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## **Second-order electoral personalization. Intra-party preference voting in Belgium and the Netherlands**

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### **Citation**

Nagtzaam, M. A. M. (2019, October 9). *Second-order electoral personalization. Intra-party preference voting in Belgium and the Netherlands*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/78476>

Version: Publisher's Version

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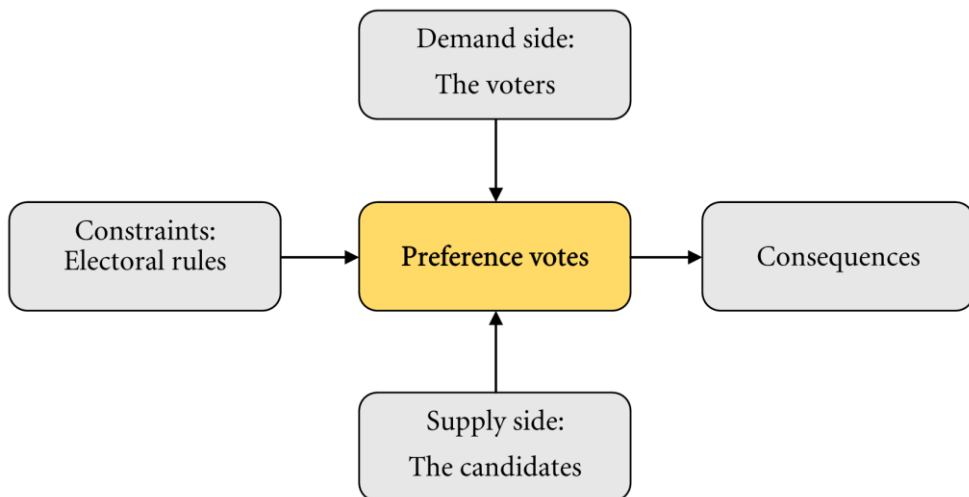
**Issue Date:** 2019-10-09

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Main findings of the study

The main research question of this study is what the causes and consequences of preference votes are. In order to fully understand the phenomenon of preference voting I argued that it is important to look at all factors influencing preference voting and at what the effects of preference votes are. The three factors influencing preference voting are the institutional rules, the voters casting a preference voting and the candidates receiving and sometimes actively campaigning for preference votes. I argue that these three factors together affect the preference votes in a political system. Preference votes in turn could have consequences on other factors (see figure 6.1). Table 6.1 provides an overview of the hypotheses tested in this book. In this section I will discuss the most important findings, both in terms of these individual aspects of preference voting and their relation.

**Figure 6.1** The causes and consequences of preference voting



#### 6.1.1 A negative preference vote?

The first notable finding is the fact that, contrary to what was expected, the results of the experiment presented in chapter 2 strongly suggest that the introduction of a list vote would affect list-pullers and other candidates than list-pullers in the same way. The expectation was that the introduction of a list vote would only have an effect on votes for the list-puller (H2.1), but not for the other candidates (H2.2). However, what the experiment showed was that voters casting a vote for another candidate would also switch to a list vote if that option would become available.

**Table 6.1.** Overview of the findings of this study

Hypothesis	BEL	NET
2.1 Voters who do not have the option to cast a list vote are more likely to vote for the list-puller than voters who do have the option to cast a list vote.	+	+
2.2 Voters who do not have the option to cast a list vote are not more likely to vote for other candidates than voters who do have the option to cast a list vote.	-	-
2.3 Voters who can cast multiple preference votes are more likely to vote for other candidates than voters who can only cast a single preference vote.	+	-
2.4 Voters who can cast multiple preference votes are not more likely to vote for the list-puller than voters who can only cast a single preference vote.	-	+
3.1 If a voter has more resources available he or she is more likely to cast a preference vote than a voter with fewer resources.	M	M
3.2 A voter belonging to an underrepresented social group in parliament will be more likely to cast a preference vote than a voter from a social group that is overrepresented in parliament.	M	M
3.3 Voters who feel closer to a particular (group of) candidate(s) are more likely to cast a preference vote than voters who do not feel close to a particular (group of) candidate(s).	+	M
3.4 If a voter, prior to the elections, gives lower evaluations to the first candidate (list-puller) on the list, he or she is more likely to cast a vote for another candidate, i.e. a preference vote.	~	+
3.5 Hypothesis 3.4 holds only if the electoral system forces a voter to vote for a candidate, and not if the electoral system allows the voter to cast a list vote.		+
4.1 If a candidate belongs to a traditionally underrepresented social group in parliament he or she will receive more preference votes, than a candidate who belongs to a social group that is traditionally overrepresented in parliament.	+	+
4.2 The effect described in hypothesis 4.1 is stronger for the first candidate of a specific group, than it is for other candidates belonging to that group.	-	M
4.3 Dutch candidates receive relatively more votes in their own district ( <i>kieskring</i> ) than they receive in other districts.		+
4.4 The more a candidate is positioned towards the top of the list, the more preference votes he or she will receive.	+	+
4.5 The last candidate on the list (the list-pusher) attracts more votes than might be expected based on the low list position he or she occupies.	+	+
4.6 Candidates with more political experience receive more preference votes than candidates with less political experience.	+	+
4.7 Candidates who deviate more from the party line will receive more preference votes than candidates who deviate less from the party line.	~	~
4.8 The more the candidate has a position towards the end on the list, the stronger the effect of deviating from the party line (hypothesis 4.7).	~	~
4.9 Deviating from the party line has a stronger effect on preference votes when it is done through submitting questions, than it has during speeches in plenary sessions of parliament.	~	~
4.10 Candidates from traditional parties are more likely to receive preference votes than candidates from newer parties.	+	~

**Table 6.1.** Overview of the findings of this study

Hypothesis	BEL	NET
4.11 Candidates from populist parties are less likely to receive preference votes than candidates from other parties.	~	~
4.12 Candidates from right-wing parties are more likely to receive preference votes than candidates from left-wing parties.	~	-
4.13 In the Netherlands, candidates of parties with less popular list-pullers receive more preference votes than candidates of parties with more popular list-pullers.		+
5.1 Candidates who receive more preference votes are more likely to deviate from the parliamentary party group line.	~	~
5.2 Candidates who receive more preference votes have a better chance of getting a higher place on the list in the next elections.	+	~
5.3 The effect of preference votes on the list position in the next election is stronger for male candidates than for female candidates.	+	-
5.4 The effect of preference votes on the list position in the next election is stronger for female candidates than for male candidates.	-	+
5.5 Candidates who receive more preference votes have a higher chance of obtaining a post in the government installed after the elections (if their party participates in the governmental coalition).	+	~

Note: + expectation met; - effect in other direction than expected; M mixed effect; ~ no effect.

This issue was further examined when looking at the motivations for voters to cast a preference vote. I explored whether there are negative reasons for casting a preference vote, which also could explain the results of the experiment. I analysed motivations of voters for casting a preference vote and looked at whether voters mentioned a negative evaluation of the list-puller as a reason to cast a preference vote. I expected that in the Netherlands, where a list vote is absent, such motivations could be found, but that for Belgium, where voters have an option to cast a list vote, such motivations would be absent (H3.4 and H3.5). The expectation was supported by the results. In the Netherlands approximately 7 per cent of voters who cast a preference vote, mentioned that they did not want to vote for the list-puller and therefore voted for another candidate. In most of these motivations, a reason for preferring the specific other candidate was missing. Thus, a substantial part of preference votes cast in the Dutch context might be seen as 'negatively motivated preference votes'. This type of preference votes was absent in Belgium, where almost none of the voters mentioned the list-puller in their motivation for their vote for another candidate. While multiple differences exist between (the electoral systems of) Belgium and the Netherlands, I argue that the most likely cause of the absence of the 'negatively motivated preference vote' in Belgium is the fact that Belgian voters have the option to cast a list vote. In the Netherlands, if a voter has no positive preference for a specific candidate, but also does not want to vote for the list-puller, he or she has no other option than to vote for another candidate. In Belgium, such a voter could cast a list vote.

### 6.1.2 No role for ideology

The second notable finding is that there does not seem to be a relation between preference

votes and the policy position of a candidate. Amongst other things, the relationship between the ideological position and preference votes of candidates was explored in chapter 4 and 5. In chapter 4 I looked at whether candidates who took an ideological position more towards the extremes within their party are more likely to receive preference votes. The expectation was that candidates who deviate more from the party line, especially if they are more towards the end of the list, would receive more preference votes (H4.7 and H4.8). When voters distinguish between candidates from the same party, it might be that they take the policy positions of candidates into consideration. The results show that the ideology of candidates did not matter for their electoral success. In chapter five I explored whether the effect between ideology and preference votes might be the other way around: that candidates start deviating more from the party line after they received relatively more preference votes. This relationship also does not exist. There seems to be no causal link in either direction. Since the causal link was studied in both directions, and theory suggests that the causal link is possible in both directions, the link was further explored in appendix E.3. The relationship was tested again in both directions, based on a first-event analysis. The results presented in this appendix did not lead to any revisions of conclusions of both chapters. When it comes to intraparty preference voting ideology seems to have no influence on either the voter or the candidate.

### 6.1.3 Limited consequences of preference votes

The third notable finding relates to the consequences of preference voting. First of all, I show that the consequences of preference voting are limited. In Belgium and the Netherlands there are not that many candidates who are elected out of list order. Most candidates do not even receive enough votes to be elected based on preference votes. Yes, in theory both systems have flexible list systems, but in practice it still are to a great extent the parties who decide which candidates become an MP after the elections.

Preference votes also do not seem to matter that much for the legislative behaviour of candidates, neither in Belgium nor in the Netherlands. In addition, in the Netherlands there also seems to be no effect of preference voting on the allocation of ministers and junior ministers. In Belgium this effect exists. However, as I argued before, the question remains how large this influence actually is. There is one area in which preference votes seem to matter: namely when it comes to candidate selection (H5.2, H5.3 and H5.4). However, the effect manifests itself in different ways in the Netherlands and Belgium. Previous research already showed that in Belgium those candidates who receive more preference votes receive a better list position in the subsequent election (André, Depauw, Shugart, et al., 2017). However, I argued that it might be important to look at the differences between male and female candidates when it comes to this effect. And if gender is taken into account, the interpretation of the findings changes. In Belgium, the effect of preference votes on the list position of a candidate in the next election only exists for male candidates. In the Netherlands, at first preference votes do not seem to have an effect on the

list position of a candidate for the next election. However, if gender is taken into account, the results show that in the Netherlands there is an effect, but contrary to Belgium, the effect applies to female candidates. This is an important contribution to the literature of candidate selection and something that should be taken into account when studying the way selectors draft the list of candidates.

## 6.2 Implications

One of the findings of this study is that the absence of a list vote can lead to negatively motivated preference votes. This has two important implications, one for research on preference voting and one more practical implication for the Dutch electoral system.

So far, the literature with regard to the Dutch case assumes that votes for a list-puller are predominantly a party vote or a preference vote for the list-puller. Votes for other candidates on the list are seen as a pure preference vote (see for example Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010). The findings presented in this book challenge this distinction. They show that votes for another candidate should sometimes be considered to be more of a party vote than a preference vote for that candidate. Some voters who cast a vote for another candidate may switch to a list vote, if that option is available. For research on preference voting in general, but specifically for the Dutch case, this adds to the complexity of the phenomenon of personalization. Future research should take this into account.

Of course, it is not possible to know exactly what a voter has in mind when casting a vote. A whole set of motivations may be related to one act; i.e. indicating a preference for one specific party or candidate. However, it seems that if voters have the option to cast a list vote it contributes to a better interpretation of the motivations of voters, based on the results presented in this study.

In 2016 the *Tweede Kamer* in the Netherlands voted against a law that would have allowed an experiment for a new ballot design. However, after the elections of 2017 the *Kiesraad* (Electoral Council) again pleaded for a re-evaluation of the ballot in an evaluation of the elections, after various problems as a result of the size of the ballot occurred (Kiesraad, 2017b). In the original proposal, different options for a new design of the voting ballot were proposed. All contained a process of two steps: first choosing a party and subsequently voting for a candidate. This was not intended as an introduction of a list vote, but if a new government would indeed take a new ballot design into consideration, an electoral reform in terms of the introduction of a list vote could also be considered. After all, such a ballot implies that the party is more important than the candidate, since that would be the first step in the voting process under such a ballot design. Why not allow the voter to only cast a vote for the party then? Introducing a list vote would increase the options of Dutch voters and therefore result in election results that are more in line with the intentions of voters. At least the difference between the pure party voters and the pure candidate voters would be much clearer in such a system. Such a system was proposed once in the

Netherlands, by the Dutch Electoral System Civic Forum. However, the government did not implement the suggested changes (Fournier et al., 2011, pp. 8–9). Recently, the proposed changes by the Civic Forum have been echoed by a State Commission (Staatscommissie parlementair stelsel, 2018).

Another implication relates to the importance of preference votes. Comments with regard to preference voting in the Netherlands sometimes relate to the surprising number of preference votes for candidates who do not actually need them, since these candidates have a high enough list position to be elected based on the success of the party. In the elections between 1998 and 2017 only 17 per cent of all preference votes are cast for candidates who are not elected and this percentage is even lower when looking at candidates from parties who won seats (15 per cent). In Belgium this percentage is much higher. Non-elected candidates together receive approximately 60% of the preference votes. In addition, in the Netherlands only a few candidates are elected out of list order. Based purely on which candidates are elected, preference votes thus have a limited influence, both in Belgium and the Netherlands. It should be noticed, however, that in the Netherlands there seems to be a development in how voters deal with this issue. In the most recent parliamentary election, for example, the website [www.stemopeenvrouw.nl](http://www.stemopeenvrouw.nl) (vote for a woman) advised voters not to vote for the first female candidate on the list, who normally is elected regardless of preference votes. Instead, the website gave some strategic options to try and get more female candidates elected. It is hard to say whether this actually had an effect, the first woman on the list still received much more votes than other women on the list. However, a record of 4 candidates got elected out of list order, three of whom are female candidates.

Apart from that, the analyses in chapter 5 show that it is not necessarily the case that all these votes for candidates who would have been elected anyway are ‘wasted’, since preference votes may also have other effects. For female candidates in the Netherlands in particular, a larger number of preference votes helps them to get a better list position in the next election. Still, this effect does not hold for candidates more towards the top of the list, so the influence stays limited in that respect. In Belgium a good electoral performance also helps candidates in their political career, although the effect applies to male candidates there. Preference votes thus have an influence beyond which candidates are elected or not, which is not only an important finding in itself, but also underlines the relevance of research on preference voting.

### 6.3 The value of preference votes

All findings and implications discussed above lead to two important questions. First, what do these findings mean for the academic literature on personalization? And second, what are the advantages of preference votes for representative democracy?

The findings presented in this study do not show overwhelming support for the personalization thesis. Yes, both in the Netherlands and Belgium the use of preference votes



has increased over the last decades, but the influence of political parties remains strong. We see that parties still control to a very large extent which candidates are elected. List position still has the largest influence on whether a candidate gets elected or not. Thus it is more important for a candidate to be popular with the selectorate of the party, than to be popular with voters. This is partly because of the electoral rules. Both in Belgium and the Netherlands the threshold for winning a seat without the support of the party are relatively high. In addition, the rules also benefit the higher placed candidates. On the other hand, this is also because of the way voters use the electoral rules. At least in theory, it is possible that more candidates are elected out of list order. However, voters tend to vote mostly for those candidates who are elected anyway. On top of that, not all of these preference votes seem to be real personal votes. Sometimes they are cast for negative reasons, especially in a system where no party vote exists. Sometimes they are cast simply for the first person on the list with a certain characteristic. For example, the first woman on the list in the Netherlands can count on a considerable number of votes. Such votes are not necessarily personal: they have more to do with a specific characteristic of that candidate, but if a different female candidate occupied that position, she would have been the one obtaining all those votes. This does not mean that such a vote is not important. It most likely shows that a part of the electorate is in favour of female representation, but it is not so much a sign of personalized politics. Both the electoral rules and the voters themselves therefore still give political parties a large influence on which candidates end up in parliament.

Increasing levels of preference votes therefore do not necessarily mean that politics become more personalized. Therefore, preference votes alone should not be used as an indicator for personalization of politics. But does this mean there is actually no sign of personalized politics at all? Not entirely. Looking in more detail at preference votes can shed light on the issue. For example, some candidates receive votes because candidates know them personally, resulting in a real personal vote. And the results presented in this dissertation show that preference votes can have some indirect effects on the political career of a candidate, by giving candidates who perform well in elections better list positions in subsequent elections. Parties respond to preference votes, which leaves room for candidates to build a political career based on performing well in elections.

The advantages of preference voting for representative democracy in Belgium and the Netherlands seem limited. If we would look at the chain of delegation (Strøm, 2000), the influence of voters on this chain of delegation in terms of influencing the actual politicians who end up in parliament or government seems weak. In a representative democracy the chain of delegation is important, because, it links voters in several steps to those who govern. The first step in this chain is from voters to elected representatives. We saw that parties to a very large extent still control which candidates are elected. In addition, if we would look further at the chain of delegation, the influence becomes even weaker. In the second and third step of the chain, elected legislators are linked with the head of government and ministers. The chain of delegation could be strengthened by given

preference votes more influence in the selection of those ministers. However, I have shown that the influence of preference vote on the selection of ministers is also weak, especially in the Netherlands. Using preference votes in the selection process could indirectly give voters more influence, which would further strengthen the chain of delegation. The influence of preference votes on representative democracy in its current form therefore seems limited.

So, these answers might be somewhat disappointing for those who think preference votes have value. Should the conclusion be that it is redundant to allow voters to cast a preference vote and that preference votes should be abolished? I do not think that this is the case. Preference votes still could be of great value, but voters should be able to make it more clear what their intentions are. Therefore, it is necessary to make changes to the electoral systems of the Netherlands and Belgium. For the Netherlands this would mean introducing a list vote. This at least would make it possible for voters who do not have a candidate preference to cast a vote that shows their true intentions. As an additional, and maybe even more important advantage, when we look at the actual preference votes it would become more clear who the popular candidates are. By definition, introducing a list vote means abolishing the obligatory candidate vote. This might seem a devaluation of the candidate vote, but I actually believe that it is the other way around. If voters have the option to not cast a candidate vote, those candidate votes that are cast are more meaningful.

To further strengthen the value of preference votes, the system could be made more open by making it easier for candidates to be elected out of list order. This also applies to Belgium. In that case, preference votes could actually have an important influence on the composition of parliament. In the current systems the effects of preference votes seem quite limited, which seems to make them somewhat redundant. If this is the case, I argue that the better way to go would be to increase the weight of preference votes, instead of abolishing them. This could also have a positive influence on representative democracy, since it allows for a more direct link between voters and MPs. In times where the relationship between voters and parties is weakening, this might be of importance for representative democracy.

## 6.4 Suggestions for further research

A first suggestion for further research relates to the information about candidates given to voters on the ballot. Many of the indicators that seem to have a strong effect on which candidates receive more preference votes, are related to information given on the ballot: gender (explicitly in the Netherlands, as the gender of (most) candidates is given and implicitly in Belgium, as the first name of candidates is given) and municipality (in the Netherlands). The information about the candidate that is given on the ballot thus seems to influence preference voting. Research could focus on the actual size of the effect of the information given on the ballot. This is also a more normative question, since it might influence the election result. To which extent is information given on the ballot desirable, if other potentially relevant information is left out?

A second suggestion relates to the nature of preference votes. The current literature on preference voting assumes that casting a preference vote is in general positively motivated. I argued and showed that motivations can also be negative, by focusing on one such negative motivation (a negative evaluation of the list-puller). Further research could focus more on the distinction between negative and positive motivations for casting a preference vote. In addition, further research could be conducted on the ‘random’ aspect of some preference votes. I showed that, in the Dutch case, some voters who do not want to vote for the list-puller voted for another candidate, without mentioning a reason for voting for the candidate who was chosen. Future research might delve into this mechanism, by studying whether the vote actually is random or that in addition to the negative motivations, positive motivations for the actual vote exist as well.

In this dissertation one chapter focuses on the voter, and one chapter focuses on the candidate. While these analyses are valuable to get a better insight in the reasons for voters who cast a preference vote and the candidates who receive preference votes, this does not explain the whole dynamic of preference voting. Therefore, another suggestion for further research would be to focus on the link between voters and candidates and how this affects preference voting. Only few studies have done this so far, mainly because it is difficult to obtain the data necessary, as detailed data about voting behaviour is necessary for such a study.

Some studies have linked voters and candidates in terms of gender based voting. However, the results of these studies are not consistent. Some studies found that voters are more likely to vote for a candidate from the same gender (Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015; Giger et al., 2014; Marien et al., 2017), while other studies did not (McElroy & Marsh, 2010; Wauters et al., 2010). In contrast to what literature would suggest, political sophistication has a limited influence on gender-based voting (De Leeuw, 2017). Gender-based voting thus does not seem to be simply a ‘shortcut’ (Cutler, 2002) for those voters with low levels of political sophistication. This strengthens the need for research that links voters and candidates, since the findings of De Leeuw suggest this type of voting is a strategy used by a broader spectrum of voters.

The only study in which multiple voter and candidate characteristics are included in an approach that links voters and candidates is conducted by Van Erkel (2017, pp. 155–180). Van Erkel included gender, age and location in his model and found a “strong effect of shared municipality, (...) a moderate effect of sex and no general effect of age” (2017, p. 177). But further studies are still necessary, not only in different contexts, but also with different candidate characteristics. One such characteristic which would be particularly interesting is ethnicity, as was mentioned in chapter 4. Results in chapter 4 showed no robust effects of whether candidates who have a non-European background receive more preference votes. Further research is necessary, which should delve deeper into this issue and also gather better information about the ethnic background of candidates. In this dissertation I coded whether candidates belong to an ethnic minority based on last names,

which is not ideal, and leaves little room for variation between members of different ethnic minorities.

Studying the link between voters and candidates more closely might give valuable insights in what voters try to accomplish by casting a preference vote. It might help to think about changes in the electoral system to facilitate that which voters actually would like to achieve with preference votes. In the current electoral systems of Belgium and the Netherlands the influence of preference votes all in all seems limited, while it could actually help to strengthen the link between voters and candidates in a representative democracy.