Patterns of Electoral Reform: The Onion Model

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Abstract:

Early work in the field of electoral reform mostly focused on the few cases of major electoral reform. Recent research in the field has moved beyond these major reforms and recognized that electoral reform comes in many forms and sizes. This paper will focus on patterns in the occurrence of different types of electoral reform. Electoral reform, in the broader sense, comes in many different combinations. Indeed, in practice, political elites often discuss and implement reform packages that tie together different electoral reforms (e.g. some increasing the impact of citizens, while other elements actually decrease the impact of citizens). The question that this paper seeks to answer is why and when do which types of electoral reform occur. I will propose an onion model whereby different electoral reforms are situated in different ‘layers’. The inner layers are important to politicians, while the outer are far less so. Depending on the type of reform process (elite-majority imposition or elite-mass interaction, cf. Renwick, 2010), politicians either reason inside-out or outside-in. This theoretical argument will also be illustrated by examples from Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands.
1. Introduction

Sometimes politicians can seem to act in a strange way—especially when it comes to electoral reform. When the Dutch Balkenende II government entered office in 2003, it started with an ambitious electoral reform agenda. The coalition agreement posited that a mixed-member system would replace the decade-old list-PR system (Balkenende, 2003). The primary driver of this major electoral reform was the smallest party in the coalition, the left-libertarian party D66. The party had advocated the reform for a long time but had never been able to get beyond the stage of setting up expert committees on the topic. The funny thing about the Balkenende II reform was that it would disadvantage D66 the most, thereby puzzling rational choice inspired scholars. Eventually the party did not succeed in getting the reform implemented. The government fell over the issue, but D66 re-entered the government on the promise that the ballot structure would be changed, making it easier for politicians to be elected out of the list order. All parties nominally supported the measure, but when the government once again fell in 2006 the bill was retracted immediately and the same parties who supported the measure (with the exception of D66) now unisono rejected it (Jacobs, 2011). If, as scholars inspired by sociological institutionalism posit, the measure was meant to increase the legitimacy of the electoral system then why was the issue so easily dropped as soon as D66 left the government? In sum, how to explain the inconsistencies in the reform attempt?

In contrast to the ‘mature’ field of electoral systems, the field of electoral reform ‘remains stubbornly underdeveloped’ (Farrell, 2011:186). Thanks to seminal work conducted by Shugart and Wattenberg (2001), Benoit (2004), Colomer (2004), Katz (2005), Rahat (2008), Blais (2008) and Renwick (2010) we actually have a fairly good insight in what drives the, rather exceptional, major reforms of electoral systems. However, if we move beyond these

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1 The reform failed despite the fact that there was actually a majority supporting it as the largest opposition party originally supported the reform.
2 A third (far less developed) approach to electoral reform, the ideational approach (cf. Farrell, 2011:188), also fails here as the main parties invoked different principles at different times, while D66 actually did not mention it in its election manifesto (D66, 2003). Needless to say, the rational choice approach did not apply either as the measure itself benefited no party.
3 As a preliminary note I would like to stress that this paper only considers (established) consensus democracies. Other theories may apply to other types of democracies.
4 More specifically these studies dealt with major reforms of the district magnitude, electoral formula and the effective threshold of an electoral system.
exceptional major reforms and include the more regular smaller reforms of the electoral system (such as a modest increase of the electoral threshold) or focus on a broader range of changes of the electoral law (including reforms such as changes to the ballot structure, the repeal of compulsory voting or the introduction of a directly elected prime minister) our knowledge is far less developed. Indeed, only from 2005 onwards have scholars devoted attention to such apparently minor electoral reforms (see Katz, 2005; van der Kolk, 2007, Pilet, 2007 and Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011). As these articles mostly tested the existing approaches to major reform on minor reforms (and concluded they only partially applied to minor reforms) we actually know very little about minor electoral reform. The two dominant approaches used to explain major reforms of the electoral system, namely the rational choice approach based on seat-maximization (see most notably Benoit, 2004 and Colomer, 2004) and the sociological institutionalist approach based on the legitimacy of the electoral system (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011) both fail to explain many of the actual minor electoral reforms (van der Kolk, 2007; Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011). The theories used to explain major reforms of the electoral system do not travel well beyond the borders of that category, as particularly the latter part of the Balkenende II reform attempts make clear.

The challenge that lies ahead is thus to come up with a theoretical approach that is able to explain minor reforms while at the same time being able to explain major reforms of the electoral system. The question this paper wishes to address is thus: why and when do which types of electoral reform occur? In this paper I will propose what I call the onion model, which is a simple model that starts with the contention that political elites rank democratic reforms according to the levels of threat or opportunity that they present to them. When confronted with public dissatisfaction or reformist politicians, non-reformist politicians are most likely to give up the ‘outer layers’ (the lowest-ranked elements) and allow, for instance, an increase in the impact of preference votes. On the other hand, when politicians expect to maximize their self-interest they will reason ‘inside out’ and focus on the ‘inner’ layers - the electoral reforms that political elites deem to have the greatest impact - and implement

\footnote{Indeed, (the absence of) compulsory voting is routinely found to be the single most important determinant of voter turnout (Geys, 2006). Changes in the ballot structure can make or break the careers of individual politicians and the introduction of a directly elected Prime Minister can produce major policy deadlocks (such deadlocks led Israel, which introduced such a measure in 1992 and abolished it once again just nine years later on, see Rahat 2008).}
reforms affecting the proportionality of the electoral system. When they fear that this may be beyond the pale and risks enraged voters, they will either move to more outer layers or add an element from such a layer to appease the media and the public.

I will proceed as follows: I will start with presenting an overview of the dominant theoretical approaches to major electoral reform. Afterwards I will demonstrate that these approaches are ill-equipped to explain minor electoral reforms. In essence there are at least four main empirical challenges to the dominant approaches, namely the challenge of equifinality, the challenge of electoral reforms at the non-national level, the challenge of ballot structure reforms and the challenge of mixed reform packages. Each of these challenges will be discussed more in depth and illustrated with examples from Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands (1986-2008). I will then develop the onion model, and provide examples of its usage. Lastly, I will discuss the direction of future research and suggest how the model can be tested more broadly.

2. Theories explaining major reforms of the electoral system

The field of major electoral reform is dominated by rational choice. It is assumed that changes in electoral law are first and foremost dominated by seat-maximizing political parties (cf. Benoit, 2004). Or in the words of one prominent scholar, ‘It's parties that choose electoral systems (or Duverger's law upside down)’ (Colomer, 2005). The sociological institutionalist approach, on the other hand, maintains that reforms occur when the legitimacy of the system, in the form of satisfaction with the way democracy works, is in danger (Dalton, 2004).

2.1 **The rational choice approach**

The initial problem with the rational choice approach was that it had severe difficulties with explaining electoral reform tout court. After all: why would politicians change the rules of a game they are winning? (Katz, 2005:60) Hence, as Nohlen (1984:217) noted, it was originally expected that ‘fundamental changes [to electoral systems] are rare and arise only in extraordinary historical situations’. Confronted with the empirical phenomenon that electoral

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6 Other types of institutionalism have also been used in the study of electoral reform. Specifically rational choice and veto player institutionalism are increasingly used. However as both are primarily used complementary to the rational choice approach (even by Benoit himself, 2004:374-375), I do not consider them to be stand-alone rivals of rational choice.
reform actually occurred rational choice inspired scholars looked for a way to explain this. Such an explanation was offered by Benoit (2004). He presents a clear and parsimonious explanation of why politicians would take ‘the risk’ of introducing a major electoral reform. Benoit (2004:374-375) offers the following prediction:

A change in electoral institutions will occur when a political party or coalition of political parties supports an alternative which will bring it more seats than the status quo electoral system, and also has the power to effect through fiat that institutional alternative. Electoral systems will not change when no party or coalition of parties with the power to adopt an alternative electoral system can gain more seats by doing so.

In short, political parties will implement an electoral reform when (a) they have the required majority to do so and (b) such a reform would increase their seat share. The rational choice approach to electoral reform is based on three general principles: the dominance of outcome-contingent motivations; optimization and information seeking.

1. Political elites are primarily interested in the outcome of a reform. According to Benoit (2004:375), political parties are predominantly interested in expanding their seat share. Hence it is the benefits attached to the outcome of a reform that matter, not whether a reform is in line with a party’s principles or whether a reform makes a party look good in the eyes of the voters (see also Colomer, 2004:6-7).

2. Political elites optimize. One could take the first principle one step further. Political elites not only want to increase their seat share, they want to optimize the gains. Political elites will implement the reform that benefits them most (Benoit, 2004:373, see also Hindmoor, 2006:190-192).

3. Political parties actively seek information about the consequences of reforms. In order to know which reform would benefit them most, political elites need to gather as much information as possible about the range of reform options and the consequences of each of

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7 More recently, scholars have stressed that political elites may also have act-contingent motivations to support or implement electoral reforms (see most notably Blais and Shugart, 2008). In such instances political elites may risk losing a substantial number of votes when they oppose an electoral reform or, conversely, may feel they can win a substantial number of votes when they support or advance an electoral reform (Reed and Thies, 2001). However, even these authors stress that of the two outcome-contingent motivations are the most important. Act-contingent motivations as best play a minor role (Blais and Shugart, 2008:197).
them. Hence, Benoit expects political elites actively to seek information and when new data become available the elites are expected to update their existing information (Benoit, 2004:379).

However, the rational choice model would predict lots of major electoral reforms, whereas in practice only very few of them occurred (cf. Renwick, 2010). Indeed, it seems that the early rational choice approach underestimated the chances of electoral reform, but the newer rational choice model actually overestimates the chances of reform. The answer to this criticism came in the form of a rational choice institutionalist approach to major electoral reform (see Shugart, 2008). Shugart proposes that only when electoral systems have inherent failures that produce recurring anomalous results, will there be enough momentum for political elites to embark on seat-maximization through electoral reform. If this is not the case, institutions (in casu the electoral system) are sticky (see also the barrier approach outlined by Rahat and Hazan, 2011). Moreover, familiarity breeds stability; and moving to a new electoral system requires adaptation from MPs and parties (e.g. new types of campaigning), entails the risk of backfiring and produces a lot of uncertainty. Hence only a combination of inherent (systemic failures) and contingent (seat-maximization) factors can explain major electoral reform (see: Shugart, 2008). In such instances the majority of politicians imposes the electoral reform on the minority (so-called elite-majority imposition; Renwick, 2010).

2.2 THE SOCIOLOGICAL-INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

The second theoretical approach to electoral reform is sociological institutionalism. Here authors state that reforms occur as ‘an elite response to popular demands for new forms of participation’ (Donovan and Karp, 2006:672). In its simplest form this approach maintains that electoral reforms occur when a significant section of citizens is dissatisfied with the existing democratic procedures. Under such circumstances, political elites have substantial electoral incentives to implement electoral reform (Scarrow, 2001:653), but it may also be that politicians simply want to increase (or save) the legitimacy of the political system as in democracies ‘legitimacy is itself a valuable political resource. (…) The point is that not just election, but victory in a contested election that is widely regarded as free and fair, is required for the successful assertion of democratic legitimacy’ (Katz, 2005:72).
The sociological institutionalist approach to electoral reform focuses on the interrelationship of institutions and their societal roots (Lijphart, 1984, 1999). Unlike the rational choice approach, no single author has formalized it explicitly, therefore the sociological institutionalist approach has multiple variations. Like most institutionalists, sociological institutionalists consider the institutional setting to be stable. Only large exogenous shocks can upset the institutional equilibrium. One of the basic principles of the sociological institutionalist approach to democratic reform is that institutions should ‘fit’ the society in which they are rooted. Following Lijphart (1984), they claim that when the link between institutions and their societal foundations is lost because of a significant societal change, political elites will either adapt to or counter these changes through electoral reform (Rahat, 2008:22). Sociological institutionalist especially point to a postmaterialist value change as the single most important trigger for electoral reform (see Dalton, 2004; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; see also Renwick, 2010). Of course no sociological institutionalist believes that electoral systems magically change. Political elites are always involved in the reform process, but this time the political elites interact with the public opinion (a process dubbed *elite-mass interaction* by Alan Renwick, 2010)

3. The difficulty to move beyond major reforms

While the aforementioned theoretical approaches can jointly explain most of the major electoral reforms that occurred in established democracies, they are not quite as successful when it comes to explaining minor electoral reforms. In what follows I discuss the findings of the few studies that examined minor electoral reforms. Additionally I will draw on a unique database including all national and local-level minor and major electoral reforms affecting the ballot structure or proportionality of the electoral system that occurred in Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands from 1986 until 2008 (for a detailed classification of different types of electoral reform, see: Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011:497; Jacobs, 2011).\textsuperscript{8,9}

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\textsuperscript{8} My units of observation were 15 governments. Caretaker governments or governments that lasted less than a year were left out as these lacked the power or time to implement electoral reforms. The following governments are covered: Vranitzky II, Vranitzky III, Vranitzky V/Klima, Schussel I, Schussel II, Gusenbauer (all Austrian); Martens VIII, Dehaene I, Dehaene II, Verhofstadt I, Verhofstadt II (all Belgian); Lubbers III, Kok I, Kok II, Balkenende II (all Dutch).

\textsuperscript{9} The country selection was based on the desire to have a most similar set of countries as electoral reforms as the ‘starting point’ (e.g. proportional electoral system or not) seems to matter for the type of process that leads to electoral reform. Especially the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies seems to matter.
None of these countries experienced major electoral reforms in the classic sense, yet all of them experienced a substantial number of minor reforms or even major reforms if one adheres to Lijphart’s definition of major electoral reform (see appendix A).\(^\text{10}\) In total a third (5/15) of the governments examined here experienced at least one electoral reform.\(^\text{11}\)

When one wants to apply the rational choice or sociological institutionalist approach to minor electoral reform one faces at least four challenges, namely equifinality, mixed reform packages; and the high number of non-national-level reforms and ballot structure reforms. Each of these four challenges will be developed below.

3.1. THE CHALLENGE OF EQUIFINALITY

The first challenge to the dominant theoretical approaches is more of a theoretical or even methodological nature. As Alan Renwick convincingly shows, neither rational choice, nor sociological institutionalism by itself can explain all of the instances of major electoral reform (Renwick, 2010:8). Only when one combines the two approaches can all of the major electoral reforms in France, Italy, Japan and New Zealand be explained. Major electoral reform thus seems to be characterized by equifinality.\(^\text{12}\) But when to expect elite-majority imposition and when elite-mass interaction? The crucial variable is probably public dissatisfaction. When public dissatisfaction is high, one can expect reforms through elite-mass interaction. Conversely if there is little or no public dissatisfaction, government politicians can freely introduce a blatantly partisan electoral reform. However, at best this may hold for major electoral reforms, but as soon as one moves to slightly smaller electoral reforms, this does not seem to be the case. In 1992, for instance, the Austrian Vranitzky III government implemented an electoral reform that introduced an electoral threshold of 4%, created a third tier, decreased the district magnitude and increased the impact of the preference vote.\(^\text{13}\) Three of those measures were blatantly partisan even though public

\(^{\text{10}}\) Lijphart (1994:13) uses a definition that is more relaxed than the traditional one as he not only considers a shift in electoral formulas but also incorporates >20% shifts in the district magnitude and effective threshold.

\(^{\text{11}}\) If we include all types of electoral reform (as defined by Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011) this number rises to 9/15.

\(^{\text{12}}\) I use the term equifinality to refer to instances where multiple paths (in casu reform through elite-majority imposition and elite-mass interaction) can lead to the same outcome (in case a successful electoral reform).

\(^{\text{13}}\) The third tier seat distribution was to be based on the D’Hondt highest averages electoral formula. As it would be calculated by inputting all the votes – not the votes that remained after the first and second tier distribution - it
dissatisfaction was clearly on the rise (Müller, 2005; Jacobs, 2011). But why then did the
government implement such partisan reforms? On the other hand, it is clear that a modest
elite-mass interaction occurred, as the impact of preference votes was increased. This brings
me to the second challenge, which concerns the content of electoral reform packages.

3.2. THE CHALLENGE OF MIXED REFORM PACKAGES

There are a number of cases where political elites win some power or seats but at the same
time lose some of it as well. As mentioned earlier, this occurred in Austria when the
Vranitzky III government implemented an electoral reform package that slightly benefited the
government parties but at the same time somewhat weakened the control of the party
leadership over who got elected by increasing the impact of preference votes. How to
explain the occurrence of such mixed reform packages? If political elites only implement
reforms that are advantageous for them then why include elements that actually disadvantage
them? Conversely, if political elites want to increase the legitimacy of the system, why would
they include elements that at least have the appearance of being blatantly partisan? Surely,
such elements are unlikely to be beneficial for the legitimacy of the system.

It thus seems that not only are we confronted with equifinality, there are clearly hybrid
situations as well. It is likely that elite-majority imposition and elite-mass interaction are
merely extremes with a large grey zone in between them, something that was also
acknowledged in Renwick’s later work (Renwick, 2011:457-458). However, it remains
unclear why and when we should expect which types of reform. We lack an overarching
theory that incorporates both equifinality and explicitly addresses this ‘grey zone’.

would slightly benefit the largest parties. At the time it was estimated that the government parties would gain
three seats on a total of 183 (Vécsei, 11/12.7.1992).

14 The Vranitzky III government serves only as an example. We have to date no comparative data connecting
minor electoral reforms to public dissatisfaction. It is therefore possible that Vranitzky III was a typical or
deviant case. Nevertheless, it poses a theoretical challenge to the two dominant approaches to major electoral
reform. Even if the Vranitzky case is the only example of this phenomenon to date, we cannot exclude
occurrences of it.

15 Based on the overview by Alan Renwick (2011:466-469) there are at least six other instances of such mixed
reform packages in European established democracies since 1945. Given that Renwick has a more restricted
view of what constitutes an electoral reform, only studied Europe and only took national-level electoral reforms
into account, this number is likely to underestimate the total number of mixed reform packages.
3.3. THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTORAL REFORMS AT THE NON-NATIONAL LEVEL

Even though major electoral reform is very rare at the national level, it is far more common at the non-national level, as the reform discussions in Australia, Canada, the US and the UK illustrate (Farrell, 2001; 2011; Bowler and Donovan, 2008). Similarly, the UK quite smoothly adopted a PR system for the European elections despite its majoritarian system at the national level (Farrell, 2001). An overwhelming majority of the major electoral reform studies focuses only on the national level whereby a lot of the other reforms fly below the radar. More importantly, the literature on major electoral reform has difficulties dealing with these reforms at the non-national level as is gently put by Bowler and Donovan (2008:106): ‘the process of change in localities, then, is likely to differ from change at the national level (see also Farrell, 2001). Neither of the two dominant approaches by itself can explain the frequent occurrence of electoral reforms that affect the European, regional, provincial or local level. After all, if political elites really want to maximize their seat shares, why don’t they implement reforms at the more important national level (thereby routinely settling for a lower-than-possible seat share)?16 And why did the Blair government risk losing seats by introducing a PR system for the European elections? On the other hand, if politicians are driven by legitimacy motivations, why implement reforms at the non-national level as these are less likely to increase the legitimacy of the overall system?

3.4. THE CHALLENGE OF BALLOT STRUCTURE REFORMS

Ballot structure reforms have recently gained more and more attention (see Pilet, 2007; Karvonen, 2010; Jacobs and Leyenaar; 2011, Renwick, 2011). This is no surprise as scholars discovered that such reforms are actually very common and thus perhaps more prone to scientific study than the rarer, accidental major electoral reforms (Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011:504, 509). Of the five electoral reforms that occurred in Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands (1986-2008), no less than four consisted of or included ballot structure reforms (for a broader overview, see Renwick, 2011). The ballot structure reforms again force a

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16 After all, some federalized countries left aside, having the power to implement reform at the non-national level also means having the power to implement reform at the national level. Benoit predicts that when parties have such power, they will maximize their seats.
couple of nagging questions upon electoral reform scholars. Indeed, if political elites are interested in maximizing their seat shares, why would they ‘waste their time’ on ballot structure reforms (cf. Van Der Kolk, 2007)? Even if we stretch the notion of self-interest and interpret it as ‘advantageous to the party leadership’ (Blais and Shugart, 2008), this does not make sense as all of the four reforms decreased the power of the party leadership.\footnote{In his comprehensive overview of electoral reforms in Europe since 1945, Renwick (2011:474) also found numerous instances of ballot structure reforms that limited the power of the party leadership and even speaks of a ‘general trend’ in this direction.} Furthermore, if political elites are interested in legitimacy, why do they implement minor reforms of which they know the impact will be very limited (see for instance Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 28.6.2006:5519) or why do they make sure that the reform will not have an impact?\footnote{This was the case in Austria when the government parties made it easier for politicians to be elected out of the list order, but at the same time forbade the individual politicians to set up individual campaigns. Those who did risked getting kicked out of the party (Stein, 24.2.2009).} After all, such ‘symbolic’ measures are unlikely to increase the legitimacy of the system.

4. The onion model

After this barrage of questions it is now time for some answers. In this paragraph I will outline the general principles of the onion model. I will first focus on the impact ranking of different types of reforms. Afterwards I will construct a theoretical ‘onion’ and discuss when to expect which types of reform.

4.1. Impact ranking

The onion model centres on the notion that political elites rank reforms according to their impact and as a consequence their degree of threat or opportunity. The notion of ‘impact ranking’ is obviously borrowed from the rational choice toolbox, but is broader than the ranking based on seat-maximization alone (cf. Hindmoor, 2006). The high-impact reforms lie at the heart of the ‘onion’, while lower-impact reforms are situated in the more outer layers. A high-impact reform will provide a greater opportunity to parties that will benefit from it. However, a reform that is deemed to have a great deal of impact can pose a more significant threat to a party. As a consequence, in such cases it will be vehemently opposed. This is the foundation on which the onion model rests.
2. THE HEART AND THE OTHER LAYERS

But what types of reform would be at the heart of the onion? If one only looks at minor and major ballot structure reforms and minor and major reforms of the proportionality of the electoral system, there is a maximum of four layers.\textsuperscript{19} When more reform types are considered, such as reforms concerning the inclusiveness of the electoral law (e.g. who has the right to vote and what are the registration requirements?) or the electoral procedures (e.g. what is the role of Electoral Management Bodies or the introduction of electronic voting), this maximum number of layers increases. For the sake of simplicity I will limit myself to the aforementioned four types of electoral reform.\textsuperscript{20} A first impact ranking is easy to make as it concerns the degree of the reform: the impact of minor reforms is mostly lower than that of major reforms. This leaves us with the ranking of the specific types of reform. Arguably it is most important for a party to be in the government. Getting into office is mostly not determined by the ballot structure, but by the proportionality of the electoral system. When one wants to get in office, it is the ‘systemic’ effects of the electoral system as a result of the district magnitude, threshold and electoral formula that matter more than the ‘strategic’ or ballot structure effects (Farrell, 2011:155-156). Therefore one can expect that political elites rank the impact of the ballot structure lower than the proportionality of the electoral system (for a similar reasoning, see Blais and Shugart, 2008:194-195). This results in the following ‘onion’ (see figure 1). But when will political elites implement which type of reform? When will they e.g. implement a reform from the third layer? And when will they implement a reform from the ‘heart’ of the onion? I propose that two opposite dynamics can explain why and when political elites will (try to) implement which electoral reforms, namely inside-out and outside-in reasoning.

\textsuperscript{19} It may be that multiple reforms are deemed to have a similar impact and thus are located in the same layer.

\textsuperscript{20} The ranking presented here is merely a deductive, theoretical impact ranking that suits exploratory purposes only. It may well be that the actual empirical ranking differs. After all, given that the onion model posits that political elites have impact rankings, this is an empirical matter best to be assessed by looking at the actual rankings (if any) of the political elites themselves.
4.3. INSIDE-OUT AND OUTSIDE-IN REASONING.

As the labels of the two types of ‘reasoning’ one refers to the dynamic where political elites start from the inner layers and move to the outer ones, while the other refers to the opposite. Each of the two dynamics is connected to one of the dominant approaches to major electoral reform. Rational choice is connected to inside-out reasoning and sociological institutionalism is connected to outside-in reasoning.

1. Inside-out reasoning. The traditional rational choice approach to electoral reform considers reform to be an act of maximizing the benefits of the outcome of electoral reform. According to this approach (a coalition of) political parties that has a majority in parliament imposes its

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21 Admittedly this specific model is somewhat biased towards list-PR systems. I will return to this in the conclusion.
will on a minority of political parties. In such cases of ‘elite majority imposition’, reformers can be expected to reason ‘inside-out’. After all, this would deliver most gains: the inner layers include the reforms that are perceived to have most impact and thus provide most opportunities to reformers who are driven by outcome-contingent motivations. In practice one can expect that the majority of political parties will start by considering implementing those reforms from the inner layers that they deem most advantageous. If these reforms are impossible or unnecessary, the reformers will try to implement a weaker version of it or move to the closest of the more outer layers that suits them best.

2. Outside-in reasoning. The sociological institutionalist approach to electoral reform considers reform to be an act of adapting to or countering a dwindling legitimacy of the system. When political elites are forced by societal pressures into implementing electoral reform, they can be expected to reason ‘outside-in’. In such cases they will protect the ‘heart’, the inner layers, at all cost, even though they cannot fully ignore the pressure put on them. Only extreme pressure will result in such reforms as changes to the proportionality of the electoral system. After all, such reforms pose the greatest threats to political elites: the inner layers include the reforms that are perceived to have most impact. In practice one can expect political elites to try to implement symbolic measures from the outer layers, such as minor ballot structure reforms. When these are deemed insufficient to appease the public, reformers can move to more inner layers.

4.4. Mixed reform packages

The onion model also allows the structuring of the analysis of the mixed nature of reform packages. In the case of both elite majority imposition and elite-mass interaction mixed reform packages are likely to occur, most frequently when there is some (but not extremely high) public dissatisfaction. In the event of reform through elite-majority imposition, it may well be that political elites feel that blatant manipulation of the electoral rules might be

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22 It can be impossible for instance because the risk of being punished at the next election is too high, or because the coalition of parties that wishes to implement reform lacks a two-thirds majority if that is required to pass it. Reforms from the inner layer may also be unnecessary, because the existing system already benefits the particular coalition maximally or close to maximally.

23 The ‘it’ in ‘weaker version of it’ should be understood as referring to major electoral reform. For instance, one can try to implement an electoral threshold of 10% and when this proposal fails water it down to an electoral threshold of 5%.
considered ‘beyond the pale’ (cf. Renwick, 2010). In such cases they can be expected to add elements from the outer layers of the onion model, such as the ballot structure, to the reform package to appease the public. Similarly, political elites may well use public dissatisfaction to advance their own interest and add elements from the inner layers to a package deal that also includes ‘symbolic’ measures from the outer layers. They may also wish to counter societal changes by introducing reforms from the inner layers. However, because there is significant public dissatisfaction other reforms also need to be included, to show that the government is taking public opinion into account.

5. Examples of the onion model

In this section I will illustrate the onion model with reference to three examples. The examples cover minor as well as major reforms and illustrate inside-out as well as outside-in reasoning. I will start with the major electoral reform implemented by the Austrian Vranitzky III government in 1992. This reform provides an illustration of the dynamics underlying the implementation of mixed reform packages. The second example concerns the two reform packages implemented by the Belgian Verhofstadt I government in 2001 and 2002. The former illustrate the difficulties that reformists face trying to implement ‘threatening’ reforms, while the latter illustrates the inside-out reasoning. The last example is the failed reform process by the Dutch Balkenende II government. This case again illustrates the outside-in and inside-out reasoning but it also highlights how difficult it is to implement an even mildly threatening electoral reform when there is no public dissatisfaction. All three examples shed light on why so many ballot structure reforms occur.

5.1 The Austrian Vranitzky III major reforms (1992)

On 15 July 1992 the Austrian Senate approved a substantial electoral reform package. The package consisted of three important changes to the prior electoral law. It introduced (1) an electoral threshold of 4%\(^{24,25}\) and (2) a ‘three-tier’-system (43 ‘regional’, 9 provincial

\(^{24}\) To be exact, a second alternative threshold is that a party is allowed into the second- and third-tier seat distribution when it gets at least one first-tier ‘regional seat’ (Müller, 2005:402). However, the effective threshold in these regional districts is extremely high because the electoral quota used to calculate the seat distribution in the ‘regional’ districts is actually calculated at the second-tier, provincial level - not at the far smaller ‘regional’ level. This means that the number of votes needed to get a seat is very high. In practice, smaller parties never even come close to winning a seat at the regional level. Hence, the nationwide electoral threshold is de facto the most important threshold.
districts and 1 national district); (3) the preference threshold was lowered to 50% or one sixth of the party vote (at the regional level); at the provincial level the preference threshold is 100%. The first two can jointly be considered as a major reform of the proportionality of the electoral system, while the latter was a minor reform of the ballot structure (see Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011: 497 and Lijphart, 1994).

It was increasing public dissatisfaction that triggered the reform discussion and contributed to keeping it on the agenda (see Müller, 2005, for a detailed discussion of the reform trajectory see Ucakar, 1994 and Jacobs, 2011). It also delineated the borders by imposing legitimacy constraints: the reform had to strengthen the relationship between the voter and the MPs one way or another. Unlike during earlier Austrian electoral reform discussion in the 1960s and 1970s, especially from 1990 onwards the government parties were not free to introduce a tailor-made electoral system, because this could entail voter retaliation. It should thus not come as a surprise that the package deal includes a ‘pro-democracy’ measure, as the government called it, in the form of the lowering of the preference threshold (Vranitzky, 1990). However, the government parties did try to reduce its impact in significant ways. First, the preference threshold is still very high. Second, and more importantly, as Stein puts it, ‘the parties prohibit the individual candidates from campaigning for themselves’ (Stein, 24.2.2009). Therefore, this means that the government parties did not want the measure to have a significant impact. The lowering of the preference threshold was thus first and foremost a symbolic measure. It did not strengthen ‘democracy’, to use the Vranitzky III coalition agreement wording, in a significant way, but did respond to demands from the media and intellectuals who were worried about the lack of a direct relationship between MPs and the(ir) voters. It was harmless, but useful. Additionally, the measure could also function as a distraction. After all, especially the subtle rise in the electoral threshold, which was harder to sell to the electorate, was less the centre of attention due to the lowering of the preference threshold.

To sum up, the Vranitzky III reform was a mixture of subtle self-interested reform elements

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25 Before the 1992 reform there was an effective threshold in the period 1970-1990 of 2.7% (Müller, 2006:287).
26 As mentioned earlier in footnote 12, in the national district the seats are distributed according to the D'Hondt system. However, as opposed to the previous electoral system, not only remainder votes but all votes for all seats are included in the calculation. This benefited the larger parties.
27 For instance, between 1994 and 2002 only two MPs were elected through preference votes (Müller, 2005:409).
and a symbolic measure to appease the general public mood. The public and media
dissatisfaction opened a window of opportunity for the government parties to tinker with the
electoral system, but it at the same time limited their options because the reform had to
include some strengthening of the contact between MPs and voters. The package deal was a
mixture of a reform to address the public dissatisfaction. Regarding the former the
government parties reasoned outside-in – as is also illustrated by the attempt limit the impact
of the measure even further; while regarding the latter they reasoned inside-out trying to
optimize their seats as much as possible.\footnote{This is also illustrated by the fact that at first the government parties wanted to introduce a more majoritarian electoral system, but this was blocked by their own MPs (Müller, 2005). Because such a far-reaching reform was impossible they ‘settled for something less.’}

5.2 The Belgian Verhofstadt I Minor and Major Reform Packages (2001 and 2002)

A second example further highlights the role of the inside-out and outside-in reasoning. The
Verhofstadt I government introduced two reform packages, one in 2001 consisting of a minor
ballot structure reform and one in 2002 that consisted mainly of a major reform of the
proportionality of the electoral system.

The first electoral reform package consisted of lowering the preference threshold and
increasing gender quotas. The act-contingent motivations to support these two elements of the
package were both positive. The lowering of the preference threshold gave voters more say.
Moreover, all parties thought that this issue mattered to the voters (Pilet, 2007: 180-181). The
increase of gender quotas, similarly, ‘portray[ed] the party as open to women and their
concerns’ (Celis, Krook and Meier, 2011:519). Both elements of the package deal thus
‘looked good’. It may thus seem that the first reform package aimed at tackling some public
dissatisfaction. Yet this was not the case. Prior to entering the government for the first time
in eleven years, Verhofstadt and his liberal party VLD had advocated a radical electoral
reform agenda. Amongst others he advocated shifting to a majoritarian electoral system, the
direct election of mayors and, somewhat paradoxically, shifting to an open-list system.
During the coalition negotiations the greens and social democrats had already vetoed moving
to a majoritarian electoral system. The electoral reform topic was referred to an expert
commitee, but Verhofstadt and his coalition partners kept on negotiating. A first package

\footnote{This is also illustrated by the fact that at first the government parties wanted to introduce a more majoritarian electoral system, but this was blocked by their own MPs (Müller, 2005). Because such a far-reaching reform was impossible they ‘settled for something less.’}
deal was struck in May 2000. The deal included the topics that were the easiest to find a compromise on: the ballot structure. Verhofstadt and the liberals wanted a wholesale shift to an open list system. Obstructing all reform was difficult as the other government parties had act-contingent motivations for not doing so, but they did want to limit the impact of the reform. In the end, the reform made the list order more flexible but did not abolish its impact.\textsuperscript{29}

Yet the government parties kept on negotiating. In the end, after lengthy bargaining, a weaker major electoral reform, in the shape of a provincial electoral threshold and provincial electoral districts (instead of sub-provincial ones), was introduced. It was clearly easier to reach a compromise on ballot structure, but there was a will –especially amongst the green and liberal parties - to use a reform of the proportionality of the system to advance their position.\textsuperscript{30} This proved to be very tricky, as the greens were relatively small-sized parties while the liberals were large-sized parties. Nevertheless all were determined to implement an electoral reform because they finally managed to get into the government.\textsuperscript{31} The negotiations clearly proceeded through inside-out reasoning: when a move to a majoritarian electoral system was blocked, the parties discussed a two-tiered electoral system with a regional layer and a regional electoral threshold (Deweerdt, 2003:245). This reform proposal was blocked by the smaller party SPIRIT, which was in an electoral alliance with the social democrats, because it feared it would not be able to pass the threshold (see Pilet, 2007 and Hooghe and Deschouwer, 2011). In the end only the sub-provincial electoral districts were merged at the provincial level and a provincial electoral threshold was implemented.\textsuperscript{32}

5.3 The Dutch Balkenende II Reform Agenda (2003-2006)

A last example brings me back to the beginning of this paper. Even though the reform Balkenende II reform process failed, it nevertheless highlights important elements of the reform process. The postmaterialist party D66 triggered the reform process. The party had

\textsuperscript{29} Funnily enough even this reform was deemed too threatening and part of it was abolished through the 2002 reform – merely one year after the reform had been approved.

\textsuperscript{30} Jos Geysels (16.3.2010), who headed the Flemish green party at the time, was even very blunt about it: ‘obviously, we wanted to use the electoral reform to consolidate our position’.

\textsuperscript{31} The greens joined the government for the first time, while the liberals had been excluded for eleven years.

\textsuperscript{32} Given that the prior system included an apparentement provision at the provincial level, the mechanical effects of the merger of the sub-provincial districts were close to nihil.
little strategic reasons to push for reform, as it would most likely loose seats if the proposed electoral system would be enacted.\textsuperscript{33} It did however have ideological reasons to be attached to electoral reform stemming from its postmaterialist roots.\textsuperscript{34}

Previous efforts to implement electoral reform had all floundered. This time, however, there was significant public dissatisfaction following the breakthrough and murder of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn. As a result there was a general feeling that ‘something’ had to be done. However, by the time the proposal was presented to the parliament in 2005, this dissatisfaction had mostly ebbed away and D66 lost the support of the liberal party (see Andeweg and Irwin, 2005).\textsuperscript{35} D66 left the government when it realized the reforms would not be approved. After short but intense negotiations the party decided to re-enter the government. The other government parties promised to support a minor ballot structure reform that would decrease the control of the party leadership on who would be elected.\textsuperscript{36} This was all D66 was able to get under these new circumstances. When the bill was discussed on 28 June 2006 virtually all parties adulated the proposal (see Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 28.6.2006). However, when D66 left the government, the parties suddenly denounced the proposal. Eventually, the bill was retracted. All of this shows that D66 was the main reason reform was on the agenda. The other government parties reasoned outside-in and when public dissatisfaction decreased they were only willing to implement a minor ballot structure reform to persuade D66 to re-enter the government. When both D66 and public dissatisfaction had disappeared from the stage, they eliminated this minor ‘threat’ by retracting the bill.

\textsuperscript{33} To avoid a cumbersome process of constitutional change, the proposed system was explicitly designed not to have an impact of the proportionality of the outcomes. The proposed system resembled the German electoral system. However, it would have strategic effects as it would focus the attention of voters on candidates of the larger parties.

\textsuperscript{34} The Minister who was responsible for the reform, Thom de Graaf (D66), was strongly committed to the issue and believed that ‘the essence of the party was its stance on the role of the citizen in the political system’ (28.1.2009).

\textsuperscript{35} This statement is based on Eurobarometer data. In the second half of 2002, 32% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the way democracy worked in the Netherlands. In early 2003 this dropped to 28%, but at the end of 2003 – when De Graaf’s proposals were tabled - the number rose to a record of 40% (cf. EB 58; EB 59; EB 60). However, in 2004 it dropped to 34% and in the first half of 2005 it declined further, to 29% (cf. EB 61; EB 63). Therefore by 2005 the ‘Fortuyn storm’ seemed to have passed.

\textsuperscript{36} It was very minor indeed as simulations showed only one extra candidate (out of 150) would have been elected out of the list order under the new system (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 28.6.2006:5519).
The three examples illustrated how the dynamics of the onion model work. They also highlight two triggers of reform debates: new or traditionally excluded parties that join a government in case of Verhofstadt I and the government participation of postmaterialist parties in the case of Balkenende II.

7. The road ahead

The goal of this study was to answer the question why and when do which types of electoral reform occur? After all, when one moves beyond major electoral reform several challenges are to be confronted. I highlighted four of these challenges and suggested that the occurrence of specific types of electoral reform can be explained by what I call ‘the onion model’. This model is based on the contention that political elites rank electoral reforms according to their perceived impact. Each reform belongs to a certain ‘layer’ and by reconstructing the impact ranking one can build an ‘onion’. When the reform process takes the form of an elite-majority imposition political elites will reason inside-out. When, however, the reform process takes the shape of an elite-mass interaction, i.e. when public dissatisfaction is high, political elites reason outside-in. When public dissatisfaction is increasing, but is not that high yet, a mixed form may occur. As I have shown, such an explanation can account for several major and minor electoral reforms in Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands.

This paper was largely exploratory and theoretical. Minor electoral reform has only recently gained a spot in the limelight and both theoretically and empirically much remains to be done. Theoretically, I have focussed mainly on the reasoning that undergirds the reform process. I did not explicitly zoom in on the triggers of the reform process. High public dissatisfaction can be such a trigger, but as Renwick (2010) rightly argued, dissatisfaction needs to be mobilised and directed towards the subject of electoral reform for it to have any impact. It thus needs reformist politicians. The Balkenende II case suggested that postmaterialist parties entering the government can act use dissatisfaction to get the topic on the political agenda. Next to postmaterialist parties one can for instance also think of populist parties as these parties also have an electoral reform agenda (see Mudde, 2007:150-155). The Verhofstadt I case suggested another trigger, namely new or traditionally excluded parties that enter the government and want to consolidate themselves by tweaking the electoral system (see also Katz, 2005:61). By focussing on the triggers, one can also get a better grip on the failure of
electoral reform processes. Indeed, when the triggers disappear (e.g. public dissatisfaction turns to normal levels or the reformist parties leave the government as in the Balkenende II case), the chances of the reform proposal are slim. Lastly, the onion model used in this paper has explicitly focused on the impact ranking of political elites, but it may be worthwhile to examine the ‘onions’ of other actors, such as the media and the public opinion. After all these actors can and often do play an important role in the reform process. Preliminary research shows that these ‘onions’ are indeed different. Farrell (2011:199) summarizes the existing research on voter attitudes towards electoral systems as follows: ‘[i]f anything it seems that voters are particularly interested in the strategic consequences of electoral systems’. Ordinary citizens seem to be interested more in ballot structure than in the proportionality of an electoral system. The same may well hold for the media, even though no comparative evidence is available on the matter, which brings me to the empirical to-do list.

Empirically, a lot still needs to be done as well. Until now little research has been done on the media coverage of electoral reform processes. All in all, we know very little about the role and agenda of the media in electoral reform processes even though it seems likely that there impact is not to be underestimated. More empirical insight into the role and position of the media can shed light more on the functioning of the inside-out and outside-in reasoning.

Regarding the onion model itself three types of empirical research can be thought of. A first type of research deals with the foundations of the onion model. The onion model rests on the foundation that political elites rank of the impact of different electoral reforms. If this is the case, then it should show when one interviews politicians or analyses their actions. The second major building block of the onion model, the inside-out and outside-in reasoning should also be subject to empirical investigation. If political elites routinely advance different electoral reform types in a random or reversed way, this would falsify the onion model. A second line of research refers to the content of the ‘onion’. The ranking presented in this

I am indebted to Jean-Benoit Pilet for this suggestion.

Here only anecdotal evidence exists. One particularly interesting example is the media analysis by Jacobs (2011) of the news coverage on the 1992 Vranitzky III electoral reform. All in all only few newspaper articles appeared, and those that appeared stressed the ballot structure reform the most. Some also mentioned the electoral threshold but only one addressed the impact of the introduction of a third tier.

The three lines of research mentioned here in effect point to ways of falsifying the onion model presented in this paper.
paper is theoretical and, even though the Austrian, Belgian and Dutch examples presented here seem to support it, needs more testing. Equally important is the expansion of the model by adding more types of electoral reform. The model presented here only focused on ballot structure reforms and reforms dealing with the proportionality of the electoral system, but empirical research should focus on other types of electoral reform as well. One could for instance think of reforms affecting the inclusiveness of electoral legislation or even the electoral procedures. Lastly it may well be that the onion model as presented in this paper works best in consensus democracies. Such democracies tend to be more susceptible to public dissatisfaction than majoritarian democracies, because of the respective electoral systems. Consensus democracies by definition have proportional electoral systems, which makes parties more vulnerable to even minor vote swings. Hence, one can expect that public dissatisfaction plays a more important role in the democratic reform process in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. As a result the ‘onion’ or ranking of the types of reform may be different in such settings. A third line of research deals with the empirical implications of the onion model. One could for instance think of research on the causes and occurrence of ballot structure reforms. Indeed, if ballot structure reforms are in the outer layers, they should occur more often and mostly during periods of public dissatisfaction. Conversely proportionality reforms should occur at times when there is little public dissatisfaction.

All of this may wrongly suggest that the field of electoral reform is stubbornly underdeveloped. A lot of research on electoral reform (understood as major and minor reform) is increasingly becoming available (see for instance Katz, 2005; Pilet, 2007; Celis, Krook and Meier, 2011; Renwick, 2011; Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011). Moreover, if the field proceeds as fast as that of electoral systems, electoral reform will be a mature field in ten years.
## Appendix A

Table A.1 Major and minor electoral reform (proportionality and ballot structure)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government period</th>
<th>Subject of the democratic reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky II</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky III</td>
<td>4.8.1992. Change to electoral system, number of electoral districts and impact of preferential vote (proportionality + ballot structure, major)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky V/ Klima</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schüssel I</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schüssel II</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gusenbauer</td>
<td>21.6.2007. Introduction of postal voting, lowering of voting age to 16 and increase of election cycle from four to five years (proportionality + inclusiveness + procedures, minor)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Vranitzky IV is not included in the analysis as it lasted merely one year.
Table A.1 Major and minor democratic reform (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government period</th>
<th>Subject of the reform bill (<em>State reform related in italics</em>)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martens VIII</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Dehaene I         | • 11.5.1993. *State reform; reduction in MPs; decrease in number of electoral districts* (and accompanying laws) (*proportionality, major*)  
|                   | • 24.5.1994. Introduction of gender quota (maximum 1/3 of candidate list of same gender) (ballot structure, major)  
|                   | • 5.4.1995. Introduction of multiple preferential vote (ballot structure, minor) |
| Dehaene II        | [none]                                                        |
| Verhofstadt I     | • 26.6.2000. Reduction of the impact of list vote by half; abolition of list of reserves (and accompanying laws) (ballot structure, minor)  
|                   | • 22.1.2002. *State reform. Increasing the number of Brussels MPs from 75 to 89* (*proportionality, minor*)  
|                   | • 28.1.2002. Gender quota, changes in existing legislation to maximum 50% of the list +/- 1 candidate of one gender (and accompanying laws) (ballot structure, minor)  
<p>|                   | • 13.12.2002. Creation of provincial electoral districts, introduction of electoral threshold of 5% and reintroduces the list of reserves (<em>proportionality + ballot structure, major</em>) |
| Verhofstadt II    | [none]                                                        |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government period</th>
<th>Subject of the reform bill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE NETHERLANDS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lubbers III</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kok I</td>
<td>29.5.1997. Change in impact of preferences votes from 50% to 25% (ballot structure, minor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kok II</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balkenende II</td>
<td>[none]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Balkenende I is not included in the analysis as it lasted merely 87 days.*
References


Geysels, Jos. (16.3.2010). *Interview*.


