Chapter 1

Introduction: Endogenous Electoral Rules

I. The LDP’s Dilemma

While the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) controlled a majority of the seats in the Japanese Diet between 1955 and 1993, it was never a truly dominant party. The LDP’s electoral popularity peaked in 1958 – the first election after its formation – when it won 58% of the vote, but the party failed to win a majority after 1962. Perhaps more telling, fewer and fewer people identified themselves as LDP partisans over time. According to monthly polls by the *Jiji Tsushin* between 1960 and 1990, the LDP last had more than 50% public support in December 1960, and more than 40% in January 1970. Although the party ultimately stayed in power for thirty-eight years, its impending demise – on the heels of various political scandals and economic upheavals – was consistently predicted before every election.

The possibility of electoral defeat was not lost on the LDP’s leaders, who resorted to various tactics to shore up the party’s declining popularity. The government boosted public spending before elections to create the illusion of higher growth (Kohno and Nishizawa 1990) and gave policy benefits to key supporters during periods of economic crisis (Calder 1988). The manipulation of fiscal and regulatory policy was at best a stop-gap solution, however, especially since the 1980s when mounting public debt made irresponsible expenditures problematic.

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1 *Jiji Tsushin* is the rough equivalent of the Associated Press (AP) in Japan. Thanks to Steven Reed for this data.
What has received less attention in the Japanese politics literature – and what this book is concerned with – is the LDP’s failure to implement an obviously beneficial tactic that could have secured the party’s long-term dominance: *altering the electoral system to win more seats with fewer votes*.

Between 1947 and 1993, Japanese elections were held in multi-member districts under a single non-transferable vote formula (MMD-SNTV), and various facets of this system helped the LDP maintain a bare parliamentary majority. It allowed smaller parties to win seats in larger districts, diminishing incentives for opposition parties to coordinate candidates against the LDP (Christensen 2000). The high degree of malapportionment in favor of rural areas – the LDP’s traditional support base – also helped the party garner more seats than warranted (Christensen and Johnson 1995; Reed and Thies 2001).

MMD-SNTV was not, however, the *optimal* system for the LDP. There are other electoral formulas, particularly single-member plurality (SMP) rules, which grant significantly more seats to larger political parties (Cox 1996; Gallagher 1991). Indeed, contemporary simulations showed that the LDP could have garnered a large super-majority had it changed the electoral formula to SMP. And in fact, the LDP leadership floated the idea of fundamental electoral reform three times – in 1958, 1973, and 1989. Despite having both the incentive and the clout, however, the LDP never actually changed the electoral system, and the party was ultimately ousted from power in 1993.

This case of institutional *non*-change in Japan echoes a critical disjuncture in the literature on electoral rule endogeneity. While various scholars – most notably Riker (1980) – predict that any institution with distributional biases is subject to political manipulation, cross-national empirical work suggests that electoral rules are surprisingly stable over time (Nohlen 1984). To the extent that political actors seek control of the policy-making process,
however, we should observe political parties manipulating electoral rules in order to increase their legislative representation. Why, then, does electoral rule change happen so rarely?

This book sheds light on this puzzle by showing that political parties do manipulate electoral rules in predictable, strategic ways, but that we need to fundamentally rethink three theoretical and empirical truisms in the literature. First, electoral rule change is actually not that rare, although this statement comes with some qualifications. Most researchers tend to see the electoral system as being comprised solely of the electoral formula or district magnitude, which are – as asserted by most studies – fairly stable. However, less prominent regulations which affect election outcomes, such as campaigning rules, party financing laws, and electoral fraud regulation, do change frequently. In fact, the LDP altered this latter group of rules 47 times between 1960 and 1990. Accordingly, the critical question is not, “why are electoral rules stable?” but rather, “why are some rules more stable than others?”

To answer this question about the strategic manipulation of electoral rules, we need to add a second dimension lacking in the current literature: the role of intra-party dynamics. Even though a party as a whole may stand to benefit from electoral rule change, that does not mean that all incumbents will be guaranteed re-election under a new system. Although the literature has long acknowledged inter-party asymmetries in the benefits and costs from electoral rule change, the same distributional asymmetries can pit members of the same party against one another. MPs who are harmed by institutional reform may refuse to support the proposal in a parliamentary vote, thereby (potentially) dooming its passage. Indeed, perceptive party leaders may simply back off of reform bills if they are likely to harm many incumbents. As I go onto argue below, the type, frequency, and timing of institutional changes can only be understood by taking account the extent to which specific electoral reforms generate intra-party distributional asymmetries.
Third, bargaining over electoral rule change is not like bargaining over public policy or budgets. Although most legislation can be enacted by a majority vote in parliament, electoral rules are often strictly specified in the national constitution. This constitutional stipulation protects the electoral system from arbitrary manipulation by political actors, because altering the institutional framework requires a constitutional amendment, which typically imposes higher hurdles to reform than a simple majority. While this constitutional protection is not relevant to the Japanese case, its constraining effect can be seen in other polities. A notable example is Ireland, where the ruling Fianna Fáil party tried on two occasions to change the electoral formula. While Fianna Fáil leaders were able to coerce their rank-and-file MPs into supporting the bill, the party's initiatives for reform failed when they were rejected by the national referendum required of all constitutional amendments.

In the rest of this chapter, I will review the existing literature on electoral rules, institutional manipulation, and party politics in greater detail. I will point out the theoretical, empirical, and methodological flaws in previous studies, and highlight the new intuition and evidence that this book provides. I will also discuss what this study purposefully omits — electoral reform initiated by other actors, such as the judiciary — and conclude by outlining the rest of this book.

II. Strategies for Staying in Power

II.1 The Manipulation of Public Policy and Formal Institutions

Strategic institutional change has important implications for representative democracy, because electoral manipulation may allow politicians to stay in power beyond their popular mandate. The ultimate manifestation of repeated incumbency — single-party dominance — grants
the ruling party the uninhibited ability to shape investment in specific sectors, control openness to foreign influences, and dictate welfare provisions and health coverage, essentially giving “one political party…a continuous opportunity to pursue its historical agenda” (Pempel 1990). However, there is yet no robust theory of how partisan motivations affect the frequency and type of electoral rule change; in fact, the conventional wisdom in the literature is that electoral systems are inherently “sticky”. As Arendt Lijphart (1994: p. 52) writes, “One of the best-known generalizations about electoral systems is that they tend to be very stable and to resist change.”

This omission in the literature is puzzling in light of the interest in other political strategies which can help extend government longevity. For example, researchers have long examined the manipulation of public policy, particularly those instruments pertaining to economic performance. Various studies – including Erickson et al’s analysis of American voter behavior (2000) and cross-national work by Lewis-Beck (1988) and Pacek and Radcliffe (1995) – show that voters frequently make electoral decisions based on the economic management skills of politicians.2 Accordingly, politicians have incentives to manipulate public policy in order to create the perception that the economy is performing well. Nordhaus’s (1975) seminal study on political business cycles, for example, argues that politicians try to lower unemployment immediately before elections. Ames (1987) finds that Latin American presidents increase public expenditures before midterm legislative elections in order to solidify their political support. Palmer and Whitten (2000) show that in parliamentary systems, parties-in-power are more likely to call for national elections when the economy is performing well, i.e. when they are more likely to win.

Politicians similarly manipulate political institutions to increase their legislative clout.

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2 Various scholars have argued that economic outcomes are not primary determinants of government incumbency, or that voters do not always punish poor economic performance. For these notable exceptions, see Przeworski and Cheibub (1999), Remmer (1991), and Stokes (1996).
Scholars have written on how political preferences influence the design of legislative committees (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987; Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Calvert 1995), the power balance between the executive and the legislature (Moe and Caldwell 1994; Frye 1997; Shugart 1998), the number of cabinet portfolios (Mershon 2002), and bureaucratic delegation (Geddes 1991; McNollgast 1999; Huber and Shipan 2002). Generally speaking, all formal political institutions create distributional benefits in favor of some actors over others (Knight 1992), and as such, are endogenous to political competition: in addition to affecting political behavior, institutions are also affected by the strategic concerns of actors.

II.2 The Twin Pillars of Elections and Electoral Systems

What is true of these various political institutions should also be true of electoral rules, whose purpose is to decide who gets represented in government, and hence who gets to make public policy – the sine qua non of political life. More specifically, electoral rules affect two critical political relationships: 1) inter-party politics, by determining the distribution of seats in parliament, and 2) party-voter linkages, by altering the criteria that voters use to make choices at the polls, and consequently what politicians do to get their support. Politicians can choose to manipulate electoral rules in ways that bias both of these elements in their favor. Before explaining the strategic decision-making underlying changes to these rules, let me explore each of their institutional effects briefly.

The principal function of electoral rules – and the one which has received the most academic attention – is determining how votes are converted into parliamentary seats. One of the most robust findings from the electoral politics literature is that larger parties tend to benefit from winner-takes-all, single-member plurality rules – as employed in the United States and Great Britain – while smaller parties are more likely to win seats under proportional
representation – as used in the Netherlands and Sweden (Duverger 1954; Rae 1967; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Lijphart 1994). The logic is straightforward: when there are more seats to be distributed within a given electoral district (as under PR), candidates and parties need fewer votes to win each seat. The difference in votes-to-seats translation between electoral rules is a function of the district magnitude, or the number of parliamentary seats allocated to each district: the larger the district magnitude, the more proportional (and better for smaller parties) the election outcomes (Sartori 1976; Reed 1991; Cox 1997). Even among large magnitude systems, the way in which votes are pooled in and across districts – for example between the single-transferable vote, the Hare quota, or the Hagenbach-Bischoff method – can affect the exact proportionality of the vote-to-seat translation (Lijphart 1986; Benoit 2000; Schuster et al. 2003).

Apart from these effects on the conversion of votes to seats, electoral rules can also have a second role: how the popularity of a party is actually converted into votes, i.e. the party-voter linkage. An extensive literature on strategic voting suggests that in single-member plurality systems, voters have stronger incentives to vote for a second-choice candidate that is likely to win rather than a first-choice candidate that has no hope (Duverger 1954; Sartori 1976; Cox 1990). Accordingly, larger parties typically win more votes than is warranted by their general popularity, because those who support fringe parties have strong incentives to side with the next-best large party. At the same time, because smaller parties have a smaller chance of winning in SMP elections, these rules induce greater coordination between smaller groups to merge into a larger party (Duverger 1954; Rae 1967; Sartori 1976; Cox 1997). This can affect the representation of societal interests in politics: when more parties have a chance of winning in elections (as under PR), the number of discrete social cleavages that are articulated as independent parties increase (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994; Lijphart 1999).
By influencing the extent to which societal interests are mirrored in government, electoral rules can influence what political actors do once they are elected into office. For example, Carey and Shugart (1995) argue that electoral rules largely determine whether election candidates pursue strategies to maximize the personal vote – the competence of the individual candidate – or the party vote – the attractiveness of the party’s overall programmatic profile. This choice in electoral strategy affects the type of policies pursued in government. For example, politicians concerned with maximizing the personal vote may seek to demonstrate competence by bringing back more “political pork” in the form of public works projects, which can result in government overspending and debt (Weingast, Shepsle, and Johnsen 1981; (Lizzeri and Persico 1999; Milesi-Feretti et al. 2002). If the party vote matters more, however, parties will try to differentiate themselves by pursuing ideological policy programs which provide public rather than private goods. There is extensive evidence demonstrating that leftist parties tend to increase spending on social welfare programs and pursue unemployment-reducing policies, while conservative parties focus on lowering inflation by reducing government spending (Hibbs 1977; Cameron 1984; Blais, Blake, and Dion 1993; Alt and Lowry 1994; Garrett 1995; Boix 1997).

III. To Change or Not to Change Electoral Rules

The importance of electoral rules cannot be overstated in terms of their effects on both political representation and policy outputs. Because electoral rules create systematic biases that benefit larger parties over smaller parties or vice versa, it should theoretically be in the interests of political parties to alter the electoral system to win more votes and seats – their electoral “bang for the buck.” Do parties, then, actually manipulate electoral rules in a predictable fashion?

On the one hand, country case studies suggest that when rule changes do occur, they
tend to reflect partisan preferences. The most compelling evidence comes from work on Germany (Bawn 1993), Mexico (Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001), Korea (Brady and Mo 1992), Japan (Kohno 1997), and Eastern Europe (Lijphart 1992), all of which confirm that parties consistently try to make the best strategic choice available to increase their vote-seat ratio.

On the other hand, cross-national work on the overall frequency of electoral rule change indicates that electoral systems appear to be relatively stable over time. Depending on whose operationalization of “change” one uses, there were thirty to forty major electoral rule changes in advanced-industrialized democracies between 1960 and 1990 (Nohlen 1984; Lijphart 1994). Admittedly, most cross-national studies of electoral rule change preceded the 1990s, when various countries instituted new “mixed-member” systems that combine elements of both FPTP and PR – notable examples being New Zealand, Japan, and Venezuela (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). More recent cross-national work that includes new democracies, particularly the edited volume by Colomer (2004), confirms that many countries do experience electoral reform at some point in their history, although repeated cases of institutional change in any given country are rare. Ultimately, the landscape of partisan electoral rule manipulation is fairly barren: electoral institutions do not change as frequently as we might expect, given the partisan benefits available to actors.

This disconnect between expectation and reality is not easy to resolve, because even if we know that parties do make strategic decisions with regard to electoral rules, the circumstances under which these rules are changed are by no means straightforward. Most notably, the actors in the position to change electoral rules – majority parties or coalitions – are in power precisely because they are the very ones who benefit most from the status quo. Gary Cox (1997) lays out a very general framework for predicting institutional change, arguing that rule changes are likely only when 1) the status quo is shifting against the dominant party, or 2) there is great uncertainty
about the future prospects of the party. The classic Lipset and Rokkan (1967) thesis falls firmly into the first category: when the franchise was expanded in early 20th century Europe, the logic of electoral rule choice was dictated by the entrenched Conservative parties attempting to weaken challengers from the fast-rising Labour parties. Boix (1999) employs statistical tests to verify this theory and shows that whether Conservative parties switched the electoral system from plurality to PR depended on the expected vote share of new parties.

A growing literature on institutional choice under high levels of uncertainty supports Cox’s second point. Studies have shown that when uncertainty is extremely high – with little common knowledge about issue salience, social cleavages, or the number and size of political parties – actors tend to be risk-averse and opt for the “safe” choice of PR electoral rules, which prevents any party from suffering disproportionately large losses (Przeworski 1991; Olson 1998; Shvetsova 2003). Andrews and Jackman’s (2005) refinement of Boix’s (1999) empirical analysis also confirms that high levels of uncertainty in the early 20th century significantly constrained strategic institutional choice.

While this research on initial electoral rule choice corroborates the intuition that parties pick electoral systems that maximize their legislative representation, it is not clear how to extend this insight to explaining long-term electoral rule change. For the most part, this is a methodological problem of case selection. The existing literature tends to explore strategic behavior during unique historical circumstances, such as colonial liberation or suffrage expansion, when the quality of information is inherently low, and more importantly, parties had to pick an electoral rule to fill the institutional vacuum. Whether parties behave similarly under more “normal” conditions is questionable, and for the most part has been unexplored. For example, while uncertainty clearly affects party strategy, how do incentives change when the level of uncertainty varies over time? Are parties more likely to change rules (to PR or some other type
of system) when uncertainty is high, or will they only make strategic choices when vote distribution is stable and they can accurately predict how much they will benefit from electoral manipulation?

Existing theories are unable to answer these questions, because we only know what factors correlate with successful electoral rule change, but not what explains non-change. While the bias in favor of studying actual events rather than non-events is common in most disciplines, institutional non-change is far more frequent than change; as such, it is as important, if not more so, to understand the incentives and constraints inhibiting the manipulation of electoral institutions.

Selecting on the dependent variable (by only studying successful institutional change) is problematic not just on a speculative level, but also because it has produced theories that over-predict the frequency of large-scale electoral manipulation. While competition between parties appears to affect choices in the initial structure of electoral rules, this factor by itself cannot explain how often electoral rules are subsequently revised, as there are many cases where no changes were made even when political parties would have benefited from strategic manipulation. Put differently, while actual cases of electoral rule change tend to help the party-in-power, not all such opportunities to benefit from manipulation are exploited. Indeed, if a party’s parliamentary bargaining power is the primary constraint on institutional manipulation – as has been put forth most prominently by Benoit (2004) – then we should have seen frequent electoral formula changes in the Japanese case that I began this chapter with. The stickiness of electoral rules cannot be explained by existing accounts, and constraints other than inter-party bargaining must also have been at work.

In re-conceptualizing strategic electoral rule change, we also need to reexamine the way that we actually count the frequency of electoral manipulation. For the most part, when
empirical studies claim that electoral rule changes are rare, they are looking at elements of the electoral system that determine the distribution of parliamentary seats between parties – the vote-to-seat translation. In many ways, the theoretical problems of existing studies are a function of this empirical assumption: extant theories revolve around the role of inter-party bargaining precisely because the empirical phenomena they examine – the electoral formula or district magnitude – deal mostly with inter-party relations. These features of the electoral system constitute what I call “macro-level” electoral rules.

However, if we look at the electoral system more holistically, we can see that electoral rules also comprise many less-examined elements, such as campaign regulations, political financing laws, and electoral fraud regulation. I call these features of the electoral system “micro-level” rules, and they differ fundamentally from macro-level rules because they affect the conversion of a party’s general popularity to actual votes – the party-voter linkage.

What exactly do these micro-level rules do? To take one example, campaign restrictions on newspaper or TV advertisements can increase incumbency advantage (and harm challengers), because incumbents – who are generally more famous than challengers by virtue of their regular political activities – don’t need as much public exposure to have their names and views register with voters. Limitations on campaign effectiveness make it difficult for voters to accurately determine what different candidates have to offer, thus shielding incumbents from viable challengers. Similarly, restrictions on campaign spending can make elections more labor-intensive, benefiting parties which have a strong mass organization; lifting these limits, in contrast, makes elections more capital-intensive and benefits parties with stronger ties to organized interests (Strom 1989; Kreuzer 2000).

Much like their macro-level counterparts, micro-level rules can generate asymmetric benefits in favor of some parties over others, creating strong incentives for manipulation. As I
go on to demonstrate, while the conventional view that electoral rules are stable applies to macro-level rules, micro-level rules change quite frequently. To understand electoral system endogeneity, we must address the distinction between these two types of electoral rules, as well as the preferences of various political actors with respect to each. Election results are about both the proportionality of outcomes, which affects aggregate party performance, and the reelection rates of MPs, which affect individual incumbents. The former is a function of macro-level rules, while the latter is affected more by micro-level regulations. Notably, the coalitions in favor of each electoral rule type are different. Macro-level changes create conflict not just between parties, but also within them. Micro-level changes that enhance incumbency advantage, on the other hand, are more likely to engender common interests across and within parties. To elucidate the logic of institutional change, we need to examine the tradeoffs inherent to both sets of rules.

IV. Intra-Party Conflict, Partisan Interests, and Constitutional Thickness

The purpose of this book is to address the literature’s biases in methodology (selecting on the dependent variable), theory (focusing entirely on inter-party competition), and empirics (omitting changes to micro-level rules). This returns us to the revised question I started this chapter with: why do parties rarely change macro-level rules but frequently alter micro-level rules, even though the former may help parties more in aggregate? And what determines the timing of these rule changes? The answer I advance is one of intra-party conflict and constitutional restrictions.
IV.1 Theory

For an electoral reform legislation to be implemented, it must get (at least) a majority of the votes in parliament. However, for this legislation to be even debated in parliament, a proposer party must first decide to place such a bill on the agenda. Accordingly, the appropriate starting point for any theory of institutional change is not inter-party conflict, but rather *intra*-party negotiations over whether electoral reform should be pursued.

Intra-party consensus is necessary for a reform bill to pass, because legislation is unlikely to get enacted if most members of the proposer party do not vote for it. The relevant groups within the party are the *party leader(s)*, whose goal is to maximize aggregate party seat share in parliament, and the *rank-and-file MPs*, who care foremost about protecting their own incumbencies. While the interests of the two are not necessarily at odds – after all, the rank-and-file’s policy-making clout will increase with the size of the party – they can clash over electoral reform. Because large-scale, *macro*-level changes to the electoral system requires district boundaries to be redrawn, seats to be reapportioned, and politicians to move to different districts, they can actually harm the reelection chances of some MPs. As a result, reforms which benefit the party as a whole may nevertheless be vetoed by particular factions and rank-and-file members who stand to lose from electoral rule change.

Micro-level changes, however, are more likely to gain intra-party approval, because they tend to benefit everybody within the party *symmetrically*. For example, changes which enhance incumbency-advantage, like reducing campaign spending, help all rank-and-file members retain their seats. When the proposing party already has a majority, strengthening incumbency advantage also increases the party’s ability to maintain its legislative dominance, thus satisfying the priorities of the party leaders as well. Put differently, any initiative to alter the electoral system is a negotiated outcome that represents resolved intra-party conflicts over distributional
asymmetries.

It is only after a proposer party forms internal consensus that the debate moves into parliament, where the axis of conflict is between rather than within parties. The logic that applies here is one that has already been identified in the literature: proposals need to be supported by a group of parties that together has the legislative fiat necessary to pass a reform bill. The easiest scenario is when the proposer group has a single-party majority, since this ensures that any plan approved within the party will gain passage in the legislature. However, a caveat applies: majority parties are only likely to propose reforms when the electoral system is not in their favor. If a majority party already benefits greatly from the existing electoral system, then it has no incentive to alter the status quo.

Finally, even if the reform bill gets majority approval in the legislature, it may still need to go through a constitutional amendment process. I define constitutions as being “thick” when they strictly define the electoral system to be used in national elections. When the choice and change of electoral rules is left to legislative statute, however, then the constitution is classified as only “thinly” specifying the electoral system. This bifurcation is critical, because when the constitution is “thick” and is difficult to amend, the proposer parties must overcome higher hurdles than a legislative majority in order to change the electoral system. These obstacles can include a super-majority in the legislature, an intervening election (where the bill has to be approved by two different parliaments before and after an election), and/or a national referendum. The constitution, in other words, acts as “rules about how to change rules” and imposes a probabilistic upper-bound on the likelihood of electoral manipulation.

The thickness of constitutions is relevant to understanding the strategic choice between manipulating macro- and micro-level rules, because macro-level rules – particularly the electoral formula – are significantly more likely to be encoded in the constitution than are micro-level
Accordingly, party leaders who have the intra- and inter-party consensus necessary for macro-level rule changes may nevertheless choose to alter micro-level rules, if they believe that those macro-level revisions cannot survive the constitutional process.

In sum, I argue that parties are neither monolithic nor are they operating in an unconstrained bargaining environment. While inter-party bargaining is a necessary condition for electoral rule change, it is by no means sufficient. We need to understand 1) the process by which proposer parties form intra-party consensus, and 2) how the constitution constrains the likelihood of reform, to better predict when electoral rules will be manipulated.

These hurdles also determine how electoral rules are likely to be changed. Parties have two different options: changing macro-level rules, which determine the translation of votes to seats, and changing micro-level rules, which affect how public sentiment is converted into votes. Their choice-set is constrained by the magnitude and probability of intra-party conflict and constitutional thickness. The larger these obstacles, the less likely that macro-level rules – which produce asymmetric benefits/costs within parties and are typically encoded in the constitution – will be altered. Under these conditions, the only option available to party leaders may be to manipulate micro-level rules, which do not face these constraints to the same degree.

IV.2 Empirics

The conclusions reached in this project are derived from research into the “negative” puzzle, “Why did the LDP not adopt electoral rule changes that could have secured the party’ control of parliament?” Citing parliamentary debates and contemporary newspaper reports, I show that the LDP leadership did, in fact, put forth proposals to alter the electoral formula on three occasions. Each of these failed because party leaders could not muster sufficient intra-party support to guarantee passage in the Diet. Reforms which could have benefited the
party as a whole were scuttled by opposition from key internal factions and rank-and-file members.

I also show, however, that the LDP compensated for this inability to manipulate major rules by systematically altering micro-level facets of the electoral system. By strategically changing campaign regulations, political financing laws, and rules about media access, the LDP was able to increase the incumbency advantage of its MPs and solidify its majority in the Diet. Using original data collected during a year of field work in Japan, I show that the LDP was able to implement these changes because they benefited the rank-and-file uniformly, and thus created fewer intra-party conflicts. As I discuss in greater depth in later chapters, the manipulation of campaign regulations enabled the LDP to stay in power a decade longer than warranted by their actual popularity level. While these micro-level rules are generally ignored in the literature, this case study highlights the importance of examining changes to all features of the electoral system in order to appreciate the strategic incentives underlying institutional manipulation.

I augment this in-depth analysis of Japan with a brief case study of Ireland. The Irish case is interesting in that it demonstrates the role of constitutional thickness in institutional reform. In Ireland, most macro-level electoral rules cannot be changed without amending the constitution. Although the Fianna Fáil party twice secured parliamentary approval to change the electoral system, the bills failed in the national referenda required of all constitutional amendments. Like the LDP, however, Irish parties were more successful in altering micro-level rules, since these elements were not encoded in the constitution.

While Japan and Ireland are not obvious cases for comparison, the countries are similar on two crucial fronts: 1) the party system – both have multi-party parliaments with one dominant party, and 2) the electoral system – both have used medium-sized districts with seat allocations between three and five for most of the postwar period. Single-party dominance in both
countries (although much more pronounced in Japan) has meant that difficulties in inter-party bargaining were rarely the crucial impediment to electoral rule change. This allows us to examine the independent effects of intra-party bargaining and constitutional thickness in greater detail. The similarity in electoral systems is significant because it holds the menu of potential electoral rule changes constant. Parties in both countries had the option to make the electoral system more proportionate (by switching to PR with large districts, which benefits the smaller parties) or less proportionate (by switching to plurality rules with single-member districts, which benefits the dominant party).

By integrating insights from these cases, I go on to formulate and test my theory cross-nationally using a logistic regression model, incorporating data from twenty advanced democracies over a fifty-year period. To avoid the type of selection bias common in a number of studies on institutional manipulation, I construct the test to predict both change and stasis, rather than simply examining anecdotal episodes of successful change. I find that the timing of electoral rule changes is, indeed, largely determined by conflicts within parties, negotiations between parties, and constitutional constraints.

V. Why Parties? What this Book Explains (and Omits)

This study seeks to explain electoral rule change with a story about the incentives and structures of political parties. Before concluding this chapter, I will briefly describe why parties are the key actors in my explanation of electoral manipulation, and what I am, as a consequence, omitting in my analysis.

At the most basic, political parties in representative democracies connect the rulers to the ruled. In The Semisovereign People, E.E. Schattschneider posits that democracy is inherently
about the breadth of participation – when more people are involved in redistributive conflicts, political outcomes better reflect the range of societal preferences. The connective tissue that he and others have identified is political parties. Huntington (1969) argues that political parties are the crucial structure for mass participation, as they link social groups to the government by aggregating various (and often competing) interests into cohesive blocs. Caramani (2003), using extensive historical data from Europe, posits that the “nationalization” of elections – where political parties emerged from their traditional regional bases and began to compete nationally – had important effects on unifying government processes and policies within the country.

While this state-society linkage has traditionally been studied in the context of party politics in Europe and the United States, recent work on democratization in other regions echoes the centrality of parties in the political process. Writing generally, Bermeo (1990) and Przeworski (1991) both argue that parties are the moderating forces in democratization, because they allow both the former authoritarian leaders and the newly enfranchised masses to have a representative body in the legislature. Indeed, Ishiyama (1995) points out that post-Cold War communist parties in Eastern Europe did not simply disappear, but adjusted to the new democratic environment and continued their political activities. In Latin America, Mainwaring and Scully (1996) show that the institutionalization of a stable system of party competition led to the legitimization of democratic politics as a fair way to resolve societal conflicts.

Apart from this relevance to democratic norms and stability, parties also matter because they represent different social cleavages, and hence have different policy priorities. This differentiation may be based on a simple left-right cleavage, where progressive parties support greater protection of workers (labor) while conservative parties represent business owners and entrepreneurs (capital). Other than the traditional capital-labor cleavage, party identity can also
be based on ethnicity (Ordesshoki and Shvetsova 1994) or state-church relations (Kalyvas 1998).³

In this book, parties matter precisely because they have different policy interests, and therefore have competing incentives to maximize their legislative representation. Elections are inherently zero-sum games: more seats to one party necessarily mean fewer seats to others. While coalitions can form based on shared policy interests, each party would prefer to increase their own power unilaterally whenever possible – hence the central insight that the benefits of electoral rules are asymmetrically distributed between parties.

The correction I make to traditional models of electoral rule change, however, is that the benefits from change are also asymmetrically distributed within parties. Parties themselves are coalitions of individual legislators, who balance the pursuit of collectively-shared policy goals with the need to secure their own reelection (Cox and McCubbins 1993). The organizational structures of parties are based on delegation and consensus among such atomistic legislators, and are functions of the extent to which cohesive party ideology matters in elections (Carey and Shugart 1995), the role of activists in campaigning (Aldrich 1995), the career interests of politicians (Epstein et al 1997), and the importance of charismatic leaders (Kitschelt 2000). This variance in party structure is critical, because when individual legislators are more independent of their parties, they can better defy party leaders who want to push through asymmetric rule changes. This rank-and-file independence matters greatly in explaining the lack of macro-level changes in Japan, which I will return to in later chapters.

While electoral system endogeneity is interesting in its own right, the topic is an equally valuable medium through which we can examine the underlying preferences of political actors.

³ Why (and how much) parties differ in policy priorities is subject to much debate, but standard electoral politics models tend to follow the Downsian “median voter theorem”, where parties strategically choose a point on a left-right (or any other uni-dimensional) scale that maximizes the number of voters they can win in elections (Downs 1957). The implemented policy will thus change depending on where that median voter falls relative to societal distributions of preferences (Meltzer and Richard 1981; Iversen and Soskice 2007).
Micro- vs. macro-level rules affect the party collective and individual politicians in different ways, and by studying cases of (non)change, we can better understand the priorities of different elites. Incumbents seek job protection first, so they will always prefer restrictive micro-level rules. For the party to improve collectively, however, it needs to win more seats by defeating opposition incumbents. This requires more relaxed micro-level rules, and depending on the electoral landscape, a different set of macro-level rules. How this conflict is resolved depends on the internal structure and power balance of political parties.

By focusing on the political party as the main strategic player, however, I am also ignoring the empirical reality that other actors can and do influence electoral system design, as described by Katz (2005). This omission is based largely on the desire for tractability and parsimony: while there is tremendous variance between countries in the number of actors who can have some level of influence on electoral design, political parties tend to be the primary players in all cases. At the same time, I am explicitly interested in the manipulation of electoral rules for partisan purposes, not necessarily electoral rule change in general. Nevertheless, before moving on to an outline of the rest of this dissertation, I will spend some moments showing how non-party actors can influence electoral rule change under specific circumstances.

The first omitted actor – one that may be particularly obvious to students of American elections – is the judiciary. Courts can step in to enforce constitutional stipulations regarding fair electoral practices, limiting the scope of partisan manipulation. Cox and Katz (2002) write that American courts became veto players against gerrymandering in the 1960s to ensure that the delimitation of electoral districts was not systematically biased against particular racial groups. Similarly, the main impetus for reapportionment and redistricting in Japan was not the LDP per se, but rather an injunction from the Supreme Court that malapportionment needed to be fixed, lest the Court be forced to declare future elections unconstitutional (Ohmiya 1992).
The problem worsens if the courts are not neutral actors. Metainstitutional constraints – particularly constitutional thickness – are capable of restraining egregious political manipulation only if political leaders respect those constraints. The separation of powers between the judiciary and executive/legislature can ensure that violations by political leaders will not go unpunished (or at least not overlooked). However, if courts can shape legislation through constitutional interpretation or if judicial appointments are highly politicized, activist judges may have greater discretion in limiting or aiding electoral manipulation by political parties. The problem of judicial partisanship may be particularly problematic in new democracies where political institutions are still weak.

The second omitted group is voters. While institutional change is typically initiated through the legislature, in some democracies, voters can institute reform through citizen-initiated referenda by gathering some fixed number of voter signatures on a petition. One prominent case is Italy in 1993, where voters – unhappy with the lack of government turnover and accountability under the existing PR system – gathered more than 500,000 signatures to force the legislature to change the electoral formula (Katz 1996). These “facultative” or “citizen-initiated” referenda can vary in scope – some allow voters to implement a new law, while others allow voters to only strike down an existing law – but they clearly add an important actor to the process of electoral rule change.

More generally, custom and tradition may also prevent governments from violating certain principles of parliamentary competition. More proportional rules guarantee greater minority representation, which may be important in ethnically divided societies, while majoritarian rules give a stronger mandate to rule alone, which may arguably make government more effective. Indeed, observers have pointed out that Dutch politics tends to be consensual precisely because the electoral system is very proportional (Lijphart 1999), while British politics
is extremely adversarial because it is based on two-party competition (Finer 1975).

Both the courts and voters are critical not only because they can force electoral rule reform, but also because they can strike down overtly partisan manipulation by political parties. They are excluded from this dissertation’s empirical and theoretical focus, however, because their role varies too greatly by country. In terms of the judiciary, there is substantial cross-national variance in rules about court appointments and jurisdiction, and whether they can be proactive vs. reactive in striking down laws. In terms of facultative referenda, most national constitutions do not allow such a mechanism. The roles of these external actors do not easily lend themselves to the crafting of a general theory about electoral rule change, and as such, are best studied through individual case studies.

VI. An Outline of the Rest of this Dissertation

The remaining chapters of this book are structured as follows.

In Chapter 2, I will outline my basic theoretical framework, looking at electoral rule change as a three-stage process: consensus-building within parties, bargaining between parties, and satisfying constitutional provisions (if any). I will also discuss the difference between macro- and micro-level electoral rules, and how this difference affects political decisions to manipulate some rules and not others.

In the following chapters, I examine the applicability of this general model to explaining the timing of macro-level electoral rule changes. Chapter 3 is comprised of case studies which show that intra-party conflict and constitutional thickness limited the ability of political parties to implement wide-reaching electoral reform in Japan and Ireland. Chapter 4 discusses the results from two cross-national statistical tests of the theoretical framework: first, I predict the timing of
macro-level electoral rule changes in 19 advanced-industrialized democracies over a 50 year period, and second, I demonstrate that these institutional reforms increased the longevity of governments. An important component of this chapter is a series of simple simulations designed to tease out conditions under which government parties expect to benefit under a new electoral system. Establishing the incentives for reform allows us to estimate the actual impact of intra-party, parliamentary, and constitutional constraints.

I then look at how political parties can circumvent constraints against macro-level change by manipulating micro-level rules. Chapter 5 examines changes to campaign regulations, political financing, and anti-fraud enforcement in Japan, and uses a logistic regression model to predict the timing of micro-level changes. Crucially, I find that the manipulation of campaign regulations enabled the LDP to maintain its single-party dominance for at least a decade longer than otherwise predicted. Following the same framework, Chapter 6 looks at micro-level electoral rule changes in Ireland, focusing in particular on the strategic nature of seat apportionment. While micro-level changes are less frequent in Ireland than in Japan, I demonstrate that the timing and content of revisions still conformed to the partisan goals of government parties.

Chapter 7 concludes this book by recapping the findings from previous chapters and discussing ways to expand this study in the future. I look in particular at how the theoretical framework – intra-party conflict, partisan interests, and constitutional thickness – can help to study the manipulation of other types of political institutions, such as parliamentary committee structures, agenda-setting powers, and bureaucratic delegation.