

Foreword

The economic analysis of politics rarely satisfies the ideal scientific conditions provided by a controlled experimental laboratory. Scholars who are interested in observing the political consequences of different voting rules, for example, typically must settle for comparing different political communities, even perhaps different countries, with all the problems of standardizing *ceteris paribus* conditions that such uncontrolled experiments imply. For the most part, the intractable nature of such problems has encouraged scholars to focus on simpler, if also less fruitful, research, for example, by relying on theory alone to shed insights on the issue or by evaluating the political consequences of one specific voting rule.

This fascinating book is a major exception to such a general rule. The authors focus attention on the postwar Italian electoral system, and utilize the significant electoral reforms of the early 1990's as a fulcrum for comparing the political implications for Italy of two alternative voting rules – proportional representation and mixed proportional representation and plurality – at the national, municipal and provincial levels. From 1946, when democracy was restored in Italy following the collapse of Fascism until 1990, when Italy began its electoral transition from the First to the Second Republic, Italy adopted the voting rule of proportional representation with party lists and the method of the largest remainder. This voting rule was changed to introduce a mixed system of proportional representation and plurality in 1993/4 following the collapse of the First Republic. By comparing the political process in Italy before and after 1993/4 the authors are able to provide invaluable insights into the political implications of two different voting rules.

The authors evaluate the alternative voting rules by reference to three criteria, namely (1) the amount of information generated on the demand side of the electoral equation, (2) the degree of competition among political parties generated on the supply side of the electoral equation and (3) the degree of proportionality between electoral votes achieved and party representation in the legislature. They conclude, following a careful evaluation, that proportional representation is superior in generating voter information relevant to an election, albeit at the group specific level, that proportional representation is superior in generating competition by increasing the openness of an election to a wider range of political parties and that

proportional representation is superior in translating the number of votes received to the number of seats in the legislature. Because the post-1993/4 Italian electoral rules provide a significant weight to proportionality, the authors still confront coalition government in Italy and therefore do not focus attention on the strengths and weaknesses of single party rule of the kind that generally results in such plurality-based electoral systems as that of the United Kingdom.

The book reaches well beyond an evaluation of the immediate public choice consequences of operating under alternative voting rules. The authors additionally analyze the choice of electoral rules from the perspective of constitutional political economy noting that, although the electoral reform in Italy was approved by a popular referendum, it was implemented by a Parliament whose members had been elected by the old electoral rules and whose primary concern was the retention of power. Predictably, such a process might be expected to result in the preservation of the old party system. Perhaps fortuitously, however, the old party system collapsed on the wave of (even by Italian standards) a major corruption scandal that served to ameliorate if not to eliminate attempts to subvert the reform process.

This Foreword can only sample the contents of such a detailed study of a complex process of political change and provide a taste of what is available for the assiduous reader. Electoral reforms occur only rarely under conditions of democracy, not least because they threaten the tenure of those who have attained political office. This book offers insights into the dynamics of electoral reform and the political consequences of such reform that should fascinate all serious students of public choice and political science.

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