The Dynamics of Democratic Representation:
How Democracy Works

Russell J. Dalton
Center for the Study of Democracy
University of California
Irvine, CA 92617-5100 USA
rdalton@uci.edu

David M. Farrell
School of Politics and International Relations
University College Dublin
Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
david.farrell@ucd.ie

Ian McAllister
School of Political Science and International Relations
College of Arts and Social Sciences
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
ian.mcallister@anu.edu.au

Paper prepared for delivery at the American Political Science Association meetings, Seattle, 31 August-4 September 2011, panel 34-6, ‘The Comparative Study of Electoral Institutions and Representation.’
Abstract
The linkage between the public and the political decision makers is one of the essential topics for the study of democratic political systems. Most of the previous literature views elections and political representation as a discrete decision-making process. This paper suggests that rather than a discrete, point-in-time choice, democracy is based on a process of ongoing, dynamic representation that occurs through a comparison of the past and the future across repeated elections. Thus, we examine the empirical correspondence between citizens and their government over time based on modules I and II of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The results strongly argue that there is a high level of democratic representation in contemporary democracies, and elections serve as a dynamic steering method to keep government in synch with their publics.
The development of representative government created the potential for modern mass democracy. Instead of directly participating in political decision making as in the Greek polis or the Swiss canton, the public selects legislators to represent them in government deliberations. Citizen control over government thus occurs through periodic, competitive elections to select these elites. Elections should ensure that government officials are responsive and accountable to the public. By accepting this electoral process, the public gives its consent to be governed by the elites selected. The democratic process thus depends on an effective and responsive relationship between the representative and the represented.

The linkage between the public and the political decision makers is one of the essential topics for the study of democratic political systems (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Miller et al. 1999; Powell 2000; Shapiro, Stokes, Wood and Kirschner 2010). This topic has generated extensive research on the nature of elections and citizen voting behavior, which examines the choices available to voters and their decision making process. A related literature examines the process of government formation, and the correspondence between electoral outcomes and the resulting government. Representation research involves the merger of these two literatures to examine the correspondence between citizens and their elected leaders, and the factors that maximize agreement.

This representation literature provides the foundation for the research presented here, however we offer a different perspective on how elections produce democratic representation and accountability. Most of the previous literature views elections and government formation as a discrete decision-making process. Voters make their electoral choices much as they might make a major consumer purchase in a car dealership or a department store, and a large part of the literature explicitly utilizes such an economic choice approach. Similarly, research on the
formation of government coalitions typically adopts the same approach except that political leaders and parties are making the choices on cabinet formation once the votes are counted. In the terms of game theory, this approach is like modeling representation as discrete decision-making at one point in time, like buying an automobile or new big-screen television. This leads to a focus on the wisdom or accuracy of this one decision; on whether people are rationally making a choice that matches their preferences.

Of course, elections and democracy are an ongoing process. The outcome of one election is just one point in this process. The performance of parties in government inevitably affects decisions—by voters and elites—at the next election. Thus, when a new election approaches voters enter the campaign with this evidence of prior governing as a starting point for their evaluations. Citizens also look forward to what they expect of government after the election. This paper suggests that rather than a discrete, point-in-time choice, democracy is based on a process of ongoing, dynamic representation that occurs through a comparison of the past and the future across repeated elections. In other words, elections function not simply as a method of collective political choice at election time, but as a dynamic method of steering the course of government. We provide empirical evidence of this process that expands upon our initial study of dynamic representation (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011).

This paper proceeds in four steps. First, we briefly review the previous literature on political representation that provides a foundation for our research, and offer a dynamic extension of this literature. Second, we introduce a case study of representation and electoral change in Spain to illustrate the logic of our research. Third, we extend the empirical evidence to examine the correspondence between citizens and their government based on two modules from
the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Our fourth and final section discusses the implications of our findings.

Conceptualizing Representation

What does it mean to be represented in a democracy? Prior empirical research has evolved through three different answers to this question, evolving from studying individual legislatures, to political parties, to the representativeness of governments. First, the early University of Michigan representation studies focused on the linkage between a constituency and its representative. This followed from the long-standing debate over trustee-delegate models of representation in a single member plurality (SMP) electoral system (Miller and Stokes 1963; Barnes 1977; Farah 1980; Converse and Pierce 1986; McAllister 1991). This research compared constituency opinions to those of the legislators elected from the district, and yielded mixed empirical results especially in the party-dominated European cases.

In a second phase, research focused on the linkage between voters and their preferred parties rather than individual legislators. This research drew primarily upon the party government theory of political representation (Rose 1974; Castles and Wildenmann 1986; Katz 1987; Blondel and Cotta 2001). This party government model seems more relevant for parliamentary systems with strong political parties (Dalton 1985; Holmberg 1989; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Matthews and Valen 1999). The party government model compares agreement between voters and their selected party. The voter half of the dyad is composed of all party supporters in a nation (even if there are geographic electoral districts or regions); the elite half is composed of party officials as a collective. Candidates are selected by party elites rather than through open primaries, so they are first and foremost party representatives. The responsible
party government model further presumes that members of a party’s parliamentary delegation act in unison. Parties exercise control over the government and the policymaking process through party control of the national legislature. In sum, the choice of parties—rather than constituency-based representation—provides the electorate with indirect control over the actions of legislators and the affairs of government. Giovanni Sartori (1968, 471) thus maintained that “citizens in Western democracies are represented through and by parties. This is inevitable” (italics in original).

As cross-national empirical research on representation expanded, this led to an even broader research focus on the extent to which governments represent the citizens who elected them. G. Bingham Powell (2000; Huber and Powell 1994) was one of the first to compare the Left-Right position of the median voters (from public opinion surveys) with the Left-Right position of the governing parties (from expert surveys) for a large set of Western democracies. He found broad congruence, which varied with the clarity of government responsibility and other contextual factors. Since then several studies have compared citizen-government congruence across the established democracies (Klingemann et al. 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005; Huber and Powell 1994; Wessels 1999; Powell 2000, 2006). Recent research has expanded the bases of comparison to include new democracies in Eastern Europe and East Asia (Blais and Bodet 2006; McAllister 2005; Powell 2010; Golder and Stramski 2010).¹

However, these representation studies have largely examined representation as a cross-sectional relationship between citizens and parties/government based on the results of a single election or at a single point in time. Do voters in an election get a government that is generally congruent with their overall policies preferences—which is the essence of democratic representation? Some of this literature presents a theoretical debate on the nature of
representation. Does representation function through voters prospectively evaluating alternatives and providing governments with a mandate for future action, or do voters retrospectively judge the performance of past governments and hold them accountable at election time (e.g., Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). This is a reasonable starting point, but we believe that this approach creates a false dichotomy and misspecifies the actual nature of democratic representation.

Democracy is not a single event, but an ongoing process. Once elected, people judge parties not just by what they said in the campaign, but by how they actually govern and by the decisions they take that affect people’s lives. Sometimes the gap between campaign rhetoric and the reality of governing can be large. George H. W. Bush’s “read my lips, no new taxes” comes to mind, repeated by Helmut Kohl in the first election after German unification. There are numerous cases where governments followed an unexpected course after taking office, or where external events forced a major change in policy direction. Parties and governments also campaign on a large range of issues, and the attention given to each may change overall public perceptions of government performance because the public’s agreement on specific issues should naturally vary. Between elections new parties or political leaders emerge, so citizen decisions might shift with a new choice set. In fact, given the complexity of politics it is almost inevitable that some voters (and expert analysts) are surprised by some of the actions of government once it takes office. Consequently, the fit between citizens and the government is likely to change over a multi-year electoral cycle.

Thus, rather than a single consumer purchase or a single decision game, the representative aspect of elections is more like a repetitive decision process or repetitive game. The analogy of navigating a sailboat on the sea might be useful. The public (the captain) makes
the best choice in directing the ship of state at the moment, and then reacts as conditions change. If scandal touches a party or a party leadership appears ineffective, voters may select the best of the remaining options in one election. If a government moves too far in one policy direction, the next election provides a mechanism to shift direction back toward the public’s collective preferences. If the public oversteers in one election, influenced by a charismatic personality or an intense issue controversy, they can correct course at the next election. And if conditions in the world change, elections can also steer a new course in reaction to these changes. In short, representative democracy is a repetitive decision making process that provides a method for the citizenry to adjust the course of government, correcting discrepancies in direction that arise from outcomes in the previous election or the actions of the incumbent government.²

In fact, we might argue that this democracy’s primary strength is its ability to repeatedly enter such feedback into the political process. Prospective voting on a party or government’s election manifesto is only likely to generate meaningful representation if there is accountability at the next election. Retrospective evaluations of a government’s performance have greater meaning if considered in terms of the government’s initial policy goals. To dichotomize accountability and representation misses the key point that both can function meaningfully in a process where they both are considered on an ongoing basis across elections.

This dynamic perspective appears in time series research linking public opinion and government policy outputs (Wlezien and Soroka 2007; Page and Shapiro 1992), but it is less evident in representation studies that focus on voter-party congruence or public-government congruence at one point in time.⁴ This paper provides an empirical test of this dynamic hypothesis using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project. The comparison of citizen and government positions across nations and across time is a difficult empirical
challenge because of the data requirements it imposes. We therefore present a relatively simple test of the dynamic hypothesis. We ask whether citizen agreement with a newly elected government is greater than with the pre-election government. *If representation is a dynamic process, then post-election congruence generally should be greater than pre-election congruence, as citizens steer the ship of state in the direction they want it to follow.*

**Methodology**

We need measures of both citizen positions and government positions in order to study representation. The initial representation studies were single nation studies based on surveys of the public and elites. Other research, such as the Comparative Manifesto Project or party expert surveys, estimate party positions from their election platforms or the evaluations of academic experts, but they lack data on citizen positions in these same party systems. To compare citizen and government positions, previous research often merged data from different sources or estimated citizen opinions from the positions of political parties. Large, cross-national comparisons of citizen-government correspondence are thus relatively rare in the research literature.

We use a different empirical base for our research. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) is a coordinated cross-national survey conducted by existing election study teams from around the world.\(^5\) Participating countries include a common module of survey questions in their post-election studies. All surveys must meet certain quality and comparability standards, and all are conducted as nationally representative surveys. These survey data are then merged into a common data file along with a variety of contextual variables. The CSES conducted its first module between 1996 and 2001 and the second module between 2001 and
The project includes a wide array of democracies spanning established and new democracies, and spread across Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia.\textsuperscript{6}

To measure the agreement between voters and the government, we begin by assuming that party competition is structured along a Left-Right dimension (Downs 1957). Past studies of political representation have often used the Left-Right scale as a summary of political positions (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999; Klingemann et al. 1994; Dalton 1985). We do not assume that most voters have an understanding of “Left” and “Right” in terms of sophisticated ideological concepts, such as socialism, liberalism or other philosophical concepts.\textsuperscript{7} Instead, the Left-Right scale is a \textit{political orientation} that helps individuals make political choices (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Inglehart 1990). We expect that positions on this scale generally summarize the issues and cleavages that define political competition to individuals in a nation. Ronald Inglehart describes the scale as a sort of super-issue that represents the “major conflicts that are present in the political system” (Inglehart 1990: 273). Philip Converse and Roy Pierce (1989: 772-774) further suggested that the Left-Right framework can provide a means of representation and popular control even when specific policy positions are ill-formed. Even if the specific definitions of Left and Right vary across individuals and nations, we assume that the simple structure of a general Left-Right scale can summarize the political positions of voters and political parties.

The CSES asks respondents to position themselves along a Left-Right scale using a standard survey question:
Almost 90 percent of the public in the diverse set of CSES nations have a Left-Right position, and this increases further among those who voted in the election (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011, ch. 5). This high level also transcends old and new democracies, and nations of quite different heritages. Furthermore, a wide range of research demonstrates that such Left-Right orientations are strongly related to citizen positions on the salient issues in the society (Ibid). For each nation we calculated the median score for the entire public who expressed a Left-Right position.

The second step in estimating citizen-government agreement requires that we identify the position of the government in Left-Right terms. To do this we first need to measure the position of political parties that might comprise the government. While both of the party manifesto and expert methods have their own advantages and disadvantages, we rely on the citizens themselves. The CSES asked respondents to place the major political parties on the same Left-Right scale as they used to identify their own Left-Right position. The project guidelines called for the survey to ask for the locations of up to six significant parties. The number of parties actually evaluated across nations ranges from three parties in the United States to nine parties in some nations. This has the advantage that evaluations are done for the same election as voters own self-location, and the data are collected simultaneously for citizens and parties. Furthermore, since the question is the extent to which citizens elect parties and governments that
represents their political views, citizens’ perceptions of the parties is an ideal standard for such comparisons.

A relatively large proportion of the public in most nations provides a Left-Right position for the parties.\(^9\) We used the mean placement of the entire electorate to determine each party’s position on the Left-Right scale.\(^10\) In France, for example, the Communist Party receives an average score of 2.42 on the Left-Right scale in 2002, while the National Front is placed at 7.85. By comparison, Americans placed the Democrats at 4.2 on the Left-Right scale in 2004, and the Republicans were located at 6.6.

To what extent can we consider public perceptions of the parties an accurate assessment of the parties’ political positions? Those who doubt the public’s ability to express their own views in Left-Right terms would understandably question the public’s ability to summarize accurately the Left-Right position of political parties. One answer is that these perceptions are reality to the voters if they use them in make their electoral choices. In addition, we have compared citizen placements to other measures of party positions, and the strength of agreement is strikingly high.\(^11\) Individual citizens may have imprecise impressions about politics, but when the views of the entire public are aggregated, the perceptions of ordinary people are virtually identical to the Left-Right scores given by political science professors judging the same parties.

We next used these party scores to define the overall political position of the government. Since most parliamentary governments typically include more than a single party in a coalition, this requires combining scores for the parties in the governing coalition. We followed the standard methodology to define the government’s Left-Right position as the average of the governing parties, weighted by each party’s share of cabinet portfolios.\(^12\) This gives greater weight to large parties that exercise more influence in setting government policy, and
undoubtedly are more visible as citizens evaluate the government as a whole. Naturally, in a single party government the government’s position is synonymous with this party’s Left-Right position. We used this method to estimate a Left-Right score for the pre-election government and the post-election government.

There are, of course, many caveats and conditions that accompany efforts to measure the representation gap between citizens and their government. The use of a single Left-Right dimension to summarize citizen and voter positions has both advantages and disadvantages in capturing political reality, especially when used to compare citizens and parties across a very diverse group of democracies. One might ask whether it is better to use the median citizen as a measure of public preferences, or perhaps the median of all those who voted. Or, one might offer a narrower view of representation and maintain that the government is there to represent those who elected it, not the public at large. Similarly, the weighted combination of parties in the governing cabinet might not fully reflect the power of each party in defining government actions. And in the case of multiparty governments, the public’s ability to select the government is often supplanted by post-election negotiations among party elites. In addition, our measures of public opinion and government positions from the CSES project are subject to measurement error, which may be significant with a modest number of nations for our analyses. Consequently, we approached these analyses with modest expectations.

**The Spanish Example**

Because the representation process is complex, and becomes more complex when we examine change over time, we begin with a single nation case study. Spain presents an insightful example of this dynamic process of representation that we can plot across three electoral cycles using the
CSES data. Over the past two decades elections have shifted the composition of the government from Left to the Right and then back to the Left again. Describing the process of electoral change in Spain is a first introduction to dynamic representation.

As the 1996 election approached, the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Felipe González had headed the government since 1982. However, González and the party were struggling because of a stagnant economy, charges of governmental corruption, and abuses of power in the campaign against the Basque ETA. In contrast, Aznar had invigorated the organizational base of the People’s Party (PP) and offered a fresh perspective to those voters who had lost faith in the PSOE.

Figure 1 presents the positions of the parties and the public in 1996 based on module I of the CSES. Despite the left leanings of the Spanish public, noted by the left-of-center location of the median citizen in 1996, the PSOE lost votes in the election and the PP gained enough votes (4 percent increase) to form a new conservative government. Because of the desire for change after fourteen years of PSOE governance, 1996 was a clear deviating election in Left-Right terms that produced a large representation gap. The gap between the median citizen and the Left/Right position of the government increased from 0.34 points before the election to 3.48 after the election. At the same time, this deviation was understandable from a broader perspective of political representation. A majority of the public was dissatisfied with the performance of the PSOE government; their electoral options were to continue on this course, or steer the ship of state in a new direction that promised more effective governance. They chose a change.

The new Aznar/PP government had considerable success in improving the economy and addressing Spain’s social and political problems. Unemployment decreased, the economy grew,
and budget deficits were trimmed to meet European Union standards. Other reforms privatized state-owned enterprises and the government more effectively dealt with corruption and regional policy. By the 2000 election, voters rewarded the PP with a further 6 percentage point gain in its vote share and an outright majority in the parliament. The governing experience also affected the representation gap in two ways: 1) by 2000 the public saw the PP as located closer to the center (a 0.73 shift toward the center) which probably reflects the party’s pragmatism and success in dealing with national problems, and 2) the public itself became slightly more conservative (a 0.44 shift to the Right). Consequently, the perceived gap between the median citizen and the PP narrowed considerably.

Gradually, however, disenchantment with the PP’s conservative policies increased. The economy slowed during Aznar’s second term, and many Spaniards opposed his Atlanticist alliance with the Bush administration (including sending troops to Iraq). Aznar also chose not to run for reelection in 2004, depriving the party of its most visible candidate. Then, just before the election a Jihadist terrorist attack at the Madrid train station shifted public opinion, partly in response to the attack and partly in response to the government’s misstatements about it. Consequently, the 2004 CSES survey shows that the median Spaniard had again moved left. At the same time, the PSOE and the PP became more polarized in their respective Left-Right positions. The result was an 8.5 percent growth in voter support for the Socialists who reentered government—and a sharp drop in the representation gap (from 2.31 in 2000 to 0.88 scale points in 2004).

These three elections illustrate the complex dynamics of the representation process that often acts in an apparently un-Downsian manner. Spain experienced a deviating election in 1996 as some voters moved away from the Socialists because of their poor policy performance, while
still closer to the PSOE in Left-Right terms. The governing experience then changed both the self-location of some citizens and their perceptions of the parties in Left-Right terms. The Left-Right representation gap thus decreased by 2000 even though the PP continued to govern. However, 2004 was a reinstating election, as the voters redirected government back toward the median citizen who generally favored leftist policies.

To return to our nautical analogy from earlier in this paper, the Spanish ship of state tacked to starboard and then back to port to make headway; these shifts might seem random but were reasonable reactions and counter-reactions to the performance of government and changes in the political context.

The Cross-national Evidence

The patterns of the Spanish party system can be extended to a general description of dynamic representation. Democracy should typically result in what Angus Campbell (1966) called “maintaining elections” in which the government closely reflects public preferences. Campbell used this terms in reference to the partisan identifications of the election, but the same idea can be extended to Left-Right congruence. Occasionally, and for good reason, the political situation may lead individuals to shift their Left-Right preferences or to select a party that differs from their overall policy orientations preferences. The 1996 Spanish election was such a deviating election, where the Spanish public voted in a conservative government that produced a substantial Left-Right representation gap. Eventually, however, we expect the political course would be corrected, when voters and parties eventually readjust to political conditions and elect a different government more congruent with their political orientations. This mix of maintaining, deviating, and reinstating elections is party of the dynamics of democratic representation.
One can follow such a pattern of dynamic representation with longitudinal data from a single nation, as in the Spanish example. But the number of nations with such long-term data series is limited. In addition, analyses within a single nation do not provide the opportunity to see how institutional factors affect the representation. Instead, we explore the process of dynamic representation by looking at shorter time comparisons cross-nationally using the CSES project. We used the CSES data to estimate the position of the median citizen in each nation on the Left-Right scale, and then compared this to the Left-Right position of the pre-election and post-election governments. This comparison over two modules of CSES should begin to show the dynamics of political representation across a wide range of democracies.

Cross-national Patterns: CSES Module II

We begin with the second module of CSES because the first module closely followed the democratic transition for several Third Wave democracies, and party systems were still very much in flux in this environment (we will present these analyses later in the paper). Figure 2 presents the relationship between the Left-Right position of the median citizen and the Left-Right position of the post-election government for the 36 legislative elections from module 2. The important finding is the strong congruence between citizens and their elected governments. Leftist publics generally select Leftist governments, and similarly on the Right. For example, only four of the 36 nations clearly fall in either of the two off-diagonal quadrants which indicate a government that is out of synch with its public. As we should expect, the scores for the median citizen cluster near the center of the Left-Right scale, between 4.0 and 6.0, since there is a center-peaked distribution of Left-Right public attitudes in most nations. The Left-Right positions of governments are more varied, with a standard deviation that is three times larger.
than for the median citizen position. This means that governments accentuate differences between electorates. In other words, a half-point difference in the citizens’ median position predicts a full-point change in the composition of the government. This corresponds to the well-known pattern because the government was selected by only half the public, and thus it is typically more polarized than the public as a whole. In overall terms, the congruence in Figure 2 provides strong evidence that democratic representation works even over this diverse set of democracies—as noted by the .60 correlation between these two variables.

Most analyses of political representation stop with the evidence just presented in Figure 2, or examine factors such as the structure of government or the electoral system that might systematically affect the level of congruence across nations. Our dynamic model of democratic representation leads us to ask another question: do elections produce post-election governments that are more congruent with public preferences than the pre-election government? As we have argued, and democratic theorists have maintained, elections should generally act as a feedback mechanism to re-elect government consistent with the majority opinion and move deviating governments closer to the public’s preferences. We might expect a similar relationship across pre- and post-election governments because of the incumbency advantage and the persistence of government. But deviating governments should be most susceptible to change through elections.

Figure 3 compares the Left-Right position of the median citizen and the weighted Left-Right position of the pre-election government. The pattern is strikingly different from the previous figure. For the exact same set of nations, there is only a weak and statistically insignificant relationship between citizens and the pre-election government \((r=.06)\). In this comparison, about a third of the nations are in the two off-diagonal quadrants. Spain and Poland,
for example, had pre-election governments that the public perceived as much more conservative than the median citizen, while the Romanian government was seen as much more liberal than the median citizen. After the election all three nations had governments more congruent with public preferences. Moreover, this is not because the public has changed its position (it is the same in both figure 2 and 3), or the public changed their Left-Right placement of individual parties (the same party scores are used in both figures to calculate the government position).

Another way to express this pattern is to compare the absolute difference in citizen-government Left-Right positions for the pre-election and post-election governments. This difference decreases from an average different of 1.30 for the pre-election government to 1.13 for the post-election government.

These results suggest that by the end of an election cycle, some governments have become distant from the current political values of the public that initially elected them. This is when electoral accountability can improve democratic representation. This disconnect between citizens and many pre-election governments arises from many sources, as we saw in the Spanish example above. The essential point, however, is that in nations where citizens see the pre-election government as out of synch with the public’s broad political orientations, elections can provide a way to increase congruence.\(^\text{15}\)

The dynamic effect of elections enters when there is a significant change in government between elections. This is quite apparent in the nations that are located off the diagonal. As we have seen, the 2004 Spanish election produced a shift from the People’s Party-led government to Zapatero’s socialist government. This caused a 4.52 point shift in the Left-Right composition of the Spanish government. Poland similarly experienced a large shift to the Left when the
Democratic Left Alliance victory produced more than a 6 point leftward shift in the government (on a 0-10 scale). Conversely, elections in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal produced a sizeable rightward shift between pre and post-election governments.

Cross-national Patterns: CSES Module I

Before discussing the Module II results, we wanted to repeat our basic analyses with data from the CSES module I nations. The first module included 31 parliamentary elections where there were sufficient data for our analyses. Many are post-communist nations and others are new democracies in East Asia or Latin America. As the module II analyses showed, party system change is greater in new democracies, especially in the 1990s when these post-communist systems were still in flux. However, we should find broadly similar results from this module if dynamic representation includes congruence before and after elections.

We first compared the position of the median citizen in each nation to the Left/Right position of the post-election government as the standard measure of political representation (Figure 4). As expected, given the larger proportions of new democracies in this sample the levels of congruence are clearly lower than we found for the second module. As we saw in Figure 2, in CSES module two just four out of the 36 nations were located in the two off-diagonal quadrants, indicating a government out of step with its public. By contrast, in CSES module one there are no less than 12 nations in that situation out of our 31 cases – most notable among them the Spanish deviating election of 1996, which is a true outlier. Reflecting this trend, the correlation coefficient (at \( r = .23 \); \( r = .37 \) if we exclude Spain in 1996) is lower than in Figure 2, though still substantial enough to show that, once again, democratic representation is working
well (as shown also by the far larger number of countries correctly located on the diagonal in Figure 4.

As before, we wanted to check relative levels of congruence pre- and post-election, and once again this shows different patterns across both time periods, albeit not as distinct as those revealed in CSES module 2. On this occasion, there is a reduction rather than an increase in the number of nations located in the two off-diagonal quadrants (down to nine nations). Clearly, the larger proportion of newer democracies in this sample is having an effect. But despite this, the correlation coefficient reported in Figure 5 (r=.16) is lower than for the post-election trends reported in Figure 4, and there were again some notable shifts across the across, notably: the UK’s dramatic election victory for “New Labour” in 1997, moving that nation firmly to the left; other notable shifts were Spain in 1996 (shifting right) and Peru in 2001 (shifting left).

At least to the authors, this pre/post-election comparison is a striking pattern. To the extent that these results from the CSES nations are generalizable to other democracies, this means that the composition of a post-election government is essentially independent of the pre-election government (module I r=.03, module II r=-.04). This might be interpreted as meaning that elections are a random process, with no predictability of what will happen after the votes are counted. However, our analyses show that this is not a random process, since voters are steering government toward a position more consistent with their Left-Right preferences. If we return to the sailboat analogy from earlier in this essay, a sailboat must tack to starboard and port to make headway; these shifts might seem random but are necessary to make headway. Similarly, it appears that elections produce turns to the Left, or to the Right (and sometimes continue on the
same course) in order to generate a democratic course that is generally congruent with public preferences. The median British voter, for instance, has a choice of going Left with Labour or to the Right with the Conservatives, but not a government of the center.¹⁶ In summary, our findings provide strong evidence that elections do generate a dynamic of democratic representation if we trace this process over time.

*Institutional Variation in Governmental Change*

One can provide a post-hoc explanation for the shifts in government in most of these cases. We have discussed such explanations in the earlier example from Spain. In addition, we expect that some institutional factors will affect the likelihood that government change their Left-Right position as a result of elections. In other words, where is there greater volatility in government positions as a function of national or institutional characteristics.¹⁷

There is limited theorizing on this point; most research focuses on the cross-sectional relationship between citizens and their government (Powell 2000, 2004, 2010a; Golder and Stramski 2010). We examine a variety of potential institutional factors across both CSES modules to identify what factors are conducive to volatility in the government’s Left/Right position from pre- to post-election. In other words, what type of institutional context increases the likelihood that government positions will change as a result of elections? We calculated the absolute value of the pre/post-election difference in each government’s Left/Right position, and then correlated this value with national characteristics.

Table 1 goes about here

Table 1 shows that the shifts in government’s pre/post-election Left-Right positions tend to be greater in proportional representation systems than in majoritarian electoral systems for
module II (r=.32) nations, with a non-significant negative correlation for module I (r=-.08). District magnitude and the effective number of parties also reflect the proportionality of electoral systems, and these two variables shows a weak relationship in both modules.

One might expect PR systems to produce gradual adaptation to shifting vote shares among parties, but because the greater diversity of choices in PR systems creates more potential volatility in the composition of government, as do post-election coalition negotiations that determine the eventual electoral outcome. Even though majoritarian democracies should produce substantial policy shift when the majority changes (as Finer [1975] would argue), the obvious point is that a change in government occurs less frequently in these systems (Powell 2010a, Table 11.1). Among the six majoritarian elections in Module II, only one produced a change in government; and the stability of majoritarian governments was relatively higher in module I as well. On the whole, the impact of the electoral system on the typical amount of inter-election government change seems modest as a result.

Beyond the electoral system, the nature of the party system may also influence the volatility of election outcomes. When political parties are widely dispersed along the Left-Right scale, a change in governing parties can also produce a large change in the policy orientations of government. This is the case in Spain, for instance, where the PP and PSOE are located close to the poles of the Left-Right dimension. In other systems, centrist parties should moderate the volatility of election outcomes, even when the governing coalition changes. Moreover, the polarization of party systems is relatively independent of the structure of the electoral system or the effective number of parties.

The second panel in Table 1 examines the relationship between party system polarization and the absolute difference in the Left-Right position of pre/post-election governments. There
are strong effects for module II ($r=.52$) and positive effects for module II ($r=.28$). This presumably occurs because more polarized party choices mean that when voters do change course, the available party choices generate a large shift in government positions.

Finally, we should expect greater volatility in election outcomes in new democracies where party systems are still being institutionalized. The parties’ electoral base tends to be more volatile in new party systems, and there is greater turnover in the list of parties running and winning seats in elections. Gradually, electoral politics stabilizes and change occurs around a long-term equilibrium. The last panel in Table 1 shows that pre/post-election shifts tend to be larger in new democracies than in established democracies ($r=.24$ in module I and module II). Paralleling this finding, volatility is also lower in more affluent nations, which are typically the established democracies. These patterns seem consistent with a political law of entropy that would suggest greater volatility in new democracies which decreases with the institutionalization of the political system and, more specifically, with the development of a stable party system.

These institutional patterns add to our understanding of dynamic representation. In some contexts, adjustment in the course of government tend to be modest and frequent. This is like a captain who constantly makes slight adjustments to keep on course. Such a pattern appears more common in proportional representation systems with low party polarization. In other cases, the ship of state is harder to adjust, so changes in course are often less frequent and larger when they occur. The ideal example of this case would be a majoritarian system with a high level of party polarization. Thus, institutional factors can affect how dynamic representation occurs.
Conclusion

Normative theories of democracy suggest that elections perform two essential functions. First, elections should ensure that governments are accountable for their actions to the citizens who elected them. Second, elections should perform a representation function, by ensuring that the legislature broadly reflects the distribution of opinions within the electorate. The tensions between these two functions are obvious. Research has shown how these tensions vary across different institutional contexts, with majoritarian democracies stressing the accountability function, consensus democracies the representative, with political parties playing a central role in mediating the processes of accountability and representation in modern democracies function (e.g., Thomassen 1994, 2002, 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997).

Embodied in the representation function is the question of ‘who is represented’ as well as the question of ‘how they are represented.’ Both questions are of equal importance, but our concern in this paper is with the latter question. We find that rather than elections acting as a discrete, point-in-time choice, as it is often assumed in theoretical and empirical studies, there is a dynamic relationship between governments and voters. Our findings suggest that democracy is based on a process of ongoing representation that occurs through retrospective as well as prospective evaluations of government performance. People elect a government, but then have the chance to reevaluate this decision at the next election. Democracy works by this dynamic process over time, even if decisions at one election deviate from what was desired or expected.

How and why does this dynamic relationship between voters and governments take place? Specifically, why does the empirical correspondence between citizens and their governments increase when we compare pre- and post-election evaluations? Testing these explanations is beyond the scope of this paper, but five explanations immediately occur as
worthy of further study. The most straightforward explanation is that citizens may change their median position, or there may be differential turnout between groups of voters which will change the aggregate images of parties. We know that low turnout has a range of political consequences (Lutz and Marsh, 2007), so it follows that turnout may influence the left-right position of the electorate as well. A variant of this explanation suggests that if voters change their images of the parties, perhaps in response to changes in leadership, this will in turn alter their median position. Such an explanation would certainly apply to the British Labour Party under Tony Blair or the German SDP under Gerhard Schröder, but whether it applies more generally is an open question.

The other potential explanations focus on exogenous factors, such as a sharp economic downturn, a political scandal or the entry of a charismatic leader onto the political stage (or, indeed, her exit from it). Such changes may lead people to vote against the incumbent government, independently of whether they agree with it in Left-Right terms. Voters may also perceive governments as acting differently in office to what they said they would do before the election. When this occurs, a future election permits voters to correct the course of government. The final explanation points to the policy agenda of parties. The changing salience of political issues between elections, which affects vote shares but not the overall Left-Right positions of the parties, may be a factor. For instance, one election may be concerned with the economy, the next about social welfare. Since elections decide a package of policies, it is inevitable that the issue hierarchy will act like winds buffeting our sailboat of state.

Whatever explanations emerge from future empirical studies, our overall assessment of the health of representative democracy is good. The dynamic that we have identified in the representative linkage between citizens and governments is evidence of a corrective process that operates from one electoral cycle to the next. In the lead-up to an election voters may have tired
of the government, and are unsure which way to turn in the approaching election. The congruence between the two parts of the classic dyad has weakened. The election allows voters to make the correction and to identify more strongly with the newly incumbent government. This continuing process ensures the stability of democratic governments.
Figure 1  Spaniards’ Left-Right Self-Placement and Party Placements

Spain 1996

Spain 2000

Spain 2004

Note: The figure displays the entire Spanish public’s average position for each party, and the median citizen’s position. The post-election governing parties are noted in gray.
Figure 2. Median Citizen and Post-election Government on Left-Right Scale (CSES Module 2)

Source: CSES, Module II

Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average post-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=36.
Figure 3. Citizens and Pre-election Government on Left-Right Scale (CSES Module 2)

Source: CSES, Module II

Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average pre-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=36.
Figure 4. Comparing Median Citizen and Post-election Government on Left-Right Scale (CSES Module 1)

Source: CSES, Module I

Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average post-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=31.
Figure 5. Comparing Citizens and Pre-election Government on Left-Right Scale (CSES Module 1)

Source: CSES, Module I

Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average pre-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=31.
Table 1. Correlates of Pre-/Post-Election Changes in Government Left-Right Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Module I</th>
<th>Module II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electoral System</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR electoral system</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Magnitude</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Number of Parties</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party System</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political System</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Democracy</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNP/capita</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CSES survey data and macro data, assembled by the authors.*

*Note: Correlations are between absolute values of pre-/post-election changes in the Left-Right government position and national characteristics. Significant coefficients at .05 level are denoted by an asterisk. The N is typically 31 nations for module I and 36 nations for module II.*
References


Endnotes

1 Although electoral system differences are not our primary concern, we should note that these new studies now question whether the electoral system significantly affects the overall level of citizen-government congruence (see Powell 2004, 2010).

2 Susan Stokes (1999) examined presidential elections in Latin America and counted nearly a quarter of the elections were followed by a fundamental economic policy shift from the pre-election campaign.

3 This analogy is flawed because of principal-agent problems. Even if the public directs government to move in a certain direction, the member of government may choose to act differently. Perhaps in our nautical jargon a significant gap between principal and agents would be an act of mutiny.

4 There are a few timeseries studies in a single nation that begin to explore the dynamics of representation over time (Holmberg 2010; Thomassen 2009). But the limited number of elections makes it difficult to systematically compare levels the representativeness of governments and how this changes. Other research examines the congruence between public policy preferences and government policy outputs over time (Page and Shapiro 1990; Wlezien and Soroka 2007).

5 We gratefully acknowledge access to these data from the project website (www.cses.org) which has additional documentation on the project, details of the participating countries and the teams, and the questionnaires that have been used in the three modules conducted to date.

6 We excluded non-democracies from our analyses (e.g., Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Hong Kong) and those nations cases where there was insufficient information to compute either the pre- or post-election government scores, e.g., Albania, Israel and the Philippines in module II. Our cross-national database is 31 nations in module I and 36 nations in module II.

7 Many public opinion researchers have questioned whether ordinary people can understand and utilize abstract political concepts like “Left” and “Right” (Converse 1964; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). We agree that abstract ideological thinking as meant by political theorists is largely confined to a small sophisticated stratum of the public; we use the Left-Right scale as a surrogate for political identities and positions on contemporary issues.

8 A common method is to measure the party positions using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (McDonald and Budge 2005; Klingemann et al. 1994). Another alternative is to utilize academic experts to measure party positions (Benoit and Laver 2006). The alternative methods of measuring party positions and empirical agreement of several measures are discussed in Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011, ch. 5).

9 Across this wide range of nations, a relatively high percentage can position the two largest parties; the average is 82 percent across 36 legislative elections in Module II. Taiwan is a clear outlier.
where only a minority uses the Left-Right scale for themselves or the parties. However, in the next lowest case, Romania, two-thirds of the public can locate the two largest parties on the Left-Right scale. Even in multiparty systems, a strikingly large percentage of the public can position some of the smaller minor parties.

10 We use the entire electorate to estimate party positions, but one might use the self-location of party identifiers or the self-location of party voters. These are reasonable alternatives that might yield significant differences in a few instances—often very intriguing cases such as the positioning of extreme parties. Our initial exploration of these alternatives showed high consistency in party locations across these alternative methods. For instance, we compared the Left-Right placement of 115 parties in CSES module II for both the public at-large and those who voted for (or partisans of) each party. The two measures are correlated at .95.

Party positions were not available for Belgium in module II. In this one case we estimated party positions using the Benoit and Laver (2006) party expert survey. 11 Additional evidence of the validity of citizen perceptions comes from comparing these party locations to those derived from other methodologies. In other research we have extensively studied the agreement between citizens’ Left-Right placements of the parties and other methodologies (author citation). For instance, Kenneth Benoit and Michael Laver collected academic experts’ judgments of party positions in 2002-03. A total of 168 parties in 27 nations are included in both the CSES and expert study. Despite different methodologies and a slightly different time reference for both estimates, there is a very strong agreement between where the public and experts locate political parties on the Left-Right scale (r=.89). Another standard methodology estimates party positions from election manifestos. For the 144 parties that overlap with the CSES, there is a .63 correlation in parties’ Left-Right positions. The party manifesto data are valuable, especially for their cross-national and cross-temporal coverage, but these data appear to yield the least consistent measures of party Left-Right positions. For additional information on party positions and alternative methodologies see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011).

12 We want to thank Matt Wall of the Free University of Amsterdam who calculated these government scores for module I, and Steffen Blings of Cornell University who calculated these scores for module II. 13 As positive examples see Holmberg (2010) for Sweden, Thomassen (2009) for the Netherlands, and Stimson (2004) for the United States.

14 The significant deviations in figure 2 are Belgium, Brazil, Italy and New Zealand.

15 We might assume that there is a persisting pattern of congruence across elections: Leftist publics will generally elect leftist governments, and rightist publics will elect rightist governments. And most of the time, governments (or the major coalition parties) are reelected. We compared the Left-Right positions of
pre-election and post-election governments and found they are essentially unrelated ($r=.06$). For more discussion of this point see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011, ch. 8).

16 Although we generally find close agreement between voters and their parties in Left-Right terms, the parties at both poles tend to hold more ideological positions than their voters. So governments of the Left and Right are also likely to be more ideological than their own supporters.

17 Although not intuitively obvious, this measure is equivalent to the volatility in the representation gap between pre-election and post-election governments. This is because the position of the public is the same in both calculations, so only the government’s position changes.

18 For a discussion of party system polarization, its measurement and effects see Dalton (2008, 2010). We also considered the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) as a correlate of pre/post-election differences. The ENEP is not significantly related to the absolute difference of pre/post-governments ($r=.07$), which further indicates that it is the diversity of parties not their numbers that affects governmental change in Left-Right terms.