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Electoral System Change in Belgium 2003: Party Strategies and Voter Responses

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Abstract

The paper addresses two points: First, what is the effect of changes to the electoral system in Belgium and second, how do voters respond to the new electoral rules? If seat-maximization is the key link then this would lead to the prediction that parties that supported the change of the electoral system particularly the parties of the incumbent governing coalition (before the change took place for the 2003 election), should expect to fare better under the new rules than the old rules that translate votes into seats. The mechanical effects of the new electoral rules for 2003 when applied to the number of votes cast in 1995 and 1999 do have a small effect in the direction predicted by the theory. The governing parties together, particular the francophone ones, can expect to fare better under the new rules than under the old rules. Regarding the second question, the number of Strategic Voters in a given district is typically predicted by the district magnitude, i.e. the number of seats that are awarded at the primary electoral district level. Contrary to previous studies there is strong evidence of strategic voting particularly within the small Belgian districts. This analysis further demonstrates that even the new incentives to cast a strategic vote through the need for every party to overcome 5% of the district vote share before gaining representation has already a systematic impact on the decision-making process of Belgium voters.

Traditionally, electoral systems are treated as exogenous factors determining the nature of the party systems or constraining an individual's decision-making process. Thus, we do not know too much about the incentives to change existing electoral rules, particular in established democracies. From an outside perspective to such a rare process one can assume that parties have reasons to support electoral reform and how they form expectations about their likely consequences. Based on these assumptions one can derive predictable implications (King et al., 1994) of these unobservable and not reliably measurable processes or phenomenon in order to provide evidence for the assumed theory about party goals and the processes of the expectation formation process of party elites. Besides behaviour of party elites in the end what counts are voters' reactions to the proposed changes. Do these changes provoke predictable behaviour on side of the voters? Using original survey data from a pre-electoral study of the parliamentary elections in Belgium one can show how voters respond to electoral reform.

One theory recently proposed by Benoit (2004) offers a seat-maximizing logic for electoral system change. Starting with the premise of parties as basic actors in an collective choice process that will lead into an electoral system, expected seat-maximization is the hypothetical process that links institutional alternatives to actors' electoral self-interest. Thus actors have to form expectations about the number of seats they might gain under different proposed electoral rules. How do actors form such expectations? One way or the other they have to entertain counterfactual experiments. What would the outcome of the election look like under different electoral rules? If seat-maximization is the key mechanism that links alternative proposals and the parties' self-interest we would expect that the parties that supported the change of the electoral system should expect to fare better under the new rules than the old rules that translate votes into seats.

Belgium changed its electoral rules just before the 2003 parliamentary election (Hooghe 2003, Hooghe et al, 2003) without prior experimentation with new laws on the regional level for instance (???). Contrary to the old system before 2003 two small changes stand out. First, the electoral districts were aggregated to fewer but larger districts. Second, a five percent threshold on the new electoral district level was imposed in order to qualify for the seat distribution process. While the first change, larger district magnitude, typically fosters proportionality, the second change, a district threshold, has the potential to limit proportionality of the electoral system because it hinders the opportunity for small parties to win representation.

Given that the old system and the two components of the new electoral system are the only clearly identifiable proposals out of the universe of electoral rules that could have been considered (Hooghe et al 2003, Hooghe et al forthcoming) I analyze in the following the effect of these two changes to the electoral system and compare it to the last election results under the old electoral system (in 1999). In contrast to Hooghe et al. (2003, forthcoming) I will not use the 2003 election results to assess the mechanical effects of this electoral reform. In order to test whether the seat-maximization logic is the driving force of electoral system change (Benoit 2004), at least for the parties in government who supported the change of the rules, we need to focus on how party elites formed their expectations about the potential mechanical effects of this reform before the change took place. Thus, the only information that was available are election results previous to the 2003 election. If seat-maximization is the key link then this would lead to the prediction that parties that supported the change of the electoral system particularly the parties of the incumbent governing coalition (before the change took place for the 2003 election), should expect to fare better under the new rules than the old rules that translate votes into seats. Thus compared to the actual result in 1999, the parties of the governing coalition - the Liberals, Socialist and the Greens - should gain more

seats under the new rules that are applied to the 2003 election than under the old rules. This would provide evidence for the seat-maximizing logic proposed by Benoit (2004).

Table 1: Simulations Based on 1999 Election Results

	Official Result 1999	Larger districts	Larger districts and threshold
		Simulation 1	Simulation 2
Agalev (Greens)	9	9	8
SP (Socialists)	14	14	13
VLD (Liberals)	23	23	23
Vlaams Blok (extreme right)	15	15	15
CD&V (Chr.-Dem.)	22	22	23
VU-ID (nationalists)	8	7	6
Ecolo (Greens)	11	12	12
PS (Socialists)	19	19	20
MR (Liberals)	18	18	19
FN (extreme right)	1	1	1
PSC (Chr.-Dem.)	10	10	10
Total (Seats)	150	150	150

Compared to the official result of the parliamentary election in 1999 the sole effect of combining small districts into larger districts does favour Ecolo. The French-speaking Green party would have gained one more seat, namely in Brussels, if the existing two-tier system would have been abandoned and seats were only distributed on the district-level. Conversely, the net effect of this change of the electoral system does harm the Flemish nationalist party, the Volksunie, predecessor of the N-VA. This party would lose one seat. The governing coalition would increase its combined seat shares from 94 to 95 seats. Although the effects of combining small districts into larger ones are not particularly large, the change does occur in the expected direction in favour of the governing parties.

Beyond these net effects, the composition of parliament would also change. Interestingly, Ecolo's additional fourth seat in Brussels comes at the cost of CD&V's loss of its third seat there. Thus, interestingly, one seat originally held by a Flemish MP gets transferred to a seat held by a Walloon MP. While this particular MP of the CD&V in

Brussels would loose the seat, the Flemish Christian Democrats could compensate it on the national level because the party wins an additional second seat in Flemish Brabant instead, while the Flemish nationalists, the N-VA, would loose its only seat there. Thus the first simulation demonstrates that reducing the number of electoral districts from 20 smaller to 11 larger districts does indeed bolster the (slim) majority of the governing coalition as expected by the seat-maximizing logic.

In the second simulation, all seats are distributed according to the new electoral law of 2003. Compared to the results of the first simulation we can asses the additional impact of a five percent threshold at the electoral district level on party seat shares and the composition of parliament. A party will never win seats with only 5% of the votes in smaller districts (threshold of exclusion, Leiphart1994), i.e. in districts with district magnitude smaller than 10, even without the new threshold. In districts with a district magnitude of 19 and higher the effects of the district threshold definitely kicks in since 5% would be enough for any party to yield at least a seat (threshold of representation, Leiphart1994: 25-30). The effect implies, for instance, that the first seat for a small party in East-Flanders, Brussels or Antwerp is generally more expensive – it will cost 5% while for all other parties the cost of an additional seat will be “cheaper” than that.¹ Looking closely at the district level, all additional changes induced by the threshold occur only in Brussels.² Of course, the mechanical effect of such a threshold should help large parties at the cost of locally small parties. This is exactly what happens. Three parties would loose representation in the district of Brussels - two parties from the governmental coalition (SP and Agalev) and one from the Opposition (N-VA), while also

¹ In 2003 the first looser of the last seat in Brussels or Antwerp got more votes than the winner of the last seat “paid” for.

² A closer examination of the special provisions that were written in the electoral law as a consequence of the Belgium Supreme Court (Arbitration Court) ruling (Hooghe et al 2003, 2005) do not have an additional effect in 1999. In 2003 the number of „wasted“ votes cast for Ecolo in Walloon Brabant and subsequently added to the number of Ecolo votes in Brussels made a difference. The consequence is that Ecolo does in fact win a second seat in Brussels, a seat the Vlaams Block would otherwise have gotten. Again this does bolster the Walloon parties and parties of the former government.

three large parties in Brussels would gain one additional seat – PS and MR from the governmental coalition as well as CD&V from the Opposition. Although the absolute change is considerable, six parties either win an additional seat or even loose their only seat in this district, the distribution of power between the governing coalition and the opposition is left unchanged. The introduction of a district level threshold does not have an independent effect on the balance of power between government and opposition in parliament. All changes occur solely within these two blocs, generally favouring Walloon parties. The party that gets disadvantaged most is VU-ID, that would loose two seats, i.e., 25% of their seats in parliament, if the votes cast in 1999 are transformed into seats using the new rules of 2003.

Table 2: Simulations Based on 1995 Election Results

	Official Result 1995	Larger districts	Larger districts and threshold
		Simulation 1	Simulation 2
Agalev (Greens)	5	4	4
SP (Socialists)	20	20	21
VLD (Liberals)	21	21	21
Vlaams Blok (extreme right)	11	11	11
CD&V (Chr.-Dem.)	29	29	29
VU-ID (nationalists)	5	5	4
Ecolo (Greens)	6	6	6
PS (Socialists)	21	21	21
MR (Liberals)	18	19	20
FN (extreme right)	2	2	1
PSC (Chr.-Dem.)	12	12	12
Total (Seats)	150	150	150

The same simulations applied to the election result of 1995 show the same pattern. With the exception of Agalev, the parties of the incumbent governmental coalition going into the 2003 election are favoured by the proposed changes of the electoral rules. However, the government would have only picked up two additional seats.

To sum up, the mechanical effects of the new electoral rules for 2003 when applied to the number of votes cast in 1995 and 1999 do have a small effect in the direction predicted by the theory. The governing parties together, particular the francophone ones, can expect to fare better under the new rules than under the old rules. Thus, the proposed change can be at least considered a compromise between different goals of large parties (Liberals and Socialists) and the small parties (Greens) that are potentially hurt by the 5%-threshold. Looking at the parties in government individually does support this argument for Ecolo. However the Flemish Green party, Agalev, does in fact loose seats. It seems to be unclear why this party supported legislation to reform the electoral law. Even enlarging the districts, what might be seen as a compromise, cannot be expected to gain offset the disadvantages of employing a 5%threshold at the district-level. The Agalev leadership should have only expected to get hurt by this reform.

How do voters respond to the new electoral rules? The number of Strategic Voters in a given district is typically predicted by the district magnitude, i.e. the number of seats that are awarded at the primary electoral district level. Cox (1997) following Cox and Shugart (1996) claim that in districts with magnitude 5 and larger it becomes to hard for voters to form expectations of who will be a contender for a seat and who is out of the running. Consequently, strategic voting should fade out because it becomes too difficult to predict when a vote will be wasted. Hooghe et al (2003, forthcoming) argue that there is not much evidence of strategic voting analyzing district-level results of the 2003 parliamentary election, not even in small districts.

A more direct way to examine the psychological mechanism of electoral reform is to look at survey data and check how voters respond to the new rules. Do they waste their votes more often as the benchmark through the relationship of the frequency of strategic voting and the district magnitude would suggest? In 2003 we (Gschwend and Pappi, forthcoming) fielded

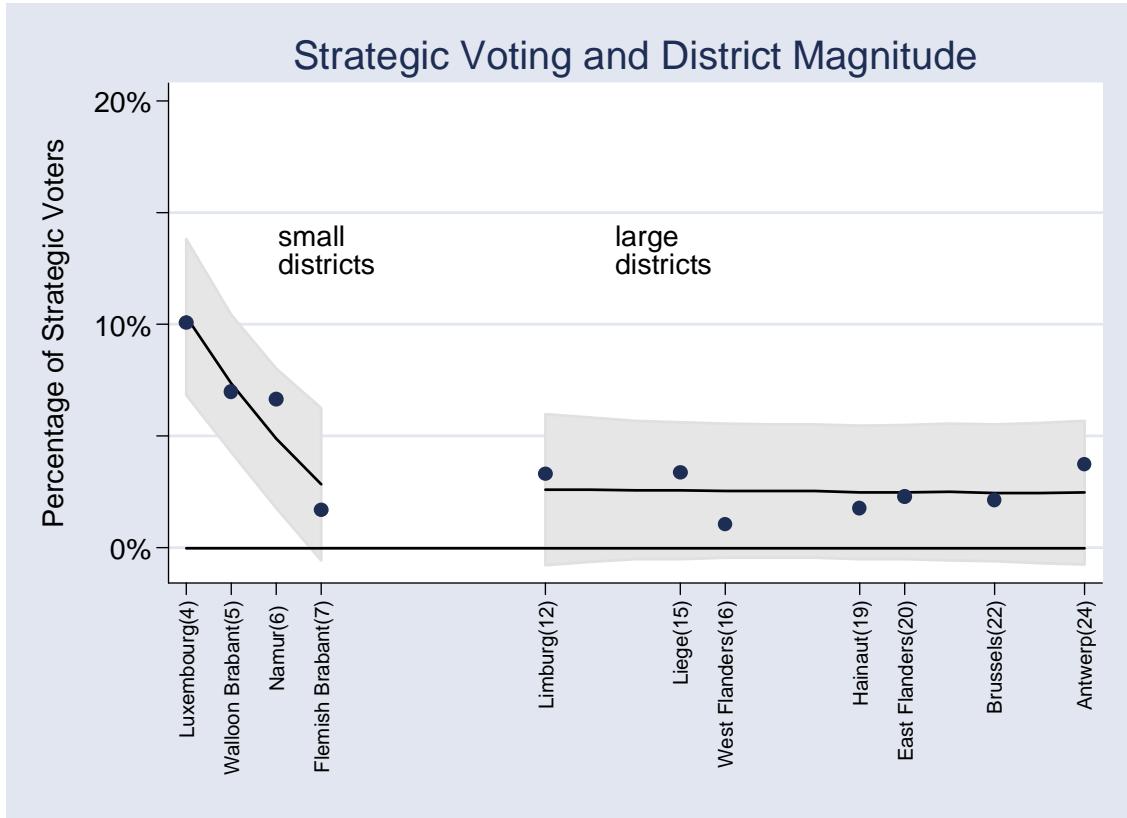
a pre-election study about 2 weeks before the election in order to get information about the context of strategic voting of the 2003 election. In order to maximize leverage on the key contextual independent variable for strategic voting – district magnitude – we draw a random sample of 100-200 respondents in every of the eleven new electoral districts in Belgium.

How do voters form expectation whether a vote for their most preferred party is wasted? Since this is the crucial questions voters face when heading to the ballot box, I seriously question the ad-hoc log of Cox (1997) and Cox and Shugart (1996) that strategic voting should suddenly become complicated (Gschwend et al 2004, Gschwend 2005). In the case of the 2003 election voters (or the media) might employ an electoral history heuristic (Gschwend 2004a) and focus on the prior election in their province (the new electoral district). Given the 1999 results and the workings of the new electoral law (see table 1) would a vote for a particular party be a wasted vote? If no: there is no reason to cast a strategic vote. If yes, then those voters who prefer a party that would not have gotten a seat in their district under this counterfactual but vote for a party that did fare better as their most preferred party are likely to behave strategically. These voters try to avoid wasting their votes. I assume that a voter whose most preferred party's vote share is below the effective threshold of the electoral districts (Leiphart1994: 27) does not expect to gain a seat there. Following this definition we get an estimate for the number of strategic voters in a given district. Although there is no clear relationship between the district magnitude and the frequency of strategic voting, theoretically at least, it seems plausible to take the logarithm of the district magnitude (M) to build some non-linearity into the model and make the unit-homogeneity assumption more believable. The expected difference in the frequency of strategic voting between two electoral districts of district magnitude 3 and 4 should be greater than between 19 and 20. I distinguish small from large electoral districts. The defining criterion for a small district is that the 5%-threshold should not make any difference there. This is true for all districts with district magnitude

smaller than 10. Thus I have small districts where only the change of the district magnitude took place and the large districts where potentially the 5%-threshold might become influential.

Running a regression on the observed frequencies of strategic voting for all eleven electoral districts in Belgium with $\log(M)$ interacted with a dummy for small districts including the constituent main effects on obtains the following predictions together with their 95 % confidence intervals.

Graph 1: Predicting Strategic Voting across Electoral Districts



Despite large confidence intervals because of the small samples these numbers are based on, there is strong evidence of strategic voting within the small districts. There is less strategic voting to be expected in the large districts. In fact, the observed frequencies of strategic voting could be observed by chance in our survey. They are not systematically different from zero.

How can one test whether the 5% district threshold did have an additional motivating factor for voters to try to avoid wasting their vote? Without being able to experimentally manipulate one can only get indirectly at the causal mechanism. In the following I try to predict whether someone casts a strategic vote based solely on the existence of certain situational incentives that the context provides. The dependent variable is dichotomous scoring one if the respondent casts a strategic vote, i.e. if she does not expect her most preferred party to gain a seat in their electoral district but instead vote for a party that did fare better than their most preferred party. As independent variables I employ a dummy scoring 1 if the expected votes shares, operationalized as the actual district-level vote shares of 2003, of her most preferred party is below 5% (5% THRESHOLD), below the (upper) threshold of exclusion (EXCLUSION) and below the (lower) threshold of representation (REPRESENTATION).

Table 3: Predicting the Proclivity of an Individual Strategic Vote as a Function of Situational Criteria

Dependent Variable: Did R. cast a Strategic Vote?			
	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> z
5% THRESHOLD	1.098	0.370	0.003
EXCLUSION	4.985	0.533	0.000
Constant	-5.838	0.448	0.000
5% THRESHOLD	2.012	0.434	0.000
REPRESENTATION	3.832	0.428	0.000
Constant	-4.803	0.258	0.000
N	1825		

The logit results clearly demonstrated that the anticipation of the 5% threshold at the district-level does in fact significantly contribute to the individuals' proclivity to cast a strategic vote above and beyond the mechanical constraints of the Belgium electoral systems, the upper and lower threshold of exclusion and representation, that have been already present before under the two-tier rule (Vander Weyden 2001). Thus, this analysis demonstrates that even the new

incentives to cast a strategic vote through the need for every party to overcome 5% of the district vote share before gaining representation has already a systematic impact on the decision-making process of Belgium voters.

To conclude while the voters apparently understand the new system reasonably well to respond to the situational criteria that might motivate them to not vote for their most preferred party in 2003, the party elites of the Flemish Greens did not anticipate the consequence of the proposed electoral reform on the parties expected vote shares – with enormous consequences as we know of today. Agalev lost all their seats in the 2003 election and consequently all Federal subsidies (Hooghe et al, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the proposed reform does fit Benoit's (2004) theory that parties follow a seat-maximizing strategy when drafting such proposal. Probably anticipating the preferences of the small coalition partners (the enlargement of the districts did come later on the negotiating table) the new electoral law might be interpreted as a compromise between the coalition partners.

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