

# Support for Regionalization in Federal Belgium: The Role of Political Socialization

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Regionalization, in the form of a dispersion of political power away from national political centers to regional governments, has been a defining feature of European politics since the 1970s. The article focuses on how institutional regionalization changed citizens' attitudes about the division of competences between the central and regional level. It argues that regional institutions and policies exert a socializing effect on citizens' preference in favor of these institutions through a mechanism of adaptive preferences. First, attitudes are studied across cohorts in a single population to test whether cohorts that came of age in a context of more institutional regionalization are more favorable towards regional decision-making than cohorts that came of age in a centralized state. The analyses indeed show evidence for a socializing effect of institutional regionalization. Second, the article shows how regional elites' discourses may moderate the relationship between institutional regionalization and citizens' attitudes about regionalization. We study Belgium as a crucial case. We use five cross-sectional datasets of the Flemish and Walloon populations during the course of increased regionalization in Belgium (1991–2007).

The dispersion of political power away from national political centers to other levels of government, primarily the European Union (EU) and subnational levels, has been a defining feature of European politics in recent decades (Hooghe et al. 2016). These dynamics raise questions about the relationship between changes in the division of competences between government levels and citizens' attitudes about this reallocation. Particularly, these dynamics raise the question of why citizens prefer certain divisions of competences. A vast literature has studied north-American cases (Kincaid and Cole 2016, 2011; Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis 2011) and the attitudinal outcomes of EU integration (e.g., de Vries and Arnold 2011; De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Goeminne 2008; Verhaegen et al. 2018). This article aims to further develop this scholarship by focusing on attitudes to regionalization

within European countries. Specifically, it focuses on whether, and if so how, institutional regionalization changed citizens' attitudes about the division of competences between the central and regional level in Belgium. The contribution argues that the socializing effects of institutional regionalization play a key role in understanding citizens' attitudes about the division of competences, in addition to earlier identified aspects such as citizens' regional identification and utilitarian considerations (Henderson, Jeffery, and Wincott 2014; Verhaegen *et al.* 2018).

Regionalization is a multifaceted political phenomenon that has restructured European polities far beyond federal countries (Hooghe *et al.* 2016). Even deeply centralized countries, such as France, have been impacted. Some countries turned into federal states, as is the case for Belgium. Drivers of regionalization processes have been extensively studied. Regionalist movements or parties (De Winter and Tursan 2003; Keating 2013), national party systems (Alonso 2012; Swenden and Maddens 2009), and citizens' or society's preferences (Erk 2003a; Keating 2013) have been identified as having impacted regionalization. Others have investigated the process of EU integration (e.g., Brusis 2002) or globalization (e.g., Fitjar 2009) as drivers of institutional regionalization.

Curiously, however, little has been written about the attitudinal changes that regionalization brought about. This contribution tackles this question head-on. We perceive the relationship between attitudes about regionalization and institutional regionalization as a cyclical process. It has frequently been studied how attitudes may impact institutional change, yet our contribution argues that attitudinal changes may in turn result from regionalization.

The article contends that institutions—in the form of formal institutions, policies, or any stabilized rules and practices—should be brought in the analysis of attitudes towards regionalization. Specifically, institutions may exert a socializing effect on citizens' preferences for the institutional setup citizens are exposed to, through the mechanism of adaptive preferences (e.g., Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Pierson 1993; Svallfors 2010; Soss and Schram 2007). Building on the literature on political socialization and political generations, we expect that when institutional change occurs, younger cohorts that grow up within the new system will adapt their preferences more to the new system than older cohorts that formed more stable political preferences by the time they experienced institutional change (Abdelzadeh and Lundberg 2016; Campbell 2006; Jennings and Stoker 2004; Rekker 2018).

The article further elaborates on the mechanism of adaptive preferences and argues that it rests not only on the institutional set-up during the formative years, but also on regional political elites' discourses about regionalization. We show how the discourses on regionalization of regional political elites may increase the salience of institutional regionalization—and thus the process of adaptive preferences—and affect the attitudes of all cohorts.

This study selects Belgium as a crucial case (Lijphart 1971) where the variables under scrutiny are magnified. Belgium<sup>1</sup> underwent a major transformation from a unitary to a federal state in recent decades (Deschouwer 2012; Dodeigne et al. 2015; Petersohn, Behnke, and Rhode 2015; Toubeau 2018). The process started with the first state reform in 1970. The last state reform thus far was in 2011. The availability of five cross-sectional datasets of the Belgian population during the course of increased regionalization in Belgium (1991–2007) allows for the necessary longitudinal perspective.

The analyses show that after 1991, attitudes about regionalization have drifted apart between Dutch-speaking Flemish and French-speaking Walloon citizens.<sup>2</sup> Whereas in 1991, on average, both groups agreed that slightly more competences should be attributed to the central level than to the regional and community levels, Walloons became more opposed to regionalization in the decades to follow. In addition, we show that early socialization matters as we report a difference between cohorts in Wallonia. Finally, our findings highlight the role of regional elites' political discourse in both regions for all cohorts.

The article is organized as follows. The next section elaborates on the state of the art and our theoretical argument. Another section presents our research design and justifies the choice for Belgium as a crucial case. This is followed by a section dedicated to empirical analysis. The concluding sections discuss the implications of the results, both within the context of regionalization in Belgium and how the findings are relevant to similar cases of institutional regionalization that are currently unfolding or being discussed.

## How Institutional Regionalization Shapes Citizens' Attitudes towards Regionalization

In the most recent and comprehensive study of citizens' attitudes towards regionalization, Henderson et al. (2014) show that identification and utilitarian considerations play a key role in explaining citizens' attitudes about the division of competences. The current article adds political socialization by institutions as a determinant of citizens' attitudes towards regionalization.

### Previous Research: Identity-Based and Utilitarian Explanations

It is well established that in Europe few citizens exclusively identify with one political community (Duchesne and Frogner 2008, 1994; Risse 2010). While acknowledging this multilevel nature of political identities in Europe, research shows that citizens are more supportive of government at a certain level when they identify with the political–geographical community that corresponds with this level of government (Verhaegen et al. 2018). In their comparative study of citizenship after the nation state, Henderson et al. show that “*a greater sense of regional identity*

is positively associated with support for regional policy control" (2014, 169; see also Guinjoan and Rodon 2014). However, the effect of regional identification is not entirely straightforward. First, it appears to be conditional on a certain level of regional identification within a community. Indeed, Henderson et al. showed that regional identification accounts for various dimensions of preferences for regionalization, but only in regions where regional identification is strong (Henderson et al. 2014). In regions where regional identification is weak, individual citizens' regional identification is not significantly related to their preferences for regionalization. Second, research shows that dual and exclusive regional identification result in support for different types of regionalization. Individuals with dual identification both to their region and their central state may support further regionalization, but not in the form of a secession, which individuals with exclusive identities are more likely to favor (Serrano 2013; Guibernau 2006).

Not only the role of identification, but also of utilitarian considerations is observed (e.g., Gabel and Palmer 1995; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Verhaegen et al. 2018). The rational utilitarian reasoning implies that institutions allocate resources, which may foster support among those who benefit (individually or as a group, perceived or objectively) from this allocation, and opposition by citizens who do not benefit (Campbell 2003; Pierson 1993).

While research on this mechanism has been more extensive on the case of the EU, some studies on regionalization have studied it from the collective perspective. Henderson et al. (2014) showed that citizens in richer regions are more supportive of regionalization than citizens in poorer regions. The latter tend to favor more authority for the central state. Based on their comparative data, the relationship they report is weak, yet consistent with the hypothesis.

In line with this literature, the empirical part of the current study takes into account that part of the variation in citizens' attitudes about regionalization is explained by their sense of regional identification and utilitarian calculation. However, the article argues that a substantial part of the explanation for variation in citizens' attitudes lies elsewhere: in their political socialization.

### **Political Socialization by Institutions**

In this article, political socialization is considered as the process of acquisition of prevailing norms about the organization of government across levels (Greenstein 1970; Niemi and Hepburn 1995). The literature on policy feedback offers a stimulating starting point to understand why and how political socialization by institutions would play a role in shaping citizens' attitudes towards regionalization. This literature describes how institutions and policies can shape citizens' attitudes and behavior towards institutions, policies and the broader political system (for a

review see [Campbell 2012](#)). The core idea is that institutions and policies are not only outputs of political systems, but that they should also be considered as inputs ([Campbell 2012](#)). In this respect, institutions and policies exert a socializing effect on individual citizens and specific segments of society through processes of adaptive preferences. Adaptive preferences mean that citizens will grow to prefer the policies and institutional setups they are used to (see also [Svallfors 2010](#), 131). In this article, we elaborate on this mechanism and contend that it rests on the regional institutions and policies, as well as on regional elites' discourses about these institutions and policies.

Based on a study of Eastern and Western Germans' attitudes toward state intervention, [Svallfors \(2010\)](#) shows that institutions convey messages regarding public institutions' legitimate and desirable scope of intervention. He demonstrates that in a context where institutional change occurred, and thus where different cohorts got socialized by different institutions, political socialization and the mechanism of adaptive preferences become visible. The study reports a significant convergence of attitudes towards state intervention in Eastern and Western Germany since reunification due to attitudinal change of Eastern Germans. Western Germans' attitudes remained stable across time and cohorts.

Specifically, the study shows a higher convergence with West Germans in terms of attitudes towards state redistribution among younger Eastern Germans than among older Germans<sup>3</sup>. The different context of early age socialization is argued to explain this difference. The study thus demonstrates that cohorts matter to understand political attitudes (see also [Grasso et al. 2019](#); [Tiberj 2017](#)). This observation is in line with theories on political socialization, which highlight that the context in which individuals come of age is crucial in the development of political and societal attitudes ([Flanagan 2013](#)). Particularly early and mid-adolescence are observed to be periods in which political attitudes and orientations are open to change, after which they become more stable ([Abdelzadeh and Lundberg 2016](#); [Dinas 2013](#); [Flanagan 2004](#); [Hatemi et al. 2009](#); [M. Hooghe and Wilkenfeld 2008](#); [Sears and Brown 2013](#)).

For this reason, we expect that individuals will be more supportive of regionalization when they came of age in a context of higher levels of regionalization. Institutional regionalization increases the salience of the regions by organizing culture, education, parts of economic development and many other issue areas along these lines, and by organizing the political system (elections and political parties) accordingly. It is expected that for individuals that came of age within the context of higher levels of regionalization, this division of political power is seen as more "natural" or evident. This reasoning is in line with what has previously been referred to as the "mere exposure effect" and the "status quo bias" ([Rekker 2018](#)). We hypothesize that *the higher the level of institutional*

*regionalization when a cohort came of age, the higher their support for regionalization will be.*

Yet, institutional change does not take place in a political vacuum. Key political actors also contribute to the mechanism of adaptive preferences as they may raise awareness about (certain aspects of) institutional change, and they may voice positive or negative evaluations of these changes. In their communication, they can also try to politicize differences and similarities between regions. They contribute thereby to shaping the public discourse about institutional regionalization. Typically, it is interest groups (Anderson and Lynch 2007) and political elites either at the national (Soss and Schram 2007) or at the regional level (Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2014) that play such a role. Specifically, it has been observed that regional political elites within a single country may voice different framings of existing and desirable institutional arrangements (Béland and Lecours 2008; Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2014; McEwen 2005). In this respect, regional elites' discourse on regionalization is central to the operation of regional institutions' socializing effects and the adaptation of individual preferences that may ensue.

We hypothesize that *the more regional elites' discourses stress the salience of the issue of regionalization and offer support to institutional regionalization, the higher individual support for regionalization.*

## Belgium as a Crucial Case

We study the effects of institutional regionalization on citizens' attitudes about regionalization through the case of Belgium. This article is explorative in the sense that it intends to introduce an original explanation in the literature on attitude formation in the context of institutional regionalization, namely political socialization by regional institutions and the mechanism of adaptive preferences they may trigger alongside regional elite/public discourses. We selected Belgium as a crucial case because this category of case-studies is "hypothesis-generating" with an exploratory purpose (Lijphart 1971). Crucial cases display variables of interest that are present in a special manner (Naroll 1966, cited in Lijphart 1971). This article uses the cases of Flanders and Wallonia to study the role of institutional socialization in explaining variation in attitudes about regionalization as the inhabitants of these two regions experienced the same Belgian state reforms, yet with high variation in the content and intensity of elite discourses about regionalization at different points in time.

## Institutional Reforms and Cohorts

A first crucial aspect of the Belgian case is that institutional regionalization unfolded in a step-wise manner. This allows us to disentangle the effects of cumulative reforms on different age cohorts over time. Since 1970, Belgium has

**Table 1** Specification of cohorts

	Pre-state reforms towards regionalization	Establishment of regions and communities (1 <sup>st</sup> to 3 <sup>rd</sup> state reform)	Establishment of the Federal state Belgium (4 <sup>th</sup> state reform)
Formative period	1830–1969	1970–1992	1993 – . . .
Years of birth in surveys	1904–1951	1952–1974	1975–1989

undergone a series of reforms, moving away from a unitary territorial organization of power (Deschouwer 2012; Dodeigne et al. 2016; Petersohn, Behnke, and Rhode 2015; Toubeau 2018). The recognition of new subnational institutions, the regions and communities, in 1970 is a first turning point. The 1993 constitutional reform that transformed the unitary Belgian state into a federal state is the second turning point. This reform is the starting point of another series of state reforms that progressively entrenched the federal nature of Belgium. This process has been shaped by the interaction of territorial, identity and party politics (Popelier and Cantillon 2013).

Following Svallfors' research design, this article takes advantage of the institutional developments of Belgium and follows a historical-institutionalist tradition of analyzing formative moments (Svallfors 2010, 121). To do so, we study attitudes about regionalization among different cohorts in the Belgian population. A cohort is a group of individuals that has been exposed to a shared socialization process, within the same political historical context (Svallfors 2010; Yang and Land 2008). Because we aim to study whether, and if so how, institutional regionalization relates to variation in citizens' attitudes about regionalization in Belgium, we construct cohorts based on the turning points in institutional regionalization in Belgium mentioned above (1970 and 1993). We take eighteen years old, the legal voting age and start of adulthood in Belgium, as the cut-off point to distinguish cohorts. Table 1 shows how this combination of turning points in institutional regionalization and life stages led to the grouping of respondents of the five cross-sections of Flemish and Walloon Belgians in three different cohorts.

The first cohort includes respondents who were over eighteen years old when the first state reform towards regionalization took place in 1970 (born before 1952). These respondents were socialized up to adulthood in unitary Belgium and reached voting age before parties were split between the regions. They experienced a change in the institutional setup of their country through processes of

federalization since 1970s, and becoming a federal state in 1993, after their most formative years. The second cohort includes respondents who grew up in a period of increased regionalization, yet Belgium was still a unitary state (born between 1952 and 1974). During this period, the regions and communities were established, which became particularly visible to citizens through the establishment of regional and community parliaments and elections, and through the movement of competences in the areas of education and public transport to the regional and community level. The third cohort includes all respondents who were younger than eighteen years old when Belgium turned into a federal state (born in 1975 and later).

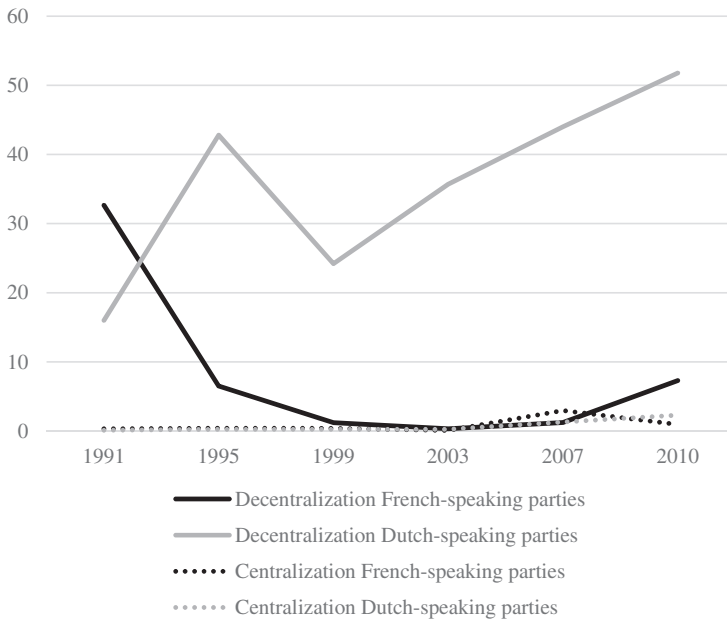
Defining cohorts in this way allows us to analyze the socializing impact of institutional regionalization on attitudes about regionalization. Thus, in line with our first hypothesis, *we expect that respondents born in 1975 and later will be more supportive of regionalization, both in Flanders and in Wallonia, than respondents socialized in a less regionalized context.*

### **Diverging Regional Elite Discourses**

A second crucial aspect of the Belgian case is that regional elites' discourses on institutional regionalization in Belgium differ greatly between Wallonia and Flanders, both in content and intensity. This allows for an analysis of the impact of political elites' discourses on the formation of attitudes about regionalization.

French- and Dutch-speaking political elites in Belgium present different worldviews regarding regionalization. While political elites in both regions refer to regional identification and regional economic interests, both the analysis of the situation, the conclusions drawn from it, and the intensity of discourses about regionalization differ. We use this variation in discourses to identify the impact of elite discourses on political socialization processes regarding attitudes about regionalization. Specifically, this variation is useful to distinguish situations where strong and salient elite discourses on regionalization are intertwined with institutional regionalization and situations where institutional regionalization is not supported by elite discourses. In that perspective, elite discourses' variation is instrumental to build additional analytical traction to study the mechanism of adaptive preferences. Previous research on attitudes of political elites, and an analysis of party manifestos allow us to describe the context of elite discourses to which the Flemish and Walloon respondents in our samples have been exposed.

First, studying attitudes of political elites, Dodeigne and his colleagues report that French-speaking Members of Parliament (MPs) are less in favour of further regionalization than Dutch-speaking MPs (2016). This result holds regardless of MPs partisan affiliation, but is strongest in the case of the two Flemish nationalist parties, Vlaams Belang and N-VA. Interestingly, Dodeigne *et al.* show that there is



**Figure 1** Party discourse on (de)centralization by region.

*Data:* Manifesto Project Dataset (version 2019a).

*Notes:* Each manifesto received a score on decentralization and centralization that corresponds to the share of quasi-sentences in the respective category (i.e., decentralization or centralization) calculated as a fraction of the overall number of allocated codes (i.e., all topics coded by the manifesto project) per document (Volkens et al. 2019). Per region, the scores of all parties are added.

a relative incongruence between individual voters' preferences and political parties' position. This leads them to rule out the possibility that MPs' position are a mere reflection of Walloons and Flemings preferences regarding regionalization. Rather, Flemish and Walloon political elites voice different discourses regarding regionalization since the federalization of the country, and this might have an impact on citizens' views about regionalization. Deschouwer (2013, 2006) suggests that the evolution of the party system in Flanders, where parties with a regionalist agenda act as agenda setters, accounts for the nature of elites' discourses in this region.

Second, a historical analysis of party manifestos demonstrates the diverging salience and positions on ethno-regionalist issues in Flanders and Wallonia (Sinardet and Morsink 2011).

Figure 1 shows the salience of the division of competences expressed in party manifesto discourse on decentralization and centralization between 1991 and 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The figure shows that in 1995, the salience of decentralization steeply decreased and remained low in French-speaking parties' manifestos. [Sinardet and Morsink \(2011\)](#) even showed that no French-speaking party has advocated in favor of further institutional reform. In contrast, the salience of decentralization rose and remained high in Flemish party manifestos (see also [Deschouwer 2013](#)). Both Dutch-speaking mainstream parties and ethno-regionalist parties have supported increased regionalization in Belgium ([Sinardet and Morsink 2011](#)). The figure further shows that parties in both regions draw little attention to centralization.

Third, the analysis of the discourses of Belgian political elites on a central issue in the regionalization process, social policy, illustrates how the desirable state of affairs is framed as both related to Flemish identity and Flanders' economic interests, put in contrast to those of Walloons. Flemish governments, backed by the Flemish nationalist movement, have framed social policy as a matter of solidarity among Flemings, resulting in the exclusion of Walloons. Flemish governments have repeatedly emphasized that “*Wat we zelf doen, doen we beter*” (“what we do ourselves, we do better”) ([Erk 2003b](#)). Historically advocated by the Flemish Movement since the 1980s, the further federalization of the Belgian insurance system draws, first, on the idea that social policies in Flanders should reflect the needs, values and policy preferences of Flemings. Second, it refers to the results of studies commissioned by the Flemish Movement on the financial flux between the two regions that report that “Walloons willingly overuse countrywide social insurance benefits or, alternatively, that their culture encourages them to do so” ([Béland and Lecours 2008](#), 166).

The political discourse on social policy of French-speaking elites, in contrast, is defensive and formulated in a reaction to the Flemish discourse (hence the few times the issue is mentioned in French-speaking parties' manifestos, which are targeting French-speakers, not Flemish audiences). In their reactions, Walloon elites have emphasized a national definition of social solidarity, rather than a regional one, thereby disputing the framing of social policy in terms of regional identity. Walloon elites have also opposed the divisive utilitarian conception of social policy. They have reminded Flemings that Flanders benefited the most from the national social insurance system for over one hundred years. Francophone experts also dispute the financial analyses conducted by the Flemish Movement ([Béland and Lecours 2008](#)). Overall, the Walloon elite discourse regarding social policy draws on country-wide identity ties and economic interests to oppose further regionalization of the welfare system.

Based on this, and in line with our second hypothesis, we expect that *in Flanders elite discourses will strengthen citizens' support for regionalization, as regionalization and the interests of Flanders have been very salient and politicized, whereas in Wallonia we expect no impact at all as the debate was much weaker.* This

means that *in Wallonia we expect that the political socialization by institutions took place without an influence from elite discourses.*

## Empirical Analysis

Apart from the innovative research design that the Belgian case offers, another important reason for studying Belgium is that we can rely on quantitative observations at the regional level at different points in time to illuminate the plausibility of our arguments.<sup>5</sup> The availability of data on citizens' attitudes at the regional level is crucial. Yet, most surveys either do not allow for disaggregation of data at the regional level, or the number of observations is too small to permit statistical analysis.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in very few cases, surveys include any region-specific items (De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Goeminne 2008, 131). Potentially, crucial explanatory variables regarding citizens' attitudes towards the regional level are thus simply absent. This issue exemplifies the methodological nationalism pointed out in other fields (Jeffery and Schakel 2013; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Last, the availability of data collected at various points in time is essential for the study of socialization processes.

### Data

The Belgian post-election surveys conducted by the Institute of Social and Political Research (PIOP–IPSO) are an exception in this regard, as they include questions on citizens' attitudes about regionalization since 1991.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the data allow for the analysis of attitudinal changes after the turning point of 1993 when Belgium became a federal state. Our analyses build on five cross sections conducted in 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007 (ISPO–PIOP Belgian Federal Election Studies)<sup>8</sup>. In each survey, a representative sample of Flemish and Walloon citizens of voting age (eighteen years and older) was interviewed about a broad range of political and societal topics, including their attitudes about regionalization. Between 1,801 and 4,116 Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians in Flanders and Wallonia were interviewed in each study. [Supplementary Appendix A2](#) provides more information on the sample sizes, response rate and interview modes used in each survey. Respondents' attitudes about regionalization are measured with the following question: *“The form of government that the country should have is still a matter of discussion. Some think that ‘Flanders and Wallonia must each be able to decide over everything by themselves’. Others think that ‘Belgium, Flemish and Walloons together, must be able to decide about everything’. Where would you place yourself on the scale?”* On a scale of 0 to 10, citizens are asked to indicate the level of government in Belgium that should be in charge of decision-making. In our analyses, “0” reflects the opinion that *“Belgium, Flemish and Walloons together, must be able to*

**Table 2** Attitudes towards regionalization by year

	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007
Entire sample (Flanders + Wallonia)	4.344 (0.053)	4.013 (0.053)	3.968 (0.049)	4.117 (0.070)	4.199 (0.072)
Flanders	4.225 (0.084)	3.291 (0.080)	3.606 (0.070)	3.563 (0.101)	3.372 (0.090)
Wallonia	4.407 (0.067)	4.367 (0.067)	4.141 (0.064)	4.409 (0.091)	4.753 (0.101)

Sources: 1991–2007: ISPO–PIOP Belgian Federal Election Studies, Post-electoral surveys.

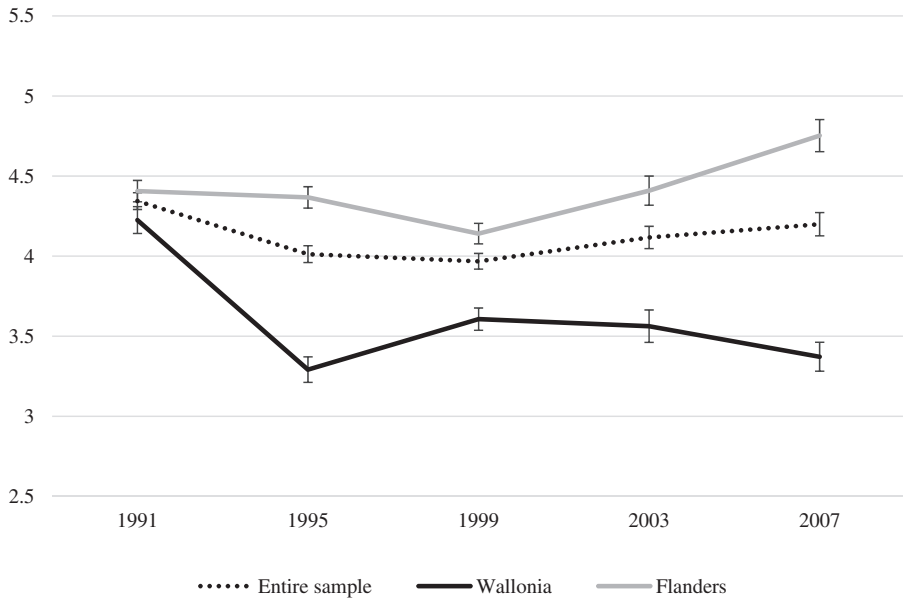
Notes: Means with standard errors between brackets are presented; 0 = everything should be decided on the central level, 10 = maximum support for regionalization; the samples are weighted for age, gender and education as to correspond to the populations they are drawn from.

*decide about everything*”; 10 refers to the opinion that all “*Flanders and Wallonia must each be able to decide over everything by themselves.*”

### Citizens’ Attitudes towards Regionalization in Belgium

As a first step of the analysis, we explore how attitudes about regionalization have evolved in the context of the regionalization of Belgium between 1991 and 2007. Table 2 presents mean levels of support for regionalization, compared to making all decisions at the national level. They are presented for the entire samples, and by linguistic community. Figure 2 presents the same values, but in a graph.

A first observation is that all mean scores are below the middle score of the scale (5). This implies that on average, both Walloon and Flemish respondents have been preferring that more decisions are made at the federal level, rather than at the subnational level. Second, we observe that attitudes about regionalization barely fluctuate if we inquire the entire sample (Flanders and Wallonia). We observe a weak decrease in support for regionalization during the 1990s, and a weak increase in the 2000s. When we split the sample by region, the pattern is entirely different. The confidence intervals in figure 2 and paired *t*-test show that in 1991 the means are not significantly different between the two regions ( $t = 0.844$ ). After twenty years of incremental reforms preparing the 1993 constitutional change, attitudes of Flemish and Walloon respondents are strikingly close. However, since the 1995 survey, Flemish respondents have been more supportive of making decisions at the regional level than Walloon respondents. From that point onwards, respondents’ opinions about the division of competences between the regional and federal levels started to vary between the two regions. In 1995, this difference is the result of decreasing support for regionalization among Walloon respondents compared to 1991. In Flanders, the observed support for

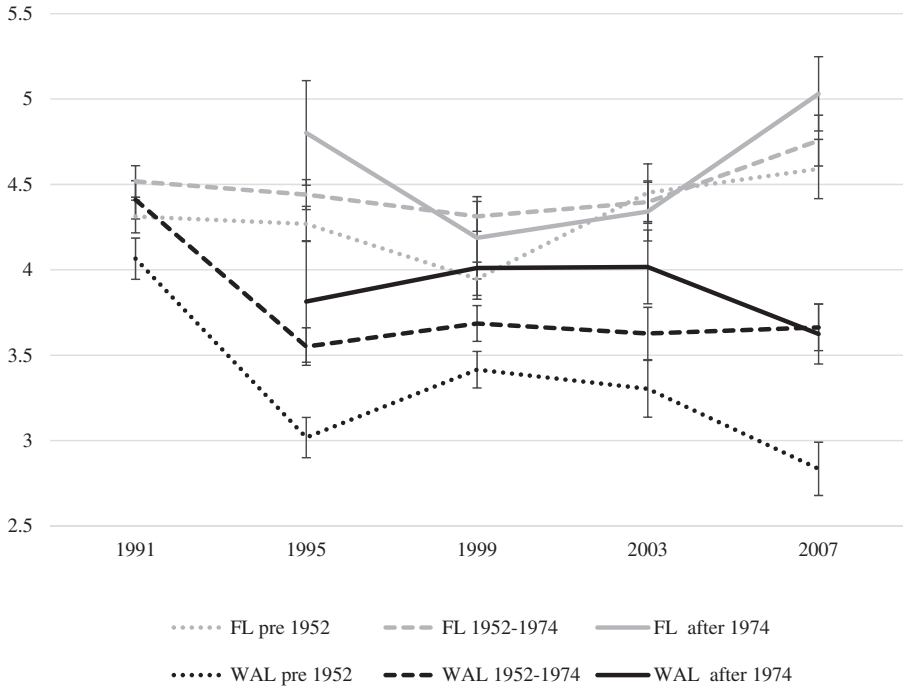


**Figure 2** Attitudes about regionalization by year and region.

*Data:* 1991–2007: ISPO-PIOP Belgian Federal Election Studies, Post-electoral surveys.

*Notes:* Responses ranged on a scale from 0 to 10 where a higher score indicates that a respondent prefers more regionalization. Means and 95 percent confidence intervals are presented. Results are weighted for age, gender, and education level. The birth years of each cohort are presented in the legend.

regionalization in 1995 is not significantly different from that observed in 1991. In 1999, attitudes in the two regions again moved towards each other, yet support for regionalization remains significantly stronger in Flanders than in Wallonia. After 1999, support for regionalization gradually increases in Flanders, and slightly decreases again in Wallonia. In 2007, the distance between Flemish and Walloon respondents increased to 1.429 points on the 11-point scale measuring attitudes about regionalization. During this sixteen-year period, dynamics in attitudes about regionalization in Wallonia and Flanders have thus been quite different. We observe that over this period of increased institutional regionalization, support for regionalization indeed increased in Flanders. This is in line with the expectations based on the logic of adaptive preferences. The evolution observed in Wallonia, however, opposes this logic. The next sections explore to what extent inquiring the role of political socialization during different life stages and variation in discourses about regionalization explains this observation.



**Figure 3** Attitudes about regionalization by year, cohort, and region.

*Data:* 1991–2007: ISPO–PIOP Belgian Federal Election Studies, Post-electoral surveys.

*Notes:* Responses ranged on a scale from 0 to 10 where a higher score indicates that a respondent prefers more regionalization. Means and 95 percent confidence intervals are presented. Results are weighted for age, gender, and education level. The birth years of each cohort are presented in the legend.

### Cohorts and Diverging Regional Paths

Based on the literature on political socialization, we expect that the effect of institutional changes on one's attitudes will be larger when such changes take place before or during one's formative years. Are respondents who have been socialized in the context of unitary Belgium less supportive of the regionalization of competences (and remain so), compared to respondents who grew up in federal Belgium? [Figure 3](#) presents the mean support for regionalization per region and per cohort. The interpretation of the significance of differences between cohorts in specific regions and at specific points in time is based on the analyses presented in [Supplementary Appendix A3](#) and [A4](#), which include controls for the most established alternative explanations for attitudes about the division of competences between government levels: identification and economic utilitarian calculation, and

political awareness and socio-demographics (Henderson, Jeffery, and Wincott 2014; Verhaegen et al. 2018). The question wording of the alternative explanations is presented in [Supplementary Appendix A5](#). Including these alternative explanations allows us to draw conclusions about the relationship between the region and cohorts respondents are part of and their support for regionalization, independent of potential covariation between respondents' region and economic utilitarian calculation, regional identification and socio-demographics (Svallfors 2010).

We observe that older cohorts tend to be less supportive of regionalization than younger cohorts. This distinction is most outspoken and statistically significant in the Walloon samples (see Figure C in [Supplementary Appendix A3](#), and Appendix A4). Here, the oldest cohort is significantly more in favor of placing competences at the federal level than the youngest cohort (1999, 2003, 2007), and the middle cohort (1995, 2007). In other words, a gap emerged between Walloons who grew up in unitary Belgium, and those who came of age in the context of regionalization. In Flanders, we only observe a statistically significant difference in support for regionalization between the oldest and middle cohort in 1999 (Figure F in [Supplementary Appendix A3](#)). These observed significant distinctions where younger cohorts are more supportive of regionalization than older cohorts are all in line with our expectations about the role of socialization when coming of age.

When comparing respondents from the same cohort but who live in different regions, we see that especially the oldest and middle cohorts drifted apart in their attitudes about the regionalization of competences. Only in 2007, opinions significantly differed between the youngest Flemish and youngest Walloon cohorts. Between 2003 and 2007, all Flemish cohorts became more supportive of regionalization, and the oldest and youngest Walloon cohorts reported more support for centralizing competences in 2007, compared to 2003. The largest gap, of 1.756 points on the 0–10 scale ([figure 3](#)), arose in 2007 between the oldest Flemish and the oldest Walloon cohorts. This gap is mainly the result of increasing support for competences at the federal level among the oldest cohort of Walloons. While the gap in attitudes between the oldest cohorts in the two regions fluctuated over time, the difference in attitudes between the middle cohorts of each region has been remarkably stable.

### **Discussion: Political Socialization and the Context of Elite Discourses**

The puzzle that emerges is one of diverging regional paths. While Flanders and Wallonia experienced similar institutional reforms, attitudes moved in opposite directions ([figure 2](#)), most clearly in 1995 and 2007, and evidence for early age political socialization is much more pronounced in the Walloon than in the Flemish samples ([figure 3](#)). We interpret these results by considering the political context in which these attitudes were measured.

In both 1991 and 1995, regionalization was high on the public agenda. The 1991 elections were the result of the government collapsing over issues that laid bare the underlying conflict along linguistic and regional lines. Indeed, governing parties were punished by voters for their feuding, and the extreme right and Flemish nationalist party “Vlaams Blok” tripled in size (to 10.35 percent of Flemish votes). This outcome resulted in the popular reference to the 1991 elections as “Black Sunday.” In Wallonia, to the contrary, the green party “Ecolo” made the most notable gains as it doubled (to 13.54 percent of Walloon votes) (Federal Public Service of Internal Affairs, 2008; Kesteloot, 2009). In 1995, reforms of economic and social policy and further developing the state reform of 1993 were two main issues on the agenda. Moreover, it was the first time that voters could also vote for their respective regional and community parliaments (in addition to the Federal Chambers) as a result of institutional regionalization through the establishment of the federal state.

As in both 1991 and 1995 state reform were high on the agenda, while we only witness a division in attitudes about regionalization between Flemish and Walloon voters in 1995 (driven by the decreased support for regionalization in Wallonia), this suggests that the institutional reform that took place in 1993 has had more impact on attitudes about regionalization than the political discourse. Yet, we would have been more confident about this conclusion should attitudinal data be available for earlier elections as well. What is clear, though, is that regionalization was highly salient in this period, causing early elections in 1991 that were followed by a long government formation period. In this context, a persisting schism appeared in attitudes about regionalization between Flemish and Walloon voters (figure 3 and Supplementary Appendix A6).

Figure 2 shows that between 2003 and 2007, another clear divergence in attitudes about regionalization occurs between Flemish and Walloon respondents. In 2007, the difference between attitudes in Flanders and Wallonia is the most pronounced one in our data. A significant change is observed in both Flanders and Wallonia: Flemish respondents became more regionalist and Walloons more “pro-Belgium.” This shift in attitudes appears against the background of the incumbent socialist and liberal federal government focusing on economic successes, and Flemish center-right parties putting “the final state reform” central in their campaigns (Sinardet and Morsink 2011). The analysis of the manifesto data in figure 1 confirms that this discourse was central in Flanders. As a result, state reform was a highly salient issue in election campaigns and debates, especially in Flanders. The context is even described as a “*tense climate between communities*” (Kesteloot 2009, 277). This salience persisted during the government formation negotiations, leading to a 196-day long deadlock.

Last, the division in attitudes between Flemish and Walloon respondents is less sharp in 1999 and 2003. This observation too is in line with our expectations as the

1999 and 2003 election campaigns were dominated by other issues, such as the state of the economy, food safety, night flights and police and justice (Sinardet and Morsink 2011), and no large state reforms took place.

The context thereby suggests that elite discourse could explain a non-trivial part of these aggregate changes in public opinion. French- and Dutch-speaking political elites in Belgium have presented different worldviews regarding regionalization, and attributed varying degrees of importance to this issue. As a result, the data provides evidence for socialization effects in Wallonia as figure 3 shows differences between cohorts, but also contextual effects of the salience of regionalization appear, as indicated by overall drops in support for regionalization in 1995 and 2007 (figure 2). The Walloon pattern can thus be understood as a case of the absence of discourses supporting regionalization. While French-speaking political elites react in their political communication to the discourses of their Dutch-speaking counterparts, the regionalization issue is not central to their manifestos (Sinardet and Morsink 2011). In this absence, our analyses show that the political socialization and adaptive effect of unitary institutions are more visible and stickier regarding respondents' attitudes about regionalization. Older Walloons' position results from the combination of two things: their socialization by centralized institutions during their youth and the lack of salient elite discourse on regionalization. The fact that their opposition to regionalization grows over time could be interpreted as a reaction to a (perceived) context that opposes their preferences and Belgian identification.

In Flanders, elite discourses on regionalization have been more outspoken, and attitudes about regionalization do not significantly differ between cohorts. These observations suggest that the socialization process of adaptive preference to institutional regionalization has taken place in the entire Flemish population, not just in younger cohorts.

Based on these observations in Wallonia and Flanders, we can conclude that the process of youth socialization (and stabilization during adulthood) appears, but that this process is moderated when discourses of regional political elites are stronger.

## **Conclusion: Political Socialization by Regional Institutions**

The results presented in this article supply support the argument that citizens' attitudes are affected by institutional changes through processes of attitudinal adaptation. We show that attitudes in Wallonia have steadily diverged from the pattern witnessed in Flanders. In Wallonia, political socialization is identified as a key mechanism through which institutional change affects attitudes. Walloon cohorts that had fully entered adult life in 1970, and thus were socialized in a unitary Belgium, are less supportive of regionalization than the youngest Walloon

cohort that has been socialized in a federal Belgium. This difference between cohorts in Wallonia holds after controlling for regional and Belgian identification and perceived economic performance.

The comparison of this pattern with the one observed in Flanders offers interesting insights for the “adaptive preferences” argument derived from institutional theory. The comparison between regions and cohorts shows that respondents of the same cohort, but who live in different regions, drifted apart in their opinions about the regionalization of competences. Indeed, even if regional identification is historically significantly stronger in Flanders than in Wallonia, all Flemish cohorts are significantly more supportive of regionalization than the two oldest Walloon cohorts in our study when controlling for identification. Building on the specificity of the Belgian case when it comes to political elites’ discourses and their preferences, we demonstrate that elite discourses are a key moderating mechanism to account for diverging attitudes about regionalization in Flanders and Wallonia.

These results illuminate political socialization by institutions and the role played by political elites in this process. First, in terms of congruence between elites and citizens, Flemish political elites (whether voluntary or involuntarily) more strongly triggered support for regionalization in the last decades than Walloon elites did. In Wallonia, the absence of elite discourses supporting regionalization and the socialization of the oldest cohort in a unitary Belgium have led them to increasingly oppose regionalization. This may suggest a counter-reaction to a process that they do not identify with. Second, while the divergence between the regional paths is driven by the oldest cohorts, the youngest cohorts in both regions have closer attitudes towards regionalization. Third, the common starting point observed in 1991, and the diverging regional paths of support for regionalization thereafter rule out an interpretation based on the responsiveness of Belgian elites—either Flemish or Walloon—to citizens’ demand for more regionalization (Dodeigne *et al.* 2016). On the contrary, insights point that elite discourses and political parties have influenced the current demand for more regionalization in Flanders.

From a methodological perspective, we framed Belgium as a crucial case. Belgium provides a unique opportunity to closely trace the development over time of institutional and attitudinal changes after 1993. From close starting points, regionalization in Belgium has jointly resulted in growing support for further regionalization in the North of the country and opposing attitudes to it in the South. Our research design and the observed interregional variation provide grounds to argue that the mechanisms behind attitudinal change should be sought in the political discourses surrounding institutional changes, or their absence, in addition to the institutions and policies.

Going back to crucial cases being “hypothesis-generating”, this case-study opens two main avenues of research. First, our article suggests that there may be a paradox—referred to by colleagues as the devolution paradox (Henderson, Jeffery, and Wincott 2014)—that conflates the lasting impact of centralized institutions and the norms of territorial uniformity that they historically promoted, and the socializing effect of more recently established regional institutions as they are experienced by different cohorts of individuals. The divergence of attitudes towards regionalization in Flanders and in Wallonia since 1993 are shaped by changes in attitudes of different cohorts in both parts of the country. Existing scholarship has largely been oblivious of how institutional socialization, and the resulting cohorts, may drive dynamics in territorial politics. This article suggests that institutional socialization offers analytical traction to account for seemingly unexpected observations such as the devolution paradox.

Second, our results confirm that identification plays a role in the story, but regional identification may itself be impacted by institutional socialization (Paasi 2003). Hence, citizens may indeed adapt their preferences about the division of competences either directly through processes of early age socialization, as studied in this article, or indirectly as political-territorial identification may mediate the relationship. In that regard, regional identification may be endogenous to institutional regionalization, and not only an exogenous factor driving support for further regionalization. More generally beyond these avenues for further research on regionalization, the article contends that research on attitudes towards institutional reform would benefit from integrating cohorts with different experiences of institutions as a key factor in explaining attitudinal formation and change.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* online.

## Notes

We would like to warmly thank the reviewers and the editor for their insightful comments which helped us sharpen our argument. We also would like to thank PIOP, ISPO, and PartiRep teams for making data available. C.D. and V.V.I. acknowledge funding by the project ERC Starting Grant Qualidem – Eroding Democracies. A qualitative (re-) appraisal of how policies shape democratic linkages in Western Democracies. The Qualidem project was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 716208). Soetkin Verhaegen’ research was funded by F.R.S.-FNRS postdoctoral fellowship 1.B.421.19F. This article reflects only the authors’ view and neither the European Research Council nor the F.R.S.-FNRS are responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

1. In this article, we write about “regionalization” when referring to the devolution of competences from the central level to the subnational level. In Belgium, the central level is the “federal level” since the establishment of Belgium as a federal state in 1993. The subnational level consists of both regions and communities, which partly overlap and partly have cross-cutting boundaries. There are three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for territorially linked issues such as economics, employment and environment. The three communities are defined by the three main language groups: the Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking communities. They govern in areas that are linked to individuals such as education, healthcare, and culture. As Belgium moved from a unitary to a federal state, this process is commonly referred to as “federalization” (rather than “regionalization”) in the Belgian public debate.
2. In this article, we focus our analyses on Dutch-speaking Flemish and French-speaking Walloons, excluding citizens living in the Brussels-Capital Region and the German-speaking Walloons.
3. This relationship is observed despite controls for other standard explanations such as education, income, economic, and employment status (Svallfors 2010).
4. In the Comparative Manifesto Project, the decentralization code corresponds to support for federalism or decentralization of political and/or economic power (Volkens *et al.* 2019). Centralization refers to general opposition to political decision-making at subnational levels of government, support for unitary government and for more centralization in political and administrative procedures.
5. Panel data would have been another choice in order to answer our research question. However, to our knowledge, no such longitudinal data exist that will allow to study citizens’ attitudes towards regionalization.
6. For an exception, see Henderson *et al.* (2014).
7. PIOP and ISPO are the respective Institutes for Social and Political Opinion Research in the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking parts of Belgium. The data we use were made available by the ISPO and PIOP—Interuniversity Centres for Political Opinion Research, sponsored by the Federal Services for Technical, Cultural and Scientific Affairs. Marc Swyngedouw (ISPO) originally collected the data for the Flemish voters and André-Paul Frogner and Pierre Baudewyns (PIOP) for the French-speaking voters. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Centre bear any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here. Also in the following elections (2009 and 2014), a post-electoral survey was organized in Belgium (by the PartiRep consortium. The PARTIREP survey was constructed by the partners of a large Interuniversity Attraction Pole – University of Antwerp, KULeuven, Free University of Brussels and Université Libre de Bruxelles—and has been funded by the Belgian Science Policy. The fieldwork for this survey has been carried out by TNS Dimarso). Yet, different survey questions were used to measure attitudes about regionalization and the other concepts of interest, so these data could not be included in the main analyses. The observations within these data do support the conclusions drawn from the 1991–2007 data, though, and are included in Appendix A6.

8. In the absence of panel data where respondents' attitudes towards regionalization are measured at different points in time, we cannot rule out a reverse causality. However, the set-up of our models is grounded in a set of theoretical expectations about the relationship between attitudes and cohorts. We include relevant covariates as controls in the models as to prevent omitted variable bias. The measure for political socialization—captured by the cohorts—is exogenous to regional identification and support for regionalization as respondents do not have agency in deciding about their birth year. Moreover, the reverse causality can also be ruled out since we are assessing the relationship between institutional context during adolescence and support for institutions at the time of completing the survey. Thus, the support for regionalization at the time of completing the survey cannot affect institutional context that one grew up in.

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