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COMPULSORY VOTING

Anachronism or avant-garde?

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1.1 Introduction

As several of the other contributions in this book will show, Belgium's electoral system is idiosyncratic in many ways but one of its defining characteristics is its reliance on compulsory voting (CV). Not only was Belgium the first country in the world to adopt CV in 1893 but it is also one of the few democracies to maintain the system to the present day. To understand this particular (and even peculiar) position, this chapter will reflect on Belgium's experiences with CV. We focus on three central questions: first, why was CV adopted and why does it still exist, despite the regular 'flaring up' of voices asking for its abolishment? Here, we discuss the historical conditions and party-strategic considerations that have led to the adoption and endurance of CV, as well as the arguments in favor of or against CV. Second, we focus on how voter turnout in Belgium compares to other countries with and without CV. Does Belgium do better or worse than comparable countries? A third and final question focuses on the potential effects of abolishment. Would we see a drop in turnout if CV were abolished? How would it affect political equality? And would it electorally benefit some parties more than others?

In the remainder of this chapter, we first discuss the historical roots of CV in Belgium, before turning to current debates on CV. The third section puts Belgium in a comparative perspective and determines whether CV actually leads to high levels of voter turnout. Finally, we discuss the consequences of CV on individuals' voting behavior, on voter equality, and on party political strength.

1.2 The historical roots of compulsory voting in Belgium

Belgium adopted CV in 1893 as the first country in the world. Nevertheless, this electoral innovation had been the object of a long and challenging ideological battle between conservative liberals on the one hand and the Catholics

and the more progressive liberals on the other. The debate essentially boiled down to different opinions on citizens' capacities to participate politically. The conservative forces claimed that citizens were not interested in politics and should ideally be kept away from participating in elections. After all, it was believed that politics was too complex for ordinary citizens and was best left to those who had the knowledge and skills to engage with political issues. The more progressive voices, on the other hand, advocated the introduction of CV as a way of elevating the masses. They agreed that citizens were not necessarily politically interested, but they believed that CV could act as a catalyst for citizens' political engagement. By forcing citizens to vote, CV could fuel voter turnout, political interest, and political knowledge (Malkopoulou, 2016; Pilet, 2011, p. 127). This would in turn lead to a better reflection of the '*volonté nationale*' in parliament according to Prime Minister Beernaert (Pilet, 2011, pp. 127–128).

Despite this ongoing debate, CV was finally embraced in 1893. Its approval can be explained by the other changes that were proposed to the electoral system. Under pressure of the 'radical' Socialist Workers Party (the *Belgische Werkliedenpartij*), a system of universal male suffrage and plural voting was adopted. This meant that every man over 25 years of age could cast at least one vote, but supplementary votes were given to men who paid at least five Belgian francs in taxes, who received higher education, or who were heads of families. The conservatives' fear was, however, that especially men belonging to the lower classes, concentrated in urban areas, would turn out to vote and that they would support the socialist party. As such, CV was considered an antidote to radicalization among the electorate: it would oblige moderate voters to go to the polling station, which in turn would limit the electoral strength of the more radical voters who would vote for the workers party (Pilet, 2011, p. 127). In addition, there were also leftist MPs who were in favor of CV, since it would discourage employers and industrial leaders to dissuade their employees to vote (Kuźelewska, 2016, p. 40; Malkopoulou, 2011, pp. 138–140; Pilet, 2011, p. 128). CV was therefore also a device ensuring the integrity of the elections.

One of the more contentious issues in the adoption process concerned the sanctions that could be implemented (Malkopoulou, 2016, pp. 20–22). Some proposed financial punishments. Others proposed to deprive citizens of their political rights if they did not turn out. And the Catholic party advocated 'moral' penalties, such as publishing the names of those citizens who stayed away from the polling station. In the end, the decision was made to combine all three: fines were imposed, absentees would lose their voting rights, and their names would be published. Moreover, it was decided that if voters abstain four times, they were unable to apply for employment or promotion in the public sector (Nerincx, 1901, p. 277; Reed, 1925, p. 335). These severe sanctions did not miss their effect since voter turnout rose from 73% in 1890 to 93.5% in the 1894 elections (Mabille, 2011; Witte et al., 2009).

1.3 Enduring debates on compulsory voting

Even though CV was adopted in 1893, it continued to propel fierce political debates, even to this very day. Some political parties remain strong advocates of the system, whereas others seek to abolish it. However, our analysis of press articles and party manifestos from the 1970s to present day demonstrates great stability in parties' framing of CV (see [Table 1.1](#)).

Ever since 1893, the socialist parties have always been staunch advocates of the measure as a way of politically empowering the urban proletariat, and CV was also supported by the Christian democratic parties for most of their existence. Regionalist and nationalist parties are historical opponents, and this remains true in the cases of Flemish radical right and regionalist parties (Vlaams Belang and N-VA) today. The liberal family continues to be divided. While the Flemish Open VLD is the most vocal critic of CV, claiming that the system limits citizens' fundamental freedom to choose whether or not to vote, the Francophone Mouvement Réformateur (MR) has officially favored the rule since the late 1980s. However, the newly elected party president (2020), Georges-Louis Bouchez, seems determined to shift that position and to support abolishing CV. Finally, the Green parties have witnessed changes in position over time: both the French-speaking Ecolo and the Dutch-speaking Groen were against CV in the 1980s and 1990s but are now supporters. Support for CV therefore does not follow the traditional linguistic cleavage with Flemish and Walloon parties opposing each other on the issue. The debate rather follows an ideological rationale.

Most parties' positions have not fundamentally changed over time, and neither have their arguments (Pilet, 2011). Three main arguments persist in support of CV. First, advocates argue that only CV can guarantee a representative political system that is appropriately legitimized by all voters. CV thus increases the legitimacy of the political system by involving all affected citizens. A second claim is that a well-functioning democracy can only work when individual liberties are linked to collective duties. The right to vote therefore implies the moral and democratic duty to enter the voting booth. Third, proponents worry

TABLE 1.1 Political parties' positions on compulsory voting

	<i>Pro CV</i>	<i>Contra CV</i>
1893	Progressive liberals, BWP, catholic progressive	Doctrinal liberals, catholic conservatives
1970–2000	Flemish and Walloon socialists, Flemish and Walloon Christian democrats, Walloon liberals	Flemish liberals, Walloon regionalists, Flemish radical right, Flemish regionalists, Flemish and Walloon Greens
2000–2020	Flemish and Walloon socialists, Flemish and Walloon Christian democrats, Flemish and Walloon Greens, Walloon radical left, Brussels' regionalists	Flemish liberals, Flemish regionalists, Flemish radical right

that the abolition of CV will raise political inequality among citizens. After all, citizens with less economic and political capital risk losing their political voice. This would then lead to policies at the disadvantage of the less well-off. At present, these are still the most widely used arguments invoked to defend CV. Arguments reminding citizens of the historical struggle for universal suffrage and the need to mobilize party's voters for the progressive cause have steadily faded from the debate over the years.

On the opponent's side, much hasn't changed either. The argument that CV restrains citizens' individual liberties resounds as loud today as it did in 1893. According to its most vocal representatives, CV takes away citizens' fundamental freedom to decide whether or not they want to vote. Additionally, some parties critique the sanctions to enforce CV. From the outset, the efficient imposition of sanctions has been problematic. The argument then goes that an unenforced CV law is an absurdity.

Even though the arguments and positions are characterized by stability, the debate on CV regained momentum since the 1990s. This can best be understood in the light of two broader societal evolutions: the alleged crisis of representative democracy and the increased mobilization of the linguistic cleavage. In the early 1990s, democracy allegedly went through a crisis in Western European countries, and Belgium was no exception (De Koster et al., 2010). The electoral victories of anti-establishment parties (Vlaams Blok and Rossem) during the 1991 federal election confirmed the increasingly large gap between citizens and politicians. In the wake of this election, a group of parties consisting of the Green parties, the regionalist parties, and the Flemish liberal party called for democratic renewal with CV spearheading the debate. It was believed that abolishing CV would require politicians to be more sensitive to citizens' demands and could bring politicians and the people closer together. Moreover, they believed that abolishment would prevent frustrated citizens from casting an anti-political vote for the radical right populist parties. The recent repositioning of the Green parties builds on this democratic renewal frame. Stepping away from the idea that CV is an obstacle for citizen participation, they now claim that it can stimulate democratic renewal. After all, voting is a first important step to deeper and more meaningful citizen participation.

A second societal evolution that influenced the contemporary debate to a lesser extent is the increased mobilization of the linguistic cleavage. Flemish nationalists and federalist voices in French-speaking Belgium increasingly invoke identity arguments in the CV debate, bringing new arguments into the discussion. For instance, Walloon Christian democrats and the Brussels' regionalist party (CDH and DEFI) have explicitly referred to Belgium's unity in their defense of CV. In the press, CDH states that "lifting the obligation to participate in the choice of representatives is a democratic step backwards, a measure that goes completely against what the National Union is demanding".¹ Flemish nationalists in contrast refer to CV as an antiquated Belgian absurdity. The abolishment of the rule would lead to low turnout, thereby confirming that Belgium is a dysfunctional democracy. Even though these are novel arguments, they are not that salient in the current debate.

1.4 Compulsory voting and voter turnout

CV is evidently closely related to voter turnout, which is often considered a thermometer for a healthy democracy. Low electoral turnout is considered dangerous because when the election results do not represent the will of the people, this could result in inegalitarian and illegitimate policies (Franklin, 2004). A citizenry that shows up at the polling booth and casts a valid and well-informed vote is seen as a sign of a strong democracy. In contrast, a dis-engaged citizenry with low political trust indicates the hollowing out of our democratic norms (Hooghe et al., 2011; Norris, 2004).

Not surprisingly, then, there is much concern about the drop in voter turnout especially in established democracies around the world (see [Figure 1.1](#)). We see

FIGURE 1.1 Voter turnout in established democracies between 1970 and 2019 by region

Notes: μ vote is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the registered electorate of the regions that held parliamentary elections from the time period 1970 until 2019. The shown percentage points are the mean by decade. We used the absolute number to show weighted averages. Hence, small countries don't bias the trend. We only selected established democracies, since newer democracies can bias the trend and this has no added value for the purpose of this chapter. We included the following countries: Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), Northern America (Canada and the United States), and Australia and New Zealand. Be cautious when interpreting the numbers for Northern America. The voting-age population (VAP) turnout is in the United States a better representation of reality; however, this is not the case in Europe. Since our research focus is on Belgium, we decided to show the proportion of registered voters.

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Solijonov, 2016).

the largest drop in voter turnout in Europe and Northern America, with 14% and 12.5%, respectively, for the period between 1970 and 2019. Europe's drop is situated mostly in the 2000s until 2019 with almost 9%. The decline in Northern America is more gradual. Although Belgium's voter turnout remains stable, we do see in the 1990s and between 2010 and 2019 a drop of over 2%. Nonetheless, Belgium remains one of the countries with the highest turnout rate of all established democracies.

Looking more closely at different countries, it is obvious that CV laws have a strong impact on voter turnout (see [Table 1.2](#)). The CV countries – Australia, Luxembourg, and Belgium – stand out in comparison with the other established democracies. However, the strength of this effect is highly dependent on how these laws are implemented (Franklin, 1999; Hirczy, 1994; Norris, 2004): Greece which has no sanctions to enforce its CV laws has a very low average turnout in comparison with other non-CV countries. Hence, laws *de jure* are not enough to guarantee high turnout. The differences between the other CV countries are quite small. Only the VAP turnout in Luxembourg is quite remarkable but this may be explained by its very large expat community.

As explained previously, electoral turnout is directly associated with democratic legitimacy. Whereas the turnout levels in non-CV countries give an indication of the citizens' political trust, this exit option is blocked in CV countries. Nonetheless, citizens can express their dissatisfaction by casting an invalid vote. We do see in CV countries that the number of invalid votes is on average 4% points higher ([Table 1.2](#)). However, on average only 6% of the voters cast an invalid vote. In comparison with the often-lower voter turnout rates in the other established democracies, Belgium and the other CV countries still show high numbers.

1.5 What if compulsory voting were abolished?

As mentioned previously, CV has been a favorite subject of normative debates on how to improve democracy. A system of CV is claimed to impart a strong moral imperative to citizens, a signal that voting is an essential part of being a good citizen. As such, it generates a sense of moral and civic duty. The question then becomes whether abolishing CV would lead to a reduction in turnout, an increase in voter inequality, and whether it would benefit some parties more than others.

Since there are no naturalistic data on voter turnout in Belgium in the absence of CV, we have to determine its effect through hypothetical survey questions. This means that to determine whether CV actually increases voter turnout, we have to rely on the hypothetical question whether citizens would still go to vote if they were no longer obliged to. This question was taken up in the

TABLE 1.2 Compulsory voting, electoral turnout, and invalid votes by country

<i>CV countries</i>	<i>Vote/Registration (%)</i>	<i>Vote/VAP (%)</i>	<i>μ Invalid votes (%)</i>
Australia	93.33	81.23	5.15
Luxembourg	90.86	53.25	6.52
Belgium	89.94	84.34	5.42
Greece (no sanctions)	68.71	77.01	2.08
<i>Non-CV countries</i>			
Denmark	86.09	81.24	0.93
Sweden	83.94	81.19	1.25
Iceland	83.04	82.84	2.04
Italy	78.74	75.94	4.40
Austria	78.68	70.89	1.58
The Netherlands	78.56	75.22	0.49
New Zealand	77.94	74.68	0.72
Norway	77.15	74.66	0.55
Germany	75.04	69.05	1.41
Spain	71.92	67.57	1.64
Finland	66.94	70.70	0.65
Ireland	65.47	62.87	0.93
The United Kingdom	64.92	60.45	n.a.
Canada	63.33	57.28	n.a.
Portugal	58.20	65.25	3.43
The United States	56.75	45.41	n.a.
France	56.56	46.45	2.89
Total CV countries (not weighted)	91.37	72.94	5.70
Total non- CV countries (not weighted)	71.96	68.33	1.64
Δ (not weighted)	19.42	4.60	4.06
Total CV countries (weighted)	92.28	81.62	5.25
Total non- CV countries (weighted)	63.36	54.27	2.18
Δ (weighted)	28.91	27.35	3.06

Notes: The voter turnout is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the registered electorate and the VAP turnout is measured as the mean of the total vote as a proportion of the voting-age population. We included the parliamentary elections from 2000 to 2019. The shown percentage points are the mean for these two decades. When looking at the CV countries and non-CV countries, we show both the weighted averages and non-weighted averages. For the United Kingdom, Canada, and United States, there were too many missing values to calculate the invalid votes.

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Solijonov, 2016).

2009 Partirep Election Survey (Partirep, 2009) and in the 2019 EOS RepResent Election Survey (Walgrave et al., 2020).

In the literature, it is generally assumed that voter turnout rates would decrease by as much as 25% if the system of CV in Belgium were abolished, as this would be in line with the decline in the Netherlands after CV was abandoned in the early 1970s (Quintelier et al., 2011). However, the data (Table 1.3) show that this might be an underestimation. Even though the figures

TABLE 1.3 Percentage of respondents that would always turn out if compulsory voting were abolished

		2009 (%)	2019 (%)
Flanders	Federal	/	56.4
	Regional	44.6	56
Wallonia	Federal	/	52
	Regional	48.4	51.6

Source: Own calculations based on Partirep (2009) and Walgrave et al. (2020).

fluctuate over time, we find that about 45%–55% of the respondents to the surveys indicated that they would no longer show up. The results also show that there are only limited regional variations, and that there would be no differences between turnout for regional and federal elections. Interestingly, there is some variation over time. In 2019, we witness a bump of over 10 percentage points in Flanders compared to the 2009 elections. This would indicate that turnout could increase when the electoral stakes are high. After all, in Flanders the 2019 campaign was hard-fought and more polarizing than the 2009 campaign and led to the revival of the right-wing populist Vlaams Belang as Flanders’ second-largest party (Pilet, 2021).

Whereas the increasing voter turnout is a first-order effect, CV is also claimed to have a number of important second-order consequences. Increasing the number of people that show up to vote is normatively appealing but it is also claimed to reduce inequalities in electoral participation (Lijphart, 1997). In systems based on voluntary voting, a steady segment of the population (mostly lower socio-economic status groups) was found to systematically abstain from voting (Keaney & Rogers, 2006). CV forces those less privileged groups to make their party preferences known, and thereby reduces inequalities. CV is therefore claimed to have important egalitarian qualities.

Empirically, however, the assumption that CV increases equality is contested. For instance, in an internationally comparative study of 36 countries, Quintelier et al. (2011) find no positive effects of CV on electoral equality, and nor does the formal model developed by Jakee and Sun (2006). In contrast, Hooghe and Pelleriaux (1998, p. 421) argue that “abolishment of CV would lead to more inequality in political participation”. Our data support this argument. As Table 1.4 shows, inequality would increase if voting were no longer compulsory. Abolishing CV in Belgium would strengthen the political say of those who already have a political say. Especially the effects of education are strong and significant: over both elections, we find that lower educated citizens would be significantly less likely than higher educated citizens to turn out to vote. In addition, we find significant gender effects with women being less likely to turn out than men, and some age effects, with younger generations

TABLE 1.4 Percentage of respondents per sociodemographic group that would always turn out for the regional elections if compulsory voting were abolished by region

		2009		2019	
		Flanders	Wallonia	Flanders	Wallonia
Gender	Male	48.0	49.1	59.9	55.4
	Female	41.1**	47.9 (ns)	51.6***	48.8*
Education	Low	32.0	39.5	46.9	30.5
	Middle	41.5	46.4	49.0	47.2
	High	60.1***	61.5***	64.9***	60.7***
Age	18–34	39.1	44.7	47.6	47.4
	35–55	47.2	48.1	49.6	49.8
	55+	45.7 (ns)	51.5 (ns)	64.3***	58.8**

Sign.: ***p = 0.001; **p = 0.01; *p = 0.05.

Source: Own calculations based on Partirep (2009) and Walgrave et al. (2020).

taking up their voting rights less often than older generations in 2019. The paradox of abolishing CV would thus be that everyone would be given the equal right and liberty to cast their vote but only the politically advantaged would take up that right.

Another potential consequence that has drawn considerable interest is whether CV has so-called directional or partisan effects. Some parties are assumed to have an electorate that is more prone to not go voting, so that non-participation always has ideological ramifications. Some parties have a much weaker electoral support and under voluntary voting systems, they would get significantly fewer votes. CV therefore has partisan effects: some parties benefit greatly from CV because their electorate is forced to come and vote. Empirical evidence on this issue, however, points in the other direction and states that the effect of CV would be negligible (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998, p. 423).

A competing hypothesis is not that CV benefits certain parties but rather that CV leads to random voting. CV forces people who would otherwise abstain to go to the ballot, but the compulsion does not force them to cast a well-considered vote. They will thus vote based on coincidence rather than conviction, and this has several negative consequences. First is the increasing number of ‘donkey ballots’, where those that are high on the ballot lists have a better chance of being elected (Keaney & Rogers, 2006). Second, when voting occurs randomly, the consistent link between having certain political preferences and choosing the best party is lost (Selb & Lachat, 2009). If people are forced to vote without the willingness to get informed, they will choose randomly, and their political preferences will be inconsistent with their party choice. As such, voting would be reduced to empty ritual rather than the strengthening of democracy, which it originally envisaged. And finally, when CV leads to random voting by politically disinterested citizens, the

TABLE 1.5 Difference in electoral outcome for each political party in the 2009 and the 2019 election (Flanders)

	2009			2019					
	Regional elections			Federal elections			Regional elections		
	With CV	Without CV	Diff. ^a	With CV	Without CV	Diff.	With CV	Without CV	Diff.
N-VA	16.6	20.5	3.9	26.3	30.7	4.4	26.5	31.9	5.4
CD&V	28.1	28.2	0.1	10.2	11.3	1.1	10.4	11.3	0.9
Open VLD	12.1	12.2	0.1	8.7	8.3	−0.4	8.3	8.2	−0.1
sp.a	15.2	17.7	2.5	10.5	10.9	0.4	10.4	10.5	0.1
Groen	5.5	7.2	1.7	8.8	10.6	1.8	8.7	10.2	1.5
Vlaams Belang	7.4	5	−2.4	19.9	17.3	−2.6	20.2	17.2	−3
PVDA	0.6	0.5	−0.1	6.8	7.7	0.9	6.7	7.5	0.8
LDD	5.6	3.6	−2						
SLP	0.9	1.2	0.3						
Blanc/ invalid/ other	8	4	−4	8.7	3.2	−5.5	8.8	3.2	−5.6
Total	100	100.1		99.9	100		100	100	

^aDiff. indicates the number of percentage points a party would lose (negative score) or gain (positive score) from abolishing CV.

representative claims of the system would be undermined. Since the outcomes of the elections do not necessarily represent the preferences of the voters, government cannot claim to represent the will of the population, which once again leads to a lack of input legitimacy.

The results in [Tables 1.5](#) and [1.6](#) support the assumption that the abolition of CV would lead to partisan effects. A first finding is that many of the respondents who voted blanc or invalid would stay at home. These are usually the politically uninterested and cynical voters, and especially in 2019, we witness strong effects with over two-thirds of the blanc voters dropping out. Most strikingly, in Wallonia in 2019, the vote share of blanc/invalid voters would drop by more than 12 percentage points, which could lead to a fundamental redistribution of seats in parliament. This suggests that – in line with political discourse on CV since the 1990s – dropout would be highest among the politically disengaged.

A second finding is that the overall partisan effects are concentrated in a limited number of parties. Based on the survey results, we can conclude that in Flanders the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA would stand to gain from abolition of CV, and that the right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang would lose some support. The results are sufficiently strong to cause a redistribution

TABLE 1.6 Difference in electoral outcome for each political party in the 2009 and the 2019 election (Wallonia)

	2009			2019					
	Regional elections			Federal elections			Regional elections		
	<i>With CV</i>	<i>Without CV</i>	<i>Diff.^a</i>	<i>With CV</i>	<i>Without CV</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>With CV</i>	<i>Without CV</i>	<i>Diff.</i>
PS	26.5	24.2	-2.3	19.9	23.2	3.3	19.4	22.3	2.9
MR	19.1	19.1	0	17.2	22	4.8	16.9	21.2	4.3
cdH	14.1	19.4	5.3	6.3	8.5	2.2	7.3	10	2.7
Ecolo	24.7	28.2	3.5	15.4	18.7	3.3	15.1	19	3.9
FDF/ DéFI			0	6	6.9	0.9	5.2	5.7	0.5
PP			0	4.2	3	-1.2	3.9	3.1	-0.8
PTB-GO	0.4	0.3	-0.1	13.3	12.3	-1	13.8	12.7	-1.1
FN	0.9	0.5	-0.4						
Blanc/ invalid/ other	14.3	8.3	-6	17.9	5.3	-12.6	18.3	5.9	-12.4
Total	100	100		100.2	99.9		99.9	99.9	

^aDiff. indicates the number of percentage points a party would lose (negative score) or gain (positive score) from abolishing CV.

of seats in parliament. The effect on the other parties is fairly limited. This is somewhat surprising as the party that is ideologically most in favor of abolishing CV (Open VLD) is also the one that stands to gain the least from it. In Wallonia, the effects are more outspoken with the main contenders, i.e. the socialist Parti Socialiste (PS), the liberal MR, and the green Ecolo being the most to gain or lose from the abolition of CV. Abolishing CV would even bring these parties closer together and would thus intensify electoral competition for political market leadership.

A third conclusion we can draw from the tables is that there are no differences in directional effects between the federal and regional levels. Parties that would lose or gain in the federal elections would lose or gain approximately the same at the regional level. This could indicate that the regional level is not considered to be a second-order election, but it could also be due to the fact that the electoral cycles have been coinciding in Belgium since 2014. In other words, if voters turn up to cast a vote for the regional elections, they might as well stay and vote for the federal elections.

The final conclusion from the tables is that electoral and campaign contexts matter. In line with the results from [Table 1.3](#), we find that the partisan effects are more outspoken in the fierce 2019 election compared to the 2009 elections.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to demonstrate how ‘exceptional’ CV is in Belgium. Not only was Belgium the first country to adopt CV for national elections, it is also one of the few countries to have retained the system. Moreover, what this chapter has also highlighted is that party political polarization on the issue remains fierce: very few parties have switched sides over time, and most of them remain committed to supporting or abolishing the system. Also, the arguments that these parties use have barely changed over time. Proponents argue that CV boosts legitimacy, increases egalitarian decision-making, and symbolizes citizens’ civic duty to go and vote. Opponents argue that CV limits individuals’ freedom and that the system is difficult to enforce in a meaningful manner. Whatever the theoretical arguments may be, our analysis has shown that CV actually does make a difference: even though CV is hardly enforced in practice, voter turnout remains at a very high level.

Two other interesting findings stand out from our analysis. On the one hand, we found that the arguments why CV was adopted in the first place, as a buffer against the electoral gain of ‘extremist parties’, are the same arguments that are used to abolish it. After all, CV was adopted in 1893 to limit the electoral strength of the ‘radical’ socialist party, but nowadays, we increasingly hear that CV should be abolished because it would reduce the electoral power of radical right-wing parties. Radical right-wing parties are thought to attract more politically disinterested voters, who would be less likely to turn out. However, our results show that the directional effects, especially for radical right-wing parties, would be fairly limited. On the other hand, our analysis has shown that abolishing CV will have a large effect in terms of voter inequality (and input legitimacy). Abolishing the system would benefit male, higher educated, and older voters.

The question what will happen to CV in the foreseeable future remains difficult to assess. At present (2021), the debate is especially salient in Flanders. In Wallonia, a consensus seems to have crystallized in favor of CV which has silenced the debate in the region. Ecolo and PS are the only parties taking an explicit position in their manifestos. Additionally, no Walloon party made any proposal to maintain or abolish CV in any Parliament. On the Flemish side, the debate has been much more active, with a total of 19 law proposals or constitutional revisions proposed by the liberal Open VLD and Flemish-nationalist N-VA in the Federal Parliament since 2000. Moreover, both parties successfully negotiated the abolishment of CV for local and provincial elections in Flanders into the 2019 government agreement with CD&V. Even though the issue of CV has been on the political agenda ever since the 1890s, it thus remains salient and fundamentally contested to this very day.

Note

- 1 La Libre, August 25, 2016, Voici pourquoi le CDH ‘refuse catégoriquement’ la fin du vote obligatoire.

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