

Political careers in Belgium: an example of the integrated career model

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Abstract :

Several countries have undergone a regionalization in recent years followed by a professionalization of regional politics. This led to research on career patterns in multi-level states, with attention for the relationship between the regional and national level. Stolz (2005) found evidence for four types of career patterns. In this article it is argued that the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia are both examples of the 'integrated careers' ideal type since the introduction of directly elected regional parliaments in 1995. Level-hopping data (1995-2010) show that there is one integrated career arena and that there is no dominant direction towards the national level.

1. Introduction: career patterns

Research on political career patterns originated in the United States. Schlesinger's work¹ on political ambition laid the theoretical foundation for a tradition of career and ambition related studies². He stated that '*ambition lies at the heart of politics*' and that this ambition could be discrete, static or progressive. A politician with progressive ambitions will use '*one office as a stepping stone to a higher one*'. But what does 'higher' really mean? Generally, the territorial division is used to define 'higher', leading from the local over the regional to the national level. This hierarchical model assumes that politicians will aspire to the offices at the highest political level and use their local and regional offices as springboards or stepping stones towards these more attractive national positions. Several career studies corroborated the hypothesis that the state legislature is a natural stepping stone towards the US Congress for many members³. This is also confirmed by recent data: 52,2 % of all Congressmen in 2010 were former State Legislators⁴. The second most important route to Congress is via political office at the local level⁵. Francis and Kenny⁶ argue that the main career ambitions of US politicians are driven by an urge to increase their territorial jurisdiction, their electoral constituency and their material compensation. As a result, their ambition leads them from the local and state level towards the national level. This dominant, though not universal, bottom-up pattern for US Congressmen served as a starting point for the emerging European research on career patterns⁷.

This research demonstrated that the classical springboard model is not applicable in many European countries. Career patterns are much more diverse in multi-level states and positions at the regional level are often as attractive as those at the national level⁸. Stolz⁹ found evidence for four types of career patterns with the classical springboard model being one of them (Figure 1). A second model is the alternative careers model, which implies that there is low movement between the regional and the national level and each career arena seems to exist on its own. Thirdly, the careers on both levels can be integrated in a non-hierarchically manner. Finally, the politician's career path can go from the national to the regional level (the inverse springboard model). According to Schlesinger¹⁰ the opportunity structure on the one hand and the politician's ambition on the other determine to which ideal type a specific region or country belongs. Borchert¹¹ defined the opportunity structure on the basis of the three A's, i.e. availability, accessibility and attractiveness. These are the main factors determining the political career patterns. In the first place, the availability refers to the mere number of mandates. This amount is determined by the size of the assemblies, the election cycle and legal restrictions (such as gender quota or minimal age requirements). The availability also increases as a result of regionalization and the creation of regional parliaments. The accessibility is a function of the degree of inter- and intraparty competition for the available seats. Seats are less accessible to the extent that parties favor incumbents and the electorate is less volatile. The accessibility can also be legally restricted, for instance through measures impeding level-hopping¹². Finally, the attractiveness is determined by the power, prestige, visibility, job security, promotion prospects, the degree of political professionalization and of course the remuneration. Whether a regional position is attractive also depends on the degree of regionalism or the strength of the regional identity¹³. In recent decades, several Western European countries have strengthened their regions by transferring significant constitutional and legislative competences away from the national to the subnational levels¹⁴. As a result, the political influence and visibility of regional parliaments and their MPs increased and the regional mandates became more attractive. This decentralizing tendency disrupts the classical hierarchical model of career patterns as it changes the existing opportunity structure and hence the individual career ambitions. This development has coincided with an organizational shift within the political parties¹⁵. In the past, the national level was the main power centre of the party, which was an extra incentive for the politicians to become a member of the national parliamentary party. But to the extent that competences are devolved to the regional level, the regional party branches acquire more power and the regional parliamentary groups become powerful and hence attractive centers of decision-making.

Figure 1. Career patterns in multilevel systems

Source: STOLZ (2008)

Stolz¹⁶ attempted to map career patterns based on the analysis of centripetal and centrifugal ratios (the career movements from the regional to the national level and vice versa). He studied career patterns in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and Belgium. This analysis was initially limited to one moment in time and later supplemented by a more elaborate study of the regions of Catalonia and Scotland¹⁷. In this article, this more elaborate analysis is carried out for Flanders and Wallonia. Obviously, in order to obtain a full picture of the political career patterns, the European Parliament and local level should also be included in the analysis. However, this article will be limited to the movements between the regional and national level as we are most interested to know where Belgium is situated in Stolz' career models and whether

the national level is still the most important one since the introduction of regional parliaments in Belgium.

2. Flanders and Wallonia

The set of possible career paths in Belgium is largely determined by the opportunity structure. Before 1970, Belgium had three different policy-levels: the municipal, the provincial and the national level with the latter being the most important one. The large majority of MPs followed a traditional career path from local to national politics until the late 1980's. They learned the craft of a politician at the local level before being recruited by the party to move to a higher level¹⁸. In the Belgian case, the possibilities of movement between levels have increased in recent decades due to the introduction of two additional policy levels. In 1979, a European level was introduced with the direct election of originally 24 Belgian members of the European Parliament (nowadays 22 members). Moreover, a process of gradual federalization initiated in 1970 which introduced a regional level through five constitutional reforms. Before the crucial constitutional reform of 1993, the Flemish and Walloon Parliament were not directly elected but were composed of the members of the House of Representatives and the directly elected Senators of the federal level. This system of dual mandates came to an end in 1995, when the regional parliaments were directly elected for the first time¹⁹. However, at the same time the number of parliamentary mandates at the national level was reduced: from 184 to 71 Senators and from 212 to 150 Representatives. Since 1995 MPs who become members of government are obliged to leave parliament and are replaced by a successor for the duration of their mandate.

In sum, in 1995 Belgium became a multi-level system with a changed opportunity structure which subsequently altered the career patterns. Fiers²⁰ found evidence that there was low movement from the regional towards the national level in 1995-2004. Consequently, he concluded that the regional and national parliament should not be placed *under* each other but *next to* each other in a career pattern diagram. Before this period, the political careers used to be in line with the hierarchical model, with politicians moving from the local to the national level. With the introduction of the regional level, the hierarchical model was no longer appropriate as only a few politicians leaped from the local over the regional to the national level. Fiers also examined the European and local level, and concluded that Belgium still largely fits the traditional model in the sense that the majority of MPs had local experience before obtaining a parliamentary mandate (at the regional or national level). The difference with Fiers' data is that our figures will include both parliamentary and ministerial movements and data from the additional time period of 2004-2010. Moreover, this article will not only discuss the Belgian case but also classify it on the basis of Stolz' typology.

In order to explain why Belgium does not conform to the hierarchical pattern, we will now discuss the opportunity structure, as defined by the three A's. The *availability* is different for Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders 124 seats are available in the Flemish Parliament, while there are 88 seats in the House and 25 directly elected and six co-opted seats in the Senate. For Wallonia there are 75 seats in the Walloon Parliament, while there are 62 seats in the House, fifteen directly elected and four co-opted seats in the Senate. Furthermore, ten members of the Flemish as well as the Walloon Parliament are at the same time member of Senate, the so-called Community Senators. Regional elections are held every five years and coincide with the election of the European MPs, while national elections take place every four years. The Belgian opportunity structure seems to facilitate movement as almost the same amount of seats are available at the Flemish or Walloon

level as at the national level. In addition, one can be a regional or national MP and be an electoral candidate for the other level without having to resign the initial mandate. If the MP is elected at the other level, he or she can still decide not to take up the seat. Being a member of the regional or national parliament is not an absolute prerequisite for becoming regional or federal minister. The constitutional electoral rules are therefore no obstacle for movement between both levels.

The availability is fixed as the number of seats and the frequency of elections do not easily change. The *accessibility* on the other hand is a more variable notion as the degree of competition depends on the parties and their strategies and of course on the electoral competition. In Belgium, all the national parties were split at the end of the sixties and the seventies, as a result of which there are only regional parties, i.e. Flemish and Francophone parties²¹. As a consequence the decisions about the selection of candidates for both the regional and federal elections are taken by the regional parties. Also, there is no clear distinction between regional and national politicians within the parties. This obviously facilitates movement between the levels. As we already mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is very common in Belgium that federal MPs are also electoral candidates for the regional elections, and vice versa²². Parties use their prominent electoral candidates in both regional and federal elections to gain more votes. Even though most of these phantom candidates²³ only have a supportive role - in the sense that they do not have the intention to transfer to the other level while most of them occupy an ineligible place on the electoral list - it shows the integrated character of the candidate selection process.

The dominance of the hierarchical career model has also decreased due to changing party recruitment strategies. In the past, politicians were to a large extent selected on the basis of their experience at the local level. In the 1990's parties changed their strategies and increasingly selected external candidates to attract the volatile voters. At first they selected popular candidates known from the media or sports; after 2000 they started recruiting successful academics, trade unionists or top managers²⁴. Even though local and party experience is still important for recruitment in Belgium, there are more and more people who entered politics through non-traditional ways and have as such a non-hierarchical career.

Movement is also facilitated by the fact that the national and regional parliaments have quite the same level of *attractiveness*, despite the notable history and prestige of the House. After all, transfer costs are low: regional and national MPs earn the same salary, the actual distance between both parliaments is one street for the Flemish politicians and negligibly small for French speaking politicians (Brussels - Namur 64 km), the degree of political professionalization is the same and level-hopping does not jeopardize the chances of career advancement. Whether a regional mandate is attractive, also depends on the strength of the regional identity and the degree of regionalism. Flanders has a strong sense of regional identity with a number of regional parties striving for Flemish independence. Therefore Flemish MPs might have a strong incentive to stay in the Flemish Parliament, rather than to move on to the House or Senate. On the other hand, all French speaking parties are in favor of maintaining the Belgian state²⁵. Nevertheless, there is also a tradition of Walloon regionalism, and it can be expected that the more regionalist Walloon politicians will prefer to be in Namur rather than in Brussels. Moreover, the attractiveness of a mandate is also influenced by the institutional setting: a regional mandate is more attractive to the extent that the scope of the regional competences is larger and regions are not subordinate to the federal level. Flanders and Wallonia are examples of strong regions with important competences and legislative powers that are equivalent to those at the federal level²⁶. As a result, offices at the regional level

can hardly be considered as inferior career options. However, the policy domains of the regional and federal level differ and the choice of a mandate on either the regional or the federal level can therefore also be determined by the expertise or interest in certain policy domains.

Based on the above mentioned characteristics, we hypothesize that the relationship between the regional and national level is integrated and non-hierarchical with notable level-hopping. To verify that there is no clear direction from the regional to the national level and to determine the degree of level-hopping, the figures for Flanders and Wallonia will be discussed in the next paragraph.

3. Career movements between the regional and the national level

Table 1 shows the career movements of MPs and ministers in Flanders and Wallonia in absolute numbers. We do not show the relative figures as the availability is nearly the same at the regional and national level (124 Flemish seats against 119 national seats; 75 Walloon seats against 81 national seats) and absolute numbers can easily be compared. We counted the actual moves, defined as the resignation of one office to take up a mandate at the other level. The moves in between elections were also taken into account. The number of politicians who transferred to the other level to become a minister is displayed between brackets (for example, from the House to the Flemish Government or from the National to the Flemish Government). For all elections except the most recent one a third number represents politicians moving after election time. Before discussing the emerging career pattern for Flanders and Wallonia, we will briefly discuss each separate election in order to reveal the integrated and complex nature of the Belgian system.

In 1995 the Flemish and Walloon Parliament organized their first direct elections. Before that, both parliaments were not directly elected but were composed of the members of the House and the directly elected Senators. As the system of dual mandates came to an end, politicians had to make a choice in 1995: stay at the national level and run for the House or Senate or move to the regional level. Dewachter, Thomas and Depauw²⁷ surveyed the Representatives and Senators of 1991-1995 and asked them whether they preferred a mandate at the regional or at the federal level: 44,7 % of the Flemish Representatives chose the Flemish Parliament, while 38,2 % preferred the House. The preference for the regional level was even more outspoken for the Flemish Senators: 40,3 % chose the Flemish Parliament while 29 % preferred to stay in the Senate. Also, most Walloon Senators preferred the regional parliament (38,2 %), while only 20,6 % preferred to remain senator. These figures are not surprising as the political role of the Senate diminished in 1995. When comparing the Walloon and the Flemish respondents of the House, the situation seems to be reversed: half of the Walloons still preferred the House while 37,5 % aspired a transfer to the regional level. These figures clearly show that there are quite some MPs for whom the national level is not the most attractive policy level and suggest that there is no clear-cut hierarchy between the regional and national level.

Furthermore, the actual transfers that took place in 1995 indicate that the regional level is an attractive career option. 66,9 % of the new Flemish Parliament (excluding the 6 members of Brussels) were previously a member of the House or Senate. The same level of transfer was found in the Walloon Parliament where 68 % was previously a member of the national parliament. Also five other Walloon members had previous parliamentary experience at the national level but before 1991-1995. Parliamentarians of all parties used the opportunity to move from one level to another. It was not surprising that the regional level would be attractive for national parliamentarians

as the number of seats was reduced in the House and Senate. 25,5 % of all Representatives of 1991-1995 moved to the Flemish Parliament and 14,6 % to the Walloon Parliament (19 % and 12 % respectively for the Senate). The election of 1995 will not be taken into account when determining the emerging career patterns as it involved a unique reallocation of political personnel throughout the institutions. Also, the accessibility was very high as there were no incumbents yet for the Walloon and Flemish Parliaments.

As expected, the degree of movement was much smaller in 1999 but still considerable: nine Flemish MPs and eight Walloon MPs moved to the national parliament while eleven national MPs moved to the Flemish level and five to the Walloon level. Six of the seventeen regional MPs who moved to the national parliament were returning. An additional three national politicians, both in Flanders and Wallonia, moved to the regional level to become minister. Fiers²⁸ considers 1999 as an instance of low movement. However, when comparing the figures of the Belgian regions to Scotland and Catalonia²⁹, the frequency of movements in 1999 was actually quite substantial. This may also be due to the fact that the regional and federal elections were concurrent in 1999, which further decreased transfer costs.

Table 1. Number of successive transfers of parliamentarians and ministers from the national to the Flemish or Walloon level and vice versa (1995-2010)*

In 2003 the transfer costs were higher as the regional and national elections were held separately for the first time. Level-hopping figures for 2003 indeed show less transfers: four Flemish MPs and one Walloon MP moved to the House, not a single MP moved to the Senate. The low attractiveness of the Senate can once again be attributed to its diminished political role. It seems that, in Wallonia, the level-hoppers consisted in large part of politicians who became minister at the federal level. At the 2004 regional elections, this tendency of MPs becoming minister at another level continued. On the one hand, seven (among which three national ministers) transferred to the Flemish level to become a minister, while three national politicians did the same in Wallonia. On the other hand, Table 1 also shows ministerial transfers in the other direction. These ministerial transfers in both directions are clear indications of the integrated character of the Belgian system as electoral changes at the regional level have consequences for the national level and vice versa. There were also national MPs transferring, even though they had only been elected at the national level a year ago: three Representatives and four Senators moved to the Flemish Parliament and six Representatives transferred to the Walloon Parliament.

At the 2007 national elections six Flemish MPs transferred to the House and one to the Senate, while on the Walloon side five regional MPs transferred to the House. Table 1 again shows ministerial movement in both directions, showing strong evidence of the intertwined character of the Belgian career arena. The 2009 regional elections show a similar story when six national politicians moved to the Flemish Parliament and nine to the Walloon Parliament. Both in Flanders and Wallonia two national politicians transferred to become a regional minister. Once again, transfers in the opposite directions occurred: one Flemish and two Walloon MPs became co-opted senators while two Walloon politicians became part of the national government. In 2010, early national elections were held due to a political crisis between both communities. Four Flemish and three Walloon MPs transferred to the national parliament at election time.

We can conclude that there has been considerable movement between both levels and that movement is possible in all directions as there are no constitutional rules prohibiting any of these

moves. Parties can move their political personnel around in accordance with their strategies. Those that are moved around are often top politicians: 33,1 % of all moves (1999-2010) involve politicians who become minister at another level. Setting apart the exceptional first elections of 1995, there were 33 moves from the Flemish level to the national one and 40 vice versa. In Wallonia, there is also no clear preference for either level: there are 30 transfers to the national level and 36 to the Walloon level. These figures show that there is no clear hierarchy and no dominant direction from the regional level to the national level or vice versa.

When considering the different career models outlined by Stolz³⁰, Belgium seems to belong to the 'integrated careers' type as it complies with its two main characteristics. To begin with, there is an integrated circuit of positions without strong institutional boundaries. Secondly, no clear-cut hierarchy exists between the regional and national mandates. Due to the fact that the regional parties select the candidates for both the regional and the federal elections, there is only one single career arena for the two levels and no separate arena for the regional level.

Finally, the integrated character of the Belgian arena also becomes apparent when we calculate the percentage of Flemish or Walloon MPs who were candidate at the national level (Tables 2 and 3). In Belgium a regional MP or minister can be an electoral candidate at the national level and vice versa without having to resign first. Even if they are elected, they can choose either to take up their mandate or to renounce it. In both Flanders and Wallonia, the percentage of regional MPs taking part in federal elections has increased over time. Three quarters of Flemish regional MPs were electoral candidates in 2010, while this was the case for almost half of the Walloon MPs. A plausible explanation for the higher percentage in Flanders is that the same constituencies are used for both the regional and national elections in Flanders, while smaller constituencies are used for the Walloon regional elections. Conversely, 70 % of all Dutch speaking national MPs were electoral candidates at the regional list in 2009.

It is however remarkable that only a small percentage of these MPs are actually elected. For instance, at the 2010 national elections only about 7 % of both Walloon and Flemish MPs were elected at the national level. This indicates that many of them only had a supportive role on the electoral list, meaning most MPs did not have the actual intention to transfer to the national level. Those regional MPs who were elected at the national level, had to choose between both mandates and the figures in the last column demonstrate that they did not unanimously chose a seat at the national level. More significantly, of all the Flemish MPs who were elected at the national level, the majority preferred not to take up this seat and to stay at the regional level (3,2 % of the 7,3 % elected Flemish MPs in 2010 took up their mandate while this was only 4,8 % of 12,1 % in 2007). In Wallonia, an amount of MPs preferred to stay at the regional level as well. This is yet another strong indication that the national parliament is not considered as more prestigious than the regional one, but that both parliaments should be regarded as equally attractive.

Table 2. Flemish MPs running for the national elections of 2003, 2007 and 2010

Table 3. Walloon MPs running for the national elections of 2003, 2007 and 2010

4. Conclusion

Belgium is a textbook example of a system with equally attractive regional and national mandates. Level-hopping data for Flanders and Wallonia show that there is no clear hierarchy and no dominant

direction from the regional to the national level or vice versa. Setting apart the exceptional first elections of 1995, there were 33 moves from the Flemish to the national level and 40 vice versa. In Wallonia as well, there is no clear preference for one particular level: there were 30 transfers to the national and 36 to the Walloon level. We have also shown that it is quite normal for a regional MP to be a candidate at federal election and vice versa. The data provide strong evidence that career patterns in Belgium are in line with the 'integrated careers' model. The two defining characteristics of this model apply: there is an integrated circuit of positions without strong institutional boundaries and no clear-cut hierarchy exists between the regional and national mandates.

This is primarily due to the far-reaching process of decentralization, as a result of which substantial competences were devolved to the regions. Political power is now about evenly divided between the regional and the federal level. But the integrated career pattern is also closely connected to the pattern of party organization in Belgium. Since the state-wide parties have split up in the seventies, there are only regional parties in Belgium. Both the regional and the federal elections are contested by these same regional parties. As a result, there is no power hierarchy between the national and the regional parliamentary groups: both form part of the same regional party organization, which is the obvious core level of the Belgian parties.

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