

10 Party Strategies, Institutions, and Electoral System Effects

ROMAIN LACHAT

1. Introduction

We know at least since the classical study of Duverger (1951) that electoral systems influence the distribution of seats as well as the behaviour of parties and voters. Political actors anticipate the consequences of the rules used to transform the votes cast into seats (Cox 1997; Lijphart 1994). Three effects of electoral systems usually are distinguished: a mechanical effect and two psychological effects. The *mechanical effect* of an electoral system is a direct consequence of the electoral formula. Depending on the distribution of votes and on the degree of proportionality of the electoral formula, the share of seats received by each party in competition will match more or less closely its share of votes. Given the limited number of seats to be distributed, however, even the most proportional electoral system will create disparities, with some parties receiving a disproportionately high share of seats, and others receiving less seats than votes or even no seats at all. This mechanical effect leads voters and parties to strategically adapt their behaviour. This is reflected in two indirect electoral system effects. The *psychological effect on voters* means that some citizens will vote in a strategic way.¹ They will avoid wasting their votes by not supporting parties or candidates who have no real chances of winning a seat (Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Blais et al. 2001). The *psychological effect on parties*, finally, means that some parties will refrain from entering the race and spending resources in electoral districts in which their chances of success are too thin. The general expectation formulated in the literature is that less proportional electoral systems have stronger effects. That is, a less proportional electoral system will lead to more parties deciding not to enter the race, to