Strategic mobilization: Why proportional representation decreases voter mobilization☆

Carlisle Rainey

University at Buffalo, SUNY, 520 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Many scholars suggest that proportional representation increases party mobilization by creating nationally competitive districts that give parties an incentive to mobilize everywhere. This paper provides theoretical and empirical arguments that bring this claim into question. I propose, unlike earlier scholars, that the positive effect of district competitiveness on party mobilization efforts increases as electoral districts become more *dis*proportional, arguing that disproportionality itself encourages mobilization by exaggerating the impact of competitiveness on mobilization. Individual-level survey data from national legislative elections show that competitiveness has a much larger positive effect on parties' mobilization efforts in single-member districts than in proportional districts. Contrary to prior literature, these results suggest proportional electoral rules give parties no strong incentive to mobilize anywhere.

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1. Introduction

Does proportional representation cause parties to mobilize more voters? Many studies of electoral systems suggest proportional electoral rules do lead to greater mobilization (and thus increased turnout). However, more recent work argues that the evidence is too limited and the theories too under-developed to support this conclusion. In particular, Blais and Aarts (2006) suggest that political scientists cannot have confidence that proportional rules cause higher turnout until scholars better understand the mechanism linking the two.

Several explanations have emerged that attempt to explain the observation of higher turnout under proportional representation (PR) rules (for an overview, see Blais and Aarts, 2006). The most theoretically compelling focuses on the frequent emergence of non-competitive electoral districts in single-member district plurality (SMDP) systems. This explanation suggests that parties (or candidates and activists more broadly) exert greater mobilization efforts under PR rules than under SMDP rules because PR rules, on average, create more competitive districts (Cox, 1999).[1] More competitive districts, in turn, provide parties a strong incentive to mobilize voters.

A large literature confirms that turnout (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) and mobilization (Cox and Munger, 1989; Karp et al., 2007) are higher in more competitive districts, but this relationship has only been examined in SMDP systems. Research examines the relationship

[1] Many scholars take as given that PR rules create more competitive districts, although recent work brings this common assumption into question (Blais and Lago, 2009).

between competition and turnout in Canada (Matsusaka and Palda, 1993; Endersby et al., 2002) and Britain (Denver and Hands, 1974, 1985), consistently finding higher turnout in more competitive districts. Further, Karp et al. (2007) estimate the effect of competitiveness in the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, and find a substantial effect of competitiveness in each country. Their empirical analysis and conceptual approach do not allow competitiveness to vary across districts within PR systems. Recent work on the conceptualization and measurement of competitiveness shows that it can and does vary across districts within PR systems (Grofman and Selb, 2009; Selb, 2009; Blais and Lago, 2009).

Despite the emphasis that previous work places on increased competition under PR rules, I argue that competitiveness, while it might be higher under PR rules (though see Blais and Lago, 2009), should not have a substantively important effect in these systems. This argument is closely related to the previous. Districts that use winner-take-all rules disproportionately reward the winner. From the perspective of the trailing candidate, disproportional rewards become increasingly obtainable as the race narrows. For the leader, the rewards become increasingly in doubt. In this situation, the incentive to mobilize a few extra voters is large. Because there are no disproportionate rewards in proportional districts to encourage fierce competition over voters, we should not expect competitiveness to play as important a role in proportional systems. Rather than PR rules creating an incentive for parties to mobilize everywhere, PR rules create no strong incentive to mobilize anywhere.

The resolution to the debate over whether PR rules cause more mobilization efforts and higher turnout has important implications for representative democracy. As noted by many previous studies (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Brady et al., 1995), wealthier, more educated, and higher SES citizens turn out at a greater rate than other citizens. Because elected officials have an incentive to respond to voters rather than the citizens as a whole (Downs, 1957), the resulting policies reflect the interests of only some citizens. While scholars disagree over the severity of this problem (Berelson et al., 1954; Lijphart, 1997; Teixeira, 1992), most agree that low turnout poses an obstacle to an ideal democracy. Indeed, Lijphart (1997) calls unequal participation "democracy's unresolved dilemma," and suggests PR electoral institutions as a resolution.

Further, Sniderman (2000) points out that parties play an important role in structuring the political world, allowing relatively uninformed voters to make sense of it. Political scientists know a great deal about how many parties are likely to emerge in a political system (e.g. Cox, 1997; Chhibber and Kollman, 1998; Clark and Golder, 2006) and where these parties are likely to position in the ideological space (e.g. Cox, 1990; Kollman et al., 1992; Adams et al., 2005), but political scientists know relatively less about what rules give parties an incentive to mobilize voters, making political participation less costly and providing voters with the information necessary to make good choices (Downs, 1957).

I make three contributions in this paper. First, I argue that previous models of electoral competition miss two important and related points: (1) Disproportionality itself provides parties a strong incentive to mobilize and (2) disproportionality also exacerbates the effect of competitiveness on mobilization efforts. Together, these points suggest a reevaluation of the claim that proportionality encourages parties to mobilize voters because it creates "nationally competitive districts". Second, unlike most previous work, I recognize that competitiveness can vary in multimember districts and use a recently developed measure of district competitiveness to directly compare the effect of competitiveness on mobilization efforts in PR and SMDP systems. Finally, I test comparative statics with a Bayesian hierarchical model. The empirical results confirm the theoretical claim that disproportionality itself gives parties a strong incentive to mobilize and increases the impact of competitiveness on mobilization efforts.

The paper begins with a formal theoretical discussion that characterizes the incentives of parties to mobilize voters as district competitiveness and disproportionality vary, finding that more disproportional rules increase the incentives to mobilize. I then proceed with empirical tests of the implications derived from the formal model, using a recently-introduced measure of district competitiveness and a Bayesian multilevel modeling strategy. Overall, I find that the observed data are consistent with the theoretical model.

2. Parties' incentives to mobilize

Consistent with recent trends in the literature examining comparative electoral institutions (Cox, 1999; Selb, 2009), the theory presented below focuses on the elite response to the electoral environment. Denver and Hands (1974) suggest that "higher turnout in marginal seats is rarely the product of 'rational' appreciation of the situation by *voters*, but results from *parties* creating greater awareness amongst voters or simply cajoling them into going to the polls [italics mine]."[2] Citizens respond to party mobilization, which occurs when mobilization might influence the outcome of the election. This shifts the focus from the utility calculations of voters to the utility calculations of elites (Cox and Munger, 1989; Cox, 1999). Thus, races in which the outcome seems certain should receive little attention from either party. The apparent winner and loser have little incentive to devote scarce resources in a non-competitive district. However, in races with an uncertain outcome, candidates and parties have strong incentives to invest resources into mobilization, since their efforts might prove pivotal. Scholars originally developed this logic to explain variation across districts *within* countries, primarily the United States, but Cox (1999) generalizes this logic. Building on Cox and extending his argument, the formal model focuses on characteristics of the district that affect parties' incentives to mobilize.

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[2] Cited in Cox (1999).