

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Measurement of Territorial Homogeneity:
A Test on Comparative Electoral Data since 1832

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the competitive strategies of political parties – aiming at maximising electoral support – in the early years of democratic elections. By spreading through geographical space in search of votes, candidates and parties challenged adversaries in their traditional strongholds, a process which led to the reduction of the number of safe seats and uncontested constituencies. Evidence includes nine European countries from the nineteenth century until World War I and is based on electoral results by candidates at the level of single constituencies. Results attest for an increasing competition among parties and candidates, and illustrate the analogy between competitive strategies of parties in the geographical and ideological space. The paper further discusses the impact of the enlargement of suffrage and electoral formulas on entry barriers for new parties in the electoral arena.

INTRODUCTION: THREE STORIES OF “SILENT ELECTIONS”¹

At the first Danish election to the *Folketing* in 1849 (the lower house of the *Rigsdag* newly introduced under the influence of the French February Revolution of 1848), the single seat returned by the constituency of Odder in the county of Århus was won by Geert H. Winter, a *magister artis* of the *Venstre* or Liberal Party. Almost 30 years later, at the general election of 1876, the same candidate (who in the meantime had become Dr. phil. Winter) won the same seat again. In between, 13 general elections had taken place, and G. Winter had always been elected in the same constituency. He had never been opposed by any other candidate (except in 1852), so that actual elections did rarely take place in Odder for almost three decades. He had always been “elected by acclamation” (*valgt ved kåring*), a procedure adopted in case of unopposed candidates. Only in 1879 did teacher N. Guldbrandsen (also *Venstre*) dare to challenge G. Winter but was defeated with 1,051 votes against 368. G. Winter was able to win two more elections, but was finally defeated in 1884.

Such cases were not limited to single-member constituencies. Since 1832 (the first election after the First Reform Bill that carried out the largest seat redistribution and constituency changes in the United Kingdom), the county constituency of Lancashire-Northern returned two seats to Westminster. Both seats remained uncontested until 1865. Actual voting did therefore never take place before 1868 (the first election after the Second Reform Bill of 1866). Out of nine general elections, in seven elections the two seats were split between one conservative and one liberal candidate. In two elections – 1837 and 1841 – the seats were won by two conservatives. The candidates were however always the same but Hon. E.G.S. Stanley – already a member of parliament at the time of Dissolution in 1832 – changed from liberal to conservative.

Similar situations arouse under different electoral formulas. The *arrondissement* of Sint-Niklaas in the Eastern Flanders between 1847 and 1892 returned three seats with a two-ballot formula and multiple vote. In 13 elections out of 16 of this period (both partial and general),² the *Parti catholique* won all seats with 100 per cent of the valid votes at the first ballot. Only in 1848 did the

¹ This paper is based on a collection of electoral data carried out at the *Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung* (University of Mannheim) and published in the form of a handbook and CD-ROM (Caramani 2000). I wish to renew my gratitude to all those persons who contributed to that project, especially Peter Flora and Franz Kraus. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am particularly indebted to Stefano Bartolini.

² Only five general elections took place in Belgium from 1847 to 1898. The remaining 24 elections were partial with half of the *Chambre des représentants* renewed every two years with two alternating sets of constituencies.

Parti libéral win one seat with 18,57 per cent of the votes at the first ballot. Until 1894 no other candidate contested that constituency and never a second ballot was needed to allocate the three seats in the remaining elections.

Electoral competition between candidates and parties emerged laboriously. On the one hand, the nineteenth century witnessed the most striking changes in political life with the transition from absolutist to parliamentary regimes, and with the progressive appearance of the masses on the political stage. Parliaments, that in many cases had not been convened since the end of the Middle Ages, were reintroduced. Even though in some cases they were still based on estate representation, in all political systems these bodies soon transformed into modern parliaments based on territorial representation as we know them today.³

Yet – as prestigious contemporary observers like Tocqueville and Lampedusa noted – democratic revolutions did not lead to immediate changes. The systems that developed in the nineteenth century remained to a large extent non-competitive, and prolonged the control by elites and notables of the past on local political life. Competition in constituencies did not appear suddenly in the aftermath of democratic reforms, so that powerful local personalities remained for long unopposed. The early history of elections is full of examples such as those above, with seats solidly in the hands of the same person and – later, with the development of party structures – with opposition parties long not daring to adventure onto unfriendly territories.

The rules of the game themselves were not favourable for competition. The franchise remained long restricted through census and capacity requirements, the abolition of which has been continuous but hard-fought. In some cases elections remained indirect or otherwise unequal with few voters having the right to cast more votes than most others on the basis of taxation, property, literacy, and so on.⁴ The electoral possibilities to challenge established elites were therefore limited, and under such voting conditions the opposition to notables could hardly express electorally. In several countries, the control over areas by given political groups was further reinforced by cultural elements, such as linguistic or religious affiliations or political subcultures. Before geographical

³ This occurred according to different timing: Belgium 1830, Luxembourg 1841, Netherlands 1848, several German states 1848, Sweden 1866, Iceland 1874, Habsburg Empire and Finland 1907. For other countries the transition occurred from periods of absolute regimes without any type of representative body (for example, Denmark 1849) and/or simultaneously with independence from foreign domination or national unification (for example, Italy).

⁴ For example in Belgium with the *vote plural* from 1893 to 1914. In Norway voting remained indirect until 1903.

mobility – through industrialisation and urbanisation, and the development of communication – ethno-linguistic and religious strongholds could not easily be eroded. Majoritarian electoral formulas, that in their many variations were employed in all countries during the nineteenth century, constituted a powerful hindrance to competition. The high thresholds for representation these formulas set, especially when combined with single-member constituencies, discouraged candidates to contest constituencies controlled by antagonists. In several cases, only with the introduction of PR did incentives become high enough for attempting at breaking the monopoly of representation of given political groups in given areas.

This paper shows empirically and comparatively the birth and the historical growth of electoral competition in nine European countries from the nineteenth century until World War I. Using constituency-level electoral data, this paper describes parties' strategy aiming at maximising their electoral support by expanding through geographical space and challenging electoral areas controlled by adversary parties. The analysis further evaluates the impact on the birth of party competition of the “massification of politics”: the extension of voting rights to larger sectors of the society, the entry of new mass parties (in particular social democrats) as a consequence of the joint impact of enfranchisement and the Industrial Revolution, and the change of the electoral formula from majoritarian to PR.

ELECTORAL COMPETITION

From a historical perspective, the definition of electoral competition must start from its basic aspect. Competition is in the first place a matter of *contestedness*: there is competition when there are at least two candidates for one seat.⁵ On the contrary, there is no competition in those constituencies in which the number of candidates equals the number of seats to be returned (for example, one candidate for one seat). The majoritarian electoral formulas in force during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in all European countries, were mostly based on single-member constituencies. A constituency is therefore competitive insofar as the single seat is contested by at least two candidates. It follows that the higher the number of contested constituencies, the higher the degree of competition.

⁵ This concept refers to the first of four concepts introduced by Stefano Bartolini, *contestability*, in regard to party competition (see Bartolini 1999 and 2000). The concept of contestability points to the extent to which conditions for the electoral market to be open are met, that is, to the thresholds for entry for candidates and parties. The concept of *contestedness* points to the degree to which elections are contested once the main barriers to entry have been removed. The former refers to whether or not it is possible to contest elections, whereas the latter to how much elections are actually contested. Contestability does not say whether or not and to what extent are elections contested in reality.

Such a definition based on a high number of contested constituencies implies a close relationship with the *territorial spread of parties across constituencies*. For a high number of contested constituencies to arise, parties must diffuse through territory to challenge constituencies dominated by other parties. A regionalised party system would on the contrary indicate the existence of non-competitive areas, with the domination of one party. The competition in a political system, therefore, increases with the transformation of territorial – or sectional – cleavages into non-territorial – or functional – cleavages.

However, even in the case of a contested constituency the level of competition is low if there is a party or a candidate dominating all others. Beside the contestedness, therefore, a competitive situation arises with parties receiving an evenly matched support and with equivalent chances to win the seat. By contrast, the larger the distance between the elected and non-elected candidate(s), the lower the competition in a constituency in terms of *marginality*, that is, when the shift from one party or candidate to the other of a reduced amount of votes is sufficient to modify the outcome.⁶

The degree of competition in a system is therefore also closely related to the *degree of homogeneity across territory of party strength*. The link between a territorially uniform electoral support for parties and the competitiveness of elections was first established by Schattschneider in his study on American politics (1960).⁷ Schattschneider shows that the marked sectionalism of American voting behaviour – with the Republican Party concentrated in the North East and Middle West, and the Democratic Party in the South – “curtailed competition” (1960: 84). The strong territorial basis of the American political system after 1892 caused a considerable lowering of the rate of competition. Only border states between the solid sections were characterised by a certain equality between parties’ electoral strength. This situation radically changed in 1932 when the high degree of territoriality dissipated and a national political alignment replaced sectional cleavages. The electoral support of the two major parties diffused throughout the national territory producing a two-party system all over the country. This produced “a very great extension of the area of party competition” (Schattschneider 1960: 90).

⁶ For Stokes the degree of competition is determined by two factors: 1) the scope of change between two elections, that is, the amount of shifted votes and 2) the size of the majority, that is, the margin or distance between the two major parties (Stokes 1967). Sundquist (1973: 333–40), defines a competitive party system as one characterised by an equal balance between parties, a roughly 50/50 per cent balance between the two parties. See, along the same lines, Key (1964).

⁷ See especially Chapter 5 on ‘The Nationalization of Politics’.

A territorially homogeneous electoral behaviour seems therefore to be a necessary condition for a competitive political system. Several other authors have established a close link between the homogeneity of territorial configuration of voting behaviour and the degree of competitiveness of political systems, to the point of making the latter an indicator of the former. This perspective has namely been adopted by Urwin in the analysis of the territorial structures of party support in Germany and the United Kingdom (Urwin 1974, 1982a,b). However, Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale have noted that “there appears to be some confusion between increasing nationalization in this sense of convergence in the levels of support and increasing competitiveness of the party system. These phenomena are not necessarily connected” (1984: 81).⁸ It is only if a 50/50 configuration is diffused in many constituencies that the rate of competition increases, both locally and nationally.⁹

This paper is limited to the analysis of electoral competition in terms of contestedness of constituencies and seats as engendered by the spread of candidates and parties across territory. It will be the task of a second paper to analyse empirically the growth of competition in terms of marginality among candidates and of homogeneity of support across regions.

⁸ If one assumes that in a two-party system Party A receives around 80 per cent of the votes in every constituency and that Party B receives around 20 per cent of the vote in every constituency, it is clear that, although the support of both parties is homogenous, this configuration does not produce a competitive type of party system.

⁹ As Schattschneiders writes, in case of territorial segmentation of the support, even though the two parties are nationally evenly matched and even though the shift of support between the two elections is of great amount, it does not necessarily follow that alternation in power occurs: ‘a general shift of the vote has little effect, because the margin of superiority of each of the parties in its own sectional base is so great that no ordinary movement of voters can overturn the alignment’. By contrast, in cases of ‘national alignment’, a minor shift of votes might be sufficient. It is therefore the change from a territorial to a functional cleavage that creates a situation in which a minor shift of votes produces alternation in power.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Countries and Time Period

Up to World War I, starting with the first elections available according to countries, electoral systems varied a great deal among countries, mixing features of repeated-ballot systems with direct/indirect vote, in some cases open voting, and estate representation. Furthermore, a large amount of information, especially concerning the party affiliation of candidates, is missing. It is therefore impossible to carry out a thorough exploration. This “pilot” analysis considers instead nine European countries with mostly direct majoritarian electoral systems:

- *Great Britain (1832–1935)*: plurality formula in single- and multi-member constituencies; *Ireland (1832–1910)* which is considered as a separate case; *Denmark (1849–1913)*: plurality formula in single-member constituencies;
- *Belgium (1847–98)*, *Germany (1871–1912)*, *The Netherlands (1888–1913)*, and *Norway (1906–18)*: two-ballot formulas in mostly single-member constituencies; In *Switzerland (1848–1917)* a three-ballot, then two-ballot system (since 1900), was used.
- *Iceland (1874–1914)*: three-ballot system in single- and two-member constituencies until 1903, then plurality, but no party affiliation of candidates for the whole of the period;¹⁰

The starting point of the period of time varies for each country according to 1) patterns of state formation, 2) the development of free elections, and 3) the availability of data sources.¹¹ For all countries the analysis stops with the last

¹⁰ The 1915 Danish election as well as the 1917 Dutch election have been excluded from analysis. In The Netherlands in 1917 an agreement between parties was reached so that the distribution of seats in parliament would remain unchanged. For this reason, second ballots display all uncontested constituencies. In Denmark in 1915 (the last election before the introduction of male universal suffrage) there were 104 uncontested constituencies because of the war.

¹¹ For these reasons other countries are excluded from the analysis. In Austria representation by estates (five *curiae*) was abolished after the 1900/01 election. In Finland the first election after the abolition of estates was held in 1907 (still under Russian rule). In France reliable data are available only since 1910 with the adoption of the new *Règlement de la Chambre* (allowing representatives to belong to no more than one parliamentary group). In Italy data by parties since 1861 (unification) are sporadic, not last because of the fluid nature of the party system. Furthermore, the aggregation of results by party affiliation (regions) does not allow for a significant analysis. In Greece elections are registered only since 1926 after the abolition of lead ballots and in Luxembourg since 1919 (election to the constituent assembly). Data are

election before the introduction of PR – except for the United Kingdom that never introduced PR and for which we present data until 1935.

In several countries, democratic institutions developed under foreign domination before independence. This is the case of Norway which was under Swedish rule from 1815 until 1905. Norwegian elections are however considered since 1906, the first direct election to the *Storting* after independence from Sweden.¹² The same applies to the Icelandic parliament (*Alþing*) that was granted direct and independent powers from the Denmark in 1874 (although full independence was reached only in 1944). Ireland returned representatives to Westminster parliament until 1918, but is considered here as a separate case because of the divergent development of its party system after the 1880s.

In the case of Belgium, independence from the Low Countries and the introduction of parliamentary life with competitive elections were two parallel processes. Elections to the *Chambre des représentants* were held since 1830 but registered only since 1847–48 in correspondence to the wave of democratisation that invested the whole of Europe in those years. Elections are registered since 1848 also in the cases of Denmark and Switzerland. In the former case, the date corresponds to the transition from the absolute regime, whereas in the latter it corresponds to the creation of the federal state and the unification on national ground of cantonal electoral laws. Unification is the starting date for the German Empire (elections from 1871 until 1912, the last election before World War I).

In several of the mentioned cases, the starting date corresponds to the transition from representation by estates (inherited from the Middle Ages) to general parliamentary representation. This transition occurred in 1848 in the case of Dutch elections to the *Tweede Kamer*. Data, however, are available only since 1888 in correspondence with the constitutional revision that reduced census requirements and abolished “double constituencies”.¹³ Representation by estates did not exist in England and 1832 is the date of the First Reform Bill and the first registered elections (the earliest case of the analysis).¹⁴

fragmented and unreliable for Portugal and Spain before the transitions to democracy in the 1970s despite longer periods of parliamentary life during the nineteenth century.

¹² Present-day spelling is adopted for proper names throughout the article (for example, *Storting* instead of *Storthing*). For historical spelling see Caramani (2000: 16).

¹³ Direct elections in two-member constituencies with one representative elected for four years every two years.

¹⁴ See Caramani (2000: 1017–75) for complete official and secondary sources.

Data

Data required are election results by parties and candidates at the level of single constituencies. Data used for analysis in this paper are those published in machine-readable form in the CD-ROM which accompanies the handbook on *Elections in Western Europe since 1815. Electoral Results by Constituencies* (Caramani 2000).¹⁵ Figures are limited to general elections and to the lower houses of parliaments.¹⁶ No by-elections are considered, but staggered elections (*élections partielles*) are included in the analysis in the case of the Belgian *Chambre des représentants* (with half of the house renewed every two years).

Data include for each election the number of persons entitled to vote, voters and valid votes. They further include the number of votes for each party and/or candidate for each ballot if applicable. Information further includes the number of uncontested constituencies. All this information is available for single constituencies, although for some of them it is missing.¹⁷

Indicators

Of the two interrelated dimensions of party competition selected above – contestedness and territorial spread – the first has been considered in a number of studies (Rose and Urwin 1975; Craig 1977; Cornford 1970; Urwin 1982a). During the early periods of electoral development, plurality systems were characterised by a high number of uncontested constituencies, that is, constituencies in which the number of candidates equals the number of seats to be returned so that no election is needed. The more uncontested constituencies,

¹⁵ The CD-ROM gives results by candidates and parties at the level of single constituencies which have been collected and computerised since the earliest elections according to standard rules. Data are available in different programmes (SPSS, SAS, Excel), formats (absolute figures, row and column percentage distributions), as well as structures: for analysing data (horizontal time dimension), building time series (vertical time dimension), and matching socio-economic data (mixed structure).

¹⁶ At the Icelandic parliament (*Alþingi*), from 1874 until 1902 of the 30 elected representatives, six constituted the upper house (*Efri Deild*) together with six members appointed by the king, and 26 the lower house (*Neðri Deild*). From 1903 until 1915 of the 34 elected representatives, eight constituted the upper house with the six appointed by the king. Similarly, in Norway one-quarter of the elected representatives to the *Folketing* constitutes the upper house (*Odelsting*) and three-quarters the lower house (*Lagting*).

¹⁷ The main missing cases are data for the 1912 German election for some parties (information for three to 329 *Wahlkreise* out of 397), for 16 constituencies (out of 100) in the 1888–94 Dutch elections, and for the six cantons (out of 25) in which voting was open from 1848 until 1869 in Switzerland.

the less competition given that uncontested constituencies are dominated by one party, or candidate, in the absence of competitors.

The use of such a simple indicator, however, varies depending upon 1) the electoral system (namely the magnitude of the constituencies), and 2) the available information, namely whether or not the party affiliation of candidates is known. Results for early periods are often given for candidates without the indication of the party affiliation. Table 1 gives a general overview of the electoral systems in force in the various countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the availability of party information.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, all electoral systems were based on majority rule. However, an important difference concerns whether majoritarian systems were based on single-member or multi-member constituencies. In electoral systems based on single-member constituencies, the number of constituencies equals the number of seats, and therefore the number of uncontested constituencies equals the number of unopposed seats. In most cases, however, single-member constituencies were combined with two-member or multi-member constituencies (for example, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, in Sweden, or in Iceland from 1903 until 1914). In systems based on multi-member constituencies, the number of seats exceeds the number of constituencies.

There is therefore a distinction to be made between uncontested *constituencies* and unopposed *seats*.¹⁸ In several cases two or more candidates of different parties were unopposed. It was frequent in the United Kingdom that, in two-member constituencies, one conservative and one liberal were unopposed.¹⁹ In these cases it is necessary to distinguish between the number of uncontested constituencies and the number of unopposed seats won by each party, the sum of which is usually higher than the number of overall uncontested multi-member constituencies. It can be misleading to limit the count to uncontested constituencies (see Rose and Urwin 1975). Since the two or more seats in the same constituency can be won unopposed by *different* parties, the territorial spread of parties does not necessarily cause a lowering of uncontested constituencies.

¹⁸ To stress terminologically the distinction between constituencies and seats, we will speak of ‘uncontested constituencies’ and ‘unopposed seats’ or ‘candidates’ or ‘parties’.

¹⁹ On the contrary, in 1859 it arrived that all seats of the four-member constituency of City of London were won unopposed by four liberal candidates.

**Table 1. Electoral systems and party information in nine countries:
1832–World War I**

| Country | Period | Number of elections | Electoral formula | Constituency magnitude | Party affiliation of candidates |
|----------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Belgium | 1847–1898 | 29 | Two-ballot | SM / MM | Available |
| Denmark | 1849–1915 | 31 | Plurality | SM | Available |
| Germany | 1871–1912 | 13 | Two-ballot | SM | Available |
| Iceland | 1874–1902 1903–1914 | 11 | Three-ballot Plurality | SM / 2M | Not available |
| Ireland | 1832–1910 | 20 | Plurality | SM / MM | Available |
| Netherlands | 1888–1913 | 9 | Two-ballot | SM | Available |
| Norway | 1906–1918 | 13 | Two-ballot | SM | Available |
| Switzerland | 1848–1899 1902–1917 | 24 | Three-ballot Two-ballot | SM / MM | Available |
| United Kingdom | 1832–1935 | 20 | Plurality | SM / MM | Available |

Notes: The 29 Belgian elections include five general elections (1848, 1857, 1864, 1870, and 1890) and 24 partial renewals. In 1870 one general and one partial election were held. In Denmark two elections in the same year were held in 1853, 1864, and 1881. The election to the Constituent Assembly of 1848 is not included. In Switzerland, party affiliation of candidates available only at the level of cantons. In the United Kingdom (with Ireland) in 1910 two elections were held (January and December).

Legend: SM = Single-member constituencies; MM = Multi-member constituencies; 2M = Two-member constituencies.

Although the distinction between single-member and multi-member constituencies applies also to repeated-ballot formulas (two-ballot and three-ballot),²⁰ with these formulas it is further possible to operationalise the level of competition by:

²⁰ In Germany, The Netherlands, and Norway (1906–1918) the two-ballot formula was combined with single-member constituencies; whereas in Belgium, Iceland (1874–1902), and Switzerland the two-ballot (or three-ballot) formula was based on both single-member and multi-member constituencies. In the first (one or two) ballots the absolute majority of the valid votes (50 per cent) is required to be elected. If none, or not all, candidates are elected in the first (or first two) ballots, a second or third ballot is carried out (called exhaustive ballot). In the ‘runoff formula’, the exhaustive ballot is limited to the top two candidates of the previous ballot, so that an absolute majority will necessarily occur. In multi-member constituencies the number of candidates admitted to the exhaustive ballot is twice the number of seats (still) to be allocated. In the ‘mixed absolute majority-plurality formula’, the absolute

- counting the number of uncontested constituencies at second ballot (the higher the number of such constituencies, the lower competition);²¹ or
- counting the number of constituencies in which a second ballot was necessary for electing a representative (the higher the number of such constituencies, the higher competition).

For both single- and multi-member constituencies, because of the frequent redistrictings and redistributions – and also for the sake of cross-national comparison – figures below are mostly based on the number of uncontested constituencies as a *percentage* of the total number of constituencies.²²

EVIDENCE

Plurality Systems

A case of pure single-member plurality system is Denmark from 1849 until 1913.²³ Until 1898 secrecy was not provided and the electoral committee decided, by looking at the crowd, whether or not a candidate could be declared elected on the basis of show of hands. In case of uncertainty a roll-call election was carried out. In the first case (*valgt ved kårning*, elected by acclamation), no counting was carried out. This does not mean that the constituency was uncontested. Sources do not allow to establish whether or not it was. When candidates were unopposed, voters could ask to vote either “yes” or “no” for the unopposed candidate. This vote too was carried out by show of hand and, again, only in case of ambiguity a counting was performed. After 1901 (when secret ballot was introduced) if there was a single candidate, elections did not take place unless 50 voters asked for the “yes/no” vote. Cases of “elections by acclamation”, that is, for which it is not known whether a candidate was unopposed or not, have been counted as uncontested constituencies since the fact that no count was needed demonstrates the “uncontestedness” of that constituency (with only marginal opposition candidates).

majority is required at the first one or two ballots, while plurality is sufficient in the exhaustive ballot. Access to subsequent ballots may be determined by a percentage of votes in previous ballots.

²¹ To do this, cases in which the exhaustive ballot is uncontested because of the withdraw of candidates before election must be added.

²² The total number of constituencies for which data are missing has been subtracted from the total number of constituencies.

²³ In Denmark elections between 1849 and 1915 were held in 100–13 single-member *valgkredse*.

As it appears from the left-hand graph in Figure 1, the number of uncontested constituencies decreases continuously from 1853 to 1905. Uncontested constituencies displayed in the graph include mostly those won by *Højre* and *Venstre*, the two main parties of the Danish system until World War I. Other parties won unopposed seats only sporadically. These parties started to appear in 1873 (the Social Democrats contested one constituency) but the system becomes significantly more competitive during the 1890s with the appearance of the United Liberals (*Forenede Venstre*), the Moderates (*Forhandlende Venstre*), the *Radikale Venstre* and the agrarians (since 1905). This shows that there are less and less constituencies dominated by one on the two main parties – *Højre* or *Venstre* – in which the other is absent, indicating a clear and progressive increase in the rate of competition in Danish electoral life.

Let us now turn to a typical case of multi-member plurality elections – that of the United Kingdom since 1832 which includes also Ireland until 1918.²⁴ Constituencies returned up to four seats although, through the mechanism of limited voting, in these constituencies a maximum of three votes could be cast. Variations occurred over time with “redistributions” of seats: the number of seats returned by constituencies was changed and, in some cases, constituencies were disfranchised because of corrupt practices.

As for Denmark, the party system was dominated by two main parties: Conservatives and Liberals. By the mid-nineteenth century, Chartist and later Liberal Unionist candidates started to challenge these parties but the impact of “third” parties on the party system format was restrained until the appearance of Labour candidates towards the end of the century. In Ireland, Conservatives and Liberals were challenged since the 1870s by Nationalists and Unionists. Since the 1880s, conservative candidates ceased to contest Irish constituencies and the Liberals underwent a rapid decline (although they continued to contest Irish constituencies until 1918).

As it is shown in the right-hand graph of Figure 1, Ireland and Great Britain present two different patterns. On the one hand, the number of uncontested constituencies declines in Great Britain indicating a progressive increase in the rate of competition until the 1930s. On the other hand, in Ireland the movement is more erratic and does not give rise to a clear trend. This

²⁴ In Great Britain the number of parliamentary constituencies varied between 333 in 1832 and 585 in 1935. For Ireland, considered separately for 1832–1910, the number of constituencies is 64–66 and 101 since 1885. Because figures for Britain do not include the number of Irish uncontested constituencies, they differ from those presented by Craig (1977: 624) and Urwin (1982a).

difference is due to the persistent partisan structure in Britain and to the radical changes that occurred in the Irish party system.

In Britain the Conservative and Liberal parties were never challenged until the growth of the Labour Party (see also Figure 5 below). In Ireland, by contrast, the decrease of the number of uncontested constituencies between 1874 and 1885 is caused by the appearance of two new antagonists: the Nationalists and the Unionists. Their presence in most constituencies made them competitive and, therefore, the overall number of uncontested constituencies declined rapidly. By 1885 nationalist candidates were mainly unopposed increasing the overall number of uncontested constituencies for that particular election. In 1892, however, the Anti-Parnell Nationalists transformed again Irish constituencies into competitive ones by opposing the Parnell Nationalists. In 1895 the Anti-Parnell Nationalists were mainly uncontested. Since 1890 the (newly unified) Nationalists won the majority of the constituencies unopposedly making again the system non competitive.²⁵

Constituencies vs. Seats

What are the figures when we consider seats besides constituencies? Table 2 gives the number of uncontested seats for the first, second, third and fourth candidates for both Conservatives and Liberals in Britain.

The first columns for both Conservatives and Liberals show that one candidate has been declared elected because unopposed in his constituency. In 1832 this happened in 44 (out of 335) constituencies for the Conservatives and in 81 constituencies for the Liberals. Among the 44 constituencies in which a conservative candidate has been elected, in six of them also a second conservative candidate was elected unopposed. Similarly, out of the 81 liberal uncontested constituencies, in 24 a second candidate has been elected unopposed. The total number of uncontested *constituencies* in which candidates won an unopposed seat, therefore, appears in the first column. The remaining columns inform about the additional seats won by unopposed candidates in the same constituencies (for example in 1859 in one constituency four liberal candidates were elected unopposed). The sum of the columns, therefore, gives the total number of unopposed *seats* won in an election.

The table indicates in the first place that constituencies in which more than two candidates of the same party were elected unopposed are rare (that is, third and fourth candidate column). Furthermore, there is a sudden drop of

²⁵ Only a small number of uncontested constituencies was won by the Unionists.

constituencies in which two candidates of the same party were elected unopposed after the Third Reform Bill (1884–85) which reduced the number of two-member constituencies in favour of single-member constituencies. Also constituencies in which two candidates of the same party were elected unopposed became rare.

What is more important, however, is the total number of constituencies in which candidates of *different* parties were elected unopposed. This information is obtained by subtracting from the sum of the constituencies in which either at least one conservative or one liberal candidate have been elected unopposed the overall number of uncontested constituencies. In 1832, for example, there were 125 constituencies in which either a conservative or a liberal had been elected unopposed. However, in total there were 104 uncontested constituencies. Therefore, in 21 constituencies both parties were present with unopposed candidates.²⁶

Figure 2 shows the evolution of “shared constituencies”. Shared constituencies in which both a conservative and a liberal were unopposed drops to zero in 1885 after the Third Reform Bill, which carried out a large redistribution of seats.²⁷ Most multi-member constituencies were abolished and replaced by single-member constituencies. For this reason the overall number of constituencies increases from 352 to 542. As can be seen, the percentage of shared constituencies is quite limited, reaching a maximum of 45 in 1859 (12.8 per cent of the total number of constituencies and 22.8 per cent of the number of uncontested constituencies). The rest of uncontested constituencies were either single-member constituencies in which there was one unopposed candidate or two-member constituencies in which there were unopposed candidates of the *same* party. The fact that seats within the same constituency were rarely shared between the candidates of different parties reinforces previous indications of a low rate of competition. Most constituencies – either single- or multi-member – attest for the presence of one party only.

²⁶ Such constituencies are obviously two- or multi-member constituencies.

²⁷ Over the entire period, figures include only conservative/liberal unopposed seats.

Figure 1. Percentage of uncontested constituencies in the United Kingdom and Denmark

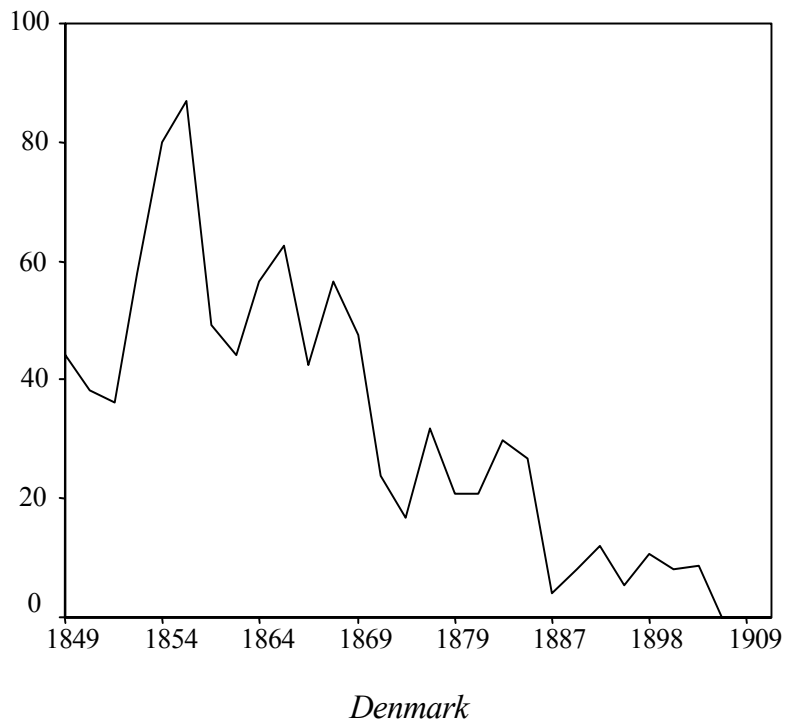
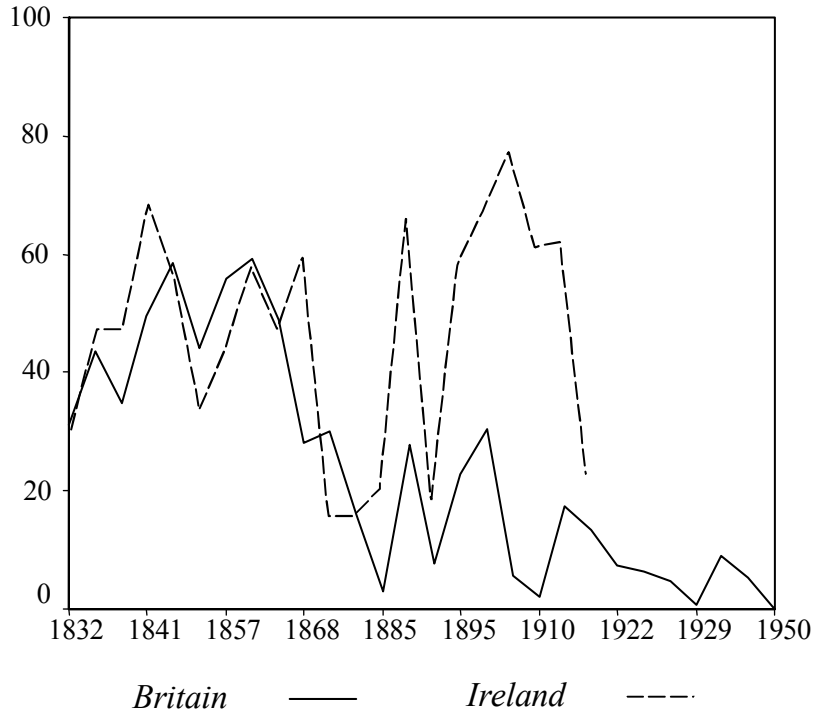


Table 2. Uncontested constituencies and unopposed seats in the United Kingdom: 1832–1910

| Election year | <i>Conservatives</i> | | | | <i>Liberals</i> | | | | | <i>Total</i> | |
|---------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| | 1st candidate | 2nd candidate | 3rd candidate | Total Conservative seats | 1st candidate | 2nd candidate | 3rd candidate | 4th candidate | Total Liberal seats | Unopposed seats | Uncontested constituencies |
| 1832 | 44 | 6 | 0 | 50 | 81 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 105 | 155 | 104 |
| 1835 | 80 | 20 | 0 | 100 | 100 | 26 | 0 | 0 | 126 | 226 | 146 |
| 1837 | 76 | 26 | 0 | 102 | 68 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 81 | 183 | 116 |
| 1841 | 123 | 56 | 4 | 183 | 70 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 83 | 266 | 166 |
| 1847 | 123 | 54 | 2 | 179 | 105 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 126 | 305 | 196 |
| 1852 | 99 | 42 | 2 | 143 | 65 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 78 | 221 | 147 |
| 1857 | 98 | 36 | 0 | 134 | 116 | 33 | 0 | 0 | 149 | 283 | 186 |
| 1859 | 115 | 41 | 0 | 156 | 127 | 30 | 1 | 1 | 159 | 315 | 197 |
| 1865 | 82 | 32 | 2 | 116 | 110 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 132 | 248 | 164 |
| 1868 | 43 | 22 | 0 | 65 | 69 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 80 | 145 | 100 |
| 1874 | 72 | 44 | 0 | 116 | 47 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 51 | 167 | 106 |
| 1880 | 29 | 23 | 0 | 52 | 36* | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 55 | 56 |
| 1885 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 12 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 19 | 17 |
| 1886 | 83 | 4 | 0 | 87 | 37 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 38 | 125 | 150 |
| 1892 | 22 | 2 | 0 | 24 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 35 | 42 |
| 1895 | 98 | 3 | 0 | 101 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 110 | 124 |
| 1900 | 121 | 4 | 0 | 125 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22 | 147 | 165 |
| 1906 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 26 | 31 |
| 1910 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 10 |
| 1910 | 51 | 2 | 0 | 53 | 31 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 84 | 95 |

Notes: Irish constituencies (1832–1918) not included. In 1910 two elections (January and December); (*) Among which one Liberal/Labour candidate. These were nominees of Liberal associations but “campaigning mainly on trade union and labour issues” (Craig 1977: xv).

Two-Ballot Systems

Among the countries under scrutiny using a two-ballot formula, the number of uncontested constituencies at first ballots is very low.²⁸ To assess the emergence of national competitive patterns in two-ballot formulas, therefore, the number of constituencies in which a second ballot was necessary for electing a representative is a better indicator: the more constituencies in which a second ballot was required, the higher competition. For comparative purposes (through both space and time), we use the percentage of constituencies in which a second ballot was carried out on the total number of constituencies.

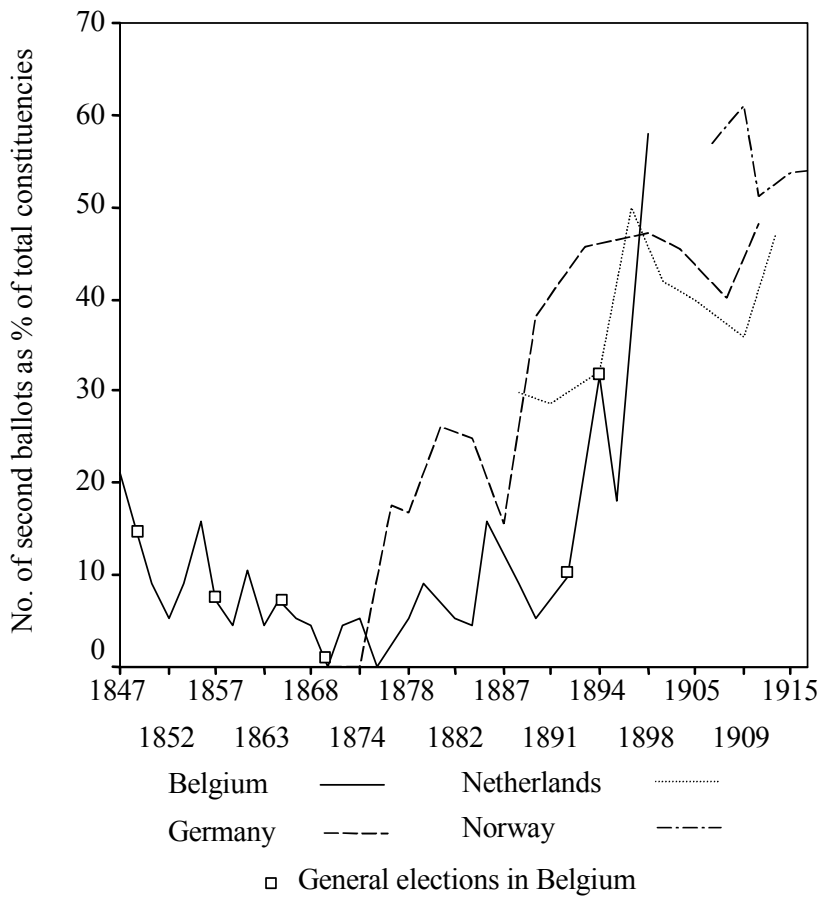
Among our cases, two-ballot formulas were used mostly in single-member constituencies.²⁹ As it appears in Figure 3, the longest trend is that of Belgium for which both partial and general elections have been considered. The two types of elections display a parallel trend: elections held alternatively in 19 and 22 *arrondissements* and general renewals of the *Chambre des représentants* are characterised by a low number of second ballots until the early 1880s. Then, this number increases suddenly to a high of almost 60 per cent of the constituencies indicating an increase of the competitiveness in the decades preceding the introduction of male universal suffrage in 1893 and PR before the 1898 election.

The same trend characterises the *Reich* period of two-ballot elections in single-member constituencies from 1871 until 1912, the last election before the Weimar constitution: the number of constituencies in which no candidate reached the absolute majority in the first ballot increases from zero in 1871 and 1874 to almost 50 per cent during the 1880s and 1890s. As for Belgium, therefore, the increase was sudden and rapid. For The Netherlands and Norway the period of time is shorter. After the abolition of “double constituencies” in The Netherlands in 1888, elections were held in single-member *kiesdistricten*. During the period until World War I the percentage of second ballots is similar to those of Belgium and Germany during the same period.

²⁸ The number of uncontested constituencies in Belgium was one in 1848 and one in 1894 (both at the first ballot). In The Netherlands, the number of uncontested constituencies was also low: from a minimum of five in 1913 to a maximum of 11 in 1901/09.

²⁹ In Belgium elections were held in 41 *arrondissements* during 1847–98 then grouped in 30 constituencies in 1900. In Germany the 382 *Wahlkreise* of 1871 were raised to 397 in 1874 with the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. In The Netherlands the number of *kiesdistricten* was 100 over the entire 1888–1917 period. During 1906–18 elections in Norway were held in 123–26 *landdistrikter* and *kjøstæder* (rural and urban districts). Especially for Germany and The Netherlands, constituencies for which information is missing have been excluded.

Figure 3. Percentage of constituencies in which a second ballot was held in Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, and Norway: 1847–1918



In the case of The Netherlands, it is interesting to consider the number of constituencies in which second ballots, rather than first ballots, were uncontested. These are cases in which one of the two run-off candidates withdraws, which occurred often during the whole of the 1888–1917 period: from a minimum of 50 out of 100 constituencies in 1897, to a maximum of 63 in 1909. Although, therefore, in many constituencies no candidate could be declared elected on the basis of the first ballot, in most of them the difference in terms of votes between the two run-off candidates was high enough to lead one of the two candidates to withdraw.

From 1815 until 1903 Norway voted with an indirect system: *valgmandsvalgene* (election of great electors) and *storthingsvalgene* (election of representatives by great electors). Elections became direct in 1906 (two-ballot formula). Already since the 1880s, however, did the two main parties cover almost 100 per cent of the constituencies (at least at the level of *valgmandsvalgene*). This competitive pattern appears therefore also in the

number of second ballots needed for electing representatives in the 123–26 *valgkredsen* between 1906 and 1918, the last election before the introduction of PR. As it appears in Figure 3, the number of second ballots as a percentage of the total number of constituencies is between 50 and 60 per cent, a little higher than the percentages of Germany and The Netherlands.

Unknown Party Affiliations

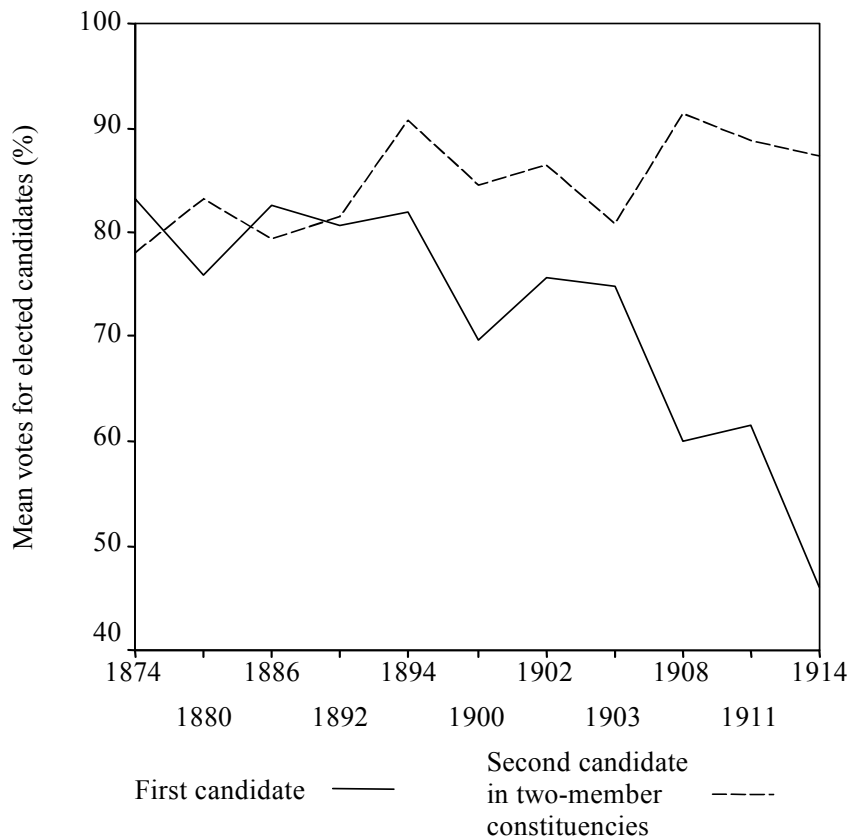
For Iceland (1874–1914) information concerning the party affiliation of candidates is missing.³⁰ For Iceland, the only available information is the number of votes obtained by the elected candidate(s) in each of the single-member and two-member constituencies (the ballot is not indicated in the sources). These data can be interpreted in terms of “uncontestedness” of the constituency. It can be considered that the higher the percentage of votes of the elected candidate(s) in each constituency, the weaker other candidates. By contrast, lower percentages would attest for a more evenly matched strength of candidates across constituencies and, therefore, for more competition.³¹

Percentages presented in Figure 4 are averages of elected candidates at one election. The figure shows that from 1874 to 1914 the Icelandic candidates are elected on average with a decreasing share of votes: from around 80 per cent to around 50 per cent. The system passes therefore from a situation of absence of competition to more “marginal” and competitive patterns, although if we also consider second candidates in two-member constituencies it appears that this decrease would be less accentuated. Trends for Sweden, which have not been reproduced here, display on the contrary, an increase in the “safety” of the seats, for both constituencies in which elections were direct and constituencies in which elections were indirect.

³⁰ In Iceland elections were held in a number of *kjördæmi* varying between 19 and 25. Uncontested constituencies have been rare: one in 1908, six in 1914, two in 1916 (October), nine in 1919, three in 1923, and one in 1933.

³¹ This anticipates the analysis of competition in terms of marginality. A similar analysis, not presented here, has been carried out for Sweden where, from 1866 until 1908 elections were held by plurality in single-member constituencies (some of which still using an indirect system).

Figure 4. Percentage of votes for the (two) elected candidate(s) in Iceland: 1874–1914



THE DEVELOPMENT OF FREE ELECTIONS

After having considered evidence about the increasing competitiveness of elections, we address now some of the most important factors which are usually put forward for understanding the growth of party competition. First, this section broadly discusses the timing of contestability in the different countries, that is, when it became possible to contest elections. Second, the next section considers the impact of two elements of the lowering of entry barriers on electoral competition: the extension of suffrage and PR.

Competition is inherently linked to democratic life and parliamentary traditions. Party competition, therefore, was born together with parliamentarism and free elections. However, not only the timing of the introduction and development of free elections was very different from country to country, but also the strength and the duration of previous parliamentary traditions varied a great deal among European states: while in some cases the development of democratic life was smooth and progressive, the introduction of constitutional government in other cases was a sudden and abrupt change from previous absolutism.

Britain and Switzerland are both characterised by a long-term and smooth trajectory. The Representation of the People Act adopted in 1832 (which included, although with different franchise provisions, also Ireland) did not constitute a violent break from representative traditions that were not discontinued – as in most continental countries – during the absolutist period. Similarly, in Switzerland the formation of the federal state in 1848 could rely upon old democratic practices. On the contrary in Denmark the transition from absolutism was sudden in 1848–49.

In other cases democratic progress was accomplished simultaneously with movements of national independence and/or unification. The Belgian revolution of 1830, when independence from the United Kingdom of The Netherlands (which also included the Duchy of Luxembourg) was achieved, introduced elections by a two-ballot majority system based on a restricted franchise. In Germany national unification in 1870 definitely introduced male universal suffrage (already introduced in 1848 but discontinued in most German states) and a two-ballot electoral system.³² In Iceland in 1874 the *Alþingi* was introduced while still under Danish rule.

Furthermore, in many states, after the absolutist period, estate parliaments were introduced as a first step in the direction of general parliamentary representation. Among our cases, this occurred in The Netherlands, elections to the *Tweede Kamer* from 1815 until 1849 were mediated by Provincial Councils in turn based on estate representation. In Belgium itself, therefore, this was the case before independence in 1830. Also in Germany during the reactionary period that followed the 1848 revolution in most states parliaments were reorganised as curial systems, with the exception of Bavaria, Baden, and Prussia (where the three-class electoral system was introduced). In Iceland, finally, in 1831–34 Denmark introduced a provincial assembly based on estate representation.

In most of the countries considered here the introduction of (male) universal suffrage was progressive. Franchise was extended progressively in Belgium (universal suffrage in 1894),³³ Norway (1900), Iceland (1916), Denmark, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Ireland (1918). In Switzerland and in Germany, on the contrary, the extension of the franchise to

³² In Germany representation continue to be organised by estates in most states of the German Union until 1848 when the *Vorparlament* adopted the *Reichsverfassung* introducing general representation for the *Nationalversammlung*. This occurred in most state parliaments.

³³ In Belgium a plural voting system was introduced together with universal male suffrage. One additional vote was given to those in the higher tax brackets, heads of households, and capitalists; two additional votes were given to teachers and persons with higher education.

all males occurred earlier and abruptly in 1848. However, whereas in Switzerland there were no reversals, the history of Germany has been more agitated with the definite extension in 1870 in correspondence to unification.³⁴

Independently from the richness in diversity of national trajectories towards free elections and mass suffrage, however, on the basis of the evidence shown above it appears that more competitive electoral configurations have developed everywhere. Figures shown in the graphs for all nine countries do therefore not support the hypothesis on a close link between the type and duration of the traditions of representation, processes of enfranchisement, and the birth of electoral competition. The different indicators used to measure the degree of contestedness of constituencies, all display a similar tendency towards increasing competition independently of the pattern and pace of enfranchisement. After the fundamental changes of the rules of the game, in all countries competition among candidates and parties has started off.

THE LOWERING OF ENTRY BARRIERS

The Entry of New Parties

The extension of suffrage is relevant for the birth and development of electoral competition above all insofar as it determines the entry of new political actors that changed the configuration of European party systems towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The opposition between conservatives and liberals was typical of politics in the age of the restricted electorates. If one looks broadly at the European party systems of the nineteenth century, the pattern appears to be almost invariably that of conservatives vs. liberals, although in several countries, conservatives were Catholic parties (as in Belgium and Switzerland, and later also in Germany) opposed to centralising secularised or – in the religiously mixed countries – Protestant parties. New parties appeared with the joint impact of two macro-processes. First, the enlargement of suffrage extended the right to vote to unprecedented numbers. Second, the Industrial Revolution mobilised large strata

³⁴ Competition was also affected by the prolonged use in some countries of indirect elections, either indirect elections as such (elections in two or more steps with the use of great electors) or elections by the members of provincial councils). In Belgium elections remained indirect until 1847 in Denmark until 1849, in Germany in several states until national unification, in Iceland until 1874, in The Netherlands until 1848, in Norway until 1906, and in Switzerland elections in the cantons were indirect until the creation of the federal state in 1848. In the United Kingdom (and in Ireland) elections have never been indirect. The progressive lowering of the voting age has not been considered here.

of the working class and of peasants. As a consequence, the end of the century witnessed the raise of mass working-class parties (and large agrarian parties in the Nordic countries and in the Protestant Germanic regions).

This section attempts at evaluating the weight of the appearance of such new parties – spreading into and contesting an increasing number of constituencies hitherto controlled by conservatives and liberals – on the overall decline in the number of unopposed seats. The alternative hypothesis would be that this decrease resulted from the spread of conservatives and liberals themselves challenging the strongholds of the opposing party. The information on party affiliation permits therefore to establish the extent to which competition raises from the “mutual challenge” of the main existing parties by expanding into adversary territories, or whether it raises from the appearance of new political forces after the lowering of entry barriers.

The entry of new parties in the electoral arena can be best shown with four cases for which the time series of electoral results by parties is longer will be employed: Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, and Britain in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.³⁵ In all four cases – with some variations – three main party families of the early party systems are considered: two old established families (conservatives or Catholics on the one hand and liberals on the other) and one “new” family (the social democrats).

In Belgium the parties considered are the *Union catholique belge*, the *Parti libéral*, and *Parti ouvrier belge*. In Denmark *Højre* and *Venstre* have been considered as conservative and liberal. The *Socialdemokrater* represent the new entrant.³⁶ In Switzerland the Radicals (*Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei*) have been considered instead of the liberal wing (*Liberal-Demokratische Partei*), together with the *Katholische Konservative* and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz*. Finally, in Britain the Conservative Party, Liberal Party, and Labour Party have been considered. In all these countries majoritarian formulas (two/three-ballot formula in Belgium and Switzerland, plurality in Denmark and Britain) made the existence of other parties difficult and sporadic.

³⁵ Similar figures, not reproduced here, can be obtained for Germany and The Netherlands since the 1870s–80s.

³⁶ Agrarian too appear as ‘new’ parties with enfranchisement and the Industrial Revolution. However, Denmark, among the Scandinavian countries, is the only case in which a large agrarian party did not develop (agrarian candidates contested elections only during 1898–1903 and, later, the *Bondepartiet* from 1935 to 1939). For this reason, only social democrats are considered.

Figure 5 is very eloquent in showing the appearance and territorial spread of new parties in Europe.³⁷ In the four cases considered we find conservatives and liberals covering most of the constituencies since the beginning of the period considered, that is, since the major transitions towards democratic elections. These were the parties which first were able to mobilise restricted electorates under the *régime censitaire* and *capacitaire*. Social democratic and labour parties appear under the joint effect of social and geographical mobilisation caused by industrialisation and urbanisation and the extension of franchise. This occurs towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the territorial spread of this party family is both sudden and rapid, as the solid lines show in Figure 5.³⁸

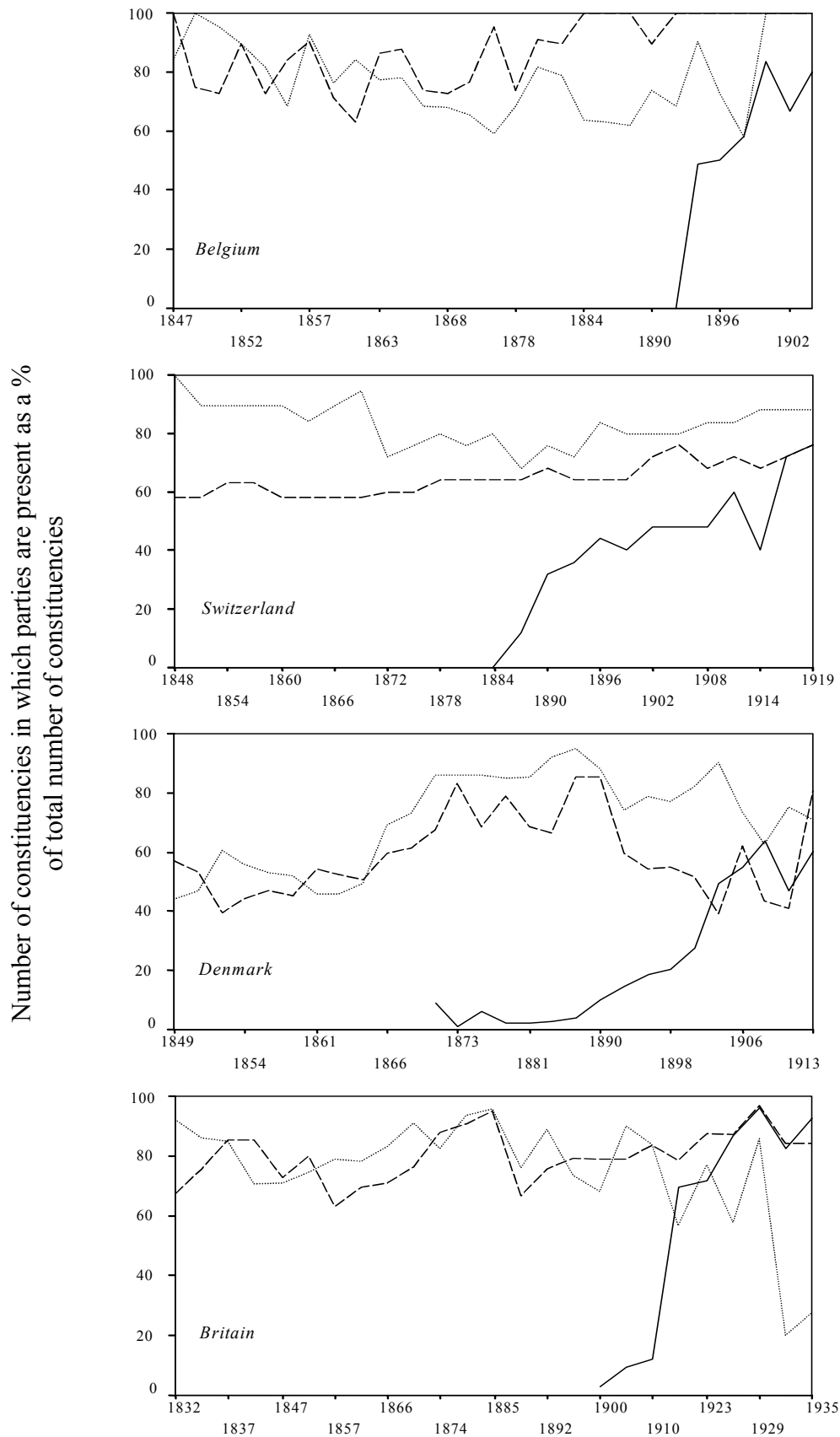
In Belgium Catholics and Liberals are present in more than 80 per cent of the constituencies; since the 1880s, Catholics are present in all constituencies. The share of constituencies in which conservatives and liberals present candidates is approximately the same in Switzerland and in Britain. The period considered for Switzerland starts with the *Sonderbundkrieg* between Protestant nation-builders and Catholic cantons and the foundation of the federal state. The cleavage between Radicals and Catholics was reflected in a clear-cut territorial segmentation of the vote. Up to the present day, for example, the Radical Party is extremely weak in the Catholic strongholds.

British parties were constantly present in 70–90 per cent of the constituencies without significant variations over time. The coverage of territory was very large for both Conservatives and Liberals (the Chartists were present in

³⁷ The measure has been computed as the percentage of constituencies in which a party is present (nominator) on the total number of constituencies (denominator). The computation of this percentage is complicated by missing data for some constituencies. In such cases the territorial coverage by parties is underestimated. To adjust for this, therefore, the number of missing constituencies has been subtracted from the total number of constituencies. Furthermore, a constituency in which a party is unopposed (an uncontested constituency) is considered as a constituency in which the party is present.

³⁸ Among the four countries considered, it appears that the spread of workers' candidates was faster in the two most industrialised countries, Belgium and Britain, whereas it was more gradual in Denmark and Switzerland (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Territorial spread of conservatives, liberals, and social democrats in four countries, 1832–1935



a very small number of constituencies). The electoral reforms of 1867–68 and 1884–85 (Franchise Act and Redistribution Act) stimulated the national organisation of political parties (see Urwin 1980 and 1982a on this point). Party support, however, remained dominated by local strains. Historically, liberal support (and later the vote for Labour) corresponded to the distribution of English Nonconformism, whereas Anglican religiosity tended to be associated with conservative support in the regions of the south-east and around London. Liberal support was therefore stronger in the areas on the remove from the centre.³⁹

Whereas in Belgium, Switzerland, and Britain the proportion of territorial coverage by conservatives-Catholics and liberals is stable through time, in Denmark the “Right” and the “Left” increased over the decades the number of constituencies in which they presented candidates. In the early elections after the sudden transition from absolutism to democratic representation, the two parties were present in around half of the *valgkredse*. Both parties expanded in the 1860s–70s reaching around 80 per cent of the constituencies. Each of the two parties increasingly challenged the domination of the other in further constituencies during this period. A retrenchment then again occurred to some extent in the 1890s and 1900s for the *Højre* and later also for the *Venstre*.

The four graphs are also very similar insofar as the spread of social democrats is concerned. In all countries the social democrats spread through national territories in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the first ones of the twentieth century. This occurs in correspondence with the major enlargements of franchise during that period. Conservatives and liberals mobilised a restricted electorate. Mass parties of the working class, along with agrarian parties in the Nordic countries, people’s parties in Catholic countries, etc. (for example, in Denmark the *Radikale Venstre* displays a pattern which is very similar to that of the Social Democrats), were ready – also because of pre-existing social organisations (namely, unions) – to mobilise the new working-class electorates.

What has been the impact of this process on the rate of contestedness? For Denmark and the United Kingdom the partisan affiliations of *unopposed*

³⁹ Until the end of the 1860s this was the case also in Ireland, at the time returning MPs to Westminster. Conservatives and Liberals were each present in around 70 per cent of the constituencies, with the exception of the 1847 election in which Peelite and Repealer candidates increased their share of votes and challenged the two main parties in several constituencies. However, by 1885 conservatives candidates stopped contesting Irish constituencies and Nationalists began to dominate the system and from this moment onwards Liberals too underwent a steep process of retrenchment.

candidates is known. This means that the number of seats won in uncontested constituencies by each party is also known, allowing to verify whether the overall decline of the number of uncontested constituencies is caused by the appearance of new parties contesting an increasing number of seats that up to that point were won by either the Conservatives and the Liberals, or whether alternatively this decrease has been determined by the spread of the support of the Conservatives and Liberals – *Højre* or *Venstre* in Denmark – themselves challenging the strongholds of the adversary party.

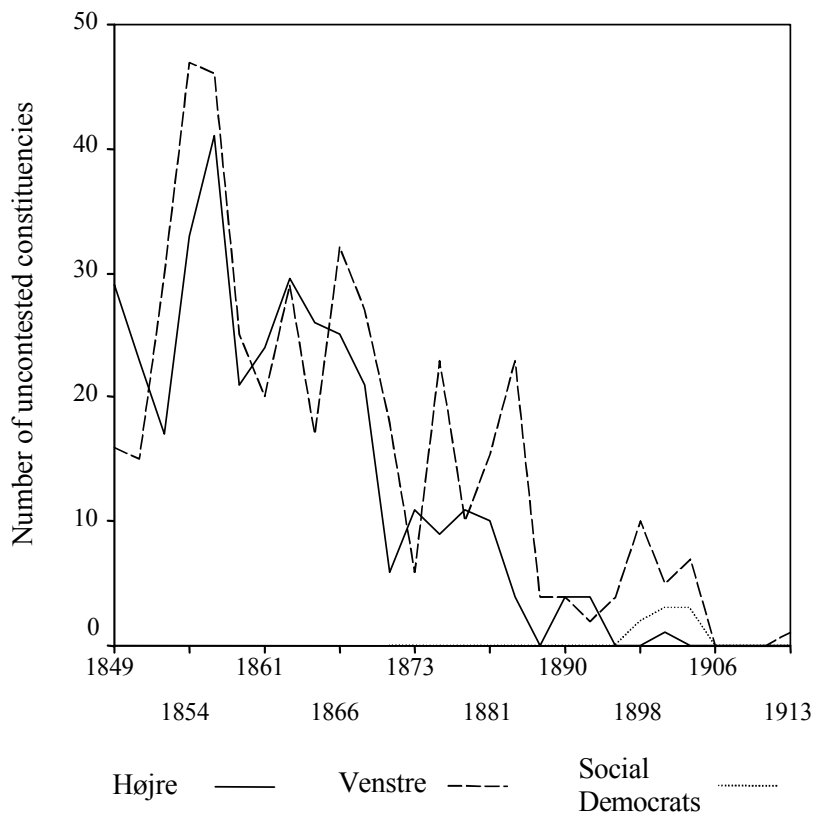
Figure 6 answers this question for Denmark. Social Democrats contest the first election in 1872 (see Figure 5 above). As it appears from Figure 6, however, by that time the overall number of uncontested constituencies had already drastically dropped. In the Danish case, the entry of the Social Democrats was therefore not the cause of the contestedness of constituencies. Only in an minor way did the entry of this new party affect the overall number of uncontested constituencies. As again can be seen from Figure 5, the spread of the Conservatives (*Højre*) and of the Liberals (*Venstre*) started long before 1872. Percentages of territorial coverage by these two parties increases continuously from 1849 until 1890, after which all three parties cover a similar portion of territory (around 60–70 per cent). The reduction in the number of uncontested constituencies is therefore rather caused by the “mutual challenge” of the Conservatives and Liberals and to the diffusion of these two parties through constituencies.⁴⁰

According to Figure 7, the same pattern seems to apply to the British case. Before the appearance of Labour towards the end of the century, parties other than the Conservatives and the Liberals were weak and sporadic (the other main political formations were the Chartists, the Liberal Unionists, and independent candidates). The first Labour candidates did not enter the electoral arena before the end of the century. Their entry is extremely sudden: by 1910, they cover already around 80 per cent of the constituencies. From the 1850s onwards, however, Conservatives and Liberals won a decreasing number of uncontested constituencies. Before 1900 the only antagonist which made these constituencies competitive was the “other” party, either the Conservative or Liberal party.

Unlike Denmark, however, Figure 5 above shows that Conservatives and Liberals were present in almost all constituencies already in 1832 (between 70 and 90 per cent of territorial coverage). The reduction of the number of

⁴⁰ Unopposed seats won by *Radikale Venstre* and *Forhandlende Venstre* have not been included in the graph.

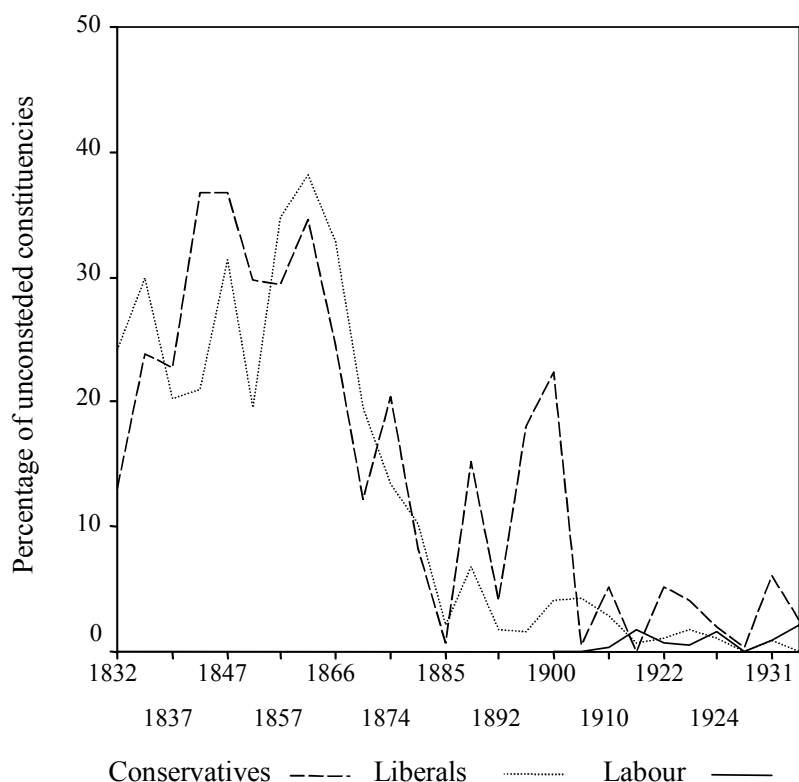
Figure 6. Number of uncontested constituencies for *Højre*, *Venstre*, and Social Democrats in Denmark, 1849–1913



uncontested constituencies for both parties displayed in Figure 7, therefore, is not so much caused by the spread of these parties through constituencies, but rather by the redistribution of seats. A large part of the drop in the number of uncontested constituencies between 1886 and 1885 can be attributed to the around 20 per cent of “shared constituencies” which disappear by 1885 (see Figure 2). In these constituencies both parties were present. If these are split into more single-member constituencies, the single seat becomes automatically competitive.

The Irish case (see Figure 8) is different from both Britain and Denmark. There is no decline of conservative and liberal uncontested constituencies until the 1870s, and only in 1874 and 1880 did the number of uncontested constituencies decline drastically. After 1885 the graph shows the complete change of the party system with the entry of Nationalists as dominant party. A replacement of parties did therefore take place after 1885 with Nationalists winning up to 60–65 per cent of the constituencies unopposed. Furthermore, also the Unionists since 1886 win between five and 10 per cent of the constituencies unopposed. Overall, therefore, almost three quarters of the constituencies were not competitive from 1885 until World War I.

Figure 7. Percentage of uncontested constituencies for Conservatives, Liberals, and Labour in Britain, 1832–1935

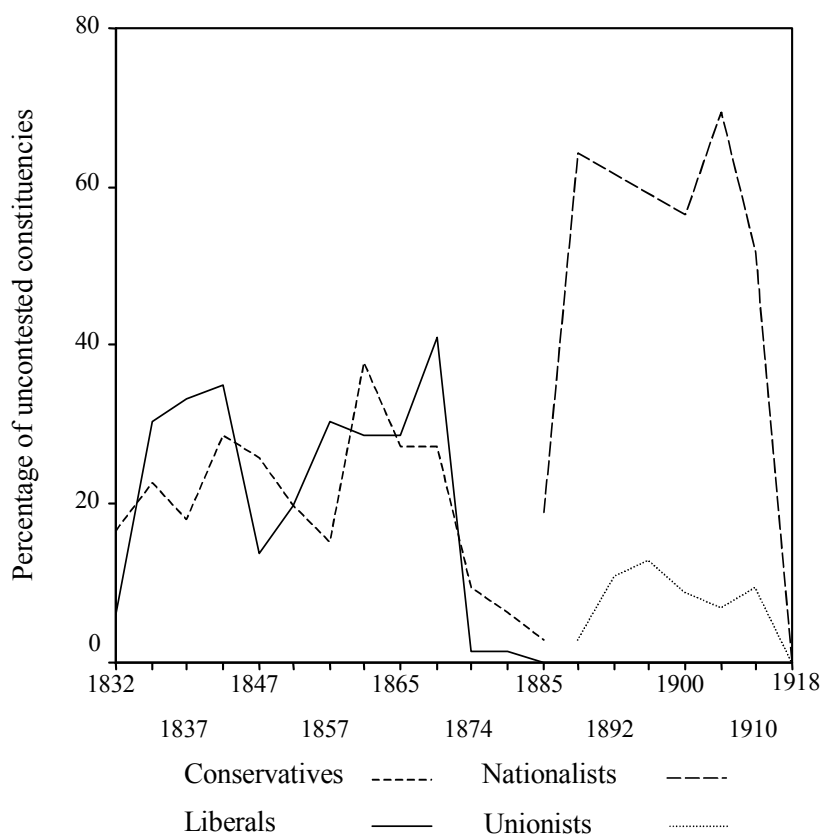


In Belgium, finally, Catholics and Liberals have occupied most constituencies since 1847. However, it is only since 1894, the moment at which universal suffrage is introduced and the Socialists enter the electoral arena, that the number of second ballots really increases (see Figure 3), indicating a growth of the rate of competition.⁴¹

In conclusion, therefore, whereas in Denmark competition seems to have originated from the mutual challenge among conservatives and liberals, and in Britain it is an effect of the redistricting and redistribution of seats, in Belgium the entry of new actors through the extension of suffrage seems to have had a stronger impact. In all cases, however, by the time of the entry of new actors in the political arena, conservatives and liberals had already occupied the political

⁴¹ For Switzerland data by party affiliation is available only at the level of 25 cantons rather than constituency level; for this reason, the analysis of uncontested constituencies is not possible. There were between 47 and 52 (depending on the period) single- and multi-member constituencies (*Bezirke*).

Figure 8. Percentage of uncontested constituencies for Conservatives, Liberals, Nationalists, and Unionists in Ireland, 1832–1918



space available and created competition independently from new parties. If the reduction of uncontested constituencies would have been caused by to the entry of new parties, evidence would have shown the reduction of the number of uncontested constituencies and the spread of new parties across territory as parallel processes.

In some cases, as in Britain, the appearance of labour parties even replaced the liberal party. The process of *depasserment par la gauche* of the liberals as the “second” party of the system takes place in the 1930s (Figure 5), when the Liberal Party contests only about 30 per cent of the constituencies. In other cases, the social democrats – and the agrarians in the Nordic countries and in Switzerland (and, later, communist parties) – transformed competition from a two- into a three- or more-some competition. This difference is partly due to the electoral formula.

Majoritarian vs. PR Electoral Formulas

A second aspect of the lowering of entry barriers is represented by the electoral law. Majoritarian systems set very high thresholds for representation making the entry of new and small parties problematic.⁴² Furthermore, given these high thresholds typical of the majoritarian systems in force in all countries until the beginning of the twentieth century, established parties too were not encouraged to spread in territories in which they could not hope to reach the majority of the votes which, on the contrary, is indispensable in a “first-past-the-post” system. As a consequence, majoritarian systems inhibited competition by increasing the persistence of electoral (territorial and subcultural) strongholds. The birth of electoral competition has for this reason sometimes been identified with the introduction of PR around World War I which allowed competition to arise.

The introduction of PR electoral formulas by or in the aftermath of World War I altered fundamentally the meaning of electoral competition. The single-member plurality formula is the ideal-typical case of a “winner-takes-all” type of competition, in which the candidate or party receiving the most votes takes 100 per cent of the stakes in a constituency. With PR, on the contrary, parties compete for the largest “share of the cake” in each constituency.⁴³ Instead of “all-or-nothing”, the rationale in multi-member PR constituencies is to run for election even in those constituencies in which support is supposed to be weak, since this will lead to some reward in terms of seats. PR therefore represents a strong *incentive* for spreading in all constituencies and challenge adversaries in their strongholds.

According to Duverger (1950 and 1951), majoritarian systems – in particular plurality systems based on single-member constituencies – do not foster the spread of parties in new constituencies. On the contrary, plurality allows parties whose support is territorially concentrated to survive despite their national weakness: “minorities can secure representation on the national level only because they constitute the majority in certain constituencies. The effect is that the majority vote accentuates geographical divisions of opinion: it might even be said that it tends to convert a national current of opinion [. . .] into a regional opinion, as its only chance of representation is in those parts of the country where its strength is greatest” (Duverger 1951: 331–32). In addition,

⁴² Rokkan’s ‘third threshold of democratisation’ (Rokkan 1999: 254).

⁴³ More generally this is true for all electoral system – even majoritarian ones – based on multi-member constituencies. However, majoritarian systems were historically based on a maximum of five-member constituencies (only exceptionally was the magnitude larger), whereas PR systems have always been based on much bigger constituencies (with the exception of STV).

parties have no incentive to increase efforts in campaigning and in presenting candidates in those constituencies in which they do not have a chance of winning the seat. This is not the case with PR. Parties are encouraged to expand and to present candidates in all constituencies where, even with a small amount of votes, it is possible to win seats: “in the countries which have adopted PR after having been used to the majority system, we can see a sort of gradual “nationalization” of opinion” (Duverger 1951: 332).⁴⁴

This view of PR systems favouring the spread of competition is shared by other researchers. For Rose and Urwin, in “multi-member constituencies of proportional representation [. . .] there is much more incentive for parties to offer a full slate of candidates in all regions” (Rose and Urwin 1975: 19). For example, Urwin notes about Germany that “[t]he particular variant of proportional representation introduced in the Weimar Republic encouraged parties to contest every electoral district” (Urwin 1982b: 192; see also Urwin 1974). Also Rokkan notes that “proportional representation systems encourage a wider participation while majority systems discourage minorities” (Rokkan 1970: 350).⁴⁵

With list systems, the presence of several candidates of a same party hinders single personalities to campaign idiosyncratically and favours a national standard partisan campaigning which is carried out on ideological-programmatic lines. General issues take therefore a more important place with respect to particular local ones: “the list system [. . .] compels the elector to vote for a party rather than for personalities, that is to say, for a system of ideas and an organization of national scale rather than for the champions of local interests” (Duverger 1951: 333; see, on the same point, Rokkan 1970: 21). In general, the fewer the seats returned in one constituency, the more small parties are penalised. Therefore, parties have no incentive to present candidates in constituencies in which they are weak. This emphasises the relationship between the disproportionality of the electoral formula (the difference in the share of votes and seats) and the spread of party support across constituencies. The higher disproportionality, the higher disparities between territorial units and,

⁴⁴ A similar conclusion has been reached by Mair in his analysis of the nationalisation of electoral strategies in Ireland under STV (Mair 1987: 128). As also noted by Hanham (1959) in the British case, elections were not always general in the sense that, for a long time, local and constituency-level factors prevailed on national competition.

⁴⁵ Furthermore, Rokkan notes that PR leads to the abandonment of local clienteles; with plurality systems marginal votes are useless if the constituency is safe whether the party wins or loses the seat, while with PR each vote counts and therefore mobilisation is encouraged in every single constituency (Rokkan 1970: 333 and 337).

therefore, the smaller the amount of constituencies in which parties contest adversaries.

Historically, electoral formulas and magnitudes of constituencies largely overlap: plurality formulas and, more generally, majoritarian systems (repeated-ballot systems)⁴⁶ were usually based on single-member constituencies (although two- and three-member constituencies were frequent in Britain as well as in other countries); PR systems were always based on multi-member constituencies.

The hypothesis of a strong link between PR and the birth of competition is however weakened by evidence. As shown in the different graphs, the trend towards more competition in European party systems occurs *before* the introduction of PR and, therefore, independently from the changes in the electoral formula. After World War I, PR has incentivated new and established parties to spread through constituencies and has mobilised voters' turnout (all votes count) by not hindering them to vote for the weakest parties in their constituencies. However, at the time PR was introduced, competition had already developed independently from a change in the rules of the game. It therefore seems that competition has so far been underestimated as a *self-functioning mechanism independent from the rules of the game*. Parties spread in search of new votes in spite of the barriers set by disproportional representation systems.

Electoral formulas have rather strong consequences on the format of party competition. With the introduction of PR at the beginning of the twentieth century, new parties could be incorporated in a multi-party competitive competition. On the contrary, under plurality systems the entry of new parties challenges the existence itself of the existing parties. This appears clearly in Figure 5 above in which it is shown that in Britain (the only country which did not switch to PR after World War I) the Labour Party *replaced* the Liberal Party in the electoral competition in most constituencies during the 1930s. On the contrary, in most other European countries – which all introduced some form of PR by or after World War I – the format of party competition was modified through the addition and incorporation of new parties.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The reasoning is the same with repeated-ballot formulas: parties must have a strong chance to reach the second ballot to present a candidate and this is possible only for larger parties in a given constituency. There is no incentive to present a candidate who has no chances to reach the second ballot since representation will not be secured.

⁴⁷ This is Sartori's well-know hypothesis sometimes referred to as the 'strategy of the weak' about the introduction of PR in terms of survival of the old parties facing the challenge of new

CONCLUSION: FROM TERRITORIAL TO FUNCTIONAL COMPETITION

“Silent elections” – *élections tacites* or *stille Wahlen* – progressively disappeared from the European electoral landscape. Uncontested constituencies were wiped away through the mutual challenge among established elites (conservatives and Catholics on the one hand and liberals and radicals on the other). In some countries competition arose as an effect of the new rules of the political game, in particular the extension of inclusion criteria. Finally, strong pressures came from new challengers, the working classes enfranchised through the extension of voting rights to the masses; mostly labour and social democratic parties, but also agrarians especially in the Nordic countries and in the Protestant areas of the Germanic world.

By World War I competition had started off everywhere. Non-competitive configurations survived only in some cases, usually in the most traditional or remote situations. In Ireland uncontested constituencies continued to exist after the introduction of STV. In 1922, the first election to the *Dáil* after independence, there were still eight (out of 28) uncontested constituencies. The last uncontested constituency is Donegal West in 1944. In Switzerland uncontested cantons continued to exist after the introduction of PR in 1919, mostly in the smaller alpine cantons in which the only seat is allocated by plurality. Between 1919 and 1987 the number of such cantons has varied from one to three.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Valle d’Aosta in Italy and the Åland Islands in Finland are under the control of ethno-linguistic parties. In the United Kingdom most university and business seats were uncontested until they were abolished with the redistricting of 1950.⁴⁹

The surge of competition was unrestrainable, indicating the most radical change in political practice. With the introduction of free elections and the enfranchisement of the masses, competition and democracy became overlapping concepts (Schumpeter 1954). Among the different factors that facilitated and favoured the birth of electoral competition, this paper has identified in the competitive strategy of parties the strongest engine. Parties increasingly tend to

mass-mobilisation parties and preferring the safety of their established positions of control in minority parties to the uncertainties of mergers (Rokkan 1970: 88–90).

⁴⁸ Mostly Appenzell Inner-Rhoden and Obwalden (where the Catholics dominate up to today with more the 85 per cent of the votes), Appenzell Ausser-Rhoden (where the Radicals dominate), Glarus (where social democrat and independent candidates dominate). Only in 1939, exceptionally, the number of uncontested cantons was nine.

⁴⁹ Also in Ireland the constituency of Dublin University was uncontested until it was abolished in 1937.

challenge other parties in their former strongholds and to “conquer” and “occupy” constituencies which were hitherto in adversaries’ hands. It is this strategy itself of existing parties that had the upwind in spite of restrictive rules, and only later did new parties enter the system under changing rules.

The competitive strategy of parties consists in expanding their support by weakening social and territorial barriers. This action by parties and candidates led to the transformation of cleavages through a loss of territoriality. On the one hand, parties adapted to changing social conditions that eroded territorial oppositions and transformed them into functional cleavages. This transformation resulted from processes of geographical mobilisation and peripheral integration through state formation and nation-building, as well as through industrialisation, urbanisation, and the growth of communication technologies and national sources of information. On the other hand, however, evidence presented in this paper shows that the transformation of political cleavages is not simply a “by-product” of the general integration of societies to which parties adapted, but the product of the action of parties themselves and of their inherent competitive strategies which led them to break down territorial barriers. Parties tend to expand in search of support all over the country. At the territorial level – as later at the ideological level – they tend to cover as much space as possible. If parties faced and adapted to new social conditions, it is also true that they contributed to create conditions that favoured them; and the outcome has been less clear-cut territorial oppositions.⁵⁰

To mobilise the most remote and peripheral electorates, parties needed a capillary network of local organisations. They therefore developed centralised agencies at the national level for the control of local candidacies and relied upon more efficient campaigning techniques which became available with technological progress. Candidates in single-member constituencies during the period of majoritarian elections until World War I were increasingly “party candidates”. They no longer represented merely their constituencies but rather nation-wide functional interests and values. Candidates became representatives chosen by national and central party organisations rather than the expression of the *notabilat local*.

Parties started intervening also directly on questions and set on the agenda issues which are not territorially delimited and which could be accepted in all areas of the country. They addressed issues and presenting platforms which

⁵⁰ As Lipset and Rokkan wrote, ‘we consider the possibility that the *parties themselves* produce their own alignments independently from the geographical, social and cultural conditions of the movements’ (1967: 3).

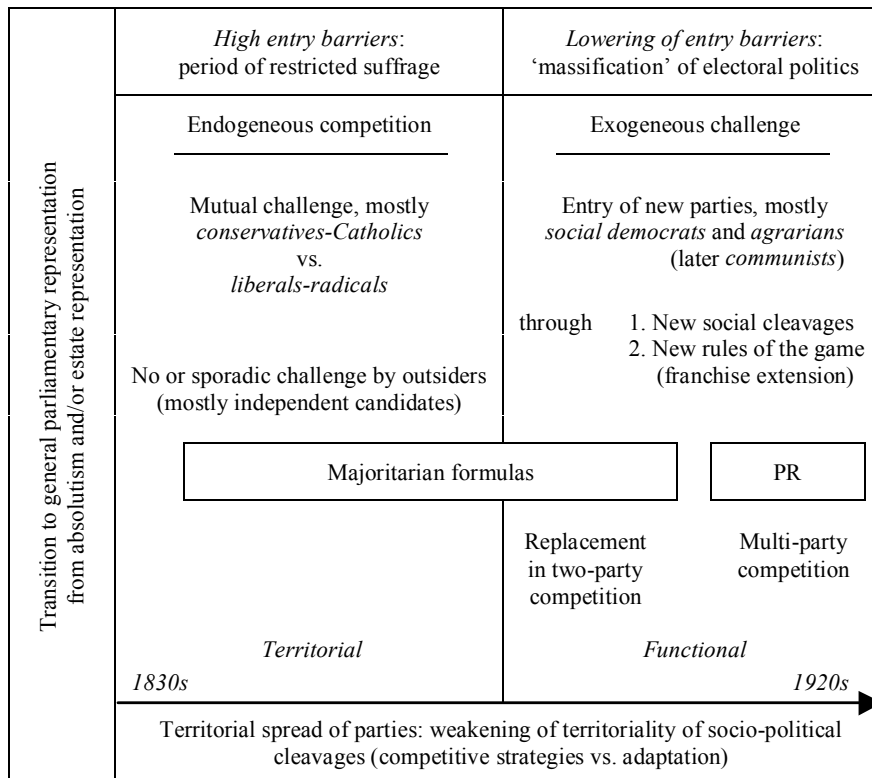
appeal large sectors of the electorate.⁵¹ In much the same way as on the ideological level, positions of parties were diluted to make them acceptable to a larger portion of voters; on the territorial level parties abandoned local claims and privileged national ones. This was done by emphasising issues which are national in scope.

Spatial analyses of electoral behaviour and party systems have formalised the notion of competition. Political competition takes place on an imaginary “ideological space” in which political parties move in the search of the optimal location for the maximisation of votes (Downs 1957). This model was inspired by the work on geographical localisation of firms carried out by economists (for example, Hotelling 1929). It is an ideological analogy of what had been developed on the basis of geographical concepts, and from these premises several authors have then employed concepts which are originally geographic: “location”, “space”, “distance”, “hunting ground”, “(de)radicalisation”, or “landscape”. However, the original geographical dimension of the model has rapidly disappeared. The dimensions of conflict considered by spatial analyses are mainly functional-ideological: left-right and religious dimensions in particular.⁵² Evidence above, however, has shown that the same competitive logic working on the ideological level also worked on the territorial level at an *earlier stage* of electoral development. Competition in the territorial space

⁵¹ In the American case, Schattschneider noted that ‘the party realignment of 1932 is closely related to a deep change in the agenda of American politics’ (1960: 93). The high degree of territoriality of American politics dissipated because since 1932 it became dominated by national and no longer local questions. The Depression and the New Deal had the effect of nationalising political issues. This process was reinforced a decade later by international events focusing the attention of the entire nation: World War II and with the beginning of the Cold War.

⁵² The ideological component of this strategy received its most articulated expression from Anthony Downs’s *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), whereas the organisational dimension has been described by Otto Kirchheimer in its famous essay of 1966 on the transformation of European party systems which shows the progressive reduction of ‘place’ as a central element of electoral competition: the strengthening of the national leadership (to the detriment of local political figures) and the de-emphasis of the *classe gardée* (the social base of support which was often territorially defined) as well as the reduction of the role of party members meaning the removal of action ‘on the ground’ in favour of a-territorial political communication and socialisation.

Figure 9. Main historical phases of party competition: 19th–early 20th century



preceded competition in the functional-ideological space, especially during phases of restricted electorates. Parties were “catch-allover parties” before being “catchall” parties.

Figure 9 summarises the main phases of the development of party competition. The democratic revolutions which led to free and direct elections, and to parliamentary life were not automatically accompanied by the raise of competition among candidates and electorates. High barriers set during the period of restricted electorates by majoritarian electoral formulas hindered the entry in the arena of new parties and discouraged established parties to spread through constituencies in which electoral consent was in control of adversary influence.

Nevertheless, even in the absence of organised “outsiders” other than sporadic independent candidates, an incipient *endogenous competition* among established parties – conservative-Catholics and liberal-radicals – slowly emerged leading to the increase of the number of contested constituencies and of the number of second ballots necessary to allocate seats. During this period, party organisations adapted to the new social conditions created by the general integration of society which reduced the territorial barriers to expansion: cultural

cleavages, rural-urban divisions, etc. However, in their competitive strain, parties contributed a great deal of surmounting these divisions and to transform territorial political cleavages into functional-ideological ones. During this phase the competition is mainly *territorial*: parties tended to expand, diffuse, and deradicalise at the territorial level in the search of support all over the country.

The lowering of entry barriers through the “massification” of politics caused by the inclusion of working classes and peasants, allows for the raise of an *exogenous challenge* from new mass parties, in particular labour parties and social democrats. In some countries, large agrarian parties developed and later also communist parties. The impact of these new challengers which emerged from the Industrial Revolution and its new cleavages was to increase the rate of competitiveness in party systems, and the nation-wide scope of the left-right cleavage caused the fast pace at which social democrat candidates spread across constituencies. Territorial oppositions gave definitively the way to an ideological competition.

In all continental European countries, the entry of social democrats (and of agrarian) was accompanied – if not caused – by PR. This altered fundamentally the type of competition which was transformed in a multi-party competition for the largest share of the cake. Where, as in Britain, plurality elections in single-member constituencies were maintained, the strict “winner-takes-all” rule caused on the contrary the replacement of the Liberals through Labour. PR had a strong effect on reducing territorial oppositions. During this phase, therefore competition is mainly *functional*, opposing groups and parties on an ideological non-territorial basis.

By focusing on the “birth” of competition, this paper has described the first phase of territorial competition. From the empirical analysis the main conclusion that has emerged is that competition developed before and independently from the modification of the electoral formula and the lowering of the thresholds of representation. In a way, therefore, this paper attempted to show that, even under rigid restrictions and thresholds, competition is “natural” and that the development of political competition cannot or should not be explained through exogenous factors.

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