

Direct democracy as a tool to shape a united public opinion in a multilingual society?

Some reflections based on the Belgian case

Dave Sinardet (Universiteit Antwerpen and VUBrussel)

Introduction

The arguments developed by Nenad Stojanovic, on the basis of the Swiss example, in favour of direct democracy as a tool to foster internal cohesion of multilingual polities, provide a fascinating and convincing new insight into the classic question of how to organise democracy in such multilingual polities. However, when we investigate whether an introduction of direct democracy in Belgium would similarly induce the ascribed beneficial effects to the Belgian multilingual polity, scepticism seems to be in order. To that extent that the question can be asked whether direct democracy can really be considered such an important factor in the explanation of the stability of the Swiss multilingual democracy.

Ethno-nationalist discourse and a common demos

Let us concentrate on two of the main arguments: direct democracy would be able to ‘deeply undermine’ the use of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and create a ‘common *demos*’. The premise that multilingual polities ‘constitute fertile ground for the establishment of ‘us vs them’ political rhetoric and ethno-nationalist discourse’ and that they face difficulties to ‘construct a national *demos*’, as Nenad Stojanovic writes, can certainly be very well illustrated by the Belgian case. While Stojanovic’s intuition that ‘on a typical daily issue ‘the’ Flemish, Walloon [...] opinion simply does not exist’ can certainly be confirmed (cf. *infra*), these homogeneous opinions do exist through political discourse and media reporting¹⁶.

One of the reasons for this can be found in the tendency to ‘homogenise’ the two large language communities of Dutch-speakers and French-speakers, which pushes internal differences within the communities to the background. In political reporting, positions of a specific Flemish or francophone political actor are easily labelled as ‘the Flemish position’ or ‘the francophone position’ even if it is not too difficult to find other Flemish or francophone political actors that do not agree with that position. This first and foremost happens with the opinion of the ‘other’ community, but through that dynamic the ‘own’ community is

¹⁶ The following paragraphs are partially based on Sinardet Dave (2007), *Wederzijdse mediarepresentaties van de nationale ‘andere’: Vlamingen, Franstaligen en het Belgische federale samenlevingsmodel*. Antwerpen: University of Antwerp, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences (doctoral dissertation), 491 p.

inevitably also stereotyped. It is only a small step for such a 'homogenised' political opinion to be ascribed to the entire language community.

For instance, when in the previous federal government, composed of liberals and socialists, the vice-prime minister of the French-speaking socialists was in conflict with the Flemish liberal prime minister on whether criminals should be able to be released before the end of their sentence, Flemish media tended to speak of a conflict with 'the francophones' and of a 'Walloon public opinion' which had a completely different (that is, more relaxed) view on the matter than the Flemish one. Even if the French-speaking liberals agreed with the Dutch-speaking liberals and the Dutch-speaking socialists with their francophone counterparts

This type of reporting fits in with more general stereotypes of the 'other' community. Flemish media and politics tend to reduce Wallonia to the old industrial areas and because of that to the Parti Socialiste, which in turn is often depicted as archaic. In French-speaking Belgium, there is an obvious tendency to attribute the separatist position in Flanders (held by about a quarter of Flemish political representatives – mostly of the extreme right – and by about 10 % of the Flemish population) to 'la Flandre'. This was externalised very explicitly by the infamous fake news program transmitted by the French-speaking public broadcaster RTBF in december 2006, in which Flanders declared its independence: the RTBF-journalist in front of the Flemish parliament announces that 'an overwhelming majority' of Flemish MP's has voted in favour of independence (in other words: when push comes to shove, all Flemish politicians are separatists). A few minutes later scenes are shown of the main square in the city of Antwerp where large crowds have gathered to celebrate Flemish independence (in other words: when push comes to shove, the whole Flemish population is separatist)¹⁷.

A logical consequence of this type of representations is that the two homogenised communities are also represented as very different from and opposite to each other. The francophone representation of Flanders as nationalist and separatist, at least implicitly includes a tolerant and universalist self-representation of French-speaking Belgium. The Flemish representation of Wallonia as archaic and decaying includes a self-representation of Flanders as modern and dynamic. Certainly in Flemish media, the 'community divide'-frame is often used to interpret Belgian political reality and leads to a focus on differences and not on similarities. The 'us vs them'-rhetoric can be taken very literally in some cases. Not only do many politicians tend to use it, media reports about political conflicts between the communities sometimes also speak of 'us' and 'them', this way positioning the journalist and the viewer or reader on the side of the 'own' community. During the recent political crisis, polarisation was often further achieved through the use of war metaphors describing political conflict and more generally through very dramatising political and media rhetoric, with incessant speculation on the imminent split of the country.

In other words: the representation of two homogeneous communities, that everything opposes, is the building stone for a widespread ethno-nationalist rhetoric and a stumbling block to the emergence of a common, national *demos*.

This should of course not be read as an accusation towards politicians and journalists as such. The point is not to discern or denounce an explicit political agenda in this type of discourse, although it is obvious that it implicitly fits in with such an agenda. Rather, as will be argued further on, this is a not too surprising consequence of the way the Belgian federal system functions.

¹⁷. Some contend that this program was explicitly conceived as a caricature, which is rather at odds with the appearance on the screen, after the fake news show, of the heads of the RTBF telling the viewers that the scenario they had just been shown was realist, credible and probable.

Public opinion and political opinion

But let us first investigate to what extent this image and often heard statement of two opposed public opinions can be considered as accurate. Such a tricky question obviously demands a prudent and balanced answer. A way to 'test' the veracity of this common representation is to turn to the available scientifically rigorous survey research. When looking at such research, one is indeed often struck by the existence of a gap, but not so much between Flemish and Francophone public opinion, as between the reality which reveals itself in the bare figures on the one hand and that created by political and media discourse on the other.

Looking, for instance at the figures of the ESS (European Social Survey), it seems that on general political attitudes, the north and the south of Belgium are not that divided. Concerning left right placement, ethnocentrism, homophobia, subjective well being, etc., differences between Flanders and Wallonia are generally limited, certainly in comparison to figures for some other countries. Moreover, those differences cease to be significant when they are controlled for socio-economic status. Although differences can be found between the party systems (the socialist party being much stronger in the Walloon region and the extreme right being much stronger in the Flemish region), these do not seem to be the reflection of significant differences in political preferences¹⁸.

Similarly, surveys on more specific day to day political issues (at least when they are held on a national basis, which is often not the case) also show that public opinion in the north and the south often does not differ strongly (in contrast to some other socio-demographic categories).

This is most striking concerning the issues *par excellence* where one would expect to see a north-south divide emerge: the community issues. On those issues the north-south divide is strongly present on the political level (at least on some specific issues, because particularly on the Flemish side the general institutional program strongly differs from party to party – that of the Flemish Greens differs day and night from that of the Flemish extreme right to take the two opposites of the spectrum¹⁹). However this clear cut divide does not seem to be reflected among public opinion. A 2007 post-electoral survey for instance showed that among the Flemish electorate, 40 % wants to redistribute competences in favour of Flanders, but another 40 % wants to do the same in favour Belgium. Given the positions of the Flemish parties, the researchers conclude that the second 40 % form an 'unserved audience'²⁰. Another telling illustration could be found in a representative opinion survey organised jointly by *De Standaard* and *Le Soir* in march 2007 and more specifically in a question on the regionalisation of labour market policy. Autonomy for the regions concerning labour market policy is a quasi-unanimous and priority demand of Flemish political parties that was quasi-unanimously rejected by their francophone counterparts, certainly in the pre-electoral period during which the survey was held. However, when respondents were asked whether the regions should become more autonomous on this level, 'only' 50 % of Flemish respondents answered favourably, while 'as much as' 49 % of francophone respondents did the same. The linguistic division in the political world on this issue does not seem to be reflected in public opinion, which on both sides of the language frontier is neatly divided among itself. Even more stunning figures out of the same survey concerned the support for regionalising mobility, where only 35 % of Flemish respondents were in favour, against 50 % of francophones.

The lack of coherence between the political and public opinion on these matters could also point to a lack of interest for and knowledge of institutional matters. Indeed, on this level too,

¹⁸. Hooghe Marc (2008), 'Is there a cultural divide? Comparing Cultural and Political Attitudes in Belgium' (presentation at 'Rethinking the Foundations of Belgium's Socio-economic Institutions', Brussels, Universitaire Stichting / Fondation Universitaire, 11/12/2008)

¹⁹. For more details on all the Belgian political parties positions on state reform, see Sinardet Dave (2009), 'Futur(s) de la fédération belge: paradoxes fédéraux et paradoxes belges' in *Le fédéralisme en Belgique et au Canada : un dialogue comparatif*, Bernard Fournier & Min Reuchamps (ed.), Louvain-La-Neuve : De Boeck

²⁰. Swyngedouw, Marc & Rink, Nathalie (2008), *Hoe Vlaams-Belgischgezind zijn de Vlamingen? Een analyse op basis van het postelectorale verkiezingsonderzoek 2007*, (CeSO/ISPO 2008-6), Leuven: ISPO-KUL

there seems to be a divide in political and public opinion. While a state reform was largely considered as the first priority after the 2007 elections and while the Flemish vote was almost unanimously interpreted as ‘a clear demand for a large state reform’, results of post-electoral research showed that for only 13.3% of Flemish voters ‘state reform’ was one of the three most important vote-determining issues and for only 5.4% the most important one²¹. Among voters in the Walloon region, who were said to have voted against a state reform, only about 2 % had based their vote on that issue²². Nevertheless, it rapidly came to dominate political life in the weeks and months after the elections. Obviously politics and society can (thankfully) not be entirely separated from each other. Still we tend to find a lot of truth in a statement by the political sociologist Luc Huysse, who lived and described the deep crises that shook Belgium after the second world war around its fracture lines on the community, socio-economical and philosophical level, and who labelled the 2007-2008 events as a ‘crisis without a public’.

Can direct democracy adjust these representations?

So, when one looks at the divergence of political opinion and public opinion on some issues in Belgium, one would be tempted to think that introducing direct democracy – which would be a way to politicize the public opinion in a more direct way than through elections – is a way to avoid the political (mis)use that is made of oversimplified representations of ‘the’ Flemish and ‘the’ Francophone opinion.

However, the question is whether direct democracy would be a sufficiently strong tool to actually achieve this, as the ‘us vs them’-dynamic at play seems to be very robust. Indeed, even when politicians and journalists are confronted with the dissonant voice of public opinion, they still seem to be tempted to interpret it in the classic community frame. A striking illustration is a news report of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster VRT on a national opinion poll concerning six socio-political issues. As is almost always the case, results are being split up between opinions of ‘Flemings’ and ‘Walloons’ (at least when opinion polls are not organised on the regional level altogether, which is also often the case), which is already a first indication that this is considered the most important cleavage. The main ‘frame’ through which the results are presented by the journalist is the existence of two different public opinions in Belgium, ‘a large gap between the opinions of Flemish and Walloon on quite all societal themes’. This is announced as the main conclusion of the survey.

However, such a ‘gap’ is not reflected in the figures. On three of the six questions, opinions of Flemings and Walloons are almost identical, on two other questions there are rather limited differences and only on one question one can indeed speak of a large difference (but this questions concerns whether the Flemish extreme right party should be allowed to participate in government). One of the two questions with limited differences is whether crown prince Filip would be a good King for Belgium. The report does not conclude that a large majority of Belgians is in favour, but insists that in Wallonia 82 % think he would be a good King, while this is ‘only’ 67 % in Flanders. At the end of the discussion of the results for the question on the efficiency of anti-speeding measures, which showed 72 % of yes in Flanders and 66 % in Wallonia (with margins of error generally being around 3 %), the journalist concludes: ‘Your Majesty, there are really no Belgians on the road anymore’.

A related example concerns a report on the post-electoral survey mentioned above in Flemish quality newspaper *De Standaard*. While, as argued, the results of the survey pointed in the direction of a continued support among Flemish voters for the federal level (a conclusion also explicitly made by the authors in the accompanying summary), the headline

²¹ Swyngedouw & Rink, *op cit*.

²² Frogner, André-Paul, De Winter, Lieven & Baudewyns, Pierre (2008), *Les Wallons et la réforme de l'Etat. Une analyse sur la base de l'enquête post-électorale de 2007*. (PIOP 2008/3). Louvain-La-Neuve : PIOP-UCL.

read: 'Fleming loses believe in Belgium'²³. The only figure that could slightly be considered to point in this direction (a difference of 8 % in comparison to 2003 on a question relating to the preferred government level) was highlighted on the front page and used as a headline.

These quite excessive (although by no means unrepresentative) examples suggest that media (and politics) are so inclined to interpret issues through the lens of the community divide (while other interpretations could be just as relevant), that this is even the case when they are confronted with figures that do not support or even contradict this interpretation. The figures simply do not fit in their 'frame'.

It is a typical example of selective perception, where only facts that confirm existing convictions are registered. Of course, in some other cases, survey figures that do not confirm the representation of two entirely opposed public opinions are presented correctly. But even then, and in contrast to figures presented as confirming the image of the 'opinion divide', they almost never become an important element in political debate. In other words they are not politicized and therefore do not turn into relevant political realities.

Again, one could argue that the organisation of national referenda would do just that: politicize public opinion, even when it is at odds with political opinion. Even if a referendum would not be binding, it would certainly have a stronger impact than the publication of an opinion survey and therefore should be able to at least counterbalance homogenisation of Flemish and francophone public opinions.

However, the only 'experiment' with a form of direct democracy that was conducted in Belgium, hardly supports this argument either. On the contrary, the referendum of March 12th 1950 on the Return of King Leopold III to the throne, is often considered as the first plain and explicit externalisation of the regional-linguistic cleavage in Belgium. In total, 57 % of the Belgian population voted in favour of the King's return. However, when those figures were divided on a regional basis, the Flemish part of the country had voted in favour by 72 % while the Walloon region had voted against by 58 % (the region of Brussels showed an almost exact 50-50 divide). After the referendum, the opposition to the King's return became ever more vehement, causing enormous uproar and heavy and violent manifestations, mostly by socialist movements in the south of the country who felt dominated by the Catholic majority which had heavily campaigned in favour of Leopold's return. This finally led to the King abdicating in favour of his son, Baudouin. Mostly in Flemish, catholic circles, this left the feeling that 'their' majority had been 'neutralised'. At the highlight of the controversy, fear existed that a civil war might break out.

However, when one analyses the results of the referendum more closely, one can also read it is an indicator of another type of divide: that between agrarian regions on the one hand and urban or industrial regions on the other, the former voting in favour and the latter against the King's return to the throne. Indeed, the more rural Walloon provinces had also voted in favour of bringing back Leopold III: Namur by 58 % and Luxemburg by 65 %. It is true that in the 1950s the urban-rural divide largely coincided with the division in language regions, but on this vote the community divide was secondary to the urban-rural one.

Detailing the reasons behind this 'linguistic' interpretation of the referendum (amongst other reasons, the catholic party saw the controversy around the King as a way to attain an absolute majority on the national level, socialists wanted to break this majority) fall beyond the scope of this contribution. The point is that while the linguistic cleavage was certainly not the only way to interpret the results of the referendum, this was however the case. The Belgian example shows that direct democracy can also be used to reinforce 'us vs them'-discourse, and to undermine the existence or emergence of a national 'demos'. Although the difference between the region's vote was more pronounced in the Belgian referendum on Leopold III (72 – 42 in favour), Nenad Stojanovic's argument on how it would hardly be possible to

²³. 'Vlaming verliest geloof in België' (De Standaard, 10/06/2008)

engraft ethno-nationalist discourse on the basis of a referendum where 60 % of Dutch-speakers would vote in favour and 60 % of French-speakers would vote against increasing the legal retirement age, is therefore not too convincing. Figures are only figures, it is interpretation and perception that turn them into political realities. When 82 % in Wallonia and 67 % in Flanders consider the crown prince would make a good King, as was the case in the VRT-survey mentioned above, one can focus on the large majority on the Belgian level, or on the 15 % difference between the two regions. One choice is not necessarily morally superior to the other, and often that choice is not made purposely by commentators, but both choices clearly have a completely different political meaning.

A federation without a federal public sphere

It seems that when discussing the dualisation of public opinion(s) in Belgium, we must make a distinction between two ways to define public opinion. If we see public opinion as a measurement of opinion distributions among the entire population of a given territory, we cannot speak of a systematically disunited Belgian opinion or of two clearly separate and opposed Flemish and Walloon public opinions. However, if we see public opinion as the outcome of public debate and as taking form in a public sphere, we can indeed speak of two separate public opinions in Belgium, as there is clearly no such thing as a Belgian public sphere, but only a Dutch-speaking and French-speaking public sphere. And it is precisely the existence of two separate public opinions in the second sense that creates the illusion of two separate and homogeneous public opinions in the first sense.

Indeed, Belgium can be considered as a federation without a public sphere, due to the absence of federal media, but also because of the organisation of the political system.

Because of the linguistically split up media system, political debate is being conducted separately in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media. Moreover, the debate that takes place within these two distinct public spaces debate is largely conducted only among representatives of the own community. When in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media, federal issues are discussed it is generally between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking politicians respectively. This is even the case when the federal minister responsible for a certain policy domain that is being discussed is a member of the other language community, which often leads to the conducted policies not being defended, even by other parties in the government. When issues concerning community conflicts are discussed, debates in Flemish and francophone media are generally held within the parameters of the political consensus of the own community. Not the heart of the matter (such as the arguments of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking politicians) is the subject of debate, but rather why politicians of the 'own' community have not been able to push through the consensual position. Even factual elements of some issues (such as the very controversial one on 'Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde') are presented differently, with elements not fitting in the political consensus of the community being omitted or presented erroneously²⁴.

This 'segregation' of political debate on the media level is closely connected to the way the political system is organised. Belgium's party system is split up on a linguistic basis, there are no nationally organised parties of importance, and electoral districts (besides the controversial district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde) do not transgress the borders of the regions. Thus, when federal elections are held, two sets of community-based, 'regional' parties compete among themselves for 'regional' votes through 'regional' election campaigns and 'regional' political debates, mostly fought in 'regional' media. After the federal elections, the two resulting 'regional' election results are combined to form one federal government. When Belgium is holding a federal election, it is in fact holding two simultaneous 'regional' elections: one Dutch-speaking election and one French-speaking election. Politicians

²⁴. See Sinardet, 2007 (*op. cit.*)

therefore only have an incentive to address the media and 'public opinion' of their own community.

It is therefore the absence of a federal public (and political) sphere that contributes to the creation of (the perception of) two opposed public opinions (in the sense of opinion distributions) and which fosters the development of ethno-nationalist discourse in politics and media. Actually, given the extent to which the two public spheres are segregated, one might even be surprised that two more explicitly homogeneous 'public opinions' do not seem to emerge.

Of course, the argument goes that introducing national referenda will precisely create such a federal public sphere. But I am not really convinced this will be sufficient or even effective to achieve a genuine federal public sphere if all the other elements that explain its absence in Belgium (bipolarity of the party system, electoral system, media system, ...) remain stable. It will certainly not be effective if – as can be expected based on the way the representative political system is now organised in Belgium – a consociational version of direct democracy would be introduced, with a requirement to reach a double majority, a majority in each language community or – given the fact that sub-nationality does not exist in the bilingual region of Brussels – a triply majority, based on the three regions (but in the latter case, it will probably be the results in the regions of Flanders and Wallonia which will be compared in the first place). This Belgian type of 'double majority' can be much more damaging for the centripetal effects of direct democracy than the Swiss type, which is based on a majority of the people and of the cantons.

But even if genuine national referenda based on a simple majority of the people are organised, chances are that the dynamic will be comparable to the way federal elections are organised in Belgium. Let's pursue with the example of a referendum on pension's reform. On both sides of the language frontier, political parties (and civil society organisations) organised on a linguistic basis would take position on the issue by positioning themselves against other parties of the same language community, Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media would organise separate debates on the issue with only Dutch-speaking or French-speaking representatives, etc. Just like federal elections are today in fact regional elections, one federal referendum might well turn into two regional referenda. And just like federal election results are today often analysed with a focus on the disparities between votes on both sides of the language frontier, referendum results might well undergo the same treatment, even if differences between provinces, urban and rural areas, socio-economic categories, etc. would be more significant.

Certainly if the 'losers' of the referendum on a national basis could nevertheless count on a majority in one of the regions, the incentive would be strong to emphasize the different regional majorities and to activate well known ethno-nationalist rhetoric to delegitimize the national decision that is unfavourable to them. For instance, if participants in a national referendum voted against an increase of the legal retirement age, but if at the same time results would show a majority on the level of the Flemish region, the Flemish lobby in favour of the reform (for instance the employer's organisations, but also centre to liberal parties) would probably insist on how 'the Flemish public opinion' has voted in favour of the reform but was blocked by the 'Walloon public opinion'. This type of discourse would make it more difficult for Walloon employer's organisations and Flemish trade unions to explicitly defend the referendum's results as they would be accused of being disloyal to the community consensus if not collaborating with 'the other side'. Of course, there is no proof that this type of scenario will develop, but based on the current dynamic, it is certainly not improbable. Because of this dynamic, the organisation of national referenda in Belgium might have opposite effects than the ones described by Stojanovic. Again, it is not so much the results of a referendum that matter, than the way they are interpreted and politicised.

Without saying that national referenda would not be able to have any of the beneficial effects that Stojanovic describes (if it is in the interest of some political parties to frame the

referendum in a 'national' way, they will probably do this), based on the arguments above, I believe the actual rub in the Belgian dynamic is at the party political level and more specifically concerns the interaction between party system and electoral system. Therefore, if the idea is to achieve a genuine federal public sphere (and for reasons of efficiency and democratic legitimacy this is necessary in the Belgian context), more is to be expected from ways to alter the dynamic on those crucial levels. In that respect, the introduction of a federal voting district for the election of (part of) the federal parliament in Belgium still seems one of the most promising and potentially effective instruments to me. The chances that a single voting district will have the supposed centripetal effects are much larger when such a district is introduced for the election of political representatives than for a popular vote, as interpretation of the latter is often determined by the first. It would be a more effective way to actually politicize majorities on the national level, even without resorting to direct democracy. Otherwise, a national majority that might be the outcome of the creation of a single voting district through the use of referenda, might at best not be politicized and at worse be turned into two different regional majorities, even if on the basis of the bare figures such an interpretation might not be the most obvious.

Much more than national referenda, a federal electoral district for the federal parliament should create incentives for political parties to cross linguistic borders and be able to achieve the 'horizontal integration' of which Nenad Stojanovic writes ('the emergence of cross-linguistic dialogues as well as the flow of political views from one language region to the other').²⁵

Indeed, one of the reasons that political and media discourse tends to reinforce the image of 'us vs them' in Belgium is the segregation of political debate. The absence of federal debate in the media can largely be attributed to the lack of incentive politicians have to defend their positions towards the public opinion of the 'other' community. Although his policies affect Belgians all over the country, a French-speaking federal minister will consider a visit to the local market to be electorally more fructuous than a visit to the television-studio's of the 'other' language community. A federal electoral district might alter this 'incentive structure' and lead to an increase of 'federal politicians'. The only politician that is now incited to develop a federal profile through his position is the prime minister (the only official 'linguistically sexless' political function in federal politics). Guy Verhofstadt, a Flemish liberal who was prime minister for 8 years, remains among the five most popular politicians in the south of the country.

Conclusion

To conclude, although the arguments based on the Swiss example are stimulating, I remain sceptical about the benefits of direct democracy to the challenges that the Belgian multilingual democracy is confronted with.

There can be two underlying reasons for this scepticism. Maybe direct democracy as such does indeed have positive effects in the Swiss context but only because of some important features in which it differs from the Belgian context, such as the existence of national political parties, absence of bipolarity, a less segregated electoral system and media system, ... Features which are of course interrelated and might well be necessary conditions for direct democracy to have a positive effect in a multilingual society. Those conditions would then be met in the Swiss case but not in the Belgian one.

But it could also be that direct democracy is not such an important element altogether to explain the success of multilingual democracy in Switzerland. It might well be those other

²⁵. For a more detailed argumentation in favour of the introduction of a federal electoral district in Belgium, see a.o. Deschouwer, Kris & Van Parijs Philippe (2008), 'Een federale kieskring voor een gezonde federatie' in Sinardet, Dave (ed.), *Dossier staatsvorming: de rationale benadering*. Ghent: Stichting Gerrit Kreveld, 2008, p. 43-52

features that are essential in fostering centrifugal or centripetal dynamics. The benefits of direct democracy would then only be a consequence – or at best a reinforcement – of some of the other institutional features of the Swiss polity that have centripetal effects, not the direct cause of those effects.

This discussion would merit a much more extensive and thorough examination, but the concise comparison of Belgium and Switzerland undertaken here rather seems to point to the second explanation. In any case, if the question is why Switzerland seems to be a more successful example of a democratic multilingual polity than Belgium – a premise which incidentally also merits more profound discussion –, there seems to be no reason to in the first place look towards direct democracy for an explanation rather than at more striking differences between the political systems of the two countries.