

## **Electoral Institutions and Electoral Responsiveness: SMD, MMD and the Representation of Interests**

November 2007

David L. Ellison

*Visiting Fellow  
Institute for World Economics*

(Word count: 12,505)

Comments welcome:  
[Ellisondl@gmail.com](mailto:Ellisondl@gmail.com)

### ***Abstract:***

The virtually hegemonic impact of the Downsian median-voter model may dissuade us from thinking adequately about the institutional effects of electoral systems. Two distinct models of *electoral responsiveness* are discussed, depending on the presence of SMD (single member district) or MMD (multi-member district) electoral systems. While the median voter model explains competitive electoral behavior well in the SMD case, it fails to understand the effects of MMD. The model proposed herein has the advantage of conceptualizing why MMD-based electoral systems—in particular in conjunction with parliamentary and unicameral institutional features—provide broader and more responsive representation. By maximizing median voter correspondence, SMD-based electoral systems narrow voter representation and diminish electoral system responsiveness. By maximizing flexibility in the party spectrum, MMD-based systems provide greater representative breadth and are more adaptable to changing social, economic and environmental needs.

\*\*\*\*\* Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the 38<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Northeastern Political Science Association, Boston, Nov. 9-11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and the 4<sup>th</sup> ECPR General Conference, Pisa, Italy, Sept. 6-8<sup>th</sup>, 2007. I thank conference participants and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. I gratefully acknowledge the inspiration of Ronald Rogowski and George Tsebelis.

“We realized that the crucial swing group of voters will only put up with taxation and a socially active government if they are seeing the benefits as accruing to their own group, to the *middle class*, and that they will have little patience for a government that is seen to be working for others. If we were to start talking about redistribution and our benefits to disadvantaged groups, we would likely lose that voting coalition.” (my emphasis, Geoff Mulgan, New Labour Architect and Director of Policy for Tony Blair; “Tony Blair: Pushed out of the world he made”, *Globe and Mail*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

Recent work on the advantages and disadvantages of different electoral systems suggests the plurality, first-past-the-post model may do a better job representing the interests of the median voter due to the greater degree of *electoral responsiveness* such single-member district (SMD) systems provide (Rogowski and Kayser, 2002). Powell and co-authors, on the other hand, argue that political systems based on proportional representation (PR) and multi-member districts (MMD) are more responsive and do a better job producing median voter correspondence (see e.g. Powell, 2000; Powell and Vanberg, 2000; Powell and Huber, 1994). Rogowski and Kayser argue that, across a wide range of countries, the electoral responsiveness characteristic of SMD based political systems results in lower consumer purchasing prices. However, Gerring et al (2005) argue that—on a broad range of potentially relevant indicators of the *public interest*—MMD-based *unitary* systems provide superior governance.

Worlds apart in their claims about the effects of electoral systems, the above authors all assume electoral systems should maximize median voter correspondence. Letting go of this decidedly Downsian tradition, I argue that SMD and MMD-based electoral systems operate through very different mechanisms. SMD systems, by providing incentives for politicians to concentrate their attention on the *median voter*—under presidential elections, on the median voter in *competitive electoral districts*—produce powerful *centripetal*<sup>1</sup> tendencies: political decision-makers face incentives to focus their attention on a decisively narrow range of interests and political outcomes concentrated at the center or median of the voter spectrum. MMD systems—due to the relative ease of party entry along multiple points in the voter-party spectrum—produce powerful *centrifugal* tendencies: political decision-makers are pressured to focus their attention on a comparatively broad range of interests concentrated about the fringes of

---

<sup>1</sup> The notion of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies has been raised at different times in the literature on the institutional effects of political systems. The reader should be forewarned however that—for reasons that will become clear below—my use of this terminology is essentially the *reverse* of that typically found in the literature. For previous uses of this terminology, see Gerring et al (2005), Cox (1990), Sartori (1976) and Lijphart (1968).

individual political party voter spectrums. This incentive ultimately results in greater *breadth of representation* and more broadly based policy outcomes. While SMD-based political systems potentially maximize median voter correspondence, MMD-based systems maximize flexibility in the party spectrum and thus require attention to a significantly broad range of interests.

As such, there are two very different types of *electoral responsiveness*. SMD systems are more responsive to a small range of voters focused about the median voter.<sup>2</sup> Because of the ease of party replacement in MMD systems at any point in the ideological spectrum (*i.e.* not just the median), MMD systems are responsive to a broad range of voters. While MMD systems likely include the median voter, their explicit advantage lies in their removal of the obligation to cater to the interests of the median voter. Public policy outcomes are likely to reflect either the narrowly focused centripetal tendencies of SMD systems or the more broadly ranging centrifugal *contagion*-type effects produced by MMD systems. Ultimately, this paper challenges the conventional Downsian *median voter* wisdom that electoral systems should aim to maximize median voter correspondence.

Further centripetal and centrifugal effects of SMD and MMD systems are *conditioned* by other institutional features (e.g. presidentialism, parliamentarism, bi- and uni-cameralism, etc.). Each of these additional institutional features can be seen as having *complementary* or *confounding* effects on the initial effects of SMD and MMD systems. As argued below, parliamentarism and unicameralism have complementary effects on MMD-based electoral systems. Further, the now common distinction between *majoritarian* and *consensual* political systems is perhaps best understood in this context. *Majoritarian* institutional features are the result of the centripetal effects of maximizing median voter correspondence. *Consensual* institutions are the result of the centrifugal effects of MMD-based systems.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, *majoritarian* systems produce relatively narrow public policy output centered upon the median voter. *Consensual* systems on the other hand produce broad public policy output that—while potentially encompassing the median voter in—remains explicitly responsive to a broader range of public interests.

Rather than emphasize the significance of median voter correspondence, this approach emphasizes the importance of the range of electoral representativeness and policy formation motivated by the structure of institutional electoral incentives—in particular *electoral competition*. Though a considerable empirical literature suggests the representation of a broad range of interests is more readily achieved through such

---

<sup>2</sup> Powell (2000), Powell and Vanberg (2000) argue that while the incentive to focus on the median voter motivates the logic of electoral competition in SMD systems, the presence of 3<sup>rd</sup> parties often skews electoral outcomes, resulting in a low level of government—median voter correspondence. This phenomenon however does not affect the above model. In both cases—whether 3<sup>rd</sup> parties are present or not—SMD systems will have the effect of narrowing the field of representation. This happens because electoral competition in SMD systems is always over the median voter.

<sup>3</sup> This involves something of a re-definition of these terms. This definition preserves the sense of cooperation most authors attach in particular to the term “consensus” democracy. However, the political institutional features considered essential to consensus or majoritarian forms of democracy differs in the above analysis.

political institutions as MMD, parliamentary systems and unitary legislatures,<sup>4</sup> far more than a theory in search of supporting evidence this literature suggests an empirical finding in search of a more consistent theory. This contribution focuses on the question of theory with broad implications the existing theoretical and empirical literature on the institutional effects of political systems.

### ***Recent Variations on the Median Voter Theme***

While the model discussed below is deceptively simple, a broad range of literature remains focused on median voter models or pursues alternative but likewise problematic approaches. Much of this can perhaps be blamed on what scholars have made of the Downsian model (Downs, 1957). Arguably the greatest positive legacy of the Downsian tradition is the concept that political institutions—in particular electoral systems—structure incentives shaping the politicians’ actions and ultimately policy output. Campaign agendas, policy formulation and policy output are thought to depend on electoral system-based incentives to cater to the median voter.

Arguably the greatest negative legacy from the Downsian tradition is the view that the ideal policy outcome—irrespective of the electoral institution—is one focused on the interests of the *median voter*. This concept, especially considered in the context of the potential Left or Right skewness of government representation, may appear a sage and reasoned requirement. The potential for *electoral responsiveness* in MMD systems is created—not by the incentive to focus on the median voter—but rather the opposite, by their creation of the incentive to focus on a broad range of voter interests at all ends of the party political spectrum.

Nonetheless, the theoretical specification requiring median voter correspondence is common to the literature. Powell (2000), Powell and Vanberg (2000) and Powell and Huber (1994), for example, argue that consensual, MMD-based political systems are more likely to correspond with the interests of the median voter because they are more likely to lead to the formation of coalition governments that include at least one political party whose voter constituency includes the median voter. Due to its focus on median voter correspondence, this approach fails to pinpoint the mechanisms that narrow political representation under SMD systems and produce governments likely to diverge from a broad range of voter interests. Moreover this approach fails to recognize the explicit advantage of MMD systems, i.e. their ability to broaden representation well beyond the interests of the median voter due to the greater degree of flexibility and ease of party entry.

Gerring et al (2005) likewise provide an analysis that ultimately appears to rely on the concept of the median voter. PR-based unitary systems are likely to exhibit better governance because they arise “from institutions that pull towards the center” (2005: 580). The authors’ central argument about the benefits/disadvantages of centralized vs. decentralized (or dispersed) authority (separation of powers, bicameralism) again distracts attention from the mechanisms that create broad, representative policy output.

---

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Gerring et al, (2005), but also Swank (2002), Crepaz (1998, 1996), Birchfield and Crepaz (1998); Persson and Tabellini (2003), Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote (2001) and Garret (1998).

Thus, their approach is ultimately unable to explain the causal mechanisms by which these two types of political systems are so radically different in their outcomes.

In contrast to Gerring et al, I emphasize the “*centripetal*” effects of SMD based systems and the “*centrifugal*” effects of MMD based systems. Gerring et al’s concept of “*centralizing*” power in particular obscures what is advantageous about consensual MMD-based systems. Such systems are explicitly un- or de-centralized (i.e. *centrifugal*) in the sense that they do not have an explicit focus on the median voter or some other center. These authors further oversimplify the division of political systems into two separate models (centralized vs. decentralized) thereby missing much of the potential range of variation resulting from the conditional interactions of political institutions. As argued below, the *conditional* effects of additional institutional features either *complement* or *confound* the initial effects of SMD or MMD electoral systems.

Crepaz in particular understands the “*responsiveness*” of consensual MMD-based systems on the view that consensual systems are more “*encompassing*” and represent broader segments of the electorate. The breadth of representation of MMD-based systems is encouraged by the fact that government cabinets represent larger shares of the voting population than is the case for SMD systems (1998, 1996: 18). Due to the higher level of voter turnout and high vote-to-seat share correspondence in MMD-based systems, coalition (or supported minority) governments by definition tend to represent 50+1% or a much broader share of the voting population than governments elected by SMD. However, this model fails to comprehend the micro-mechanisms by which parties are compelled to respond to a comparatively broad segment of voter interests. Further, though less explicit, Crepaz’s approach too is ultimately based on the median voter model.

The approach of Persson and Tabellini (2003) and Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote (2001) is more compatible with the current approach. In particular, these authors argue that PR (or MMD) systems promote universal spending programs, while SMD systems create geographically targeted ones. By recognizing that SMD systems are likely to produce geographically based median voter policy output and MMD systems are likely to promote broader (i.e. universal) policy output, their approach gets at the point somewhat better than the more generalized median voter model. However, Persson and Tabellini point to *district size* as the explanatory variable. Due to the larger electoral districts present in MMD systems, these political systems will promote more broadly focused policy output. Smaller SMED electoral districts promote more narrow policy output.<sup>5</sup> These authors thus ignore the role of the flexibility of party systems as the key factor driving broader interest representation and policy output.

One recent approach diverges from the median voter model, developing a broad-based theory of institutional performance based on the number of *veto players* present in individual political systems (Tsebelis, 1995, 1999). The veto player argument has advantages in its parsimonious modeling of the principle factors explaining decisive policy output. Moreover, Tsebelis is sensitive to the notion that the relationship between the number of veto players and the quality of policy output is not necessarily linear.

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the greatest weakness in this model is of course that both presidential SMD systems—at least for presidential elections—and senate elections are based on comparatively large electoral districts.

While he points to the Italian example as one of too many veto players producing policy sclerosis, he likewise raises important questions about the advantages of having a highly streamlined political system with too few veto players (as in the British case).

Tsebelis' approach however likewise fails to distinguish variation in the effects of different institutional and party veto players. As argued above, certain institutions (SMD, presidentialism, bicameralism) are likely to have *centripetal* effects, while others are likely to have *centrifugal* effects (MMD, parliamentarism, unicameralism). Further, Tsebelis' (1995, 1999) model is linear or additive in the sense that each new institution or political party constitutes an additional veto player. In contrast, I argue that the effects electoral and institutional features are *conditional* upon the presence or absence of additional institutional features and can pull in contradictory directions. Tsebelis' argument however is useful for understanding the disadvantages of having both too many actors (e.g. too many political parties in the parliamentary model), as well as for understanding some of the problems produced by the interaction of institutional features.

### ***Electoral Responsiveness: Inconsistencies in the Conventional Wisdom***

The principal question addressed in this essay is which of these two electoral systems—SMD vs. MMD—is more responsive to the public interest. As argued above, conceptions of what drives “*electoral responsiveness*” are mired in over-simplified views of competition about the *median voter*, typically failing to consider alternatives. Thus, while the Downsian contribution elevates our understanding of electoral competition, it likewise blinds us to alternative conceptions of the broader dynamics of electoral and party systems.

Based on the observation that small shifts in voter behavior have large and significant impacts on party electoral fortunes, Rogowski and Kayser (2002) argue that SMD systems produce greater “*electoral responsiveness*”. *Winner-take-all* SMD-based electoral systems distribute seats to the plurality vote winner in an individual district. Since other parties are not compensated for votes received in that district—giving rise to what the literature commonly refers to as *wasted votes*—small shifts in voter behavior can produce significant windfalls for individual political parties. Iterated across electoral districts, this *mechanical mechanism* (Duverger, 1954) promotes what Lijphart (1984) has termed *manufactured majorities*—political parties that receive a majority of parliamentary seats, despite smaller shares of electoral votes.

Approaches emphasizing the systemic institutional effects of SMD—see e.g. Taagepera's (1986) *cube law* or Gelman and King (1994a)—typically focus on measures of *vote-to-seat share differentials*. In these measures, proportional MMD systems approach a one-to-one correspondence between vote and seat shares, while SMD-based systems have the opposite effect. MMD-based electoral systems typically diminish vote-to-seat share differentials. In fact, several features combine in MMD electoral systems to yield more proportional outcomes: the more proportional the MMD electoral formula used for translating votes into seats, the larger the district magnitude (number of seats per district) and the smaller the electoral threshold for denying representation, the smaller is the vote-to-seat share differential. Thus small shifts in voter behavior have relatively little effect on the electoral fortunes of individual parties.

Many argue that higher *vote-seat share differentials* are a measure of democratic health (Gelman and King, 1994a, 1994b; Ferejohn, 1977). Rogowski and Kayser (2002), for example, argue small swings in voting behavior about the median have great significance for final electoral outcomes. High *vote-to-seat share differentials* thus force candidates to be more attuned to the interests of the median voter, creating the foundation for high *electoral responsiveness*. Discussion of the degree of electoral responsiveness should be contrasted however with the extraordinary degree of electoral party seat-share stability in SMD-based political systems and the inverse degree of stability characterizing MMD-based systems. Very few US district-level elections, for example, are “competitive” in the sense that there is regular alternation in power (Patterson and Caldeira, 1987; Gelman and King, 1990, 1994a; Swain et al, 2000; Matland and Studlar, 2005: 90; Samples and Basham, 2002). Thus while *vote shares* may change from election to election, *seat shares* remain remarkably stable over time.

Swain et al (2000) note that in the U.S. House of Representatives—presumably the most susceptible to seat change due to the small size of electoral districts and smaller campaign funding requirements—the most common form of turnover is retirement. In general, turnover affects an extraordinarily small and historically declining number of House representatives. In the postwar period legislative turnover in the House due to general elections was typically well under 10% of available seats (Swain et al, 2000: Appendix). The US SMD system, for example, produces an extraordinary degree of incumbency advantage. Similar findings presumably emerge in the British case.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, significant changes in voting patterns are rare in SMD systems and are sometimes attributed either to broad scale historical shifts or realignments in voter behavior,<sup>7</sup> or to the infancy of SMD systems.<sup>8</sup>

The relative electoral stability of SMD systems could of course mean that politicians are more “responsive” to the public interest. Yet there is considerable evidence the degree of public dissatisfaction with politics and the political system is at an all-time high in these and other countries (see e.g. Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Samples and Basham, 2002). Moreover, performance on a range of indicators of interest to consumers and workers alike (growth, unemployment, inflation, and other social welfare indicators) has *not* been significantly better in SMD systems than elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, despite rising public discontent in a broad range of political systems, incumbency rates in the US have risen. Historically, the U.S. constitution was designed to reduce the power of “*faction*”—i.e. of smaller groups (or parties)—that could potentially sway voters in more radical directions, away from mainstream views.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the American political system was explicitly modeled to reduce responsiveness and to ensure government durability.

---

<sup>6</sup> Field (1994), for example, argues that electoral volatility in the British case is subdued and any increase in the 70’s remains within the margin of error of survey data.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Swain et al (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Gerring (2005) argues for example that across SMD systems, the newer, younger political systems exhibit higher levels of electoral volatility.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Swank (2002), Gerring et al (2005), Crepaz, (1998, 1996), Lake and Baum (2001), Persson and Tabellini (2003), Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote (2001), Garrett (1998).

<sup>10</sup> *Federalist Papers*, No. 10.

Models of *electoral responsiveness* based purely on *vote-to-seat share differentials* exhibit several deficiencies, failing to consider alternative factors equally related to electoral responsiveness—in particular the ease of new party entry. In fact, as mentioned above, the emergence of new parties in MMD systems is not even detected by and does not necessarily affect vote-to-seat share differentials. Thus *vote-to-seat share differential* indicators used as a proxy for electoral responsiveness introduce considerable measurement *bias*. A second deficiency relates to internal party turnover. Where turnover occurs as a result of party debate and renewal, vote-to-seat share differentials again fail to register important indicators of *electoral responsiveness*.<sup>11</sup>

One telling corollary of the logic of *vote-to-seat share differentials*: the larger is the *power effect* (or *manufactured majority effect*) of electoral rules, the smaller is the pivotal (or *swing*) voter constituency required to elect politicians. Since small shifts in voter behavior trigger big changes in electoral outcomes in SMD systems, politicians care primarily about a thin sliver of potential swing voters concentrated at the median of the broad voter spectrum.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this is true not only due to the vote-to-seat share bonus winning candidates receive in SMD systems, but also due to the markedly lower rates of electoral participation SMD systems motivate (Jackman and Miller, 1995; Jackman, 1987; Lijphart, 1997), and the much larger share of *wasted votes* such systems produce. Thus the fortunes of winning electoral candidates in SMD systems depend on a much smaller range of potential voters, thereby diminishing *electoral responsiveness*.

While vote-to-seat share differentials may heighten candidate attentiveness to some voter interests, two parallel effects need to be considered. For one, concerns about vote-to-seat share differentials focus attention primarily on the median voter—thereby *distracting* attention away from voters further from the median. For another, vote-to-seat share responsiveness raises the comparative advantage of creating incumbency advantages—whether these take the form of gerrymandering or other types of incumbency privileges (see e.g. Samples and Basham, 2002). In other words, the relative return on incumbency investments (targeted policy output, gerrymandering, corruption or the provision of rents) is greater (the potential payoff higher) where the power or manufactured majority effect is high. In this respect, high incumbency/low turnover and the declining competitiveness of SMD electoral districts is potentially an endogeneity effect of SMD systems.

Two alternative institutional features potentially reinforce *electoral responsiveness*. One is flexibility at the level of the party system created by the *ease of party entry*. In MMD systems, a potentially larger number of effective electoral parties results from more proportional mechanisms for translating votes into seats, lower threshold requirements for gaining seats, larger electoral districts (that make it possible to distribute seats more proportionally) and potentially higher electoral tiers (that

---

<sup>11</sup> Current variants of this measure (Gelman and King, 1994b; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Taagepera, 1986) all share the same basic problem that they only relate vote-to-seat shares. They say nothing therefore about the potential for changing party fortunes across time.

<sup>12</sup> There are similarities here with Bueno De Mesquita et al's (2001) concept of the "*selectorate*". Though the set of voters inhabiting the swing voter spectrum do not necessarily have hopes of becoming part of a political leader's administration, they may nonetheless obtain the direct benefits of policy output or political rents.

compensate parties for wasted or lost votes at lower tiers). “*Effective electoral thresholds*” (EETs)—i.e. the threshold vote share sufficient or necessary to gain a legislative seat in an individual electoral district—attempt to measure these broad system effects and thus provide one potential indicator.<sup>13</sup>

A second form of *electoral responsiveness* is the potential for internal party renewal. Though some propose other methods (e.g. term limits), the most efficient method of promoting internal party change may be through the *preferential* or *personal vote*. While political parties face strong incentives to reduce the potential for internal party change—in particular where this results from mechanisms outside the jurisdiction of party organizations—party turnover and change is potentially beneficial. Preference voting essentially provides individual voters an opportunity to influence the shape of the party list and thus ultimately to alter the internal structure of political parties. As a result, this may provide stronger incentives for political parties to be more immediately responsive to the interests of the electorate.

### *Effective Electoral Thresholds*

Lake and Baum (2001) argue the more *contestable* are political systems, the more likely rulers (authoritarian or democratic) will be obliged to respond to a broader range of public interests. Though these authors compare authoritarian and democratic systems, their general argument is easily broadened to the concept of SMD and MMD based electoral systems. Lower effective electoral thresholds reduce the potential costs of contesting elections (and/or leadership) and thus raise the degree of *contestability* of political systems.

Thus one appropriate measure of *electoral responsiveness* is potentially the role of *effective electoral thresholds* (EET) and their impact on the ease of party entry. Electoral thresholds are typically defined as the constitutionally defined share of votes required to win a seat (e.g. in Germany 5%, in Sweden 4%). *Effective electoral thresholds* differ from the legal threshold in that they attempt to estimate the share of the vote necessary and sufficient to win a seat in a given electoral district. The EET differs from the legal electoral threshold in that it is potentially also a function of electoral formulae, district magnitude (the number of seats up for grabs in an individual electoral district), legal electoral thresholds and the presence of higher tiers that attempt to correct for wasted votes at lower tiers.

Taagepera, for example, estimates the EET of individual electoral districts as a function of district magnitude ( $dm$ ):  $EET = [(.75)/(dm + 1)]$ . This formula however does not adequately account for the role of different electoral formulae, legal electoral thresholds or higher tiers. Adequate measures of EET’s are a matter of considerable

---

<sup>13</sup> Potential access to the public financing of political parties presumably also influences the degree of contestability of political systems and thereby facilitates the ease of entry of new political parties. Even though new parties do not automatically receive funding (most must achieve some threshold of voter support before public support is granted), the *potential* to receive funding provides strong incentives for party formation and the initial receipt of party funding certainly facilitates the survival of electorally successful new political parties. Thus political systems with public financing of political parties are also presumably more electorally responsive. A relevant indicator is developed in International IDEA (2003).

debate and controversy (see e.g. Ruiz-Rufino, 2007; Taagepera, 2002). SMD systems have very high EET's while MMD-based systems typically have far lower EET's but also exhibit substantially more variation from system to system.

EET's matter because they alter both the stakes and the incentives of electoral competition. As noted above, in SMD-based systems candidates only have incentives to focus on the interests of the median voter. SMD systems are “porous” toward the middle—i.e. the failure to focus on the median voter leads to the likely entry of new parties or gains by opposition parties in the middle of the ideological spectrum. MMD systems, however, are *porous* on the ends. The failure to consider the interests of groups on all fringes of an individual party's ideological spectrum leads to the entry of new parties or gains by opposition parties.

Put another way, assuming the range of party voter preferences can be accurately represented by a single-peaked, bell-shaped curve, candidates must care about the tails or extremes of the distribution. Thus, not only do candidates have to hang onto their core voters (centered about the median of party voters), they also have to consider potential losses or gains on the margins of the party voter spectrum. Thus the lower the effective electoral threshold—i.e. the more flexible is the party system—the greater the degree of competition over the margins is likely to be. Moreover, in the MMD context, number of issue-dimensions likewise affects the likely degree of competition over fringe party voters.<sup>14</sup> Even when political parties enter into coalition compromises with other political parties, the range of interests they are pressured to consider is far greater than under SMD-based systems. Of course, this does not guarantee that political parties will be responsive to voter interests. Nor does it guarantee they will be voted out of office if they fail to represent the interests of party voters. Other factors, such as the degree of transparency in political decision-making, the relative knowledge and awareness of voters or the degree of free and investigative journalism likewise play a role.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of the argument that *electoral responsiveness* is produced by the potential ease of party entry through low EET's stems from Europe's period of increasing electoral volatility beginning in the mid- to late 70's and 80's. This rise in voter volatility has been explained as a function of several factors: increasingly sectoral values, declining support for trade unions, declining role of party identification as well as declining party membership. Moreover, this rise in voter volatility paralleled a rise in voter discontent with the parties, politics and governments of the day.<sup>16</sup>

Germany provides a good example. Despite its “mixed-member” SMD-MMD electoral system, exceptionally proportional results are generated by the compensatory

---

<sup>14</sup> I deliberately leave open the question of what explains the number of issue dimensions, whether this is a function of political institutional features or of the number of important social cleavages structures.

<sup>15</sup> Serra (2006) argues that as the share of investigative journalism rises in individual political systems, political parties are more likely to choose candidates on the basis of primaries as opposed to elite-level control.

<sup>16</sup> Beginning with Rose and Urwin (1970), there is an extensive literature on this topic (see also Pedersen, 1979; Crewe and Denver, 1985; and most recently Mair, 1997).

distribution of a large number of 2<sup>nd</sup> tier seats.<sup>17</sup> For an extended period the concept of *Parteienverdrossenheit* (party weariness) suggested that many voters were discontent with the dominant role played by the two main parties. Together, the SPD and the CDU-CSU controlled the vast majority of parliamentary vote and seat shares. From the mid-80's however, the German party system was radically altered by the successive emergence of the *Greens*, then *Alliance '90* and most recently *Die Linke* next to the traditional established parties (SPD, CDU/CSU and the FDP). Instead of three major political parties, the German party system now sports five major political parties. Such transformations are unimaginable under the US electoral system.

Less anecdotal empirical evidence that electoral volatility or party system change is explicitly related to MMD-based electoral systems is nonetheless sparse. Studies by Bartolini and Mair (1990: 157) and Matland and Studlar (2004: 107) note that—apart from the role of new democracies—there is no significant variation in the degree of electoral volatility across SMD and MMD-based political systems. Matland and Studlar (2004) do find that MMD-systems lead to greater legislative (not per se “party”) turnover. Further, these authors find that *electoral volatility*—typically measured as change in the vote shares of individual parties from election to election—is positively and significantly related to turnover. More recently, Tavits (2006) found the emergence of new parties is more likely where barriers to entry are low.<sup>18</sup>

How well this argument holds at the more differentiated level of the EET requires testing. As Matland and Studlar indicate; “electoral volatility is expected to lead to greater turnover in majoritarian systems because of the power function effects” (2004: 107). However, due to the relative endogeneity effects of SMD systems, incumbency is likely to be higher in the short-term, though vote-to-seat share volatility may produce greater long-term seat share changes at particular key elections or historical junctures. This point is further supported by the above-noted observation that significant change in party seat shares in SMD systems appears to be driven by broad-scale historical or voter re-alignments, again presumably an endogeneity effect of SMD systems.

Thus, while potential *vote-to-seat share responsiveness* may be greater in SMD-based systems, MMD-based systems appear to produce more significant election to election alternation in seat ownership. Moreover, there is a considerable amount of *noise* in the data on SMD systems produced by vote-to-seat share differentials that nonetheless fail to result in changing seat shares. Of course, broad cross-sectional averages of electoral volatility across SMD and MMD systems merely ignore problems of this nature and fail to investigate whether—in the short term—the electoral volatility evident in SMD systems matters for seat shares. Higher election-to-election volatility as it relates to seat shares might potentially confirm the distinctiveness of MMD-systems and the importance of the ease of party entry.

*Conditional or contingent effects* of MMD and SMD-based electoral systems presumably also have a significant impact on the degree of electoral responsiveness.

---

<sup>17</sup> Germany sports equal shares of SMD and MMD seats. Votes “wasted” at the SMD level or compensated at the MMD level for all parties surpassing the legal 5% electoral threshold (or winning 3 SMD district seats).

<sup>18</sup> Lijphart has likewise illustrated that minor parties exhibit greater electoral success under MMD electoral systems (1994).

Given the closer one-to-one correspondence between vote-to-seat shares in MMD systems and the requirement of coalition or supported minority governments, there are two further advantageous outcomes. First, as just noted above, governments built on the foundations of MMD are representative of a broader voter constituency (Crepaz, 1998, 1996). Second, due to the ease of party entry in MMD systems, coalition or minority governments are strongly motivated to build coalition agreements representing the broad expanse of electoral constituent interests (not just those about the median). Finally, higher voter turnout in MMD systems likewise boosts both electoral responsiveness as well as representational breadth.

Finally, gerrymandering is a distinct threat in SMD-based systems, thereby reducing incentives to the mobilization of voter interests. MMD-based systems however further promote electoral responsiveness by creating incentives for candidates (or parties) to mobilize everywhere. All districts are essentially “competitive” because both turnout and vote shares have an immediate impact on the parliamentary fortunes of individual parties. This is not to say that MMD systems fully escape the *safe seat* problem. Closed party lists, dual listings and the accumulation of mandates all introduce this phenomenon to MMD systems. All in all however, in contrast to the relatively narrow and geographically concentrated local spectrum of interests promoted by SMD, MMD systems provide powerful incentives to make individual electoral districts more competitive.

In general, such factors as those enumerated above are likely to make MMD-based systems more broadly representative. MMD based political systems are more likely to deliver greater *representative breadth* and more “*universal*” policy output, while SMD based political systems are more likely to deliver narrow median voter and even geographically based policy output. In this sense, it seems appropriate to speak of the “*centrifugal*” pressures of MMD systems as opposed to their centripetal tendencies. MMD systems can be thought of as producing centrifugal pressures because their policy output necessarily requires the inclusion of a *broader range of interests*.

### *Preference Voting*

Though not always referred to as such, the purest form of *preference voting* is arguably found in SMD-based presidential political systems. By weakening the role of political parties, the division of executive and legislative power enhances the potential for *personalizing* the vote. Two features of the American SMD system, in fact, are often admired. For one, due to the *open primary* system, it is highly contestable at the electoral district level. Since party organizations do not control the choice of candidate, virtually any candidate can campaign on the democratic or republican ticket. For another, the combination of SMD, division of powers and weak party discipline is often thought to create conditions for strong local representation. In this sense, each election is simultaneously a local referendum on the shape and goals of the respective political parties. In this regard, US political parties are truly shaped from the bottom up.

Deliberately conflated here with the *personal vote*, *preference voting* is surprisingly common in MMD-based electoral systems.<sup>19</sup> Similar to the type of *internal* electoral referendum offered by US open primary systems, the institution of *preference voting* allows voters to provide personal preference rankings of party list candidates. Much pooh-poohed due to claims it promotes internal party factionalism and corruption,<sup>20</sup> more moderate versions of this feature thrive in a number of countries: Sweden, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and others. Preference voting affects the ease of candidate entry and thus has the potential to strengthen the degree of responsiveness of political parties to voter interests.

MMD-based electoral systems with preferential voting concentrate potential renewal both on the level of the party system (via MMD) and on the level of internal party candidates (via preference voting). By weakening the potential for internal party renewal, closed party lists limit flexibility to the level of the party system. While potentially reducing internal party fragmentation, closed lists likewise turns parties into more hierarchical organizations. Distinctly less palatable to the American liberal individualist tradition, closed party lists have likewise generated discontent in the European context. Green parties for example targeted the institution of hierarchical party control by introducing rotating mandates. The impact of such mandates however on the failed accrual, implementation and continuity of policy expertise led to their eventual dilution.

Though preference voting potentially introduces considerable flexibility into electoral and political systems, the empirical evidence noted above on the degree of incumbency in the US system ironically suggests the US political system is virtually static and uncontestable. Matland and Studlar likewise find the threat of intra-party competition (*preference voting*) lowers rates of legislative turnover (2004: 107). As these authors note, this finding is particularly surprising in the context of the so-called “*power function effects*” of SMD systems. Surprise over this empirical anomaly arises in part, however, from the way in which the preference vote is both conceptualized and operationalized. Focusing on the concept of the *personal vote*, Matland and Studlar view the ability to voice voter preference as driven by the ability of candidates to make electoral campaigns *personal* as opposed to *party-driven* events, arguing this is promoted by SMD-based electoral systems (2004: 97-8). Their conceptualization ignores both the relative *similarity* and *continuity* of preference voting across SMD and MMD-based systems, as well as the effects of presidential and parliamentary institutional incentives.

---

<sup>19</sup> Though there is a fascinating and growing literature on which institutional features of electoral systems favor the *personal vote* (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Persson, Tabellini and Trebbi, 2003), significantly less is known about why the *preference vote*—despite considerable cross-country variation—is adopted in the first place and thus why parties choose to abandon or loosen their control of candidate selection. Comparative work both on the range, type and effects of preference voting (see however Villodres, 2006) and explanations for why political parties might opt to allow preference voting represents a yawning gap in the literature.

<sup>20</sup> As suggested by the literature on preference voting in Italy and Japan (Golden and Chang, 2000; Boucek, 2002; Reed and Thies, 2001), politicians who depend on independent power bases and financial resources for legislative longevity are likely to build stronger ties to special interest groups and even to engage in more corrupt political practices (see also Carey and Shugart, 1995).

Party control of candidate selection (in SMD systems) or closed party lists (in MMD systems) are common in parliamentary systems precisely because without fixed terms of office, parties have strong incentives to exercise greater control over parliamentary legislative majorities (and thus government stability). Preference voting represents a threat both to internal party cohesion and thus to maintaining parliamentary legislative majorities. This fact may explain why particularly divisive forms of the preferential vote—in particular the ability to both rank and strike individual candidates from the list—have either been eliminated (e.g. Italy and Japan) or are less common than either closed party list systems or open list systems with more restrictive rules. Closed list systems which grant parties explicit control over the nomination of candidates and control of the political offices of government (e.g. the distribution of government portfolios) provide the means to control and discipline party members.

High incumbency/low turnover is thus presumably an endogeneity effect of individual institutional features. Whether through closed party lists in MMD-systems and or party control of candidate selection in SMD parliamentary systems, political parties face strong incentives to create internal party organizational rules that reinforce the position of incumbents.<sup>21</sup> In presidential systems with divided powers, strong party discipline is a potential liability when compromise and deal-making are required in order to pass legislation. Thus high incumbency/low turnover in presidential SMD systems is presumably more directly related to the role of legislators (than *per se* political parties). The higher potential threat produced by the vote-seat responsiveness of SMD and the typically weak structure of party organizations under presidentialism (and bicameralism) motivate politicians to embed political-institutional features that promote electoral district-level incumbency advantage. Such features range from successful local representation, to the provision of political rents to local and other interests, gerrymandering and other incumbency privileges (see e.g. Samples and Basham, 2002).

When and under what circumstances preference voting is likely to promote higher levels of electoral responsiveness is complex. Despite the frequently presumed advantage of local representation, under the US form of presidential government only certain representatives are likely to have any real power to represent local interests: i.e. when states (or districts) are potential swing states (or districts), or when the idiosyncratic composition of issue-coalitions on individual bills favors individual congressional representatives acting as swing voters. The overwhelming share of non-competitive districts in the US system however diminishes the potential role of local representation for the majority of electoral districts.

Moreover, as suggested above, there is likely to be significant *conditionality* (measurable an *interaction effect*) between preference voting and the presence of presidential or parliamentary systems. Preference voting in presidential SMD systems further weakens incentives to pursue party policy positions<sup>22</sup>—already significantly weakened by the institution of presidentialism and/or strong bicameralism. In the context

---

<sup>21</sup> In addition to closed party lists or the institution of party controlled candidate selection, a further example is the potential for “double listings”. In the German and other mixed-member systems, candidates can appear both on the party list and as candidates in single-member districts, thereby improving chances of re-election (Matland and Studlar, 2004: 96-7, 105).

<sup>22</sup> In many ways, this analysis recalls the work of Schattschneider (1950).

of weak political parties and divided power (i.e. under presidentialism and bicameralism), political power devolves in the US political system to presidential agendas (again typically built on median voter competition in the most important swing states and districts), or to powerful members of congress (for example those heading important committees or coming from states with large numbers of *Electoral College* votes), and/or to representatives from swing states (or districts) who happen to have coalition building power on individual issues.

While some argue the *dispersal of power* produces broad political and social compromise across a wide range of political actors in the US system, this ignores the geographic concentration of electoral competition and political power on swing state and district median voters. Moreover, institutions that divide power (e.g. bicameralism, presidentialism) potentially narrow public policy outcomes to a lowest common denominator encompassing cross-institutional compromises and the ad hoc interests of individual swing-voting representatives. Particularly problematic of course are the consequences of this type of system for the pursuit of more *cohesive* and broadly representative policy goals.

Thus the perceived advantages of preference voting and local representation in the US system depend on particular sets of circumstances and power constellations that only haphazardly and inconsistently result in the potential for strong local representation. In SMD systems, the incentive to mobilize around the median voter provides incentives for candidates to ignore voters further away from the median and in non-competitive districts. Candidates in the long run only have incentives to cater to those further from the median or in non-competitive districts when the ability to mobilize inactive voters is likely to have a disproportional impact on voting outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking, however, as predicted by the median voter model, mobilizing voters further from the median always harbors the intrinsic threat of losing voters clustered about the median. Thus the avenues for internal renewal of political parties and local representation may be more limited than sometimes thought.

These features of SMD, coupled with the fact that successful electoral challenges from 3<sup>rd</sup> party or independent candidates are minimized through SMD,<sup>24</sup> accentuate the degree of centripetal and geographic median voter effects and thus can have a particularly narrowing impact on *electoral responsiveness*—seen in the larger sense of representing the national public (or median voter) interest. This illustrates the concept that the multiplication of centripetal institutional features and their consequent interaction not only further narrows the potential range of public policy outcomes around the median voter, it likewise increases the potentially ad hoc character of policy outcomes (decreases the degree of cohesiveness)—in particular because such outcomes must encompass and endure compromises across multiple institutions and mandates.

Though often argued that MMD-systems providing absolute control to voters are divisive (as witnessed by the above-cited literature on Japan and Italy), the findings on Italy and Japan are potentially spurious. The levels of corruption and general system

---

<sup>23</sup> The phenomenon of low voter participation—in particular among voters on the Left—is well documented (see e.g. Lijphart, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Duverger's (1954) contribution on this point is arguably still the most significant and widely known.

dysfunction could be related to other factors such as the sheer number of political parties or the secret ballot in the Italian case. Where strong preference voting is dysfunctional, this may be a function of the relative degree of intra-party competition, similar to the effect of having too many political parties in excessively liberal MMD-systems (see below). On the other hand, excessive party control (with more limited potential for citizens or progressive party members to influence hierarchy and party policy) is presumably also not advantageous. Persson, Tabellini and Trebbi (2003), for example, find that corruption is more likely under closed list systems, while some degree of preference voting has a positive impact on levels of corruption.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, a combination of MMD and moderate levels of preference voting presumably provide greater levels of *electoral responsiveness*. In particular in MMD parliamentary and unicameral systems, we might expect the effects of preference voting to be the reverse of those in SMD-based systems. In this case, and perhaps where preference voting has a more moderate character (as opposed to absolute voter control over party lists), we might expect its impact to be similar to that of the ease of party entry in party systems. Preference voting should have a centrifugal and more inclusive impact both on party appeals and ultimately policy output. In this case, competition is shifted slightly from the level of the party system to the internal level of the political party itself.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the potential endogeneity of closed party lists in MMD-parliamentary systems, even where preference voting is not the rule, political parties have substantially less control over the extra-party margins of political competition. Since entry into the party system is far more contestable in MMD-systems, parties are only able to limit new party entry to the degree they are able to manipulate the size of the EET. Where preferential voting is the rule, both party and legislative flexibility are presumably higher in MMD systems.

In the context of SMD parliamentary (and unicameral or bicameral) systems, this mixture has somewhat contradictory implications. On the one hand, while political parties attempt to control candidate selection processes due to the incentives to maintain parliamentary majorities, the election of single candidates at the district level shifts considerable emphasis to the *personal vote*. The outcome is likely to create a distinct tension between national level party interests on the one hand and district level median voter interests on the other. Due to SMD, both levels are likely to focus on the median voter and thus exhibit centripetal tendencies. But there is still likely to be some conflict due to discrepancies between median voter interests at the national and district levels.

---

<sup>25</sup> These authors further find that small electoral districts and closed party lists are strong predictors of higher levels of political corruption. Further, there is comparatively little difference between the levels of corruption found in SMD and MMD-based systems. In the context of the argument developed above, this is presumably because of the incentives in each of the systems for building either strong individual or party-level incumbency into each of the two political systems.

<sup>26</sup> Private campaign finance systems that give more candidate control over the use of finances are presumably endogenous to presidential systems (since these weaken political parties and strengthen interests of individual politicians). Public-based campaign finance systems on the other hand are presumably endogenous to parliamentary systems because they strengthen interests in party discipline and organizational control. Preference voting is likely to strengthen interests in more liberal models of party and individual candidate campaign financing.

This situation again makes it possible for geographic median voter interests and policy output to interject themselves into the mix, though the parliamentary structure produces tensions pulling in the opposite direction (i.e. toward the national level median voter and related policy output).

### *Conditional Complementary and Contradictory Effects*

As argued above, the role of electoral institutions is mediated by additional political institutions. Moreover, it is possible to think about the role of additional political institutions in the same way as one thinks of the roles of SMD and MMD based systems. Presidentialism or parliamentarism, uni- or bicameralism, weak or strong party discipline and judicial independence or parliamentary supremacy for example may either complement or confound the effects of these two basic types of electoral system. The introduction of presidentialism or strong bicameralism, for example, further narrow the potential focus of public policy toward the median voter and reduce the potential range of policy choices likely to satisfy institutional actors.<sup>27</sup> Thus the impact of these two institutions is explicitly centripetal. The effect of weak party discipline or an independent judiciary is similar.

The multiplication of centripetal institutional features and their consequent interaction not only further narrows the potential range of public policy outcomes around the median voter, it likewise increases the potentially ad hoc character of policy outcomes (or decreases the degree of cohesiveness)—in particular because policy output must encompass and endure compromises across multiple institutions and mandates.<sup>28</sup> Parliamentarism and uni-cameralism, on the other hand, have opposite effects. They allow for breadth of representation since—under the key condition of MMD electoral systems—they reduce the necessity for compromise across institutions and permit the consideration of a greater range and breadth of policy options by removing the requirement of focusing attention on the median voter.

The effects of MMD and SMD systems can either be complemented or confounded by the introduction of additional political institutional features. For example, the introduction of bicameralism in the MMD parliamentary context should produce strong centripetal pressures in an otherwise strongly centrifugal institutional structure. A relevant example here is the *strong* bicameralism of the German political system. Though the MMD parliamentary setting produces strong centrifugal pressures, Germany's upper house (the *Bundesrat*) favors strong median voter pressures when the two houses are composed of different partisan majorities. One might likewise expect the SMD element of the German mixed-member electoral system to have a similar effect. MP's representing SMD districts are presumably more likely to promote constituency based

---

<sup>27</sup> The reasoning here can be likened to the concept of *winsets* and bears some resemblance to Tsebelis' (1999) veto player argument. As the number of institutional actors increases, the range and breadth of the potentially acceptable winsets diminishes. However, in contrast to Tsebelis, I distinguish between centripetal and centrifugal institutional features. This distinction has a decisive impact both on an understanding of how political parties behave in the parliamentary context and the likely focus/outcome of public policy.

<sup>28</sup> This analysis bears some resemblance to Birchfield and Crepez's discussion of collective vs. competitive veto points (1998: 181-2).

(thus geographically determined) median voter interests where these are relevant to national public policy output.<sup>29</sup>

Table I below provides an overly simplified illustration of the model outlined above. Though neglecting the effects of bi-, uni-cameralism and preference voting, it provides an overview of the conditional effects of different political institutions. Thus, for example, presidential systems with SMD-based electoral systems are have complementary and centripetal institutions that narrow the range of representation and concentrate policy on the median voter. Parliamentary systems with MMD-based electoral systems, on the other hand, are assumed to have complementary and centrifugal institutional features that effectively broaden the range of representation, permitting representational breadth. The last two cells assume institutional features in each type are essentially contradictory and produce confounding institutional effects.

**Table I: Conditional Centripetal and Centrifugal Effects**

	<b>SMD-based Electoral Systems</b>	<b>MMD-based Electoral Systems</b>
<b>Presidential Systems</b>	Centripetal	Centrifugal
<b>Parliamentary Systems</b>	Centrifugal	Centrifugal

*Too Many Cooks?*

At some indeterminate level, too many political parties appear to make it difficult for individual governments to generate effective policy output or substantive reform. Discussion of the potential importance of upper bounds or limits to the smooth functioning of MMD-based parliamentary systems appears in a broad range of literature (Powell, 2004; Roubini, 1991; Roubini and Sachs, 1989; Jackman, 1987; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Tsebelis, 1999; Warwick, 1992). In this general context, political systems

<sup>29</sup> A more interesting classification problem is posed by the British political system which combines SMD with the parliamentary structure. While the parliamentary model is certainly more centrifugal compared to the presidential model, SMD institutional features produce contradictory effects, again casting the focus of policy making about the median voter.

can presumably be both too centripetal (i.e. too focused on the median voter)—as well as too centrifugal (or consensual).<sup>30</sup> The resulting *U-shaped* hypothesis is based on the following predictions: as political systems move from centripetal to centrifugal, there may be an upper bound where overly centrifugal systems are likely have a fragmenting effect, leading ultimately to political immobilism (see also Tsebelis, 1995: 321). On the other hand, as political systems move from centrifugal to centripetal and—in particular—the centripetal effects of SMD are further fragmented by the effects of additional centripetal institutions, leading to the complete fragmentation of responsive representation.

### *Representational Breadth vs. Narrowing the Political Field? Effects on Public Policy*

The empirical question this paper addresses is which type of electoral and political system discussed above is more responsive to voter interests? Answering this question is complicated by a number of empirical and theoretical problems. For one, defining voter interests assumes both that we know and that voters know what they want. For another, in defining voter interests, one is immediately confronted by another problem. Voters rarely weigh their interests across competing sets of interests or clear cost-benefit calculations—something politicians are required to do when they attempt to prioritize public policy emphasis and balance the budget. Finally, clearly not *ALL* public interests can be represented by policy. At some point, conflicting interests must be resolved and balancing the budget again requires making cost conscious prioritizing decisions.

The most explicit outcome of SMD, presidentialism and bicameralism is the capacity of such institutional features, in particular in concert, to assist political actors in narrowing the field of representation and thus reducing the necessary breadth of policy output. This of course can have the explicit advantage of making it easier to reduce budgetary expenditure and adopt other measures that may have the effect of reducing prices. The reverse case can be said about MMD-based parliamentary and unicameral systems. Many argue these systems both represent a broader range of interests and thus either spend more on a broad range of welfare, healthcare, educational and other interests, or perform better with respect to employment and occasionally economic growth. In this respect, the *cost (benefit)* of SMD (MMD) systems can be measured in lower (higher) wages, lower (higher) welfare expenditure and higher (lower) levels of inequality.

The principal *advantage* of SMD then is presumably its ability to create what one might call a *safety margin* within which politicians can move more freely. One might define this safety margin as depending on the following features: the EET (and thus to a range of factors endogenous to EET's: electoral participation rates, an incumbency

---

<sup>30</sup> Despite the relatively persuasive evidence that a high effective number of political parties (or very low to non-existent electoral thresholds) spills over into dysfunctional forms of policy output and thus diminished electoral responsiveness, it is possible that the problems of the Italian, Japanese (and potentially other cases) can be explained on the basis of other institutional features. In the Italian case, for example, both the institution of preference voting and the practice of secret ballots in parliamentary voting go a long way to explaining the instability of Italian governments and the inability to undertake serious policy reforms (see Golden and Chang, 1990; Boucek, 2002; Della Sala, 1998).

coefficient,<sup>31</sup> a measure of party discipline and the share of “wasted votes”), knowledge/awareness of the average voter, the range and degree of preference voting (including presidential or parliamentary system interaction effects), the presence of closed party lists (though this last point accrues more to individual party members—in particular at the district level—than to the party as a whole), the presence of presidential vs. parliamentary systems and bi-cameralism vs. uni-cameralism.<sup>32</sup>

The broader the safety margin however, the more politicians can be “*less responsive*” to either voter *or* special interests (or both). In the US presidential and SMD-based system, such a model fits well perhaps with an historical and cultural ethos that has tended to focus on finding methods of shielding politicians and/or the political system from the role of more radical groups or factions and to some extent from special interests. This viewpoint is expressed on many levels. Historically, this view reinforced support for the separation of powers and the division of power and authority into multiple institutions and levels of representation (*Federalist Paper No. 10*) and was presumably intended to protect or shield political decision-makers from the whimsy of voters.<sup>33</sup> This viewpoint continues to be reflected in the common defense that SMD systems have the positive effect of removing the potential instability caused by the emergence of 3<sup>rd</sup> or extremist parties.<sup>34</sup>

In the modern day, this type of model is directed at protecting or shielding decision-makers from the role of special interests (as witnessed, e.g., by defenses of central bank independence, presidential authority, judicial independence, etc.). Thus many hypothesize that where MMD-based multi-party systems lead to higher prices, overspending, political rents (e.g. protectionism), or difficulties in reducing budget deficits (Park and Jensen, 2005; Rogowski and Kayser, 2002; Roubini, 1991; Roubini and Sachs, 1989), SMD systems are potentially a reasonable alternative.

The alternative hypothesis is that political systems dominated by small numbers of political parties, limited potential for entry into the party system and additional centripetal institutional features have the effect of limiting or making spending more restrictive in character. Such an analysis, for example, presumably helps us to explain why healthcare, educational and welfare policies in some countries are more *universal*, while in other countries government spending is available to the poor and is typically “*means-tested*” (see e.g. the well known typology outlined by Esping-Andersen, 1990).

---

<sup>31</sup> This should essentially be the inverse measure of the cube law. Thus manufactured majorities create rigidity, not flexibility, in that they depend on and require a much smaller and typically more coherent (based on the median voter) constituency for electoral survival.

<sup>32</sup> Both presidential and bicameral systems are likely to increase the size of the safety margin because they potentially confuse legislative responsibility and thus reduce the ability to enforce accountability.

<sup>33</sup> It is well known that the vote was originally only given to propertied individuals. Moreover, the Senate was initially not directly elected and the U.S. President was chosen by a body of specially chosen electors (the well known “electoral college”).

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Gladdish (1993). Rogowski (1987) argues this is not the case and Norris (2004: Ch.5) finds that parties of the Far Right perform equally well under MMD and SMD systems. There are of course many SMD systems that sport 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> parties. For example, the UK—in addition to the main parties (Labour and the Conservatives)—hosts a range of other political parties from the Liberal Democrats, to the Scottish and Welsh National Parties. For the most part however, such parties tend to be regionally concentrated.

Claims that public spending is lower in the US, taxation less progressive, or that the poor receive much less support seem well substantiated by the empirical literature (see e.g. Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote, 2001). And some even go to the extreme of arguing that the US incarcerates rather than employs (Western and Beckett, 1999; Lipset, 2000). While the majority of European healthcare systems provide universal care, by the latest American Bureau of the Census count, approximately 15.5% of the US population remains uninsured.

While some connect this problem in particular to low rates of voter turnout in SMD systems (see Lijphart, 1997), the emphasis herein is instead on the institutional incentives of electoral competition and political mobilization created (though not exclusively) by different types of electoral systems. While “not voting” is presumably almost equivalent to “not being represented”, in SMD systems political candidates themselves face diminishing incentives to mobilize voters, the further they lie from the median voter. Thus, from this paper’s perspective, the interesting question is what explains the *breadth* of distribution in cases where more universal public policy is in effect? Or, alternatively, why are U.S. or British policies more clearly focused on the middle class than the poor and other racial and minority groups?

### *Implications, Preliminary Conclusions*

The approach outlined above has a number of advantages over existing approaches to electoral and political institutions. For one, while the approach of many authors is linear in character (e.g. Tsebelis: the more veto players there are, the more policy becomes fragmented), this above approach is decidedly non-linear. The final outcome depends upon the conditional effects generated by the specific combination of institutions. As indicated by the above typology, the effects of each element discussed herein (MMD-SMD, preferential voting vs. party control of candidates, parliamentarism vs. presidentialism, uni- vs. bicameralism, etc.) are conditional upon the presence or absence of additional institutional features.

This model likewise has broad implications for the concept of *consensual systems*. Whereas in Lijphart’s terminology (and that of others), the US system is regarded as *consensual*, this approach argues that presidential systems—in particular those based on SMD—are likely to be both decisively majoritarian and narrowly focused about geographically dispersed median voter interests. This approach in fact suggests that it is potentially more reasonable to think of “*consensual*” institutions as those that have complementary centrifugal effects (MMD, parliamentarism, unicameralism and preference voting). Further, this model argues that political institutions such as SMD, presidentialism, bicameralism, even closed party lists) introduce specific forms of institutional insularity and ultimately have the effect of reducing electoral responsiveness.

The above analysis further helps us to understand why some of the proposals of previous authors for improving political systems may be destined to fail. For one, Schattschneider’s 1950 proposal for the US political system essentially focused on the creation of strong political parties with a higher degree of ideological cohesion and strong party discipline. This model however is clearly conditional upon the presence of other

features—in particular parliamentarism. For another Lijphart’s (1997) proposal to increase US electoral responsiveness by introducing compulsory voting (and perhaps an MMD-based electoral system) would presumably have little effect because it fails to address the fundamental problem of increasing electoral responsiveness by maximizing representational flexibility and breadth.

This paper thus provides a micro-foundation for understanding the potentially greater electoral responsiveness of MMD-based electoral systems and other related institutional features. In doing so, it provides an important counterweight to the overwhelming influence of Downsian median voter models. Both the *mechanisms* by which countries arrive at social choice and the specific nature of the public interest require further investigation. In particular, one must ask what the marginal returns to investing in different political systems are. The explicit advantages—social, political, economic and environmental—of MMD-based electoral and political systems thus require further enumeration and empirical testing. Such benefits potentially extend well beyond the range of findings related to lower levels of income inequality, higher levels of healthcare and welfare expenditure and lower levels of political violence to include a range of other and perhaps somewhat less well-known outcomes.

For one, MMD-based electoral systems appear to provide more even representation of the interests of different groups (through higher levels of income equality, more universal healthcare and welfare systems), potentially lower levels of incarceration, and more even gender representation (Norris, 2006; Matland, 2005). Lijphart has long argued that MMD-based electoral systems provide more stable governance under the conditions of ethnic fragmentation. For another, MMD-based electoral systems may ultimately provide higher levels of environmental protection. Though deeper empirical analysis is required, the US—with its strong two-party SMD-based electoral system—is among the worst performers in terms reducing levels of CO<sub>2</sub> or SO<sub>2</sub> emissions reductions.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the US performs worse than a significant number of European countries on a significant range of quality of life indicators including infant mortality and longevity.<sup>36</sup> MMD-based systems, in particular due to the greater potential for changing representation due to the ease of entry of new political parties may ultimately prove more flexible and adaptable to social, economic and political change.

This analysis likewise raises questions about the consequences of moving in the direction of larger political units. As many SMD-based electoral systems are used in large countries (e.g. the US, Australia), one must ask whether the creation of more supranational institutions (such as the EU and others) ultimately means a movement in the direction of more centripetal majoritarian-type systems? And if so, what does this ultimately mean for the quality and breadth of representation? As Dahl (1994) has argued, as political systems become larger they may improve their degree of efficiency with respect to some features (e.g. the free movement of goods, capital, labor, services and information), but they may likewise diminish their ability to adequately and effectively respond to a greater range of voter interests.

---

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. the data in Ellison (2006: Table IV, p.11).

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. data from the *World Health Organization*.

While Dahl's analysis does not consider the effects of variation in the types of electoral institutions (in particular SMD and MMD-based electoral systems) chosen at the domestic and more supranational levels, such an analysis necessarily begs the question both of how these types of electoral systems affect representation and of whether there is some endogenous mechanism by which larger political systems naturally turn toward more majoritarian SMD-type political systems. Finally, given the possibility that some level of supranational decision-making is potentially important for increasing the degree of *efficiency* of political, economic and social systems, this further raises compelling questions—in particular but not exclusively in the EU context—regarding *subsidiarity*, the efficient organization of political systems, the appropriate division of labor at national and supranational levels and the ability to create genuinely *responsive* representation.

***Bibliography:***

Alesina, Alberto, Edward Glaeser and Bruce Sacerdote (2001). "Why Doesn't the United States Have a European-Style Welfare State?" *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* No. 2.

Bartolini, Stefano and Peter Mair (1990). *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilization of European Electorates, 1885-1985*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Birchfield, Vicki and Markus M.L. Crepaz (1998). "The Impact of Constitutional Structures and Collective and Competitive Veto Points on Income Inequality in Industrialized Democracies", *European Journal of Political Research* 34(): 175-200.

Boucek, Françoise (2002). "The Structure and Dynamics of Intra-Party Politics in Europe", *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 3(3): 453-493.

Bueno De Mesquita, Bruce, James D. Morrow, Randolph Siverson and Alastair Smith (2001). "Political Competition and Economic Growth", *Journal of Democracy* 12(1): 58-72.

Carey, John M. and Matthew Soberg Shugart (1995). "Incentives to Cultivate a Personal Vote: a Rank Ordering of Electoral Formulas", *Electoral Studies* 14(4): 417-439.

Cox, Gary W. (1990). "Centripetal and Centrifugal Incentives in Electoral Systems", *American Journal of Political Science* 34(4): 903-935.

Crepaz, Markus M. L. (1998). "Inclusions Versus Exclusion: Political Institutions and Welfare Expenditures", *Comparative Politics* 30(1): 61-80.

Crepaz, Markus M. L. (1996). "Consensus Versus Majoritarian Democracy: Political Institutions and Their Impact on Macroeconomic Performance and Industrial Disputes", *Comparative Political Studies* 29(1): 4-26.

Crewe, Ivor and David Denver (1985). *Electoral Change in Western Democracies: Patterns and Sources of Electoral Volatility*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

Dahl, Robert A. (1994). "A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness vs. Citizen Participation", *Political Science Quarterly* 109(1): 23-34.

Della Sala, Vincent (1998). "The Italian Parliament: Chambers in a Crumbling House?" in Norton, Philip (ed.), *Parliaments and Governments in Western Europe*, London: Frank Cass: 73-96.

Downs, Anthony (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper.

Duverger, Maurice (1954). "The Number of Parties", in Duverger, Maurice, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, New York: Wiley: 217-228.

Ellison, David L. (2006). "Weighting the Politics of the Environment in the New Europe", Working Paper No. 169, Institute for World Economics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest.

Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990). *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ferejohn, John A. (1997). "On the Decline of Competition in Congressional Elections", *American Political Science Review* 71(1): 166-176.

Field, William H. (1994). "Electoral Volatility and the Structure of Competition: A Reassessment of Voting Patterns in Britain 1959-1992", *West European Politics* 17(4): 149-165.

Garrett, Geoffrey (1998). *Partisan Politics in the Global Economy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gelman, Andrew and Gary King (1994a). "Enhancing Democracy Through Legislative Redistricting", *American Political Science Review* 88(3): 541-559.

Gelman, Andrew and Gary King (1994b). "A Unified Method of Evaluating Electoral Systems and Redistricting Plans", *American Journal of Political Science* 38(2): 514-554.

Gelman, Andrew and Gary King (1990). "Estimating Incumbency Advantage without Bias", *American Journal of Political Science* 34(4): 1142-1164.

Gerring, John (2005). "Minor Parties in Plurality Electoral Systems", *Party Politics* 11(1): 79-107.

Gerring, John, Strom C. Thacker and Carola Moreno (2005). "Centripetal Democratic Governance: A General Theory and Global Inquiry", *American Political Science Review* 99(4): 567-581.

Gladdish, Ken (1993). "Choosing an Electoral System: The Primacy of the Particular", *Journal of Democracy* 4(1): 53-65.

Golden, Miriam and Eric Chang (2000). "Competitive Corruption: Factional Conflict and Political Corruption in Postwar Italy Christian Democracy", mimeo, UCLA.

International IDEA (2003). *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns*, Stockholm: International IDEA.

Jackman, Robert J. (1987). "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies", *American Political Science Review* 81(2): 405-424.

Jackman, Robert J. and Ross A. Miller (1995). "Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies", *Comparative Political Studies* 81(2): 405-424.

Lake, David A. and Matthew A. Baum (2001). "The Invisible Hand of Democracy: Political Control and the Provision of Public Services", *Comparative Political Studies* 34(6): 587-621.

Lijphart, Arend (1997). "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma", *American Political Science Review* 91(1): 1-14.

Lijphart, Arend (1984). *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lijphart, Arend (1968). "Typologies of Political Regimes", *Comparative Political Studies* 1(1): 3-44.

Lipset, Seymour Martin (2000). "Still the Exceptional Nation?" *Wilson Quarterly* (Winter).

Mair, Peter (1997). *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Matland, Richard E. (2005). "Enhancing Women's Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems", in Ballington, Julie and Azza Karam (eds.) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance: 93-111.

Matland, Richard E. and Donley T. Studlar (2004). "Determinants of Legislative Turnover: A Cross-National Analysis", *British Journal of Political Science* 34(1): 87-108.

Norris, Pippa (2004). *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Electoral Behavior*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, Pippa (2006). "The Impact of Electoral Reform on Women's Representation", *Acta Politica* 41(2): 197-213.

Park, Jong Hee and Nathan M. Jensen (2005). "Electoral Equilibrium and Electoral Politics: Multilevel Analysis of OECD Agricultural Support", mimeo.

Patterson, Samuel C. and Gregory A. Caldeira (1987). "Party Voting in the United States Congress", *British Journal of Political Science* 18(1): 111-131

Pedersen, Mogens N. (1979). "The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility", *European Journal of Political Research* 7(1): 1-26.

Persson, Torsten and Guido Tabellini (2004). "Constitutional Rules and Fiscal Policy Outcomes", *American Economic Review* 94(1): 25-45.

Persson, Torsten, Guido Tabellini and Francesco Trebbi (2003). "Electoral Rules and Corruption", *Journal of the European Economic Association* 1(4): 958-989.

Pharr, Susan J. and Robert D. Putnam (2000). *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Democracies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Powell, G. Bingham (2004). "The Chain of Responsiveness", *Journal of Democracy* 15(4): 91-105.

Powell, G. Bingham (2000). *Elections as Instruments of Democracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Powell, G. Bingham and Georg S. Vanberg (2000). "Election Laws, Disproportionality and Median Correspondence: Implications for Two Visions of Democracy" *British Journal of Political Science* 30: 383-411.

Powell, G. Bingham and John D. Huber (1994). "Congruence Between Citizens and Policymakers in Two Visions of Liberal Democracy", *World Politics* 46(?): 291-326.

Reed, S.R. and Michael F. Thies (2001). "The Causes of Electoral Reform in Japan", in Matthew S. Shugart and M.P. Wattenberg (eds.), *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems – The Best of Both Worlds?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rogowski, Ronald (1987). "Trade and the Variety of Democratic Institutions", *International Organization* 41(2): 203-223.

Rogowski, Ronald and Mark Andreas Kayser (2002). "Majoritarian Electoral Systems and Consumer Power: Price Level Evidence from the OECD Countries", *American Journal of Political Science* 46(3): 526-539.

Rose, Richard and D. Urwin (1970). "Persistence and Change in Western Party Systems Since 1945", *Political Studies* 18(3): 287-219.

Roubini, Nouriel (1991). "Economic and Political Determinants of Budget Deficits in Developing Countries", *Journal of International Money & Finance*, 10, Supplement: S49-S72.

Roubini, Nouriel and Sachs, Jeffrey D. (1989). "Political and Economic Determinants of Budget Deficits in the Industrial Democracies", *European Economic Review* 33(5): 903-938.

Ruiz-Rufino, Rubén (2007). "Aggregated Threshold Functions or How to Measure the Performance of the Electoral System", *Electoral Studies* 26(2): 492-502.

Samples, John and Patrick Basham (2002). "Election 2002 and the Problems of American Democracy", *Policy Analysis* (451): 1-19.

Sartori, Giovanni (1976). *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schattschneider (1950). "The Need for Greater Party Responsibility", *American Political Science Review* 44(3, Part 2 supplement): 15-36.

Serra, Gilles (2006). "Primary Elections vs. Smoke-filled Rooms: A Theory of Party Democratization in Latin America", prepared for the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Northeastern Political Science Association, Boston, Nov. 9-11<sup>th</sup>.

Swain, John W., Stephen A. Borrelli, Brian C. Reed, and Sean F. Evans (2000). "A New Look at Turnover in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789-1998", *American Politics Quarterly* 28(4): 435-457.

Swank, Duane (2002). *Global Capital, Political Institutions, and Policy Change in Developed Welfare States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taagepera, Rein (1995). "Nationwide Threshold of Representation", *Electoral Studies* 21(3): 383-401.

Taagepera, Rein (1986). "Reformulating the Cube Law for Proportional Representation Elections", *American Political Science Review* 80(2): 489-504.

Taagepera, Rein and Matthew Soberg Shugart (1989). *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tavits, Margit (2006). "Party System Change: Testing a Model of New Party Entry", *Party Politics* 12(1): 99-119.

Tsebelis, George (1999). "Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies: An Empirical Analysis", *American Political Science Review* 93(3): 591-608.

Tsebelis, George (1995). "Decision-making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism and Multipartyism", *British Journal of Political Science* 25(): 289-325.

Villodres, Carmen Ortega (2006). "Preference Voting Systems and their Impact on the Personalization of Politics", unpublished manuscript, Universidad de Granada.

Warwick, Paul (1992). "Ideological Diversity and Government Survival in Western European Parliamentary Democracies", *Comparative Political Studies* 25(3): 332-361.

Western, Bruce and Katherine Beckett (1999). "How Unregulated is the U.S. Labor Market? The Penal System as a Labor Market Institution", *American Journal of Sociology* 104(4): 1030-1060.