



Plurality versus proportional electoral rule: Which is most representative of voters?

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the representativeness of voters in the proportional electoral system with the situation under plurality rule. Representativeness is commonly measured by comparing parties' received votes with their shares of seats in the Parliament, this implies that proportional rule should always represent voters better. A coalition within the Parliament, however, rules the country without interference. When a coalition is formed, the pivotal role of small parties and the proposal right of the *formateur* may significantly impact the distribution of power. Focusing on the coalition formation stage, I demonstrate that proportional rule is more representative only under specific conditions. Otherwise, introducing certain distortions in the distribution of seats among parties can actually improve representativeness.

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“Thus there is an inherent conflict between two goals. The ideals of democracy and equality require as proportional representation as possible while efficient government often requires less proportional representation” (Laakso and Taagepera (1981), p. 107).

1. Introduction

Electoral systems differ in terms of government efficiency and representativeness. I focus on representativeness,¹ which is the system's ability to produce laws that reflect the will of voters. In a perfectly representative system, each party's power would be proportional to the votes received.

Under the proportional rule, a Parliament's composition perfectly reflects parties' shares of the vote (thus, it matches voters' preferences). This suggests that proportional systems should be the most equitable.² This is not necessarily the case: consider for example the experience of Italy during the 2006–2008 Prodi government, in which a small pivotal party succeeded in heavily

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¹ A study of efficiency, i.e., the ability to produce well-structured laws that minimise resource wastage, is beyond the scope of this work.

² See, for instance, Douglas (1923). However, one drawback of proportional representation is the greater instability and the increased time required to enact laws, compared with majority voting systems. See Laakso and Taagepera (1981); Nurmi (1981) and Schofield (1981).

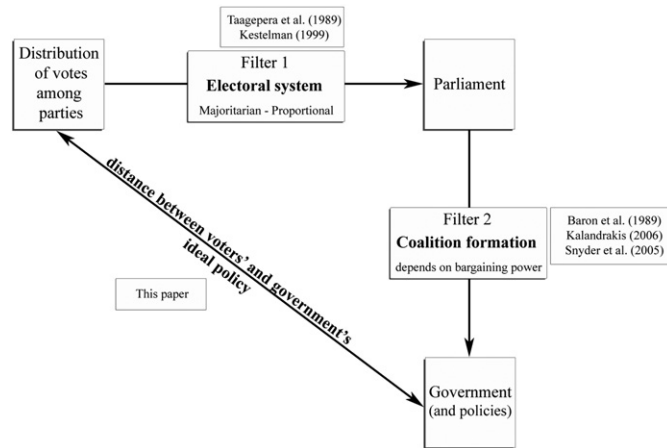


Fig. 1. The government formation process.

influencing his decisions. I show that the common wisdom is misleading: plurality rule can sometimes better reflect voter preferences.³

Two filters impact representativeness and can induce distortions (see Fig. 1): the electoral system (filter 1) and the coalition formation stage (filter 2). All electoral systems other than the proportional approach distribute seats in a distortive (i.e., non-proportional) way. At the coalition formation stage, the distortion between the share of seats and the decisional power is due to two factors: i) some parties are excluded from the government, and ii) the share of power amongst the others differs from the distribution of seats in Parliament, since pivotal parties enjoy disproportionately strong bargaining power. Voters' misrepresentation of preferences depends on the distortions in both filters 1 and 2. When these distortions are of opposite sign, they compensate for one another, possibly up to the point where they cancel out.

While several papers addressed to each distortion separately,⁴ this paper is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to analyse the entire process, from elections to government formation. Within the (possibly infinite) set of potential electoral rules, I focus my attention exclusively on proportional and plurality approaches, which inspired most of the western democracies. I assume that parties act non-cooperatively during government formation. I compute the misrepresentation of voters' preferences in the two systems, defined as the difference between parties' expected power and their share of the votes received, and I derive the conditions under which one system reflects citizens' preferences better than the other.⁵

Not surprisingly, the pivotal position of small parties in coalition formation contexts can confer on them a level of political power that is more than proportional to their share of the seats. This distortion is reduced when the parties are impatient to form a coalition. The distribution of seats under plurality rule is favourable to large parties. Pushing in opposite directions, the distortions compensate. When their magnitude is similar, the voters' preferences are better represented under plurality rule. I conclude that majority voting is preferable when parties are patient, whilst the proportional rule is more representative when the parties are impatient.

Section 2 sets the framework of this study and describes the model used. Section 3 describes my results. Section 4 validates the model using data from the 2006 and 2008 Italian elections. In Section 5 I discuss the consequences of relaxing certain assumptions. The last section concludes the paper.

³ Another important issue that might be considered, along with representativeness, is the heterogeneity in the composition of the Parliament. A proportional electoral system might modify the composition of the Parliament, guaranteeing more pluralism/heterogeneity among the MPs not belonging to the winning coalition. In the words of the anonymous referee who kindly made this point, "it can be argued that new ideas and interests find more easily their way to the Parliaments in Proportional than First Past the Post systems." Although beyond the scope of this work, this is certainly an interesting starting point for future research.

⁴ Besides the well-known paper by Taagepera and Shugart (1989); Morelli (2004) and Kestelman (1999) offer a clear and succinct review of the literature on distortions in electoral rules. Baron and Ferejohn (1989); Snyder et al. (2005) and Kaldrakis (2006) study certain properties of the coalition formation game.

⁵ When designing and describing the model, I had in mind the case of a parliamentary democracy requiring that a law/bill needs the support of the majority of the parliament to be approved. My description also suggests that each party, after negotiations, has power over a part of the governmental decisions/budget (e.g., party A obtains ministry X). An anonymous referee, whom I am glad to acknowledge, raised two interesting issues: i) decisions are taken collectively within the government, a ministry can only rarely take a decision against the will of the rest of the cabinet, and ii) some countries allow for minority cabinets (e.g., Sweden and Canada). According to my description, office benefits are the object of the bargaining. Actually, the bargaining game can occur between a minority government in power and some parties in the parliament, whenever voting on a law. Therefore, the model can apply also to countries in which the government does not control the majority of seats in the Parliament as long as laws need the approval of the Parliament to become effective. Furthermore, my model can be used, after minor changes, for situations in which the threshold to be reached is different from 50%, as for the case of laws that require qualified majorities.

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