

## DUVERGER'S LAWS FROM MICROSCOPIC VIEW

*Radek Svec, MA*

Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

---

### Abstract

This article deals with the problematic of relationship between electoral and party systems. Its based on theory of Maurice Duverger and Giovanni Sartori, but it takes the influence of electoral systems from microscopic view rather than from macroscopic view. It shows three different electoral systems – plurality, two round plurality and proportional representation, in three different countries – Germany, Great Britain and France, and influence of electoral systems to the party system, especially to small and new parties. It works with the theory of barriers, that parties has to overcome to become relevant – barrier to legislature and barrier to executive.

---

**Keywords:** Duvergers law, electoral systems, Great Britain, Germany, France

### Introduction

History of research of electoral studies is the history examining their impact on party systems. Although a pioneer of this field is considered to be Maurice Duverger, long before him we find academics that came with theories about the relationship between electoral and party systems. We can mention Ferdinand Hermens, who on the basis of instability of Weimar Germany argued that proportional systems lead to the destabilization of the party and even the political system (Hermens 1968). But earlier in the 19th was talked about the impact of the electoral system, e.g. John Stuart Mill.

However, much attention is still given to Duverger, because he was the first one, who elaborated these ideas to a wider theory and in the original versions of his work expressed a strong relationship between electoral system and party system (which he later relatives). Duverger thesis can be expressed as follows:

- 1) Proportional representation (PR) results into multiparty systems with rigid, stable and independent parties.
- 2) Plurality system with additional conditions (second round of elections, requirement of majority) leads to multiparty flexible system of dependent and relatively stable parties.
- 3) A simple plurality system leads to a two-party system with large, independent parties.<sup>199</sup> (Duverger 1951)

Many authors have followed Duverger, whether they further developed his thesis, agreed with him or vice versa rejected it critically. But majority of research to the topic of relationship between electoral and party systems focused on number of parties, in simple terms, which system brings which number of political parties.

A little different perspective was brought by Giovanni Sartori, who worked with the term of a reductive effect (Sartori 1997). The influence of the electoral system lies in its ability to reduce the number of relevant political parties, ie those parties that have a real impact on politics.

---

<sup>199</sup> With rigid/ flexible the intraparty stability is meant, with dependent / independent the preelection competition is meant.

Still this issue remains to be examined from macroscopic point of view – party systems and number of parties. It is possible, however, using Sartori's typology to examine things microscopically - from the perspective of each party, specifically their chances of obtaining relevance, which means entering legislature or executive. If this assumption is combined with reductive conception of the electoral systems, the question is not “How many political parties an electoral system will bring”, but "Which system brings which conditions for a political party to become relevant." Relevant in this context is meant not only to overcome the first barrier, or to obtain a mandate / enter the legislative authority, but also exceed the barrier of government involvement.

I will try to illustrate this question on the three Western democratic political systems - Germany, UK and France, each of it uses a different electoral system. In each of these states, we can find new topics coming into politics since 70th, but in every country another influence and development was made. I will first briefly introduce the main points of the electoral system, and then the conditions under a new party can become relevant. In conclusion I compare effects of electoral systems. I will deal with the national political level, as it is difficult to create a unified picture of the lower levels, which are often very different.

### **Germany**

German electoral system is the so-called personalized proportional system. The voter has two votes, one for candidate elected in single-member district and the other one for political party in multimember district. An important element is 5% electoral threshold, which eliminates small parties and prevents excessive fragmentation of the party system (Scarrow 2003). 5% threshold is therefore THE barrier, the parties must overcome. (There is an alternative barrier if the party wins at least three seats in single-member constituencies. However, it is unlikely that the party won three seats and does not exceed 5% threshold).

Germany has experienced the onset of mental transformation of the young generation in the sixties, through the revolutionary year of 1968 and further to the seventies. The key features of the new movement were ecological, environmentalist, pacifist and social - socialist / Marxist nature. Initially, these new ideas were reflected rather in local movements, which stood at the municipal level since mid seventies. At the end of the seventies the first regional branch was created, and in 1980 after the Green Party as such. In 1983 it succeeded with overcome the 5% threshold and with 27 seats came to the Bundestag for the first time. Important thing is that it does not guarantee participation in government. The Greens were unacceptable coalition partner by the main parties (Social democrats, Christian democrats), because the overall stance of the Greens can be described as anti-system - rejected the market economy, NATO, government participation. This policy came mainly from the Fundis - radically left-wing members. On the opposite side stood wing of Realos - realistically minded politicians, who gained the main influence in the party in 90<sup>th</sup>. As a result of winning Realos and other events (the unification of Germany, the failure of elections in West German section 1990), the Party's orientation has changed in the direction of pro-system party, which agreed with social market economy and anchoring Germany in NATO and the European Community / EU. As a result, it has become acceptable coalition partner and after the SPD victory in 1998 they entered the government.

This example shows that the first barrier - entering legislature is relative low, but overcoming the second barrier can be more difficult. Parties are independent on each other, and there are more coalition options for the parties, so it's unsure for a party to come to the government even as a winner of elections.

## **Great Britain**

The electoral system in the UK is known as a plurality system - FPTP. In the single-member districts candidates fight against each other and the one who gets the most votes will receive a mandate. The electoral system has very disproportional effects, the prevailing party is heavily over-represented, and gains above-average share of seats compared to the share of votes. This system is disadvantageous to other parties except the first, especially for third parties and other parties and small and medium size, because their share of votes can not be transferred into a mandate and, if so, the gain is very small and has no effect on politics. As can be seen, the barrier to entry of new political parties in the system is very high and it is no coincidence that traditionally (except the last parliamentary term and the short period from 1977 to 1978) there are only two parties - Labour party and the Conservative party, which alternate in the government.

Under these conditions the main bearers of new policy issues are not new political party. Although there are parties in Britain that are defending themes that can be called minority (vs. majority - the economy, health ...) and these political parties are able to obtain several mandates, yet at the central level have no real impact on the policy and they have no government involvement (eg, the Green Party won in 2010 elections its first mandate).

Therefore, this system requires much greater flexibility from political parties and a greater ability to respond to new topics. Because the big parties want to hold their dominant position, trying to be the catch-all party, party maximizing their vote share, long-term overlooking of a particular topic could lead to the outflow of voters, despite the psychological effect of FPTP, which should force voters to cast a vote for a big party, which don't have to be a first choice, but with the prospect that the vote for a minor party will not lead to the gain of a seat and will be wasted. Therefore new themes that emerged since the seventies - the issue of devolution, the European Community, ecology etc. - were step by step elaborated into the program on both sides and is now an integral part of their policy.

## **France**

French electoral system to National Assembly is two-round system with semi-open second round in single-member districts. To be elected in the first round of voting, a candidate must obtain at least 50% of the votes cast. If no candidate is elected in the first round, those who poll in excess of 12.5% of the registered voters in the first-round vote are entered in the second round of voting. If no candidate comply such conditions, the two highest-placing candidates advance to second round. In the second round, the candidate who receives the most votes is elected. Therefore there can be more candidates in second round than just two; characteristically there is a competition two candidates from left against one from right; or two from right against one from left. (Blais, Indridason: 2007).

This system brings at first sight a similar barrier as FPTP in the UK – parties need high vote share to gain a seat. Open second round, however, changes the electoral competition. From a competition of independent political parties is a race, forcing them to think about cooperation. New parties can achieve relevance in the case of vote share significantly lower than the real barrier, they need such a share that is relevant for one of the two major political parties (today Socialists and Union for a Popular Movement), so that it can help to gain superiority over its political opponent. In this case, for both large and small party is advantageous to form electoral alliance with the mutual exchange of votes.

Great party wins important extra votes and increases the chance of achieving an absolute majority of seats, small party may gain a few seats in exchange, the promise of fulfillment of program and possible government involvement. French case is complicated because of a different form of the local political system, in which the major role is held by President and main attention is focused on the presidential election and not elections to the

National Assembly, the logic of the system continues to work, also enhanced because the presidential candidates of major parties are pressured to negotiate support in the presidential election.

The most obvious example is the cooperation Socialists and the Greens, which has continued through several election cycles. Thanks to this cooperation, despite the low overall voter support (generally about 3% of the votes in the last election in 2012), Greens received 17 seats and two seats in government. The vote share therefore can be used much more effectively than under plurality system like in Britain.

On the other hand, another new party – National Front, that has reflected the topic of immigrants, is considered as radical and extreme and is not considered as suitable partner. Therefore, despite its vote share, that is higher than the one of Greens (5 – 10%), they had only 4 mandates in its history. It shows that for a small party at its own the barrier is too high.

## Conclusion

On the example of three political systems, I tried to demonstrate how electoral system can effect to the low side and the pursuit of relevance.

Every electoral system has a reductive effect and each brings a different type of barriers for political parties to entry into the political contest. These barriers can be divided yet: the barrier to entry to the legislature; barrier to entry into the government; combined condition barrier to entry into the government after overcoming the first barrier. An important complement remains whether the party can rely on the assistance of the electoral partner, so it is possible to efficiently form coalitions (Duverger called it dependence / independence). The following table will try to compare the effects of three systems.

Table 1 – Comparing of effect of electoral systems

	Germany - PR	Britain - FPTP	France - TRS
barrier - legislature	low	very high	high / low
possibility of alliance	no	no	yes
barrier executive	mid high	high	mid high
combined barrier	middle	low	mid low

PR – Proportional representation; TRS – Two round system

Now for the explanation. In Germany, the barrier to entry into the legislature is relatively low, but its overcome does not guarantee government involvement. Due to the entry of more political parties, there are more options of coalition governments; therefore the probability of party government involvement is decreasing. Therefore the combined barrier is somewhere in the middle.

In Britain the first barrier is generally very high, same for executive barrier. But if a party is strong enough to overcome a first barrier and is relevant (so it is one of two major parties), it has high chance to be involved in government, therefore the combined barrier is considered as low.

In France, the barrier as such to entry to the legislative body is high. The character of electoral system that encourages the parties to create an electoral alliance, however, reduces this barrier. At the same time, this cooperation results in the fact that a party that exceeds the first threshold, if it is a partner of one of the major parties, has a higher chance of government involvement. Compared to Germany, this party is tied to the large party (it is dependent) and a large party takes it as a coalition partner to the government. Therefore the combined barrier is relatively low.

*As a very conclusion I can daringly claim – electoral systems do matters.*

**References:**

- Blais, A; Indridason, I.H. Making Candidates count : The Logic of Electoral Aliances in Two-Round legislative elections. The Journal of Politics, Vol 69, No 1., 2007.
- Blühdorn, I. Reinventing Green Politics: On the Strategic Repositioning of the German Green Party. German politics, 2009.
- Duverger, M. Les Parties Politiques. Paris: Librairie, 1951.
- Gallagher, M. Mitchell, P. The Politics of Electoral Systems. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hermens, F.A. Demokratie oder Anarchie. Köln: Opladen, 1968.
- Nohlen, D. Wahlrecht und Parteisystem. Leske + Budrich, 2009.
- Rudzio, W. Das politische System Deutschlands. Springer, 2011.
- Sartori, G. Comparative constitutional engineering. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Scarrow, S.E. Germany: The Mixed-member system as a political compromise. In Shugart M.S.; Wattenberg, M.P. Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds? Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

**Web pages:**

- [www.bundeswahlleiter.de](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de) – election results in Germany
- <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/> - electoral results in Great Britain
- <http://www.electionresources.org/fr/> - electoral results in France