

Why representation fails. Determinants of incorrect voting in a crowded party system

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Introduction

Democracy is based on the idea of representation. Representation can be conceptualized in different ways – procedurally, substantially and descriptively. Here, we define representation substantially: representation implies policy responsiveness; the elected represent the ideas and opinions of the citizens who gave them their support in the polling booth (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). It is through elected representatives that public and policy are connected and that responsiveness of policies to public preferences is organized (Ström, Müller et al. 2003). Of course, there are many other features of democracy, but representation by elections invariably is one of its key characteristics (Schumpeter 1950; Dahl 1998). In most democracies, representation is organized by political parties. Parties present programs and lists at competitive elections and get a mandate, or not, to carry out their program and put their ideas, and thus the ideas of the people that elected them, into practice (Klingemann, Hofferbert et al. 1994). Crucial assumptions for a representative democracy to properly function are (1) that voters vote for a party because of its program and (2) that voters vote the party that *best* represents their opinions and beliefs. Regarding the first assumption, an extensive voting literature has established that voters do take ideology, issue stances, manifestos etc. into account when voting but that many other determinants of the vote play a role too (Fournier, Blais et al. 2003; Thomassen 2005; Ansolabehere, Rodden et al. 2008). In this paper we focus on the second assumption: that voters choose the party that corresponds with their ideas.

This assumption has been partially challenged by a small but steadily growing body of work on ‘correct voting’, mainly in US (presidential) elections. The correct voting literature tests the idea that voters vote for the party that most closely resembles their ideas (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). Work on correct

voting has shown that a variable segment of the electorate does *not* vote correctly but votes for parties that do not ‘represent’ them properly; there are other parties in the same party system that they ‘should’ have voted for. In this paper, we elaborate on this work. We advance the available knowledge on representation and correct voting by offering four things: (1) unique and innovative data that allow us to reliably, and more precisely than was possible before, connect parties with their voters on an extensive series of detailed policy positions, (2) a better and more powerful operationalization of correct voting not as a dichotomous but as a continuous variable, (3) new ideas and hypotheses about the determinants of (in)correct voting on the party-level, (4) an application of the correct voting idea to a different system than the US system it was designed for. We draw here on the case of Belgium¹, a small consociational democracy with an extremely crowded party system. In fact, Belgium has one of the most fragmented party systems around (Anckar 2000). We argue that party system fragmentation creates more theoretical possibilities for correct voting than a majoritarian system as the US but that it at the same time also increases the information cost of correct voting.

Our operational research question simply is: *why are people not voting for the party that represents them best (incorrect voting)?* We tackle this question by first briefly reviewing the literature on correct voting especially highlighting the data problems associated with this research. Then, we generate a number of hypotheses mainly focusing on party features; one of our claims is that parties have a dissimilar share of incorrect voters and that specific party features lead people to vote for the wrong party. Next, we present our data consisting of 229 concrete statements about current issues that have been answered by both voters *and* by party executives across four elections in Belgium (2003-2009). We then proceed with defining and operationalizing incorrect voting in different ways and testing to what extent voter features but especially party features affect the degree of correct voting in Belgium. We wrap up with a conclusion and discussion section.

Representation, correct voting and measuring ‘correctness’

The literature on substantial representation can be divided in two main strands; there is an ‘upstream’ and a ‘downstream’ approach. On the one hand, there is a steady flow of work that investigates to what extent government (and

¹ In fact, the paper does not deal with Belgium as a whole but with Flemish voters and Flemish parties. Flanders is the Northern part of Belgium where 60% of the population lives.

its policies) represent the preferences of the public at large. This body of work mostly compares across political systems and gauges the 'effectivity' of political systems to translate popular wishes into policy (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Traditionally, these studies are based on self-reported left-right positions of voters that are compared to similar measures of government or government parties' left-right position based on manifestos or expert surveys (see for example: Huber and Powell 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005). This 'downstream' literature, thus, focuses on the congruence between the citizens at large and policymakers. On the other hand, a different and separated literature does not depart from policy or government but from the voters. It examines to what extent voters cast a ballot for the party that best represents them in terms of values and interests. This 'upstream' literature focuses on the congruence between specific voters and their parties (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). Both schools of research are dealing with different sides of the same coin. We believe that the citizen-policy link can only be effective when the voter-party link works properly. Only when voters vote for *the* - or for *a* - party that represents them to a satisfying extent can governments and policies represent the preferences of the citizens at large. Correct voting, thus, is a precondition for adequate policy representation. If elections are supposed to be a vote on the policies that the public wants, voters should be voting for the party that best, or at least fairly well, represents their policy preferences. Representative democracy can only fulfil its promise if this assumption is warranted.

In reality, most voters have very little interest in politics, let alone a good view on the policy stances of the different parties (Caplan 2007). How can they ever live up to the rigorous standards of 'rational' voting by voting for the right party? Lau and Redlawsk (1997: 74-76) introduced the concept of 'correct voting' as the benchmark against which voters' performances can be compared: a voter is voting correctly *if she would have made the same choice had she been fully informed* about the issues and candidates running in the election. Assuming that most (if not all) voters know which parties are competing in an election, voting correctly means voting for the party whose issue stances best match your own.

While correct voting provides us with a benchmark, measuring this benchmark for representative samples of the (voting) population proved to be difficult. In experimental research the measurement is relatively easy to obtain as shown by Lau and Redlawsk (1997), but the measurements obtained through survey research and used in the correct voting research have severe limits. Lau et al. (2005) attempted to measure correct voting in 30

democracies by comparing, amongst other things, subjective left-right placements of voters with expert-based left-right placements of parties. However, the reliability of such measurements is questionable by their own account. They state: “*Would estimates of correct voting be 18 percent lower in every country if we had more items available to estimate correct voting? We cannot say.*” (Lau, Patel et al. 2005: 13). Their initial 1997 paper provides more detailed measurements, combining party identification measures, agreement with candidates’ policy stands, linkages with groups and incumbents’ job performance. Apart from the fact that one can dispute the fact that party identification or group linkages have anything to do with correct voting, it is the way these measures are obtained that causes most worries. All the measures essentially rely on voters’ own perceptions of what the candidates stand for or what they accomplished in the past. While the concept of correct voting provides a theoretically solid benchmark, important flaws still plague its measurement.

Spatial models try a different approach but suffer from similar data problems. For spatial modellers, a ‘pure’ rational voter only takes policy positions into account and consequently votes correctly. Both proximity and directional spatial voting models try to assess the extent to which voters engage in this type of rational issue voting, although they make different predictions. The proximity model, following Downs (1957), predicts that voters vote for the party whose platform is closest to their own ideal points (Henning and Hinich 2007). The directional model assumes that voters pick the party that not only is on the same ‘side’ of a policy dimension, but has the most extreme position as well. Again, both spatial model types do not predict the vote based on actual party positions, but rather on the *perception* that voters have of them. This cripples the extent to which we can make inferences about actual voter rationality and correct voting: a voter can make very rational choices, but if he makes them on false pretences (faulty perceptions of party positions) the end result would still be an incorrect vote.

Hence, the literature on correct voting, together with the similar literature on spatial voting, is plagued by data deficiencies. We see data problems both at the side of the voters and at the side of the parties. If we want to compare real voter preferences and real party preferences – if we really want to test whether voters vote correctly - we need a different type of data. On the voters’ side the correct (and spatial) voting literature has often relied on general self-assessments of people, often a self-placement on a left-right scale (see for example: Hines 2006; Lau, Patel et al. 2008). While the left-right

dimension sure is an important structuring dimension, in many party systems it certainly is not the only dimension (Kriesi, Grande et al. 2008). Some issues - some would argue: increasingly more issues - cannot be adequately placed on the left-right dimension. Moreover, representation is more than just a very broad congruence between general ideological positions of voters and their parties. Representation, we contend, first of all implies that specific voter preferences are congruent with specific party positions on specific policies. An alternative and, perhaps, better method to assess voters' preferences is confronting them with a list of very precise policy measures and ask their opinion about these preferences. In some of their work Lau and Redlawsk do partially rely on such issue position measures but they always combine it with other and much more general measures.

The most pressing data problems in the correct and spatial voting literature, though, are situated at the candidate or party side. While we can ask people about their own specific policy preferences, we cannot really ask them about parties' preferences since more often than not citizens simply would not know the correct party position (or they project their own position on their preferred party/candidate)(Koch 2005). Lau and Redlawsk (2007: 85) acknowledge the problem of getting reliable evidence about party/candidate positions: *"The trick is getting decent 'objective' measures of where the candidates actually stand on those considerations"*. They decide to use the mean perceptions of 'political experts' to solve the problem of getting 'objective' measures, those experts being the *voters* with most political interest and knowledge. In a more recent paper Lau and colleagues (2008: 406) make an appeal to find better objective measures: *"We do urge researchers attempting to operationalize correct voting... to devise some objective means of determining which candidate best represents a citizen's values... rather than relying on purely subjective judgements by survey respondents themselves as to where the candidates stand on the issues or considerations at hand"*.

We contend that precise positions of parties/candidates can only be obtained from the parties themselves, for example by extracting party positions from their manifestos. The main disadvantage of party manifestos as evidence of precise policy preferences is that parties, in their manifestos, do not address the same issues but rather tend to discuss only a few policy domains; each of them has an interest in focussing on its own issues while neglecting other parties' issues (Budge and Farlie 1983). To solve this problem, this study draws on a different type of party preference data: we simply asked

all Belgian parties over four elections what their stance was on a large amount of policy issues; we asked the same questions to a representative sample of the population before the same elections and, consequently, can compare voters' precise policy positions with the exact same positions of the parties they plan to vote for (Koch 2005 drew on a more or less similar procedure for assessing new candidates' positions in his paper on correct voting in US House elections).

Instead of drawing on general and indirect measures, hence, we propose to rely on direct and precise measures of policy preferences of voters and of their parties (see also Koch 2005). Using more precise measures bears consequences for what one finds. General distance measures are one-dimensional and conceal many differences between parties and their voters; as long as she is close to her party on the left-right scale, for example, a voter is supposed to vote correctly. Under this apparent ideological congruence many differences between voters and their parties may exist. Voters' issue preferences are not always logically connected to an overarching ideology but may be idiosyncratic and context-dependent; parties too, because of strategic and electoral reasons, may present the voters with a batch of policy preferences that are not entirely rational or ideologically coherent (e.g. because they are one-issue parties that only care about some issues). Consequently, when comparing voters and parties on specific policy issues we expect to find much more discrepancy and much less correct voting than when just relying on general ideological measures. More complex and elaborate measures of preferences, we expect, will lead to finding less correct voting. When positions are compared in detail, the average distance between voters and their preferred party will be considerably larger than when comparing just a few and broad measures. Lau and colleagues compared their own results on the share of correct voters relying on many and on fewer items; they found that relying on less items leads to higher congruence and to more voters that are classified as voting correctly (Lau, Patel et al. 2008: 6). Although voters, in principle, can agree with every concrete issue position their party adopts it is likely that most of them are not aware of many of these positions and that their own positions differ. Especially in a multi-party system with many parties competing and with a large choice set for the voters, as is the case in Belgium, we expect there to be a large amount of incorrect voting. The more parties there are, the higher the information costs for voters to find the right party. Similarly, Lau and Redlawsk (2007) found for the American presidential elections that voters

voted less correctly when there were more (serious) presidential candidates in the race.

What levels of correct and incorrect voting did previous research find? The initial work by Lau and Redlawsk on US presidential elections (Lau and Redlawsk 1997) came to the conclusion that, across five US presidential races between 1972 and 1988, on average around 75% of the voters voted for the candidate they should have voted for if they had followed their preferences and would have been fully informed about the stances of the candidates. Later they added more presidential elections but this did not affect the average correct voting share (Lau, Andersen et al. 2008). Koch's investigation of correct voting in US House elections 1994-1998 led to surprisingly similar figures: 71% of the voters opted for the right candidate (Koch 2005). Hines examined EU-elections in 1999 in 15 countries using similar measures and came to the conclusion that on average 71% of the voters got it right and voted for the correct party (Hines 2006); the Portuguese were the most correct voters (93%) while the Irish scored lowest (53%). Belgium scored right in the middle with 70% correct voters. Lau and colleagues' recent comparative work including 32 countries arrives at an average of 61% correct voting across all countries and elections (Lau, Patel et al. 2008). An election in Israel produced the highest level of correct voting (83%) while in Romania they recorded a record low of correct voting (24%). For the Belgian 1999 and 2003 elections, the authors recorded correct voting shares of around 61%. Belgium scores averagely and is not at all an exceptional case. We will show below, that our more detailed and precise measure of correct voting produces correct voting rates for Belgium that are *much* lower than the ones being reported by Lau and colleagues.

Our main claim in this study is that we can obtain a better and more precise measure of correct voting by relying on precise policy statements and objective information of parties stances. Drawing on these better measures of correct voting allows us to refine our analyses of the determinants of correct voting. When we tap more precisely to what extent voters are voting correctly – for example by assessing on *how many* issue positions they differ with their party – we can better examine the determinants of correct voting as well. Technically said, when our dependent variable is more validly and reliably measured, we can estimate models better grasping the variance in the dependent variable. Connected to this, a second contribution of the study is that it considers correct voting not as an binary or dichotomous phenomenon. People do not vote correctly *or* incorrectly, there are *degrees* of correctness (see also Koch 2005: 15). Some votes are more correct than others and we

show that one can fairly precisely measure the degree of correctness of voting. We argue that to be able to make a sensible transposition of the correct voting concept to other countries than majoritarian two-party systems as in the US, we need to go beyond the dichotomous logic and measure degrees of correct voting – one still can have large amounts of representation even with small amounts of dichotomous correct voting (see for a similar argument Lau, Andersen et al. 2008: 407). Third and related, the present study applies the idea of correct voting to a very different political system than the one it was initially conceived for. Previous research mostly focused on the US and on the US presidential elections and comparative research in other party systems is scarce (but see: Hines 2006; Lau, Patel et al. 2008). We show in this study that the concept of correct voting can be easily applied to an entirely different political system than the US and that it has general relevance as a measurement of the representative quality of democracies. A final asset of the present study is that it allows to compare the degree of correct voting across parties. The available explanatory studies tested a series of individual-level predictors of incorrect voting and some also incorporated predictors on the political system level. Yet, there is no work that focuses on the specific characteristics of parties that leads to more or less correct voting. We will show that parties matter.

Hypotheses: determinants of correct voting

A first batch of basic hypotheses is in line with the available research (Lau, Patel et al. 2005; Lau, Andersen et al. 2008; Lau, Patel et al. 2008) and deals with individuals' characteristics that stimulate correct voting. It is obvious that incorrect voting can be expected to be a more frequent phenomenon amongst less cognitively apt people. Political knowledge and interest should lead to better informed and thus more correct voting. We do not have measures of knowledge or interest at our disposal and will rely on the proxy of education. Our first hypotheses reads: *Lower educated people vote more incorrectly than higher skilled people (H1).*

Age is fairly straightforward too (see also: Lau, Patel et al. 2008). With age comes experience in voting decision making. The more elections citizens witnessed and participated in, the better they are able to make up their minds adequately and vote for the correct party. *Younger people vote more in correctly than older people (H2).*

One of the contributions we aim to make with the present study, is showing that correct voting not only depends on individuals or on the political system as a whole but also on the party system and party features. We put forward six hypotheses relating to parties' features. A first hypothesis indirectly tests the idea that more competition and thus more complex decision tasks leads to more incorrect voting. As we only deal with one country we cannot compare different party systems with different levels of fragmentation. The Belgian party system, though, is very crowded but that is in particular the case at the right side of the political spectrum. There are two left-wing parties (*Sp.a* and *Groen!*), one centre party (*CD&V*) and four rightwing parties (*VB*, *LDD*, *VLD* and *N-VA*). Consequently, the right wing parties are closer together and it is more difficult for a right-wing voter to pick out the correct party than it is for a left-wing voter. So, we expect that correct voting is associated with the ideological position of the preferred party. *Right-wing parties in Belgium count more incorrect voters than left-wing parties (H3)*.

In an election campaign parties face a double challenge: they have to keep the voters they already had and at the same time they have to broaden their base by attracting new voters that did not vote for the party before. It is likely that these new voters are less affiliated with the party than the loyal voters who have voted for and identified with the party for a longer time – similarly the US correct voting literature has established that party identification boosts correct voting (Lau, Andersen et al. 2008). In this paper, we cannot test on the individual level whether there is more incorrect voting amongst voters that switched parties than amongst loyal voters. Yet, we can indirectly test, on the party-level, the idea that incoming voters differ from persistent voters. When parties win elections – their vote share goes up – we can be pretty sure that they managed to attract a lot of new voters. Together with the assumption that new voters are more frequently incorrect voters than old voters, this leads to the hypothesis that winning parties count, on average, more incorrect voters amongst their electorate than losing parties (who are reduced to their core electorate). In fact, we can theorize that winning elections even depends precisely on the fact that parties succeed in attracting many voters that do *not* agree with the party on many points. Parties that manage to attract new voters notwithstanding the differences of opinion with these new voters, tend to win the elections. Winning means broadening its base beyond the people who actually agree with the party's policy. So, our hypotheses states: *winning elections leads, on average, to more incorrect voting for the party than losing elections (H4)*. We note that this hypothesis contradicts some of

the voting and trust literature contending that majoritarian party systems leads to better representation of the winners of elections (and thus to distrust among repetitive losers of elections)(Anderson and Guillory 1997). In fact, we hypothesize just the opposite: winning elections diminishes the effective policy representation of the voters of these winning parties as more of the winning voters will be presented by parties that do *not* share their ideas.

Large parties should, on average, be more internally heterogeneous than small parties. If voters are normally distributed over a given ideological spectrum, large parties normally adopt a broader (larger) position on this spectrum. Consequently, their electorate should be more ideologically diverse and, hence, we expect there to be more incorrect voting for larger parties. Smaller niche parties, in contrast, can cater to specific segments of the population and, *ceteris paribus*, their electorates should display more ideological homogeneity. Applied to correct voting we expect: *larger parties have more incorrect voters than smaller parties (H5)*.

It is easier for citizens to vote correctly when the different parties are better distinguishable. In crowded party systems parties are, on average, closer together and, thus, more difficult to distinguish. Yet, there are degrees of distinctiveness within the same party system. Following Lau and Redlawsk (2007) who compared several American presidential races and found that extreme presidential candidates got more correct votes than more centrist candidates, we suppose that in multiparty systems the ideologically more extreme parties get comparatively more correct votes than the ideologically less distinct and more centrist parties. Stated as an hypothesis: *ideologically more extreme parties get on average more correct votes than ideologically more centrist parties (H6)*.

Parties get votes for a lot of reasons, and policy content admittedly is only one of them (and we consider it the only correct measure of correct voting). The more voting, in a strong party system, is based on the personality of the candidates on a party list, the less likely it is to be driven by policy preferences. So, we consider correct voting and preference voting as a trade-off. More preferential votes equals less correct voting. *Parties whose candidates get a lot of preferential votes get more incorrect votes than parties with less preferential votes (H7)*.

We expect there to be differences between voters of opposition and government parties. Governments parties' policies are visible and transparent. After all, in an election campaign concluding a legislature, they just had the chance to carry out their program. Large parts of the campaign, therefore, will

be spend discussing the results of the previous government. Opposition parties' policy ideas, on the other hand, are more obscure. Being in the opposition, discussions during the previous term have been mainly reactive, that is: challenging government's policies. Added to that, we also expect that opposition parties attract a number of dissatisfied voters who oppose government parties for many possible reasons. These negative or protest voters primarily decide to vote against the government and are less attracted by the programs offered by the opposition parties. In short, they just want to throw the rascals out. In principle, one could make an opposite argument too, namely that incumbents' larger resources (e.g. character visibility, experience...) enables them to attract voters who would not have voted for them would they not have been in power (this argument is made by Koch 2005: 6 for example). Yet, we believe the first factor to be stronger and expect that *the electorate of opposition parties votes more incorrectly than the electorate of the government parties (H8)*.

Finally, we put forward a general hypothesis about differences over time. Correct voting is not stable over time. It may differ between elections. Electoral institutions may change (though this is not the case in Belgium during the research period), party competition and fragmentation may shift, voters may get better informed, campaigns may be more or less informative etc. In their comparative project, Lau and colleagues found differences in levels of correct voting in the same country through time (Lau, Patel et al. 2008: 7-8). This leads to the hypotheses that *there will be differences in levels of incorrect voting across time (H9)*.

Data and methods

To test the ideas formulated above, we have an innovative dataset at our disposal. Our evidence consists of detailed data on issue positions of voters and of parties in Belgium. More concrete, at the elections of 2003 (national), 2004 (regional), 2007 (national), and 2009 (regional) we confronted a representative sample (each time N=±1000) of the Belgian population with a substantial battery of statements about current issues. The number of statements varied across elections but for each of the four elections we used at least 39 issue statements (total number of different statements over the four elections equals 229; 39 in 2003, 90 in 2004, 50 in 2007 and 50 in 2009). The statements where formulated in a straightforward manner and respondents were only asked whether they agreed or disagreed, or did not have an opinion.

The surveys were each carried out two months before election date. In addition to the statements, our surveys also included socio-demographics, several political attitudes, and political (voting) behavior. The crucial variables here are previous voting behavior and future voting intention. So, our voter data permit us to pretty reliably chart the detailed issue positions of past and future electorates of all Belgian parties over a period of six years and comprising two electoral cycles (regional and national). In this paper we will mainly rely on the future voting intention and less on the past vote – the past vote may be years ago and it is likely that both parties and voters have changed their stances. Future voting intention is a proxy for the current vote choice of the respondent, and therefore superior for our purposes. For the 2007 elections, we do not dispose of the voting intention data and consequently, for most analyses, the 2007 data will not be used and we will draw on the 2003, 2004, and 2009 data (N=3099 respondents, N=179 issue position statements).

To assess (in)correct voting, however, one does not only need voter data but also party data. The neat thing is that we dispose of identical issue position information about all Belgian political parties. At about the same time when the population was surveyed and across the four elections, all Belgian parties made their official position to the same statements known to us. The authors of this paper, in fact, were producing a so called Voting Aid Application (VAA); that is an online system that helps people with making their choice (see for example: Walgrave, Van Aelst et al. 2008; Walgrave, Nuytemans et al. 2009). The VAA, called '*De Stemtest*', was sponsored by the public broadcaster VRT. Parties were asked to convey their positions to the makers of the VAA so that these could construct a system that links voters and parties and could give individual voters validated information about where parties stand compared to their own positions. Parties took the request by the makers of the VAA very seriously. Party leaders themselves, together with their most close advisors or the party executive, answered the questions and decided on parties' positions on the same 229 issue statements voters were confronted with. We can safely assume that the recorded party positions capture the real party stances (maybe even more than the formal party manifestos); the positions they took on the issues were largely publicized and discussed in the mass media. There are many parties in Belgium (Flanders). Through the research period (2003-2009) the fragmentation of the party system further increased and all these parties were requested to convey their party's official position on the issue statements. In total, we have position data for 11 different parties. For reasons of clarity, since some parties were new and only competed one election, and since we do

not have enough voters for these small parties in our dataset, we will limit our analyses here to the seven main parties in the Belgian (Flemish) party system: *CD&V* (christian-democrats), *VLD* (liberals), *Sp.a* (socialists), *Vlaams Belang* (extreme-right), *Groen!* (greens), *N-VA* (Flemish nationalists), and *LDD* (right-liberals).

Our evidence consists of the positions voters and parties adopted vis-à-vis a large number of issue statements. The question that pops up, of course, is to what extent the issue statements can be regarded as a representative sample of all possible issue statements. In other words: do our statements grasp overall party positions in a valid and systematic way? We cannot definitely prove that this is the case, but we are fairly confident that our batch of statements grasps a good deal of parties' overall position. First, for each election, we have a large amount of statements per party (minimum 39). This increases the reliability of our measure (scale) considerably. Second, the statements have been carefully selected to map onto the main policy domains. No major policy domains are ignored and a wide variety of domains is encapsulated whereby the most important domains are covered by more statements. Third, the select statements each time attempt to grasp actual and current debates in the run-up to each election. They include many issues that have been widely discussed in the media and should therefore be considered as salient issues. Fourth, the statements have been formulated in such a way so as to maximize differences between parties. They do not relate to valence issues but to issues on which parties had adopted clear and diverging policy positions. This increase the chance that we are dealing with underlying and real party positions and ideologies. Fifth, the associations between statements (both on the respondents as on the party level) has for each election been exploratively examined. These analyses yielded similarities and differences between parties and voters that make sense and that resemble the traditional socio-economic left-right cleavage as well as the new socio-cultural progressive-conservative cleavage. So, at face value, the issue statements grasp a big part of the main conflicts and vault lines dividing Belgian politics.

Our study is situated in Belgium; more concretely in Flanders, Belgium largest region. What characteristics of the Belgian political system are relevant for our study here? The most important feature of the Belgian polity is its deeply federal character. The language divide (Dutch-French) splits the country in two large regions (Flanders-Wallonia) with a bilingual (but mainly French) Brussels-capital region in the middle. Both major regions form separate political arenas: different people compete for elections and different

media cater to the different communities (Billiet, Maddens et al. 2006). The four elections in our dataset are strictly speaking not comparable – with two regional and two national elections – but as regional elections and national elections are very similar (same parties, same candidates, same media exposure, and same issues) we consider them here as being equivalent.

A second key feature of the Belgian (and Flemish) polity is the extremely fragmented nature of the party system. In fact, Belgium has one of the most fragmented party systems available (Anckar 2000) and the level of fragmentation has gone up starkly during the last two decades. There are good reasons to expect that fragmentation and representation are associated. Indeed, purely mathematically party systems with more parties offer better chances for representation: provided that parties differ from each other, as the number of parties goes up more citizens will get the chance to vote for parties that are positioned closer to their own political position. A more crowded party system increases the possibility for correct voting to occur. Yet, more parties also implies that the parties are closer positioned to each other, that they are not so mutually different, and that it becomes more difficult for voters to inform themselves on parties' precise positions. Fragmented party systems lead to a decrease in transparency and an increase in information costs as voters have to take into account information about more parties. So, although fragmentation creates more theoretical possibilities for correct voting (for every voter there exists a party that closely matches her beliefs), it also increases the cost of correct voting (it is difficult to find this closest party) (for a similar point see: Hines 2006: 9; Lau, Patel et al. 2008: 9). Consequently, we are not sure what high fragmentation does on balance with actual representation and correct voting - increase or decrease it.

A third feature of Belgian politics that might affect levels of correct voting is the compulsory character of the vote. Due to compulsory voting laws turnout in Belgium is consistently very high. This probably implies that many uninterested and inattentive Belgian citizens still go out to vote – not because they want but because they have to. We expect this to, in general, decrease the level of correct voting in Belgium (see also: Lau, Patel et al. 2008). Yet, as we showed earlier, previous research did not come to the conclusion that Belgium was a special or deviant case in terms of correct voting, even on the contrary.

Summarizing, the analyses below draw on an exceptionally rich and large dataset including direct, detailed, standardized and extensive information about voters' and parties' issue positions over time. Especially unique is the fact that we dispose of certified and reliable, direct measures of

party positions that can be directly matched with identical population data. This offer a strong design to test correct voting and adequate representation. Our evidence regarding voters' and parties' issue positions is analyzed on three different levels: the individual level (what makes an individual vote correctly?), the party-level (which party features lead to correct voting for that party?), and the election-level (are there differences in correct voting between elections?).

Before we start analyzing, we present a succinct overview of the Belgian parties' positions and their overlap throughout the research period. On all 229 statements, to what extent are parties' positions overlapping? Or in other words: how close to each other are the different Belgian parties? Table 1 has the evidence.

Table 1: Percent agreement between parties on all issue statements (combined data for 2003, 2004, 2007 and 2009)

	Groen!	CD&V	N-VA	Sp.a	VB	VLD	LDD	N
Groen!	100.0	47.7	41.7	67.5	43.2	28.3	21.0	229
CD&V	47.7	100.0	62.8	52.6	58.6	55.0	50.0	229
N-VA	41.7	62.8	100.0	46.1	62.7	70.5	63.0	229
Sp.a	67.5	52.6	46.1	100.0	48.6	42.8	25.0	229
VB	43.2	58.6	62.7	48.6	100.0	51.3	66.0	229
VLD	28.3	55.0	70.5	42.8	51.3	100.0	63.0	229
LDD	21.0	50.0	63.0	25.0	66.0	63.0	100.0	100

The table shows that the seven parties do offer choice to the voters - there are differences between the parties. Yet on the other hand, parties overlap to a fairly large extent: in general, parties agree on 59.3% of the statements. So, across all 36 party pairs the average overlap comes close to two thirds. The closest parties are *VLD* and *N-VA* (70.5%) while the most distant parties are *LDD* and *Groen!* (21.0%). At face value, this makes much sense as *VLD* and *N-VA* both are centre-right parties while *Groen!* is an outspoken left-wing party and *LDD* is a radical right-wing liberal party. The other overlap figures make sense too with left-wing (*Groen!* and *Sp.a*) and (centre-)right-wing parties (*VLD* and *LDD*, *VB* and *N-VA* etc.) much closer to each other than vice versa. Overall, the party distance table validates that the sample of statements grasps the major and well-known cleavages and vault lines in Belgian politics. Interestingly, distances between parties do not vary much over the four elections we cover. In 2003, 2004, 2007, and 2009 the average overlap does not change but is constant at $\pm 59\%$. This testifies to the fact that our sample of statements – although each time containing different issue

statements -is more or less constant over time and covers similar ideological dimensions election after election.

The main expectation we derive from Table 1 is that incorrect voting would be mostly situated between party pairs that are close together (see bold type face in the table). When parties are close, it will be more difficult for the voters to distinguish them from each other and, as a consequence, we expect the electorate to resort increasingly to other means of informing their vote (e.g. habit, party leader, party image...) leading to incorrect voting.

Results

Degrees of representation

First we ascertain bivariately to what extent incorrect voting is a frequent phenomenon in Belgian politics and we introduce the dependent variables we will draw upon in the next section. We begin by calculating per voter the degree of congruence with the party she plans to vote for as well as the degree of congruence with the other parties. The idea is that, if voters voted largely correctly, the congruence with the own party should be high and systematically higher than the congruence with other parties. Table 2 presents the evidence.

Table 2: Average agreement (%), per party electorate, of all party voters on all issue statements with all parties, (combined data for 2003, 2004 and 2009; N=179 statements)

Current vote choice	Percent agreement with...							
	Groen!	CD&V	N-VA	Sp.a	VB	VLD	LDD	N
Groen!	50.8	48.7	48.8	52.5	45.4	46.9	9.2	197
CD&V	47.5	48.0	51.3	49.9	49.6	49.4	9.0	678
N-VA	44.1	44.7	49.7	47.3	46.5	42.4	38.2	139
Sp.a	49.3	47.3	49.7	51.9	46.7	48.6	7.9	526
VB	43.5	46.9	52.8	49.9	52.7	49.7	14.9	382
VLD	45.4	46.3	48.5	48.8	46.1	48.0	9.0	519
LDD	42.5	43.2	50.2	49.1	47.5	43.1	48.5	133

The evidence suggests that there sure is some correct voting in Belgium, but that is not extremely frequent. Conversely, the table seems to imply that in many cases voters do not opt for the party that is closest to their combined issue positions. The diagonal and shaded figures contain the average congruence between a party's electorate and the same party's issue positions.

For example, the 50.8% in the left upper corner signifies that all prospective *Groen!* voters through all three elections for which we have voting intentions do have an average congruence with the green party on a bit more than half of the issue positions. The figure implies that on just a little less than half of the statements green voters do *not* agree with their party. The figures on the diagonal in Table 2 document that aggregate differences between parties are small: agreement scores between parties and their electorate hover around 50% with some parties slightly above and others slightly below. Interestingly, some electorates are on average closer to *other* parties than to their own preferred party. We marked these cases in bold in the table; for five of the seven electorates there is at least one other party (two for *VLD* and *LDD*) whose positions are on average closer than those of the own preferred party. This is strong proof of incorrect voting and goes against earlier research that found systematically high levels of correct voting in the US but also comparatively.

One could argue that it is not surprising that voters and their parties are not always on the same page when it comes to a large aggregate batch of very diverse issue positions. Parties are specialized in specific issues and are considered as the ‘owners’ of certain issues and not of others. This is the well-know issue-ownership thesis (Petrocik 1989; Petrocik 1996). Some issues are particularly salient for parties and their electorate and we expect that parties and their electorate in particular concur on these issues and not necessarily on all other issues. Based on earlier work on Belgian parties’ issue ownership (Walgrave and De Swert 2007) we assigned issues (and statements about these issues) to specific parties and reran the analyses on the specific subsets of statements that can be considered as dealing with a party’s key issues. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Average agreement (%), per party electorate, of all party voters on the party's most important issue statements with all parties, (combined data for 2003, 2004 and 2009)

Current vote choice and statement subset	Percent agreement with...							
	Groen!	CD&V	N-VA	Sp.a	VB	VLD	LDD	N
Groen!	51.3	48.8	48.1	54.5	47.4	44.3	8.8	197
CD&V	45.6	53.1	55.8	49.1	49.7	50.2	8.6	678
N-VA	51.1	42.6	54.4	50.1	41.4	48.0	44.9	139
Sp.a	48.0	47.9	50.0	53.2	48.2	45.8	7.4	526
VB	35.2	50.3	60.3	50.7	58.9	51.0	17.9	382
VLD	47.5	48.6	43.5	44.6	48.4	42.9	9.0	519
LDD	35.8	40.9	47.3	49.3	50.6	51.8	50.9	133

Compared to the aggregate analysis including all statements (see Table 2), the congruence with the preferred party goes up. Except for the *VLD* who is doing remarkably bad on its own issues, the average agreement between voters and their parties now lies consistently above 50% with even almost 60% congruence between *Vlaams Belang* voters and their party. Yet, even on their owned issues parties are often beaten by other parties (see the figures in bold). So, the evidence cautiously supports the idea that voters are (somewhat) more close to their party when it comes to issues the party cares a lot about. Yet, even on those pet issues the agreement scores remain on the low side and parties, even on their own issues, are quite often surpassed by competing parties.

Although our analyses so far suggested that incorrect voting is all over the place, we did not directly gauge incorrect voting. In a very strict sense, incorrect voting happens when an individual votes for another party than the one she is most close to in terms of issue position. Table 4 yields direct evidence on incorrect voting per party. The first data column contains, separately for each electorate, the percentage of statements a voter concurs with her preferred party (see also Table 2)(as well as the standard deviation). The second column lists the on average highest agreement score each electorate has with any party (and the standard deviation). The third column contains the average distances between the preferred party and the closest party. The fourth and fifth columns contain the percentage of correct and incorrect voters per electorate - a correct vote is a vote for the closest party; an incorrect vote is any other vote.

Table 4: Average agreement (%) with preferred party, highest possible agreement with any, and correct voting per party electorate (combined data for 2003, 2004 and 2009)

	Agreement with preferred party (stddev.)	Highest agreement with any party (stddev.)	Average distance preferred and closest party	Percent of voters preferring...		N
				... the 'correct' party	... an incorrect party	
Groen!	50.8 (14.4)	60.1 (7.54)	9.3	37.1	62.9	197
CD&V	48.0 (8.15)	58.4 (6.69)	10.3	12.8	87.2	678
N-VA	49.7 (9.63)	56.7 (7.18)	6.9	30.9	69.1	139
Sp.a	51.9 (9.29)	58.4 (6.83)	6.5	35.9	64.1	526
VB	52.7 (12.1)	59.7 (6.63)	7.0	36.4	63.6	382
VLD	48.0 (9.99)	56.4 (7.13)	8.5	20.0	80.0	519
LDD	48.5 (11.44)	57.2 (7.81)	8.8	30.8	69.2	133
Overall	49.8 (10.41)	58.1 (7.05)	8.3	26.3	73.7	2574

The table attests that the average voter of any party has *another* party she is more close to – the highest percentage agreement with any other party is systematically about 8% higher than the agreement with the own party (compare columns 1 and 2). This leads to the figures in the two next columns: on average - over all 229 statements, seven electorates and three elections - almost 3/4th of the surveyed voters vote *incorrectly* (73.7%) while only 1/4th vote for the party that is the best match (26.3%). Differences between party electorates are considerable with some electorates exhibiting relatively high correct voting rates (*Groen!* and *VB*) and other displaying, we dare to say astonishingly low correct voting rates (*CD&V* and *VLD*).

By and large, this is strong evidence for the fact that incorrect voting, defined in a strict way, is omnipresent and that much more voters in Belgium vote incorrectly rather than correctly. Earlier, we cited previous comparative correct voting research including Belgium; those studies estimated the level of correct voting in Belgium to be considerably higher around 60-70%. Lau c.s. investigated the same Belgian 2003 elections we study here and concluded that about 70% of the Belgian voters voted correctly in 2003 (Lau, Patel et al. 2008). Based on our more reliable and precise evidence on parties' and voters' actual preferences we do challenge these optimistic conclusions. Correct voting in Belgium is way less frequent than previous studies argued. Note that in the few available comparative studies Belgian voters scored just around the average regarding correct voting; it is by no means an exceptionally incorrectly voting country. The low incidence of correct voting in Belgium must be put somewhat in perspective, though, as the Belgian party system is very crowded. The 26.3% correct voters can be compared with the share each party would have had when people just voted randomly, that is: 14.3% (=100/7). So there

seems to be some correct voting in Belgium but it only pertains to about one tenth of the entire electorate voting more correct than when votes would have been distributed randomly.

Correct voting can be defined very strictly, the only correct vote is a vote for the party that is *the* closest party, or more loosely as voting on a party that is fairly close but not necessarily the single most close party. In an overcrowded multiparty system as in Belgium with seven major parties and with lots of overlap between parties' positions (see Table 1) it is not really sensible to consider correct voting as a dichotomous variable. Rather, correct voting must be considered a continuum with some people exerting a fairly correct vote and with others voting rather more incorrectly. For example, since *VLD* and *N-VA* have an issue overlap of 70.5% (Table 1) many voters are close to both parties; it is not accurate to call a vote for one of these parties an incorrect vote while only a vote for the other but closer party is categorized as correct. In other words: we need a more realistic measurement of correct voting that is tailored to crowded multiparty systems. Table 5 contains such a measure. It is, per party electorate, the rank order of the preferred party on the agreement scale. The idea is that people who vote for parties that are *comparatively* close to them – there are a few or no parties positioned in between their preferred party and their most close party - exhibit correct voting. If people, in contrast, vote for parties that are way down the rank order their vote is comparatively less correct. This idea is related to the discussion about inter- and intra-block switching in the electoral literature. When people switch to other parties chances are high that they opt for a party that is ideologically relatively close (intra-block switch). Voters do seldom switch to parties that are ideologically very distant (inter-block-switch)(Lachat 2004).

Table 5: Rank order of preferred party on agreement scale, row percentages and cumulative percentages per party (combined data for 2003, 2004 and 2009)

Current vote choice	Rank order of the party on agreement scale							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N
Groen!	37.1	17.3	7.1	9.1	8.1	19.8	1.5	197
Σ	37.1	54.3	61.4	70.6	78.7	98.5	100.0	
CD&V	12.8	12.4	15.9	20.2	19.2	19.0	0.4	678
Σ	12.8	25.2	41.2	61.4	80.5	99.6	100.0	
N-VA	30.9	23.7	19.4	11.5	10.1	3.6	0.7	139
Σ	30.9	54.7	74.1	85.6	95.7	99.3	100.0	
Sp.a	35.9	20.0	9.9	14.8	13.3	6.1	0.0	526
Σ	35.9	55.9	65.8	80.6	93.9	100.0	100.0	
VB	36.4	18.8	15.2	9.9	8.6	9.9	1.0	382
Σ	36.4	55.2	70.4	80.4	89.0	99.0	100.0	
VLD	20.0	19.3	19.7	15.4	16.0	8.5	1.2	519
Σ	20.0	39.3	59.0	74.4	90.4	98.8	100.0	
LDD	30.8	15.0	8.3	13.5	6.0	15.0	11.3	133
Σ	30.8	45.9	54.1	67.7	73.7	88.7	100.0	
Overall	26.3	17.4	14.5	15.0	13.8	11.9	1.2	2574
Σ	26.3	43.7	58.1	73.1	86.8	98.8	100.0	

Across all parties, we see an almost linear pattern. The preferred party scores in 26.3% of the cases highest on the agreement scale. In 17.4% of the cases the preferred party is second, in 14.5% of the cases it is third etc. This makes sense. It shows that, although many people do not vote for the closest party, a good many do. It also shows that most people do vote for parties that are relatively close and that the number of people who vote for distant parties is relatively small and decreases with increasing distance. On the other hand, the slope is rather flat and substantial amounts of voters vote for parties that are way down in their personal agreement rank order. There are some noticeable exceptions to this general pattern. Especially the *CD&V* voters do not behave according to this linear correct voting logic. The largest categories of *CD&V* voters are way down the scale. The modal category among the *CD&V* voters are those that have the *CD&V* only as the fourth most close party and the second category has the *CD&V* even as the fifth party (see bold figures in the table). This strongly suggests that *CD&V* voters in Belgium are to a very large extent voting incorrectly.

We established above that the average issue position agreement between parties and their electorate is rather small, around 50%. The electoral context, however, may differ from election to election and cause parties and their electorate to be on average closer to each other in some elections compared to

others. Therefore we compare the average agreement score per party over three covered elections. Results are in Table 5.

Table 5: Average agreement (%) of party electorates with preferred party per election

Vote choice	Percent agreement with party at elections in...		
	2003	2004	2009
Groen!	35.7	59.0	57.3
CD&V (+ N-VA in 2004)	43.8	50.9	47.2
N-VA	39.8	-	52.6
Sp.a	43.8	56.4	56.3
VB	33.9	60.7	51.1
VLD	42.6	58.8	44.6
LDD	-	-	48.5
Overall	41.7	56.0	50.5
N	820	994	760

The data show that there are indeed considerable differences over time. In 2003 the average agreement between parties and their electorate was 41.7%, in 2004 it rose to 56.0% to return to an average score of 50.0% in 2009. All parties, except for the *Sp.a*, show this secular up-and-down trend. These differences could be due to several causes. It could be that the 2003 issue statements were less ‘friendly’ formulated and pushed parties to adopt on average unpopular positions that conflicted with a large part of their electorate (and that of other parties as well). Another possibility is that parties went through a learning process between 2003 and 2004. As mentioned earlier, the evidence was gathered in the process of constructing the VAA *De Stemtest* sponsored by the Belgian public broadcaster. In 2003 parties did not yet know how to deal with the statements and how to answer them to their advantage. One year later, they had more experience and may have collectively adopted more popular positions when confronted with the statements. A third possibility is that, in 2004 (and 2009), voters were better informed than in 2003 and simply voted more correctly. This may have been the case as the 2003 national elections had been preceded by a four-year period without elections and thus without informative election campaign – we remind that the survey of voters and parties was each time conducted two months *before* the elections. In 2004, the 2003 elections and campaign had just happened eight months earlier and voters may still have been better informed. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that the average agreement in 2009 is higher than in 2003 but lower than in 2004. The 2009 regional elections were preceded by national elections only two years earlier (2007).

In any case, we find substantial differences between elections and we need to incorporate the election context variable in our multivariate analyses below.

Wrapping up the descriptive part of the analyses, we will test our nine incorrect voting hypotheses on four different operationalizations of incorrect voting: (1) the *reversed* agreement score with the preferred party (higher = more incorrect voting); (2) the dichotomous correct voting variable (vote closest party = correct (0); all other votes = incorrect (1)); (3) the rank order on the agreement scale of the preferred party (1-7; larger = more incorrect voting); (4) the average distance between the preferred party and the closest party (larger = more incorrect).

Determinants of representation

We present a series of four regressions with each one of the different measures of incorrect voting as dependent variables (Table 6-9). We always estimate three models: model 1 with voter characteristics only, model 2 with specific election dummies, and model 3 with party traits. We discuss the results of all these models together and see whether the independent variables hold across the different operationalizations of incorrect voting.

In terms of the individual features of voters, it is clear that their impact on incorrect voting is small. Only sex seems to play a role. Men are on average voting less correctly than women. This applies to three of the four models estimating different operationalizations of incorrect voting. The impact of sex is small (see the low explained variance of the models with voter traits only) but it is significant and holds when election dummies and party variables are included. Contrary to H1 and H2, education and age do not play a role and we must reject these hypotheses.

Table 6: OLS regression estimating issue position disagreement with preferred party (larger = more disagreement = more incorrect vote)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig
Voters						
Age (1-7; low-high)	.056	.007	.012	.478	.004	.805
Sex (0=man; 1=woman)	.009	.667	-.025	.122	-.022	.174
Education (1-6; low-high)	-.154	.000	-.011	.528	-.009	.607
Elections						
2004 (ref: 2003)	-	-	-.675	.000	-.673	.000
2009 (ref: 2003)	-	-	-.386	.000	-.335	.000
Parties						
Left-right scale (1-7; left-right)	-	-	-	-	.239	.000
Previous election results (% difference)	-	-	-	-	-.059	.006
Party size (percentage votes)	-	-	-	-	-.097	.002
Extremity (0-4; central-extreme)	-	-	-	-	-.296	.000
Preference votes (% PV first candidate)	-	-	-	-	.012	.695
Government position (0=opp.; 1 = gov.)	-	-	-	-	-.024	.318
Adj R ²	.030		.354		.386	
N	2,434		2,434		2,326	

Table 7: OLS regression estimating dichotomous incorrect voting (not voting for the most close party = incorrect vote)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig
Voters						
Age (1-7; low-high)	.022	.288	.006	.623	-.013	.532
Sex (0=man; 1=woman)	-.032	.122	.018	.046	-.050	.013
Education (1-6; low-high)	-.018	.386	.006	.561	.013	.535
Elections						
2004 (ref: 2003)			.021	.000	-.093	.002
2009 (ref: 2003)			.023	.000	-.032	.336
Parties						
Left-right scale (1-7; left-right)					.162	.007
Previous election results (% difference)					-.068	.010
Party size (percentage votes)					.006	.868
Extremity (0-4; central-extreme)					-.222	.000
Preference votes (% PV first candidate)					.147	.000
Government position (0=opp.; 1 = gov.)					-.068	.024
Adj R ²	.001		.024		.074	
N	2,434		2,434		2,326	

Table 8: OLS regression estimating rank order on issue position scale of the preferred party (higher number = lower rank = more incorrect vote)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig
Voters						
Age (1-7; low-high)	.006	.773	-.009	.662	-.027	.194
Sex (0=man; 1=woman)	-.032	.113	-.043	.031	-.045	.024
Education (1-6; low-high)	-.030	.152	.006	.768	.001	.959
Elections						
2004 (ref: 2003)			-.206	.000	-.180	.000
2009 (ref: 2003)			-.183	.000	-.075	.026
Parties						
Left-right scale (1-7; left-right)					.188	.002
Previous election results (% difference)					-.022	.394
Party size (percentage votes)					-.057	.133
Extremity (0-4; central-extreme)					-.317	.000
Preference votes (% PV first candidate)					.063	.090
Government position (0=opp.; 1 = gov.)					-.087	.003
Adj R ²	.001		.037		.083	
N	2434		2434		2326	

Table 9: OLS regression estimating the issue position distance between chosen party and party with the highest score (larger distance = more incorrect vote)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig	Std Beta	Sig
Voters						
Age (1-7; low-high)	.026	.215	.002	.914	-.003	.874
Sex (0=man; 1=woman)	-.052	.011	-.070	.000	-.071	.000
Education (1-6; low-high)	-.045	.032	.025	.227	.021	.309
Elections						
2004 (ref: 2003)	-	-	-.349	.000	-.368	.000
2009 (ref: 2003)	-	-	-.239	.000	-.220	.000
Parties						
Left-right scale (1-7; left-right)	-	-	-	-	.096	.098
Previous election results (% difference)	-	-	-	-	-.076	.003
Party size (percentage votes)	-	-	-	-	-.053	.156
Extremity (0-4; central-extreme)	-	-	-	-	-.186	.001
Preference votes (% PV first candidate)	-	-	-	-	-.013	.713
Government position (0=opp.; 1 = gov.)	-	-	-	-	-.087	.003
Adj R ²	.005		.095		.115	
N	2,434		2,434		2,326	

A second series of variables relates to the specific elections in our sample. We compare the 2004 and the 2009 elections data with the 2003 elections data that act as a baseline. Election effects are strong and persistent across the board. The election dummy coefficients are by far the strongest predictors of incorrect voting in its four different guises. Compared to the 2003 elections, there is much less incorrect voting in 2004 and in 2009. This testifies that incorrect voting is a context-dependent phenomenon and confirms H9. Contingent on the specific electoral context, more people do not vote for their most close party. At present, we are unaware how we could further test this context specific electoral context with only four different elections in our database. Probably, learning by parties and the electorate as well as the varying competition and crowdedness of the party system plays a role. We leave it to other work to further explore this.

The third batch of variables relates to party traits. Many coefficients are significant and point towards the expected direction. The left-right variable (for precise operationalizations of all independent variables: see technical appendix) is significant in three of the four models. The more right-wing a party in Belgium, the more incorrect its voters vote. We do not claim that right-wing parties experience less correct voting because of their ideology; rather the right-wing side of the party spectrum in Flanders is much more crowded leading to higher rates of incorrect voting at the right. We can maintain H3. Previous election result is significant too and goes in the expected direction corroborating H4. When parties gain votes at the polls, their voters do on average more so incorrectly. Gaining elections means broadening one's base and this leads to a decrease in correct votes. In a sense, electoral changes lead to less effective and correct representation. Party size plays a more modest role, we guess that the effect of party size is largely soaked up by the other variables (extremity, party position and previous elections result). Only in one model, with the disagreement score variable as the dependent variable, does party size significantly affect incorrect voting. In that model, though, the sign goes in the opposite direction as expected: the larger the party the *less* incorrect voting. H5 is falsified and must be discarded. The extremity of the parties is a powerful variable; when parties have a more extreme ideological position, the number of correct votes goes up. This is logical and confirms our expectations. Centre parties have a less outspoken and distinct profile and, as a consequence, many of their voters should in reality, would they have followed their issue position preferences, have voted for another party. H6 is supported by the evidence. The number of preference

votes a party got at the previous elections is not a very strong predictor; it is only significant in one case (the dichotomous correct voting model) where it goes in the opposite direction than expected. We reject H7. Finally, the position of the party as an incumbent or opposition party is significant in three of the four models. Votes for government parties are on average more correct votes than votes for opposition parties as we expected. H8 receives clear support and can be maintained. Table 10 summarizes the hypotheses and our findings.

Table 10: Hypotheses and findings

Hypothesis		Test
H1	Low education → more incorrect voting	-
H2	Younger → more incorrect voting	-
H3	Right wing parties → more incorrect voting	+
H4	Previous elections gain → more incorrect voting	+
H5	Large party → more incorrect voting	-
H6	Center party → more incorrect voting	+
H7	More preference votes → more incorrect voting	±
H8	Opposition party → more incorrect voting	+
H9	Different elections → different levels of correct voting	+

By and large, the models do confirm most of our expectations and corroborate many hypotheses. The explained variance of the models remains modest, though. A lot of the incorrect voting is not captured by the variables we present here. The best models that most efficiently grasp a consistent part of the variation in incorrect voting are the initial models with the disagreement score as the dependent variable; the worst models are the dichotomous voting models. This underscores the fact that incorrect voting, at least in multiparty systems, is best conceptualized and operationalized as a continuous and not as a dichotomous variable. We can make most sense of why people vote incorrectly when we distinguish different levels of incorrectness.

Conclusion and discussion

The study departed from the idea that adequate representation entails that voters vote for the party that best matches their interests and values. How can we expect policy makers to carry out the public’s wishes if they are selected by a public that does *not* base its choice on its wishes? Drawing on the concept of correct voting – voting for the candidate or party that one would have voted for under conditions of perfect information – we examined the case of

Belgium. Relying on unique and direct evidence about voters' and parties' positions on an extensive range of specific policy issues we examined to what extent parties and their voters in Belgium agree and we investigated what could explain potential mismatches between parties and their constituency.

In terms of the share of correct voting in Belgium our findings strongly contradicted previous research on the US but also in other countries (including Belgium). In a strict sense, only one fourth of the voters in our sample can be considered as truly voting correctly. We argued that in a multi-party system with many parties close to each other, it does not make sense to treat correct voting as something binary. Voting correctly is a matter of degree and we proposed several alternative measures of correct voting that do a better job in grasping the scale character of correct voting in non-majoritarian systems. But even when broadening, and softening, the categorization of correct voting the fact remains that many Belgian voters opt for a party that does not satisfactorily matches their ideas and values and, therefore, cannot be considered as representing them properly in terms of policy content; the average distance between voters and parties is substantial.

We doubt whether this finding is caused by typical Belgian idiosyncrasies, although we do not have any definitive proof thereof. Naturally, the crowded character of the Belgian party system makes picking the right party a comparatively difficult task but many voters in our surveys did not even pick a party that was just reasonably close to their own positions. Moreover, previous comparative research including the Belgian case, and even incorporating the same elections as the ones we examined in this paper, established that Belgium is definitely no exceptional case when (in)correct voting is considered. In fact, Belgium exhibited average scores each time.

The main reason we found such low levels of correct voting, we believe, is the new data we use: direct and objective measures of policy preferences of parties (candidates) and similar standardized measures of voters. Previous research drew on broader and less reliable evidence especially on parties' positions; most available research used subjective measures based on voters' perceptions of parties' positions which, almost endogenously, leads to larger congruence between voters and their parties. Moreover, the optimistic conclusions reached by previous studies cheering about the 'surprisingly' large amounts of correct voting are partly based not on measures of policy preference but on other measures such as party identification. The crucial idea of substantial representation, though, is that policy preferences are translated into policy via voting. The only 'pure' way to measure this mechanism is by

only taking policy content into account when matching voters and parties. Our results for Belgium seems to suggest that when one only takes pure policy content into account the level of correct voting may be much lower than scholars thought so far.

Low levels of correct voting in our study could also be explained by the fact that we do not use real voting behavior recorded after the polls but vote *intentions* before the polls. It could indeed be the case that a similar examination of the match between voters and their parties after a long and informative campaign would lead to finding more congruence. Two mechanisms might be responsible: as party position become more visible during the campaign and voters attend more to political information voters that already made up their mind might alter their preferences and adapt to move closer to their preferred party; another possibility is that information during the campaign makes some voters realize that their preferred party is not the best match and decide to opt for a party that resembles their ideas more. These mechanisms probably play a role, but we doubt whether they could make up for the large gap between voters and their parties two months before the elections and lead to substantially more correct voting at the end of the campaign.

There is an indirect indication in our data that the second mechanism mentioned above – voters switching parties when they realize there has been a mismatch – is not happening frequently. The upcoming elections being just two months away, the analyses above are based on connecting *prospective* voting with policy preferences. We ran the same analysis using *retrospective* voting, the real vote at the previous elections. If voters would leave a party because of a mismatch between their and their party's stances we would expect that their 'retrospective match' would be lower than their 'prospective match' as they leave an incorrect party and move to a more correct one. This is not the case. Voters are just as close, or distant, to their old party as to their new party. So, we see no evidence of learning and consequently changing (voting) behavior amongst the voters in our sample.

Another potential alternative explanation of the low congruence between parties and their voters in our study may be that the specific issue statements voters and parties where confronted with were highly unpopular and led to skewed distributions amongst the voters (and the opposite distribution amongst the parties). As statements are selected based on their distinguishing power it could be that in most cases most voters and most parties just where on a different side of the scale with most voters agreeing and most parties

disagreeing (or vice versa). This could have led to artificially large amounts of incongruence. At the time of writing we could not verify whether or not this had an effect but will do so in a next version of the paper.

The second aim of the paper was not only to describe correct voting and examine potential representational flaws but also to try to explain it. Our main contribution here was to draw attention to the party level by showing that specific party features lead to more or to less correct voting. Previous research focused mainly on individuals or on the political system and did hardly take party features into account. Parties that are closer to other parties, parties that won previous elections, centre parties and opposition parties seem to attract more incorrect voters. All this makes sense and it is entirely in line with the general idea that incorrect voting occurs when the decision task voters are confronted with gets more difficult. Our explanatory analyses also indirectly validated the claim that correct voting can better be considered as a continuous and not as a dichotomous variable. The models estimating degrees of correct voting were more powerful than the models estimating dichotomous correct voting.

Much more can be done of course. By focusing on party features we added a new intermediary level to the existing analyses of correct voting – between the individual, the election and the system level – but we suppose a lot of progress can be made by focusing on the policy issue level and thus the precise content on which voters and parties agree or not. Parties and voters may disagree in the aggregate but as long as they agree on some statements that both voters and parties find important we may consider a certain party still the best match. Apart from salience, also the relevance of the statements might be weighed, as well as their conflictual and divisive character etc. We can also consider to weigh statements based on the media attention the topic got during or before the campaign.

Wrapping up, are our findings reason to worry about the quality of representation (in Belgium)? To some extent they are. If other research would confirm our findings that policy congruence between voters and their parties is very low, this would suggest that the first step of the representational process is flawed. Voters vote for parties for the wrong reasons, and if they would be trying to vote for the right reasons (policy content) they are most of the time mistaken and voting for the wrong party. How are parties supposed to keep their promises and fulfill their mandate when voters did not give the parties a mandate in the first place but should rather have given a mandate to another party? Parties are not representing their voters' preferred policy because the

voters did not adequately take policy into account when they elected them. The main problem we see is that the potential mismatch between voters and parties leads to a spiral of distrust and alienation. Parties do not keep their promises to their voters not because they are unloyal or because they betray their promises once they are in power but simply because they promised *other* things than their voters think they have. Incorrect voting leads to wrong expectations of what will be done once the representatives are elected. Whether this misunderstanding is due to parties or to voters seems to be secondary.

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Technical appendix

Independent variables used in the OLS regression:

Age

7 categories: '15-20', '21-24', '25-34', '35-44', '45-54', '55-64', '65 and upwards'.

Sex

1 = man, 2 = woman

Education

6 categories: (1) Lower education or no education at all, (2) secondary education, unfinished, (3) secondary education (technical or professional), finished, (4) secondary education (general), finished, (5) higher education (not university), (6) university.

Left - Right

Parties were given a left-right score, as follows: (1) Groen!, (2) Sp.a, (3) CD&V, (4) VLD, (5) N-VA, (6) LDD, (7) VB.

Previous election result

The percentage difference between the last regional / federal elections and the current election. E.g. if a party scored 20 per cent in 2007 and 15 per cent in 2009, it would get a -5 score.

Party size

The percentage of votes that the party received in the previous election.

Extremity

A curvilinear scale based on the left-right scale: (0) CD&V, (1), Sp.a and VLD, (2) N-VA and Groen!, (3) LDD, (4) VB.

Preference votes

The percentage of preference votes for the first person on the list divided by the total number of votes on the list.

Government or opposition

Dummy variable: (0) if the party was in the opposition on the government level for which elections were held, (1) if it was a part of government.