

# The effect of compulsory voting on women's descriptive representation: an analysis on Belgian voters

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## Abstract

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The presence of women in parliaments (and factors influencing this) have been high on the research agenda for several decades. In this paper, we focus on the gendered effects of one specific institutional factor: the provision of compulsory voting. While it could be argued that compulsory voting is beneficial for the formal representation of women, its effect on their descriptive representation remained largely underexposed. Studlar and McAllister (2002) found a negative effect from compulsory voting on women's descriptive representation, but no theoretical explanations were given. We develop two possible explanations here: potential non-voters vote less sophisticated and they have different attitudes about the role of women in political life.

In our Belgian case study, we found that the only significant differences between voters and potential non-voters are related to the level of sophistication of the vote. Non-voters vote significantly more for top candidates (mostly men) and give significantly less preference votes for candidates lower down the list. Differences in gender role attitudes do not provide an explanation.

We conclude that the descriptive representation of female politicians would increase by abolishing compulsory voting. But since women are more likely to abstain if voting was no longer compulsory, their formal representation would be worse off. As both forms of representation leads to substantive representative representation, the maintenance of compulsory voting constitutes a dilemma for women activists.

## Introduction

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Political representation is a widely used concept. The contemporary popularity of the concept depends much upon the fact that it is linked with the idea of democracy, as well as with ideas of liberty and justice (Pitkin, 1967). The concept of representation, as developed in Pitkin's (1967) work, is complex, however. She identifies four distinct, but interconnected dimensions of representation. Formal representation focuses on the rules and procedures through which representatives are

chosen. Descriptive representation, or representativeness, refers to the extent to which representatives stand for the represented. Substantive representation, or responsiveness, is defined as acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them. Finally, symbolic representation refers to the feelings of the represented of being fairly and effectively represented.

In this paper, the effect of compulsory voting on women's representation will be considered for the formal and descriptive dimension.

In order to be *formally* representative, political representation must arise and be maintained through a set of procedural standards of authorization and accountability, usually by way of free and fair elections. The audience selects a representative, constrained by a set of rules in which a selection agent and a decision rule is specified. In most democratic systems, the selection agent is constituted by voters, men and women, within an electoral district (Rehfeld, 2006: 3-5). Since women are entitled to vote in western democracies, they can be considered as formally represented. The extent to which voters make effectively use of the possibility to cast a vote could, however, also be considered as a part of formal representation. Turnout might differ between groups of citizens, and constitutes as such biases in formal representation.

In terms of *descriptive* representation, a legislative assembly is said to be representative if its make-up constitutes a miniaturized model of society (Tremblay, 2007: 7). Although women form more than half the population, they constitute only a small minority of all members of parliament worldwide, just over 21 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). To explain this underrepresentation, scholars refer to the supply and demand model of candidate selection (Randall, 1982). This can be understood as a sequential model of political recruitment progressing from those who are eligible to run to those who aspire to run, those who are nominated and those who are eventually elected (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013: 556). The question of voter response to women candidates has been an issue that has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Overall, the findings indicate that women are not disadvantaged by voters: they not only vote for male and female candidates at equal rates (Norris et al., 1992), but may even sometimes express a preference for women over men, controlling for other influences (Black & Erickson, 2003; Murray, 2008; Brians, 2005). The underrepresentation of women appears to be largely due to the fact that women are not equally supported by the media, by their party and by society in general to pursue votes, which is called a 'systemic bias' (Wauters et al, 2010 ; Verge & Troupel, 2011).

A growing literature (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013; Rule, 1994; Studlar & McAllister, 2002; Duverger, 1955; Caul, 1999) has emphasized the importance of institutional factors as an intervening variable for explaining the (descriptive) representation of women. In this paper, we will focus on one

specific institutional variable that is part of the electoral system: the provision of compulsory voting. While it could be argued that this provision is beneficial for the formal representation of socially disadvantaged groups (including women), its effect on the descriptive representation of women remains underexposed. In a cross-country analysis on the macro level, Studlar & McAllister (2002) found a negative effect from compulsory voting on women's descriptive representation, but no theoretical explanations for this finding were given. We will here conduct an in-depth analysis on Belgium, one of the about 30 countries using compulsory voting. By conducting a study at the individual level, we hope to gain more insight in the underlying mechanisms of the gender effects of compulsory voting. More in particular, we will investigate whether voters who no longer would vote when compulsory voting is lifted, are more or less likely to vote for women. In doing so, we hope to make a significant contribution to the existing literature on electoral systems and the factors that shape women's representation.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we situate the gender-related effects of electoral institutions. Then, we introduce compulsory voting as part of the electoral system and indicate how it could impact on the descriptive representation of women. Next, we describe the methodology and the results of the empirical analysis. We end with conclusions.

## **Electoral institutions**

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According to Krook and Schwindt-Bayer, electoral institutions are "the formal and informal rules governing the electoral process" (2013: 554). Electoral institutions are critical for determining election outcomes and are an important variable affecting why women are underrepresented in legislatures. These electoral arrangements are not neutral: they are means to exclude or include groups (Rule, 1994). The electoral system has been identified as one of the most important factors explaining cross-national variations in women's representation (Studlar & McAllister, 2002).

We will now first discuss the gender effects of the electoral formula (which is a crucial part of the electoral system) and then devote attention to other aspects of the electoral system, including district magnitude and ballot structure.

There is a broad consensus in the literature (Duverger, 1955; Caul, 1999; Studlar & McAllister, 2002; Rule, 1987) that the list variant of proportional representation (PR), in which seats are allocated among lists in accordance with their respective share of the vote, is more propitious for the nomination and election of women than the plurality/majority rule, in which the largest party obtains the seat in single-member districts.

Scholars have offered a number of reasons to explain why PR systems produce more women in office than majoritarian systems. The most popular explanation focuses on differences in district magnitude, i.e. the number of seats elected in a district. PR systems have, by definition, consistently higher district magnitudes (Duverger, 1955; Rule, 1987; Matland, 2005). It is thought that as district magnitude increases, election strategies change. Since contests in single-member districts are zero-sum games, the party can nominate one person per district and has no chance to balance its ticket. Female candidates have to compete directly against all men, who often represent powerful intraparty constituencies and have more political experience. When district magnitude increases, the chance that a party will win several seats in the district increases, which gives more leeway to balance their tickets (Matland, 2005). This makes it easier for party officials to slate women candidates: the party may see this as essential to its appeal to (a part of) the voters, and men do not need to be deposed for a woman to receive a spot on the party's list (Matland, 1993: 738).

Darcy, Welch and Clark (1987) point to the fact that greater district magnitude will not automatically lead to an increase in female representation. There is an interaction between district magnitude and number of parties: in systems with a large district magnitude and many parties, winning representation is just as difficult as in electoral systems with smaller magnitudes and fewer parties. If each party only expects to win one or two seats, competition for slots at the top of the party list become zero-sum games similar to those fought in single-member districts. According to Matland (1993), a party will satisfy the more powerful interest first and move on to weaker interests only afterwards. If the party has several seats at its disposal, legitimate, but weaker, interests have a higher chance to be represented. If the party has few seats, those weaker interests will not make it to parliament.

In general, we can conclude that PR systems, which have greater district and party magnitudes, are more beneficial for women's representation than majoritarian systems. There are yet other differences within PR systems. Some characteristics of PR systems stimulate women's representation more than others.

Ballot structure is one of them (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013). Systems of list PR have rules that determine which candidates fill the seats won by a list. In closed formats, voters choose only among lists, not among individual candidates. The party determines the rank-ordering of candidates, and the seats obtained by a party are allocated to the candidates according to their order on the lists. In contrast, in open formats, voters are able to influence which of the party's candidates are elected by means of personal voting, since seats are allocated to the candidates according to the number of preferential votes obtained. Finally, flexible formats give both party leaders and voters some say in

the allocation of a list's seats : voters may cast ballots for certain candidates, but these preferences do not exclusively determine who fills the seats won by a list (Schmidt, 2008: 191).

The crucial question is whether it is easier to convince voters to actively vote for women candidates, or to convince party leaders to give women a prominent and safe position on the list (Matland, 2005; Wauters et al, 2010). Duverger (1955) already suggested that female candidates may be more successful under electoral rules that give voters less choice. Since the mid-1990s, the view that closed lists are more advantageous for the election of women has definitely become the most common perspective (Schmidt, 2008; Castles, 1981; Rule, 1987; Caul, 1999). This has coincided with the increasing use of gender quotas and placement mandates, i.e. requirements that female candidates be distributed in electable positions, rather than clustered at the bottom of the list (Schmidt, 2008: 193). Whereas quotas can be adopted regardless of ballot structure, placement mandates make little sense in open list or in flexible formats in which seats are primarily allocated by preferential votes.

In sum, research on the effects of electoral rules has focused on broad distinctions between PR and majoritarian systems, and has examined nuances in district magnitude and ballot structure. But it has overlooked other important parts of electoral systems that could also have gendered effects (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013: 569). Compulsory voting is such as an aspect, which will be tackled in the next section.

## **Compulsory voting**

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In this paper, we want to dig deeper into the relationship between compulsory voting and women's representation. Therefore, we will first conceptualize and situate compulsory voting. Next, we will give an overview of the pros and contras of compulsory voting and third, we will develop theoretical arguments about the possible effects of compulsory voting on gender and women's representation.

### *Conceptualization*

Most democratic governments consider participating in national elections a right of citizenship. In some countries, this is considered a citizen's civic responsibility, or even a duty. In these countries, voting at elections has been made compulsory, which has been regulated in national constitutions and electoral laws. Liechtenstein (1862), Belgium (1893), Argentina (1914), Luxembourg (1919) and Australia (1924) were among the first countries in the world to introduce compulsory voting laws. Nowadays, approximately 30 countries in the world have regulations that make voting compulsory (Gratschew, 2004). Most of them are in Latin America or Western Europe, but there are also a few

cases in Asia. Examples are Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Congo, Egypt, Greece, Luxembourg, Mexico, Thailand and Turkey (IDEA, 2015).

#### *Pros and contras*

Advocates of compulsory voting argue that decisions made by democratically elected governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate. This argument is often posited in societies where compulsory voting is particularly effective in making traditionally marginalized groups participate, which thus boosts their formal representation. Voting, voluntarily or otherwise, also has an educational effect upon the citizens. Moreover, democracy is often considered as government by the people. Presumably this includes all people, which reinforces the idea that it is every citizen's responsibility to elect their representatives (Gratschew, 2004).

The leading argument against compulsory voting is that it is not consistent with the freedom associated with democracy. The enforcement of the law can be seen as an infringement of the citizens' freedom associated with democratic elections. It may discourage the political education of the electorate because people forced to participate will react against the perceived source of oppression. It has also been proved that forcing the population to vote results in an increased number of invalid and blank votes compared to countries that have no compulsory voting laws (Puplick & McGuiness, 1998). Another consequence of mandatory voting is the possible high number of random votes: voters who are voting against their free will, may check off a party or a candidate at random. These voters do not care for whom they vote as long as the government is satisfied that they have fulfilled their duty (IDEA, 2015).

#### *Effects on gender*

Compulsory voting systems do not seem to affect the results of the various parties competing in an election. In a simulation for Belgian elections, Hooghe and Pelleriaux (1998) found that no party would lose more than 1.5 per cent of the vote by abolishing compulsory voting (see also: Hooghe, Quintelier & Marien, 2011; Reuchamps et al, 2015). It remains unclear, however, which gender effects can be linked with the provision of compulsory voting and turnout. As mentioned before, it is our aim to consider the effects of compulsory voting on women's representation for the formal and descriptive dimension.

As for the **formal dimension**, there is a general trend towards lower turnout figures in Western Europe, even despite provisions for compulsory voting. One of the problematic effects of this trend is that low voter turnout is usually associated with strong and persistent patterns of inequality (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). According to Lijphart (1997), in countries without compulsory voting,

more privileged citizens (those with higher incomes, greater wealth and better education) exercise their right to vote more often than less privileged citizens. Lower turnout rates are therefore expected to strengthen the social stratification of the electoral process (Kittelson, 2005), which is detrimental to the formal representation of several groups in the population. They do not have the chance (or at least a lower chance) to give a mandate to the representatives they prefer. Low turnout rates also lead to a distortion of the ideological and political preferences of the enfranchised population at large, endangering their substantive representation. As a result, some segments of the electorate become more influential in the decision-making process, which runs counter to the democratic principle of equal consideration of all interests (Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995 ; Martin, 2003).

When it comes to gender, which has already been extensively studied in relation to formal representation, results are mixed in terms of differences in turnout. Kittelson (2005) argues that men are more likely to participate in elections than women. Hooghe and Pelleriaux (1998) also conclude that abolishing compulsory voting would introduce considerable bias in the composition of the electorate. The willingness of women to vote is lower than that of men. According to Hooghe, Quintelier and Marien (2011) in their cross-country analysis, differences between women and men remain rather small. De Winter and Ackaert (1998) indicate, however, that women do not show up less because of their gender, but due to lower educational and professional status. According to them, if we control for other variables (like educational level and professional status), there is no longer a gender effect. Also Campbell (2006) could not find gender differences in voter turnout patterns in her analysis on the UK. In a chapter on the recent Belgian election study, Reuchamps et al (2015) offer an analysis of the individual characteristics of potential non-voters. They found that women are more likely to abstain if voting was no longer compulsory, but that this effect disappears when other variables (such as political interest and income) are added to the explanatory model.

When it comes to the **descriptive dimension**, the number of studies has been far more limited. In their comparative analysis of women's legislative representation since 1950, Studlar & McAllister (2002) point to the fact that there are two important factors in influencing the proportion of female elected representatives: the electoral system and the level of turnout. They analyze female representation for 20 industrialized democracies over a period of half a century (from 1950 to 2000). They contend that turnout and voter registration are differentially located among social groups, as a consequence of differences in political interest and political involvement. According to them, this could have an influence on women's representation. Their reasoning is that the higher the turnout (either stimulated by compulsory voting or not), the more diverse the voters, and the higher the share of elected women. Contrary to their expectations, Studlar and McAllister (2002) found that

compulsory voting had a negative effect on women's representation, with each percentage increase in turnout reducing women's representation by 0.14 per cent. Compulsory voting systems reduced women's representation even by about 3.5 per cent. The authors did not provide any explanation for this unexpected outcome, however. It is our aim to search for these explanations and to consider their actual role in influencing women's descriptive representation. To that end, we develop two theoretical explanations in the next section.

## **Explaining the effects of compulsory voting on descriptive representation**

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The fact that compulsory voting systems are linked with lower levels of women's descriptive representation can be due to different effects. Since no explanations have been provided by other scholars so far, it is our intention to broaden this understanding. The explanations for why potential non-voters would vote significantly less for women can be divided into two broad categories. First, potential non-voters are thought to vote in a less sophisticated manner and, second, they are considered as being less convinced of the importance of political participation by women.

First, Reuchamps et al (2015) found a strong link between potential absenteeism and political interest. Those who are not interested in politics, will not participate in elections. The provision of compulsory voting forces also voters with low interest in politics to vote. This has several consequences on voting behavior.

The most extreme consequence is, what Reuchamps et al (2015) and IDEA (2015) suggest: compulsory voting leads to arbitrary votes, as it forces electors who would otherwise abstain to cast *any* vote. Potential non-voters check off a candidate at random.

But consequences could also be more subtle, in the sense that voters with low levels of political interest will make fewer use of preferential voting, when forced to vote. According to the resource model (Marsh, 1985), casting a preference vote is more demanding on the part of voters, since this requires to learn about candidates and compare them (Shugart et al 2005). Since potential non-voters are less politically interested, they are less likely to make the effort to cast a preference vote. André et al (2012), using data from the Belgian 2009 regional elections, indeed come to the conclusion that a higher degree of political interest and resources is more likely to be translated into candidate-based voting. Preferential voting in general, and specifically for women (who often take positions lower down the list), can thus be considered as sophisticated electoral behavior that requires skills and attitudes (Mariën et al, forthcoming).

Another effect is that potential non-voters vote more for incumbents, i.e. existing holders of a political office. Incumbents have structural advantages over non-incumbents during elections: they often have more name recognition because of their previous work in the office and they have easier



access to campaign finance (Boundless, 2015). Related is the advantage enjoyed by the head of list. Maddens et al (2006) indicate that candidates in prominent positions on the ballot form draw automatically more votes, even when other factors are controlled for. This effect can be labelled Ballot Position Effect (Maddens et al, 2006; Geys and Heyndels, 2003; Lutz, 2010). In Belgian elections, the most favorable positions are those at the top and the bottom of the list of main candidates. Female candidates used to be underrepresented at the top of the list. For that reason, the revised quota law required that in 2003 elections at least one of the three top places on the list should be reserved for a woman. Parties initially complied in a minimalistic way with the quota regulations concerning the top positions, but recently progress has been made (Wauters et al, 2014). At the most recent elections of 2014, about 29 per cent of all heads of lists were women (Smulders et al, 2014). This means that most women continue to occupy less attractive places on the list. Male party elites are often reluctant to lose their power position and while they agree to introduce quota regulations, they are often mitigating these regulations in practice (Dahlerup, 2007).

The ranking of candidates on the list is determined by the party. Women still face a major barrier in the attitudes of selectors and do not make it to the top of the ballot. Rasmussen (1983) points to the fact that party selectors and other supporters hold sex role stereotypes which reinforce images of women in traditional roles, and thereby undermine the qualities and experience which women bring to public life. These attitudes may be particularly influential in preventing women from being selected to fight contests at the top. The crucial point is thus that political parties have the power to compensate for the skewed nature of their pool of aspirants through the use of party rules, but that they are often reluctant to do this.

In sum, one major explanation is that potential non-voters do not seem to deliberately vote less for women, but vote less sophisticated (more list, head of list and incumbency voting), which is a disadvantage for women, because often they are not on top of the ballot and have less political experience.

Secondly, we can point to differences in voter attitudes about the role of women in political life (Jennings, 2006 ; Bittner et al., 2010), which is also sometimes called 'gender ideology' (Shvedova, 2005; Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015) or 'gender role attitudes' (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). This concept refers to opinions of individual voters about the role of men and women in society. This role could encompass several spheres, including family life, the workplace and the political sphere (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004 ; Bittner et al, 2010). We focus here on attitudes about the role of women in politics. These have to be discerned from gender consciousness, which refers to self-identification,

and from feminist attitudes, which refer to very specific attitudes mostly also including actions to overcome negative situations (Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015). Although over time clear progress has been made, not all voters are equally convinced about the extent that women should play a prominent role in politics (Jennings, 2006).

The limited number of studies that have focused on the link between ‘political gender ideology’ and voting behavior come to the conclusion that there is a significant effect from the former on the latter (Goodyear-Grant & Croskill, 2011 ; Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015). Voters more open to women taking up a prominent political role, are more likely to vote for women. This finding points us to the importance of considering gender role attitudes in explaining voting behavior for women.

As indicated above, not all individuals hold the same gender role attitudes. Several factors could be held accountable for differences in these role attitudes, both over time and between individuals at one particular moment (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004 ; Jennings, 2006). For our comparison between voters and non-voters at the present time, the exposure hypothesis put forward by Jennings (2006) is especially relevant. This hypothesis posits that differences in the role conceptions about women in politics could be explained by differences in exposure to practices of gender equality and to discussions about political underrepresentation of women. Exposure is, as Jennings notes, driven by media content, social movements and interpersonal relations. This is especially relevant for women politicians, who in general receive less media attention than their male counterparts (Kahn, 1994 ; Wauters et al, 2010). In sum, knowledgeable voters, who have been intensively exposed to prominent female politicians and to discussions about women’s political underrepresentation, are more likely to be receptive to gender equality in the political sphere.

This line of reasoning corresponds with the approach of Bittner et al (2010), who include a related variable, i.e. political sophistication, as explanatory variable in their analysis of gender role attitudes. Political sophistication is linked to other concepts, such as political knowledge (used by Bitter et al (2010) to operationalize political sophistication) and political interest. At the same time, these concepts traditionally have a large impact on the decision whether or not to cast a vote (e.g. Reuchamps et al, 2015).

Taken together, voters who are less politically interested, have a higher chance to stay at home when compulsory voting is lifted, and as they tend to be less open to women in politics, they are less likely to vote for women. Therefore, when these low interested voters are forced to vote by the provision of compulsory voting, women candidates will be worse off, we hypothesize.

## Research design & method

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In this section, we first give some background information about the Belgian case, and then describe the survey data we use and the variables that will play a center role in the empirical analysis.

We start by discussing compulsory voting, the electoral system and the quota regulation in Belgium. Belgium is one of the few countries in the world in which a generalized system of mandatory voting still exists. The current Belgian system of compulsory voting leads to a turnout of about 89 per cent which is far above average turnouts in other countries. Despite the fact that voting is compulsory in Belgium, the number of people that do not vote is rising, but only very slowly. It becomes increasingly unfeasible to enforce the legal obligation to vote. The judicial system is already overburdened, and it gives little priority to the prosecution of non-voters (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998: 420).

Belgium has a PR electoral system with flexible lists: a Belgian voter has the choice between casting a preferential vote for one or more candidates (on a single party list) and casting a list vote. Candidates receiving sufficient preferential votes to pass the election threshold are automatically elected. The other candidates can reach the threshold by making use of the list votes. These list votes are distributed to candidates according to their order on the list, offering a substantial advantage to candidates at the top of the list. Seats are thus mainly awarded to candidates in the order in which they appear on the list.

Legislation concerning the presence of women on candidate lists has been introduced in Belgium for several years. In 1994 a first quota law, which stated that maximum two thirds of the candidates of a list could be of the same sex, was introduced. In 2002, this was changed into the requirement of an equal number of men and women (with a maximum difference of one in case of an odd number of candidates) on the list. In addition, one of the two highest positions on the list is reserved for a women candidate. This quota legislation has led to substantial increase of women MPs (Wauters et al, 2014).

For our empirical analysis, we make use of data of the PartiRep Election Study, which is an electoral panel survey held before (pre-electoral wave) and after (post-electoral wave) the European, federal and regional elections of 2014 in Belgium (see: [www.partirep.eu](http://www.partirep.eu)). We focus in this paper on the federal (or national) elections, which are generally perceived as the most important ones (Dandoy et al, 2015). In the pre-electoral wave, based on a stratified sample of eligible voters in two main Belgian regions (Flanders and Wallonia), face-to-face CAPI interviews were conducted among 2,019 respondents (response rate of 45 per cent). The same respondents were contacted again for the

post-electoral wave shortly after Election Day in which telephone CATI interviews were used. This yielded 1,532 respondents (response rate of 76 per cent). Respondents were also asked to return a self-administered mock-ballot on which they had to cast exactly the same (preference) votes as on their real voting ballot. This innovative method was previously used in the Irish National Election Studies (McElroy and Marsh 2010) and in a study on Belgian local elections (Pilet et al, 2013). This methodology is particularly useful in an open list system with a high number of preference votes, as it allows to obtain detailed information on the kind of preferential votes.

As for the variable about compulsory voting, respondents were asked “If voting was not compulsory in Belgium, would you always; often; sometimes or never vote for the Belgian federal elections?”. These four different categories were recoded into 2 categories: always (1), and often, sometimes or never (2). We follow here the same categorization as Reuchamps et al (2015).

Table 1. Answers on the question whether respondent would still vote when compulsory voting would be abolished (N = 1628)

| Type      | Answer    | N   | %    |
|-----------|-----------|-----|------|
| Voter     | Always    | 796 | 48,9 |
| Non-voter | Often     | 224 | 13,8 |
|           | Sometimes | 182 | 11,2 |
|           | Never     | 425 | 26,1 |

Results indicate that a small majority, 51 per cent, say that they would no longer vote. In comparison with a previous Belgian election study (1991), we notice a rise in the proportion of people that would no longer vote (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). For sake of clarity, we will call those who will always vote ‘voters’, while the others will be labelled as ‘non-voters’.

Belgium has a flexible list PR-system, which means that voters can use their preference votes in various ways. They can choose to cast none, one or multiple preference votes on candidates of one or both sex(es) within one party list (see also Mariën et al, forthcoming). Given that the first position on the list is a highly visible position, it is interesting to distinguish between casting one preference vote on the first candidate of the list and casting a preference vote for another candidate lower down the list. These options result in a variable with seven categories: voting for only women including the options: (1) casting one preference vote on the first candidate on the list (2) voting for one woman - not the first candidate on the list, (3) voting for multiple women; and voting for only men including the options: (4) casting one preference vote on the first candidate on the list, (5)

voting for one man, not the first candidate on the list, (6) voting for multiple men; and finally (7) voting on both men and women. This will allow us to sketch a rich and multi-faceted picture of voting for women in Belgium, taking into account the complexity of this voting behavior.

The attitude about women’s role in political life was measured by two items in the questionnaire on which respondents could strongly agree, agree, agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree. The first item was about an equal division of political responsibilities between men and women, the second one was about the need to have an equal number of men and women represented in parliament.<sup>1</sup>

## Results

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This section is divided into two parts: in the first part, we describe differences in voting for women between voters and non-voters. In the second part, we will test the two theoretical explanations by looking at the complexity of voting behavior and support for a political role for women.

### *Descriptive part*

We start with the descriptive analysis. Two findings immediately strike the eye when looking at differences in the kind of vote between voters and non-voters (i.e. voters who would no longer vote if compulsory voting would be lifted) (see Table 2).

First, the percentage of list voters is significantly higher among non-voters compared to voters: 57 per cent versus 47 per cent. As list votes are transferred according to the list order and women only take 29 per cent of top positions on the list (Smulders et al, 2014), a high share of list votes is detrimental for women candidates.

Table 2: Kind of vote for voters and non-voters (list vote versus preference vote)

| Answer                 | Voter (N=613) | Non-voter (N = 531) | Significance |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------|
|                        | %             | %                   |              |
| List vote              | 47,6          | <b>57,3</b>         | 0,001        |
| Preference vote        | 52,4          | 42,8                |              |
| For at least one woman | <b>25,9</b>   | 16,4                | 0,019        |
| For no woman           | 23,3          | 22,6                |              |
| Unknown                | 3,1           | 3,8                 |              |

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<sup>1</sup> Other gender-related items were included in the questionnaire, but as they were mainly about the appropriateness of the use of instruments to overcome underrepresentation (such as quota, penalties for parties or companies, and gender neutral education), they are not used in this analysis.

Secondly, the percentage of voters casting at least one vote for a woman candidate is with almost 26 per cent among voters significantly higher than among non-voters where only 16 per cent of them voted for at least one woman. This means that female politicians would have a greater voter share when the votes of non-voters would not be taken into account.

Taken together, non-voters do not only cast fewer preference votes, they do also vote less often for women candidates when casting a preference vote. These two findings indicate that female politicians would gain by abolishing compulsory voting. Or, in other words, compulsory voting has a negative effect on the descriptive representation of women. This finding is in line with results of Studlar and McAllister (2002).

#### *Explanatory part*

We divided the explanations for why non-voters vote significantly less for women into two broad categories. It could be that they do not vote for women because their votes are less ‘sophisticated’ (by following the closed lists presented by party elites). Another possible explanation is that non-voters are less convinced of the quality of women in politics and that they hold sex role stereotypes which reinforce images of women in traditional roles, thereby undermining the qualities and experience which women bring to public life.

For the first explanation, we already demonstrated in Table 2 that non-voters prefer list voting over preference voting. But we will dig deeper and investigate the kind of preference vote more into detail. We looked more in particular at whether a vote was casted for the candidate at the top of the ballot, a vote for another candidate on the list, a vote for more than one candidate on the list, and whether a candidate’s gender makes a difference in these kind of votes.

Table 3: Kind of vote for voters and non-voters (kind of preference vote)

| Voted for...            | Voter (N = 321) | Non-voter (N = 227) | Significance |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|
|                         | %               | %                   |              |
| 1 woman as head of list | 6,0             | 9,7                 | (ns)         |
| 1 man as head of list   | <b>26,5</b>     | <b>37,9</b>         | 0,007        |
| 1 woman lower on list   | 13,6            | 9,7                 | (ns)         |
| 1 man lower on list     | 11,4            | 14,1                | (ns)         |
| several women           | 5,3             | 2,9                 | (ns)         |
| several men             | <b>9,9</b>      | <b>5,3</b>          | 0,060        |
| several men and women   | <b>27,8</b>     | <b>20,3</b>         | 0,053        |

Results in Table 3 indicate that the only significant differences between voters and non-voters lie in the following three types of voting behavior: non-voters vote significantly more for male top candidates and give significantly less preference votes for several men, and for several men and women together. This is a clear confirmation of the ‘less sophisticated vote’ thesis. Non-voters have a clear preference for votes that do not require much effort and knowledge. We already saw in Table 2 that they prefer list votes. When casting a preference vote, it becomes apparent from Table 3 that they often only vote for the head of list: 37 per cent of the non-voters do so when a man ‘pulls’ the list and 9 per cent when a woman is head of list.

Votes that suppose more in-depth knowledge about candidates, such as voting for several candidates, are only seldom casted by non-voters: almost 3 per cent votes for several women, 5 per cent votes for several men and 20 per cent votes for several men and women. Together less than 30 per cent of the non-voters who cast a preference vote, indicates a preference for more than one candidate. To compare: for voters, the same percentage is above 40 per cent.

It is furthermore very noticeable that there are no significant differences on whether or not to vote for female heads of lists, whether or not to vote for one woman and whether or not to vote for more than one woman. This points us to the fact that non-voters do not appear to have a negative bias towards women candidates, but that their less frequent vote for women is caused by the fact that this kind of voters does not really ‘choose’ candidates, but follows the figure heads (mostly men) put forward by the party.

Now, we move towards the second explanation, i.e. non-voters are less supportive towards a political role for women. We analyze whether there are differences in opinion between voters and non-voters concerning two statements.

Table 4: Support for a political role for women (row percentages)

|           | Women and men should be given equal responsibilities in politics (N = 1621)             |                           |                            |
|-----------|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
|           | <b>(Strongly) agree</b>   | <b>Agree nor disagree</b> | <b>Strongly (disagree)</b> |
| Voter     | 89,4  | 7,6                       | 3,0                        |
| Non-voter | 88,3  | 7,7                       | 3,5                        |
|           | Chi <sup>2</sup> = 0,899 (not significant)  |                           |                            |
|           | It is important that there is an equal number of men and women in parliament (N = 1617) |                           |                            |
|           | <b>(Strongly) agree</b>   | <b>Agree nor disagree</b> | <b>Strongly (disagree)</b> |
| Voter     | 46,6  | 24,1                      | 29,3                       |
| Non-voter | 43,0  | 30,3                      | 26,7                       |
|           | Chi <sup>2</sup> = 7,922 (p = 0,019)  |                           |                            |

The first statement is about giving equal responsibilities to men and women in politics. The results in Table 4 show that there is almost unanimity that political responsibilities should be shared. Differences between voters and non-voters are small and non-significant: 89 per cent of the voters agree with the idea of shared responsibilities, while also 88 per cent of the non-voters does so. The percentage of people that disagree is with 3 per cent equally low for voters and non-voters. In sum, based on the analysis of the first statement, no differences in gender role attitudes between voters and non-voters could be detected.

The second statement refers to an equal descriptive representation for men and women in parliament. The opinions of voters and non-voters do differ significantly here, but the direction of difference is not clear. The percentage of voters that agree with an equal representation in parliament is with 46 per cent higher than the share of non-voters supporting this idea (43 per cent). But also the opponents of descriptive representation are more numerous among voters (29 per cent) than among non-voters (26 per cent).

In conclusion, there are some minor differences in how voters and non-voters perceive women in politics, but these differences are small and not always unequivocal. This allows us to conclude that gender role attitudes could only provide a minor explanation for differences in voting for women between voters and non-voters.

## **Conclusion**

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The presence of women in parliaments has been high on the research agenda for several decades. There is a broad consensus in the literature that the list variant of proportional representation is more beneficial for women's representation than majoritarian systems.

Research on the effects of electoral rules has, however, often overlooked other aspects of electoral systems that could have gendered effects. In this paper, we focused on one specific institutional variable that is part of the electoral system: the provision of compulsory voting. By conducting an in-depth analysis on Belgium, one of the about 30 countries in the world using compulsory voting, we hoped to gain more insight in the underlying mechanisms of the gender effects of compulsory voting.

While it could be argued that compulsory voting is beneficial for the formal representation of socially disadvantaged groups, including women, its effect on the descriptive representation of women remained underexposed until now. In a cross-country analysis on the macro level, Studlar & McAlister (2002) analyzed female representation for 20 industrialized democracies over a period of half a century (from 1950 to 2000). They found a negative effect from compulsory voting on women's



descriptive representation, but no theoretical explanations were given. It was our aim to search for these explanations and to consider their actual role in influencing women's descriptive representation. To that end, we developed two theoretical explanations.

One major explanation is that potential non-voters (i.e. those who would no longer vote when compulsory voting is lifted) vote less sophisticated (more list, head of list and incumbency voting), which is a disadvantage for women, because often they are not on top of the ballot and have less political experience. Preferential voting in general, and specifically voting for women (who often take positions lower down the list), can be considered as sophisticated electoral behavior that requires skills and attitudes. Potential non-voters often lack these skills and attitudes.

Secondly, we pointed to differences in voter attitudes about the role of women in political life. Although over time clear progress has been made, not all voters are equally convinced about the extent that women should play a prominent role in politics (Jennings, 2006). We hypothesized that voters with low levels of political interest tend to be less convinced about the political role of women, and research has found out that precisely this kind of voters are also more likely to abstain if compulsory voting is lifted. Therefore, we expect that when voters with low interest in politics are forced to vote (by compulsory voting), they will be less likely to vote for women.

For our empirical analysis, we made use of data of the Partirep Election Study, which is an electoral panel survey held before and after the national elections of 2014 in Belgium. In line with our expectations, we found that non-voters not only cast fewer preference votes, but they also vote less often for women candidates when casting a preference vote.

When it comes to explaining these effects, the only significant differences between voters and potential non-voters are related to the level of sophistication of the vote. Non-voters vote significantly more for top candidates (mostly men) and give significantly less preference votes for candidates lower down the list (this is especially true for voting ballots that combine votes for both men and women). Non-voters seem to have a clear preference for votes that do not require much effort and knowledge. This points us to the fact that non-voters do not appear to have a negative bias towards women candidates, but that their less frequent vote for women is caused by the fact that this kind of voters does not really 'choose' candidates, but follows the figure heads (mostly men) put forward by the party.

For our second explanation, we found no clear evidence. There are some minor differences in how voters and non-voters perceive women in politics, but these differences are small and not always unequivocal. Therefore, we conclude that gender role attitudes do not provide an explanation for differences in voting for women between voters and non-voters.

Our findings indicate that compulsory voting has a negative effect on the descriptive representation of women. Female politicians would thus gain by abolishing compulsory voting and be able to attract more votes.

But we have to point to the effects that abolishing compulsory voting could have on the formal representation of subordinated groups in society (including women). Some research indicates that women are more likely to abstain if voting was no longer compulsory. Abolishing compulsory voting might as such form a deterioration of the formal representation of women. As important issues to those who would no longer vote, will receive less attention in the policy process, a decrease in women's formal representation would potentially have detrimental effects on their substantive representation.

We end by discussing three implications of our findings and at the same time avenues for future research are developed.

First, there is a clear trade-off between boosting women's descriptive representation by abolishing compulsory voting and keeping women's formal representation on the current level by maintaining compulsory voting. Both dimensions of representation have an effect on substantive representation, which is often considered the most important dimension of representation (e.g. Pitkin, 1967). Formal representation leads to politicians who, out of electoral concerns, take interests of potential voters into account, but the descriptive representation ensures that champions of women's interests are present in parliament.

Policy makers, female politicians and women's interest groups have to consider this trade-off and have to define their position towards abolishing or maintaining compulsory voting. In other words, they have to determine what is most important to them: electoral incentives making the equal consideration of all interests attractive or a higher proportion of female representatives in order to actively promote these interests.

Secondly, we want to highlight that in our study party selectorates come again forward as main culprit for women's underrepresentation. If they would equally nominate men and women at the top of the lists, no gender effects of compulsory voting would appear, as these effects are mainly driven by voters following the choices of the party elite.

When the selection of candidates depends heavily on the views and initiatives of party elites, the onus for change lies with them. Further research is therefore necessary to gain more insights into the factors that prevent women from being selected by those political elites. It would be particular interesting to examine which sex-role stereotypes influence this process.

Finally, by digging deeper into the relationship between compulsory voting and women's representation and by focusing on the micro level (i.e. voters), we were able to provide a significant contribution to the existing literature on electoral systems and the factors that shape women's representation. The negative effect of compulsory voting on the descriptive representation of women, already demonstrated in the cross-country study of Studlar and McAllister (2002), came again forward from our analysis. We showed that this effect is mainly attributable to voting behavior of potential non-voters that is not very sophisticated, and not to their gender role attitudes. It remains to be seen whether the same applies in other countries, where the share of women in parliament (which positively influences gender role attitudes) is lower than in Belgium. In addition, future research should also investigate whether our findings are typical for systems of compulsory voting, or whether turnout in general is the central variable in this perspective.

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