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The Future of Belgian Federalism Through the Eyes of the Citizens

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ABSTRACT How do Belgian citizens see the future of federalism? In the typical consociational Belgium citizens have not had much to say about the federalization process, which has been largely elite-driven. And actually not so much is known about the future of Belgian federalism through the eyes of the citizens. Survey research shows some differences in identity and in institutional preferences between the two language groups, but also a low salience of the issue when they cast a vote. This article, therefore, looks at alternative methods to capture the perceptions of the citizens: focus groups, deliberative experiments and mental maps.

KEY WORDS: Belgium, federalism, citizens, focus group, deliberative experiment, mental map

Introduction

The future of Belgian federalism is definitely a hot topic in Belgian politics not only for politicians, journalists and scholars but also for citizens in general. The last few years yielded several heated political crises and, in their wake, almost no citizens could escape from discussions about the future of their country. Indeed, generally speaking, citizens do talk about the future of Belgium and sometimes try to predict how it will be.

However, citizens so far have never been able to play an active role in the process of federalization of Belgium. Hitherto it has been a top-down process, as most scholars point out (Deschouwer, 2005; Swenden and Jans, 2006), where there was no room for citizens' input. This is, of course, related to Belgium's consociational history. According to this model of democracy, in a divided society, citizens should remain deferent and passive (Lijphart, 1968; Bogaards, 1998) because their participation is likely to hinder rather than foster the fragile compromise between the segments (Huyse, 1970). Caluwaerts (2012, 10) summarizes this paradox: "democratic stability in divided societies is endangered whenever the demos plays too prominent a role". The only time Belgians did have their say through a popular consultation for the Royal question in 1950, it ended up with deeper tensions and divisions.

Yet, attention should be paid to how the citizens see the future of federalism in Belgium; this is the purpose of this paper. Thus, if they are not the drivers of federal dynamics, they may be its supporters (or not) and at least they are the recipients of federal politics and policies. In fact, throughout the process of federalization of Belgium, attention has been given to the attitudes and the opinions of the Belgian public, or better publics, as Belgian public opinion is often seen as divided by the language border (Billiet *et al.*, 2006; Sinardet and Hooghe, 2009). Indeed, political scientists have devoted some of their attention to the measurement of Belgian citizens' opinions about the transformation and the future of the country (for recent examples, see Frogner *et al.*, 2008; Swyngedouw and Rink 2008; Deschouwer and Sinardet, 2010).

None the less, more recently, another strand of research, relying on focus groups, deliberative experiments and mental maps, has endeavoured to dig further. Instead of relying on classic survey research, these alternatives have sought to tell the story behind the numbers and to look more closely at citizens' preferences and their perceptions of Belgium. And these stories are interesting, especially because they reinforce each other. The aim of this article is to articulate these different stories in order to offer a more comprehensive picture of how citizens see the future of Belgian federalism. Focus groups held in Wallonia and Flanders identified different profiles of citizens. Deliberative experiments have demonstrated that ordinary citizens from both sides of the linguistic divide are capable of talking with each other, with a high level of deliberation, on the contentious topic of the future of Belgium. And mental maps have been able to apprehend Belgians' views of Belgium through drawings. After a review of the existing quantitative research, this article explores these three alternative ways to look at the future of Belgium through the eyes of citizens and, in so doing, participates in the endeavour of this special issue to tackle the future of Belgian federalism.

Election and Survey Data

A first way of looking at Belgian political dynamics is by looking at the steady rise of regionalist parties. As Figure 1 shows, while traditional parties—catholic, socialist and liberal—still enjoyed a large share of the total of the votes in the post-war period (1945–60), from the 1961 election regionalist parties (but also—not shown on the graph—green and radical-right parties) came to the front with the promotion of a regionalist agenda on both sides of the language border (Bouhon and Reuchamps, 2012). First, the Volksunie (VU) in Flanders, then the Rassemblement wallon (RW) in Wallonia and the Front démocratique francophone (FDF) in Brussels substantially increased their vote share with a first peak in 1968–71. This rise of the regionalist parties led to the reform of the state with the first step towards more autonomy to the new cultural communities (van Haute and Pilet, 2006; Deschouwer, 2009b). The language division did put pressure on the entire political system, including on the traditional political parties. As a consequence, the Belgian party system was gradually split into two parts, one Dutch-speaking, one French-speaking (Deschouwer, 1997). This first state reform also set the tone for later ones: from then onwards, granting more sub-state autonomy would become the key conflict resolution technique in

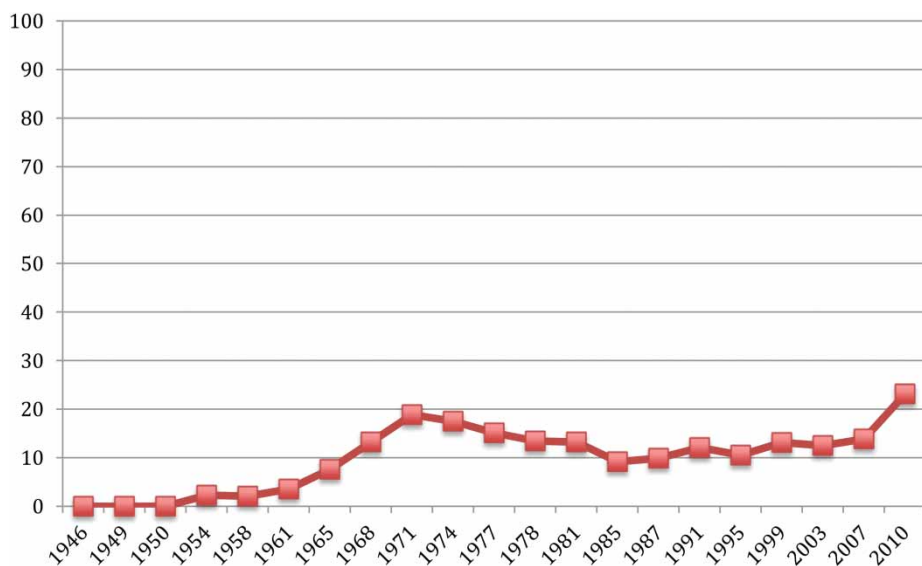


Figure 1. Percentage of the votes of the regionalist parties (1946–2010)

Belgian politics (Swenden *et al.*, 2006). However, the granting of sub-state autonomy was always flanked by protection mechanisms for minority rights. This was a thorn in the eye of the regionalist parties that were willing to further the devolution without minority rights, and it led to a continuous rise of support for regionalist parties.

This technique of granting autonomy while guaranteeing minority rights was part of the elite bargaining. In this process of federalization, citizens were merely passive observers, because citizen activism, according to consociational theorists, would endanger democratic stability (Lijphart, 1968; Bogaards, 1998). None the less, citizens had their vote, and their vote was important to define the balance of powers between political parties. Since voting was the only opportunity for citizens to let their opinions be known, the results are often interpreted as a message for the elites. This raises an important question: does the act of voting for a regionalist party automatically mean the voter supports more sub-state autonomy or even the split of the country. Or, more generally, is party preference related to preference for (or against) Belgium?

The debate on this question relies on two main assumptions. On the one hand, it is assumed that the issue of state reform and federalism in Belgium is a very salient one for the Belgian population, and it will thus impact upon citizens' voting behaviour. On the other hand, and as a corollary, the opinions on this issue—the future of the state—are assumed to differ largely between the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the north and the French-speaking inhabitants of the south. Survey research has, however, not provided strong evidence for these assumptions.

To check for the salience of the issue, respondents in surveys are asked to pick—usually three—themes among a list of two-dozen, which are important in their vote choice. The reform of the state then always comes far behind socio-economic issues (Swyngedouw *et al.*, 1993, 1998, 2007; Frogner and Aish, 1994, 1999, 2003;

Swyngedouw and Billiet, 2002; Frogner *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Swyngedouw and Abts, 2011). The second assumption finds a bit more empirical ground. Attitudes about the different scenarios for the future of Belgium are indeed different in north and south. The differences are, however, not spectacular, and show a difference in degree rather than a strong opposition between the two groups. While there are members of both language groups all along the continuum between a strong central state and full separation, Dutch speakers lean a bit more towards more sub-state autonomy and French speakers towards more powers for the central/federal government. These attitudes are strongly and unsurprisingly related to the respondent's identity. Those identifying strongly with Flanders or Wallonia and less or not at all with Belgium prefer a further devolution of powers to the sub-state (Deschouwer and Sinar-det, 2010).

To sum up, election and survey data demonstrate quite convincingly three elements about citizens. First, while the question of the reform of the state has some saliency among the population, it is definitely not the most salient issue, especially in explaining the voting behaviour of citizens. Secondly, even though it is not the most salient issue, the reform of the state still resonates with the Belgian public(s). In fact, there is a large diversity of opinion on this issue from the return to a unitary state to the break up of the country. The autonomist position is stronger in Flanders, but it is not overwhelming, while it is not absent in Wallonia. And, thirdly, preferences for the future of Belgium and identities are intrinsically linked. These survey data give an interesting insight into the opinions of the Belgians. They are, however, quite crude and do not offer a very deep or dynamic view into the way in which Belgians think about the future of their state. In the remainder of this article we will, therefore, present results of research that has used very different approaches. We do believe that these alternative approaches can be helpful in providing a more nuanced image of how citizens perceive and see the future of federalism in Belgium.

Five Profiles of Citizens

The future of federalism in Belgium is not only the product of individual preferences but also of collective preferences. In this perspective, focus group techniques might complement well survey techniques. Indeed, allowing citizens to talk about the future of their country might be useful to apprehend their perceptions and preferences. To do so, two citizens' panels were held in Belgium in 2007–08: one in Liège (French-speaking Belgium) and one in Antwerp (Dutch-speaking Belgium). Each panel was made of four focus groups composed of six to nine people. For over four hours, the participants from various backgrounds and with different political beliefs, discussed the future of Belgian federalism with fellow citizens as well as with politicians and experts (Reuchamps, 2011).

The group discussions were recorded and transcribed. With that material five different types of citizens were defined. These are based on the different perceptions and preferences that participants had of federalism in Belgium. The construction of these types follows Max Weber's prescription to construct an "ideal type" which

is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally

absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized view points into a unified *analytical* construct (Weber, [1904] 1949: 90, italic in the original).

Thus, these profiles of citizens are not statistical products but analytical constructs, which are based on a careful qualitative analysis of the group discussions. None the less, as analytical constructs, they can shed light on survey data. As such, focus group data and survey data complement each other well. In fact, the data collected in the two citizens' panels help to qualify the findings from survey data. The five types or profiles are the unitarist, the unionist, the federalist, the regionalist and the independentist. They are quite similar on both sides of the language border, yet with some differences.

The first profile is the 'unitarist'. She has a dual unitary vision: on the one hand, the unity of Belgians and, on the other hand, the unity of Belgium—since Belgians are united, Belgium should also be united. She is very unhappy with the functioning of the federal state because it exacerbates the conflicts, instead of reducing them. She also believes that the federal system creates conflicts that would not exist in a more unitary system. For the unitarist, the Belgian federal system is way too complex. Moreover, politicians as well the media are seen to be responsible for the tensions between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians. None the less, for the unitarist, these tensions are quite artificial—the product of the politicians—since Belgians are, or at least should be, united. Feelings of solidarity should bind them together. Therefore, the unitarist fiercely opposes those who believe that Flanders pays too much for Wallonia. In short, the unitarist has a—very—negative vision of federalism because it perpetuates the conflicts, and even creates them. In fact, she argues that only the language distinguishes Flemings and Walloons. Yet, while the French-speaking unitarist rejects the possibility of dual senses of belongings (for instance, Walloon and Belgian or Flemish and Belgian), the Dutch-speaking unitarist accepts this idea, even though she feels only Belgian. For the future of Belgium, the unitarist wants ideally the return to a unitary state. However, participation in the panel makes her understand such a return is definitively impossible in Belgium. Therefore, she favours a reinforcement of the federal state, i.e. a reduction of the autonomy of the Communities and the Regions. If one had to infer from the quantitative data mentioned in the previous section the percentage of Dutch speakers and French speakers falling within the remit of this profile, it would be a difficult endeavour since such a profile is intended to be more comprehensive than a single survey question or even a series of questions. None the less, survey data have shown throughout the years that between a quarter and a third of French speakers still have a unitarist vision of Belgium. On the Dutch-speaking side, the figure has always been lower, but at least 10% of the population share this vision. However, caution is advised about these percentages because survey questions tend to measure altogether the unitarists and the unionists—whom we are going to discuss now.

The second profile we identified was the 'unionist'. The unionist shares with the unitarist the will for a united Belgium, but their arguments diverge. While the latter is guided by an ideal of unity, the former wishes the union of the two main communities of the country. This is an important qualitative difference (which is not easy

to capture in survey design). For the unionist, there are definitely differences between Dutch speakers and French speakers but they should not lead to the division of Belgium. In fact, they call for a peaceful coexistence. In this perspective, the federal system seems to be the best solution, even though its functioning is far from optimal, especially because politicians perpetuate the conflicts. Above all, the unionist fears demands for more regional autonomy, especially for Flanders. It is not that she does not recognize a dual identity—she herself feels both Belgian and Flemish or Belgian and Walloon/Francophone, with a preference for Belgian identity—but she rejects demands for more regional autonomy because this might lead to the division of the country. In order to prevent the dislocation of Belgium, the unionist wants a reinforcement of the federal state, which has the role of keeping the union of Belgium. None the less, the unionist is quite pessimistic because she sees an ever-increasing division of Belgium and Belgians. The French-speaking unionist is even more pessimistic because she fears federalism will inevitably lead to the end of the country. We find here the so-called “paradox of federalism” (Erk and Anderson, 2009; Sinardet, 2009c):

[t]he fundamental question, then, is whether federalism provides a stable, long-lasting solution to the management of conflict in divided societies or is, instead, a temporary stop on a continuum leading to secession and independence. A federal arrangement that formally recognizes ethno-linguistic diversity to help manage the political system can also set this newly—or increasingly—federal state on a path to eventual disintegration (Erk and Anderson, 2009: 192).

By contrast with the two previous profiles, the ‘federalist’ has a federal vision of Belgium. Not only does the Belgian federal system ensure a peaceful coexistence between Dutch-speaking Belgians and French-speaking Belgians but also it recognizes the differences between the two groups and, therefore, enables them to implement distinct policies, more in line with each community’s preferences. The federalist understands federalism in its classical definition: a mix of shared rule and self-rule (Elazar, 1987; Burgess, 2006). In fact, according to her, federalism is an attempt to achieve a fair sharing of the resources of the country and, above all, to ensure that the country is viable in the long run. Nevertheless, federalism might perpetuate the tensions between the communities and especially between politicians of each side of the language border (and this is also due to a lack of inter-community contacts). But federalism is the best solution to ensure a peaceful coexistence between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians. In fact, the federalist has a strong dual identity, both Flemish and Belgian or Walloon/Francophone and Belgian. It does not mean she minimizes the differences between the two communities. To the contrary, she very much acknowledges them. They are at the heart of Belgium’s federalism. The federal system came into existence to accommodate these differences. The federalist’s view of the system is not naïve, however. While the federal system has very positive elements, its complexity and the conflicts that paralyse it are important drawbacks (Perrez and Reuchamps, 2012). This is why the federalist wants to remain within a federal system but wants to make it stronger. To do so there should be transfers of power from the federal level to the regional and community level, but also from the

latter to the former. Above all, what matters for the federalist is that the federal system works well because that is the best solution for Belgium. Finally, one should note that the evolution of the system is of crucial importance for the federalist. Should it remain stuck as it was in the last few years, the federalist might turn into a regionalist. Therefore, in quantitative terms, it is rather difficult to infer how many federalists are to be found within each community in the long run. If we take the answers to the status quo question, there are usually between 10% and 20% in both language groups, but these figures do not tell the whole story about the nature of federalists, as they are more than mere status quo-seekers.

The 'regionalist', i.e. the fourth ideal-type, wishes to remain within a federal framework but with a larger autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. Regionalism is for her a matter of efficiency. The Flemish regionalist has a strong Flemish identity, which is more important than her Belgian identity. This is not so much the case for the Walloon regionalist whose position is explained mainly by a will for—more—efficiency. Indeed, the regionalist from both sides of the language border is very dissatisfied with the functioning of the current federal system. Federalism exacerbates conflicts instead of reducing them. The conflicts arise because of the differences between the two communities and, therefore, Regions and Communities should be allowed to follow separate paths, which will also accommodate the different identities in Belgium. This is particularly relevant for the Flemish regionalist who feels Flanders pays too much for the other Regions. And she believes that stronger autonomy for Flanders would be the way to keep Belgium working. Finally, should further autonomy be given to the Regions and the Communities, a regionalist is likely to turn into a federalist. On the contrary, should it not be given, a regionalist might progressively turn into an independentist. Quantitatively speaking, the recent survey research shows that half of Dutch speakers are willing to increase sub-state autonomy and a quarter of French speakers share this opinion (Deschouwer and Sinardet, 2010). None the less, as mentioned earlier, some federalists do agree with this idea, as long as it brings about an equilibrium. Thus, trying to quantify the number of regionalists in Belgium blurs the distinction between federalists and regionalists.

The 'independentist' is the fifth and last profile of citizens. It is found mainly in Flanders—even though it is not the most widespread profile, as surveys demonstrate (Swyngedouw and Rink, 2008; Deschouwer and Sinardet, 2010). The independentist wishes the independence of Flanders or Wallonia; that is the break up of Belgium. This objective takes its foundations in a specific set of perceptions and identities, which distinguishes the independentist from the other profiles. There are two main reasons behind the will for separation. They are different but they reinforce each other. On the one hand, the independentist anchors her identity in a Flemish nation or Walloon nation, distinct of Belgium. She feels exclusively Flemish or Walloon; Belgian identity and Flemish/Walloon identity are incompatible. Walloons or Francophones and Flemish are very different, so different that a common living-together is not justified. On the other hand, the federal system is totally inefficient, according to her, and the reason why it is inefficient is because the whole system relies on joint decision making, which bring more problems than solutions. The deadlocks are also the result of the vetoes by the other language group. Belgium often faces joint-decision traps (Scharpf, 1988). Therefore, it is not only a matter of identity but also a matter of

efficiency. Lately this second strand of the argument has been more emphasized. Flemish nationalist discourses have been “denationalized” (Sinardet, 2009a). The division of Belgium is justified on the basis of rationality. The independentist does not see any future for Belgian federalism in the long run because it will not function properly. However, in the short term, she might accept reforms, which would grant more autonomy for the Regions and the Communities, even if she fiercely criticizes these because they do not go far enough. Above all, she believes that separation is the best solution for all Belgians, including the Walloons, because the new states will be more efficient than the current federal system.

The five profiles are quite different from one another even though some of them share similar features. At the core of each of them is the relationship between identities and federal perceptions and preferences. Simply looking at identities would be insufficient to understand fully the federal dynamics in Belgium and looking only at federal dynamics would be misleading. Identities and federal dynamics do matter and one needs to capture them in order to understand citizens’ views about federalism in Belgium. These profiles go deeper than the results from survey data in explaining the different positions towards the future of Belgian federalism; that is why this first alternative approach complements survey data well.

Deliberations between Citizens

Focus groups have proven useful for shedding light on different profiles within each language community. These focus groups did, however, organize discussions among the speakers of the same language. It is, therefore, interesting to investigate how people in mixed groups would behave. This is what Caluwaerts (2012) has looked at with the organization of nine deliberative experiments. In 2010, 83 Belgian citizens from both sides of the language border were gathered to discuss a simple, albeit controversial, question: “how do you see the future of Belgium?” Three groups were homogeneously Dutch speaking, three were French speaking and three were mixed. All the groups were asked to make a decision, but the decision-making rules varied between the groups. Three were asked to reach a decision with a simple majority, three with a two-thirds majority and three had to use a unanimity rule. At a moment when Belgian politics was deeply glued in a political deadlock on the next state reform and, in fact, early elections were in sight, ‘ordinary’ citizens gathered in these nine deliberative mini-publics dealt with issues that went to the heart of the future of Belgian federalism.

The findings of these deliberative experiments are important for the study of the relations between citizens and federalism and above all between citizens themselves. Indeed, while surveys have convincingly showed that the difference between the language groups on the future of Belgium is a matter of degree rather than direction and focus groups have emphasized the differences within language groups, very little was known on how citizens from the two main language groups in Belgium interact with each other on such a hot topic as the future of their country. With this very cautious experimental research design, Caluwaerts (2012) was able to explore the deliberation processes between and within Dutch speakers and French speakers. In contrast to what democratic theory (Mouffe, 2000) and social psychology

(Mendelberg, 2002; Morrell, 2010) posit—in divided societies, communication turns into confrontation—the deliberative experiments demonstrated the contrary. Indeed, using the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), an instrument to measure the quality of the deliberation (Steiner *et al.*, 2004), it appeared that the deliberation quality in the divided groups—those composed of both Dutch speakers and French speakers—was higher than in the homogenous groups, regardless of the decision-making rule (even though such a rule matters within the homogenous groups). That is to say, facing the out-group did not hinder deliberation but rather foster deliberation, even though citizens held fundamentally different positions and had heated discussions on highly contentious issues in Belgian politics. To explain this interesting pattern Caluwaerts (2012: 190) draws on cognitive psychology:

Divided settings activate different cognitive schemes that allow the participants to cope with the unease that accompanies intergroup deliberation. After all, when the stakes are high and the environment is diverse, which is clearly the case in intergroup decision making, citizens no longer rely on familiar scripts for action. Rather, they activate their surveillance systems and are more attentive to new cognitive cues and stimuli from their environment. In surveillance mode, people are active information processors and demonstrate the kind of non-coercive openness to persuasion that deliberative democracy requires. This contrasts sharply with the dispositional system that operates in homogeneous groups. Citizens involved in deliberation with their ingroup members know what to expect, and the cognitive frames that are uttered during the discussion are known to all members. In this system, citizens rely on heuristic cues and confirmation biases to process what is being said and new information is interpreted largely in light of previously known frames. As such, the argumentative effort in lower conflict situations is much lower and the quality of deliberation decreases.

Even though these are interesting findings for federal dynamics in Belgium at the level of citizens, they should be taken with caution. On the one hand, such deliberative experiments are known as ‘cold settings’ (vs. ‘hot settings’) because the stakes were very limited. The participants were asked—for the sake of research—to make a decision, but there was no formal consequence attached to it. None the less the nature of the topic prevented a too artificial discussion, since discussions on the future of Belgium do occur in everyday life. On the other hand, the objective of these nine deliberative experiments was a high internal validity rather than a high external validity. Thus, given the fact that the sample was not completely randomly selected, the generalizability of the findings might be limited, even though they definitely opened a new avenue of research in divided societies.

A larger deliberative experiment, the so-called G1000, was held in Brussels on 11 November 2011 and gathered 704 randomly selected participants from everywhere in Belgium (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2012a). The aim of this day of deliberation, following the model of town hall meetings (Elliott *et al.*, 2005), was to allow citizens to deliberate on important issues for the future of Belgium. It was more of a democratic experiment than a scientific experiment *per se*. In tables of ten, each facilitated by a

trained moderator, the participants discussed three topics common to the whole group—social security, welfare in times of economic crisis and immigration—and one open topic chosen by each table. After each round of discussion, the conclusions from the tables were sent to the central desk where they were clustered into different propositions, which were then put to the vote of the participants.

Before and after the G1000, the participants were asked to fill a similar questionnaire, with some of the questions on their perception of deliberation and of the out-group. The results reveal a smaller percentage of participants becoming more positive towards the out-group than in the experimental design (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2012b). This is probably due to the fact that the discussions of the G1000 did not explicitly deal with the question of the essence of Belgium. Indeed, while the three topics—social security, welfare and immigration—do have important implications for the language groups, they were not framed as a linguistic issue, so that the beneficial effects on intergroup relations can be expected to be more modest, but also higher on mundane realism. None the less, interviews with the moderators showed the perceived quality of the deliberation at the 32 bilingual tables was higher than at the unilingual tables, confirming the results of Caluwaerts. Furthermore, the comparison of pre-test and post-test responses for the participants at unilingual tables reveals that the odds of becoming more negative towards the out-group are about half as large for participants at divided tables. In other words, being confronted with the out-group can be considered a good buffer against becoming more negative (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2012b). Thus, the language difference does not hinder but rather foster deliberation. This is a key finding for a country where Dutch speakers and French speakers hardly speak to each other because they live in separate political and public spheres (Billiet *et al.*, 2006; Sinardet, 2009b).

Such deliberative experiments may be useful to apprehend the future of Belgian federalism through the eyes of the citizens. They bring to the fore two main conclusions. On the one hand, citizens are willing to be more involved in the decision-making process for small but also for big issues, such as the evolution of their country, even though it might be a politically divisive issue. It is even more tempting since politicians themselves seem to face increasing difficulties discussing with one another. On the other hand, it is not only possible to sit at the same table citizens of various backgrounds, notably in terms of language (if language translation is provided), but also possible to reach high quality deliberation (provided the goal is not necessarily to reach a consensus) in a very diverse deliberative setting. What is more, direct confrontation and interaction with the out-group do not lead to conflicts but rather reduce the chances of attitude extremization.

Drawings of Belgium

The three previous methods, despite their differences, have all one point in common: they start from the assumed difference (which they qualify afterwards) between the citizens and above all between the citizens of the two main language groups. Of course, this difference reflects the ongoing federal dynamics of the country (Deschouwer, 2009a). Moreover, all of them frame the data collection more or less through the researchers' lenses. This is especially the case with surveys, which rely

on standardized questions and do not leave much room for nuance. The fourth alternative presented in this article offers a quite radically different approach to capture the attitudes and positions of Belgian citizens about their country and its political organization. It asks citizens to draw Belgium (Reuchamps *et al.*, forthcoming).

In October–November 2010, more than 5000 first-year higher education students in the human and social sciences from both sides of the language border were invited to draw Belgium on a blank sheet of paper in five minutes. No other guidelines were given. It is not a random sample and it is not representative of the overall population. Rather, the study sought both homogeneity within the sample, in order to minimize potential problems of internal validity, and heterogeneity in terms of preferences for the future of Belgium so as to maximize explaining leverage. But targeting only first-year students combined the advantage of reaching fairly easily—and not too costly—a large number of respondents, with the advantage of the diversity which can be found within first-year students (especially since the survey was carried out in the beginning of the academic year—drop-out rate is quite high among first-year students).

Most of the drawings of Belgium (90%) were in fact—mental—maps of Belgium. They confirm the importance of the two most prominent elements of the territorial conflict in the country: the language border and the position of Brussels. In fact, one out of two respondents drew the internal language border and Brussels. Maps can be analysed in different ways. Since the future of Belgium is intrinsically linked to the debate on internal boundaries, we have looked at the way in which this debate is reflected: drawing of the language border and position of Brussels *vis-à-vis* the border. We thus classified the drawings according to features directly related to that, with inter-coder reliability checks. On the one hand, we used a dichotomous variable to discriminate the presence or not of the language border (see examples in Figure 2). On the other hand, we captured the position of Brussels on the map. There are three mutually exclusive possibilities (see examples in Figure 3): first, it can be located fully north of the language border (that is the ‘geographically correct’ answer); second, it can be drawn through the border (that is geographically incorrect, but reflects the fact that Brussels is seen as being in the middle of Belgium, in between the two main language groups); and, third, it can be on the language border, either in Flanders or in Wallonia (that is again geographically incorrect, but politically sensitive, since there is only a very small distance between Brussels and the French-speaking region of Wallonia whose political parties have often demanded this gap to be closed).

We assumed that Dutch speakers are more likely to draw the language border and put Brussels correctly. Conversely, we assumed French speakers are less likely to draw the language border and to draw it through Brussels or touching Brussels. But the results are not convincing. That is, there are no differences between the members of the two language groups when drawing Belgium and, above all, its internal boundaries, even though they are the main sources of division. To control for other variables, triangulation may be very helpful. Indeed, triangulation of mental maps with data from other methods, such as surveys or interviews (Breux, 2008; Breux *et al.*, 2011), is an interesting way to increase the explaining leverage of mental maps—as was confirmed by a pilot study conducted on 200 students (Reuchamps *et al.*, 2009). To do so, after completing the drawing, the students were invited to fill in a survey inquiring about

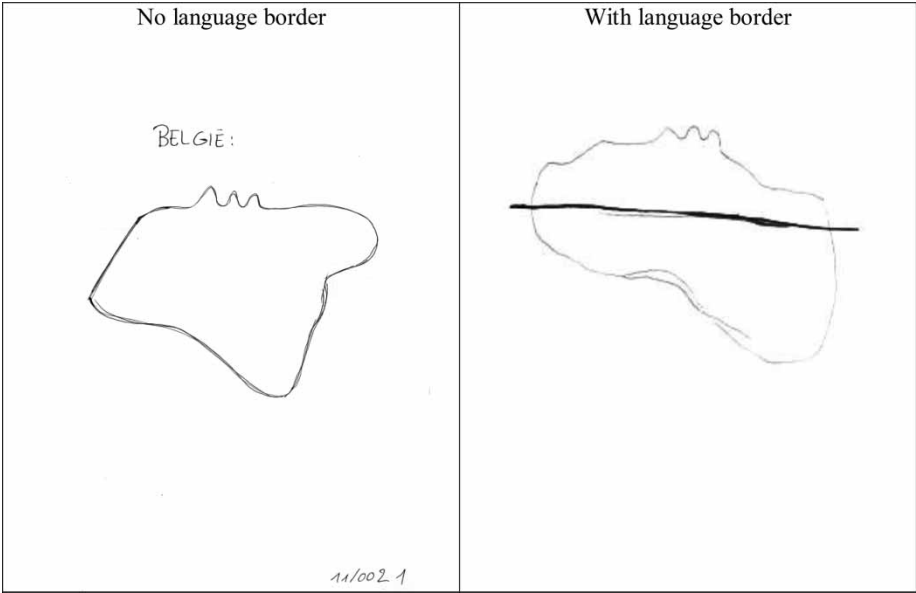


Figure 2. Language border

their socio-demographics, political knowledge, political interest, voting behaviour and political attitudes concerning Belgium and its future. The statistical models, controlling for gender, political knowledge and nationality of the respondents (over one-tenth of the respondents were non-Belgian), confirm that Flemish- and French-speaking students do not differ fundamentally in their mental construction of boundaries and frontiers. The only significant, but weak, difference between the two main language groups is to be found in the position of the Brussels: quite surprisingly, French-speaking students tend to draw Brussels more often in a geographically correct way (above the language border) than Dutch-speaking students who tend to see Brussels in a mediating position between Flanders and Wallonia.

None the less, federal dynamics in Belgium is not only a matter of language *per se*, but also and, above all, of identities (Sinardet, 2008). The mental maps of Belgium did capture these dynamics. Respondents who identify exclusively as Flemish are more likely to draw the language border and to put Brussels—moreover, correctly—in their mental representation of Belgium. By contrast, the respondents who feel only as Belgians are more likely, unsurprisingly, not to draw any internal boundaries. Their representation of their country is one with no elements of internal division. In other words, the mental representation of the individuals tends to match their ethno-territorial identification. Mental maps were helpful in shedding light on this relationship. The innovative use—with caution to ensure both internal and external validity—of mental maps with a more classic survey design (re)emphasize the fact that

political identification and preferences really shape the perception of the place where one lives. Citizens don't have an unbiased and complete representation

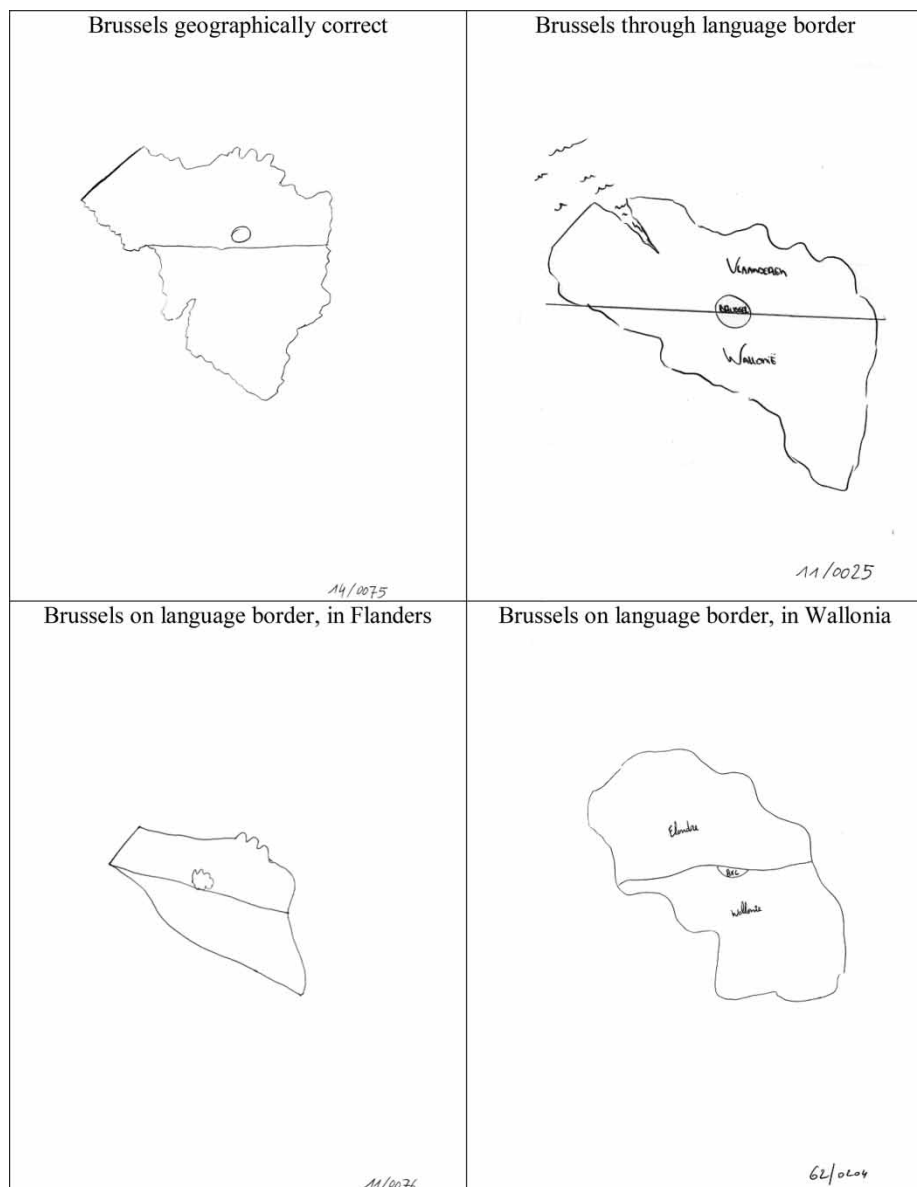


Figure 3. Position of Brussels

of their polity, but use cognitive shortcuts. Mental maps can indeed capture these shortcuts and their political meaning. In this case they have brought to the surface a division *within* the Flemish part of the country that is more important than the division between the language groups. (Reuchamps *et al.*, forthcoming)

The findings from the drawings of Belgium thus reveal that differences between north and south are not tremendous. This confirms the surveys. It also confirms the deliberative experiments, which show that dialogue between language groups is possible. Yet focus groups underpin quite a degree of frustration among the citizens with how the current federal system works. There is, thus, need and room for greater and more active involvement of citizens in the future of Belgium.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to look at the future of Belgian federalism through the eyes of the citizens. To do so, it explored four different techniques and the insights they yield: surveys, focus groups, deliberative experiments and mental maps. As a starting point it was noted the citizens had only a limited role in the federalization of the process. In consociational Belgium, they were merely voters and, above all, voters of only the political parties of their own community. None the less, the increasing support for regionalist parties on both sides of the language border was an important motor to the transformation of Belgium from a unitary state to a federal state. Moreover, while citizens were merely voters throughout the federalization, they were also, but only, members of different language groups, which are seen in constant opposition with each other.

None the less, both quantitative and qualitative data show quite convincingly that, on the side of the population, the issue of state reform has a low salience. On top of this, while there are differences, the preferences of Dutch speakers and French speakers are not so distant from each other—each of the different techniques presented in this article confirm it. There is, thus, a paradox in the Belgian federal system. The political elites, who have always played the most prominent role in decision making (it is a feature inherited from the consociational history of Belgium), have had increasing difficulties in reaching an agreement on state reform, i.e. on how to organize the coexistence of Dutch speakers and French speakers in an efficient federation. In fact, parties—and not only regionalist parties—of each language group defend positions that are quite different and hardly compatible. The Belgian community crises are mainly the product of political-institutional dynamics. Furthermore, behind these oppositions is the assumption of large differences between the two main language groups.

Yet, an exploration of citizens' perceptions and preferences through different techniques demonstrates that there are perhaps even more differences within the members of a language group than between language groups. But, on the other hand, the deliberative experiments demonstrate that citizens, regardless of their language, are able to communicate peacefully and constructively with one another, if institutional conditions conducive of deliberation are set up. Belgium has always been a divided country: religion, class and, above all, language have divided the population. But these cleavages evolve over time and they are not as clear-cut as is often assumed. To have a future, federalism in Belgium has to take into account these cleavages with no under-estimation but also no over-estimation.

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