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PART III

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

8 Alternative electoral systems

This chapter is based upon a paper presented by Mr Anders Johnsson, Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the ensuing discussion and by a paper presented by Baroness Diana Maddock, House of Lords, UK, and the ensuing discussion.

Regular elections, where the will of the people can be tested fairly and the population can choose freely who is to govern them, are an essential element of democratic government. Putting an electoral system in place and holding elections regularly requires decisions to be made on many questions, most of which should continue to be asked as circumstances change and as a country evolves and matures.

The right to vote

To the question who should have the right to vote, the easy answer is that universal suffrage is a requirement for democracy. In a situation where the vote is denied because of gender, race, colour or religion, most would agree that such a situation was undemocratic. Kuwait, for example, denies the vote to women. If half a population is disenfranchised, it is difficult to argue the situation is democratic.

Having stated the obvious, most countries do impose some minor restrictions on who may vote. For example, most countries require a person to be the legal age of majority in order to vote. In other words, an elector must be old enough to make an informed,

independent judgement. Many countries will deny the vote for mental incompetence, or to those in prison. Some countries deny the vote to certain high officials such as judges or electoral officers, in order to avoid potential criticisms of political bias. Residency requirements are another common restriction, the assumption being that a non-resident is less knowledgeable about current issues and candidates. In some jurisdictions, there is a link between representation and the obligation to pay taxes. While restrictions vary widely from country to country, most impose some minor limitations. In all cases, only a very small number of people should be disenfranchised, and for justifiable reasons.

The right to be elected

Who should have the right to be elected? Ideally everyone who can vote should be able to stand for office. However, because the purpose of an election is to choose representatives to sit in an assembly and make decisions on the affairs of state, most countries impose some restrictions here as well. Qualifications may relate to nationality, place of residence, age, personal conduct, ability and so forth.

Alternative models

Having discussed who can stand for office and who can vote, the next obvious question is how elections will be run. In choosing an electoral system many factors influence the decision: everything from cultural background, political experience, societal values, cost, need for simplicity, desire to be just, to be inclusive or even to be up to date. First, however, one needs to have an understanding of what the different systems are and how they work; their strengths and weaknesses. There are many valuable resource areas and reference works available on this subject, so this chapter will provide an overview only of the three broad types of electoral systems that are in use in the world: the majority system, the proportional system and the mixed system.

Majority systems (plurality-majority systems)

The oldest electoral system, the majority system, existed before the advent of political parties, and for a very long time it was the only electoral system. Basically, the candidate who receives the majority of the votes cast is declared the winner. There are however, several variations possible within this system depending upon whether it is a single member constituency or multi-member, and even within a single member system, variants exist.

First-past-the-post (FPTP) or a simple majority of votes cast is the commonest variant. Its major advantage is its absolute simplicity. It is easily understood by everyone and straightforward to implement. Every voter is given a ballot with all candidates listed and chooses one, or the voter is given a blank ballot on which he or she writes the name of the preferred candidate. When all votes are counted the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of the total number of votes cast. With only two candidates, the winner will have 50 per cent plus one or more of the votes cast. With several candidates, the winner might have only a very small percentage of the votes cast, but as long as he or she has more than anyone else, he or she wins.

Detractors of the simple majority system argue that it is not a just practice for someone to be elected with only 20 or 30 per cent of the votes, which can occur when several candidates are running and the vote is split among them all. In its favour, there is no uncertainty as to the results provided the process is fair. In a two-candidate election, if one candidate has 1000 votes and another has 1001, the latter wins.

A variant on the simple majority is the requirement for an absolute majority of the votes cast. In this case a candidate is not elected until he or she has obtained 50 per cent plus one of the votes cast. A second ballot is held if the first has not delivered such a majority. This is usually done several days or a week or two after the first ballot. It can either be a run-off between the top two candidates from the first ballot, where one of them will of necessity be the winner on the second ballot, or a simple majority can be sufficient

to win the second round. The requirement for a second round, of course, costs extra time and money and allows for additional campaigning between votes.

Another variant on the majority system is the preferential or alternative voting system. Here the elector chooses one candidate but also indicates, in declining order, his or her preference for the other candidates. If no one wins an absolute majority of the votes cast on the first count, the candidate with the least number of votes is dropped and the votes for second choice on those ballots are added to the totals. This exercise is repeated as many times as necessary to obtain an absolute majority for one candidate, who then becomes the winner.

Proportional systems

Many think that proportional representation is a new system, which overcomes all the problems of majority systems. It has, in fact, been in use for over a hundred years. Belgium used it as early as 1889. In addition, it is not without its detractors. Proponents argue that it is a more just system, for the results proportionately reflect the voters' wishes along party lines. Smaller parties, women and minorities are all thought to have better chances of being elected under proportional systems. In principle, no set of political views will be excluded from electoral representation provided it receives sufficient votes.

On the negative side, because the elector is voting for lists of candidates chosen and ordered by the various political parties, the elector is removed from the elected. It is no longer one candidate representing each constituency, where voters know who their member of parliament is. A list of candidates is elected, none of whom may reside in or represent a constituency per se.

Removing an unpopular member is also more difficult for electors in a proportional system, because if the party continues to put the individual's name near the top of its list, its proportional vote share may well ensure re-election.

Another aspect of this system is that it encourages the formation of small parties, as well as parties representing minority groups, single issues and so forth. Such parties have a better chance of having at least some members elected under this kind of system. While this provides a broader base of elected members, it can and often does lead to political fragmentation. Many more parties usually end up being elected. If no one party has sufficient members elected to form a government, then coalitions are required. Proponents argue that this favours consensus and compromise. Opponents say it can lead to political instability and inability to govern.

A proportional system, whatever its faults, ensures that all votes count for something. In fully proportional representation, the whole country is effectively one constituency. Each party presents the elector with a list of candidates long enough to fill every vacancy. The party chooses the candidates and the order in which they appear on the list. In a closed list system, voters choose one list. In an open list system, they choose names from any list, up to the number of vacancies. The votes are tallied and proportionately allocated to each party, which thereby has elected the number of candidates on its list that correspond to that proportion, either from the top down in a closed list, or by name in an open list system.

The problems with the fully proportional system are obvious. In a country with a large number of seats in the assembly, the party lists are very long and those elected are far removed from the voters. A person in the voting booth is faced with books of lists, probably containing many names totally unknown to him or her. In a closed list system, electors vote by party only, with no means to affect which candidates win seats. In an open list system, nationally known figures will likely receive more votes. Sports heroes, entertainers and outspoken advocates on particular issues will probably increase in the legislature - in other words, known names. This no doubt makes for an interesting legislature. How representative it is in governing is another question.

Most countries, rather than having a fully proportional voting system, opt instead for limited proportional representation. The

country is divided into various constituencies and the seats are distributed among them. There will of necessity be proportional discrepancies between the number of votes a party obtains and the number of members elected throughout the country, and this distortion varies depending on the number of constituencies, the number of seats and the number of voters. The number of seats allocated to a particular party on the first count is never exactly equivalent to the total number of votes obtained by that party. The remainder, or votes left over for each, must then be taken into account and distributed, until all seats are allocated.

There are a multitude of mathematical formulae and processes for translating votes into seats in proportional systems, and a great deal of information is readily available for those wishing to study this in detail. One aspect common to most countries is an electoral threshold of votes required for a party to be included in the distribution of seats. The Netherlands, for example, requires 0.67 per cent of the votes, while in the German Bundestag and the Polish Sejm it is 5 per cent. In Liechtenstein it is 8 per cent. This arbitrary threshold also results in proportional distortion, but most feel it is necessary in order to reduce the number of very small parties, and thereby increase political stability and decrease the probability of frequent elections due to an inability to govern.

Mixed systems

Mixed systems vary enormously and have been growing increasingly popular in recent years. Only a few of the multitude of options possible will be listed to give some idea of the variants. While some of the mixed systems favour majority voting, others favour proportional representation and still others effectively apply both.

MAJORITY-MIXED SYSTEMS

In a single non-transferable vote model, the voter may vote for only one candidate, even though the constituency in which he or she votes has several seats to be filled. Those candidates who

receive the most votes win the seats. This system is used in Jordan and Vanuatu.

For the limited voting method, the voter may vote for several candidates, but his or her total votes cast must be less than the total number of seats to be filled in that constituency. Again, the candidates with the most votes win the seats.

The cumulative voting system allows the voter to cast as many votes as there are seats to be filled in the constituency and he or she may choose either to give all votes to one candidate, or to spread them however he or she wishes among the candidates. Again, the candidates with the most votes win the seats.

MODIFIED PROPORTIONAL MIXED SYSTEMS

The single transferable vote (the Hare system) method allows the voter to vote for only one candidate regardless of the number of seats to be filled, but to also indicate an order of preference for the other candidates. Once a candidate reaches a specified electoral quotient, he or she is declared elected and any additional votes are then redistributed to other candidates on the basis of second choices indicated. The candidate who receives the fewest votes is eliminated, and his or her votes are also reallocated on the basis of second choices. This process continues, if necessary, until all seats are filled.

COMBINATION MAJORITY VOTING PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SYSTEM (PARALLEL SYSTEM)

Many countries seek to combine both majority voting and proportional representation, either by using one system in the lower house and the other in the upper house, or by combining both in one house, electing some seats by majority voting and other seats by proportional representation.

Germany, for example, has half the seats in the Bundestag elected from single member constituencies through a simple majority vote. The other half of the seats is divided according to population into the various Lander and elected proportionally. Each party prepares closed lists of candidates for each Land. The

voter then casts two votes in each election, one for a constituency representative, and one for a party list.

Hungary uses three different voting methods. In 176 single member constituencies, members are chosen using absolute majority voting. For 152 seats in the twenty regional districts it uses proportional representation based on a single quotient. It also uses full proportional representation for fifty-eight seats chosen from national 'compensation' lists nominated by parties. Each voter has two votes, one for a constituency candidate and one for a party list.

Multi-member constituencies may be determined in a majority system by having the voter choose between various party lists, where the list with the most votes wins all the seats in that constituency. This is known as a closed list. Alternatively, a voter is asked to choose candidates from any party lists up to the number of seats available to be filled, and those candidates with the largest number of votes win. This is the open list, multi-member constituency majority vote system, sometimes called the block vote system.

Choosing between systems

With the plethora of possible electoral systems available, how does a country choose one over another? What factors need to be considered in making the choice, and what is the breakdown of choices that have been made?

Change in political systems is normally a rather slow evolution, the fine-tuning and adjusting of existing systems over long periods of time. Extreme events or widespread significant discontent with the status quo are required for the major change of replacing one system with another. Examples of such extreme events are obvious: the collapse of communism (Eastern Europe), civil wars (Sri Lanka), the death or overthrow of a powerful dictator (Spain), evidence of significant corruption or fraud within the existing system (Italy), or even total exasperation by the population with the existing situation (New Zealand). Whatever the cause, the people themselves usually drive the requirement for

change, and the country's intellectual elite and populist leaders suggest and introduce alternatives, eventually finding a solution that satisfies the majority. Normally, things have to get bad enough that the majority of the population encourages and supports either a major shift in the status quo or a fresh start.

In operating any democratic system of government, the electoral process is key to ensuring that the widest possible number of people have a legitimate voice in choosing who will govern them and how. Without an appropriate electoral system, faith in the entire democratic process is questioned. The system must be fair and be seen to be fair.

There are various essential elements to any electoral system. It should provide the maximum possible participation of citizens in order to be truly democratic. All votes should count for something, if possible, and should be as close as possible to equivalent weight. At the same time, the whole point of elections is to choose representatives who together are capable of governing the country, and the system must allow for sufficient stability for that to be possible.

The electoral system should be free from manipulation and abuse. There should be built-in safeguards, which ensure that is the case, and the population at large should be confident of that. The way in which the system works should be understood readily by all who participate in the elections, and a major education initiative is likely to be required for a new system to be introduced.

There needs to be a close link between the electors and the elected. The elected must be accountable to those who have chosen them, and must reasonably reflect the various social and political groups that make up the country.

Neither of the two major systems, majority vote or proportional representation, can guarantee all of the above criteria to an equal degree, so trade-offs have to be made that are acceptable to the majority. What are these?

Advocates of proportional systems argue that the most important criterion of an electoral system is that it returns representatives who fairly reflect the various interests and political views in the country. In other words, the number of votes a party receives

on the national level should translate as closely as possible into seats in the legislature. This is most likely to happen with a proportional system.

On the other hand, proponents of majority systems contend that the principal point of an election is to choose representatives who can form a government and provide stable decision making and leadership for the country. Such stability is more likely to be the outcome of majority system elections in their view.

They also argue that majority systems are more easily understood by all electors and normally provide a far closer link between the voter and the elected member than do proportional systems, which often require a voter to choose party lists rather than individual constituency representatives. Even in mixed proportional systems, where some members represent constituencies and some are chosen proportionately, either the constituency representative must represent a very large number of voters, or the size of the legislature must be extremely large, in order to accommodate the two types of members. In a larger forum, each member will of necessity have less voice.

No electoral system will fill all requirements equally. No system is perfect. Choices must be made based on the specific needs, requirements and priorities of the country or region concerned, the priorities of the people who live there, and the particular circumstances at the time.