

The elusive behavioral effect of electoral reforms? The impact of electoral system changes on the behavior of voters and political elites - a quasi-experimental approach and new evidence from local elections in Poland

The voting system is an important factor affecting electoral outcomes. This project builds upon Maurice Duverger's theory that claims that social heterogeneity will increase the number of political parties in the party system only when the electoral system is sufficiently permissive (e.g. a system that uses Sainte Lague method and relatively large electoral districts). The so-called Duverger's (1959) laws of the impact of electoral rules on party systems' fragmentation are among the key political science concepts. Duverger's proposition maintains that the implementation of the single-member district plurality system will result in the emergence of a two-party system (Duverger, 1959), except where strong local minority parties exist (Riker, 1982), while proportional representation (PR) rules tend to form multipartyism (Duverger, 1959).

In this project, I examine the unique case of the two consecutive Polish electoral law reforms in 2011 and 2018. Specifically, I study how different subtypes of the electoral system affect the behavior of voters and political elites utilizing longitudinal data from the relatively homogenous society, that is, employing observations from the Polish local elections (in 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018) at the commune or municipal level.

Electoral systems have „mechanical” and „psychological” effects. The mechanical effect of electoral rules is the result of a “purely” mathematical conversion of vote shares into seat shares. In contrast to the mechanical effect, the exact nature of the psychological effect, or - as I prefer to call it - the *behavioral* effect, is more difficult to specify; the effect is open to multiple interpretations. The behavioral (or psychological) effect can be referred to as the anticipation of the mechanical effect. Garry Cox (1997) points out that this psychological effect is composed of two interrelated elements: *strategic voting* and *strategic party entry/exit*. When it comes to voters, they are aware that there is a (natural or legal) threshold of representation (Lijphart 1994), and they decide not to support parties that are likely to fail to get seats because of the mechanical effect; voters anticipate that some parties, for example, have no chance of winning seats. Therefore, they cast their vote in favor of a party that has some chance. As for strategic entry, parties, anticipating voters' strategic behavior, exit the electoral races if they are not likely to get seats. Also, not viable parties have incentives to form electoral alliances to increase the chances to get seats.

Local elections in Poland and the two consecutive Polish electoral law reforms in 2011 and 2018 provide the opportunity to investigate behavioral components such as strategic voting; strategic party entry/exit. Also, following a game-theoretic model by Herrera, Morelli and Palfrey (2014), this project will revisit the complex and still understudied relationship between electoral rules, electoral competitiveness and voter turnout. Various cross-national studies including democracies in Latin America and Eastern Europe suggest that the conventional wisdom regarding the effect of proportionality on turnout might be in need of rethinking.

This project makes the following key theoretical contributions that advance our understanding of *behavioral* effects of the voting system on electoral outcomes. *First*, using a quasi-experimental design, I examine the behavioral effects (e.g. strategic voting, strategic entry/exit) of the electoral reforms on the party system fragmentation; taking into account the shifts between the understudied subtypes of voting systems. *Second*, this project uses a quasi-experimental setting to give a rigorous empirical test for the aforementioned game-theoretic model by Herrera et al. (2014); I will examine whether sub-national units, which were or were not closely contested in the pre-reform period, experienced the decline/rise in competitiveness and voter turnout following the introduction of the new electoral rules.