



The classification of electoral systems: Bringing legislators back in



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 June 2015

Received in revised form

26 November 2015

Accepted 28 January 2016

Available online 30 January 2016

Keywords:

Electoral incentives

Personal vote-seeking

Legislator perceptions

Electoral system classifications

ABSTRACT

It is widely assumed that electoral institutions shape politicians' incentive for personal vote-seeking, with important behavioral and policy consequences. Yet, there is a surprising lack of consensus on how to compare real-world electoral institutions. Using new data this paper examines how legislators' own perception of their electoral incentives in fifteen democracies correspond to some of the most seminal classification schemes in political science. Our survey of 2326 legislators – the empirically broadest study of personal vote orientation so far conducted – demonstrates that legislators do not always understand electoral incentives in the same way scholarly rankings do, highlighting the need for scholars of political institutions to justify their choice of classification scheme. If not, an entire body of literature may be misguided.

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1. Introduction

Electoral institutions, the scholarly literature argues, affect political elites' behavior and, ultimately, the type of public policy produced. Party-centered electoral institutions are said to lead to increased public goods spending benefitting large swaths of the population (Persson and Tabellini, 2003; Edwards and Thames, 2007; Hicken and Simmons, 2008), trade liberalization (Nielson, 2003), and economic reform (Bagashka, 2012). More candidate-centered systems are, by contrast, associated with increased particularism (pork) and subsidy spending catering to narrow – typically geographically concentrated – constituencies (Hallerberg and Marier, 2004; Park and Jensen, 2007; Rickard, 2012), protectionism (Crisp et al., 2010; Kono, 2009), and corruption (Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman, 2005). The nature of legislators' electoral support, that is, matters for policy and distributive outcomes, providing some of the strongest evidence in political science and political economy that variation in the design of political institutions is consequential (for recent overviews, see André et al., 2014; Rickard, 2015).

However, there is disagreement in the scholarly community as to what makes electoral institutions more candidate-centered, or

alternatively more party-centered, and thus how electoral systems should be classified. A large and growing body of literature has developed alternative ranking systems of electoral institutions, with each ranking arguing that it best captures the incentive on the part of legislators to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Mitchell, 2000; Shugart, 2001; Wallack et al., 2003; Nielson, 2003; Johnson and Wallack, 2008). These classifications position even common electoral institutions, and the countries that use them, sometimes at the party-centered end and other times at the candidate-centered end of the spectrum. At best, such ambiguity potentially calls into question existing findings on the nature and effects of electoral institutions (see also Teorell and Lindstedt, 2010).

What is needed, we argue, is a better appreciation of real-life electoral incentives as they are understood by the legislators who live and 'die' by them. In this paper, we employ a new individual-level dataset to examine legislators' own perception of personal vote incentives in fifteen democracies and to explore how these correspond to existing classification schemes. Our survey of 2326 legislators represents the empirically broadest study of legislators' orientation so far conducted, covering legislators seeking re-election across a host of different electoral institutions. The results allow for a re-examination of the various rankings to see which best corresponds to the incentive to cultivate a personal vote as perceived by legislators themselves.

After all, ultimately, individual politicians decide how much effort to devote to cultivating their personal reputation and how

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much effort to upholding the party reputation (Carey, 2009). By exploring empirically the micro-foundations of the personal vote, we are able to differentiate between when legislators understand electoral incentives in the same way that scholarly rankings do and, by contrast, when scholars inaccurately presume incentives to court a personal vote that legislators themselves fail to see. As such, our data provide a unique opportunity to test whether the incentives identified by some of the most seminal classification schemes in political science are actually relevant to, or understood by, politicians. If not, an entire body of literature may be misguided.

This paper not only provides a substantive contribution to the extant body of scholarly literature on the design of electoral systems and the effects they have in a wide range of subfields such as political economy (e.g. subsidy spending – see Park and Jensen, 2007), political representation (e.g. presence of women in parliament – see Ellis Valdini, 2013), voter behavior (e.g. turnout – see Robbins, 2010), and public opinion research (e.g. satisfaction with democracy – see Farrell and McAllister, 2006). More specifically, it sets out critical differences between commonly used classifications of electoral systems and uses legislators' own perceptions of personal vote incentives in search of the salient properties of electoral systems in this regard. It also makes two important methodological contributions. First, this paper demonstrates that the common practice of treating ordered categorical data as continuous variables obfuscates inconsistencies in existing studies of the personal vote. Second, it cautions against assuming that academics' theoretical constructs exist in the minds of the persons they study by carefully examining the (mis)match between scholarly rankings of electoral systems and legislators' own perception of the electoral incentives.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section compares six of the most widely used existing electoral system classifications, finding that different indexes present dramatically different rank-orders of even the most common electoral institutions. Section three introduces our survey and section four our measure of personal vote orientation. Section five employs this data to gauge whether legislators understand the electoral incentives in the same way scholars presume. The paper concludes with a discussion of the wider consequences and avenues for future research.

2. Existing electoral system classifications

Electoral institutions shape patterns of representation. In deciding how to vote, people typically use a variety of party-based and candidate-based information shortcuts (Popkin, 1991). They use different information shortcuts, moreover, under different electoral rules (Shugart et al., 2005; Carey and Shugart, 1995). If partisan identifications and the state of the economy dictate people's vote, the public record of the party will decide legislators' re-election and they will concentrate on presenting to voters coherent policy packages that they pledge to pursue in office (see Kitschelt, 2000). But if people's vote is more swayed by candidates' qualities and actions, a legislator has incentives to build, advertise, and claim credit for, his or her personal record (Carey and Shugart, 1995). In other words, if voters' preferences for an individual candidate exercise relatively stronger influence over his or her (re) election, a legislator will need to signal to voters some reason to vote for him, or her, and not for some other candidate. That is, insofar legislators value re-election, the nature of their electoral support shapes policy-making and ultimately its outcomes (Cain et al., 1987).

However, the robustness of the finding that electoral institutions matter sharply contrasts with the widespread disagreement in the scholarly community as to how to classify and rank-order the electoral institutions used across the globe. In

particular, six of the most commonly used ordinal ranking systems – i.e. the Carey and Shugart (1995), the Mitchell (2000), the Shugart (2001), the Wallack et al. (2003), the Nielson (2003), and the Johnson and Wallack (2008) indexes – present dramatically different rank-orders of even the most common electoral institutions. Clearly there is no disagreeing, Table 1 demonstrates, with the view that *closed-list proportional representation (CLP)* systems constitute the most party-centered systems. Voters have no option but to mark their support for a party list and seats are allocated to candidates in the order they appear on the list. By contrast, there is a lot of disagreement as to how to classify systems where voters may indicate their support for a candidate, in addition to their party choice, and they have some say over *who* will represent them.

More specifically, *open-list proportional representation (OLP)* systems are at times more candidate-centered than *single-member plurality (SMP)*; other times they are more party-centered (contrast Carey and Shugart, 1995 to Wallack et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2000 to Nielson, 2003). At times a distinction is made singling out *flexible-list proportional representation systems (FLP)*; other times they are added to the open-list PR systems (contrast Shugart, 2001 to Carey and Shugart, 1995; Wallack et al., 2003). In turn, single-member plurality is at times more candidate-centered than *two-round systems (TRS)*; other times SMP is more party-centered (contrast Carey and Shugart, 1995 to Wallack et al., 2003) and still other times both are indistinguishable (Mitchell, 2000; Nielson, 2003). The *single-transferable vote (STV)* as well has been thought of as both more candidate-centered and more party-centered than open-list PR systems for instance (contrast Nielson, 2003 to Shugart, 2001).

One reason for the discrepancies is that the Carey and Shugart (1995), the Mitchell (2000), the Shugart (2001), the Wallack et al. (2003), the Nielson (2003), and the Johnson and Wallack (2008) indexes prioritize different elements of the electoral rules in seeking to classify incentives to cultivate a personal vote. They all make the distinction between ballots on which voters merely mark a party list and ballots that allow voters some opportunity to vote for a candidate. Voters' ability to indicate a preference for a candidate is – it seems – the *sine qua non* of the personal vote. Yet, indexes disagree on what constitutes a candidate vote notably with regard to single-member plurality systems. Some consider voting in single-member plurality systems to be for parties, others for candidates, and still others think it to be impossible to separate the two – critically affecting the system's ranking as at times more party-centered and other times more candidate-centered than open-list PR systems for instance (contrast in particular Carey and Shugart, 1995 to Wallack et al., 2003 and to Johnson and Wallack, 2008). What's more, indexes differ in their attempts to disentangle various kinds of candidate voting and identify different system properties as salient in determining personal vote incentives, as Table 2 indicates.¹

Voters' ability to hold incumbents to account is thought to vary with the type, optional nature, number, and impact of candidate votes, generating various incentives on the part of legislators to cultivate a personal vote. Some types of candidate votes are pooled across all candidates running under the same party label, allowing a

¹ Indexes that focus on Latin America also include party control over access to the ballot. Challenges to party control over the ballot thus include the leadership's inability to prevent candidates from running under the party label, voters' ability to upset the party-preferred order of election of candidates (Carey and Shugart, 1995), or even independents' ability to gain election (Johnson and Wallack, 2008). Processes of candidate selection are not a system property, however (see Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Shomer, 2014), but demonstrate remarkable differences across parties competing in the same polity (except where candidate selection is governed by law).

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