



Public disaffection and electoral reform: Pressure from below?

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Synopsis: Many case studies suggest that political legitimacy plays a critical role in the adoption, maintenance and modification of electoral rules. Where the public sees the regime as legitimate, this provides little pressure for change to the status quo. Where citizens are dissatisfied with the regime, especially when performance is evaluated against democratic aspirations, this heightens the salience of electoral reform on the policy agenda. Although many scholars have often suggested a connection, systematic cross-national evidence establishing this relationship has not been examined. Moreover this assumption is challenged by rational choice accounts which regard electoral reform as an elite-level issue, where the public plays only a marginal role.

After reviewing the previous literature and outlining the theoretical debate, this study analyses this issue. Citizens' satisfaction with the performance of democracy, aspirations for democracy, and confidence in regime institutions are compared by drawing upon the 2nd and 3rd waves of the World Values Survey (WVS), in the early to mid-1990s, covering a wide range of around 50 countries around the globe. Patterns of institutional reform are measured by changes to the electoral systems used for the lower house of parliament from 1993-2004. The research design allows us to see whether public disaffection influenced subsequent changes in electoral systems, controlling for macro-level factors, such as levels of democracy and development. Moreover, to reverse the relationship, we also compare whether different electoral systems shape public perceptions of the fairness and integrity of elections, using the ISSP-2004. Among all the cultural factors, the results show that democratic aspirations (support for democracy as an ideal) prove a strong, significant, and robust predictor of subsequent electoral reforms. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and considers their implications, both for theories concerning political legitimacy, as well as for understanding the role of public opinion in institutional reform.

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Theorists have long suggested that political legitimacy is the foundation of democratic governance. The concept of 'legitimacy' represents acceptance of the underlying 'rules of the game', so that all actors, even electoral losers, willingly consent to rule by the regime, without the sanction of force. Legitimacy, in Seymour Martin Lipset words, "involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society."¹ For this reason alone, citizens' evaluations of regime legitimacy should be regarded as a critical indicator of the quality of democracy. Moreover where citizens aspire to democratic ideals, where they lack confidence in the legitimacy of political parties, parliaments, and governments, as well as where they express deeper concern about the performance of democracy in their own country, this is widely believed to have important consequences. Loss of legitimacy for authorities in fragile states and transitional regimes can be particularly problematic; where specific election results are disputed, for example, the consequences can be mass riots and the breakdown of order, such as the internal turbulence and inter-ethnic killings following the December 2007 Kenyan elections.²

Legitimacy is particularly important for the stability and change of regime institutions. In democratic states where referenda are required to amend the constitutional and legal framework governing elections, such as New Zealand, citizens exercise a direct voice in the policymaking process. In states lacking direct channels, public opinion is still often assumed to play an important role. Widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy, low levels of institutional confidence, aspirations to democratic ideals, and concern about the integrity or fairness of particular elections, are all expected to heighten the salience of electoral reform on the policy agenda and thus mobilize elite-level attempts to amend the rules of the game. Hence, for example, during the early 1990s, Italian electoral reform was widely regarded as a reaction to the Tangentopoli scandal, while public anger about government corruption was also seen as one of the main triggers for Japanese reforms.³ After comparing the series of major electoral reforms occurring in established democracies since 1950, Katz concludes that 'public outrage' featured as a common catalyst in all cases.⁴ For Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, as well, electoral system changes occur either during the initial process of regime transition, or else when there is a 'crisis of governance' involving 'high public mistrust and dissatisfaction with the political system.'⁵ Gallagher expressed similar views in a vivid metaphor, when he argued that widespread public disaffection has the potential, like 'woodworm', to undermine the foundations of the electoral system, until it suddenly caves in.⁶ In turn, reforms to electoral institutions and the adoption of new rules can be expected to influence public opinion, ideally, where effective, by progressively strengthening confidence in the democratic process.

Numerous commentators have commonly suggested that public opinion matters for reform efforts in established democracies, although cross-national empirical studies have not clearly established evidence of the assumed linkage. The issue is tricky to analyze as it requires both cross-national and time-series survey data. The previous literature has generated many detailed 'before' and 'after' case-studies documenting the dynamics of public opinion surrounding electoral reforms occurring within particular countries, usually established democracies such as New Zealand and the UK.⁷ Yet it is difficult to generalize more widely from these particular contexts, especially to the role of public opinion in younger democracies and transitional regimes where the vast majority of institutional changes have occurred in recent years. In the last few years, an expanding body of comparative literature has analyzed

the impact of electoral rules upon public perceptions of political legitimacy in a growing number of countries worldwide, as well as the way these effects vary among ethnic minority and majority populations, and among partisan winners and losers.⁸ Nevertheless the reverse relationship, where the causal arrow runs from public opinion to institutional reform, has not been demonstrated. Rational choice theories also challenge the claim that public opinion matters. These accounts emphasize that electoral reform is an elite-level game among partisan interests, where the outcome depends upon the calculation of gains for office-holders, and the general public is largely marginalized. In this perspective, the public may demand institutional reform, as part of the agenda-setting process, but it would be naïve to assume that political elites will necessarily respond to these pressures, if the outcome runs counter to their partisan interests. Rational choice accounts predict that there can often be a mismatch between the public agenda and the elite-level agenda over electoral reform, even in the most democratic states.

To advance the debate, Part I of this study reviews the previous literature and develops a policy cycle model as a comprehensive theoretical framework which is useful to identify the multiple actors and sequential stages involved in the maintenance and modification of electoral rules. This model seeks to clarify the potential role of public opinion as part of the agenda-setting process for institutional reform, as well as the way that, in turn, mass attitudes may be influenced by the outcome of the process. *Part II* outlines the sources of evidence and the research design used in the study. Testing the cyclical model fully requires information about public opinion at t^1 , electoral reforms at t^2 , and then subsequent changes in public opinion at t^3 . Here we present a partial test of the first two steps in the process. The research design ideally needs to establish public attitudes in t^1 , prior to electoral reforms being introduced; hence public opinion is compared drawing upon the 2nd and 3rd waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) in the early-to-mid 1990s, covering 50 countries around the world.⁹ Perceptions of the political legitimacy are conceptualized to operate at four levels, ranging from the more diffuse to the more specific: *democratic aspirations*, measured by support for democratic ideals; *democratic performance*, measured by the public's perception of the performance of democracy in each country; *institutional confidence*, especially trust in parties and parliaments; and *electoral legitimacy*, measured by attitudes towards the fairness and honesty of elections. Institutional changes are monitored according to changes to the electoral system which occurred from 1993 to 2004 in all countries worldwide, based on classifications contained in successive editions of the International IDEA *Handbook of Electoral System Design*.¹⁰ This comparison identifies almost four dozen cases of major changes to electoral systems during this period, mostly in developing countries and in transitional regimes and electoral democracies. Among these, almost half (21 cases) are in countries contained in the WVS survey. *Part III* presents the preliminary analysis, examining the impact of attitudes towards democratic ideals, democratic performance, and institutional confidence in the early-to-mid 1990s on subsequent cases of electoral institutional change, controlling for macro-level factors such as levels of democracy and development. The key results indicate that among all cultural factors, *democratic aspirations are the strongest and most significant predictors of the subsequent adoption of electoral reforms*. In a series of multivariate regression models, democracy aspirations proved stronger predictors of reform than levels of economic or human development, the historical record of democracy in each country, as well as cultural indicators such as satisfaction with democratic performance and institutional confidence. To examine whether, in turn, the experience of electoral processes and outcomes shape public opinion, *Part IV* compares a wide range of countries to see whether electoral systems influence attitudes towards electoral fairness and honesty, comparing data from the International Social Survey Program

2004 (ISSP2004). The conclusion considers the implications, both for theories concerning electoral reform, as well as for understanding the role of public opinion in broader process of institutional change.

I: Theoretical framework and literature review

Ever since seminal work by Maurice Duverger (1954) and by Douglas Rae (1971), a rich literature has developed typologies of electoral systems and analyzed their consequences.¹¹ The most common approach has compared established democracies in the post-war period to identify the mechanical impact of electoral institutions upon seat and vote distributions, and thus patterns of party competition, as well as the representation of women and ethnic minorities, issues of governability and political stability, types of constituency service and legislative behaviour, patterns of ethnic conflict, and levels of voting turnout.¹² When comparing Western democracies, the logic of treating electoral rule as stable equilibrium institutions made much sense from the post-war era until the early-1990s; with a few exceptions, in most European states the basic electoral system usually persisted in recognizable form for decades, or even centuries. For example, Bartolini and Mair noted only fourteen unbroken transitions in Europe between 1885 and 1985, defined as a major shift in electoral rules between two democratic elections, excluding disruptions caused by wars, dictatorships, establishment of a new state, or the reappearance of an old one.¹³ Katz identified only fourteen cases of wholesale electoral system reform in established democracies since the 1950s, and five of these occurred in one country (France).¹⁴ In Western countries the electoral rules of the game appeared settled and predictable, although more minor electoral regulations were modified at more regular intervals, typified by adjustment to voting thresholds, electoral formulas, and suffrage qualifications.¹⁵ Nevertheless these estimates remain highly conservative. It is important to compare a broader range of countries and types of regimes to generalize about this phenomenon more widely; any analysis which focuses only upon established democracies, and which is further restricted to the limited number of 'major' cases of electoral system reform, provides a deeply skewed and atypical set of cases, under-estimating the degree of volatility to electoral rules common in countries which have more recently experienced the transition from autocracy and the consolidation of democratic elections.

During the 1990s, the conventional assumption that electoral institutions were usually stable equilibrium institutions came under increasing question, and a revisionist body of literature evolved to understand the dynamics of 'electoral engineering'.¹⁶ This shift was driven in part by the major changes to electoral systems in established democracies since the early-1990s, notably the well-known cases of Italy (1993, 2005), New Zealand (1993), Japan (1994), Israel (1992, 2001), and the UK (at sub-national and supra-national levels, since 1997).¹⁷ Debate about electoral reform also intensified on the policy agenda in other Western democracies, such as Canada.¹⁸ The third wave of democratization also strongly challenged conventional assumptions, especially the transition and consolidation of democratic regimes in Latin America and post-Communist Europe.¹⁹ Frequent amendments to electoral institutions in these regions highlight the importance of the initial choice and subsequent modification of electoral systems and voting procedures as part of the process of regime change.²⁰ The revision to the standard perspective was also stimulated by broader notions of what counts as 'electoral reform' due to the institutionalization of electoral management during recent years, including the rapidly growing legal and administrative frameworks regulating political finance and media campaign coverage, the professionalization of election management bodies, and the use of legal gender quotas and reserved seats in the candidate nomination process.²¹ The international community's engagement in electoral processes, through the capacity development of EMBs and through the deployment of electoral

observer missions, generated debate about standards of electoral integrity.²² Studies also examined rules in electoral autocracies, where many regimes learnt to hold popular elections, thereby reducing international and domestic pressure for reform, while simultaneously limiting effective party competition through manipulating election processes and outcomes.²³ In short, rather than treating electoral rules as endogenous, the common feature of studies seeking to understand each of these important developments was to reverse the traditional direction of causality assumed in the conventional perspective, by focusing upon understanding the factors driving the adoption, maintenance, and modification of electoral institutions.

Rational choice institutionalism and partisan interests

What drives change? The most popular approach is based upon rational choice institutionalism; these accounts have emphasized the paramount importance of the calculation of partisan interests in a two-stage game, where parties have preferences for alternative institutions based on expectations about the payoffs these rules will have for them in future.²⁴ The key decision-makers are seen as actors within the legislature and executive who seek to maintain or revise constitutional, legal and regulatory frameworks when calculating the optimal rewards in elected office anticipated from any rule changes.²⁵ In these accounts, the concept of partisan interest is often framed relatively narrowly, in terms of policy outcomes, office-seeking, and personal gain for key individuals. Partisan interests can also be conceptualized more broadly, however, to include general value or ideological preferences, for example when parties seek reforms based on the principles of fairness, governability or social representation, although doing so carries the danger of generating tautological explanations which lose their analytical power.

Rational choice approaches to electoral institutions have been developed in a series of recent studies; for example, in a widely-cited article, Carles Boix argued that the choice of electoral systems derives from the decisions ruling parties make to maximize their representation. As long as the electoral arena does not change and the current electoral regime benefits the ruling parties, the electoral system is not altered. As the electoral arena changes (due to the entry of new voters or a change in voters' preferences), the ruling parties modify the electoral system, depending on the emergence of new parties and the coordinating capacities of the old parties.²⁶ Similarly, Kenneth Benoit posits that electoral laws change when two conditions are fulfilled: (i) when a party coalition forms with the power to alter electoral rules; and (ii) where each party in the coalition expects to benefit by gaining more seats under alternative electoral institutions.²⁷ Echoing these views, Josep Colomer argues that existing parties in assemblies and governments tend to prefer the electoral formulas that reinforce their power, with party fragmentation in many countries gradually encouraging the adoption of more inclusive formulas.²⁸ The rational choice approach is attractive because of its theoretical parsimony and elegance. It provides a simple way to compare diverse countries and types of reforms, generating some clear propositions which are testable against the empirical evidence, if we have data on (i) the partisan composition of national legislatures and (ii) the enactment of legal statutes governing electoral institutions. It provides few insights, however, which could be used to generate plausible explanations concerning underlying processes and contexts which constrain or facilitate elite-level actions, including the prior step of agenda-setting in the public sphere. In the comparative literature, the most popular theory of electoral reform, based on rational choice, assumes that this process is an elite-level game among legislators.²⁹

Historical institutionalism and contingent complexities

The idea that partisan interests and elite actors alone drive the process of electoral reform has been subject to extensive critique; hence Katz presents a series of reasons why this theory fails to predict the outcome, including cases where changes are imposed on ruling parties; members of the winning coalition are divided; politicians miscalculate the unforeseen consequences of new rules; parties value long-term change over short-term electoral advantage; and parties trade electoral advantage for other goals.³⁰ The wealth of case-study descriptions in the literature usually emphasize the complexity of the political process of particular electoral reforms occurring in specific countries, including the convergence of multiple actors and forces, and the contingent impact of idiosyncratic events.³¹ In describing reform in Israel, for example, Rahat rejects rational choice theories as oversimplifying the complex reality of the multi-stage bargaining process and the motivations of the key actors.³² In the UK, as well, the rational choice approach fits uneasily with the actions of the Blair Labour government, which implemented a series of reforms which weakened the traditional SMD plurality system, and thus two-party predominance, despite enjoying a massive parliamentary landslide in 1997, based on the largest majority in its history, and experiencing a series of subsequent comfortable election victories.³³ Labour implemented public party funding and introduced new electoral systems at almost every level except for Westminster.³⁴ Labour adopted these policies as manifesto pledges when in opposition, it is true, but in terms of their rational and naked pursuit of electoral advantage, beyond the risk of some loss of political trust, there was little reason for the government to press ahead with implementing these reforms once they came to power. The UK case fits uneasily, and indeed remains a puzzle, according to the rational choice perspective of self-interested partisan actors, unless the notion of 'self-interest' is stretched so far as to become almost meaningless.

Rational choice accounts assume that legislative parties can act relatively autonomously when manipulating or maintaining electoral rules to further their self-interest, without constraint. Yet this premise may under-emphasize the broader process whereby legislative and executive elites are constrained by other institutions, such as constitutional courts or judicial review, by other actors, such as reform NGOs and the media, and by public opinion and the broader political culture. Detailed case studies of the reform process, and many popular observers, have often emphasized the role of long-term trends in public disaffection with the political process, or even a crisis of popular support, functioning as the underlying catalyst or broader context driving electoral reform at elite-level. As already mentioned, studies have often suggested that a series of major corruption scandals acted as a catalyst for reforms in the Japanese Diet and the Italian Chamber of Deputies.³⁵ The paramount role of constitutional referendums, as a way to by-pass the log-jam of established partisan interests, was evident in the New Zealand and Italian cases.³⁶ Case studies suggest that, at least in democratic states, reservoirs of political legitimacy dampen the prospects of reform, where public opinion acts as ballast which anchors institutions within cultural constraints. Conversely, more critical evaluations about the fairness and honesty of specific elections, and weaker feelings of regime legitimacy, are expected to strengthen prospects for change, driving reforms from below.

The policy cycle model of institutional stability and change

The rational choice and the historic case-study approaches are often regarded as offering competing perspectives but of course these are not necessarily either/or explanations; if understood more comprehensively as a cyclical process, public disaffection and lack of political legitimacy could plausibly serve as the long-term context generating political pressures for change, getting the issue of

reform onto the policy agenda, while elite-level bargaining among parties could determine the formulation of policy proposals and the negotiated outcome of the decision-making process. Although electoral rule changes represent one specific type of public policy issue --involving the redistribution of power -- this does not imply that scholars need to abandon standard approaches to understanding the policymaking process. The roots of the policy cycle approach can be traced back historically to David Easton's notion of a political system, as well as drawing upon notions of public policymaking as a multistage process.³⁷

[Figure 1 about here]

The proposed cyclical model used in this study identifies multiple actors as players in a sequential policymaking process, illustrated in Figure 1, with four distinct sequential steps: (i) the *agenda-setting* stage in the public sphere, engaging the public, political parties, the media and NGOs, which heightens the salience of institutional reform as a key problem to be addressed on the policy agenda; (ii) the *policy-making* stage in the state, where policy options are formulated, coalitions are built, and regulatory policies are adopted to address these perceived problems, directly engaging decisions by political parties in the legislature and the executive, as well as, indirectly, the influence of public referendums and international diffusion; (iii) the *implementation* stage, where the revised regulatory framework is put into practice in subsequent elections, involving election management bodies and the courts; and finally, (iv) the *feedback* evaluation loop, when learning about the consequences of the new regulatory framework shapes either satisfaction with the status quo or further demands for subsequent revisions. All this activity is understood to occur within a broader environment in each country, including the role of path-dependent historical traditions, the social structure and culture, and the economic structure. This cycle regards the policymaking process as a series of activities – involving problem identification, agenda-setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation and feedback.

The general model is sufficiently flexible to apply to any major dimension of public policymaking, rather than generating *sui generis* explanations of electoral reform, while recognizing significant factors common to diverse reform efforts in a wide variety of contexts. It also has the advantage of identifying a more comprehensive range of actors and a broader series of stages than rational choice accounts, which focus only upon the role of partisan interests within the legislature. The model remains agnostic, however, about the precise impact of each type of actor in the policy process, for example the relative weight of the public, NGOs and the media in agenda-setting, and whether referenda or international agencies influence the legislature. The proposed notion of a feedback loop is particularly important to understand countries which have modified their electoral rules and then revised them again within a few years, such as France, Italy and Israel, as the consequences of the new system became apparent.

Within this general cyclical model, this study focuses on examining comparative evidence concerning the agenda-setting stage of the process, and, in particular, the role of public evaluations of the legitimacy of regime institutions. In understanding this process, we can draw upon a useful distinction, suggested by Shugart and Wattenberg, between *inherent* factors, focused on pre-existing long-term conditions, and *contingent* factors, or tipping points, which trigger a specific event.³⁸ In democratic states (where public concerns can be freely expressed without fear of reprisal or repression), the policy cycle model postulates that aspirations for democratic change, citizen disaffection with specific elections, and lack of public confidence in core regime institutions, represent inherent conditions heightening the issue of electoral reform on the policy agenda, and thus encouraging the

formulation and enactment of revised regulations by the legislature. Public disaffection should mobilize pressures for reform, encouraging debate about policy options among the media, parties, and NGOs. In transitional regimes, as well, where the public is free to express their concerns, aspirations for more democratic reforms should mobilize democratic movements. By contrast, where regime institutions are widely regarded as legitimate, this should stabilize and 'freeze' opportunities for reform. In this regard, in democracies, perceptions of political legitimacy of regime institutions are an important check on the actions of legislative elites.

Whether elected officials respond to public opinion, in turn, can be theorized to depend upon many contingent conditions, including whether the regime responds to democratic pressures, the availability of direct channels for public expression (for example, through constitutional referenda, plebiscites, or citizen's juries), perceptions about the depth and breadth of public disaffection, the responsiveness of governing elites to citizen's concerns, and the partisan and ideological composition of the legislature. In editing a series of articles on the topic more than a decade ago, I observed that the reform movement appeared to gather steam in Italy, Japan, the UK and New Zealand in the early-1990s due, in part, to increasing public dissatisfaction with the political system.³⁹ Growing public concern seems to be an inherent but far from sufficient cause of reform; there is considerable evidence that citizen disaffection with political institutions deepened during recent decades in many established democracies, after all, without necessarily resulting in major changes to electoral systems.⁴⁰ While commonly assumed in many case-studies, comparative studies have not yet established systematic and comprehensive evidence of the role of public opinion as one of the underlying drivers in the process of electoral reform.

A growing comparative literature, however, has started to examine the reverse pattern, and the role of institutions in shaping the political attitudes. Hence a series of studies by Anderson and colleagues examined the attitudes of 'winners' and 'losers' in the electoral process, under different types of rules.⁴¹ These studies found that even those who supported losing parties in an election were mostly willing to admit that the election was fairly conducted, although this pattern varied across different countries. Moreover losers from the election usually displayed less satisfaction with democracy than winners, although this pattern was strengthened by the type of electoral system and the longevity of democracy. The negative effects of losing were amplified in majoritarian elections and in newer democracies. Losers were also more likely to support reforms in institutional practices. In an earlier study, based on comparing nations contained in the CSES Module I, I found that, as expected, members of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities had more negative attitudes towards the fairness of election, feelings of political efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy than majority populations. But the study found no evidence, however, that this pattern was associated with the specific type of electoral system, whether proportional, mixed, or majoritarian.⁴² Another recent examination of public attitudes towards electoral integrity, by Sarah Birch, examined 28 nations which formed part of Module 1 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).⁴³ The study used multilevel analysis to analyze whether institutions which 'level' the playing field enhance public confidence in the fairness of elections. Birch concluded that proportional electoral systems and public funding of parties had positive effects on mass evaluations of the conduct of elections, whereas the formal independence of electoral management bodies was negatively related to public confidence. This body of research has contributed towards understanding how institutions shape perceptions of political legitimacy. What is less apparent, however, is the reverse relationship, in particular whether public attitudes are one of the factors driving concern about electoral reform on the policy agenda.

II: Research design, data and methods

The most effective comparative research design ideally requires evidence about public opinion at t^1 across a broad range of independent nation states, as well as subsequent patterns of electoral reform at t^2 and any subsequent changes in public attitudes at t^3 . Individual-level evidence about attitudes in many different societies is derived in this study from two surveys. The broadest comparative analysis is available from the World Values Survey (WVS), a global investigation of socio-cultural and political change carried out from 1981 to 2007. This project has carried out representative national surveys of the basic values and beliefs of the publics in more than 90 independent countries, containing over 88 of the world's population and covering all six inhabited continents. It builds on the European Values Survey, first carried out in 22 countries in 1981. A second wave of surveys was completed in 43 countries 1990-1991. A third wave was carried out in 55 nations in 1995-1996, and a fourth wave, in 59 countries, took place in 1999-2001. The fifth wave covering 55 countries was conducted in 2005-2007.⁴⁴ The WVS survey includes some of the most affluent market economies in the world, such as the U.S., Japan and Switzerland, with per capita annual incomes over \$40,000; together with middle-level countries including Mexico, Slovakia, and Turkey, as well as poorer agrarian societies, such as Ethiopia, Mali and Burkina Faso, with per capita annual incomes of \$200 or less (see Table 1). For this analysis, we select data from the second and third waves, conducted in the early to mid-1990s, prior to the enactment of the electoral reforms under comparison.

[Table 1 about here]

There are also significant variations in levels of human development in the countries under comparison in the WVS, as monitored by the UNDP Human development Index combining per capita income with levels of education, literacy and longevity. Some smaller nations also have populations below one million, such as Malta, Luxembourg and Iceland, while at the other extreme both India and China have populations of well over one billion people. The survey contains older democracies such as Australia, India and the Netherlands, newer democracies including El Salvador, Estonia and Taiwan, and autocracies such as China, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, and Egypt. The transition process also varies markedly: some nations have experienced a rapid consolidation of democracy during the 1990s; today the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Argentina currently rank as high on political rights and civil liberties as Belgium, the United States, and the Netherlands, which have a long tradition of democracy.⁴⁵ The survey also includes some of the first systematic data on public opinion in several Muslim states, including Arab countries such as Jordan, Iran, Egypt, and Morocco, as well as in Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The most comprehensive coverage comes from Western Europe, North America and Scandinavia, where public opinion surveys have the longest tradition, but countries are included from all world regions, including Sub Saharan Africa.⁴⁶ This data allows us to compare public attitudes which could plausibly heighten or dampen the prospects for reform of electoral institutions on the policy agenda, including satisfaction with the performance of democracy, and also patterns of institutional confidence, especially concerning political parties, governments, and parliaments. This data is supplemented by the ISSP 2004, covering 42 countries, which contains items monitoring public evaluations of electoral legitimacy, measured by how far citizens regarded elections as honest and fair. For the national-level institutional context, many factors could shape evaluations of political legitimacy. For each country, the study controlled for levels of economic development (logged per capita GDP in purchasing Power Parity) and for the longevity of democracy (measured by the mean civil liberties and

political rights annual scores estimated from 1972-1995 by Freedom H), to see if levels of development and experience of a succession of democratic contests also shaped public attitudes.

Classifying and measuring electoral reforms

The question at the heart of this study is whether public perceptions of regime legitimacy contribute towards subsequent electoral reforms. We therefore need to unpack what counts as an 'electoral reform' and establish which countries and types of regimes have changed their electoral system in the period under review. As Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis observe, there is an important distinction between the process of regime change, for example as states within the Soviet Union adopted new constitutional arrangements after the fall of the Berlin Wall, versus processes of electoral reform within long-established democracies.⁴⁷ The study compares classifications of electoral systems used worldwide for the lower house of the national parliament at two points of time, in 1993 and in 2004. Following Lijphart, an *electoral system* is understood to represent a set of consistent electoral rules (whether constitutional, legal or administrative) under which one or more successive elections for the lower house of the national parliament are conducted within an independent nation state.⁴⁸ The most basic components of electoral systems concern the *electoral formula*, determining how votes are counted to allocate seats. Three other important factors concern: (i) *district magnitude*, referring to the mean number of seats per district (ii) the *electoral threshold*, or the minimum votes needed by a party to secure representation; and (iii) the *assembly size*, referring to the total number of seats in the legislature.⁴⁹ Traditional concepts of electoral reform can also be broadened considerably, however, if applied to rule changes in all stages of the contest from the candidate nomination process, party registration, and ballot access regulations, though the franchise requirements and voter registration processes, media coverage, campaign finance, and party campaigning to the final stage of polling, vote counting, and the allocation of offices.⁵⁰ Although the research design used in this study could be applied to all these dimensions, this paper is restricted to analyzing changes to the basic electoral formula. As such, this study provides a conservative estimate of the total number and frequency of modifications to electoral rules, and further research is required to compare broader types of rule changes.

Electoral formulae were classified for the purpose of the study into three major electoral *families*, each including a number of sub-categories of *electoral systems* used for elections to the lower house of the national parliament in independent nation-states worldwide. The typology, illustrated in Figure 2, distinguishes *majoritarian* systems (including First-Past-the-Post, Second Ballot, the Block vote, Single Non-Transferable Vote, and Alternative Voting systems); *combined* systems (otherwise called 'mixed', incorporating both majoritarian and proportional formula, whether Combined Independent (parallel) or Combined Dependent (such as MMP)); and *proportional systems* (including Party Lists as well as the Single Transferable Vote systems).⁵¹

[Figure 2 about here]

Based on this classification, electoral reforms are defined relatively narrowly as major changes to the electoral system in the period from 1993 to 2004.⁵² Data is drawn from the appendices contained in successive editions of the International IDEA *Handbook of Electoral System Design*.⁵³ There are also a few cases lacking an elected legislative body in the constitution (such as in Saudi Arabia), as well as a few more complicated cases to classify, where the constitution or legislature is 'temporarily' suspended for an indefinite period, for example due to a military coup (e.g. Burma, Thailand), or due to a period of

internal conflict in failed states (e.g. Eritrea). In addition, in a few cases absolute autocracies have introduced elections for the lower house for the first time, replacing previously-appointed or advisory bodies, and these are also counted as cases of electoral system change.

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Based on this classification, estimates of the number and distribution of changes to electoral systems in 190 independent nation-states around the world from 1993 to 2004 are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. It is apparent that almost three quarters (145 or 76%) of all countries, listed in bold on the diagonal, have kept the same electoral system throughout these years. Nevertheless this still means that one quarter (46 or 24%) of all countries changed their electoral system during this period, not surprisingly providing a far higher estimate of levels of institutional volatility than is traditionally assumed by comparisons based upon established democracies. Moreover Table 2 shows that among all types of electoral systems, it is the countries which used First-Past-the-Post (single member plurality) systems which have most commonly revised their laws, moving either to other types of majoritarian systems, such as AV (Fiji and Papua New Guinea), and to SNTV (such as Afghanistan), or alternatively shifting further across the spectrum to a combined dependent system (Lesotho), or even straight to List PR (Rwanda). As others have often observed, there are few recent cases of states moving in the other direction, from PR electoral systems towards majoritarian arrangements.⁵⁴ In nearly all cases the shift has been in the direction of power-sharing, generating lower electoral thresholds for representation.

Part III: Does public opinion affect institutional change?

The aim of this study is not to explain what types of electoral systems were adopted but rather to address the prior question: why did these changes happen at all? And, in particular, does public disaffection play an important role in processes of institutional change, or is this mainly an elite-level process of bargaining and accommodation occurring within the executive and legislature, as rational choice theorists imply? Using 2nd and 3rd waves of the WVS, institutional confidence was measured in the early-to-mid 1990s by items gauging confidence in parliament, political parties, government and the civil service. Responses to these four items were summed to generate a reliable and well-distributed 100-point standardized scale (Cronbach's Alpha=.824). Technical details about all the items are given in the appendix. In addition, at the more diffuse level, similar 100-point standardized scales measuring approval of the performance of democracy in each country and also democracy aspirations, measured by approval of democracy as an ideal, were also compared from the same waves of the WVS survey in the early-to-mid 1990s. The dependent variable under investigation was a binary variable coded for whether countries changed their electoral system from 1993-2004, based on the classification presented in Table 3.

[Table 4 about here]

A series of binary logistic regression models were run, as presented in Table 4, for the 50 countries under comparison. All models were checked through tolerance statistics to avoid problems of multicollinearity, for example in the interaction between economic and democratic development. The results indicate that democratic aspirations in society (support for democracy as an ideal from the early-to-mid 1990s) was the most powerful and significant cultural predictor of subsequent electoral changes occurring in the period from 1993-2004. By contrast, institutional confidence and evaluations of the actual performance of democracy were not significant in any of these models. Moreover the impacts of democratic aspirations were consistently significant and the results proved robust, irrespective of the

controls which were introduced for levels of economic and human development. In addition, the cumulative historical record of civil liberties and human rights in a country, from 1972 to 1992, as gauged by Freedom House, proved a significant but weaker predictor of electoral reform.

[Figure 3 about here]

To examine the distribution of countries further, Figure 3 shows the scatter-gram illustrating the underlying relationship between the historical experience of democracy (on the horizontal axis) and the aspirations for democratic ideals (on the vertical). It is apparent that among the group of countries which have not experienced electoral reform, there is a broad scatter across the regression line, with some countries in the top right-hand corner, such as Norway, with strong democratic ideals and experience of democracy. By contrast, others are loosely distributed across the graph. Among the group of countries which have introduced electoral reforms, however, there is a more consistent relationship, and stronger tensions between democratic aspirations and experience of democratic practices. It is this group of countries where public aspirations for democratic ideals are most closely related to institutional reform outcomes.

IV: Do electoral systems shape perceptions of electoral legitimacy?

What of the reverse relationship; does the type of electoral system influence public perceptions of the fairness and integrity of these contests? The policy cycle model outlined earlier posits a feedback loop, as the implementation of electoral rules, and the experience of the election process and outcome, is expected to shape public attitudes. We lack comparable public opinion data towards perceptions of electoral legitimacy in the WVS, which would allow us to monitor changes in public opinion over time. But we can use evidence from the 2004 ISSP, to see how contemporary attitudes vary cross-nationally and, in particular, how this relates to the type of electoral system. The ISSP contains a range of moderate and high income economies, and all states are rated as electoral democracies, although a few (Russia, Venezuela) have lower ratings for civil liberties and political rights, according to Freedom House.⁵⁵ Electoral legitimacy is understood here in terms of two indicators: procedural fairness defined by the opportunities for all parties and candidates to campaign, and honesty in the counting and reporting of votes. Both aspects are measured by the last national election. Where values conflict, many aspects of electoral systems are open to normative debate, such as the relative importance of generating socially-inclusive legislatures, high levels of voter turnout, proportionality, or governability, but there is a consensus in all agreed international standards that both fairness and honesty are central to effective electoral processes.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of public evaluations, combining both criteria, ranging from countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands where there was widespread approval of the legitimacy of elections, down to countries such as Bulgaria and Russia, where the public was less positive about the process. Yet it was not simply established democracies where the public gave high marks to electoral processes; in South Africa, for example, the public proved much more positive than in the United States, Japan, and France.

As the ISSP survey was only conducted in 2004, until this battery is replicated in a later module, we cannot use this data to examine the impact of electoral reforms. Nevertheless, without making any assumptions about the direction of causality, we can compare the contemporary distribution of public

opinion on both dimensions against the type of electoral system used for the lower house of parliament in the same year. The results, illustrated in Figure 5, show some interesting patterns. The scatter of countries across both dimensions shows a relatively close fit among proportional electoral families, where perceptions of electoral honesty and fairness coincide quite closely. Most of the established democracies using List PR have relatively high evaluations on both dimensions (with the exception of Finland, on fairness), while the newer democracies (with the exception of South Africa) usually score lower. Among countries using combined electoral systems for the lower house, there is an even closer fit across both dimensions, with higher ratings for Combined dependent electoral systems (exemplified by MMP in New Zealand) and lower ratings for the combined independent electoral systems (notably for the Russian Duma). Lastly, among the majoritarian systems, there was a far greater scatter, with three cases where these attitudes coincided (Australia, Canada and Britain), but with France as an outlier in terms of fairness and the US in terms of honesty.

It remains difficult to explain the outliers, in particular because the ISSP asked about evaluations of the 'last' election, without specifying whether this referred to the legislative or presidential contest. We can speculate, however, that specific factors may have contributed to both these cases. In particular, perceptions in the US case may have been colored by bitter recollections of the 'Florida' problems of 2000 Bush v Gore presidential elections, and perhaps by controversy about the campaign during the 2004 Bush v. Kerry contest, while the French ratings may have been influenced by the 2nd round run-off presidential elections on 5th May 2002, between the top two candidates (Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen), excluding a left-wing standard-bearer. Further research is needed to explore these issues and the impact of electoral systems on public attitudes in a wide range of countries, including multilevel models with a series of macro and individual-level controls for other factors which could plausibly shape these attitudes.

V: Conclusions and discussion

According to the standard rational choice account of the process of electoral reform, parties seek to maximize their seat gains arising from alternatives electoral rules. This approach generates a series of empirically-testable predictions; all other things being equal, for instance, smaller parties are predicted to prefer power-sharing rules, while larger parties are expected to advocate power-concentrating rules. Strategic bargaining among decision-makers in the legislative arena is assumed to determine the outcome. Although an elegant and parsimonious theory, the rational choice approach fits uneasily with the wealth of counter-evidence provided by historical descriptions of specific institutional changes occurring within particular countries. Detailed accounts of electoral reform, notably the well-known cases of Italy, New Zealand, Israel, and the UK, as well as many accounts of the process of regime change elsewhere, usually emphasize the incremental, contingent, sui generis, path-dependent, and multifaceted nature of the policymaking process, as well as the often unexpected nature of the outcome, defeating attempts to foresee partisan benefits. Moreover the rational choice account focuses upon legislative elites without considering the broader context set by public opinion, both how perceptions of political legitimacy constrain rule-changes as well as occasionally pressuring legislators to address reform issues.

Yet looking at a broad range of survey evidence derived from multiple societies shows that public opinion should not be so easily discounted, confirming the observations that many case studies of specific reforms have usually emphasized. The main finding from the comparative evidence is that mass aspirations for democracy are indeed one of the factors which help to set the agenda for successful

reform movements. Moreover the fact that public aspirations are followed by subsequent institutional changes, even in many non-democratic regimes, suggests that 'reform from below' is an important strategy which can succeed, even against elite interests. The fact that the effects of this process are evident is all the more remarkable given the long chain of causality and the multiple actors and many complex stages which are required in the process of institutional reform. The results should hearten democratic forces and mass reform movements everywhere which are seeking to strengthen democratic regimes and electoral institutions.

Figure 1: The policy-cycle model of the origins, maintenance and reform of electoral institutions

