

REGIONALISM AND REFORM:  
THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONSOCIATIONALISM IN BELGIUM

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## ABSTRACT

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Regionalism and Reform: The Consequences of Consociationalism in Belgium  
(Under the direction of Dr. Susan Allen)

With the success of the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), a Flemish regionalist party, in recent federal and regional elections, the continued role of regionalism in Belgian politics has been made clear. This has occurred despite significant efforts by Belgian politicians to counteract this tendency. By analyzing the impact of the six state reforms that have drastically affected the political system within the country, this paper outlines how the reforms themselves have unintentionally incentivized the political parties to pursue regionalism as a winning political strategy, which laid the groundwork for the current success of the N-VA. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates how the institutional system known as consociationalism has been unable to implement the moderating tendency that it seeks to provide in the Belgian case and has instead contributed to stagnation in the federal parliament and to a centrifugal pull of the parties into separate linguistic communities. In examining this, the paper makes use of the devolutionary framework proposed by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill (2002) to show how the reforms have impacted the legitimacy of the subnational governments.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCR	Brussels Capital Region
BHV	Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde
cdH	Centre Démocrate Humaniste / Humanist Democratic Center (Francophone)
CD&V	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams / Christian Democratic and Flemish
FDF	Front Démocratique des Francophones / French-Speaking Democratic Front (Francophone Regionalist Party)
MR	Mouvement Réformateur / Reformist Movement (Francophone Liberals)
N-VA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie / New Flemish Alliance (Flemish Regionalist Party)
PS	Parti Socialiste / Socialist Party (Francophone)
OpenVLD	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten / Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats
RW	Rassemblement wallon / Walloon Rally (Walloon Regionalist Party)
sp.a	Socialistische Partij Anders / Socialist Party Differently (Flemish)

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1970, rising tension between Flemings and Walloons, the two major ethnolinguistic groups in Belgium, led to a series of reforms aimed at better representing the needs of these two groups. This process slowly transformed the country from a unitary state to a federal state and cemented representation based on language. Leaders hoped that these changes would quell the divisions between the groups and return stability to the government. Instead, continual calls for additional reforms to shift the power towards the Communities and Regions have become the norm and regionalist parties continue to play an important role. The largest political party in Belgium, the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance/N-VA), advocates for an eventual termination of the Belgian state with the rise of an independent Flanders. The reforms have objectively failed to accomplish their goal of quelling the divide. Thus, this paper seeks to explain the continued importance of the ethnolinguistic divide and the strength of regionalist parties despite the efforts of the past six state reforms to pacify these problems.

The situation in Belgium reflects the predicament faced by many countries that lack ethnic homogeneity. Such countries face a challenge in ensuring that their diverse group of citizens believe that their system of government properly represents them. As a result, many of these societies, known as plural societies, are fraught with instability and violence.<sup>1</sup> This problem is especially common when these countries are democracies, since the legitimacy of a democracy is partially grounded on the idea of representation. As a result, the exclusion of segments of the population directly undermines the

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability*, Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972, 21.

legitimacy of that government. Thus, democracies in plural societies must find a way to ensure the stability of their system by addressing this concern. Countries that are attempting to democratize may try to emulate the model of other countries that seem to overcome the violence that often accompanies pluralism. Belgium is cited as an example of such a country due to its extensive history of pluralism with limited political violence. It is for this reason that the emergence of a secessionist movement in Flanders is particularly noteworthy. The rise of regionalism demonstrates the challenges of finding a suitable and stable system of government for plural societies, even without the presence of violence.

The particular model in place in Belgium falls under a design known as consociationalism, whose very goal is to mitigate the role of extremist tendencies, such as secessionist groups. Consociationalism attempts to provide successful, stable democracy through its power-sharing structure that encourages compromise among political leaders. Despite Belgium's historical practice of consociationalism, the prevalence of separatism continues, indicating a failure, at least in part, of the institutional design. For critics of the consociational structure, who contend that consociationalism often aggravates the very divisions it hopes to counteract, the strength of the N-VA represents a natural consequence of the implementation of the institutional system in a plural society.

This paper analyzes the situation of regionalism in Belgium as affected by the reforms and seeks to see if the resurgence of the regionalist parties represents the realization of the detrimental aspects of consociationalism. My hypothesis is that the reform process itself 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. Political parties compete only within their own region and have no incentive to appeal to Belgians in general. This division of the electorate reduces the negative consequences of using divisive regionalist rhetoric that pits Flanders against Wallonia and encourages prioritizing matters that benefit their half of the country to the detriment of the efficiency of the national government. As no major party operates at the national level, politicians in Flanders face limited consequences for failing to cooperate with those from Wallonia and vice versa, and the traditional parties, which historically worked together, have lost influence. Furthermore, the installation of regional and community parliaments that have vast powers increases the credibility of the idea of a separate Flanders and Wallonia.

To understand the connection between the reforms and the Belgian political system, this paper makes use of a devolutionary framework proposed by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill (2002). This framework links devolution with the legitimacy held by the national and subnational government. This aspect of legitimacy is important because a consociational system aims to increase the national legitimacy at the expense of the subnational. If the consociational structure, as implemented in Belgium, does indeed increase the legitimacy of the subnational government over that of the national, it would seem unlikely that such a system can weaken regionalism.

Chapter two further outlines and explains the concept of consociationalism and the devolutionary framework. Chapter three provides a historical context of regionalism in Belgium from its founding and presents the constitutional reforms as they relate to changes in the institutional structure of the nation. Chapter four draws the theoretical



concepts of chapter two together with the case of regionalism in Belgium. It looks at the effect of the reforms on the legitimacy of the subnational government by analyzing the strength of the regionalist parties and regionalism within the traditional parties, shifts in public opinion, and their role in shaping later reforms. Chapter five discusses how the reforms have changed the incentives for the political parties, particularly as it pertains to encouraging accommodation and moderation. Chapter six provides concluding remarks.

## **CHAPTER 2: OVERCOMING THE PLURAL SOCIETY DILEMMA**

The political unrest often faced by ethnically heterogeneous societies has been the subject of much discussion. Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) outline the underlying causes of instability in plural societies and present a pessimistic forecast for efforts to establish long-term regime stability. Lijphart and Horowitz have instead focused on potential solutions to this dilemma by proposing institutional frameworks designed to address the segmentation of plural societies. Their solutions, known as consociationalism and centripetalism, respectively, seek to address conflict between different identity groups within a society, but disagree on the way to encourage politicians from these groups to work together to overcome this divide.

### **2.1 Identity Theories**

The issue at the forefront for a plural society is one of identity, namely that such a society must contend with subnational identities with enough salience to challenge the national one. The question then becomes why identity matters, as an individual's association with a certain subnational group does not on its own automatically cause a breakdown in national stability. For theorists who study the interaction between identity and politics, much of the importance of identity lies in its salience and the ability of the politicians to use this identity to advance their goals.

Social identity theory looks at how people categorize 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

because “membership positively distinguishes group members from outsiders.”<sup>2</sup> Low-status groups will focus on positive attributes of their group or fight against the negative image.<sup>3</sup> In his overview of social identity theory, Michael Hogg (2016) argues that politicians capitalize on these aspects to further their political goals, especially if they are seen as fitting the general image, or prototype, of a group member.<sup>4</sup> Hogg suggests that a potentially successful way of bridging the divide between groups is to create a cross-categorization in which the existing group identity is complemented by an overarching identity shared on other dimensions between the in-group and out-group.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Stability in Plural Societies

A key characteristic of plural societies is deep divisions between various groups, typically along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines. These cleavages frequently lead to political violence or instability by challenging the legitimacy of the state through their competition with nationality to serve as the primary identification for an individual.<sup>6</sup> Politicians, seeking to gain a basis of support in a plural society, realize that the identities behind the divisions are highly salient and provide fertile grounds for organizing. As a result, political parties in plural societies are commonly based on identity groups.<sup>7</sup> This leads to a problem known as ethnic outbidding, in which politicians vie for votes on the

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<sup>2</sup> Leonie Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2001): 134.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Rabushka and Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Jarrett, “Consociationalism and Identity in Ethnically Divided Societies: Northern Ireland and Malaysia,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16, no. 3 (2016), 401.

basis of ethnic identity and moderate views are seen as counterproductive since one cannot hope to obtain votes outside of the group to account for lost radical votes.<sup>8</sup>

Political competition in a country plagued by ethnic outbidding becomes inseparable from conflict between the various groups. Majoritarian democracy often aggravates this tendency by creating a winner-take-all system in which the losing groups are shut out of power, thereby significantly raising the costs of failing to win, given the fear of a tyrannical or suppressive majority. Even without this extreme, losing prevents minority groups from obtaining their goals. Thus, the system pits the identity groups against each other.

Once this process of ethnic outbidding begins, it often reinforces itself. The different segmental groups move further apart and turn towards increasingly extreme positions. Eventually, the political situation in such societies becomes untenable and stability collapses. Given this bleak forecast for democratic governance in plural societies, some have questioned whether it is possible for such a society to maintain a stable democracy. While pessimism remains the norm, two main institutional designs have been proposed as potential solutions to the plural society dilemma: consociationalism and centripetalism.

### **2.3 Consociationalism**

Consociationalism, as defined by Arend Lijphart, in its democratic form, is a four-part institutional structure designed to promote power-sharing. The key components are:

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<sup>8</sup> Christina Isabel Zuber and Edina Szöcsik, "Ethnic Outbidding and Nested Competition: Explaining the Extremism of Ethnonational Minority Parties in Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 54 (2015), 786-787.

(1) the existence of a grand coalition of political leaders, (2) a mutual veto, (3) proportional representation, and (4) autonomy for the various groups over their internal affairs.<sup>9</sup>

The first characteristic refers to a system, likely parliamentary in nature, in which elites from various segments of the populations govern together. Lijphart distinguishes a grand coalition from a typical parliamentary cabinet by noting that the former requires an overwhelming majority of parties to participate in the government.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the latter can have a significant number of parties in the opposition.<sup>11</sup> The mutual veto serves to protect minorities by preventing the majority from taking actions that violate the vital interests of the minority.<sup>12</sup> Proportionality extends beyond simple allocation of seats in the legislative body and the cabinet to all civil service appointments, in an effort to prevent the disproportionate allocation of resources.<sup>13</sup> It also helps to reinforce the goal of the grand coalition by guaranteeing representation in the government for all populations. Thus, it is not feasible to form a coalition that excludes that segment. Autonomy provides each group decision-making powers over issues that fall solely under the group's purview. This can take different forms, including a federalized structure, though Lijphart does not deem federalism to be a necessary element of consociationalism.<sup>14</sup> The goal of this segmental autonomy is to reduce the number of issues that bring the groups into conflict by giving them power over issues considered to likely create tensions, such as education or language policy. Through these features, in a

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<sup>9</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

consociational system, any issues that must be decided among the entire population are decided by elites representing each segment of the whole populace, while those that are limited to a community are placed solely under that community's control.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the required features outlined in the previous paragraph, there are various factors that are beneficial in establishing and maintaining a stable consociational democracy in plural societies. These include overarching loyalties beyond the subnational divisions, isolation of the segments, a history of elites working together to accommodate the interests of different populations, and the existence of cross-cutting cleavages.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the balance of power between the different groups is also important. Equally-sized populations are more likely to create a cooperative system, while a numerical imbalance would instead tempt the larger group to disregard the interests of the smaller one.<sup>17</sup>

Proponents of consociationalism argue that this system provides stability by helping to moderate radical tendencies. They point to the grand coalition as a method that allows for politicians who would otherwise be extremists to work within the system to address their grievances and argue that participation in government helps to promote the more moderate members within extremist groups.<sup>18</sup> By prioritizing accommodation, consociationalism promotes a culture of cooperation among elites, which is expected to lead to reduced tension and divisions between the social identities and to turn the attention of the political system towards the typical political divisions of non-plural

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<sup>15</sup> Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps, "Combining Federalism with Consociationalism: Is Belgian Consociational Federalism Digging its Own Grave?" *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 3 (2015), 279-280.

<sup>16</sup> Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Consociational Theory, Northern Ireland's Conflict, and its Agreement 2. What Critics of Consociation Can Learn from Northern Ireland," *Government and Opposition* 41, no. 2 (March 2006), 262.

societies of disagreements over socio-economic policies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, with each segment of the population guaranteed representation, a consociational system is expected to reduce the tendency for ethnic outbidding and the rallying around ethnic politics. Consociationalists maintain that divisions based on identity are often too difficult to overcome by the creation of a transcending identity. They argue that the installation of the consociational structure mitigates the salience of these identities, which allows for the society and political system to move beyond them and for a shared identity to be obtained.<sup>20</sup> This shared identity would serve as an overarching loyalty, encourage elite accommodation, and provide additional ties between the subnational groups.

Critics of consociationalism point to several aspects of its institutional structure as counterproductive to its goals. First, it advocates for the inclusion of all significant groups, in hopes of encouraging moderation, and ultimately relies on this moderation to achieve its aims. In the case in which a significant grouping within a country is made up of radicals, consociationalism would require the inclusion of that group in the belief that their participation in government will serve as “a powerful stimulus to moderation and compromise.”<sup>21</sup> This tempering of positions may not take place. The extremists in power may continue to push for policies that are unacceptable to others. Consociationalists also promote an elitist system with the idea that political elites are likely to be more moderate or accommodating than the public as a whole. Furthermore, it continues to emphasize the role of the divisions in society through both its representational structure and its focus on

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<sup>19</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, “Consociational Theory, Northern Ireland’s Conflict, and its Agreement 2. What Critics of Consociation Can Learn from Northern Ireland,” 275-276.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Jarrett, “Consociationalism and Identity in Ethnically Divided Societies: Northern Ireland and Malaysia,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16, no. 3 (2016), 401.

<sup>21</sup> Lijphart, “Democracy in Plural Societies”, 31.

group separation and autonomy that verges on voluntary apartheid.<sup>22</sup> This group autonomy can entrench the divisions between the communities rather than leading to the eventual bridging of them that consociationalism aims to accomplish.<sup>23</sup>

While Lijphart proposes that federalism will aid with the consolidation of the national state and will weaken secessionist claims, others argue that devolved powers will strengthen the subnational units by providing them with increased political legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the focus on reducing conflict by limiting the amount of interaction between groups can also be problematic. Often, it can undermine the creation and continuation of overarching loyalties and solidify any pre-existing prejudices. Without interaction between the subnational groups, identification within the group is strengthened because there is little outside contact that could dispute negative associations with the other segments of the population. This could make accommodation and moderation increasingly difficult, as the level of trust or mutual respect may diminish or remain limited without building positive interactions. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish commonalities between the various segments of the population if the interaction between them is limited to the extent that the commonalities are rarely apparent. Recognizing commonalities between the groups is helpful, if not necessary, in reducing the level of tension in a consociational society because it is unlikely that elites would willingly choose to share power with those whom they share little in common.

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Dixon, "The Politics of Conflict: A Constructivist Critique of Consociational and Civil Society Theories," *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 1 (2012), 102.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Selway and Kharis Templeman, "The Myth of Consociationalism? Conflict Reduction in Divided Societies," *Comparative Political Science* 45, no. 12 (December 2012), 1548-1549.



## **2.4 Devolution and Federalism**

Given the importance placed on providing the different segments of the population with self-rule within the consociational structure, the institutional design cannot completely avoid decentralization within it and still fulfill its group autonomy requirement. While this decentralization need not be territorial, a territorial decentralization, such as federalism, may be the natural way of implementing group autonomy in countries where the societal cleavages coincide with geographical regions. The problem posed by a federalist system in a consociational country is its tendency towards a stronger subnational status. For countries that already have aspects of independent power at a subnational level, the pull of federalism towards increased devolution exists outside of the consociational system, particularly if it predates that power-sharing institutional structure. However, for highly centralized states that wish to implement a consociational system, this issue of increased subnational legitimacy may become a greater problem. This is due to its paradoxical nature. While consociationalism seeks to prevent the pull into subnational communities, implementing a federal structure does that very thing. It creates and gives power to the subnational level that is independent of the power of the national government. It, therefore, reduces the power of the national government, which seems inconsistent with the aims of consociationalism.

The general argument for federalism within the consociational idea is that it helps to reduce the direct conflict of the different subnational groups as they are given autonomous power over certain aspects of their society. Federalism provides a useful way of implementing this decentralized power, particularly if the segmental divisions correspond to specific territory within the country. For consociationalism, the goal of

federalism is to transform the subnational divisions from problems into “constructive elements of stable democracy.”<sup>25</sup> When the groups are in constant competition with each other, they only contribute to instability, but removing some of the roots for their conflict by placing them under the individual group control can reduce this effect. However, in doing so, a federalist structure formalizes these divisions as the basis of politics.

The pull towards federalism is not limited to consociationalism. Despite the strength of the synonymous nature of the nation and state in most of Europe, several countries, such as Italy and the United Kingdom, have implemented elements of devolutionary policies.<sup>26</sup> The causes for this shift are linked to the existence of subnational legitimacy, either due to historical or ethnolinguistic identity factors or uneven regional economic development combined with a desire to achieve increased economic efficiency.<sup>27</sup> Devolution refers to the shift of resources and responsibilities from a higher level of government, typically the national government, to lower levels of government, such as regions or locales. The devolution in Belgium represents one of the more extreme examples with its official federalization, as other countries either became federations with or around the time of their founding or have yet to implement the institutional changes that constitute a shift from a unitary state to a federal one.

Though the general trend over time has been the accumulation of power at the national level, there has been an increase in devolution in recent years. In an attempt to better understand this trend and the differing types of devolution, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill (2002) developed a framework that distinguishes between two types of

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<sup>25</sup> Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> 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), 337.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

devolution: decentralization of resources and decentralization of authority. A graphical depiction of their framework can be found in Appendix B. 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 by looking at historic factors, such as culture, language, religion, and ethnicity, that tend to indicate a strong regional or national identity as well as the political support for both the central and regional governments.<sup>28</sup> In addition, they note that the devolution itself produces a response that can either strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of the central and regional governments.<sup>29</sup> 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 legitimacy will likely lead to an increase in resources at the subnational level.<sup>30</sup> 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 issue of legitimacy is particularly important as it pertains to understanding the effects of consociationalism, given its aims of reducing the role of the subnational divisions over time. While subnational legitimacy is not strictly linked to the strength of these divisions in all cases, for those countries whose federal divisions are based on ethnicity or other highly salient identity factors, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully distinguish between them. This is reflected among the factors that affect the legitimacy of the subnational and national governments. For the consociational system, the legitimacy

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<sup>28</sup> Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, "The Global Trend towards Devolution and its Implications," 335.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

of the national government ought to increase as it would represent a realization of its goal of overcoming the problems posed by pluralism. The growth of legitimacy of the subnational government would instead represent a direct failure of the system by further entrenching the very divisions creating the problems the system hopes to solve.

## 2.5 Centripetalism

While consociationalism seeks to provide representation to each ethnic group, centripetalism aims to depoliticize these divisions by institutionalizing cross-ethnic voting. Centripetalism draws its name from its idea of creating a system designed “to engineer a centripetal spin to the political system – to pull the parties towards moderate, compromising policies and to discover and reinforce the center of a deeply divided political spectrum.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than allowing politicians to work within their own ethnic camps and expecting them to compromise after being elected, centripetalism encourages moving beyond these divisions prior to the election. The use of preferential, rank-order electoral system, often the alternative vote, is one of centripetalism’s main methods of persuading politicians to campaign beyond their ethnic group.<sup>32</sup> The alternative vote requires voters to rank all candidates, not only their first choice, and transfers votes based on those rankings in the case where no candidate reaches an outright majority.<sup>33</sup> As a result, candidates are incentivized to reach out to groups that they might otherwise ignore

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<sup>31</sup> Timothy Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Reilly, “Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies: Consociationalism, Centripetalism and Communalism Compared,” *European Political Science* 11 (2011), 264.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

if they only need a plurality to be elected. In other words, candidates are benefitted by appealing to a broad range of people, which favors moderation in their electoral strategy.

In order for the alternative vote to work in this manner, ethnic cleavages cannot serve as the basis for political representation. While encouraged by consociationalism, this form of representation runs counter to the principle of depoliticizing ethnic divisions in centripetalism. Instead, centripetalists encourage multiethnic parties by requiring parties to demonstrate a basis of support across the country or have an ethnically diverse party list.<sup>34</sup> As a result, parties are not only incentivized to appeal broadly but also required to overcome ethnic divisions in order to be allowed to compete. This system makes refusal to expand beyond ethnic-based politics an unviable strategy since politicians need a basis of support beyond their own ethnic group in order to continue to participate in politics.

While centripetalists do not disagree on all the proposals of consociationalists, the two differ greatly in their proposals for structuring the institutions in which political parties operate. This focus on institutions in both ideas illuminates their shared belief that the political system itself can aggravate or alleviate the tension between different ethnic groups that leads to political instability. As both aim to encourage parties to work across the ethnic divisions and pursue moderate positions by changing the electoral system and political structure, one would expect that such changes would influence the parties to shift their strategies in order to succeed. Thus, to understand why regionalism has resurged in Belgium among political parties, it is necessary to explore the reforms and their effect on the country in general and the political parties in particular.

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Reilly, "Political Engineering and Party Politics in Conflict-Prone Societies." *Democratization* 13, no. 5 (December 2006), 817-819.

### CHAPTER 3: HISTORY OF REGIONALISM IN BELGIUM

While the linguistic dichotomy within Belgium predated the creation of the independent Belgian state, the territorial aspects appeared only in the decades following. Rather than inheriting the division of Flanders and Wallonia, Belgium received them through a lengthy process of social movements from inhabitants and elites from the two areas who created and promulgated the notion of Flemings and Walloons. The history of the Flemish and Walloon nationalist movements points to the traditional role of elites in driving, rather than alleviating, the ethnolinguistic division inside the country.

The first references to the ‘Walloon’ or ‘Flemish’ provinces appeared in 1814, but were strictly limited to territorial distinctions rather than a denotation of the existence of separate communities.<sup>35</sup> These terms would eventually become co-opted by the leaders of the two regionalist movements, but were not rooted initially in the in-group/out-group rhetoric of today. Furthermore, the districts created by early Belgian leaders demonstrate that strict linguistic divisions had limited saliency at the national governmental level. This becomes clear when noting that both Limburg, a Dutch-speaking province, and Liège, a French-speaking province, were placed within the same district.<sup>36</sup>

A potential alternative explanation for this disregard of linguistic lines is that this was a natural consequence of the focus of the French-speaking elite who ruled the newly independent country. They desired to promote French as the national language and instituted a monolingual regime. Their strong emphasis on French as the governing language resulted from a belief in the superiority of the French language over Dutch and

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander B. Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium: A Study in Cultural-Political Geography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, The Committee on Geographical Studies, 1998), 51.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

from a desire to further distinguish themselves from the Netherlands after independence. Together, these factors encouraged the leaders of the new Belgian state to devalue the Dutch language and its role in the political system. Thus, it is possible that they would have ignored the language aspect of the provinces when establishing districts. However, given that linguistic division originating in a municipality that fell in the Limburg-Liège district caused the collapse of the national government in 1987, one must recognize that any linguistic division at the early stages of Belgium lacked the ability to drive politics in the same fashion that it does today.<sup>37</sup>

### **3.1 The Flemish Movement Prior to the State Reforms**

The monolingualism instituted by the ruling elite provided a rallying point for the initiators of the Flemish movement. French was the sole language of parliament, courts, the military, and the majority of secondary schools, leaving Dutch-speakers as second-tier citizens as advancement was tied to knowledge of French. A collection of students, intellectuals, religious leaders, and local rulers organized to obtain a role for their language in their country. Their ambitions focused on achieving linguistic equity for Dutch in Flanders first and then in Belgium as a whole.<sup>38</sup> The first major victory for their movement came in 1898 with the De Vriendt-Coremans law that placed Dutch as an official language of Belgium equal with French.<sup>39</sup> However, the French ruling class fought against their efforts, limited the law to little more than a formality, and refused to

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<sup>37</sup> Rolf Falter, "Belgium's Peculiar Way to Federalism," in *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780-1995*, ed. Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998), 185.

<sup>38</sup> André Lecours, "Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium," *National Identities* 3, no. 1 (2001), 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

consider the adoption of a bilingual status for Wallonia like the one imposed in Flanders.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Dutch-speaking Flemings coalesced around the promotion of a unique Flemish identity and culture that, over time, separated from an overarching Belgian identity.<sup>41</sup> This represents their move to advocating for their own sub-nation of Flanders and, with it, the beginning of the nationalist movement with its own symbols, songs, and a national Flemish holiday.<sup>42</sup>

The First World War marked an important moment in the Flemish movement. During the occupation, Germany found the Flemish movement as an ideal tool to divide Belgium from within, making it easier to control. Thus, the Flemish nationalists, for the first time, had a ruling body sympathetic to their efforts.<sup>43</sup> The power gained by the Flemish during the war did not disappear with the end of the occupation and the division between the linguistic groups could no longer be ignored. In 1921, Belgium was officially divided into two linguistic sections, and governments operating within the two segments were required to use the language of that section, thereby officially instituting the notion of two monolingual regions.<sup>44</sup>

For decades, the Flemish, who always numerically outnumbered the Francophones, were limited in their power due to economic and political inferiority. In the 1950s, this began to change with the growth of foreign investment in Brussels and Antwerp. The work of the Flemish movement had partially undercut the political power of the Francophones by creating and instilling a Flemish identity, but they had failed to

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<sup>40</sup> Lecours, "Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium," 57.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Shepard B. Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1968), 123-124.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.



reduce the dependence of the region on agriculture. The postwar period changed this, especially as the steel and coal industries of Wallonia began to decline while the economic prospects of Flanders only increased. This positioned the Flemings to successfully make demands to obtain some autonomy and provided a platform for the newly formed *Volksunie*, a political party founded in 1954 dedicated to obtaining political and territorial power for Flemings, to capitalize on. The *Volksunie* experienced limited electoral success during the two decades prior to the reforms, culminating in receiving almost ten percent of the total vote share in the 1968 election.<sup>45</sup>

Around this same time, the growing tension between Flanders and Wallonia erupted in the Flemish city of Leuven, the home of the Catholic University of Louvain (Louvain being the French name for the city). This dispute would ultimately bring down the government, opening the door for the initial state reform. Higher education in the Dutch language had long been a rallying point for the Flemish movement, and the continued French presence at this university angered many Flemings, especially due to the proximity of the city to both Brussels and Wallonia. As the border between the two regions, and thus territorial monolingualism, hinged on the proportion of language speakers, any increase in French speakers in Leuven could risk the city joining Wallonia or becoming wrapped up in the complex workings of the Brussels suburbs. So, when the university moved to broaden its resources for Francophone students, the people of Leuven rioted, taking to the streets with the slogan “Walen buiten” (Walloons out).<sup>46</sup> The university ultimately caved to pressure and moved the French part to Wallonia but this

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<sup>45</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, “PARLINE Database on National Parliaments,” Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp> (accessed October 27, 2018)

<sup>46</sup> Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium*, 139.

situation had become so tense that the government fell, and new elections were called for in March 1968. That election saw the *Volksunie* gain eight additional seats in the Chamber of Representatives, bringing their total to twenty.<sup>47</sup> The newly installed government knew that change was necessary if they wanted to avoid the fate of their predecessors. This reform came in 1970.

### **3.2 The Walloon Movement Prior to the State Reforms**

While markedly smaller than its counterpart in Flanders, the Walloon Movement also dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like the Flemish Movement, its initial concern centered on language. To understand the origins of the Walloon Movement, which until the interwar period is perhaps better understood as a Francophone movement, it is important to grasp the motivations of the leaders of the early Belgian state as it pertains to language policy. For them, French represented the path to civilization and refinement. As the Flemish Movement sought to achieve equal status for Dutch, numerous Francophones saw this as an affront to the existence of a civilized society as they regarded Dutch as crude and backward. The Francophones in Brussels felt acutely threatened by these linguistic laws pursued by the Flemish activists due to the capital's location within the territory of Flanders. So, the first instance of what would become the Walloon Movement began with these French speakers in Brussels.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, "PARLINE Database on National Parliaments," Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp> (accessed October 27, 2018); Belgian Federal Government, Service Public Fédéral Intérieur, "DB élection: Résultat 1965" (Election Database: Results 1965), [http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/fr/result\\_ko.php?date=1965-05-23&vt=CK&ko\\_type=KO\\_RK&ko=263](http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/fr/result_ko.php?date=1965-05-23&vt=CK&ko_type=KO_RK&ko=263) (Accessed November 11, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Chantal Kesteloot, "Growth of the Walloon Movement," in *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780-1995*, ed. Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998), 142-143.

However, Brussels was not, and is not, Walloon, and therefore could not speak to a broader Walloon culture. As the Flemish Movement adopted its cultural aspects to advocate for its heritage, Walloons began to counteract this by promoting their own. 1912 served as a defining year for this effort with two major events: the creation of the *Assemblée wallonne* (Walloon Assembly) and Jules Destrée's letter to the King of Belgium. Like the Flemish Movement had done two decades prior, the *Assemblée wallonne* selected their own emblem and national holiday.<sup>49</sup> The letter by Jules Destrée, entitled "Letter to the King, Concerning the Separation of Flanders and Wallonia," was a remarkable moment in the history of Belgian regionalism with its famous line of "Il y a en Belgique, des Wallons et des Flamands; il n'y a pas de Belges" (In Belgium, there are Walloons and Flemings; there are no Belgians).<sup>50</sup> Destrée has been considered the founding father of the Walloon Movement, and his letter exemplifies the reasons for its existence through its delineation of the things that Walloon activists believed the Flemish had taken from them: Flanders, their money, security, and, most importantly, their language.<sup>51</sup> The most radical aspect of the letter was its endorsement of a federal solution for Belgium should the Flemish continue to ignore Walloon interests. The Walloon Movement as a whole did not embrace the idea of regional autonomy until the eve of World War II, but the impact of this letter, along with the *Assemblée wallonne*, shifted the focus of linguistic activists from a broader Francophone cause to a concentration on Wallonia.

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<sup>49</sup> Chantal, "Growth of the Walloon Movement," 144; Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement*, 123-124.

<sup>50</sup> Destrée, Jules, "Lettre au Roi sur la séparation de la Wallonie et de la Flandre" [Letter to the King, Concerning the Separation of Wallonia and Flanders], Brussels, 1912.

<sup>51</sup> Chantal, "Growth of the Walloon Movement," 140; Destrée, "Lettre au Roi sur la séparation de la Wallonie et de la Flandre."

The 1950s marked the beginning of a Walloon consciousness. Until the end of World War II, Walloon activists failed to mirror the strength of the movement of the Flemings. This changed as Wallonia recognized that its historic position of superiority over the North was waning. Economic development had progressed significantly in Brussels and Antwerp, two cities located outside of Wallonia, while Walloon industries fell behind and became increasingly expensive to maintain. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s, Walloons faced the threat of marginalization. The gains of the Flemish movement had weakened the status of French and had almost eradicated the language from Flanders completely. Furthermore, the majority of the Belgian population resided in Flanders. Economic dominance was the last remaining factor that prevented them from complete minority status, but the decades leading up the reforms made it clear that this too would be gone in the near future.

With this in mind, the Walloon activists had to seek support from the average Wallonia resident, who had mostly ignored the regionalist movement due to historically experiencing economic prosperity and a lack of fear of losing their language. After all, the Francophones in Brussels, who were more cognizant of the possible problems posed by a Flemish majority, had been cast aside decades earlier in favor of a Walloon cultural push. The 1960s brought a loss of jobs in the industrial sector, in which the majority of Walloons were employed, without a comparable gain in another sector.<sup>52</sup> The activists declared that the national government's funding of the Flemish economy incentivized development in Flanders at the cost of Wallonia and that federalism was necessary to rectify this and protect Walloon interests.<sup>53</sup> This message rallied the working class to

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<sup>52</sup> Chantal, "Growth of the Walloon Movement," 150.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

their side and the Leuven crisis, with the Flemish rallying cries of ‘Walloons out,’ brought the country to a near-breaking point. The average Walloon agreed with the assessment made by Destrée in 1912: reform was necessary to protect Wallonia.

### **3.3 The Reforms**

#### *3.3.1 The First State Reform – 1970*

The first state reform established two separate overlapping subdivisions of the country: the Communities and the Regions. Each Community and Region was to be given its own institutional structure in the form of a parliament, though the ones for the Regions did not come into existence until the second state reform.

Communities in the Belgium context correspond to the three linguistic groups within the country: the French speakers, the Dutch speakers, and the German speakers (a small segment of the population residing in Wallonia along the border with Germany). The Communities are tasked with cultural matters, the most important being education policy.<sup>54</sup> The 1970 reform left the Communities without delineated borders. In general, the Flemish Community was placed in control of all schools in Flanders and any school in Brussels in which the primary language of instruction was Dutch while the French Community received the same authority in Wallonia and the French-speaking schools in Brussels.<sup>55</sup> This preserved the bilingual nature of Brussels as each individual family could choose whether to send their child to a Dutch or French school, thereby ensuring the continued role of their linguistic community in the education of their child.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Falter, “Belgian’s Peculiar Way to Federalism,” 182.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

The role of the Regions is to provide economic autonomy to different territorial areas of Belgium.<sup>57</sup> The constitutional reform indicated that there were to be three different Regions: Brussels, Flanders, and Wallonia. The difficulty that the government experienced in establishing the institutions for the Regions was based on the issue of territoriality itself, since they could not sidestep the issue of borders as they did with the Communities. This was particularly problematic for the Brussels Capital Region (BCR), which explains the lack of a Brussels regional parliament until the third state reform. The issue of Brussels prevented the creation of the other two Regions as well, since Brussels is enclaved within the Flanders Region. To create the Flanders Region, it would have to be decided which suburbs surrounding Brussels would count within its Region and which would not. This was a highly contentious issue given that Brussels is bilingual while Flanders is not. In other words, the determination of the border could have the consequence of placing French speakers within a monolingual Flanders, which Francophones could not accept, while a too large Brussels would anger Flemings, who would view it as territorial theft on the part of the French speakers. This ‘stealing’ of Flemish land had, after all, partially incited the Leuven crisis. So, the government was reasonably concerned with the reception of any delineation of Brussels, as it was unlikely to please both groups.

The other parts of the 1970 reform focused on ensuring protection for political minorities, both within the Regions and Communities and at the national level.<sup>58</sup> At the subnational level, the concern was that the major political parties drew support from specific areas of the country, namely the Christian Democrats in Flanders and the

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<sup>57</sup> Falter, “Belgium’s Peculiar Way to Federalism,” 182.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

Socialists in Wallonia. While the regions were hardly politically homogenous, it seemed highly possible that those two parties would have outsized support within their Region/Community and would be able to suppress the other parties. To address this concern, the government added an amendment requiring the subnational governments to protect the freedom and rights of political minorities.<sup>59</sup> At the national level, the fear of the Walloons that their numerical minority would lead to their inability to stop undesired actions by a Flemish majority led to two amendments. The first decreed that the national government must have an equal number of Francophone and Flemish ministers with an exception for the role of Prime Minister, and the second created the notion of Special Laws.<sup>60</sup> Special Laws refer to any law that addresses the relationship of the ethnolinguistic groups in Belgium that is not in the form of a constitutional amendment and require the approval of a simple majority among the two linguistic groups and a two-thirds majority of the entire Parliament to pass.<sup>61</sup> These laws ensured that French speakers would not suffer under the tyranny of a Flemish majority, thereby cementing the consociational principle of the mutual veto.

### *3.3.2 The Second State Reform – 1980*

Ten years after the initial reform, the Regions existed only in the Constitution. The second state reform sought to bring them into reality, though the BCR would not materialize for another eight years. To establish the Region of Flanders, a provisional boundary was created between Flanders and Brussels under an agreement that a permanent border would be decided later.<sup>62</sup> The two established Regions were given

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<sup>59</sup> Falter, “Belgium’s Peculiar Way to Federalism,” 183.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

authority over “environment, housing policy,” and “regional aspects of economic policy” as well as the ability to create decrees.<sup>63</sup> The Communities received additional responsibilities in the form of health and social policies.<sup>64</sup> The parliaments for the Regions and Communities were comprised of members of the national parliament, except for the German-speaking Community which obtained a directly-elected parliament. The finances for the subnational governments was to come mostly from a set portion of the national tax revenue.<sup>65</sup>

This reform also saw the creation of the Court of Arbitration whose main purpose was to settle disputes over what powers belonged to the Regions, Communities, or national government.<sup>66</sup> This was necessary for two interrelated reasons. First, the Constitution stipulated the general category of policies that belonged to each governmental entity but did not provide an exclusive list, thus providing the possibility that different parliaments could equally claim to have authority over a particular issue. Second, the Belgian politicians refused to establish any hierarchical structure between the parliaments. This meant that the national parliament is considered equal to those of the Communities and Regions. Furthermore, it prevents the possibility of overlap on policy as decrees could otherwise conflict with national laws and one could not outweigh the other due to the lack of hierarchy. This made the possibility of uncertainty over who had authority over a certain issue a potentially major problem.

After the creation of the two Regions, the Flemish Community and Region decided to merge into a single authority with one parliament. A merger between the

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<sup>63</sup> Falter, “Belgium’s Peculiar Way to Federalism,” 183-184.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.



French Community and Walloon Region would have been considerably more complicated given the large number of French speakers in Brussels, while the proportion of Dutch speakers in Brussels to those in Flanders was small enough that it was fairly easy to overcome. This disparity between the two halves of Belgium has allowed the Flemish Parliament to emerge as a singular representative authority for Flemish interests in a way that Francophones have not been able to replicate with the subnational powers divided between three parliaments.

### *3.3.3 The Third State Reform – 1988*

Like the initial state reform, the third reform occurred following the fall of the government due to a crisis relating to the language status of a city in Flanders. This time, the city in question was Voeren. Voeren is a Flemish enclave within Wallonia along the country's border with the Netherlands. It had ended up as part of the Flanders due to political bargaining leading up to the 1962 language law that had determined the official language status of each Belgian province.<sup>67</sup> Despite this official status, a Walloon party had dominated local politics and the mayor refused to use Dutch, despite it being the official language of the city, unless the language status of Voeren was addressed.<sup>68</sup> The national parliament was divided on this issue and failed to find a solution, partially because any reopening of debates on the language policy of one area could spread to others, namely Brussels whose borders remained tenuous.

The government that came to power following this incident realized that a permanent delineation of the BCR was necessary to remove its constant status as a threat

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<sup>67</sup> Falter, "Belgium's Peculiar Way to Federalism," 185; Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium*, 135.

<sup>68</sup> Falter, "Belgium's Peculiar Way to Federalism," 185.

to government stability. The Flemish parties prevented the expansion of Brussels beyond the nineteen municipalities given bilingual status in 1962, but compensated the Francophones by establishing French language facilities in six outer regions despite their official status as part of Flanders.<sup>69</sup> In addition, those cities and Voeren would be given institutional structures to guarantee the role of the minority language in the local government.<sup>70</sup> This agreement allowed the BCR to become operational, finally establishing all of the Regions and Communities that had been added into the Constitution in 1970. The BCR immediately received a directly elected parliament, unlike Flanders and Wallonia, which continued to have representatives who served at both the regional and national level.

Power devolution in this reform involved transferring remaining educational policy control to the Communities and public works and industrial policy to the Regions.<sup>71</sup> This led to the subnational governments obtaining larger budgets, particularly for the Regions, whose budgets were nearly tripled.<sup>72</sup> The overall expenditures of the subnational units accounted for twenty percent of the national governmental expenditures following this reform.<sup>73</sup> However, this was not accompanied by greater fiscal autonomy, since, during the reform process, the public learned of the vast amount of financial transfers from the now-richer Flanders to Wallonia.<sup>74</sup> The backlash to this revelation threatened to undermine the already-weakened solidarity between the two regions, so the financing for the Regions and Communities was addressed in a Special Finance Law in

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<sup>69</sup> Falter, "Belgium's Peculiar Way to Federalism," 187.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

1989 that has remained controversial. It established criteria by which the revenue of the subnational governments would be determined and provided significant benefits for the Region/Community with a weaker economy.<sup>75</sup>

#### *3.3.4 The Fourth State Reform – 1993*

The fourth reform officially declared what had been informally established by the first three reforms: Belgium was no longer a unitary state but a federal entity. Flanders and Wallonia finally received direct election for their regional parliaments and the number of seats in the national government decreased significantly, with the Chamber of Representatives losing almost thirty percent of its seats and the Senate reduced by sixty percent.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, this reform allowed the Regions and Communities to establish a foreign policy related to their competences and required that any treaties that the national government pursued that overlapped with a competence of a subnational government must obtain agreement from the Communities or Regions depending on the issue.<sup>77</sup> In practice, this means that Belgium cannot sign onto any international trade treaties if a Region objects since this would interfere with the economic competences of that Region.

#### *3.3.5 The Fifth State Reform – 2001*

The fifth state reform was comprised of two parts: the Lambermont Agreement, which involved mostly further devolution, and the Lombard Agreement, which affected the institutions of the Brussels Capital Region. The Lambermont Agreement increased the number of funds transferred to the Communities from the federal government.<sup>78</sup> In

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<sup>75</sup> Falter, “Belgium’s Peculiar Way to Federalism,” 188-189.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-191.

<sup>78</sup> Dirk Jacobs and Marc Swyngedouw, “Territorial and Non-Territorial Federalism in Belgium: Reform of the Brussels Capital Region, 2001,” *Regional & Federal Studies* 13, no. 2 (2003), 133.

regard to the Regions, in addition to receiving a limited amount of fiscal autonomy, provincial and local laws were placed under their jurisdiction, shifting the oversight of the local level from the federal government to the Regions.<sup>79</sup> The Lombard Agreement addressed the lack of guaranteed representation for Flemings within Brussels at both the regional and municipal level and changed the representation of Brussels in the Flemish Parliament.<sup>80</sup> Whereas previously the members had served in both bodies and were directly elected to the Brussels Parliament, the Lombard Agreement made them directly elected to the Flemish Parliament, no longer a part of the Brussels Parliament, and limited their voting power in the Flemish Parliament to solely community matters.<sup>81</sup>

### *3.3.6 The Sixth State Reform – 2012*

The sixth reform showcased the increased strength of the subnational governments. In a reversal of the original structure of the regional parliaments, the Senate is no longer directly elected and is instead composed of members of the regional and community parliaments that those parliaments themselves elect to send to the Senate.<sup>82</sup> The powers of the Senate were also greatly reduced, as the legislative process at the federal level has been made a unicameral procedure through the Chamber of Representatives for most matters.<sup>83</sup> The Senate is now a non-permanent body tasked with addressing constitutional and institutional related acts and mostly provides a means for

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<sup>79</sup> Jacobs and Swyngedouw, "Territorial and Non-Territorial Federalism in Belgium: Reform of the Brussels Capital Region, 2001," 133.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>82</sup> Jurgen Goossens and Pieter Cannoot, "Belgian Federalism after the Sixth State Reform," *Perspectives on Federalism* 7, no. 2 (2015), 38.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

the Communities and the Regions to directly influence policy at the national level, though this remains limited to the narrow list of issues under the Senate's purview.<sup>84</sup>

The financing of the Regions has been greatly affected by this reform due to its changes to the Special Finance Law of 1989. Starting in 2014, the Regions gained increased taxation powers. Previously, the amount they collected from personal income tax was set by the national government. They now can increase or decrease the amount of taxes on top of the federal tax that they collect and are able to reduce the amount of federal income tax collected regarding matters that fall under their competences.<sup>85</sup> The Communities remain financed solely by funds devolved from the national government. Additionally, the highly controversial solidarity mechanism, which led to a continual transfer of funds from Flanders to Wallonia has changed. The funding for the Regions is no longer tied to economic performance, except that a Region or Community cannot "be structurally impoverished."<sup>86</sup> To reduce the impact that this will adversely have on Wallonia, the transfers are slowly phasing out over a period of ten years with a reduction of ten percent per year.<sup>87</sup>

The series of the six reforms has demonstrated the influence that the subnational nations have gained since the founding of Belgium. The extensive efforts to reduce tension between the Flemings and Walloons have created an institutional structure that, as will be seen in the next chapters, has shifted the focus of the country from the national level to the subnational level, thereby solidifying the notion of separate ethnolinguistic groups within the country that were not recognized in 1830.

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<sup>84</sup> Goossens and Cannoot, "Belgian Federalism after the Sixth State Reform," 38-39.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

## **CHAPTER 4: A RESHAPED BELGIUM**

The political system that has emerged from the reforms is complicated, with effectively six separate parliaments with equal powers. A simplified visualization of the relationships between the parliaments can be seen in Appendix C. While the Communities and Regions are separate entities under the Belgian Constitution, in Flanders, they govern as one body. A partial stipulation must be made regarding this, though, since some members, the six who represent the Dutch-speaking residents of Brussels, of the Flemish parliament are only partial members and can only vote on matters pertaining to the Flemish Community. For Belgian Francophones, the relationship between the Communities and Regions is slightly different because the Walloon parliament remains a separate governing body from the French Community. The French Community parliament is composed of all of the elected representatives of the Walloon parliament, excluding the two German-speaking representatives who are replaced by French-speaking members of the same party, and nineteen selected representatives from the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). Thus, although Walloons are technically governed by two separate subnational parliaments, their relationship with the French Community and their Region is similar to that of the Flemings, since they have the same elected representatives in both bodies. It is those living in the bilingual BCR that have a more complicated situation. The parliament for the BCR has eighty-nine deputies, but only twenty-five of those members also represent their language community. This arrangement does little to counteract the role that Brussels plays in domestic political discourse as a city torn between Flanders and Wallonia despite its

official status as an equal Region, though it prevents it from otherwise having an outsized role in the governance of the Communities.

With the major transformation of the Belgian political system due to the reforms, one would expect to see shifts in the way in which politics operates within the country. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight these changes as it pertains to the broader strength and legitimacy of regionalism. Before discussing the actual effects, it is important to recall the expected outcomes of the reforms. Belgian politicians sought a way to counteract the tensions caused by rising regionalism and to protect the interests of the groups they represented. The goal was to appease the regionalists and return politics to its traditional form of economic and social disagreements between the Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals. However, as will be seen, these efforts only temporarily addressed the problem and, in fact, created a structure that has proved beneficial to enterprising regionalists.

#### **4.1 The Disappearance of the Belgian Voter**

As discussed in the previous chapter, regionalist parties are not an entirely new phenomenon. However, they remained marginalized as the politics of Belgium centered on the three major social cleavages of the country: the Socialists, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals. In the 1968 election, two regionalist parties, the *Volkswijde* and the French-Speaking Democratic Front (FDF), received a combined 15.7% percent of the vote with the remaining 85% going to the traditional parties.<sup>88</sup> Despite only obtaining this small proportion, the regionalist parties succeeded in their push for a devolution of

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<sup>88</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, "PARLINE Database on National Parliaments," <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp> (accessed October 27, 2018)

power and achieved the first state reform, mostly due to the other parties deeming it in their best interests to do so. The 1971 election appeared to mark a shift in fortunes for the regionalist parties, particularly for the FDF, as they nearly doubled their vote share and seat count in the Chamber of Representatives. Yet, while the gains for those particular parties dissipated over time, their impact, along with the reforms, led to the breakdown of the historic three-party system that had guided the country since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The slow rise of the Volksunie, the FDF, and the RW (Walloon Rally) during the 1960s forced the traditional parties to grapple with these new threats. They addressed the rise of the regionalist parties by beginning the state reform process and dividing into linguistic camps. The Christian Democrats were the first party to split, doing so in 1968, following the Leuven crisis. It is understandable that their separation preceded the others given that the strongest regional presence came from Flanders, a significant base for their party, as well as the commonalities between the typical Christian Democrat voter and those that opted for the Volksunie.<sup>89</sup> The voter profile of the two parties overlapped greatly, more so than the Volksunie did with the Socialists or Liberals, and, as a result, the Christian Democrats faced greater pressure to address regionalism.<sup>90</sup> The Liberals succumbed in 1972 after small regional factions had already abandoned the party, while the Socialists managed to remain united until 1978.

The continued unity of the Socialists until a decade after the split of the Christian Democrats can be explained by their ability to avoid the dramatic effects of regionalism.

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<sup>89</sup> John Fitzmaurice, *The Politics of Belgium: A Unique Federalism*, (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 1996), 177, 205.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



The RW, which posed the greatest threat to the Socialists' base of power in Wallonia, remained the weakest of the three regionalist parties and only experienced electoral success when allied with the FDF.<sup>91</sup> The Socialists managed to maintain a fairly constant vote share despite the dramatic rise of the regionalists. Like the other parties, their totals decreased between 1965 to 1971, but their decrease remained the smallest. Importantly, while the other parties began to regain their lost votes after splitting, the Socialists instead remained consistent and, in fact, fell in their overall vote share in the 1978 election. After watching their political adversary, the Christian Democrats, experience improved success with their regional arms, the party leadership of the Socialists decided that they could no longer resist the pull towards the Communities and separated into their different linguistic camps. Since that division, the country has lacked any true national party, and thus lacks any party that campaigns in both Wallonia and Flanders. Instead, they only aim to appeal to the voters within their party's linguistic group.

While the separation of the major parties weakened or eliminated their ability to counterbalance the spread of the conceptualization of Belgian in regional terms, it did position them to address the issues that strengthened the regionalist parties. They succeeded in doing so that by the mid-2000s, it seemed that the age of the regionalist parties had come to an end. The success of the regionalist party, the N-VA (New Flemish Alliance), in recent elections signaled that Flemish support for regionalist parties had not dissipated. Instead, it exploded with the N-VA receiving a larger vote share than any of its predecessors and nearly obtaining, on its own, the combined vote share obtained by the FDF and *Volksumie* in the 1971 election, the previous peak of regionalist party

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<sup>91</sup> John Fitzmaurice, *The Politics of Belgium: A Unique Federalism*, 198.

support. A graphical depiction of the shifts in vote share for various regional parties and for the regionalist parties as a whole in each election year since 1968 can be seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 respectively.

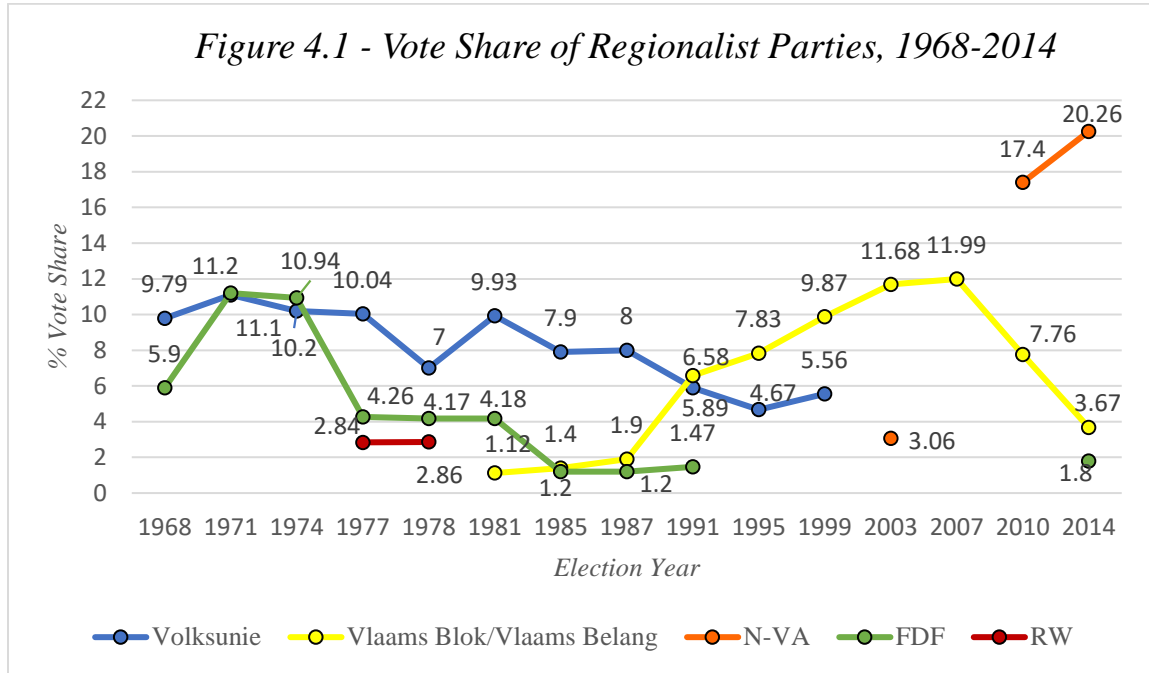


Figure 4.1 - Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. "PARLINE Database on National Parliaments." Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp> (accessed October 27, 2018); Norwegian Centre for Research Data. "European Election Database: Belgium." 1991-2010. [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/country/belgium/](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/belgium/) (Accessed: September 21, 2018).

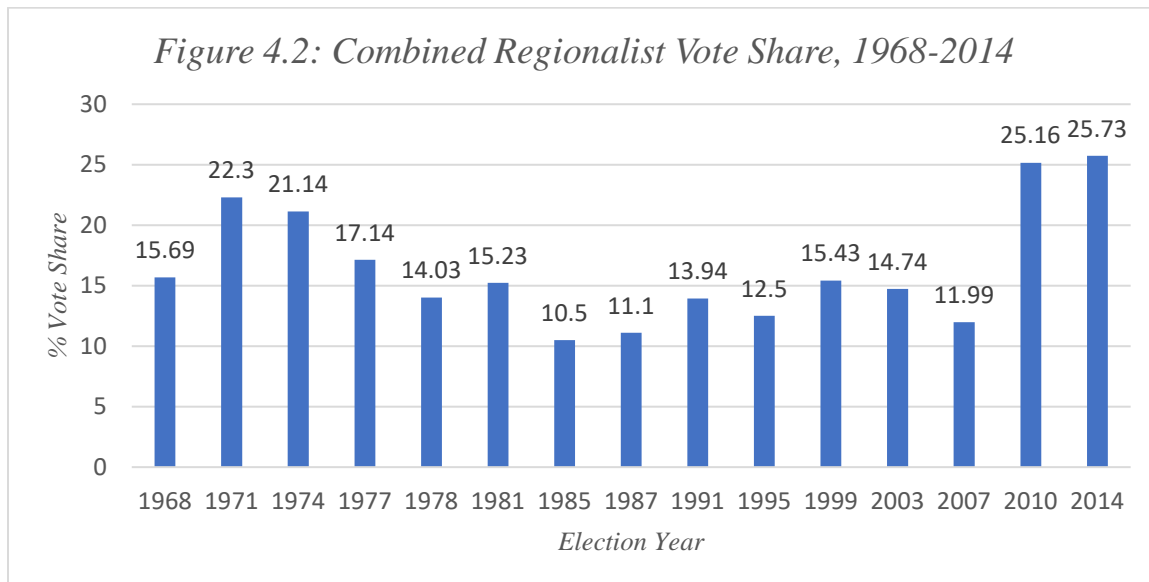


Figure 4.2 - Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. "PARLINE Database on National Parliaments." Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp> (accessed October 27, 2018); Norwegian Centre for Research Data. "European Election Database: Belgium." 1991-2010. [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/country/belgium/](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/belgium/) (Accessed: September 21, 2018).

Thus, the major story of Belgian regionalist parties centered around their demise and the ability of the regionalized major parties to render them obsolete. However, this fails to account the rapid rise of the N-VA. Following the fracturing of the *Volkswijde*, the N-VA was its sole successor party to compete in the 2003 election as an independent party. Another offshoot, known as Spirit, realized that it lacked the support necessary to compete at a major level and decided to partner with Sp.a, the Flemish Socialists.<sup>92</sup> This lasted until 2008, at which point Spirit chose to operate on their own, but they failed to garner enough votes to obtain a single seat in the Chamber of Representatives in the 2010 election.<sup>93</sup> While the N-VA did not immediately become absorbed by another party, they only managed to obtain 3.06% of the total votes and opted to ally with the CD&V for the 2007 election.<sup>94</sup> By the 2010 federal election, they received 17.4% of the total vote share.<sup>95</sup> Certainly, the obituaries for all regionalist parties were premature. Somehow the N-VA managed to break free from the fates shared by its predecessors, both Francophone and Flemish.

#### *4.1.1 The Demise of the Cross-Cutting Cleavages*

Repercussions of the breakdown along linguistic lines extend beyond electoral effects. The ideologies of the three parties had historically cut across the ethnolinguistic divide, with both Walloons and Flemings identifying with each party in large numbers. Stereotypes painted Wallonia as a Socialist party stronghold with the Christian Democrats succeeding mostly in Flanders, but the reality was more complicated than this.

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<sup>92</sup> Kris Deschouwer, "The Rise and Fall of the Belgian Regionalist Parties," *Regional and Federal Studies* 19, no. 4-5 (December 2009), 567.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 567; Norwegian Centre for Research Data. "European Election Database: Belgium." 1991-2010. [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/country/belgium/](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/belgium/) (Accessed: September 21, 2018)

<sup>94</sup> Norwegian Centre for Research Data, "European Election Database: Belgium," 1991-2010.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

The Socialists certainly relied on Wallonia for votes, though this was the result of socioeconomic factors rather than ethnolinguistic ones. Their voters were mostly industrial workers and, since Wallonia had undergone more industrialization than other areas of the country, Walloons constituted the majority of their voting bloc.<sup>96</sup> The Christian Democrats drew support throughout Flanders and in the southern areas of Wallonia, while Liberal voters had little geographic tendencies, though they did typically experience better results in Brussels and the surrounding area.<sup>97</sup> The splitting of the parties severed these linkages.

Cross-cutting cleavages serve an important role in plural societies, such as Belgium, through their ability to provide connections to otherwise divided groups. This occurs at both the level of the voter and the politician. The individual voter who identifies with different groups that overlap has a linkage to segments of the larger population that they would not if the divisions completely coincided. In a practical example in Belgium, the Walloon who supported the Christian Democratic party had ties to the larger Francophone/Walloon group as well as to those who also support the Christian Democratic party, which provided an association with a large swath of Flemings. These linkages tend to moderate opinions as people are more likely to think of the negative effects that a hardline stance on one factor could cause to members of another group with which they identify. A similar effect occurs on the politician as they must moderate their rhetoric due to the recognition that the group they represent, while potentially

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<sup>96</sup> Pieter Saey, Christian Kesteloot, and Christian Vandermotten, "Unequal Economic Development at the Origin of the Federalization Process" in *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780-1995*, ed. Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998), 174-175.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175

homogenous at the ideological level, is heterogeneous on another factor.<sup>98</sup> Thus, for the major parties in Belgium, their regionalist aspect was moderated as the party as a whole represented both Walloons and Flemings and the leadership had to act accordingly. They could not denounce one ethnolinguistic group in favor of the other without isolating an important element of their voting bloc.

Interestingly, even the regionalist parties during the 1960s and 70s seemed to recognize the cross-cutting nature of the major parties. They refused to address the traditional dividing issue of religion and also avoided entrapping themselves with any particular economic policies.<sup>99</sup> The tenets of their platforms rested on the issue of the relationship of the national government and the ethnolinguistic groups. Had the typical stereotypes of a Christian Democrat Flanders and a socialist Wallonia directly coincided with the actual division of the two regions, the reluctance of the regionalist parties to align accordingly would be strange, particularly as they presented themselves as the best representatives to advocate for their group. Instead, the regionalist parties distanced themselves from the traditional dividing lines out of concern of isolating those that would otherwise support their agenda.

Originally, the three parties provided a cross-cutting cleavage with the linguistic division. Though the parties always had a certain element of territorialism, this was no more severe than in other countries and did not originate from intentional discourse based on dividing the country on the basis of language. With their breakdown on linguistic lines, whatever moderating effect this had on the Belgian ethnolinguistic divisions was

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<sup>98</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 10.

<sup>99</sup> Emilie Van Haute and Jean-Benoit Pilet, "Regionalist Parties in Belgium (VU, RW, FDF): Victims of Their Own Success?" *Regional & Federal Studies* 16, no. 3 (November 2006), 304.

eradicated at both the level of the voter and the politician. Certainly, this did not occur overnight but, as years have progressed, the halves of the parties have drifted further apart as they adopted differing leadership and electoral platforms and have voted increasingly on linguistic lines, especially as it pertains to state reforms.<sup>100</sup> By the most recent federal election in 2014, the cooperation between what initially began as the two regional halves of the same ideological party had weakened to the point where the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) were part of the coalition government while the French Christian Democrats (cdH) remained in the opposition.<sup>101</sup>

This breakdown plays a role in concentrating the focus of the country to the regional level. Politicians no longer need to consider the other linguistic community when campaigning and constructing party platforms, except perhaps for derogatory purposes in pitting their region against the other. The removal of the cross-cutting cleavage additionally removes a barrier to solely constructing one's identity in regional terms. Now, when a Walloon thinks of their political party, they do not have any Flemish figures to think of as ideological compatriots as they do not operate under the same party banner. Instead, their party serves only to reinforce that they are a Walloon and a Francophone. No longer does the regional-minded Belgian have to seek out the regionalist party to support this identity since the parties have decided that they too are regional. The sole exception to this phenomenon is the Green parties, which now act as a single party in the federal government and propose agendas together.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium*, 166.

<sup>101</sup> Régis Dandoy, Min Reuchamps, and Pierre Baudewyns, "The 2014 Federal and European Elections in Belgium," *Electoral Studies* 39 (2015), 167.

<sup>102</sup> Groen, "Partijstructuur" [Party Structure], Groen, <https://www.groen.be/partijstructuur> (accessed November 2, 2018).

#### *4.1.2 The Reign of the Regionalist Voter*

With their separation, the traditional parties began their efforts to chase the regionalist voter. Their fear of losing power to an outside threat drove them to change their electoral approach to coax these voters back into their traditional camps. The success from this shift in reducing support for the regionalists and returning the parties to their previous position as the sole arbiters of Belgian politics reinforced this notion of the importance of a strong position regarding regionalism. This focus was only compounded by the electoral structure providing greater benefits to a regional focus with the direct election of the regional parliaments. In order to succeed at this level, parties needed to concentrate their message on benefitting their Region, with less regard for the federal since it was no longer the place of the only major election in the country, and began their efforts to represent the position of their Region on regionalism better than their competitors. With these positions, certain halves of the major parties formed electoral cartels with the regionalist parties: the FDF partnered with the MR (the Francophone Liberals), the N-VA with the CD&V, and Spirit with Sp.a (the Flemish Socialists).

In this chase, the parties eventually outpaced the general population, yet they suffered no electoral blowback from this extremism. Instead, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, they watched as efforts to compromise led to the electoral success of those who failed to do so. This situation can be attributed to a reduction of saliency of the continuation of Belgium on the Flemish side while the saliency of devolution and separatism remains strong among a segment of voters. In Wallonia, the situation is similar but an inverse in the positions: voters are motivated to vote against further

devolution while those indifferent or supportive of such measures are more concerned with other issues.

This reality can be seen in analyzing voter volatility and the types of voters drawn to the regionalists. A panel survey given following the 2009 and 2014 regional elections found that almost half of the Belgians surveyed had switched their vote from one party in 2009 to a different one in 2014.<sup>103</sup> It further concluded that the traditional parties along with the Green parties obtain the greatest share of their votes from the stable voters, while the N-VA obtained a significant share of its votes from those who voted for a different party in 2014.<sup>104</sup> Given the great increase in votes for the N-VA in the 2014 election compared to their results in the 2009 election, this is not surprising, but when analyzed in companion with a similar voter volatility study that focused solely on N-VA voters, the predicament for the traditional parties becomes clearer. This study found that a voter's preference for Flemish independence significantly increased the likelihood that a voter would switch from any of the traditional parties to the N-VA.<sup>105</sup>

With so much volatility, particularly driven among voters in favor of Flemish independence, Flemish parties cannot afford to abandon regionalism as it would risk potentially losing more voters to the N-VA. The dynamics of the electorate further compound this as they cannot hope to regain these votes by appealing to a more moderate position on regionalism, as such voters likely continue to support the traditional parties as they have no alternative. Unlike in the 1960s where the parties turned to regionalism to

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<sup>103</sup> Ruth Dassoneville and Dieter Stiers. "Electoral Volatility in Belgium (2009-2014): Is There a Difference Between Stable and Volatile Voters?" *Acta Politica* 53, no. 1 (February 2017), 83.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>105</sup> Joris Boonen and Marc Hooghe. "Do Nationalist Parties Shape or Follow Sub-National Identities? A Panel Analysis on the Rise of the Nationalist Party in the Flemish Region of Belgium, 2006-11," *Nations and Nationalism* 20, no. 1 (2014), 68.



counteract the rise of the regionalist parties, there is no threat faced by the Flemish parties at the center that advocates for an anti-regionalist position.

Even if enough support existed for such a party, the dynamics of the electoral system inhibits its potential success. As a result, the voters who are either unmotivated by regionalism or against its spread are ignored by party leadership who fears the loss of the regionalist voter more than that of the non-regionalist voter, as it is assumed the latter has nowhere to go. The non-regionalist voter is seen as selecting a party based on factors other than regionalism and thus is unaffected by the party's position on the issue. The pro-Belgian voter has yet to constrict the posturing of the Flemish parties in the way that the pro-Flanders voter can. The continued growth of the Regions makes the resurgence of the power of the pro-Belgian voter less likely, particularly now that success in one of the two houses of the federal parliament depends on one's ability to win at the regional level, something more difficult for a party whose foundation opposes increased prominence of the Region. Thus, the centrifugal tendency of the Belgian parties further and further away from their counterparts in the other Region will likely continue, particularly as the rise of the N-VA reaffirms the importance of the regional-minded voter.

#### **4.2 Devolution and Regional Legitimacy**

With the end of the cross-cutting cleavages, there was little to mitigate the relevance of the regional identity. However, as parties took on a regional aspect, it could be argued that any vote for these non-national parties allowed for the voicing of regional feelings and that the regionalist parties became obsolete. The decline of vote share for these parties in the 1980s and 1990s seems to coincide with this reasoning. Despite this,

the N-VA managed to break this trend and become the largest party indicating that regionalism has not disappeared as a factor that influences Flemish voters. A driving force behind this has been the institutional reforms that have aided in increasing regional and linguistic community legitimacy, which, in turn, has only furthered the salience of the ethnolinguistic identities. While the Belgian leadership sought reforms to provide more autonomy to the regions in the hopes of minimizing the overall tensions, the splitting of the electorates and creation of regional and community parliaments has provided a governmental structure that has effectively created two functioning states within one country. With this reality, it has been relatively easy for Bart De Wever, the current leader of the N-VA, and his party to reinforce the idea in the minds of Flemish voters that the current structure is inefficient and that Flanders can survive on its own.

To look at this issue of the legitimacy of the region and community in the case of Belgium, particularly in Flanders, it is important to recall the relationship between the legitimacy of the national and subnational government and devolution, as discussed in Chapter 2 and displayed in Appendix B. Legitimacy is affected by various historical factors as well as the political support for the government.<sup>106</sup> It then influences the method of devolution based on whether the national or subnational has greater legitimacy. The type of devolution can, in turn, affect the legitimacy of the government based on reception of the devolution and the way that it changes the way people view future devolution and the existing government units.<sup>107</sup> If the reception of devolution is positive and the subnational government is viewed positively, the legitimacy of the subnational government will continue to grow. On the other hand, if the devolution is met

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<sup>106</sup> Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, “The Global Trend towards Devolution and its Implications,” 335.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 335-336.

with backlash, the national legitimacy will likely increase in relation to that of the subnational.

Chapter 3 provided a discussion of the subnational legitimacy in Belgium leading up to the devolutionary process. By the time of the reforms, Wallonia and Flanders had constructed their own identities within the Belgian state and had succeeded in obtaining territorial monolingualism. With these elements in place, they had moved towards strengthening the salience of the linguistic identity in both segments of the country. The success of the regionalist parties in the election of 1968 and the societal pressures that caused the major parties to turn to reforms further developed the subnational legitimacy.

However, it is difficult to contend that at the beginning of the devolutionary process that the regions had greater legitimacy than the nation. The major dividing groups of Socialists, Christian Democrats, and Liberals each still obtained a greater share of votes than any of the regionalist parties, and this continued in the 1971 election immediately following the first reform. Furthermore, given the lack of institutions at the regional/community level prior to the reforms, any legitimacy they had was informal. Thus, in line with the prediction of the devolutionary framework, the initial reforms involved mostly a decentralization of responsibility.

As evidenced by the breakdown of the political parties on the linguistic lines, devolution was not met with backlash as people accepted the creation of the Communities and Regions and the economic and social powers given to the subnational units. To some extent, it simply reflected a pre-existing reality. The majority of legitimacy remained at the national level though, as it took several years for the regional/community parliaments to come into existence, and even then, they initially

were comprised of politicians who had been elected to the national parliament. This continued to emphasize the national government, since those who would decide on regional matters served primarily at the national level. As a result, the regional and community parliaments continued to operate underneath the national government rather than separately from it. The existence of these new governmental bodies did provide an additional challenger to the national government though, even if part of this was negated by their ties to the central government. This linkage of the politicians serving at both levels was ruptured with the official federalization in 1993.

While the national government continued to have greater legitimacy moving into the 1993 election, the lopsided nature of their legitimacy over that of the subnational was quickly deteriorating. The growing strength of the legitimacy of the subnational governments prior to 1993 reform can be seen in a 1991 National Election Survey. Questions asked to the participants included their self-identification as Belgian or Flemish/Walloon/Francophone and their desire for future decentralization.<sup>108</sup> Around 56% of the Flemish respondents wished for the Regions and Communities to continue to grow in power, with almost 11% completely rejecting Belgium altogether.<sup>109</sup> Walloons were less certain, with only 35% categorized as regionalists.<sup>110</sup> The continued strength of the national government remained evident in the survey as well with about 30% of the participants among both Walloons and Flemings desiring no further devolution.<sup>111</sup> So, a significant portion of the population fell on both sides of the debate over increased

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<sup>108</sup> Bart Maddens, Roeland Beerten, and Jaak Billet, "The National Consciousness of the Flemings and the Walloons. An Empirical Investigation," in *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780-1995*, ed. Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998), 199-200.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

devolution at the point of the 1991 elections, but following the 1991-1992 crisis, public opinion in Flanders lurched towards a completely independent Flanders.<sup>112</sup>

The official declaration making Belgium a federal state in 1993 marked a point of no return in many ways. In addition to delineating which powers belonged to the subnational parliaments and to the national parliament, the issues raised by the lack of hierarchy among the governmental bodies came to the forefront. As all the regional and community parliaments have the same level of authority as the federal parliament and their laws are treated with the same weight, the supremacy of the national government in certain areas, specifically foreign policy was called into question. While that reform itself decided to ignore that problem, the discussion of devolving foreign policy was both radical and an example of the vast responsibilities that the subnational state reasonably argued it had a right to control. The direct election of the subnational parliaments freed them of their direct tie to the national parliament and removed the association of regional MPs with those of the other region or community. When the politicians served at both the national and subnational level, they were accustomed to working with both ethnolinguistic groups to create policies for the nation in addition to their subnational role. With the direct election, this was removed as separate politicians serve in the subnational and national parliaments. For these MPs, this reinforces their ties to their Region and Community over the nation rather than the two complementing each other. The chasm between the two ethnolinguistic groups only deepened with this and it continues to widen. Despite this, it is possible that the newest reform to the Senate has the potential to re-establish some of these linkages as it will provide the members of the

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<sup>112</sup> Falter, "Belgium's Peculiar Road to Federalism," 189-190.

subnational parliament with increased interaction with those of other Regions and Communities.

Almost twenty years after the federalization of Belgium, the N-VA emerged as the largest party in Flanders. In discussing the party's success, De Wever turned directly to the country's institutional structure, claiming that it had established two separate democracies in one country.<sup>113</sup> While that is perhaps an oversimplification given that there are truly four separate electorates, plus the complex situation of Brussels and its suburbs, the idea of two separate democracies coexisting in Belgium encapsulates the separate party systems and the general trend of the country that has created an underlying notion that Belgium is already two separate countries that are simply continuing to ignore that reality.

The division of the ethnolinguistic groups at the government institutional level has guided the overall media culture of the country. With the initial language laws enforcing monolingualism within the two main regions, bilingualism was driven out and francophone media in Flanders mostly ceased to exist.<sup>114</sup> This has become even more evident since the communities received their own cultural competences, as each language group has its own monolingual broadcasting network.<sup>115</sup> In addition, the information provided by these media mostly concerns the Region to which that linguistic community belongs which does nothing to address the limited amount of interaction the average Fleming has with Walloon culture and vice versa. Occasionally, the television and radio

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<sup>113</sup> Gijss Moes, “‘Laat België maar rustig verdampen’” (‘Let Belgium Slowly Evaporate’), *Trouw De Verdieping*, April 8, 2010.

<sup>114</sup> Jaak Billiet, Bart Maddens, and André-Paul Frogner, “Does Belgium (still) Exist? Differences in Political Culture between Flemings and Walloons,” *West European Politics* 29, no. 5 (November 2006), 914.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 914.

stations will have programming specifically discussing the culture of the other half, such as *De Andere Belgen* (the Other Belgians) which sought to give Flemish viewers a look at francophone Belgians, but the existence of such programming indicates the disconnect between the two groups.<sup>116</sup>

This drifting apart at a societal level further shifts the self-construction of identity for citizens. With news continually discussing Wallonia and mostly ignoring the other half of the country, Flanders become increasingly distant in the minds of Walloons. The linguistic division of the parties further removes the two groups from each other. In addition, with the majority of cultural powers that are used to instill a common identity, most notably education, at the subnational level, the national government has no real means of promoting a Belgian identity. Thus, neither the national government nor the media can successively counteract the deficiencies of the other and create or promote a national identity. Instead, they both serve to emphasize the subnational.

The latest reform demonstrated the hallmark result of a stronger subnational legitimacy relative to that of the national government in its decentralization of resources. Beyond the changes of the reform that were discussed in chapter 3, the actual shift in subnational government expenditures both overall and as a percentage of total governmental expenditures demonstrate this gain of the subnational governments, specifically the Regions relative to the national government. This can be seen in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4, which depict the increased expenditures of the subnational governments over time. The key year for this newest shift is 2015, the first year after they gained their increased fiscal powers. As Figure 4.4 presents, this increase in 2015

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<sup>116</sup> Murphy, *The Regional Dynamics of Language Differentiation in Belgium*, 173.

occurred at a point in which total government expenditure stayed at a comparable level to the previous year as the increase of the subnational expenditure was roughly matched by a decrease in spending at the national level. Part of this increased expenditure is derived from funds obtained from their newly acquired taxation powers, and thus is not directly a transfer of money from the national to the subnational; however, the improved fiscal autonomy obtained as a result of their ability to tax does result in a reduction of authority of the national government over the Regions. As a result, while it is not a devolution of resources, it nevertheless represents a decentralization of them.

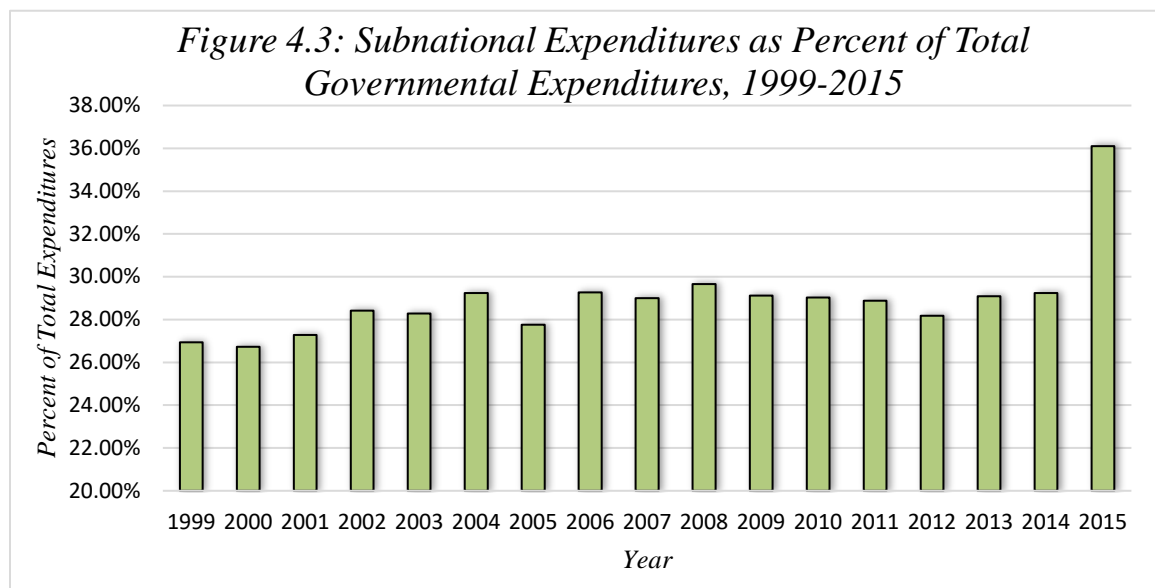


Figure 4.3 – Source: International Monetary Fund. “Government Finance Statistics (GFS).” International Monetary Fund, <http://data.imf.org/?sk=a0867067-d23c-4ebc-ad23-d3b015045405&slId=1409151240976> (accessed November 10, 2018).

In line with the model proposed by Rodríguez-Pose Gill, the decentralization in Belgium promulgated by the state reforms originated with the type expected with a strong national legitimacy in relation to that of the subnational. However, in the most recent reforms, this has shifted towards a decentralization of resources, indicating that the subnational legitimacy has increased, and perhaps overtaken, the legitimacy of the federal government. This move towards greater regional legitimacy has coincided with the



resurgence of regionalist parties, specifically the meteoric rise of the N-VA. For a party which advocates for a confederal Belgium and, eventually, an independent Flanders, legitimizing the Regions over the country provides greater credence to feasibility and appeal of their aims.

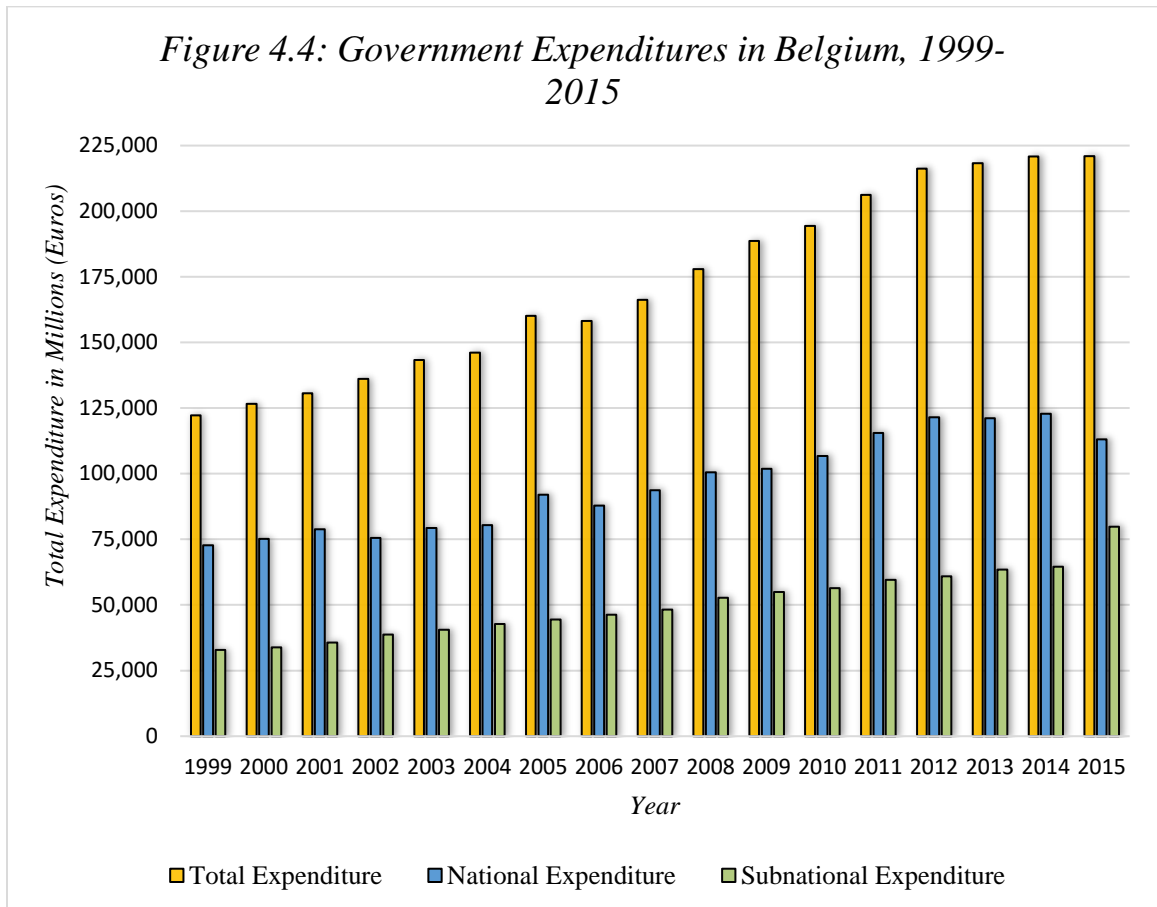


Figure 4.4 - Source: International Monetary Fund. "Government Finance Statistics (GFS)." International Monetary Fund, <http://data.imf.org/?sk=a0867067-d23c-4ebc-ad23-d3b015045405&sid=1409151240976> (accessed November 10, 2018)

## **CHAPTER 5: SHIFTING INCENTIVES FOR POLITICAL PARTIES**

The underlying idea of consociationalism is the belief that the elites that rise to power through the political parties will not be the very radicals that undermine the stability of democracy in a plural society. Instead, the leaders are supposed to be moderates, or at least willing to accommodate. It fundamentally hinges on those who govern being less radical than the average member of their segment and the population at large. An initial problem for consociationalism is that it lacks a mechanism to guarantee this, and its insistence on all segments of the population receiving representation undermines its ability to elevate moderates, particularly in the cases where one of the significant segments of the population is comprised mostly of radicals. Furthermore, in the event that radicals do come to power, consociationalism relies only on norms to hope that such elected officials will decide to compromise and work within the structure rather than against it. If they simply refuse to compromise, a consociational system becomes stagnant, which would likely only increase tensions and the segmental tendencies that it aims to mitigate. In fact, as a consociational system requires the inclusion of all major segments of the population, it will likely lead to the inclusion of some extremists in power with the belief that providing an avenue to achieve some gains in the system will encourage them to support it and turn towards moderation. Once in power, those radicals are constrained by the power-sharing structure and mutual vetoes, but there is nothing to stop them from refusing to cooperate with other parties and stoking segmentalism for their own political benefit. In that case, it is unlikely that consociationalism will successfully stabilize a country's political system.

Belgium, with its relatively peaceful history despite its ethnolinguistic divisions, historically demonstrated the stability that was possible with mostly moderates in power. When the more radical individuals began to challenge the power of the traditional parties, the country's leaders followed the consociational path of accommodating the wishes of the regionalists in the state reforms without allowing extremists into power. In doing so, the electoral success of the regionalist parties began to fade, and the traditional parties began to once again consolidate power. However, as the rise of the N-VA has demonstrated, this return to historical norms was short-lived and radicals play an increasingly larger role in the Belgian government. The difficulty faced by politicians in forming a governing coalition following the 2007 and 2010 elections demonstrates a reduction in the ability of the elites to work together and compromise. Thus, the consociational ideal has seemingly been lost in Belgium in the years following its federalization.

Different ideas have been proposed as explanations for this phenomenon. Some point to socioeconomic factors such as increasingly diverging opinions between the average Walloon and Fleming and the continued economic strength of Flanders in comparison to Wallonia. The basis for this argument rests on the idea that, as the socioeconomic situation within the two regions differs, the positions of the political parties naturally reflect this divide and, as the gap widens, finding a suitable solution for representatives for both sides becomes increasingly difficult.<sup>117</sup> This proposal has weaknesses on both the social and economic halves of the argument, as they fail to account for the depth of the political dilemma in which Belgium currently finds itself.

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<sup>117</sup> Kris Deschouwer, "Party Strategies, Voter Demands and Territorial Reform in Belgium," *West European Politics* 36, no. 2 (February 2013), 347.

First, the evidence for the existence of voter disparity is inconclusive. While a greater percentage of Flemish voters prefer further devolution than Walloon voters, the difference is not as great as the divides between the Flemish and Walloon parties would suggest. In a 2009 survey, participants were asked to place themselves on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 represented giving all powers to the sub-states and 10 represented giving all powers to the federal state.<sup>118</sup> The average response from Flemish voters was 4.3 versus 5.1 among Walloons, demonstrating that voters in the two Regions do differ on their desire for federalism, but not by an insurmountable amount.<sup>119</sup> This issue of identity presents a convergence among Flemish and French speakers as well. A 2014 survey found that, when asked to rank the territorial/communal entities with which they identify, the majority in both groups of respondents selected Belgium.<sup>120</sup> This identification was chosen by about half of the Flemings surveyed and around sixty percent of the Walloons.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, when members of the two language communities are brought together in focus groups, they are able to reach agreements and hostile attitudes are lessened.<sup>122</sup> Thus, differences between the groups on the issue of state reform do exist and could influence the parties but, at the individual level, it does not appear to be so great as to prevent accommodation and to push radicalization.

The issue of the economic supremacy of Flanders over Wallonia certainly influences the political leaders of the country and has historically played a role in the regionalist movement as discussed in Chapter 3. An important element of the most recent

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<sup>118</sup> Deschouwer, "Party Strategies, Voter Demands and Territorial Reform in Belgium," 345.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps, "Combining Federalism with Consociationalism: Is Belgian Consociational Federalism Digging its Own Grave?" *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 3 (2015), 283-284.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Wilfried Swenden, "Conclusion: The Future of Belgian Federalism – Between Reform and Swansong?" *Regional & Federal Studies* 23, no. 3 (2013), 371.

constitutional reform sought to address the transfer of funds from Flanders to Wallonia, which had been heavily criticized by the N-VA.<sup>123</sup> The overall timeline of the shift of economic prosperity from Wallonia to Flanders, however, does not correspond to the rise of the N-VA and the increased instability of the Belgian political system. These events have followed the federalization in 1993, with the N-VA's electoral success beginning in 2007, while the economic disparity dates to the 1960s. As a result, if the economic issues alone drove the push for regionalism, it seems unlikely that the regionalist parties would have faded from prominence only to return years later while the economic relation between Flanders and Wallonia remained relatively constant. Thus, while one cannot disregard the socioeconomic differences between the two halves of Belgium, claiming this divide can solely explain the current political situation is to overstress their importance. Instead, it is necessary to look at the institutional pressures placed on the political parties following the federalization of the country in 1993.

The design of the federal system in Belgium was heavily influenced by disagreements among Francophone and Flemish politicians over the structure of the subnational units. Francophones preferred a regional distinction while Flemings argued for separation on the basis of communities.<sup>124</sup> For Francophones, the benefit of a regional-based divide is clear as it provided them a numerical advantage over the Flemish with the two mostly Francophone regions of Wallonia and Brussels versus the singular Flemish one of Flanders. For the Flemish, a division between language communities would create a one-to-one conflict, which, due to the greater numbers of Dutch speakers

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<sup>123</sup> Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, "The Belgian Finance Bill," N-VA (April 8, 2011), <https://english.nva.be/news/the-belgian-finance-bill>. (Accessed September 4, 2018).

<sup>124</sup> Kris Deschouwer and Philippe Van Parijs, "A County-Wide Electoral District for Belgium's Federal Parliament," in *Electoral Engineering for a Stalled Federation* (Brussels: Re-Bel Initiative, 2009), 10.

than French speakers, would provide them with a numerical advantage. So, in order to accommodate both of these positions, this dual-system of both Regions and Communities was created. This has created an asymmetric system with few subnational units. The limited number of Regions and Communities was not an inevitable result since, prior to the reforms and still to this day, Belgium has several provinces, some of which crossed linguistic boundaries until the official federalization in 1993.<sup>125</sup> However, as the regional movements had dedicated significant effort to building a subnational identity tied to the ideas of Flanders and Wallonia rather than the Dutch- or French-speaking provinces, national rhetoric had shifted towards these larger units, leading to the federalization along Flanders versus Wallonia lines.

This bipolar arrangement is one of the more problematic aspects of the federal state. It has institutionalized the idea of ‘us versus them’ and has clearly defined which groups fall under the ‘us’ and who represents the ‘them’. In conflicts that pit the Regions or Communities against each other, it is always the same players as there are no alternatives between Flanders versus Wallonia or Dutch versus French within the country. This makes the system more unstable than if it had several subnational units. In such a system, the sides in disputes would likely vary rather than remaining stable over time. With more players, hostilities may be lower as an opponent in one dispute may be an ally on another. Under the Belgian system, there is no such incentive as the sides never change. Instead, politicians are forced to operate in a zero-sum mindset, where any gain by the other side provides no benefits for them and, in fact, may weaken their ability to obtain victory in other areas. The existence of the Brussels Capital Region does alleviate

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<sup>125</sup> Swenden, “Conclusion”, 372.

some of the pressures placed by this bipolar structure as it provides a linkage between the other two Regions, though even the politicians within that Region belong to one of the two language groups.

Furthermore, the electoral system provides incentives for more radical actors and discourages compromise. The mechanisms for this are twofold: first, the division of the electorate on the basis of language, and second, the mismatch in timing of the federal and regional elections during a period in which the subnational entities continue to gain increased powers. Together, these elements have reduced the benefits of holding a moderate position while simultaneously encouraging hardline stances.

Within Belgium, there are four separate electorates: the German-speaking electorate, the Dutch-speaking electorate of Flanders, the French-speaking electorate of Wallonia, and the bilingual Brussels electorate. These electorates, with the exception of Brussels, have created monolingual electoral systems within a bilingual country. Even in Brussels and the Halle-Vilvoorde municipalities with special facilities, voters are required to choose to vote either from the French lists or from the Dutch ones.<sup>126</sup> As a result, politicians are only held accountable to members of their own language community. This removes some of the consequences of taking radical stances in regard to regionalist rhetoric. Without having to worry about gathering votes in Wallonia, Flemish parties can solely focus on policies in the best interest of Flanders and disregard the effects they may have on Wallonia. The incentive to focus on the best interests of Belgium as a whole is limited since they are accountable not to Belgians, but to Flemings or Walloons.

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<sup>126</sup> Goossens and Cannoot, "Belgian Federalism after the Sixth State Reform," 36.

This issue is further complicated by the timing of the elections. Following the federalization and the direct election of the regional parliaments, the political parties gained another important election in which they needed to succeed. The prominence of the regional parliaments has only grown over time with their increased powers and the same parties compete against each other at both levels. For this reason, the occurrence of the federal and regional elections in different years, particularly the regional elections occurring in the year after the federal elections, has caused a predicament for those elected to the federal parliament that could be clearly seen in the struggles to form governing coalitions following the 2007 and 2010 federal elections.

### **5.1 The 2007 Federal Election and Coalition Formation**

The 2007 federal election marked the second time where the federal and regional elections occurred in separate years. The previous instance, the 2003 federal election and 2004 regional election, had, in many ways, laid the groundwork for the six-month-long coalition formation discussion that followed the 2007 election. In 2003, the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) experienced their second major election defeat in a row. The party, historically the strongest in Flanders, both prior to the party split along linguistic lines and afterward, watched as its longtime rivals obtained a larger vote share.<sup>127</sup> With the regional elections occurring in 2004, the party decided to seize on an opportunity to attempt to reduce this slide and return to public favor by partnering with another party looking to strengthen their electoral platform, the N-VA.<sup>128</sup> This electoral

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<sup>127</sup> Norwegian Centre for Research Data. "European Election Database: Belgium." 1991-2010. [http://www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/country/belgium/](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/country/belgium/) (Accessed: September 21, 2018).

<sup>128</sup> Kris Deschouwer, "Coalition Formation and Congruence in a Multi-layered Setting: Belgium 1995-2008," *Regional & Federal Studies* 19, no. 1 (2009), 26.



alliance led to their victory in the 2004 regional election. In the process, members of both parties took strong regional stances, including maintaining that they would not join the regional governing coalition unless efforts began to split the controversial Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) electoral district.<sup>129</sup> The regional parliament to which they were elected had no ability to take such a measure, but they succeeded in convincing the Flemish Liberals (OpenVLD) and Socialists (sp.a), who were a part of the federal government, to agree to these terms.<sup>130</sup> The actual split did not occur until later, which allowed the CD&V–N-VA alliance to campaign in the 2007 federal elections with the message that sp.a and OpenVLD had failed to keep their promises and caved to the Francophone parties. Furthermore, they utilized the rhetoric of successful governing at the regional level in comparison to incompetence or bad governance at the federal level.<sup>131</sup>

Thus, when the CD&V–N-VA alliance gathered the largest vote share in the 2007 election, they had already partially tied their hands as to the amount they were able to compromise. The results of the election had demonstrated the costs of failing to maintain promises of state reform and the potency of the narrative of better governance at the regional level. Now, as the leading Flemish party at the federal level, it would be considerably difficult to use the regional versus federal governing competency argument if they chose to participate in the federal coalition, but once in power, they needed to deliver on their promises to which the Francophone parties were in strong opposition.

The coalition formation process was doomed from the start to be long and tenuous. The Belgian constitution requires that the federal government must include both

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<sup>129</sup> Deschouwer, “Coalition Formation and Congruence in a Multi-layered Setting: Belgium 1995-2008,” 26-28.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Francophone and Flemish parties as there must be an equal number of French- and Dutch-speaking ministers. This arrangement is a key aspect of consociationalism as it prevents either group from being locked out of power, but it posed a difficult barrier to surmount when the parties on each side of linguistic divide take positions that are incompatible. In this case, it was the divide of the BHV electoral district and greater fiscal autonomy to the Regions as the major Flemish parties had campaigned on fulfilling while the Francophone parties had campaigned on resisting any Flemish push for further devolution.<sup>132</sup> The Francophone parties feared compromising with the Flemish parties after witnessing the results of the 2007 election, as joining alongside with the CD&V–N-VA coalition would risk losing votes in the 2009 regional election to whichever party refused to cave and remained in the opposition. After six months of failed negotiations, the leader of the CD&V who was in charge of forming the government resigned and the previous prime minister was tasked with putting together a temporary cabinet that was to govern until the next federal election.<sup>133</sup> This cabinet included members from all of the three traditional parties except for the sp.a, and failed to agree on pursuing state reform. As a result, fifteen months after the initial election, the disgruntled N-VA broke from their alliance with the CD&V and entered the opposition.<sup>134</sup>

## **5.2 The 2010 Federal Election and Coalition Formation**

The refusal of the N-VA to compromise on state reform allowed them to enter the campaign for the 2009 regional elections as the sole party that had not compromised on

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<sup>132</sup> Marc Hooghe, “The Political Crisis in Belgium (2007-2011): A Federal System without Federal Loyalty,” *Representation* 48, no. 1 (2012), 133-134.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, “History,” N-VA (2019), <https://english.n-va.be/history>.

state reform. OpenVLD had once again participated in the federal government and failed to deliver on state reform. Sp.a had caved previously, and the CD&V remained in the government despite their inability to persuade the Francophone parties. While the CD&V managed to retain the largest vote share in the 2009 regional election, the rise of the N-VA was apparent as they obtained sixteen seats.<sup>135</sup> For the Liberals, the decline continued with a loss of four additional seats.<sup>136</sup> Perhaps the CD&V was able to avoid the fallout experienced by sp.a and OpenVLD from the 2004 regional election to the 2007 federal election due to successful governance at the regional level; however, this did not transfer to the 2010 federal election where the N-VA received the largest vote share of any party in Belgium.

Given their previous experience, the N-VA could (and did), rightly or wrongly, attribute their success due to a refusal to compromise.<sup>137</sup> Thus, they entered the government formation process determined to implement the state reforms they believed were long overdue. On the Francophone side, the Socialists (PS) received the largest share of votes and, not only had they taken a strong stance against the desired reforms of the N-VA, but they also were on the opposite side of the left-right political divide as the N-VA. For PS, who had retaken superiority over the Francophone Liberals (MR), this was particularly precarious as they had branded themselves as the strongest opponent to the Flemish regionalists. As a result, they were incentivized to avoid compromising as long as possible.

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<sup>135</sup> Belgian Federal Government, Service Public Fédéral Intérieur, “Parlement Flamand : Résultats des Listes 2009” (Flemish Parliament: List Results 2009), [http://elections2009.belgium.be/fr/vla/results/results\\_tab\\_VLR00000.html](http://elections2009.belgium.be/fr/vla/results/results_tab_VLR00000.html) (Accessed February 12, 2018).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Gabriela Goudenhoft, “The Right Wing Parties Dynamic between the Economic and the Identity Discourse: Case Study – Belgium,” *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 7, no.1 (2013), 49.

Eventually, 541 days after the election, a coalition was formed among the traditional parties from both sides of the linguistic divide, leaving the N-VA in the opposition, and the sixth major state reform passed.<sup>138</sup> While the ultimate agreement served as an important affirmation of the ability of the Belgian federal structure to accommodate, it also highlighted several weaknesses of the system. First, the federal election was not due until 2011, but the failure to form a government following the 2007 election had left the federal parliament in an unstable position. In fact, there were three different governments led by the CD&V between 2007 and 2010: the first falling apart after the N-VA quit the government, the second lost their prime minister with his appointment to the presidency of the EU, and the third marked the collapse of the government with the Flemish Liberals exiting the coalition.<sup>139</sup> With the fall of the third CD&V government, the leaders had no choice but to call for elections a year early. Thus, this compromise came only after another government had collapsed as a result of a failure to find a compromise. Even with this history, the newly elected government still needed almost eighteen months to accommodate the wishes of the two sides.

Secondly, due to the amount of time it took, it demonstrated the lack of pressure on the federal government to function. Had the politicians faced serious repercussions for delaying the formation process, they may have been incentivized to work together to achieve a suitable solution. The absence of pressure came from both the system and the general public. On the part of the populace, there was a general indifference to the lack of

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<sup>138</sup> Koen Abts, Dmitriy Poznyak, and Marc Swyngedouw, "The Federal Elections in Belgium, June 2010," *Electoral Studies* 31 (2012), 452.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 448; Hooghe, "The Political Crisis in Belgium (2007-2011): A Federal System without Federal Loyalty," 134.

government. They did not mobilize in any organized fashion, particularly as they saw no real impact on their daily lives.<sup>140</sup>

Their passivity can be partially explained by the framework of the country. The Belgian constitution provides for a caretaker government to run the country in the absence of a federal coalition. This caretaker government is composed of the ministers from the previous government and remains in place until the King officially appoints the new ministers who were selected from the coalition formation process.<sup>141</sup> These ministers carry out the implementation of policies agreed upon prior to the election and attempt to ensure stability at the national and international level.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, with the number of powers given to the subnational parliaments and the number of subnational parliaments, the strain on the federal government has been lessened. Thus, the absence of a full-strength federal parliament does not have the same weight as it would prior to the federalization of Belgium. The role of the national government in the daily lives of the average Belgian has been reduced with the devolution of powers and its year-long absence was hardly felt at the individual level as a result. This structure provides little incentive to the parties to form a government if doing so would require a compromise of the positions on which they ran, particularly for the Flemish parties who push for confederalism. In fact, the longer the federal government fails to function, the more credence they gain in their claims that the Regions are more productive and the place of good governance. They can discredit the federal government and point to the obstinance of those from the other Region(s).

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<sup>140</sup> Marc Hooghe, "Does Multi-level Governance Reduce the Need for National Government?" *European Political Science* 11 (2012), 91.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

The response of the political parties to the federalization of Belgium has demonstrated the way in which consociationalism has been undermined by this process. Moderation and accommodation have been replaced by moves towards extremes, even beyond the positions of the average citizens, and a reluctance or outright refusal to compromise. This latter issue can best be seen in the difficult government formation process following the 2007 and 2010 elections. Even though the 2014 election fared better in this regard, it resulted in a coalition that included only one Francophone party, leaving the federal government heavily lopsided towards Flanders and the Flemish, hardly the power-sharing ideal sought by consociationalism.

### **5.3 The ‘De Wever’ Effect**

It should be noted that the success of the N-VA has other possible causes beyond the effects of the reforms combined with consociationalism. Given this uniqueness of the N-VA, these other explanations look directly at the characteristics that set it apart from the other parties that had slowly lost their basis of support. One such reason includes the charismatic appeal of the party’s chairman, Bart De Wever. This personality aspect likely does influence voters, particularly given the entrenchment of a regional-based identity and De Wever’s ability to operate as a prototypical representative of Flemings. As discussed in Chapter Two, a leader who represents a prototypical group member benefits from increased influence when that group identity is highly salient as they are associated with group ideals and values in a way that a less prototypical individual is not and, as a

result, that leader can better persuade people to their side on the notion that their personal beliefs mirror those of the group.<sup>143</sup>

As it pertains to prototypicality, it matters less whether or not De Wever properly represents the standard Flemings as the important element is the perception of him as such. De Wever became a well-known public figure due to his participation in 2009 on a Flemish quiz show called *De Slimste Mens ter Wereld* [The Smartest Person in the World] where he reached an audience of almost two million people during each of his ten appearances.<sup>144</sup> Through this show, he was able to present himself as a relatable individual who spoke the language of the average Flemings.<sup>145</sup> By this point, De Wever was an established politician, having already led the N-VA for five years and been elected to the Flemish Parliament in 2004, though he was hardly the major political figure that he would become following the 2010 election. A survey of public perception of politicians following De Wever's participation on the show revealed that almost half of the people questioned saw him as steadfast and straightforward, capable of leading Flanders, and someone with whom one would want to share a drink.<sup>146</sup> These appearances allowed him to appeal to a broader base beyond those typically in the Flemish nationalist camp, yet the publicity alone cannot account for his appeal, as other politicians who participated on *De Slimste Mens* failed to garner the same increased popularity.

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<sup>143</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "A Social Identity Theory of Leadership," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 3 (2001), 189-190.

<sup>144</sup> Dirk Rochtus, "The Rebirth of Flemish Nationalism: Assessing the Impact of N-VA Chairman Bart De Wever's Charisma," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12, no. 2 (2012), 277.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-278.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

De Wever succeeded where others had failed by casting himself as the youthful, humorous politician who understood Flemings and could combat the inefficiency of the national system. He was someone they could trust to fight for their interests and proposed a Flemish nationalism that sought power for Flanders on the basis that the economic disaster faced by Belgium originated from the failures of the Walloons. Having received almost 800,000 preferential votes in the 2010 election, De Wever emerged as the most popular politician in Belgium.<sup>147</sup>

Despite this personal success and the emergence of the N-VA as the largest political party in Belgium, De Wever did not participate in the federal government following that election. Instead, his party was in the opposition, and in 2012, he opted to run for mayor of Antwerp rather than remain at the federal level. Furthermore, when the N-VA formed a government with the *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR), CD&V, and the OpenVLD following the 2014 federal election, De Wever promoted other members of his party to serve as federal ministers rather than serving as one himself. This has had two major effects. First, it protects his image from the negativity associated with the federal government. National politicians in Belgium often are seen as self-interested, money-hungry, and untrustworthy. By staying away from this spotlight, De Wever seems pure due to his refusal to seek the greatest power available to him. Additionally, his position as mayor of Antwerp continues to emphasize that he considers the smaller elements of the government to be important rather than indirectly providing legitimacy to the national government with his participation. If he questions why a Flemish voter would even want to contribute to the Belgian state and calls for Belgium to “evaporate” but at the same

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<sup>147</sup> Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie. “History.” N-VA, <https://english.n-va.be/history> (Accessed November 6, 2018).



time serves as a minister in the federal government, he loses some credibility and his status as someone who can be trusted since such a move would appear inconsistent.<sup>148</sup>

The second effect of his promotion of other party members to the federal platform while remaining local himself is that it expands the party beyond him and reduces the dependence the party has on his personal image. This effort has been successful, as Theo Francken, a member of the N-VA who served as a state secretary in the federal government until the N-VA quit the government in December 2018, has overtaken De Wever as the most popular politician among Flemings as of June 2018.<sup>149</sup> De Wever remains a visible and boisterous face of the N-VA, but he is now one of many. For this reason, it will become increasingly difficult to argue that the success of the N-VA hinges on the appeal of De Wever.

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely discount the effect that De Wever has likely had in the success of the N-VA, there are several reasons to believe that his charismatic appeal alone cannot account for the growth of the party to be the largest in Belgium. First, the N-VA has succeeded even without De Wever on the ballot as evidenced by their success in the 2012 provincial elections where the party won three of the five provinces.<sup>150</sup> While they fared best in Antwerp, where De Wever ran for mayor, the ability to succeed in those other areas demonstrated that, even prior to the massive success of the 2014 election, the party had gained support that was not solely tied to the

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<sup>148</sup> Gijs Moes, “‘Laat België maar rustig verdampen’” (‘Let Belgium Slowly Evaporate’), *Trouw De Verdieping*, April 8, 2010.

<sup>149</sup> *Courrier International*, “La N-VA quitte le gouvernement Michel, désormais minoritaire” (The N-VA leaves the Michel government, henceforth in minority), December 10, 2018; David Coppi, Ann-Charlotte Bersipont and Bernand Demonty. “Grand Baromètre : trou d’air pour la N-VA, qui chute de 4,8%” (Great Barometer : Air Hole for the N-VA, who falls 4.8%). *Le Soir*, June 8, 2018.

<sup>150</sup> Flemish Government, “Verkiezingen 2012: Provincie” (Elections 2012: Province), [https://www.vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2012/#/provincie/70000/p\\_-2/uitslagen](https://www.vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2012/#/provincie/70000/p_-2/uitslagen) (Accessed November 7, 2018).

prospects of De Wever in power. Additionally, his refusal to seek the prime ministership makes it difficult to argue that Flemings continue to vote for the N-VA because they want him in power rather than the party in general.

Most importantly, the divided nature of the Belgian electorate has played a valuable role in the 'De Wever effect'. Despite his former status as the most popular politician, he is summarily disliked in Wallonia and among many Bruxellois in general who characterized him as a "Flemish Milošević".<sup>151</sup> His polarizing nature does not damage him when he never has to face his harshest critics. This same effect extends to the N-VA as a whole, since the party does not have to try to court Francophones or even worry about their votes. Thanks to the separate electorates, the first time that newly elected politicians from the two language communities come into contact is when the process to form the new government begins. It is the consequences tied to this and the other aspects of the reforms that have benefitted the rise of the N-VA as they created the institutional framework within which the N-VA has succeeded.

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<sup>151</sup> Rochtus, "The Rebirth of Flemish Nationalism," 280.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to analyze the resurgence of regionalism in Belgium despite the efforts taken over the past half-century to mitigate this tendency. While the reforms along with the linguistic separation of the parties initially reduced the support for the regionalist parties, it did little to reduce the overall role of regionalism in the political sphere. Instead, the party with the greatest electoral support advocates for a path towards independence for Flanders and other Flemish parties push for confederalism.

My hypothesis was that this continued importance of regionalism was intrinsically linked with the institutional structure created in Belgium by the reforms themselves, particularly the process of federalization itself. This argument was selected due to the way in which the reforms solidified the notion of subnational identities within Belgium and changed the incentives for the political parties. My analysis found that the reforms have led the parties towards extremism by granting greater weight to the regionalist voter and increasing the consequences for compromise. Rather than drawing attention away from the ethnolinguistic divisions, the reforms have solidified their importance. Furthermore, the latest reforms have highlighted the growth in the legitimacy of the subnational government over that of the national.

This paper thus supports the critiques of consociationalism as implementing institutions that undermine its own goals. While Belgium has avoided the political violence that often plagues plural societies, it is still wrought with instability and calls for separatism. As a result, it appears that consociationalism is limited in its ability to address the difficulties in creating a suitable institutional structure for democracies in plural societies. The design's dependence on moderate elites while failing to incentivize those

very elites towards moderate positions limits its functionality whenever the elites find extremism to be politically advantageous. Furthermore, in the Belgian case, it is the compromises reached as a result of consociationalism that have furthered the turn towards regionalism.

As this paper focuses on the Belgian case, the general applicability of its findings on consociationalism in plural societies is limited. The dynamics within Belgium with the subnational identities growing from political dissidents over time rather than predating the country itself demonstrates that the country has been slowly drifting away from the center rather than towards it for a significant period of time. Consociationalism has failed to reverse or to even stop this tendency. It is possible that the particular issue for the Belgian state is the bipolar nature of its divide as it provides the parties on either ethnolinguistic side with a clear opponent. Furthermore, the greatest benefit of consociationalism may lie in its ability to reduce violence in plural societies, and thus the consequences of its centrifugal tendencies may be an acceptable trade-off for societies plagued with these conflicts. The Belgian case cannot address this issue as it has managed to avoid political violence, perhaps due to its use of consociationalism. In fact, the relative peace in the country, despite the strength of Flemish nationalism, may result from consociationalism allowing such representation, even if such positions are deemed undesirable by the institutional structure itself, unlike centripetalism which would prevent the existence of the N-VA altogether. Thus, this paper cannot provide a determination on whether or not consociationalism is a suitable political structure for plural societies. Instead, it calls for careful consideration of its limitations.

For those pluralistic countries seeking a way to avoid the pitfalls of the ethnic outbidding common in diverse democracies, the problems faced by Belgium provide a warning of the potential consequences in implementing a consociational structure. The lack of mechanisms in place to combat extremism beyond relying on institutional norms can prove fatal if those in leadership decide that those norms are no longer politically advantageous. In the electoral model of Belgium where the majority of the electorate is divided based on ethnolinguistic identity, parties face a greater incentive to appeal on these identities rather than those of the broader country, especially if they are confronted with a segmental party that manages to erode their electoral support. While consociationalism may reduce violent tendencies among segmentalist groups, it does not guarantee the long-term political stability and unity of a country. In fact, for countries that begin with a strong national government, implementing the segmental autonomy of consociationalism can strengthen the legitimacy of the subnational unit. Federalism thus may serve as only a temporary salve for such societies if one implements a consociational structure.

However, this should not discount the benefits of a federalist structure as it provides methods of self-governance and reduces the number of points of conflict between different subnational groups. Federalism serves as one of the few systemic commonalities between consociationalism and centripetalism due to these factors. Perhaps, under a centripetal system, the turn to federalism would not have reinvigorated regionalism within Belgium, though this is contentious itself. After all, one of the major prescriptions of centripetalism would have been the creation of national parties, which were the very types of parties that began the process of the reforms. The Belgian parties

found it advantageous to split into their ethnolinguistic camps rather than remain united. While a centripetal system would forbid the parties from competing solely within one group, leaders within the country may simply abandon these rules when they too find it beneficial to do so. Thus, perhaps, as long as politicians believe pitting groups against each other will lead to greater political success than appealing to the voters at the national level, it will be difficult to eliminate the role of segmentalists in politics.

The case of Belgium continues the general pessimism that accompanies forecasts for stable, functional democracy in plural societies, though it does contradict those who argue that peaceful democracies are impossible for such societies. The continued presence of regionalists in the absence of political violence should provide a certain level of hope to those seeking an institutional model for their plural democracy. It is important for those leaders to note the dilemmas faced by Belgian politicians and to exercise caution if they hope to reduce the process of ethnic outbidding. It may be beneficial for them to implement a mix of the policies proposed by consociationalism and centripetalism to encourage politicians to work across their subnational lines and compromise.

It is perhaps ironic, in light of the division presented in this paper, that the motto of Belgium reads “unity makes strength.” However, despite the half-century of devolutionary reforms, the Regions and Communities of Belgium remained united. There are a few possible reasons for this, such as the importance of Brussels, both as the country’s capital and as the de facto capital of the European Union, and the slow-moving nature of the consociational institutional structure. Most important, though, is that most Belgians desire for their country to remain whole. Around 80% of Walloons and residents

of Brussels and 54% of Flemings prefer a unified Belgium to independence for Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels.<sup>152</sup> It seems unlikely, as long as the majority of Belgians oppose splitting up their country, that the N-VA will achieve its aim of an independent Flanders.

Will regionalism continue to plague Belgium? If the model proposed by Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003) is any guide, it seems unlikely that the national government will be able to reverse this trajectory, particularly as it has lost primary legitimacy to the regional, at least in the minds of politicians. 2019 marks the next round of the federal and regional elections and polls continue to point to the N-VA maintaining its position as the largest party in the country. Barring any major efforts on the Flemish side to restore the importance of Belgium, it seems unlikely that institutional problems shown in this paper will simply disappear. Perhaps, with enough time, the role of regionalism will diminish, as Belgium remains a young federation. However, as long as the parties fear losing the regionalist voter, they will lack the political incentive to move towards the center. In this divided system without any national voters, it seems unlikely that parties will decide to pursue a position at the center of national, rather than regional, public opinion. As long as this remains the case, the continued divisions between the Flemish and Walloon voters will discourage the parties from looking beyond the ethnolinguistic divide.

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<sup>152</sup> Bol, Damien, et al., 2017, “MEDW 2014 Belgian National Election Study,” <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7GA3IT>, Harvard Dataverse, V1.

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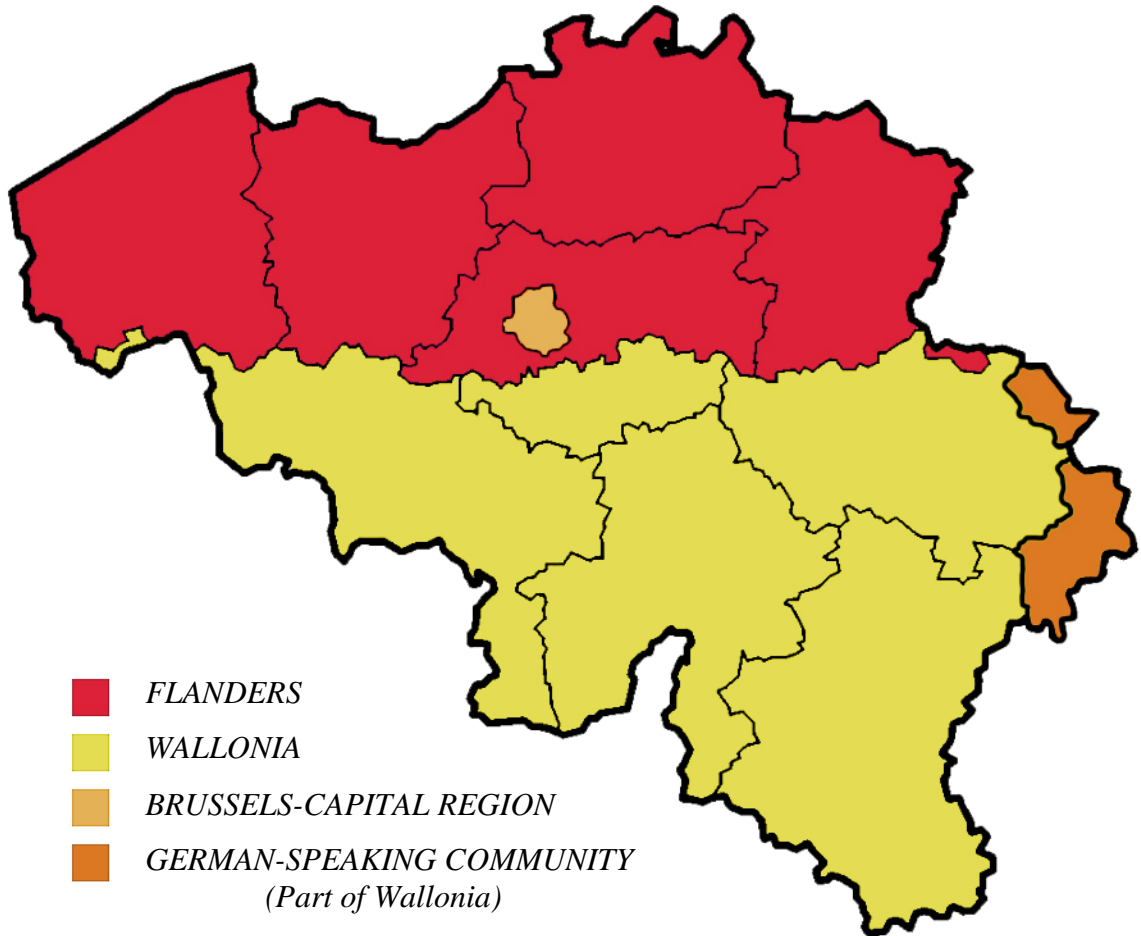
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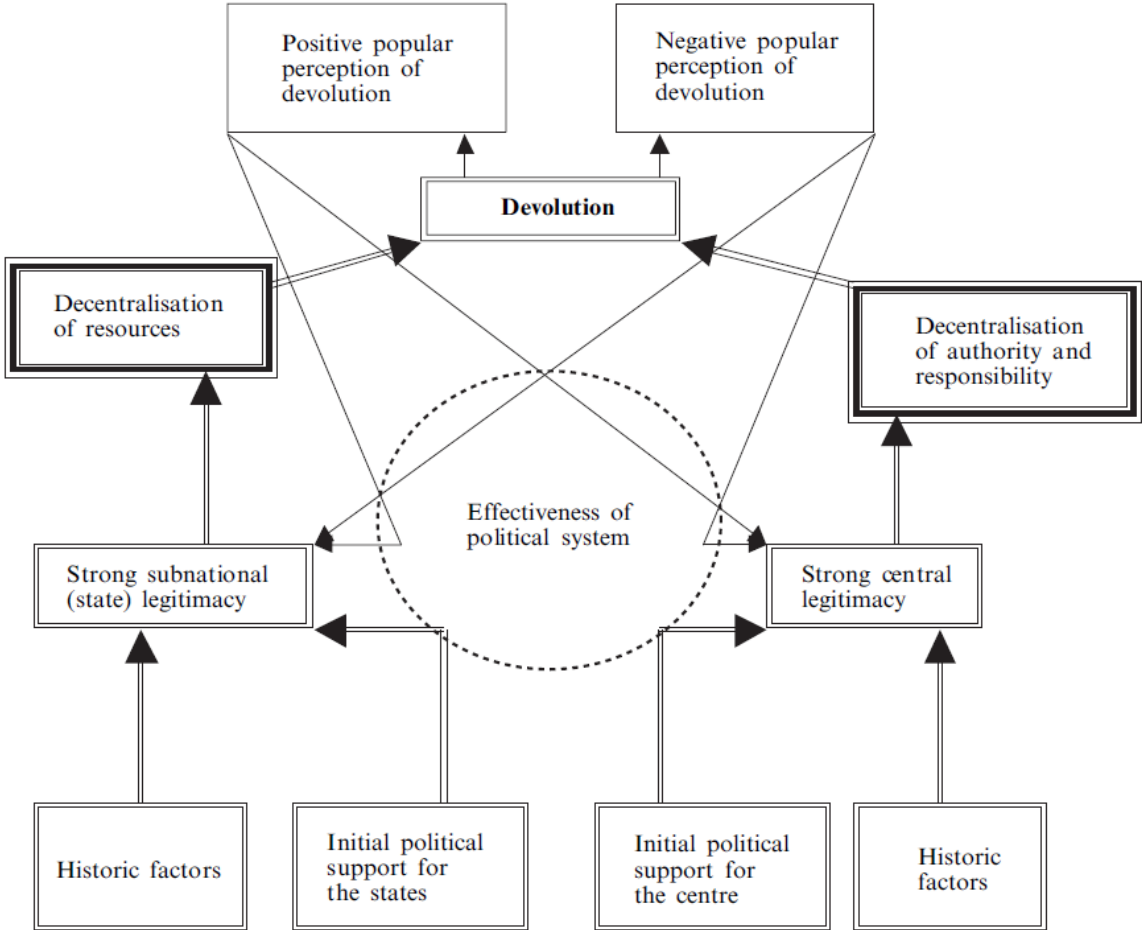
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**Appendix A: Map of Belgium**





**Appendix B: Theoretical Framework of Devolution**



Note: Doubled-lined boxes and arrows indicate initial factors and processes, respectively; single-lined boxes and arrows indicate subsequent factors and processes, respectively.

Source: 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), 335.

### Appendix C: Structure of Belgian Government

## Federal Level

Chamber of Representatives

Senate

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## Subnational Level

German-Speaking Community

Flemish Parliament

French-Speaking Community

Brussels Parliament

Wallonia Parliament

Note: Members of the regional and community parliaments make up the Senate, which is not directly elected. The other parliaments are directly elected. Dutch-speaking members of the Brussels Parliament also serve in the Flemish Parliament; French-speaking members serve in the French-Speaking Community. Members of the Wallonia Parliament also serve in French-speaking Parliament, excluding the two German-speaking members of the Parliament, who are replaced by French-speaking members of the same party.