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**ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND THEIR POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES:
ELEMENTS OF INTEREST FOR TUNISIA**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. According to many political observers, the electoral system is “the most fundamental element of representative democracy”.¹ This idea is based on two reasons. First, electoral systems constitute the modus of converting electoral votes into parliamentary seats. Therefore, they considerably affect the structure of party systems, i.e. the number and relative size of the parties in parliament. Second, electoral systems can be deliberately “designed” in order to shape the party system in the normatively desired direction. This feature is in stark contrast to most other preconditions for a consolidated democracy, such as socioeconomic development or a vivid civil society that are usually lacking in transition countries and cannot be generated at once. Taken together, choosing the “right” electoral system is of particular importance for new democracies.

2. Against this background, the present paper gives a comprehensive overview on the varieties of electoral systems and their political consequences. The argument is divided into three parts. The following second section highlights the most important objectives – representativeness (proportional representation, PR) and governability (majority rule) – that electoral systems ought to achieve. On this basis, a typology is presented that includes those majority and PR systems that are most common in established democracies. The third section deals with the empirical effects of electoral systems. More specifically, it shows that both majority and PR systems tend to operate in the theoretically expected manner – provided that they are “embedded” in a stable party-system environment. However, in dynamic political contexts that are characteristic of most new democracies, electoral systems may also show effects that run counter to conventional wisdom. The third section concludes by drawing some lessons for the electoral system choice in Tunisia.

II. THEORETICAL EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL VARIETY

3. Democratic political institutions ought to meet two fundamental criteria. First, they should be *inclusive* in the sense that they provide the citizens with differentiated options to effectively express their will in the political process (“government of the people”). Second, they should also allow for *efficient* policy-making, i.e. authoritative decisions to be taken within a reasonable period of time (“government for the people”). Although both criteria are crucially important for the functioning of democratic systems, there is a trade-off between them: increased inclusiveness usually goes hand in hand with decreased efficiency and vice versa. Therefore, constitution-makers have to decide if they prefer more inclusive or more efficient institutional arrangements.

4. This general logic also applies to electoral systems. Here, the basic choice is between two ideal-type principles. On the one hand, there is the *majority principle* that aims at a concentrated party system, enhancing the building of single-party majorities in parliament and thus fostering the *governability* of the democratic system (although this may seriously affect the proportionality of votes and seats). On the other hand, there is the *PR principle* that aims at the highest possible degree of proportionality between votes and seats, thus securing the *representativeness* of parliament (although this may lead to highly fragmented party systems and ensuing difficulties in forming coherent governments). In the real world, these principles of representation more or less correspond to the British-type *plurality system in single-member constituencies* (SMCs) that has usually produced single-party governments by heavily benefitting the strongest parties at the expense of the others, and the *pure PR system*, as applied, for instance, in the Netherlands, where it has generated highly proportional outcomes but not facilitated government formation in a considerably fragmented parliament.

¹ Arend Lijphart: *Electoral Systems and Party Systems*, Oxford 1994, p. 1.

5. In most other democracies, however, electoral systems have political effects that are in-between those of “pure” majority rule and “pure” PR, i.e. that neither produce huge bonuses for the strongest parties nor perfect proportionality. This is primarily due to the fact that an electoral system may include a lot of different technical elements that can be combined in almost any way one can think of. These “institutional details” – such as different constituency sizes, legal thresholds, allocation formulas etc. – affect the proportionality of votes and seats in idiosyncratic ways, both separately and interactively.² Therefore, the variety of electoral systems is immense – not only in theory, but also in political practice.³ For the sake of conciseness, we will now focus on three critical choices that highlight the main institutional differences between the most well-known types of electoral systems.

6. The first institutional choice refers to the *decision rules in majority systems*: SMC seats can either be allocated by *plurality*, i.e. “the first past the post”, or by *absolute majority*, i.e. the winning candidate is to receive 50%+1 votes, otherwise a run-off must take place. This slight difference might significantly affect the electoral outcome: whereas smaller parties in the British-type system usually do not have many chances to enter parliament, in the absolute majority system – as, for example, in France – they may join electoral alliances for the run-off and thus receive a considerable number of seats.

7. The second choice concerns the *sizes of multi-member constituencies (MMCs)*. As a general rule, the fewer seats in a constituency, the more difficult it is for smaller parties to enter parliament and, vice versa, the higher the bonuses for the stronger parties. An extreme case in this regard is Chile where parliamentary seats are allocated by *PR in two-member constituencies*. Due to the small constituency size, the two biggest parties get the lion’s share of seats. Therefore, the Chilean electoral system can be subsumed under the majority principle, although the PR formula is applied. On the other hand, a lot of democracies in Europe and elsewhere, such as Poland or Brazil, apply *PR in larger MMCs* (ten and more seats per constituency). These systems normally display a considerably high degree of proportionality between votes and seats. In-between there are PR systems in medium-sized MMCs, such as Spain (average constituency size: 7.0), that tend to provide stronger parties with moderate bonuses at the expense of smaller parties.

8. The third choice regards specific *combinations of plurality rule in SMCs and PR in MMCs*. Such “hybrid systems” have been introduced in quite a number of countries during the last two decades since they are often believed to produce the “best of both worlds”⁴, i.e. to cumulate the virtues of majority rule and proportional representation. Apart from the fact that representativeness and governability can be “optimized” only to a limited extent, the political consequences of hybrid systems crucially depend on how the plurality part and the PR part are interlinked. Two distinct arrangements are of particular significance in this regard.

9. On the one side, there is the *segmented system* (also known as “parallel system”), applied in Japan, Mexico and several other countries. Here, parliamentary seats are allocated by two completely separated procedures. For the one portion of seats, PR in large MMCs (or in one national MMC) is applied; the other portion is elected in SMCs by plurality or absolute majority. As the two parts are not interconnected in any way, the effects of the entire system tend to be

² Cf. Report on Electoral Systems. Overview of Available Solutions and Selection Criteria (CDL-AD(2004)003); Comparative Report on Thresholds and Other Features of Electoral Systems Which Bar Parties From Access to Parliament (CDL-AD(2008)037); Report on Thresholds and Other Features of Electoral Systems Which Bar Parties From Access to Parliament (II) (CDL-AD(2010)007).

³ For a detailed world-wide overview of electoral systems see Dieter Nohlen/Florian Grotz/Michael Krennerich/Bernhard Thibaut: Appendix: Electoral Systems in Independent Countries, in: Richard Rose (ed.): International Encyclopedia of Elections, Washington D.C. 2000, p. 353-79; International IDEA (ed.): Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook, Stockholm 2005.

⁴ Cf. Scott Mainwaring/Matthew Shugart (eds.): Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?, Oxford 2001.

in-between majority rule and PR, i.e. a moderate concentration accompanied by a moderate disproportionality.⁵

10. On the other side, there is the so-called *mixed-member proportional system* (MMPS), applied in Germany and internationally known as the “German model”. Like a segmented system, the German system includes two parts of MPs to be elected: one half by plurality in SMCs and the other by PR in one national constituency. However, the SMC-candidates which are usually affiliated to particular parties are subtracted from the relevant party’s seat total that is determined before by the list votes according to PR. Due to this subtraction, the PR part determines the partisan composition of parliament while the plurality part only affects the “personal” composition of MPs.⁶ Therefore, the effects of the MMPS are not “mixed” but clearly follow the PR principle.

Table 1: Main Types of Majority and Proportional Electoral Systems

Normative Principles	Majority Principle				Proportional Representation			
	Types of electoral systems	Plurality System in SMCs	Absolute Majority in SMCs	PR in small MMCs	Segmented system	Mixed-member PR	PR in large MMCs	Pure PR
Empirical Examples	UK	France	Chile	Japan	Germany	Poland	Netherlands	

Source: Author’s compilation.

Abbreviations: MMCs = multi-member constituencies; PR = proportional representation; SMCs = single-member constituencies.

Remarks: For reasons of comprehensiveness, not all types of electoral systems are included that play a role in the international debate (e.g. the Australian “alternative vote” or the Irish “single transferable vote” systems).

11. *Table 1* summarizes the above considerations on the theoretical effects of electoral systems. It highlights once again the two ideal-type principles of representation that are incompatible at the normative level: electoral systems may either secure the representativeness or enhance the governability of a parliamentary democracy. At the level of electoral system types, the distinction between the majority and PR systems is still there, but it looks rather like a continuum between more or less (dis-)proportional settings than a discrete choice between mutually exclusive alternatives. The fact that institutional details matter leads to a twofold conclusion. Electoral system can be generally designed in a way that they produce more “balanced” effects between concentration and proportionality. However, in order to achieve such balance, one has to carefully study the technical elements of an electoral system and their mutual combinations. This does not only include the above mentioned basic choices but also further institutional regulations, such as legal thresholds, forms of candidacy and voting procedures.⁷ However, the more complex the institutional design of an electoral system becomes, the more difficult it will be to delineate its prospective consequences. This is reinforced by the fact that the effects of electoral systems not only depend on their institutional design, but also on the political context in which they operate.

III. EMPIRICAL EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

⁵ This ‘medium effect’ assumption is based on a 50:50-ratio of majority and PR-seats. In case of a more asymmetric distribution in one or other direction, the political consequences of segmented systems will approximate those of the ‘pure’ majority or ‘pure’ PR type respectively.

⁶ In Germany, the system is called “personalized proportional representation” (“*personalisierte Verhältniswahl*”).

⁷ Cf. among others the Report on Electoral Law and Electoral Administration in Europe (CDL-AD(2006)018), p. 38-42.

12. There is a bulk of cross-national studies that has investigated the empirical effects of electoral systems on party systems. Two general findings of this literature are particularly relevant here. First, *the political consequences of electoral systems in established democracies tend to follow to their respective institutional design*.⁸ More specifically, electoral systems with strong majoritarian elements (small constituency sizes, high legal thresholds etc.) tend to produce significantly more disproportionality between votes and seats than electoral systems with few majoritarian elements. Furthermore, the number of “manufactured” single-party majorities is much higher under majority systems than under PR systems. However, this does not mean that electoral systems determine the structure of party systems. Quite contrary to the “sociological laws” established by Maurice Duverger,⁹ a plurality system in SMCs does not produce a two-party system each place and any time. A most telling example is the United Kingdom that indeed saw a two-party system under a plurality system during the 1950s and 60s (thus serving as case in point for Duverger’s theory). During the recent past, however, Britain has experienced the evolution of a multi-party system with a coalition government formed in 2010, although the plurality system has still been in force. The obvious reason for the changed outcome is that third parties could build up regional strongholds and thus captured the respective SMC seats from Labour and the Conservatives respectively.

13. The case of the UK points to a second general finding of cross-national studies: *the structure of the party system affects the performance of electoral systems to a considerable extent*. This becomes even more evident if we look at new democracies where party systems are often characterized by high fragmentation and organizational “fluidity”. In such contexts, electoral systems can have highly idiosyncratic effects that may even contradict the conventional wisdom derived from established democracies. A most telling example in this regard is the 1995 parliamentary election in Russia. In this election, a segmented system was applied, i.e. half of the seats were to be allocated by plurality in SMCs and the other half by PR in one national MMC with a 5%-threshold. Conventional wisdom would have expected that the plurality part produces a concentrated party system while the PR part guarantees a high proportionality between votes and seats. In fact quite the reverse was true.¹⁰ The plurality part led to a considerable fragmentation because “local notables” running as independent candidates won nearly 50% of the SMC seats. The PR part, on the other hand, produced substantial majority bonuses as almost 50% of the votes were cast for small parties failing to pass the 5%-threshold. As a consequence, the four parties that received more than 5% could nearly double their share of seats in comparison with their share of votes.

14. It goes without saying that such counterintuitive outcomes as in the Russian case are more the exception than the rule. Further, with the constant stabilization of party organizations and voting behaviour, the “filtering” effect of the legal threshold has decreased to a considerable extent. Similar tendencies can also be observed in other Central and Eastern European countries.¹¹ Nevertheless, such unexpected outcomes should remind institutional designers that it is extremely difficult to predict the effects of electoral systems in “fluid” party-system contexts. This applies even more to those electoral systems that include different majority and PR elements and are therefore expected to combine the “best of both worlds”.

IV. CONCLUSION: SOME LESSONS FOR CHOOSING AN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

⁸ Douglas W. Rae: *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, New Haven/London 1967; Rein Taagepera/Mathew S. Shugart: *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems*, New Haven 1989; Arend Lijphart: *Electoral Systems and Party Systems*, Oxford 1994.

⁹ Cf. Maurice Duverger: *L'influence des systèmes électoraux sur la vie politique*, Paris 1950.

¹⁰ See Robert G. Moser: *Unexpected Outcomes. Electoral Systems, Political Parties, and Representation in Russia*, Pittsburgh 2001.

¹¹ Cf. Florian Grotz: *Electoral Systems and Party Systems in Central and Eastern Europe. A Contextualised Comparison*, in: Venice Commission (ed.): *Evaluation of Fifteen Years of Constitutional Practice in Central and Eastern Europe*, Strasbourg 2005, p. 81-92.

15. Which electoral system is most suitable for new democracies such as Tunisia? This question has been discussed controversially among academic scholars and political practitioners since decades. The present paper should have made clear that no electoral system fits best each place and any time. Choosing the “right” electoral system always meets with three fundamental challenges. Firstly, there is a *general trade-off between securing representativeness and fostering governability*. Which principle should be given priority in a particular sociocultural and historical context, has to be decided normatively by the relevant political actors. Secondly, *the institutional variety of electoral systems is immense*. As technical details matter quite a lot, the design of an electoral system has to be “fine-tuned”, especially if it should allow for more balanced effects between strongly manufactured majorities and pure proportionality. And, thirdly, *the context makes a significant difference*. Therefore, an electoral system design should also take the given party-system environment into account.