



# Strategic electoral considerations under proportional representation

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long assumed that voters do not employ strategic considerations when casting a vote in systems of proportional representation. Either this would not be necessary because few votes were wasted or impossible because the calculations involved would be too difficult to make. This research note examines the latter and concludes that (Dutch) voters are better able to make such calculations than traditionally has been presumed. Under quasi-experimental conditions that involved what can be called coalition preference voting, voters show tendencies to react to strategic considerations when determining their vote preference.

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## 1. Introduction

Voters vote for the party or candidate they like best. At least, this is the straightforward assumption from which the bulk of studies of voting behavior proceed. According to this orthodoxy, voting is an expression of preference and voters cast a 'sincere vote' (e.g., Catt, 1996). Yet substantial numbers actually cast a non-sincere vote for a less preferred party.<sup>1</sup> In electoral systems employing first-past-the-post, it has long been known that voters may have good cause to deviate from their preferred party. It was likely Henry Droop who in 1869 first formulated a version of what is known as the 'wasted vote' hypothesis: sensible voters in a winner-takes-all system cast a vote for a less preferred-candidate with a greater chance of winning (see e.g., Riker, 1982: 756; Cox, 1997). This form of non-sincere voting is generally referred to as 'strategic voting', in Britain often as 'tactical voting'.

The antidote to the wasted vote was proportional representation (PR), in which according to, for example, Maurice Duverger voters had no reason for this behavior: "Because votes turn into seats more or less continuously

under PR, Duverger thought that voters would not face any incentives to vote strategically" (Cox and Shugart, 1996: 300). This would mean that "(...) rational voters are free to cast a sincere vote without fear of it being wasted" (Karp et al., 2002: 3). While Duverger reasoned that non-sincere strategic voting was unnecessary in PR systems, Downs felt that it was impossible. He assumed that "voters look upon elections purely as means of selecting governments" and "will cast their ballots with only this in mind" (Downs, 1957: 145). He concluded that it was impossible to satisfy the necessary conditions in PR systems with coalition governments and that voters would be driven by the difficulty of rationally selecting a government to treat elections as expressions of preference (Downs, 1957: 163).

This 'pessimistic' conclusion (Blais et al., 2006), combined with Duverger's conviction that non-sincere strategic votes were unnecessary, may be the primary reasons that until recently little attention has been paid to non-sincere voting in PR systems. Yet voters do cast non-sincere votes in these systems, so it becomes necessary to expand voting studies to account for such votes. This research note will demonstrate that voters are able to make the calculations necessary to cast a reasoned, if not necessarily rational, non-sincere vote and that a substantial number of Dutch voters indicate that they would adapt their vote to different strategic circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'non-sincere' is employed rather than 'insincere', since the latter might incorrectly imply that the vote was not honest or forthright.

## 2. Sincere and non-sincere voting

Rosema (2004, 2006) has provided insight into psychological vote choice mechanisms by distinguishing successive steps involved in casting a sincere vote. First, the voter examines and evaluates the parties. Second, she determines which party best represents her interests or viewpoints; this is the preferred party. Third, the voter forms the intention to vote for the preferred party. Finally, she actually casts a vote for this party. This sequence of decisions makes a distinction between the vote intention and the actual vote, as these may not agree and either or both may depart from the preferred party and lead to a 'non-sincere vote'.

It is the departure from the preferred party that is defined as a non-sincere vote, thus any attempt to investigate non-sincere voting must operationalize the concept of 'preferred party'. Our operationalization makes use of feeling thermometer scores (see also e.g., Abramson et al., 2010; Alvarez et al., 2006; Blais et al., 2006; Rosema, 2004).<sup>2</sup> In the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study of 2002 (DPES 2002), which is the basis for the analysis here, the respondents were asked to indicate their feelings on a scale from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm) with 50 as neutral feelings. The assumption of many studies is that voters have a unique preferred party, yet in systems with many parties this is not necessarily true. In the DPES 2002, 74 per cent of the respondents had a unique preferred party, i.e., gave the highest score to a single party; 19 per cent gave equal high scores to two parties, 5 per cent to three, and 2 per cent to four or more parties.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that these 26 per cent of respondents had a preferred party among those to whom they awarded the highest score, but we have no way of determining which party that might be. It is therefore possible, and likely, that they actually do consider more than one party to be their most preferred party.

The existence of ties raises questions about sincere and non-sincere voting. In the case of the Dutch election of 2002, about half of the voters (52 per cent) can be classified as sincere voters: they had a unique preferred party and voted for it. Another 19 per cent had more than one preferred party and voted for one of their favorites; they are sincere since they voted for a preferred party, but they had to employ a tie-breaker to reach their final choice. We therefore label this group as 'sincere tie-breakers'. This still leaves 29 per cent of the 2002 respondents as non-sincere voters. About two-thirds of these (21 per cent of all voters) had a unique preferred party but voted for a different party, the rest consisted of voters with multiple preferred parties who voted for yet another party.

## 3. Strategic considerations

If over a quarter of the Dutch electorate is casting a non-sincere vote, it is important to attempt to explain what has

led to such decisions. There are various reasons for casting such a vote, including choosing randomly and pleasing a spouse, but most interest should focus on reasoned choices. The most well-known reasoned choice has been referred to as 'strategic voting', the attempt to avoid a wasted vote in plurality systems. Rational choice theorists employ a definition of strategic voting that involves the probability of casting a pivotal vote (e.g., Fisher, 2004: 154). Fisher has discussed the difficulties of extending the pivotal vote approach to multi-member districts and PR systems and Cox and Shugart (1996) have examined strategic voting under PR and focused on the allocation of the last seat (employing the largest remainder method). However, it is next to impossible for even the most advanced statistician to calculate the probability of casting the pivotal vote that determines the last remainder seat to be allocated under a largest average d'Hondt system, let alone that any ordinary voter could do so.

The extension of the rational choice concept of strategic voting to other electoral systems is thus fraught with difficulties. Therefore, to avoid confusion of terminology, we will not employ this concept. We do believe, however, that voters in PR systems may be motivated by instrumental considerations and may cast an outcome-oriented vote to achieve political goals. These will be referred to as 'strategic considerations' that a voter employs in casting a non-sincere vote.

Downs formulated conditions that would be necessary to cast a rational vote under PR systems with coalition governments: "1) what coalitions each party is willing to enter (...). 2) Estimated probability distributions which show how likely each party is to enter each coalition open to it. Estimating these amounts to predicting how all other voters will vote (...). 3) (...) what policies each coalition would adopt after it was formed. (...) to predict the compromises a voter must predict the outcome of the election (...)" (Downs 1957: 147). It is extremely difficult to satisfy all these conditions and "[c]onsequently, each voter can make his own voting decision only after estimating what decisions others will make, so a problem of conjectural variation arises to which no solution has been found" (Downs, 1957: 163; see also Blais et al., 2006).

There may be various sets of strategic considerations that could lead voters to cast a non-sincere vote in PR systems. Downs is concerned with perhaps the most important set: voters want to determine who governs them and thus would wish to influence which coalition is formed. This set of considerations can be labeled 'coalition preference voting', i.e., voters cast a non-sincere vote because they prefer a particular coalition and wish to increase the probability that this coalition will emerge. Downs concluded that the strategic calculations necessary to cast such a vote would be too difficult to make. This research note thus first investigates whether Downs was correct empirically as regards the information levels and capabilities of voters.

## 4. Exploring Downs' conditions

Downs' conditions can be reformulated as: 1) Voters have expectations concerning how other voters will vote

<sup>2</sup> Alvarez et al. (2006: 5) argue that this assumes that ratings are provided sincerely; we have no reason to doubt the accuracy of this assumption.

<sup>3</sup> In their analysis of the same data, Abramson et al. (2010) seem to have ignored the problem of ties. Presumably, those without a unique single preference have been eliminated from their analyses.

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