

A Federal Electoral System : Country-Wide Electoral District or Multiple Proportional Vote ?*

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Creating a federal or country-wide electoral district aims at breaking the isolation of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking public spaces by encouraging the candidates running within this electoral district to address the voters from the other language community. It cannot be denied that the present system establishes two almost impenetrable public spaces and stimulates the radicalization of political leaders as well as public opinions. Language disputes and the lack of understanding between the two communities are expected to grow until the institutional system will stop encouraging centrifugal forces. This is why the wish of the advocates of the country-wide electoral district to reinforce centripetal forces by encouraging the main political leaders to look for a federal legitimacy, is excellent.

However, without questioning the salutary character of a change in the electoral system, it is necessary to ponder about the real efficiency that a federal electoral district might have in comparison with its aim. Failing that, isn't it possible to conceive an alternative electoral system, maybe more likely to reinforce the federal cohesion?

Limits to the Federal Electoral District

The main limit to a country-wide electoral district is that it forces electors to choose whether they vote for a French-speaking or a Dutch-speaking candidate. The elector is thus not really encouraged to vote for a candidate from the other community as it means that, for one of his votes, he has to give up the idea of influencing the election of his most direct representatives. For example, for a Dutch-speaking elector to decide to vote for a French-speaking candidate, he does not only have to think that this candidate expresses the French-speaking point of view as well as understands the Flemish expectations better than the other French-speaking candidates. More radically, he should feel better represented by a candidate from the other community than by someone from his own community. This can only be the case for a very limited number of voters, as is demonstrated by electoral behaviour in the central Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) district. This district, at the heart of the present inter-community dispute, is indeed a constituency where French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties are both represented. However, far from being a pacification factor, it turns out to crystallize language identities.

The interest of voting for a candidate from the other community would even be slighter if seats were allocated to each community proportionally to the results obtained. In this case, the elector from a community who votes for a candidate from the other community makes his own community's representation decrease, which makes no sense. Hence the number of seats allocated to each language community must indeed be fixed in advance.

However, in such a case, the country-wide electoral district consists in two different polls – one to elect the French-speaking representatives and one to elect the Dutch-speaking representatives – but the voter has to choose in which one he wants to take part. Given that Dutch speakers are the majority, this raises an objection of principle for the French-speaking

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minority: the French-speaking representatives would be elected by a mainly Flemish potential electorate.

However, this objection is mainly theoretical because, for the reasons we have already explained, only a limited number of electors will vote for a candidate from the other community. But if this number is too limited, the country-wide electoral system does not reach its goal: as it seems unlikely that they will obtain a high number of votes from the other community, the candidates will continue positioning themselves according to the expectations of the members of their community and the political line of a unilingual party.

In order to really be effective, the country-wide electoral district requires a return to federal parties¹. If the parties running for the federal elections were federal parties and, as a consequence, were different from the parties running for the regional elections, the Belgian political dynamic would certainly be radically different. However, the question is to know if creating a federal electoral district limited to a few seats is the best way -or an adequate way- to encourage the emergence of such parties. Anyway, coming back to real federal parties seems highly unrealistic and in contradiction with the spirit of the Belgian consociational system, which is based on the explicit recognition of language communities. All things considered, the country-wide electoral district seems to me to pertain to another conception of federalism than the one which is currently in force in our country. Moreover, it could only marginally reinforce the federal dynamic.

An Alternative: the Multiple Proportional Vote

An alternative to the federal electoral district, more in accordance with the Belgian consociational federalism, can be suggested. This is based on the multiple proportional vote technique (MPV) and constitutes, in some way, a kind of country-wide electoral district limited to a percentage of the votes and not to a part of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Rather than offering a technical description of this electoral system, we shall rather specify the way it could be implemented in Belgium².

Just as would be the case with a country-wide electoral district, each elector receives two ballot papers. The first one is used to vote in one's home district, as is currently the case. With the second one, by contrast, electors have to choose between political parties from *the other language community*. It is, in the simplest version of the MPV, a system of closed lists. The elector votes for a party and not for a candidate.

The votes that parties obtain within the other language community are totalled and then divided by a reduction coefficient, let us say 4. Afterwards, they are shared out between the different provincial districts, proportionally to their size, and added to the votes cast within these districts in order to obtain the final electoral result³.

The main advantages of the MPV are the following:

It does not create a special category of federal representatives, about whom we do not really know if they have more or less legitimacy than the classic elected representatives. Every representative still represents his own community, but is encouraged to defend its point of view while remaining open to the other community. From this point of view, the reduction coefficient has an essential role: it must be significant enough to make sure that the weight of the votes cast by the other community remains lower compared to the weight of the votes cast within the candidate's community, but it must not be excessive, on pain of making the influence of the external votes marginal.

¹ Caroline Gennez, the President of the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A), is aware of it. See Gennez (2008).

² For a detailed presentation, see de Briey (2000, 2006).

³ Note that if the same reduction coefficient is used in both language communities, the weight of Dutch-speaking voters on the election of French-speaking representatives would be higher than the weight of French-speaking voters on the election of Dutch-speaking representatives. The use of different coefficients can also be justified by reference to the protection of minorities.

Electors do not have to choose between a French-speaking and a Dutch-speaking candidate. They are not likely to weaken their own community by voting for a candidate from the other community. Likewise, electors must not feel better represented by a candidate from the other community than by a candidate from their own community in order to vote for one of them, but they could decide between the candidates from the other community, while still fully taking part in the election of their own representatives.

Political parties could not regard as insignificant the number of voters from the other community which are likely to really vote for one of them. They should address them and, in this way, put an end to the isolation of public spaces.

As such, the MPV seems to me much more likely than the country-wide electoral district to reinforce centripetal forces and to improve relationships between communities. Moreover, it seems more in accordance with the Belgian federal system, insofar political representatives explicitly remain the representatives of a language community.

Conclusion

While the present electoral system multiplies centrifugal trends, the Pavia group's ambition is to reinforce the existing centripetal forces within two language communities by encouraging the main political representatives to look for a federal legitimacy rather than competing in order to appear as the most radical supporter of a single community.

However, there is an unavoidable ambiguity in this proposal. Either the candidates elected within the country-wide electoral district are viewed as fully federal representatives, they must be "linguistically asexual". In this case, it is not necessary to define the quotas of Dutch-speaking and French-speaking representatives beforehand. As the candidates elected in this way will then be atypical representatives in the fringe of political parties, and not the leaders of these parties. Or we are aware that, even if they have been elected in a federal electoral district, these representatives still come from a clearly identifiable community. But, in this second case, it is not a question of nominating elected candidates who are independent from their community membership, but of encouraging elected candidates who remain members of a given community to express their community's concerns and wishes by confronting them to the other community's expectations. Far from denying community membership, it is important to make it possible for the dialogue between representatives from both communities and the promotion of the general interest to replace confrontation and the search for a more or less balanced compromise. However, the representatives from each community must then be elected mainly by members of their community.

This is why it seems to us that what the creation of a country-wide electoral district aims at could be better reached with the multiple proportional vote technique. Rather than choosing part of the representatives on the basis of electoral results entirely determined within a federal electoral district, all the representatives would be chosen on the basis of electoral results partially determined by the votes of all the citizens⁴.

REFERENCES

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⁴ Although more attention was paid to the federal electoral district than to the MPV in the political debate, the Dutch-speaking MP from Brussels, Sven Gatz, proposed a bill in February 2009 in order to use the MPV-technique for the election of the members of the parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region.

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