

The Existential Threat: Varieties of Socialism and the Origins of Electoral Systems in Early Democracies

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Published online: 30 September 2012
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Abstract The origins of electoral systems in early democracies have received a great deal of attention in recent years, as scholars seek to explain why at the time of suffrage expansion some countries adopted proportional representation (PR) while others chose single-member plurality (SMP). This paper offers a systematic explanation of the choice of electoral systems based on the “existential threat” posed by rising workers’ parties after suffrage expansion, that is, the extent to which these parties threatened the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. Original historical research offers important correctives to the dominant scholarly narrative, revealing that PR and SMP were both novel systems at the time, devised to replace the “mixed” systems that prevailed in the predemocratic period. Both, moreover, were seen as elite safeguards that, through different mechanisms, would protect right parties from the impact of suffrage expansion. Mid-range analysis of 18 historical cases reveals that the choice ultimately turned on the different strategic advantages and time horizons associated with the two systems as well as the existential threat presented by new workers’ parties.

Keywords Democratization · Electoral systems · Institutional choice · Party formation · Advanced democracies

The origins of electoral systems in advanced democracies have received a great deal of attention in recent years. Of particular concern to scholars is the dramatic transformation that took place throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as

I am grateful to Ivan Ascher, Jose Cheibub, Jorgen Elklit, Gary Marks, Csaba Nikolenyi, Tatishe Nteta, M.J. Peterson, and Jesse Rhodes for valuable comments on drafts of this paper. The paper has also greatly benefited from feedback received at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Comparative Politics Workshop, as well as the ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop “Why Electoral Reform.” In addition, I would like to thank the Editors of *Studies in Comparative International Development* as well as two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on the manuscript.

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countries embarked on suffrage expansion. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a wide array of electoral configurations could be found throughout the democratizing world. By the Second World War, many countries had moved to a system of proportional representation (PR) while some adopted single-member plurality (SMP) for national elections. What explains this institutional upheaval and what accounts for the variation in outcomes? Scholars interested in a wide range of issues from comparative democratization to the dynamics of institutional change and the varieties of capitalism have converged on these questions in the belief that understanding the origins of electoral systems may potentially hold the key to a number of central questions: Was democracy a victory from below or manipulation from above? Does democratic consolidation rely on the use of undemocratic institutions? Do institutions have an independent impact on political outcomes or are they merely epiphenomenal, reflecting deeper structural conditions?

Existing research into the question, while producing some important findings, has yielded an endless chicken and egg dilemma. Most agree that the choice of PR or SMP was the result of the interplay between social structures and political institutions but strongly disagree about the causal mechanism and even the direction of the causal arrows. Scholars have shown empirically a high correlation between PR and strong socialist parties and conversely between SMP and weak socialist parties, however, the question remains: Which came first? The key to this empirical puzzle I argue lay in understanding the impact of electoral socialism on predemocratic electoral configurations. By “predemocratic” I refer to the period of parliamentary government prior to the extension of manhood suffrage, which in many countries involved electoral competition but excluded large portions of the electorate.¹ Accounts of electoral system choice have erroneously assumed that during this period, the electoral system in place was SMP. Thus, they have focused on explaining only the move to PR, concluding that where SMP prevailed it was “retained.” However, historical evidence reveals that most of the countries in question were not starting with SMP. Predemocratic electoral arrangements usually consisted of “mixed” systems: haphazard combinations of single- and multimember districts, elected under either plurality or majority rule. Both SMP and PR were in fact devised as alternatives to these mixed systems.

Understanding the point of origin sheds important light on the nature of the choice and the causal mechanism at work. SMP and PR, I argue, were not means to different ends but different means to the same end—safeguarding predemocratic right parties against threats associated with suffrage expansion; in particular, against the “existential threat” posed by electoral socialism.² What explains the choice of one or the other was the different strategic advantages and time horizons associated with each system. SMP offered less protection to right parties in the short run but could potentially exclude workers’ parties entirely in the long run. In contrast, PR offered more immediate protection but would effectively concede a permanent presence in the party system to one or more workers’ party. Ultimately, what determined right

¹ According to this definition, the “democratic” period is understood to begin (though certainly not end) with manhood suffrage, which opened up the sphere of political participation.

² The term “right parties” refers to both Conservative and Liberal parties who would often find themselves to the right of the median voter after suffrage expansion.

parties' preferences and the extent to which they were willing to risk competition under SMP or seek the added protection of PR, was the existential threat posed by new workers' parties and particularly the threat they posed to the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. This suggests that the dynamics of institutional choice during democratization turned not exclusively on a logic of partisan seat maximization but also a desire to shape the ideas and interests that will have a lasting impact in the new democratic order.

Explaining Electoral System Choice

A rich body of scholarship has sought to understand the origins of electoral systems in advanced democracies. For the most part however, the focus has been on explaining the move to PR. Starting with Stein Rokkan's (1970) seminal study, scholars have linked the move to PR in many Western European countries to the dynamics of democratization and particularly to the rise of socialist parties after suffrage expansion. Rokkan maintained that majoritarian systems were only acceptable where right parties could make common cause against the socialists. But where the "inheritance of hostility and distrust" made a coalition of the right impossible, right parties moved to proportional systems in the hopes that the lower threshold of entry would allow them to continue to compete independently (Rokkan 1970, p. 158).

Building on one of Rokkan's central propositions, Carles Boix (1999) has expanded and formalized the argument, hypothesizing that the choice depended on the electoral threat presented by new socialist parties, a function of the electoral strength of the left and the coordinating capacity of the right. Thus, where weak socialist parties emerged, unable to challenge right parties, and where strong socialist party emerged but the right could successfully coordinate, leading to the rise of a dominant right party, SMP was maintained. It was only where the new socialist party was strong and the right remained fragmented, unable to coordinate around a dominant right party, that PR was adopted.

While usefully operationalizing some of the key concepts in Rokkan's work, this explanation has run into considerable difficulty on historical and analytical grounds. Critics have been quick to point to a number of cases that deviated considerably from the logic of partisan seat maximization (Blais et al. 2005; Andrews and Jackman 2005; Cusack et al. 2007; Calvo 2009). One is Australia where SMP was retained despite the rise of a socialist party posing a significant electoral threat to fragmented right parties. Another is Belgium, where PR was adopted despite the successful electoral coordination of the right around a dominant party that controlled two thirds of parliamentary seats.³ There are also a number of cases that cast doubt on the explanatory power of the "electoral threat," as PR was adopted long before workers' parties would truly pose a threat in the electoral arena. This includes Denmark and Switzerland, where despite the presence of a fragmented right, the weakness of the

³ Rokkan originally explained the Belgian case as an exception where the move to PR had more to do with concerns for the representation of ethnic and religious minorities. However, there is little in the historical accounts to support such a claim, as the religious and ethnic cleavage had receded in Belgian politics by the time of the adoption of PR (see Kalyvas 1996; Caramani 2004, p. 98).

electoral threat posed by workers makes it an unlikely factor in electoral system choice (Calvo 2009, pp. 255–256). My analysis will show that while this line of scholarship has been correct in emphasizing the exclusionary nature of the choice, an excessive focus on the electoral threat has obscured the broader existential threat posed by workers' parties and undermined efforts to systematically explain right parties' responses.

An alternative explanation has identified very different dynamics behind the move to PR, arguing that the choice was an endogenous outcome reflecting deeper structural conditions. Building on scholarship that has shown the advantages of PR for the left (Crepaz 1998; Persson and Tabellini 2003; Iversen and Soskice 2006; Rodden 2006; Martin and Swank 2008), as well as its benefits for broader economic interests in trade and industrial relations (Katzenstein 1985; Rogowski 1987), those advancing the endogenous institutions argument maintain that structural factors produced both the institutions and their political outcomes, suggesting that electoral systems themselves are epiphenomenal.

Alesina and Glaser (2004) have argued that the move to PR was not a reaction to the rise of socialist parties but rather a sign of their strength as they demanded more inclusionary democratic institutions. In a similar vein, Cusack et al. (2007) have argued that PR was achieved through cooperation between predemocratic right parties and new left parties where national level economic coordination necessitated a consensual policy framework to support economic policies. SMP was retained where structural conditions did not make such cooperation necessary.

One of the most important contributions of this line of inquiry has been to highlight the impact of the varieties of capitalism, and particularly the varieties of workers' parties that emerged at this time, on the choice of electoral system. As my analysis will show, these structural considerations did indeed play an important role in the choice. However, there is little in the existing historical evidence to support the claim of inclusionary motivations behind the move to PR. Most problematic is the notion that the left was unambiguously in favor of PR. In fact, historical evidence reveals that there were vast differences in the position of socialist parties, and in many cases the left was adamantly against PR (Penadés 2008).⁴ The expectation was that workers would come to constitute the majority and therefore a move to PR would undercut labor's strength.

Also problematic is the notion that actors understood the long-term consequences of different systems for economic interests. As Kreuzer (2010, p. 17) has shown, there is little evidence linking economic interests to institutional preferences. Actors at the time had very little understanding of either the dangers or the benefits of PR for economic policy. PR was not expected to have the distributive consequences that we now know it does. Nor was it expected to impact economic interests in trade or

⁴ This was true particularly in Sweden, Denmark, and Belgium. In other cases, socialist parties were often either agnostic on the issue or expressed lukewarm support, often using PR as a bargaining chip to extract other concessions. Only in the case of the German SPD did the socialists truly embrace PR. The logic behind this support was that PR would allow the party to appeal to a primarily working class electorate, thus sparing it the need to moderate its platform to appeal to other electors. It was a position criticized by many pragmatists who recognized that PR would hurt the left, but proportionalists ultimately prevailed and PR was adopted in the SPDs platform in 1891.

industrial relations. It was not until PR had been in place for some time that these effects became apparent.

Understanding the Starting Point

My intervention in this debate starts with an important corrective to the dominant historical narrative regarding the originary electoral systems. In particular, these accounts have tended to assume that the starting point in the predemocratic period was SMP. Thus, they have misconstrued the nature of the choice, focusing primarily on the dynamics behind the move to PR and assuming that where SMP prevailed it was “retained” because of a lack of threat or economic incentive. However, most of the countries in question were not starting with SMP. At the time of suffrage expansion, what prevailed in most countries were “mixed” electoral systems, a combination of single- and multimember districts elected under either plurality or majority rule (Blais et al. 2005; Colomer 2007). Though a system of uniform single-member districts may have existed in early stages of democratization, over time, most countries grew out of this and into more complex systems incorporating multimember districts as well. This evolved out of the prevalent ad-hoc practices of apportionment. Redistricting was always a messy and highly contentious process because it often involved taking members away from districts and allocating them to others. It was easier logistically and politically to add new representatives to areas with growing populations. These tended to be the urban areas that steadily grew in size with the rise of industry. By the late nineteenth century, single-member districts in most countries could only be found in small rural areas. Elsewhere, the number of representatives per district would balloon with the size of the population. In some cases, this reached well into the double digits (Colomer 2007; Ahmed 2012).

By the mid-nineteenth century, these mixed systems were the norm, not the exception.⁵ Though they shared with SMP their majoritarian decision rules, they differed dramatically in their operation. Besides the lack of uniformity, these mixed systems presented serious problems in that they tended to greatly exaggerate majorities, particularly in the multimember districts. Because all members within these districts were elected as a single slate, a party with even a slight plurality of the votes could sweep the entire district taking all contested seats. What further exacerbated the danger was that in most countries these multimember districts were usually established in urban areas with large working class electorates. Once workers had reached their full potential as an electorally majority, it was feared that workers’ parties would easily sweep these districts. In anticipation of this, right parties set out to find alternative electoral configurations that would allow for “minority representation” and help them to compete more effectively with rising workers’ parties. A number of electoral innovations were introduced during this period, but over time countries converged on SMP and PR as the most effective safeguards of right parties’ interests.

⁵ SMP could only be considered the originating system in cases of late state formation or where the regime was interrupted: in Italy, SMP was adopted at the time of unification in 1861, in Germany the Electoral Law of 1871 established SMP as part of the Federal Constitution, and in the same year SMP was adopted with the founding of the French Third Republic. Elsewhere, however, the lack of systematic apportionment meant that the electoral configurations varied widely within countries.

They were both conceived as forms of minority representation and for a time were even treated as functional equivalents. Both were essentially “strategies of competition” (Ahmed 2012) that would allow right parties to be more competitive in areas where workers’ parties were expected to be strong.

PR would accomplish this by lowering the threshold for entry, making it possible for right parties to gain representation with a smaller share of the votes. Under the preexisting systems, the threshold was either a plurality or a majority of the vote. Both would be prohibitively high in a situation where workers were in a majority. In contrast, the threshold for PR was either the de-facto mathematical threshold or a predetermined quota, both of which would be significantly lower than a plurality of the vote. This would allow right parties to continue competing, albeit in a diminished capacity, even after workers had reach their full potential as an electoral majority.

Perhaps more surprising is that SMP was initially introduced as a form of minority representation as well. Though SMP was not a completely new discovery—single-member districts existed by default in many constituencies where population did not warrant additional members—it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that SMP came to be seen as an electoral safeguard and explicitly promoted for that purpose.⁶ What was “discovered” is that by applying SMP uniformly to the entire country, it could produce an element of minority representation. This is because it would essentially open up the “game” of redistricting, a game in which right parties would have a distinct advantage over rising workers’ parties. Under the preexisting mixed systems, at-large elections in multimember districts could potentially shut out right parties in areas with large working class electorates. In contrast, SMP would allow right parties to manipulate the “geographic distribution of preferences” (Rodden 2010) to their advantage, strategically parsing out districts so as to establish safer seats for their candidates. Class-based gerrymandering would allow right parties to protect some seats in these all-important multimember districts, which combined with victories in rural areas where they were naturally stronger would allow them to maintain their dominant position, thus limiting the long-term electoral potential of new of workers’ parties.

Thus, the sharp dichotomy that has been drawn between SMP and PR is misleading. They were both devised as electoral safeguards that would allow right parties to be more competitive in districts where workers’ parties were potentially stronger. Often they were considered side by side, not as means to different ends, but as different means to the same end. This can be seen throughout the cases examined here. Take for example Belgium, where districts ranged from 1 to 18 members under the predemocratic majoritarian system. After the introduction of manhood suffrage in 1893 the Socialists made impressive gains, surpassing the Liberals in their first contested election to become the main party of opposition. The mixed system aided in their quick rise, particularly in the multimember districts. Of the greatest concern for right parties were the larger urban constituencies of Antwerp, Brussels, Leuven, Gent, Mons, Charleroi, and Liege, each with over six members (Moyne 1970). By 1898, the Socialists already controlled Mons, Charleroi, and Liege and were making gains in other industrial areas as well. Both SMP and PR were proposed at this time as

⁶ The earliest instances in which we find SMP implemented explicitly as an electoral safeguard came in the USA in 1842, Denmark in 1848, and the UK in 1884 (see below).

remedies to the socialist threat. Indeed the governing Catholic party itself was divided on the matter. The choice was between the D'Hondt system of PR endorsed by Prime Minister Smet D'Nayer and a proposal for SMP supported by Charles Woeste, a prominent Catholic MP (Scudamore 1895, p. 337). Both sides maintained that theirs was the best means of ensuring the desired representation of minorities. The proposal for PR would ultimately prevail in 1899 but only after several proposals for SMP had been rejected for fear that the need for continuous gerrymandering under the system would produce its own political perils.

That PR and SMP were considered to be functional equivalent could be seen in other cases as well. In the UK for example, after a drawn-out battle over PR that spanned the two great Reform Acts, it was SMP that was ultimately adopted to provide an element of minority representation. When the system of SMP was proposed in 1885, however, it was in fact presented as an alternative to PR. According to Charles Dilke a Liberal MP and one of the architects of the bill, under SMP, “the representation of minorities would be secure in the most practical form in which it could be secured by parliamentary measures... the result of the Bill would be to give a large and varied representation in that House to minorities” (United Kingdom 1885, p. 1816). This is because it was accompanied by specific instructions to gerrymander according to occupation. Instructions to the commission entrusted with determining the constituencies went so far as to specify “commercial districts,” “poor law districts,” “miners’ districts,” etc. (Hare 1885). In this way, SMP was expected to produce results very similar to PR.

To be sure, later generations of policy makers would come to see stronger dichotomies between these systems and SMP would cease to be considered a form of minority representation. However, at the time they were initially adopted, SMP and PR were both seen as electoral safeguards that could, through different mechanisms, secure the representation of minorities and protect right parties from the impact of suffrage expansion.

The Logic of the Choice

Understanding the preexisting electoral configurations fundamentally alters the framework of analysis of electoral system choice in advanced democracies. Instead of simply examining the move to PR, we must treat both PR and SMP as positive cases of change. Both were departures from the predemocratic status quo, and both were conceived as electoral safeguards. Moreover, though today SMP and PR are seen as diametrically opposed systems, they were initially conceived as functional equivalents. How then do we explain the variation? Why did some countries choose PR and others SMP? Previous work has shown the highly contingent nature of electoral systems choice, as elites sought to navigate the emerging political situation under conditions of uncertainty (Ahmed 2010). Here, I offer a systematic explanation of the logic guiding elites in their choice. I argue that the decision to adopt SMP or PR ultimately turned on the existential threat presented by workers’ parties following suffrage expansion. This is because although both SMP and PR could act as safeguards, each had different strategic advantages and different time horizons. These features were especially important given the high levels of uncertainty regarding the

electoral prospects of workers' parties. Of the two, PR was understood to be the stronger safeguard—not necessarily a safeguard against a stronger threat, but a better guarantee of right party representation. It was a more reliable measure in that it would not require continuous redistricting in order to operate properly and therefore would not rely on the continued political strength of right parties. SMP, because it required the ongoing involvement of right parties in contentious battles for districting, presumed that they would continue to be strong enough to play the game.

However, the choice of PR was not a straightforward one. PR would offer more immediate protection to right parties, but it would make it easier for workers' parties to gain representation. Because PR would lower the threshold of entry not just for right parties but for all parties, it would effectively make it easier for workers' parties to get a foothold in the electoral landscape. PR would in fact open up the electoral space to a wide array of forces, potentially leading to party fragmentation and the rise of more radical workers' parties. Thus, although PR was a more fool-proof safeguard, adopting it was essentially conceding that at least one workers' party, perhaps more, would have a permanent presence in the party system.

In contrast, SMP would offer moderate protection against immediate threats, but by maintaining a high threshold for representation, it would make it more difficult for workers' parties to establish a permanent presence in the electoral arena. This strategy of competition also came with significant risks. Because SMP rewarded high premiums for marginal victories, if workers' parties were to make quick gains, the result would likely be an overwhelming socialist victory. Thus, while SMP left open the possibility that workers' parties could be eliminated from competition in the long run, it left right parties very vulnerable in the short run.

Because of the uncertainty surrounding the electoral potential of workers' parties throughout this process, neither SMP nor PR represented a dominant strategy that right parties could pursue in all scenarios. Both systems involved risks and tradeoffs. Most importantly, each involved different time horizons. The decision ultimately depended on whether or not right parties were willing to endure the short term risk of competition under SMP for the long term payoff of containing workers' parties. And this, in turn, depended on the existential threat posed by workers' parties, that is, the extent to which these parties threatened the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. It was the existential threat, rather than the electoral threat, posed by workers' parties that determined the stakes involved and whether right parties were willing to risk competition under SMP or seek the added protection of PR.

The Existential Threat

Previous iterations of the socialist threat argument (Rokkan 1970; Boix 1999) have tended to look almost exclusively at the electoral strength of workers' parties in relation to right parties as an explanation of the choice of electoral systems, assuming that stronger safeguards were chosen where workers' parties were stronger. This is problematic because it effectively reduces the socialist threat to an electoral threat, hindering efforts to systematically explain the choice. My analysis seeks to move beyond such narrowly construed notions of the socialist threat to consider the broader threat workers' parties posed to the existing political and social order. It was this existential threat that determined right parties' risk threshold; that is, whether they

were willing to risk a socialist victory for the longer time horizon of SMP or hedge with the safer choice of PR. The electoral threat presented by workers' parties was neither necessary nor sufficient in determining the choice of electoral systems. And while in some cases the existential threat and the electoral threat coincided, as I will show below, it was the level of existential threat that ultimately drove the decision. I take the existential threat posed by workers' parties to be a function of two key factors: (1) whether an electorally viable workers' party emerged and (2) the level of ideological radicalism it displayed.

The measure of electoral viability is meant to assess whether an independent workers' party had established a permanent presence in the party system. To some, this measure may seem too broad in that it does not take into account the relative electoral strength of workers' parties. To others it may seem too narrow in that it does not consider the broader revolutionary threat existing in society outside of electoral competition. In assessing the existential threat, however, neither electoral strength nor the broader revolutionary threat would be determinative. With regards to the former, the electoral strength of workers' parties at any given time would not be decisive because the move to PR was often preemptive. Because the choice of electoral systems often depended on right parties' calculations of what an anticipated workers' majority would mean for their interests, simply having an electorally viable workers' party would be sufficient. Once a workers' party established a permanent presence in the party system, even if it did not come close to actually gaining a majority, it posed a credible threat of someday doing so. As for the broader revolutionary threat, while there is no doubt that this had an impact on the tone of debate, electoral systems were ill-equipped to deal with such threats. For this, elites had other, often more devastating, tools of repression. Electoral system were only suited to deal with the threat as it was manifest in the electoral arena. Thus, the focus on viable parties that had embraced electoral socialism offers the greatest analytical purchase on these matters.

The second measure of existential threat, ideological radicalism, would also prove highly consequential for the choice. This is because it was the ideological disposition of worker's parties that ultimately determined the extent to which the socialist threat was in fact a *socialist* threat. Why did the character of the threat matter? Because in the normal course of things, simply having an electoral threat from a new party does not necessitate changes to the electoral system. Successful new entrants typically trigger party realignments and are absorbed into the existing system.⁷ In fact, new parties had been entering the electoral arena throughout the nineteenth century. Demographic and ideological shifts meant that new parties were frequently forming and party systems were constantly absorbing new entrants that would have posed an electoral threat to incumbent parties. But there were no attempts to restructure the electoral system on any of these occasions. This is because the entrance of a new party in itself was not enough to produce the level of cooperation between existing parties that would be necessary to implement changes to the electoral system.

⁷ A long line of scholarship has explored the dynamics of party realignment under majoritarianism, particularly in the USA. See for example the work of Key (1955), Burnham (1970), and Sundquist (1983). Though such realignments are rare, they tend to happen during periods of significant ideological and demographic transformation, such as that experienced with suffrage expansion.

The ideological disposition of workers' parties influenced the incentive structure for right party cooperation on the question of electoral reform because it determined the stakes of competition. The more moderate were workers' parties, the more they could be treated as just another entrant. Radical workers' parties on the other hand posed a threat to the existing social order. And by raising the stakes of competition, ideologically radical workers' parties created common ground between right parties. This was important because the type of cooperation that would be necessary for right parties to bring about changes to the electoral system was uncommon. After all, these were rival parties with distinct partisan interests and often competing economic interests. However, these interests were in themselves predicated on the preservation of the existing social order, particularly the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. Thus, where workers' parties threatened a radical departure from the status quo, right parties' desire to protect their shared class interests outweighed the cost to their particular partisan and economic interests.

For these reasons, as I will argue below, it was the existential rather than electoral threat posed by workers' parties that best accounts for the outcomes. But there is more at stake in this distinction than simply the technical accuracy and explanatory power of the argument. Understanding actors' motivations sheds important light on the nature of institutional choice in the context of democratization. In particular, the ideational component of the decision takes the politics of electoral system choice out of the realm of rationalist seat maximization which is often assumed to underlie electoral politics. Instead, what emerges is a constitutive politics in which elites sought to shape the ideas and interests that would have a lasting influence in the new democratic order. In this view, what is important about the politics of electoral system choice in the context of democratization is not just that it sets the rules of the game in some generic way but rather that it determines the players who will have a seat at the new democratic table.

In the following sections, I offer "episode analysis" (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010) of the logic of electoral system choice in 18 democratizing countries between 1848 and 1939. Here, I adopt a "medium-N" qualitative approach (Haggard and Kaufman 2008, pp. 17–25), offering mid-range empirical analysis of the dynamics of electoral system choice. This approach offers a great deal of leverage for theory building and hypothesis generation, as it strikes the necessary balance between identifying patterns of electoral system choice under given conditions and assessing the plausibility of the causal connections through contextual analysis (Kreuzer 2011). The cases examined include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the USA.

This case selection and periodization allows me to examine the determinates of electoral system choice at a critical period of democratic development. Within this group of countries this period constitutes the most intense phase of industrialization and working class mobilization. Thus, focusing on the origins of electoral systems during this period is useful because it allows us to examine elite responses to changes in the workers' movement, and particularly variations in the existential threat posed by workers' parties. Moreover, the choices made in this period consolidated the power of the key players and the decisions became more or less "locked-in" by extant political circumstances. There are of course a number of cases of postwar

adoption (Italy, Germany, and Spain), but because I am interested in the ideological radicalism of workers' parties, I eliminate these cases from consideration. In these cases, socialist parties may have maintained a doctrinal commitment to Marxist principles, but after decades of fascist domination, the Socialists' program of revolutionary social transformation had lost much of its force (Kreuzer 2010). Attempts to explain both pre- and postwar cases run the risk of being a historical evidence in their treatment of actors and motives. Thus, limiting the study in this way is necessary for systematic analysis.

Patterns of Electoral System Choice

Together, the electoral viability and ideological radicalism of workers' parties indicated the extent to which they represented a broadly conceived existential threat to the social order. It was this threat, in turn, that determined the stakes of competition under SMP and PR. As the following table demonstrates, there was a strong correspondence between the choice of electoral systems and the existential threat posed by workers' parties (Table 1).⁸

No Viable Workers' Party

In the first scenario, where no viable workers' party emerged at the national level, SMP was deemed the optimal strategy of competition. The only two cases that fall into this category are the USA and Canada. In both cases, SMP was adopted in response to nascent working class mobilization. In the USA, calls for electoral safeguards began with the rise of Workingmen's Parties after suffrage expansion. A uniform system of single-member districts was adopted as part of the Apportionment Act of 1842. The move to SMP was expressly advocated as a means of providing minority representation to remedy the dangers of the mixed systems that had previously existed (Shields 1985). Increased working class mobilization in the post-Civil War period led to renewed calls for electoral safeguards. The success of the Greenback-Labor party in the 1870s, along with the rise of workers' parties at the state and municipal level, inspired an organized movement to establish PR throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Despite some success at the subnational level, however, efforts to establish PR for the House of Representatives were consistently defeated by those who feared that it would backfire by creating greater incentives for independent working class mobilization (Hoag and Hallet 1926). By the 1890s, the labor movement had definitively moved away from direct political action at the national level (Lorwin 1972, p. 91) obviating the need for further electoral safeguards.

⁸ The measure for electoral viability is binary: a party is considered to be viable once it has successfully contested three consecutive elections. The level of ideological radicalism is broken down into three categories: "moderate" representing a commitment to cross-class cooperation to achieve progressive reform but tacit acceptance of the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy, "mixed" representing a divided movement combining elements of reformism and radicalism into a distinct doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism; and "radical" representing a commitment to productive class struggle and a desire for radical transformation of the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. A detailed discussion of the measures for both electoral viability and ideological radicalism can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Table 1 Patterns of electoral system choice

Case	Party	Electorally viable	Ideologically radical	Existential threat ^a	SMP	PR
Scenario 1						
USA	SPA	N	Y	NA	1842	NA
Canada	CLP	N	N	NA	1900	NA
Scenario 2						
UK	BLP	Y	N	NA	1884	NA
Australia	ALP	Y	N	NA	1901	NA
New Zealand	NZLP	Y	N	NA	1905	NA
Scenario 3						
France	SFIO	Y	Mixed	1914	1871, 1889, and 1928	1919
Italy	PSI	Y	Mixed	1914	1861	1919
Spain	PSOE	Y	Mixed	1936	NA	1931
Scenario 4						
Germany	SPD	Y	Y	1891	1871	1919
Austria	SPÖ	Y	Y	1923	NA	1919
Sweden	SAP	Y	Y	1902	NA	1908
Finland	SDP	Y	Y	1909	NA	1907
Norway	DNA	Y	Y	1909	1905	1919
Belgium	POB	Y	Y	1898	NA	1899
Denmark	SD	Y	Y	1906	1849	1918
Netherlands	SDAP	Y	Y	1905	NA	1917
Iceland	SDPI	Y	Y	1934	1904	1934, 1942, and 1959
Switzerland	PS	Y	Y	1914	NA	1919

Source: Ahmed 2012 (reprinted with permission); Sources consulted: Mackie and Rose 1974; Grofman and Lijphart 2002; Ritter 1990; Farrell and McAllister 2006; Hart 1992; Carstairs 1980; Cole and Campbell, 1989; Aardal 2002; Colomer 2004

SPA Socialist Party of America, *CLP* Canadian Labor Party, *BLP* British Labour Party, *ALP* Australian Labor Party, *NZLP* New Zealand Labour Party, *SFIO* French Socialist Party, *PSI* Italian Socialist Party, *PSOE* Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, *SPD* German Social Democratic Party, *SPÖ* Austrian Social Democratic Party, *SAP* Swedish Social Democratic Party, *SDP* Finnish Social Democratic Party, *DNA* Norwegian Social Democratic Party, *POB* Belgian Workers' Party, *SD* Danish Social Democratic Party, *SDAP* Social Democratic Workers' Party, *SDPI* Icelandic Social Democratic Party, *PS* Swiss Social Democratic Party

^a An anomaly that appears is that, with the measure of existential threat used here, there are a number of cases in which PR seems to be adopted before the point at which the threat appears. This includes Austria, Finland, and Spain. In all three cases, ideologically radical workers' parties had successfully participated in elections in the predemocratic period and the severity of the threat was understood before the move to democracy. For this reason, in all three cases, PR was adopted with the new democratic constitution. However, given the conservative measure of electoral viability used here, they would not technically be considered a threat until they had successfully contested three consecutive elections. Rather than adjusting the measure for these cases, I choose to keep it constant in order to maintain consistency across cases.

In Canada, SMP was adopted in 1903, 3 years after the first independent labor candidate, Arthur Puttee, was elected to parliament (McCormack 1970). The

Representation Act of 1903 removed districting from the provinces and established a parliamentary commission charged with regulating uniform single-member districts (Canada 1903, pp. 405–429). The rise of the Canadian Labor Party (CLP) in 1917 inspired a movement to establish PR as a stronger safeguard of minority representation. However, the limited success of the CLP, which received only marginal support in a handful of elections, limited the impact of PR advocacy as right party leadership saw more pitfalls than advantages in the move. The CLP was finally disbanded after a few unsuccessful electoral campaigns and with it ended the campaign for PR.

In both cases, right parties came to represent workers' interests, and in the absence of a viable workers' party, there was little incentive to pursue a stronger safeguard. Moreover, the adoption of PR as an added safeguard in this scenario would have been potentially dangerous. By lowering the threshold of representation, PR would have aided independent working class mobilization and made it more likely that an electorally viable workers' party would emerge. For this reason, right parties chose to retain SMP, which offered moderate protection against emerging workers' parties without the risk of further strengthening or radicalizing working class mobilization.

Workers' Party Electorally Viable, Ideologically Moderate

SMP was also the chosen strategy in the second scenario where workers' parties emerged but maintained relatively moderate ideological platforms. This was the case in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, where workers' representatives achieved sustained representation from the first elections after suffrage expansion but maintained a moderate ideological platform, rejecting the notion of revolutionary class conflict in favor of an agenda of reform through cross-class cooperation (Hunt 1981; Bean 1988; Burgmann 1985). The dynamics of electoral system choice followed a similar pattern in all three cases: SMP was adopted in the early stages of working class mobilization. As workers' movements intensified and electorally viable workers' parties emerged, all three cases saw the rise of campaigns for PR. However, despite the fact that workers' parties often posed considerable electoral challenges, in some cases even displacing established right parties, PR was ultimately rejected in all three countries (Hart 1992; Farrell and McAllister 2005; Hamer 1987).

In the UK, the provision for a uniform system of SMP came as part of the Reform Act of 1885, just a few years after the first labor representatives were elected to the House of Commons. Several attempts to implement PR as an additional safeguard would be made in the following decades but all would be rejected in favor of elaborate redistricting schemes under SMP. Despite its growing electoral strength, the relative moderation of the British Labour Party (BLP) reassured the right that they posed little danger to the status quo. This was reinforced by the strong tradition of cross-class cooperation that was cultivated by both right parties, but most notably by the Liberals who helped to establish Lib-Labism as a central feature of British politics (Hunt 1981, pp. 275–281; Hinton 1983, p. 33; Cole 1941, pp. 42–43). The sudden rise of Labour in 1922 would catch all parties off guard and effectively close the window of opportunity to implement PR. In this way, the rise of Labour forced a party realignment in the UK. Though the Liberals survived as a minor party, the Conservatives would emerge as the dominant right party and Labour would take the Liberals' place as the main party of opposition.

Similar patterns could be found in Australia and New Zealand as well. The case of Australia is especially instructive in this regard. Because it is the only case that adopted SMP despite the presence of a strong electoral threat, Australia represents a crucial case for arguments advancing partisan electoral engineering as an explanation. There, SMP was adopted along with the Federal Constitution of 1900. From the very first election after suffrage expansion, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) would pose a significant electoral threat to the fragmented right parties, earning 21 % of parliamentary seats. In the second election in 1903, Labor consolidated its position, earning 33 % of the seat share and producing a three-way tie with the Liberals and Conservatives. But as Labor continued to grow, several efforts to establish PR, first in 1902, then in 1906, and again in 1909, were consistently rejected in favor of SMP (Uhr 1998, pp. 108–114; Graham 1968). By 1910, the window of opportunity for PR had closed as Labor eclipsed both right parties and forced a party realignment. Though efforts to establish some form of PR continued, right parties no longer had the numbers to push PR through on their own and the opposition of the ALP proved decisive (Farrell and McAllister 2006, pp. 36–37). Finally in 1918, the issue of electoral system reform was settled with some degree of permanence with the adoption of the Alternative Vote, a modified majoritarian system that allowed for preferential voting. This was a modest concession that would aid in the coordination of the right, while maintaining the advantages of majoritarianism for the left (Farrell and McAllister 2006, pp. 39–40).

In New Zealand, SMP was established in 1905, just a few months after the first independent labor representative was elected to parliament (Atkinson 2003, pp. 289–290). There too, several proposals for PR met with defeat. In New Zealand, labor was slower to mobilize into electoral politics. A loose parliamentary coalition of labor representatives existed as early as 1901 but the New Zealand Labour Party (NZLP) would not officially form until 1916. Labour's rise after this point was quick and steady. In 1922, Labour replaced the Liberals as the main party of opposition. Though the Reform Party remained dominant over the next several elections with almost a majority of the votes, by 1928, Labour had forced right parties into a three-way split. As with the case of Australia, in New Zealand as well, this situation of electoral threat and the high level of fragmentation on the right did not lead to the adoption of PR. Instead, right parties consistently rejected PR until the window of opportunity had closed and Labour forced a party realignment.

The relative lack of concern regarding the socialist threat in these cases reflects the fact that workers' parties did not actually represent a "socialist" threat. They were reformist parties that sought progress through the existing social order and posed a minimal threat to the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. This point was made forcefully by J.W. Kirwan a Liberal MP commenting on the meteoric rise of Labor in Australia, which by 1903 posed a serious electoral threat to the fragmented right parties. "In Australia" he maintained "even the enemies of the Labour party have no extreme fears of the result of its probable domination. To those who do not agree with the party's aims, the prospect of its obtaining power excites no more alarm than the average English Conservative might feel regarding the possible capture of the Ministerial branches by the Liberals" (Kirwan 1905, pp. 828–829). Thus, even where workers' parties posed a serious electoral threat, so long as they maintained a moderate ideological position, SMP remained the optimal strategy of competition for

right parties. Moreover, despite the rise of workers' parties in this scenario, right parties still had something to lose in moving to PR. The partial success of right parties in capturing the working class vote had forced workers' parties to develop broad-based appeals and form cross-class alliances in order to be electorally viable. Though PR would have likely reduced the seat share of workers' parties, it would have eliminated the need for such broad-based appeals, potentially strengthening radical elements within the existing workers' party or facilitating the rise of new workers' parties with a more radical orientation. Because the ideological moderation of workers was valuable in itself, right parties were unwilling to jeopardize this for the added protection of PR.

Workers' Party Electorally Viable, Mixed Ideological Platform

A third scenario presented a situation where a divided workers' movement resulted in the rise of electorally viable workers' parties with mixed ideological platforms. In these cases, strong Marxist influences combined with a long tradition of socialist eclecticism to produce a doctrine of "revolutionary syndicalism" which many have identified as a distinct ideological orientation, reflecting a combination of moderate and radical doctrines (Bartolini 2000; Steenson 1991). Cases where workers' parties identified with this position include France, Italy, and Spain. For these cases, the ambiguous nature of working class mobilization inhibited the ability of right parties to assess the extent of ideological radicalism and identify an optimal strategy of competition. Right parties faced significant risks with either system. Under SMP, moderates and radicals would coexist within workers' parties and compete in a two-party system where they could potentially become the main party of opposition. Under PR, radicals and moderates would likely establish separate workers' parties and compete in a multiparty system with right parties.

With no clear optimal strategy, preferences in these cases would depend more than in any other scenario on right parties' expectation of the likely fate of the workers' movement. While it is true that for all the cases considered here, right parties had to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, for these intermediary cases where working class movements were split between distinct forces, the uncertainty was even greater. In France, the direction of the workers' movement remained unclear throughout the nineteenth century. It was not until 1905 that the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) was founded, uniting the left under the relatively moderate leadership of Jean Jaurés. In Italy, a split that emerged at the turn of the century would endure in various forms through the interwar period. For a time, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) seemed to be moving in a more moderate direction, but a decisive split with the Liberals in 1909 over domestic and foreign policy would lead to the steady radicalization of the workers' movement. This was most evident during the First World War with the PSI's refusal to support the government (Salomone 1945, pp. 46–85; Eley 2002, pp. 170–175). And in Spain, the movement would briefly unite under the more moderate Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in 1931, only to fall apart again during the Civil War.

The result of this heightened sense of uncertainty was a great deal of instability in the choice of electoral systems. This can best be seen in the case of France, where in the first decade of the Third Republic alone three separate electoral systems were

tried. The pattern of instability would continue well into the twentieth century with a brief experiment with PR before the country would finally settle on SMP (Cole and Campbell 1989). This sort of instability marked the process in Italy as well. SMP was adopted there in 1861, briefly abandoned in 1882, and then restored in 1890. It was not until the postwar period that right parties in Italy settled on an electoral system, choosing to move to PR in 1919 (Carstairs 1980, pp. 149–150). In Spain, the electoral system enjoyed relatively greater stability. The mixed-member plurality system was maintained throughout the Restoration and continued through the early years of the Second Republic until 1936 when PR was adopted.

It is also noteworthy that these three cases represent the only instances in which a system of multimember plurality was deliberately adopted. In Italy, the electoral law of 1882 established multimember districts varying in magnitude from two to five representatives (Carstairs 1980, p. 150). In France, the electoral law of 1885 established the *arrondissement* as the electoral district, which meant that the number of representatives per district reached well into the 1960s in some locales (Cole and Campbell 1989; Colomer 2007). And in Spain, a uniform system of multimember plurality was adopted in 1919 (Colomer 2004, p. 255). The hyper-majoritarian tendencies of multimember districts, which in other cases were feared for their potential to exaggerate workers' majorities, were embraced at various points in France, Italy, and Spain to deal with an even greater threat. Though the dangers of the system were well known at the time, all three countries were facing serious challenges to the regime itself from loyalists seeking to restore monarchical rule. It was thought that the hyper-majoritarian features of multimember plurality would help to strengthen dominant parties and wipe out the antisystemic threat. In France and Italy, the experiment would prove disastrous and the system was rejected within a few years (Garner 1913; Carstairs 1980). In Spain, the system endured through the Second Republic and was replaced after the Civil War (Garrido 1998).

While the path of electoral system choice in these cases was highly idiosyncratic, the outcomes reflect the pattern found in the broader pool of cases, with Spain and Italy moving to PR and France adopting SMP. In France, right parties, and particularly the Radical Republicans, maintained strong influence among workers and succeeded in forging cross-class electoral alliances along the lines of the Lib-Lab cooperation found in the UK. To be sure, these alliances were of a different nature from those found in the UK. The French Socialists were less dependent electorally and more distinct ideologically than their English counterparts. Thus, Republicans did not dominate these alliances in France as the Liberals did in the UK (Stenson 1991, p. 137). However, the success and stability of these alliances reflected a level of moderation in the workers' movement not found in either Italy or Spain. Though competing ideological influences continued to play a role in the French workers' movement, the formation of the SFIO in 1905 would signal that the scales had tipped in a more reformist direction. In Italy and Spain, similar efforts of right party accommodation were made only sporadically and were ultimately unable to attract workers. The absence of strong moderating influences in these cases meant that workers' parties, although espousing doctrines very similar to their French counterpart, displayed greater radicalism in practice (Meaker 1974, pp. 207–208; Seton-Watson 1967, pp. 264–271). Thus, the partial success of labor accommodation in the French case helped to pull workers to the center and allowed for the adoption of SMP,

whereas its failure in Italy and Spain meant that the radicalization of workers would progress unabated, leading right parties to seek stronger safeguards in the form of PR.

Workers' Parties Electorally Viable, Ideologically Radical

In the final scenario where electorally viable, ideologically radical workers' parties emerged, the choice was PR. It was only in this scenario that workers' parties posed a clear existential threat, and therefore the benefits of PR for right parties outweighed its risks. Cases that fell into this last category included Germany, Austria, Finland, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Iceland, and Switzerland. In these cases, the failure of containment meant that the only way to minimize the influence of socialism was to minimize the seat share of workers' parties, and this was better achieved with PR than with SMP. With SMP, right parties risked having a workers' party become the main party of opposition and someday gain the majority. Given the radicalization of workers, this posed a greater existential threat than in any other scenario. Though PR would likely reinforce the existence of a workers' party, where ideologically radical workers' parties had established a permanent presence in the party system, right parties had little to lose from this move. PR would offer added protection, not to any particular right party, but to the right in general. It would make it much more likely that the majority would remain a "right party majority." And by the same token, it would make it much more difficult for a workers' party to secure the majority it would need to enact radical social reforms. Therefore, despite the risks associated with PR, it was the chosen strategy in this scenario because it allowed right parties to continue to compete, though likely in a diminished capacity while simultaneously minimizing the representation of workers' parties.

Among cases falling in this last category, several first moved to SMP to safeguard against early working class challenges. In the Netherlands, SMP replaced the mixed-member system in 1887 (Talsma 1998, p. 376). In Norway a system of uniform single member districts was adopted in 1905, a few years after the first labor representative was elected to the Storting (Aardal 2002, p. 168). In the wake of the revolutions of 1848, Denmark adopted some of the most liberal voting rights in all of Europe but accompanied them with SMP as an electoral safeguard, replacing the mixed-member system that had been in place there (Elklit 2002, p. 25). And in Iceland, SMP was adopted in the early stages of parliamentary government as part of the Representation Act of 1909 (Hardarson 2002).

For these and other cases, the move to PR came at different times, depending on right parties' assessment of the extent of the existential threat. Given the highly subjective nature of the decision, the timing and circumstances varied from case to case. In Belgium, the first case to make the switch to PR, it was having the Liberal Party on the brink of extinction that signaled the need for PR. Belgium, another crucial case for arguments advancing partisan electoral engineering as an explanation, offers an important look at the motivations guiding actors' choices. There, though a strong workers' party emerged after suffrage expansion, the right was quick to coordinate around a single nonsocialist party. The Catholics, who emerged as a dominant party, benefitted greatly from the existing mixed-member system. However, fear that the Liberal party would be eliminated, leaving the Socialists as the main party of opposition, led them to accept PR in 1899 (Goblet d'Aviella 1900; Mahaim 1900).

Though it was well known at the time that this would reduce their seat share, such a sacrifice was deemed necessary to minimize the influence of the Socialists.

Elsewhere, PR was adopted with suffrage expansion. In Finland, PR was adopted even before the Socialists had a chance to contest an election. The radicalization of the Finnish Social Democrats could clearly be seen in 1905, when the Revolution in Russia spilled over to Finland and ignited a general strike which spread through the country (Kirby 1990, pp. 524–526). The antisystemic threat and potential for instability led right parties to adopt PR along with suffrage expansion in the following year (Sundberg 2002, pp. 72–75). In Sweden also, suffrage expansion corresponded with a radicalization of the workers' movement. In fact it was delays in suffrage expansion that was in part responsible for this radicalization, as factions within the socialist camp questioned the wisdom of cooperating with right parties to achieve their goals (Tingsten 1973; Bartolini 2000, p. 83). When suffrage expansion finally passed in 1908, a coalition of Conservatives and Liberals made its passage conditional on the acceptance PR for parliamentary elections (Särilvik 2002, pp. 235–236).

In the remainder of the cases, it was the First World War that paved the way for the adoption of PR. The War was transformative in a number of ways that significantly affected the politics of electoral system choice. First, it pushed many countries to embrace further suffrage expansion to incorporate all adult males, and in some cases women, into the electorate. The war also led to unprecedented industrial growth in many countries, expanding the industrial workforce and swelling the ranks of labor unions. For these reasons, the immediate postwar period saw huge expansion in the membership of workers' parties, accompanied by a general radicalization of the left. Thus the war effort in many ways helped to consolidate the position of a more radical brand of socialism in the political system.

Adding to the general revolutionary climate of the postwar period was the rise of Bolshevik influence on organized labor (Eley 2002, pp. 176–179). Many of the new recruits swelling the ranks of workers' parties were young men inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and eager to put its principles into action. This led to the rise of communist parties and other left party challengers. In Germany for example, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the postwar period found itself outflanked on the left by two potential powerful challenges: a new Communist party, and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which had been formed by a dissenting left wing faction of the SPD in 1917. In the critical years after the war, most socialist parties struggled with the question of Bolshevism, seeking to distance themselves from its tactics, but needing to respond to the growing sympathies among their followers. The pressures of the time led to complex and often contradictory platforms. Responses to the communist challenge among socialist parties varied, but none could afford to directly reject Bolshevism. In the immediate postwar period most parties would send delegates to both the Socialist and Communist International (Lindemann 1974, pp. 70–74).

Though in later years, many social democratic parties would break with their communist counterparts, in the immediate postwar period, the threat of further radicalization was pervasive. Given the general uncertainty and anxiety of the times, it is little wonder that so many countries made the move to PR during this period. PR would be adopted in the Netherlands in 1917, in Denmark in 1918, in Germany, Austria, Norway, and Switzerland in 1919, and finally in Iceland in 1934

(Carstairs 1980; Hardarson 2002). There was certainly an element of demonstration effect in this group of cases, and by 1919 it seemed that the embrace of PR would be inevitable throughout Continental Europe. It should be noted however that demonstration effect may have led many countries to embrace PR, but it was not sufficient to insure its retention. In France for example, where a measure for PR was passed in the immediate postwar period, the system only lasted for two electoral cycles. Ultimately, it was rejected because it was thought to be contributing to the fragmentation of the left and the rise of more radical elements within the workers' movement (Ahmed 2012). Thus while initially swept up in the panic of the postwar period, right parties came to the conclusion that given the relatively moderate nature of the SFIO, minimizing the existential threat meant restoring SMP.

The role of the existential threat in driving both the outcome and timing of electoral system choice can be seen throughout these cases. Moreover, the alternative explanations have trouble systematically accounting for the dynamics of the choice in these cases. First, the notion that the move to PR was an endogenous outcome—the result of cooperation between the right and the left to establish a consensual policy framework—is difficult to sustain in light of the historical evidence. In only two cases did PR pass with the support of the main workers' party: Denmark and Germany. The reason for this had much to do with the peculiar application of SMP in these cases. As in other countries, SMP was adopted as an electoral safeguard with the first signs of working class mobilization, but in Denmark and Germany, rather than using redistricting to carve out safe districts for right parties, district boundaries were held constant for extended periods of time, resulting in massive malapportionment and underrepresentation of urban centers, where population steadily grew during this period. In Denmark, there was some effort to correct for this as part of the 1894 constitutional revisions, but they fell well short of equitable apportionment and would quickly be made obsolete by the growth in industrial centers (Elklit 2002). In Germany, the application of SMP was even more problematic as there was no redistricting at all. Even with population growth, the district boundaries established in 1871 would remain unchanged until the end of the monarchy in 1918 (Sperber 1994, p. 25; Bernhard 2005, pp. 60–61).

The response of the Social Democrats in Denmark at first was to seek better apportionment under SMP. This began in 1905 with efforts to introduce legislation establishing more equitable districts. The proposal met with great resistance from the Conservatives who preferred PR and controlled the Upper Chamber, making the passage of an apportionment bill impossible (Elklit 2002, p. 31). In the end, the Social Democrats reached a compromise facilitated by the Liberals who controlled the Lower Chamber to support PR in exchange for other constitutional revisions.

The situation in Germany was different, as the Social Democrats expressed support for PR as early as 1891 as part of their Erfurt program. The German Social Democrats were unique among workers' parties in the extent of their support for PR. Though there was internal dissent over the decision, advocacy for PR was a constant for the SPD beginning in the 1890s. The reasons for this were twofold. First, they were eager to remedy the extreme malapportionment which had gone unchecked throughout the entire Imperial period. Second, there was among SPD leadership the belief that PR would allow them to maintain greater ideological purity and reduce the need to appeal to broad cross-sections

of the electorate. Though party leaders were certainly aware that PR could potentially reduce their seat-share or lead to fragmentation (Eduard Bernstein in particular warned of the latter), PR advocates prevailed in convincing others of the long-term benefits of such a strategy. Right parties in Germany attempted to maintain SMP, but by 1919 they lacked the political strength to resist PR, which ultimately passed with little discussion or dissent (Ritter 1990, p. 60).

In the remaining cases, it was a coalition of the right that pushed PR through, often against the vehement protests of workers' parties. With pressures for suffrage expansion mounting in the postwar period, PR became the single most important safeguard against the perceived radicalization of the left. In the Netherlands, Austria, and Norway, it was explicitly stated as a condition for the passage of suffrage reform. The move to PR in the Netherlands came during the war. As agitation for suffrage expansion intensified, right parties agreed to a compromise in which they conceded full manhood suffrage but implemented a highly proportional form of PR to safeguard the position of the right (Carstairs 1980, pp. 62–63; Hansen 1988, pp. 183–185). In Austria, PR was adopted as part of the democratic constitution in 1918. Though no democratic election had yet taken place, the Socialist Democratic Party (SPÖ) had already asserted its strength prior to the democratic period, gaining representation in the Imperial council even under restricted suffrage. Under these circumstances, right parties were unwilling to experiment with their electoral prospects, and made PR a condition for the adoption of democratic reforms (Müller 2005). In Norway, the Conservatives had always supported PR. The Liberals were finally convinced in the postwar period that their efforts of accommodation had failed as the Social Democratic Party (DNA) moved drastically to the left, joining the Communist International (Carstairs 1980, pp. 91–92; Aardal 2002, pp. 186–187). There PR was adopted in 1919.

In Switzerland, it is difficult to determine the party dynamics of the move to PR as it came about through a referendum. However, in the process leading right parties to agree to put the issue to a referendum (which all anticipated would pass), the influence of the existential threat could easily be seen. Right parties that had resisted PR for decades found themselves confronted with a volatile political situation in the postwar period. After decades of reformist policies, the Swiss Social Democratic Party (PS) experienced an abrupt and intense period of radicalization in the years preceding the war, which only intensified after the war, culminating with the Socialists' decision to join the Communist International (Busky 2000, p. 50). Demands for democratic reforms were accompanied by strikes and riots that were highly uncharacteristic of the formerly moderate Swiss workers' movement. While the Socialists were nowhere near posing an electoral threat in parliament with only 10 % of the seats, they clearly posed an existential threat at this point. In 1919, right parties agreed to put the issue to a national referendum, which passed handily by a margin of two to one (Carstairs 1980, p. 141; Lutz 2004, pp. 286–287).

Finally, Iceland was the last country in this group to make the move to PR—a process that began in 1934, continued in 1942, and finally concluded with the establishment of full PR in 1959. There too, it was right parties that brought about the move. It is noteworthy that the adoption of PR came in the same year that the Social Democratic Party (SDPI) would first be considered an existential threat. The party was established in 1916, but contested elections with little success in the

following two decades, achieving parliamentary representation only in 1926 and 1927. It had from its earliest days positioned itself on the radical end of the spectrum, but it was not until the 1930s that it would become a permanent presence in electoral life and thus pose an existential threat to the right.

That the postwar move to PR was a function of the socialist threat can be seen from the constellation of actors behind its adoption. In only two cases (Denmark and Germany) did the Socialists support PR and in only one of those cases (Germany) could the Socialists be considered a veto player whose advocacy was critical to the passage of reform. In the remaining cases, as in previous periods of PR adoption, the move came through collusion of the dominant right parties in order to safeguard their position from the rising socialist threat. However, the question still remains: To which socialist threat was the right was responding? Was it the electoral threat as has been claimed by previous scholarship, or the existential threat which is the focus of this investigation? Were right parties motivated by partisan interests in seat maximization or an interest in protecting the existing social order?

In these cases, parsing out interests and motivations is especially difficult as the adoption of PR in effect served both sets of interests. However, the timing of adoption is in itself somewhat telling. While in several cases the situation of electoral threat did exist in the postwar period, it must be noted that this was nothing new. In particular the situation of a fragmented right facing a competitive socialist challenger existed in many countries prior to the War. In fact most socialist parties gained very little ground in the postwar period, and some actually lost ground. For example, among the countries that held elections after the war and prior to the adoption of PR, nowhere did the Socialists make dramatic advances.⁹ In Denmark, support for the Social Democrats held constant at 28 % (of both vote share and seat share). In Norway, with approximately the same vote share (32 %), the Labor Party lost ground to right parties, moving from 15.4 % of the seat share in 1915 to 14.3 % in 1918. Finally, in Switzerland, the Socialists did experience dramatic increases in vote share (10 to 30 %), but this did not translate into an increase in seat share, which held constant at around 10 % from 1914 to 1917 (Mackie and Rose 1974).

Despite the increasing support for the workers' movement, the competition among left parties at this time meant that few could capture the gains of the revolutionary fervor. What had changed was not the electoral standing of workers' parties but the increased radicalization of workers' movements with a credible claim to revolutionary potential. Changes in the ideological disposition of workers' parties could clearly be seen in the cases where parties chose to join the Communist International, as with the Norwegian Labor Party and the Swiss Social Democratic Party. But even where radicalization did not reach such extremes, workers' parties at the time had to make some concessions in their platforms, either signaling a move to more revolutionary methods, or articulating the need for a more radical transformation of the institutions of capitalism and liberal democracy. With the heightened sense of anxiety and uncertainty, right parties chose to pursue more aggressive strategies of competition through PR. Once radical workers' parties had established a permanent presence in

⁹ An assessment of changes in the electoral threat could only be made in three cases: Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland. In the remaining cases, any change in the electoral threat during this period cannot be assessed because PR was adopted before post-war elections had taken place.

the electoral landscape, right parties had little to lose and much to gain by adopting PR as a means of securing more favorable ground for electoral competition. PR could not stop the left, but it would minimize their representation and make it difficult for them to achieve the majorities they would need to enact sweeping changes. To be sure, there was always an electoral element to the existential threat. It was after all the electoral incarnation of the socialist threat that was the target of electoral system change, both in the case of SMP and PR. However, the electoral threat was neither necessary nor sufficient for the success of PR.

Conclusions

This paper brings new historical evidence and novel theoretical insights to bear on the study of the origins of electoral systems in early democracies. First, it offers an important corrective to some faulty assumptions about predemocratic electoral configurations. As has been demonstrated here, the point of origin was not SMP, as many have assumed, but rather “mixed” systems that combined single and multimember districts under either majority or plurality rule. Both SMP and PR were designed to replace these mixed systems. Moreover, both were conceived as electoral safeguards that, through different mechanisms, would provide an element of “minority representation” to remedy the hyper-majoritarian tendencies of the mixed systems.

Furthermore, I show that understanding the starting point fundamentally alters the framework of analysis. SMP and PR were not means to different ends, but rather different means to the same end: protecting right parties from threats associated with democratization. A survey of 18 democratizing countries reveals that the choice of one or the other ultimately depended on the different strategic advantages and time horizons associated with each system as well as the existential threat presented by rising workers’ parties. This existential threat, a combination of workers’ parties’ electoral viability and ideological radicalism, determined whether or not right parties would risk competition under SMP for the long term benefit of greater containment, or forfeit the possibility of containment for greater protection under PR.

The findings of this study offer important insights into the dynamics of nineteenth century democratization. In particular, they show that the use of electoral safeguards was not exclusive to a certain set of cases; rather, safeguards were implemented in all democratizing countries at this time. Moreover, the way in which they were implemented insured that, within certain structural limitations, elites were able to minimize the impact of electoral socialism. This suggests that the fate of workers’ parties at this time was, at least in part, an institutionally structured outcome: the result of specific choices made at a critical stage of working class mobilization.

The theoretical framework developed here also has important implications for the study of institutional choice more broadly. The politics of electoral system choice reveals a dynamic that strays significantly from the logic of partisan seat maximization that is assumed to underlie most electoral politics, and has been at the heart of previous explanations of the origins of electoral systems. This study instead suggests that elites were motivated by a broader concern with the existential threat posed by workers’ parties and a desire to shape the ideas and forces that would have a lasting influence in the new democratic order. To be sure, partisan interests played a role and

elites worked hard to protect their seat share. But where their interests in seat maximization conflicted with their interests in eliminating threats to the existing social order, the latter always prevailed. The influence of ideational factors on elites' decision making speaks to the unique nature of institutional choice in the process of democratization. In particular, it reveals that at such times, it is not only the procedural components of democracy, but also the substance of political competition and the identity of the competitors that matter. It also highlights the significant constitutive power inherent in such choices: power not just to set the rules of the game in some generic way but also to determine the specific players who would have a seat at the new democratic table.

Appendix

Measurements of the Existential Threat

The existential threat is understood to be a function of two variables: the electoral viability of workers' parties and the extent of ideological radicalism they displayed. In this section, I offer a more detailed discussion of the measurements used for these indices.

Electoral Viability

The first indicator, "electoral viability" assesses whether or not an independent workers' party had a permanent presence in the party system. In many cases, workers' representatives contested elections as independents or under the auspices of one of the major right party before the formation of an independent workers' party. These efforts, though often having a significant impact are not included in the measure of electoral viability as they would not in themselves indicate an existential threat. In fact, so long as workers' representatives remained fragmented or relied on right parties, the latter could be confident of their continued dominance. Thus, electoral viability is measured with the rise of an independent worker's party.¹⁰ Such parties are considered viable once they have contested three consecutive elections.

The only cases where workers' parties did not meet this minimal threshold of viability were the USA and Canada. There, despite some notable electoral achievements, workers' parties were unable to maintain representation at the national level. In the USA, independent working class mobilization began in the decades after suffrage expansion with Workingmen's parties established in several states (Foner 1947). Despite the promising start, labor leaders ultimately failed to unite these disparate groups into a unified movement. By the 1890s, the labor movement had definitively moved away from direct political action (Lorwin 1972, p. 91). The Socialist Party of America would emerge at that time espousing a radical platform, but ultimately proved ineffective electorally. In Canada, labor was more successful in

¹⁰ It should be noted that in some cases the independence of the worker's party was compromised through ongoing cooperation with an established right party. This is accounted for in the measure of ideological radicalism below.

electing individual candidates. Representatives of labor consistently won elections beginning in the late nineteenth century. However, labor never consolidated its efforts to form a viable national party (McCormack 1970). The CLP was established in 1917 but disbanded after a few unsuccessful electoral campaigns. In both the USA and Canada, right parties would come to represent the interests of workers, maintaining the predemocratic status quo.

Ideological Radicalism

The second important indicator of existential threat—ideological radicalism—is decidedly more complicated to assess. In developing a measure of radicalism, I use a number of sources. I begin with Marks, Mbaye, and Kim’s examination of nineteenth-century socialist party radicalism (Marks et al. 2009). Using socialist party platforms, they score parties along four important dimensions of radicalism: (1) attitude towards the political system, (2) attitude towards the economic system, (3) methods sanctioned, and (4) number of dissenting factions. These measures are subjective in that they are based on party platforms rather than actual party behavior, but given that many of these parties were fairly new at the time, their espoused beliefs and goals were the only source of information available to their contemporaries. Therefore, subjective measures are useful in capturing how these parties were perceived and situating them in relation to one another (Table 2).

Useful as these measures are, however, they do not in themselves indicate what is to be considered radical. For that, we need to consider the substantive positions reflected by the scores. In the category of political orientation, positions 3 and 4 indicate an antisystemic stance that “democracy is not legitimate” and thus clearly constitute radical positions. However, even position 2 that “democracy is legitimate but requires major reform” represents a radical departure from the status quo as the socialists could potentially use their political position to change the rules of the game to their advantage. Thus, I consider a score of 2 to be the cutoff for radicalism in this category. On economic orientation, similarly a score of 2 will be the cutoff score for radicalism. While challenging the legitimacy of capitalism (positions 3 and 4) clearly reflects a radical position, the threat of major reform with potentially major redistributive consequences as indicated by position 2 would also represent a radical departure from the status quo.

In the category of “methods,” Marks, Mbaye, and Kim consider a range of activities from lobbying and advocacy to violent insurrection. However, electoral competition, which is precisely the method that right parties were most concerned about and aimed to contain through electoral reform, scores low on the scale of radicalism (score of 1). To be sure, more radical methods such as strike activity and the threat of violence (positions 2, 3, and 4) were a great concern; however, the threat did not have to rise to that level for a party to be considered radical. Simply using elections as a method combined with the threat of major changes to the political and economic status quo would suffice for a party to be considered radical. For this reason, the cut-off for methods in this analysis will be a score of 1.

Thus as a starting point, a score of 2 on political and economic orientation, and 1 on methods, with no dissenting factions would be considered the minimum threshold for radicalism. According to this classification scheme, socialist parties in The UK,

Table 2 Measures of ideological radicalism, 1900

		Political orientation ^a	Economic orientation ^b	Methods ^c	Dissenting factions ^d
Australia	Labor Party	1	1	1	0
Austria	Social Democratic Party	3	3	3	0
Belgium	Workers' Party	2	2	3	1
Canada	Social Democratic Party	1	1	1	0
Denmark	Social Democratic Party	2	2	1	0
Finland	Democratic Party	4	4	3	0
France	Parti Socialiste (Guesde)	3	3	3	0
France	Parti Socialiste (Jaures)	2	2	2	0
Germany	Social Democratic Party	3	3	3	0
Great Britain	Labor Party	1	1	1	0.5
Italy	Socialist Party	2	2	2	1
Netherlands	Social Democratic Workers' Party	2	2	2	1
New Zealand	Labour Party	1	3	1	-0.5
Norway	Labor Party	2	2	1	0
Spain	Socialist Party	3	3	2	0
Sweden	Social Democratic Party	2	3	3	0.5
Switzerland	Social Democratic Party	1	2	1	0
USA	Socialist Party of America	2	3	3	1
Scale		1–4	1–4	1–4	-1.0 to +1.0

Source: Marks et al. 2009, p. 633

^a 1=representative democracy is legitimate and does not require major reform; 2=representative democracy is legitimate and requires major reform; 3=representative democracy is illegitimate, requiring major reform; and 4=representative democracy should be abolished and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat

^b 1=capitalism is legitimate and can be improved by piecemeal reform; 2=capitalism is legitimate but requires basic reform; 3=capitalism is illegitimate and reform can be justified only as a step toward its abolition; and 4=capitalism is illegitimate and all reform short of its abolition is unproductive

^c 1=the party advocates conventional political activity; 2=the party advocates unconventional alongside conventional political activity to defend basic political rights; 3=the party advocates unconventional alongside conventional political activity as part of a revolutionary strategy; and 4=the party rejects conventional political activity and advocates the violent overthrow of the existing regime

^d -1.0=a large moderate wing or moderate social democratic party confronts the mainstream of the party; -0.5=a small moderate wing or moderate social democratic party confronts the mainstream of the party; +0.5=a small radical wing or radical social democratic party confronts the mainstream of the party; and +1.0=a large radical wing or radical social democratic party confronts the mainstream of the party

Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Switzerland would be considered moderate and socialist parties in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, the USA, Iceland, Denmark, France, Spain, and Italy would be considered radical.

For the most part, this would seem consistent with the broader literature. Most accounts place the British model of parties based in trade-unionism with a reformist agenda and strong tradition of cross-class cooperation on the more moderate end of the spectrum (Bartolini 2000, p. 70). The BLP embraced a vision of harmonious class

relations which deviated significantly from the rigid socialist principles that guided its counterparts on the Continent (Hunt 1981, pp. 275–281; Hinton 1983, p. 33; Cole 1941, pp. 42–43). The moderate model was highly influential in Australia and New Zealand as well where workers' parties similarly rejected the notion that revolutionary social transformation was necessary for progress (Burgmann 1985; Olssen 1990). The NZLP advanced a program of constitutionally grounded reform and remained committed to the political process as a means of improving the lives of workers (Olssen 1990, p. 616). Australian labor similarly embraced a doctrine of 'Laborism' as a positive alternative to socialism (Markey 1990, p. 595). Notably, Labor parties in all three cases accepted not only parliamentary democracy, but the capitalist system as well. These parties often faced more radical socialist challenges and sometimes experienced periods of radicalization themselves, but overall they maintained a commitment to achieving progress through the existing social order (Hinton 1983, p. 35; Stephens 1979, p. 143).

At the other end of the ideological spectrum was the German model of parties adhering to more orthodox Marxist principles emphasizing class conflict and the need for revolutionary social transformation (Bartolini 2000, pp. 72–73; Berman 1998, p. 66). Though there was a great deal of variation in this category, these were all cases where workers' parties espoused a platform that posed an existential challenge to the prevailing capitalist democratic order. The SPD beginning with the Erfurt Congress in 1891 adopted a platform that emphasized the role of productive class conflict and endorsed revolutionary tactics to bring about social transformation (Bartolini 2000, pp. 72–73; Steenson 1991, pp. 70–72). The Erfurt program would influence workers' parties throughout Europe, and though the German SPD may have been unique in the extent of its embrace of socialist doctrine, workers' parties in several other cases also incorporated these principles at various levels of orthodoxy.

The closest in ideological orientation to the Germans were the Finnish and Austrian Social Democrats, who at times displayed greater radicalism than even the Germans (Marks et al. 2009, p. 633). In Finland, after an extended period of isolation from the international socialist movement, labor would have an abrupt introduction to Marxism in the wake of the Russian revolution of 1905. The Finnish Social Democratic Party would come to embrace one of the most radical doctrines of European socialist parties (Kirby 1990, pp. 525–526). The SPÖ also had a decidedly radical orientation. Its platform explicitly identified the "proletariat" as the object of its efforts to forge a class conscious movement, splitting with moderate forces that used more inclusive rhetoric such as "the oppressed people" or "toiling masses" (Steenson 1991, p. 186).

Elsewhere, workers' parties adhered to Marxism in a less orthodox fashion, adopting a more conciliatory tone, but still maintaining a commitment to class conscious action and radical social transformation. In the Netherlands, the Social Democratic Workers' Party established in 1894 modeled itself on the German SPD, from which it derived its party program as well as its organizational structure (Buiting 1990, p. 67). The Belgian Workers' Party founded in 1885 also adopted a radical platform and under the leadership of Emile Vandervelde the party would utilize more revolutionary tactics (Strikwerda 1997, p. 109; Polasky 1992). The Danish Social Democratic Party similarly adopted a Marxian doctrine, though from the 1890s on it rejected militarism (Callesen 1990, p. 159). In SDPI, established in 1916, was in fact

the first modern party to form. And in the absence of strong moderating influences, it would develop a radical platform espousing orthodox Marxian principles (Karlsson 2000, pp. 302–303).

For a number of other cases, in the early stages of working class mobilization, labor would maintain a relatively moderate orientation but would later come to embrace more radical doctrines. For the Swedish Social Democrats, radicals who had been in the minority for the first decades of the party's existence acquired greater influence by the turn of the century and by 1908, a more orthodox Marxism had firmly taken root (Tingsten 1973; Bartolini 2000, p. 83). In Norway, the Socialist Labor Party (DNA) established in 1887, began contesting elections under the patronage of the Liberal party. But dissatisfaction with their subordinate position led to a radicalization of workers and the embrace of more orthodox socialist doctrine. This was marked in 1891 with the adoption of a new platform closely following the German SPD's Erfurt Program (Terjesen 1990, pp. 115–116; Lafferty 1972). The PS, which looked to be moving in the direction of moderation also experienced a sustained period of radicalization prior to WWI which extended through the interwar years (Luebbert 1991, p. 98; Bartolini 2000, p. 85).¹¹

There are a number of cases, however, that due to conflicting ideological influences do not fit into this simple radicalism vs. reformism classification. This includes France, Italy, and Spain, where the strength of anarchist factions divided workers' movements, resulting in a doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism, which many have identified as a separate ideological orientation altogether (Kergoat 1990, pp. 169–171; Seton-Watson 1967, pp. 157–158; Castillo 1990, pp. 227–228). In these three cases, the ideological divisions were so deep that in the early stages of working class mobilization separate workers' parties successfully competed for the support of working class electors. In France, the movement was split between the radical socialism of Jules Guesde and the moderate social democratic perspective of Jean Jaurès (Stenson 1991, p. 137). The movement would later unite under the leadership of Jaurès to form the SFIO, but tensions between the two factions would persist. The Spanish labor movement was even more deeply divided, delaying the consolidation of the left until after the First World War. The PSOE maintained a relatively moderate position but was continuously confronted with radical challenges and extended periods of fragmentation (Meaker 1974, pp. 207–208). The PSI, from its inception in 1892 was a combined movement, bringing together disparate socialist and anarchist groups (Stenson 1991, p. 233). Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, the PSI was able to maintain unity among these different groups and even seemed to be moving toward moderation. However, divisions within the movement over a number of issues, most notably Italy's imperial policy, led to fragmentation and the greater radicalization of workers. By the First World War, the movement had turned more definitively towards radicalism (Seton-Watson 1967, pp. 264–271). In all

¹¹ There has been some disagreement in the case of Switzerland, which is identified by some as being on the more moderate end of the spectrum (Marks et al. 2009), and by others on the more radical end (Bartolini 2000; Stenson 1991). While the Swiss SDP did for a time look to be moving in the direction of moderation, it maintained a doctrinal commitment to Marxism and experienced a sustained period of radicalization prior to WWI which extended through the interwar years (Luebbert 1991). Because it is this later period that is of interest in examining the choice of electoral systems, for the purposes of this analysis the Swiss SDP will be identified as ideologically radical.

three cases, the division would leave a lasting mark on the movement which, even during periods of greater unity, would maintain a mixed ideological program, combining elements of radicalism and reformism. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, France, Spain, and Italy will be considered under a third category of revolutionary syndicalism.

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