



The majoritarian and proportional visions and democratic responsiveness[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 July 2015

Accepted 14 July 2015

Available online 7 August 2015

Keywords:

Electoral systems

Public opinion

Representation

Congruence

Policy responsiveness

ABSTRACT

Although previous research demonstrates that proportionality positively impacts the congruence between the positions of the government and the public after elections, recent work argues and shows that proportionality dampens policy responsiveness in between elections. Why this is true is unclear, however. This paper considers how proportionality matters for policy responsiveness, focusing on two primary suspects: (1) the friction associated with coalitions in proportional systems and (2) the comparatively weaker electoral incentives in those systems. In this paper we first assess the general effect of electoral systems, showing that results are robust across measures, and also that the impact of electoral systems increases exponentially alongside party fragmentation. We then examine two alternative mechanisms at work in proportional systems, and preliminary results point towards the potential importance of government fractionalization in accounting for weakened inter-election responsiveness. In the concluding section we consider implications for our understanding of democratic representation, and also for future research on opinion-policy congruence.

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A growing body of literature addresses the influence of electoral institutions on the political representation of public opinion. Most of this research focuses on differences between majoritarian and proportional “visions,” using Powell’s (2000) language. Research by Powell and others finds that proportional representation tends to produce greater congruence between the positions of the government and the public; specifically, the general ideological disposition of the government that emerges after an election and the ideological bent of the electorate tended to match up better in

proportional systems (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000; also see Miller et al., 1999).

Recent work has challenged these findings (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010; Dalton et al., 2012). We discuss this research further below; here, it is worth noting just that current work is increasingly divided on what have seemed to be the representational advantages of proportional systems.

Even if proportional systems do provide greater ideological congruence in the wake of elections, it is not at all clear that they provide greater representation in between elections. Indeed, there are reasons to expect governments in majoritarian systems to be more responsive to opinion change throughout the electoral cycle (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010), and empirical research supports the conjecture (see Wlezien and Soroka, 2012). This paper assesses the robustness of that connection and attempts to take the next step, establishing exactly how proportionality matters for policy responsiveness.

We begin by reviewing expectations regarding the effect of electoral systems on dynamic policy representation and then turn to empirics. Our first set of analyses re-test the possibility that proportional systems actually produce less dynamic representation than majoritarian systems. This provides stronger and more detailed evidence in support of the claim. Subsequent analyses then

[☆] Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Victoria, British Columbia, 2012, the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Political Science Association, San Antonio, 2014, the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, 2015, and at Arizona State University, Columbia University, the University of Gothenburg, and the University of Mannheim. The project was funded in part by the Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC). We are grateful to Clare Devereux for research assistance, to Ernesto Calvo for guidance on estimating seats-votes ratios, and to Hanna Back, Lenka Bustikova, Peter Esaiasson, Mikael Gilljam, Staffan Kumlin, Jeff Lax, Paul Lewis, Staffan Lindberg, Johannes Lindvall, Mark Pickup, Mark Ramirez, Justin Phillips, Sarah Shair-Rosenfield, and Melissa Schwartzberg for helpful comments.

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turn to understanding precisely why proportional systems are less responsive. We consider two mechanisms: coalitional friction and electoral incentives (We also consider differences in electoral accountability associated with single-party and coalition governments). The results of these analyses indicate that electoral incentives (and electoral accountability) have little impact but that friction might. We view this as an important step towards understanding not just *whether* but also *how* proportional versus majoritarian systems matter for policy representation.

1. Representation after and between elections

Public opinion can influence government policy in two well-known ways. The first way is indirect, through elections, where the public can elect governments that share their opinions, who undertake corresponding policy change. This sometimes is referred to as “congruence.” The second way is direct, in between elections, where policymakers (may) adjust policy in response to changing public opinion. This can be thought of as “covariational congruence,” following Weissberg (1976). Research on the effects of electoral institutions has focused almost entirely on the former.

Lijphart (1984) provides the first statement on indirect representation. He distinguishes between “consensual” democracies – characterized by, most notably, proportional representation, multiparty systems, and coalition governments – and “majoritarian” systems – characterized by simple plurality election rules, a two-party system, and single-party government. He then suggests that consensual democracies provide better general policy congruence than do majoritarian systems.

Powell (2000) provides further theory and empirical support, focusing specifically on the differences between majoritarian and proportional election rules and their implications for representation. Powell argues and finds that proportional representation tends to produce greater congruence between the government and the public; specifically, the general ideological disposition of government and the ideological bent of the electorate tend to match up better in proportional systems. For Powell, this reflects the greater, direct participation of constituencies the vision affords (also see Miller et al., 1999). In effect, coalition governments tend to include ideological centrist parties, which brings the average orientation of coalition parties closer to that of the median voter.

This logic is compelling, although it is challenged in some recent research. Blais and Bodet (2006) argue that, while proportional systems encourage coalition governments, thus pulling the government more to the center, they also encourage a greater number and diversity of parties in the first place, which promotes representation of more extreme positions (Their analysis reveals little difference in the congruence between citizens and governments in proportional and majoritarian systems). Golder and Stramski (2010) show much the same.¹ Powell's (2011) own recent analysis, which encompasses a broader period than his original work, also demonstrates little difference between electoral systems.

Even accepting Powell's original (2000) results, they pertain to the period just after elections. What about in the periods between elections? We have argued in previous work that there is reason to think that governments in majoritarian systems are more responsive to opinion change (Wlezien and Soroka, 2007; also see Wlezien and Soroka N.d.). There are two main explanations.

First, it presumably is easier for a single party to respond to change than a multi-party coalition, as coordination in the latter is more costly and difficult. This reflects increased transaction costs

when multiple parties are involved but also the constraints posed by coalition agreements (Muller and Strom, 2010), which limit the room for the government to maneuver. In effect, coalitions introduce “friction” into the policymaking process (e.g., Jones et al., 2009; Tsebelis, 2002).²

Second, majoritarian governments have more of an incentive to respond to opinion change owing to the larger seats-to-votes ratios in those systems. Since a shift in electoral sentiment has bigger consequences on Election Day in majoritarian systems, governments there are likely to pay especially close attention to the ebb and flow of opinion. This possibility generalizes Rogowski and Kayser's (2002) argument about the sensitivity of governments to consumers in majoritarian systems.

There thus are strong organizational and electoral reasons for governments in proportional systems to be less responsive than majoritarian governments to changing public opinion in between elections. Note that this contrasts with Powell's expectation. Of course, it ultimately may be that proportional and majoritarian systems may work to serve representation but in different ways, where the former provide better indirect representation via elections and the latter provide better direct representation in between elections. What is important for us is that taking account of this inter-election period leads to rather different expectations about the impact of electoral systems. Let us empirically assess those expectations.

2. Toward an analysis of spending

Building on past work by Wlezien and Soroka (e.g., Wlezien, 1995, 1996, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien and Soroka, 2012), our tests rely on a dynamic model of policy representation. The crux of the model is relatively simple. If policymakers are responsive, policy change (ΔP_t) will be a function of relative preferences for policy (R_{t-1}), which reflect support for policy change. Other things also may matter for policy, of course, including the partisan control of government (G_{t-1}). Still other things, including economic conditions and fiscal constraints (O_{t-1}) may matter as well. Note that the independent variables are lagged so as to reflect preferences and party control when budgetary policy, the focus of our empirical analysis, is made.³ For any particular domain, the equation is:

$$\Delta P_t = \rho + \gamma_1 R_{t-1} + \gamma_2 G_{t-1} + \gamma_3 O_{t-1} + \mu_t, \quad (1)$$

Where ρ and μ_t represent the intercept and the error term, respectively. This equation captures both indirect and direct representation. The former — representation through election results and subsequent partisan composition of government — is captured by γ_2 , and the latter — adjustments to policy reflecting shifts in preferences — is captured by γ_1 .

Recall however that we are interested in assessing whether and how electoral systems impact policy responsiveness to public opinion. This too can be assessed directly, by extending equation (1) across countries k as follows:

² A compounding factor is that parties in a coalition may respond differently to a change in opinion, where some prefer to not respond at all or even move in a different policy direction (see Calvo et al., 2013).

³ This dovetails with thermostatic public responsiveness to spending (Wlezien, 1995; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Public opinion in year t reacts (negatively) to policy for year t and policymakers adjust policy (positively) in year $t + 1$ based on current (year t) opinion. Now, if studying policy that, unlike budgetary policy, is not lagged, then policy change could represent year t public opinion, which in turn responds to lagged (year $t - 1$) policy. That is, the model can be adjusted to reflect the reality of the policy process.

¹ They do, however, show that proportional systems produce more representative legislatures.

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