



Disproportionality and voter turnout in new and old democracies

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ABSTRACT

A long-standing puzzle in electoral research is why the disproportionality of electoral systems has a negative effect on voter participation in established democracies, but not in new democracies. We propose a learning theory of electoral system's effects, and test it in a cross-national analysis and by using Spain as a case study. Electoral disproportionality is unrelated to voter participation in early elections after democratization, but the relationship is increasingly visible as democracies grow older. The case study uncovers two mechanisms: small parties optimize their mobilization strategy only after the first democratic elections, and the difference in the turnout rates of small party supporters and large party supporters grows over time. Time is needed before the consequences of electoral systems are fully revealed. Importantly, the findings suggest that studies carried out just after an electoral system is created or reformed may provide downward biased estimates of their long-term consequences.

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1. Introduction

The characteristics of the electoral system that determine the degree of correspondence between the share of the vote for political parties and the share of the seats they obtain are among the better established predictors of voter turnout in advanced industrial democracies (Jackman, 1987; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Blais and Carty, 1990). The more disproportional the electoral system, the lower voter turnout is. However, this finding is not consistent outside of established democracies. The relationship is weak when a large number of democracies is considered (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998) and it does not hold in Latin America (Blais and Aarts, 2006; Fornos et al., 2004; Pérez-Liñán, 2001). This has led some scholars to conclude that “the nil findings reported in Latin America suggest that the patterns observed in the small set of established democracies may not be robust” (Blais and Aarts, 2006, 41).

Why does the electoral system affect voter turnout in advanced industrial democracies, but not in new

democracies? Why would voters and parties be insensitive to the incentives and constraints provided by the electoral system in some places but not in others? One interpretation of this puzzle is that new democracies are fundamentally different than older ones and their parties and citizens are just less able or willing to understand the implications of the rules of the game for their strategic decisions. Secondly, it has been recently proposed that in some new democracies, such as the Dominican Republic, clientelistic networks help to boost turnout rates in small, rural districts. Since district size is related with disproportionality, this would help explain the lack of a link in some democracies (Jacobs and Spierings, 2010). However, we don't know to what extent this explanation may apply to other contexts.

We propose a different and more general solution to this puzzle which builds on the contention that the electoral system's effects are not immediately obvious for inexperienced actors. During the early years of a democracy, voters and parties are new players in a new game. They lack relevant information on the distribution of political preferences in the population and cannot properly incorporate the incentives provided by the electoral system into their decisions. As a result, there is no relationship between

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electoral disproportionality and voter participation. Only after repeated interaction do the consequences of the electoral system become apparent, and as actors learn, they also adjust their behavior. Eventually, the rules of the game are learned and new democracies look just like old ones. In this paper, we argue that time is a crucial factor in letting electoral systems display their psychological effects.¹

This developmental theory of electoral system effects is tested with a large N comparative analysis and with a study of Spain. We conclude that there are clear learning effects: as citizens and elites accumulate experience with the democratic process, they respond in a more predictable way to the electoral context. These findings have implications for the understanding of how and why institutional incentives matter for voting, as well as for the expected time that electoral reforms may take before they fully display their potential effects. The paper is structured in four sections. First, we present the theoretical arguments. Then, we outline the research design and the data. Next, we present the results of the analysis and finally the implications of the findings are discussed.

2. Disproportionality and turnout: learning to vote in new democracies

Electoral systems are the fundamental institutions that determine how votes are translated into seats (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). The type of electoral system (PR, mixed member, plurality/majority), the electoral formula of seats allocation (d'Hondt, Saint-Laguë, largest remainders, etc.), district magnitude, the use of electoral thresholds, and other features of the system affect this translation. The concept of proportionality refers to the degree of correspondence between the share of the vote for the parties and the share of the seats they obtain. It summarizes the psychological and mechanical effect of several of these features and allows us to compare different systems along one dimension (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005). Plurality and majority rules, as well as PR systems with small districts or high electoral thresholds, produce disproportional outcomes characterized by the fact that a significant number of the votes cast are wasted, as only the winning candidate or the largest parties obtain representation in each district.

Two main mechanisms have been proposed which explain why disproportionality depresses turnout: the first focuses on citizens and the second on political parties. On the demand side, disproportionality is expected to depress participation among supporters of parties with poor prospects of obtaining representation because their votes are unlikely to be translated into seats. In fact, research has found that disproportionality depresses political efficacy

and voter turnout, particularly among supporters of small parties (Karp and Banducci, 2008). On the supply side, the electoral system affects political parties' mobilization strategies. The main argument is presented by Powell: "With proportional representation for the nation as a whole or from large districts, parties have incentives to mobilize everywhere. With single member districts some areas may be written off as hopeless" (Powell, 1986, 21). Whereas in PR systems with large districts, most votes count and district level-contests are competitive, highly disproportional systems see varying intensities of constituency-level competition, which produces lower national level turnout (Selb, 2009). Thus, in a disproportional system it is more likely that some districts are not competitive; this makes parties less likely to invest effort in mobilizing citizens, which ultimately reduces voter turnout.

The theories on the electoral system effects on voter turnout are typically expressed in static terms, and virtually all cross-national analyses use pooled cross-sectional designs that do not take the moderating effect of time into account.² This assumes either explicitly or implicitly that parties and voters are sophisticated and perfectly informed: political parties are rational actors with full knowledge and maximize their investment to optimize the number of seats obtained; citizens correctly process the information about the elections, evaluate the benefits and costs of voting to various candidates and take the action suggested by their analysis with the aim of influencing the outcome. For example Cox (1997) and Myerson and Weber (1993) explicitly assume in their work on strategic voting that voters know the expected constituency-wide breakdown of preferences with certainty. If both voters and parties are rational and fully informed about the consequences of electoral rules and the distribution of the votes, the effect of the electoral system should be immediately apparent after they are introduced.

Alternatively, the strength of the link between disproportionality and the vote might not be stable along a democracy's age. While political parties and, to a lesser extent, voters, are rational actors, the perfect information assumption is unrealistic. Knowledge about the public's preferences and the electoral system's effects given the distribution of votes is not available a priori. Admittedly, some features of the institutional system, such as the presence of compulsory voting or the degree of importance of an institution, are relatively simple to understand. They are usually common to the whole country, do not involve territorial variations, and are straightforward incentives to participation. Yet, the electoral system involves a set of rules (district magnitude and delimitation, electoral formula, electoral thresholds, ballot design) that are complicated to grasp and their political consequences, both mechanical and psychological, are not easy to anticipate. Even if some early polls are available, parties and voters in

¹ Duverger (1954) makes a distinction between mechanical and psychological effects of electoral laws. Mechanical effects refer to those introduced by the conversion of votes into seats. For instance, single member majoritarian systems have the mechanical effect of over-representing large parties and under-representing small parties. Psychological effects refer to how voters anticipate and react to those mechanical effects: in our example sympathizers of small parties are more likely to consider strategic voting (voting for a large party that is not their first preference but has a chance to get representation).

² Only one analysis takes the age of democracy into account and shows that PR only fosters voter turnout in countries that have a highly consolidated democratic system and in democracies which are 20 years or older (Endersby and Kriekhaus, 2008). However, they do not provide and test a clear rationale that explains these results.

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