

Electoral Laws, Parties, and Public Policy*

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In the modern era, when direct democracy in small city-states is no longer seen as feasible, to speak about democracy is to speak about elections. Our concern in this chapter is to model the link between elections and public policy outcomes. Since, with the relatively rare exception of non-partisan elections,¹ to speak about elections is to speak about political parties, in studying the effects of elections on public policy it is necessary to see how elections can affect party representation and other aspects of party competition. Of course, exactly how elections will affect the nature of representation and the structure of party competition is influenced by a variety of institutional features, but, because of space constraints, we focus on only one of these, the influence of electoral rules (such as the choice between plurality or majority methods and methods aiming at some form of proportional representation). Thus, we will be looking at a two-stage model: first, at the effects of electoral rules on party competition and representation, then at the effects of the structure of representation and party competition on public policy.²

Following Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell (1978), we may think of there being four types of policy arenas that we might examine-- *extraction*, *distribution*, *regulation*, and *symbolic policies* -- but, for reasons of space, we will deal primarily with the first and fourth. To further simplify our presentation we shall confine ourselves to a small but important set of electoral rules: simple *plurality* (more commonly called *first-past-the-post* in Great Britain) in single seat election districts, the *single non-transferable vote* (used, *i.a.*, in Japan for Diet elections until the early 1990s), the *single transferable vote* (used, *i.a.*, in Ireland and Northern Ireland), and the *d'Hondt* form of list proportional representation (historically, the most common formula for list PR elections in Western Europe).

Within any legislature, electoral rules can have both pre-election and post-election consequences for representatives and parties. The pre-election consequences we may think of as the direct effect of electoral rules, e.g., on the "types" of candidates/parties who compete. Two of the more important aspects of representation where electoral rules directly matter are in terms of effects on the incentives for "extremist" parties to form and on the incentives for a "localist/pork-barrel" perspective on the part of elected representatives. The post-election consequences we may think of as the indirect effects

of electoral rules. Perhaps the most important of the indirect effects of electoral rules is their impact on the likelihood of there being a single party controlling a majority of the seats in the legislature.³

We begin with one important aspect of symbolic policy representation, the descriptive representation of individuals with certain characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, or gender.

electoral systems and descriptive (racial, religious and gender) representation

The exclusion from office or substantial underrepresentation of members of a given subset of the society has important symbolism, even if has no direct impact on substantive policies. Moreover, it is likely that most types of discriminatory policies are made less likely if minorities have representatives of their own who may be attuned to such discrimination.

There is a considerable body of evidence, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, and general consensus among students of electoral systems, that, *ceteris paribus*, *large magnitude districts*, i.e., constituencies from which a large number of representatives are elected, will tend to increase the representation of minority or subordinated groups relative to similar electoral rules of lower district magnitude. The basic notion is that large districts make it easier for the parties to nominate a diverse array of candidates, whereas single member districts provide incentives to parties to nominate only candidates from the dominant group in the given party (a group which may be predominantly male or predominantly of one ethnic or religious persuasion, at least in terms of party activists).⁴ Moreover, since proportional representation (PR, for short) tends to allow groups comprising less than a majority of the electorate to elect candidates of choice, PR methods tend to favor the descriptive representation of minorities as compared to plurality.

¹ *Nonpartisan elections* are those in which candidates do not run on a party label. While rare, worldwide, this election type is, however, found in many U.S. cities: see e.g., Davidson and Grofman (1994).

² Of course, the causality does not go only in one direction. On the one hand, parties seek electoral rules that advantage them and, on the other hand, the policy performance of the governing party or governing coalition will almost certainly translate into vote gain or loss for it in future elections.

³ See e.g., Grofman, Lee, Winckler and Woodall (1999).

⁴ Alternatively, women or ethnic or racial minorities may be guaranteed representation by way of quotas. These quotas may either be imposed by the government or by the internal rules of the parties themselves. Reserved seats are one way of ensuring the representation of specific minority groups in parliament. Parliamentary seats are reserved for identifiable ethnic or religious minorities in countries as diverse as Jordan (Christians and Circassians), India (secluded tribes and castes), Pakistan (non-Muslim minorities), New Zealand (Maori), Columbia (black communities), Croatia (Hungarian, Italian, Czech, Slovak, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, German and Austrian minorities), Slovenia (Hungarians and Italians), Taiwan (the aboriginal community), Western Samoa (non-indigenous minorities), Niger (Taurag), and the Palestinian Authority (Christians and Samaritans). Quotas are often defended as transitional mechanisms to lay the foundation for a broader acceptance of women's representation.