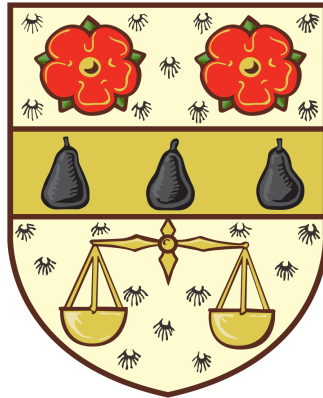


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Electoral Systems and Opinion Representation

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Abstract

Electoral systems are critical to the political representation of public opinion. Most existing work considers differences between proportional and majoritarian systems, concentrating for the most part on whether proportional representation produces greater ideological congruence between the positions of governments and the public. The focus is mainly on the immediate aftermath of elections, however — the existing literature on electoral systems has largely ignored the fact that representation occurs (or not) in the years between elections as well. Here, we argue for a shift in focus to the impact of electoral systems on representation throughout the electoral cycle, that is, *during* the tenure of governments. This shift, capturing the period during governments actually govern, leads to quite different expectations.

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A growing body of literature addresses the influence of political institutions on the political representation of public opinion. Electoral systems are the emphasis of much of this research, almost all of which focuses on differences between the majoritarian and proportional “visions,” using Powell’s (2000) language. This research concentrates on representation after elections – the match between the public and the government that emerges after elections. Until recently, scholars found that proportional representation tends to produce greater congruence between the positions of the government and the public. Specifically, the general ideological disposition of the government that emerges after an election and the ideological bent of the electorate tended to match up better in proportional systems (Lijphart 1999; Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000; also see Miller et al. 1999). In theory, the tendency reflects the necessity of coalition government in those systems. Because coalition government typically encompasses ideological middling parties, it brings the “average” ideological orientation closer to that of the median voter.

What about in the periods in between elections? Are coalition governments more responsive to ongoing changes in opinion? Even if proportional electoral systems produce better ideological congruence following elections, it is not clear that they afford greater representation between elections. In fact, there are reasons to expect governments in majoritarian systems to be more responsive to opinion change.

In this paper, we outline Powell’s theory of “indirect” representation of public opinion in electoral systems, and introduce our theory of “direct” representation, highlighting both institutional and electoral mechanisms. We then spell out the empirical implications of these theories for government policy. To be clear: we do not test our expectations directly here, but focus (almost) entirely on empirical democratic theory. We do this in part

because the data required to test our expectations do not currently exist. (This is discussed further below.) That said, we draw on the existing empirical literature. Even past work seems to support our contention that a shift in focus, capturing the period during which governments actually govern, leads to quite different expectations.

Electoral Institutions and Opinion Representation

Our focus here is on what Pitkin (1967) refers to as “substantive” representation – the representation of public preferences in government policy outputs.¹ Public opinion can influence these outputs in two well-known ways. The first way is indirect, the result of elections. That is, the public can elect governments that share their opinions. This match between the positions of the public and elected officials sometimes is referred to as “congruence” (e.g., Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010). The second way is direct, in the responsiveness of governments in between elections. Here politicians (may) adjust policy in response to changing public opinion, what can be thought of as “dynamic congruence.” Research on the effects of electoral institutions has focused almost entirely on elections and their immediate aftermath, however. What about the period in between elections? How do electoral institutions impact the responsiveness of sitting governments? Let us consider how electoral systems might matter for representation both after elections, and between elections. We begin with the former.

¹ This is just one of several types of representation, of course. Pitkin (1967: chapters 3-5) discusses four, the others being “formalistic,” “symbolic,” and “descriptive”; Mansbridge (2003) offers another useful typology.

Representation after Elections

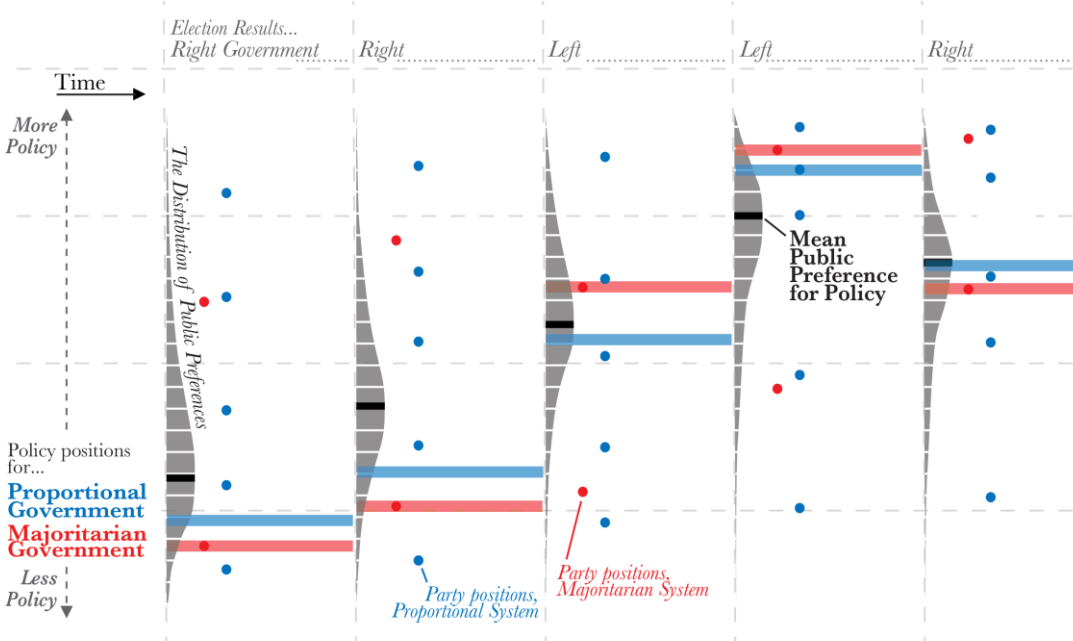
Lijphart (1984) provided the first direct statement on the relationship between electoral institutions and the representation of public opinion. As part of his far-reaching investigation of representative democracies, Lijphart distinguished between “consensual” systems – characterized by, most notably, proportional representation, multiparty systems, and coalition governments – and “majoritarian” systems – characterized by simple plurality election rules, two parties, and single-party government. He posited that consensual democracies provide better general policy congruence than majoritarian systems and then adduced evidence of the pattern based on comparisons of the positions of the public and governing officials.

Powell (2000) provided what is now the classic work on the subject, focusing specifically on the differences between majoritarian and proportional election rules. Powell argued that proportional representation tends to produce greater congruence between the government and the public. According to Powell, this reflects the greater, direct participation of constituencies the system affords (also see Miller, et al. 1999). In effect, coalition governments tend to encompass ideological middling parties, and so bring the “average” ideological orientation closer to that of the median voter. Powell provides empirical support for his conjecture. Specifically, he finds that the general ideological disposition of government and the ideological bent of the electorate tend to match up better in proportional systems. That is, there is greater congruence in those systems.

Figure 1 displays the main expectations – not just from Powell’s (2000) work, but in much of the literature on electoral systems and representation. The x-axis represents time, during which five hypothetical elections occur. These are indicated by vertical dashed lines. The

y-axis depicts public preferences for government policy, broadly defined, where higher values indicate a preference for more. At each election, we see the distribution of preferences as well as the mean preference for policy. We also see hypothetical party positions for a two-party majoritarian system (red dots), and a five-party proportional system (blue dots). In majoritarian systems, we assume unified government and

Figure 1. A Static Conception of Political Representation across Electoral Systems



homogenous parties that enact their ideologies when in office. Thus, government policy after elections always centers on one of the party positions. In the figure, the right party wins the first election, so government policy (indicated with a red bar) exactly matches the right party preference, which is clearly to the right of the average citizen. The mismatch between the government position and public continues from election to election, even though the public and the parties change. Consider that public preferences for policy shift upward—in a liberal direction—between the first and the second election cycle, but the

right party (having also shifted upward) still wins. Preferences shift even more markedly in the third and fourth electoral cycles, and the left party benefits and wins. In the fifth election, a slight downward shift in preferences returns the right party to power. But the government that results after each election is consistently to the right or left of the public.

Proportional systems in Figure 1 produce somewhat different government positions. This is because there are multiple parties and a coalition government always emerges after each election. In the first election the proportional system – given the placement of parties and the distribution of preferences – produces a government position (indicated with a blue bar) somewhere between the right and center-right party positions.² This government position is different from the position that the majoritarian system produces. Most importantly, while both governments are to the right of the average voter, the coalition government is closer. The tendency for the proportional system to produce coalition governments whose positions are closer to the average voter is then repeated in subsequent (hypothetical) elections.

The figure captures some common expectations about the effects of electoral systems on opinion representation. They are canonical, part of the conventional wisdom in comparative politics. The logic is compelling, but we believe also problematic. Our objections are twofold.

² The positions of parties and governments (and public preferences) are purely hypothetical, and intended only to reflect the expectations of majoritarian and proportional systems in the existing literature on indirect representation. In the case of governments' policy positions, we determine the proportional-system placements by extrapolating from party placements alongside the distribution of public preferences, assuming that citizens will vote for the party closest to their position (and thus that parties closer to the thicker part of the distribution will receive greater vote shares). Of course, elections are not decided solely by policy preferences; for expository purposes, however, we assume that they are.

The first objection is theoretical. The vision of representative democracy on which Figure 1 and a good deal of past work is premised is rather limited. Preferences and positions (and policy) are regarded as largely static between elections, much as is the case for classic models of electoral accountability, rooted in what might be called a “responsible party model” of democracy: parties promise that they will enact specific policies if elected, and electorates hold them accountable for these promises at election time. It is however rarely clear which policies are (and are not) part of a government’s mandate; and the notion of a mandate is particularly difficult under coalition government, which is of course more likely in proportional systems. It also seems clear that publics re-elect governments that do not fulfill their promises, sometimes because priorities have changed since the last election, for both the public and government. (For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Franklin et al. 2014.) The notion of a system of representation in which mandates are clear and preferences are static for four-year periods is far from ideal – and it falls far short of what we want from representative democratic government.

A second objection is empirical: there is an accumulating body of evidence that does not support the contention that PR systems produce higher levels of opinion-policy congruence.³ In fact, recent work finds few advantages of proportionality for the representation of policy preferences. Blais and Bodet (2006) argue that, while proportional systems encourage coalition governments, thus pulling the government more to the center, they also encourage a greater number and diversity of parties in the first place, which promotes representation of more extreme positions. (Imagine another version of Figure 1 in which proportional parties are distributed much more broadly across the policy spectrum

³ And we are putting aside the serious measurement gauntlet thrown down by Warwick and Zakharova (2013), which questions most of the research because of its reliance on citizens’ votes to infer beliefs.

than are majoritarian parties; also see our discussion of polarization, below.) Blais and Bodet's analysis reveals little difference in the congruence between citizens and governments in proportional and majoritarian systems. Golder and Stramski (2010) show much the same.⁴ Powell's (2011) recent analysis, which encompasses a broader period than his original work, also demonstrates little difference between electoral systems.

Representation between Elections

Representation beyond the immediate post-election period is, as Key noted, a much more "vexing" analytical problem (1961:413). And it may be that the effect of electoral institutions on direct representation between elections differs from what we observe in the wake of elections.⁵ A thought experiment may prove useful. Consider two countries with different electoral systems, one majoritarian and one proportional. There is a single-party government in the former and a coalition government in the latter, both of which control a majority of seats in the legislature. We also can assume that the average position of the coalition better matches the average position of the public, though this does not matter for our thought experiment. Now, imagine that, at some point between elections, there are equal-sized "shocks" to (or changes in) public preferences. Which government is likely to be more responsive?

The thought experiment is useful in getting one to think about representation in a different, more explicitly dynamic way. It also helps one see the effects of electoral systems in a different way. Indeed, there is reason to suppose that governments in majoritarian systems are *more* responsive to opinion change than are governments in proportional systems. There

⁴ They do, however, show that proportional systems produce more representative legislatures.

⁵ This view of representation is closer to that in work focused on "dynamic" representation. See, e.g., Erikson et al. 2002; Wlezien 1996, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2010.

actually are a number of possible mechanisms, falling into two broad classes: electoral and organizational.

Consider first the “electoral” mechanism. Majoritarian systems tend to produce single-party governments, which tend to afford voters greater clarity of responsibility. That is, voters can directly reward or punish parties for what they do or do not do while in power. Electoral accountability thus tends to be greater in majoritarian systems (Powell and Whitten 1993; also see Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; redacted). In short, augmented electoral accountability gives governments more reason to pay close attention to public opinion. In proportional systems, by contrast, coalition governments predominate, which reduces accountability by confusing parties’ responsibility for government action. This in turn reduces the incentive for government to represent citizen preferences.

Putting aside accountability, it is also the case that seats-to-votes “swing” ratios (see, e.g., Niemi and Fett 1986; King 1990) tend to be larger in majoritarian systems. A given shift in electoral sentiment thus has bigger consequences on Election Day. Thus, governments in majoritarian systems once again have more reason to pay attention and respond to the ebb and flow of public opinion. This is highly intuitive; it also generalizes Rogowski and Kayser’s (2002) argument about the sensitivity of governments to consumers versus producers in majoritarian systems.

Responsiveness is not just about willingness; it also involves opportunity, which varies across electoral systems as well, owing to differences in the types of governments – single-party versus coalition – that tend to emerge. This second set of organizational, or coalitional, mechanisms makes a difference for dynamic representation as well. It clearly is easier for a single party to respond to change than a multi-party coalition.

To begin with, coordination in the latter is more costly and difficult. This partly reflects increased transaction costs whenever bargaining between parties is required, much as is implied by Coase’s classic theorem. It also reflects the constraints posed by coalition agreements (Muller and Strom 2010), which limit the room for a government to maneuver in response to changing public opinion. In effect, coalitions introduce “friction” into the policymaking process (e.g., Jones et al. 2009; Tsebelis 2002). This seemingly is increasingly true as the size and diversity of the coalition increases.⁶

Perhaps even more fundamentally, the parties in a coalition may respond differently to a change in opinion. Some may prefer to not respond at all or even move in a different policy direction, depending on their positions and the location of the public (see Calvo et al. 2012). And even if parties in a government do agree to respond in the same direction, by increasing policy in response to an increase in public preferences for more policy, they may not agree on how much to respond. Much as for coordination, the basis for disagreement likely increases alongside the size and diversity of the coalition.

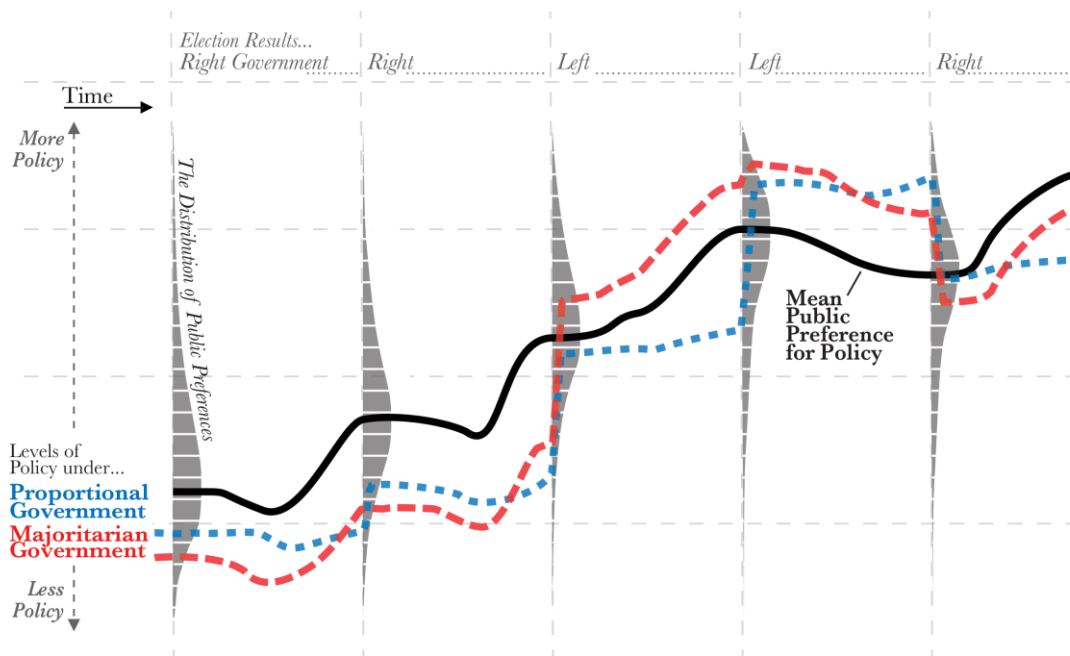
There are, in sum, good reasons to suspect that even if representation after elections is stronger in proportional systems, representation between elections is stronger in majoritarian systems. Figure 2 represents the main predictions of our theory. The figure relies on the same longitudinal trend in preferences as Figure 1. But while the election-time distributions of preferences are the same in this figure, here we see average policy preferences *throughout the electoral cycle*. We can see these preferences changing, not just as we jump from one electoral cycle to the next, but in inter-election periods. We now have

⁶ Note that some of the same logic that applies to multi-party coalitions also applies to single parties – each party is itself a coalition, after all – if to a lesser degree. It follows that some parties will exhibit more “friction” than others; and some of these dynamics will operate behind the scenes, i.e., in party caucus meetings, both in proportional and majoritarian systems.

a more dynamic view of preferences – and a more dynamic view of government positions and policy as well.

As in Figure 1, the party control of government in Figure 2 changes over time. Government policy also changes sharply after party control changes: there is a marked upward shift in policy when a left-leaning government is elected in the third election, for instance, and a marked downward shift in policy when right-leaning governments regain control in the fifth election. In this sense, Figure 2 shows results that are the same as those in Figure 1.

Figure 2. A Dynamic Conception of Political Representation across Electoral Systems



A focus on direct representation means that we are concerned not just with election-period alignments, however, but adjustments between elections as well. The central message in Figure 2 is as follows: proportional systems produce government policy positions that are closer to mean public preferences immediately following elections, but these systems also show less adjustment to shifting preferences between elections. Majoritarian systems, in

contrast, produce governments that are able (and incentivized) to move alongside preferences in inter-election years.⁷ The end result is that the gap between preferences and policy can widen over time in proportional systems, and will tend not to in majoritarian systems.⁸ Indeed, in our figure the disjuncture between preferences and policy at the end of the electoral cycle is always lower in majoritarian systems.

Figure 2 depicts the most important difference in representation across majoritarian and proportional governments, but it by no means captures the full range of possible outcomes. Variation in preferences over the inter-election years will matter to the relationship between preferences and policy in both majoritarian and proportional governments at the end of the electoral cycle, for instance. If preferences trend upward steeply between elections, as in much of Figure 2, then a non-responsive coalition government will fall further and further behind where the public is. If preferences for policy do not trend or drift, conversely, coalition governments may provide policy that better matches what the public wants – not just at the beginning but also throughout the electoral cycle.⁹ There thus may be no real difference in the *average* congruence across majoritarian and proportional systems – sometimes majoritarian systems will be closer to preferences, sometimes proportional systems. There still would be differences in the *variation* in congruence across elections, however: the majoritarian system would exhibit a more consistent distance to preferences while the proportional system would show a good deal of cross-election variation. In short,

⁷ For our illustration, the effects of party transitions on policy change are expected to be greatest early on and diminish over time, as policy approaches the party's ideal point—this is consistent with empirical research (see, e.g., Alt 1985; redacted).

⁸ Though note that there is another possibility, namely, that majoritarian systems produce an incentive for governments not just to move in parallel with preferences, but to move towards public preferences over the electoral cycle – so that majoritarian governments are closer to preferences at the end of the electoral cycle than they are at the beginning of it.

⁹ In this instance, preferences would be stable much as is assumed in the standard, static model described above.

it may be that variation in congruence over time, rather than levels of congruence at any given point in time, is the central difference between the two systems.

What is important is that proportional and majoritarian systems may both work to serve representation, but in different ways, where the former provide better indirect representation via elections and the latter provide better direct representation in between elections. The implications are, we think, rather important. The literature on the impact of electoral systems on representation has focused too much on representation immediately following elections, and has all but ignored the impact that electoral institutions may have on the representation that occurs over the subsequent three to five years. Taking account of this inter-election period leads to rather different expectations about the impact of electoral systems.

Adding Party Polarization

Recent work points to the importance of party polarization as a moderating variable in the connection between electoral systems and opinion representation after elections (Blais and Bodet 2006; Powell 2011; Dalton et al. 2012). This work suggests that congruence between the public and governments declines as polarization increases: as parties polarize, governments tend to be more extreme, widening the gap between them and the public. This should be true in all electoral systems, but the effect may be strongest in majoritarian ones, where we cannot count on coalitions to moderate extreme party positions.

Polarization is not randomly distributed across electoral system types, however. It tends to be greater in proportional systems. This is not surprising, as majoritarian systems reward centrist parties. Consider Dalton's (2008) measure of polarization, which is based on

respondent ratings of parties in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey files. He relies on 11-point (0-10) left-right ratings of parties alongside party vote shares, and provides a Party Polarization Index for all countries in the first and second rounds of CSES surveys (1996-2001, and 2001-2006 respectively). Dividing countries into majoritarian and proportional systems, the mean polarization score for majoritarian systems in the 1996-2001 period is 2.2 while the score for proportional systems is 3.1. Results are similar for the 2001-2006 period: the mean for majoritarian systems is 2.4 and the mean for proportional systems is 3.4.¹⁰

Our suspicion, suggested and largely borne out by Blais and Bodet's (2006) analysis, is that the potentially moderating impact of coalition government is regularly overwhelmed by increased polarization in proportional systems. Put differently, although there may in principle be ideological-representational gains due to the need for multiparty coalitions in proportional systems, this may be undone by the tendency for parties in those systems to be more polarized. The end result may be that indirect (ideological) representation is no better, and perhaps even worse, in proportional systems than in majoritarian systems – even if proportional systems offer some advantages for indirect representation through a more accurate translation of votes into seats.¹¹

¹⁰ Data are drawn directly from Table 1 in Dalton (2008); a thorough account of the polarization measure is provided there. We categorize the following countries as majoritarian (and all others as proportional): Australia, Canada, France, the UK and US. For the 1996-2001 period, the difference in means is not significant different ($p=.28$). For the 2001-2006 period, the difference in means is statistically significant at ($p=.09$). Note that the N equals 28 for each period. Pooling data from the two time periods produces a majoritarian-system mean of 2.35 and a proportional-system mean of 3.27, where the difference is significant ($p=.06$).

¹¹ This does not mean that factors other than electoral systems do not matter for polarization, and these can override the centristism of majoritarian systems. Consider the US over the past 30 years.

How does this play out in terms of representation between elections? The effects of polarization on between-election representation are less straightforward. They partly depend on what type of mechanism – electoral or organizational – is at work.

If electoral mechanisms provide the main differences across electoral systems, then there is reason to suppose that polarization may not matter for government responsiveness to changing opinion. Consider that party polarization does not impact clarity of responsibility in majoritarian systems, and so that basis for responsiveness does not change. Polarization can reduce seats-votes ratios, however, as parties become less susceptible to the changing median voter. To the extent this is true, we expect polarization to have an even greater net dampening effect on the responsiveness of governments in proportional (coalition government-forming) systems.

If coalitional mechanisms are operative, then polarization may serve to widen differences in responsiveness across systems. Recall that coalitions are hypothesized to make it more difficult for governments to respond owing to transaction costs between parties and, perhaps most importantly, their differences. Government non-cohesion should serve to dampen responsiveness by increasing the reliance on coalition agreements and by making it more difficult for the parties in those governments to reach a consensus. Insofar as party polarization leads to less cohesive coalition governments, therefore, it should serve to widen differences in responsiveness across systems. (To be absolutely clear, this is due entirely to the reduced responsiveness of coalition governments – polarization should impact the degree of after-election congruence for both single-party and coalition governments.)

Discussion

We have argued that the two main types of electoral systems might work to serve representation but in different ways, where proportional systems provide better indirect representation via elections and majoritarian systems better direct representation to changing preferences in between elections. This hypothesis has relatively clear empirical implications: if proportional systems provide better indirect representation, then we should find greater congruence between the public's preferred levels of policy and policy itself after elections in those systems; if they provide less direct representation, we should find that the gap between what the public wants and gets in proportional systems would widen over time.¹² Leading up to an election, then, the level of congruence in those systems may be less than we observe after elections. Indeed, the level of pre-election congruence in majoritarian systems might approach or exceed that in proportional systems.

Is it possible to test these different expectations? In theory, yes; in practice, we are not sure. What we require are good measures of both absolute public preferences and policy change, taken throughout the electoral cycle, across a wide range of policies, and across a wide range of countries with variations in both electoral systems and party system polarization. To our knowledge, these data do not exist. Existing work using much more limited data is nevertheless suggestive.

Recent work (redacted) relies on spending preferences from the ISSP Role of Government Surveys alongside OECD spending measures, over 2-4 data points between 1985 and 2006, and across 17 countries. The data are relatively weak longitudinally, then, but broad in

¹² Recall from our earlier discussion that this assumes that preferences trend up or down. If they don't trend, then we would expect little difference in the average congruence across systems but would expect a difference in the variation, which should be larger in proportional systems.

cross-national terms. Results show that the proportionality of electoral systems – based on an Effective Number of Parties (ENP) measure – reduce the tendency for policy change to reflect public preferences for policy change. Indeed, countries at the 25th percentile of (within-sample) ENP show significant direct representation, while those at the 75th percentile show none whatsoever.

Other comparative work points in the same direction. Eichenberg and Stoll (2003) have analyzed what is to our knowledge the only body of long-term (annual) time-series data of both preferences and policy, albeit for defense only, across both majoritarian (US and UK) and proportional (France, Germany, Sweden) electoral systems. It is notable that their analyses find no evidence of direct representation in the most proportional system (Sweden); and, taking the variance in preferences and spending into account, they find weaker representation in France and Germany than in the US and UK.¹³ Hobolt and Klemmensen’s (2005; 2008) research partly addresses the issue as well. They show that government rhetoric in one proportional system (Denmark) is more responsive than in one majoritarian system (the UK) but not in another (the US). Perhaps most importantly, actual policy is more responsive in the US than the two other countries, as noted above.¹⁴

That said, a definitive test of the impact of electoral systems, moderated by political polarization, requires more broadly comparative data. While previous work has been hugely instructive on a number of other issues, Eichenberg and Stoll’s data are too limited in terms of countries (and policy domains), Hobolt and Klemmensen have to rely on issue

¹³ The difference between France and Germany on the one hand and the US and UK on the other is based on our own interpretation of Eichenberg and Stoll’s findings: we simply produce standardized beta coefficients from the raw coefficients for preferences (in Table 2 of their paper), and the standard deviations in both spending and preferences (from the raw data provided by the authors).

¹⁴ Though note that they do not actually assess responsiveness to public preferences for policy, and focus instead on public mentions of the “most important problem” facing the country.

salience rather than policy preferences (see note 12), and the ISSP data on which we rely are too infrequent to allow for a serious consideration of post- and inter-election representation. Work on ideological congruence (see, e.g., Powell 2000; Dalton et al. 2011) points to the possibility of looking at citizen-government similarities both immediately before and immediately following elections, but CSES data (a) cannot capture dynamic representation, and (b) do not really tap *policy* representation in any case. In short, there is to our knowledge no body of data that can speak directly to the issues we outline above – issues related to one of the most important and enduring questions in the study (and design) of representative democracy.

In sum: we know that electoral institutions matter for representation; but we only partly understand the ways in which the institutions increase (or decrease) the likelihood that governments produce policies in line with public preferences. Our main objective here has been to emphasize the fact that existing work has focused almost exclusively on representation after elections, and has consequently ignored the possibility of representation during the rest of the electoral cycle. Shifting the focus to inter-election periods leads to quite different expectations where electoral systems are concerned. Indeed, we propose that the two electoral system types might have different advantages where representation is concerned: proportional systems may produce stronger representation of opinion at election time while majoritarian systems may produce stronger representation of opinion between elections.

Data limitations make it difficult to empirically assess our expectations, but such analysis is an important task for future work. Too much research on institutions has taken for granted

that proportionality offers clear and incontrovertible advantages for political representation.

There are good reasons to question this assumption.

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