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Comparative Politics
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Elections

Electoral systems, representation and media

Introduction

New focus: how do democracies work?

- Upcoming next: parties and citizens, then legislatures.
- Today: elections.
 - Electoral systems (focus on national legislatures).
 - Other kinds of elections.
 - Representation.
 - Political communication and media (if time allows).
- Empirical and theoretical focus on democracies.

Introduction

Elections are the cornerstone of representative democracy

- The vehicle that translates the will of the people to a set of representatives.
- Communication between voters and their representatives.
 - Candidates/parties get to inform the voters.
 - The election result “sends a message”.
 - Proper dialogues at the door or on the street.
- Civic education.

Electoral systems



Electoral systems

The rules that determine how elections work

- Eligibility to vote or stand for office.
- The size and number of electoral districts.
- What the ballot looks like.
- How votes are translated into parliamentary seats.

Which in turn affect

- The number, strength and ideological profile of parties.
- Behaviour of voters, politicians and parties.
- Eventually policy outcomes?

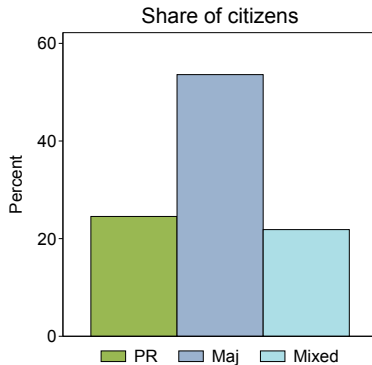
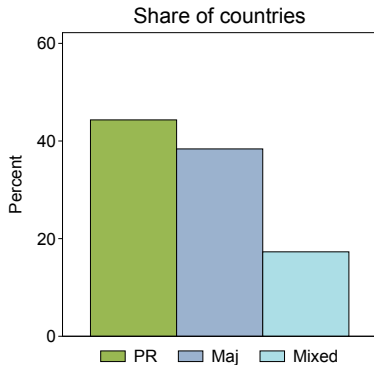
Electoral systems

Two main principles for seat allocation

- Majoritarian representation.
 - The winner (in a district) takes it all (typically one seat).
 - Tend to result(?) in two-party or few-party systems.
- Proportional representation.
 - Seats in proportion to votes.
 - Tend to result(?) in multi-party systems.

Only a matter for legislative elections.

Electoral systems



Electoral systems

Versions of majoritarian representation

- Multiple rounds until (absolute) majority.
 - *Two-round system.*
 - France.
- Voters rank candidates.
 - *Ranked choice or alternative vote*
 - Australia.
- Most votes win (plurality or relative majority).
 - *First past the post or single-member plurality*
 - UK.
 - Benefits two largest parties (cf. Duverger's law).

Plurality systems are often separated from majority systems.

Electoral systems

Elections to the National Assembly in France

- Two-round system with single-member districts.
- Candidates with a majority (and 25 percent of registered voters) are elected after first round.
- Run-off between top two candidates (and any other with 12.5 percent of registered voters) where plurality is enough to be elected.
- The NA is a multi-party system.

Electoral systems

Versions of proportional representation

- List system
 - Open or closed lists.
 - Often presented as a dichotomy but flexibility varies.
 - Most PR-systems have a list system.
- Single transferable vote.
 - Wasted/surplus votes are transferred.
 - Ireland and Malta.

Electoral systems

What affects proportionality in PR systems?

- District magnitude.
- Adjustment seats.
- Electoral thresholds.
- Allocation formula.

Electoral systems

Elections to the Swedish riksdag

- 310 seats are elected in 29 districts.
- Seats allocated according to Mod. Webster/Sainte-Laguë, which is slightly more proportional than D'Hondt/Jefferson.
- Electoral threshold of 4 % (or 12 % in one electoral district).
- 39 adjustment seats to adjust for disproportionality.

Electoral systems

Mixed systems

- One vote for a candidate in a single-member district.
- One vote for a party in a multi-member district.
- *Can* be as proportional as a PR system, if the latter are used to adjust the disproportionality of the former.

Electoral systems

Elections to the German bundestag

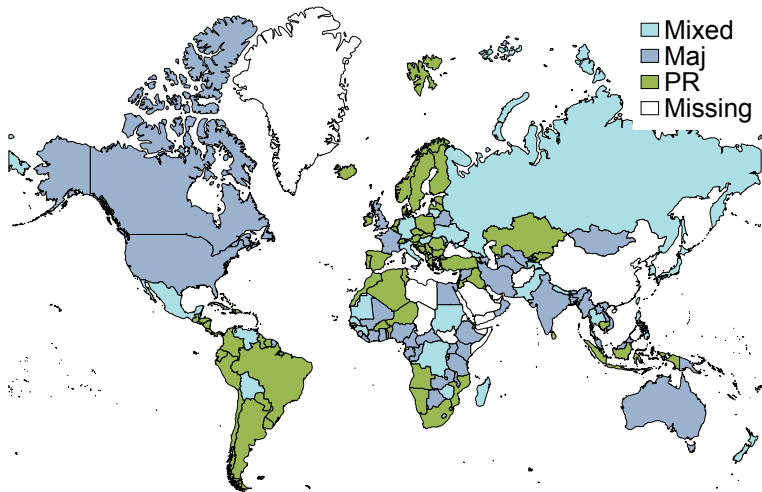
- Two votes per voter: a constituency vote (first vote) and a party list vote (second vote).
- 299 members are (provisionally) elected in single-member constituencies by first-past-the-post voting (first vote).
- 331 members are allocated using the proportional Sainte-Laguë method and a 5% threshold, adjusting for the disproportionality of the first 299 seats.
- Parties can lose some of their constituency seats if the list seats do not fully offset the disproportionality.
- Before 2025, the Bundestag instead had an unlimited number of compensation seats.

Electoral systems

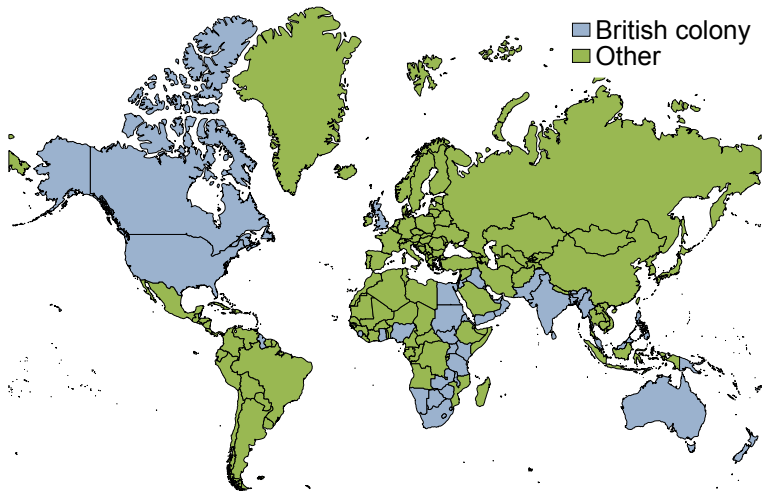
A few words about typologies

- Remember that all classifications are simplifications.
- Regardless if we talk about 3 (PR/MR/Mixed) or 18 (IDEA) electoral systems, the countries within each category will still differ.
- What typology we should use – what differences we will highlight – depends on what aspects that are relevant for our purposes and where our study is located.

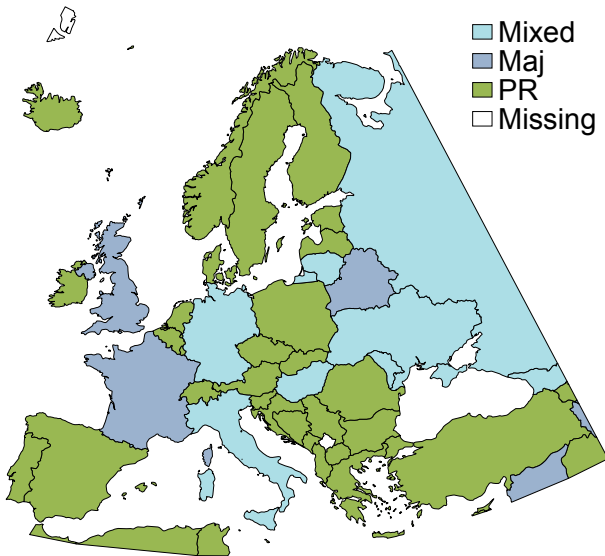
Electoral systems



Electoral systems



Electoral systems



Electoral systems

So which system is best – PR or majoritarian?

Electoral systems

Arguments for PR systems, with counter arguments

- More representative legislature in PR systems.
 - Less so for median voter, so does it affect policy?
- Pivotality of swing states vis-à-vis popular vote hurts legitimacy and causes unwanted strategic behaviour.
 - Parties bunching above the threshold cause similar problems.
- Turnout is lower in majoritarian systems.
 - Does not affect representation if it only reflects safe districts.

Electoral systems

Arguments for majoritarian systems, with counter arguments

- Accountability is stronger in majoritarian systems.
 - Clarity of responsibility is high, but viable alternatives few.
- Lack of clear majorities leads to weak governments and long coalition formation processes.
 - Good medicine against polarization.
 - Checks and balances of majoritarian systems also create deadlocks.
- Closer connection between voters and representatives.
 - MPs should represent the country and not their constituency.

Other elections



Other elections

Executive elections

- Legislature selects head of gov. in parliamentary systems.
- Presidential systems use elections.
- Common with term limits.
 - Protects the system from domination by a single person.
 - Popular presidents cannot remain and no accountability during the last term.
- Presidential elections follow a majoritarian rule:
 - Two rounds (e.g., France, most of South America).
 - Plurality (e.g., Iceland and Mexico)

No need for more than one electoral district. Or?

Other elections

American presidential elections

- Indirect election: voters elect the electoral college.
- Most states give all electors to plurality candidate.
- Some votes are more important than other:
 - Swing states > popular vote.
 - Electors not fully proportional to population.

Other elections

European elections and second-order elections.

- Countries elect their MPs and campaigns are fully national.
- Degressive proportionality of apportionment.
- Conceptualized as *second-order* (Reif and Schmitt 1980):
 - Lower turnout and campaign-intensity.
 - Domestic agenda and cleavages.
 - Small and new parties fair better (sincere or protest voting).
 - Government parties punished.

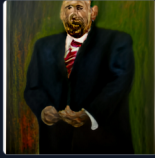
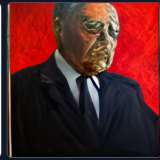
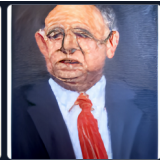
Other elections

Referendums

- The most important form of direct democracy.
- Can be binding or advisory.
- When?
 - Sometimes mandatory (constitutional amendments, transferring power)
 - Referendum initiatives.
 - When an issue does not follow party lines or was not debated in an election, or when parties cannot agree.
 - Often related to EU membership or treaty ratification.
- Switzerland is special with 500 referendums since WWII.

Representation





Representation

What do we mean by representation

- John Adams and Edmund Burke represents two ideals of representation: delegates vs trustees.
 - Autonomy from a party or a subgroup within the electorate.
 - Central to understanding elected assemblies in civil society.
 - Less relevant when discussing modern legislatures?
- Hanna Pitkin's dimensions are more useful:
 - Formalistic representation – authority and accountability – is insufficient as it says nothing about how well they represent.
 - Acting for = **Substantive representation** (what they do).
 - Standing for = **Descriptive representation** (who they are) and symbolic representation (how they are perceived).

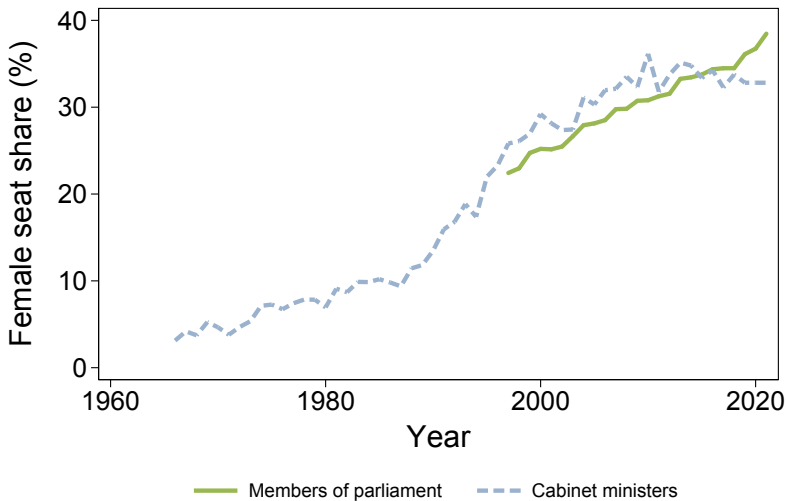
Representation

Substantive representation

- Static: Congruence. Typically operationalized as attitudes.
- Dynamic: Responsiveness.
- Congruence is more difficult to achieve with weaker class voting and more complex attitude configurations.
- Lack of congruence hurts participation and satisfaction:
 - Voters are more likely to abstain from voting when there is no ideologically close party.
 - The level of egocentric congruence also affects their satisfaction with democracy.

Representation

Female representation in Western Europe



Representation

Descriptive representation

- Female representation has improved over time, but women remain underrepresented.
- The underrepresentation of immigrants is even worse.
- Situation tends to be worse at the top.
 - The female share of presidents/prime ministers has always been below ten percent.
 - 19 percent of adults in Sweden are foreign-born, but only 9 percent of local politicians and 2 percent of 'majors'.
- Representation in terms of class is complicated.

Representation

Underrepresentation may have serious consequences

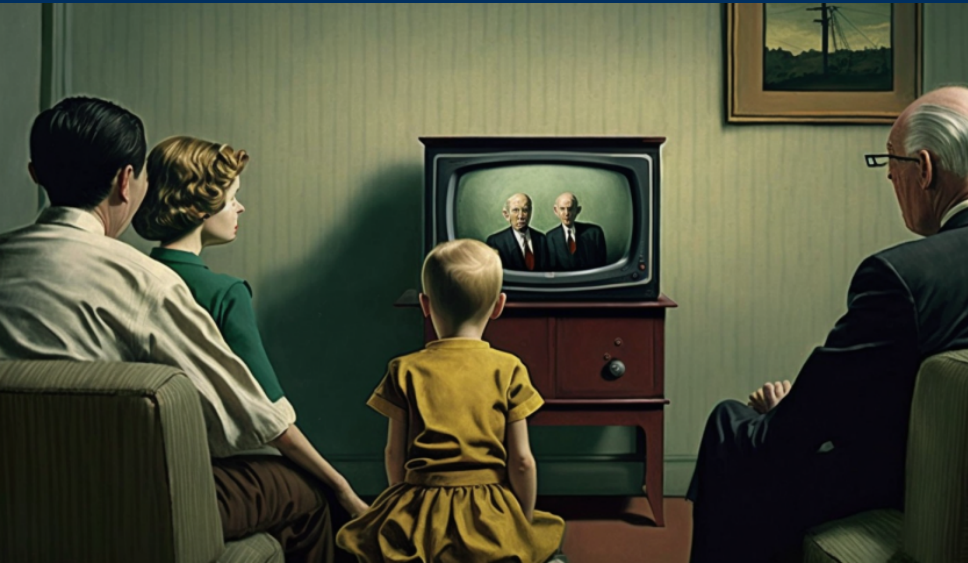
- Decreases political participation ...
- ...which is costly for some parties.
- Hurts democratic legitimacy.
- Hampers deliberation and skew policy.

Representation

But the explanations are still under investigation

- Structural determinants remain unclear.
 - Are there too few qualified and willing candidates?
 - Do elites or voters discriminate?
- Institutional setting matter.
 - PR is better than majoritarian.
 - Formal and informal quotas are important.

Political communication and media



Political communication and media

The importance of political communication

- Political communication allows voters to learn about alternative policies and their consequences.
 - Voters discuss and debate with each other.
 - Parties and candidates market their platforms.
 - Voters watch while politicians debate each other.
 - Voters communicate to politicians.
- Most of this communication goes through the media.
 - The power of agenda-setting and framing puts responsibility on journalists and publishers.
 - Underscores the importance of free press and journalism.

Political communication and media

The media–politics relation varies also between democracies

- **The Anglosphere:** Characterized by high press freedom, a strong professional tradition, and a market-oriented media landscape.
- **Northern Europe:** Known for high professionalism, substantial state support, a strong public service–tradition, and press freedom.
- **Southern Europe:** Features partisan media, lower levels of journalistic professionalism, and public television often used as a political tool.

Similar to other typologies. Exceptions are plenty!

Political communication and media

New media, new politics

- Before mass media parties relied on posters and agitators.
- Newspapers came around 1900 and were often connected to a party, but have later been commercialized.
- Radio and TV allowed to politicians to broadcast directly into homes, which required a less agitating style.
- Thanks to the Internet, there is now more political communication than ever.

The forms of communication shapes politics (and parties). Yet, all of the above keep being important!

Political communication and media

We are just beginning to understand our new landscape

- Algorithms provide us information similar to what we have engaged with before, but not obvious that filter bubbles of social media are more selective than other forms of communication.
- Tailored messages are more effective, but that does not mean that elections can be bought.
- False information travels fast and far, but myths are probably debunked more now than ever.

Source criticism is important also vis-à-vis 'critical' messages.

Political communication and media

And now AI may change everything?

- Will deep fakes change the role of sound and video?
- Will we discuss politics with our speakers and lose debates against Twitter bots?
- Or will AI be a fact checker, correcting people online as well as on TV? Research on conspiracy theories is promising.
- Daily reports about what issues people discuss at home?

The real effects will probably be something entirely different.

Concluding

- Today: elections.
 - Electoral systems.
 - Other kinds of elections.
 - Representation.
 - Political communication and media.
- Next Friday: parties.

Concluding

Thank you all for listening!