Comparing Electoral Reform
in Old, New, and Fragile Democracies

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Note: This version of the paper is revised slightly from the version originally submitted to workshop participants. It includes the revised version of Table 2 that I used in my oral presentation, as well as slight consequential amendments to the text.

PRELIMINARY DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

This paper tackles the question of how processes of electoral reform vary depending on a country’s democratic status. My recent work has analysed the politics of electoral reform in established democracies, particularly in France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand (Renwick, 2008, 2009). My purpose now is to understand how the approach I developed there might be applied to other parts of the world, where electoral system choices may take place in very different contexts. This paper is my first attempt to consider this wider question. It is a very preliminary study: I am only now beginning this analysis. I will therefore be grateful for participants’ feedback on how I might best proceed.

As in my previous work, I focus here upon the reform specifically of legislative electoral systems: of the subset of all electoral rules concerned with
defining the nature of the preferences that voters can express on the ballot paper and the translation of those votes into seats in the legislature. Electoral system reforms can take place in non-democracies, in countries undergoing transition to democracy, in young or fragile democracies, and in established democracies. I will not say much in this paper about reforms in non-democracies: election results in such countries are often conditioned not so much by the choice of electoral system as by ballot access rules, campaign rules and practice, and out-and-out rigging. I ask two broad questions of electoral reform in the remaining contexts. First, what are the points of similarity and difference in processes of electoral reform (and non-reform) across those contexts? Do electoral reforms involve similar or different sorts of actor? Are they motivated by similar or different considerations? Are they shaped by similar or different cognitive, informational, normative, and institutional constraints? Second, what are the implications of such similarities and differences in processes for electoral system outcomes: for the frequency and direction of reforms?

One set of answers to these questions has already been developed on the basis of a simple rational choice model in which politicians are the key actors, power is the dominant goal, and electoral prospects and uncertainty are the crucial variables shaping outcomes. I begin by outlining this approach and the propositions it suggests regarding the questions above. I then outline the less parsimonious (I might say, richer) account of electoral reform processes that I have argued for in my work on established democracies and consider what can be expected in extending it to young, fragile and transition contexts. Finally, I turn to empirical evidence, arguing that a mix of large-n and small-n approaches is required. I offer the beginnings of a survey of global patterns, though this is very limited at present. I also give some very preliminary analysis of qualitative evidence and probe avenues for building upon this further.

A Simple Account of Electoral Reform

What I call here the simple account of electoral reform is made explicit by such authors as Colomer (2004, 2005) and Benoit (2004), but is implicit in many writings on electoral reform. It is notably applied outside the world of established democracy by Przeworski (1991) and Andrews and Jackman (2005). On this view, politicians dominate the process of choosing electoral systems: no other types of actor need be taken into account. And these politicians seek simply to maximize their power by maximizing their party’s share of the seats in the legislature after the next election.
For this simple model, variation in electoral system outcomes between countries does not arise because of differences in the sorts of actors involved in the decisions or in the basic motivations of those actors: there are assumed to be fixed. Rather, differences arise from variation in the strategic circumstances facing those actors: broadly, those who belong to large parties will prefer less proportional systems, while those who belong to small parties will prefer more proportional systems (Colomer, 2005). When it is combined with an assumption of uncertainty regarding parties’ future electoral prospects, the simple model leads to a prediction of a general trend towards the adoption of more proportional systems. As Przeworski (1991: 87) puts it, “If everyone is behind the Rawlsian veil, that is, if they know little about their political strength under the eventual democratic institutions, all opt for a maximin solution: institutions that introduce checks and balances and maximize the political influence of minorities, or, equivalently, make policy highly incentive to fluctuations in public opinion”.

This model retains the assumptions that politicians dominate and that they focus on maximizing their own power when it is extended to transitional or new or fragile democratic contexts. Where these contexts differ from that of established democracy is in the degree of uncertainty: actors’ uncertainty regarding their future electoral prospects is likely to be higher when they have no (recent) electoral experience to go on or where politics remain unstable or political affiliations inchoate. Drawing on careful analysis of electoral reform episodes both in Western Europe during the early twentieth century and in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, Andrews and Jackman (2005) argue that high levels of uncertainty have been central in shaping the patterns of electoral systems chosen, particularly the strong tendency towards the adoption of proportional systems.

**A Richer Account of Electoral Reform**

The simple account of electoral reform clearly captures an important part of reality: politicians are undoubtedly central to almost all possible reform processes, and politicians are generally concerned in very significant part with preserving or enhancing their power. I have argued, however, that, at least for established democracies, the simple account fails to capture enough of reality to allow reliable predictions even of general trends (let alone outcomes in individual cases) to be made. Whereas, at least in Colomer’s version (Colomer, 2004, 2005), the simple account generates a prediction of a general trend towards
more proportional systems, in fact, at the level of national lower house electoral systems in established democracies, the evidence for such a trend is not clear. And whereas the simple model expects reforms towards proportionality to occur when there are many parties and reforms away from proportionality to occur when there are few parties, in fact, in established democracies in recent decades, the reverse is true (Renwick, 2008). The simple model successfully predicts at most three of the six cases of major electoral reform in consolidated democracies in the last fifty years: that is, it predicts the reforms in France in 1985 and 1986 and (with some tweaks around the edges) in Italy in 2005, but it does not predict the reforms in New Zealand, Italy, and Japan in 1993-4. It also significantly overpredicts reform: for example, whereas it expects a governing party in a majoritarian system facing heavy defeat at the next election to seek to introduce greater proportionality, in fact, of all the cases where such defeat has been imminent in established democracies in recent decades, only in France in 1985 has reform taken place (Renwick, 2008).

I have therefore argued for a richer account of electoral reform that allows for a diverse range of actors, motivated by many varied concerns, facing a variety of constraints and opportunities (see Renwick, 2009 for details). In respect of actors, while politicians are clearly almost always important, electoral reforms in established democracies also often importantly involve ordinary citizens. Electoral reforms in consolidated democracies typically follow one of two patterns, which I label elite-mass interaction and elite majority imposition. The role of ordinary citizens is clearest in the case of reform by elite-mass interaction. Here, though a minority of politicians favour reform, they are able to secure this goal against the opposition of the majority of their colleagues only by enlisting public pressure behind their cause. This occurred in Italy and New Zealand in 1993, where reformers successfully tied electoral reform to public anguish over, respectively, corruption and unfettered economic restructuring and thereby won reform through referendums. It occurred also in Japan in 1994: though no referendum occurred, politicians were galvanized into accepting electoral reform in significant part because they perceived they would otherwise be punished by voters. Reforms by elite majority imposition are rather more dominated by politicians, who do pursue their power interests. This type of reform is thus close to the simple model described above, though I allow for greater complexity in how electoral reform can influence politicians’ power. Even here, however, we need to consider ordinary citizens: such reform is likely only if politicians are confident voters will not punish them for manipulating a core element of the democratic system for their own purposes.
Within each of these types of reform, a diverse array of motivations may come into play. These can be divided into two broad categories, relating to power interests and values. On the whole, politicians’ dominant concern in thinking about electoral systems is power: there are exceptions, such as New Zealand’s Geoffrey Palmer, Italy’s Mario Segni, and British Columbia’s Gordon Campbell, but they never have sufficient support among politicians to enact reform on their own. Electoral reform may influence power in many ways: it is about much more than short-term partisan seat maximization. I reproduce below the table from my forthcoming book in which I lay out the relationship between electoral reform and power along three dimensions: whether the relevant maximizing agents are parties or individuals; whether actors look at the effects on their power of different electoral systems (outcomes) or of the actions they take in the course of the reform process (acts); and whether actors look at effects upon seat shares, as the simple model supposes, or upon other contributors to power, such as voters’ underlying preferences across parties and a party’s prospects for holding government office. Not shown in the table is a further dimension of potentially important variation: namely, actors’ time horizons. This complexity is not central to my current purposes, so I will not go into further detail here.

Table 1. Typology of power-seeking considerations.

(a) Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Aspects of Reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Voters’</td>
<td>(a) importance of candidate-, party-, and leader-centred</td>
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<tr>
<td>preferences</td>
<td>competition</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(b) avoiding reforms seen as illegitimate</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Votes</td>
<td>(a) psychological effect</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(b) intra-coalition candidate distribution (coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>effect)</td>
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<tr>
<td>III. Seats</td>
<td>(a) mechanical effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Office</td>
<td>(a) ensuring favourable coalition dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Influence</td>
<td>(a) enhancing party’s intra-coalition influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(b) Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Aspects of Reform</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VI. Re-election</td>
<td>(a) fit between system and personal resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) answering voters’ desire for reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) avoiding reforms seen as illegitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Intra-party power</td>
<td>(a) intra-party power of backbenchers and leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) building personal credit within the party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Influence in political system</td>
<td>(a) reconfiguring the party system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) attracting potential allies in other parties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Renwick (2009)

On the values side, meanwhile, actors may be interested in a variety of principles, relating, for example, to fairness and representation, to accountability, to efficient and effective law-making, and to systemic stability. Such values may influence many politicians at the margin and some politicians fundamentally. Insofar as ordinary voters attend to electoral systems and electoral reform, such values are central to their thinking. Again, I provide a full analysis of these values elsewhere (Renwick, 2009).

Knowing actors and their motivations does not, plainly, allow us to predict outcomes: we need also to understand the processes by which motivations translate into preferences in respect of electoral reform and how these preferences translate into outcomes. Specifically, we need to understand how these processes are constrained and refracted by cognitive and informational limitations, by legitimacy constraints, and by the institutions through which any reforms must be adopted. I will not summarize here my findings in relation to established democracies. But all of these factors need to be taken into account in thinking about the comparison between the contexts of established democracy, new or fragile democracy, and democratic transition. I turn to that comparison now.
Moving beyond Established Democracy

As I indicated in the introduction, my purpose is to understand similarities and differences between electoral reform processes in established democracies, new or fragile democracies, and countries undergoing democratic transition, and to assess the implications of these findings for the frequency and direction of enacted reforms. Before I proceed, some definitions are in order. I define electoral reform in the context of democratic transition narrowly to cover the choice of the system used in the first democratic elections in a country (at least, the first after a non-democratic interlude) or in semi-democratic elections that are rapidly followed by further democratization. I use the term “established democracy” to cover both age and consolidation: an established democracy is one that has endured for a considerable period and that faces no significant threat of breakdown. It is awkward to define “a considerable period” in terms of a fixed number of years: the length of time we are likely to require before being comfortable in referring to a country as an established democracy varies depending on the duration and nature of any prior non-democratic period. For example, France took less time to achieve established democratic status after the crisis of 1958 than did the countries of East-Central Europe after four decades of communism. Nevertheless, for analytic purposes, I define twenty years as the minimum period of healthy democracy required for the age criterion to be passed. In looking at current cases, it is possible to define consolidation solely in terms of the health of democracy: a healthy democracy is one scoring at least 8 on the Polity IV Polity score. Looking at historical cases, a further criterion can be added: at any given time, a country’s democracy is consolidated only if it maintains a Polity IV score of at least 8 for at least the following ten years. Finally, I count any country that does satisfy minimal criteria for an electoral democracy, as defined by Freedom House, but does not satisfy the criteria for an established democracy as a new or fragile democracy.

In what follows, I consider in turn the core building blocks of electoral reform processes: actors; motivations; and constraints and opportunities. Then, in the following section, I tease out specific propositions regarding the nature of electoral reform process and of reform outcomes across different democratic contexts.

Actors

When we move from the context of established democracy to that of democratic transition, the cast of actors changes. In the first place, the category of politicians
is best broken down into three elements: old regime elites, dissidents, and new entrants to the political realm. I explore these types in some more detail below when I look at motivations.

Second, it appears reasonable to posit that the role of ordinary citizens will be weaker than in established democracies. Citizens may certainly be strongly mobilized in the overall process of democratic transition. But at such times of major systemic transformation it appears unlikely that much public attention will focus upon the esoteric technicalities of alternative electoral systems, beyond the basic requisite that the system adopted should be democratic.

Third, actors from outside the domestic arena can gain prominence. A country cannot be an established democracy if foreign governments or other foreign actors are able to exert strong pressure in electoral reform processes. In the context of democratic transition, by contrast, such a role is common. Occupiers significantly influenced electoral system and other constitutional choices in, for example, West Germany and Japan after World War II and Iraq and Afghanistan more recently. International aid and assistance can also be made conditional on electoral arrangements, though more commonly this relates to the broad electoral framework rather than the specific electoral system itself. What is possible in established democracies is that foreign actors can influence electoral reforms in an advisory capacity: the royal commission that recommended electoral reform in New Zealand in 1986, for example, was strongly influenced by conversations with and advice from politicians and experts, particularly in West Germany, Ireland, and the UK. Yet the role of experts—and particularly foreign experts—is again likely to be greater in the context of democratic transition. As I argue further below, there is more likely here to be a tabula rasa, creating much scope for individual experts significantly to influence outcomes.

As transition states become new democracies, the distinctions between members of the old regime, dissidents, and new entrants gradually erode and it becomes possible again to employ the category of politicians. But scope for public attention to focus specifically upon the electoral system is likely to remain more limited than in established democracies: agendas are likely to remain heavy and problems many. Foreign involvement will tend to diminish as a democracy ages, but less so if it remains unconsolidated. The cast of actors in new or fragile democracies thus converges upon that in established democracies, but the role of ordinary citizens is likely to remain weaker and that of external actors stronger.
Motivations

Turning to actors’ motivations, old regime elites are simplest: they can be expected to mirror politicians in established democracies in being power-seekers before they are policy-seekers.

Dissidents, however, are different. These are people who chose to eschew power within the old, non-democratic regime and who, in many cases, suffered considerable personal hardship because they fought for a different sort of political system. It would be surprising if they forgot these ideals once the opportunity to craft a new democratic political system came within their grasp. This phenomenon was noticed at least as early as the 1930s, by Leo Kohn, historian of the writing of the constitution of the Irish Free State: “The habit of resistance dies slowly”, he wrote; “to the successful revolutionary, possessed at last of the long-coveted gift of self-government, restriction of authority is of greater moment than effective government” (Kohn, 1932: 81). If Kohn’s words are correct, pro-democracy campaigners in non-democratic contexts can be expected generally to emphasize the value of creating an open and inclusive system. Whether other general or case-specific values need to be allowed for is something that I seek to explore further through empirical enquiry. This is not, however, to suggest that dissidents ignore power entirely: there is no reason to adopt such an extreme position. Even if dissidents were interested solely in promoting democracy and not at all in advancing their own power as an end in itself, they would likely see the chances of democratic development as greater if their own influence within it was strong and if the power of their opponents was held in check.

It is harder to posit general motivations for new entrants to the political stage. Some may be principled policy-seekers who were repelled by the previous regime but who also saw dissident activity as futile and perhaps counterproductive, and who therefore preferred before transition to pursue a furrow outside politics. Others may be opportunists who see a chance to pursue the political careers that have previously been closed to them. In the aggregate, therefore, new entrants are likely to have motivations intermediate between those of old regime elites and of dissidents. There is no obvious way of predicting where they will fall at the individual level.

Thus, old regime elites are likely to be predominantly concerned with their own power while dissidents will, to a far greater degree, be interested also in democratic values, notably in the value of inclusiveness, and new entrants will distribute between these poles. Beyond these basic goals, however, all these actors are likely also to want the system they create to be sustainable. This
generates three particular concerns, with governability, legitimacy, and accommodation of inter-group conflict. Governability appears as an important value in debates over electoral reform in established democracies: for example, supporters of the status quo in New Zealand before 1993 and in the UK today argue that it promotes single-party governments that are able to do the job of governing effectively, and reformers in Italy before 1993 and since have contended that a less fragmented party system would promote better government. Concern to ensure governability is likely to gain an extra dimension in new or fragile democracies: it may be thought important for the survival of the political system itself.

Concern over the legitimacy of the political system is also a factor in electoral reform politics in established democracies. Where new political institutions are created, they may initially have to fight against scepticism over whether they are needed: this was a major factor in the decisions to adopt proportional electoral systems for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in the 1990s (Plant, 1995: 12; Laffin, 2000: 537). More generally, Dalton (2004: 181) argues that growing popular alienation from and cynicism towards the political world will encourage reforms designed to restore legitimacy, and such thinking has been a factor in recent pressure for reform in some Canadian provinces (e.g., Carty, 2004: 176; Carty, Blais, and Fournier, 2008: 141-2). The desire to strengthen legitimacy is likely to gain added potency in some transition contexts. In particular, old regime elites may pursue electoral (and wider constitutional) reform precisely in order to enhance their legitimacy: in order to facilitate the survival of existing political structures or to enable them to enlist opposition support for necessary economic reforms.

The need to accommodate conflicting groups in society has a long pedigree as a factor studied by students of electoral reform: it is identified by Rokkan (1970: 157) as one of the key factors explaining the adoption of proportional systems in much of Europe in the early twentieth century; Rokkan himself attributes the insight to Braunias (1932). It has rarely been significant in debates over electoral reform in established democracies in recent decades, for the simple reason that a country is unlikely to be an established democracy unless it has already found means of accommodating diversity. A notable exception might be Northern Ireland, but it would be better in fact to classify Northern Ireland as an unconsolidated democracy. In transition contexts and in unconsolidated democracies, by contrast, the need to secure institutions that will accommodate conflicting groups is likely to remain prominent.
To the extent that actors perceive the basic stability of the system as threatened by weak governability or legitimacy or by inter-group conflict, their direct pursuit of their own power or democratic values is likely to be constrained. For example, even power-seekers may forgo some opportunities to enhance their own grip on power in the short-term in order to accommodate ethnic groups that would otherwise rise up in violent conflict and destabilize the whole system. Even inclusive democrats may promote limits on fragmentation if concerned that weak government may create opportunities that demagogues could exploit for their own purposes. This implies that these factors will remain prominent in new or fragile democracies to the extent that system stability appears threatened, even as the categories of old regime elites and dissidents decline in relevance and it becomes more useful to speak simply of regular politicians.

Foreign actors can be posited as seeking to promote democracy and stability. They are likely to share dissidents’ desire to promote inclusiveness, seeing this as a way of preventing particular groups from gaining excessive power and destabilizing the system. To the extent that the system is threatened by weak governability or legitimacy or by strong inter-group tensions, they will also seek choices designed to limit these dangers.

Thus, whereas the simple model posits that actors’ motivations are the same in cases of democratic transition and new and fragile democracies as they are in established democracies—that relevant actors seek to maximize their short-term seat shares—I argue that we should, at the very least, be alive to the possibility of differences. First, during the immediate transition phase, dissidents are likely to promote democratic values as ends in themselves. Second, both in the transition context and in new or fragile democracies, the need to secure the basic stability of the system is likely to constrain pursuit of short-term power. Third, as I indicated previously, political actors are less likely than in established democracies to be constrained by public opinion. Fourth, foreign actors are likely to encourage a focus on inclusiveness and stability.

**Constraints and Opportunities**

The simple model sees the crucial difference between electoral reform politics in established democracies and in democratic transitions as lying in levels of uncertainty: uncertainty is higher in the latter than in the former. I agree that this distinction is plausible: in many cases of transition, actors’ information regarding their future electoral prospects is limited. But that is not true in all cases: sometimes, considerable relevant information is available. We should not
therefore presume that any propensity towards the adoption of proportional systems in transition contexts necessarily reflects maximining behaviour from behind a veil of ignorance. Furthermore, in some cases where uncertainty is high, crucial actors may not recognize this, and may pursue preferences formed on the basis of misperceptions. Such was the case, for example, for the Polish Communists in 1989 (Kaminski, 2002), and also for the Hungarian Communists, until several severe by-election losses brought an abrupt change in their approach (Schiemann, 2001: 243-4; Kosztricz et al., eds., 1993: 1380; Minutes of National Roundtable Committee I/3, 28 July: Bozóki et al., eds., 2000: VI, 312).

Besides uncertainty regarding future electoral prospects, the approach that I have developed in analysing reform in established democracies suggests that a number of other factors that constrain or refract the translation of motivations into preferences and preferences into outcomes need to be considered. The first involves informational and cognitive constraints upon the options that actors perceive and their understanding of the general effects of those options. On the one hand, we might expect these constraints to be higher in countries with more limited democratic experience: not only will actors generally have less personal experience of how particular systems operate; they may also have limited appreciation of what issues need to be thought about when choosing an electoral system. On the other hand, the absence of prior experience may also be liberating. In my work on electoral reform in established democracies, I found that radical innovation in electoral systems is most likely in the early stages of democratic development. Thereafter, even if reform occurs, the options considered are generally restricted to a recurring subset of all the possibilities. Of reforms in recent decades in established democracies, only that in New Zealand in 1993 has been truly innovative in the sense of breaking the bounds of previous national debate. This is likely to occur in large part because most actors stick with the familiar. Where, however, there is no “familiar”, scope for innovation is greater. As I suggested above, this is likely to be enhanced by the flow of international experts, and we are more likely to be able to identify the handiwork of particular experts in electoral reforms in transition contexts than in established democracies. On yet a third hand, however, while openness to multiple options may be great in transition contexts, understanding of all the implications of these options may be more limited, and unintended consequences may therefore ensue. Electoral reforms enacted during democratic transition are therefore more likely to spring surprises than are those in established democracies: they are more likely to be innovative relative to the national past and more likely to clash with what their promoters hoped to
achieve. Such surprises—such apparent randomness—will be explicable only through careful reconstruction of case histories.

I have argued that electoral reform processes in established democracies are also constrained by perceptions of what it is legitimate to do (Renwick, 2007, 2009). Politicians thinking about manipulating the electoral system to their own advantage need to think about possible reactions from voters who consider such action, to use Benoit’s words, “beyond the pale” (Benoit, 2004: 385). Politicians may themselves internalize such perceptions: writing about the absence of any hint of talk about electoral reform when Germany’s grand coalition was established in 2005, Helms (2006: 59) observes, “Neither of the two major parties even dared to touch the issue, which would have been considered by many as little short of an assault on democracy itself”. I expect such legitimacy constraints to be weaker in transitional or new or fragile democratic contexts. First, as I suggested above, I expect public attention to be more distracted: in such rapidly changing contexts, it appears unlikely that any attempt to manipulate the system through electoral reform will garner attention for long enough to raise significant constraints. Second, the status quo institutions will not yet be seen as set in stone: the idea of changing them will in itself be no big deal. There may of course be exceptions. On the whole, however, I expect that self-interested reform by power-seeking politicians—reform by elite majority imposition—will be easier under conditions of democratic transition or new or fragile democracy than it is in most established democracies.

The final constraint relates to institutions—that is, the institutions through which electoral reform can be enacted. In some cases, these institutions are permissive: President Mitterrand was able to transform the French National Assembly electoral system in 1985 by simple parliamentary majority; newly elected Prime Minister Jacques Chirac could equally straightforwardly reverse the measure a year later; in Illinois in 1980, disgruntled voters could pass reform of the state legislature electoral system against solid bipartisan opposition by means of citizen-initiated referendum. In other cases, institutions present a significant bar to reform: Irish governments in 1959 and 1968 were prevented from abolishing STV by the constitutional requirement for a ratifying referendum; in Japan in 1956 and 1973, Diet standing orders allowed opposition parties to threaten enough mischief to persuade the prime minister in each case to withdraw reform proposals.

The institutional mechanisms in place during democratic transition occupy an even broader spectrum than do those in established democracies. At one extreme, new institutions can be imposed by the outgoing regime, as
occurred to a very large extent in Chile in 1989 (Rahat and Sznajder 1998: 430-31; Siavelis 2005: 436-8). At the other extreme, reform can require consensus at roundtable negotiations between the old elite and (sometimes diverse) challengers, as in Hungary the same year. Intermediate arrangements also occur. Given such diversity, no general predictions are possible beyond the obvious point that actors’ interests or values are more likely to shape electoral system outcomes to the extent that those actors are empowered by the particular institutions used in each country.

**Teasing Out Specific Propositions**

From this general discussion I seek now to develop more specific propositions that can be further explored through empirical analysis. As in my previous work, these are propositions that I put forward as anchor points for follow-up empirical analysis, not hypotheses to be rigidly tested. They will structure the systematic comparison of cases, but there is much scope for them to be refined along the way.

**The Frequency of Reform**

The first proposition—and perhaps the most obvious—concerns the frequency of electoral reform. Electoral reform is likely to occur much more frequently in the context of democratic transition than in established democratic contexts. During transition, there is often no credible status quo system. Furthermore, in a context of general transformation, the normal assumption that the existing rules of the game can be taken for granted no longer applies. And established vested interests are often weakened or entirely removed.

There are good reasons to expect continued volatility in new and fragile democracies too. In terms of motivation, initial choices may be based on misperceptions or on uncertainty; once such constraints are lifted, pressure for reform may result, which will sometimes lead to change. Initial idealism may give way to a different set of priorities. Continuing fragility may give rise to efforts to solidify the democratic system through reform. In terms of constraints, institutions gain an air of permanence only gradually, particularly if the democratic system as a whole remains unstable. Those involved in initial institutional choices may retain an interest in and knowledge of the subject, such that they do not view electoral reform as a murky black box best kept firmly shut. At the same time, electoral reform is likely to be less frequent in new and fragile democracies than during democratic transition. Most importantly, a
credible status quo is likely by then to exist, so building a coalition to defeat it will be harder.

Just how far electoral system volatility will continue after initial democratic transition is difficult to predict in the abstract. Bielasiak (2002) finds that, though electoral reforms have been frequent in Central and Eastern Europe since the initial transitions from communism in 1989-91, they have mostly been small. But whether this finding generalizes is unclear. It may reflect the rapid consolidation of democracy in much of the region: we may posit that the frequency (and size) of reform will decline over time in proportion to the consolidation of democracy. This leads to our first proposition:

P1: Major electoral reforms occur most often in democratic transitions and least often in established democracies. Between these extremes, their frequency declines in proportion to the consolidation of democracy.

Types of Reform
What, then, of the frequency of particular types of reform process? I have argued that two types of reform dominate the field in established democracies: elite majority imposition and elite-mass interaction. The discussion above suggests that reform by elite-mass interaction should be restricted largely to established democracies: with so many pressing matters on the agenda in other contexts, it appears unlikely that mobilizing public opinion specifically around electoral reform will be easy.

In previous work, though I have argued that elite majority imposition and elite-mass interaction dominate electoral reforms in established democracies, I have also laid out a range of other types of possible electoral reform process, as summarized in Figure 1. Three of these additional types—elite settlement, elite-external interaction, and external imposition—are particularly relevant to democratic transitions and new and fragile democracies.

Reforms by elite settlement are dominated by political elites (politicians, old regime elites, dissidents). But these elites treat the electoral system primarily not, as we generally assume, as a redistributive institution—one in which gains for one group imply losses for another, as when a particular electoral reform gives one party a greater seat share than the status quo and therefore must give another party a smaller share—but as an efficient institution—one in which reform gain generate gains for all (Tsebelis, 1990: 104). The choice of system therefore becomes a positive-sum rather than a zero-sum game. This most clearly occurs where reform is seen as promoting the survival of the political
system as a whole, as where it is designed to accommodate inter-group conflict. Something akin to elite settlement also occurs when actors operate behind a veil of ignorance: here, at least if Rawls (1972) is right, though fundamentally actors think of institutions in redistributive terms, in practice they behave as if they saw them as efficient, thus producing collectively just outcomes. Elite majority imposition and elite settlement in reality occupy the ends of a continuum: different actors may conceive of institutions in different ways; even individual actors may have mixed motivations.

**Figure 1. Types of Electoral Reform**

Reforms by elite-external interaction or external imposition, meanwhile, occur when foreign actors can exert pressure over the choices made. At the extreme, those foreign actors can impose their wishes on domestic actors. From my existing work on post-war reforms in Japan and West Germany and from the evidence of the literature on the recent reforms in Afghanistan (Reynolds, 2006) and Iraq (Dawisha and Diamond, 2006), I have posited that wholesale imposition is rare. Foreign actors know that the new institutions are likely to operate more effectively if they are supported by domestic actors and they therefore seek to involve those actors in the decisions. But this remains an empirical question to
be explored through wider inquiry. Certainly, it is clear that there have been many instances of reform by elite-external interaction.

These considerations lead to the following propositions:

P2: Whereas reforms in established democracies divide between elite majority imposition and elite-mass interaction, reforms during democratic transition and in new or established democracies are likely to follow the paths of elite majority imposition, elite settlement, or elite-external interaction. The possible incidence of cases of elite-mass interaction and of external imposition needs also to be investigated.

P3: Reform by elite majority imposition is likely to occur more frequently in new than in established democracies.

P4: Elite majority imposition and elite settlement define the ends of a continuum. We are most likely to see cases close to the elite settlement end when uncertainty regarding future electoral prospects is highest or when inter-group conflict threatens the survival of the political system. Pure or nearly pure elite majority imposition is most likely during transitions that are controlled by the old regime elite or in new or fragile democracies where the threat from inter-group conflict is low. Intermediate patterns are most likely when dissidents dominate transition or where transition occurs through bargaining across the political spectrum.

**Actor Preferences**

The next step is to consider the preferences of the various actors over different electoral system options. Very specific preferences are impossible to predict at this level of abstraction: they depend upon particular country histories, on regional patterns, on the fashions that prevail when choices are made, on the identities of key experts, and, often, on the skills of individuals in bargaining, persuasion, and manipulation of the system (on such factors, see, e.g., Bowler and Donovan 2008: 108; Farrell and McAllister, 2006: 25-9; Horowitz, 2002: 31-3; Katz, 2005: 74; Lundell, 2005: 206-22; Rahat 2008: 217, 219). But more general propositions can be grounded. We can be more specific for some groups than for others:

P5: Foreign actors will generally favour broadly proportional systems. In some cases, this is because they are concerned to ensure accommodation of inter-group conflict. In others, they will wish to safeguard against anti-
democrats securing a majority. In others, they wish simply to promote the development of an inclusive political culture.

P6: During democratic transition, dissidents will tend to favour broadly proportional systems. In part, this will be because they often face high uncertainty regarding their future prospects. Even where they are confident of future success, however, dissidents should be more inclined towards proportional systems than we would expect under assumptions of short-term seat maximization, because they will approach the choice of electoral institutions with a strong dose of democratic idealism.

P7: Old regime elites during transition and the majority of all politicians in new or fragile democracies seek in the first instance to enhance their own power. As in established democracies, which electoral system they prefer on this basis depends on a wide variety of factors, most obviously the size of their party, the dynamics of coalition formation, and their own individual interests, as well as uncertainty and their perceptions thereof. Except insofar as uncertainty is high, no tendency to favour the adoption of more proportional or more majoritarian systems can be posited on this basis.

P8: Actors may be pushed away from these basic preferences where they see the stability of the political system as threatened. Worries over governability will lead them to advocate more majoritarian systems than they otherwise would. Concern over legitimacy or conflict will shift their preferences towards greater proportionality.

The Direction of Reforms
I finally consider the implications of these propositions for the overall direction of electoral reforms. As I have argued elsewhere (Renwick, 2008), my approach predicts at most a very weak general trend in the direction of reforms in established democracies: there can be pressure for reforms towards either proportionality or majoritarianism; while there is some reason to expect that proportional reforms might predominate, there is no overwhelming reason. In that previous work, I also offered evidence that in fact there is no general trend in established democracies in either direction. In the context of transition, however, there is reason to expect the direction of travel to be predominantly but not exclusively towards greater proportionality:
P9: During democratic transition, actors often face high uncertainty and may confront strong inter-group conflict. Some are also attached to ideals of inclusiveness. These factors are likely in the aggregate to predominate over worries about governability, leading to a skewing of cases towards more proportional systems.

Reforms in new and fragile democracies are more complex. Threats from inter-group conflict may remain, favouring proportionality. But the decline in uncertainty may prompt early winners to seek to consolidate their position by weakening proportionality. Inclusive idealism may also give way to a more brutal understanding of the realities of governing and to a stronger focus on power. Overall patterns will depend on how frequently these various mechanisms operate and therefore cannot be predicted without further information. Nevertheless, the following propositions are possible:

P10: Where proportional systems are initially adopted in the absence of strong inter-group conflict, proportionality will tend subsequently to be eroded.

P11: Where majoritarian systems are initially adopted where inter-group conflict is present (or subsequently emerges), change will tend towards proportionality.

Besides these specific mechanisms arising from the differences identified between transitional and new or fragile democratic contexts, we may also allow for Shugart’s proposition of a general tendency for electoral systems to move from the extremes towards more moderate alternatives (Shugart, 2001; Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001):

P12: Changes to systems that are highly proportional or highly majoritarian will tend towards more moderate alternatives.

Empirical Analysis

As I have emphasized, my purpose is not conclusive testing of these propositions: they remain too general and sometimes too inchoate for that to be possible, at least at this stage. Rather, I seek to assess and revise them through empirical analysis. Such analysis is best conducted through a combination of broad survey evidence and detailed analysis of specific case histories. I am currently at only the earliest stages of both of these, so I offer only very initial suggestions here.
**Broad Survey Evidence**

I give only one very basic table here, but I intend to offer more in the future. Table 2 shows the direction of reforms in established democracies, in democratic transitions, in new or fragile democracies, and in non-democracies since 1989.¹ I count all significant reforms, by which I mean all reforms satisfying Lijphart’s criteria for significance: any change in the electoral formula, or a change of at least 20 per cent in district magnitude, legal threshold, or assembly size (Lijphart, 1994: 55). Lijphart’s criteria are not always unambiguous when applied to mixed systems: for example, does a formula change affecting only a few seats count as significant? I have included such cases for now, but this requires further consideration.

The definitions of the two columns should be noted. The “pro-PR” column includes all cases that either preserved the proportionality of an existing proportional or semi-proportional system or that made an existing system of any type more proportional; where no previous democratic system was in place, I include all proportional and semi-proportional systems. The “pro-majoritarian” column, meanwhile, includes all cases that preserved the disproportionality of an existing majoritarian system or that made an existing system of any type more disproportional or that instituted a majoritarian system where no democratic system had previously existed. Thus, the pro-PR column includes, for example, Papua New Guinea’s decision in 2002 to switch from single-member plurality to alternative vote, even though the latter is still a majoritarian system. The pro-majoritarian column includes the Polish threshold increase of 1993, even though the system remained proportional. Clearly, other categorizations are possible, and I will continue to explore how these affect the patterns observed in future work.

By way of final caveat, I reiterate that these figures are preliminary: I continue to work on refining them; there is no doubt that they contain errors.

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¹ I base the categorizations on Freedom House scores. Established democracies are those that have been categorized as ‘Free’ for at least twenty years by the time of reform and that remain ‘Free’ for at least ten years after. Countries in democratic transition experience a shift from not counting as electoral democracies to counting as electoral democracies or from ‘Partly Free’ to ‘Free’ in the year of reform or the year before or after reform. Non-democracies are those classified as not being electoral democracies. All other cases count as new or fragile democracies. Using Freedom House scores is, of course, problematic, and in future work I intend to replicate this table on the basis of the Polity IV dataset.
Table 2. Direction of reforms in countries with different democratic status, since 1989.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic status</th>
<th>Direction of Reform</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pro-PR</td>
<td>Pro-majoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>established democracy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>democratic transition</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new or fragile democracy</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-democracy</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main sources: “Notes on Recent Elections” section in Electoral Studies (many dates); European Journal of Political Research Yearbook (many dates); “Constitution Watch” section in East European Constitutional Review (many dates); Nohlen et al. (1999, 2001, 2005); IPU Parline Database (www.ipu.org).

The table does not replicate the absence of any clear trend among electoral reforms in established democracies that I have found in previous work (Renwick, 2008). The reasons for the differences are several: first, the time period here is shorter; second, my previous work excluded changes in assembly size that did not affect district magnitude; third, my previous work excluded countries with a population below one million (thus excluding the reform in Monaco in 2003); fourth, my previous work categorized Botswana and Greece as new democracies; here, by contrast, they are established democracies (in the Greek case, by the time of the 2007 reform, though not that of 1990). This is clearly an issue that requires further consideration, but the fact that the results appear to depend on category boundaries does support the notion that any trend towards PR in established democracies is weaker than has often been supposed.

The table does show a very clear tendency for choices made during democratic transition to favour more proportional options. As expected, the pattern among new or fragile democracies is less clear. The lack of any clear pattern among reforms in non-democratic contexts may also be noted, though I have not sought to develop any expectations regarding this context.

Little more can be said about these figures on their own. But much more can be said by identifying cases according to transition path and the nature of the
actors involved in decision-making. I hope to offer such analysis in future elaborations of this paper.

Case Histories

Broad cross-national evidence cannot provide all the answers that we need on its own: given that instances of electoral reform are rather scarce and are subject to numerous contingencies, the associations such an approach can identify are always likely to be weak. This approach needs, therefore, to be supplemented by detailed case narratives. Such narratives have played a large part in my recent work on electoral reform in established democracies, and they will be central to my analysis of reforms in other contexts too.

For now I offer some brief observations based on my existing research. I focus in particular on the various mechanisms suggested by the propositions above that might underpin the general tendency for more proportional systems to be chosen in the context of democratic transition. The propositions identified four such mechanisms: uncertainty; dissident idealism; the need to accommodate inter-group conflict; and the preferences of external actors. I do not claim that my analysis of these mechanisms is in any way systematic or conclusive at this stage: the cases that I refer to are those that I happen already to have conducted research on. But this does provide a useful point of departure.

Uncertainty—or, in some cases, clear expectations of future electoral weakness—does matter. In France in 1945-6, for example, most parties (aside from the Radicals) favoured a proportional system in part because they were uncertain of their electoral prospects: the country had experienced major upheavals since the previous elections; the enfranchisement of women meant that the majority of the electorate had never been eligible to vote before. De Gaulle himself initially opted for a broadly proportional system, despite grave misgivings among his supporters, in part because he wanted to avoid a majority for any of his opponents—particularly for the Communists (De Gaulle 1959: 261; Debré 1974: 70). In Japan at the same time, domestic politicians accepted a significant shift towards greater proportionality partly because uncertainty over the future shape of the political landscape was so high. Moving to more recent cases, there is also evidence of bet-hedging among some actors in countries such as Hungary in 1989 and Czechoslovakia in 1990.

Andrews and Jackman (2005: 70) imply that the existence of a general tendency towards proportionality is in itself sufficient evidence to conclude that uncertainty drives choices: “That the electoral system choice for most of the world’s democracies involves some form of proportional representation provides
compelling evidence of the impact of uncertainty on electoral choice.” As I have argued, however, this shift is too quick: other factors might generate the same pattern. In fact, it is clear that uncertainty on its own does not explain the tendency towards proportionality entirely. Perhaps the clearest case is that of South Africa: the ANC initially supported single-member plurality, but switched its position to support PR in October 1990; it held to this position throughout the subsequent negotiations, despite the clear expectation that it could dominate the post-apartheid parliament if a majoritarian system were chosen (Ebrahim, 1998: 84-86; Gouws and Mitchell, 2005: 358). In Czechoslovakia in 1990, similarly, though the opposition umbrella organization, Civic Forum, dominated the process of deciding the new electoral system and expected also to dominate the elections that followed, still it advocated a proportional system. Its various members adopted this position for a variety of reasons: some, for example, were probably thinking about a future in which the Civic Forum had broken up and individual parties had to fight on their own (see, e.g., Občanske fórum, 1990b: 19). But such considerations cannot account for the positions of all those involved.

There is evidence for all the further factors that I have mentioned. The dissident legacy of idealism identified by Kohn—which in Ireland in 1922 facilitated the retention of a proportional electoral system as well as remarkably advanced procedures for citizen initiated referendums—has been evident in more recent cases too. In Czechoslovakia in 1990, as Birch et al. (2002: 69) observe, “men and women who until recently had been dissidents felt bound by their long-standing normative commitment to pluralism”. In the course of the negotiations over the electoral system, for example, Jan Kavan, a prominent Civic Forum member who had, while in exile in the UK, been a member of the British constitutional reform movement Charter 88, argued, “we must consider not what is favourable for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia or for us, but what is favourable for democracy” (Občanske fórum, 1990a: 7). Spoken behind closed doors, these words appear to have been genuinely meant.

There is also evidence, however, that dissidents who place system values above their own power do not always focus on values of inclusiveness and democracy. Hungary’s Free Democrats argued for limitations on proportionality during the roundtable negotiations of 1989 despite the fact that opinion polls suggested their own prospects were precarious. The Young Democrats, after initial doubts, came to adopt a similar position, even though, as a generationally based party, they could not hope to secure majorities in single-member districts. These preferences reflected concern over governability. Péter Tölgyessy, the Free
Democrats’ principal thinker on constitutional matters, wrote well before the negotiations began, “I oppose the introduction of a ‘proportional’ electoral system in the strongest terms. This system generally renders the formation of a strong government impossible and almost guarantees in advance permanent government crisis. Through this, a popular demand for strong-handed leadership can emerge” (Tölyessy, 1989: 521). Citing the examples of the French Fourth Republic and the Weimar Republic, he argued during the negotiations that the “purely proportional system, in every European country, has led always to collapse and catastrophe” (transcript of the meeting of the Opposition Roundtable on 10 July 1989, in Bozóki et al., eds., 1999: II, 359; see also Renwick, 2005). The trenchant advocacy of single-member plurality by Gaullists such as Michel Debré and René Capitant in France in the 1940s may show a similar mechanism. Debré, for example, argued that proportional representation would generate party system fragmentation, prevent the creation of stable majority governments, favour fragmentary sectional interests rather than the national interest, and cause governments to be formed on the basis not of the popular vote, but of post-election dealing among parties (Debré, 1947: 193-8). Yet another pattern can be observed in Czechoslovakia. While most of the former dissidents supported a proportional system, the minority around newly enthroned President Václav Havel advocated a majoritarian system, arguing that PR would lead to “centralized structures” and “a weakening of the role of individual character” in politics (Občanské fórum, 1990a: 8; see also Lidová demokracie, 14 February 1990: 3). These preferences reflected Havel’s continuing attachment to old dissident ideals of anti-politics and his specific aversion to political parties. In his address as president on New Year’s Day 1990, he argued, “It is not really important now which party, club, or group will prevail in the elections. The important thing is that the winners will be the best of us, in the moral, civic, political, and professional sense, regardless of their political affiliations” (Havel, 1992 [1990]: 395-6; see also Kopecký, 2001: 324; Jičínský, 1993: 99; Tucker, 1990: 76).

Thus, there are good grounds for thinking that dissident ideals can matter. But further exploration is required to understand better the circumstances under which they matter. And exactly which ideals dissidents focus on evidently is complex. Again, broader empirical analysis will be required in order to determine the degree to which generalizations are possible. My work on East-Central Europe suggests that differences among the dissidents there during the roundtable negotiations were rooted in longer-term differences in the dissident
movements and the regimes they were reacting to (Renwick, 2006). Whether these patterns replicate elsewhere remains to be seen.

The need to accommodate multiple ethnic groups, meanwhile, was clearly a primary consideration underlying the choice of electoral system in South Africa during the constitutional negotiations of 1993. As Sisk puts it, “The most significant factor in the ANC’s choice for PR ... was its concern with the politics of inclusion, a significant consideration in a divided society” (Sisk, 1995: 190). Mozaffar (1998: 89-91) observes similar patterns in Angola, Namibia, and Mozambique, to which the more recent case of Lesotho can also be added (Southall, 2003). PR is, of course, not the only option that political scientists have advocated as a response to ethnic division: Horowitz (1991, 1997) argues for alternative vote in order to foster inter-group coalitions, and that advice was followed by reformers in Fiji in 1997 and Papua New Guinea in 2002. But the pro-PR argument has generally dominated, and Fiji’s experiences since 1997 have highlighted the restricted circumstances under which alternative vote can do an effective job (Fraenkel and Grofman, 2006; Reilly, 2001).

I have not to date sought to analyse in any detail the preferences of foreign actors. Clearly, my expectation of a tendency to support proportional systems has to confront the historical behaviour of the UK and France as colonial powers, in favouring the transplantation of their own majoritarian systems without regard for local circumstances (see, e.g., Mozaffar, 1998). Outside these contexts, however, there is evidence of support for proportionality for the reasons that I have described. In Japan in early 1946, voices within the Allied occupying force arguing for the transplantation of American electoral practice were overruled (Williams, 1979: 75-78). Rather, a limited vote system was adopted that was marked more proportional than either American or previous Japanese practice. It was intended to break the power of old elites and foster the emergence of new political groups (Williams 1979: 14-15; Bisson 1949: 57; Ward 1966: 551). More recently, heavy external pressure was exerted to secure an MMP system in Lesotho in 2002 (Southall, 2003), following the violent outbreak that ensued after the legal but highly disproportional election results of 1998. Again, whether such patterns are replicated more widely is a matter for further investigation.

**Conclusion**

Electoral reforms are complex political processes in which numerous actors motivated by multiple purposes interact against complex historical, ideational, institutional, and social backdrops. My purpose in my previous work has been
to gain analytic traction over that complexity: to seek understanding of the generalizations we can make about electoral reform processes without losing sight of the fact that these are deeply political processes that do not follow rigid rules. I have sought here to offer some initial ideas on how to extend this approach to the analysis of electoral reforms outside established democracies. I have argued that there are strong similarities in electoral reform processes across these contexts: the same building blocks matter; differences in the salience of different actors, different motivations, and different sorts of constraint are matters of degree, not of kind; in at least some cases, reform processes follow the same overall pattern across contexts, particularly where they are controlled by power-seeking actors who impose reform to suit their own interests. Yet there is much more still to learn about exactly where and why specific similarities and differences arise. I have offered the very beginnings of empirical analysis of these questions. But much more is clearly required, and I look forward to your suggestions on how best to proceed.

Bibliography


