

Mirror Mirror Tell Me, Who is the Most Popular? Assessing Preferences for Political Representatives in a Multi-Level Democracy: The Case of Belgium

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Defining citizens' level of support and their preferences for political representatives on a regular basis is both crucial for parties' strategy, and problematic to measure. While large empirical surveys are often too encompassing to discriminate representatives on an individual basis, the counting of candidates' preferential voting, when available, provides an accurate overview, yet occasional and of little use in a comparative perspective. Based on a dataset covering eleven years of quarterly opinion polls conducted by the national newspaper *La Libre Belgique*, the present paper aims to introduce an original perspective on how to measure popularity among political elites. Taking into account the nature of the Belgian polity, where hierarchies between levels of power tend to be blurred, systematic investigations are conducted in order to identify if some profiles among politicians are more likely to attract voter's preferences, based on the mandate they hold. From a broader perspective, the question asked is to what extent does a particular level of power get the upper hand and what does it eventually tell us about the institutional balance of power in Belgium? Hence, five levels are compared, respectively the European, the federal, the regional – i.e. regions and communities – and the local ones – i.e. provinces and municipalities – as well as the party itself as a level, which includes peoples who holds a mandate within their own party. Although the latter does not properly correspond to a specific level of power, constitutionally speaking, it has been counted as such since some functions within a party can be highly strategic and attract prominent politicians, as it is the case for parties' presidents. Theoretically, the paper offers an original contribution to the second order elections' literature and its assumption that levels of power are hierarchically organised. Empirically, it provides a fresh perspective on the assessment of citizen's preferences due to its exclusive set of data.

Keywords: multi-level systems, popularity, political preferences, second-order elections, Belgium

Introduction

For the first time since the launch of the federalisation process in 1970, on the 21st of May 1995 Belgian citizens were given the opportunity to cast separate votes for the general and for the regional elections. Hence, breaking with the usual practice of indirect representation at the regional level, the direct elections of the Flemish, the Walloon and the Brussels parliaments constitute a major turning point in the balance of power between entities. From a macroscopic perspective, governments relying on different political coalitions became from this point forward a possibility, not only between linguistic communities – as it was already the case – but also among them. Yet, formally, the external coherence of the Belgian political system has been preserved by two usages, namely the symmetry principle and the congruence principle¹. *Primo*, for ideological reasons, Flemish and French-speaking parties belonging to the same political family continued until 2007 to join governments together, despite their historical splitting. Practically, it was made possible by including more partners than required within the federal government, in order to please the needed sister parties. *Secundo*, post-election negotiations have also been driven so far by the principle of congruence, according to which parties condition their participation to a certain level of power to their inclusion in another, ensuring their simultaneous presence (or absence) at the different levels of power. Regardless of minor exceptions, government Michel I constitutes the first major exception to the rule, since French-speaking liberals decided to join the federal government, alone with the Flemish parties of the majority while, at the regional level, French-speaking socialists and Christian-democrats constituted the Walloon government together, as well as Brussels', in association with the French-speaking regionalist party and Flemish parties from the majority.

Together, those two principles – the symmetry and the congruence principles – participate in maintaining *de facto* horizontal and vertical homogeneity within the Belgian political system and prevent it from the potential centrifugal effects of decoupling polls. However, from an individual perspective, the impact was more straightforward as it leads to several changes regarding career paths among political elites, especially members of parliament. Since the 1995 elections, holding a regional mandate truly has become an objective *per se* in Belgium and it opened the way towards a certain specialisation and a professionalization of the function². In the meantime, the devolution of powers associated with the increasing federalisation of Belgium has strengthened competences associated with sub-national mandates and made them more salient to the public, putting some additional pressure on politicians when they operate arbitrages regarding the political arena they choose to compete within. This is even truer since being simultaneously candidate for both a regional and a national election is legally forbidden.

Consequently, the number of politicians who only, or mainly, experienced a regional career has grown, with some notorious illustrations. However, the reaction of the public towards this disconnection of political arenas remains unclear. Although, pieces of research address the different aspects of the problem, they have addressed them separately, not globally, due to the lack of accurate data. On the one hand, research that compares career patterns in Belgium tends to focus on objective factors among politicians, such as the mandate they hold, the

¹ Dandoy, R. « Résultats des élections et formation des exécutifs » in F. Bouhon, M. Reuchamps (eds.), *Les systèmes électoraux de la Belgique*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 2012, pp. 449-50 ; Deschouwer, K., « Coalition Formation and Congruence in a Multi-layered Setting : Belgium 1995-2008 », *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 19(1), 2009, pp. 13-35

² Borchert, J., Stolz, K « Introduction : Political Careers in Multi-level Systems », *Regional and Federal Studies*, Vol. 21(2), 2011, pp. 205-222

period of time they were present, or the level of power wherein they take an active part. Measuring the duration of political careers at different levels on an individual basis, Dodeigne shows for instance how several profiles are actually endorsed by Walloon politicians; parliamentarians being mainly divided between those pursuing either a national or a regional career while members of government being more likely to follow a multi-level career³. It has also been highlighted that the level of activity of members of parliament influences their agenda, regional members being more enthusiast regarding devolution mechanisms than their federal *alter ego*⁴. On the other hand, in Belgium, politicians' subjective appeal to the electorate has mainly been measured through the use of preference voting, the latter acting as a proxy of citizens' proximity with some specific politicians. Yet, if proximity actually drives preference voting, it is nonetheless far from being the only significant variable⁵. Furthermore, preference voting is hard to connect with politicians' attractiveness in practice. Indeed, as politicians compete at different time and within political arenas closed to each other, formal records are indeed of little use as they exclude both cross-level and longitudinal comparisons.

Based on an original dataset the present paper aims to introduce an global perspective on political elites' popularity measurement in order to allow both multi-level and time-series comparisons. Based on the systematic identification of voters' preferences for top political elites, such an approach could contribute to a better understanding of how they identify themselves to the different levels of power within a multi-level democracy. Basically, it is commonly assumed that the higher the responsibilities and the visibility attached to a function, the higher the reward and the prestige attached to it, hence the higher the desire to obtain the corresponding mandate. All other things remaining equal, being Minister could be interpreted as a more important function than holding a local mandate, although the mayorship of a large city could also constitute an attractive function due to the political leverage and the electoral anchorage it offers. In a federal state, two additional precisions should nonetheless be added. *Primo*, depending on the objective degree of devolution within the system, the hierarchy between levels of power can fluctuate. In a proper federation, the centre of political gravity lies at the national level while the opposite is true in a confederation; distinguishing between the two models being subject to constitutional interpretations. *Deuxio*, the subjective perceptions attached to the respective levels of power are also likely to fluctuate according to the arena voters or politicians identify themselves with.

Applied to the Belgian case, those remarks lead to the formulation of three competing hypotheses. In accordance with what could be called a '*federal*' hypothesis, a clear top-down pyramidal hierarchy exists between political levels, from the national to local ones. Coherent with Reif and Schmit's second order elections' model⁶, the federal hypothesis regards legislative elections as first-order elections, that elections where there is "more at stake" while other elections are relegated to the second rank. In turn, this is reflected by greater attractiveness for federal mandates among political elites, as well as in their higher recognition among the public. Conversely, following a '*confederal*' hypothesis, the hierarchy

³ Dodeigne, J. « (Re-)Assessing Career Patterns in Multi-Level Systems : Insights from Wallonia in Belgium », *Regional and Federal Studies*, Vol. 24(2), 2014, pp. 151-171

⁴ Reuchamps, M., Dodeigne, J., Sinardet, D., Gramme, P. « Territorial Politics in inter-party and intra-party competition. Insights from Belgium », Paper presented at the Biennial International Conference, Reykjavik, Iceland, 2012

⁵ André A., Wauters B., Pilet J-B., « It's Not Only About Lists : Explaining Preference Voting in Belgium », *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, Vol. 22(3), 2012, pp. 293-313

⁶ Reif K., Schmitt H., « Nine Second-Order national elections – a conceptual framework for the analysis of European elections », *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 8(1), 1980, pp.3-44

is reversed and the confederate units dominate the central level. In such a scenario, sub-national mandates attract most of the attention among politicians and the electorate. Finally, according to a 'flat' hypothesis, no clear hierarchy emerged between the different levels of power – that is, they are respectively regarded as important. This final hypothesis echoes in particular recent research supporting that politicians and voters now regard federal and regional elections both as first-order elections as a consequence of the high salience given to the ethno-territorial cleavage in Belgium⁷. Mutually exclusive, those four hypotheses could nonetheless coexist within a single system taking into account that the different regions of a state do not necessarily share the same view regarding the underlying hierarchy among the different levels of power. For instance, one region can consider the federal level to be of first order while another regards regions as dominant and while a third believes both levels deserve equivalent attention. In Belgium, testing such hypotheses could help determinate voters' proximity with the different political levels of the federal state. Hence, this should provide some original insights about into how Belgian citizens perceive the ongoing state reforms of the state, the constitutional division of labour between levels of government and, finally, into who they think governs Belgium.

Data and Methodology

In order to evaluate voter's proximity with the different levels of power, the present paper is based on the analysis of individual preferences for political representatives as measured by *La Libre Belgique*. Over the years, the national newspaper has indeed built itself a reputation thanks to its *Baromètre politique*, a quarterly ranking of most prominent politicians in each Belgian region⁸. Basically, every three months, the political division of the newspaper establishes a list of around thirty Belgian prominent politicians per region. The lists being non mutually exclusive, one single personality can be present on one, two or the three lists constituted. In association with polling companies⁹, regional statistical samples among the population are then asked to order those personalities by answering the following question: "For each of the following personalities (name, party), would you tell us if you would like to see them playing a more prominent role in the coming months?". Every politician evaluated thus receives a score per poll equivalent to the percentage of the sample wishing to see him playing a more prominent role. Hereunder, the data collected cover the period from June 2004 to March 2015, that is 44 quarterly surveys¹⁰; 247 different personalities were evaluated, 52 of them being evaluated in the three regions, 67 in two of them and 128 in only one. Among them, some appear systematically on the list while some appear only once. In every survey, we collected each single evaluation attributed to surveyed politician in each region based on respondents' aggregated answers. In total, several thousand observations were thus collected.

In addition to individual preference scores, the political mandates held by the politicians assessed were also collected and registered. We then focused our attention to those belonging to the federal level and to the regional level. Preferences for each level were then calculated separately for every regions; that is we sorted politicians according to the level of power they were active for each survey. In total, we calculated six time-series, two in Flanders, two in

⁷ Rihoux B., Dandoy R., Dewinter L., Dumont P., « Belgium », *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 44(7-8), 2005, pp. 957-967

⁸ The authors would like to thank the political division of *La Libre Belgique* and Xavier Ducarme and Pierre Gilissen in particular who sent us the raw data required in this research.

⁹ Over the period covered, the companies were respectively INRA (June 2004-December 2004), Ipsos (March 2005-June 2011) and Dedicated (Septembre 2011-Present)

¹⁰ In September 2008, two surveys were conducted, one before and one after the splitting of the CD&V-N-VA cartel

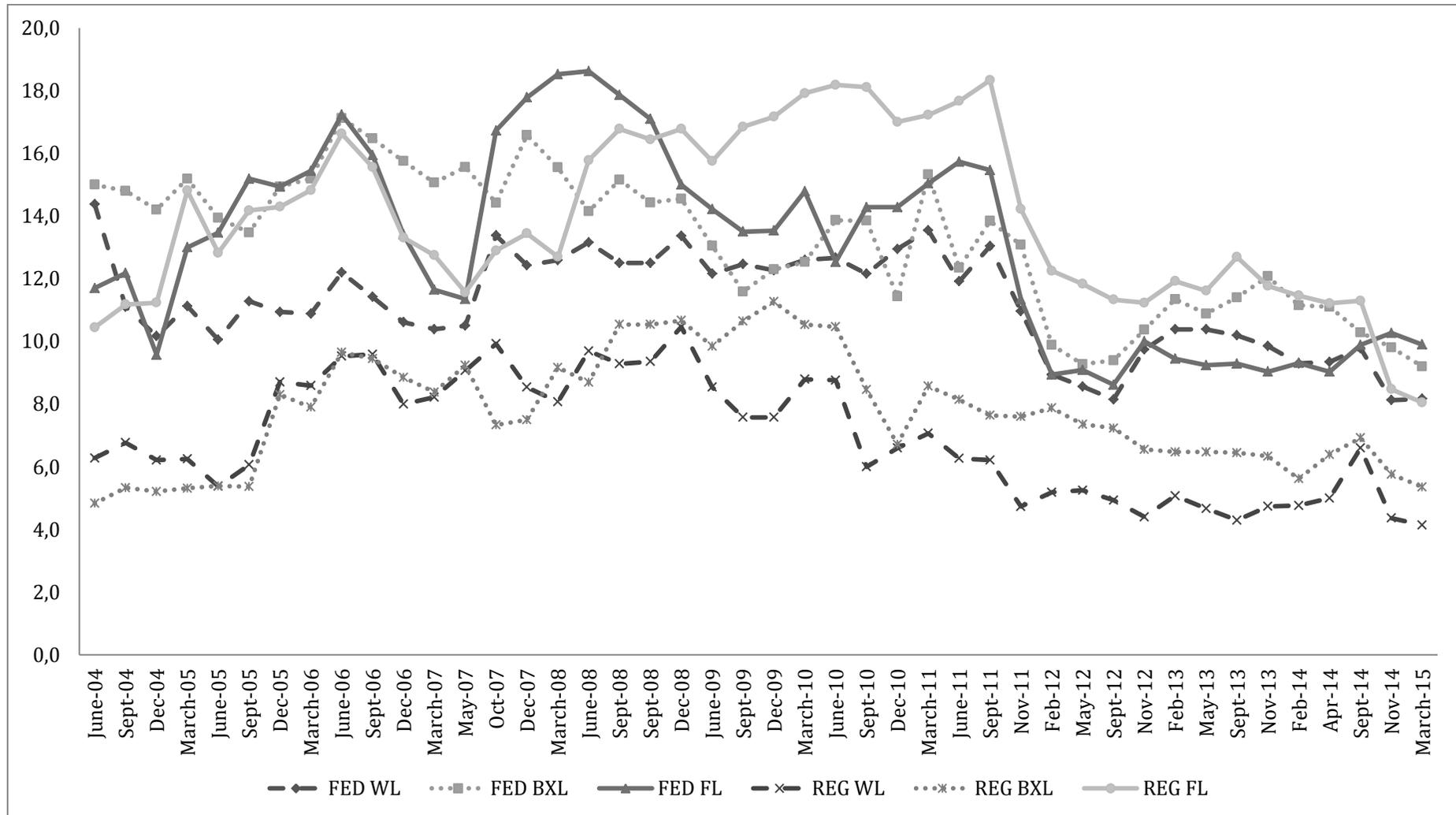
Wallonia and two in Brussels. As a last step, in each series, every politician evaluated and who was not active within the level of power assessed – that is directly influencing the respondents – was dismissed. This is for instance to the case of Flemish regional representatives evaluated in Wallonia and who were excluded from our series measuring regional preferences in Wallonia due to fact that they exert no direct influence on Walloon respondents. Conversely, federal politicians from both communities were taken into account when the federal level was evaluated, because the three regions are equally impacted by federal decisions, whoever decides. Following the same logic, deputies from both the Flemish and the French-speaking communities were considered as relevant when answers from Brussels' respondents were analysed. Hereunder, the six time-series are represented in figure one (fig.1.)

As illustrated, the three regions differ first and foremost in the level of preference they attribute to political elites. Overall, Flemish respondents tend to be more assertive than respondents in Brussels and, to a larger extent, in Wallonia. Whatever the level, Flemish are indeed more likely to positively assess the politicians surveyed, that is wishing to see them playing a more prominent role in the future. All other things being equal, this is particularly true regarding their evaluation of the regional level since the mean score attributed over the period to regional politicians in Flanders (0.139) is higher than the mean scores in Brussels (0.78) and in Wallonia (0.069). To some extent, the same observation applies to the evaluation of federal politicians too, although things are here more nuanced. On the one hand, Walloons systematically expresses the lowest level of preference for federal elites, with a mean score of 0.112 and a rather stable profile. On the other hand, Brussels and Flanders are neck to neck (0.132 and 0.13), with some significant but punctual differences. Between the three regions, differences could then be highlighted considering the consistency of the series. With the highest fluctuations of both federal and regional preferences, Flanders appears to be the most volatile region – standard deviation coefficients being respectively equivalent to 0.031 and 0.028. Conversely, Wallonia displays a much more constant profile, with a standard deviation coefficient of 0.016 at the federal level and of 0.019 at the regional level; Brussels occupying for the rest an intermediary position, with standard deviation coefficients being respectively 0.022 and 0.019 et the federal and at the regional level.

Though further research on the topic remains something to be encouraged, a handful of studies are dedicated to the study of political confidence in multilevel systems. In particular, van Haute and Hooghe recently analysed how Belgian voters' trust in several political institutions is subject to interregional variations¹¹. Based on 2014 PARTIREP opinion survey, they measured the degree of confidence expressed in Flanders and in Wallonia in several political institutions, including federal and regional governments and parliaments. Since no observation was available for Brussels, the region was excluded from the analysis. Among other findings, the authors highlight the higher confidence of the Flemish electorate in the regional institutions than in the federal ones, while the opposite is true in Wallonia. They also found that while support for regional institutions is higher in Flanders than in Wallonia, no regional difference can be identified when federal institutions were evaluated. Finally, if Flanders and Wallonia differ in the degree of confidence they put in parties – Flemish voters being more likely to trust their parties than Walloons – a similar and slightly negative evaluation of politicians was calculated in both regions – respectively 4.54 out of 10 in Flanders and 4.52 in Wallonia; ten representing the maximum level of trust.

¹¹ Henry L., van Haute E., Hooghe M., « Confiance, satisfaction et comportement électoral dans un état fédéral », in Deschouwer K. *et al.* (eds.), *Décrypter l'électeur. Le comportement électoral et les motivations de vote*, Louvain, LanooCampus, 2015, p. 218

Fig. 1. Average Preferences for the Federal and the Regional Levels in the Walloon Region, the Region of Brussels-Capital and the Flemish Region, Based on Aggregated Individual Preference Scores (*Baromètres La Libre Belgique*, 2004-2015)



Assuming that aggregated preferences for political representatives could serve as an indirect measure of political confidence, our own results are important as they provide a regular and alternative measurement of the legitimacy of the different levels of power in Belgium as well as of the variations between the regions. In accordance with Henry, van Haute and Hooghe¹² our analysis confirms first and foremost the higher degree of confidence for regional elites in Flanders compared to Wallonia. In particular, our results lead to the conclusion that the gap between the two regions is not only continuous, but also continuously significant, as respondents appear to support regional elites over the period twice as much in Flanders as in Wallonia; average levels of preference for the period being respectively equivalent to 0.139 and 0.069. Conversely, our observations differ also from Henry, van Haute and Hooghe's on two aspects. Firstly, our results go further and suggest that differences between Flanders and Wallonia are not restricted to the regional level. Indeed, the present piece of research highlights a second gap towards the federal level. Although the difference is less pronounced, preferences for the federal level are almost systematically superior in Flanders, the only exceptions being June 2004, December 2004, June 2010, February 2012 and the period from February 2013 and April 2014. Secondly, while Henry, van Haute and Hooghe measure a similar degree of confidence in politicians in Flanders and in Wallonia, the very nature of our research itself demonstrates the opposite. Though each politician can be evaluated on a single basis, and despite the logical individual variations it induces, it appears clearly that Flemish respondents are more enthusiasts than their Walloon peers about political elites.

Within each region, we then compared the mean approval rating of federal elites with that of regional elites in order to determine which level of government gets the upper hand. In this respect, it is worth reminding that we consider three competing hypotheses: the federal one, the confederal one and the 'flat' one (see above). As evident from figure 1, patterns vary depending on the region. In Brussels as well as in Wallonia, results provide strong empirical evidence in support of the federal hypothesis which assumes that federal elites should be more popular than regional ones. In Wallonia, we find that over the period 2004-2015, the level of support for federal representatives averages 11.2 % against only 6.9 % for those politicians who hold a mandate at the subnational level. Among Brussels' respondents, the differential in popularity between the federal and the regional levels proves to be even larger, since the mean level of preference for federal elites averages 13.2 % against only 7.8 % for regional elites. In line with Reif and Schmitt's model of "second-order" elections, the results of these two intraregional comparisons unambiguously demonstrate that despite the successive devolutions of competences from the federal state to regions and communities, federal representatives still exhibit the highest approval ratings among Walloon and Brussels' citizens.

In Flanders by contrast, we may point at another pattern that differs fundamentally from that observed in the two other regions. When considering the period 2004-2015 as a whole, it seems that at first glance, none of our three hypotheses can account for differences in popularity between federal and regional elites among Flemish respondents. In fact, providing one single interpretation for the overall period proves to be a very intricate task in the Flemish case, because the time span clearly covers two distinct sequences which deserve separate investigation: the sequence June 2004-September 2008 and the sequence December 2008-April 2014. During the first sequence, the mean level of support for federal representatives was quite similar to that of regional elites and the respective popularity curves of federal and regional politicians crossed each other several times. Between June 2007 and August 2008,

¹² Henry L., van Haute E., Hooghe M., « Confiance, satisfaction et comportement électoral dans un état fédéral », in Deschouwer K. *et al.* (eds.), *Décrypter l'électeur. Le comportement électoral et les motivations de vote*, Louvain, LanooCampus, 2015, p. 218

preferences for federal politicians even dominate preferences for regional elites. In other words, no clear hierarchy between the two tiers of government emerged between June 2004 and September 2008, which concurs with our 'flat' hypothesis. After September 2008, the hierarchy between the levels became much less blurred, since the mean approval rating of regional elites was definitely higher than that of federal personalities. In 23 consecutive political barometers, those politicians who held a mandate in the institutions of the Flemish Region/Community were found to be, on average, more popular than their federal colleagues. This observation lends support for the confederal hypothesis which suggests that regional elites nowadays dominate the Belgian political landscape. In light of these findings, we may conclude that the regional political arena can no longer be considered as a "second-order" arena in Flanders.

Discussion

There are basically two different ways of considering our results, one absolute and one relative; each of them having different consequences. According to an absolute interpretation, most of the observations we highlighted above should be tempered when analysed, since they refer to rather small variations, all things remaining equal. Yes, Flemish respondents do put higher trust rates in political elites than the rest of the country – Wallonia, in particular – and they do treat the federal and the regional levels on an equal footing. Conversely, federal politicians benefit from a preference bonus in Brussels and in Wallonia while elites at both levels enjoy lower levels of support than in Flanders. Yet, though the federal hypothesis is largely validated in Wallonia and in Brussels, we also observed that the results are less straightforward in Flanders. Despite inflections between the federal and the regional curves in 2008 and in 2014 and despite some significant but punctual gaps – e.g. December 2007, March 2008, and June 2010 – preference scores for the two levels are indeed rather close. Hence, from an absolute point of view, the only valid interpretation is to conclude that the flat hypothesis is confirmed over the period in Flanders. However, from a relative point of view, the confederal hypothesis could be supported too. First, the fact that the federal and the regional levels are treated equally in Flanders is already remarkable in itself, the federal hypothesis being commonly assumed when dealing with multilevel democracies. Second, from September 2008 to November 2014, the rupture is even more symbolic since the regional level takes the upper hand. Therefore, if we could say that absolute differences are limited, it is also true that they are relatively significant.

Admittedly, our data do not enable us to explain the shift from the flat scenario to the confederal scenario, which occurred in the Flemish public opinion during the fall 2008. Nevertheless, it may first be assumed that this shift can be partially attributed to the split of the electoral cartel CD&V-N-VA in September 2008 and to the subsequent success of the Flemish nationalist party. As the N-VA has become the biggest Flemish party during the period under scrutiny, an important proportion of the Flemish respondents have been drawn from the ranks of its sympathisers. As a consequence, the levels of support for both federal and regional personalities have probably been affected by the political line of the Flemish nationalists. The N-VA's fierce opposition to the successive federal governments may have contributed to the decline in approval ratings of federal politicians, while at the same time, its participation in the Flemish government Peters II may have fostered the popularity of regional elites. Second, the fact that regional personalities were more popular than federal ones between 2008 and 2014 can also be partially explained by the non-congruence between the partisan composition of the federal government and that of the Flemish regional government. At the federal level, Flemish governing parties did not hold a majority of seats in their linguistic group, while at the regional level, the governments Peters I and Peters II did

represent an overwhelming majority of the Flemish electorate. Hence, Flemish citizens may have been inclined to assess regional elites more positively than federal ones. Finally, a third potential explanation for the differential in popularity between federal and regional personalities in Flanders lies in the fact that approval ratings of federal politicians might have been undermined by the successive political crises taking place at their level of government, such as the resignations of the government Leterme I and Leterme II or the long process of coalition formation after the 2010 elections.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that the present paper constitutes an explorative attempt to make use of a source of data often overlooked in the past. So far, our first results are rather encouraging, since they are conclusive, coherent with the literature and highlight some new trends. In the future, a fine grained analysis of all the mandates evaluated in the *Baromètres politiques* – i.e. not only the federal and the regional ones, but also the European, the local and the partisan ones – should open new perspectives for research. Indeed, in a multi-level democracy such as Belgium where numerous politicians tend to hold several mandates, a multivariate analysis of preferences could help us determining which one of them is significant when popularity is assessed.

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