



# Why electoral systems matter: an analysis of their incentives and effects on key areas of governance

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## **1. Introduction**

Electoral systems, or the manner in which votes cast in a general election are translated into seats in the legislature, matter because they influence key governance dimensions and dynamics. Electoral systems provide different kinds of incentives to appeal to voters in order to yield electoral pay-offs. For example, in country-wide elections where voters vote for closed party lists, party leaders have considerable power because they determine the ranking of each of the candidates on that list. Under that kind of system, parliamentarians are likely to feel more accountable towards the party leadership than to voters, given that their political future lies with the party rather than with the electorate. Electoral systems based on a majority principle generate the opposite kind of incentive, as they are much more focused on the individual candidate, and less on the party they belong to. Electoral systems also can help shape the calculations of politicians about policy choices, and they also provide different incentives to make narrow or more broad based appeals to the population, depending among other things on whether the electoral system encourages the proliferation of political parties or not. Understanding electoral incentives is therefore important to understand how institutional rules of the game interact with stakeholders – on the demand as well as on the supply side.

Electoral systems come in many different varieties. There is a rich, and growing, body of literature, most of it theoretical but also increasingly based on empirical analysis, exploring the relationship between electoral systems and governance. While this literature has largely been based on assumptions and experiences derived from well-established democracies in the developed world, there have been growing efforts to understand what the impact of different electoral systems may be in countries in the developing world. Among other things, the literature suggests that electoral systems can have an impact on the degree of coherence/fragmentation of the party system and broader government effectiveness, as well as on public policy outcomes and the behavior and incentives of political actors and resulting accountability linkages. Different scholars have also argued that different electoral systems are more likely to ease or exacerbate conflict. Finally, an emerging body of literature focused exclusively on incipient democracies in the developing world is seeking to uncover linkages between electoral systems and electoral malpractice.

This paper is organized around four main sections. Section 2 provides an overview of what electoral systems are and why they matter. The overview also stresses that electoral systems do not exist in a vacuum and that electoral effects are contingent on other structural and institutional factors as well. Section 3 looks at the different kinds of electoral systems that currently exist, organized around three broad families: plurality/majority systems, proportional representation systems, and mixed systems. Section 4 then explores the kinds of impact that electoral systems can have on different governance dimensions and dynamics. These include government effectiveness, violence and conflict, different aspects of public policy (including the provision of public goods and corruption), and electoral malpractice. The article concludes with a set of lessons outlined in Section 5.

## **2. Overview**

At the most basic level, electoral systems translate the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates (Reynolds et al. 2005) in the legislature at the national and, where relevant, the sub-national level as well.

The key elements of an electoral system include:

- the electoral formula (plurality/majority, proportional, mixed, or other)
- the ballot structure (i.e. whether the voter votes for a candidate or a party and whether the voter makes a single choice or expresses a series of preferences)
- the district magnitude (the number of representatives to the legislature that a particular district elects).

Electoral systems are important for several reasons. Firstly, there is a perception that they have an impact on the degree of coherence/fragmentation of the party system, and hence on government effectiveness. Electoral systems may also help to ease or exacerbate conflict. In addition, they help shape public policy outcomes and the behavior and incentive structures of political actors. Whether politicians depend directly on voters or on their parties for the furthering of their careers on the basis of the formula that elects them to office is an important factor in determining whom they feel most accountable to, what use they might make of public resources to build linkages with their constituencies, and even what kinds of incentives there may be for corruption and electoral malpractice. Understanding these different dynamics is essential from a governance perspective because it helps provide insights into the institutional frameworks within which political actors operate and the interests that drive them.

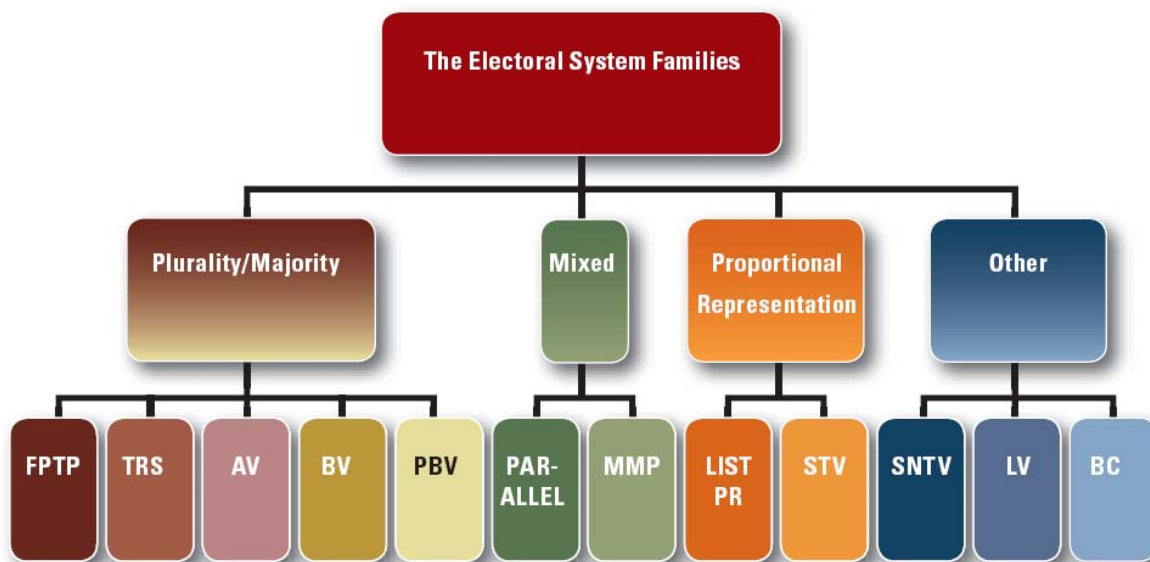
However, it is also important to keep in mind that electoral systems do not exist in a vacuum. Electoral effects are not shaped by electoral systems alone but are also heavily contingent upon other structures and institutions (Reynolds et al. 2005; Horowitz 2003; Cox 1997). For instance, is a given country presidentialist or parliamentarian? Is it federal or unitary? How is a society structured in terms of ideological, religious, ethnic, racial, regional, linguistic and/or class lines? Is the country an established democracy or more of a hybrid one, combining authoritarian features with formal democratic ones? Is there an established party system, or are parties embryonic or unformed, and how many effective parties are there? Are a particular party's supporters geographically concentrated or dispersed over a wide area? Are political parties programmatic, clientelistic or organized around a charismatic leader, and how does the differing orientation of a political party affect its relationship with political leaders and candidates? As can be appreciated, contextual factors are crucial here, and electoral systems and their effects need to be understood in relation to the context within which they operate.

### **3. Types of electoral systems**

There are many different electoral systems currently in use and many more permutations on each form (Reynolds et al. 2005). For the sake of simplicity, they can be categorized into three broad families: plurality/majority systems, proportional representation systems, and mixed systems. Within these, there are nine 'sub-families': First Past The Post (FPTP), Block Vote (BV), Party Block

Vote (PBV), Alternative Vote (AV), and the Two-Round System (TRS) are all plurality/majority systems; List Proportional Representation (List PR) and the Single Transferable Vote (STV) are both proportional systems; and Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and Parallel systems are both examples of the mixed model. In addition, there are other systems such as the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV), the Limited Vote (LV), and the Borda Count (BC) which do not fit neatly into any category and can be regarded as three further sub-families.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 below lays out these different families and sub-families.

**Figure 1:**



Source: Reynolds et al. (2005)

The key characteristics/features of the three main electoral families are summarized below (Reynolds et al. 2005):

In most **plurality/majority systems** (e.g. FPTP, AV, TRS), there is only one seat per electoral district (that is, the district magnitude is 1), and only one candidate can be elected from a given district. Under plurality, candidates can win a seat when they win the most votes without necessarily winning over 50 percent of the vote. However, majoritarian systems (e.g. AV and TRS) try to ensure that the winning candidate receives an absolute majority (i.e. over 50 per cent), essentially by making use of voters' second preferences to produce a winner.

The rationale underpinning **all proportional representation (PR) systems** is to consciously reduce the disparity between a party's share of the national vote and its share of the parliamentary seats: if a major party wins 40 per cent of the votes, it should win approximately 40 per cent of the seats, and a minor party with 10 per cent of the votes should also gain 10 per cent of the legislative seats. Proportionality is usually achieved through party lists of candidates, and these lists can be either open (where voters rank the

<sup>1</sup>The Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) is a multi-member-district, candidate-centered system in which voters have one vote, so that, among other things, there is a risk that a lot of votes are wasted. Limited Vote is very much like SNTV but gives voters more than one vote (however, unlike Block Vote, not as many as there are seats to be filled). Borda Count is a preferential system in single- or multi-member districts.

candidates in order of preference) or closed (where the ordering is in the hands of the party leadership and is decided prior to the elections).

In **mixed systems** (e.g. Parallel and Mixed Member Proportional), representatives are elected through a combination of different elements of the PR and plurality systems.

Plurality systems are the most widely used worldwide. Of the 199 countries and territories which have direct elections to the legislature, just under half (91, or 46% of the total) use a variant of plurality. Another 72 (36%) use PR-type systems; 30 (15%) use mixed systems; and only six (3%) use one of the other systems (Reynolds et al. 2005). Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the geographic distribution of electoral systems in different parts of the world.

**Table 1: Geographic distribution of different electoral systems by broad family**

	Africa	Americas	Asia	Eastern Europe	Western Europe	Oceania	Middle East	Total
<b>Plurality/Majority:</b>								
FPTP	15	17	5	0	1	7	2	47
BV	1	3	2	0	3	2	4	15
PBV	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	4
AV	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
TRS	8	3	6	1	1	1	2	22
<b>Proportional Representation:</b>								
List PR	16	19	3	13	15	0	4	70
STV	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
<b>Mixed:</b>								
MMP	1	3	0	2	2	1	0	9
Parallel	4	0	8	7	1	1	0	21
<b>Other:</b>								
SNTV	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	4
BC	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
LV	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>199</b>

Source: Reynolds et al. 2005

## 4. Impact of electoral systems on governance dimensions and dynamics

### 4.1 Government effectiveness

#### 4.1.1 The argument linking electoral systems in the aggregate to government effectiveness

There is a large body of both theoretical and empirical literature suggesting that, the more fragmented and dispersed a political system is, the less effective its government is likely to be (Tsebelis 1995; IDB 2006). Electoral systems are relevant here because the question of whether a given government can enact legislation effectively is linked to whether it can assemble a working majority in the legislature, which is in turn linked to the electoral system (Reynolds et al. 2005; Lizzeri and Persico 2000). The conventional wisdom has been that plurality systems are more effective than PR systems because they are supposed to be less fragmented and therefore more decisive. The main argument, originally developed by Maurice Duverger

(1954), is that, because only one candidate from one party can win, candidates tend to cast a wide net to secure as broad a base of support as possible, and this tends to provide inducements for the aggregation of different interests into a fewer number of political parties, which normally should be no more than two. There are also essential economies of scale involved in this process (Cox 2009). Proportional systems, on the other hand, are supposed to encourage the multiplication of parties, and, as a result, they are more prone to give rise to coalition governments and to be less effective.

The evidence on the assumed superiority of plurality systems in terms of government effectiveness is not conclusive, though. In his seminal 1999 study on *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, which includes 11 democracies in developing countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Arend Lijphart sets out to test this proposition. Lijphart compares the independent effects of the various aspects of the electoral systems on several dimensions of government and democratic performance. In terms of government effectiveness in particular, Lijphart concludes that “empirical results do not permit the definitive conclusion that [either plurality or PR systems] are better decision-makers and better policy-makers [than the other]” (Lijphart 1999).

Thus, the link between electoral system type and government effectiveness is not straightforward. Part of the challenge may in fact be that plurality/majoritarian systems do not automatically produce two-party systems, as Duverger would have predicted, and PR systems do not automatically lead to party systems with a greater number of political parties. In his book on *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*, Cox (1997) develops a formal model of Duverger's Law and tests it using data on electoral systems from 77 democracies. He finds that, on the whole, Duverger's prediction towards a two-party system holds at both the district and the national levels, but only on the basis of a considerable set of assumptions that do not always bear out in practice. Cox (1997) thus concludes that the numbers of parties in a party system depends on the interaction between electoral and social structures. In the end, Duverger's Law seems more notable for its exceptions than for its application – both in the developed and in the developing world (Grofman, Bowler and Blais 2009).

#### *4.1.2 Incentives and dynamics embedded within different sub-categories of party systems*

In light of the analysis above, it may be more useful to think about the question of government effectiveness and party systems not in terms of plurality systems vs. PR systems in the aggregate, but rather in terms of the different incentives and dynamics embedded within the different sub-categories. Research suggests that, the more candidate-centered the electoral system (more on this further below in this paper), and the greater the pressure for intra-party competition, the greater the level of fragmentation, irrespective of whether the system in place is a plurality or PR one (Hallerberg & Marier 2004). This can be a particular problem in incipient or emerging democracies, where the issue is not only that too many parties may be winning seats, but that these parties are inherently weak. In many cases, the relatively sudden opening of the floodgates of electoral competition has led to the proliferation of political parties that lack coherence and deep roots in society, and instead tend to serve as personalized vehicles to access power. For example, in Thailand, the Block Vote (BV), which is part of the plurality electoral system family and would therefore be expected to lead to a two-party system, was seen as having encouraged the fragmentation of the party system, with an average of more than six effective national parties between 1975 and 1996. Indeed, in recent years, a number of countries, including Thailand and the

Philippines, have abandoned the BV in favor of other systems in an attempt to strengthen the development of political parties (Reynolds et al. 2005).

PR systems may also lead to different levels of fragmentation and degrees of party weakness depending on whether they are open- or closed-list systems. In open-list systems, candidates to the legislature must appeal directly in a district to get elected, which may contribute to party weakness because politicians are more concerned about their own personal ambitions than about the well being of the party as a whole. Also, in the measure that the number of seats in a district increases, so does intra-party competition and fragmentation. In contrast, under closed-list PR, candidates must appeal to party leadership for a high ranking on the list. In this case, as the number of seats in a district increases, intraparty competition and fragmentation decrease. Political parties also tend to be internally more coherent because party discipline is essential to further a politician's career.

#### *4.1.3 The centrality of context in mediating the relationship between electoral systems and government effectiveness*

Contextual variables are also crucial in nuancing the relationship between electoral systems and stability. For plurality formulas that would typically produce two-party systems tend to foster multiparty systems where voters are regionally concentrated and vote as a block, as in India, Malaysia and Canada for example. This is because a candidate can win his or her district with a relatively low percentage of votes, especially in races where three or more parties/candidates are competing (Mozaffar et al. 2003, Horowitz 2003). In a deeply divided society, with many groups and subgroups of affiliations, PR is also likely to produce greater party fragmentation.

However, the proliferation of parties may be managed in different ways: for example through thresholds in PR systems, so that parties that are not able to garner a minimal percentage of votes cannot win representation in the legislature, or through requirements to achieve a regional distribution of votes in both plurality and PR systems. In Nigeria, for instance, where territory is a proxy for ethnicity because groups are regionally concentrated, presidential elections need to be won not only on the basis of plurality, but also on the basis of obtaining a set percentage of votes at the regional level (Horowitz 2003).

The example of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is instructive in this respect. PNG has used two different electoral systems from the plurality family – AV from 1964 to 1975, when it was an Australian territory, and FPTP from 1975 to 2002 – and its experience illustrates just how dependent much of the accepted wisdom regarding electoral systems is on the structure of the society concerned. Despite having an FPTP electoral system, PNG had a very fluid party system, based on individuals rather than ideologies. All governments under FPTP were weak coalitions. Under the AV system, levels of fragmentation of the party system were less acute, thus helping to manage inter-ethnic conflicts.

Moreover, some empirical research also suggests that party fragmentation in the legislature need not lead to government immobilism. In the case of party systems in Africa, Nicolas Van de Walle (2003) has found that, in general, it is the case that plurality systems (especially FPTP) have generated party systems with a lower number of effective parties than systems that use PR or mixed systems. Yet, in the case of the latter (i.e. PR or mixed systems), this has not led to the

multiplication of medium-size parties and veto players, but rather to leading parties that can corral a majority and a multiplication of tiny parties without much say. So, despite fragmentation, dominant party systems have emerged nonetheless, as in Namibia and South Africa, for example.

The explanation for this is rooted in the African context. In sub-Saharan Africa, a majority of political systems can be characterized as hybrid regimes that combine formal democratic institutions with authoritarian features – or what Andreas Schedler (2006) has defined as “electoral autocracies”. They are also highly presidentialist, with much power and control concentrated in the executive. In such systems, political parties do not serve an aggregation function. Rather, they serve a representation function in a context of clientelistic politics that are dominated by a disproportionately powerful president. The main drama is about control of the presidency, and about how politicians may curry favor from or bargain with the executive to gain access to patronage and state resources (Van De Walle 2003).

Legislative elections and the consolidation of single-party rule accompanied by the proliferation of small parties serve this purpose. Two sets of incentives are at work here reinforcing these dynamics. Firstly, ‘big men’ often opt to join the dominant party. But they may also seek to maintain small, highly personalistic parties because there may be advantages to developing an independent power base to bargain more effectively with the executive (Van De Walle 2003). Another interesting finding from Van De Walle is that, in the African experience, many of the countries where a party system has emerged with no clear majority in fact have been more prone to political instability. For instance, the military coups in Niger and Congo in the 1990s were a direct result of governmental paralysis due to the absence of an unambiguous majority. On the other hand, those multi-party states that have survived electoral contests without reverting back to (formal) authoritarian rule also seem to be the ones that have a higher quality of democracy (e.g. Benin, Malawi). There may therefore be a trade-off here between stability and genuine democracy: dominant party systems may provide stability but also lead to more centralized and less accountable rule (Van De Walle 2003).

#### ***4.2 Violence and Conflict***

Scholars disagree as to which electoral systems may be most appropriate in divided or conflict-prone states and societies. Two schools of thought predominate. One school has long argued that some form of proportional representation is needed in the face of deep-rooted ethnic divisions, in order to give minorities adequate representation. Such arguments have been important in influencing the electoral design recommendations of consociational/proportional representation approaches to managing ethnic cleavages, based on elite power-sharing mechanisms. According to promoters of this school of thought, in terms of electoral systems, party-list PR tends to be the best choice for divided societies, because it enables different groups, to “define themselves” into identity-based parties, and to gain representation in parliament in proportion to their numbers. The scholar most associated with the consociational model, Arend Lijphart (1969), developed this prescription from a detailed examination of the features of power-sharing democracy in some continental European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland). However, there is disagreement over how far these measures can work (if at all) when applied to violence/conflict in developing countries (Sisk 1996).



Other scholars have argued that systems based on PR are more likely to exacerbate fault lines of conflict than to generate compromise because they encourage fragmentation and the hardening of narrow identities (Horowitz 2003). In a setting with multiple social cleavages, this magnifies rather than compresses differences, makes it difficult to build sturdy government (coalitions), and can lead to immobilism and even polarization.

According to this school of thought, the situation is exacerbated in PR systems where thresholds are low, because there are considerable incentives for the proliferation of parties. This may in turn enable very small parties that can make or break a government to have disproportionate impact in determining policy and receiving patronage (e.g. Israel). On this basis, scholars in this tradition argue that, while proportionality and moderation are both worthwhile goals, they may be difficult to achieve simultaneously and they may in fact pull in opposite directions (Horowitz 2003).

According to this tradition, what is needed are electoral systems that can generate incentives for conciliation among different groups and to help build bridges across groups by making such behavior essential to secure electoral success. Electoral systems in the plurality family are believed to provide those kinds of incentives more readily, because candidates need to cast a wider net of support in order to win. For example, the system used for presidential elections in Nigeria requires the winning candidate to gain support from different regions, thus helping to break down the claims of narrow parochialism or regionalism. However, as discussed above, this is true only when the party system is not heavily fragmented and/or when potentially conflicting groups are not regionally concentrated (Horowitz 2003).

Significantly, most of the scholarship on electoral systems, democratization and conflict/violence remains relatively theoretical, and when empirical findings have been developed these tend to be country-specific. But some studies that have attempted to provide more systematic evidence of the linkages between electoral systems and conflict/violence are worth mentioning. In addition to developing a statistical model of government effectiveness, Lijphart's book on *Patterns of Democracy* also attempts to test the relationship between electoral systems and violence. His findings suggest that consensual (i.e. PR) democracies perform slightly better when it comes to the control of violence. However, the data the author uses for this seems relatively old and is heavily caveated. From Lijphart's analysis, it becomes very difficult to make substantive conclusions that can point decisively to the better performance of one or another type of system when it comes to violence.

In a study on *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds (1999) look at a broad set of countries with divided societies in both the developed and the developing world and the kinds of electoral systems that they have put in place to avoid (further) conflict. Their comparative analysis suggests that four specific types of electoral systems are particularly well suited for conflict afflicted and divided countries. Interestingly, these include systems in both the plurality and PR families:

- *Consociationalism* (based, in part, on list proportional representation, a type of PR system). Examples include: Belgium, Switzerland, and post-apartheid, South Africa.

- *Centripetalism* (based, in part, on the vote-pooling potential of the alternative vote (AV), which is a majoritarian system). Examples include: Papua New Guinea 1964-1975 (see Box 2) and Fiji since 1997.
- *Integrative consensualism* (based, in part, on the single transferable vote (STV), which is a PR system). Examples include Estonia in 1990, and Northern Ireland).
- A construct that the authors call *explicitism*, which explicitly recognizes communal groups and gives them institutional representation. In theory explicitism can be based on almost any electoral system, but in practice is usually based on the block vote (BV), which is part of the plurality family. Examples include Singapore and Mauritius.

The authors also emphasize that conflict afflicted societies tend to be divided in different ways, and that, as suggested by the list above, there is no “one-size fits all” conflict-managing electoral system that will work in all contexts. There are many variables in terms of the nature of a political conflict which will directly influence the optimum electoral system, including factors such as the nature of the conflict, its intensity, and its geographic/demographic manifestation(s), colonial history, etc. In the end, the authors argue that, while the choice of electoral system does matter, it is not the only relevant factor in helping to build a stable and institutionalized political system that can process conflict peacefully (Reilly and Reynolds 1999).

The analysis above helps crystallize the challenges that the international community faces in fragile states that are deeply divided and are trying to undergo a transition towards democracy. There are no easy choices. As discussed, plurality systems may be more likely to encourage parties that have a broad base of appeal and exclude extremist parties, but only if electoral support is not geographically concentrated, and they may also entail costs in terms of fairness and representation that may simply prove too high to bear (e.g. Iraq). Systems like AV and SNTV may help alleviate some of these problems, but they entail problems of their own. AV is a complex system requiring considerable voter sophistication and relatively high literacy and numeracy. SNTV, for its part, may accentuate internal party fragmentation and discord, as well as clientelism, given that it is based on intra-party competition. Two-round majority systems can also be crucial in promoting greater coherence and cohesion of the party system, but they tend to create electoral processes that are very expensive and also considerably more demanding on the electorate, with voters expected to vote more than once.

### ***4.3 Implications for public policy***

There is a rich body of literature in both the economics and the political science traditions that explores the linkages between electoral systems and different public policy dimensions/outcomes (Persson, Roland and Tabellini 2003). For the most part, this literature is highly theoretical and based on the development of stylized models, though sometimes such models are also empirically tested. Importantly, most of the assumptions underlying this kind of work are based on the experiences democracies in the developed world. Thus, it is not entirely clear how well the conclusions of this work hold in most poor democracies, where political parties are not programmatic, may not be deeply rooted in society, are highly personalized and centralized, and have weak organizational and management structures (Carothers 2007). As a result, there is a need

to further develop this research, both in terms of its theoretical propositions and its empirical basis, in the developing world. With this caveat in mind, this article outlines below some of the key arguments, findings and conclusions of this literature, especially in relation to the provision of public or more targeted goods and corruption.

#### *4.3.1 Incentives to develop candidate- vs. party-based reputations*

The critical assumption underlying all this work is that politicians are rational actors who want to be (re)elected, and that electoral systems vary in the extent that they provide incentives to go about this. As they seek (re)election, is it more important to cultivate a reputation that is more personal or one that is party focused? The interests of a given candidate or politician may not always be aligned with the need to look after the collective electoral interests of his/her party. As a result, candidates and politicians need to determine whether they can benefit electorally by developing a personal name for themselves distinct from that of their party, or whether it is better for their career prospects to follow the party line. This will have an impact on the way politicians seek to build linkages with voters and use public policy to connect with them.

From a general perspective, plurality systems on the whole tend to encourage more personal than party vote-seeking dynamics, and are therefore more grounded in localized interests. This is because, as discussed earlier, they are based on single-member districts that can only be won by one candidate of one party, and this winning candidate is the sole member of his/her party responsible for representing his/her district. As a result, in plurality systems, candidates have a strong incentive to make themselves personally known to prospective constituents. On the other hand, when the competition for votes is more broad-based and votes accrue principally to a party as a whole rather than to a specific candidate, which is more often the case in PR systems, the party brand is more valuable and candidates and political parties will find it more electorally beneficial to run on national public goods or social welfare platforms. A study using government spending data for 21 OECD countries from 1973 to 2000 confirms this general argument (Chang 2008).

However, as John Carey and Matthew Shugart (1995) have argued, it is possible to make some further distinctions within the different sub-families that populate these two broad families of electoral systems. The authors develop a theoretical model to determine what factors encourage personal as opposed to party vote-seeking and they rank 13 electoral systems according to the incentives to cultivate a personal reputation. Among other things, Carey and Shugart find that electoral competition will be more or less candidate-centered depending on the degree to which party leadership can exert party discipline and on the extent of intra-party competition. The greater the ability of the party leadership to exert party discipline and the lesser the extent of intra-party competition, the greater the value of party reputation will be in electoral contests. Thus, for example, open-list PR systems provide greater incentives than closed-list PR systems for candidates to distinguish themselves individually because the party leadership does not control the ranking of candidates on the list but rather they must compete with one another for the choice of voters. Electoral systems that require primaries also encourage more candidate-centered than party-centered dynamics. On the other hand, in plurality systems where the party leadership has control of endorsements, individual candidates have more of an incentive to preserve/maintain the party label rather than to focus exclusively on their personal reputation.

#### 4.3.2. *The provision of public vs. more targeted goods*

There is broad agreement in the literature that, in general, pork barrel politics are more prevalent in settings where the electoral system is based on candidate-centered as opposed to party-centered electoral competition and candidates feel they need to differentiate themselves from other candidates. Lizzeri and Persico (2000), for example, develop a model comparing proportional and winner-take-all systems in terms of public project provision. They argue that politicians who care about the spoils of office may under-provide a public good whose benefits on average may be higher because such benefits cannot be targeted to voters as easily as pork barrel spending. The authors thus conclude that desirable public goods are provided less often in plurality systems than in PR systems given the incentives that are in place.<sup>2</sup>

This is, in essence, what David Mayhew (1975) originally termed ‘the electoral connection’ when analyzing the incentives that politicians face in the US House of Representatives but that has much more universal application: in candidate-centered systems, candidates and politicians aim at winning support from their constituents in specific localities by claiming that they can ‘bring home the bacon’ in the form of particularized benefits and targeted projects. Evidence emerging from a multi-year research program on Africa Power and Politics, for example, suggests that, in several African countries including Ghana, under plurality systems, politicians are keen to ‘deliver the goods’ to their particular constituency in order to increase their reelection chances (Lindberg 2010).

On the other hand, additional work on the comparison between majoritarian and proportional systems undertaken by Persson and Tabellini (1999) that examines cross-country data from 1990 (including mostly OECD countries but also several countries in the developing world) finds weak support for the prediction that plurality elections are associated with more pork and less public projects. This suggests that there is a need for further empirical research in this area, and that such research should disaggregate electoral systems *within* the plurality and the PR families, as suggested by Carey and Shugart (1995).

#### 4.3.3. *Corruption*

Corrupt political rent-seeking and pork-barrel spending are not the same thing. While the relationship between the two is complex, corruption refers to illicit efforts to increase one’s personal wealth, while pork barrel includes government programs that benefit a narrow group of citizens often in the politician’s ‘home district’.

There is a growing body of literature that analyses the impact that different electoral systems have on the prospects for corruption as opposed to pork barrel. This literature tends to argue that PR systems, especially closed-list ones, are most susceptible to corrupt political rent-seeking because the opportunities for rent extraction are vested mainly in party leaders, which makes it more difficult for voters and opposition parties to monitor corrupt incumbents. In addition, closed party lists weaken the link between re-election and performing well in office. Evidence emanating mostly from developed democracies but also from some democratic systems in the developing world tends

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<sup>2</sup> However, they do not distinguish between the incentives that may be generated in party systems within the PR family.

to support these theoretical propositions (Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman 2005; Persson, Tabellini, and Trebbi (2003).

Hence, there may be an interesting tension within different electoral families here: PR systems may be more likely than majority systems to produce desirable public goods – but they also foster greater corruption systems. This suggests that there may be a trade-off between systems that provide targeted benefits to narrow constituencies and those that foster corruption. But this, again, needs to be further investigated empirically, especially within the context of democracies in the developing world, and in relation to other institutional factors that may be relevant as well.

#### **4.4 Electoral malpractice**

Electoral malpractice has become an increasing problem in incipient democracies that emerged as a result of the so-called “Third Wave” of democratization that swept across the developing world from the 1980s onwards. In these “electoral autocracies” (Schedler 2006), the electoral playing field is not leveled, but rather is heavily biased in favor of certain groups or organizations – most often the incumbent party. Thus, in electoral autocracies, politicians have become adept at using elections as a means of maintaining and enhancing their hold on power and even their legitimacy.

This is an area of research that is still in its infancy, both in terms of theory building and the generation of evidence. However, it has begun to generate some interesting hypotheses and findings, and could potentially have interesting policy implications.

In a 2007 study, Sarah Birch developed the hypothesis that electoral misconduct is associated more closely with single member districts (plurality) than with proportional representation electoral systems. Birch’s reasoning for this echoes many of the points that have been highlighted in this article. All else being equal, according to Birch politicians will be more likely to engage in electoral misconduct when they have at their disposal a reliable means of manipulating elections. Certain aspects of SMD electoral systems make the manipulation of elections more reliable than under PR given i) the incentives faced by individual candidates and party leaders to engage in electoral misconduct; and ii) the mechanical effects of electoral systems in turning votes into seats.

In terms of incentives, as has been discussed, in PR systems, voters typically vote for parties (though they may also have the option of selecting one or more candidates if the system is an open-list one), whereas in plurality systems voters select individuals. Under PR, parties stand together or fall together, both in terms of reputation and overall levels of electoral support, and party leaders therefore have a greater incentive to enforce compliance with the electoral law to protect party reputation. They also have greater ability to enforce party discipline than under plurality systems. In single member district systems, on the other hand, reputations are separable and sanctions are more difficult for the central party organizations to apply because of the greater autonomy afforded candidates. Thus, trade-offs should be made more often on an individual than on a collective basis, as the benefits of misconduct accrue directly to the candidate. (Birch 2007)

In terms of the second consideration, manipulation under plurality systems tends to be more efficient than under PR because of the well-known tendency of the former to magnify the success of large parties. In a close contest, only a limited number of marginal seats in a plurality system will

need to be won to swing the election, and often, only a small number of votes will need to be manipulated in any individual district to alter the outcome in that district. In a PR system, by contrast, relatively large proportions of the national vote will have to be switched to change the overall balance of power in the legislature. The risks of loss of legitimacy are thus relatively smaller under SMD rules than under PR, as fewer votes need to be changed to achieve the same result in terms of seat allocation. (Birch 2007)

Birch tested this hypothesis doing regression analysis with data from the set of post- communist countries that have held competitive multiparty parliamentary elections between 1995 and 2004). She concluded that “there is a strong relationship among the post-communist countries considered here between the number of SMD [i.e. plurality] seats up for grabs in parliamentary elections and the level of manipulation in the electoral process.”

In a later study (2010), Birch expanded her data set considerably to include Latin America, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and Sub-Saharan Africa, in an attempt to assesses differences in overall levels of manipulation and abuse across regions in the developing world, over time, and across election type (parliamentary, presidential or combined). In this study, Birch disaggregated electoral malpractice along three principal dimensions: manipulation of the rules governing elections, manipulation of vote choice (i.e. candidate electorate votes for), and manipulation of voting (electoral administration). And she suggested that rulers are likely to resort to the first two forms of malpractice much more often than the third because that is the aspect of the electoral process that is easiest for domestic and international actors to monitor, and therefore the one that can undermine their legitimacy the most. Birch’s regression analyses revealed some interesting regional variations in the manipulation of elections. As the author suggests, further work needs to be done to explore elaborate the causal patterns underlying the descriptive findings that her study yielded, especially in terms of understanding what accounts for the significant differences in electoral malpractice across regions. Research into forms of electoral malpractice that have so far proven difficult to trace because of their illegal or informal practice (e.g. vote-buying) is also needed, though it remains unclear how that can be done. (Birch 2010)

## **5. Lessons**

The analysis above helps to highlight several lessons about electoral systems that international development actors ought to keep in mind as they attempt to deepen their understanding of the different contexts in which they work. These include the following:

- It is important to understand how electoral systems work to develop a more nuanced understanding of the interests, opportunities and constraints that drive political actors and the institutional environment within which they operate.
- Electoral systems do not exist in isolation but are part of a broader set of institutions and structures. Context matters for the consequences of the choice of a particular electoral system (e.g. nature of societal cleavages, federal vs. unitary system, nature and quality of political parties, etc.).

- Choices of electoral design are not technical but political; effects of changes to electoral systems are not likely to become manifest over the short-run; and there may be unintended consequences in the long term.
- (Changes in) electoral systems should not be viewed as a panacea for all ills but their influence should not be underestimated either: changes are likely to be incremental, but can be quite important. (Horowitz 2003)
- No electoral system is perfect – there are always trade-offs involved (e.g. candidate/personal influence vs. party coherence; accountability to voters vs. accountability to the party; short-term advantage vs. long-term stability, minority representation and ensuing fragmentation of party systems vs. government coherence and durability; incentives for pork barrel vs. corruption; the provision of public goods vs. the provision of more targeted ones; etc.). This means that the design of constitutional structures and electoral rules is a balancing act that has produced a wide range of both problems and solutions (Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman 2005).

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