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Electoral System Change

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Abstract and Keywords

Most research into electoral systems focuses on their effects. Only recently has a significant literature emerged examining how they are chosen. This chapter explores four core issues in that literature. First, it considers what is meant by “electoral system change.” This can refer to changes of any scale to any electoral rules in any context, but typically—including here—a narrower definition is used. Second, the chapter investigates what electoral system changes happen. It considers the frequency of reforms and patterns in those reforms. Third, it examines the determinants of electoral system change. Most studies focus on the microfoundations of reform. Others highlight the systemic level. Both perspectives are needed to develop a complete picture. Finally, the chapter gauges the effects of electoral system change and assesses why such changes, notwithstanding important effects, often fail to deliver on their promoters’ expectations.

Keywords: electoral reform, electoral system change, first past the post, interparty, intraparty, personalization, proportional representation

THE study of electoral systems is acknowledged as among the most developed subfields of political science (Shugart 2005). By the early 1980s, Riker (1982) could already review over a century of work, which had generated considerable understanding of the effects of electoral systems on other aspects of politics. In contrast to such *effects*, however, the issue of how and why electoral systems *change* until recently received comparatively little attention: in 2005, Shugart could still characterize the subfield merely as “beginning to take greater note of the origins, or ‘engineering’ side, of the study of electoral systems” (Shugart 2005, 27). Today’s situation is quite different from the one Shugart described little more than a decade ago. Many issues remain unresolved, but much work has emerged, from which we can draw important insights.

This chapter will seek answers to four questions. The first is a necessary conceptual precursor to all later questions: what do we actually mean by electoral system change? The second is descriptive: what electoral system changes happen? Or, to put it differently, what patterns can we observe in electoral system changes? The third and fourth questions are causal: what are the determinants of electoral system change, and what are its effects? Each of these questions has generated important debates that deserve our attention. Before getting to these questions, it will be useful to briefly survey the history of research into electoral system change.

The Study of Electoral System Change: A Brief History

As just noted, a coherent body of research into electoral system change has only recently begun to emerge. Before the 1990s, only a few notable exceptions broke this pattern: Rokkan (1970) examined the switch from majoritarian to proportional systems in many European (p. 114) countries in the early twentieth century; Carstairs (1980) surveyed the history of electoral reforms across Western Europe; and detailed single-country studies included those of Butler (1963) on the United Kingdom, Campbell (1958) (later Cole and Campbell 1989) on France, Törnudd (1968) on Finland, and Ziegler (1958) on early developments in Germany.

The main reason for the dearth of interest in these early years was simple: major electoral system change in established democracies very rarely happened. In the 1960s and 1970s, not one long-standing democracy changed the basic principles of its electoral rules. Nohlen (1984, 217) argued, “Fundamental changes [to electoral systems] are rare and arise only in extraordinary historical situations.” As Katz (1980, 123) put it, major electoral system change “seems likely only when, as in France after the Second World War or during the Algerian crisis, the nation seems on the verge of collapse.”

New interest in electoral system change began to emerge in the 1990s. The main impetus was a wave of real-world reforms. France abandoned its two-round majoritarian system in favor of proportional representation for the election of 1986, only to revert back to majoritarianism in the election that followed. Of more lasting importance, in the mid-1990s, New Zealand moved from first past the post (FPTP) to a mixed-member form of proportional representation (MMP), Italy replaced a pure proportional system with a less proportional mixed-member system, and Japan adopted mixed-member rules in place of the system of single non-transferable vote. The first attempt to draw comparative lessons from these cases was a collection of studies edited by Norris (1995). At the same time, renewed interest spurred re-examination of earlier cases, such as the adoption of (West) Germany’s postwar electoral system (Bawn 1993) and the wave of early twentieth-century reforms in Western Europe (Boix 1999).

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The subfield has expanded enormously since the turn of the present century. Benoit (2004), Colomer (2005), Remmer (2008), and Calvo (2009), among others, offered rational choice theories of electoral system change, while Katz (2005) advocated a less parsimonious approach that acknowledged the variety and complexity of electoral reform processes. Edited volumes (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001a; Grofman and Lijphart 2002; Colomer 2004; Gallagher and Mitchell 2005; Blais 2008) provided both case studies and comparative analyses. Book-length monographs include my own (Renwick 2010; Renwick and Pilet 2016), as well as Ahmed (2013) and Pilon (2013). Surveys of the burgeoning literature are given by Benoit (2007) and Rahat (2011).

The lessons of this tide of work will be analyzed over the following sections. The first question to consider is that of what electoral system change actually is.

What Is Electoral System Change?

Electoral system change is, simply, the process by which the rules of an election are altered. The concept is essentially identical to that of electoral reform (though it is free of the positive evaluative tone sometimes associated with the latter), and I will use these two terms interchangeably. Three principal questions can be asked of this definition.

(p. 115) First, does it include electoral system *origination*, as well as electoral system *alteration*? Second, which are the electoral rules that we have in mind? Third, how substantial does the change in these rules need to be before we count it?

The first of these questions is perhaps the least important, but clarity is needed. On the one hand, the concept of *change* would seem to imply the pre-existence of something to which that change is applied: an electoral system can be changed only if there is an electoral system already in place. On the other hand, this may be a rather academic distinction: existing rules are not necessarily used as a reference point in devising new rules, particularly during overarching regime change. A more common distinction separates changes in existing democratic contexts and changes during regime transitions. Processes in these two circumstances may be very different from each other: in the former, politicians elected through the old rules are almost certain to play a major role; in the latter, that may well not be the case. There is no single right answer to the question of whether this distinction is useful: it depends on our purposes. What matters is simply that we are clear about what we are referring to. For reasons of space, this chapter focuses on reforms in existing democracies.

The next question concerns which rules we have in mind. The concept of the electoral system can be understood broadly to encompass all the rules governing elections—including, for example, rules on who can vote or run for election, how candidates and their supporters can campaign, and how the election is administered. More commonly, however, the electoral system is defined narrowly to consist of two things: the nature of the votes that voters can cast; and the rules through which it is determined, on the basis

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of those votes, who is elected. In the FPTP system, for example, voters can cast a vote for a single candidate, whereas some other systems allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference, vote only for a party, or vote for a party and a candidate. In FPTP, the candidate who wins the most votes is elected; other systems specify a threshold that must be passed or allocate seats across parties in proportion to the votes cast. Given limited space, I will, in common with most studies, employ the narrow definition here. That is not remotely to suggest that other changes are unimportant. Notably, Celis, Krook, and Meier (2011, 515) are well justified in characterizing the increasing use of gender quotas as “among the widest-reaching electoral reforms of recent years” and in criticizing the excessively narrow focus of most electoral reform studies. I remain within those narrow bounds only to keep the scope of the chapter manageable.

Finally, we should think about the degree of change we have in mind. Those who see electoral system change as rare have in mind change from one type of system—such as first past the post or list proportional representation—to another. If, by contrast, we allow changes within these systems—such as changes to thresholds or to voters’ ability to order the candidates on a party’s list—then reforms look much more common. My own recent study, for example, found seventy-four reforms in European democracies between 1945 and 2009 (Renwick and Pilet 2016, 45–46). But how small can a reform be and still be counted? Do we count, say, a small change in the number of seats available in one electoral district? Lijphart (1994, 13) was the first to grapple in detail with this issue, proposing minima that a reform had to pass to count as significant. It was a revised (p. 116) version of this scheme that Jean-Benoit Pilet and I used to reach the reform count just cited. Jacobs and Leyenaar (2011) distinguish three categories of reform: major, minor, and technical. Again, there is no single correct definition of which reforms count. But precise criteria are always needed.

Bearing these conceptual considerations in mind, we can turn now to the question of what electoral system changes can actually be observed in the world.

Patterns of Electoral System Change

The preceding paragraphs have already referred to one aspect of patterning in electoral system changes: namely, their frequency. As we have seen, how often we characterize electoral systems as changing depends crucially on how we define electoral system change. Major shifts from one type of system to another are rare, but significant adjustments within those basic types are, in many countries, not unusual. In addition, changes to electoral systems are much more likely to happen during or immediately following democratic transitions than they are in long-established democracies (Renwick 2011, 470–471). Beyond the frequency of electoral system changes, we can examine two further patterns: first, the direction of change; second, its character.

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Following Shugart (2001), the direction of change can be measured on two principal dimensions: interparty and intraparty. The interparty dimension relates to the degree of proportionality of the electoral system: the degree to which the system converges upon or diverges from the “ideal” in which each party’s share of the seats is identical to its share of the votes. The intraparty dimension, meanwhile, refers to “personalization”: the degree to which voters or parties can determine which individual candidates are elected.

The best-known finding on the interparty dimension is Colomer’s conclusion (2005, 16–17) that the broad pattern of change has been toward more proportional systems. In 1874, there were, by his count, twenty electoral democracies in the world with populations over one million, and all of those employed majoritarian electoral rules. By 1960, there were sixteen democracies with majoritarian systems and twenty-three with proportional rules. By 2002, there were still sixteen majoritarian systems, but the number of proportional democracies had risen to sixty-six. But this contrasts with the analysis of Núñez, Simón, and Pilet (2017, 385), drawing on the Electoral System Change in Europe database: looking at European democracies between 1945 and 2012, they find no clear direction of change: thirty-three reforms increased proportionality over that period, while twenty-nine reduced it.

These differing findings relate to the conceptual distinctions identified in the previous section. The trend toward proportionality identified by Colomer has two components: first, in the early twentieth century, many European countries shifted from majoritarian to proportional rules (see also Boix 1999; Cusack, Iversen, and Soskice 2007; Kreuzer 2010; Ahmed 2013); second, the great majority of the countries that have democratized since World War II have adopted (wholly or partially) proportional (p. 117) systems (Bormann and Golder 2013). But that does not mean there is an inexorable trend toward proportionality everywhere. Some democracies—notably including the United States, United Kingdom, India, Canada, and Australia—have stuck with majoritarian systems, despite (in some cases) repeated waves of reform pressure (though the United Kingdom has shifted to new rules in both sub- and supranational elections—see Lundberg’s chapter in this volume). As the data in Núñez et al. (2017) show, established European democracies manifest no general pattern of change. Among major changes of system type, New Zealand replaced FPTP with a proportional system (specifically, MMP) in 1993, but Italy moved partially in the opposite direction the same year. France briefly flirted with proportional representation in the 1980s but quickly restored majoritarianism.

The intraparty dimension of electoral system change has received much less attention: as Colomer put it in the title of his book on the subject, this is “the neglected dimension of electoral systems” (Colomer 2011). Karvonen (2010, 101) surveyed evidence from a range of cases and found no general pattern. By contrast, my own work with Jean-Benoit Pilet, drawing on detailed research into thirty-one European democracies, identified a clear trend: between 1945 and 2009, we found thirty-five reforms that increased personalization and only twelve that reduced it; for the period since 1989, that trend was overwhelming (Renwick and Pilet 2016, 45–46). In this case, the divergence of results appears to be due to the greater scope of the latter study and its use of a more fine-

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grained definition of personalization. There is no systematic study of electoral reforms affecting the intraparty dimension outside Europe, but changes have occurred in both directions. The adoption of mixed-member systems in Japan and New Zealand in the 1990s reduced personalization, as did the creation of a list PR system in Colombia a decade later (Pachón and Shugart 2010). By contrast, El Salvador (España-Nájera 2016) and Iraq (Younis 2011, 14) have both opened their previously closed lists.

Turning to the character of electoral system changes, one aspect that has received attention is the fact that electoral reforms tend not to be enacted in isolation; rather, they are often embedded within packages that include other changes (e.g., Bedock 2014, 371; Emmenegger and Petersen 2015, 8). This may matter to analysis of the origins of these reforms: many of those voting for them might not even want them but support them in return for agreement on other parts of the package. Equally, we should also remember that changes to the electoral system are not always the only possible means through which reformers might pursue their objectives: depending on what those objectives are, other options might also be available. This could again skew our analysis of causes.

Finally, electoral system change is a subset of the broader phenomenon of institutional change, and it is valuable to consider how the wider literature characterizes such change. One recent focus concerns the incremental nature of institutional change: because they face opposition from entrenched interests, reforms, when they occur, often preserve aspects of the status quo. Streeck and Thelen (2005, 19–31) argue that this can lead to a range of patterns, which they place under such headings as “displacement” (where subordinate elements in an institutional order rise in salience), “layering” (where aspects of (p. 118) the old are maintained as new arrangements are maintained), and “drift” (under which institutions change because they are not updated to reflect an evolving context).

As we will see in the following section, the pervasiveness of barriers to reform is recognized in work on electoral system change too (Rahat and Hazan 2011). That may help explain why most reforms retain the basic structure of the status quo. It may also explain one recent phenomenon: namely, a growth in the popularity of mixed-member electoral systems. While Shugart and Wattenberg (2001b, 24) suggest that such systems may be preferred because they are believed to offer “the best of both worlds,” another interpretation is that they are manifestations of layering: while moving toward a new system, reforms are designed to preserve elements of the old.

Determinants of Electoral System Change

The primary question asked by scholars of electoral system change is simple: what causes it? More particularly, we seek to understand why changes to electoral systems happen or do not happen and, where they happen, why they take the forms that they do. Approaches to answering these questions range from purely theoretical models (Benoit 2004),

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through statistical analyses (e.g., Boix 1999; Calvo and Micozzi 2005; Cusack et al. 2007; Bol 2016) and qualitative comparative studies (Sakamoto 1999; Katz 2005; Renwick 2010), to deep, sometimes interpretivist histories (Ahmed 2013; Pilon 2013). Cutting across these methodologies, most studies focus primarily on the microfoundations of reform processes, analyzing who is involved in those processes, what motivates them, and how they pursue their goals. But the broad political and social forces that shape the world in which these actors operate—shaping their interests and values, influencing their knowledge, and constituting the opportunities and constraints they face—are also crucial. In this section, I begin with microfoundations before moving out to the big picture. We can distinguish five main questions:

1. Who are the actors involved in electoral system change?
2. What are those actors' goals or purposes?
3. What do those actors know?
4. How are actors' preferences aggregated and translated into outcomes?
5. What broad political and social forces shape processes of electoral reform?

Actors

The dominant actors of electoral system change are politicians: there is no case of significant electoral reform, at least in an established democracy, in which politicians have (p. 119) played no role (Renwick 2010, 16). That is so for two reasons: first, politicians typically control the mechanisms by which the rules can be changed; second, electoral reforms affect politicians more directly and more substantially than they affect anyone else. Many accounts of electoral system change focus exclusively on politicians, seeing decision making around the electoral system simply as an arena in which politicians seek to maximize their power (e.g., Benoit 2004; Colomer 2005; Calvo 2009).

But politicians are not always in sole charge, and the literature on electoral system change identifies four further sets of actors who can also be involved: judges, interest and pressure groups, the general public, and international actors. The last of these groups are often involved during democratic transitions (Reynolds 2011; Reilly 2013). But they are much less prominent in established democracies, so I will not consider them further here.

Decision making can be wrested furthest from the hands of politicians by judicial rulings. In 2013, for example, Italy's Constitutional Court determined that the electoral law passed in 2005 breached the constitution because it was insufficiently proportional and gave voters too little opportunity to vote for individual candidates (Baldini and Renwick 2015, 164–165). Four years later, the same court decided that key parts of a replacement law were also unconstitutional (see Passarelli in this volume). Other significant judicial interventions in the electoral system are discussed, for example, by Katz (2011), Williams (2005), and Zittel (this volume). Still, while court rulings have significantly changed aspects of the broad electoral system—notably in US Supreme Court decisions on the

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franchise, districting, and campaign finance (Hasen 2003)—major change via the courts in the electoral system narrowly defined remains rare.

More frequently important is the general public. Public influence is sometimes exerted through formal channels such as referendums (e.g., Donovan 1995; Vowles 1995; Curtice 2013) and citizens' assemblies (Fournier et al. 2011; LeDuc 2011). But more often it occurs informally, as public preferences shape politicians' agendas. Widespread public mobilization specifically around electoral reform is rare: voters are typically more concerned about matters that affect their daily lives than they are about the finer details of the representative system. But two more indirect mechanisms are more common (see Quintal 1970; Reed and Thies 2001, 153; Renwick 2011, 458). First, politicians might retreat from reforms that could bring them advantage if they fear voters would punish them for engaging in such self-interested maneuvering. Second, politicians might enact reforms they otherwise would not pursue if they believe voters will reward them for doing so. While cases of the first mechanism can be difficult to identify empirically, cases of the second are clearly widespread. My recent work on personalizing reforms in Europe, for example, suggests that many such reforms over the past quarter century have been influenced by politicians' desire to show they are responding to voters' disillusionment with the political status quo (Renwick and Pilet 2016, 210).

The role of interest and pressure groups in processes of electoral system change is perhaps the least researched. Democratic reform groups are common and can exert influence if the circumstances are right. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the potential that economic interests or other nonpolitical groups can have an important driving role. (p. 120) Cusack et al. (2007), notably, present an interpretation of electoral system changes in the early twentieth century in which politicians are no more than the conduits for enacting the will of wider economic interest groups. Leeman and Mares (2014) offer a more nuanced model, in which deputies respond to electoral pressures in their districts, but these electoral pressures are shaped, in turn, by underlying economic patterns. Ahmed (2013), from a very different methodological perspective, similarly argues for the importance of class interests.

Goals and Purposes

The preceding discussion of actors has begun also to open up the question of those actors' motivations. The dominant approach here sees participants in the electoral reform process as seeking to advance their own interests. Given that politicians are typically the principal actors, the assumption tends to be that those politicians are seeking to advance their (or their party's) power. The cleanest statement of this perspective is offered by Benoit (2004, 373–374):

Electoral systems result from the collective choice of political parties linking institutional alternatives to electoral self-interest in the form of maximizing seat shares A change in electoral institutions will occur when a political party or

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coalition of political parties supports an alternative which will bring it more seats than the status quo electoral system, and also has the power to effect through fiat that institutional alternative.

There is no doubt that this captures a large part of the politics of electoral reform: it is the logic that underlies the fact that large parties (and the politicians within them) tend to prefer more majoritarian electoral systems, which favor large parties, while smaller parties (and their representatives) favor more proportional systems (e.g., Colomer 2005). It might also be reasonable to suppose a similar logic for voters: insofar as they think about electoral systems, they may prefer one that advances the electoral interests of their favored party.

On the other hand, two complications need to be considered before we have a rounded picture. First, pursuit of power can mean many things. Should we look at individual politicians' power interests or those of their parties? Do politicians look just at the next election or are their time horizons longer? Are they mainly interested in winning seats in the legislature or in exercising power in government (these are typically positively correlated, but are not always so)? Perhaps most important, building on the previous discussion of the role played by public opinion, do politicians look simply at the mechanical effects of different electoral systems on their electoral fortunes, or do they also look at whether the actions they take in regard to electoral reform will affect their popularity? This is the distinction, introduced by Reed and Thies (2001) and used also by Shugart (2008), between "outcome-contingent" and "act-contingent" motivations—between (p. 121) comparing the effects of the outcomes of reform processes (alternative electoral systems) and comparing the effects of one's actions in the course of the reform process (supporting or opposing reform). As suggested earlier, public opinion often has an important role in processes of electoral system change, and that is because politicians do look at options in an act-contingent as well as an outcome-contingent way. The first complication, thus, is that the pursuit of power can shape decision making around electoral systems in a wide variety of different ways.

The second complication is that, much as the pursuit of power clearly matters, it is not the only motivation that can influence how actors approach electoral system change. As Katz found, reviewing the papers in a symposium on electoral reform:

the ideas that electoral reforms can be understood simply as stratagems of political parties to maximise their voting power, and that voting behaviour with regard to referendums concerning reform of the electoral system is driven simply by the desire for one's preferred candidate to win the present election, find little support in these papers. (Katz 2007, 308)

Similarly, I have argued that none of the three major electoral reforms of the 1990s—in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan—can be explained solely in terms of political interests (Renwick 2010, 167–238). Values matter too.

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This point has now gained support from a range of empirical studies. Looking at electoral system changes in the early twentieth century, Blais, Dobrzynska, and Indridason (2005, 184) found that proportional systems were often adopted largely by consensus and that this reflected general acceptance of “the principle that each vote should count the same.” Focusing on more recent times, Bowler, Donovan, and Karp (2006), drawing on surveys of politicians in four democracies between 1999 and 2002, found that their attitudes on electoral reform questions were shaped partly by their electoral interests, but partly also by their ideological commitments and democratic values. Bol (2016) surveys the positions of 115 parties in relation to twenty-two proposals for electoral reform across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries between 1961 and 2011 and concludes that these positions were shaped by party ideologies as well as by party interests: “values appear to be as crucial as self-interests in explaining the overall electoral reform story” (Bol 2016, 102).

While the studies just cited concentrate on politicians, others look at the general public. Norris (2011) finds that high levels of popular “democratic aspiration,” as measured through survey evidence, are associated with greater incidence of electoral reforms. Drawing on survey data from the 1993 electoral reform referendum in New Zealand, Lamare and Vowles (1996) found that a range of values, as well as party interests, correlated with voting patterns. Karp (2007) found similar patterns for a referendum in Colorado in 2004 on whether to allocate the state’s nine votes in the presidential electoral college proportionally, as did Whiteley et al. (2012) regarding the United Kingdom’s electoral reform referendum of 2011. (p. 122)

A full understanding of goals and purposes in relation to electoral system change thus requires us to engage both with the complexity of power interests and with the roles of a range of values. There is no doubt that many reforms do conform to the narrow rational choice model, in that they are dominated by the electoral interests of the politicians in power. But often those interests are shaped by act contingencies that depend on public opinion. And a growing body of work suggests that values are also central to the story of electoral reform.

Knowledge

Our third question relates to what the actors know. Knowledge comes in two principal forms: what actors know about electoral systems and their effects; and what they know about their own positions—particularly, for politicians, about their popularity. It could be, for example, that a party’s support among voters is falling and that it would therefore benefit from a more proportional system. If it does not know about proportional systems, however, or if it does not know about its falling support (or—more likely in a world of regular polling—it is uncertain of whether the decline is a short-term blip or a long-term trend), then it may fail to change its preferences.

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The importance of knowledge about electoral systems is evident, for example, in the fact that proportional systems spread in the early twentieth century only once familiarity with them increased. We might expect variation in system knowledge to matter less in today's interconnected world than in the past. But knowledge can be about practical familiarity, as well as basic awareness: actors may be wary of options that they do not feel they understand or that they feel have little chance of catching on. Thus, for example, single transferable vote (STV) systems are widely used and advocated in the British Isles and, to varying degrees, other Anglophone democracies, but almost ignored elsewhere. Furthermore, knowledge about the effects of different electoral systems can be shaky: as we explore in the section below on the effects of change, reform supporters' claims (and probably often also their genuine beliefs) about the positive effects that electoral system change will bring are frequently exaggerated.

The key aspect of knowledge regarding future electoral prospects is often uncertainty. Andrews and Jackman (2005) offer evidence that the choices made in conditions of high uncertainty—particularly in the early stages of democratization—are often based on short-term calculations and turn out to harm the interests of their initial advocates. If actors are aware of uncertainty, this may, following the logic of the Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” (Rawls 1972, 136–142), lead them to prefer more proportional systems in which they essentially hedge their bets. Pilet and Bol (2011) show how perceptions of risk do indeed matter in electoral reform processes, and that they can vary across actors.

Translating Preferences into Outcomes

Actors' goals and purposes combine with their knowledge to generate their *preferences* among the options that are available. But how do those preferences then translate into (p. 123) outcomes? If, as in Benoit's model (2004), there is a single, united party that has the power to decide the electoral system on its own, then this will be a simple business: the leadership of that party will enact whatever it thinks will best advance its purposes. If, on the other hand, parties contain a diversity of views or no one party has an overall majority, or public opinion is swayable, then the translation of preferences into outcomes will be far from straightforward.

Emmenegger and Petersen (2015) argue, indeed, that the complexity of this process means that large-n cross-sectional analyses of electoral reform processes will always struggle to find meaningful general patterns: processes of electoral system change are likely to involve “collective actors, such as political parties, social movements or governments,” which “are likely to be characterized by internal factions, personal and ideological rivalry, charismatic leaders,” such that their behavior will be “highly context-dependent and volatile” (Emmenegger and Petersen 2015, 2). Similarly, I have emphasized the importance of context-dependent processes of leadership and path dependence (Renwick 2010, 69–85). Some—notably, Browne and Hamm (1996), on an electoral system change in France in 1951—have sought to reconstruct particular

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instances of electoral reform using the techniques of social choice theory, but in doing so they simply illustrate the difficulties of generalizing beyond the single case.

Rahat and Hazan (2011) seek to systematize our understanding of some of the mechanisms through which preferences translate into outcomes by identifying seven “barriers” to reform. Some of these, such as political traditions and social structures, are in fact best seen as undergirding the formation of preferences. But others relate to aggregation of preferences into outcomes. The formal institutional structure is important for determining the number of veto points in the system and the degree to which power within any of these points is likely to lie in the hands of a single, unitary actor or multiple, complex actors. The nature of coalition politics and the degree to which different veto players have differing preferences are also crucial. Nunez and Jacobs (2016) draw a range of hypotheses from this work, which they test by combining statistical analysis of electoral system dynamics in sixteen countries from 1975 to 2005 and qualitative analysis of key cases. They find (perhaps unsurprisingly) that electoral system change is less likely in countries with more rigid constitutional structures. On the other hand, their expectation that strong judicial review will make reform harder is not supported; in fact, it appears that judicial review may be more likely to catalyze than to block electoral system change.

Underlying Drivers

The preceding subsections demonstrate the importance of combining microfoundational analysis of actors with broader analysis of wide social and political forces: any study of actors requires engagement with the factors that shape those actors’ interests, values, understandings, opportunities, and constraints. Many of the underlying drivers of processes of electoral system change have thus already been touched upon: democratic and other values frame the options that are considered legitimate; social structures (p. 124) influence class identities and interests; knowledge, values, and other ideas flow between people and places.

Some authors explore these same forces without paying much attention to the microfoundational mechanisms through which they generate their effects. A literature on diffusion, for example, looks at the tendency for similar electoral rules to be adopted in particular time periods, regions, or colonial networks (Lundell 2010, 59–87). Pilon (2013) goes further, seeing electoral system change as a by-product of evolving struggles over the meaning of democracy: “the search for constant variables affecting choices over voting systems fails to capture what is really going on. The real battle is over what democracy will be, with voting systems and their reform taken up as one of many possible terrains” (Pilon 2013, 52). He tracks electoral system change in the twentieth century through four historical epochs; across these periods, it is above all the shifting character of the political Left that lies at the heart of his narratives.

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The most developed non-microfoundational account of electoral system change is Shugart's theory of "systemic failure" (Shugart 2001, 2008). Shugart defines systemic failure of the electoral system as "the incapacity of the electoral system to deliver the normatively expected connection between the vote and the formation of executive authority" (Shugart 2008, 13). On one version, those expectations are shaped by the prevailing electoral system (Shugart 2008, 13); on another, any "extreme" system—one that is highly proportional, majoritarian, candidate-centric, or party-centric—is more likely to be seen as failing than a more balanced system (Shugart 2001, 28–29). The occurrence of such failure creates the circumstances in which a change in the system becomes more likely. Thus, the broad pattern of electoral reforms is determined at the systemic level, while the level of actors and their preferences just fills in the timing and detailed dynamics. Shugart does not argue that this systemic account of the drivers of electoral reform is sufficient to explain why reforms do or do not occur: he emphasizes that that requires an analysis also of the contingencies through which the failures feed into the key actors' rational calculations (Shugart 2008, 14–19). Still, his approach differs from many in highlighting the crucial role of the systemic level.

Effects of Electoral System Change

Our final question turns to the effects of electoral system change: once reform has happened, how does this affect wider political life? In part, this is a question simply about the effects of electoral systems as such: to understand the effects, for example, of a shift to a more proportional electoral system, we can consider, in part, the effects of electoral system proportionality in general. Indeed, it may seem that that is all we need to consider. Yet students of electoral reform have repeatedly found that the reality appears to be more complex: that changes to electoral systems do not necessarily deliver the effects that their advocates hoped for. For example, while there is general agreement in (p. 125) the literature on electoral systems that more proportional systems are associated with substantially higher electoral turnout (e.g., Endersby and Kriekhaus 2008), Vowles's detailed study concludes that the adoption of proportional rules in New Zealand in the 1990s had little or no effect on turnout (Vowles 2010). Similarly, Gambetta and Warner (1996) and Katz (2006) set out the expectations of electoral reform supporters in Italy in the 1990s and conclude that those expectations were frequently dashed. Concentrating on the Japanese reform at the same time, McKean and Scheiner (2000) found that it did not yield the shift toward more policy-oriented campaigning that was hoped for. My own recent work suggests that personalizing reforms, while often designed as a way of reconnecting voters with politics, have not discernibly produced any such effect (Renwick and Pilet 2016, 249–260). This recurring finding is summed up in the work of Bowler and Donovan (2013). Exploring a range of putative effects of a variety of reforms, they repeatedly find that effects are small or undetectable: "Our assessment demonstrates that expectations about the effects of electoral reforms are generally not

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met . . . [F]or all the discussion of institutional engineering and manipulation and all the effort involved, institutional changes may not actually change very much” (Bowler and Donovan 2013, 5).

Still, this pattern should not be exaggerated. Electoral system changes do have effects on politics more broadly. Electoral reform in New Zealand, for example, has facilitated multiparty competition, contributed to a new normal of coalition governments, and helped open the system to greater gender and ethnic diversity (e.g., Vowles, Banducci, and Karp 2006). Reed (2001, 2002) offers a far rosier picture of the effects of the reforms in Italy and Japan than the aforementioned contributions suggest, and more recent assessments of the Japanese case confirm that it has stimulated a gradual shift toward more policy-based competition (e.g., Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012). Looking at data from fifty-nine countries between 1945 and 2010, Riera (2015) finds that reforms that open up the system to smaller parties do yield more proportional results (and vice versa), as would be expected. Fiva and Folke (2016) find that such effects have both mechanical and psychological elements.

Scheiner, reviewing this literature, points out that some of the desired effects of electoral reforms are more proximate to the electoral system itself than others (Scheiner 2008, 168–169). At one extreme, electoral systems have entirely mechanical effects on how votes are translated into seats. Their effects on the votes themselves, by contrast, are a step removed: they depend also on the responses of (potential) candidates, parties, and voters. And wider effects on modes of campaigning or satisfaction with democracy involve a still more complex causal chain. While purely mechanical effects flow inevitably from electoral system changes, more “distal” effects will be contingent upon other conditions.

Scheiner’s account clearly provides some explanation for the mixed pattern of success and failure in the achievement of electoral reformers’ goals. Several additional factors can also be taken into account. One is what Katz (2007, 312) calls “the pathological optimism of reformers”: supporters of reform often believe (or at least claim to believe) that relatively limited institutional changes will have transformative effects on politics at (p. 126) large that no research in political science supports. Another is the fact that the reforms that are enacted are often more limited than those proposed by reform advocates: in both Italy and Japan in the 1990s, for example, campaigners pushed for pure majoritarian systems but had to compromise in the end on mixed-member systems that weakened the mechanisms that they hoped to introduce.

Such factors are not surprising. More intriguing is the possibility that electoral reforms may show the effects of electoral systems to be more subtle or complex than standard cross-sectional studies suggest. One possibility is that some effects of electoral systems may take multiple electoral cycles to emerge, as actors gradually update their expectations and their behavior. Studies conducted in the immediate wake of reforms—when interest is greatest—may therefore tend to underestimate ultimate effects. Another possibility is that the effects of electoral systems are contingent on other factors. For example, the effects of electoral systems on turnout may depend in part on modes of

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campaigning, which, once they have become entrenched in a country, may be difficult to change. A third possibility—and the most radical—is that some of the correlations between electoral systems and other aspects of politics may be (wholly or partly) spurious: causation may run the other way or unobserved third variables may intervene. Colomer (2005) is well known for arguing that party systems determine electoral systems, rather than the other way round. As the preceding section on the determinants of reform suggests, it may also be that a culture favorable to inclusive values favors the adoption of more inclusive electoral institutions. If such arguments are correct, then the insertion of particular electoral rules into an unsupportive environment may fail to yield the expected results.

Further research into the effects of electoral reforms will be needed to resolve these debates fully. What we can say is that electoral reforms do often have effects—on party systems, voting patterns, modes of competition, governing arrangements, and so on. But some of these effects are more predictable than others. And electoral reforms rarely deliver all that their advocates promise.

Conclusion

Until the 1990s, the lack of much literature on electoral system change reflected widespread acceptance of what seemed like a simple truth: because the future of the electoral system is determined by those in power, who have typically entered power because they benefit from the prevailing rules, significant electoral reform is very rare. Since the 1990s, we have learned that, in fact, things are more complex. Significant electoral reforms do occur. They can come about via a variety of routes involving a range of actors, motivations, and contexts. Their effects range from the predictable to the highly uncertain.

Our task as political scientists is to find the order in this complexity. We can begin, as here, by systematically mapping the many possibilities. Beyond that, we want also (p. 127) to understand the most important recurring patterns. Benoit (2004) offered a crucial insight by crystallizing understanding of the central role of power-seeking behavior on the part of politicians. In my own work (Renwick 2010, 2011), I have argued for the value of locating electoral reform processes on a continuum from those that fit Benoit's model in being dominated by politicians to those in which politicians' approach is determined by their desire to curry public favor. Shugart (2001, 2008) and Pilon (2013), in very different ways, offer insights into the circumstances in which opposition to the status quo may be more likely to arise. Regarding the effects of reform, meanwhile, Scheiner (2008) highlights the need to consider the degree to which putative effects will arise only through interactions of the electoral system with other variables.

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None of these attempts to draw out general patterns is set in stone: each can be contested or further refined, and other ideas may in the end prove more fruitful. Research into electoral system change has made much progress, but many opportunities for further work remain.

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