Are there really two public opinions in Belgium?

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One of the recurrent claims in the rhetoric about Belgian linguistic divisions is that public opinion in the two communities would be radically different. The fact that Dutch and French speaking communities would adhere to different value patterns would render it all the more difficult to reach a political compromise on various topics, ranging from how to reduce the government deficit to how to fight corruption. If we want to develop coherent policies, the logic goes, we should develop two separate political systems: institutions should adapt to cultural realities in society.

At first sight, the argument makes sense. First of all, we know from empirical research how important public attitudes are for politics. We can assume that the political culture of a country to a large extent determines the way a political system operates. E.g., various international experiences have shown that it is very difficult for a government to fight corruption if there is a feeling among the population that corruption is not all that bad as a survival mechanism. Already from the 1950s on it has been shown that the political culture of a country has a strong impact on the stability of democratic political systems. Public opinion matters, to put it simply.

Furthermore, we also know that cultures tend to change slowly, and that there are profound differences between various cultures. The argument has been formulated most strongly by the late US political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in his work *The Clash of Civilizations*. The Huntington argument is by now well known: the assumption is that there are strong and stable differences between the basic values of different civilizations, and at some point these different civilizations will resort to a conflict in order to achieve hegemony. In the recent literature, a number of authors and political entrepreneurs have tried to apply the Huntington thesis also to the Belgian case: it is assumed that the two communities are so radically different that in the end there is no other solution than, either a culture clash, or a separation of the two cultures.

At his point, however, the argument becomes all too easy. One of the empirical mistakes of Huntington is his assumption that cultures are completely static. Apparently, there are some fundamental characteristics in Islam or other religions, that will never change, and inevitably will lead to conflict with other cultures. It is indeed true that cultures change rather slowly, and that we should not expect fundamental changes from one day to the next. But within a couple of decades, cultures do change. One of the strongest examples in this regard is the research that was done in the early 1950's in Western Germany. The survey still showed strong support for an authoritarian style of practising politics, and a strong lack of tolerance. Various studies published in that period openly questioned whether “the Germans” would ever be ready for democracy. Twenty years later, the situation is completely reversed. West Germany developed into a mature and very stable democratic political system. The basic structure of political attitudes might not change overnight, but it can change within a couple of decades.

This tends to undermine the validity of any ‘clash of civilizations’ argument. On a global scale, it can be observed that both in the Islamic world as in large parts of Asia, basic value

patterns have changed substantially in recent decades. One can argue therefore that there are no historically invariant blocks of civilizations, that necessarily will enter into conflict with one another. Cultures, self-evidently, can be on a collision course with one another, but most likely they will influence one another in varying forms of intercultural influences.

In a Belgian context, the same argument applies. There is no reason at all to assume that there would be something like a "Flemish culture", or a "Walloon culture", that will remain the same in the decades ahead. Just like in other countries and regions, we can expect that political cultures will evolve strongly in the decades ahead, partly because changing economic and structural circumstances. And while there might some historical examples where Dutch and French public opinion react differently to a number of political topics, in most of the cases this kind of difference was either non-existent or not important at all.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that the political culture of the Dutch and the French speaking population of Belgium does not differ all that strongly as is often assumed. The European Social Survey can be considered as the most reliable data source for social and political attitudes in Europe. With regard to most of the attitudes, Belgium is right in the middle of all observations. On one side of the continuum we have the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, that are characterized by high levels of political trust, a strong emphasis on volunteering, support for redistribution and low levels of ethnocentrism. On the other side of the extreme are countries like Italy, Portugal or Greece that traditionally are characterised by low levels of political trust, and less support for social redistribution programs. These patterns are remarkably stable and they show up in all kinds of survey programs from the 1970s on. And, as one might have guessed, Belgian public opinion is usually right in the middle, and there are indeed few other countries that come so close to the European average.

Self-evidently, there are some differences between public opinion in the Dutch and the French speaking part of the country. French public opinion tends to be a little bit more left-leaning, but differences are not all that significant. Using various scaling techniques, it becomes obvious that the distance between public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia is very small indeed. This fact is often neglected in the debate, because it is assumed that election results can be used as a reliable indicator for public opinion. This, however, is not the case. Various analyses, e.g., have shown that the level of racism or ethnocentrism is not different in Flanders than it is in Wallonia. Most people who are not familiar with the quantitative study of opinion data have a hard time in accepting this analysis. After all a political party that thrives mainly on feelings on ethnocentrism is remarkably successful in Flanders from the 1980s on, while a similar party is almost completely absent in the Walloon region. These elections results, however, do not inform us at all about the basic value pattern of the population. For various historical and organisational reasons, the Vlaams Blok or Vlaams Belang, indeed has been quite successful at the polls, while this is not the case for the Front National. But in the Walloon region, voters with a high level of ethnocentrism simply spread out to different political parties, but they do remain ethnocentric. All in all, the basic value patterns of Walloon and Flemish people do not differ all that strongly. Basically, Belgians can be considered as very average European citizens.

This finding does not imply that there would be something inherently "Belgian" or cultural about public opinion in the country. Rather, it can be argued that the way institutions function indeed has a profound impact on public opinion. In this regard, the neo-institutional approach as it is developed by Nenad Stojanović indeed makes sense. Long-term, historical experiences with, e.g., the welfare state, or a corrupt or well-functioning political system indeed can be expected to have a lasting impact on the way public opinion functions.

Other authors in this volume pay attention to the fact that the current institutional design of Belgium is not conducive at all to the development of a common public opinion in the country. The electoral system provides strong incentives to political parties to pay attention

only to their own constituency, and there is no reason at all to respond to the demands of public opinion in the other side of the country. Media systems are completely segregated, and French newspapers are hardly read in the Flemish side of the country or the other way around. This segregation by itself can be considered as a problem. Most theoretical approaches to the way federal systems function assume that such a political system at least requires some form of federal, or overarching loyalty. Citizens can have a strong loyalty to their own, subnational identity, but this should be compensated by at least some form of loyalty to the rules of the system itself, and the willingness to continue the system in the future. The most important author in this field, the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart already stated in his earliest works in the 1960s that federal loyalty is an absolute necessity if one wants to maintain the stability of such a system. In the current institutional design, it seems as if this element of federal loyalty has simply been forgotten. At least, there is no incentive whatsoever for citizens or for political actors to develop this form of loyalty. Applying the Lijphart logic would mean that this lack of federal loyalty indeed spells trouble for the long-term stability of the political system.

While I do agree with Stojanović that institutions can be instrumental in providing incentives for federal loyalty, I wonder whether forms of direct democracy offer the best tool to achieve this goal. To start with, the use of direct democracy runs counter to the basic idea in the Lijphart theory that 'ordinary' citizens can easily be mobilized into various forms of radical political action. In Lijphart's view of a consociational democracy, the moderating influence always originates from the political elite, not from the rank and file. Second, however, the moderating effect of direct democracy could only be achieved in very specific circumstances. One could think of referenda on, e.g., nuclear energy, euthanasia, mobility, etc. For a lot of these issues, we know indeed there are no profound differences between public opinion in the North and the South of the country. Proponents of nuclear energy, indeed, could form coalitions, and this would encourage the development of political coalitions across the linguistic divide, as Stojanović would assume. But one can easily think of numerous other cases, where a referendum could only be divisive. How about a referendum on the legal position of the French speaking minority in the Flemish suburbs of Brussels? Or about the separation of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde? Even a topic that at first sight has nothing to do with the linguistic divide, like the membership of Turkey into the European Union, could easily show a strong divide. In the Flemish region, the Vlaams Belang would strongly mobilise for an anti-Turkish vote, while such a mobilisation campaign probably would be absent in the Walloon region.

The challenge for the Stojanović proposal therefore would be that some topics would be acceptable, while others would be off-limits, if we do not want to encourage a further opposition between the two main communities in the country. It would be unacceptable to introduce such a system, however, and this would not be considered as legitimate. Direct democracy, after all, implies that one considers the citizens to be a sovereign force for political decision making. We run into a fundamental contradiction here if the system allows referenda on obnoxious topics like nuclear energy, but not on the language regime in the Brussels suburbs.

Direct democracy therefore might not be the ideal mechanism to offer some incentives for the development of federal loyalty, but the underlying logic of Stojanović is correct: one should think of institutional incentives for political actors to develop a basic form of loyalty toward the stability of the system. The current institutional make-up of Belgium fails to deliver such incentives, and maybe on the contrary. The current electoral rules encourage political parties to pay lip service to nationalist rhetoric. Even parties that are not that strongly into nationalism, refrain from deserting the agreed upon "hard line" within their community. To cite but one example: together with my colleagues Stefaan Walgrave and Kris Deschouwer, we made a round-up of the positions of Flemish political parties for the regional elections of June 2009. Not a single political party dared to diverge from the resolutions that were approved by the Flemish parliament in 1999. Even parties that are

realistic enough to know these resolutions cannot be applied fully, will never admit that in the open. We might lament this lack of political courage, but it is clear that this a natural reaction the incentives provided by the electoral system. If a political party only has to be elected by – in this case – Dutch-speaking voters, there is no sense at all in stating that a further institutional reform of the country will be the result of a compromise between the two communities. In such a system, it makes more sense to support, at least symbolically, the demands of nationalists, even if these are not rational or realistic.

Changes in the electoral system, therefore, are called for. The Pavia group, that was initiated by Philippe van Parijs and Kris Deschouwer, has already called for establishing a federal electoral district. But maybe a much more urgent reform would be to have federal and regional elections on the same day, and no longer according to a separate calendar. Having simultaneous elections at least would make clear that – in some way or another – they will have to enter a government coalition following the elections and that this coalition will have to involve partners from both large communities in the country. Only paying attention to one's own community could be discouraged in such a setting. Other smaller institutional rules could be implemented too. E.g., one will remember that following the 2007 elections in Belgium, there was some discussion about which parliamentary party group should be considered as the "largest" group. This is not just a symbolic discussion as it is generally assumed that that the largest parliamentary party group has the right to initiate governmental coalition talks. It would be possible to define the parliamentary groups in federal terms, offering an incentive to parties that succeed to reach an agreement with their counterpart in the other side of the country. Applying these rules to the 2007 elections, by the way, would have implied that the liberal family (i.e., MR and Open VLD) is clearly larger than the Christian-Democrats (CD&V and cdH). This is but one example, but various other incentives could be thought of to stimulate political actors to pay at least some attention to what happens in the other community. The experience of other federal systems shows that this kind of cross-cutting loyalty is a requirement for the stability of the political system.