

Comment: Does PR promote political extremism, redux.

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The last special issue of *Representation* (40:2) presented an important collection of articles monitoring the electoral fortunes of radical right parties in many countries of Western Europe, particularly the role of electoral systems in contributing towards their rise. The opening piece by Elisabeth Carter (2004) provided a comprehensive classification of electoral systems used in 14 Western European nations compared with the mean vote for 33 right-wing extremist parties from 1979-2002. The results of Carter's research appeared to be a striking refutation of the conventional wisdom: "*Contrary to prevalent assumptions, the share of the vote won by the West European parties of the extreme right in the period 1979-2002 appears unrelated to the type of electoral system in operation in the various countries. This finding is both intriguing and important.*" (p.93). Majoritarian electoral rules, it appeared, do not depress popular support for these extremist parties.

This study is not the first to make this observation. An earlier book by Herbert Kitschelt (1995) also concluded that countries with PR display starkly contrasting shares of the vote by the radical right, so the basic type of electoral system could not be blamed for their rise: "*While electoral laws have a non-negligible impact on party formation and the fragmentation of party systems taken by themselves, they explain very little about the actual dynamics of competition.*" (p.60).

Could the conventional wisdom be so wrong? The answer, quite simply, is that it isn't. In analyzing the effects of electoral systems, we should distinguish their potential impact upon votes, seats, and party strategies. Both Carter and Kitschelt count only the ballots cast. But radical right parties benefit from PR in terms of their share of seats, which is what matters, after all, for the power, legitimacy, status, and resources that flow from elected office. In this regard, as this brief note will demonstrate, majoritarian electoral systems work exactly as proponents claim by excluding extreme parties from parliament. 'Combined' or 'mixed' electoral systems prove the intermediate position, as predicted, because they include elements from both the majoritarian and PR systems. And, as expected, radical right parties gain their greatest parliamentary rewards under PR elections. This observation is hardly novel, but it is worth restating in the light of revisionist critiques.

Evidence

This study theorizes that the hurdles facing radical right parties can be expected to vary under certain conditions, the most important of which concern:

- i. The basic type of electoral system* (whether majoritarian, combined, or proportional);
- ii. Specific aspects of electoral regulations* which can vary within the major types of electoral systems, including the legal electoral threshold, the electoral formula translating votes into seats, the mean district magnitude, the frequency of multilevel contests, the use of compulsory voting regulations, and the use of manipulated partisan bias, such as gerrymandering, to benefit or penalize minor parties; and,
- iii. The spatial distribution or concentration of party support*, regarded as a separate and distinct factor since this is determined more by the geography of social and political cleavages than by the electoral rules per se.

This brief note cannot present all the evidence concerning these conditions but we can focus simply upon evidence for the impact of the basic type of electoral system.

'Before-and-after' case-studies monitoring the impact of electoral reform over successive contests within particular countries lend credence to the conventional assumption that rules matter for radical right party fortunes. In France, for example, the Front National won no seats in the 1981 parliamentary elections (held under the Second Ballot majoritarian electoral rules), surged to 35 deputies (6.3%) under the proportional representation system tried in the 1986 parliamentary election, and then plummeted to only one deputy in 1988, despite an unchanged share of the vote, after PR was repealed. Only a few FN candidates have ever been elected to the National Assembly under the second ballot system, but by contrast they have been far more successful under PR rules in European and regional contests (see Hainsworth 2004). The impact of electoral reform can also be demonstrated by the electoral opportunities of New Zealand First under the Mixed Member Proportional system adopted in 1993, when a two party system became a multimember system overnight (Vowles et al. 1998). Yet although 'before' and 'after' natural experiments within each country are persuasive, they cannot be regarded as conclusive proof. Much else can change over successive elections, such as the issue agenda, media coverage, and government popularity, which can also alter party fortunes. Moreover the exact conditions under which electoral systems constrain the success of radical right parties are only imperfectly understood.

To explore more systematic evidence for these claims, electoral systems in 39 countries can be classified into three major families, as listed elsewhere (Norris 2004), each including a

number of sub-categories: *majoritarian* formula (including First-Past-the-Post, Second Ballot, the Block vote, Single Non-Transferable Vote, and Alternative Voting systems)¹; *combined* systems (incorporating both majoritarian and proportional formula); and *proportional formula* (including Party Lists as well as the Single Transferable Vote systems).

Based on this classification, Table 1 compares the share of the votes and seats won by radical right parties in the 39 nations under comparison. Two periods are selected for analysis: the mean vote and seat share won by radical right parties in national elections held in each country since 1990, and, for comparison, the votes and seats share in the most recent national elections (held from 2000-2004). The research is drawn from a forthcoming book comparing the underlying conditions and strategic actions conducive to the rise of radical right parties, which discusses in detail the comparative framework and the classification of parties (Norris 2005). When the comparison was restricted to just the 14 West European countries included in the Carter study, for purposes of strict replication, the main findings did not change.

[Table 1]

The results confirm that the share of the vote achieved by radical right parties in the most recent national legislative elections was similar under majoritarian (7.2%) and proportional (7.1%) electoral systems. But the mechanical effects of the electoral formula are also strikingly evident: despite having roughly the same share of the vote, *radical right parties were more than twice as successful in gaining seats under PR as under majoritarian elections*. In the most recent elections, radical right parties won 3.8% of seats under majoritarian rules and 9.9% under PR. Another way of summarizing this data is to calculate the votes: seats ratio². Under majoritarian systems, with 7.2% of votes, radical right parties won 3.8% of seats, or a ratio of 0.52. Under combined or 'mixed' systems the ratio is 0.64. Under PR it becomes 1.39, meaning that radical right parties win a higher share of seats than they get votes. Similar patterns were evident in the comparison of all national legislative elections held since 1990. The effect of majoritarian systems was therefore not to depress the popular vote for radical right parties, for all the reasons already discussed, but rather to limit their access to legislative office and all the trappings of power and legitimacy that flow from this position.

[Figure 1 about here]

The impact of the electoral rules is also illustrated by Figure 1, showing the proportion of votes to seats under the three basic types of electoral system. The majoritarian systems provide the least proportional results, notably in France where Le Pen's Front National gains minimal deputies in the French National Assembly, due to the Second Ballot majoritarian system, despite having the support of more than one in ten voters. In Canada, by contrast, the Reform Party does relatively well in parliament, because of the regional nature of Canadian electoral politics. The combined systems used for national legislative elections in countries such as Hungary, Russia,

Italy and New Zealand prove moderately proportional. And the PR electoral systems, used in places such as Chile, Switzerland, Romania, and Norway, prove most proportional.

Conclusions

There are many reasons why the share of the vote for extreme parties is not depressed by the basic type of electoral systems. In particular, as explored in depth elsewhere, since the ideological position of radical rightwing supporters is located well away from mainstream parties across the political spectrum, under proximity theories of voting this makes it unlikely that they would defect to cast a strategic or tactical vote for another party, even if their chosen standard-bearer faces little hope of any electoral success. Other parties on the center-right, such as Christian Democrats and Conservatives, are simply located too far away from their ideal policy position. Moreover, rational supporters of the radical right may be seeking other political benefits beyond electing members to the legislature and policy process. If people are seeking to cast an 'expressive' ballot, such as registering disgust with the immigration policies adopted by both the mainstream governing and opposition parties, they might well remain willing to vote for a radical right party, even if their chosen candidate or party cannot gain office. By 'sending a message' through the ballot box, they may still hope to influence public policy indirectly, for example causing the government to adopt more restrictive policies towards refugees and asylum seekers, even if not gaining an elected parliamentary representative. The rational choice facing supporters of smaller radical right parties in majoritarian elections is therefore either staying home (exit), or else casting an expressive or symbolic ballot for the radical right, with a potential indirect impact upon public policy, rather than switching to a party which is far away from their ideal ideological location.

But the mechanical effects of electoral systems kick in, as proponents intend. As this note demonstrates, the higher thresholds of majoritarian systems work, as proponents argue, to keep extreme parties out of power. Focusing only on the popular support for the radical right overlooks this simple fact: elections are primarily about political power and access to legislative office, not simply objects of analysis for social scientists.

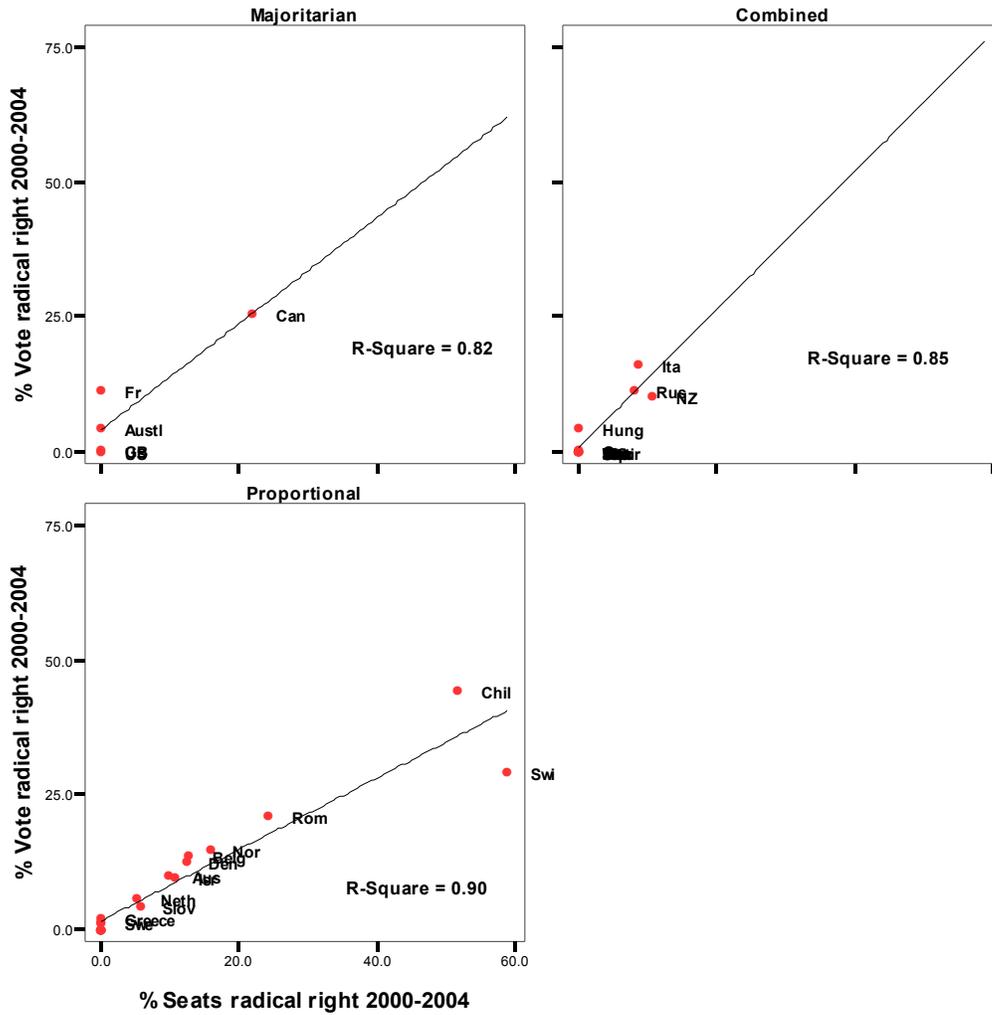
Table 1: Electoral systems and support for radical right parties

Major type of electoral system	Elections 1990-2004			Most recent election			Number of countries
	% Votes	% Seats	Ratio	% Votes	% Seats	Ratio	
Majoritarian system	8.6	3.5	0.40	7.2	3.8	0.52	6
Combined system	4.4	2.1	0.48	3.6	2.3	0.64	12
Proportional system	7.9	8.7	1.10	7.1	9.9	1.39	21
Total	6.9	5.9	0.85	6.1	6.6	1.08	39

Notes: The results summarize the mean percentage of votes and seats won by radical right parties in elections for the lower house in the national legislature. For the classification of electoral systems by nation see Table 2.1 and also Pippa Norris. 2003. *Electoral Engineering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.

Data sources: Thomas T. Mackie and Richard Rose. 1991. *The International Almanac of Electoral History*. Washington DC: CQ Press; Tom Mackie and Richard Rose. 1997. *A Decade of Election Results: Updating the international Almanac*. Studies in Public Policy. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde; *Elections around the World* www.electionworld.org; Richard Rose, Neil Munro and Tom Mackie. 1998. *Elections in Central and Eastern Europe since 1990*. Studies in Public Policy 300. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.

Figure 4.1: The ratio of votes to seats won by radical right parties, 2000-2004



Note: The proportion of votes and seats won by radical right parties in the most recent national legislative election for the lower house (held from 2000-2004). The regression line summarizes the relationship between votes and seats.

Data sources: see Table 1.

References

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¹ It can be argued that a further distinction needs to be drawn between majority and plurality elections, given the higher effective electoral threshold used in the former. The contrast is evident for example between First-Past-the-Post used in Canadian parliamentary elections, which requires a plurality of votes (winning at least one more vote than any other candidate) to gain office and the Second Ballot system used in the Russian Presidential elections, which requires an absolute majority to win office. Nevertheless the classification used in this study is more parsimonious, the ballot structure used for plurality and majoritarian elections is similar (casting a vote for a single candidate), and it is the standard typology used in the literature.

² Calculated simply by dividing the percentage of votes won by radical right parties into their percentage of seats.