

Notes and Comments

To Adopt or Not to Adopt Proportional Representation: The Politics of Institutional Choice

ANDRÉ BLAIS, AGNIESZKA DOBRZYNSKA AND INDRIDI H. INDRIDASON*

In September 1864, the Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales met in Amsterdam to examine the system of proportional representation (PR) which had just been proposed by Thomas Hare. The meeting signalled a growing interest in systems of PR across the more democratic nations of the world – some of which had already begun experimenting with it. Sixty years later, the majority of existing democracies, including Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, had adopted PR for the election of their national legislatures.

Why did so many countries decide to shift to PR? Why did the shift occur at a given point in time, not earlier or later? Why did some countries never move to PR? These are the questions that we address in this Note.

We are interested in exploring the factors that influenced the decision to adopt PR at the turn of the twentieth century. We argue that two factors of considerable theoretical relevance were particularly important in facilitating the shift to PR: the spread of democratic ideas and the presence of a majority (usually two-round) system and, as a consequence, a multi-party system.

Carstairs's classic history of electoral systems shows that at the turn of the twentieth century there was a strong demand for PR, which was linked to a more general demand for democratization.¹ As Carstairs notes,

there was a general movement in the direction of more democratic political institutions which took several different forms ... There was a movement for the establishment or strengthening of parliamentary institutions ... Extensions of the franchise for parliamentary elections enabled an increasingly large proportion of the population to gain representation in parliament ... With these developments it became a matter of increasing concern that the elected members of parliament and the parties they supported should fairly represent the various interests and opinions of the electorate.²

Carstairs indicates that such a concern played an important role in Belgium, the first country to adopt PR in 1899, where the 'support for proportional representation had been greatly strengthened. The last bastion of opposition was in the house of representatives itself, where many members owe their seats to the working of the majority system. The coming of PR was a triumph of public opinion over the repugnance of many members of parliament.'³

During this period of democratization the idea that each individual should have one vote and that each vote should count the same gained enormous ground. From that perspective democracy and PR appeared to dovetail perfectly. PR came to be regarded as the fairest system. The challenge is

* Blais and Dobrzynska, Département de science politique, Université de Montréal; Indridason, Department of Political Science, University of Iceland.

¹ Andrew McLaren Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

² Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 9.

³ Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 10.

to explain why politicians in some countries reacted less favourably to, or were better positioned to resist, the public demand for PR.

Previous research attempting to explain the choice of electoral system in cross-national perspective has primarily focused on a rational choice interpretation of the ruling parties' interests. Boix, building on Brauns and Rokkan, argues that in certain circumstances the governing parties may arrive at the conclusion that the existing system, which has benefited them in the past, will hurt them in the future. More specifically, in the face of the growing support of socialist parties at the turn of the century, the ruling elite saw it to be in their interest to adopt PR.⁴ The incentive to adopt PR was most pronounced when the right was fragmented and the presence of strong socialist parties posed a threat to their continued rule. The conservative parties were most vulnerable in these circumstances; the presence of multiple parties on the right risked splitting the conservative vote, increasing the possibility of a socialist victory. Anticipating a continually growing socialist following, the conservative parties chose a pre-emptive strategy (PR) that guaranteed them strong representation in parliament even if they remained divided.

Boix's account is elegant and appealing. It is not, however, entirely compelling. The theoretical argument focuses on single-member district plurality systems. Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, majority systems were more common than plurality systems. As a matter of fact, only two countries, Sweden and Denmark, moved from a single-member district plurality system to PR. The distinction is not innocuous because the effects of majority run-off systems on electoral competition are quite different from those of plurality rule. As we argue below, resistance to PR was weaker under majority rule than under a plurality system. The adoption of PR was therefore driven, at least in part, by reasons different from those advanced by Boix.

Another hypothesis has been proposed by Rokkan, Katzenstein and Rogowski, who all suggest that PR was more likely to be adopted in small countries.⁵ According to Katzenstein, concern for political compromise, which is associated with PR, is greater in small countries, while Rogowski contends that small trade-dependent countries face stronger pressure for democratic participation.

Our own explanation emphasizes the interplay between the popular appeal of PR and existing electoral institutions. The subsequent empirical analysis tests our interpretation jointly with alternative hypotheses.

SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

In a basic sense PR was adopted in many countries in the period considered here (1865–1938) for the very simple reason that the 'idea' of PR existed, methods of its implementation had been devised, and it had come to be considered the most 'democratic' electoral system. In many countries, the switch to PR came at the same time as universal manhood suffrage. Not surprisingly, at the same time as people came to agree with the 'one man/one vote' principle, they also came to accept the view that the number of seats a party gets should be proportional to its votes.

It is instructive, from that perspective, that PR was adopted in many countries without much opposition. In Finland, PR was proposed by an all-party committee.⁶ In the Netherlands, the proposal to switch to PR in 1917 was made by a special committee in which all seven political parties were equally represented and was accepted with near-unanimity. The decision was part of a larger package in which public aid to private schools and universal suffrage were at the forefront: all schools and parties should be treated equally.⁷ In Germany, an overwhelming majority of the

⁴ Carles Boix, 'Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, 93 (1999), 609–24; Karl Brauns, *Das parlamentarische Wahlrecht* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1932); Stein Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties: Approaches to the Comparative Study of the Processes of Development* (New York: McKay, 1970).

⁵ Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties*; Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in the World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Ronald Rogowski, 'Trade and the Variety of Democratic Institutions', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), 49–67.

⁶ Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 119.

⁷ Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

members of the constituent assembly proposed PR, and the legislation was supported by a large coalition of socialists, liberals and centrists.⁸ In Norway, it was 'without much opposition, or even debate, that proportional representation was adopted'.⁹ In Austria, 'the adoption of proportional representation aroused little debate or opposition'. In Italy, 'PR was introduced with little opposition',¹⁰ and 'one provision of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act which caused little discussion and virtually no opposition in southern Ireland was that elections to the parliaments in both the north and the south should be according to the principles of proportional representation'.¹¹

There was of course a debate, and sometimes a vigorous debate, in a number of countries and in those countries where there was little opposition some parties were less enthusiastic or more reluctant than others. Still, the fact that a large consensus in favour of PR emerged in many countries suggests that PR was perceived at the time to be a 'good idea', that it was considered consistent with the principle that each vote should count the same. In fact, the very presence of a consensus in what is necessarily a zero-sum game (what a party gains when shifting from one electoral system to another is by definition at the expense of other parties) suggests very strongly that other factors, which exerted similar pressures on all parties, were at work.

However, the normative appeal of PR may not have been enough by itself. While PR was clearly championed in each of the countries in our sample on the above grounds, it is nevertheless the case that some of the most democratic countries during this period, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, never adopted PR at the national level. Other factors must therefore have influenced the decision to adopt, or not to adopt, PR. Our argument takes account of the fact that the decision to adopt PR was not taken in a vacuum but depended on the existing institutions dictating electoral competition. In particular, we maintain that politicians' reactions and positions were contingent on whether the choice was between a plurality system and PR *or* a majority system and PR.

Several factors combine in making the adoption of PR a more attractive alternative when electoral competition takes place under majority rule than when it does under plurality. First, the incentives to vote strategically differ between plurality and majority systems. Cox, for instance, argues successively that 'in top-two majority runoff elections with three or more candidates, voters always face incentives to vote strategically', but that 'as a practical matter voters under runoff rules do not vote strategically very often', because it requires more complex information, and yet that 'there are situations when strategic voting in top-two runoffs seems a plausible bet'.¹² In contrast, under plurality rule strategic voting requires relatively little information, that is, the voter only has to determine which two parties have the most support. Under the majority run-off, the voter must in addition form expectations about the identity of the third runner-up, and also about how the voters of the unsuccessful candidates will split their votes between the front-runners. In today's world of extensive polling these may not seem prohibitive requirements but in the period we focus on, late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is safe to assume that far more guess-work was required.

Because they do not induce as much strategic voting, majority systems tend to have a higher number of parties than plurality systems. The lack of strategic voting discourages party consolidation, as minor parties are able to show their strength on the first ballot, allowing them to extract policy concessions in favour of second-round endorsements.¹³ In the sample covered by this study, the mean effective number of legislative parties in majority systems equals 3.7 as compared to 2.2 in plurality systems.

As a consequence of the higher number of parties in majority systems, multiparty governments appear to be the norm; indeed during the period considered in this study, 54 per cent of the

⁸ See Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 164; and Dankwart Rustow, 'Some Observations on Proportional Representation', *Journal of Politics*, 12 (1950), 107–27, p. 125.

⁹ Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 92.

¹⁰ Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 155.

¹¹ Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*, p. 203.

¹² Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 137.

¹³ George Tsebelis, *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

governments in majority systems were multi-party, compared to 29 per cent in plurality systems.¹⁴ Although majority systems allow legislative representation for more parties than plurality systems, it is nevertheless the case that majority systems lead to a high degree of disproportionality.¹⁵ The minor, electorally disadvantaged, coalition parties are therefore likely to favour the adoption of PR and to make a strong case for it on grounds of fairness. Efforts to adopt PR under majority rule are also likely to meet with less resistance by the major parties since they already face the necessity of forming coalitions.

In short, less strategic voting in majority systems leads to greater party fragmentation, which leads to coalition governments, and the presence of coalition governments increases pressure for the adoption of PR.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the parties face greater uncertainty under majority than under plurality rule. Consider first the incentives that the larger parties face under plurality rule. Plurality rule provides strong incentives for strategic voting and party consolidation, which favours a two-party system. While third parties occasionally gain some momentum the obstacles to their success are so high that their presence can generally be considered ephemeral. There is thus an expectation that the party system will, for all practical purposes, remain a two-party system and little uncertainty surrounds the chances of the larger parties surviving. Furthermore, from the parties' perspective it is relatively clear what is required if they want to retain their position. According to the standard spatial model, party strategies are well defined – whether there are potential entrants or not.¹⁶

As we have argued above, multi-party systems go hand in hand with majority rule, which alters the incentives facing the parties. No equilibrium exists in the spatial model when three or more parties compete.¹⁷ We can therefore surmise that the political parties face greater uncertainty under majority than plurality rule. Because of this great uncertainty few parties may be willing to defend the status quo steadfastly.

There are thus numerous reasons, reinforcing one another, which suggest that parties in majority systems will be more willing, or less unwilling, to shift to PR than those in plurality systems. Our argument is not that politicians in majority systems will necessarily *prefer* PR to majority rule. In the period we are concerned with, there was a widespread push for the adoption of PR, which on normative grounds was generally seen as being fairer or more democratic than both plurality and majority rule. The pressure to adopt PR was not restricted to the countries using majority rule. In the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia,¹⁸ for example, the adoption of PR was actively debated and in some instances experienced at lower levels of government.¹⁹ Our argument is rather that the governing parties in majority systems had weaker incentives to resist the pressure for adopting PR, for the reasons discussed above, than governing parties in plurality systems. Generally

¹⁴ Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and Elections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); André Blais and R. Kenneth Carty, 'The Impact of Electoral Formulae on the Creation of Majority Governments', *Electoral Studies*, 6 (1987), 99–110.

¹⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies 1945–1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 96; Katz, *Democracy and Elections*, p. 130.

¹⁶ See, for example, Gary Cox, 'Electoral Equilibrium under Alternative Voting Institutions', *American Journal of Political Science*, 31 (1987), 82–109, for a model with potential entrants; and Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), for a model without potential entrants.

¹⁷ See, for example, Cox, 'Electoral Equilibrium under Alternative Voting Institutions', and Martin Osborne, 'Candidate Positioning and Entry in a Political Competition', *Games and Economic Behavior*, 5 (1993), 133–51.

¹⁸ Australia used the plurality rule until 1918, when the alternative vote (majority system) was adopted.

¹⁹ Leon Weaver, 'The Rise, Decline, and Resurrection of Proportional Representation in Local Governments in the United States', in Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart, eds, *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences* (New York: Agathon Press, 1986), pp. 139–53; Martin Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace, 1906–1918* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*; Bruce D. Graham, 'The Choice of Voting Methods in Federal Politics, 1902–1918', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 8 (1962), 164–79.

speaking, in majority systems the governing parties already faced the need to form coalitions as well as considerable uncertainty about their future, thus making it more likely that an agreement could be reached about the adoption of PR.

THE STUDY

We examine the decision whether to adopt a PR system between 1865, the first year after the proposition of Thomas Hare's system of PR was debated at an international conference, and 1939, the beginning of the Second World War.²⁰ The study includes the countries covered by Mackie and Rose, that is, the industrial countries holding competitive elections.²¹ Each country is included in our sample starting with the first election (beginning with 1865) 'in which the great majority of seats for the national parliament were contested, and most candidates fought under party labels common across all constituencies'.²²

Our unit of observation is each legislative term in which PR could have been adopted. Since a switch to PR requires that the previous election was held under some other electoral system, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta, whose very first competitive election was under PR, are excluded. In addition Portugal, for which data are available for only one of the elections (1915),²³ and Iceland, which had a mixed electoral system throughout the period, are excluded. This leaves us with a total of eighteen countries and 183 legislative terms.²⁴

We test our model using a logistic regression where the dependent variable equals 1 when PR is adopted and 0 otherwise. Once a country adopts PR it drops from our sample because we are interested in the shift to PR rather than the presence of PR. Our choice of estimation method deserves some justification, as survival analysis may appear to be the most obvious approach to testing our theory. Unfortunately, the properties of our data do not permit the use of survival analysis.

When a duration model is estimated each subject is ideally observed from the time it is first exposed to the risk of failure (success) until the point in time failure (success) occurs. Often, the available data do not provide this information for each subject. Certain shortcomings are, however, more easily remedied. Right censoring and truncation, when the failure (success) of some subjects is not observed, can be modelled and thus do not pose major problems for estimation. Left censoring or truncation is more problematic because the duration since exposure to risk is unobserved. Beck, Katz and Tucker claim that left censoring does not cause serious problems when all observations are equally left censored.²⁵ Our data do not meet that criterion because the date of first democratic election varies considerably in our sample. In such circumstances, duration analysis is of limited value.²⁶

²⁰ The fall of the Weimar republic led to some deep questioning about the potential vices of PR (see, most especially, F. A. Hermens, *Democracy or Anarchy: A Study of Proportional Representation* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1941)). There was no longer any consensus about which electoral system was the most 'democratic'. Similarly, the rise of fascism in Italy has often been linked to PR.

²¹ Thomas T. Mackie and Richard Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, 3rd edn (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1991).

²² Mackie and Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, 3rd edn, p. viii.

²³ The first election held in a country cannot be included because we need to consider the outcome of the previous election for two of the variables (*Majority* and *Socialist Threat*).

²⁴ The sources of our data are the following: Mackie and Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, 3rd edn; Brian R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Europe, 1750–1988* (New York: Stockton Press, 1992); Brian R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: The Americas, 1750–1988* (New York: Stockton Press, 1993); Brian R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Africa, Asia and Oceania, 1750–1988* (New York: Stockton Press, 1995); *Polity IV Project: Polity IV Dataset* [Computer file; version p4v2000] (College Park: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, 2000).

²⁵ Nathaniel Beck, Jonathan Katz and Richard Tucker, 'Taking Time Seriously: Time-Series-Cross-Section Analysis with a Binary Dependent Variable', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 1260–88.

²⁶ Kazou Yamaguchi, *Event History Analysis* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1991).

Another reason that we do not use the duration model is that we have grouped data, that is, time of failure is not a continuous variable as each observation corresponds to a legislative term. As Beck, Katz and Tucker point out, such data can be analysed using a logit model including temporal variables.²⁷ Indeed, this approach is equivalent to duration analysis with discrete time periods.

We therefore opt for a logit model. We estimate robust standard errors and we use a cluster model in which multiple observations for each country are deemed to be interdependent. Because we are faced with left censoring and because we expect the probability of PR to depend on time, we include, alongside the independent variables of interest, the log of the number of years (*Log Years*) since the earliest observation enters our sample.

Finally, as King and Zeng have shown, the probability of rare events is underestimated when the ratio of 0 to 1 in binary dependent variables departs substantially from 0.5.²⁸ In our sample the adoption of PR is rare (thirteen cases out of 183 cases), and therefore we estimate our model using King and Zeng's rare events logit correction method.

The first independent variable, *Spread of Democracy*, indicates the relative diffusion of democratic ideas in a region at a given point in time. The hypothesis to be tested is that the push for PR was stronger in an environment in which democratic norms were more widespread. The hypothesis is directly related to previous research that has shown that 'the spread of democratic ideas promotes democracy consistently over time'.²⁹

Following Li and Reuveny, we define *Spread of Democracy* as the number of democracies within a region at a given point in time.³⁰ Following Li and Reuveny, Mansfield and Snyder, and Oneal and Russett, we measure the level of democracy as the difference between the ten-point democracy index and the ten-point autocracy index in the Polity IV dataset, and we define a country as democratic if the difference is equal or greater than 6.³¹ The variable *Spread of Democracy* 'may be thought as a proxy for information and communication flows of democratic ideas among countries'.³²

The second independent variable, *Majority*, equals 1 when the previous election had been held under the majority rule and 0 otherwise. The third independent variable, *Socialist Threat*, is, following Boix, operationalized as the interactive term of the strength of socialism (the proportion of votes obtained by socialist and communist parties in the previous election) and the effective number of non-socialist parties (as defined by Taagepera and Shugart), based on the fractional share

²⁷ Beck, Katz and Tucker, 'Taking Time Seriously'.

²⁸ Gary King and Langche Zeng, 'Logistic Regression in Rare Events Data', *Political Analysis*, 9 (2001), 137–63; Gary King and Langche Zeng, 'Estimating Absolute, Relative, and Attributable Risks in Case-Control Studies' (unpublished paper, Harvard University, 1999).

²⁹ Quan Li and Rafael Reuveny, 'Economic Globalization and Democracy: An Empirical Analysis', *British Journal of Political Science*, 33 (2003), 29–54, p. 52; Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'Economic Crisis and Political Regime Change: An Event History Analysis', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 882–97; Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, 'What Makes Democracies Endure?' *Journal of Democracy*, 7 (1996), 39–55; Harvey Starr, 'Diffusion Approaches to the Spread of Democracy in the International System', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35 (1991), 356–81.

³⁰ Li and Reuveny, 'Economic Globalization and Democracy'.

³¹ Li and Reuveny, 'Economic Globalization and Democracy'; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Democratization and the Danger of War', *International Security*, 20 (1995), 5–38; John R. Oneal and Bruce Russett, 'The Classical Liberals Were Right: Democracy, Interdependence, and Conflict, 1950–1985', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41 (1999), 267–94; John R. Oneal and Bruce Russett, 'Is the Liberal Peace Just an Artifact of the Cold War?' *International Interactions*, 3 (1999), 213–41. It is worth noting that the indicators of democracy and autocracy are not based on institutional factors that may directly affect the proportionality of electoral outcomes (for details, see *Polity IV Project 2000: Dataset Users' Manual*; and also Keith Jagers and Ted Robert Gurr, 'Tracking Democracy's Third Wave with the Polity III Data', *Journal of Peace Research*, 32 (1995), 469–82.).

³² Li and Reuveny, 'Economic Globalization and Democracy', p. 42.

TABLE 1 *The Choice of Proportional Representation, 1865–1939*

Independent variables	Proportional representation	
	Coeff.	Robust S.E.
<i>Spread of Democracy</i>	0.53***	(0.18)
<i>Majority</i>	1.47*	(1.14)
<i>Socialist Threat</i>	0.17	(1.10)
<i>Log Population</i>	– 1.20**	(0.81)
<i>Log Years</i>	– 5.77***	(2.34)
Constant	– 6.11	(3.43)
N	183	

Note: Rare events logit regression, robust estimates.

* Significant at the 0.10 level (one-tailed test). ** Significant at the 0.05 level (one-tailed test). *** Significant at the 0.01 level (one-tailed test).

of votes for non-socialist parties in the previous election).³³ Finally, the model includes the log of the population (*Log Population*) at the time of the election.

Table 1 presents the findings. As expected, the probability of adopting PR decreased as time (*Log Years*) passed. The two substantive variables at the core of our interpretation, *Spread of Democracy* and *Majority*, have a statistically significant effect on the propensity to move to PR. The findings are thus consistent with our contention that the shift to PR occurred when and where there was strong popular pressure to change to a fairer electoral system and the existing majority system made the governing parties less reluctant to change. It should be pointed out that the results are just barely significant (at the 0.10 level and with a one-tailed test) in the case of *Majority* and that they should be treated cautiously. We take comfort, however, in the fact that the variable does reach some level of statistical significance despite the small number of cases, the very small variance in the dependent variable and the strict controls introduced.³⁴

Figure 1 illustrates the substantive joint effect of these two variables on the probability of adopting PR. It indicates how the likelihood of a shift to PR increases in a given legislative term in majority and plurality systems depending on the number of democracies in the region, everything else being equal.³⁵ It can be seen that the probability of adopting PR becomes relatively important only when there is a majority system and there is strong democratic pressure.

Table 1 also indicates that the adoption of PR was somewhat more likely to occur in smaller countries. Everything else being equal, the probability of PR was three times as large in a country of one million persons than in one of ten million.

Finally, we find no empirical support for the hypothesis that PR was adopted in countries where

³³ Boix, 'Setting the Rules of the Game'; Rein Taagepera and Matthew Soberg Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

³⁴ It could be that the consociational culture of politics in some countries led them to prefer majority systems over plurality systems in the first place, and that the cultural outlook also drove these countries to adopt PR. We find this interpretation not plausible for two reasons. First, the majority principle is the very opposite of the consensual approach ('The majoritarian interpretation ... argues that majorities should govern and that minorities should oppose. This view is challenged by the consensus model of democracy.' See Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 21). Secondly, the most thorough analysis of consensual politics (Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation*) shows that the shift to consensual politics did not precede the shift to majority rule. In the Netherlands, there was intense conflict at the beginning of the century, when the majority system was in place. ('Around 1910, therefore, the political situation looked quite serious. The three major issues reached a peak of tension, and the lines between the rivals were sharply drawn.' See Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation*, p. 109.)

³⁵ We estimated the predicted probability of adopting PR when all cases were successively given a score of 0, 5 or 10 on *Spread of Democracy* and 0 or 1 on *Majority* and kept their mean scores on all other variables.

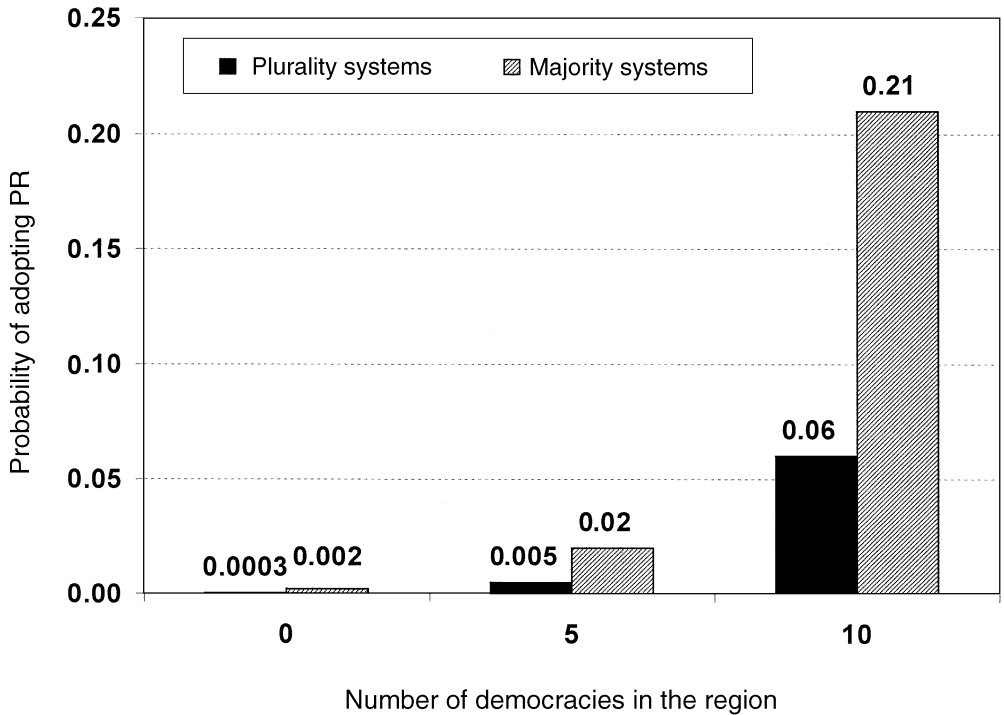


Fig. 1. The effect of spread of democracy and of the existing electoral system on the probability of adopting proportional representation

the right-wing parties faced a serious socialist threat. Socialist parties were particularly strong in countries with a majority system and non-socialist parties were particularly divided in majority systems (there are more parties in majority than in plurality systems), so that there is a moderately strong positive correlation (+0.49) between *Majority* and *Socialist Threat*.³⁶ Once the greater propensity to adopt PR in majority systems is controlled for, the presence of a socialist threat does not significantly improve our ability to predict whether PR is adopted or not.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Our objective has been to explain where and when PR was adopted between 1865 and 1939. We began by taking account of the generalized pressure for PR at the time. The view that PR was the only truly 'democratic' system that ensured the fair representation of various viewpoints was widespread. The problems of the Weimar republic, and the coming to power of Hitler, shattered

³⁶ The correlation is not coincidental. As we argue above, majority systems lead to greater party fragmentation and lower barriers of entry.

³⁷ Boix's argument is that non-socialist parties adopted PR in order to protect themselves from the socialist threat. Under such circumstances one would expect the socialist parties to have resisted the adoption of PR. Yet, there were countries, such as Germany, where it was the socialist parties that introduced PR, and many others, like the Netherlands and Norway, where the decision to adopt PR was made more or less consensually, with the approval of almost every party (Carstairs, *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*). Such a pattern is more consistent with our interpretation, according to which there was a general push for PR at the turn of the century, linked to the growing appeal of democratic principles, a push that faced little resistance in majority systems which had already experimented with multi-party systems and coalition governments.

that consensus. But the point remains that until the late 1930s there was a strong push for the principle of PR.

The second piece of the puzzle is to shift the attention to institutional factors previously ignored in the literature. PR was adopted mostly in countries that had a majority system. These majority systems had produced multi-party systems and coalition governments, as well as great uncertainty as to the optimal strategies for winning elections. As a consequence, governing parties in these countries offered little resistance to the widespread push for PR that was taking place at the time.

Our results contradict the previous research on the subject by Boix that has posited that the rise of socialist parties and the fragmentation of the right influenced the adoption of PR.³⁸ As explained above we find the theoretical underpinnings of Boix's approach lacking. Using a more detailed dataset we find no support for the socialist threat thesis once we account for the spread of democracy and existing electoral institutions.

³⁸ Boix, 'Setting the Rules of the Game'.