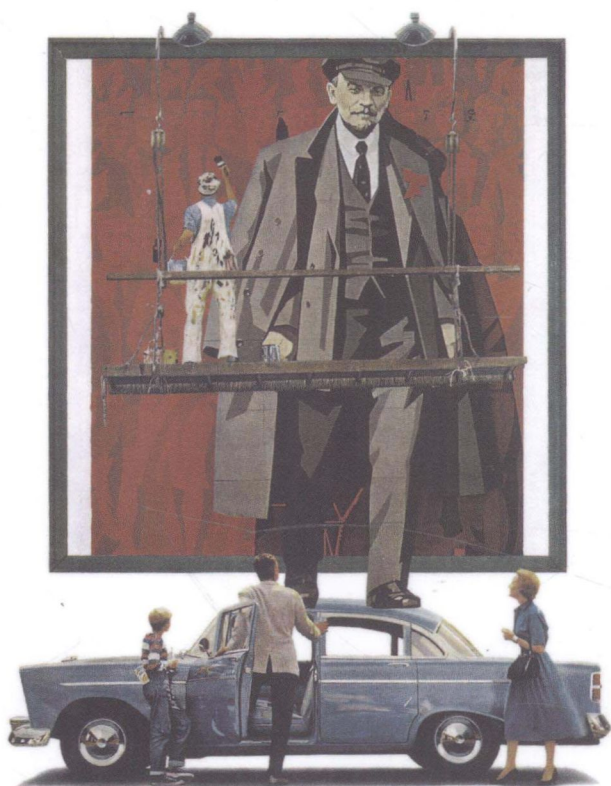


WRESTLING WITH DEMOCRACY

Voting Systems as Politics in the Twentieth-Century West



DENNIS PILON

Wrestling with Democracy

*Voting Systems as Politics
in the Twentieth-Century West*

DENNIS PILON



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Wrestling with Democracy

Voting Systems as Politics in the Twentieth-Century West

Though sharing broadly similar processes of economic and political development from the mid- to late nineteenth century onward, western countries have diverged greatly in their choice of voting systems: most of Europe shifted to proportional voting around the First World War, while Anglo-American countries have stuck with relative majority or majority voting rules. Using a comparative historical approach, *Wrestling with Democracy* examines why voting systems have (or have not) changed in western industrialized countries over the past century.

In this first single-volume study of voting system reform covering all western industrialized countries, Dennis Pilon reviews national efforts in this area over four time spans: the nineteenth century, the period around the First World War, the Cold War, and the 1990s. Pilon provocatively argues that voting system reform has been a part of larger struggles over defining democracy itself, highlighting previously overlooked episodes of reform and challenging widely held assumptions about institutional change. In doing so, he underlines the key importance of social class, disputes between left and right, and the messy and unpredictable impact of historical events.

(Studies in Comparative Political Economy and Public Policy)

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To Dann and Ryann

Acknowledgments

This book has a history. It began with my introduction to the topic while living in the United Kingdom in 1987. Upon returning to Canada I became fascinated with uncovering the largely forgotten historical episodes of voting system reform in various Canadian municipalities and provinces. So began my decades-long engagement with this topic, one I continue to find interesting. Over the years I have come at the issue in different ways. I have written fine-grained, archive-based historical studies of Canadian voting system reform, focusing on the national, provincial, and municipal levels. At the same time, I have produced more synthetic and comparative accounts of voting system change across Western countries, like the 2002 study I prepared for the Law Commission of Canada. This book is cast in the latter approach and is based on my PhD dissertation. However, the present book represents a major revision of the original study, with a completely reworked introductory chapter, a wholly new chapter on democracy, as well as significant changes to the empirical chapters.

Not surprisingly, given its long gestation, I have many people and institutions to acknowledge for their support of this project. Given its origins in my dissertation research, I must first thank the committee who helped direct and shape the work: Leo Panitch, Fred Fletcher, and Bob MacDermid, as well as my external examiner, Frances Fox Piven. As the book has transitioned from a dissertation to a book, I have benefited from the advice of numerous academics: Mark Leier, Henry Milner, Graham White, Rob Walker, Miriam Smith, Bryan Palmer, Joan Sangster, David Marsh, Joyce Green, Greg Albo, James Curran, the members of the Law Commission of Canada, and my colleagues in the Political Science Departments at University of Victoria and York.

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Finally, I should acknowledge my family – parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters – who have been very supportive of my obsession over the years. But the man who has done the most heavy lifting throughout the long process of making this book has been my husband Dann, with support from our daughter Ryann. In recognition, I dedicate this book to them.

Let me end with a few words about the cover of the book. The photo-montage was created by the late Toronto artist Richard Slye, a jazz drummer, Faulkner scholar, cineaste, poet, and social critic, particularly on questions of class. The cover is meant to capture the clash of social visions I argue is at the heart of twentieth-century struggles over democracy, particularly at the level of perceptions and propaganda. The right often promoted the left's agenda as if there were little difference between social democrats and Leninist communists. Some believed it, but many more opportunistically blurred the differences for political gain. So too on the left, critics complained that the right were merely apologists for American influence and a democratic process reduced to consumerism. Behind these representations were, in fact, real differences in terms of what left and right thought democracy should amount to. But, as the book makes clear, sometimes decisions were based as much on struggles over these perceived differences as the substantive ones.

Contents

Acknowledgments xi

1 Introduction 3

Introduction 3

Why Study Voting System Change? 8

Sketching the Research Project 9

What's Been Done: A Review of the Literature 11

What Will Be Done Differently Here: The Framework 20

Doing Social Science Differently 20

Applying a Comparative Historical Method 22

Critical Institutionalism 26

The Plan of the Book 30

2 Contextualizing Democracy 32

Introduction 32

Political Science and Defining Democracy 33

From Definition to Context: Historical Struggles over Democracy 37

1900 to the First World War 39

The Interwar Period 41

The Cold War 43

The Neoliberal Era 46

Voting System Reform and Democracy: Making the Links 49

Conclusion 53

3 Prologue to the Democratic Era 55

Introduction 55

Voting System Reform in the Nineteenth Century 57

The Rise of a New Class 58

The Link between Class Politics and Voting System Reform:

Sweden, Germany, and Belgium 66

Conclusion 70

4 Facing the Democratic Challenge, 1900–1918 72

Introduction 72

Conservative Resistance to Democracy in Europe, 1900–1918 74

Germany 76

Finland 84

Sweden 86

Negotiating the Limits of Democracy in Europe, 1900–1918 92

Switzerland and Norway 93

France 95

Denmark 98

The Netherlands 101

Anglo-American Voting System Reform, 1900–1918 104

United Kingdom 106

Australia 114

New Zealand 120

Canada and the United States 122

Conclusion 124

5 Struggling with Democracy, 1919–1939 126

Introduction 126

The Sudden Rise of Proportional Representation, 1918–1921 127

Germany 130

The Neutral Countries in Europe 131

Italy and France 134

Anglo-American Countries 138

Conservative Resurgence and the Slow Decline of PR,
1922–1939 143

Anglo-American Countries 145

Continental Europe 149

Conclusion 152

6 The Cold War Democratic Compromise, 1940–1969 155

Introduction 155

Italy 157

France 164

Germany 179

Conclusion 187

7 The Neoliberal Democratic Realignment, 1970–2000 190

Introduction 190

Ireland, the Netherlands, and Canada 192

France 194

Voting System Reform in the 1990s 197

New Zealand 198

Italy 206

Japan 212

United Kingdom 218

Conclusion 223

8 Conclusion 227

Notes 235

Select Bibliography 347

Author Index 373

Subject Index 389

Wrestling with Democracy

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Introduction

Introduction

For most of political science, *democracy* is a word that seems to engender a degree of uneasiness, similar to the way economists respond to the word *capitalism*. Economists, it is said, prefer to talk about “market societies” rather than capitalist ones. The former term seems neutral and universal, whereas the latter seems historical, vaguely normative, and freighted with political connotations. In a similar way, and for arguably similar reasons, political scientists will often briefly mention democracy but spend most of their time talking about elections. In practice, most simply reduce democracy to elections. While there may be practical reasons for such shorthand, the convention can have the effect of obscuring important lines of enquiry. For instance, Alan Renwick’s recent book *The Politics of Electoral Reform* begins by suggesting, “Elections lie at the heart of modern democracy.”¹ For that reason, he argues, we should understand where election rules come from and how they change. But after reading the book one might be forgiven for thinking that, for Renwick, elections are not merely the heart of democracy but the entire body. Indeed, he says at one point, “Belief in democracy amounts to belief in the value of following certain processes.”² Democracy then seems little more than the rules concerned with carrying out elections. Such a narrow casting of the scope of democracy has the effect of presuming the very thing that should be examined – what did people think they were doing when they engaged in efforts to change democracy’s rules? The “democracy equals elections” shorthand obscures this question before any investigation can begin.

This book is also interested in where democratic rules come from and why they change or stay the same. But it seeks to displace the electoralist focus of the current political science work on this topic with an interdisciplinary one that puts democracy at the centre of the study. Renwick's claim must then be reversed. If we want to know where election rules come from, we need to recognize that democracy, and more specifically democratic struggle, is at the heart of elections, particularly when the rules come under critical scrutiny. Such an approach would recognize that democracy is not merely this or that institution, nor is it amenable to a neat ideal-type definition or categorization, but is instead a messy historical accomplishment with no fixed boundaries or content. Despite a recent spate of books with *politics* in the title, much work on democratic structures and their reform seems unaware of these struggles, or that such struggles may have influenced what they are studying.³ In fact, most are devoid of any engagement with the issues and movements that defined politics and democratic struggle in the twentieth century, such as battles between left and right, historic campaigns around social citizenship and the welfare state, etc. This reflects the peculiar penchant in political science for dealing with such institutions in isolation, divorced from the larger social environment.⁴ An interdisciplinary approach, by contrast, brings the social back in, recasting the story into a narrative where the very shape of democracy is recognized to be constantly under pressure from competing and conflicting political interests and campaigns. Here democratic struggle is the story, and fights over election rules are just one locale for the brawl.

Of course, that modern democracy appears to be all about elections should not really be surprising. As the key interface between citizens and government in western societies, elections are where politics is seen largely to occur. As a result, political science has examined many aspects of the electoral process: voter behaviour, political party activity, the role of the media, etc. Yet, until recently, one key aspect of elections was largely overlooked: the origin of the electoral rules themselves. Modern representative elections are governed by a complex body of rules generally known as an "electoral system." These rules cover everything from who can vote and how to mark a ballot paper, to how much money aspirants to office may spend to get elected, and much else. While scholars have expended much effort cataloguing and comparing these various rules across western democracies, they have spent less time enquiring about their origins or why particular countries use the rules that they do. This has been particularly true of one specific set

of election rules: the voting system. Yet, since the 1990s, voting systems have elicited considerable interest, with academics and some members of the public and media wanting to know where particular western voting systems come from, why different countries use the ones they do, and what factors may contribute to keeping them in place or replacing them with something else.

Just to be clear, the voting system is understood here as the subset of electoral laws that set out how votes cast in an election will be converted into representation. Throughout the twentieth century, western industrialized countries typically used one of three major voting systems – plurality, majority, or proportional – for national elections.⁵ Historically, political scientists devoted considerable attention to analysing how these different voting systems work, and an enormous scholarly literature emerged debating how different voting rules may condition different political effects.⁶ But less attention was paid to why a voting system may change at any given time in any given country. The lack of interest might be explained by the long-term stability of voting system arrangements in most western industrialized countries – from 1920 to 1993, France was the only western democracy to change from one system to another. For the most part, then, political scientists tended to assume that the choice of voting system somehow reflected the needs of its particular polity, the desires of its citizens, or the ability of existing, self-interested political party elites to prevent consideration of change from emerging as a serious issue. Widespread public indifference towards the voting system, and a general ignorance of its workings or the existence of alternatives, only further convinced political scientists that the origin or alteration of these voting rules was not a terribly important object of study.

But a host of developments in the 1990s forced political scientists to revisit the question of voting system change, including the rapid institutional renewal of the former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe, the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the return to civilian and democratic rule throughout Latin America. Voting system reform came even to the more established western democracies – something political scientists had long declared nearly impossible – with change effected for national elections in Italy, New Zealand, and Japan, and at the sub-national level in the United Kingdom. Observers quickly noted that political science apparently had little to offer in explaining these recent developments.⁷ Since then, scholars appear to be making up for lost time. Fortunately, at a more general level, the discipline had