Chapter 4

Consequences of Electoral System Choice

The previous chapter demonstrated that political actors take electoral system design seriously, even in nondemocratic countries, updating and modifying the rules to benefit themselves and their allies. This chapter investigates a primary output of the electoral rules: political party systems.1

Political scientists have intensively investigated the connection between election rules and the party systems that emerge out of the electoral process. This connection is important because the number of parties in a political system is one indicator of how power is distributed. As Giovanni Sartori (1976, 120) observed, “It does matter how many are the parties. For one thing, the number of parties immediately indicates, albeit roughly, an important feature of the political system: the extent to which political power is fragmented or non-fragmented, dispersed or concentrated.” The concentration of power in too few hands threatens viable democracy, but significant dispersion of power may undermine effective governance.

This chapter addresses how political institutions, social cleavages, and the postcommunist legacy affect party system development. As noted in Chapter 1, an intense scholarly debate has raised questions about the equivalence of postcommunist cases with their counterparts in other world regions. Rather than assuming, a priori, that postcommunist states differ from other transition countries, this chapter’s investigation explicitly controls for the postcommunist experience. The analysis reveals that expectations about party system development may obtain in postcommunist societies, but that these outcomes may be attenuated by regional idiosyncrasies.

The first section of this chapter outlines the debate over the relative importance of institutional and contextual features in determining the contours of party systems. The second section presents interregional and intraregional
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empirical analyses that assess how institutional, social, and contextual factors influence the number of effective parties. The third section presents deeper discussions of post-Soviet party systems to show how election results have conformed with, and diverged from, expectations about election rules and their consequences.

Institutions, Social Cleavages, and the Number of Parties

Much of the political science literature has dichotomized the debate about party system evolution, suggesting that scholars who emphasize the role of institutions trace their lineage to Maurice Duverger’s work (1954), while those who emphasize the role of social cleavages are aligned with Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan’s (1967) approach. Recent research has called this simple dichotomy into question, noting that Duverger himself viewed social factors as a driving force determining the number of political parties and election rules as a constraining force (Clark and Golder 2006).

Researchers who lean toward Duverger’s explanation focus on individual decision making, emphasizing how formal rules create incentives to which political actors respond. Duverger labeled the complementary processes driving behavior the mechanical and psychological effects. The mechanical effect describes how election rules translate votes into seats. The psychological effect describes how political actors respond to the expected consequences of the mechanical effect.

Single member–district systems (SMD) with plurality rules create a relatively high barrier for victory, although this barrier depends on the number of contestants and their relative strength. To obtain a seat in an SMD plurality system, the winning candidate must receive at least one more vote than the closest rival. If, for example, five candidates compete, and they enjoy equal support among voters in the district, the winner must garner at least twenty percent of the vote, plus one, to exceed the vote total of the second-place candidate. In a two-candidate race, one contestant must exceed 50 percent plus one vote to win. Regardless of the number of participants in the campaign, any candidate who exceeds 50 percent plus one vote will win the seat. The mechanical effect in SMD plurality thus benefits large parties and punishes small parties, propelling the psychological effect.

Political actors are faced with two major decisions that significantly impact the structure of the party system: voters must decide whether they will vote sincerely or sophisticatedly (strategic voting), and parties and candidates must determine if they will contest seats (strategic entry) (Cox 1997). After determining which candidate (or party) he or she prefers, a voter must make the final decision of whom to support at the polls. A sincere choice may guide the voter all the way to the ballot box, regardless of the candidate’s likely fate. However, many voters are seduced by the logic of strategic voting. If the