

Decentralization and conflict between ethno-territorial segments: comparing conflict frequencies on different policy domains against the background of decentralization in Belgium (1979-2006)

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ABSTRACT The impact of decentralization on ethno-territorial conflict in divided states is widely debated, but empirical analyses of conflicts at the party-political level are scarce. This paper assesses whether the decentralization of certain (aspects of) policy domains came with more or less conflict between segmental leaders on these domains. To this end, I use new data to provide a longitudinal assessment of the frequency of central-level cabinet conflicts on different policy domains in Belgium (1979-2006). While the results provide cautious support for the thesis that decentralization comes with pacification, they are too ambiguous to fully validate this claim.

Keywords: decentralization, ethno-territorial conflict, cabinet conflict, Belgium

Introduction

The impact of decentralization on ethno-territorial conflict in divided states is widely debated (Amoretti & Bermeo, 2004; Anderson, 2013; Bermeo, 2002; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Horowitz, 2000, 2007; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Swenden, 2013; Watts, 2015; Wolff, 2013). On the one hand, providing sub-state entities with (increasing) autonomy is a particularly popular way to overcome tensions between segmental groups. Indeed, allowing segments to govern themselves on certain policy domains leaves them with less issues to clash about in the first place and competences are often transferred to the sub-states because they are (perceived as being) too prone to ethno-territorial tensions to be handled jointly at the federal level. Decentralization can evacuate such tensions from the central policy level (Swenden, 2006, p. 288) and prevent conflicts over the actual or perceived unfair treatments by the ‘other side’ (Brancati, 2006, p. 656). On the other hand, and flying under the banner of the ‘paradox of federalism’ (Erk & Anderson, 2010), several scholars have highlight the potential counterproductiveness of decentralization reforms. Rather than dampening the flames of ethno-territorial conflict, it might well fuel the fire (Brancati, 2006). Decentralization, some argue, can provide politicians with additional incentives for confrontation (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). Adding to this debate, this paper provides a longitudinal assessment of the frequency of conflicts between segmental leaders on different policy domains. **The central research question under scrutiny here is whether the decentralization of certain (aspects**

of) policy domains came with more or less conflict between segmental leaders on these domains. In answering this question, the focus is on cabinet conflicts in the case of Belgium (1979-2006).

The analyses presented here **add to the field in a number of ways**. First, elite cooperation is hard to grasp empirically, and this “thorny issue of how to measure the degree of elite cooperation” is still “unresolved” (Andeweg, 2000, p. 520). Most analyses of such cooperation in a power-sharing context are either theoretical in nature or focussed on very rough indicators of failing cooperation like the presence of major gridlocks and crises, cabinet formation duration, cabinet terminations, etc. (for Belgium, see e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Deschouwer, 2002, 2006; Hooghe, 1993, 2004). This paper builds on recent data of **cabinet conflicts** (N=318) (Vandenberghe, 2022a, 2022c), which allows for a more fine-grained assessment of conflict between segmental elites.

Second, existing analyses tend to focus on the evolution of conflict levels in general, showing for instance general increases in the duration of cabinet formation or generally declining levels of ethno-territorial cabinet conflicts (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Vandenberghe, 2022c). However, to understand the role of decentralization, **analyses on the level of policy domains** are also relevant. As Halpern (1986, pp. 192-193) notes when discussing the literature on consociationalism, the behaviour of political elites can differ between policy domains. Cooperation in some domains might be combined with confrontation on other issues (see also Steiner, 1981, p. 348). This concern is particularly pertinent when assessing decentralization. To get a better grip on the relation between decentralization and conflict between segments, this paper assesses whether there is less conflict on specific policy domains when they are (partly) decentralized, and whether there are different conflict trends for policy domains that were not subject to decentralization. Such an analysis goes to the heart of the argument that lifting the need to govern together can alleviate tensions. But to my knowledge, it is unprecedented.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section taps into the theory and hypotheses. It also presents the Belgian case and discusses its relevance for a broader audience. The second and third sections discuss the data and results, respectively. In general, the findings provide some support for the idea that decentralization can decrease the number of conflicts between segmental elites. However, the results are too ambiguous to validate this thesis unconditionally. I conclude by reflecting upon these findings and some of their implications.

Theory

The paradox thesis

The debate on decentralization as conflict-management tool is one of the most salient and pertinent ones within the field of ethno-territorial politics (Amoretti & Bermeo, 2004; Anderson, 2013; Bermeo, 2002; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Horowitz, 2000, 2007; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Swenden, 2013; Watts, 2015; Wolff, 2013). According to the so-called **paradox of federalism**, decentralization exacerbates conflicts and divisions rather

than fostering stability (Erk & Anderson, 2010). From this perspective, opting for decentralization in search of pacification is like stirring up a hornet's nest to avoid getting stung. In this respect, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015) provide three reasons why "granting segmental autonomy effectively accommodates political conflicts that are currently on the agenda, but renders the process of intersegmental conflict accommodation increasingly more difficult in the long run." For one, decentralization can encourage the **growth of autonomy demands and regionalist parties** by legitimizing autonomist struggles while providing regionalist parties with a more fruitful institutional context (e.g. Brancati, 2006, 2009; Guibernau, 2006). In Belgium, for instance, all major parties have increased ethno-territorial demands and opted for more radical stances as decentralization went on (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Witte, 2009a). Competition between segmental elites can even result in **ethnic outbidding** dynamics: tension-fueling spirals of ethno-territorial radicalization (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972). Accordingly, it can be expected that decentralization comes with a growing number of conflicts between segmental sides (Flemish vs. Francophone politicians) *on the ethno-territorial policy domain*.

H1: Decentralization has come with a growing number of conflicts between segments on the ethno-territorial policy domain.

Second, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015) argue that decentralization **decreases the room for the kind of encompassing package deals** that are often used to settle disputes. This is because it leaves federal politicians with less and less competences and finances that can be used to 'buy off peace'. Third, and related, politicians are argued to have less incentives to avoid or solve conflicts at the federal level as decentralization goes on. After all, the stripping of the federal level reduces the cost of nonagreement and excluded the risk of a so-called generalized policy paralysis – "a broad and generalised blockage of the wider decision-making processes" (Jans, 2001, p. 44). Put differently, decentralization makes clashes and gridlocks at the federal level less concerning because it reduces the relevance of that level. While this logic is appealing, it seems to be improbable that decentralization processes in Western-Europa have ever dismantled the federal policy level enough to actually unleash the abovementioned dynamics. Even in cases with comparatively extensive levels of substate autonomy like Belgium (Hooghe et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021; Watts, 2013), the federal level still accounts for 21,4% of all government expenses (Decoster & Sas, 2013, pp. 5-6) and it is still in charge of key domains like justice, police, defence, foreign affairs, major taxes, and social security. This is the situation after the sixth state reform (agreed upon in 2011). Needless to say, this argument is even more pertinent for this study (which fails to cover this last state reform). And in many cases including Belgium, central policymaking still marches to the beat of package deals (so serious clashes still burden the larger decision-making process). In centrifugal federations, the federal level is evidently less prominent than before. But it is still too big to fail. Also, in the case under study (Belgium), the abovementioned rationales cannot account for the growing number of clashes between segments in power-sharing cabinets, as data on these clashes indicate that no such continued growth existed (Vandenberghe, 2022c). Indeed, the data on Belgian cabinets used in this paper indicate that conflict levels fluctuated in the period under study, and that the largest levels of clashes between segments are typically observed in the past

rather than recently (cf. *infra*). The question tackled here is whether the decentralization of certain (elements of) policy domains actually reduced the number of clashes between segments on those domains. As discussed in the next section, we have solid reasons to expect this to be the case.

Decentralization and pacification

Based on several elements, it is expected that pacification occurred on the policy domains that have been subject to decentralization. Evidently, on these domains, elites are left with **fewer elements to fight about in the first place**. Some scholars even argue that “the emptying of distributive prerogatives at the federal level, [...] left the linguistic communities with little to disagree about at the federal level.” (Swenden & Jans, 2009, p. 888) Indeed, decentralization is often praised for its potential to **evacuate ‘multiethnic tensions from the politics of the center’** (Swenden, 2006, p. 288). Often, policy domains are decentralized exactly because they are (perceived as being) too prone to clashes between segments to be handled jointly at the federal level.

Often, this logic is underpinned by referring to the (actual or perceived) **gap between the policy preferences of representatives of different segmental groups**. These divisions are typically considered to be a burden on federal policymaking. As recent analyses on Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy, and Scotland show, this logic is stressed by regionalist parties (Dalle Mulle, 2018). They often point out the (perceived) indecisiveness and inefficiency of the central state, which is argued to be the result of cultural differences and opposing policy-views. It is well-known that regionalists movements often link the centre-periphery divide to the ideological left-right divide, e.g. by talking about ‘right-wing Flanders vs. left-wing Wallonia’ or ‘progressive Scotland vs. conservative England’ (Béland & Lecours, 2016; Billiet, Abts, & Swyngedouw, 2015; De Wever, 2011).¹ These divisions are typically invoked as an argument for sub-state autonomy, as it would be less difficult to reach consensus and meet the demands and priorities of citizens at the more homogeneous sub-state level.

Regionalists are not alone in stressing this rationale. For example, economists have proposed the well-known **trade-off between the scale (size) of a state and the heterogeneity cost** (the difficulties resulting from divergent preferences) (Alesina & Spolaore, 1997). This logic is sometimes explicitly mentioned by regionalist (part) actors. For example, Bart De Wever, the chairman of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*), has often referred to this trade-off (Dalle Mulle, 2016, 2018). Many mainstream parties embraced these kinds of arguments too. Discussing contemporary debates in Belgium, some scholars even claim that

¹ When it comes to election results, there is an overt left-right gap between Flanders and Wallonia which is visible as early as the 19th century (de Smaele, 2011). In this respect, the most prominent tip of the iceberg of segmental divisions is perhaps the extraordinary difference between the strength of the radical right party in Flanders and the complete lack of any successful radical right party in Wallonia (Coffé, 2005; De Jonge, 2021). However, when it comes to specific policy preferences or political values, several studies have indicated that the gap between sub-groups in Belgium is less wide than is often presumed (for Belgium, e.g. Billiet, 2011; Billiet et al., 2015; Billiet, Maddens, & Frogner, 2006; Walgrave et al., 2019).

the “**recurring incongruities form the major argument used by the Flemings**, who claim more competences for the regions, supposed to be more internally homogeneous in their priorities and goals.” (Walgrave, Zicha, Hardy, Joly, & Van Assche, 2014, p.?.; emphasis added). They continue:

“Flemish parties state that it has become increasingly difficult to strike a national compromise between Flemish-speakers and Francophones because the two groups care about different issues; furthermore, even when they care about the same issues, they have different opinions on how to solve them.”

In other cases too (e.g. the EU or Germany), joint decision-making between multiple actors with different views and interests has been argued to impede efficiency, come with frustrations, and bear sub-optimal solutions. This so-called **joint decision trap** (Scharpf, 1988) is often cited as an argument in favour of decentralization. Following these rationales, it can be expected that decentralization on a given policy domain will come with declining conflict levels. Additionally, if decentralization comes with pacification, it is only logical to expect that this pacification should not occur to the same extent on policy domains that were not subject to decentralization.

H2: The decentralization of competences within a given policy domain comes with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain.

H3: The decline in the number of conflicts between segments is more prominent for policy domains that were subject to some or far-reaching decentralization than for policy domains that were not subject to some decentralization.

The case of Belgium (1979-2018)

The focus of this paper is cabinet conflicts between segments in the country of Belgium. Decentralization in Belgium was an answer to the rising ethno-territorial tensions between its **two main segments**: the Francophone minority (French-speaking) and the Flemish majority (Dutch-speaking), which accounts for roughly 60% of the Belgian population. After Belgium gained its independence in 1830, politics and public affairs were only conducted in French, while the Dutch dialects were perceived and treated as being inferior (Witte, 1993; Witte & Van Velthoven, 2010). In reaction to these dynamics, the ‘Flemish Movement’ emerged. As it became increasingly more radical, its campaign for the recognition of Dutch eventually resulted in a larger struggle for cultural autonomy or even separation from Belgium (depending on the faction). Next to these dynamics in Flanders, the Walloon appetite for autonomy was fuelled by the fear of being dominated by the conservative Flemish majority in combination with the harsh economic decline that hit its coal sector and industrialized belt in the post-war period (Deschouwer, 2012, 2013; Witte, 1993, 2009b). In response to these demands on both sides and the growing pressure of ethno-territorial debates and conflicts, political elites abandoned unitarism and opted for a peculiar federal system that essentially combines federalism with

consociationalism (Deschouwer, 2002, 2005, 2006). Ever since the first state reform (1970), segmental elites in Belgium have two options: governing together or not governing at all (Deschouwer, 2013, p. 214). Throughout five additional decentralization reforms, the last of which was agreed upon in 2011 (*Vlinderakkoord*), the system was further developed and amended, while the Belgian **sub-states obtained increasingly more autonomy** (Brans, De Winter, & Swenden, 2009; Deschouwer, 2013; Van den Wijngaert, 2011). As such, the need for cooperation was lifted in many domains.

For several reasons, this **Belgian case is a particularly relevant one** for an analysis of conflict dynamics against the background of decentralization. State reform in Belgium came in six major waves, four of which are covered here. This provides us with sufficient variation in the level of decentralization to assess dynamics within and between policy domains (Hooghe et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021). These reforms have provided the sub-states in Belgium with very high levels of autonomy (Hooghe et al., 2016; Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021; Watts, 2013), which further strengthens the analysis.

The **focus on the 1979-2006 period** is based on pragmatical and theoretical considerations. The starting point of the analysis (1979) represents a theoretical milestone. It marks the first full year since the split of the last traditional party in Belgium (cf. De Winter, Swyngedouw, & Dumont, 2009). This split is generally considered to be a major burden on cross-segmental cooperation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Deschouwer, 2002, 2006, 2013; Reuchamps, 2013). This study assesses dynamics of cooperation while keeping this factor constant. The analysis covers the full period until the end of 2006. This demarcation point is a reflection of the pragmatical choice to build on a recently collected dataset (Vandenberghe, 2022a), which builds on a series of political yearbooks (Res Publica) that was discontinued after the report on 2006. No data provides a similar view on conflicts in the pre-1979 period or the post-2006 era. The choice was made not to combine different datasets (based on different sources) to avoid an overly complex empirical section.

Data and method

As the focus is on ethno-territorial conflict at the power-sharing level, this study maps these conflicts through **cabinet conflicts**. In doing so, I build on recent work on such conflicts in which novel definitions and data are presented (Vandenberghe, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Building on existing definitions (e.g. Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993, p. 316 (Appendix II); Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015), cabinet conflict is defined in these works as any explicit and antagonistic disagreement between two or more cabinet members and/or relevant coalition party actors (cabinet members or actors that represent a party at large, e.g. PPG-leader, president). Disagreements are only seen as conflicts if they are antagonistic (e.g. include threats, swearing, or vetoes). As discussed in the abovementioned works, a list of indicators was used to grasp such situations. A **manual coding effort of all political yearbooks** of the Res Publica journal (1743 pages) exposed cabinet conflicts in Belgium in the period under study (1979-

2006).² These yearbooks provide systematically available and comprehensive yet detailed expert summaries of the Belgian political year and the political debates and conflicts they featured. The coding effort took several months and resulted in the most fine-grained and comprehensive view of Belgian cabinet conflicts to date. An intercoder reliability test used to compare the original coding with that of an external coder resulted in excellent intercoder reliability ratings (Cohen's $\kappa > 0.8$) (Appendix I).

The analyses below include **322 coalition conflicts**.³ One of the variables in the dataset allows me to grasp which actors stood oppose in each conflict. Here, I need to distinguish clashes that put politicians of different segments oppose from other clashes. Clashes are considered to be fought along segmental lines when the conflicting sides are homogeneous, that is when Flemings stand oppose Francophones. Often, *all* Flemish coalition parties are mobilized in a conflict against (1) *some* of the Francophone coalition partners or even (2) *all* Francophone partners. These instances are referred to as clashes with (1) **one segmental side**, and (2) **two segmental sides**, respectively. In some cases (N= 4), only a *sub-set* of Flemish coalition partners stands oppose a *sub-set* of Francophone partners. For instance, when one of the two Flemish parties clashes with one of the two Francophone parties in a coalition. Such cases are referred to as conflicts with (3) **partial segmental sides**.

To determine which policy domain each clash was about, I used the typology presented by and used in the **Belgian Agendas Project** (Walgrave, Joly, Van Assche, & Zicha, 2009).⁴ In total, 18 policy domains are discerned. One important amendment should be noted. Given the aim of this study, a separate 'ethno-territorial' policy domain was constructed. It combines the ethno-territorial issues that are scattered across the BAP-typology (e.g. state reform, transfer discussions, language law, intergovernmental relations, and the protection of segmental cultures).

Finally, the **periods between the different state reforms** are discerned. Pinpointing the exact date of birth of these reforms is not that evident, as they were the product of multiple negotiation rounds and (legislative) initiatives. Here, and given the scope of this paper, I used the date of the last major legislative translation of each reform as a demarcation point.⁵ Next, I established

² Coded chapters: *Overzicht van het Belgische Politieke Gebeuren*. Res Publica is now called Politics of the Low Countries.

³ Conflicts are excluded when there is doubt on whether they are fought between coalition partners (e.g. 'the minister received fierce criticism'). Cases are included when there is doubt on whether those involved represent their party at large (e.g. an attack by a handful MPs), which is in line with Belgium's partitocratic nature (De Winter & Dumont, 2006).

⁴ The BAP is part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (Baumgartner, Breunig, & Grossman, 2019). BAP-data originally collected by Walgrave, Joly, Hardy, Zicha, Sevenans, and Van Assche. Funding: European Science Foundation (07-ECRP-008), Flemish National Science Foundation (G.0117.11N), Belgian Federal Science Policy (IUAP P7/46).

⁵ 'Bijzondere wet van 8 augustus 1980 tot hervorming der instellingen' and 'Gewone wet van 9 augustus 1980 tot hervorming der instellingen', 'wet van 16 juni 1989 houdende diverse institutionele hervormingen', 'Gewone wet van 16 juli 1993 tot vervollediging van de federale staatsstructuur', and 'Bijzondere wet van 13 juli 2001 houdende

an overview of the policy domains that were subject to decentralization at each state reform under study (Appendix II). To this end, I used the (special) laws cited in footnote 5 and several expert overviews (Hooghe et al., 2016; Senelle & van de Velde, 1998). Next, I provide a very rough indication of the resulting degree of decentralization of each policy domain. Three levels are discerned: 0 (no/hardly any decentralization), 1 (some decentralization), 2 (far-reaching/nearly full decentralization).

Results

Before I address the evolution of the frequency of conflicts between segments on different policy domains, Table 1 provides an overview of the **percentage of clashes along segmental lines by policy domain**. Overall, the picture is rather blurry. On the one hand, three of the policy domains with the *highest* percentages of conflicts fought along segmental lines (agriculture and fisheries, education, and arts, culture, and entertainment) are domains that were prone to far-reaching decentralization in the following periods. Also, none of the domains that were not/hardly prone to decentralization were prone to high levels of clashes between segmental fronts [*note: if ethno-territorial domain = decentralization degree 0, this does not hold. If so, this should be referred to as an exception that can be explained*]. But for several reasons, it is clear that decentralization was not per se primarily used to stabilize the most troublesome domains. First, the absolute numbers of clashes on two of the three domains that validate this logic are very low: agriculture and fisheries (2 clashes, 1 with partial segmental fronts) and arts, culture, and entertainment (1 clash, 1 with one segmental front). Only education gave rise to many conflicts along segmental lines before being decentralized: 15 clashes, 8 involving partial segmental sides or full segmental front(s). Second, two other domains were not prone to large numbers of clashes along segmental lines in the period studied but still prone to far-reaching decentralization: foreign trade and community development, housing, and urban planning. Note that these policy domains were prone to few conflicts too (2 on each domain). Third, policy domains that were prone to some decentralization (degree = 1) do not appear to be less troubled by clashes along segmental lines.

Of course, these aggregated numbers only tell us so much. To check whether decentralization was followed by less clashes along segmental lines, **conflict evolutions** must be tracked. Tables 2 and 3 show the frequencies of conflicts along segmental lines for each policy domain throughout each period between state reforms. Note that the period before the second state reform (1980) is only partially covered by the data (that is, since 1979). These tables allow me to evaluate the hypotheses. To begin with, I discuss the absolute numbers (Table 2). They indicate that decentralization has not come with a growing number of conflicts between segments on the ethno-territorial policy domain (thus **contradicting hypothesis 1**). Indeed, **no persistent trend** is found. Rather, both increases and decreases are noted.

overdracht van diverse bevoegdheden aan de gewesten en de gemeenschappen', 'Bijzondere wet van 13 juli 2001 tot herfinanciering van de gemeenschappen en uitbreiding van de fiscale bevoegdheden van de gewesten', and 'Wet van 13 juli 2001 houdende diverse institutionele hervormingen betreffende de lokale instellingen van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest'.

Table 1. Conflicts involving segmental fronts: percentage by policy domain (N=318)

Policy domain	Degree of dec.	Clashes with ... segmental front(s) (%)				N (total)
		None	One	Two	Partial	
Macroeconomics & tax	1	95,65	2,17	2,17	0,00	46
Civil rights & liberties	0	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	13
Health	1	90,91	0,00	9,09	0,00	22
Agriculture & fisheries	2	50,00	0,00	0,00	50,00	2
Labour	1	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	15
Education	2	46,67	33,33	6,67	13,33	15
Energy policy	1	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	2
Immigration & Integration	1	80,00	10,00	10,00	0,00	10
Traffic & transport	1	77,78	22,22	0,00	0,00	9
Justice & crime	0	96,77	3,23	0,00	0,00	31
Social affairs	1	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	3
Comm., housing, urban	2	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	2
Defense	0	85,00	15,00	0,00	0,00	40
Foreign trade	2	100,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	2
Foreign affairs & Dev. aid	1	94,44	5,56	0,00	0,00	18
Demo & Public adm.	1	82,22	4,44	11,11	2,22	45
Art, culture, entertainment	2	0,00	100,00	0,00	0,00	1
Ethno-territorial	1	47,62	19,05	33,33	0,00	42
N	/	262	28	24	4	318

Testing **hypothesis 2**, the data also expose whether the decentralization of competences within a given policy domain comes with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain. The **results call for nuance**. When comparing consecutive periods, and very strictly speaking, decentralization came with pacification on a given policy domain in **5/26** cases of overt decentralization. These cases, in which there were **less conflicts on the policy domain than in the preceding period**, are the ones with a “(D)” on a green background. When excluding the segment of domains in which there were never clashes along segmental lines, this number increases towards 5/17. Whatever the perspective, it is clear that in many cases, the **number of conflicts between segmental fronts failed to decrease after decentralization**. Indeed, there were as much instances (5/26 and 5/17) in which there were more conflicts between segments in the period in which a policy domain was partly decentralized than in the preceding period (see “(D)” on a grey background). These results contradict the hypothesis.

On a more aggregated level, we can assess dynamics for each of the 18 policy domains under scrutiny. Most of these (15/18) were prone to some degree of decentralization. **One third of these domains (5/15) show dynamics of lasting pacification** (no more increases in conflict frequencies throughout consecutive periods) since the introduction of decentralization. The education domain is the only one that shows immediate pacification, that is a declining level of conflicts between segmental fronts in the period that starts with the decentralization reform. The other domains, the decline only started in the following period (macro economics and

taxation, agriculture and fisheries, democracy and public administration, and art, culture and entertainment). For **another third of the policy domains** that were decentralized to some extent (5/15), **no conflicts along segmental lines were observed** prior to the decentralization reform(s) and no such clashes were noted since these reforms. Hence, only one in three policy domains that was subject to decentralization failed to show either clear pacification or continued stability. In sum, these results provide **some cautious support for hypothesis 2**, which states that the decentralization of competences within a given policy domain comes with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain. However, given the nuanced nature of the results, it would be wrong to embrace this thesis unreservedly.

Table 2. Conflicts involving segmental fronts: absolute frequency by policy domain and state reform period (N=57)

Policy domain	Degree of dec.	State reform period					N	% of all clashes
		Pre-SR2	SR2-3	SR3-4	SR4-5	Post-SR5		
Macroeconomics and taxation	1	0	2 (D)	0 (D)	0	0	2	3,51
Civil rights and liberties	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,00
Health	1	0	0 (D)	0 (D)	2	0	2	3,51
Agriculture and fisheries	2	0	0 (D)	0 (D)	1 (D)	0 (D)	1	1,75
Labour	1	0	0 (D)	0 (D)	0	0	0	0,00
Education	2	2	6	0 (D)	0	0	8	14,04
Energy policy	1	0	0 (D)	0	0	0	0	0,00
Immigration & integration	1	0	0 (D)	0	2	0	2	3,51
Traffic and transport	1	0	0	0 (D)	0	2	2	3,51
Justice and crime	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	3,51
Social affairs	1	0	0 (D)	0	0 (D)	0	0	0,00
Community, housing, and urban planning	2	0	0 (D)	0	0	0	0	0,00
Defense	0	1	1	2	2	0	6	10,53
Foreign trade	2	0	0	0 (D)	0 (D)	0 (D)	0	0,00
Foreign Affairs & Development aid	1	0	0	0	0 (D)	1 (D)	1	1,75
Functioning demo & Public administration	1	0	4	1	2 (D)	1	8	14,04
Art, culture and entertainment	2	0	1 (D)	0 (D)	0	0	1	1,75
Ethno-territorial	1	6	3	2 (D)	7	4	22	38,60
Total	/	10	17	5	17	8	57	100,00
% Total	/	17,54	29,82	8,77	29,82	14,04	100,00	

Legend: increase in conflict frequency (grey), decrease in frequency (green), stable frequency

(white); (D) = decentralization of (parts of) the policy domain at the start of this period

Finally, the policy **domains that were prone to far-reaching decentralization** (degree= 2) and on which Flemish and Francophone coalition partners clashed in the period under study **show either clear** (education) **or ambiguous pacification evolutions** (agriculture and fisheries, art, culture and entertainment). The results for the education domain, a highly conflict-prone domain, are particularly clear. While Flemings and Francophones often clashed on this department, it has been free of conflicts along segmental lines ever since its far-reaching decentralization as part of the third state reform (1988-89). For the two other largely decentralized domains on which clashes along segmental lines were noted, an initial increase in conflict levels was followed by a lasting situation of conflict absence. However, strong conclusions should be avoided given the very low number of clashes on the latter policy domains (N= 1 on each domain). Also note that two policy domains are highly decentralized while no clashes along segmental lines were noted throughout the period under study (foreign trade on the one hand and community development, housing, and urban planning on the other).

In assessing whether decentralization is followed by stability, it is also relevant to compare the dynamics noted above with those observed for the **policy domains that were not or hardly prone to decentralization**. The conflict dynamics observed for the justice and the defense domain are also noted for certain decentralized domains. However, **neither of the two former domains shows the kind of lasting pacification tendency** that was observed for the (partly or mostly) decentralized domains, that is a situation of conflict absence during multiple periods (since decentralization) (as noted in the domains of macroeconomics and taxation, education, and art, culture and entertainment). All in all, these **findings lend some support for hypothesis 3**, which states that the decline in the number of conflicts between segments is more prominent for policy domains that were subject to some or far-reaching decentralization than for policy domains that were not decentralized.

These absolute numbers are relevant, but only shed light on part of the story. Attention should also be devoted to the **relative frequency of clashes** between segmental fronts, that is the number of such clashes on a certain policy domain within a certain period as a percentage of all conflicts on that domain in that period. As shown in Table 3 and interestingly, the resulting picture is very similar to that of the absolute frequencies. An ambiguous exception to this is the very **cautious support for hypothesis 1**. In relative terms, decentralization came with growing number of conflicts between segments on the ethno-territorial policy domain. However, this was only the case since the fourth state reform (1993).

As with the absolute numbers (Table 2), the relative frequencies **call for nuance while providing some very cautious support for hypothesis 2**. There is some evidence that decentralization of competences within a given policy domain can come with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain. But this is not always or per se the case. Decentralization came with pacification on a given policy domain in the period in which it was initiated in 6/26 cases of overt decentralization (as compared to 5 for the absolute frequencies). When ignoring the domains on which segmental fronts never clashed, this number increases towards 6/17. In contrast to the results for the absolute frequencies, these cases of

‘success’ (lower percentages of clashes along segmental lines after the initiation of decentralization) were more frequent than situations of immediate escalation (4/26 and 4/17), i.e. instances in which there were higher percentages of conflicts on a certain domain between segments in the period in which a policy domain was partly decentralized than in the preceding period. The results on the more aggregated **level of policy domains** indicate that 4/15 policy domains that were prone to decentralization show dynamics of lasting pacification (no more increases in conflict frequencies throughout consecutive periods) since the introduction of decentralization. Here, both the education domain and the domain concerning democracy and the public administration show immediate pacification trends, i.e. declining levels of conflict between segmental fronts in the period that starts with the decentralization reform. In the other domains, the decline only started in the following period (macro economics and taxation on the one hand, and art, culture and entertainment on the other). Four other (partly) decentralized policy domains were free of conflicts along segmental lines both before and after decentralization. Hence, only a minority of domains (7/15) that was subject to decentralization failed to show either clear pacification or continued stability. Nevertheless, this minority is quite large. In sum, these results (silently) **echo the cautious support for hypothesis 2**, which states that the decentralization of competences within a given policy domain comes with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain. But as with the results of the absolute conflict frequencies, the support for this thesis is rather weak.

Table 3. Conflicts involving segmental fronts: relative frequency (% of all cabinet conflicts) by policy domain and state reform period (N=318)

Policy domain	Degree of dec.	State reform period					N	% of all clashes
		Pre-SR2	SR2-3	SR3-4	SR4-5	Post-SR5		
Macroeconomics and taxation,1	1	0,00	8,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	46	14,47
Civil rights and liberties	0	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	13	4,09
Health,3	1	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	33,33	0,00	22	6,92
Agriculture and fisheries	2	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	50,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	2	0,63
Labour	1	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	15	4,72
Education,6	2	100,00	46,15	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	15	4,72
Energy policy	1	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	0,00	2	0,63
Immigration & integration,9	1	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	25,00	0,00	10	3,14
Traffic and transport,10	1	0,00	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	33,33	9	2,83
Justice and crime,12	0	50,00	0,00	0,00	5,26	0,00	31	9,75
Social affairs	1	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	3	0,94
Community development, housing, and urban planning	2	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	0,00	2	0,63
Defense,16	0	16,67	9,09	22,22	28,57	0,00	40	12,58
Foreign trade	2	0,00	0,00	0,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	2	0,63

Foreign Affairs & Development aid, ¹⁹	1	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00 (D)	25,00 (D)	18	5,66
Functioning demo & Public administration, ²⁰	1	0,00	20,00	33,33	18,18 (D)	9,09	45	14,15
Art, culture and entertainment, ²³	2	0,00	100,00 (D)	0,00 (D)	0,00	0,00	1	0,31
Ethno-territorial, ⁹⁹⁹⁹	1	60,00	27,27	25,00 (D)	77,78	100,00	42	13,21
Total	/	26	106	29	80	77	318	100,00
% Total	/	8,18	33,33	9,12	25,16	24,21	100,00	

Legend: increase in conflict frequency (grey), decrease in frequency (green), stable frequency (white); (D) = decentralization of (parts of) the policy domain at the start of this period.

Note: when there are no conflicts on a given policy domain, the percentage of clashes along segmental lines is also reported as 0

Finally, the relative conflict frequencies provide **further evidence for hypothesis 3**, which states that pacification is more prominent for domains that were subject to some or far-reaching levels of decentralization. Here too, none of the policy domains that were not prone to decentralization (justice and defense) shows the kind of lasting pacification tendency that was observed for the (partly or mostly) decentralized domains. However, the dynamics characterizing these domains are also noted on more decentralized domains, which serves as a welcome nuance.

Conclusion

The impact of decentralization on ethno-territorial conflict in divided states is widely debated (Amoretti & Bermeo, 2004; Anderson, 2013; Bermeo, 2002; Brancati, 2006, 2009; Erk & Anderson, 2010; Horowitz, 2000, 2007; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Swenden, 2013; Watts, 2015; Wolff, 2013). Yet, empirical analyses of conflicts at the party-political level are scarce. This paper assesses whether the decentralization of certain (aspects of) policy domains came with more or less conflict between segmental leaders on these domains. To this end, this paper uses new data (Vandenberghe, 2022a, 2022b) to provide a longitudinal assessment of the frequency of central-level cabinet conflicts on different policy domains in Belgium. The **resulting picture only allows for very nuanced conclusions**. In themselves, the results do not suffice to fully support the claim that decentralization comes with pacification.

First, based on the data, it is clear that decentralization was sometimes but certainly not always applied to troublesome policy domains, i.e. domains in which segmental elites often clashed (Flemings vs. Francophones). This confirms that **pacification is not the only concern that triggers decentralization reforms**. Other rationales are also at play. Second, from a theoretical perspective, it might even be expected that decentralization increases the frequency of clashes between politicians of different segments – at least on ethno-territorial issues (cf. the **paradox of federalism**) (Erk & Anderson, 2010). The results do not fully corroborate this expectation.

In absolute numbers, decentralization did not come with a growing number of conflicts between segments on the ethno-territorial policy domain. In relative numbers, however, a paradox-like tendency was noted, but only since the fourth state reform (1993).

Third, is it true that the decentralization of competences within a given policy domain comes with a decline in the number of conflicts between segments on that policy domain? Put differently, can **decentralization stabilize troublesome policy domains**? While the results provide some cautious support for this thesis, they are too ambiguous to allow for unreserved conclusions. In terms of the absolute number of conflicts, roughly two in three policy domains that was subject to decentralization showed either clear pacification (about one in three) or continued stability (i.e. an absence of conflicts before decentralization continued after decentralization; also about one in three). Often, however, these dynamics fail to start in the period in which decentralization was initiated, but only kick off in the following period. The relative numbers provided a similar picture.

Comparing dynamics on policy-domains that were prone to different degrees of decentralization, it is clear that all policy domains that were prone to **far-reaching levels of decentralization** and on which Flemish and Francophone coalition partners clashed in the period under study show **either clear or ambiguous pacification** evolutions. Also, and generally speaking, the decline in the number of conflicts between segments is more prominent for policy domains that were subject to some or far-reaching decentralization than for policy domains that were not decentralized. And none of the policy domains that were not or hardly prone to decentralization (justice and defense) shows the kind of lasting pacification tendency that was observed for the (partly or mostly) decentralized domains. However, the fact that the dynamics characterizing these domains are also noted on more decentralized domains, serves as an important nuance.

Evidently, these **findings call for further research**. Future analyses could use more data (on recent times or other polities) to yield more evidence for or against the hypotheses and sharpen the conclusions. It would also be relevant to gain sight on additional factors of relevance. Indeed, it is commonplace to state that decentralization of federalism ‘is not a panacea’ (e.g. Bermeo, 2002; Keil & Anderson, 2018; Kymlicka, 2001; Seymour & Gagnon, 2012). One way to make sense of the role and relevance of decentralization is by checking whether it explains more of the variation in the results than other factors. Another element that might explain the ambiguous nature of the results is the fact that each state reform in Belgium is a “contradictory combination of strong autonomist and strong unitarian tendencies” (Hooghe, 1993, p. 55). This might explain (in part) why the theoretically expected pacification dynamics fail to materialize more solidly. In assessing these rationales, both large-N (comparative) analyses and qualitative studies would be useful.

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Appendix

Appendix I. Cohen's κ by variable (N=18)

Variable	Cohen's κ^*	Asympt. SE
Ethno-territorial issue (0/1)	0.852	0.142
Segmental sides (0/1)	0.891	0.104
Ethno-territorial conflict (0/1)	1.000	0.000
Outcome type	0.778	0.109

* $p < 0.001$ (all variables)

Appendix II. Policy domains, degree of decentralization, and decentralization reforms

Policy domain	Degree of dec.	Decentralization			
		SR 2 (1980)	SR 3 (1988-89)	SR 4 (1993)	SR 5 (2001)
Macroeconomics and taxation	1	X	X		
Civil rights and liberties	0				
Health	1	X	X		
Agriculture and fisheries	2	X	X	X	X
Labour	1	X	X		
Education	2		X		
Environment	1	X		X	
Energy policy	1	X			
Immigration and integration	1	X			
Traffic and transport	1		X		
Justice , administration of justice and crime	0				
Social affairs	1	X		X	
Community development, housing and urban planning	2	X			
Companies, Banking and domestic trade	1		X		
Defense	0				
Scientific research, technology and communications	1	X			
Foreign trade	2		X	X	X
Foreign Affairs and Development aid	1	*		X	X
Functioning democracy and Public administration	1			X	
Spatial planning, public nature and water	2	X		X	
Art, Culture and Entertainment	2	X	X		
Ethno-territorial issues	1		X		

*Too minor to be coded