



# Does district magnitude matter? The case of Taiwan<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

A sizable literature on electoral institutions argues that proportional electoral rules lead to higher voter turnout. However, recent work finds little evidence that the effect generalizes beyond western Europe and suggests that the theoretical arguments in the literature remain sparse, incomplete, and contradictory. I use a well-chosen data set to resolve the problem of omitted variable bias and Bayesian model averaging to address model uncertainty. I use Bayes factors to evaluate evidence both for and against the null hypotheses and find that the proportionality of electoral rules exerts no meaningful effect on turnout or any of the theoretical mechanisms I test.

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A literature extending forward from Powell (1986) suggests that majoritarian electoral rules generate chronically lower voter turnout. Since politicians have incentives to represent voters, who tend to have higher socioeconomic status, some political scientists have argued that countries with chronically low participation should switch to proportional rules in order to boost turnout (Lijphart, 1997, 1999). However, recent work that extends empirical tests beyond western Europe casts doubt upon the claim that proportional rules generate higher turnout. For example, using a large set of democracies inside and outside Europe, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) demonstrate that, while electoral institutions might affect participation, the effect is most likely quite small. Further, Blais and Aarts (2006) criticize this literature for claiming that proportional rules cause higher turnout, while only observing a small, inconsistent correlation and having conflicting explanations for the effect. Theoretically, Jackman (1987) points out that voters have less incentive to participate in PR systems because elections are less decisive (Powell, 2000). Further, some formal models (Rainey, 2015; Herrera et al., 2013; Schram and Sonnemans,

1996), experimental evidence (Herrera et al., 2013; Schram and Sonnemans, 1996), and observational evidence (Rainey, 2015; Karp et al., 2007) suggest that proportional rules might lower the incentives to mobilize voters. This research offers sufficient evidence to give political scientists pause. Until the effect is demonstrated in a wider range of cases and a more compelling theoretical argument emerges, skepticism is warranted and further study is required.

In this paper, I use survey data from the 2001 Taiwan legislative election to test the claim that more proportional electoral rules lead to higher turnout, as well as several of the causal mechanisms. These data are especially useful for testing this claim because Taiwan is one of few countries with substantial variation in the proportionality of electoral rules across electoral districts. In particular, the 2001 Taiwanese electoral system features several single-member districts and multimember districts with magnitudes up to 13. Unlike earlier studies, these data allow me to hold the national political context constant as district magnitude varies, making the inferences more compelling.

I use a Bayesian model averaging approach to combat problems of model uncertainty and assign probabilities to hypotheses (Montgomery and Nyhan, 2010) and I find little support for the claim that proportional rules lead to higher turnout or for the theoretical mechanisms that some researchers have suggested explain the purported relationship. In fact, using posterior probabilities, I argue that proportional rules have no meaningful effect on

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turnout and that none of the proposed methods operates.

## 1. Electoral rules, parties, and turnout

As district magnitude increases, two important and related changes occur in the political system. First, the assignment of seats based on vote shares becomes more proportional as district magnitude increases (Cox, 1997; Benoit, 2000). Duverger (1954) first identified this as the “mechanical effect.” When district magnitude is small (e.g., single member districts), electoral rules punish small parties by assigning a smaller percentage of legislative seats to these parties than their vote share. In contrast, larger parties tend to receive a larger percentage of seats than their vote share. However, as district magnitude increases, the assignment of seats tends to be more proportional.

Second, a well-developed theoretical and empirical literature extending forward from Duverger suggests that district magnitude increases the number of political parties. In particular, as magnitude increases, the number of parties increases as well, but a larger increase occurs in systems with more social cleavages. Cox (1999b) shows formally that parties have a stronger incentive to coordinate and drop out of contests as the district magnitude shrinks. Sophisticated empirical work confirms many of these theoretical predictions (e.g. Clark and Golder, 2006).

### 1.1. The proportionality of seat assignment

All else constant, larger district magnitudes leads to more proportional outcomes, while smaller magnitudes lead to less proportional outcomes (Cox, 1997; Benoit, 2000). Banducci et al. (1999) and Bowler and Lanoue (1992) argue that systems that disproportionately reward large parties leave supporters of small parties feeling under-represented, or not represented at all. In the extreme case of a single-member district with a plurality rule, the party that wins the most votes, even if it is less than a majority, represents the entire district. Often, 45% of voters or more find themselves with no candidate representing them in the legislature. While districts with magnitudes greater than one do not easily allow such severely biased outcomes, many small parties get no seats at all. In general, as district magnitude gets larger, smaller parties are able to win seats. Thus, as district magnitude increases, more voters receive representation because their preferred party receives enough votes to earn a seat. This leads to the first empirical hypothesis, which focuses on whether individuals feel represented or not.

**REPRESENTATION HYPOTHESIS:** As district magnitude increases, potential voters are more likely to feel represented in the political system.

### 1.2. Ideological heterogeneity

Downs (1957) and Cox (1999a) show that when district magnitude is one, all but two parties have an incentive to exit the system and the two remaining parties have an incentive to converge to the median voter. However, as district magnitude increases, so does the number of political parties that can exist in the system in equilibrium (Cox, 1997, 1999b; Clark and Golder, 2006). More importantly, Cox (1990) formally shows that these rules also give parties an incentive to disperse across the ideological space. This has the effect of increasing the ideological heterogeneity of the parties in the district because as the district magnitude increases, parties have an incentive to appeal to more narrow constituencies and develop a political niche. As the heterogeneity of parties' ideologies increases, voters should be more likely to find a party they agree with and feel

close to (Bowler et al., 1994). This leads to the second hypothesis, which focuses on whether or not voters feel close to a political party.

**CLOSENESS HYPOTHESIS:** As district magnitude increases, potential voters are more likely to feel close to a political party.

### 1.3. The efforts of political parties

Previous work has often assumed that proportional districts create greater incentives for parties to mobilize voters, since single-member districts are plagued with the problem of noncompetitive districts. Proportional systems, on the other hand, create “nationally competitive districts” (Powell, 1982; though see Rainey, 2015). Cox (1999b) offers a formal extension of Powell's suggestion, arguing that elites will “exert more mobilization effort when the probability of that effort being decisive is greater.” He argues that there is likely to be less variance in the effort exerted by parties in PR systems, and that the effort will be on average greater than in majoritarian systems. Selb (2009) offers a sophisticated empirical test of this argument, finding that turnout varies less in PR systems and is on average higher. This leads to the third hypothesis, which focuses on whether political parties contact citizens.

**CONTACT HYPOTHESIS:** As district magnitude increases, potential voters are more likely to be contacted by a political party.

### 1.4. Turnout

If citizens feel represented, feel close to a party, and are mobilized by a party, they are more likely to turn out. For example, Schattschneider (1960) argues that citizens whose views are not represented in the political system become chronically disengaged. Solt (2008, 2010) extends and tests this argument and finds strong support for the idea. Also, a large literature in American politics stemming from Campbell et al. (1960) shows that citizens who feel closely attached to a political party are more likely to turn out. Using a rational choice model, Downs (1957) notes that campaigns serve the function of reducing information costs, helping voters overcome the costs of turning out to vote. Gerber and Green (2000) point out empirically that campaigns can get citizens to the polls, especially through canvassing. This leads to the fourth, and perhaps most important hypothesis, which focuses on whether citizens turn out to vote.

**TURNOUT HYPOTHESIS:** As district magnitude increases, potential voters are more likely to turn out to vote.

In summary, the literature has proposed that PR might lead to higher turnout and offered several mechanisms. PR allows supporters of small parties to receive representation in the legislature, which gives citizens a greater stake in politics. PR also causes parties to disperse across the ideological space and make more effective, narrow appeals to voters, which allows voters to develop a close attachment to particular parties. Finally, PR increases parties' incentives to mobilize voters by ensuring that non-competitive districts do not emerge. Each of these consequences of PR should lead to an increase in voter participation.

## 2. Data and measures

I use survey data from the 2001 Taiwanese legislative elections collected by Taiwan's Election and Democracy Study and included in Module 2 of the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems (*The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (2007)). These data offer

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