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Electronic Voting in Belgium: societal mistrust or trust?

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Introduction

Does representative democracy imply that there is ... representation? What does one mean by *representation*? Looked at very generally, it means that the legislative (Parliament and government) and executive (government) bodies represent the opinions of those who are represented.

The primary method for expressing opinions in democracies is by voting: the Parliaments are made up of representatives that reflect the different trends of the opinion expressed by the vote. Universal suffrage is neither a historical fact nor a clear-cut contemporary feature.

There have been and there still are individuals who are excluded from voting and universal suffrage. For a long time, several European countries had representational parliamentary systems that were not democracies. Elected representatives and voters represented the elite (whether economic or cultural) and the vote was only spread to a small proportion of the population. We then experienced a *notabilization* of political relations.

Nowadays, the problems arise in new and really reverse terms. The question is more about knowing how to bring citizens back to the ballot boxes and in this manner to perpetuate the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Indeed, voter turnout rates have been falling for the past twenty years. In many European countries, abstention has risen in a straight line since the end of the seventies right up to present day. In view of this trend and considering the growing number of election choices for *a priori* non-government parties, several analysts and political leaders have been wondering about ways to curb this development.

In part, thoughts relating to *electronic voting* lie within this context. A certain number of academics and political leaders have been examining institutionalised restraints likely to improve the current state of affairs. Naturally in this framework, the automated vote is only one element amongst others. In this regard, Arend Lijphart has undoubtedly pursued this the

furthest, since in 1997 he suggested (re)introducing compulsory voting in democratic States in order to respond to the sagging voter turnout¹.

The will to reduce voter abstention was not the only issue at the origin of studies on the possibility of introducing or extending electronic voting. The mobilisation of new communication methods and technology for voting was also at issue.

This report shall first briefly discuss the issue of automated voting by looking at the response to the introduction of electronic voting by Belgian citizens who used it. We shall show the results of a major exit poll survey conducted on the occasion of the May 18 2003 federal elections on Belgian's opinions with regard to electronic voting. Two major issues were examined. To what extent was automated voting as it was used in Belgium considered as easy or difficult to use? Was electronic voting commonly accepted or rejected by the voters who used it?

The Belgians and automated voting

On May 18 2003, a team of twenty-seven pollsters supervised by seven researchers and professors from the Université Libre de Bruxelles went to thirteen polling stations in the country. The fieldwork was done in Lens (Hainaut Province), Liège centre, Seraing and in Sart Tilman (Liège Province), in Asse (Province of Flemish Brabant), Antwerp centre and Borgerhout (Antwerp Province), in Anderlecht, Jette, Brussels-City and Saint-Gilles (Brussels-Capital District). In addition, two teams of pollsters went to Waarschot (East Flanders Province) and Verlaine (Liège Province) where the so-called 'ticketing' method was being tried out.

The questionnaire submitted at the polling station exit on May 18 2003 was in three parts. The first had a series of questions that enabled defining the socio-demographic profile of the individuals interviewed.

This information has a twofold use. On the one hand, it enabled assessment of the value of the sampling in terms of representativeness. On the other hand, this data also permitted us to

¹ Arend Lijphart, "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma", *American Political Science Review*, March 1997, Vol. 91, n° 1, p. 11.

determine whether certain socio-economic groups or certain age categories showed any specific association with electronic voting problems.

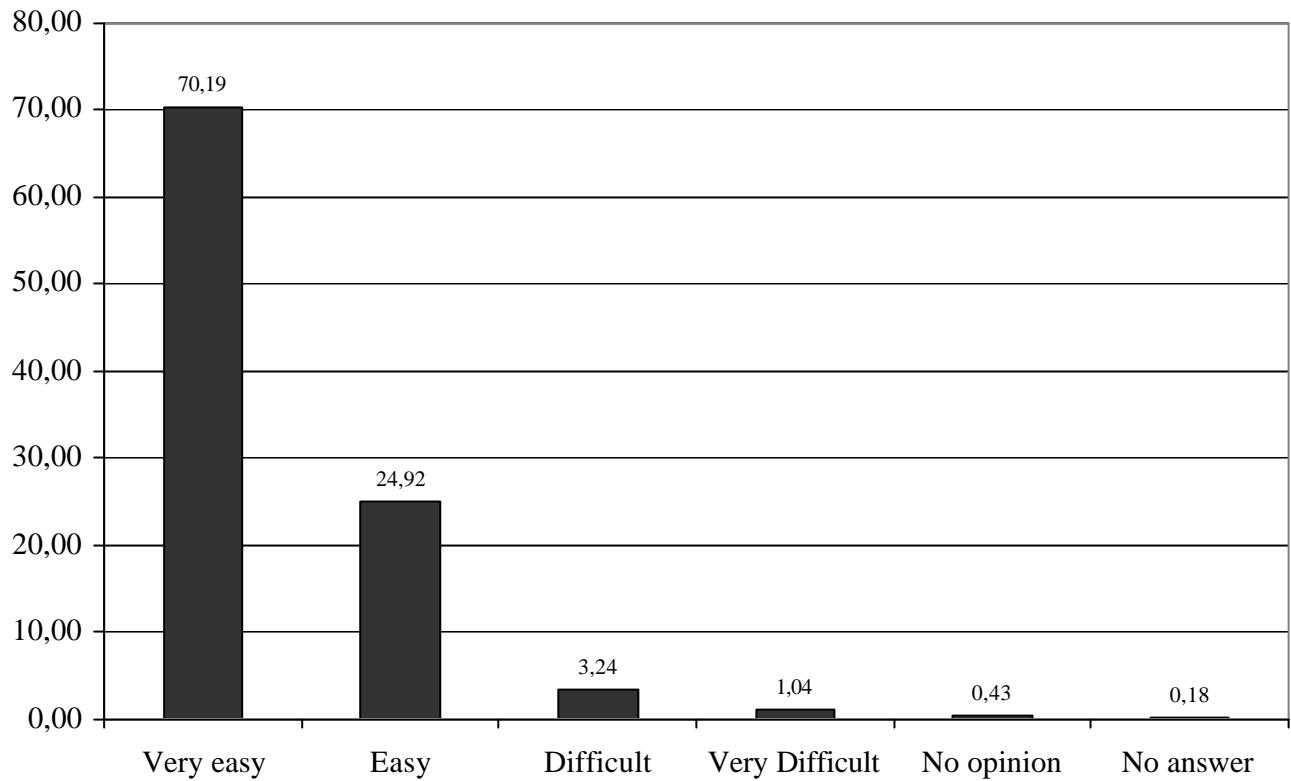
The section part of the questionnaire contributed a second round of objective data on the profile of the persons polled. Its purpose was to provide the resources needed to assess whether familiarity with computers and the information received beforehand about this new voting system tended to influence the way voters felt about computerised voting.

The user-friendliness of electronic voting

Those polled were asked to evaluate the easiness/difficulty of use by stating that electronic voting as ‘very easy’, ‘easy’, ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to use. Looking at the figures, it seemed clear that if there was any criticism voiced by the interviewees about electronic voting, the reproaches had nothing to do with the user-friendliness of this method of voting.

Indeed, just under three-fourths of respondents stated ‘very easy’ for computerised voting. The positive comments relating to the actual operation of the electronic voting mechanism even reached 95.11% if one adds the 24.92% of persons who noted ‘easy’ to vote with computer. Except for a very small minority of 3.28%, a favourable opinion was given about the user-friendliness of electronic voting.

Easiness/difficulty in using electronic voting



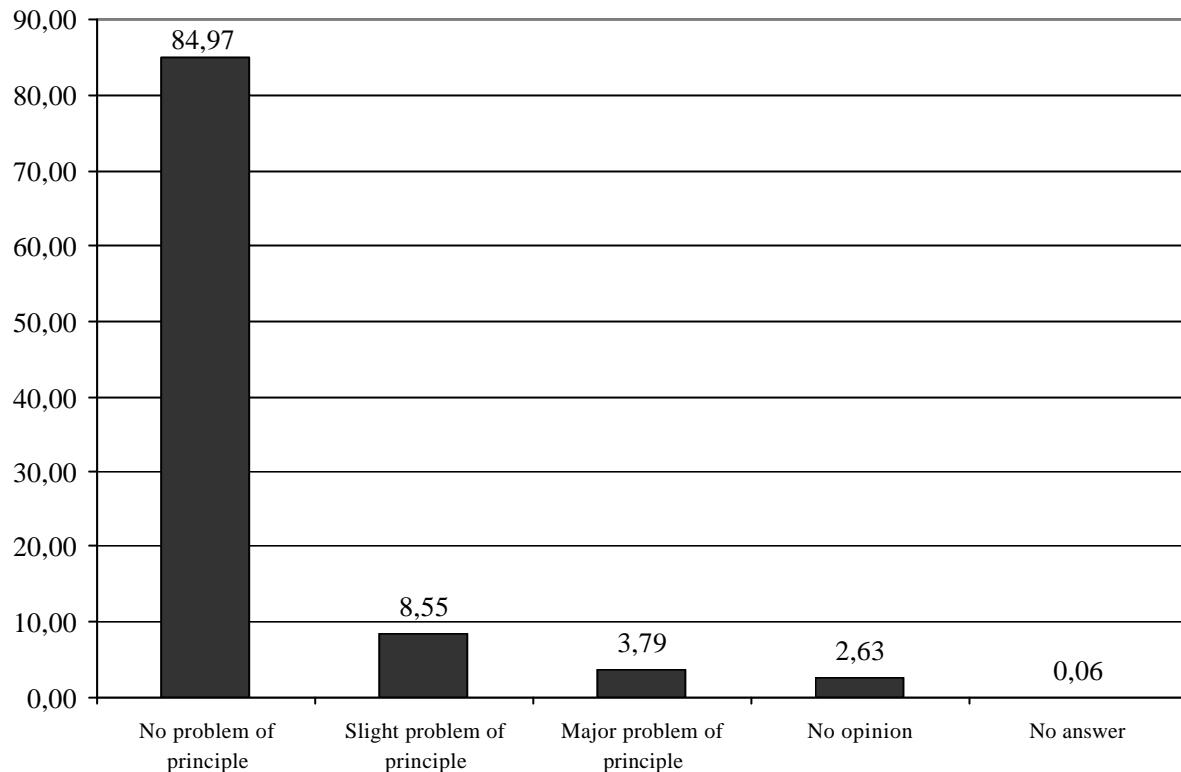
If one cross checks ease of use with the educational background, one can analyse to what extent electronic voting would be more accessible to the better educated. The data obtained in our research was able to confirm this hypothesis to a certain degree. Indeed, it was with respondents having greater academic assets (university and college qualifications) that the percentages of people who stated ‘very easy’ for electronic voting were the highest. In the two cases, it was close to 80% (78.16% for university graduates and 79.95% for those who graduated from colleges). Conversely, individuals with few academic assets gave fewer favourable answers. For example, it was only 41.67% with people whose final diploma was the one they obtained at the end of their primary school education.

Societal acceptance of electronic voting

The second variable tested was societal acceptance of electronic voting. Here, it dealt with assessing within our sampling if electronic voting posed any philosophical problems.

In order to assess if the persons interviewed had any complaints to make in this realm, an *ad hoc* question was put to them. It asked them to state if for them, electronic voting was ‘a major problem of principle’, ‘a slight problem of principle’ or ‘not a problem of principle’.

The matter of principle



The figures are clear for the matter of societal acceptance of electronic voting. By a very substantial majority (84.97%), the respondents stated that for them, the new voting method was not a problem of principle. The two other replies were only given by 12.34% of those questioned.

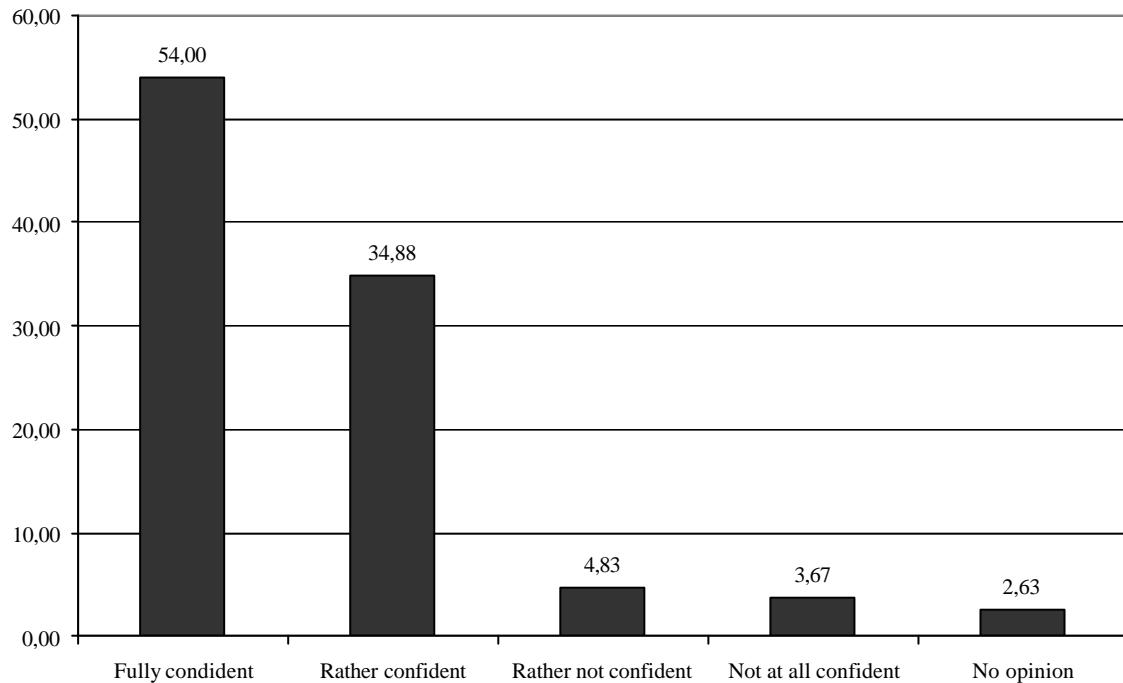
Therefore it clearly emerged that societal acceptance of electronic voting was not a disputed issue within our sampling taken on May 18 2003 at polling station exits.

The issue of trust/mistrust in electronic voting

The third and final question was about citizens' confidence in automated voting. The last variable is vital for establishing the legitimacy of computerised voting. As several authors have repeated, without this legitimacy, any wide-scale application of this method could be problematic.

Over the sampling as a whole, there was a majority feeling of trust towards automated voting. The favourable responses ('full confidence' and 'rather confident') were mentioned in 88.88% of cases. Only 8.5% of those surveyed expressed mistrust ('rather not very confident' and 'not at all confident') towards computerised voting.

Trust/mistrust in electronic voting



The feeling of trust appeared to dominate to a large extent, although it was not without reservations. Indeed, a majority of respondents (54%) expressed complete confidence, but nearly a quarter of the sampling expressed qualified trust (34.88%).

Thus there was now a different configuration than the one for the question on ease of use. For the latter variable, the proportion of qualified responses was much lower.

What about the experimental tests with ticketing? The experiment conducted at the Waarschot and Verlaine polling stations increased confidence a bit but it especially altered its fundamental nature. 70% of voters in these polling stations actually confirmed they had complete confidence in computerised voting compared to 52% of voters in other stations. A

contrario, the number of citizens expressing some kind of mistrust was reduced to its most simple expression, 3%, compared to 9% amongst citizens voting in a different station. It did indeed seem that ticketing had a valued added effect.

Electronic voting is starting to be used more and more at the expense of paper ballots. In this respect, it was interesting to put it into perspective and see how Belgian voters felt compared to the old voting method.

The preceding figures showed that computerised voting gave rise to relatively few negative reactions on the subject of user friendliness , societal acceptance and trust. Nonetheless, it was certainly advisable to wonder if the relationship to the new voting method was better or not as good as Belgian ties to the paper ballot.

For this purpose, the questionnaire submitted at the poll exits included a question about confidence in voting with paper ballots.

A majority of respondents expressed their confidence in the paper ballot. 32.19% of them declared to have ‘full confidence’ and 44.59% said they were ‘rather confident’, which meant 76.78% positive responses.

Negative responses were made by 17.26% of those polled (10.93% ‘relatively little confidence’ and 6.29% ‘no confidence at all’). Finally, there were 5.93% with no opinion. Amongst the latter, one undoubtedly will find voters who have never voted with paper ballot.

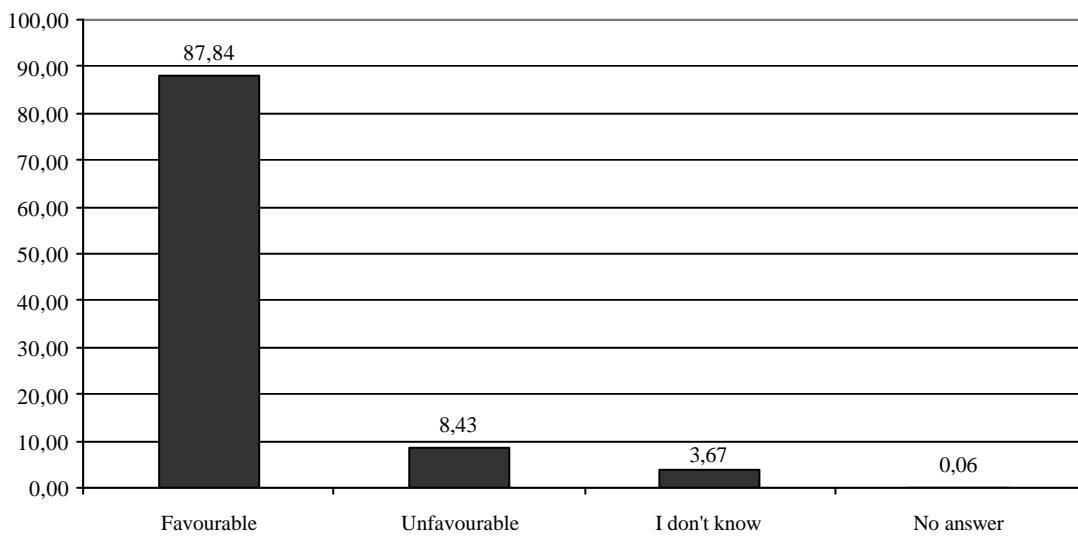
Just as for electronic voting, the confidence of those questioned was largely positive. Even so, it was expressed in a more nuanced manner than it was for the new voting method. The paper ballot received more ‘reasonably confident’ than ‘fully confident’. Conversely, 54% marked ‘full confidence’ for electronic voting compared to 34.88% ‘reasonably confident’. Nonetheless, this comparison must be made with caution because it compared real circumstances – the electronic voting done on May 18, 2003 – with a past situation – voting with paper ballot – or virtual, notably in the case of the under 30’s who may have never voted with paper ballot.

In brief, two trends appeared. A majority of those who had confidence in electronic voting also had confidence in the paper ballot, but in a more moderate fashion. On the other hand, with those who mistrusted the new method, it was generally through preference to the former technique.

The respondents' positioning towards electronic voting was analysed in detail according to three variables: societal acceptance, user friendliness and trust. A fourth and more encompassing question was added to the questionnaire. It asked the respondents to state if in the end, they were or were not favourable to computerised voting.

A vast majority (87.84%) answered yes to this question. Less than 10% gave an unfavourable answer (8.43%). The percentage of non-answers was 3.67%. As with the totality of questions, the opinions were positive with regard to electronic voting. But one should keep in mind the nuances that surfaced with socio-demographics and voter familiarity with computers.

Overall feeling regarding electronic voting



If we differentiate between voters from polling stations with ticketing system and the others, we once again observe a high level of acceptance. Nearly 92% of voters in Verlaine and Waarschot declared themselves in favour of computerised voting compared to 87% of surveyed voters from other polling stations. And only 6.6% had a differing opinion compared to 8.7% in the second category.

Conclusion

Just as the Netherlands, Great Britain, the United States and Brazil, Belgium partially introduced this new method of voting.

In 1991, the villages of Waarschot and Verlaine served as the first testing grounds for this. The trial was considered conclusive enough for the procedure to be expanded. At the last elections on May 18th 2003, around 44% of voters used the new method.

In this context, the *Centre d'étude de la vie politique* of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* got involved in very extensive field research. Studies have included an ‘exit poll’ conducted on May 18, 2003. It enable them to compile 1637 questionnaires on the entire country.

In this concise report, we have given a brief presentation of the results of this survey. Looking at the figures, it seemed clear that if any criticism was made with regard to electronic voting, the main concern of these reproofs had no connection with the user friendliness of this voting method. Indeed, a bit less than three-quarters` of respondents felt that they had used computerised voting ‘with the greatest of ease’.

At societal acceptance level, the exit poll results showed the absence of any major problems. By a very large majority (84.97%), respondents confirmed that the new method of voting did not pose any problems in principle. Societal acceptance of electronic voting appeared to be contest just a little and not very strongly within the scope of our sampling taken on May 18th 2003 at the polling station exits. We noted that only 8.5% of Belgians interviewed felt a ‘small problem of principle’ regarding automated voting and 3.5% of whom did express a major objection to this voting method.

The third dependent variable assessed was confidence in the new method of voting amongst Belgian voters. The favourable responses (‘full confidence’ and ‘reasonably confident’) were expressed in 88.88% of the cases.

Looking at the cross-checking of certain socio-demographic data with levels of confidence in electronic voting, some nuances can be established. Thus we could detect differences in terms of levels of academic assets.

The aforementioned figures show that computerised voting gave little rise to negative reactions in the realms of user friendliness, societal acceptance and confidence. However some nuances existed when studying data that was dependent on specific aspects: academic assets, age or familiarity with computers.

Moreover, we observed that in the Verlaine and Waarschot polling stations, where the ticketing experiment was introduced, societal acceptance and confidence in computer voting were higher than the average.

If it is feasible financially and in terms of organisation, the implementation of computerised voting together with ticketing appeared beneficial from two points of view:

- In the eyes of voters, it seemed to increase confidence in the use of electronic voting.
- For political and social party actors, political leaders, candidates, civil society associations,... – it enables verification in case of grave doubts or controversies.

Nonetheless, it would undoubtedly be more judicious to reverse the official quality of the ballot; the official ballot would be the automated ballot. The ‘paper ballot’ would be used uniquely in the event of a request for verification. Indeed, the ‘paper count’ for bureaux de the Verlaine and Waarschot polling stations on the 18th and 19th of May 2003, proved to be extremely problematic and kept teams of vote counters hard at work for most of the night.