Recasting Electoral Reform:
Identifying and Overcoming Problems of Selection Bias

Laura Levick
PhD Candidate, Queen's University

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association,
Victoria, British Columbia, 2013.

Abstract:
The present paper advances a methodological critique of widespread selection bias in the existing comparative literature on electoral reform. By largely omitting historical reforms, sub-national reforms, and unsuccessful cases of reform, the present literature is limited by a myopic focus on a very small sample of cases of successful electoral reform at the national level. In order to explain when and why electoral reform occurs, it is logically imperative to consider cases where it does not. To that end, the paper asserts that a reconceptualization of the variable of electoral reform is urgently required. Rather than a simple binary (of successful vs. unsuccessful reform), it would be more useful to think of reform in a multidimensional way, as a process or series of stages. Consideration of historical, sub-national, and especially unsuccessful cases would not only greatly increase the prospective sample of cases available to researchers, but would also improve scholars' ability to advance causal claims and generate generalizable theories.

Keywords: electoral reform, electoral systems, case selection

Introduction

Elections are central to democracies. As the principal mechanism by which citizens participate in the democratic decision-making process, the act of voting is at the heart of modern democracy. But it is not just the *act* of voting that matters. How are votes expressed? And how are they counted? Because they specify the process by which votes are tabulated and translated into legislative representation, electoral rules are also central to representative democracy. As the crucial link between citizen preferences and government policy choices, electoral systems have a vital role in the political process. Further, by defining the conditions necessary to win an election, electoral systems have a significant influence upon election outcomes. Electoral systems, therefore, have important consequences for government formation and policy, as well as the nature of democratic representation and accountability.

Given the importance of electoral rules, it is no surprise that their study has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Once lamented as a tragically underdeveloped field (see Lijphart 1985; Taagepera and Shugart 1989), the study of electoral systems now represents one of the richest bodies of work in the field of political science.[1] At present, a vast majority of this rapidly growing literature on electoral systems is devoted to the study of their political consequences. Less attention has been paid to examining electoral system change (or stasis). This paper argues that the predominant tendency within the discipline to consider electoral systems as *explanans* rather than *explananda* has been problematic for the study of electoral reform. After a brief overview of the prevailing trends within the existing literature on electoral reform, the paper addresses some of the most common problems that arise as a result of widespread selection bias. By largely omitting historical reforms, sub-national reforms, and unsuccessful cases of reform, the paper argues that present literature is limited by a myopic focus on a small sample of cases where electoral reform has occurred at the national level. Consideration of such cases would not only greatly increase the prospective sample of cases available to researchers, but would also improve scholars' ability to advance causal claims and generate generalizable theories. The paper then proceeds to advocate for a novel, multidimensional means of conceptualizing the variable of electoral reform, which, unlike the commonly used dichotomous variable, does not systematically exclude the majority of observed cases.

Revisiting Electoral Reform

The two largest bodies of literature within the study of electoral institutions are both focused on the relationship between the mechanics of electoral systems and their effects on preference aggregation and policy outputs. The first such sub-field, the school of social choice, is focused on the intersection between the technical and theoretical aspects of voting systems. With a claim to be one of the oldest traditions in the study of electoral institutions, the origins of social choice theory can be traced back through the works of early modern and medieval scholars all the way to Ancient Rome (McLean and Urken, 1995), but the field truly came into its own in the wake of Arrow's (1951) pathbreaking impossibility theorem. Simultaneously practical and philosophical, social choice literature is primarily engaged in an investigation of the mechanics of electoral systems and the theoretical paradoxes associated with attempting to aggregate the complex preferences of the voting public, as well as the implications of these puzzles for collective action, welfare economics, political institutions, and policy-making (see, for example Felsenthal and Machover, 2012; Mueller, 2003; Riker, c.1982; Sen, 1970).

A second quite distinct and considerably larger sub-field considers the practical political, economic, and sociological effects of electoral systems in a comparative context. Beginning with Rae's (1967) seminal work *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, this field is characterized by large, cross-sectional analyses that aim to demonstrate a relationship between observed outcomes, such as majority status, government stability, and policy outputs, and the mechanics of voting systems, such as electoral formula, district magnitude, and ballot structure. From this fertile field a considerable comparative literature has sprouted—one that is likely familiar to most political scientists, irrespective of their area of specialty. Some of the better-known works from this genre examine the effects of

electoral rules on a diverse variety of political phenomena including party systems (for example Duverger, 1972; Lijphart, 1995), cabinet formation (Strøm, 1990), economic institutions (Hall and Soskice 2001; Iversen and Soskice, 2008), social policy (Lijphart, 1999), and welfare state politics (Swank, 2002).

As a brief review of these two well-established sub-fields indicates, there is a substantial focus on the *effects* of electoral systems in the existing literature. Put differently, electoral systems are most often investigated as *independent* rather than *dependent* variables.[2] This prevailing tendency within the discipline to consider electoral systems as *explanans* rather than *explananda* has been somewhat problematic for the study of electoral system reform. As Katz explains, the established trend in the existing literature has been to take electoral systems as fixed, or, in the rare case that electoral reform occurs, to simply take the reformed system as defining a new case, rather than to consider the process of major electoral reform as a phenomenon that merits explanation in and of itself (2005: 58). As a result, there is a tendency to overlook the fact that while electoral rules do influence political phenomena, they are also influenced by them. In that sense, electoral systems should be seen not just as affecting political institutions, but as embedded within them. Thus, despite falling under the umbrella of one of the best-studied subjects in the field of political science, the comparative literature on electoral system reform remains relatively underdeveloped.

In addition to the tendency to view electoral systems as independent variables, many additional factors complicate the study of electoral reform. Firstly, as a number of authors have noted, it can be difficult to disentangle normative arguments about democratic values from the mechanics of electoral system design and operation (Dunleavy and Margetts, 1995: 13-24; Lijphart, 1995; 1999). This is especially true of electoral reform, where the self-interested motivations of actors are often intimately entwined with their (purported) ideological commitments (for example see Katz, 2005). In addition, the study of electoral reform is further compounded by the rarity of major electoral system reform (Katz, 2005; Nohlen, 1984; Norris, 1995). While minor tinkering with electoral rules is not uncommon, major electoral system reform[3] is relatively rare.

These challenges notwithstanding, there has been some excellent single-case research on electoral reform. The 1993 switch from Single Member Plurality (SMP) to a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system in New Zealand has been well documented (for example see Vowles, 1995), as has Italy's conversion from Proportional Representation (PR) to a mixed system in the same year (see Donovan, 1995). In France, the series of major electoral reforms that occurred as part of the constitutional changes related to the collapse of the Third and Fourth Republics has been the subject of much academic study (see Cole and Campbell, 1989). Similarly, in Japan, the transition from the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) to MMP in 1994, and the corresponding shift in the party system, has also received considerable attention (see Reed, 2005). At present, the literature on electoral reform is heavily focused on this small sample of cases of successful reform. Less well-documented, however, are a multitude of cases of attempted but ultimately unsuccessful reform,[4] while the literature currently contains virtually no comparative examination of unattempted reforms—that is, the vast majority of cases in which reform is neither investigated nor initiated.

While it is true that many factors complicate the comparative study of electoral reform, this paper argues that these difficulties have been unnecessarily exacerbated by this narrow focus. The lack of scholarly attention dedicated to unsuccessful and unattempted reforms represents a serious methodological limitation of the existing literature. In order to explain when and why electoral reform occurs, it is logically imperative to consider not only successful cases, but also cases where reform was unsuccessfully attempted or not attempted at all. Studies that investigate only successful reforms necessarily take their evidence from a skewed and unrepresentative sample of cases. Without considering any cases in which reform is not attempted or investigated, it is methodologically problematic to generalize about the underlying causal processes that are responsible for the success (or failure) of electoral reform.

Case Selection Problems

Electoral law comprises a great many varied and complex elements, encompassing everything from voting rights and registration to campaign finance and election administration. Minor reforms to electoral laws, including tinkering with electoral boundaries and assembly size (for example, to compensate for population changes), occur with relative frequency. Of course, these reforms can and do have important political implications. However, the scholarly literature on electoral reform is largely concerned with what are deemed 'major reforms': that is, significant changes to the way in which votes are counted and/or translated into legislative representation at the national level. These major reforms occur far less regularly. By Katz's count, the number of such reforms is quite small:

> If one limits attention to the established democracies (roughly, democratic since the 1950s), and limits the meaning of 'major reforms of national electoral systems' to the wholesale replacement of the electoral formula through which a strong president, or the chamber of parliament to which the national government is responsible, is elected, the list of major reforms since 1950 numbers only fourteen (2005: 59).

Katz's calculation of such reforms is undoubtedly sound. But the assumptions cited in his calculus raise some troubling questions. For instance, on closer scrutiny, it is not immediately obvious why academics ought to limit our collective attention to the 'national level', or why it is necessary to focus exclusively on the 'postwar period'. What is the purpose of restricting the sample of cases in this way? Katz and others who restrict their analysis to the examination of industrialized postwar cases (see for example Blais, 2005; Renwick, 2010: 1-26), appear to assume that such restrictions are natural and intuitively obvious, and thus tend to offer little discussion or explicit justification for these choices. This section will begin with a critical examination of some of the most widely-held assumptions by considering a number of possible justifications for restricting the sample in this way. It will then proceed to scrutinize the effects of these restrictions in terms of their implications for the authors' comparative conclusions.

Temporal Boundaries

In many respects, the postwar era represents a natural temporal focus for studies of comparative politics. This period witnessed massive global shifts in political culture, technological innovation, economic integration, and the rise of the welfare state, which clearly distinguish it from previous eras. In many important ways, post-1945 states looked remarkably different than their predecessors. In addition, for many political scientists, good pre-war data (especially in the form of surveys, indices, etc.) is hard to come by. But many modern political institutions, electoral systems included, originated in the nineteenth century and have not experienced radical change since that time. (If anything, as previously noted, electoral systems are remarkable for their *lack* of change.) Therefore, it is not immediately obvious why studies of these phenomena should be restricted to the latter third of their existence. In that sense, the apparently natural focus exclusively on the postwar era can be seen as somewhat arbitrary and artificial. Restricting the sample of cases in this way is not only methodologically problematic, but likely affects authors' conclusions about the causes of reform.

Consider the case of pre-war electoral reform in Australia, where the Preferential Ballot (or Alternative Vote: AV) system replaced SMP for lower house elections in 1918, and was used in the Senate between 1919 and 1946. The issue of electoral reform was investigated by a Royal Commission in 1913-14, but was not put to the public in the form of a referendum. Consensus in the academic literature suggests that introduction of AV was a strategic move on the part of the two largest parties, and was intended to benefit them by excluding emerging minor parties and preserving the existing two-party structure—which it largely did (see for example McLean, 1996). The adoption of the preferential ballot in this case was largely "for political reasons, not reasons of principle" (McLean, 1996: 379). Yet

despite the self-interested motivations of its founders, the AV system has remained in place and largely unchallenged for nearly a century.

In the Australian case, the move to replace the SMP electoral system inherited from Britain was largely driven by political elites with the intent of modifying the existing party system in order to deal with new political rivals and shifting electoral coalitions. This appears to make Australia an excellent candidate for consideration in Blais' 2005 book *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post?* Yet there is virtually no mention of Australia (or any other case of pre-war reform), and no justification is provided for its exclusion.

Of course, it is possible to imagine a number of valid reasons for restricting the sample to the postwar period. Perhaps the most plausible reason is the argument that pre-war reforms were almost entirely elite-driven, and that such a process would be unlikely to unfold in a similar way if reforms were proposed today. (Presumably because there is a tendency among modern reform attempts to put the issue of reform to the voting public, usually via referendum.) Thus, comparison between pre-war and postwar reforms may problematic because it compares two fundamentally different phenomena.

The problem with this argument, however, is that the evidence does not support it: as Renwick (2010) demonstrates, a majority of major electoral reforms in the postwar period have been cases of elite imposition, involving relatively little interaction between party elites and the electoral masses. Thus, there does not appear to be an obvious justification for the exclusion of pre-war cases. In fact, it seems plausible to hypothesize that excluding historical cases from comparative analyses might lead researchers to understate the importance of elite influence (which continues to be a highly relevant factor), as well as the frequency and long-term success of self-interested partisan manipulation of the existing system, as in Australia. Failure to justify the exclusion of these cases is therefore problematic for comparative researchers.

Level of Analysis

Historical reforms are not the only cases of electoral reform that are notably absent from the literature on the subject. While there has been some excellent single-case research on electoral reform at the national level, on the whole, literature on electoral reform has tended to overlook reforms at the sub-national level. The systematic omission of sub-national cases is clearly to the detriment of the literature, however, as sub-national reform campaigns often mirror their national counterparts in virtually every respect.

In the cases of the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario, for example, electoral reform followed essentially the same process as in the United Kingdom and New Zealand: after being proposed during an election campaign by the party that would eventually form a government, reform was initially investigated by an independent body before being put to at least one referendum (see Flinders, 2010; LeDuc, Bastedo and Bacquero, 2008; Pilon, 2010; Vowles, 1995). The remarkable similarities in the process make these provincial reform campaigns natural cases for comparison with the national level reform efforts in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, yet few studies have offered any serious examination of the obvious parallels between any these cases,[5] and none has yet compared them all in any detail.

The ongoing oversight of sub-national reforms is especially unfortunate given the fact that sub-national experimentation with electoral reform is far more common than it is at the national level. For example, Mitchell describes the United Kingdom as "very active laboratory for electoral system design and implementation" due to the experimentation with proportional and mixed electoral systems in the devolved territories of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (2005: 157). Similarly, in the United States, where debate on electoral reform has been conspicuously absent at national level, Bowler and Donovan (2005) argue that there has been an abundance of change at the state and local levels. In Canada, half of the ten provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Québec) have taken serious steps toward electoral reform (Cross, 2007). As these examples indicate,

considering sub-national electoral reforms alongside national cases would significantly increase the population of available cases. The general tendency to ignore the apparent multitude of sub-national reform attempts is especially unfortunate, therefore, given the oft-lamented rarity of national-level reform.

It is worth noting here that some studies have recognized the additional value that can come from including sub-national cases in comparative analyses, and there are some interesting examples of such small-sample comparative studies. For instance, LeDuc, Bastedo and Bacquero (2008) draw some useful but limited comparisons between the Ontario case (their primary focus) and reform efforts in British Columbia and New Zealand, although their comparison is largely restricted to a procedural analysis of reform efforts, rather than explaining the outcome of referenda. Flinders (2010) conducts a more systematic comparison of the reform process in British Columbia and the United Kingdom, although he omits other similar cases (such Ontario and New Zealand) for unspecified reasons. These analyses demonstrate that cases of sub-national reform can make for useful comparative analysis, but compararivists should remain cautious about including sub-national cases in their analyses. In particular, it is advisable for scholars looking to compare national and sub-national cases to continue to exclude instances of reform in sub-national units that do not have the constitutional authority to amend their own electoral systems. In such cases, the fact that the reform process involves at least two levels of government likely affects the nature of the process by adding additional actors (likely with competing political motivations) and institutional veto points.

Selection on the Dependent Variable

In addition to the exclusion of historical and sub-national cases of reform, which the previous sections of this paper have shown to be problematic, the literature also suffers from a far more severe problem of systematic selection bias: selection on the dependent variable. In general, the literature is heavily focused on a small sample of cases of successful cases. Attempted but ultimately unsuccessful reforms receive considerably less attention. And the literature contains virtually no comparative examination of unattempted reforms—that is, a great number of cases in which reform is neither investigated nor initiated. This represents a serious methodological limitation of the existing literature.

Selection bias is a persistent problem throughout the discipline of comparative politics. It occurs as a result of "systematic error in causal inference that derives from the selection processes through which the data are generated, and/or through which the researcher's access to the data may be filtered" (Collier, Mahoney and Seawright, 2004: 88). Selection on the dependent variable is the most serious form of selection bias, and occurs where cases are selected because they have achieved the outcome of interest. It, too, is a persistent problem throughout the discipline. Many authors, especially those with quantitative backgrounds, have been critical of qualitative comparative scholars who select cases on the dependent variable, arguing that this method obscures causal relationships and leads to logically faulty conclusions. In their well-known work on the subject, King, Keohane and Verba summarize the problem succinctly: "how can we explain variations on a dependent variable if it does not vary" (1994: 129)? According to these authors, the answer is simple: we cannot. They therefore emphasize the fact that comparativists aiming to draw causal inferences ought to select a sample of cases that are as representative as possible of the *entire* population of cases (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). Their caution against selecting cases on the dependent variable is unmistakably strong: "the cases of extreme selection bias—where there is by design no variation on the dependent variable—are easy to deal with: avoid them! We will not learn about causal effects from them" (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 130).

In response to criticisms from quantitative political scientists, a number of scholars have argued that some of the most important comparative studies have yielded valuable findings despite apparently violating the case selection procedures proposed by the literature on selection bias, leading to a heated methodological debate within the discipline (see Rogowski, 1995). Although there is insufficient space to wade too deeply into this debate at present, Collier and Mahoney (1996) offer some excellent advice

on case selection for qualitativists: in addition generally rigorous self-consciousness in terms of case selection, researchers must choose cases and analytical frameworks most appropriate to answering their research question.

In the case of electoral reform, if the research question asks "what explains the success of electoral reform initiatives?", it is clearly problematic to examine only those cases where reform has succeeded. The overwhelming focus on cases of successfully implemented reform is a clear example of selection on the dependent variable. Cases of attempted but ultimately unsuccessful reform receive scant attention in the literature. Even more problematically, where comparative analyses do include these cases, they are usually compared against each other rather than successful cases of reform (see for example Flinders, 2010). The literature also contains virtually no comparative examination of where reform was not attempted. On the rare occasion when such cases are examined, these studies usually take the form of single-case analyses rather than comparative studies (see Bowler and Donovan, 2005). It is a well-known adage in the study of political science that the absence of change is more difficult to study than change that has actually occurred. But selection on the dependent variable represents a serious methodological problem for the discipline. Any analysis that is restricted to successful cases is likely to face at least one major explanatory challenge: how can we be sure that the causal mechanisms/processes identified exist only in successful cases and not elsewhere without considering those cases as well? The restrictive focus on successful cases is also especially puzzling given the very small sample of successful cases and the apparent abundance of unsuccessful reform attempts.

These cautions are not to suggest that studies that rely exclusively on the examination of successful cases of electoral reform have nothing useful to contribute to the analysis of the phenomenon. As Geddes (1990) explains, such studies can offer valuable insight into differences among the selected cases. Single-case studies can also offer valuable insights into causal mechanisms at work within the case in question.[6] However, it is problematic to generalize about underlying causal mechanisms or processes from a single-case study, or from a sample selected on the dependent variable. And, as Collier and Mahoney (1996) show, even where the researcher's aim is not produce generalizable claims, the use of a broader variety of cases is still likely to increase the quality of the explanation.

Alan Renwick's 2010 book *The Politics of Electoral Reform* is a perfect illustration of the uses and limitations associated with selecting on the dependent variable. With his emphasis on the multitude of influences on reform and the diversity of reform processes, Renwick's analysis represents a significant step forward in the development of the comparative literature on the subject, and has been widely celebrated in that regard. Yet because his sample is restricted to include only cases in which reform eventually succeeded, Renwick is limited in his ability to generate generalizable conclusions. Although the analysis does consider several unsuccessful reform attempts, it only examines those failed reform attempts *that occurred during the course of ultimately successful reforms*. The most useful contribution of Renwick's analysis comes from his distinction between elite-imposed reform processes and those involving elite-mass interaction, but this observation is primarily descriptive rather than causal in nature. In fact, Renwick makes only limited and vague causal claims. In the case of elite-imposed reform, for example, Renwick (2010) argues that elites are likely to seek to maximize their own power.

Blais (2005) makes a similar argument. Yet the case of Ireland shows that blatantly self-interested reforms may be less likely to succeed than this argument suggests. Twice, in 1959 and 1968, Ireland held referenda to determine whether to keep the STV system or revert to the pre-1922 SMP system. Although both referenda failed, scholars on the subject are quick to note that this does not necessarily represent a ringing endorsement of STV so much as a rejection of SMP, which was the only proposed alternative (Gallagher, 1986; Sinnott, 1999). Literature on the Irish reform attempts suggests that the proposed reforms were part of a broader power struggle between the major parties, which included a variety of other gerrymandering and redistricting efforts aimed maximizing political gains, and that voters likely rejected the proposed SMP electoral system on these grounds (Gallagher, 1986).

Renwick also identifies a three-step process whereby minority politicians who vocally advocate reforms and can eventually rally public support for their cause may be able to convince other politicians to respond by mobilizing in favour of reform (2010: 210-238). Yet in many cases, it has been exceptionally difficult to translate popular support for reform into institutional change, even when reforms are backed by powerful political elites (as in the cases of the United Kingdom, British Columbia and Chile, for example). Because it does not consider unsuccessful reform attempts, Renwick's analysis also offers little insight into the role of institutional constraints (such as veto points) in determining the outcome of reform. Without examining cases of failed or unattempted reforms, it is impossible to identify the factors that explain why reform succeeds in some countries but fails in others. In that sense, although his process-tracing approach offers excellent insight into the cases in question, Renwick largely fails in his attempt to "develop comparative generalizations regarding the nature of the reform process" (2010: 7). In order to explain when and why electoral reform occurs, it is logically imperative to consider cases where it does not. What the study of electoral reform urgently requires now is an approach that can speak not just to the reasons why reform succeeds, but also to the reasons that it does not.

Reconceptualizing Electoral Reform

The current literature on electoral reform suffers from serious problems related to systematic selection bias. In particular, an overwhelming tendency to focus on cases of successfully attempted reform is hindering investigation into the underlying causal processes and mechanisms behind electoral reform. To that end, a reconceptualization of the variable of electoral reform is urgently required. In order to address these methodological issues, it would be useful for comparativists to consider approaching the variable of electoral reform in a way that does not encourage a focus on successful reforms to the exclusion of all other cases. In particular, it is vital that researchers consider *both* successful *and* unsuccessful cases of reform. Not only would such an approach eliminate problems associated with selecting on the dependent variable, it would also greatly increase the population of cases available to researchers.

Yet even conceptualizing reform as a binary variable (considering both 'successful' and 'unsuccessfully attempted' cases, for example) is methodologically problematic. This binary approach still suffers from a form of selection bias by creating a false dichotomy. It does so by effectively continuing to select cases on the dependent variable and then separate them into different categories; by considering only cases in which reform was *formally attempted* (whether successfully or not), this conceptualization of the variable continues to exclude a great many cases where reform was never attempted or even proposed.

Alternate formulations of this binary are equally problematic. For example, describing reform outcomes as merely 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' creates a pair of highly lopsided categories. While it may make sense to combine cases of successful reform under a single umbrella, it is more difficult to justify the jumbled category of 'unsuccessful' reforms. It seems misleading, for example, to design a category in which near-successful referenda outcomes (like that observed in British Columbia 2005) are lumped alongside cases where electoral reform has never been seriously investigated at all.

By thinking about the process of reform, which often occurs in incremental stages as battles are won and lost in a protracted struggle between political parties, elites, and shifting electoral coalitions, it is possible to design a more multidimensional reform variable that better captures the nature of the process itself. To that end, several broad degrees or phases of attempted reform can be identified. By unpacking the bloated binary category of 'unsuccessful reform' it is possible to distinguish between at least three different types of cases where electoral reform did not occur.

Firstly, there are those reforms that were formally attempted but failed to receive the support necessary pass. This category would include cases in which electoral reform was put to a binding referendum and failed, including Ireland (both 1959 and 1968), the United Kingdom (2011), British

Columbia (2005 and 2009), and Ontario (2007), among others. It would also include cases where electoral reform was voted on in the national legislature but was not enacted into law, including the United Kingdom (1918 and 1931), where reform bills in favour of adopting the Alternative Vote were passed in the House of Commons but blocked by the House of Lords (see Hart, 1992). Note that 'failure' in this case is defined as 'not passing', rather than not receiving majority support, as some 'failed' cases included in this category (such as British Columbia 2005) *did* in fact receive support in excess of a simple 'fifty per cent plus one' majority, but failed to pass due to the imposition of at least one additional supermajority requirement.

A second category would include those cases in which reform was proposed or formally investigated (such as the appointment of an independent investigatory body) but no further action (i.e. referendum, legislative vote, etc.) was taken. At present, this category would include cases such as South Africa (following the 2002 report of the Electoral Task Team), New Brunswick (following the report of the Commission on Legislative Democracy in 2004), and Québec (following the 2004 Liberal government proposal to reform the electoral system, which was later postponed for further research). This category would also include cases in which consultative, non-binding referenda were held, such as the 2011 plebiscite in New Zealand on whether or not to keep the mixed system introduced in 1996. Between 1998 and 2011, this category would also have included the United Kingdom (following the report of the Independent Commission on the Electoral System, also known as the Jenkins Commission)—illustrating the fact that electoral reform is often a lengthy process, and cases can migrate from one category to another over time. Indeed, as Table 1 demonstrates, it is possible to for cases to appear in multiple categories simultaneously, as distinct electoral reform initiatives may be classified separately.

Finally, there are a great many cases in which serious investigation of electoral reform has never been proposed. In the United States, for example, despite widespread criticism of the Electoral College system and considerable public debate on the issue of electoral reform (especially in the wake of the 2000 presidential election, in which the result was referred to the Supreme Court), government-sponsored investigation into the possibility of electoral reform has been conspicuously absent. Similarly, in Canada (at the national level), while pro-reform advocacy groups such as Fair Vote Canada have long campaigned for the adoption of a proportional electoral system, their efforts have not translated into government action. In spite of its name, the 1989 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing was explicitly forbidden from examining the electoral system, and its extensive 23-volume report does not contain a single reference to electoral system modification (Farrell, 2001: 39). The 'not investigated/proposed' category remains the most ill-defined, as it continues to group cases where there has been considerable public debate on the issue of reform with those where debate has been limited or non-existent. The common denominator, however, is that, irrespective of public debate and lobbying efforts, no formal, government-sponsored investigation into the possibility of electoral system reform has yet been initiated.

Table 1: Cases of Electoral Reform and Non-Reform

	Reform Occurs	**Reform Does Not Occur**		
	Successful Reform	**Attempted Reform**	**Reform Proposed/ Investigated**	**Reform Not Proposed/ Investigated**

National	France (1946, 1958, 1985) Japan (1993) Italy (1946, 1953, 1954, 1993, 2005) New Zealand (1992-1993) South Africa (1994)	Ireland (1959, 1968) Italy (2009) United Kingdom (2011)	New Zealand (2011) South Africa (post-2002) France (1991-1993) France (2008) Italy (1994, 2001)	Canada United States
Historical (pre-1950)	Australia (1918) Ireland (1922)	United Kingdom (1918, 1931)		
Sub-National	British Columbia (1951, 1953)	British Columbia (2005, 2009) Ontario (2007) Prince Edward Island (2005)	New Brunswick (post-2004) Québec (post-1984) Québec (post-2004)	

As Table 1 illustrates, by reconceptualizing the variable of electoral reform in a multidimensional way, it is possible for researchers to consider the entire population of cases: not just successful reforms, but also attempted but unsuccessful cases, cases where reform was investigated but not pursued further, and cases where reform has yet to reach the political agenda. This represents a clear advantage over binary conceptualizations in which the 'unsuccessful' category is either limited to 'attempted but unsuccessful' cases or, confusingly, lumps all cases where reform did not occur into a single category.

The universality of the proposed categorization scheme is also its greatest weakness. Classifying cases according to this more sophisticated scheme requires a considerable amount of case-specific knowledge. Even in its present state, Table 1 remains largely incomplete. Correctly placing dozens or hundreds of potential cases requires a great deal more background research than simply limiting one's attention exclusively to those very few cases in the upper left cell. Yet the value of this approach lies in the fact that it is theoretically possible to place every case (that is, every contemporary, historical, national *and* sub-national case, where appropriate) in one of the cells above, making this a novel and useful way of approaching the variable of electoral reform. This way of operationalizing the variable allows for the inclusion of all cases of electoral reform (and non-reform!), thereby maximizing the data available to comparative researchers.

In addition to its ability to accommodate the entire population of cases, this approach also allows researchers to distinguish between different stages of attempted electoral reform. The development of the 'unsuccessfully attempted' and 'proposed/investigated' categories is especially useful, as it allows for clear differentiation between degrees of attempted reform, specifically by distinguishing between cases where electoral reform was formally attempted and those where reform was merely investigated or discussed but where no action was taken. After all, the holding of a binding referendum on reform suggests a degree of commitment to the reform process that is distinct from the proposal to *eventually* hold one at an unspecified future date, or the decision to hold a non-binding plebiscite. It is possible to imagine, for example, that a government facing pressure to address a highly disproportional election outcome may commit to some limited investigation of the issue of electoral reform in response to public pressure. However, unless a government is deeply committed to the issue of electoral reform, it seems unlikely that it would take additional steps toward reform, assuming that public pressure to act on reform eventually dissipates. By distinguishing between these categories, researchers may be able to better understand some of the institutional constraints facing actors in each case. If there is public pressure for

reform but political elites remain opposed to change, how might reform efforts be designed to appease voters while minimizing institutional change?

By clustering like cases in a more nuanced way, this classification scheme is likely to assist researchers with the identification of causal mechanisms. This may eventually allow researchers to address several important questions about the reform process. For example, if we know that successful reform is rare, is it rare because investigation of reform is rare, or because formal reform attempts are rare? Or is it rare because formal attempts rarely succeed? The present comparative literature on electoral reform cannot address these important causal questions, since it does not adequately consider cases where reform did not occur.

This classification scheme also illuminates other questions about the reform process. What are the obstacles to reform at each stage? Do certain institutional configurations make reform attempts more likely to succeed/fail/stall at a particular phase? It seems entirely possible, for example, that investigation of reform may be quite rare in some types of systems, while in others it is relatively common (although it may not necessarily result in further action). By clustering like cases in a more nuanced way, this classification scheme allows researchers to tease out trends and patterns. In this way, by reconceptualizing the variable of reform, this scheme has the potential to offer valuable insights into the reform process, including the identification of barriers to reform and patterns or reform.

Conclusion

Although there has been some good single-case research on electoral reform, the comparative literature on the subject remains relatively underdeveloped. Although some scholars have broached tentative generalizations about actors' motivations (Katz 2005) and the significance of veto points (Blais and Shugart, 2005; Flinders, 2010), many appear loath to engage in broader theory-building or multi-case analysis, and authors often conclude that the models and processes identified as explanations of reform in one case are difficult to translate to others. In his edited volume on the politics of electoral reform in SMP systems (one of the best-known comparative works on the subject), André Blais, for example, argues that "no simple and parsimonious model can explain why electoral reform does or does not emerge on the political agenda, and, when it does, why it sometimes succeeds and, more often, fails" (2005: 7). While it is true that many factors complicate the comparative study of electoral reform, this paper has argued that the weakness of the comparative literature has been unnecessarily exacerbated by widespread methodological errors related to selection bias. The lack of scholarly attention dedicated to unsuccessful and unattempted reforms represents a serious methodological limitation of the existing literature. In order to explain when and why electoral reform occurs, it is logically imperative to consider not only successful cases, but also cases where reform was unsuccessfully attempted or not attempted at all. Studies that investigate only successful reforms necessarily take their evidence from a skewed and unrepresentative sample of cases. Without considering any cases in which reform is not attempted or investigated, it is methodologically problematic to generalize about the underlying causal processes that are responsible for the success (or failure) electoral reform.

In response to this problem, this paper has proposed an alternative means of conceptualizing the variable of reform that would eliminate problems related to selection bias while simultaneously expanding the range of data available to researchers. Adopting such an approach, as well as including a broader range of pre-war cases and cases the developing world, would greatly improve the data available to future researchers on the subject and allow comparative scholars to better understand that causal mechanisms and processes at work.

Notes

1. For a good sense of the rapid rate of expansion of the field, compare Katz (1989) with Katz (1992).
2. When electoral systems are investigated as dependent variables, the focus tends to be on their historical and economic origins in the class conflicts of the nineteenth century (for example see Ahmed, 2013; Boix, 1999; Cusack, Iversen and Soskice, 2007; Rokkan, 1970) and a chicken-and-egg debate about the causal relationship between multipartism and the emergence of proportional representation in Europe (for example Grumm, 1958; Riker 1982; Sartori 1986). By comparison, this sub-field represents a relatively small proportion of the literature on electoral systems, and few accounts of the historical origins of electoral systems generalize their findings to speak to more contemporary efforts to modify electoral rules (but see Pilon, 2013).
3. The literature typically defines major electoral reform as significant changes to the way in which votes are counted and/or translated into legislative representation, involving the complete switch from one electoral system to another, usually from another 'family' of systems (see Katz, 2005: 58; Renwick, 2010: 2-4; for a detailed categorization of electoral 'families' see Blais, 1988; Farrell, 2001; Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis, 2005).
4. One notable exception appears to be the case of the United Kingdom, where a referendum in May 2011 to replace the status quo of the Single Member Plurality (SMP; better known, somewhat misleadingly, as First-Past-the-Post) system with the Alternative Vote (AV; also known as the Instant Runoff or Preferential Vote) was decisively defeated yet still received considerable academic interest, including being the subject of entire edition of *Electoral Studies* (see for example Laycock et al., 2013).
5. For noteworthy exceptions see Flinders (2010) and LeDuc, Bastedo and Bacquero (2008).
6. Single-case studies represent a notable exception to the selection bias critique leveled against comparative analyses. As Mahoney explains, the logic underpinning process tracing analysis is fundamentally different from that which underpins regression analysis and even qualitative comparative studies: "the analysis of [within-case causal process] mechanisms involves a logic that can be modeled as Bayesian, as opposed to the frequentist logic that underpins [*DSI*'s] regression-oriented approach" (2010: 128). In other words, "[w]hat is important is not the number of pieces of evidence within a case that fit one explanation rather than another, but the likelihood of finding this evidence if the alternative explanations are true" (Bennett, 2006: 341). Thus, although scholars should be cautious about over-generalizing based on the results of within-case analysis, the method itself remains a useful explanatory tool.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Amel. 2013. *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arrow, Kenneth. 1951. *Social Choice and Individual Values*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Bennett, Andrew. 2006. "Stirring the Frequentist Pot with a Dash of Bayes." *Political Analysis* 14 (3): 339–44.

Blais, André. 1988. "The Classification of Electoral Systems." *European Journal of Political Research* 16: 99-110.

Blais, André, ed. 2005. *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blais, André and Matthew S. Shugart. 2005. "To Keep or Change First Past the Post: Conclusion." In *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post*, ed. A. Blais. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boix, Carles. 1999. "Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies." American Political Science Review 93 (September): 609-24.

Bowler, Shaun and Todd Donovan. 2005. "Election Reform and (the Lack of) Electoral System Change in the USA." In *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post,* ed. A. Blais. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cole, Alistair and Peter Campbell. 1989. *French Electoral Systems and Elections Since 1789.* Gower: Aldershot.

Collier, David and James Mahoney. 1996. "Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research." *World Politics* 37 (1): 56-91.

Collier, David, James Mahoney and Jason Seawright. 2004. "Claiming Too Much: Warnings About Selection Bias." In *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, eds. H. Brady D. Colier. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cross, William. 2005. "The Rush to Electoral Reform in the Canadian Provinces: Why now?" *Representation* 41 (2): 75-84.

Cusack, Thomas, Torben Iversen and David Soskice. 2007. "Economic Interests and the Origins of the Electoral System." *American Political Science Review* 101 (3): 373-391.

Donovan, Mark. 1995. "The Politics of Electoral Reform in Italy." *International Political Science Review* 16 (1): 47-64.

Dunleavy, Patrick and Helen Margetts. 1995. "Understanding the Dynamics of Electoral Reform." *International Political Science Review* 16 (1): 9-29.

Duverger, Maurice. 1972. "Factors in a Two-Party and Multiparty System." In *Party Politics and Pressure Groups*, ed. M. Duverger and trans. R. Wagoner. London: Nelson.

Farrell, David M. 2001. *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*. New York: Palgrave.

Felsenthal, Dan S. and Moshé Machover. 2012. *Electoral Systems: Paradoxes, Assumptions, and Procedures*. Berlin: Springer.

Flinders, Matthew. 2010. "Explaining Majoritarian Modification: The Politics of Electoral Reform in the United Kingdom and British Columbia." *International Political Science Review* 31 (4): 41-58.

Gallagher, Michael. 1986. "The Political Consequences of the Electoral System in the Republic of Ireland.' *Electoral Studies* 5 (3): 253-275.

Geddes, Barbara. 1990. "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 2: 131-152.

Grumm, John. 1958. "Theories of Electoral Systems." *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 2: 357-76.

Hall, Peter A. and David Soskice. 2001. *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Hart, Jennifer. 1992. *Proportional Representation: Critics of the British Electoral System, 1820-1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Iversen, Torben and David Soskice. 2008. "Electoral Institutions, Parties, and the Politics of Class." In *Democracy, Inequality, and Representation*, ed. P. Beramendi and C. Anderson. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Katz, Richard S. 1980. *A Theory of Parties and Electoral Systems*. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press.

Katz, Richard S. 1989. "International Bibliography on Electoral Systems." Revised and expanded edition, *International Political Science Association,* Comparative Representation and Electoral Systems Research Committee.

Katz, Richard S. 1992. "International Bibliography on Electoral Systems." 3rd Edition, *International Political Science Association,* Comparative Representation and Electoral Systems Research Committee.

Katz, Richard S. 2005. "Why Are There So Many (Or So Few) Electoral Reforms?" In *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, eds. M. Gallagher and P. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Laycock, Samantha, Alan Renwick, Daniel Stevens and Jack Vowles. "The UK's Electoral Reform Referendum of May 2011." *Electoral Studies* 32 (2): 211-14.

LeDuc, Lawrence, Heather Bastedo and Catherine Baquero. 2008. "The Quiet Referendum: Why Electoral Reform Failed in Ontario." Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association 80th Annual Conference. Vancouver, British Columbia.

Lijphart, Arend. 1985. "The Field of Electoral Systems Research: A Critical Survey." *Electoral Studies* 4 (3): 3-14.

Lijphart, Arend. 1995. *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies 1945-1990.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lijphard, Arend. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries.* New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press.

Mahoney, James. 2010. "After KKV: The New Methodology of Qualitative Research." *World Politics* 62: 20-147

McLean, Iain. 1996. "E.J. Nanson, Social Choice and Electoral Reform." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 31 (3): 369-86.

McLean, Iain and Arnold B. Urken, eds. 1995. *Classics of Social Choice.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Mitchell, Paul. 2005. "The United Kingdom: Plurality Rule Under Siege." In *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, ed. M. Gallagher and P. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mueller, Dennis C. 2003. *Public Choice III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nohlen, Dieter. 1984. "Changes and Choices in Electoral Systems." In *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives*, eds. A. Lijphart and B. Grofman. New York: Praeger.

Norris, Pippa. 1995. "Introduction: The Politics of Electoral Reform." *International Political Science Review* 16 (1): 3-8.

Pilon, Dennis. 2010. "The 2005 and 2009 Referenda on Voting System Change in British Columbia," *Canadian Political Science Review* 4 (2-3): 73-89.

Pion, Dennis. 2013. *Wrestling with Democracy: Voting Systems as Politics in the 20th Century West*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Rae, Douglas. 1967. *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Reed, Steven R. 2005. "Japan: Haltingly Towards a Two-Party System." In *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, ed. M. Gallagher and P. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Renwick, Alan. 2010. *The Politics of Electoral Reform.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reynolds, Andrew, Ben Reilly and Andrew Ellis. 2005. *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Riker,William. 1982. “The Two-Party System and Duverger’s Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science.” *American Political Science Review* 76: 753-66.

Riker, William. c1982. *Liberalism Against Populism.* San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Rogowski, Ronald. 1995. "The Role of Theory and Anomaly in Social-Scientific Inference." *American Political Science Review* 89: 468-70.

Rokkan, Stein. 1970. *Citizens, Elections, Parties: Approaches to the Comparative Study of the Processes of Development.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Sartori, Giovanni. 1986. “The Influence of Electoral Systems: Faulty Laws or Faulty Method?” In *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences*, ed. B. Grofman and A. Lijphart. New York: Agathon Press.

Sen, Amartya. 1970. *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*. San Francisco: Holden-Day.

Sinnott, Richard. 1999. “The Rules of the Electoral Game.” In *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, eds. J. Coakley and M. Gallagher. New York: Routledge.

Strøm, Kaare. 1990. *Minority Government and Majority Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swank, Duane. 2002. *Global Capital, Political Institutions and Policy Change in Developed Welfare States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taagepera, Rein and Matthew S. Shugart. 1989. *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vowles, Jack. 1995. “The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand.” *International Political Science Review* 16 (1): 95-115.