

# Thinking Canada (with or without Quebec) and Thinking Belgium (with or without Flanders): The Future of Federalism through the Eyes of their Citizens

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## **Introduction**

Since 1960, both Canada and Belgium have experienced passionate debates about the future of federalism in their country. While the debate has somewhat declined in Canada in general and in Quebec in particular, it is currently very hot in Belgium. However, both federations share a common goal – accommodating within a single country two national communities – which enables a fruitful comparison of the way one can think Canada with or without Quebec and Belgium with or without Flanders. More specifically it is interesting to look comparatively at the place of Quebec and of Flanders in their respective federation. It can be done through the eyes of Quebeckers and Flemish but also through the eyes of citizens from the other community: English-speaking Canadians and French-speaking Belgians. Relying on qualitative data collected in Quebec, Ontario, Flanders and Wallonia, this paper aims at illuminating the identity and the federal dynamics in Canada and Belgium from below – the citizens – rather than from the top – institutions or political actors. While institutions and political actors do matter, citizens play also an important role in thinking their country and the place of their region within or without it.

Identities matter and this is especially true in multinational societies. In such societies, political identities play a chief variable in the political dynamics of the country. Identities receive therefore much attention in most studies on this topic (Burgess and Pinder 2007; Gagnon, Rocher, and Guibernau 2003; Gagnon and Tully 2001; Keating 2001). In this perspective, communities are often seen as monolithic blocks at war with each other, along ethnic-linguistic lines (Sinardet 2010). However, there is a missing link between identities and federal dynamics, especially at the level of the citizens: it should be explored how identities shape the federal dynamics and how the federal dynamics shape identities. This is the aim of this paper; it offers a different perspective on how to think Canada (with or without Québec) and how to think Belgium (with or without Belgium).

In Belgium and Canada, two multinational federations, the federal dynamics is much influenced by a bipolar dynamics between the two main ethno-linguistic groups, which may stir fruitful comparisons and insight for the understanding of multinational federations (Fournier and Reuchamps 2009; Deschouwer 2009; Pelletier 2008; Gagnon 2006). In both countries, identities and federal dynamics are intrinsically related to each other (Karmis and Gagnon 1996). Yet, their current political situation is quite different. While Belgium is stuck in a deep institutional crisis, Canada has now entered a period of – more or less – stability; even though the potential for tensions has not disappeared. The different path may be explained by the interactions between identities and federal dynamics within and between the two main linguistic groups.

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To explore these interactions, four citizens panels were organised in Montréal (Quebec), Kingston (Ontario), Liège (French-speaking Belgium) and Antwerp (Dutch-speaking Belgium) (Reuchamps 2008, 2010). Each panel gathered 20-30 citizens for a half-day group discussion and thus provides insightful qualitative data. More specifically, different profiles come out this original research and these profiles illuminate different perceptions and preferences for the future of their country. The results show the profiles within Canada are more dissimilar than within Belgium. It also reveals the proximity of some profiles between the two countries. Although a quantitative research would be needed to offer a greater leverage in terms of generalisations, such a qualitative study offer a deeper look into the identity and federal politics, which illuminate the dynamics at the heart of most multinational federations.

### **1. Identities and Federalism in Belgium**

Five different profiles may qualitatively be identified among citizens in Belgium: four in Wallonia – i.e. French-speaking Belgium – and five in Flanders – i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgium<sup>1</sup>. Four of the five profiles – unitarist, unionist, federalist and regionalist – are quite similar on both sides of the linguistic border, yet with some differences. The profile of the independentist has been mainly identified in the Flemish fieldwork.

A first profile is the profile of the unitarist. She has a dual unitary vision: on the one hand, the unity of the Belgians and, on the other hand, the unity of Belgium – since Belgians are united, Belgium should also be united. This dual vision is at the core of the profile of the unitarist. She is very unhappy with the functioning of the federal state because it exacerbates the conflicts, instead of reducing them; and, she also believes the federal system creates conflicts that would not exist on a more unitary system. On top of that, for the unitarist, the federal system is way too complex in Belgium. Moreover, politicians as well the media are seen to be responsible for the tensions between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians. Nonetheless, for the unitarist, these tensions are quite artificial – the product of the politicians – since Belgians are or at least should be united and above all a solidarity should unite them. Therefore, she fiercely opposes those who believe Flanders pays too much for Wallonia. To sum up, the unitarist has a – very – negative vision of federalism because it perpetuates the conflicts, and even creates them. In fact, she argues only the language distinguishes Flemings and Walloons. This vision is quite unusual in Belgium since it goes against the usual claim that Belgium is deeply divided. But the unitarist believes Belgians are united and formed one nation. It is therefore easier to understand why she sees federalism conflicting with her own vision of Belgium and of Belgians. Nonetheless, while the Walloon unitarist rejects the possibility of dual senses of belongings (for instance Walloon and Belgian or Flemish and Belgian), the Flemish unitarist accepts this idea, even though she feels only Belgian. For the future of Belgium, the unitarist wants ideally the return to the unitary state. However, the participation to the panel makes her understand such a return is definitely impossible in Belgium. Therefore, she favours a reinforcement of the federal state, i.e. a reduction of the autonomy of the Communities and the Regions.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of concision, I only present here the main elements of each profile without any quotations from citizens' discourses. For an exploration of the empirical data as well as the methodology: (Reuchamps 2007, 2008, 2008, 2010).

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The unionist shares with the unitarist the will for a united Belgium, but their approaches and lines of argument diverge. While the latter is guided by an ideal of unity, the former wishes the union of the two main communities of the country. For the unionist, there are definitely differences between Flemings and Walloons but they should not lead to the division of Belgium. In fact, they call for a peaceful coexistence. In this perspective, the federal system seems to be the best solution, even though its functioning is far to be optimal, especially because the politicians perpetuate the conflicts. Therefore, according to the unionist, the politicians should be distinguished from the citizens. Above all, the unionist fears demands for more regional autonomy, especially for Flanders. It is not that she does not recognize a dual identity – she herself feels both Belgian and Flemish or Belgian and francophone, with a preference for the Belgian identity – but she rejects demands for more regional autonomy because this might lead to the division of the country. In order to prevent the dislocation of Belgium, the unionist wants a reinforcement of the federal state which has the role to keep the union of Belgium. Nonetheless, the unionist is quite pessimistic because she sees an ever-increasing division of Belgium and Belgians. The French-speaking unionist is even more pessimistic because she fears federalism will inevitably lead to the end of the country. We find here the so-called “paradox of federalism” (Anderson 2004; Cameron 2009; Erk and Anderson 2009; Sinardet 2009; Buchanan 1991; Balthazar 1999; Bakke and Wibbels 2006): “[t]he fundamental question, then, is whether federalism provides a stable, long-lasting solution to the management of conflict in divided societies or is, instead, a temporary stop on a continuum leading to secession and independence. A federal arrangement that formally recognizes ethno-linguistic diversity to help manage the political system can also set this newly—or increasingly—federal state on a path to eventual disintegration” (Erk and Anderson 2009, 192).

By contrast with the two previous profiles, this third ideal-type relies on a true federal vision of Belgium. Not only does the Belgian federal system ensures a peaceful coexistence between Dutch-speaking Belgians and French-speaking Belgians but also it recognizes the differences between the two groups and therefore enables them to implement distinct policies, more in line with each community’s preferences. The federalist understands federalism in its classical definition: a mix of shared rule and self-rule (Elazar 1987; Burgess 2006). In fact, according to her, federalism is a try (*poging* in Dutch, *essai* in French) to share fairly the resources of the country and above all to ensure the country is viable on a long term. Nevertheless, federalism might perpetuate the tensions between the communities and especially between politicians of each side of the linguistic border (and this is also due to the lack of inter-community knowledge). But federalism is the best solution to ensure a pacific coexistence between the Dutch-speaking Belgians and the French-speaking Belgians. In fact, the federalist has a strong dual identity both Flemish and Belgian or francophone and Belgian. It does not mean she minimizes the differences between the two communities, to the contrary she very much acknowledges them; they are at the heart of Belgium’s federalism. The federal system came into existence to accommodate these differences. The federalist’s view of the system is not naïve, however. While the federal system has very positive elements, its complexity and the conflicts which paralyze it are important drawbacks. This is why the federalist wants to remain within a federal system but wants to make it stronger. To do so there should be transfers of power from the federal level to the regional and community level, but also from the latter to the former. Above all, what matters for the federalist is that the federal system works well because that’s the best solution for Belgium. Finally, one should note that the evolution of the system is of crucial

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importance for the federalist. Should it remained stuck as it is now, the federalist might turn into a regionalist.

The regionalist wishes to remain within a federal framework – which is currently very problematic – but with a quite bigger autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. So regionalism is a matter of efficiency. In addition to this will for efficiency, the Flemish regionalist shows a strong Flemish identity, which is more important than her Belgian identity, which however still exists. This is not so much the case for the Walloon regionalist whose position is mainly explained by a will for – more – efficiency. Indeed, the regionalist from both side of the linguistic border is very dissatisfied with the functioning of the federal system. Federalism exacerbates conflicts instead of reducing it. The conflicts arise because of the differences between the two communities and therefore Regions and Communities should be allowed to follow separate paths, which will also accommodate the different identities to be found in Belgium. This is particularly relevant for the Flemish regionalist who feels Flanders pays too much for the other Regions. Yet, it does not mean she rejects every aspect related to Belgium; she feels Belgian to some extent. In fact, she believes stronger autonomy for Flanders would be the way to keep Belgium working. Finally, should further autonomy be given to the Regions and the Communities, a regionalist is likely to turn into a federalist; on the contrary, should it not be given, a regionalist is likely to turn into an independentist.

The independentist is the fifth and last profile of citizens. It is mainly found in Flanders – even though it is not the most widespread profile, as surveys demonstrate (Deschouwer and Sinardet 2010; Swyngedouw and Rink 2008). The independentist wishes the independence of Flanders; that is the scission of Belgium. This objective takes its foundations in a specific set of perceptions and identities which distinguishes the independentist from the other profiles. There are two main reasons behind the will for separation – they are different but they reinforced each other. On the one hand, the independentist anchors her identity in a Flemish nation, distinct of Belgium. The Flemish are in a fact a nation without state, as it also the case for other nations such as the Basques or the Québécois (Keating 1997, 2001; Guibernau 1999). She feels exclusively Flemish and Belgian identity and Flemish identity are incompatible. Walloons or francophones and Flemish are very different; so different that a common living-together is not justified. On the other hand, according to her, the federal system is totally inefficient and the reason why it is inefficient is because the whole system relies on agreements which bring more problems than solutions. The deadlocks are also the results of the Walloon vetos. Therefore is not only a matter of identity but also a matter of efficiency. Lately this second strand of the argument has been more emphasized. The Flemish nationalist discourses have been “denationalized” (Sinardet 2009); the division of Belgium is justified on the basis of rationality – the manifesto of the group in De Warande is a perfect example of such a discourse (Denkgreop In de Warande 2005) even though the figures it relies on can be contested (Pagano, Verbeke, and Accaputo 2006). Thus, the independentist does not see any future for Belgian federalism in the long run. However, on the short term, she accepts any reform which would allow for more autonomy for the Regions and the Communities. It is the first step toward the separation. Above all, she believes the separation is the best solution for all the Belgians, including the Walloons, because the new states will be more efficient than the current federal system.

The five profiles which were found in the citizens’ panel are quite different from one another even though some of them share similar features. At the core of each of them, was the

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relationship between identities and federal perceptions and preferences which animate the federal dynamics. Simply looking at identities would be insufficient to understand fully the federal dynamics in Belgium and only looking at the federal dynamics would be misleading. Identities and federal dynamics do matter and one needs to capture them in order to understand citizens' views about federalism in Belgium. In the next section, we focus on identities and federal dynamics in Canada in order to offer a comparison in the third section between the two countries.

## **2. Identities and Federalism in Canada**

From the two citizens' panel held in Canada, five different profiles can be identified. However, only two overlap between Quebec and English-Canada: unionist and federalist. The centralist only came out the panel in Kingston, while the sovereignist and the independentist were only found in Montreal.

The centralist can very much be compared to the Belgian unitarist as both want the federal/central government to be *the* government of the country. In fact, for the Canadian centralist, the federal government is the true government. This vision relies on united vision of Canada and Canadians – the Belgian unitarist holds also a united vision of Belgium and Belgians – within the geographical, provincial, cultural diversity that characterizes the country. The centralist calls for the reinforcement of the federal government's powers, even though (or in fact because) it means reducing the autonomy of the provinces. According to her, the federal government is the real engine of the country and its mission is to keep Canada together. The provinces should have a limited role – to the geographical diversity of the country – but none of them should play a major role. The centralist rejects any calls for asymmetry, as it is sometimes suggested to accommodate Quebec's distinctiveness (Kymlicka 1998; Laforest and Gibbins 1998), and instead calls for national policies for the entire territory. This centralist vision comes from a nationalizing vision of Canada. The centralist feels first and foremost Canadian. Furthermore, this identity is exclusive and has political consequences. First, every Canadian should feel first and foremost Canadian. Regional or local identities are marginalized in a Canadian nation which transcends all the identities to foster the Canadian identity and nation. Second, the centralist refuses to recognize Quebec as a distinct nation; there is only one nation – the Canadian nation. Finally, the First nations should integrate themselves into the Canadian nation, without any privileges, such as land restitution. The Canadian federalism should maintain Canada and the Canadians united from coast to coast. In this perspective, Canada will be able to play an important role on the international scene and offer an efficient service delivery to the citizens.

Keeping Canada together is the main priority for the unionist – be her English-Canadian or Quebecker. On this regard, she is similar to the centralist. Yet, by contrast to the latter, she sees diversity – be it regional, provincial or multicultural – as the heart of Canada. According to her, federalism ensures the union – and not the unity – of the country and especially of its different components; keeping Canada together is the main virtue of Canadian federalism. To do, the federal government has an important – albeit not exclusive – role to keep the cohesion of the whole, in particularly in areas such health and education. Nonetheless, the cohesion cannot be achieved against the will of provinces, which should be allowed to adopt, within a federal framework, certain specific policies on their own through the mechanism of opting out. It is a form of asymmetry that is accepted by the unionist (Gagnon and Chokri 2005, 25). The Canadian

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federation relies on a both shared-rule and self-rule but with an emphasis on the former. This vision falls back on a strong Canadian identity but which is based on the diversity of the country. It is not an exclusive identity. In fact, one aspect of the diversity is the provincial attachment of quite a few Canadians. There is recognition of regional and provincial identities in particular of Quebec as a nation among many other nations (therefore not in the sense federalist, regionalist and independentist will understand it). What's more, the First nations should also be recognized as nations and should play a greater role in the Canadian federation. Above all, the unionist is satisfied with the current functioning of the federal system. As a citizen puts it "our federal system works well, if it's not broken don't fix it".

The profile of the federalist differs quite radically from the centralizing and nationalizing vision of the centralist. Closer to the profile of the unionist, the federalist is nevertheless different from this profile. She believes the provinces should have a real autonomy in order to undertake their own policies. According to her, federalism is a matter of equilibrium between the federal government and the provinces. This vision of federalism reflects her identity which is both national and provincial. She defines herself as first and foremost Canadian but it is not at all an exclusive identity. She has also a strong attachment to her province. Her identity is not only multicultural but also multinational which goes back to the foundation of a country by two founding peoples – French and English (Brooks 2007, 201). At the origin of Canada is a dualism – even though it's mostly recognized by the French-speaking Canadians (Pelletier 2009) – which is translated into a multiple identity. This vision initially dualist has been gradually opened up to a multinational identity (Burgess and Pinder 2007; Gagnon, Rocher, and Guibernau 2003; Gagnon and Tully 2001; Keating 2001; Maíz Suárez 2000). This multinationalism gives right to an asymmetrical federalism rather than a symmetrical federalism where each province should have the same policies (McRoberts 2001). Yet, this vision is not supported by a majority in Canada. In fact, the federalist, both in Quebec and in English-Canada, thinks the federal government has too much power. Therefore, she calls for the strengthening of the federation and rejects any attempt to give more power to the federal government. She favours the status quo, and if possible the reinforcement of the provincial powers in order to reach a harmonious balance between shared-rule and self-rule. In such a federation, federalism should be strong, i.e. it should allow each level of government to use its power properly. This is an organic vision of federalism (Fafard, Rocher, and Côté 2010; Rocher 2009): federalism as equilibrium between federal forces and provincial forces which should coexist and not dominate.

The sovereignist differs quite largely from the first three profiles. In fact, it is only found in Quebec. The relations Canada-Quebec are at the core of this profile. The sovereignist wishes the sovereignty of Quebec; this means leaving the Canadian federal framework while maintaining a partnership or an association with Canada in an equal relation between Quebec and Canada. This will for a sovereign Quebec is based on several factors. First, she has a strong and exclusive identity: she is Québécois. According to her, there are real differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada; these are not only linguistic differences but differences in views of the world, especially related to environment or foreign policy. Quebec is really distinct from Canada. Second, French-speakers and the French language are not well protected by Canadian federalism. Federalism Canada has not integrated Quebec's distinctiveness, either. Because of this set of reasons and because of the failure of the constitutional agreements to recognize Quebec as a distinct society, the sovereignist demands the sovereignty of Quebec, while maintaining a partnership with Canada. Indeed, the unknown economic consequences of Quebec's sovereignty

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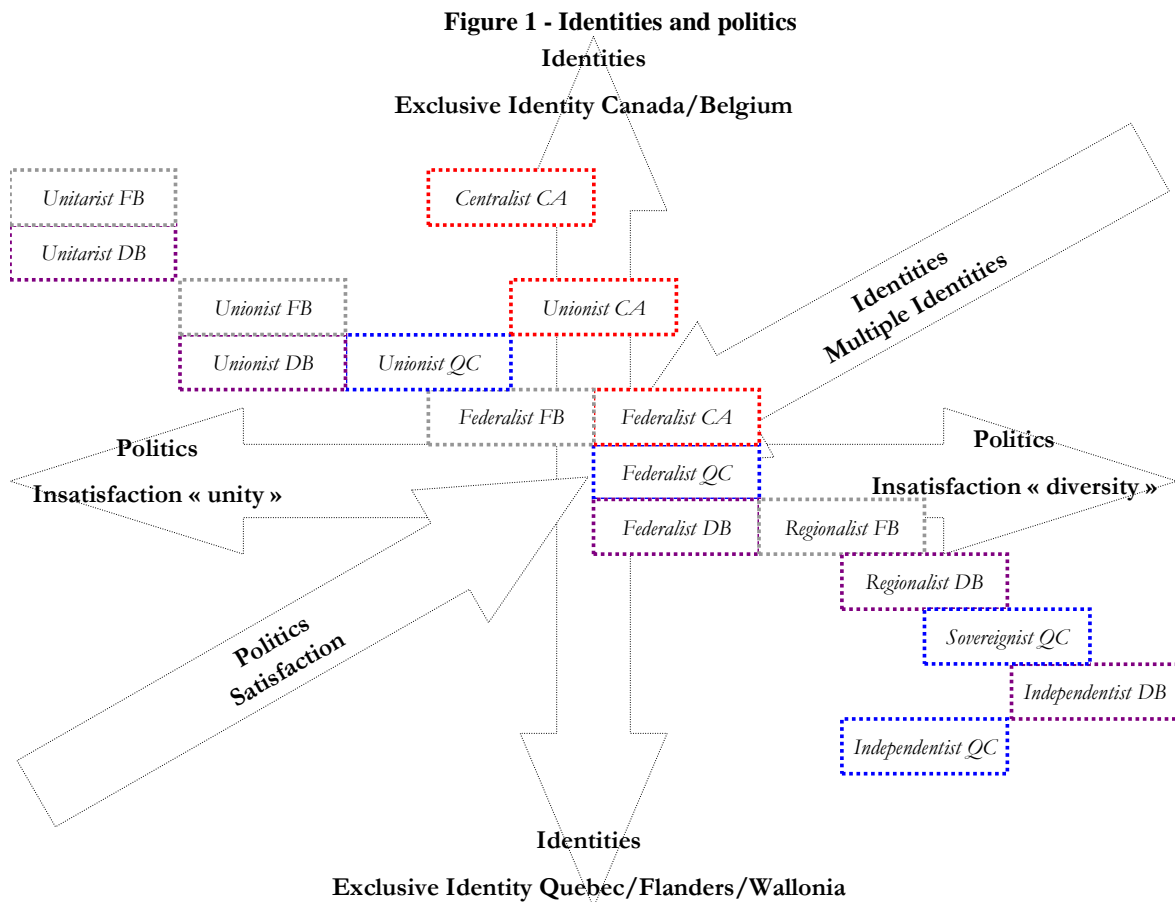
constitute an important element of the debate (Facal and Pratte 2008). The sovereignist is quite pragmatic. Ideally, she would have preferred that Quebec found an agreement with the federal government, in particular about Quebec's distinctiveness. Yet, each attempt badly failed (Brouillet 2005, 384; Gagnon and Hérvault 2008). Thus, the profile of the sovereignist is based on a negative perception of Canadian federalism and a positive identification with Quebec.

The independentist is not a sovereignist: on the one hand, she wants Quebec to become an independent state, with neither an association nor a partnership with Canada. It is the independence *pure et simple*; on the other hand, her position is not only related to the constitutional issue, she wants a separate future for Quebec. In fact, even though the independentist has some problems with the Canadian federalism (Perrella and Bélanger 2009; Blais and Nadeau 1992), the core of her argument is a will for Quebecois to manage themselves the future of Quebec, of their country. She has an exclusive Quebec identity based on a Quebec nation, which is very different from the rest of Canada because of Quebec's own history (Séguin 1995; Frégault 1954; Dumont 1996; Maclure 2004; Rudin 1997; Armony 2007). Therefore, the national question is not only a matter of a constitutional question; it is the democratic aspiration of the Quebec's nation to self-government. It is not *against* Canada but *for* Quebec. As of the future, the objective is very straight forward: sovereignty with no other form of partnership or association. Even if, this not seem to be possible soon – after the two lost referendums – the independentist believes one day Quebec will become independent (Gagné and Langlois 2002, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, she rejects any intermediary options, including sovereignty with a partnership or association with Canada. In fact, she is not afraid of the possible economic consequences of the independence of Quebec. Generally speaking, she does not want to have anything do with Canada and Canadians; it's not a matter of rejection but of indifference. To sum up, the independentist is first and foremost the supporter the independence of Quebec because of its distinctiveness.

### **3. Comparing Identities and Federalism in Belgium and in Canada**

The presentation of these different profiles showed significant differences within each community – ethno-linguistic group – which are often seen as monolithic blocks standing against each other, however. This exploration demonstrated a larger number of perceptions and preferences than what is usually portrayed by the media – sovereignists/independentists in Flanders and in Quebec; unitarist/centralist in French-speaking Belgium and English-speaking Canada. By the way, the assumed link between the Québécois and the French-speaking Belgians disappears through this analysis. In fact, generally speaking Québécois are more similar to Flemish and, quite surprisingly, French-speaking Belgians to English-speaking Canadians. What's more through this exploration we apprehend the missing link between identities and federal dynamics. The following figure (Figure 1) shows how these dynamics are interrelated and how an insightful comparison can be drawn.

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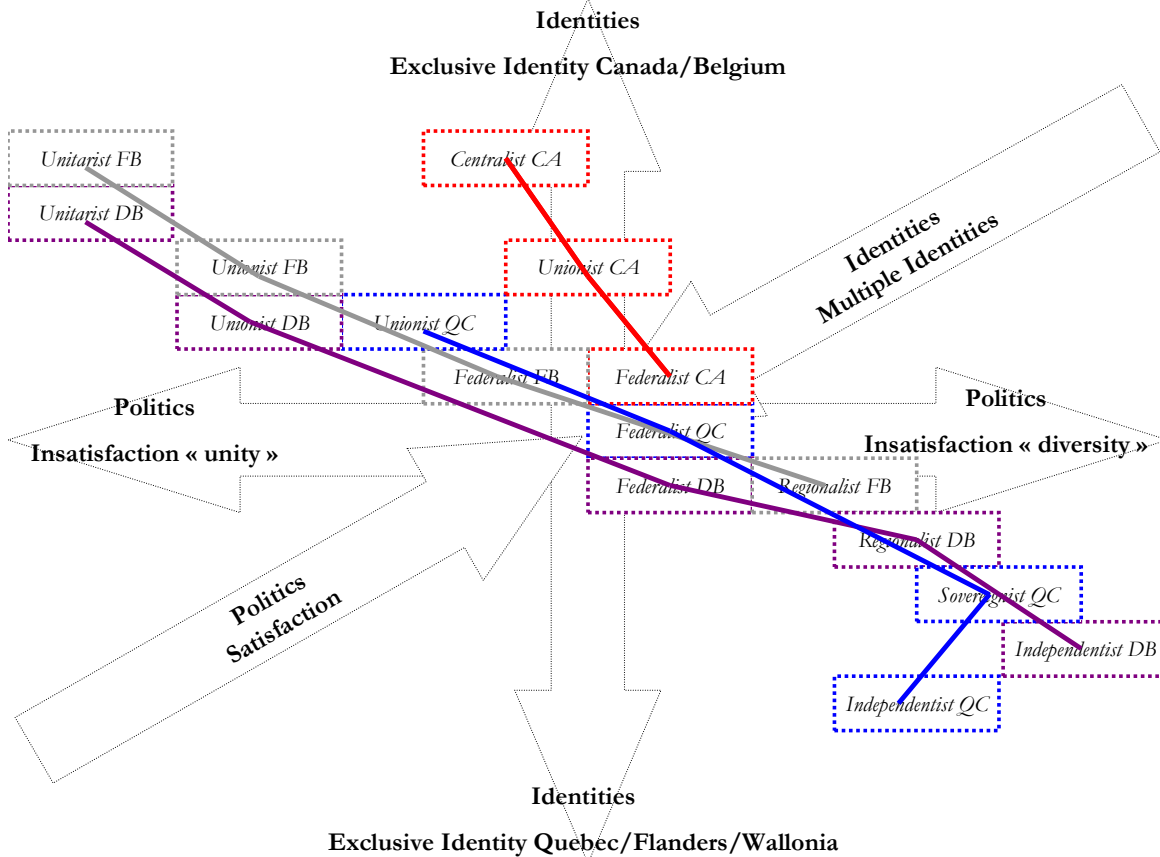
From the figure above, one can observe the interrelation between identities and politics, i.e. perceptions and preferences vis-à-vis federalism and its future. There are indeed similarities between the profiles across communities and countries, but also important differences. Indeed, while the four profiles of unionist are located in the same quadrant, their positions differ both in terms of identities and politics – insatisfaction/satisfaction. In multinational societies, not only do identities matter but also political/federal perceptions and preferences. Therefore, in multinational societies, both dynamics should be taken into account in order to apprehend the tensions that can arise and in fact do arise, as the Belgian case demonstrates today.

One can also go one step further. Relating each profile with a line (red for English-speaking Canada, Blue for Quebec, Grey for French-speaking Belgium, and Purple for Dutch-speaking Belgium) reveals empirically the federal dynamics in each specific context.



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**Figure 2 - Identities, Politics and Federal Dynamics**



To some extent, we can observe that the longer the line (federal dynamics), the more potential the tension within a community – this is quite true in Quebec and in Flanders. Furthermore, the distance between the lines (federal dynamics) reveals the potential tensions between two communities living in a same country. Indeed, the English-speaking Canada’s federal dynamics is quite different (and distant) from the Quebec’s federal dynamics. This is a way to understand their tensions: federalism is perceived differently in Quebec and Canada. In Belgium, there is not so much distant between the lines which are also quite similar. It does not mean that there are no tensions. But the problem lies here in terms of “centre of gravity” which can be identified as the middle point of each line: while this point is between the unionist and the federalist in French-speaking Belgium, it lies between the federalist and the regionalist in Dutch-speaking Belgium. So in Belgium the conflict arises between the two main communities and it is about how federalism should be (leaning towards more regional autonomy in Dutch-speaking Belgium but towards more federal power in French-speaking Belgium). In Canada, the conflict takes place within each group: in Quebec it is between those who are ready to live within the Canadian federal framework and those who are not willing to do so; in English-speaking Canada, the tensions are not so high on this topic (there is currently very little debate about federalism) and the main source of misunderstanding is related to the position of some profiles in Quebec.

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**Conclusion: Thinking Canada (with or without Quebec) and Thinking Belgium (with or without Flanders)?**

How does one explain the tensions within a multinational society? In other words, how does think of Canada and of Belgium? One way to do so is to look at identities, and this would emphasize the difference between Quebec and the rest of Canada and similarly the difference between Flanders and the rest of Belgium. Yet, as this paper has endeavoured to show, while identities matter, it does not tell the whole story. Political and federal dynamics should also be taken into account, in addition to identities, in order to explain the tensions in multinational societies, at least in the case of Belgium and in Canada. In these two countries, it is a combination of identities and federal perceptions and preferences (through different profiles) which sheds light on the current political situation. For several years, Canada has experience a period of relative stability in terms of federalism (not so much in terms of elections, since voters have gone to the polling booths four time in seven years). Yet, the future of Canadian federalism is still potentially highly problematic since the federal dynamics in Quebec and in the rest of Canada are very dissimilar. Belgium is currently in a deadlock – representatives of the two main communities have not been able to reach an agreement about where federalism should go. Everybody agrees that federalism should be reformed, but there is no agreement on the direction it should take. More regional autonomy seems to be the answer, but as the profiles showed there are quite different views on this. In both cases, as in many multinational societies, the political institutions should take into account the different profiles of citizens, but that is a tricky business.

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