



Innovative Applications of O.R.

Ghost seats in parliaments[☆]Nora Ibarzabal^a, Annick Laruelle^{b,c,*}^a Foundation of Economic Analysis I, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Avenida Lehendakari Aguirre, 83, Bilbao E-48015, Spain^b BRiDGE, Foundation of Economic Analysis I, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Avenida Lehendakari Aguirre, 83, Bilbao E-48015, Spain^c IKERBASQUE, Basque Foundation of Science, Bilbao 48011, Spain

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ABSTRACT

In several European Countries citizens' movements have formed parties whose programme is to reform electoral legislation so that blank votes are transformed into vacant seats in parliament. The first objective of this paper is to offer some tools in order to quantify the potential effect of a reform that would allow citizens to cast a dissatisfaction vote. We show that such a reform would reduce the ease to pass a proposal and modify the distribution of power among parties. The second objective of this paper is to show that this reform could have an impact in parliaments. This is illustrated by the case of the Basque Parliament from 1980 to 2016. At the theoretical level this paper provides some relations between measures of success.

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1. Introduction

Electoral turnout has decreased in most democratic countries in the past few decades. Since 1988 the average turnout in EU Member States has been around 78% compared to almost 84% before 1987. The average hides significant differences between countries. In Belgium, Luxembourg and Italy, around 90% of the electorate usually vote, while in Ireland, France and Portugal turnout is less than 75% (IDEA, 2004). The 2014 elections to the European Parliament exhibit the lowest turnout on record: only 42.54% of Europeans voted, and turnout did not even reach 20% in the Czech Republic or Slovakia. As put by Muxel (2009), the party of abstainers would be the biggest political group in the European Parliament.

Part of this abstention may be circumstantial (illness, absence from home, registration problems) but the rest is voluntary. Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson (1997) propose the following ex-

planations for voluntary abstention in European Parliament elections: lack of interest, lack of knowledge, distrust or dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, distrust or dissatisfaction with the electoral process. According to Delwit (2013) the growth of abstention is a sign of indifference toward or distrust of politicians and politics. The link between levels of citizen satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) and turnout has been empirically tested, though the evidence is patchy. Grönlund and Setälä (2007) find that trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy increase turnout. By contrast Ezrow and Xezonakis (2014) find that electorates in established democracies tend to mark increasing dissatisfaction with democracy by participating in national elections.

Among “non votes” (i.e., abstentions, blank votes and null votes) it is abstention that has attracted the lion's share of attention in the literature. See, however, Power and Garand (2007); Power and Roberts (1995); Troumpounis (2011); Ugglä (2008). One reason for the scant attention paid to the other two forms of expression¹ is that they are notoriously difficult to interpret. As put by Damore, Waters, and Bowler (2012), the number of “non votes” is part of the signal that the election sends to the political system, but the signal is not clear. Non votes may arise from motivations varying from alienation to boredom or confusion. Another reason may be that null and blank votes account for a very low percentage of the electorate. Nevertheless the phenomenon has become increasingly common, as has voting for extra-parliamentary parties (Ugglä, 2008). For instance in France the percentage of blank votes

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¹ As pointed out by Teixidor Viayna (2012) some countries do not recognize the blank vote option. In these cases blank votes are considered as null votes.

increased from 2.5% in 1990 to 5% in 2000 (Zulfikarpasic, 2001). It even reached between 9 and 20% in districts where the competition in the second round was between two candidates from the same side of the electoral axis (two right-wing candidates or two left-wing candidates). Power and Garand (2007) point out that these percentages may be non negligible in some countries, especially in Latin America (with an average of 11% of invalid votes, with a range from 2 to 3% in some countries to 20–30% in others). A blank vote is usually intentional, though it may sometimes be a form of hidden abstention. It may express dissatisfaction with politics or politicians or inability to choose between candidates (Zulfikarpasic, 2001). Teixidor Viayna (2012) distinguishes between null votes due to inexperience or error and those which are spoiled intentionally (to show political disagreement). The respective proportions of intentional and unintentional null votes cannot be evaluated.

The following examples illustrate clear signals of disagreement or dissatisfaction sent by electors through non votes. In 1928 in Antwerp (Belgium), the by-election to replace a deceased liberal member of parliament was transformed into a plebiscite on the nation's language policy. Some parties called for a boycott of the election and as a result 31.3% of the ballots were spoiled (van Goethem, 2010), 153–154). In the 1969 French presidential election, the defeated communist candidate in the first round called on his supporters to abstain in the second round. As a result abstention rose from 21.8% in the first round to 30.9%, and in parallel blank votes increased from 1 to 4.5% (Zulfikarpasic, 2001). In the 2001 Argentine elections 20% of the votes cast were either left blank or spoiled with the clear objective of casting an “angry vote” (Ugglá, 2008). In the 2009 elections to the Basque Parliament the illegalised party Batasuna called on its supporters to cast a null vote and 5.7% of the electorate did so. Note that disagreement or dissatisfaction can also be hidden behind votes for an alternative candidate. In the second round of the 2002 French presidential elections, the right wing candidate Chirac was chosen by 82.21% of the voters. Many of the votes cast in favour of Chirac were votes against his opponent, the extreme-right candidate Le Pen.

The “None of the Above” (NOTA) option has the advantage of offering a non ambiguous means to indicate dissatisfaction. Voters bear the cost of participating in the election in order to send this signal. This option is however used in few countries. A well-known example is the state of Nevada, where it was chosen by an average of 10.98% of the electorate during the 1976–2010 period (Damore et al., 2012). The NOTA option was introduced in Russia in the 1993 electoral reform and suppressed in 2006 in spite of its success. For instance in 2003 this option was the second most voted “party” with nearly 13% of the votes. In some constituencies it achieved more votes than the largest party (McAllister & White, 2008). In 2013 the NOTA option was introduced in India by the Supreme Court. In the only general election held since then, in 2014, it has obtained a modest 1.1% of the votes (Diwakar, 2015).

In France, there has been some movement towards having the blank option recognised. Since 2014 blank and null votes are counted separately even though both options are considered as invalid and do not count in the tally.² Zulfikarpasic (2001) reports that in 1992 a party whose objective was to represent blank votes obtained one seat in regional elections in Brittany (and got 5% of the votes). In Spain a citizens movement has formed a party (Escaños en blanco which translates as “Blank Seats”) whose programme is to reform the electoral legislation so that blank votes are transformed into vacant seats in parliament. Meanwhile their elected candidates will decline to sit in parliament. They achieved

a total of four seats in the 2011 local elections in Catalonia³ (two out of seven in Foixá, one out of thirteen in Gironella and one out of thirteen in Santa Maria de Palautordera).

As put by Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels (2011), three options are generally available to dissatisfied citizens: the first is not to participate (exit option); the second is to vote for populist or extreme parties (voice option); the third is to vote for a mainstream party (loyalty option). The proposed electoral reform suggests that a fourth option (sanction option) could be offered to dissatisfied voters. Indeed reducing the total number of seats in parliament in proportion to dissatisfaction would provide a sanction to political actors.

The first objective of this paper is to offer some tools in order to quantify the potential effect of such a reform. More generally we study an electoral system that divides the electorate into votes for parties, dissatisfaction votes and indifference votes. The dissatisfaction votes are treated as a party and the seats won by the dissatisfaction votes are left vacant. The possible impact is measured by modelling the parliament decision-making as a weighted voting rule and computing some probabilities to assess it.

There is a vast body of literature on assessing decision-making in parliaments. Many power indices have been proposed to quantify the parties' ability to influence outcomes. The most popular include the Banzhaf (1965); Coleman (1971); 1986); Rae (1969); Shapley and Shubik (1954) indices. Here we use the Coleman's power of a collectivity to act and the Rae index. The justification of this choice is based on the probabilistic approach proposed by Laruelle and Valenciano (2005, 2008). The issues that interest us are the following: how would the dissatisfaction votes affect the ease with which proposals are accepted or rejected? How would they affect the likelihood of a party obtaining the result that it voted for? As the objective is a normative comparison of the decision-making attributable to the different apportionments, we leave out of our model elements that should be incorporated, if the objective were to give an accurate descriptive account of the parliament. Thus, we ignore the information concerning party location in the political space as inconsistent with the normative approach. The only relevant information is the distribution of seats. That is, we assume that all vote configurations have the same probability. We show that the reform would drastically reduce the ease to pass a proposal. For a party it will be more difficult to get its preferred outcome given that it favors it than to get its preferred outcome given that it is against the proposal.

The second objective of this paper is to show that dissatisfaction votes could have a real impact if they were taken into account. The potential effect on a parliament is illustrated by a case study. In this paper we focus on the regional parliament of the Basque Autonomous Community (Spain) from 1980 to 2016. The reason for this choice is that there was a clear instance of dissatisfaction votes in 2009. We conjecture that this parliament is representative of parliaments elected by proportional systems.

The limits of the exercise must be kept in mind. First it is difficult to predict what voters would do in the new institutional framework.⁴ Throughout the exercise we assume that modifying the apportionment method does not alter the numbers of votes for the different parties. Voters who vote for a given party continue to vote for it. Second, the probabilities of obtaining majorities do not capture the similarities and differences between parties in political space and thus do not provide a descriptive analysis of the situation of the Basque Parliament. The objective of the exercise

³ See the website of the Spanish Ministry of the Interior: www.infoelectoral.mir.es

⁴ It is also difficult to predict how parties would react to the modification of the electoral system. It is clear that leaving seats vacant would be a clear incentive for politicians to pay more attention to dissatisfied voters.

² By contrast in other countries blank votes are considered as valid and count in computing the threshold for a party to obtain representation while null votes are not.

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