

Duverger's Laws: Between social and institutional determinism

VIRGÍLIO AFONSO DA SILVA

University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to relocate Duverger's Laws within the debate about the effects of electoral systems on the number of parties. Although Duverger's theory has always been seen as the best example of a purely institutionalist approach to the issue, it is possible to argue that this is only true if one overemphasises the meaning of the laws without considering Duverger's justification and explanations for them. However, if one takes into consideration not only the laws, but also Duverger's theories about the effects of electoral systems on the number of parties as a whole, one can argue that his theses do not have a purely institutionalist character and can therefore coexist with theories that try to take into account variables other than electoral rules.

Duverger's Laws: Institutionalism and sociology

The debate about the effects of electoral laws on the number of political parties used to be dominated by two main approaches (Lane & Ersson 2000: 182): on the one hand, there was the 'institutionalist approach', which stresses the importance of electoral rules in structuring the party system (see, e.g., Sartori 1986, 1994; Rae 1971; Riker 1982; Taagepera & Shugart 1989); on the other hand, there is the 'sociological approach', which rejects, or at least strongly minimises, the importance of institutions and claims that pre-existing social cleavages are the decisive – or even only – factor (see, e.g., Lavau 1953; Lipson 1953; Eckstein 1963). However, for the last two decades, another approach seems to have come to dominate the electoral research field; an approach that tries to take both the electoral rules and the social cleavages into account (see, e.g., Powell 1982; Ordeshook & Shevtsova 1994; Amorim Neto & Cox 1997).

The main goal of this article is not to defend one of these three approaches against the others, but rather to propose a relocation of Duverger's theory within this taxonomy. Duverger's theory has always been seen as the best example of an institutionalist approach (Lane & Ersson 2000: 182–183), for his 'laws' have always been understood as an expression of the decisive role of electoral systems in determining the number of parties in a given polity. It will be argued here that this view is an oversimplification of Duverger's ideas,

for it takes only the summary statements of his laws into account, leaving aside his justification and explanation. When we consider not only the laws, but also Duverger's elaboration of them, and if we bear in mind that Duverger did not claim a causal relationship between electoral systems and party systems, Duverger's laws lose their purely institutionalist character and can thus co-exist with theories that consider other variables to influence the number of parties in a given polity.

Duverger's Laws: Synthetic formulation and explanations

Maurice Duverger was not the first to study the influence of electoral systems on the political environment; nor was he the first to try his hand at formulating laws codifying these influences. In the nineteenth century, Henry Droop, for example, has already commented on the reductive effect of plurality on the number of parties (see Riker 1982: 756, 1986: 23; Cox 1997: 13; Fey 1997: 135). However, Duverger's work, theories and, primarily, his famous 'laws' on electoral systems are certainly the most widely known, researched, discussed, translated, and – naturally – criticised and rejected in the field of electoral systems research. Yet we may challenge the distortions from which Duverger's laws have suffered in the last fifty years. The goal here is to present his ideas just as he formulated them in his three most prominent works (Duverger 1951, 1954, 1959), and then use his own interpretation of the evolution of his ideas, as well as the critiques and corrections he made to them (Duverger 1986).

The centrepiece of Duverger's work on electoral systems is the examination of the influence that these systems exert on the number of political parties of a given country. First of all, it must be said that Duverger was always careful to make clear that none of his laws were absolute in character. Thus, he believed that no electoral system would, *per se*, be capable of determining the political party structure of any country (Duverger 1950: 11); he stated, maybe with excess caution, that these laws would be no more than rough approximations, (Duverger 1950: 13). The use of the verb *to tend* in his laws was no accident. The English translation uses the verbs *to encourage* (Duverger 1954: 204–205) and *to favour* (Duverger 1954: 217) instead of *to tend*, which was used in the original French text. The verb *to tend*, however, is employed in his later work on his laws (see Duverger 1986: 70). The term was used to show that electoral systems cannot *produce* on their own a political party structure (Duverger 1986: 70). Nevertheless, Duverger believed that the pressures resulting from the electoral system should not be neglected. Together with other factors, these pressures would tend to shape the party system (Duverger

1954: 217, 228). Keeping this in mind, he devised the following sociological laws:¹

1. Proportional representation encourages a system of parties that are multiple, rigid, independent, and stable (except in the case of waves of popular emotion).
2. The majority system with two ballots encourages a system of parties that are multiple, flexible, dependent and relatively stable (in all cases).
3. The simple-majority single-ballot system encourages a two-party system with alternation of power between major independent parties.² (Duverger 1954: 204–205)

In the following sections, I will discuss the grounds for the two more important of the above laws: the one related to plurality and the one related to proportional representation.

Plurality system

The tendency described in this law – the relationship between simple-majority single-ballot systems (plurality systems) and two-party systems – can be explained, according to Duverger (1950, 14; 1954, 224–226), by the convergence of two factors: one mechanical and one psychological. The mechanical factor is associated with under-representation. Whenever a third party joins the race under plurality systems, the number of seats it wins will be far lower than suggested by the number of votes cast for it. Examples of this phenomenon abound and include the British general election of 1974 when the Liberal Party finished third, behind the Conservatives and Labour; although it achieved 19.3 per cent of the total votes cast, it secured a mere 2.2 per cent of the seats. In a single-member district, plurality is like a series of isolated elections. Even if a third party achieves a reasonable number of votes in all constituencies, it may actually only win in few and will only be awarded seats for those districts where it won, no matter how well it did nationwide. This is how the logic of plurality and the mechanical factor work.

The psychological factor, on the other hand, is the anticipation of the electoral function's mechanical constraints (Benoit 2002: 36), and is shown by the exercise of 'sophisticated' voting. In a plurality system, it does not take long for voters to realise that casting votes for a third party that has no possibility of winning the election is a waste of a vote. Thus voters realising that only one of the two largest parties stands a real chance of winning vote not for the favourite party, but for the closest party with a chance of winning. Downs (1957: 48) describes the 'sophisticated' voting theory as follows:

A rational voter first decides what party he believes will benefit him most; then he tries to estimate whether this party has any chance of winning. He does this because his vote should be expended as part of a selection process, not as an expression of preference. Hence, even if he prefers party *A*, he is ‘wasting’ his vote on *A* if it has no chance of winning because few other voters prefer it to *B* or *C*.

By doing so, voters cause the chances of a third party gaining seats to decrease progressively, and the natural fate of this party may be either to become a microparty or be phased out.

Since plurality is adopted in single-member districts, each district poll may be taken as an isolated election. This is the reason why one should not assume that the effects of Duverger’s third law are applicable to a whole country. Duverger indeed recognised exceptions to his third law in order to justify, for instance, the Canadian multi-party system at that time. He said that ‘it [that is, plurality] tends to the creation of a two-party system inside the individual constituency; but the parties opposed may be different in different areas of the country’ (Duverger 1954: 223). Duverger never volunteered to change the phrasing of his law. Justifying his reasons for not doing so, he stated that ‘the increased centralization of organization within the parties and the consequent tendency to see political problems from the wider, national standpoint tend of themselves to project on the entire country the localised two-party system brought about by the ballot procedure; however, the true effect of the simple-majority system is limited to local bipartism’ (Duverger 1954: 223). In other words, he admitted regional limits to the relationship between plurality and two-party systems; and understood that the tendency for polarisation would become uniform nationwide. Therefore, for this reason, there was no point in changing his law.

To support his reservations on the influence that electoral systems could exert on other systems, Duverger (1954: 228) stated that plurality is only one of the rules that promotes a two-party system, but plurality does not necessarily and absolutely lead to a two-party system. Yet he clearly states that the relationship between this electoral system and party polarisation was the most solid of his three laws. Initially, Duverger (1950: 13) said that such a relationship was the ‘most firmly established’; later, however, he asserted that it was actually the closest to a ‘true sociological law’ (Duverger 1954: 217). Decades later, he restated his earlier claim that the tendency of plurality toward a two-party system was undoubtedly the most firmly established, but he nonetheless declared that his laws varied in degree, rather than in kind (Duverger 1986: 70).

Proportional representation

According to Duverger, the relationship between proportional representation and multiparty systems should be easier to establish and delineate. His often ambiguous writings, however, make it difficult to interpret exactly what his thesis was on the effects of proportional representation. His analysis starts out by accepting that proportional representation does not necessarily tend to cause an increase in the number of parties: 'the trend to multiply, which proportional representation bears, is, then, a great deal less visible, at first glance, than the dualistic tendency of the majority system' (Duverger 1950: 17). However, he promptly softened this restriction, claiming that this tendency would be no less apparent than the effect of plurality systems (Duverger 1950: 17).

Duverger explained this tendency to multiparty systems as follows. First, proportional representation maintains an existing multiparty system. Second, proportional representation favours splitting up existing parties because the divergent parties, despite their potentially small size, are not obliterated by their competitors. Third, proportional representation facilitates the creation of new parties (Duverger 1950: 17–20). If, despite all ambiguities, a brief explanation of Duverger's analysis of proportional representation could be finalised, one might be willing to state – relying on Duverger's (1954: 245) own words – that 'it is certain that proportional representation always coincides with a multi-party system'. That does not mean, however, that this system necessarily multiplies the number of parties; it may solely keep this number steady.

Duverger's Laws: Rejections, corrections, distortions

Duverger's work quickly attracted sharp criticism. The harshest criticisms were the earlier ones that dismissed all or most of his generalisations. Such criticisms held that electoral systems are a mechanical factor with a much less significant role in shaping political life than Duverger claimed. Lavau (1953: 46), for instance, stated that 'the voting system proves to be something of little importance compared to the complex and highly diverse factors that, blended differently in each national society or in each group of national societies, condition the political life and, especially, the division into two or more political parties with its parliamentary effects'.

Lavau sought to show that not only was Duverger wrong in formulating his sociological laws, but his mistake was to attempt to show a causal relation

between electoral systems and party systems, an impossible task since the relationship between the factors that influence the electoral structure of a country would be so complex as to make any attempt to form 'scientific' laws to explain their operation pointless. Bogdanor (1983: 261), for instance, argued that 'the relationships between electoral systems, party systems and the process of social change are, therefore, reciprocal and highly complex. They are not such as can be summed up in scientific laws.' Nohlen (2000: 403, 1978: 359–360, 366–370) similarly states that electoral systems are 'only one among several factors influencing the party system structure. Therefore, one cannot assume an unambiguous causal relation between electoral system and party system. 'Attempts to formulate sociological laws are often labelled 'social determinism' (Cox 1997: 15). Statements about the influence of electoral systems on party systems are always open to the charge that only an analysis of each polity, including its social, ethnic, political and economic characteristics, can provide plausible explanations for the structure of its party system. An attempt to generalise through sociological laws will be always a mistake.

However, the authors who analysed Duverger's theories in a rather constructive manner also contributed to the generalised view that he claimed a causal relation between electoral systems and the number of parties in a given polity and that, therefore, Duverger's laws have a purely institutionalist character. After quoting Duverger's proposition on the relationship between plurality and two-party systems, Rae (1971: 93; emphasis added) distorted the original proposition and rewrote it as follows: 'Plurality formulae *cause* two-party systems.' The following statements are even more interesting and deserve quotation:

This proposition implies that plurality formulae are a necessary and sufficient condition for two-party competition. If this is correct for the twenty nations analyzed here, all two-party systems will be associated with plurality formulae, and all plurality formulae will be associated with two-party systems. By the same logic, no other formulae will be associated with two party-competition, and two-party systems will never exist beside formulae other than plurality types. (Rae 1971: 93)

First of all, it is evident that Rae's logic is somewhat deficient. The statement that he attributes to Duverger ('plurality formulae *cause* two-party systems') does not mean that plurality formulae are 'necessary and sufficient condition for two-party competition', nor is it legitimate to interpret Duverger as saying that 'no other formulae will be associated with two-party competition'. This is an evident fallacy that demands no complex logical explanations. A statement like 'smoking causes heart diseases', for example, does not imply

that high cholesterol or stress could not have the same effect. So just like heart diseases can be associated with other factors than smoking, two-party competition can be associated with other electoral formulae. Moreover, it seems that by changing Duverger's proposition, Rae knew that the result would be rejected. That is actually what Rae stated later, after learning that the Duverger's proposition he rewrote proved true in 89.7 per cent of the cases he studied. According to Rae (1971: 94): 'This suggests a relationship which is somewhat weaker than the term "sociological law" might lead one to expect, but it is, nevertheless, a strong association.' His distortion of Duverger's proposition led solely to the realisation that plurality formulae do not necessarily cause two-party systems – a causal relationship that, after all, Duverger had not suggested. It thus triggered a new proposition without using the verb *to cause*, curiously used only at the time Rae distorted Duverger's proposition.

Duverger's Laws: Between social and institutional determinism

Duverger was aware that electoral systems are not always the decisive factor and, above all, that there is no causal relation between electoral systems and party systems, as excerpts quoted above indicate. Bearing this in mind, one can and should read his laws in a different way – a way that allows them to co-exist with the current social and institutional approaches to this subject. After all, as Duverger (1964: 205) himself emphasised:

The influence of electoral systems could be compared to a brake or an accelerator. The multiplication of parties which arises from *other factors* is facilitated by one type of electoral system and hindered by another.

and

The relationship between electoral rules and party system is not mechanical and automatic: A particular electoral regime does not necessarily produce a particular party system; it merely exerts pressure in the direction of this system; it is a force which acts among several other forces, some of which tend in the opposite direction. (Duverger 1959: 40).

Most of the criticism on Duverger's laws solely looks at the summary formulation. Explanations made by Duverger were disregarded and, most important of all, so was the discussion of exceptions. Unquestionably, Duverger should be held responsible for this failure, also because he failed to include in the enunciation of his laws some effects he acknowledged when commenting

upon and explaining his laws (Wildavsky 1959: 304–305; Leys 1963: 305, 308–309). Duverger (1954: 223) acknowledged, for instance, that the polarisation effect of plurality systems is present only at constituency level. Nevertheless, he failed to include this in his law on the plurality system.

Even though electoral systems are not the only influence on the number of parties in a given polity, this does not mean that electoral systems have a negligible impact on party systems and that the formulation of laws related to these influences is futile. These laws are not deterministic and do not follow the pattern of natural science laws (see Weber 1949: 79). One of Sartori's arguments is useful here: instead of insisting on necessary and/or sufficient conditions, one might resort to facilitating and obstructive conditions, which may not have the same explanatory power as necessary and sufficient conditions, but can still be a useful tool for analysing electoral systems. Electoral systems do not necessarily determine the party system and may not be necessary or sufficient conditions for them having the characteristics they possess. Electoral systems may, however, facilitate or hinder trends of polarisation or fragmentation in a constituency.

We can present some propositions that may facilitate understanding of the influence of electoral systems on the number of parties. They are neither new propositions nor simply corrections of Duverger's laws, but should rather be understood as an attempt to combine Duverger's laws with Duverger's explanations.

- (1) Every electoral system has a reductive effect, for every system has a filter effect upon the existing parties selecting the ones that have managed to win parliamentary seats. Corollary: proportional systems do not multiply the number of parties (Duverger 1986: 71).
- (2) The reductive effect of majority systems is stronger than the effect caused by proportional systems for two main reasons: (a) the threshold to obtain seats is higher, for only candidates obtaining a majority of the votes, whether majority is an absolute or a plurality, manage to take seats; in proportional systems, however, the number of votes necessary to take a seat tends to be lower, this permitting a large number of parties to take seats; and (b) in majority systems, voters tend to vote only for the parties which stand a chance of winning (sophisticated voting) – that is, in the course of time, they cease to vote for smaller parties, which tend either to be phased out or merge into larger parties (Duverger 1950: 14; 1954: 224–226).
- (3) The extreme reductive effect (i.e., a two-party system) can be caused by a set of factors in addition to mere electoral dynamics (in which party structure and social homogeneity are two key factors), but since

electoral systems apply pressure of varying intensity to reduce the number of parties, a two-party system is favoured and even fostered by majority systems (Duverger 1954: 228; 1950: 13).

- (4) Proportional systems neither favour nor foster two-party systems, but because they tend to neutrality (Duverger 1954: 251), it may happen that a party polarisation caused by other factors will occur if these other factors – including culture, ethnicity, religion, economy and politics – apply strong pressure and thus do not require the support of the electoral system in order to cause polarisation (Duverger 1959: 115).

Conclusion

It is extremely hard to agree or disagree with Duverger's theories as a whole. Given the way Duverger devised and supported his propositions, I argue that there are two blocks of ideas – sometimes almost contradictory – in his works. The first one – the most widely known and criticised – consists of the synthetic statements of the three so-called 'sociological laws' that were presented in the second section of this article. The second of these blocks concerns the premises of these propositions and explanations concerning their exceptions. If one is able to bring together these two blocks of ideas, one should also be able to set Duverger's laws between social and institutional determinism.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Roberto de Cillo and Magdalena Nowinska for their help with the translation of my text.

Notes

1. The term 'sociological laws' was used by Duverger. Initially, the use of this term would be restricted to the third law (Duverger 1954: 217). Later, with more emphasis, the term became applicable to the three laws (Duverger 1959: 113). This uncertainty was perhaps the remote reason for a division between Duverger's third law (the relationship between plurality and two-party systems) and the other two laws. Riker (1982: 754, 1986: 19), for instance, sustained that only the former could be defined properly as a law. The latter, however, were rather *hypotheses*. This division was the starting point for a school that became fairly popular among several authors (see Grofman & Reynolds 2001: 130; Reynolds 1999: 205; Taagepera & Shugart 1989: 142; Taagepera & Grofman 1985: 342). This theory was, however, rejected by Duverger (1986: 69–70, 1964: 39, Note 2) himself, who claimed that there was 'only a difference of degree between the two categories and not a difference in kind'. According to Sartori (1986: 65, Note 3), Riker was led to devise this divide because of a mistake in the translation of Duverger's book into English.

2. The same laws can also be found in Duverger (1950: 13), except that in this book, apparently as a typo, the second law contains a reference to independent parties, something that, as shown below, is not consistent with Duverger's later explanations. In Duverger (1959: 113–114), the laws were stated as in this translation.

References

- Amorim Neto, O. & Cox, G.W. (1997). Electoral institutions, cleavages structures and the number of parties. *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1): 149–174.
- Benoit, K. (2002). The endogeneity problem in electoral studies: A critical re-examination of Duverger's mechanical effect. *Electoral Studies* 21: 35–46.
- Bogdanor, V. (1983). Conclusion: Electoral systems and party systems. In V. Bogdanor & D.E. Butler (eds), *Democracy and elections: Electoral systems and their political consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 247–262.
- Cox, G.W. (1997). *Making votes count: Strategic coordination in the world's electoral systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Duverger, M. (1950). *L'influence des systèmes électoraux sur la vie politique*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Duverger, M. (1951). *Les partis politiques*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Duverger, M. (1954). *Political parties: Their organization and activity in the modern state*. London: Methuen.
- Duverger, M. (1959). *Droit constitutionnel et institutions politiques*. Paris: PUF.
- Duverger, M. (1964). *Political parties*. London: Methuen.
- Duverger, M. (1986). Duverger's Law: Forty years later. In B. Grofman & A. Lijphart (eds), *Electoral laws and their political consequences*. New York: Agathon Press, pp. 69–84.
- Eckstein, H. (1963). The impact of electoral systems on representative government. In H. Eckstein & D.E. Apter (eds), *Comparative politics: A reader*. New York: Free Press, pp. 247–254.
- Fey, M. (1997). Stability and coordination in Duverger's Law: A formal model of preelection polls and strategic votes. *American Political Science Review* 91(1): 135–147.
- Grofman, B. & Reynolds, A. (2001). Electoral systems and the art of constitutional engineering: An inventory of the main findings. In R. Mudambi, P. Navarra & G. Sobbrío (eds), *Rules and reason: Perspectives on constitutional political economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 125–164.
- Lane, J.-E. & Ersson, S. (2000). *The new institutional politics: Performance and outcomes*. London: Routledge.
- Lavau, G.E. (1953). *Partis politiques et réalités sociales*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Leys, C. (1963). Models, theories and the theory of political parties. In H. Eckstein & D.E. Apter (eds), *Comparative politics: A reader*. New York: Free Press, pp. 305–315.
- Lipson, L. (1953). The two-party system in British politics. *American Political Science Review* 47: 337–358.
- Nohlen, D. (1978). *Wahlssysteme der Welt: Daten und Analysen – Ein Handbuch*. München: Piper.
- Nohlen, D. (2000). *Wahlrecht und Parteiensystem*. Oplade: Leske+Budrich.
- Ordeshook, P.C. & Shevtsova, O.V. (1994). Ethnic heterogeneity, district magnitude and the number of parties. *American Journal of Political Science* 38: 100–123.

- Powell, G.B. (1982). *Contemporary democracies: Participation, stability and violence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rae, D.W. (1971). *The political consequences of electoral laws*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Reynolds, A. (1999). *Electoral systems and democratization in Southern Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Riker, W. (1982). The two-party system and Duverger's Law: An essay on the history of political science. *American Political Science Review* 76: 753–766.
- Riker, W. (1986). Duverger's Law revisited. In B. Grofman & A. Lijphart (eds), *Electoral laws and their political consequences*. New York: Agathon Press, pp. 19–42.
- Sartori, G. (1986). The influence of electoral systems: Faulty laws or faulty method. In B. Grofman & A. Lijphart (eds), *Electoral laws and their political consequences*. New York: Agathon Press, pp. 43–68.
- Sartori, G. (1994). *Comparative constitutional engineering: An inquiry into structures, incentives and outcomes*. New York: New York University Press.
- Taagepera, R. & Grofman, B. (1985). Rethinking Duverger's Law: Predicting the effective number of parties in plurality and PR systems – Parties minus issues equals one. *European Journal of Political Research* 13: 341–352.
- Taagepera, R. & Shugart, M.S. (1989). *Seats and votes: The effects and determinants of electoral systems*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Weber, M. (1949). 'Objectivity' in social science and social policy. In *The methodology of the social sciences*. New York: Macmillian, pp. 49–112.
- Wildavsky, A.B. (1959). A methodological critique of Duverger's *Political Parties*. *Journal of Politics* 21(2): 303–317.

Address for correspondence: Virgílio Afonso da Silva, Faculdade de Direito, Universidade de São Paulo, Largo São Francisco, 95, São Paulo SP-01005-010, Brazil
Tel.: +55 11 3111 4010; E-mail: vas@usp.br