



Beyond personal vote incentives: Dividing the vote in preferential electoral systems[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 July 2010

Received in revised form 20 September 2011

Accepted 22 September 2011

Keywords:

Electoral systems

Personal vote

Vote division

Incumbency advantage

ABSTRACT

Comparative studies of preferential electoral systems have paid much attention to the incentives for personalized instead of party-centered campaigns, but they have largely ignored how some of these systems allow “allocation errors” and so create incentives for parties to “manage” the vote and intraparty campaigns. We discuss how the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) and single transferable vote (STV) systems create these incentives, and we illustrate the degree to which they affect actual electoral results across seven preferential electoral systems. The analysis reveals statistically significant differences in the vote inequality among incumbent cohorts (members of the same party and district), indicating the strong influence of vote division incentives over candidate-centered electoral environments. The results also have important implications for comparative research on legislative turnover and the incumbency advantage.

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In their widely-cited article, [Carey and Shugart \(1995\)](#) argue that various features of legislative electoral systems affect candidates’ incentives to cultivate personal reputations over partisan reputations for the purposes of electoral competition. The argument has significant implications for electoral campaigns and legislative politics, and therefore has inspired a large body of cross-national research.² But while Carey and Shugart focus their attention on “personal vote” incentives, the same institutional variation they consider has other consequences. In particular, unlike other electoral systems that promote intraparty competition and high personal vote incentives, the so-called single non-transferable vote (SNTV) and the single transferable vote

(STV) allow for “allocation error,” which occurs when a party has won enough votes to elect two or more candidates but has instead won fewer seats due to a poor (unequal) distribution of votes across its candidates. The threat of allocation error provides incentives for parties to find ways to promote good vote divisions across their candidates. This has wide-ranging implications for the personal vote and political behavior.³

Sometimes—like when they tell voters how to ration their votes across candidates—parties will take a very active approach in their attempts to avoid allocation errors. Other times, parties may do little to actively “manage” the vote, but this does not mean that they and their candidates have not tried to lay the groundwork for good vote divisions. In systems without the threat of allocation error, candidate selection, personal-vote building, legislative behavior and the like can proceed with no concern for vote inequalities. Elsewhere, parties that ignore vote division risk losing legislative seats to their competitors.

[☆] The authors thank Matthew Shugart, David Fisk, Daniel Bochsler, Isaac Martin, participants at the 2009 meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. The usual disclaimer applies.

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² See, for example, [Crisp et al. \(2004\)](#) and [Shugart et al. \(2005\)](#).

³ [Carey and Shugart \(1995: 429\)](#) note the possibility of allocation errors in SNTV systems, but they do not discuss its implications.

It has not gone unnoticed in country-specific research that SNTV and STV allow for allocation error and that parties may respond with various political strategies (Cox, 1996; Cox and Niou, 1999; McCubbins and Rosenbluth, 1995; Gallagher, 1999). However, these phenomena have been ignored in comparative research. In this essay, we describe and compare electoral systems' vote division incentives—i.e., the incentives to avoid allocation errors—and we provide a cross-national analysis that illustrates how much these incentives influence the personal vote. Using electoral data from seven countries, we show that when electoral systems provide a greater risk of allocation error, there is less vote inequality among incumbents in the same party-district, and so much so that the cross-national differences are highly statistically significant.⁴ Because incumbents' individual vote totals are much more equally sized among parties at risk of allocation error, it is clear that parties do not ignore such risks and that vote division incentives greatly affect how candidates pursue a personal vote.

In the next section, we explain why and when SNTV and STV allow allocation errors, what steps parties may take in order to divide the vote, and how these attempts affect the distribution of votes across various candidates. Subsequently, we demonstrate that electoral outcomes differ cross-nationally in accordance with the likelihood of allocation error. That our measure is based only on the vote inequality among *incumbents* in a party-district ensures that our statistical tests are not an artifact of cross-system variation in either the incumbency advantage or the number of non-incumbent nominees, which is itself another relevant consequence of electoral system variation. As we explain, the independence of our results from whatever cross-national variation there may be in the incumbency advantage is itself relevant for research on the incumbency advantage because it suggests that attempts to measure or control for the incumbency advantage must account for the effects of parties' vote division strategies wherever allocation errors are likely. The final section discusses the implications of our findings and poses questions for future research.

1. Electoral systems and dividing the vote

Both the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) and single transferable vote (STV) are part of a larger family of preferential⁵ electoral systems that use (a) districts electing more than one candidate at a time per district (i.e., multi-member districts) and (b) rules in which *votes* determine which candidates in each party's slate of nominees win seats. This means that they promote intraparty competition for votes wherever parties run multicandidate slates, and so create high incentives for candidates to cultivate

a personal vote (Carey and Shugart, 1995). But, among these systems, only SNTV and STV allow for allocation errors, where parties lose one or more seats that they would have won if their candidates had obtained less unequal vote shares.

To explain, first consider SNTV, in which voters cast a (single, exclusive) vote for a single candidate, and a district's winners are the top M vote-winners (where M is the district magnitude, the number of candidates to elect in the district). An allocation error occurs when a party's winning candidate(s) had enough votes to spare to have also elected one or more copartisans. Table 1 shows this scenario for party A in an $M = 2$ district. If A shifted eleven or more (up to 39) votes from candidate 1 to candidate 2, then it could have won both seats (and deny B a seat). However, given B's votes, A committed an allocation error.⁶ Any seat-seeking party that expects an outcome like A's has incentives to engineer a more equitable distribution of votes across its candidates. We call these *vote division incentives* rather than vote equality incentives because parties do not need perfectly even vote distributions to avoid allocation errors and because there is no electoral payoff to greater vote equality once allocation errors are averted. However, while greater vote equality is not always necessary, large vote inequalities are always dangerous. Therefore, the threat of allocation error creates incentives for a party to see that its vote is divided somewhat evenly across its candidates.

Consider next party B—it cannot improve its electoral prospects by better equalizing its vote. In fact, with greater vote equality (and A's votes unchanged), B would lose a seat. In this way, B almost commits an “overnomination error” by running more candidates than it can reasonably expect to elect and spreading its vote too thinly.⁷ Any seat-maximizing party that anticipates a result like B's would be wise to nominate fewer candidates or to persuade a candidate to withdraw. Note that a party can commit an over-nomination error and an allocation error simultaneously. Suppose, for example, party B had three candidates who obtained 60, 49, and 10 votes in an $M = 3$ district, and party A had two candidates who obtained 100 and 50 votes. In this case, B would have committed both an overnomination error—it only took one seat despite having enough votes to take two—and an allocation error, because it could have won two seats with a small shift of votes from its strongest to its second-strongest candidate. Clearly, parties competing under SNTV must be wary of both kinds of error. However, it is important that allocation error can still occur when the party has not overnominated, as our first example shows. Indeed, every party competing under SNTV that believes it can win multiple seats has incentives to avoid large vote inequalities among its viable candidates.

Like SNTV, STV allocates seats to the top M candidates in the district, but according to how they are rank-ordered by voters. On STV ballots, voters rank candidates in decreasing order of preference from one up to as many candidates as

⁴ The elections we analyze are Brazil 1998, 2002; Colombia 2002; Finland 1999, 2003, 2007; Switzerland 1995, 1999, 2003; Ireland 1997, 2002, 2007, Malta 1992, 1996, 1998, 2003, 2008; Japan 1960, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1972, 1976, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1990.

⁵ We take a “preferential” electoral system to be one in which voters can or must cast a vote for a specific candidate in a party slate.

⁶ In this example, however, A has enough votes to win both seats regardless of how B's votes are distributed across its candidates.

⁷ For more on nomination errors, see Cox and Niou (1999).

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