

Thesis Prospectus

Research Question

In 1970, Belgium began a series of reforms that transformed the country from a unitary state to a federal one to address the ethnolinguistic divide between Wallonia and Flanders. The continual calls for additional reforms to shift the power towards the communities and regions and the growth of regionalist parties indicate that this federalization has not quelled the divide as it intended. Thus, my research question is the following: what explains the continued ethnolinguistic divide and the strengthen of regionalist parties, particularly those, such as *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance/N-VA), whose end goal is the termination of the end of the Belgium state, despite the efforts of the past six state reforms to pacify these problems? I consider this to be an important question for multiple reasons. Firstly, Belgium's process of federalization is unique in that most countries develop a federal system as the result of different territories coming together to form a single country rather than breaking down into regions and communities. It provides a contrast to the historic trend towards centralization of power at the national level and an extreme example of a growing shift in some parts of Europe towards devolution. Secondly, Belgium's capital city of Brussels serves as the official seat of many of the most important institutions of the European Union. The European Union strives to link countries across divergent languages and cultures to create a united Europe. The inability of the country that is home to the de facto capital of the EU to mitigate its own cultural and linguistic differences despite almost two hundred years of existence signals the difficulties of successful integration.

My preliminary hypothesis is that the reform process themselves had the unintended consequence of shifting the focus from the national level to the subnational level which has helped to legitimize the notion of Flanders and Wallonia functioning as two separate nations. The reforms have created essentially separate political systems as political parties compete only within their own region and have no incentive to appeal to Belgians in general. This makes it easier for them to use regionalist rhetoric and prioritize matters that benefit their half of the country at the detriment of the other side. As no major party operates at a national level, politicians in Flanders face no consequences for failing to cooperate with the Walloons and vice versa, and the traditional parties who historically worked together have lost influence. Furthermore, the installation of regional and community parliaments that have vast powers increase the credibility of the idea of a separate Flanders and Wallonia, particularly as the European Union and globalization in general provide them with the ability to maintain economic linkages so that, at least for Flanders, they can remain viable.

Methodology

The theoretical framework I plan to use to answer my research question is borrowed from a 2002 work by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill that analyzes what they saw as a global trend towards devolution in federal states.¹ They created a framework of devolution in an attempt to find a model that could be applied to and help explain numerous types of devolutions. They first begin by separating devolution into two general types: decentralization of resources and decentralization of authority. They argue that whether one type is chosen over the other relates to whether the central or regional governments begin with more legitimacy. They begin

¹ Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill, "The Global Trend towards Devolution and its Implications," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 21, no. 3 (June 2002): 333-51. Accessed: April 27, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1068/c0235>

by looking at historic factors such as culture, language, religion, and ethnicity that tend to indicate a strong regional identity as well as the political support for both the central and regional governments.² They also include economic factors as part of their historical factors. In addition, they note that the devolution itself produces a response that can either strength or weaken the legitimacy of the central and regional governments.³ They argue that in cases where the central government has more legitimacy, devolution occurs through decentralization of responsibilities with the central government losing minimal resources, while a case with stronger regional powers will likely lead to their increase in resources while they will be less concerned with increases in responsibilities. While both types of decentralization may occur, the strength of one type over the other is determined by the relative legitimacy of the central government to the regional government in their model.

This element of legitimacy is of particular interest for testing my hypothesis as Belgium's reforms initially exemplified a decentralization of responsibilities, as the initial reforms shifted cultural and educational policy from the national to the community level, while the national government retained the majority of resources. The fifth state reform marked a change from this trend, as it provided increased resources to the language communities by reallocating some of the federal budget funds to the community-level. Thus, in line with their model, this would likely coincide with greater relative legitimacy of the regional government to the central government.

It is important to note that my application of their framework to the case of Belgium does stretch it beyond their initial purpose as they were concerned with power shifts mostly among pre-existing federal states rather than the breakdown of a unitary state. Thus, the countries they used in creating and testing their framework had more experience with federalism than Belgium

² Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, "The Global Trend towards Devolution and its Implications," 335.

³ *Ibid.*, 336.

and, as a result, the legitimacy of the regional government will have a narrower time frame to analyze and likely a greater shift in contrast to the national government than it did in their cases.

Based on this framework, some of the factors I will be looking at are the historic factors such as linguistic and cultural differences between the regions and communities in Belgium, and the relative legitimacy of the regional governments versus the national government. The historic factors will be analyzed across time to account for the changes in the problems to which regionalists have pointed at different points in Belgium's history and the extent that the other region(s) have fought the proposed responses to those issues. The legitimacy of the two governments will be analyzed through favorability ratings of leaders at the various levels as well as the support for specific political parties. A practical example of this is that high favorability ratings for political parties that advocate further regional power or the creation of a separate Flanders or Walloon state will be considered legitimacy for the regional government. Some of my data for this will be taken from national election surveys and electoral results.

In addition, particularly for the later reforms, I will be looking at the public responses to the reforms to see if they led to increased support for the regional or national governments and whether they are generally viewed as satisfactory or insufficient. Some of this will also come from electoral data as support for separatist political parties in the aftermath of the reforms will be used to indicate popular support for further reform. I will also try to focus on the particular individuals or groups that directly call for a reform of the system and to analyze their responses to the reforms that take place. I will attempt to link these individuals and groups to either a desire for separatism or for stabilizing the Belgian state based on their general rhetoric. Additionally, I will see if their rhetoric or position on regionalism changes in reaction to the reforms. If separatism becomes more fervent in rhetoric, this will help to confirm my hypothesis that the

reforms have provided increased legitimacy to the regionalist governments and, with it, the separatist movement in general.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Belgium has typically been limited. Scholars have mostly focused on analyzing the culture of the two regions or on future stability of the country. Discussions on the ethnolinguistic differences between Flanders and Wallonia tend to concentrate on Flanders. This has led to a tendency to treat Wallonia as the norm, and thus truly Belgian, with Flanders as the outlier, which negates the importance of the Walloon identity and furthers the historic issue of the Flemish as outsiders in a nation in which they are the majority. While this gap likely results from survey data indicating that the Flemish identity is stronger as a personal identifier than the Walloon or francophone identity⁴, the francophone parties also rely on cultural and linguistic appeals in their rhetoric which is important to understand the process and difficulty the Flemish faced in bringing about reform since the founding of Belgium.

André Lecours (2001) analyzed the formation of territorial identities in Belgium. He pointed to three potential explanations: historic cultural bonds of the regions, economic factors, and political institutions and elites.⁵ He found the first two explanations as unsatisfactory and instead pointed to the governmental institutions themselves as the cause of the Flemish and Walloon identities. For the Flemish identity, he pointed to the construction of the Belgian state following the 1830 revolution and its implementation of French as the national official language, effectively making Dutch speakers second-tier citizens.⁶ He then argues the Walloon identity

⁴ Kris Deschouwer, "Party Strategies, Voter Demands and Territorial Reform in Belgium," *West European Politics* 36, no. 2 (February 2013), 342-343.

⁵ André Lecours, "Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium," *National Identities* 3, no. 1 (2001): 51-52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

grew as reaction to the Flemish movement out of fear of a powerful coalition working to weaken their grip on power without a way to mobilize against it.⁷ Lecours' work is important in its establishment of the role of political institutions and elites historically as the driving forces behind the two major regional identities in Belgium. This would place my hypothesis as a continuation of this pattern.

Leonie Huddy (2001) discusses social identity theory and its role in politics. Social identity theory looks at the prevalence of people categorizing themselves and others based on various identifiers such as ethnicity, language, and political affiliation. In general, the theory argues that high status groups are more likely to formulate a group identifier as "membership positively distinguishes group members from outsiders."⁸ Low status groups will focus on positive attributes of their group or fight against the negative image.⁹ In his overview on social identity theory, Michael Hogg (2016) argues that politicians are able to capitalize on these aspects to strengthen their political goals, especially if they are seen as fitting the general image, or prototype, of a group member.¹⁰ Hogg suggests that a potentially successful way of bridging the divide between groups is to create a crossed-categorization in which the existing group identity is complemented by an overarching identity shared on other dimensions between the in-group and out-group.¹¹ These works on social identity theory provide possible explanations for the way that party leaders can utilize the regional identities to rally support through rhetoric. Hogg's discussion on the charismatic politician as a prototype of the group could offer an

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2001): 134.

⁹ Ibid., 134-135.

¹⁰ Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," In *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Shelley McKeown, Reeshma Haji, and Neil Ferguson (Cham: Springer 2016), 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

alternative to my hypothesis, especially in the case of the leader of the N-VA, Bart De Wever, as there are several arguments that tie the party's success to him rather than to institutional factors. These opinions view the rise of the N-VA as a marker of the appeal of De Wever, but fail to account for the divided electoral structure that buoys the party's success.

Hopkins' (2002) work looked at devolution within the countries of the European Union. He challenges what he saw as the prevailing notion of devolution in Europe that saw it as a unique occurrence in the United Kingdom and instead notes that regionalism has grown in Europe since the 1990s.¹² He looks at fifteen member-states and analyzes the strength and function of the regional governments in each. He notes that despite the continue supremacy of the unitary state in Europe, "by 2000 some form of democratic regional government existed in 13 of the 15 EU Member States."¹³ This provides a greater context for regionalism in Belgium, though Belgium's shift from unitary to a truly federal state remains unique. Perhaps this indicates the position of Belgium as a forerunner of what is to come throughout Europe if regionalism continues to challenge the tenability of the unitary nation-state in a globalized society.

Belgium's process of devolution is an exemplification of a consociational arrangement, a system of power-sharing that contrasts with centripetalism. Consociationalism, a theory popularized by Arendt Lijphart, refers to an institutional system designed to mitigate ethnic divisions in a society by "including representatives of all relevant social groups in the executive decision-making process" and "allowing all relevant groups considerable say over the affairs of

¹² W. John Hopkins, *Devolution in Context: Regional, Federal & Devolved Government in the Member States of the European Union* (London: Cavendish Publishing Limited, 2002), xxi-xxii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

their own communities with minimal interference from the agents of the central state.”¹⁴ This prevents the problem of an important social group being excluded from power and avoids a majority rule of one group. The goal of consociationalism is to establish a functional government and remove political violence. The detractors of consociationalism argue that it strengthens extremist views in two ways. First, the system, in its purist form, does not discriminate between viewpoints as its goal is allowing differing viewpoints to be represented. This allows for extremist party’s participation despite the disapproval of the vast majority. Secondly, as parties represent a particular group, they are incentivized to utilize the divisions between their group and others to gain support which further entrenches the divides.¹⁵ These unintended consequences of a consociational system underline my hypothesis as it is the belief that the institutions themselves have solidified the role of the divisions in the society rather than eroding their relevance.

Chapter Outline

The thesis will consist of several chapters, beginning with an introductory chapter which will outline my research question and hypothesis as well as provide some background information. The second chapter will be a literature review detailing the major existing literature on federalism, devolution, social identity theory, and the Belgian state itself and the regions and communities within it. The third chapter will detail my methodology and the fourth will contain the analysis itself. The fifth chapter will discuss conclusions, limitations, and areas for further research.

The fourth chapter will look at Flanders and Wallonia/French-speaking community separately for two key reasons. First, the Flemish parliament is a merger of the Dutch-speaking

¹⁴ Joel Selway and Kharis Templeman, “The Myth of Consociationalism? Conflict Reduction in Divided Societies”, *Comparative Political Science* 45, no. 12 (December 2012), 1545.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1547.

community's parliament and the regional parliament for Flanders. This has the effect of allowing it to serve as a single voice for Flemings, which is not replicated on the French-speaking side due to the issue of Brussels. Furthermore, it has the powers attributed to both the regions and the communities, making it a stronger institution than its French/Walloon counterpart. Secondly, as the parties operate in separate sphere, they have different audiences and, as a result, different constraints. It is therefore likely that the reforms and the institutions created by them have affected the two sides differently.

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