SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the pre-electoral strategic behaviour of both parties and voters in proportional multi-party systems. The topic of pre-electoral strategic behaviour as such has received quite some attention in political science literature. Authors as far back as Duverger (1951) have elaborated on how parties and voters adapt to incentives provided by the electoral system and there is a vibrant debate on whether it is in fact not parties that shape electoral systems rather than the other way around (Colomer, 2005). Yet, studies on strategic coordination of parties or voters seldom include cases with a highly proportional electoral system and multi-party competition. The underlying motive for this gap in the literature is in fact quite straightforward: proportional multi-party systems are assumed to lack the institutional incentives required to trigger strategic behaviour. However, there are plenty of theoretical arguments – and more and more empirical proof – that support the existence of strategic incentives and behaviour under PR rules. We distinguished three effects of the electoral system: 1) a mechanical effect, 2) a psychological effect on parties, and 3) a psychological effect on voters. The degree of disproportionality of the seat allocation model and the formal or informal electoral threshold can distort the proportionality between a party’s vote share at the polls and its seat share in the elected assembly. State subventions that are based on seat shares rather than vote shares, and (in)formal rules regarding the process of coalition negotiations and portfolio allocation that reward the largest list, can cause additional concerns for parties. Increasing levels of electoral volatility and the emergence of the cartel-party as a new type of party organization that is more detached from the party on the ground, create even more uncertainty among parties and might push them towards strategies that bypass the ballot box.

Using Belgium as a case we first looked at pre-electoral alliance formation at the local level in 2006 and 2012. Analyses based on an in-depth qualitative exploration in 2006 and the
PartiRep Local Chair Survey in 2012 confirm our expectation that strategic party behaviour is based on wide-ranging and sometimes complex motives, but clusters around the thresholds of representation and office participation. We also observe that goals, costs and benefits vary according to party size. Large parties are more concerned with the goal of office participation and delivering the mayor, while small parties exhibit a wider range of motives. This does not mean they are only concerned with safeguarding their seat(s) or recruiting capable candidates; office participation is an important goal for all parties at the municipal level. We do see, however, that small parties are confronted with a broader range of risks and threats, and potential consequences affect them disproportionately. This makes them more reluctant to engage in pre-electoral alliance formation.

We then turn to the strategic considerations of voters, which are likely clustered around the same thresholds as those for parties. We acknowledge the complexity that is involved in making these considerations, but we expect that strategic voting is in essence based on the perceived government and district viability of parties.

An analysis of the 2012 PartiRep Exit Poll data in 40 Belgian municipalities, shows that 44% of the surveyed voters considered voting for another party. These hesitating voters mostly considered voting for a party within the same ideological bloc. Few voters hesitate between a distinctly right- or left-wing party. Among hesitating voters, 10% indicated that strategic considerations determined their vote choice. They mostly refer to the electoral threshold, the odds of office participation and their coalition preferences. The group of strategic voters is relatively small and mostly consists of highly educated voters who are interested in politics.

The last two chapters move on to the Belgian regional and federal level and try to examine whether the complexity of the Belgian political context makes it impossible for voters to vote strategically. These chapters use data from the 2014 Making Electoral Democracy Work and PartiRep Voter Surveys. We find that roughly one quarter of voters with a single preferred party intends to vote for another one. At the federal level it is quite clear that the smaller, ideologically more extreme parties are abandoned in higher numbers by their potential electorate than their larger, centrist adversaries, all of which points in the direction of strategic voting. When we extrapolate the proportion of strategic coalition voters to the entire electorate, we see that between 7 and 9% of the population casts a strategic coalition vote. We also show that the current literature on strategic voting in PR systems has a blind spot, because it only focuses on government viability. Our analyses show that voters in PR systems also have incentives to desert parties that have no chance
of winning a seat in their district, because parties without parliamentary representation can hardly participate in the public debate.