District magnitude and the personal vote

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ABSTRACT

In spite of widespread interest in the effects of electoral institutions, research has largely missed, or misspecified, the 'theoretical link' tying legislators' behaviour to the rules' formal properties. District magnitude, in particular, can operate through the number of candidates running under the same party label and the number of votes required to win (re)election. Using data from the PARTIREP cross-national legislator survey in 15 European democracies, the article demonstrates that district magnitude is a proxy of different processes in closed-list and open-list systems. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how the mechanical effects of electoral institutions translate into incentives on the part of legislators to cultivate a personal reputation.

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1. Introduction

Legislators are a group of people, Fenno (1977: 884) quipped, "all of whom come from somewhere else". They are elected – with few exceptions[1] – by territorial districts and this simple fact shapes the interests that may gain representation (Rehfeld, 2005). The debate regarding local versus national –read partisan– interests has a long pedigree in the study of representative government, dating back at least to Edmund Burke (Pitkin, 1967; Esaiasson, 1999). That is, legislators' efforts to balance their time attending to local and national constituencies are shaped by the incentives created by the institutions governing electoral competition. US Congressmen frequently travel back to their single-seat district in order to spend time among constituents, Fenno (1977) observed. Their availability and

commitment to the local community, they believe, wins them constituents' trust and electoral support (Cain et al., 1987; Bianco, 1994). The time elected representatives spend in the district varies across electoral institutions, in Ireland and the United Kingdom (Wood and Young, 1997). Columbian legislators travel more or less frequently to their multi-seat districts, Ingall and Crisp (2001) noted. Their trips home become more frequent as district magnitude increases. That is, almost by definition legislators spend part of their time in the district and part of their time in the capital. More importantly, the conditions that legislators compete under for re-election shape their relation with constituents and thereby representative government (see e.g. Dovi, 2007; Disch, 2011).

Elected representatives seek re-election (see Mayhew, 1974). Elections therefore cast their long shadow forward: all things equal, legislators will do the things that they believe voters will reward in the next election and shun those that voters will not reward (Mansbridge, 2003; Manin et al., 1999). Much of what legislators do cannot be separated for this reason from the electoral institutions that they compete under for re-election (Fenno, 1977). Electoral institutions translate votes into seats – electing politicians into office in the process (Farrell, 2001: 4). Research in this respect has centred on *the inter-party dimension* and

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[1] Israel and the Netherlands are often considered exceptions in this respect. Voters in effect form voluntary –partisan– districts in that case, Thompson (2005) for instance argues. But the effect, we would like to point out, is one in degree rather than in kind: even within the geographical boundaries of single-seat districts US congressmen look after the 're-election constituency' that voted for them (Fenno, 1977).

district magnitude's properties of proportionality (for a literature review see Powell, 2004). Increasingly, however, research has shifted attention to *the intra-party dimension*: electoral institutions allocate seats to parties, but also to candidates – generating incentives for legislators to cultivate a 'personal vote' (Carey and Shugart, 1995). This part of the vote that originates with a candidate's qualities, traits, and behaviours (Cain et al., 1987) is, again, related to district magnitude. But research has largely missed the 'theoretical link', Shugart (2005: 50) pointed out. Electoral institutions shape incentives; but incentives are largely unobservable and have to be read off legislators' behaviour. There is often a gap, as a result, separating legislators' behaviour from the mechanical properties of district magnitude – sometimes resulting in contradicting hypotheses.

District magnitude, in particular, has been understood to be a proxy for different considerations shaping legislators' behaviour: district magnitude has been related to the number of candidates running under the same party label (Carey and Shugart, 1995); but also to the number of votes needed to win a seat and the size of legislators' re-election constituency (Grofman, 1999, 2005; see also Fenno, 1977; Shugart, 2005; Nemoto and Shugart, 2012). Using data from the cross-national PARTIREP survey of national and regional legislators in fifteen – mostly European – advanced industrial democracies the paper aims to disentangle district magnitude's incentives for legislators to spend time in the district. The argument will proceed in four steps. The first section outlines the theoretical basis for the argument, discussing district magnitude's *differential* effect and the 'theoretical links' responsible for them. The second section presents the case selection and describes the dependent variable: that is, the time legislators spend in the district. The third section presents alternative measurements focussing on the number of co-partisan competitors that legislators face and the number of votes they need to win a seat in the inter-party and intra-party seat allocation and how these are related to district magnitude. The fourth section, then, demonstrates how these alternative measures shape legislators' incentives to cultivate a personal vote, by spending time in the district. The fifth section explores the robustness of these findings, controlling for a number of alternative explanations, before concluding in the sixth section.

2. Electoral institutions and the personal vote

Electoral institutions structure the options open to voters and thereby generate incentives for legislators to nurture a personal reputation in-between elections. Voters typically do not know much about politics and are reluctant to learn more. They therefore use a combination of party-based and candidate-based information shortcuts in the polling booth (Popkin, 1991; Downs, 1957). More importantly, they use different shortcuts under different electoral institutions (Shugart et al., 2005). That is, the party label signals to voters the policies a candidate running under it will seek to enact once elected and the 'constituencies' of people (s)he will cater to (Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991: 40). But when voters have the option to indicate a

preference among co-partisans, there is frequently a tension between what is in the interest of the party and what is in the interest of the individual legislator running under its label (Carey and Shugart, 1995). The legislator will then need to signal to voters some reason to vote for him, or her, and not for some co-partisan running under the same party label. That is, (s)he will need to cater to a different 'constituency' of people than the party leadership: more often than not, the local community (Cox and Thies, 1998; Kam, 2009).

The ballot structure, more precisely, structures the options open to voters and in combination with district magnitude generates incentives for legislators to nurture a personal reputation in the local community. District magnitude has a differential effect, Carey and Shugart (1995) argue, depending on the ballot structure: the incentive to nurture a personal reputation *increases* with district magnitude when voters directly affect the intra-party allocation of seats to (co-partisan) candidates; but the incentive *decreases* when voters cannot affect the intra-party allocation of seats. There is disagreement, however, about the 'theoretical link' responsible. More specifically, district magnitude has been demonstrated to shape party leaders' calculus as to the number of candidates to field in a district, on the one hand (Bergman et al., 2013; Cox, 2008; see also Duverger, 1951). On the other hand, the effective threshold in terms of the number of votes needed to win a seat has long been known to be a function of district magnitude (Lijphart and Gibberd, 1977; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Myerson, 1993). Starting from Carey and Shugart's (1995) hypothesis as to district magnitude's differential effect, we will turn to alternative operationalizations, in terms of candidates and votes, in order to disentangle the different processes motivating legislators to spend time in the district.

Hypothesis 1. *As district magnitude grows, the incentive for personal vote-seeking increases when voters directly affect the intra-party allocation of seats to candidates; the incentive decreases when voters cannot.*

The incentive to cultivate a personal vote is, first, shaped by the scope of intra-party competition – that is, operating through the number of *candidates* running under the same party label against whom legislators compete for nominal votes. Katz (1986: 97) first distinguished between the threat to legislators of inter-party defeat and the threat of intra-party defeat.[2] Defeat on the inter-party dimension is due to the party winning fewer seats and not all incumbents running under the party label being returned. Defeat on the intra-party dimension, on the other hand, results from a competitor running under the same party label being elected instead. That voters have the option to mark a preference among co-partisans, Carey and Shugart (1995) point out, generates a 'product differentiation problem' (Cox and Thies, 1998: 271) on the part of co-partisans seeking to court votes, not based on the party, but based on their individual qualities, actions, and

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[2] Katz (1986: 97) uses the notion of 'partisan defeat'; we prefer the term of 'inter-party defeat' here.