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## **Inter-regional contacts and voting behaviour in Belgium: What can we learn from the 2019 elections?**

Can the intensity of the inter-regional contacts explain voting behaviour in multinational federal countries? In such countries, voting behaviour often tends to be explained by identity-based factors. Nevertheless, the existence or lack of contacts between distinct groups living on the same territory is known to shape ethnocentric attitudes (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019). As a matter of fact this insight is embedded in a genuine contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). However, the role of inter-regional contacts, and by extension the utility of contact theory, in explaining voting behaviour in federal countries has largely been unexplored. In multinational federal countries, such as Belgium, identity-based explanations of the party vote traditionally highlight factors such as identity feelings and preferences regarding devolution (Henderson & Medeiros, 2021; Deschouwer et al., 2015a). This explanatory logic is in line with the traditional funnel of causality approach whereby behaviour is only the tip of an iceberg with a more crucial attitudinal underwater segment (e.g. Ajzen, 1998). Yet, recent studies have pointed out that (reported) behaviour should not be neglected in participatory models (e.g. Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Moreover, political philosophers such as Hannah Arendt also point at the importance of solid patterns of political action and cooperation for a (federal) political culture (1998[1958]: 212). In this sense it is an important question whether inter-regional contacts directly or indirectly shape voting behaviour and whether the effects are in line with the partisan views. This article seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the relative weight of the inter-regional contact factor on the vote for the distinct political Belgian parties in the most recent elections.

The 2019 federal and regional elections in Belgium yielded contrasted results between the two main regions of the country, Flanders and Wallonia. In the former, the right-leaning Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang (VB) reached together more than 40% of the Flemish voters. In the latter, the left-leaning parties attracted over 50% of the Walloon voters. It is regularly posited that this right-left division is related to a more right-wing regionalism in Flanders and a more left-wing regionalism in Wallonia (Erk, 2005) that are yield to intermingled factors of identity and state reform preferences: Flemish voters would have a stronger regional identity that leads to demands for more regional autonomy, whereas Walloons voters would have a stronger Belgian identity that explains their pro-federal stance (Reuchamps, 2010; Reuchamps, Dodeigne, & Perrez, 2018). In fact, Belgian politics is often interpreted as being largely driven by identity feelings and autonomy preferences, but Belgian politics is also known for its centrifugal tendencies that prevents strong inter-regional contacts (Thijssen, Arras, & Sinardet, 2019; Thijssen, Sinardet, & Dandoy, 2015). In this context, it is particularly relevant to investigate what role inter-regional contacts play in explaining voting behaviour in multinational federations such as Belgium. More particularly, it is interesting to look at the interrelation of contact and regional identity in vote explanations.

To answer this question, we present in the following section the foundation of this investigation based on the theoretical debate revolving around contact theory, before proposing a set of hypotheses that is afterwards analysed by structural equation modelling in order to compare 2019 voting behaviour in the Flemish and Walloon region. In order to do so, we rely on the 2019 RepResent cross-sectional post-electoral survey that offers a representative sample of the population in both regions, including indicators of their inter-regional contacts and party choice.

## **1. Contact theory and voting behaviour**

Based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), the typical hypothesis to explain voting behaviour in multinational federal countries is that the more a voter feels at home in or identifies with his/her region/community, the more (s)he wants further power for this region/community. Accordingly, parties that defend interests of their own linguistic or territorial group are likely to receive more support from their members (De Winter, 1998). This view is clearly in line with the conflict-integration dialectic propagated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) which starts off from the existence of a wicked conflict which demarcates social groups, *in casu* language of ethno-territorial groups. The 'identity politics' around in-group favouritism and out-group antagonism subsequently creates some form of integration which also is an important component of a federal culture (Kincaid & Cole, 2011). Interestingly, according to this view contacts with groups across the linguistic and/or the ethno-territorial border are often seen in a negative light as they can strengthen the 'threat feelings' associated with the conflicting group (e.g. Putnam, 2007). Contact between groups in which there is already a certain level of animosity are likely to deepen negative prejudices. The assumption is that contacts stimulate feelings of being threatened, because members of the other ethnic-cultural group are perceived as competitors for scarce resources, particularly within the context of economic crisis in which political elites capitalize on the differences between groups.

Yet, in our current era characterized by globalization and hyper-individualization these frozen 'cleavages' that are demarcating solid group memberships are increasingly melting away and becoming liquid (Kriesi et al., 2012). Hence, in this changing political climate it makes sense to look at the reverse integration-conflict dialectic (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2020), which is incidentally also a possibility acknowledged by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Indeed, instead of taking certain social conflicts for granted, one starts off from the importance of encounter and cooperation among citizens belonging to different social groups. Accordingly, many analysts

stress the co-productive potential of contacts among individuals rather than the conflicts among deeply entrenched social groups (e.g. Thijssen & Van Dooren, 2016; Van Eijk & Steen, 2016). Integration comes first, and conflict has a second order character because it primarily arises around different ways to obtain the necessary integration. Not coincidentally, this integration-conflict dialectic perspective also links up with a longstanding socio-psychological theory: notably the contact theory which is often connected with the names of Allport (1954) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2008).

However the psychological contact theory has most often be applied to ethno-cultural contacts conditioned by migratory behaviour whereas it has hitherto received much less attention in so-called “historical contexts of conflict” (Tropp, 2015). The apparent reason for this is that intense feelings of fear and revenge might impede the favourable effects of interpersonal contact between members of the different factions (Stephan & Stephan, 2001). This is in line with the fact that contact theory is traditionally conceived as a conditional theory. It is only worthwhile to look for the beneficial effects of contact if certain conditions are fulfilled. After all the founding father of contact theory Allport proclaimed in 1954 that contact can only play a fruitful role if four conditions are fulfilled: equal status within the contact situation, intergroup cooperation, common goals and support of authorities or law. Not coincidentally these conditions regularly pop up as crucial components of the federal political culture that is necessary to uphold federal systems.

## **2. Belgium as a case with centrifugal tendencies but without intractable conflicts**

On this background, we acknowledge that the Belgian federal political dynamics might have less to it than that in other federal systems because it is characterized by centrifugal structural

tendencies. For instance, Sinardet (2013) pointed at the importance of the diverging media landscape of the Flemish and French speaking communities and the fact that the different language groups are increasingly stuck in their own media bubble. Furthermore, also the absence of statewide parties and of a statewide voting district are characterized as crucial factors for the scarce contacts between political elites across the Belgian language border (Dandoy, Matagne, & Van Wynsberghe, 2013; Sinardet, Reuchamps, & Dodeigne, 2014). Nevertheless, it is misleading to identify Belgium as a ‘lost case’ for contact theory because of the absence of meaningful historical conflict which creates a climate of fear that produces seemingly intractable conflict areas (Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

Moreover, the reverse integration-conflict dialectic seems also to be in line with a number of recent Belgian trends. For one, an increasing number of Belgian parliamentarians and citizens are pleading for a so-called refederalization of some competences (Dodeigne et al., 2016; Dodeigne et al., 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2017). Additionally, Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2020) have argued that bringing together members of the different Belgian language groups in deliberative settings can be a fruitful antidote for the centrifugal nature of Belgian federalism and politics. Last but not least, although members of the working class tend to be less tolerant and open for contacts with ethnic minorities, in particular Green and Left-libertarian parties in Western-Europe tend to favour such attitudes (e.g. Weldon, 2006: 339). In line with this Thijssen and Verheyen (2020) have established that some Flemish parties, such as Greens and left Liberals, typically stress the merits of exchanges and contacts among people belonging to different groups (organic solidarity) in their manifestoes, while others, especially regionalist parties, are more inclined to insist on the importance on the merits of supporting your own group members (mechanical solidarity). Above all, the programmatic rift between ‘contact parties’ and ‘identity parties’ appears to be growing over time. Furthermore, in contrast with all

traditional parties who were once unitary but split according to the regional and linguistic cleavage, Ecolo (the French- and German-speaking green party) and Groen (the Dutch-speaking green party) came separately to life in the early 1980s but work closely together (Reuchamps et al., 2020). Both parties presented joint lists in local elections, included candidates from the other party on their lists, and formed a joint party group in the Chamber of Representatives. In this respect, there is only one party, that is genuinely organized in one statewide party organization, namely the radical-left PVDA-PTB. Hence, this party gives us a unique opportunity to test if a statewide party is more successful among voters with intense inter-regional contacts. Although the Flemish liberals of the VLD and the Francophone liberals of MR do not share anymore similar inter-regional collaborative structures and practices (De Winter, Dumont, & Benoumeur, 2005), their liberal ideology nevertheless stresses free-trade, interdependence and the merits of inter-national and inter-regional contact (Kirchner, 1988; Close & Van Haute, 2019). Furthermore, only the MR was willing to join a federal coalition that included the Flemish-nationalist N-VA and eventually was the only Francophone party in the federal government together with three Flemish parties (De Winter, 2020).

### **3. Hypotheses**

Yet, it remains to be seen if voters do what their parties propagate. Do voters of green, statewide, and liberal parties have relatively more contacts across the language border, while voters of regionalist parties do have relatively less contacts? This is indeed what we would expect based on recent analyses of the partisan supply that are in line with contact theory. ‘Unknown makes unloved’, and we therefore hypothesized:

*H1 When one has more contacts across the language border the chances of voting for green, statewide or liberal parties increase.*

*H2a(contact) When one has more contacts across the language border the chances of voting for regionalist parties decrease.*

However, given that the manifestoes of regionalist parties also exhibit a considerable degree of negative solidarity or a reluctance to close ties with the other region, here too Putnam's conflict perspective is relevant. Notably, we should acknowledge that according to the alternative fear theory the effect for the regionalist parties could be the other way around. People that have more contacts across the language border and see these contacts in a negative 'conflictual' light could then be more inclined to vote for a regionalist party. 'What you do not know will not hurt you', and H2a(contact) can be opposed to H2b(threat).

*H2b(threat) When one has more contacts across the language border the chances of voting for regionalist parties increase.*

Additionally, it remains to be seen whether the effects in H1, H2a(contact), and H2b(threat) will be equally strong in the French- and Dutch-speaking regions. We know that regional feelings of identification are much more widespread in Dutch-speaking Flanders, with the presence of electorally successful parties (N-VA and VB) that capitalize on historical grievances towards the Belgian state. Accordingly, regional identity and preferences regarding devolution have usually more explanatory behaviour in Flanders than Wallonia (Baudewyns, Dandoy, & Reuchamps, 2015; Dandoy, Reuchamps, & Baudewyns, 2015). However, is this also true for inter-regional contacts? Based on earlier studies on the evolution of inter-regional contacts over time we know that these contacts have decreased over time in both regions



(Thijssen, Arras, & Sinardet, 2019; Thijssen, Sinardet, & Dandoy, 2015). Nevertheless, with the exception of media use across the border, the average proportion of Walloons reporting regular contacts with Flemings is significantly higher than that for Flemings reporting regular contacts with Walloons. Nevertheless, based on the lower salience of the communitarian issue in Wallonia (Reuchamps, 2015; Reuchamps et al., 2021), we expect the total effects in H1 to be stronger in Flanders. Because there are no analogues in Wallonia for the successful Flemish regionalist parties, we think it is less useful to apply the same kind of reasoning to H2a and H2b.

*H3 When one has more contacts across the language border the chances of voting for green, statewide or liberal parties increase more in Flanders than in Wallonia.*

Last but not least, it is plausible that the net effect of contact disappears when taking into account that the affective effect of increased contacts across the language border may be mediated via a stronger feelings of compassionate solidarity, whereas more rational effects of increased contact across the language border may be mediated by preferences regarding devolution or socio-economic solidarity. After all, a rich research tradition regarding the evolution of autonomy preferences in Belgium that dates back to the early 1980s (Delruelle-Vosswinkel & Frogner, 1980, 1981; Delruelle-Vosswinkel, Frogner, Dawance-Goosens, & Grodent, 1982, 1983) has pointed out that the impact of those preferences remains fairly stable across time. However, the electoral study of inter-regional contact has been kept apart from electoral studies on devolution and on solidarity. This is unfortunate since other recent empirical studies have established that all three independents are strongly interrelated (Thijssen et al., 2019; Thijssen et al., 2015).

*H4 Because voters which have more contacts across the language border identify more with the supra-regional Belgian state and have a preference for less devolution, they will vote more for green and liberal parties.*

*H5 Because voters which have less contacts across the language border identify less with the supra-regional Belgian state and have a preference for more devolution, they will vote more for regionalist parties.*

Because the hypotheses above focus explicitly on green, liberal and regionalist parties, we implicitly assume that the aforementioned effects will not be statistically significant in case of other parties, which of course remains to be seen<sup>1</sup>.

### **3. Data and methods**

In order to test our hypotheses we will establish to what extent past contact across the language border explain devolutionary preferences, solidaristic attitudes, and last but not least voting preferences of the general public. These type of studies are extremely rare, not only in Belgium, because of three methodologically interrelated reasons. First, because indicators related to interregional contact are often not available and one has to rely on contextual ‘proxies’ such as distance to the language border and heterogeneity of communities (e.g. Wimmer, 2008). Serrano (2020) recently pointed out the extent to which statewide parties are successful in Basque region, depends on the number of non-native Basques living there. While he proclaims

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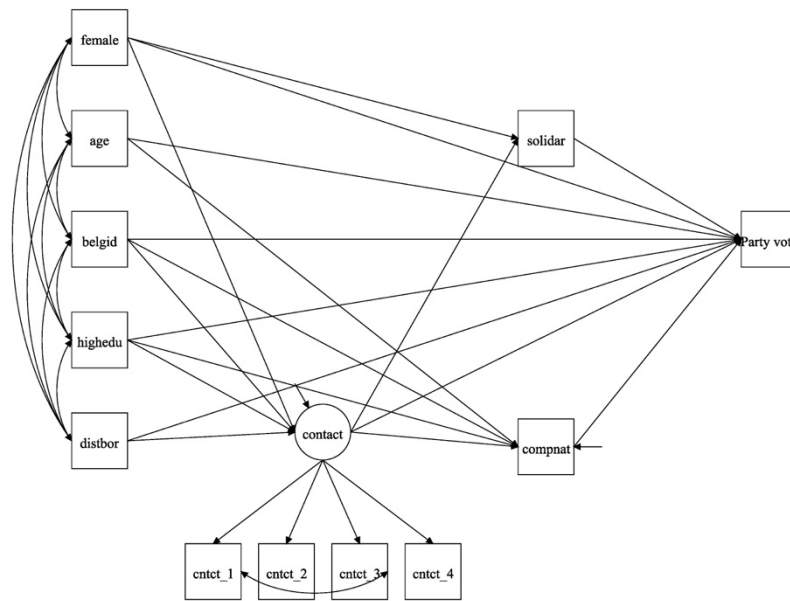
<sup>1</sup> The – acronym of the – parties under study are: CD&V and cdH the respectively Dutch- and French-speaking Christian-democrat parties, Groen and Ecolo the ecologist parties, N-VA and DéFI the regionalist parties, Open VLD and MR the liberal parties, PVDA and PTB which form a single radical left party, sp.a and PS the socialist parties, Vlaams Belang (VB) and PP the radical right parties.

this to be a confirmation of the contact theory, the contextual effect obviously can only provide circumstantial evidence. In this paper we will therefore directly measure the direct contact Belgian citizens have across the language border, while controlling for the distance they live from this border.

Second, the knowledge of contact effects on voting preferences is also scarce because researchers have for long refrained from predicting preferences based on behaviour based on the dominant theories of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1988). However, in the meantime, also here, a reverse logic has become more and more accepted, especially because the effect of behaviour on political preferences is usually much stronger than the other way around (e.g. Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). So-called endogeneity problems can perfectly be avoided if one relies on retrospective contact behaviour whereby the contact questions precede the questions related to identity. That is exactly what we will do in this paper.

A last difficulty related to the study of past behaviour effects is that they can be direct, but also indirect via other attitudes. In this respect it is difficult to evaluate total effects of past inter-regional contact because they can also run indirectly via preferences regarding devolution or solidaristic attitudes. Hence, in order to properly evaluate the explanatory potential of the contact theory on voting, we will adopt structural equation modelling, SEM-methodology because this method enables one to single out mediated effects. Figure 1 shows the empty model that we will estimate for each of the twelve major political parties in Belgium. We will structure the party vote according to the region.

**Figure 1: Structural equation model**



On 26 May 2019, voters were invited to express their party choice at three levels: European, federal and regional. While there is some split-ticket voting in Belgium (Willocq & Kelbel, 2018), it is rather limited with 87.3% of the voters in Flanders who voted for the same party in the regional and the federal elections of 2019 and 84.6% in Wallonia. Because it is at the federal level that the issues of state reform are discussed, we opted to use vote choice at this level as our dependent variable. There is another – contingent – reason for this choice. The RepResent cross-sectional post-electoral survey that contains the variables under study for this election report does not include the regional vote choice, which was asked in the RepResent panel survey. Nonetheless, the RepResent cross-sectional post-electoral survey offers a representative sample of the population in Flanders and in Wallonia. Important for this study is that the inhabitants of the Brussels region were not included in that RepResent survey. The distribution of respondents across parties is presented in Table 1a for Flanders and in Table 1b for Wallonia, next to the results for the House of representatives in each region in order to be able to appreciate the representativeness (or lack thereof) of the voters.

**Table 1a**  
Distribution per party – Flanders

Party choice	N	%	Results for the House
CD&V	104	11,7%	14,2%
Groen	82	9,2%	9,8%
N-VA	244	27,4%	25,5%
Open VLD	82	9,2%	13,5%
PVDA	74	8,3%	5,6%
sp.a	102	11,5%	10,8%
Vlaams Belang	201	22,6%	18,6%

**Table 1b**  
Distribution per party – Wallonia

Party choice	N	%	Results for the House
cdH	63	8,0%	10,7%
DéFI	40	5,1%	4,1%
Ecolo	145	18,4%	14,9%
MR	143	18,1%	20,5%
PP	44	5,6%	3,2%
PS	201	25,5%	26,1%
PTB	153	19,4%	13,8%

Next to the dependent variable ‘federal party vote’ we also model three intermediary variables. The *preferred distribution of competences* (‘compnat’) between the federal and the regional/community levels is measured on 0-10 scale where 0 means all the competences to the regional/community level and 10 all the competences to the federal level. *Solidarity* (solidar) is measured by the indicator of compassion with unemployed, according to five categories, ranging from ‘1 = not at all’ to ‘5 = very much’. We realize that a single indicator referring to only one ‘social group’ seems crude to measure a broad attitude such as solidarity but unfortunately we were unable to construct a reliable scale based on multiple deservingness groups. Yet, in each of these measurement scales compassion with the unemployed by far got the strongest factor loading. Last but not least, the measurement model for *inter-regional contacts* consists of three indicators having to do with face-to-face contacts across the language border, along with one indicator that assesses contact with the media of the other linguistic

community ('cntct\_4'). The three face-to-face indicators refer to holiday visits ('cntct\_1'), friend visits ('cntct\_2') and shopping visits ('cntct\_3'). Each of the four indicators is measured according to five categories, ranging from '1 or more times per week' to 'never'. We also tried to integrate a fifth indicator related to inter-regional professional contacts. Yet, this indicator correlated only weakly with the other indicators, which is not entirely surprising because professional contacts are less voluntary and less equal, while according to Pettigrew these conditions should be fulfilled in order to expect powerful contact effects. In line with this we also integrated an error covariance between holiday visits ('cntct\_1') and shopping visits ('cntct\_3') because those indicators do not necessarily lead to strong interpersonal contact.

Next to the aforementioned endogenous variables we also integrate five exogeneous or control variables. The first one is the influence of *Belgian identity* that is a dichotomous operationalisation of the so-called Moreno question (1 = first identification is Belgium and 0 = all other categories). We realize that this might again be regarded as a rather crude measure that somehow disregards the multilevel character of national identities. Yet, while national identification traditionally is a central factor in Belgian party vote models, we intentionally treat it here as a benchmark for contact. For this purpose a clear unambiguous reference category suffices. Four socio-demographics are added as control variables: age (a continuous variable from 18 to 89 years old), gender (1 = male, 2 = female and 3 = other), education (1 = higher education and 0 = lower), and the orthogonal distance to the language border (a continuous variable in kilometres that has been computed based on the postal code of each respondent) because living nearby the other language group could foster inter-regional contacts for the better or the worse as posited in the theoretical framework. We present the descriptives of these socio-demographics and the regional differences in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Descriptives of explanatory factors and of socio-demographics - Regional differences

	Region	Mean	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
Contacts	Flanders	-.04	-.09	.02	.86	-.75	3.96
	Wallonia	.04	-.02	.09	.90	-.75	3.96
Belgian identity	Flanders	.45	.42	.48	.50	.00	1.00
	Wallonia	.57	.54	.60	.50	.00	1.00
Distribution of competences	Flanders	4.69	4.50	4.87	2.93	.00	10.00
	Wallonia	5.53	5.36	5.69	2.71	.00	10.00
Solidarity	Flanders	3.26	3.18	3.33	1.19	1.00	5.00
	Wallonia	3.37	3.29	3.45	1.28	1.00	5.00
Age	Flanders	49.16	48.04	50.28	17.95	18.00	88.00
	Wallonia	47.57	46.47	48.67	17.78	18.00	89.00
Gender	Flanders	1.47	1.44	1.50	.50	1.00	2.00
	Wallonia	1.49	1.46	1.52	.50	1.00	2.00
Higher education	Flanders	.36	.33	.39	.48	.00	1.00
	Wallonia	.32	.29	.35	.47	.00	1.00
Orthogonal distance to language border	Flanders	33.53	32.42	34.64	17.75	.26	80.42
	Wallonia	28.10	26.65	29.55	23.46	.16	132.65

#### 4. Findings

For each party, we ran a SEM seeking to explain the voting behaviour in the light of the three intermediary variables and the control variables. The two overview tables below present the total (i.e. both direct and indirect) effects for parties in Flanders (Table 3a) and parties in Wallonia (Table 3b). In the appendix, we present a visual representation of the effects measured in the SEM for each party. The dependent variable is vote choice in the 2019 elections.

**Table 3a**  
Overview table of the total effects – Flanders

	CD&V	Groen	N-VA	Open VLD	PVDA	sp.a	VB
Inter-regional contacts	-0.15 (0.14) -0.09	0.53*** (0.13) 0.26	-0.06 (0.11) -0.04	0.24+ (0.13) 0.12	0.08 (0.13) 0.04	0.04 (0.13) 0.02	-0.55*** (0.11) -0.28
Distribution of competences	0.03 (0.03) 0.08	0.02 (0.02) 0.05	-0.09*** (0.02) -0.25	0.04* (0.02) 0.12	0.07*** (0.02) 0.20	0.08*** (0.02) 0.23	-0.02 (0.02) -0.05
Solidarity	-0.02 (0.02) -0.02	0.23*** (0.06) 0.21	-0.19*** (0.05) -0.18	-0.00 (0.06) -0.00	0.17** (0.05) 0.17	0.20** (0.06) 0.19	-0.10* (0.05) -0.10
Belgian identity	0.41*** (0.11) 0.20	0.16 (0.12) 0.08	-0.35*** (0.09) -0.17	0.36** (0.12) 0.17	0.17 (0.13) 0.08	0.16 (0.11) 0.08	-0.40*** (0.10) -0.19
Age	0.00* (0.00) 0.10	-0.02*** (0.00) -0.26	0.01** (0.00) 0.15	-0.01* (0.00) -0.12	-0.00 (0.00) -0.06	0.01** (0.00) 0.22	-0.01* (0.00) -0.12
Gender (female)	0.09 (0.11) 0.04	0.19 (0.12) 0.09	-0.18+ (0.09) -0.08	0.03 (0.12) 0.02	-0.08 (0.13) -0.04	0.13 (0.12) 0.06	-0.06 (0.10) -0.03
Higher education	-0.08 (0.12) -0.04	0.19 (0.12) 0.09	0.24* (0.09) 0.11	0.15 (0.13) 0.07	0.05 (0.13) 0.03	-0.19 (0.12) -0.09	-0.36*** (0.10) -0.17
Orthogonal distance to language border	-0.01* (0.00) -0.10	0.00 (0.00) 0.07	0.01+ (0.00) 0.08	-0.00 (0.00) -0.07	0.01* (0.00) 0.13	-0.00 (0.00) -0.02	-0.00 (0.00) -0.05
FIT	R <sup>2</sup> =0.07	R <sup>2</sup> =0.22	R <sup>2</sup> =0.18	R <sup>2</sup> =0.08	R <sup>2</sup> =0.09	R <sup>2</sup> =0.15	R <sup>2</sup> =0.15



	RMSEA= 0.044 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =97.28 (33)	RMSEA= 0.044 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> = 97.53 (33)	RMSEA= 0.046 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =101.36 (33)	RMSEA= 0.045 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =98.52 (33)	RMSEA= 0.043 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =95.05 (33)	RMSEA= 0.044 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =96.78 (33)	RMSEA= 0.046 CFI= 0.97 CHI <sup>2</sup> =102.82 (33)
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Top left: unstandardized effects (standard errors)

Bottom right: standardized effects

+: P < 0.10; \*: P < 0.05; \*\*: P < 0.01; \*\*\*: P < 0.001; red: negative significant effect; green: positive significant effect

Each column summarizes the effects in a logistic path model (voted for that party vs. voted not for that party)

**Table 3b**  
Overview table of the total effects – Wallonia

	cdH	DéFI	Ecolo	MR	PP	PS	PTB
Inter-regional contacts	-0.06 (0.15) -0.03	0.06 (0.17) 0.03	-0.12 (0.13) -0.06	0.45*** (0.13) 0.22	0.33+ (0.19) 0.17	-0.14 (0.11) -0.07	-0.24* (0.12) -0.12
Distribution of competences	-0.03 (0.03) -0.06	0.04 (0.03) 0.10	0.03 (0.02) 0.08	0.04+ (0.02) 0.10	0.03 (0.03) 0.09	-0.06** (0.02) -0.15	0.01 (0.02) 0.02
Solidarity	0.04 (0.07) 0.04	-0.13+ (0.08) -0.13	0.19** (0.06) 0.18	-0.25*** (0.05) -0.24	-0.24** (0.07) -0.24	0.07 (0.05) 0.07	0.23*** (0.05) 0.23
Belgian identity	0.35* (0.14) 0.17	0.19 (0.16) 0.09	-0.23* (0.10) -0.11	0.21* (0.11) 0.10	0.09 (0.16) 0.04	0.05 (0.10) 0.03	-0.23* (0.10) -0.11
Age	-0.00 (0.00) -0.03	0.00 (0.00) 0.06	-0.01*** (0.00) -0.22	0.01* (0.00) 0.13	-0.01 (0.01) -0.13	0.01** (0.00) 0.14	0.00 (0.00) -0.01
Gender (female)	-0.23* (0.13) -0.11	0.02 (0.16) 0.01	0.02 (0.10) 0.01	-0.13 (0.10) -0.06	-0.19 (0.15) -0.09	0.10 (0.10) 0.05	0.02 (0.11) 0.01
Higher education	0.36** (0.13) 0.16	0.19 (0.15) 0.09	0.31** (0.11) 0.14	0.34** (0.11) 0.15	-0.14 (0.16) -0.07	-0.34** (0.10) -0.16	-0.21+ (0.11) -0.10
Orthogonal distance to language border	0.00 (0.00) 0.10	0.00 (0.00) 0.10	0.00 (0.00) 0.00	-0.00+ (0.00) -0.10	-0.01 (0.01) -0.14	-0.00 (0.00) 0.04	-0.00 (0.00) -0.02
FIT	R <sup>2</sup> =0.08 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =111.85 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.06 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =111.85 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.12 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =110.99 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.18 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =111.85 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.13 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =111.64 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.18 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =110.78 (33)	R <sup>2</sup> =0.09 RMSEA= 0.048 CFI= 0.96 CHI <sup>2</sup> =111.88 (33)

Top left: unstandardized effects (standard errors)

Bottom right: standardized effects

+:  $P < 0.10$ ; \*:  $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $P < 0.001$ ; red: negative significant effect; green: positive significant effect

Each column summarizes the effects in a logistic path model (DV: voted for that party vs. voted not for that party)

The global fit of a SEM is usually assessed based on a combination of fit measures that are based on normalized  $\chi^2$ -value because the value of the latter is influenced by the sample size. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) reflects the discrepancy between the hypothesized model and the population covariance matrix and ranges from 0 to 1, with smaller values indicating better model fit. The comparative fit index (CFI) reflects the model fit by examining the discrepancy between the data and the hypothesized model, while adjusting for the issues of sample size inherent in the chi-squared test of model fit. CFI values range from 0 to 1, with larger values indicating better fit. As a rule of thumb an acceptable fit is reached when RMSEA is smaller than 0.6 and the CFI exceeds 0.95. Based on those fit measures all of our party vote models fitted adequately which gives additional support to the overall structure of our path model.

For each party, in first instance we discuss the significant total effects (T) for the variables under study based on Tables 3a and 3b, because they resemble the effect parameters in standard multi-level regressions. We report the unstandardized effects and their standard errors as well as the standardized effects. Yet, the total effects are composed of both direct (D) and indirect (I) effects in the SEM path model (see path models in Appendix 1). Sometimes direct and indirect effects have opposite signs, which leads to the somehow misleading impression that the variable has no meaningful effect at all. Moreover, in line with our mediation hypotheses 4 and 5, by comparing the total effects in Tables 3a and 3b with the direct effects in the path models for each party presented in appendix, one can assess to what extent the contact effect is mediated by other variables (*in casu* devolution preferences and solidarity). Because in order to test hypotheses 1 to 3, strictly speaking SEM is not needed, we also include the estimations of the direct electoral effects of ‘inter-regional contact’ based on ordinary logistic regression

for party families (Appendix 2) and specific regional parties (Appendix 3). Yet, all in all these results strongly resemble those of the SEM. Hence, we will only refer to them whenever there is some meaningful deviation. In Appendix 3 the reader can additionally also see the marginal effects of inter-regional contact on the predicted probabilities to vote for a party in the 2019 federal elections with distance to the language border held constant at its mean.

In line with H1, inter-regional contact is key to understand the vote for Green parties in Belgium. Yet, at closer sight this is only true for the Flemish greens. Groen (0.26\*\*\*) is the Dutch-speaking party with the strongest positive standardized total effect. However, this is not at all the case for voters of the French-speaking ecologists of Ecolo (-0.06). So overall, with respect to the Green parties we only find partial confirmation for H1. Interestingly, these differential effects of inter-regional contact on ecologist voting have nothing – or not a lot – to do with the fact that their voters predominantly live close to the language border.

Neither do we see a positive effect for the statewide list PTB/PVDA. Although PTB/PVDA form one single party organisation, we estimated separate models for the Francophone PTB and the Flemish PVDA. And this makes sense because our analysis reveals an interesting difference. Whereas for Flemish voters of PTB/PVDA the total standardized effect of inter-regional contacts is positive but not significant (0.04), the corresponding effect for Francophone voters is even significantly negative (-0.12\*). Again, we see a remarkable difference within the party family, and this time the family is close-knit. Moreover, the strongest effect for PTB goes against H1. Voters with less intense inter-regionalist contacts vote less for PTB.

The two liberal parties get support that is quite similar for all variables in our SEM as we find significant effects for Belgian identity (0.17 for Open VLD and 0.10 for MR), preference of

competence distribution towards the national level (0.12 for Open VLD and 0.10 for MR). More importantly for our purpose, we also find similar significant standardized total effects for inter-regional contacts (0.12+ for Open VLD and 0.22\*\*\* for MR). In line with H1 voters with more intense inter-regional contacts vote more for liberal parties. Inter-regional contact especially is a distinctive feature for the MR voters. Again, these positive effects of inter-regional contacts are not influenced by the distance to the language border. Yet, It is therefore a more profound facet of MR electorate that could be related to the fact that this party was the sole French-speaking party in the federal coalition and therefore people with inter-regional contacts were more likely to support this party. However, contrary to the total effect of ‘inter-regional contact’, the direct effect is only significant for  $P < 0.10$  (Appendix 3) which is also visible in the corresponding marginal plot (Appendix 4a and Appendix 4b).

In sum, we find limited confirmation for H1. When one has more contacts across the language border the chances of voting for the Flemish greens and to a smaller extent also the Francophone liberals of the MR increase, which is congruent with the viewpoints expressed by these parties. Yet, in the case of the Francophone greens of Ecolo and the Francophone voters of the statewide PTB-PVDA the effects run in the opposite direction. Hence, we cannot say that the total effects are overall smaller in Wallonia than in Flanders as was hypothesized in H3. After all, the positive effect of inter-regional contact is significantly stronger for the MR than for the Flemish liberals of Open VLD.

If we turn to the party that was the main opponent of Groen during the campaign, the N-VA got its support from people who hold a higher education degree (0.11), who do not have a strong Belgian identity (-0.17), are not so keen on solidarity (-0.18) and above all are in favour of regional autonomy (-0.25). They are also more likely to be older (0.15) and male (-0.08). Yet,

we do not find a significant standardized total effect for our central variable under investigation: inter-regional contacts (-0.04). However, interestingly, as we can see in the path model for N-VA in appendix, the standardised direct effect of inter-regional contacts is positive (0.04). This means that this direct positive effect is neutralized by statistically significant indirect effects on voting for N-VA, via devolution preferences (-0.05\*\*\*) and solidarity (-0.04\*\*). While we do not find confirmation for H2b, N-VA voters do not have significantly less inter-regional contacts, we do find confirmation for its mediated variant H5. Which means that the relative scarcity of inter-regional contacts is nevertheless indirectly important for the explanation of a vote for N-VA because they lead to less identification with the supra-regional Belgian state and a wish for more devolution.

We get a different picture when we turn to that other Flemish regionalist party, the radical right Vlaams Belang (VB). Here we do find a significant negative standardized total effect for inter-regional contacts (-0.28\*\*\*) and strong support for H2a. The fact that VB voters live on average at 25.90 kilometres from the language border, which is the smallest mean distance among all Dutch-speaking parties, underlines the relevance of this finding. Moreover, the fact that VB voters have significantly less inter-regional contacts, is not significantly mediated via devolution or solidaristic preferences as the difference between the standardized total effect (in table 3b) and the standardized direct effect (path diagram) is very small. In sum, we do find confirmation for a negative effect of inter-regional contact on the Flemish regionalist vote (H2a), but in the case of N-VA this effect is mediated via preferences for further devolution or less solidarity (H5). Hence, we do not find any confirmation for the reverse hypothesis H2b which posited that inter-regional contacts would generate more threat for the other region, and ipso facto more votes for regionalist parties.

Although in line with prior supply-based results our hypotheses focused on the ecologist, statewide, liberal and nationalist party families, in tables 3a and 3b as well as in the path models in appendix we also presented the results for other party families. In general, most significant results were somehow expected as they were in line with our hypotheses. Nevertheless, there were some smaller exceptions, notably for PP. The PP electorate scores slightly higher on inter-regional contacts (0.17+). Interestingly, in this respect we again see a clear difference with the electorate of the Flemish radical-right, where the effect was strongly negative (-0.28\*\*\*). Yet, it should also be reminded that there are only 44 PP voters in the dataset.

## **5. Discussion**

For decades, public opinion concerning the process of federalization in Belgium, particularly with regard to voters' identities and to the division of powers across the various levels of government, has been studied in detail (for an overview, see Reuchamps, 2013). In fact, the evolution of these 'ethnic-territorial' identities and preferences for power divisions is usually linked with a number of the classic socio-demographic variables in explaining party choice (see e.g. Deschouwer, De Winter, Reuchamps, Sinardet, & Dodeigne, 2015b; Deschouwer & Sinardet, 2010; Sinardet, De Winter, Dodeigne, & Reuchamps, 2018; Swyngedouw & Abts, 2011; Swyngedouw, Abts, Baute, Galle, & Meuleman, 2015; Swyngedouw, Billiet, Carton, & Beerten, 1993; Swyngedouw & Rink, 2008). In this approach, insights from contact theory have been left outside. Applying psychological contact theory had been mainly done on ethno-cultural contacts conditioned by migratory behaviour and much less in "historical contexts of conflict" (Tropp, 2015). In this light, Belgium serves as an interesting case study.



What comes out of our analyses is that, in such context, inter-regional contacts have indeed a co-productive potential among individuals rather than the conflicts among deeply entrenched social groups (Thijssen & Van Dooren, 2016; Van Eijk & Steen, 2016). The effect of inter-regional contact is particularly strong among Groen voters, which is in line with this party's stance which is in favour of opening up integration (between the two main language groups in Belgium) rather than fostering conflicts. This finding confirms the longstanding socio-psychological contact theory (Paluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008): inter-regional contacts do bring about a more positive vision of the out-group and contribute to reduce prejudice.

Moreover, contact theory is also relevant for the explanation of the regionalist voter. In general we see that voters which have relatively many contacts across the language border tend to vote less for those parties. These effects are controlled for distance to the language border. Interestingly, among VB voters, we also find a strong negative effect despite the fact that these voters on average live very close to the language border. Yet, we also see a somehow diverging path between VB voters and N-VA voters. While in the case of N-VA the negative effect is only indirect, because it is fully mediated by preferences regarding devolution and solidaristic feelings, the negative effect is only mediated to a very limited extent by those variables. Further longitudinal analyses and the integration of other more 'affective' mediators might give us more insight into the mechanism behind these differences. What is also noteworthy is that the contact effects are overall stronger in the Flemish region, where the identity and state reform debate is more lively. Contact theory therefore appears more relevant in a context of intense feelings and debates.

## **6. Conclusion**

The results of the 2019 elections in Belgium show a contrast between the two main regions of the country, Flanders and Wallonia. At the core of this difference in voting behaviour identity and state reform preferences are often pointed out as potential explanatory variables. In fact, because of this division and the broader difficulties of achieving a sixth reform of the Belgian state, Belgium has experienced the longest period without a fully functional government in its history (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). After the 2019 elections, the federal government formation process again took a very long time (almost 300 days to reach a minority government and almost 500 days for a majority coalition), which is in part interpreted by some as a consequence of the diverging voting patterns in the North and the South.

The analysis of voting behaviour for these elections allowed us to tackle an overarching question, that resonates strongly in centrifugal Belgian politics, that is the role of inter-regional contacts. In a country, where such contacts remain limited, the structural equation models reveal that they do play a role and they distinguish quite strongly the voters of green and liberal parties from those of regionalist parties. More interestingly, when we add the regional dimension, our findings reveal an interesting cross-cutting pattern. On the one hand, right-wing and left-wing parties have received support from voters who strongly oppose themselves on the issue of solidarity. On the other hand, Flemish right-wing parties (N-VA and VB) and French-speaking left-wing parties (Ecolo and PTB) to some extent have voters with the same characteristics in terms of low Belgian identity feelings and low inter-regional contacts. However, these similarities and differences neither align nor cross-cut the preferred distribution of competences which could be seen, in one way or another (more competences for the substate or for the federal level) as the institutional translation of identity feelings and inter-regional contacts. Yet, it seems that voters do see these dimensions as separate from one another, which makes party positioning even harder. This finding somehow resembles that of Kopstein and Wittenberg

(2009) who studied inter-ethnic contacts in former Czechoslovakia and also concluded that the electoral impact of contact depends upon the socio-economic peculiarities of the region being studied and the national demographic context under which contact occurs. In other words, inter-regional contact seems to cut across traditional left-right divisions and in this respect also needs more attention from political science.

This article opens up other avenues for further research. First, in further investigation, one should include other mediators for the electoral impact of inter-regional contact such as affective polarization or perceived economic performance. The former could reinforce the – positive or negative – effect of inter-regional contacts depending on the stance of their preferred party, while the latter seems to be key to apprehend in light of a competition for scarce resources in a context of economic crisis in which political elites may seek to play on the differences between groups. Second, contact theory has much to do with solidarity claims between the groups: in this perspective, a better operationalization of solidarity would be helpful as to capture opinions on mechanical and organic solidarity. Third, while Belgium provides an interesting case with centrifugal tendencies without intractable conflicts, other multinational societies should be explored such as Spain where the dynamics are less bipolar than in Belgium. Fourth, differences between and within party families, in particular ecologist, radical right and radical left party families, call for further theoretical explanations as these parties show surprising cross-cutting patterns that have the potential to reshuffle party competition in federal polities.

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