



Behavioral consequences of mixed electoral systems: Deviating voting behavior of district and list MPs in the German Bundestag

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ABSTRACT

Electoral rules should affect parliamentary behavior. In particular, deputies elected from single-member districts should be more likely to deviate from the party line than deputies elected under proportional representation. This paper suggests a framework for conceptualizing and modeling the effect of the type of mandate on deputies' propensity to cast deviating votes in mixed electoral systems. The proposed modeling strategy uses disaggregated voting data and integrates dependencies among observations in a multi-level design. Empirically, the paper analyses voting behavior in the 16th German Bundestag (2005–2009) and shows that the odds of district MPs to deviate are significantly higher despite frequent claims that the two types of MPs behave alike. However, the behavioral differences cannot be attributed to attempts by district MPs to follow their local constituents as competing principals.

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1. Introduction

Electoral rules are among the most intensively studied political institutions because they affect a large variety of dependent variables. Examples include vote choice and strategic voting on the mass level, the entry decision of parties and candidates and the formation of pre-electoral coalitions on the elite level, the proportionality of the election outcome, party system characteristics such as the effective number of parties and last but not least the behavior of MPs in parliament. This paper focuses on parliamentary behavior, more specifically on the question of whether electoral rules affect the propensity of MPs to defect from the party line. Recent literature argues that deputies from single-member districts should be more likely to be rebels than deputies elected from (closed) party lists and suggests that mixed electoral systems provide a particularly useful environment for testing this and related hypotheses. However, existing studies, mainly from Eastern Europe, use different methodological approaches to investigate this claim and

arrive at inconclusive empirical findings on whether such a 'mandate divide' (Thames, 2005) exists.

This paper advances our understanding of the effects of mixed electoral systems on legislative voting in three ways. First, it discusses methodological problems in existing studies and proposes a framework for conceptualizing and modeling the effect of the type of mandate on the propensity of MPs to cast deviating votes. The proposed modeling strategy makes optimal use of available information by utilizing disaggregated voting data and adequately integrates dependencies in the data in a multi-level framework. Second, the paper shows that a substantively and statistically significant mandate divide existed in the German Bundestag for the period 2005–2009. This finding is particularly relevant for comparative research because the compensatory nature of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system and the dominance of dual candidacies make Germany a hard case for finding behavioral differences between district and list MPs. Third, the paper probes the most prominent causal mechanism for explaining the mandate divide according to which this difference should be driven by attempts of district MPs to satisfy local constituency demands. I test two hypotheses

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derived from the ‘competing principals’ framework (Carey, 2007, 2009) and demonstrate that this mechanism cannot explain the findings in the German case. Thus, the results indicate that district MPs do not simply respond to different principals but are indeed more independent in their voting behavior.

In the next section I present a simple model of legislators’ decision to follow or deviate from the party line (2.1), discuss the effects of electoral rules on this decision (2.2), review existing empirical research and its problems (2.3), and present a framework for conceptualizing and modeling the mandate divide in mixed electoral systems (2.4). The third section reviews arguments for and mainly against finding a mandate divide in the German case (3.1), derives empirically testable hypotheses (3.2), introduces the data set (3.3), and finds evidence for a substantial mandate divide (3.4). Section 4 shows that this finding is not due to district demands. Section 5 summarizes the results and discusses perspectives for future research.

2. Electoral rules and parliamentary voting behavior

2.1. A model of vote defection in parliaments

To understand the impact of electoral rules on parliamentary voting we should start from a general model of how MPs decide whether to follow the party line or defect in legislative voting. According to the rational choice paradigm, deputies choose the option they expect to best advance their personal goals. I assume MPs to have three analytically distinct motivations (Müller and Strøm, 1999; Strøm, 1990): They want to be reelected (‘votes’), they want to shape policy in line with their personal preferences (‘policy’), and they want to further their career (‘office’). The reelection goal is particularly important because reelection is usually a necessary condition for reaching the other goals (Fiorina, 1989).¹ A deputy’s decision to follow or deviate from the party line should thus be driven by considerations about how best to reach these goals (Sieberer, 2006).

In general, all MPs in parliamentary systems have strong incentives to toe the party line on most occasions because parties help them to reach all three goals (Katz, 1986; Müller, 2000): First, parties dominate the electoral process and are thus central vehicles for reelection. Second, they control the policy-making process and thus offer the most promising avenue for affecting policy contents. Third, parties control access to offices both within parliament and the executive branch so that MPs are most likely to reach their further office goals via their parties.

However, rational MPs should deviate from the party line if institutional variables and personal characteristics make deviation a more promising strategy for reaching their goals.² First, some MPs campaign heavily on their

personal record in addition to and partly instead of the party label and try to differentiate their position from that of their party. These personal vote incentives institutionally depend on electoral rules that can give parties a more or less central position in the electoral process. Second, an MP’s policy preferences can diverge from those of his or her party on some votes. Such an MP has policy incentives to deviate from the party line, either because s/he hopes to obtain a more preferred policy through cooperation with other parties or simply to vote in line with his or her personal preferences even though this behavior will not affect the outcome. Third, MPs differ with regard to their current career stage and their ambition to reach higher offices. In general, incentives to defect decrease the higher an MP ranks in the hierarchy of parliamentary and executive offices because such MPs have more to lose from defection. In contrast, backbenchers without realistic hopes for further advancement have fewer reasons to follow the party line for office-related reasons. Similarly, MPs from cabinet parties have more incentives to follow the party line in order to retain the various benefits of being in government.

According to this model, the propensity of MPs to deviate from the party line should depend systematically on (1) electoral rules, (2) the policy content of the motion voted upon and (3) an MP’s career situation. In this paper, I focus on the effect of electoral rules, especially in mixed electoral systems, which is discussed in detail in the next subsection. Variables affecting policy and office-related incentives to defect are included mainly as control variables to ensure unbiased estimates of electoral system effects. I derive expectations on these factors in Section 3.2.

2.2. The mandate divide in mixed electoral systems: theoretical foundations

A number of studies have argued that electoral rules should affect party line voting. In particular, scholars expect more deviating voting behavior by MPs pursuing a ‘personal vote’ (Cain et al., 1987; Carey, 2007, 2009; Norris, 2004; Sieberer, 2006). The incentives for such a personalized electoral strategy in turn depend on the electoral system. MPs elected via closed party lists completely depend on their parties for (re-)election and should thus follow its demands. In contrast, MPs elected in single-member districts (SMD), via open party lists or in the single transferable vote (STV) system have incentives to build personalized support among their electorate which can involve distinguishing themselves from co-partisans and the party line (Cain et al., 1987; Carey and Shugart, 1995; Mitchell, 2000).³

Empirical research on the consequences of electoral rules is complicated by the fact that each MP is elected

¹ In some countries, politicians occasionally gain executive office without a parliamentary mandate. However, such cases are rare and cases in which politicians lose their mandate but nevertheless retain or even gain executive offices are even rarer.

² In some contexts, switching parties may be an additional strategy (Heller and Mershon, 2009). As party switching is not relevant for the German case analyzed below, I do not discuss this strategy here.

³ The incentives for candidates in single-member districts are somewhat unclear in systems with strong parties. Carey and Shugart (1995) argue that these systems function like closed-list PR systems with a district magnitude (M) of $M = 1$. At the same time, they claim that personal vote incentives in closed-list PR systems decrease with district magnitude. Thus, they are larger for SMD candidates than for candidates in closed-list PR with $M > 1$.

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