

Electoral System Change in New Democracies

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My aim today is to identify the factors that contribute to electoral system change in new democracies, and in so doing to specify the ways in which values influence the choice of electoral institutions following transitions from authoritarian rule. The focus of my analysis will be on context, values, and choices.

I The political Context

Transition from authoritarian rule creates a unique situation in which a society comes together around a set of democratic values which feed into the electoral system design process.

There are two principal reasons for this: (1) democratic transition is a concrete embodiment of the principle of rule of law over rule of men, that is, putting values over individuals, and (2) it is accompanied with high levels of uncertainty, which make it difficult for individuals to identify their personal interests and to evaluate which electoral system would be most likely to serve those interests.

These two factors – the ‘moments of concentrated democracy’ and uncertainty – lead to a situation that is ideal for the promotions of value-based electoral system choice, because it is under these circumstances that values take precedence over personal interest.

II Which Values?

New democracies are mainly those that have recently emerged from authoritarian rule. In this context, citizens and politicians are keenly aware of what distinguishes democratic systems from non-democratic systems. First I will set out some of the key characteristics of authoritarianism before identifying the values of electoral democracy in a post-authoritarian setting.

The characteristics of authoritarianism:

Most modern authoritarian regimes hold elections, and they hold them under universal franchise (South Africa under Apartheid was a rare exception to this rule, as are states such as Saudi Arabia and China which do not hold elections for national assemblies (though they have both started experimenting with local elections)).

In authoritarian systems, politics is non-competitive (because coercion is used to stamp out challenges to the ruling political elite), and it tends to become personalised. This is true even in ideological regimes such as the USSR where personal networks were far more important than communist ideology in maintaining control over the state apparatus.

Democratisation therefore involves making the electoral process competitive and de-personalised. The principal mechanism through which this is carried out is the creation of a multi-party system, and fostering competitive multi-party politics is the main aim of electoral system design in many new democracies.

The values of democracy:

Table 1: Parties versus Individual Politicians

	Parties	Individual politicians
Object of choice	Party programme as ‘value package’	Individual as a lone voice or ‘wise judge’
Basis of competition	Pooled resources	Individual resources
Basis of accountability	Parties are judged on the basis of collective policy outputs	Individuals are judged on the basis of individual decisions

The establishment of a competitive multiparty system is the central feature of democratisation in most contemporary contexts.

Only political parties are able to put forward ‘value packages’. Individual politicians can at most only be ‘wise judges’, but they are lone voices and there therefore not likely to be in a position to deliver on policy commitments unless they are able to co-ordinate with other like-minded politicians, and the only effective way of doing this is by means of party formation.

Parties are also able to pool their resources in order to allow politicians from modest backgrounds to compete. When competition takes place among individual politicians, individual resources tend to be vital. For example, the United States has a party system that is far weaker than those of most established democracies, and it is not surprising that individuals in the US have to possess considerable personal wealth in order to contemplate a high-level political career. This is not the case where party systems are stronger, if the parties themselves are able to provide the resources necessary to contest elections, and they therefore have an interest in seeking out talented individuals where they can find them.

Parties enhance accountability: As much as individual politicians can never deliver policy on their own, their performance can only be judged in terms of the individual decisions they make when elected – in other words, votes in the assembly. Parties, on the other hand, can be evaluated in terms of collective policy outputs. It is clearly much more difficult for voters to evaluate the relevance of an individual vote; it is much easier to evaluate policy outputs.

In the post-authoritarian context where party systems are weak, it is generally seen as important to promote value packages over individuals.

This is especially true in that many new democracies are states where corruption is common, and the means individual politicians use to promote themselves are often illicit. The promotion of parties is therefore also a way of reducing electoral corruption and abuse.

At the same time and for the same reason, it is often important for voters to have control over the personnel choices parties make. For this reason an attractive type of electoral system is one that promotes competition by political parties as value packages, but at the same time gives voters a say in which politicians from each party are elected.

There are two principal means of generating this result: open-list proportional representation and mixed-member proportional representation. In both cases, the most important decisions voters make is which party – or ‘value package’- they would like to see elected, because in both cases the choice of party is that which determines the overall outcome. Voters also, however, have the ability under each of these systems to select the individual politicians best suited to delivering this ‘value package’.

III Which Electoral System Choices?

It is perhaps for this reason that most successful new democracies have adopted some form of proportional representation.

I will focus on two regions of the world – Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and Latin America – because these are both regions where the individual countries have significant similarities in terms of their political heritage (including electoral system traditions), and because they are both regions where here large numbers of states attempted transitions to democracy at approximately the same time – Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and Latin America at various points in the 1980s and 1990s. The similarities among countries within each region allow us to see more clearly the relevance of the electoral system choices that were made.

Eastern Europe is a good context in which to observe the process of electoral system choice, because all the states in this region started out with the same type of electoral system - SMD – and attempted transitions to democracy with varying degrees of success. It is therefore useful to compare their success at democratisation with their choices of electoral system.

At the time of the transitions from communism, proportional representation systems were favoured by democratic reformers, who wanted to promote multi-party politics. SMD systems were favoured by communists, who had a large number of well-know and experienced political figures among their ranks.

These two groups, reflecting different sets of values, bargained over outcome. In those states where the communists were still relatively strong and had significant bargaining power, the result was either the initial retention of the communist-era SMD system (Albania Belarus, Macedonia, Ukraine, and the five Central Asian republics of

Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), or the introduction of a mixed systems (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia, Yugoslavia, and the three Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). See Table 2.

Most of these mixed systems were of the parallel variety, which had not been widely used before its adoption in post-communist Europe. Azerbaijan subsequently reverted to an SMD system.

In those states where the opposition had the upper hand from the outset, list-PR was adopted. These include Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

Later, as the transitions advanced and the powers of the communists waned, the SMD systems in Albania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Tadjikistan and Ukraine were all replaced by mixed systems. Macedonia and Ukraine subsequently adopted list-PR systems, and the mixed systems in Bulgaria, Croatia, Russia and Yugoslavia (later to become Serbia and Montenegro) were replaced by list-PR systems, though like Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan later abolished the PR component of its electoral system and went back to a pure SMD system.

Points to note:

- The choice of a mixed electoral system at an early stage of electoral system development was partly the result of bargaining between communists and the democratic opposition; but they were also chosen partly because under conditions of uncertainty, mixed systems are an attractive means of hedging bets. (Those in Eastern Europe were mostly of the parallel variety).¹
- There is a clear relationship in this region between PR and democracy (see Table 3). Open lists PR systems are common among the most democratic states.

In Latin America, however, we see a different pattern. Like Eastern Europe, all the Latin American states had the same electoral system at the time of the transitions to democracy that took place in the 1980s, but in the Latin American case, they were all list-PR systems. (Cuba is the only country in the Latin American region to have had an SMD system throughout its recent history, but it has not yet made an attempted transition to democracy, so it will not be considered here).

¹ The only linked electoral systems in the region are those of Albania and Hungary, though neither is a traditional MMP system of the type used in Germany or New Zealand. Albania uses a single ballot in single-member districts. The party vote totals that result form the election of single-member district representatives are then used to distribute 'top-up' seats according to a proportional formula. The complex three-tier two-round Hungarian system is 'anti-compensatory', in the sense that it provides a bonus to large parties.

Democratisation has in the Latin American context been associated with a partial move toward mixed-member proportional electoral systems in certain countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia), in order to enhance the accountability of elected representatives. It is worth noting, however, that no state in Latin America has changed to an SMD system, and most of this region's countries have democratised under list-PR. See Table 4.

Despite the different cultural and political contexts and despite a different starting point in electoral system terms, we see the same pattern in Latin America as we saw in Eastern Europe. The states with open list PR electoral systems are most democratic, followed by those with closed list PR systems and then mixed systems. See Table 5.

I do not wish to speculate as to how much electoral systems promote democracy in these cases, and to what extent democratic countries choose more democratic electoral systems; evidence supporting both views has been presented by scholars, and it is likely that both views are right. But there is in any case a clear association between more democratic political arrangements and electoral systems that reflect multiple values by combining voting for individuals and parties, and in so doing deliver a proportional result.

Table 2: Electoral Systems in Post-Communist Europe and the Former Soviet Union

Country	Freedom House rating 2006	Initial post-transition electoral system	Electoral system 2006
Albania	Partly free	SMD	Mixed
Armenia	Partly free	Mixed	Mixed
Azerbaijan	Not free	Mixed	SMD
Belarus	Not free	SMD	SMD
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Partly free	PR	PR
Bulgaria	Free	Mixed	PR
Croatia	Free	Mixed	PR
Czech Republic	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Estonia	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Georgia	Partly free	Mixed	Mixed
Hungary	Free	Mixed	Mixed
Kazakhstan	Not free	SMD	Mixed
Kyrgyzstan	Partly free	SMD	SMD
Latvia	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Lithuania	Free	Mixed	Mixed
Macedonia	Partly free	SMD	PR
Moldova	Partly free	PR	PR
Montenegro	Free*	Mixed	PR
Poland	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Romania	Free	PR	PR
Russia	Not free	Mixed	PR
Serbia	Free*	Mixed	PR
Slovakia	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Slovenia	Free	PR (open lists)	PR (open lists)
Tadjikistan	Not free	SMD	Mixed
Turkmenistan	Not free	SMD	SMD
Ukraine	Free	SMD	PR
Uzbekistan	Not free	SMD	SMD

* Rating for Serbia and Montenegro before Montenegro gained independence.

Key: PR = list proportional representation (closed lists, unless otherwise indicated); SMD = single-member districts.

NB: In the ex-Soviet states, the first post-transition elections listed are those held after independence.

Table 3: Democracy and Electoral Systems in Post-Communist Europe and the Former Soviet Union (2006)

	'Free'	'Partly Free'	'Not Free'
PR systems – open list	6	0	0
PR systems – closed list	6	2	1
Mixed systems	2	3	2
SMD systems	0	1	4

Ratings of 'freedom' are taken from the Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2006*, available at www.freedomhouse.org. Freedom House data are commonly used to measure democracy.

Table 4: Electoral Systems in Latin America

Country	Freedom House Rating 2006	Electoral System 2006
Argentina	Free	PR
Bolivia	Partly free	Mixed
Brazil	Free	PR (open list)
Chile	Free	PR (open list)*
Colombia	Partly free	PR
Costa Rica	Free	PR
Ecuador	Partly free	PR (open list)
El Salvador	Free	PR
Guatemala	Partly free	PR
Honduras	Partly free	PR
Mexico	Free	Mixed
Nicaragua	Partly free	PR
Panama	Free	PR**
Paraguay	Partly free	PR
Peru	Free	PR (open list)
Uruguay	Free	PR (open list)
Venezuela	Partly free	Mixed

* Two-seat districts are used in Chile; this has the effect of reinforcing the two-party system.

** Though PR is employed in Panama, many of the districts are single-member, which renders the system effectively a semi-proportional one.

Table 5: Democracy and Electoral Systems in Latin America (2006)

	'Free'	'Partly Free'	'Not Free'
PR systems – open list	4	1	---
PR systems – closed list	4	5	---
Mixed systems	1	2	---
SMD systems	---	---	---

Ratings of 'freedom' are taken from the Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2006*, available at www.freedomhouse.org.