

# The More, the Better?

## Counterfactual Evidence on the Effect of Compulsory Voting on the Consistency of Party Choice

Peter Selb  
Romain Lachat

### **Abstract**

Compulsory voting (CV) undoubtedly raises electoral turnout. But does it also affect individual party choices and aggregate election outcomes? Previous studies have focused on partisan or 'directional' effects of CV in favour of, for example, social-democratic or anti-establishment parties. Observed effects are usually small, however. Using survey data from the Belgian General Elections Study, we find that CV primarily affects the consistency, rather than the direction, of party choices. In particular, our analyses suggest that CV compels a substantial share of uninterested and less knowledgeable voters to the polls. These voters, in turn, cast votes that are clearly less consistent with their own political preferences than those of the more informed and motivated voluntary voters. Claims that CV promotes equal representation of political interests are therefore questionable.

## Introduction

Low voter turnout is often considered an important democratic problem. This may call into question the legitimacy of both the electoral results and the policy outcomes. Elections are often decided by a minority of all eligible voters, and most importantly, political participation is unequal among social groups. This problem has been emphasized by Lijphart, who argues that low turnout puts the democratic ideal of political equality at risk.<sup>1</sup> While institutional arrangements such as automatic registration of voters and weekend voting also affect turnout, Lijphart suggests that compulsory voting (CV) is the best means to solve the problem of unequal representation and influence of social groups. Central to his argument is the suggestion that higher turnout would lead to a better representation of the preferences of voters of low socioeconomic status and education level.

The contribution of Lijphart has sparked new debate and research on the consequences of low turnout and the advantages and disadvantages of CV. The debate touches on normative aspects, such as an opposition between conceptions of electoral participation as a right or as a duty. Here, however, we are interested in the empirical implications of CV. Its positive impact on turnout has been established beyond doubt,<sup>2</sup> and it reduces inequalities in the level of participation among social groups.<sup>3</sup> The expected impact of CV, however, goes beyond the size and composition of the electorate. Much of the literature has focused on the relationship between turnout and electoral outcomes. In this respect, Lijphart's hypothesis is that higher turnout will affect the relative strength of parties. Those representing the preferences of voters with lower socioeconomic status should benefit from the increase in turnout. Thus, CV should lead to a more equal representation of political preferences. This proposition has received little empirical support, though. A variety of research designs and data sources have shown that higher or lower turnout would have only marginal effects on the strength of parties.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Arend Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma', *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1997), 1–14.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Hirczy, 'The Impact of Mandatory Voting Laws on Turnout: A Quasi-Experimental Approach', *Electoral Studies*, 13 (1994), 64–76; Robert W. Jackman, 'Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, 81 (1987), 405–423.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Marc Hooghe and Koen Pelleriaux, 'Compulsory Voting in Belgium: An Application of the Lijphart Thesis', *Electoral Studies*, 17 (1998), 419–424.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Brunell and John DiNardo, 'A Propensity Score Reweighting Approach to Estimating the Partisan Effects of Full Turnout in American Presidential Elections', *Political Analysis*, 12 (2004), 28–45; Cees van der Eijk and Marcel van Egmond, 'Political Effects of Low Turnout in National and European Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 26 (2007); Ben-

While the impact of CV on the 'direction' of the vote seems to be limited, CV may also affect the consistency of the relationship between citizens' political preferences and their electoral choices. CV may compel less motivated and knowledgeable voters to the polls who would otherwise have abstained. These voters, in turn, may tend to cast votes that do not accurately reflect their political preferences. In other words, the distribution of their party choices may be more variable than those of the more sophisticated voluntary voters, with their preferences being equal. This would imply that the conditions for an efficient representation of their preferences should be less fully met. This equally important consequence of CV has received only little attention. This reflects a general paucity of political science research focusing on variance-altering effects.<sup>5</sup> But it is all the more surprising in this context, as the risk that CV brings politically less interested citizens to cast uninformed votes is a central argument of its opponents. This fear was clearly expressed by Abraham, for instance, who argues that 'an unwilling or indifferent vote is a thoughtless one'.<sup>6</sup> Advocates of CV, by contrast, have emphasized the positive effect of this institution on citizens' degree of political interest and knowledge. In this more optimistic view, CV does not only increase turnout, but also functions as a method of political education. This consideration seems to have been important when CV was introduced in countries such as Belgium in 1893 or in the Netherlands and in Australia around 1920.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this article is to examine the impact of CV on the consistency of the translation of political preferences into party choices. In the next section, we discuss in more detail the mechanisms underlying this expected causal effect, as well as some possible counter-arguments. We test our hypotheses using data from the 1995 Belgian Election Study, analyzing how the variance of the relationship between issue positions and the vote is affected by citizens' propensity to participate in voluntary elections. We find strong support for our hypothesis that CV affects the consistency of voting decisions. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

---

jamin Highton and Raymond E. Wolfinger, 'The Political Implications of Higher Turnout', *British Journal of Political Science*, 31 (2001), 179–223; Daniel Rubenson et al., 'Does Low Turnout Matter? Evidence from the 2000 Canadian Federal Election', *Electoral Studies*, 26 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Bear F. Braumoeller, 'Explaining Variance; Or, Stuck in a Moment We Can't Get Out Of', *Political Analysis*, 14 (2006), 268–290.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma', p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> William A. Robson, 'Compulsory Voting', *Political Science Quarterly*, 38 (1923), 569–577; Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma'.

## Compulsory voting, political sophistication, and electoral choice

Much research has shown that a higher level of education, of political interest, or of political sophistication, increases the probability of turning out to vote.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in a voluntary voting system, citizens who participate should come disproportionately from those with high education, interest, or sophistication. Under CV, by contrast, this bias should be weaker. This has been illustrated by Jackman, for example, who compares Australia and the United States.<sup>9</sup> In the latter country, citizens with a low level of political sophistication are strongly underrepresented among voters. In Australia, by contrast, CV brings more citizens with a low level of political sophistication to the polls. While this claim seems to be intuitive, there is a counter-argument that must be considered seriously. As emphasized in the introduction, advocates of CV suggest that this institution may foster civic education.<sup>10</sup> CV might incite less interested voters to become more informed about politics.<sup>11</sup> Yet, empirical evidence in favour of this argument is quite thin. Gordon and Segura are among the few who have analyzed the impact of CV on political sophistication.<sup>12</sup> This was part of a more general attempt to study how contextual factors may shape the costs and benefits of political information. In their analysis of 12 Western European countries, including three in which voting is compulsory, they report a small, positive impact of this institution on the level of political sophistication. However, the significant impact they find is due to a methodological artefact. Their analysis, which combines characteristics of both voters and countries, is performed at the individual level. This design strongly underestimates the uncertainty surrounding the effects of contextual factors. This is the problem of the 'miraculous multiplication

---

<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); G. Bingham Powell Jr., 'American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective', *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), 17–43; Henry E. Brady, 'Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 271–294; Robert A. Jackson, 'Clarifying the Relationship Between Education and Turnout', *American Politics Research*, 23 (1995), 279–299.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Jackman, *Moderating the News: Political Information, Media Effects and the Role of Political Institutions*, paper presented at the ECPR General Conference, Marburg, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma'.

<sup>11</sup> Bart Engelen, 'Why Compulsory Voting Can Enhance Democracy', *Acta Politica*, 42 (2007), 23–39.

<sup>12</sup> Stacy B. Gordon and Gary M. Segura, 'Cross-National Variation in the Political Sophistication of Individuals: Capability or Choice?', *Journal of Politics*, 59 (1997), 126–147.

of the number of units'.<sup>13</sup> Once the model is properly specified, the effect of CV disappears.<sup>14</sup> The same problem affects an analysis by Berggren,<sup>15</sup> who uses the data of Gordon and Segura to test a slightly different causal model.

These results do not support the claim that CV will make citizens more knowledgeable or interested in politics. While electoral participation may have positive effects on citizens, such as on their degree of external political efficacy,<sup>16</sup> there is little evidence that participation makes citizens politically more sophisticated.<sup>17</sup> We must thus consider seriously the risk that CV brings citizens to the polls who would otherwise not vote, but will not increase their level of political sophistication. This situation, we argue, will make the relationship between political preferences and party choices less consistent. Their voting decisions will be more loosely related to their political preferences. In other words, it should be more difficult to predict their vote on the basis of their policy preferences. This relationship will be more variable among 'compelled' than among 'motivated' voters.

This possible consequence of CV has been developed on a theoretical level by Jakee and Sun.<sup>18</sup> They show that an increase in the number of voters who cast an 'uninformed' vote can affect the electoral outcome. The larger the proportion of uninformed voters, the higher is the probability that the result diverges from the average preferences of informed voters. Their reasoning is based on a formal model, which assumes that uninterested citizens have no clear preference for a given party or candidate and that their voting decision is a random choice. While the assumption of pure randomness is probably unrealistic, their model clearly identifies the mechanism through which CV may alter the outcome of the election. Furthermore, their general argument is still valid with less restrictive assumptions.<sup>19</sup> As long as the party choices of citizens who would abstain in a voluntary system are less predictable than

---

<sup>13</sup> Tom Snijders and Roel Bosker, *Multilevel Analysis: An Introduction to Basic and Advanced Multilevel Modeling* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Using the data reported in Tables 1 and 3 of Gordon and Segura, we replicated their first model, which includes only contextual variables. But we used countries rather than individuals as units of observation. The impact of CV is then clearly non-significant, with a *p*-value of 0.84.

<sup>15</sup> Heidi M. Berggren, 'Institutional Context and Reduction of the Resource Bias in Political Sophistication', *Political Research Quarterly*, 54 (2001), 531–552.

<sup>16</sup> Steven E. Finkel, 'Reciprocal Effects of Participation and Political Efficacy: A Panel Analysis', *American Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1985), 891–913.

<sup>17</sup> Jan Leighley, 'Participation as a Stimulus of Political Conceptualization', *Journal of Politics*, 53 (1991), 198–211.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Jakee and Guang-Zhen Sun, 'Is Compulsory Voting More Democratic?', *Public Choice*, 129 (2006), 61–75.

<sup>19</sup> Larry M. Bartels, 'Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 40 (1996), 194–230.

those of motivated participants, CV may weaken the link between voters' preferences and the electoral results.

This claim is supported by research on the effects of political sophistication. Political experts not only have a better knowledge of politics than 'political novices', but they also organize and process this information in a more meaningful way.<sup>20</sup> Voters with a high level of political sophistication are, for example, better able to locate parties in the political space.<sup>21</sup> This should also improve their ability to relate their own preferences to those of parties. In fact, it has been shown that uncertainty about parties' positions weakens the relationship between issue preferences and voting choice.<sup>22</sup> Such uncertainty should characterize the citizens who only take part in the election because they are compelled to do so. The consequence, we argue, will be a less consistent relationship between voters' preferences and the electoral outcome, as well as a less effective representation of these preferences.

While this argument is also supported by much research on electoral behaviour and opinion formation, we must also discuss a possible counter-argument. Even if less sophisticated voters have a more approximate knowledge of parties' positions, they could still vote in a meaningful way on the basis of other criteria. Central to this claim is the suggestion that citizens can base their voting decisions on heuristics or cognitive shortcuts, which allow them to vote as if they had been better informed.<sup>23</sup> The reliance on heuristics has been clearly established and is a central component of many models of information processing and of attitude formation.<sup>24</sup> For example,

---

<sup>20</sup> Susan T. Fiske, Donald R. Kinder, and W. Michael Larter, 'The Novice and the Expert: Knowledge-Based Strategies in Political Cognition', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 19 (1983), 381–400; Kathleen M. McGraw and Neil Pinney, 'The Effects of General and Domain-Specific Expertise on Political Memory and Judgment', *Social Cognition*, 8 (1990), 9–30; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> R. Michael Alvarez and Charles H. Franklin, 'Uncertainty and Political Perceptions', *Journal of Politics*, 56 (1994), 671–688; Lynda W. Powell, 'Analyzing Misinformation: Perceptions of Congressional Candidates' Ideologies', *American Journal of Political Science*, 33 (1989), 272–293.

<sup>22</sup> Larry M. Bartels, 'Issue Voting Under Uncertainty: An Empirical Test', *American Journal of Political Science*, 30 (1986), 709–728; R. Michael Alvarez, *Information and Elections* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Phillip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Arthur Lupia, 'Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections', *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), 63–76.

<sup>24</sup> Shelly Chaiken, 'Heuristic Versus Systematic Information Processing and the Use of Source Versus Message Cues in Persuasion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39 (1980), 752–766; Susan T. Fiske and Steven L. Neuberg, 'A Continuum of Impression

citizens may rely on their perception of candidates' traits, rather than on their issue positions. Evaluating such traits should be less demanding in cognitive terms, as voters are used to making such inferences in everyday life.<sup>25</sup> Yet, while heuristic decision processes may moderate the impact of differences in the level of political sophistication, they do not make such differences irrelevant. This claim is supported by the analyses of Bartels, for example, who shows that electoral results would differ if all voters were fully informed.<sup>26</sup> In fact, voting decisions based on heuristics may also be affected by uncertainty, in the same way as those based on issue preferences. Voters can be uncertain about candidates' traits, for example. This uncertainty also makes party choices more unpredictable. It weakens the relationship between citizens' perceptions of candidates' traits and their evaluations of these candidates.<sup>27</sup> Uncertainty about candidates' traits and uncertainty about party positions are related to the same individual-level characteristics. Both are characteristic of voters with a low level of political information, a low education level, or a low exposure to political news.<sup>28</sup> To sum up our hypotheses, we expect a lower propensity to turn out if voting is voluntary to be associated with a lower level of political sophistication, a less accurate perception of party policy positions, and a less consistent relationship between political preferences and voting choice.

## Research design and data

In order to assess the causal effect of CV on voting behaviour, we would ideally observe the same voters confronted with the same stimuli (issues, candidates, parties, etc.) under voluntary and compulsory voting at a single election. Of course, such data cannot exist even in principle, but this counterfactual is nevertheless a useful starting point to evaluate alternative research designs. Cross-national studies of the effect of CV make inferences based on different voters reacting to different stimuli at different elections

---

Formation from Category-Based to Individuating Processes: Influences of Information and Motivation on Attention and Interpretation', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 23 (1990), 1–74; Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, 'The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19 (1986), 123–205.

<sup>25</sup> Wendy M. Rahn et al., 'A Social-Cognitive Model of Candidate Appraisal', in *Information and Democratic Processes*, ed. by John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 136–159.

<sup>26</sup> Bartels, 'Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections'.

<sup>27</sup> Garrett Glasgow and R. Michael Alvarez, 'Uncertainty and Candidate Personality Traits', *American Politics Quarterly*, 28 (2000), 26–49.

<sup>28</sup> Glasgow and Alvarez, 'Uncertainty and Candidate Personality Traits'.

held under different electoral institutions, party systems, and so forth, that may all intractably impinge on the voters' behaviour. The pursuit of such a design therefore seems hopelessly error-prone.<sup>29</sup> Second, panel studies that cover either the introduction or the abolishment of CV in a single country provide the potential to account for the unobserved heterogeneity at the level of voters, eliminate the unsolicited variation at the level of political systems, and substantially reduce background noise from differential stimuli. Hence, the causal leverage of panel studies would far exceed that of a cross-national design. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, such data do not exist.<sup>30</sup> Yet another possibility would be to capitalise on countries such as Austria and Switzerland, where some regions apply CV while others do not.<sup>31</sup> Such a design would *prima facie* allow us to observe different voters confronted with more or less identical stimuli at the same election held under the same systemic features (besides CV, of course). However, in Austria, regional survey data that satisfy the demands of our empirical venture are again nonexistent. Switzerland, on the other hand, exhibits extreme regional heterogeneity in cleavage structures, electoral institutions, and party support, which suggests that voters primarily react to regionally varying rather than national (i.e., identical) political stimuli.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the above reservations against cross-national comparisons may more or less equally apply to cross-regional comparisons within Switzerland.

What we are using instead are election survey data from Belgium, a country that applies CV, but in which CV itself has recently become a hotly debated political. More precisely, we are using survey data that were collected on the occasion of the 1995 Belgian Chamber of Representatives elections.<sup>33</sup> The 1995 Belgian Election Study (BES) includes an item designed to capture the respondent's propensity to turn out if CV were voluntary, and thus allows us to compare under otherwise equal conditions the actual voting be-

---

<sup>29</sup> Hirczy, 'The Impact of Mandatory Voting Laws on Turnout: A Quasi-Experimental Approach'.

<sup>30</sup> The earliest Dutch National Election Study panel survey came within an inch of providing such data, but its first wave was fielded at the occasion of the 1970 provincial elections—the first elections that were held *after* the abolishment of CV. See Philip C. Stouthart, 'De Verkiezingen van Maart 1970', *Acta Politica*, 6 (1971), 12–38.

<sup>31</sup> Hirczy, 'The Impact of Mandatory Voting Laws on Turnout: A Quasi-Experimental Approach'.

<sup>32</sup> Daniele Caramani, *The Nationalization of Politics. The Formation of National Electorates and Party Systems in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Jaak Billiet and André P. Frogner, *1995 General Election Study Belgium: Documentation and Computer File*, The Hague: Data Archive and Networked Services DANS (Steinmetz Archive No. P1422), 1998.

haviour of the 'voluntary' voters and of those who would probably abstain if CV were abolished.<sup>34</sup> The crucial question here is that of the validity of such a hypothetical question. Jackman rightly cautions against an overly naïve use of this item in Australian election studies, since self-selection of politically involved citizens into election survey samples<sup>35</sup> and the pressures of social desirability may bias estimates of the effects of CV.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Jackman is worried that estimates of turnout declines under the voluntary vote are too small. Given that self-selection and social desirability actually are at work in our Belgian data, we would also expect attenuated estimates of group differences between the self-declared voters and abstainers under voluntary voting. Some respondents who would potentially abstain could be expected to wrongly indicate their willingness to participate in elections due to social desirability, and those who would actually abstain should be underrepresented in the whole sample due to the self-selection of the politically interested. Thus, if we are erring, at least we will presumably be erring on the conservative side.

## Party choice

Our dependent variable is party choice in the 1995 Chamber of Representatives elections as reported by the 3,668 respondents to the BES.<sup>37</sup> Due to the far-reaching autonomy of Flanders and Wallonia, national parliamentary elections in Belgium are, in fact, separate regional elections in which com-

---

<sup>34</sup> Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 'Compulsory Voting in Belgium: An Application of the Lijphart Thesis'; Lieven De Winter and Johan Ackaert, 'Compulsory Voting in Belgium: A Reply to Hooghe and Pelleriaux', *Electoral Studies*, 17 (1998), 425–428.

<sup>35</sup> As opposed to voting, participation in election surveys is, of course, voluntary in Australia and Belgium.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Jackman, 'Correcting Surveys for Non-Response and Measurement Error Using Auxiliary Information', *Electoral Studies*, 18 (1998), 7–27; Simon Jackman, 'Non-Compulsory Voting in Australia? What Surveys Can (Can't) Tell Us', *Electoral Studies*, 18 (1999), 29–48.

<sup>37</sup> The 150 members of the Chamber of Representatives are elected by proportional representation from party lists in 20 electoral districts of varying magnitudes according to the D'Hondt method. Disproportionalities in the transformation of votes into seats that potentially emanate from small districts are corrected at the level of the provinces. Thus, incentives to vote strategically, that is, to choose another but the most preferred party in order to obtain a more favourable outcome, are limited in Belgium. This is important to note, since strategic voting would also affect the variance of the vote function that links the voters' preferences to their choices, and could thus bias our conclusions. This bias would presumably disadvantage the more sophisticated voters, since they have a higher propensity to vote tactically. See André Blais and Mathieu Turgeon, 'How Good Are Voters at Sorting Out the Weakest Candidate in Their Constituency?', *Electoral Studies*, 23 (2004), 455–461.

pletely different sets of parties compete for voters. But while subnational diversity has qualified Switzerland as an error-prone case in the cross-sectional study of CV effects, it actually puts additional causal leverage on the Belgian data, since it allows us to replicate our analyses for both the Flemish and the Walloon voters.

The BES data provide sufficient information to include the voters of all 11 parties that gained parliamentary representation after the 1995 election in our study. In the Flemish case, these are the Christian People’s Party (CVP), the Liberals and Democrats (VLD), the Socialist Party (SP), the right-wing Vlaams Blok, the People’s Union (VU), and the Ecologists (Agalev). In Wallonia, these are the Socialists (PS), the Liberal Reformist Party (PRL-FDF), the Christian Social Party (PSC), the Ecologists (Ecolo), and the National Front (NF).<sup>38</sup>

## Turnout propensities

According to official election results, 91 percent of the eligible voters turned out at the 1995 General elections. In the sample, we observe a slightly over-reported turnout of 95 percent, probably due to self-selection of politically involved citizens into the sample and misreports to satisfy social desirability. The aim of this study is to compare the behaviour of those who would choose to vote even if CV were abolished and those who would probably abstain. As indicated in the design section, we use a hypothetical measure to identify these groups. Table 1 shows how respondents are distributed over the categories of this question, along with their reported voting behaviour. The picture is striking: only 44 percent of the respondents reported that they would always vote regardless of whether CV was abolished.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, one out of four respondents indicated that he or she would never vote if voting were voluntary. Another five percent could not answer this hypothetical and therefore difficult question.<sup>40</sup>

Turning now to the reported behaviour of these groups, 93 percent of the voters with the highest turnout propensity reported that they voted for a

---

<sup>38</sup> See the second column of Table 5 and the related Footnote 66 for how the voters in the sample are distributed over these parties.

<sup>39</sup> Similar data from Australia tell quite a different story: 76 percent of the respondents of the Australian Election Study reported that they would definitely vote even if CV were abolished. See Jackman, ‘Correcting Surveys for Non-Response and Measurement Error Using Auxiliary Information’. De Winter and Ackaert, ‘Compulsory Voting in Belgium: A Reply to Hooghe and Pelleriaux’, pp. 426-427, attribute the alerting Belgian figures to a ‘problematic political culture’ characterised by low levels of efficacy and trust in politicians, as well as institutions.

<sup>40</sup> These will be excluded from the estimation sample.

R would ...	Regular party choice	Invalid ballot	R did not vote	R does not remember	Total
... always	.93 (1,432)	.01 (11)	.02 (37)	.04 (57)	.44 (1,537)
... generally	.92 (455)	.01 (4)	.04 (21)	.03 (17)	.14 (497)
... sometimes	.87 (407)	.02 (8)	.04 (15)	.08 (39)	.13 (469)
... never vote	.75 (640)	.11 (91)	.06 (47)	.09 (80)	.24 (858)
R doesn't know	.88 (131)	.05 (8)	.05 (8)	.08 (13)	.05 (160)
Total	.87 (3,065)	.04 (122)	.04 (128)	.06 (206)	3,521

*Note:* Entries are proportions and total numbers (in parentheses).

Table 1: Reported voting behaviour by turnout propensities.

party. Only one percent cast an invalid or blank ballot, and only two percent abstained. Among those who reported that they would never vote again if CV was abolished, 11 percent cast spoiled votes, 6 percent abstained, and another 9 percent did not remember how they voted. These group differences are highly significant ( $F = 36$ , 3 d.f.,  $p < .001$ ). Obviously, unwillingness to vote has observable behavioural consequences under CV at present. However, in the remainder of this study, we will turn our attention to those voters who reported a regular party choice.

## Political knowledge and interest

Varying levels of political sophistication are the primary causal mechanism that theoretically account for potential differences in the voting behaviour of the citizens voluntarily participating in elections and the unwilling compelled to the ballot box by CV. Whereas political sophistication is usually conceptualised as the degree of elaboration and organisation of political beliefs,<sup>41</sup> political knowledge and interest mark the informational and motivational aspects that antecede sophistication<sup>42</sup>. Our operationalisation of political knowledge is based on a battery of knowledge questions that asked respondents to assign 14 Belgian politicians to their respective parties. Combining these items into a single measure of knowledge is complicated by two related observations. First, the overall prominence of the political leaders varies tremendously. For example, three-quarters of the respondents correctly assigned then prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene to the CVP, while only 12

<sup>41</sup> Philip E. Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. by David E Apter, (New York: Free Press, 1964), 206–261.

<sup>42</sup> Robert C. Luskin, 'Explaining Political Sophistication', *Political Behavior*, 12 (1990), 331–361.

percent of the sample were able to determine the party affiliation of Daniel Feret, *le Président à vie* of the right-wing National Front. Moreover, as a consequence of the *de facto* split of the Belgian party system along language lines, the prominence of all the politicians varies from region to region. For example, 94 percent of the Flemish respondents correctly assigned Dehaene to the CVP, whereas only 51 percent of the Walloon voters accomplished this task. In other words, the difficulty of these questions varies over stimuli, that is, politicians, and from language region to language region. Thus, simply adding up the correct answers into an index would yield a flawed measure of knowledge. Instead, we employ the *Rasch model*, a frequently utilised psychometric scaling technique for dichotomous items, to assess the difficulty of knowledge question  $k$  and to locate the respondents  $i$  on a latent knowledge dimension for each of the language regions separately.<sup>43</sup> The Rasch model is of the logistic form

$$P_{ik} = \frac{\exp(\kappa_i - \delta_k)}{1 + \exp(\kappa_i - \delta_k)} \quad (1)$$

where  $P_{ik}$  is respondent  $i$ 's probability of correctly answering question  $k$ ,  $\kappa_i$  is  $i$ 's political knowledge, and  $\delta_k$  is the difficulty of question  $k$ . Thus, if  $i$ 's political knowledge is higher than the difficulty of item  $k$ , she has a better-than-even chance of correctly assigning the respective candidate to his party. However, the model in Equation 1 is not identified, since the probabilities only depend on the relative positions of the knowledge and difficulty parameters. We therefore constrain the latent knowledge scores  $\kappa$  to have means of zero. The detailed results from the Rasch model of political knowledge in the Flemish and Walloon electorate are given in the Appendix.<sup>44</sup> Our measure of political knowledge is then  $\kappa_i$ , the respondents' location on this latent scale. For interpretational convenience and comparability, we have standardised the knowledge scores of the Flemish and Walloon voters so that their standard deviations are one. Table 2 describes the knowledge measure by the different propensities to turn out, defined above. Not surprisingly, the groups vary significantly in their mean political knowledge ( $F = 150, 3$  d.f.,  $p < .001$ ), with those respondents who reported to always turn out even if CV were abolished exhibiting much higher levels of knowledge than those who were more inclined to abstain.

<sup>43</sup> George Rasch, *Probabilistic Models for Some Intelligence and Attainment Tests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> We used `raschtest`, a user-written program for Stata to estimate the parameters via conditional maximum likelihood and to assess the model fit. See Jean-Benoit Hardouin, 'Rasch Analysis: Estimation and Tests with the Raschtest Module', *Stata Journal*, 1 (2001), 1–21.

R would ...	Knowledge		Interest		N
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
... always	.31	.97	2.10	.94	1,571
... generally	.18	.94	1.69	.82	518
... sometimes	-.16	.91	1.31	.81	485
... never vote	-.50	.93	.85	.90	895
Total	.02	1.01	1.61	1.03	3,469

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation (SD) of political knowledge and interest by turnout propensities.

The same applies to the average levels of political interest ( $F = 391$ , 3 d.f.,  $p < .001$ ). Political interest is measured here with a standard survey item on which the respondents could indicate with a five-point- scale whether they were 'very' (4) to 'not at all' (0) interested in politics. In sum, voters that would probably abstain if voting were voluntary have substantially less motivation and skills—which are considered a precondition of informed choices in normative theory—than voters who would probably turn out even if CV were abolished.<sup>45</sup>

## Political preferences

While normative theory expects voters to choose among candidates and parties on programmatic grounds, it offers no explicit account of how exactly voters come to make their decisions. Over the past 15 years, a lively debate has evolved around whether voters prefer the party that represents political views most similar to their own (the *proximity model*), or whether they vote according to the *directional model*, i.e., prefer the party that is 'on their side' in a political conflict but advocates even stronger positions.<sup>46</sup> It is not the purpose of this study to review and compare the empirical merits of the two models against each other.<sup>47</sup> It has repeatedly been shown that both models

<sup>45</sup> See also Galen Irwin, 'Compulsory Voting Legislation. Impact on Turnout in the Netherlands', *Comparative Political Studies*, 7 (1974), 292–315.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey B. Lewis and Gary King, 'No Evidence on Directional Vs. Proximity Voting', *Political Analysis*, 8 (1999), 21–33; Samuel III Merrill and Bernard Grofman, *A Unified Theory of Voting. Directional and Spatial Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Bart Maddens, 'Directional Theory of Issue Voting: The Case of the 1991 Parliamentary Elections in Flanders', *Electoral Studies*, 15 (1996), 53–70; Bart Maddens and Istvan Hajnal, 'Alternative Models of Issue Voting: The Case of the 1991 and 1995 Elections in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research*, 39 (2001), 319–346 scrutinise both

fit empirical voter data reasonably well, and that a mix of the two is frequently the best descriptor of actual voting behaviour.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, this debate is of substantial importance for our study. Some authors have argued that proximity voting is more informationally demanding than directional voting, and therefore should be a better reflection of how sophisticated voters make their decisions, while less sophisticated voters follow the directional model.<sup>49</sup> If true, imposing assumptions exclusively in favour of one of the two models could seriously bias our conclusions about the behaviour of the (more sophisticated) voluntary voters and those solely compelled by CV. We therefore use both conceptions of issue voting and test them separately as well as jointly. According to the proximity model, voter  $i$ 's utility  $U$  for party  $j$  is the negative of the sum of the squared distances between  $i$  and  $j$  in an  $M$ -dimensional space, where  $M$  is the number of political issues  $m$ :

$$U_{ij}^P = - \sum_{m=1}^M (v_{im} - p_{ijm})^2 \quad (2)$$

The directional model, on the other hand, states that the voter's utility for  $j$  is the sum of the products of voter and party locations, each relative to a neutral point:

$$U_{ij}^D = \sum_{m=1}^M v_{im} p_{ijm} \quad (3)$$

In our case,  $m$  includes eight issues that have, for a long time, stimulated political controversy in Belgium: the conflict between Catholics and non-Catholics, state interventions in the economy, immigration, environmental protection, law and order, privacy rights, and regional autonomy.<sup>50</sup> Respondents were asked to place themselves, as well as the major parties running in their region, on 11-point bipolar scales. We have recoded these scales to the (-5,5) interval, with the neutral point at zero. We have also partly reversed the scales so that a value of -5 represents the most 'leftist' view in order

---

models with data from the 1991 and 1995 elections in Belgium. Contingent upon the party under consideration, they find mixed evidence for the directional and proximity models.

<sup>48</sup> Torben Iversen, 'Political Leadership and Representation in Western European Democracies: A Test of the Three Models of Voting', *American Journal of Political Science*, 38 (1994), 46–74; Merrill and Grofman, *A Unified Theory of Voting. Directional and Spatial Models*.

<sup>49</sup> Stuart E. MacDonald, George Rabinowitz, and Ola Listhaug, 'Political Sophistication and Models of Issue Voting', *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 453–483; Maddens, 'Directional Theory of Issue Voting: The Case of the 1991 Parliamentary Elections in Flanders'.

<sup>50</sup> English translations of the questions are given in the Appendix.

to facilitate interpretation.<sup>51</sup> Finally, we have normalised the proximity and directional measures for each voter by dividing by the number of issues with valid data.<sup>52</sup> Note that the models in Equations 2 and 3 link voter positions  $v$  to *individual* perceptions of the positions of the parties  $p$ . If voters tend to perceive their preferred party as being close to themselves, irrespective of what this party’s ‘true’ location in the ideological space is, this will cause bias. Several authors have therefore suggested replacing individual perceptions of  $p$  by the parties’ average placements on the issue scales. However, if parties present different issue positions to different groups of voters, mean placements will introduce measurement error.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, even if the true  $p$ ’s were constant over voters, measuring  $p$  by average placements will introduce bias in our model estimates, since less sophisticated voters who are uncertain of the ‘true’  $p$ ’s probably tend to place all the parties closer to the neutral point of the issue scales.<sup>54</sup>

Figure 1 supports this conjecture. While the most knowledgeable voters, on average, place the Socialists and the Liberals at the opposite ends of the classical economic divide, the mean perceived positions of these two parties hardly differ in the least knowledgeable group of voters. The latter group also exhibits substantially larger variance in their party placements, which is indicative of their uncertainty as to where to locate the parties. At the same time, however, their larger variance casts some doubts on the argument that the observed mean differences in the perceptions of party positions are primarily due to parties presenting different issue positions to different groups

---

<sup>51</sup> These reversals have been based on a correlational analysis of the issue scales and the respondent’s self-placements on a left-right scale.

<sup>52</sup> This strategy maximises the number of usable cases in the face of missing observations. See Merrill and Grofman, 1999, *A Unified Theory of Voting*. We include all the respondents who were able to locate themselves, ‘their’ party, and at least one other party on at least one issue scale. However, the number of issues that inform the spatial utility components, and thus, their discriminatory power, now differs between individuals. Given that less sophisticated voters are more susceptible to fail to respond to the issue-related survey questions, this may bias our results to the disadvantage of these voters. In fitting the models, we have therefore also used the number of valid issue-observations per voter as a control variable. This did not substantially change our results. On the other hand, the number of parties from which to choose may also be limited by missing observations, that is, when some voters fail to provide any information with respect to a single party. Such limited choice sets, in turn, may actually enhance the predictive power of the spatial utility components, this time to the disadvantage of the voters who provided issue-specific information on all the parties. We have therefore also controlled for the number of alternatives in the individual choice sets. Again, the substantive conclusion remain unaffected.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis and King, ‘No Evidence on Directional Vs. Proximity Voting’.

<sup>54</sup> Alvarez and Franklin, ‘Uncertainty and Political Perceptions’; Powell, ‘Analyzing Misinformation: Perceptions of Congressional Candidates’ Ideologies’.

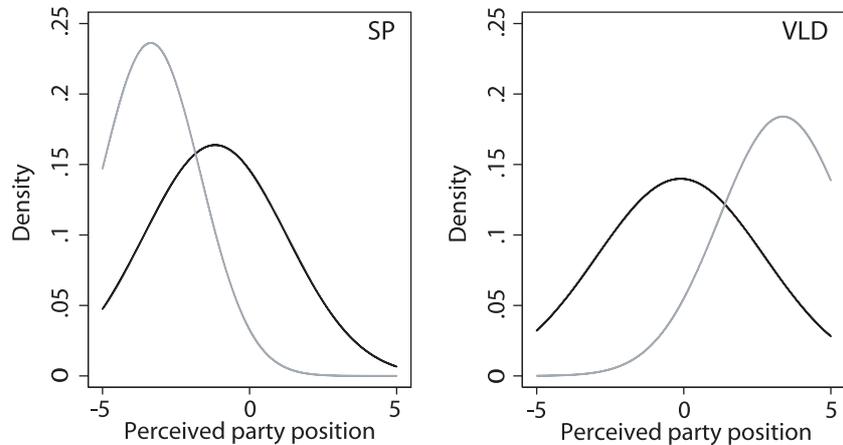


Figure 1: Distribution of perceived positions of the Flemish Socialists (SP) and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD) on the state intervention vs. free enterprise scale by political knowledge. Grey curves represent the most knowledgeable 10% of the electorate; black curves represent the least knowledgeable 10%.

of voters. Thus, if we use average party placements to measure  $p$  in our models of issue voting, we will probably disadvantage the knowledgeable voters, who know where the parties are ‘truly’ located and vote accordingly. Alternatively, if we use the mean party placements of the most knowledgeable voters to measure  $p$ , we will still ignore potentially varying issue positions that parties may signal to different groups of voters, disadvantaging the less sophisticated voters. Our solution to this problem is to specify three alternative conceptions of  $p$ : individual placements, mean placements, and mean placements of the most knowledgeable 10 percent of the electorate. However, since our main conclusions do not substantially differ across these specifications, we will only present the results for the individual perceptions specification  $p_{ij}$  and enter the results of the alternative specifications on the credit side of robustness.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> We have also fitted several less restrictive models in which the parameters of the utility functions were allowed to vary by party and by issue, respectively. Again, our main conclusions remain unaffected. These additional results are available from the authors upon request.

## A heteroscedastic conditional logit model of party choice

The previous normative and operational discussion of issue-voting has been deterministic in the sense that voters have been assumed certain to select the party with the highest issue-based utility. Of course, this is unrealistic, since voters may also choose on criteria other than issues, and on issues other than the ones included in any specific empirical model. We do not even attempt to explicitly measure such factors here. Instead, we take up and extend a probabilistic approach, that is, we model the unobserved component of individual utility as a random variable.<sup>56</sup>

Again, let  $U_{ij}$  be the voter's  $i$  utility for party  $j$ . We assume that  $U$  can be partitioned into a systematic component  $\beta X_{ij}$  and a random term  $\epsilon_{ij}$ , so that

$$U_{ij} = \beta X_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (4)$$

where  $X_{ij}$  is a vector of (in our case, spatial) variables measuring attributes of party  $j$  relative to  $i$ .<sup>57</sup> The random component  $\epsilon_{ij}$  represents unmeasured factors that affect the voters' choices that are assumed to be unrelated to the systematic component. The probability that  $i$  votes for party  $j$  is then the probability that the utility of voting for  $j$  is higher than the utility of voting for any other party  $k$ :

$$\begin{aligned} P_{ij} &= P(\beta X_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} > \beta X_{ik} + \epsilon_{ik}) \\ &= P(\epsilon_{ik} - \epsilon_{ij} < \beta X_{ij} - \beta X_{ik}) \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

If we assume the random component to follow an IID extreme value distribution, the *conditional logit model* results.<sup>58</sup> In the conditional logit model, the probability that  $i$  votes for  $j$  is of the form

---

<sup>56</sup> For an overview of deterministic and probabilistic modelling traditions in electoral research, see Barry C. Burden, 'Deterministic and Probabilistic Voting Models', *American Journal of Political Science*, 41 (1997), 1150–1169.

<sup>57</sup> We also include  $j - 1$  party intercepts in  $X$  in order to account for varying non-spatial party attractiveness.

<sup>58</sup> See Daniel McFadden, 'Conditional Logit Analysis of Qualitative Choice Behavior', in *Frontiers in Econometrics*, ed. by Paul Zarembka, (New York: Academic Press, 1973); R. Michael Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, 'When Politics and Models Collide: Estimating Models of Multiparty Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 55–96. The extreme value distribution is substantially similar to the normal distribution, but leads to cleaner expressions for the choice probabilities. See Merrill and Grofman, *A Unified Theory of Voting. Directional and Spatial Models*.

$$P_{ij} = \frac{\exp(\lambda\beta X_{ij})}{\sum_{k=1}^J \exp(\lambda\beta X_{ik})} \quad (6)$$

where  $\lambda$  is a scale parameter that is inversely proportional to the variance  $\sigma^2$  of the error term  $\epsilon_{ij}$ :

$$\lambda = \frac{\pi}{\sqrt{6\sigma_\epsilon^2}} \quad (7)$$

Since  $\lambda$  is not identified, it is usually fixed at one. Thus, the conditional logit model assumes that the error variance is constant across individuals. This assumption is in direct contradiction to our expectation that uninformed and uninterested voters forced to the polls by CV will exhibit a larger error variance in translating their issue preferences into vote choices. We therefore directly model the hypothesised heterogeneity of the error term as a function of the voters' propensity to turn out  $Z_i$ :<sup>59</sup>

$$\lambda_i = \exp(\gamma Z_i) \quad (8)$$

This gives the *heteroscedastic conditional logit model*.<sup>60</sup> Finally, substituting  $\lambda$  by the right-hand side of Equation 8 and resolving Equation 7 for  $\sigma_i$  yields

$$\sigma_i = \frac{\pi}{\exp(\gamma Z_i)\sqrt{6}} \quad (9)$$

In the subsequent empirical section, we will denote Equation 6 the *location submodel*, since it locates the voters in the party space. Equation 8 is labelled the *precision submodel*, since higher estimates of  $\gamma$  signify a closer fit of the systematic component to party choice. Thus, if the hypotheses held, we would expect lower  $\gamma$ 's and  $\lambda$ 's and, therefore, larger variances ( $\sigma^2$ 's) of the systematic vote functions among voters who would probably abstain if CV were abolished. Statistical results are presented in the following section.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> In a final estimation step, we will also include political knowledge and interest in  $Z$  in order to assess to what extent eventual differences in the behaviour of voluntary and forced voters are due to differential average levels of political sophistication.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, David A. Hensher, Jordan J. Louviere, and Joffre Swait, 'Combining Sources of Preference Data', *Journal of Econometrics*, 89 (1999), 197–221.

<sup>61</sup> We have fitted the heteroscedastic conditional logit models via maximum likelihood using `clogit`, a user-written program for Stata. See Arne R. Hole, *Small-Sample Properties of Tests for Heteroscedasticity in the Conditional Logit Model*, University of York: HEDG Working Paper 06/04, 2006.

## Findings

Table 3 presents results from four different specifications of the heteroscedastic conditional logit model of party choice. Model 1 includes only the proximity measure in the location submodel that links the voters' preferences with their choices; the heteroscedastic component is made up of the three lower categories of the voluntary turnout propensity item. Those voters who indicated that they would always turn out, even if CV were abolished, constitute the reference category, for which the scaling parameter  $\lambda$  is fixed at one (otherwise the model would not be identified). Model 2 contains only the directional utility measure in the location submodel. Model 3 comprises both the proximity and the directional specification. Model 4 adds measures of political knowledge and interest to the precision submodel in order to assess to which degree eventual variance-altering effects of the turnout propensities are due to a differential composition of the turnout propensity groups with respect to their sophistication levels.<sup>62</sup>

Not surprisingly, the estimates of Model 1 indicate a highly significant positive effect of the ideological closeness of voters and parties on the probabilities to choose a party, for both Flanders and Wallonia. As hypothesised, however, this effect is diluted by the voters' propensities to turn out under the voluntary vote, with those voters susceptible to abstention revealing a less consistent translation of their issue positions into party choices. Since the respective  $\gamma$ -coefficients do not easily lend themselves to substantial interpretation, we have plugged them into the above Equations 8 and 9 to retrieve the according estimates of the scaling parameters  $\lambda$  and the variances  $\sigma^2$  in Table 4. Turning now to these variances, we can see that the choices of voters who declared that they would never vote again if voting were voluntary are three times (among Flemings) to six times (among Wallonians) as variable as the party choices of the voluntary voters, with their proximity-based utilities being held constant. In other words, the proximity model indicates that unwilling or ignorant voters forced to the polls by CV tend to make choices that are considerably less consistent with their policy preferences than voluntary voters.

Could this result be an artefact arising from the case that less sophisticated voters make their decisions according to the directional rather than

---

<sup>62</sup> The standard errors of the estimates are robust standard errors that account for the possibility that the errors are related within individuals across parties. This seems to be particularly appropriate, since the conditional logit model (like the spatial model of voting) assumes the choice alternatives to be independent (IIA) once conditioned on the covariates and the random effects. See Alvarez and Nagler, 'When Politics and Models Collide: Estimating Models of Multiparty Elections'.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Flanders</i>				
<i>Choice submodel (<math>\beta</math>'s)</i>				
Proximity	.13 (0.01)***		.04 (0.01)***	.03 (0.01)***
Direction		.29 (0.02)***	.23 (0.03)***	.19 (0.03)***
<i>Precision submodel (<math>\gamma</math>'s)</i>				
R would ...				
... generally	-.02 (.12)	-.11 (.13)	-.08 (.13)	-.07 (.13)
... sometimes	-.48 (.21)**	-.45 (.19)**	-.47 (.20)**	-.30 (.19)
... never vote	-.51 (.14)***	-.50 (.12)***	-.52 (.13)***	-.36 (.14)**
Knowledge				.27 (.07)***
Interest				.05 (.06)
Log-likelihood	-2,406	-2,341	-2,332	-2,311
LM-Test (3 d.f.)	52.06***	59.89***	65.43***	189.41***
<i>Wallonia</i>				
<i>Choice submodel (<math>\beta</math>'s)</i>				
Proximity	.12 (.01)***		.03 (.02)**	.03 (.02)**
Direction		.29 (.03)***	.23 (.04)***	.20 (.05)***
<i>Precision submodel (<math>\gamma</math>'s)</i>				
R would ...				
... generally	.12 (.18)	-.13 (.22)	-.08 (.21)	.07 (.19)
... sometimes	-.35 (.27)	-.50 (.24)**	-.48 (.25)*	-.22 (.22)
... never vote	-.91 (.32)***	-.95 (.30)***	-.96 (.31)***	-.74 (.27)***
Knowledge				.26 (.07)***
Interest				.01 (.07)
Log-likelihood	-1,167	-1,137	-1,134	-1,120
LM-Test (3 d.f.)	81.46***	99.68***	103.70***	240.50***

*Notes:* Robust standard errors in parentheses;  $N$ : 1,698 (Flanders), 950 (Wallonia)  
 $J$ : 6 (Flanders), 5 (Wallonia), Estimates of party intercepts omitted from the table  
\*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .10$ .

Table 3: ML-estimates from the heteroscedastic conditional logit models of party choice.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	$\lambda$	$\sigma^2$	$\lambda$	$\sigma^2$	$\lambda$	$\sigma^2$	$\lambda$	$\sigma^2$
<i>Flanders</i>								
R would ...								
... always	1	1.64	1	1.64	1	1.64	1	1.64
... generally	1	1.65	.90	2.04	.92	1.93	.93	1.91
... sometimes	.63	4.19	.64	4.01	.63	4.20	.74	3.01
... never vote	.60	4.56	.61	4.46	.60	4.61	.70	3.39
<i>Wallonia</i>								
R would ...								
... always	1	1.64	1	1.64	1	1.64	1	1.64
... generally	1.13	1.28	.88	2.13	.93	1.91	1.08	1.42
... sometimes	.71	3.30	.61	4.50	.62	4.26	.80	2.57
... never vote	.40	10.11	.39	11.02	.39	11.10	.48	7.30

Table 4: Predicted scale parameters ( $\lambda$ 's) and variances ( $\sigma^2$ 's) from the heteroscedastic conditional logit models of party choice.

the proximity model?<sup>63</sup> The estimates from Model 2 suggest that this is not the case. Altogether, the directional model reveals a slightly closer fit to the data than the proximity model, as indicated by the model log likelihood. However, the group differences in the precision submodel persist at the same level. Again, the party choices of the forced voters are much more variable than those of the voluntary voters. As is obvious from Equation 9, this larger variance comes along with a ‘scaling’ effect in our models’ systematic component. That is, a larger variance is associated with a lower  $\lambda$ -parameter that, in turn, attenuates the slope that links the voters’ preferences to their probabilities to vote for the parties considered. The conditional nature of our models complicates the graphical illustration of such an effect a bit. In order to do so, let us assume four voters in Wallonia, each with a different propensity to turn out under the voluntary vote. All these voters have a prior probability of voting for any of the five parties of  $1/5 = .2$ . Based on the estimates from Model 2,<sup>64</sup> Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities of each voter choosing a given party over the whole range of the directional

<sup>63</sup> MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug, ‘Political Sophistication and Models of Issue Voting’; Maddens and Hajnal, ‘Alternative Models of Issue Voting: The Case of the 1991 and 1995 Elections in Belgium’.

<sup>64</sup> We are using Model 2 at this stage for expositional convenience. In the subsequent aggregate predictions, we will be using Model 3, which provides a (slightly) better fit to the data.

utility measure, other things being equal. The scaling effect of the varying  $\lambda$ 's is clearly visible: the probability of choosing the respective party rises steeply with increasing directional utility for the two voters that would always or generally vote if CV were abolished. For the other two voters, and particularly for the one that declared he would never vote again, the linkage between the directional measure and party choice is clearly weaker. Similar conclusions can be drawn from Model 3, which includes both the directional and the proximity components, but provides only a marginally better fit with the data. Model 4 adds the knowledge and interest variables to the precision submodel in order to assess whether the previously observed differences between the turnout propensity groups are due to these groups' differential levels of political sophistication. In fact, the inclusion of information and, in particular, knowledge, decreases the differences in voting behaviour between the voluntary voters and the voters compelled by law. Nevertheless, the group most susceptible to abstain if CV were abolished still exhibits significantly larger variance in their vote functions. We can only speculate that this finding might signal that our indicators of knowledge and interest do not fully cover the complex concept of political sophistication. In particular, we reckon that our operationalisation taps the motivational and informational facets of political sophistication, but probably ignores the important aspect of the voters' capabilities to process political information.<sup>65</sup>

Whencesoever these differences come from, we observe that voters prone to abstain if CV were abolished are less inclined to make their decisions in a way that coherently reflects their issue preferences. But do their party choices also systematically differ from those of the voluntary voters? That is, would election results change in a predictable direction if these voters actually could abstain? Moreover, what would election results look like if these voters chose parties on issue grounds in the same way as did the voluntary voters?

In an attempt to answer these hypothetical questions, we have set up two simple counterfactuals in Table 5. The first column reports the official results of the 1995 Chamber of Representatives elections.<sup>66</sup> The second column shows the respective frequencies in our sample. The third column aggregates predicted probabilities of voting for the parties from Model 3 under actual conditions, that is, including the self-declared abstainers and assuming their actual voting behaviour. The fourth column provides the party proportions

---

<sup>65</sup> Luskin, 'Explaining Political Sophistication'.

<sup>66</sup> We have taken the official figures from the website of the Belgian Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.elections.fgov.be/>). In order to enhance the comparability, the population from which the party percentages have been calculated is not the number of valid votes cast at this election, but the total number of votes cast for any of the parties included in this analysis, segregated by region.

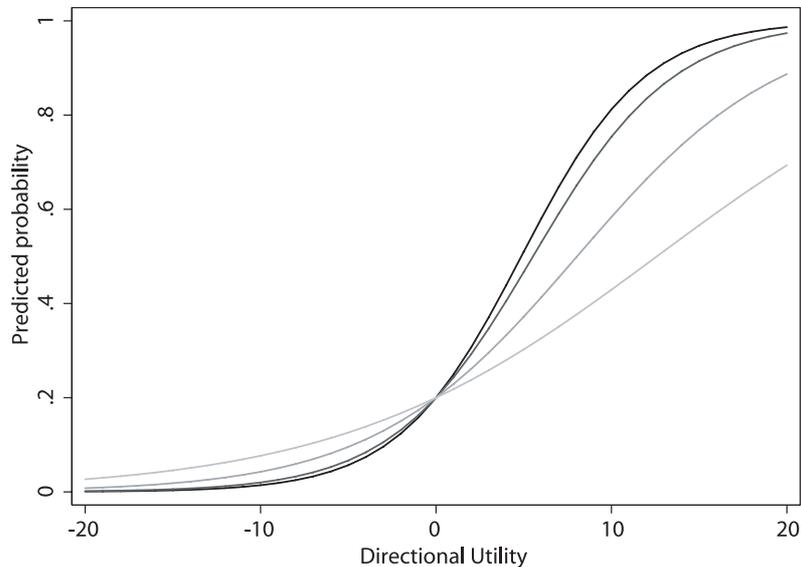


Figure 2: The ‘scaling’ effect of turnout propensities on the vote function that translates (directional) preferences into party choice. The steepest, black curve represents voters that would always turn out if voting were voluntary. The flattest, grey curve represents voters that would never turn out. The voters have a (non-spatial) baseline probability to vote for the party of 20%. The directional utilities for other parties are kept constant at zero (indifference). Estimates are taken from Model 2 (Wallonia).

from a simple frequency count excluding those respondents who reported that they would never vote if CV were abolished; these are the election results that we would probably expect if voting were voluntary. Finally, the fifth column gives the aggregated voting probabilities predicted by the estimates of Model 3 including the probable abstainers, but assuming that all the voters vote as precisely as the voluntary voters do (i.e.,  $\lambda$  is fixed at one).

Since the voter distributions across parties in our samples differ slightly from the official election results, we use column two as a yardstick to evaluate the first counterfactual (which is also based on a simple frequency count). In the same vein, since the ‘actual’ model prediction also deviates slightly from the simple frequency count, we use the predicted outcome in column three as the baseline to evaluate the second counterfactual in column five. As to the first counterfactual, we find barely any differences between the results. Obviously, the self-declared abstainers do not systematically differ in their party choices from the voters that expressed more willingness to participate under the voluntary vote. Thus, frequently expressed concerns that the left

parties, in particular, would suffer electoral losses if CV were abolished are not supported by our data. Likewise, our second counterfactual suggests that election results would not differ dramatically if the probable abstainers voted as coherently in accordance with their policy preferences as did the voluntary voters. However, one tendency seems noteworthy here: the smaller parties, such as Agalev and Ecolo on the one hand, and the Vlaams Blok and—in particular—the National Front on the other, seem to consistently profit under these counterfactual conditions. This interesting finding also refutes a potential rival interpretation of our individual-level results: it may well be that CV compels to the polls the politically disaffected that would otherwise abstain. These voters, in turn, may be expected to cast a ‘protest vote’ for an anti-establishment party.<sup>67</sup> Consequentially, we would also find that these voters make choices less consistent with their policy preferences, but that this inconsistency is due to a conscious decision rather than a lack of motivation, information, or capability. If this conjecture held, however, we would expect the vote shares of the less established parties to *decrease* under the second counterfactual.

Another alternative explanation of our individual-level findings might criticise our usage of *individual* perceptions of party placements to measure the issue-based utilities. In particular, proponents of the view that cues and heuristics can provide all the information necessary to identify the party with the highest utility could argue that voters who do not explicitly know where the parties are located relative to their own preferences may nevertheless vote for the ‘right’ party using auxiliary information. However, if these voters masked their ignorance of the party positions, for example, by locating all the parties in the middle of the issue scales in an election survey, they would probably appear not to vote in accordance with their preferences operationalised on grounds of *individual* perceptions. But if this conjecture held, we would expect these voters to be as consistent as fully informed voters when more ‘objective’ utility measures are used. As already mentioned in the data section, we have replicated our analyses with utility measures based on fixed party positions. This does not change our main conclusions.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed the impact of CV on the relationship between citizens’ political preferences and their voting choices. Focusing on the 1995

---

<sup>67</sup> Jaak Billiet and Hans de Witte, ‘Attitudinal Dispositions to Vote for a ‘New’ Extreme Right-Wing Party: The Case of ‘Vlaams Blok’’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 27 (1995), 181–202.

Parties	Actual		predicted	Counterfactual	
	official	sample		w/o	$\lambda = 1$
<i>Flanders</i>					
Agalev	.07	.08	.07	.09	.10
CVP	.29	.32	.33	.32	.32
SP	.21	.22	.22	.21	.19
Vlaams Blok	.13	.09	.09	.08	.11
VLD	.22	.22	.22	.22	.20
VU	.08	.08	.08	.09	.10
<i>Wallonia</i>					
Ecolo	.11	.15	.15	.16	.16
FN	.06	.03	.02	.03	.10
PRL-FDF	.28	.27	.27	.28	.24
PS	.33	.31	.31	.29	.27
PSC	.21	.25	.26	.26	.24

*Notes:* official vote shares; vote shares in the sample; vote shares as predicted by the HCLM; sample vote shares disregarding those who would never vote; predicted vote shares, with the scale parameter ( $\lambda$ ) set to 1.

Table 5: Results of the 1995 Belgian Chamber elections under actual and counterfactual conditions.

General Belgian Elections, we observed that voters differ strongly in their willingness to turn out if CV were abolished. A large share of the electorate indicated that they would probably abstain in such a situation. This disposition towards participation in a voluntary voting system has important consequences: A lower turnout propensity is linked with lower levels of both political knowledge and political interest. Citizens who participate only because they are compelled to do so by CV also tend to be less aware of the differences between the various parties on the main issue dimensions. These differences between compelled and voluntary voters have important implications for the relationship between policy preferences, party choice, and election outcomes. The party choices of citizens forced to vote by CV are less consistently related to their political preferences. This individual effect is strong, it is of similar size in both linguistic regions under study, and it is robust across various specifications of our model. At the aggregate level, CV increases the likelihood that the election outcome does not accurately reflect the distribution of voter preferences. Using the estimates of our model, we predicted what the results of the 1995 Belgian Chamber election would have looked like if the linkage between individual preferences and choices had been as strong among compelled voters as among the voluntary ones. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this would have changed the outcomes, with small parties—particularly those on the far-right—gaining a larger share of the vote. However, the magnitude of the aggregate effects we found is not outstanding.

In sum, it is questionable whether CV promotes the equal representation of political interests. Equal representation requires both socioeconomically unbiased participation and voters who vote in accordance with their wants and needs. While CV tends to ensure the former condition by boosting levels of turnout, it fails to guarantee the latter. Which contextual factors, then, may help these voters to make choices consistent with their preferences? Comparative electoral researchers have repeatedly pointed out the role of the ‘stakes’ of elections in this regard:<sup>68</sup> Elections that are highly competitive and consequential stimulate parties and candidates to wage intensive election campaigns. These campaigns, in turn, mobilize voters to turn out and, at the same time, provide them with the information necessary to make choices that reflect their preferences. Few of these conditions are met in Belgium: negotiations among the elite, rather than the election

---

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Mark N. Franklin, ‘Electoral Engineering and Cross-National Turnout Differences: What Role for Compulsory Voting?’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999), 205–224; Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

outcome itself, determine the composition of the government; oversized government coalitions frequently cloud the accountability of particular parties for specific policies; and political power is decentralized due to the federalist state structure. These circumstances may explain why the anticipated turnout decline, as measured by the share of those unwilling to participate in elections if CV were abolished, is dramatically higher in Belgium than in other countries applying CV.<sup>69</sup> Thus, low levels of electoral participation are a serious democratic problem, but the sources of this problem are unlikely to be affected by CV.

---

<sup>69</sup> De Winter and Ackaert, 'Compulsory Voting in Belgium: A Reply to Hooghe and Pelleriaux'.

# APPENDIX

Results from Rasch-tests of the 14 political knowledge items.

Name	Party	Flanders				Wallonia			
		% correct	difficulty	SE	R1c (11 d.f.) <sup>a</sup>	% correct	difficulty	SE	R1c (12 d.f.)
Gerard Deprez	PSC	.21	1.90	.08	263***	.62	-2.60	.09	296***
Bert Anciaux	VU	.77	-2.62	.08	128***	.13	2.13	.11	37***
Jean Gol	PRL-FDF	.38	.41	.07	269***	.75	-3.96	.10	337***
Jos Geysels	Agalev	.27	1.32	.07	195***	.01	6.40	.39	25**
Louis Tobback	SP	.88	-4.10	.10	350***	.34	-0.24	.08	25**
Jacky Morael	Ecolo	.02	5.90	.20	230***	.44	-1.08	.08	9
Filip Dewinter	Vlaams Blok	.73	-2.28	.07	91***	.06	3.34	.14	29***
Jean-Luc Dehaene	CVP	.94	-5.21	.13	3,002***	.51	-1.70	.08	23**
Jose Happart	PS	.51	-0.49	.07	145***	.66	-2.95	.09	33***
Georges Clerfayt	PRL-FDF	.07	3.91	.11	191***	.31	.01	.08	45***
Guy Verhofstadt	VLD	.90	-4.36	.10	113***	.25	.61	.09	21*
Philippe Busquin	PS	.24	1.61	.07	246***	.62	-2.61	.09	31***
Daniel Feret	FN	.02	5.61	.18	189***	.27	.39	.09	39***
Johan Van Hecke	CVP	.66	-1.62	.07	136***	.12	2.27	.11	29***
R1c-test (d.f.) <sup>a</sup>				562 (143)***				579 (156)***	
LR-test (d.f.) <sup>b</sup>				516 (143)***				232 (156)***	
N				2,149				1,519	

<sup>a</sup> Glas' first-order test for monotonicity, see Hardouin, 'Rasch Analysis'.

<sup>b</sup> Andersen's test that the estimates of the difficulty parameters are the same, whatever the respondents' knowledge.

## English translations of the question wordings used in the BES 1995<sup>70</sup>

### Turnout propensities

If voting for parliament were no longer obligatory in Belgium, would you then 'always', 'generally', 'sometimes', or 'never' vote, or don't you know for certain?

### Respondents' self- and party-placements on issue scales

**Respondent – Catholic / Non-Catholic** People are sometimes classified to the degree to which they are 'Catholic' or 'non-Catholic'. Card No. 21 presents this. Someone who is very strongly 'Catholic' would mark the '0' and someone who is very strongly 'non-Catholic' would mark '10'. Of course, there are intermediary positions to the degree that one is more or less 'Catholic' or 'non-Catholic'. When you consider your own ideas on this, where would you place yourself?

**Parties – Catholic / Non-Catholic (exemplary)** To answer the next questions, we will use these wooden squares on which the names of different political parties are printed. Political parties are said to be 'non-Catholic' or 'Catholic'. Please place the squares of the various parties on Card No. 21 at the place that, in your opinion, corresponds best to the degree to which the party is 'non-Catholic' or 'Catholic'. If two or more parties are just as 'Catholic' or just as 'non-Catholic' in your opinion, place the wooden squares on the same square. If you do not know how 'Catholic' or 'non-Catholic' a party might be, then simply put its square aside.

**Respondent – free enterprise / government regulation** In politics, there are differing ideas about the organisation of the economy. Some think that 'businesses must be completely free to do what they want'; others think that 'businesses must be regulated by the community'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 22? And where would you place the parties on the scale of free enterprise on Scale No. 22?

**Respondent – immigrants same rights / fewer rights** About immigrants, and here we mean Turks and Moroccans, there are different conceptions. Some think that they must receive 'the same rights' as the Belgians, others think that they should have 'fewer rights' than the Belgians. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 23?

**Respondent – conservation of environment / jobs** In politics, sometimes one has to choose between alternatives. Suppose that a choice had to be made between 'conservation / protection of the environment' and 'jobs'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 24?

**Respondent – public order / freedom of speech** Sometimes in politics, one also has to choose between 'public order' and 'freedom of speech'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 25?

---

<sup>70</sup> Billiet and Frogner, *1995 General Election Study Belgium: Documentation and Computer File*.

**Respondent – right to security / right to privacy** Similarly, one sometimes has to choose between the 'right to security of the citizen' and 'right to a private life/privacy of the citizen'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 26?

**Respondent – quality of life / economic growth** Sometimes, too, one must choose between 'the quality of life' and 'the preservation of a high rate of economic growth'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 27?

**Respondent – new identities / Belgium must decide** The form of state that the country has to have is still being discussed. Some think that 'Flanders [Wallonia]—the new identities—must be able to decide over everything itself'. Others think that 'Belgium must be able to decide about everything'. Where would you place yourself on Scale No. 28?