Electoral and party systems in Europe

Pedro Riera

Does anyone believe that the United States would remain a two-party system if it adopted Israel’s electoral rules? Can we satisfactorily explain the presence of almost absolute party unity within the Spanish Parliament without taking into account the closed-list system employed to elect its members? Despite the underdevelopment of the field of comparative electoral systems observed by Arend Lijphart in 1985, the clear correct answer to these two questions is no. It is important to study electoral systems because they affect the answers to these questions, among others (Taagepera 2007b). Nowadays, there is no longer a lack of comparative studies on electoral rules; in fact, in Matthew Shugart’s view, the field could already be considered mature as of a few years ago (Shugart 2005). However, there is still room for improvement. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the state of the art of this research. To this end, I will first elaborate on the definition and classification of electoral systems. I will then conduct a longitudinal review of the most important contributions in the field, starting with classical approaches and then focusing on more recent developments.

In the second part of the chapter, I will briefly describe empirical data on the variation in electoral systems across countries and over time within democratic Europe, not only with regard to their higher or lower stability but also in terms of their different typological classifications. Moreover, I will demonstrate the extent to which electoral systems fundamentally shape certain important political outcomes. In this regard, we cannot simply ignore the impact of electoral institutions on the behaviour of actors and on the configuration of institutions such as party systems, parliaments and governments. Finally, I will devote the last part of the chapter to outlining some of the main challenges ahead for the science of electoral systems. Despite the significant progress made in this field over the last three decades, I am firmly convinced that better theory, methods and data are required if we want electoral systems to become a ‘Rosetta Stone’ for political science (Taagepera and Shugart 1989).

In sum, the goals of this chapter are basically twofold. From the theoretical perspective, I aim to offer a comprehensive review of the different ways in which electoral systems have been studied in the past and could (and should) be studied in the future. To this end, I will attempt to summarize the most relevant topics to date in the field and to identify the main remaining gaps that, in my view, should be addressed by researchers in the coming years. Moreover, from the applied point of view, I would like to elucidate the most significant empirical patterns
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observable in contemporary Europe with regard to electoral systems. Thus, this chapter seeks to examine whether electoral rules on the European continent have become more or less stable, permissive and candidate-centred in recent times.

However, before proceeding with the rest of the chapter, two caveats should be noted. First of all, I will review several strands of the literature, but I primarily focus on studies that limit themselves to descriptions of how things ‘are’, as opposed to how they ‘should be’ (Hume 1890 [1739]). Hence, mine is a positive rather than a normative approach, despite the advocacy orientation of the first comparative studies on electoral systems. Second, I will largely concentrate on those works that are ‘comparative’, broadly defined as those that either examine the selection and/or operation of electoral systems in at least two countries or do so within one country that either has reformed its electoral institutions or uses two different sets of rules simultaneously.

In terms of scope, the analyses are confined to democracies from one particular region of the world (i.e. Europe) between 1945 and 2010. More specifically, I study the rules that shape electoral outcomes at the national level. However, an explanation is in order concerning countries that elect more than one office at the national level. With regard to bicameralism in parliamentary and semi-presidential democracies, I choose to focus on the rules employed to elect the chamber of parliament that is mainly responsible for providing confidence to the national government. However, problems begin to arise as soon as we start to consider countries in which cabinets must win confidence votes in both chambers in order to remain in office (as in Italy). In such cases (not that many, to be frank), I take into account the rules employed to elect the chamber that is traditionally considered the lower house. The same solution applies to those presidential countries that are bicameral.

The study of electoral systems

Definition, components and basic typology

Although it is widely argued that there is no such thing as the ideal electoral system (Carey and Hix 2011), and that the answer to the question of which electoral system is the best depends on ‘who you are, where you are, and where you want to go’ (Katz 1997: 308; see also Norris 1997), this has not deterred specialists from proffering advice on where to place greatest emphasis in electoral system design and reform (for a recent illustration, see Taagepera 2002), and trying to discover the particular electoral system towards which the specialists are themselves leaning (Bowler et al. 2005). In fact, the study of electoral systems began with advocacy pieces for specific sets of rules, such as those of Hermens (1972 [1971]) and Lakeman and Lambert (1955). This type of work formed the foundation upon which the field would later be built.

But what is an electoral system? According to a classic definition, ‘electoral laws are those which govern the processes by which electoral preferences are articulated as votes and by which these votes are translated into distributions of governmental authority (typically parliamentary seats) among the competing political parties’ (Rae 1971 [1967]: 14). Despite their apparent equivalence, it is clearly necessary to distinguish between electoral (or election) laws and electoral systems (Farrell 2011 [2001]). Electoral systems are undoubtedly a major component of election laws, but they are not the only element (Massicotte et al. 2004). In this view, electoral systems are only a subset of election laws (Blais 1988); the latter include innumerable details vital to the administration of elections without necessarily being of strategic importance to parties and/or candidates – such as the forms of restriction on universal suffrage, the methods of compiling and updating electoral registers and the various types of central electoral administration in use (Katz 1997).
Gary Cox (1997: 38) understands an electoral system ‘to be a set of laws and party rules that regulate electoral competition between and within parties’. As in the previous definitions, here electoral systems are equated with the set of rules that translates citizens’ political preferences into votes and votes into seats, but now they also include party rules rather than only electoral laws. Even more importantly, Cox introduces the important distinction between the interparty and the intraparty dimension of electoral systems. According to Shugart (2005: 37), electoral systems should be conceived of as functioning along two different dimensions: the interparty dimension, which corresponds to the allocation of seats to parties, and the intraparty dimension, which concerns the allocation of seats to candidates. Although the former is at least as important as the latter (Grofman 1999), the intraparty dimension of electoral systems has been largely neglected by scholars in the field (Colomer 2011). While the interparty dimension affects features such as the degree of proportionality of electoral outcomes or the number of parties winning votes and seats, research on the intraparty dimension has concentrated on, for example, the representation of women (Norris 1985) or the candidates’ incentives to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995).

A second step that needs to be taken in the comparative analysis of electoral systems is the description of their different features (or ‘dimensions’), as well as the elaboration of a typology. Surprisingly enough, almost all electoral system experts provide their own list of variables to characterize a given set of electoral rules. Despite this apparent disagreement, there is broad consensus among the community of scholars who address the causes and consequences of electoral institutions that the most important components of electoral systems are the electoral formula, the legal threshold, the ballot structure and the district structure. The first two elements are expected to have a significant impact on the proportionality of electoral outcomes, whereas the third is the most important variable in explaining candidates’ incentives to cultivate a personal vote. Finally, the district structure is comprised of at least two of the traditional features of the electoral systems (i.e. the district magnitude and the assembly size), and can have an important effect in both dimensions.

The electoral formula is the mathematical method used to translate votes into seats (Taagepera and Shugart 1989: 19). Confronted with the task of reducing the incredible heterogeneity of electoral systems to an acceptable typology (Farrell (2011 [2001]: 4), analysts have traditionally decided to categorize electoral institutions according to the formula they employ. In this regard, Bormann and Golder (2013) classify legislative electoral systems into three main categories – majoritarian, proportional and mixed – based on their electoral formula. The key feature that characterizes a system as majoritarian is that its electoral formula requires the winning candidate to obtain either a plurality or a majority of the votes (M. Golder 2005). Majoritarian systems can be classified in terms of the number of votes that candidates or parties must receive to win, the number of votes cast per voter, the number of seats allocated per district and the use (or lack) of lists. The single-member plurality rule (i.e. first past the post), the single non-transferable vote (SNTV), the block vote, the majority-runoff and the alternative vote are the most common majoritarian systems.

Proportional representation (PR) systems are, by contrast, quota- or divisor-based systems utilized in multi-member districts. All proportional systems except the single transferable vote (STV) employ party lists. Quota-based systems first calculate a quota by dividing the total number of valid votes in a district by the district magnitude plus the modifier of the quota. The number of seats a party is guaranteed is determined by their total number of votes divided by the quota. Divisor-based systems divide the total number of votes won by each party by a series of numbers (divisors) to obtain quotients. Seats are then allocated according to which parties have the highest quotients. There are five different quotas (i.e. Hare, Hagenbach-Bischoff, Imperiali, Reinforced
Imperiali and Droop) and three different divisor systems (D'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë and Modified Sainte-Laguë) in common use. Quota systems can be further classified in terms of the three ways in which remainder seats are typically allocated (i.e. the largest remainder, the highest average or the modified highest average).

Finally, there are two different ways of defining mixed (or ‘mixed-member’, in Shugart and Wattenberg’s terminology) systems. Following Matt Golder (2005), I will characterize as mixed those systems that employ a combination of majoritarian and proportional electoral rules. According to Massicotte and Blais (1999), mixed systems differ in terms of whether their majoritarian and proportional components operate independently or dependently. Independent and dependent mixed systems come in three (i.e. coexistence, superposition and fusion) and two (i.e. correction and conditional) forms, respectively. By contrast, Shugart and Wattenberg (2001: 13) identify two broad subtypes of mixed systems, which they call mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) and mixed-member proportional (MMP). The crucial variable in distinguishing between these subtypes is the absence or presence of a linkage between tiers in the allocation of seats.

The second main component of electoral systems on which this chapter will focus is the legal threshold. Significant vote thresholds that parties must cross in order to win any representation are devices traditionally used to limit the degree of proportionality of electoral results (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005b). Electoral thresholds can be imposed at the national, the regional or the district level. In this regard, Cox (1997: 62–3) differentiates between two main categories of threshold: those defined at the level of the ‘primary district’ and those defined at the level of the ‘secondary district’. Almost every PR system employs some kind of threshold. By contrast, non-PR systems do not generally have rules specifying a threshold, mainly because they do not need it. As Taagepera and Shugart (1989) point out in their discussion of thresholds, the low magnitude of single-member districts makes the costs of entrance to parliament prohibitively high for small parties. For that reason, Lijphart (1994: 12) claims that ‘legal thresholds and district magnitudes can be seen as two sides of the same coin’. The concept of effective threshold neatly illustrates the functional equivalence between these two elements of electoral systems. According to its most recent formulation, the effective threshold should be estimated by the formula \( \frac{75}{m + 1} \), where \( m \) refers to the district magnitude (Lijphart 1994). A party must win a percentage of votes higher than the effective threshold in order to be likely to win at least one seat in a particular constituency. If the legal threshold (i.e. the legally stipulated minimum percentage of votes parties must win to be entitled to a seat in parliament) is higher than the result of this calculation, the legal threshold becomes the effective threshold.8

The third element, ballot structure, is one of Douglas Rae’s (1971 [1967]) three basic dimensions of electoral systems. According to Rae, there are two types of ballots: categorical and ordinal. The former ‘asks the voter to decide which one of the parties he prefers’ and the latter ‘allows the voter to express a more complex, equivocal preference by rank-ordering the parties’ (Farrell 2011 [2001]: 17). Unfortunately, this typology fails to grasp the full complexity of ballot structure in the real world (Blais 1988). For example, permitting simple-vote splitting and enabling voters to rank-order candidates are two different features (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005b). However, Rae wrongly lumps electoral systems allowing voters to do each of these things together under the same label. Partly for this reason, Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 14) argue that the distinction between categorical and ordinal ballots is not clear cut; rather, the authors suggest that there is a continuum between these two ideal types.

I believe that the distinction between categorical and ordinal ballots is still valid. However, it only addresses two aspects of the ballot structure: the number of votes allowed, which may range from one to the number of candidates, and the type of information the voter is asked to
provide, which can be nominal, ordinal or cardinal. In this regard, Blais (1988) warns his readers that sources of variation in the ballot structure cannot be reduced to these two aspects because they only identify how voters are asked to reveal their preferences. In his view, it is also necessary to indicate whom the citizens can vote for. To address this problem, Shugart and Wattenberg (2001) distinguish between nominal and list voting (see also Farrell 2011 [2001]). Under the former, citizens cast votes for candidates by name and seats are allocated to individual candidates on the basis of the votes they receive, whereas list votes are pooled among multiple candidates nominated on a list submitted prior to the election by a party, alliance or other political organization. This distinction has important practical implications, since ‘Caligula’s horses’ are less easily elected with single-person voting than with list systems in multi-member constituencies (Sartori 1997 [1994]: 17).

Over the course of time, descriptions and classifications of electoral systems based on ballot structure have gained importance. In fact, most scholars, once they have established the main categories of electoral systems based on allocation rules and district magnitude, employ the three aspects of ballot structure I have just described to refine their classification. In this regard, Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 24) distinguish between PR closed-list systems, in which the voter can only choose one of the party symbols or names (and hence automatically votes for all candidates of that party), and PR preferential-list systems, in which the voter is able to choose specific candidates individually. In the same vein, Farrell (2011 [2001]) divides list systems into closed and open, and Colomer (2004b) distinguishes between open ballot (panachage), preferential voting for individual candidates and categorical voting. Finally, Shugart (2005) extends the classification between closed and open lists by splitting preferential-list systems into four categories: open, flexible, quasi-list and latent list. It is important to note that the logic behind the classifications of Colomer and Shugart differ: while the former highlights the voter’s degree of freedom with respect to choosing individual candidates, the latter also takes into account the presence (or absence) of other determinants of candidates’ rank on the list besides preference votes. On this basis, the former does not differentiate between open and flexible lists.

In fact, one of the most significant changes in the literature on the intraparty dimension over the last few years has been the more frequent adoption of the voters’ perspective. Following the emergence in the mid-1980s of the first studies to address these questions, one point of view (that of the candidates) and two particular scholars (Carey and Shugart) largely dominated the literature. However, this approach is increasingly being complemented by a second strand of research that emphasizes what Farrell and Gallagher (1998: 56) call the ‘openness’ of the electoral system, by which they mean ‘how much choice is given to voters’ (Farrell and Gallagher 1998: 56; Renwick and Pilet 2011). Similarly, Trigo Pereira and Andrade e Silva (2009) have developed an index that measures citizens’ freedom to choose their representatives. To this end, they take into account three different elements of the electoral system: voters’ ‘options’ (the cardinality of the choice domain), ‘choices’ (the number of revealed preferences for either candidates and/or parties) and ‘information’ (on candidates’ characteristics).

In summary, there is no universally accepted method of classifying electoral systems based on ballot structure. In addition, some scholars do not consider ballot structure at all (e.g. M. Golder 2005) and others consider it to be a minor element of electoral systems (e.g. Lijphart 1994). However, most authors today would strongly agree with the idea of establishing two main categories of electoral systems (majoritarian and proportional) based on the formula employed. According to Dieter Nohlen (1984a), electoral systems lean towards the majority/plurality or the proportional principle of representation. In the same vein, Giovanni Sartori (1997 [1994]: 42) distinguishes between strong and feeble electoral systems. However, there is a fundamental difference between Nohlen and Sartori’s conception of electoral systems: the former
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considers the principles of majority/plurality and PR to be antithetical, while the latter defines them as the two extremes of a unipolar continuum on which all electoral systems can be located.

As explained above, electoral systems have traditionally been classified on the basis of their formulas. Several scholars, however, emphasize the role played by district magnitude, which is defined as ‘the number of representatives elected in a district’ (Lijphart 1994: 10). Although district magnitude is characterized as ‘the decisive factor’ by Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 112), Blais (1988) and Cox (1997) propose the broader concepts of constituency and district structure, respectively, in order to capture not only the size but also the nature of the district. In this regard, it is crucial to first distinguish between districted electoral systems, in which the country is divided into areas within which popular votes are converted into assembly seats (i.e. electoral districts), and at-large electoral systems, in which it is not (Engstrom and McDonald 1986). Second, Rae (1971 [1967]) identifies two kinds of districts based on their magnitude: single-member, which return one officeholder to a legislature, and multi-member, which return more than one. Unfortunately, this distinction is not sufficient, as it neglects the substantial variations that exist within the category of multi-member districts (Blais 1988). Third, it is important to take into account how divergent magnitudes are across districts (Monroe and Rose 2002). Finally, whether seats are distributed among districts according to the size of their population or not (i.e. the levels of malapportionment observed) is also an important feature of the electoral system (Farrell 2011 [2001]; Samuels and Snyder 2001; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). In short, the fact that the potentially consequential features of districts cannot be reduced to their magnitude leads me to use the broader concept of district structure.

Effects in the interparty dimension

It seems fair to credit Maurice Duverger with being the most distinguished French political scientist of the last century (Benoit 2006). His chief contribution deals with party politics and electoral systems; it can be summarized in what have come to be called Duverger’s Law and Duverger’s Hypothesis (Duverger 1964 [1954]). Since his seminal contribution, the vast majority of published works on electoral systems have revolved around two main questions: how do the electoral rules shape the party system? And to what extent are voters influenced by electoral systems? According to Duverger, the negative consequences of restrictive electoral rules on party system fragmentation can be understood as the result of two mechanisms. First, minor parties are typically awarded a much smaller share of seats than the share of votes they receive. Second, the existence of this mechanical effect creates incentives for electoral coordination. As defined by Cox (2000: 49), electoral coordination ‘refers to a variety of processes by which groups of voters and politicians coordinate their electoral actions in order to win more legislative seats or executive portfolios’ (see also Riker 1982). Therefore, we expect electoral restrictiveness to decrease the number of parties by generating incentives for strategic entry or withdrawal on the part of political entrepreneurs and tactical voting on the part of voters (Cox 1997). Duverger refers to these behavioural consequences of non-permissive electoral laws for party system size as psychological effects.

However, the effects of electoral rules are not as straightforward as most institutional studies suggest (Benoit 2001; Blais and Carty 1991; Duverger 1964 [1954]; Lijphart 1994; Rae 1971 [1967]; Sartori 1997 [1994]; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). Recently, some prominent scholars have successfully argued that the strength of electoral rules interacts with the number of sociological cleavages to shape party systems (Amorim Neto and Cox 1997; S. Golder 2006; Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994; Taagepera 1999). This research suggests that the district-level number of parties should be an interactive function of the number of social cleavages and electoral
permissiveness. If this general conclusion were valid, multipartism would arise as the joint product of many exploitable cleavages and a permissive electoral system. Unfortunately, this proposition is largely untested at the district level, even though that is the level at which the relevant pressures are expected to act.

The second source of deviation from Duverger’s Law among single-member districts (SMDs) with a plurality rule has an exclusively institutional origin. Strategic entry and tactical voting assume the complete independence of a majoritarian system from other sets of electoral rules; however, most of the time this assumption simply does not hold. In fact, some prior research has shown that there are interaction or contamination effects between the different kinds of electoral systems used in a given country (Ferrara and Herron 2005). Although the existence of contamination has previously been demonstrated in scenarios of incongruent bicameralism (Lago and Martínez 2007), presidential systems (Shugart and Carey 1992), multilevel politics (Lago and Montero 2009) and in cases of high district magnitude variance under PR rules (Lago 2009), recent literature has been particularly successful at showing evidence of this type of effect in mixed-member electoral systems between their PR and SMD tiers (Cox and Schoppa 2002; Crisp et al. 2013; Herron and Nishikawa 2001).

A second important effect of the interparty dimension of the rules of the game is, of course, the disproportionality of electoral outcomes, defined as ‘the deviation of parties’ seat shares from their vote shares’ (Lijphart 1994: 57). This deviation has been at the core of a growing body of literature that has measured it, identified some of its main determinants and discussed its consequences for several political outcomes (e.g. Anckar 1997; Benoit 2000; Carey and Hix 2011; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). In the last century, Rae (1971 [1967]: 86), arguably one of the founders of the science of electoral systems, emphasized the relevance of disproportionality as the main consequence of electoral systems, depicting them as the Sheriff of Nottingham, ‘apt to steal from the poor and give to the rich: strong parties usually obtain more than their proportionate share of legislative seats while weak parties receive less than their proportionate share of seats’. As he argued later (Rae 1971 [1967]: Ch. 9), while most electoral systems share the same directional pattern of redistribution, there are still very important differences in terms of its strength and degree.

Further work on the direct effects of the interparty dimension of electoral systems has built upon Duverger’s contribution, cumulating in a literature that has produced findings on the number of wasted votes (Tavits and Annus 2006; Uggla 2008), the emergence of new political parties (Hamel and Robertson 1985; Hug 2001; Lago and Martínez 2011; Tavits 2006) and the formation of pre-electoral coalitions (S. Golder 2005, 2006). In a nutshell, the more inclusive the electoral formula, the higher the district magnitude and the lower the legal threshold, the fewer votes may be wasted, the more new parties may emerge and the fewer pre-electoral coalitions may be formed. As an explanation of some of the consequences of electoral rules, most of these findings suffer from two important shortcomings: either they lack an adequate econometric basis or they do not use information at the district level.

Effects in the intraparty dimension

Turning now to the main consequence of variations in the intraparty dimension, electoral systems have also been found to have an impact on the personal vote, typically defined as ‘that portion of a candidate’s electoral support which originates in his or her personal qualities, qualifications, activities, and record’ (Cain et al. 1987: 9). The personal vote may therefore be based either on actual behaviour or on assigned attributes. Some empirical studies have examined the impact of variations in the rules of the game on the characteristics of candidates. If the electoral system
promotes a personal vote, candidates will exhibit personal attributes that may attract preference votes away from co-partisans, or even from candidates of a different party. By contrast, if citizens cast votes strictly for a political party with little or no regard to or evaluation of the individual(s) representing that party in electoral contests, there is no personal vote. Shugart et al. (2005) provide the first comparative empirical evidence in this regard. Using data from six PR cases in Europe, they find that the probability that a legislator will display personal vote-earning attributes (PVEAs) – operationalized as local birthplace and prior representative experience at the municipal or regional level – is higher when specific institutional characteristics of the intraparty dimension of electoral systems that foster candidates’ incentives to cultivate a personal vote are present, but lower when these are absent.

Second, there clearly are behavioural consequences of the intraparty dimension of electoral systems that go beyond parties’ incentives to nominate candidates with diverse characteristics and profiles that appeal to constituent subgroups. For example, Heithusen et al. (2005) examine the constituency focus of MPs in six legislative chambers spanning a variety of electoral systems. In the same vein, Bowler and Farrell (2008 [1993]) suggest that institutional variables of electoral systems affect the frequency with which members of the European Parliament engage in constituency service. By contrast, the contribution of Scully and Farrell (2003) on members of the European Parliament counter-intuitively suggests that those members elected from open lists place more emphasis on traditional parliamentary activities. However, this effect tends to disappear as district magnitude increases.

The intraparty dimension also has an effect on the types of bills that legislators initiate. In this regard, Crisp et al. (2004) provide evidence that perfectly fits with the incentives allegedly generated by the electoral system to cultivate a personal vote, showing that the probability that a legislator will initiate a local bill is higher in candidate-centred rather than party-centred systems. Another interesting recent avenue of research in the field has been the analysis of the assignment of legislators to committees. To my knowledge, there are at least two papers that consider committee assignments in relation to the tier (nominal or list) by which a member was elected in Germany (Sieberer 2010; Stratmann and Baur 2002). Likewise, Pekkanen et al. (2006) show that members of the Japanese Parliament elected from PR lists and single-member districts are assigned different types of positions, reflecting their distinct electoral incentives. Unfortunately, it remains untested how voter interests correspond to the committee system in closed-list PR systems (Shugart 2005: 48). Jones et al. (2002) provide the only study on committee assignment under party-centred electoral rules that I am aware of, but they do not explore district magnitude as an explanatory factor. Finally, the electoral connection between legislators and voters also affects the extent of party unity within legislative chambers. Legislative factionalism is higher in countries where candidates compete against members of their own parties for personal votes (either in primaries or in the general election) than where nominations are controlled by party leaders and electoral lists are closed (Hix 2004; Sieberer 2006). In other words, where legislators only have to please one principal (that is, the party leader), defections do not exist in practice (Carey 2009).

Nor are intraparty effects of electoral systems confined to legislative behaviours or merely to aspects of electoral campaigns or parliamentary functioning. Broadly speaking, there are two main alternative perspectives as to which electoral system generates more opportunities for incumbents to advance narrow interests over general interests and extract political rents. On the one hand, Lijphart (1999) advocates the use of PR systems to avoid political corruption. On the other hand, Persson and Tabellini (2005) argue that the freedom to choose individual candidates (rather than party lists) is associated with less corruption. Likewise, Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman (2005) find that rules that reduce individual accountability (i.e. proportional...
representation systems) are associated with higher corruption.\textsuperscript{16} Chang and Golden (2007) provide the most recent test to date on the relationship between electoral rules and corruption, examining a large sample of democratic nations. In contrast to previous research, they find that open lists can either increase or have no effect on political corruption, depending on district magnitude.

To sum up, although its scope is increasingly comparative, the literature that examines the relationship between electoral systems and personal vote across countries has long been hampered by variation in the numerous intervening variables that influence candidates’ behaviour. As a consequence, several scholars have examined whether personal vote exists (or not) in single-country studies that focus on a particular electoral system: single transferable (Marsh 2007) and non-transferable (Hirano 2006) vote systems, closed-list (Crisp and Desposato 2004) and open-list (Golden 2003) proportional representation, mixed-member proportional and majoritarian rules (Canache et al. 2000), and single-member districts with a plurality rule (Gaines 1998). In the same vein, Johnson and Hoyo (2012) argue that personal vote-building is likely to occur in ways that promote good vote divisions where strong vote division incentives are present (e.g. under Japan’s former SNTV system). Other political scientists have taken advantage of the recent proliferation of countries adopting mixed-member systems and of the existence of bicameral systems in which members of the two chambers are elected according to different rules to compare two systems within the same country, thereby reducing the number of intervening variables (e.g. Desposato 2006; Moser and Scheiner 2004). Despite this extensive literature, Morgenstern and Swindle (2005) find only limited evidence that electoral systems affect the personal vote.

\textbf{The origins of electoral systems}

As Duverger (1984: 34) argued some time ago, ‘[electoral systems] are strange devices – simultaneously cameras and projectors’. However, as a research topic the consequences of electoral laws are considerably more developed than the study of their causes; Shugart (2005: 51) considers establishing a body of theoretically driven comparative work on why one electoral system is used rather than another to be a ‘research frontier for the twenty-first century’. Following Benoit (2007), I will organize the main studies explaining electoral system adoption and reform according to three criteria. The first key question concerns the actors and the forces involved in the design. By addressing the issue of who or what affects the electoral system, we can distinguish between party-centred (Benoit 2004; Birch et al. 2002; Boix 1999; Colomer 2004b), non-party-centred (Hazan 1996; Remington and Smith 1996), democratic (Blais and Massicotte 1997), technocratic (Benoit and Schiemann 2001), economic (Cusack et al. 2007; Katzenstein 1985; Rogowski 1987), geographical (Dahl and Tufte 1973), historical (Elster et al. 1998) and societal (Lijphart 1992; Rokkan 2009 [1970]) approaches to electoral adoption and reform.

Second, the analysis of electoral system adoption and change points to another traditional division in comparative politics concerning the number of countries analysed. A comprehensive review of the studies that address this topic requires that we take into account not only non-quantitative (e.g. Birch et al. 2002; Elster et al. 1998; Ishiyama 1997; Jones Luong 2002; Lijphart 1992; Renwick 2010; Sakamoto 1999) and quantitative (e.g. Best 2012; Colomer 2005; Harfst 2013) examinations of multiple cases, but also propositions inductively generated from single case studies (e.g. Bawn 1993; Kaminski 2002; Lago and Montero 2005; Moraski 2007; Remington and Smith 1996).

Finally, four broad categories of the contexts in which the origins of electoral systems are rooted can be identified. The first category links electoral system adoption and change to the extension of suffrage in Western Europe in the years immediately before and after World
Electoral systems: empirical patterns

Having presented the theory that logically leads from electoral systems to political outcomes, in this section I will offer some empirical evidence on whether these ideas actually reflect reality. Figure 30.1 shows the proportion of democratic elections employing majoritarian, proportional and mixed electoral systems in five-year periods between 1946 and 2010. This figure indicates that the use of proportional electoral systems has significantly declined, while that of mixed systems has increased (at least until 2005). Before the 1950s, majoritarian, proportional and mixed electoral systems were employed in about 32 per cent, 62 per cent and 6 per cent of democratic elections, respectively. By the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, proportional systems were employed in ‘only’ 46 per cent of elections, whereas mixed systems were employed in 21 per cent.

The geographic distribution of electoral systems around the world is shown in Figure 30.2. The impact of colonial rule is obviously still felt today, with former British and French colonies

![Figure 30.1 Proportion of electoral systems in democracies over time (1946–2010)](image)

Source: Bormann and Golder (2013).
from Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Oceania typically employing majoritarian electoral systems like their past colonial rulers (Blais and Massicotte 1997; Lundell 2009). Proportional systems have historically predominated in South America, Europe and the few democracies that exist in the Middle East and North Africa. Finally, since 1989 many of the new democratic countries in Eastern Europe have adopted mixed systems. In addition to their prevalence in post-communist countries, mixed systems are now also common in Asia, a trend driven by democracies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

An overview of European electoral systems in terms of the main dimensions of variation and the significant changes that have taken place since World War II is provided in Table 30.1, in which a number of general patterns can be identified. In overall terms, most of the electoral rules used in Europe today are proportional representation systems. There are also five mixed systems (two compensatory in Germany and Romania, and three non-compensatory in Bulgaria, Hungary and Lithuania) and two majoritarian systems (the two-round system in France and the first-past-the-post regime in the United Kingdom).

Although PR systems differ from one another with respect to the specific formula in use, the D'Hondt method (within the highest averages subtype) and the Hare quota (within the quota subtype) are the two most frequently employed. However, the seat allocation method is only one dimension of variation within PR systems; a second and often more important dimension is district magnitude. Some countries, such as Ireland, Malta, Austria, Greece and Spain, employ relatively small constituencies (i.e. district magnitude averages less than 7); others, such as the Netherlands and Slovakia, use large constituencies. In fact, in each of these two latter cases the entire country forms one giant district of 150 seats.

There are also important variations with regard to legal thresholds. The best-known example is that of Germany. German parties must obtain at least 5 per cent of the national vote in order to be allowed to participate in the allocation of list seats.17 Up to ten European countries use
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower-tier allocation formula</th>
<th>Lower-tier district magnitude</th>
<th>Legal threshold</th>
<th>Assembly size</th>
<th>Choice of candidate within party</th>
<th>Significant changes since 1945/1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>4.26*</td>
<td>4% national vote/1 constituency seat</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several; the last one, in 1992, involved the introduction of a third tier, the restructuring of the other two and the reinforcement of the preferential vote system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>5% district vote</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several; the last one, prior to the 2003 election, involved the abolition of the higher tier, a reduction in district magnitude, the introduction of a legal threshold and the reinforcement of the preferential voting system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>9.33*</td>
<td>1.8% national vote/1 constituency seat</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several: electoral formula, assembly size and legal threshold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>D’Hondt</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several, in both the interparty and the intraparty dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>D’Hondt</td>
<td>13.5*</td>
<td>2% national vote</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Many minor changes, but mainly focused on the interparty dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>8.42*</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Introduction of preferential voting in the upper tier before the 2003 election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>D’Hondt</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Change from multiple to open lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>3% national vote</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Many minor changes, in both the interparty and the intraparty dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>D’Hondt</td>
<td>10.5*</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several, in 1959, 1987 and 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Single transferable vote</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>23.73</td>
<td>4% national vote</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Many, with major changes in 1953, 1954, 1993 and 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Sainte-Laguë</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Increased legal threshold prior to the 1995 election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Hagenbach-Bischoff quota</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Single transferable vote</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Introduction of the majority-vote and the plurality-vote guarantees in 1987 and 1996, respectively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued
Table 30.1 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower-tier allocation formula</th>
<th>Lower-tier district magnitude</th>
<th>Legal threshold</th>
<th>Assembly size</th>
<th>Choice of candidate within party</th>
<th>Significant changes since 1945/1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Hare quota</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>0.67% national vote</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Increased assembly size in 1956 and several reinforcements of the preferential voting system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Modified Sainte-Laguë</td>
<td>7.89*</td>
<td>4% national vote</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Change of formula in 1953; addition of national seats before 1989 election (increased before 2005 election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>D'Hondt</td>
<td>11.22</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Many minor changes in 1993, 2001 and 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>D'Hondt</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None since 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Droop quota</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Several, in both the interparty and the intraparty dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Droop quota</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>4% national vote</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Introduction of 4% threshold and abolition of national lists prior to the 2000 election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>D'Hondt</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>3% district vote</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None since 1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Modified Sainte-Laguë</td>
<td>10.69*</td>
<td>4% national vote/12% district vote</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Change of formula in 1952; introduction of higher-tier seats in 1970; introduction of meaningful preference voting in 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hagenbach-Bischoff quota</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mixed systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower-tier allocation formula</th>
<th>Lower-tier district magnitude</th>
<th>Legal threshold</th>
<th>Assembly size</th>
<th>Choice of candidate within party</th>
<th>Significant changes since 1945/1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgariaa</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4% national vote</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Change from mixed to pure PR before 1991 election; change from pure PR to mixed before 2009 election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germanyb</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5% national vote/3 constituency seats</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Many minor changes in 1953, 1956, 1985, 1990 and 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarya</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Two-round system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Increased legal threshold prior to the 1994 election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuaniaa</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Two-round system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5% national vote</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Many, in both the interparty and the intraparty dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romaniab</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Two-round system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5% national vote/6 constituency seats</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Several: progressively higher threshold and introduction of nominal seats prior to the 2008 election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Majoritarian systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower-tier allocation formula</th>
<th>Lower-tier district magnitude</th>
<th>Legal threshold</th>
<th>Assembly size</th>
<th>Choice of candidate within party</th>
<th>Significant changes since 1945/1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Two-round system</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Many; major changes in 1958, 1985 and 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In the case of new democracies, only changes since democratization are noted. * Indicates country has ‘complex districting’, i.e. higher-tier constituencies to iron out discrepancies arising from lower-level constituencies. In these circumstances, it is difficult to provide a meaningful figure for the district magnitude, as the units in which people vote may have no significance when it comes to the allocation of seats. a Indicates a parallel mixed system. b Indicates a compensatory mixed system.

Source: Bormann and Golder (2013) and Riera (2013b).
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the same threshold. Although European electoral systems differ considerably in terms of the
total number of seats allocated, this feature is largely explained by country size. For example,
the assembly size in large countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany (all more
than 600 seats) is much bigger than that of small nations like Cyprus, Iceland and Malta (all less
than 70 seats). Table 30.1 also provides some information on voters’ degree of freedom with
regard to the exact identity of the candidates finally elected. According to Table 30.1, only
three PR systems in Europe (i.e. Italy, Portugal and Spain) are non-preferential, in the sense
that the order of candidates drawn up by the party is a fixed ranking that voters cannot alter
(the so-called ‘closed-list’ system). In contrast, non-preferentiality is common among mixed
and, obviously, majoritarian systems.

In Table 30.2 I provide descriptive statistics on the number of times European democracies
changed their electoral systems between 1945 and 2010. Here, I define electoral reform as a
significant change in at least one of the following elements of an electoral system: the electoral
formula, the number of districts, the assembly size, the electoral threshold, the presence (or
absence) of a ban on pre-electoral coalitions and linked lists, and the number of and linkage
between electoral tiers.18 These criteria represent a slightly amended version of Lijphart’s
concept of electoral reform (M. Golder 2005). However, the identification of an instance of
electoral system change without specifying the direction in which the rules of the game are
modified is clearly insufficient. On this basis, it is very useful to distinguish between permissive
and restrictive reforms, which decrease and increase the overall disproportionality produced by
the electoral rules, respectively (Taagepera and Shugart 1989), and between party-centred and
candidate-centred reforms, which decrease and increase candidates’ incentives to cultivate a
personal vote, respectively (Carey and Shugart 1995).

An electoral reform is coded as permissive in the following cases: first, the replacement of the
existing formula by one that is intended to create less deviation of seat shares of parties from
their vote shares; second, a reduction of at least 20 per cent in the number of districts; third,
an increase of at least 20 per cent in the assembly size; fourth, a reduction of at least 20 per
cent in the electoral threshold; fifth, the implementation of an additional tier to allocate seats
in PR systems; sixth, an increase of at least 20 per cent in the percentage of seats that are allocated
in the PR tier in mixed systems; and, seventh, the introduction of linkage between tiers in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of electoral reform in democracies by European region (1945–2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No reform</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s dataset.
multi-tier or mixed systems. A change in the opposite direction in any of these elements is coded as restrictive. Finally, *ambiguous* reforms are not supposed to change the overall disproportionality produced by the existing electoral rules, either because they only affect the intraparty dimension of the system or because they simultaneously combine permissive and restrictive elements of change.19

For example, the electoral reform passed in France in 1985 is considered to be permissive because it replaced the two-round single-member majoritarian system employed in that country since 1958 with a PR system. In contrast, the Polish electoral reform of 2002 is considered to be restrictive because the D'Hondt method replaced the Sainte-Laguë formula in use in the previous election. Finally, the introduction of the plurality-vote guarantee in Malta after the 1992 election is a case of ambiguous electoral reform in the interparty dimension.

An electoral reform is coded as *party-centred* in the following cases: (1) an increase in the degree of control party leaders can exercise over ballot rank; (2) an increase in the contribution that votes cast for one candidate of a given party makes to the number of seats won in the district by the party as a whole; (3) certain specific changes in the number of votes citizens are allowed to cast and the level at which they may cast them; (4) an increase in the number of districts when the electoral formula itself fosters personal vote behaviours; (5) the elimination of a nominal tier in PR systems; (6) the introduction of or an increase in the size of the PR-tier in mixed systems; (7) a reduction in the size of the so-called ‘personal tier’ in multi-tier systems; (8) a reduction in the number of preferences a voter can express in preferential-list allocation methods; and (9) a reduction in the degree by which preference votes may change the party-provided ranking in flexible-list systems. A change in the opposite direction of any of these elements is coded as *candidate-centred*. Finally, *ambiguous* reforms are not intended to change the candidates’ overall incentives to cultivate a personal vote generated by the existing electoral rules, either because they only affect the intraparty dimension of the system or because they simultaneously combine candidate-centred and party-centred elements of change.

For example, the reform that took place in Finland before the 1954 election can be categorized as candidate-centred because the multiple-list system in use until that point was transformed into an open-list system. In contrast, the reform passed in Bulgaria in 1991 was party-centred due to the elimination of the nominal tier in the mixed system used in the country’s first democratic election. Finally, the formula shift (from Hare to Sainte-Laguë) in Germany in 2008 is a case of ambiguous electoral reform in the intraparty dimension.

Amongst West European countries, legislative terms in which an electoral reform does not take place are the rule rather than the exception, with relatively few countries changing the rules of the game. Overall, permissive reforms in the interparty dimension and ambiguous reforms in the intraparty dimension are the most common types of electoral system change registered in this group of countries. About 8 per cent of legislative terms include one of these two types of electoral reforms. By contrast, electoral system changes occur in 56 per cent of the legislative terms in Eastern Europe. Among electoral reforms in the interparty dimension, 23 per cent are permissive and 24 per cent are restrictive. Among electoral reforms in the intraparty dimension, 23 per cent are party-centred and 17 per cent are candidate-centred. Interestingly, the empirical evidence regarding electoral system changes in Eastern Europe differs significantly from the general trends towards greater permissiveness and greater personalization predicted by Colomer (2005) and Carey (2009), respectively.

If we return now to the information displayed in Table 30.1, we can see how European countries vary considerably in terms of the stability of their electoral systems. For example, some countries (such as Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Poland) quite frequently reform the electoral system. Within this group, we must distinguish between
countries that have conducted major reforms (like France and Italy) and those that have primarily tinkered with somewhat less important dimensions of the electoral system. In contrast, we do not observe any changes in at least six countries: Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Figure 30.3 illustrates how the level of party system fragmentation varies in relation to district magnitude. Specifically, I provide information on the effective number of electoral and parliamentary parties. This index, first introduced by Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera in 1979, indicates ‘the number of hypothetical equal-size parties that would have the same total effect on fractionalization of the system as have the actual parties of unequal size’ (Laakso and Taagepera 1979: 4). Its exact operationalization corresponds to the inverse of the sum of the square of all parties’ vote or seat shares, ranging from 1 to infinity (in fact, to the number of parties that obtain at least one vote or seat, respectively). Although these plots ignore the important influence of social heterogeneity on party system size and only employ data at the national level, the evidence provided is consistent with the theories of Rae (1971 [1967]) and Taagepera and Shugart (1989). This is indicated by the fact that party systems under permissive electoral rules (i.e. with high district magnitudes) are consistently larger than those operating under restrictive rules (i.e. with low district magnitudes).

Two plots summarizing the perceptions of corruption in Europe between 1996 and 2005 across party-centred and candidate-centred systems are shown in Figure 30.4. Carey and Shugart’s (1995) theory predicts that candidates’ incentives to cultivate a personal vote will be higher under candidate-centred rules but lower under party-centred rules as district magnitude increases. Given this assumption, it follows that the level of political corruption should be higher...
Figure 30.4 Perceptions of political corruption and incentives to cultivate a personal vote in Europe (1996–2005)


in candidate-centred systems but lower in party-centred systems as district magnitude increases (Chang and Golden 2007). The data in Figure 30.4 are broadly inconsistent with these predictions. Perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain are higher in party-centred systems and lower in candidate-centred systems as district magnitude increases. These preliminary findings open up a further research agenda on how electoral institutions are linked to perceptions of political corruption.

Challenges ahead

The significant development of comparative electoral systems research over the last 30 years does not mean that all the questions in this field have been answered. In the following pages, I outline four possible avenues for further research.

First, in response to the current trend towards design-based identification strategies, Adam Przeworski (2007) contemplates whether the study of comparative politics is even possible in an era of experimental political research. Although his conclusions are far more optimistic, Jonathan Rodden (2006) starts from the same point of departure. Despite these challenges, certain institutional settings offer an excellent opportunity for theory building and testing by providing us with quasi-experimental designs. At one time, scholars sought to define settings in which Mill’s method of difference would apply – a world in which the instances in which the phenomenon of interest occurred and did not occur would have every circumstance in common save one. This is what enabled researchers to make causal inferences about the impact of institutions on outcomes. Unfortunately, it has become clear that such research designs are impractical, giving
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rise to an emphasis on random assignment of the treatment. Within such a framework, careful attention to patterns of institutional variation appears to be particularly useful.

Most of the time, it is neither feasible nor politically correct to manipulate the institutional setting of two similar countries. However, it is always possible to find innovative ways to study the relationship between institutions and outcomes by taking advantage of controlled comparisons (e.g. the simultaneous operation of different electoral systems in a particular place) or by adopting an appropriate research design (e.g. the comparison of parties or candidates that have won or lost a seat by a small number of votes). The (non-trivial) requirement for causal inferences is a profound knowledge of the cases. In recent years, several such studies have been published. For example, Crisp et al. (2012a) examine whether contamination occurs across tiers of mixed-member systems in the United Kingdom by observing voting in the same (or very similar) districts under different electoral rules. Likewise, by taking advantage of the discontinuities generated by thresholds of representation at the national level in 37 countries, Dinas et al. (2013) analyse whether small parties that barely obtain parliamentary representation are more likely to politically succeed in the short term in comparison to those that do not enter the legislative chamber.

A second possible strand of future research involves the refinement of the study of Duverger’s mechanical and psychological effects (i.e. the ‘Duvergerian agenda’) in democracies, as well as its extension to autocracies. The proposition that party system size should be larger in democracies with high district magnitudes and considerable ethnic fragmentation remains largely untested at the district level, even though that is the level at which the relevant pressures are expected to act. Moreover, there is a general lack of theoretically driven comparative research on whether party system fragmentation can be driven by other sources of heterogeneity in terms of preferences (for example ideological differences). Likewise, uneven district magnitude in PR systems and the phenomenon of party system nationalization have traditionally been considered relatively minor topics in comparative electoral systems research, but they are now becoming increasingly important due to enormous improvements in the accessibility of sub-national data (e.g. Crisp et al. 2013; Penadés and Riera 2011). Finally, the study of the consequences of electoral systems under dictatorships, also largely neglected thus far by the literature, should benefit from the increased availability of data.

Third, electoral systems are thought to have a long list of consequences that likely extend beyond their interparty dimension. For example, candidate quality, legislative organization and parties’ appointments may matter more under some institutional frameworks than others (Taagepera 2007b). These are empirically observable consequences of the rules of the game that have not yet been properly tested, mainly because of a lack of data (Shugart 2005). In the coming years, the extensive quantitative data collection in nine countries carried out by Krauss et al. (2008) will allow us to analyse how parties recruit and allocate personnel to electoral, party, legislative and executive positions.

Finally, the study of the origins of electoral systems is obviously still an open field from both the theoretical and the empirical perspective. A disadvantage of research addressing the causes of the adoption and reform of electoral rules is that the study of the effects of an institution is more conducive to systematic theorization (and quantification) than the study of its genesis (Shugart 2005). Moreover, it may sometimes be more difficult to assess why one electoral system is chosen over another because there are (naturally) relatively few cases of major shifts in systems to analyse (Rahat 2011). For instance, in most systems featuring single-member districts and a plurality rule, the same electoral rules have been in use since their initial adoption. The same can be said about the PR and mixed-member systems of several countries, including Argentina and Japan. However, these cases are quite rare; as we have seen, electoral reforms are far from uncommon.
Conclusion

The significant development of the field of comparative electoral systems research from the quantitative perspective over the last 30 years has also involved a qualitatively important transformation in how scholars approach the field. The maturity that Shugart (2005: 25) refers to is reflected in the recent publication of several pieces that are significantly broader in the substantive sense and increasingly comparative and sophisticated from the methodological point of view. In the early days of the field, the analysis of electoral systems mainly focused on the consequences of the interparty dimension of electoral laws. Moreover, it lacked an adequately comparative approach and often fell short of sufficiently quantitative rigour. Fortunately, this is no longer the case.

Nowadays, the application of the proper statistical tools to the analysis of the operation of more than one electoral system, either in the same or in different countries, has become the rule rather than the exception. As a result of substantial advances in the study of the impact of electoral rules on the format of the party system and the behaviour of voters, some scholars have concluded that ‘the agenda of proportionality and number of parties is largely closed’ (Shugart 2005: 51). The progress recently made in this regard has been decisively assisted by enormous improvements in the accessibility of both electoral and institutional data.39 Apart from these developments, the study of the intraparty effects of electoral rules and their origins are two additional sub-fields that have attracted the attention of political scientists over the last two decades.

Electoral reforms have been characterized as fairly uncommon in democratic regimes (Lijphart 1994; Nohlen 1984b; Norris 1995; Taagepera 2007a).30 Nevertheless, electoral system changes actually occurred with some frequency in established democracies during the 1990s (e.g. Israel, Italy, Japan and New Zealand), and several governments’ attempts to modify the rules of the game in the early 2000s led some scholars to conclude that ‘the whiff of electoral reform is in the air’ (Farrell 2011 [2001]: 172). In my brief overview of the data, we have seen that the use of proportional systems has significantly declined over time, while mixed rules have become increasingly common. Additionally, certain empirical patterns have clearly emerged with regard to the geographical distribution of electoral systems and the frequency and typology of electoral reforms. In overall terms, the rules of the game are becoming less stable (at least, in Eastern Europe), but there is no evidence of the general trend towards proportional representation or candidate-centredness over time that some authors predicted. There are no strong indications of how these trends will develop in the future. Finally, the data document two additional effects of electoral rules: first, party systems at both the electoral and legislative levels are consistently larger when district magnitude is high and, second, perceived levels of corruption are generally higher in party-centred systems with large districts as well as in candidate-centred systems with small districts.

In the last section of the chapter, I have sketched four avenues for further research in this field: the use of electoral institutions as a means of addressing potential problems of causality in the study of their effects, the refinement of the analysis of Duverger’s mechanical and psychological effects (i.e. the Duvergerian agenda) in democracies and its extension to autocracies, the examination of intraparty effects and a focus on the origins of electoral systems. In the meantime, specialists will also continue to search for an ideal electoral system, despite Carey and Hix’s (2011) claim of having identified the electoral ‘sweet spot’. Whether the combination of low-magnitude districts and proportional formulas they advocate produces the best of both worlds still remains to be seen; in the end, it simply depends on what we want from an electoral system (Gallagher 2005: 568).
Notes

1 In particular, I only take into consideration nations where ‘incumbents lose elections and leave office when the rules so dictate’ (Przeworski et al. 2000: 54).

2 For example, in Italy, because the president of the Senate acts as the head of state when the president of the Republic must be replaced, the Senate is traditionally considered the upper house.

3 Just as Carey and Hix (2011) seek to identify a ‘sweet spot’ on the interparty dimension where the goals of representation and accountability are maximized, Bergman et al. (forthcoming) share a similar ambition for the intraparty dimension, pursuing the design of a non-transferable preference voting system in which a proliferation of candidates may mean that many voters will not be represented by a candidate of their choice.

4 Other scholars offer similar definitions. For example, Blais (1988: 100) defines electoral systems as ‘those rules which govern the processes by which preferences are articulated as votes and by which these votes are translated into the election of decision-makers’. Likewise, Farrell (2011 [2001]: 4) concludes that ‘electoral systems determine the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office’.

5 Although Lijphart (1994: 10) employs the term ‘dimension’ to refer to the different features of electoral systems, I prefer to confine the use of this word to the distinction between the interparty and the intraparty aspects of electoral rules.

6 The number and the ways in which electoral tiers are connected or not in cases of more than one tier are two additional features of electoral systems. Although their significance is often not necessarily negligible, I do not consider them here.

7 Shugart and Wattenberg (2001: 10) employ a slightly different definition, according to which mixed-member systems are ‘a variant of such multiple-tier systems, with the specific proviso that one tier must entail allocation of seats nominally whereas the other must entail allocation of seats by lists’. Hence, they preclude the possibility that a system can be classified as mixed when it uses only one electoral tier. Moreover, their definition is based on the nature of the vote cast by the citizen and how it is employed to allocate seats (nominally versus lists) instead of the formula in use (majoritarian versus majoritarian).

8 A common mistake found in a surprisingly large number of highly regarded publications is the projection of the effective threshold from the constituency to the national level. It is obvious upon reflection that if we want to estimate the national-level effective threshold, we need to take the number of constituencies into account; whatever the effective threshold may be within each constituency and the more such constituencies there are, the lower the national-level effective threshold will be (Taagepera 1998).

9 Open-list systems are those in which the ballots provided by parties are unranked and preference votes alone determine the order of election from a party’s list. In flexible-list systems, the allocation of candidates takes into account both the party-provided rank order and preference votes. Quasi-list and latent-list systems are two subtypes of open-list and flexible-list systems, respectively, in which the citizen only indicates preference votes.

10 In the 1980s, a similar controversy arose between Bogdanor (1983) and Marsh (1985). The former did not address the issue of the flexibility of lists (in Shugart’s terminology) at all, while the latter proposed a differentiation between ‘systems where seats are allocated between candidates purely on the basis of preference votes and those where the ordering of the list by the party is also a factor’ (Marsh 1985: 376).

11 For example, Karvonen (2010: 35–40) applies Shugart’s revised schema in order to assess the degree of ‘personalization’ of electoral systems.

12 Although I will not specifically address assembly size, it is obviously an important component of electoral systems because it decisively conditions district magnitude (Lijphart 1994; Taagepera 2007a).

13 Another systematic account of cases deviating from Duverger’s Law among plurality systems involves what have come to be called ‘sectionalist third parties’; that is, non-national parties that are sufficiently competitive locally to benefit from, rather than be punished by, Duverger’s Law (Rae 1971 [1967]; Riker 1982). Because the central concern of this chapter pertains to party system size at the national level, I will not attempt to explain why the number of parties may be inflated at the local level (Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Cox 1999).

14 Finally, John Carey and Simon Hix (2011) posit that low-magnitude multi-member districts (the so-called ‘limited PR systems’) produce a distance between the median voter and the median
government (in the case of majority cabinets) or legislature (in the case of minority cabinets) party that is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

15 I believe that this is counter-intuitive; if the theory were true, representatives elected through open lists would be more focused on constituency service than on parliamentary activities.

16 For the authors, all proportional representation systems reduce individual accountability, but this is obviously not true if we also take into consideration preferential-list electoral rules. Unfortunately, they do not distinguish between the latter and closed lists.

17 Although quite exceptional in practice, German parties can also qualify for list seats by winning at least three constituency seats.


19 Note that a reform that does not exceed any of the thresholds mentioned above is not coded as an actual reform in my data.


21 To be more precise, the formula is:

\[
\frac{1}{\sum p_i^2}
\]

where \( p_i \) is the percentage of votes obtained by party \( i \).

22 For example, the district magnitude of the only electoral district in the Netherlands is 150, and the effective numbers of electoral and parliamentary parties in the 2010 election were 6.97 and 6.74, respectively. In contrast, in the 2010 election in the UK the exclusive existence of single-member districts resulted in effective numbers of electoral and parliamentary parties of 3.71 and 2.57, respectively.

23 The World Bank website (World Governance Indicators) and Johnson and Wallack (2010 [2003]).

24 Spain and Moldova are examples of party-centred systems with low and high district magnitude, respectively. In contrast, France and the United Kingdom are examples of candidate-centred systems with low district magnitude, and the Netherlands and Slovakia are examples of candidate-centred systems with high district magnitude.

25 See Crisp et al. (2012b), Hicken and Stoll (2011), Riera (2013a), Singer (2013) and Singer and Stephenson (2009) for research on this issue that employs data at the district level.

26 With regard to electoral data at the sub-national level, it is worth mentioning the Constituency Level Electoral Archive (CLEA) from the University of Michigan and the Constituency Level Elections (CLE) dataset from Washington University at St Louis.

27 For exceptions, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) and Lust-Okar and Jamal (2002).

28 Katz (2005: 74) warns in the same vein that, ‘while it may be possible statistically to estimate the probability of reform in any particular year, it would appear that even the “peaks” in predicted probability will be so low as to leave accounting for specific instances in the realm of historical reconstruction rather than statistical prediction’.

29 With regard to the former, see, for example, the volumes compiled by Nohlen and Stöver (2010) and Caramani (2000); with regard to the latter, see the handbooks edited by Colomer (2004a) and Gallagher and Mitchell (2005a), or the datasets of Bormann and Golder (2013) and Johnson and Wallack (2010 [2003]).

30 For an opposing view, see Colomer (2001).

Bibliography


Electoral and party systems in Europe


Pedro Riera


