

9 How Electoral Systems Shape What Voters Think about Democracy

CHRISTOPHER J. ANDERSON

When they fail to offer choices, elections lose their meaning as instruments of democracy (Powell 2000). Yet, despite their centrality for the quality of democratic elections, little is known about how the variety of options voters have on Election Day affect people's views of the political system. Are the choices available to citizens connected to consent? The literature suggests that they are, but scholars disagree about whether more and more distinct choices are good or bad for the legitimacy of political systems. On one hand, scholars have reported higher levels of support for political systems with more proportional election rules and expansive party systems. On the other, a long-standing concern in comparative politics has been with the corroding effects of polarized and fragmented party systems, which often are thought to be the natural by-product of proportional electoral systems. Who, if anyone, is right?

To answer the question of whether fragmented and polarized party systems are good for or inimical to democratic support requires that we differentiate the key dimensions of electoral supply and delineate the logic by which they are expected to shape voters' attitudes about the political system.¹ It also requires that we examine the connection between the kinds of choices democratic elections provide at the level of countries on one hand and the attitudes of individual voters on the other. Below, I do so by arguing that the menu of choices on hand at election time shapes citizen attitudes about democratic political systems, but that it does so with distinct consequences for different groups of voters. Electoral supply in the form of party system polarization and the number of viable parties influences citizens who are likely to take a dim view of the political system – i.e., those who voted for the losers in the last election – differently from those who are among the winners