The Limited Effects of Election Reforms on Trust, Efficacy and Engagement

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Abstract

Rules governing the conduct of elections have important consequences for democratic politics, and much can be learned from studying changes in electoral rules. Instances of change (or reform) allow us the possibility of examining how (or whether) new rules might create different outcomes. We begin with a discussion of how electoral reform might occur. We then consider the effects of two major changes in electoral rules - the adoption of proportional representation and the adoption of legislative term limits. We do this to assess whether these reforms have affected efficacy, trust, and voter participation. We suggest that reform efforts such as these may have only minimal effects on engaging citizens with politics.
The Limited Effects of Election Reforms on Trust, Efficacy and Engagement

This paper examines changes in election rules with a focus on how change might affect engagement with democratic politics. Continuity of electoral rules may be the norm, but instances of change (or reform) allow us the possibility of examining how (or whether) new rules might create different outcomes. Advocates of rules changes often promote change in the name of some normative good, and claim that change can make citizens more trusting of government, more efficacious, or more likely to participate in elections (e.g. Amy 1996; Karp 2010). We conclude that such claims might be overstated. First, we begin with a discussion of how, and when, electoral reform might occur. We then consider the effects of the adoption of proportional representation and the adoption of legislative term limits in order to assess whether these reforms have lived up to some expectations.

Incumbent self-interest and reform

Electoral rules define winners and losers. Tsebelis (1990) describes electoral rules as redistributive institutions that either "preserve the interests of the dominant coalition, or they create a new majority composed of the previous losers and some of the previous winners" (Tsebelis 1990:111). More broadly, these rules define who has access to representation, and who does not. The stakes involved with changing electoral arrangements are thus high. Indeed, much of the literature examining electoral arrangements portrays rules as reflecting the strategic interests of incumbents, with incumbents attempting to protect their interests in response to ascendant social groups previously excluded from representation (Rokkan 1970; Lijphart 1992; Benoit 2004).
One reason to expect that electoral reforms may not have much effect on trust, efficacy, and participation is that reforms are often introduced to further the interest of entrenched incumbents. Electoral rules are largely controlled by elected officials who hold office as a result of winning under status quo rules. As such, we might expect change of electoral rules to be particularly difficult; especially if these rules threaten the interests of incumbents. Given the incentives incumbents have for changing institutional arrangements only when it suits their interests (Prezworski 1991; Shepsle 2001; Boix 1999; Benoit 2004), we might assume that most 'reform' in electoral rules reflects the interests of incumbents - or at least the interests of an influential incumbent faction.

Ware (2002) offers this argument to explain the diffusion of the direct primary in the United States. Many other changes in electoral rules have been explained in terms of self-interested incumbents acting strategically - and at times pre-emptively - to change rules in anticipation of broader demographic trends that might work to their disadvantage (e.g. Angus 1952; Farrell and McAllister 2005). The politics of redistributive institutions is evident in other discussions of election reform. Contemporary debates about the future of compulsory voting in Australia reveal the differential interests of the ALP and the Coalition, given that the practice appears to advantage the ALP (Mackerras and McAllister 1999). In the US, questions about who may be registered on voter roles, and how far in advance they must register, create regular partisan divisions.

It is unlikely that every question of electoral reform fits perfectly into this description of redistributive institutions that have zero-sum properties. But many reform proposals have this quality. Indeed, it is difficult to think of questions about changes to electoral institutions where outcomes might be seen by interested parties as efficiency
gains for everyone. Theories of electoral system change thus place great emphasis on incumbent self-interest as a reason why electoral rules remain static. Yet election rules do change in ways that are not always obviously in the interest of incumbents. What explains why, and when, electoral systems change?

**Rules do change**

There are some prominent examples where electoral reforms have been adopted that appear to run counter to incumbent self-interest – or at least counter to the interests of the majority coalition in power at the time. Some involve reforms pushed by forces somewhat external to the government. The direct initiative in the US is one rare mechanism that allows for an end-run around incumbents. The American experience provides several examples of initiatives being used to alter status quo rules governing political parties (Bowler and Donovan 2006), to limit legislative tenure, and take reapportionment authority from the legislature. But examples of reforms promoted by direct voter initiative need not mean that theories of institutional change stressing incumbent self interest are flawed. In the United States, popular proposals to place limits on the length of legislative terms (Donovan and Snipp 1993; Karp 1995) have been resisted by incumbents in states that lack the constitutional initiative device.

Reforms that appear to be anti-incumbent and anti-party present an interesting question: why would representatives ever allow the introduction of new rules? Consider the adoption of direct democracy. Studies of attitudes of candidates and legislators demonstrate that, although outsiders might find the idea of direct citizen legislation appealing (Donovan and Karp 2006), incumbent legislators do not (Bowler, Donovan and
Karp 2002). Candidates for Parliament in Australia have been shown to have an interest in direct democracy that wanes when they are in government (Williams and Chin 2000). As much as these studies show incumbent resistance to change, change can serve incumbent interests at times. German political parties have promoted greater direct participation to increase the number of people engaged with parties (Scarrow 1999; 2001). American parties regularly use the supposedly anti-incumbent initiative process to advance their objectives (Smith and Tolbert 2001). Nor is it easy to separate incumbent self-interest from some incumbents' beliefs that a new electoral rules might promote normative goals of fairness or citizen engagement. Incumbent legislators' political ideology and personal values have been shown shape incumbents' preferences for certain electoral institutions. Regardless of incumbency status, politicians with post-materialists values are more supportive of some electoral rule changes, whereas political conservatives are less supportive (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006).

The point is that incumbent self-interest is not the sole explanation of when, and if, electoral reforms occur. Even rule changes that may have been motivated by the short-term gain of one party, such as adoption of STV for the Australian Senate, can be difficult to reduce to narrow partisan interest. But we must remember that self-interested incumbents do generally have substantial influence over how electoral rules are changed. This being the case, should we really expect election reforms to have widespread transformative effects on trust, efficacy and political engagement in the public?
The limited scope of election reforms

Does adoption of new election rules - rules that might in part be crafted to conform to the interests of some subset of political incumbents - have the potential to produce substantively important changes in how people are oriented toward politics? Reform advocates often link normative assumptions about the benefits of proposed reforms to empirical claims about how their proposal will change mass behavior. Some make explicit claims about how new rules will affect citizens, representatives or both. Many of these claims are testable, at least indirectly.

As examples, champions of proportional representation claim that the winner-take-all rules depresses participation in elections, because plurality systems discourage participation by political minorities who have no chance of electing like-minded representatives (Amy 1994). By presenting more choices, PR is also expected to encourage more people to have attachments to a political party. Proponents of the use of direct democracy employ a similar logic. They claim the process of making choices over ballot questions can make citizens learn more about politics, and become more engaged with elections (see examples from Smith and Tolbert 2004). Implicit in these expectations is that a reform produces some normative gain by changing how people behave or how they are oriented to politics. These are not isolated examples. Advocates for term limits claimed that limits can make elections more competitive, improve the quality of candidates seeking office, reduce the power of narrow interest groups (Fund 1992), enhance the ability of women and minorities to win office, reduce levels of cynicism in the mass public, and increase participation (Will 1992).
Many reform advocates place priority on normative goals, such as procedural fairness, equal rights, and improvements in the quality of democracy. Advocates of proportional representation and term limits made explicit claims about how these reforms should alter behavior. The politics of election reform thus merges important normative questions with positive questions about how changes in electoral institutions will somehow alter human behavior.

There are numerous studies assessing how differences in electoral arrangements correspond with variation in how people behave and how they are oriented to politics. In fact, for some of the assumptions that reform advocates advance, we have a pretty good understanding how different rules that exist in various places are associated with different outcomes. As we discuss below, however, much less is known about whether or not changes in rules that exist in a particular place can cause a change in political behavior. Much of our understanding of the potential effects of election reforms is based on cross-sectional studies; fairly little comes from studying the effects of particular rules changes over time. The issue of endogeneity thus inhibits our understanding of how much of a substantive effect we might expect when any election reform is adopted.

At the same time, we know fairly little about how effects of engaged with politics at the moment their nation changes from plurality to PR rules, or when term limits suddenly make an uncontested seat competitive. But by how much, and do we expect such events to have permanent effects on citizens, effects that transform them and leave them more interested in politics and more efficacious? How much, exactly, does the adoption of major reforms such as proportional representation or term limits actually affect political engagement and participation?
Proportional Representation

Even the most sophisticated studies of the effects of PR have difficulty with causality and endogeneity: Did nations with traditions of greater civic engagement or more participatory cultures end up adopting PR, or does the adoption of PR have a predictable causal effect on engagement and participation, independent of the forces that led to its adoption? But, leaving this to one side for a moment, PR is expected to hold a number of consequences for a political system. First and foremost, we should see an increase in the number of political parties after PR is adopted. But a number of other consequences should follow on from this. More parties may lead to more campaign activity, which could stimulate voter interest. Simply having new choices on a ballot may empower people who were not previously engaged established parties. This could make people who were previously not voting become more interested, and more likely to vote. There is ample cross-sectional empirical evidence that nations with PR rules have higher turnout (see Blais 2006 for a review). Cross-national research also demonstrates that people report more attachments to parties and higher political efficacy in nations that use PR, and that supporters of smaller parties are more efficacious and more likely to vote in PR nations than in places using plurality/majoritarian rules (Banducci and Karp 2008). We can begin examining these expectations with the simplest one: a rise in the number of parties.

Causation is not crystal clear here. For example, prior to the adoption of STV for Australia’s Federal Senate seats in 1949, the average number of minor parties per state contesting elections was already increasing in both House and Senate races. This trend
continued beyond 1949 for both chambers. Minor parties in Australia posted similar (upward) trends in support over time in the PR elected Senate and the majoritarian (AV) elected House.

Figure 1 about here

New Zealand provides a more recent example of a major electoral system change (from plurality to MMP). It is clear that adoption of MMP affected the number of parties in parliament and in government. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of parties in the NZ Parliament from the 1980s to 2008. But it would be a mistake to assume that changes in the party system are only consequent on changes in electoral rules. First, minor parties were already receiving support in New Zealand prior to adoption of MMP. Third parties received 30% support in 1993. After the adoption of MMP in 1996 support for third parties went up to 38%, but dropped back to 31% in 1999. By 2005 and 2008 third parties received support under PR at levels similar to what was posted in 1978 and 1981 under plurality. We must ask then, how much the change from voting for a third party that likely did not win seats, to a voting for one that did, actually affected how much people were engaged with their political system. Second, changing the electoral system may provide a sufficient condition for party system change - but it is not a necessary condition for change. Social change can also bring about changes in the party system. Indeed a lot of the recent work on Duverger’s law (e.g., Clark and Golder xxxx) stress the interaction between electoral system and the social system.

One example of this comes from Germany where the MMP electoral system has remained largely unchanged during the period displayed in Figure 1 - yet the party system has undergone major change: what seemed to be a stable 3 party system of
CDU/CSU, FDP and SPD is now a 5 party system. A jump from 3 to 5 parties in the legislatures may not seem especially dramatic, particularly when we consider the size of the exogenous shock imparted by re-unification of East and West Germany. Figure 2 demonstrates that the change in number of parties understates the change in the German party system. The drop in the vote share of the two largest parties (the right hand scale marks the SPD and CDU/CSU seats total combined; the left hand scale the number of parties, repeating the pattern from the previous graph) has been especially dramatic over the last decade. The exogenous shock of re-unification may well be the cause of most or even all of that change in the party system, but what is clear is that any increase was not brought about by electoral system change.

Perhaps what is more troubling for a purely institutional account is that changes in electoral system may not produce change in party system when the effect is examined in the same place across time. Here we can turn to Australia to provide an example. South Australia, West Australia, and Victoria have elected the upper chamber of their state legislatures (the Legislative Council) for many decades, with New South Wales moving from an appointed to elected Council in 1978. Different states adopted different electoral rules for Council elections. NSW began electing its Legislative Council with PR, whereas elections in South Australia, West Australia and Victoria were using majoritarian preference voting in the 1970s. Each of these latter states subsequently changed to proportional (STV) representation (South Australia in 1975, West Australia in 1989, and Victoria in 2006). This provides a natural experiment for assessing how
differences in election systems across similar context, and how changes in these electoral systems, might affect political behavior.

PR is expected to give voters who had previously resisted supporting their most preferred (smaller) party new opportunities to express sincere preference, as the fear of wasting their vote is reduced. If PR empowers some people by encouraging sincere (and thus efficacious) voting, we might see support for smaller parties spike upon adoption of PR and to remain at higher levels afterwards. As expected, the distribution of seats in these Councils was altered by the change to PR. No minor party candidates were elected to the West Australian, South Australia, or Victorian legislative councils under majoritarian voting. A small number of Greens, Democrats, independents and others have been elected in these states under PR and votes to seats distortions are less pronounced. But did the adoption of PR cause greater sincere voting that produced higher support for third parties?

Figure 3 about here

Figure 3 plots trends in support for minor parties in these states since the 1970s. One striking feature here is that trends in all states look very similar. Independent of election system, and independent of most changes in the state's election system, we see a gradual increase in support for minor party candidates since the 1970s. Apart from the spike in voter support for third parties in South Australia after adoption of PR in 1975, nothing suggests there were major changes in voter behavior caused by adoption of PR. Support for third party candidates was growing in Victoria prior to 2006 under majoritarian rules, just as it was in New South Wales under proportional voting. Voters

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1 The states differ in how proportional their rules are. NSW has 21 seats per district; South Australia has 11, West Australia 5 to 7, and Victoria 5.
were increasingly casting ballots for third parties in West Australian under majoritarian rules, and the trend continued after the change to PR. Given these very subtle differences (if any) in voter behavior associated with the presence of, and the adoption of proportional voting rules, it is difficult to expect there were major changes in individual-level political efficacy associated with these electoral reforms. Admittedly, the substantive stakes are rather low in the Australian examples: changing from having an upper house of a state parliament that had only two large parties, to one that has two large parties and a small number of third party representatives.

So much for the parties - what about voters? Is there evidence that electoral reforms had the anticipated effects on citizen's attitudes and behavior? In New Zealand, turnout was up modestly over the previous election when PR was first used in 1996, but it declined in the two subsequent elections. Figure 4 illustrates that PR did nothing to arrest a long-term decline in voter turnout in New Zealand - the same long-term decline that is occurring in many other democracies. It should be noted that Japan also experienced a major drop in turnout when that nation changed from a semi-proportional (SNTV) system to a much more directly proportional system in 1995.

Figures 4 and 5 about here

Another example is the UK’s move to list PR for European Parliament (EP) elections in 1999. Figure 5 plots turnout in UK parliamentary and UK EP elections to illustrate that the move to PR corresponded with a low point for turnout. Perhaps, some confusion on the part of voters faced by an entirely new system might provide an explanation for that low point, and the subsequent recovery in turnout figures would seem to bear out the idea that PR will increase turnout. However, 2004 saw both the local
elections being held at the same time as the EP elections and, also, an experiment in vote-by-mail that resulted in a marked increase in turnout in the regions that held mail ballots.

Turnout is just one of the measures by which we judge effects of electoral reforms. Other measures show positive effects as a consequence of electoral system reform. For example, the adoption of the MMP in New Zealand corresponded with changes in behavior and attitudes about politics, but the results are a mixed bag when compared to the expectations of reform advocates. In the short term, there was a general shift of opinions among citizens in New Zealand toward greater efficacy and greater perceptions that government was responsive on some measures - particularly for political minorities (Banducci, Donovan and Karp 1999).

There were other positive signs: more people trusted political parties after 1996 than before, fewer said that government was ran by a few big interests, fewer said MPs were out of touch, and substantially fewer (17%) said they had no say two elections after PR was adopted (Vowles et al 2006). Some of these effects are relatively modest,\(^2\) and others are difficult to separate out from economic trends that correlate with trust and satisfaction. However, despite what PR advocates suggest attachments to parties eroded gradually in New Zealand over the two consecutive elections held after 1996, never returning to the levels recorded prior to 1990 (Aimer and Vowles 2003). Measures of satisfaction with democracy were also lower at the two elections conducted after 1996.

Cross-sectional evidence shows PR associated with greater turnout. But cross-sectional data – as we noted above – has the problem of endogeneity that can really only be addressed by looking over time where PR has been adopted. Adoption of PR clearly

\(^2\) For example, 61% said MPs were out of touch in 1993; 52% said so in 1999.
increases the numbers of parties winning seats. However, the effects of an increase in numbers parties in a legislature on how citizens interact with the political system (e.g., on participation and efficacy) appear less than clear.

Looking at the effects of shifts to and from PR is complicated by the fact that other than the case of New Zealand, there are very few (if any) well-documented cases that allow us to look for before and after effects. The other examples we have looked at – from Australia, Germany, and the UK – do seem to provide a consistent pattern. The cases are consistent in not showing clear effects of electoral system change.

**Term Limits**

The adoption of term limits in American states in the 1990s provides another 'before and after' opportunity to study the effects of a major election reform on engagement and trust. Advocates of term limits argued the reform would improve representative democracy in a number of ways. Proponents of the California citizen initiative Proposition 140 of 1990 argued that limiting terms “will create more competitive elections, so good legislators will always have the opportunity to move up the ladder.”\(^3\) Term limits were to rebuild voter trust of the legislature by cutting the ties between "special interests" and legislators that many voters perceived as corrupt. Proponents made claims about increasing turnout in their ballot pamphlet argument in support of Proposition 140:

Why don’t more people vote? Because incumbents have rigged the system in their favor so much, elections are meaningless. Even the

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\(^3\) Term limits would also “bring new ideas, workable policies and fresh cleansing air to Sacramento.”
worst of legislators get reelected 98% of the time. Honest, ethical, truly representative people who want to run for office don’t stand a chance. (Source: California Ballot Pamphlet 1990. Rebuttal to argument against Proposition 140)

Through a chain of changes, then, term limits were to improve turnout and trust. Term limits break incumbent advantages by forcing increased turnover of incumbents, which should produce more competitive elections. The increase in the number of races with no incumbent should stimulate more campaign activity, boost voter interest, and also make representatives more responsive. Some term limits advocates also claimed limits would reduce campaign spending, produce representatives who were less parochial, and eliminate 'career politicians' and generally improve the quality of representation (Will 1992; Fund 1992).

Citizen initiatives for term limits proved widely popular in the 1990s, and were adopted by voters in over a dozen American states. Courts rejected some of these measures, but limits remained in place in 15 states, allowing us another rare opportunity to compare behavior and attitudes in these states before and after the adoption of this reform.

Did term limits have the effects that proponents expected? A number of studies show that the reform may have actually reduced electoral competition, or show that existing trends toward greater incumbent advantages simply continued after limits began terming out incumbents (Mooney 2007). Campaign spending was not reduced in California under term limits (Masket and Lewis 2007) and more incumbents ran unopposed, as potential challengers waited for the time the seat will automatically come

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4 see also the arguments listed by one pro-term limits activist http://tenurecorrupts.com/arguments.html
open (Mooney 2007). Term limits may have reduced professionalism in some chambers (Kousser 2005) but rather than putting an end to career politicians they may have shuffled ambitious politicians from lower offices into term limited legislatures, and from the legislature to other offices (Carey et al 1998; Powell 2000). There are no differences between limited and non-limited states in the type of people who seek office (Carey et al 2006). There is evidence that term limited legislators are less informed, and thus less able to address state-wide issues (Powell et al 2007).

Given this muted effect on electoral competition, how much did the adoption of term limits affect voter participation? Term limit reformers expected that a new level of electoral competition caused by "leveling the playing field" would boost voter interest. This assumes that a large proportion of incumbents were actually staying in office longer than the limits, which typically restrict terms to three or four two year terms in the lower house, and two four year terms in the upper house. Limits began to have major effects on some state legislatures in the late 1990s. Between 1996 and 1998, a majority of upper house seats and 47% of lower house seats in [California] became open contests since incumbents could not seek re-election. Limits also began to apply to legislatures in Colorado, Michigan, and Arkansas in 1998. That year, 58% of Michigan House seats, and 49 of 100 seats in the Arkansas lower house were open contests as a result of term limits. Limits hit hard in Missouri in 2002, when 73 of 163 seats were made open.

Figure 6 plots trends in general election voter turnout in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Michigan and Missouri. We might expect the sharp rise in open seats when term limits kicked in to correspond with more campaigns and greater voter mobilization. Open seat contests are known to attract quality candidates (Jacobsen and Kernell
1983:32), and involve more campaign spending (Jacobsen and Kernell 1983:41). Yet, although term limits forced many incumbents out, they do nothing to affect the distributions of voters in legislative districts. Many districts are composed of an overwhelming majority of voters who support one dominant party. These likely remained safe for that party's new candidate in the general election when an incumbent retired. This being the case, term limits can occasionally make some party nomination contests more competitive, but effects on general election turnout could be limited given the fact that large proportions of state legislative districts are safe for one of the two major parties.

There is little in Figure 6 that suggests term limits affected voter turnout, at least at the state level. Despite most House seats being open contests in Michigan in 1998, and large proportions of legislators termed-out in Arkansas, California, and Colorado - turnout declined in each state that year. (compared to the previous midterm). Turnout was up slightly in Missouri when limits opened many seats, but much if not all the 6% increase in turnout over that state's previous midterm can be attributed to an incredibly close special election for a US Senate seat, and an unusually large number of initiatives and referendums on the ballot. Well after term limits have taken effect, we do see a rise in turnout in Michigan in 2006. Far fewer seats were open as a result of limits in Michigan (21% of lower house seats) in 2006 than in 1998 (when 58% of lower house seats were opened). Turnout in Michigan likely rose due to a contested US Senate seat and a gubernatorial race, and a controversial statewide anti-affirmative action ballot

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5 The race to fill the seat of John Ashcroft. Carnahan's widow was appointed to serve until the special election of 2002, where she was defeated by Jim Talent, 49% to 48%.
Turnout was up slightly in Missouri in 2006 during that state's repeat of the highly competitive US Senate race, and a nationally prominent ballot measure on stem cell research in 2006. With only 6% of lower house seats opened by term limits that year, the turnout effect would seem unrelated to term limits.

Figure 6 and 7 about here

Figure 7 plots trends in voter turnout in Florida and Ohio. In both of these states, term limits had their first impacts in 2000. One half of the Ohio lower house, and 46% of the Florida lower house was termed out in 2000. Turnout was up slightly in these states in 2000, but the turnout in Ohio and Florida that year largely matches national trends associated with the mobilizing effect of presidential elections. Again, any effect of term limits on voter engagement in these states is likely swamped by larger forces, particularly the closely fought presidential contests in Florida and Ohio.

Figure 8 about here

One final point brings us back to California, home of one of the earliest and more stringent term limit reforms. Proponents of the California reform claimed that by weakening "special interests" and empowering "citizen legislatures," limits would rebuild trust and increase popular regard for the legislature. Again, data are hard to come by and it is difficult to assess the effects of any reform in isolation. Still, evidence that is available does not offer much support for these claims. Figure 8 plots the trend in public approval of the California legislature from 1997 to 2006, with multiple opinion polls conducted most years. The series begins the year the legislature was first affected by

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6 Colorado also had two initiatives on gay marriage, and a medical marijuana vote in 2006.
6 Where Claire McCaskil defeated Talent 49% to 47%.
term limits. As can be seen, there has been a strong trend downwards in regard for the legislature. As more incumbents were limited out, public regard for the legislature declined steadily.

**Why effects of reforms are limited**

Election reforms – at least the two examined here – have not really worked to the extent that was anticipated. Reformers could, quite plausibly, advance a counter-factual argument: “were it not for reform x then the [drop in turnout / decreased efficacy/ diminished regard for the legislature] would have been much worse.” This is a difficult argument to assess. It is also a much weaker claim for reform. What does seem to be the case is that these election rules changes have not had much impact on mass behavior and attitudes. There may be a number of reasons for this.

First, much of the impetus for reform may come from people who have an overly optimistic view of politics. Less charitably, proponents of some electoral arrangements may have incentives to make over-blown, civic-minded claims about the effects of their proposals in order to mask instrumental motivations. Proposals to advance proportional representation sound more fair-minded when framed as a way to enhance civic engagement than when framed as a strategy to strengthen the hand of smaller parties trying to secure seats in parliament. Term limits were largely promoted by well-funded conservative activists frustrated with Democratic majorities in the US Congress and most state legislatures (Benjamin and Malbin 1992). Republicans were generally more
supportive of term limits than Democrats in the 1990s\textsuperscript{8} (Donovan and Snipp 1994), but
an overtly strategic, partisan argument could have been less successful than one
appealing to fairness and civic virtues. If instrumental motives are the primary force
driving electoral reforms, and claims about civic engagement are at least partially
rhetorical, than it may be no surprise that reforms show a limited capacity to build
efficacy and participation.

Second, the expectation that changes in electoral institutions have substantial
effects on political engagement may simply be wrong. Politics - particularly the parts
affected by electoral rules - is a very small piece of all the factors that affect how most
people view their world. Moreover, the manner in which people interact with and
understand how votes are translated into seats via elections might be a rather small part of
how they view politics. Larger forces include personal relationships, families, jobs, job
searches, bills to pay, retirements to plan, chances for education, access to government
services, and myriad other concerns. Direct experiences with government as a taxpayer
or as a person seeking services, and indirect experience via mass media, may have larger
consequences than electoral rules in shaping political trust and efficacy. Interpersonal
trust is known to be built upon a host of broad life experiences, and, independent of
experiences with electoral politics, is a strong predictor of trust in government. (Donovan
et al 2007). Perceptions of public corruption that are difficult to connect to electoral
arrangements also affect trust in government. Is a relatively small force, such as adding
one or two more parties to a legislative chamber, or limiting legislative tenure, ever going
to be of enough consequence to rival the effects of these larger forces that shape efficacy,

\textsuperscript{8} Republican elites' enthusiasm for term limits waned after the party took control of
Congress in 1994.
trust, and political engagement? These core attitudes are also formed as a result of childhood socialization, education, income, life security, occupation, age, etc. Compared to all of these larger forces, how much can experiencing a competitive election, or a multiparty system in one chamber of a legislature, affect efficacy and trust for most people?

Third, incumbents still have much control over what is adopted in the name of reform. Given that self-interested incumbents often have a hand in designing electoral reforms, the substantive scope of reforms may be quite limited. Proportional representation might change a party system only slightly, moving it from two parties, to two large parties and a handful of minors. Even the rules written to spite incumbents can be weak agents of change, and thus have weak potential to engage new voters. Term limits do not address what may be the root causes of incumbent advantages: safe partisan districts and incumbent advantages in fundraising. As such, they simply replace one set of relatively safe incumbents with another.

In sum, electoral reforms that are aimed at increasing trust, efficacy and participation may be running against much more powerful political and social tides. Although support for basic democratic processes remains stable, citizens in many of the world's advanced democracies - regardless of electoral arrangements - have weaker attachments to parties than in previous generations. Trust was eroding at similar rates in many nations as cynicism increased. Confidence in political institutions has eroded in a host of advanced democracies (Dalton 1999). For several decades, voter turnout has been in decline in many nations (Scarrow 2002; Dalton 2004). Whatever it is that is driving these behavioral and attitudinal changes, the fact they are so widespread, and occur
across places with such a range of electoral arrangements, suggests that electoral institutions alone may not be the cause, nor the cure, to changes in how contemporary citizens view their political world.
Figure 1

Number of parties with seats in NZ Parliament and German Bundestag 1980-2010

- **NZ**
- **Germany**
Figure 2:

Changing German party system in Bundestag 1980-2009

- **No. of parties**
- **Major party share of seats**
Figure 3: Third Party Vote Share, Legislative Councils 1973-2010

- Victoria (2006)
- W. Australia (1989)
- S. Australia (1975)
- N.S.W. (1978)
Figure 4: Turnout in New Zealand before and after adopting PR

Sources: IDEA data base; New Zealand Electoral Commission.
Figure 5

Turnout in EP elections 1979-2009

% turnout


UK EU
Figure 6: Trends in Turnout, and effects of term limits

Figure 7: Trends in turnout, and effects of term limits
Figure 8

Approval of California Legislature 1997-2006

source: Field Poll
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