

ELECTION SYSTEMS

(The following mini-Study Kit was written as an insert for the Sacramento VOTER. A member of that League, Pete Martineau, also an Election Systems study committee member, authored the material with input opportunity from that the state study committee. You are welcome to use all or part of this article.)

The various election systems used throughout the world can be divided into three families: Plurality-Majority, Proportional, and Semi-Proportional. Each family has its own characteristics, advantages and disadvantages. All three families of systems can be used for electing legislative bodies, such as the state legislature, city councils, and school boards. For executive offices, such as governor or mayor, only variations of the Plurality-Majority family can be used.

Plurality-Majority

First in the Plurality-Majority election family is the system we are most familiar with, single member district plurality. This is presently used to elect our congressional and California state assembly representatives, and almost all city councils and school boards. Candidates run for a single seat in a geographically defined district. The candidate who receives the most votes, not necessarily a majority, wins, or, the "winner-takes-all." Plurality candidates can often win a seat when more people voted against them than for them. Examples are common in local elections, where there may be several viable candidates and the vote is split among them.

◆ Advantages.

Voters find it very easy to use. It is also easy for people to understand how votes are translated into seats - the winner is the one with the most votes. Election administrators feel very comfortable with the details of this process that includes designing the ballots, counting the votes, and so on.

Choosing between election systems may require considering trade-offs between conflicting values. In this case of a geographically based system, the trade-off is fairly clear. On the one hand each representative is beholden to a specific geographical area and issues that are important to a particular neighborhood or region.

On the other hand, decennial gerrymandering of the districts tends to produce large numbers of safe seats where one party has a significant majority and its candidates are easily and routinely elected. Nationally, in 41 percent of the races for state legislative seats in 1998, the smaller of the major parties in the district did not even bother to field a candidate. In the 1998 California congressional races, nine of the 54 seats were uncontested by a major party candidate; in many other races, losing candidates were simply tokens.

The use of single member district plurality voting for seats in the state legislature has consequences for political parties. Winner-take-all makes it virtually impossible for minor parties to win seats and therefore guarantees the

two-party system. One of the two major parties will then control the legislature, in contrast to other systems in which minor parties may have enough strength to require coalitions to be formed. Although most Americans think that governments formed from single party legislative majorities are more stable and effective, the vast majority of democracies favor systems that guarantee small party representation.

Disadvantages.

Election systems differ widely in the number of votes wasted. In plurality systems a majority of the votes are often wasted. (Political scientists use the term "wasted votes" to describe votes that do not elect a candidate and it is not intended to be subjective or judgmental. For example, if a losing candidate receives 47 percent of the vote, those votes are considered wasted. Likewise for a winner with 65 percent of the vote, almost 15 percent of those votes are considered wasted.) Voters in majority-plurality systems, especially probable to feel that their votes are wasted, are Republicans who live in safe Democratic districts, Democrats living in safe Republican districts, and supporters of minor parties. It is not surprising that they may not see much point in voting. Countries that do not use our plurality-majority system tend to have considerably higher voter turnouts and some, but not all, of this difference may be due to the election systems that waste far fewer votes.

Majority-plurality systems often do a poor job of representing racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, it is the failure of these systems that has prompted much of the growing interest in alternative voting systems on the part of some minority voting rights advocates and judges hearing more cases involving the Voting Rights Act.

Let's go on now to two majority systems. First, two-round runoff voting. In California this is used in many local jurisdictions, especially for county supervisor. The method is simple - if no candidate gets a majority of the votes in an election, all except the top two vote getters are eliminated and the remaining two candidates compete in a second election, usually from a month to several months later. The advantage of this system is that it produces a majority, while the disadvantage is requiring a costly second election. Almost always the voter turnout is lower in the second election unless it happens to be consolidated with a general election.

The other majority system we will consider is instant run-off voting, or IRV. Although it has been used to elect the president of Ireland for decades, it has never been used in public elections in this country. The 2000 presidential election problems have created great interest in IRV. It has drawn increasing interest in recent years, especially among League members. The Vermont State League adopted a position recommending the use of IRV for elections both at the state and local levels, and several local Leagues in California have recently done the same for local elections. In Alaska an initiative is on the 2002 ballot to implement IRV for all statewide elections, including those for congress.

In an IRV election, voters rank the candidates in their order of preference. On a paper or computer ballot you would mark 1 after the name of your first choice, 2 for your

second choice, and so on. You need not rank all of the candidates but if you don't you may forfeit some of your influence on the outcome of the election. The vote counting can be done very quickly by computer. If no one receives a majority on first count, the lowest ranking candidate is dropped, and those votes are transferred to ballot second choices. When one candidate has a majority of the votes, the election is decided.

- ◆ **Disadvantages.** IRV is unfamiliar to California voters. County voting administrators may not want to hand count ranked ballots, although in Ireland and Australia ballots have been hand counted for decades. If hand counts are rejected, the voting technology needed to implement it such as computer-readable ballots or touch screen voting machines would have to be purchased by most jurisdictions. Florida voting machine problems will probably speed up these purchases nation-wide.
- ◆ **IRV advantages,** besides providing a majority winner in one election, are that IRV encourages sincere voting because voters who favor a candidate who they know can't win can still vote for her, secure in the knowledge that if this candidate is eliminated their vote will be cast for their second choice. (Sincere voting is another political science term used to describe votes cast for your most preferred candidate. It is neither subjective nor judgmental.) Some experts maintain that IRV may have the added benefit of discouraging negative campaigns. Candidates might win from being the second or other choices of voters. If they attack their opponents, they risk alienating these possible supporters.

At-large voting is the last of the plurality-majority systems we will consider. This plurality system is used exclusively at the local level. Typically an entire town or city is considered to be one large district, and all candidates for office run at the same time in competition with one another. Voters have the same number of votes as the number of seats to be filled. The candidates with the highest numbers of votes (a plurality) win.

- ◆ Some consider two features of this system as **advantages.** One is that at-large winners normally get support from all areas of the city, while district representatives may tend to vote mostly only for programs that benefit their area. The other is that gerrymandering is not possible with at-large voting because no district lines need to be drawn. This is the only member of the plurality-majority family to escape this problem. This in turn is likely to lead to more competitive elections and fewer safe seats.
- ◆ The **disadvantages.** At-large elections cannot ensure geographical representation. As a result, some minority neighborhoods may have no one on the city council working to ensure that their particular problems are addressed. Furthermore, it is quite easy for an ethnic majority, voting cohesively, to elect an ethnically pure city council or school board. It is this high potential for racial bias that has caused this system to be increasingly challenged in the courts as being in violation of the Voting Rights Act and its amendments.

Proportional Voting Systems

The proportional family of election systems, which has not been used much in this country, is the most used system in the world. Among the 21 developed democracies, only the United States, Canada, Great Britain and France do not use forms of proportional voting.

The basic principle of proportional representation, commonly referred to as PR, is that the number of seats a political party or like-minded group wins in a legislature should be in proportion to the amount of its support among voters. So if a political party wins 30 percent of the vote, it should receive about 30 percent of the seats. This is in contrast to winner-take-all systems, where 30 percent of the district vote would get no representation. For PR to work requires the use of multi-member districts. Instead of electing one member of the legislature per district, PR elects several members per district, allowing proportionality. The larger the number of district seat the more proportional the results will be.

First, a short discussion about party-list PR voting. Even though this is not one of the systems we will be considering for consensus question 3a, because of its simplicity it is a good starting point to explain the principles of PR. Here is how it works. Each party puts up a list or slate of candidates equal to the number of seats in the district. On the ballot, voters indicate their preference for a particular party, and the parties then receive seats in proportion to their share of the vote. So in a five-member district, if the Democrats win 40 percent of the vote, they would win two of the five seats, or two from the party list. (Some countries allow you to rank candidates on your party's list.)

With party-list PR, there is little geographical representation and very few safe seats. So if you think having a representative associated with the place you live is an important value you may not like PR. On the other hand you may think that in today's mobile society geography is much less important than it used to be and one might be attracted by the idea of elections based on ideas, not geography.

Minor parties have a much better chance of being represented in a PR legislature. In a five-seat district less than 20 percent of the vote is enough to win a seat, and with ten seats less than 10 percent is required. This brings up another set of trade-offs to consider. If you like the idea of minor parties being represented, that will be a plus for PR, but if you think two parties are best for our country it will be a minus.

One of the characteristics of PR governments is coalitions. If no party wins a majority of seats in a legislature, which frequently happens, two or more parties must form a governing coalition. In our system, in contrast, one of the two major parties always controls the legislature. Opponents of PR point to Italy and Israel as examples of countries which have been plagued by unstable governments as a result of constantly changing coalitions. Proponents of PR respond with examples of countries like Germany and Switzerland, which have had stable governments for decades.

Actually Israel is a special case and its PR system illustrates some important points. Until recently, an Israeli party needed only one percent of the vote, called the threshold, to win seats, allowing many tiny parties seats in the 120 seat Knesset, causing extra coalition instability. Other democracies with districts prevent this by mandating a threshold of usually 3 percent of the vote to win seats. When Israel recently raised its threshold to 1.5 percent, many small parties were eliminated from the legislature, and their members absorbed into larger parties. This example may demonstrate the advisability of moderate sized districts and more significant thresholds in PR systems.

If both allowing minority points of view to be represented at the table and coalitions can sometimes be difficult, why should we support an election system which allows it? One answer is that the divisions in a PR legislature reflect divisions in the society as a whole. Of course, some of these minority views are represented within our two major parties, but they don't have a party explicitly advocating them. Is it better that these points of view be represented, or does allowing that lead to more trouble than it's worth?

This study is about voting systems, not methods of governance. Many nations that use a PR system are also organized using the parliamentary form of government. Some people mistakenly believe that one is necessary to have the other. If our state had a PR voting system, the collapse of a coalition here would not cause new elections as it would in a parliamentary system.

Mixed member voting systems have become one of the hottest topics being considered by countries thinking about modifying their election systems. If PR ever comes to this country, MMP is the most likely form, at least at the state and national level. Votes are for a local district representative, as in our present system, and voters also cast a regional multi-member party list ballot. An example should make this clear. In a 100-seat legislature the Republicans win 40 percent of the party list vote. This establishes the number of seats they will have in the legislature, 40. If 28 Republicans have won district seats, those winners will take the first 28 of the 40 seats. The remaining 12 come from the party lists. A proportional result for the election as a whole is guaranteed.

However, the inclusion of single member district seats provides geographical representation lacking in a pure PR system. Although minor parties would still have no chance of winning seats district seats, the party list vote would give them the same amount of representation they would obtain in a conventional PR election. The single member district portion is susceptible to gerrymandering and may discourage sincere voting, while minor parties will be represented in the legislature and coalition governments are likely. MMP is a middle ground between our and the PR voting systems.

Choice Voting

The final member of the proportional family we will consider is choice voting. This is the only form of PR that has been used in this country. It has the advantage of being usable for both partisan and nonpartisan elections. Choice voting is expressly designed to minimize wasted votes. It is more successful in that regard than any other system, and most voters contribute to the election of a candidate.

A choice voting ballot resembles the one for instant run-off voting. The candidates in a multi-member district are listed with their party affiliations if it is a partisan election, and voters rank them in order of their preference. On a paper ballot or a computer screen you would put a "1" next to your first choice, "2" for your second and so on. You can rank as few or as many as you want. A lower rank will never hurt a higher rank.

The vote counting procedure can all be done quickly by computer. Winning vote thresholds are key, and are based on the number of votes cast and a simple formula. A candidate's number of votes necessary to win in a five-seat district with 10,000 voters

would be about 17 percent, or 1,700 votes. The more seats in a district, the lower the threshold will be.

The first place votes for each candidate are counted. Anyone who has reached 17 percent is declared elected. The excess votes over 1,700 for that candidate are then transferred to the second choices on the ballot. This transfer may or may not allow other candidates to reach the threshold for election. Next, if five are not yet elected, the candidate with the lowest number of first place ballots is dropped and the second choice votes from those ballots are transferred to those candidates. This process continues until five candidates reach 1,700 votes.

The complexity of this process may be considered a disadvantage of choice voting, as is the fact that, like instant run-off voting, its use would require most jurisdictions to purchase new voting equipment. Another drawback is more crowded ballots. With a five-member district and three parties vying for office, you could easily have 10-12 candidates on a choice ballot.

Like instant runoff voting, choice voting allows voters to cross party lines with their rankings. So a Democratic voter might rank a Democratic candidate first, but then give her number two ranking to a Republican candidate that she particularly likes.

Local elections, at least in California, are almost always nonpartisan. Like our present voting system, individual groups may be organized sufficiently to run candidates as a slate in a choice voting election. In less organized communities voters could choose to support candidates on the basis of their personal qualities (leadership, experience, etc.) or on factors such as political philosophy, positions on issues, ethnic or gender identity, where they live, etc. Winning candidates may or may not represent any readily identifiable group of voters. For an individual voter decisions on how to rank the candidates might involve weighing the relative importance of these various factors.

One possible strategy for a candidate could involve making a highly targeted appeal to a relatively small segment of the community, with the goal of receiving about 20 percent of the first place votes, which would assure election. This could be done with relatively modest campaign spending. Others may choose a broader based campaign hoping to get enough first place votes to keep them in the running and then pick up transferred votes from other candidates. Unlike an at-large system, it is not possible for an organized but minority group to win a majority of the seats, even if the opposition was fragmented. Voters could choose to support candidates on the basis of geography, their personal qualities, political philosophy, positions on issues, ethnic or gender identity, etc.

Semi-proportional Voting

The third and final family is called semi-proportional voting. Proponents like to think of it as a practical compromise between plurality and PR systems. It eliminates some of the problems of plurality voting, and produces more proportional results. However, the system is often attacked from two different sides. On the one hand, champions of plurality-majority systems see them as overly complicated and largely unnecessary reforms that lean too far backwards to try to accommodate political minorities. On the other hand, advocates of PR consider semi-proportional voting to be a crude and unreliable version of PR.

Semi-proportional systems are far less common than the other two families and are used mainly in a few local U.S. elections (and many US corporation and non-profit board elections). We will only consider one of them, cumulative voting. Recently

national voting rights advocates have expressed growing interest in this form of voting. In response to voting rights suits, over sixty local areas have abandoned plurality-majority systems and adopted cumulative voting. It is currently used in Amarillo and some cities and towns in the South to elect school boards and city councils. The first African American and the first Latina ever, and the first Latino in over 20 years were elected in Amarillo's first cumulative voting election in May 2000.

In a cumulative voting election, candidates run in multi-member districts. Voters have as many votes as there are seats, like at-large elections, and the winners are the ones with the most votes. The difference is that if there are seven seats to be filled, voters can cast all seven in any combination; all for one candidate, one vote for each of seven candidates, four for one and three for another, etc.

Clearly under this system, minorities, both political and ethnic, can concentrate their votes on one candidate and have a much better chance of winning representation than in a plurality-majority system. Cumulative voting also shares some of the other advantages of PR systems such as not being susceptible to gerrymandering and thereby providing more competitive elections. Its main disadvantage is that strategic voting is essential for maximizing representation. Groups or parties often try to give instructions to their supporters on how to vote, which may or may not be successful. The proportionality of this system is subject to wide swings from one election to another. A minority party might get no representation in one election, and then even end up with a majority of the seats in another if votes for the opposition are split sufficiently.

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THE CRITERIA

Ensure Majority Rule

One characteristic of a good election system is ensuring majority rule. This decision-making principle is one of the cornerstones of democratic government. It justifies the use of governmental power, and it facilitates the peaceful transition of power from one political group to another. When officials or the government represent only a minority of citizens this greatly undermines their political legitimacy and increases the likelihood of public opposition to their policies.

Somewhat surprisingly, not all election systems do a good job of assuring majority rule. Some systems, for instance, allow a candidate for office to win with less than majority support. Also, these same systems may allow a party to win a majority of the votes in the legislature while winning less than 50% of the vote. Other systems are explicitly designed to ensure that winning candidates and legislative majorities have the support of the majority of the electorate.

Encourage Minority Representation

Good election systems not only promote majority rule but minority representation as well. These are not incompatible criteria. A truly representative legislature can reflect both the views of the majority and of significant minorities. Minority representation has several political benefits. It enhances the political legitimacy of our legislatures; it promotes the protection of minority rights; and it fosters a greater sense of civic inclusion among those political minorities. The presence of minority political views in our legislatures also creates a more healthy and vibrant political dialogue in these institutions and it helps to introduce new political ideas into the policymaking process. No one political group has a monopoly on the truth, and a variety of political voices in our political institutions contributes to a more thorough search for the best policy ideas.

In the United States, the issue of minority representation usually arises in two forms. The first concerns the representation of minor political parties. Americans are displaying increasing interest in minor party candidates. However, as you saw in the introduction, some voting systems make it hard for minor parties to win any representation in legislatures, while others make it much easier.

The other concern over minority representation involves racial and ethnic minorities. We live in an increasingly racially diverse society. Many would argue that it is desirable for our legislatures to accurately represent this racial and ethnic diversity. However, election systems differ greatly on how well they promote this political goal. Some election systems make it difficult for these minorities to be elected, while others are specifically designed to facilitate the fair representation of these groups.

Encourage Geographical Representation

Many voters want someone to represent their geographical area: their neighborhood, city, or county. In part this is desirable because political concerns are sometimes specific to particular geographical regions. Rural areas and urban areas, for instance, may have very different policy problems.

Having a representative accountable to a specific area ensures that local concerns have a voice in our governing bodies. Election systems can have a strong effect on the extent of geographical representation. A few of them do away with local districts entirely. Other election systems put more of an emphasis on geographical representation, and employ small districts in order to maximize this principle.

Increase Voter Participation

Voter turnout is an important measure of the health of a democracy. Low voter turnout often indicates a high level of voter alienation from the electoral process. Also, when relatively few people participate in elections, this casts doubt on the political legitimacy of elected officials. It becomes difficult for politicians to claim a mandate to govern when less than half of the electorate turns out to vote. Also, studies have shown that countries

that have higher voter turnout tend to have less citizen turmoil and experience fewer protests and riots.

Many factors affect voter turnout, including such things as registration procedures and whether elections take place during the week or on weekends. But political scientists have found that election systems can also have a significant effect on turnout rates. As you will see, some systems give more incentives to voters than others, and this affects participation levels.

Provide a Reasonable Range of Voter Choice

American voters often complain that they lack real choices at the polls. Some see little difference between the candidates they usually see, and many would like to have more independent and third party candidates on the ballot. When voters lack a sufficient range of choice, they often feel alienated from the election process, and unrepresented by elected officials.

The type of election system has a very large impact on both on the number of candidates and the variety of political parties present on the ballot. An obvious example of this impact is the presence or absence of minor parties on the ballot. Some voting systems, plurality-majority systems in particular, tend to discourage minor parties from running candidate because they stand so little chance of winning under those rules. In contrast, proportional representation systems make it easier for minor party candidates to get elected, and so many more of them appear on the ballot.

Election systems can also affect the range of choices among candidates of the same party. Some systems end up nominating only one candidate per party in the general election. Other systems that use multi-member districts encourage each party to nominate several candidates for those seats. This allows a Republican voter, for instance, to choose between voting for a far right Republican candidate and a moderate Republican candidate.

Of course while everyone wants a reasonable range of choice at the polls, there is disagreement over what "reasonable" is. Having only one choice is obviously not enough and having 20 choices is clearly too many. But what is reasonable? Some people argue that having at least three or four parties to choose from is essential in democratic elections, while others maintain that a choice between two parties is adequate in most cases. One thing everyone can agree on: the election system you opt for will have a large impact on the range of candidate and party choices you have at the polls.

Prevent Fraud and Political Manipulation

To the greatest extent possible, a election system should discourage fraud and political manipulation. Voters must have confidence that the results of the voting process are legal and fair. Most current election systems have safeguards that make outright fraud unlikely, but political manipulation is another story. In some election systems, it is easier for politicians to manipulate the rules and how they are applied in order to give certain candidates or parties an unfair advantage. The most common example of this in the

United States is the use of gerrymandering: the drawing of voting district lines to favor certain incumbents or parties. Election systems differ dramatically on how much they allow or discourage gerrymandering and other kinds of political manipulation.

Produce Fair and Accurate Party Representation

Democratically elected legislatures should reflect accurately the distribution of political views found among the public. We give these bodies the right to make laws for us in large part because they claim to closely mirror the views of the electorate. John Adams, one of our founding fathers, expressed this principle when he noted that legislatures in the United States "should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason, and act like them." In practical terms, this means that legislatures should give fair and accurate representation to political parties. The percentage of a party's seats in the legislature should reflect the strength of its support among voters. Legislatures that violate this principle cannot be relied on to produce public policies that reflect the will of the public.

Election systems vary on how accurately they translate voter support for parties into seats in the legislature. When there are large deviations between a party's share of seats and its share of the vote, this raises questions about the fairness of the election system and about how well the legislature represents the will of the people. A good voting system will do a reasonably good job of giving each party its fair share of seats.

Promote Stable and Effective Government

Governments need enough stability and continuity to be able to act quickly and efficiently to address the pressing problems of society. But while most people agree on the need for stable and effective government, there is considerable disagreement on what exactly it is and what role various election systems play in promoting this basic political value. For many people, an effective government is one that is able to avoid political gridlock and to act efficiently to pass policies in a timely manner.

Several political factors have an effect on this, such as the design of checks and balances in these institutions, but election systems do play a role in promoting or undermining this political goal. They can help to determine whether there is an effective working majority in the legislature and reasonable stability between elections. For example, some election systems are more likely to produce one-party majorities in legislatures while others tend to produce majorities made of coalitions of several parties. It is often argued that single party majorities are more stable and more capable of effectively passing their policy agenda.

Election systems can also affect the degree of political continuity that exists from one election to the next, which is another way of looking at political stability. When one single party majority is replaced with a completely different one, this can produce abrupt and radical changes in policies. A Republican Congress, for example, may have very different policy priorities than a Democratic one. However, elections in systems that encourage multiparty coalition governments often produce only a modification of the

parties in the ruling coalition, not a complete replacement of the parties in power. Some argue that this outcome increases the continuity and stability of public policy over time.

Finally, the effectiveness and stability of government can also depend on its degree of support among the public. Consider a situation where an election system allows a party that came in second place at the polls to win a majority of the seats in the legislature. This could easily undermine public confidence and support of those elected.

Maximize Effective Votes/Minimize Wasted Votes

Effective votes are those that actually contribute to the election of a candidate. Wasted votes are votes that do not elect someone. If your candidate loses, you have cast a wasted vote. Generally, a good election system maximizes effective votes and minimizes wasted votes. Wasted votes are considered undesirable for several reasons. First, casting wasted votes can be very discouraging for voters, and contributes to voter apathy. If you always lose, why bother to vote. But more importantly, wasted votes mean that people come away from the voting booth with no representation. The more effective votes that are cast, the larger the number of people actually represented in the legislature. In this way, the number of effective votes is directly related to the quality and quantity of representation in a political system. If voters are to not only have the right to vote, but also the right to representation, then they must be able to cast an effective vote.

In the US, we often assume that in all elections some voters must win and some must lose, and that large numbers of wasted votes are inevitable. But while this is usually true for single office elections, like that for governor, it is not necessarily true for legislative elections. In these elections, the amount of wasted votes depends very much on the voting system. Some systems for legislative elections routinely waste large numbers of votes, sometimes even a majority of them. In contrast, some other systems minimize wasted votes and ensure that upwards of 80%-90% of voters cast effective votes.

Establish Close Links between Constituents and Representatives

A good election system encourages close links between individual representatives and their local constituents. Officials should be in contact with their constituents and directly accountable to them. Also, constituents should feel free to contact their representatives about problems they are having with the government or its agencies.

All election systems claim to foster these links, but they do so in very different ways. Some do it by utilizing small geographical districts where voters and officials may more easily interact. Other election systems use larger multi-member districts that are designed to ensure that all voters have an elected representative who is sympathetic to their particular political concerns, and whom they would feel comfortable approaching.

Encourage Sincere Voting

Sincere voting is when voters are able to vote for their first choice candidate or party. The desirability of sincere voting is obvious. For most people the whole point of voting is to

support the candidate or party they like the most. But in practice, there are situations in which some voting systems actually penalize people for casting a sincere vote.

For example, some voting rules tend to discourage supporters of minor party candidates from voting for them. If they do, they are likely to waste their vote or to inadvertently help elect the major party candidate they like the least. So instead, voters often abandon their first preference and vote for the lesser-of-two evils among the major party candidates. Political scientists call this "strategic voting," which is defined as having to vote for a candidate other than your first choice in order to most effectively promote your political interests. As you will see, many systems are susceptible to strategic voting, but in general it is better to have an election system that minimizes strategic voting and maximizes the opportunity for sincere voting.

Promote a Healthy Party System

Political parties play a crucial role in democracies. They are the main organizations that offer candidates and formulate policy alternatives. Election systems can have a variety of impacts on party systems. For example, they can affect the internal cohesiveness of parties by pitting party candidates against each other on the ballot. But undoubtedly their most important and well-documented impact is on the size of the party system, whether it is a two-party system or a multiparty system. Experts have long known that winner-take-all systems, like plurality voting, encourage a two-party system, while proportional representation voting usually promotes a multiparty system.

However, many people disagree about whether it is healthier to have a two-party or multiparty system. And much of where you stand on this issue depends on your views of some of the other criteria being discussed in this chapter. If you think it is very important to offer voters more choices at the polls, you probably support a multiparty system. On the other hand, if you believe that single-party legislative majorities are essential to stable and effective government, then you will lean toward a two-party system. In any case, we will examine this party system debate in much more detail later in the study; for now it is simply important to note the election system you think is best is going to be strongly affected by which kind of party system you prefer.

Raise the Level of Political Campaigns

Voters frequently complain about the poor quality of campaigns, campaigns that tend to emphasize mudslinging over a discussion of the issues. Campaigns that focus on personal attacks rather than policy substance tend to drive voters away from the polls and to increase voters' cynicism about elections and politics in general. Moreover, such campaigns make it much more difficult for voters to make an informed and intelligent choice between the candidates.

Some experts have suggested that election systems can have an effect on how politicians campaign for office. They argue that different voting rules create different requirements for victory and these tend to change campaign strategies. For example, systems that require people to cast a vote for a party seem to encourage less of a focus on individuals and more of an emphasis on issues and party platforms in campaigns. Also, proponents of

voting schemes that use multiple votes or the ranking of candidates argue that their systems discourage mudslinging campaigns. Candidates may tend to be more civil to each other if they believe they might receive one of the votes of supporters of another candidate. If you are concerned about the current style of political campaigns in the U.S., you will want to pay close attention to how voting systems affect campaign behavior.

Discourage Extremism

A good election system should not encourage political extremism or extremist parties. Such groups can act as a cancer on the body politic. However, we must be careful to make a distinction between fringe groups and extremist groups. Fringe groups may have radical political ideas, such as abolishing the income tax, but they usually pursue their goals in a peaceful and democratic manner. In contrast, extremist groups are those that advocate the violation of democratic rights, promote violence and disorder, or have racist ideologies. Neo-fascist or neo-Nazi parties are typical examples of extremist groups.

There is some disagreement on how election systems can best deal with the threat of extremism. Some election systems erect very high barriers to representation, barriers that make it difficult for any minor party, not only extremist parties, to win representation. Other election systems set lower barriers to representation, which are designed to allow some minor party representation, but seek to exclude very small extremist parties. These systems would grant representation to extremist parties that have significant public support. Which approach is more desirable depends in part on how serious a threat you believe extremist groups are in your political system.

Encourage Competitive Elections

Many voters are concerned about the lack of competitive elections in the United States. In one typical example, 99% of the incumbents in the U.S. House who ran for reelection in 1998 won their contests. Without competitive elections, it is difficult for voters to hold politicians accountable.

Lack of competitiveness can take several forms. First, it may result from one or more parties simply refusing to offer candidates. In 1998, for instance, in over 40% of the races for state legislative seats, the smaller of the two major parties in the district did not even offer a candidate to challenge the other major party nominee. That's not much of a contest in those elections. Races may also be uncompetitive even when several parties offer candidates if one party has so large a majority of supporters in a district that their candidate is a shoo-in.

The competitiveness of elections can be directly affected by the choice of election system. It can make a large difference, for example, whether a voting system uses single or multi-member districts. In a single-member district, one party may be so dominant that other parties stand little chance of winning the seat. This discourages those other parties from fielding candidates and running serious campaigns. Election systems that use multi-member districts can have a very different effect. It is easier for several parties to win representation in those districts, and so many more parties are likely to vie for office.

Races become more competitive both in the sense that more parties offer candidates and in the sense that it is more possible for several parties to actually win seats.

Easy to Use and Administer

A good election system also should allow citizens to easily cast their votes and understand the outcomes of elections. Overly complex election systems may discourage some people from going to the polls. In addition, people who don't understand clearly how an election system works may be unable to use it effectively to promote their political interests. In some multiple vote systems, for instance, casting a vote for more than one candidate may hurt your chances of electing your favorite one.

But while experts agree that election systems should be as user-friendly as possible, they disagree about how well various systems meet this criterion. For instance, some are concerned that American voters could be confused by the new ballot structures associated with some alternative election systems. But others note that voters using these ballots in other countries have experienced little confusion.

A related concern involves the ease and expense of administering various election systems. Some systems, for example, involve two rounds of voting or a process of transferring votes and this adds to their administrative complexity. Also, switching to some alternative systems may require a change in voting machines, which is an added expense.

Encourage Fair Gender Representation

Despite gains over the last several decades, women continue to be severely underrepresented in many legislatures in this country. In the United States Congress, for example, women still make up only about 11% of the seats. For some, this means that an distinctive voice and set of political concerns is underrepresented in these bodies, a deficiency that ultimately undermines the legitimacy of these institutions.

At first glance, it might seem that election systems would have little to do with this situation. But numerous cross-national studies have shown a strong correlation between election systems and the percentage of women in legislatures. In particular, it seems that in voting systems where slates of party candidates are nominated to fill seats in multi-member districts, women tend to be nominated more often and go on to win office more often. People concerned with fair gender representation should therefore take a careful look at how different election systems affect the achievement of this political goal.

Help Manage Conflict

Elections are one of the main ways that we manage political conflict in our society. A good election system should not intensify the discord between different political, religious, economic, and racial groups. Instead, it should promote dialogue, negotiation, and compromise among these groups, essential elements in any peaceful and democratic society.

All election systems claim to aid in this process, but they attempt to do so in very different ways. Some tend to produce large and inclusive political parties, where a considerable amount of negotiation between groups takes place before elections in an attempt to create an effective electoral coalition. Other election systems concentrate on encouraging dialogue and compromise after elections by ensuring that all significant political groups are adequately represented in legislatures and thus have a seat at the political table when policy is being discussed and decided.

Reduce Campaign Spending

Many voters believe that money in politics and the high cost of campaigns create a climate where only voices of special interests or large contributors are heard. As a result voters are disillusioned. They see their elected representatives spending considerable time raising money for future campaigns in which other prospective candidates may not have the financial resources to compete. The result typically is fewer choices for voters. Many people even lose interest in voting when they are subjected to multiple and often negative and confusing campaign ads on TV and in the mailbox. A desirable feature of an election system would be its likelihood to reduce campaign spending.

Proven Track Record

In this study we are looking at election systems which are inherently imperfect. Kenneth Arrow won a Nobel prize by proving that it is impossible to devise a perfect election system. Every voting scheme will, at times, exhibit shortcomings. Therefore we need to judge them not on their theoretical perfection but rather on how they perform in actuality and what their consequences are. We can accept some weaknesses provided that there are enough positives to balance them.

Election Systems Study Kit
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