# Do More Parties Make for Happier Voters?

## Democratic satisfaction and party representation across thirty-six democracies

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## Abstract

Extensions of Downsian theory of party competition imply that the greater the number of political parties, the greater the perception of representation and satisfaction with the democratic process. However, this logic has been subjected to increasing scrutiny. This paper conducts a cross-national analysis of public opinion data from thirty-six democracies to assess whether a) feeling represented by a party increases democratic satisfaction, and b) whether more parties induce a greater sense of party representation. Multivariate regression results find that feeling represented by a party correlates with greater satisfaction with the democratic process. The more striking results emerge when testing the relationship between the number of parties (as measured by the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) and parliamentary (ENPP) parties) and party representation. Namely, although more parliamentary parties correlate with greater perceived representation, the opposite is true for the number of electoral parties. This implies that more parties do not necessarily make for happier voters.

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## 1. Introduction and paper overview

*Citizens in modern democracies are represented through and by parties. This is inevitable.*
Sartori (1968: 471).

This paper analyzes one of the most fundamental *raisons d'être* of political parties; the function of representing people's preferences. The analysis is also extended to the party system level to see whether some types of party systems, namely pluralist ones, are more representative of the people's preferences than others. This is assessed through public opinion data, largely because, whether parties represent the electorate or not, the *perception* of representativeness in the eyes of the public can seriously effect support for democracy. The analysis conducted uses a large N dataset spanning across thirty-six democracies and thirty-eight elections held between 2001 and 2006. Two primary questions are explored. First, are voters who feel represented by a political party more likely to be satisfied with the democratic process? Finally, do more parties engender a greater sense of party representativeness amongst voters?

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 provides both a literature review and some hypotheses to test the above questions. It first provides a cogent overview of the literature on party representation and democracy, developing a hypothesis that voters who feel represented are more likely to feel satisfied with the democratic process. It then moves to consider, and strongly scrutinize, Downsian theory and its implications for party system representativeness, deriving the second hypothesis, namely that there is no relationship between the number of parties and the perception of party representativeness. Section 3 moves to discuss the dataset compilation and coding processes. Section 4 conducts multivariate regression analysis to test the hypotheses in the paper, finding support for the first hypothesis and mixed support for the second. More specifically, the results strikingly find that increasing the number of electoral parties decreases the sense of party representation amongst voters, whereas increasing the

number of parliamentary parties has the opposite effect. Finally, section 5 provides some possible interpretations for the regression results and section 6 concludes.

### 2.1 Party representation and democracy

Political parties were not always viewed as beneficial or necessary by political scholars. Early political philosophers, including such notables as Machiavelli, Madison, and Montesquieu, could not conceptualize of a party as being anything more than a faction. Parties were seen, in the words of Bolingbroke, as "a political evil, and faction is the worst of all parties" (Sartori 1976: 5). Yet with time, political parties gradually began to be viewed "not as a weed but as a necessary microbe lodged deep in the digestive tract – not pretty, but vital to keeping the body politic in good health" (Stokes 1999:244). Indeed, many contemporary scholars now argue for the necessity of parties. To this end, Schattschneider (1942) famously argued that "political parties created democracy…modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."

One of the most oft-cited reasons why political parties are increasingly perceived as necessary for democracy is their representation function. Sartori (1976) writes that "parties are channels of expression. That is to say, parties belong, first and foremost, to the means of representation: They are an instrument, or agency, for representing the people by expressing their demands." Similarly, Hirshman (1970) characterizes parties as providing a "voice function" for voters. Nuemann (1956) discusses how parties are able to organize the public's preferences and to then channel such preferences to the governmental level. Key (1961) considers parties to be the primary tools to translate public opinion into public policy, and Lipset and Rokkan (1990) discuss how parties represent different social cleavages through their expressive function. These

arguments highlight that parties are conditioned by society, serving a "bottom up" function that diffuses popular preferences to the policymaking process (Sartori 1969; Stokes 1999).

In short, political parties create an institutionalized linkage between government and citizens, engendering a government that is responsive to the preferences of the people (Dix 1992; Stokes 1999). This is due to political parties' ability to aggregate the preferences of voters, to codify them into political platforms, to advocate for them on the campaign trail, and to implement them once in office (Sartori 1976). This matters because governmental responsiveness is often considered the primary characteristic that sets democracy apart from alternative forms of government (Key 1961; Dahl 1971; Sartori 1976; Dalton 1985).

The foregoing clearly supports the notion that parties' representation function is beneficial. Therefore, voters who feel represented by a political party should be more satisfied with the democratic process. This inference has been subjected to relatively little skepticism, especially amongst contemporary scholars, and is thus incorporated in the first hypothesis:

***Hypothesis I:*** *Voters who feel represented by a political party are more likely to be satisfied with the democratic process than voters who do not feel represented by a political party.*

### 2.2 Party representation and the number of parties

If there is empirical evidence supporting Hypothesis I, then the natural question to ask is "what factors contribute to feeling represented by a political party?" The literature linking party representation to party system characteristics is strongly ground in the spatial theory resulting from the work of Anthony Downs. Extending theories of spatial economic competition first developed by Hotelling (1929), Downs (1957) modeled the preferences of voters in one-dimensional space and showed that, given uniformly or normally distributed voter preferences, vote-seeking political parties have an incentive to converge upon the ideal point espoused by the

median voter. Downs' spatial theory was later extended to a multidimensional Euclidean space and to cases of multiparty competition (see Davis et al. 1970; McKelvey 1986).

The basic notions of the spatial model of competition are that individuals and parties are rational, that voters hold complete and transitive preferences, and that they will vote for the party whose platform is closest to their policy ideal point (Ferejohn 1995; Stokes 1999; Tsebelis 2002). The incentive for the vote-seeking party is, therefore, to adopt policy positions that minimize the distance to the policy ideal points of the largest group of voters possible (Stokes 1999). Note that what matters is not the direction (i.e. whether the party platform is more conservative or more liberal than the voters' preferences), but simply the proximity between the respective policy positions of party and voters (Achen 1978; Dalton 1985: 280).

By extending this logic to the party system level, spatial theory implies that the greater the number of parties, the greater the sense of representation. This is because, *ceteris paribus*, increasing the number of parties should reduce the proximity between voters and party platforms. This appears both logical and theoretically parsimonious. However, scholars have directly challenged many of the simplifying assumptions that underlie this logic.

Spatial theory assumes that parties are unitary actors which espouse a single platform. Indeed, both Downs (1957) and Black (1958) characterized political parties as "teams" (Stokes 1999). Further, these unitary actors are able to move freely across policy space, minimizing their platform's proximity to the greatest amount of voters without cost (Stokes 1999). Finally, citizens are also assumed to have access to perfect information regarding the policy positions of parties, to be aware of their own policy preferences, to be able to compare the platforms of parties to their own ideal points. But clearly, these assumptions are far from realistic.

Przeworski and Sprague (1986) have criticized the notion that voters hold exogenous policy preferences and that parties always seek to minimize their proximity to the greatest number of voters. They argue that by adopting more extreme positions than voters, parties can shape both their political identities and values, thereby pulling public opinion towards their respective party platforms. This occurs because activists can often drive the party agenda (Aldrich 1983; Tsebelis 1990). The implications are that parties do not always minimize proximity to the greatest number of voters and that there exists a 'tug of war' of sorts between both ideological party activists and party pragmatists and political parties and the electorate (Aldrich 1983; Strom and Mueller 1995). This fundamentally challenges the notion that parties are unitary actors that can more through 'frictionless' policy space. Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) also reach similar conclusions. They argue that because voters do not have fully formed preferences, they are attracted to clear and somewhat more extreme messages. Thus, parties have another incentive to adopt policy positions that are more extreme than the voters they target.

There exists empirical evidence supporting the foregoing notions. Inglehart (1984) and Dalton (1985) conducted separate analyses of the first wave of elections to the European Parliament, and both found that candidates generally adopted more extreme economic policies than the majority of voters. Similar patterns surfaced through studies of Sweden (Holmberg 1989), Norway and the United States (Listhaug et al. 1990) and cross-country analyses (Rabinowitz et al. 1991; Iversen 1994). This supports the assertion that parties tend to adopt policy positions that are more extreme than the majority of the electorate.

However, even this conclusion may not be robust. In the words of Lipset and Rokkan (1990), "no party can hope to gain decisive influence…without some willingness to cut across existing cleavages to establish common fronts with potential enemies." Indeed, in societies

where social cleavages are prominent, political parties must be more moderate than their bases in order to avoid deadlock in government. This argument is found in the consosciational literature (Lijphart 1984; Tsebelis 1990; Lijphart 1999). This exposes another flaw in traditional spatial assumptions, namely that parties are solely vote-seeking. As Tsebelis (1990) argues, political parties are constantly balancing their strategies in *both* the electoral and the policymaking arenas.

In short, there are reasons to be skeptical of the simplistic logic that more parties engender a greater sense of representation. If Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) find that parties in two-party systems, such as the United States, have incentives to be somewhat more extreme than voters, whereas Lijphart (1984) and Tsebelis (1990) argue that parties in a multiparty system, such as Belgium, often moderate over the heads of the electorate, is it obvious that the Belgian voter should feel more represented than the American voter? The answer is unclear, and due to the insufficient evidence regarding the relationship between the number of parties and political representation, the second, and final, hypothesis takes the form of a null hypothesis:

***Hypothesis II****: There is no relationship between the number of parties in a party system and voters feeling represented by a political party.*

## 3 Data compilation and coding

To test the foregoing hypotheses, data were gathered primarily from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems accessed through the online database of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Philips and Sapiro 2007). The dataset used in this analysis covers thirty-eight elections between 2001 and 2006 across thirty-six democracies (voters in Taiwan and Portugal were polled on two separate election cycles). The sample size approaches nearly 60,000 voters. For all variables, responses such as "not available," or "refused" were coded as missing.

For Hypothesis I, the dependent and independent variables of interest are *democratic satisfaction* and *representation by a political party*, respectively. The democratic satisfaction variable is compiled from the question "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?" with answers coded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied). The representation by a political party variable is compiled by aggregating two dichotomous variables ("Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?" and "Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represents your views reasonably well?" with responses to both questions coded as 0 for a negative response and 1 for a positive response). The resulting variable thus ranges from 0 ("no" to both questions) to 2 ("yes" to both questions).

For Hypothesis II, the independent variable of interest is the *number of parties*. There has been much debate over how to best count the number of relevant parties in a party system (see Rae 1967; Sartori 1976; Sartori 1994; Lijphart 1999). This debate need not be repeated here, except for mentioning that any counting measure will possess some degree of arbitrariness and will be sensitive to differing interpretations of what "relevant" means. The measure for this analysis, and which has seen extensive use in empirical studies, is the effective number of parties (ENP) formula by Laakso and Taagepera (1979):

$$ENP = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} {p_i}^2}$$

Where $n$ is the number of parties receiving at least one vote or parliamentary seat and $p_i^2$ is the proportion of seats or votes squared. This formula is used to calculate both the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) and the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) in this analysis. This helps clarify whether voters refer to electoral parties or parliamentary parties when they consider party representation, and allows for analyzing whether the significance and

directionality of the partial regression coefficients of the two measures differ. Note that I use the *log of the ENPP and the ENEP* in the analysis, the logic being that the effect of adding a political party decreases as more parties are present in a party system.

Other variables in the analysis are used as controls. These include demographic variables, namely *age*, *gender* (dummy coded as 1 for male and 0 for female), *education* (ranging from 1 for "no formal education" to 8 for "college degree attained"), *race* (coded as 0 for "European-Caucasian" and 1 for "other"), *marital status* (dummy coded as 1 for "married" and 0 for "divorced, single, or other), *employment status* (where the coding is 1 for "employed" and 0 for retired, student, or other), *union, business, or farmers' association membership* (coded as 1 for being a member and 0 for not being a member), *residence* (ranging from 1, denoting a rural residence, to 4, specifying residence in a large town or city) ), *self-reported religiosity* (on a scale from 1 to 4, with 4 denoting "very religious"), and *self-reported political ideology* (ranging from 1 for left-wing to 10 for right-wing).

For Hypothesis I, additional control variables are included if there are reasons to suspect that they may correlate with democratic satisfaction. These variables include *leader representation* ("Would you say that any of the individual party leaders/presidential candidates at the last election represent your views reasonably well?"), *election representativeness* ("How well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by MPs?"), *corruption perception* ("How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is amongst politicians in [country]?"), *government performance* ("how good or bad a job do you think the government/president in [capital] has done over the past [number of years between the previous and the present election OR change in government] years?"), and *support for democracy*

("Please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government").

For Hypothesis II, measures of corruption, government performance, and support for democracy are removed, since there is little theoretical reason why they should correlate with feeling represented by a political party. In their place, a control variable for the *average age of political parties* is used, compiled from the 2009 version of the Database of Political Institutions (Beck, Keefer, and Clarke 2009). The measure averages the age of the three largest parliamentary political parties. The logic for including this measure is that party attachment may be greater in institutionalized and longstanding party systems. All other control variables, namely demographic variables and representation variables (i.e. election and leader representation) are also retained in the analysis.

## 4 Results

Multivariate regression analysis was used to test both Hypothesis I and Hypothesis II. Cases were excluded pairwise in order to maximize the number of observations; nevertheless, the case count was reduced to 13,283 for all analyses, largely due to lower response rates for some variables and the exclusion of responses such as "don't know" or "refused" from the analysis. Final valid responses per variable, along with descriptive statistics, are displayed in Table 1.

For all of the analyses provided, I chose a significance level of $\alpha=.05$, and this is denoted with a double asterisk in the regression results. Coefficients that are significant at an $\alpha=.10$ level are considered to be approaching significance, and are denoted with a single asterisk to render them easier to discern. Significance levels of $\alpha=.01$ and $\alpha=.001$ are marked with three and four asterisks, respectively. The results for the first hypothesis test are displayed in Table 2 in the

column titled "Model 1," displaying the correlation of the independent variables with the democratic satisfaction (dependent) variable. Partial regression coefficients are provided with their significance levels, followed by standard errors in parentheses. Finally, model summary statistics, such as R square values and F statistics, appear on the bottom of the regression table.

*Table 1: Descriptive statistics for variables of interest.*

| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Value Labels | N Valid |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Party representation | 1.09 | 0.82 | 0 | 2 | 0=not close to party & no party represents my views; 2=close to party & party represents my views | 49,710 |
| Log (ENPP) | 0.58 | 0.16 | 0.3 | 0.93 | none | 59,278 |
| Log (ENEP) | 0.66 | 0.19 | 0.34 | 1.45 | none | 59,278 |
| Average party age | 48.85 | 31.59 | 5 | 152.5 | none | 58,698 |
| Leader representation | 0.59 | 0.49 | 0 | 1 | 0=no; 1=yes | 49,909 |
| Election representativeness | 2.44 | 0.74 | 1 | 4 | 1=not well at all; 4=very well | 48,569 |
| Corruption perception | 2.96 | 0.91 | 1 | 4 | 1=it hardly happens at all; 4=very widespread | 55,062 |
| Democracy support | 3.27 | 0.69 | 1 | 4 | 1=disagree that it is best form of gov't; 4=agree that it is best form of gov't | 54,405 |
| Government performance | 2.45 | 0.76 | 1 | 4 | 1=very bad job; 4=very good job | 51,368 |
| Age | 45.89 | 16.94 | 16 | 102 | none | 58,910 |
| Gender | 0.48 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 | 0=female; 1=male | 59,176 |
| Education | 5.01 | 1.84 | 1 | 8 | 1=none; 8=undergraduate college degree completed | 58,719 |
| Marital status | 0.66 | 0.47 | 0 | 1 | 0=other; 1=married or living together as married | 56,936 |
| Race | 0.44 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 | 0=other; 1=European (Caucasoid) | 20,326 |
| Religiosity | 2.57 | 0.97 | 1 | 4 | 1=have no religious beliefs; 4=very religious | 35,344 |
| Political ideology | 5.15 | 2.56 | 0 | 10 | 0=left; 10=right | 47,158 |
| Union membership | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0 | 1 | 0=no; 1=yes | 51,512 |
| Business association membership | 0.04 | 0.19 | 0 | 1 | 0=no; 1=yes | 35,685 |
| Farmers' association membership | 0.02 | 0.15 | 0 | 1 | 0=no; 1=yes | 34,913 |
| Employment status | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0 | 1 | 0=other; 1=unemployed | 55,860 |
| Urban/rural residence | 2.52 | 1.2 | 1 | 4 | 1=rural area/village; 4=large town or city | 51,758 |

Note: Responses such as "refused," "not available," "see codebook," and "other" were coded as missing and removed from the analysis.

*Table 2: Regression results: democratic satisfaction (Model 1) and party representation (Models 2a-2c).*

| | **Model 1** | **Model 2a** | **Model 2b** | **Model 2c** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Party representation | .042**** | | | |
| | (.008) | | | |
| Log (ENPP) | | | -.190**** | .470**** |
| | | | (.039) | (.063) |
| Log (ENEP) | | -.400**** | | -.723**** |
| | | (.034) | | (.055) |
| Average party age | | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) |
| Leader representation | .020 | .810**** | .813**** | .804**** |
| | (.014) | (.013) | (.013) | (.013) |
| Election representativeness | .186**** | .135**** | .137**** | .135**** |
| | (.008) | (.008) | (.008) | (.008) |
| Corruption perception | -.139**** | | | |
| | (.007) | | | |
| Democracy support | .188**** | | | |
| | (.009) | | | |
| Government performance | .289**** | | | |
| | (.008) | | | |
| Age | .001**** | .004**** | .004**** | .004**** |
| | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) | (.000) |
| Gender | .008 | .042**** | .041**** | .043**** |
| | (.012) | (.012) | (.012) | (.012) |
| Education | .019**** | .020**** | .023**** | .021**** |
| | (.003) | (.004) | (.004) | (.009) |
| Marital status | -.008 | .007 | .005 | .009 |
| | (.013) | (.013) | (.013) | (.013) |
| Race | .006 | -.031** | -.001 | -.035*** |
| | (.013) | (.013) | (.013) | (.013) |
| Religiosity | -.009 | -.006 | -.010 | -.001 |
| | (.006) | (.006) | (.006) | (.006) |
| Political ideology | .009**** | .006** | .006** | .006** |
| | (.002) | (.002) | (.002) | (.002) |
| Union membership | .038*** | .041*** | .035** | .024* |
| | (.014) | (.015) | (.015) | (.015) |
| Business association membership | .003 | .021 | .023 | .026 |
| | (.031) | (.031) | (.031) | (.031) |
| Farmers' association membership | .003 | .111*** | .104** | .134*** |
| | (.040) | (.041) | (.041) | (.041) |
| Employment status | -.057** | -.023 | -.028 | -.017 |
| | (.025) | (.025) | (.025) | (.025) |
| Urban/rural residence | -.019**** | .016*** | .017*** | .018*** |
| | (.005) | (.005) | (.005) | (.005) |
| Constant | 1.006**** | .179**** | -.018 | .108** |
| R square | 0.280 | 0.314 | 0.308 | 0.317 |
| Adjusted R square | 0.279 | 0.313 | 0.307 | 0.316 |
| ANOVA F statistic | 287.006**** | 380.076**** | 369.499**** | 362.392**** |
| N | 13,283 | 13,283 | 13,283 | 13,283 |

Note: Unstandardized partial regression coefficients provided, with standard errors in parentheses. Highest VIF value=3.063 for log (ENEP) in Model 2c (denoting little collinearity). *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001.

The regression results for Model 1 support Hypothesis I, namely that voters who feel represented by a political party are more likely to be satisfied with the democratic process. The partial slope regression coefficient for party representation is .042, meaning that, on average, for every unit increase in the party representation variable (for example, moving from a respondent who does not feel close or represented by a political party to one who does feel represented, but not close, to a political party) there is a corresponding .042 increase in the democratic satisfaction variable (recall that this variable ranges from 1, an unsatisfied response, to 4, a fully satisfied response). This result is statistically significant at the 99% level (p=.000). This outcome is largely unsurprising, and supports the literature arguing that voters gain some utility, and grow more satisfied with the democratic process, if they feel that a party represents their views.

These results justify moving to an analysis of the relationship between the number of parties and party representation; since feeling represented by a political party appears to improve satisfaction with the democratic process, it is important to scrutinize the spatially-derived assumption that increasing the number of parties should engender a greater sense of representation. Recall that Hypothesis II predicted that there would be no relationship in this case. This hypothesis is tested through Models 2a, 2b, and 2c in Table 2. The first model includes the log(ENEP) as the independent variable of interest and omits the log(ENPP), the second model does the reverse, including the log(ENPP) and omitting the log(ENEP), and the third model includes both. The reason for including three models in the regression table becomes clear when the significance level and directionality of the partial slope regression coefficients of both measures are analyzed.

*Prima facie*, the regression results appear to reveal a perplexing picture. In Model 2a, the log(ENEP) partial slope regression coefficient is both negative (b=-.400) and highly statistically

significant (p=.000), suggesting that, on average, the greater the number of effective electoral parties, the less voters feel represented by a political party. Further, a similar results surfaces in Model 2b, with the log(ENPP) partial slope regression coefficient being both negative (-.190) and statistically significant (p=.000). If the analysis was truncated here, it would appear that, against all intuition, the greater the number of both electoral and parliamentary parties, the less voters feel represented by a party. But Model 2c returns a bit of sanity to the analysis.

When both the log(ENEP) and the log(ENPP) are included in the analysis, and thereby each variable controls for the effects of the other, a striking shift occurs: the partial slope regression coefficient for the log(ENEP) becomes even more negative (b=-.723) and statistically significant (p=.000), whereas the corresponding coefficient for the log(ENPP) switches to becoming positive (.470) while also achieving very high statistical significance (p=.000). This shift in the more specified model might be explained away as a manifestation of multicollinearity, however the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) does not rise above 3.063 for either measure[2]. While clearly there is a correlation between the log(ENEP) and the log(ENPP) (R square=.642) and thus some detectable collinearity between the two variables, such VIF values are far from concerning. Additionally, the high statistical significance of both variables in Model 2c suggests that it would take a significant amount of multicollinearity to warrant placing their coefficients' directionality and statistical significance under scrutiny.

A more plausible interpretation is that, because of the moderate correlation between the log(ENEP) and the log(ENPP), each variable was capturing the very significant, and directionally opposed, effect of the other variable in the first two Models. In other words, Models 2a and 2b suffer from omitted variable bias. In Model 2a, the coefficient for log(ENEP) is less

[2] Note that a VIF value of 10 is often considered, albeit somewhat arbitrarily, as the point when multicollinearity can become a significant concern. VIF values of 2 or 3 usually denote minor amounts of multicollinearity.

negative than in Model 2c because it is likely detecting some of the positive correlation between the log(ENPP) and the dependent variable (party representation). Extending this logic, in Model 2b the coefficient for the log(ENPP) is pulled into negative territory because it is capturing some of the very negative correlation between the log(ENPP) and party representation. Once the model is fully specified, and both variables are included and allowed to control for each other's effects, their true correlations manifests themselves. These correlations are, vis-à-vis feeling represented by a political party, highly negative for the log(ENEP) and highly positive for the log(ENPP).

The striking story that Model 2c appears to support is that, on average, increasing the number of *electoral* parties makes voters feel *less* represented by parties, whereas increasing the number of *parliamentary* parties makes voters feel *more* represented by political parties. Therefore, rather than refuting or supporting Hypothesis II, the regression results provide mixed support at best and suggest that Hypothesis II lacked specificity; in order to determine whether the number of parties impacts party representation, one must first define *what kind of party* is being analyzed. But beyond this conclusion, it is important to interpret these results by providing some possible theoretic explanations, which is the focus of the next section.

## 5 Electoral versus parliamentary party representation

Given that the result supporting Hypothesis I, or that party representation engenders greater democratic satisfaction, finds widespread theoretic backing and is of little surprise, it is worthwhile to move to interpreting the more interesting results from the second hypothesis test. Two questions seem to warrant consideration. First, how can having *more* choice with respect to electoral parties cause voters to feel *less* represented? Second, why would the effect (vis-à-vis party representation) of increasing the number of electoral parties be opposite the effect of

increasing the number of parliamentary parties? The results certainly seem to contradict spatial logic and the rational-choice assumptions upon which it stands. Two plausible explanations are that a) voters are less happy when they have more parties to choose from during elections, and b) the conflict-inducing effect of more electoral parties disillusions voters, whereas the compromise-inducing effects of more parliamentary parties attracts voters.

The first explanation is not as counterintuitive as it might first appear. It is worthwhile to mention that there exists significant scholarly research, primarily in the behavioral economics literature, which finds that sometimes utility is increased by *reducing* the number of choices, that is that less choice sometimes makes people better off. For example, Sunstein and Thaler (2008) argue that a reduction in the number of options can often increase individual utility by overcoming uncertainty in the face of a complex choice. In the context of voters' decision over which parties to choose from, a plethora of parties may be a source of frustration and confusion for voters. This is due to two primary factors. First, as the number of parties increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish amongst parties. Second, making an informed decision when faced with many parties to choose from may require a greater amount of information and research on the part of the voter compared to a simpler binary choice. This requires time and is costly to the voter. In this light, it is plausible that voters actually prefer having fewer parties competing in elections because it simplifies their voting decision.

A strength of this interpretation is that it clearly distinguishes between electoral parties and parliamentary parties. Since parliamentary parties are parties in government, they do not necessitate voters having to 'choose' amongst them. Contrariwise, electoral parties compete for votes in elections, and voters ultimately have to create a party preference ordering to finalize which party will receive their support. In short, increasing the number of electoral parties does

increase the proximity between party and voter, but it also complexifies the decision voters must make regarding which party to support. The regression results suggest that, in this case, the latter effect may dominate the former, and thus voters' utility is decreased the more parties compete in elections. In the case of parliamentary parties, the second effect disappears, thereby allowing the benefits of greater representation in government to manifest themselves.

The second possible explanation is that voters garner a greater sense of representation when there are more parties in the parliamentary arena but not in the electoral arena. This could be caused by a number of factors. First, voters may care more about their policy positions being represented by parties in government, where they can be turned into policy, instead of parties competing in elections, where, at best, voters' preferences can be incorporated in a political platform. Further, an important issue to consider is that of inter-party divisiveness. Linz (2002) finds that voters across countries dislike when parties become a source of division within society, especially when such division is coupled with negative campaigning. This divisiveness is engendered by inter-party competition. Importantly, however, this competition amongst parties must be balanced by compromise in the parliamentary arena in order to avoid deadlock in government. This need for compromise is increased when there is a greater number of parliamentary parties, given that none of them commands a majority of seats. In short, a greater number of parties in government may cause its associated compromise-inducing effect to trump the parties' divisive effect. This argument is explicitly made by Lijphart (1984) and is one of the foundational assumptions of the consosciational literature (or of "consensus" democracy, as Lijphart refers to it). Voters may thus appreciate that a greater number of parliamentary parties

not only increases the likelihood of their preferences being included in the policymaking agenda, but that the policymaking process is characterized by compromise and consensus[3].

Conversely, a greater number of parties in the electoral arena may spark more conflict and engender greater divisiveness. This is because the "prize" in elections is not policy (as in the parliamentary arena), but electoral victory. The associated strategy, therefore, may move from one of compromise to one of negative campaigning, because there a lesser incentive for electoral parties to cooperate vis-à-vis parliamentary parties. This is especially true if there are a significant amount of parties competing for votes, because each party has an incentive to distinguish itself from its competitors. Given the research finding that inter-party conflict is less than appreciated by voters, it would make sense that they would distance themselves from this culture of negativity by affirming that the increased conflict they engender leads to a disillusionment with the entire process.

To recapitulate, there exist plausible interpretations of the regression results. The first interpretation is that more choice renders voters worse off because it complexifies their voting decision. This effect only manifests itself in the electoral arena because voters do not have to choose amongst parliamentary parties. The second possibility is that a greater number of electoral parties engenders conflict and negative campaigning, thus causing disillusionment amongst voters, whereas the presence of more parliamentary parties provides an impetus for compromise and consensus in the policymaking process, which attracts voters instead. Voters may thus feel more represented by the compromise-stimulating effect of more parliamentary parties than by the divisiveness-stimulating effect of more electoral parties. These theories are summarized in Figure 1:

[3] This is in clear contrast to the British two-party system case, for example, where the parliamentary party in power holds a monopoly on both parliamentary seats and agenda-setting power (Tsebelis 2002).

*Figure 1: Selected impacts of increasing the effective number of parties.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **More electoral parties** | • *More choice, thus more complex voting decision*<br>• *More inter-party conflict and division* |
| **More parliamentary parties** | • *No impact on decision-making process*<br>• *Greater incentive for compromise and consensus* |

While both of these conceptualizations may not fully explain the regression results, they do offer a plausible interpretation that can be validated, refuted, or revised through future research.

## 6 Conclusion

The possible interpretations offered in Section 5 are, stylized, developed *a posteriori*, and the analysis is tentative at best. However, their purpose is to show that there exist plausible interpretations of the regression results. Indeed, the analysis in this paper may have surfaced a puzzle meriting future research. Namely, the results suggest that while party representation increases satisfaction with the democratic process, more parties do not necessarily engender a greater sense of party representation; more electoral parties tend to decrease perceived representativeness, whereas a greater number of parliamentary parties tend to increase a sense of representation. To the author's knowledge, no prior study has found similar results. Further, given both the large size of the sample used for the analysis and the high statistical significance of the regression results, there is reason to conclude that the regression output is robust. Thus, while the results should not be free from skepticism, two conclusions can be drawn with confidence. First, when assessing party representation, both the type of representation and the type of party being scrutinized matter. Finally, while party representation appears to improve voters' satisfaction with democracy, more parties do not necessarily make for happier voters.

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