Understanding Politics — Chapter 13 Student Practice Pack

Elections, Parties and Party Systems

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About this pack

This pack follows the practice-chapter template: a seat-allocation exercise you can do by hand or in a spreadsheet, and a party-system case using an election of your choice. Answers are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com. Student Pack, Chapter 13, version 1.0 (October 2026). © Oxter Press. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Chapter at a glance

Concept	Meaning	Key source
Mechanical effect	Electoral rules convert votes to seats unevenly	Duverger (1954)
Psychological effect	Voters and elites avoid likely losers	Duverger (1954); Cox (1997)
Cleavages	Durable social divisions that structure party competition	Lipset and Rokkan (1967)
Effective number of parties	Party count weighted by vote or seat share	Laakso and Taagepera (1979)
Disproportionality	Gap between vote and seat shares	Gallagher (1991)
Volatility	Net change in parties' vote shares between elections	Pedersen (1979)
Institutionalisation	Stable competition, roots, legitimacy, organisation	Mainwaring and Scully (1995)
Cartel party	Parties relying on state resources and collusion	Katz and Mair (1995)

Seat-allocation exercise

A five-seat district casts 100,000 votes: Party A 40,000; Party B 30,000; Party C 18,000; Party D 12,000.

Step 1. Allocate the five seats under each rule.

- **D'Hondt:** divide each party's votes by 1, 2, 3 … and award seats to the five largest quotients.
- **Sainte-Laguë:** divide by 1, 3, 5 … and award seats to the five largest quotients.

- **Largest remainder (Hare quota):** quota = votes ÷ seats; award whole quotas, then remaining seats to the largest remainders.
- **Plurality:** suppose instead five single-member districts, each with the same vote distribution.

Party	Votes (%)	D'Hondt seats	Sainte-Laguë seats	Largest remainder seats	Plurality seats
A	40				
B	30				
C	18				
D	12				

Step 2. Answer:

1. Which rule most favours the largest party? Why?
2. Calculate the effective number of parties by seats under D'Hondt and under plurality (1 ÷ the sum of squared seat shares).
3. Under plurality, what would supporters of Party D be likely to do at the next election? Which effect is this?
4. Which rule would Party C's leaders lobby for, and why?

Case analysis: a real party system

Choose one recent national election, in Ghana, the UK or a country your tutor assigns. Using official results:

1. Calculate the effective number of parties by votes and by seats. What explains the gap?
2. Calculate Pedersen volatility against the previous election.
3. Is the system institutionalised on Mainwaring and Scully's four dimensions? Give evidence for each.
4. Does the main competition follow a social cleavage, a programmatic divide, clientelist networks or leadership? Use evidence, not labels.

Self-test

1. Duverger's mechanical effect refers to:
    - A. How electoral rules convert votes into seats, often favouring large parties
    - B. Voters' strategic choices
    - C. Party funding
    - D. Turnout
2. The psychological effect occurs when:
    - A. Parties merge
    - B. Courts intervene
    - C. Voters and elites avoid wasting support on likely losers
    - D. Turnout falls

3. Duverger's law states that:
    - A. PR produces two parties
    - B. The simple-majority single-ballot system favours the two-party system
    - C. All systems become multiparty
    - D. Parties follow cleavages
4. Cox's M + 1 rule predicts that the number of viable candidates:
    - A. Equals the number of parties
    - B. Is always two
    - C. Depends on turnout
    - D. Tends not to exceed district magnitude plus one
5. The effective number of parties:
    - A. Weights each party by its share of votes or seats
    - B. Counts all registered parties
    - C. Counts only governing parties
    - D. Measures ideology
6. Gallagher's index measures:
    - A. Turnout
    - B. Polarisation
    - C. Disproportionality between votes and seats
    - D. Volatility
7. Lipset and Rokkan's 'freezing hypothesis' holds that:
    - A. Parties never change
    - B. 1960s party systems reflected 1920s cleavage structures
    - C. Voters stopped voting
    - D. Cleavages disappeared
8. Pedersen's index measures:
    - A. Party membership
    - B. Disproportionality
    - C. Polarisation
    - D. Net change in parties' vote shares between elections
9. Party-system institutionalisation includes:
    - A. Stable competition, social roots, legitimacy and party organisation
    - B. A two-party system
    - C. Compulsory voting
    - D. State funding
10. The cartel party relies on:
    - A. Mass membership
    - B. Clientelism only
    - C. State resources and collusion among established parties
    - D. Social movements
11. Pitkin's descriptive representation concerns:
    - A. What representatives do
    - B. Who representatives are

    - C. How they are elected
    - D. Their party
12. Krook distinguishes gender quotas as:
    - A. Formal and informal
    - B. National and local
    - C. Voluntary only
    - D. Reserved seats, party quotas and legislative candidate quotas
13. Boix argued established parties adopted PR when:
    - A. Socialist parties threatened them under plurality rules
    - B. Voters demanded it
    - C. Courts required it
    - D. Turnout rose
14. Sartori's predominant-party system is one where:
    - A. Elections are not competitive
    - B. Two parties alternate
    - C. One party repeatedly wins majorities in competitive elections
    - D. There are no parties
15. Powell and Whitten found economic voting is weaker when:
    - A. Turnout is high
    - B. Clarity of responsibility is low, as under coalitions
    - C. Parties are old
    - D. Media are free

Short answers and essays

Short answers: (1) Mechanical versus psychological effects. (2) Duverger's law and its limits. (3) The effective number of parties. (4) Cleavages and the freezing hypothesis. (5) Volatility versus collapse. (6) Party-system institutionalisation. (7) Why electoral rules are political outcomes. (8) Descriptive versus substantive representation. (9) Party finance and equality. (10) Ethnic parties: label versus evidence.

Essays: (1) Do electoral systems shape party systems, or the reverse? (2) Is proportional representation fairer? (3) Are parties in decline? (4) Should legislatures mirror the societies they represent? (5) Are African party systems best explained by ethnicity? (6) Does a dominant party threaten democracy?

Glossary

Term	Definition
District magnitude	Number of seats elected in a district
Proportional representation	Allocating seats in proportion to votes
Strategic voting	Voting for a viable second choice

Term	Definition
Cleavage	Durable social division structuring competition
Effective number of parties	Size-weighted count of parties
Volatility	Change in party vote shares between elections
Dominant / predominant party	A party winning repeatedly in competitive elections
Descriptive representation	Representatives sharing characteristics with those represented