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# The Winter of Democracy

## Partitocracy in Belgium



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# Chapter 7. Partitocracy and the future of Belgium

*Revisiting Does Belgium (still) exist?*

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## Introduction

In 2006, Jaak Billiet, Bart Maddens and André-Paul Frogner raised the question: Does Belgium (still) exist? And they explored the differences in political culture between Flemings and Walloons (Billiet, Maddens, & Frogner, 2006). 15 years later, we continue their journey and seek to uncover whether these differences have increased or by contrast declined. Because the general endeavour of the volume is to disentangle partitocracy in Belgium, we focus on political differences or similarities between the two main language groups and add to the perspective of voters, the perspective of candidates. This allows us to grasp possible differences not only between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers but also between political elites and masses. Billiet and colleagues started their exploration from the gradual cultural and social divergence between Flanders and Wallonia that led to two separate political systems in Belgium. They came to the conclusion that “quite a few differences in public opinion still exist between Flemings and francophone Belgians” (Billiet et al., 2006, p. 929). In particular, the former have a stronger regional – i.e. Flemish – identity whereas the latter a stronger national – i.e. Belgian – identity, which goes hand in hand with preferences for further regionalization in Flanders but less in Wallonia, even though emotional ties to Belgium do still exist in each region, albeit more widespread in Wallonia than in Flanders.

In order to explain these differences, the researchers concluded that “contextual characteristics are more important than national character” (Billiet et al., 2006, p. 929). In 15 years, the political and social context in Belgium has quite dramatically changed and centrifugal but also centripetal dynamics can be observed (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; 2020; 2022). Such dynamics can be seen both between language groups and between so-called ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ (De

Winter & Van Wynsberghe, 2015). The objective of this chapter is therefore to look at the evolution of political attitudes and opinions over the last 15 years regarding the future of Belgium. Beside voter surveys, we can rely on candidate surveys that offer insightful data to grasp the evolution of this question in both language groups and between masses and elites. In this chapter, we first look at the left-right dimension, before focusing on ethno-territorial identities and finally turn to state reform preferences. In so doing, we seek to revisit the underlying twofold question: does Belgium (still) exist and will it continue to do so?

## 1. Left-right dimension

A first political cleavage for which we investigate the potential differences between Flemings and Walloons is the political left-right dimension. Drawing on the Belgian Candidate Surveys (2007-2019), the Belgian National Election Study (2007-2019) as well as at the PartiRep (2014) and RepResent (2019) studies<sup>1</sup>, we look at how voters and candidates in both Flanders and Wallonia position themselves on the following question:

“In politics, people often speak of ‘left’ and ‘right’. This can be represented on a scale where 0 indicates ‘fully left’ and 10 indicates ‘fully right’ – with intermediate steps depending on whether one is more or less inclined to the left or right. If you think about your own position, where would you position yourself on such a scale?”

In the last years, we have witnessed an increasing share of votes for parties on the political left in Wallonia, and for parties on the political right in Flanders (Dodeigne & Renard, 2018). Combined with the consociational features of the Belgian federation, this has substantially complicated the formation of federal governments when majorities in both language groups were sought – either to reform the Constitution during a state reform or to contribute to the symbolic legitimacy of the government (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Deschouwer, 2009). Despite lengthy negotiations, the three last regular governments did not have a majority on either the Flemish (Di Rupo, De Croo) or the Francophone side (Michel I) – in addition to three minority cabinets (Michel II, Wilmes I & II). This led the Flemish nationalist N-VA to describe Belgium as being composed of “two democracies” – one on the left in Wallonia, and one on the right in Flanders – each of which should have the right to govern itself according to its own wishes (Sinardet, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the chapter, the voter data are weighted by age, gender, education and vote. The data for 2007 come from the Belgian National Election Study as well as the data for 2010 in Wallonia. For Flanders, the data for 2007 and 2010 were published by Abts et al. (2011) and Swyngedouw et al. (2014). In particular, we would like to thank Marc Swyngedouw for sharing the mean on the left-right scale for Flemish voters by party in 2010. The data for 2014 come from the PartiRep Election Study – European, Federal and Regional 2014: <http://www.partirep.eu/> and for 2019 from the RepResent Electoral Surveys. The candidate data are weighted by age, gender and party. The data come from the Belgian Candidate Survey 2007, 2010, 2014, 2019.

Based on these evolutions and electoral results (Reuchamps et al., 2020a), one would thus expect to find an increasing share of both voters and candidates in Flanders to position themselves on the political right, as well an increasing share of both voters and candidates in Wallonia to position themselves on the political left. When we look at the results of the aforementioned surveys in Table 7.1, however, we see that the picture is not that clear-cut.

Table 7.1: A comparison of the left-right self-placement of voters (V) and candidates (C) in Flanders and in Wallonia from 2007 to 2019 (0-10 scale)

Parties	2007			2010			2014			2019		
	V	C	Δ	V	C	Δ	V	C	Δ	V	C	Δ
CD&V	5,4*	5,4	0,0	5,8	5,5	0,3	5,4	4,8	0,7	5,3	4,9	0,4
N-VA	5,4*	6,1	-0,7	5,9	6,7	-0,8	5,9	6,8	-0,9	7,2	7,1	0,1
Groen	4,0	1,8	2,1	3,8	2,2	1,6	3,6	2,0	1,7	3,7***	2,1	1,6
Lijst Dedecker	5,5	7,3	-1,8	5,9	7,4	-1,5	-	-	-	-	-	-
Open VLD	5,5	6,1	-0,6	5,4	6,7	-1,3	5,6	6,5	-0,9	5,6	6,4	-0,8
PVDA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	2,7***	0,4	2,3
sp.a	4,1**	2,5	1,6	3,9	2,4	1,5	4,0	1,9	2,1	4,1	2,0	2,1
VB	6,8	8,2	-1,4	6,4	8,4	-2,0	7,1	8,6	-1,5	7,3	8,0	-0,7
<b>Flanders</b>												
Mean	5,39	5,59	-0,20	5,41	5,74	-0,33	5,34	5,30	0,04	5,76	5,39	0,37
Std. dev.	0,89	2,04	1,19	0,88	2,01	1,22	0,93	2,12	1,27	1,52	2,46	1,22
CDH	5,3	5,2	0,1	4,9	5,1	-0,2	5,4	5,2	0,2	5,3	5,1	0,2
Ecolo	4,6	2,8	1,7	3,8	2,3	1,5	3,9	2,3	1,6	4,5***	2,6	2,0
FN	5,8	8,9	-3,1	5,5	-	-	8,2	-	-	-	-	-
FDF/DéFI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5,9	4,7	1,2
MR	6,1	7,1	-1,1	5,2	6,9	-1,7	6,5	7,1	-0,7	6,9	7,3	-0,4
PP	-	-	-	-	8,0	-	-	8,6	-	7,6	-	-
PS	3,6	2,8	0,8	4,2	2,1	2,1	3,5	0,9	2,6	3,7	1,2	2,5
PTB	3,0	-	-	3,0	-	-	3,6	0,4	3,2	3,6***	0,3	3,3
<b>Wallonia</b>												
Mean	4,97	4,97	0,00	4,57	4,17	0,40	4,73	3,52	1,21	4,96	3,33	1,63
Std. dev.	1,04	2,12	1,44	0,54	2,09	1,57	1,30	2,74	1,12	1,37	2,60	1,35
Δ Mean Fla./Wall.	0,42	0,62	-0,2	0,84	1,57	-0,73	0,61	1,78	-1,17	0,80	2,06	-1,26

Sources: Belgian Candidate Survey (2007-2019); Belgian National Election Study (2007-2010); PartiRep (2014); RepResent (2019).

Note: Regional means and standard deviations were weighted based on parties' electoral vote share. For the candidates of Francophone parties, left-right positions were not available in 2010's electoral data. We used positions on a more specific economic issue question (public vs.

private ownership of enterprises) instead. \* Estimates merged because of electoral cartel. \*\* In an electoral cartel with Spirit. \*\*\* These estimates do not consider voters in the Brussels region, where support for each corresponding party was not measured separately (i.e. PTB-PVDA and Groen-ECOLO merged together).

A look at the average (mean) position of candidates and voters grouped by region, visualized in Figure 7.1, shows us that that during the period of observation, the average Flemish candidate and voter have positioned themselves a little more towards the political right, while the average Walloon candidate and voter have positioned themselves more towards the political left. This confirms the initial expectations. However, the difference between Flemish and Walloon voters is very limited without a real tendency to drift apart – the difference always remains under one point difference on the ten point-scale – who can both rather be considered to be close to the political center.

The latter is less the case for candidates who are also less stable in their positioning. Among candidates we do see a tendency for Flemings and Walloons to move further apart. This tendency seems to come above all with the average Walloon candidate positioning itself increasingly towards the left. In Flanders, against many common expectations, the average candidate remains stable in the (moderate) right.

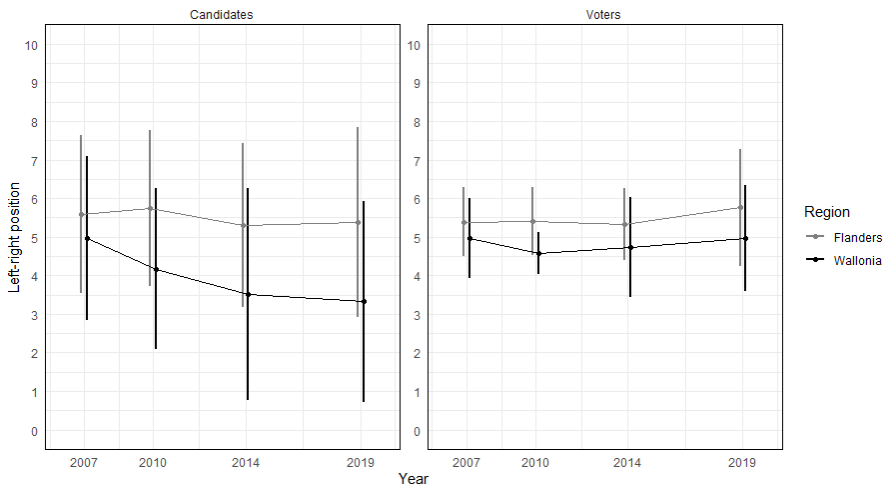


Figure 7.1: A comparison of the left-right self-placement of voters and candidates in Flanders and in Wallonia from 2007 to 2019 (0-10 scale)

Note: Mid-point = mean, bars = standard deviation (only based on aggregated data by party here). Regional scores were weighted based on parties' electoral vote share.

These observations call for a more detailed look into the distribution of positions by political party, visualized in Figure 7.1. Such a look shows us first that the leftist turn in Wallonia stems not only from the radical left PTB who has gained increasing votes in recent years. The candidates of the traditional socialist PS also position themselves

increasingly towards the political left. Beside stability among most other parties, we see that overall, the difference between parties within each region are larger than the differences between regions displayed above – which is not to cover the fact that the electoral strongholds remain on the right in Flanders and on the left in Wallonia. At the same time, the tendency already spotted above across regions for voters to be more centered than their candidates is also confirmed across parties – both on the left and on the right.

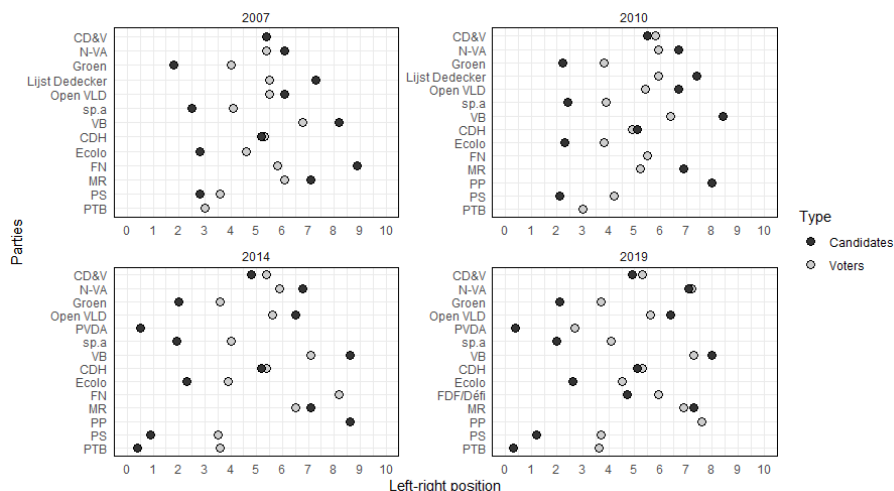


Figure 7.2: A comparison of the left-right self-placement of voters and candidates in Flanders and in Wallonia from 2007 to 2019, by political party (0-10 scale)

Now, what does this glance at the evolution of left-right self-placements among Flemish and Walloon voters and candidates between 2007 and 2019 tell us for the future of the Belgium? Well, at first, we do see a growing discrepancy of the political left-right positioning of candidates in Flanders and Wallonia, indicating that there is a growing apart of the elites of the two regions. Among voters, however, this tendency is not reflected. Voters in Flanders and Wallonia are on average more centered than the candidates they vote for and there is no real growing apart observed at this stage.

In addition to this conclusion, two caveats deserve mentioning – both related to the left-right scale as a measurement tool for voters’ and candidates’ political position. First, one should keep in mind that voters may be less familiar with and have a different perception of the left-right scale than elites. They may indeed see themselves as belonging to the political center although their opinions are effectively more leftist or rightist. Secondly, while candidates can be expected to be more aware of their effective position on the scale, their responses may be influenced by the way in which they want to see themselves rather than by the effective policies of their party. One may



wonder indeed whether the PS really became more leftist in recent years, or whether its candidates wished to position themselves as such in reaction to the increasing electoral pressure from the radical left PTB.

## 2. Ethno-territorial identities

Existing studies of identity in Belgium do not find empirical evidence of regional identities gaining importance (De Winter & Frogner, 1999; De Winter, 2007; Deschouwer et al., 2015a; 2015b)<sup>2</sup>, in spite of the increasingly strong community tensions in recent years (Sinardet et al., 2018; Devillers et al., 2019; Reuchamps et al., 2020b; Thijssen et al., 2021). There have been discussions on the linguistic border and perimeters of Brussels, the competencies and funding of Communities and Regions and the splitting of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde where Flemish and French-speaking political arenas used to overlap (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013; Bouhon & Reuchamps, 2018). In 2010, the N-VA, a Flemish nationalist political party, became the country's largest party, a position further reinforced in 2014 (Baudewyns et al., 2015; Dandoy et al., 2015). Given the post-2010 electoral long government formation (541 days) generated by the demand of different Flemish parties for more autonomy and francophone parties' desire for the federal system to remain unchanged, one could have expected that Flemish identity in Flanders and Belgian identity in Wallonia would have been reinforced (Reuchamps, 2013b).

In Table 7.2, we show the evolution of Flemish or Walloon, and Belgian identities among voters and candidates from 2007 to 2014, using the so-called Linz-Moreno question (Linz, 1975; Moreno, 1986; Moreno, 2006; Frogner & Baudewyns, 2007) that offers five possible responses: only X, more X than Y, as X as Y, more Y than X, only Y, to the question "Which of the following propositions match the most your vision of yourself?". In Belgium, the propositions were the following (with a variation between the two main language groups):

- I feel only Flemish/Walloon;
- I feel more Flemish/Walloon than Belgian;
- I feel as Flemish/Walloon as Belgian;
- I feel more Belgian than Flemish/Walloon;
- I feel only Belgian.

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<sup>2</sup> Lieven De Winter has played a major role in these existing studies, as it is reminded in the introduction of this volume. This section and the following one are largely drawn from a chapter co-authored by Lieven De Winter and published in the book *Candidates, Parties and Voters in the Belgian Partitocracy*, edited by Audrey Vandeleene, Lieven De Winter and Pierre Baudewyns.

Table 7.2. A comparison of the sense of political identity among voters and candidates in Flanders and in Wallonia from 2007 to 2014 (%)

	2007			2010			2014		
	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	$\Delta$	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	$\Delta$	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	$\Delta$
<b><i>Flanders</i></b>									
Only Flemish	7,3	22,1	-14,8	8,0	32,1	-24,1	8,7	14,9	-6,2
More Flemish than Belgian	27,4	29,3	-1,9	27,4	23,8	3,6	18,4	16,2	-2,2
As Flemish as Belgian	35,5	30,4	5,1	41,3	28,5	12,8	41,7	28,5	13,2
More Belgian than Flemish	17,0	9,2	7,8	12,4	12,5	-0,1	8,0	27,5	-19,5
Only Belgian	12,7	7,7	5,0	10,9	3,1	7,8	23,2	12,9	10,3
<b><i>Wallonia</i></b>									
Only Walloon	1,6	1,4	0,2	4,4	2,7	1,7	2,1	1,6	0,5
More Walloon than Belgian	6,1	7,0	-0,9	5,0	6,9	-1,9	6,9	5,4	1,5
As Walloon as Belgian	38,0	45,1	-7,1	21,1	54,9	-33,8	42,7	39,1	3,6
More Belgian than Walloon	19,9	35,9	-16,0	22,8	29,8	-7,0	11,7	32,2	-20,5
Only Belgian	34,4	8,9	25,5	46,7	5,7	41,0	36,6	20,7	15,9

Among voters, all data yielded by the Linz-Moreno question does not display any increase of regional identities. In Flanders, the “only Flemish” category, which expresses the strongest the exclusive Flemish identity, hovered around 7 to 9%. This answer category is the least chosen during the entire period (except 2014). The third category “as Flemish as Belgian” is the most frequently selected by Flemish respondents, on average. During the period under study, between 35% and 42% chose this answer category. This situation has remained unchanged in spite of the increasing inter-community tensions in 2007 and in 2010-2011. Rather, we observe an opposite, pro-Belgium trend: in 2014, many more Flemish voters felt “only Belgian” (23%, the double of 2010) while we find clearly fewer respondents in the category “more Flemish than Belgian” (which decreased from 27% to 18%).

On the Walloon side, Belgian identity is even more strongly prominent compared to the regional identity, although the trends are less linear. In 2014, 37% of the Walloon respondents felt “only Belgian”, and 12% felt “more Walloon than Belgian”. The middle category had always been (except in 2010) the most favored option (43% in 2014), whereas those who feel “more Walloon than Belgian” or “only Walloon” constituted a very small minority (7% and 2% respectively).

However, when comparing the answers of the Walloon and Flemish candidates, the picture appears to be more contrasted. The Flemish candidates, i.e. the candidates running in the federal and regional elections, opt more markedly than the voters do for the “only Flemish” political identity (22.1% in 2007, 32.1% in 2010 and 15.6% in 2014). The difference in percentages between the candidates and the voters indicates a gap that has widened between 2007 and 2010, and narrowed between 2010 and 2014. This difference is easily explained by the 2007 and 2010 political context, in which the N-VA gained predominance in electoral and political terms within the Flemish party system. The identity of N-VA candidates is very clear, as the party advocates a very strong Flemish identity. Many candidates also choose the “as Flemish as Belgian” answer category, but to a lesser extent than voters. This is also the case for the “only Belgian” answer category. The two categories that reflect the strongest Flemish identity (“only Flemish” and “more Flemish than Belgian”) are systematically more popular among candidates than voters. Despite the focus on Flemish identity in public discourse of Flemish parties and media (Sinardet, 2013), this phenomenon is mainly observed on the candidates’ side, rather than amongst voters.

On the Walloon side there is less difference between candidates and voters, concerning the strength of the regional identity. Only about 5% of them declared themselves as “only Walloon” in 2007 and 2010, with a slightly lower score in 2014. The majority of candidates and voters fall under the “Belgian” pole, declaring themselves as either “as Walloon as Belgian”, “more Belgian than Walloon”, or even as “only Belgian”. However the ‘only Belgian’ category is systematically stronger among voters than candidates, although this gap diminishes in 2014 because of a rise of this category among candidates, suggesting a ‘Belgicisation’ trend.

Generally, these results suggest a genuine stability of the relative weight of different entities amongst the public’s feelings about identity. Changes over time, if any, do not seem to boost regional identities. This confirms all previous research results, regardless of how the question is asked (Frogner & De Winter, 2013). Attitudes thus do not vary according to intensive outburst of community conflicts. When parties that strongly mobilize on the identity issue, lose votes (as was the case of the Flemish Volksunie until 2001, or earlier in the case of the Rassemblement Wallon) or, on the contrary, win votes (such as the Vlaams Belang after 1991, or the N-VA after 2007), this cannot be considered as the result of “identities adrift”. These are visibly more stable than what high electoral volatility levels would suggest (Baudewyns et al., 2015; Dandoy et al., 2015). The stability of identities does not mean that voters’ opinions are not varying on other matters indirectly related to identity, such as the future of Belgium’s institutional configuration, as we will discuss in the next section.

Before turning to this question, Tables 7.3a and 7.3b look at the most recent data, those collected from the voters after the 2019 elections. Then, the identity question that was asked to respondents was not the Linz-Moreno question but the so-called hierarchical question. The question asked was: “To which cultural or geographical

entity do you feel you belong to in the first and the second place?” with as possible answer categories Europe, Belgium, The French Community of Belgium, The Flemish Region or Community, The German-speaking Community; The Walloon Region; The Region of Brussels-Capital, Your province, Your town or commune. In the following table, we show the results for the voters, grouped by their vote choice (political party), first for Flanders (Table 7.3a) and then for Wallonia (Table 7.3b).

Table 7.3a. Sense of political identity in Flanders among voters in 2019, by political party (%)

Flanders	Europe	Belgium	The Flemish Region or Community	Your province	Your town or commune
CD&V	8,0	57,6	21,5	6,6	5,5
Groen	19,9	53,2	11,3	2,2	11,9
N-VA	5,1	35,0	49,7	2,9	7,4
Open VLD	13,4	61,3	13,0	1,1	9,7
PVDA	16,0	55,4	16,1	7,2	5,3
sp.a	13,7	53,7	20,9	5,5	6,3
Vlaams Belang	3,3	34,1	46,1	5,8	10,1

Table 7.3a shows, on the one hand, that a majority of the voters for Flemish traditional parties (CD&V, Open VLD, sp. a) and for Groen choose Belgium as their first choice. This is also the case for the voters for the countrywide PVDA. On the other hand, almost one N-VA and Vlaams Belang voter out of two opt for The Flemish Region or Community as their first choice. This said, one voter out of three for these two same parties choose Belgium as first choice.

Table 7.3b. Sense of political identity in Wallonia among voters in 2019, by political party (%)

Wallonia	Europe	Belgium	The French-speaking Community	The Walloon Region	Your province	Your town or commune
cdH	2,7	71,1	3,1	8,8	4,8	8,2
DéFI	6,8	67,5	4,2	0,0	8,5	13,1
Ecolo	15,6	49,1	7,1	11,5	3,8	11,2
MR	12,3	65,8	5,2	4,8	2,4	6,9
PP	0,0	63,1	8,8	5,7	0,0	16,7
PS	6,6	61,7	4,5	14,8	2,6	7,2
PTB	6,7	50,5	7,3	16,6	5,3	12,4

In Wallonia, a majority of voters, regardless of their vote choice, choose Belgium as first choice. There are however some differences between the electorates. cdH voters are those who identified the most with Belgium (71,1%), whereas ecole voters are ‘only’ 49,1% who choose Belgium as a first choice. The identification to Europe comes second for these voters (15,6%). It is interesting to note that among PS and PTB voters, we find a group of around 15% of voters in each party who identify first with the Walloon Region. As the responses to the Linz-Moreno questions showed: there is a significant group of voters in Wallonia who identify first and foremost with Belgium.

What can we conclude from this longitudinal overview of the feelings of identities among both candidates and voters? Three findings are striking. First, the differences between the two main language groups are very far from being as deep as expected from the repeated political tensions between elites. Second, there is no evolution towards stronger regional identities over the period under scrutiny, rather to the contrary, given the strengthening of the Belgian identity election after election. Third, the question whether candidates are more radical than their voters finds a nuanced answer: in some instances, such as for the VB and the N-VA, candidates have a stronger Flemish identity than their voters, but in others, especially in Wallonia, voters feel more exclusively Belgian than their candidates. The following step in our inquiry is to explore whether these identities find an echo in the institutional preferences for the future of Belgium.

### 3. Institutional preferences

In the previous section, we sought to assess, over a 15-years period, the evolution and more specifically the (in)congruence between the identities of candidates and of voters in the two main Belgian regions. In countries where different identities coexist, the structure of the state has usually been – more or less – adapted to accommodate these diverging identities (Reuchamps, 2015). Billiet and colleagues observed in 2006 that “the stronger subnational feelings in Flanders are also translated into more outspoken support for the further federalisation of Belgium” (Billiet, Maddens, & Frogner, 2006, p. 917). The question that remains is whether, since then, this trend has evolved in both Flanders and Wallonia, and whether there are differences between candidates and voters.

In Belgium, institutional preferences regarding the potential reform of the Belgian state towards more or less devolution has been tapped by a question asking respondents to position themselves on a so-called devolution scale (Reuchamps et al., 2017; Sinardet et al., 2018; Reuchamps et al., 2021). Generally, the question reads as follows: “The form that state should have in our country is still discussed. On this regard, some think that “regions and communities (Walloon region, Brussels region, French-speaking community and German-speaking community) should make all decisions”,

while others on the contrary think that “Belgium should make all the decisions”. Where would you position yourself?”. On this basis, respondents are asked to situate their preferences for Belgian federalism on a Likert scale where “0” means a preference for an exclusive regional self-rule situation (“Regions and Communities should make all the decisions”) while “10” implies that “Belgium should make all the decisions”. The point “5” means that respondents are satisfied with the status quo.

For the sake of clarity and parsimony, we summarize the answers on this scale into three categories: “pro region” (0-4), “status quo” (5) and “pro Belgium” (6-10). In Table 7.4, we present data collected from both voters and candidates around three elections: 2007, 2010, 2014.

Table 7.4. A comparison of the institutional preferences among voters and candidates in Flanders and in Wallonia from 2007 to 2014 (%)

	2007			2010			2014		
<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ
Pro region	42,3	56,5	-14,2	38,3	68,8	-30,5	43,4	54,9	-11,5
Status quo	17,1	20,6	-3,5	27,2	14,7	12,5	34,9	29,4	5,5
Pro Belgium	40,6	22,9	17,7	34,5	16,5	18,0	21,7	15,7	6,0
<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	Δ
Pro region	13,3	13,9	-0,6	15,7	20,3	-4,6	26,1	27,3	-1,2
Status quo	26,6	27,9	-1,3	32,0	41,6	-9,6	30,2	26,3	3,9
Pro Belgium	60,2	58,1	2,1	52,3	38,1	14,2	43,7	46,5	-2,8

In Flanders, a first striking observation is the large difference between the institutional preferences of the voters and of the candidates. The comparison indeed shows noteworthy differences, of which the biggest is observed in 2010 (and in 2007, to a lesser extent but following the same pattern) regarding the positions on the regionalization of competencies, that is more power for the Regions and Communities, with two-thirds of the candidates demanding more autonomy versus “only” a bit more than one-third of the voters. For that year, we also find a large difference between the positioning of voters and candidates concerning the position “Belgium should make all the decisions” with twice as many voters (34,5%) as candidates (16,5%) supporting this claim. It is also interesting to note that the middle category, that prefers the institutional status quo, also increases over time for voters (from 17,1% to 34,9%). Taking a step back, it is quite clear that the large differences between candidates and voters in 2007 and 2010 should be understood in light of the ongoing political tensions between the elites of the two main language groups in the period 2007-2011. In this period,

Flemish candidates were demanding regional autonomy more than their voters, who seemed to remain somewhat distant from these political tensions and negotiations.

In Wallonia, differences between the opinions of candidates and voters are less important. On the 0-4 positions (“pro region”), the proportions of candidates and voters are relatively identical and increase in the same direction. The proportions of the “status quo” category (position 5) are also similar, with the exception of 2010 where the difference is larger. That year, it is interesting to compare Flemish and Walloon candidates because their respective position reveals where the political negotiations were at an impasse: Flemish candidates wanted more autonomy and Walloon candidates were defending the status quo. No wonder then why it took a year and a half to reach an agreement between both language groups (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013).

In order to go deeper into the analysis, we can look at the 2019 voter survey and compare voter’s institutional preferences in light of their party choice. We first do it for Flanders (Table 7.5a) and then for Wallonia (Table 7.5b).

Table 7.5a. Institutional preferences in Flanders among voters in 2019, by political party (%)

Flanders	Pro region	Status quo	Pro Belgium
CD&V	32,1	32,7	35,2
Groen	33,2	24,9	42,0
N-VA	61,7	16,0	22,3
Open VLD	31,4	30,0	38,6
PVDA	28,3	26,4	45,3
sp.a	24,1	31,9	44,0
Vlaams Belang	47,9	25,2	27,0
Total	41,5	25,5	33,0

Table 7.5a. allows to dig further into these institutional preferences by looking at voters according to their vote choice. The data resonates with the N-VA discourse relating strong Flemish identity with further regionalization of competencies. Indeed, over 60% of N-VA voters are pro region, which is many more than for all other parties, including Vlaams Belang voters who are less than 50% to be pro region. On the other side of the institutional spectrum, PVDA, sp.a and Groen (as well as Open VLD and CD&V in a lesser extent) voters are more inclined towards Belgium.

Table 7.5b. Institutional preferences in Wallonia among voters in 2019, by political party (%)

Wallonia	Pro region	Status quo	Pro Belgium
cdH	19,2	39,7	41,1
DéFI	19,5	22,2	58,3
Ecolo	30,9	27,6	41,5
MR	14,1	24,3	61,6
PP	24,5	27,4	48,1
PS	40,7	24,0	35,3
PTB	33,3	25,7	41,0
Total	28,5	26,7	44,8

Table 7.5b presents the institutional preferences of the voters by political party. The preferences of Walloon voters reflect the classic picture of the Walloon landscape on this dimension (Dodeigne et al., 2013; 2015; 2016; 2021). 40% of Socialist Party's voters shows a "regionalist" inclination, which is a marked difference with other parties (even if among PS voters there is also a 'Belgicist' group). Indeed, the largest group of voters for all other parties is the "pro Belgium" one. This said, for the voters of the cdH one finds almost as many of them in the "status quo" category (position 5).

Previous works by Lieven De Winter have shown that the longitudinal analyses of institutional preferences indicate a certain degree of congruence between candidates and voters throughout the years despite the country's divided nature. However, during the period 2007-2011, infested by severe inter-community tensions, incongruence reached a peak, both between Flemings and Walloons as well as between candidates and voters. In the years before and after, congruence was rather business as usual.

## Conclusion

To the question "Does Belgium (still) exist?", Jaak Billiet, Bart Maddens and André-Paul Frogner answered in 2006 that "emotional ties to Belgium remain, in both regions, an important counterbalance to the centrifugal forces, both institutional and social" and added "these forces are also contained by the fact that an over-arching Belgian political and economic elite still exists, which uses its not inconsiderable, albeit significantly reduced power to maintain the unity of the country" (Billiet, Maddens, & Frogner, 2006, p. 930). In this chapter, following the works of Lieven De Winter, we have sought to update this research by looking at left-right self-placement, ethno-territorial identities and institutional preferences in the two main regions of Belgium: Flanders and Wallonia. In addition to public opinion (i.e. voters), we have also looked



at elite opinion (i.e. candidates), so that we can not only offer a comparison between the two language groups but also within each of these language groups.

Looking at the evolution of left-right self-placement among Flemish and Walloon voters and candidates in the last 15 years, we observed a growing discrepancy between candidates in Flanders and Wallonia but not between voters. In fact, the latter are on average more centered than the former. This trend can also be seen when looking at ethno-territorial identities. Indeed, somewhat counterintuitively to the usual presentation of Belgium as a country divided by the language groups, the findings show that the divide is actually larger between voters and candidates than between language groups. This is not so much the case for institutional preferences. Lieven De Winter's works have shown some congruence between candidates and voters throughout the years despite the country's divided nature. Yet, as it can be clearly seen in the data presented in this chapter, the political tensions in 2007-2011 sparked incongruence both between Flemings and Walloons and between candidates and voters.

Does Belgium still exist? And what role do political parties play in this dynamic? In this chapter, we try to give a nuanced answer to an otherwise heatedly debated question. The tendencies indicate that there is still quite some common ground between voters, while elites tend to drift apart. This drift has in the past been attributed to various features of the consociational federal architecture of the Belgian state. Whether a reform of the latter can and should address the former issue lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet, a seventh state reform is in preparation. But, however, this time with a citizen component, via an online platform and mixed deliberative committees made of parliamentarians and randomly selected citizens (Reuchamps, 2020; Vrydagh et al., 2021). Next to the typical political (i.e. partitocratic) dialogue, there is – some form of – a citizen dialogue in motion to shape the future of Belgium. Will this mean the end of partitocracy in Belgium, only the future will tell.

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In itself, *partitocracy* can be simply defined as a political regime where power is – in an excessive degree – in the hands of political parties. In Belgium, partitocracy has perhaps reached its highest level of elaboration, with complex interactions between citizens, candidates and elected representatives, parties as well as parliaments and governments.

*The Winter of Democracy: Partitocracy in Belgium* aligns a dozen of scientific contributions that tackle the multifaceted concept of partitocracy from multiple perspectives. The book also celebrates the academic career of Lieven De Winter, almost five decades of a rich research commitment that spanned both at Université catholique de Louvain and at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, as well as across numerous institutions, projects and networks all around Europe. Lieven De Winter has significantly contributed to the study of all dimensions that constitute the core object of this book: *Partitocracy in Belgium*.



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