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Introduction: The Politics of Electoral Reform

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Countries commonly introduce minor changes to the legal and procedural regulations of elections, such as revisions of constituency boundaries or campaign finance rules. Some have occasionally implemented more significant modifications, such as switching electoral formulas between d'Hondt and Saint-Lague, or expanding parliamentary assemblies (see Lijphart, 1994: 78–94). A few have experienced more radical change; the French National Assembly has oscillated between proportional and majoritarian elections, while Greece and Argentina have experimented with frequent reforms (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989: 219–222). But in most countries the basic electoral system—the rules by which votes are translated into seats—has usually persisted without fundamental change since their emergence as liberal democracies. Once established, the constitutional framework develops entrenched interests from incumbent parties which benefit from the status quo (see Dunleavy and Margetts this issue). In “normal politics” the rules of the game are taken for granted, and politicians merely dispute the spoils. In the early 1980s David Butler noted that, except for Britain, there was almost no serious discussion of changing the electoral system in any of the elections examined in the *At the Polls* series (Butler, 1981).

Reflecting this perspective, most of the scholarly literature has focused on the consequences of alternative electoral systems. Voting systems are treated as independent variables explaining the party system (Lijphart, 1994; Rae, 1967; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989), the behaviour of politicians (Katz, 1980), government accountability (Powell, 1982), or the representation of women and minority groups (Rule and Zimmerman, 1992, 1994; Amy, 1993). Discussions of electoral reform often seem abstract and mechanical in academic work, as though incremental change was a rational exercise in “designing electoral systems” (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989), or “electoral engineering” (Lijphart, 1994). The literature suggests that the process of reform requires judicious and careful calculation about the most appropriate means to achieve certain ends. And there is an underlying conservative bias—most commentators suggest caution, discouraging incremental tinkering: “Most of the longstanding electoral systems do the job. Keeping the ills we know may be better than leaping into the unknown” (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989: 236).

If there is a single message from this special issue, it is that electoral systems are rarely designed, they are born kicking and screaming into the world out of a messy, incremental compromise between contending factions battling for survival, determined by power politics. We lack a theoretical framework to understand how political systems reform basic constitutional principles. The analogy for the final outcome is less precise electoral engineering than a Heath Robinson-like improvisation, a fudge designed to maintain a loose coalition for enough time to produce reform. We need to understand less the mechanics than the *politics* of reform.

In this issue we start to unravel the puzzle of what explains fundamental reform of electoral systems. The usual perspective is reversed; here the electoral system is treated as the dependent, not independent, variable. In the 1990s electoral reform moved from peripheral concern to centre stage in a number of countries, both in established democracies like Italy and New Zealand, and in the newly emerging systems in Central and Eastern Europe. For advocates, proportional or majoritarian systems were seen as the cure for diverse ills in the body politic, whether these were political corruption, unresponsive government, or party fragmentation.

The most striking phenomenon in recent years has been the simultaneous shift in New Zealand (November 1993), Italy (December 1993), and Japan (March 1994) away from the extremes of proportional *and* majoritarian systems towards the middle ground of the “additional member” system (AMS) used in Germany. All are long-established liberal democracies, where the electoral system had existed for generations. In Italy and Japan the system was established after their emergence from the war, and in New Zealand it can be dated to 1852. Events in 1993–94 are the equivalent of three electoral earthquakes in quick succession, after generations of dormancy. Equally striking, many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe adopted variants of AMS in their first free elections. Russia, Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Albania combined single-member plurality elections with proportional party lists, although there were considerable variations between these systems in the formulas adopted and use of reserved seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1993). The AMS system has also attracted considerable support among reformers in Britain and Israel, as a compromise counterbalancing the need for representative inclusion and the need for government effectiveness.

What caused the events of 1993–94? To understand the politics of electoral reform this special issue compares Italy, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and Britain. These five countries were chosen to illustrate a wide range of electoral systems, ranging from majoritarian through highly proportional, and to reveal some of the common factors driving the reform movement.

The Established Electoral System

To provide readers with a comparative framework, we need to outline the basic features of these electoral systems in 1993 prior to reform, including exemplars of the “proportional,” “semi-proportional” and “majoritarian” models of elections (see Table 1).

Majoritarian Systems

Majoritarian systems are among the oldest in the world, and continue to be used by 83 out of 150 countries in a recent world-wide study (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1993).

TABLE 1. *Electoral Systems Prior to 1993–94 Reforms.*

		Number of seats	Number of Districts	Max. Term (years)	Electoral System
Israel	Knesset	120	1	4	National Party List (closed)
Italy	Camera dei Deputati	630	31	5	Regional Party List (open)
	Senato	325	20	5	Regional Party List (open)
Japan	Shugi-in	512	130	4	Single Non-Transferable Vote
	Sangi-in	252	47	6	SNTV+Party List
UK	House of Commons	651	651	5	Plurality Single Member Districts
	House of Lords	1196		–	None
New Zealand	House of Representatives	97	97	3	Plurality Single Member Districts

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Electoral Systems: A World-wide Comparative Study,” (IPU, Geneva 1993).

New Zealand. For all previous elections New Zealand has used first-past-the-post simple plurality elections for the House of Representatives. As Vowles notes (this issue), New Zealand's political system has long been dominated by a strong executive, able to exert control through tight party discipline over a small (97-seat) unicameral legislature.

United Kingdom. The UK uses simple plurality elections for the House of Commons, in 651 single member constituencies. The system buttressed the other features of the Westminster model: strong cabinet government, a unitary state and parliamentary sovereignty (see Norris this issue).

Semi-Proportional Electoral Systems

Japan. The Japanese Diet includes the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. Prior to reform, in the lower House of Representatives 512 members were elected from 130 multi-member constituencies by the single non-transferable vote (SNTV). Under SNTV each voter wrote in the name on the ballot paper for one candidate in a multi-member constituency. Seats were allocated to the candidates who won the most votes within a seat, providing that this total was above a minimum threshold. There was no mechanism for transferring votes from one candidate to another. In a four-member constituency, the four candidates with the highest number of votes were elected. With a small district magnitude and low threshold, the Japanese system could be classified most accurately as "semi-proportional." The system encouraged candidates within the same party to compete with each other for votes, through constituency service (see Shiratori this issue).

Proportional Electoral Systems

Proportional representation was first introduced in Belgium in 1889, and rapidly spread throughout Europe. In recent years different types of proportional systems are used in 57 out of 150 countries worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1993).

Italy. Prior to reform, representatives in Italy were elected from open regional party-lists using proportional representation. Members of the Chambers of Deputies (630) were elected for 31 constituencies using the imperial electoral quota. Each voter could cast one preferential vote, used to prioritize candidates within party lists. The system had a low threshold to qualify for a party seat (300 000 votes nationwide). The 315 members of the Senate were elected on a regional basis, with most seats primarily allocated using majoritarian single-member districts (see Donovan this issue).

Israel. The 120 members of the unicameral Knesset are elected from a closed party-list system of proportional representation, with a single nation-wide constituency. The minimum threshold to qualify for seats is relatively low (1.5 percent of valid votes cast) (see Diskin and Diskin, this issue).

Driving Factors Behind Reform

The systems under comparison therefore range from New Zealand, taken as a classic example of strong government based on plurality elections, to Israel which has coalition government based on one of the most proportional systems. What were

the driving factors behind electoral reform? Based on the discussion in the articles which follow, we need to draw a distinction between long-term facilitating conditions and short-term catalysts contributing towards change.

The politics of electoral reform is a complex matter, varying substantially between nations. Nevertheless the authors within this issue identify three *long-term* conditions as critical, namely: significant changes to the established party system, including the fragmentation of dominant one-party systems, weakening party loyalties due to decades of dealignment, and the rise of minor parties; a series of political scandals and/or government failures which rocks public confidence in the political system; and (in Italy and New Zealand) the constitutional provision of referendums with the potential to break the log-jam of established party interests. In contrast the *short-term* catalysts described in the following articles include the particular circumstances, leaders and events surrounding reform, the policies of party factions and their legislative behaviour in government coalitions, and the extra-parliamentary role of the reform movement, pressure groups and the media. Long-term conditions created the potential for change, and electoral reform is seen as completing a process of democratization which would put an end to deep-rooted failures in the political system.

Therefore the reform movement gathered steam in the 1990s in these countries largely due to increased dissatisfaction, not just with the particular policies, or politicians, but with the constitutional foundations of the political system. There was a crisis of legitimacy with far-reaching consequences. Critics charged proportional systems in Italy and Israel with producing government instability, party fragmentation, lack of public accountability, and political corruption (see Donovan this issue; Diskin and Diskin this issue). In Japan, reforms were driven by concern about one-party dominance and a series of corruption scandals (see Shiratori this issue). In contrast, in New Zealand (Vowles this issue) and the United Kingdom (Norris this issue), critics of the "Westminster model" attacked the disproportionality of election outcomes, problems of government responsiveness, fairness to minor parties, and the under-representation of social groups. As Dunleavy and Margetts suggest, the normative criteria used to evaluate voting systems remain contested, since systems are open to criticism or defence on many different grounds (Dunleavy and Margetts this issue).

As a result of reform in 1993–94 Italy, Japan and New Zealand moved to variants of mixed member systems, similar in certain regards to that used in Germany. The new systems aim to combine the best of both worlds: majoritarian single-member districts and proportional party lists. The consequences for legislative elections remain uncertain. Whether the reforms will cure the perceived ills remains even more doubtful. In Britain and Israel constitutional debate has been heated, and the reform movement has gained ground, but at the time of writing it has not yet produced fundamental change in legislative elections.

The aim of this issue is to explore the politics of electoral reform. Why did the reform movement eventually succeed in Italy, Japan, and New Zealand, while it had less impact in Israel and Britain? What are the implications of the new electoral systems for the politics of these countries? The following papers address these issues.

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