Introduction

At the time of writing, the United States is recovering from one of its most divisive and bitter presidential elections. The contest between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney polarized the entire country into two camps, leading many observers to bemoan this state of affairs. This chapter offers a counter-intuitive view that goes against the grain in the scholarly literature as well as in popular perception. In this huge democracy of 300 million citizens, the election was divisive, true; but the polarization united the country from ocean to ocean — a phenomenon best captured by the German phrase die Einheit der Zweitteilung (‘the unity of bifurcation’). Differences in race, ethnicity, religion, class, region, and demography all managed to merge around two nationwide camps who were offering different degrees of the same Whig ideology. Most pundits seem to believe that the Republican flirtation with the anti-immigrant sentiment originating from the right-wing of the party, which seems to have cost them centrist support, played a big role in Romney’s defeat. While not being the sole reason for nationwide politics punishing extremist policy positions, this chapter calls for a second look at an electoral system that seems to have only a few friends left among political scientists. This is a call to evaluate the pluses and minuses of the first-past-the-post (majoritarian) electoral system in an even-handed way. The political context for the examination is a comparison of the nationalist parties in Québec and Flanders, their policy positions towards immigration, and the role their respective electoral systems (first-past-the-post in Québec and proportional representation in Flanders) might
have played in their positioning on immigration. This fits in with the hypothesis on electoral systems that Eve Hepburn outlines in her framework in Chapter 3.

The French-speaking Canadian province of Québec and the Dutch-speaking Belgian region of Flanders have historically housed vibrant sub-state nationalist movements seeking self-rule. The Parti Québécois (‘Party of Québec’) in Québec/Canada and Vlaams Blok (‘Flemish Bloc’, now renamed Vlaams Belang ‘Flemish Interest’) in Flanders/Belgium are the two main contemporary sub-state nationalist parties committed to independence for their respective regions. In the last few decades, both regions have also faced growing immigration. While the nationalist goal of self-rule unites the agendas of these two parties, there is a clear difference in terms of their position on immigration. The Parti Québécois actively courts the immigrant vote, but opposition to immigration is a core policy of Vlaams Belang.

This chapter seeks to examine to what extent different electoral systems explain the different positions nationalist parties adopt towards immigration in Québec/Canada and Flanders/Belgium. The examination relies on a perspective that highlights how different political incentives arise from different electoral institutions. Accordingly, first-past-the-post voting in Québec creates incentives for the nationalists to broaden their voter base to include immigrants. In this majoritarian system based on single-member electoral districts, office-seeking parties naturally seek to maximize their votes. The proportional representation (PR) system in Flanders, on the other hand, puts a premium on retaining distinct political platforms that differentiate political parties from their competitors. Add to this the fact that such electoral systems tend to produce coalition governments. This system allows smaller parties with distinct ideological/ethnic/religious/linguistic agendas and a small fraction of the vote to still become part of the government by sticking to their core voters only. There are, thus, incentives for nationalist parties to strengthen their restricted appeal by excluding immigrants.

The chapter looks at the modern development of nationalist parties in both regions and how their positions on immigration diverge. The perspective that the chapter follows rests on the argument that electoral systems influence the policy positions of nationalist parties by affecting the incentives they face. In doing so, the chapter combines the literatures on party and electoral politics, sub-state nationalism, immigration, as well as Belgian and Canadian politics. The author is aware that combining all this within a single chapter is a daunting challenge, but the expected return justifies the effort: By exposing the incentives for