

WHY ELECTORAL REFORM?

The Determinants, Policy and Politics of Changing Electoral Systems

Monique Leyenaar (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Reuven Y. Hazan (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Abstract

This workshop seeks to shed light on the causes and determinants of electoral reform. In other words, why does the debate on electoral reform occur at all, when does it happen and what forms does it take?

Electoral reform is a growing phenomenon that requires explanation but is still uncharted territory in political science. Outside the vast literature on electoral systems and their political consequences, little attention has been devoted to why electoral systems have recently undergone substantial change in several advanced liberal democracies, while in other countries the topic has been placed on the national agenda or is seriously being discussed beyond academic circles. Why has a change of the democratic rules of the game become acceptable after decades of treating electoral systems as fixed elements in stable democracies?

We are interested in papers dealing with empirical research into the actual reasons for the (debate on) electoral reform and the question of who took the initiative. Where does the initiative come from – parliament, government, NGOs, citizens? Is there a relation between party family and certain reforms? Do reforms expand the influence of citizens? Can we explain the current wave of having a group of randomly selected citizens come up with a plan for reform? We welcome theoretical papers linking electoral reform to different ideas on democracy, such as representative, direct, participatory or deliberative, or relating them to different views on representation. Another type of paper may focus on the discourse of E-democracy, and more specifically the role of ICT in promoting electoral reform and/or defining the alternatives.

Workshop Description

The field of elections and electoral systems in general, and electoral reform in particular, has over the last two decades exhibited both tremendous growth and cross-national appeal. The rise in stature of journals such as *Electoral Studies*, and the emergence of additional journals such as *Representation*, the *Journal of Elections*, *Public Opinion and Parties* and *Election Law Journal*, is but one of the more apparent products of this growth. The increase in PhD dissertations devoted to elections is yet another. However, beyond the increased knowledge in voting rules and their consequences for political behaviour, little attention has been devoted to why electoral systems have recently undergone substantial change in several advanced liberal

democracies, while in other countries the topic has either been placed on the national agenda or is seriously being discussed beyond academic circles.

The majority of the literature – even the most recent – is, therefore, concerned with election laws themselves or with the political consequences of electoral laws and their reform. Scholars are still focused on outcomes, rather than inputs. That is, electoral systems are taken as cases, with each reform presenting an additional case. Electoral reform as a growing phenomenon that itself requires explanation – addressing why change of the democratic rules of the game has become acceptable after decades of treating electoral systems as fixed elements in stable democracies – is still uncharted territory in political science. One of the reasons for this is that major reforms of national electoral systems have been quite rare, at least until the spate of reforms in the 1990s. In other words, if the lack of empirical evidence held back academic research, this reason is no longer valid.

Recently, Katz (2005) found that there are fourteen examples of wholesale replacement of the electoral system since 1950 (interestingly enough, five of them took place in one country). However, if one takes a more expansive view of electoral reform to include changing certain aspects of the electoral system, like the preferential threshold or rules on gender composition, then this type of change is far more common. Moreover, if one is interested in why electoral reform appears on the national agenda – not to mention what kind, and by whom – then there are a numerous examples of countries that have either debated electoral reform or are currently addressing this possibility (the Netherlands and Israel are but two current examples).

The focus of this workshop is to shed light on the causes and determinants of electoral reform. In other words, why does the debate on electoral reform occur at all, when does it happen and what forms does it take? Furthermore, since this type of change in democratic countries can generally take place only with the approval of a parliamentary majority elected according to the existing voting rules, the apparent question is why politicians are willing to change the rules of the game when they are benefiting from the existing ones? On the other hand, if electoral reform is becoming more acceptable, why are the parties in power not doing so more often in order to gain an advantage? Another interesting phenomenon is the current wave of having a group of randomly selected citizens propose alternatives for electoral reform (Canada and the Netherlands are two ongoing examples). Is this because the traditional political parties cannot agree on whatever proposal on electoral reform is being debated?

Types of paper

We welcome different types of papers which address the main theme of the workshop: what are the causes and determinants for electoral reform. Papers can either discuss electoral reform in a particular country or study this phenomenon cross-nationally. We invite various types of papers. The first type deals with empirical research into the actual reasons for the (debate on) electoral reform and the question of who took the initiative. These may be case studies or cross-comparative studies describing and analysing the causes and determinants of electoral reform. Important questions are who takes the initiative for electoral reform, whether the reasons for change are elite-driven or mass-driven and what are the motives for these changes. Is it purely electoral gain, or are politicians trying to bridge the gap between politics and

citizens, and enhance people's trust in politics in light of declining participation in and support for elected bodies. Electoral systems may also be adapted in order to comply with demands for greater inclusion of women and/or representatives from ethnic minorities. And where does the initiative come from – parliament, government, NGOs, citizens? Is there a relation between party family and certain demands for reform? Is it true that the quest for reform always comes from the Left, or more recently from populist parties? Are these parties more in favour of expanding the influence of citizens (by adopting, for example, preferential votes or a two-vote mixed system)? And what exactly is the role of the political elite in the debate on electoral reform. Can we explain the current wave of having a group of randomly selected citizens come up with a plan for reform? And are these plans more successful in terms of real change? Another type of paper is more theoretical, linking electoral reform to different ideas on democracy, such as representative, direct, participatory or deliberative or relating them to different views on representation. A third type of paper may focus on the discourse of E-democracy and more specifically, the role of ICT in promoting electoral reform and/or defining the alternatives, for example, the push toward (or strong resistance against) voting machines.

Relation to existing research

The workshop relates to several types of empirical and analytical work. First, it relates to the large number of studies done on the impact of electoral systems. These began with Rae (1967) and more recently continue with Sartori (1994), Lijphart (1994), Cox (1997), Boix (1999); Shugart and Wattenberg (2001); LeDuc, Niemi and Norris (2002); Norris 2004; Massicotte, Blais and Yoshinaka 2004; Pappalardo (2007); and on the inclusiveness of electoral systems Matland (1998); Meier (2003); Meier and Celis (2004); Leyenaar (2004); Mackay, Meyers and Brown (2003), Dalton and Wattenberg (2001). Secondly, it builds on work focusing on institutional innovation, and more specifically research explaining the introduction of certain reforms, such as electoral reforms, e.g. Johnston, Krahn and Harrison (2006); Scarrow (2003); but also the introduction of a national referendum like the work of Bowler, Donovan and Karp (2002); and Scarrow (2004); participatory arrangements or deliberative forums, e.g. Dalton (2005); Cain, Dalton and Scarrow (2006); Zittel and Fuchs (2007). Thirdly, it connects with research on E-Democracy, the impact of ICT on electoral systems and on electoral laws, e.g. Krimmer (2006); Oostveen and Besselaar (2005).

Despite the growing interest in the issue of electoral reform there has been no workshop on the issue in the last five Joint Sessions. This workshop offers not only the opportunity to scholars to discuss their recent work on electoral reform, but given the relatively high numbers of reform in “real life politics”, we expect a clear interest for a publication of the workshop papers.