

4. Electoral Institutions and Political Competition

Coordination, Persuasion and Mobilization

GARY W. COX

In the Schumpeterian conception, democracy consists of regular and non-violent competition for control of government between alternative teams of elites (Schumpeter 1942). The question that much scholarship in electoral studies addresses, and on which this essay will focus, is: how does changing the rules of the electoral game change the strategies of parties and candidates, hence the outcome of elections?

Figure 1 illustrates both the sequence of events in a stylized democracy and some of the topics to be covered. In the beginning, there is a set of potential electoral competitors. These agents decide (at stage 1 of the diagram) whether to enter a particular electoral competition—that is, to formally nominate candidates for one or more elective offices. Since winning office requires amassing a sufficient number of votes, the nature of the entry game between potential competitors has a strong coordination game flavor to it.¹ For example, if fifteen right-of-center parties all enter the race as separate competitors, while the left unites behind a single option, the right is likely to do poorly (under most extant electoral systems). The right can do better if some potential competitors withdraw in favor of others, but each potential competitor may prefer that *it* remain and *the others* withdraw.

After a given set of competitors have entered the race, each decides to allocate effort to one or more of three vote-producing activities: (2.1) persuasion: providing voters with reasons, such as better policy positions or larger bribes, to prefer it to the other competitors; (2.2) vote coordination: convincing supporters of other parties that the expected utility of their vote, in terms of affecting the allocation of seats across competitors, will be higher if they support it than if they support their most-preferred competitor; (2.3) mobilization: boosting the probability that its known supporters will actually participate in the election.

¹The essence of a coordination game is that the players would like to coordinate their actions on some one of n possibilities but disagree which of these possibilities is the best. For example, two allies, A and B, may wish to coordinate an attack on a third nation but disagree whether the attack should be launched from A's territory or B's.

n potential competitors



(1) coordination of entry.

$m \leq n$ actual competitors in the election(s)



(2.1) persuasion; (2.2) coordination of votes; (2.3) mobilization.

vote distribution across competitors



(3) mechanical translation of votes into seats.

seat distribution across competitors



(4) government formation process.

portfolio distribution across competitors

Figure 1. The office-seeking sequence in a hypothetical democracy

Each of these vote-producing activities is cost-effective under somewhat different conditions.

After the election has been held, an allocation of votes across the available competitors is determined. This allocation of votes is translated into an allocation of seats by a series of deterministic mathematical operations mandated by the relevant electoral rules (in particular, the electoral “formulas”) of a system. Finally, after the allocation of offices has been determined, those competitors who hold seats in the national legislature can bargain among themselves over the distribution of portfolios (defined here to include both cabinet ministerial posts and, in those systems where such positions confer substantial authority over the legislative agenda, legislative committee chairs).

In this essay, I focus on the first three stages of Figure 1, leaving government formation to others. In order to simplify the exposition, I do not deal much with the detailed electoral rules. Rather, I categorize electoral systems by three broad architectonic features: the number of votes per voter; the number of seats per district; and the proportionality of the votes-to-seats translation. These features play the role of independent variables, with candidates’ and parties’ strategies of coordination, persuasion and mobilization in the role of dependent (or sometimes intermediate) variables.²

Although not the focus of this essay, it may be worth suggesting how parties’ strategies in turn affect policy choices. A short answer is that parties’ strategies help define the sort of actor they will be in government. In particular, the larger are the electoral aggregates that form (the greater is the equilibrium level of coordination), the broader are the interests those aggregates will represent; and the more that parties choose to persuade via promises to provide differing packages of public goods, rather than differing packages of private goods, the greater the pressure will be on them to deliver such goods when in office.³

²Throughout, I focus (albeit not exclusively) on formally derived institutional comparative statics results. For other reviews similar in spirit, see Myerson (1995, 1999).

³More elaborate answers along these lines can be found in Shugart (2001), Cox and McCubbins (2001), and Tsebelis (2002).