Electoral systems: Important and Fun?

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SMP, PR, AV, STV, MMP, MMM—even from this incomplete list, it is evident that there is a wide variety of electoral systems. In my opinion, people don’t spend enough time thinking about electoral systems. Even some scholars have a tendency to underestimate the impact institutions such as electoral systems can have on politics. Many people in the United States take our “first-past-the-post” system (more appropriately called single-member plurality or SMP) for granted. To be honest, I never gave it much thought until I took my first comparative politics class (despite the fact that by that time I had voted in my first presidential election). Now, I find electoral systems fascinating. Admittedly, this is a fascination that most of my friends and even my professors don’t quite understand. I don’t expect all of you to love institutions the way I do. However, I do hope that by the end of this presentation you will have a better appreciation for why they matter. Those of you who aren’t political science people, don’t worry, I will do my best to keep this as simple and clear as possible.

I suppose that leads me to my first argument: electoral systems matter. In truth, in recent years this has become less of an argument as this point has come to be more and more accepted by scholars. The type of electoral system can affect such democratic fundamentals as representation, accountability, stability, type of government—single party versus coalition—and the party system (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005; see also: Duverger, 1984; Sartori, 1994). In an effort to keep a topic that can quickly become convoluted simple, I will follow Lijphart’s example and distinguish between two basic types of systems—majoritarian and consensus (1999). Within these there are a variety of electoral systems. However, generally speaking, majoritarian systems typically use single-member district plurality or majority electoral systems
and consensus systems typically use proportional representation, also known as PR (Lijphart, 1999). Although there are many electoral options, I will limit my argument to the point that proportional electoral systems are superior to plurality systems.

Before diving into the argument, let me back up and explain the two systems more clearly. The simplest way to explain single-member plurality or SMP systems is by saying that is what we have in the United States (they also use it in the United Kingdom). Therefore most of us know the system even if we aren’t familiar with the details that scholars discuss. The “single-member” part of the title refers to the fact that only one member of the legislature is elected from each district or constituency (think House of Representatives). Plurality refers to the fact that a candidate does not need fifty percent plus one vote to win. Rather, they need more votes than any other candidate. Therefore a candidate could win with forty or even thirty percent of the vote. This is what first-past-the-post rather misleadingly refers to. Generally speaking, SMP electoral systems are one factor that lead to two-party systems and usually result in one party controlling the legislature (Farrell, 2001; Lijphart, 1999). Note that control of the legislature is even more important in parliamentary systems than it is in our presidential system.

While SMP and PR systems are primarily what I will be discussing, I will also mention majority systems. Although the mechanisms vary, under majority systems a candidate must have fifty percent plus one vote to win. In this way, majority systems are most similar to plurality systems and I will occasionally discuss them together.

Proportional systems, on the other hand, are exactly what they sound like. If a given party wins twenty percent of the votes, they win twenty percent of the seats in Parliament. There are different types of proportional representation or PR, but this is the basic idea. Since parties receive seats in proportion to their percentage of the vote, PR electoral systems often contribute
to multi-party systems. This means that rather than two large parties with a few smaller parties that are not very competitive, like here in the States, there are three or more competitive parties. Further, elections under PR rules often do not result in one-party rule. Rather, it is common for no single party to get a majority of the seats in parliament and for a coalition of parties to be formed after the election to govern.

Hopefully, we are now on the same page with regards to the basics of these electoral systems and now we can proceed to analyze them. If you recall, I mentioned a few fundamental criteria that people usually use to evaluate electoral systems. The most important of these are clarity, accountability, stability, government effectiveness and representation. People often argue that plurality systems are clearer for the voters to understand, more accountable, more effective or efficient, and more stable. Proportional systems, it is generally granted, are more representative. This quick summary would seem to go directly counter to my argument that PR is superior so I will examine each of these criteria in turn.

The main way in which proportional representation is seen as superior is in terms of representation. Plurality or majority systems seek to satisfy most people, but by no means all, and in so doing, concentrate power. By definition, some portion of the citizenry—as much as forty-nine percent or even more in the case of plurality systems—did not vote for the winning candidate or party. One could argue that as much as half the population does not get their voice heard; are not represented. Contrast this with PR systems, which fit under the heading of consensus democracy. There is a very good reason for this name—the consensus model, in the words of Lijphart, “tries to share, disperse, and restrain power” (1999, 2). By translating votes into parliamentary seats much more proportionally, PR systems better represent the entire society. For example, say that I am a supporter of a minor party such as the Greens. In the United States,
my vote will essentially be wasted if I vote for the Green candidate for the House of Representatives—they will never win. If however, I supported a minor party such as the Greens in a nation that used proportional representation, most likely, at least one Green party candidate would win enough votes to be seated in parliament. In this way, my voice would be heard under PR in a way that it would not be under plurality electoral rules.

There are a multitude of criticisms of any system, but there is one fairly basic criticism of PR, which I would like to address first. This is that because these systems are more complex, voters are more likely to be confused (Farrell, 2001). This is what I consider to be the weakest objection to PR. David Farrell notes that in looking at nearly fifty countries, some of the most proportional systems, and therefore likely some of the most complex, had high turnout and low levels of invalid votes in the 1990s (2001). This indicates that despite the complexity, voters seem to be faring just as well in proportional systems as they do in plurality or majoritarian systems. While it may be true that proportional systems are slightly more confusing, the evidence does not show that this translates to voter confusion as measured by invalid votes or turnout. I would also point out that any system would be confusing when it is new or different from what one is familiar with. Someone new to the United States may find our electoral system confusing, especially trying to understand the role of the Electoral College. This does not necessarily mean that the system is fundamentally flawed.

A much stronger argument against PR is that it leads to less stable governments than plurality electoral systems. Especially when considering countries such as Italy, some argue that because PR tends to produce coalition governments, which are, by nature less stable than one-party majority governments, proportional systems are less stable (Farrell, 2001). Generally, one points to the British system (which uses SMP) as a model of stability where governments often
last four or five years. Conversely, Italy seems to be a model of instability where elections are
held frequently and government tenure can be measured in months (Farrell, 2001). There are
several ways to approach this argument. First, Carol Mershon argues that Italy is in fact more
stable than often thought. She points out that although governments do not last very long in Italy,
there is not very much alternation of governments (Mershon, 1996). In other words, the parties
that are forming the coalition governments are not changing substantially. This begins to poke
holes in the argument that countries like Italy are unstable. A second approach is to examine
stability cross-nationally. This is the approach of Lijphart and Farrell. Farrell’s analysis does not
bear out the idea that proportional systems are less stable. In fact, his discussion shows that if
anything, proportional systems may be more stable (Farrell, 2001). Of course there are nuances
in these arguments that I am not delving into. There are different ways to measure stability—
does the government change when the party composition changes, when the prime minister
changes, or by some other criteria? Regardless, what this simple discussion shows is that, despite
perceptions to the contrary, proportional systems are not significantly less stable than plurality
systems.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of PR is that Members of Parliament are less accountable
under PR than under a plurality system. The way most people think about accountability is that if
voters are unsatisfied with the way the country is running, at the next election, it is possible to, as
they say, “throw the bums out” (Powell, 2000). Under SMP, this is usually quite simple. Only
one candidate was elected from each constituency, so if you are unhappy with your Congressman
or Member of Parliament, you can vote them out in the next election. Since there is only one
person responsible for each constituency the voters can easily hold that person accountable.

Further, most of the time under SMP (the 2010 British general election excluded), one party
controls the legislature and/or the government. If the voters are unhappy, it is clear that the party in power was responsible (at the very least for not improving things, if not for actually causing the problem) and they can be tossed out at the next election simply by voting for another party. This is why most people say that SMP systems have high levels of accountability.

Accountability can get much trickier in countries with PR. First, I have to admit that up until this point I have been able to keep things fairly simple (at least I hope I have), but PR can actually get quite complicated. There are a variety of proportional systems, including list PR (both open and closed) and the Single Transferable Vote or STV. For simplicity’s sake, let’s just ignore STV for now. Essentially, list PR means that the party compiles a list of candidates (up to the number of total seats in parliament). After the votes for each party are counted and translated into a certain number of seats for the party that number of candidates become Members of Parliament (or MPs for short). So for example, if party X won twenty seats in a one hundred-seat parliament (i.e. twenty percent of the vote), the first twenty candidates on their party list would become MPs. In this way, under PR, citizens are voting for parties, not candidates. This in and of itself can make accountability difficult, as there is no single person responsible for a given district. However, the more important difficulty is the tendency for coalition governments under PR. As I explained earlier, coalition governments are much more common under PR. Essentially what happens is that no single party wins a majority at the election. Therefore, immediately after the elections a series of negotiations begin between the party leaders to determine which parties will form a coalition government (it should be noted that occasionally, these negotiations can occur before an election as well). The outcome depends on many factors but the number of seats a party controls and ideology are critical factors. This negotiation period can take anywhere from several days to several months. Since the precise composition of the government is determined
after the election, there is a certain sense in which the voters do not determine which parties or people run the country. Further, with coalition governments it is often difficult to determine which party is responsible for unpopular policies or other national problems. The parties are likely to try to make the case that such and such as policy was not what they wanted, but that they had to go along with the plan to keep the coalition together.

The problem of accountability is not one that I can counter entirely satisfactorily. As I said, this is the strongest criticism of PR. The best I can do is note that while accountability is more difficult under PR, it is not impossible. Voters can still send a message by voting in substantial numbers for opposition parties. Essentially I, like many before me, must concede that proportional systems have a bigger problem with accountability than plurality systems. However, the benefits of PR in terms of representation outweigh this difficulty.

The final criticism of PR is closely related to accountability. This is government effectiveness. Some have argued that coalitions, and therefore proportional systems, do not lead to effective governance. The argument is that single-party governments can act quickly and effectively to deal with problems. Coalitions may not be able to act as efficiently. If the coalition is composed of many parties or parties that are ideologically distant, it is certainly possible that government effectiveness will be reduced. However, coalition government does not necessarily lead to ineffectiveness (Sartori, 1994). For this reason, proportional systems are not necessarily inferior to plurality systems in terms of effectiveness and efficiency.

What I hope has become clear from this discussion is that in truth the choice of electoral systems involves trade-offs—trade-offs such as that between accountability and representation. Having said this, many of the arguments against proportional representation are overstated. While PR can be less stable and less effective, the opposite may also be true. Even the case of
Italy does not present as substantial a challenge to PR as often thought. There are many more countries that use some form of proportional representation than there are countries that use plurality systems. What I hope I have shown is that these countries are on to something. Generally speaking, PR is preferable to plurality.

Having said that, I should make it clear that this has been a theoretical argument. I am not suggesting that all those countries that use plurality should switch to PR. In most cases this would be entirely impractical. Even if it would be better, let’s face it, the United States is not going to be switching to PR any time in the near future. The two main parties are benefited too much by this system to even contemplate changing it.

I should also admit at this point that I have set up this argument as between plurality and proportional systems as if these were the two options from which we have to chose. I did this for the sake of simplicity and clarity for those people who don’t love electoral systems as much as I do. In fact there are different types of proportional systems, different types of majoritarian systems, and indeed, there are a variety of mixed systems. These mixed systems combine parts of plurality and proportional systems in an effort to have the best of both worlds. Germany is a prime example of this. They elect a certain number of MPs using single-member plurality and a certain number with proportional representation. Without going into detail, I have to admit that I believe these mixed-systems are probably superior to either straight proportional or plurality systems. They really do have the best of both worlds—accountability is less of an issue and yet they still have the benefit of being more representative.

Electoral systems matter. The electoral system can affect the party system, the type of government (single-party or coalition), accountability, stability, government effectiveness, and representation. Taking into account these criteria, proportional representation is superior to
single-member plurality, but mixed systems are likely preferable to either PR or plurality. If nothing else, I hope this discussion has shown that electoral systems should not be taken for granted—there is a great variety and the differences between systems are meaningful.
Works Cited


