

# Does Electoral System Reform Work? Electoral System Lessons from Reforms of the 1990s

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Italy, Japan, New Zealand, parties, party system, personalism

## Abstract

In the early 1990s, popular discontent with politics in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan led to the enactment of new electoral systems in all three countries. The results of the reforms have been mixed, as they have dramatically altered politics in some cases but in others have been a great disappointment to many observers. This essay examines the reforms and the conditions under which they successfully addressed the problems of their party systems. The cases highlight the limitations of using electoral systems to explain political outcomes that are not direct effects of electoral rules.

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**SMD:**  
single-member  
district

**PR:** proportional  
representation

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## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, popular discontent with politics led to a push for major political reform in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan. In each country, there was agreement that the government lacked accountability, and reformers promoted electoral system change to address the problem. All three countries enacted variants of “mixed-member” electoral systems, and all three included systems in which voters cast two ballots: one for a candidate in a single-member district (SMD) and one for a party in proportional representation (PR). There was hope that reform would create tighter links between the wishes of voters and the governments elected to office. In all three cases, the public was disappointed by the results of the first elections under reform, but now that more than a decade has passed, it is easier to offer a more measured analysis of the new systems. Overall, in terms of the principal aim of reform-minded observers of the systems, the reforms in New Zealand were extremely successful; those in Italy had a mixed effect but also instituted a major improvement in the level of government accountability; and reform in Japan has been the least successful. What explains this variation?

The first part of this review discusses the substance of the reforms. In particular, to what extent did the reforms meet their objectives? The second part of the review considers why electoral system reform has not uniformly led to desired outcomes. Most of the literature on the effects of electoral system reform tends to be case-specific, explaining the effects of reform in a given country and eschewing analysis that considers more broadly when reform will succeed. But viewing such changes across two or more country cases creates an opportunity to make more generalizable statements. In terms of addressing the problems faced by their politics, the greatest successes occurred where the aim of reforms was to increase party system proportionality (New Zealand) or consolidate party competition around competing blocs (Italy and to some degree Japan).

The greatest disappointment with reform occurred where observers had hoped to bring about a shift away from a heavy emphasis on particularistic money politics and longtime dominance of a single party (Japan).

Comparing the successes and failures of the different reforms highlights the limitations of using electoral systems to explain political outcomes. As suggested by the immediate impact of the reforms on party consolidation and proliferation, analyses of the effects of electoral rules are most compelling when focused on outcome variables that flow directly from the incentives created by the electoral system (i.e., proximal effects). Electoral system explanations are less convincing when they require multiple steps to get from the electoral rule incentives to the predicted outcomes and behaviors (i.e., distal effects). In such cases, the electoral system is at best a partial explanation, and other factors deserve attention. For this reason, when electoral reform is enacted to address behaviors and outcomes—such as clientelism or single-party dominance—that are distal effects of electoral rules, observers are likely to be disappointed by the results.

The third part of the review takes this distinction into account in suggesting two directions for future research. First, the failure of electoral system reform to resolve particular problems indicates that the literature on party systems could be enhanced by greater attention to explanatory variables other than the electoral system. Second, the cases in which electoral system reform successfully addressed problems within the party system indicate areas where electoral rules provide a particularly compelling explanation for behavior, and therefore suggest that future literature within the electoral system field ought to focus more on these areas. In particular, such cases should encourage greater attention to the impact of electoral rules on the behavior of individual legislators, making what Shugart (2005) calls the “intraparty” dimension of politics perhaps the most

fruitful avenue for future work on electoral system effects.

## REFORM IN ITALY, NEW ZEALAND, AND JAPAN

In Italy, New Zealand, and Japan, there was great discontent with the lack of perceived party accountability. As Shugart points out, all three countries utilized “extreme” electoral systems that caused them to fall short on at least one of the two dimensions of electoral “efficiency”: the interparty dimension, where in an efficient system there is a clear government-opposition choice, with a majority of voters endorsing one side or the other; and the intraparty dimension, where in an efficient system parties and politicians campaign on collective policy programs (Shugart 2001a,b).

Italy faced problems on both dimensions, and the country’s prereform electoral system was often held responsible (Katz 2001, p. 96). The Chamber of Deputies maintained a PR-list system where voters could use preference votes to alter the lists. The PR system helped bring about party fragmentation, which in turn led to unstable coalition governments. The preference vote personalized legislator-constituent relations, which elected representatives help maintain through particularistic spending (intraparty inefficiency). The Christian Democratic Party (DC) used anticommunist appeals and clientelistic networks to win a consistent plurality of the vote. As the ideological center point of a multiparty system, the DC was a part of every government over 1945–1992 and nearly always held the prime ministership. Unstable coalitions made governing more difficult, but the general lack of turnover of the leading parties and the ministers in the government created a sense of unaccountability (D’Alimonte 2005). With heavily fragmented governing coalitions, campaigns lacked a clear division between government and opposition (interparty inefficiency). Popular anger grew in the 1980s and early 1990s as the leading Italian

parties were engulfed in corruption crises involving bribes and ties to the mafia.

New Zealand’s problem prior to reform was interparty inefficiency; the ruling party did not represent the majority of voters. With an SMD system in a unicameral legislature, New Zealand was ruled by strong and decisive majority party governments, with alternation between two highly disciplined and programmatic parties. The general practice in elections was for voters to judge parties according to their platform promises, and once in office, parties avoided enacting policies that they had not presented in the election (Denemark 2001). Over time, though, voters grew discontented. From 1978 on, disproportionality increased, as smaller parties gained votes but few seats, and voters grew concerned about small party representation. Elections offered a clear choice between the government and opposition, but, with small parties winning many votes, the winning party did not represent a majority of voters. Three times (1978, 1981, and 1993) a single party won a seat majority with under 40% of the popular vote. Especially galling were successive elections (1978 and 1981) in which the National Party won a majority of the seats even though it (*a*) passed a series of unpopular policies that went against its campaign promises, and (*b*) was not even the plurality vote winner (Denemark 2001, p. 77). Worse, the New Zealand public perceived the major parties to be unaccountable and despotic. In the 1980s, both National and Labour Party governments passed unpopular economic policies that ran contrary to voter expectations.

Intraparty inefficiency plagued Japan’s prereform system. Under the single nontransferable vote in multi-member district (SNTV/MMD) system used in Japan’s House of Representatives (HR), each voter cast one ballot for a candidate in a district, which typically held 3–5 seats. The top vote-getters in each district would win office, up to the number of seats in the district. In order to win a majority of the seats, a party had to win roughly two seats per district, so a large

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**DC:** Christian Democratic Party (Italy)

**SNTV/MMD:** single nontransferable vote in multi-member district

**HR:** House of Representatives

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**LDP:** Liberal Democratic Party (Japan)

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party like the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) needed to run at least two candidates per district. As a result, intraparty inefficiency dominated the system: Intraparty competition was the norm, with candidates' campaigns highlighting personal attributes and ability to deliver pork rather than issues. Candidates had to raise and spend huge sums to maintain personal bases of support. Many associated the system with the LDP's long reign, which began with the party's birth in 1955 and continues, as of 2007, in the HR. Even in a system that promoted fragmentation, power—especially to disburse government funds—proved effective at keeping members of the LDP together, while the opposition was more fragmented. In addition, substantial malapportionment existed, so that the LDP's rural base of support received more seats per voter than in the more competitive urban areas. There is disagreement over how much the electoral system aided LDP dominance [see especially Cox (1997) and Christensen & Johnson (1995)]. However, irrespective of academic analyses, the public associated SNTV/MMD with LDP dominance, as the party had not won a majority of the vote since 1963. As money scandals emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the public grew tired of an electoral system that seemed to support the reign of an unaccountable and corrupt party.

Reform took a different path in each case. In Italy, in April 1993, voters passed a referendum overturning the Senate's PR electoral system and thereby initiated direct pressure on elites to pass comprehensive electoral system reform (Katz 2001, p. 96), which they did later that year. It was widely agreed in Italy that the new rules should be more majoritarian to ensure more stable governments and government accountability. No single party controlled the reform process, and small parties were able to maintain elements of proportionality (D'Alimonte 2005, p. 255). In New Zealand, the leadership of the two major parties sought to avoid major reform (Vowles 2005), but in November 1993, voters passed a

binding referendum replacing the old SMD system (Denemark 2001, p. 70). In Japan, voter ire increased with each scandal. The arrest of one of the LDP's leading politicians in 1992 led a number of LDP members to seek electoral system reform, but party leaders blocked efforts. In response, a key group left the LDP to create new parties. After new elections were held in June 1993, an anti-LDP coalition government, which included the LDP defectors, took power. In 1994, the coalition in conjunction with the LDP enacted a new electoral system.

### The New Electoral Systems

All three countries implemented mixed-member electoral systems, but with significant differences between them. (The Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies were both reformed with somewhat different rules introduced in each, but for the sake of simplicity I focus here on the new rules for the Chamber.) The new system in all three cases offered voters two ballots: one for a candidate in plurality-winner SMDs and one for a party list in PR voting. Each system permits dual candidacies, whereby a candidate can run in both the SMD and PR tiers simultaneously; dual candidates who lose an SMD are eligible for seats in PR. The dual-candidate rule is especially prominent in Japan, where clusters of dual candidates get ranked prior to the election at the same spot as one another on their party's PR list; those that "lose best"—i.e., with a higher proportion of their SMD winner's vote total—get better spots on the list once ballots are tallied. The new Italian system put into place a 4% threshold of representation, so only parties with at least 4% of the list vote could win seats. New Zealand enacted a 5% threshold, from which a party would be exempted if it won at least one SMD. Japan's system includes no threshold. The Italian reforms allotted 475 out of 630 seats to SMDs. In New Zealand, SMDs account for 65 of the 120 seats. And in Japan, there are 300 SMDs, compared to 180 PR seats (it had been

200 PR seats in the first new-system election in 1996). Italy and New Zealand utilize one national district for their PR tiers. But Japan's is divided into 11 blocs (now ranging in district magnitude from six to 29), adding greater disproportionality to Japan's PR system.

New Zealand utilizes a mixed-member-proportional (MMP) system, much like Germany's. The PR vote determines the total number of seats a party is entitled to and seats in the PR tier are allotted as "compensation seats." For example, in 2005, the Labour Party won 41% of the PR vote and 31 SMDs. The PR vote entitled the party to 50 seats overall, so, subtracting out the 31 SMDs, it was allotted 19 PR compensation seats. Italy and Japan introduced mixed-member-majoritarian (MMM) systems, with the intention of pushing toward two-party systems or at least systems that included real alternation in power (Reed 2001, p. 313). Japan's system does not include compensation seats. Each party wins seats through PR balloting and simply adds these seats onto the SMDs it wins. With a high ratio of SMD to PR seats and a lack of compensation given to small parties, the system advantages larger parties. The Italian reform offered no compensation seats, but it did introduce a system of "negative vote transfers" (*scorporo*), whereby parties and cartels lose PR votes for every SMD they win. These vote transfers provided some assistance to small parties, but—especially given the high ratio of SMD to PR seats—hardly made up for the seats won by parties in SMDs.

Italy's reforms permitted party "cartels" made up of pre-election-established coalitions of parties. A party receiving less than 4% of the vote could receive representation if it were part of a pre-election coalition that, as a group, surpassed the threshold. Candidates could choose to run in SMDs under the banner of their pre-election coalition, rather than a specific party, so that if endorsed by a party cartel, even candidates from small parties could compete in SMDs.

## How the New Systems Have Worked Out

In all three cases, there was displeasure with the results of reforms, but they did bring about substantial changes in the political systems, with accountability—one of the central objectives of reformers—improved in important ways.

For Italy, many scholars (Bartolini et al. 2004, Bartolini & D'Alimonte 1996, D'Alimonte 2005, Morlino 1996) express disappointment with the continued high levels of party fragmentation and the weak cohesion of coalitions. By nearly any measure, there remain many parties. If we count all parties that won at least 0.5% of the vote, 14 (1987) and 16 (1992) parties won representation in the last two elections prior to reform, compared to 14 (1994), 11 (1996), and 14 (2001) after reform. And cabinet stability did not markedly improve. Over 1945–1993, the average cabinet duration was 11 months (D'Alimonte 2005, p. 272); under the new system, there were seven cabinets in the first ten years, with an average duration of 17 months, and only two lasted more than two years.

But focusing on these shortcomings misses the greater interparty efficiency emerging through alternating blocs of parties in the government. The death of the DC due to widespread corruption charges facilitated this shift, but the incentives created by the new electoral system were at least as important. The weak compensation provided by the PR tier and the large number of SMDs created incentives that helped the system consolidate around two principal alternatives. Reed (2001) shows a clear move from many parties in the first election under the new system toward a two-party—or, rather, two-candidate—system at the SMD level by the second election, and the two major blocs came to control 89% of the vote and 98% of the seats in the SMD tier (D'Alimonte 2005, p. 266). Rules permitting pre-election cartels and allowing SMD candidates to run under the banner of an entire alliance

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**MMP:**  
mixed-member-proportional

**MMM:**  
mixed-member-majoritarian

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gave parties strong incentive to coalesce (D'Alimonte 2005). These pre-election coalitions, which D'Alimonte (2001, p. 342) calls the "most important effect" of the new system, helped make possible greater efficiency and alternation in power. The importance of the new electoral system became especially clear during the 1999 election to the European Parliament held in Italy under PR rules. The parties of Italy's center-left coalition contested the election as separate entities (without alliance), as they lacked the institutional incentives to consolidate (D'Alimonte 2001, p. 344).

However, given the system's complicated rules, further tinkering was always likely, and in 2005, Italy replaced the mixed-member system with one that offered voters in Chamber elections simply one ballot for a party list. The (pre-election-determined) coalition that wins the plurality of the vote then receives 55% of the seats at the national level, with seats allocated proportionally within the coalition to each party with more than 2% of the vote. The system still provides incentives for two-alliance competition but also continues to give individual parties power within the coalitions.

New Zealand's new system was unpopular during its first two years, but over time antagonism toward the system declined, as reform achieved its fundamental objectives. Despite the continued strong presence of the National and Labour Parties, the system led to an increase in the effective number of parties and proportionality, minority and minor party representation, and, most important, a move from single-party to coalition government (Barker et al. 2001, p. 317–20). Vowles argues: "*New Zealand's change to MMP has been a success . . . . The political process contains more veto players. Majoritarianism is still ingrained in the political culture, but the electoral system no longer so easily facilitates its extremes*" (Vowles 2005, p. 310—emphasis added). And Shugart (2005, p. 35) points out that "a change from single-party to coalition cabinets represents one of the most dramatic changes to the

overall political system that an electoral system could be expected to produce."

In Japan, the new electoral system has produced some very important changes. Thanks to SMDs, the opposition has consolidated around a single party, the Democratic Party of Japan, and the LDP and its small coalition partner (*Kōmeitō*) coordinate so as to avoid competition within the same SMD. As a result, there is now more direct two-party competition between the opposition and LDP in SMDs (Reed 2005). Moreover, the need to capture a plurality of the district vote has led candidates to develop broader bases of district support (Hirano 2006). Personal support organizations for SMD candidates remain at least as important to candidates under the new system as under the old, but the new organizations focus on developing a broader base of support than under SNTV/MMD (Krauss & Pekkanen 2004). Along these lines, in elections for the HR, parties now typically offer general policy manifestoes. Also, under SNTV/MMD, heavy intraparty competition made it difficult for leaders to keep unwanted candidates from running for their party. But the SMDs promote greater leadership control, as only one candidate can realistically be nominated for a party in a given district. Intraparty competition and factionalism (especially in relation to district-level elections) have declined.

However, after four elections, it appears that in some of the most important areas major change did not occur. Even with consolidation of the opposition, LDP dominance continued and the LDP's challengers were overall no more successful in the HR than they had been at their strongest in the prereform period. To be sure, in postreform Japan, unlike the pre-1993 period, the LDP needed to enter into a series of coalition governments, and in SMDs the party relied in part on votes mobilized by its coalition partner. But, except for the brief period of party upheaval that grew out of the 1993 LDP split, the biggest reason for the coalitions was the LDP's relative weakness in the House of Councillors, which

scarcely changed its electoral system. And, as of 2007, the LDP remained dominant in the HR, where the electoral reform had been enacted. In addition, public support for parties continued to be weak in general, and campaigning continued to be highly candidate-oriented, with substantial emphasis on pork-barrel politics (see, e.g., Christensen 1998, p. 1003; Gallagher 1998, p. 225; Scheiner 2006). The new system helps maintain a number of features of the SNTV/MMD system that many found undesirable, most notably the fact that the best-loser dual candidate provision offers most PR candidates a strong incentive to behave like locally oriented SMD candidates rather than party-beholden PR representatives (McKean & Scheiner 2000). For these reasons, electoral reform in Japan has been deemed a failure by many (Reed 2001, p. 313). [See, among others, Reed (2003, 2005) for excellent discussions of the various effects of the reforms in Japan.]

To gain insight into when electoral reform will be successful, it would be ideal to consider other examples of reform as well. Unfortunately, most cases of reform since 1990—most notably, Colombia, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Bolivia—did not have sufficiently grounded democratic legacies and/or have not yet had enough elections under their new electoral systems to offer useful comparisons.

Although attracting less attention, Israel offers the most comparable electoral system reform from the past two decades. Israel utilizes closed-list PR with a low threshold (now 2%, up from 1% and then 1.5% over the past two decades), which made it possible for many fringe parties—often led by ultraorthodox religious minorities—to win seats. Especially in the 1980s, when no large party could win a large percentage of the seats, small parties acted as pivots. With power disproportionate to their numbers, they were able to decide the composition of the cabinet, weakening and destabilizing coalitions (Hazan & Rahat 2000, p. 1316). Popular displeasure pressured the parliament to pass reform. The leading proposal, which passed in

1992, focused on an unusual mixed system. Voters cast two ballots: one for a legislative party list and one for a candidate for prime minister. The intuition was that directly electing the prime minister would take away the power of the extreme parties in the government formation process and, because voters might be inclined to cast straight ticket ballots, would reduce the number of seats controlled by such parties (Rahat & Hazan 2005, pp. 345–46). Many individuals—including political scientists—argued that the reform would have the opposite effect (i.e., strengthening small parties) because voters would determine the government in the prime minister vote but could then vote their “true” preference in the party voting (Rahat 2001, pp. 138, 141). However, nearly 80% of the public supported enactment (Hazan 1996, p. 28). The reform went into effect in 1996 and quickly proved its opponents correct. It led to an all-time high in party system fragmentation, and prime ministers were forced to spend the bulk of their time keeping the coalition together (Rahat & Hazan 2005, pp. 346–47). The system was widely derided—Giovanni Sartori called it “the most incredibly stupid electoral system ever designed” (quoted in Hazan 2001, p. 351)—and was repealed in 2001.

In short, electoral reform has been a mixed bag. In New Zealand, the change in electoral rules largely achieved its purpose of increasing proportionality and therefore also made it difficult for a party to dominate the government with less than a majority of the vote. In Italy, the change in rules clearly helped change a system with rare real turnover in power, and therefore little accountability, to one in which two blocs alternate in power. In Japan, the new rules helped consolidate the party system around two general blocs and appear to have helped broaden the appeals that many candidates make. In other ways, though, reform has left many observers dissatisfied. In Italy, the party system remains very fragmented, leaving coalitions unstable. In Japan, the system remains highly clientelistic, with substantial corruption, and LDP dominance

continues—although the LDP rule is now part of a coalition government—more than a decade after the introduction of the new system. And in Israel the reforms worked against the very aims they were designed to produce.

### WHY NOT MORE CHANGE UNDER THE NEW ELECTORAL SYSTEMS?

What prevents reforms from achieving their stated aims? As noted above, most analyses of the effects of reform have tended to focus on the reforms of only a single country. When reforms are considered comparatively, greater possibilities emerge for understanding when they will achieve their objectives.

One might simply argue that the more dramatic the change in the rules, the more likely it is that political change will also be substantial. The shift from SMDs to MMP in New Zealand was the sharpest break from the old rules, and the move from SNTV/MMD to MMM in Japan was the least dramatic change. However, though clearly correct, such an explanation does not explain the genuine successes that occurred in Italy and, especially, Japan, nor the *types* of political and party system changes that are most likely to emerge from electoral system reform.

Two factors appear particularly important to addressing these questions. First, in evaluating the likely effects of electoral reform, it is important to keep in mind how closely linked objectives are to the mechanics and incentives of electoral rules and the limits, therefore, to what electoral rules are likely to affect. Second, many of the aims of electoral reform become subverted by the actions of sitting legislators. By seeing how reform came to be initiated, and by whom, we can predict how far it is likely to go.

### Electoral Reform Successes

In his classic work on the consequences of electoral laws, Rae (1971) distinguishes between proximal effects, which are based on

a direct link between electoral rules and outcomes, and distal effects, which are more indirect. Electoral system models are more consistently successful when focused on proximal effects. For example, PR has a direct mechanical effect, ensuring that most groups receiving votes also gain seats. In this way, the aims of reform were likely to be attained in New Zealand; the shift from SMDs to MMP was almost certain to have the immediate desired effect of increasing small party representation and halting the election of a single party with manufactured majorities (Shugart 2005, p. 35).

Although not at the proximal extreme, reforms that seek to elicit outcomes and behaviors that are themselves a direct response to mechanical effects are likely to bear fruit as well, but may be slower to succeed (Shugart 2005, p. 36). For example, SMDs have a direct mechanical effect, denying representation to all but the top vote-getter, but there is also a psychological effect—in which weak parties exit and supporters of weak candidates vote for a more likely winner—that flows directly from the mechanical effect. The psychological effect may not occur immediately because it depends on actors gaining information about likely behavior and success under the system. In the Italian, New Zealand, and Japanese postreform systems, two-party competition did not emerge in SMDs immediately, but did begin to appear within a small number of elections. In the previous section, I discussed the shift to two-candidate competition in the Italian SMDs. In New Zealand, the mean effective number of candidates in districts at the SMD level dropped steadily in each election from 3.3 in the first election under the new system in 1996 down to 2.5 by 2005. In Japan, there was also a steady decline in the number of candidates, as both intra- and interparty coordination (discussed in the previous section) emerged in response to the incentives created by the mechanics of SMDs. Indeed, if we exclude the Communist Party (which according to party policy until 2007 ran a candidate in nearly every SMD despite



its inability to win any), by 2005 there were on average only 2.3 actual candidates in each SMD—very close to Duverger’s predicted two candidates per district.

In short, electoral system reform successfully addressed many of the concerns of the reformers, but these successes tended to be proximal effects, areas on which the impact of the electoral system was more direct.

### **Electoral Systems are Not Sufficient Explanation**

However, many of the most important problems in political and party systems are not proximal effects of electoral rules, so it is important to investigate influences other than electoral systems. Even if wisely chosen, electoral rule changes designed to address problems that are actually distal effects of the electoral system are more likely to lead to disappointment with reform.

Outside of work on the most proximal, mechanical effects of electoral rules, most electoral system theories are not merely founded on a pure relationship between electoral rule and outcome but also include particular assumptions. For this reason, understanding the limits of electoral system explanations requires attention to the assumptions that underlie them. We can see this in Cox’s (1997, p. 79) argument that two-party competition will probably not obtain in plurality SMDs under any of the following conditions: voters who are not short-term instrumentally rational; a lack of public information about voter preferences and vote intentions (and, hence, insufficient sense of which candidates are “out of the running”); widespread certainty regarding likely winners; and the presence of many voters who strongly prefer their first choice and, thus, are nearly indifferent to other choices. For example, the lack of information about parties and uncertainty about their likely success makes strategic voting much more difficult in new democracies and poorly institutionalized party systems, thereby leading to more parties in SMDs than in estab-

lished democracies (Moser 2001, Moser & Scheiner 2004). This fact undoubtedly contributed to a proliferation of parties in the first postreform election in each of the cases discussed in this essay. But it is also noteworthy that with greater information and party institutionalization over time, the number of parties declined in the SMD tiers.

Moreover—again, except at the level of the most proximal, mechanical effects—even when the assumptions underlying electoral system “laws” hold, electoral institutions interact with other features of the political system. It is typically easiest to draw concrete causal connections between electoral systems and the number of political parties at the district level. The links are also relatively direct between electoral systems and outcomes such as legislators’ willingness to toe their party’s line, campaign strategy, and, presumably, the “personal vote.” However, even in these areas where electoral systems are fairly determinative, other factors shape the party system. For example, in determining the number of parties, social diversity interacts with the electoral system, and party proliferation is most likely where there are both a proportional electoral system and a heterogeneous population (Cox 1997). Returning to the cases discussed here, the new rules in Italy certainly helped promote party fragmentation, but that fragmentation was also partly due to the regional character of many of the parties in the country (Morlino 1996), making less likely a substantial reduction in the number of nationalized parties.

The more indirect the link between electoral system and outcome—i.e., the more distal the effect—the more likely it becomes that other factors are shaping the outcome. For example, despite the above exceptions, plurality SMDs do tend toward two-partism at the district level, but they do not necessarily lead to only two parties at the national level. The logic of Duverger’s Law principally applies to district-level incentives, and Chhibber & Kollman (1998, 2004) indicate how the level of government centralization affects the

degree to which district-level parties coordinate and become nationalized: Such nationalization is most common in centralized systems, where local-level parties have greater incentive to coordinate so as to be able to be active in politics where it most “counts.”

Because the Japanese case provoked the strongest complaints about the outcomes of electoral reform, and because it is the case I know best, I give it additional attention. In Japan, many of the key changes observers hoped for—but as of 2007 had not achieved—from the reforms relate to particularly distal effects of the electoral system. Most notable are the highly clientelistic political arrangements and the longtime dominance of an unpopular party, the LDP. With regard to clientelism, political science has yet to put forward a model that can consistently tie electoral system type to the type of politician-voter linkage (i.e., clientelistic or programmatic). Most standard views hold that programmatic politics are more likely in PR systems in which party leaders control the party lists, but such models are unable to explain counterexamples such as the heavily clientelistic Austrian case, where—despite an element of preference voting in the system—party leaders traditionally have dominated the PR lists that determine which candidates win seats. (That said, the electoral system is probably more likely to shape the *form* clientelism takes—e.g., whether clientelistic networks are founded on personal or impersonal ties.)

Many critics of SNTV/MMD in Japan sought to replace the system in the hopes of eliminating the clientelistic system that led to wasteful spending and corruption, but there was reason to think that change was not likely. SNTV/MMD certainly reinforced clientelistic practices in Japan, but clientelism was in large part a result of factors other than the electoral system (Scheiner 2006, 2007). Clientelistic party practices had begun with Japan’s first parties, as public servants ran for office using the resources of the state to “purchase” popular support, and, once established, clientelistic practices proved sticky. In addition,

despite the presence of SNTV/MMD across the country, the extent to which clientelistic practices were used varied depending on the social structure and political economy in a given region (Scheiner 2006, 2007). Clientelistic ties may be weakening now in Japan, but probably not because of changes in the electoral system. Large numbers of politicians and voters seek to maintain those ties, but slowed economic growth has led to tighter budgets and an inability to afford as much clientelistic spending—offering support for political-economic explanations for the type of politician-voter linkage (see, e.g., Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007a).

The lack of party turnover in power was of even greater concern to most observers of Japanese politics, but the continuation of LDP control despite the shift from SNTV/MMD to MMM suggests that the electoral system does not fully account for one-party dominance. (As noted above, the shift to coalition governments is of course an important change, but as of 2007 this shift was due more to changed party dynamics in the Upper House; the LDP remained more solidly in power in the HR, where the reforms had been implemented.) LDP success—like the success of dominant parties in Austria, Italy, and Mexico—has been due in large part to the heavily clientelistic and centralized governmental system in the country (Scheiner 2005, 2006). Electoral politics in Japan tends to be founded on politicians’ ability to deliver government benefits to their constituents. Because government finances in Japan have been controlled to a very large degree by the central government, local politicians have strong incentives to cozy up to the national ruling party—typically by becoming members of it—and this in turn made the LDP even more dominant in subnational elections. For this reason, the LDP has a massive advantage, through its ability to use local politicians to mobilize voters and run for national office as “quality” candidates whose experience in office and pre-existing base of support make them more likely to win.

The electoral system is certainly not irrelevant to LDP dominance. The introduction of greater head-to-head competition between ruling and opposition parties increases the opposition's ability to run coordinated challenges against the LDP, but SMDs also help the LDP by giving the LDP and its coalition partner (*Kōmeitō*) incentive to coordinate at the district level (even while usually competing in PR). Even so, forces outside the electoral system continue to give the ruling party its greatest advantages. The LDP has had little shared ideology with most of its coalition partners, but in a highly clientelistic system like Japan's, control of state resources is at least as important as general policy positions. As a result, the LDP was able to join hands with other parties more easily than its opponents out of the government. Moreover, to be sure, had the reforms enacted a more proportional and non-candidate-centered electoral system, party alternation in power would almost certainly have been secured. But the necessity of reforms of this sort becomes most salient once we recognize the non-electoral system underpinnings of ruling party dominance.

### The Process and Reforms Themselves

Particular features of the reform process itself impact the likelihood of electoral reform succeeding. In predicting when reform will succeed, it is important to examine not just the change in rules, but *how* rules were changed and *by whom*. Electoral rule changes are often effective, but the aim of those actually passing the legislation that institutes the reform is not always to fix the problems noted by observers. Disappointment with reform has been lowest in New Zealand, where reform was enacted by popular referendum, which did not permit sitting legislators a say in how they were elected. Substantial change was enacted in Italy, where the reform process was also kick-started by a popular referendum. In Israel, reform changed the system substantially, having been enacted, in large part, because of a wave

of popular enthusiasm for the proposal. In the face of overwhelming popular support for the reform, many politicians supported legislation out of fear of voter retribution.

The cases of Italy, Japan, and Israel all illustrate the importance of the actors (especially sitting legislators and leading parties) involved in the reform process. In Italy, large parties had insufficient numbers to pass reform, so the legislation included protections for small parties. In Japan, if eliminating LDP dominance had been the central aim, a system such as pure PR might have been introduced. But reform was led by sitting members of the parliament, with the LDP playing a central role. In Israel, many legislators supported reform because it was both very popular and did not threaten the way they were elected (Hazan 2001). Still others—notably, the left—supported the reform because of perceived advantages it offered to the center-left camp (Rahat & Hazan 2005, p. 345; Bueno de Mesquita 2000). More reasonable reform alternatives might have been chosen, but they would have required the cooperation of the large parties—a problem because the reforms were not favored by the leadership of Likud, Israel's large conservative party (Bueno de Mesquita 2000).

Not surprisingly, with sitting legislators shaping the rule changes in Italy and Japan, the reforms maintained particular advantages for those in office. In Japan, although the general electoral system was reformed, key continuities remained (see Scheiner 2006, ch. 3): One was Japan's campaign law, which offers candidates and parties only limited use of television, radio, and print to appeal to voters. These restrictions make broad-based, mass appeals more difficult (Christensen 1998) and encourage more targeted particularistic and clientelistic appeals. The maintenance of such rules naturally benefited incumbents. In Italy, the proportionalization of SMDs helped maintain party fragmentation (Bartolini et al. 2004, p. 11), not a surprising fact given that small parties played a critical role in the development of the new system. The rules that

permitted alliances in SMDs helped bring about the creation of two competitive blocs but also helped maintain a multi-party system that made coalitions unstable. Parties held onto their own separate identities to maintain their electoral bases (D'Alimonte 2005, p. 273), but the 4% PR threshold was a barrier to small parties. The fact that *cartels* could form but did not have to be a single *party* meant that coalitions made a great effort to divvy up the SMDs proportionally to the parties that composed them.

The legacy of the previous system is also important in shaping the effects of reform. Problematic features of the political system preceding reform undoubtedly continue to impact politics, possibly confounding the relationship between electoral system and political outcomes (Shugart 2005, p. 34). For example, in Italy, party fragmentation and the implementation of the new system were driven by the same phenomenon: In the late 1980s and early 1990s, disclosures of corruption helped destroy Italy's leading parties and bring about the enactment of the new electoral system. Independent of the new electoral system, the collapse of the DC led to a proliferation of new parties, increasing fragmentation of the party system and reducing government stability (Morlino 1996, p. 20).

Path dependency is also important. Italy's history of party fragmentation undoubtedly contributed to the country's large number of parties after reform. And many expected that in Japan certain features of LDP politics—most notably, personal support organizations and factions—that were seen to go hand-in-hand with the SNTV/MMD system would disappear under the new system. Both of these features were criticized for keeping politics heavily personalistic and money-oriented and allowing “issues” to be underemphasized. However, with the introduction of the new system, politicians continued to use the personal support organizations and factions, but did so differently (and unpredictably) from the past (Krauss & Pekkanen 2004).

Finally, a few words should be devoted to potential explanations for the lack of greater change that, though plausible at first glance, can probably be dismissed. One potential explanation relates to “contamination” effects within mixed-member systems, whereby the existence of the PR tier affects behavior within the SMD tier and vice versa (Cox & Schoppa 2002, Ferrara et al. 2005, Herron & Nishikawa 2001). For example, under mixed-member systems, more parties have an incentive to run candidates in SMDs than in a pure SMD system because the presence of these additional candidates is likely to increase the parties' PR vote in the district. Contamination surely exists in mixed-member systems. However, if, as I have argued, political outcomes such as LDP dominance at the national level in Japan are due to non-electoral system factors, it is not clear how contamination would impact the problems of major concern in Japan.

Second, one might note that equilibrium is rarely established in the first elections under new rules (Reed 2001), and additional time might be needed for the systems' effects to take hold. However, multiple elections have now been held under the Italian, Japanese, and New Zealand mixed-member systems, leaving one to wonder, if they have not yet entered equilibrium, what will it take for them to do so? Indeed, the Duvergerian tendencies in all three countries' SMDs suggest that they have come to approximate equilibrium conditions.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

There appear to be two particularly profitable paths for future research. First, although the links between electoral rules and outcomes such as the number of parties have been well documented, significant work remains to be done in delineating the impact of non-electoral system factors (such as party institutionalization). Additional analysis of such relationships would add to our understanding of the specific topic of the likely effects of electoral reform—including when reforms

are likely to address their intended targets—and also contribute, more generally, to the literature on party systems. Second, there is room for greater attention to what else electoral systems explain. To predict better the likely effects of electoral reform, we need to learn more about the likely impact of electoral system rules in general. The discussion of the successes of electoral reform indicates areas in which electoral systems play a critical role in shaping party systems, but, beyond the impact of electoral rules on the number of parties, many questions remain about electoral system effects in general, even and especially in areas surrounding their proximal effects. Most notably, much work remains to be done on the effects of electoral rules on individual legislator behavior.

### Non-Electoral System Factors

In general, the relationship between electoral systems and the number of parties is well understood, but to understand more fully what shapes the number of parties, we need to test the assumptions that underpin models such as Duverger's Law. As noted above, most models of electoral system effects are founded on certain assumptions (see Cox 1997), but when those assumptions break down—which they do especially often in developing democracies but also in established democracies—outcomes no longer fit the expected patterns. Most notably, in new democracies, the lack of public information about voter preferences and intentions and the poorly institutionalized party systems often lead to a very large number of candidates and seat winners from many different parties in the SMD tiers of mixed-member systems, a sharp contrast to the trend toward two-partism in SMDs in mixed-member systems in established democracies (Moser 2001, Moser & Scheiner 2004). (Of course, large amounts of information—e.g., great certainty that one candidate is likely to win—can lead to a drop in strategic behavior and, therefore, also lead to an increase in the number of candidates.) Additional work

is needed comparing electoral system effects in new and established democracies in order to draw out the assumptions undergirding the models and then turn the assumptions into variables that can be tested.

Similarly, the literature would benefit from more work on the interaction between electoral rules and social diversity. Many authors find that the combination of a proportional electoral system and social diversity leads to a larger number of parties (Brambor et al. 2007, Clark & Golder 2006, Cox 1997, Ordeshook & Shvetsova 1994), but others suggest a more complex interaction. Examining Africa, Mozaffar et al. (2003) argue that ethnic diversity reduces party system fragmentation when ethnic groups are geographically dispersed but increases it when ethnic groups are geographically concentrated. And considering Latin America, Madrid (2005) argues that ethnic groups fragment party systems in the absence of ethnic parties but have a curvilinear relationship with party fragmentation when ethnic parties are present. This work provides a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between diversity and electoral rules. That said, most of the literature utilizes nationally aggregated data, but theories explaining the effective number of elective parties rely on a district-level logic. More district-level analysis might therefore establish the mechanisms more directly.

This last point highlights the important distinction between the numbers of parties at the district and national levels. Electoral system mechanisms work most directly at the district level, but many of the most important questions involve the aggregation of parties at the national level. However, to move beyond the district level to questions of national parties and representation requires additional variables, such as presidentialism [for different views on this, see Cox (1997) and Shugart & Carey (1992)], level of government centralization (e.g., Chhibber & Kollman 1998, 2004), or the degree to which there are regionally concentrated minority groups (e.g., Sartori 1986). The literature would benefit

from more comprehensive analysis that incorporates into a large, cross-national project the various factors that shape district- to national-level projection of the number of parties.

### **Possibilities for Major Breakthroughs in the Study of Electoral Systems**

Perhaps most important, there is significant analysis left to be done on the proximal effects that electoral systems are especially good at explaining. In particular, electoral systems affect individual politicians most directly, and future electoral system research ought to focus on this relationship, which Shugart (2005) refers to as part of the “intraparty” dimension.

Factors other than the electoral system—for example, individual parties’ rules governing candidate nominations—certainly help determine the extent to which individual candidates and politicians are party-oriented (Samuels 1999),<sup>1</sup> but electoral systems clearly play a central part. Carey & Shugart’s (1995) typology of electoral rules’ propensity to lead to more personalistic or party-oriented politics pushed the field in precisely the right direction, but actual direct measurement is difficult, and attempts typically involve heavy use of proxy variables (Shugart 2005, p. 46). Most empirical analysis has been at the single-country level, but the field would benefit greatly from more genuinely cross-national work.

Carey’s (2007) work on legislative voting unity within parties is one of the best examples of cross-national work in this area, demonstrating the impact of institutions on intraparty behavior. Carey analyzes data from 19 countries that vary from presidential to parliamentary, from new to established democracies, from federal to unitary structure, and of course in the type of electoral rules used, and finds that unity is lower in systems with rules

that provide for intraparty competition than where party lists are closed. Carey’s party-level analysis leaves some of the individual-level underpinnings for future work. For example, within parties, do particular factors explain systematic variance in individual legislators’ propensity to fall in line with the rest of the party? Moreover, a clear implication of Carey’s findings is that leadership control over nomination determines unity, but how much influence is exerted by features such as widespread logrolling or intraparty rules governing the candidate selection process?

A number of thoughtful studies address the intraparty dimension at the level of the individual legislator. Bowler & Farrell (1993) and Hix (2004) examine legislators within the European Parliament (EP), a legislative body in which representatives’ electoral rules vary depending on the country. Bowler & Farrell use a survey of EP representatives to show that smaller-district and candidate-centered systems were more likely to see their legislators contacted by large numbers of constituents. And the smaller the district magnitude, the more likely members were to set up constituency offices, thereby targeting their constituents geographically. Hix’s analysis of legislators’ EP voting behavior shows that candidate-centered electoral systems and decentralized candidate-selection rules produce parliamentarians who are more independent from their parties. Unfortunately, studies of the impact of electoral rules on the behavior of members of the EP yield limited inferences because very few members were elected in SMDs. The literature would also benefit from attempts to replicate these studies in elections for national legislatures.

Indeed, an increasing number of studies do offer cross-national analysis of the impact of electoral rules on national legislators. Shugart et al. (2005) examine a number of PR systems and demonstrate that the number of legislators with localistic leanings (*a*) increases with magnitude in systems that emphasize candidates’ personal attributes and (*b*) decreases with magnitude in those that emphasize the

<sup>1</sup>Also see, among others, Gallagher & Marsh (1988) for more analysis of the importance of candidate selection rules.

party. The analysis is a substantial step forward in demonstrating the impact of institutions within a PR context, but leaves for future research comparisons between plurality and PR (and mixed) types of systems. Utilizing data from a variety of Latin American presidential systems, Crisp et al. (2004) examine the impact of electoral institutional incentives on the degree to which legislative bills target specific local constituencies. They find that legislators in systems offering incentives that personalize politics are more likely to initiate bills that target parochial concerns. The use of locally targeted bills as a proxy for personalism will be particularly useful in future studies of legislators in presidential systems, but it does not offer comparisons with and among parliamentary systems, which make up a huge percentage of advanced democracies and in which individual politicians rarely initiate legislation. Utilizing a data set based on interviews with legislators elected under an array of rules in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the British House of Commons, Heitshusen et al. (2005) demonstrate that legislators elected under a number of different types of systems engage in constituency service, but that there is a greater emphasis on such activities in plurality systems. This is a substantial contribution, but from the perspective of planning future research to get at the problem, it is not ideal because of the difficulty of generating similar data cross-nationally. Ultimately, the ideal study of intraparty behavior would combine the individual legislator-level analysis of studies like Shugart et al.'s, Crisp et al.'s, and Heitshusen et al.'s with the cross-national variation used in Carey's (2007) analysis.

Much of the literature on electoral rules posits that systems that provide incentives for personalistic behavior also lead to greater pork allocation and clientelistic behavior, but new literature argues that institutional explanations for clientelistic behavior have limitations, and suggests alternative explanations founded on factors such as political economy (see, e.g., Kitschelt 2000, Kitschelt &

Wilkinson 2007a). According to this literature, personalism helps increase the likelihood of clientelistic behavior but the relationship is not determinative. In addition to existing in systems that give incentives for personalistic legislator behavior, clientelism has been present, contrary to most electoral system theories, even in systems (such as Austria's and Belgium's) where party leaders maintain de facto control over the party lists, and the presence of clientelistic or programmatic behavior varies widely even within electoral systems (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007a). This new literature pushes the field in an important new direction but is limited by its lack of operational measures of clientelism. Kitschelt & Wilkinson (2007b) suggest one approach to measurement involving expert panels, but the logistics involved are a substantial obstacle to their implementation. Until measurement obstacles are overcome, it will be difficult to clarify the links between electoral institutions and both pork and clientelism. For this reason, the development of such measures offers an important direction for future research.

### **Mixed-Member Systems as an Approach to Studying Individual Legislator Behavior**

The substantive focus of this review—electoral system reforms since 1990—offers another avenue to examine the effects of electoral systems on individual legislator behavior. Two-vote mixed-member electoral systems, like those introduced in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan, offer new opportunities to study the impact of electoral rules on political behavior, especially that of individual legislators. Where voters simultaneously cast two ballots, electoral rules can be studied in isolation from social context such as social cleavages, socioeconomic development, or culture. In this way, mixed-member systems offer scholars what Shugart (2005, p. 34) calls “crucial experiments” and what Moser (2001) and Moser & Scheiner (2004) call “controlled comparison.” To be sure, “contamination”

occurs between the two tiers in mixed-member systems, but if properly controlled for, it is unlikely to cause problems in the analysis of individual legislators.

The majority of mixed-member system analyses of individual legislators has been at the single-country level. Studying Germany, Lancaster & Patterson (1990) utilize surveys of legislators to show that those elected from SMDs are more likely than PR representatives to emphasize pork distribution. Similarly, Stratmann & Baur (2005) find that German SMD representatives tend to sit on legislative committees that have influence over the allocation of benefits to their geographic constituency, whereas PR legislators select committees that have control over funds that benefit party constituencies. Studying Japan, Pekkanen et al. (2006) find that LDP legislators who run in SMDs are most likely to receive a committee post relating to distributive goods. More specifically, those who lost their SMD race (especially by a large margin) but then took a seat via the PR route were especially likely to hold committee posts related to distributive goods. In short, Japanese SMD legislators and those in electoral need took up posts designed to help them target their districts with pork. Many post-Communist states utilize both a presidential system and mixed-member rules to elect their legislators, thereby permitting analysis of the impact of electoral rules on legislative voting behavior in such systems. The conventional wisdom holds that mixed-member systems would lead to a "mandate divide," whereby representatives elected in SMDs would defect from the general voting trend of their party more often than PR representatives would. However, in an analysis of discipline in the Ukrainian parliament, Herron (2002) finds no significant difference between SMD and PR legislators, which, he argues, is because many PR seat holders had also run in SMDs, thereby altering the incentives they face. Controlling for factors such as legislators' ranking on the PR list and their level of electoral safety in their SMD, Herron finds more evidence of elec-

toral system factors shaping representatives' voting behavior. This indicates that when examining behavior under mixed-member systems it is important to recognize the electoral imperatives driving candidates, but it does not suggest that mixed-member systems cannot be used to help understand the impact of electoral rules. To the contrary, work such as Herron's highlights the great utility of studying mixed-member systems that elect legislators according to different rules and pathways and therefore allow the researcher to study the institutions' different effects on behavior.

Thames' (2005) analysis of the mandate divide in Hungarian, Russian, and Ukrainian legislatures indicates the importance of including variables other than electoral rules in attempting to understand electoral behavior. Similar to Herron, Thames finds no mandate divide in Hungary and Ukraine but demonstrates that in Russia legislators elected in SMDs are more likely than PR representatives to vote differently from their party. He argues that this is because of Russia's more weakly institutionalized party system, which gives candidates less incentive to toe the party line. Although testing the proposition will be difficult because of the lack of presidentialism in mixed-member systems in established democracies, Thames' analysis offers fodder for future works as it suggests that the mandate divide ought to be uncommon in advanced democracies as well.

Thames' analysis indicates the importance of comparative work. As noted above, most analysis of the intraparty dimension within mixed-member systems has been at the intra-country level, but to develop fully generalizable models, greater cross-national work will be necessary. Moser & Scheiner (2005) take a step in this direction by analyzing the difference between SMD and PR votes cast in Germany, New Zealand, Japan, Russia, and Lithuania. They report the strong presence of strategic voting in Germany and very high levels of personal voting in the other four cases. However, even this study merely notes



the presence of such types of voting; it cannot identify *how much* is based on a strategic or personal vote and, at least as important, it does not focus directly on legislator behavior.

The mixed-member system literature discussed above indicates clearly that the different rules legislators face in the electoral process affect their behavior. Research on mixed-member systems would do well to use a cross-national research design to understand what sorts of rules will shape behavior in different ways and take advantage of Bawn & Thies's (2003) insight that we ought to see significant differences in behavior based on the substantial differences in the types of mixed-member systems used. Considerable cross-national work on mixed-member systems remains to be done, focusing on the impact of different institutions governing elections, the use of MMM or MMP rules, and the degree to which the party system is institutionalized.

## CONCLUSION

The electoral reforms of the early 1990s, most notably those enacted in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan, attracted substantial attention in political science. Disappointment with the political outcomes of the reforms was common, especially with regard to Japan and particular features of the new party system in Italy. Disappointment is not an unusual response to electoral system reform. Whenever a new electoral system is implemented, the public is likely to go through "a period of enhanced surprise, disappointment, and frustration" (Taagepera & Shugart 1989, p. 218). However, over time, parties, candidates, and voters often adjust their behavior and expectations and overcome their displeasure with the system itself.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

But a mere attitude adjustment is unlikely to address the shortcomings of the reforms discussed in this review. A comparison of the outcomes of electoral system reform in the early 1990s indicates that electoral reform is not always even intended to address the problems raised by "objective" analysts. Observers of any reform should watch carefully how reform is enacted: When those who benefit from the existing rules are entrusted with reform, we should be somewhat pessimistic about the likelihood of genuine change. More important from a political science perspective, where reformers seek to address problems that are less proximal effects of electoral rules, there is a greater likelihood of general displeasure with the results of reform. That is, explanations of the likely impact of electoral rules are more plausible when the hypothesized mechanism directly links the incentives of the electoral system to predicted outcomes and behavior. This suggests that the next stage of scholarship on the effects of electoral systems ought to focus on the behavior of those most directly affected by electoral rules: individual politicians. The principal limitation to analysis of this sort is lack of data. The success of future research on the impact of electoral rules on politician behavior depends on future scholars investing considerable energy into the collection of data on individual legislators.

However, the "failure" of the electoral system reforms was also due to the fact that reformers were implementing new rules to deal with political behavior that was a distal effect of the electoral system. One of the next steps in future research is to consider more systematically what electoral systems can and cannot explain, as well as how the electoral system interacts with other features of politics to influence political outcomes and behavior.

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## Errata

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