



# Strategies Under the Surface: The Determinants of Redistricting in Belgium

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Most of the time, electoral reforms are seen as decisions taken by political players aiming at increasing their seat share.<sup>1</sup> According to Benoit's model, parties rank reform plans according to whether they maximize their share of seats (Benoit, 2004). In that respect, the decision of the Belgian government to change district boundaries for the 2003 federal elections is rather strange, as the reform adopted has no mechanical impact on the allocation of seats among parties. This does not, however, mean that this redistricting is one of the few reforms not driven by strategic considerations. Belgian parties are driven by other forms of strategy lying under the surface. As a matter of fact, four power-related elements have played a part in the decision to change district boundaries. Firstly, the change to province constituencies was made to reduce the uncertainty of parliamentary careers caused by the two-tier system in use up to 2003. Secondly, promoters of redistricting tried to introduce a new campaign structure, which they hoped would be more appropriate for their party. Thirdly, large parties required to introduce a 5% threshold jointly to the redistricting. The threshold was meant to block smaller parties and consequently to favour larger ones. And finally redistricting was also pushed by centralized parties expecting this reform to increase their control over decentralized party structures. All these strategies show that in the study of electoral reform, political science will have to go beyond merely considering its impact on each party's share of seats.

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## Introduction

In most research about electoral reform, political parties are primarily seen as strategic players. Promoters of reform aim at increasing their power. According to Brady and Mo: 'the goal of political parties is to try to maximize their seat share, given their (expected) votes, through the choice of electoral rules' (Brady and Mo, 1992, 406). From this starting point, a series of articles has been published developing the strategic reform model. The idea that players try primarily to increase their power has been developed by authors



such as Benoit (2004), Boix (1999) or Reed and Thies (2001). In most works, the assumption is that parties are driven by the hope of winning more seats.

In this respect, the redistricting decided upon by the Belgian legislature in 2002 on the initiative of the ruling coalition (liberal–socialist–green) is rather surprising. The decision was to merge existing constituencies at province level. The consequence was that the 2003 federal elections were organized in 11 districts instead of 20 as in 1999. The oddness of this decision is that it has no mechanical impact on the allocation of seats among the parties (Hooghe *et al.*, 2003). In other words, none of the governing partners could hope that redistricting would increase their share of seats. Under these circumstances, it is fair to wonder why they decided to adopt such a reform that contradicts the classical model of the strategic reformer.

The purpose of this article is to go under the surface to seek the alternative strategies, that caused the Belgian ruling coalition to change constituency boundaries for the 2003 federal elections. This analysis is based on in-depth research using party manifestos, parliamentary archives, press articles and interviews with 24 top politicians. The 24 persons interviewed were selected for two reasons. Firstly, it was essential that all parliamentary parties be studied. Secondly, we decided to concentrate on politicians directly involved in the redistricting, either as party president, heads of parliamentary groups or ministers in charge. This revealed that strategy can extend beyond the simple idea of winning extra seats by changing electoral rules.

The first part of the article presents theories of electoral system change in order to underline the main definition of the strategic reformer. The second part consists of analyses produced by specialists in Belgian politics to show that the redistricting decided upon in 2002 had no impact on the allocation of seats among the parties. And in the third, primary source data (manifestos, parliamentary archives, press articles and interviews) are researched to underline the strategies lying under the surface of this electoral reform.

### **Theory of Electoral System Change: The Dominance of the Strategic Reformer**

Research into electoral reforms has always underlined the impact of strategic reasoning on party attitudes. In 1980, Katz stressed that party systems and electoral systems are tied to one another through the self-interest of politicians (Katz, 1980, 123). Beyond this observation, in the last decade, several scholars have tried to expand the model of electoral reform to understand precisely how the dynamic of strategic reform works. The two authors most often referred to in this field are Boix and Benoit.

Boix has developed an analysis of the change from majority systems to proportional representation in several European countries at the turn of the



19th and 20th centuries. His core idea is that ‘the ruling political parties, anticipating the (varying) effects of different electoral regimes, choose the regime that maximizes their chances of staying in power’ (Boix, 1999, 611). In the early 2000s, Benoit developed this logic to build a solid model of strategic reform. By studying post-1989 electoral reform in Hungary (Benoit and Schiemann, 2001) and Poland (Benoit and Hayden, 2004), Benoit produced the following model of electoral system choice (Benoit, 2004, 375):

1. Parties know and understand the reform plans debated.
2. Parties undertake arithmetic simulations on the basis of past elections to assess the impact of each reform plan.
3. Parties rank reform plans, favouring the one that maximizes their share of seats.
4. Parties adopt positions according to these preferences.
5. Party positions are modified when new information leads to a change in the preferences they have elucidated.

According to this logic, electoral reform occurs when parties that believe that a new rule would give them more seats have a majority in parliament. Here is the first weakness of Benoit’s model. Being part of a majority in parliament supporting reform is not so straightforward. In most cases, the pro-reform majority must also be the ruling majority. In single-party governments, there is no problem. In multi-party coalitions, all the partners must hope to increase their share of seats. In other words, an agreement based on an office-seeking perspective is not often found with a coalition in power. In the Belgian case studied in this article, such confluence of interests is even less likely, as six parties with widely divergent strengths were in government when the redistricting was passed. It is difficult to imagine that all the six were simply expecting to increase their respective seat share. This preliminary remark leads to a search for alternative explanations for the redistricting, which is the subject of this article.

A second problem with Benoit’s and Boix’s model is that electoral reforms’ main objective can hardly be to gain seats only. Several other authors have contested this view that they consider to be too restrictive. For Bawn, parties do not only look for extra seats but also hope to increase their chances to enter government, to be part of the ruling coalition (Bawn, 1993). For De Mesquita, parties not only try to change the allocation of seats among parties by changing the electoral law; they also hope to affect the way citizens vote (De Mesquita, 2000). These two examples are summed up by Rahat who explains that ‘electoral reform should not be reduced to a simplistic model in which a few factors, driven by a few well-defined, coherent motives, demonstrate stable and dichotomous patterns of behaviour (for and against reform)’ (Rahat, 2004, 461).



## Redistricting in Belgium: A Reform without Impact on Seat Allocation Among Parties

Following Rahat's argument, the redistricting decided upon in Belgium in 2002 by the ruling coalition (liberal–socialist–green) brings new evidence that political science should go further than the office-seeking model to understand electoral reforms. The office-seeking model of electoral reform would claim that the redistricting is to be explained by the fact that its supporters hoped that the new constituencies would increase their share of seats. The interesting point about this reform is precisely that is not the case. Several studies have shown that the change from 20 sub-province districts to 11 province constituencies had almost no effect on the allocation of seats among the parties.

Before 2003, proportional representation for the 150 seats in the Belgian Chamber of Deputies was applied in 20 multi-member districts (Table 1). Three of them were already province districts (Luxemburg, Namur and Limburg).

**Table 1** Districts for the Belgian chamber of deputies in 1999

<i>Subprovince district</i>	<i>Province district</i>	<i>Magnitude</i>
Namur	Namur	6
Luxemburg	Luxemburg	3
Limburg	Limburg	11
Antwerpen	Antwerpen	14
Mechelen–Turnhout		10
Aalst–Oudenaarde	East Flanders	6
Gent–Eeklo		9
Sint–Niklaas–Dendermonde		6
Brugge	West Flanders	4
Kortrijk–Roeselaere–Tielt		8
Veurne–Diksmuide–Ieper–Oostende		5
Liège	Liège	9
Verviers		4
Huy–Waremmé		2
Mons–Soignies	Hainaut	6
Charleroi–Thuin		9
Tournai–Ath–Mouscron		4
Walloon Brabant	Walloon Brabant + Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde	5
Flemish Brabant	Flemish Brabant + Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde	7
Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde	Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde + Flemish/Walloon Brabant	22



Redistricting did not change anything for these three constituencies. In the other 17 districts, the magnitude was varying from 2 in Huy–Waremmes rising to 22 in Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde.

To compensate for the disproportionality arising from the small size of some constituencies, a two-tier seat allocation system was introduced by the legislature in 1919. This complex system allocates seats at two stages. Firstly, seats are allocated at sub-province level (*‘arrondissements’*). At this primary level, the Hare Quota is calculated and used to divide the score for each list. If the result is  $> 1$ , the party is awarded as many seats as the Hare Quota gives for its electoral result. For example, if the Hare Quota is 2000, a list with 5000 votes would receive two seats ( $5000/2000=2.5 \rightarrow 2$  seats). However, in most cases, this initial seat allocation level does not allow for the allocation of all the seats.

In the second stage, the remaining seats in each sub-province district are allocated at the province level.<sup>2</sup> At that level, lists from different sub-province districts may have signed *‘apparentement’* agreements before the elections. Such agreements authorize them to take part in the allocation of the remaining seats at province level. Their score in each sub-province district comprising the province constituency is totalled. These totals are used to allocate the remaining seats. They are divided by the total amount of seats already awarded to the party at each sub-province level, plus 1. The list with the biggest result received the first remaining seats. The same method is repeated until all seats are allocated.

As mentioned above, in 2002, the Belgian legislature decided to redistrict electoral constituencies. Sub-province districts were grouped at province level (Table 2). The only exceptions were Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde, Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant, where the former two-tier system (the *‘apparentement’*)

**Table 2** Districts for the Belgian chamber of deputies in 2003

<i>Provincial district</i>	<i>Magnitude</i>
Namur	6
Luxemburg	4
Limburg	12
Antwerpen	24
East Flanders	20
West Flanders	16
Liège	15
Hainaut	19
Walloon Brabant	5
Flemish Brabant	7
Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde	22



was retained. In all the others, the consequence of the redistricting was that the two-tier system was abolished. In province constituencies, seats were allocated by direct use of the D'Hondt system.

This reform was voted through by the ruling majority (liberal—socialist—green), with the opposition voting against. The demand originated from the Flemish socialists (SP.A), rapidly supported by the Flemish liberals (VLD). Their request was accepted in 2002 by the rest of the government (PS, MR, Agalev and Ecolo) in the framework of broader electoral reform, including other initiatives, such as the introduction of a 5% threshold.<sup>3</sup> The Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) were the staunchest opponents to redistricting. They were supported by the other opposition parties: CDH, Vlaams Blok and Front national.

As explained in the introduction, the redistricting decided upon in Belgium for the 2003 federal elections has no impact on seat distribution. In 2000, Vander Weyden compared the two-tier system in use up to 1999 with the D'Hondt formula applied directly at province level. He applied both the systems to all Belgian elections held between 1946 and 1995. The result was that both mechanisms produced the same allocation of seats among the parties:

the traditional D'Hondt sequence and the Alternative D'Hondt system for two-districting systems produce, without the interruption of the thresholds, the same results (Vander Weyden, 2000, 11).

Three years later, Vander Weyden's work was confirmed by Hooghe, Noppe and Maddens who studied the 2003 federal elections. Larger province constituencies were used for the first time on this occasion. Hooghe, Noppe and Maddens tested what the allocation of seats would have been if the former smaller districts with the two-tier system were used instead of the province constituencies: The results are illuminating: not a single seat would have changed. The effect of larger constituencies on the parliamentary representation of parties is non-existent. (Hooghe *et al.*, 2003, 274)

One additional remark should be made, however, about the strategic significance of redistricting. In the system prevailing up to 1999, after the primary seat allocation at sub-province level, lists were permitted in the allocation of remaining seats at province level only if they had one direct seat (at sub-province level), or if they had won a number of votes greater than one third of the electoral quota (=valid votes/amount of seats to be allocated) in one of the sub-province districts. This threshold was applied to exclude the smallest lists. Some of the parliamentary parties involved in the debate about the change to province constituencies in 2002 had lost seats in previous elections due to this threshold. The two green parties (Ecolo and Agalev) were in this situation. Redistricting was therefore not without a hypothetical effect on their share of seats. They could hope to gain some extra seats if the reforms



were adopted and the ‘*apparentement*’ threshold was abolished. Interviews revealed such strategic reasoning. Isabelle Durant (Ecolo, deputy Prime minister 1999–2003) explained that: ‘As far as Ecolo is concerned, the larger the constituency, the better it is in terms of electoral results. In that respect, one of our former calls was for a nation-wide constituency’.<sup>4</sup>

Jos Geysels (secretary general of Agalev 1999–2003) expressed the same idea: ‘we had calculated that the establishing an electoral district as a province would give us one or two extra seats. [...] We therefore accepted the 5% threshold in exchange for the declaring a province to be an electoral district’.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the Greens, other smaller parties, such as the two heirs of the former Volksunie (N-VA and Spirit), also considered redistricting as a strategically positive reform. In that sense, Bart De Wever (chairman of the N-VA since 2004) clarified the fact that ‘for a smaller party, it is better to have larger constituencies in order to have a lower threshold and to win seats more easily’.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, for these parties, Benoit’s model that parties prefer reform plans, which maximize their seat share is applicable.

This does not, however, explain why larger parties not affected by the ‘*apparentement*’ threshold, such as the socialists (SP.A and PS) and the liberals (VLD and MR), supported redistricting. From their point of view, the work of Vanderweyden and Hooghe, and Noppe and Maddens, demonstrated that the change to province constituencies has no mechanical impact on their seat share. The interviews we conducted and public claims made during parliamentary debates confirm that the fact that parties shared this opinion at the time of the reform. Vande Lanotte (Deputy Prime minister 1999–2005; chairman of the SP.A since 2005) explained in the Chamber of Deputies that ‘the choice of provinces as new constituencies is appropriate, and guarantees that redistricting will have no effect on the allocation of seats’.<sup>7</sup> Even opposition parties like the CD&V admitted the neutrality of redistricting on the mathematical allocation of seats even if the Flemish Christian-Democrats believe that some other strategies lie under the surface.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, the reform has not been driven by the prospect of gaining extra seats through a mechanical transformation of the seat allocation method. Benoit’s model is not applicable in this case. But this does not mean that there were no strategic considerations. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that other strategies may lie under the surface. They will be described in the following pages. These motivations were revealed using primary source material, particularly parliamentary bills and face-to-face interviews with 24 top Belgian politicians involved in the redistricting initiative decided upon in 2002.

Carrying out interviews in the field of political science could be hazardous. Some scholars believe that quotations from interviews are not robust enough for a scientific work. However, we take the view that excluding interviews could



be problematic. Interviews must certainly be taken into account when studying perception and subjective rationality. They are a valuable tool in exploring what the players had in mind when taking a decision. This article is concerned with strategic motivations under the surface. By definition, these concealed strategies can only be investigated through interviews. Quantitative data show what is on the surface but not what lies beneath. Even so, interviews must be conducted with care. In particular, the risk of *ex post* rationalization must be guarded against. Political elites must be tempted to rationally justify some of the decisions they have taken in the past. In order to avoid being cheated, strategic motivations expressed in interviews after the reforms are compared with lines of reasoning claimed in parliamentary debate before the redistricting initiative was passed in 2002.

## Strategies Under the Surface

### Linking redistricting and the 5% threshold

An initial hidden strategy that helps explaining the support of bigger parties for redistricting is that the decision has been linked to another change in Belgian electoral law: the introduction of a 5% threshold. At the same time, as constituencies were being redesigned, the Belgian legislature introduced a threshold requiring a party to win at least 5% of the votes in a constituency to take part in the seats allocation. This new mechanism was mainly pressed for by the larger parties. The Greens have also accepted the introduction of the threshold even though they are one of the smaller parties. Their best score ever in 1999 (18.3% for Ecolo in Wallonia; 14.1% in Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde; and 11.28% in Flanders for Agalev) led them to believe that they would have never been hurt by a 5% threshold. We shall shortly show that they were too optimistic on this point. Only the opposition objected to the introduction of a 5% threshold (CD&V, CDH, Vlaams Blok, N-VA and Spirit).

In actual fact, the 5% threshold was what the larger ruling parties (PS, SP.A, VLD and MR) wanted in return for redistricting. As mentioned earlier, merging electoral districts into province constituencies had lowered the effective threshold, favouring smaller parties. Within the federal coalition, the Greens were happy with this reform. But their larger partners had no direct positive office-seeking prospects. They even feared a multiplication of smaller parties. It was in this context that they called for a 5% threshold. It was expected that the mechanism would prevent parties that were too small from entering parliament. The measure was also important for the larger parties as fragmentation was fairly high in Belgium. In 1999, the effective number of parliamentary parties was 9.05 (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979). This intention





was made clear by the government in its bill and in parliamentary debate: ‘the threshold has been established to reduce fragmentation’.<sup>9</sup>

The mechanical effect of the 5% threshold was fairly limited in 2003. It only changed the allocation for three deputies (Hooghe *et al.*, 2003). Agalev was deprived of one seat in Antwerp (going to the VLD) and one in West Flanders (going to the VLD) (going to the CD&V). The N-VA lost one seat in Antwerp (going to the Vlaams Blok). However, other indirect consequences of the threshold were more like what bigger parties in the ruling coalition had expected in 2002. The threshold deprived two parties — Spirit and N-VA — of the majority of their seats. As a consequence, the two parties have been looking for a partner. In 2003, a cartel between Spirit and SP.A was formed. In 2004, N-VA joined the CD&V in another cartel.

The first strategy beyond the surface that helps explaining the support of the PS, SP.A, VLD and MR to the redistricting is therefore that they have linked this reform to another that was supposed to strengthen their electoral position. Theoretically, it shows that analysing an electoral reform should be made by looking at other decision taken jointly in a sort of ‘package deal’.

### Reducing uncertainty in parliamentary careers

The second element to be stressed is that the two-tier system was not appreciated by political players. As Tobback (president of the SP.A, 1994–1998) explains: ‘Since I began my career in politics 40 years ago, the ‘*apparentement*’ has never been liked’.<sup>10</sup> The two-tier system introduced a significant level of uncertainty into a parliamentary career. It is designed to enhance proportionality in the translation of votes into seats at province level, but it does not guarantee that the allocation of seats in sub-province districts will be proportional. For example, in 1991, in the sub-province district of Aalst, Agalev had 9,910 votes and one MP while the Vlaams Blok had 15,954 votes but no seat. In another sub-province district of the same province (Oudenaarde), the Vlaams Blok had one MP with 3,917 votes while the PVV, the SP, Agalev and the Volksunie had no seat at all, even though they all had more votes than the Vlaams Blok (22,662 votes for the PVV).<sup>11</sup> Such situations, called ‘*les caprices de l’apparentement*’, are due to the fact that the number of seats to be allocated in each sub-province district is established by the electoral law. When a party has a remaining seat to allocate among its lists in each sub-province district, it goes by priority to the sub-province district where the party was the closest to directly winning a seat. The problem is that the remainder seat can only go to a district that does not already have a number of MPs equal to its magnitude as stated in law. If all the seats to be received in the sub-province district have already been allocated, the office goes to another sub-province entity. For the last remaining seats to be allocated, the



mechanism can produce situations such as the ones described above in Aalst and Oudenaarde.

For incumbents, these *'caprices de l'apparement'* have been sources of uncertainty for their political careers. Most of them understand the advantage of the two-tier system in producing results, which are more proportional. However, they find it difficult to live with a rule that can allocate seats in such an unpredictable way. Their desire to reduce this uncertainty in their parliamentary careers was one of their main reasons for backing the redistricting adopted in 2002. This reform abolished the two-tier system and the uncertainty caused by the mechanism. A look at the parliamentary bills and the debates that led to the abolition of the two-tier system reveals this motivation through the actions of MPs from several parties of the ruling majority. The bill proposed by the government explicitly states that: 'redistricting has been decided in order to end the uncertainty caused by the present two-tier system'.<sup>12</sup> This goal was confirmed in parliamentary debate by Vande Lanotte (SP.A): 'the number of candidates directly elected in sub-province districts is marginal; most seats are allocated randomly through the two-tier system. As a consequence, electoral results are derived from mathematical rules and not from the weight of parties in each sub-province district'.<sup>13</sup> Speaking for the Francophone socialists, Lizin (PS) stressed the same objective: 'the socialist parliamentary group considers that the current two-tier system contains a series of faults. It has led to the unpredictable, and sometimes random, allocation of seats'.<sup>14</sup>

Lessening uncertainty in a parliamentary career is undoubtedly a form of strategic behaviour. It follows Benoit's logic that political players favour mechanisms increasing their odds of being (re-)elected (Benoit, 2004). In this respect, uncertainty is an element to be eliminated for a strategic player, as it increases the difficulty of being elected even when your list receives a large number of votes. A parliamentary bill submitted in 2000 by the Flemish socialists (SP.A) confirms the strategic goal of parties in supporting the abolition of the two-tier system. The bill proposed the change from three sub-province districts to a province constituency in West Flanders. The reform was prompted by the following case:

[the two-tier system] introduces a level of uncertainty into the allocation of seats. This unpredictability prevents a candidate from build a parliamentary career with any degree of certainty.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, the goal is to reduce the uncertainty caused by the two-tier system in order to enhance the probability of being elected. Incumbents were particularly aware of this problem. The second strategy under the surface in favour of redistricting was to support a rule surrounded by less uncertainty, and hence providing a greater opportunity of remaining in parliament.

### Changing campaign structures

The third strategy, and certainly the most important one, was to change the campaign structures. Belgian parties, and more precisely Flemish parties, believe they have two ways of winning votes. The first is to field candidates who are very popular at the local level. A list composed of such candidates would earn votes in the municipalities making up the constituency. The other campaign strategy is to have a few candidates who are popular at the national level. These top candidates would win a large number of votes even if the list does not cover all parts of the constituency.

Considering the two campaign structures, the three traditional Flemish parties (CD&V, VLD and SP.A) have different views of which they see as most suitable for their party. The CD&V believes that having lists full of locally popular candidates is the most effective way to campaign. This belief is based on the fact that the CD&V is the strongest party in Flemish municipalities. Nearly, a half of Flemish mayors are from the CD&V (48.4%), and the party is in the ruling coalition in 69.5% of the Flemish localities. These figures show how many locally popular candidates the CD&V could place on CD&V lists in order to campaign in all parts of the constituency.

On the contrary, the SP.A and the VLD are weaker at the local level. Only 11.7% of Flemish mayors are from the SP.A and 26.6% from the VLD. But the Flemish socialists and the Flemish liberals have more nationally popular politicians, with a media profile that can be mobilized for elections. At the time of the redistricting, the VLD and the SP.A were part of both the federal government and the Flemish regional executive. As a consequence, they can mobilize some well-known federal and regional ministers in elections. Being conscious of this advantage, the two parties favour the second type of electoral campaign, based less on local politicians and more on nationally popular leaders.

Although less obvious, the same considerations are to be found among French-speaking parties, and especially in the three traditional parties (PS, MR, and CDH). The liberals (MR) are in a position similar to the one adopted by the VLD and the SP.A. They are part of the federal government as well as of the regional executives in Wallonia and Brussels. In that context, they believe their national leaders and ministers are their best trump for winning elections. The Christian democrats (CDH), however, were in opposition when redistricting was discussed in parliament. They therefore had no nationally popular figures to run. But the CDH is stronger locally and tends to perform better in local elections than in national and regional ones. For instance, 26.6% of Walloon mayors are Christian democrats while the party only got 17.6% of the votes in the last regional elections. As a consequence, the CDH would prefer to campaign by fielding locally popular politicians. The French-speaking



socialists (PS) are in an intermediate position. They are the strongest party in Wallonia at the local level. 38.2% of all mayors in this region are socialists. At the same time, the PS has been present in the federal and regional executives without interruption since 1988. In those circumstances, the PS has several nationally popular ministers to rely upon.

Actually, the two ways of campaigning are the sources of a third strategy under the surface motivating the change from sub-province districts to province constituencies. The reform was strongly supported by the parties that believe that their main electoral resources are their nationally popular politicians. On the other hand, parties opposing the change to province constituencies were those believing they are more efficient when they campaign with their locally popular candidates.

The redistricting decided upon in 2002 was initiated by the SP.A. The Flemish socialists aimed to maximize the popularity of some of their national leaders. The SP.A had realized that it had some of the most popular politicians at the national level but the polls were not positive for the SP.A. In order to boost the electoral performance of the party, the Flemish socialists pushed for the change to province constituencies. Redistricting was supported so that they could use their popular leaders in each of the five Flemish provinces. The SP.A did not want to restrict the benefit it could get from these nationally popular politicians to a small sub-province district. This strategy was confirmed in the interviews conducted with some leaders of the SP.A. Van der Maelen explained that:

For my party it was clear that in 2002–2003 we would perform better with province constituencies [...] It is not necessary to carry out a scientific study to realize that our party would be better at province level because we had one strong leader in Limburg (Steve Stevaert), one strong leader in the Flemish Brabant (Frank Vandembroucke), one strong leader in West Flanders (Johan Vande Lanotte)....<sup>16</sup>

Tobback did not deny van der Maelen's explanation: 'We had the kind of strong leaders who can operate in that kind of system'.<sup>17</sup>

The strategy developed by the SP.A also convinced the Flemish and the French-speaking liberals. De Croo's declaration (VLD — President of the Chamber of deputies since 1999) in a national newspaper in 2003 confirmed it: 'In the new province constituencies, who will still be able to succeed? Politicians from areas with many inhabitants and those who have the media backing them'.<sup>18</sup> The MR also expected that the change to province constituencies would be good for its electoral results. It was confirmed in two interviews. Firstly, Charles Michel (Deputy President since 2004) declared that:

Enlarging constituencies allows the strengthening of parties with strong popular leaders at province level [...] In 2003, it worked for the PS and the

MR. I think that the CDH had no strong leader who could compete with Reynders (MR) in Liège or with Di Rupo (PS) in Hainaut. I think that in 2003 it was positive for the PS and the MR.<sup>19</sup>

Maingain (MR) supported Michel's arguments when he explained that: '[redistricting] was based upon the hope expressed by some popular candidates that they could perform better in larger electoral districts'.<sup>20</sup>

From the opposite point of view, the two Christian democrat parties were opposed to redistricting, because they thought it would prevent them getting the benefit from their locally popular candidates. In that respect, Dehaene (CD&V — Prime Minister from 1991 to 1999) considers that: 'electoral campaigns are more and more media-based. Only a few popular leaders have a part to play. We believe you should also give space to local politicians'.<sup>21</sup> The same logic is to be found among the French-speaking Christian democrats. According to Wathélet Jr. (CDH — leader of the parliamentary group since 2004), '[redistricting] did not help parties such as the CDH. As far as we are concerned, the smaller the constituency, the more locally we operate, the better'.<sup>22</sup>

All these statements confirm the fact that a third strategy was present under the surface in the redistricting decided upon in Belgium in 2002. Parties who felt they had more nationally popular candidates such as the SP.A, the VLD and the MR supported the reform. They hoped that with larger districts, their stronger candidates would be able to attract votes from a wider area. On the contrary, the two Christian democrat parties (CD&V and CDH) opposed redistricting because they feared it would be more complicated for them to campaign efficiently. Their main trump was their locally popular candidates. For both the CDH and the CD&V, such candidates attract more votes in smaller constituencies. This strategy is rather different from the one modelled by Benoit as it supposes that an electoral reform changes not only the allocation of seats among parties but also the distribution of votes among them. Voters change their behaviour when the electoral law is amended. In that sense, parties remain strategic reformers; they are not office-seeking but vote-seeking. They do not reform to change the allocation of seats but to modify the distribution of votes.

### **Intraparty strategies**

The strategies highlighted above are related to the balance of power between parties. They are more like inter-party strategies. But the change to province constituencies also affected the balance of power within parties to some degree, in intra-party politics. One of the main sources of conflict inside a party is the balance of power between the party in central office and the decentralized components of the party. Belgian parties are organized at three levels: national,



constituency and municipal.<sup>23</sup> The national level constantly seeks to increase its control over the decentralized structures while the constituency level and the local level try to maintain their autonomy.

In that respect, the 2002 redistricting had several effects on the balance of power between the national and constituency levels. Firstly, by enlarging constituencies, the legislature transferred *de facto* control of the selection of candidates to a higher level. Sub-province districts have to merge into a province structure capable of drafting electoral lists and coordinating a campaign. Secondly, campaigning in a larger constituency implies greater expense and the access to wider channels of communication. As Nothomb (president of the CDH from 1996 to 1998) explains: ‘having twice as many voters means printing twice as many leaflets, travelling twice as many kilometres’.<sup>24</sup> Individual candidates experience great difficulty in bearing these costs alone. They have to seek help from the party structures, reducing their autonomy.

Considering these effects of the change from sub-province districts to province constituencies, it is not surprising that this reform has been influenced by intra-party strategies at both national level and constituency level. Actually, in several parties, the party in central office pushed for redistricting in order to increase its control over the party structures at constituency level. According to Cortois (VLD—leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies 1987–1995), the reform clearly pursued this goal: ‘it was going to strengthen the power of the party in central office [...] national party leaders have used it to fortify their position’.<sup>25</sup> Maingain (MR) confirmed it:

we must admit that making constituencies provinces has reinforced the power of the national party. Lists are composed at that level and it is the national party that allocates the money to campaign and to be elected’<sup>26</sup>

While the national level supported redistricting for strategic reasons, the constituency level strongly opposed it for the same reason. They did not want to support a reform that was going to reduce their autonomy and to reduce their influence in candidate selection. Such considerations were heard in all parties. When Dehaene (CD&V) was asked if redistricting raised opposition among sub-province structures, he answered that: ‘it always caused tension. These structures are rooted in history and need 10 or 15 years to reform. If we want to reorganize the structures at province level, we will need time’.<sup>27</sup>

The same reactions were observed in the ruling coalition parties. About the way redistricting was prepared, Vandebossche (VLD) explained that: ‘it would have been a mistake not to take into account problems raised by the reform for smaller sub-province districts’.<sup>28</sup> van der Maelen (SP.A) made the same point clear: ‘the opponents were the small sub-province districts and politicians who feared they would no longer be in power’.<sup>29</sup>

In each and all parties, the national level was willing to support the change to province constituencies in order to strengthen its control over the decentralized party structures. At the same time, the constituency level opposed redistricting to maintain its autonomy. Even if present everywhere, the dispute was not won by the same actor in all parties. In fact, the balance of power within the party determined whether the standpoint of the national leaders would be followed or if the sub-province structures would win. In parties dominated by the party in central office, national leaders succeeded in imposing their view, favouring the enlargement of electoral districts. But in parties where sub-province structures were strong, redistricting was harder to accept.

### **Which strategy in which party**

The previous paragraphs show that different strategies may be at play beyond the general strategic model of electoral reform developed by Benoit (2004). When considering the change from sub-province districts to province constituencies, Belgian parties took account of elements other than the simple mechanical effect of redistricting on the allocation of seats among parties. They also considered how this reform could reduce uncertainty in parliamentary careers, how it would change campaign structures and how it would affect intra-party politics. They also linked redistricting with another reform: the introduction of a 5% threshold.

Aside from identifying the presence of these strategic considerations under the surface, it is also interesting to analyse which strategy operated in which party. The case of smaller parties such as Ecolo, Agalev and the N-VA must be set aside. For them, enlarging the district has potentially a mechanical effect on their share of seats. The two-tier system included a threshold to access the secondary level of seats allocation. For smaller parties, this threshold was potentially damaging. As a consequence, the abolition of the two-tier system has been strategically positive following Benoit's logic (2004). In supporting the reform, smaller parties favoured reform plans maximizing their share of seats.

In all other parties, other strategies were implemented, as they are big enough not to be concerned by the threshold associated with the two-tier system. For these larger parties, the first comment to be made is that all of them considered that the change to province constituencies had one advantage: it reduced the uncertainty of parliamentary careers. All of them agreed upon the desirability of removing this undesirable consequence of the two-tier system. The introduction of a 5% threshold was also supported by all the larger parties, in government and in opposition. Concerning the two other strategies that played a role, the picture is less clear. The parties can effectively be divided into three groups.



The first includes parties where all strategic incentives favour redistricting. It includes three parties: VLD, SP.A and MR. For them, the new electoral map was a positive as it would allow them to use their nationally popular leaders more efficiently. At the same time, the strong national leaders supported redistricting in order to increase still further their control over decentralized party structures. Having confluent strategic incentives, the three parties voted for redistricting in 2002. They even promoted the reform.

On the other hand, the two Christian democrat parties (CD&V and CDH) also had confluent strategic incentives but in the opposite direction. For them, redistricting was perceived as strategically negative. Firstly, both the CD&V and the CDH believe that they campaign more efficiently in smaller districts by fielding their locally popular candidates. Furthermore, within the two Christian democrat parties, the intra-party balance of powers leans in the direction of the sub-province party structures. These organs were strong enough to make their voices heard and to oppose the change to province constituencies. Consequently, the CD&V and the CDH voted against redistricting in 2002.

Thirdly, the case of the PS should be set aside as it is the sole party with divergent strategic incentives. The party was divided between believing whether enlarging constituencies was strategically advantageous or not. On the one hand, the PS has a large number of locally popular candidates to campaign in smaller electoral districts. In addition, the PS is the party where the sub-province federations are strongest (Delwit, 1996). Both elements tended to encourage the PS to support redistricting. On the other hand, the PS has been part of the ruling coalition since 1988 and therefore has had nationally popular leaders who were able to attract votes in larger constituencies. Moreover, the party president, Di Rupo, wants to increase his control over the sub-province federations. Both elements predisposed the PS to support redistricting. In the end, the pro-reform strategic incentives were the strongest and the PS voted for redistricting in 2002. However, in 2003, they opposed the same reform for the Walloon regional elections. For the Walloon parliament, sub-province districts and the two-tier system have been retained. In this situation, the strategic incentives against redistricting were the strongest.

Finally, the case of the Vlaams Blok must still be analysed. This far right party voted against redistricting in 2002. This position is somewhat surprising. Firstly, the Vlaams Blok is not rich in locally popular politicians. It is not part of any local executives and has no mayor. To the contrary, the Vlaams Blok is dominated by nationally popular leaders, such as Dewinter (leader of the parliamentary group in the Flemish parliament), Annemans (leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies) and Vanhecke (party president). Under these circumstances, we would expect the Vlaams Blok to prefer an electoral campaign in larger constituencies. Besides, the Flemish





extreme right is a highly centralized party (Coffé, 2005). One would therefore expect the party in central office to wish to increase its control over decentralized structures by supporting redistricting. Yet, this is not the case. In 2002, the Vlaams Blok went against its convergent strategic incentives and voted against the change to province constituencies. In that respect, the decision of the Vlaams Blok to vote for the same expansion of electoral districts to a province for the Flemish parliaments in 2004 is more coherent. A possible explanation is that in 2002, the support of the Vlaams Blok was not needed to pass the bill. In those circumstances, the extreme right had the opportunity to vote against a bill proposed by the government without risking, blocking of a strategically favourable reform. It allowed the party to keep its image of being different from all the others (Mudde, 2002). In 2004, the support of the Vlaams Blok was needed to pass redistricting for the Flemish parliament. The party did not want to risk endangering the status quo and voted for reform.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The aim of this article has been to determine whether other strategies than seat-maximization may exist. This general question challenges Benoit's model (2004) that states that electoral reform occurs when a majority of parties hope that a reform will increase their share of seats. The problem is that some reforms have no effect on the allocation of seats. However, the literature does not pay much attention to the many reforms that have no impact on that at all. The analysis of the redistricting implemented in Belgium for the 2003 federal elections aimed at filling this theoretical gap. This redistricting has no impact on the allocation of seats, at least for bigger parties. Alternative explanations for this reform thus had to be found.

What has been proven in this article is that other kinds of strategies other than seat-maximization may exist under the surface. In that sense, it should encourage political scientists to go further than just considering the impact of an electoral reform on the allocation of seats. Strategic behaviours in electoral reforms are more than just voting for the rule, maximizing one's share of seats. Benoit's work was an important first theoretical step but a more sophisticated model must be proposed. This article is a first step in this direction.

Four elements have been underlined. Firstly, strategic incentives explaining a reform may be present in other decisions taken jointly. All decisions must be studied to understand a change in the electoral law. Secondly, incumbents desire to safeguard their political careers. In that respect, any reform reducing the uncertainty of re-election is welcome. Thirdly, parties may also push for a reform that is neutral on seat allocation, but modifies the distribution of votes to their advantage. Parties are not only office-seeking but also vote-seeking.



Finally, an electoral reform affects not only inter-party relations but also the intra-party balance of power. Intra-party actors would support reform for strengthening their prerogatives and powers. These four strategies identified are new elements to take into account for the future analysis of any electoral reforms. Moreover, they make room for further research into strategies lying under the surface in electoral system changes (For list of parties, see Appendix A).

Q2

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the editors and the referees for this article. Their remarks and comments have helped me to improve significantly the quality of this article. I also would like to thank the 'Fondation Wiener-Anspach' for its financial support.
- 2 For Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde, the Flemish Brabant and the Walloon Brabant, the system is slightly different. The two-tier system applies between Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde and Flemish Brabant for Flemish lists, and between Brussels–Hal–Vilvorde and Walloon Brabant for French-speaking lists.
- 3 The 5% threshold is calculated at the constituency level, namely the provinces.
- 4 Interview conducted in Brussels, 1 September 2005.
- 5 Interview conducted in Brussels, 7 November 2005.
- 6 Interview conducted in Brussels, 10 October 2005.
- 7 Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Rapport de la Commission de l'intérieur de la Chambre sur le projet de loi portant diverses modification en matière de législation électorale*, Document parlementaire no. 50-1806/008, 15 July 2002, p. 33.
- 8 Tom Caluwé (CD&V) in Sénat de Belgique, *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission de l'Intérieur et des Affaires administratives sur le projet de loi portant diverses modification en matière de législation électorale*, Document parlementaire no. 2-1280/3, 5 November 2002, p. 24.
- 9 Antoine Duquesne (Minister of Home Affairs — MR) in Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Rapport de la Commission de l'intérieur de la Chambre sur le projet de loi portant diverses modification en matière de législation électorale*, Document parlementaire no. 50-1806/008, 15 July 2002.
- 10 Interview conducted in Leuven, 25 October 2005.
- 11 For other examples, see Dewachter W. (2003) 'Elections, partis politiques et représentants. La quête d'une légitimité démocratique. 1919–2002', in E. Gubin, J-P. Nandrin, E. Gerard and E. Witte (eds.) *Histoire de la Chambre des représentants de Belgique*, Brussels : Chambre des représentants, pp. 63–86, p. 66.
- 12 Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Projet de loi portant diverses modification en matière de législation électorale*, Document parlementaire no. 50-1806/001, 14 May 2002, p. 6.
- 13 Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Rapport de la Commission de l'intérieur de la Chambre sur le projet de loi portant diverses modification en matière de législation électorale*, Document parlementaire no. 50-1806/008, 15 July 2002, pp. 32–33.
- 14 Sénat de Belgique, *Annales de la séance plénière du jeudi 7 novembre 2002*, Document parlementaire no. 2-238, p. 17.
- 15 Chambre des représentants de Belgique, *Proposition de loi modifiant le Code électoral en vue de créer une circonscription unique pour la province de Flandre occidentale*, Patrick Lansens, Erik Derycke, Dalila Douifi et Henk Verlinde (SP.A), Document parlementaire no. 50-0477/001, 28 February 2000, p. 1.
- 16 Interview conducted in Brussels, 25 August 2005.
- 17 Interview conducted in Leuven, 25 October 2005.



- 18 Herman De Croo, *De Standaard*, 24 November 2003.  
 19 Interview conducted in Brussels, 31 August 2005.  
 20 Interview conducted in Brussels, 19 September 2005.  
 21 Interview conducted in Brussels, 21 September 2005.  
 22 Interview conducted in Verviers, 23 August 2005.  
 23 Or more precisely at the level of the linguistic community.  
 24 Interview conducted in Brussels, 7 September 2005.  
 25 Interview conducted in Brussels, 24 October 2005.  
 26 Interview conducted in Brussels, 19 September 2005.  
 27 Interview conducted in Brussels, 21 September 2005.  
 28 Interview conducted in Brussels, 14 October 2005.  
 29 Interview conducted in Brussels, 25 August 2005.

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- Q6** Norris, P. (2004) *Electoral Engineering. Voting Rules and Political Behaviour*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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## Appendix A

### List of parties

- VLD: *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* — Flemish Liberals and Democrats (PVV until 1992)
- CD&V: *Christen Democratisch & Vlaams* — Flemish Christian-Democrats (CVP until 2002)
- SP. A: *Socialistische Partij. Anders* —Flemish Social Democratic Party (SP until 2002)
- GROEN!: Flemish Ecologists (Agalev until 2003)
- NV-A: *Nieuwe Vlaamse Alliantie* — Conservative Flemish nationalists from the former VU
- SPIRIT: Progressive Flemish nationalists from the former VU
- VU: *VolksUnie* —Flemish nationalists (disappeared in 2001)
- VLAAMS BELANG: Flemish extreme-right party (Vlaams Blok until 2004)
- MR: *Mouvement réformateur* —Reformer Movement — French-speaking liberals
- PS: *Parti socialiste* — French-speaking Social Democratic Party
- CDH: *Centre démocrate humaniste* — French-speaking Christian-Democrats (PSC until 2002)
- ECOLO: *Ecologistes confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales* — French-speaking Greens

### List of politicians interviewed

<i>Nom</i>	<i>Prénom</i>	<i>Parti</i>	<i>Fonction politique</i>
Annemans	Gerolf	Vlaams Blok	Leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies (1987–)
Bertrand	Marc	CDH	Advisor to the Party President (1996–1998)
Busquin	Philippe	PS	Party President (1992–1998)
Caci	Antonio	Ecolo	Secretary of the parliamentary group for the Walloon parliament (1999–2004)
Cadranel	Benjamin	PS	Advisor to the Party President (1999–2004)
Cortois	Willy	VLD	Leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies (1987–1995)
Daras	José	Ecolo	Walloon Minister (1999–2004)




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**List of politicians interviewed (*continued*)**


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<i>Nom</i>	<i>Prénom</i>	<i>Parti</i>	<i>Fonction politique</i>
De Wever	Bart	N-VA	Party President (2004–)
Dehaene	Jean-Luc	CD&V	Prime Minister (1991–1999)
Duquesne	Antoine	MR	Federal Minister of Home Affairs (1999–2003)
Durant	Isabelle	Ecolo	Deputy Prime Minister (1999–2003)
Geysels	Jos	Groen !	Federal Party Secretary (1999–2003)
Grasso	David	PS	Speaker of the Walloon Minister of Home Affairs, Philippe Courard (2004–)
Istasse	Jean-François	PS	President of the French-speaking Parliament (2004–) and Walloon MP (1995–)
Maingain Martou	Olivier François	MR-FDF	President of the FDF (1995–) President of the Christian Workers Movement (MOC)
Michel	Charles	MR	Walloon Minister of Home Affairs (1999–2004)
Nothomb	Charles-Ferdinand	CDH	Party President (1972–1979 and 1996–1998)
Prévot	Maxime	CDH	Directeur politique (2004–)
Tobback	Louis	SP.A	Federal Minister of Home Affairs (1988–1994) and Party President (1994–1998)
Vandenbossche van der Maelen van Grembergen	Manu Dirk Paul	VLD SP.A VU–Spirit	Advisor to the Prime Minister (1999–) Leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies (1999–) Flemish Minister of Home Affairs (1999–2004)
Wathelet	Melchior Jr.	CDH	Leader of the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies (2004–)

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