ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND THE NUMBER OF PARTIES IN POSTCOMMUNIST STATES

By ROBERT G. MOSER*

Arend Lijphart concluded his book on electoral systems in consolidated democracies with the following note on new democracies:

When a first electoral system has to be chosen which will hopefully guide the new democracy’s elections for a long time (or, in the case of a redemocratizing country, a new system that will hopefully work better than the old one), it is important to examine all of the options as well as their advantages and disadvantages. . . . Therefore, to the extent that this study of seventy electoral systems in twenty-seven democracies will have some practical utility, it may have more to offer to electoral engineers in the new democracies than in these twenty-seven old democracies.1

Implicit in this statement is an assumption that the effects of electoral systems are more or less universal and will therefore hold in new democracies as well as old. Based on a rational choice understanding of the behavior of voters and candidates, the influence of electoral systems has provided a powerful explanation for the shape of party systems in consolidated democracies. After decades of empirical testing, the essence of the major hypotheses made famous by Maurice Duverger—namely, that single-member plurality elections tend to constrain the number of significant parties operating in a polity to a much greater extent than multimember proportional representation (PR) systems—has remained remarkably intact.2 Thus, as democratization has swept

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through southern Europe, Latin America, and now the former communist states of east central Europe and Eurasia, it has been quite natural for politicians and political scientists to apply this body of knowledge to new democracies making the momentous decision to establish a new electoral law.3

It remains to be seen, however, whether the hypotheses regarding the effect of electoral systems, based for the most part on the experience of Western democracies, will actually hold in new democracies, particularly in the very different social and political context of postcommunist states. The experiences of Russia, Ukraine, and Poland (Senate elections) have shown that plurality and majoritarian elections can produce very fragmented party systems, suggesting that the reach of Duverger’s laws may be limited.4 Such findings have important practical implications for these new democracies as they struggle to survive. They also have important theoretical implications for new institutionalism, which seeks to grant institutions a political effect that is to some extent independent of their social and political environments.

This article examines the effect of PR and single-member district (SMD) elections in five postcommunist states to ascertain the effects of electoral systems in the postcommunist context. It will be shown that some of those states, most notably Poland and Hungary, have followed the standard pattern of party consolidation over time in reaction to incentives of electoral systems, while others, most notably Russia and Ukraine, have not. The different effects of electoral systems in these cases can be attributed to different levels of party institutionalization found in postcommunist states. Building on the work of Sartori and Cox, I argue that the constraining effects of electoral systems on the number of parties will be mitigated by the institutionalization of the party system.5

Institutionalization is defined as

a process by which a practice or organization becomes well established and widely known, if not universally accepted. Actors develop expectations, orientation, and

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5 See Sartori (fn. 2); and Gary W. Cox, Making Votes Count (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
behavior based on the premise that this practice or organization will prevail into the foreseeable future. In politics, institutionalization means that political actors have clear and stable expectations about the behavior of other actors.\(^6\)

Weak institutionalization of party systems can explain the failure of plurality and majoritarian electoral systems to have their expected reductive effects in postcommunist states. Moreover, variance in the level of strategic voting and learning over time among the postcommunist cases studied here can be attributed to a country’s level of party institutionalization. Those postcommunist states showing increased strategic voting over time are those with the most institutionalized party systems in the region, while those that exhibited no signs of adaptation to electoral–system constraints have weaker party systems. Finally, given the low party institutionalization of some postcommunist states, this study suggests that PR systems with legal thresholds may provide a greater constraint on the number of parties than single-member district elections. PR elevates the status of political parties by providing them with a monopoly over nomination procedures not found in single-member district elections.

Perhaps the failure of electoral systems to have their predicted effects in new, unconsolidated democracies should not be surprising. Sartori has argued that strong electoral systems (for example, plurality systems) do not have their expected reductive effects on the number of national parties in countries with unstructured party systems.\(^7\) Similarly, Cox has argued that strategic voting requires certain conditions that may not be approximated in all political contexts.\(^8\) This article builds on these hypotheses by providing empirical support from postcommunist states.\(^9\)

The least institutionalized party systems in Latin America, such as

\(^6\) Scott Mainwaring, “Rethinking Party Systems Theory in the Third Wave of Democratization: The Importance of Party System Institutionalization” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D. C., August 28–31, 1997), p. 7. Mainwaring argues that party institutionalization is the key variable distinguishing party systems in established Western democracies and party systems in democratizing states, and he explains much of the variance in democratic performance within the broad class of democratizing states. According to his measures of institutionalization—which emphasize continuity of party organizations, control over candidate nominations, and the volatility of electoral support of parties—party systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are among the least institutionalized of the late democracies. See also Samuel Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 12.

\(^7\) Sartori, (fn. 2), 62.

\(^8\) Cox (fn. 5).

\(^9\) This is important because scholars have not identified many empirical cases that do not fulfill Cox’s necessary conditions for strategic behavior. Cox’s primary example of a country with a weakly institutionalized party system defying the expected effects of a plurality electoral system is Papua New Guinea. See Cox (fn. 5), 85. Sartori concentrated on the Indian example which produced a multiparty system in the electoral realm, but the expected high levels of disproportionality and a dominant party system after votes were translated into seats. See Sartori (fn. 2), 55–56.
Brazil, have tended to adopt PR electoral systems that foster party factionalization, thus providing no challenge to the debate over the constraining effects of PR and majoritarian systems. The weakly institutionalized party systems of postcommunist states present a set of cases in which plurality and majoritarian electoral systems are used (independently or as part of a mixed electoral system), providing a unique opportunity to test hypotheses regarding strategic voting and the reductive effects of these systems.

**Duverger's Law and Its Limits**

Duverger originally formulated three laws of the effects of electoral systems:

1. Proportional representation tends to lead to the formation of many independent parties, ... 
2. the two-ballot majority system tends to lead to the formation of many parties that are allied with each other, ... and 
3. the plurality rule tends to produce a two-party system.11

The final law, Duverger claimed, was “the closest to a sociological law.”12 Subsequent studies have better specified the causal nature of these correlations both empirically and theoretically. District magnitude (the number of representatives elected from each district) was found to be the decisive influence on disproportionality and multipartism. Low district magnitudes, particularly single-member districts, have a powerful constraining effect on the number of parties and produce high levels of disproportionality in the translation from votes to seats. High district magnitudes allow a greater proliferation of parties (but do not cause a multiplication of parties) and produce lower levels of disproportionality.13 The constraining effect of electoral systems was found to reside most directly at the district level rather than at the national level.14 Finally, the electoral system was found to interact with, not override, the cleavage structure in society.15 The major modifications to Duverger's laws arise from these findings.

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12 Ibid., 69.
13 Taagepera and Shugart (fn. 2); Lijphart (fn. 1).
14 Sartori (fn. 2), 54–55.
The fact that electoral-system effects are manifested at the district level has been used to accommodate exceptions to the correlation between plurality systems and two-party systems at the national level. For example, Rae argued that Canada retained three or four significant parties despite a plurality electoral system because of the existence of geographically concentrated minority parties. Minority parties in Canada survived because they supplanted one of the major parties in some districts while remaining third parties nationally.\textsuperscript{16} Such a revision retained the plurality system’s causal influence on the number of parties because plurality elections still produced two-party competition at the district level. With geographically concentrated minority parties, however, the same two parties were not always the major players in every district, resulting in multipartism at the national level.

Cox has contributed greatly to this debate by explicating the conditions under which strategic voting takes place. Using a rational choice model, he argues that strategic voting (and by implication strategic entry and departure by elites) requires certain conditions that involve actors’ motivations, preferences, time horizons, and the availability of accurate information. Thus, Cox has argued that single-member plurality elections may fail to reduce the vote for minor parties if one or more of the following conditions arise:

1. The presence of voters who are not short-term instrumentally rational;
2. Lack of public information about voter preferences and vote intentions (hence about which candidates are likely to be “out of the running”);
3. Public belief that a particular candidate will win with certainty; or
4. The presence of many voters who care intensely about their first choice and are nearly indifferent between their second and lower choices.\textsuperscript{17}

Even if conditions are favorable for the establishment of two-candidate races at the district level, the projection of this bipartism to the national level is not assured. Rather it depends on the ability of parties to unite prominent elites in single nationwide party organizations. If this is not accomplished the two candidates produced in plurality elections at the district level may belong to a multitude of different parties across the country. Cox cites institutional forces, most notably the direct election of a powerful national executive, as primary for pushing the nationalization of parties that is essential to the realization of Duverger’s third law at the national level. In the absence of a general theory of nationalization, however, the existence of nationwide parties remains a

\textsuperscript{16} Rae (fn. 2), 95.
\textsuperscript{17} Cox (fn. 5), 79.
necessary condition only for the constraining effect of plurality electoral systems to be felt at the national level.  

The presence of these preconditions for strategic behavior and the projection of local bipartism to the national level are particularly questionable during initial elections in new democracies, especially in post-communist states with little or no democratic tradition. The absence of previous electoral experience and accurate polling information alone may deny voters and elites the information necessary to behave strategically.

Most importantly, the lack of well-established political parties undermines the ability of voters and elites to behave strategically. Parties serve as the primary mechanism to channel and aggregate public opinion, while electoral systems are a secondary mechanism influencing the number of viable political parties. If significant political parties do not exist they cannot aggregate political elites into nationwide political organizations nor represent large segments of public opinion. In weak party systems, the absence of party identification leaves voters with no cues, other than the personal characteristics of candidates and patronage, as to how to cast their votes. Due to the transitory nature of party organizations in the most unstable new democracies, parties continually enter and leave the scene (usually in tandem with the political clout of their leader) and provide no continuity between electoral periods. Such conditions provide little opportunity for voters to cultivate lasting preferences for one party or another, leaving most uncommitted. For example, in Russia survey research has put the number of independent voters without a party identification at 78 percent, compared with 13 percent for the United States and 8 percent for Great Britain. It is difficult, then, for us to attribute voting preferences to the majority of voters in unconsolidated democracies in the same way we attribute voting preferences to voters in consolidated democracies with institutionalized party systems. Without concrete preferences, strategic voting as a process based on a rank ordering of preferences seems very unlikely.

If one examines only consolidated democracies, the conditions necessary for strategic voting are usually approximated. Exceptions are few and easily accommodated through special conditions for geographically concentrated parties. This is not the case for new democracies, particularly in the postcommunist world where parties are not well-developed

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18 Ibid., 182–93.
19 See Sartori (fn. 2), 55–56.
and voters and elites cannot easily respond to incentives from electoral systems. It would be a mistake to assume that institutional effects found in established democracies will be replicated in the very different social context of new democracies in eastern Europe and Eurasia.

**RECONCEPTUALIZING MIXED ELECTORAL SYSTEMS**

The electoral systems of postcommunist states reflect the influence of the German system. Many states employ some sort of mixed electoral system with representatives elected in both party-list PR contests in large multimember districts and plurality or two-round majoritarian elections in single-member districts. No exclusively plurality systems elect all representatives in single-round, single-member district races, and this produces certain obstacles for those interested in testing theories of electoral systems in postcommunist states.

Mixed electoral systems complicate the categorization of electoral systems and the analysis of effects. Most scholars have thought of a mixed electoral system as a modified form of PR designed to curb the potential for party proliferation.21 Such a conception is quite accurate for those mixed systems that utilize compensatory seats that interlock the two halves of the electoral system into one, as the German system does. Another type of mixed system, used in Russia and Croatia, however, does not use compensatory seats. Rather, it calculates the vote of the two portions of the system separately and allows parties to keep all seats won in each half of the system regardless of the results of the other tier. Shugart has argued that such a system is actually a modified plurality system. Since there is no mechanism to prioritize the PR tier over the plurality tier, he assumes that the effects of the plurality portion of the system will override the more feeble PR tier.22

Mixed electoral systems also tend to produce moderate levels of multipartism and disproportionality as designers have intended. In practice, such results are laudatory and are a major reason why the system has been replicated so widely in east central Europe and Eurasia. Mixed electoral systems, however, add little to the dichotomous debate between PR and plurality systems. Western scholarship has shown that the most powerful effect of electoral systems on the number of parties is the constraining effect of single-member plurality systems. Taken at

21 Lijphart (fn. 1), 39–46.
face value, the electoral systems of east central Europe and Eurasia do not offer any persuasive cases to test this hypothesis. The high levels of party fractionalization usually found in these states can be attributed to the combination of a fractionalized social cleavage structure and an insufficiently strong electoral system. Given that no postcommunist state exclusively employs the strongest system—single-member plurality elections—one can not test whether a plurality electoral system would have been able to curb the party fractionalization found in many such states.

Mixed electoral systems, however, also offer certain opportunities for the comparison of electoral systems. I argue that one can treat a mixed electoral system that employs separate votes for each tier of the system exactly as its name implies—as a mixture of two separate electoral arrangements operating side by side. Such a conceptualization provides a unique opportunity to study the effects of separate plurality or PR tiers of a mixed system while holding constant other possible intervening variables such as culture, social cleavages, and the level of socio-economic development.

This conceptualization of mixed electoral systems follows the method of controlled comparison, which studies “cases that differ with regard to the variables one wants to investigate, but similar with regard to all other important variables that may affect the dependent variables; these other important variables can then be treated as control variables.”23 Although a powerful methodological tool, cases that are similar except in certain independent variables are very hard to find. This method has been used effectively by Putnam, who studied the interrelationship between political institutions and social environment in Italy, and by Lijphart, who examined changes in electoral systems over time within individual countries.24 Lijphart argued that when a country changes its electoral system “many potentially important explanatory variables can be controlled in the sense that they can be assumed not to differ or to differ only marginally: the same country, the same political parties, the same voters, and so on.”25 The combination by mixed electoral systems of dichotomous electoral systems (PR and plurality/majoritarian) in a single social environment contributes a significant dimension of comparability not found in Lijphart’s study. Despite their theoretical malleability, electoral systems are resilient institutions. All

23 Lijphart (fn. 1), 78.
25 Lijphart (fn. 1), 78.
of Lijphart’s cases involved changes within the same broad categories of electoral systems, mostly within the class of PR systems. Mixed electoral systems provide the unique opportunity to compare the diametrically opposed categories of PR and plurality elections upon which the debate over electoral systems has been based.

This approach to mixed electoral systems is not without precedent. To test for strategic voting, some scholars have compared the PR and plurality tiers of Germany’s mixed electoral system to one another. Fisher, Jesse, Bawn, and Cox have all used the mixed electoral system of West Germany to show the greater level of strategic voting in the plurality tier than in the PR tier. Such analyses have consistently found that large parties in West Germany received more votes in the plurality tier than in the PR tier and vice versa for smaller parties, as the strategic voting hypothesis would predict. By showing that voters behave differently in the separate tiers of a mixed system, such studies bolster the case for treating the different tiers of mixed electoral systems separately as long as a vote is cast in each tier.

The controlled comparison of different tiers of mixed electoral systems, however, is not without potential problems. The greatest problem is cross-contamination between the two cases compared. Unlike cross-national analysis or Lijphart’s analysis across time, the electoral systems being compared in this test are not independent of one another. They form two halves of one electoral system for the same legislative body in the same election. No matter how independently the two halves of the system operate, the separation of mixed electoral systems into two systems for the purpose of comparison remains artificial. The two tiers of a mixed electoral system will surely affect one another to some extent. For example, small parties that run in the PR tier of the election have already assumed the entry costs of electoral competition and could be expected to run candidates in the single-member districts as well with little regard to payoffs in terms of seats. Or, one or two large parties may dominate the single-member plurality races, having coattail effects that produce greater vote shares in the PR contest. Consequently, the effective number of parties in the PR half of a mixed system may tend to be lower than if the system had a strictly PR electoral system.

While it is important to keep the danger of cross-contamination in mind, it does not ruin this experiment. Incentives for strategic entry and withdrawal by elites in the single-member district tier may be weakened because the costs and payoffs of competition are changed. Strategic voting, however, should remain intact as shown in studies of West Germany. Rational voters will still have incentives to abandon small parties in the plurality tier in favor of large parties with a better chance of winning. Moreover, the mechanical effects of single-member district elections should remain intact producing greater disproportionality in favor of large parties than in the corresponding PR tier. Over time such mechanical effects should produce strategic behavior by parties who are punished in the translation of votes into seats.

**THE EFFECTS OF PR SYSTEMS IN POSTCOMMUNIST STATES**

Do electoral systems affect the number of parties in postcommunist states and consolidated democracies similarly? To answer this question, electoral systems in five postcommunist states will be examined. Three of these, Russia, Hungary, and Lithuania, employ a mixed electoral system of various combinations of PR and plurality or majoritarian elected seats. The two tiers of these systems will be analyzed individually as separate systems following the controlled-comparison method described above.27 Two countries with single-tier electoral systems, Poland and Ukraine, will also be studied.

These cases were selected to provide roughly equal coverage of PR and single-member district electoral systems. The cases also provide examples of varying levels of party institutionalization. Poland and Hungary have the highest level of party institutionalization. Parties monopolize the nomination process making independents rare and marginal phenomena. While there is significant volatility in popular support for parties from election to election, major parties or ideological tendencies have survived over time.28 Russia and Ukraine represent the opposite end of the spectrum. Parties do not control the nomination process and independents dominate the field of candidates in single-member

27 In the case of the 1992 Lithuanian elections, district-level data was not available for the single-member district tier. Therefore, only the PR tier of the 1992 Lithuanian election was included in the study.

28 Six major parties have remained dominant in Hungarian politics since the end of communist rule. While the party system in Poland has been more fluid, Tworzecki has argued that the political system is actually more consolidated around a small number of political tendencies. Hubert Tworzecki, *Parties and Politics in Post-1989 Poland* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996). The recent consolidation of reformist forces into the AWS would tend to support this assessment.
district elections. Parties are fluid, and voters tend not to have a strong and long-lasting identification with a particular party. \(^{29}\) Lithuania represents a middle ground between the east European and former Soviet cases. Like Poland and Hungary, Lithuanian parties tend to monopolize nominations but are not as stable or firmly grounded in society.\(^{30}\)

Table 1 provides basic information on the electoral systems of the five countries analyzed. Each individual election for which data were available will be treated as an individual case. By separating mixed systems into their component PR and plurality/majoritarian tiers, fifteen cases result: nine PR elections and six elections conducted under a plurality or majoritarian system.\(^{31}\) Two measures common to the electoral-systems literature will be used to examine these systems: the effective number of parties and the least-squares index of disproportionality. The effective number of parties provides a measure of party system fractionalization by counting parties weighted by their shares of votes or seats so that very small parties do not count as much as large parties.\(^{32}\) The level of disproportionality produced by an electoral system is the deviation between the proportion of votes a party receives in an election and the proportion of seats it actually gets in the legislature. According to cross-national studies disproportionality tends to be highest in plurality systems, which penalize small parties and reward large parties more than multimember district PR systems. Like the effective-number-of-parties measure, the least-squares index of disproportionality

\(^{29}\) This characteristic is perhaps best captured by the unusually high level of split-ticket voting in Russia. In 1993, 70 percent of voters planned to split their votes in the PR and plurality tiers, voting for different parties or for a party and an independent candidate in the two halves of the election. Only 19 percent planned to vote a straight party ticket. White, Rose, and McAllister (fn. 20), 139–40.

\(^{30}\) Kitschelt provides an index of the chances of program-based party formation for postcommunist states, which corresponds to the classification of the level of party institutionalization of the cases in this study. Using Kitschelt’s scale Hungary and Poland have the highest scores at 5.5 and 5.0 respectively. The Baltic states are marginally lower at 3.5 to 5.0. Russia, Ukraine, and other Soviet republics have a much lower score of 0.5. Herbert Kitschelt, “Formation of Party Cleavages in Postcommunist Democracies,” Party Politics 1, no. 4 (1995), 457. Moreover, Evans and Whitefield argue for a similar classification of postcommunist states’ potential for the development of stable party systems, with east central Europe (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) possessing the greatest potential for stable party development followed by the Baltic states with Russia, Ukraine, and other Soviet successor states having much lower chances for the establishment of stable party systems. Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, “Identifying the Bases of Party Competition in Eastern Europe,” British Journal of Political Science 23, no. 4 (1993).

\(^{31}\) Only tiers in which a vote is cast are analyzed here. Therefore, compensatory seats in Hungary and Poland calculated on the basis of previous votes are not included.

\(^{32}\) The effective number of parties index is calculated by squaring the proportion of the vote or seat shares of each party, adding these together, then dividing 1 by this total:

\[ N^* = 1 / \frac{1}{v^2} \]

See Lijphart (fn. 1), 67–72; and Taagepera and Shugart (fn. 2), 77–81, 104–5.


### Table 1

**Electoral Systems in Five Post-Communist States**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
<th>PR Tier</th>
<th>Plurality/Majoritarian Tier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>225 seats elected in one nationwide district with 5% legal threshold</td>
<td>225 seats elected by plurality in single-member districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>152 seats elected in 20 multimember districts with 4% (1990) and 5% (1994) legal threshold; 58 compensatory seats elected in one nationwide district with same thresholds</td>
<td>176 seats elected under two-round majoritarian rules in single-member districts; top three go to second round plus any candidate with 15% or more of first-round vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>70 seats elected in one nationwide district with 4% (1992) and 5% (1996) legal threshold</td>
<td>71 seats elected under two-round majoritarian rules in single-member districts; top two go to second round</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>391 seats elected in 37 multimember districts; 69 compensatory seats elected in one nationwide district; no legal threshold (1991), 5% (1993)</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>majoritarian</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>450 seats elected under two-round majoritarian rules in single-member districts; top two go to second round</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Cox (fn. 5), 50–54; Bojcun (fn. 4); “Polozhenie o vyborakh deputatov Gosudarstvennoy dumy v 1993 godu (Provisions for elections of deputies of the State Duma in 1993), Rossiiskie vesti, October 12, 1993.

Proportionality weights the deviations between seats and votes so that small deviations have less effect than large ones.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) The least-squared index of disproportionality is calculated by squaring the vote-seat share differences and adding them together; this total is divided by 2; and then the square root of this value is taken:

\[
\text{LSq} = \text{SqRt of } \frac{1}{2} \Sigma (v_i - s_i)^2
\]

For discussion of these two measures see Lijphart (fn. 1), 67–72; and Taagepera and Shugart (fn. 2), 77–81, 104–5.
Table 2 shows the effects of PR systems in the selected postcommunist states. The most striking characteristic of all the states is the level of party fractionalization. While party proliferation is expected in PR elections, the number of significant parties operating in postcommunist states outstrips anything found in developed countries. The average effective number of elective parties for the cases studied here is 7.71, which is higher than all electoral systems in consolidated democracies except Belgium and nearly twice the average for consolidated democracies using PR (D’hondt method). It is also higher than in most new democracies with the exception of Ecuador and Brazil, both of which have around ten effective electoral parties.

Clearly, the high number of parties in postcommunist states is due in part to fragmented and fluid cleavage structures. However, the high level of disproportionality produced by legal thresholds (which were used in every case but one) suggests an absence of strategic behavior in those cases with the highest level of disproportionality. The average level of disproportionality produced by PR systems was 11.31 (11.96 excluding Poland 1991, which had no legal barrier). That is more than

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Lijphart (fn. 1), 96, 160–61.

Cox (fn. 5), 309–11.
twice the average level of disproportionality for PR systems in consolidated democracies and is also higher than the average of majoritarian systems.36

According to Taagepera and Shugart’s Law of Conservation of Disproportionality, the number of parties and hence the level of disproportionality produced by a system will be underestimated by the actual vote shares (as opposed to real voter preferences) because voters and elites make strategic decisions favoring larger parties before the vote even takes place.37 Thus, postcommunist parties and voters should have anticipated the disproportionality that would be produced by the legal threshold imposed and have gravitated toward larger parties capable of overcoming the threshold. Then there would have been fewer electoral parties, fewer votes would have been wasted on sure losers, and disproportionality would have been lower. This process should increase over time as voters and elites learn the rules and adapt to the incentives of the system.

Among our cases this phenomenon seemed to occur in significantly varied ways. Poland provides the strongest evidence of adaptation to the incentives of a legal threshold and learning over time. Poland had the highest party proliferation among our cases in 1991 when there was no legal threshold. There was very limited consolidation and very high disproportionality in 1993 when a 5 percent legal threshold was first introduced, suggesting an absence of strategic behavior. But in 1997 elites seemed to learn from the devastating effect of the 5 percent legal threshold on small parties, and they consolidated in broad electoral blocs cutting the effective number of electoral parties in half. As a consequence, the level of disproportionality dropped significantly because there were fewer small parties left without representation. A smaller decrease in the effective number of parties and disproportionality over time in Hungary also shows support for the learning of strategic behavior over time. Russia and Lithuania show an opposite trend. In both countries the number of parties in the PR tier increased substantially from the first to the second election raising disproportionality exponentially.

What accounts for this difference in the learning of strategic behavior among our cases? Party fragmentation does not seem to be the culprit. Poland, on the one hand, had the most fractionalized party system in its first election, yet it displayed the greatest amount of adaptation to

36 Lijphart (fn. 1), 96.
37 Taagepera and Shugart (fn. 2), 123; Lijphart (fn. 1), 97; Cox (fn. 5), 173–78.
electoral-system constraints over time. Hungary also has a relatively high degree of party fractionalization but a low degree of disproportionality. On the other hand, Lithuania had the lowest degree of party fragmentation in 1992 but almost doubled the number of significant electoral parties at the next election despite an increase in the legal threshold from 4 to 5 percent.

I argue that the difference in learning over time is caused by the degree of party institutionalization. Hungary has the most stable party system in this sample. It is dominated by the same six major parties that have consistently crossed the legal threshold and left little room for marginal parties. Poland’s party system has been much more tumultuous; but Tworzecki has argued that underneath its fluid surface, Polish society is divided along several dominant cleavages and is evolving toward a cleavage structure similar to Western Europe. The situation is different in countries of the former Soviet Union. With the exception of the Baltic republics, these countries have no significant recent experience with democratic governance or even independent statehood in the twentieth century. Politics is polarized, and political parties with identifiable social constituencies have been slow to emerge. In Russia the most developed parties occupy the extreme ends of the political spectrum and have a small minority of dedicated followers. This leaves a broad and amorphous center that encompasses the majority of voters and is represented by a multitude of fluid, minor parties. To a lesser extent, the same is true for Lithuania, which saw the former communist party return to power in 1992 with a majority of seats, only to be replaced by the Lithuanian Conservatives of the right at the next election, with minor parties of the center increasing over time. Under such conditions voters ignore the incentives to defect from marginal parties because they have no clear preference for a major party representing either end of the political spectrum. Moreover, it is difficult to decide which parties are viable or "out of the running" since the largest group in most opinion polls are the "undecideds." 

This is not to say that voters and elites in Soviet successor states will never respond to the incentives of legal thresholds. The likelihood of strategic behavior in these states, however, is undermined by social conditions that retard the institutionalization of political parties. Thus, we may expect Lithuania to experience strategic behavior in response to

38 Tworzecki (fn. 28), 194.
39 This is particularly true in Russia where surveys regularly report that 40 percent of respondents answer "don't know" to questions about whom they will vote for in the next election, more than twice the percentage supporting the most popular political party. Rose, White, and McAllister (fn. 20), 141.
electoral systems sooner than Russia or other former Soviet republics because there is a better environment for future party institutionalization there.

**Effects of Plurality and Majoritarian Systems in Postcommunist States**

An even more perplexing conundrum presented by postcommunist experience has been party proliferation in plurality and majoritarian elections, which have been deemed the most powerfully reductive electoral systems in the literature. In two cases, Russia and Ukraine, not only have single-member district elections failed to produce local bipartism at the district level, but they also have failed to produce a dramatic mechanical effect—reducing the number of parties entering the legislature due to disproportionality—that is seen in comparative experience. The failure of strategic behavior in single-member district elections typically leads to an overwhelming advantage for the largest party in the system and thus to a dominant party system as found in India until the 1990s. Russia and Ukraine, therefore, are truly unusual cases of party proliferation in the legislature arising from single-member district elections.

Table 3 shows the effects of single-member district plurality and majoritarian elections. In three cases (Lithuania 1996, Hungary 1990 and 1994) there was a significant mechanical effect in the SMD tier. In all these cases the effective number of parliamentary parties was less than half the effective number of elective parties. Moreover, the level of disproportionality in SMD elections in Lithuania and Hungary was extremely high with values equal to or higher than the most disproportional PR election in the study, Russia 1995. Within-country comparisons further support the increased reductive force of single-member district elections in these cases. In Lithuania and Hungary the effective number of parliamentary parties in the single-member district elections was lower and the level of disproportionality higher than in the corresponding PR tier, just as one would expect from the literature. The Hungarian experience is particularly striking. Although the effective number of electoral parties was quite similar in the PR and majoritarian tiers in the 1990 and 1994 elections, the effective number of parliamentary parties produced in the single-member districts was less than half of that in the PR tier. Indeed, the impressive victories of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDG) in 1990 and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in 1994 were driven in large part by seats won in single-member districts. The MDF won 67 percent of the 176 single-member district
### Table 3

**Effects for Plurality and Majoritarian Tier/Election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
<th>Effective # of Electoral Parties ($N_e$)</th>
<th>Effective # of Parliamentary Parties ($N_p$)</th>
<th>Least-Squares Index of Disproportionality</th>
<th>Effective # of Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia 1993</td>
<td>plurality</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia 1995</td>
<td>plurality</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>7.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania 1996</td>
<td>maj.</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>20.37</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary 1990</td>
<td>maj.</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>31.88</td>
<td>5.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary 1994</td>
<td>maj.</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>40.89</td>
<td>5.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine 1994</td>
<td>maj.</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Seats on 24 percent of the first-round vote in 1990 while the MSZP won 86 percent of those seats on 31 percent of the first-round vote.40

Russia and Ukraine present a different situation altogether. The effective number of parties reaching parliament (4.15 for Ukraine 1994 and over 5.00 for Russia 1993 and 1995) show none of the dramatic mechanical effect found in the other cases. Moreover, this measure probably underestimates the amount of party fractionalization pro-

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duced by Ukraine’s majoritarian system in which independents made up the largest “bloc” of representatives entering parliament (40.2 percent) and can hardly be considered a cohesive group. They were, however, treated as a single entity in computing the measure of the effective number of parliamentary parties. The high effective number of candidates per district in Russia shows that Russia’s plurality system failed to have its most basic effect—local two-candidate contests at the district level—an effect Sartori claimed even held in unstructured party systems.

What distinguishes the cases in Ukraine and Russia from the others is the proliferation of independent candidates in single-member district elections. In Ukraine, only a small minority of the candidates (11 percent) were officially nominated by parties rather than by groups of voters or worker collectives. This percentage, however, overestimates the number of independents because many candidates with a partisan affiliation chose to be nominated by nonpartisan methods. Using party membership rather than party nomination as the more accurate measure of partisanship among candidates, 61 percent of the first-round vote went to independent candidates. This corresponds roughly to the Russian experience in which nonpartisan candidates gained 48 percent of the vote in 1993 and 36 percent in 1995. In Lithuania independents won only 3 percent of the vote. In Hungary the vote for independent candidates dropped from 7 percent in 1990 to only 2 percent in 1994. Independents in Ukraine and Russia not only made up a large proportion of candidates competing for office, they also accounted for the largest proportion of the winners. Fifty-two percent of winners in the Russian elections in 1993 were independents and 34 percent in 1995, while 40 percent of Ukraine’s winning candidates did not belong to a party. In Lithuania’s 1996 and Hungary’s 1990 elections, independents made up only 6 percent and 3 percent of the winners, respectively.

41 The effective number of parliamentary parties is based on estimates of partisan affiliation in the Ukrainian parliament for 338 of 450 deputies who were successfully elected after the first run-off election in April 1994. Bojcun (fn. 5), 239. Only 338 of the 450 district elections were declared valid after the first run-off because the other districts failed to fulfill the required criteria of both 50 percent participation and 50 percent support for the winning candidate. The rest of the seats were filled in special make-up elections held until 1996. Given the fluid and unstable nature of partisan affiliation in Ukraine this figure should be considered only an estimate of party fractionalization. In the Russian case, the effective number of parliamentary parties is based on membership in parliamentary factions, which renders a more accurate reflection of party fractionalization in the legislature.

42 Sartori (fn. 2), 62.
43 Bojcun (fn. 4), 233.
44 This figure is based on data from the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), which listed both the mode of nomination for a candidate (party, voter group, workers collective) and the party affiliation of the candidate. The latter was used to estimate the percent of vote going to independents. See IFES, online, http://ifes.ipri.kiev.ua.
There were no nonpartisan winners in Hungary’s 1994 election.\textsuperscript{45} There is some evidence that parties are gaining control over nomination procedures at least in Russia where the number of winning candidates without a partisan affiliation declined in 1995. Both Russia and Ukraine, however, continue to have a large contingent of independent candidates winning elections, which signals a continuing weakness in their party systems not found in the other postcommunist countries in this study.\textsuperscript{46}

The proliferation of independent candidates is just another sign of the lack of party institutionalization in Russia and Ukraine as opposed to the other cases in the study.\textsuperscript{47} Ukrainian and Russian parties have not controlled the nomination process in single-member districts in these countries and have not enjoyed a consistent level of significant support nationwide (with the possible exception of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation beginning in 1995). Consequently, without one or two large parties to benefit from strategic voting or disproportionality, single-member district elections fail to constrain the number of candidates per district. Rather, single-member districts produce their own proliferation of partisan and nonpartisan candidates and allow individual candidates with name recognition and financial resources to find success regardless of party affiliation. Once in parliament, this mass of independent candidates does not act as a unified group but splinters further. Some join parties they eschewed during the campaign; others form new parliamentary factions unrelated to electoral associations fielding candidates in the campaign; still others become atomized members of parliament without any consistent affiliation with a larger group.


\textsuperscript{46} In March 1998 Ukraine held parliamentary elections under a new mixed electoral system similar to Russia’s, which was not included in this study for lack of data. The results show a continued prevalence of independent candidates in single-member district elections in Ukraine. Of the 225 deputies elected in plurality elections, 114 (51 percent) were independents.

\textsuperscript{47} Mainwaring uses the proliferation of strong independent candidates as one characteristic of his index of party institutionalization. Mainwaring (fn. 6).
The fact that proliferation of nonpartisan candidates did not occur in all the postcommunist cases again suggests that party institutionalization varies in the region. While parties are relatively weak and fluid in all the emerging postcommunist democracies, a clear distinction needs to be made between those states with parties that dominate the nomination process and control the choices voters face and those that do not. The electoral system plays an important role in the development of parties in this context. PR party-list systems center attention on parties as the only vehicles for nomination, while single-member district elections allow nonpartisan candidates to enter the contest. At the same time, the effects of electoral systems on the number of parties are mitigated by the institutionalization of the party system itself.

Finally, it must be reiterated that while plurality and majoritarian electoral systems had a significant mechanical effect in some postcommunist states, single-member districts surprisingly appeared to have no effect on the number of electoral parties in any of the cases under examination. In no case does the effective number of elective parties in SMD elections approach the number expected in the literature ($M + 1$ where $M$ signifies the number of candidates winning election). Of course, majoritarian elections are more ambiguous in this sense for they provide more incentives for party proliferation in the first round. For majoritarian cases, however, the expectation of reductive influence remains $M + 1$ with $M$ signifying the number of candidates that can advance to the second round.\textsuperscript{48} For Lithuania $M + 1$ would equal three effective candidates per district since the run-off is between the two top vote getters, an expectation Lithuania does not come close to approximating. Hungary allows the top three finishers plus any candidate with 15 percent of the vote into the second round. Thus, only in Hungary can the high number of effective candidates be attributed to a permissive electoral system, especially since Hungary has a third national tier of compensatory seats that uses votes not used to win seats from both the single-member district tier and the territorial PR tier. This situation provides even more incentive for party proliferation because a vote for a candidate with no chance of getting to the next round is not wasted; it can be used for compensatory seats in the national tier.

The chief consequence of the failure of voters and parties to act strategically is a high level of disproportionality in those countries with relatively developed parties that constrain the proliferation of independent candidates. Up to now, most postcommunist party elites (with the

\textsuperscript{48} Cox (fn. 5), 123.
exception of Poland) have failed to anticipate being punished by the mechanical effect of effective thresholds of single-member districts. They thus have entered competition only to fail to achieve representation. Likewise, postcommunist voters have tended not to anticipate that their vote will be wasted on marginal parties or do not care.

Thus, all the postcommunist cases employing single-member districts examined here provide some surprising and intriguing findings. In Ukraine and Russia, single-member districts produce party proliferation defying both the expectation of strategic voting and mechanical effects due to disproportionality. In Lithuania and Hungary, large parties benefit greatly from the mechanical effect of single-member districts due to high disproportionality, but voters and elites did not seem willing or able to react to these incentives and behave strategically.

The big question for both PR and single-member district electoral systems is whether the lack of strategic voting found in this study is a permanent or transitory feature of postcommunist elections. Will there be greater party consolidation over time as democracy takes hold and elites and voters learn the rules and better adapt to the incentives provided by the electoral system? Perhaps time and repeated electoral cycles are all that is needed to produce the types of outcomes so regularly found in established democracies. Cox has argued that time is required for electoral systems to take effect in new democracies:

The typical scenario in emerging democracies, whereby a great number of parties spring up in the first elections, and there is a relatively slow winnowing out process, makes sense. A large number spring up in the first election because it is not clear who will be viable and who not. As information is revealed about voter preferences, the more serious groups will continue to enter, even against poor short-term odds, in the hopes of convincing less committed competitors to drop out.

While there have not yet been enough elections to make any definitive judgments about learning, these initial findings suggest some interesting differences among cases and between electoral systems. In both PR and single-member district elections, the countries with the more institutionalized party systems showed the strongest signs of learning over time. In PR elections, Poland and Hungary saw their effective number of electoral parties and disproportionality drop over time, while the number of parties and disproportionality rose sharply in Russia and Lithuania from the first election to the second. In single-member district elections, only Hungary showed signs of party consolidation over time, and Russia (the only other country with full data for

Ibid., 159.
more than one election) saw fractionalization increase over time. In comparing learning under PR and single-member district elections, the evidence of learning of strategic behavior in PR elections was, contrary to expectations, greater than in SMD elections. This evidence suggests that in postcommunist states PR elections with legal thresholds may be more effective in controlling the number of parties than SMD elections.

Given the dramatic mechanical effects produced by effective and legal thresholds in both PR and single-member district elections in postcommunist states, one could expect the winnowing-out process described by Cox as long as parties are developed enough to give some semblance of party preferences. Voters, then, can behave strategically in light of those preferences. Where parties are weakest and can not even control the nomination process, however, such as in Russia and Ukraine, learning becomes less likely, particularly in single-member district elections where independent candidates are allowed to proliferate.

**Electoral System Effects in Other New Democracies**

The findings presented here suggest that electoral systems in postcommunist states have not led to a significant level of strategic behavior by voters and elites. In most cases the number of effective electoral parties exceeded the carrying capacity of the electoral system leading to extremely high levels of disproportionality. Is this a trend peculiar to postcommunist states, or can it be found in initial elections in all new democracies? Perhaps the proliferation of electoral parties in postcommunist states is a normal condition of initial elections that will subside as increased information and experience reward viable parties and weed out nonviable ones. If so, comparisons with other new democracies should show similar party proliferation in initial elections and contraction in the number of electoral parties over time.

The most effective comparison would be between the electoral systems of the postcommunist states and new democracies, which use plurality systems. The comparison would show whether the most powerful electoral system has faced party proliferation in initial elections in other new democracies only to produce consolidation over time as voters and elites learn to navigate the system. Unfortunately, few third-wave democratizers have adopted plurality systems. Therefore, the most in-

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50 Eleven countries experiencing initial democratic elections in the 1980s adopted plurality systems but all were very small states, mostly Caribbean islands. Such cases do not provide the most suitable comparison with large postcommunist states. Nevertheless, these new democracies did not experience the same high level of party proliferation exhibited by the postcommunist states in the study. The
structive comparison is a historical one with the initial elections of older, new democracies that have now become relatively consolidated. Two postwar democracies, the German Federal Republic, with its mixed electoral system employing both plurality elections and PR, and India, with its pure plurality system, will be examined to shed some light on the degree of party proliferation in initial elections under a plurality system and on the system's reductive properties over time as a result of learning.

Postwar Germany's early electoral history provides support for the idea that party proliferation may be a common phenomenon in new democracies but that reductive effects of the electoral system do take hold over time. Scholars have found evidence of strategic voting under plurality rules in the difference in vote totals for parties between the PR tier and the single-member district tier. The two largest German parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, have gained more votes in the single-member districts than in the PR race while smaller parties like the FDP lost votes. This situation suggests that voters defected from small parties less likely to win in single-member districts and gravitated toward parties with better chances for representation. While the discrepancy in the vote between the two tiers is not that significant, averaging a gain or loss of less than 2 percent for the three parties most affected (CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP), it does provide persuasive evidence of strategic voting under plurality rules even when the vote does not really influence the final distribution of seats among parties.51

This phenomenon did not occur in the first election under the mixed system in 1953. In that election the SMD tier produced over three effective electoral parties (3.38), a higher effective number of electoral parties than in the corresponding PR tier (3.31). By the next election the effective number of electoral parties produced in the single-member districts had fallen to 2.75, and the single-member district tier produced fewer effective electoral parties than the PR tier (2.78), as the literature would expect.52 This trend has grown over the years reducing the chances for victory by marginal parties in the single-member districts to virtually nothing and solidifying a two-party system in the SMD tier. Since the third election held under the mixed system in 1961, no party other than the CDU/CSU or SPD has won a single-member district

average effective number of electoral parties for this group of new democracies is 2.26, which is much lower than the average produced in Russia's two plurality elections. For data regarding these cases see Cox (fn. 5), 309–11.
51 Jesse (fn. 26), 112.
52 Calculations of effective number of parties were based on data in Barnes et al. (fn. 26), 906.
seat. Thus, Germany provides a case of increased consolidation, presumably due to learning, which began to take place in the second election. German voters and elites did not need much time to adjust to the incentives of the electoral system.

India provides an example of the opposite phenomenon—a persistent absence of strategic voting under a plurality system. Party proliferation at the district level has remained high in India despite the fact that the plurality system consistently produced very high disproportionality, severely penalizing marginal parties. As a consequence, until the late 1980s, India experienced a dominant party system in which the Congress Party maintained a majority of seats based on a minority of votes while the opposition was fragmented. Unlike Germany there is no evidence of consolidation over time as a result of learning. In India’s first two elections, the effective number of electoral parties stood at 4.21 despite the fact that the high disproportionality of the plurality system narrowed that number down to less than two effective parliamentary parties (1.79). Although one would expect voters and elites to adjust to the severe disincentives against small parties, the high level of party fractionalization did not subside over several decades of repeated democratic elections. In six elections from 1962 to 1984, India actually had more effective electoral parties, an average of 4.31, even though the electoral system’s mechanical effect repeatedly reduced the number of effective parties entering parliament to 2.27. By the end of the 1980s the mechanical effect of India’s plurality electoral system even failed as the Congress party lost power and the manufactured majorities Congress enjoyed for decades gave way to coalition governments. In 1996 thirty parties were represented in parliament with 5.88 effective parliamentary parties. The 1998 parliamentary elections produced a similar outcome with 5.29 effective parliamentary parties, strikingly similar to the fractionalization produced by Russia’s single-member district elections.

These two examples show that party proliferation in initial elections may be a common occurrence. However, while Germany provides a case of learning that produced strategic voting beginning in the second

53 Lijphart (fn. 1), 161.
54 Calculations for the 1996 and 1998 Indian parliamentary elections were based on seat distributions provided by the India Votes ‘98 website, http://www.indiavotes.com. One crucial difference between the Indian and Russian cases is that the Indian case tended to produce two- or three-candidate races at the district level. The multiparty system at the national level was produced by the fact that the two major candidates in each district did not belong to the same two major parties from district to district. This was not the case in Russia, which saw an average of seven significant candidates compete in single-member districts. For district-level analysis of the number of candidates in Indian elections see Pradeep Chhibber and Ken W. Kollman, “Party Aggregation and the Number of Parties in India and the United States,” American Political Science Review 92 (1998), 332.
election, the Indian experience shows that the passage of time and repeated elections alone are not sufficient to promote strategic behavior. As in the postcommunist cases, I would argue that the key determining factor is the institutionalization of the party system, in which a relatively well-established party system in Germany provided the basis for strategic voting while a more weakly institutionalized party system in India failed to do so.

**Conclusions**

The findings presented here suggest that electoral systems affect the number of parties in postcommunist states and in more established democracies in very different ways. These findings provide greater empirical support for Cox’s theoretical work on the conditions necessary for strategic voting to take place. Without a relatively institutionalized party system, voters and elites may not have the ordered party preferences to behave strategically or may not have enough information to differentiate viable from nonviable contenders. Under such conditions one would not expect the powerful reductive impact of plurality elections to take effect. Cox provided only anecdotal evidence from Papua New Guinea to illustrate how such conditions in the real world may produce party proliferation under plurality rules. The findings presented here suggest that many postcommunist states may be undergoing democratic transition under such circumstances.

This study has reemphasized the importance of party institutionalization as an intervening variable influencing the relationship between electoral systems and the number of parties. The constraining effects of legal and effective thresholds seemed to vary with the institutionalization of the party system in postcommunist states. Countries like Poland and Hungary with more developed party systems showed greater tendencies for strategic adaptation to electoral system incentives and learning over time while countries like Russia and Ukraine with weakly institutionalized party systems showed no signs of strategic behavior or learning. The passage of time will not necessarily guarantee an eventual adaptation to electoral systems along patterns found in consolidated democracies if the social context never produces a relatively institutionalized party system as the case of India powerfully demonstrates.

Under conditions of extreme party underdevelopment, the electoral system that promotes the use of party labels—proportional representa-

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55 Cox (fn. 5), 85.
tion—may be more effective in constraining the number of parties than the plurality system, provided a legal threshold is used. Indeed, in Russia a PR system with a 5-percent legal threshold had a stronger mechanical effect than its plurality counterpart. Poland has shown that over time PR elections with legal thresholds can reduce the number of parties in a postcommunist state as elites and voters learn the incentives of the system. Our cases have shown no such dramatic reduction in the number of electoral parties over time in single-member district elections. Therefore, electoral engineers hoping to curb party fractionalization in states with developing party systems may find better results with PR and a legal threshold than with single-member district elections.

Postcommunist states provide a challenge to electoral studies with party fractionalization that defies even the strongest electoral systems. The most underdeveloped party systems, such as those found in Russia and Ukraine, produce such fragmentation that even the mechanical effect of single-member district elections does not take hold. Such phenomena suggest that in integrating postcommunist states into the field of electoral studies greater attention will need to be paid to the implications of low levels of institutionalization of party systems. The main puzzle arising from this analysis is the process and conditions under which party systems become institutionalized in democratizing states.