

## **Where do Distrusting Voters Turn to if there is no Viable Exit or Voice Option? The Impact of Political Trust on Electoral Behaviour in the Belgian Regional Elections of June, 2009**

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### **Abstract**

It has been suggested that political distrust is associated with lower levels of voter turnout and increased votes for challenger or populist parties. We investigate the relationship between political (dis)trust and electoral behaviour using the 2009 Belgian Election Study. Belgium presents an interesting case because compulsory voting (with an accompanying turnout rate of 90.4 per cent) compels distrusting voters to participate in elections. Nevertheless, distrusting voters are significantly more inclined to cast a blank or invalid vote. Second, distrust is positively associated with a preference for extreme right (Vlaams Belang) and populist (Lijst Dedecker) parties. Third, in party systems where there is no supply of viable challengers (i.e. the French-speaking region of Belgium), the effect of political trust on party preference is limited. We conclude that electoral effects of political distrust are determined by the electoral and party system and the supply of electoral protest.

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## S U M M A R Y

### **Introduction**

Empirical research has provided quite convincing evidence that (a lack of) political trust has strong effects on electoral behaviour. Low levels of political trust indicate that citizens, on average, have a negative perception of the way the political system in their country functions. This dissatisfaction will also have an effect on the way citizens behave when they have the opportunity to voice their political preferences. A first possibility is that dissatisfied citizens will use the *exit* option, i.e. that they will no longer participate at all. There is a positive relationship between political trust and voter turnout (Grönlund and Setälä 2007), and in the United States, for example, the structural decline in political trust has been invoked as one of the main reasons for the observed drop in voter turnout (Shaffer 1981; see however Hetherington 1999). A second option is that dissatisfied voters will *voice* their discontent by voting for populist or extremist parties. Low levels of political trust have indeed been identified as one of the main voting motives for extreme right and populist parties (Billiet and De Witte 1995; Denmark and Bowler 2002; Pauwels 2010). A third possibility is that, in spite of their distrust, they will opt for *loyalty* by supporting a mainstream political party. The latter possibility can particularly be expected in a system without viable exit or voice options (Hirschman 1970).

Research on the relation between political trust and voter behaviour has become all the more significant given the widespread concern about the alleged decline in political trust, although it has to be noted that this concern has received only limited support in empirical research (Newton 2007; Bovens and Wille 2008). Similarly,

populist parties have gained electoral appeal since the 1980s, which seems to suggest a causal relation between both phenomena (Taggart 2004). A distrustful attitude towards the political system as a whole has been identified as a compelling mental framework allowing us to explain the electoral success of extreme right parties (Rydgren 2007). Because of these electoral consequences, low levels of political trust could pose a threat to the stability of the party systems in contemporary democracies. For the United States it has been demonstrated that distrust is associated with a propensity to vote for contenders (Hetherington 1999), and in multi-party systems as well, distrust has been linked to an electoral preference for reformist parties (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005). In a European context, however, few comprehensive studies on this topic exist. Even though the effect of trust on extreme right voting behaviour has been studied extensively (e.g. Van der Brug et al. 2000; Ivarsflaten 2008; Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009), systematic analyses of the electoral consequences of political distrust remain rather scarce (Grönlund and Setälä 2007). In this paper we report on the consequences of political distrust for electoral behaviour in Belgium.

The Belgian case offers a number of interesting theoretical perspectives. First of all, extremist and populist parties are well-represented in Belgium. During the 2004 regional elections, the extreme right Vlaams Belang emerged as the second largest party in the Flemish region, with 24.2 per cent of the vote, thus becoming one of the most successful extreme right parties in Europe. During the June 2009 regional elections, the new populist party 'Lijst Dedecker' gained a foothold in the regional Flemish Parliament with 7.6 per cent of the vote. Second, Belgium has a system of compulsory voting, leading to a turnout of 90.4 per cent of all enfranchised voters during the June 2009 elections. This implies that distrusting citizens are deterred from

taking the exit option, which has led to some speculation that this might be one of the causes of the high percentage of protest votes in the country (Pauwels 2010: 8). Third, while the relation between dissatisfaction and party preference is relatively straightforward in two-party systems, this relation can be considered more complex in multi-party systems. The latter are usually associated with coalition governments, which render it much more difficult for voters to identify who exactly is responsible for the state of affairs. In Belgium, coalition governments are formed at the federal and the regional level, generally among four to six political parties at the federal level and two to four political parties at the regional level. Moreover, the effective number of parties in Belgium is 8.81. Given the wide array of political parties available, it remains to be ascertained whether Belgian voters can indeed make clear voting decisions based on their level of political trust.

In this article we investigate the relation between political trust and electoral behaviour in the regional elections which were held simultaneously with the European elections in Belgium on 7 June 2009. The analyses will be based on the results of the Belgian National Election Study (PartiRep 2009). This survey was conducted both in the Dutch and in the French region of Belgium, in which respect it has to be noted that Belgium has two completely segregated party systems, as the Dutch and the French political parties do not compete in the same territory (Deschouwer 2009).<sup>1</sup>

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## **Data and Methods**

This analysis is based on the results of the 2009 Belgian Election Study (PartiRep 2009), which was conducted around the time of the regional elections of 7 June 2009. Together with the elections for the European Parliament, regional elections were held for the parliaments of the autonomous regions in the country. Since Belgium is a federal country these regional parliaments – and their regional governments – have considerable authority, which is why the regional elections can be seen as much more important for politicians and public opinion than the European elections, which were held simultaneously (Deschouwer 2009).

A special feature of the PartiRep Study (2009) is its panel design with two waves of pre-electoral questions and one wave of post-electoral questions. This research design allows us to investigate electoral behaviour among the Belgian population in the most reliable manner.<sup>2</sup> During the first wave (February-May 2009) 2,331 face-to-face interviews were conducted with randomly selected respondents. The response rate was 48.3 per cent. This is slightly lower than average in Belgium, but for ethical reasons potential respondents were informed upfront that participation preferably involved all three waves of the PartiRep Study. This informed consent procedure might have reduced the willingness to participate. Subsequently, 1,845 respondents (79.2 per cent) participated in the second wave of the PartiRep Study, which was conducted in the two weeks preceding the elections of 7 June 2009. Finally, in the weeks following the elections, respondents were contacted again to ascertain whether their responses during the first two waves actually corresponded to their voting behaviour on 7 June. In the current analysis, we will limit ourselves to the first two waves of the PartiRep Study. More specifically, in the first wave (February-May

2009) *political trust* was measured, which means that for most respondents these results were obtained two or three months prior to the elections, thus ensuring that campaign effects had no influence. In the second wave *Party preference* was measured, yielding results that were as close to those of the actual election as possible<sup>3</sup>.

In this survey political trust was operationalized by asking respondents how much trust they have in the following institutions: political parties, regional government (Flemish or Walloon region), regional parliament, Belgian government, Belgian parliament and politicians. For all these institutions respondents could indicate their trust levels on a scale ranging from 0 to 10. A factor analysis indicated that these six items form a one-dimensional and solid scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that in both regions trust in the regional government and parliament is higher than in the federal institutions, although this difference is more outspoken among the Dutch-speaking respondents. This larger gap between regional and federal institutions among the Dutch-speaking respondents also accounts for the slightly weaker internal coherence of the scale among these respondents. It is also worth noting that the average trust level in the Walloon region is lower than it is in the Flemish region. Despite the success of populist parties in the Flemish region and their virtual non-existence in the Walloon region, distrust actually seems to be stronger in the Walloon region.

**Table 1. Political Trust in Belgium**

	Flemish region (Dutch)	Walloon region (French)	All respondents
Political parties	4.66	4.27	4.53
Regional Government	6.02	5.32	5.78
Regional Parliament	5.84	5.14	5.60
Belgian Government	5.01	5.19	5.07
Belgian Parliament	5.05	5.14	5.08
Politicians	4.64	4.69	4.66
Average score	5.21	4.96	5.13
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.895	0.922	0.903
Eigen value	3.944	4.317	4.048
Explained Variance	65.74	71.95	67.47

Source: PartiRep Study (2009) n= 2,247. Notes: Entries are scale averages. Data are weighted by region to correct for slight differences in age and gender distributions.

In general, we can be confident that the PartiRep Study is quite representative for the general population. If we compare the results with those of the European Social Survey (ESS 2006), it is striking that the rank order of the institutions is identical, with Parliament receiving the highest trust scores, while there is less trust in politicians and political parties. The comparison with ESS also demonstrates that it makes sense to introduce a distinction between the various institutions. In the European Social Survey (2006), respondents were simply questioned about their trust in 'Parliament', without receiving any information about the specific level.

ESS results suggest that political trust was slightly lower in the Walloon region than in the Flemish region. The PartiRep figures, however, demonstrate that respondents in the Flemish region actually have *less* trust in the federal institutions than respondents in the Walloon region. The higher average score in the Flemish region can entirely be attributed to the higher level of trust that these respondents have in the regional institutions than in the federal institutions. Given the strong one-dimensionality of the political trust scale, it is acceptable to use a simple additive scale, ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 60 (very high trust in all six institutions).

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## **Discussion**

In our analysis of the Belgian Election Study (PartiRep 2009), the effect of political trust on electoral behaviour has been examined in a very specific European context. Belgium has two distinct party systems. While populist and protest parties are well represented in the Flemish region, these parties are almost non-existent in the Walloon region. This implies that distrusting citizens in the Flemish region have the option to vote for a viable populist or extreme right party, whereas this option is not available for voters in the Walloon region.

The Belgian system of compulsory voting presents a unique case study as to whether dissatisfied voters will refrain from voting. The analysis shows that the system of compulsory voting leaves a blank or invalid vote as the only available exit option, and distrusting voters tend to make use of it. However, if the current system of compulsory voting were abolished, distrusting voters indicate that they would no longer vote at all. This suggests that invalid voting is preferred because electoral abstention is not a viable option in the Belgian case. If compulsory voting were abolished, the relation between political trust and invalid voting would be rendered insignificant.

It has to be acknowledged that even in a system of compulsory voting, citizens clearly have sufficient means to voice their discontent with the main political parties. During



the 2009 elections, 9.6 of all Belgian enfranchised voters did not vote. Furthermore, an additional 5.7 per cent of all enfranchised citizens cast a blank or invalid vote. While it is very likely that both groups are at least partially motivated by political distrust, data limitations do not allow us to develop a comprehensive causal model for both these groups based on the current survey data available. Finally, another 13.3 per cent of all enfranchised voters voted for an extremist or populist party, bringing the total of potentially alienated voters to 28.6 per cent of the electorate.

In a system of compulsory voting invalid voting apparently serves as a functional equivalent for abstaining. Still, there is a clear difference in the incentive structure. Abstaining is the easiest exit option, as it does not require any effort at all from the citizen. It could therefore be argued that there is a positive incentive to abstain from voting. Invalid voting, however, requires voters to go the polling station, wait their turn and cast an invalid vote. In practice, only 6 per cent of Belgian voters bother to do so, while it is likely that more than 25 per cent of potential voters would abstain if there were no legal obligation. It is thus safe to assume that the system of compulsory voting boosts turnout levels in Belgium by at least 20 per cent.

Clearly, this confirms Hypothesis 1: in a system of compulsory voting low levels of political trust will lead to invalid and blank voting. Hypothesis 2 is partially supported in the Flemish case: even in a multivariate model, low levels of political trust had a strong impact on voter preference for the extreme right Vlaams Belang and the populist LDD. Somewhat surprisingly, there was also a positive relation with a preference for the Flemish Nationalist party. This might be due to the rather populist discourse of this party's leader.

For the Walloon case, on the other hand, political trust had far less of an impact on party preference. Only the Green party benefited from sentiments of distrust, but the effect was much weaker than what we found for the Flemish case. This thus confirms the hypothesis developed by Hetherington that the effects of political (dis)trust are influenced by the specific political context. If – for various system-related or historical reasons – no reform or protest vote is possible, political distrust does not seem to have a profound effect on electoral behaviour. If the exit option does not exist (for legal reasons) and voice is excluded (for a lack of political opportunities), political distrust can only lead to loyalty. Although levels of political trust are actually lower in the Walloon region, this does not seem to have an impact on party preference. Distrusting voters in the French-speaking part of Belgium are clearly more reluctant to express their discontent. This therefore confirms Hypothesis 3: without a supply of populist parties, distrusting voters will remain loyal to the traditional parties.

It is not within the scope of this paper to try to explain why there is no viable populist party in the Walloon region. The minority position of Wallonia within the Belgian federation might cause Walloon voters to prefer strong, traditional parties to defend the interests of their region, while these parties have also been quite successful in maintaining their local presence in the communities of the region. The lower success rate of extreme right parties in the Walloon region might be explained by the legacy of World War II and the greater cultural diversity in the Walloon region than in the Flemish region, despite equal levels of racism and distrust.

The literature generally takes for granted that it is ‘good’ for the long term stability of a political system if dissatisfied voters can somehow voice their discontent. If the hypothesis of Miller and Listhaug (1990) is correct, this implies that voters in the Flemish region effectively have an opportunity to express their discontent. Voters in the Walloon region, on the other hand, do not seem to have any viable option to express their discontent. Theoretically, this confirms the notion developed by Bélanger and Nadeau that the electoral consequences of distrust strongly depend on the opportunities offered by the electoral and the party system. Although the long-term consequences of this lack of voice and exit options still require further investigation, the data currently available do not show any indications that political trust declines more rapidly in the Walloon region, where voters do not have access to a viable option to express their distrust, compared to the Flemish region, where various political parties offer voters ample opportunity to express their discontent.

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<sup>1</sup>. In this article we refer to the Flemish region (ca. 6,000,000 inhabitants) in the North of the country and the Walloon region in the South of the country (ca. 4,000,000 inhabitants). For reasons of clarity we do not analyse the results of the smaller regions in Belgium (i.e. the bilingual capital Brussels and the German language community). For all practical purposes, the Flemish region can be identified as the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium, while the Walloon region can be referred to as the French-speaking region of the country. For more detailed information about the Belgian federal system, we refer to Deschouwer (2009).

<sup>2</sup>. For budgetary reasons the Belgian Election Study was conducted only in the Flemish and the Walloon region. The Brussels bilingual region (10 per cent of the population) and the German-speaking community (less than 1 per cent of the population) were excluded. Given that 90 per cent of the population was included, we can still be confident that the 2009 PartiRep Election Study is representative for Belgium as a whole.

<sup>3</sup>. There is no significant relation between political trust and panel dropout, indicating that there is no significant relation between political trust and attrition in our sample.