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It's Not Only About Lists: Explaining Preference Voting in Belgium

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ABSTRACT   *This article analyses the decision of Belgian voters to cast a preference vote on the occasion of the 2009 regional elections. And what appears is that preference votes could be given three meanings. First, preference voting appears to be a sophisticated voting behaviour more accessible to politically interested and involved voters. Less politically active voters more often limit themselves to marking their ballot on the top of the list without differentiating their support among candidates. Second, preference voting is very much a token of voter–candidate proximity. Voters are more likely to support candidates when they know one or several specific candidates directly or via the media. Finally, preference voting is also very much dependent on the structure of institutional incentives. The more influence a preference vote has on the process of intra-party seat allocation, the more likely voters are to make the effort. All in all, this article shows the diversity of motivations behind preference voting, and more importantly the different meanings it could take in elections.*

1.   Introduction

Politics in advanced industrial democracies, it is commonly argued, has become increasingly personalized over the past decades (e.g., Adam & Maier, 2010; McAllister, 2007). Due to the erosion of long-standing cleavages in society, an ever smaller share of the electorate takes a permanent set of party predispositions as guide for their vote choice. Voters, as a consequence, increasingly respond to short-term electoral conditions and events, and consequently electoral volatility has been rising (Dalton et al., 2002). In particular, a growing body of research has demonstrated that the traits and appeals of charismatic leaders and individual candidates more frequently enter voters' decision calculus (e.g., Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011). However, few studies have addressed the use that voters make of the preference vote in PR-list systems (Karvonen, 2004; Marsh, 1985; van der Kolk, 2003). More in particular, little is known about what drives voters' decision to express a candidate preference.

In this article, data from the Belgian 2009 regional elections are used to gain a deeper insight into the conditions that increase voters' probability of casting a

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preference vote. The choice of this case study has several justifications (see Section 3) but the most important is to be found in the rules organizing preference voting in Belgium. For the elections of the Flemish and Walloon parliaments voters are offered the explicit choice to either simply endorse a party list as a whole or to select one or more candidates within a given list (this is a so-called flexible list system). In most other PR-list systems, voters can only indicate their party choice (e.g., Portugal and Spain) or are obliged to express a candidate preference (e.g., Finland and Poland), making it much more difficult to discuss the trade-off between candidates and parties in electoral choice. In addition, the actual effect of preference votes on how seats are allocated within lists varies from one district to another for the Belgian regional elections. In larger districts with on average more seats to be allocated within each list, preference votes have more influence. This configuration offers a good opportunity to test how voters adapt to the institutional structure.

The article is structured in five sections. The first section reviews the modest volume of existing literature on preference voting and distils from it three distinct theoretical models that capture voters' motivation to indicate a candidate preference – i.e. the resource model, the proximity model and the instrumental model. It further develops the analytical model and formulates more precise hypotheses. The third section then presents the PARTIREP election survey and discusses the electoral context of the Belgian case. The fourth section discusses the empirical findings, which demonstrate that voters' likelihood of choosing among candidates is related to their political resources, their proximity to candidates, and the impact of their vote on who is ultimately sent to parliament. The conclusions are summed up in the fifth section.

2. Towards Three Theoretical Models of Preference Voting

More than 30 years ago, Katz (1980) opened the field of research on preference voting by exploring the consequences it has on the political system in general, and on party organization, campaign funding and factionalism in particular. Five years later, Marsh (1985) mapped the variation in preferential systems across Western European democracies. Drawing on the resource theory of political participation, he further proposed some tentative hypotheses (without empirical testing however) explaining why some voters cast preference votes while others do not. In the next decades, however, preference voting was by and large treated as a mere feature of the electoral rules rather than as a topic of substantive interest. It was referred to in studies classifying electoral systems (e.g., Bogdanor, 1983; Carey & Shugart, 1995; Cox, 1997), explaining legislative behaviour (e.g., Bowler & Farrell, 1993; Carey, 2007; Lancaster, 1986), or analysing the underrepresentation of historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., Matland, 2005; Teney et al., 2010). Political psychology studies on the other hand have addressed party leader effects on vote choice (see Karvonen, 2010 for an overview of this strand of research) and tried to uncover what people look for in political candidates. Voters, it was demonstrated, make inferences about candidates' abilities and behaviour on the basis of their physical

appearance (e.g., Rosenberg et al., 1986), their local roots (e.g., Tavits, 2010) and easily observable group traits like sex, race and age (e.g., Holli & Wass, 2010; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982). Only recently, scholars have re-emphasized preference voting in list-PR systems as a complex phenomenon that is worthy of study in its own right. Karvonen (2004) has tested aggregate-level hypotheses about the effect of preference voting on a number of variables such as political stability, party organization and cohesion, legislative turnover, party system fragmentation and electoral behaviour. Van der Kolk (2003) has tested the effect of individual and contextual factors on the propensity to cast a preference vote in local elections in four European countries, even though these countries were using quite different systems of preference voting. In sum, academic research on preference voting is strongly underdeveloped. Only exceptionally, studies have addressed what drives voters to choose not only among political parties but also among candidates and the scant empirical evidence is far from conclusive.

Taking our cues from this scattered body of research, we distinguish three distinct theoretical models that could explain voters' propensity to indicate a candidate preference when offered the much simpler option of casting a list vote. In particular, it is the assumption that voters' propensity to cast a preference vote is related to their political resources (i.e., resource model), their familiarity with candidates (i.e., proximity model), and the impact their voting decision has on who is ultimately sent to parliament (i.e., instrumental model). Each model will now be discussed in turn and more precise hypotheses for subsequent testing will be developed (see Table 1).

2.1. *The Resource Model*

Casting a preference vote, Marsh (1985) pointed out, should be understood as more sophisticated voting behaviour. Party labels provide a concise and efficient short cut

Table 1. Summary of the hypotheses explaining voters' use of preference voting

	Operational definition		Expected effect
Resource model	political interest		+
	education		+
	social class	working class	−
		unemployed	−
	age		+
	sex	women	−
Proximity model	contact over casework		+
	level of urbanization	population density	−
	interest group membership		+
	party membership		+
	party leader or minister on list		+
Instrumental model	party magnitude		+

that reduces transaction costs in the electoral arena by economizing the process of information transmission (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). They act as brand names from which rationally ignorant and risk-averse voters can readily infer information about the issue positions and policy commitment of all candidates a party endorsed (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Petrocik et al., 2003). But collective party reputations do not help voters to distinguish among candidates running under the same label and, as a consequence, it is more demanding on the part of voters to indicate on their ballot paper a preference for an individual candidate. Casting a preference vote requires them to learn about and compare candidates (Shugart et al., 2005). Voters' propensity to choose among co-partisans is therefore expected to be a function of their levels of political sophistication. A higher degree of political interest and resources is more likely to translate into candidate-based voting. In this research tradition, political resources are commonly linked to citizens' socio-demographic background characteristics – education, social class, age and sex in particular.

Within the resource framework, the least empowered citizens in terms of education and economic status should also be least likely to cast a preference vote (van der Kolk, 2003). Citizens with lower levels of education may find it particularly difficult to separate good representatives from the bad: the time and effort needed to acquire and process sufficient information about the multitude of candidates quickly exceeds what they are able and willing to invest in reaching a satisfactory vote choice. It is far less cognitively taxing to cast a list vote and thereby delegate the decision about the order in which candidates will be elected to the party. This is also the conclusion from a recent study tying education levels to voter turnout (Gallego, 2010): lower-educated citizens are significantly more likely to abstain from participating in elections with open ballots than those with closed ballots. In addition, access to political information is spread disproportionally across different levels of social class. Less affluent – working class and unemployed – citizens are less involved in social networks within which such information is exchanged and because they participate less in many areas of public life they are more difficult to reach in election campaigns. As such, they will be less likely to evaluate individual candidates and more likely to rely on simple decision rules such as party identification.

Age and sex form a basis for political stratification as well. Political consciousness tends to be highest among older people and men. While younger citizens more frequently engage in individual, direct and elite-challenging acts of political participation, older citizens demonstrate a stronger investment in "classic" participation processes (Dalton, 2008). As voting in elections constitutes the core of conventional forms of political engagement a clear age gap in turnout exists (Rubenson et al., 2004). Higher age cohorts, Goerres (2007) pointed out, have habituated voting over time and are more aware of the political alternatives because of their longer duration of residence. Older people will expend more resources and effort on reaching a "reasoned" voting decision and as a result will be more inclined to choose among candidates of their preferred party. Van der Kolk (2003) indicates however that the relation between age and preference voting is curvilinear: only in the 30–50 age group, voters more often express a candidate preference.

By contrast, women's propensity to utilize the preference vote should be lower than that of men: the broader pattern of gender stereotyping and structural inequality in society is reflected in women's differential access to political resources. Theories of political representation suggest however that this effect might be offset by the importance of group similarity cues in voting behaviour (McDermott, 2009; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982). Preference voting increases the chances of having an elected representative who shares the same gender identity and who is therefore more likely to understand and raise their concerns in and outside parliament (Holli & Wass, 2010).[1]

2.2. *The Proximity Model*

An alternative approach to preference vote is to be found in what we call the proximity model. The underlying idea is that a preference vote would be the sign of an intense and regular relation between voters and candidates they vote for. People are more likely to trust candidates they feel familiar with and are thereby also more likely to support them in elections (Fenno, 1978; Hardin, 2008). Research has shown that voters value direct contact with their representatives (Coleman, 2005; Grill, 2007). Our expectation is that it would translate into more preference votes for candidates with whom voters feel closer.

Several hypotheses could be derived from the proximity model. First, certain citizens are more likely to have personal interactions with aspiring politicians than others. Politicians often go where people meet in order to communicate with voters. It is much harder to connect to unorganized citizens than it is to those that are actively involved in a vibrant associational life (Fenno, 1978: 235). In addition, interest organizations such as labour unions, women's organizations and peace movements are an important breeding ground for party personnel (Devos et al., 2008). In an attempt to maximize their vote share, political parties in PR systems try to broaden their electoral appeal by ensuring the presence of special interests and historically disadvantaged groups. Interest group affiliated candidates are expected to add to the party result a base of personal support: citizen activists will try to have those candidates elected that are most likely to advocate their concerns.

Party members are even more likely to have frequent personal contacts with would-be representatives. They are well-informed about the characteristics and achievements of their party's candidates and that information will be taken into account when deciding how to vote. On top of that, they might express an intra-party candidate choice in order to increase the weight of their preferred faction within the party organization. Some of the staunchest party supporters however may also be inclined to cast a list vote as a token of their trust in the party's appraisal of which candidates are best suited for a career in parliament (Marsh, 1985).

Another element of direct contact is constituency service. Perceptions of service responsiveness feed into more positive evaluations of candidates: voters value the feeling that they can go to see a representative when they need assistance in their

dealings with public authorities or just someone to listen to them (Cain et al., 1987; Parker & Davidson, 1979).

Yet direct personal interaction is not the only way to cultivate a sense of familiarity. Candidates can also use the media to connect with voters, to build up a relation of "parasocial intimacy-at-a-distance" (Pels, 2003: 59). This false feeling of mediated proximity increases the importance of candidates in voters' decision calculus (Hayes, 2009). But not all candidates benefit from regular media coverage. Only prominent figures have this opportunity. It can therefore be expected that preference voting would be mostly fostered by the presence of a party leader or government minister on the party list in one's district.

Finally, one could also expect that the proximity model would work differently according to the local context of the elections. As Fenno (1978: 236) noted, the local identity of candidates will only matter to voters where some sense of community exists. In particular, we can expect an urban–rural divide in the use of preference votes: ties between voters and politicians tend to be stronger in rural areas with lower levels of mobility and denser social networks (Marsh, 1985; Wauters et al., 2012).

2.3.   *The Instrumental Model*

The last model ascribes differences in voters' use of preference votes to the electoral context rather than to voters' personal characteristics. It emphasizes the instrumental rationality underlying voting behaviour. In deciding how to vote, citizens face an effort-accuracy trade-off. Voters, Stroh (1995) argues, try to optimize the accuracy of their choice with minimal cognitive effort. Under a Downsian logic, it is "irrational" for voters to choose among candidates when preference votes are highly unlikely to impact the order of intra-party seat allocation. In these circumstances, the cost of acquiring and updating information about individual candidates is far outweighed by the infinitely small probability that their candidate preference will affect the composition of parliament. As such, voters' propensity to select individual candidates on their ballot paper will increase with the relative weight of preference votes as compared to list votes in determining which candidates are elected (Katz, 1986; van der Kolk, 2003). While the consequentiality of preference votes clearly differs across the hybrid category of flexible-list systems and over time (Wauters et al., 2012), substantial intra-system variation exists – as is the case in Belgium. As discussed in detail in the next section, the effectiveness of preference votes in these systems is a function of the number of seats a party wins in a given district (party magnitude).

3.   **Preference Voting in Belgium**

In order to test the extent to which voters' propensity to choose among candidates can be explained by the resource, proximity and instrumental models, data from the PARTIREP Election Study on the occasion of the 2009 regional elections in Flanders

and Wallonia are used.[2] The PARTIREP Election Study relies on a geographically stratified sample of Flemish and Walloon citizens eligible to vote drawn from the national registry. The survey has a panel design organized in three waves: three months before, in the last two weeks before and two weeks after election day. In the first wave, structured face-to-face interviews (CAPI or computer-assisted personal interviewing) of approximately 45 minutes were conducted with 2,331 respondents. They were contacted again for two short follow-up telephone interviews (CATI or computer-assisted telephone interviewing), leading to 1,845 (or 79.2%) and 1,698 (or 72.8%) completed questionnaires in the second and third wave respectively. For the analysis we use questions from the first pre-electoral and the third post-electoral wave.

Belgium is a strongly decentralized federal state in which political competition is structured on a regional basis. Regional parliaments (including the Flemish and Walloon parliaments) are directly elected and exercise extensive competencies since the far-reaching constitutional reform of 1993 (Hooghe et al., 2006). As a consequence of the high salience of the ethno-territorial cleavage in Belgium, federal and regional elections are considered first-order elections by political parties, the media and voters alike (Rihoux et al., 2005).

Moreover, the choice of this case study and of the PARTIREP survey is motivated by several elements related to the various explanatory models of preferential voting.

First, for the resource model, because participation in elections is compulsory in Belgium, inequalities in turnout among different groups in the electorate are eliminated or at least strongly reduced (Gallego, 2010). Therefore, we will have better data to assess the effect of resources on preference voting.

Second, Belgium's electoral rules offer a good opportunity to understand how institutional incentives shape voters' propensity to cast a preference vote (instrumental model). The members of the Flemish and Walloon parliaments compete under the same set of flexible-list PR rules, which we will now describe in more detail.

On the ballot paper, political parties present ordered candidate lists. Voters can simply endorse the predetermined list order by ticking the box at the top of the party list (i.e., a list vote) or they can indicate a preference for one or more co-partisan candidates (i.e., a preference vote) (Smits & Thomas, 1998).[3] To allocate seats to parties, preference vote ballots are pooled across the party list. Each ballot marked by a list vote or by one or several preference votes within the list is counted as one vote for that list. Once seats are allocated between lists (D'Hondt method[4]), preference and list votes come into play for the distribution of seats within a list. The intra-party allocation of seats to candidates proceeds in three stages. First, candidates are directly elected when the number of preference votes behind their name exceeds the "eligibility threshold" equal to the party's total district vote divided by the number of seats won plus one (i.e. Droop quota). Seat allocation proceeds by transferring list votes to augment the preference votes of the highest-ranked candidate until (s)he clears the eligibility threshold. This procedure is repeated in the order of the party list until half the number of list votes cast is depleted.[5] In the third step, then, remaining seats are assigned to candidates with the largest number of preference votes

irrespective of their position on the party list. The decision, taken in 2000, to redistribute only half of the list votes cast has significantly reduced the influence of a candidate's list position and increased the weight of preference votes. Between 1945 and 1991 no more than 23 of the 3,382 members of the Chamber of Representatives have been elected in defiance of the party's ranking (Dewachter, 2003). In recent elections, by contrast, the share of elected representatives leapfrogging past higher-ranked co-partisans always exceeds 10% (Wauters & Weekers, 2008; Wauters et al., 2004). The growing effectiveness of preference votes in determining the order of intra-party seat allocation is also related to voters' increased use of preference voting. Figure 1 depicts the trend lines for the elections of the bicameral federal parliament since 1919.[6] The share of the electorate casting a preference vote grew steadily from less than one-fifth after the First World War to more than half in the 1980s to approximately two-thirds after the turn of century. The number of voters deciding to indicate a candidate preference in regional elections is very comparable. About 60% of the Flemish and 62% of the Walloon voters casting a valid vote indicated a candidate preference in 2009.

The impact of preference votes on the order in which candidates are elected is not only contingent upon the degree to which voters utilize their possibility to alter the party's predetermined list ranking, however. It also depends to a large extent on party magnitude, and this brings us back to the reasons why the Belgian case is interesting to analyse. Preference votes become more decisive as the number of seats a party wins in a given electoral district grows. No more than a few well-known politicians are able to reach the eligibility threshold on their own. Candidates can get elected in defiance of the list order with fewer than the minimum required number of preference votes, but only if there remain seats to be allocated after the supply
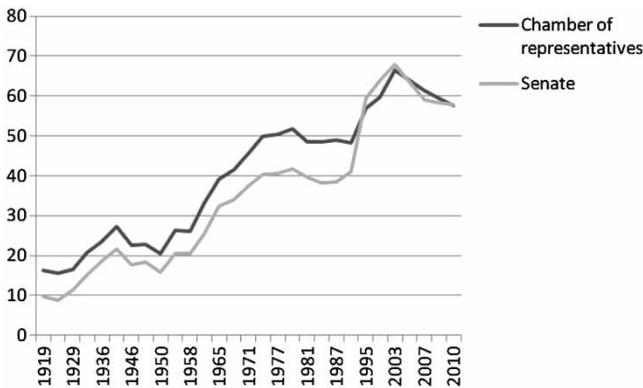
Figure 1.   Percentage of Belgian voters casting a preferential vote since 1919 (based on official election results).
Note: regional parliaments are only directly elected since 1995 and figures closely resemble those of national elections. Therefore, and for a better readability, figures on preferential votes for regional elections are not included in Figure 1.

of list votes is exhausted. District magnitude is the key determinant of party magnitude. The 124 members of the Flemish parliament are elected in six districts ranging in magnitude from six to 33 seats in Brussels and Antwerp. The 75 members of the Walloon parliament are elected in 13 districts ranging in magnitude from two in Neufchâteau-Virton to 13 seats in Liège. Party magnitude therefore tends to be smaller in Wallonia, but the number of parties gaining seats to some extent counterbalances the difference: in the Flemish parliament eight parties are represented compared to four parties in the Walloon parliament. In Antwerp, for instance, the largest party (the Christian Democratic CD&V) has won eight seats, two of which are allocated in the first stage, three in the second stage and three in the last stage. In Liège, party magnitude amounts up to six seats. In smaller districts, preference votes are therefore of very limited influence on who is actually elected. They only have an indirect influence in allowing parties to evaluate the popularity of candidates, which might affect the assignment of government positions and/or the reselection for future elections (Ackaert, 1996). It is precisely this variation in party magnitude which renders Belgium's regional elections an interesting case to evaluate the instrumental model.

Finally, the PARTIREP survey in itself is also of strong interest. First, it includes extensive questions on voters' use of preference votes and on motivations underlying their candidate choice. Moreover, in contrast with other election studies in Belgium, data from the PARTIREP Election Study are easily and rapidly accessible to the community of scholars.

4.　Disentangling Voters' Decision to Choose among Candidates

The goal of this article is to understand voters' decision to cast a preference vote rather than a list vote. The dependent variable is operationalized as a dichotomous indicator coded "1" for respondents that have cast a preference vote and "0" for those that have cast a list vote. The share of voters expressing their candidate choice equals 54% in the sample – compared to about 60% in the population. The outcome variable is best analysed by means of binomial logistic regression models. We account for the non-independence of observations within the same electoral district by computing robust standard errors clustered at the district level. Doing so decreases the probability of concluding that particular explanatory variables have a statistically significant effect when this is in fact not the case (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). The data are weighted according to province, age, gender, education, occupation and party preference to correct for possible sampling effects.

The analysis will proceed in two steps. The three explanatory models of preference voting (resource, proximity and instrumental) will first be looked at each in turn to assess their isolated effect on voters' likelihood of casting a preference vote. Next, we examine their combined effect. To ascertain that the results are not driven by regional differences, all models include a regional parliament dummy as control. More details on the exact operationalization of the explanatory variables and their summary statistics are provided in Appendix 1. The estimated logistic regression

coefficients of the individual effects, their standard errors and measures of model fit are presented in Table 2, their combined effect in Table 3. In non-linear models, however, the magnitude of the estimated change in the probability of a positive outcome caused by a change in an independent variable cannot easily be read off from that variable's coefficient (Brambor et al., 2006). Table 2 therefore reports the estimated predicted probability of casting a preference vote for the minimum and maximum observed values of each explanatory variable while holding all other variables constant (Long & Freese, 2006).

According to the resource model, indicating a preference for individual candidates on the ballot paper is assumed to be a more sophisticated voting behaviour that, as a consequence, should be more widespread among politically sophisticated voters (Marsh, 1985). Table 2 provides strong evidence for the hypothesis that voters' levels of political interest guide their actions in the polling booth. Respondents showing low levels of political awareness appear to be unwilling to expend much time and effort learning about candidates. They are approximately 20% less likely to cast a preference vote than those feeling strongly about politics and policies. On the contrary, evidence that political resources as reflected by voters' socio-economic status and demographic characteristics condition the use of preference voting is less convincing.[7] In particular, the probability of expressing a candidate choice is not significantly lower among lower-educated, unemployed and working class citizens even though preference voting is more cognitively taxing than ticking the box at the top of a party list. Nor are women less inclined to acquire and process information about candidates than men. Age, by contrast, clearly has consequences for the mode of voting. The probability of casting a preference vote is almost 30% lower among first-time voters than among 80-year-olds: not only are older age groups more experienced with the electoral process, they are also more aware of the political alternatives offered on the list they support.

The proximity model, on the other hand, is predicated on the assumption that citizens' propensity to make use of the option to express a preference vote is linked to their familiarity with the candidates running for elections. Interpersonal relations and mediated intimacy with candidates increase the trustworthiness of these would-be representatives in the eyes of voters and trust in turn is a necessary condition for political support. The results presented in Table 2 confirm the theoretical expectations. First, media-driven feelings of proximity encourage candidate-based voting behaviour: the likelihood of casting a preference vote is 16% higher when in a voter's district a party leader or government minister occupies the top position on the list of his/her preferred party. Moreover, direct personal familiarity with candidates further increases the use voters make of preference votes both at the aggregate and the individual level. At the aggregate level, candidate-based voting is found to be significantly more common among people living in sparsely populated rural areas with a small social distance between citizens and politicians, whereas a sense of urban anonymity tends to encourage list voting. At the individual level, people seem to reward service responsiveness on the part of politicians: voters that have contacted a politician about a personal grievance are about 10% more likely to cast a

Table 2.

Table 2. The individual effects of resources, proximity and instrumental motivations

	Resource model		Proximity model		Instrumental model		Pred. Prob.	
	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)	min.	max.
political interest	0.091	(0.033)***					0.47	0.69
education	−0.003	(0.035)					0.58	0.57
unemployed	0.162	(0.176)					0.57	0.61
working class	−0.002	(0.177)					0.57	0.57
age	0.017	(0.004)***					0.45	0.73
female	−0.031	(0.140)					0.57	0.57
contact over casework			0.429	(0.235)*			0.47	0.58
level of urbanization			−0.128	(0.064)**			0.50	0.35
interest group membership			0.435	(0.116)***			0.47	0.58
party membership			1.078	(0.263)***			0.47	0.72
party leader or minister on list			0.639	(0.185)***			0.47	0.63
party magnitude					0.129	(0.049)***	0.50	0.74
Flemish parliament	−0.232	(0.173)	−0.288	(0.159)*	−0.483	(0.241)**		
constant	−0.881	(0.413)**	−0.128	(0.136)	0.017	(0.138)		

(*Continued*)

Table 2.   (*Continued*)

	Resource model		Proximity model		Instrumental model		Pred. Prob.	
	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)	min.	max.
N	1,482		1,482		1,482			
log pseudo-likelihood	−931.69		−923.28		−947.51			
LR(df)	54.54	(7)***	71.37	(6)***	22.91	(2)***		
Nagelkerke r²	0.05		0.07		0.02			
mean Variance Inflation Factor	1.14		1.44		1.05			

Note: T
the table displays logistic regression coefficients and standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$, using two-tailed t-values. To compute the predicted probabilities continuous variables were fixed at their mean values and all dichotomous variables were set to zero.

Table 3. The combined effect of resources, proximity and instrumental motivations

	Combined model		Pred. Prob.	
	b.	(s.e.)	min.	max.
political interest	0.081	(0.031)***	0.42	0.62
education	−0.005	(0.035)	0.53	0.51
unemployed	0.145	(0.120)	0.52	0.55
working class	−0.021	(0.181)	0.52	0.51
age	0.014	(0.004)***	0.42	0.65
female	−0.082	(0.141)	0.52	0.50
contact over casework	0.369	(0.211)*	0.52	0.61
level of urbanization	−0.163	(0.070)**	0.56	0.35
interest group membership	0.303	(0.112)***	0.52	0.59
party membership	0.903	(0.271)***	0.52	0.73
party leader or minister on list	0.518	(0.154)***	0.52	0.64
party magnitude	0.060	(0.030)**	0.47	0.59
Flemish parliament	−0.415	(0.173)**	0.52	0.41
constant	−1.122	(0.423)***		
N	1,482			
log pseudo-likelihood	−903.67			
LR(df)	110.59	(13)***		
Nagelkerke r^2	0.10			
mean Variance Inflation Factor	1.29			

Note: the table displays logistic regression coefficients and standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$;
** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$, using two-tailed t-values.

preference vote than those that have not. In addition, marking candidates on the ballot paper is more widespread among citizens that are actively involved in associational life. Organized interests are not only easier to target in election campaigns, interest group activism is often a stepping stone towards a political career and therefore interest groups provide an arena to become familiar with (future) politicians. But even more than citizen activists, members of political parties seize the opportunity to differentiate among candidates: the predicted probability of casting a preference vote markedly increases from 0.47 for the politically unengaged to 0.72 for party members. By supporting individual candidates, party members may seek to affect the intra-party balance of power.

The third regression model included in Table 2 tests the instrumental rationality underlying preference voting. It is the assumption that voters are more likely to mark one or more individual candidates on their ballot paper when preference votes become more effective in determining which candidates are ultimately sent to parliament. As explained in detail above, the actual effect of preference votes critically depends on the number of seats a party wins in a district. The transfer of list

votes to the highest-ranked candidates hampers the influence of preference votes when party magnitude is small. The analysis indeed reveals a positive and statistically significant relation between voters' likelihood of casting a preference vote and the party magnitude of their preferred party. An increase in party magnitude from one to eight seats increases the predicted probability of choosing among candidates by almost 25%.

We now turn to combined effect of the resource, proximity and instrumental models in predicting voters' propensity to cast one or more preference votes. The coefficients displayed in Table 3 by and large confirm each separate model's effects, both in terms of the magnitude and the statistical significance of the obtained effects. In particular, familiarity with candidates and the actual effect of preference votes on the order of intra-party seat allocation do significantly increase the probability to cast a preference vote even after controlling for voters' resources. Moreover, these effects are not merely driven by regional differences between Flanders and Wallonia regarding, for example, the smaller magnitude of districts in Wallonia than in Flanders, or the more strict regulation of casework in Flanders. The region dummy only picks up part of the effect of this variable, and elements of the three models tested in this article remain significant.

To further corroborate the robustness of our findings, additional controls have been added to the combined model. As displayed in Appendix 2, including voters' ideological views and levels of political trust on the one hand and party choice on the other does not alter our conclusions.[8] Nor do these variables affect voters' likelihood of selecting individual candidates on the ballot paper. Confidence in the results is further increased by adding district-specific fixed effects to the model: the conclusions hold even after controlling for the impact of plausible alternative district-level determinants.[9]

Taken together, however, the capacity of the existing theoretical models for explaining voters' use of preference voting is modest at best. Only 10% of the variance in the dependent variable is captured. In other words, the resource, proximity and instrumental models tell us an important part of the story. But the large amount of unexplained variance seems to suggest that some key factors shaping voters' propensity to indicate a candidate preference are omitted from the analysis. This might inflict a bias on the results by increasing the possibility that some of the coefficients are under- or overestimated. To address this issue, future research will have to dig deeper into the motivations underlying voters' candidate choice in order to identify the missing pieces of the puzzle and improve the analytical model.

5. Conclusion

This article contributes to the rapidly developing body of literature on the alleged personalization of politics by studying voters' decision to indicate a preference for one or more candidates when the much simpler option of endorsing the party list is also available. Taking cues from studies of political participation, representation and cognitive psychology, it distils three theoretical models plausibly explaining voters' use

of preference voting. The *resource model* conceives candidate-based voting as a sophisticated political behaviour used more frequently by politically interested and well-resourced voters. The *proximity model* assumes that a preference vote is an indication of a closer relation between voters and candidates – either through direct or mediated contact. The *instrumental model* emphasizes that voters' propensity to choose among candidates is a function of the effectiveness of preference votes in determining the ultimate composition of parliament.

Belgium offers an excellent case to assess the empirical value of the three theoretical models in explaining voters' likelihood of casting a preference vote. Using data from the PARTIREP Election Study held on the occasion of the 2009 regional elections in Flanders and Wallonia, it was demonstrated that voters' political interest, their familiarity with candidates and the impact their voting decision has on the order in which candidates are elected do account for variation in the type of vote citizens mark on their ballot paper. The models, however, perform poorly in terms of the proportion of overall variance that could be explained. Two possible conclusions may flow from this observation: either preference voting is a largely idiosyncratic phenomenon that cannot be deciphered or important explanatory factors are overlooked by the current state of knowledge.

Subsequent research on voters' use of preference voting therefore would not only benefit from a replication of this study in other countries that offer voters the choice between casting a list vote and selecting particular candidates within a party list. Scholars should take one step back and concentrate on reconstructing voters' decision making processes at election time. In-depth interviews and experimental designs will prove particularly valuable in trying to reveal what voters look for in representatives and what traits or behaviours they reward or sanction. Only when gained a deeper understanding of the motivations underlying voters' candidate choice will we be able to generate new hypotheses for future testing.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The same reasoning holds for ethnic minorities. Citizens belong to an ethnic minority lack conventional political resources, but they are more likely to identify with and vote for candidates with a foreign origin (Berg & Bjorklund, 2011; Teney et al., 2010). However, ethnic minority voters are excluded from the

analytical framework because their strong underrepresentation in our sample does not allow reliable statistical analyses.

2. The region of Brussels has been excluded from the PARTIREP Election Study due to the cost of bilingual interviewers and the difficulty of conducting survey research in urban areas. The number of eligible voters in Brussels only amounts to 7% of the country's total, moreover. Detailed information on the survey can be found at www.partirep.eu.

3. Before the introduction of multiple preference votes in 1995, voters could only support a single candidate within the list they voted for.

4. In Flanders, the D'Hondt divisor is applied in each of the six districts for lists having passed the 5% threshold. Wallonia uses a more complex two-tiered system. Direct seats are first allocated in 13 lower-tier districts. Remainder seats are then allocated in five upper-tier districts to lists that have won at least two-thirds of the Hare quota in one of the lower-tier districts.

5. To be comprehensive, the list votes transferred to the highest-ranked effective candidates also comprise (half of) the ballots cast for substitute candidates only.

6. An analysis over time for the regional assemblies does not make sense as they are only directly elected since the 1993 state reform.

7. No multi-collinearity among the set of predictors can be observed: the mean variance inflation factor (VIF) of the resource model is as low as 1.14.

8. The party dummies capture the difference between large and small parties and as a consequence the effect of party magnitude logically disappears.

9. The only minor differences when adding district-specific fixed effects is the relatively lower impact of the degree of urbanization. The effect of the degree of urbanization in the fixed effects model still has the expected sign but no longer reaches statistical significance because some districts are more rural than others.

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Appendix 1

Table A1.   Operationalization and summary statistics of the independent variables

Variable	Operationalization	min.	max.	mean	s.d.
Resource model					
political interest	scale ranging from no interest in politics at all to very interested in politics	0	10	4.59	2.53
education	scale ranging from no education to university degree	0	10	6.44	2.61
social class	respondents below retiring age (65) reporting to be currently unemployed	0	1	0.15	
	respondents reporting to be labourer as their main occupation	0	1	0.16	
age	measured in years	18	88	47.43	17.24
sex	female	0	1	0.51	
Proximity model					
contact over casework	contacted a politician about a personal grievance in the previous four years	0	1	0.09	
level of urbanization	population density of the place of residence in number of inhabitants per km^2 (z-score)	37.34	3303.09	728.21	667.36
interest group membership	active member of an interest organization (e.g. women's movement, third world organization or labour union)	0	1	0.20	
party membership	member of a political party	0	1	0.06	
party leader or minister on list	party leader or cabinet member included on the list of a respondent's preferred party	0	1	0.45	
Instrumental model					
party magnitude	number of seats a party list has won in the district	0	8	3.32	2.16

Appendix 2

<p align="center">Table A2.   Robustness test of the combined model</p>

	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)
political interest	0.082	(.028)***	0.078	(0.030)***
education	−0.005	(.036)	−0.018	(0.035)
unemployed	0.118	(.180)	0.203	(0.164)
working class	0.046	(.172)	−0.018	(0.173)
age	0.014	(.004)***	0.011	(0.004)***
female	−0.094	(.148)	−0.164	(0.142)
contact over casework	0.346	(.218)	0.318	(0.198)
level of urbanization	−0.157	(.071)**	−0.117	(0.060)*
interest group membership	0.301	(.122)**	0.265	(0.120)**
party membership	0.867	(.281)***	0.864	(0.275)***
party leader or minister on list	0.548	(.170)***	0.430	(0.141)***
party magnitude	0.058	(.031)*	0.022	(0.049)
Flemish parliament	−0.404	(.171)**	−0.634	(0.314)**
left−right self-placement	−0.049	(.030)		
political trust	0.008	(.053)		
Flemish parties (ref. Green)				
socialist (sp.a)			0.545	(0.301)*
Christian Democrat (CD&V)			0.818	(0.526)
liberal (Open VLD)			0.525	(0.337)
extreme right (VB)			0.086	(0.537)
regionalist (N-VA)			0.113	(0.323)
Lijst Dedecker			0.456	(0.413)
Walloon parties (ref. Green)				
socialist (PS)			0.025	(0.256)
Christian Democrat (CDH)			0.591	(0.357)*
liberal (MR)			0.242	(0.331)
extreme right (FN)			-1.872	(1.074)*
constant	−0.948	(0.430)**	−0.872	(0.540)

<p align="right">(Continued)</p>

Table A2. (*Continued*)

	b.	(s.e.)	b.	(s.e.)
N	1,456		1,482	
log pseudo-likelihood	−879.58		−888.03	
LR(df)	111.97	(15)***	141.88	(16)***
Nagelkerke r^2	10.2		12.6	
mean Variance Inflation Factor	1.28		2.47	

Note: the table displays logistic regression coefficients and standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$, using two-tailed t-values.