

# **Strategic motivations in electoral reforms.**

## **Explaining parties' preferences.**

Jean-Benoit Pilet<sup>1</sup> and Damien Bol<sup>2</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Parties' preferences about changing the electoral system are explained in various ways. The most common approach is based upon rational-choice models stating that parties are first and foremost strategic actors considering any change to the electoral system for its impact on the balance of power between and within parties (Boix, 1999). But how precisely they estimate whether a reform would enhance or not their political power parties is not clear. The dominant model was set up by Kenneth Benoit (2004) and considers that parties evaluate potential reform according to their expected impact on their future seat share (Benoit, 2004). Other authors argue parties are more influenced by their previous performance under the electoral system in use (Shugart, 2008). The parties that have been the most disadvantaged in the translation of votes into seats and that are the most often in the opposition are the more likely to support a change in the electoral system. In other words, it is not so much the hopes (or fears) to gain (or to lose) power that is determining the attitudes about changing the electoral system, it is more the (dis)satisfaction about the rules in use that is decisive.*

*The controversy is also fed by the lack of systematic empirical testing of the various definitions of parties' strategic motivations. Precisely, the aim of this paper is to test three models of actors' vested interests for 103 parties involved in 14 different electoral reform debates (Belgium, British Columbia, Canada, Israel, Italy 1993, Italy 2005, Japan, The Netherlands, New Brunswick, New Zealand, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and the United Kingdom). The results show that parties do not rely upon one single aspect to determine whether electoral reform would be good for them in terms of power. They rather take various elements into account to make up their mind.*

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant-professor in Political Science. Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), [jpilet@ulb.ac.be](mailto:jpilet@ulb.ac.be)

<sup>2</sup> Research Fellow. Université catholique de Louvain (UCL), [damiem.bol@uclouvain.be](mailto:damiem.bol@uclouvain.be)

## **Introduction**

Political scientists analysing the positions of parties about potential electoral reforms have underlined a variety of motivations they may have to support or to oppose changing the methods translating votes into seats. Some insist on the impact of ideas, or values (Birch, 2002), others on the impact of tradition (Norris, 1995) or of institutions (Sakamoto, 1999). But most stress that electoral reforms are motivated by the self-interest of political actors (Boix, 1999; Bowler et al., 2006). According to this perspective, parties are first and foremost strategic actors considering any change to the electoral system for its impact on the balance of power between and within parties.

Yet, the way strategic motivations are being studied may vary between authors. It ranges from straightforward positions stating that big parties prefer majority systems while small parties favour PR, to very subtle and sophisticated analysis disentangling multi-stage strategies like the analysis of the Israeli direct election of the Prime minister offered by De Mesquita (2000). But the most often cited model, was made up by Kennet Benoit (2004). He states that parties' position may be simply explained by the evaluation they make of the expected impact of a reform on their future seat share.

Other characterizations of strategic interests have been given. An interesting one is offered by Shugart (2008). According to him, it is not so much future but past elections that explain support and opposition concerning electoral reforms. Parties that have been constantly disadvantaged by the electoral system in use would prefer almost all possible changes rather than keeping the system in use, while those that have been advantaged in previous elections would be more reluctant to change.

In this paper, we propose to test the two alternative approaches in order to determine whether they can really help understanding the way parties define what is in their interest when it comes to reform the electoral system. Is one of the models better accounting for parties' preferences about the rules governing elections? Or is a combination of the various models the best way to understand parties' attitudes?

## 1. Theoretical framework

As perfectly stated by Reeve and Ware (1992), “*despite the infinite variety of electoral systems and their importance in allocating values in a society, in most regimes, electoral systems tend not to be changed very often or very radically. Particular electoral systems are maintained even when elites forming the government change*”. Up to the 1990s, most stable democracies had maintained their electoral institutions unchanged since WWII. Changes from PR to majority or mixed systems as well as from FPTP or run-off to PR or mixed systems were rare. Stability has been challenged by the triple reform in 1993-4 in Italy, New Zealand and Japan. Yet, except for these three countries, adopting a new electoral formula remains uncommon. Debates are frequent like in 1997 in Britain, in 2004 in the Netherlands or recently in various Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec) but most failed modifying profoundly the electoral law.

Such stability is on one hand surprising since electoral laws are powerful institution to manipulate the balance of power between parties; they can be changed aiming at “*structuring the world as you can win*” (Riker, 1986: 9). On the other hand, stability is perfectly logic. Electoral reforms are an insiders’ choice requiring that those elected by a particular system vote for a new system without no guarantee of being re-elected under the new legislation (Norris, 1995). And such an act of courage - or for some others such an act of political suicide – is rather unusual.

Therefore, political science has to explain why some parties can push for changing the method of seats allocation. Quickly, a kind of consensus was reached within the academic community stating that parties were first and foremost strategic actors strongly influenced by their vested interest, by the impact a reform would have on power distribution among actors. Strategic considerations are not the only determinant. Other factors like institutions, ideas, social structures also play a role but the centrality of power-related motivations was hardly ignored.

Yet, how precisely parties evaluate whether a reform would be in their favour has not been settled.

A first answer was given by authors considering the potential gains encouraging reformers to pass a new legislation. Reformers “*try to maximize their seat share, given their (expected) votes, through the choice of electoral rules*” (Brady and Mo, 1998: 406). Benoit has developed a five-step model of electoral system choice (Benoit, 2004: 375):

1. Parties know and understand the reform plans debated.
2. Parties undertake arithmetic simulations on the basis of past elections to assess the impact of each reform plan.
3. Parties rank reform plans, favouring the one that maximizes their share of seats
4. Parties adopt positions according to these preferences.
5. Party positions are modified when new information leads to a change in the preferences they have elucidated.

According to this logic, electoral reform occurs when parties believing a new rule would give them more seats have a majority in parliament. In that sense, it is prospective strategic motivations that would account for the position of parties - opposition or support - about potential reform.

Other authors insist on retrospective strategic motivations to explain the attitudes of parties concerning voting rules. The central idea is that those dissatisfied with the results produced by the system in use would be the ones willing to break up from the status quo and to push for abandoning the electoral law, which has maybe from time to time helped them from time to time to get elected but not as often as they would have hoped (Anderson et al., 2007). Parties having spent long period on the opposition benches, having gained fewer seats than expected considering their vote share, having been victims of lopsided majorities – like in 1987 in New Brunswick when the opposition had no seat despite its 39.61 per cent of votes – or of majority reversal – like in Quebec in 1998 when the Quebec Liberal Party won in votes but lost in seats– would be more open to electoral reform (Shugart, 2008). And it appears that those satisfied with the system, with the way it translates their votes into seats, or with their time spent in power would be less willing to support change even if it can strengthen their position. It was for instance the case for the Flemish Christian Democrats (CVP-CD&V) in Belgium and of the Dutch Christian Democrats (CDA), both opposing a shift to majority elections despite being the biggest party in their respective country. Their already dominant position

under PR (almost constantly in power) led the two parties to be careful about changing the system in use even though most simulations forecasted the party would gain even more seats under majority rule (Pilet, 2008; van der Kolk, 2007).

In this paper, we are going to test the two alternative approaches, to confront them, before trying to combine them.

## **2. Case selection: Analysing 14 electoral reform debates and 103 political parties**

The paper has three goals.

The first goal is to confront the various models that tries to determine how parties evaluate what is their strategic interest, what would be the best system for them to support in case of a reform debate. In particular, we are going to confront the explanatory power of Benoit's prospective seat-maximisation model as well as Shugart's retrospective models that insist on how the system in use has impacted in the past the share of seats and the access to cabinet for the parties involved in a reform debate.

Yet, we would also like to evaluate whether these alternative models cannot be combined instead of being confronted. We hypothesize that parties are not half-blinded, looking only to past results under the system in use or only relying upon prospective simulations. In order to determine whether a reform is good for them, they would probably take into account all elements, both how they have been doing under the system in use (in terms of seats and of access to government) and how they could be doing under a new legislation.

And finally, our third goal is to offer the first systematic empirical analysis of the general idea that political parties define their attitude about changing the electoral system after having evaluated what electoral formula allows them to maximize their political power and what others would reduce their influence. This rational-choice approach, and its various declination (be it by Benoit, Shugart or others) is the most often mentioned but has not been very much confronted to facts and figures.

In order to contribute to the academic debate, this article will asses various strategic models for the position of 103 political parties involved in 14 electoral reform debates in the past 20

years. Actually, we have gathered data about all parliamentary parties in Belgium, British Columbia, Canada, Israel, Italy (1993 and 2005), Japan, The Netherlands, New Brunswick, New Zealand, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and the United Kingdom.

**Table 1: Electoral reform debates analysed**

<b>Country/Province</b>	<b>Year of reform initiation</b>	<b>System in use</b>	<b>Proposed system</b>	<b>Success</b>
Belgium	2000	List PR	Mixed	0
British Columbia	2003	FPTP	STV	0
Canada	2004	FPTP	Mixed	0
Israel	1984	List PR	Mixed PR	0
Italy	1993	List PR	Mixed Maj	1
Italy	2005	Mixed Maj	Mixed PR	1
Japan	1994	SNTV	Mixed	1
Netherlands	2002	List PR	Mixed	0
New Brunswick	2003	FPTP	Mixed	0
New Zealand	1992	FPTP	Mixed	1
Ontario	2003	FPTP	Mixed	0
Prince Edward Island	2003	FPTP	Mixed	0
Quebec	2002	FPTP	Mixed	0
United Kingdom	1997	FPTP	Mixed	0

The selection criteria were the following. First, we wanted to include only serious electoral reform debates or put differently to avoid minor debates among minor parties or bills proposed by the opposition. We try not to include cheap talk. Consequently, all debates included in our study had to be serious enough to be at one moment in the hands of the government, either with the government drafting a bill, deciding the creation of a commission or of a citizens' assembly, or opting for a referendum to be held on the issue. The second criteria was to include both reform debates that finally led to the adoption of a new electoral system as well as those that failed and have not amended the electoral law. And finally, a last criteria was to study electoral reform debates concerning the electoral formula, potential shift from PR to mixed of majority systems and the other way round only. In that sense, we do not follow Lijphart's definition also including changes in the ballot structure, introduction of

electoral thresholds or modifications of constituencies' boundaries and of district magnitude (Lijphart, 1994).

In Belgium, in 1999, when the Liberals came to power after 12 years in the opposition, they pushed for opening the discussion about changing the electoral system. In 2000, the newly formed rainbow coalition (Liberals-Socialists-Greens) decided to institute the *Parliamentary commission for Democratic Renewal*. The change considered was the introduction of a mixed system. But the coalition never agreed upon a final decision since all parties but the liberals opposed a reform (Pilet, 2007).

In British Columbia, the newly elected Liberal cabinet decided in 2001 to institute a *Citizens' Assembly* in charge of proposing a new electoral system for provincial elections (Ruff, 2004). The proposed system (STV) was submitted to BC citizens via a referendum in 2005. But with 57 per cent of support it failed to reach the required 60 per cent threshold (Ruff, 2004).

In Canada, the federal minority liberal cabinet led by Paul Martin was pushed in 2004 by the New Democratic Party to consider electoral reform. Martin announced his cabinet would go in this direction and nominated Jacques Saada to become Minister for Democratic Renewal in charge of electoral reform. But soon after this appointment, the liberal cabinet abandoned the idea of a reform and no draft plan for reform was ever issued (Russell, 2006).

In Israel, in 1984, the Labour-Likud cabinet decides to open the debate about changing the electoral system in order to make it a bit less proportional and to reduce the influence of small parties. A bipartisan committee was set up. In 1988, in the last months before the elections, a bill was submitted proposing to shift to a kind of German-style MMP for national elections in Israel. The bill was voted for in preliminary and first reading but it was not possible to adopt it before the end of the legislature (Diskin and Diskin, 1995). After the elections, in 1989, the second Labour-Likud government instituted a second bipartisan committee on electoral reform but was not more successful. Finally, the idea of a new electoral formula came down on the agenda as the idea of a directly elected Prime minister came up (Hazan, 1996).

The 1993 electoral reform in Italy cannot be understood without referring to the corruption scandal *Tangentopoli-Mani Pulite*. Leading politicians from the main governing parties (DC and PSI) were involved and the distrust in the politics was widespread among the Italian

population. In this context, citizens' movements were created to force a radical change in Italian politics. In April 1993 a citizen-initiated referendum was organized to abrogate proportional representation in the election of the Senate. A vast majority voted in favour of a new electoral system. Being pushed by the referendum to adopt a new electoral system, the legislator opted for a MMP system, both for the lower Chamber and the Senate, with 75% of MPs elected in single-member districts and the 25% via list PR (Katz, 2001; Donovan 1995). The new system was used for the first time in 1994. The shift from PR to MMP was more than a simple reform. It was the beginning of the Italian Second Republic. All traditional parties (DC, PSI, PCI, PRI, PSDI) were gone and a new party system, more bipolar, was emerging with new dominant parties (*Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Alleanza Nazionale, PDS-DS, Rifondazione*). The role of the Prime Minister was enhanced and a real alternation in government was introduced. In this article, we analyse the position of the parties of the First Republic about electoral reforms. We study their position about changing the electoral system before the 1993 referendum. The choice has been motivated by our variables. Since we are testing whether parties are influenced by their past electoral performances and not only by their expectations about their share of seats under a new legislation, we cannot study the new parties of the Second Republic with no previous electoral experience for almost all of them.

In Italy, in 2005, the Berlusconi government initiated a reform process to make the mixed electoral system in use since 1994 more proportional. A few months before the 2006 elections, the right-wing coalition *Casa Della Libertà* submitted a bill making the electoral system proportional but with a majority bonus for the winning coalition (55% of the seats) and with blocked lists. The bill was passed in December 2005 with the support of right wing and center-right parties (*Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Alleanza Nazionale, UDC, Nuovo PSI*).

In Japan, in 1993, when the LDP was defeated and ended up on the opposition benches for the first time in 40 years, the coalition made of all other parties set electoral reform on the agenda. Finally, after long debates and tensions between parties including within the ruling coalition, a new mixed system was adopted in 1994 with the support of all parties (Shiratori, 1995).

In the Netherlands, the newly formed government (CDA-PvdA-VVD-D66) opened in 2002 the debate to amend the electoral system. Thom De Graaf (D66) was the minister in charge. He handed out a report in 2003 proposing shifting to a mixed system. A draft bill was submitted in 2005 but never received support except from D66.

In New Brunswick, in 1993, the newly elected Progressive Conservative government appointed the *Commission for Democratic Reform* to report about a potential electoral reform for the province. The Commission suggested in 2005 to shift to a mixed system. The PC cabinet aimed at organising a referendum in 2008 but when the liberals returned to power in 2006 they decided to abandon this reform plan they had always opposed (Cross, 2007).

In New Zealand, a *Royal Commission for Electoral Reform* was instituted in 1985 and later proposed abandoning FPTP and shifting to MMP. They received at that time little attention from parties, media and citizens. It took seven years for the Royal Commission's proposal to be back on the political agenda. During the 1990 campaign, all parties talked about organising a referendum to determine whether New Zealanders wanted to abandon FPTP (Renwick, 2007). And when the referendum was eventually held in 1992, a clear majority voted in favour of changing the system. One year later, a second referendum was organised and New Zealanders voted in favour of MMP (Nagel, 1994; Vowles, 1995; Lundberg, 2007).

In Ontario, in 2004, the newly elected Liberal government opened the debate about changing the electoral system. The Prime Minister McGuinty opted for the creation of a *Citizens' Assembly* following the example of British Columbia (Massicotte, 2008). In 2006, the Citizens' Assembly proposed MMP and a referendum was organised in 2007. But the change was eventually defeated by 63.1 per cent.

In Prince Edward Island, after the strange results of the 2000 and 2003 elections, the PEI Prime minister Pat Binns (Progressive-Conservatives) appointed in January 2003 Judge Norman Carruthers to report on a potential change to the electoral system (Milner, 2004). In December 2003 Judge Carruthers proposed to go for STV and to organise a referendum. The government decided to take some more time and to institute first a new, broader commission. In 2005, a new proposal suggested shifting to MMP. On 28 November 2005 a referendum was organised but MMP was defeated by 64 per cent.

In Quebec, there have been various discussions about shifting to MMP since the 1970s and René Lévesque (Milner, 2006). The one considered in this paper is the recent debate in the years 2000s. In 2002, the Parti Québécois was in power and appointed Jean-Pierre Charbonneau *Minister for democratic reform*. Charbonneau organised vast public

consultations and pushed for MMP. In the 2003 provincial elections, the PQ was defeated by the Quebec Liberal Party of Jean Charest. The Liberals maintained the idea of changing the electoral system and their minister in charge, Jacques Dupuis, submitted a draft bill in 2004 also going for a form of MMP. Yet, the reform process stopped at that stage and no signs of new developments are currently observable.

For the 14 electoral reform debates considered we have identified the position of all parties represented in parliament when the electoral reform debate was launched. We also included smaller parties with no parliamentary representation but that can hope to gain a few seats in case of reform - like the Green Party in British Columbia. It leaves us with a total of 103 parties to study<sup>3</sup>.

Their position about changing the electoral system is the dependent variable (PARTY POSITION). It has been coded as a fourfold ordinal variable making a distinction between parties fully against a reform, parties somewhat against, parties somewhat in favour and party fully in favour on the issue<sup>4</sup>. The rationale for the fourfold typology is also that the fully favourable or fully unfavourable parties concerning changing the electoral system would also be the one with the clearest view on their strategic motivations.

The ‘fully’ positions have been attributed to parties with a strong view on electoral reform (either for or against), that are united on the issue and that have not changed their mind during the reform process. The ‘somewhat’ positions have been used for parties with a less consistent view on electoral reform. They are divided internally on the attitudes to adopt about changing the electoral system or/and have switched position on the issue during the reform process. The best example is the British Labour Party in the UK in the late 1990s. The Labour was before the 1997 general elections officially in favour of a more proportional system for the House of Commons. Yet, the party was divided on the issue with both a pro-PR group and a pro-FPTP group. And the official line of the party has changed once Labour came back to power.

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<sup>3</sup> Due to missing information, we have not included several very small parties, i.e. *Tzomet*, *Miflaga Demokratit Aravit* and *Mapam* (they are dissidence of Israeli bigger parties that have never properly competed for vote in a election), and *Lega Pensionati* (they gained only one seat in Italy in 1992 elections).

<sup>4</sup> Parties’ scores on the dependent variable (see appendix) have been double-checked by experts of these debates. We would like to thank André Blais, Louis Massicotte, Bill Cross, Brian Tanguay, Henk van der Kolk, Alan Renwick, Gideon Rahat and Caterina Paolucci for their help.

### **3. Model 1: Parties preferences can be explained by the expected gains/loss in case of reform**

The first model to be tested is based upon Benoit's work. In an often cited but also debated article (Rahat, 2004), the author explains that parties do support the electoral system that would maximize their seat share and would oppose any system that risks to weaken their position.

The major problem is that it is hard to get the access to the data needed to conduct an empirical test of Benoit's model. Often, parties do run simulations predicting what would have been the allocation of seats in previous elections if the electoral formula had been different. But these simulations are most of the time secret and are thus hardly available to researchers. Fortunately, in all the cases considered in this article but four, a simulation was published and made public by state authorities in an official report<sup>5</sup>. Using these simulations<sup>6</sup>, we have built a variable (GAIN-LOSS SIM) accounting for the expected impact of an electoral system on the allocation of seats. GAIN-LOSS SIM consists of the weighted<sup>7</sup> difference between the party's seat share according to this simulation and the party's seat share for the elections preceding the start of the debate about electoral reform<sup>8</sup>.

The expectation according to Benoit's model is that parties anticipating to gain extra seats would support electoral reform. On the contrary, we expect parties that could lose seats to oppose adopting a new method of seats allocation. We therefore run a univariate ordinal regression using GAIN-LOSS SIM as independent variable and PARTY POSITION as dependent variable. Table 2 shows that the coefficient for the variable GAIN-LOSS SIM is positive (even if very small) meaning that, as Benoit expected, the more a party have to gained from an electoral reform, the more it supports it. Nevertheless, we can observe that the  $\Pr |z| > 0,05$ . It means that the strength of the prediction of GAIN-LOSS SIM is limited.

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<sup>5</sup> For the federal debate in Canada, no simulation was published in an official report but a simulation was published by *Elections Canada*. For Israel and Italy (both in 1993 and in 2005), no official simulation was published. We have therefore excluded Israeli and Italian parties for this part of the article testing Benoit's model. The number of valid cases is then 59.

<sup>6</sup> In some countries (e.g. The Netherlands), the official simulation included different scenarios of reform. In such circumstances, we have opted for the scenario that was the closest the reform bill being discussed by parties in parliament or in government.

<sup>7</sup> Considering, for example, two parties with an equal gain of seats, the party with the bigger seat share for both the simulation and the preceding election will receive a smaller value for the variable.

<sup>8</sup> The details of all the variables can be found in the Appendix.

Indeed, the overall model-fitting test shows us that the model including GAIN-LOSS SIM will not give better a prediction concerning PARTY POSITION than the model with the constants only (at a level of significance of 0,05).

**Table 2: Univariate Ordinal Regression for GAIN-LOSS SIM**

N = 59; PseudoR<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke) = 0,005; Cases correctly classified: 39%; Sig. for the model-fitting test = 0,603

Variable	Coeff.	Std Error	z	P >  z	95% Conf. Interval	
Constants PARTY POSITION = 0	-1,048	0,370	8,047	0,005	-1,773	-0,324
PARTY POSITION = 1	0,41	0,207	0,039	0,844	-0,365	0,447
PARTY POSITION = 2	0,371	0,229	2,632	0,105	-0,077	0,820
GAIN-LOSS SIM	0,016	0,035	0,207	0,649	-0,052	0,084

Link function = Cauchit<sup>9</sup>

**4. Model 2: Parties’ preferences can be explained by the past results of the party under the system in use**

An alternative to Benoit’s model can be derived from Shugart’s work (2008). His work on attempts to shift from FPTP to more proportional system in Canada (and in all its provinces), the UK New Zealand, and the larger Commonwealth Caribbean countries has underlined that political parties are also strongly influenced by the performance of the electoral system in use. Two elements appear to be influential: the translation of votes into seats and the presence in government. First, parties disadvantaged by the electoral system in use would not be very supportive of it, and the other way round. In order to test this hypothesis, we have built up a variable labelled DISPRO MEAN. The variable measures the mean of the weighted<sup>10</sup> difference between party’s seat share and its vote share for the 6 elections preceding the debate about electoral reform. It then represents a period of 25 years. The term of 25 years has been chosen to cover a lifetime in politics. What has happened more than 25 years ago may have affected your party but for a previous generation, not for yours. In that sense, it would less affect your attitude vis-à-vis the electoral system.

Second, the access to power, the presence in government also plays a major role in parties’ satisfaction concerning the electoral system in use (Bawn, 1993). The more often a party is in

<sup>9</sup> The link function Cauchit has been chosen because the two extreme categories of the dependant variable have a high frequency.

<sup>10</sup> Considering, for example, two parties with an equal disproportion, the party with the bigger both seat share and vote share will receive a smaller value for the variable.

the opposition, the less it would be supportive of the electoral system in use. And logically, the most frequently it is in power, the less change would be attractive. The related variable in our model calculates the proportion of time spent in government for the same 25 years before the reform process was initiated (GVT YEARS).

Univariate regressions for these two independent variables (DISPRO MEAN and GVT YEARS) and the dependent variable (PARTY POSITION) have been run in order to assess the strength of their relation, and especially if they appear to be more predictive to explain parties' attitude about electoral reform than GAIN LOSS SIM. In other words, we have tested if Shugart's model is more valid than Benoit's. Table 3 and 4 report that both models are well fitted and that both retrospective variables have a negative coefficient. That confirms our prediction concerning parties' satisfaction with the electoral system in use: the more a party is satisfied, the less it will be in favour of an electoral reform. The value of the coefficient and its degree of significance are hence rather different. As it is clear that GVT YEARS is a strong predictor to PARTY POSITION, the situation is more equivoque turning to DISPRO MEAN. Its feeble coefficient is significant only at 0,1. Therefore, one can then say retrospective variables are better predictor of parties' attitude about electoral reform than the prospective variable, and especially the proportion of time spent in government for the last 25 years.

**Table 3: Univariate Ordinal Regression for GVT YEARS**

N = 101<sup>11</sup>; PseudoR<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke) = 0,190; Cases correctly classified:49%; Sig. for the model-fitting test <0,001

Variable	Coeff.	Std Error	z	P >  z	95% Conf. Interval	
Constants PARTY POSITION = 0	-2,383	0,523	20,769	0,000	-3,407	-1,358
PARTY POSITION = 1	-0,952	0,277	11,835	0,001	-1,494	-0,410
PARTY POSITION = 2	-0,310	0,204	2,315	0,128	-,709	0,089
GVT YEARS	-2,493	0,711	12,301	0,000	-3,886	-1,100

Link function = Cauchit

**Table 4: Univariate Ordinal Regression for DISPRO MEAN**

N = 103; PseudoR<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke) = 0,070; Cases correctly classified: 39%; Sig. for the model-fitting test = 0,008

Variable	Coeff.	Std	z	P >  z	95% Conf.
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<sup>11</sup> Due to missing information, two small parties have been excluded from this regression, i.e. *Südtiroler VolksPartei* and *Union Valdôtaine*, two parties normally included in the 2005 debate in Italy.

		<b>Error</b>			<b>Interval</b>	
Constants PARTY POSITION = 0	-0,679	0,217	9,772	0,002	-1,104	-0,253
PARTY POSITION = 1	0,162	0,166	0,945	0,331	-0,164	0,488
PARTY POSITION = 2	0,593	0,203	8,574	0,003	0,196	0,990
DISPRO MEAN	-0,194	0,105	3,399	0,065	-0,401	0,012

Link function = Cauchit

### **5. Model 3: Parties' preferences can be explained by combining retrospective and prospective variables**

The univariate regressions have shown that parties' position about changing the electoral system are better explained by the retrospective variables accounting for the past performance of the electoral system in terms of translation of votes into seats and of access to power than by prospective variables related to simulation predicting what seat share would the party have in case of reform.

Yet, the overall predictive ability of the retrospective independent variable taking separately is not very high as the feeble proportion of cases correctly classified by these models shows. It is then interesting to build up a model that combines them and see how well it is able to predict categories of the dependant variable. We have therefore run a multivariate analysis combining the three independent variables (GAIN-LOSS SIM, DISPRO MEAN, and GVT YEARS). Table 5 shows that the model classifies in the correct category a large majority of the 59 party positions analysed here. Up to 59% of the cases fall in the correct category of the dependant variable if we process them through the regression equation. The model-fitting test and the pseudoR<sup>2</sup> also confirm the predictive ability of the model combining prospective and retrospective variables for accounting for parties' attitude about electoral reform.

Table 5 also confirms the conclusions drawn above. The sole coefficient for GVT YEARS is significant at 0,01. The two other variables appear to be less significant, if not at all. Moreover, the absolute value of the z statistics is more than 5 times bigger for GVT YEARS than for GAIN-LOSS SIM.. One can thus say that the time spent in government is predicts up to 5 times better parties' attitude about an electoral reform than other strategic motivations: the more often a party is in the government, the less it would be supportive of an electoral reform.

**Table 5: Multivariate Ordinal Regression<sup>12</sup>**

N = 59; PseudoR<sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke) = 0,416; Cases correctly classified: 58%; Sig. for the model-fitting test > 0,001

Variable	Coeff.	Std Error	z	P >  z	95% Conf. Interval	
Constants PARTY POSITION = 0	-0,679	0,217	9,772	0,002	-1,104	-0,253
PARTY POSITION = 1	0,162	0,166	0,945	0,331	-0,164	0,488
PARTY POSITION = 2	0,593	0,203	8,574	0,003	0,196	0,990
DISPRO MEAN	-0,262	0,159	2,728	0,099	-0,574	0,049
GAIN-LOSS SIM	0,061	0,043	1,964	0,161	-0,024	0,145
GVT YEARS	-4,290	1,382	9,640	0,002	-6,999	-1,582

Link function = Cauchit

These results clearly show our expectation that parties are not single-minded when they try to estimate whether a reform is strategically in their interest or not. Parties do not simply rely upon simulation of what the balance of power under a new electoral legislation would be; nor do they simply define their preference on basis of their judgement on how good the system in use is for them. They try to gather as many information before defining what their attitude about changing the electoral system would be. This paper offers a first multivariate model but other, complementary interest-related independent variables could for sure be added in order to increase the general validity of the model... but without losing too much of its parsimony.

<sup>12</sup> We have checked for multicollinearity problems and the three independent variables show correlation coefficients between them are inferior to |0.03| (Persons), which is not significant at a level of 0.01.

## Conclusion

In the literature about electoral system change, various elements are mobilised to understand and explain the attitudes of political parties about electoral reforms. The dominant approach, but not the only one (Rahat, 2008), is that they are driven by strategic motivations. Parties are expected to favour the system that would maximize their political power and to oppose any reform that could threaten their position (Boix, 1999). Yet, predicting the future, what would be the party system in case of reform is complex and highly uncertain. And how parties do evaluate whether a reform is in their interest or not has been very much studied systematically.

The aim of this paper was precisely to dig a bit deeper by analysing how parties' attitudes about electoral reform can be explained by different modelizations of their strategic interest. The first model tested was inspired by Benoit's work (2004). According to him, parties define their preference about electoral systems by estimating which system does maximize their political power. In other words, parties support reform if they expect to win extra seats and they oppose it if they fear losing some.

An alternative model was derived from the recent work of Matthew Shugart (2008). In his analysis of reform debates to quit FPTP in Canada, the UK, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries, he shows that reform prospects are influenced by how the system in use work. Parties' evaluations of the electoral system are shaped by their past performance under the legislation in use. In particular, the translation of votes into seats and their access to cabinet determines whether they are satisfied of the current legislation and whether they estimate that a reform would be strategically a good move or not.

The afore mentioned models have been tested taking into consideration the position of 103 political parties about changing the electoral system in 14 various political systems (Belgium, British Columbia, Canada, Israel, Italy (1993 and 2005), Japan, The Netherlands, New Brunswick, New Zealand, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and the United Kingdom).

Benoit's model has been operationalized using simulations of what the allocation would be under a new system published by State authorities in their official reports about electoral reform. The results show that this simulations-based variable is not statistically significant.

For Shugart's alternative approach, we have built up two variables: one taking into account the overall disproportionality between vote share and seat share a party can suffer from, and the other accounting for the time it has spent in government in the last 25 years. Both have proven to be more significant than the prospective variable simulating the allocation of seats in case of reform. In other words, the analysis shows that to determine whether a reform is strategically interesting for them, parties tend to rely much more on their past experiences than on hypothetical calculations of what would be the balance of power under a new method of seats allocation. In that perspective, the time spent by the party in government appeared to be a very strong predictor to its attitude about an electoral reform.

The low significance of the classical prospective model based upon what the allocation of seats in case of reform would be raise question. One potential explanation is that unlike in Benoit's model (2004) parties are not so well informed and not very sophisticated in the way they try to figure out what would be the impact of electoral reform. They rely upon simple handcrafted rather than upon complex simulations. Big parties think they are better off under majority rule and small parties prefer PR, without going further than that. Another explanation would be that for many party, when electoral reform comes on the agenda, they have little time to define their attitude publicly. They can not wait for simulations. And when they have declared whether they support or oppose a reform, it is complicated to change their mind. In the same line, Lundberg showed Labour and National in New Zealand after having accepted to open the debate about a new electoral system never had the opportunity to go back and to stop the reform movement (Lundberg, 2007). And finally, a third explanation could be that politicians simply do not trust simulations based upon previous electoral results. They know that changing the electoral system would imply some evolutions in voters' behaviours and therefore do not rely upon simulations. Uncertainty is too high to rely strictly upon predictions (Andrews and Jackman, 2005). Politicians' scepticism about simulations also explains why our retrospective variables are more significant than the prospective one. In some respect, parties act as 'peasants' and not as 'bankers' (MacKuen et al., 1992). Peasants define their attitudes by considering their present experiences. They do not rely upon expectations on an undefined future. 'Bankers', however, are "indifferent about the past except as it portends the future" (MacKuen et al., 1992: 597).

But further than confronting various ways to characterized parties' strategic motivations, one of our initial hypothesis was that parties define their preference about electoral reform by

combining has many information as possible. They multiply the indicators and it is only when most lights turn green than they are ready to go for a reform. In that sense, the probability is high that they consider both whether the system in use has been good for them in the past and whether they can expect to strengthen their position under the new system to be adopted. This theoretical assumption has been tested in a multivariate model combining the three variables derived from Benoit's and Shugart's works. And the overall explanatory value of the multivariate model shows that this approach has proven to be the most effective one to account for the attitudes of political parties about electoral reform within a rational choice perspective is to combine prospective and retrospective strategic motivations. More cases in are explained when past and future electoral outcomes are combined. Parties are not half-blinded, only looking back or only looking forward. They look in both directions before deciding which way to go.

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## Appendix

### 1. Variables tested and that appear in the paper

PARTY POSITION: ordinal variable (0,1,2,3) for the position of parties about changing the electoral system.

- 0: Fully against a reform
- 1: Somewhat against a reform
- 2: Somewhat in favour of a reform
- 3: Fully in favour of reform

$$\text{GAIN-LOSS SIM} = \frac{(S_{\text{simulation}i} - S_{\text{election}i}) \cdot (|S_{\text{simulation}i} - S_{\text{election}i}|)}{(S_{\text{simulation}i} + S_{\text{election}i})}$$

$$\text{GVT YEARS} = \frac{T_{\text{years spent in government}}}{25}$$

(or, if less, the number of years from the first participation to an election to the initiation of the reform debate)

$$\text{DISPRO MEAN} = 100 \cdot \frac{\left[ \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{[(S_i/S - V_i/V) \cdot (|S_i/S - V_i/V|)]}{(S_i/S + V_i/V)} \right]}{N_{\text{number of elections}}}$$

### 2. Other variables also tested but not retained

We have also tested the following **independent variables** but they have been rejected either because they have proven to be non-significant and/or because they were theoretically less relevant:

- a. For the prospective variable: a dummy variable based upon official simulations and making a distinction between parties that would have gain seats in case of reform and those that would have lost seats in case of electoral reform;

- b. For the prospective variable: a continuous variable accounting for the impact of electoral reform in terms of seats but that, unlike GAIN-LOSS SIM, was not weighted according to the size (in terms of seats) of the party;
- c. For the retrospective variable (translation of votes into seats): a non-weighted disproportionality index that reported the average disproportionality of the translation of votes into seats for each party but that, unlike DISPRO MEAN, was not weighted according to the size (in terms of seats) of the party;
- d. For the retrospective variable (translation of votes into seats): instead of taking the average disproportionality of the translation of votes into seats (like for DISPRO MEAN), we have tested a variable counting the number elections in the last 25 years with a negative index of proportionality for the party

As **dependant variable**, we also tested:

- a. a dummy variable (against / in favour of a reform)
- b. a threefold variable (against / divided / in favour of a reform) but they both have proven to be less significant.

### 3. *Parties scores on the dependent variable*

COUNTRY	PARTY	POSITION
Belgium	PSC	0
Belgium	PS	1
Belgium	PRL-FDF-MCC	2
Belgium	VLD	2
Belgium	CVP	1
Belgium	SP	0
Belgium	Ecolo	0
Belgium	Agalev	0
Belgium	VolksUnie	0
Belgium	Vlaams Blok	0
New Brunswick	PC	1
New Brunswick	Liberals	0
New Brunswick	NDP	2
PEI	PC	1
PEI	Liberals	1
PEI	NDP	3
Ontario	PC	0
Ontario	Liberals	2

Ontario	NPD	3
Ontario	Greens	3
British Columbia	PC	3
British Columbia	Liberals	2
British Columbia	NDP	1
British Columbia	Social Credit	3
British Columbia	Greens	3
Québec	Parti québécois	1
Québec	Liberals	1
Québec	ADQ	2
Canada	NDP	3
Canada	Liberals	1
Canada	Conservative Party	1
Canada	Bloc Québécois	1
Canada	Greens	3
United Kingdom	Labour Party	1
United Kingdom	Conservative Party	0
United Kingdom	LibDem	3
United Kingdom	SNP	3
United Kingdom	Plaid Cymru	3
New Zealand	Labour Party	1
New Zealand	National Party	0
New Zealand	Alliance	3
New Zealand	New Zealand First	3
Japan	Japan Communist Party	2
Japan	Democratic Socialist Party	3
Japan	Japan New Party	3
Japan	Komeito	3
Japan	Liberal Democrat Party	1
Japan	Sakigake	3
Japan	Japan Socialist Party	2
Japan	Shinseito	3
Netherlands	CDA	1
Netherlands	Democraten 66	3
Netherlands	List Pim Fortuyn	0
Netherlands	Christen Unie	0
Netherlands	Groen Left	1
Netherlands	Staatkundig Gereformeerde	0
Netherlands	SP	0
Netherlands	PvdA	1
Netherlands	VVD	1
Israel	Shas	0
Israel	Agudat Israel	0
Israel	NRP	0
Israel	Hadash	0
Israel	Tehiya	0
Israel	Progressive List For Peace	0
Israel	Tami	0
Israel	Morasha	0
Israel	Kach	0
Israel	Likud	2
Israel	Labour	3

Israel	Ratz	3
Israel	Shinui	3
Israel	Ometz	3
Israel	Yahad	3
Italy 1993	DC	1
Italy 1993	PLI	1
Italy 1993	PRI	1
Italy 1993	PSDI	1
Italy 1993	PSI	1
Italy 1993	Südtiroler VolksPartei	2
Italy 1993	Union Valdôtaine	2
Italy 1993	Verdi	3
Italy 1993	Lega Autonoma Veneta	3
Italy 1993	Lega Nord	3
Italy 1993	La Rete	3
Italy 1993	MSI-DN	3
Italy 1993	Pannella List (Radicals)	3
Italy 1993	PDS	3
Italy 1993	Rifondazione Comunista	3
Italy 2005	Comunisti Italiani	0
Italy 2005	DS	0
Italy 2005	Lista di Pietro-Italia dei Valori	0
Italy 2005	Pannella Bonino (Radicals)	0
Italy 2005	Rifondazione Comunista	0
Italy 2005	Südtiroler VolksPartei	0
Italy 2005	Union Valdôtaine	0
Italy 2005	Il Girasole	1
Italy 2005	La Margherita	1
Italy 2005	Alleanza Nazionale	2
Italy 2005	Democrazia Europea	2
Italy 2005	UDC	3
Italy 2005	Forza Italia	3
Italy 2005	Lega Nord	3