What kind of electoral system sustains a politics of firm commitments?

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In an age of grand coalitions, and widespread dissatisfaction with them, it is clear that one of the major challenges for contemporary parties is to pursue power without sacrificing the principles by which they define themselves. This points to one of the most important yet neglected criteria by which to assess an electoral system: its capacity to sustain principled partisanship. This paper makes a case for the distinctiveness of this criterion and why it should receive more attention. Drawing on the comparative politics of electoral systems, it examines the kinds of institutional feature relevant to an evaluation in these terms, and what it might mean to make institutions more conducive to a politics of firm commitments.[1]

'Grand coalitions' – governments that include the two largest parties in an electoral system – have become a popular target of critique in a number of European countries. One factor behind this would seem to be how such formations interfere with the commitments by which parties define themselves. Being alliances that bring together those of varied political outlooks, typically of both left and right, they tend to depend on major compromises of principle. As members of the German SPD emphasised in the early months of 2018, entering another grand coalition might be fatal to the party's longer-term prospects as an association of principle. Clarity of message in opposition might be preferable for the party, and also the country, to its hollowing-out in office. The call for #NoGroKo was a call to renew the commitments on which the SPD was founded.

Grand coalitions are just one of the contexts in which partisans may depart from their party's traditions and in so doing incur wider criticism. This article investigates how the structure of an electoral system can generate pressures that push in this direction. It examines how electoral rules, and the political culture that emerges around them, can shape the capacity of parties to maintain clarity in what they stand for and to act consistently with their stated purposes. Electoral systems are by no means determining: the SPD had a choice to make, and the same systems that give rise to grand coalitions today have historically given rise to other formations. But for those SPD members preferring the course of coalition-abstention for the sake of the party's longer-term profile, the structure of the electoral system arguably heightened the burdens of justification. The article asks how such structures can afford or hinder a politics of enduring principle.

In a long-standing sceptical tradition, the question posed in the title is misconceived. For anarchists and anti-parliamentarians of various stripes, *no* electoral system can sustain a politics of firm commitments. Institutions degrade the principles of those they absorb: the thought that they can support them is one of the false promises of party democracy. Under conditions of financial capitalism, the strictures of bureaucratic logic are arguably compounded by a deeper set of socio-economic constraints. But a politics of commitment remains, I believe, an immanent ideal of contemporary western democracies, and a suitable yardstick to hold against existing institutional forms. Moreover, if we take seriously the institutional turn in political activism across the West in recent years, whereby those previously committed to social-movement methods have found new reason to embrace parliamentary channels, it seems topical to re-examine how electoral structures bear on the capacity to pursue principled ends.

The article's main aim is to highlight this neglected standard for the evaluation of electoral systems. Analyses of this kind have some important precursors – Arendt's comparison of Anglo-Saxon and Continental systems in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is one we shall connect to – but they tend to be rare today.[2] To the extent that this core object of study in political science is normatively analysed at all, it tends to be with rather different criteria in mind. The qualities of electoral systems tend to be sought in matters of functionality and representative capacity. As I argue, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to look beyond these, to questions to do with the facility with which partisans can maintain their commitments. As I go on to show, both first-past-the-post and proportional systems have distinctive strengths and weaknesses as regards their capacity to foster a politics of firm commitments. As I argue in the final section, such a politics is likely to be best served by a mixed electoral system that couples the proportional representation of opposition parties with government by a single party.

Principled partisanship as a normative standard

In an overview of the relative merits of proportional, majoritarian and mixed electoral systems published in the late 1990s, Pippa Norris identified the heart of the debate as a trade-off of values. Preferences on electoral model ultimately boiled down to 'whether strong and

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[2] For a rare contemporary discussion in political theory, see Bonotti 2017, chapter 7.

accountable government is more or less important than the inclusion of minority voices.'[3] All

models being imperfect, it was a question of balancing or prioritising different concerns. Her

conclusion emerged from a discussion in which the key criteria to assess electoral systems

were taken to be *government effectiveness* and *responsive and accountable government* (on

both of which Westminster models scored well), *fairness to minor parties* and *social

representation* (on both of which proportional models fared better).

A party, we may stipulate, is an association that identifies itself in terms of a set of
political ends, ranging from relatively specific policy goals to more abstract values and

Norris' standards of evaluation are both logical and widely shared. Although the

larger part of contemporary electoral-systems analysis tends to say little on the desirability of

the mechanisms it describes, when explicitly normative questions are posed it is typically with

such criteria in mind. The extent to which institutional structures reflect democratic ideals is

read as a question of how far the interests of effective government on the one hand are

reconciled with the inclusion of citizen opinion, majoritarian and minoritarian, on the other.[4]

But there is a perspective which gets lost in these discussions, and arguably one of

some importance for those closely engaged in the contest of elections, the members and

supporters of parties. This is the extent to which an electoral system makes it feasible for

parties to uphold the normative commitments they define themselves by. At stake is their

capacity to maintain clarity in what they stand for and to act consistently with their stated

purposes.

A party, we may stipulate, is an association that identifies itself in terms of a set of

political ends, ranging from relatively specific policy goals to more abstract values and

principles.[5] Some may be specified in the party's founding text, while others will be dispersed

across its election manifestoes and other important policy statements. The party's capacity to

maintain and advance these commitments is continually tested by a wide range of factors in

everyday politics, from demands arising in the socio-economic sphere, to the shifting currents

of public opinion, to dynamics internal to a party such as when members lose commitment to

its programmatic ends or come to disagree on their meaning. The structure of the electoral

system is, I suggest, a further factor that can test partisanship's principled focus, and a

potentially important one. It can interfere with the efforts of even the most committed and

united to further their cause.[6] All institutional arrangements demand compromises of those

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[3] Norris 1997. For an overview of electoral system types, see Gallagher and Mitchell ('Introduction to Electoral Systems') in Gallagher and Mitchell 2005, esp. p.3.

[4] See also Blais 1991; Blais 2008, pp.2-3; cf. Lijphart and Grofman 1984. For an interesting discussion of a separate criterion centred on substantive outcomes – whether certain electoral systems favour left-wing politics – see Döring and Manow 2015.

[5] White & Ypi 2016; see also Herman 2017.

[6] As will be clear, I am interested in the prospects of partisans who are genuinely committed to the programmatic cause they espouse. Most electoral systems will include groups whose goals are less principled, while even the most programmatic parties will include individuals of the same sort. Possibly the structure of

that participate in them, and how those institutions are structured will shape the kind of compromise expected.

To pick a key example, and one that relates both to parties of government and opposition: how the electoral system is structured is likely to influence how far parties come under pressure to make alliances with other parties and the compromises of principle required to sustain them. Some systems are designed such that alliance arrangements are systematically encouraged, e.g. in the form of coalition government; others may exert lighter pressure in this regard, though may encourage compromises to be struck at other points in the process, e.g. at the point of party formation. These are matters on which partisans will typically retain some degree of choice, not least since refusing office for the sake of not compromising on fundamental commitments generally remains an option. But if the structure of the electoral system shapes the frequency with which such decisions must be taken, that structure becomes an appropriate object of critical evaluation. The criterion of *principled partisanship* becomes a relevant yardstick for assessment.

This is a different criterion from the more familiar ones cited. It may, at first, resemble what Norris and others describe as 'government effectiveness' – whether those in power can get through their manifesto pledges.[7] But the timescale of a government is the single electoral cycle. A government is an agent constituted for the duration of a term in office. A party, by contrast, is a longer-term entity, formed not just for the single cycle but for an open-ended succession thereof, presumptively spanning periods of government and opposition. It is a continuing association, whose ends are generally not expected to be realised in the short-term but to be advanced as an ongoing normative project. Maintaining a principled position across time, and locating present-day decisions in a larger temporal perspective, is part of what makes the party a distinctive political form.[8] It matters then not just how far partisans can advance their core commitments when they happen to form the government of the day, but how far they can maintain these for the longer term.

Is this standard genuinely applicable across diverse electoral systems? In Arendt's reflections on Anglo-Saxon and Continental electoral systems, the two were understood to express quite different conceptions of the political role of parties. 'Behind the external difference between the Anglo-Saxon two-party and the Continental multiparty system lies a

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the electoral system may influence the relative balance of the two. Here though I treat firm commitments as an exogenous factor: I assume the existence of principled partisans, so as to reflect on how the structure of the system may affect their prospects.

[7] See also Blais 1991, looking at government effectiveness in terms of stability, cohesion, decisiveness, accountability to the electorate.

[8] White & Ypi 2016, chap. 6.

fundamental distinction between the party's function within the body politic, which has great consequences for the party's attitude to power, and the citizen's position in his state […] Since the rise of the party systems it has been a matter of course to identify parties with particular interests, economic or others, and all Continental parties, not only the labour groups, have been very frank in admitting this as long as they could be sure that a state above parties exerts its power more or less in the interest of all. The Anglo-Saxon party, on the contrary, [is] founded on some "particular principle" for the service of the "national interest" …'.[9]   A normativised, Burkean conception of the party as an enduring association of principle was, in other words, applicable to the one setting only. Elsewhere, the role of parties was rather to make sure in the short-term that certain interests did not go unheard in the business of state.

It is worth emphasising however that, even in 'Continental' systems, parties have rarely defined themselves as just electoral agents for the advancement of sectoral interests. There has always been an ideological depth to such traditions as Christian Democracy and Social Democracy that has made them irreducible to mobilisations on behalf of church and class: they have defined themselves as oriented to ends more generalisable in scope.[10] One has also seen the emergence of programmatic parties such as the Greens that are difficult to associate with the interests of any pre-determined social constituency. Rather than the immediate representation of sectoral interests in the processes of the state, parties in these 'Continental' systems too have generally taken the form of associations intended to advance longer-term programmatic ends. Principled partisanship is a standard common to a range of institutional settings.

There are real-world empirical reasons to emphasise this criterion today. One of the critiques commonly made of many parties, both by their rank-and-file membership and populations at large, is that they honour such ideals in the breach, having a tendency to sacrifice the principles they claim to stand for. They are charged with opportunistically going against their stated convictions to win office, or with refusing to clarify what they stand for in the first place.[11] Contemporary debates concerning grand coalitions, and difficult alliances within party families between radicals and moderates, are just some instances of this broader phenomenon.[12]

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[9] Arendt 1951, p.253.
[10] Arendt's reading is ultimately not at odds with this, as she believed parties in Continental systems tended to move over time from defining themselves by narrow interests to a wider ideology: they were 'ashamed of these interests and therefore developed those justifications which led each one into an ideology claiming that its particular interests coincided with the most general interests of humanity.' (Arendt 1951, p.254.)
[11] White & Ypi 2016; see also Invernizzi Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017.
[12] On grand coalitions: Jacoby 2017; on alliances between centre- and far-left parties: Dunphy & Bale 2011.

There are, of course, many factors in play that extend well beyond the structure of the electoral system. Amongst these are the sociological composition of party elites, the changing nature of society at large (including the time available to citizens for participation), the vitality or decay of political ideologies, the media and its biases, the constraints posed by powerful socio-economic structures and agents, and the financing of parties themselves. All are relevant influences on partisan behaviour and its public reception. The fact that condemnations of *un*principled politics are to be found across almost all contemporary societies, irrespective of their electoral system, suggests the latter is not typically the decisive factor. Pursuit of a politics of firm commitments must contend with a great variety of cross-currents, many of them little to do with political institutions.

But the electoral system remains a powerful consideration nonetheless, because situations can arise in which the force of these other factors is weakened. Consider for instance such contexts as the appearance of party leaders intent on pursuing a politics of firm commitments, or the emergence of new ideological formations that give renewed credibility to such projects, or of socio-economic crises that put existing power structures in question and create receptiveness to principled critiques. In such contexts, the influence of these wider checks on a politics of firm commitments may be softened, and the structure of the electoral system becomes increasingly important accordingly. Moreover, party members have more reason to seek to engineer such conditions – e.g. by electing radical leaders, or renewing and extending their ideological repertoires – if the electoral system they are part of is not an additional obstacle to principled partisanship.

It may be tempting to see an emphasis on principle and consistency of programme as a kind of fundamentalism that has no place in democratic politics. Participation in executive and legislative institutions requires pragmatism and compromise, one may say, and those reluctant to make such concessions had better get over their scruples or withdraw to other arenas. If parties are to make a contribution to democracy, it may be continued, it is by channelling the views of the wider public, and this means a process of perpetual adaptation rather than seeking constancy of outlook. Likewise, it might be said that prudent partisans do not spell out too many normative commitments in the first place: the vaguer their 'offer', the more they can tailor it to whatever political conditions they find themselves in, with less need for compromises of principle.

Such readings seem problematic however. Channelling the preferences of a wider public need not be at odds with maintaining enduring positions of principle. A well-designed ideological programme is one whose goals are generalisable to the many, and which may therefore align with and reinforce wider sentiment. Support and principle go hand in hand.

Moreover, even if we acknowledge the potential for the two to be mismatched at times, the capacity of an electoral system to maintain principled partisanship has its own independent importance. Parties rely on the voluntary time and effort of activists for whom the political commitments at stake, be they socialist, liberal, conservative or other, are likely to be a major motivating factor. To the extent these commitments are fatally compromised, the sustainability of a party and its wider contribution is likely to be in question. Beyond the self-understanding of partisans themselves, it is also a question of sustaining a structure to political conflict. Without enduring positions of principle articulated across a series of electoral cycles, adversarial politics tends to fragment into an aggregate of isolated clashes. While opposition in some form may continue, even in the absence of lasting party formations,[13] it will generally be less cumulative and harder to narrativize.

More generally, if citizens at large become convinced that parties have little commitment to the goals they espouse, the legitimacy of the system as a whole is weakened. Opportunistic practices of one kind or another would seem at least as damaging as any potential misfit between the views of principled parties and the – supposedly exogenous – views of voters more widely. Whether disaffection takes the form of rising levels of non-voting, or the embrace of movements that define themselves by their hostility to parties and procedures, the implications are bad. Furthermore, any societal transformation that might be advanced by partisan means is also going to be impeded. Principled partisanship, in other words, is a normative standard for partisans, democrats and progressives alike.

Naturally a further doubt one may have is whether it does not very much depend on the nature of the commitments in question. Not all principled positions are ones one would want to endorse: for some observers, an important purpose of an electoral system is to marginalise the political 'extremes' and put pressure on such agents to engage in serial compromises. There is a domesticating function to institutions, it might be said, one that is exactly *not* about affording committed agents the scope to uphold their views. Here one touches on a number of large democratic-theoretical questions that cannot be engaged here: let it suffice to say that granting an electoral system this kind of filtering role is problematic too. Systematic non-representation of views reinforces the challenges to legitimacy mentioned, and encourages those views to be articulated in other contexts where they may be less easily challenged.[14] Nor can one assume that only undesirable views come to be obstructed in this way: all positions of principle risk being compromised, with the result that

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[13] On the relationship between organisational and programmatic continuities, and their larger democratic significance, see Borbáth 2018.
[14] For a broader discussion see Rosenblum 2008, esp. chapters 8 and 9.

such an electoral system acquires the conservative bias characteristic of all forms of piecemeal politics.

Before connecting to a closer discussion of electoral systems, it is worth reflecting on the more general question of why identifying the normative implications of these institutional structures is important. For in some respects it may seem a rather theoretical concern. Partisans, it may be said, do not generally get to choose the electoral system in which they operate: it is a given of their activity rather than something they can select. Institutional structures once formed tend to be rather resistant to change, and to the extent that changes at the margins are possible, it can be hard to mobilise the kind of public support needed to see them through. Probing the normativity of electoral systems might seem a redundant exercise if they are impervious to choice or revision.

There are several reasons to be less sceptical. A standard observation of comparative political science is that electoral systems are never entirely fixed and indeed have become more fluid in recent decades. This was already the premise of Norris' overview in 1997, and the point has been often repeated. Not only are there contexts in which electoral systems have been designed afresh, whether after regime change or at the transnational or sub-national level, but old systems are susceptible to revision.[15] Moreover, electoral systems are typically as much about conventions of behaviour as all-determining procedural mechanisms, which makes them susceptible to informal reinterpretation – a point we shall return to below. One may also note that there are contexts in which the same party may be exposed to more than one type of electoral system, whether in federal states or transnational political orders such as the EU. In addition to raising its own set of challenges,[16] this may leave them a degree of choice concerning where to concentrate their efforts.

There would seem to be enough motivation for further reflection on the normativity of electoral systems, and to ask how they may fare with respect to the standard of principled partisanship.

Electoral systems compared

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[15] Norris 1997; Colomer forthcoming.
[16] Consider for instance that European-Parliamentary elections are organised according to an electoral model (proportional representation) different from that used in some member-states. Parties that contest both European and national elections may therefore find their capacity to take a principled stand unevenly served across the two settings, and their reputation as a whole may suffer in line with outcomes tied to the less favourable setting.

The political science of electoral systems[17] continues to be organised around the basic distinction between models based on proportional representation (PR) and those based on majority or plurality (first-past-the-post, FPTP). In the former, seats in the legislature are allocated in a way that reflects the distribution of votes in the relevant jurisdiction (though typically with thresholds to exclude very minoritarian strands of opinion). In the latter, seats are allocated according to which agent achieves the largest share of opinion (with or without mechanisms to ensure this is more than 50%). Both are to be found in numerous variations, including to do with the relation between national and sub-national units, the number of rounds of voting, and the transferability of votes. Many systems involve a mix of the two principles. Though there may be some drawbacks to condensing this diversity into the single spectrum of PR<->FPTP, it remains the most effective organising distinction.[18]

Neither PR nor FPTP is necessarily centred on ideas-based political parties. Candidate-centred systems involving unaffiliated individuals, or multiple individuals associated with the same loosely defined political group (as with open-list primaries), are not uncommon.[19] As a first step therefore, we may say that a necessary condition of an electoral system being conducive to principled partisanship is that it allows for the emergence of parties as ideas-based associations. This condition may not be that discriminating. Though it may rule out contexts in which parties are legally *required* to hold open primaries, typically this remains a matter for parties themselves to decide. Sometimes the same system is host to parties that take different approaches (or have done so in different periods). Already one sees the potential relevance of the distinction between the formal requirements of an electoral system and the political culture that develops around it. We may limit the scope of our discussion to contexts in which groups that want to define themselves as associations of principle, i.e. as parties rather than as simply electoral platforms for the support of individuals, can do so. The question becomes how far the structure of the electoral system allows them to maintain this stance.

As noted, PR systems tend to be admired for a number of qualities, including giving voice to minority parties and representing the diversity of political views in society. How do they fare on the criterion of principled partisanship? What can be said at a general level about the extent to which they facilitate parties seeking to maintain themselves as associations

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[17] A standard definition of an electoral systems is 'the set of rules for taking votes in any given election and determining the seats in the representative assembly or other elected institution.' See Herron et al, 'Terminology and Basic Rules of Electoral Systems', in Herron et al. forthcoming.

[18] Affirming the same, see Herron et al p.4; cf. Gallagher & Mitchell 2005. On mixed systems, see also the final section below.

[19] For some discussion of the implications for how far partisanship is 'ideological' or not, see Gallagher & Mitchell 2005, p.10. See also Muirhead 2014, chapter 6.

defined by, and credibly advancing, a certain set of political commitments? I shall tackle this question from the angle of alliance-formation. One of the most salient influences on a party's capacity to maintain its principled commitments is the extent to which it is pressured to make common cause with those of different commitments. As a working thesis, we may say that a desirable electoral system is one that discourages the formation of bad alliances, i.e. those that undermine the core commitments of partisans, without obstructing the formation of alliances consistent with those commitments.[20]

One of the well-known features of PR systems is that they tend to result in votes being divided across a large number of parties.[21] While there is nothing to stop a single party acquiring a large plurality or even a majority, this tends to be less common. Indeed, it is what the system is typically intended to militate against. For the sake of the wider representation of views in society, but also as a check on the concentration of power, PR systems encourage a fragmented assembly in which representation is divided across multiple agents.[22] Following Arendt, we may suspect that historically there was a distinctive conception of parties underlying this. 'The Continental party system supposes that each party defines itself consciously as a part of the whole, which in turn is represented by a state above parties. A one-party rule therefore can only signify the dictatorial domination of one part over all others …'.[23] Although this conception of party democracy as the sum of partial interests is, as I have suggested, hard to regard as the intellectual basis of PR systems today, the material feature of a large number of parties in the legislature persists.

Governments consequently tend to take the form of coalitions. The system generally relies on alliance-formation and maintenance for the allocation of executive power. (In some contexts this may be coupled with more informal forms of cooperation between parties across the different representative chambers.[24]) FPTP systems also of course may give rise to alliances and coalitions, but in the case of PR this is a structural feature.

Does this mean such systems necessarily produce more occasions when parties are required to compromise their principles for the sake of alliance-formation? Much depends on how the distribution of political opinion looks. In some contexts it will be possible for coalitions to form between parties that are fairly like-minded, with concessions limited to

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[20] There are other aspects of alliance-formation a normative analysis of electoral systems might consider, concerning for instance the extent to which alliances foster generalisable or sectarian forms of political justification. For reasons of space I do not follow up this angle here.
[21] Duverger 1954.
[22] For the same reason, PR systems have tended to be preferred in contexts where consensus-formation rather than political adversarialism is widely considered the appropriate goal: see e.g. Lijphart's account of consociational democracy Lijphart 1977, esp pp.31ff.
[23] Arendt 1951, p.253.
[24] On how German bicameralism undergirds the need for cross-party compromise, see Schmidt 1996.

areas generally agreed to be non-essential. In periods when there is a large overlapping consensus between parties – i.e. periods of low polarisation – the compromises required to form alliances may be relatively minor. It may also be possible for partisans to achieve an adequate level of support without spelling out too many normative commitments on which they would be reluctant to compromise.

There are conditions however when the institutional pressure to form coalitions will be more problematic. When opinion in society is more polarised, for reasons exogenous to the electoral system (e.g. in periods of crisis and waning hegemony), alliance-formation becomes a more challenging prospect. Not only may one see the emergence of new parties, and thus the fragmentation of support into smaller units, but the compatibility of outlook of those represented in parliament may decrease.[25] These are the conditions in which cross-party alliances are likely to do the most harm to the programmatic commitments of each. In such contexts, the institutional pressure to form a coalition becomes more problematic.[26]

By way of illustration, consider the German federal system, in which the PR principle is prominent. Under conditions of relatively low polarisation of opinion in the 1990s, the coalitions demanded by the system could be embraced by partisans of different stripes as an acceptable price for the stability and representativeness of the system. To be sure, governing alliances did not necessarily turn out well for the parties involved (the Greens were arguably lastingly harmed by their cooperation with the SPD in its *Neue-Mitte* form around the turn of the millennium). But entering into such arrangements was not widely seen as inherently problematic for their capacity to maintain the core of their programme. Under the relatively consensual ideological conditions of the post-Cold War period, the burdens of compromise could seem acceptable to party leaderships and memberships alike.

Consider by contrast the German federal election of 2017 and its aftermath. Here was a test of a PR system under conditions of political repolarisation. Increasing dissatisfaction with the consensual politics of grand coalitions, combined with the rise of critical new parties such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), meant that the structural pressure for alliance-formation faced by any party with aspirations to govern became increasingly at odds with an attachment to political principle. The FDP showed that such pressure might be resisted, choosing to abandon coalition talks with the CDU in autumn 2017, but this move served only to increase the pressure on other parties in the system to entertain

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[25] What constitutes 'compatibility of outlook' is of course ultimately something to be decided only from the perspective of the partisans in question.

[26] Note that I do not assume polarisation itself to be necessarily problematic, either in general or for its effects on partisanship: indeed, for arguments to the contrary, see White & Ypi 2018.

the possibility of coalition. According at least to the standard interpretation of how the system worked, this was not an option that all parties could afford to pursue (we shall return to the question of minority government in the next section). The pronounced shift witnessed under the Schulz leadership over the course of 2017, from the early intent to reassert the party's distinctive platform and reaffirm its social-democratic credentials, to the later acquiescence in the prospect of a grand coalition, can be understood in significant part as the collision of partisan principles with the structure of the electoral system.

By the spring of 2018 one saw significant divisions in the SPD, with many party members expressing enthusiasm to reaffirm the basic principles of the party, combined with severe doubts about the capacity to do so as partner in another grand coalition. Participation in the coalition was ultimately agreed, but arguably not because it was widely felt that such arrangements would advance, or even be compatible with, the party's basic commitments. It was agreed, the consensus seems to be, largely due to the fear – mistaken or reasonable – that abstaining would cause further instability for the country and bolster the position of the AfD. Participation was agreed because the structure of the electoral system under conditions of increased polarisation seemed to demand it. Note also the dynamic implications. Parties that become embroiled in a difficult alliance are likely to find it harder to maintain the support of their members and their appeal to potential followers. Once such tendencies set in, party leaders have an incentive to adapt further to the structure of the electoral system, embracing compromising alliances as a route to power with diminishing regard for the ideological traditions they claim to represent.

I do not want to exaggerate here the significance of institutional structures. Clearly parties retain the capacity to make choices under such conditions. Some of the constraints facing the SPD were arguably the result of its long-term reluctance for historical reasons to consider another potential alliance (with the Linkspartei). And the argument made by the party's youth wing – that a period of opposition would be better for both party and country in the long run – was quite possibly a good one which the party might have pursued. I want to suggest only that here one sees how the structure of the electoral system can generate a level of pressure for alliance-formation that poses recurrent difficulties for partisans wanting to define and maintain their programmatic commitments. It is not that striking an agreement with another party need always be at odds with a politics of principle: some pacts may be defensible in these terms, depending on circumstance.[27] The concern is rather that some kinds

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[27] On the ethics of alliance, see White 2018.

of system build pressure for such arrangements indiscriminately, encouraging compromises both good and bad.

How do things look if we turn to the model of FPTP? Is principled partisanship more achievable in this context – or at least, are the structural pressures different? These systems tend to produce fewer parties in the representative assembly and are more conducive therefore to one-party governments, which tend to be more common.[28] Does fewer parties mean fewer situations in which there is pressure to strike deals with those of incommensurable commitments?

Some might say that the difference is simply that the moment of compromise is shifted. The contention would be that parties in FPTP systems are often, by their very construction, electoral coalitions formed of loosely coherent or misfitting ideas. In order to succeed in a non-proportional system, it may be suspected that parties must draw together a broad range of intellectual currents in a potentially unsatisfactory amalgam. FPTP demands that parties primarily be 'vote-seeking' to survive. Whereas parties in a PR system can choose to retain a clear programmatic profile if they are content to remain a small party and / or forego opportunities for inclusion in government, those in FPTP systems arguably will not even win seats in the assembly if they do not make the compromises needed to integrate a diversity of outlooks. In FPTP systems the logic of 'vote-seeking' displaces the more programmatic logic of 'policy-seeking'. Again, this reading has a venerable history. Although Arendt saw Anglo-Saxon systems as the natural home of 'parties of principle', she saw these parties as typically rather loose and under-theorised agglomerations, 'since in the two-party system a party cannot exist for any length of time if it does not win enough strength to assume power.'[29]

Whether an electoral imperative to build a broad basis of support amongst voters necessarily leads parties to be programmatically diffuse and incoherent in this way is not quite so clear. The view relies on the assumption that different social constituencies are mobilised by different kinds of political demand, and thus mobilising the many will involve aggregating a wide range of demands. (This logic is so engrained in the study of party politics that it has become the basis of periodisation: the 'catch-all party' is generally said to be the defining feature of European party systems from the mid-twentieth-century onwards.) But clearly there is an art to how demands are identified and brought together, and a programme of broad appeal need not necessarily be ill-defined. Another way of saying this is that, despite the assumptions of median-voter theorem, elections are not necessarily won from the political 'centre' if this

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[28] Blais 1991.
[29] Arendt 1951, p.254.

implies aggregating a diffuse array of preferences: the centre is a political artefact that partisans can hope to shape and reshape in accordance with their programmatic ends.[30]

Observe also that, even if building a successful party in a FPTP setting is correctly understood as a process of serial compromise, it is a process that can play out over a lengthy period, in contrast to the compressed episodes in which alliances tend to be negotiated in PR systems. In the latter, the reconciliation of diverse partisan commitments tends to take place against the pressure of the electoral clock, whether in the lead-up to polling (a pre-electoral coalition) or the aftermath (a post-electoral coalition). By contrast, the process of party formation and revision in a FPTP setting, and the search for programmatic coherence this entails, is one for which there is no defined timescale. It has the potential to be more deliberative as a consequence.

What seems hard to deny though is that FPTP systems offer little outlet for the principled commitments of smaller, non-governing parties. The barriers to entry in FPTP systems are famously high. A wider variety of political views will find expression as self-standing partisan programmes in a system based on PR. This matters from the perspective in question because holding executive office is not the only way a party may seek to advance its goals. Influencing public debate and the positions of other parties is clearly another means, and FPTP systems offer much less of a platform for parties not expected to be a government-in-waiting. Note also that when alliances *do* suggest themselves in FPTP systems, they will often pair very large parties with rather small ones, given the non-proportional relation of parliamentary representation to voting. When alliances are not a partnership of approximate equals, the risks of exploitation would seem to be greater: some will preserve their principles very much at the expense of others.

The conclusion would seem to be that FPTP systems are better able to sustain the commitments of large parties whose programmes have mass appeal, since if able to achieve a plurality of votes they will then be in a position to pursue their goals relatively unencumbered by the veto-capacity of others. PR systems, on the other hand, tend to compromise such parties by encouraging them to form coalitions with others, but make available a mode of principled partisanship for smaller parties by granting them the parliamentary presence they would otherwise lack.

Discussion

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[30] White & Ypi 2016b.

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What do the above remarks imply for electoral design and reform? Given our focus is on just one of the various normative criteria that one might want to apply to electoral systems, perhaps little directly follows. There may be advantages to one or another electoral system that outweigh the considerations examined, and I do not wish to offer an overall assessment here. But to the extent that one takes seriously principled partisanship as a normative standard, the question would be whether there exist electoral structures that can balance the considerations raised in the least objectionable fashion. One that deserves further scrutiny, I suggest, is a PR system decoupled from the expectation of coalition government.

The first thing to emphasise in this regard is that how electoral rules come to be practiced and given meaning is no less significant than whatever objective demands they present. Convention matters. The frequency with which PR systems produce coalition government is partly a function of a political-cultural scepticism found in many towards *minority governments*. Widely viewed as unconducive to political stability, there tends to be an expectation that they should be avoided, even if constitutionally they are permitted.[31] From this derives a significant part of the pressure on parties to make cooperation arrangements with their peers.[32] As the preceding observations suggest however, majority governments too can be a source of instability if they depend for their construction on the kinds of coalition that alienate both partisans and the wider electorate alike. One implication of our discussion then may be the need to cast a more favourable light on minority government as a practice in PR systems.[33]

From the perspective of principled partisanship, minority governments are of course hardly an ideal. Dependent on the votes of other parties to pass legislation, they are likely to have to engage in compromise and/or bargaining on a regular basis, sometimes sacrificing parts of their programme and sometimes supplementing it with undesired and dubiously-compatible elements.[34] More generally, a minority-governing party faces the distraction of potential votes of no-confidence, and the need to factor this possibility into its governing plans. Relative to majority governments, minority governments are clearly unconducive to principled partisanship. A majority government in a PR system, rare as this outcome may be, would seem evidently preferable from the perspective in question.

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[31] As they are in Germany.

[32] A similar taboo can be found in FPTP systems in the form of an aversion to hung parliaments, though here the prospect of new elections tends to loom larger than coalition government.

[33] On minority governments, see Strøm 1990. For the argument here, not much hangs on the different varieties of minority government – e.g. wholly ad hoc forms vs those based on a 'confidence and supply' agreement, distinguished from a coalition by the fact that the junior partners retain the status of opposition parties.

[34] On additive and subtractive compromises, see Weinstock 2015; cf. White 2018.

But relative to a coalition government composed of ideologically divergent parties, a minority government has some important positive features. Responsibility for decisions is more easily attributed in such a context. Law-making proceeds on a case-by-case basis, which means how party representatives choose to align themselves on the difficult decisions that require at least one side to compromise will be fully in view at the moment of voting. Where the largest party that heads the government fails to pass legislation, it can point to the voting record as evidence of its intentions, indicating to its members and supporters that responsibility lies not just with itself. Whether to approve or reject proposals will be something that opposition parties can decide with reference to their political commitments, and justify to their members and supporters in these terms, unlike in a coalition where their position may be set by the terms of a coalition agreement. A party's capacity to maintain its principles, and its capacity to rebut suspicions that it is being dragged away from them, would seem to be stronger accordingly.

Such a system leaves parties better placed to preserve their programmatic commitments, as well as to better account for decisions to depart from them. Their identities in the eyes of fellow partisans and unaligned citizens are better maintained. There may be occasions when a formal alliance is still preferable for the parties involved, because they believe they *can* reconcile it with the commitments by which they define themselves. The point is not to exclude such possibilities but to question the assumption that minority governments have little to be said for them. This type of reinterpretation of existing institutional structures is one way to cope with the challenges posed for principled partisanship.

Conventions of political culture run deep of course. As we have seen, Arendt's view was that multi-party government was intrinsic to the rationale of (proportional) Continental systems. 'The multiparty system never allows any one man or any one party to assume full responsibility, with the natural consequence that no government, formed by party alliances, ever feels fully responsible. Even if the improbable happens and an absolute majority of one party dominates Parliament and results in one party rule, this can only end either in dictatorship, because the system is not prepared for such government, or in the bad conscience of a still truly democratic leadership which, accustomed to thinking of itself only as part of the whole, will naturally be afraid of using its power.'[35] If minority government side-steps the first of these problems (of dictatorship), it presents the second in magnified form. Without generalised acceptance of the legitimacy of one-party government, striking out

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[35] Arendt 1951, p.253.

alone is difficult. But the conventions by which electoral systems are interpreted are not static. Partisans who take seriously the principled ends by which they define themselves, and who refuse the notion that these are just a mask for interests, have little reason for reticence and bad conscience in the pursuit of their commitments.

Beyond reassessing the merits of minority government, the design of formal electoral rules matters too. Clearly one of the variables likely to have a direct effect on the question at hand is the threshold set for representation in parliament. The lower the threshold, the more parties can be expected to enter the legislature, and the smaller is likely to be the vote-share of a minority government. Raising the threshold to a higher figure than is customary[36] is one way to reduce the fragmentation of the legislature into a large number of parties, and to assuage some of the pressure for cross-party alliances that may accompany this. In tandem with this, a way to encourage the formation of broad-based parties that integrate diffuse political demands into a larger whole is to require that new elections be called should a sizeable percentage of votes go to parties that fall short of the threshold. Such measures risk of course that, in the process of forming groups that are electorally viable, partisans forego some of their core commitments, thus defeating the purpose of the reforms.

More promising then as far as formal design goes is arguably some version of a *mixed* electoral system, combining elements of both PR and FPTP. Such systems come in a great many varieties, not all of which are desirable from the perspective adopted here.[37] The drawback of some, such as 'mixed-member PR', is that they are still geared primarily to achieving proportional outcomes (typically by using compensatory mechanisms), and thus embed many of the problems previously discussed. A more convincing form of mixed system is one that offers a significant PR component in the composition of the legislature while giving the largest party some protection from the burdens of compromise that typically afflict it in PR settings.

Here a 'majority bonus system' would seem to be the most promising model.[38] Such a system entails reinforcing the largest party by giving it extra seats, either as a fixed number or whatever figure is required to reach a certain total. Such a mechanism can be used to grant the largest party a parliamentary majority, or to ensure that its minority is nonetheless a substantial one and less prone to the problems generally associated with minority

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[36] Parties gaining a very small share of the overall vote – typically in the region of 2%-5% – tend to be excluded from entering parliament in PR systems.

[37] For overviews see Massicotte and Blais 1999; Shugart and Wattenberg 2003.

[38] 'Parallel voting' is another potentially relevant model, but has other drawbacks to do with the complexity involved in asking citizens to cast two votes, and the potential weakening of the partisan dimension to constituency voting.

government. (To avoid wholly disproportionate outcomes, the bonus may be withheld if the largest party fails to achieve a certain threshold, e.g. 25% of seats before the application of the bonus.) The advantage of such a system is that it preserves the conditions for parties to campaign in elections on a defined, principled programme (more so than FPTP), while preserving the capacity of the largest party to institute its programme thereafter (more so than conventional applications of PR). The majority bonus system is not a widely-tried model, so its practical effects remain largely untested and certainly little studied.[39] It would seem to offer considerable potential however for a balance to be struck between the virtues of FPTP and PR systems with regard to this criterion of principled partisanship.

Some may still feel that such a system leads to too much distortion in the composition of government. It may be seen as unfairly benefiting a party whose vote-share may have been just fractionally larger, and as going against a key virtue of PR, the capacity to include a wide variety of voices in decision-making. There are other systems that may cater to such concerns. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system has been categorised variously as a form of PR and as a mixed system.[40] At the national level it is rarely used (the main exception is Ireland), but it is found sub-nationally and is a favourite proposal of reformers like the British Electoral Reform Society. By allowing voters to express ranked preferences and an allocation of seats that reflects them, it can offer significant proportionality, limited according to how thresholds are set and the number of seats per district. The question would be whether, for this reason, it does not again promote recourse to coalitions with the problems noted. Such criticisms have been voiced in Ireland, along with concerns that STV encourages excessive localism and clientelism.[41] More generally, one may expect it to loosen the programmatic commitments of parties and to promote more candidate-centred forms of electoral politics, as partisans come to depend on the votes of those who did not offer them first-choice support.[42] For such reasons a majority-bonus system still seems preferable, at least as regards the criterion of principled partisanship.

Instituting any such change always faces tricky problems of course concerning how the revision of an electoral system can be legitimately conducted and what kind of agent can lead the process. One may assume that such changes will be advanced only when leading

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[39] Countries that have used a majority bonus system include Armenia, Greece, Italy (2006-13) and San Marino. For one of the few analyses, see Bedock and Sauger 2014: note though that they consider cases where the bonus can be won by a coalition of parties rather than the largest party alone, which is not the version I have in mind.
[40] For an overview, see Herron, Pekkanen, and Shugart (forthcoming), Introduction.
[41] See Michael Marsh, 'Electoral Systems in Context: Ireland', in Herron,. Pekkanen and Shugart (forthcoming).
[42] For discussion and a nuanced evaluation: Bowler, McElroy and Müller 2018.

parties see them as consistent with their programmatic ends. To the extent that their power within the existing system is assured, they may see little reason to do so. Where their position is under challenge from new rivals, or could be consolidated by electoral reforms, the motivation may be stronger.[43] If one-party government is ever to become an established practice in PR systems, it will presumably happen when its leading parties sense that the only way to stave off the challenge of emerging rivals is to prioritise their own long-term profile as associations of principle over the immediate gains of office.

Conclusion

As just one component of the institutional architecture of the state, and embedded like the rest in powerful structures of society, culture and economy, the electoral system is something whose influence is perhaps easily overstated. Its rules may only rarely be decisive, and these rules are in any case in part what partisans choose to make of them. One should be careful not to reproduce the assumptions of the more mechanistic strands of political science, in which the actions of parties appear largely determined by the incentives apparently offered by the structure of institutions. These systems are never so closed. But at least in the looser sense of affordance, electoral rules are not without their implications, and so a relevant object of normative analysis.

One thing this article has sought to do is challenge the dichotomy that shapes discussions of the merits of electoral systems, between those that foster stability and those that foster inclusiveness of representation. For both theoretical and empirical reasons, it seems important to recognise a cross-cutting standard to do with the capacity of parties to maintain a defined and principled programme. Such a standard is implied by the continued reliance of modern democracy on open-ended associations whose members aim to perpetuate them beyond the life-cycle of any one government or opposition in the service of enduring commitments. Contemporary controversies within parties and beyond concerning what it is

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[43] Colomer forthcoming: 'an alteration of the electoral system can be more successfully promoted by parties with high decision, negotiation, or pressure power under the existing institutional framework. This makes incumbent rulers submitted to credible threats by new or growing opposition parties likely candidates to undertake processes of institutional change.' It is one of the ironies of the problem that the condition of achieving sufficient power within the existing system to be able to lead such a process of change may be the willingness to enter coalition with programmatically dissimilar partisan peers. As Britain's Liberal Democrats discovered not so long ago when in coalition with the Conservatives (2010-15), one needs a pretty solid guarantee of electoral reform before it is appropriate to enter a coalition premised on compromises of substantive principle.

they stand for, and how consistently they act, speak likewise for the significance of this criterion.

The article further explored how the structure of an electoral system can put partisan principles under strain. Structural pressure for the formation of alliances is one way that electoral rules can set parties on the path to unwelcome compromise. Systems of proportional representation, whatever their merits on different criteria, would seem to have a weakness here. Whether these differences are written into the very structure of the electoral rules, or are a function more of the conventions of political culture, is something the final section touched on. Arguably all systems offer scope for reinterpretation. PR systems decoupled from the expectation of coalition government offer some potential for combining the virtues of political inclusion with clarity of partisan principle. Incorporating an element of FPTP in the form of a 'majority bonus' is one way to undergird this institutionally. But whatever the possible solutions, in an age of simmering dissatisfaction with party democracy, it seems appropriate to start asking how far electoral systems aid partisans in the maintenance of the commitments by which they define themselves.

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