TWO-AND-A-HALF-PARTY SYSTEMS AND THE COMPARATIVE ROLE OF THE 'HALF'

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the concept of the 'two-and-a-half-party system' is re-examined, with particular focus on the role of the 'half'. The analysis is on longer-term parliamentary democracies since 1945 or democratization. First, various ways of measuring a party system are outlined, and a new alternative is proposed. Based on this, 10 countries are seen to qualify (at least for certain time periods) as two-and-a-half-party systems: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. Each of these systems is outlined and analysed. This category is then contrasted with both two-party systems and multiparty systems in order to explain its causes. Next, some general conclusions about when 'half' parties are likely to matter more (in a governmental sense) are made, with a particular distinction occurring between 'hinge' and 'wing' half parties. Finally, the geographic shift in the presence of two-and-a-half-party systems is noted.

KEY WORDS ▪ 'half' party ▪ hinge party ▪ two-and-a-half-party system ▪ wing party

Introduction: Not All Parties Are Equal

In contemporary United Kingdom elections, categoric distinctions are made among the three national parties (the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats), the two Celtic nationalist parties and marginal parties, with the latter two sets of parties often grouped together simply as 'others'. Yet no one claims that the three national parties are equal, in particular that the Liberal Democrats have an equal chance of (ever) forming a government. Liberal Democratic leaders may be national figures but they are not seen, or scrutinized, as potential prime ministers the way Conservative and Labour leaders are.

Such a party system, with two main parties but not only two parties, is normally called a two-and-a-half-party system. In his book on (industrialized) party systems, Ware (1996: 163) does not, in fact, place the United Kingdom in this category, but he does include Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany and Ireland. Yet Ware (1996) goes on to stress that 'this category turns out to contain party systems with rather different patterns of relations between the parties in terms of how they co-operate and compete with each other'. We thus seem to have a category which is open to debate as to who qualifies and which does not seem to contain countries that have much else in common. In this analysis, I re-examine the concept of the two-and-a-half-party system with particular focus on the role of the 'half'. I begin by outlining various ways of measuring a party system, and propose a new alternative. Data are given on the party systems of 35 longer-term parliamentary democracies since 1945 or democratization (Greece, Portugal, Spain) or independence,[1] 10 of which are seen to qualify in recent decades as two-and-a-half-party systems. Each of these cases is outlined briefly. Next, explanations for the existence of two-and-a-half-party systems are assessed empirically. The cross-national patterns then lead to some general conclusions about when 'half' parties are likely to matter more in a governmental sense.

Counting Parties

Party systems lend themselves to measurement, both for comparative purposes and to the extent that specific types of party systems have broader implications (for democratization, stability, accountability, and so on). In terms of the numerical aspect of party systems, one can of course easily list and compare the total number of parties in a legislature,[2] or parties with at least 3 percent of the seats in a legislature.[3] This method has the obvious disadvantage of treating equally parties that may be dissimilar in size and/or influence.

This problem has led to two alternative approaches. The first is to weight each party according to its size, the standard formula being that of Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) effective number of parties, which can range from one to infinity.[4] Another way of expressing the same result is by Rae's (1971) index of fragmentation.[5] The second approach, associated with Sartori (1976), is to decide whether each and every party is *relevant* in terms of either 'coalition' or 'blackmail' potential, and then to 'count' only the relevant parties. In so doing, however, the relevant parties are counted equally. Of course, one can combine a purely mathematical number with additional measures of relative size, as Ware does (1996: 163–8).

With any mathematical formula, of course, one will rarely get a round number. The spectre is thus raised of saying that country A has a 1.62 party system, country B a 1.51 party system, country C a 5.44 party system, country D a 7.20 party system, and so on. In fact, these numbers can usually

be grouped into one of three categories: a one-party predominant system, where the effective number of parties (ENP) is clearly less than two; a two-party system, where the ENP is around two;[6] or a multiparty system, where the ENP is (around) three or more.

However, there is one 'crack' into which some systems will fall, and that is the space between two-party and multiparty systems. What do we do with an ENP of, say, 2.5 or 2.6? Does the 0.5 or 0.6 'count' enough to make it a multiparty system? The reality is that scholars often use a fourth category, that of the two-and-a-half-party system, which is seen to be unique, whereas a three-(etc.)-and-a-half-party system is not. The first comparative uses of the term were made in the late 1960s, those of Rokkan (1967–8) and Blondel (1968), the latter of whom noted that it is practically impossible to have a system of three roughly equal parties. Thus for the period 1945–66, Blondel (1968: 184–6) identified West Germany, Luxembourg, Canada, Belgium and Ireland as each having three parties but a two-and-a-half-party system.

The distinction between the top two and the third party (or various 'third parties'), however, is not just one of size but also one of influence. As Epstein (1964: 48–9) wrote of Canada in the 1960s (then a clear system of two main parties and two 'third parties' or halves):

> With respect to the most familiar of items, the number of parties, Canada has to be described as a *two-plus party system* rather than as a two-party system in the clear-cut American national sense or in the less clear-cut British sense. 'Multi-party,' however, would not be the appropriate label since regularly no more than two parties have had broad enough voting support to win national power and since much – though by no means all – of the time, one of these two parties has been able to win national [majority] power on its own.

In terms of two-plus party systems, however, Sartori would be more vicious and discard the 'plus' parties:

> What we miss when playing with halves and fractions is the very nature of the issue: whether the so-called two-party systems deserve separate recognition, that is, whether they display unique two-party *properties* [two competitive parties, each of which is potentially able and willing to form a single party government, ideally but not necessarily with a majority]. And these properties have very little to do with the existence, or nonexistence, of impressionistically assessed 'half parties.'
> (1976: 190)

> We have a two-party *format* whenever the existence of third parties does not prevent the two major parties from governing alone, i.e. whenever coalitions are unnecessary . . . the format of twopartyism must be assessed in terms of *seats*, not of electoral returns. The very obvious reason for this 'must' is that governments are formed, and perform, on the basis of their strength in parliament.
> (1976: 186)

Two general points of agreement emerge between Epstein and Sartori: first, the extent to which the major parties do or do not win majority governments

Table 1. National party system features, 1945–30 June 2002

	Total no. of elections	HP	MM	EM	Total % MM+EM	Majority parties	Mean PFRG	Mean ENPP	Mean $N_\infty P$	Median P3%S	Mean 2PSC	Range 2PSC	Median SR1:2	Median SR2:3
One-party predominant systems														
Botswana 1965–	8	0	0	8	100.0	1	0.275	1.41	1.21	2	96.1	87.1–100.0	8.67	5.50
Japan	21	10	8	3	52.4	1	0.653	3.09	2.06	5	74.1	50.4–97.0	2.04	1.93
India 1951–	13	5	8	0	61.5	2	0.621	3.24	2.02	4	70.3	54.5–83.7	6.34	1.61
Two-party systems														
Belize 1979–	5	0	1	4	100.0	2	0.391	1.69	1.50	2	100.0	100.0–100.0	2.60	∞
Jamaica 1962–	8	0	0	8	100.0	2	0.351	1.58	1.36	2	100.0	100.0–100.0	3.31	∞
Malta 1966–*	8	0	2	6	100.0	2	0.498	1.99	1.91	2	100.0	100.0–100.0	1.10	∞
St. Vincent and the Grenadines 1979 –	6	0	1	5	100.0	3	0.304	1.50	1.33	2	100.0	100.0–100.0	4.00	∞
St. Lucia 1979–	7	0	7	0	100.0	2	0.368	1.64	1.46	2	99.2	94.1–100.0	2.40	∞
Barbados 1966–	8	0	3	5	100.0	2	0.380	1.68	1.41	2	99.0	91.7–100.0	2.40	∞
Liechtenstein*	18	1	8	9	94.4	2	0.509	2.04	1.89	2	98.7	92.0–100.0	1.14	∞
Bahamas 1972–	7	0	0	7	100.0	2	0.387	1.66	1.36	2	97.6	90.0–100.0	2.91	∞
Trinidad and Tobago 1961–	9	2	1	6	77.8	3	0.449	1.87	1.63	2	97.2	94.4–100.0	2.00	16.00
Mauritius 1967–	8	1	1	6	87.5	5	0.355	1.65	1.42	3	94.6	88.6–100.0	1.96	4.00
St. Kitts and Nevis 1984–	5	1	3	1	80.0	2	0.578	2.48	1.87	4	80.0	72.7–90.9	3.00	2.00
Transitional systems														
New Zealand*	19	2	14	3	89.5	2	0.516	2.14	1.84	2	96.3	67.5–100.0	1.29	∞
United Kingdom*	16	1	15	0	93.8	2	0.527	2.12	1.82	2	95.1	87.9–98.9	1.26	21.26
Two-and-a-half-party systems														
Greece 1974–	10	2	7	1	80.0	2	0.544	2.21	1.83	3	92.4	88.4–95.7	1.39	8.61
Austria*	17	12	2	3	29.4	2	0.594	2.55	2.18	3	87.1	63.9–97.6	1.15	7.00
Germany*	14	13	0	1	7.1	1	0.616	2.65	2.15	3.5	85.5	67.2–94.0	1.20	4.12
Australia*	23	12	11	0	47.8	2	0.605	2.54	2.01	3	85.2	81.1–89.9	1.42	2.47
Canada	18	6	10	2	66.7	2	0.572	2.42	1.85	4	84.4	71.4–97.0	1.97	3.24
Spain 1977–	8	4	4	0	50.0	2	0.626	2.68	2.02	4	84.2	80.3–88.3	1.43	7.61
Transitional/borderline systems														
Ireland*	17	13	3	1	23.5	1	0.648	2.88	2.09	3	79.8	67.4–87.4	1.50	2.84
Portugal 1975–*	11	8	0	3	27.3	1	0.637	2.85	2.36	4	79.3	58.0–90.0	1.47	1.94
Belgium	18	17	1	0	5.6	1	0.767	5.36	3.59	7	57.5	30.0–88.7	1.21	1.64
Multiparty systems														
Luxembourg*	12	12	0	0	0.0	0	0.704	3.50	2.60	5	69.5	56.7–82.7	1.23	1.52
France V 1958–	12	9	3	0	25.0	2	0.668	3.36	2.29	5	69.3	55.9–85.8	1.78	1.36
Sweden	17	16	0	1	5.9	1	0.701	3.39	2.19	5	67.9	61.0–73.5	2.01	1.50
Italy	15	13	2	0	13.3	2	0.728	4.05	2.68	6	66.8	36.0–96.8	1.50	1.91
Norway	15	11	4	0	26.7	1	0.709	3.55	2.30	5	66.4	49.1–77.0	2.19	1.68
Iceland	17	17	0	0	0.0	0	0.727	3.70	2.66	5	65.6	49.2–75.0	1.38	1.67
Israel	15	15	0	0	0.0	0	0.779	4.80	2.85	8	59.6	37.5–79.2	1.37	2.17
Netherlands	17	17	0	0	0.0	0	0.779	4.68	3.24	6	58.8	46.0–70.7	1.10	2.08
Denmark	23	23	0	0	0.0	0	0.773	4.53	2.79	6	58.1	42.3–71.6	1.68	1.40
France IV (1945–1956)	5	5	0	0	0.0	0	0.789	4.86	3.77	5	51.1	37.5–59.5	1.10	1.08
Finland	16	16	0	0	0.0	0	0.802	5.05	3.71	6.5	50.4	44.0–55.0	1.11	1.17

*Always the same top two parties.

is crucial; and second, to this end seats matter more than votes. In this analysis, I thus limit myself to numerical measures of seats, not votes.

Table 1 gives a range of data on 36 cases.[7] First are listed the total number of elections held from 1945, or democratization or independence, through the middle of 2002.[8] These are then listed in three mutually exclusive and comprehensive categories: hung parliaments (HP), manufactured majorities (MM) and earned majorities (EM), the latter two of which are then combined. The number of different parties that won (any) single-party majorities is noted. Next is given the mean extent of parliamentary fragmentation (PFRG), followed by the mean effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP). Then comes the mean of the seat version of Taagepera's (1999) supplemental measure to the effective number of parties, $N_\infty P$; that is, the inverse of the percentage of seats won by the largest party. As Taagepera stresses, this value will always be below 2 when there is a single-party majority. Next is the median number of parties winning at least 3 percent of the seats (P3%S), the measure of relevance used by Ware (1996: 158–9). Then comes the mean value for two-party seat concentration (2PSC), that is, the combined seat shares of the top two parties (not necessarily the same two in each election, of course), or what is called 'parliamentary bipartyism' (Stewart, 1994: 191).

Lastly, as measures of competitiveness, median seat ratios are given for both the first versus second party (SR1:2) and the second versus third party (SR2:3). Again, these are not always the same parties, but the measure simply indicates whether results tend to be close. However, where the same two parties have always been the top two in terms of seats (regardless of the order), this is indicated by an asterisk [*] after the name. Where an asterisk is missing, there has then at some point been a change in the party system in terms of the poles of party competition, even if not necessarily of the system properties.

In terms of capturing the essence of counting parties, I argue that two-party seat concentration is instinctively clearer than the other measures, and 'loses' very little information in the process. For example, in this analysis the correlation between mean ENPP and mean 2PSC for the 36 cases is –0.969, and the correlation between mean $N_\infty P$ and mean 2PSC is –0.909. Consequently, I argue that the key distinction is whether two-party seat concentration is (a) close to the maximum, that is, between 95 and 100 percent; (b) between 80 and 95 percent; or (c) less than 80 percent.[9] In the last situation one is clearly into the realm of multiparty systems.[10] However, the 2PSC measure especially must be combined with a measure of competitiveness to ensure one is not just measuring '1PSC'.[11] Consequently, I suggest the following classifications of systems:

- A *one-party predominant system* is where the 'typical' result is for a given party (indeed the same party) to have at least 51 percent of the seats and a seat ratio vis-à-vis the second party (SR1:2) of at least 1.8.

- A *two-party system* is where the two main parties get more than 95 percent of the seats (2PSC > 95), *but* where neither party permanently has an imbalanced lead, as in the previous case; consequently, in a given election, victory for either party is theoretically possible.
- A *multiparty system* is where the top two parties get less than 80 percent of the seats (2PSC < 80) *and* where the system does not meet the criteria of one-party predominance.

Finally,

- A *two-and-a-half-party system* is where the two main parties get at least 80 percent of the seats but not more than 95 percent (80 ≤ 2PSC ≤ 95) *and* where the system does not meet the criteria of one-party predominance. Moreover, a stronger version of this type is where the seat ratio between the second and third parties (SR2:3) is at least 2.5, otherwise one approaches a one-and-two-halves-party system.

Perhaps the key question, and certainly a relevant one, about any party system is the following: regardless of the number of parties competing and/or elected, does some party actually 'win'?[12] In this regard, a one-party predominant system will by definition have a single-party majority, a two-party system will almost always have a single-party majority, and a multiparty system will very rarely have a single-party majority. However, there is no 'normal' pattern for a two-and-a-half-party system outcome: *this can occur either with or without a single-party majority*.[13]

Based on the data in Table 1 (and the raw data for this), I would initially group the 36 longer-term parliamentary democracies as follows: Botswana, India and Japan have normally been one-party predominant systems.[14] There have been 11 cases of continuing two-party systems, the majority of these being Caribbean nations. There are two cases that began as two-party systems, but then changed. That is, the United Kingdom became a two-and-a-half-party system as of 1974 (1979 excepted) and New Zealand became a multiparty system with its first proportional representation elections in 1996. There are then six cases which appear to have been two-and-a-half-party systems (or sequences of such) over the vast majority of their elections: Greece, Austria, Germany, Australia, Canada and Spain. There are then three countries that have made a transition between two-and-a-half-party and multiparty systems. Ireland became a multiparty system technically in 1987, and certainly in 1992. Portugal has evolved from a multiparty system to a two-and-a-half-party system, whereas Belgium has undergone a reverse change. Finally, all of the remaining countries have had multiparty systems.[15]

More specifically, Table 2 provides 2PSC values for each country that at some point has been a two-and-a-half-party system. One can thus see here the changes in the United Kingdom, Portugal and Belgium. Moreover, the table also shows how some of the remaining cases have lost their 'two-and-a-half-partyness' in the 1990s. That is, Austria and Ireland became

multiparty, whereas Canada is now a one-party predominant system with the collapse of its Conservatives. Thus, as Table 2 shows, there now seem to be only six two-and-a-half-party systems, those of the United Kingdom, Greece, Germany, Australia, Spain and Portugal. Australia and Spain, let me stress, have *always* been two-and-a-half-party systems throughout the period of analysis, and Germany has always been one since its second post-war elections of 1953. This being said, in order to assess and contrast the role of such 'halves' over the long term, what follows is an assessment of each of the 10 two-and-a-half-party systems which exist or have existed.

Contrasting the Halves

When looking at the 'half' in a two-and-a-half-party system, or if one prefers the third party or parties, there seem to be three central questions: (1) Is there a sole third party? (2) Where is such a party or are such parties positioned in the party spectrum? (3) Does it/they ever get to be in government? In terms of position on the political spectrum, in a unidimensional system a smaller party can either be between the two major parties or at one end. In the former situation it is thus in a 'hinge' position, whereas in the latter it is in a 'wing' position. In a multidimensional system one can also be in a hinge position if there are (differing) elements of commonality with each of the major parties. Although perhaps an obvious point, hinge parties are more likely to be in government over the long term than are wing parties, all other things being equal. Indeed, this distinction between 'hinge' halves and 'wing' halves is one of the central findings of this analysis.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP) in *Germany* was historically the best example of a consistent and powerful third party, so powerful that one at times hesitated to call it a 'half'. The FDP is clearly small, never having achieved more than 13.2 percent of the seats (in 1961), and never submitting a 'Chancellor candidate', as do the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Yet it has been the most common party of government. The FDP has been in government for about 41 of the 53 years since 1949, with its periods in opposition being only about one term at a time. Key government changes in Germany traditionally came about not from election results per se, but from the Free Democrats switching from coalescing with the Christian Democrats to coalescing with the Social Democrats or back again (1969 and 1982). Only in 1998 was this pattern ended. The Free Democrats thus clearly provided the hinge or the '*pivot* around which the [German] party system revolve[d]' (Padgett and Burkett, 1986: 164).

Almost all German elections, and all since 1961, have resulted in both hung parliaments (Table 1) and two-and-a-half-party systems (Table 2), although since 1994 Germany has been on the borderline of a multiparty system. Initially, from 1961 until 1983 and the arrival of the Greens as a 'wing' half, only three parties were represented in the *Bundestag*. Thus

Table 2. Presence of two-and-a-half-party systems since 1945 (annual calculations through 30 June 2002)

	Two-party seat concentration values										Total no. of 2½-party systems
	UK	Greece	Austria	Germany	Australia	Canada	Spain	Ireland	Portugal	Belgium	
1945	92.5		97.6			78.3					2
1946					81.1					79.7	2
1947											2
1948								67.4			2
1949			87.3	67.2	83.6	89.3				80.6	5
1950	98.1									87.2	4
1951	98.6				86.0			74.1			4
1952											4
1953			89.0	80.9		83.7					5
1954					85.9			78.2		85.4	5
1955	98.8				85.2						5
1956			94.5								5
1957				88.3		81.9		80.3			6
1958					84.4	97.0				88.7	5
1959	98.9		95.2								4
1960											4
1961				86.6	86.1			81.2		84.9	4
1962			90.2			81.5					6
1963					83.6	84.5					6
1964	98.6										6
1965				90.1		86.0		82.6		66.5	5
1966	98.0		96.3		82.3						4
1967											4
1968						86.0				51.4	4
1969				94.0	84.0			86.8			4
1970	98.1		97.0								4
1971			94.5							50.9	5

Year												
1972				91.8	84.0	81.8						5
1973									85.4			5
1974	94.0*	93.3			83.5	89.4					51.4	7
1975			94.5		81.8					78.8		7
1976				92.1						68.5		7
1977		88.4			84.7			81.1	85.9		55.6	8
1978											39.2	8
1979	95.8		94.0				88.6	82.6		80.8		8
1980				89.4	84.0		88.6			83.2		8
1981		95.6							86.2		36.8	7
1982								88.0	87.1*			7
1983	93.3		93.5	87.8	86.4					70.4		7
1984					85.8	89.0						7
1985		95.7								58.0	39.6	7
1986			85.8					82.6				7
1987	92.9			82.3	87.2				79.5	83.2	39.2	7
1988						85.4						7
1989		91.0*						80.6	79.5			8
1990		91.0	76.5	84.3		89.9						7
1991										90.0	34.9	7
1992	93.2								68.1			7
1993		93.7			87.7		78.3	85.7				6
1994			63.9	81.3								6
1995			67.8							87.0	33.3	6
1996		90.0			84.5			84.9				6
1997	88.6						71.4		78.9			6
1998				81.1	87.8							6
1999			63.9							85.2	30.0	6
2000		94.3					79.1	88.0				6
2001	87.9				89.3							6
2002									67.5	87.4		6

*Average of two elections in the same year.

unless the two main parties wished to govern together (which only occurred once), until 1983 the only governing option was a coalition between one of the larger parties and the FDP – a coalition made known to the voters before the elections. The period since 1983 has been more bipolar, however, with Christian Democratic–Free Democratic majorities (until 1998) being opposed by the Social Democrats and Greens, joined later on the left wing by the PDS.

No other half party in a two-and-a-half-party system seems to have had quite the analogous role and power of the German FDP. In *Austria*, the post-war party system was similar to that in Germany in the sense of having large socialist (SPÖ) and Christian democratic (ÖVP) parties and a small liberal one (FPÖ), later joined by greens. However, from 1971 to 1983 the Austrian socialists under Bruno Kreisky were able to achieve single-party majorities. From 1983 to 1987 there were SPÖ–FPÖ coalitions; however, with the FPÖ under Jörg Haider moving to a wing position on the far right this has since been untenable. Indeed, the most common governing pattern in Austria has been a 'grand coalition' between the two main parties (1945–66, 1987–99). Similarly, in early post-war *Belgium*, there were Catholics and Socialists as the two largest parties, with the Liberals at best third – and in this case the Communists fourth. Belgium had a wide range of governments between 1946 and 1965, including some 'grand coalitions', but one could argue that the Liberals were able to play a hinge role for a brief period, since they were the junior partners in a government with the Socialists from 1954 to mid-1958 and then likewise with the Catholics from late 1958 to 1961.

The *United Kingdom* has had a unidimensional spectrum, and the only national 'half' party has been the Liberal Democrats (formerly the Liberal–Social Democrat Alliance, and before that just the Liberals). It has normally been clearly positioned between the Labour and Conservative parties. Since the normal outcome of a British election is a manufactured majority (Table 1), opportunities for the Liberal Democrats to enter government have been limited. Their major influence came not in the brief Labour minority of February–October 1974, but instead when the Labour majority government formed in October 1974 fell to a minority position due to by-election defeats. The 'Lib–Lab Pact' of 1977–8 did see the Labour government implement certain Liberal wishes, in particular devolution legislation for Scotland and Wales (Stevenson, 1993: 61). With the failure of the Alliance to break the two main party mould of British politics in the 1980s, the United Kingdom continues to function effectively as a two-party system.

Since 1974, *Greece* likewise has been functioning effectively as a two-party system, because most elections have yielded a majority of seats for either the socialist PASOK or the conservative New Democracy. In part this is due to the inherent bias in the Greek electoral system of 'reinforced' PR. The 'half' party in Greece has been the Communists, which did participate in two brief broad coalitions in 1989–90 – consequences of responses to PASOK corruption in the 1980s, but also of the only two hung parliaments in Greece.

In *Canada*, in contrast, hung parliaments were not uncommon, including three in a row in the 1960s. However, during that decade there were two half parties – the New Democratic Party (NDP) and Social Credit – which the Liberals in particular could play off against each other. With the decline of Social Credit the NDP was the clear 'half' until 1993. However, its wing position to the left of the Liberals meant that cooperation with the Progressive Conservatives was impossible, weakening its bargaining power. Moreover, since on average the Liberals have been the strongest party (granted with wide variations) they have generally and reasonably felt confident in their (long-term) ability to win majority governments, and thus have used the NDP more as a party from which to steal ideas than one whose support is crucial. Hung parliaments in Canada thus produced minority governments, not coalitions.

Ireland stood as a two-and-a-half-but clearly bipolar system, at least through the 1980s. Of the two main parties, the more conservative Fianna Fáil was always much larger than Fine Gael (Blondel, 1968: 185). The former could win parliamentary majorities; the latter never did – unlike the traditional second party in Canada, the Progressive Conservatives (Ware, 1996: 164).[16] Consequently the Irish half party, Labour, was essential for Fine Gael to come into power, and a coalition of the two was the only real alternative to a Fianna Fáil government, majority or minority. Since the early 1990s, the Irish party system has become both multiparty and multi-dimensional, with many more coalition possibilities and realities, including a brief Fianna Fáil–Labour government.

Australia has not only carried on with the initial Irish pattern but in fact has taken it further. The large Liberals and the 'half' of the National (formerly Country) Party have an unshakable conservative alliance, with the former based in the suburbs and the latter in the countryside. This alliance is aided by the preferential single-member ballot used for the Australian House of Representatives. Moreover, the Liberals and the National Party have always governed together, even when – as in 1975, 1977 and 1996 – the Liberals themselves wound up with an outright (manufactured) majority of seats. Consequently, post-war Australia can be seen as a competition between this bloc and the Australian Labor Party, and thus effectively as a two-party system. In recent years, post-materialist and green parties have entered the picture (and the powerful Senate) but not the House itself.

As indicated in Table 2, *Portugal* has clearly been a two-and-a-half-party system since the late 1980s. Earlier, the 1979 and 1980 Portuguese elections did produce two-and-a-half-party system values, because the centre-right of liberals, Christian democrats and monarchists was grouped into the Democratic Alliance. However, this alliance did not last, and the main centre-right party, the liberal PSD, would only get around 30 per cent of the vote in 1983 and 1985. The PSD's winning of an absolute majority of both votes and seats in 1987 would transform the Portuguese party system, leading it and the Socialists to be the two main parties. In the Portuguese case there

is in fact more precisely a two-and-*two*-halves-party system, with the two (wing) halves being a communist–green coalition on the far left and the nationalist Popular Party on the right.

Spain is complicated in that it has moved through no less than four party systems since democratization.[17] In the 1977 and 1979 elections (the first period), the Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD) won close to a majority of seats, and was able to govern relatively easily until it collapsed due to internal divisions. The two main parties in this period were thus the UCD and the socialists (PSOE). Subsequently, the two main parties have been the PSOE and the conservatives, since 1989 known as the Popular Party (PP). In the second period of the 1980s, the PSOE was able to win absolute majorities. The third period of the 1990s saw two hung parliaments in a row, the first with a PSOE plurality, and the next one with a PP plurality. Finally, in 2000, the conservatives were able to win their first ever majority.

Although the main third party in Spain has generally been the United Left (or the Communists before it), this wing party has had little interest in government, and after 1993 the socialists did not wish to rely on its support. Instead they turned to the main (of the many) regional parties in Spain – Convergence and Union (CiU) in Catalonia and the Basque National Party (PNV) – to get the necessary votes for investiture. Consequently, a PSOE minority government was able to last for three years, but was continually beholden to these parties, especially to the CiU. A similar situation befell the Popular Party minority government of 1996–2000, with one difference being that the main regional parties now included the Canarian Coalition.

In short, Spain since the late 1980s can perhaps best be characterized (like Portugal) as a two-and-two-halves-party system in which one 'half' is not in fact a single party but rather the main regional parties of Catalonia, the Basque Country and the Canary Islands, only the first of which actually gets more than 3 percent of the seats. These parties (especially the CiU) are closer to the Popular Party on macro-economics and social policy, but closer to the PSOE on constitutional (decentralization) matters. In the 1990s they were thus in an effective hinge position, and used this position successfully – but for policy ends, rather than to be in government per se.

Population and Electoral System Explanations for Two-and-a-Half-Party Systems

What explains the presence of two-and-a-half-party systems? In particular, what makes them different from two-party systems on the one hand and multiparty systems on the other? Two hypotheses are worth testing here. The first is the relationship between population and party systems, most thoroughly analysed and noted by Anckar (1998). The second area of hypothesis concerns variations in electoral systems, or at least electoral system effects. Table 3 thus provides population and electoral system data

on the party systems listed in Table 1. The 1990 population data are those used in Anckar (1998). Table 3 next gives typical electoral thresholds[18] and then the means for the Loosemore-Haneby measure of disproportionality (DISP) and for the seat bias (or bonus) of the lead party (SBLP), that is, its seat percentage less its vote percentage. Table 3 then gives the means for an analogous measure, what I call the 'seat bias of the top two parties' (SBT2); that is, the two-party seat concentration (central to this analysis) less the vote for these two parties. SBT2 thus measures the extent to which the top two parties as a pair are favoured (or perhaps disfavoured) by the workings of the electoral system. Finally, for a given election one can calculate the SBT2 as a percentage of the total disproportionality. By definition, this value cannot be above 100 percent. This was done for every election, with the national means given in Table 3.

For comparison purposes, I take a broad definition of two-and-a-half-party systems and include all those cases that have ever been two-and-a-half-party systems; as discussed, the United Kingdom through Belgium inclusive. These 10 cases are thus contrasted with, first, the 11 cases of two-party systems, and then with the 11 cases of multiparty systems.[19] Table 4 provides the results of *t*-tests comparing these pairs of groups, starting with the first pairing (section 1 of Table 4). In terms of population, one sees that two-and-a-half-party systems occur in countries that are significantly larger than countries with two-party systems. Indeed, the smallest of the two-and-a-half-party cases, Ireland, is still bigger than the largest of the two-party cases, Jamaica. However, there is no significant population difference when comparing two-and-a-half-party and multiparty systems. Population thus seems to be a factor separating out the two-party systems, not the two-and-a-half-party systems. An analogous point can be made for most of the electoral system effects. There is a significant difference in the mean typical effective (electoral) threshold between the two-and-a-half-party systems and the two-party systems, but there is no significant difference between the two-and-a-half-party systems and the multiparty systems. The two-party systems generally use single-member districts, whereas this is true of only the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada within the two-and-a-half-party system group. Indeed, with a single-member electoral system Germany would be a two-party system, as evidenced by the results in its direct mandates, that is, the single-member plurality component of its mixed but ultimately proportional representation electoral system. Single-member electoral systems, one hypothesizes, would also yield or have yielded two-party systems in Greece, Portugal and, until recently, Austria. Conversely, one can imagine that some of the two-party systems might be(come) two-and-a-half-party systems under a lower effective threshold.

Following from the electoral system differences proper, there are significantly lower levels of disproportionality and seat bias of the lead party in two-and-a-half-party systems compared with two-party systems. However, even though the seat bias of the top two parties is not significantly different

Table 3. Population and electoral system features

	1990 population 000's	Typical effective threshold	Mean DISP	Mean SBLP	Mean SBT2	Mean SBT2 as % of DISP
One-party predominant systems						
Botswana 1965–	1300	35.00	15.5	15.5	8.2	53.1
Japan	123537	16.49	10.1	7.6	8.4	81.4
India 1951–	834697	35.00	18.9	16.8	15.9	78.7
Two-party systems						
Belize 1979–	189	35.00	16.0	16.0	0.3	1.2
Jamaica 1962–	2415	35.00	19.4	19.4	0.9	4.9
Malta 1966–*	354	13.10	2.5	1.8	1.8	62.0
St. Vincent and the Grenadines 1979–	107	35.00	23.4	23.4	6.3	24.3
St. Lucia 1979–	133	35.00	17.9	15.7	6.9	45.4
Barbados 1966–	257	35.00	18.3	18.2	3.9	28.5
Liechtenstein*	29	8.00	4.6	2.9	3.5	54.7
Bahamas 1972–	255	35.00	19.3	18.6	2.5	10.0
Trinidad and Tobago 1961–	1227	35.00	13.6	9.8	8.7	52.6
Mauritius 1967–	1059	35.00	21.8	19.6	6.1	31.2
St. Kitts and Nevis 1984–	42	35.00	21.9	8.3	12.4	38.2
Transitional systems						
New Zealand*	3363	35.00	12.6	10.4	10.7	77.0
United Kingdom*	57561	35.00	14.2	10.6	12.1	82.3

Two-and-a-half-party systems					
Greece 1974–	10161	15.50	11.0	9.3	10.3	94.2
Austria*	7718	4.69	3.7	1.8	3.1	82.7
Germany*	79365	5.00	4.2	2.4	3.9	92.4
Australia*	17065	35.00	13.5	7.0	3.7	21.4
Canada	26584	35.00	14.9	13.0	10.3	75.1
Spain 1977–	38959	10.18	12.9	9.1	12.8	96.4
Transitional systems					
Ireland*	3503	16.07	5.8	3.4	4.9	81.9
Portugal 1975–*	9896	6.76	7.6	5.3	7.6	100.0
Belgium	9967	7.52	6.2	2.2	4.0	65.7
Multiparty systems					
Luxembourg*	382	4.79	7.1	4.4	4.6	61.8
France V 1958–	56735	35.00	23.1	16.4	19.7	81.6
Sweden	8559	4.00	3.1	1.4	2.1	67.3
Italy	57661	4.61	7.1	3.9	5.4	83.8
Norway	4241	4.00	7.2	4.7	5.0	72.3
Iceland	255	6.60	5.6	0.2	4.2	70.9
Israel	4660	1.25	4.7	1.6	2.9	57.6
Netherlands	14952	0.67	2.9	1.1	2.0	71.1
Denmark	5140	2.00	3.1	0.8	1.6	47.3
France IV (1945–1956)	56735	12.80	6.8	1.2	1.2	41.8
Finland	4986	5.36	5.6	2.0	3.7	68.0

*Always the same top two parties.

Table 4. Population and electoral differences between party systems (*t*-tests)

	Total cases	Mean 2½	Mean 2	Two-tailed	
				t	*sig.*
1. Between two-and-a-half-party systems broadly defined and two-party systems					
Population in 1990	21	26077.90	551.55	3.372	0.003
Effective threshold	21	17.072	30.555	−2.688	0.015
Mean DISP	21	9.400	16.245	−2.694	0.014
Mean SBLP	21	6.410	13.973	−2.939	0.008
Mean SBT2	21	7.270	4.845	1.489	0.153
Mean SBT2 as a % of DISP	21	79.210	32.091	4.957	0.000

	Total cases	Mean 2½	Mean multi	Two-tailed	
				t	*sig.*
2. Between two-and-a-half-party systems broadly defined and multiparty systems					
Population in 1990	21	26077.90	19482.36	0.609	0.550
Effective threshold	21	17.072	7.362	1.954	0.066
Mean DISP	21	9.400	6.936	1.114	0.279
Mean SBLP	21	6.410	3.427	1.589	0.128
Mean SBT2	21	7.270	4.764	1.256	0.224
Mean SBT2 as a % of DISP	21	79.210	65.773	1.679	0.110

	Total cases	Mean 2½	Mean 2	Two-tailed	
				t	sig.
3. Between two-and-a-half-party systems broadly defined (Australia excluded) and two-party systems					
Population in 1990	20	27079.33	551.55	3.342	0.004
Effective threshold	20	15.080	30.555	−3.153	0.005
Mean DISP	20	8.944	16.245	−2.759	0.013
Mean SBLP	20	6.344	13.973	−2.806	0.012
Mean SBT2	20	7.667	4.845	1.686	0.109
Mean SBT2 as a % of DISP	20	85.633	32.091	6.955	0.000

	Total cases	Mean 2½	Mean multi	Two-tailed	
				t	sig.
4. Between two-and-a-half-party systems broadly defined (Australia excluded) and multiparty systems					
Population in 1990	20	27079.33	19482.36	0.666	0.514
Effective threshold	20	15.080	7.362	1.590	0.129
Mean DISP	20	8.944	6.936	0.876	0.392
Mean SBLP	20	6.344	3.427	1.472	0.158
Mean SBT2	20	7.667	4.764	1.402	0.178
Mean SBT2 as a % of DISP	20	85.633	65.773	3.634	0.002

between these two groups, such SBT2 as a share of disproportionality is significantly higher in the two-and-a-half-party systems. The reality here is that in a two-party system the seat bias (that is, disproportionality) in favour of the winning party in an election tends to come in large part at the expense of the other main party, not from smaller or fringe parties. In two-and-a-half-party systems, however, both main parties usually benefit (although not equally) at the expense of the smaller parties.

However, *none* of these aforementioned measures of electoral system effects have statistically significant differences between two-and-a-half-party systems and multiparty systems (section 2 of Table 4). In other words, although there are various explanations why two-and-a-half-party systems are not two-party systems (and vice versa), these factors are not significant as explanations for why two-and-a-half-party systems are not *multiparty* systems (and vice versa). Here I would advance the perhaps provocative argument that Australia is different in a crucial way from the other two-and-a-half-party systems, flowing from its unique use of the preferential vote for the House of Representatives. In the stereotypical two-and-a-half-party system, the 'half' party is either underrepresented in parliament or at best is fairly represented. In Australia, however, the National Party (or its predecessors) has always been overrepresented in the lower house; in fact consistently so since 1922. This reality serves to depress both the SBT2 and SBT2 as a percentage of DISP values for Australia (see Table 3). What happens, then, if we remove Australia from the group of two-and-a-half-party systems and redo the *t*-tests? First of all, nothing fundamental changes in terms of the differences between two-and-a-half-party systems and two-party systems (section 3 of Table 4). Nor is there any change on most factors for the differences between two-and-a-half-party systems and multiparty systems (section 4 of Table 4). However, here the mean SBT2 as a percentage of disproportionality value now acquires a clearly significant difference. Thus the difference between most two-and-a-half-party systems (Australia excluded) and multiparty systems is not that the former is more disproportionate per se, but rather that the disproportionality occurs in a very specific way: it accrues overwhelmingly to the two main parties as a pair. Indeed, Portugal is the paradigmatic case of this: in *all* Portuguese elections both main parties have been overrepresented and every other party has been underrepresented. Consequently, Portugal's SBT2 as a percentage of DISP has been the maximum of 100 in every election. Controlling for the Australian electoral system (and the fact that the National Party only runs in select constituencies), I conclude this section by noting that two-and-a-half-party systems are not multiparty systems because in the former the two main parties basically 'duopolize' the electoral disproportionality.

Comparative Conditions Facilitating the Influence of the 'Half'

Let us now return to distinctions within two-and-a-half-party systems, specifically concerning the influence of the 'half' party. Based on the earlier analysis, it seems clear that one must first distinguish between *wing* half parties and *hinge* half parties. For *wing* half parties – the Greek Communists, the Canadian New Democratic Party until 1993, the Irish Labour Party until 1992, the Australian National Party and the Spanish United Left – the key factors seem to be the attitude and behaviour of the main party closer to the wing towards the wing party and vice versa. Where this main party sees the wing party as a permanent and necessary ally, as do the Australian Liberals (vis-à-vis the National Party) and as did Fine Gael in Ireland (vis-à-vis Labour), then the wing party is clearly relevant and will be in government if the 'bloc' is victorious. This is because in these situations government alternation is 'wholesale' rather than 'partial' (Mair, 2002: 94–5), involving a complete change of government blocs, or more precisely the wholesale alternation between a bloc (of one main and one half party) and the other main party (Labor in Australia, Fianna Fáil in Ireland). However, where a main party feels it can (usually) govern without a formal understanding with a wing party, let alone an alliance, then the wing party becomes marginalized and largely irrelevant; and the two main parties behave more as if they are the *only* two parties. Canada until 1993 clearly fits this pattern, and with a brief exception so does Greece. Of course, for any such coalitions to form, the wing party itself must be interested. Thus, we would define the National Party in Australia, but also the Labour Party in Ireland, as a *coalitional* wing party, that is, eager to be part of a governing coalition. In contrast, the Spanish United Left, the Greek Communists and the Canadian New Democrats have all been 'hesitantly coalitional' wing parties, more interested in ideology than in office-seeking.

Regarding the normally centrist *hinge* half parties – the German FDP (until the 1980s), the Austrian Freedom Party (until 1986), the British Liberal Democrats and the main Spanish regional parties – the key factor seems to be first and foremost 'achieving' a hung parliament. This is of course more likely where the voters do not want majority governments, and to that end do not want a pure two-party system. Failing a hung parliament, such hinge half parties are likely to be irrelevant. Yet in a situation of a hung parliament, such a hinge half party may become quite relevant, especially if it is the only half party and/or if it alone is sufficient to provide a majority to one of the larger parties. However, this presupposes that the two main parties do not choose to coalesce together, and thus we can note that the (potential) power of a hinge half party is greater the bigger the antagonism, or at least rivalry, between the two main parties.

Finally, let me make two general points on the importance of half parties. First of all, their importance seems generally greater when the political

culture is consensual rather than majoritarian (Lijphart, 1984, 1999). Secondly, half parties are aided by a system of positive rather than negative parliamentarianism, especially where the former requires an absolute majority on the first ballot, as in Germany and Spain. In the case of negative parliamentarianism, the temptation is great for the incumbent party simply to 'tough it out' for a while without giving much or anything to the half party, and then call new elections, as did the British Labour Party in 1974. This approach might also have been tempting to the Spanish Socialists in 1993, but was impossible given the required vote of investiture.

Two-and-a-Half-Party Systems and the Varying Roles of the 'Half'

Two-and-a-half-party systems have always been a minority within parliamentary democracies. Some of these – the United Kingdom, Greece and Canada – essentially function or functioned as two-party systems. Of the rest, the role of the half party has varied, as follows:

(1) Where there have only been three relevant parties, where neither of the two antagonistic main parties gets a majority, and where the half party is a hinge one, then the said half party is in the most powerful strategic position there can be for a 'half'. This was the case of the FDP in Germany from the 1960s through the early 1980s. Such a situation tended to yield a coalition of one of the larger parties with the FDP, leading to its permanence in government.

(2) Such permanence occurred in part because the other obvious majority coalition, that of the two main parties, was rarely used at the federal level (although more so at the Land level). However, such 'grand coalitions' have until recently been the norm in Austria, which made the FPÖ much less of a governmental force even when there were just three parties and a hung parliament.

(3) Where there is only one half party and it is on a wing, then it will get into government when, but only when, its side wins. This has been the unquestionable situation of the National Party in Australia, and was also the situation of the Irish Labour Party from the 1960s through the 1980s.

(4) Where there are two half parties, though, one on a wing and one wishing to play a hinge role, then the bargaining power seems to shift to the major party on the side of the wing. This was the situation of Ireland since the late 1980s, with the Labour Party trying to reposition itself in the centre, which, however, allowed Fianna Fáil to play it and the free-market Progressive Democrats off against each other.

(5) On the other hand, if there are two half parties, one on a wing and one in the centre, but the wing party is disinterested in power, then the

centre party acquires a powerful hinge function analogous to situation (1). This has been the reality in Spain since the 1990s, where the leftist IU has not been a governmental player, thus allowing the main regionalist parties, especially the Catalan CiU, to play the kingmaker role.

(6) Finally, where there are two half parties on either wing, the competition becomes effectively bipolar, so that a half party will govern only if its side wins, and neither half party has any huge bargaining power. Germany has been in this situation since the 1980s, and the addition of the PDS as another leftist wing party has not changed things fundamentally. Portugal, however, is an interesting variant of this, in that its elections under the two-and-a-half-party format have yielded two earned majorities (for the conservatives) and two 'near majorities' (for the Socialists), thus making the system bipolar without any role for the wing parties until the 2002 elections, which led to a Social Democrat – Popular Party coalition.

Conclusions: Regional Variations

Two-and-a-half-party systems stand as a distinct sub-type of party system, different from both two-party and multiparty systems. Initially rare in the 1940s, their total number peaked in the late 1970s, but they still remain significant today. Moreover, there has been a geographic evolution in their presence. Through the early 1970s the two-and-a-half-party system was a Germanic (including Austrian) and 'British legacy' (Australia, Canada, Ireland) phenomenon. Through the rest of the 1970s other nations developed such a system, although with the exception of Spain this involved 'on-and-off' patterns. By the 1980s we could say that the phenomenon was not strictly speaking restricted to any one or two locations, but nevertheless the core examples seemed to be the Germanic countries, the British Isles and Australia. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw two-and-a-half-partyism cease to exist in Ireland and Austria, and weaken considerably in Germany. During this same time frame the phenomenon finally acquired permanence in both Portugal and Greece. Thus from the 1990s, and still today, it has been more of an Australian and southern European reality, the United Kingdom notwithstanding. Spain (which has had such a system since democratization) has thus perhaps become the best real world example, consequently really replacing Germany in this regard.

Spain also has (as had Germany before it) the more 'effective' version of the two-and-a-half-party system, that is, where the 'half' party (or group of parties in Spain) is in a hinge position rather than a wing position. This we have seen can make a fundamental difference in the influence of a half-party. Of course, the main overall constraint on the influence of a half-party remains the achievement of a single-party majority by one of the two main parties – a standard outcome in the United Kingdom and largely the case

in Greece, but in contrast an occasional (Spain), rare (Portugal) or non-existent phenomenon elsewhere.

Notes

1 Where a colony had an election immediately preceding independence, this election is also included in the analysis.
2 For example, Montero (1995: 59) – among a whole range of measures, of course.
3 As is done in Ware (1996: 158).
4 This calculation can be done either for votes (effective number of electoral parties) or seats (effective number of parliamentary parties). It involves squaring each party's share of the votes (or seats), summing all of these squares and dividing 1.00 by this number, that is: $N = 1 \div \bullet p_i^2$, where N is the effective number of parties and p_i is the share of seats (0.40, 0.25, etc.) of the i-th party.
5 That is, $1 - \bullet p_i^2$.
6 As Mainwaring and Scully (1995: 31) suggest, '[m]ost party systems with an N_s between 1.8 and 2.4 approximate the logic of two-party systems'.
7 There are 36 cases because the French Fourth and Fifth Republics are measured separately. The values in this and subsequent tables are taken from or calculated from the information in Siaroff (2000), updated and expanded.
8 Two elections – Jamaica 1983 and Trinidad and Tobago 1971 – were not included in this analysis since in these the main opposition party completely or largely boycotted the elections.
9 Here I differ from Rae (1971: 93), who defined two-party systems as those where the top two parties together hold at least 90 percent of the seats.
10 Ware (1996: 162 [Table 5.2]) likewise considers a 2PSC of 80 percent to be the cut-off between two-and-a-half-party and multiparty systems.
11 This is also a problem for some of the other measures. A system where Party A and Party B each have 44 percent of the seats and Party C has 12 percent would have an ENPP of 2.490 and a PFRG of 0.598. However, if Party A has 54 percent of the seats, Party B 27 percent and Party C 19 percent, the figures are essentially the same – an ENPP of 2.496 and a PFRG of 0.599. Only the $N_\infty P$ would be significantly different.
12 I am indebted to Richard Katz for this point.
13 For their part, Ball and Peters (2000: 112) refer to two-and-one-half-party systems as those 'in which there are two dominant parties but the larger parties rarely command an overall majority and need the support of other parties to form a government'.
14 Strictly speaking, so too was Norway until 1961.
15 Of course, one can make further distinctions within the overall category of multi-party systems. See, for example, Ware (1996: 162–8).
16 The difference in electoral systems between Canada and Ireland is obviously relevant here.
17 See Montero (1995: 62–3 and 1998: 55–9) on the first three of these party systems.

18 On the concept of an effective threshold, see Lijphart (1994). Data are taken from Lijphart (1994) and Anckar (1998).

19 Thus, neither the three one-party predominant systems nor New Zealand are included in the subsequent analysis.

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