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THE FUTURE IS IMAGINATION, THE PRESENT IS REALITY: WHY DO BIG RULING PARTIES OPPOSE MAJORITY SYSTEMS? A BELGIAN CASE STUDY

Jean-Benoit Pilet

To most, electoral reforms are motivated by the self-interest of parties. They compare the outcome of several electoral rules and choose the one that maximises their share of seats. The problem with this 'seat-maximising' or 'office-seeking' model is that it does not explain why electoral reforms are rare. In most countries, status quo is the favoured option for parties. If parties were simply guided by the hope of gaining extra seats, we would expect to observe more reform proposals. The reason for the stability of electoral rules is that parties are not always 'bankers'; they are sometimes 'peasants'. Before going into a risky reform, they will first assess how satisfied they are with the extant electoral laws. Only those that are dissatisfied with the political influence they have will push for a reform.

Introduction

After decades spent studying the effects of electoral systems, political scientists have recently turned to the issue of the conditions under which electoral systems are adopted and reformed. Recent contributions to the literature have given us a better insight into why an electoral reform is promoted. To most, electoral reforms are motivated by the self-interest of political actors (Bowler et al. 2006). For authors such as Benoit (2004) or Boix (1999), parties are first and foremost strategic actors looking for electoral rules that would increase their power in general and their seat share in particular. Parties compare the outcomes of several electoral rules and go for the one that maximises their political influence.

However, the main problem with this model is that it does not account for the stability of most electoral laws. As Reeve and Ware have clearly stated, 'Despite the infinite variety of electoral systems and their importance in allocating values in a society, in most regimes, electoral systems tend not to be changed very often or very radically. Particular electoral systems are maintained even when elites forming the government change' (Reeve and Ware 1992).

But why would electoral laws tend to be immutable given the fact that the ruling party has high incentives to amend them to its advantage? Why would a ruling party not aim at 'structuring the world as you can win' (Riker 1986, 9)? Part of this answer can be found in the debate that occurred in the 1990s in Belgium about a potential shift from PR to majority run-off elections. This reform was pushed by the Liberal parties (VLD and PRL) once they were on the opposition benches. The ruling coalition rejected their proposal.

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0 Such hostility can be easily understood when it comes to the Flemish Socialists (SP) and for 0
 the Francophone Christian Democrats (PSC). Both score around 20 per cent of the votes
 and therefore fear losing most of their parliamentary representation under majority
 elections. Yet for the two other ruling parties – Flemish Christian Democrats (CVP) and
 5 Francophone Socialists (PS) – the issue is less straightforward. Why do they oppose the
 shift to majority elections even if they could expect to increase their share of seats under a 5
 majoritarian system?

The explanation is that, before looking at the potential gains of an electoral reform,
 parties first consider how the current legislation works. Uncertainty surrounding
 10 simulations of the allocation of seats among parties if a reform were passed tends to
 be too high. Therefore only parties dissatisfied with the current electoral law will consider 10
 the potential outcomes of a new electoral rule in terms of the allocation of seats. Parties
 satisfied with the current legislation do not run such simulations. They would prefer to
 maintain a safe status quo they are satisfied with than to speculate in order to accumulate.
 15 To coin a phrase, they act as ‘peasants’ and not as ‘bankers’ (MacKuen et al. 1992). 15

Electoral Reforms Guided by Self-Interest

19 In the last ten years, several articles and books have been published to answer a
 20 single question: how can we explain the support or the opposition of a political actor to
 electoral reform? The most frequently given answer is that one has to look at the strategic
 interest actors have in supporting the reform. More precisely, ‘the ruling political parties,
 anticipating the (varying) effects of different electoral regimes, choose the regime that
 25 maximises their chances of staying in power’ (Boix 1999, 611). Political actors run
 simulations of the impact of various electoral rules, including the one currently in force, on
 the allocation of seats among parties. With these simulations in mind, parties rank reform 25
 plans, favouring the one that maximises their share of seats (Benoit 2004). This logic is
 usually referred as ‘office-seeking’ or ‘seat-maximising’. When an actor can expect to
 increase its power by reforming the electoral system, it would definitely be pro-reform. On
 30 the contrary, if it fears losing power in case of reform, it would strongly oppose any
 amendment to the electoral system. Some amendments to this theory have mentioned
 that parties are not only seat-seeking. First, they may also be vote-seeking players and
 support any electoral reform making them gaining more votes (Reed and Thies 2001).
 Second, parties may also be office-seeking, pushing for the electoral system that would
 35 maximise their chance of being in government to influence policies (Bawn 1993). 35

The problem with these approaches based on power-maximisation is that we should
 observe much more electoral reform than we actually do. If electoral reforms were only
 guided by the hope of ruling parties to increase their share of seats, they should be
 frequent. In particular, in countries with single-party government, manipulating the
 40 electoral law in order to favour the ruling party is not that complicated. Even in countries
 governed by coalitions of party, such manipulation is not that difficult to effect. Yet the
 first thing that strikes one about electoral reforms is their scarcity (Nohlen 1984). Even if
 electoral system change is increasing in recent decades, we still observe fewer of them
 that we would expect given the seat-maximising model. Their rarity is even more striking if
 45 changes in the electoral formula are taken into account. Countries shifting from PR
 systems to mixed or majority formulas are exceptional. And there are hardly more 45

0 countries shifting from majority rule to PR or mixed systems. Amendments to the seat-maximising model are therefore needed to account for the stability of electoral laws. 0

The Belgian Context

5 The Belgian case helps us to amend the seat-maximising model. Since 1899, elections at all levels (federal, regional, provincial and local) have been organised under PR (D'Hondt, semi-open lists). For about a century, PR was only marginally contested. But in the early 1990s, two major parties opened the debate about the electoral formula. At that time, the Flemish Liberals (VLD) and the Francophone Liberals (PRL) proposed a shift from PR to majority two-round run-off elections. In the early 1990s, the president of the Flemish Liberals, Guy Verhofstadt, publicly declared on several occasions a preference for majority formula or at least for mixed systems such as the one adopted in 1993 in Italy. In 1993, the president of the Francophone Liberals, Jean Gol, made the same statement. In 1995, some Liberal MPs submitted a bill to the federal parliament to revise the Belgian Constitution in order to introduce majority systems for federal elections in Belgium. 15

Their proposal was opposed by all other parties. The governing majority from 1991 to 1999 composed of the Flemish Socialists (SP), Francophone Socialists (PS), Flemish Christian Democrats (CVP) and Francophone Christian Democrats (PSC) refused to discuss the proposal in parliament. The Flemish Greens (Agalev), the Francophone Greens (Ecolo), the Flemish nationalists (Volkunie-VU) and the Flemish extreme right (Vlaams Blok) who were in the opposition along with the liberals did not support a shift to majority rule. 20

Facing this opposition, the VLD and the PRL maintained support for reform until the end of the 1990s. After 1999, when they returned to power in coalition with the Socialists (PS and SP) and the Greens (Ecolo and Agalev), they proposed opening the discussion in the federal parliament. A parliamentary committee was established in 2000 to discuss a potential reform of the Belgian electoral law, but the liberals failed to persuade other parties. They finally gave up in the early 2000s. 25

Big Ruling Parties Opposing a Shift to Majority Elections

30 The positions of all Belgian parties on a shift to majority run-off elections are summed up in Table 1. The picture is clear: all parties oppose this reform except the two Liberal parties (VLD and PRL). What is particularly interesting is the position of the two biggest parties, the PS and CVP. According to the seat-maximising model, their opposition to a shift to majority system should be explained by their fear of losing some seats in case of reform. In order to test this model, we need to evaluate what would be the allocation of seats under majority systems in the 1990s. This exercise was carried out by Delwit (2000), whose simulation of majority elections in Belgium was attached to the report given to the parliamentary committee on electoral reforms. Therefore Belgian parties had his work in mind when evaluating the impact of a potential shift to majority systems. The results of Delwit's simulation of majority election are also summed up in Table 1. 40

Delwit has tested what would be the allocation of seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 1995 and 1999 under a French-style two-round majority run-off. Before presenting these figures, a preliminary remark is required. The Belgian political system is divided into two political systems: Flanders and Wallonia (the French-speaking part of the country). Flemish parties compete for elections in Flanders and in Brussels. Francophone parties compete for 45

TABLE 1

Positions of Belgian Parties on a shift to majority elections, and simulation of majority election outcomes for the Chamber of Deputies, 1995 and 1999

Parties	Attitudes towards a reform	Two-round majority		PR as applied	
		1995	1999	1995	1999
CVP	Against	74	64	29	22
VLD	Pro	3	19	21	23
SP	Against	12	6	20	14
Vlaams Blok	Against	0	0	11	15
Volksunie	Against	0	0	5	8
Agalev	Against	0	0	5	9
PS	Against	33	39	21	19
PRL-FDF	Pro	18	16	18	18
PSC	Against	10	6	12	10
Ecolo	Against	0	0	6	11
FN	Against	0	0	2	1
Total		150	150	150	150

Source: Delwit, 2000.

elections in Wallonia and in Brussels. This division produces a political system with a high number of parties, since each political family (liberals, socialists, Christian democrats, greens and so on) is represented by one party in each linguistic community. In that context, any analysis of the electoral strength should treat Flemish and Francophone parties separately.

Having this element in mind, from Delwit's work, Belgian parties can be grouped into three categories. First, the smaller parties such as Ecolo, Agalev, VU, Vlaams Blok, FN, SP and PSC would lose most, if not all, of their parliamentary representation if elections were held under majority systems. They would be the losers from a shift from PR to majority elections. The second group is made up of the two liberal parties. Both the VLD and the PRL(-FDF) would approximately maintain their share of seats in case of reform. However, they would be the second party in Flanders and Wallonia. The VLD would be behind the CVP in Flanders while the PRL would be behind the PS in Wallonia. The third group is made of the PS and the CVP. The two parties would be the biggest winner were Belgium to shift to majority elections. The CVP would be far ahead of all parties in Flanders and the PS would be in the same position in Wallonia. Therefore, they would be the two parties in power.

These figures make clear that the opposition of the PS and the CVP to a shift to majority system cannot be explained by the seat-maximising model. According to Delwit's simulation, a reform in this direction would see them gaining extra seats. Moreover, from interviews conducted with leaders of the two parties, it appears that they were fully aware of the potential for gain. According to Jean-Luc Dehaene (CVP – Belgian prime minister 1991–9), 'the CVP should not be the strongest opponent as we know we would be favoured by a reform' (interview, 21 September 2005). Philippe Busquin (president of the PS 1992–9) was also optimistic: 'We were pretty sure that in most of Wallonia the socialists would be the winner of a majority election' (interview, 6 December 2005).

If the PS and the CVP could expect to gain extra seats if Belgium had shifted to majority elections and if the leaders of the two parties were aware of it, why did they

0 prefer to maintain PR? Their positions clearly illustrate the contradiction between the seat-maximising model and the stability of electoral laws. 0

Explaining Non-Strategic Attitudes

5 The preference of both the PS and the CVP for the PR status quo can be explained if we add a preliminary step in the way political parties evaluate the opportunity of electoral reforms. This preliminary step helps us understand why the status quo is the favoured option. 5

10 The fact is that parties considering a potential electoral reform do not start by looking to the future and assessing its impact. Before that, they evaluate the desirability of a reform by looking back, by assessing how the current electoral legislation performs. In that sense, they first act as 'peasants' and not as 'bankers' (MacKuen et al. 1992). Peasants define their attitudes by considering their present experiences. They do not rely upon expectations of an undefined future. 'Bankers', however, are 'indifferent about the past except as it portends the future' (ibid., 597). 10

15 Applying this metaphor to the Belgian case can help us understand the apparently non-strategic attitudes from the PS and the CVP. Rather than running simulations presenting the potential impact of a shift to majority system, they evaluate the actual impact of the system currently in place on their political influence. 15

20 The reason why they first act as 'peasants' and not as 'bankers' is because evaluating the outcomes of an electoral reform is highly difficult. As Brady and Mo state, 'parties' calculations of their electoral interests [as affected by electoral reforms] are subject to many forms of uncertainty, including uncertainty on the outcome of the elections to be held under the negotiated electoral system' (Brady and Mo 1992, 406). Therefore, before looking at the future, parties seek something more reliable and that is the present, namely the way the current electoral law is working. 20

25 The reluctance to rely upon simulations of the impact of new electoral formulas has been confirmed by Jean-Luc Dehaene (CVP, prime minister 1991-9): 'All these simulations are wrong. You cannot rely upon them. They assume that the distribution of votes for the coming elections would be equivalent to the ones of the last elections. Of course it is not the case. Therefore, reality is most of time different from these simulations' (interview, 21 September 2005). Dehaene's words remind us of those of MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson when they wrote that 'for peasants the future is imagination, the present is reality' (MacKuen et al. 1992, 597). 25

30 Being reluctant to define their attitudes about an electoral reform using only simulations of an uncertain future, parties start by assessing the way the current electoral law works. More precisely, they evaluate how satisfied they are with the current electoral law. They do not take into account their satisfaction with democracy at large (Bowler et al. 2006) but their satisfaction with the functioning of the electoral system. Does the current legislation, in this case PR, satisfy them? Does it give them enough power, enough political influence? A party satisfied with the current electoral system will not support a reform. Being satisfied with the status quo, it will not take on the risk of a reform with unpredictable outcomes on the allocation of seats, or as Colomer said '[parties] are not risk-prone, thus preferring a secure partial victory to betting on a relatively low probability of total victory with the chance that it could end in total defeat' (Colomer, 2005, 2). 30

45 45

The attitude of the PS and the CVP illustrates this idea that parties first look at the way the current electoral law works before they contemplate simulations of a potential reform. The two parties are satisfied with the way PR works in Belgium, with the political influence they have. As shown in Table 1, under PR, they are the first parties in their region (Flanders for the CVP and Wallonia for the PS). Moreover, they have been part of most governmental coalitions since the Second World War (see Table 2). In the last 40 years, the Socialists have been in power for 32 years. The Christian Democrats have been constantly in power since 1945 except from 1954 to 1958 and since 1999. Their long-term presence in government explains why they are satisfied with the way PR works. Being satisfied, they are not ready to take on the risk of a move to majority elections even if simulations predict they could increase their share of seats.

Table 2 is also valuable in understanding the attitudes of the promoters of the shift to majority elections: the Liberals of the VLD and PRL. Like the PS and the CVP, the two parties have first considered if they are satisfied with the way PR works in Belgium. Unlike the PS and the CVP, the answer was negative for the PRL and the VLD. The Liberals are dissatisfied with the way PR works. They perceive themselves to be the losers of proportional representation. According to both the VLD and the PRL, PR tends to exclude them from government more often than it includes them. During the 1990s, when the Liberals pushed for majority systems, they were in the opposition (from 1991 to 1999). Being dissatisfied, they were ready to consider a reform.

At that point, excluded parties take into account the impact of a change in the electoral law on their political influence. They will start acting as 'bankers'. If we look at the literature, several elements may feed into the process and determine whether electoral rules have to be modified. According to Benoit (2004), they will consider the impact of a reform on the allocation of seats among parties. For Bawn (1993), parties will also evaluate how a change in the electoral formula would affect the composition of government. For instance, in the case of the two Liberal parties, their hope was to gain more seats and to be part of the executive more often in the long run. The VLD and the PRL understood that simulations such as the one performed by Delwit predicted they would lose some seats and be the second party in Flanders and Wallonia far behind the CVP and the PS. The risk of being sent into the opposition for a while was high. Yet they hoped that in the long run, they would be able to bipolarise the Belgian party systems. The Liberals would be the

TABLE 2
Presence in government of parties (1945–2006)

Parties	Proportion of time spent in government since 1945
CD&V	82.0%
VLD	47.5%
SP.A	65.6%
Vlaams Belang	0%
Voksunie	8.2%
Groen!	6.6%
PS	65.6%
MR	47.5%
CDH	82.0%
Ecolo	6.6%
FN	0%

0 spinal column of a right-wing bloc. In that system, parties alternate in government. 0
Therefore the Liberals hoped that, in the long term, they would be back in power as
dominant party on one side of the spectrum. These hopes were made clear by some
Liberal leaders. Charles Michel (vice-president of the Francophone Liberals since 2005)
explained: 'In the short-run, the majority system would be in favour of the Socialists. But, in
5 the long-run, we can expect the PS to be penalised and the right would get the majority' 5
(interview, 31 August 2005).

A multitude of other determinants can play a role at this stage, such as ideology
(Bowler et al. 2006). Some would argue that the individualist and neo-liberal nature of the
Liberals lead them to support electoral rules reducing the influence of parties as organised
10 groups. In that sense, the Liberals would prefer candidate-centred mechanisms than party- 10
centred ones (Gaxie 1990).

But that is not the point of this article. The point here is to demonstrate that a
preliminary step is missing in converted models trying to explain how parties define their
position on electoral reform. This point is that a party will first evaluate how the current
15 legislation works before going into simulations of an uncertain future. Electoral system 15
changes can no longer be studied by making simulations of the impact of alternative
electoral rules, expecting that parties will simply support the one that maximises their
share of seats. Parties start by looking at the way the current legislation works. If they are
satisfied, they will not trust simulations of electoral reforms. They would rather defend the
20 status quo. Only parties dissatisfied with the actual legislation will seriously evaluate 20
alternative electoral systems. It explains why the status quo tends to be the favourite
option of most actors involved in electoral reforms.

To some extent, these considerations were already present in the works of authors
such as Riker (1986) and Andrews and Jackman (2005). They explain that perpetual losers
25 support electoral reforms while winners tend to defend the existing rules. Yet, there are 25
some differences that make 'satisfaction' more accurate than 'losing' as the key to
understanding the attitudes of parties to electoral reforms. Firstly, 'satisfaction' can be
applied to elections under both majority and PR formulas. 'Losing' is less evident in PR
systems as there is rarely a clear winner with a majority of seats that therefore immediately
30 forms a government. Secondly, parties can lose seats and still be satisfied with the 30
electoral law. For example, the CVP has constantly lost votes and seats in the last decades
(Figure 1). However, as long as the party remained in government (see Table 2), the ³
Christian Democrats were satisfied with the way PR works in Belgium.

In contrast, a party can be winning seats and still feel dissatisfied about the current
35 electoral legislation. For example, in 1995, the VLD won two extra seats (see Table 1). 35
Yet the party was dissatisfied with the way PR works and therefore pushed for a shift to
majority elections. Even if the time spent in government is taken into account, parties that
are in office most of the time can be dissatisfied with the electoral law. For example, the
Liberals have been in government for about 30 years since 1945 (see Table 2). Yet they are
40 dissatisfied with PR and consider that they are disadvantaged by coalition governments. 40
These examples show that 'satisfaction' is not analogous to 'losing' and 'winning' elections
and that 'satisfaction' better explains the attitude of a given party about a potential
electoral reform.

The problem, of course, is that 'satisfaction' is more complicated to operationalise
45 than 'losing' and 'winning'. Being satisfied with an electoral law is a subjective feeling. In 45
our research we have studied it through face-to-face interviews with top politicians. The

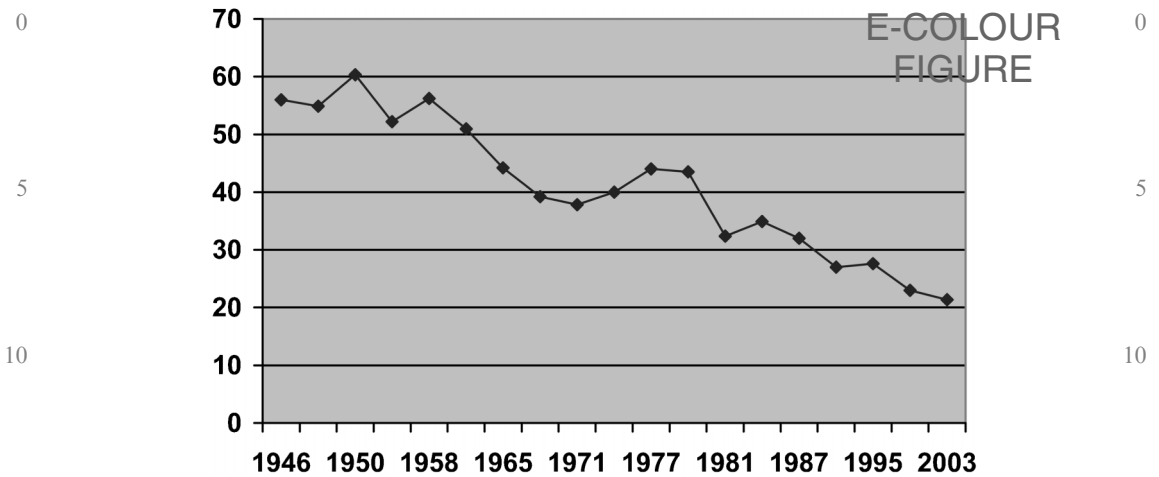


FIGURE 1
Electoral results (%) of the CVP in Flanders

problem is that this is a highly time-consuming method. Another possible way to investigate satisfaction is to work with questionnaires sent to MPs. This method would allow us to tap the views of more political actors in more countries, even given the problems of response rate. In that sense, it is probably the way to pursue comparative research on the impact of satisfaction in electoral reforms.

Conclusion

In recent years, a new field has been open in political science: the politics of electoral reform. The central issue in this field is to understand what leads to the adoption of new electoral rules, what are the motivations of reformers. In most research, electoral reforms are analysed as guided by politicians' self-interest. More precisely, electoral system changes are seen to be pushed by those expecting to increase their power in case of reform (Boix 1999). Most of time, parties' self-interest is analysed by evaluating the outcome of an amendment to the electoral law. Those who can expect to increase their share of seats would support a reform while those risking losing some seats would oppose any change (Benoit 2004).

The problem with this explanation is that it does not explain why electoral reforms are so uncommon. They should happen each time ruling parties hope to gain extra seats by manipulating the electoral law, and therefore we should observe more reform. The analysis of the debate about a shift from PR to majority systems in Belgium in the 1990s helps us understand why the status quo is, most of time anyway, the favoured option for political parties.

In simulations of a shift to majority two-round elections for the Belgian parliament, two parties, the PS and the CVP, were seen as the potential winners of a reform. The two parties were informed of these simulations. However, they opposed the shift to majority elections. These non strategic attitudes promote us to amend the seat-maximising model of electoral reform. From our analysis, it appears that a preliminary step was missing in the way political actors define their attitude to a change in the electoral law. Before evaluating

0 the opportunity of an electoral reform by simulating the future allocation of seats 0
 under majority rule, parties look at the current state of affairs. They are not always
 'bankers' defining their position by looking to the future. They are sometimes 'peasants'
 who do not trust simulations on the impact of a reform because these simulations are
 highly uncertain. If parties are satisfied with the way the current rules work, and with the
 5 political influence they have under the actual electoral law, they defend the status quo. It 5
 is only those dissatisfied with the way the electoral system works that go one step further
 and analyse the potential impact of an electoral reform on the distribution of power
 among parties.

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