

Where do Distrusting Voters Go to if there is no Exit or Voice Option?

The Impact of Political Trust on Party Choice in the Belgian Regional Elections of June, 2009

Paper presented at the
5th ECPR General Conference

Potsdam, 10-12 September 2009

Marc Hooghe, Professor of Political Science, KU Leuven[°]
(Marc.Hooghe@soc.kuleuven.be)

Sofie Mariën, Research Fellow, KU Leuven[°]
(Sofie.Mariën@soc.kuleuven.be)

Teun Pauwels, Research Fellow, Université Libre de Bruxelles[°]
(tepauwel@ulb.ac.be)

Abstract

It has been suggested that political trust will lead to a decline in voter turnout and a willingness to vote for challenger or populist parties. Most of the empirical research on this relation, however, has been conducted in the US or Canada. In this paper we investigate the relationship between political (dis)trust and party choice, based on the Belgian Election Study 2009. Belgium offers an interesting case because compulsory voting (with an accompanying turnout rate of 90.4 per cent) effectively means that distrust cannot have an impact on turnout. Nevertheless, distrusting voters are significantly more inclined to cast an invalid vote. Second, it was shown that distrust is positively associated with an electoral preference for extreme right (Vlaams Belang) and populist (List De Decker) parties. Third, in party systems where no populist or extremist challenger is viable (i.e., the French speaking region of Belgium), political trust does not have a significant effect on party preferences, even in conditions of a high level of distrust. We conclude that the electoral effects of political distrust are strongly dependent on the electoral system, the party system and the supply on the electoral protest market.

[°] All the authors belong to the PartiRep (Participation and Representation) Consortium of the universities of Brussels, Leuven, Antwerp, Leiden and Bruxelles (www.partirep.eu). The consortium is generously funded by the Belgian Federal Science Agency.

1. Introduction

Empirical research has shown quite convincingly that (a lack of) political trust has strong effects on electoral behaviour. Low levels of political trust indicate that citizens, on average, have a negative perception of the way the political system in their country functions. This dissatisfaction will also have an effect on the way citizens behave when they have the opportunity to voice their political preferences.

A first possibility is that dissatisfied citizens will use the *exit* option, i.e., that they will no longer participate at all. There is a positive relation between political trust and voter turnout, and at least in the United States, the structural decline in political trust has been invoked as one of the main reasons for the observed decline in voter turnout (Shaffer 1981, see however Hetherington 1999). A second option is that dissatisfied voters will *voice* their discontent by voting for populist or extremist parties. Low levels of political trust indeed have been identified as a main voting motive for extreme right or populist parties (Billiet & De Witte 1995; Pauwels 2010). A third possibility is that they will opt for loyalty nevertheless, by supporting a major political party, due to a lack of viable exit or voice options (Hirschman 1970).

Research on the relation between political trust and voter behaviour has become all the more salient since survey research indicates that political trust levels tend to decline in Western democracies, although it has to be noticed that this downward trend has not been documented for all countries (Newton 2007; Bovens & Wille 2008). Simultaneously populist parties have gained electoral appeal and it seems straightforward to assume a causal relation between both phenomena (Taggart 1995). A distrusting attitude toward the political system as a whole has been identified as a powerful mental frame allowing us to explain the electoral success of extreme right parties (Rydgren 2007). Because of these electoral consequences, low levels of political trust could pose a threat to the political status quo in these societies. For the United States it has been demonstrated that distrust is associated with a propensity to vote for contenders (Hetherington 1999) and in multi-party systems too, distrust has been linked to an electoral preference for reformist parties (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005). Studies on the electoral consequences of political distrust in a European

context, however, are thus far rather rare (Grönlund & Setälä 2007). In this paper we report on the consequences of political distrust on electoral behaviour in Belgium.

The Belgian case offers a number of interesting theoretical perspectives. First of all, the country has no shortage of extremist and populist parties. During the 2004 regional elections, the extreme right Vlaams Belang emerged as the second largest party in the Flemish region, with 24.2 per cent of the vote, rendering it one of the most successful extreme right parties in Europe. During the June 2009 regional elections, the new populist 'List De Decker' gained entrance into the regional Flemish Parliament with 7.6 per cent of the vote. Second, it has to be remembered that Belgium has a system of compulsory voting, leading to a turnout of 90.4 per cent of all enfranchised voters during the June 2009 elections. This implies that the exit option for dissatisfied voters is not available and there is some anecdotal evidence that this might be one of the elements leading to the high percentage of protest votes in the country. Third, the relation between dissatisfaction and party preference is relatively straightforward in two party systems, but the relation is more difficult to assess in multiparty systems. Belgium in this regard too, offers an exceptional case, with an effective number of parties of 8.54. Given the wide array of available political parties, it remains to be ascertained whether Belgian voters indeed can make clear voting decisions based on their level of political trust.

In this paper we investigate the relation between political trust and party preference during the regional elections that were held simultaneously with the European elections in Belgium, on June 7, 2009. The analysis will be based on the results of the Belgian Election Study, that was conducted by the inter-university research consortium PartiRep (PartiRep 2009). The survey was conducted both in the Dutch as in the French region of Belgium, and in this regard it has to be remembered that Belgium has two completely segregated party systems as the Dutch and the French political parties do not compete in the same territory (Deschouwer 2009).

We first review the literature on the relation between political trust and party preference, before we present the Belgian case more fully. Subsequently we present data and methods and the statistical analysis. We close with some observations about the theoretical relevance of our findings.

2. Political Trust and Party Preference

Political trust is routinely considered as an essential component of the civic culture that according to Almond and Verba (1963) is necessary to ensure the stability of democratic political systems. Political trust offers a form of diffuse support the political systems receives from its environment (Easton 1965). In recent years, the topic has attracted renewed attention in the scholarly literature as a reaction to various studies documenting a structural decline of political trust levels, most notably in the United States. A number of authors have argued that the loss of trust does not remain limited to a more critical attitude toward politicians, but also extends toward a loss of trust in basic democratic institutions and procedures (Dalton 2004; Stolle & Hooghe 2005). The dominant view in the current scholarly debate is that low levels of political trust should be considered as a major reason for concern. Partly it is feared that low levels of political trust reflect a general alienation from citizens and the political system, but it can also be assumed that low levels of trust have direct electoral consequences.

First, a lack of political trust can lead to a decline in voter turnout. If the object of distrust remains limited to current office holders, this might serve as incentive to go out and vote as voters will be inclined to replace current politicians with their challengers. In this manner, voting opposition parties into power in the long run might lead to a renewed confidence in the political system among the population (Miller & Listhaug 1990). However, if distrust extends to the basic rules of democracy itself, there is less reason to go out and vote since in that case citizens can no longer assume that their vote will make a difference. Especially with regard to the electoral process itself, Alvarez et al. (2008) have demonstrated that citizens are less motivated to vote if they do not believe the electoral procedure will be administered in a fair manner (Birch 2005). While it might be true that political distrust will be associated with various non-conventional forms of political participation (Li & Marsh 2008), it is most likely to deter electoral participation. Low levels of electoral turnout, in the long run, might have a negative effect on the legitimacy of the democratic process.

Second, if distrusting voters go out to vote, they are less likely to vote for the incumbent candidate. In a two party system like the United States, the voice strategy

might even go further by preferring a third party candidate, even if that candidate does not have the slightest chance of being elected. As Hetherington (1999, 318) suggest: “as trust decreases, the probability of a vote for the incumbent and the other major party *both* drop significantly, while support for the third party increases. These results suggest that the distrustful favour candidates who challenge existing political norms”. While in the literature, it is often assumed that two party systems allow for a clear alternation in power positions, in the eyes of the distrustful apparently the two major parties are seen as belonging to the same political establishment.

The question however, is what kind of mechanism we can expect in multi party systems. While in two party systems, it is relatively easy for the voter to assign blame to the ruling party, the endemic structure of coalitions in a multiparty system renders it much more difficult to identify who exactly is responsible for the state of affairs in a political system. Bélanger and Nadeau (2005) have tried to identify the effects of political trust in a multiparty setting, based on Canadian election studies from the 1980s and 1990s. Their first conclusion is that distrusting voters are more likely not to participate in elections at all. Second, they are more strongly inclined to vote for a third party than for a traditional opposition party. Apparently, opposition parties too are strongly associated with the ‘normal’ function of the political system, so voters are more strongly attracted to anti-system parties, promising a clear break with the ruling political elite. Bélanger and Nadeau (2005, 127): “Put differently, distrust would act as a motivating factor drawing people towards new party alternatives and away from traditional old-line parties”. It is interesting to note, however, that the rise of the Reform party in Canadian politics did not reduce the effect of trust on turnout. Distrusting citizens in Canada continued to refrain from participation in elections, but additionally, when they did go out to vote, they could express their distrust by a vote for the Reform Party, or, in some cases also by a vote for the Bloc Québécois. These findings too, might however, be tied to the specific Canadian context as the campaign of the Reform party in 1993 provided voters with ample arguments to believe in the possibility for a strong and structural reform of the Canadian political system. For the European context, as far as we know, the relation between political trust and electoral preference has never been studied in a systematic manner.

The Belgian case offers an ideal setting to test a number of hypotheses rising from the current literature. First, the question of voter turnout. The most straightforward assumption is indeed that distrusting citizens will not vote at all. The Belgian system of compulsory voting, however, blocks that exit option¹. Previous research has indicated that in a system of compulsory voting, alienation from the political system might lead to deliberately casting an invalid vote (Power & Garand 2007). Although the percentage of voters casting an invalid vote has remained remarkably stable in Belgium, this might still serve as an exit option in the Belgian electoral system². Second, extremist and populist voting has been quite successful in Belgium. Therefore, there is sufficient variance in order to assess the impact of political trust on protest voting. Furthermore, Belgium offers an ideal case since basically the country has two different party systems. Due to electoral legislation, Dutch speaking voters in the Northern part of the country can only vote for Dutch speaking political parties, while in the Southern part of the country, only French speaking parties compete (Deschouwer 2009). While in the Dutch speaking part of the country extreme right (Vlaams Belang) and populist parties (List De Decker) are active, this is not the case for the French speaking part of the country. Depending on where exactly they live, Belgian voters are thus confronted with different supplies with regard to protest voting, and it remains to be ascertained what impact these different party systems have. Especially the Walloon case is extremely relevant: voters in this region do not have an exit option (since there is a system of compulsory voting) and they do not have a voice option (since there is not an extremist or populist party in the region), so the question arises what will be the consequences of political distrust in this specific region.

Given the specific characteristics of the Belgium, the Belgian case offers an ideal case study to investigate our main hypotheses:

¹. It is interesting to note in this regard that, although compulsory voting is not enforced in Belgium, in practice turnout rates remain stable above 90 per cent. Some legislative proposals to abolish compulsory voting never reached the plenary session of Belgian Parliament (Birch 2009).

². Various electoral districts in Belgium have changed from paper and pencil voting to electronic voting. In the electronic voting procedure, invalid voting has been rendered impossible, but the system explicitly asks voters if they want to cast a blank vote. Evidence suggests that in those districts where electronic voting is practised, invalid votes disappear but blank votes rise substantially.

Hyp 1: In a political system with compulsory voting, political distrust will be positively associated with blank and invalid voting.

Hyp 2: Political distrust will have a positive effect on voting for a populist or extremist party

Hyp 3: In the absence of populist or extremist parties, distrust will have no effect on party choice.

These hypotheses will be tested, using the results of the Belgian Election Study that was conducted on the occasion of the regional elections of June 2009.

3. The Belgian Case

The Belgian case is rather particular because of the two segregated party systems that exist within one country. Since the early 1960s, the country has developed from a centralized into a fully federal state (Van Haute and Pilet, 2006). One of the indirect consequences of this structural reform has been that all national parties have split up according to linguistic lines (Deschouwer, 1993). Between 1969 and 1978, the unitary Christian democratic, liberal and socialist parties all split in separate Flemish and Francophone parties. Since 1993 Belgium has become officially a federal state in which the regions and communities have their own institutions. The result of this process is that there exist only Flemish and Francophone parties in Belgium nowadays and that these parties compete in two separated party systems (except for the bilingual region of Brussels).

As a consequence of the segregated party systems, the electoral strength of different party families is very diverse in the Flemish and Walloon region. Particularly the Christian democrats and the populist radical right are much more successful in the north of the country. In the south of the country, the socialist PS traditionally is the strongest party and the Walloon region also has a successful green party. The largest difference within the country can be found when comparing the strength of populist parties. While the populist radical right VB and the neoliberal populist LDD gained

together more than 25 per cent of the votes at the Federal elections in 2007 in Flanders, the populist radical right FN only obtained 2 per cent in Wallonia. This large difference can be mainly attributed to supply-side factors (ideology, leadership and organizational strength). While voters in the Flemish region have access to both the Vlaams Belang and the LDD, voters in the Walloon region only have access to the Front National.

Vlaams Belang

The Vlaams Belang (VB) emerged in 1978, as an offspring of the Flemish nationalist movement. In the first few years it remained a small fringe party dominated by its founder Karel Dillen. The principal goal of the party was to create an independent Flanders. Near the end of the 1980s, the party gained in organizational strength, adapted its ideological profile, and started to achieve its first electoral successes. The demand for an independent Flemish republic became accompanied with a call for an ethnically homogeneous Flanders. It was argued that only Flemish people should have the right to live in Flanders and that ethnic minorities should not be endowed with too many rights. The party even made an operational plan for the repatriation of ethnic minorities to their country of origin. Xenophobia, mainly aimed at Muslims, became central to the ideology of the VB³. Other issues that are regularly addressed are law and order, conservative ethics and populism (Mudde, 2000). Consequently, the VB could be labelled a textbook example of the populist radical right. The party achieved one electoral victory after the other in the 1990s and it received 24 per cent of the votes in the 2004 regional elections. Despite these electoral successes, the VB remains to date isolated since all democratic parties in Belgium refuse to co-operate with the VB at all levels of government.

There is little doubt that the VB is a populist party (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). The party depicts “the people” as a homogeneous and virtuous group of Flemings who have common sense, work hard, pay taxes but are politically quiescent. In addition, it is argued that there exists a common will among the Flemings. This general will of the ‘silent’ majority is neglected, however, by the “corrupt elite”. The VB equals the

³. In November 2004, the party changed its name from “Vlaams Blok” (Flemish Bloc) to “Vlaams Belang” (the Flemish Interest), following a verdict by the highest court in Belgium, confirming an earlier conviction on grounds of racism.

Belgian political system to terms such as political mafia, political banditry, corruption, nepotism and betrayal. This antagonism between the pure people versus the corrupt elite is sometimes reinforced by conspiracy theories. The party claims that the media, the monarchy, intellectuals and political parties collaborate to denounce the VB and hence the voters it represents. One of the favourite targets of the VB is the refusal of the democratic parties to co-operate with the VB, arguing that it is undemocratic to neglect the “voice of the people”. Observers, however, also point out that the party carefully cherishes this underdog role. The party favours direct democracy to remove power from the establishment and to give it back to the people.

List Dedecker (LDD)

LDD was established by businessman Jean-Marie Dedecker in January 2007. Dedecker was the formal national judo coach of Belgium and he joined the liberal party VLD in 1999. As he openly criticized his party, however, he got expelled in 2006. After a short but unsuccessful stay with the Flemish nationalist party N-VA he decided to establish his own party. Contrary to expectations, LDD managed to pass the electoral threshold of five per cent and received 6.4 per cent of the votes in Flanders at the 2007 elections. This result was confirmed at the 2009 elections when the party obtained 7.6 per cent of the votes. LDD could be most accurately described as a neoliberal populist party (Pauwels, 2010). The main goal of LDD is to put a halt to excessive state intervention in the economy and private sphere. In accordance with the principles of neoliberalism, the party claims that the individual should be left unrestrained and that the government should only provide the most essential services. The LDD manifesto associates government with a burdensome bureaucracy, overregulation, inefficiency, abuse of social insurance and financial transfers from Flanders to Wallonia. Solutions are to be found in a smaller government, privatization, a flat tax, and limited unemployment benefits. This ‘thick’ neoliberal ideology is combined with a ‘thin’ ideology of populism, although the populism of LDD is somewhat milder than that of the VB.

The Belgian political system is presented by Dedecker as corrupt, clientelistic and as a particracy, functioning by means of compromises between party headquarters without any say of citizens. As he challenges the establishment (for instance by hiring a private detective to investigate potential fraud by a VLD politician), Dedecker claims

that the traditional parties conspire against him to maintain their power. While denouncing the establishment, Dedecker sees himself as the representative of the common people, who can no longer identify themselves with highly educated politicians (*Knack*, 4 February 2009). To contrast this, the party manifesto mentions that LDD “will always take into account what lives among the Flemish population”. Similar to the VB, the party favours citizen initiatives, enabling citizens to exercise unmediated power while weakening the power of parties.

Front National

The only populist party with parliamentary representation in Wallonia is the populist radical right Front National. The party became established in 1985 by Daniel Féret. The main goal of Féret was to profit from the wide attention that the French FN of Le Pen received after its electoral victory at the European elections of 1984. The Belgian FN even copied the symbols, labels and the style of its example (Coffé, 2005). Unlike the VB, the FN could not rely on much organizational resources in the early years. The erratic leadership by Féret also prevented serious organizational expansion (Delwit, 2009). The ideological program of the FN is less developed as well. Nonetheless, it is clear that the fight against immigration is the main priority of the party. Similarly to the VB, the FN also insists on harsher punishments for criminals, and adheres to conservative values. Populism can be found in the party’s ideology as well. The FN claims to represent the people in contrast to the traditional parties: “Les politiciens veulent sauver leur peau! Le Front National veut sauver les gens!” (quoted from Coffé, 2005: 67). In line with the populist ideology, FN wants to organize referendums to give the “ordinary people” a voice again.

From this overview we can conclude that the supply of populist parties in Flanders is both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the one in Wallonia. The VB is known as one of the best organized populist radical right parties in Europe (Lubbers et al., 2002) and faces now competition from a new populist party LDD, which focuses more on economic issues. In Wallonia, the populist radical right suffers from an erratic leadership, weak institutionalization and underdeveloped propaganda machinery. Interestingly, Coffé (2005) has found that populist radical right values (negative sentiments against immigrants, authoritarianism, and political alienation) were (slightly) higher in Wallonia than in Flanders (relying on election studies from

the 1990s), which means these attitudes could not explain the electoral success of the VB and the weakness of the FN. While in the Walloon region, the presence of ethnocentrism, authoritarianism and political distrust is just as strong as in the Flemish region the party system offers hardly any opportunities to express these attitudes. This again leads to the question in what way voters in the Walloon region could express their alienation from the political system?

4. Data and Methods

This analysis will be based on the results of the Belgian Election Study. The Belgian Election Study (BES 2009) was conducted on the occasion of the Belgian regional elections of June 7, 2009. Simultaneously with the elections for the European Parliament, regional elections were held in Belgium for the parliaments for the autonomous regions in the country (Flemish region, Walloon region, Brussels bilingual region and German speaking Community in the east of the country). Since Belgium is a federal country these regional parliaments, and the regional governments that result from them, have a substantial authority (Deschouwer 2009).

A special feature of the BES 2009 was that it is a panel study, with two waves of pre-electoral questions and one wave of post-electoral questions. This research design allows us to investigate electoral behaviour among the Belgian population in the most reliable manner⁴. During the first wave (February-May 2009), 2,331 face to face interviews were conducted with randomly drawn respondents. The response rate was 48.3 per cent. This is slightly lower than is customary in Belgium, but for ethical reasons potential respondents were up front informed about the fact that participation preferably entailed a participation in all three waves of the BES. This informed consent procedure might have reduced the willingness to participate in the Belgian Election Study.

⁴ For budgetary reasons, the Belgian Election Study was conducted only in the Flemish and the Walloon regions. The Brussels bilingual region (10 per cent of the population) and the German speaking community (less than 1 per cent of the population) were excluded. Given the fact that 90 per cent of the population was covered, we can still be confident that the BES 2009 is representative for Belgium as a whole.

Subsequently, 1,845 respondents (79.2 per cent) participated in the second wave of BES 2009 that was conducted in the two weeks preceding the elections of June, 7, 2009.

Finally, in the weeks following the elections, respondents were contacted again to ascertain whether their responses during the first two waves actually responded to their voting behaviour on June, 7. In the current analysis, we will limit ourselves to the first two waves of the PartiRep Election Study.

More specifically:

- political trust was measured during the first wave (February-May 2009). For most respondents this attitude was measured two or three months prior to the elections, thus ensuring that the measurement of political trust was not influenced by campaign effects
- party preference was measured during the second wave, enabling us a measurement that was as close to the election day as possible.

In this survey, political trust was operationalized by asking respondents how much trust they have in the following institutions:

- political parties
- regional government (Flemish or Walloon region)
- regional parliament
- Belgian government
- Belgian parliament
- politicians

For all these institutions, respondents could indicate their levels on a scale, ranging from 0 to 10. A factor analysis indicated that these six items form a one-dimensional and solid scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of .91 (Table 1). It will be observed that both in the French as in the Dutch speaking sample trust in the regional government and parliament is higher than in the federal institutions, although this difference is more outspoken among the Dutch language respondents. The fact that among the Dutch speaking respondents the gap between regional and federal institutions is larger than among the French speaking respondents is also responsible for the slightly weaker internal coherence of the scale among the Dutch language respondents.

It is quite interesting to note here that the average trust level in the Walloon region is lower than it is in the Flemish region. Despite the fact that populist parties are successful in the Flemish region and absent in the Walloon region, distrust actually seems to be stronger in the Walloon region.

Table 1. Political Trust in Belgium

	Dutch language	French language	All respondents
Political parties	4.66	4.25	4.46
Regional Government	6.00	5.30	5.65
Regional Parliament	5.83	5.12	5.48
Belgian Government	5.00	5.17	5.08
Belgian Parliament	5.04	5.12	5.08
Politicians	4.64	4.66	4.65
Average score	5.20	4.94	5.07
Cronbach's α	0.897	0.921	0.908
Eigen value	3.960	4.303	4.106
Explained Variance	66.0	71.7	68.4

Source: Belgian Election Study (2009) Wave 1, n= 2,151. Entries are scale averages.

Data are weighted by region to correct for slight differences in age and gender distributions.

In general, we can be confident that the Belgian Election Study is quite representative for the general population. If we compare the results of the BES with those of the European Social Survey (ESS) 2006, it is quite striking that the rank order is identical, with Parliament receiving the highest trust scores, while there is less trust in politicians and political parties. The comparison with ESS also demonstrates that it does make sense to make a distinction between the various institutions. In the ESS, respondents were simply questioned about their trust in 'Parliament', without providing any information about the specific level. ESS results showed that political trust was slightly lower in the French speaking part of Belgian than it was in the Dutch speaking part of the country. The BES figures, however, demonstrate that Dutch speaking respondents actually have *less* trust in the federal institutions than the French speaking citizens of Belgium. The higher average score of the Dutch speaking respondents is fully explained by the fact that Dutch speaking respondents have much more trust in the regional institutions than they have in the federal institutions.

Given the strong one-dimensionality of the political trust scale, it is safe to use a simple additive scale, ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 60 (very high trust in all six institutions).

While the question on political trust was only included in the first wave of the BES, voting intentions were questioned both in the first as in the second wave of the survey. In Tables 2 and 3 we list a comparison between the results from both waves and the official election results of June 7, 2009⁵. As can be noticed, the BES results are roughly in line with election results, with deviations that show up routinely in this kind of research. E.g., in the Walloon region the Green party is overrepresented since the specific demographics of the Green voters usually imply that these voters are more easily included in this kind of electoral research. In general, the results of wave 2 are more closely in line with the election results than wave 1, especially in the Flemish region. Therefore, voting preference as expressed in wave 2 of the BES will be used as the dependent variable in this analysis⁶.

Table 2. Electoral results, wave 1 and wave 2 of Belgian Election Study (Flemish Region)

% of vote	Election results	BES Wave 1	BES Wave 2
CD&V (Christian-Democrats)	22.9	27.3	24.5
NV-A (Nationalists)	13.1	8.4	11.7
SP.A (Socialists)	15.3	18.9	15.9
Open VLD (Liberals)	15.0	17.9	16.6
VB (Extreme Right)	15.3	8.8	7.7
Groen! (Greens)	6.8	5.9	7.2
LDD (Populist)	7.6	9.6	9.1
PVDA+ (Communist)	1.0	0.5	0.4
SLP (Leftist Liberal)	1.1	0.4	1.0
Other	1.8	2.3	0.8
Total	100	100.0	100.0
		(n=1,116)	(n=949)

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 and official election results. Data are weighted by region according to age and gender

⁵. Belgium is divided in separate electoral district per region. Basically, voters can only vote for the parties using their own language.

⁶. In a separate analysis, voting preference in wave 1 was used as a dependent variable. This did not lead to substantially different results but in general the explained variance of the models was slightly lower.

Table 3. Electoral results, wave 1 and wave 2 of Belgian Election Study (Wallonia Region)

Wallonia % of vote	Election results	BES Wave 1	BES Wave 2
PS (Socialists)	32.8	34.5	24.2
MR (Liberals)	23.4	23.3	21.7
CDH (Christian Democrats)	16.1	14.7	16.5
ECOLO (Greens)	18.5	23.1	26.9
FN (Extreme Right)	2.9	1.4	1.2
PTB (Communists)	1.2	0.5	0.7
Other	5.0	2.5	1.2
Total	100.0	100.0 (n=963)	100.0 (n=797)

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 and official election results. Data are weighted by region according to age and gender.

Further, the most important socio-demographic control variables were added namely age, education level and gender. These were obtained in wave 1 of the Belgian Election Study. We also added a variable measuring whether voters would turnout when voting was no longer compulsory. The question was phrased: ‘If voting for parliament would no longer be compulsory in Belgium, would you always, most of the time, some of the time or never turn out to vote?’ A dummy was made and those that would never turn out were given a value of 1, all others received 0.

As the aim of the present analysis is to explain voting behaviour, we will use a multinomial logistic regression, predicting the likelihood that the respondent will vote for a specific party.

What if the exit option were available?

First we will investigate whether distrusting respondents would indeed abstain from voting in the first place, if compulsory voting was abolished in Belgium, opening up the ‘exit’ option. Table 4 shows that turnout would drop by approximately a fourth if compulsory voting would be abolished: a quarter of all respondents claim they would never bother to vote anymore if compulsory voting in the country was abolished. In this regard, there is hardly any difference between both regions of the country. It can be observed that among the least trusting, 39 per cent of all respondents indicate that

they would never go and out and vote anymore, while this is just 12 per cent among the most trusting part of the test population. Apparently those who are not trusting toward to the political system indeed feel inclined to go for the exit option, but they refrain from doing so by the system of compulsory voting in Belgium. The fact that the courts hardly ever prosecute non-voters does not imply that compulsory voting would no longer have a deterrent effect on voters.⁷ These first results therefore already suggest that the legal obligation to vote by itself is sufficient to close off the exit option for most voters.

Table 4. Percentage that would never vote if compulsory voting were abolished

	Belgium	Flanders	Wallonia
According to political trust			
Low political trust	38.5	44.0	33.5
Median political trust	23.1	24.0	21.4
High political trust	12.0	10.4	13.9
Total percentage in population			
%	25.3	26.2	24.4
n	453	254	199

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 (wave 2). *Notes:* the political trust variable is divided in three equal categories with low political trust=0-29; Median political trust 30-35 and High political trust : 35-60.

Results for Party Preference

We are mainly interested, however, in the effect that political trust might have on party choice: will dissatisfied voters *voice* their grievance by voting for a populist or extremist party? In order to answer our research question, we estimated a multinomial logit model. This analysis is an extension of the binary logit models in multiple-choice settings. The results of the multinomial logit analysis must be interpreted as the odds to choose one party over the other party with values higher than ‘1’ indicating that increases in the independent variables increase the odds of choosing one party over the reference category. As reference category we have chosen the main incumbent party, namely the largest party in the coalition government leading the regional government, respectively the Christen Democratic party CD&V in Flanders and the Socialist party PS in Wallonia. Given the fact that Flanders and Wallonia offer

⁷ The fact that compulsory voting still has such a strong deterrent effect might partly be caused by some confusion among potential voters. While courts do no longer prosecute non-voters, they still prosecute the voters that are randomly assigned to ‘volunteer’ to man the polling stations. Citizens who fail to perform this citizenship duty are prosecuted, and this is well-publicized.

two different party systems, the analyses will be performed separately for both regions. Each time we start with a simple baseline model, before constructing a more elaborate model including all control variables.

Table 5. Effect of Political Trust on Partychoice in Flanders

Model 1	Probability of choosing party over CD&V (main incumbent party)						
	SP.a. (<i>Socialist party</i>)	Open VLD (<i>Liberal party</i>)	Vlaams belang (<i>Far right party</i>)	N-VA (<i>Regionalist party</i>)	LDD (<i>neoliberal populist</i>)	Groen! (<i>Green party</i>)	Blank /invalid
Political trust (Reference category: high)							
Low (0-29)	1.347ns (0.258)	1.306ns (0.251)	8.881*** (0.400)	2.455*** (0.270)	3.088*** (0.324)	1.438ns (0.347)	8.478*** (0.656)
Middle (30-35)	1.245ns (0.240)	1.107ns (0.238)	3.179*** (0.425)	0.994 (0.293)	2.452*** (0.315)	1.362ns (0.324)	1.363ns (0.830)
Pseudo-R ²	0.073						
Number of cases	930						

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 (wave 2) *Notes:* Entries are odds ratios. Baseline choice is the Christen Democratic party (CD&V) which is the largest party, leading the regional government. *Sign.:* * p<0.05, p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

Table 5 shows that in Flanders political trust has no effect on casting a vote for the different parties which make up the regional government (SP.a. or Open VLD) nor for the Flemish green opposition party (Groen!). In line with our first hypothesis (H1) it can be seen that distrust has a very strong effect on the likelihood that one will cast an invalid vote. However distrusting voters are just as likely to vote for the Vlaams Belang, while this is also the case, although to a lesser extent for the populist LDD and the nationalist N-VA party, thus confirming hypothesis 2.

In Table 6, control variables are added to this multinomial logistic regression, but most relations stay in place. Lowly educated voters are more likely to vote for the Vlaams Belang, while men have a stronger preference for LDD than women do. Those who would like to abstain from voting, either cast an invalid vote or they vote for LDD. In line with earlier research (Hooghe & Pelleriaux 1998), there is no significant relation between the willingness to vote and a preference for the Vlaams Belang.

If we take the willingness to vote into account, there is no significant relation anymore between political trust and invalid voting. This suggests that invalid voting is seen as

an exit option by the distrusting voters. If the most straightforward exit option, i.e., not to vote at all would be available in the Belgian legal system, this group would no longer do all the trouble to go out to vote and cast an invalid ballot. Controlling for the willingness to vote and the background variables, distrusting voters most likely will vote for Vlaams Belang, Flemish Nationalists or the populist LDD. In a multivariate model too, therefore, hypothesis 2 is confirmed for the Flemish case.

Table 6. Effect of Political Trust on Partychoice in Flanders (Full Model)

Probability of choosing party over CD&V (main incumbent party)							
	SP.a. (<i>Socialist party</i>)	Open VLD (<i>Liberal party</i>)	Vlaams belang (<i>Far right party</i>)	N-VA (<i>Regionalist party</i>)	LDD (<i>neoliberal populist</i>)	Groen! (<i>Green party</i>)	Blank /invalid
Political trust (Reference category: high)							
Low (0-29)	1.360ns (0.274)	1.345ns (0.269)	6.580*** (0.418)	3.377*** (0.289)	2.284* (0.348)	1.804ns (0.372)	3.608ns (0.707)
Middle (30-35)	1.285ns (0.246)	1.098ns (0.244)	2.817* (0.431)	1.073ns (0.299)	2.143* (0.325)	1.506ns (0.335)	0.861ns (0.854)
Age (Reference category: 55+)							
Young (18-35)	2.136** (0.282)	2.428** (0.263)	3.161** (0.355)	1.490ns (0.309)	2.846** (0.336)	5.590*** (0.401)	1.526ns (0.701)
Middle (36-54)	2.707*** (0.252)	1.754* (0.254)	2.443** (0.341)	1.470ns (0.280)	2.789** (0.314)	3.362*** (0.402)	3.025ns (0.571)
Education (Reference category: higher educated)							
Lower	1.044ns (0.292)	0.528* (0.294)	3.774** (0.460)	0.306*** (0.353)	1.177ns (0.395)	0.453ns (0.449)	1.174ns (0.892)
Middle	0.918ns (0.251)	0.653ns (0.242)	2.431* (0.437)	0.509* (0.269)	1.874ns (0.333)	0.713ns (0.319)	2.343ns (0.809)
Gender (male)	0.865ns (0.210)	1.149ns (0.207)	1.145ns (0.280)	1.872** (0.241)	2.215** (0.266)	0.508* (0.298)	2.061ns (0.496)
Would Abstain	0.905ns (0.276)	1.369ns (0.265)	1.367ns (0.314)	0.627ns (0.338)	2.341** (0.297)	0.644ns (0.413)	8.604*** (0.596)
Pseudo-R ²	0.238						
Number of cases	930						

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 (wave 2) Notes: Entries are odds ratios. Baseline choice is the Christen Democratic party (CD&V) which is the largest party, leading the regional government. Sign.: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

For the Walloon region, the analysis proceeds in exactly the same manner and Tables 7 and 8 demonstrate the consequences of political trust on party choice in this region. In the Walloon region, too, distrusting voters are more likely to cast an invalid vote although this effect is not as powerful as in Flanders⁸. Hypothesis 1, therefore is also confirmed for the Walloon case. Political distrust has a positive effect on voting for the Green party, but this effect remains all together limited. It can be observed, furthermore that the explained variance for the Walloon model (.04) is smaller than for the Flemish model (.07). In general, the effect of political trust on party preference is rather small in the Walloon region.

Table 7. Effect of Political Trust on Partychoice in Wallonia

Model 1	Probability of choosing party over PS (main incumbent party)			
	CdH (<i>Christen democratic</i>)	MR (<i>Liberal</i>)	Ecolo (<i>Green</i>)	Blank /invalid
Political trust (Reference category: high)				
Low (0-29)	0.857ns (0.283)	1.453ns (0.246)	2.000** (0.236)	5.000* (0.793)
Middle (30-35)	1.582ns (0.270)	1.052ns (0.267)	1.122ns (0.262)	2.966ns (0.855)
Pseudo-R ²	0.042			
Number of cases	744			

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 (wave 2) *Notes:* Entries are odds ratios. Baseline choice is the Socialist party (PS) which is the largest party, leading the regional government. *Sign.:* * p<0.05, p<0.01, *** p<0.001

In Table 8 we again develop a fully multivariate model. The analysis shows that the Parti Socialist is very successful among lowly educated citizens, much more so than all the other parties. Contrary to what we observed in Flanders, willingness to vote is not related to casting an invalid vote, and this is probably due to the small number of blank/invalid voters in our sample (and in the population). Political trust only has an effect on a preference for the Green party, but this effect remains limited. The analysis on the Walloon sample, therefore lends support for hypothesis 3: in party systems where no viable populist party is present, the impact of political trust on party preference remains very limited. Voice, clearly is not an option in the Walloon party system.

⁸ The fact that the relation is only significant at the .05 level is due to the limited number of respondents casting an invalid or blank vote.

Table 8. Effect of Political Trust on Partychoice in Wallonia (Full Model)

	Probability of choosing party over PS (main incumbent party)			
	CdH (Christen democratic)	MR (Liberal)	Ecolo (Green)	Blank /invalid
Political trust (Reference category: high)				
Low (0-29)	0.947ns (0.294)	1.567ns (0.258)	2.127** (0.248)	4.321ns (0.809)
Middle (30-35)	1.581ns (0.278)	1.026ns (0.275)	1.089ns (0.269)	2.686ns (0.864)
Age (Reference category: 55+)				
Young (18-35)	0.900ns (0.286)	1.429ns (0.281)	1.275ns (0.262)	0.754ns (0.670)
Middle (36-54)	0.764ns (0.276)	1.785* (0.256)	1.367ns (0.241)	0.775ns (0.596)
Education (Reference category: higher educated)				
Lower	0.307*** (0.300)	0.379*** (0.271)	0.353*** (0.260)	0.388ns (0.671)
Middle	0.772ns (0.287)	0.659ns (0.274)	0.672ns (0.262)	0.766ns (0.656)
Gender (male)	1.1226ns (0.231)	1.418ns (0.213)	1.150ns (0.204)	4.467* (0.594)
Would Abstain	0.551* (0.303)	0.722ns (0.257)	0.723ns (0.243)	2.616ns (0.546)
Pseudo-R ²	0.129			
Number of cases	744			

Source: Belgian Election Study 2009 (wave 2) *Notes:* Entries are odds ratios. Baseline choice is the Christen Democratic party (CD&V) which is the largest party, leading the regional government. *Sign.:* * p<0.05, p<0.01, *** p<0.001

5. Discussion

In the current analysis of the Belgian Election Study 2009, the effect of political trust on electoral behaviour was ascertained for a very specific European context. For linguistic reasons, Belgium basically has two distinct party systems. While in the Northern Flemish region populist and protest votes are abundant, these parties are almost absent in the southern Walloon region. So while distrusting citizens in

Flanders have the option to vote for a populist or extreme right party, for Walloon citizens this option is simply not available.

The Belgian system of compulsory voting offers a very specific test for the question whether or not dissatisfied voters will refrain from electoral participation. The analysis shows that given the system of compulsory voting, casting a blank or invalid vote indeed functions as the only available exit option, and distrusting voters tend to use this option. Since electoral abstention is not a viable option in the Belgian case, invalid voting is preferred. In this regard, it has to be acknowledged that even in a system of compulsory voting, citizens apparently have sufficient means at their disposal to voice their discontent with the main political parties. During the 2009 elections, 9.6 of all Belgian enfranchised voters did not vote at all. Furthermore, an additional 5.7 per cent of all enfranchised citizens did cast a blank or invalid vote. Another 13.3 per cent of all enfranchised voters did vote for an extremist or populist, bringing the total of potentially alienated voters to 28.6 per cent of the electorate.

In a system of compulsory voting, invalid voting apparently serves as a functional equivalent for abstaining. Still, however, there is a strong difference in the incentive structure. Abstaining is the easiest exit option, as it does not require any effort at all from the citizen. One could say, therefore, there is a positive incentive for abstaining from voting. Invalid voting, however, requires that one goes to the polling station, waits one's turn and finally one can cast an invalid vote. In practice, only 6 per cent of Belgian voters bother to do so, while it can be safely assumed that more than 25 per cent of the voters would abstain without a legal obligation. It can thus be safely assumed that the system of compulsory voting boosts turnout levels in Belgium by at least 20 per cent.

Hypothesis 1 is thus confirmed: in a system of compulsory voting low levels of political trust will lead to invalid and blank voting.

Hypothesis 2 received partial confirmation for the Flemish case: even in a multivariate model, low levels of political trust had a strong impact on a voter preference for the extreme right Vlaams Belang and the populist LDD. Somewhat surprisingly there was also a positive relation with a preference for the Flemish Nationalist party, and the effect is even stronger for the Flemish Nationalists than for the LDD. This might be due to the rather populist discourse of that party's leader. For

the Walloon case, on the other hand, political trust had far less of an impact on party preference. Only the Green party profited from sentiments of distrust, but that effect was much weaker than the effects we found for the Flemish case. This confirms the hypothesis developed by Hetherington that the effects of political (dis)trust are dependent on specific political context. If – for various reasons – no reform or protest vote is possible, political distrust does not seem to have a profound effect on electoral behaviour. If exit is not possible (because of legal reasons), and voice is closed off (because of a lack of political opportunities), political distrust only leads to loyalty. Distrusting voters in the French speaking part of Belgium simply do not have any opportunities to express their discontent. The fact that in the Walloon region levels of political trust are actually lower, but that these feelings do not seem to have an impact on party preference, therefore confirms our hypothesis 3: without a supply of populist parties, distrusting voters will remain loyal to the traditional parties. It is not the ambition of this paper to try to explain why there is no viable populist party in the Walloon region. The minority position of Wallonia within the Belgian federation might imply that Walloon voters prefer strong, traditional parties in order to defend the interests of their region. The legacy of World War II and the fact that the Walloon region is culturally more diverse than the Flemish region might explain why extreme right parties are far less successful in the Walloon region than in the Flemish region, despite equal levels of racism and distrust.

Within the literature it is generally taken for granted that it is ‘good’ for the long term stability of a political system if dissatisfied voters can voice their discontent in some way or another. If the Miller and Listhaug (1990) hypothesis would be correct, this would imply that the Dutch speaking voters of Belgium effectively have an opportunity to express their discontent. This might provide them with an opportunity to express their doubts on the Belgian political system. Voters in the Walloon region, on the other hand, do not seem to have any viable option to express their discontent. Theoretically, this confirms the notion developed by Bélanger and Nadeau that the electoral consequences of distrust will be strongly dependent on the opportunities being offered by the electoral and the party system. The long term consequences of this lack of voice and exit options, however, remain to be investigated. Given the currently available data, however, we have no indications that political trust would decline more rapidly in the Walloon region, where voters hardly have any possibility

to express their distrust, than in the Flemish region, where various political parties provide voters with the possibility to express their discontent. This cast new light on the role political entrepreneurs play in mobilizing political distrust in specific political systems.

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