Malapportionment and democracy: A curvilinear relationship

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ABSTRACT

This article examines electoral malapportionment by illuminating the relationship between malapportionment level and democracy. Although a seminal study rejects this relationship, we argue that a logical and empirically significant relationship exists, which is curvilinear and is based on a framework focusing on incumbent politicians' incentives and the constraints they face regarding malapportionment. Malapportionment is lowest in established democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes with an overwhelmingly strong incumbent; it is relatively high in new democracies and authoritarian regimes with robust opposition forces. The seminal study's null finding is due to the mismatch between theoretical mechanisms and choice of democracy indices. Employing an original cross-national dataset, we conduct regression analyses; the results support our claims. Furthermore, on controlling the degree of democracy, the single-member district system's effects become insignificant. Australia, Belarus, the Gambia, Japan, Malaysia, Tunisia, and the United States illustrate the political logic underlying curvilinear relations at democracy's various levels.

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1. Introduction

Electoral malapportionment—the disjuncture between the share of population in an electoral district and its share of seats—is an important theme in political processes. As a norm, equality in the value of a vote, or the one-person-one-vote principle, is a prerequisite for modern representative democracy. It also has several practical consequences. For example, the presence of malapportionment distorts election results (Boone and Wahman, 2015), cabinet portfolios (Bhavnani, 2015), and the allocation of government resources in favor of overrepresented constituencies (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2008; Gibson, 2004; Horiuchi and Saito, 2003). Given the importance of this topic, international election-monitoring organizations have recently begun addressing malapportionment in their evaluations of electoral integrity among emerging democracies around the world (Handley et al., 2006).

While the past several decades have seen substantial advancements in the study of malapportionment (e.g., Handley and Grofman, 2008), one major issue remains unresolved: the relationship between the regime type and the degree of malapportionment. On the one hand, in a seminal article investigating malapportionment in a cross-national context, Samuels and Snyder (2001), hereafter S&S, reported that the degree of democracy is not a significant predictor of levels of malapportionment. On the other hand, as we discuss in more detail below, while some scholars argue that malapportionment is a result of authoritarian politics, others find that malapportionment is a cause of authoritarian longevity.

In this article, we attempt to resolve this disagreement by assessing the relationship between malapportionment and democracy. We maintain, contrary to S&S's findings, that there is a logical reason to expect a relationship between the two, empirically demonstrating that one such relationship exists. More specifically, we argue that there is a curvilinear relationship between malapportionment and democracy: malapportionment exists at relatively low levels in consolidated democracies and highly authoritarian countries and at relatively high levels in countries in the middle of the democratic–authoritarian spectrum. Such a relationship exists because the nature of the political regime influences politicians' incentives to manipulate electoral delimitation and the constraints they face. We provide empirical evidence for this claim using a newly constructed dataset of malapportionment levels for 160 countries and case studies of Australia, Belarus, the Gambia, Japan, Malaysia, Tunisia, and the United States that illustrate the

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mechanisms underlying this relationship.

This study contributes to strands of several subfields in political science. First, it adds to research on electoral systems by advancing a new theory about the curvilinear relationship between malapportionment and democracy. As we show below, a large body of literature exists on the consequences of malapportionment, but studies addressing the causes of malapportionment are still very limited. Our study is one of the few attempting to theorize conditions influencing the degree of malapportionment. Another new insight of this paper is that while previous studies associated single-member district (SMD) plurality systems with higher malapportionment than was associated with proportional representation (PR) systems, we demonstrate quantitatively and qualitatively that this is not necessarily so; it depends on the nature of the political regime.

Second, the current study is an addition to a body of literature investigating the effects of democracy. A long series of studies have been conducted on the consequences of regime type regarding various aspects, such as effects on international peace (Russett, 1994), economic growth (Acemoglu et al., 2014), and media freedom (Adsera et al., 2003), among others. This study belongs to this tradition of research, connecting regime type and electoral malapportionment.

Third, this article contributes to the study of electoral authoritarianism. In our study, we deal with democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes—those regimes that "hold regular multi-party elections at the national level, yet violate liberal-democratic minimum standards in systematic and profound ways" (Schedler, 2013, p. 1). Many scholars have already pointed out that malapportionment is a tool used by autocrats to manipulate elections (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2013). This paper introduces a more nuanced understanding of how autocrats deal with electoral manipulation, pointing out the conditions under which malapportionment is more likely to be included in autocrats' toolbox of manipulation measures.

In addition, the current study also contributes to database building in the social sciences because we introduce a new dataset of malapportionment, including 160 countries. In their seminal cross-national study of malapportionment, S&S provided a Loosemore—Hanby-index-based measurement of malapportionment for 112 countries. In our dataset, we employ the same measurement method as S&S, but we use newly collected data from original sources to provide wider, more up-to-date coverage than S&S.

Several caveats are in order before we proceed. First, our analysis does not concern malapportionment in upper houses. We exclude upper house elections because the Constitutional provisions on seat quotas often determine the degree of malapportionment for upper house elections and such provisions are the product of history rather than the current incentives of politicians, which we are attempting to theorize. Second, we adopt a minimalist, institutionalist definition of democracy. In other words, we do not use the "maximalist" definition of democracy that encompasses various issues, including the substantial benefits of the institutions of democracy (Munck and Verkuilen, 2002). As in many empirical studies, we define democracy as a type of political regime with institutional mechanisms of accountability, such as periodic elections and checks and balances (Schmitter and Karl, 1991).

Below, we begin by reviewing relevant existing studies to identify unresolved questions and then provide our hypothesis. A cross-national statistical analysis follows to test our hypothesis We then provide illustrative case studies to support our argument. In conclusion, we discuss future avenues of research.

2. A curvilinear theory of malapportionment and democracy

Existing studies of malapportionment have reached inconsistent conclusions about the relationship between malapportionment and the type of political regime. On the one hand, the seminal work by S&S finds no relationship. Based on regression analysis, using data from 112 countries, they report that there is no statistically significant relationship between the degree of malapportionment and the level of democracy. On the other hand, others argue that regime type and malapportionment do have some link, usually associating malapportionment with authoritarian politics. Studying post-democratization Latin America, Bruhn et al. (2010) argued that overrepresented districts are more prone to maintain authoritarian politics. Scholars who study Malaysia have found that malapportionment in favor of the ruling coalition is one of the main reasons why electoral authoritarianism has been maintained in the country (Ostwald, 2013; Lim, 2005). How can we resolve these conflicting claims?

Our basic premise is that malapportionment is essentially a political problem: malapportionment is a type of institutional arrangement with distributional consequences. As such, political actors (politicians and political parties) are involved, acting strategically in creating and/or maintaining malapportionment in their favor. In some instances, malapportionment can arise for reasons that are not strategic, e.g., due to "natural" or "historical" reasons. Natural reasons include population movements from one geographical area to another within a country, differential birth and mortality rates in different areas, and the manner in which a country's administrative units are divided. Historical reasons affecting malapportionment are usually found in constitutional provisions made at the founding of the country, such as the seat quota for each administrative unit, or for certain segments of the population, usually minority groups. Our theory does not address such naturally and historically induced malapportionment.

Another restriction for our theory is that we are only concerned with political regimes wherein elections serve as a device to elect national-level legislators and opposition forces can participate in those elections. In other words, our theory's scope does not include absolute monarchies and one-party regimes wherein opposition parties are practically banned. This means that the scope of our theory applies to democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes.

We focus on politicians' incentives and the institutional constraints that they face. As for incentives, regardless of regime type, we expect that incumbent politicians have an incentive to create malapportioned districts when they anticipate that doing so will increase their chances of increasing the number of legislative seats their party holds and remaining in power. For example, as in Japan up to the early 1990s and in Malaysia since independence to the present day, when the ruling party's main support base lies in the countryside, the rural districts are often overrepresented because such a scheme allows the ruling party to gain seats with fewer votes than when they have to win districts with larger numbers of voters (underrepresented districts). Opposition politicians, on the other hand, have incentives to reduce malapportionment to improve their own chances of winning.

When incumbents expect their tenure to be relatively safe, we expect that politicians have less incentive to create malapportioned districts. This situation practically excludes incumbents in democracies since a democratic political regime essentially implies a system in which a politician's tenure is insecure due to electoral competition. As for the rulers of non-democracies, we can classify them into two types. The first type is the autocrat who is already overwhelmingly strong electorally due to several pre-existing reasons, including abundant natural resources, personal popularity, or the fragmentation of opposition forces. This type would have little incentive to manipulate the boundaries because malapportionment is generally regarded as unfair conduct that degrade the legitimacy of electoral results; such autocrats have less