



## Partisan turnout bias and district magnitude<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how the partisan turnout bias (i.e. turnout rate differences across districts that are linked to the partisan vote shares in those districts) changes over time in PR districted electoral systems. We argue that the bias after the founding election is the unintended consequence of parties and voters' strategic behaviors when they respond to the incentives provided by the electoral system. By looking at the case of Portugal, one of the countries with the largest variation in district magnitude, we find that the increasing asymmetry in turnout rates across districts makes the bias more severe as time goes by.

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### 1. Introduction

Electoral systems are not neutral institutions regulating the electoral competition among parties, but rules shaped by ruling parties to their own advantage. Even when parties are of the same size, electoral systems can create relative advantages for some parties depending on their ideology. Partisan biases refer to situations where some parties are able to win a larger share of the seats with a lesser (share of the) vote than other parties (Grofman et al., 1997: 457). Not surprisingly, electoral systems scholarship has focused much attention on the determinants and consequences of partisan biases, mainly in single-member, simple-plurality systems. In this paper we focus on the partisan turnout bias (i.e., turnout rate differences across districts that are linked to the partisan vote shares in those districts, in that certain parties are more likely to have 'cheap seats' vis-à-vis turnout, Grofman et al., 1997: 457) in countries using

electoral systems with districts of varying magnitudes to explore how the bias changes over time.

Our argument is that in proportional representation (PR) districted electoral systems in which districts are of different sizes, there are systematic differences across elections in the partisan turnout bias. Based on data from Portugal, a Third-Wave democracy with a large variation in district magnitude, we show that the bias is the unintended consequence of strategic behaviors by the parties which lost out by this bias. In addition, it is the case that those parties are mainly leftist (and small) parties. As leftist parties (and small parties) tend to do better in large (and urban) districts than in small (and rural) districts, they will progressively invest more heavily in the former once the distribution of partisan support is known after the founding election. Given that turnout tends to be higher in large districts than in small districts, the strategic behavior of leftist parties will make the gap greater. All else equal, the consequence is that the partisan turnout bias will be more severe as time goes by: seats will be cheaper in number of votes for rightist parties and more expensive for leftist parties. In sum, our argument hinges on the classical proposition that low turnout biases election outcomes such that right-wing parties gain at the expense of left-of-centre alternatives (DeNardo, 1980; see also the symposium about

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the consequences of low turnout in [Electoral Studies](#), 2007).

Our findings have substantial implications for the quality of democracy in countries using PR districted electoral systems; we show that there is no “level playing field” for representatives of rightist and leftist parties when disputing an election. Moreover, when electoral system reform is discussed, this issue is seldom mentioned, thus making it likely that further reforms will not address it, or may even aggravate the problem.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, the argument addressing how the partisan turnout bias should evolve after the founding election in a PR districted electoral system is presented. The third section describes our case study, data, and methods. The fourth section discusses the results of the empirical analysis. We conclude with the presentation of our findings and a discussion of their implications.

## 2. Arguments

Our basic story is that the partisan turnout bias in PR districted electoral systems is not constant, but changes over time as the unintended consequence of parties and voters' strategic behaviors when they respond to the incentives provided by the electoral system.

The prequel of the argument is the conventional wisdom within electoral studies that turnout is higher in proportional representation systems and/or larger districts (see [Blais and Aarts, 2006](#) for a review of the literature). Although the empirical evidence is robust, the two main mechanisms, proportionality and competitiveness, have weak or no effects both in cross-national and cross-district national analyses. For instance, using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), [Fisher et al. \(2008\)](#) find that turnout is lower under plurality rule than under PR because those with weaker motivations to vote are discouraged from voting. Similarly, relying on district-specific national data from Switzerland and Spain, [Grofman and Selb \(2011\)](#) show that proportionality and competition do not increase with district magnitude. In sum, “most of the literature supports the view that PR fosters turnout, but there is no compelling explanation of how and why” ([Blais, 2006](#): 116).

In our view, however, the relationship between turnout and district magnitude becomes clearer if one employs a longitudinal analysis. Based on what [Tavits and Annus \(2006\)](#) define as the developmental argument of strategic behaviors, [Gallego et al. \(2012\)](#) show in a recent piece that the proportionality–turnout nexus in PR districted electoral systems is a long-term relationship connected with the psychological effect of electoral systems.<sup>1</sup> First, parties will invest more heavily in those districts where their mobilization can make a difference. While the targets of mobilization for large parties can be in small and large districts depending on the existence of marginal seats, small parties

have no incentive to campaign or even enter the race in small districts in which they are not competitive. Therefore, once actors have sufficient information about the relative chances of potential competitors, aggregate campaigning efforts will be more targeted at large districts as time goes by. Consequently, turnout differences across small and large districts will tend to increase after the founding election.

Second, voters will not show up for less-competitive elections or waste their vote on parties that do not have a chance of winning. When voters are able to separate winners from losers in district-level races and they are sure who is ‘out of the running’, they face incentives to desert minor parties or, if they do not have a clear second preference, to abstain. All else equal, as this happens in small but not in large districts, differences in turnout between large and small districts will increase after the founding election.

In sum, in electoral systems with districts of varying magnitude, such as Portugal, the asymmetry in turnout rates across districts should be higher when actors start to respond to the incentives provided by the electoral system.<sup>2</sup> This is exactly what [Fig. 1](#) shows. As can be seen, the correlation between turnout and district magnitude is positive both in the founding and the last election. That is, turnout is higher in large districts. However, the correlation is much stronger in the latter (0.57, statistically significant at the 0.01 level) than in the former (0.18, not statistically significant).<sup>3</sup>

The second element of our basic story is the asymmetry in the distribution of partisan voting strength across districts. This should not be a surprising correlation in PR districted electoral systems. As explained by [Monroe and Rose \(2002: 69\)](#), to the extent that high population areas are also high population density areas within the country, urban areas are represented by high-magnitude districts and rural areas by low-magnitude districts. If partisan sentiment tends to be correlated with urban–rural demographics, then partisan sentiment is also correlated with district magnitude. Roughly speaking, this means that the ideological left should tend to do better in large districts and the right in small districts.<sup>4</sup> The empirical evidence from the fourteen Lower-House elections held in Portugal from 1975 to 2011 supports this argument. As can be seen in [Fig. 2](#), in the founding election leftist parties (the PS and the PCP) did better in large districts and rightist parties (the PSD and the CDS) in small districts. However, as we will see later in detail, this pattern of distribution of partisan support across districts does not remain constant over time.

<sup>2</sup> [Grofman and Selb \(2011\)](#) also rely on data from PR districted electoral systems in which district magnitude varies (Switzerland and Spain). However, as subnational parties are so strong in both countries, the relationship between turnout and proportionality and the number of parties is undermined considerably.

<sup>3</sup> District magnitude goes from 4 to 55 in the 1975 election and from 2 to 47 in the 2011 election.

<sup>4</sup> Urbanization is not the only feature that can be correlated with district magnitude. Demographics as employment or average wage, for instance, are not randomly distributed across districts ([Monroe and Rose, 2002: 69](#)).

<sup>1</sup> Their analysis of the learning process over time is focused specifically on Spain, one of the two countries included in the [Grofman and Selb's](#) paper.

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