



Income-based voting and polarization over redistribution under alternative electoral systems[☆]



Agnar Freyr Helgason

The University of Iceland, Iceland

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ABSTRACT

Democracies that have proportional electoral systems spend substantively more on welfare policies than those that have majoritarian systems. Theoretical accounts of this empirical regularity are generally tested using macro-level data, leaving micro-level implications untested. In this paper, I take an alternative approach, leveraging the fact that the theories in question make predictions about the electoral coordination between parties and voters around broad-based redistribution under alternative institutional arrangements. To test the theories, I create a novel measure of income-based voting, which captures the sensitivity of vote choice to changes in income and forms the dependent variable in a second stage model. Overall, I find robust support for more proportionality leading to more income-based voting.

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1. Introduction

Do electoral institutions affect the electoral coordination of parties and voters around broad-based redistributive issues? If so, can that explain why democracies with proportional electoral institutions have considerably more generous welfare states than democracies that have majoritarian electoral systems? In recent years a number of scholars have attempted to explain this empirical regularity, offering a variety of theoretical accounts of how electoral systems affect redistributive outcomes. While the causal mechanism by which one affects the other takes different forms in different accounts, most theories focus on how electoral systems affect the electoral coordination between political parties and voters, which in turn affects policy outcomes. On the elite level, electoral institutions are claimed to have implications for the number of viable political parties that compete, for the policy platforms that parties choose, and for how credible those platforms are to voters (e.g. [Persson and](#)

[Tabellini, 2003](#); [Iversen and Soskice, 2006](#)). On the mass level, electoral institutions are claimed to affect how citizens translate their interests into vote choice and how those vote choices are translated into seats in assemblies (e.g. [Roemer, 1998](#); [Rodden, 2005](#)). All these features have been hypothesized to have systematic implications for the generosity of welfare policies.

The most common approach to testing the empirical implications of the major theories in the literature is at the macro-level, by associating some measure of redistributive outcomes with some feature of electoral systems. While such tests have served to assess the plausibility of the different theories, they are in many ways problematic. This is not least so because the theories in question were, at least partly, inspired by the empirical regularities found in the data. As such, there is value in developing further and testing the theories in a setting that did not form part of the original puzzle motivating the theories.

A number of papers have sought to go beyond the standard approach and focus squarely on specific aspects of the posited mechanisms. For example, [Stratmann and Baur \(2002\)](#) analyze how legislative behavior in the German Bundestag differs between legislators elected through the majoritarian tier and the proportional tier, finding that legislators elected through the former tier are more likely to be members of parliamentary committees that allows them to appropriate funds to their geographically-based constituencies. Similarly, [Gagliarducci et al. \(2011\)](#) find that legislators elected through the majoritarian tier of the mixed Italian electoral system between 1994 and 2006 were more prone to

[☆] Social Research Centre, University of Iceland, Gimli G-201, Sæmundargötu 2, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland. Email: afh@hi.is. I gratefully acknowledge comments and suggestions from Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Sarah Brooks, Raphael Cunha, Vittorio Merola, Marcus Kurtz, Jason Morgan, Anthony Muga, Irfan Nooruddin, Philipp Rehm, and four anonymous reviewers. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, 2013, at the Comparative Politics Dissertation Workshop (CPRW) at The Ohio State University, 2013, and at Þjóðarspejillinn: Conference in Social Sciences at the University of Iceland, 2014. I thank participants and discussants for helpful comments and suggestions.

E-mail address: afh@hi.is.

sponsor bills targeting spending at their constituencies than their proportionally elected counterparts. Such studies have also analyzed differences in party discipline across electoral tiers in mixed systems. Sieberer (2010) finds that legislators elected under the majoritarian tier in the German electoral system are more likely to deviate from the party line in parliamentary voting, while Kunicova and Remington (2008) reach a similar conclusion for legislator behavior in the mixed Russian electoral system.

In this paper, I take such an alternative empirical approach to assessing the plausibility of the major theories in the literature. I leverage the fact that the theories in question make predictions about the coordination between parties and voters and use data at the micro-level to test those predictions. The paper thus goes beyond existing approaches by testing the observable implications of established theories in a novel setting. In doing so, it provides a stronger empirical foundation for evaluating the theories in question.

To test the theories, I create a measure of income-based voting, which captures the sensitivity of vote choice to changes in income. The measure, which covers 99 elections in 41 democracies from 1996 to 2013, forms the dependent variable in a second stage model that seeks to explain why the association of income and vote choice differs across countries. In addition to the main analysis, I also leverage the unique structure of seven mixed electoral systems included in the sample and test whether the extent of income-based voting differs across electoral tiers in the same country.

I find robust support for more proportional systems leading to more income-based voting. In particular, my results suggest that larger average district magnitudes are consistently associated with more income-based voting. At the same time, I do not find evidence in support of the claim that the voting behavior of middle-income voters is systematically more similar to the voting behavior of high-income voters in majoritarian systems; nor that alternative salient cleavages only affect the extent of income-based voting under majoritarian electoral rules. Furthermore, although the number of mixed electoral systems in the sample is small, the results indicate that income has a larger effect on how individuals vote in the proportional tier than in the majoritarian tier of the system, which is consistent with the evidence from the main analysis.

2. Linking electoral systems and the welfare state

Democracies that have proportional electoral systems spend considerably more on welfare policies than those that have majoritarian electoral systems. Persson and Tabellini (2003:179), for example, find that in a sample of 70 democracies in the 1990s “[m]ajoritarian elections cut welfare spending [...] by as much as 2–3% of GDP.” Considering that the mean value of their cross-sectional measure of welfare spending is 8.1% of GDP, the difference in spending between countries with different electoral systems is substantively significant. In Fig. 1, I show the bivariate relationship between welfare spending and electoral systems, operationalized in terms of average district magnitude. The graph shows that the simple association between the two is fairly strong, with Persson and Tabellini’s (2003) results suggesting that the association holds when analyzed with more sophisticated methods.

In recent years, several mechanisms have been proposed to account for this empirical regularity.¹ Broadly, they can be divided

into three categories, based on their primary explanatory factor: First, theories that focus on how electoral rules affect the incentives of parties to offer broad-based versus geographically targeted policy platforms; second, theories that focus on the effects electoral rules have on the number of viable parties, which in turn affects party platforms; and, finally, theories that posit that majoritarian electoral systems diffuse the effects of economic interests on vote choice in the context of alternative salient cleavages.

Below, I discuss these mechanisms in turn, highlighting the observable implications they have for the electoral coordination between parties and voters around broad-based redistributive issues. In particular, I specify the implications in terms of how the association of income and vote choice — income-based voting — should differ systematically across electoral systems.² As I discuss further below, any systematic differences we observe in income-based voting should be directly related to the extent to which political parties mobilize voters on redistributive issues.

2.1. District-based targeting of goods

Several related contributions to the literature on the policy implications of electoral systems contrast the platform incentives faced by political parties under majoritarian and proportional electoral rules (e.g. Persson and Tabellini, 2000, 2003; Milesi-Ferretti et al., 2002). In these accounts the critical feature of electoral systems is to what extent electoral competition between parties is partitioned into districts. When parties compete in a single national district and receive seats in proportion to their vote share, they have an incentive to seek support from broad coalitions of voters and provide broad-based goods, such as social protection. However, when parties compete under plurality rule in single-member districts, electoral competition will to a larger extent be characterized by promises of targeted local goods, or “pork-barrel” (Persson and Tabellini, 2003:17). Importantly, targeting under majoritarian systems is driven by the fact that some districts are “swing” districts and thus play an especially important role in the bid of parties for a majority in the legislature. In the case of proportional electoral systems, however, districts do not have the same discrete effect on electoral outcomes, making appeals to voters across districts a more viable political strategy.

Because theories in this tradition generally do not depend on voters having redistributive interests based on their relative income, they do not have clear implications for how income-based voting should be affected by different electoral systems. They do, however, indirectly suggest that elections in majoritarian electoral systems should be characterized by more district-based cleavages. Formalizing the micro-level intuition behind that implication, Huber and Ting (2009) develop a model whereby parties can offer two different transfers to voters: Either transfers from rich to poor (i.e. redistribution), or transfers to specific districts from a common pool of funds (i.e. pork). The authors go on to demonstrate that under certain circumstances it can actually be rational for voters to vote against their redistributive interests, if by doing so they gain access to pork barrel spending (2009:22). While Huber

¹ Several theories also associate electoral systems with the size of the public sector more generally or the extent of public goods provision (e.g. Lizzeri and Persico, 2001; Persson and Tabellini, 1999, 2000; Bawn and Rosenbluth, 2006; Persson et al., 2007). While these theories pertain to the subject of this paper, I focus on theoretical mechanisms that have explicitly associated electoral systems with welfare spending or the level of social protection.

² While broadening the focus to the more commonly used concept of class voting would be possible, the causal mechanisms in the theories being tested generally center on the effects of redistributive interests on political behavior. While the effects of class on political behavior is often attributed to class-based redistributive interests (e.g. Lipset, 1960), class can also affect political behavior through other mechanisms, such as educational differences and cultural voting (Van der Waal et al., 2007). As such, focusing on income-based voting, rather than class voting, provides a more accurate test of the implied micro-level mechanism of the theories on question.

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