

Making votes count in parliament or government?

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars have sought to elucidate voting strategies in proportional representation (PR) systems. The argument is that the existence of coalition governments forces voters to consider potential alliances and to vote in order to maximize their chances of influencing the outcome. In this paper, we argue that this vision is incomplete as PR, just as single-member district plurality, also creates incentives for voters to desert parties that have little chances of obtaining a seat in their district. We validate this theoretical claim using two different surveys conducted during the 2014 Belgian federal and regional elections. Our results show that both government and district viability have a substantial and distinct effect on vote choice.

Introduction

There is a vast literature, starting with Duverger (1951), which shows that voters do not necessarily always vote the party that they like most. They also take into account how their vote may affect the result of the election; they want to make their vote count (Cox 1997). This leads some to cast a strategic vote, that is, a vote for a party that is not the preferred one, for the purpose of influencing the outcome of the election (Blais et al. 2001).

The first studies on strategic voting focused on single-member district plurality (SMP) elections (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Blais and Nadeau 1996; Franklin, Niemi, and Whitten 1994; Heath and Evans 1994). However, more recent research shows that strategic voting is as frequent under proportional representation (PR) (Abramson et al. 2010; Blais and Gschwend 2011; Hobolt and Karp 2010). Yet, according to this literature, strategic voting takes a different form under these two electoral systems. While SMP creates incentives for voters to desert their most preferred party if this party has little chances of winning in their district, the existence of coalition governments, and of parties bargaining over their composition, is said to induce voters to consider the chances of each party entering the ruling coalition, and to vote to

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maximize their chances of influencing the outcome (Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Blais et al. 2006; Blais, Erisen, and Rheault 2014; Duch, May, and Armstrong 2010; Indridason 2011; Meffert and Gschwend 2011).

In this paper, we argue that this vision of strategic voting under PR is incomplete. Just as in SMP, voters should also desert their most preferred party if this party has little chances of obtaining a seat in their district, as Cox and Shugart (1996) and Cox (1997) already claimed (for a discussion of their findings, see further). The underlying assumption is that voters care about both (1) the policies that are implemented by the governing parties and (2) the parties that represent them in parliament. We argue that the study of strategic voting in PR systems should therefore take into account both government and district viability. We offer evidence of this theoretical claim in analysing two surveys conducted during the 2014 federal and regional elections in Belgium. Belgium is a typical case of a PR country with medium-size districts and coalition governments. We show that both government and district viability have a significant, substantial and – more importantly – distinct effect on vote choice.

Strategic voting under PR

Strategic voting is defined as the practice of voting for a different party than one's favourite in order to affect the outcome (Blais et al. 2001). The policies that are effectively implemented during the upcoming legislature are the ultimate outcome of an election. In representative democracies, the nature of these policies depends on the partisan composition of the government, which itself (partly) depends on the partisan composition of the parliament.

Voting strategically to influence the coalition composition under PR is complex for two reasons. First, under PR rules the range of mathematically possible coalitions is (often) high, making it harder to identify post-electoral coalitions (Downs 1957). However, Herrmann (2014) argues that voters have other tools at their disposal to reduce the number of viable coalitions to more practical levels. In PR systems, parties often signal their post-electoral intentions to the electorate and sometimes go as far as to form pre-electoral alliances (Debus 2007; Golder 2006). But even in the absence of coalition signals, parties still tend to adhere to a criterion of ideological closeness and form more or less ideologically consistent coalitions because this facilitates policy-making (Laver and Budge 1992; Müller and Strøm 1999, 2003). According to Herrmann (2014), these constraints allow for strategic considerations under PR rules, even though they do not necessarily lead to a clearly defined set of outcomes and the context of each election still has great impact on the predictability of post-election coalition outcomes.

The second reason for complexity under PR is that government composition is not a direct function of parliamentary seats (Indridason 2011). In countries using PR, governments are composed of various parties that represent a majority of parliamentary seats and that agree to form a coalition. The composition of the government therefore depends on both parliamentary seats and pre- and post-election bargaining between parties. Voters thus have to anticipate this bargaining and should concentrate their votes on parties that are likely to enter government. In doing so, they maximize their chances of affecting the composition of the government. Imagine a far right voter who realizes that her preferred party has virtually no chance of entering the government coalition because its agenda is considered too extreme. Faced with the possibility of a center-left coalition, she might consider strategically abandoning her preferred party – even when this party is viable at the district level – and casting a vote for a center-right party with higher government viability.

Cox (1997) also described another possible strategic vote in PR systems where there is a formal or informal rule to grant the initiative to form the government to the largest party. Assuming that there are three parties (A, B and C) that are viable at the district level and that party B has no chance of becoming the largest party, supporters of B might be inclined to vote for A or C (depending on their second preference) because they want to increase the probability of an AB or BC coalition.¹ Even though this motive is certainly strategic, our study is not able to account for it because it would assume a voter to abandon a preferred party with high levels of district and government viability in favour of a party with lower government viability.

The theoretical claim that voters anticipate post-election bargaining and concentrate their votes on parties that are likely to enter government in order to maximize their impact on government composition has been validated by various empirical studies. In a comparative analysis of PR countries, Duch, May, and Armstrong (2010) show that voters are able to anticipate potential post-election coalitions during the campaign, even in countries where parties do not signal what would be their preferred partners, and to adapt their vote choice accordingly. As Blais et al. (2006) point out in their case study of Israel, perceptions of potential coalitions influence vote choice independently of classical determinants of voting behaviour, namely ideology, party preference and candidate characteristics. Focusing on Israel, Bargsted and Kedar (2009) identify more precisely the ideological dimension of strategic coalition voting. They find that leftist voters desert the Labour Party when the party is unlikely to participate in a government coalition and opt for a centrist party instead, which is “the lesser evil” in their mind. Studying vote choice in Germany, Gschwend (2007) and Shikano, Herrmann, and Thurner (2009) show that there is also another type of strategic coalition voting: supporters of the senior coalition party (CDU) sometimes use their

second vote to support the junior coalition partner (FDP) in order to help this party obtain representation in parliament and to increase the chances that the coalition will conquer a majority of seats (see also Meffert and Gschwend 2011). Cox (1997) labelled this type of strategic voting *threshold insurance voting*. Fredén (2014) shows a similar pattern for the Christian Democrat party in Sweden using the 2010 Swedish National Election Study.²

The basic assumption behind strategic voting is that some voters do not want to “waste” their vote by supporting a party that has little chance of influencing the outcome. Under PR, this means not voting for a party that has little chance of entering the governing coalition. However, a voter may still waste her vote in another way.

Under SMP, the party that obtains the largest seat share forms the government. Because the electoral rule tends to advantage large parties, the winning party usually obtains a majority of parliamentary seats. The distribution of parliamentary seats thus directly decides which party forms the government. Accordingly, if voters aim at affecting the electoral outcome, they have to cast a vote in favour of a party that has some chance of winning in their district, i.e. a viable district party, even if this means deserting their most preferred party. In doing so, they maximize their chances of influencing the composition of the parliament, the government and the overall policy direction. Empirical studies show that this concerns a substantial amount of supporters of small parties that are unlikely to obtain a seat in their district (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Blais et al. 2001; Franklin, Niemi, and Whitten 1994).

As mentioned above, most studies that deal with formal thresholds and strategic voting under PR focus on threshold insurance voting, i.e. the strategic desertion of viable parties in order to enable a preferred post-electoral coalition. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been little empirical research on the strategic desertion of parties that are not viable at the district level under PR. Cox and Shugart (1996) and Cox (1997) explore the desertion of weak lists both theoretically and empirically (in Chile, Colombia and Japan). Lago (2008) shows that in Spain (a country where there is always a single party in government like in most SMP countries) small parties that did not obtain any seat in the district in the previous election tend to be deserted. Selb (2012) also used the strategic desertion of parties that are not viable at the district level in Spain as an indicator of strategic adaptation of voters and elites to new electoral systems. Similar to Cox and Shugart (1996), his study supports the idea that parties’ previous electoral performance influences voters’ tendencies for strategic desertion. These findings are in line with those of Gunther (1989), who shows that the supporters of the Communist party in Spain are prone to vote for another party if they live in a district where the party is bound to win no seats.

Just as in SMP, a vote is also wasted under PR if it is cast in favour of a party unlikely to win a seat in the district. A party that is not represented in the

legislature does not participate in coalition bargaining. Even opposition parties can exert some influence over policies in participating in committees or in asking questions to the government during plenary sessions. By contrast, parties have little influence on the ultimate policy outcome when they are not in parliament. What is more, our expectation is that voters pay attention not only to government but also to district viability because they care not only about ultimate policy outcomes but also about whether their views and concerns are represented in parliament. It is because of the presence of such concerns that among supporters of opposition parties those who voted for parties with seats in the legislature are more satisfied with the way democracy works than those who voted for parties with no seats (Blais, Morin-Chassé, and Singh 2017). For these reasons, a voter who prefers a party unlikely to obtain a seat in her district thus has to turn to another party that does have district viability if she wants to influence the post-electoral bargaining game between parties that obtained parliamentary representation.

We are not aware of any study that examines and compares the effects of government and district viability on vote choice under PR simultaneously. Our paper aims to fill this gap and to contribute to a deeper understanding of what motivates some voters to cast a strategic vote in this context. The two types of viability are, of course, likely to be correlated, as major parties that are viable at the government level are also likely to be viable in most districts. However, the situation is different in the case of small parties. They are often viable only in the largest districts and perceptions about whether they have a chance of being in government vary a lot. As a consequence, government and district viability can be distinguished, as we do in this research. We expect that both viabilities have a positive – yet separate – effect on vote choice among parties that are liked by the voter.

We also expect that voters pay more attention to government than to district viability. As mentioned above, the theory regarding strategic voting supposes that the policy impact of a party is more important when this party is in government. Being represented in the legislature is nice, being represented in the government is even better. Also, the mechanical effect of PR systems is such that many parties are viable at the level of the district. Therefore, considerations related to district viability only concern the supporters of small parties. By contrast, considerations related to government viability concern all voters.

This expectation is in line with the dominant view in the literature that most of the power in contemporary democracies is concentrated in hands of the executive (Norton 1990). Furthermore, the media give more coverage to party leaders, Prime Ministers, and other important cabinet members than to parliament as such (Bittner 2011; Karvonen 2012). We thus expect people to care more about which parties will form the government than about which ones will and will not be represented in the legislature.

Belgium as a case study

To test the relative importance of government and district viability on vote choice, we focus on the case of the 2014 federal election in Belgium and 2014 regional elections in the two main regions of the country (Flanders and Wallonia).³ Belgium uses a PR system with districts of different sizes. In the districts we are covering in our study, the magnitude ranges from 4 to 33, with a mean of 16.4.⁴ As a consequence, there is important variation in the district viability of the parties included in this study – these are the parties with at least one seat in the incumbent parliament and those that obtained at least 1% of the votes in 2014, with the exception of the FN in Wallonia that did not participate in any of the two elections although they had some seats in the regional parliament. This gives us variation on the effective threshold of representation, and thus district viability.

Although the major parties were guaranteed to obtain at least one seat in almost all of the districts, this was not the case of medium-size and small parties. In Flanders, the green party (Groen) and radical right party (VB) – both have a parliamentary representation since 1980 – did not obtain any seat in the federal district of *Limburg* (magnitude of 12). In Wallonia, the Christian-democratic party (CDH), which was part of the incumbent federal government coalition, did not obtain any seat in the federal district of *Brabant-Wallon* (magnitude of 5), while the green party (Ecolo) suffered the same fate in the federal district of *Luxembourg* (magnitude of 4). Furthermore, in both regions, there were several small parties that were unsure to obtain seats in most districts such as the populist right party (LDD) in Flanders, which was a small incumbent legislative party at both the federal and regional level, or the radical left party in Flanders (PVDA) and in Wallonia (PTB) – this last party obtained parliamentary seats in both the regional and federal parliament for the first time in its history.

The presence of PR with relatively large districts and the juxtaposition of two party systems in the two regions (in federal elections) contribute to a highly fragmented party system. Actually, the federal parliament of the country is one of the most fragmented among modern democracies (Lijphart 1999). In all three parliaments covered in this study (the federal parliament and the Flemish and Walloon regional parliaments), at least three parties obtained more than 15% of the seats, with no party obtaining more than 40%.

As a consequence of this fragmentation, regional and federal governments have always been coalitions, sometimes including as many as six parties. The institutional system requires governments to be supported by a majority of parliamentary seats, and at the federal level to include at least one party of each linguistic group. In 2014, the composition of the governments that would be formed after the election was uncertain for at least two reasons.

First, the coalition signals were weak. None of the parties mentioned a clear preference for governing with another party, at the exceptions of the green parties (Groen in Flanders and Ecolo in Wallonia) that indicated that they would enter government together. The other parties simply made clear that they would refuse to form a government with the radical right parties (VB in Flanders and PP in Wallonia) given their extreme position on various issues, especially against immigration. The only other negative signal came from the two largest parties of the two regions. The regionalist party in Flanders (N-VA) and the social-democratic party in Wallonia (PS), which both obtained about 30% of the votes in their respective regions, declared that they would not govern together at the federal level (Dandoy, Reuchamps, and Baudewyns 2015).

Second, for about 20 years, Belgian parties have not followed an ideological proximity criterion when it comes to government formation. Right- and left-wing parties have governed together multiple times (De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Dumont 2006). Furthermore, 10 out of the 15 parties included in this study took part in at least one government coalition during this period. Next to the parties from the Christian-democratic (CD&V in Flanders and CDH in Wallonia), liberal (Open VLD in Flanders and MR in Wallonia) and social-democratic families (SP.A in Flanders and PS in Wallonia), both the green (Groen in Flanders and Ecolo in Wallonia) and the regionalist parties (N-VA in Flanders, and FDF in Brussels and Wallonia) were the junior partners of a coalition at some point. The game was thus rather open, which explains why voters had very different perceptions regarding the potential composition of the governments (see below).

Table 1 shows the parties included in the analysis together with their share of votes in their respective regions in the 2014 federal and regional elections. Ultimately, the Flemish regional (N-VA) and Christian-democratic (CD&V) parties formed the federal government together with the two liberal parties (Open VLD in Flanders and MR in Wallonia). The MR obtained the Prime Minister given its pivotal position. At the regional level, the N-VA, the CD&V and the Open VLD formed the Flemish government, whereas the social-democratic (PS) and the Christian-democratic (CDH) parties formed the Walloon government.

Data and variables

To test our theoretical claim about strategic voting under PR, we rely on two pre-election surveys (conducted in the weeks preceding Election Day) that sampled between 500 and 1000 respondents in each of the two regions covered. The two surveys used different sampling and interviewing techniques. The first one (PartiRep) is a face-to-face survey conducted with a representative sample of randomly selected adult citizens in the national

Table 1. Parties included in the study and description of the variables.

	Rating	Gov. viability	Dist. viability	Vote	Rating	Gov. viability	Dist. viability	Vote
Flanders								
	Federal election (N = 809)				Regional election (N = 535)			
N-VA	0.51	0.66	1.00	32.2%	0.51	0.73	1.00	32.7%
CD&V	0.54	0.69	1.00	19.3%	0.59	0.76	1.00	21.0%
OpenVLD	0.49	0.58	1.00	16.2%	0.50	0.64	0.98	14.5%
SP.A	0.49	0.57	1.00	14.7%	0.51	0.56	0.99	14.3%
VB	0.25	0.20	0.56	5.8%	0.28	0.00	0.64	6.1%
Groen	0.48	0.42	0.89	8.5%	0.48	0.46	0.98	8.9%
PVDA	0.35	0.21	0.06	2.7%	0.33	0.25	0.00	2.6%
LDD	0.29	0.14	0.00	0.7%	Did not compete			
Wallonia								
	Federal election (N = 671)				Regional election (N = 364)			
PS	0.55	0.76	1.00	31.9%	0.56	0.79	1.00	32.7%
MR	0.52	0.68	1.00	31.3%	0.49	0.64	1.00	28.2%
CDH	0.54	0.61	0.96	18.8%	0.52	0.70	1.00	16.1%
Ecolo	0.51	0.50	0.69	9.9%	0.47	0.61	0.93	9.1%
PTB	0.33	0.22	0.39	5.2%	0.29	0.31	0.40	6.1%
PP		Did not compete			0.37	0.00	0.20	5.1%
DFD	0.39	0.33	0.02	3.0%	0.22	0.35	0.03	2.7%

Note: Entries are means of the main variables (standardized, ranging from zero to one) and proportions of vote intentions.

population registry. The second one (Making Electoral Democracy Work) is an online survey conducted with a panel of adult citizens selected on a quota basis, thus ensuring the diversity of the sample. We use the first survey to study vote choice at the federal level, and the second to study vote choice at the regional level.

Our analysis focuses on four central variables: vote choice (the dependent variable), government viability, district viability and party preference (the independent variables). We expect vote choice to be a function of party preference on the one hand (as in a “sincere” or non-strategic vote choice model) and government and district viability on the other (as in our strategic vote choice model under PR).

Vote choice is the party that the respondent indicated she intended to vote for in the upcoming federal or regional election (depending on the survey). Party preference is tapped with a question asking people to tell how much they like/dislike each of the parties included in the analysis on a scale from 0 (not liking at all) to 10 (liking a lot).⁵ Government viability is measured with a question asking respondents to rate the chances of each of the parties⁶ to be part of the federal or regional government on a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely).⁷

Given the high uncertainty regarding the composition of the upcoming government during the campaign (see above), this type of subjective measure of government viability is preferable. Unfortunately, a similar question regarding the chances of each party to gain parliamentary representation

in the respondent's district was not asked in either of the two surveys. We thus created a district viability proxy, using the actual results of the 2014 federal and regional election per district. We used a logit model to regress a dummy indicating whether a party obtained a seat in the district on district magnitude, the party's vote share in the district and an interaction between the two. These are the elements a voter would take into account when determining district viability. We then use the predicted probability of each party winning at least one seat in the respondent's district as our measure of district viability. This strategy brings an interesting nuance compared to a simple dummy district viability variable, especially for small parties that were close to obtaining a seat.⁸

We are well aware of the fact that the two viability variables are not measured the same way and that this might create a comparability problem. However, even though this presents us with limitations concerning our analyses, we also believe that district viability was much less uncertain than government viability during the 2014 campaign, and that our objective measure of the former reflects voter's subjective evaluations. Some studies show that voters manage to update their expectations regarding the chances of the parties in their district on the basis of the polls released during the campaign (Blais and Bodet 2006; Guinjoan et al. 2014). However, we also replicated our analyses with the results of previous elections (2010 for federal and 2009 for regional elections) in order to check the robustness of our results.

Table 1 reports the averages of the three independent variables (that have been standardized from zero to one) for each of the parties for each election. For all the results presented in this paper, respondents are weighted so that the overall distribution of vote intentions matches the actual electoral results. We can distinguish two groups of parties, those with a mean preference rating around 0.5 and those with a mean below 0.4, which are much less liked overall. Unsurprisingly, these ratings are correlated with vote intentions. The parties with a low overall mean always get less than 10% of the vote, usually between 3% and 5%. There are, however, some parties with high average preference ratings that receive relatively few votes, the most striking case being the green parties (Groen in Flanders and Ecolo in Wallonia); these two parties have ratings around 0.5 yet get less than 10% of the vote.

When it comes to district viability, there are three groups of parties: the largest group is composed of the "main" parties, which are viable everywhere (viability score above 0.9), the very small parties (PVDA, LDD and FDF) that are non-viable everywhere (viability score under 0.1) and a few other parties (VB and PTB) that are viable only in some districts. Note that Ecolo belongs to that category in the federal election, because of the smaller district magnitude.

Finally, the government viability scores underline the fact that it is more difficult to predict which parties will be in and out of government. All the main parties are given relatively good chances (between 0.4 and 0.8, on average)

but none is perceived to be almost certain to be part of the coalition government. The small parties usually get a score around 0.2. We also observe that voters' perceptions are rather in line with the actual composition of governments. In Flanders, the three parties that entered the regional and federal governments (N-VA, CD&V and VLD) are those with the highest scores. The same is true concerning the two parties that formed the regional government in Wallonia (PS and CDH). However, the only francophone party that entered the federal government (MR) is second in terms of (average) government viability. The PS comes first, probably because it was part of the incumbent federal government (together with MR and other parties from Flanders).

Results

In order to determine the presence of strategic voting, we need to evaluate whether the viability variables have a significant positive effect on the probability to vote for a party, which would indicate that voters are more inclined to vote for more viable parties, even when controlling for their party preferences. To test this hypothesis, we estimate conditional logit models with vote intention being the dependent variable, and party preference and the two viability indicators the independent variables. The unit of analysis is the party/respondent.

Model 1 in Table 2 reports the results of the baseline model. In line with the literature on strategic voting under PR, we only include government viability and party preferences. We observe that, as expected, both coefficients are positive and statistically significant. In Model 2, we add the district viability variable. We see that the two viability coefficients are highly significant and

Table 2. Effects of district and government viability on vote choice.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Federal	Regional	Federal	Regional	Federal	Regional
Preference	12.95*** (0.69)	10.18*** (0.67)	12.94*** (0.69)	10.28*** (0.67)	11.40*** (2.05)	3.60*** (0.92)
Gov. viability	3.00*** (0.27)	1.27*** (0.24)	2.46*** (0.3)	0.77*** (0.27)	2.63* (1.51)	-0.69 (1.18)
Dist. viability			0.72*** (0.24)	0.83*** (0.2)	-0.52 (0.71)	-4.46*** (0.94)
Pref. * dist. viability					2.00* (1.13)	8.02*** (1.36)
Pref. * gov. viability					-0.28 (2.23)	1.62 (1.59)
Chi ²	422.91***	268.34***	413.21***	274.22***	617.03***	498.65***
Pseudo R ²	0.61	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.64
N	1480	899	1480	899	1480	899
Obs.	10,498	6293	10,498	6293	10,498	6293

Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates of conditional logit models with fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

have the predicted positive sign, indicating that, everything else being equal, voters are more prone to vote for a party that is viable in their district and that has more chance of being in government. What is more, we observe that, in both federal and regional elections, the coefficient associated to government viability is smaller compared to the baseline model. This suggests that it is important to include both viabilities in models predicting vote choice in PR systems. Table A1 in the appendix shows that the results are essentially similar when we calculate district viability using the previous elections' results. The bottom line is that it would be misleading to interpret the vote as a mere expression of voters' preferences.

We are also interested in comparing the effects of district viability and government viability. Without much surprise, we also observe that preference matters more than viability given that the coefficient associated to this variable is much larger. The results in Table 2 indicate that government viability matters more for the federal elections. The two viability coefficients of Model 2 are statistically different at a level of $p < .05$ in the case of the federal election but for the regional elections this is not the case. We conclude that Belgian voters are influenced at least as much (and perhaps more in the case of federal elections) by the parties' chances of being in government as by their viability in their district. As to complete this comparison, we also estimate Model 2 with standardized variables (Z-scores). Results are identical: the coefficient associated to government viability is significantly larger than the one associated to parliament viability, but only in the federal election (see Table A2 in the appendix).

However, we cannot make any definitive statement regarding the magnitude of the effect of the two viabilities given that we do not use the same indicator for government and district viability. We thus simply conclude that government viability matters at least as much as district viability, and that the two have a distinct effect on vote choice. We also estimated models where we interacted government and district viability. The interaction between the two variables is small and not significant (see below), which suggests that the two have a distinct effect on vote choice.

As we briefly mentioned before, Table 2 shows that the effect of government viability on vote choice is larger for the federal election. The reason for this may be that, in Belgium at least, government viability is more straightforward at the regional level: the only parties forming the regional coalition are the ones that were directly competing with each on the same ballot. This is not the case at the federal level, where parties from both sides of the country have to form a government, whereas voters only see their sides' (or their language group's) parties on the ballot. It is thus reasonable to assume that it is easier for voters to predict which party will be in government at the regional level. Also, this may be due to the classic curse of regional elections: because of their second-order nature, voters care less about which

party wins. That said, these explanations are tentative given that we only compare one federal election and two regional elections in our study.

A strategic voter votes for a party that she likes *and* is viable. There should thus be an interaction effect between preference and viability. The third model in [Table 2](#) therefore includes interaction terms between preference and district viability, and preference and government viability.⁹ The inclusion of these interaction terms makes it difficult to correctly interpret the coefficients in the model. However, the marginal effect plots in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) make it easier to understand how the variables in our model interact.

As we can see from both [Figures 1](#) and [2](#), all four marginal effects go in the predicted (positive) direction once the preference values for a party exceed 0.5. This indicates that voters make potentially strategic vote choices between parties they at least somewhat like and that this is moderated by a utility derived from varying district and government viability. Three out of the four marginal effects also increase as the preference rating increases. The marginal effect of government viability for the federal elections is clearly positive, but it is impossible to determine whether this effect increases, decreases or just remains stable.¹⁰

The different effect sizes between the election levels might hint at second-order effects during this simultaneous election, since the marginal effect of government viability is relatively stronger for the federal elections, while the marginal effect of district viability is relatively stronger for the regional elections. This could point towards a dynamic in which strategic voters treated the federal elections as a first-order election and cared more about government composition at this level, while the regional level was considered second-order and strategic considerations were more skewed towards the electoral threshold. This remains, however, a speculation, since we did not ask respondents to differentiate between party preferences according to the election levels and we do not have any longitudinal data to support this interpretation.

As to further evaluate the concrete implications of strategic voting for electoral competition in Belgium, we calculate what would be the vote share of each party if government viability, district viability, and then both district and government viability were maximal for all parties, that is, under a context where every party was fully viable and thus no party would be handicapped by lack of viability (we keep all other variables at their observed value). To calculate predictions, we use a specification similar to Model 3 in [Table 2](#). We use the predicted probabilities to vote for each party in the two regions based upon party preference, government viability, district viability, an interaction between party preference and government viability and an interaction between party preference and district viability. We then compare the predicted vote of the respondents in all those situations to their predicted vote when we keep all other variables at their observed values.¹¹

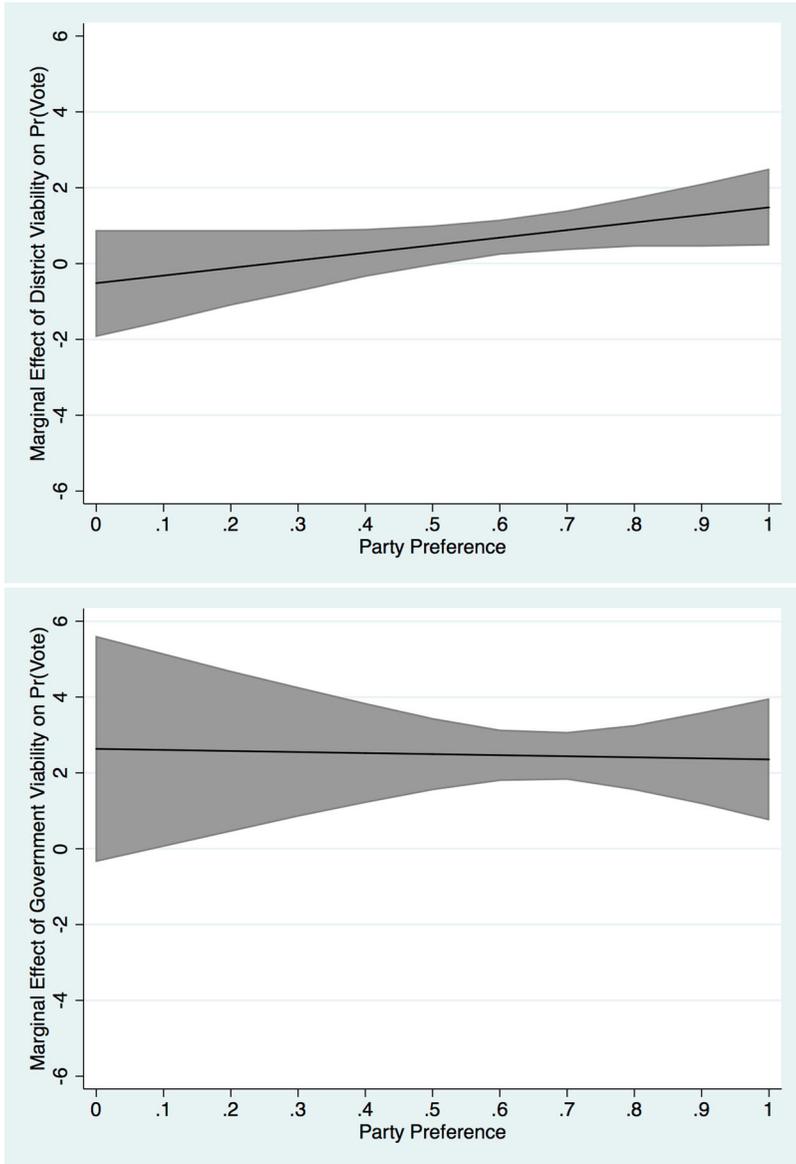


Figure 1. Marginal effect of district and government viability on vote choice for the 2014 Federal elections (Flanders + Wallonia).

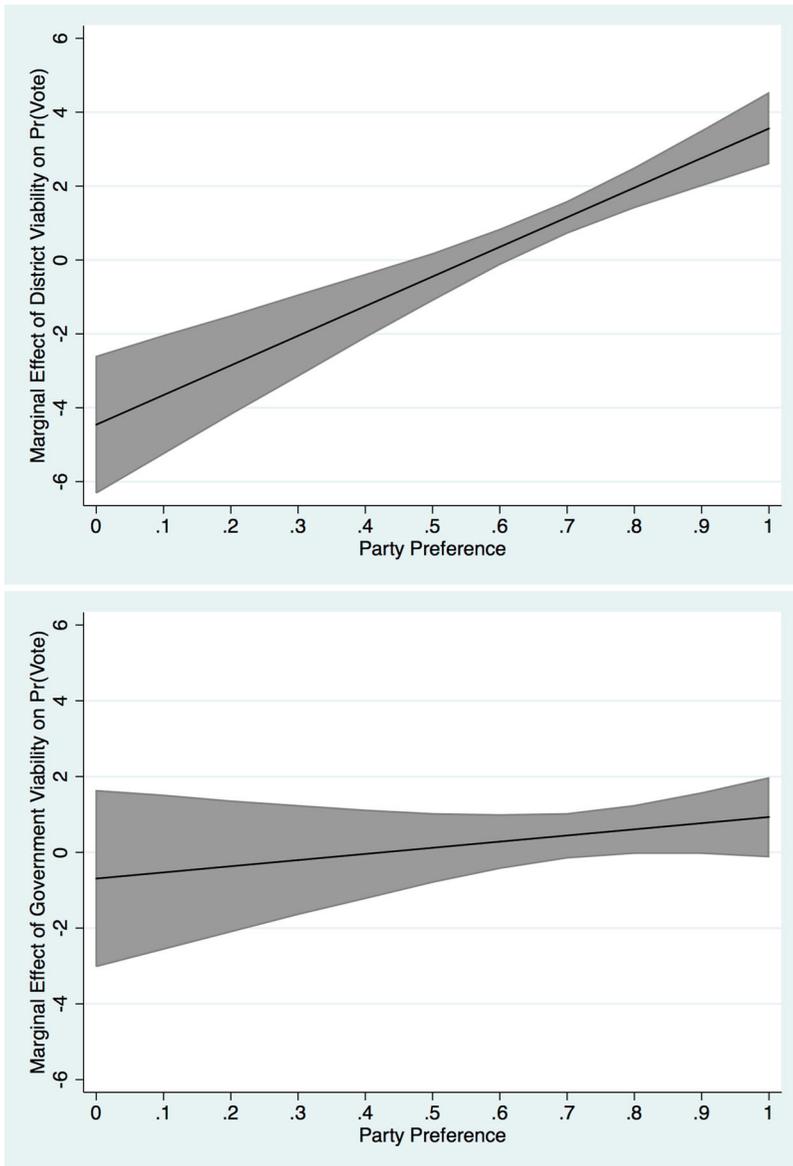


Figure 2. Marginal effect of district and government viability on vote choice for the 2014 Regional elections (Flanders + Wallonia).

Table 3 reports these results. Column 1 shows the predicted vote share that each party gets when we keep the original value of all three variables. Columns 2–4 indicate how different predicted vote shares would be if every party had the maximum score of one on government viability (column 2), on district viability (column 3) or on both types of viability (column 4). We see that in this last scenario, the two main parties of the two regions would

Table 3. Simulated effects of strategic voting.

	Original pred.	Max. gov. viability	Max. dist. viability	Max. viabilities	Original pred.	Max. gov. viability	Max. dist. viability	Max. viabilities
Flanders								
	Federal election (N = 809)				Regional election (N = 535)			
N-VA	32.9%	-4.8	-0.5	-6.2	33.4%	-0.3	-1.2	-2.7
CD&V	22.3%	-5.2	-0.2	-5.6	20.6%	-0.6	-0.0	-0.6
OpenVLD	12.5%	+1.7	+0.1	+1.1	13.9%	+0.1	+0.3	+0.4
SP.A	15.1%	-0.9	-0.1	-1.4	15.1%	+0.2	-0.8	-1.5
VB	3.4%	+2.3	+0.7	+2.6	3.7%	+0.6	+0.4	+2.7
Groen	10.8%	+5.4	+0.1	+4.1	10.1%	+0.1	+0.3	+0.5
PVDA	2.3%	+0.6	0	+2.9	3.2%	+0.1	+1.1	+1.3
LDD	0.8%	+0.9	0	+2.6	Did not compete			
Wallonia								
	Federal election (N = 671)				Regional election (N = 364)			
PS	38.8%	0	+1.1	+1	37.5%	-0.9	-3.0	-4.0
MR	29.0%	-0.1	+1.4	+1.4	28.7%	+0.2	-1.8	-1.1
CDH	15.8%	0	+0.5	+0.5	16.3%	-0.2	-0.7	-1.3
Ecolo	10.6%	+0.1	-1.2	-1.0	9.2%	-0.3	+0.4	+1.0
PTB	4.1%	0	-0.3	-0.3	3.8%	+0.6	+2.4	+2.6
PP		Did not compete			1.3%	+0.1	+0.8	+1.4
DFD	1.9%	0	-1.6	-1.6	3.3%	+0.5	+2.0	+2.3

Notes: Entries are differences in predicted votes estimated through conditional logit models with fixed effects (see results in Table 2). Differences are expressed in percentage points.

receive fewer votes in three out of the four cases, the difference ranging from one to six percentage points, and the median being three points. This is a relative difference of about 10%, since the median vote share of these parties is 32%. We can thus say that the two main parties get a boost of three percentage points each (or 10%), thanks to the presence of these two types of strategic voting. This comes at the expense of the other parties, which typically get one or two percentage points fewer votes than they would in the absence of viability considerations, which also corresponds to a relative difference of 10–20%, since their median vote share is 9%.

Looking at the independent effects of government and district viability (columns 2 and 3), we observe that the two effects are about equally important.¹² There are as many instances where the effect of district viability is higher as there are cases where it is the reverse. Overall, we can observe that the general direction of the vote shift would be from large and/or centre parties towards smaller and ideologically more extreme ones. The only case in which this does not seem to hold is the federal election in Wallonia, where the differences in predictions are, in fact, very small compared to the other cases.

Conclusion

The literature on strategic voting has long concentrated on SMP elections. Strategic voting in this context concerns voters who have a preference for parties that have little chances of winning in their district. Some of those voters then decide to desert their favourite party and support a more viable

party, in order to maximize their chances of affecting the composition of the government, and therefore the policy outcome.

Recently, several scholars have studied strategic voting in PR countries. They have argued that strategic voting is more complex in this context given the existence of coalition governments, whose composition depends on both the distribution of parliamentary seats and (pre- and post-electoral) bargaining between the parties. In order to influence the outcome of the election, strategic voters need to consider the chances of each party entering the governing coalition.

In this paper, we argue that this vision of strategic voting under PR is incomplete. Voters also have incentives to desert parties that have no chance of winning a seat in their district, because parties without parliamentary representation can hardly participate in the public debate. This suggests that voters are not concerned solely with affecting the policies that governments adopt, they are also keen to see their views and priorities represented in the legislature.

To our knowledge, there is no study that examines the effect of both government and district viability on vote choice. This is what we do in this paper by studying the 2014 federal and regional elections in Belgium – a typical case of PR systems with coalition governments. Relying on data from two surveys, we find that both government and district viability have a substantial, distinct and positive effect on vote choice. We also find that the marginal effect of these viabilities on vote choice is higher among those who very much like their party. Our results thus bring an important contribution to the literature on strategic voting in PR countries, as we stress the importance of considering both district and government viability in order to take into account the complexity of vote choice in PR elections.

Notes

1. Another condition for this type of strategic vote is that party B has a pivotal role between A and C, so that the possibility of an AC coalition does not exist.
2. Note that these studies do not deal with the specific type of strategic voting that we are interested in this paper, that is, not voting for the preferred party because that party is perceived to have little chance of being in government or obtaining representation in parliament.
3. Both these elections, together with the European election that we do not consider here, were held on the very same day. We exclude the regional election of Brussels and the federal district of Brussels, both of which are complicated cases since voters have the choice to vote on two types of ballot depending on their linguistic affiliation. For a general description of the specificity of the Belgian party system, see De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Dumont (2006).
4. Our study covers 10 federal electoral districts and 18 regional electoral districts (5 Flemish, 13 Walloon). These are all of the electoral districts except Brussels (for both levels).
5. Regional survey (online): "Evaluate the following political parties on a scale from 0 to 10 (where 0 means you do not like that party at all and 10 means you like that party a lot)/Federal survey (face-to-face): "There are many political parties in our country. I would like to know how much you like these parties. You can give

each party a score between 0 and 10, where 0 means you do not like the party at all and 10 means you like the party a lot. The more you like a party, the more points you can give to that party. If you don't know a party or believe you know it insufficiently, please do not hesitate to tell us."

6. We did not ask the likelihood of the Flemish radical right party (VB) entering government in the regional survey. As all the other parties declared they would refuse to govern with it, we set the value of the government viability of this party to zero for all respondents.
7. "Could you indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10 (where 0 means not likely at all and 10 means very likely) for each of the following parties how likely you believe it is that they will be part of the next [Flemish/Walloon/Federal] government?"
8. The distribution of the district and government viability variables can be found in [Figures A1](#) and [A2](#) in the appendix. For district viability 30% of the observations have a viability lower than 0.5.
9. In order to examine all potential interactions, we also ran a fourth model that includes a three-way interaction between preference and district and government viability. The marginal effect plots of these interactions can be found in the appendix ([Figures A3](#) and [A4](#)). As these figures show, the marginal effects of the three-way interactions are consistent with the effects of the two-way interactions. The marginal effect of district viability is stronger when government viability is high and the marginal effect of government viability is stronger when district viability is high, but none of these differences are statistically significant. We therefore opted to only report the two-way interactions in [Table 2](#).
10. When we look at parties that are disliked by voters (receiving a preference score less than 0.5), increasing government and district viability actually negatively impacts the probability to vote for that party in three out of four cases (government viability at the federal elections being the exception). This effect also increases when the party is disliked more.
11. We consider that respondents are predicted to vote for the party for which they have the highest predicted probability to vote. In case there is a tie between the predicted probabilities to vote for several parties, we adopt a conservative strategy, and consider that respondents are predicted to vote for the party they reported having the intention to vote for.
12. Note that the combined effect does not necessarily equal the addition of each specific effect. The predicted vote may differ if only one or the other viability is neutralized, if either, or if both. And sometimes (rarely), the two effects can cancel each other.

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Appendix

Table A1. Effects of district and government viability on vote choice calculated with previous electoral results.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Federal	Regional	Federal	Regional	Federal	Regional
Preference	12.95*** (0.69)	10.18*** (0.67)	12.94*** (0.68)	10.25*** (0.67)	11.60*** (2.09)	3.18*** (0.81)
Gov. viability	3.00*** (0.27)	1.27*** (0.24)	2.55*** (0.29)	0.85*** (0.25)	2.34 (1.48)	−0.43 (1.19)
Dist. viability			0.65*** (0.21)	0.84*** (0.18)	−0.18 (0.75)	−5.09*** (0.99)
Pref. * dist. viability					1.32 (1.16)	9.19*** (1.44)
Pref. * gov. viability					−0.33 (2.16)	1.51 (1.53)
Chi ²	414.67***	269.73***	414.67***	263.68***	615.38***	506.85***
Pseudo R ²	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.61	0.62	0.66
N	1480	899	1480	899	1480	899
Obs.	10,498	6293	10,498	6293	10,498	6293

Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates of conditional logit models with fixed effects.

Clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Table A2. Effects of district and government viability on vote choice calculated with standardized variables (Z-scores).

	Model 2	
	Federal	Regional
Preference	3.34*** (0.18)	3.28*** (0.08)
Gov. viability	0.71*** (0.09)	0.26*** (0.09)
Dist. viability	0.30*** (0.1)	0.33*** (0.08)
Pref. * dist. viability		
Pref. * gov. viability		
Chi ²	413.21***	274.22***

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

	Model 2	
	Federal	Regional
Pseudo R^2	0.62	0.61
N	1480	899
Obs.	10,498	6293

Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates of conditional logit models with fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses.
 * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

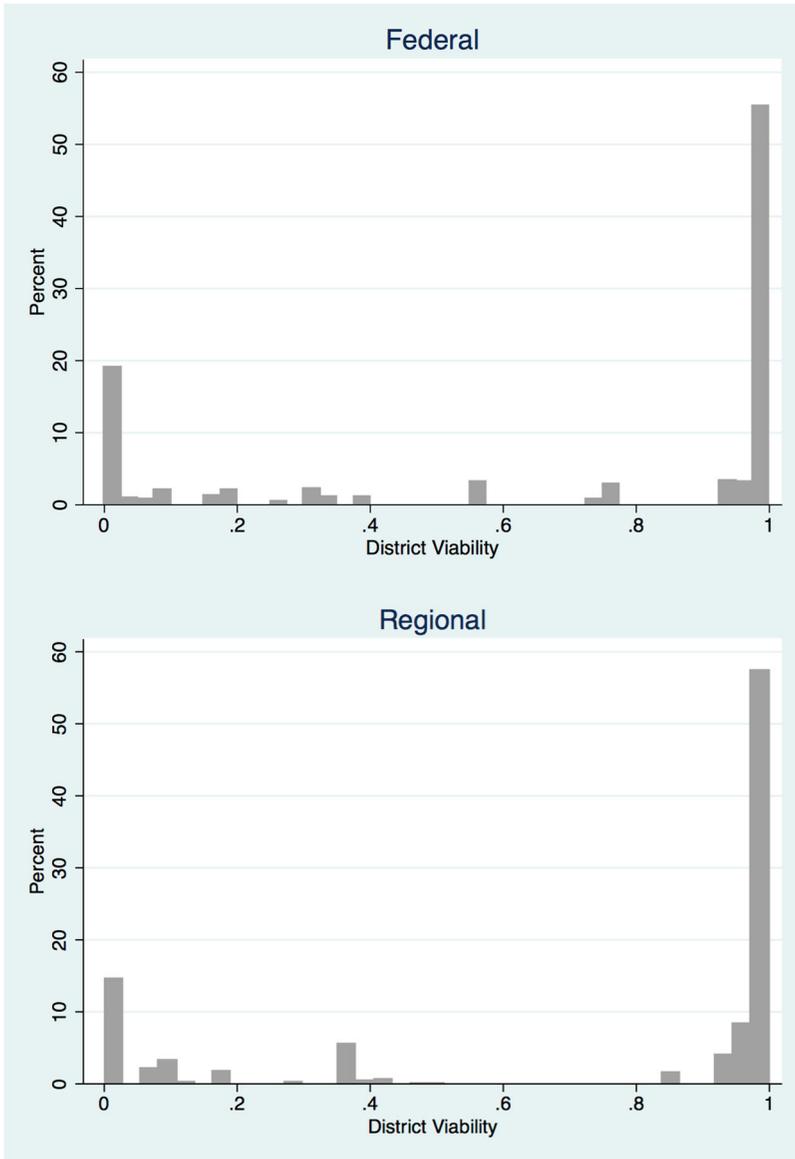


Figure A1. Distribution of district viability for the 2014 Federal and Regional elections (Flanders + Wallonia).

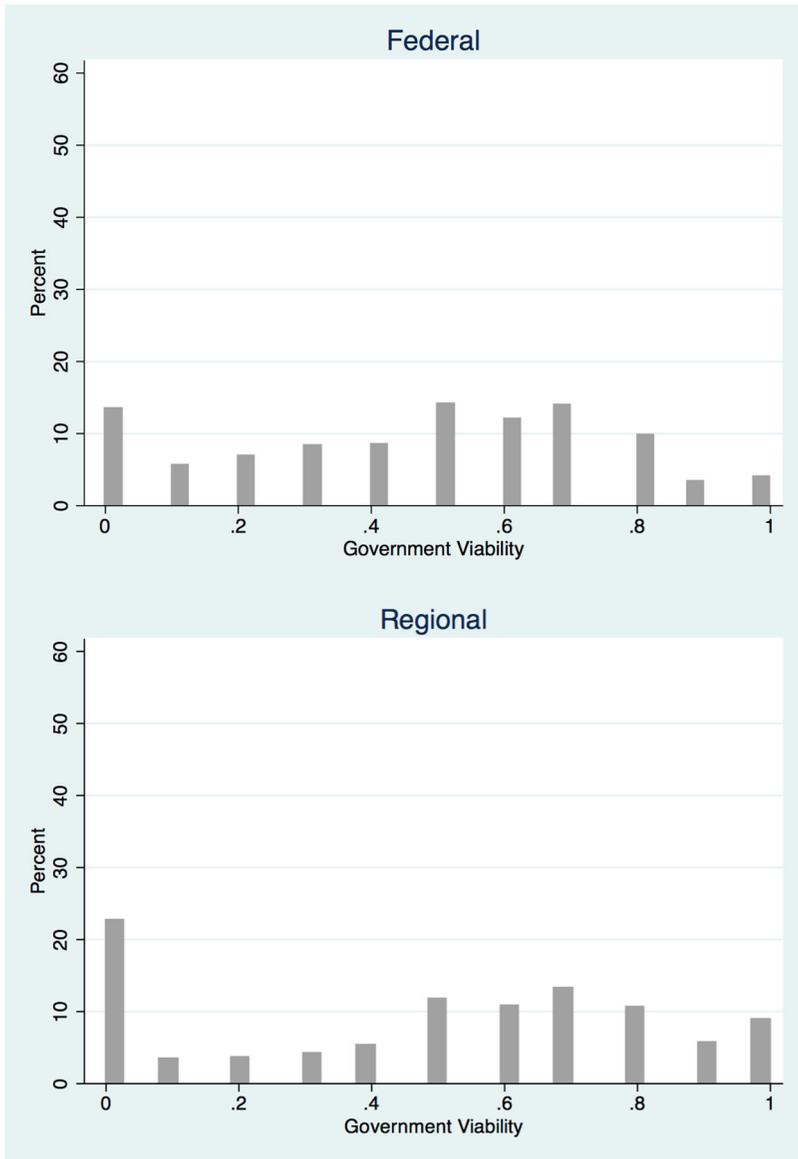


Figure A2. Distribution of government viability for the 2014 Federal and Regional elections (Flanders + Wallonia).

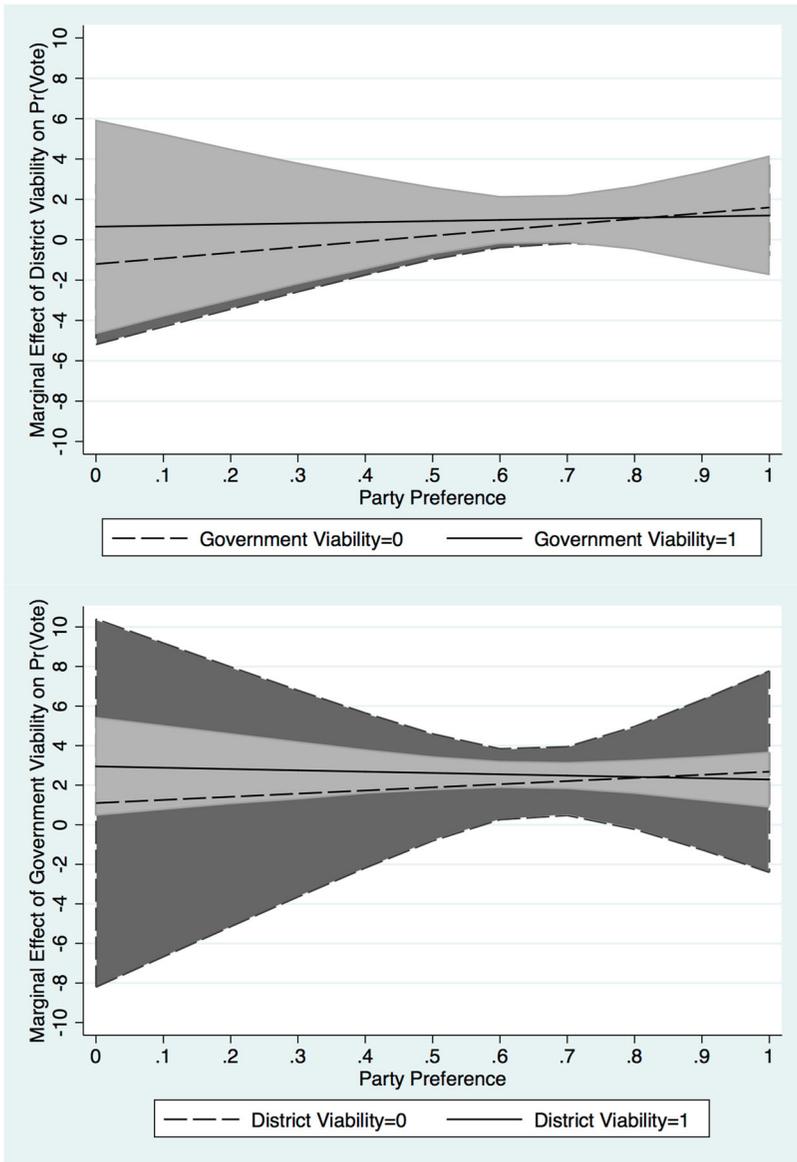


Figure A3. Marginal effect of district and government viability and preference on vote choice for the 2014 Federal elections (Flanders + Wallonia).

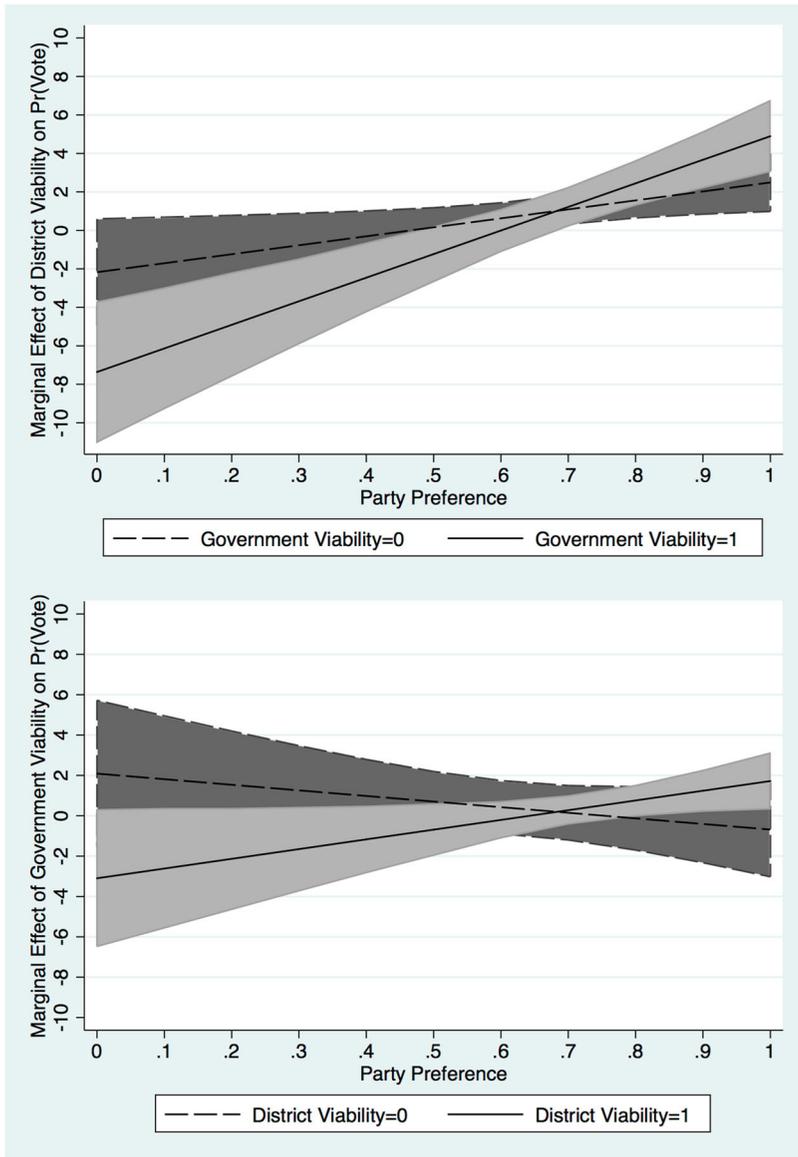


Figure A4. Marginal effect of district and government viability and preference on vote choice for the 2014 Regional elections (Flanders + Wallonia).