

Does Proportional Representation Boost Turnout?

A Political Knowledge-based Explanation

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INTRODUCTION

Other things being equal, more politically knowledgeable citizens are more likely to vote. Whenever it is tested, researchers find a positive relationship with voting and other forms of political participation for virtually every indicator of political knowledge. For example, a simple test conducted on the author's behalf using data from the huge Roper Social Capital Benchmark Surveys, controlling for education, sex, race, marital status, religion and group membership,¹ showed a stronger relationship between voting and political knowledge than with other characteristics such as political trust, efficacy and even interest. Respondents who knew the names of both US Senators in their state were about 3.5 times more likely to turn out to vote in the 1996 US election than those who did not. Moreover, that knowledge had nearly four times the impact in boosting voter turnout in the younger and less educated population than among older and more educated eligible voters.²

While there is a growing literature in which individual political knowledge is used as an independent variable to explain various aspects of political choice, there is little exploratory work into its relationship to voter turnout. On the other hand, there is a wide literature linking political and electoral institutions with turnout.

In this paper I try to link these two literatures, i.e. to show how the relationship between political knowledge and the choice of whether to vote or not passes through institutions, electoral institutions in particular. The first step is to treat political knowledge not simply as an individual trait, but as an aggregate, a characteristic of a given society comparable to turnout. We have empirical indicators of turnout both objective and subjective (survey based) that readily allow for aggregate-level comparative analysis the equivalent of which do not exist for political knowledge. Part of this is inevitable, but part of the problem lies in the choices made by the research community, choices that, I hope, are on their way to being corrected.³

Such data would make it possible to more systematically test the central contention of this paper, namely that political knowledge is the missing link between electoral systems and turnout. An indirect empirical test is provided in the latter part of this paper, but the main effort here consists of elaborating the underlying logic of this relationship.

I am not the first to argue that political knowledge is a reflection of something other than individual traits. For example, according to Gordon and Segura (1997:129), "Measures of political sophistication ... are really products of both capabilities and decisions.... Lack of sophistication need not indicate an inherent weakness of mass publics; this shortcoming may, instead, be a product of the systems - and the individual choices structured by those systems - within which it

emerges.” Franklin et al (1995), in their analysis of turnout variations in elections to the European Parliament, find turnout to be related to the voters’ awareness of the consequences of their decisions. In other words, the more their institutions are able to simplify the relationship between their actions and political outcomes, i.e. the lower their cost of political knowledge, the more political systems will foster citizens at the margin turning out to vote.

When this principle is applied to political institutions generally, it can be expressed as coherence versus fragmentation. Other things being equal, countries that disperse power between President and Parliament, between chambers in a parliament (Arnold 2007, Gordon and Segura 1997), and between central and regional governments in a federation, reduce the potential for citizens’ awareness of the relationship between actions and outcomes. Presidential systems, federal systems, and bicameral legislatures, whatever their other benefits, render the link between one’s choice as a voter and its institutional effect less visible and comprehensible. While they may not be appropriate in large, pluralistic countries for other reasons, unitary⁴, unicameral, parliamentary systems reduce the cost of gaining the knowledge necessary to cast an informed vote or otherwise participate meaningfully in politics.

When this knowledge-based logic is applied to electoral systems, the set of institutions via which ordinary citizens register their choices as to who will make political decisions on their behalf, a crucial quality associated with fostering citizens’ awareness is argued to be proportionality, which, in the terms of Franklin et al enhances the predictable consequences of the voter’s choice. Fully developed, the proportionality of party representation to its popular support (PR) is a principle that extends beyond the allocation of seats in the legislature. Institutional arrangements based on PR extend to representation in local and regional assemblies, even school boards and various councils in which parties have a legitimate place, as well as to the regulations governing media access and public financing for parties. The underlying principle is to ensure that all legitimate political positions among the population enjoy equitable public expression. More than a mathematical formula, when systematically built into political institutions, proportionality becomes part of the political culture: the public presence of a political position is understood to reflect its popular support.

The basic argument in this paper is that, especially when thus systematically built into political institutions at the various levels, and, even more so, when combined with unitary, unicameral, parliamentary institutions, a proportional system of elections promotes a politically knowledgeable population, and thus informed political participation. In this analysis I follow the logic of Lijphart (1984, 1999), who places democratic countries on a continuum from what he terms majoritarian to consensual democracy, the most important distinguishing element of the latter being the proportionality of a country’s electoral system. Lijphart introduces a second dimension of consensualism, focusing on the relationship between institutions at the regional levels with those at the centre.⁵ Our approach to this vertical dimension stresses the relationship between voting systems and political party organization: proportionality, it is argued, favours integration of political

party activities oriented toward macro-level national politics and those concerned with micro-level local matters, and thus reduces the cost of gaining the knowledge necessary to cast an informed vote.

It should be stated at the outset what is *not* being claimed. The argument rests on the objective of enhancing informed political participation. This is hardly the only criterion for choosing an electoral system. For example, a non-proportional electoral system based on single member districts may better assure the representation of minorities in very complex pluralistic societies. India comes to mind here. Moreover, we do not here enter the discussion of the relationship between electoral systems and government efficiency. The absence of a single party majority – far more likely under PR than under the alternative, SMP (single member plurality/ first past the post) systems, leads some – especially political economists - to claim that SMP produces governments that are more efficient (e.g. Barker 1994). This is a view contested by Lijphart (1999) among others. Moreover, given that our focus is on Canada, currently a textbook case of what happens to government when SMP does not produce single party majorities, our entering this discussion would only muddy already less than clear waters.

WHY PR?

The relationship between PR and electoral participation operates at a number of levels, not all of which are knowledge related. The first and most superficial reflects the underlying logic of PR electoral systems to widen choice by more fairly representing parties. Unlike SMP, PR does not exclude from representation relatively weak parties whose support is not geographically concentrated. The supporters of such parties especially, finding their own positions reflected in those articulated by elected members of deliberative bodies, are more motivated to take part in electoral politics.

In Canada this applies especially to the Greens, and especially to the relatively large number of young persons among their supporters who we assume to share the lower sense of civic duty to vote characteristic of their generation. The party does significantly better in the polls than in the ballot booth. Indeed, the proportion who expresses sympathy for the Greens in polls in Canada is not much different from that in northern Europe, except that the electoral system has effectively excluded the Canadian Greens from winning seats, leading many of their supporters, if they bother to vote, to strategically vote for another party. Most of their European counterparts face no such dilemma since, under PR, they can see their support finding its way into the legislature and even national policy choices. The number that do not bother to vote, but who would have voted if they expected it to count toward giving environmental concerns representation in the public arena, though small, constitutes a direct negative impact of the absence of PR on turnout.

There is a possible link to political knowledge here in that some of the citizens thus not participating would also be more motivated under PR to pay attention to politics which could in turn lead them to participate at other levels. But the basic

effect is simply numerical. Just having a larger number of parties present viable candidates for office boosts turnout. In the US, more voters turned out for elections in where prominent third party candidates took part. For example, Ross Perot's candidacy caused a large blip in turnout in the 1992 presidential election. Lacy & Burden (2000) estimated that voting increased by 3 percent due to his candidacy, while in Minnesota's 1998 gubernatorial election, independent Jesse Ventura added 7 percentage points to the turnout rate, bringing younger and less educated voters out to the polls. Overall, from their study of third-party candidates in the 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections, they found that between 24 and 34 percent of third party candidate supporters would have stayed home on Election Day had their candidate not chosen to run.

A related argument in favour of PR is that it enhances the possibility of women and members of visible minorities⁶ being elected to the legislature due to the simple fact that PR systems – including MMP systems - use lists from which – unlike winnable single-member districts - it is hard to exclude women or identifiable minorities. To the extent that women or members of minorities' political interest is aroused by the presence of role models in the legislature or on the ballot, it can be argued that PR encourages electoral participation, and even perhaps greater attentiveness to politics.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Before delving further into the opposing logics of the two systems and their relationship to political knowledge and turnout, a brief digression into the actual workings of proportional systems is in order. PR is common in Europe, but only in New Zealand among the Anglo-American democracies. The others, Britain, Canada, and Australia, as well as many former British colonies such as India, share a set of political institutions known as the Westminster model, though Australia uses a form of PR to elect its weaker but not powerless upper chamber, and the Scottish Parliament and Welsh assemblies are elected using a form of MMP. While the United States rejected other elements of the Westminster model, it has fiercely maintained SMP (what Americans often term "winner take all", i.e., that is the principle under which the members of the legislature gain their seats by virtue of having won the highest number of votes in a geographical district). Alternatives to SMP have effectively been limited to the municipal level.⁷

Among the old Westminster countries only Canada retains SMP for all its regional (provincial) as well as national elections. While there has been quite intense debate in recent years about replacing SMP in British Columbia, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and New Brunswick, little has come of it.⁸ While second ballot systems (used in France) or preferential ballots (used in Australia) have certain potential advantages over SMP, when it comes to the principle of enhancing the predictable consequences of the voters' choice, only PR systems qualify. Though several forms of PR meet this criterion, from a Canadian perspective we focus on MMP (mixed-member proportional), the only practical form, in my view, of PR that could be implemented under North American

conditions.⁹ This is because it is the only form of PR that allows voters to continue to have their own geographically based individual member of Parliament – something North Americans are exceedingly unlikely to give up for the claimed benefits of PR. Hence when delving into the practical side, i.e. a system applicable in Canada in particular, this paper compares the MMP form of PR with SMP as to their effects on informed political participation.

The term “mixed” in MMP is somewhat misleading; a better if more cumbersome labelling term sometimes used is “compensatory.” Under MMP the voter casts two votes – a party vote for the list of a party, and a district vote for a constituency representative. After constituency winners are decided by plurality – just as under the SMP system – the party vote determines the total number of seats to which each party is entitled. The constituency seats it has won are subtracted from its overall total in order to establish the number of MPs drawn from its lists. Constituency candidates can also be eligible to be nominated to have their names placed on the lists, and this is common in Germany, New Zealand and Scotland.¹⁰ The overall result is proportional, though the extent to which the outcome diverges from perfect proportionality is affected by several factors.

The first is the threshold used in almost every PR system to discourage the proliferation of small parties. In New Zealand for example, to qualify for list seats, a party must either receive at least five per cent of all party votes or win at least one district seat. North American voters would likely insist on such a threshold to limit the number of parties winning seats to, typically, 4 to 6.

The second is the percentage of overall seats available for purposes of compensation. In Germany this is 50 percent; in New Zealand and Scotland it is about 42 percent. In addition, New Zealand’s outcomes are more proportional than Scotland’s since the territory covered by the party lists is large (the entire country), while in Scotland each list covers a regional district with approximately one-eighth of the population. The result is an effective regional vote threshold that somewhat reduces overall proportionality.¹¹ North American voters would very likely prefer the Scottish model, i.e. that the lists be based on relatively small regions with which they can identify, as well has have the electoral law specify, as it does in Germany, that placement on the list is determined by party members (or their elected delegates) and not just by party officials. They may even wish to go further along these lines by adding an element of “openness” to the lists: in Sweden for example, a popular candidate low on the party’s regional list is moved to the top if he or she receives the “personal vote” of more than 8 percent of the party’s supporters.

These aspects, and other more technical ones such as the actual mathematical method for allocating seats,¹² can be “made to measure” to suit local circumstances. All, however, are sufficiently faithful to the basic principle of proportionality, so as to fit the fundamental arguments presented in favour of PR systems, namely that of fairer representation for parties and sectors of society in the legislative and governing process, putting an end to what can be highly distorted patterns of representation. Canada produced textbook cases of the kind

of distortions that can occur under SMP. These include: one-party dominance,¹³ decimation of parties,¹⁴ regionalization of parties,¹⁵ enfeeblement of the opposition,¹⁶ loser wins,¹⁷ and hyperpolarization.¹⁸ It was the appearance of such distortions that overcame the usual inertia due to politicians' desire to keep in place the system that elected them, and thus led several Canadian provinces to seriously consider bringing in a form of PR.

At the federal level, strong regional identities are exacerbated by the electoral system, with the result that SMP's most discernible effect is to regionalize party representation. Hence even supporters of large parties in many SMP districts face a choice similar to that of Green supporters, in that their preferred candidates have effectively no chance of winning the seat. This is also true in the US due to not only to regional identities but especially to the drawing of district boundaries to favour incumbents.

As a general rule, then, the wider the choice, the fewer potential voters that are excluded from identification with a party or candidate. Since it offers a greater meaningful choice, other things being equal, PR should, at least marginally, boost voter turnout. The empirical data we have, on the whole, bears this out. While earlier such analyses found even greater differences, we can take as representative a comprehensive assessment (Farrell 2001) based on turnout for 39 democracies where voting is not compulsory in the last election before the year 2000, which found turnout averaged 68.2 percent in non-proportional systems compared to 70.8 percent in proportional systems.¹⁹ In an effort to control for cultural differences, in an earlier work (Milner 2002, Chapter 5), I calculated the difference in turnout in municipal elections under PR and non-PR systems in three countries where both are or have been found (Switzerland, Norway and Australia), finding higher turnout under PR in each case.²⁰

Of course, the validity of such empirical tests is limited by the many contextual factors affect turnout (on Switzerland, see Milner and Ladner 2006). While it seems clear that other things being equal PR leads to higher turnout, the complexity and variety of the real world makes this a proposition extremely difficult to operationalize to allow for a definitive conclusion. My purpose here is thus different. I argue that compared to SMP PR produces a larger proportion of the electorate with the minimal knowledge needed to make an informed vote. Whether that propensity in fact translates into higher turnout is contingent on other factors.

We would expect, however, that in two institutionally and culturally comparable societies – where they can be found - the one with a more politically knowledgeable population would experience higher turnout.²¹ Hence, a given society's adopting PR along the lines noted at the outset, as a system in which the principle that all legitimate political positions among the population are equitably represented in the various political bodies is built into the very political culture, should raise turnout.

PR AND AN INFORMED ELECTORATE

A clue that political knowledge is an intervening variable in the relationship between electoral systems and political knowledge can be found in the results of the National Geographic-Roper survey.²² In the nine mature democracies, young people in the three with SMP electoral systems, the United States, Canada and the UK, scored lowest, while the two PR countries, Sweden and Germany, ranked at the top in youth geopolitical knowledge. In-between were the countries with mixed systems, Italy and Japan, as well as France with its second ballot system. A similar result had been attained in the first such test which was not limited to young people.²³

To see how these seemingly unrelated variables may be connected we need to return to the workings of SMP. Let us begin with competitiveness and the fact that in American mid-term elections, and most Canadian elections (Eagles 1991), and there is perceptibly lower turnout in the one-party dominant congressional

Part of this difference results from the above logic can be seen of numerical: with the number of candidates having a real chance of winning the district being equal to 1, or the chances of one's preferred candidate winning approaching zero, under a non-proportional (SMP) system rational individuals can arrive at non-voting on a simple cost/benefit logic. But the same logic can discourage citizens from voting in most elections since the chances of actually affecting the outcome are minimal. The main effect would appear to be an indirect one, via political parties, and how they allocate scarce resources in their mobilization strategies. Under PR there is an incentive for parties to mobilize potential supporters to vote even in areas where they are weak, while under SMP this is largely limited to winnable districts.²⁴

The scarce resources include not only money, but also time, quality of local candidates and which issues are stressed. In all of these, political knowledge enters, since fundamental to mobilization, especially when the electoral rules encourage this - as they tend to do in PR countries (see Bowler, Carter, and Farrell 2000) – is the task of informing insufficiently informed potential voters. In the terms of Gordon and Segura (1997), the electoral system, along with the party system and legislative institutional structure, affect the availability, clarity and usefulness of political information, and, thus, the level of political sophistication.

Of course political knowledge is not the only factor. Incentive effects built into different electoral systems are complex. In a recent paper, Elklit, Svensson, and Togeby (2007) argue that the electoral system is a key part of the explanation for high Scandinavian, and especially Danish, turnout. They see a kind of virtuous circle underlying Danish electoral institutions linking the mobilization of weak groups, the high competitiveness in the national elections, and the high level of mobilization.

Systems of proportional representation provide fairly good possibilities for

new political interests to be represented in parliament, in particular in Denmark where the ... threshold is as low as two percent. This institutional framework has facilitated the mobilization of groups of citizens who felt that they were not well represented by the established parties, in particular with regard to issues like immigration, refugees, foreigners, and the European Union. The Progress Party and its successor, the Danish People's Party, have both been able to mobilize voters with few resources....

Denmark's remarkable level of voter turnout – even compared with its Nordic neighbours - is in good part due to the fact that young Danes turn out to vote to almost the same high extent as previous generations, and that even citizens who express low interest in politics continue to vote. One effect of this virtuous circle is to more effectively than elsewhere pass the norm of civic duty to vote onto new generations, as they note: "Political mobilization ... helps uphold the norm of civic duty."

THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Let us look more closely at how incentives under alternate voting systems can affect party strategies, and, thus, voters' political knowledge. As noted, a party contesting a PR election seeks to mobilize support everywhere, while one contesting an SMP election will concentrate resources on marginal districts, knowing that the choices of a relatively small number of voters can make the difference between monopolizing political power and having none whatsoever. Hence, not only does the average voter under PR have a greater number of choices, but he or she has greater knowledge about the available choices than the average SMP voter.

Yet this is only the tip of the iceberg of the relationship between the electoral system and informed electoral political participation. There is much that lies beneath the surface. Conventional thinking tends to assume that voting under SMP is a simpler proposition since it is typically a choice between "keeping the bums in or kicking them out." But such conventional thinking views voters one-dimensionally. It ignores, first, the reality of party identification, which develops over time. By favouring stable party identification, PR elections reduce the costs of political knowledge, especially for those for whom it is at a premium.

Stable party identification is more likely under PR since, compared to SMP, there is far less incentive for parties to engage in precipitous changes to their programs and identity, that is, the elements that constitute their place on the political map. Parties that frequently change their image, via their platforms and leaders, in an effort to maximize short-term support are more likely to lose than gain long-term adherents. But SMP drives them to do just this. Unlike under PR, the volatility of their support is exaggerated in their representation: SMP blows up their strength when they do well, and shrivels it when they do poorly. Hence the frequent ideological shifts of parties in the Westminster democracies in an effort to at least appear to keep up with shifting public opinion, compared to the more gradual evolution under PR in Europe.

A parallel logic operates at the level of the electoral district. We know that single-member constituencies under SMP encourages catering to narrow local interests. But this too is but the tip of the iceberg. SMP overvalues the choices of the least partisan citizens, those who can make the difference between winning and losing marginal seats -- since that is what counts for winning power -- at the expense of traditional party supporters. Thus the normal, everyday activities of the local MP contradict the basic message and undermine the continued rootedness of the party.

The overall effect is to erode the usefulness of party identification to the electorate. In the long run more and more voters become volatile, that is, they loosen their ties to the political party which purports to be "everybody's instrument." In contrast, under PR, legislators elected on a proportional basis in a multi-member district are less prone to lose sight of the fact that it is the party that links them to the electorate, just as a large governing party elected under PR does not lose sight of the fact that it is supported by only a minority of the electorate and must compromise with smaller parties on legislative initiatives if they are to have the support of the majority.

Under PR, political actors, and the voters themselves, can thus count on a relatively clearly drawn and stable political map on which to plot their own paths. For political actors, this includes reliable expectations as to with which other actors to cooperate and over what issues. They gain greater benefits and face fewer institutional obstacles (costs) from sharing political information. In comparison to SMP, under PR there is less incentive for political leaders, who may very well need their opponents' support after the election, to use distortion to inhibit the awareness of the electorate of alternative positions on the issues of the day. Conversely, the clarity of the political map discourages a small party from using its balance-of-power position to extract a legislative concession greater than merited by its support in the electorate.

Under SMP, with so much depending on so few votes, there is a strong tendency for politics to become a ruthless zero-sum game -- you lose; I win -- creating an incentive for distorting the opponent's position (through appeals to emotion, negative advertising and the like), while keeping one's own policies as vague as possible. The result, whatever the intentions of the actors involved, is a public less informed than it needs to be.²⁵

Ultimately, thus, the logic of SMP is to breed cynicism and electoral abstention. A case in point emerges from recent British politics. To defeat Thatcherism, Tony Blair pushed Labour firmly to the centre, creating "New Labour." Yet the powerful Conservative majority he overcame was in fact an artefact of the electoral system, highly vulnerable to defeat by a Labour-Liberal Democratic coalition, had the elections been fought under PR and not SMP. A "Lib-Lab" government would have enacted centre-left policies similar to those of New Labour. But there is a profound difference between Blairite policies emerging as a compromise program of government between parties of the centre and left rather than from a party transformed almost beyond recognition. In the former case, normal under PR, a formal or informal coalition government implements a compromise program

reflecting the expressed choices of a majority of voters, but constituent parties retain programs reflecting the evolving expectations of party supporters. The party need not, thus, renounce core principles when it enters the government, a renunciation that stokes cynicism toward politics and, in due course, discourages voters.

This, I suggest, in part explains the dramatic decline in democratic participation in Britain (turnout in 2001 was 18 percentage points lower than in 1992). It suggests, also, that while the current move to the centre by the Conservatives may win them the upcoming election, it is likely to further erode party identification, and thus informed electoral participation even further.

Ironically, when SMP produces minority governments, as currently in Canada, it is even more prone to stoking cynicism toward politics, since it combines the instability of fragile minority governments, with an SMP-based allergy to structured interparty cooperation.

But I want to stress the more profound effect in how the interplay of incentives built into the electoral system influences the political knowledge of the citizens. The transformation of Labour into New Labour ripped up the political map, changing the settings on the citizen's political compass. Especially in the context of an SMP environment in which parties concentrate mobilization efforts – including providing information – on voters in marginal districts, such a transformation makes it all the harder for the average citizen to effectively apply to current choices the distinctions drawn from past experience. And for those at the margins of political knowledge, this can make the difference between having and lacking the minimal knowledge needed to cast a meaningful vote.

THE VERTICAL DIMENSION

So far we have looked only at participation at one level, voting for members of national legislatures. But there is a second, vertical dimension to this relationship since voting takes place at more than one level. The logic of SMP discourages parties from risking operating at levels other than the one at which they are best organized, or which the stakes are highest. More specifically, under SMP, a national party has a disincentive against investing resources to compete in elections to assemblies and councils in regions and municipalities where it is weaker than it is nationally, since such outcomes weaken its overall image. Over time, this has the effect of pushing national parties away from operating at all at the regional and local level.

Where national parties are partially or fully absent from lower level political activity, vertical political links are weak and vertical communication flows disrupted. Citizens find themselves with a political map from which side roads that connect the small communities to the main centres have been erased. The extreme case is Canada where municipal political parties – where they exist at all – have no formal and few informal links to the parties operating at the federal and provincial levels. In the US, in many states, one of the two parties is effectively absent, while at the municipal level, where parties were traditionally present, over

three-quarters of municipalities currently use non-partisan elections to select their public officials (Shaffner and Streb, 2000: 2).

The opposite logic operates under PR. In the case of Norway, for example, once PR was adopted for the national legislature, its use spread to other levels to become embedded in a system of vertically integrated relationships centered on the political parties. In Sweden, the introduction of PR led the Social Democrats to become active in municipal politics and then rural communes, which forced their "bourgeois" opponents to do likewise - a process completed with the municipal amalgamation reforms of 1974.²⁶

One indicator of this difference can be found in career patterns. As noted in the classic study by Eldersveld and his colleagues from interviews of 250 to 400 local leaders in 15 to 20 comparable municipalities in the majoritarian United States as well as consensual Sweden and the Netherlands in the latter 1980s, concluding that "there is a strong vertical structuring of the party relationships in Europe among policy leaders, from the bottom to the top of the system, unlike in the US ... The role of the political party as a very relevant, powerful, integrative institution for the entire system is very distinctive in Europe, in contrast to the US (Eldersveld, Strömberg and Derksen: 1995:239).²⁷

Of course, the electoral system is not the only factor explaining the presence of national political parties at the base – as we can see in the case of the UK, where local elections serve largely as a kind of nation-wide poll on the national parties. Nevertheless, as a rule, the closer the institutional fit between the levels, similar PR electoral systems, but also congruent constituency boundaries, etc., the greater the chances of vertical continuity, the clearer the political map.

EMPIRICALLY TESTING PR'S EFFECT ON INFORMED ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

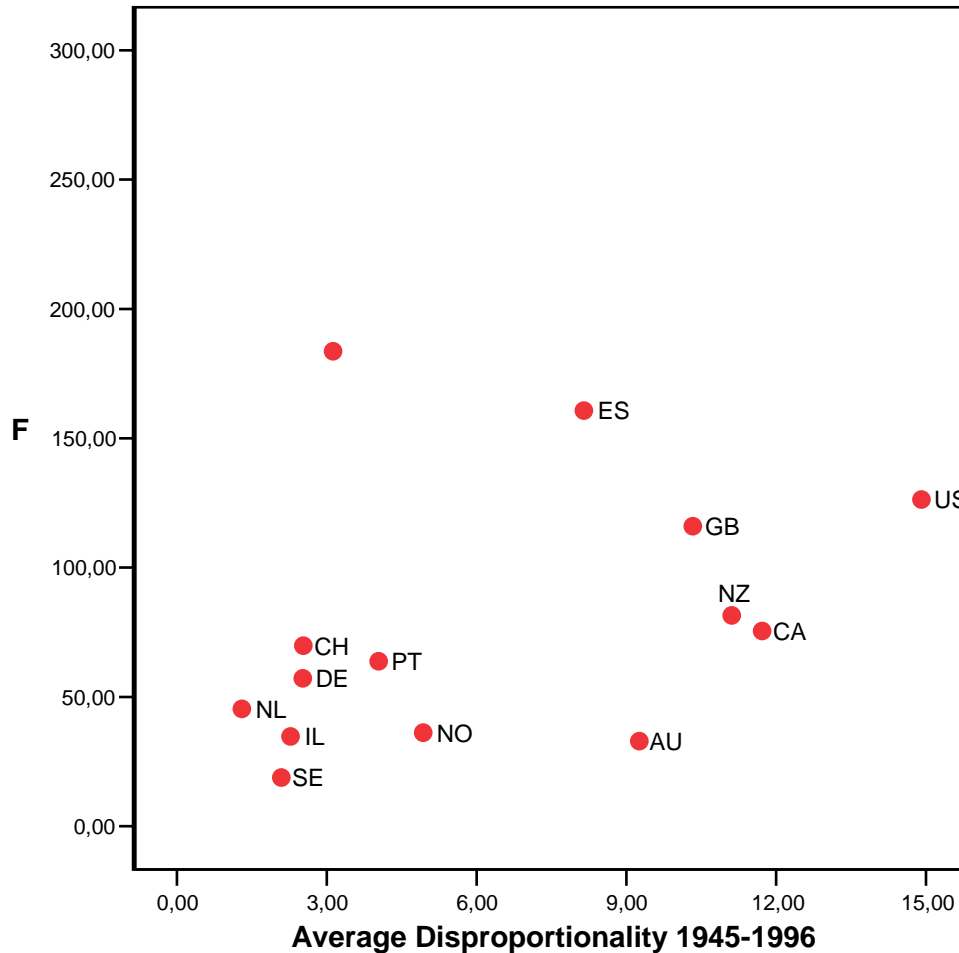
To summarize so far: because PR systems are more conducive to the formation and durability of programmatically coherent parties that contest elections throughout the country and at more than one level, they provide potential voters with a political map that is relatively clearly drawn and stable across time and space. They make it easier for the potential voters to locate themselves politically, i.e. to identify with a party and to use that identification as a guide through the complexities of issues and actors over time and at various levels of political activity. In this way PR fosters political knowledge and thus, potentially, electoral participation, (especially) at the lower end of the education and income ladders, where information about issues and actors is at a premium.

How can we put this argument to the test? As noted, the data for directly testing this assertion comparatively by using political knowledge as the dependent variable (with electoral systems as independent variable), or the independent variable (with turnout as dependent variable) are inadequate, since there is as yet no standard set of factual political knowledge questions used cross-nationally – something I hope and expect the CSES will soon address. Nevertheless, it is possible to derive insights using the responses to the CSES' political knowledge

questions.²⁸ Kimmo Grönlund and I (2006) found a higher correlation between the level of education attained and political knowledge in the majoritarian CSES countries than in the PR ones, confirming the expectations the argument presented here. In the PR countries, the average correlation of number of correct answers with level of education attained: $r = 0.26$ (compared to 0.33 under majoritarian institutions).

We examined the dispersion of political knowledge among educational categories by calculating the variation from the mean for each CSES country of the political knowledge score by the group with the lowest education. We reported that the average dispersion was significantly lower in countries using PR, thus bolstering the contention that PR reduces the cost of the political knowledge needed to make an informed vote for those for whom the cost is highest, i.e. those lacking in educational resources. We tested this further by using not a dichotomous, PR and non-PR classification, but instead placing countries' electoral institutions on a continuum based not on institutions but on outcomes, i.e. how close to proportional the number of seats won by parties were compared to the vote they received. Figure 1 reproduces a chart using as one indicator that derived from Lijphart's (1999:162) application of the Gallagher Index of Disproportionality to democratic general elections from 1945-1996, and the dispersion of political knowledge among educational categories rate (F score) on the other.

FIGURE 1: THE EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES SCATTERED AGAINST THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF EDUCATION ON POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE.



There is a reasonably strong linear association in Figure 1, which, when the clear outlier Belgium (unlabelled) is excluded, becomes highly significant ($r=.62$). (The data for Belgium is an amalgam of the results for Flanders with the highest dispersal rates – something meriting investigation in itself - and Wallonie, with rates between those of the US and Spain.) As expected, thus, as outcomes become more proportional to the popular support attained by political parties, political knowledge becomes less dependent on formal education.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE: WILL PR SHELTER US FROM DECLINING VOTER TURNOUT?

The logic that PR elections favour informed participation by reducing the costs of political knowledge for those for whom it is at a premium applies, as we should expect, to young people. We have already noted the results of the National

Geographic-Roper survey of knowledge of political geography. More closely linked to turnout are the results of an International IDEA (1999: 30) study. In examining differences in turnout level for voters between 18 and 29 years of age in 15 Western European countries in the latter 1990s, IDEA estimated that in countries using PR systems the average youth turnout rate was almost 12 percentage points higher than in non-PR countries. IDEA's interpretation stressed the electoral system's facilitating access to parliamentary representation for small parties.

This is the case for a minority of informed young people whose green and other minoritarian views are poorly represented under majoritarian systems; but there is also an effect on a larger group, the large number of young people at the margins of political knowledge (see Milner 2010). In two recent papers, Donovan and Tolbert (2007, 2008), using American turnout data, confirm that variation in turnout across states reflects campaign mobilization effects. They add that these effects are most pronounced among young people with lower levels of interest in politics because those with higher levels of interest are likely to participate in most elections regardless of how much interest is generated by competition for the contested positions. The absence of electoral competition thus depresses interest among the most vulnerable to abstaining and thus reduces participation.

This is not to say that adopting MMP can be counted on to at least shelter Canadians and others in a similar position from continued turnout decline. Certain PR states, Finland in particular, have experienced a real turnout decline in recent legislative elections. In New Zealand, which adopted MMP in 1996, we observe a kind of spike, pushing turnout upward by about 3 percent in 1996, only to see the decline that marked the 1980s resume in 1999. In Scotland, the turnout of voters casting ballots in PR elections for the new Assembly fell sharply in its second election in 2003 (to 49.4 from the 58.8 percent recorded in 1999). In the London mayoral election the percentage of registered voters turning out in 2000, 34.7 percent, was identical to that that took part in the previous borough elections (Electoral Commission 2002: 23). In our study of Switzerland, the only country without compulsory elections that uses using a variety of electoral systems in local elections, Andreas Ladner and I found that though PR municipalities had higher turnout to begin with, they were no better at withstanding the turnout decline experienced at all levels in Swiss elections in the 1990s (Ladner and Milner, 1999).

In considering such cases, we should keep in mind that proportionality is far from fully institutionally rooted in all of these countries. Scotland, which operates in the context of Westminster's dominating SMP environment, has only recently introduced semi-proportional STV to local elections. In New Zealand, PR has only made it in fits-and-starts to local elections.²⁹ Hence we are far from attaining the political knowledge effects from a simplification of the political map that a full-fledged PR institutional environment would bring. Moreover, there are factors above and beyond national institutional arrangements that account for these developments (on Finland, see Milner 2009). The shift identified by certain observers toward a culture that measures the value of an activity based only on

its meaningfulness to the individual carrying it out does not bode well for electoral participation. In such a context, it is certainly possible that the adoption of PR may have kept turnout decline from accelerating.

AND IN CANADA...?

Concretely, if the outcome of the April 2009 referendum had resulted in British Columbia changing its electoral system, it could perhaps have boosted turnout somewhat in a subsequent STV election, bolstered especially by Green voters who stayed home. But, with young Canadians generally close to the “mainstream” in their political attitudes (O’Neil 2001),³⁰ the number of young supporters thus brought to the polls is not likely to be large. On the other hand, given the importance of habits developed when young (Franklin 2004), had PR elections been introduced federally in time to be used during the period of uncompetitive elections from 1993 to 2004, the effect could have been perceptible over the long term by developing the habit of voting among a meaningfully greater proportion of young people than turned out to be the case.

Of course, this was never in the cards. Nor is there much chance of Canada adopting MMP at this time, despite the fact that in this highly contested period of recurrent minority government, it would incontestably facilitate inter-party cooperation and thus reduce the frequency of elections by making governments more stable and durable – something universally sought. Still, it cannot be ruled out entirely: public pressure for change could become irresistible if the upcoming election, as the polls predict, results in another Conservative minority.

However slim, the chances for meaningful change are in Canada greater than in the United States where Barack Obama, who put “change” on the American political agenda, did not see fit to include political institutions as a dimension of the change required, since, presumably, he realized that even he could not raise the political capital needed to reform the American electoral system.

With the US excluded, there are not that many countries apart from Canada that do not use PR and in a position to benefit from it. Australia has resolved the turnout – though not the political attentiveness - problem through compulsory voting. Canada, as noted, is one. Still, any change that could come out of this in the context of Canada’s federal system will be a slow and gradual one, characterized by different systems operating in different provinces and for the federal Parliament, indeed constituting a kind of laboratory of the workings and effects of alternate electoral systems. Something like this has been taking place in the United Kingdom in recent years, with different variations of proportional electoral systems implemented in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the city of London. Moreover, given the widely expressed active dislike of the major party candidates by many young Britons (Electoral Commission: UK. 2002), bringing PR to Westminster, should the Liberal Democrats be in a position to force it upon a Labour or even Tory minority, stands a better chance of halting the decline if not reversing it.

To have any meaningful effect on turnout, electoral institutions must foster and maintain higher levels of party identification, political attentiveness and electoral

participation, changes in the voting system for federal elections would need to be complemented by other institutional reforms such as fixed voting dates (see Milner 2010). And a PR political culture would need to emerge through the adoption of PR at the provincial level and in large cities where parties are present. This is not possible given Canada's size, composition, and decentralized federal institutions. Hence we need to be wary of assuming that institutional reform will shelter us from the effects of the powerful technological and cultural forces shaping the political engagement of emerging generations. On the other hand, this is no excuse for doing nothing. Political institutions are man-made and can be remade.

I end with a plea to the academics interested in this question, in particular those who design international surveys testing political engagement and voter turnout. In seeking to compare the effects of electoral and related political institutions on citizen attitudes and actions – and thus advise decision makers about political institutional reforms, we are severely hampered by the absence of an appropriate indicator of comparative political knowledge. It is more than time to do something about this.

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NOTES

¹ The overall finding is based on responses to a telephone survey in 2000 of a US sample of almost 30,000 respondents from 39 communities with independent samples ranging from 388 to 1505 using logistic regression modeling. The finding holds up after statistically controlling for the effects of the other predictors. Separate logistic regression on each of the 39 community samples found that statistically controlling for the effects of all other predictors in the model, the political knowledge predictor was statistically significant in 27 of the 39 communities.

² The unpublished study, entitled "Some Findings from an Analysis of the Roper Social Capital Benchmark 2000 Surveys" was conducted in August 2002 by Richard E. DeLeon of San Francisco State University.

³ I have made a proposal to this effect to be incorporated into the next round of the CSES.

⁴ Note that unitary systems can be highly decentralized. When it comes to the proportion of spending determined at the local level, the Scandinavian countries are more decentralized than many federal countries including Australia (See Lijphart 1999).

⁵ Lijphart originally conceived of federalism as an element of consensualism, a position different from that taken here, but later distanced himself from that conceptualization.

⁶ The exception is when residential patterns result in specific minorities concentrated into what SMP effectively turns into ghetto constituencies.

⁷ Proportional representation has been instituted in a number of local elections throughout the United States, including a number of city and school district elections in the 20th Century, though it was repealed due to various public fears, including worries of African-Americans or Communists taking power.

⁸ As this is being written, in spring 2009, British Columbia has by referendum just rejected a semi-PR variant known as STV (the single transferable vote) used in Ireland and Malta.

⁹ The various proposals that were considered were all based on MMP, with the exception of BC, which held two referenda over STV. There is some debate over whether STV even qualifies as a PR system, and it will not be considered here.

¹⁰ A New Zealand Royal Commission proposed, and the people in 1992 and 1993 referenda ratified, MMP. After New Zealand, forms of MMP came to Britain, to the new Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and the Greater London Council.

¹¹ Germany avoids this by adding additional members in regions where there are not sufficient list seats to fully compensate the underrepresented parties.

¹² There are two quota methods used: Hare, which sets the quota at V (votes) divided by S (seats); and Droop (V divided by $S+1$). There are also two divisor methods: D'hondt, successively dividing the votes of each party by 1,2,3 ...; and Saint-Lague (using divisors 1,3,5....).

¹³ While the Liberals averaged around 40 percent of the overall vote in the 1993, 1997 and 2000 federal elections, no other party could win nearly enough seats to form any kind of effective opposition or government in waiting.

¹⁴ In 1993, the voters repudiated the ruling Progressive Conservatives, but the electoral system decimated Canada's oldest party. Rather than the 46 MPs that a PR system would have given them, they managed only two.

¹⁵ In 1997, two thirds of all the Liberal MPs were elected from Ontario, where the Liberals won only 48.5 percent of the vote but 101 of 103 seats. This left almost none for the Reform party; yet Reform received many more votes in Ontario than it did in Alberta where it won 92 percent of the seats with 55 percent of the votes.

¹⁶ Elections in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia ended up kicking the party in power not just out of the government, as the voters wanted, but – effectively - out of the legislature.

¹⁷ In the Quebec election in 1998, with their support concentrated in non-francophone ridings, the Provincial Liberals garnered the most votes (43.6 to the Parti québécois' 42.9 percent) but elected only 48 deputies compared to the Parti québécois' 76.

¹⁸ In the 1998 Quebec election, no room was left for parties representing the middle group of Quebecers who prefer a compromise short of sovereignty, and do not define themselves politically along the federalist-sovereignist fault line. The Action démocratique, which takes such a position, was effectively marginalized, averaging 2 seats (of 125) in the three previous elections despite being supported by about one sixth of Quebecers. At the same time, in Ontario successive elections produced majority governments ideologically more extreme than the majority of Ontario voters - first, the NDP on the left, then the Harris Conservatives on the right - though neither won anywhere near the support of 50 percent of the voters.

¹⁹ Estimates based on earlier data were higher: for Lijphart (1997) it was about nine percent, a difference similar to that found by the International IDEA in its report "Voter Turnout from 1945-1997" using voting age populations rather than registered voters.

²⁰ See also Ladner and Milner 1999; 2006.

²¹ Conversely, in two societies with comparable levels of political knowledge and similar electoral systems, turnout levels should be similar, unless affected by institutional differences. An example is Sweden and Finland: lower turnout in the latter seems to be due to institutional arrangements resulting in more frequent elections and "rainbow" governing coalitions (see Milner 2009).

²² This is not a paper about the informed political participation of young people per se, but it should be noted that given the habitual aspect of voting (Franklin 200x), the long term effect of young people's voting or abstaining is especially important.

²³ In that study (December 1989, 816–18), Sweden came in first, with 11.6 average right answers; Germany, Japan, France, and Canada followed with, 11.2, 9.6, 9.3, and 9.2, respectively; and then came the United States and the United Kingdom, with 8.6 and 8.5. The only major change was the significant improvement of Italy, from eighth to third place.

²⁴ The extreme case of this is found in the effect on the communications' strategy the Electoral College on US presidential campaigns which have come to exclude all but

toss-up states. In 2000 four of the nation's top eight media markets -- Boston, Dallas, New York City, and Washington, DC -- had a grand total of six presidential ads aired, while eight media markets in battleground states each aired more than 6,500 presidential ads." (November 22, 2000, electronic report of the center for Voting and Democracy - www.fairvote.org.)

²⁵ A study comparing the political marketing strategies of parties in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, found that the latter differed from the others in that the larger parties avoided negative advertising targeting the small parties, since they knew they might need their support in forming governments (From a talk by Jennifer Lees-Marshment from the University of Auckland, entitled "Political Marketing and Democracy," June 3, 2009, McGill University.)

²⁶ Moreover, in comparing differences between average national turnout and average local turnout under SMP and PR, I found a significantly larger gap in the countries in which national parties play little or no role in local politics, such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand, than in the European countries where they are very much involved (see Milner 2002, Chapter 5).

²⁷ Eldersveld et al continue: "In both European systems local elites have much more contact with national administrators than US elites do.... European leaders are also more in touch with party leaders at the local and the national levels. In Europe, for example, over 80 per cent of local councillors report that they initiate contacts with the local party organizations (93 percent in Sweden, 83 percent in the Netherlands, compared to 27 percent in the US).

²⁸ There are no common questions, but a modicum of similarity emerges out of the stipulation that their content be chosen to try to have them answered correctly by roughly 2/3, 1/3, and 1/2 of respondents respectively.

²⁹ A law allows local authorities to run elections under STV as well as SMP. For the 2004 municipal elections, only 10 chose the former. (See http://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/Resource-material-STV-Information-Index?OpenDocument#four)

³⁰ In asking abstainers why they failed to vote in the 2000 election, in their study for Elections Canada, Pammett and LeDuc (2003: 17) found respondents 18 to 24 had the lowest tendency (27.3 percent versus 34.4 percent overall) to cite a failing in the political process as a reason.