# Electoral reform, values and party self-interest

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## Abstract

It is often taken for granted that parties support electoral reform because they anticipate seat payoffs from the psychological and mechanical effects of the new electoral system. Although some studies point out that elements related to values and the willingness to achieve social goals are also relevant to explaining party preference in those situations, a general model of how these considerations influence support for electoral reform is still missing. To fill this gap, I develop in this article a policy-seeking model accounting for values-related factors and operationalize it using one of the most firmly established effects of electoral systems in the literature: The degree of inclusiveness and its consequences for the representation of social groups in parliament. The empirical relevance of this model is then tested using an original dataset reporting the actual position of 115 parties facing 22 electoral reform proposals in OECD countries since 1961. The results show that willingness to favour the electoral system most in line with a party's electoral platform has a unique explanatory power over party support for a more proportional electoral system. In turn, values appear to be as crucial as party self-interest in explaining the overall electoral reform story.

## Introduction

Political parties have an ambivalent relationship with electoral systems. While electoral systems shape a structure of incentives to which parties must adapt strategically, these parties, once elected, are able to modify electoral systems through the legislative process they dominate (Benoit and Schiemann, 2001). Consequently, it is hard to know whether parties seek to manipulate the institution to facilitate their re-election or to achieve social goals such as ensuring the representation of each citizen in the decision-making process.

In the literature, this ambivalence is framed as tension between partisan interests on the one hand and values on the other (Renwick, 2010). Missing, however, is a proper assessment of the empirical relevance of these two types of motive. To fill this gap, I develop in this article a policy-seeking model accounting for values-related factors and operationalize it using one of the most firmly established effects of electoral systems in the literature: namely the degree of inclusiveness and its consequences for the representation of social groups in parliament. The empirical relevance of this model is then tested using an original dataset reporting the actual position of 115 parties facing 22 electoral reform proposals in OECD countries since 1961.

## Values and interests in party support for electoral reform

When it comes to deciding whether to support or to oppose electoral reform, many scholars studying party competition seem to consider that political parties are first and foremost strategic players acting in their own interests. This self-interest is mostly understood as the willingness to maximize parliamentary representation towards an anticipation of the mechanical and psychological effects of the new electoral system. The idea comes from the observation that multipartism usually preceded the adoption of proportional representation (PR) in the early 20th century (Boix, 1999; Rokkan, 1970) as well as in more recent democracies (Colomer, 2005; Pilet and Bol, 2011; Remmer, 2008). The decision of governments to replace pluralitarian and majoritarian electoral systems by a more proportional one is

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interpreted as a strategy towards minimizing their chances of losing their entire parliamentary representation in the future, given the rise of electoral volatility in favour of new parties. Some case studies of parties involved in the immediate constitutional-making process that followed democratization in Taiwan (Brady and Mo, 1992), Russia (Remington and Smith, 1996) and Hungary (Benoit and Schiemann, 2001) confirm this claim.

Yet precisely how parties evaluate whether or not an electoral reform is in their favour is still a matter of discussion. Analysing the various aspects of the 2001 reform in Belgium, for example, Pilet (2007) reveals diverse self-interested motives that had influenced the behaviour of party leaders at that time. These range from the desire to maintain strong control over their backbenchers to ways of making future campaigns easier to conduct. Also, it is worth mentioning that although a wide variety of actors (beyond political parties), such as social movements, international organizations or judges, also intervene in electoral reform processes at times, political parties usually remain decisive (Benoit, 2007).

A baseline theoretical model of electoral system choice can be derived from this idea (Benoit, 2004), with parties assumed to rank electoral system alternatives according to their respective expected seat-payoff compared to the status quo and then opt for the preferred one. As a consequence, an electoral reform occurs when legislators who have the same preference are able jointly to secure a majority of seats within the parliamentary assembly that is in charge of voting on electoral reforms.

In a more formal way, one could say that considering $s$, the status quo electoral system, and $p$, the proposed electoral system, the utility for a party $l$ of supporting $p$ is a function of its current seat share under $s$ and of its expected seat-share if $p$ is implemented (see Equation 1).

$$\begin{aligned} U_{ip} &= f(S_{ip}^{e}, S_{is}) \\ &= S_{ip}^{e} - S_{is} \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Some authors, however, contest this idea. They argue that parties sometimes also consider the consequences of the change for the societal and political system in general. In this context, electoral reforms are seen as policies implemented to achieve social goals considered relevant by the governing parties. This type of motive is usually considered to be 'values-driven' (Renwick, 2010).[1]

This logic is marshalled to explain the evolution of party support for electoral reform in countries engaged in serious political turmoil. In supporting replacement of the list PR by a mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system after the 1999 'earthquake elections' in Belgium that saw the Christian democratic parties losing the dominant position for the first time since 1945, the right-wing *Open Vlaamse liberalen en democraten* was willing to increase the occurrences of complete political alternations in the future as a way of increasing government efficiency (Pilet,

2007). Similarly, during the sex and cash scandals of the mid-1990s in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party opened up the discussion about a shift to a more proportional electoral system in order to subject individual politicians to more constraints and to limit such practices (Renwick et al., 2011).

In the same vein, some authors use values-related arguments to explain party support for electoral reform during critical periods in world history. They state, for example, that during the political liberalization and suffrage extension that occurred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in many industrial democracies, parties adapted to a changing political environment. Among party elites, especially those of the Socialists parties, it was indeed more and more expected that PR was the only way to ensure inclusive political representation (Carstairs, 1980; Blais et al., 2005). Examining the same cases, Cusack et al. (2007) claim that the adaptation was made to changing economic structures, and was part of an overall economic strategy designed to encourage cooperation between labour and capital over social programmes. In addition, during the democratization period following the collapse of the Soviet union, the local constitution-makers of virtually all Eastern European countries favoured PR or MMP electoral systems in order to foster the multipartism that was cruelly absent during the authoritarian period (Birch et al., 2002; Renwick, 2011b). In the 1990s and 2000s, proposals on switching towards more proportional electoral systems were put on the agenda of many commonwealth democracies as a means of avoiding situations where the government was in the hands of the second largest party in terms of popular support (Shugart, 2008).

These studies have in common the fact that they offer explanations specific to the context and period studied. Missing is a general model of how considerations about societal and political consequences influence party support for electoral reform. Only the study of Bowler et al. (2006) truly investigates this question. Relying on parliamentarian survey data in four countries, the authors show that desire to be re-elected (i.e. self-interest) is a much better predictor of legislator support for electoral reform. However, their analysis does not include either considerations about the type of electoral system to be implemented, or the societal and political consequences this reform would have. The dependent variable used is indeed support for the status quo electoral system in the parliamentarian's country, no matter its type. In this article, I show that, while properly modelled, the values appear to have unique explanatory power of party support for electoral reform.

## A policy-seeking model of party support for electoral reform

The Downsian spatial proximity model is frequently used in the literature to provide causal accounts of voting

behaviour. At the core of this model lies the assumption that voters and parties have precise positions about state policies and that the information about these positions is available to everyone. Voters evaluate the distance between their positions and those of each party and opt for the party that has similar positions, or, by default, for the one that has the closest positions (Downs, 1957).

The idea of spatial proximity can be adapted to party support for electoral reform to create a policy-seeking model. Each electoral system indeed has pros and cons, and there is no agreement on one best electoral system. Preference depends on one's priorities (Bowler and Farrell, 2006). Electoral systems can thus be seen as policy instruments implemented to achieve social goals. It has long been understood that the type of electoral system in use has dramatic effects on the societal and political system. From Mill (1861) to Schumpeter (1942), nearly all the classical authors on democracy point out this causal relationship.

In this sense, parties should opt for the alternative closest to their own policy position. In doing so, they can expect to increase their popular support. Acting in line with what it has been elected for – that is, the positions emphasized in its manifesto – and presenting itself as trustworthy and consistent is assumed to be the best strategy in this respect. Formally, this can be expressed assuming a space with a single social goal that can be achieved by the electoral system $G$, a status quo electoral system $s$, and a proposed electoral system $p$. The utility function of the party $i$ to support $p$ then depends on the distances between the desire of $i$ to achieve this social goal and the capacity of $s$ and $p$ to do so (see Equation 2).

$$\begin{aligned} U_{ip} &= f(G_i, G_s, G_p) \\ &= (G_s - G_i)^2 - (G_p - G_i)^2 \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Operationalizing this theoretical model presents two challenges. First, $G_i$ needs to be defined. The scientific literature points to social goals that are thought potentially to be achieved by a change of electoral system; these include for instance a reduction in corruption (Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman, 2005) or an increase of trust in political institutions (Norris, 2004). Many social goals may thus be chosen to operationalize this term. However, in order to have an efficient measure of $G_i$, it should echo salient and contested issues. Also, the causal link between this goal and the electoral system must be established unambiguously (to make sure parties are aware of it). The focus is then on the inclusiveness of parliamentary representation, or, in other words, the representation of citizens from all social groups in the legislative process, including minorities and underprivileged people. There is indeed long-standing consensus among political scientists saying that the electoral system is pivotal to achieving this social goal. Thanks to the work of Duverger (1951) and Rae (1967) (among others) the effects of electoral systems on the inclusiveness of parliamentary

representation have been known since the 1960s. The issue has the advantage of not being as consensual as it seems at first glance. To increase the inclusiveness of representation, the cost of entry into parliament must be lowered, which decreases the chances of single-party governments being formed and undermines accountability and efficiency. This unavoidable trade-off typically creates contention among party elites and experts on the subject (Powell, 2000).

Second, as the terms of the equation reflect very different realities, finding a standard scale that would derive meaningful results is difficult. While $G_i$ stands for party willingness to set an inclusive parliamentary representation, $G_s$ and $G_p$ refer to the capacity of the status quo and proposed electoral systems to achieve such a goal. To solve this problem, further modifications of the policy-seeking model need to be made (see Equation 3).

$$\begin{aligned} U_{ip} &= (G_s - G_i)^2 - (G_p - G_i)^2 \\ &= (G_s^2 - G_i^2 + 2G_sG_i) - (G_p^2 - G_i^2 - 2G_pG_i) \\ &= (G_s^2 + 2G_sG_i) - (G_p^2 + 2G_pG_i) \\ &= (G_s^2 + G_p^2) + 2G_i(G_s - G_p) \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

Presented this way, and in particular in isolating the terms $G_s$ and $G_p$, the theoretical model becomes easier to operationalize. The terms $G_s$ and $G_p$ are comparable, since they both represent the capacity of an electoral system to achieve inclusive parliamentary representation. As a general rule, PR electoral systems produce a low entry cost for new electoral contestants compared to pluralitarian and majoritarian electoral systems. The picture is more complex, however, as many electoral systems, such as the MMP, fall between these two poles. The most exact measure of the inclusiveness of electoral systems is the minimum number of votes a party must receive in order to secure at least one seat in parliament, which is in turn a function of district magnitudes (Lijphart, 1994). However, as the proposed electoral system is often rather loosely defined, it is impossible to calculate this indicator with precision. Let us, for instance, think about the Fillon Commission proposal (in 2007) introducing 'bits of proportionality' into the French lower house of the national parliament, and which has been elected through the two-round system (TRS) since 1958. There was no mention of the number of deputies intended to be elected through a PR electoral system, nor of the exact variant used to do so.

Even with a limited amount of case knowledge, though, it is possible to get a clear estimate of which electoral system, between the status quo and the proposal, is likely to achieve the greater degree of parliamentary representation's inclusiveness. In other words, it is possible to know whether $G_s > G_p$, $G_s < G_p$ or $G_s = G_p$. Formally speaking, it amounts to fixing the absolute value of the difference $G_s - G_p$ to 1 and letting the sign vary. In doing so, the utility of party $i$ to support the proposed electoral system $p$ becomes

**Table 1.** CMP items selected to construct the aggregated indicator of party position in favour of social groups.

| Favourable items | Unfavourable items |
|---|---|
| Labour groups: Positive<br>    Favourable reference to labour groups, working class, unemployed, support for trade unions, and good treatment of employees | Labour groups: Negative<br>    Abuse of power by trade unions; otherwise as a positive item, but negative |
| Farmers: Positive<br>    Support for agriculture and any farmers' policy aimed specifically at benefiting these | Political authority: Positive<br>    Favourable mention of strong government, including government stability, and manifesto party's competence to govern and/or other party's lack of such competence |
| Middle class, professional groups: Positive<br>    Favourable reference to middle class, professional groups such as physicians or lawyers; old and new middle class | |
| Underprivileged minority groups: Positive<br>    Favourable reference to underprivileged minorities who are defined in neither economic nor demographic terms, e.g. the handicapped, homosexuals, immigrants, etc. | |
| Non-economic demographic groups: Positive<br>    Favourable mention of, or need for, assistance to women, the elderly, young people, linguistic groups, etc.; special interest groups of all kinds | |

a function of the sole $G_i$. The utility function derived from the policy-seeking model can thus be transformed into the utility of supporting the more inclusive electoral system $U_{ig}$.[2] This utility is then defined as a function of the party willingness to set inclusive parliamentary representation $G_i$ (see Equation 4).

$$U_{ig} = f(G_i)$$
$$= 2G_i \quad (4)$$

To confront this policy-seeking model to the seat-maximization model presented above, some transformations to the latter model need to be made. Specifically, it should be expressed in terms of the utility of the party $i$ of supporting the more inclusive electoral system among the status quo and the proposal. In the absence of other information, parties are likely to use previous electoral results as a cue to evaluating how much they may expect to gain from the reform. As long as the direction of the reform is towards more inclusiveness, the expected seat gain or loss brought by the combined mechanical and psychological effects of the new electoral system is a negative linear function of the proportion of seats received at the preceding election (Taagepera, 2007). Mechanically speaking, the more exclusive the electoral system, the greater the advantage given in the translation of votes into seats to big parties. The psychological effect reinforces this link. Therefore, the utility for the party $i$ of supporting the more inclusive electoral system among the status quo and the proposal is a function of its seat-share at the latest elections $S$ (see Equation 5).

$$U_{ig} = f(S_{is})$$
$$= -S_{is} - S_{is} \quad (5)$$
$$= -2S_{is}$$

## Measurements and hypotheses

The key variable of the policy-seeking model is $G_i$, which corresponds to how much party $i$ wants to set an inclusive parliamentary representation. Two operationalizations of this variable are considered. The first relates directly to the definition of inclusive parliamentary representation as presented above and the party position in favour of social groups such as minorities or underprivileged citizens. It is by nature expected to be positively associated in its support for a more inclusive electoral system, since the best way to ensure that social groups are considered politically is to include them in the legislative process and then to lower the entry cost to parliament. To operationalize party position in favour of social groups, the data gathered by the comparative manifesto project (CMP) are used (Volkens et al., 2011). In particular, all six items of the CMP that directly relate to this broader concept are combined following recent developments of party position measurements (Lowe et al., 2011). The rationale is that the greater the number of items, the less sensitive the aggregated indicator to measurement errors. The items used concern the position in favour of all kinds of social groups distinguished by type of employment and demographics. Moreover, an extra item concerning political authority was added, as an inclusive parliamentary representation also has the consequence of undermining the government's strength and its ability to conduct policies freed from constraint. Table 1 reports the description of these items and the direction they take in the aggregated indicator.

From this operationalization of the policy-seeking model, the following first hypothesis is derived:

**Hypothesis 1:** The more favourable a party position towards the inclusion of social groups in the

decision-making process, the more likely its support for a more inclusive electoral system.

A second operationalization of $G_i$ relates to the broader concept of ideology. According to political theory literature, ideologies are directly related to a given electoral system. Each one corresponds to a specific vision of what is good governance and, as a consequence, of what is a good way of organizing elections. In this sense, the left-wing ideology – socialism – promotes the inclusion of all groups of citizens in parliament and in the legislative process in order to achieve goals such as the equality of treatment and of the redistribution of growth benefits. At the opposite extreme, the right-wing ideology – liberalism – gives priority to stable and efficient governments in order to maintain the free-market ideal. For this reason, this ideology favours a higher cost of entry to parliament (Iversen and Soskice, 2006; Katz, 1997; Schumpeter, 1942).

To operationalize party ideology, two different measures are chosen. First, a multi-categorical measure of traditional party families, as determined by national experts, is used. In line with the argument presented above, it differentiates a right-wing family (made of Conservative, Christian-democratic and Radical populist parties) and a left-wing family (composed of Socialists, Communists and Greens), all other parties serving as reference. These classifications are also contained by the CMP dataset.

Second, the CMP items selected by Mair and Bartolini (1990) to capture party position along the socio-economic left–right scale are chosen to derive a scale measure of party ideology. Given the debate about the link between ideology and electoral systems, it makes more sense to restrict the aggregated indicator to socio-economic items such as the attitude towards free enterprise or economic orthodoxy, instead of adopting a broader definition that would have included non-related elements such as patriotism, law and order or authoritarianism. A free-market economy requires strong single-party government, while an authoritarian position is associated with a preference for the status quo, regardless of its type (Bowler et al., 2006). Party position along the left–right scale is taken for the election before the electoral reform proposal reached the government's agenda. Another two hypotheses are derived from these operationalizations:

**Hypothesis 2A:** A left-wing party is more likely to support a more inclusive electoral system than a right-wing party.

**Hypothesis 2B:** The more left-wing the party, the more likely its support for a more inclusive electoral system.

Finally, to assess the empirical relevance of values and partisan interests on party support for electoral reform, a last hypothesis needs to be derived from the transformed seat-maximization model. The operationalization of the variable involved is straightforward. As mentioned above, it simply consists of the party seat-share at the preceding election, taken as an indicator of its expected seat gain (or loss) brought by the more inclusive electoral system. A fourth hypothesis is thus derived:

**Hypothesis 3**: The smaller the seat-share of the party, the more likely its support for a more inclusive electoral system.

## Data

To test the hypotheses derived from the theoretically built utility functions, an original dataset of party supports for major electoral reform proposals in OECD countries is constructed. Two stages are necessary. In the first, major electoral reform proposals in the literature are identified, specifically the numerous case studies contained in edited books. When missing, this information is supplied by direct contacts with national experts. Two remarks need to be made about data collection.

First, only proposals are included that were at one point on the political agenda of the government because they were drafted by a committee specifically appointed by the government, subject to a referendum, or submitted to parliament by (one of) the government party(-ies). Electoral reforms are technical issues that in most cases do not attract much media attention. Politicians thus do not have much incentive to express any kind of position about them. For example, in the US in 1997 the proposal of the Democrat Congresswoman, Cynthia McKinney to adopt some sort of PR electoral system for the election of the Congress was rejected before being submitted to a vote and therefore remained largely absent from the media agenda. As a consequence, leading politicians did not take any public stand on the subject (Bowler and Donovan, 2008).

Second, for similar reasons of saliency, the focus is strictly on proposals that include a wholesale replacement of the electoral formula in use for the election of the lower house of parliament. In other words, only the proposed switches from one category of electoral system to another are considered (following the typology of Reynolds et al., 2005). These reforms are often called 'major' (Katz, 2005). As they directly relate to the general principle of political representation at stake in the country, they are more likely to attract the attention of the general public (Nohlen, 1984).

All in all, I collate 23 proposals covering 15 countries and more than 40 years. Table 2 gives a brief summary in reporting the year the proposals reached the political agenda of the government, the variants of the status quo and proposed electoral systems, and whether or not the process succeeded. It includes the binary approximation of the more or less inclusive character of the electoral reform proposals that need to

**Table 2.** Major electoral reform proposals in OECD countries, 1961–2011.

| Country | Year | Status quo | Proposal | Outcome | Inclusiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austria | 1989 | List PR | MMP | Failure | Less |
| Belgium | 2001 | List PR | MMP | Failure | Less |
| Canada | 1979 | FPTP | MMP | Failure | More |
| Canada | 2004 | FPTP | MMP | Failure | More |
| Czech Rep. | 2001 | List PR | MMP | Failure | Less |
| Hungary[6] | 2011 | TRS | FPTP | Success | Less |
| France | 1985 | TRS | List PR | Success | More |
| France | 1986 | List PR | TRS | Success | Less |
| France | 2007 | TRS | Parallel | Failure | More |
| Ireland | 1968 | STV | FPTP | Failure | Less |
| Ireland | 1996 | STV | MMP | Failure | Less |
| Italy | 1993 | List PR | MMP | Success | Less |
| Italy | 2005 | MMP | List PR + | Success | Less |
| Japan | 1994 | SNTV | Parallel | Success | More |
| Mexico | 1996 | Parallel | MMP | Success | More |
| Netherlands | 2002 | List PR | MMP | Failure | Less |
| New Zealand | 1986 | FPTP | MMP | Failure | More |
| New Zealand | 1993 | FPTP | MMP | Success | More |
| New Zealand | 2011 | MMP | AV | Failure | Less |
| Portugal | 2008 | List PR | MMP | Failure | Less |
| South Korea | 2003 | FPTP | Parallel | Success | More |
| United Kingdom | 1997 | FPTP | MMP | Failure | More |
| United Kingdom | 2011 | FPTP | AV | Failure | More |

be identified to test the hypotheses presented above. While a switch from PR (list PR, single transferable vote (STV)) or from MMP (or other more majoritarian variants such as the so-called parallel electoral system) to a majoritarian (alternative vote (AV), or two-round system (TRS)) or pluralitarian (first past the post (FPTP)) is easy to approximate as a reduction of the inclusiveness of the parliamentary representation, a more in-depth examination is usually required to achieve such an objective.

In the MMP, the PR component usually fully compensates for the disproportionality brought by the pluralitarian or majoritarian component. It can thus be considered more inclusive than the parallel electoral system, where the two components function independently of each other. However, even in the MMP, the so-called coordination effect between parties of the two overlapping districts tends to increase, in a vague psychological manner, the cost of entry to parliament (Ferrara and Herron, 2005). A switch from the list PR to one of these systems therefore tends to reduce the inclusiveness of parliamentary representation. The STV, in contrast, is rather less proportional than the MMP and the list PR, while the district magnitude is held constant (Gallagher, 1991).

It is tricky to evaluate the effect on inclusiveness of a switch from FPTP to TRS or AV. Examining the political consequences of the potential introduction of the AV in the United Kingdom in 2011, Renwick (2011a) argued that it would not make life easier for small parties (meaning all parties other than Labour, Conservative and LibDem). However, the very possibility offered by the AV to rank the

parties in order of preference would have assuaged citizens' fears of wasting their votes, and would therefore have increased small parties' vote and seat-share. In this sense, the proposal can be interpreted as a change towards a more inclusive electoral system. The same applies to the bills introduced by the Hungarian ruling party *Fidesz* in 2011.

Finally, among the proposals identified, two electoral systems are exceptional and thus hard to assess. The single non-transferable vote (SNTV), used in Japan until 1993, constitutes a very special case. Although highly proportional in the translation of votes into seats, the SNTV is exclusive when one big party manages to coordinate its various candidates across multi-member constituencies. Hence, the Liberal democratic party had been able to secure a comfortable majority of seats in the lower house of the Japanese parliament for about 50 years following 1945 (Cox, 1996). Its replacement by a parallel electoral system in 1993 is therefore termed more inclusive. In the same vein, the list PR implemented in Italy in 2005 is peculiar in the sense that it gives extra seats to the coalition of parties with the greater number of votes until it gets a majority of support in parliament (List PR+). This electoral system is therefore usually subsumed within the majoritarian/pluralitarian category as it exacts a high-entry cost to parliament from parties that do not fit within one of the two main coalitions (Baldini, 2011).

The second stage of the construction of the dataset consists in coding party position about the identified major electoral reform. To do so, I use a binary coding-frame (whether parties were in favour of, or against, the proposal).
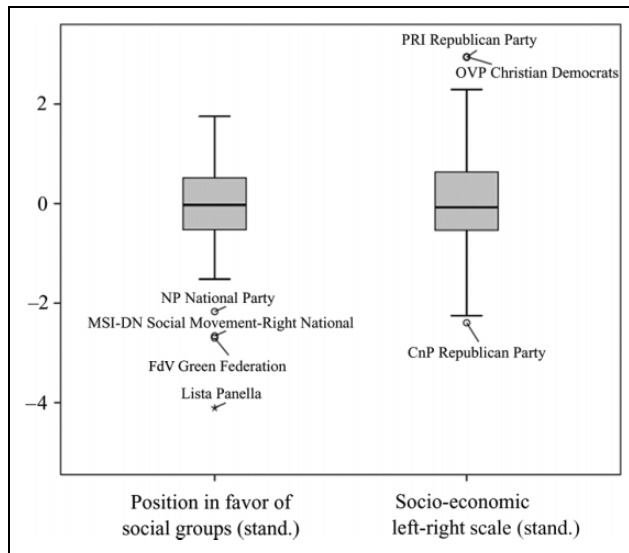
**Figure 1.** Distribution of the standardized CMP-based predictive variables.

As a general rule, all parties represented in the lower house of parliament when the proposal reached the government's agenda were included in the analysis. For practical reasons of data accessibility, minor parties such as the *Front national* in Belgium or the *Leefbar Nederlands* in The Netherlands are excluded. In the same vein, information is missing for the *Magyar Szocialista Párt* in Hungary. For similar reasons of data availability, the mexican parties are not included in the analysis. I follow a mixed-strategy procedure between qualitative hand-coding based on the existing literature just as for identification of the first stage of data collections, and a cross-validation of this pre-coding by national experts. Proceeding this way allows me to address critiques of Budge (2000) concerning expert party positioning. For example, it was clearly stated that the information asked was about the very specific behaviour (not a vague attitude) of a party leader (and not backbenchers or party activists) at a precise moment in time. In turn, among the 115 positions coded, 63 were in favour of a more inclusive electoral system (see the online appendix available at the author's website).

This dataset is superior to those used in the existing literature for two reasons (see, for example, Boix, 1999; Colomer, 2005, Cusack et al., 2007; Shugart, 2008). First, the units of analysis are individual parties and not governments. The politics of coalition is sometimes relevant to the shaping of party support for electoral reform. For example, Renwick et al. (2009), who analyse the 2005 Italian reform, point out that the support of *Forza Italia* (i.e. the biggest party of the ruling coalition) for re-implementation of a list PR electoral system for the election of the lower house of the national parliament is explained by its desire to secure its leading position in the right-wing coalition, which was at that time threatened by its ally, the *Alleanza nazionale*.

Second, in considering only electoral reforms that have eventually been adopted, the comparative datasets used in the existing literature arbitrarily exclude many relevant cases. Many failed attempts at electoral reform are indeed blocked at the very last stage of the decision-making process by non-partisan actors. For example, in 2011 in the United Kingdom the proposal to adopt AV for the election of members of parliament was dismissed by the population by referendum. In Slovenia, the Constitutional court played a key role in failed attempts to reform the list PR that occurred between 1996 and 2000 (Nikolenyi, 2011). Yet, there is no reason to exclude these proposals from the analysis of party support for electoral reform.

## Empirical analysis

To test the empirical relevance of values and interests in party support for electoral reform, and to test the three hypotheses presented above, log transformations of the utility functions are estimated. In addition, given the multi-level nature of the dataset presented above, specific fixed-effect correction terms are included to avoid biased results. Among other things, the fixed-effect terms account for whether the more inclusive electoral systems are the proposal or the status quo. Equation 6 represents the model estimated.

Log(Party support for more inclusive electoral system)
$$= \mu_k + \beta_1 \text{Standardized predictive variables} + \beta_k \text{Controls} + \in_{ki}$$
$$(6)$$

The predictive variables correspond to those of the utility functions derived from the policy-seeking and the seat-maximization models presented above (as the central parameter of both theoretical models is multiplied by 2, this multiplier has been simplified). Additional control variables added are: A dummy variable accounting for whether the party was in office or in opposition when the electoral reform proposal reached the government's agenda (i.e. incumbency) to control for the distorting effect of support motivated by an agreement on a broader package deal (Rahat and Hazan, 2011) and the position in favour of decentralization, as pluralitarian and majoritarian electoral systems tend to give seat bonuses to parties with a geographically concentrated electorate such as ethnic or linguistic minority parties that defend such a cause.

Given the frequency of the measurement errors in the CMP dataset (Dinas and Gemenis, 2010), specific attention is paid to the two variables relying on CMP items: the position in favour of social groups and the left–right scale. Their distribution boxplots are given in Figure 1. Because the variables are standardized, the two distributions are obviously similar. Hence, the figure is useful for pointing at outliers. In line with conventions, the cases with a value

**Table 3.** Empirical tests of the policy-seeking model.

|  | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Standardized predictive variables |  |  |  |  |
|   Position on social groups | 1.024*** (0.327) | 0.941*** (0.308) |  |  |
| Ideological families: |  |  |  |  |
|   Left-wing family |  |  | −0.008 (0.588) |  |
|   Right-wing family |  |  | −1.616** (0.630) |  |
|   Ideology (scale) |  |  |  | −0.626** (0.261) |
| Controls |  |  |  |  |
|   Position on decentralization | −0.035 (0.095) | −0.034 (0.095) | 0.049 (0.106) | 0.026 (0.092) |
|   Incumbency | −0.437 (0.434) | −0.442 (0.434) | −0.496 (0.414) | −0.494 (0.410) |
| Diagnostics |  |  |  |  |
|   Log-likelihood | 39.943 | 39.915 | 39.679 | 42.931 |
|   $\chi^2$ | 15.97*** | 14.94*** | 16.49*** | 9.99** |
|   N | 115 | 114 | 115 | 115 |

*Note:* Entries are fixed-effect standardized coefficient estimates clustered by proposal (22 clusters); the predicted outcome is support for a more inclusive electoral system; standard errors are given in parentheses *<0.1, **<0.05, ***<0.01 (two-tailed).

equal to or higher than 1.5 times the interquartile range are represented in the figure by circles; the one with a value equal to or higher than three times the interquartile range is represented by a cross. This last case is an extreme outlier. It is the *Lista panella*, which faced the 1993 proposal to adopt a MMP electoral system for election to the Italian lower house. Given the rather low number of cases, the extreme negative value of this party for this variable may artificially inflate the results. The estimates are therefore calculated with and without this outlier to ensure robustness of the findings.

Table 3 reports the coefficient estimates relating to the policy-seeking model presented above. All in all, the empirical material supports the derived hypotheses (H1, H2A and H2B). First, all of the estimates of the predictive variables show the expected sign. Second, the diagnostics of all models give significantly different predictions from the empty model at a degree of signification of at least 0.01.

The empirical evidence is particularly strong for operationalization of a policy-seeking model in favour of social groups (H1). If a party moves towards a position more favourable to social groups for a unit equivalent to a standard deviation, its chances of supporting a more inclusive electoral system increase by 178 percent (almost triple!), all other things being equal.[3] This effect is significant at 0.01.

In contrast, even if an increase of an identical unit towards the right pole of the socio-economic spectrum decreases a party's chances of supporting a more inclusive electoral system by 87 percent, the effect of ideology is only significant at a level of 0.05 (as is the overall fit of Model 4). In the same vein, the evidence is poor when measuring ideology through the party family affiliation (Model 3). While right-wing parties have an 80 percent less chance of supporting a more inclusive electoral system compared

to the reference category (significant at 0.01),[4] mainly composed of centrist parties, belonging to the left-wing family does not have any significant impact on this likelihood.

These unsatisfactory results for H2A and H2B are certainly due to the encompassing character of the concept of ideology. Very diverse elements are indeed used to define it, which prevents it from being a significant predictor of the very specific issue of electoral reform. For example, in the UK in 1997 and in 2011, the LibDems were at the forefront of the proposal to implement an MMP or an AV electoral system that would have produced a more inclusive parliamentary representation than the FPTP in use. While the party has a favourable position on the inclusion of all social groups in the decision-making process, it endorses classical right-wing positions such as support for free enterprise. In this sense, it would be classified as a centre-left party even regarding its support for those more proportional electoral systems.

Estimates when the outlier is excluded confirm the robustness of the effect of the position in favour of social groups on party support for more inclusive electoral systems. As reported in Model 2, an increase of a one standard unit of the position in favour of social groups increases the chances of support for this type of reform by 156 percent (significant at 0.01). It can therefore be concluded that the policy-seeking model is empirically relevant when its central variable (i.e. party willingness to produce inclusive parliamentary representation) is defined with a position in favour of social groups.

Table 4 reports coefficient estimates for the seat-maximization model. These provide empirical evidence for the derived hypothesis (H3).[5] A party electoral score increasing by one unit, equivalent to a standard deviation, means a likely more inclusive electoral reform proposal in the forthcoming legislature decreasing by 138 percent.

**Table 4.** Empirical tests of the seat-maximization model, and confrontation with and without outlier.

|  | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Standardized predictive variables |  |  |  |
| Seat-share (reversed) | 0.867*** (0.268) | 0.811*** (0.276) | 0.811*** (0.275) |
| Position on social groups |  | 1.015*** (0.361) | 0.929*** (0.342) |
| Controls |  |  |  |
| Position on decentralization | 0.026 (0.096) | −0.006 (0.101) | −0.006 (0.101) |
| Incumbency | 0.097 (0.491) | 0.285 (0.517) | 0.279 (0.518) |
| Diagnostics |  |  |  |
| Log-likelihood | 40.054 | 34.916 | 34.884 |
| $\chi^2$ | 15.74*** | 26.02*** | 25.01*** |
| N | 115 | 115 | 114 |

*Note:* Entries are fixed-effect standardized coefficient estimates clustered by proposal (22 clusters); the predicted outcome is support for a more inclusive electoral system; standard errors are given in parentheses *<0.1, **<0.05, ***<0.01 (two-tailed).
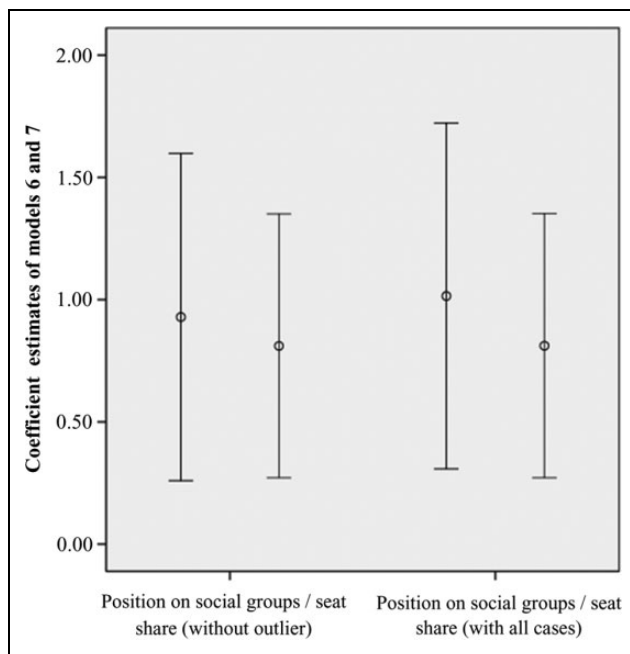


**Figure 2.** Comparison of the coefficient estimates.

This effect is significant at a level of 0.01, as is the overall goodness of fit.

Since potential associations between predictive variables may inflate or deflate the coefficients, confrontation models are also estimated (see Table 4). These include at the same time the central variable of the policy-seeking and seat-maximization model in order to assess their respective net effect. Since the party position in favour of social groups appeared as the only robust operationalization of the policy-seeking model, other operationalizations of the model are not disclosed in this table (all the model estimations are shown in the online appendix available at the author's website). The coefficient estimates, both with and without the outlier, confirm the previous findings: a party position in favour of social groups is a strong predictor of support for a more inclusive electoral system. What is new is that this predictor appears to be as strong as party seat-share (in Table 4 the variable seat-share is reversed for the sake of comparability). While a one-unit increase in the position in favour of social groups increases a party's likelihood of supporting a more inclusive electoral system by between 156 percent and 173 percent, a similar decrease in its vote-share at the preceding election increases it by 125 percent (see Models 5 and 6). These effects are all significant at a level of 0.05, while the overall goodness of fit of these estimated models is significant at 0.01.

Figure 2 offers a graphical comparison of these coefficient estimates and of associated standard errors. It shows that, with and without the outlier, the predictive power of the two variables overlaps. They are thus equally strong predictors of the support for more inclusive electoral systems. Furthermore, it means that both have a unique explanatory power in capturing the variation of the predicted variable. In other words, there are some instances of party support for electoral reform that cannot be fully explained by a willingness to increase parliamentary representation alone. The policy-seeking motives represent a self-standing piece in the overall electoral reform story. Evidence indeed indicates that some parties value inclusiveness as an end in itself, notwithstanding how many seats they may expect to gain if the reform is implemented.

## Conclusions

It is often taken for granted in the literature that parties support electoral reform because they anticipate seat pay-offs from the psychological and mechanical effects of the new electoral system. Rejecting this somehow simplistic seat-maximization logic, some authors point out that willingness to achieve various social goals is also a frequent motive. This article contributes to the debates, and more generally to the study of electoral reform, in conducting systematic analysis of the empirical relevance of values-related motives explaining the support for electoral

reform. To do so, the Downsian spatial proximity model is adapted in a policy-seeking model and the derived utility functions are tested with the use of an original dataset of major electoral reform proposals in OECD countries. The analysis shows that willingness to favour the electoral system most in line with their electoral platform, and in particular the position on the inclusion of all social groups in the decision-making process, is a good predictor of party support for more proportional electoral systems.

In turn, values appear to be as crucial as self-interests in explaining the overall electoral reform story. There is indeed a unique part of the variation that cannot be captured by classic seat-maximization reasoning. Many case studies in the literature confirm this idea. For example, in Austria in 1989, support of the economically very conservative *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP) for the implementation of a less inclusive electoral system was said to be at least partially motivated by a desire to get rid of the list PR that had long favoured the formation of very costly grand coalitions at national level (Müller, 2005). In the same vein, in The Netherlands the small right-wing party D66 was at the helm of many proposals for reducing the inclusiveness of the extremely proportional list PR electoral system used to elect the national parliament, this as a way of renewing the political class and of implementing policies of economic liberalization. The position of the party cannot be explained by anticipating the mechanical and psychological effect of the new electoral system, since all the proposals on the table seriously threatened their parliamentary representation (Van der Kolk, 2007). Values are therefore essential in our understanding the puzzle of electoral reform.

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## Notes

1. In practice, distinguishing between motives that are genuinely values-driven from those that are vote-maximizing may be difficult. Parties can expect to attract new voters by supporting a reform that would fulfil a social goal positively perceived by the population. Some authors prefer to talk about act-contingent motives when describing this type of support (Blau 2008; Reed and Thies, 2001).

2. The term 'more inclusive electoral system' stands for the electoral system that is supposed to achieve the greater degree of parliamentary representation's inclusiveness.

3. The entries in Tables 3 and 4 are the logarithms of the odds of supporting a more inclusive electoral system. The odds are then given by the exponential of the estimates.

4. Since the ideological family's variable is multi-categorical and therefore unstandardized, the associated odds cannot be directly compared to those of other predictive variables.

5. To facilitate comparison of the effect of the party seat-share at the preceding election and its position in favour of social groups, the former variable is reversed.

6. The 2011 reform in Hungary concerns the single-member district part of the MMP electoral system.

## Supplemental material

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