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The Limits of Electoral Reform

edited by
Shaun Bowler
and Todd Donovan

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

THE LIMITS OF ELECTORAL REFORM

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SHAUN BOWLER AND TODD DONOVAN

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2013

Impression: 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-969540-9

Printed in Great Britain by
the MPG Printgroup, UK

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank a number of people who—wittingly or not—helped the project in its various stages. Ian McAllister and Caroline Tolbert have generously supported us over the years in putting items on their surveys, as did Jack Vowles who put together the referendum project which informs much of chapter 2. We would like to thank our friends and colleagues for conversation and collaboration. These thanks not just owed to Caroline, Ian, and Jack but also—and notably—David Farrell, Martin Johnson, Jeff Karp, and Gary Segura. Without their broad and encouraging ideas on collegiality over the years this would have been a very different project. We also owe a debt of gratitude to our friend and colleague David Denmark who invited us to Perth where a version of this argument was first presented. Some of that work was subsequently published in the *Australian Journal of Political Science* in ‘The Limited Effects of Election Reforms on Efficacy and Engagement’ Volume 47, Issue 1, March 2012, pages 55–70 (<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cajp20/47/1>). Thank you to the editors of the journal and the publishers, Taylor and Francis, for granting permission to reprint that work. Thank you, too, to the editorial staff of OUP for their forbearance in helping this project reach publication. Thank you to Aisha, Carla, Emma, Kevin, Lizzy, Nicola, and, of course, Dominic Byatt for their help and professionalism as the project moved to publication. Thanks are also due to the series editors—David and Ken—for their encouragement and advice and to the (anonymous) reviewers who provided welcome and very useful feedback on the early version of this project.

Errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Last, and certainly by no means least, we would like to express a heartfelt thank you to our families for their patience and support—so thank you Deb, Fiona, Ian, Jadie, Jess, and Vee.

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The Promise and Politics of Electoral Reform

Electoral arrangements are frequently the subject of heated debate. When a new democracy begins plans for its initial election, some of the most contentious moments occur well before a party system has formed, before campaigns have been conducted, and before the first vote has been cast. Even in established democracies, decisions about how elections are conducted are often revisited. Electoral arrangements involve many decisions ranging from the large scale to the mundane: If single-member district, first past the post is chosen as an election system, what criteria are to be used to draw district boundaries? Who will draw district lines? Who has final say over approving the maps? How often will districts be redrawn? If proportional representation is used, what threshold for representation? In any system, how will campaigns be regulated? Where will polling places be located? Will voters be allowed to vote only in person, or by other means? How will voter rolls be managed? What identification will be required in order to vote? How long can representatives stay in office? What checks do voters have over elected officials? Answers to any of these questions can—at least at the margins—help shape who wins and who loses the election or, at least, how they win and lose. Examples of electoral reforms and reform movements aimed at changing electoral rules suggest that at least some people think that the answers to such questions do indeed matter. What is less clear is whether answers to such questions matter to citizens.

POLITICS OF ELECTORAL REFORM

Electoral rules are moving targets in most democracies—new or established. As we demonstrate below, electoral arrangements change frequently—perhaps more frequently than many students of elections and representation appreciate (but see Norris 1995). This book demonstrates that proposals for reform, or change, are common enough for us to observe several consistent features of the politics of changing electoral institutions.

First, proponents of changes to existing electoral arrangements regularly take on the mantle not just of ‘changers’ but of ‘reformers’. The difference in words

represents a subtle but meaningful distinction that implies not simply alteration but also improvement. For some, the title of reformer is self-selected. Perhaps more commonly, advocates of changes to existing election rules are simply referred to as reformers. Although the terms ‘reform’ and ‘electoral reform’ are used regularly in the academic literature, scholars of elections and representation have no clear consensus about the meaning of the terms. For Lijphart reform is equated with ‘electoral engineering’, in the sense that reforming and engineering share the same goals of incremental improvements to electoral rules (Lijphart 1990; 1994:9,139; Norris 2004). Lijphart notes that a less flattering term than engineering is manipulation, but argues that there are ‘moral constraints’ on how often rules can be manipulated for partisan advantage (Lijphart 1994:151). Constitutional reforms are also presented as means for improvement, tools that cure ‘weakness and inefficiency’ in a political system (Sundquist 1992:4).

There is a sense from this that ‘true’ reform must promise a progressive component, an advance over some status quo, and a sense of improvement.¹ Regardless of whether their motives are noble, and regardless of whether they have a sincere goal of strengthening democratic institutions, reformers—i.e. proponents of changing electoral rules—consistently argue that there are structural flaws to status quo arrangements and that the proposed reform represents an improvement, often along some normative dimension. What is clear, however, is that while reformers couch their arguments in terms of improving some normative attribute of elections, the underlying idea is an institutionalist one. For ‘real world’ reformers as for many political scientists, institutional arrangements provide incentives for politicians; if we change the institution, we change the preferences and so the behaviour of politicians and voters.

A second consistent feature of the politics of electoral reforms is that one person’s reform may be another person’s loss. Decisions about electoral rules are often a zero-sum political game, or conflicts over the design of what Tsebelis (1990) termed ‘re-distributive’ institutions. This conflict plays out between self-interested actors who are aware of how changes in rules affect their electoral prospects. Electoral rules of all sorts define winners and losers, and conflict over these proposals to change rules can be seen in terms of how one party or faction may benefit from the change while another may lose. Self-interested political elites are often keenly aware of this, and several treatments of the politics of electoral systems are built on the assumption that self-interested politicians view electoral rules as a means for maximizing their hold on power (e.g. Boix 1999; Colomer 2004). Sartori describes electoral systems as ‘the most specific manipulative

¹ See Richard Hofstadter (1955) for a comparison of the ‘ambiguous character’ of various American reform movements.

instrument of politics'.² Reform, from this perspective, is not simply another word for changing the rules but for changing the rules with the specific goal of maximizing partisan or factional advantages: any improvement or benefit would not be general but be concentrated on a specific subgroup and, possibly, a specific party.

As we noted, Lijphart observes that rules 'should not be changed for narrow partisan purposes', and that there are limits to how much elites can manipulate rules. This book is, in part, about the mechanics of some of those limits. Manipulation of rules, we suggest, may not be limited so much by moral constraints as by constraints imposed by popular opinion and opposing partisan interests. We identify the role of a public audience as a third feature of the politics of electoral reform. Some existing theories of electoral system change acknowledge that popular opinion conditions changes in electoral systems—reform may happen as a result of systemic failures, when election results are grossly out of synch with popular preferences (Renwick 2010; Shugart and Wattenberg 2003). We see the role of the public more broadly. Self-interested partisan elites are constrained by their need to mobilize popular support for the changes they propose. Despite the fact that all or nearly all electoral rules changes can have partisan consequences, aspiring reformers do not highlight the partisan stakes of their proposals to change rules. In an established democracy, many elite proposals for changes to electoral rules must be justified before the public. Even the most self-interested elites typically promise the public that their reform will have beneficial effects on politics and democratic processes. As with other matters that divide partisan elites, lofty political arguments are made to justify the proposed change. Grand promises are made about the effects of the reform. In response, rival elites adversely affected by the reform may not be willing to let the matter pass without mobilizing popular opposition. Citizens, we find, are capable of recognizing their partisan interest in debates over electoral reforms, and thus may support or oppose proposals that advance or hinder their party's electoral prospects.

This brings us to a fourth feature of the politics of electoral reform—heightened expectations. As we see in the chapters that follow, various reformers present their proposals in sweeping rhetorical terms in order to build popular support—changes in election rules, even rather minor changes, are promoted not only as having beneficial but transformative effects on citizens and politicians. Any political argument in support of changing the status quo is likely to criticize existing arrangements and argue that change will make things better. Yet political arguments for electoral reforms go well beyond saying that 'change is better'. We find numerous examples of electoral reforms where proponents said change would enhance how representation works, improve how politicians behave, and

² Quoted in Lijphart 1994:139. From Giovanni Sartori 1968. 'Political Development and Political Engineering' in J. Montgomery and A.O. Hirschman (eds) *Public Policy* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 273.

transform how citizens are engaged with democracy and elections. Expectations may not just be heightened but heightened to the point of being unrealistic. Furthermore, we find that different reformers promoting a wide array of institutional fixes use a common rhetoric. We also find common themes in the political arguments of reformers and in rational choice models of politics. Within those themes are arguments and assertions that label politicians as narrowly self-interested and, in addition, the themes may contain arguments outlining how different institutional arrangements provide different incentives that shape the behaviour of political actors. These arguments are ones that clearly resonate with an academic understanding of institutions within a rational choice framework.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL REFORMS

When rules changes are introduced or campaigned for, how should we assess the promises of electoral reforms? How much should we really expect from reform? One approach—and the one we take here—is to take reformers at their word and see if examples of electoral reforms really have had transformative effects on citizen engagement, participation, and trust. The yardsticks we use are ones which reformers themselves often use as part of their arguments for reform. Often they are also the same kinds of yardsticks by which the academic literature assesses the effects of electoral institutions. In fact we often see an overlap between the kinds of arguments made in the academic literature and by reformers: causal arguments about effects of institutions and changes in institutions are often very close to the surface in political arguments promoting electoral reform. In some ways it is surprising to see that both reformers and scholars of institutional effects share, at least implicitly, an analytical model of what institutions do, who they do it to, and why. Pro-reform arguments in particular often bear some similarities to the academic literature on institutions. Reformers who target electoral laws argue that citizens will respond to the institutional reform. The goals of many electoral reforms, at least as stated in the political arguments we examine, is to increase the scope of opportunities for citizen engagement in politics, to increase participation, to give citizens a greater ‘voice,’ to combat ‘special interests,’ to restore public confidence in democratic institutions, and to provide direct means for people to hold officials accountable. Academics, likewise, stress that electoral laws have political consequences as politicians respond to the incentives provided to them (e.g. Rae 1967; Grofman and Lijphart 1986; Lijphart 1990).

As examples, we note that legislative term limits advocates linked low voter participation to a lack of competitive races, and argued that turnout would increase due to the reform (Benjamin and Malbin 1992:276, 279). Similar assumptions about institutions exist in the academic literature on district-level electoral

competition and voter turnout (Cox and Munger 1989; Aldrich 1993). Likewise, advocates of PR (e.g. Amy 1994) link its use to increased voter engagement and mobilization. Similar assumptions about voter mobilization exist in the academic literature on the effects of electoral systems on voter turnout (see Blais 2006 for a review). Scholars of elections also argue that reforms can improve regime support (Buchanan 2000) and reforms that produce ‘better candidates’ or greater partisan mobilization will also produce higher levels of political efficacy, more trust in government, and greater social solidarity (Rahn et al. 1999). Regardless of the hyperbole surrounding political arguments about how various reforms will increase electoral competition, efficacy, trust, or voter mobilization, the arguments occasionally echo claims and assumptions common in the political science literature.

The fifth feature of the politics of electoral reform that we identify is that of limited effects. In the chapters that follow, we put some of the claims of reformers (and claims from academic political science) to the test. We examine whether various electoral reforms produced the changes that reform advocates promised. Our assessment demonstrates that expectations about the effects of electoral reforms are generally not met. Proponents of reforms may offer inflated expectations about the beneficial effects of particular reforms. In fact, this is one of the major points of this project: for all the discussion of institutional engineering and manipulation and all the effort involved, institutional changes may not actually change very much.

This disappointment in reform is somewhat surprising given the claims made by reformers. Yet the claims of reform advocates’ arguments are not the only reason why we should expect effects. For example, a large body of scholarly work demonstrates that PR nations have higher turnout and greater voter efficacy. Academics and reformers share the view that institutions have consequences and, hence, changing (reforming) institutions should produce effects.

With examples of electoral system change being quite rare, scholars have few opportunities to track political behaviour before and after such reform in the place where it occurred. Absent those opportunities, they attempt to make inferences from cross-national comparisons. For example, do nations using PR have higher turnout than nations using FPTP (Franklin 2004; Blais 2006)? Is corruption lower in nations using closed- or open-list PR (Chang and Golden 2007)? Is corruption lower in nations with plurality or PR rules (Birch 2007; Persson et al. 2003; Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman 2005)? There are numerous cross-jurisdictional quantitative studies assessing how differences in electoral arrangements correspond with variation in how people behave and how they are oriented to politics (e.g. Anderson and Guillory 1997; Bowler and Donovan 2002; Karp and Banducci 2008; Blais 2006).

Cross-national empirical demonstrations of institutional effects are important not simply because they help test claims made by reformers but they also tell us about how institutional arrangements in many nations correspond with

cross-national variation in attitudes and behaviour. But cross-sectional research designs may shed no light on what would happen if a major electoral rule was changed in one of those nations. The inference we are meant to draw from cross-sectional work is that a change from plurality to PR, or from open to closed lists, should *cause* changes in behaviour or attitudes.³ Little, however, is known about whether or not *changes* in rules that exist in a particular place can *cause* a change in political behaviour in that place. Much of our understanding of the potential effects of major election reforms is based on cross-sectional studies; fairly little comes from studying the effects of rules that change over time. The issue of endogeneity thus inhibits our understanding of how much of a substantive effect we might expect when any election reform is adopted. Finding limited effects of reforms such as PR in places where they were adopted may not establish that electoral reform has no effect but it does raise important methodological questions about how we should measure the effects of electoral institutions.

HOW OFTEN DO THE RULES CHANGE?

Assessing the effects of electoral rules changes over time, or across jurisdictions, requires that rules actually change with some frequency. The standard view is that rules are stable. Some of that stability in rules is partly definitional: institutions are stable and are often designed to be hard to change. Other elements of stability are structural: institutions are hard to change either because of other formal rules that impose hurdles or because institutions are sometimes embedded in constitutions which require a supermajority for changes. Change may also be hard to effect because electoral rules are typically controlled by incumbents who are likely motivated to maintain rules they were elected (won) under. In fact, it may be so difficult to accomplish change that actors may be deterred from even attempting to change institutions.

Given these kinds of hurdles, major electoral reforms are, not surprisingly, said to be relatively rare events in established democracies (Katz 1980:123; Nohén 1984:218; Norris 1995; Cox 1997:18; Renwick 2010). For Benoit, aside from the examples of France and Greece, ‘the norm in post-war Europe has been for electoral systems not to change’ (Benoit 2004:365). Katz, writing in 2005, noted

³ Of course, it is not clear what the time horizon is for how long it takes after the adoption of a new rule for behaviour to be affected. If some electoral rules create incentives for corrupt activity while others create incentives for monitoring such activity, and if corrupt activity is a learned behavior that is not readily ‘unlearned’, it may take a substantial amount of time (a generation?) for the effect of a rule change to occur. However, if a rule change affects party mobilization efforts, and citizens respond to mobilization efforts, we might expect a rule change to produce changed behaviour rather quickly.

TABLE 1.1 *Major electoral reforms in established democracies 1950–2010*

Finland 1994*	Direct election of president
France 1951	Mixed (from PR)
France 1958	Two ballot (from mixed)
France 1965	Direct election of president
France 1985	PR (from two ballot)
France 1986	Two ballot (from PR)
Israel 1992	Direct election or PM
Israel 2001	Repeal direct election of PM
Italy 1993	MMP (from PR)
Italy 2005	Bonus PR (from MMP)
Japan 1996	MMP (from SNTV)
Malta 1987	Modification of STV
New Zealand 1993	MMP (from FPTP)

* two elections

Sources: Katz 2005; Renwick 2010

that when established democracies were considered, since 1950 there were only twelve cases of ‘wholesale replacement of the electoral formula through which a strong president, or the chamber of parliament to which the national government is responsible, is elected’ (2005:58). The cases are listed in Table 1.1. Looking at Table 1.1, it would seem that our ability to study the politics of electoral reforms is limited to a handful of cases. At the very least, it suggests that a cross-national or cross-polity research design is the only practicable approach in such circumstances if we are to understand anything about the effects of electoral institutions.

But, perhaps, we have an incomplete view of institutional change. After all, at least among political elites, it seems reasonable to anticipate that political entrepreneurs on the losing side may constantly be on the lookout for opportunities to make changes and try to mobilize discontent in order to produce changes. Possibly, too, members of the winning group are interested in wanting a better or more permanent victory next time. It may also be the case that there are voices advocating change among interest groups, academics, think tanks, reform groups, and voters. There may also be many voices advocating for change, possibly even a constant background or chorus of advocates. Even if examples of successful change may be quite rare, examples of attempts at change are likely much more common.

A further reason for there being an overemphasis on the rarity of institutional change is that examples tend to be drawn from the national level. Studies of change in electoral institutions tend to focus on events such as the choice of electoral systems at the setting up of new constitutions such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, or to focus on dramatic changes in electoral institutions such as New Zealand’s. At the national level, then, we know changes such as these are likely to be quite rare. But that may not mean we do not see examples of change sub-nationally or regionally.

In some contrast to the idea that examples of institutional change are quite rare, the accounts of electoral rules change discussed in this chapter and throughout this book suggest that at least attempts at changing electoral institutions are quite common—even if many are unsuccessful. The list of major electoral reforms can grow much larger than those presented in Table 1.1 ‘if one takes a slightly more expansive view of electoral reform’ (Katz 2005:59) and one looks beyond long-standing democracies. Renwick identifies nearly sixty incidences of major electoral reforms in the 1990s alone (Renwick 2010:5; Colomer 2004). The list would grow even longer if one looks at the sub-national level in established democracies and when one considers changes other than just the macro-level electoral system.

Qvortrup (2011) identified sixty-nine cases of changes or attempted changes in national or state (sub-national) electoral formulas from 1980 to 2010. Forty-nine of these attempts were in independent nation states. If we assume that there were approximately 190 nations during this period,⁴ this suggests that one-quarter of the world’s independent nations had attempts at electoral system changes over a two-decade period. Many of these changes, however, were in nations that had only recently become independent, were just recently democratic, or were nominally democratic.⁵ Nonetheless, when electoral reform is considered this way, attempts at electoral formula change (e.g. from MMP to List PR, from FPTP to MMP, FPTP to List PR, etc.) are not such rare events. Despite the difficulties, attempts at institutional change would seem to be a fairly regular part of politics.

THE ROLE OF VOTERS

Just as existing literature may overstate the rarity of electoral system change, such literature may also implicitly understate the role of voters in change and attempts at change. In the cases identified by Qvortrup, just over 80 per cent of all the attempts at electoral formula change (national and sub-national), were successful. Table 1.2 demonstrates that these attempts at electoral system change were most likely to succeed where there was no requirement for voters to approve the proposal via a referendum. It also shows that reformers often need to convince or persuade voters to support their proposals: they do not receive a blank cheque from voters. Table 1.2 demonstrates that incumbents are much more constrained when it comes to changing electoral formulas if opponents have the opportunity to

⁴ As of 2010 there were approximately 203 independent nations. Thirty-four became independent since 1990.

⁵ In addition to those listed in Table 2.3, these include Afghanistan, Albania, Andorra, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, East Timor, Ecuador, Fiji, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liberia, Lithuania, Macedonia, (Qvortrup’s list omits Mexico), Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, etc.

TABLE 1.2 *Success rate For proposed changes in electoral formula 1980–2010*

Overall success rate	81.1% (n = 69)
Success when no requirement for popular approval	94.0% (n = 50)
Success when requirement for popular approval	47.3% (n = 19)

Source: Qvortrup 2011

block changes at a referendum. Voters—and elite attempts at convincing voters—may thus be a key element of electoral reform. In many US cities, states, Canadian provinces, and in several nations, the initiative process or referendum requirements also mean that voter support is often essential if change is to occur. Even within a single local US jurisdiction, voters may be regular players in accepting or rejecting changes to electoral rules.

ELECTORAL REFORM, BROADLY DEFINED

Changes are not just proposed—electoral rules do change with some regularity. But when are changes to rules ‘reforms’ as opposed to simply being changes? Do we need to identify improvements in order to distinguish between the two? As we noted above, one person’s reform may be another person’s loss. Change—especially with electoral rules—need not always make everyone better off and may often make some worse off. We therefore have an agnostic view of the difference between change and reform and will use the terms interchangeably. For our purposes an electoral reform is any change to status quo electoral arrangements. We do not confine ourselves to changes in electoral systems but consider changes in electoral rules as well. Scholars and politicians alike expect that a wide array of changes to electoral rules—including reapportionment schemes, redistricting plans, changes in the ways redistricting is done—can have profound effects on elections (Katz 2005:59). The same can be said about changing the technology and machinery used in voting (Ansolabehere and Stewart 2005). Changes to campaign finance rules, the adoption of term limits, the presence or absence of direct democracy are also expected to have major effects on public attitudes (Smith and Tolbert 2004; Buchanan 2000; Will 1992), on who wins elections, and on who gets what from government. Changes in electoral rules occur with greater frequency than changes to electoral systems and give us a wider range of examples to consider when looking for the effects of change (or reform).

Earlier we noted that a focus on the national level may, at least implicitly, reinforce the idea that changes in rules are quite rare. There is, in any event, no clearly established expectation of just how frequently we may expect to see

TABLE 1.3 *Attempts at changing rules in US cities 1996–2001*

	Attempts		Successful attempts
	N	N	As % of attempts
Change <i>from</i> at-large to ward or district elections	66	23	35
Change to a mixed system with some at-large and some ward or district elections	35	12	34
Change <i>the mix</i> between the number of council members elected at large and the number elected by district	21	9	43
<i>Increase</i> the number of members of the council or board	60	35	58
<i>Decrease</i> the number of members of the council or board	32	16	50
Change the method of election of the chief elected official	38	15	39
Total	252		
Total municipalities in sample	4244		

Source: ICMA Form of Government Survey 2001

institutions change beyond quite general statements that anticipate changes will be infrequent. A look at sub-national data gives us at least some basis for establishing the frequency of changes in rules. Table 1.3 presents information from the International City/County Management Association survey of 2001. This is a survey of US local governments conducted every five years⁶ that asked city officials if there were changes or proposed changes since 1996 to how representatives were elected (city-wide ‘at large’ or individual districts), if there were changes to the size of their local councils, or changes in how the chief executive official was elected. It is important to note these changes can have important consequences for how various groups—particularly racial and ethnic minorities—are represented (Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Guinier 1994). Table 1.3 describes the frequency of attempted reforms.

The 4,244 communities in the sample⁷ experienced around 250 attempted changes in election rules involving districting, council size, and the election of the local executive. Some of these represent multiple attempts within the same community over that five-year period, but these figures and ones from an earlier survey conducted in 1996 suggest that around 6–8 per cent of communities see attempts at consequential electoral rules changes in any ten-year period, with roughly one-third to one-half of these attempts succeeding.

Absent any precise guideline about expected frequency of reform, it is difficult to say with any conviction whether this level of change is ‘frequent’ or ‘infrequent’ or whether these represent ‘major’ or ‘minor’ reforms. What we can say is that attempts at institutional change occur fairly often, at least more often than assumptions about institutional stability might lead us to believe.

⁶ ICMA surveys all US jurisdictions over 2,500 population.

⁷ The survey was mailed to 7,867 cities; 4,244 (53.9 per cent) responded.

TABLE 1.4 *Popular votes on whether to have districted or at-large elections San Francisco, CA 1973–1996*

Date	Proposed election system	Pass/ Fail	Votes For %	How put on ballot	Turnout %
1973, Proposition F	Districts	Fail	35.5	Initiative	60
1976, Proposition T	Districts	Pass	52.4	Initiative	73
1977, Proposition A	At large	Fail	42.5	Initiative	53
1977, Proposition B	At large (reside in a district)	Fail	35.7	Initiative	53
1980, Proposition A (August)	At large	Pass	50.6	Initiative	35
1980, Proposition N (November)	Districts	Fail	48.4	Referendum	66
1987, Proposition P	Districts	Fail	43.9	Initiative	51
1996, Proposition G	Districts (+ runoff)	Pass	56.7	Referendum	40

Source: San Francisco Public Library; City & County of San Francisco Department of Elections <http://www.sfgov2.org/index.aspx?page=1670>

ELECTORAL REFORM AS A CONSTANT PROCESS

As a specific example of the recurring politics of electoral reform, we can point to the city of San Francisco. Between 1973 and 1996 city voters were asked eight times to decide whether city elections were going to be conducted ‘at large’⁸ or by districts—with most reform proposals promoted by citizen groups using the initiative process. Early advocates of districting promised that the reform would promote accountability and increase diversity of representation.⁹ In 1976, voters approved a change from at-large elections to elections by single member districts. In 1980, they voted to change back to at large. In 1996, they voted for elections by districts (again). Table 1.4 lists choices between districts and at-large elections that were put before the voters. This is a partial list choices voters made regarding the city’s electoral arrangements—it omits a 1972 proposal that had voters choose among five options on various combinations for a mix of at large and districting; a 1984 proposal to reduce the size of the council from eleven members, two term limits measures (1988 and 1990), and two proposals to adopt preferential voting (1996 and 2002).

Ordinary San Franciscans, then, were involved in a long series of attempts to change their system of elections and representation. The San Francisco case underscores two additional themes we examine in the chapters that follow:

⁸ ‘At-large’ representation means that the community is not divided into districts. Each representative (called Supervisor in San Francisco) is instead elected by all voters in the community.

⁹ Argument in favour of Proposition T, Nancy Walker, San Franciscans for District Elections. November 1976 San Francisco Voters Pamphlet.

1) the importance of self-interest as a criterion for judging proposed changes in electoral institutions; 2) the self-interested perspective is important, but it is not the only way voters see institutions. This last point is important because self-interested elites may well have preferences for changing electoral institutions but sometimes require popular support for those changes.

Institutional reforms often pit different coalitions of voters against each other in quite a direct way. In the case of San Francisco, for example, early proposals for moving to districted elections were supported by prominent Democrats (including then state legislators Willie Brown, John Burton, and George Moscone), geographically concentrated minority groups (Wirt 1974), neighbourhood groups, and some elements of organized labour (Crowfoot 2000; 1973 San Francisco Voters Pamphlet). Downtown business interests, the Chamber of Commerce, and most incumbent Supervisors elected under at large (including then Supervisor Diane Feinstein) supported at-large (city-wide) elections (Hartman 1984; Deleon 1992:23; 1973 Voters Pamphlet).

The campaigns in San Francisco over district versus at-large elections clearly identified the nature of the opposing coalitions, and each side decried the self-interest that motivated their rivals. Early campaigns in support of districts, for example, made explicit reference to the way in which business elites such as the Chamber of Commerce could dominate at-large elections because of their fundraising advantages when campaigning for city-wide elections. The districting reform would replace 'big money influence' with 'personal contact with voters'.¹⁰ Official arguments in favour of the districting reform also made explicit reference to the promise that district elections would promote greater minority representation. The coalition in favour of at-large elections, in contrast, argued that 'ethnic bosses' and 'ward leaders' would be given control under districted elections,¹¹ and that control of only three districts in each election would mean control of the city council by 'extreme' and 'divisive' groups. Opponents of the reform referred to the district representation as 'racial political ghettos where only large concentrations of minorities could elect their own—Blacks would only represent Blacks, Whites Whites, Latins Latins, etc.'. Incumbent Supervisors (previously elected at large) were more tactful in their argument against districted elections. They noted that 'the promise of increased political power for racial minorities... through districted elections is largely illusory and deceptive' because minorities voters would lose their ability to influence all eleven Supervisors. These opponents stressed the advantages to minority voters of electing people on the basis of 'representing everyone equally rather than representing their own'.

As for the second point, campaigners in San Francisco raised issues that were not completely related to the self-interest of competing factions, but that also

¹⁰ Official argument in favour of Proposition K, 1973.

¹¹ Official argument against Proposition K, 1973.

raised more abstract questions about the nature of representation and hinted that the reform would have transformative effects. Advocates of district elections stressed it would cause representatives to be more accountable than those elected at large because district representatives would know their area better and constituents would better know their representative. They also claimed district elections would ‘unify’ the city, provide ‘more democratic government’, and make San Francisco a ‘better city’.

Campaigners who supported at-large elections argued that district election would confine voters to having just one representative rather than being able to turn to any of the eleven Supervisors and that districts would limit the ability to advance cross-city projects. The 1970s era coalition in favour of at-large representation also argued that districts would mean higher taxes because of wasteful pork-barrel spending promoted by district-based representatives who would engage in log-rolling.¹² After rejecting districting initiatives in 1972 and 1973, voters approved the change to districts in 1976, with 52.4 per cent in favour.

After their initial defeat, defenders of at-large elections placed their own reform initiatives on the 1977 ballot asking voters to return to one of two versions of at-large elections. The *New York Times* noted differences between those who supported districts and those advocating for at-large elections centred on their views of the nature of government:

Those who support either or both propositions [to return to at-large elections] appear more conservative and more concerned with private property, taxes and crime. Those who oppose them tend to seek control of local government and advocate making it a more responsive instrument of change.¹³

Both of the 1977 initiatives were rejected.

One promise of the district election reform—that it would increase diversity on the Board of Supervisors—was met. In San Francisco’s first brief experiment with elections by district in November 1977, the city elected its first openly gay man (Harvey Milk), its first African-American woman (Ella Hill Hutch), its first Asian-American (Gordon Lau), and Dan White, a former police officer (Crowfoot 2000). White subsequently assassinated Milk and Mayor George Moscone in November 1978. The assassinations were likely a contributing factor in the at-large coalition’s ability to convince voters to ‘reunite San Francisco, pick up the pieces and put the City back together again’.¹⁴ In August 1980, voters narrowly approved an initiative proposing to reinstate at-large elections. Incumbent representatives who

¹² Official argument against Proposition K, 1973.

¹³ ‘San Francisco Votes Tomorrow On Hotly Contested Charter Issues’, Les Ledbetter *New York Times* 1 August 1977.

¹⁴ 1980 August ballot pamphlet. At-large advocates also noted that campaign costs had increased under district elections and that ‘totally incompetent Socialist radicals who violently opposed our free enterprise system’ were elected.

were elected by districts in 1977 then placed a referendum on the November 1980 ballot asking voters to reconsider and return to districts, but voters rejected their proposition. Voters were presented with two more proposals for district elections, and again approved districts in 1996. More than twenty years after the first campaigns for reforming San Francisco's elections with district-based representatives, reformers and their opponents were returning to many of the same themes about which interests would win or lose, about which election system is best for holding politicians accountable, and about how campaign costs could be reduced.

LESSONS FROM SAN FRANCISCO

The San Francisco case may strike some as narrow and uninteresting. But, as a case, San Francisco's experience illustrates several aspects of how we see the promise and politics of electoral reforms in general. First, it demonstrates that electoral arrangements may be stable but they are not static. Although electoral institutions are, by definition, a means to achieve stability, we see self-interested political actors regularly, almost constantly, attempting to change the rules—in the name of reforms aimed at improving things—in order to advance their electoral interests and to promote ideas about how elections and government should work.

The San Francisco case also highlights the implicit belief in institutionalist arguments that we find with other election reform proposals. Proponents of reform make claims about the effects of electoral institutions that can be found (obviously in far more rigorous terms) in academic economic and political science literature. For example, proponents of districting argued it would increase minority representation. We can find evidence of this in the pages of the *American Political Science Review* around the same period this was offered as a campaign argument in San Francisco (McDonald and Engstrom 1981). Opponents of districting countered that it would increase parochialism and pork-barrel politics. The academic literature also reflects these claims (e.g. Stratmann and Baur 2002; Lancaster and Patterson 1990). Likewise, San Francisco's 1970s era debate over the effects of districts on minority representation foreshadows an identical academic debate about trade-offs between descriptive and substantive representation and whether minority interests are better served with 'majority-minority districts' or majority white districts where minorities have 'influence' (e.g. Lublin 1999; Overby and Cosgrove 1996; Petrocik and Desposato 1998).

While we see self-interested political actors in San Francisco attempting to change rules in order to advance their electoral interests and promote ideas about how elections and government should work, we also see the important role of voters in affecting (or constraining) how electoral rules change. True, that role for voters is exaggerated by the part that the city's direct democracy processes—both

the referendum and initiative—play in the reform efforts. The San Francisco case may be somewhat limiting from a comparative perspective. In particular, the citizen initiative allows actors other than incumbent elected officials a chance to propose rule changes. But elected incumbents themselves, not voters or reform groups, placed some of the proposals in San Francisco on ballots. As we demonstrate in chapters that follow, incumbent elites regularly seek public consultation and popular support for their proposed rules changes—because of popular pressure to do so, because of pressure from opposing political parties, or constitutional requirements to do so, or due to some perceived need for a popular mandate that makes rules changes legitimate.¹⁵ In advanced democracies, even when referendums are not required to change electoral rules, incumbents must keep an eye toward re-election prospects being affected by the force of opinion mobilized by opposing parties. The need for popular support for proposed rules changes can even be seen among relatively powerful leaders who have nominal attachments to liberal democratic values. Hugo Chavez,¹⁶ Vladimir Putin,¹⁷ Alvaro Uribe,¹⁸ and others,¹⁹ including some who might have the capacity to achieve their electoral goals via coercion, media control, intimidation, or force nonetheless used, attempted to use, or benefited from, referendums designed to impart some semblance of legitimacy to electoral reforms.

The continuing process of electoral reform in San Francisco also highlights two other features of the politics of electoral reform that we examine in this book: the exaggerated promise of a political transformation and the failure to produce one. Minority representation did increase after adoption of districting, but racial and ethnic minorities won office prior to this, and continued to win at increased rates after the city returned to at-large elections. Indeed, given the frequent change in rules, combined with larger demographic and political changes in the city, it is difficult to attribute minority representation in San Francisco to either system of elections.

¹⁵ A partial list of reforms referred to voters by incumbents include regional devolution referendums in the UK (Scotland 1979, 1997; Wales 1979, 1997, 2011), the UK referendum on the electoral system (2011), Canadian referendum on electoral systems (British Columbia 2005, 2009; Ontario 2007; Prince Edward Island 2005); New Zealand (1993, 2011). Several more examples are listed in Table 3.1.

¹⁶ In 2007 Chavez sought, among many other things, to end limits on presidential terms, to extend the presidential election cycle to seven years, to lower the voting age, to regulate campaign finance and provide public financing for campaigns. In 2009 Chavez's government proposed a more streamlined proposal for removing term limits.

¹⁷ Putin benefited from a referendum placed before voters by Boris Yeltsin's government in 1993.

¹⁸ In 2010 Uribe attempted to have a referendum on a proposal to change Columbia's constitution to allow him a third term, but the referendum law was struck down by the Constitutional Court.

¹⁹ Evo Morales of Bolivia (2009), Rafael Correa of Ecuador (2009), Jose Manuel Zelaya of Honduras (2009), Adolph Hitler (1933, 1934, 1936, 1938), Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan (1995, 2011).

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Electoral reforms often prove disappointing. This book is an attempt to understand this problem by examining the logic used by proponents and opponents of various electoral reforms, and by assessing the role of the public in affecting how electoral rules change. We hope to develop a more realistic sense of what political reform can, and cannot, accomplish. We do not refute the argument that institutions have consequences but we show that there are limits to how consequential electoral institutions, or at least institutional change, may be. We are interested in the success or failure of various electoral reform efforts, not in whether or not a referendum or bill proposing a new electoral rule passes or fails. Rather, we consider whether or not changes in electoral rules—or the presence or absence of particular rules—produce some of the transformative effects promised by advocates of reform. Some of the effects we search for are promised not only by reformers, but are also found in academic literature on the effects of political institutions. The disappointment of electoral reform poses questions not just for reformers but for the academic understanding of institutions, too.

In Chapter 2, we examine how electoral institutions change, and develop the concept of electoral rules as redistributive institutions. We demonstrate that self-interested partisans regularly promote electoral reforms that advantage their party. The role of self-interest is a well-known feature, if not a well-established driver, of the politics of electoral reform. In this chapter we consider incumbent self-interest in terms of the uncertainty about the effects of rules changes, and in terms of elite need for citizen support. This latter aspect of electoral reform is often ignored, in part because of assumptions about voters as being too disinterested or too ignorant to be able to evaluate how electoral rules affect their political interests. We demonstrate that voters often come to support reforms that advance their partisan self-interest. Likewise, we find voters opposing reforms that disadvantage their self-interest. Citizens, we argue, are often directly and explicitly tied into the mechanics of changing electoral rules. This means that self-interested elites have a good deal of marketing to do when they make arguments in favour of or against proposals to change electoral arrangements. The need for popular approval, or at least the need for some tacit acquiescence on the part of the public, can limit elite options in seeking institutional changes.

Chapter 3 examines political arguments for and against a variety of electoral reforms. Partisan self-interests may be the primary force motivating elites who seek to change electoral rules, and voters respond to electoral rules in terms of self-interest. But voters also have values and process concerns that elites must address. These process and values concerns shape how elites make public arguments in favour of the reforms they propose. We summarize themes repeated in arguments for and against reforms by examining a wide range of examples: including efforts promoting the Alternate Vote in Britain, Single Transferable Voting in British

Columbia, Mixed Member Proportional in New Zealand, as well as arguments over a menu of electoral rules in California and other American states. We find elites using rhetorical appeals to citizens' values and process concerns. We suggest their political justifications for reform need to overstate their case with broad claims about the transformative effects of proposed reforms. Disappointment over electoral reform may result from pro-reform arguments that are often exaggerated and overly optimistic. Anti-reform arguments, in contrast, highlight the self-interested, partisan motives of reformers. This creates a dynamic of great expectations about the potential effects of reforms, and the possibility that reforms cannot meet the expectations that they create. One consequence of this repeated failure of expectations may, as we argue, help generate further voter disappointment with politicians and, possibly, a greater degree of cynicism. Reform politics, we argue, may be at the same time both self-fulfilling and self-defeating: disappointment with one set of reforms provides a rationale for a further round of reform attempts which also disappoint and lead to a further set of reform proposals. While this cycle may help generate more reforms, it likely does little to improve citizen engagement with politics.

In the next several chapters, we put some the reformers' expectations to the test. Reform arguments are political arguments, but they also share characteristics of academic research on the effects of institutions on behaviour and attitudes. In Chapter 4, we assess effects of changes in electoral rules. We argue that where possible, effects of a rule change should be considered across time where a rule has been changed, rather than cross-sectionally. Chapter 4 presents our assessment of the effects of adopting proportional representation. PR advocates, and extant empirical research, lead us to expect that the adoption of a more proportional electoral system should change the party system, increase turnout, and increase political efficacy. Evidence from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and other nations suggests that this broad promise of PR reforms may not have been met and that effects on citizens of adopting PR are rather limited. PR may affect party systems but we find little to suggest that its adoption affected turnout or voter efficacy. Indeed, voter engagement with electoral politics appears to have continued to decline after adoption of PR.

Chapter 5 applies the same method to examine the effects of adopting term limits in the United States. We find, again, that the promise of broad transformative effects of the reform was not met. Term limits may have affected how legislatures function, but we find no evidence that, as promised, they restored trust in elected officials or increased participation in elections. Indeed, public regard for legislators continued to decline after term limits were adopted. In Chapter 6, we look at campaign finance reform in the UK and US and test another set of reformers' promises. We see that a series of reforms, limits, and regulations has done little to slow the rate of campaign expenditures in the US and has done little or nothing to improve popular regard for, or trust in, politicians in either the US or

UK. Campaign finance rules have seen many changes, but these have little or nothing to do with popular regard for elected officials.

Chapter 7 examines the promise of direct democracy. As with PR and term limits, there is evidence suggesting that use of direct democracy may have important consequences—on public policy and, perhaps, voter turnout. However, scholars (citing cross-sectional evidence) and direct democracy advocates claim that experience with direct democracy has ‘educative effects’ that engage citizens, stimulate interest, and produce learning. We test for this by tracking the attitudes of citizen before, and after, the 2011 UK referendum on the electoral system. We find little evidence that use of direct democracy stimulated interest in or knowledge of the subject of the referendum.

In sum, when we look for effects of rules changes across time, and when we put reformers’ claims to test with cross-sectional data, we find that the effects of electoral reforms on citizens are not nearly as great as reform proponents or, even, scholars would lead us to expect. In the final chapter, we offer several reasons why changes in electoral rules should *not* affect citizen engagement with politics. We do not reject the argument that institutions have consequences but we argue that there are several major constraints to the effects of electoral institutions on citizens. One contribution of this book, then, is a partial corrective to an existing literature that makes overly robust assumptions about the effects of electoral institutions on behaviour.

Part of our argument is that electoral reform may, in the end, not do anything to satisfy voter discontent with politics and politicians. Electoral reform may be pursued and even accomplished and that may happen with the participation and approval of citizens. But the reform may not address the problems that voters care about. In Chapter 8, we discuss sources of voter discontent that may be beyond the reach of most electoral rules. As rules are changed to supposedly cure the disease of voter discontent, voters may likely not notice, or if expectations of reforms are set too high, they may be disappointed by reforms. Reformers’ appeals to citizens’ values and procedural concerns may well fall on deaf ears. That is, even if a reform does have some clear effects, they may not be the effects voters care about.

Institutional Change and Citizens

Institutions are, by definition, bundles of enduring rules and practices that bring stability to a political system. The fact that the bundles endure is an important one. Political institutions—legislatures, courts, electoral arrangements, and the like—may have difficulty functioning if the institutional rules that define them shift too frequently. It is also hard for institutions to acquire legitimacy if they change too readily. Institutions should therefore be hard to change—and even resistant to it. But this is not to say they cannot or do not change. Advocates of change constantly press for reform of election rules. Larger structural features of elections, such as electoral formula, the scope of the right to vote, the range of offices subject to election, the role of political parties in nominations, and mechanisms for financing elections, have been contested for decades. Even features of elections systems that might seem more technical and administrative—the physical layout of ballots, rules governing voter registration—also continue to be contested and continue to change.

ELECTORAL RULES AS REDISTRIBUTIVE INSTITUTIONS

One way of understanding what institutions do—and hence why these changes come about—derives from within the rational choice perspective. Political institutions do have normative dimensions that would seem to fit awkwardly with a rational choice approach. A discussion of who may participate in elections and under what circumstances quickly raises concerns over fairness, rights, and the definition of citizenship. In understanding the stability of political institutions and institutional change, however, the dominant intellectual framing is some version of self-interest couched in terms of the rational actor model (e.g. Boix 1999; Benoit 2004). Related to this, Tsebelis (1990) distinguishes between efficient and redistributive rules. Efficient rules tend to be ones that help solve coordination issues. Whether we stop at traffic signals on red and go on green, or stop on green and go on red does not really matter very much so long as we all do the same. Similarly, whether we drive on the left- or the right-hand side of the road or whether the convention is to tighten screws and nuts clockwise or anticlockwise

may not matter very much so long as we all do the same (see also North 1990). These established conventions make society function more efficiently, and make everyone better off.

Redistributive rules, by contrast, make winners and losers. Redistributive institutions—particularly electoral institutions—either ‘preserve the interests of the dominant coalition, or they create a new majority composed of the previous losers and some of the previous winners’ (Tsebelis 1990:111; see also Knight 1992). The category of redistributive institutions helps point up the dynamic of institutional change: the self-interest of relevant actors. In this book we are primarily concerned with rules relating to the system of elections and representation. Rules affecting who gets to vote, who gets to vote on what, how votes are translated into seats, how seats are allocated, who can serve in office, and many other matters offer especially clear examples of redistributive institutions. What might seem the most minor change to rules governing elections can often produce bitter partisan divisions when one side sees a proposed rule change as advantaging another side.

INCUMBENT SELF-INTEREST AND CHANGES IN ELECTORAL RULES

Theories of electoral system change thus place great emphasis on incumbent self-interest as a reason why electoral rules remain static. If institutions construct winners and losers, and losers under one set of rules want to become winners, electoral self-interest will be a source of demands for change. Given the incentives incumbents have for protecting themselves by defending or changing institutional arrangements only when it suits their interests (Prezworski 1991; Shepsle 2001; Boix 1999; Benoit 2004; Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006), we might assume that most reform in electoral rules reflects the interests of incumbents—or at least the interests of an influential incumbent faction—in some form or other. Since officials who hold office as a result of winning office under status quo rules largely control any change in electoral rules, we might expect reforms of electoral rules to be particularly difficult; especially if these rules threaten the interests of incumbents and the push for change occurs absent any force from a major social movement.

Many changes in electoral rules have been explained in terms of self-interested incumbents acting strategically—and at times pre-emptively—to change rules in anticipation of broader demographic trends that might work to their disadvantage (Rokkan 1970; Lijphart 1992; Shugart 1992; Geddes 1996; Bawn 1993; Brady and Mo 1992; Benoit 2004). Examples of incumbents attempting to act pre-emptively include the adoption of the Alternative Vote (AV) in Australia in 1918 (Farrell and McAllister 2005), and the adoption of AV in British Columbia in 1952

(Angus 1952a; 1952b; Jansen 2004). In both cases, right-of-centre governments worried that fragmentation of the right-of-centre vote across multiple parties would advantage a left party.

Boix (1999) develops a version of this argument in relation to a move to an electoral system of proportional representation.

...electoral systems derive from the decisions the ruling parties make to maximize their representation... As long as the electoral arena does not change and the current electoral regime benefits the ruling parties, the electoral system is not altered. As the electoral arena changes (due to the entry of new voters or a change in voters' preferences), the ruling parties modify the electoral system, depending on the emergence of new parties... When the new parties are strong, the old parties shift from plurality/majority to proportional representation if no old party enjoys a dominant position (Boix: 1999:609)

Ware (2002) develops a subtle version of this argument to explain the diffusion of the direct primary in the United States which he describes as '... a reform that had its origins in changes in American society that, by the 1880s, were starting to pose severe problems for party politicians' (Ware 2002:22). Although American politicians eventually came to regret many aspects of the primary system, it may originally have been intended as a device to retain party control over nomination processes.

Other—non-American—examples of incumbents changing a wide variety of electoral rules include the adoption of limited voting in UK parliamentary elections in 1867 (McMillan 1997), and various experiments with cumulative voting (CV). The adoption of CV in the Cape Colonies (Trapido 1964), Illinois (Dunn 1972), and Victorian England (Sutherland 1973; Bowler, Donovan and Farrell 1999) are similar examples where incumbents redesigned electoral rules in response to political circumstances that might have weakened incumbent influence were status quo rules to persist. Likewise, the Chifley Labour government moved to adopt STV for Australian federal senate contests in an attempt to limit Menzies' future electoral prospects (Farrell and McAllister 2005b). Electoral arrangements produced by the practice of redistricting legislative districts in the United States are seen by many scholars as reflecting either the self-interest of a majority party that attempts to maximize its own seat share, or as a bipartisan cartel arrangement designed to protect as many incumbents as possible (e.g. Cain 1985; McDonald 2004). Governments in France have also manipulated electoral rules to gain partisan advantages. In 1951 non-communist parties sought to end PR in order to reduce the influence of the French Communists. In 1986 Mitterrand's government switched from the two-ballot system to department-based list PR elections in order to reduce the left's anticipated electoral losses (Elgie 2005:120).

As we noted in Chapter 1, incumbents are often tempted to tinker with election rules—possibly to keep their status as incumbents—but they are also regularly

faced with attempts by others to change existing rules. Even modest changes are seen by partisans as having major consequences. In 2011 California Democratic governor Jerry Brown angered his Republican opponents by signing a bill written by a Democratic senator from Berkeley that required all voter-initiated laws to appear on the November general election ballot.

The bill was one part of a larger, enduring conflict over election rules. Previously, citizen initiatives appeared regularly on primary ballots in June or in November, depending on when signatures were submitted. Republicans favoured votes in June because lower turnout can produce a more conservative electorate. Republicans and their affiliates had hoped a 'paycheck protection' initiative they had recently qualified (to restrict a key source of Democratic campaign funds) would be set for the June 2012 ballot. Democrats favour November because higher turnout is expected to favour their interests.¹ Immediately after Brown signed the bill, Republican strategists were considering funding an effort to collect enough signatures to force a popular referendum to veto the initiative-scheduling bill that Brown signed. However, GOP funds were already tied up in another referendum petition effort designed to repeal legislative boundaries produced by the state's citizen redistricting commission.² The redistricting commission and its boundaries were the product of a citizen-initiated law that had previously been championed by former governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican (we return to this in Chapter 3).

That same year, 2011, some Republican legislators in Wisconsin, a state that had voted Democratic in the 2008 presidential election, were supporting a bill to award their state's presidential electors to the candidate winning specific congressional districts, rather than granting all the state's electors to the winner of the state-wide vote. Redistricting conducted in 2011 made more of Wisconsin's congressional districts safe for Republicans in 2012. Wisconsin was not unique. Republican legislators in Pennsylvania, another state Obama won in 2008, also proposed changing from winner-take-all allocation of electors based on the state-wide vote to awarding by electors by congressional district.³ Republican legislators in Nebraska, a state that was solidly GOP in the 2008 election, worked to change from allocating electors by congressional district to allocating by winner-take-all based on the state-wide vote. Nebraska awarded electors by district and Obama won the state's elector from the urban Omaha district in 2008. Republicans are not alone in trying to gain advantages in changing how electors are awarded. Democrats and liberal groups promoted an unsuccessful ballot measure in 2004 that would have changed how Colorado awarded its presidential electors.⁴

¹ <http://www.sacbee.com/2011/10/19/3988249/dan-walters-referendum-on-california.html>

² http://www.mercurynews.com/politics-government/ci_19172398

³ Bauer, Scott. 2011 'Proposal would change electoral college in Wisconsin.' Associated Press. October 12.vf

⁴ <http://archive.fairvote.org/articles/denverpost.htm>

When it comes to attempts at changing electoral rules, there is nothing particularly unusual about 2011, or about the United States. Examples from the US are numerous, in part, because direct democracy provides an avenue for reform efforts not found in many other places and in part because there are so many different units of government—almost 90,000.⁵ Yet that same year, incumbent and opposition partisans across the globe were also faced with decisions about when to call the next elections, about how electoral districts would be drawn, about apportionment issues, campaign finance rules, rules governing media coverage of elections, the release of pre-election polls, and the like. Between 2009 and 2011, voters in British Columbia, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand, and St Vincent & Grenadines were asked to weigh in on referendums about their electoral systems.

Explanations of institutional change that are grounded in, and motivated by, an account of elite self-interest work quite well. Explanations grounded in self-interest are theoretically coherent, intuitively appealing, and straightforward and are supported by empirical evidence. The reason these may be the most common explanation is that they seem to be largely correct. But the explanation of change brought about by self-interested elites is incomplete, in part because it omits citizens as relevant actors. Citizens can be important actors in many examples of institutional change. Citizens are most obviously and directly concerned when they get to vote on a proposal for electoral rules change via an initiative or referendum proposal.

INCUMBENT SELF-INTEREST MAY BE NECESSARY BUT IS NOT SUFFICIENT TO PRODUCE REFORM

In addition to incumbent self-interest, popular support often seems to underlie prominent examples of electoral reforms that have been proposed or adopted—even reforms that appear to run counter to some segment of the incumbents in power at the time. Many reforms are pushed by forces external to executives and legislatures. Social movements, mandates from courts, and voter-approved initiatives are three such forces external to executives and legislatures. Courts were instrumental in ordering the end to malapportionment of legislative districts that over-represented rural areas in the United States (*Baker v. Carr*; *Reynolds v. Sims*). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) allowed citizen groups to use the courts as a venue to challenge many state and local governments' districting practices that under-represented minority voters (Davidson and Grofman 1994). Despite

⁵ http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/state_local_govt_finances_employment/governmental_units.html

substantial opposition from (white) incumbent office holders, courts have used the VRA to order numerous local governments to abandon at-large local elections that, for decades, artificially over-represented the electoral influence of white voters (Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Bowler et al. 2003). US courts have also forced states to eliminate poll taxes, and rules that limited participation in primary elections to white voters. Even in these cases, the rules changes advantaged ‘one of the two competing factions of the dominant class’ (Tsebelis 1990:113) seeking access to the governing coalition.

There are also cases of major electoral reforms being adopted by incumbents that are difficult to place in terms of whether or not the reform furthered the interests of incumbents generally or the interests of some subset of challengers. Early adoption of women’s suffrage in Wyoming (1869), New Zealand (1893), South Australia (1894), Australia (1902), and several other American states seem to be cases where incumbents bent to the will of broad-based social movements arguing for change in the name of basic fairness.⁶ Expansion of suffrage in most of these cases occurred independent of external pressures on incumbents from courts or direct democracy. Early adoption of women’s suffrage is a case where electoral institutions were newer, and incumbent interests may have thus been less entrenched and easier to deflect. This ‘newness’ argument has also been made to explain the diffusion of reforms to judicial election methods (Hanssen 2004) and direct democracy in the United States (Goebel 2002; Lawrence et al. 2009; Bridges and Kousser 2011).

Adoption of the Voting Rights Act in the United States in the 1960s is another example of a major change that occurred in relation to a broad-based social movement. From the perspective of incumbent interests, it could be seen at the time as something that would further the electoral interests of the majority Democratic Party. But a purely self-interested explanation would need to make bold assumptions about incumbents’ ability to see into the future. We would have to assume Democrats could have safely expected that newly registered African-American voters in key states would remain loyal, long-term Democratic voters, and that this would produce a net gain to compensate for the loss of support from pro-segregationist, southern white voters who had previously voted Democratic.⁷

Unpopular election rules such as those in Japan and Italy in the 1990s, and rules that are seen by the public as being grossly unfair, can become difficult for incumbents to defend: a sustained defence of such rules might cost incumbents political capital. The potential costs to incumbents of resisting proposed reforms that are widely popular (campaign finance regulations, disclosure requirements,

⁶ Norway (1913), Denmark, and Iceland (1917) were also early in adopting women’s suffrage. The origins of the suffrage movement are sometimes attributed to 18th-century France, but full women’s suffrage in France was not completed until 1944. Quebec extended the suffrage in 1940.

⁷ Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson is reported to have stated to his press secretary Bill Moyers, ‘We have lost the south for a generation’ after signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

enforcement of voting rights, some forms of direct democracy) might appear too steep for many incumbents to ignore. Moreover, some incumbents might champion popular reforms in order to build their base of popular support.

Even rule changes that may have been motivated by the short-term gain of one party, such as adoption of STV for the Australian Senate, can be difficult to reduce to narrow partisan self-interest. Votes-to-seats distortions were so great under the pre-STV Senate electoral rules that even incumbents from parties advantaged by the bias would have been hard pressed to defend it. Menzies' Liberals who inherited the new STV system retained it, as did subsequent governments. Radical changes to presidential nomination rules in the United States after 1968 can be attributed as much to the need of party officials to respond to a crisis in public confidence resulting from the disastrous Democratic convention in Chicago (Polsby 1983) as to party elites protecting their interests by modifying status quo rules. The same thing might be said about adoption of the 'McCain-Feingold' campaign finance regulations (Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, or BCRA) in the US. Public contempt over party fundraising practices may have forced Congress to at least appear that it was responsive to public concerns.⁸

Furthermore, when self-interested incumbents attempt to repeal reforms they do not like—as the British Columbia government did shortly after adopting AV in the 1950s, and as several US state legislatures attempted after the initial adoption of direct democracy and term limits (Smith 2003)—if voters continue to signal support for the reforms, the capacity that self-interested incumbents have to control rules can be limited (Parry and Donovan 2008). At some point, public support for reforms (or outrage over status quo conditions) can reach a point that incumbents must adapt by embracing reforms or at least appearing to embrace reforms.

UNCERTAINTY AND ELECTORAL REFORM

Uncertainty also constrains how partisan self-interest can shape electoral reforms. Uncertainty about the effects of major reforms—and a general expectation that there will be unanticipated consequences—can make it difficult for politicians to predict the effects of reform (see e.g. Andrews and Jackman 2005). If politicians are risk averse then they may simply not be willing to engage in reform. As examples, Democrats and Republicans in the US were divided internally about whether various aspects of the BCRA campaign finance rules would advantage or disadvantage their respective parties. Uncertainty about the 2011 proposal to adopt

⁸ On widespread public dissatisfaction with campaign fundraising in the US during this period, see Bowler and Donovan 2004, pp. 152–4.

the Alternate Vote in the United Kingdom may also have muted the potential for Labour support. Liberal Democrats and some smaller parties may have seen a partisan advantage with the proposal. Prior to 2010, Liberal Democrats might have safely assumed that many Conservative and Labour voters would mark the Lib Dems as a second preference, and that the party would gain seats. Conservatives could see a partisan disadvantage, particularly if they assumed they would lose seats if few voters marked the Tories as a second preference. However, the potential partisan consequences of the reform were more muddled for Labour. For Labour there was near certainty that the Lib Dems would gain seats under AV, and uncertainty about which parties Lib Dem voters would mark as a second preference.⁹ AV thus presented uncertainty about what would happen if an increase in Lib Dem seats prevented Labour from winning future majorities.

Uncertainty means that incumbents can also get things wrong. Many US Democratic elites thought that the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA, or ‘motor voter’) adopted in 1993 allowing voter registration at public offices would bring Democrats electoral advantages. Republicans thought the same, and fought implementation of the rule. However, subsequent research suggests any effects of NVRA on turnout were at most very modest, and that it either produced no advantage for either party (Franklin and Grier 1997) or an advantage for Republicans rather than Democrats (Martinez and Hill 1999; Berinsky 2005).

Conservative incumbents in Canada got things spectacularly wrong when they changed from first past the post (FPTP) elections to AV in order to keep an ascendant social-democratic party out of power in 1952. Table 2.1 illustrates that the Liberal Party and Progressive Conservative Party coalition had large legislative

TABLE 2.1 *Uncertainty and electoral reform: seat share, British Columbia legislature before and after change to alternative vote*

	1941	1945	1949	1952	1953	1956
Liberal/Conservative coalition	n/a	77%	81%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Liberal Party	44%	n/a	n/a	12%	8%	4%
Conservative Party ¹	25%	n/a	n/a	8%	2%	0%
Co-operative Commonwealth Federation ²	29%	21%	15%	38%	29%	21%
Social Credit	n/a	0%	0%	40%	58%	81%
Others	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	

¹ Renamed as Progressive Conservative Party in 1951

² Became the BC New Democratic Party in 1961

Source: Elections BC

⁹ Survey research at the 2010 General Election demonstrated that in England, 66 per cent of Labour voters and 54 per cent of Conservatives would list Lib Dems as their second choice; 40 per cent of Lib Dems would list Labour second, and only 27 per cent would list Conservatives second (Sanders et al. 2010).

majorities prior to 1952. That year, the coalition partners changed the election system to AV, anticipating that each party's voters would mark the other party as their second preference. However, so many voters ended up marking the upstart Social Credit Party as a second preference that Social Credit was able to form a minority government with the Social Democrats as the opposition (Angus 1952a; 1952b). After the election system was changed back to FPTP, Social Credit dominated BC elections for the next thirty years. The social democratic Commonwealth Cooperative Federation (CCF, later the New Democratic Party) became the main opposition party, and the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives were relegated to 'third party' status in the province for decades.

None of this is meant to deny that politicians evaluate election rules in terms of narrow partisan self-interest, nor does it deny that strategic politicians can be quite successful in their assessment of rules and changes in rules. But, as we noted, politicians may face quite substantial uncertainty about mid- to long-run effects of reforms (Andrews and Jackman 2005; Remington and Smith 1996). Politicians may also not simply judge rules in terms of partisan self-interest but may also apply broader principles such as procedural fairness when considering proposals for reforms. Surveys of legislators reveal that, in addition to their electoral self-interest, ideals about democratic processes also condition how they evaluate proposals for changing electoral rules (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006). Although surveys of politicians find incumbents saying they evaluate election rules in terms of their personal values (such as promoting participation, fairness, openness), this research cannot determine if incumbents are being sincere. But even if their responses are politically motivated, these results suggest that incumbents at least feel the need to justify election rules in terms of normative goals that might resonate with the public.

PUBLIC OPINION AND CHANGES IN ELECTORAL RULES

If politicians look at election rules with an eye toward their partisan self-interest, and at least some awareness of broader normative concerns, then what about citizens? Do citizens approach things similarly? In the American setting, experience with the direct popular initiative suggests voters and incumbents may not always share the same goals when it comes to choosing electoral rules. The initiative is a venue that allows outside groups or a minority party an end-run around self-interested incumbents who might block new rules from emerging from a legislature.¹⁰ In a similar

¹⁰ This was one of the original justifications for the initiative process in the United States. See Cain and Miller 2001.

view, when referendums are required for approval of electoral reforms, elite political self-interest may be constrained by the force of popular opinion.

The American experience provides several examples of initiatives being used to challenge status quo electoral rules governing political parties (Bowler and Donovan 2006), to limit legislative tenure (Benjamin and Malbin 1992), to alter how a state's presidential electors are allocated (Karp 2007) and to take reapportionment authority away from state legislatures (Donovan 2011). These are rules changes that may be seen as running counter to the interests of elected representatives as a class. Many American state constitutions allow voters to propose initiative constitutional amendments independent of the legislature (Magleby 1984). Nearly every state that has adopted legislative term limits did so by citizen initiative, rather than by actions taken by legislative incumbents (Tolbert 1998).

The success of efforts to promote reforms by direct voter initiative does not mean that theories of institutional change stressing incumbent self-interest need to be thrown away. The standard account of elite self-interest goes a long way to explaining opposition to these kinds of anti-incumbent reforms. In the United States, for example, proposals to place limits on the length of legislative terms, although widely popular with the public (Donovan and Snipp 1994; Karp 1995), have been successfully resisted by incumbent legislators in states that lack the constitutional initiative device (Tolbert 1998). In addition, reforms such as term limits, equality in apportionment, and expanded voting rights advantage one of the two major political parties. This is the nature of electoral rules as redistributive institutions. Incumbent self-interest may not be a unitary interest, as incumbency includes government and opposition. Indeed, as we see in Chapter 3, incumbents themselves use initiatives and referendums to promote new electoral rules that further their partisan interests.

The citizen initiative process—although rare outside the United States and Switzerland—sheds light on the differences between citizens and politicians in terms of their preferences over electoral institutions. Pressure from the initiative process may have spread more rapid diffusion of campaign finance reforms in the states: reforms that a majority of legislators might otherwise have resisted (Pippen et al. 2002). Direct primary rules (Lawrence et al. 2011) and citizen-based commissions to draw legislative district boundaries (Donovan 2011) also appear to have diffused more rapidly in American states that had the initiative process. These examples demonstrate that election reforms we might expect governing incumbents to resist may eventually be adopted if citizens' preferences for institutions are given some force by the initiative device.

Yet, as noted earlier, direct primaries might have benefited the parties in power (Ware 2002) even if the reform diffused across the states via the initiative process. Elected representatives have been able to amend and weaken some voter-approved term limits (Parry and Donovan 2008), campaign finance reforms (Smith 2001), and many other citizen initiatives (Gerber et al. 2001). As much as advocates for women's suffrage hoped direct democracy would advance their cause early in the

20th century (Banaszak 1996; Piott 1992; 2004), in many initiative states legislators were instrumental in promoting suffrage, even as voters rejected ballot measures promoting the reform (Ellis 2002:240).¹¹

The citizen initiative example may be a rare case when we consider these matters from a cross-national perspective, but it does illustrate that our definition of winners and losers under electoral arrangements has a broader component than just the unitary interests of elected incumbents and established political parties. Incumbent elites' self-interest alone provides an inadequate explanation of when, and if, electoral reforms occur. Different incumbent factions have rival interests when it comes to rules that structure elections. Incumbents, moreover, may also need some level of popular support to change electoral rules, particularly when initiatives and referendums are involved. A faction of incumbents seeking advantages by changing status quo rules can find themselves aligned with proposals for reform that are popular—particularly among their political supporters. Explanations of the expansion of the franchise beyond the class of male property owners provide a classic example of this. As rudimentary party systems were taking root in new nation states in the 19th century, 'one of the two competing factions of the dominant class' (Tsebelis 1990:113) was 'often led to promote the enlargement of the electorate in order to be rewarded at the polls by the newly enfranchised' (Poggi 1978:124; Roth 1979).

Among incumbents, then, partisan divisions over matters of electoral rules are rather common. Contemporary debates about the future of compulsory voting in Australia reveal the differential interests of the ALP and the coalition, given that the practice appears to advantage the ALP (Mackerras and McAllister 1999). Partisan divisions are not just evident at the elite level. In the US, questions about how registration and voting procedures affect the composition of the electorate create regular divisions among party elites and their supporters in the public. Discussions about what may seem to be mundane regulatory matters, such as rules about which forms of identification can be required at polling places, can generate partisan divisions among elected officials and their supporters.

As an example from the US, Republican legislators have promoted increased regulations of voting, while Democrats have promoted rules making it easier for people to register and vote. Table 2.2 illustrates the partisan division in support for laws requiring photo identification for voting. Bills requiring photo identification passed along strict party-line votes in state legislatures. A Brennan Centre study estimated that across the US, these and similar bills could have prevented 3.3 million qualified (mostly Democratic) voters from participating in the 2012 elections. In Texas, all Republican state senators and representatives supported that state's photo ID bill and all Democratic legislators opposed it. A similar

¹¹ There is some debate about whether direct democracy helped (see Banaszak 1996) or hindered (see Ellis 2002:240) the early diffusion of suffrage in the United States.

TABLE 2.2 *Electoral Rules and the partisan divide; elite support for photo identification voting laws*

Texas, 2011	House vote	Senate vote
Republicans Yes	101	19
Democrats Yes	0	0
Republicans No	0	0
Democrats No	8	11

Note: Floor vote on SJR 14

Montana, 2011	House vote	Senate vote
Republicans Yes	65	27
Democrats Yes	0	0
Republicans No	2	1
Democrats No	32	22

Note: Floor vote on HB 152

TABLE 2.3 *Electoral rules and the partisan divide; elite support for ending election day voter registration*

Maine, 2011	House vote	Senate vote
Republicans Yes	74	18
Democrats Yes	0	0
Others Yes	0	0
Republicans No	0	2
Democrats No	69	14
Others No	1	1

Floor vote on LD 1376

Note: two House Democrats and four House Republicans were absent.

partisan divide was evident in Montana and other states where legislatures considered strict photo ID laws. Table 2.3 illustrates that the partisan divide was also evident in Maine, where Republicans passed a law repealing that state's long-standing rule that allowed voters to register to vote at polling places on election day.¹² It is worth noting that these are not votes cast in a parliamentary system. This level of party discipline is not always the norm in the US.

At the mass level, although polling on the matter is rare, public opinion surveys demonstrate that Republican voters are much more likely than Democrats to support such policies. Republicans are more likely to believe that convicted felons

¹² The rule change was justified as preventing fraud; it required voters must register five days before an election. <http://mainecampus.com/2011/11/10/webster-defends-gop-agenda/>

TABLE 2.4 *Electoral rules and the partisan divide; mass support for voter identification laws*

	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Support requiring all currently registered voters to provide proof of citizenship and residence	43.4%	85.3%	66.2%
Oppose requiring all currently registered voters to provide proof of citizenship and residence	50.4%	12.3%	30.1%
Don't know/refused	5.9%	2.3%	3.7%

Source: Washington Poll, October 2006. N = 672

and non-citizens vote illegally (Ansolabehere and Persily 2008), and Republicans are thus more likely to support rules requiring photo ID at polling places. Table 2.4 illustrates this partisan divide among voters was evident in Washington state when voters were asked if they would support a hypothetical proposal that would require ‘all registered voters to provide documentation of citizenship, proof of permanent address, and other requirements prior to the next federal election or their voter registration status would be cancelled’. Eighty-five per cent of Republicans supported the proposal and most Democrats were opposed.

There are many other examples of voters acting in ways that suggest they realize their partisan self-interest when considering election rules—and that their interests align with their party’s elites. A California redistricting initiative favoured by Republican elites (the minority party in the legislature) produced major partisan divisions among voters in 2005. Seventy per cent of Republicans supported the proposal, compared to less than 20 per cent of Democrats. Conversely, a Florida redistricting initiative favoured by Democratic elites (the minority party in that state’s legislature) found overwhelming approval from Democratic voters but tepid support from Republicans (Donovan 2011:126). Republican elites embraced term limits in the 1990s when the party had minority status nationally, and in many states. One of the first term limit proposals, California’s Proposition 140, was authored by a Republican state legislator who had served in the minority (Price 1992). Republican voters in California and other states where the Republican party had minority status were more supportive of term limits than Democratic voters (Donovan and Snipp 1993). After Democrats lost the 2000 presidential election despite winning the popular vote, some Democratic elites proposed awarding the presidency to the popular vote winner. Not surprisingly, opinion polls found Democrats favoured direct election of the president more than Republicans (Karp and Tolbert 2010). Likewise, minor parties and their voters in New Zealand were more supportive of adopting MMP than supporters of larger parties (Banducci and Karp 1999). Similarly, when Democratic strategists placed the initiative on Colorado’s ballot proposing that the state (then leaning more Republican) award proportionally (rather than winner-take-all), Republican voters opposed proportionality much more than Democratic voters did (Karp 2007).

BUT DO CITIZENS UNDERSTAND ELECTORAL REFORMS?

Generally speaking, although it makes a great deal of sense for accounts of institutional reform to focus on self-interested incumbent politicians, that picture may be incomplete because it pays insufficient attention to the role of citizens. As we illustrated above, there are regularly instances where voters do appear to see reform proposals in terms of their partisan self-interest. Several generations of scholarship have noted that voters as a whole tend not to be very interested in or informed about politics. If citizens have similarly little interest in or awareness of the consequences of electoral rules then elites in government may have fewer constraints when attempting to set the rules.

There is a strong current of academic opinion that voters are unlikely to care about institutional reform let alone understand it in terms of either partisan interest or in terms of how a particular reform might ‘fix’ something that a rule change is targeting. This perspective is somewhat at odds with campaigns for various electoral reforms. Advocates promoting electoral rules changes often act as if they expect that voters will care about institutional reform, and as we see in the next chapter, they often promote reforms as a means to increase the scope of citizen engagement with politics. Reform proposals are promoted as a way to increase participation by voters, to enhance ‘fairness’ and ‘accountability’, and as a means to weaken the influence of ‘parties’ and ‘special interests’—with little public discussion about which party is advantaged by a proposal. But we know, from several generations of scholarship on public engagement with politics, that voters have—at best—an intermittent or part-time engagement in politics (Harrop and Miller 1987).

Public opinion research suggests that most citizens may simply be too uninformed, too busy, or so uninterested in politics that we should not expect them to pay much attention to the nuances of how electoral rules affect politics and policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). For the most part politics is only a small part of most people’s lives. Table 2.5 presents results from survey questions asked of Americans about political institutions and processes. When asked factual questions about political parties, candidates, candidate nomination processes, and other election-related matters, most Americans are wrong quite regularly. Granted, these are a biased set of questions about politics and elections, but the results from asking about these topics suggest it may be a stretch to expect that the public is keenly aware of the potential effects of many electoral reform proposals. If most Americans don’t know what primary elections are, and most don’t know how delegates are selected to the parties’ nominating conventions, we might expect they are hard pressed to see how changing nomination elections would affect things they care about.

A further body of work (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; 2002) casts serious doubt on whether voters are engaged enough by everyday politics to care very

TABLE 2.5 *Public knowledge about institutions, processes, and politics*

Popular votes don't determine president (1986)	69%
Know convicted felons not assured a vote (1986)	55%
Define filibuster (1963)	53%
Know how presidential delegates selected (1978)	49%
Know how presidential candidates selected (1952)	40%
Define a primary election (1952)	36%
Define electoral college (1955)	35%
Name both US senators from state (1985)	35%
Know length of US House term (1978)	30%
Know party with US House majority (2001)	31%
Name two branches of government (1958)	27%
Know votes in Senate to break filibuster (2010)	26%
Know length of US senator's term (1991)	25%
Know both US senators from state (1989)	25%
Know majority party leader of US Senate (2008)	24%

Source: Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Pew surveys various years

much about institutions at all, especially if they are presented with proposals that demand greater effort on the part of citizens when it comes to engaging in politics. Electoral reforms that push towards greater voter participation (more frequent elections, direct democracy, early voting, 'motor voter' registration, voting by mail, etc.) would, then, seem to be prime candidates to founder on the rocks of disengagement, ignorance, and popular apathy. It seems something of a stretch to argue that current (low) levels of citizen participation are a reaction to there being too few opportunities to participate (Berinsky 2005). Yet one argument that is commonly advanced is that of course citizens are disengaged given the way current institutions work; citizen disengagement is a consequence of current institutions.

Whatever the cause of apathy, reform efforts persist in appealing to citizens to build popular support in favour of changing electoral rules. Citizens may get a say over the reform (referendum or initiative), and they are also enlisted as participants in some reform efforts (via social movements, interest groups, partisan appeals, education campaigns, etc.). Citizens are an audience that advocates of electoral reform (including party elites) appeal to, and they may be participants (as voters) in reform after an election rule has been changed. Some cases where citizens are involved are quite dramatic and widespread—efforts to enfranchise women, for example. Others are much less dramatic—changing apportionment, changing registration rules, limiting legislative tenure—yet significant nonetheless. Elites might be much more aware than the mass public of the potential political consequences of rules changes. However, although many electoral reform debates may be mainly conducted by elites for elites, citizens would seem to play a role of some kind either as an audience that needs to be convinced of the need for change or the legitimacy of change, or as an audience mobilized to promote or oppose change.

But when citizens are involved in a fairly direct way the question of whether they really understand what electoral institutions do is raised straight away. There are a number of possible reactions voters may have to proposals for institutional changes. One is that voters may not show much evidence at all of thoughtfulness or even partisan self-interest when it comes to questions of institutional choice (Neumann 1986; Bennett 1988).

‘Ordinary voters,’ note Harrop and Miller, ‘do not think very long or very hard about political questions’ (Harrop and Miller 1987:101). Voters may only pay attention to issues after some threshold has been passed. So, for example, voters may pay attention to unemployment or inflation only when the relevant indicators become noticeably bad. Likewise, they may pay attention to governmental processes and electoral rules only after dramatic scandals such as the political corruption that rocked Italy (Donovan 1995) and Japan in the early 1990s (Shiratori 1995; see also Renwick et al. 2011). People are not likely to have an especially warm opinion of government after major scandals—such moments may provide advocates of new rules the opportunity to attract public attention and to assume the role of reformers.

If voters do not understand much about the consequences of electoral rules, then we might plausibly expect to see their opinions motivated by something like a ‘change for change’s sake’ response. Such voters may simply support any change presented to them—particularly if it is seen as a tool to target politicians tainted by scandal. That is, they may see something wrong with government but fail to understand how electoral arrangements affect *why* something is wrong. Demands for change may therefore not be linked to some systematic popular understanding of electoral institutions and thus may not necessarily be the product of reasoning about the workings of electoral rules. For example, younger voters may generally be more supportive of changing status quo electoral arrangements than older voters due to some pattern of ‘youthful rebellion’ favouring change versus ‘aged conservatism’ favouring the status quo. Although this may be a systematic life-cycle effect it cannot really be regarded as thoughtfulness in the sense that it reflects a consideration of how a particular electoral arrangement affects older citizens differently than younger ones. Similarly, discontent over the economy and personal economic circumstances may correspond with support for changing electoral rules. Again the pattern would be systematic—those dissatisfied with the economy may support proposals for change—but again, this is not necessarily representative of thoughtful connection where the reform proposal is seen as something to improve economic performance.

A second possibility is that voters evaluate institutions in terms of winning and losing, more or less as elites do under the model of self-interested behaviour. A party’s voters may have the same sympathies or strategic goals as elites, and thus share elite preferences for institutions; or they may take cues from party elites who signal how a party’s interests are affected by particular rules (Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Lupia 1992; Hobolt 2007). If voters receive cues from party

elites about a policy proposal, their attitudes about the proposal may come to match the elite position (Niemi and Westholm 1984; Zaller 1992). In order to assess this claim in the realm of electoral reform we need to assess public arguments for and against electoral reform proposals. We also need public opinion survey data on voter attitudes towards changing electoral rules. The latter tend to mean survey evidence from relatively few instances, several of which are mentioned above: evaluation of the NZ referendum on electoral system change, the proposals on the California ballot to change elements of governance, the electoral system referendum in the UK, and so on.

In the next chapter, we take a detailed look at the public arguments frequently used for and against electoral reform proposals. Overt claims about the partisan stakes involved with reforms are rare, but we suggest partisan cues are evident. Survey data, furthermore, suggest voters see electoral reform proposals in partisan terms. Polling done during the 2011 UK electoral system referendum demonstrates that not only did many voters see the proposal in terms of their partisan interests, but that this became more apparent over the course of the campaign. Figure 2.1 illustrates how the interests of voters and parties aligned over the course of the 2011 campaign. As noted above, the Conservative Party had reason to see AV as a threat, and the party opposed the proposal to change from FPTP to AV. The Liberal Democratic party, in contrast, was clearly supportive. Labour elites were divided internally, with some Labour officials campaigning for AV and some for retaining FPTP. Figure 2.1 presents three graphs that illustrate how partisan voters' opinions on the matter changed over the course of the campaign. Public opinion was measured by a three-wave panel survey conducted during and after the 2011 AV referendum campaign.¹³ The patterns of partisan support (and opposition) in the electorate largely match the partisan interests of elites. Most Conservative voters were opposed to the proposal early on, and Conservatives became even more opposed by the end of the campaign. Conversely, most Liberal Democratic voters supported changing to AV at the start, and Lib Dem voters became even more disproportionately supporting by the time they voted. Labour voters remained rather evenly split throughout the campaign.

Electoral systems may well have distributional consequences but that is not the only way they may be seen or talked about. While some of the normative talk about rules might be window dressing, not all such discussion of electoral rules is spurious. In particular, voters may have concerns over procedural fairness. Examples of this in the literature include, most notably, work by Tyler (1990; 2000), but similar kinds of arguments can be seen in the literature discussing popular attachment to civil liberties (see, for example, Sniderman et al. 1996). Institutions that promote or represent procedural fairness are more likely to be

¹³ Details of the survey are available from the website of Jack Vowles, the Principal Investigator of the project: <http://www.jackvowlesdomain.co.uk/UKReferendumSurvey%20Experiments.htm>

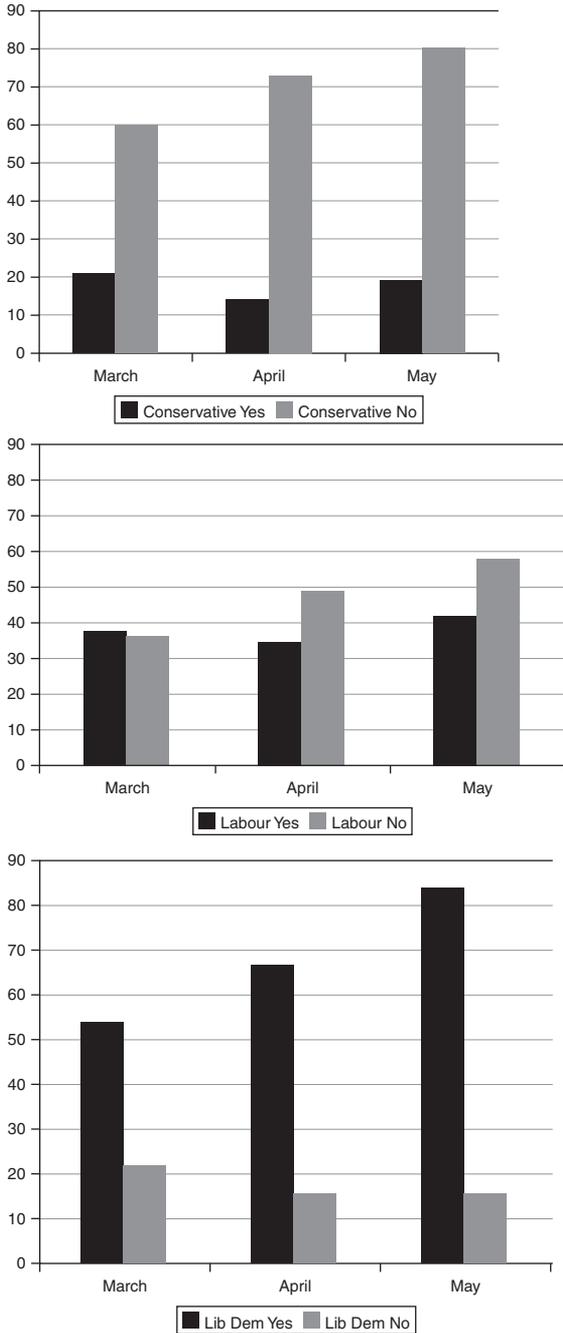


FIGURE 2.1 Voter support for adopting AV in the UK, 2011 by party
 Source: Vowles et al., UK Referendum Study, Exeter University

supported than those that do not. Arguments grounded in an assumption of rationality such as that which sees citizens motivated by a concern for outcomes are sometimes questioned as demanding too much of voters. But this social-psychological approach can be seen to demand even more of citizens than that of self-interest since it is an argument that requires citizens to develop and hold values that they apply as a yardstick by which to evaluate institutions.

Just as there were complications in applying a theory motivated by self-interest so, too, there are complications in applying a social-psychological argument. It is far from clear, for example, where ideas of procedural fairness come from. Some ideas could come from general ideological orientations, others from norms or socialization. Nor is it very clear a priori which values are important. In the literature on popular concern over rights, discussion often centres on a concern for civil liberties and consciousness of those rights (for examples see Galligan and McAllister 1997; Sniderman et al. 1996). But these rights seem to be established patterns within the politics under discussion and so are often de facto outcomes as well as procedures.

More importantly, it is not clear that concerns regarding procedures and concerns over outcomes are necessarily contradictory arguments. Although the two kinds of arguments, one emphasizing process, the other stressing outcomes, stem from different research traditions—the emphasis on outcomes coming much more from a perspective of individual rationality, the emphasis on process from social psychology—and although the two arguments can be cast as rival ideal types, there is room for a good deal of overlap between the two. Tyler (1990; 2000), for example, pointed up the importance of ‘fairness’. But if fairness is defined in terms of a process in which, say, everyone has a chance to win, then the two criteria for evaluating institutions (procedural and outcome based) are related at some level. Take, as a particularly important example, the impact of personal experience. If a citizen’s personal experiences with a given institution convince him/her that the institution is not especially fair, it seems reasonable to argue that fairness has not just a procedural, but an instrumental, outcome-based component as well. In fact, it seems reasonable to suppose that personal experiences of this kind do have a role to play in shaping citizen views of institutions perhaps by leading them to see current institutions as not particularly ‘fair’.

We can illustrate these points by referring again to the UK referendum on whether to change the electoral system from first past the post to AV. Table 2.6 models public support for AV. The first column of the table lists a basic SES model with a couple of other factors—whether the voter saw a TV ad in support of AV, an ad against AV, and also what the voter thinks of politicians (perhaps someone who doesn’t like politicians very much will want reform no matter what).

The second column of the table builds in party ID as a measure of partisan self-interest. Following the discussion above, we expect Liberal Democrats to support the reform, Conservatives to oppose it—and indeed both of those things are true. In addition the model fit improves. Column 3 and Column 4 add to the previous

TABLE 2.6 *Popular support for AV vs. FPTP: UK Referendum Study. Probit model*

	(1)	(2)	2Δ	(3)	3Δ	(4)	4Δ
Age	-0.12**	-0.10**		-0.07		0.05	
University degree	0.46**	0.43**		0.34**		-0.06	
Income	-0.09**	-0.09**		-0.05		0.01	
Female	-0.18*	-0.20**		-0.12		-0.09	
Dislike politicians	-0.06**	-0.05**		0.01		-0.07	
Saw Yes TV ad	0.01	0.03		0.07		-0.56	
Saw No TV ad	-0.10	-0.14		-0.01		0.19	
Liberal Dem ID		0.92**	0.35	0.80**	0.31	0.24	
Conservative ID		-0.67**	-0.24	-0.51**	-0.19	-0.27	
Labour ID		0.01		0.04		0.26	
AV means some votes count more than others				-0.30**	-0.33	-0.07	
FPTP gives strong government				-0.70**	0.70	-0.53**	-0.56
AV will restore balance of power in favour of voters						10.4**	0.96
Constant	0.70**	0.61**		1.7**		-1.0	
% correctly predicted	61%	65%		78%		89%	
Observations	770	770		617		317	

Note: Dependent variable 1 = intend to vote yes for AV, 0 = vote to preserve FPTP. Probit coefficients. Δ values are the change in probability supporting AV associated with a change from the lowest to highest value of the independent variable. ** = $p < 0.01$ * = $p < 0.05$. ^ This question was asked of a random half of the sample.

Source: 2011 UK Referendum survey, Exeter University. Pre-election wave 2 sample

model by building in some ideas people have about what electoral systems are and what they should do. Specifically, there are three measures of respondent attitudes. People were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with statements that:

1. AV means that some votes count more than others
2. The first past the post system gives us strong government
3. AV will restore the balance of power in favour of voters

Response to these ranged across four options, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. We expect reaction to these statements to tap into a voter's normative assessments of what electoral systems ought to do and are not uniformly attributable to partisan self-interest alone. We suggest the first item captures concerns about procedural fairness, the second item may reflect a preference for majoritarian outcomes, while the third can represent concern about voter influence over elected officials. Including these attitudinal measures has a notable effect. Model

TABLE 2.7 *Partisanship and attitudes about election systems*

	AV will mean some votes count more than others	The first past the post system gives us strong government	AV will restore the balance of power in favour of voters
Liberal Dem ID	-0.08	-0.28**	0.66**
Conservative ID	0.36**	0.64**	-0.46**
Labour ID	0.02	0.14 +	-0.04
Constant	1.6**	1.6**	1.04**
Observations	806	877	445
R-squared	0.02	0.07	0.09

Note: OLS regression coefficients. Dependent variables are responses to statements, where 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = agree, 2 = disagree, 3 = strongly disagree. ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$, + = $p < 0.10$.

Source: 2011 UK Referendum survey, Exeter University. Pre-election wave 2 sample

fit increases, particularly when the attitude about AV ‘restoring the balance of power in favour of voters’ is added in (Column 4). Columns 2, 3, and 4 list the change in the probability of supporting AV associated with the partisan and attitudinal measures, and illustrate that the effects of these attitudinal measures are substantial. Granted, these attitudes may reflect how partisans rationalize their opinions about this electoral reform, but the attitudes mute and even overwhelm the independent effect of partisanship. If we had stopped the modelling at Column 2 it would seem that partisan self-interest was the dominant force in voter reasoning about electoral rules—but that would only present part of the picture. People’s views of what elections should do clearly matter as well.

Table 2.7 presents a little more context on where beliefs about FPTP and AV come from. This table simply predicts the three main attitudinal items from Column 3 and Column 4 (of Table 2.6) using the respondent’s party identification. As can be seen, there are strong and consistent predictors based on party identity—the measure we use as a marker of self-interest. Liberal Democrats, for example, were significantly more likely to strongly disagree with the idea that FPTP produces strong governments, and they were significantly more likely to support the idea that AV would restore power to voters. Conservatives held directly opposed views—and they were significantly more likely to agree that vote counting under AV would be unfair. Arguably, then, even voters’ normative evaluations of an electoral system have a component associated with self-interest or at least partisanship.

Both the argument relating to partisan self-interest as a driver of attitudes about reform and the argument of values as a driver imply that citizens are capable of evaluating and understanding electoral institutions. The difference between the two arguments lies in the nature of that understanding, although there is room for

TABLE 2.8 *Popular support for institutional changes. Findings in the literature*

Examples of reform	Which voters 'should' support it	Who supported it
Proportional representation	Supporters of small parties	Supporters of small parties UK (Wenzel et al. 2000); NZ (Banducci and Karp 1999)
Term limits	Out partisans; those who see current institution as unresponsive	Out partisans; those who see current institution as unresponsive (Karp 1995; Stein et al. 2002)
Direct election of US president (weak support for electoral college)	Democrats in 2000/01	Democrats in 2000/01 (Anderson et al. 2002)
Open primary (Proposition 198)	Independents/moderates	Independents/moderates (Bowler and Donovan 2002)
National primary	Residents of bigger states; people in states who have late primaries	Residents of bigger states; people in states who have late primaries (Tolbert, Keller and Donovan 2010)
Support for reform in general	'Losers' under current arrangements	'Losers' under current arrangements (Bowler and Donovan 2007)

overlap between the two, especially when it comes to issues of fairness. Another way of seeing the difference between the two arguments is by reference to the term 'beliefs'. This term may mean underlying principles but can also mean expectations as in expectations of winning and losing. Both senses of the word can be brought to bear in helping voters decide whether an institution is or is not working better than some proposed alternative. A preference for expanding the role of the judiciary, for example, can be motivated by a principled belief in a legal framework of rights but may also be rooted in an expectation that courts produce better outcomes than do legislatures and executives. In the literature reflected in Table 2.8, for example, we see the relationship between winner/loser status and judgements about the fairness (or otherwise) of political institutions. There is, for example, a relationship between believing first past the post is unfair and being a supporter of a small party, and both factors helped to predict support for PR in NZ (Banducci and Karp 1999). Although there may well be a concern for fairness in process such a concern is not independent of a (partisan) concern for the outcome: processes which allow someone to become a winner are likely seen as fairer than those that do not.

Taking the results from the UK AV referendum as our example, then, self-interest may not be the only driver of popular opinions towards institutions, but it is an important one. Voters seem to be quite capable of understanding institutions in the same terms as rational choice scholars. The UK referendum example is not unique.

Studies of voting on a variety of electoral rules do show a consistent pattern of popular support for institutional change that is coloured by partisan ‘winner/loser’ concerns of self-interest. Table 2.8 summarizes conclusions from several studies of popular support for proposals to change electoral rules. Those who we assume might be advantaged by a particular rule change—at least in the sense of short-term partisan gain—are found to be more likely to support the reform. Generally speaking, these studies take opinion poll data and predict support/opposition to a particular reform on the basis of characteristics such as political loyalties, attitudes towards the political system, and SES characteristics. There are several points to make about this collection of findings. First, it underscores the relevance of self-interest as a criterion that voters use when judging institutions. Second, it is important to note that voters evaluate institutions and reform in the same terms as do elites. This is evidence that says voters can and do understand what institutions do. The third point is that this self-interested perspective is not the only way voters see institutions—just as it is not the only way that elites see institutions.

DISCUSSION

The role that citizens play in affecting how rules are shaped has been overlooked in many accounts of electoral institutions. The argument of this chapter has been that changes in electoral rules often involve citizens and that citizens can—and do—understand institutional change in the relatively short-term, self-interested way that elites do. True enough, it is not likely that voters possess an in-depth understanding of every consequence of every rule change. Yet many voters do see calls for electoral reforms in terms of partisan interests. However, as we discuss in the next chapter, elites recognize that many in the public also view reforms in terms of normative or procedural concerns. Voters are often tied into the mechanics of electoral system change quite directly and quite explicitly. Voters may provide the force behind social movements or be the audience that elites attempt to rally or, most directly of all, voters may get to decide an issue of institutional change via a referendum. In many situations, elites seeking to modify or manipulate electoral rules cannot simply ignore voters.

Reformers, then, often have some marketing to do. As we see in the next chapter, proposals for changing electoral rules can clearly be explained in terms of partisan interests, but in public arguments reform proposals are largely framed in terms of broader normative values. Advocates of change—including those with clearly partisan goals—promote norms such as increasing fairness, increasing participation, increasing representation, defeating special interests, and transforming politicians and citizens. One of the key issues in electoral reform is what we expect to happen as a consequence of reform and, in particular, what citizens

expect and how those expectations are formed. Reform campaigns often build great expectations about the anticipated effects of a change in an electoral rule. This discussion raises several questions that become topics of the following chapter: How are electoral reforms sold to the public? What are the expectations about electoral institutions that reformers generate?

Arguments for Change: Partisan Interests and Expectations about Process

In the previous chapter we noted the scope for overlap between self-interest and broader notions of ‘fairness’ as applied to elections. In this chapter we examine that overlap more fully to look at how claims about electoral reform—especially within the context of campaigns for reform—and self-interest are intertwined. We suggest that the need for elites to highlight procedural issues in their public arguments, while downplaying partisan motivations behind their reform proposals, inflates expectations about what electoral reforms are able to accomplish.

CITIZENS, VALUES, AND ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

There is evidence that voters’ value concerns shape their preferences for democratic institutions, although there is no consensus that all voters share the same value framework when evaluating institutions. Citizens who distrust government are more likely to prefer institutions that allow more direct participation in politics—in part because they see voters as being less influenced by ‘special interests’ than their representatives are (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006). Some voters also have preferences for delegate models of representation and others prefer a trustee model—voters who value competence in representatives favour the trustee model, while those who value ideological congruence with representatives value the delegate model (Fox and Shotts 2009). Voters also likely differ in how they apply norms of fairness, openness, efficiency, accountability, and transparency when evaluating electoral arrangements. But the fact that there is no single package of values that most voters consider does not mean that values concerns are not important to voters.

As we noted earlier, the literature notes that institutions may be judged by two kinds of criteria: outcome criteria and procedural fairness. These criteria are sometimes cast as rivals but are more reasonably seen as being related. Take, as a particularly important example, the impact of personal experience.

If a citizen's personal experiences with being on the losing end of a given electoral institution convince him/her that the institution is not especially fair, it seems reasonable to argue that fairness has not just a procedural but an outcome-based component as well. In fact, it seems reasonable to suppose that personal experiences of this kind play a role in shaping citizen views of institutions perhaps by leading them to see status quo institutions as not particularly 'fair'. Of course, this outcome-based view of fairness bleeds into standard conceptions of individual self-interest. There is, for example, a relationship between believing first past the post (FPTP) is unfair and being a supporter of a small party that loses under FPTP, and both factors helped to predict support for proportional representation (PR) in New Zealand (Banducci and Karp 1999). Although there may well be a concern for fairness in process, such a concern is not independent of a concern for the outcome: processes which allow someone to become a winner are likely seen as fairer (to the potential winner, at least) than those that do not.

Yet views of fairness based on institutional procedures (rather than outcomes) may be somewhat more distinguishable from a self-interested perspective. It is far from clear, however, where ideas of procedural fairness come from. Some such ideas could come from general ideological orientations, others from norms or socialization. Although we know a tremendous amount about how political conservatives and liberals (particularly elites) differ in their views about such things as race (Sniderman and Piazza 1993), social issues (Brewer 2003; Sniderman et al. 1991), globalization (Quinn and Toyoda 2007), and government spending (Rudolph and Evans 2005; Bean and Papadakis 1998), we know far less about how (or why) liberals or conservatives may have distinct preferences for democratic institutions. Hibbing and Thiess-Morse (2002:142) note that work attempting to account for variation in the American public's 'procedural preferences' has yielded little, although Hibbing et al. (2009:162) suggest that a conservative ideology may be associated with preferences for more 'populist' procedures.¹

The 'ill-developed state of the literature' on procedural preferences (Hibbing et al. 2009:159) does not mean that a person's preferences for electoral arrangements are unrelated to their political values. A body of research on materialist vs. post-materialist values highlights a modest increase (at least through the mid 1990s) in post-materialist values. Procedural concerns that may be related to preferences for democratic arrangements ('giving people more say') are key to

¹ When ideology is included as a control for instrumental concerns (e.g. conservatives have been on the winning end of referendum votes to cut taxes) there is evidence that conservatives view direct democracy more favourably. This does not establish that conservative ideology, per se, structures preferences for the institution of direct democracy but is consistent with that view.

post-materialist values, but it is not clear how these values translate into preferences for institutions (see Dalton et al. 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006). Moreover, in the US and most established European democracies fewer than 20 per cent of citizens can be categorized as having post-materialist values (Abramson and Inglehart 1995:12–21).

Norris (1999) argues that democracies suffer from a legitimacy crisis where many politically active, critical citizens who value democracy are seeking non-traditional venues for participation. Citizens are becoming more distrustful of political parties, and increasingly sceptical of representative institutions, but they may nonetheless value political ‘self-expression’. Likewise, a rise in general distrust of government has been identified in many established democracies (e.g. Nye et al. 1997; Warren 1999). Distrust may be fuelled by public concern about economic and social conditions (Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000), and it may correspond with a preference for change for change’s sake. Distrust and preferences for self-expression have been found to be associated with distain for representative institutions and incumbents (Hetherington 2000), but there is no established systematic relationship between distrust and ideas relating to procedural fairness nor between trust and preferences for a particular set of electoral reforms.²

In short, it is not clear a priori which values are important or if people from different political or ideological perspectives would share the same normative concerns about electoral arrangements. More importantly, it is not clear that concerns regarding procedures and concerns over outcomes are necessarily contradictory arguments. An emphasis on outcomes comes from a perspective anchored in individual rationality, while an emphasis on process comes more from social psychology. Although the two stem from different research traditions, there is room for a good deal of overlap between the two. Both the assumption of self-interest as a driver of attitudes and the assumption of values as a driver imply that citizens are capable of evaluating and understanding electoral institutions but in different ways—although as we saw in the case of the UK referendum campaign there may be overlap between the two.

When elites want to change institutions, however, appeals to narrow self-interested or partisan goals seem somehow inappropriate or at least ineffective. Appeals grounded in an over-expression of self-interest are not used very frequently despite the fact that self-interest is a major component of how institutions, and institutional changes, are understood. Instead, campaigners focus on the procedural and conceptual consequences of institutional change.

² General distrust may thus predict support for various (unrelated) institutional reforms, such as term limits (e.g. Karp 1995).

PRO-REFORM ARGUMENTS CONCERNING THE CONSEQUENCE
OF LARGE-SCALE CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONS

Any proposal for change from status quo democratic arrangements means that some claims have to be made about how life will differ under the new set of rules. Expectations about the reform need to be formed, and they do not come from thin air. Ideas are provided. This is especially seen in cases where institutional reforms involve citizens either as an attentive audience that elites must respond to (Soroka and Wlezien 2009) and in the case of reforms put to voters via the initiative and referendum, as the actors who will make the decision.

How many—and which—reforms are put to voters varies by system. Some changes to the constitution in general may require a referendum (e.g. Denmark). Under the referendum process we have seen both the United Kingdom and New Zealand put electoral reform to a popular vote. So, too, did the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario. Other examples of reform put to referendum include the question of whether to move to a republic with a president as head of state (Australia, 1999), whether to change the length of the president's term (France, 2000); whether to directly elect the president (France, 1962); to lower the number of MPs; to allow internet voting (Slovakia, 2010) as well as various packages of electoral laws (Italy 2009, 2005, 1999, 1993, and 1991). In opening up agenda setting to a wider range of voters the initiative process in the US has seen many examples of reform including proposals regarding term limits, candidate nomination processes, legislative districting practices, campaign finance reforms and many other measures. In these instances voters are given a direct say on the reform proposal. But even when voters are not given a direct say—'motor voter' bills in the US, campaign finance reform in the UK—they are an audience in the sense that debates about the reform take place in public, and voter reaction (or lack of reaction) is expressed and known to political elites.

With many election reforms, then, voters are a relevant audience for both pro- and anti-reform groups. Given that political reform can involve a campaign to win over voters, or to at least influence citizen opinions about the proposal, it should not be a surprise to see that some language of reform appeals to the values discussed above and to distrust of incumbent politicians. It may also be no surprise that these political arguments tend to be exaggerated and overblown. Regardless of what the partisan stakes might be, the purpose of reform is often cast in terms of some beneficial, broad impact that procedural changes have in relation to citizens and society.

It might come as little surprise, then, to see examples of high-flown and overblown rhetoric especially when it comes to quite broad-ranging institutional changes. In arguing for independence, Scotland's SNP, for example, argues that:

With an SNP government, independence would also bring greater freedom for individuals, families and communities within a society built on common interests.³

Or take, as another example, the argument to replace the Queen as head of the Australian state, a change of largely symbolic rather than actual importance. The Queen is largely a ceremonial figure in Australian politics, although the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975 by Governor-General Sir John Kerr—the Queen’s representative—created a constitutional furore because it was seen as an act that overstepped the bounds of the governor-general’s ceremonial role (Cowan 1985). Since that time, however, the role of the monarch/governor-general has gone back to being largely ceremonial, but the issue of republicanism was put to a referendum vote in 1999. The referendum failed (McAllister 2001; Uhr 2003) but the discussion continued. Pro-republican reformers argue:

An Australian republic is about Australia’s future. It’s about our shared identity and place in the world. It will have a constitution that reflects the sovereignty of the Australian people, so that any Australian citizen can aspire to the highest office in the land.

An Australian republic will embrace our egalitarianism and the concept of a fair go. It will acknowledge our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and respect its culture, with its timeless connection to the Australian land and sea. It will recognise and build upon our British heritage and acknowledge its gifts, including our political and legal institutions. An Australian republic will celebrate our immigrant heritage of opportunity and endeavour and its contribution to our national identity. It will unite all Australians behind an Australian Head of State.⁴

Election system reformers may not typically use such themes of freedom, shared cultural identity, and sovereignty when promoting changes in institutions, but their arguments frequently make similar appeals to broadly held norms of honesty, fairness, equality, and accountability, as well as appeals to political unity (ending divisiveness) and enhancing civic virtue. Take US reformers arguing their case for the expansion of direct democracy in the National Initiative for Democracy (NI4D):

As a direct result of the balanced public information programs and deliberative procedures established by the National Initiative for each qualified initiative, citizens will come to better understand the consequences of various public policy and legislative alternatives than they do under our present system. Over time, this will enhance the People’s ability to render wise legislative decisions and contribute to the maturity of the electorate.⁵

³ SNP website <http://www.snp.org/node/240> accessed 25 January 2009

⁴ <http://www.republic.org.au/> accessed 2 August 2011

⁵ National Initiative For Democracy website <http://ni4d.us/en/partnership> accessed 25 January 2009

The promise of a civic transformation that will produce citizens who are wise and understanding is a contemporary argument that echoes many of the themes that Progressive Era proponents of direct democracy offered a century earlier. Progressives noted the ‘educational advantages’ that direct legislation would provide for citizens (Smith and Tolbert 2004:10). J.W. Sullivan, one of the earliest prominent direct democracy advocates in the US, promised that the state-level initiative process would transform politics and society, precipitate a peaceful revolution and replace ‘lawmaking monopoly’ with empowered citizens (Piott 2004:6).

These are but three examples of quite high-flown rhetoric and great expectations that are found in proposals for reform. Given the scope of these reforms (independence for Scotland, a republic for Australia, and moving to direct democracy in the US) it may not be surprising to see such rhetoric. But we find similar themes when we examine many other reforms that call for less sweeping changes to electoral rules. Direct democracy in California and other states provides numerous examples where proposals to reform electoral rules are placed on the ballot for a public vote. The federal constitution limits the scope of changes to those things affecting state and local elections. Proposals for change are typically ‘smaller’ than attempts at independence or instituting a whole new political process. However, there is substantial leeway for altering many aspects of a state’s electoral process, including the length of tenure of elected officials, the electoral formula, the manner that a state’s presidential electors are allocated, changing campaign finance rules, changing rules governing candidate nominations, proposing rival plans for drawing legislative districts, and so on.

PRO-REFORM ARGUMENTS CONCERNING THE CONSEQUENCE OF ELECTORAL REFORM

We can get a sense of the arguments used by supporters and opponents of these reforms from the state ballot pamphlets, campaign ads, and official websites of reform advocates. Table 3.1 lists examples of campaigns for electoral reforms in Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. Many of the examples of pro- and anti-reform arguments we use here come from campaigns in the US. In several US states a government office prints a pamphlet detailing initiative and referendum proposals, as well as official arguments for and against proposals. These are mailed to every registered voter in the state, and they serve as a key source of information for voters. Over two-thirds of voters claim to use the voter’s pamphlet and also report that it is a ‘very important’ source of information. Voters rank the pamphlet as more important than TV news, TV ads, newspapers, or any other information source they use when evaluating ballot measures (Bowler and Donovan 1998:57; 2002). One study found that 90 per cent of voters who read

TABLE 3.1 *Examples of electoral reform campaigns*

Jurisdiction	Date	Reform proposal	Measure	Pass/fail (% yes)
<i>Participation</i>				
California	2010	Top-two primary	Proposition 14	Pass (54%)
Washington	2004	Top-two primary	Init. 872	Pass (60%)
California	1996	Blanket primary	Proposition 198	Pass (59%)
Ohio	2005	No-excuse absentee voting	Issue 2	Fail (37%)
Maine	2011	Election day registration	Question 1	Pass (60%)
<i>Electoral system</i>				
British Columbia	2005	STV to replace plurality		Fail (57%)*
British Columbia	2009	STV to replace plurality		Fail (39%)
Great Britain	2010	AV to replace plurality		Fail (32%)
New Zealand	2011	Retain MMP		Pass (57%)
New Zealand	1993	Adopt MMP		Pass (54%)
<i>Districting</i>				
California	2008	Redistricting commission	Proposition 11	Pass (51%)
Florida	2010	State leg. districting	Amend 5	Pass (63%)
Florida	2010	US House districting	Amend 6	Pass (63%)
Ohio	2005	Redistricting commission	Issue 4	Fail (30%)
<i>Campaign finance</i>				
Ohio	2005	Contribution limits	Issue 3	Fail (33%)
California	2010	Public campaign funds	Proposition 15	Fail (43%)
California	2006	Contribution limits	Proposition 89	Fail (26%)
California	2005	Union political contributions	Proposition 75	Fail (46%)
Oregon	2008	Union political contributions	Measure 64	Fail (49%)
<i>Term limits</i>				
California	1990	Term limits	Proposition 140	Pass (52%)
Arizona	1992	Term limits	Proposition 107	Pass (74%)
Ohio	2005	Appoint elections officer	Issue 5	Fail (30%)
California	2000	None of the above	Proposition 23	Fail (36%)

* Required 60% to pass.

the pamphlets looked at the pro and con arguments—far more than claimed to read the summary of the measure or the text of the proposed legislation. A large majority of voters also reported looking at who *signed* the arguments (Dubois and Feeney 1998). This last point is important. Although pro-reform arguments might not make explicit appeals about how a reform affects rival partisan interests, many voters likely find cues about the partisan effects of a proposal if they know who is for it and who is against it (Lupia 1994; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Branton 2002).

Campaigns for and against each ballot measure publish their arguments in the pamphlet, in their own words. That is, the arguments in the ballot pamphlet are made by the campaigns themselves directly to voters and are unmediated by journalists or pundits. Reform campaigns in California thus provide numerous examples of public arguments in favour of reform, published in the state's official

ballot pamphlet. The full text of both the reform proposal and the proponents' ballot arguments are archived online, but excerpts used here give a sense of the arguments being advanced by various pro-reform actors.

The underlying form or rhetorical structure of these arguments is generally fairly straightforward. Arguments in favour of new electoral rules establish some cause for complaint in order to justify the need for reform—something needs to be broken in order for there to be a need for a fix. Often we are told that what is broken is the system because incumbent politicians are overly beholden to 'special interests'. What we also see is that these institutional reforms are cast in terms of the likely effects of the reform on the behaviour of politicians and citizens—indeed, one common theme is that the proposed reform will improve the behaviour of politicians and enhance the efficacy of voting. But as we will see, common themes run through the arguments promoting a wide range of electoral reforms. Advocates for change regularly make their case with appeals based on reducing partisanship, limiting the influence of special interests, increasing accountability, empowering citizens, and achieving fairness.

TARGETING PARTISANSHIP AND POLITICS

Partisanship and party politics are common targets of pro-reform arguments. A 2010 measure on the California ballot (Proposition 14) proposed to alter the process of candidate nominations such that the top two candidates from any party—regardless of whether they were from the same party—would advance to the general election ballot. All voters, regardless of their party affiliation, would receive the same primary ballot listing candidates from all parties. Proponents claimed the reform would 'END THE BICKERING AND GRIDLOCK AND FIX THE SYSTEM' (emphasis in original) by allowing voters to 'elect the best candidates'. The top-two primary, it was argued, would also give voters 'an equal voice'. Six years earlier, voters in Washington state were presented with a similar top-two primary proposal (Initiative 872) and the same arguments. The proponents' official ballot pamphlet argument stated the change would allow people in Washington to stand up to party 'bosses' and 'vote for the person, not the party'. Proponents also contended that their reform would produce 'more competitive primaries and general elections' as well as increase participation. A similar 'blanket' primary election reform on the 1996 California ballot (Proposition 198) promised to 'increase participation by giving voters a real choice' and to force 'candidates to focus on the issues, not just partisanship'.

Likewise, voters in Oregon were told that term limits would fix partisan 'gridlock' there. Proponents of the 2005 referendum to adopt Single Transferable Voting (STV) in British Columbia echoed this theme that an electoral reform

would empower voters and change how politicians behave. The British Columbia Citizen's Assembly argued that STV 'gives more power to voters' in part because 'all candidates must work hard to earn voter support'.⁶ Advocates using the banner Reform Ohio Now (Ballot Issue 4 of 2005) told voters that their proposal for 'an independent, non-partisan commission to draw legislative districts' would 'make politicians more accountable and responsive to constituents, and that it would 'restore accountability by making elections meaningful again and in so doing make corruption less likely'. This same Ohio group sponsored three additional election reforms in 2005. These included Issue 2, a proposed change in absentee voting rules 'to increase participation in elections, make government more accountable to the people of Ohio'; Issue 3, campaign contribution limits that would 'restore confidence'; and Issue 5, a proposal to no longer elect the state's chief elections officer, so as to 'lessen partisanship'.⁷

TARGETING SPECIAL INTERESTS

In addition to combating partisanship and making the act of voting more meaningful, 'special interests' are a regular target in pro-reform arguments. The official argument in favour of California's Proposition 13, a 1970s campaign finance regulation scheme, stressed that 'special interests' have 'too much influence' and 'must be stopped'. The ballot pamphlet argument in favour of another set of campaign finance reforms proposed in 2006 (California's Proposition 89) claimed the new rules would help elect candidates who were 'not rich or well connected to wealthy special interests'. Similar high-minded rhetoric can be found in the arguments advancing term limits in the 1990s. The official term limits argument from California held little back in claiming that it would 'end the ingrown, political nature of both houses—to the benefit of every man, woman and child in California' because the reform would 'remove the grip that vested interests have over the legislature'. US Term Limits, an advocacy group that has spent millions of dollars promoting term limits in the US for several years, targets politicians and interest groups as rent-seekers, 'a tyrannical ruling class who care more about deals to benefit themselves, than their constituents'.⁸ Advocates of a successful term limits initiative in Oregon used a theme commonly found in the pro-term limits campaigns: rules that limit how long legislators can serve, they claimed, will reduce legislators' dependence on special interests for campaign funds.

⁶ <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/deliberation/CABackgrounder.pdf>

⁷ Statements of Reform Ohio Now in Ohio Issues Report. Distributed by The Ohio Ballot Board and Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell.

⁸ <http://www.termlimits.org/content.asp?pl=2&contentid=2>

The major groups backing two initiated constitutional amendments proposing to change how legislative districts were drawn in Florida (Amendments 5 and 6, 2010) also linked their cause to weakening the power of interests and increasing the efficacy of voting. ‘Florida’s voting districts today are too often drawn purely to protect special interest.’ As with many other pro-reform arguments this electoral change for Florida also targeted a problem that, according to advocates, had been ‘keeping voters from having an effective voice’.⁹ Likewise, a seemingly trivial proposal to add a ‘none of the above’ vote choice option to the California ballots (Proposition 23, 2000) was promoted as having the capacity to reduce negative campaigns, encourage more citizens to vote, and ensure that ‘better candidates’ will be nominated. Similarly, primary reforms that open participation in the candidate selection process to a wider range of voters (e.g. Proposition 14, 2010) are said to push elected officials to ‘begin working for the common good’ rather than ‘special’ interests.

ADVOCATING FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY

Electoral reformers of various stripes make routine appeals to fairness. Advocacy groups such as FairVote and FairDistricts Now—the first concerned with reforming the electoral system, the second with redistricting in Florida—emphasize the theme in the very names they assume. Under the rules targeted by reformers, ‘politicians were choosing their voters instead of voters having a fair chance to choose their representatives’.¹⁰ The BC Citizen’s Assembly recommended STV as the best reform to the provinces’ plurality electoral system because ‘STV is fair. Each party’s share of seats in the Legislature reflects its share of voter support. This means voters’ views are fairly represented.’¹¹ Proponents of partial public financing for campaigns (California’s Proposition 89, 2006) promised to make elections ‘more fair and competitive so candidates with the best ideas have a chance to win’. Proponents of a 2005 Ohio campaign finance measure (Issue 3) used their official ballot pamphlet space to argue it would limit the influence of ‘big money’. The fairness appeal here is clear, albeit implicit: the lack of contribution limits ‘widen[s] the gap between the haves and the have-nots making it increasingly difficult for average citizens to compete in the public arena’.

We can see these same tropes at work in the UK’s 2011 referendum on changing the electoral system to the Alternative Vote (AV). The roots of the AV referendum

⁹ http://www.aarp.org/politics-society/government-elections/info-08-2010/aarp_florida_endorses.html

¹⁰ <http://fairdistrictsnow.org/redistricting/>

¹¹ <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/deliberation/CAbackgrounder.pdf>

lay in the deal that the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties made as part of the coalition arrangement that was made after the 2010 British election. The decision to hold a referendum on the electoral system was part of the price of participation in coalition government by the UK Liberal Democrats.¹² In a content analysis of newspaper coverage of political reform in the UK, for example, Renwick et al. (2011) argue that: ‘In order to rouse public support for reform . . . it is necessary to link election reform to a concern that is high on voters’ agendas: to convince voters that electoral reform is a solution to a problem that they care about’ (Renwick et al. 2011:39). The problem is that often the reforms may have little causal link between the issue that voters may care about: voters may be so angered by an expenses scandal involving UK MPs that they may wish to punish MPs somehow. It is far from clear, however, how some reforms—such as moving to AV—would soothe voter anger. Even so, the referendum was held and, if it had been passed, would likely have introduced serious changes into UK national politics. AV was expected to reward the Liberal Democrats with more seats. Despite major differences in political context we find arguments about the UK electoral reform that are similar to those used in the American and Canadian (STV) examples. The motto—or at least one of the mottos—of the ‘yes to AV’ campaign was ‘make your MPs work harder’. Again we see arguments in favour of reform that, despite rather clear partisan stakes in the change, appeal to widely held norms such as efficacy, accountability, and fairness—using the theme that an electoral reform will have a transformative effect on politicians and the political order. An example from the pro-AV arguments runs:

The alternative vote is a small change that will make a big difference – making MPs work harder to get and stay elected, and giving you more of a say. No wonder the old political establishment will say anything to cling on to the old rules. They will say anything to defend a broken system that can let them win power with just one in three voters on their side.

A system that has let them enjoy jobs for life in safe seats. A system that has bred the complacency we all saw in the expenses scandal. The last general election was decided by fewer than 450,000 voters in marginal seats. Two-thirds of our MPs don’t have the majority of voters on their side – so most of us are now represented by MPs that most of us didn’t vote for.

It is not right, and in this referendum you can change the rules. AV takes what works with our current system and improves on it – making MPs work harder to win and keep their jobs.¹³

Although most of these examples of pro-reform arguments might appear to be particularly steeped in hyperbole they are not unusual. These various examples

¹² A similar process produced the top-two measure—Proposition 14—on the California ballot in 2010. That measure was put on the ballot in return for securing the key vote in support of a budget of Abel Maldonado, a moderate Republican.

¹³ Katie Ghose Chair, Yes to Fairer Votes <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12554401>

also reveal a common pro-reform theme: changes in electoral rules will have highly desirable, transformative effects on politics, parties, candidates, and even voters. Politicians, particularly incumbents, are typically cast in starkly negative terms—even in arguments crafted by political incumbents and their allies. Incumbents are often depicted as little more than rent-seekers out for their own interests, or out to serve ‘special’ interests. Proposals for new electoral arrangements are presented as changes that will put in rules that improve the democratic process by correcting the behaviour of politicians and somehow making politics less ‘partisan’ and less ‘political’.

It should not be too surprising that arguments in favour of electoral reform are cast in quite dramatic terms in which some immense disaster will occur if the reform does not pass; or some current crisis will be resolved if the reform is approved. That kind of hyperbole—although clearly contributing to high expectations about the significance of institutional reform—would seem to be part and parcel of any political campaign.

SUBTLE (AND NOT SO SUBTLE) PARTY CUES

Thus far we have said very little in this chapter about who it is that proposes these electoral reforms or about who funds their campaigns. Although voters report that the ballot pamphlets provide very important information, many people may pay only limited attention to the details of each official argument. However, research has established many are particularly interested in knowing who supports a proposal and who is against it (Lupia 1994; Bowler and Donovan 1998). As we noted in Chapter 2, in order for voters to evaluate proposals for changes in electoral rules, they likely require some information about the sponsor of a measure and/or about elites who oppose it. Knowing who is for it and who is against it can be a powerful decision cue. Such information can, if obtained, allow the voter to see the partisan stakes in the proposal, regardless of whether they are well informed about the details of the proposal (Lupia 1994).

In some rare cases, the official arguments advocating changes in election rules are attributed directly to party officials.¹⁴ In other situations such as the proposal for AV in the UK, proponents of the electoral reform may be readily identified with a specific political party. But even in that case parties kept some distance from the official ‘YES! To Fairer Votes’ campaign and the Electoral Reform Society. In the American and Canadian cases discussed above, the links between those making

¹⁴ For example, when rival parties are unified in opposition to a proposed rule change that the parties see as a threat to their autonomy (e.g. changes in candidate nomination rules).

the pro-reform argument and the political parties were often far less apparent. Official pro-electoral reform campaign groups frequently sign their arguments (and run their advertisements) with names that can make it difficult for an average voter to decipher who, exactly, is proposing the reform.

At some level, most changes in electoral rules are likely to alter status quo arrangements that provide some set of parties and incumbents with certain advantages; electoral systems are an archetypical example of Tsebelis's 'redistributive' institutions. By extension, new rules may advantage another set of actors. As noted in Chapter 2, partisan stakes are apparent even with proposals to change minor election procedures. Reform proposals discussed here may be even more consequential. Changing from plurality to PR elections would end the votes-to-seats bias that advantages larger parties over smaller parties (Farrell 2011). Term limits can have adverse effects for a party with a legislative majority, whereas increased turnover of incumbents may advantage a party in the minority. The same might be said for changes in legislative redistricting rules. Rules that allow a majority party the ability to draw legislative districts clearly present an advantage to the party with a majority. Conversely, various proposals that weaken a majority party's control over districting may advantage a minority party. Proposals for 'blanket' and 'top-two' primary systems reveal intra-party conflicts, and these rules changes may affect which faction of a party is able to get their candidates on the general election ballot (Cain and Gerber 2002). Changes in campaign finance rules can be designed to favour some actors over others.

But reform advocates face a bit of a dilemma. We generally do not see overt arguments of the type 'Vote for AV—it's good for Liberal Democrats and bad for Conservatives' or 'Term limits in California will help Republicans get even with Democrats.' Even where referendums are not required, reformers often need some broad measure of popular support for proposed rules changes in order to maintain their legitimacy. Where referendums are used, reformers need a popular *majority* to achieve their desired change. As we showed in our examples, arguments for change and reform are often built on appeals to fairness and on defeating parties, incumbents, and special interests. But electoral rules create winners and losers, and proponents of new rules generally (if not uniformly) stand to benefit from the changes they propose. In order to build a majority coalition in support of change, reformers must convince their fellow partisans (or their closest partisan allies) to support the proposal. Assume, however, that proposals for changing electoral rules frequently come from actors who are disadvantaged by status quo rules—a minority party or some faction of a party. If a political entrepreneur or a reformer interested in trying to bring about change is to find a popular majority in favour of a rules change, they must find support beyond the voters of the party that stands to benefit the most from the proposed change. This means that partisan appeals must often be subtle, or that partisan motives behind the proposals are muted, at least so far as proponents are concerned. A common framing within reform efforts is to argue that it is the other side who are partisan and self-interested.

In Ohio, for example, official arguments for a series of reforms in 2005 were signed by Reform Ohio Now, and the group used the same name in campaign advertising. Filings for Florida's two 2010 redistricting proposals simply listed Fair Districts Florida as the sponsor, and the Fair Districts organization was also used as the sponsor of campaign advertisements. In California and several other states, proponents often enlist co-signers on their arguments who are officials from well regarded groups—groups that have a non-partisan aura. An official from the American Association of Retired People (AARP) and one from the California Alliance for Jobs co-signed the argument in favour of the top-two primary (Proposition 14, 2010). The official argument for California's Proposition 15 (2010), a campaign finance proposal, was signed by the same AARP official who signed Proposition 14 as well as by the president of the rather innocuously labelled California Clean Money Campaign. In Washington state, the argument on behalf of the top-two primary proposal was co-signed by the president of Washington State Grange, a group with roots as an agricultural organization.

Officials from the League of Women Voters are enlisted to co-sign in support of (and opposition to) a variety of electoral reforms, as are academics and former members of the California Fair Political Practices Commission (sometimes on opposite sides of the same reform). Officials from long-standing reform groups (Common Cause) and lesser-known groups (the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights) are also employed by reform advocates. Our point here is that only the most savvy citizens would be able to find partisan cues from most of these sources. An exception might be when one side refers to the nefarious partisan motivations of the other side. Such claims may explicitly identify the party of one side (them) but only implicitly reveal the partisanship of the other (us). While cue-taking is an important and well-understood component of our understanding of how voters navigate direct democracy politics (Lupia 1994; Bowler and Donovan 1998) there is clearly scope for more study of strategies in cue-giving.

Proponents of rules changes also enlist groups that have a history of regularly supporting, endorsing, and financing the candidates of a political party. Arguments signed by officials from these groups may thus offer the public some cues about which party—or which faction of a party—may benefit from the reform proposals. California's political parties opposed reforms to the candidate selection rules (Proposition 14, 2010 and Proposition 198); an influential moderate business-oriented faction of California Republicans promoted the change¹⁵ in response to the influence of social conservatives in the party. The California Chamber of Commerce, a group close to the business wing of the state Republican party, co-signed the argument in favour of the top-two primary proposal.

The use of non-partisan actors to sign arguments and labelling reform groups with innocuous, positive-sounding names do not mean that parties are idle in

¹⁵ <http://www.camajorityreport.com/index.php?module=articles&func=display&aid=4300&ptid=9>

campaigns over electoral reform proposals. Arguments for and against reform measures in Ohio's 2005 official ballot pamphlet were signed, respectively, by Reform Ohio Now and Ohio First. The former group promoted four different reform proposals and raised nearly \$5 million from traditional Democratic donors, including George Soros, People For the American Way, public sector unions, and environmentalists. Their opponents, Ohio First, raised \$5.2 million and were funded by prominent Republican donors (major corporations, energy companies, realtors PAC) and the Ohio Republican Party. The money was spent campaigning for and against a redistricting proposal (Issue 4) that would have replaced partisan control of districting with an independent commission. Democrats supported the proposal because, at the time, Republicans held majorities in both of Ohio's legislative chambers.

Similar divisions were evident in campaign financing behind the yes and no campaigns over redistricting reforms in Florida and California. As in Ohio, proponents and opponents operated through organizations that assumed non-partisan, 'good-government'-sounding labels. In Florida, Republicans held majorities in both legislative chambers. Fair Districts Florida raised over \$8 million to campaign for Amendment 5 and Amendment 6, proposals that would amend the state's constitution and require that districts could not be drawn 'to favor or disfavor an incumbent or political party'. Fair Districts Florida was financed by major Democratic donors, such as the National Education Association and state public employees' unions. Their opponents, Protect Our Vote, raised about \$4 million, mostly from the state Republican Party. In California, where Democrats held solid legislative majorities, a group calling itself Hold Politicians Accountable sponsored a measure that would change from districting by the legislature to districting by an independent commission (Proposition 11, 2008). Arnold Schwarzenegger's affiliates, prominent Republican donors, and others contributed \$16 million to Hold Politicians Accountable. The top contributors to the no campaign's Citizens For Accountability were public sector unions and the California Democratic Party. Although rival partisans were actively funding these campaigns in Ohio, Florida, and California, none of the official ballot arguments in favour of or against the proposals was signed by any partisan figure.

Nearly all rules changes have partisan consequences in terms of who wins and who loses. Yet despite the often intense partisan motivations for reforms, and partisan consequences, popular discussion most often involves inflated claims about how the reform will make the world a better place. Overt party cues can be hard to find because advocates of electoral rules changes have incentives to appeal to popular values and to procedural concerns that resonate with the public: it can be hard to make the argument that a change favouring just one political party satisfies, let alone enhances, 'fairness'. Proponents of change are therefore likely to have incentives to mask their partisan goals. The partisan stakes of change may also be masked somewhat because many reformist groups are genuinely non-partisan—the League of Women Voters and Fairvote in the US, the Electoral

Reform Society in the UK, the Citizen's Assembly in Canada. Such groups may be genuinely motivated by a desire to 'do good', but this doesn't mean there are no partisan consequences. Arguments against reforms, we suggest, are often structured to highlight such consequences.

PUBLIC ARGUMENTS AGAINST REFORM

The characterization of politicians exhibiting problematic behaviour is often one theme shared by proponents and opponents of reform. In one way this is somewhat surprising—both sides in a discussion on political reform cast politics, politicians, and 'special interests' in very unflattering terms. On the other hand, it may not be terribly credible for a modern political campaign to advance the claim that politicians are generally upstanding and hard-working people or that interest-group politics have beneficial effects for society. However, rather than arguing, as proponents do, that new rules will cure the bad behaviour of politicians, arguments against proposals for new electoral rules often seek to define the proponent as partisan, self-interested, and part of the status quo 'problem'. Where proponents of change may have incentives to mask or mute the overtly partisan effects of proposed rules changes, opponents' partisan appeals may be more explicit—in part because suggestions about the partisan stakes of a proposal for change may help define reformers as self-interested partisans. Revelations of partisan motives also allow opponents to limit reformers' ability to make appeals to normative values and procedural concerns.

Just as pro-reformers do, anti-reform arguments offer critical views of politicians as self-interested and behaving poorly. Opponents of a reform may dismiss it as a trick to cover up even more of that kind of behaviour. Where proponents of the top-two primary election reform (California's Proposition 15, 2010) argued it was 'non-partisan,' opponents (party officials) claimed it was 'written in the middle of the night and put on the ballot by a couple of politicians and Arnold Schwarzenegger' so candidates could 'CONCEAL THEIR PARTY AFFILIATION FROM VOTERS' (caps in original). While proponents of the 2010 campaign finance measure (California's Proposition 15) argued their reform would target 'special interests' and 'politicians', opponents of the same measure argued it was a 'TRICK' 'full of loopholes' that let 'candidates raise money from special interests'. Where proponents of term limits (Proposition 140) argued it would target long-serving legislators who had 'cozy' relationships with special interests, opponents of the same measure contended that it was written by 'a downtown Los Angeles politician' who had 'Big Bucks friends including high priced lobbyists'.

In one way this is somewhat surprising—both sides in a discussion on political reform cast politics, politicians, and ‘special interests’ in very unflattering terms. On the other hand, it is, perhaps, not terribly credible for a modern political campaign to advance the claim that politicians are generally upstanding and hard-working people or that interest-group politics have beneficial effects for society. The arguments made by opponents of new electoral rules often distil down to highlighting the partisan and political motives of reformers themselves. Opponents of California’s ‘blanket primary’ reform (Proposition 198) noted that it was ‘a cynical attempt by a few self-serving politicians’ to advance their own careers. The official argument against the 2006 campaign finance proposal (Proposition 89) stressed that the proposal was largely financed by a single interest, the California Nurses Association (CNA). The point was likely not to sway voters by bashing nurses, but to highlight the partisan stakes of the reform. The CNA was a major financier of Democratic candidates in California.

The No to AV campaign in the UK made arguments that were couched in very similar terms to the ones seen in these American campaigns. The No campaign also used appeals to fairness, albeit from a very different perspective than proposed by the Yes campaign, while also trumpeting the theme of holding politicians accountable:

AV is complex and unfair. The winner should be the candidate that comes first, but under AV the candidate who comes second or third can actually be elected. That’s why it is used by just three countries in the world—Fiji, Australia and Papua New Guinea. Voters should decide who the best candidate is, not the voting system. **We can’t afford to let the politicians off the hook by introducing a loser’s charter.**

AV is a politician’s fix. AV leads to more hung parliaments, backroom deals and broken promises like the Lib Dem tuition fees U-turn. Instead of the voters choosing the government, politicians would hold power. Under AV, the only vote that really counts is Nick Clegg’s. **We can’t afford to let the politicians decide who runs our country.**¹⁶

Again, as in California, we see the ‘no’ argument defining the proponents of new rules as ‘politicians’ who will escape accountability of the reform is approved. The official argument against Ohio’s 2005 redistricting measure also stressed a similar accountability theme. The proposed districting commission in Ohio would be staffed with ‘political appointees’ who ‘would never be accountable to Ohio voters’. Opponents of California’s 2008 redistricting reforms made an identical argument about accountability, and also claimed the commission ‘guarantees members of the two political parties more say than the rest of us’.¹⁷ Television

¹⁶ <http://www.no2av.org/why-vote-no/> (emphasis in original)

¹⁷ <http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/past/2008/general/argu-rebut/argu-rebutt11.htm>

ads arguing against the 2009 proposal for STV in British Columbia stressed that STV would ‘remove local accountability of MLAs’.¹⁸

EXPOSING THE PARTISAN STAKES OF REFORM

Where pro-reform campaigns generally provide little explicit information about which parties win or lose under a change in electoral rules, opponents of rules changes may be much more explicit about the partisan stakes. The argument against the AV referendum went further than what we see in proponents’ pro-AV claims about ‘fixing’ what is wrong with politics—it also identified the political party that would benefit from the change. Conservative party direct-mail ads used during the campaign also emphasized the partisan stakes of change. One mailer stressed that ‘supporters of extreme right wing parties like the BNP would get their votes counted many times’. Another ad associated AV with the Labour Party and claimed when Labour used AV for a leadership election David Miliband won support of ‘most Labour MPs and Party Members’ yet was shocked to lose to Ed Miliband in a fourth round of counting.¹⁹

Similarly, arguments against Florida’s redistricting proposal made the partisan stakes quite clear. A Republican majority legislative leader claimed the proposed reform was ‘a stealth agenda funded by the left to do in the courts what they can’t do at the ballot box. This is the top priority of Democrats in 2010.’²⁰ A referendum (Question 1, 2011) to overturn the Maine law that ended election day registration (see Chapter 2) was placed on the ballot by Democratic party allies under the name of Protect Maine Votes.²¹ Protect Maine Votes ran television advertising urging a ‘yes’ vote, making no mention of political parties but stressing that election day registration ‘made voting possible for thousands of hard working Mainers’ and that ‘politicians in Augusta took that right away’.²² Figure 3.1 illustrates that Republican opponents of the referendum²³ were far more blunt in print ads about the partisan stakes than the group Secure Maine’s Ballot ran for the ‘no’ campaign. The ‘no’ campaign highlighted that the ‘yes’ side was funded by donors

¹⁸ <http://www.nostv.org/videos.html>

¹⁹ Copies of these ads are available from the authors.

²⁰ <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/state/floridas-ballot-initiative-to-ban-gerrymandering-starts-to-draw-foes/1032238>

²¹ State of Maine campaign finance records show that Protect Maine Voters raised over \$600,000, with large contributions from unions (MEA, NEA, SEIU, and AFSCME), environmentalists, the Maine Democratic Party, and Donald Sussman, a wealthy patron of liberal causes.

²² <http://protectmainevotes.com/tv-ad>

²³ Maine campaign finance records show the ‘no’ side raised \$45,000 with contributions from the Maine Republican party and county Republican parties.

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• PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISING • PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISING • PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISING • PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISING •

FACT!

IN THE 2010 ELECTIONS, EQUALITY MAINE
(ADVOCACY GROUP FOR GAY/LESBIAN
MARRIAGE) DONATED \$141,000 FOR THE
ELECTION OF DEMOCRAT CANDIDATES
TO THE MAINE LEGISLATURE.*

FACT!

IN THIS ELECTION, EQUALITY MAINE HAS
DONATED \$5000 AND RECEIVED OVER
\$46,000 TO COLLECT SIGNATURES IN
SUPPORT OF REFERENDUM QUESTION #1.*

WHY...

IS THIS SPECIAL
INTEREST GROUP SO INTERESTED IN
REPEALING MAINE ELECTION LAWS?

ON TUESDAY NOVEMBER 8

VOTE NO ON QUESTION #1

SECURE MAINE'S BALLOT
*www.maine.gov/ethics/

FIGURE 3.1 No on Question 1 newspaper ad: Maine, 2011

Note: Ad funded by Maine Republican Party in response to a referendum that would reinstate election day registration. The ad appeared in several local newspapers in the state.

who funded Democratic candidates and who financed a controversial campaign for same-sex marriage two years earlier.

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter we demonstrated how even minor changes in electoral rules precipitate clear partisan divisions among elites. This makes sense, given assumptions about how elites approach the design of electoral institutions. Party elites support rules changes that might be expected to advantage their party, and oppose changes that could be expected to disadvantage it. Yet elites often need popular support to change electoral rules. In Chapter 2 we illustrated that voters, despite having limited interest in politics and limited factual information about political institutions, also appear to evaluate proposals for new electoral rules in terms of partisan advantages. But how do people with limited awareness of the effects of electoral institutions come to see the partisan advantages and disadvantages in changing electoral rules?

In this chapter, we provide numerous examples of how voters might come to see proposals for new electoral arrangements in a partisan light. Party elites and rival elected officials rarely present arguments for and against reforms in stark partisan terms. Institutions clearly have more than simply distributional consequences and so it is quite reasonable to refer to those non-distributional attributes. Still, whether consciously or not, campaigns tend to shy away from casting their own argument in partisan terms, although are often quite happy to cast the rival argument in those terms: pro-reformers cast opponents as partisan, anti-reformers cast proponents as partisan.

Elite arguments in favour of reforms, then, are often framed as tools that promote procedural fairness, methods of fighting ‘special interests’, and means to control the behaviour of politicians. However, elite attempts at building public support for new electoral rules very often generate counter arguments from rival partisan elites—arguments that reveal the partisan motivations of reform proponents.

The fact that proponents frequently promote their reforms with sweeping claims of broad, transformative effects, we suggest, generates excess of optimism about the potential consequences of electoral reforms. Some of this optimism may be tied to the fact that—as part of the reform process—reformers have to engage in a political campaign to woo voters. Still, that political campaign means claims about the beneficial effects of the reform may be overstated. Expectations over the consequences of the reform may therefore be unreasonably high, overly vague, or both.

It is also the case that reform attempts are often couched as a way of fixing problems with politicians themselves and improving the conduct of politics.

The process of politics is frequently characterized as one open to corruption, self-dealing, and rent-seeking. Although this may be a necessary component of any argument it is also one that makes reform groups a continual source of criticism of politics, politicians, and the political process. This drumbeat of criticism seems continual either because the reform has yet to be accomplished and so the group is a long-lasting source of criticism²⁴ or because different reforms keep being proposed, but tend to use similar rhetoric.

In the next chapters we evaluate how (or if) specific electoral reforms lived up to the expectations generated by proponents of the reforms. We examine, in turn, the effects of adopting proportional representation (Chapter 4), legislative term limits (Chapter 5), campaign finance regulations (Chapter 6), and direct democracy (Chapter 7). Clearly this is not an exhaustive list of electoral rules that are fought over by partisans and reformers, but they represent a broad cross-section of electoral rules where scholars, pundits, and reform advocates lead us to expect major consequences when these reforms are adopted. As we see in these chapters, however, the effects of adopting these rules appear quite limited. There is often a sizable gap between the expectations of what institutional reform is supposed to accomplish and what, in the end, results. The existence of such a gap may pose some questions for reformers but it also poses questions for the academic understanding of institutions: institutions may well ‘matter’, but there are times when they may not matter very much, even when we have expected them to matter a lot.

²⁴ For example the US reform organizations FairVote was formed in 1992, the Center for Governmental Studies was formed even earlier in 1983. The UK’s Electoral Reform society was formed in 1884 and is still going strong.

Assessing Effects of Reforms: Changing the Electoral System

Any argument in support of change is likely to criticize the status quo and any argument criticizing the change is likely to argue that it will make things worse. Similarly, many political campaigns, at some point, are quite likely to impugn the motives of opponents. Campaigns for changing electoral rules are likely to contain claims identifying politicians as self-interested merged with the arguments about how new institutional arrangements will alter the incentives for politicians to engage in that kind of behaviour. While this is a common feature of arguments in favour of new electoral rules it is also a commonplace component of rational choice models of politics. Reformers and many academics seem to share an analytical model of what institutions do and how they do it. Pro-reform arguments in particular often bear some similarities to the academic literature on institutions.

THE IMPLICIT INSTITUTIONALISM OF REFORM

Reformers who target electoral rules argue that citizens will respond to the institutional reform. The goals of reforms, at least in the public, political arguments offered by advocates, is to increase the scope of opportunities for citizen engagement in politics, to increase participation, to give citizens a greater 'voice', and to provide means for people to hold officials accountable. Sometimes the pro-reform argument offers no causal link between the proposed electoral rule and the promised outcome. It is unclear, for example, how placing 'none of the above' on ballots as a voting option would 'reduce negative campaigning' as proponents claimed in their official arguments. However, the causal arguments about effects of institutions are often overt in these arguments. New rules for nominating candidates are said by proponents to 'encourage healthy competition in every district' and thus increase voter participation. Term limits advocates likewise linked low voter participation to a lack of competitive races (Benjamin and Malbin 1992:276, 279). We see similar assumptions about institutions in the academic

literature on district-level electoral competition and voter turnout (Cox and Munger 1989; Aldrich 1993). The pro-AV arguments discussed in Chapter 3 make explicit links between the electoral system, safe seats, and political scandals. Again, the academic literature on corruption contains a similar institutional logic. Academic studies of political corruption are often built on the assumption that electoral competition mitigates incentives for public corruption (Huntington 1968; Chang and Golden 2006; Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman 2005; Rose-Ackerman 1978).

There is then, quite some overlap between political arguments used to advocate for electoral reforms and academic research on the effects of electoral institutions. The gap that exist is between conceptual arguments about institutional effects of electoral reform and demonstration of empirical effects. Analytical academic arguments and reformers both share the view that institutions provide incentives and political actors respond. If the reformer's goal is to change the status quo behaviour of politicians or citizens, then different electoral institutions can produce a desired change. But empirical demonstrations of effects of various electoral rules in the academic literature are often underwhelming because there are relatively few opportunities to directly test how a change in electoral rules affects politics and political behaviour.

ASSESSING THE PROMISE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM CHANGE

Given limited opportunities to directly observe changes in rules, empirical work on the effects of electoral rules is largely focused on cross-sectional, cross-national statistical analysis.

Consider the case of proportional representation. Advocates of reform who promote changing from plurality to PR elections claim plurality rules depress participation due to disincentives to voting associated with 'wasted votes'. Many Americans live in areas that are safe for one political party, and thus may see their vote as having little efficacy. One well informed academic advocate of PR thus argues that if PR elections were used in the US, 'public participation in American elections could be expected to rise significantly' (Amy 1993:146). Some champions of PR claim that winner-take-all rules depress interest in politics (Ritchie and Hill 1996) and depress participation in elections because plurality systems discourage political minorities who have no chance of electing like-minded representatives (Amy 1993). The Electoral Reform Society of England advocates for PR because they see plurality elections as wasting votes, leaving Members of Parliament unaccountable, and being 'bad for democracy'. Proportional representation, in contrast, is said to have efficacious effects because it will 'put power

back into the hands of the voters'.¹ By presenting more choices, PR is also expected to encourage more people to have attachments to a political party (Vowles et al. 2006).

Indeed, there are numerous cross-sectional, cross-national studies that establish that turnout is higher in nations with PR (for a review, see Blais 2006). However, even the most sophisticated studies of the effects of PR have difficulty with causality and endogeneity: did nations with traditions of greater civic engagement or more participatory cultures end up adopting PR, or does the adoption of PR have a predictable *causal* effect on engagement and participation, independent of the forces that led to its adoption? A statistically significant effect for PR when estimating turnout in cross-sectional studies may thus not necessarily be substantively significant.

There is also a sense of the 'drunkard's search' in attempts at identifying effects of the adoption of new electoral rules. Studies of the effects of PR, term limits, new primary election rules, and the like tend to focus on easily measurable quantities such as turnout and survey measures of efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. Despite the fact that many reform advocates promote their cause in terms of increasing efficacy and voter participation, these may not always be the most relevant measures to assess whether a reform 'worked'.

A straightforward question becomes: does the adoption of new election rules—rules that might in part be crafted to conform to the interests of some subset of influential political incumbents—really have the potential to produce substantively important changes in how people are oriented toward politics? As we saw, many reform advocates certainly emphasize normative goals such as advancing 'fairness,' reducing the influence of 'special' interests, increasing voter participation, and improvements in the quality of democracy. Results from many academic studies lend some support to the idea that changes in electoral arrangements might have transformative effects. Existing cross-national literature suggests that PR is associated with greater satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997), higher political efficacy (Karp and Banducci 2008), and increased voter turnout (Blais 2006). Some reform advocates claim that changing to PR should increase participation, efficacy, or both. These claims are testable, at least indirectly, by comparing attitudes and turnout in places with PR to places that do not use PR.

More directly, the claim that an election reform will change behaviour or attitudes can be tested by examining trends in voting, turnout, and attitudes in the same place before and after the reform was adopted. Here, and in the following chapters, we examine instances where key reforms have been adopted and where time series of election results or public opinion data are available. Instances of major changes to electoral systems are rather rare. Despite a relatively large

¹ <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/FPTP-bad-for-democracy/>

TABLE 4.1 *Number of assembly electoral systems over time*

Electoral System	1874	1922	1960	2009
Majority rules	20	13	16	16
PR rules		20	23	66
Total countries	20	33	39	82

Sources: Colomer 2005:17; see also Golder 2005

number of lesser-order changes in electoral arrangements, rich public opinion data taken before and after rules changes are uncommon. Nonetheless, we identify several cases where available data allow us to examine how (or if) voting, turnout, or voter attitudes have changed after proportional electoral rules were adopted. Our criterion is straightforward: we can conclude that reform was consequential if we observe changes in behaviour or attitudes after the reform that are consistent with expectations derived from existing literature and from reform advocates.

Changing an electoral system can produce significant effects within a political system:

Some systems encourage, or even enforce, the formation of political parties; others recognize only individual candidates. The type of party system which develops, in particular the number and the relative sizes of political parties in the legislature, is heavily influenced by the electoral system. So is the internal cohesion and discipline of parties: some systems may encourage factionalism, where different wings of one party are constantly at odds with each other, while another system might encourage parties to speak with one voice and suppress dissent. Electoral systems can also influence the way parties campaign and the way political elites behave, thus helping to determine the broader political climate; they may encourage, or retard, the forging of alliances between parties; and they can provide incentives for parties and groups to be broadly based and accommodating, or to base themselves on narrow appeals to ethnicity or kinship ties. (IDEA 2005:6)

The choice of an electoral system is therefore consequential and changes in electoral systems are important. This is not to say that nations do not change their electoral system. Table 4.1 presents data from Colomer (2005) that give some idea of both the frequency and direction of changes that have taken place in democratic systems. Work by Golder (2005) reaches a slightly different conclusion on the kinds of changes² but still points up the frequency of change. Fewer assemblies were elected with majoritarian/plurality rules by the early 21st century than were in the late 19th century, and the proportion of assemblies elected under PR increased substantially over time. Changing an electoral system can produce

² Golder's work considers elections rather than countries and considers a wide range of countries. His work also points to the growing complexity of electoral systems.

major consequences for party systems, and it is something that several countries have done at one time or another.

The trend towards proportionality identified by Colomer is especially interesting since, in principle, a move from a plurality to a proportional system means that some parties are—in effect—choosing to share power. This puzzle was studied by Boix (1999). Boix posits that current winners change the system in order to minimize their losses in future years. This argument has since attracted criticism (e.g. Andrews and Jackman 2005; Blais et al. 2005) but regardless of motives a change to proportionality should produce changes in electoral politics. In particular, PR should increase the number of parties, and many claim it should also increase turnout and efficacy.

Gosnell noted the relationship between turnout and proportionality as long ago as 1930. Since then other studies have addressed the issue. It is all very well to say that turnout will ‘increase’ as a consequence of moving to a proportional system—but do we have a sense of how much of an increase we will see? Table 4.2 reports findings from the literature on this topic. The literature is generally supportive of the idea that PR is associated with greater turnout. The findings echo studies of the use of ‘vote by mail’ in that the effect seems to be significant, but less than 10 per cent. Moreover, there is some evidence that the effect of the electoral system interacts with personal cognitive resources of voters (Perea 2002) such that some voters are more likely to vote as a consequence of proportionality than others.

TABLE 4.2 *Findings from the literature on turnout and proportionality*

Study	Cases/data	Findings in relation to proportionality and turnout
Jackman 1987	1960s–1970s including US	A continuous measure of proportionality positively related to turnout
Blais and Carty 1990	24 countries 1919 onwards excluding US	8% turnout compared to plurality systems
Blais and Dobrzynska 1998	91 countries 1972–1995	3% turnout increase
Perea 2002	15 countries	An interaction between individual resources and institutions. Those with low level of resources will not turn out even if electoral threshold changes quite a lot (p.663)
Geys 2006	Meta analysis of 14 studies including 71 estimates of the relationship	70% of the estimates demonstrate a positive effect of proportionality
Selb 2009	3,194 electoral districts for 31 elections in 20 countries	‘turnout differences between majoritarian and PR systems are indeed a consequence of more variable local patterns of competition in former’ (p.544)

Much of the work assessing PR and turnout is cross-national and cross-sectional in scope. Even the most sophisticated statistical studies of the ‘effects’ of PR have difficulty with questions about causality and endogeneity. Did nations with traditions of greater civic engagement or more participatory cultures or a wider range of social cleavages end up adopting PR, or does the adoption of PR have a predictable causal effect on engagement and participation, independent of the forces that led to its adoption? But, leaving these issues of causality to one side for a moment, PR is expected to hold a number of different consequences for a political system. First and foremost, we should see an increase in political parties once PR is adopted. But a number of other consequences should follow on from this. More parties may lead to more campaign activity, which could stimulate voter interest over the long haul. Simply having new choices on a ballot representing new perspectives may empower people who were not engaged with long-established, major parties. This could make people who were previously not voting become more interested, and thus make them more likely to vote. As noted above, nations with PR rules have higher turnout (see Blais 2006 for review). Cross-national research also demonstrates that people report more attachments to parties and higher political efficacy in nations that use PR, and that supporters of smaller parties are more efficacious, and more likely to vote in PR nations, than in places using plurality/majoritarian rules (Banducci and Karp 2008).³ Yet we know very little about what happens in nations that change from plurality to PR rules. We begin assessing this by examining the most basic expectation about the effects of PR—that it should increase the number of political parties winning representation.

The 1994 adoption of PR (MMP) in New Zealand is the canonical example of electoral system change. It is clear that adoption of a new electoral formula affected the number of parties in parliament and in government.⁴ Figure 4.1 shows the growth in number of parties in the NZ Parliament from 1980 to 2011 and the vote share for ‘minor’ parties that could rarely—if ever—win seats under plurality rules used in elections prior to 1996. The right-side scale marks minor party (not Labour or National) vote share, the left-side scale marks the number of parties winning at least one seat. Trends in Figure 4.1 demonstrate that it would be a mistake to assume that changes in the number of parties in Parliament was a consequence only of changing the electoral system. It is another reminder of the

³ This begs the question of how to sample from the small pool of minor party supporters in nations with plurality systems.

⁴ Even in these cases, causation is not crystal clear. Prior to the adoption of PR for Australia’s Federal Senate seats in 1949, the average number of minor parties per state was increasing in both House and Senate races. This trend continued beyond 1949 for both chambers. Minor parties in Australia posted similar (upward) trends in support over time in the PR elected Senate and the majoritarian (AV) elected House. Prior to adoption of PR in New Zealand, third parties received 30 per cent support in 1993. After the adoption in 1996 support for third parties went up to 38 per cent, but dropped back to 31 per cent in 1999. By 2005 and 2008 third parties received support under PR at levels similar to what were posted in 1978 and 1981 under plurality.

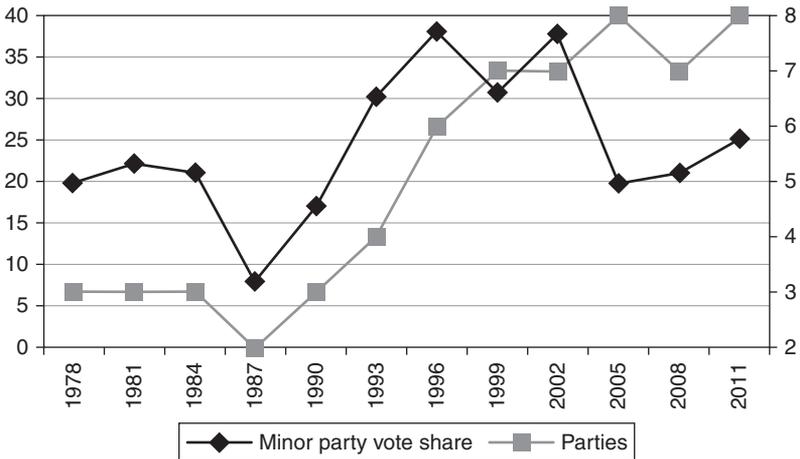


FIGURE 4.1 Minor party vote share and number of parties, New Zealand before and after electoral system change

Note: Minor party vote share for independents and parties other than Labour and National.

Source: New Zealand Electoral Commission

importance of social structures as well as institutions (Clark and Golder 2006). The new electoral system may have provided a sufficient condition for party system change in New Zealand—but it was not a necessary condition for change. Minor parties were already receiving support in New Zealand prior to adoption of MMP. Despite Duverger's Law, minor parties received 30 per cent support in 1993 under plurality voting. After the adoption of MMP in 1996, support for third parties went up to 38 per cent, but dropped back to 31 per cent in 1999. By 2011 New Zealand's minor parties received support under PR at levels similar to what was posted in 1978 and 1981 under plurality. Put differently, a crude application of Duverger would have us expect a more sustained increase in voting for smaller parties after the adoption of MMP. However, the attitudes, behaviour, and conditions that brought people to vote for smaller parties in New Zealand already existed under plurality and cannot easily be attributed to the adoption of MMP. The change in electoral system may have institutionalized (in the party system) pre-existing social conditions.

Social change can also bring about changes in a party system. Indeed, much of the recent work on Duverger's law (e.g. Clark and Golder 2006) stresses the interaction between electoral system and social system both in Duverger's original work and in the actual empirical results of the 'received version' of Duverger. One straightforward example comes from Germany, where the electoral system has remained largely unchanged since the end of the Second World War yet the party system has undergone quite dramatic change since reunification: what seemed to

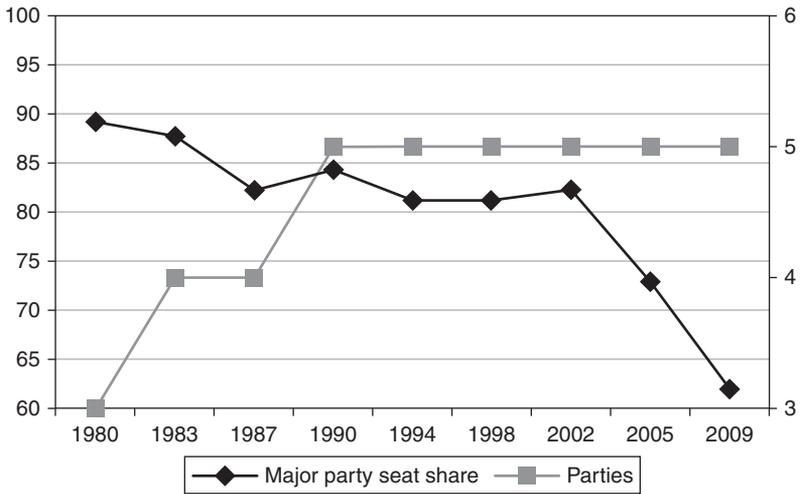


FIGURE 4.2 Major party vote share and number of parties, Germany 1979–2009

be a somewhat stable three-party system of CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD is now a five-party system with the same electoral system. A jump from three to five parties in the legislatures may not seem especially dramatic, especially when compared to the changes in New Zealand's party system and considering the size of the exogenous shock imparted by reunification in 1990. But just looking at the change in number of parties understates the change in the German party system. Figure 4.2 displays another way of looking at changes in the system. The drop in the vote share of the two largest parties (the right-side scale of Figure 4.2 marks the SPD and CDU/CSU vote combined; the left side the number of parties) has been especially dramatic fifteen years after reunification. The exogenous shock of reunification may well be the cause of most of the change in the party system, but what is clear is that the increase in the number of parties in the Bundestag was not brought about by electoral system change.

Perhaps what is more troubling for a purely institutional account is that changes in electoral system may not produce change in party system. Here we can turn to Australia to provide examples that illustrate this point. South Australia, West Australia, and Victoria have elected the upper chamber of their state legislatures (the Legislative Council) for many decades, with New South Wales moving from an appointed to elected Council in 1978.⁵ Different states adopted different

⁵ The states differ in the proportionality of their electoral rules. NSW has twenty-one seats per district, South Australia has eleven, Western Australia has between five and seven, and Victoria five. Queensland has had no Legislative Council since 1921. Legislative Council candidates in Tasmania typically are not listed with a party label.

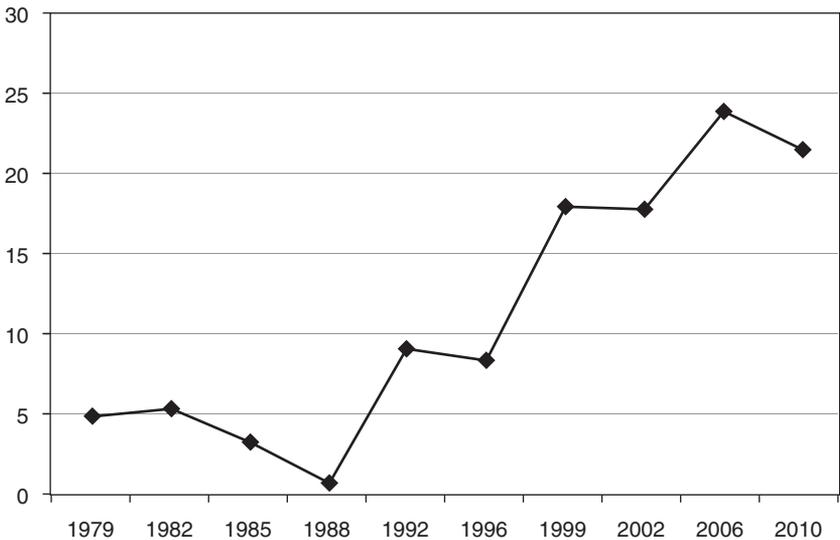


FIGURE 4.3 Support for minor parties, Victoria Legislative Council Elections 1979–2010

Note: Victoria changed from majoritarian AV to proportional representation (STV) in 2006. First preference vote share for non-Labor, non-coalition parties show.

electoral rules. NSW began electing its Legislative Council with PR, whereas elections in South Australia, West Australia, and Victoria were using majoritarian preference voting in the 1970s. Each of these latter states subsequently changed to proportional (STV) representation (South Australia in 1975, West Australia in 1989, and Victoria in 2006). This provides a natural experiment for assessing how differences in election systems across similar contexts, and changes in these electoral systems, might affect political behaviour. Figures 4.3 to 4.6 display patterns from this natural experiment. If PR empowers some people by allowing them to cast a more efficacious vote, we should see support for smaller parties spike upon adoption of PR and remain at higher levels afterwards. Recall from earlier chapters that PR advocates claim that proportionality gives voters new opportunities and incentives to express meaningful preferences for smaller parties—particularly for voters who had previously resisted supporting their most preferred party, per Duverger, out of fear of wasting their vote. PR advocates also note that once empowered to express their real preferences, these voters will become more efficacious.

As expected, the distribution of seats in these assemblies was altered by the change to PR. No minor party candidates were elected to the West Australian, South Australia, or Victorian legislative councils under majoritarian voting. A small number of Greens, Democrats, independents, and others have been

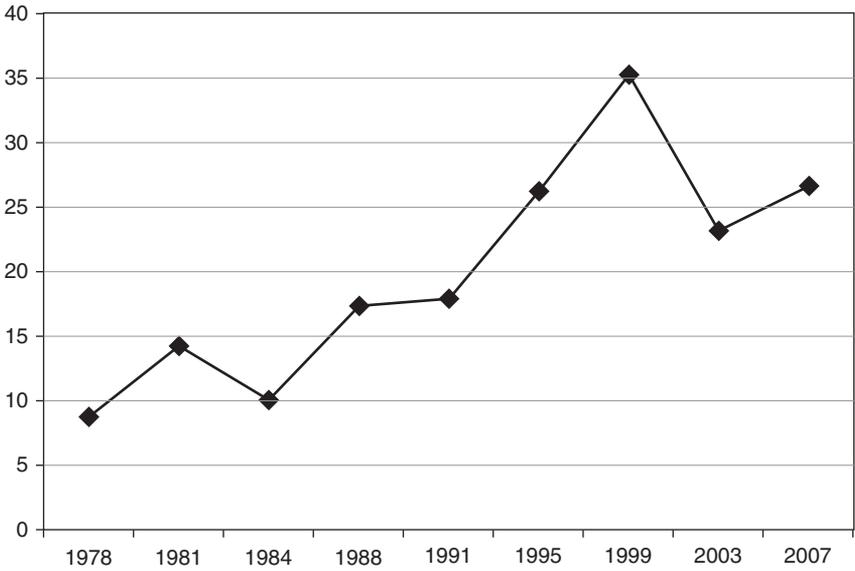


FIGURE 4.4 Support for minor parties, New South Wales Legislative Council Elections 1978–2011

Note: New South Wales used proportional representation (STV) at each election since 1978. First preference vote share for non-Labor, non-coalition parties show.

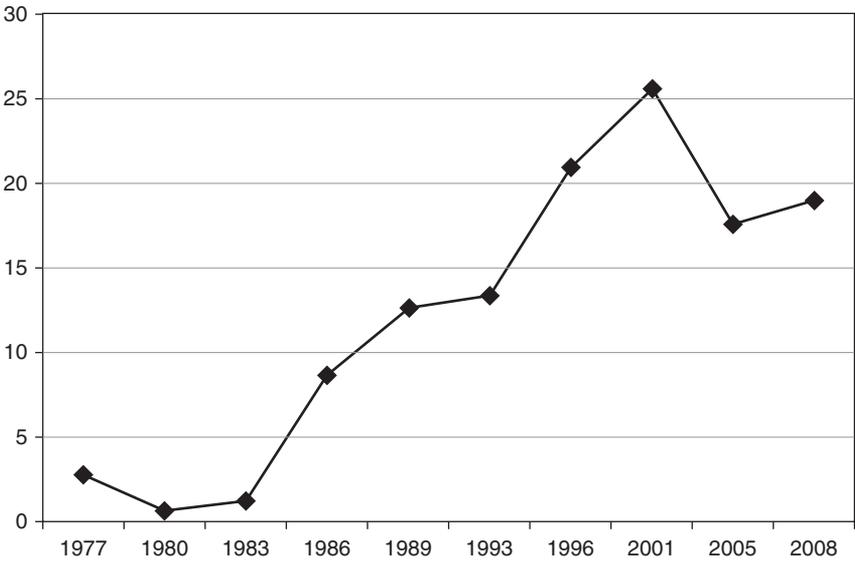


FIGURE 4.5 Support for minor parties, Western Australia Legislative Council Elections 1977–2008

Note: Western Australia changed from majoritarian AV to proportional representation (STV) in 1989. First preference vote share for non-Labor, non-coalition parties show.

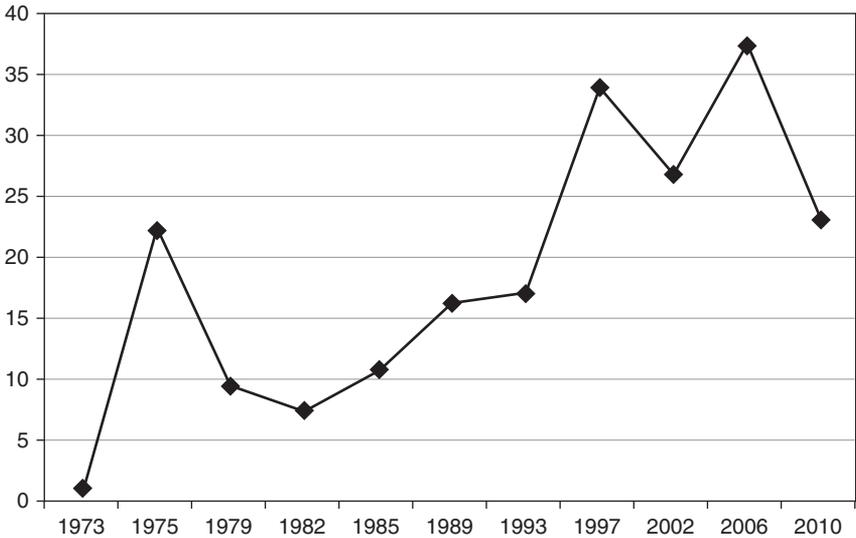


FIGURE 4.6 Support for minor parties, South Australia Legislative Council 1973–2010

Note: South Australia changed from majoritarian AV to proportional representation (STV) in 1975. First preference vote share for non-Labor, non-coalition parties show.

elected in these states under PR, and votes-to-seats distortions are less pronounced.⁶

One striking feature about the effects of changing to PR in these Australian states is that trends in support for smaller parties is largely identical in each state. Independent of election system, and independent of when most states changed their election system, we see a gradual increase in support for minor parties since the 1970s. Apart from the spike in voter support for third parties in South Australia that occurred upon adoption of PR in 1975, nothing in these figures suggests there were major changes in voter behaviour caused by adoption of PR. Support for third-party candidates was growing at about the same rate in Victoria under majoritarian rules (prior to 2006) as it was in New South Wales, which used proportional voting since 1978. Voters were increasingly casting ballots for third parties in West Australia under majoritarian rules, and the trend continued after the change to STV in 1989.⁷ This muted effect of election system change on voting for smaller parties is similar to the pattern in New Zealand.

⁶ The states differ in how proportional their rules are. NSW has twenty-one seats per district; South Australia has eleven, West Australia five to seven, and Victoria five.

⁷ The increase in support for minor parties across time in these Australian state elections mirrors trends in national standings of the parties.

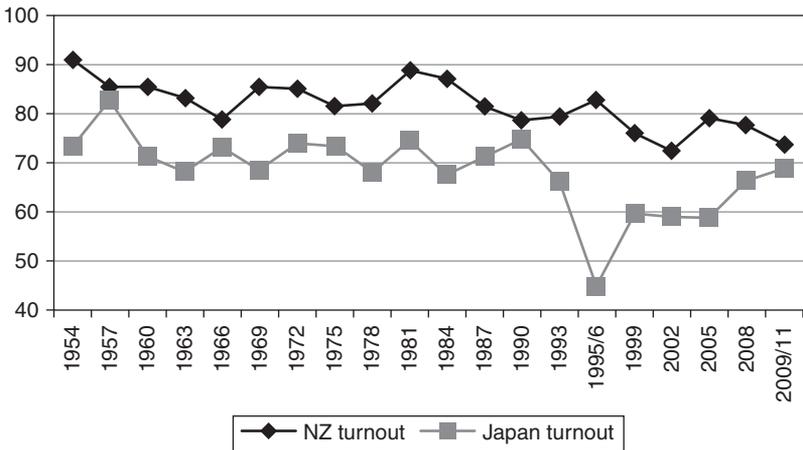


FIGURE 4.7 Turnout in Japan and New Zealand before and after electoral system change 1954–2011

Sources: IDEA database; New Zealand Electoral Commission

Note: New Zealand's first election under MMP was 1996. Japan changed from SNTV to a more proportional system in 1995.

So much for support for smaller parties—what about voter turnout? Is there evidence that switching to PR had the anticipated effects on citizen's attitudes and behaviour? Given these very subtle differences (if any) in support for small parties associated with adopting proportional voting rules, it is difficult to expect major changes in individual-level attitudes and participation caused by these reforms. Turnout was up modestly in New Zealand's first PR election of 1996, but the two subsequent elections reached historical low points for voter participation. Figure 4.7 illustrates that the adoption of PR in New Zealand did nothing to arrest a long-term decline in voter turnout—the same long-term decline in turnout that is occurring in many other democracies. Figure 4.7 also displays the trend in voter participation in Japan, a nation that changed to a more proportional system in 1995 with the hope that reform would re-engage citizens put off by political corruption associated with the former, candidate-centric Single Non-Transferable Vote electoral system (Sakamoto 1999).⁸ As with New Zealand, turnout continued a downward trend despite the new election system.

Two additional examples also display the nuances of the impact of PR. One is the United Kingdom's move to regional lists for European Parliament elections from 1999 onwards. Figure 4.8 plots the trend in UK turnout for EP elections.

⁸ Japan switched to a mixed-member system for the Diet that combined 300 plurality seats with 200 closed-list PR seats.

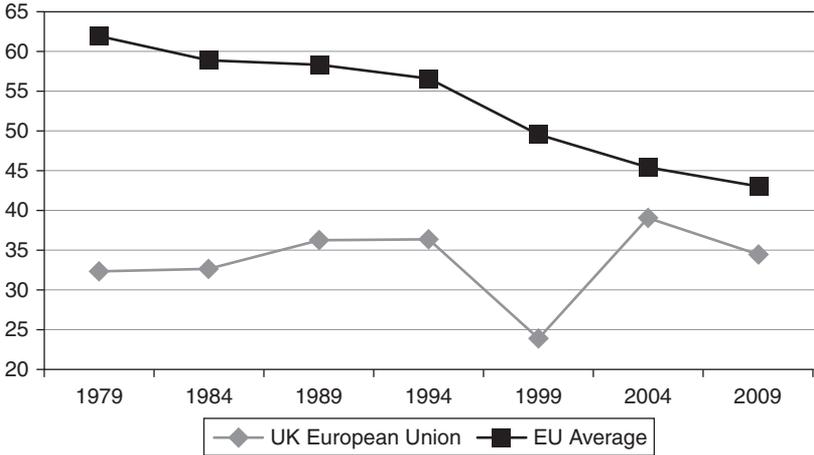


FIGURE 4.8 Turnout in European Parliament Elections before and after electoral system change in the United Kingdom

Note: The UK began conducting EP elections under PR in 1999.

The move to PR for the 1999 election coincided with the lowest level of UK voter turnout at any EP election. Perhaps some confusion on the part of voters faced by a new PR election system might provide an explanation for that low point. The subsequent recovery in UK EP turnout since 1999 would seem to support the idea that PR increases turnout. However, 2004 saw UK local elections being held at the same time as the EP elections and also an experiment in vote by mail that resulted in a marked increase in turnout in the regions that held mail ballots. Once again, Figure 4.8 suggests an underwhelming relationship between PR and voter turnout.

Perhaps a clearer test for the effect of PR on turnout would be to show the reverse effect: that is, a move from PR to a plurality/districted system corresponds with a decline in turnout. Italy provides an example of this shift (Figure 4.9), and the trends in turnout since the 1980s give some credence to that argument. Between the two red lines (1993–2005) Italy's elections had a component of single-member districts and turnout fell, and did so, apparently, faster than any previous decline. True, the period immediately prior to this change had seen a political crisis with the Italian state tied to massive corruption scandals and so the effects of changing from a PR system to a less proportional electoral system are difficult to disentangle from that context. Still, the initial post-reform pattern is as one would expect if PR increases turnout. After 2005, however, Italy moved back to a fully proportional system and, rather than increase to former levels, turnout continued to decline—just as turnout declined in New Zealand and Japan after the change toward proportionality.

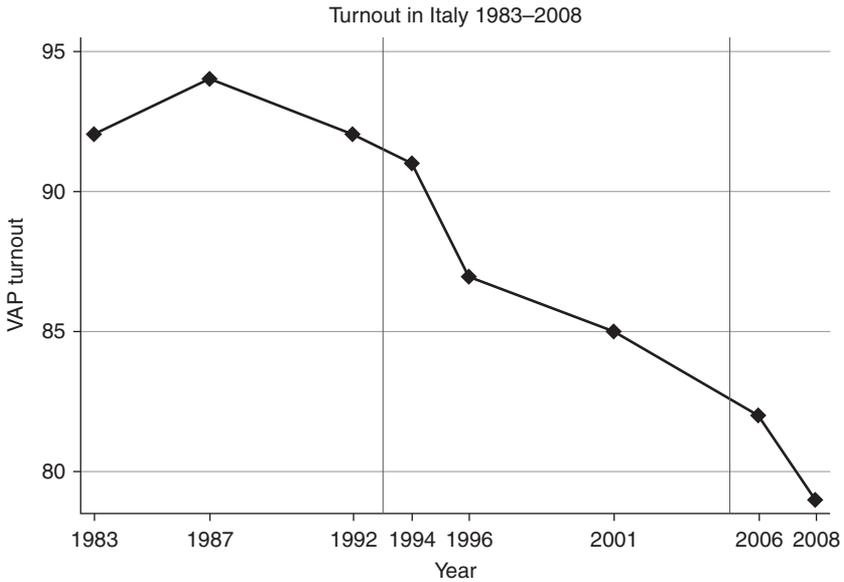


FIGURE 4.9 The effect of Italy's change . . . and change back

Turnout is just one of the measures by which we judge popular affect towards a political and party system. There are other measures, too, and some show positive effects as a consequence of electoral system reform. There is some evidence, for example, from New Zealand showing that the adoption of the new PR (MMP) electoral system corresponded with changes in behaviour and attitudes about politics, but the results are a mixed bag when compared to the expectations of reform advocates. In the short term, there was a general shift of opinions among citizens in New Zealand toward greater efficacy and greater perceptions that government was responsive on some measures—particularly for political minorities (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 1999).

Despite what PR advocates suggest, attachments to parties eroded gradually in New Zealand over the two consecutive elections held after 1996, never coming close to the levels recorded prior to 1990 (Aimer and Vowles 2003). Aggregate measures of satisfaction with democracy were lower at the two elections conducted after 1996. There were also positive signs: more people trusted political parties after 1996 than before, fewer said that government was run by a few big interests, fewer said MPs were out of touch, and substantially fewer (17 per cent) said they had no say two elections after PR was adopted (Vowles et al. 2006).

Some of these effects are relatively modest,⁹ and others are difficult to separate out from economic trends that correlate with trust and satisfaction.¹⁰

DISCUSSION

The adoption of proportional election rules may well produce increases in the numbers of parties represented in the legislature. When we examine trends in voting, turnout, and attitudes in places that adopted PR, however, the apparent effect of PR appears rather muted. Most of the results presented in this chapter contradict what is reported in cross-national studies of the effects of PR on voting. But cross-sectional data—as we noted above—has the problem of endogeneity that can really only be addressed by looking over time. Electoral systems plainly have consequences in terms of numbers of parties, but they are not the only source of those consequences. Furthermore, the downstream consequences of the effects of an increase in numbers of political parties on the ways in which citizens interact with the political system (e.g. on engagement via turnout) appear much more limited than we might expect given the academic literature, and given claims made by advocates of reforms.

Looking at the effects of shifts to and from PR is complicated by the fact that—other than the case of New Zealand in 1996—there are very few (if any) examples of cases where the change was well documented with opinion survey data collected before and after the electoral system change. In the case of New Zealand, there is only limited evidence that the ‘new’ electoral system lives up to expectations and arguments made by pro-reform advocates. The other examples we have looked at—from Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the UK—provide a consistent pattern of evidence: one of muddiness and null effects of electoral system reform. The cases examined here are consistent in showing no clear-cut and clean effects of electoral system change.

The lack of clear consequences of institutional reform is not entirely surprising. We noted in this chapter that political and social conditions that reforms are expected to affect can predate changes in electoral rules. For example, voting for minor parties increases before reforms that gave representation to those parties. Furthermore, our discussion in Chapter 2 noted that electoral reforms should be considered in terms of the influence that self-interested, partisan incumbents have over how reforms are crafted and implemented. Recall also (Chapter 3) that

⁹ For example, 61 per cent said MPs were out of touch in 1993; 52 per cent said so in 1999.

¹⁰ A long-run decline from double-digit unemployment levels in New Zealand began around 1990 and continued through 2006. Likewise, economic growth was negative during a severe recession from 1991 to 1992, then began to recover in 1993.

expectations about the effects of electoral reforms may be inflated by the political rhetoric used to promote reform. We also demonstrated that citizens evaluate electoral reforms through a lens of partisan self-interest.

We return to these points in Chapter 8, but they are worth stressing as we consider the possible effects of other reforms in subsequent chapters. If election reforms are shaped substantially by incumbents who are responding to political and social pressure for 'reform', and if expectations about the effects of reforms are largely inflated, why would we expect electoral reforms to alter the status quo in ways that fundamentally change how citizens are oriented to politics? But, of course, we have only examined a handful of cases of reform in this chapter. What we need to do, then, is look elsewhere for examples of changes in other electoral rules.

Campaign Finance Reform: a Collection of Null Results

Campaign finance rules provide another example of institutional reform relating to elections. While campaign finance rules may not be an example that has as straightforward a link between votes and seats as PR, campaign finance is an issue that voters often care about and, because money is important to campaigning and elections, rules on campaign finance should have consequences for elections. After all, campaign spending is a factor that affects electoral outcomes and the structuring of campaigns: how much money is needed, where it can be raised, and how it can be spent all have the capacity to shape elections. Campaign finance regulations thus have the potential to structure the conduct of elections in important ways. Campaign finance, moreover, may have the capacity to resonate with citizens in ways other electoral rules do not. As noted in Chapter 3, concern about how ‘big money’ corrupts politicians and about the need to control the undue influence of ‘special interests’ are major themes used to advance a wide range of electoral reforms—but these themes are particularly evident in debates over campaign finance. In most settings, however, campaign finance rules are largely crafted by incumbents. What, then, might be the consequences of adopting rules that are said to control the role of money in politics?

Nations differ quite markedly in their campaign finance laws, but many laws share an underlying concern about the role of money in politics: the assumption that money corrupts and provides an ever-present temptation for politicians. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is no one settled regulatory structure. Van Biezen and Kopecky illustrate the variety of national rules measured across three dimensions. These dimensions consist of availability of public funding for parties, the presence of a system of regulation of party finances, and constitutional recognition of political parties (van Biezen and Kopecky 2007:242–4).

These three dimensions of public finance are related to a broader argument of van Biezen in which political parties are seen as public utilities. That is, political parties are organizations regulated by government that are also supported by government via public subsidies for campaigns, as necessary components of electoral democracies (van Biezen 2004). Still, even given a relatively simple classification across dimensions in which nations are coded according to the presence or absence of public funding (yes/no), the variety of regularity

frameworks is striking. Among twenty-two established democracies, 77 per cent are classified as having public funding, and 73 per cent are classified as having a system of regulation of party finance (van Biezen and Kopecky 2007:242). Were we to add in gradations of party finance—how generous the subsidy and so on—the variations would increase even further.

Although there is considerable variation in legal and regulatory context there is less variation in the concerns voters and reformers express about the role of money in politics and in particular the ways in which special or privileged interests can use money to gain their own way improperly or at the expense of public interests. For example:

we should recognise that there is a strong public perception amongst all the European countries that large donations are not done without a purpose. Indeed, there is a perception that large donations which are coming from companies, interest groups, rich individuals, they are done to meet short-term goals and it is buying access to information, buying access to decisions, there is a perception like that.¹

Advocates of campaign finance regulations push to limit the effects of money on politics in several different ways. There are efforts towards greater transparency so that donors and donations can be recognized out in the open. There are pushes towards support from the public purse, both as recognition of the public utility of parties as well as an attempt to limit the need for private donors. There are also efforts towards controlling money directly by imposing caps on spending and/or caps on the size of contributions—the former reduce the need for cash, the latter reduce the scope for any one donor to have disproportionate influence over a candidate or party.

Reformers advance claims on behalf of these and similar regulations in terms of mitigating the problem of corruption. Take, for example, the argument in support of greater public finance for campaigns in the US. Under one proposed scheme, in exchange for public subsidies candidates commit to voluntarily raising small donations from a large number of individuals—rather than a smaller number of large donations from a few donors. In the US this is advocated by the group Fair Elections:

Fair Elections is a practical, proven reform that puts voters in control of elections. Rather than being forced to rely on special interest donors to pay for their campaigns, candidates have the opportunity to raise small donations from their grassroots base to qualify for Fair Elections funding, which ends their reliance on special interest campaign cash. Being freed from the money

¹ Comments of Dr Marcin Walecki, Chief of Democratic Governance, OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Warsaw Committee on Standards in Public Life Inquiry into Political Party Funding: International Evidence. April 2011 at 22 http://www.public-standards.org.uk/Library/International_Panel.pdf

chase means they have more time to spend with constituents, talking about issues that matter to them. When they enter office, they can consider legislation on the merits, without worrying about whether they are pleasing well heeled donors and lobbyists. Fair Elections would return our government to one that is of, by, and for the people—not bought and paid for by special interests.²

Some US states, notably Arizona, have a version of this law already in effect while outside the US many nations have systems of public subsidies that give parties money generally on a per-vote-won basis (Van Biezen and Kopecky 2007). Not all voters, however, are fully persuaded that public funding is the answer to problems associated with money in elections. A report on public opinion in relation to public funding for UK political parties conducted for the Committee on Standards in Public Life showed the familiar cynicism about the corrupting role of money in politics, with 85 per cent of respondents seeing politicians as very often or sometimes doing special favours for those who make very large donations (Rose 2011:4–5). Yet only 40 per cent—a plurality but not a majority—of respondents were supportive of increasing state funding to political parties; 30 per cent remained opposed (Rose 2011:8).

Elsewhere, opposition to public funding has been more pronounced. California's Proposition 15 in June 2010, for example, sought to introduce a system of public support for candidates. The argument in favour was consistent with other arguments noted above:

YES on 15: The amount of money in politics is outrageous and corrupts the system. The League of Women Voters of California says Proposition 15 will get politicians out of the fundraising game so they will focus on California's priorities. Elections should be won, not bought by special interests.³

Despite very little spending against the measure, the proposal was defeated, with 57 per cent of voters saying no. A large part of the 'no' vote seemed to be related to voter objections to giving tax dollars to politicians. That is, California voters were unpersuaded that parties were public utilities deserving of taxpayer support. But California voters, like voters everywhere, seem to be persuaded that money provides a harmful link between special interests and politicians. In 2000, for example, Californians supported Proposition 34—a law that limited private contributions to candidates. The argument in favour of Proposition 34 claimed it would 'put the brake on special interest dollars' and noted that 'Proposition 34 is real reform that puts voters not special interests back in charge of California's political process.'⁴

² <http://www.publiccampaign.org/fair-facts> accessed 12 December 2011

³ Argument in favour of Proposition 15 <http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/past/2010/primary/propositions/15/>

⁴ http://vote2000.sos.ca.gov/VoterGuide/text/text_summary_34.htm

THE EFFICACY OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORMS

Direct democracy in the US provides what may seem a rare opportunity for citizens—rather than incumbent elected officials—to design campaign finance rules (Pippen et al. 2002). One of the patterns we see with citizen-initiated reform efforts in the American states, however, is that politicians implement and adapt to rules that might otherwise constrain them, and so undermine reform efforts (Gerber et al. 2001). This is a feature of institutional reform in general, as actors respond to pressure for new rules strategically. Strategic adaptation is clearly seen with campaign finance rules. A study of legislative floor voting on bills overturning voter-approved initiatives found that representatives generally voted on bills in a manner consistent with how people in their district voted on similar initiatives—however, this was not the case with campaign finance regulations. Legislators ignored their constituents and voted to overturn voter-approved campaign finance regulations (Smith 2001). Even rules that stay in place, such as bans on large donations, may be hard to police since one potential large donation may be broken down and bundled into parcels of smaller ones:

For example, you could make donations by family and have five or ten members of the family making donations; you can have small companies contributing on behalf of one larger group, interest group. So they are difficult to be properly enforced.⁵

Elected officials can also adapt to pressure for change by assuming the role of reformer. Although California's Proposition 34 was approved by voters, it was placed on the ballot as a legislative referendum. In other words, the campaign finance rules were written by incumbent elected officials. Unsurprisingly, the measure did little to rein in contributions or expenditures because it allowed candidates and their supporters to set up different kinds of fundraising committees such as ones that ostensibly raised money for ballot propositions, for 'legal defence', and committees that raised money for races the candidate was not running for (FPPC 2009:5). Some argued that this may well have been an intention of the law in the first place since Proposition 34 was proposed by legislators themselves and because it replaced a much tougher initiative measure—Proposition 208—that voters had passed in 1996. The League of Women Voters called Proposition 34 a 'phony campaign reform measure'.⁶ The reform group Common Cause was similarly sceptical. Proposition 34 may

⁵ Comments of Dr Marcin Walecki, Chief of Democratic Governance, OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Warsaw Committee on Standards in Public Life Inquiry into Political Party Funding: International Evidence. April 2011 at 22 http://www.public-standards.org.uk/Library/International_Panel.pdf

⁶ <http://ca.lwv.org/action/prop0011/prop34.html>

have actually increased spending in legislative elections because there were so many loopholes built into the law (FPPC 2009).

In a separate, 2008, report the state's Fair Political Practices Committee examined another loophole in Proposition 34 campaign finance law, so-called 'independent expenditures'. These kinds of expenditures are, in the US at least, largely seen as protected under First Amendment rules. In theory committees can spend money advocating a particular issue or candidate, provided—at least in California—they do not coordinate with the candidate. In practice, however, such coordination is difficult to prove (FPPC 2008:5). Independent expenditures have been sizable, and can be quite one-sided. The 2008 report noted ten 'independent expenditure' committees that spent over \$40 million in ways that were both politically significant yet hard to police. The Fair Political Practices Commission report gives several examples including:

Californians for a Better Government, A Coalition of Firefighters, Deputy Sheriffs, Teachers, Home Builders and Developers only participated in the 2006 Democratic gubernatorial primary election. All \$9,855,582 spent by the committee was for one candidate—California State Treasurer Phil Angelides. More than 80% of the committee's contributions came from Angelo Tsakopoulos and Eleni Tsakopoulos-Kounalakis.

Alliance for a Better California, Educators, Firefighters, School Employees, Health Care Givers and Labor Organizations spent \$5,245,109 on independent expenditures in the 2006 general election supporting California State Treasurer Phil Angelides and opposing Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Contributors to the Alliance for a Better California included: California Teachers Association (\$2,750,000), California State Council of Service Employees Committee (\$1,000,000) and SEIU Local 1000—California State Employees Association (\$1,000,000). (FPPC, 2008 11–12)

The examples in the report—including these two—show that independent expenditures operate in ways that mean candidates and campaigns can sidestep other spending restrictions. Although this discussion might seem overly dependent on the single case of California, it illustrates how politicians can strategically adapt to popular pressure for electoral reforms. The California example is not unique. In 1992, during growing popular discontent with rising campaign expenses, a legislator qualified a campaign finance initiative (Initiative 134) for the Washington state ballot. Although 73 per cent of voters approved the measure, it is not clear they anticipated that the new rules provided for unlimited contributions to legislative caucus organizations, legislative district party organizations, and state party organizations (Donovan 2004).

The federal Bi-Partisan Campaign Finance Reform Bill of 2002 (BCRA, also known as the McCain–Feingold bill⁷) might also be seen as strategic adaptation by politicians

⁷ The law that actually passed was known as the Shays–Meehan bill.

who faced popular discontent over elections. Opinion polls at the time showed overwhelming public discontent with American campaign finance practices. One poll from 2001 asked Americans how they would ‘describe the current way in which candidates for federal office raise money’. Forty-six per cent responded that fundraising practices were ‘unethical,’ 31 per cent described campaign fundraising as ‘corrupt’ and only 15 per cent replied that ‘nothing was seriously wrong’ (Donovan and Bowler 2004:153). BCRA was, in part, a legislative response to public cynicism over the role that unregulated ‘soft money’ was playing in US elections. Nearly every Democrat in Congress voted for the bill, but most congressional Republicans opposed it. President Bush signed BCRA into law, but his signing statement suggests that he expected (correctly) that the law would eventually be rejected by the US Supreme Court.⁸

If these reform efforts largely—or at least partly—reflect the strategic efforts of adaptive politicians we might expect that they could have rather little effect on campaign expenditures. Muted efficacy of reforms could be deliberate if proposals are crafted by politicians themselves—and thus the rules were not overly strict, or not designed to endure. Pippen et al. argue, for example, that campaign finance laws crafted via the initiative process (i.e. crafted by voters) tend to be more stringent than those crafted by politicians themselves. But the Washington state example illustrates that even strategic politicians can pass policies via citizen initiatives. Part of the challenge for reforms targeting campaign finance is the continuing evolution of finance methods. For example, financiers in the US have used various modes of large-scale expenditures when other avenues of expenditure (such as unlimited ‘soft money’ donations to political parties) were limited. We see this pattern at the state and federal levels in the US where so-called ‘527’ groups provide billions of dollars in independent campaign expenditures since BCRA was passed.⁹ Although these 527 groups—and the provision in the tax code that gave rise to their names—predated BCRA, the passing of that Act gave a new impetus to their use as vehicles for large-scale spending on campaigns.

We have noted that campaign finance reforms, such as BCRA, are often hailed as a method to restore public confidence in elections and elected officials. Indeed, the title of the first section of BCRA was ‘Reduction of

⁸ <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020327.html>

⁹ One lobby/reform group documents just how many millions:

	Receipts	# of 527s
2004	598,613,234	543
2006	384,319,018	616
2008	493,021,312	596
2010	546,337,171	680

Source: The Center for Responsive Politics. <http://www.opensecrets.org/527s/index.php#tots>

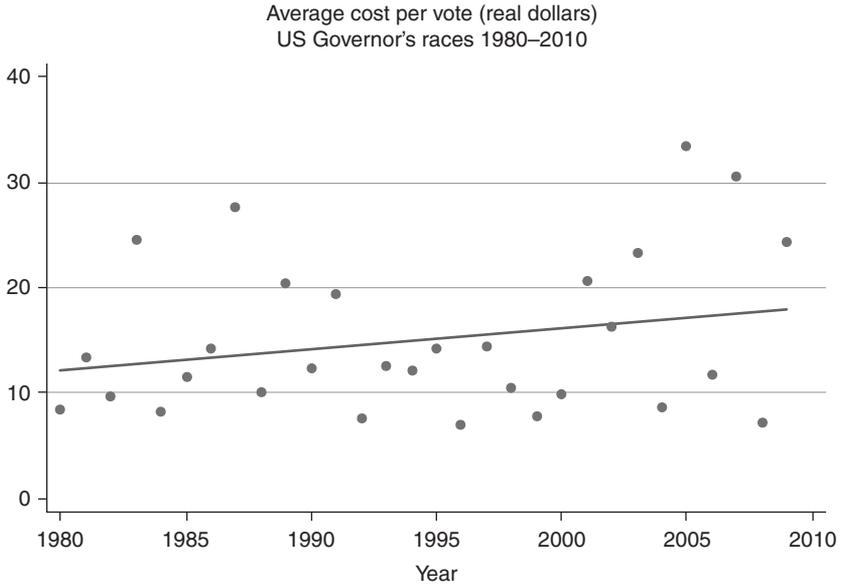


FIGURE 5.1 Campaign spending in the American states

Source: American National Election Study, various years

Note: Percentage of respondents agreeing that ‘public officials don’t care much what people like me think’, that ‘government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves’, and that ‘people like me have no say about what the government does’.

Special Interest Influence’. One provision of BCRA (a ban on corporations and unions using general funds to broadcast ads at election time) was struck down by the US Supreme Court in 2007.¹⁰ Regardless of this, the reform does not seem to have affected public perceptions about elections and representation. Figure 5.1 plots trends in ANES measures of Americans’ attitudes about their political system before and after BCRA. A few years after BCRA, more people agreed that government was run for ‘a few big interests’ than did before, and more believed that they had ‘no say’ in what government does. After BCRA more people than before felt that ‘public officials don’t care much what people like me think’.

¹⁰ Wisconsin Right to Life PAC vs. Federal Election Commission.

ESTIMATING THE EFFECTS OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE REGULATIONS

Loopholes in California's Proposition 34 and Washington's campaign finance rules when put alongside the limited BCRA illustrate the limitations of campaign finance reform efforts as a whole. That said, even as these reforms may illustrate the potential for loopholes, they may still succeed in other ways. As noted in Chapter 3, and illustrated in the discussion above, reform advocates stress the importance of regulating money in politics in order to build public confidence in elections and representatives. Ideally, we could examine trends in spending and attitudes before and after campaign finance rules were adopted in several different settings (as in Figure 5.1). We can also look at the potential effects of campaign finance reform across several nations, and across the American states.

While one of the disadvantages of cross-sectional data is that they do not allow for a before-and-after design, one of the advantages of looking at the effects of campaign finance reform across the US is that it allows us to exploit differences in state legal context. Moreover, comparison across US states would seem to have fewer problems of comparison than cross-national comparisons. Witko (2005) shows that US states vary quite markedly in terms of the context of campaign finance laws. He provides a breakdown of state campaign finance laws along three dimensions similar to those of van Biezen, assessing campaign contribution limits, spending limits/public financing, and disclosure requirements (Witko 2005:296).

We can exploit these differences across states to assess the effects of campaign finance reform in two ways. First, we examine the relationship between rules and expenditure. One ostensible goal of campaign finance rules—particularly public finance systems and limits on contributions—is to constrain the perpetual 'money chase' that candidates are said to be engaged in. If campaign finance regulations have such effects we might see a difference in spending levels between states that have subsidy measures, contribution limits, rigorous regulations, campaign spending limits, and those that do not. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we can also look at popular attitudes towards the political process. One of the primary goals stated by advocates of campaign finance reform is the need to limit the unpopular abuse of 'big money' and 'special interest' influence in politics. Thus, when we assess the effects of these reforms we must also test if voters' negative assessments of politics and the political process are allayed by reforms such as greater transparency in campaign finance disclosure, by contribution limits, or by other regulations. Put simply, if reforms do what advocates claim they do, we should see that citizens have more positive attitudes towards the political process in places where reforms have been adopted.

We present statistical tests of each of these questions in turn. First: does regulation of campaign finance reduce the amount of money spent in elections? Using data from Thad Beyle's project on campaign expenditures in US governors' races (expressed in constant 1980 dollars for the period 1980–2009), we provide

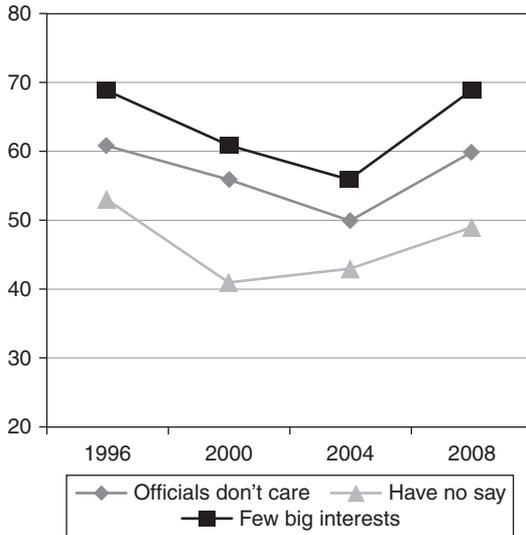


FIGURE 5.2 Trends in Americans' attitudes about the political system, before and after campaign finance reform (Bi-Partisan Campaign Finance Reform Bill 2002).

Source: American National Election Study, various years

an overview of the national expenditure trend for state-level races. This is presented in Figure 5.2, which shows the average annual expenditure per voter in gubernatorial elections between 1980 and 2009.

Figure 5.2 illustrates that there has been a slight upwards trend in real expenditures during this period. In other words, regardless of how many states have adopted various campaign finance rules since 1980, state-level campaign spending increased. To be fair, breaking this down by state should give us a better picture of how campaign spending is associated with various regulations. Using Witko's measures of party finance as our main independent variable, we test if states with more rigorous regulations on finances have less spending than states that have relatively lax legal frameworks.

To do this, we estimated pooled time series models of state-level spending in gubernatorial elections from 1980 to 2010. Our models control for factors expected to be associated with higher campaign spending—legislative professionalism, growth in state population, and the nature of the state's interest group population. Results of this analysis are displayed in Table 5.1. These models produce little evidence that state campaign finance laws do much to hold the line on spending per voter. There is some evidence to suggest that contribution limits did have a limiting effect, but other finance regulations did not. States with contribution limits had significantly less spending than other states but we find no differences in state-level campaign spending that are associated with the overall stringency of a state's campaign finance regulations, nor any differences

TABLE 5.1 *Impact of state campaign finance rules on spending in state gubernatorial races, 1980–2010*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Change in state population 1990–2000	0.016×10^{-6}	0.017×10^{-6}	0.018×10^{-6}	0.02×10^{-6}
	(0.04×10^{-6})	(0.04×10^{-6})	(0.04×10^{-6})	(0.04×10^{-6})
Interest group population	-0.00161	-0.00143	-0.00137	-0.00182 +
	(0.00110)	(0.00109)	(0.00109)	(0.00109)
Legislative professional– amateur scale (NCSL)	-1.181**	-1.095**	-1.046**	-1.196**
(1 = professional.5 = amateur)	(0.320)	(0.315)	(0.311)	(0.306)
Campaign Finance law measures (Witko 2005):				
Disclosure laws		-0.0416 (0.152)		
Public finance			0.0564 (0.140)	
Contribution limit				-0.308* (0.141)
Stringency	-0.0766 (0.0732)			
Constant	17.85** (1.897)	16.85** (1.834)	16.33** (1.507)	18.39** (1.646)
Observations	259	259	259	259

Standard errors in parentheses + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Note: Pooled-time series (xtgls); measures on campaign finance laws from Witko (2005).

associated with a state’s disclosure laws or public finance schemes. What does seem to drive spending is whether politics in the state were professionalized—this is the most robust effect we find. The more professionalized the politics of a state (in terms of length of legislative session, legislative salary, and the number of political staff), the greater campaign spending per voter.

These underwhelming results for the effects of finance rules are consistent with previous research. Gross and Goidel (2001) and Gross et al. (2002) also used measures of state law to predict patterns of campaign spending in the US states. They found that contribution limits and public funds had no effect on total spending, while expenditure limits did seem to put a brake on campaign spending at the state level. Much of that ‘limiting’ effect, however, applied to challengers rather than incumbents: with relatively high spending limits (per voter), incumbent spending increased. Incumbent spending was also higher in states with restrictive contribution limits, and campaign finance regulations had no direct effects on electoral competitiveness. What we conclude from this set of evidence, then, is that campaign finance laws do not have dramatic or readily identifiable effects on electoral politics.

EFFECTS OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE REGULATIONS ON ATTITUDES

The important effects of these regulations may not be related to levels of spending but may be related to popular perceptions of how politics work. That is, it might very well be that although most of these election rules do not reduce campaign spending, they may have secondary effects. Public finance programmes may ‘level the playing field’ such that a state’s candidate pool is diversified, and thus improve voter efficacy and satisfaction. Disclosure rules may increase transparency, and thus improve trust in government. Likewise, if contribution limits effectively limit the influence of unpopular ‘special interests’, we might find more positive attitudes about politics where these rules are in place. Here, then, we turn to our second question: does regulation of campaign finance at the state level lead people to think better of the political process?

The phrase ‘think better of the political process’ can mean many different things. It may mean that people trust elected officials in general, or it may mean that people are more ready to believe that candidates keep their promises than they otherwise would. Of course, since the laws we are looking at are instituted at the state level, it is appropriate to test if those laws are associated with higher regard for state-level officials in particular. The potential effects of these rules on popular attitudes could also be a more general response in the form of increased political efficacy, such that voters in states with a more regulated electoral environment are more ready to believe that they have a say in politics.

Using a 2004 Annenberg survey of American opinions, we test whether campaign finance laws are, in fact, associated with more positive views of the political system—everything else being equal. By ‘everything else’ we mean the usual socio-economic suspects of age, education, income, partisanship, religious attendance, and race. With a baseline SES model of a respondent’s attitudes about elections and representation, we identify the state the respondent resided in, and then add in measures of the state’s campaign finance rules. We estimate attitudes with Witko’s (2005) overall measure of stringency, and with measures that represent individual components of each state’s campaign finance regulations. Our tests can help answer a question that was put to an expert witness at a UK inquiry into party financing:

What do you think generally has been the effect of capping donations? Has it had the effect of making people feel that politics is more transparent and therefore they have greater trust in politics and politicians?¹¹

¹¹ Question of Dr Elizabeth Vallance Committee on Standards in Public Life Inquiry into Political Party Funding: International Evidence. April 2011 at 26 http://www.public-standards.org.uk/Library/International_Panel.pdf

Campaign Finance Rule Measures

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Stringency</i>	<i>Disclosure</i>	<i>Public Finance</i>	<i>Contribution limits</i>
Confidence in state elected officials				
People like me have no say in government				
Trust elected officials	-	-		
Candidates try to keep promises			+	

FIGURE 5.3 Effect of campaign finance regulation on citizen opinion in the US states 2004, summary of results

Note: See Appendix for an example of the model that underlies these results.

Sources: Annenberg 2004; Witko 2005

In total, then, we have four key dependent variables: a measure of confidence in state-elected officials, a ‘people like me have no say in government’ measure of efficacy, a standard ‘trust elected officials’ measure, and a measure of whether the respondent agreed that candidates try to keep their promises. These attitudes are modelled as a function of the SES measures and four key independent variables: a measure of stringency of finance regulations, a measure of disclosure rules, a measure representing public finance schemes, and the contribution limit measure. In short, there are sixteen tests in each of which we should see—or at least might find—a statistically significant relationship between attitudes and these campaign finance rules. With four dependent variables and this series of independent variables the presentation of statistical results can quickly overwhelm any attempt to gain an overall picture of how these rules might affect attitudes about politics.

We simplify this picture in Figure 5.3 by only reporting the direction of the statistically significant parameters for the measures of campaign finance regulations. The Appendix reports models that estimate the effects of campaign finance rules on public attitudes about politics. The awkward and very apparent picture in Figure 5.3 is that there are almost no statistically or substantively important effects associated with state-level campaign finance rules. In fact, of the sixteen models we found statistically significant effects in just three—and in two of those models

the effect was in the ‘wrong’ direction. People in states with more stringent rules, and in states with disclosure rules, were less likely to say they trusted elected officials. In sum, then, we found just one very modest effect (out of sixteen tests) that is consistent with the ideal that campaign finance reforms would improve public perceptions of politics. One significant effect out of sixteen tests could easily be attributed to random error.¹²

Additional analysis of public opinion data and campaign finance regulations reveals that the null relationship between attitudes and finance rules is not limited to the US. We used CSES Module II data to estimate perceptions of political corruption¹³ and satisfaction with democracy across seventeen established democracies.¹⁴ These attitudes were modelled¹⁵ with a standard SES model (age, education, gender, religious attendance, partisanship) that also included van Biezen and Kopecky’s (2007) measures of whether each nation had public subsidies for political parties, and whether a nation had a system for regulating party finances. Results are similar to what is reported in Figure 5.3. The presence of a public funding scheme was unrelated to attitudes about the political system, and regulations on party finances were associated with a significantly higher likelihood of a respondent saying that corruption was widespread in their country.

As is the case for our estimation of the effects of rules on campaign spending, reporting non-results is always difficult. There are many reasons why statistical models may not have ‘worked’ to produce the result that we—or at least reformers—believe should be out there. But these results are just as underwhelming as those reported in Primo and Milyo (2006), using data from the American National Election Studies to model the effects of finance regulations on self-reported efficacy. That is, as in the results on spending, we are not alone in finding it hard to see any effects of campaign finance reform on citizen attitudes.

An explanation for at least some of these null results, perhaps as far as disclosure is concerned, may be found in patterns from the UK. The UK set up the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1994¹⁶ largely as a response to concerns over improper behaviour in Parliament. In subsequent years the Committee’s remit was extended and by 1998 it was reporting on the financing of political parties. The Committee’s report led directly to the Political Parties, Elections and

¹² One of our fears learned from conducting this research is that this sort of singular ‘positive’ result is often found by well-meaning scholars and then published as a journal article.

¹³ Respondents were asked, ‘How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is among politicians in [country]: very widespread, quite widespread, not very widespread, it hardly happens at all?’

¹⁴ These include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

¹⁵ Ordered logit and regression estimates were conducted, with sample weights and robust standard errors clustered at the nation level. Substantive results were not affected by the choice of estimator.

¹⁶ <http://www.public-standards.gov.uk/about.htm>

Referendums Act (PPERA 2000) and then a subsequent review in 2007. PPERA established an Electoral Commission to help oversee the conduct of elections, made classes of donations public and limited campaign expenditure (Fisher 2001; Clift and Fisher 2004; 2005). The first decade of the 21st century thus saw dramatic change in the landscape of British party political finance that included elements of transparency, monitoring, and spending limitation. As in the case of the US, however, these reforms do not seem to have produced much of a change in attitudes towards political parties and politicians. As one of the regular reports on public opinion published by the Committee on Standards put it:

The results of the survey make stark reading. Previous surveys have shown that public confidence in those holding public office has been on a long term decline since 2004. The 2010 results suggest that the rate of decline may have increased. Worryingly, between 2008 and 2010, the proportion thinking that most MPs are dedicated to doing a good job for the public fell by twenty percentage points (from 46 to 26 per cent); the proportion thinking that most MPs are competent at their jobs fell by ten percentage points (from 36 to 26 per cent).¹⁷

Despite extensive reform, public attitudes in the UK seem to have a similar resilience to reform efforts.

People's views as to how national politicians should behave and the priority that people attach to specific criteria of propriety have remained similar since the survey was first conducted in 2004... As in the previous surveys, the 2010 survey suggests a mismatch between how people think national politicians should behave and how they think they actually behave in practice. MPs fall short of what people expect of them on all of the dimensions covered in the survey.¹⁸

This reluctance of voters to update and take on board the reform effort is puzzling. It is the case that MPs seem to be adept at finding new ways to disappoint. In the 1990s the scandal de jour was 'cash for questions' (in the House). Ten years later the scandal involved a series of expenses claims. One of the features of reform efforts has been to give journalists easier access to such information. This means that some scandals are publicized that might well otherwise not have seen the light of day. In particular, scandals and headlines relating to party donors can now be written much more readily given that donor identities are more likely to be a matter of public record (van Heerde-Hudson and Fisher 2011; Clift and Fisher 2004; 2005). The UK reforms on party finance, then, may provide an example of a familiar line of argument in institutional reform more generally: that is, institutional reforms may have unintended consequences. In this instance it might be

¹⁷ Committee on Standards Survey on Public Attitudes (2011:4).

¹⁸ Committee on Standards Survey on Public Attitudes (2011:20).

possible to explain the non-results of public opinion response to reform as a consequence of wider and more thorough news coverage facilitated by the reforms themselves.

Unintended consequences to one side, van Heerde-Hudson and Fisher (2011) develop a more subtle argument. Their work makes the point that, even after reforms that increased disclosure, voters remain uninformed about party finance. In the aggregate voters know little about sources of campaign funds, and know little about levels of expenditure—they overestimate the amount of money that is spent. Voters also have an appetite for further reform. Survey work suggests that voters also know very little about the provisions of existing reforms and in some ways the attitudes towards reform are driven by broader underlying attitudes towards political parties and politicians in general. It may not just be that voters are cynical about politicians because they—the voters—only imperfectly understand the true state of campaign finance but in a sense their opinions are grounded in deeper attitude structures. As van Heerde-Hudson and Fisher note, this in turn suggests that the public's push for, and response to, campaign finance reform may be a misleading yardstick.

DISCUSSION

It seems easier to account for motivations behind reform efforts and to demonstrate the basis for popular support for such efforts than it is to show that reforms have important consequences on how citizens view their political system. Major changes in electoral systems considered in the previous chapter were, for the most part, implemented by incumbent elected officials responding to changes in their electoral landscape, or (as with Japan and Italy) by incumbents responding to popular discontent associated with political scandal. Scandals are often an impetus to reform (Clift and Fisher 2004; 2005), particularly in the realm of campaign finance. Yet if politicians themselves have a major hand in crafting the reforms, effects of the new rules may well be milder than had reforms been introduced by independent courts or by a citizen initiative that elites could not amend (Pippen et al. 2002).

Our assessment of campaign finance rules is consistent with our evaluation of changes in electoral systems in Chapter 4. Some reforms have very little detectable effect on popular attitudes. What seems to be lacking is a sense that campaign finance reforms have much of an effect on key factors that reform advocates suggest the reforms are supposed to 'fix'. In particular there seems to be very limited effect on popular perceptions of politics and political corruption. In sum, campaign finance rules examined here do not seem to produce the results that reformers claim. At least, campaign finance reform has not produced robust or

easy to find effects—neither in the US, nor the UK, nor across several other established democracies. Two familiar arguments relating to institutional change suggest ways in which reform efforts may be undercut. Reforms may be undercut by a strategic response of politicians (e.g. in setting up new organizations to raise money) or by unintended consequences (more publicity about donations may mean more publicity about the foibles and failings of donors). Other possible reasons for the undercutting of reform efforts may include the concern that the link between money and political corruption is so strong that no reforms can shift perceptions of that tie and its impropriety—a perceptual tie that is strengthened by what seems to be an endless series of scandals of the week. A second, related possibility is that reformers inflate expectations about the consequences of electoral rules. Expectations may need to be heightened in order to ‘sell’ a reform idea, but if the target of the reform—in this case the link between money and politics—is so immutable, expectations in the promise of reform may never be reachable.

APPENDIX CHAPTER 5: EXAMPLE OF MODEL
UNDERLYING FIGURE 5.3

Figure 5.3 reports broad results of models without reporting the models themselves. In this appendix we report an example of a model that produced those results. In this instance we look at the (non-) effect of a public finance law.

The (non-) effect of party finance laws on popular attitudes 2005: Public financing of parties

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Confidence in state-elected officials	People like me have no say in government	Trust elected officials	Candidates try to keep promises
Democrat party ID	0.112** (0.0319)	-0.0255 (0.0237)	0.0859** (0.0192)	0.0553* (0.0263)
Republican party ID	0.152** (0.0318)	-0.280** (0.0241)	0.303** (0.0194)	0.266** (0.0266)
Gender (1 = female)	0.0762** (0.0261)	0.0357 + (0.0197)	0.00514 (0.0159)	0.0187 (0.0216)
Age	0.00131 + (0.000796)	0.00216** (0.000609)	-0.000456 (0.000492)	-0.00121 + (0.000691)
Education	0.00133 (0.00639)	-0.0846** (0.00480)	0.000268 (0.00389)	0.0109* (0.00521)

(Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Confidence in state-elected officials	People like me have no say in government	Trust elected officials	Candidates try to keep promises
Attend religious services	-0.0219* (0.00997)	0.0728** (0.00746)	-0.0532** (0.00605)	-0.0342** (0.00841)
Household income	0.00552 (0.00717)	-0.0415** (0.00539)	0.00575 (0.00433)	0.0000946 (0.00594)
Public Finance law [^]	0.0103 (0.0137)	-0.00792 (0.00640)	-0.00342 (0.00564)	0.0134 + (0.00797)
Latino	0.122* (0.0546)	-0.156** (0.0412)	0.0911** (0.0344)	0.0223 (0.0471)
African-American	0.144** (0.0532)	0.0463 (0.0366)	-0.146** (0.0307)	-0.0372 (0.0428)
Asian-American	0.0471 (0.124)	0.104 (0.0890)	0.103 (0.0705)	-0.0444 (0.0884)
Foreign born	0.0184 (0.0532)	0.0969* (0.0400)	0.132** (0.0324)	-0.0684 (0.0439)
Constant	2.437** (0.0803)	2.220** (0.0565)	2.534** (0.0464)	2.748** (0.0644)
lns1_1_1 Constant	-2.051** (0.168)	-3.566** (0.547)	-3.392** (0.355)	-2.940** (0.299)
Insig_e Constant	-0.319** (0.0124)	0.0574** (0.00640)	-0.394** (0.00815)	-0.361** (0.0107)
Observations	3311	12,247	7579	4426
Pseudo R ²				
Ll	-3698.6	-18122.9	-7815.8	-4730.4
df_m	12	12	12	12
Aic	7427.3	36275.8	15661.5	9490.8
Bic	7518.9	36387.0	15765.5	9586.7

Standard errors in parentheses + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01 ^ from Witko (2005)

Term Limits: Effects, but Not as Advertised

There are a variety of reforms designed to affect the demographic composition of representative assemblies. Some mandate specific outcomes on who holds seats. Rules that require parties to nominate a minimum percentage of women, for example, may increase the number of women in office (Caul 1999; 2001). Similarly, reforms that reserve a fixed number of seats for women, or for racial, ethnic, or other minority groups, will assure a minimum number of members from these groups being present in a chamber. A number of countries have adopted rules of this kind (Reynolds 2005; Dahlerup 2007). New Zealand, for example, has long set aside seats for its Maori population (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2004). Croatia reserves seats for members of a number of national minorities including Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, and Serbs. Singapore ensures minority candidates are elected via Group Representation Constituencies and guarantees that the Opposition will receive at least a minimum number of seats.¹

Electoral rules that mandate a particular or specific outcome plainly have an identifiable impact. If a rule bans a particular political party from contesting an election then we should be little surprised to see low vote totals for that party. Where quotas on women and minority representation are in place (and enforced), we see an increase in the number of women (Caul 1999; 2001) and minority representatives—although for language and national identity minorities in many nations ‘reserved seats are little more than lone voices in large majority parliaments’ (Reynolds 2005:306). Other reforms are promoted as a means to affect the composition of a legislature without actually mandating specific outcomes. These rules involve the goal of increasing the representation of women and minorities, indirectly, by altering the pool of people who seek office or by changing the conditions under which elections are contested. Examples of such efforts include public financing of campaigns,² altering thresholds required to win seats via multi-member districts (Welch and Studlar 1990), altering nomination rules, increasing opportunities in non-incumbent ‘open seats’ (Burrell 1994), and the creation of ‘majority-minority’ districts. In electoral systems with district boundaries, boundaries can be drawn to ensure that a majority of the population are members of a

¹ <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/members-parliament>

² Julie Ballington, ‘Gender Equality in Political Party Funding in Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns.’ *International Idea* 157 (Reginald Austin & Maja Tjernström eds, 2003).

specific racial or ethnic minority.³ Historically this has meant drawing boundaries to encompass African-Americans. More recent practice—especially at the sub-national level—has meant districts or other electoral reforms to help encourage the representation of Native Americans and Latinos. Drawing electoral districts of this kind involves a more indirect approach to ensuring minority representation than reserving seats or imposing a quota. Although voters in majority-minority districts could return a white candidate (and on occasion have done so) they are highly unlikely to do so, because voters generally support candidates who share their race (or ethnicity) and party (Brace et al. 1988; Lublin 1999; Absoch, Barreto and Woods 2007). Majority-minority districts are ways to increase the number of minority legislators and to improve minority representation without mandating the outcome.

THE PROMISE OF TERM LIMITS

Term limits advocates stress the transformative effects that reform can have on elections and representation. Term limits can be seen as having both mandatory and indirect effects. Elections, in principle, are a process that allows politicians to be removed from office but this can be quite rare in practice. Turnover in American state legislatures declined every decade from the 1930s through the 1990s (Squire and Moncrief 2010:63), as did turnover in the US House (Polsby 1968). Although voters may approve of their own representative being in office for a very long while, they seem to object to the pattern that sees most representatives being in office indefinitely. In limiting the maximum term in office of politicians, term limits seek to increase turnover and shorten the time horizons of legislators. In effect they mandate exit from office without elections.

But term limits were largely promoted for their indirect effects on the behaviour of legislators and potential candidates, and for indirect effects on how citizens would view politics. These indirect effects seemed to be the ones reform supporters especially valued. In the US, term limits were promoted as a means of disrupting incumbent re-election incentives and hence disrupt pathological behaviours produced by the constant pursuit of re-election. For example, term-limited legislators may not view the legislature as a career and may thus have weaker re-election incentives than politicians elected without term limits. This is important in

³ Examples of majority-minority districts are hard to find outside the US, although, perhaps, some of the reserved districts for the Croatian parliament come close. Similarly, Croatia and Italy have seats in which the voters are their respective nationals overseas. For Croatia this means the many Croatians living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for Italians this especially applied to nationals and dual citizens living in North and Central America.

that a substantial portion of the literature about legislators stresses the desire to be re-elected as driving a representative's behaviour (e.g. Mayhew 1975).

The re-election, rather than simply the election, of politicians has several different consequences. Re-election allows politicians to build up expertise that they can then apply either in the policymaking process or in dealing with other branches of government. In particular, the building up of expertise among legislators means that the legislature is better able to perform its oversight task in relation to the executive. Elections may be seen as a filtering process that eliminates lower-quality representatives while retaining higher-quality ones (Mondak 1995). Arguably, too, it is the desire for re-election that induces elected representatives to follow closely the wishes of voters and to behave more like a 'delegate' than a 'trustee'.

Although re-election may bring expertise, the desire for re-election also brings a range of behaviours that are less appealing. The pursuit of re-election may involve relatively harmless behaviour on the part of the legislator such as following the opinion polls very closely and adopting policy positions after the results of such polls. Less harmlessly it may involve supporting public works projects (bridges, freeways, defence contracts, sports grounds, and other public facilities) that are not needed. Pork barrel projects and wasteful or inefficient government policies may be produced by the incentive for re-election (Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen 1981; Ferejohn 1974). General examples include tax breaks and subsidies, or regulatory protection to favoured groups.

Some critics of re-election without end share concerns outlined by Burke in his classical statement in favour of a trustee (rather than delegate) model of representation.⁴ That is, a desire to be re-elected can produce inefficient government spending. This may help explain why the Cato Institute—a conservative think tank—was such a staunch supporter of term limits.⁵ Yet official pro-term limits arguments had a decidedly populist tone, stressing that the reform would reinvigorate a delegate model of representation that had somehow been corrupted by legislative professionalism. Reform would produce legislators freed from the constant need for special interest campaign funds, lead them to be more responsive to 'the people', and less beholden to narrow interests.⁶

The pursuit of re-election also means that incumbents require the support not just of an electoral majority, but also of donors, interest groups, and a core group of

⁴ 'Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.' Burke's Speech to the Electors of Bristol 1774 <http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Burke/brkSWv4c1.html>

Burke was not, however, re-elected.

⁵ <http://www.cato.org/politics/term-limits.html>

⁶ The pro term limits argument in the 1991 Washington state campaign noted that 're-election is a politician's top priority. Nothing proves it more than the outrageous growth in campaign spending using PAC and special interest money. We have a system where incumbents nearly always win . . . Excellent candidates are discouraged from running against incumbents . . . I-553 makes our representatives more accountable to us.'

ideological voters. These actors may help the re-election of incumbents but may not share the interests of the median voter in a district (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). The desire for re-election is, for supporters of term limits, often seen as one of the ways in which special interests get their way at the expense of voters.

Term limits, then, are supposed to produce a number of secondary effects. One is mitigating incumbent electoral advantages. Proponents contend that incumbent advantages mean elections are uncompetitive, and quality candidates are deterred from entering elections. These advantages are attributed to incumbent self-promotion via government-funded communications, greater incumbent name recognition, incumbent dominance in fundraising, and policy giveaways to constituents. As a result of uncompetitive and uncontested elections, incumbents have no need to mobilize voters, voter interest is depressed, and turnout declines—as does public regard for the political system as a whole (Fund 1990; Coyne and Fund 1992; Nalder 2007). Advocates for imposing term limits on US legislators argued limits should make elections more competitive and improve the quality of candidates seeking office. By extension, this would reduce public cynicism about ‘special interest control’ of legislatures (Fund 1992; Petracca 1992). Supporters of the reform also argued that forcing more open-seat contests would help women and minority candidates win office—the assumption being that the incumbents advantaged by the status quo were overwhelmingly white and male. The president of the Cato Institute testified at a congressional hearing that women are more likely to win open-seat contests, and that term limits would thus help women win office (Carroll and Jenkins 2001a; see also Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994, for a similar argument from the political science literature. In contrast see Thompson and Moncrief 1993). With fewer ‘careerist’ representatives, less ‘special interest control’ of legislatures, more women and minorities in office, voter participation would increase and public cynicism about interest group control over legislatures would decline (Will 1990; Fund 1992).

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE WITH LEGISLATIVE TERM LIMITS

Legislative term limits were extraordinarily popular in the US in the 1990s (Donovan and Snipp 1994). Voters in twenty states adopted some form of legislative term limits in the 1990s. As of 2012, fifteen state legislatures operated under some form of term limits. Six other states had term limits that were repealed.⁷ As a reform they allow us to assess both the reasons for introducing the reform and the

⁷ Four were repealed as a result of legal challenges, two—Idaho and Utah—were repealed by the legislatures themselves: <http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/legisdata/chart-of-term-limits-states.aspx>. Thirty-six governors operate under term limits. One notable example of term limits from outside

consequences of making the change. In nearly every case, term limits were imposed via the citizen initiative process (Tolbert 1998).

Arguments in support of term limits from the campaigns in the 1990s followed a familiar rhetorical pattern—some of these were introduced in Chapter 3—of targeting ‘politicians’ and ‘special interests’ in order to increase accountability. Politicians were said to fail at serving the public interest but were instead following narrower interests at the expense of the public good. As we noted earlier, reformers’ arguments in ballot pamphlets provided to voters are an especially useful source because they provide examples of political arguments that reformers made directly to voters about the need for reform.

Language in support of Washington State’s Initiative 553 in 1991 illustrates the familiar pattern:

Experienced career politicians, financed by PACs and special interest money, have brought us the savings and loan scandal, a \$3 trillion national debt and elected officials’ excessive pay raises. Term limitation will make it more difficult for lobbyists to maintain their influence with elected officials . . . Vote YES on I-553 to reduce the influence of lobbyists and special interests.⁸

The arguments in support of Oregon’s Measure 45 (2006) were similar and also contained a list of what Oregonians could expect if term limits passed:

- Regular open-seat elections with a greater number of more-qualified candidates and more lively, interesting campaigns;
- An end to the good-old-boy club, with greater opportunity for the under-represented to hold office, including women and minorities;
- Loss of clout for lobbyists and bureaucrats, whose power depends on long-time, cozy relationships with our lawmakers.⁹

Likewise, arguments in support of California’s Proposition 140 in 1990 included:

Limiting terms will create more competitive elections, so good legislators will always have the opportunity to move up the ladder . . . [and] will remove the grip that vested interests have over the legislature.¹⁰

California’s voters were also told that term limits would ‘bring new ideas, workable policies and fresh cleansing air to Sacramento’. The reform was said to rebuild voter approval of the legislature by cutting the ties between ‘special interests’ and legislators that many voters perceived as corrupt. Proponents

the US is that of Mexico, where legislators are limited to one term in office before having to leave (although they can stand again after being out of power for a term).

⁸ Washington State’s Initiative measure 553 in 1991 Voter’s Pamphlet.

⁹ http://oregonvotes.org/pages/history/archive/nov72006/guide/meas/m45_fav.html

¹⁰ Argument in favour of Proposition 140 (1990). http://library.uchastings.edu/ballot_pdf/1990g.pdf

made explicit claims about increasing turnout in their ballot pamphlet argument in support of Proposition 140:

Why don't more people vote? Because incumbents have rigged the system in their favor so much, elections are meaningless. Even the worst of legislators get re-elected 98% of the time. Honest, ethical, *truly* representative people who want to run for office don't stand a chance.¹¹

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS ON LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Legislative term limits were generally introduced in the 1990s, meaning that the first decade of the 21st century allowed for a series of studies on the effects of term limits (see e.g. Kousser 2005; Kurtz et al. 2007; Nalder 2007; Miller et al. 2011). There are two broad sets of conclusions from these studies. The first is that there were effects that were the opposite of some claims made by advocates of the reform, especially as they relate to legislative processes. Proponents claimed shorter tenure would strengthen the standing of the legislature vs. the professional lobbyists, and that term limits would reduce the clout of 'bureaucrats'. However, surveys of lobbyists in term-limited states found strong consensus that the reform 'caused the state political influence structure to shift away from the legislature and toward the governor, administrative agencies, and interest groups' (Moncrief and Thompson 2001:394). There is now a 'fair amount of evidence that the legislature has declined in capacity relative to the executive branch' (Kurtz et al. 2007:190; see also Carey et al. 2006). Supporters and opponents of the reform noted it would weaken legislative professionalism, and evidence of this has been found—with opponents lamenting this, and supporters promoting it as a virtue. Kousser concluded the effect of term limits was 'the decline of legislative professionalism', as well as the rise of executive influence over the legislature (Kousser 2005) while Clucas described, somewhat disparagingly, the 'new amateur politics' observed after term limits (Clucas 2002).

Studies note additional effects of term limits that ran counter to expectations about a delegate model of representation highlighted by reform advocates. Some evidence suggested that term-limited legislators are less informed, and thus less able to address state-wide issues (Powell et al. 2007). Representatives decoupled from long electoral careers were supposed to be more accountable to 'us'. Carey et al. (2006), however, surveyed state legislators and noted that one of the most pronounced effects on legislative processes was a 'Burkean shift' where term-limited legislators appeared less concerned about constituents in their district than

¹¹ California Ballot Pamphlet 1990, Rebuttal to argument against Proposition 140.

other legislators. Cooper and Richardson's (2006) survey of legislators also found that representatives from term-limited states were more likely to see themselves as trustees (see Wright 2007, however, who found this effect did not carry over to how legislators voted on bills). Other work shows notable effects of the reform on representative processes. Lax and Phillips (2012) show that legislatures in term-limited states are more responsive to voters: 'term limits increase the marginal impact of [state opinion on policy] by 44 per cent and increase the probability of congruence [between opinion and policy] by up to 15 percentage points' (Lax and Phillips 2012:160).

It is important to note that the effects of term limits on the legislative process—like any reform—may be difficult to observe in a systematic manner across multiple jurisdictions. For example, effects relating to the balance of power between the legislature and the executive may be conditional and subtle. Miller et al. (2011), for example, argue that the effects of term limits are conditional on the pre-existing structure of relations between legislature and executive. Using data from a survey of state legislators they argue that 'term limits pull power away from legislative leadership and towards other institutional actors such as governors and interest groups' (Miller et al. 2011:90). They note that these effects vary: 'Term limits typically have the largest impact in states where there is the greatest potential for change' (Miller et al. 2011:92; Kurtz et al. 2007:190). Governors having relatively weaker formal powers, for example, should pick up more influence than governors in states that already had strong powers.

Another reason why some effects may be hard to see is that some term limits regimes are more constraining (weakening of legislators) than others. This provides another set of conditions for effects. Louisiana, for example, has a twenty-four-year limit, with no more than twelve years in each house at a time; California has a fourteen-year lifetime limit on service in both houses (Mooney 2007; 2009). Clearly, some limits are more binding than others and so it is likely that not all term limits are the same. In addition, term limits do not always completely do away with the re-election incentive: termed-out legislators often try to move into the other legislative chamber or another elective office. Legislators who wish to pursue other electoral offices may thus retain incentives to pursue pork barrel projects and 'special interest' support.

Overall, then, there is little to suggest term limits changed the legislative process in ways promised by reformers. Limits did reduce professionalism in some chambers (Kousser 2005), but rather than putting an end to career politicians they may have shuffled ambitious politicians from lower offices into term-limited legislatures and from the legislature to other offices (Carey et al. 1998; Powell 2000). Since the major costs and benefits of being a legislator (salary, prestige) did not change, people seeking office after the reform were no less ambitious politicians than people who ran without term limits (Carey et al. 2006:117).

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS ON COMPOSITION OF THE LEGISLATURE

One area in which there may have been some limited effects of reform consistent with the promise of reform advocates is in affecting the representation of women and minorities in some state legislatures. By limited, we mean that the evidence here is quite mixed, and, again, contingent. Studies of states experiencing the ‘limiting out’ of large numbers of members in 1998 and 2000 found no evidence that women gained representation. In fact, Carroll and Jenkins (2001a; 2001b) found that ‘women’s numbers in term-limited seats in state houses and assemblies actually decreased’ and that women (particularly in lower houses) failed to take advantage of opportunities created by term limits (see also Bernstein and Chadha 2002). Nationally, women gained a few upper house seats, but these were largely women who left lower house seats due to term limits (Carroll and Jenkins 2001b). Another early study (Carey et al. 2000) detected a ‘slight tendency’ toward the election of more women nationally, but concluded at the time that the effect was only ‘suggestive’. Studies from Florida (Schraufnagle and Halperin 2006) and nationally (Kousser 2005) found similar results—no notable gains for women after term limits went into effect.

Carey et al. (2006:115) noted that while the overall prospects of women candidates for state legislatures had improved after limits were adopted, they were unable to attribute any part of that change to ‘the extraordinary opening up of legislative seats that occurred as term limits took effect’. Term limits may have created opportunities for women, but for the most part women were not recruited to run for newly opened seats. And limits did nothing to affect the cost of running for office that might be a barrier for women.

Carroll and Jenkins (2005) found that unlike the pattern with representation of women, minorities picked up additional seats—increasing from thirty-two (11.6 per cent) to thirty-nine (14.2 per cent) of seats in term limit states after the 2000 election. An analysis by term limit enthusiasts at the Cato Institute concluded that African-American candidates were not advantaged by the reform, but that Hispanic candidates may have been (Basham 2001). Again, it is not clear this is due to the reform. Cain and Kousser (2004) concluded that term limits ‘sped up a diversification’ of the gender and racial composition of the California legislature, but that this trend was largely due to social and demographic changes that predated the reform. In California, racial and ethnic minorities were gaining seats prior to limits because of the increased numbers of districts where minority voters had majority or near-majority status.

We assess the effect of term limits on the representation of women several ways. First, we can track trends in the percentage of seats held by women in states before and after the adoption of term limits. Figure 6.1 displays representation of women from 1990 to 2010 in states that adopted term limits. In this figure, we only display states that, in 1990, had female representation above the national average (17 per

cent). Nearly all of these states had more women in the legislature by 2010, but none had rates of increase that greatly exceeded the national average increase of 8 per cent (from 17 per cent in 1990 to 25 per cent in 2010). Figure 6.2 plots trends in a similar set of states that also had above average levels of female legislators in 1990, but that did not implement term limits. Most of these states adopted the reform, but had it repealed (Idaho, Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming). Apart from Wyoming, these states also had increases in representation of women that trended with the national average.

Figures 6.3 and 6.4 plot trends in female representation at the state level in states that had below average levels of female representation in 1992. Plainly we should expect term limits to increase levels of female representation. Figure 6.3 illustrates trends in states that adopted term limits, while Figure 6.4 shows trends from similar states that did not adopt. Two things are noteworthy here. First, states with lower than average levels of female representation had greater gains than states (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2) that had higher levels in 1990. Second, there is

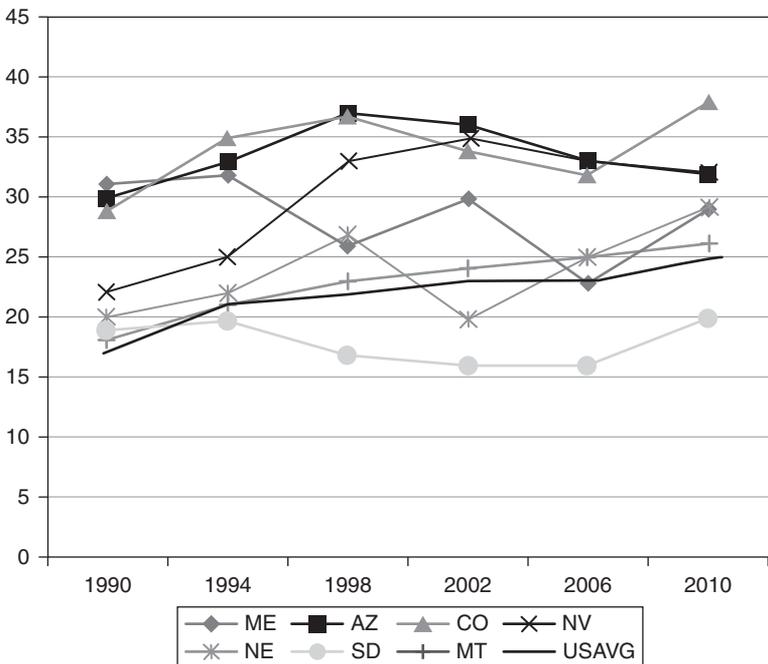


FIGURE 6.1 Percentage of women in state legislatures 1990–2010; states with above average women in legislature, adopted term limits

Source: Rutgers Center for Women and American Politics

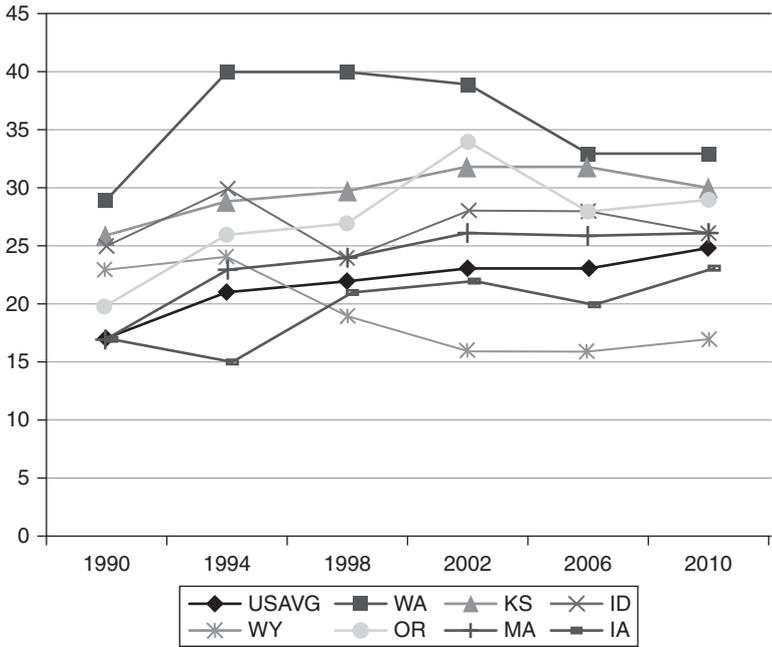


FIGURE 6.2 Percentage of women in state legislatures 1990–2010; states with above average women in legislature, no term limits

Source: Rutgers Center for Women and American Politics

Note: In 1990 17% of state legislators were women, 24.5% were in 2010.

no noticeable difference between trends in term limit states and other states. In both categories, representation of women increased on average by about 10 per cent.

We also estimated several cross-section time series models of the percentage of women in state legislatures over this period. Models controlled for factors that may be associated with women in office—state ideology, participation of women in the workforce, and legislative professionalism. If we fail to account for the initial level of women’s representation in a state, we can detect a modest ($p = 0.12$) relationship between term limits and representation. This weakens, however, when we account for initial levels of women in office, and disappears when we estimate change in women’s representation over time. The trends in representation illustrated here, and our statistical analysis, suggest that states that had more women in office were also more likely to adopt term limits and that representation of women in these states increased at the same rate as non-term-limited states. This result, or, rather, this lack of results, is not consistent with expectations raised by term limit advocates.

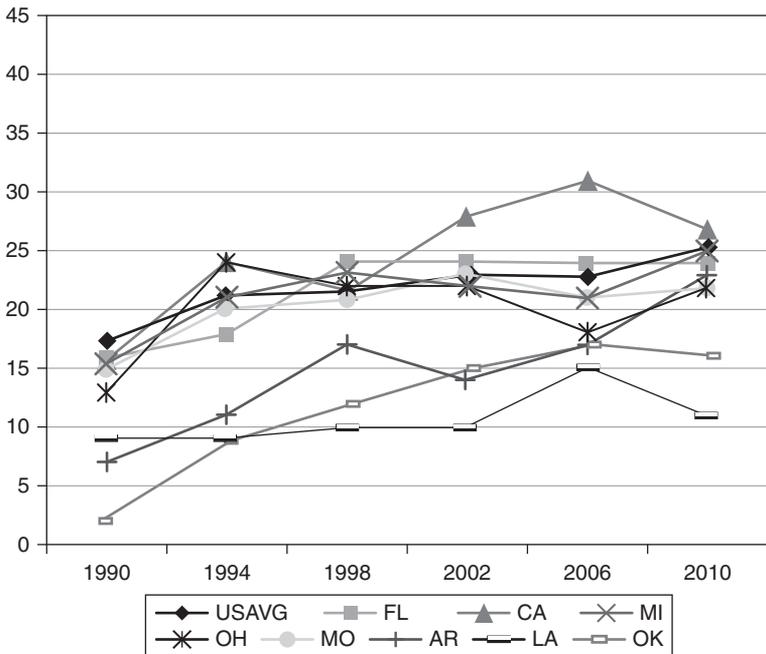


FIGURE 6.3 Percentage of women in state legislatures 1990–2010; states with below average women in legislature, adopted term limits

Source: Rutgers Center for Women and American Politics

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS ON VOTER TURNOUT

As with many election reforms, term limits were sold as having transformative effects on citizen engagement. Seats opened for electoral competition by limits were expected to increase mobilization of voters, and thus increase voter turnout. However, a number of studies show that the reform may have actually reduced electoral competition, or show that existing trends toward greater incumbent advantages simply continued after limits began terming out incumbents (Mooney 2007; 2009). In a connected set of findings, other work (Sarbaugh-Thompson et al. 2004; Niemi and Rulinson 2011) notes that electoral competition has not increased as a consequence of term limits. Campaign spending was not reduced in California under term limits (Masket and Lewis 2007) and more incumbents ran unopposed, as potential challengers waited for the time the seat would automatically come open (Mooney 2007; 2009).

Given this muted effect on electoral competition, how much did the adoption of term limits affect voter participation? Reformers expected that a new level of

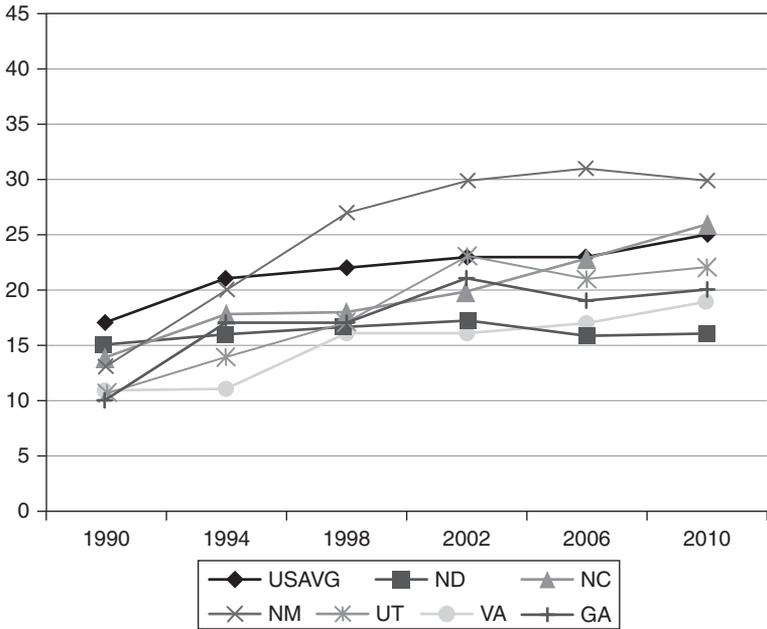


FIGURE 6.4 Percentage of women in state legislatures 1990–2010; states with below average women in legislature, no term limits

Source: Rutgers Center for Women and American Politics

Note: In 1990 17% of state legislators were women, 24.5% were in 2010.

electoral competition caused by an increased number of open-seat contests would boost voter interest. This assumes that a large proportion of incumbents were actually staying in office longer than the limits. Limits typically restrict terms to three or four two-year terms in the lower house, and two four-year terms in the upper house. Limits began to have major effects on some state legislatures in the late 1990s. Between 1996 and 1998, a majority of upper house seats and 47 per cent of lower house seats in California became open contests since incumbents could not seek re-election. Limits also began to apply to legislatures in Colorado, Michigan, and Arkansas in 1998. That year, 58 per cent of Michigan House seats, and forty-nine of 100 seats in the Arkansas lower house were open contests as a result of term limits. Limits hit hard in Missouri in 2002, when seventy-three of 163 seats were made open.

Figure 6.5 plots trends in general election voter turnout in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Michigan, and Missouri. We might expect the sharp rise in open seats when term limits kicked in to correspond with greater voter mobilization. Open-seat contests are known to attract quality candidates and involve more campaign spending (Jacobsen and Kernell 1983:32,41). Yet, although term limits forced many

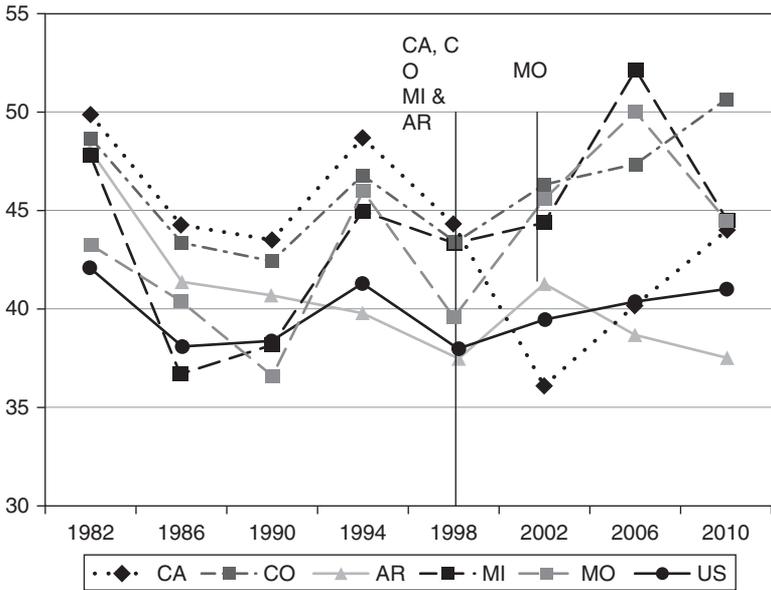


FIGURE 6.5 Turnout in US, and states before and after term limits

Note: Percentage of voting eligible population casting ballots for highest office. Limits began to take effect in California, Colorado, Michigan, and Arkansas at the 1998 election, and Missouri at the 2002 election.

Source: United States Election Project, George Mason University

incumbents out, they may do nothing to affect the distributions of voters in legislative districts. Many districts are composed of an overwhelming majority of voters who support one dominant party. These are likely to remain safe for that party's new candidate in the general election when an incumbent retires. This being the case, term limits can occasionally make some internal party nomination contests more competitive, but effects on general election turnout could well be limited.

There is little in Figure 6.5 that suggests term limits affected voter turnout, at least at the state level. Despite most House seats being open contests in Michigan in 1998, and large proportions of legislators termed-out in Arkansas, California and Colorado, turnout declined in each state that year (compared to the previous midterm election). Turnout was up very slightly in Missouri when limits opened many seats, but much if not all of the 6 per cent increase in turnout over that state's previous midterm can be attributed to an expensive and close special election for a US Senate seat,¹² and an unusually large number of high-profile initiatives and

¹² Jim Talent, a Republican, defeated Democrat Jean Carnahan 49.8 per cent to 48.7 per cent.

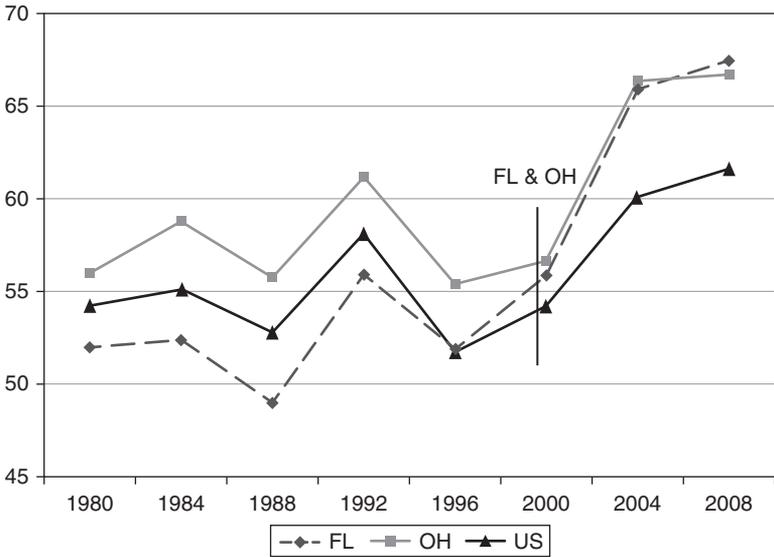


FIGURE 6.6 Turnout in US, and states before and after term limits

Note: Percentage of voting eligible population casting ballots for highest office. Limits began to take effect in Florida and Ohio at the 2000 election.

Source: United States Election Project, George Mason University

referendums on the ballot (including a measure on funding stem cell research). Well after term limits have taken effect, we do see a rise in turnout in Michigan in 2006. However, far fewer seats were open as a result of limits in Michigan (21 per cent of lower house seats) in 2006 than in 1998 (when 58 per cent of lower house seats were opened). Turnout in Michigan likely rose due to a contested US Senate seat, a gubernatorial race, and a controversial state-wide anti-affirmative action ballot initiative.¹³ By 2010, Michigan’s voter turnout returned to its previous levels. Nalder (2007) also examined voter turnout in California—the state with the most severe term limits. She concludes that ‘even controlling for other influences on turnout, term limits continue to be associated with a decrease in voter participation’ (Nalder 2007:201).

Figure 6.6 plots trends in voter turnout in Florida and Ohio. In both of these states, term limits had their first impacts in 2000. One half of the Ohio lower house and 46 per cent of the Florida lower house were termed out in 2000. Turnout was up slightly in these states in 2000, but the turnout in Ohio and Florida that year

¹³ Colorado also had two initiatives on gay marriage and a medical marijuana vote in 2006.

largely matched national trends associated with the mobilizing effect of presidential elections. Again, larger forces, particularly the closely fought presidential contests in Florida and Ohio, likely swamped any effect of term limits on voter engagement in these states. At the risk of labouring the point, this is the opposite finding to the one predicted by term limit supporters.

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS ON PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Another transformative effect of term limits was to restore popular regard for legislatures, and renew voter interest. ‘Citizens’ elected under term limits would somehow behave ‘better’ than ‘career politicians’ who served previously but were corrupted by ‘special interests’. With a transformed legislative and political process, voters would respond, and see politics more favourably. However, we find no increase in popular regard for, or trust in, state legislatures in states that have introduced term limits. As in Chapter 5, we utilize a 2004 Annenberg survey of American opinions to estimate attitudes about politics. In this analysis, we test if there are differences in attitudes that are associated with whether or not a respondent lived in a state where term limits had been in effect.

Survey respondents were asked questions about their belief in the (dis)honesty of candidates, the lack of trustworthiness of politicians, whether or not they had a say in government and their (lack of) confidence in their state government. Our model of attitudes includes an indicator for residence in a state with term limits, and measures that account for the respondent’s age, gender, level of education, race, ethnicity, income, nation of origin (foreign born or not), and party identification.

Table 6.1 shows results from a model of attitudes very similar to what we reported in Chapter 5 on the effects of party finance regulation. What we see is that term limits do not seem to produce any improvement in attitudes towards politicians or government. A simpler and more straightforward demonstration of ‘non-results’ is shown when we look at attitudes to the California state legislature. While there is a difficulty in relying too heavily on the California case to draw general conclusions, it is worth underscoring that California has experienced many reform efforts aimed at the legislature. If these reforms were to have any effect on improving attitudes we should see them here.

As we stress in other chapters, the potential effects of electoral reforms should be considered in the places they are adopted over time—before and after the reform takes place. As noted above, California adopted one of the more restrictive term limits measures (Proposition 140 in 1992), with limits beginning to take effect in the Assembly in 1996 and starting for some Senate seats in 1998. If limits led people to have a more positive evaluation on the California state legislature,

TABLE 6.1 *Effect of governance reforms on popular pessimism about politics and politicians*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Lack of trust in elected officials	Lack of confidence in state-elected officials	People like me have no say in government	Candidates do not try to keep promises
Term limits	-0.0190 (0.0249)	0.0149 (0.0589)	-0.00339 (0.0293)	0.0388 (0.0376)
Number of initiatives	0.00137* (0.000585)	0.00252 + (0.00146)	-0.0000715 (0.000673)	0.00208* (0.000923)
Polarization (short measure)	-0.0196 (0.0258)	-0.00499 (0.0634)	0.0832** (0.0301)	-0.0746 + (0.0391)
Sex	0.000593 (0.0161)	-0.0867** (0.0262)	-0.0369 + (0.0197)	-0.0194 (0.0216)
Age	0.000514 (0.000499)	-0.00158* (0.000799)	-0.00226** (0.000611)	0.00117 + (0.000692)
Education	-0.00107 (0.00396)	-0.00312 (0.00644)	0.0831** (0.00482)	-0.0106* (0.00523)
Attend religious services	0.0703** (0.00607)	0.0278** (0.00988)	-0.0749** (0.00753)	0.0337** (0.00847)
Household income	-0.0118** (0.00439)	-0.00886 (0.00720)	0.0412** (0.00541)	0.0000378 (0.00595)
Campaign finance stringency	0.00643* (0.00262)	-0.00471 (0.00645)	0.00310 (0.00308)	-0.00452 (0.00401)
Latino	-0.0653 + (0.0352)	-0.123* (0.0549)	0.135** (0.0417)	-0.0283 (0.0473)
Black	0.216** (0.0304)	0.146** (0.0521)	-0.0383 (0.0367)	0.0397 (0.0428)
Asian	-0.0862 (0.0716)	-0.0351 (0.125)	-0.114 (0.0890)	0.0367 (0.0883)
Foreign born	-0.118** (0.0330)	-0.0133 (0.0536)	-0.101* (0.0400)	0.0721 (0.0439)
Democratic Party ID			0.0259 (0.0238)	-0.0545* (0.0263)
Republican Party ID			0.281** (0.0242)	-0.269** (0.0267)
Constant	2.336** (0.0605)	2.391** (0.124)	2.111** (0.0727)	2.837** (0.0883)
Ins1_1_1 Constant	-3.581 (0)	-2.139** (0.194)	-3.541 (0)	-2.865** (0.273)
Insig_e Constant	-0.378 (0)	-0.314** (0.0124)	0.0571	-0.362** (0.0107)
Observations	7523	3283	12163	4399
Pseudo R^2				

Standard errors in parentheses + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

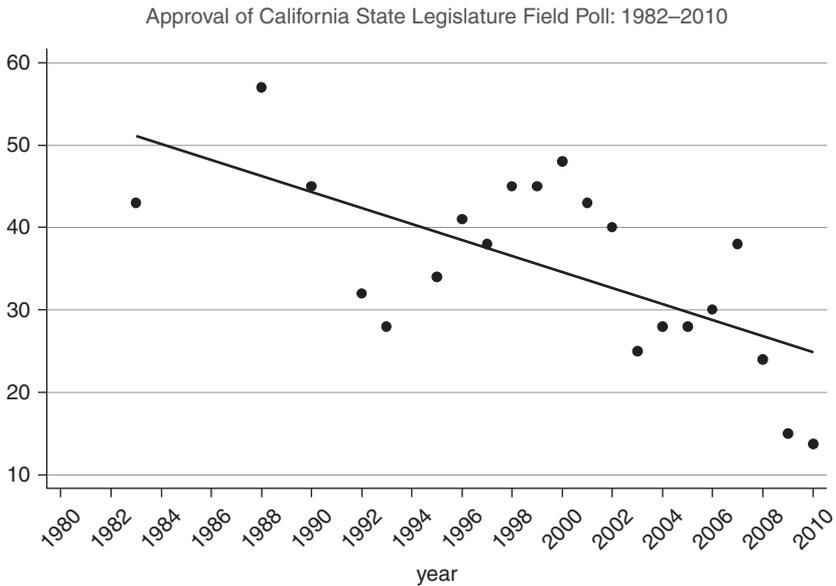


FIGURE 6.7 Approval of the California State Legislature 1988–2012

Source: California Field Polls, various years

Note: Term limits were adopted in 1992. The first seats were opened by the reform in 1996 and 1998.

we would expect to see public approval of the legislature begin to trend upwards after 1998. Figure 6.6 displays trends in Californians' approval of their legislature from 1988 to 2012, as measured in California Field Polls. Each point in the figure is the average approval rate for the legislature for a year. The evidence in Figure 6.7 displays a secular decline in approval of the state legislature, with a rather steady decline in approval since 1998—the first election where term limits were affecting some seats in both legislative chambers. It might be the case that popular regard for the legislature as measured here was skewed lower by methods used by this polling organization, or by responses of citizens who are relatively inattentive or unengaged and likely not to be especially warm toward politicians anyway. Yet we find a similar downward trend when we examine data from a different polling organization (Public Policy Institute of California), and we find even lower approval and a more rapid decline among likely voters (i.e. the relatively more attentive public) than among all respondents.

DISCUSSION

Our account of the effect of election reform in this chapter shares many elements of the previous two chapters. Term limits were a reform that was promoted with great expectations. Advocates of this reform claimed it would have transformative effects on the political process, on the nature of representation, and on how the mass public is engaged with politics. As with our analysis of reforms to the electoral system (Chapter 4) and campaign finance reforms (Chapter 5), we find, again, that the effects of the reform largely fail to meet the expectations laid about by some political scientists and expectations raised by many reform advocates. As with our assessments of the effects of other reforms, we searched for effects with cross-sectional data that compare places with the reform to places without. We have examined trends across places, across time, and we have examined trends before and after reform where term limits were adopted. Given that a survey of the literature demonstrates only minimal effects of term limits on state legislatures and sometimes effects that run counter to those promoted by reformers, it is likely of little surprise that we find no effects of electoral reform on mass politics. Whatever the effects of term limits, then, they have not been seen in voter mobilization, nor in popular opinions towards state legislatures, nor in improved attitudes about the political process.

As we noted in earlier chapters, this raises the obvious question: why? Why, given the promise of reformers, are effects so difficult to identify empirically? We return to this theme in Chapter 8, but there are important points of this discussion to highlight here. We explained the limited effects of campaign finance on politics in terms of the motives of reformers and the actors charged with implementing the reforms. Campaign finance regulations, like electoral system changes examined in Chapter 4, might be seen as reforms adopted by and implemented by strategic politicians. Reforms might be expected to have little identifiable effects if, at least in part, they were adopted or implemented by strategic politicians protecting their electoral interests from pressure to ‘do something’ in response to changing conditions or popular discontent. Electoral system change, we noted, may also be seen as reform adopted in response to changing political conditions, rather than a reform that changes politics and public attitudes.

Term limits in the United States, however, are a different sort of electoral reform—one that was generally imposed on incumbents against their will by angry voters. In California the reform was enshrined in the state Constitution via direct democracy, leaving elected officials very little room to define how it would be implemented. Yet we still see no transformative effects. We noted here that despite the origins of this reform, incumbents were nonetheless able to adapt, moving from one chamber to another to extend their tenure in office. This could mute the potential effects of the reform.

There are likely larger factors limiting the measurable effects of this election reform. Consider all of the interrelated, moving parts that would need to be affected for term limits to have effects similar to those promised by advocates. For term limits to meet the expectations of reformers, the type of candidates seeking office would need to change, the type of candidates winning elections would need to change, the internal practices of legislatures would need to change substantially, the extent that state legislative campaigns mobilize voters would need to change, and, *in response to all of this*, the manner that voters evaluate politics and the power of 'special interests' would need to change. Relative to all of the larger forces affecting these things (including how parties recruit candidates, the cost of running for office, levels of partisan polarization, the health of the macro economy, national electoral forces, and myriad individual-level and contextual forces that determine voter behaviour and attitudes), the maximum length that legislators serve in office may be a small factor. The question we return to in Chapter 8 is whether election reforms are generally such a small factor relative to larger political, social, and economic forces that we should rarely, if ever, expect much to change after reform.

Direct Legislation: Mobilization without Engagement

In principle direct democracy is an electoral reform that should transform the politics of a polity. Instead of voters voting on candidates who then vote on policy it allows voters to vote on policy directly. There are different varieties of direct democracy ranging from the relatively familiar referendum to the far less common, but more thoroughgoing, initiative process. All varieties of direct democracy give voters a way of participating directly in policy, and all have become increasingly widely adopted in recent years at either the local or national level (Scarow 2001: Table 1). The introduction and promise of direct democracy seem to follow the patterns we have seen in other reforms: reformers make a set of promises that seem to fall short in performance. What is especially puzzling in this instance is that the reform itself is so thoroughgoing—taking power away from legislators themselves—that we should see much bigger effects than we do.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY AS ‘REFORM’

Long before federation, Switzerland had an early tradition of agrarian and market square direct democracy in some cantons (Kobach 1993), and the Swiss grafted the initiative and referendum into their federal constitution in 1848.¹ Adoption of direct democracy in the United States, in contrast, occurred as a reform associated with the social, economic, and political upheavals of the Populist (Lawrence, Donovan and Bowler 2009) and Progressive eras of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Piott 2003). Direct democracy is not a feature of America’s federal constitution, nor was it a part of any state constitution prior to 1898. Goebel (1997) and Piott (2003) describe the forces advocating for direct democracy in the US as coalitions of economic populists, farmers, prohibitionists, socialists, labour

¹ The Swiss Constitution of 1848 looked very much like the US Constitution, apart from the Swiss inclusion of direct democracy.

groups, and urban progressive social reformers who shared an ‘anti-monopoly’ goal of weakening the influence that powerful economic interests had over political parties and state legislatures. Most American states that adopted direct legislation did so between 1898 and 1918 when Populist and Progressive forces had their greatest influence over state legislatures and state governors. In some states Populist or Progressive parties emerged very briefly and won seats. More commonly, these forces had power as a faction within a state’s Democratic or Republican party (Piott 2003).

In Germany, direct legislation expanded in conjunction with unification. Four of eleven western states and all five eastern states adopted procedures for state-level citizen-initiated laws and referendums between 1989 and 1997, and twelve states adopted direct democracy at the local level (Scarrow 1999). Scarrow notes that expanded use of direct legislation in Germany occurred at the same time that traditional German political parties were opening their internal practices to more direct citizen influence in response to declining membership. The established parties embraced changes in electoral rules as they were threatened with competition from newer parties (such as the Greens and other new-left parties) that embraced expansion of direct legislation and direct participation in party affairs (Scarrow 1999).

By now governments in numerous established democracies refer important policy and constitutional questions to voters.² Ireland decided by referendum to eliminate that nation’s constitutional ban on divorce in 1986. Voters in Canada decided the fate of special constitutional status for Quebec at a 1992 referendum. The Australian public decided against becoming a republic in 1999. Voters in many European nations have made decisions about NATO, the European Union, the European Constitution, and the euro via referendums. In addition to these issues, referendums on electoral rules have been held in a number of areas including New Zealand (2011, 1993), the UK (2011), British Columbia (2005, 2009), Ontario (2007), Prince Edward Island (2005), and Italy (1993). As noted earlier, one of the uses of direct democracy, and especially referendums, is to give voters a say on new electoral rules.

² Uruguay (Altman 2002) and Lichtenstein may be the only other places with direct popular legislation at the national level. New Zealand has provisions that allow citizens to petition for non-binding advisory votes on issues. Italy has a popular referendum process for repealing acts of Parliament that has been used occasionally. Newer Central and Eastern European nations also have some provisions for direct democracy. There are other places that allow citizens to initiate legislative acts, but these processes are used less commonly or used only locally. As examples, the Canadian province of British Columbia has provisions for direct citizen law making, but the qualification threshold has rarely been met. The Netherlands and Australia have direct democracy locally.

THE PROMISE(S) OF DIRECT LEGISLATION

Along with reformers come the promises of reform. Proponents of expanded use of direct democracy in Germany and the European Union argue that it can transform people from ‘mere spectators’ of politics to ‘engaged citizens’.³ Advocates of direct legislation in Bavaria claimed the process makes people ‘feel less powerless’. (Rehmet and Wenisch 2005) Other champions of the process in Europe have noted that direct legislation satisfies basic human needs, and that direct participation in law making can make people feel happier, have stronger feelings of social solidarity, and have greater trust in other people (Vernhulst and Nijeboer 2007). Scarrow noted ‘typical arguments on behalf of [German direct democracy] stressed how these changes would provide disaffected citizens with increased opportunities to exert direct (not party-mediated) influence’. German reformers, furthermore, claimed that direct democracy ‘would combat declining electoral participation by making voting a more consequential act’ (Scarrow 1999:351).

These justifications for expanded use of direct democracy in Germany are similar to those used by Populist and Progressive reformers in America, and they echo claims of transformative effects promoted by advocates of other electoral reformers and indeed other reforms. Disparate elements of the Populist and Progressive reform coalitions advocating for direct legislation could not agree on policy aims—one set sought economic security for farmers, another hoped to advance labour rights, while others sought to make it difficult for working men to drink. They agreed, however, that direct legislation was the instrument to achieve their various policy goals, and to alter the design of political institutions that impeded their goals. But more than policy goals, the introduction of direct legislation also advanced more conceptual goals associated with participation and citizenship. The comments of Hiram Johnson, a prominent reformer and one of the people most responsible for introducing the most radical form of direct democracy into California, are worth noting in some length. In his inaugural address he pointed up the problem of special interests:

The problem first presented to us, therefore, is how best can the government be made responsive to the people alone? Matters of material prosperity and advancement, conservation of resources, development of that which lies within our borders, are easy of solution when once the primal question of the people’s rule shall have been determined. In some form or other nearly every governmental problem that involves the health, the happiness, or the prosperity of the State has arisen, because some private interest has intervened or has sought for its own gain to exploit either the resources or the politics of the State. I take it, therefore, that the first duty that is mine to perform is to

³ <http://www.democracy-international.org/aboutus.html>

eliminate every private interest from the government, and to make the public service of the State responsive solely to the people. (Johnson 1911: see also Reinsch 1912:205)

The popular will, if it is allowed to be expressed, cannot be corrupt or reflective of only ‘special’ interests. There is, of course, a practical difficulty in accomplishing an institutional reform to defeat special interests: the objects of reforms—politicians—are often the ones supposed to introduce them. But one reform—direct democracy—offers the hope of being a positive step in itself but, also, a more or less permanent solution to that hurdle in future:

while I do not by any means believe the initiative, the referendum, and the recall are the panacea for all our political ills, yet they do give to the electorate the power of action when desired, and they do place in the hands of the people the means by which they may protect themselves. (Johnson 1911)

The benefits did not stop there. Early American supporters of direct legislation, like many supporters of expanding the franchise, stressed the instrumental and ‘educative’ changes that would occur with the use of direct legislation (Smith and Tolbert 2004). William S. U’ren, one of the original American champions of direct legislation and an advocate of Henry George’s single tax, explained his motivation in the following way: ‘The important thing was to restore the law-making power where it belonged—into the hands of the people. Once give us that, we could get anything we wanted—single tax; anything’ (Johnson 1944:292). The referendum would be a check on representatives who acted out of synch with public opinion, while the initiative would be an end run around legislators who blocked popular policies (Polhill 2001).

Progressive Era ‘reformers viewed the process of citizen law making as one of many ways to encourage citizens to become more actively engaged in the political process’ (Smith and Tolbert 2004:3). Populist and Progressive era reformers, like contemporary advocates, looked to direct democracy as a means to increase voter turnout by stimulating interest in public affairs (Munro 1912). Direct legislation was seen as a means for getting citizens more engaged with the substance of public policy, and a way to increase substantive political knowledge and political efficacy: ‘nothing will so train the electorate to see the difficulties and problems of legislation, and to form an intelligent judgment about them, as having to solve those problems itself at times’ (Reinsch 1912:158, and more generally Smith and Tolbert 2004). The promise of direct democracy, then, was not simply that it would change policy, but that citizens would deliberate on issues placed on their ballots and learn about policy and politics while doing so. Modern-day reformers echo those claims:

As a direct result of the balanced public information programs and deliberative procedures established by the National Initiative for each qualified initiative, citizens will come to better understand the consequences of various

public policy and legislative alternatives than they do under our present system. Over time, this will enhance the People's ability to render wise legislative decisions and contribute to the maturity of the electorate. (National Initiative For Democracy website <http://ni4d.us/en/partnership> accessed 26 April 2012)

Direct democracy, then, would deal with the issue of special interests—possibly once and for all. It will also produce policies more to the tastes of the voters and, also, have a series of educative effects that would, in effect, awaken a political consciousness among voters.⁴ It is worth emphasizing that the arguments of reformers are, yet again, entirely consistent with, and sometimes informed by, the academic political science understanding of institutions: if we shift the locus of agenda-setting power we are likely to see changes in outcomes; if people are given the rights and responsibilities to participate they are likely to behave differently than when participation is not permitted.

EFFECTS OF DIRECT LEGISLATION ON POLICY AND INSTITUTIONS

What of direct democracy's effects on policy and the political process? Prominent academic observers of American direct legislation report that 'the impact of state ballot initiatives on state policy is beyond question' (Sabato, Larson and Ernst 2001:x). There is some consensus that direct democracy alters policy in states that have the process, but much less consensus on how this alteration occurs. Some contend that direct democracy resolves the agency problem, and causes representatives to better reflect popular preferences for policy (Buchanan and Wagner 1977; Matsusaka 1995; 2006; Gerber 1999). Other research demonstrates that voter-initiated land use laws may be more restrictive than those adopted by representatives (Donovan and Neiman 1992; Gerber and Philips 2010). Studies of abortion and death penalty laws show that places with direct democracy have laws that better reflect median voter preferences (Gerber 1996a; 1996b; 1999; Arceneaux 2002). However, studies that examine a wider range of policies, including fiscal policies, find that direct democracy does not make policy more responsive to opinion (Lax and Phillips 2009; 2012; Lascher et al. 1996). These latter findings may reflect that legislators who control implementation of direct legislation can often avoid the constraints of citizen-initiated laws (Gerber et al.

⁴ The phrase comes from Reinsch who, despite his arguments in support of some role for voters, did express some caution in expanding the role for voters. For example: 'The legislation of Oregon [on direct democracy] to my mind is attempting too much. It expects of the electorate a constant exercise of legislative action and if this expectation should be met it would mean a removal of the center of deliberation from the halls of legislation to the popular forum.' (Reinsch 1912:158–9)

2001; Bowler and Donovan 2004). Voters do approve laws that restrict minority rights (Gamble 1997; Christmann and Danaci 2012 for religious intolerance in Switzerland), but they may be no more or less likely to do so than legislators (Haider-Markel et al. 2007), and direct legislation violates minority rights—courts regularly veto such laws (Donovan and Bowler 1998; Donovan et al. 2000). Indeed, courts have been shown to frequently invalidate many citizen-initiated laws in the US (Miller 2009). Regardless of whether direct legislation does or does not make policy more responsive to public opinion, and regardless of whether it does or does not move policy systematically in a particular direction, many argue that direct legislation is nonetheless highly consequential, because voters will approve tax and spending constraints that are more restrictive, or policies that are less responsible, than those legislators would otherwise adopt (e.g. Smith 1998; Ellis 2002).

Other arguments concern not just the potential for change in policy but the potential for change in institutions. One of the difficulties of any reform is the obvious one: proposed changes to political institutions tend to require the current ‘winners’ to make the changes, which makes change unlikely. Under the referendum process considerable power remains in the hands of legislators, notably agenda-setting power. That is, under the referendum legislators still retain considerable leeway over what questions to put to the vote, and when. The referendum, then, has limits as an agent of change. But under the initiative, agenda-setting power exists outside the legislature and the executive, opening up the possibility for some agenda setters to realistically insist on changes to the legislature or the executive and plausibly expect to obtain those changes.

Some expect that direct legislation serves as a catalyst that furthers numerous electoral reforms (e.g. Tolbert 2003). In previous chapters we saw some evidence consistent with this argument. Legislative term limits (Chapter 6) were largely the direct product of citizen legislation, and thus were virtually unknown in states without direct democracy (Tolbert 1998). But other than adoption of term limits, it is not clear that direct legislation—or even the threat of citizen initiatives—has transformed political institutions where it is used. The adoption of Progressive era reforms such as the direct primary and women’s suffrage, for example, appear to covary with presence of direct democracy but these reforms were no more likely to have been adopted by legislators or via popular initiative (Ellis 2002; Lawrence, Donovan and Bowler 2009; but see Banaszak 1996). Persily and Anderson (2005) examine whether a wide range of electoral reforms—various campaign finance rules, commission-based redistricting, open primaries, direct primaries, women’s suffrage, mal-apportionment reforms—were more likely to be adopted in American states where citizens could directly legislate. They find a ‘mixed picture’ and conclude that apart from term limits and some campaign finance rules legislators adopted reforms, rather than voters.

Effects of direct legislation on policy and institutions, then, may be largely indirect, although still consequential. For example, the handful of citizen-initiated

redistricting plans adopted in the US tend to be more insulated from legislative influence than plans designed by legislators (Donovan 2011). The cumulative effect of initiative use may also weaken the autonomy of political parties (Bowler and Donovan 2006), and weaken the link between party control of government and a party's ability to shape public policy (Philips 2008), which may go some way to explaining why some scholars find no link between direct legislation and policy being responsive to public opinion (e.g. Lax and Phillips 2012). Some legal observers in America also speculate that direct democracy affects how courts function in states by causing judges to feel less insulated from public opinion (Eule 1993). However, courts are quite willing to invalidate laws initiated by citizens (Miller 2009). To summarize, direct democracy likely does affect policy and institutions where it is used, but the effects may be subtle, idiosyncratic, and difficult to quantify.

EFFECTS OF DIRECT LEGISLATION ON CITIZEN BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES

As we saw, advocates of direct legislation not only discussed the effect of direct democracy on policy outcomes but predicted effects upon the democratic process. Direct legislation is promoted as having transformative effects on citizens. Many empirical studies have searched for links between initiative use and various measures of civic engagement, including turnout, efficacy, and participation. The implicit causal argument from the Progressives is that initiative use stimulates interest, knowledge, engagement, and efficacy, which, in turn, stimulate voter turnout.

Unlike the cases of changes in electoral systems (Chapter 4), campaign finance regulations (Chapter 5), and the adoption of term limits (Chapter 6), we have less ability to observe how things changed in places that adopted the initiative process. Most US states and Swiss cantons that have free-wheeling versions of direct democracy adopted the process prior to the advent of modern survey research. Rather, a large number of cross-sectional studies document potential differences between initiative and non-initiative states. Some identify a link between usage of ballot initiatives and individual survey respondents' self-reported political efficacy in the US (Bowler and Donovan 2002; Smith and Tolbert 2004); between initiative use and voter knowledge in the US (M. Smith 2001); between referendums and efficacy in Canada (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000), and between initiatives and life satisfaction in Switzerland (Frey and Stutzer 2000). Several cross-sectional studies document a link between initiative use and higher voter turnout (see Tolbert et al. 2009 for a review).

Nearly all of these studies suffer from the same problem that bedevil cross-national research on institutional effects: it is very difficult to assign causality to the use of direct democracy in a state, given that other features of that place covary with use of direct democracy (Marschall and Ruhil 2005). It is possible that states that adopted direct democracy shared some common social context that, a century later, continues to affect levels of efficacy and participation. Moreover, Dyck and Lascher (2009) note that although efficacy is associated with turnout, changes in efficacy have a very weak relationship with trends in voter turnout (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993:214). Studies using panel data show that much of the relationship between efficacy and participation is endogenous, with the act of participating (Leighley 1991) or supporting winning candidates (Clarke and Acock 1989) driving efficacy. Given all of this, Dyck and Lascher (2009) expect a weak relationship between initiative use and civic engagement. Their reassessment of several years of survey data from the US shows that some of the reported links between direct democracy and external efficacy⁵ in cross-sectional studies may be erroneous. Internal efficacy,⁶ however, has a very modest relationship with turnout. People scoring highest on a measure of internal efficacy are about 2.9 per cent more likely to vote than people with low efficacy, whereas people scoring highest on external efficacy are about 10.6 per cent more likely to vote (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003:144–5). Many factors other than exposure to an occasional ballot measure (education, having an attachment to a political party, childhood socialization, media usage, etc.) all likely play a much larger role in determining an individual's level of political efficacy.

EFFECTS ON VOTER TURNOUT

If direct democracy may only be loosely related to the weaker form of efficacy, how might direct democracy increase voter participation? As a more concrete instance we can ask just how large the substantive effect of direct democracy is on turnout. The link between initiative use and turnout may have as much (or less) to do with direct democracy building civic engagement as with the mobilizing effects of expensive and sensationalist initiative campaigns—campaigns that often have anti-government themes that might actually stimulate distrust (Dyck and Lascher 2009). Nonetheless, there is a link between initiative use and participation—

⁵ External efficacy is measured with items that ask: 'People like me don't have any say in what government does' and 'Public officials don't care much what people like me think.'

⁶ This is measured with items that ask: 'I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics' and 'Sometimes government and politics seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand...'

turnout is higher in initiative states generally (Smith and Tolbert 2004), and higher across initiative states where more initiatives are used (Tolbert et al. 2009).

Depending on the study we consult and the years being examined, the substantive effects are rather modest. After assessing the adoption of direct democracy in Germany, Scarrow (1997:356) concluded that ‘efforts to boost electoral participation have met little success’. Smith and Tolbert report that a ballot initiative increased statewide turnout by 0.5 per cent in 1996, and by 1 per cent in 1998 (2004:51). A study of turnout from 1980 through 2002 estimated the effect at 0.7 per cent for presidential years and 1.7 per cent for midterm elections (Smith and Tolbert 2005). Another study estimates that a ballot measure increased turnout by 2 per cent in 1994, but that the presence of an initiative caused turnout to *decline* by 1 per cent in 1996 (Tolbert et al. 2001:641–2). This latter study further muddled the causality issue: initiative states were shown to have higher turnout in 1994, even if no initiatives were on the ballot that year. Another study examining turnout in 2002 and 2004 estimated the effect as a 1 per cent increase in 2002, and a smaller effect for 2004 (Tolbert et al. 2009). A study pooling data from 1980 to 2006 showed the effects to be even smaller: 0.3 per cent for presidential years, and 0.5 per cent for midterm elections (Tolbert et al. 2008).

Put simply, reform advocates promoted direct democracy, at least in part, as a means to transform, educate, and engage citizens. Experience in the US suggests that direct democracy has a mixed record in terms of affecting engagement, and only a modest effect on voter participation.

DOES DIRECT DEMOCRACY AWAKEN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG CITIZENS?

Few (if any) studies have tested how political interest and knowledge changed over the course of a referendum campaign. Yet change in opinion over the course of a campaign provides a direct way of assessing the educative effects of direct democracy. Data from the UK referendum on AV in May 2011 provide a rare opportunity to assess how people respond to the stimulus of a fairly high-profile referendum campaign. National referendums are uncommon in the UK, but the decision on whether to change the election system was a reasonably high-profile matter. Voter decision making, and some arguments in favour of and against changing the electoral system were presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Our question here is whether this campaign environment awakened the political consciousness of the British electorate in a measurable way. We are interested in whether the electorate learned about the substance of the policy at hand. Substantively, did they learn basic information about the Alternate Vote electoral system, or at least end up more understanding of it after the campaign? Related

TABLE 7.1 *Change in interest and engagement during UK referendum campaign*

	5–8 March	24–28 April	7–10 May
Care personally which system used to elect MPs	70% (71%)	77% (78%)	79% (79%)
AV will restore trust	39% (38%)	n/a	27% (27%)
	<i>5–8 March</i>	<i>24–28 April</i>	
Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on in politics?			
very interested	26% (29%)	28% (29%)	
interested	51% (51%)	51% (52%)	
not very interested	17% (15%)	16% (16%)	
not at all interested	5% (5%)	4% (4%)	

Source: University of Exeter UK Referendum Survey

Note: Sample size in March = 1586, in April = 1166, in May = 995. Values in parentheses are responses from people who remained in all waves of the panel.

to this, we want to know if people became more engaged with politics as a result of the process of making a major political decision via a referendum.

The referendum campaign began in early March, and featured television ads, newspaper ads, direct mail, and an information booklet mailed by the Electoral Commission to every household, supported by an advertising campaign across television, radio, and online.⁷ Although nowhere near the scale of a general election campaign, it is clear that voters were aware of, and exposed to, the referendum campaign. Our surveys found that 85 per cent had heard about the referendum by the end of the campaign in late April. Two-thirds of respondents received at least one piece of direct mail, 40 per cent reported seeing TV ads, and 40 per cent reported seeing the information booklet.

The panel was interviewed early in March at the outset of the campaign, then again roughly a week before the vote, then again the week after the vote.⁸ Each wave of the survey asked respondents about substantive matters related to AV that were prominent in the campaign, and also asked about their interest in politics and about their interest in the electoral system. Table 7.1 reports that, at the outset, a large majority of these respondents reported that they ‘cared personally’ about which electoral system would be used to elect Parliament. We do find evidence that this increased slightly over the course of the campaign. Seventy-one per cent of respondents said they cared about the electoral system in early March. After the

⁷ The public information given to voters is available here: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/public-awareness-campaigns/public-information-on-5-May-2011-elections-and-referendum>

⁸ The panel was a random national sample surveyed via Internet by Qualtrics.

TABLE 7.2 *Change in substantive knowledge during UK referendum campaign*

	5–8 March	24–28 April	7–10 May
Every MP has to win a majority of votes with AV	46% (47%)	44% (45%)	48% (48%)
AV is ranking your candidates 1, 2, 3	55% (57%)	56% (58%)	61% (61%)
AV is too confusing to understand	46% (48%)	42% (43%)	44% (44%)

Source: University of Exeter UK Referendum Survey

Note: Sample size in March = 1586, in April = 1166, in May = 995. Values in parentheses are responses from people who remained in all waves of the panel.

campaign, 79 per cent of the same respondents reported caring about the electoral system. While this pattern is consistent with a process where a campaign stimulates voter interest, additional results in Table 7.1 suggest that while the referendum campaign might have generated interest in the subject at hand, it did not affect general levels of political engagement and interest. There was no change in the panel in reported levels of political interest. There was, in contrast, a notable decline in support for the idea that a change to AV would restore trust in politics.

While there may have been a slight increase in interest (or caring) about the electoral system after the referendum campaign, evidence of substantive learning is more muted. Respondents were asked two factual questions about AV in each wave of the survey. They were asked if they agreed or disagreed that under AV, every MP has to win a majority of votes to be elected, and if they agreed or disagreed that AV involved ‘ranking your candidates 1, 2, 3’. Respondents were also asked if they agreed or disagreed that AV was ‘too confusing’ for voters to understand. If interest stimulated by the campaign translated into substantive learning, we would expect to see a general increase over the course of the campaign in agreement with the first two items, and a decrease in agreement with the third item. Results are reported in Table 7.2. Responses to the first item—that MPs are elected with a majority under AV—were unchanged over the course of the campaign. There is a very slight increase in agreement that AV involves ranking candidates: 2 per cent when we compare all respondents from March to those from May or 4 per cent when the comparison is limited to those who completed each wave of the panel. There is an even slighter decrease (2–4 per cent) in agreement with the statement that AV is too confusing. Overall, these results suggest direct democracy may have produced a slight increase in concern about the electoral system, but that it produced little noticeable effect on substantive learning or engagement with politics. Rather, as we demonstrated in Chapter 2, voters appear to have learned the rival political parties’ positions on the question, and voted accordingly.

What can we learn from the UK referendum about how direct democracy affected voter turnout? The referendum on the UK electoral system was held in

TABLE 7.3 *Self-reported propensity to vote if no referendum, UK 2011*

	Scottish	Local
	Parliament	Election
Would you vote if there was no referendum?		
Yes	99%	84%
No	1%	16%

Source: University of Exeter UK Referendum Survey

Note: Questions asked of a split sample of 272 respondents.

conjunction with regularly scheduled local elections in much of the nation and in conjunction with Scottish Parliamentary elections. Our post-election survey asked people if they would have participated had there been no referendum on their ballot. Table 7.3 illustrates that in Scotland, nearly everyone reported they would have voted on 5 May regardless of the fact that the electoral system referendum was also on the ballot. In contrast, 16 per cent of voters who said they had a local election in their jurisdiction reported they would not have voted if there were no referendum. This suggests that when a modestly high-profile election is taking place (a regional assembly or a national parliament) direct legislation of this sort might have no effect on mobilizing voters. We cannot assume that the survey responses reported in Table 7.3 mean that turnout at the local elections increased 16 per cent because the electoral system question was put before voters. In fact, turnout in 2011 was slightly higher than in the immediately preceding ‘local only’ election of 2009 as well as the more directly comparable 2007 election. Average turnout figures in local elections were, for 2011, 42.6 per cent; in 2009 it was 39.2 per cent and in 2007 37.4 per cent.⁹ However, if local elections have a lower salience for voters, these results suggest that a referendum held simultaneously might bring additional voters to the polls, although so, too, does holding any other election at the same time. Turnout in the 2010 local elections, held simultaneously with a general election, was 63.5 per cent.

DISCUSSION

The existing scholarly literature coupled with our assessment of voter response to the 2011 UK referendum suggest that there are some effects of direct legislation that match the promises of those advocates of greater use of direct democracy.

⁹ For local elections 2002–2011, excluding the ones held simultaneously with general elections (2005, 2010) there is a slight upward trend in turnout in local elections.

There is a robust literature demonstrating that citizens' initiatives are associated with a very modest increase in voter mobilization—at least in the American states. Survey respondents in the UK also claim they might not have otherwise voted in local elections had a referendum not also been on their ballots. When initiatives are decided in conjunction with standard elections, it seems that some people who otherwise might not have voted are mobilized by direct legislation. All of this is consistent with standard campaign effects. When something on the ballot generates campaign activity, advertising, and media attention, more voters become interested. This may motivate them to seek out cues for navigating the referendum decision—in this case, learning which party or party leaders are in favour of or opposed to the proposal (Lupia 1994; Bowler and Donovan 1998; 2002; Chapter 2 of this volume).

Reform advocates, however, promised much more from direct democracy than a few more voters becoming interested enough to show up at the polls and vote their partisan interest. Disaffected citizens would become engaged. The act of deciding matters of policy would build feelings of solidarity and trust. Powerless spectators would become engaged citizens who would learn substantive details of policy. We find little evidence of this either in the existing literature or in our study of the effects of the UK referendum. Although more people cared about the topic of the referendum by the end of the UK referendum campaign, interest in politics remained unchanged, few people knew more about AV after the campaign than before, and limited public support for the idea that electoral system reform could restore trust in politics eroded over the course of the campaign.

Granted, it could be that the topic of electoral system reform in the UK was too banal—or too great a partisan matter—to have any educative effects. Furthermore, the UK case is a referendum, not direct citizen authorship and decision making. It could be that empowerment and trust building are only possible when campaigns are about legislation that was produced by 'the people' rather than 'the politicians'. That said, our largely null results for learning and engagement from a study of voter attitudes across the course of a referendum campaign are consistent with those from previous cross-sectional studies by Dyck (2009) and Dyck and Lascher (2009). In the next chapter we present reasons for why effects are so limited.

The Limits of Electoral Institutions

This project has examined a fairly straightforward question: What are the prospects for electoral reforms to have substantial effects on voter behaviour and attitudes? In looking at a series of electoral rules we see that there are, in fact, only very limited effects on voter behaviour and attitudes. In part reforms themselves are relatively limited in their scope. Compared to the expansion of the franchise to women, for example, such reforms as term limits or campaign finance are quite limited. Even so, the rules changes and reforms we have examined were promoted with great expectations, but they all seem to have had effects on popular engagement with politics that fell short, and often far short, of those expectations. In this chapter we examine why this is the case, and we discuss whether the findings on these particular reforms generalize to others.

THE OLD ‘NEW INSTITUTIONALISM’

Across the reforms we noted the predictions reformers made on behalf of their reform that stressed the transformative effects the new electoral arrangements should have on citizens. We should note that, the need for campaigning to one side, many of the claims were eminently plausible. The underlying idea that institutions provide incentives and that voters and politicians respond to those incentives is eminently reasonable and underlies many scholarly treatments of institutional effects. Even more specific claims about the incentives changed by specific institution were typically quite plausible and so the reforms ‘made sense’. Institutions, in other words, should matter. In fact, in the past few decades ‘institutions matter’ became a common theme among many political scientists and economists—where institutions are presumed to affect norms, beliefs, and behaviour (e.g. Riker 1980; March and Olsen 1984; Moe 1984; North 1990; Shepsle and Weingast 1994; Hall and Taylor 1996). It is fairly easy and persuasive to see political elites respond to institutional rules. In legislative settings, for example, we can see changes in behaviour according to institutional rules. But what may influence elites may not influence how citizens engage with the political system: can we or should we expect variation in electoral systems to cause people to

change their behaviour and attitudes? In Chapter 4 we tested this latter expectation and found little to suggest that a change from plurality to proportional rules had noticeable effects on the voter attitudes and behaviour. In Chapter 5 we tested expectations about how campaign finance rules might affect how people view politics, and found little to support the idea that the rules mattered. Chapter 6 demonstrated no effects of term limits on popular attitudes and mass behaviour. Chapter 7 presented our assessment of direct democracy, where we found some evidence that the process mobilizes more voters, but little showing that it has educative effects.

It could simply be that we looked at the wrong things, in the wrong places, at the wrong time. Electoral system change we studied in Australia and New Zealand covered a relatively short period of time, for example. Had the time series spanned several decades, perhaps we would see clearer and stronger effects of the rule change. The same thing could be said about each reform we examined. However, there are important points about the ‘new institutionalism’ that may explain why we observe such limited effects of electoral rules. Institutions are endogenous—‘their form and functioning depend on the conditions in which they emerge and endure’ (Prezowski 2004:527). If this endogeneity is strong, the institutions cannot have causal effects of their own. The idea that ‘institutions matter’, then, becomes ‘almost tautological’ (Sachs 2003:38). If campaign finance reforms emerge and form in an environment of scandal and mistrust they may have little ability to cause people to be trusting. Indeed, the rules themselves may be institutional manifestations of distrust. The same may be said of direct democracy and term limits. Likewise, if proportional representation is adopted because major parties are losing vote share to smaller upstart parties, then PR may be an institutional expression of previous changes in voting behaviour, rather than a cause of it.

CORRELATION IS NOT CAUSATION

Demonstrating weak and null effects of electoral rules may not seem as compelling as showing that institutions matter, but we argue that null results should not be taken lightly. Electoral rules generally emerge from struggles over partisan self-interest. If self-interested partisans change rules in response to changing electoral conditions, the rules we study may embody, at least in part, changes that have already occurred. This logic may be under-appreciated because a large number of published studies report significant effects of various electoral arrangements on voting behaviour, efficacy (e.g. Karp and Banducci 2008), turnout (e.g. Blais 2006), satisfaction with democracy (e.g. Anderson and Guillory 1997), political engagement (e.g. Karp 2011), and other attitudes and behaviour.

One difficulty in assessing institutional effects is that of measuring effects on citizen attitudes and behaviour. Publications from cross-sectional research designs often demonstrate modest effects of institutions on the main political behaviours of interest—notably turnout. Yet these effects are larger than we find when we look at the effect of institutional change across time. In fact, in some instances, it is not just that the effects we detect are small but that they are not there at all. We are hard pressed, then, to find a connection between electoral reforms and popular attitudes towards government—even when the standards we use are those suggested by proponents of the reforms themselves and often by the political science literature.

The gap between our results and those from cross-national studies may reflect a fundamental difference between studies that measure change over time (as we have attempted to do in this book where possible) and correlational studies. Correlational studies are now ubiquitous, aided in part by a new and welcome wealth of public opinion data. The World Values Survey, the Globalbarometer, and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems surveys cover many different nations, asking hundreds of survey questions of tens of thousands of respondents in dozens of nations. Onto these are merged numerous measures of political institutions: presidential versus parliamentary systems, plurality versus proportional versus mixed systems, district magnitude, assembly size, federalism, and so on. Given multiple surveys, large sample sizes, and the fact that there are so many tests for so many potential relationships between various attitudes, behaviours, and electoral rules, something will be statistically significant.¹ In contrast, major electoral rules change somewhat rarely so observation of the effects of change on behaviour over time is relatively rare. Change may not only be less likely to be studied, but there will be fewer studies of it.

Apart from efforts using computer simulations and experiments where human subjects are treated with hypothetical scenarios in a lab, we cannot directly manipulate electoral rules and then observe the results. Correlational studies are valued in the social sciences because they are often the only way of answering a question with readily quantifiable data. But they are typically only subject to replication by similar correlational studies. Use of large (often survey) data sets and fast computers for correlational studies exploded in biomedical sciences in the early 2000s because these studies cost a fraction of a rigorous clinical trial.² Over 250,000 such studies were published from 2001 to 2011.³ Correlational studies in

¹ With a $p < 0.05$ criterion for significance, one out of every nineteen statistical tests conducted will, randomly, appear as significant. At a $p < 0.10$ level, one out of every ten tests is 'significant' by chance. As the researcher performs different refinements and new specifications of their statistical models, the odds of a Type I error increase further.

² Statistical software and estimation methods used in epidemiology and cross-national comparative political science research are rather similar.

³ *Wall Street Journal* analysis of scholarly journals indexed by Thompson Reuters Web of Science.

the natural sciences have promoted the idea that consuming wine was good for health, that consuming wine was bad for health, that women taking hormone-replacement drugs were healthier than those who did not, that an osteoporosis drug increased the risk of cancer, and that it did not—and so on. Given what is at stake in medicine, correlational studies were often subject to replication, sometimes with clinical trials. There is a growing realization—promoted by John Ioannidis (Ioannidis et al. 2001; Ioannidis 2005) of Stanford and others—that results from biomedical correlational studies are ‘either completely useless or there are only small effects’. Estimates of the rate that correlational studies are successfully replicated range from 5 per cent to 20 per cent, whereas the replication rate for random trials—where the effect of something is observed over time—is 80 per cent (Niak 2012). Ioannidis, a prominent scholar of genetics and research methods, concluded that because of existing bias in scientific and publication practices, most published research findings are false (Ioannidis 2005).

A BIAS AGAINST NULL RESULTS?

Our point is not so much that a correlational approach is wrong, but that an emphasis on positive correlations may help build to a picture that institutions are more consequential than they in fact are. A related point is undoubtedly a problem in terms of standard social science practice—one typically does not publish null results demonstrating that yesterday’s previous innovation may have been wrong. There are lots of reasons, then, why null results are hard to interpret. There are often good reasons that explain a lack of statistical and substantive significance—perhaps an opinion poll had flaws, or statistical models were specified incorrectly, and so on—or perhaps the hypothesis was simply wrong. It is quite simply very hard to disentangle null results from running a flawed study. A null result, then, is generally of little use in academic fields—particularly given practical limits. Page space in journals, for example, is limited and researchers and their audience are more interested in new findings, or new ideas supported with something that is significant. Few journals, if any, frequently publish papers with null results. We rarely receive papers to review where some compelling new idea was tested, but the tests produced null results. Similarly, we rarely receive papers to review where null results contradict some conventional wisdom that was put to the test. There are several very good reasons, then, for not publishing null results. Yet some null results are relevant. When we only report results that are statistically significant, we distort our understanding of the world. This is the case, we argue, when it comes to looking for institutional effects.

Our difficulty in finding institutional effects is also informative in that it might help to push analysis of institutional effects towards conditional and contingent

effects: institutions may be more likely to have effects under some conditions or bigger effects under other conditions. But if we do have to try so hard to demonstrate effects then we may be overestimating the theoretical importance of institutions. A disciplinary bias against reporting negative results and a bias in favour of reporting positive ones may well have the substantive effect of skewing our understanding of institutions to make it seem that they have bigger effects than they do in practice. Despite the intellectual appeal of the argument that institutions do have effects on political behaviour, a lack of reporting of the negative results may overinflate the importance of institutions.

DISENTANGLING EFFECTS

Another reason why it is difficult to see effects of individual electoral rules is that electoral reform can encompass several efforts at once. In the UK, for example, the rules governing campaign spending, donations to parties, and standards in public life were all changed within a relatively short period of time. In California the legislature was subject to changes in redistricting practices, a new rule about the size of a majority required to pass a budget, and changes in primary election rules within a very short period around 2012.⁴ Were we to study California a decade after this, it would be difficult to assess which rule change, if any, was most consequential. Various rules changes may have overlapping and interacting effects. One possibility for the lack of effects where we have studied is that some reform efforts may well cancel each other out, perhaps because politicians are strategic actors who are able to adapt. This adaptability seems especially pronounced when it comes to campaign finance reform as politicians are able to find new ways to raise money even in the face of limitations.

The California case is an important one—and one we refer to a lot in this volume—because of the sheer number of reform efforts that have been introduced there. One could argue, then, that it is not surprising that we see no clear effects of rules changes on attitudes and behaviour in California because that legislature was subjected to overlapping reform efforts during the period we examined, including term limits (beginning in 1998), primary election reform (the state used an open ‘blanket’ primary in 1998, then returned to closed primaries), and new campaign finance rules initiated by legislators (in 2000). Maybe the effects of these other reforms cancelled out or undercut the purported trust-building effect that a term-limited legislature would have on citizens. Perhaps. It may be the case that

⁴ An independent redistricting commission drew lines for legislative districts that went into effect in 2012. That same year an open, ‘top-two’ primary replaced closed partisan primaries. Voters also passed an initiative in 2010 that changed the majority requirement from two-thirds to a simple majority.

whatever changes in incentives facing politicians that were put in place or removed by term limits were overshadowed by other incentives provided by additional institutional changes made at the same time. The problem is that all these reforms adopted in California during this period were intent on accomplishing broadly similar goals: reducing the influence of special interests, increasing legislative responsiveness to ordinary voters, and so on.

In this case, then, the worry is not so much that reforms cancelled each other out but that they reinforced each other. With multiple reforms promoted as weakening ‘politicians’ and ‘special interests’ working at the same time, the California case should provide an easy one in which to demonstrate some kind of relationship between increased popular engagement and electoral reform—there are so many reforms all aimed in the same direction *one* of them should have an effect. The difficulty should be in trying to sort out which reform brought about the improvement in public regard for the legislature, yet we find approval of the legislature continued to decline. A similar pattern existed in the UK where, despite the first part of this century embracing over a decade of more transparency in politics and ever-more regulation of campaign finance and public standards, most voters remained cynical about parties and Parliament, and voter turnout never returned to within 10 per cent of levels seen prior to 1997. These changes were sold as a means to produce an improvement in popular regard for politicians, yet, like reform efforts in America, they seem to have failed.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND ELITE SELF-INTEREST

Advocates of PR or term limits or campaign finance or direct democracy could, quite plausibly, advance a counterfactual argument in response to the findings in this book: ‘Were it not for the reforms, then the [drop in turnout/decreased efficacy/diminished regard for the legislature/low interest in politics] would have been much worse.’ But this is a difficult argument to assess. It is also a much weaker claim than the expectations raised in public rhetoric advanced by reform proponents. We see two broad reasons why these arguments in support of reform may lead to disappointment.

First, many pro-reform arguments are made by self-interested elites and are, therefore, likely to be disingenuous. Self-interested elites generally have substantial influence over how electoral rules are changed. They act strategically—and at times pre-emptively—to change rules in anticipation of broader demographic trends that might work to their disadvantage (for example, Angus 1952a; 1952b; Farrell and McAllister 2005b). This being the case, we might expect election reforms to maintain the status quo rather than have transformative effects on efficacy and political engagement in the mass public. Proportional representation

might change a party system only slightly, moving it from two large parties to two large parties and a handful of minor ones. Even the rules written to spite incumbents can be weak agents of change, and thus have weak potential to engage new voters. Term limits do not address what may be the root causes of incumbent advantages: safe partisan districts and incumbent advantages in fundraising. As such, they simply replace one set of relatively safe incumbents with another. Changing the UK electoral system to AV was sold as being more 'fair' by Liberal Democrats advantaged by the change, but Conservatives disadvantaged by the proposal thought it unfair.

Contemporary debates about the future of compulsory voting in Australia reveal the differential interests of the ALP and the coalition, given that the practice appears to advantage the ALP (Mackerras and McAllister 1999). Reynolds and McCormick (1986) also note that 19th-century American party officials allied with reformers in support of the Australian ballot in order to limit the influence of political upstarts. Ware (2002), for example, develops this argument to explain the diffusion of the direct primary in the United States. German political parties have promoted rules allowing greater direct participation to increase the number of people engaged with parties (Scarrow 1999; 2001). American political parties regularly use the supposedly anti-incumbent citizen initiative process to advance their partisan goals (Bowler and Donovan 2006; Smith and Tolbert 2001). Incumbent legislators' partisan self-interest and political ideology have been shown to shape their preferences for certain electoral institutions (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2002; 2006).

It is worth underscoring that overtly self-interested arguments do not seem to be ones that carry broad appeal. Rather, discussion of institutional change often gravitates towards valence issues such as fairness, participation, or trust. Proposals to advance proportional representation sound more fair-minded when they are framed as a way to enhance fairness and civic engagement than when they are framed as a strategy to strengthen the hand of smaller parties trying to secure seats in parliament. Likewise, term limits may find appeal when marketed as a way to weaken all politicians and defeat special interests. Term limits were largely promoted by well-funded conservatives frustrated with Democratic majorities in the US Congress and most state legislatures. Republicans were generally more supportive of term limits than Democrats in the 1990s⁵ (Benjamin and Malbin 1992; Donovan and Snipp 1994), but an overly partisan argument would likely have been less successful than one appealing to civic virtues.

If instrumental motives are the primary force driving electoral reforms, and claims about civic engagement are largely rhetorical window dressing, then it may be no surprise that reforms show a limited capacity to build efficacy and

⁵ Republican elites' enthusiasm for term limits cooled after the party took control of Congress in 1994.

participation. Increasing efficacy and/or participation or making a system fairer, or less influenced by moneyed interests, may not have been the real aims of these electoral reforms in the first place. Similarly, the adaptability of politicians to rule changes in order to sidestep them—quite clearly seen in campaign finance restrictions—suggests that there may always be ways which strategic behaviour can undercut institutional reforms.

But explaining the failure of institutional reform to produce results using the same kind of theoretical approach that helps explain why we have reform in the first place (self-interested elites) is not entirely satisfactory. Our understanding of institutions both in this project—and in the discipline more broadly—is very heavily coloured by rational choice. Over the past generation rational choice as a theoretical perspective has done a great deal to develop our understanding of institutions—what they do and how they do it. One reading of the past generation of scholarship is that institutions were brought back into the discipline to help address gaps and questions left by the behavioural studies of the 1960s and 1970s. It might be time to bring behaviour back into our understanding of institutions.

Any argument that stresses rational self-interest has a tendency to see claims about fairness or participation as disingenuous or self-serving. Yet while arguments about reform are conducted with reference to changing incentives there are also wider concerns over values such as fairness or the value of increasing participation as a good in itself. These kinds of values do not sit easily in a rational choice framework and suggest there is something of a disconnection between how institutions are thought of in the academic literature and how they are thought of more broadly by citizens.

Explaining electoral institutions solely within a framework of rational self-interest may mean we have an incomplete understanding of institutional change, at least as far as the public is concerned. Perhaps, at worst, then, the arguments in favour of reform are not cynically misleading but simply too optimistic in their overestimate of likely consequence of institutional reform. After all, there must be some reason for an audience thinking the reforms will have an effect and so some reason for thinking that the arguments are not just window dressing. Furthermore, there are many who advocate reform from a position of genuine belief in the transformative effects of the reform. Supporters and advocates of reform—especially with direct democracy—may not have as intensely self-interested motivations as the elected may do. We therefore cannot discount their optimistic claims in terms of advancing a partisan interest. But this line of reasoning still begs the question of why their optimism exists and persists.

Part of the reason for optimism among proponents of reform may stem from the need to campaign for reform, in part by persuading voters. In order to persuade, campaign language of all kinds—whether related to institutional reform or welfare reform, the electoral system, or the promise of funding stem cell research—generally skews to being overstated. Effects and benefits will be exaggerated to be large, costs and drawbacks will be minimized. A broad reason for the

disappointment in the actual effects of institutional reform is thus that reformers overclaim, either from a misplaced sense of optimism or simply from the rhetorical needs inherent in any sales pitch.

Unfortunately, there is also the danger that pro-reform rhetoric may be damaging to public regard for political institutions. Advocating for reforms on the basis of outcomes that are not realized (or not possible) must surely disappoint the more attentive among the audience. For reasons of organizational maintenance, the reformer's answer for why reforms fail is not likely to be 'The reforms were oversold' but some version of 'The weasel politicians undercut the reforms—again.' But such arguments can only serve to depress popular regard for politicians even more. Furthermore, simply as a matter of the structure of reform arguments, reform campaigns need to criticize the status quo: by default the status quo must be seen as broken and in need of being fixed by the reform (and reformers). That means—especially when there are repeated reform campaigns—voters are told over and over again how corrupt or failing their representatives are. Reform efforts may therefore worsen public engagement with politics even as reformers propose ways to improve it: the cure of reform may not be worse than the disease of low regard, but peddling the cure may keep the perception of disease alive.

LARGER FORCES

In the end we argue that the expectation that electoral institutions have substantial effects on political engagement may simply be wrong. In part, the generic 'institutions matter' mantra may be overstated. As a simple example, Fukuyama (2012) noted that controversy over Hungary's new constitution of 2012 was not direct concern about institutional design. The new constitution weakened checks on executive power, changed electoral laws to benefit the governing party, weakened legislative control over the budget, and increased government influence over the media. The rules produced an executive with powers not unlike those granted to a British prime minister. Europe's concern about the constitution was not so much about the formal institutions, but how Viktor Orbán would use executive power. If elected officials are motivated by authoritarian tendencies, the rules they govern under may have limited effects on outcomes. Likewise, if public officials are part of a society with a tradition of widespread political corruption, new electoral rules may have little effect on how they are perceived by the public. Laws and rules mean little where there is little rule of law.

Electoral rules are also but just one part of a nation's political system, and, even in the best functioning democracies, they probably play a very minor role compared to larger forces that people are responsive to, including economic performance and the rule of law. Claims about the effects of electoral institutions on

citizens seem overstated. Politics—particularly the parts affected by electoral rules—are a very small piece of all the factors that affect how most people view their world. Moreover, the manner in which people interact with and understand how votes are translated into seats via elections might be a rather small part of how they view politics. Larger forces that shape a person's sense of efficacy, trust, and engagement with politics include childhood socialization, education, their personal relationships, families, jobs, job searches, bills to pay, retirement plans, chances for education, access to government services, and myriad other concerns. Direct experiences with government as a taxpayer or as a person seeking services, and indirect experience via mass media, may have larger consequences than electoral rules in shaping political behaviour and efficacy.

The lack of measurable effects of electoral rules changes may also be attributable to a lack of voter sensitivity to some changes. It is one thing for a voter to see that limiting legislative terms might help or hurt their party in the short term. It seems unreasonable, however, to assert that the reason he or she is not responding to term limits in the long term is that they are disappointed that limits caused the legislature to do relatively less well in budget and legislative mark-up sessions compared to the governor. Perhaps more generally voters may not respond to the actual processes of government but rather to pictures drawn by partisans they sympathize with, to media critics, reform campaigns, and even comedians.⁶ Arguably, politicians themselves in attributing success or blame to their rivals do not help voters see structural causes of behaviour in political systems. The point is that voters may not respond to real changes in the political process but to imagined ones. Even more simply, perhaps processes of government may matter less to voters than reformers believe them to; what may matter more are outcomes (even symbolic ones).

None of this is intended to be read as saying that institutions do not have effects. Institutional changes clearly can and do shape the incentives faced by politicians in many ways, and political elites—candidates, legislators, party strategists, and others—are the actors who are most sensitive to those kinds of incentives. Electoral system changes, for example, will change the vote-gathering incentives and campaigning strategies of candidates. Campaign finance reform can and will change how money is raised. Legislative districting practices have distinct effects on who wins seats. Rules that require parties to rank women high on candidate lists mean that more women are elected. And so on. The set of patterns we have seen, however, shows muted responses to such rules among voters.

The fact that political elites are more attentive than voters to incentives provided by institutions is not news (Tsebelis 1990:34–5). But it does point up broader questions of citizen engagement in democratic processes. If voters' response to

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/25/corrupt-lying-politics-satire?INTCMP=SRCH> 'Heard the one about the corrupt, lying politician?' Martin Kettle, the *Guardian*, 25 August 2011.

institutions is mostly limited to short-term responses to their partisan interest, or some generalized distaste for ‘politicians’, then does this mean that reforms aimed at giving citizens a greater say or more choice or making politicians more responsive are a waste of time? Is it, for example, possible to throw considerable doubt on the value of direct democracy essentially on the grounds that ‘giving voters more of a say’ in politics is to give voters something they do not really want? Just as enthusiasts of all kinds sharing their enthusiasm often seem to generate more irritation than interest, so, too, might institutional reformers—especially those who seek to give voters more of a say. In that sense, reformers should stop bothering voters and politicians with endless reforms and projects and let elected representatives get on with their jobs.

There are two reasons for thinking that such an argument pours too much cold water on reform efforts. First, such an argument does not seem to square with evidence that voters are able to develop sensible opinions on political institutions and institutional reform.⁷ Similarly, even with a part-time or intermittent attentiveness, voters do respond to scandals and failures in government with sensible disapproval. It seems overstated, then, to go too far in asserting that voters are so oblivious or uncaring as to make thinking about institutions worthless.

What it may suggest, however, is that maybe it is time to rethink the yardsticks by which we measure institutions when it comes to voters. Although political science may care about phenomena such as turnout and trust, perhaps voters themselves are more involved with a different set of concerns: Are the politicians ‘honest?’ Are representatives ‘trying hard’ or just engaging in point-scoring? Are they listening to voters and talking about the process of reconciling disagreements or are they talking at voters? The limited effects of reforms on voters may not be the unresponsiveness of citizens so much as a fault in the concepts we measure. Measures such as turning out to vote and trust in government are perhaps too constrained a way to assess popular attitudes, and maybe present the wrong targets at which reforms should aim. Perhaps a more plausible conclusion of why reforms have such limited effects on voters is that the reforms tend not to address the issues that voters care about.

In sum, electoral reforms that are aimed at increasing efficacy, participation, and trust may be running against much more powerful political, economic, and social tides. Although support for basic democratic processes remains stable, citizens in

⁷ Despite the surprisingly uphill climb to substantiate that point it really should not come as a surprise to find that voters can understand institutional effects. After all, voters who are spectators of any sporting event at all are used to the idea that the rules govern conduct. Examples of this range from the familiar (the offside rule in soccer, the designated hitter rule in baseball) through the ones that are recognized by serious fans rather than spectators (the ban on off-throttle diffuser in F1; the points system in ice skating) through to the truly recondite (rules on unwanted dogs under the Sled Dog Code of practice issued by the BC, Canada Ministry of Agriculture). Since sports spectators are generally familiar with the idea that rules shape outcomes it should not be too hard to expect that something similar holds true with voters and political institutions.

many of the world's advanced democracies—regardless of electoral arrangements—have weaker attachments to parties than in previous generations. Political trust eroded at similar rates in many nations as cynicism increased. Confidence in political institutions eroded in a host of advanced democracies (Dalton 1999), and for decades voter turnout has been in decline in many nations (Dalton 2004; Scarrow 2001). Whatever it is that is driving these behavioural and attitudinal changes, the fact they are so widespread, and occur across places with such a range of electoral arrangements, suggests that electoral institutions alone may not be the cause of, or the cure for, changes in how contemporary citizens view their political world.

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