

“Small political parties prove irrelevant in all electoral systems”

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A key feature of liberal democracies is that anyone can take part in the government of one's country directly or indirectly through chosen representatives. However, it is debated whether all political parties, regardless of size, have the opportunity to be influential in a party system. Scholars claim that this largely depends on the type of electoral system that operates in a country. This assignment will argue that small political parties prove irrelevant only in a first-past-the-post electoral system. Relevance for small parties will be limited to gaining seats and be influential in parliament. This paper will support its thesis mainly based on Duverger's law and examine factors such as electoral districts, proportionality, strategic voting, regional fiefdoms, ballot access and financial resources. Counter-arguments, based on criticism of Duverger's law and the rational choice theory, will be refuted. Empirical evidence will be presented from the United States and Sweden as the two countries represent two different electoral systems, the first-past-the-post system and the proportional representation system. The two countries chosen make for an effective argumentation of how the first-past-the-post system excludes smaller parties, in contrast to another electoral system. All evidence will be based on national elections.

To begin with, a first-past-the-post system generally produces a two-party system which excludes smaller parties according to Duverger's law. The theory suggests that first past the post systems tend to leave the voter to choose between two parties due to mechanical and psychological effects (Duverger, 1959). As an example, in the US two major parties, the Democratic party and the Republican party, alternate in power. Usually, as in the case of the US, one party tend to move towards the left, and the other one to the right. (Ashbee, 2012). In contrast, proportional representation system generally leaves the voter to choose between more than two parties. This favors a multi-party system, where smaller parties can gains seats in parliament. As an example, in Sweden, there are eight parties, and smaller parties like the Swedish Democrats have won representation (SCB, 2016).

Therefore, according to Duverger's law, proportional representation is more likely to favor smaller parties, while as a first-past-the-post system is more likely to prevent smaller parties from gaining access.

Duverger's law is supported by the mechanical effects of an electoral system which in a first-past-the-post-system tend to make small parties less relevant. The mechanical effects focus on how the votes are converted into seats by the electoral system, which can determine the party that will gain power. In a first past the post system there are usually "seat bonuses" where larger parties get a favorable number of seats in relation to the percent of the votes gained. As this is a zero-sum process, smaller parties, get fewer seats in proportion to their number of votes (Benoit, 2006). To demonstrate, in the United States during the last election, the Republicans got 55.2 percent of the seats despite getting 49.9 percent of the votes (Reynolds, 2016), A proportional representation system, on the other hand, translate the seats in proportion to the votes. For example, a party in Sweden which wins 10 percent of the votes gain 10 percent of the legislative seats (Reynolds, Reilly & Ellis, 2005). For this reason, smaller parties get a more fair representation in relation to their votes in a proportional representations system whereas in a first past the post system the mechanical effects, supporting Duverger's law, excludes minor parties from fair representation.

Continuing on the mechanical effects, a first past the post system prevents small parties to win as they need to gain a majority of votes in numerous electoral districts. In a first past the post system, the winning party in a district gains all the electoral college votes in that area, and the loser gets none,. This is often referred to as "the winner takes all." Because of this, a first past to post system favor systematically larger parties, produce disproportional election outcomes and make it difficult for multipartyism (Lijphart & Aitkin, 1995). Winning the election is not dependent on getting the most votes from the population, so-called the popular vote, but rather winning the most ECVs. Famous examples drawn from the US was in 2000 when Al Gore lost against Bush despite winning the popular vote (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). This happened again in 2016 when Clinton won the popular vote, but Trump won the overall election (Spike, 2016). In a proportional

representation system, on the other hand, a party only needs to get the popular vote to win. For instance, in Sweden in 2014 the Social Democrats won the overall election with 31% of the people's votes (SCB, 2014). To summarize, small parties are less relevant in a first-past-the-post system as it takes more than the popular vote to win.

Furthermore, according to Duverger's law, the mechanical effects are reinforced by the psychological effects of electoral systems. The psychological effects suggest that a voter's behavior is a consequence of the anticipation of the operation of electoral rules (the mechanical factor). Supporters of smaller parties will not vote for their preferred party as they are rational and will realize that the party has a smaller chance of winning in a first-past-the-post system (Benoit, 2006). Hence, they will vote for a more established party that have a higher chance of gaining representation, called strategic voting (Cox, 1997). In a poll conducted in the United States in 2012, 40% of Americans claim they would like to vote for a third-party candidate, however, only 1.8% did (Lightner, 2016). Suggesting that voters vote for a candidate that is more likely to win, rather than voting for the candidate being closer to one's beliefs. On the contrary, in a proportional representation system, a voters belief that their vote will have an impact on the outcome of the election, increases the voter's willingness to vote (Benoit, 2006). Therefore, psychological effects also support the correlation between a proportional representation system leading to a multiparty system and a first-past-the-post system leading to a two-party system which excludes smaller parties.

These psychological effects do not only affect voters but also parties. Political parties will recognize the competition they are facing in a first past the post system and consequently be deterred from entering the political arena. Alternatively, small parties will form coalitions with prospects of more viability. Political parties will avoid wasting money, time and energy in launching what the voter will think of as hopeless candidacies. This is known as the Duvergerian equilibria, in which the electoral system produce equilibrium number of parties (Cox, 1997). Conversely, proportional representation systems that favor multipartyism will give the parties a greater incentive to participate and favors political innovation (Reynolds, Reilly &

Ellis, 2005). In sum, in a first-past-the-post system, voters strategically neglects minor parties, which harm political parties willingness to compete. This leads to fewer parties, less political innovation and increases the chance of a two-party system.

If people, despite the psychological effects mentioned above, still decided to vote for smaller parties a first-past-the-post system results in many wasted votes. As only the party that gets the most votes wins seats, all other votes can be considered wasted (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). Building on a previous mention example of Al Gore and Bush, the 2000 election also had a significant point regarding “wasted votes.” The outcome of the overall election was dependent on 25 Electoral College Votes from Florida. In the end, Bush won in Florida and became president by only 537 votes. Nader who was another candidate during the election gain 97 488 of votes in Florida. Scholars suggest that many of these votes would have been cast for Al Gore if Nader did not participate (Ashbee, 2012). In elections after 2000, with this case in mind, it is believed that although a voter’s heart is with another party, they will increasingly vote for a bigger party to avoid that the party they prefer the least will win (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). In contrast, in a proportional representation system like Sweden where the requirements to earn seats are lower, few votes are wasted. To summarise, a first past the post system encourage voters to reject smaller parties knowing that one’s vote is likely to go to waste if they do.

Wasted votes can be even more dangerous when considering a phenomenon called regional fiefdoms in a first-past-the-post systems which further discourages small parties. Unless the minority party’s electoral support is geographically concentrated, it is not likely to win any seats in parliament. Smaller parties thus have a high chance of being excluded from representation in the legislature for that province or area (Reynolds, Reilly & Ellis, 2005). For example, in the US, states determine the boundaries of the district used for election to the House of Representatives. In 1992, Ross Perot gained 19% of the overall votes in the US election. However, he received 0 Electoral College Votes since he did not win in a particular state (Lewis-Beck & Squire, 1995). On the contrary, in a proportional representation system like Sweden, a party does not need to be geographically

concentrated to be relevant. In short, a first-past-the-post system hinders small parties that are not geographically concentrated.

How geographically concentrated a support for a political party can be manipulated in favor of larger parties through gerrymandering in a first past the post system. Gerrymandering is a practice intended to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating district boundaries. For instance, in Houston in the US, a boundary is claimed to be drawn in favor of the Republicans through excluding minority groups (Ashbee, 2017). The boundaries are made every ten years by state legislators. The majority of the states drawn by the redistricting plans build in electoral majorities for one of the two main parties advantages The party in power, therefore, have a significant advantage in so-called census year when they can re-draw the districts (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). This makes it even harder for small parties to be geographically concentrated. Naturally, in a proportional representation system like Sweden gerrymandering is not a problem as it is not depended on an electoral district. Therefore, a first-past-the-post electoral districts can be manipulated through gerrymandering which can work as an advantage to larger parties and make small parties less relevant.

When the boundaries are in favor of a party, this can lead to the notion known as safe states which further discourage smaller parties relevance. In the United States, for example, each state has a certain number of electoral college votes related to population, meaning that some states are worth more than others. Many states have proved throughout history to repeatedly favor one party, known as safe states. For instance, in New York, the Democrats always win, and in Texas, the Republicans always win. This results in that the candidates only fight for a few states where the outcome is yet unknown. Therefor, small parties have smaller possibilities in gaining votes as their target groups are limited to swing states. Further, since parties are safe in certain states, they can target their campaign resources in a handful of states, making in even more difficult for small parties to compete (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). In contrast, in Sweden as mentioned before, there cannot be safe states as there are no electoral districts. To sum, a first past the post

system limits smaller parties relevance in the electorate because of the barriers of safe states.

The winner takes it all notion associated with first past the post system further neglects smaller parties as it demands more financial resources to win. Smaller parties presumably have less financial resources than bigger parties who can attract greater funding. Larger parties who have more money can be able to hire PR-and consulting firms, buy advertisement, hire expertise and create bigger campaigns. In the US, for example, the two top candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump raised 1.4 billion dollars and 956 million respectively (Federal Election Commission, 2016). Small parties have a small chance of gaining enough money to be competitive. As it is essential for a party to reach out to many people in many states in a first past the post system money can have a decisive role. This is reinforced by the short electoral cycle and money has been suggested as a source of America's weak political parties (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). On the contrary, in a proportional representation system like Sweden parties do not need as much money. Parties are only dependent on winning the overall vote above the electoral threshold to gain influence. As noted, unequal access to political funding harms smaller parties more in a first past the post system and thus make it more difficult for them to be relevant.

In the light of legal thresholds, the absence of legal thresholds in first past the post systems produces another barrier for small parties. In a proportional representation system, all that is needed to gain seats in government is to win a percentage of votes above the electoral threshold. In Sweden, for example, a party needs to win more than 4% of the overall vote to get seats in government (SCB, 2014). In a first-past-the-post system, however, there are in general no electoral thresholds. The reason is that the election system is naturally unfavorable for small parties, so they generally do not need or use legal thresholds (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011). As mentioned, to win a seat in government a party needs to win the majority of votes in one state. Thus the demand to gain entry is much higher in a first past the post system compares to a proportional representation system. In the

US today, for example, only two seats are distributed to parties that are not Democrats or Republicans, proving how difficult it is for a smaller party to win an ECV (Spike, 2016). If the US would have an electoral threshold, it is suggested that it would be about 35 percent (Lijphart & Aitkin, 1995). Therefore, the nonexistence of electoral thresholds in a first past the post system adverse small parties to gain seats in government.

A reason for smaller parties not winning seats and be irrelevant in a first-past-the-post-system is because the difficulties in getting ballot access. In general, the major parties have no problem meeting the requirement to gain access. However, these requirements play a vital role for minor parties. In the US, each state decides its conditions, known as ballot access laws. Requirements usually include a circulation of a petition which has apparent consequences for minor parties. Studies have shown that the laws prevent smaller parties from entering into the political competition (Lewis-Beck & Squire, 1995). Further, the Supreme Court has recognized that states regulate the ballot in order to keep a two-party system. (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2006) As an example, John Anderson in 1992 had to spend half of his campaign budget on just gaining access to the ballot in all the states. Proving again the importance of financial resources and how it can prevent smaller parties to gain access (Lewis-Beck & Squire, 1995). In Sweden, on the other hand, parties that have gained 1% or more votes in the two recent elections get ballot access. This makes it easier for smaller parties to compete for the seats in the legislature (SCB, 2014). In essence, the difficulties of ballot access in a first-past-the-post system is another barrier for small parties to gain influence.

As a counter-argument, scholars claim that small parties are relevant in the first-past-the-post system. Scholars suggest that small parties have a crucial role in setting the agenda for the political debate. Others argue that the influence of minor parties can be greater than just agenda setting. Minor parties ensure that the bigger parties keep in touch with the electorate (Ashbee, 2012). First of all, the relevance of a small party naturally depends on how one measure relevance. If one considers relevance as agenda setting, then minor parties may well have influence a first-past-the-post system. In this essay, however, relevance has been defined as gaining

seats and having influence in parliament. Hence agenda setting is not enough for small parties to be relevant. Second of all, while scholars recognize that minor parties can make an impact, it does only last for a short period. Minor parties are referred to as bees; they die after they have stung. (Ashbee, 2012) Anti-immigrant parties in America and Ross Perot are seen to as an examples. They influence American politics dramatically, but then they disappear, and the battle remains between the Democrats and Republicans. Once again, although having some significance at first, proving that in the long term small parties are irrelevant in a first-past-the-post system.

Furthermore, scholars claim that Duverger's law is dated and that smaller parties have gained representation in parliament in first-past-the-post systems. Critiques point to two well-known systems such as Canada and the UK to argue for their case. In both countries, the first-past-the-post system has not resulted in a two-party system as Duverger's law suggests (Reynolds, Reilly & Ellis, 2005). For example today the UK has a multiparty system consisting of Labour, Conservatives and smaller parties like UKIP despite their electoral system. Despite this being true in theory, in practice, however, it is suggested that the party system work as a two-party system. In the last election in 2017, Labour and Conservatives gained together 82.3 percent of the votes in the House of Commons (Economist, 2017). A two-party dominance which has not been seen since the 1980s. Therefore scholars claim that it is only two parties in the system that really has an influence. As Labour and Conservatives receive most of the votes, they are as a consequence able to dominate the business of government (Webb, 2000). Therefore, despite more parties entering the House of Commons in the first past the post system, the system still tend to work as a two-party system where small parties are irrelevant.

Another critique of Duverger's law, questions if voters are as rational as the psychological effects of Duverger's law assumes' (Fiorina, 1995). The rational choice theory associated with Anthony Downs suggests that voters base their decisions on who to vote for or if even to vote at all, on the expected utility of voting (Downs, 1957). The rational choice theory assumes that the purpose of voting for a citizen is to maximize one's expected utility. Critics argue that voters

are not as rational as one think. Some argue that voters base their decision on social and cultural factors and would still vote for smaller parties despite it not being the rational choice. First of all, rational choice theorists do not claim that all individuals act rationally all the time. Voters sometimes make mistakes but tend not to make the same mistake again and again (Fiorina, 1995). Secondly, the fact that first-past-the-post systems tend to have a lower voter turnout than proportional representation supports the rational choice theory and that it tends to favor bigger parties or no parties at all (Reynolds, Reilly & Ellis, 2005)

Further, rational choice is argued to be of even more relevance where stakes are high, and the number involved is fairly low, which is the general case in a first-past-the-post electoral system. Making a logic decision is not worth the effort if the result is of little value or if one's vote does not make a difference to the outcome. In the 1960s studies of national voting behavior had found that the most determinant of a voter's choice of party was party identification. However, later in the 1960s a third party candidate enters the election named George Wallace and made people question previous findings. Many people who had identified with the Democrats for a long time left their party. Consequently, it was difficult to argue for the theory that people vote based on party identifications, paying little attention to issues. For this reason, in the following years, scholars focused on the importance of issues and government performance as rational choice theorists. However, it is important to stress that rational choice theorists do not mean that a social-psychological approach has nothing to say about voters behavior. Rather that the social factors and the rational choice approach should differ in their applicability to voting decisions (Fiorina, 1995).

Finally, some scholars claim that the party system is not dependent on electoral laws but rather the social structure in which it operates. Meaning that the underlying cleavage structure of a society is more important for the outcome than the electoral system. (Lijphart & Aitkin, 1995) This further criticizes Duverger's law, and that small parties relevance is not dependent on whether it operates in a first-past-the-post system or in a proportional representation system. Scholars refute this by suggesting that looking at how social factors influence the parties

relevance in contrast to the electoral system are two different approaches. This does not mean however that one is more important than the other, rather that both factors should be examined to understand the outcome. The cleavage structure is important, but that the same party system would arise no matter electoral laws is unlikely. Imagine the United States if it had Israel's electoral system for example, would it remain a two-party system? One can, therefore, argue that there the social and electoral structure interacts and both have an influence on the party system and their relationship between the parties (Cox 1997).

This essay has considered how the institutional framework, namely the electoral system, effects parties relevance. In a first past the post system small parties are irrelevant because of its dependence of electoral districts, restricted ballot access, low proportionality and strategic voting. Whereas in proportional representations system small parties are more influential due to high proportionality, low thresholds and meaningful voter choice among parties. This paper is however limited in evidence from the United States which has different election laws compare to other countries that use the same electoral system. Further research should focus on how the social context also impacts small parties roll in different electoral systems. As briefly addressed above, historical and cultural factors may result in different outcomes by the same electoral system. Therefore, investigations of the interaction between political institutions and social structure may be fruitful to understand small parties relevance.

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