

Political Science 381: The Politics of Electoral Systems

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2:30-3:30
or by appointment

Course Description

It is impossible to appreciate the variety of electoral systems used to select legislative bodies without taking a comparative perspective. We will begin this course with a brief consideration of what goals political founders and reformers are pursuing when they design an electoral system. Then we will define the conceptual dimensions along which the incentives created by electoral rules can vary. With these basic concepts in hand we can then study specific national cases to assess the impact of electoral laws on party systems, legislator behavior, and interbranch relations. After completing a long series of case studies, we will return to a comparative perspective to discuss recent scholarly research in this field. Finally, we will conclude the semester by reconsidering the question of what founders and reformers can hope to achieve when selecting electoral systems.

Most fundamentally, you should think of electoral rules as formal institutions that incentivize certain behaviors. If voters, candidates, or members of parliament want to achieve certain outcomes, they must develop a strategy for making that outcome most likely. The strategy one chooses must take into account the rules. For example, how a voter who wants policy to move in a radically different direction should cast his vote will be affected by the rules regarding district magnitude (the number of seats awarded in each district). An incumbent candidate who wants to win reelection may vote very differently on which new laws should become law depending on whether her re-nomination is controlled by a handful of party leaders or by voters in a primary. Whether the executive has to compromise on the ideological content of his preferred bills in order to get legislative support for them will be affected by whom legislators run against in elections – just members of other parties or members of their own as well.

Electoral systems are made up of rules that govern a host of issues related to how elections work, including rules about how candidates get access to the ballot; the extent to which voters can *disturb* the ballot presented to them; to what level voters votes will be pooled before seats are awarded; how many votes each voter gets to cast and whether they can select individual candidates or just party banners; how seats are allocated within a district or tier once all the votes are counted; and whether certain thresholds must be met before a seat can be won. As we will discuss in great deal over the course of the semester, these rules have effects on *interparty* politics and *intraparty* politics. Aspects of intraparty politics we will explore include the relationship between supporters and party and the relationship between party leaders and rank-and-file politicians. Aspects of interparty politics we will explore include the the number of political parties that exist, their relative size, and their position in policy space.

Course Readings

- Reynolds, Andrew, Ben Reilly, and Andrew Ellis. 2005. *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Gallagher, Michael, and Paul Mitchell, eds. 2008. *The Politics of Electoral Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Course Requirements

Participation

Please plan to attend all class periods and to have completed the readings so that you can participate in a discussion. Every Friday you should send me a brief e-mail assessing your participation during the week. I will respond to your e-mail with my own assessment. Attendance and participation will account for 12.5% of your total grade.

If you have trouble knowing what you are supposed to “get from” the readings or trouble seeing a connection between the readings and what we are doing in class, please raise the issue immediately. The country-specific readings are very detailed, but I want you to focus on how to put each case into a larger, conceptual context. Each country’s electoral system is part of a larger family and each family has attributes that lead to generalizations regarding interparty and intraparty politics. It is these cause-and-effect relationships upon which I want you to focus. Remember, electoral systems are incentive structures for voters, candidates, sitting legislators, etc. We will be deducing hypotheses about how we expect these systems to influence behavior, and we will be looking at the empirical record to determine the extent to which our expectations hold. Some days I will spend a great deal of time summarizing the readings, but most days I will assume that you have done them and that we can use them as a common base of knowledge. Again, if it appears to you that there is a fundamental gap between your readings and our discussions, let’s talk about it sooner rather than later. Otherwise, I will expect your regular participation.

Class Presentation

Each of you will make a class presentation of approximately 1/2 hour. The presentation will cover the electoral system of a particular national case including an overview of its electoral system; the historical origins of that system; the political consequences of the electoral system for the party system, parties themselves, parliament, and the government; and any possibilities of electoral reform. Your oral presentation should be accompanied by slides outlining your topic, hard copies of which you distribute to your peers.

Part of your presentation should be devoted to summarizing the text, but I expect you to introduce new material as well. That new material should focus on the consequences of the electoral system for relationships among members of the same party, relationships between parties, and/or relationships between the legislature and the executive. You should make use of original empirical data and draw on previous scholarly work on a relevant topic. Please feel free to consult with me regarding your original subject matter and relevant extra readings. Your presentations will account for 12.5% of your total grade.

Quizzes

On a very regular basis we will have very brief quizzes regarding the day's readings and/or previous discussion. Questions formats include multiple choice; true/false; fill-in-the-blank; matching; short answer; etc. You are welcome to submit possible quiz questions. At the end of the semester, we will drop the scores of your worst quizzes (25% of them) and use your best quizzes (75% of them). The quizzes will be worth 25% of your total grade.

Research Paper

You will also write a major research paper. The paper will compare the electoral systems of three or more countries. Only one of those countries may be covered in the TPoES text. It will be evaluated on both its substance and on the quality of your writing. The paper should cover:

- the historical origins of the electoral systems and how they stand today;
- the political consequences of the electoral systems for the party systems and parties themselves;
- the political consequences of the electoral systems for the parliament and government;
- and any possibilities of electoral reform.

The paper will be done in installments (see the Course Schedule below). In the first installment you should cover their historical origins, how the systems stand today, and why these systems all fit together in one paper (your *hook*).

The second installment will include a revised version of the first installment (in response to my detailed comments) and add coverage of the consequences of the electoral systems for party systems and the parties themselves.

The third installment of the paper will include revised versions of the first and second installments and add coverage of the consequences of the electoral systems for parliament and government.

The final installment will include revised versions of the first three installments and conclude with possibilities of electoral reform, if relevant, or a more general conclusion about causal generalizations. A revised, complete draft of the paper will be due at the final exam.

Each of the first three installments will account for 10% of your grade, and the revised final version will account for 20% of your final grade. In other words, all installments of the paper combined account for 50% of your final grade.

A more detailed description of the paper assignment will be provided in a separate document.

Course Schedule

Tuesday, August 30: Course Overview

No Readings

Categorizing Electoral Systems

Thursday, September 1: Criteria for Electoral System Design

ESD pp. IX-15

TPoES pp. 20-23

Tuesday, September 6: Dimensions along which Systems Vary: Intraparty

ESD pp. 27-33

TPoES pp. 3-20

TPoES pp. 579-597

Thursday, September 8: Dimensions along which Systems Vary: Interparty

ESD pp. 27-33

TPoES pp. 3-20

TPoES pp. 579-597

Tuesday, September 13: The Politics of Electoral Systems (*Discuss Papers*)

TPoES pp. 3-20

Plurality/Majority Systems

Thursday, September 15: Plurality/Majority Systems

ESD pp. 35-56

Tuesday, September 20: Single-Member Constituency Systems I

TPoES: pp. 79-205 (selected)

Thursday, September 22: Single-Member Constituency Systems II

TPoES: pp. 79-205 (selected)

(*Student Presentations*)

List PR Systems

Tuesday, September 27: Proportional Representation Systems

ESD pp. 57-90

Thursday, September 29: CLPR Cases I

TPoES: pp. 333-394 (selected)

Tuesday, October 4: *PAPER INSTALLMENT I DUE*

Thursday, October 6: CLPR Cases II

TPoES: pp. 333-394 (selected)

(*Student Presentations*)

List PR Systems continued

Tuesday, October 11: OLPR Cases

TPoES: pp. 433-452, 473-490 (selected)

Thursday, October 13: FLPR Cases I

TPoES: pp. 397-432, 453-472, 491-510 (selected)

Tuesday, October 18: FLPR Cases II

TPoES: pp. 397-432, 453-472, 491-510 (selected)

(Student Presentations)

Thursday, October 20: STV Cases

TPoES: pp. 511-532

Mixed Systems

Tuesday, October 25: Mixed Systems

ESD pp. 90-112

Thursday, October 27: *PAPER INSTALLMENTS I & II DUE*

Tuesday, November 1: Mixed Cases I

TPoES: pp. 209-330 (selected)

Thursday, November 3: Mixed Cases II

TPoES: pp. 209-330 (selected)

(Student Presentations)

Consequences of Electoral Systems for the Policy-Making Process

Tuesday, November 8: Summary of TPoES

TPoES: pp. 543-563

Thursday, November 10: Impact on Intraparty Politics

TBA

Tuesday, November 15: Impact on Interparty Politics

TBA

Thursday, November 17: Impact on Interbranch Relations

TBA

Tuesday, November 22: *PAPER INSTALLMENTS I, II, & III DUE*

Changing the Rules of the Game

Tuesday, November 29: Electoral Reform: Theory

ESD: pp. 15-24

TPoES: pp. 57-76

TPoES: pp. 563-566

Thursday, December 1: Electoral Reform: Empirics

TBA

Tuesday, December 6: Which Electoral System Is Best?

TPoES: pp. 566-575

Thursday, December 8: Discuss Final Papers

No New Readings

Thursday, December 15: *PAPER INSTALLMENTS I, II, III, & IV DUE*