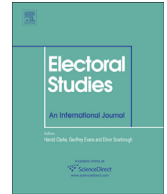




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# Candidate centred campaigning in a party centred context: The case of Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

Candidates to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives vary considerably with regard to the extent to which they run personalized campaigns. However, very few candidates get elected on the basis of preference votes. In light of this weak link between preference voting and the actual allocation of mandates, this paper asks about why Belgian candidates run personalized campaigns at all. Our findings point to the impact of the following factors in this regard: district magnitude, party magnitude, electoral safety, and seniority with regard to party organizational offices. Furthermore, our findings also demonstrate considerable differences between Belgian parties with regard to the extent to which their candidates run personalized campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent analyses on Belgian electoral politics suggest that Belgian elections are not only about party but also about candidates and thus about personalized forms of representation (Colomer, 2011). For example Bräuninger et al. (2012) in their analysis on private member bills in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives unveil significant efforts among legislators to actively seek personal votes. Furthermore, impressionistic evidence tells us that candidates vary in their campaign styles and in related efforts to seek personal votes.

In addition to legislators and candidates, Belgian voters also seem to wholeheartedly subscribe to the model of personalised electoral politics. In the 2007 Elections to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, more than ten million

preference votes were cast.<sup>1</sup> More than six out of ten voters used the possibility to vote for at least one candidate rather than just cast a party list vote.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, voters seemed to be eager to use preference votes rather than list votes (André et al., 2012).

Despite Belgian voters' proclivity to cast preference votes, however, Belgian candidates' personal vote seeking behaviour is puzzling for two reasons. First, traditionally, only a handful of candidates get elected by virtue of their preference votes. Preference votes hardly make any difference with regard to who gets elected. Candidates' ranks on

<sup>1</sup> We focus on the 2007 elections, because these were regular elections that gave parties and candidates ample time to develop their campaign strategies. This is in contrast to the special 2010 elections that were triggered by an unexpected coalition crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 6,671,360 voters, 61.3 per cent cast one or more preference votes (on the average 2.45, Wauters and Weekers, 2008). Hence, Belgian voters do not seem to vote just for the head of the list – the party's electoral leader in the constituency – but rather aim to fine-tune their candidate preferences (André et al., 2012).

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party lists still are the most decisive factor in this regard. Second, despite the candidate centred nature of the Belgian electoral system, some of its components erect numerous constraints to seeking personal votes, especially in campaign contexts. Furthermore, significant changes in electoral rules introduced since the mid-1990s raised additional obstacles to personalized electoral politics.

In this article we aim to explore this puzzle and to ask why Belgian candidates seek personal votes despite numerous electoral obstacles and despite their negligible electoral effects. To answer our research question, in the first section of this article, we will sketch the structural context Belgian candidates face with regard to related opportunities and constraints for personalized campaign efforts. Additionally, we will discuss individual level personal vote earning attributes that might reinforce candidates' motivations to campaign in personalized ways. In the second part of this article we will present our data and empirical approach, with a special emphasis on the question of how to operationalize our dependent (party vs. candidate centred campaigning) and independent variables. In a third part, we test the hypotheses derived from the theoretical section in a bivariate way. The final section of the article is based upon an OLS regression analysis and upon the aim to explain differences in the campaign styles of Belgian candidates from a multivariate perspective.

Since we lack longitudinal data on the campaign behaviour of constituency candidates, our analysis is conducted in cross-sectional ways based upon data that result from the first genuine parliamentary candidate survey conducted in Belgium (2007), within the framework of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS).

## 2. The prerequisites for cultivating a personal vote

The seminal article of [Carey and Shugart \(1995\)](#) shifted our theoretical focus in explaining personal vote seeking behaviour. Structural features of the electoral system and particularly intra-party competition gained in prominence compared to individual level factors such as local roots, campaign skills, and campaign resources ([Balmas and Sheaffer, 2010](#); [Karvonen, 2010](#)). According to Carey and Shugart, preferential voting systems such as the Belgian one particularly provide incentives to seek personal votes. This is because fellow partisans are made to compete against each other and thus to develop vote getting mechanisms other than their party affiliations. Carey and Shugart furthermore hypothesize that incentives to seek personal votes should increase with the level of intra-party competition in a given district. While this argument found general support, it stimulated debates on the appropriate measures to gauge the levels of intra-party competition. Carey and Shugart consider district magnitude a useful proxy in this regard. In contrast, [Crisp et al. \(2007\)](#) proposed using party magnitude as an alternative and supposedly more valid indicator. The following section addresses this debate but also aims to discuss additional contextual factors that might have an impact on the campaign styles of Belgian candidates. In this section, we argue, that Belgium represents a complex case. It must be

considered a flexible list PR system that allows for intra-party competition and thus provides particular incentives for personal vote seeking behaviour. However due to distinct electoral and party system factors the behavioural effects of the preference vote are less than straightforward and difficult to model. Changes in electoral rules across time further contributed to the systems' complexity in this regard.

### 2.1. Electoral and party attributes

#### 2.1.1. Variations in constituency size

Developments regarding the geographical size of constituencies decreased incentives for personal vote seeking behaviour across time. A 2002 electoral reform bill significantly reduced the number of constituencies for the elections of the Chamber of Representatives to eleven, comprising the ten Belgian provinces plus the large capital constituency, Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. The 150 seats in the Chamber of Representatives are allocated to the constituencies proportional to their number of inhabitants. District magnitude varies from four to twenty-two (median = 15). In contrast, in the period between 1946 and 1993, thirty constituencies elected 212 candidates to the Chamber of Representatives, with district magnitudes varying between two and thirty-three. The number of candidates competing for preference votes varies across constituencies because of differences in district magnitudes and because of differences in the number of competing parties.<sup>3</sup>

The 2002 reform measure nearly tripled the average geographical size of Belgian constituencies. This raises obstacles to candidates and legislators that wish to target a distinct set of voters, for example by means of traditional face-to-face contacts. In fact, Belgian MPs used to be very active in this regard in their hitherto small constituencies. Pre-reform MP surveys indicated that they spent about as much time in their constituencies as they did in the capital ([De Winter and Brans, 2003](#)), engaging in a variety of face-to-face activities such as holding surgeries, participating in social and cultural events at the local level, or remaining active in local party chapters.<sup>4</sup>

With geographically larger districts, candidates and legislators need to become more distant to their constituents and less able to engage in individualised face-to-face constituency service as effectively as they did prior to the 2002 reform. Neither can they visit local party activists, nor participate in their districts' social, cultural and economic life as intensively as they did in the hitherto small constituencies. In absolute numbers, candidates and legislators can still manage to meet as many constituents as they did prior

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the Luxembourg constituency, competition is limited to sixteen candidates selected by the four relevant parties competing for four seats (effective number of parties in 2007 equals 2.67). In contrast, in the Antwerp constituency, 144 candidates representing six relevant parties compete for 24 seats (ENP in 2007 equals 4.30).

<sup>4</sup> The strong emphasis on constituency work is facilitated by the small size of Belgium. Most MPs can get from Brussels to her constituency within 1 h. This allows to engage in constituency activities on a daily basis – on the average 30 h a week – even after a regular parliamentary working day in the capital.

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