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Can the Dutch Electoral System be Improved Upon?

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Abstract: In this paper, we propose an alternative electoral system for the Netherlands as a means to address several contemporary challenges of the Dutch political system. This system provides the Dutch people with multiple (but not cumulative) votes that can be distributed among different parties of their choice. Seats are apportioned in a manner proportional to the total number of votes each party received. One can think of this system as a cross between the current Dutch electoral system and approval voting. We argue that this system besides tapping more accurately the preferences of the people, promotes centripetal results (increases the influence of centrist parties, and enables more durable and flexible coalitions). We corroborate our argument by recalculating the results of the 2012 election with different variations of our system, and demonstrate that more extreme parties lose power, and most likely different coalitions would emerge.

Keywords: multiple vote system, approval voting, proportional representation, electoral systems, election law, political representation, polarization, social choice.

JEL classifications: K16, D71.

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1. Introduction

In "The Future and Viability of the Dutch Democracy: A Model Case", Brouwer and Staal (from now on B+S) provide an invaluable contribution to Dutch Democracy and to the analysis of political institutions in general, in that they present a systematic accounting of all the unsatisfactory characteristics of institutions that overall function very well, as well as questions some of the proposed changes in a systematic way. Given the overall difficulty of modification of the Dutch constitution (requiring two approvals by the bicameral legislature, one with 2/3 majority after an election) and the fact that the Constitution of 1848 has been modified only 19 times through the year 2013 (18 of which Tsebelis (2020) classifies as "insignificant"), the authors' make a compelling case for the need to underscore and understand institutional problems in the Netherlands.

In this rejoinder, we therefore examine one specific institution, the Dutch electoral system, focusing in particular on the consequences of the Netherlands' proportion system. The Netherlands' electoral system is perhaps the most proportional electoral system in the world (along with Israel), the entire country functions as a single electoral constituency. Thus, the features of proportional systems are likely to be more pronounced in the Netherlands than in other proportional systems. As Brouwer and Staal argue, "A proportional system represents preferences better in parliament than a majoritarian one; it increases the responsiveness of and the trust in the system; and it allows for the representation of small minorities." (p. 39) Yet, "Charron and Lapuente (2011) present empirical evidence based on subnational European regions, that there is indeed a negative correlation between political fragmentation and the quality of governance [in proportional systems]." (p. 44-45).

Thus, a potential problem in this system is that "voters have little influence on which coalition government is formed after an election" (p. 39), and that "although ideological divergence between the electorate and its representatives takes place in both systems [plurality and proportional], this discrepancy is larger in a proportional system (Stadelmann et al. 2019)" (p. 42). One proposed solution for these problems is the "formateur" elected by the voters (p. 51), and it is interesting to note that this was the solution adopted by Israel. However, the solution was rejected after conflicts erupted between the two institutions independently directly elected by the people (Parliament and prime minister).

These challenges, we believe, underscore the need for changes to the electoral system itself – and not the multiplication of elections – if reformers wish to remedy the discrepancies between the people and their parliament (and government), as well as the fragmentation and quality of governance. In addition to these challenges, we also believe that the Netherlands (and similar proportional systems) face other potential problems that are addressable via electoral reform. In particular, the significant changes in the composition of parliaments from one election to the next in the Netherlands could generate problems, especially since the Netherlands presents more oscillation in electoral results and in party composition than other European countries.[1] For example, early elections and replacement of one or more coalition partners has been a frequent phenomenon in the Netherlands: out of the six elections between 2000 and 2018, for example, coalition partners changed four times, and several of the elections were early. Our study will focus on one particular election that had both these features.

In conclusion, on top of the problems of the electoral system identified in the B+S paper, there is a significant variance over time in Parliamentary composition, and an even more significant variation in government composition. Moreover, we will argue there is significant *policy* dispersion among different political parties, which is likely to translate into the difference of opinion between the electorate and the parliament (as well as resulting Government). For these reasons, we propose here an electoral system that addresses several current challenges in the Dutch system, along with some others we will identify below. The essential feature of the electoral system we propose is that it is a multiple vote system; that is, it provides voters with more than one vote, and voters may cast as many (or as few) of their allotted votes as they wish. These votes are cast under just one condition: they cannot be used to support the same party more than once – in technical terms, they cannot "cumulate" (Cox 1990). This electoral system can be combined with any transposition mechanism for the distribution of seats: proportional representation at the national (current system) or local level, with the application of a low – say, 1 or 2% – threshold, or even with the application of a high (5 or 7%) threshold.

[1] For many years, astute observers of party systems argued that "party systems are frozen" (see Lipset and Rokkan 1967) In the Netherlands case, it appears that the opposite has begun to occur.

2. The multiple vote system in brief: Advantages for voters

The distinctive feature of the system is that votes cast are summed up and distributed via mechanical provisions of the specified electoral system. What difference does the provision of multiple votes generate? We will argue that there are three significant consequences: first it enlarges the voters' strategy space; second, it is likely to increase voter information; and third, it has centripetal consequences for the party system of the country. We will provide conceptual explanations for the first two, and we will focus our analysis on the last of these consequences – the significance of this centripetal property.

With respect to voters, this system presents an exponential increase in the number of voting alternatives. Indeed, if we permit voters to have number of votes equal to the number of parties minus one (a vote for all parties is equivalent with no vote at all), the number of choices is:

$$\sum_{i=1}^{n-1} \frac{N}{i} + 1$$

where N equals the total number of parties in a country. For example, if the Netherlands presents voters with 10 viable parties for election to Parliament, a single-vote system provides the voter just eleven options: a single vote for any of the ten parties (plus outright abstention). In a three-vote system, however, the number of choice profiles increases to 176 (abstention, plus the 10 single party votes, 45 two party votes, and 120 three party votes). Even more impressively, a four-vote system affords the voter 386 unique choices. The maximum number of available choices lies at 5 total ballots, wherein Dutch voters would enjoy 638 total choice profiles.[2] One may object that the number of choices is overwhelming for the voter; but, in reality, it is a simple task, since the voter only has to determine which of the parties (s)he likes enough to vote in favor of. Our system, in fact, is identical to some forms of approval voting, which has already been adopted successfully by several smaller voting bodies (Brams and Fishburn 2007 [1980]).

Compared to other multiple vote systems, we believe our approach strikes an appropriate balance between the expressive benefits of multiple voting and the cognitive difficulty associated with some such systems. For

[2] The total number of available choice sets decreases after 5 votes, since the voters now face the decision of who to *exclude* in their ballot, rather than who to *include.*

example, proponents of other systems may argue that simple approval is not a sufficient option, and that the voter should be able to grade the parties (say from 1 to 10) or at least to be able to reject the ones (s)he dislikes (have the options 1, 0 and -1). However, each of these options requires considerably more of the voter, namely that they require her to form opinions not just about the parties themselves, but about their *relative* appeal. Our system, which effectively combines approval voting with the current Dutch proportional system, requires comparatively less of the voter while nevertheless enabling her to better express herself than in single-vote regimes.[3]

We believe this increase in choices is likely to reduce the number of abstentions, since it dramatically lowers the probability that voters are indifferent between vote choices (e.g., Plane and Gershtenson 2004). Indeed, a voter who does not know if she should prefer party A or B in a multiparty system may now simply vote for both. Moreover, she may do so without confronting the cognitively taxing task of ranking candidates: all votes in this setting are "worth" the same.

In addition to its potential for decreasing abstention, we believe that a multiple vote system may help to increase voter information. In order to evaluate different parties under such a system, voters will have to pay attention to the positions of a larger number of parties —understanding that they will ultimately be voting for more than a single party. Moreover, understanding that actually casting multiple votes increases their impact on the outcome, voters face incentives both to cast more votes and improve their information in the process. We are hopeful this particular feature of the multiple voting system will have a significant impact on the voting habits of the public.

Taken together, these two characteristics potentially promote a critical attitude of voters vis à vis parties, as opposed to an identification attitude. That is, instead of voters trying to find a party to identify with, they can be more critical and express their preferences more fully (if they so wish). This result carries with it both pros and cons. On one hand, some researchers claim that party identification fulfills a variety of positive societal functions, such as increasing voter turnout, serving as a policy

[3] Because we have incorporated the existing PR system into our modified system. One can also incorporate possible modifications of the Dutch system (such as different representational threshold) in the model we propose.

evaluation heuristic, and encouraging other types of political participation (see Dalton 2016 for a review). However, as Lavine et al. (2012) and others have underscored, intense partisan identification can lead to narrow-mindedness on the part of partisans. Indeed, such identifications may lead partisans to disregard important information that does not confirm their partisan biases. Doing so could empower demagogic leaders or create partisan informational asymmetries and fracture a society according to partisan identifications.

These advantages notwithstanding, we focus for the remainder of the paper on one particular property of this electoral system, which has not been discussed as one of the challenges of the Dutch electoral system, despite the fact that it is becoming a more permanent feature of contemporary electoral systems: namely, centrifugal results of the Dutch party system. Typically, this characteristic is attributed to populism and polarization of the body politic, and researchers often neglect to identify *institutional means* for overcoming it. Our institutional solution to polarization is to institute a multiple vote system, which we believe will also alleviate discrepancies between voters and parliamentary or governmental representation. This solution is based on an increase of voter influence on the electoral results via the multiple voting system. Below, we discuss the effects of our system on Dutch electoral outcomes at greater length, demonstrating how affording voters with multiple votes could help to draw Dutch parties toward the center of the political spectrum.

3. Calculating the mechanical effect of the multiple vote system

In order to demonstrate the centripetal nature of our multiple vote system in the Dutch context, we ran a series of simulations of electoral results under the new system. This analysis is based on current research by Crosson and Tsebelis (2020), and interested readers may find the program and apply the simulations below to any country or election they wish. The basic assumption underlying our electoral program is that if voters select to exercise their multiple vote option, they will select for their additional votes the parties closer to them. Thus, in order to simulate the effect of our system, we calculate the distances of other parties to each voter's first preference in order to estimate how voters would cast their second ballot.

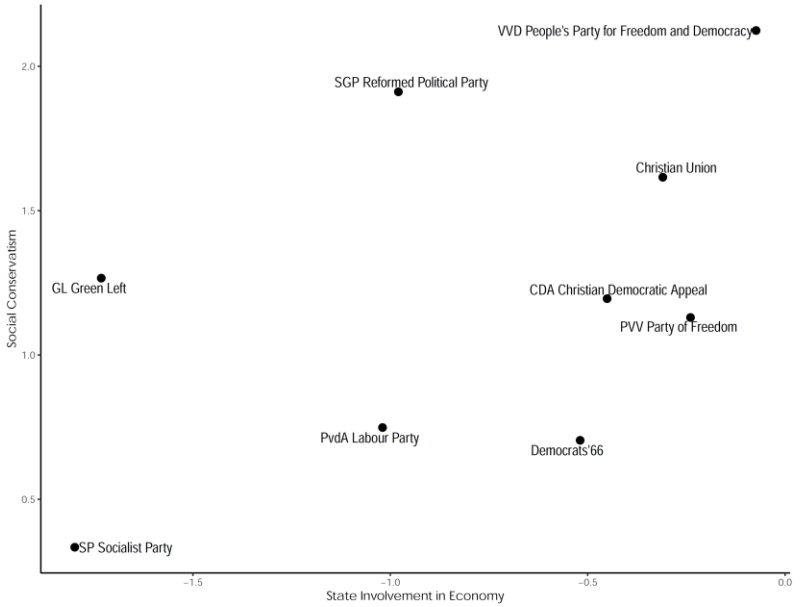

Figure 1. Ideological positions of Dutch Parties. *Two-dimensional ideological representations of Dutch parties in 2012, according to Laver and Benoit's (2007) schema (as applied by Lowe et al. 2011).*

We begin our simulation by assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that voters for a particular party roughly share the policy positions of that party. We recognize that this assumption is unlikely to hold in many instances, and we relax it below. Nevertheless, this allows us an empirical starting point, as the ideological positions of the parties, as well as initial party sizes, are provided by the Manifesto Project (Krause et al. 2018). More specifically, we use the 15-dimension refinement of the Manifesto Project scores generated by Lowe et al. (2011). Lowe et al. generate these 15 dimensions from a much larger number of topical categories found within the Manifesto Project data. The authors reduce the Project's dimensionality in a principled way by pairing opposing positions within the Project's data into individual dimensions – rather than incorporating some positions that lack a clear "opposite" position within the data. We join these 15-dimensional measurements with seat share data in the Netherlands from 2012, the most proximate year to Lowe et al.'s version of the Manifesto data.

Given the high dimensionality of the data, providing visual representation of the parties' ideal points is impossible. Thus, for visualization purposes, we plot the parties' locations according to Lowe et al.'s scaling of Laver and Benoit's (2007:98) Table 2). The 2-dimensional party scores place parties along "social conservatism" and "state involvement in the economy" dimensions. The first observation from Figure 1 is that the political parties are located in an ellipse, with the longer diameter along the first diagonal of the space. This implies that the Dutch political parties occupy a large policy space, as we discussed earlier. On the basis of this positional image and a series of additional parameters, we have constructed a program that calculates the effects of multiple voting. Here we will describe the algorithm, and thereafter present the actual results of the calculations.

The algorithm's requirements are as follows:

1) *Initial party percentages:* The initial positions of voters are provided by the percentages of each party, and their policy positions as shown in Figure 1. The program can use as many policy dimensions as specified by the user. In addition, the option for parties of *not* taking position in any particular dimension is also available to the user.
2) *Number of votes:* The program user can determine how many votes can each voter use.
3) *Prevalence of proximity voting:* Voters are assumed to select the parties closest to them for subsequent votes. So, they will select the party closest to them for their second vote. However, we have added a random error term in this selection, whereby voters, with some probability, cast their votes randomly. The justification is either that voters may not have an accurate picture of positions in all dimensions, or that some voters attribute higher significance in particular dimensions such that they chose to give their subsequent votes to parties that are closer to them in this particular dimension as opposed to the smallest multidimensional distance.
4) *Ideological Acceptability**:*** Since vote cumulation (attributing multiple votes to the same party) is not permitted, we provide the voter with the option of using only some of the available votes, i.e., to refuse to vote for parties that are considered too far away from the voter's preferences. Accordingly, the user of our program can specify the maximum distance within which a party must fall in order for voters to

actually cast their ballot for that party. One may think of this as the "tolerance" distance.

An important feature of our program is that with every additional vote cast, the algorithm recalculates the positions of voters. That is, instead of assuming that a voter's preferences are perfectly expressed by their first vote (and, consequently, perfectly in agreement with their party's preferences), we update voters' preferences with each additional vote. The updating occurs by placing each voter at the midpoint between his or her first and second choice. This way, the voters of each party become more differentiated from each other. (We remind the reader that the error term we have introduced differentiates the choices of voters.) The process is repeated as many times as permitted by the user through the specification of the tolerance distance.

The essential features of this algorithm are that centrist parties will get more votes from extremist ones, because they will receive votes from all directions, while extremist parties will receive votes only from their neighborhood. In addition, the difference in the size of different parties will decrease under our algorithm. To see why, we assume that a large and a small party are close to each other, and therefore "exchange" votes within our framework. When this occurs, the large party will necessarily provide more second votes to the smaller one than vice versa. This is a first order approximation of our system: it assumes that voters distribute their additional votes on the basis of proximity alone. One could assume instead that voters of small parties would be more willing to vote for a larger one than vice versa. If one makes this additional assumption, then the size of the parties will not be as dramatically affected by the electoral system we propose as in our analysis.

In what follows, we will present the results of the multiple vote electoral system and primarily its centripetal property, by calculating the gains and losses of the different parties as a function of their distance from a central point of the policy space, i.e., the multidimensional median. In order to assess the robustness of our results, we have also calculated the distance from other centrally located points such as the geometric median and center of gravity and the results are the same.

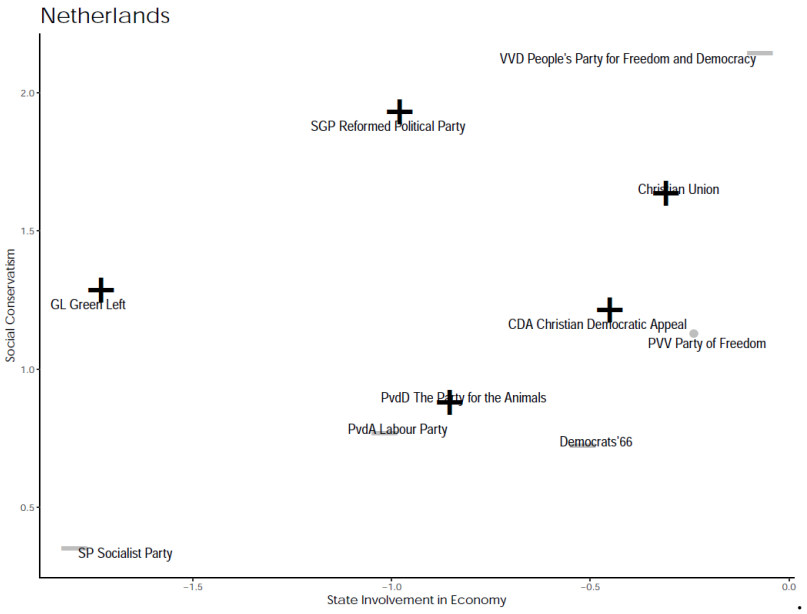

Figure 2. Gains and Losses by Dutch Parties in N-Vote System *Two-dimensional ideological locations of Dutch parties (Laver and Benoit 2007), with gains and losses in the N-vote system (relative to the actual 2012 electoral results). Plus signs indicate gains, while minus signs signify losses. Since PVV made neither gains nor losses, its location is signified with a point.*

4. Analysis of electoral results

Figure 2 combines the positions of the different parties presented in Figure 1 with the gains and losses incurred by each party calculated by our program (depicted with plus and minus signs).[4] There is primary observation to be derived from Figure 2. Note that there are two different divisions in the bottom portion of the figure, whereby all parties on the fringes of the distribution shrink in size – with the exception of the Party of Freedom (PVV), which remains the same size at 15 seats – while the

[4] We remind the reader that all the results of our system will be a function of the depicted ideological positions generated by the *Manifesto Project*, and encourage those who disagree with the current positioning to apply updated or improved locations to the program articulated by Crosson and Tsebelis (2020).

more centrist see their shares increase relative to the current electoral system. Another observation is that larger parties, such as VVD and PvdA, are among the losers of the electoral system we propose, while the smaller parties have increased their share.

This latter observation is primarily a technical one: as we explained above, it is a general characteristic of our algorithm that large parties will lose votes and small ones will gain, all else being equal. However, we also explained that making voters of larger parties more "patriotic" (or, depending on one's point of view, loyal or dogmatic) would reduce this effect. Yet this mechanical feature constitutes just one aspect of the depicted dynamic. Indeed, more interestingly, the two larger parties are actually the parties that *gained* votes in the 2012 election: VVD increased its seats from 31 to 41, and the PvdA from 30 to 38.Given the positions of the parties, the 2012 result seems like a polarizing one, and further examination of the political history of the 2012 elections confirms this analysis.

Party	Initial Seat Share	Mean N-vote Seat Share	N-vote Seat Share Range	N-vote Seat Share Less PvdD
VVD	41	16	[11, 24]	18
PvdA	38	25	[18, 31]	25
SP	15	9	[6, 12]	10
PVV	15	15	[13, 18]	18
CDA	13	18	[15, 23]	25
D66	12	11	[6, 16]	24
CU	5	22	[18, 25]	22
GL	4	5	[2, 10]	5
SGP	3	8	[2, 13]	8
PvdD	2	21	[17, 26]	-

Table 1. Average Seat Distributions according to N-Vote System. *Average seat share (and range across all simulations) in the lower chamber for each party, across all parameter values in the simulation. Final column displays the seat share if PvdD is excluded from the simulations.*

An early election in 2012 was forced by the PVV, who withdrew its support for Prime Minister Mark Rutte because of the austerity measures that the government wanted to apply. In the election, the VVD won seats, and the PVV lost. Another winner was the PvdA, which increased from 30

to 38 seats. After almost 50 days of negotiations, the two winners formed a coalition government. Table 1 explains why this was an obvious solution (the two parties have a majority of seats), while Figure 1 explains why this solution was nevertheless difficult – as the distance between the two parties is large. This coalition was ultimately successful. It is one of the few governments that completed its term. But because it lacked a majority in the upper chamber, it had to rely on the votes of Democrats '66 (D66), the Christian Union (CU) and the Reformed Political Party (SGP).

Had the election been performed with the system we propose, both parties would have had *fewer* seats, as Table 1 demonstrates, so this government would not have been possible. However, there are many parties located *between* these two coalition partners that would, at least spatially, support any policy solution that the VVD and the PvdA would agree upon. In fact, this is exactly how the government coalition functioned in order to achieve a majority in the Upper House. With our results, then, a coalition would likely form without the PVV, but the Christian Union and all the other parties needed for an Upper House majority would also have a majority in the lower House. Overall, in fact, there are many more politically flexible coalitions that would be closer to the center of the policy space as Figure 1 indicates.

There is one feature of our system, however, that will likely surprise readers with knowledge of the political life of the Netherlands: The Party of the Animals (PvdD) makes major gains in our system, shifting from 2 to 21. According to Figure 1, this occurred because of PvdD's central location in the policy space. However, the reason for this central location is not necessarily because of moderate policy positions. Instead, it is because PvdD does not express official positions on many major issues. Regardless of the reason, this central location attracts votes from all directions and renders PvdD a theoretically useful coalition partner. In actuality, PvdD may not be a reasonable recipient of additional votes, nor a credible partner. That is, the fact that they do not take positions on other issues may be considered a sign of peculiarity, and not of flexibility. Thus, not only would PvdD likely seem an odd coalition partner, but many voters may never consider voting for such a party, in spite of its overall "moderate" location. For these reasons, we rerun our results without this party, in order to demonstrate the robustness of our results. As the last column of Table 2 indicates, the centrist coalition still prevails with a significantly larger number of seats. The primary beneficiary of the

elimination of the Party of Animals was the neighboring Democrats '66 (D66).

But is it justifiable to alter the will of the Dutch people who rewarded one party (VVD) and punished another (PVV)? First let us clarify that our system would significantly reduce the reward of the PVV, but it would nevertheless leave the PVV at15 seats. What would be the basis of this outcome? As Figure 2 indicates, these parties were far away from the center of gravity of the Dutch political system. The actual history of the early 2012 election appears to corroborate this distance: the two parties were in sufficient agreement to form a government, but ultimately decided to separate from one another. The distance between coalition partners was even larger in the VVD-PvdA government, and the reasons that the government survived was the inclusion of additional partners. Our electoral system would have promoted a more centrist coalition, given the larger influence it affords to the centrist parties.

5. **Implications**

The major debate we hope our paper will generate is the following: is what we propose an "alteration" of the will of the people? *We believe that the electoral results are not a simple reflection of the will of the people, but a product of the interaction between the will of the people and the institutions undergirding the electoral system.* Indeed, when people vote they answer the question: "which one party do you like the most?" We change the question to: "which *n* parties do you like the most?" In this exercise, we showed that giving more weight to each voter produces more moderate outcomes than the current electoral system. If reduction of polarization is a desirable outcome, the multiple vote is a means to achieve it not only without distorting voter preferences, but actually relying *more* on the preferences of Dutch voters.

	Dependent variable:
	Gains from n-vote System
Distance from Center	-0.632^{***}
	(0.016)
Initial Party Size	-14.680^{***}
	(0.215)
Acceptability Parameter	0.055^{***}
	(0.012)
Number of Votes	0.086^{***}
	(0.017)
Proximity Voting	0.276^{*}
	(0.164)
Constant	5.219^{***}
	(0.212)
Observations	6,000
R^2	0.476
Adjusted R^2	0.476
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2. Regression Results of N-Vote System Gains. *Linear regressions of the difference between our n-vote system electoral vote shares by party and the "actual" results of the 2012 elections, normalized by actual party size following the 2012 election.*

Table 2 corroborates this argument. In this table we analyze the results of our algorithm with different values of the parameters we have selected. The dependent variable is each party's difference – normalized by initial party size – in percentage points between the actual electoral system and the multiple vote electoral system we propose. The model includes terms for each party's distance from the multidimensional median (*Distance from Center*) and each party's "original" size (*Initial Party Size*).;

Additionally, we have introduced a range of the parameters discussed in the introduction of this article: namely, the number of votes permitted by the electoral system, the acceptability parameter (what policy distance makes a voter unwilling to use more of his available votes), and the percentage cases where a voter votes by proximity as opposed to other criteria (e.g., randomly).

For each combination of parameters we performed a number of simulations (6000), and calculated the outcomes. Table 2 provides the average contribution of the different parameters across these 6000 experiments. The reader can verify that the distance from the center as well as the initial party size have negative and significant coefficients as expected. In addition, providing each voter with more votes increases the difference in the outcomes between the current voting system and the one we introduce. Having more tolerant voters – willing to use their votes to promote parties located further away from their first choice – also increases this difference. Finally, increasing the percentage of voters using actual distances in their subsequent choices also increases the difference between the actual and the multiple vote electoral systems. We find that our system would encourage significant moderation in the Dutch system, which we believe would aid in the formation of broadly representative coalitions.[5]

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have focused on the Dutch electoral system and the criticisms that it has generated – namely the discrepancies between parliament (and formed governments) and the people, as well as the correlation between fragmentation and quality of governance reported in the B+S article. We have also reiterated the challenges deriving from the dispersion among parties in the Dutch policy space. The world-wide emergence of populism demonstrates that these features are not restricted in the Netherlands alone.

[5] We want to point out that Crosson and Tsebelis (2020) have used the same electoral system in other countries (Germany, Belgium, Romania) and have concluded that the effect of the last three parameters is contingent on the electoral strength and the distribution of parties, and they are not as straightforward implications of the multiple vote electoral system.

As we have argued throughout the paper, we believe electoral reform – and not necessarily within-government reform – may serve to alleviate many of these challenges. More specifically, we have provided evidence that providing voters with more than one vote may improve voter information, increase participation, and drive governing parties toward the center of the political spectrum. We believe this system is both simple and effective, as it merely increases the number of votes that the voters may cast.

Our paper was based on the actual results of the 2012 election, and it assumed that the basic preferences of the voters were identical with the program of the parties they supported as reported in the Manifesto project (see Figure 1). As Figure 2 aptly summarizes, our system reduces support for several parties that are located farther away from the center of the Dutch political system. This particular feature of reduction in polarization should increase the correspondence between voters and the political system, as well as reduce coalitional swings, both previously identified as problems of the Dutch political system. Indeed, by better tapping the preferences of the people in a more accurate way than under the current restricted, we enable the emergence of outcomes that approximate more the "average" voter – and that are therefore likely to produce more flexible and durable coalitions.

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