

# Electoral reform: the fine print matters

*How and when does a dominant party reform the electoral system? And how do they shape the details of that reform? In new research on the case of Swiss cantons, **André Walter** and **Patrick Emmenegger** find that self-interest by a dominant party can be crucial to determining how proportional the new system actually is.*



Montreal Electoral Reform Protest, Feb 11 2017. Picture: [Jer Clarke/ \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\) licence](#)

Partisan self-interest is said to drive electoral system reform. The fact that the UK has never adopted proportional representation (PR) for Westminster elections is a case in point. Even though PR was considered on multiple occasions in the past, party leaders, both Conservative and Liberal, were reluctant to lower the entry barrier for potential competitors. Only when the Liberals were surpassed by Labour after the First World War, they started to advocate the introduction of PR – to no avail.

In continental Europe, supporters and opponents of PR were similarly divided along party lines. Yet, many countries introduced PR nonetheless, often with the support of parties that had benefited from the previous electoral system. For instance, the Catholic Party in Belgium and the Liberals and the Conservatives in Norway pushed for electoral reform even though they were greatly advantaged by majoritarian rule and occupied a majority position before the adoption of PR. From the perspective of self-interested parties, these developments seem counter-intuitive, to say the least.

In our [current research](#), we attempt to make sense of these surprising developments. After the experience of the First World War, electoral system choice turned from a problem of political representation of minority interests to a question of democratic legitimacy in many countries. Facing increasingly radicalised workers' movements, but also popular demands for PR, most European countries adopted PR in the aftermath of the war, sometimes even with the support of parties that had dominated parliament before.

While normative ideas and public pressure undoubtedly have an impact on what legislators do, it is unlikely to be sufficient to push dominant parties to sacrifice a significant amount of parliamentary seats. Instead, we argue that the advantaged parties' ability to draw up the fine print of electoral laws is decisive in explaining why they ultimately agreed to electoral reform. Even though these parties had good reasons to expect to fare less well under the new system, they had a few possibilities to influence their outlook under the new PR systems. For instance, electoral districts under the new PR system could be strategically drawn or kept small in the strongholds of dominant parties. Alternatively, new electoral thresholds could deter the entry of new competitors. In this way, new PR systems could turn out to be surprisingly 'distorted'.

To examine our argument, we have focused on a prominent case in the literature: the Swiss cantons. Stein Rokkan, one of the most important political scientists in the 20th century, argued that the Swiss cantons were front-runners in the adoption of PR because parties wanted to pacify long-lasting conflicts between ethnic and religious groups by incorporating them into political decision-making. In addition, recent research has shown that in many cantons, large cross-party majorities supported the adoption of PR. To test our argument and assess competing claims, we have assembled a new data set on the timing of PR introduction as well as the design of PR systems. To measure whether a PR system is 'distorted' in favour of certain parties, we have used the entry barrier of the median-sized district. This indicator captures how many votes an opposition party must get in order to start endangering the majority position of the dominant party. Furthermore, we have coded the party positions on PR adoption at the time of the electoral reform.

Our analysis consists of two steps. In the first step, we have shown that the timing of PR adoption, i.e. whether a canton introduced PR early (e.g. Geneva in 1892) or late (e.g. Schaffhausen 1952), is negatively affected by the dominance of the strongest party (in terms of seat shares). This finding aligns with arguments about partisan self-interest, because it shows that the most dominant parties defended the electoral system that helped them achieve this position of dominance. In contrast, the adoption of PR is unrelated to the electoral support of socialist parties or the degree of ethnic and religious heterogeneity.

Yet, not all dominant parties are strong enough to resist calls for PR forever. In a second step, we have therefore examined whether the position of dominant parties on PR adoption affects the institutional design of the resulting electoral system. We show that electoral reforms supported by dominant parties have systematically higher entry barriers in median-sized districts than reforms without the support of dominant parties. In addition, we demonstrate that in the first election under PR, dominant parties lost only few seats in such distorted PR systems. In fact, in some rare instances, they even made electoral gains. In contrast, PR systems adopted without the support of dominant parties, and thus without any distorting elements, resulted in large seat losses for the dominant parties in the first election under the new systems. These findings are consistent with our argument about the political origins of distorted PR, while they challenge arguments about electorally strong parties engaging in electoral reform to grant minorities political representation.

The results show that the fine print of electoral laws matter a great deal. In Swiss cantons, only PR systems introduced against the opposition of the historically dominant parties turned out to be truly proportional. In the Swiss context, these reforms were often the work of temporary parliamentary majorities of opposition parties or they were introduced by means of direct democracy. In the first case, minority parties were able gain enough seats in parliament to legislate for electoral reform. In the second and more Swiss-specific case, parties launched an initiative to put PR to a popular vote to circumvent parliament. If the vote was successful, the proposal turned into law without giving the parliament the opportunity to make any amendments. In either case the dominant parties had no opportunity to change the 'fine print'.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on their article, ['Majority protection: The origins of distorted proportional representation'](#), published in *Electoral Studies*.*

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## About the authors

**André Walter** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science, University of St. Gallen. His research focuses on democratization, electoral systems, party formation, and redistribution.

**Patrick Emmenegger** is Professor of Comparative Political Economy and Public Policy at the University of St. Gallen. Recent publications include *The Age of Dualization: The Changing Face of Inequality in Deindustrializing Societies* and *The Power to Dismiss: Trade Unions and the Regulation of Job security in Western Europe* (both with Oxford University Press).

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