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Introduction

Elections lie at the very heart of modern democracy. They are typically the occasions when citizens become most directly engaged in the political process; they determine the identity of those who will govern, often for four or five years; and they significantly influence how that governing power can be exercised.

The rules that govern elections therefore matter too, for they can have a major impact upon outcomes. Had different electoral rules been in place, George W. Bush might not have been elected to the American presidency in 2000 and Tony Blair might never have secured a majority of the seats in the British House of Commons. Had less proportional rules been used, Italy might not have been quite so plagued by 'revolving door' governments for the last sixty years. Conversely, had proportional representation not been chosen as part of the interim constitution of 1993, South Africa might not have achieved such remarkable democratic stability after its hard-fought transition from white-only rule.

Given the importance of electoral rules, it matters that we understand where those rules come from. Three questions in particular demand our attention. First, who has the power to choose the electoral system? To what extent do politicians control the decision process? To what extent are they constrained or can they be entirely displaced by others, including citizens, judges, and foreign powers? Second, what interests or values do these choices serve? If politicians are in control, do they simply pursue their own narrow self-interest or can they be motivated by broader values? If citizens are involved, are they also captured by narrow partisan interests or can they focus on the wider good of the polity? In so far as values matter, which are these values and what determines their role? Third, what electoral system changes are likely to take place? How often is reform likely to occur in general, and can we predict its incidence in particular countries? Is it correct, as Colomer (2004a: 62–6) argues, that electoral system choices are largely determined by the prevailing party system – specifically, by the number of parties it contains? Is it true, as

Colomer (2004a: 55–62) again contends, that there is a general drift in the direction of more proportional systems?

These are all big questions. They can be approached using multiple methods, and no single method is likely to yield answers that entirely exhaust our curiosity. Three approaches in particular can be distinguished. One uses formal theory to derive precise hypotheses that can subsequently be tested against reality. This approach has been fruitfully exploited by Benoit (2004), Boix (1999), Colomer (2004a, 2005), and Iversen and Soskice (2006). The second employs evidence, whether statistical or qualitative, from a large number of cases. Boix (1999) and Colomer (2004a, 2005) test their theoretical hypotheses against such data. Gallagher (2005) and Katz (2005) employ inference from broad surveys of cases to ground a variety of propositions. The third uses intensive analysis of a smaller range of cases in order to tease out mechanisms that are harder to discern at higher generality. Notable examples include Birch *et al.* (2002) on post-communist countries, Reilly (2006) on the Asia-Pacific, Mozaffar (1998) on Africa, and Rahat (2008) on Israel in comparative perspective.

Except in single case studies, the last of these three methods has not been used extensively to study reforms in established democracies. But it should be, and this is the method and the empirical focus that I adopt in this book. As I shall argue, the answers we can develop to the questions stated above are enriched greatly if we engage with the complexity and contingency of diverse electoral reform processes. Specifically, the conventional answers to these questions are that politicians dominate the choice of electoral system, that in doing so they pursue their own power interests, and that this implies both a strong connection from the number of parties to the choice of electoral system and a general trend towards the adoption of more proportional systems. I argue that these answers are either wrong or too simple. In fact, ordinary citizens have considerable influence too, conceptions of the public interest can matter, the link from the party system to the electoral system is complex, and there is no clear trend – at least in established democracies – towards greater proportionality.

I focus on *major changes in electoral systems*. Electoral law comprises enormously many elements, including who has the right to vote or run for office, how voters are registered, who conducts elections following what administrative procedures, how campaigns are financed, how people vote, what preferences voters can express, and how votes are translated into seats (on many of these aspects, see Massicotte, Blais, and

Yoshinaka 2004). I cannot cover all of these here, and, in common with most electoral system scholars, I limit the inquiry to the last two elements, concerning the nature of the vote and its translation into seats. It is to these elements that the label of *electoral system* is typically given.

At the most general level, two types of electoral system can be distinguished. First, there are *plurality or majority systems*: those in which the candidate or candidates who gain the greatest number of votes in a voting district win the seat or seats available, while all others win nothing. Second, there are *proportional systems*: those in which the seats available are divided up between candidates or parties in proportion to the number of votes they win. Within each of these categories, however, further distinctions can be made, and some systems do not neatly fit either category. In this book, I employ a classification of fourteen different types of electoral system. This is based on a twelve-way classification developed by Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005: 35–118), to which I add two further categories – bonus-adjusted systems and cumulative vote – into which some of the cases I discuss fall. These fourteen types are listed in Table 1.1 and explained in the Appendix. I define major electoral system change as a shift from one of these categories to another.

In analysing major electoral system changes, I focus primarily on reforms to the systems used to elect national legislative lower houses. I do not consider changes at sub- or supra-national levels, such as the adoption of mixed-member proportional (MMP) systems for elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and list proportional representation (list PR) for British elections to the European Parliament. Nor do I analyse upper house reforms – such as Japan's House of Councillors reform in 1982 – or changes in the method of choosing the head of government – notably, the direct election of the French president in 1962 and of the Israeli prime minister in 1992.

I also focus primarily upon reforms in established democracies. That electoral systems often change in the course of democratization is hardly surprising: some authoritarian states allow no legislative elections at all; in others, the electoral system inherited from authoritarian times may not be serviceable for the democratic future. Reforms in new or fragile democracies are also to be expected: these are countries where the institutional framework has not bedded down or is endangered by systemic instability. The association of electoral reform with democratization is illustrated by Figure 1.1, which charts in broad terms the number of cases of major electoral reform in non-authoritarian contexts since World War II. The chart has two peaks. The first, around the 1940s

Table 1.1. *Types of electoral system*

Plurality/majority systems
Single-member plurality (SMP)
Block vote (BV)
Party block vote (PBV)
Alternative vote (AV)
Two-round system (TRS)
Proportional systems
List proportional representation (list PR)
Single transferable vote (STV)
Mixed systems
Mixed-member proportional systems (MMP)
Mixed-member majoritarian systems (MMM)
Bonus-adjusted systems (BA)
Other systems
Single non-transferable vote (SNTV)
Limited vote (LV)
Cumulative vote (CV)
Borda count (BC)

Notes: Based on classification in Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005: 35–118). To their twelve categories two have been added: bonus-adjusted systems and cumulative vote. In accordance with widespread usage, two categories are relabelled: Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis call single-member plurality 'first past the post (FPTP)' and mixed-member majoritarian systems 'parallel systems'.

and 1950s, encompasses the second wave of democratization that occurred immediately after World War II and through the following period of decolonization. The second, during the 1990s, is associated principally with the quickening of the third wave of democratization following the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe in 1989.

What is analytically most curious, however, is electoral reform in the context of stable democracy. Katz argued in 1980 that such reform was 'unlikely': major 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' (Katz 1980: 123). Similarly, Nohlen argued a little later

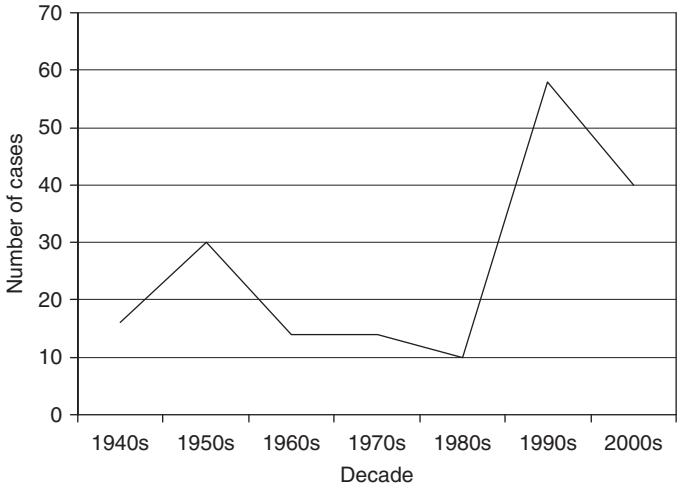

Figure 1.1. Incidence of major electoral reform since World War II.
Principal sources: Colomer (2004a: 74–6); EISA (2009); EJPR (1992–2007); Electoral Studies (2000–2009); IFES (2009); IPU (2009).

that 'Fundamental changes [to electoral systems] are rare and arise only in extraordinary historical situations' (Nohlen 1984: 217). He had in mind fundamental ruptures such as democratization in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s or the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic in France in 1958. In the decades since Katz and Nohlen wrote, however, six episodes of major electoral reform have occurred in established democracies – defined stringently as those countries that were independent democratic states by the end of the second wave of democratization in 1962 (Huntington 1991: 16) and that have remained consolidated democracies ever since – without such ruptures. These cases are summarized in Table 1.2.

The two French cases in the mid-1980s may be thought relatively minor in historical perspective, involving as they did only a very short-lived deviation from the two-round system established at the birth of the Fifth Republic in 1958. At the time, however, they were highly contentious and had major implications for the structure of political competition. There is no doubting the significance of the remaining cases. Italians began to consider ways of reforming their unstable, corruption-ridden political system through electoral reform in the 1980s, leading to the abandonment of full list PR in 1993. The new system was a compromise that left few people happy, but repeated efforts to complete the reform effort

Table 1.2. *Major electoral reforms in established democracies since 1980*

Country	Year enacted	Previous electoral system	New electoral system
France	1985	Two-round qualified plurality	List proportional representation
France	1986	List proportional representation	Two-round qualified plurality
Italy	1993	List proportional representation	Mixed-member majoritarian with partial compensation
New Zealand	1993	Single-member plurality	Mixed-member proportional
Japan	1994	Single non-transferable vote	Mixed-member majoritarian
Italy	2005	Mixed-member majoritarian with partial compensation	Bonus-adjusted proportional representation

throughout the remainder of the 1990s all failed. A significant reform was pushed through in 2005; but it was universally regarded as botched, and pressure for another change has remained high since. In Japan too, the need to tackle rampant corruption was one of the central goals of reform advocates. The unusual system of single non-transferable vote (SNTV) in multi-member districts that had been in place almost continuously since 1925 was widely seen as partly responsible for that corruption; it was hoped that its abolition would bring alternation of parties in power and more programmatic political debate. New Zealand's reform was perhaps the most momentous of all. Aside from brief use of a two-round system in 1908 and 1911, New Zealand had never deviated from plurality rule, and single-member plurality became universal there before even in the UK. In 1993, however, New Zealand broke all Westminster tradition. Not only did it adopt proportional representation: it also opted for a form of PR – MMP – never before used in the Westminster world. A country that previously had shown exceptional electoral system conservatism stepped decisively into the unknown.

In the chapters that follow, I conduct detailed analysis of electoral reform in these four countries – France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand. In order to increase the size and diversity of the sample, I include not just

the six cases of reform since 1980, but all cases of major reform and of attempted but failed reform in these countries since 1945 – a sample that encompasses nineteen episodes in total. My primary method is comparative process tracing, through which mechanisms operating in these cases can be explored and patterns across them identified. My purpose is not just to illuminate these cases – though that is a worthy goal in itself – but also to develop comparative generalizations regarding the nature of reform processes, allowing answers to be developed to the questions about power, interests, values, and outcomes that were stated above.

Before I turn to the empirical study, however, an analytical framework is required. I pursue four main tasks in the remainder of this chapter. First, I consider existing analytical frameworks, arguing that, though they take us far, they do not give us all the tools needed to understand electoral reform. I propose that a revised framework must recognize two key points: that different electoral reform episodes come in quite different types that cannot readily be placed within a single model; and that various aspects of the complexity of each type must be grappled with if we are to derive all the understanding we can of processes and outcomes. Second, I address the first of these two points, considering what different types of electoral reform exist and which are particularly likely to be found among cases of major electoral reform in established democracies. Third, I lay out the terrain for the analysis of each reform type that will take up the bulk of the book. Each type comprises a variety of 'building blocks', concerning who is involved, what motivates them, how their motivations translate into preferences, and how those preferences translate into outcomes. I consider these in detail in Chapters 2 to 4, but I provide a brief outline here. Finally, I round off the chapter by pointing towards the conclusions I will reach on the three fundamental questions regarding electoral reform with which I began.

Existing approaches to analysing electoral reform

Recent analysis of electoral system change has yielded two main theoretical perspectives regarding the reforms of recent decades. One – the power-maximization perspective – is specified most precisely by Benoit (2004), but also underlies the work of Boix (1999) and Colomer (2004a, 2005), among others. It assumes that politicians control the choice of electoral system and that they are motivated to maximize their power. The other, developed by Shugart (2001) and Shugart and Wattenberg (2001c), allows for a wider range of actors – in particular, including

Table 1.3. *Performance of the power-maximization and inherent/contingent factors approaches in relation to major electoral reforms in established democracies*

Approach	France 1985	France 1986	Italy 1993	New Zealand 1993	Japan 1994	Italy 2005
Power-maximization	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y
Inherent and contingent factors	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N

Y: approach can interpret reform. N: approach cannot interpret reform.

ordinary citizens as well as politicians – and sees electoral reform as the product of a mix of inherent and contingent factors: the electoral system is vulnerable to reform where it occupies an inherently extreme position on either an inter- or an intra-party dimension; reform can then occur in response to specific instances of systemic failure.

Table 1.3 gives an initial assessment of the empirical performance of these two perspectives in relation to the six major electoral reforms since 1980 that were identified above. As is apparent, both approaches can explain some of the reforms, but not all. The power-maximization perspective can account for President François Mitterrand's decision in 1985 to replace France's two-round system with list PR: it was evident that his Socialist Party was going to lose the election due the following year, and the reform would limit the size of that loss. It can also explain the reversal of that decision by the victorious centre-right coalition led by Jacques Chirac in 1986: PR had diminished the size of the centre-right's majority; Chirac expected that restoration of the two-round system would make it easier to secure comfortable majorities in the future. And, with more effort, it can explain the Italian case of 2005 too: the reform enacted by the government of Silvio Berlusconi enhanced the coalition's expected seat share, but (as I shall argue in Chapter 6) did not maximize it; nevertheless, once a range of other considerations is taken into account, it in various ways advanced the power interests of all the parties that supported it. But the power-maximization account does not explain the three remaining reforms. In New Zealand, two large parties had long dominated politics and could expect their dominance to continue under the status quo; MMP, by contrast, would force them to compete with smaller rivals who would be likely to eat into their seat

shares. In Italy in 1993, a shift away from proportional representation was enacted when the party system was going through enormous flux, with old parties vulnerable to collapse and new parties seeking to establish themselves – precisely the context where seat-maximizing parties would be most expected to want proportional rules. In Japan too, the system adopted in 1994 was slightly less proportional than the old (Gallagher 1998: 217), even though the party system had lately fragmented and several parties that contributed to the reform expected their capacity to win seats to be harmed.

The perspective developed by Shugart and Wattenberg, meanwhile, is well able to deal with the reforms in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan in 1993–1994: in each country, the electoral system prior to reform was 'extreme' in terms of Shugart's criteria (Shugart 2001: 43); and all three political systems were subject to severe systemic failures in the run-up to reform. Shugart also categorizes the French two-round system as extreme, and so the approach is compatible with its abandonment in 1985. But the approach cannot account for the return to the extremities in France in 1986, nor for the reform in Italy in 2005: in neither of these cases was the prevailing electoral system extreme.

Thus, each approach captures a significant part of the real-world story, but each leaves much to be explained. The value of the two approaches is not determined solely by their performance in this test. Nevertheless, there is clearly scope for further exploration.

A second reason for probing further is not revealed in Table 1.3: many aspects of the process of reform envisaged by each approach remain underexplored. In the case of the power-maximization approach, for example, the most clearly specified version is Benoit's model, which operationalizes *power*-maximization solely in terms of *seat*-maximization:

> 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 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.
>
> (Benoit 2004: 373–4)

Yet, as Benoit (2004: 367–8; 2007: 378–80) and others (e.g., Blau 2008: 63–5; Katz 2005: 61–2) have pointed out, even if politicians simply pursue power, power may mean multiple things and may be influenced by electoral system choices in many ways. Seats matter, but so, for

example, do intra-party relations and possibilities for inter-party coalition-building. In order to develop a full understanding of how power-maximizers approach electoral reform, we need a more nuanced conception of their motivations. In relation to the approach developed by Shugart and Wattenberg, meanwhile, much remains to be learnt about the precise mechanisms through which underlying problems translate into electoral reform. If voters as well as politicians are involved, the motivational complexity increases considerably, and the dynamics of how these different actors relate to one another become important.

In the light of these two issues, I seek to develop a more refined understanding of electoral reform processes through two steps. First, we should acknowledge that there are different types of electoral reform process. The evidence in Table 1.3 already points in this direction: in five of the six cases, one of the two approaches successfully predicts reform while the other does not, suggesting that they may be capturing essential features of different types. Second, with regard to each of the key types, I seek to develop more nuanced understanding by analysing various aspects of the reform process in considerable detail. I turn now to the first of these tasks.

Types of electoral reform

As I have suggested, the traditional idea that major electoral reform will occur only in response to systemic rupture must be rejected in the light of the fact that six major reforms have occurred in unbroken democratic contexts since 1980. Nevertheless, that only six cases of major reform in such contexts exist in thirty (indeed, fifty) years indicates that the traditional view was not far wrong: major electoral reform in established democracies is a very rare event. That is so, in essence, because politicians usually control the electoral system and those politicians with the power to change the system are typically precisely those who benefit from it and therefore want to keep it unchanged. This implies two potential routes to electoral reform: either the politicians in power do decide that they want reform; or those politicians lose control over the decision process (cf. Banting and Simeon 1985: 12). We thus have two broad types of electoral reform. It is useful, however, to subdivide these further, as summarized in Figure 1.2.

Politicians retain control

Among cases in which politicians retain control, the key further question concerns how those politicians approach the electoral system. Following