws are created, I think about, for example, the language facility communities that are not realisable. In theory maybe, but on paper if you read the language policies and you have a thorough look, there maybe some that look good, but the practice is not realisable!"

Some participants, like M4-08, simply see it as a source of administrative blockade, that contributes to an inability of decrees to produce their intended outcome. For example, M4-08 argues that the language requirements of the federal administration to have employees for all three national languages has led to a situation where the German-speaking community in particular is dependent on the presence and decision of a single official. Another participant highlights the cost-ineffectiveness that many of the complex and compromise-oriented institutions of Belgium have bargained. The participant argues that many of the provisions do not necessarily correspond to the needs of the regions or provinces. Using the example of highways,

the participant argues that while, indeed, highways cost much more in Wallonia due to the hilly topography, Flanders would receive an equal amount of money for infrastructure and thus built a controversial and under-frequented highway (A11) between Brugge and Zeebrugge with a bascule bridge. In some examples, citizens give voice to a feeling of absurdity. They share experiences of Flemish buses terminating at unexpected places to avoid the border with Brussels (M4-08), of friends who drive garbage to Wallonia as trash regulations were more flexible (M6-18), of several traffic fines they received because they weren't aware of the change in speed regulations between Wallonia and Flanders (L2-18), or of train personal that is not allowed to speak French but Spanish to passengers in Antwerp because of the language regulations (L3-18). These anecdotes and experiences with the administration appear to sometimes be coupled with humour, and sometimes with despair. In one case, for example, a psychologist (M1-18) recounts how a highly depressed patient could not be admitted in Flanders because of a lack of places, but had no right to be admitted in the French-speaking community because of the distribution of competences.

As the thematic analysis has already indicated, these illustrations underline that Belgian federalism is not just an abstract, theoretical concept. On the contrary, federalism is an everyday reality that citizens are confronted with and often experience negatively. However, it is not so much the anecdotes citizens share, but the way they frame the origins and agency behind the problem that provides us with a profound insight into how citizens' make meaning of the state organisation. The justification that reoccurred most on why it was actually seen as a problem, was, to my surprise, that it did not serve the interest of the people or that it was simply put undemocratic:

"M3-08: For the average [...] Belgian, if that is no a Fleming or a Walloon or a person from Brussels, is this Belgian federalism a chaos of unconcernedness. If you then want to give some clarity then you have to start talking about people in sub-structures in fragments and then it starts to get a little light in the game. [...] That is actually now something for experts. From this perspective, it starts being a little dangerous... the average Belgian might let themselves be misled.

"K3-08: ...but I think that it is first and foremost a problem, like the participant just said that people do no longer know for what actually cast a vote, if they look at what they vote for, if they vote for a party, they just don't know what competences they vote for."

In the eyes of M3-08 and K3-08, federalism has thus given rise to a situation in which the complex and untransparent division of competences lead to an inability to adequately exercise democratic control. M3-08 speaks of expertise and a situation that provides fruitful ground for false claims and assumptions. Another layer appears to be an inability to make informed decisions, or possibly even to hold politicians accountable.

What is striking, however, is that only in few cases the complexity is presented as a somewhat 'neutral' problem that is the product of a historical process where even politicians would rather be the victims of a path dependency:

"L5-18: It's simply grown like this because we've always been with two different sets of parties, actually three, euh, because there is the German part, too."

If causality is identified in the statements (n=19), that is the link between problem and proposed solution, according to citizens' framing, the problem is mainly triggered by actors (n=12). Although, it should be emphasized that a kind of 'radicalization' seems to be detectable over the years. Initially, causality is strongly dependent on the political identity of the participants. As already to be expected, the problem of federalism cannot be subtracted from Belgium's identity

conflict. In fact, some participants defend the point that it is the French-speaking elite who are responsible for the fallacies of the Belgian state. One participant (L6-08) claims that many of the contemporary problems have been caused by a mismanagement from the French-speaking side. In the participant's narrative, grievances with regard to financial transfers from Flanders to Wallonia play an important role. They underline their frustration of the inability to hold Walloon politicians accountable for political mistakes due to the electoral split into Flemish and French-speaking parties that characterises the Belgian system. Another participant (K1-08) believes that the inability to efficiently reform the Belgian state originates in a fundamental, ideological difference between French- and Flemish-speakers. While the participant agrees that this point may be irrational, they insist that the two groups are often irreconcilable on certain matters, such as defence or migration policy. M5-18 stresses that any efficient state organisation would not succeed due to an intransigence from the French-speaking side, as they would have to give up their welfare benefits. In one case, even the independence of the justice system in Brussels is questioned and it is claimed that French-speaking judges would make ideological decisions against Flemish policies (L4-08). These examples illustrate a profound mistrust against the French-speaking political elite and come with a shared wish for independence of the Flemish region. These opinions do affirm that a crucial process of othering is taking place within the regionalist Flemish-speaking community (Meuleman et al., 2017; Sinardet, 2008). The participants generally invoke cultural differences throughout the conversation that inform the interpretation of these statements. The claims also seem to reflect regionalist partisan discourse in Flanders. In her doctoral research, Fyhr (2020), for example, finds that the partisan discourse of the NV-A is strongly coloured with elements highlighting historical grievances and othering of the French-speaking community. The confederal model is therefore often presented as the only way to preserve Flemish rights or interests.

Another pre-dominant perspective attributes the political blockades and mismanagement within the Belgian federal state rather to a failure of the aggregate group "politicians". For example, "kibbelministers"¹ (M2-18) are accused of preparing joint discussions with international representatives only last minute. Parties are generally blamed for writing unreliable party programs (K3-08) and thus acting only regarding their own electorate, or for thinking only in the short term (K4-18) from election to election and thus losing sight of long-term efficient solutions. Some citizens differentiate between partisan ideology. They claim that radical but marginal forces cause the country to drift apart (L1-08), with one participant (M4-18) clearly pointing out that the population also does not protest sufficiently against radical undercurrents in politics and therefore presents a false image of general tolerance. However, it is precisely in this line of argumentation where an interesting change can be observed. Whereas in 2008 the missteps seem to be attributed more to squabbles and incompetence, ten years later participants take a far more critical perspective. An ideal-typical illustration is the following:

"L3-18: But does it have to be this complicated, I wonder.

L4-18: Well, I say it is complicated, but I don't say that it has to be like that.

L3-18: It seems to me, personally yes, it seems to me that on a higher level a lot of artificial context is created. They want precisely to create as many jobs as possible for as many people as possible to nominate them as ministers. That really is my impression."

L3-18 thus argues that fragmentation has become a tool of political authorities to create posts. Yet, also that the identarian conflict is argued by some to be constructed:

¹ A Kibbelminister is a person that essentially fights over everything.

"M6-08: In the times when the Voerenstreek² was still a communitarian problem, I had a friend who worked for the cabinet of a minister. And he said, it was during the vacation, he said 'Look, on 11th of September, you will see, the Voeren-problem will reignite'. He said that two months ahead. And he was right, on 11th of September the Voeren-problem was a thing again. Why? Because the government needed a distraction manoeuvre for other issues that were not supposed to get too much attention."

The issue of constructed division and apparent opportunism arises periodically in all of the three discussion groups in 2018. Interestingly, while the thematic analysis has indeed already indicated that federalism seems to be somewhat perceived as a construct, it did not play an important role at the beginning of the discussion. Also with regard to 2008, the times a 'construct' is mentioned during the round of associations did not really change. Yet, what should be further interrogated in future research is the question whether a divide is truly and generally perceived as constructed by a wider public. It could be that in 2018, issues were simply not dominant in the public debate and public attention mainly focused on intra-Flemish squabbles without depicting French claims. The situation might again have changed. Nevertheless, it appears in any case that a group of participants do express a form of generalised distrust against the political elite that acts against the will of the people (K6-18). This opinion goes hand-in-hand with either a wish for recentralisation, simplification of structures and even Unitarianism.

Generally, we can therefore observe that there is, indeed, a mismatch between ideals and practice. The practice of federalism, as it is generally perceived by Belgian citizens, has generated a system that is too complex to understand, to control and to develop from the individual point of view. At the same time, a larger portion of citizens identifies a political agency behind this complexity. To them, untransparent complexity has been caused by a political elite. If this perception is paired with an exclusive Flemish identity, it appears that the fault is attributed to the French-speaking political elite, whereas in other cases a general mistrust towards politics might drive the opposition towards federalism à la belge. The discrepancy between practice and social imaginary, namely a simplified and accessible state structure (independently of the state structure), raises crucial questions with regard to the legitimacy of the Belgian federal system. Relying on Toqueville's theorisation on democracy, Offe (2009) argues that it is often the political practice that informs citizenship and assures the access to the institutional apparatus of liberal democracy. If thus citizens believe that the institutions are mal-functioning and out of line with their moral order, and that their demands are unheard, it could be possible that the mistrust we are observing is, in fact, linked to a wider political disaffection and mistrust towards the political level (Offe, 2009). The nature of this link remains yet to be investigated.

7. Conclusion

The article aimed at generating a bottom-up conceptualisation of federalism by exploring citizens' associations and framing of federalism as both an ideal and a status quo. It did so on the basis of thematic and critical frame analysis, and drawing on the concept of 'social imaginaries'. The study relied on focus group data collected in two observation years namely 2008 and 2018. The findings of the study suggest that citizens' definition appears to align with a theoretically acknowledged simple definition of federalism. On the basis of the invoked descriptive elements, federalism seems to be understood as a vertically separated form of state organisation, which distributes competences to different subnational entities. Yet, despite the dominance of descriptive and value-neutral elements in citizens' associations, a negative understanding of federalism seems to

² The Voerenstreek is a language facility municipality in the Flemish region that is, however, enclosed by Wallonia. As a consequence, a large proportion of the population is French-speaking. Since the 1970s, protests have reignited on whether the municipality should be Flemish or Walloon.

emerge. In 2008, when Belgium was in a constitutional stalemate, terms related to the notion of conflict appeared to be of relevance. Later on, in 2018, the connotation of conflict was replaced by a more general negative conception. The dominance of negative over positive associations seemed to indicate that the political practice of federalism in Belgium was out of line with the social imaginary of what citizens thought a state organization is *ought* to look like. The subsequent results of the CFA have shown that a general negative perception of federalism appears to persist. This finding affirms that not only is there a negative practice, but a general belief that the way federalism is enacted in Belgium is not necessarily to the good of the society. As the CFA illustrates, it appears that citizens question the legitimacy of the current practice of federalism in Belgium today. However, this discrepancy raises also important questions about the political future, not only with regard to the practice of federalism, but also with regard to the future relationship between citizens and politics. The political level was initially criticised more from a functional perspective. In 2018, however, ethical questions were raised. The arising connotation of federalism appears to fall into the realm of political disaffection. It is therefore necessary to explore further on the invoked link and to question its direction: Has the perpetual conflict, the gradual change and the complexity led to alienation or is it rather political alienation that clouds the experience with the (federal) state? The fact is, however, that this exploratory study seems to show that practice of federalism in Belgium suffers from a legitimacy problem. Future research might privilege in-depth interviews with an explicit focus on the functioning of the Belgian federal state. As the available data was limited, the critical frame analysis can only be an indication of the true nature of the divergence between political practice and social imaginary.

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