Electoral Majorities, Political Parties, and Collective Representation

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Abstract

In practice democracies privilege plurality parties. Theories of the democratic process challenge the democratic credentials of this practice. Abstract social choice theory wonders whether an electoral majority even exists. A more optimistic line of argument, prominent in research on collective representation, assumes that the policy position of the median voter embodies the majority electoral preference. The conflict between what democracies actually do and what two leading theories of the democratic process say calls for a comparative inquiry into electoral majoritarianism. For each of a dozen countries we ask whether any political party commands a predominant majoritarian position among voters—i.e., is a Condorcet winner—and, if so, which party it is. We find that a Condorcet winning party exists in all twelve countries and that the plurality party can lay more claim to representing the popular majority than the left-right median party. These findings have important implications for the study of democratic representation, which we consider in our conclusions.
For much of the modern period democratic theory has concerned itself with the question of whether or not the popular majority should rule and what safeguards should be in place to protect against its ‘extreme’ and often ‘transient’ passions (see Dahl 1956, pp. 5-33, for a précis). In the mid-twentieth century a new consideration was added. Theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter began to question whether a majority-supported policy program could exist at all (Schumpeter, [1942] 1950, pp. 269-83). At most, discernible majorities could emerge for the choice of governments (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 269). Skepticism about whether a policy majority could exist, let alone be identified, grew with the rediscovery of Condorcet’s analysis of voting cycles (Condorcet, 1785; see Black, 1948; 1958). After Kenneth Arrow showed that no voting system abiding by democratic principles can necessarily identify a predominant majority preference (Arrow, 1951; 1963), the critique of majority rule extended beyond the choice of policy to the choice of party governments. Later, in the wake of the contra-majoritarian chaos theorems (McKelvey, 1976; Schofield, 1978), William Riker concluded that majorities could emerge only for retrospective evaluations of the government record (Riker, 1982). But even this proved untenable (Schofield, 1985).

In attempting to find a stable and fair position to represent majority preferences, even where a majority does not emerge spontaneously, Anthony Downs and Duncan Black looked to the median voter position on a one-dimensional policy continuum (Black, 1948; 1958; Downs, 1957). The median not only provides a point around which a majority will cohere under pure policy voting but is also the
collective outcome which most effectively minimizes individual dissatisfaction with the collective choice.

How do contemporary theories of democracy and the actual practice of democracy deal with ambiguity over the majority preference of voters? A behavioral variation on pure social choice theory challenges the conclusion that majorities do not exist. When institutional arrangements and behavioral tendencies are taken into account a true majority position is likely to emerge (Regenwetter, Grofman, Marley, & Tsetlin 2006). On the assumption that electoral majorities do exist, a developing body of comparative politics research sees the median voter position along the left-right dimension as embodying the preference of the electoral majority (e.g., Blais & Bodet, 2006; Colomer 2001; Golder & Stramski, 2009; Huber & Powell, 1994; Kim, Powell, & Fording, 2010; Lijphart, 1999, 287-8; McDonald, Mendes, & Budge, 2004; McDonald & Budge, 2005; Powell, 2000; 2009; Powell & Vanberg, 2000; Warwick, 2009). On the other hand, the actual operation of democracy often gives a privileged status to the electoral plurality party. Thus, a basic issue of democratic representation remains unsettled. Perhaps the actual practice of democracy has it right—the majority preference resides with the plurality party. Or, perhaps, studies of collective representation have it right—the majority preference resides with the left-right median voter. Or, perhaps, pure social choice theory has had it right over the past fifty years—no electoral majority position exists at all.

Our purpose here is to investigate whether the theories or the actual practice of democracies correspond better to what can be uncovered empirically. The evidence presented below indicates that behavioral social choice and democratic
practice are closer to the mark than is pure social choice theory or the left-right version of the median voter theorem. An electoral majority does settle on a single party in our data from twelve countries, and more often than not it settles on the plurality party.

Our analysis develops dialectically, in five steps. The next section draws on behavioral social choice theory and shows why cyclical majorities are not so much of a concern for actual elections as pure social choice theory might lead one to think. We then consider the extent to which democracies privilege the plurality party and discuss the contrary theoretical assumption that the median position deserves the majoritarian privilege. Next, we challenge the claims of the left-right median by showing that its essential assumption of policy deterministic proximity voting along a left-right dimension is not strongly supported by evidence. We then draw on the probabilistic thinking about majorities developed by Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera to specify conditions under which a plurality party can make a plausible claim to majority status (Shugart & Taagepera, 1994), even under multi-party proportional representation (PR) elections. In our final empirical analysis we use data from twelve countries in the European Election Study 2004 (Schmitt, Loveless, et al., 2004) to examine whether a majority party exists at all—i.e., a Condorcet winning party, one preferred to all others in comprehensive rounds of head-to-head competitions—and, if so, which party it is. In all twelve countries there is a Condorcet winning party. In three of the twelve, the plurality and median parties are one and the same, and in each country it is the Condorcet winning party. Among the nine countries where the plurality party and electoral median party are different, the
plurality party is the Condorcet winner in six; the electoral median party is the Condorcet winner in only one; some other party is the Condorcet winner twice.

These results are important inasmuch as the plurality party appears to be more than twice as likely to be a Condorcet winner as the left-right median party. They thus elevate the claim of the plurality party to represent the popular majority. A more far-reaching implication, at least for the twelve countries analyzed here, is that the generic existence of a Condorcet winner implies that considerations other than current policy enter into voting decisions—e.g., strategic voting, party ID, party and candidate competences, retrospective evaluation of performance, candidate attractiveness, social voting traditions, among others. This is no more that we might expect from representative general elections which invite electors to choose between parties on a variety of grounds all at the same time. It is what election studies have been telling us for 60 years, and it calls into question analyses of representation using the left-right median voter position as the benchmark for accurate collective representation. The plurality party may be majority-preferred on many of the grounds cited above, or even in a policy-based choice made under their constraints.

**Are There Electoral Majorities?**

In the years following the rediscovery of cyclical majorities by Duncan Black (Black, 1948; 1958) and with a growing appreciation of Kenneth Arrow’s impossibility theorem (Arrow, 1951; 1963), majority choice in collective decision-making has appeared problematic for pure social choice theorizing. While vexatious for pure theory, recent developments in behavioral social choice theorizing show that for actual elections much of the pessimism about cyclicity is unfounded. As a
starting point for our inquiry into majoritarianism we review the vexations from pure
theory and the reasons to doubt the pessimism they foster.

In pure theory, a large electorate with no constraints on individuals’ strict
preferences over alternatives on an open agenda (i.e., under an impartiality
assumption) is unlikely to lead to a predominant majority winning position—i.e., no
Condorcet winner—inasmuch as majority cycles are all but inevitable.² Given that
cycling incoherence does not rule in actual democratic practice, there are two ways
to try to understand its absence. One travels along the path of pure theory in pursuit
of some deep structure within the collective preferences “even in the face of apparent
chaos and independently of particular institutional arrangements” (Miller, 2007, p.
22). The other takes an empirical path in line with the concept of structure-induced
equilibria and accepts that choices arising from collective preferences are always
embedded in some form of institutional arrangements (Miller, 2007, p. 22; on
structure induced equilibria see, e.g., Niemi, 1969; 1983; and, more expressly,

Recasting the issue within a behavioral approach to social choice theory
shows that worries about cycling almost entirely disappear (Regenwetter et al., 2006;
see also Van Deemen, 1999; and on behavioral social choice more broadly see
Adams, Merrill, & Grofman, 2005). In particular, because elections are conducted
within fixed institutional arrangements and because electoral agendas are not open
but limited to a small number of viable parties and because voter preferences over
the parties are inconsistent with the assumption of an impartial culture, the
pessimism of pure theory about cycling is almost always unfounded in its application
to actual elections. First, electoral institutions endogenize the number of viable alternatives. Second, among Western democracies, only Belgium, with its enforcement of party divisions by language community, has an effective number of parties greater than half a dozen (see, e.g., Taagepera and Shugart, 1989, pp. 82-3). Third, the assumption of an impartial culture does not square with what is known about electorates. In Britain, for instance, an impartial culture would mean that an equal one-sixth of voters order their preferences in each of six possible arrangements among the three predominant parties. That is, preference orders would be equiprobable through all six forms:

Con>LD>Lab=1/6;
Con>Lab>LD=1/6;
LD>Con>Lab=1/6;
LD>Lab>Con=1/6;
Lab>Con>LD=1/6;
Lab>LD>Con=1/6.

This sort of distribution and similar impartial cultures elsewhere—as seen in the empirical investigations undertaken in Regenwetter et al. (2006)—find no empirical support. On this reasoning, then, the following conclusion is warranted: “for a small number of alternatives, we need not worry much about majority cycles when dealing with realistic distributions…” (Regenwetter et al., 2006, p. 189).

Disposing of any serious threat from the theoretical nonexistence of a majority electoral preference for one of the parties is but one step forward for majoritarianism. In one sense it is a large step. The existence of a Condorcet winner
reveals enough social consensus to say there is a stable majority-preferred party. By itself, however it does not indicate which party that is. One has still to be concerned with actually identifying the majority position (see Regenwetter et al., 2006, p. 189 and throughout). We now turn to address this issue.

**A Mismatch of Practice and Theory**

Several well known empirical generalizations in comparative politics point to a privileged position being granted to the electoral plurality party when governments are formed. In contrast, the median voter theorem provides a strong and appealing argument against giving any privilege to a plurality party when it is not also the party favored by the median voter.

*Privilege to the Plurality Party in Practice*

The best known plurality party privilege comes from the tendency for single-member district plurality rules (SMDP rules) to manufacture a parliamentary majority out of an electoral plurality. By virtue of its parliamentary majority, the electoral plurality party then has exclusive control of a single-party government.

While PR systems do not normally give any single party a parliamentary majority, the electoral plurality party often has a privileged status in coalition negotiations. In some situations the plurality party in parliament has an advantage because its leader is named as *formateur*. Perhaps even more important are the practical matters summarized by Wolfgang Müller and Kaare Strøm: the “two factors that most decisively determine a party’s bargaining power are (1) its share of seats in parliament and (2) its position relative to the other parliamentary parties in the policy space” (Müller & Strøm 2000, p. 7). Furthermore, even if these two decisive factors
have equal standing in determining which parties enter government, the plurality party retains an advantage inasmuch as government portfolios are almost always allocated in proportion to the parliamentary seats held by the parties in government. This tendency is so strong that it stands as a law-like empirical generalization referred to as *Gamson’s Law* (proposed in Gamson, 1961; see also Browne & Franklin, 1973; Laver & Schofield, 1990; Warwick & Druckman, 2006).

In brief, democracies grant a privileged position to their plurality electoral parties. Especially under SMDP systems, but also under PR systems, the consequence is to make the policy disposition of parliaments and governments less congruent with the left-right position of median voters than they would be were the median electoral party more privileged. Privileging plurality parties distorts the representation of electoral majorities, if an electoral majority preference is the one embodied by the left-right median voter position.

**Privilege to the Median Electoral Party in Theory**

Ever since Anthony Downs (Downs, 1957) and Duncan Black (Black, 1948; 1958) extended Harold Hotelling’s (Hotelling, 1929) ideas about spatial competition to spatial theories of voting, the median position on a one-dimensional policy continuum has normally been taken to represent the electoral majority preference. This is clearly true of research on collective representation. G. Bingham Powell states the assumption in these words: “if we assume that the preferences of voters are single-peaked, the position of the *median voter* is the only policy that would be preferred to all others by a majority of voters” (Powell, 2000, p. 163, italics in the original). Michael McDonald and Ian Budge say this: “C’s position [i.e., the median
position along a left-right continuum] will constitute the point to which majority-backed policy always tends, where voting is determined solely by the desire to advance one’s own policy preferences” (McDonald & Budge, 2005, pp. 6-7).

From Figure 1 it is easy to see why. If all voters prefer policy positions closer to their own to ones further away, voters at A would always prefer to be in the majority ABCDE. Similarly, voters at G would always prefer the combination GFE to any other majority. These preferences make position E, at the median, crucial in deciding which majority will form, as it is essential to both. Voters at E are also assumed to be policy-motivated and thus will favor the majority that adopts the policy position closest to their own. Successive bargaining rounds end up with a majority position close to and eventually at the median. Hence the median position is the one which bargaining and negotiation produce as the majority preference.

[Figure 1 about here]

Adding weight to this theoretical argument is a set of empirical facts that come from viewing distributions of citizens along the left-right dimension, (Figure 2). The data come from the European Election Study 2004 (Schmitt, Loveless, et al., 2004).³ One message from the distributions is clear. Most electorates have a unimodal distribution along this left-right continuum, with the central tendencies near the middle of the continuum. Mean, median, and modal values are at 4, 5, and 6 on the 1 to 10 scale (or 0 to 10 in Sweden), and standard deviations are between 1.8 and 2.8. Some distributions are more peaked (notably Austria and Luxembourg) and others are flatter (notably France, Italy, and Portugal). Also, some list a bit to the left (France and Spain); a few others list a little to the right (Denmark and Finland).
Still, as mentioned, all 14 countries have means, medians, and modes in the 4-6 range; means for 10 of 14 countries are between 4.5 and 5.5; 11 of 14 medians are at position 5; and 12 of 14 modes are at position 5. The center of left-right political gravity in these countries is the center. Moreover, the centrism has persisted over decades. Powell’s report of left-right citizen distributions for the early 1980s and early 1990s show the same sort of unimodal centrism (Powell, 2000, pp. 168, 180-1, 184-5). So, too, do more recent data from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (Best & McDonald, forthcoming) and in the form of the annual *Eurobarometer* left-right mean values (Adams et al., 2004, p. 596).

[Figure 2 about here]

**Summary**

The practice of democracy tends to privilege the plurality party. Countries using SMDP electoral systems do so totally by handing control of government to the plurality party. Countries using PR systems do so more indirectly and less completely, usually by empowering the plurality party as first-mover in government negotiations. In these first-mover cases, but also in most others, the plurality party’s numerical strength grants the party an important say in which parties join government. When the plurality party does join a government it almost always holds the largest number of portfolios.

Political science research on collective representation privileges the left-right median voter and, implicitly, the median electoral party as the touchstone of “elections as instruments of democracy,” in Powell’s phrase (Powell, 2000), or of the process of “conferring the median mandate,” as McDonald and Budge describe the
representational process (McDonald & Budge, 2005). In this research the privileged position expressly rests on the idea that the left-right median voter and, by extension, its nearest like-minded representative, the left-right median electoral party, is the best embodiment of electoral majority preferences.

**Questioning Left-Right Policy Deterministic Voting**

There is much to commend the median thesis. Nevertheless, there is good reason to wonder whether the preference of the left-right median voter can always be taken as the reliable, robust, and valid indicator of the electoral majority position. An essential condition, policy deterministic proximity voting along the left-right dimension, rests on shaky grounds empirically. Nor can the centrist disposition of citizen left-right preference distributions be taken as entirely conclusive. In democracies voters get to make choices at election time about governments and candidates as well as policy. That voters individually and electorates collectively are inclined to be multi-motivated, as the evidence below suggests, gives no leave to an analyst to say voters have made the wrong choice or, as social choice theory would say, that voters made a choice less efficient in social utility than they could have (Colomer, 2001, pp. 66-140).

Data on left-right policy deterministic voting are presented in Table 1, again from *EES 2004*. These give evidentiary voice to doubts about the dominance of left-right policy deterministic voting on purely proximity grounds. Left-right deterministic votes are counted as such for those respondents who self-placed on left-right, said they intended to vote, identified a party vote intention, and put their preferred party’s left-right position at least as close to their left-right self-placement...
as any other party. Non-deterministic voters in the left-right proximity sense are those who self-placed on left-right, said they intended to vote, identified a party vote intention, and put that party’s left-right position at a distance farther away from their own than that of some other party. Excluded from the count are respondents who did not self-place on left-right, said they did not intend to vote, did not know for which party they would vote, or put all parties in the same left-right position.

Of the 13 European democracies where the appropriate questions were asked, only Spain has a percentage of policy deterministic proximity voters above 68. Everywhere but Spain between one-third and nearly one-half of the respondents indicate they do not intend to vote for the party that they personally and individually place closest in left-right terms. Notice, these no more than modest levels of proximity voting rest on as liberal an operational interpretation as we can construct. For one thing, they most likely include voters who rationalize their party support by placing their preferred party close to them; for another, they take no account of whether voters as a collective group have a coordinated sense of where parties stand in left-right terms. Nevertheless, even on the evidence employing a liberal interpretation, the assumption of left-right policy deterministic proximity voting is clearly wanting.

[Table 1 about here]

The moderate levels of policy deterministic voting have several sources. Among them is the multi-dimensionality of the policy space. A voter may place a great deal of policy weight on one particular issue—e.g., the environment, crime, taxes, immigration—and vote for a party that bests advocates that single issue
position regardless of where the party stands in left-right terms. Also, behavioral research tells us that many voters are likely to have concerns that mix their policy considerations with other matters. Identification with a party on grounds other than pure policy could play a determinative role (Adams, 2001a; 2001b), or one party may have a valence advantage in terms of being regarded as indisputably better on certain competencies (Schofield, 2003; 2004). As well, a strong like or dislike of party leaders can carry weight in voting decisions (Sanders & Carey, 2000; Stokes, 1966). Another important consideration is strategic voting; voters often abandon small parties they prefer in policy terms in favor of a larger party that has governing potential (Abramson et al., 2010; Blais, Young, & Turcotte, 2005). In addition or perhaps in conjunction with strategic considerations, voters may behave more in line with the directional theory of voting than a proximity theory (Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989). And there is a large literature on performance evaluation voting, most especially economic voting, where voters cast a ballot to reward or punish incumbent parties (for an review and overview see Anderson, 2007).

Each and all of these possibilities are unquestionably legitimate concerns for voters. However, they can disrupt the median voter’s left-right position as a valid indicator of the majority policy preference in a general election. Thus, identifying the median voter left-right position as the embodiment of the electoral majority could prove to be a real but neglected problem in studies of collective representation.

**A Best-Guess Identification of Majority Representatives**

Thus far we have seen that some majority party almost surely exists in actual elections and that the party standing closest to the self-ascribed left-right preference
of the median voter has only a loose and shaky claim to embodying the majority. Below we introduce and extend the *double complement rule* developed by Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera (Shugart & Taagepera, 1994) to suggest that a plurality party’s claim to majority support has a good deal of plausibility.

**Double Complement Rule, Plurality Elections**

Electoral systems endogenize the effective size of party systems. Under simple plurality rules the tendency is toward a two-party system. If the tendency holds strictly, one could rely on the endogeneity to produce a binary choice that guarantees a majority decision. The argument (see, e.g., Riker, 1982) is that parties maneuver during the election season to put together majority voting coalitions; in the end, a majority of voters decide which party has made the better case. However, outside the U.S., where there are almost always strict two-party races for Congress and normally (but not always) competition between two viable candidates for president, plurality elections seldom produce majority winners nationwide. Usually minor parties receive enough votes to give the electoral winner only a nationwide vote plurality, even if the rules then give it a manufactured majority of seats.

Facing up to the need to produce a decisive but fair election outcome, Shugart and Taagepera developed a double complement rule as a compromise between trying to identify a Condorcet winner through plurality decisions and through runoff majority decisions (Shugart & Taagepera, 1994). Their purpose was to create a decision method for single-office elections in which entry by minor parties is discouraged while also guarding against a narrow plurality victory turning into a definite winner without a runoff (Shugart & Taagepera, 1994, pp. 343-6).
The double complement rule says there is probably no need for a runoff if one party’s vote percentage in the first round is closer to 50 than it is to the vote percentage of the second party. A party at 45% (5 points from 50) is declared the winner after the first round, if no other party has more than 40%. The rule combines the principles of naming the winner based on a plurality position in the first round and naming the winner only after a majority reveals itself in a runoff. The combination can be expressed as a numerical average (see Shugart & Taagepera, 1994, pp. 324-5, for the calculation of the average).

Whatever one thinks of the double complement as a rule for deciding actual elections, it is theoretically interesting for what it says about identifying a probable Condorcet winning party in a multi-party plurality election when no party wins a majority in the first round. The intuition we see embedded in the rule is this. In a runoff, votes for minor parties would have to break in favor of the second-place party in such a lopsided manner, vis-à-vis the first-place party, that it is not plausible to think a runoff is necessary. For instance, if the vote split among three parties is 45-35-20, then the second place party would need more than 75% of the votes from supporters of the third-place party (>15 of the 20% third-place party votes) in order to overtake the first-place party. Because such a lopsided split is unlikely, the probabilistic bet as to the majority’s preference can be made after the first round. When the initial vote split has the top two parties in tighter competition—say, 41-39-20—the second place party would need over 55% of the third-place party’s vote (>11 of the 20%) to succeed in a runoff. In that case, too much ambiguity remains to say with much confidence which of the two leading contenders the majority favors.
In British elections of the 1950s through 1970s Liberals are generally considered to have been the electoral median party, the one closest to the median voter. Yet, it seems unreasonable to think the party would have been the majority preference in, for instance, the 1966 election. Considering percentages over just the three major competitors, the 1966 vote distribution was Labour = 48.8, Liberals = 8.6, and Conservatives = 42.6. Liberals would need 41.5 of the Conservatives 42.6 percent, that is 97.4% of the Conservative vote, to defeat Labour. That lopsided preference for Liberals among Conservative voters appears so highly improbable as not to be credible. Also, as Labour would have needed only just over 15% of the Liberal votes to defeat the Conservatives head-to-head (1.3 of the Liberals 8.6, since 1.3 + 48.8 = 50.1), empowering the plurality party as the one likely to embody the majority preference stretches credulity not at all.

First-round election results without an outright majority-winner provide no guarantee as to which party is majority preferred, even accepting Regenwetter et al.’s analysis showing that some one party would likely be a majority winner. Nevertheless, in strict probability terms without information about the full preference profiles of voters, the plurality party is the most likely. Furthermore, even with a strong sense of where the parties are located along a left-right continuum, as in the 1966 British election, the plurality party often remains the best bet. None of this is to say that the plurality party, lacking an outright majority, is majority preferred; rather, it says that the plurality party has a good basis for making such a claim.
Extending the Double Complement Rule to PR Elections

The average calculation, the underlying principle, and the implicit intuition of the double complement rule cannot be extended straightforwardly to multi-party PR elections. The reason is simple. PR multi-party election outcomes seldom manufacture a parliamentary majority, and thus government formation does not come directly on the heels of an election but after coalition negotiation. Below we think through the possibilities from three scenarios—(1) close competition between two large parties plus a smallish third party, (2) close competition among three sizable parties, and (3) one party standing far ahead of its nearest rival. In all three, the plurality party has standing as the dominant coalition partner in a majority coalition and sometimes as a single-party government.

In our first scenario we take a situation resembling the German election of November 1972. Among the three German parties winning more than a 0.6 percentage of the vote, the split was CDU/CSU = 48.6, SDP = 42.6, and FDP = 7.9. In a head to head contest, of course, one of the two leading parties has to win a majority. The next question is whether the FDP—the party most likely preferred by the median voter—can defeat that winner. For that to happen the FDP would need 42.1%+1 of the CDU/CSU’s 48.6% (>86.6%) to defeat the SDP, or the FDP would need 42.1%+1 of the SDP’s 42.6% (>98.8%) to defeat the CDU/CSU. While either of such lopsided splits is possible, neither is likely. This is to say that, probabilistically, one of the large parties is the party likely to be favored by an electoral majority. The centrist, median FDP is an unlikely Condorcet winner.
Despite this probabilistic fact, majoritarianism as embedded in studies of collective representation assumes that the FDP embodies the majority position because it is nearest the left-right median. Given its unlikely majority status, this would appear to be an analytical problem for these studies. The potential majority is much more likely to be with one of the two major parties. In strict probability terms the plurality party is the more likely of the two, as Shugart & Taagepera imply. Given the procedural need for a parliamentary majority in Germany, this seems to give a plurality party in coalition with a smaller party popular majority support. Such coalitions have of course been the norm in post-war Germany.

When confronting a situation with three large parties in close competition, as in the Netherlands in September 1982, ambiguity reigns. The vote percentages calculated on the basis of the three leading parties are PvdA = 36.7%, CDA = 35.5%, and VVD = 27.9%. PvdA would defeat CDA with about 13/28ths of the VVD vote and could defeat VVD with about 13/35ths of the CDA vote. But CDA could defeat PvdA with roughly 15/28ths of the VVD vote and defeat VVD with roughly 15/37ths of the PvdA vote. Furthermore, VVD could defeat PvdA with 22.1/35.5 of the CDA vote and defeat CDA with 22.1/36.7 of the PvdA vote. Some form of coalition is necessary just to have a government. However any coalition formed by the major parties runs counter, at least partially, to standard analyses of collective representation, the CDA coalition with the VVD which actually formed drew the government position away from the median voter position.

Finally, consider the Swedish case. In elections from 1950 into the 1990s, Sweden’s Social Democrats (SDA) won between 40 and 50 percent of the vote while
its closest competitor was winning between 15 and 25 percent. Under these circumstances the SDA was probabilistically the Condorcet winner quite often. This could be put down to often being the median party in left-right terms. In Sweden, then, installing the SDA in government, alone or with a partner, does square with reading the election result in terms of the party being the probabilistic Condorcet winner via its median status, in line with the conventional analysis of collective representation. But its plurality position seems at least equally important.

**Summary**

Elections with both a small number of viable parties on the ballot and the structured partiality of preference orderings among electorates—in contrast to “as if” random distribution of preference orderings of the impartial culture assumption of pure social choice theory—almost certainly produce a single party that could be a Condorcet winner. Absent an outright majority, it is usually arguable which party that is. Evaluated in strict probability terms, a better than even bet would be on the plurality party. The bet changes when information about other party characteristics is taken into account, e.g. their left-right standing. Still, the plurality party has a strong claim, either to wholly or partially represent the electoral majority.

Figure 3 summarizes our thinking about some of these possibilities. Our construction of the question arranges election outcomes with respect to both the overall vote for the plurality party (horizontal axis) and its lead over the second largest party (vertical axis). This arrangement reflects arguments about the claim of the largest party to represent the majority the nearer it approaches to 50% of the vote, and the more it stands out in the party system compared to other parties. This builds
on Shugart and Taagepera’s (1994) rule for SMDP party competition. Lead and vote-share are related in that a plurality party with, for example, 30% of the vote cannot lead by more than that amount over its nearest rival. However, it is also the case that two parties that split the overall vote almost equally would have shaky claims to exclusive majority representation precisely because they are almost equal in votes.

[Figure 3 about here]

The figure distinguishes between such situations by mapping the space into four zones, depending on the extent to which the plurality party emerges so clearly from others that it can claim to carry the majority preference without much challenge.

The four possibilities are represented as Zones 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the figure.

**Zone 1:** Here plurality parties’ absolute and lead size is small. Hence all parties might stake some claim to majority support, particularly if they can get together to form a coalition.

**Zone 2:** Two parties are large but neither has a commanding lead. Again, this seems to leave the field relatively open, although the largest party might stake a claim to representation, particularly if it can get another party’s support.

**Zone 3:** The plurality party is relatively small and has but a small lead. It has some standing as the majority representatives but clearly could not govern alone.
Zone 4: The plurality party is large and has a commanding lead over its rival. This clearly buttresses its claims to represent majority opinion over and against others, the median party included.

Condorcet Winning Parties

We now turn to empirically investigate the observations and conjectures offered in the preceding section using the ESS 2004 data. That set of surveys asked respondents their vote intention in the next general election and, in twelve countries, went on to ask “how probable is it that you will ever vote for the [to be identified] party” (Schmitt, Loveless, et al., 2004, see Q12). This combination of questions allows us to construct preference orderings and use them to identify which party—if any—is the Condorcet winner among the available alternatives.

As an estimate of a respondent’s preference order over parties at the next election we take the vote intention as the first preference and use the probability statements as preference order rankings for other parties. When the head-to-head party competition involves two parties other than the one for which a respondent intended to vote, we use a respondent’s probability assignment as the indicator of vote choice. Respondents who said they had not decided their vote intention or refused to state an intention are assigned preference orders based solely on their probability estimates. Respondents saying they would not vote or would cast a blank ballot are excluded. Respondents who said they did not know what probability to assign to a particular party are recoded to the lowest probability category (“not at all probable”) on the assumption that most did not know enough about the party to think they might vote for it in the next election. We use this construction of preferences to
record hypothetical vote totals of each party in head-to-head, two-party competition. From these preferences we identify the Condorcet winner (there is one in all twelve countries) and, as side information, the winner of the contest between the electoral left-right median party and the plurality party.¹⁰

The plurality party is directly observed as the party with the highest count among respondents stating a vote intention.¹¹ We follow the research on collective representation in identifying the left-right electoral median party. It is the party standing closest to the median voter’s (and median citizen’s) left-right self-placement position—noting, in each of the twelve countries that the citizen median and the median among those intending to vote is identical.¹² A party’s left-right position is estimated by the average left-right position assigned by respondents.

Table 2 reports the results of the various Condorcet-style tournaments. The first major column identifies the country. The second major column reports which party is the Condorcet winner and whether the Condorcet winner is the plurality party, the median electoral party, both, or neither.

Every country examined has a Condorcet winning party, much as the work by Regenwetter and his colleagues expects (Regenwetter et al., 2006). This bodes well for the prospects of majoritarian representation generally. Our next concern is which party has a strong claim to speak for the majority. The second column under the ‘Condorcet Winner’ heading indicates whether the party holding plurality or median status is the winner. In Austria, for example, the SPÖ is the Condorcet winner and it is both the plurality party and the one closest to the median voter position. In Britain, in contrast, the Liberal Democrats are the Condorcet winner. They are the
median electoral party, while the Conservatives are the plurality party. In further contrast, the Danish Social Democrats is the plurality party, the Condorcet winner, but not the electoral median party. Finally, Finland reveals the fourth alternative. Finnish Social Democrats is the Condorcet winner but neither the plurality nor the median party.

[Table 2 about here]

Looking at the results across all twelve nations, the electoral median party is the Condorcet winner four times—Austria, Britain, Portugal, and Spain—and in three of those four cases it is also the plurality party. In the eight other countries, the plurality party is the Condorcet winner in six. When combined with the three times the plurality party is also the median party this means that in nine of twelve cases the plurality party is the predominant single-party majority preference.

The third major column of Table 2 shows the results of head-to-head competition between the plurality and median parties. Of the nine countries where they are different parties, only in Britain does the median party stand ahead of the plurality party. In the six countries where the plurality party is the Condorcet winner it, of course, defeats the median party. Note, too, the defeats are strong ones in the sense that even with all the indifferent voters voting for the median party it would still lose. Further, in Finland and Ireland, where a party other than the plurality or median has the Condorcet tag, the plurality party rather handily defeats the median party.

No surefire method of identifying a single Condorcet winning party can be derived from the electoral results absent a clear majority count for a party.
Furthermore, even in the face of the evidence that one party almost surely could be crowned with a Condorcet win, there is no surefire way of knowing even with presently available survey evidence whether the majority prefers a coalition of parties over a single-party Condorcet winner. Nevertheless, this much is clear. When democratic practice privileges the plurality party it is probably doing so in line with the preferences of a majority in a sizable proportion of cases.

**Conclusions**

Three key findings emerge from our analysis. First, a Condorcet winning party exists in all twelve countries surveyed. Second, the Condorcet party is more likely to be the plurality party than the party standing closest to the median voter along a left-right continuum. Third, the more frequent majoritarian status of the plurality party over and against the electoral median party has much to do with voters not choosing as if by left-right policy determinism.

One direct implication of these three points is that granting privileged status to plurality parties, as democratic practice often does, is in line with majoritarian principles. Another is that on questions of collective representation voter choice itself is a starting point for governments not being as congruent with the survey-elicited left-right median voter positions as they could be. By voters’ own reports and for their own reasons, they choose less congruent representation of their self-reported preferences than they could. Only a truncated construction of democratic theory can downgrade the representational credentials of a democratic government forming in response to outcomes consistent with majority preferences. Thus, our first conclusion is this. Congruence with the median voter identified through self-
placement cannot be taken as the exclusive yardstick for evaluating the quality of representation. Congruence with her or his position is often not responsive to the expressed preferences of the voters when casting their ballots.

This first conclusion should not be read with a full stop. The discrepancy between citizen self-placements and their voting preferences in any one election may be but a short-run phenomenon. Despite more often preferring the plurality party over the electoral median party, when they are not the same, the left-right citizen self-placement distributions are known to display a persistent centrist tendency year in and year out (e.g., from Adams et al., 2004, p. 596, and others cited above). The persistent centrism signals that a centrist policy alternative is the one most congruent with voter and citizen preferences in the long run, whatever their vote preferences may be saying in the short run.

What, then, is one to say about democratic representation that has a majority of voters pointing in the policy direction advanced by a plurality party when that party’s policy position is more at variance with the settled centrist preferences of voters than some other party? The answer will surely start with Powell’s observation that “elections … are instruments of democracy, not democracy itself” (Powell 2000, p. 160). From that starting point one could next note that applying the median congruence standard on an election-by-election basis is a short-run and mostly election-specific perspective. The settled centrism is a long-run phenomenon. That the voters choose not to abide by long-run centrism when making their short-run vote choices means that median congruence standard deserves consideration, but it has to be seen and analyzed as a long-run matter.
Our second conclusion at this stage in the development of theory and evidence is this. In line with the observation that elections are not democracy itself, the process of democratic representation might be properly viewed through theoretical lenses that focus separately but simultaneously on short-run responsiveness to voter choice and long-run congruence with the settled centrist preferences of voters and citizens. Are elections as instruments of democracy capable of producing both? We cannot be sure at this juncture. But not being sure is a consequence, in good part, of not having given the two time horizons the full consideration they require.
Table 1: Percentage of Left-Right Policy Deterministic Voters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% Choosing Closest Party: Self-Placement</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>1019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>1114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>1173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>1035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Analysis by authors using EES 2004, 1st ed. (Schmitt and Loveless, et al. 2004; data at europeanelectionstudies.net)

A Left-right policy deterministic voters are respondents who report intending to vote for the party they placed at least as close to their own left-right position as any other party. Respondents included in the analysis are those who reported a party vote intention, self-placed on left-right, placed their country’s two largest parties plus at least one other, and did not place all parties at the same left-right position.
Table 2: Identification of Condorcet Winning Party and Comparison of Vote Support for Plurality versus Electoral Median Party in Head-to-Head Contests, Twelve West European Countries in 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Condorcet Winner</th>
<th>Vote Intention Comparison of Plurality Party versus Party Closest to Electoral Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Plurality or Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>SPÖ</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>PSOE</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Party underlined in italicized bold* is the winning party in this head-to-head contest.

Source: Analysis by authors using EES 2004, 1st ed. for all countries except Sweden, 2nd edition for Sweden (Schmitt and Loveless, et al. 2004; data at europeanelectionstudies.net)

A By country, the parties listed are: Austria, Socialist; Britain, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives; Denmark, Social Democrats and Radical Liberals; Finland, Social Democrats, Conservatives (aka National Coalition), and True Finns; France, Socialists and Greens; Germany, Christian Democrats and Free Democrats; Ireland = Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Greens; Italy = Left Democrats and Popular Alliance; Netherlands = Labor and D66; Portugal = Socialist; Spain = Socialist Workers; Sweden = Social Democrats and June List.
Figure 1: The Median Position E and Plurality Position G in a One-dimensional Policy Space
Figure 2: Histograms of Left-Right Self-Placement: 14 European Countries, 2004 (mean, median, and standard deviation in parentheses)

Source: Authors calculations using EES 2004 (Schmitt and Loveless, et al. 2004; data at europeanelectionstudies.net)
Figure 3: Plurality Party Claims to Majority Representation, where No Party has More than 50% of the Vote

(1) No party has clear claim to majority representation

(2) Both lead parties represent majority opinion, but plurality party still has an edge over the second party

(3) Plurality party has a plausible but controversial claim to represent majority rule

(4) Plurality party has a clear claim to represent majority opinion due to its outstanding size and lead over rivals
References


Endnotes

1 See http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net/.

2 With equiprobable strict preferences over the alternatives, the probability of a majority cycle increases as the number of options and the number of voters increase (DeMeyer & Plott, 1970, 353; Weber, 1993).

3 Data displayed in Figure 2 along with those reported below in Table 1 and Table 2 come from computation and analysis of the European Election Survey 2004 (ESS 2004). The EES 2004 was made possible by numerous grants and administered, in collaboration with others, by principal investigators Herman Schmitt and Matthew Loveless (Schmitt, Loveless, et al., 2004). Neither the original collectors of the data nor their sponsors bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations reported here. The data are available on the European Election Study homepage (http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net/) and from the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) at the University of Cologne, Germany. Further details about the data sources, question wording, and particular coding decisions used here can be found at http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/research/index.html.

4 Part of the similarity in the numerical values of central tendencies is likely to be an illusion due to respondents norming their position to the center of their own nation’s political spectrum. We should therefore not make too much of this cross-national equivalence of mean locations. However, it is important to note that each country’s median citizen position is somewhere in the middle of its political spectrum; 46 to 74 percent of respondents self-locate from 4 through 7; and relatively small percentages report being extremists (Portugal and France are partial exceptions).
Belgium is excluded because the vote intention question was not asked.

Using the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* data for 39 elections in 22 countries, Paul Warwick finds that only one-third of voters vote for the party closest to them when the party placements are based on the average party positions assigned by all voters (Warwick, 2009, p. 18).

The actual vote percentages on the basis of valid votes are CDA = 29.4%, PvdA = 30.4, VVD = 23.1%.

Two countries are lost compared to those in Figure 2 because respondents in Belgium and Luxembourg were not asked the probability questions.

Two points about the probability estimates are worth mentioning. First, the question includes a behavioral choice consideration for voters. Unlike asking voters to rank order party preferences, asking about voting implies that respondents take into consideration such concerns as governing potential. Second, as with all responses to survey questions, stochastic variance is surely part of respondents’ probability estimates (Converse, 1964; 1970; 2000; Zaller, 1992). A few general tendencies stand out here. Respondents intending to vote for one of a nation’s two largest parties in the next election assign an average probability score between 8.5 and 9.5 (10 = very probable). In comparison to supporters of a country’s two large parties, respondents intending to vote for smaller parties assign slightly lower probabilities to their chosen party at the next election and sometimes a middling probability to one of the two largest parties. A dimensional analysis seeking to recover party distances based on the probability responses shows the two largest parties as polar opposites (except in Ireland) with smaller parties often off the line connecting the largest parties. This is consistent with
the interpretations given above for the possible reasons for moderate levels of policy
deterministic proximity voting. Large parties anchor a dimension interpretable as left-
right. Supporters of large parties see little probability of crossing from left to right
(right to left) to support the major opposition party, and they have only limited
motivation to support a small party. Supporters of smaller parties, on average, see a
sometimes moderate probability of supporting another party, as their vote intention
indicates a willingness to overlook strategic considerations related to governing
potential.

10 The construction requires two inferences on our part. One accepts that the probability
report is directly applicable to their choice in the next election; the other assumes
respondents who give an estimate would actually vote when faced with any and all pairs
in a comprehensive series of rounds. A question asking directly which parties in rank-
order sequence a respondent would support if their intended party were not on the ballot
would be closer to the question of interest here; however, we are unaware of any data
from a number of countries that asks such a question (but see Converse, 1966, for a
truncated set of French and Finnish respondents asked something similar). The issue of
nonvoting is partially addressed by the possibility that respondents who might abstain
because they find a subset of parties unacceptable have an opportunity to say it is “not
at all probable” that they would vote for the party. We assign respondents saying “not
at all probable” about two parties in a given paired comparison to the ‘indifferent’
category and thus remove them from a direct role in inferences about a Condorcet
winning party.
In all twelve countries this is the same party were we to have used the highest count on vote intention plus the count of the highest probability among those not stating a vote intention but intending to vote.

This squares with Powell’s treatment. He uses left-right self-placement survey data to identify the median citizen and describes that position interchangeably as the position of the median citizen and median voter (Powell, 2000, 164). Other studies rely on HeeMin Kim and Richard Fording’s (1998) calculation of a median voter position, which overlays vote percentages for parties with parties’ left-right positions as recorded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (see Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). The overlay does not specify that voters provide a full-fledged endorsement of the policy position of the party closest to their own. Rather, the calculation assumes an even distribution of voters between party positions and marks the median as a point in the voter distribution.

Given that Labour rather than Conservatives won the General Election in 2005, this casts some doubt on how far electoral surveys mirror the actual electorate, their preferences and opinions. That is too large a question to pursue here. However it does generally mirror the point made above, that ‘ideal’ preferences as expressed in an abstracted survey context may well differ from preferences expressed under the constraints of an actual election campaign.

This anomalous result may again buttress the idea that factors other than current policy enter the election campaign. In Finland for example a recurrent constraint has been fear of alienating Russia (and formerly the Soviet Union) either by choice of candidate or of (foreign) policy initiatives in the election.
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