

# **Gender-based voting in Belgium's flexible list system: Gender affinity effect or party effect?**

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## 1. Introduction

The socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions constitute a topic that is high on the political agenda in a large number of countries across the globe. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is increasingly considered a democratic problem (Phillips, 1995). To counter this lack of representativeness, many countries have therefore undertaken action, amongst others by implementing quota systems (Krook, 2007; Dahlerup, 2007). The presence of women in parliaments has also been high on the research agenda for several decades. Norris (1996) has developed a common framework for examining the presence of women in parliaments, which focuses on three levels of analysis: the recruitment environment, the recruitment structures and the recruitment process. The electoral system is part of the recruitment environment and is generally seen as having a large impact on the political representation of women (Norris, 1996; Matland and Montgomery, 2003). There seems to be a consensus among scholars that a system of proportional representation (PR) is more favorable for the election of women than a majority system (Norris, 1996; Caul, 1999; Matland and Montgomery, 2003; Leijenaar, 2004; Norris, 2004; Matland, 2005). There is, however, a lot of variety in PR systems and recent literature (Tremblay, 2008) suggests that how actors cope with institutional provisions (such as electoral systems) should be looked at more closely. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study provisions for preferential voting, and how these provisions can be (and are effectively) used by voters to further the descriptive representation of women.

The focus of this paper will be on Belgium's flexible list system. In this system, voters have the option between casting a list vote and casting a vote for one or more candidates. This latter option opens a whole variety of possible gender-based voting acts: voters can either choose for candidates of the same sex (same-gender voting), for candidates of a different sex (cross-gender voting), or for mix of candidates of both sexes (mixed-gender voting), or they can decide not to vote for a candidate but for a party list as a whole (list vote). In this paper, we will map the frequency of the diverse types of gender-based voting in Belgium's flexible list system. Subsequently, we will focus on voting for women and estimate the effects of individual voter characteristics (gender, level of education, level of political efficacy, etc.) and context-related characteristics (variables related to the electoral district and party-related variables) on the propensity of casting a vote for women. The analysis will be based on the 'PartiRep Exit-Poll 2012' dataset (N = 4,715), which was held in 40 local municipalities all over Belgium at the occasion of the 2012 local elections. Voters were presented a 'mock ballot' on which

they could cast their vote(s) as they did in the polling booth. This will yield us realistic answers unbiased by media reports or gaps in respondents' memory.

Apart from the specific nature of the preferential system, local elections in Belgium are particularly interesting for yet two other reasons. Contrary to most research on gender-based voting that focuses on low information contexts, this study investigates voting behavior in a high information context given that voters are often very familiar with the candidates in Belgian local elections (Deschouwer, 2009). As a result, we can expect that information shortcuts (such as a candidate's gender), which are important when information costs are high, are less frequently used (McDermott, 1997). Secondly, quota legislation stipulates that in every municipality the number of women candidates is equal to that of men. Hence, an important contextual variable (the number of female candidates in a district) is held constant.

First, we will give an overview of the literature on gender-based voting which leads to five hypotheses. Subsequently, we will discuss why Belgium is an interesting case to test these hypotheses. Next, we will describe the data and methodology and present the findings of this study. We close with a discussion of the main results.

## **2. Political representation of women and electoral systems**

An inclusive society, where the interests of all citizens receive equal consideration in the political process, serves as an important normative ideal for social scientists and policymakers. Inclusive legislatures are perceived as more legitimate (Thomas, 1998) and also the quality of public policy increases when all relevant perspectives and interests are taken up in the debate (Habermas, 1989). The descriptive representativeness of political institutions decreases the possibility that some interests or issues are overlooked (Paolino, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). In effect, empirical research has shown that different groups put different issues on the parliamentary agenda supporting the idea that descriptive representation fosters substantive representation (Erzeel, 2012; Little et al., 2001; Mansbridge, 1999; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Swers, 2002; Thomas, 1991). In addition, inclusive legislatures are also of symbolic importance as they foster the belief that the political process is open to all groups in society. In effect, the presence of female role models positively affects women's belief in their ability to run, their political engagement and trust in the political system levels (Alexander, 2012; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006; Denmark et al., 2012; Koch, 1997; Sapiro and Conover 1997; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007).

However, contemporary societies rarely live up to the ideal of political equality. Gender inequality is even, as Kenworthy and Malami (1999: 235) note, perhaps most pronounced within the political arena. Female presidents and prime ministers remain rare; Paxton *et al.* (2007) counted world-wide only 30 women who were elected to this top position in their country. The percentage of women in legislatures too is disproportionately low in regard to the share of women in the population. At the beginning of the 21st century, less than 30 per cent of legislatures consisted of women in the overall majority of the countries leading to a worldwide average of 10 per cent of women in legislatures (Kenworthy and Malami, 1999: 235-236). In recent years, this pattern has not changed all that much (Paxton *et al.*, 2007).

The electoral system has a large impact on the political representation of women (Norris, 1996; Matland and Montgomery, 2003). In general, a system of proportional representation is considered to be more favorable for gender equality in legislatures than a majority system (e.g. Norris, 2004; Matland, 2005). However, there is a large diversity within proportional systems and the equality of their outcomes. Next to institutional provisions (such as electoral systems), the ways in which actors (such as voters and parties) cope these provisions are important determinants of gender equality in legislatures (Tremblay, 2008). Hence, it is important that research on the under-representation of women takes voting behavior into account. To date, the results of empirical studies dealing with voting behavior are mixed. While some studies provide evidence that female candidates obtain fewer votes than men, some other studies point to the contrary (Smith and Fox, 2001; Leijenaar, 2004; Matland, 1994; 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Some authors even state that a system of preferential voting renders the outcome of the elections in terms of women representation only more unpredictable (Ballmer-Cao and Tremblay, 2008).

### **3. Factors influencing voting for women**

In order to gain a better understanding of this crucial topic, we will investigate the determinants of voting for women in Belgium. We will begin by discussing the nature of the voters and contexts in which the literature expects gender-based voting. A first important determinant is the **gender** of the voter. Dolan (2008) theorizes that women are more likely to vote for female than male candidates because of a 'gender affinity effect'. Gender identity can indeed be considered as an important voting motive (Banducci and Karp, 2000). Especially women are more likely to cast a vote for a female candidate first and foremost to show solidarity to candidates of their own group rather than based on an evaluation of their capacities, ideological stances or their partisan affiliation. A condition for

such a group identity vote is that the group can be clearly delineated in society (objective membership) and that it corresponds to a subjective identification translated in a form of group solidarity and consciousness (Gurin *et al.*, 1980). Whether and to what extent social groups correspond to these requirements varies over time and over place (McDermott, 2009).

Gender can also be considered as an important voting cue. Politics and elections are complex to many citizens. In order to make a deliberate choice at the polls, citizens often have to rely on voting cues, especially in elections with limited information. The most used cue is party affiliation (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996). By running for a particular party, the candidate communicates to the voter where he or she stands for. A voter expects for instance that a candidate of a social-democratic party will advocate the maintenance and further development of social services. By making this kind of generalizations, making an electoral choice becomes easier and less time-consuming for voters. Also by means of associative cues voters make inferences about candidates based on the group they belong to (Cutler, 2002; McDermott, 1997; Lupia, 1994; McDermott, 2008). A possible inference could be that female candidates will defend women's interests. The presence of female representatives is indeed found to be crucial in order to ensure that gender-salient issues are not overlooked (Erzeel, 2012). Hence, gender can be a cue for women to vote on a female candidate to ensure their group interests will be defended. Another related element is raised by Sanbonmatsu (2002) who argues that voters have a gender baseline preference that is based upon the gender stereotypes they have. The reasoning is that stereotypes that consider women as less suited for political careers lead to fewer votes for women and as a result fewer elected female politicians. This implies that an associative cue can also be used in a negative sense: voters refrain from voting for women because they think that women in general are not as capable for a political function as their male counterparts.

The use of associative cues is particularly relevant in low-information elections (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). It could serve as a last rescue for voters that are not very politically sophisticated, i.e. voters with low levels of education, political interest or efficacy. Hence, next to gender, we expect political sophistication to be an important determinant for gender-based voting. Based on the reasoning behind associative cues, we expect less sophisticated voters to be more likely to vote for women. The relationship between voting for women and the level of sophistication of the vote can, however, also be interpreted in the opposite way. Casting one or more preference votes requires voters to gain information about candidates and compare them (Marsh, 1985; Shugart *et al.*, 2005; André *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, voting for women is more demanding as it supposes that voters have done effort

to know beforehand who is on the candidate list. Therefore, the propensity to make a conscious choice for female candidates is expected to be a function of **political sophistication**. A higher level of political interest, efficacy and education can be expected to increase the likelihood to cast a vote for women. This overview of the literature leads to two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: In line with gender affinity effect, we expect women to vote more for female candidates than for male candidates.*

*Hypothesis 2: We expect a higher level of political sophistication (i.e. political interest, efficacy and education) to increase the likelihood to cast a vote for female candidates.*

Recent empirical studies resulted in mixed evidence on the gender affinity effect. In the US several studies have indeed documented that women are more likely to vote for female candidates than male candidates (Paolino, 1995; Brians, 2005; Dolan, 1998, 2008; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996). Some studies even showed that female voters would shift political party in order to vote for a female candidate (Cook, 1994). Earlier research on the national elections in Belgium found an effect of sex and education with higher-educated women being more likely to vote for women (Carton, 1998). However, in other studies women were not more likely to vote on female candidates (McDermott, 2009; King and Matland, 2003). Especially, outside the context of the US, evidence of a gender affinity effect is rather limited (Giger *et al.*, 2012; Goodyear-Grant and Croskill, 2011; Holli and Wass, 2010; Matland and Tezcür, 2011; McElroy and Marsh, 2010; McElroy and Marsh, 2011).

These and other studies have come to the conclusion that voting for women is not (so much) driven by individual variables (voter bias), but by the context in which elections are held (Wauters *et al.*, 2010a; Giger *et al.*, 2012). Although important, individual-level variables can only explain a part of the story. Therefore, context-related factors should be taken along in the analysis. Context can be operationalized in different ways. In the literature three different contexts are considered relevant for gender-based voting: the political system, the electoral district and the party level. As in this single-country study the political system (including electoral system, quota regulations, attitudes towards women in society, etc.) remains constant, we will only discuss the electoral district and the party.

The district in which the elections are held is considered to be of crucial importance for gender-based voting by Giger *et al.* (2012). Given that elections in small districts tend to be more competitive,

political parties more often select candidates with a broad appeal and voters tend to vote only for candidates who have a real chance to become elected. As a result, women are likely to encounter more difficulties in small districts (especially when voters are only allowed to cast a single vote). This phenomenon is apparent in majority systems, but also in PR systems with small **district magnitude**. Related, Giger *et al.* (2012) contend that women are also less likely to be selected in highly competitive elections (i.e. the closeness of the contest). In addition, female candidates are in general underrepresented at the ballot. Hence, the ratio of male and female candidates running is also an important context variable (McElroy and Marsh, 2010). Previous experience of women in politics and the presence of female MPs in the electoral district is another important context variable according to Giger *et al.* (2012). The reasoning is that voters become used to the idea that women can play a prominent role in politics, and also for female candidates themselves, experience in politics and election campaigns can be an asset in electoral contests.

We will explain below that most of these variables, due to the specific Belgian context in which more than one preferential vote can be casted, are supposed to have only a limited effect.

*Hypothesis 3: The difference in the likelihood to vote for women between voters in large electoral districts and voters in small districts is small.*

Next to the electoral district, political parties also influence gender inequalities in election outcomes. First of all, the supply of female candidates is important: the more (valuable) female candidates, the higher the chance to cast a vote for a woman (McElroy and Marsh, 2010). Given the far-reaching quota regulation that exists in Belgium, all parties have an (almost) equal number of female candidates on their lists (see below). Therefore, it is not so much the number of female candidates that is important here, but their list position. The position of the different sexes on the ballot influences the amount of votes male and female candidates can attract. The **first candidate on the ballot list** is the most visible candidate position, which due to the ballot layout effect (Geys & Heyndels 2003 ; Wauters *et al.*, 2010a ; Lutz, 2010) quite automatically obtains a higher number of votes (Marissal and Hanssen, 2001). Parties play a crucial role here as they determine the rank order of the list. It has been found that women are only seldom given this top position of the list (Wauters *et al.*, 2010a). The expectation is that parties that are giving top positions on the list to women will stimulate their voters to vote for women.

In addition, the ideology of a political party affects the efforts political parties undertake to enhance women's representation. In general leftist parties (including social-democratic and green parties)

support egalitarian ideologies more than rightist parties and consequently, tend to be more open to subordinated social groups. This openness can be translated in recruiting more women, giving them better positions on the list, giving them more support in the election campaign, and so on (Matland and Studler, 1996). Consequently, we expect that, in line with previous research on the Finnish elections (Holli and Wass, 2010), voters of leftist parties are more likely to vote for women.

*Hypothesis 4: Voters of political parties that gave the first position of the list to a women, vote more often for women.*

*Hypothesis 5: Voters of political parties that are situated at the left of the political spectrum vote more for female candidates than voters of political parties at the right of the political spectrum.*

We will now explain several relevant characteristics of the Belgian local electoral system that are likely to influence the effect of some of the context variables described above.

#### **4. Belgium as an interesting case**

In Belgium, a PR system with rather large districts and flexible lists is used: Belgian voters can either vote for a party list or for one or more candidates (on a single party list). Candidates receiving sufficient preferential votes to pass the election threshold are automatically elected. The other candidates can make use of the list votes in order to reach the threshold. 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, as a result of which the system used to function as a de facto closed-list system. However, in recent elections, more low ranked candidates have managed to get elected at the expense of higher ranked candidates. This is due to the growing number of voters casting a preferential vote instead of voting for the party list (André *et al.*, 2012). In addition, a recent electoral reform halved the impact of list votes on the allocation of seats to candidates, thereby diminishing the advantage of higher ranked candidates. The Belgian electoral system has thus evolved from a de facto semi-closed list PR system to a de facto semi-open-list PR system. It should be noted that voters do not necessarily have to make a choice between voting for men or for women: they can vote for both (mixed-gender voter) or for the party list as a whole (list voter). A vote for a male candidate does not preclude a vote for a woman, or in other words voting for women is not at the expense of voting for men. This particular element is supposed to create more room for voting for women. In small districts or in highly competitive electoral contests, voters are expected to cast a strategic vote



for men in order to ensure a seat for their preferred party rather than for a person of their preferred sex. As voting for men and women can easily be combined in Belgium, these phenomena are less likely to occur.

Consequently, four types of votes are possible:

- 1) List voters (complying with list positions, often with a men as head of list)
- 2) Same-gender voters (women voting for women ; men voting for men)
- 3) Cross-gender voters (women voting for men ; men voting for women)
- 4) Mixed-gender voters (women voting for men and women ; men voting for men and women)

In Table 1, we present the frequencies of the diverse forms of gender-based voting in the most recent 2012 local elections in Belgium. Voters are almost equally distributed over the four categories. The results in Table 1 show that men are more likely to cast a same-gender vote, which corresponds with the findings in Finland that men tend to vote for men (Holli and Wass, 2010). About 35 per cent of the male voters prefer candidates of their own gender. Women, on the contrary, more often cast a cross-gender vote: 33.5 per cent of the female voters prefers exclusively male candidates, while only 17.5 per cent prefers female candidates. The shares of mixed-gender voters (voting for both men and women) are almost equal among male and female voters and constitute about one quarter of the voting population. Finally, there is no significant gender effect on whether or not one casts a list vote: women are not more likely to cast a list vote for the party as a whole. This is in line with previous research in preferential voting in the Belgian context (André *et al.*, 2012).

Table 1: Types of voting by gender (column percentages)

	Total	Men	Women	
Same-gender votes	26.1	35.0	17.5	***
Cross-gender votes	23.7	13.4	33.5	***
Mixed-gender votes	24.7	25.0	24.5	NS
List votes	25.5	26.5	24.6	NS

Note: N= 3,781 Significance based on Chi Square test. \* p< 0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Another element that makes Belgium an interesting case to analyse is the long-existing and far-reaching quota system. Legislation aimed at increasing the proportion of women on candidate lists has rather early been introduced in Belgium (Meier, 2004; Celis and Meier, 2006). In 1994, a first quota law, stating that maximum two thirds of the candidates on a list could be of the same sex, was introduced. In 2002, this was changed into the requirement that electoral lists should contain an equal number of male and female candidates (or differing by one in the case of an odd number of candidates). In addition, one of the two highest (often safe, electable) positions on the list should be reserved for a women candidate. This quota regulation, which was valid for the national level, is also

applied to local level. In 2005, a similar quota regulation for the municipal elections was adopted by the regional parliaments and after some transitional measures have been passed, the regulation is applied in full force. This means that for the local elections at stake here (those of 2012) all local lists need to have an equal number of women and men. The share of women on the list is precisely one of the variables that proved to have a significant effect on gender-based voting (Giger *et al.*, 2012). However, despite their guaranteed presence on the candidate lists, women obtain in general fewer votes than men in Belgian elections. For the Senate elections in 2003, for instance, they obtained 31.1 per cent of the votes while constituting due to quota regulations (almost) half of the candidates. For the most recent Senate elections (of 2010) the share of votes for female candidates rose to 42.9 per cent (Wauters *et al.*, 2010b).

Belgium's local elections are for yet another reason interesting. It is claimed that voters will use voting cues (such as the sex of a candidate) when information costs are high to determine their vote choice (Koch, 2000; Giger *et al.*, 2012). The local level in Belgium, on the contrary, has a real and visible impact on the daily lives of the citizens, and local politicians are often very well known in the local community (Deschouwer, 2009). This is confirmed in our study, as the top three answers on an open question about the reasons to vote for a party were to endorse local politicians, to determine local government and opposition parties, and local issues. This renders the Belgian local elections and their candidates highly visible, and reduces the chance of a vote solely based on voting cues. It also goes against most studies that have researched same-gender voting in rather artificial settings (Giger *et al.*, 2012).

## **5. Methodology: data collection and variables**

Within the framework of the Interuniversity Attraction Pole PartiRep, several Belgian universities and university colleges (KU Leuven, ULB, UAntwerpen, VUB, Hogeschool Gent and UHasselt) collaborated in the organization of an exit-poll survey. The fieldwork has resulted in the 'PartiRep Exit-poll 2012'-dataset, containing information on a representative sample of Belgian voters.

A major innovation of the PartiRep exit-poll was the combination of a traditional questionnaire with a mock-ballot. This method of surveying vote choices has previously been employed in the Irish National Election Studies (Marsh and Sinnott, 2007; McElroy and Marsh, 2009). Especially given the open list electoral system in Belgium and the frequency of preference votes therein, this mock-ballot design is a perfect tool to record voting behavior taking into account preferential voting. With the use of the mock-ballot we aimed to have information not only on what list respondents voted for but

also to which candidates on the list they gave preferential votes. Moreover, these responses are not biased by media reports or by gaps in the respondent's memory.

A multi-stage stratified sampling procedure was used. First, a random sample of municipalities was drawn based on region and on socio-economic indicators of the municipalities (the so-called 'Dexia' typology). Subsequently, a random sample of polling stations within the selected municipalities was drawn. The number of polling stations in each municipality was determined by the number of inhabitants, while ensuring that all municipalities were covered by at least one team. Interview teams (consisting of two students of the participating institutions who had received intensive training) were allotted to each polling station. In order to randomize the selection of respondents, interviewers were instructed to approach every fifth voter leaving the polling station and ask the voter to participate. This fieldwork has resulted in a total of 4,715 respondents in the whole country who agreed to participate and completed at least part of the questionnaire. Combined with 7,742 refusals noted down by interviewers, the response rate is therefore 37.9 per cent. Furthermore, 3,981 respondents indicated their voting behavior on the mock-ballot as well, which is 84.4 per cent of all respondents. In order to check for representativeness, respondents were weighted for sex, age groups and region.

We will now discuss the variables used in the empirical analysis.

In Belgium, voters have various options of gender-based voting. In this paper, we focus on voting for women. The **dependent variable** "voting for at least one women" is a dummy variable with a code of '1' indicating that the respondent voted for at least 1 women. A code of '0' indicates that the respondents did not vote for a female candidate. A missing value is given when a respondent did not vote for a candidate, but casted a list vote.

In line with the gender affinity effect, hypothesis 1 expects that women are more likely to vote for women (Dolan, 1998). Hence, we include the **gender** of the respondent at the individual level. Also **political sophistication** is expected to affect voting for women. Therefore, we include the highest completed educational level as a variable, ranging from 'primary education' to 'university education'. In addition, we also include political interest in the local level that was measured on a 0 ('no interest at all') to 10 ('a lot of interest') point scale. We also included a variable that taps into respondents levels of political efficacy. Respondents were asked whether they could change an unjust decision taken at local level (0= do not agree at all; 10=fully agree).

We also control for **age** as previous research has shown that this could be a relevant variable. Holli and Wass (2010) and Giger *et al.* (2012) for instance found a significant effect of age on same-gender voting: younger people were more likely to vote for candidates of their own gender. McElroy and Marsh (2010) did, however, not find a significant effect of age on voting for women.

At the party-level, we include the **gender of the first candidate** on the ballot list. In line with hypothesis 3, we expect that voters will more often vote for women if the first candidate of their preferred party is a woman. Also the **ideology of the political party** should be taken into account. In previous studies there was often a strong relation between the ideology of a political party and the number of female candidates (Dolan, 2008). This ‘party/sex overlap’ makes it difficult to assess whether voter deliberately choose for female candidates or whether the candidate of their preferred party just happens to be female (Dolan, 2008). Also in PR systems the supply of female candidates is limited and often unequally distributed among political parties (McElroy and Marsh, 2010). Given the Belgian quota regulation, all political parties have an equal supply of candidates from the two sexes. Hence, the party/sex overlap is less salient in Belgium. However, to be sure, we also control for the ideology of the political party. We expect voters of left-wing parties to be more likely to support female candidates than voters of right-wing parties. We assess the ideology of a political party by taking the mean of the ideological orientation of the voters of the political party. We used this method since in many municipalities, local party lists participated in the elections for whom it was not straightforward to assign them to a national political party or a political ideology.

At the municipal level, we take **district magnitude** into account. In the literature, it is expected that district magnitude increases the likelihood of voting for women. In effect, it was shown that women tend to encounter more difficulties in small districts (Giger *et al.*, 2012). In Belgium, a PR system with rather large districts is used, and voters have the possibility to vote for more than one candidate of the same list. A vote for a woman candidate lower on the list is thus not at the expense of a more prominent candidate on top of the list. Therefore, in this study we expect a limited effect of district magnitude. Marissal and Hanssen (2001) found for the Belgian local elections of 2000 indeed only a very weak correlation between district magnitude and preference votes for women.

Because the dependent variable is coded as dichotomous variables, we use logistic regressions techniques. Moreover, given the hierarchical structure of the data (individuals nested in political parties in municipalities) and the inclusion of individual level, party level and municipal level variables, we will use multilevel regression analysis (Hox, 2002).

## 6. Empirical analysis

First, we will map how many voters cast a vote for female candidates, and whether there is a difference between men and women in this respect. Next, we investigate the impact of political sophistication on voting for women. Finally, in a multilevel analysis, we combine both individual and context variables into the analysis.

### 6.1 Descriptive analysis

In Table 2, percentages of men and women that voted for at least one woman and percentages for those who voted for at least one man are presented. As indicated before, voters can cast multiple preferential votes. The results show that women are slightly more likely to vote for female candidates (55.5% versus 52.0%) but these differences do not reach the standard threshold of significance ( $p=0.064$ ). Men are clearly more likely to vote for candidates of their own gender: 81.7 per cent compared to 76.8 per cent. This difference, which is statistically significant, corresponds with earlier findings on the Finnish electoral context (Holli and Wass, 2010).

Table 2: Voted for at least one man/woman (column percentages)

	Men	Women	Total	Sig.
Voted for at least one woman (N = 2,821)	52.0	55.5	53.8	NS
Voted for at least one man (N = 2,817)	81.7	76.8	79.2	***

Note: Voters who casted a list vote were excluded. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

We move on to investigate whether voting for women is a sophisticated behavior performed by higher educated, politically interested or efficacious voters. Tables 3 and 4 completely confirm the expectations based on the thesis from the literature that voting for women is sophisticated electoral behavior that presupposes particular skills and positive attitudes towards the political system. Higher educated people are more likely to cast a vote for women than lower educated people, both when it concerns women voting for women (same-gender voting and mixed-gender voting) and men voting for women (cross-gender voting and mixed-gender voting). The same applies when political interest and political efficacy are analyzed: those voters that casted at least one vote for a female candidate have significant higher levels of political interest and a significant higher feeling of political efficacy than voters who have exclusively voted for male candidates. Also if we split the voting population into male and female voters, the differences in political interest and political efficacy remain

significant. Men express in general higher levels of political interest and political efficacy than women, but also among male voters there is a difference in political sophistication between voters for women and voters for men. This seems to suggest that for cross-gender and mixed-gender voting (men voting for women) higher levels of political sophistication are needed than for same-gender voting.

Table 3: Level of education and voting for at least one woman (column percentages)

Highest degree	Voted for at least one woman (%)		
	Total	Women	Men
Primary education	50.0	45.8	53.6
Lower secondary education	48.8	52.7	45.0
Higher secondary education	49.6	54.0	45.7
Higher non-university education	56.3	56.5	56.2
University education	62.3	63.4	61.5
Total	53.5	55.4	51.7
Pearson chi <sup>2</sup> test	27.82***	10.11*	24.44***

Note: \* p< 0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 4: Political interest and political efficacy, and voting for at least one woman (column percentages)

Mean values (on 0-10 scale)	Voted for women	Voted for only men	Sig. (t test)
<b>Political interest</b> (all respondents)	6.36	5.69	-6.51*** (df=2,866)
Women	6.08	5.49	-3.94*** (df=1,384)
Men	6.63	5.85	-5.47*** (df= 1,475)
<b>Political efficacy</b> (all respondents)	3.52	3.09	-4.10*** (df= 2,850)
Women	3.34	2.92	-2.85** (df=1,378)
Men	3.69	3.23	-3.08** (df= 1,465)

Note: \* p< 0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

The idea that gender merely functions as a voting cue offering less-informed voters a yardstick to evaluate candidates is rejected by these results. This becomes also apparent when we analyze the scores given by the voters to a series of possible motivations to cast a preferential vote.

Table 5: Importance of the following reasons to vote for a candidate

	Voted for women	Voted for men	All voters
Knowledgeable candidate	7.38	7.29	7.29
Want impact on who gets elected	6.36	6.15	6.16
<b>Support female candidate</b>	6.81	5.36	6.12
Know candidate personally	6.60	5.73	6.04
Support ethnic minority candidate	4.51	3.83	4.17
National candidate	3.96	4.25	4.12
Helped me to solve a problem	3.88	3.67	3.76

*Note:* respondents were asked to assess the importance of these reasons on a 0 to 10 point scale.

Table 5 shows that supporting female candidates is an important motivation to cast a preferential vote: a general score of 6.12 on an eleven-point scale is given and a score of 6.81 among the people that casted a vote for at least one woman. It is, however, not the most important motivation (nor in general nor for voters who supported female candidates). The fact that a candidate is competent for the job and knowledgeable is more important than the gender of the candidate. This again is a confirmation that voters do not blindly vote for women, but evaluate them thoroughly and only when voters estimate that they deserve their confidence, they will vote for them. In sum, voting for women is sophisticated political behavior that requires skills and attitudes that are helpful to fully understand politics.

## 6.2. Multilevel analysis

As discussed extensively above, individual-level variables only tell us a part of the story. Therefore, we conduct a number of multi-level logistic regressions including individual and context level variables. As the political system is held constant in this single-country study, we are taking two context levels into account i.e. the electoral district (being the municipality in which elections were held) and the local political party one voted for. Therefore, we are running a 3-level multilevel model, in which individuals are nested within political parties within municipalities. In Table 6, the results of the logistic multilevel regression analyses are presented. The results of the empty multilevel model reveal that approximately 15 per cent of the variance in voting for women can be found at the party level. As expected, the electoral district level (i.e. the municipality) is not very important for

explaining voting for women in Belgium. This implies that variables such as district magnitude and the presence of experienced women politicians in a municipality will not have a large impact on the likelihood to vote for woman. Hence, the party level as well as the individual level account for a substantial amount of variance in voting for women.

Table 6: Multi-level logistic regressions explaining voting for female candidates

	Model 0	Model I	Model II
<b>Individual level</b>			
Gender		1.22*	1.20*
Age		1.01***	1.01***
Educational level		1.15***	1.15**
Political interest		1.08***	1.08***
Political efficacy		1.04*	1.04*
<b>Party level</b>			
Female first candidate			3.14***
Ideology (Left-right)			0.88**
<b>Municipal level</b>			
District magnitude			0.98***
Constant	1.274**	0.25***	0.77
Variance component at party level (with standard error)	0.595 (0.109)	0.593 (0.109)	0.301 (0.072)
Variance component at municipal level (with standard error)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
% Variance at party level	15.31	15.26	8.38
% Variance at municipal level	0.00	0.00	0.00
Log likelihood	-1,844.92	-1,772.43	-1,739.03

Notes: The entries are odds ratio.  $N_{\text{individuals}} = 2,818$ ;  $N_{\text{Local parties}} = 237$ ;  $N_{\text{municipalities}} = 40$ .

Sig.: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

In Model I we enter the individual-level variables to the model. The results confirm our findings from the bivariate analyses: voting for women is a sophisticated vote: higher educated and people with higher level of political interest and efficacy are more likely to vote for female candidates. Although our bivariate results did not show a significant gender effect, when individual control variables for political sophistication are included in the model there appears a gender affinity effect (women vote more often for female candidates). The lack of gender effect in Table 2 can thus be attributed to lower levels of political sophistication among women. When controlling for this variables, gender has a significant effect on the likelihood to vote for a woman. This implies that women who have equal levels of political sophistication as men are more likely to vote for women than these men. Age also has a positive effect on voting for women, but in the opposite direction as expected: older people tend to vote more for women than younger people.



In Model II party level variables and district magnitude are added to the model. Whether or not a woman is the first candidate on the ballot has a tremendous impact on the propensity of voting for women. This is remarkable as the Belgian quota regulation provides an equal number of men and women on candidate lists and one woman on one of the two top positions of the lists. Apparently, when it comes to voting for women, it is only the first position that is very important: if a woman is at that position for the party one votes for, the chance that a woman receives a vote increases tremendously. This confirms that list composition as determined by the party has a large impact on the electoral result of women. In addition, also the ideology of the political party seems to matter. Voters of right parties are less likely to vote on female candidates than voters of left parties.

Finally, district magnitude has a significant effect on the likelihood to vote for a woman, but in the opposite direction than previous research. Previous findings in the literature have demonstrated that women receive more votes in large districts (where intra-party competition tends to be lower), but our results show that when district magnitude increases, the chance to vote for women decreases. Given the fact that Belgian voters possess multiple preferential votes and that consequently intra-party competition is less sharp in Belgium, the lack of positive effect of district magnitude comes as no surprise. The explanation for negative effect of district magnitude on voting for women remains unclear, however. We should note, though, that the effect is rather small en that it does not contribute to explain variance between municipalities, as our multilevel analysis shows that there is no significant variance between the municipalities.

## **7. Conclusions**

The underrepresentation of women in parliaments is increasingly considered as a problem in contemporary societies because of normative, substantive, symbolic and efficiency reasons. The electoral system plays a crucial role in this respect. It is widely accepted that proportional representation systems are more beneficial for the election of women than majority systems. However, there is also a wide variety in the gender equality of the outcomes of various proportional systems. In effect, not only institutional provisions but also how actors such as voters and political parties cope with institutions are important (Tremblay, 2008). As a result, a crucial factor in the analyses of the underrepresentation of women in legislators is the study of voting behavior. Studying the provisions for preferential voting, and how these provisions can be (and are effectively) used by voters furthers our understanding of the descriptive representation of women.

We focused in this paper on the 'gender affinity effect' for women and the context in which this kind of voting behavior is facilitated or hindered. Gender affinity effect refers to female voters voting for female candidates, either out of solidarity with their own social group or because they use gender as

a voting cue facilitating their choice at elections. In the literature, two approaches to these voting cues are used: some authors see the use of gender as voting cue as a last resort for ill-informed voters, while others state that voting for women is sophisticated behavior which requires skills and political interest. Previous empirical research has shown that the gender affinity effect does not (always) materialize, but is dependent on the context, such as the competitiveness of the electoral district and the supply of female candidates by the party.

In this paper, we have conducted an analysis among voters at the local Belgian elections of 2012. This focus is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, given that voters can cast multiple preferential votes in Belgium's flexible list PR-system, intra-party competition tends to be lower, therefore, we expect a low (or no) effect of district magnitude. Secondly, due to the far-reaching quota regulation, the share of female candidates (an important explanatory variable in previous studies) is held constant for all parties and all districts. Finally, the local level is a very visible policy level close to the citizen, which makes the use of voting cues less relevant. In addition, the use of mock-ballots in a face-to-face interview is also innovative and particularly useful to look at gender-based voting in flexible list systems.

The results of this study show that the gender affinity effect exists for women, but only when controlling for political sophistication. Women in general are not more likely than men to vote for women, but women with equal levels of political sophistication as men have a higher chance to vote for a women candidate than their male counterparts. Political sophistication is an important factor: both the level of education, the level of political interest and the level of political efficacy prove to have a significant effect on the chance to vote for a woman. This clearly confirms the view that voting for women is politically sophisticated behavior, which tend to be less frequently used by ill-informed voters (as was stated by some authors).

Despite the significance of these individual-level variables, the context-variables (and more in particular party-related variables) are far more important. The supply of female candidates is a crucial variable here. Other studies stress the impact of the *number* of female candidates (McElroy and Marsh, 2010), but in Belgium, due to strict quota regulations, the number of women candidates equals that of men. Nevertheless, the supply of candidates continues to play an important role: not the number of female candidates as in previous research, but their *position on the ballot list* has a large effect on the propensity to vote for women. Parties with a woman as head of the list attract considerable more voters that cast a vote for women than parties with a male first candidate on the

list. Also the ideology of a political party has an effect: left-wing political parties tend to attract more people voting for women than right-wing political parties. The electoral district has, as expected due to lower levels of intra-party competition, no effect on voting for women. District magnitude, however, appears to exhibit a significant effect, but in the opposite directions as was found in previous research. The explanation for this effect remains to be investigated.

To conclude, we point to possible remedies for this observed gender inequality. Based on our findings, three kinds of actors could undertake action to increase the number of votes for women and consequently also their presence in parliament. Firstly, political parties are crucial actors to stimulate voting for women: by granting women (more) better positions on the ballot list, including more top positions, they can incite more voters to cast a vote on a female candidates. Secondly, voters themselves can also do more for women's representation by voting for more candidates. The results of this study show that 55 per cent of all preference voters cast only a vote for one candidate and 24 per cent of all preference voters casts only a vote for the candidate at the head of the list. By casting more votes and spreading them over more candidates than only the head of list, women will obtain more votes. Finally, the legislator can do more. In Belgium, far-reaching quota about the number of female candidates and their position at the top two positions on the ballot list exist, but that does not prevent that the head of list remains male dominated. It is exactly this position that is crucial for obtaining a lot of votes and gaining a seat in parliament. By adopting even more strict quota regulations (including regulations about the heads of lists), the legislator can stimulate voting for women.

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