

Chapter 1

Why Elections?

Elections are everyday events in the modern world. In representative democracies, their purpose is to allow voters to express their political preferences by making choices – between parties and/or between candidates – choices with implications (sometimes clear consequences) for the conduct of government and the policies that a government will pursue. Elections are opportunities for citizens to render a verdict on the past performance of their government and to establish guidelines for future government actions. Yet as soon as we refer to citizens we raise an enormous question mark over the electoral process in democratic countries. How well do ordinary men and women perform in making the sorts of judgements and choices that these lofty goals imply? Many critics of democracy have denied that members of the public have either the knowledge or the perspicacity required for rendering such verdicts or establishing such guidelines. And political scientists who have studied the behavior of voters at election time have sometimes expressed exactly the same doubts. This book is centered on the question of how citizens in democracies go about making the choices that elections call upon them to make. It also tries to assess the extent to which these choices turn out in practice to be good ones, and whether there are institutional arrangements that make it more or less easy for citizens to exercise their democratic judgment.

Before we start on this major task, we need to introduce a number of concepts and concerns that will be encountered frequently in later chapters. We begin by focusing on what it is that voters choose between when they vote in a national election.

Political parties

In some elections – elections for the President of the United States, for example – voters might be thought of as choosing primarily between different individual contenders for the *office* concerned. In other elections – elections for the British or French Parliaments, for example – voters might be thought of as choosing primarily between different *political parties*. Even in the United States, however, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the candi-

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dates are running on behalf of political parties, and many voters focus on the party that a presidential candidate belongs to as well as on her or his individual characteristics. When discussing elections, it is thus almost unavoidable to speak of political parties. But what we mean by the term 'party' is very different in different parts of the world; and the critical role that parties play in electoral politics makes it important for us at the very outset of this book to confront a major difference between types of parties. At one extreme we have parties that are loosely organized coalitions of *political elites* (*politicians* and other politically influential individuals) who may even switch between parties as it suits them. Such parties usually do not have formal *mass memberships* and have only weak organizations. Politicians operating under the banner of such parties may have widely different views on important policy issues without being sanctioned by their parties. At the other extreme, we find parties that are highly *disciplined*, which means that politicians are active on behalf of the party and are therefore expected to follow the party's program. Failing to do so can lead to serious sanctions, including expulsion from the party. Such parties are often based around organized mass support, where individual citizens can be formal members of the party and play a role in determining its policy stances and choosing its candidates. Moreover, these parties are characterized by strong organizations that in principle represent the members and keep politicians in line.

Within any particular political system we often find different sorts of party with characteristics that vary between these extremes. However, there are often even greater differences between systems, with all the parties in a particular country sharing characteristics that are different from those of parties in other countries. Among established democracies the United States is most often seen as the epitome of the first extreme, having loosely organized, relatively undisciplined political parties. Politicians, rather than parties, are at the center of the political stage. This is why we often refer to politics in the United States as *candidate-centered*. The countries of Western Europe fall closer to the other extreme, and established parliamentary systems generally have more disciplined parties and more *party-centered* politics than does the United States. We will explain in Chapter 2 why it is, in party-centered countries, that parties tend to be *policy centered*.

In countries with party-centered politics, a further distinction needs to be made between *top-down* and *bottom-up* politics (Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). Top-down politics occurs when politicians make promises and try to fashion policies that will appeal to voters, with the primary objective of getting elected, along the lines first suggested by Joseph Schumpeter (1942) that we now associate with the term *vote-seeking*. Bottom-up politics occurs when grass-roots movements (like the Socialist Movement or the Ecology Movement) organize themselves as political parties that incorporate into their platform the objectives of the original movement. Such parties exist to

‘sell’ a set of policies and are thus *policy-seeking*. Parties that can be characterized as mass membership parties (like the socialists and communists) tend to have their origins in bottom-up political movements and contain many *activists* who play important roles in governing the party and mobilizing its electoral support. Such parties often have their origins in *social cleavages* (for instance distinctions between religions or between social classes). We will have more to say about social cleavages in Chapter 4. Top-down parties, by contrast, tend to be dominated by their founding elites and tend not to have mass memberships (Duverger 1967). They are thus often referred to as *elite parties*.

Between these extremes, policy-centered party systems can contain a number of other party types, most notably the *cadre party* – identified by Duverger (1967) as a party with its origins in a mass movement but whose leadership has divorced itself from the control of that mass movement (we are thinking here of classic Marxist–Leninist-style Communist parties) – and the *catch-all party*, identified by Kirchheimer (1966) as an elite party that has become successful in garnering support beyond its personalistic clientele or even a mass movement party that has become successful in appealing to voters beyond the bounds of those that it was originally founded to represent. More recently a new party type, the *cartel party* (Katz and Mair 1995), has been identified as a party so strongly entwined with government power as to be able to take advantage of government finance in electioneering. Such parties often have reputations for effectiveness honed by decades of participation in government that give them enormous advantages at election times. Of course, these various categories are not distinct, and parties of one type can easily evolve into parties of a different type.

Historically, a different kind of mass party has also had enormous importance. The *anti-system party* implicitly or explicitly sought votes in order to attain a position of power from which to change the existing political order. One form that this could take (epitomized by fascist parties in the 1920s and 1930s, and communist parties up until 1989) was by aspiring to abolish the liberal-democratic character of the country. Significant electoral support for such parties endangered democratic political systems not just by providing an electoral threat that, if realized, would result in the demise of democratic politics, but also by removing often large numbers of legislative seats from the pool of those that might support a coalition government (because anti-system parties won those seats). This made it hard to achieve alternation in office by pro-democratic parties (see Box 3.4 on p. 73, on electoral reform in Italy) and tended to throw the democratic political system into disrepute, in turn increasing the danger of electoral victory by anti-democratic forces. With the defeat of fascism in 1945 and the collapse of communism 44 years later, these anti-system parties lost most of their power to disrupt political life, and today’s anti-system parties (generally left-libertarian, anti-immi-

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grant and/or anti-EU parties of the far left and far right) often present themselves as wanting to abolish the cartelized form of political power that characterizes some contemporary democratic polities or to change existing definitions of citizenship and legal residence (Katz 1997). Some of them claim to be more rather than less democratic than the parties they seek to supplant (Meny and Surel 2002) – though such claims (at least from right-wing anti-party-system parties) need to be treated with skepticism given the often poor democratic credentials of the parties concerned.

Different types of parties behave differently in electoral processes. Some – in particular catch-all parties and anti-system parties – can easily adapt their policy positions in the hope of attracting more voters, while others – mass membership parties and cadre parties – find this more difficult. For some parties elections are a plausible way to government power, for others – anti-system parties in particular – this is not the case. So elections serve different functions for parties of different types.

Functions of elections

The specific functions that elections fulfill, and the way in which they do this, are not only different for different political parties but also for different individuals, as we will see. Moreover, they are not the same at all times or in all places. These differences even cause problems with the very terms that we employ in discussing the topic: not only the term ‘party’ can be confusing, as we have just seen. Likewise, what it is that is elected can be different at different elections – sometimes it is a single office (like a president), sometimes a set of offices (like a legislature). Sometimes these offices have fundamental roles in government, and sometimes not. Even abstract notions such as ‘representation’ carry quite different meanings in different systems. Because of all of this it is impossible to talk of elections and voters in the abstract. We have to pay attention to these differences by speaking of both elections and voters in terms of specific instances. That is what we do in the early chapters of this book.

Even non-democratic countries sometimes hold elections. Understanding why they do this helps us to understand some of the functions that elections have. In the first place, elections serve a *legitimizing function*. The very fact that citizens troop to the polls in large numbers to cast a ballot, even if that ballot serves no function in terms of choice, provides legitimation for a regime. Moreover, people are likely to rationalize their behavior in terms of regime acceptance roughly in the same way that, after making an impulsive purchase, they might later rationalize their behavior in terms of their need for the item purchased. Moreover, even if the election was not a democratic one, and involved no choice, the apparently willing ratification of a regime’s

bona fides in this way can influence world opinion and international agencies such as the World Bank. Legitimation can also shade into nation-building, as the experience of performing a common act helps to generate a sense of community. Certainly, many despots seem to believe that conducting elections, even if they are neither free nor fair, helps to cement their power.

Elections that provide no real choice between candidates and policies can still provide a safety valve if they include the opportunity to vote against the available options. Electoral rules in the old Soviet Union provided the somewhat unlikely option of casting a 'vote against all'. This was a genuine (though not explicit) option, invoked by scoring out the names of all candidates, and in the later days of the regime this option was increasingly actually used by voters and responded to by the Communist Party which was genuinely embarrassed on those occasions when a majority cast their ballots for no candidate.

Turning to democratic elections, these perform a number of additional functions (and of course also provide better legitimation than do non-democratic elections). Most importantly, democratic elections *allocate power to office-holders*, generally by providing voters with a choice between different contenders for the offices concerned. Sometimes the contenders are individual candidates, such as those who contest a presidential election. But often the contenders are not individuals but political parties, which present the voter with alternative slates of individuals to be elected in greater or smaller numbers depending on the number of votes cast for each party list. When the election is for representatives to a decision-making body such as a national legislature, the election also determines the relative strengths of the parties to which those representatives belong: parties that receive more votes will generally receive more *seats* in the legislature (the mechanics of translating votes into seats in legislative elections will be explained in Chapter 3).

Since some of the candidates in any democratic election will generally be incumbent office-holders, elections also serve the function of *holding those office-holders accountable* for the manner in which they have used their power since the previous election, recording popular approval for their actions or 'kicking the rascals out' (a classic phrase meaning that voters inflict an electoral defeat on the government). In the process voters may also have the opportunity to make a choice between the policies proposed by government parties and those proposed by parties that would like to replace them. If the winning parties or candidates are chosen on the basis of voters' policy preferences, a *mandate* may be said to exist for those particular policies. However, politicians are often quicker than they should be to claim a mandate as a result of an election outcome.

To the extent that governments are responsive to the choices manifested in election outcomes, elections serve as a guidance mechanism that may

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help to bring the course of public policy closer to what voters want. Moreover, the sight of candidates submitting to the popular will presumably provides voters with at least some sense of empowerment. Research in the Netherlands has shown that support for democracy is greater after elections have been held – and not just among those whose parties gained seats and might thus be considered to have ‘won’ (van der Eijk 2000). Even when voters are disappointed or even disgusted with the way elections were conducted, as was the case for many US citizens after the 2000 election with its taint of voter intimidation and even fraud, such elections almost certainly still play a positive role in bestowing legitimacy on the eventual winner.

The turnout paradox

Elections for nationwide office (the elections studied in this book) marshal thousands, generally millions, of votes in order to elect a candidate or party. The chances of any one vote being decisive in such a contest are thus vanishingly small. Voting is generally not difficult. It involves a few minutes of minor inconvenience and a rather minimal amount of prior thought. However, it is not cost-free. A question often asked by scholars is why would anyone at all engage in an act that is not cost-free when the chances of that act having any effect whatsoever are vanishingly small (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). The fact that people do vote in large numbers in national elections gives rise to the so-called ‘impossibility’ result – positive turnout in the face of a theoretical expectation of none.

Yet the ubiquity of a form of behavior often characterized by theorists as not rational tells us something important about the voting act. The act of voting is not done in the expectation of any sort of benefit that would not have been received otherwise (no individual stands to gain anything from her or his individual vote). It is rather a social act that people perform because it is expected of them as members of a group that collectively benefits from as many as possible of its members voting. The group concerned apparently differs from one individual to the next. For some it is their fellow citizens who expect them to vote as a social duty, for others it is their colleagues at work or their fellow union or church members whose expectations they do not wish to disappoint. For some it is the other supporters of the same political party who need the votes of all of that party’s supporters if the party is to have a chance of winning (Franklin 2004, ch. 2).

This view of the voting act is not universally shared by scholars, since many political scientists still believe that the only reason to vote is in order to be a good citizen (Riker and Ordeshook 1968) or to affirm a political belief or identity (Schuessler 2000). However, these alternative ways of

thinking about the voting act do not explain why the same people are more likely to vote in elections they view as important than in less important elections; or why countries in which elections play a more critical role see a higher turnout. Ideas about duty and expressive behavior also utterly fail to explain why people would vote for a party or candidate that is not their first choice, which is common.

We will come across each of these behavior patterns throughout this book, and we will find that elections are all about group behavior. If we do not see voters as social beings who act as members of various kinds of social groups we will not understand very much about the voting act.

Limitations of elections

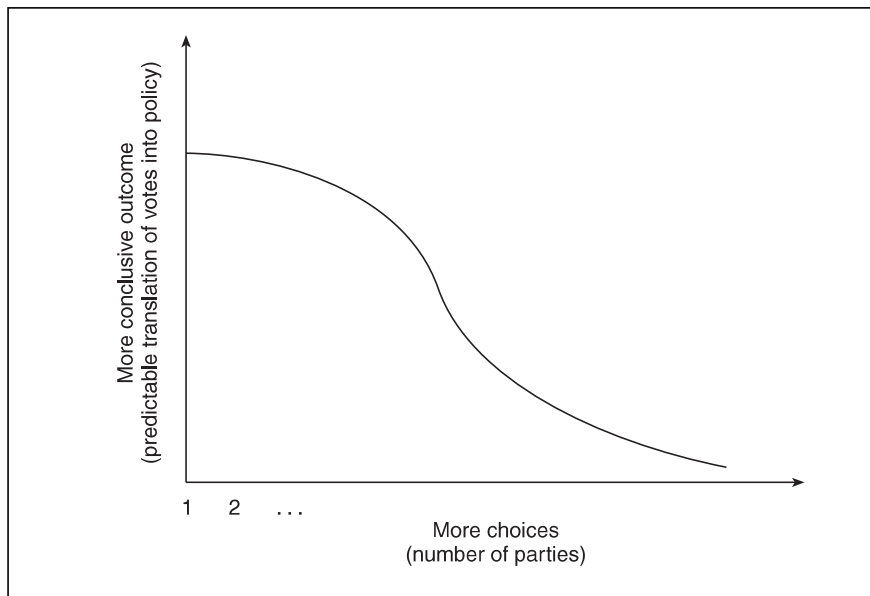
Having millions of people express their preferences in such a way as to yield an intelligible outcome from which a mandate to govern can be derived requires organization, discipline and sophistication. Different political systems over the course of time have found their own solutions to these challenges, making democracy in each country unique in important respects. As a consequence, democratic elections differ from one another in the ways in which they permit voters to influence the course of public policy. Indeed, elections can be seen primarily to vary along two dimensions: meaningfulness of choices and conclusiveness of outcomes. By meaningful choice we refer particularly to the number of options between which a voter can choose. The more options the more likely it is that each voter will find one that is attractive to her or him. By conclusive outcome we mean an outcome whose policy implications are clearly defined – something that generally requires one option to receive an outright majority of the votes cast. Both are desirable features of an election: ideally one would want elections at which citizens were able to select their most desired policies in the knowledge that, if enough other citizens agreed with them, those policies would be enacted. In practice the two dimensions constitute something of a trade-off. To be more meaningful, elections must allow voters to choose from a larger set of alternatives. But when voters are presented with a large number of choices their votes rarely produce a majority in favor of any one of those choices. When choices are framed in terms of political parties, the failure of elections to generate a majority for any one of those parties brings about the need for compromise and negotiation as the parties try to overcome the inconclusive result, meaning that voters cannot be sure ahead of time how their vote will influence policy. On the other hand, simplifying the choices to the point where an unambiguous winner can emerge generally requires pre-election mechanisms (of which the most obvious are American primary elections) that simplify the alternatives on offer by removing some of them.

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The trade-off is illustrated in the graph in Figure 1.1, which shows the conclusiveness of the outcome falling as the number of parties contesting an election increases. By allowing for more choice we reduce the policy implications of the outcome because the likelihood increases that no single candidate or party will get a mandate to govern. Choice is good, and some lack of conclusiveness has to be tolerated in return; but conclusiveness drops off more rapidly as the number of options increases beyond two. At some point, it is clear, additional options result in less reduction in definitiveness (15 parties make things quite complicated, but five more do not make things much worse). Still, too much choice can reduce the definitiveness of the outcome virtually to zero, making it impossible for voters to anticipate the policy consequences of their votes and vitiating a primary purpose of elections.

How far do options need to be limited in order for elections to have meaningful policy consequences? The exact extent to which options need to be limited cannot simply be read off from Figure 1.1. The pictured curve only illustrates the principles at work, not the detailed nature of the trade-off (which itself is also affected by a variety of institutional factors that differ from country to country). The way in which options are limited has to do primarily with the electoral system that is employed in different countries, but also with other 'rules of the game', including the system of nominations and even the system of party formation. These rules provide mechanisms for channeling and stylizing the options available to voters.

Figure 1.1 *Suggested trade-off between choice and conclusiveness*



Different electoral systems and other political arrangements place countries at different points in terms of the trade-off illustrated in Figure 1.1. These differences will be explored in later chapters, along with other trade-offs that have to be made in designing the institutions of electoral democracy: for instance how disciplined the parties are and the ways in which political power can be either concentrated or dispersed. In particular there always has to be some mechanism for translating votes into outcomes, and the mechanisms adopted to arrive at an election outcome may have unintended side-effects. For instance the rules used in the United States to translate votes into outcomes in presidential races may lead to the victory of the candidate who did not win the most votes (as happened in the 2000 presidential election there – see Box 1.1).

So far we have talked as though there is some absolute standard according to which elections matter or not, but different people can have different views about this. The American political parties, for example, choose their candidates via a process of caucuses and primary elections. The 2008 race for the Democratic Party's nomination between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton could have been won by either of these two candidates. A different

Box 1.1 The American Electoral College and the 2000 American election

In November 2000 the election for President of the United States, contested by George Bush and Al Gore, ended in a very messy legal dispute regarding contested votes in the state of Florida (words like 'hanging chads' and 'butterfly ballots' entered the general vocabulary at that time). The case went to the US Supreme Court which ruled that a recount was unnecessary and upheld the existing count that gave the Electoral College votes for the state of Florida to George Bush. The consequence was that Bush won more Electoral College votes than Gore and was declared the winner, despite Gore having won a greater number of votes nationwide (even without a recount). The case was important for a number of reasons. In the first place, it marked a milestone in US judicial politics as the first time the Supreme Court had decided a contested election for President. In the second place, the outcome was the first in over a hundred years to give victory to a candidate who had not won the popular vote. The US constitution provides for an arcane electoral process (more appropriate to an era when it took weeks to travel by horse across even the 13 original states) in which votes for President are cumulated in each state and determine the composition of an Electoral College with the duty of actually selecting a president. These days (and since almost the earliest presidential elections) the Electoral College delegates from each state cast their votes in a predetermined fashion, generally giving them all to the candidate who won in the state concerned. This usually gives victory to the candidate with the most votes, but is not bound to do so.

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winner would have changed the nature of the ensuing election for certain people. Not only was there the question as to whether there would be a female or a black person as a first-ever major party nominee, but for some Clinton did not sufficiently represent ‘change’, while for others Obama was as yet insufficiently tested in the arena of national and international politics. So different choice options turn the election into a different contest, and different voters are motivated differently by the different contests they see as taking place.

Recurring themes

This book is arranged in terms of topics which are the subjects of different chapters. As we investigate these topics we will come across a number of themes that will recur in chapter after chapter. There are seven of them:

1. Elections can be looked at individually but, in our view, they can only be understood comparatively (seen in contrast to earlier elections in the same country or to elections elsewhere).
2. What is at stake in an election is not the same for all contenders. Challengers view the opportunity to win very differently from incumbents who view the possibility of losing; moreover, some contenders have no serious expectation of winning but participate in order to publicize their views, in order to lay down a marker for future elections, or just for fun.
3. Elections can be understood in terms of a relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Effective elections permit voters to select among alternative ‘teams’ of potential rulers – what are referred to as ‘elites’ – or to pass judgment on how ruling elites have used their time in office. Elections can thus be seen as channels of communication, with elites making their views known by way of party *manifestos* or *programs* and voters communicating their own views by way of their electoral choices.
4. The character of the choices presented to voters determines the extent to which they can choose an outcome that makes sense in terms of their ideals, interests and values; but quite often voters support a party or candidate other than the one that is closest to these ideals, interests and values. Voters engage in so-called *strategic* or *tactical* behavior if they believe that the vote they would otherwise have cast would be ineffective, as we will explain in Chapter 4 (pp. 103–13). So choices are not always simple expressions of voters’ sincere preferences.
5. In particular, both candidates and voters often find themselves having to anticipate the behavior of others and condition their own behavior on that basis. This fifth theme stresses that elections constitute a strategic

- game in which many players are looking over their shoulders to see what other players are doing or might do. It also stresses that not just candidates but also many voters behave quite instrumentally in considering the practical implications of voting one way rather than another, given the likely behavior of candidates and other voters.
6. The nature of the electoral contest at any particular election is largely set by the extent and nature of electoral competition between parties (or candidates). If each party has a set clientele of voters who will support that party under all circumstances then there is no real electoral competition. For competition to occur there has to be some doubt about the choices that will be made by at least some of a country's voters. The more voters there are who hesitate between different parties, the greater the extent of electoral competition. The extent and nature of this competition is a major topic to which we return repeatedly in different ways.
 7. Voters have to be distinguished in terms of the periods and conditions under which they acquired their political orientations and habits. Differences between generations, and thus also generational replacement, are crucial for understanding electoral change (see Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 The study of generational replacement in electoral research

In this book we give special attention to a mechanism that, while prominent in early electoral research (e.g. Campbell *et al.* 1960, 1966; Nie *et al.* 1979), has hardly figured in recent electoral scholarship. Miller and Shanks (1996: 34–5) speculated on the reasons why the study of *political generations* has been largely ignored in contemporary electoral research and unequivocally demonstrated its importance. However, the lack of attention given to this topic continues to this day and a recent work on electoral realignment (Stonecash 2006) does not even mention generational replacement. Recent trends in political research stress the importance of *heterogeneity* (which is to say differentiation) in the electorate, distinguishing educated from less educated voters, for example, or the politically engaged from those who are unengaged; but it is still not common to focus on heterogeneity in terms of generational differences. In this book we follow the lead of Miller and Shanks in giving considerable attention to this neglected theme.

The implication that flows from these themes is that no single unequivocal answer can be given to common questions such as whether elections matter, whether voters act responsibly or whether elites compete. The answers to such questions depend on features of particular elections in relation to their social and political environment. So elections can only be studied in their proper contexts.

Voters, electorates, parties and party systems

A fundamental feature of elections is that they can be examined from a number of different *levels of analysis*. Voters are individuals, best examined at the *individual level*, but (since an election involving only a single person makes no sense) elections must intrinsically be investigated at a higher level of analysis. In this book we generally concern ourselves with elections at the *country level*. When we view voters at the country level of analysis we call them collectively an *electorate*, but an electorate does not take its characteristics uniquely from the voters of which it is composed. It has *aggregate* characteristics that could not be applied to any of its individual members (an average age, for instance, or a bulge in the number of its middle-aged members deriving from a baby boom long past). An electorate can be small or large, which generally depends on the population of the country in which it is found; but note that an electorate is not the same as a population, some of whose members at any time will be under voting age, not citizens, or otherwise disqualified from voting.

When they vote, voters choose between the parties that vie for their support. This implies that voters have *preferences* for different parties such that, at any time, parties can be arrayed for each voter in order of preference and that the strengths of these preferences can be compared. We measure these preferences in terms of voters' *propensity to vote* for different parties (see Box 1.3).

When we consider the various preferences in the minds of individual voters, we are thinking in terms of a level of analysis *below* that of the individual, since each individual voter has multiple parties in her or his preference structure. When we come to study voters' preferences, in Chapter 7, that will be the level of analysis that we employ.

Just like individual voters, parties can be viewed at different levels of analysis. They can be viewed at the level of voters' preferences for each of them, as just explained. More usually though they are viewed at the *party level*, which is the level at which one would examine such things as their organizational structure or the number of their members or the policies they propose; but they can also be viewed at the country level, as a competitive *party system*. A party system is to a party as an electorate is to a voter: the aggregate counterpart of a lower-level phenomenon. But just as electorates have characteristics that voters cannot have, so party systems have characteristics that parties cannot have: above all, the number of parties. Much has been written about party systems, which have been defined in all sorts of ways (e.g. Mair 1997; Sartori 2005). For us a party system is simply the structure of competitive and collaborative relationships between parties. These relationships provide considerations that voters will need to bear in mind when deciding how to vote.

Box 1.3 Studying preferences for political parties

A second way in which this book differs from much of contemporary scholarship, in addition to its focus on generational replacement as a mechanism of change (Box 1.2), is in its focus on voters' preferences for parties in addition to the more widespread focus on their choices between parties. In Chapter 2 we expand on some of the implications of this distinction. The strength of voters' electoral preferences for political parties is measured by a survey question that asks voters about the likelihood that they would ever vote for each of the available parties. We refer to these measures as the 'propensity to vote' for each party. The theoretical expectation, that voters choose the party they prefer the most, is reflected empirically in their tendency to choose the party for which they hold the highest vote propensity (van der Eijk *et al.* 2006; see also Further Reading). This is the observational equivalent of Downs's (1957) theoretical proposition that voters choose the party that yields them most 'utility', a proposition that implies the need to conceive the voting act in two stages: the stage at which preferences ('utilities' in Downs's terminology) are formed or updated and the stage at which a choice is made. In past research it has been customary to focus exclusively on the second of these stages, all but ignoring the first, despite various more or less strident reminders (e.g. Powell 2000) that knowledge of preferences is needed in order to understand voter motivations. In this book we are thus concerned with voters' party preferences, as well as the vote choices that derive from those preferences, and how both of these are shaped by institutional arrangements and other country characteristics.

Akin to the distinction between electorate and population, a distinction needs to be made between *parties in the legislature* and *parties in the electorate* (this is short for 'party system in the legislature' and 'party system in the electorate'). There will generally be more parties competing for votes (parties in the electorate) than parties that actually win enough votes to gain seats in the legislature. For the most part in this book we will be talking about parties in the legislature, but the distinction between these two views of the party system will occasionally be relevant.

The axis of political competition and the median voter

In any political system, it is often found convenient to differentiate politicians and political parties along a political continuum, providing a short-cut means of identifying differences between parties and politicians. The most common continuum or 'axis' along which parties are distinguished is the so-

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called *left–right* axis, which derives its name from the physical positions where members of different parties sat in the first French Assembly elected after the French Revolution. In the United States, the equivalent dimension is known as the *Liberal–Conservative* axis, and politicians are often characterized in terms of their alleged positions on this axis (more or less liberal than other politicians, for example). In the political vocabulary of left and right, parties of the left generally propose what Americans would call ‘liberal’ policies (though this word is used differently in Europe), while parties of the right are oriented towards conservatism.

In countries where the party system is in flux, with parties being frequently dissolved and re-established under different names, it may be very difficult for voters to learn their way around the system, and a common vocabulary such as that provided by the concepts of left and right may be hard to establish. If such a vocabulary is already in use, however, it can prove quite useful for navigating a complex political system, with parties being identified in the minds of voters rather in terms of their left–right locations than in terms of the plethora of their proposals and activities, providing the opportunity for *ideological identification* of voters with a position on the political spectrum, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. We will defer until Chapter 6 the question of how adequate a single dimension really is for encapsulating the differences seen between the parties in a party system.

Not only parties and politicians but also voters can be arrayed on the same axis, from what Americans would think of as most liberal to most conservative or from what Europeans would think of as most left to most right, providing the opportunity to think of representation in terms of how closely the orientation of individual political parties matches the equivalent orientation of the voters who support those parties. Moreover, the ranking of voters from left to right gives rise to a concept often used in political science (and referred to repeatedly in later chapters of this book) of the *median voter* – the voter who stands in the exact center of the political spectrum, with as many voters to her or his left as to her or his right. When we come to talk about the adequacy of political representation in a country, the question of how well the median voter is represented looms large – especially if the median position in the issue space is occupied by large numbers of voters. The assumption that the median voter is indeed representative of large numbers of voters is a common one, which we will consider carefully in this book.

Representation

In a democracy, political decisions are supposed ultimately to reflect the wishes of a country’s citizens. If this is the case then the government of a country should to some extent reflect popular sentiments. In which sorts of

ways might governments reflect the concerns of the governed? And, given that in most democracies political parties are the vehicles for achieving *representative government*, how *responsive* are political parties to what voters want? These and similar questions motivate much research and theorizing about the electoral process.

The general concept of political representation contains a number of related yet somewhat different aspects which can best be distinguished by distinctive adjectives. *Social representation* considers the similarity between citizens and representatives in terms of their social characteristics, specific forms of which are ‘women’s representation’ (Norris and Inglehart 2003), ‘minority representation’ and ‘ethnic representation’, all of which focus on whether elected representatives (and governments) ‘look like’ the people they are supposed to represent. Implicit in the notion of social representation is that such similarity is required for politicians to represent the interests of the group involved in an authentic fashion. Linked to these ideas is *ideological representation* – the idea that representatives and governments should ‘look like’ or be ‘close to’ their supporters in ideological terms. This idea is at the heart of the *proximity* (sometimes known as the *smallest distance*) theory of party choice, a theory we will discuss in Chapter 6. *Output representation* or *policy representation* is more concrete and focuses on the substance of what governments bring about. Do the policies that governments enact match the needs and demands of their supporters or of the society as a whole?

A related question is what motivates parties and their leaders. Politicians might be *policy-seeking* (see p. 3), in which case they would primarily be concerned to win votes for the policies they believe in. Alternatively they might be *office-seeking* (also known as *vote-seeking*, see p. 2), in which case they might craft policies that would appeal to as many voters as possible. Or they might be motivated by a combination of objectives, having certain policy objectives on which they hoped for voter support while crafting other policies so as to create a maximally attractive package.

In this book we do not attempt to unravel the motivations of politicians, but assume that both types of motivations exist, perhaps even in the same individuals. This assumption allows us to focus our attention on ideological and policy representation, and to concern ourselves mainly with whether governments, for whatever reason, actually provide the policies that voters want.

Electoral change

A major preoccupation of this book is to understand how change occurs. How and why do party systems evolve? Why do ruling politicians lose elections, to be replaced by new faces? Why do parties gain or lose support and hence find their political influence enhanced or reduced? Why are there

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sometimes big discontinuities in the pattern of election outcomes (often referred to as ‘realignments’) while for much of the time change appears rather to take the form of trendless fluctuation?

To understand electoral change one must understand some basic concepts and distinctions used by political scientists to talk about change. The most important of these is the distinction between change on the part of an individual voter and change on the part of an electorate. Aggregate entities, such as electorates, can remain the same even if many or all of their members change. For example, in the case of only two parties, many voters can switch in their choice of party but, if the same number change in one direction as in the other direction, then the aggregate (or ‘net’) change is zero: individual changes can cancel each other out. On the other hand, electorates can change even if no single individual voter does. This is because they can change their *composition* as individuals leave or die and are replaced by new voters with different characteristics and/or preferences.

Indeed, there are three ways in which change can affect an aggregate entity such as an electorate. First, and most obviously, its members can change their minds and/or their behavior. Something can happen – a war, a nuclear accident, generally something dramatic – that is felt by large numbers of individuals, and the behavior of many of those individuals may change in a similar way as a consequence. This also gives rise to a change in the behavior of the entity of which those individuals are part. Because change of this kind is generally associated with a particular event (sometimes a series of linked events like the Great Depression of the 1930s) we refer to it as a *period effect*. This is the sort of change that is the easiest to understand, because the aggregate entity is behaving just like the individuals of which it is composed. This type of change is rare, however.

A second type of change, an *age effect*, is much more common. It occurs as individuals grow older and learn new behaviors and attitudes. Voters in particular learn their way around the political world by experiencing it. They learn what parties stand for, which party to support, and generally they learn the habit of voting for that party. As they learn, they change (cf. C. Franklin 1992; Franklin and Jackson 1983). At the other end of the life cycle, voters grow infirm and find it hard to get to the voting booth; they suffer loss of function and find it hard to make decisions, and so on. Indeed, it can be seen that an electorate – like many other aggregate entities – is in constant flux as its members age and evolve. But the important thing about this sort of change is that, in itself, it need not affect the character of the aggregate entity. Voters individually age and change, but so long as those who leave the electorate are replaced, one for one, by new voters who have the same characteristics as the departing voters had when they were young, the aggregate character of the electorate is unchanging. It evinces what is known as a *steady state*.

It is of course possible to get aggregate change from the aging process if the rate of replacement of the electorate changes. A baby boom will evidently lead to an electorate with many more young members, later to one with many more middle-aged members, and finally to one with many more old members. At each stage in this process the electorate as a whole will change to reflect the character of the age the baby-boom generation has reached. This is known as a *composition effect* because it arises from a change in the composition of the electorate – the proportion of the electorate with certain characteristics becomes greater or smaller. A war that kills a great many young men or a medical breakthrough that extends the lifespan of older people can similarly bring about a change for compositional reasons. Composition effects are ubiquitous, but are usually very small in the short run (cf. Franklin 2004). Continuing change in the same direction could have large cumulative effects, but some mechanism is required to produce continuing change in the size of a particular group of people. One such mechanism is long-term social evolution that is sometimes referred to as ‘development’ or ‘modernization’ and that has generated during the 20th century increasing proportions of the population in established democracies that are literate, educated, urbanized and who enjoy minimum levels of material security. The third way in which an aggregate, such as an electorate, can change is by *generational replacement*.

As we will see in later chapters, the group of citizens who became eligible to vote at a particular election often acquires a particular character that the group retains during the rest of its lifetime. Such groups are known to political scientists as *electoral cohorts*. Their unique character is caused by the particular social, economic and political circumstances that existed at the time that their members entered the electorate and that constituted formative experiences. A particular electoral cohort may, for example, have a lower propensity to turn out and vote than other cohorts because of the political circumstances they encountered at the time when they were first eligible to vote. Obviously, the next cohort may experience quite different circumstances by which it, in turn, will be formed. These enduring differences between cohorts are known as *cohort effects*; and, if successive cohort differences are idiosyncratic or random, are still compatible with a steady state. However, it sometimes happens that some development gives rise to an effect that is not restricted to a single cohort but characterizes a series of successive cohorts or even all cohorts after a given point in time. If successive cohorts continue to evince the same distinctiveness then the changing cohort-composition of the electorate does not yield a steady state. In such circumstances the electorate can show a progressive change as a larger and larger proportion of the aggregate entity comes to be made up of individuals who are distinctively different from members of earlier cohorts when they were the same age. We call this a *progressive cohort effect* and will explore it in some detail in

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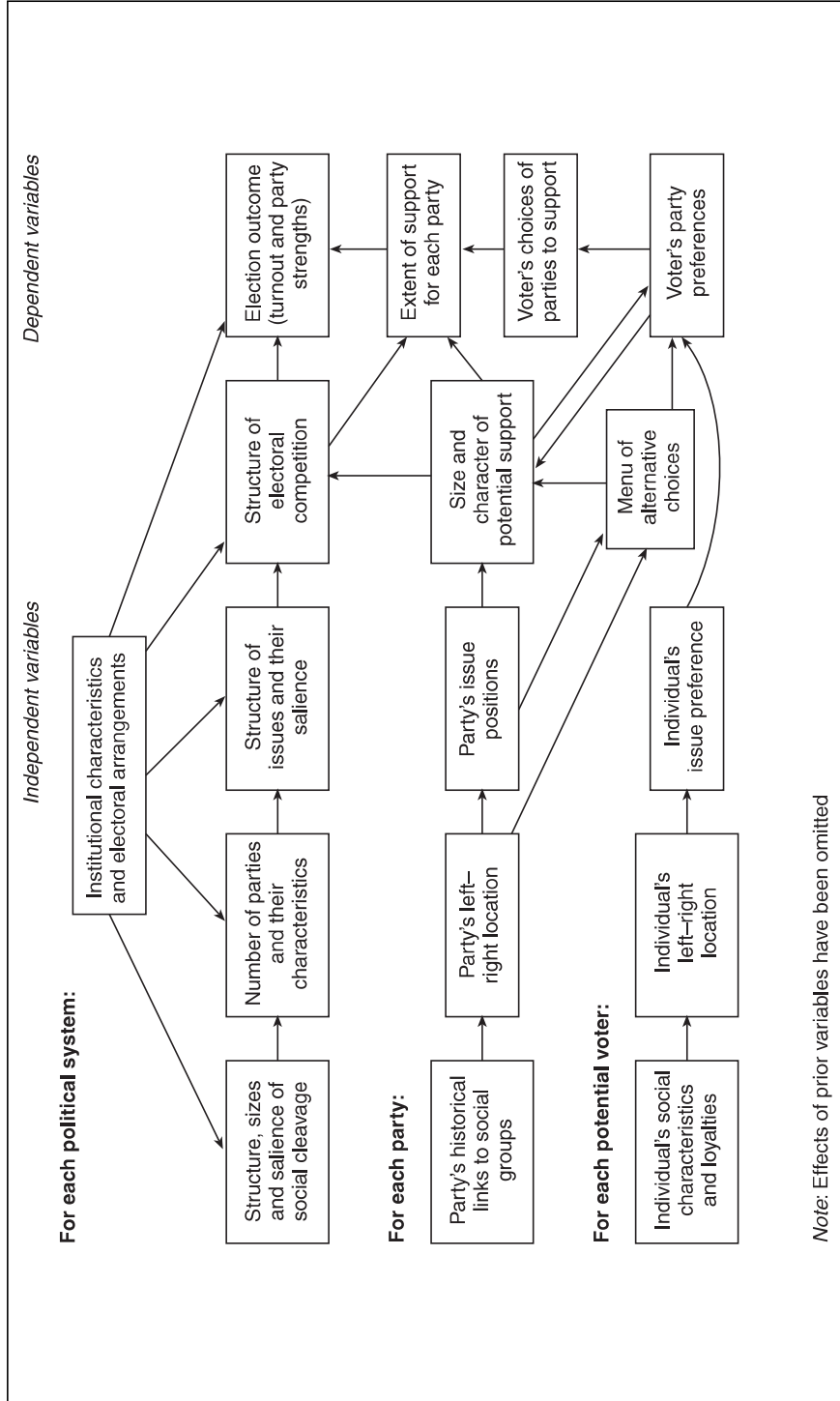
Chapters 4 and 7. A progressive cohort effect starts almost imperceptibly as only a tiny fraction of the electorate is initially distinctive. But this tiny fraction expands inexorably as older voters leave the electorate, taking their characteristics with them, to be replaced by a continuing influx of new voters with different characteristics. Because of the inexorable nature of generational replacement, progressive cohort effects end up being very powerful – often the most powerful of the processes involved in electoral change.

Topics

This book covers a lot of ground. As illustrated in Figure 1.2 the contents of the book can be seen in terms of two organizing principles. From left to right we differentiate topics according to where they fall in causal sequence: the things that happen first – the prime causes – are represented towards the left of the page, while the election itself and things about the election are pictured at the right of the page. In technical terms, the concepts at the right of the page are *dependent variables*, so called because their character depends on the factors to their left, the *independent variables*. Up and down the page we differentiate topics according to the level of analysis at which they fall. Higher-level topics provide the context within which lower-level topics operate. At the top are topics having to do with electoral institutions and other features of the country as a whole. The middle row of topics has to do with political parties. At the bottom we place topics that have to do with individual voters. Elections are inherently about multiple levels of analysis which need to be considered all at the same time. One cannot understand the choices made by individuals unless one also understands the choices on offer: the *menu* (if you like) from which the choices are made. But to understand the menu one has to understand political parties and the factors that lead those parties to propose the particular policies that they put on offer. The behavior of political parties in turn is constrained by the electoral and party systems in which they operate. The upward-pointing arrows towards the right of Figure 1.2 indicate the way in which contextual characteristics are created by aggregating lower-level concepts: the votes that are cast by individuals determine the sizes of parties, and these in turn, taking all parties together, constitute an *election outcome*.

Elections can be thought about in terms of which party won (the top row) but parties need also to be thought of in terms of their relative performance (the middle row). Did they do better than another party or better than they did at the previous election? And the performance of parties cannot be understood unless we study why individuals choose to support each party, or choose not to (the bottom row). Moreover, the outcome of an election has generally to be thought of at every level in terms of turnout as well as in

Figure 1.2 Topics covered and their causal priorities



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terms of choices between parties. This is because, except in countries with compulsory voting, one of the choices that is always available is the choice not to vote at all. Indeed, for many people at most elections the choice is not one between parties but between voting or not voting for the party they normally support.

The arrows drawn onto the diagram indicate the general direction of causal flow, but the diagram should not be interpreted as exhaustive. Causes do not flow only along each arrow. All considerations depicted to the left of the diagram have the opportunity to influence, directly or indirectly, considerations depicted to the right, though arrows that would have passed around rather than through subsequent boxes have generally been suppressed so as to improve legibility. Just as importantly, the diagram generally ignores *reciprocal causes*: effects felt on topics to the left of the diagram that are consequential on topics to the right. The picture is a static snapshot of what is in reality a *dynamic system*. If time is allowed to flow, all sorts of reciprocal effects become evident as parties change their stances in the light of election outcomes and individuals change their preferences in the light of government performance and changes in the menu of alternatives on offer. But those reciprocal effects take, in general, more time to materialize than the ones pictured. This implies that, in the short run, causality flows along the arrows pictured, while only over a longer time scale do processes in the reverse direction manifest themselves.

Despite our wish to avoid reciprocal links, one of the boxes in the diagram does have an arrow entering from its right: the 'size and character of potential support' of political parties. This box represents the party-level counterpart of the 'structure of electoral competition' in a political system (the box above in the diagram, which is indirectly affected by the same reciprocal link). This box in turn corresponds to the sixth of the general themes listed earlier as being central to this book. The reciprocal arrow influencing this concept in Figure 1.2 emphasizes the centrality of this theme, which is intimately tied to the structure of party preferences in the minds of each voter and to the resulting choices that each voter makes to support a particular party with her or his vote.

The topics in Figure 1.2 do not map cleanly into different chapters of this book. Indeed, some topics are dealt with multiple times from different perspectives in different chapters, while others are only touched on in passing. Still, Figure 1.2 displays the structure of our subject matter in semi-causal terms, and readers may find it useful to look back at it from time to time in order to remind themselves of where different topics fit within that causal structure. From this perspective the figure can be treated as a conceptual map illustrating the way in which different topics are connected (close or far, directly or indirectly), just like cities on a geographic map, and we will ourselves have reason to refer to it repeatedly in later chapters.

Countries

This is a book about elections and voting in established democracies. Though we take our examples from any available source, our focus is on countries for which we have good data and understanding – generally countries that have held elections continuously for 60 years or more. These examples are an important part of the text, since they are intended to illustrate how the mechanisms we discuss work out in practice.

The reason we focus on countries that have held elections for a considerable period is because, as we shall see, understanding the current election in any country requires an understanding of all the different influences acting on citizens who might participate in that election. Several of the most important of these influences are those that were felt by citizens at the time of their first electoral experiences which could have occurred as long as 60 years earlier. By focusing on countries that were holding free and fair elections 60 years ago – what we call *established democracies* – we avoid our findings being affected by pre-democratic experiences. Nevertheless, in order to extend the number of presidential systems we do include some examples from Mexico, even though that country only recently qualified as a democratic country by virtue of the previously ruling party losing power in 2000 for the first time since 1929. This was the outcome of a variety of reforms which had generally been viewed as creating free and fair elections there from about 1994 onwards.

Despite the book's focus in terms of countries, our objective is to provide an understanding of the forces at work in any electoral democracy. Though we mainly deal with established democracies, what we have to say about them should increasingly come to be true of other democracies as well, as they become established in terms of our usage. In Chapter 7 we do deal explicitly with one particular set of quite new democracies: those ex-communist countries that became members in 2004 of the European Union. Our examination of electoral behavior in those countries suggests that individuals in new democracies rapidly acquire behavior patterns very similar to those in more established democracies. What we are unable to do is talk about the evolution of party systems and election outcomes in new democracies, because in those countries such developments are idiosyncratic in ways that are not yet well understood.

Institutional arrangements

In some countries the executive is directly elected by the people, while in others it is appointed by an elected legislature. This major constitutional difference colors many aspects of the electoral connection between voters

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and their governments, and we will deal with this in Chapter 2. The United States is in many ways a quite exceptional country – not least in terms of its political system – and the fact that we can explain electoral behavior there in the same terms as in other countries serves to validate many of the conclusions reached in this book. Taking the United States as an explicit case enables us to better understand elections and voting in other countries; and comparing the United States with those other countries enables us to better understand elections and voting in the United States. American readers may find parliamentary systems hard to understand, and readers outside the United States may find the American system equally perplexing, but the effort it takes to understand the other type of system will pay off handsomely in a greater understanding of the electoral processes in systems of both types.

Other constitutional differences are less important for this book than the difference between parliamentary and presidential systems, but we occasionally refer to the fact that some countries are unitary, while others are built out of largely self-governing components. We call the latter federal or confederal countries. Most countries also have elections to fill executive or legislative positions at subnational levels (states in the US, Länder in Germany, regions or provinces in most other countries). If elections at these subnational levels are contested by the same parties as at the national level, they are often referred to as *second order* national elections because the national character of the parties and their concerns overshadows whatever concerns might be different in these elections from those at *first order* elections (the national elections we focus on in this book). Moreover, many countries have forms of functional government where the relevant authorities are elected (for instance school boards in the United States or water boards in the Netherlands). In this volume we will not deal with subnational or functional governments but will concentrate on elections for executive and legislative offices at the national level. We can do this because governments at the national level determine the boundaries of autonomy and self-governance at all levels of government, except to the extent that this is prevented by explicit constitutional prohibition.

In addition to specifically constitutional arrangements, there are additional institutional differences between countries that are important to us in this book. The most important of these are *electoral institutions* (sometimes these are specified in a country's constitution, but often they are not). Electoral institutions determine the rules under which elections are held. Here the most important distinction is between elections that yield *proportional representation* (PR) and other systems which are variously known as *majoritarian*, *plurality* or *first past the post* (FPTP). This bifurcation constitutes the other primary organizing feature (besides the difference between presidential and parliamentary systems) around which this book is organ-

ized. Because of the importance of these institutional differences we devote Chapter 3 to discussing them.

A third set of distinctions that need to be made are those that characterize different *party systems*. Such differences are often regarded as quasi-institutional since they are often relatively stable: the number of parties, their characteristics and the distribution of electoral support that they enjoy determines the nature of electoral competition in different countries. Electoral competition is central to our concerns, as mentioned earlier, so the nature of the party system is also central and is discussed at various points (mainly in Chapters 2 and 3).

The distinction between different types of party system overlaps with and partly leads to a final distinction between the types of government that are customarily formed in different countries. Presidential systems and certain parliamentary democracies have what are called *single-party* or *unitary* governments in which the *executive* (the President in presidential systems, *cabinet members* elsewhere) all belong to the same political party and gain their executive positions as a straightforward consequence of the fact that their party 'won' the election. Having a single winner is natural in countries where two major parties are the only real contenders for government office. In other parliamentary systems the larger number of political parties makes it unlikely that any one party will win an outright majority of the votes in an election (or seats in the legislature). If such countries have parliamentary systems, then the governments that are formed generally consist of *coalitions* of two or more parties that divide up the responsibilities of government between them, so that cabinet members are drawn from different parties. Indeed, many countries have traditions of governing either with single-party or coalition governments and these traditions sometimes supersede the actual strengths of parties that result from particular elections. Whether the government that will be formed following an election is expected to be a unitary or a coalition government has enormous importance for the nature of the electoral contest, and this difference is explored mainly in Chapters 2 and 3.

These four sets of institutional and quasi-institutional differences between countries can be seen as more or less fixed features that distinguish countries from each other. Constitutional arrangements are the most fixed (most difficult to change) and sometimes endure for centuries. Electoral systems are generally fixed over considerable periods of time but are not as immune to change as are the more strictly constitutional arrangements. Few have lasted unchanged for as long as a century and in some countries they are changed quite frequently. Party systems can endure for considerable periods but are not regarded as being fixed in the way that electoral and constitutional arrangements are fixed. This is because the objective of many political leaders is to change the party system of their countries by founding a new party or ousting an existing party from its dominant position.

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Many of the countries that we study are members of the European Union and for these countries there is an additional layer of institutions above the national level that we have been considering. Most of these institutions have no relevance to the concerns of this book, but the European Parliament is relevant because of the regular five-yearly occurrence of elections to that Parliament in EU member countries. These elections are of a type that we have just described as ‘second order’ elections; but, because they are second order *national* elections, what we observe are national electoral forces at work, and because these elections are conducted simultaneously in a large number of countries they provide unparalleled insight into the role and importance of institutional differences between countries.

Voters and the puzzle of the ignorant electorate

This is a book about elections and voters, yet we have hardly mentioned voters so far. Voters only occupy the bottom row in Figure 1.2. Nevertheless, they are actors of central importance. Elections in a democracy provide a primary link between rulers and the ruled, and they are often seen as justification for referring to the system as democratic. The extent to which voters succeed in guiding a political system towards the policies they favor is critical to assessing the performance of democratic institutions.

Because parties and elections are policy centered in some systems but candidate centered in others, we have a major distinction to make repeatedly throughout this book. Nevertheless, it turns out that much of voting behavior can be described in general terms that do not need to take account of this distinction. This is just as well, or we would not be able to take the comparative approach that we have already said is needed in order to understand anything much about elections and voting. But readers should note that when we use the words ‘party choice’ we mean ‘party or candidate choice’ unless we explicitly differentiate between the two.

A major puzzle, often referred to as the ‘puzzle of the ignorant electorate’, confronts anyone who would study elections and voters. Once every four or five years (depending on the country concerned) parties and political elites submit themselves to the judgment of voters who are expected to rule on the adequacy of past government and on the relative merits of the competing claims of those who would participate in future governments. Unavoidably, these voters will often be uninformed about many details of government performance and about the credentials of those who wish to become future office-holders. Most of them are also unavoidably incapable of discerning which of myriad alternative policies will most likely lead to their desired objectives (a problem shared, it must be said, by political elites as well). Despite the fact that individual voters are so lacking in information, collec-

tively they appear to make quite sensible decisions. Viewed at the country level of analysis, election outcomes do make sense. So the puzzle of the ignorant voter is also the puzzle of how electoral democracy works. That is one of the principal puzzles that we address in this book.

Plan of the book

The book consists of seven more chapters, four that mainly focus on the institutions that govern the conduct of elections and their implications for the voting act, and three that evaluate how elections work in practice. The reason why we start with institutions is because voting behavior can only be understood in the context of the institutional and party structures in which it takes place and so we need to spell out how the behavior of voters is channeled by the institutional contexts in which those voters find themselves. In Chapter 2 we lay the groundwork by setting out how elections should be studied. The chapter describes how political power is allocated by elections in three very different kinds of political system: presidential systems, two-party parliamentary systems and multiparty parliamentary systems. We ask what decides elections and what elections decide in each type of system. In Chapter 3 we further differentiate between the different contexts in which elections occur by describing the different sorts of electoral systems that are employed in established democracies, focusing on what Bingham Powell (2000) refers to as the 'two great visions' of electoral democracy: the proportional and majoritarian visions. In Chapter 4 we turn to the various ways in which parties serve as linkage mechanisms between voters and governments, and the way in which parties provide a focus for electoral contests. In Chapter 5 we complete our survey of the nuts and bolts of how elections are conducted, and what voters do when they go to the polls, by focusing on election outcomes, discussing the ways in which outcomes are different in proportional than in majoritarian systems. In Chapter 6 we turn to public opinion, along with the news media that play such an important role in informing the public, and explore the interplay between public opinion and electoral behavior, while in Chapter 7 we focus on the individual voter, seeking to understand how voters' party preferences are shaped by the forces that were investigated in earlier chapters. Here we take advantage of a linked set of public opinion surveys covering both established and emerging democracies in order to consider the question: how does the nature of electoral democracy evolve over time? In Chapter 8 we sum up, first by asking to what extent the policies promised by winning parties correspond to the policies wanted by the voters who elect them, and then by considering the adequacy of electoral democracy and ways in which it could be or is being improved.

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The book ends with a guide to further reading in which we provide detailed suggestions for those who want to extend their understanding beyond the material contained in this book. To document our assertions, chapters do contain traditional references to sources, but these are generally kept to a minimum. Additional sources are listed in the guide to further reading. When actual research findings are reproduced in our text, the sources are documented in notes to the tables and figures concerned.