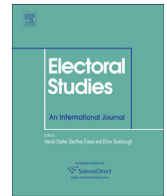




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Representation and district magnitude in plurality systems



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ABSTRACT

Despite the widely accepted theoretical prediction that high district magnitudes should yield less proportional results in plurality systems, empirical evidence is surprisingly mixed. We argue that these mixed results are ultimately due to a lack of clarity about the counterfactual being considered. We use a simple model to show that an increase in district magnitude reduces expected proportionality in a plurality system only if it is accompanied by a reduction in the number of districts. This conditional prediction helps to explain the diversity of existing findings and is consistent with our own analysis of both U.S. congressional delegations and local councils in Britain.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between district magnitude and representation is a conceptual cornerstone in the literature on electoral systems. District magnitude is considered to be one of the most important institutional determinants of proportionality (i.e. the relationship between seats and votes) in any democratic system (Rae, 1967; Sartori, 1986; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). In both PR and plurality/majoritarian systems, the choice of district magnitude shapes the distribution of power between small and large parties. The common view in the literature is that in PR systems greater district magnitude increases proportionality, whereas the opposite is true in plurality systems (Benoit, 2001; Blais and Carty, 1987; Grofman, 2006; Lijphart, 1999; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989).

The prediction that higher district magnitude should produce less proportional outcomes in plurality systems has received surprisingly weak empirical support, however. Some studies find support for the common view (Blais and Carty, 1987; Calabrese, 2000; Golosov, 2003; Scarrow, 1999;

Ware et al., 2001) whereas other studies find evidence of the opposite relationship (Benoit, 2001; Niemi et al., 1985; Niemi et al., 1991; Rallings et al., 1998).¹ If there is any part of political science in which we might expect to discover predictable, measurable relationships, it would seem to be the study of electoral systems (Taagepera, 2007). Yet when it comes to the relationship between district magnitude and proportionality in plurality systems, the diversity of empirical findings suggests either that regularities cannot be found or that the existing theoretical accounts are insufficient to uncover them.

The reason why these contradictory results have not yet attracted much attention is probably that larger-magnitude plurality systems are rare in national legislatures, where most research in electoral studies is focused.² Yet there are at least three reasons why it is worth resolving this confusion about larger-magnitude plurality elections. First, multimember plurality elections are in fact quite common,

¹ The related literature on the effect of district magnitude on gender and minority representation in plurality systems is also characterized by mixed empirical evidence (Colomer, 2007).

² Indeed, national-level plurality elections with district magnitudes larger than one are rare enough that political scientists have often used district magnitude as the *only* defining characteristic of electoral systems, conflating electoral formula with district magnitude (Cox, 1999).

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not just at the local level where they are very widely used (in e.g. the U.S., U.K., Canada, Russia, India, France, and Hungary) but in a sizable number of national legislatures as well (in e.g. Mexico, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Mauritius, Philippines, Bermuda and, historically, both the U.S. and U.K.).³ Second, the confusion about how district magnitude in plurality systems relates to representativeness is relevant to policymakers, not just at the local level where multimember plurality elections are most common but also in recent debates about electoral reform at the national level. For example, with reference to the Egyptian electoral system introduced in 2011 (in which one-third of MPs are elected from two-member districts), one might ask whether the system would become more or less representative if district magnitude were reduced from two to one⁴; the literature currently does not appear to produce a clear answer. Finally, setting aside the practical importance of multimember elections, on a conceptual level it seems important to resolve an outstanding ambiguity about the relationship between such fundamental elements of electoral systems as district magnitude and representativeness.

In this paper, we try to resolve this confusion. We suggest that the reason for these surprisingly disparate empirical findings is an insufficient attention to what counterfactual scenario is being considered. The standard theoretical claim is based on a comparison between a scenario in which a system elects its representatives from many single-member districts and a scenario in which it elects its representatives from a single multimember district. In this comparison (as we confirm via a simple formal model), increasing district magnitude is likely to make election outcomes less proportional on average. One can also conceive of a simpler counterfactual comparison between a scenario in which a district elects m members and a scenario in which the same district elects $m + 1$ members. In this comparison (as we again confirm via a simple formal model), increasing district magnitude should make election outcomes *more* proportional on average. The diversity of empirical results is explained by the fact that some analysis compares *systems* and thus approximates the first counterfactual comparison while other analysis compares *districts* and thus approximates the second counterfactual comparison. Apparently contradictory findings are thus seen to be consistent with a revised prediction that takes into account the level of analysis (i.e. what is being compared) and how these comparisons map onto counterfactuals.

³ Allowing the number of representatives to vary across districts is attractive to electoral engineers because it makes it possible to achieve roughly equal representation across districts without redrawing district boundaries and thus disrupting the relationship between an integral community and its representatives. For an overview of the current and historical use of multimember plurality systems see Colomer (2007).

⁴ The system used in the 2011 Egyptian parliamentary elections is unusual in that it applies a profession-based quota: if the leading vote-getter is a “professional”, the second seat goes to the leading vote-getter among non-professional candidates (i.e. farmers or laborers). The rise of quotas of various kinds in election systems around the world (see e.g. Dahlerup, 2006) may lead to more such multi-member plurality systems being adopted.

After elaborating on the existing state of the literature in Section 2 and offering our diagnosis in Section 3, we present a simple model to formalize our argument in Section 4. We then proceed to illustrate our points with our own empirical analysis. We first examine congressional delegations from small U.S. states, which sometimes elected multiple members in a single state-wide district until the practice was eliminated in the 1960s (Calabrese, 2000). We then analyze a large panel dataset of local election results from Britain, where many local wards elect more than one member and district magnitudes are frequently altered due to population shifts. We provide results consistent with our analysis: in system-level analysis, higher district magnitude (i.e. lower district number) is associated with higher disproportionality; in district-level analysis, higher district magnitude is associated with lower disproportionality.

Not only does our theoretical and empirical work help to resolve the apparently contradictory findings of recent research on multimember plurality elections, it also makes clear the factors on which the district-level effects of district magnitude should depend. Adding seats to an existing district (i.e. increasing district magnitude at the district level) should lead to more proportional results by giving under-represented parties extra chances to win seats; this should especially occur in contexts where parties are competitive and voters respond to candidate-specific factors. In Section 6 we illustrate this point through analysis of British local elections, where we can carry out fixed-effects analysis in a large sample of elections to show how the effect of district magnitude depends on local factors.

2. The existing confusion

The literature on representativeness and electoral systems since Rae (1967) has emphasized the role of district magnitude, which Rae defined as “the number of seats assigned to the district” (Lijphart, 1999; Sartori, 1986; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Rae, 1967; pp. 19–20). Because most countries elect their legislatures either using plurality in single-member districts or using PR in districts of larger (sometimes much larger) magnitudes, discussions of district magnitude and representativeness have mostly focused on the question of whether plurality or PR leads to more proportional outcomes and, within PR systems, how disproportionality varies with district magnitude. There is widespread agreement that electoral outcomes in PR systems are more proportional in larger districts; this emerges fairly mechanically from the operation of any proportional electoral formula. There is also widespread agreement that electoral outcomes tend to be more proportional in PR systems than in plurality systems, although the comparison depends largely on the distribution of preferences across districts (Gallagher, 1991; Powell and Vanberg, 2000). Focusing on systems using SMD plurality or PR, then, the overall pattern is that greater district magnitude makes results more proportional.

As several authors have pointed out, however (e.g. Blais and Carty, 1987; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Lijphart, 1999), this prediction does not seem to apply when we turn our attention to plurality systems with varying district magnitudes; instead, it seems that large-magnitude

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