Electoral Reform in the Middle East: Rising Parties and Elite Action in Israel and Jordan

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Paper for presentation at the Andrea Mitchell Center for Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism’s Graduate Workshop
University of Pennsylvania

6 April 2017
Introduction

In the 1950s, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion attempted to drastically restructure his country’s electoral system. At independence in 1948, Israel established a closed-list proportional representation system for elections to its Constituent Assembly, a system carried over to subsequent parliamentary (Knesset) elections. In place of this proportional system, Ben-Gurion and his political allies proposed a system resembling that of the United States: single-member, simple-plurality districts. Yet despite his personal popularity and the strength of his party, Mapai, Ben-Gurion was unable to secure a majority of votes for any kind of electoral reform, much less his wholesale replacement of the system. In fact, Israel’s proportional representation system achieved constitutional status, written into a Knesset Basic Law. Ben-Gurion not only failed but saw his goals move further from achievement.

Under what conditions do electoral systems change? The literature on electoral systems holds that “drastic changes in electoral systems...are extremely rare in established democracies” (Lijphart 2016: 208). As Cox (1997: 18) put it, “electoral systems tend to be, and to be perceived as, rather long-lived.” In this project, I contend that elites engineer electoral systems in the face of threats out of a desire to maintain control of electoral power. This paper builds on the work of Rokkan (1970) and Ahmed (2013), among others, in developing a theory of electoral systems change that challenges the assumption that electoral systems are stable and that helps to explain elite collective action necessary for electoral systems to change.

Rokkan’s and Ahmed’s work is limited by their focus on the historical moment in the late 1800s to early 1900s, their focus on industrializing countries and their implicit acceptance of electoral systems as stable from that moment to the present day. In their telling, the rise of workers’ parties and the imminent enfranchisement of their voters generated elite wholesale changes to the
electoral system from a norm of plural voting districts to either single-member plurality districts or proportional representation systems. Where workers were strong, elites adopted proportional representation to ensure that workers would face significant difficulties gaining a majority. Where workers were weak, elites adopted single-member plurality districts to maximize their seat share and minimize that of workers. Though persuasive in the context of franchise expansion, in a different, contemporary context of universal suffrage, this conception of electoral threats is insufficient to explain changes in electoral systems.

My project, therefore, broadens the scope of electoral systems engineering and generalizes the concept of threat. Under this model, incumbent parties engage in electoral engineering when they feel threatened by other parties on the political scene. First, I examine multiple changes to the electoral system, from shifts in the method of translation of votes into seats, such as single-member plurality districts or proportional representation, which I term *inter-system electoral engineering*, to smaller shifts in the legal implementation of the electoral system, such as changes to the electoral threshold, which I term *intra-system electoral engineering*.¹ Second, I develop two types of threat: *ideological*, whereby incumbent parties are so revolted by the ideas fronted by parties that they seek to exclude them from the political system entirely, and *instrumental*, whereby incumbents fear that threatening parties could supplant them for representation of incumbent party voters. Third, I take into account elites’ perception of the past and expectations of the future, in which I categorize threats as *rising, stable, or falling*. Finally, I address the potential that changes to the electoral system or its legal implementation can backfire. Opposition elites can act strategically to counter electoral engineering. Parties’ success in electoral engineering – measured not by whether

¹ A third type of electoral engineering, *electoral regulatory engineering*, will be discussed below. It is not directly addressed in this study.
parties succeed in passing electoral reform legislation, but by whether the threatening party loses seats – is not assured; electoral engineering can be counteracted by strategic action among (threatening) party elites and by strategic voting in the electorate.

I view the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a region with sufficient internal variation from which to generate a new theory of electoral systems change suitable for a global context of universal suffrage. The MENA has a wide range of electoral systems. Israel is frequently hailed as one of the purest examples of list proportional representation with democratic elections for Israeli citizens. Jordan was one of the few countries in the world that used the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system. Countries across the region exhibit variation in levels of political party institutionalization. Finally, countries across the region also vary in political regime. The electoral systems literature, even to this day, has failed to take into account elections under authoritarian rule. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project, for example, overwhelmingly focuses on democracies and entirely excludes the MENA with the exception of Israel and Turkey. However, especially since the 1990s (in many cases earlier), parliaments and elections have become omnipresent. The use of elections in authoritarian regimes has been widely studied by scholars of competitive authoritarianism and of non-competitive authoritarianism. These same scholars have devoted considerable attention to the conditions under which elites participate in political institutions (Lust-Okar 2006; Lust 2009; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2010), but in general these studies focus less on questions of institutional design and change and more on reasons for political participation in the first place. I argue that the literatures

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2 I define the MENA as including the 22 states of the Arab League, Iran, Israel, and Turkey. While this leads to the inclusion of several states not always considered part of the Middle East (Djibouti, Comoros, Mauritania, Somalia), I submit that following existing transnational geopolitical ties is a safer strategy for delineating a set of cases than ad hoc subtractions and additions to an initial condition. I justify the inclusion of Turkey, Iran, and Israel on the basis of historical ties to the countries of the Arab League as well as geographical proximity.
on electoral systems change and on authoritarian electoral systems must speak more directly to each other. If, as Massicotte and his co-authors (2004: 3) suggest, elections are “game[s] in which parties or candidates attempt to convince electors to vote for them,” then elections and the rules that govern them ought to be studied wherever they are found. To the extent that significant and consistent differences in the impetus behind and the rate of electoral systems change exist between authoritarian and democratic regimes, such a finding is only possible in a project that studies elections across regime type.

This paper proceeds as follows. I first detail the state of the literature on electoral systems change, a literature that still reflects Lijphart’s (1985) contention that research on electoral systems is most needed considering electoral systems as an independent variable. Second, I present a preliminary examination of the state of electoral systems in the contemporary MENA, highlighting the variation in electoral systems in this region. Third, I present my model of electoral systems engineering. Fourth and finally, I discuss the model in relation to two historical moments in Israel.

The Politics of Electoral Systems

Note to readers: this section serves as a literature review of the state of the field on electoral systems research and the current electoral system in place in several MENA states. I have included it for completeness, but you should feel free to skip to page 13.

Lijphart (1985: 3) once lamented that “the study of electoral systems is undoubtedly the most underdeveloped subject in political science.” Such a statement hardly seems appropriate today. With the publication of Taagapera and Shugart’s Seats and Votes (1989) and Cox’s Making Votes Count (1997), the study of electoral systems was revolutionized. Our understandings of how voters are induced to act strategically and the effects of a variety of different systems on such normatively important issues as representation and equality have been greatly improved. Yet
recent surveys of the field, such as that of Grofman (2016), both note the sheer volume of useful material scholars now have in the study of electoral systems and retain skepticism over the precision of our knowledge of anything more complex than simple list-PR or single-member systems. What seems clear is that the study of electoral systems has generated numerous tests of electoral systems as an independent variable: we know now, to a great degree, the relative proportional effects of different seat allocation rules (D’Hondt versus Hare quota versus Haagenbach-Bischoff quotient), the ways electoral systems produce predictable numbers of candidates (Cox 1997), and various strategies for lessening the fractionalization of party systems.

It is no accident that research on electoral systems as an independent variable has blossomed. Lijphart (1985: 7) wrote that “the more important task of electoral systems research is to discover the consequences of the different aspects of election rules.” In other words, studying the consequences of electoral systems for addressing representation of minority groups, the degree of multipartism, or the level of polarization was deemed a more pressing task than understanding how electoral systems arise in the first place. Grofman (2016) suggests that this focus was successful in no small part because many of the important variables of interest in electoral systems research – the magnitude of districts, the share of votes – are quantifiable (or indeed are already quantified). Assembling datasets for empirical testing, then, has been a key focus of political scientists since Lijphart criticized the poor state of the field two decades ago.

Though political scientists have produced voluminous high-quality research that addresses the consequences of electoral systems for numerous normatively important topics, I submit that a lack of focus on the causes of electoral systems has contributed to a curious black hole in political science research. We know much about what electoral systems do – that a district with magnitude 20 will produce more proportional results than a district with magnitude 1, for instance – but little
about how the electoral system itself got there in the first place. Moreover, if “the study of electoral systems has been enhanced because…there are many more countries with a history of democratic elections to study” then political science has focused far more on democratic elections vis-à-vis electoral systems research than it has on authoritarian elections in the same field (Grofman 2016: 524). This paper addresses both of these issues: inattention to the causes of electoral systems and to the formation and use of electoral systems in non-democratic contexts.

Political science, however, has not completely missed the question of the origins of electoral systems. A few salutary works have addressed the adoption of electoral systems in the West. The first to deal extensively with electoral systems origins was Stein Rokkan (1970) in *Citizens, Elections, Parties*. Rokkan hypothesized that the adoption of proportional representation (PR) in Scandinavia and continental Europe was driven by two forces: the inclusion of minority groups and the rise of workers (Rokkan 1970: 157). Workers, previously excluded from the franchise and from representation, pushed for PR to seek independent political representation outside the dominant parties of the bourgeoisie and the landholding classes. Conversely, the incumbent parties colluded to adopt proportional representation to prevent workers from achieving a potential majority under other forms of election—single-member simple plurality (SMSP), for instance. Thus workers were able to gain representation under PR, but found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a majority in which they could govern without coalition support. Incumbent parties saw their share of parliamentary representation erode, but not vanish; they were not completely supplanted by rising workers’ movements. Rokkan’s explanation suggests that part of what drives electoral systems change is the threat of a new entrant to the political system. This threat, if fearsome enough, can drive elite collective action to blunt its force. Yet Rokkan, as Boix
Smith (1999) points out, fails to tell us the specific conditions under which incumbent elites will feel threatened enough to change the electoral system.

Ahmed (2013) has extended Rokkan’s argument in important ways. First, she examines this same historical adoption of PR with attention to the previous electoral system. In many locations, that electoral system was *plural voting*, such that many seats saw multiple representatives elected and voters had multiple votes to use. These seats were disproportionately clustered in urban areas where workers’ movements were rising. Thus the previous electoral system played a significant role in convincing elites of the gravity of the threat from workers’ movements. Second, she notes that SMSP took hold in some places, even where those same places had workers’ parties rising. Incumbent elites made decisions on the adoption of electoral system based on their assessment of the level of threat posed by workers. Part of their information on this threat level came in the form of the ideology of the workers’ party. Ahmed finds that in polities where a workers’ party was nonexistent, like the United States, incumbent parties adjusted electoral systems to SMSP, under which they could maintain permanent majorities and incorporate what workers’ movement existed. In polities where a workers’ party was moderate but rising, incumbent parties adjusted electoral systems to SMSP, under which they were unafraid of the political consequences of incorporating workers. Sometimes this resulted in the effective marginalization of one or more incumbent party, such as the Liberals in the United Kingdom. In places where the workers’ party was radical, incumbent parties chose PR to limit the ability of workers to gain a majority.

Boix (1999) both formalizes and extends the arguments made earlier by Rokkan. His puzzle is why ruling parties ever change the rules of the game that got them elected, and thus attempts to predict the “conditions under which the ruling parties, anticipating the effects of
different electoral regimes on voters and candidates, choose different sets of electoral rules to
maximize their chances of securing parliamentary representation as well as cabinet posts” (Boix
1999: 609). Important for Boix is the intuition that elites, especially incumbent power-holders, are
well-positioned to understand the coordination effects of implementing electoral rules on voters’
strategic decisions. Thus, if power-holders determine that voters behaving strategically will not
threaten incumbents’ hold on power, they will introduce systems that induce strategic behavior
(such as single-member plurality systems); conversely, if inducing strategic behavior is expected
to “substantially” weaken incumbents’ seat shares, then elites will introduce more proportional
rules. This formalizes Rokkan’s logic over the enfranchisement of workers and concomitant
changes in the electoral systems of industrializing Europe: workers’ mass entry could have led to
a dramatic shift in power under existing electoral rules, so elites adopted PR where workers were
strong and SMSP where workers were weak.

Though the above frameworks focus on the internal dynamics of a political unit and relative
power imbalances between competing groups to explain the origin of electoral systems, Rogowski
(1987) turns to the dependence of a society on international trade. Put briefly, the more a state
relies on external trade, the more likely it will be to use PR, to adopt a parliamentary (as opposed
to a presidential) system, and to have large districts. Trade-dependent economies prosper through
efficient exploitation of comparative advantage, but are also vulnerable to rapid changes in terms
and flows of trade. Rogowski reasons that a trade-dependent state must then insulate its
government from factional pressures for protectionism, must guard against rent-seeking wealthy
interests, and must pursue stable policy, because predictability will be important for other states
seeking to establish long-term trading relationships. Insulating against factional pressures is
provided for by large districts that dilute the effect of geographic concentration. Guarding against
rent-seeking can be accomplished by strong parties, an accepted side effect of party-list PR. And stability is best achieved by the combination of PR in large districts with a parliamentary system. Rogowski is quick to acknowledge that PR is usually thought of as enhancing instability. However, in societies dominated by traditional loyalties or by more than one axis of political competition (e.g. economics and foreign policy), PR ensures institutional stability better than single-member plurality systems or presidential systems, in which factional groups can “manufacture” majorities.

This study adopts some of the intuitions presented about the level and trend of threat driving electoral engineering. But more importantly, the above studies highlight the theoretical poverty of the literature on the origins of electoral systems and the necessity of more theory-building. The above works limit their scope conditions to either the historical moment surrounding franchise expansion to working-class men in Europe and the Anglophone world, as Rokkan and Ahmed do, or only theorize about “the developed world” (Boix 1999: 609) or “economically advanced state[s]” (Rogowski 1987: 206). Moreover, even though Lijphart (1985: 6) called for contesting the “proposition concerning the constancy or near-constancy of the electoral system” (that is, once a system is chosen it remains fixed), these studies, by not expanding their scope beyond the exogenous shock of franchise expansion or by only addressing developed societies, fail to effectively challenge this presumption. We should seek, if not law-like generalities that govern all electoral systems across time and space, at least theory that can address the nature of the post-World War II polity (one with universal suffrage) and speak to the vast majority of states today.

This, importantly, is not something to which the literature is fully averse. Boix (1999: 622) notes that advanced democracies may be suitable for study because “the government could predict with some certainty the future structure of electoral competition; parties had, in most cases,
become national; and parliamentary and semipresidential systems were (excluding the United States) the norm.” Outside these conditions, Boix (ibid.) suggests, but does not test, a few propositions: that electoral systems emerging out of authoritarianism will be those that minimize risks (i.e. PR), that single-member districts should emerge in situations rife with patronage politics, that the character of democratization (e.g. from below, from above) should affect the type of electoral system chosen, and that the electoral law will be shaped by the emergent constitutional framework. These are fine propositions to examine in the cases under study in the MENA, even though Boix still restricts the scope of his suggestions to democracies.

**The MENA and Electoral Systems⁴**

I present here the state of affairs in the MENA with regard to electoral systems. I do so both to highlight the variation present in the region, variation that exemplifies the sort of electoral systems beyond Taagapera’s (2007) simple systems present in an increasingly complex global electoral landscape. There are twenty-five countries under study: the twenty-two countries of the Arab League, Iran, Israel, and Turkey. These represent a sample chosen for convenience from the total universe of cases, which I consider to be the global system of states. I contend that this sample represents a broad enough distribution of electoral systems changes and outcomes to mitigate the effects of selecting on the dependent variable. In three of these countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Somalia), no national elections are present. In an additional two (Palestine, the United Arab Emirates) I am still attempting to collect reliable data on the national electoral system. Both have parliaments with varying degrees of power. The Palestinians have not held parliamentary elections since state recognition in 2011. I exclude these cases from the below table.

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³ Data for Table 1 comes from a wide variety of sources, particularly the Inter-Parliamentary Union PARLINE database (http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp), the Quality of Government database (https://knoema.com/QOGISD2017/quality-of-government-institute-standard-dataset-version-january-2017), and the very helpful overview of changes after the Arab revolts by Szmolka (2014: 137-8).
MENA countries employ a wide variety of electoral systems, from 10 countries that use solely some form of PR to a number of countries that use mixed systems. Their electoral thresholds range from nonexistent to high; they employ gender and ethnic quotas in many cases. Moreover, nearly countries have changed their electoral laws within the past decade. Collecting detailed and accurate information on all cases in the MENA about electoral systems changes is difficult, but in a future version of this project I plan to plot out electoral system changes and attempts at changes region-wide by year. Given the well-known predominance of authoritarian regimes in the MENA, it is worth questioning why authoritarian rulers, having made the decision to employ elections for some purpose (not necessarily a democratic one) change the electoral law. In advanced democracies, the presumption is that the electoral law should remain stable: incumbents do not change the rules of the game that they win, although increasingly this presumption is challenged (Lijphart 1985; Katz 2005: 60). Is it that parliaments are shams and that authoritarian leaders change the law because they can (ironically, often using the parliament to do so)? Or is it that parliaments have more power (even discursively) than we give them credit for, and electoral engineering is necessary to keep docile parliaments? Though this paper will deal particularly with Israel’s highly democratic electoral system, future versions of this project will explore electoral engineering in authoritarian contexts in more depth.

Models

My model predicts when incumbent parties will adopt electoral engineering strategies. The dependent variable is adoption of electoral engineering strategies, a capacious phrase that

4 I use “incumbent” to mean “currently governing or with the potential for governing.” I use this instead of Ahmed’s (2013) “Right parties,” which serves a similar function. Ahmed uses “Right parties” to denote parties that will, whatever their current ideological position, sit to the right of the median voter once suffrage expands to include working-class men. Suffrage has already expanded and the term “Right parties” is nonsensical, but I nevertheless want to encapsulate the sort of elite collusion that Ahmed demonstrates around suffrage expansion in a universal-suffrage context. “Incumbent parties” also does
Table 1: Current MENA Electoral Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>System</th>
<th>Year Implemented</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Average Magnitude</th>
<th>Threshold</th>
<th>Quotas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>20-50% women on list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Single-member majority</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comoros</td>
<td>Single-member majority</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>33 (24 direct, 9 indirect)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Mixed: SNTV and PR</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>65 (52 SNTV, 13 PR)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Mixed: SMP and PR</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>“protections”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Two-round plurality</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Ethnically reserved seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>15.27</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>At least 25% women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Sectarian quotas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>Mixed: SMP, SNTV, and PR</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2.5 (SNTV districts)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Mixed: Majority and PR</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Gender party list parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>PR in districts and national</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6% local, 3% national</td>
<td>60 seats for women, 30 for youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>Multi-member plurality</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>Mixed: majority and PR</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>30% women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

not adequately capture the range of actors I predict engage in inter-system electoral engineering, especially in authoritarian regimes with one party, a highly fragmented party system, or no parties. It is nonetheless a useful heuristic.
allows for several potential manipulations of the electoral laws to fall under it. Broadly speaking, I conceptualize electoral engineering in three forms: the first, inter-system electoral engineering; the second, intra-system electoral engineering; the third, electoral regulation engineering. *Inter-system* electoral engineering entails changing the way votes translate into seats. For instance, incumbent parties could change the electoral system from the single transferable vote to list PR. *Intra-system* electoral engineering involves, conversely, changing the rules governing different aspects of the electoral process. For instance, incumbent parties may decide to implement, raise, or lower the formal electoral threshold necessary for translating votes into parliamentary seats under list PR, or they may re-draw district boundaries. Finally, electoral *legal* engineering involves the manipulation of franchise laws (at what age can a person run for office or vote), the involvement or lack thereof of politicized or non-politicized electoral commissions, or the counting process beyond the mathematical formula necessary to translate votes into seats (Massicotte, Blais, and Yoshinaka 2004). The level of granularity at which these regulations operate is beyond the scope of this study. I make no predictions about the independent effects of engineering such regulations on electoral outcomes.

The independent variables – what I expect to be primary drivers in adopting electoral engineering strategies – are the *existence*, *trend*, and *character* of threatening party vote share. Incumbent parties engage in electoral engineering in order to limit or eliminate the threat posed by other parties in the political system. First, threatening parties must effectively *exist* in order to be limited. While this may seem a nonsensical condition, it can offer some explanatory value. For instance, we would not ascribe changes in electoral district lines in the United States to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Electoral Threshold</th>
<th>Gender Party List Parity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>SMP</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
collective desire of Democrats and Republicans to limit the vote share of the Greens. For practical purposes, the Green Party does not exist in the United States, even if its candidates sometimes produce interesting effects in elections.\textsuperscript{5} Second, threatening parties must see an upward trend in their vote share in order to drive electoral system change. This more drastic step (in comparison to intra-system electoral engineering) is driven by the reasonable fear among incumbent parties that competitors may take significant shares in upcoming parliamentary elections or even supplant their rule. However, if the trend in vote share is relatively static, incumbent parties may \textit{still} engage in intra-system electoral engineering to minimize the short-term potential for threatening parties to develop into more potent threats to incumbent party rule.

Finally, I conceptualize threat in broad fashion. Ahmed’s (2013: 11) explication of electoral system change in democratizing Europe and the Anglophone world relied on not solely a threatening party, but one that would be threatening to the “social order” – workers’ parties. I retain this conception in part. Workers’ parties are no longer the only threat, or even the main threat, to incumbent parties, and thus I expand the definition of threat to include two variants. Threatening parties may be threatening ideologically to incumbent parties—their philosophies may be so radically different as to cause incumbent parties to worry about the future success of the state, or to otherwise be so intolerable that incumbent parties view a parliament without threatening parties as ideologically preferable to a parliament with them. Threatening parties may also simply be instrumentally threatening: parties with similar ideologies may cannibalize existing incumbents. I propose that incumbent parties will engage in electoral engineering of all types more often against ideologically threatening parties than instrumentally threatening parties, because ideologically threatening parties may be threatening to party voters, not just party elites, and thus

\textsuperscript{5} It may seem unnecessarily harsh to say that the Green Party does not exist, but the literature on the effective number of political parties suggests that the number in the United States is two.
electoral engineering will find broad-based support among backers of incumbent parties. I further suggest that incumbent parties will find it easier to engage in intra-system electoral engineering than wholesale inter-system change. Finally, I predict that in order for inter-system electoral engineering to be passed – it need not be successful – incumbent parties must face a rising ideological threat. Table 2 presents predicted outcomes. Stable instrumental threatening parties do not exist; to be instrumentally threatening (to cause incumbents to worry about cannibalized vote shares) a party must be rising. Transnational threats can only be rising; a stable transnational threat should produce no change in-country.

Table 2: Predicted Types of Electoral Engineering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of threat</th>
<th>Ideological</th>
<th>Direction of trend</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Transnational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Rising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intra-system electoral engineering</td>
<td>Inter-system electoral engineering</td>
<td>Null set</td>
<td>Null set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intra-system electoral engineering</td>
<td>Over-correction against domestic political actors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, incumbent parties need not respond only to threats internal to their political system. If incumbent parties feel threatened by political developments in related countries – as conceivably happened to various MENA incumbents during the Arab revolts of 2011 and beyond – incumbent parties can manipulate the electoral system to guard against the emergence of future threats. This move is a riskier one for incumbent parties. I hypothesize that incumbent parties face persistently imperfect information in attempting to predict the entrance and success of different political movements into their polity. We should not expect incumbent parties in the MENA (or anywhere) to be able to perfectly tailor their electoral engineering strategies to the mere potential impact of exogenous political movements in a multicausal world. Rather, I expect that incumbent parties will over-correct in response to exogenous political events, as demonstrated in a similar
context in Koesel and Bunce’s (2013) study of Russia’s and China’s responses to the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions.

Case selection

To probe the plausibility of this theory, and to build a theory to be tested in other cases, I examine two historical moments in Israel. Israel is a semidemocracy, Polity IV score notwithstanding,⁶ that operates a fully democratic electoral system for Israeli citizens.⁷ It uses a single district, magnitude 120, under closed-list PR. For this reason, Israel has frequently found itself cited in the literature on electoral systems: it represents one of the clearest extant examples of country-wide list PR. The Israeli legislature, the Knesset, met for the first time in 1949 as the Constituent Assembly. In these initial elections, Israel used closed-list PR, but allocated seats according to the Droop quota with remainders allocated by the d’Hondt method (Rahat and Hazan 2009: 334). The 1951 elections were then held under the largest remainders principle using the Hare quota, and in 1973 the parties adopted the Hare quota with remainders allocated by the d’Hondt method, a system that has persisted to the present day (Rahat and Hazan 2009: 337). These relatively minor changes in seat allocation rules (changes which nevertheless did affect the electoral performance of small parties) should not detract from the consistent use of closed-list PR in all elections to the Knesset.

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⁷ Standard nomenclature here in the Israel studies and Middle East studies literature is to say that Israel is a democracy “within the Green Line [the armistice borders drawn at the end of Israel’s 1948 war of independence],” or in “Israel proper.” This terminology fails on technical and normative grounds. First, Israel functions as a democratic political regime inside and outside the Green Line for its own citizens. Israeli settlers living in the West Bank are governed by Israeli law, not the law of the Palestinian Authority. Second, the terminology of “Israel proper” obscures the very deep integration of the West Bank (née Gaza Strip) into Israel, the country. I speak of Israel as a semidemocracy because, while Israel has a real, thriving multiparty democracy for its citizens, it also presides over an occupation of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, has undertaken an internationally unrecognized border expansion to East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, and denies Palestinians in all these areas (save those who hold its citizenship and reside within the Green Line) important political rights, crucial among them for this paper the right to vote.
This fact is remarkable for two reasons. First, as noted above, Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, pushed for a shift to a single-member simple plurality (SMSP) constituency-based system in the 1950s. Ben-Gurion’s proposal was roundly defeated and proportionality was enshrined as a fundamental principle of the Israeli constitution-in-making. Second, the only notable change Israel has made with regard to its PR system has been the slow ratcheting up of the electoral threshold, initially set at one percent, changed to 1.5 percent for the 1992 elections, to two percent for the 2006 elections, and to 3.25 percent for the 2015 elections. These two phenomena – Ben-Gurion’s push for SMSP and one instance of the ratchet in the electoral threshold – will be analyzed below. Table 3 adds case studies to Table 2.

**Table 3: Predicted Types of Electoral Engineering, with case studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direction of trend</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Rising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intra-system electoral engineering</td>
<td>Positive case: <strong>Israel 2013</strong></td>
<td>Negative case: none in this paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-system electoral engineering</td>
<td>Positive case: <strong>Jordan 1989, 2016</strong></td>
<td>Negative case: <strong>Israel 1950s</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type of threat**

| Positive case: none in this paper | Negative case: null set |
| Instrumental | Intra-system electoral engineering |
| Transnational | Over-correction against domestic political actors |
| Null set | Positive case: none in this paper |
| Null set | Negative case: null set |

**Israel**

Israel’s electoral system has remained remarkably stable over its nearly seventy years of existence. Its first elections, in 1949 to a Constituent Assembly, returned a parliament dominated by the party of David Ben-Gurion, *Mapai* (Worker’s Party of Eretz Israel), although one in which
Mapai did not win a majority of seats. Table 4 lists the main factions that won seats in the first five Knesset elections.\(^8\) Names in **bold** indicate left-wing parties; names in *italics* indicate right-wing parties; names *underlined* indicate center parties. Asterisks indicate coalition members. Data is taken from the Knesset’s website.\(^9\)

One particularly notable phenomenon observable among the first elections to the Knesset is the preeminence of Mapai. As numerous early observers noted, it was inconceivable that a government could be formed without Mapai, a vaguely ideological center party (Akzin 1955; Etzioni 1959; Johnston 1962). Etzioni helpfully traces Mapai’s dominance to the party system of the *yishūv*, the Jewish settlement in the Ottoman and British Mandate periods, in which the parties that would come to make up Mapai held overwhelming support.\(^10\) Yet it is equally clear in the above data that Mapai did not enjoy majority support among the Israeli public. This lack of majority support will prove consequential in explaining Israel’s proposed electoral system change from closed-list PR to SMSP.

**Israel and SMSP: Enshrining Proportionality**

Numerous early commentators on Israeli politics stress David Ben-Gurion’s desire to scrap the closed-list PR system in favor of the British SMSP system (Akzin 1955; Etzioni 1959; Johnston 1962; Badi 1963; Bernstein 1957). Electoral reform dominated significant parts of the legislative agenda in the first decade of Israeli politics (Rahat and Hazan 2009: 336). Yet closed-list PR endured despite the proposals of David Ben-Gurion and others to modify or eliminate it. Why was this the case? What prevented both inter- and intra-system electoral engineering?

I argue that the absence of a rising threatening party explains why Mapai was unable to

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\(^8\) I have grouped parties together in blocs due to a variety of name changes and party splits.

\(^9\) See https://www.knesset.gov.il/history/eng/eng_hist1_s.htm.

\(^10\) See Etzioni (1959: 200) for a table of the parties elected to the “Assembly of the Elected.”
gain even the support of its coalition for proposed inter-system electoral engineering. While ideologically threatening parties did exist (Ben-Gurion is famous for saying “bli Herut ve-Maki”, “without Herut or Maki” to describe his coalition-building philosophy), they were not rising in a way that threatened the existence of other incumbent parties. Herut, the party of future Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, stayed roughly stable in seat share excepting the 1951 elections (when it declined); Maki, the Communist party, held roughly five seats in each Knesset. Moreover, Mapai’s left-wing opposition, Mapam and Aḥdut ha-Avodah, were not even instrumentally threatening—while their ideologies were similar to Mapai’s, they never gained significant seat shares. Because Mapai did not command a majority of the Knesset, other incumbent parties had no reason to ally with it to leave list PR for SMSP, even when the General Zionists formed part of

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11 The General Zionists formed part of the third and fourth governments of Israel, which were new coalitions under Mapai in the second Knesset.
12 Arab parties in this era formed satellite parties of Mapai.
13 Included in the first government were the four members of Knesset (MKs) from the Sephardic and Oriental Communities list.
the government. Other intra-system electoral engineering proposals by both Ben-Gurion and the General Zionists to raise the electoral threshold from the same time period met similar fates. The below analysis will chart the rise and fall of electoral system and intra-system reform in the 1950s.

In the 1949 Constituent Assembly and Provisional Government, Ben-Gurion sought to implement a single-member district system (Rahat 2009: 48). The committee responsible for choosing the electoral system was composed of three members, Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Greenbaum of the General Zionists and Pinchas Rosen of the Progressives. The minor-party members voted Ben-Gurion down, as did the larger assembly. As Rahat (ibid.) points out, other parties had little incentive to support such a system, because of its perceived more democratic nature (its proportionality), its historical use in the yishuv (Medding 1990: 15), and its implicit mandate in the United Nations partition plan that led to the founding of the state. In fact, Mapai archival documents demonstrate that the very reason Israel adopted a proportional system in the first place was the UN partition plan instructions that the system be universal, proportional, and secret.  

Perhaps most importantly, however, Ben-Gurion’s party, Mapai, was unable to win an outright majority in the Constituent Assembly, and was thus unable to dictate the electoral system outright; smaller parties, by contrast, had little incentive to support a system that seemed to dictate their extinction. Other aspects of the PR system used – the single nationwide district with magnitude 120 and the closed-list system – were not, however, foregone conclusions (Horowitz

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14 We might wonder why a PR system was used in the yishuv if Ben-Gurion admired single-member districts so much. A study of the voting system of the yishuv is beyond the scope of the current state of this paper, but it seems logical that severe organizational, logistical, and financial barriers might hamper the drawing of districts and the holding of elections in Palestine under British colonial rule.

15 Mapai, “Hitkatvut merkaz ha-miflagah ‘im snif Haifa (yanuar – oktober) [Correspondence of the party center with the Haifa branch (January–October), 28 February 1948, Archives of the Labor Party, Beit Berl, Israel, 2-004-1948-206.

16 As Cox points out, strategic voting in single-member districts should tend toward two candidates in local elections, a system that would favor only Mapai nationally. See Chapter 13, Making Votes Count.
and Lissak 1989; Sager 1985). While single-member districts seemed to be out of the question for the Constituent Assembly, the extreme (Rahat and Hazan 2009) or “pure” (H. Diskin and Diskin 1995: 31) nature of Israel’s electoral system had yet to be enshrined.

The Constituent Assembly and First Knesset, as Lerner (2013) notes, was occupied with other matters during its first term (1949-1951), including the religious-secular balance in the state, the absorption of new immigrants, and the writing of a constitution. To the extent that it engaged in discussions of electoral reform, it only made two notable adjustments: first, it raised the electoral threshold from 0.83 percent to one percent, and second, it changed the seat allocation formula from the Haagenbach-Bischoff quotient \[\text{Quotient} = \frac{\text{Votes}}{\text{Magnitude}+1}\] to the Hare quota with largest remainders (Rahat 2009: 51). These reforms were enshrined in the election law for the Second Knesset, a move that pro-reform MKs (usually Mapai members) thought indicated the temporary nature of reform.

In the Second Knesset, however, electoral reform took center stage. The 1952 coalition agreement between Mapai and the General Zionists for the fourth government of Israel (the third from this Knesset) called for raising the electoral threshold to ten percent (Rahat 2009: 52; H. Diskin and Diskin 1995: 35). Eventually Mapai would whittle down the proposed threshold to four percent, and in 1955 abandon it wholesale. As the threshold debate wound down, pressure for larger-scale electoral reform rose: Mapai adopted a commitment to single-member districts as part of its platform (Medding 1990: 172), and the party formed a committee with the General Zionists to discuss a broader electoral reform proposal (Rahat 2009: 52). The General Zionists’ proposal, a proportional-representation system with a smaller Knesset, higher threshold, and district-based seats, was the basis for discussion.\(^{17}\) Yet the General Zionists walked away from their own

\(^{17}\) Mapai, “Ha-va’adah ha-pratit shel Mapai ve-ha-tsiyoniyim ha-klaliyim b-‘inyan shitat ha-bachirot [The special committee of Mapai and the General Zionists on the subject of the electoral system],” 1955
proposal, delaying and cancelling meetings with Mapai (Rahat 2009: 52). This points to, at the least, a commitment problem on the part of the General Zionists: perhaps the party was uncertain about its future prospects even under its own, more proportional proposal. But it also points to the difficulty of reforming the electoral system even when the current electoral mechanism is deemed to be temporary. Without a threat that can force elite collective action, the pressures that drive representation in the existing system also drive the system’s inertia. Incumbents vote for the system that got them there, or as Boix (1999: 610) put it, “[a]s long as the electoral situation does not change substantially and the current rules serve the ruling parties well, the government has no incentives to modify the electoral regime.” Thus even a 65-seat Knesset majority could not win electoral reform.

In the Third Knesset, which was elected under the same (purportedly temporary) rules as the Second Knesset, Mapai lost its erstwhile reform allies and governed with the aid of parties to its left. Mapai developed intense rivalries with both Herut, which it accused of fascism (Ben-Gurion would eventually make the first of many comparisons between Menachem Begin and Hitler on the Knesset floor), and with Mapam/Achdut ha-Avodah, which it accused of covert anti-Zionism and submission to the Comintern (Medding 1990: 83). Mapam was close enough ideologically that it threatened to cannibalize Mapai’s base. As Medding (1990: 82) put it, the struggle between Mapai and Mapam “manifested the intensity and ambivalence of ideological proximity, shared goals, common party origins, a long period of Zionist and halutzic cooperation, and the belief of both that theirs was the right path, and that the others were not real political enemies but mistaken comrades who had strayed from the path of truth, and who therefore could and might be persuaded by ideological arguments to recognize the error of their ways.” Opponents

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of electoral systems change, including Mapam, also argued that any electoral systems change was designed to push it out. As the Mapai Committee for Examination of the Regional Electoral System concluded in 1954, “the opponents of the district-based electoral system explain their opposition by reference to the fact that the system was proposed by Mapai only for the defense of its interests. As a ruling party it can finally set the regions to its liking and ensure for itself all the disadvantages.” Mapai argued against this, calling the existing electoral system undemocratic and unpopular. If Mapai’s leftist opponents held such views about its electoral engineering goals in 1954, the chances for electoral reform after 1955 with them sharing power with Mapai were slim.

The Third Knesset saw the completion of the first portion of Israel’s ongoing constitutional project (Lerner 2013), Basic Law: The Knesset, to which electoral engineering was offered as an amendment. Mapai submitted an amendment in 1958 to replace the PR system with single-member districts; the General Zionists submitted a proposal similar to the one that formed the basis for electoral reform discussions in 1954 and 1955 (Rahat 2009: 53). Both amendments were voted down, the Mapai one by the astonishing supermajority of 73 to 42—Mapai could not even maintain the support of all its party members (H. Diskin and Diskin 1995: 34). The two pro-reform parties failed even to coordinate their legislation, and thus, the national-district, high-magnitude PR system that had once seemed temporary began to acquire ardent supporters (Rahat 2009).

Ben-Gurion’s push for electoral reform reached its end when, in 1958, and in response to continued electoral reform pushes from Mapai and the General Zionists (including calls for a national referendum on the subject of single-member districts), the Knesset adopted an amendment to the Basic Law reading: “The Knesset shall be elected by general, national, direct, equal, secret

and proportional elections, in accordance with the Knesset Elections Law; this section shall not be varied save by a majority of the members of the Knesset.” (Basic Law: The Knesset, Article 4). Proportionality was enshrined in Israel’s constitutional legislation, and could only be changed by a 61-vote majority. Though Mapai held the position of dominant party, even kingmaker, in early Israel, it never gained an absolute majority, and no party has done so since. The push to create a Mapai majority – what seemed like a “permanent Mapai majority” – failed, despite Ben-Gurion’s early desire to “turn the party into a majority within three to four years, for without this the state will not accomplish its mission” (Medding 1990: 177).

*Israel and Electoral Threshold Engineering*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Israel embarked on two electoral reform projects: a rise in the electoral threshold from one to 1.5 percent of the vote, and direct election of the prime minister’s office. The prime ministerial reform, though passed with the goal of increasing government effectiveness, failed in its goals. The electoral threshold rise, however, did affect the number of small parties in the Knesset. Diskin and Diskin (1995: 32-33) note that the number of parties elected dropped by five between 1988 and 1992, although the effective number of parties remained nearly the same. The electoral threshold was later raised from 1.5 to two percent in 2003 (for the 2006 elections) and from two percent to 3.25 percent in 2014 (for the 2015) elections. These threshold numbers seem, in Taagepera and Shugart’s (1989: 37) words, “arbitrary.” Why were such minuscule changes in the threshold adopted, especially against the backdrop of earlier pushes for a much higher threshold in Israel’s first decade? I argue that presence of ideologically threatening Arab parties, particularly Balad, and the inability of the Knesset to eliminate them from running by the existing electoral law drove elite collective action to raise the electoral threshold. This was the case even though the threshold threatened small religious parties (Yachad, the party
of former Shas leader Eli Yishai, missed membership in the Knesset) and small left-wing parties (Meretz barely passed the threshold), the proposal to raise the threshold passed by a wide margin. The existence of an ideological threat – one that was so offensive to other Knesset members that it needed to be engineered out – was sufficient to spur elite collective action. Yet electoral laws need not be effective: instead of the provocative Arab parties leaving the Knesset, the four Arab parties merged onto a joint list that became the third-largest party in the Knesset. Table 5 shows the party membership of the Knesset before and after reform. Names in **bold** indicate left-wing parties; names in *italics* indicate right-wing parties; names underlined indicate center parties.

**Table 5: Israeli Knesset during Electoral Threshold Ratchet, 2013-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likud</strong></td>
<td>*31</td>
<td>*30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yisrael Beiteinu¹⁹</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesh Atid</td>
<td>*19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labor</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Home</td>
<td>*12</td>
<td>*8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shas^</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>*7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Torah Judaism^</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>*6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hatnuah</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>*6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meretz</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ra’am-Ta’al^^</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadas^</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balad^^</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kadima</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Arab List</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kulanu</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>*10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* - Coalition member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^ - Ultra-Orthodox</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^^ - Arab</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁹ Merged with Likud for the 2013 elections.
²⁰ Merged with Labor to form “Zionist Union” in 2015.
Proponents of intra-system electoral engineering, like Finance Minister Yair Lapid, argued that a rise in the electoral threshold would help to coalesce parties and would reduce the leverage of small parties in coalitions (Zilber 2014). They point out that even the new electoral threshold is low both globally (below eighteen European Union member states) and regionally (it pales in comparison to Turkey’s ten percent threshold), and note that in the 2013 elections, around seven percent of the vote went to parties who failed to pass the electoral threshold. Raising the threshold here seems on the surface more about government effectiveness and increasing the strategic voting tendencies of voters than malicious intent. Others noted the possibility that the electoral threshold would produce a large number of mid-size parties (2015). Critics of the proposal, however, highlight the particularly negative effects the threshold would have on the Palestinian-Israeli political parties, two of which would have missed the threshold in 2013. They focused on the historical efforts to ban Balad from participation in the elections in general, and its controversial MK Hanin Zoabi in particular; seeing those efforts fail, in this telling, the government decided to increase the electoral threshold (Sheizaf 2014). Opponents focused on the rhetoric of then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, with Hadash (Jewish) MK Dov Khenin saying “In the past, Liberman has proffered ideas to 'transfer' the Israeli Arab population out of the country, and now he is behind this 'political transfer' that seeks to deny Arabs fair representation in the Israeli political process” (Lev 2013). Liberman himself called the opposition “terrorists, post-Zionists, anti-Zionists, haredim and crybabies” following the vote (Jerusalem Post Staff 2014).

The vote on the electoral threshold was notable in the non-participation of the opposition (Lis 2014). The election threshold was raised by a vote of 67-0. Where once Mapai was strongly in favor of electoral reform, its successor, Labor, refused to participate in the vote. Its leader, Isaac Hertzog, said that “the government is taking steps of hatred and exclusion and trying to push
certain parties to the sidelines” (Lubell 2014). The parties the threshold would most strongly affect, the four Arab parties, denounced the vote. The strong showing by the opposition in avoiding the vote entirely highlights the degree to which opposition parties worried about the effect the threshold rise would have on minor party representation.

Some early analysts predicted that Arab representation would actually increase due to the threshold change, in contrast to the perceived motivations of the governing coalition. Hilou and Hreib (2014) suggest that Palestinian-Israeli parties would be likely to unify, despite ideological differences, thus increasing Arab representation while easily passing the threshold. In January 2015, the Arab parties did precisely that, unifying for the purposes of election as a joint parliamentary list despite ideological differences (Zonszein 2015). Analysis of this shift in Israeli politics has pointed to the role of the electoral threshold rise in spurring cross-ideological party fusion. Thresholds, according to Taagepera and Shugart (1989), counteract the incentive in PR toward party fragmentation. Thus a rise in the threshold, if alliances are allowed, should spur party fusion (Cox 1997). What the Israeli government got from the threshold rise was a coalition of parties—the very parties they hoped to eliminate from representation in the Knesset. Because Palestinian-Israeli parties are never included as part of an Israeli government, their increased seat share reduced the number of seats available to the main parties, Likud and Labor. Intra-system electoral engineering backfired.

More work needs to be done to effectively theory-build from these cases. I am currently sifting through a large number of archival documents from the 1950s to better understand why Mapai sought to change the electoral system in the first place and the reasons for their failure. Internal party documents suggest that Mapai was interested in electoral engineering for the purpose of state-building: a strong one- or two-party system could accomplish tasks with greater ease than
the fractious process of coalition-building and government formation that characterized Israel even when Mapai’s power was at its peak.21 But such drastic electoral engineering for the (noble?) sake of state-building could not have happened: no rising ideological threat could persuade elites to change the rules of the game in which they were already winning.

**Jordan**

In 1989, under pressure from worsening economic circumstances (Robinson 1998) and from riots (Lust-Okar 2006: 458), King Hussein of Jordan called for new elections to the Jordanian parliament. The elections resulted in a majority-opposition lower house with strong representation from the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. In 1992, the monarchy engaged in a national dialogue process resulting in the adoption of the “National Charter,” which called for the legalization of political parties, the end of formal censorship of speech and the press, and a liberalizing political system with the monarchy at its head. Yet shortly thereafter, King Hussein – after dismissing Parliament – promulgated a new election law that changed the electoral system from plural votes in multi-member districts (the block vote) to the single non-transferable vote. The results, in the 1993 elections, boded well for the monarchy: Islamist representation fell by a third and the parliament was stacked with supporters of the regime. The monarchy had identified the electoral system as the obstacle to the creation of parliamentary compliance. SNTV would not disappear from the Jordanian electoral system until the 2016 elections, when it was replaced in full by open-list PR in multi-member districts. It is to these two shifts – from plural voting to SNTV to open-list PR – that I now turn.

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1993: Responding to the Islamist Threat

The 1989 elections were held under an election law that allowed electors a number of votes equal to their district’s magnitude, ranging from two to nine (Robinson 1998: 392). Thus voters could choose between candidates on a number of axes, voting for one (or more) based on kinship or tribal affiliation and one (or more) on ideology (Lust, Hourani, and El-Momani 2011: 122). The elections resulted in a parliament composed of a mixture of Muslim Brotherhood, independent Islamist, leftist, and independent regime allies. Table 4 depicts the outcome of the 1989 elections. Data is drawn from Ryan (1998: 190).

Table 4: 1989 Election Results in Jordan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blocs</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Brotherhood</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Islamists</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftists / Arab Nationalists</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime Supporters</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these elections, as Taagepera and Shugart (1989) predict, higher district magnitudes appeared to result in higher proportionality. Voters were able to choose representatives along multiple relevant issue axes, particularly urban voters who had many votes to use. The success of opposition parties was highly surprising, especially given the regulations accompanying the 1989 elections. The polls were held under martial law, with a brief campaign period of twenty-five days, and political parties were still illegal (Robinson 1998: 392). Moreover, twelve seats of the eighty were reserved for ethnic minorities (Chechens and Circassians) and for Christians; thus the showing of the Islamists was even more impressive. These electoral regulations were unable to prevent the election of an opposition-dominated lower house. Though the monarchy had embarked on a process of limited political liberalization in part to distract from pressing economic concerns, as Robinson (1998) points out, it had instead been given a parliament with at least the potential for
combativeness. And though the Muslim Brotherhood had long been the only tolerated political organization in Jordan, the high proportion of Islamist representatives gave the Western-facing monarchy cause for concern. What to do?

As the 1993 elections approached, the government tried several tactics to deal with the *rising ideological* threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood in the electoral system. First, it co-opted the Brotherhood into the government, giving it the Ministry of Education, a post it had long coveted. The Brotherhood then announced it would segregate the sexes in schools, an unpopular public position that allowed Hussein to dismiss the government and hurt the Brotherhood’s standing (Robinson 1998: 392). Second, it embarked on a project of at least cosmetic liberalization: after the publication of the National Charter, a document endorsed by political figures across the political spectrum, the government introduced and parliament passed bills to legalize political parties and end press censorship (Ryan 1998: 181). Third and finally, the monarchy dismissed parliament and promulgated a new election law, one which championed the principle of “one person, one vote” through the reduction of plural votes to the SNTV.

The results were predictable. Though the Muslim Brotherhood ran a legal political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), it only ran thirty-six candidates and was elected to sixteen seats out of the eighty-member house. Other opposition movements were similarly cut down. The regime achieved a lower house of fifty-five “pro-government members” (Amawi 1994: 26), a clear majority in its favor and one that could be counted on to support the regime in its policy goals, including a peace treaty with Israel and the continuation of structural adjustment policies under the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Yet these results were not a foregone conclusion. They depended on two conditions. First, the government maintained the rural bias in seats, such that Amman and other major cities were disproportionately underrepresented in seats
relative to their percentage of the population. Urban districts contained a relatively higher level of Muslim Brotherhood supporters than corresponding rural districts, which were conversely dominated by tribal groups. Second, a few particularities in Jordanian political system agitated against the development of political parties (despite their legality).

Cox (1997) suggests that SNTV systems should tend toward M+1 candidates. M+1 serves as an “upper bound on the number of competitors” (Cox 1997: 101). We can test this hypothesis in Jordan by examining the SF ratio (the ratio of the second-loser’s vote total to the first-loser’s vote total). This ratio, if it tends toward zero, indicates that only M+1 effective candidates compete in a district (e.g. the second loser has zero votes); if it tends toward one, “it is not clear ex ante who will be the first loser and who the second, with the result that neither suffers from strategic desertion” (ibid.) While he is careful to not extend this argument to parties, we may briefly relax that care and note that, should a non-Duvergerian equilibrium arise, we should expect that parties, as candidate aggregators, may also be fairly weak.

Figure 1 gives the SF ratios for Jordanian districts in 1993. I have taken data on the losing candidates and on district magnitudes from ‘Assāf (1997). Only one district tended toward a Duvergerian equilibrium: Amman’s third district. Every other district had either middling results or tended strongly toward a non-Duvergerian equilibrium. Thus precisely the opposite effect of “M+1” was realized in Jordanian SNTV. Why was this the case? Lust (2009) has proposed that parliamentary systems like Jordan operate under what may be called “competitive clientelism.”

22 The Jordanians, unfortunately, do not have full results online to access. The results are also, somewhat frustratingly, organized by number of votes received, then by district, making determination of first- and second-place losers complicated.
provenance of the cabinet (Lust 2009; Lust, Hourani, and El-Momani 2011). Thus, it is not that Jordanians are necessarily more “tribal” than residents of an established democracy, or that tribal and kinship identities are simply stronger than all other forms of identification, but that identities that support the exchange of services become the instrumentally rational basis for electors’ votes. Ideological parties cannot make the same sorts of patronage promises and thus find it more difficult to succeed in an atmosphere of “competitive clientelism.” Though many commentators on the Jordanian elections point out that SNTV is weighted toward tribal candidates against ideological parties like the IAF, had Jordan’s parliament been a lawmaking body rather than an amalgamation of individuals whose primary responsibility is the provision of services to constituents, the Jordanian party system could have taken a different turn. We need look no farther than the 1989 results to see the possibilities of Jordanian voters acting ideologically.

The Jordanian monarchy – an authoritarian proxy for an incumbent party – manipulated the electoral system to prevent the IAF from even coming close to matching its 1989 position in parliament, much less exceeding it. It did so because the Muslim Brotherhood represented an
ideological threat to its dominance of the Jordanian political system. The IAF was already a known quantity, representing the only legal association in Jordan from the banning of political parties onward, and it was a rising threat: the Muslim Brotherhood had elected the majority of its candidates in 1989 and with more time to organize could have ran candidates in more seats in 1993. Moreover, as an ideological party, the IAF carried with it the potential of upending the Jordanian party system such that ideology, rather than patronage, would be the key driver of Jordanians’ votes for their MPs. Had this shift occurred, the monarchy would have faced the difficult choice between further liberalization or a return to open repression. Instead, the adoption of SNTV in the context of a weak party system and an atmosphere of “competitive clientelism” stacked the deck against the IAF, which would see its position weaken again as the party boycotted the 1997 elections.

2016: Minimizing Threat through Disproportional Proportionality

The intervening years between the 1993 elections and the 2016 elections saw numerous changes in Jordanian electoral law. A maximum of two consecutive elections, twice, were held under the same electoral regime (1993 and 1997; 2003 and 2007). Table 4 summarizes the different electoral regimes. Data for Table 5 is taken from the blog Impatient Bedouin (2013). The themes of malapportionment with a rural bias persisted even as the size of the parliament grew. The Islamic Action Front boycotted several elections due to the persistence of SNTV and the malapportionment of districts. The regime succeeded in creating a docile parliament with minimal opposition. Yet in 2015, at long last, King Abdullah II promulgated a new election law (this time, with parliamentary approval) reapportioning the districts and changing the system to open-list PR. Table 6 summarizes the new system, with data taken from the 2016 election law.  

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23 This can be found at http://iec.jo/sites/default/files/2ParliamentaryElectionLawMay2016EN.docx%20%29_0.pdf.
Table 5: Jordanian Elections between Electoral Shifts

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>SNTV</td>
<td>SNTV + PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserved</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>9 Christian, 3 Chechen/Circassian, 9 Bedouin, 6 women</td>
<td>Same as 2007</td>
<td>Same as 2007 with 12 women</td>
<td>Same as 2010 with 15 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special features</td>
<td>Rural bias, introduction of SNTV</td>
<td>IAF boycott</td>
<td>Quotas, new king</td>
<td>“Virtual districts,” IAF boycott</td>
<td>27 national open-list PR seats, electoral commission, IAF boycott</td>
<td></td>
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Table 6: Description of 2015 Jordanian Election Law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2015 Election Law</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>Open-list PR in multi-member districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserved</td>
<td>9 Christian, 3 Chechen/Circassian, 9 Bedouin, 15 women (including 3 Bedouin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strategic voting literature tells us that PR systems also tend toward M+1 effective candidates in Duvergerian equilibria, if perhaps a bit more weakly than SMSP and SNTV systems. If Abdullah’s goal had really been to foster an effective party system, as media accounts contend (Kao 2016), then open-list PR should have led to at least some districts exhibiting Duvergerian equilibria. Urban districts, in particular, might be more prone to this sort of outcome; urban areas with their mixing of people from different regions within the polity might exhibit some reduction of the salience of tribal identities (Posner 2005). A shift to open-list PR, given my preexisting assumption that elites stick with the same electoral system unless they face an existing and rising

Interestingly, since 2013, in which an independent electoral commission was established, Jordan has had an English-language electoral commission website with translations of key laws.
threat, would be surprising. Figure 2 gives the SF ratios for Jordan’s 2016 elections. Data for Figure 2 is from the election results published by the Independent Electoral Commission.24

In the 2016 elections, the SF ratios tell us that Jordan’s electoral system existed in two types of non-Duvergerian equilibria. One of these was not unlike the pockets of one-party rule Cox cites in the United States: a situation in which M lists competed for M seats. The probability of this occurring in rural districts was 0.58, while its probability in urban districts was 0.27, lending some support to the above hypothesis about urban mixing. The second non-Duvergerian equilibrium was the one Cox found in various systems: the tail end of the bimodal distribution in which the difference between the second-place losing list’s votes and the first-place losing list’s votes was small. The SF ratio here tends toward 1, indicating that there are more than M+1 effective lists competing for M seats.

Figure 2

Open-list PR did not immediately lead to the coalescing of parties. Instead, as in the brief experiment with open-list PR at the national level in 2013, tribal lists simply ran in districts where

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they could be assured of a certain number of votes necessary to gain one seat. With voters only able to vote for one list (although able to rank the candidates within the list), voters were still forced to view the parliament for what it was: an instrument of competitive clientelism in which identities that could guarantee the distribution of services were more salient than other identities. The elections resulted in a parliament dominated, once again, by “independents.”

Moreover, the parties that did win were by and large non-threatening ideologically. Rather, they represented the recent efforts of the government to foster a fragmented party system made up mostly of parties loyal to the regime. In 2013, the government instituted an election law that allocated 27 nationally-allocated open-list PR seats, which in theory would foster political parties alongside the persistence of the SNTV system for allocating the majority of parliamentary seats. Instead of fostering party development, however, the IAF boycotted the elections, and the newly elected “parties” were fluid bodies characterized by constantly changing membership. The parliament spent two and a half years without creating even the semblance of a functioning opposition (Sowell 2015). The 2016 law, continuing the pattern of constantly revising electoral rules (Lust-Okar 2006), removed these national seats in favor of a district-based apportionment system. This allowed the semblance of party development with the benefit of rural malapportionment that the SNTV system maximized.

The EU’s election monitoring report provides details on this malapportionment (European Union Election Observation Mission 2016). First, the female quota (fifteen seats) is allocated across the governorates, which now form electoral districts with the exception of Amman (which

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25 An interesting question here, however, is whether voters used the ranking of candidates within the lists to cast votes based on ideology. This is especially important with regard to the quota system. In many districts in which only M lists competed for M seats, a woman from the top list received the quota seat for women allocated to that district even though her vote total was less than the third-place candidate’s vote total. Examining candidate vote totals could tell us whether Jordanians are using their “multiple votes” in the same way they did in the 1989 elections, albeit with more restrictions.
has five districts), Irbid (which has four), and Zarqa (which has two). This has the practical effect of adding an additional female seat to 12 rural districts in which political parties outside of regime affiliates have little support; by contrast, Amman gets one female quota seat allocated across all five of its districts. The design of the quota is not solely to produce female representation in parliament, but to generate the right kind of women in parliament: regime supporters. Second, a quick glance at population numbers reveals the persistence of overt rural malapportionment. Karak, for example, has 167,945 registered voters and receives eight seats. Amman’s heavily Palestinian second district has 400,822 voters but receives only six seats. This pattern of urban (especially Ammani) underrepresentation has remained strikingly consistent over the years. Lust-Okar (2006: 466) notes that Amman in 1989 formed 22.5 percent of parliamentary seats; in 2003 it formed 22.1 percent. A calculation for 2016 reveals that Amman receives 22.3 percent of the total seats (24.2 percent of the nonreserved seats), despite having 37.6 percent of registered voters. Finally, the monarchy enjoys strong support from Bedouin tribes, which receive special districts ostensibly totaling nine seats. Practically, however, due to each of these districts receiving a women’s quota seat, Bedouin extra representation increased to twelve seats in parliament even as the number of total seats shrunk by twenty.

The Jordanian government changed its party system in 2016 seemingly without an ideological or instrumental threat. But in practice, the IAF still represented a major ideological threat to the regime, just as it did in spurring the 1993 electoral system change. Because the IAF boycotted the 2010 and 2013 elections, the parliaments had even less legitimacy than usual. Successful IAF participation was a threat to the regime, but its nonparticipation was even more significant. Two rounds of nonparticipation constituted a quasi-rising threat to the legitimacy of the electoral system. The monarchy thus opened up the electoral system to open-list PR, allowing
the IAF to return to parliamentary elections, which its membership approved by a three-quarters majority (Magid 2016). Yet through rural malapportionment and the maintenance of a practical one-vote system, and through no effort expended on fostering political party development, the monarchy retained a docile parliament. Of the 130 seats, the IAF and its allies only won fifteen. Of the 226 lists that contested the election, at least seventy-three won seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to extend the work of Cox (1997), Rokkan (1970) and Ahmed (2013), among others, in developing a theory of why parties modify electoral systems. I have proposed a model in which incumbent parties engage in *electoral engineering* when they feel threatened by other parties on the political scene. I have further considered inter- and intra-system change together in one model and considered elections outside of fully democratic political systems in an attempt to broaden the scope of the theory. To do so, I developed a model relating the *existence*, *trend*, and *character* of threatening parties’ vote share to the *adoption of electoral engineering strategies*. I hypothesized that, in order to spur electoral engineering of any kind, incumbents need a threat to exist. To spur wholesale inter-system change, a threat needs not only to exist but to trend upwards.

I examined the plausibility of these models with reference to two cases, each with two historical instances: Israel and Jordan. In Israel, a paradigmatic list PR case, I analyzed the proposals to set up Israel’s electoral system as SMSP in the 1950s, finding that without a significant threat to a majority of incumbent elites, electoral engineering could not be adopted, even in the limited form of a higher threshold. I then explored the rise in the Israeli electoral threshold in 2014, a rise specifically designed to eliminate Arab political parties from meaningful representation in
the Knesset. This rise backfired, as the threshold increase did what the literature on electoral thresholds suggests: Arab parties unified and gained even more seats together than they had apart. In Jordan, I examined the introduction of the SNTV system in 1993, in which the government rallied behind the discursively attractive phrase “one person, one vote” that masked the deleterious effect SNTV had on party representation, especially that of the Islamic Action Front. I then explored the introduction of open-list PR in multi-member districts in 2015, showing how the government relied on easier forms of electoral engineering to maintain its supermajority in parliament even as it ceded to the open-list demand of opposition movements.

Considerably more research is needed to build the theory that informs these two models and to establish its validity even in the four instances presented here. For this last, access to parliamentary debate records (in Israel and Jordan) can help establish the specific threats electoral system reform was designed to counter, explicitly and implicitly. The Knesset’s records were difficult to obtain in the course of this research, but access to the discussion of the electoral threshold bill would provide useful information on the “ordinary language” of parliamentarians as they debate meaningful electoral system engineering. Access to the archives of the Labor Party can add to our historical understanding of the reasons for the push for electoral reform in the 1950s. In Jordan, interviews with opposition and regime figures involved in the historical development of electoral laws can shed light on the specific reasons proposals were adopted. Why was open-list PR ceded to the opposition in 2015? What pressures led to its adoption? Beyond these case-specific notes, the research can and should be viewed as the base for a longer-term project examining electoral law manipulation across the Middle East, with other semidemocracies, including Lebanon and Turkey, and competitive authoritarian regimes, including Morocco, Kuwait, and the United Arab
Emirates, providing fertile ground for the exploration of the manipulation of electoral laws outside of advanced democracies and the development of middle-range theory.
Works Cited


