How electoral systems affect MPs' positions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The question how different electoral systems affect the representation of voters in parliaments has been a thorny issue for a considerable time. While some research suggests that first-past-the-posts systems should lead to a closer correspondence between the preferences of the electoral district's median voter and of its representative, other work concludes that in proportional representation (PR) systems, especially with open lists, candidates have an incentive to cultivate a strong personal vote.

To study this question we take advantage of two peculiarities of the Swiss political system, namely that in the same chamber of the parliament some members are elected in PR and some in plurality elections and that direct democratic instruments play an important role. The second element, given that for a series of votes in parliament voters have to decide on the same issue, allows us to estimate the policy positions of members of parliament (MPs) and the median voter of each electoral district in the same policy space. We find that MPs elected in plurality elections are on average closer to their respective median voter. In PR districts MPs are much more widely spread around the median voters' preferences.

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1. Introduction

A consensus seems to exist in the literature that electoral systems affect the way in which interests are represented in parliaments. More precisely, the rules under which members of parliament (MPs) are elected influence the attention they pay either to broad-based constituency preferences or more narrow-based special interests (e.g., Denzau and Munger, 1986; Bawn and Thies, 2003). Where the literature disagrees, however, is regarding the exact relationship between electoral systems (i.e., majoritarian and proportional representation) and the type of representation. In a series of recent articles (e.g. Dow, 2001, 2011; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Ezrow, 2007, 2008; Schofield, 2008; Golder and Stramski, 2010; Powell, 2010; Ezrow, 2011; Warwick, 2011) a debate has emerged on how congruence between citizens and their representatives (MPs, parties, and governments) should be measured and whether and how this congruence depends on the electoral system.

At the theoretical level and focusing on the electoral connection[1] scholars disagree whether majoritarian systems lead to more centripetal competition (to use the

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[1] The contributions of Blais and Bodet (2006) and Golder and Stramski (2010) nicely distinguish various types of relationships between citizens and party positions, respectively different types of congruence.

term employed by Cox, 1990), or whether proportional representation favors more moderate candidates. At the empirical level studies of this relationship are hampered by the well known (at least since the work by Achen, 1977; 1978) difficulties in measuring representation. Achen (1977, 1978) alerted the discipline that finding correlations between voter and MP positions in no way allows us to judge how well voters are represented by elected officials. His proposed solutions require, however, measures on the same scale, something largely amiss in most empirical studies.[2]

In the present article we first review the various strands of research dealing with the relationship of voter and MP preferences. Concurring with Golder and Stramski (2010) we emphasize that in studies on congruence the exact type of relationship to be studied needs to be clearly defined. As Blais and Bodet (2006) argue the first and important link in this context is the connexion between voters and MPs.[3] From this (largely) theoretical literature we derive a simple hypothesis that we will assess with a novel dataset. This dataset combines the full voting record of MPs in the Swiss lower house of parliament from three legislative periods with the voting results in referendum campaigns. Given that both MPs and citizens voted on a series of identical issues (with exactly the same question for them to consider) we can use these referendum votes to link the voter preferences to MP preferences. This allows us to circumvent the pernicious problem in the study of representation, namely the lack of common scales (e.g., Achen, 1978; Powell, 2010). We discuss in section three the methods we use by drawing on work linking voting behavior in different institutional settings by Bailey and Chang (2001) (see also Bailey, 2007; Shor et al., 2010; Treier, 2011) and as employed by Masket and Noel (forthcoming)) to link constituency preferences with those of MPs. While this dataset allows us to estimate simultaneously ideological positions of voters (more precisely the median voter) and their elected MPs, the Swiss context offers an additional advantage for the theoretical question we are interested in. A small proportion of the MPs of the lower house are elected in majoritarian elections, while the rest are elected through proportional representation. Section four reports our main empirical results which demonstrate that in majoritarian electoral systems the MPs are located on average more closely to the median voter's positions than in proportional representation systems. Hence, proportional representation systems lead to MPs being much more spread out in ideological terms than majoritarian systems. Section 5 concludes.

2. Electoral systems, incentives and representation

First theoretical insights on how electoral systems relate to the positions of candidates and MPs appeared in models of spatial competition. Early work by Hotelling (1929) and Downs (1957) demonstrated that if voters vote for the closest (in policy and/or spatial terms) candidate in a majoritarian election with only two candidates the latter should position themselves at the location of the median voter (provided such a median exists) (for a review see Grofman, 2004). Extensions to the various forms of proportional representation proved more difficult, and the discussion in Downs (1957) lacks the formal elegance of his treatment of majoritarian systems. An early attempt to model proportional representation systems appeared in Greenberg and Shepsle (1987).[4] These authors were able to show that the equilibrium positions of candidates and parties in a one-dimensional electoral competition have to be spread out along the policy continuum (see also Shepsle and Cohen, 1990; Shepsle, 1991).

Cox (1990)[5] offered a first systematic and comprehensive treatment of how electoral systems affect the equilibrium positions of political parties. His equilibrium results suggest that centrifugal and centripetal tendencies may exist in both proportional representation and majoritarian systems, but that the former are more prevalent in PR systems, and the latter in majoritarian systems.[6]

Obviously all these spatial models assume that political parties, especially in proportional representation elections, take ideological positions and thus act as unitary actors. In most parliamentary systems this is assumed to hold due to the considerable party discipline. Candidates and future MPs, however, have obviously also incentives to appeal to specific groups of voters, possibly independently of their political party (see for instance the work on the German parliament by Stratmann, 2006; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008; Sieberer, 2010; discussed below). Work by Denzau and Munger (1986) and Bawn and Thies (2003) deals exactly with this question. In their more general analysis Bawn and Thies (2003) find that MPs elected under closed-list proportional representation respond more heavily to special interest groups than those elected in majoritarian systems. Vice-versa the former respond less to more broad-based voter interests. Bawn and Thies (2003) careful analysis highlights the complex interplay of different features of electoral systems which leads them to a very prudent assessment of the latter's combined effects.[7]

[2] Powell (2010) offers a systematic review of different empirical strategies for measuring citizen-government congruence.

[3] While finding the conceptualization offered by Golder and Stramski (2010) appealing, we consider a closer look at the exact "mechanics" linking voters to political actors (e.g., MPs, parties, governments) as proposed by Blais and Bodet (2006) necessary. During the time when Israel elected its prime-minister in a direct election, any measure of congruence involving the government would have a different meaning than during the time when parliament selected the prime-minister. For this reason, presumably, Golder and Stramski (2010) also exclude all presidential and semi-presidential regimes from their analysis.

[4] Some preceding work (e.g., Sugden, 1984; Greenberg and Weber, 1985) focused on very specific and hardly used forms of proportional representation.

[5] See also the precursor study by Cox (1987) on equilibria under different electoral institutions and the more comprehensive treatment in Cox (1997).

[6] Ideally, we would have liked to test a hypothesis based on Cox (1990) much more refined work. As discussed below, however, in our empirical data the criteria used to predict centrifugal or centripetal tendencies do not allow us to distinguish between different situations. We also neglect studies conceiving voting as probabilistic decisions (e.g., Coughlin, 1992) as many of the main insights remain the same as for the models discussed above (see Schofield et al., 1998; Lin et al., 1999).

[7] A similar, but as admitted by the authors, less theoretically informed attempt appears in Carey and Shugart (1995) analysis of electoral systems in terms of the incentives the latter create for MPs to cultivate a personal vote (see also Shugart, 2008).