

# Unit 10

## Electoral Systems

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### Overview

This unit discusses the main alternative electoral/representative models (first past the post, proportional representation, preferential vote, and the like) and their implications for the parliamentary democratic process. In addition to a commentary, this unit provides an analysis of the most significant electoral systems used in parliamentary democracies. First, the unit discusses two forms of electoral systems (majoritarian and proportional). Second, it examines six types of electoral sub-systems that are subsumed under the majoritarian or proportional systems.

### Learning Objectives

1. Explain how electoral systems can structure the composition of governments and legislatures.
2. Consider the differences between majoritarian and proportional systems.
3. Discuss how a number of different electoral systems work in practice.

### Commentary

For many students of voting and elections the critical variable is the manner in which votes are translated into seats. This has major ramifications for the structure of both the political system and the party system as electoral arrangements can have both long and short term effects on electoral and party behaviour. The electoral system conditions the number of parties and the continuity of government. It can determine whether governments will be single party majorities or minorities, or whether a coalition government will be put in place. The choice of an electoral system can also affect the internal cohesion and discipline of parties.

An interesting illustration of the role of the electoral system can be seen by contrasting the roles played in national politics by the German Free Democrats (FDP) and the British Liberal Democrats (known in the past as both the Liberals and the Alliance). The FDP have long played a significant political role in German politics, having been decisive in determining the composition of all but two of the post-war German governments. During the same time period the British Liberal Democrats and their predecessors have never participated in government. From this information one might assume that the Free Democrats receive much higher support from the voters than

the Liberal Democrats do and their more significant role is based on that. Such an assumption would be in error: both parties receive roughly the same level of support; in actuality British Liberal Democrats have an average vote share that is higher than that of the FDP. The differences do not lie in popular support but rather with the systems for translating votes into seats.

## Majoritarian or Proportional?

There are basically two forms of electoral systems, one based on majoritarian principles and another based on proportional principles. We will look at examples of each system in practise. There is an extensive debate as to which is superior. Historically, majoritarian systems have been favoured because they have been associated with two-party systems, stable majority governments, and centrist parties. In contrast, proportional systems have at times been criticised as the Trojan Horse of Democracy because of their association with multi-party systems, cabinet coalitions and government instability. Critics deplore a system that exaggerates the influence of small parties and allows extreme parties to secure representation and point in particular to the Weimar republic in Germany that culminated in the Nazi acquisition of power.

The Proportional–Majoritarian debate deals with questions such as wasted votes and whether all votes count. It deals with issues such as minority representation and splinter parties. It reflects on the accuracy of representational outcomes and finally on the comparative advantages of stable one-party majorities and coalition governments.

The reality is that proportional systems are hardly a Trojan Horse in that many democratic systems use proportional rather than majoritarian arrangements. The balance of contemporary opinion favours proportional systems that engender legislative representation that more closely mirrors voting and reduces what are termed wasted votes.

## Electoral Systems in Action

We will look at six different electoral systems that have been used in parliamentary systems. Each is a variant of either the majoritarian or proportional type. (See Figure 10.1)

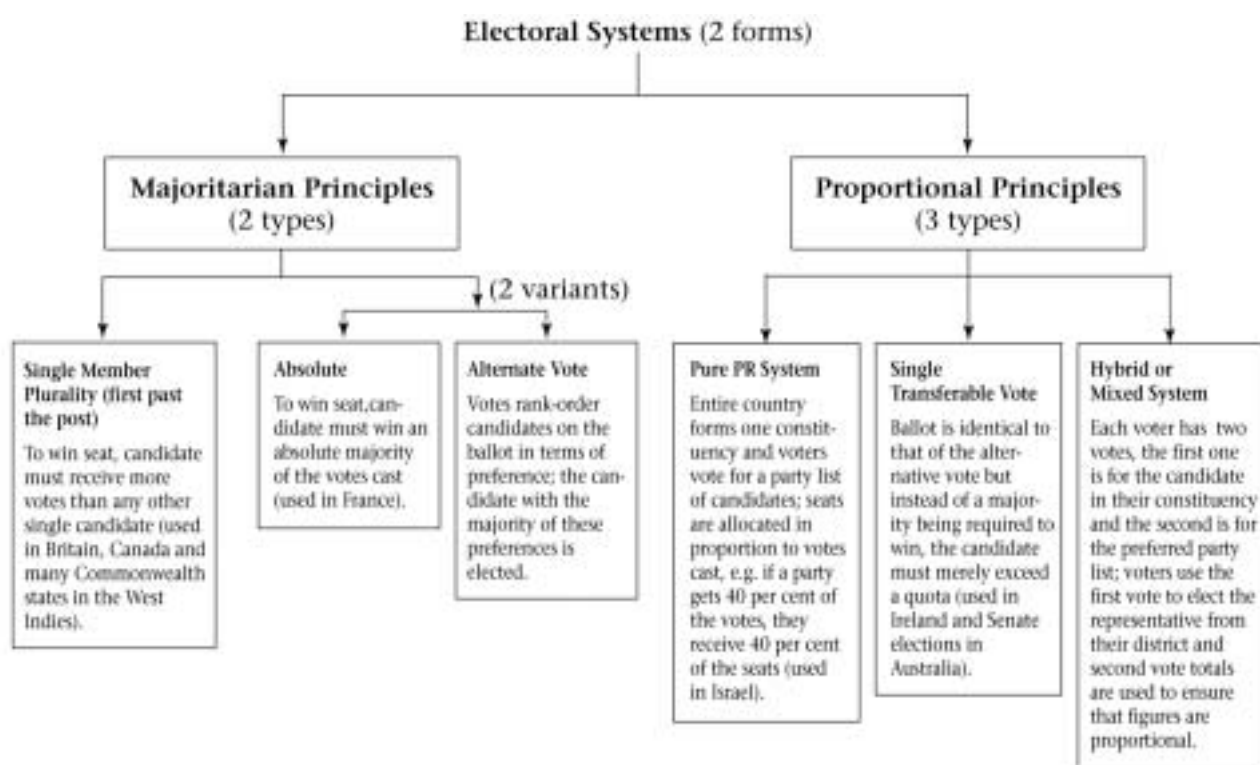


Figure 10.1 Electoral Systems

## Majoritarian Systems

### The plurality system

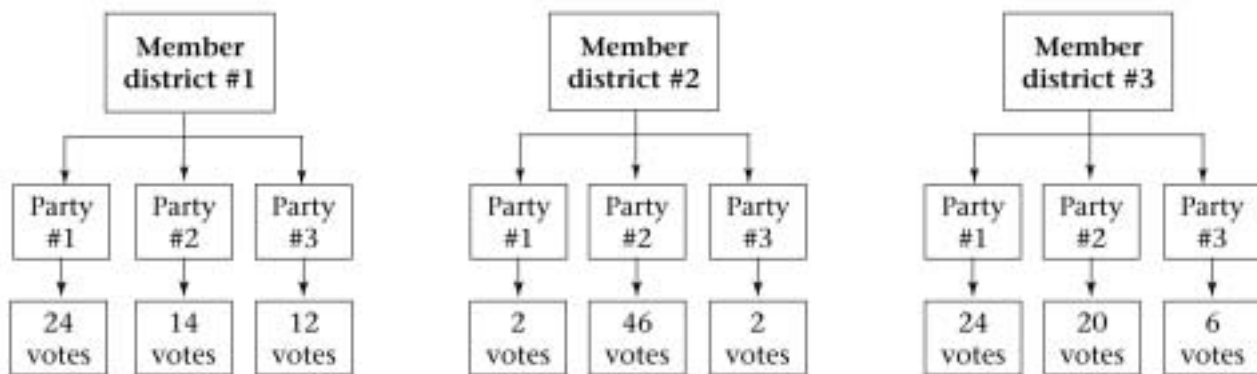
The plurality system is one of Britain's most significant contributions to world parliaments. Countries that have had no connection with Britain or its empire do not currently use it. Britain continues to provide the leading examples of this system in practice. The same system is also used in Canada and many of the Commonwealth states in the West Indies.

The single member plurality (or first past the post) system is composed of a large number of single member constituencies. Each constituency has its own representative in parliament. In these constituencies, voters have a direct relationship to the members elected from their locality. This system fosters strong parties—two parties are likely to predominate while minority parties are likely to be under represented. The government is usually based on a single party and alternation of governments is also likely.

In this system the translation of votes into seats can be haphazard. To win a seat, all a candidate needs is more votes than any other single candidate. The size of the vote is irrelevant, and more often than not there is no majority. Rather than the size of the margin of victory in an area, what is important for a party is to have its vote efficiently distributed, because it is quite possible to win control of the government with not only a minority of the votes but with fewer votes than another party. In Canada in 1979 the Progressive

Conservative Party won control of the government despite its trailing the Liberal party by 5 percentage points in overall vote share.

An example will make this clearer. (See Figure 10.2) Suppose there is a system with three single member districts and three parties contest the election in each constituency. The result in Constituency A is 24 votes for party 1, 14 votes for party 2 and 12 votes for party 3. In Constituency B, party 2 receives 46 votes while parties 1 and 3 receive two votes each. Finally, in Constituency C, party 1 receives 24 votes, party 2 receives 20 and party 3 receives 6. When these results are combined we find that party 1 forms a majority government despite its having received fewer votes than party 2, and that party 3 has no representation at all. This is, of course an extreme example but it illustrates how the single member plurality system can create majority governments when there is no majority disposition among the electorate, how the size of the winning margin is irrelevant and how some parties can be denied representation in parliament.



Party #1 would form the majority.

**Figure 10.2 Single Member Plurality (or first past the post)**

The single member plurality system does a superb job of creating single party majority governments. Since the end of World War II, not once has a British party received a majority of the popular vote, but majority governments have been elected after every election but one. Moreover, in 1983, although the Labour party and the Liberal-SDP Alliance received quite similar vote shares (Labour receiving 28 per cent of the vote and the Liberal-SDP Alliance garnering 25 per cent), Labour ended up with 32 per cent of the parliamentary seats and the Liberal-SDP Alliance with just 4 per cent.

The two variants of the absolute majority system are the run off system currently practised in France and the alternate vote system currently in use in Australia.

## **The run off system**

Within the absolute majority system, there are two other variants, which focus on ensuring that all candidates elected to parliament have the support of a majority of their constituents. The first is the run off system currently used in France. Once more the election is based on single member constituencies but in order to be elected in France one candidate must win an absolute majority of the votes cast. With many candidates this does not always happen on the first ballot. So a second ballot, or run off election, is held. This is in essence an additional round of voting. After the first round some parties are forced off the ballot, others voluntarily withdraw and like-minded parties stand down in each other's favour. On the second ballot, there is usually a majority, but a plurality is sufficient. Although this system increases the number of parliamentarians chosen by a majority of constituents there are still wasted votes, small parties are penalised and the first ballot voting preferences can be heavily distorted. As well, single party governments have been quite rare.

## **The alternative vote system**

The second variant is the alternative vote system used in Australia. Once more there are single-member constituencies and an absolute majority is needed for election. Instead of voters just putting a mark by the candidate they prefer, each voter rank orders the candidates on the ballot in terms of preference. Once this is done, the first preferences are counted. If one candidate has a majority of these preferences, that candidate is elected. If not, the candidate with the least first preference support is eliminated and the second preferences marked on their ballots are counted. This process continues until the point at which one candidate has an absolute majority of the vote. It ensures that the victor in a particular constituency is in the end preferred by a majority but again, it has no nationwide effect and the problem of wasted votes remains. It is said to discriminate against the second place finisher and to reduce the influence of extremist parties. In recent years this system has resulted in both the election of single party Labour governments, and coalition governments composed of the Liberal and National parties.

## **Proportional Systems**

The second of the two major variations of electoral system is that of proportional representation, of which there are several common variations.

### **The pure proportional representational system**

The pure PR system is used in Israel, where the entire country forms one constituency and voters vote for a party list of candidates. The seats are allocated in strict proportion to votes cast. In the Israeli parliament there are 120 seats, so in order for a party to get a seat in the legislature only .83 of 1 per cent of the national vote is required. The number of legislative seats is directly related to the popular vote: if a party gets 40 per cent of the votes it will get 40 per cent of the seats. Such a system eliminates the problem of wasted votes. Majority governments are possible, but they will not be manufactured and the result is that coalition governments are normal. The

formation of a government can require extensive negotiations among the parties who have secured election. Small parties can be very powerful in this system. In the most recent Israeli election 31 different parties contested the election and 15 secured parliamentary seats. The leading party received 26 seats. There is no direct relationship between a parliamentarian and a particular constituency. If such a system had been used in Britain in 1997, Labour, instead of winning a huge majority, would have received 290 seats while the Conservatives would have won 204 seats, the Liberal Democrats 112 and other parties 46. Parliamentary dynamics would have been changed dramatically as the Liberal Democrats and small parties would have been highly significant actors.

There are a number of key issues to consider in list systems of PR.

- how the party lists will be composed
- whether there will be a single constituency or regional constituencies and
- whether small parties will be required to surpass a threshold of popular support in order to qualify for representation.

In New Zealand, for example, the threshold is 5 per cent, while in Sweden it is 4 per cent. In most of the countries using this system there are a number of multi-member constituencies and parties prepare lists of candidates from which voters cannot deviate. The South African system involves two lists, a national list and regional lists, and half of the parliamentarians are chosen from each.

### **The single transferable vote system**

Another proportional system is the single transferable vote system used in Ireland and for Senate elections in Australia. As a proportional system it requires multi-member constituencies but it retains a geographic relationship between the voters and specific representatives. Parties run multiple candidates in these constituencies and the ballot is identical to that of the alternative vote system. Voters rank-order their choices, but instead of a majority being required to win, the candidate must merely exceed a quota.

Once a candidate has received the quota any additional votes received are considered surplus and redistributed to other candidates. If no candidate met the quota on the first count, the last place candidate is removed and the second preferences counted. The results of this system are more proportional than that of majoritarian systems. Further, coalition governments are the most likely outcome. As with majoritarian systems the problem of wasted votes remains. The transfer of votes between candidates is incredibly complex and it can take some time for election outcomes to be clear. Some suggest that this sort of system is most likely to increase the independence of parliamentarians. In the most recent Irish election, independent candidates received almost 10 per cent of the first preferences and seven of them were elected to parliament.

## The hybrid or mixed system

The final system we will discuss is used in New Zealand. This system is often described as a hybrid or mixed system but in reality it is proportional. Slightly less than half of the legislature seats are filled by proportional representation based on party lists while the remaining seats are based on a plurality system. Each voter gets 2 votes, first for the candidate in his or her constituency, and, second for the preferred party list. With the first vote voters get to elect, on a plurality basis, the representative from their district. The second vote is used to correct the deficiencies of the first, that is the second vote totals are used to ensure that the figures are proportional. For instance, in the last election (27 November, 1999), the Labour party won 41 constituencies, the National party 22 and the Alliance, ACT and Green parties each won a single constituency. However, in terms of second votes, Labour had 39 per cent, the National party 31 per cent, the Alliance 8 per cent, ACT 7 per cent, the Greens 5 per cent, New Zealand First 4 per cent, Christian Heritage party 2 per cent. The few other parties received much lower levels of support. The parties that received less than 5 per cent of the vote were not entitled to representation based on their share of the popular vote. (The New Zealand First party was actually entitled to receive list seats because even though it had not reached the 5 per cent plateau, it had won a constituency seat.) As Labour won 39 per cent of the vote it was entitled to 39 per cent of seats or 49. Because it had won 41 in the constituencies it was given 8 list seats. The National party was entitled to 39 seats; it won 22 constituencies and was therefore given another 17 from the list. The ACT party that was entitled to 10 seats won none of the districts so all of their representatives came from the party lists. Finally, the single constituency seats won by the Alliance, Greens and New Zealand First parties were topped up, with 9, 6 and 4 list seats, respectively.

This system avoids one of the critiques of PR, namely the appearance that it removes local representation and close ties between voters and representatives. However, like other proportional systems it prevented a majority government and resulted in a coalition government. The 6 per cent of New Zealanders who voted for other parties received no representation.

Despite the variety of electoral systems and their different effects on the construction of majority governments or their propensity for creating coalition governments, they all share one feature. Each is associated with strong party discipline. Changes in electoral systems are in themselves unlikely to increase the independence of ordinary members of parliament. The proportional systems have however, been associated with the election of an increasing number of women to parliament.

## Recommended Reading

Blais, Andre and Louis Massicotte. "Electoral Systems" in *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. Lawrence Leduc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds). Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1996.

Benjamin, Gerald. "Systems of Representation for Legislatures in Democracies" in *World Encyclopedia of Parliaments and Legislatures*. George Thomas Kurian (ed). Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1998.

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## Study Questions

Based on your readings, see if you can answer the following questions. If not, read the commentary over again to find the answers.

1. How can electoral systems structure the composition of governments and legislatures?
2. What are the differences between majoritarian and proportional systems.
3. How do the different electoral systems work in practice?



# Internet Resources

## Electoral Models

Canada. Elections Canada: "Review of Political Systems"

<http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=index&dir=sys&lang=e&textonly=false>

International Committee for Research into Elections and Representative Democracy (ICORE). "The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems"

<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/cses/papers/stimulus.htm>

International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES). Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project: "Electoral Systems"

<http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/es/default.htm>

PR Library. "Readings in Proportional Representation"

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/prlib.htm>

Richard Kimber's Political Science Resources. "Elections and Electoral Systems Around the World"

<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/>  
<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/election.htm>

United Kingdom. Electoral Reform Society: "Voting Systems"

<http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk>

United Kingdom Parliament. Library Research Papers 1998: "Voting Systems: The Government's Proposals"

<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp98/rp98-113.pdf>

United Kingdom Parliament. Library Research Papers: "Voting Systems: The Jenkins Report"

<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp98/rp98-112.pdf>

Center for Voting and Democracy

<http://www.fairvote.org/>

Represent Democracy

<http://www.represent.org.uk/>

Coalition Government and Satisfaction with Democracy: An analysis of New Zealand's reaction to Proportional Representation

[http://www.nzes.org/papers/wpsa\\_2000r.pdf](http://www.nzes.org/papers/wpsa_2000r.pdf)

Twilight of Westminster: Electoral Reform and its Consequences

<http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/acrobat/apsa2000bpg.pdf>

Women's Representation and Electoral Systems

<http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/acrobat/womenele.pdf>

Proportional Representation Society of Australia  
<http://www.cs.mu.oz.au/~lee/prsa/>