

Political Scientists and Electoral Reforms in Europe and Canada: What They Know, What They Do

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force on Political Science, Electoral Rules, and Democratic Governance released a report in which the authors say that more than 50 U.S.-based political scientists have been involved in electoral reform processes in the U.S. and abroad since 2010 (Htun and Powell 2013). In this symposium, we give new insights to this topic by offering a view from the outside of the U.S. European and Canadian political scientists who had been invited to give their opinion about the electoral system of their country, and who engaged with politicians, public officials, and national media on the topic, talk about their experience as national experts. They answer two related questions: (1) What do political scientists know about electoral reform that practitioners do not? and (2) Does it make a difference? This symposium gathers their respective contributions to the roundtable. In this introduction, we give a brief overview of the literature on the role of political scientists in electoral reforms and summarize the main conclusions of the four contributions to the symposium.

Keywords: electoral system, electoral reform, political science, pracademics, Europe, Canada

INTRODUCTION

AS CAIN (2012) NOTED, many electoral laws are designed with the help of political scientists. When politicians or public officials are wondering whether to change the electoral system, and in which direction, they often seek advice from academic experts. The involvement of political scientists in electoral reform processes goes a long way back in time: as early as 1920, Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of the discipline, sat on the commission that drafted the Weimar Constitution in Germany (Giddens 2013).¹ More recently, the

American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force on Political Science, Electoral Rules, and Democratic Governance conducted a survey on the topic among U.S.-based political scientists. In their follow-up report, Htun and Powell (2013) show that respondents have been involved in more than 50 electoral reform processes since 2000.

The practice of mixing an academic career with practical politics, which is sometimes labeled “pracademics,” is more and more common in political science (McDonald and Mooney 2011). The rationale is that the discipline gains in realism and creativity by building on hands-on experiences of politics, and politics gains in efficiency and legitimacy by relying on scientific discoveries and hard

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¹It is interesting to note that, despite his involvement in actual politics, Max Weber was one of the first scholars to theorize the distinction between the “scientist” and the “political actor,” and the concept of axiological neutrality (Weber 2003).

data (Mead 2010). This is particularly true for matters related to elections.

There are hundreds of stories of political scientists who have been essential actors in electoral reform processes, either in the U.S. or abroad. For example, in the U.S., some have acted as expert witnesses in electoral law disputes (Engstrom and McDonald 2011); others have helped at identifying cases of gerrymandering (Grofman and King 2007). In other countries, some have been invited to present electoral system alternatives, sometimes with a precise goal such as facilitating democratic transition (Lijphart 2004) or promoting gender equality (Krook and Norris 2014), and sometimes with the general objective of identifying the electoral system that is the most suited to a particular national context (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). The list could go on, demonstrating the variety of repertoires of action used by political scientists on issues (electoral formula, voter registration, ballot design, districting, electoral integrity, etc.).

In this symposium, we offer a view on this topic from the outside of the U.S. At the 2016 European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference, we organized a roundtable with five political scientists from Europe and Canada who had been invited to give their opinion about the electoral system of their country, and who engaged with politicians, public officials, and national media on the topic. We invited them to talk about their experience as national experts and to answer two related questions: (1) What do political scientists know about electoral reform that practitioners do not? and (2) Does it make a difference? In this symposium, we compile their contributions to the roundtable. Our goal is to identify the differences and similarities between countries and give new comparative insights to the debate regarding the involvement of political scientists in electoral reform.

In this introduction, we briefly discuss what the literature says about these two questions. Then, we present and summarize the main contributions of the articles of the symposium. The contributors point at the difficulties for political scientists to be heard and/or to influence the outcome of the reform given the strategic importance of electoral systems for politicians. However, they also mention a few areas in which political scientists can make a difference, such as raising public awareness regarding electoral systems via national medias or contribut-

ing to the overall transparency of the process by forcing politicians to clarify their position.

WHAT POLITICAL SCIENTISTS KNOW

There is a huge body of scientific evidence on the consequences of electoral laws on various aspects of politics. The literature started with the “Duverger laws” about the effect of electoral formulas on the number of parties (Duverger 1951), but is now going well beyond it. It covers many topics that are crucial for the functioning of democracies, and therefore also for practitioners, such as voter turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Herrera, Morelli, and Palfrey 2014), the political representation of women (Murray 2013; Golder et al. 2017) and minorities (Hazan and Rahat 2000; Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington 2003), the ideological congruence between voters and governments (Huber and Powell 1994; Golder and Stramski 2010), citizen satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005), or electoral integrity (Norris 2014). In their report, Htun and Powell (2013, 809) note that “the scientific and engineering dimensions of the relationship between political scientists and electoral systems are mutually reinforcing.” As the knowledge on electoral laws has expanded, political scientists have become more involved in electoral reform processes. Presenting all of this knowledge in detail is well beyond the scope of this article.

What clearly comes out of this literature is that there is no single electoral system that can achieve all desirable goals that electoral systems could potentially achieve at the same time. Therefore, advocating for a precise rule necessarily implies hierarchizing between multiple, and potentially contradictory, goals. There is a necessary trade-off between them. The most commonly discussed trade-off is the one between accountability and representativeness (understood as a fair representation of all groups of the society in the legislative process). In their survey, the 2013 APSA Task Force on Political Science, Electoral Rules, and Democratic Governance asked political scientists to rank the importance of various goals that electoral systems could potentially achieve. The results show that respondents consider that ensuring the accountability of politicians is the most important goal, followed by government stability and proportionality

between votes and seats, whereas the least important goal is having a single-party government (Carey et al. 2013).

In the same vein, the McDougall Trust conducted a survey of political scientists throughout the world in the early 2000s. It asked them to identify their favorite electoral system. The results show that the most popular is the mixed-member proportional system, as used in Germany, closely followed by the single transferable vote, as used in Ireland (Bowler, Farrell, and Pettitt 2005). The two praised systems share an important characteristic: they represent a reasonably good compromise between accountability and representativeness. Along these lines, Carey and Hix (2011) label these systems as “electoral sweet spots.” In combining proportional representation and relatively small districts,² they maximize the achievement of the two aforementioned goals.

The literature thus suggests that there is a wide agreement among political scientists about the goal electoral systems should pursue: ensuring that voters can hold politicians accountable and that all social groups are fairly represented in parliament. Although some disagreement still exists regarding the precise modalities that should be promoted to reach such goals (Farrell and Bowler 2009), it seems that what political scientists know has led to precise preferences about what they want. As Bowler, Farrell, and Pettitt (2005, 15) put it, “[it] is hard to think of another subfield of political science that shows this level of consensus about its topic of study.”

WHAT POLITICAL SCIENTISTS DO

At first glance, we can think that the agreement regarding the goals that electoral systems should achieve that exists among political scientists would help them to exert an influence in the electoral reform processes. However, the reality shows that it is not as straightforward as it seems.

Political scientists use a variety of strategies to influence electoral reform processes. As Carey et al. (2013, 828) noted, “political scientists have, among other things, presented political parties and legislative commissions with a blueprint for a new election system, drawn lists of options for stakeholders at regional meetings, conducted shuttle diplomacy between government and opposition in

the halls of the United Nations headquarters, trained the staff of democracy promotion organizations, and planted the seeds of new ideas.” However, most of the time, the main “weapon” at their disposal is to bring awareness about the likely outcome of reforms. In doing so, they give tools for the general public and political actors to make an informed decision. As Htun and Powell (2013, 1) put it, “by developing, testing and sharing theories about how different electoral designs shape politics, political scientists play an important role in this process.”

It is not clear whether political scientists can decisively affect the outcome of electoral reform processes. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that they can, especially in new democracies (Renwick 2010). One of the most famous examples is the involvement of Arend Lijphart in the elaboration of the new electoral law of post-apartheid South Africa (Taylor 1992; Lijphart 2004). In the early 1990s, the country took a democratic turn after the incumbent government freed the opposition leader, Nelson Mandela, because of domestic protests and international pressures. Consulted on the institutional form the country’s government should take, Arend Lijphart recommended the adoption of a proportional representation system to accommodate the severe ethnic divisions of the country. His argument was that proportional representation encourages the different groups of a society to share power, and thus to collaborate. In the long run, this collaboration helps to smooth the divide and create functioning consociational multi-group democracies, such as in the Netherlands, Belgium, or Switzerland. Following this advice, the new leader, Nelson Mandela, decided to adopt a proportional representation system for national South African elections. This choice has been proven successful, as the ethnic tensions have considerably diminished in the country.

Beyond a few emblematic examples, there is, however, little evidence that political scientists are decisive in shaping electoral reform outcomes. As Carey et al. (2013, 830) put it, “we lack systematic evidence that political science knowledge compelled actors to choose courses of action they would not have taken otherwise. In fact, some of

²The electoral system used in Portugal and Spain can be labeled as electoral sweet spots according to Carey and Hix (2011). Each of them is the subject of a contribution of the present symposium.

our evidence reveals [that] actors on the ground picked and chose among the scientific findings that were more useful for their purposes.” In other words, the solution proposed by political scientists is unlikely to be successful when it clashes with the interests of political actors. It has long been established that self-interested partisan interests are the most important determinant to predict the outcome of electoral reform processes (Boix 1999; Colomer 2005).

In an interview, Simon Hix told a story that illustrates the difficulty for political scientists to have an impact on the electoral reform outcome. In 2006, he was invited by the Israeli government to give his opinion about what would be the best electoral system for the country. He suggested a mixed-member proportional system to solve the endemic problem of government instability, partially caused by the “pure” proportional system in use in the country. However, it was soon obvious that “the very problem Hix and others were invited to try to correct—the inflated power of small parties over coalition formation and stability—prevented them from making any progress” (Carey et al. 2013, 830). Small parties of the ruling coalition, which would have suffered from a less proportional system, blocked any attempt of reform in the direction advised by Hix.

In their study, Krook and Norris (2004) argue that many political scientists promoting gender equality are aware of these strategic aspects. They thus use various “tricks” to achieve their objectives. For example, they know that the promotion of gender equality should not be limited to gender quotas, and that other creative options need to be explored, especially in countries in which gender quotas are unlikely. Krook and Norris (2004) insist that the main barriers to reforms are political, and that political scientists should be fully aware that not all options are equally likely to be successful depending on the political context.

PRESENTATION OF THE SYMPOSIUM

In this symposium, political scientists from Europe and Canada who had been invited to give their opinion about the electoral system of their country, and who engaged with politicians, public officials, and national media on the topic, report on their experiences as national experts. In adopting

a comparative perspective, we aim to gain a more systematic understanding of the role played by political scientists in electoral reform processes, and their ability to exert an influence. The direct involvement of the contributors into practical politics helps to bring important new advances, both at the empirical and theoretical level. This symposium thus also contributes to the reflection on “practical reflexivity” of political science as a whole (Villumsen, Berling, and Bueger 2013).

In the first contribution to the symposium, Alan Renwick reports on his experience as one of the main government and media experts in the (unsuccessful) 2011 electoral reform referendum in the United Kingdom. The referendum asked voters to decide whether the first-past-the-post system should be replaced by a system of alternative voting. Renwick explains why the common wisdom that practitioners know less about electoral systems than political scientists is largely unfounded. Practitioners have a clear idea about the effects and consequences of electoral laws. He draws three main conclusions from his involvement in the British process. First, political scientists should focus on educating the public rather than the politicians. Second, they should be very modest about the knowledge they have gained about electoral systems over the years, as the systematic empirical patterns identified by political science are already well known by practitioners. Third, they should also accept to learn from practitioners, as they sometimes know better about electoral systems than the political scientists.

In the second contribution, Henry Milner builds upon years of involvement in various electoral reform processes in Canada. In 2015, the Liberal government committed itself to reform the first-past-the-post system and started consulting political scientists on the topic. Milner notes that the consultations tend to focus on electoral system technicalities. Despite the clear preference built over the years by some political scientists in Canada for a mixed-member proportional system, they have not been able to put it forward. According to Milner, political scientists should engage in the strategic dimension of electoral reforms, for example in anticipating the arguments of the proponents of the status quo.

In the third contribution, André Freire answers the questions of the symposium in view of his involvement as the main government expert in an

important electoral reform in Portugal in 2009. Freire identifies two key points regarding his involvement in the process. First, although political scientists have specific knowledge vis-à-vis practitioners, the electoral reform outcome is at the end political, not academic. Along this line, the major difference between political scientists and practitioners is not so much about knowledge but about the specific (partisan) interests. Second, the involvement of political scientists in electoral reform processes makes them more open and transparent. It also forces politicians to be more accountable.

In the fourth contribution, Pedro Riera and José Ramón Montero report on their involvement in the (failed) electoral reform process that occurred in Spain in 2008 and 2015. According to them, parties are to blame for these failures. Although some of the new parties managed to put the issue on the government agenda, the long-standing parties strongly opposed it. Riera and Montero admit, quite honestly, that despite their formal involvement in the process their influence was almost nil. They argue that in situations where there is a divergence of interests among parties, there is little that political scientists can do to affect the electoral reform outcome.

We believe this symposium advances the literature on electoral reform in four directions. First, it offers a comparative perspective on the topic by presenting concrete cases in which political scientists were involved in electoral reform processes. Just as in the U.S., local political scientists tend to be consulted, although this consultation seems to be mostly about technicalities of electoral systems.

Second, this symposium discusses the ability of political scientists to exert an influence on electoral reform outcomes in Europe and Canada. This influence is limited, given the strategic dimension of electoral reforms for political parties. Whereas political scientists attempt to promote the “best” electoral system, politicians have other considerations in mind, including their reelection. Along this line, the knowledge of political scientists seems to be utilized by practitioners to legitimize their preferred option.

Third, this symposium highlights the need for political scientists to concentrate their efforts on informing the general public. This seems to be the main channel through which they can exert some influence. This, however, implies leaving the “cozy circles” of the parliament to engage in more

down-to-earth dialogue with the media and citizen associations.

Fourth, the case studies of the symposium show that political scientists have an influence on the quality of the electoral reform process. Their participation makes the process more transparent and open, and forces politicians to be more accountable in their decisions. To conclude, local political scientists certainly have a role to play in electoral reform processes everywhere in the world. However, their involvement is contingent, short term, and limited to the role that political elites are willing to give them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the ECPR for letting us organize the roundtable on which this symposium is based at its 2016 General Conference in Prague. Also, we would like to thank the attendees and participants for their insightful feedback during this roundtable.

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