

*Bernard Grofman and Shaun Bowler argue that the debate on electoral systems should consider aspects of voting systems other than 'party proportionality'.*

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# STV's Place in the Family of Electoral Systems: The Theoretical Comparisons and Contrasts

Bernard Grofman and Shaun Bowler

## Introduction

The proportionality/disproportionality of electoral systems has been the central focus of electoral studies research for at least a generation. It might seem, then, that once we establish the single transferable vote's (STV's) place in terms of proportionality of result relative to other systems we will know the place of STV in the family of electoral systems. In 1994 Lijphart showed that the two countries with full use of STV, Ireland and Malta, rank 15th and 20th respectively out of 37 countries in terms of proportionality. This ranking, based on actual electoral results, places STV in the second, or middle group, of electoral systems (along with systems like the Single Non-Transferable Vote [SNTV] that had been used in Japan): more proportional than first-past-the-post systems such as in Britain or the US, but not so proportional as list PR systems with large district (seats per constituency) sizes. But comparing proportionality of result is not the only way to evaluate the similarity of electoral systems. In our view understanding electoral systems is important because of the effects that electoral systems have on the behaviour of politicians and voters and on policy outcomes and the legitimacy of the political system. While proportionality puts STV intermediate between first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems and list PR, albeit rather more like the latter than the former, other ways of thinking about comparisons among electoral systems can make STV either seem more like or more unlike FPTP.

We list four different areas where (like proportionality of outcome) there are strong effects of electoral systems that warrant serious attention. This list, however, is merely intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive:

- the incentives to encourage a candidate-centred as opposed to a party-centred politics
- the incentives to develop localistic and clientalistic politics rather than a politics whose principal concern is for broad national policy issues
- the difficulty put in the way of voters making choices that truly reflect their preferences

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- the incentives for a politics of coalition-building and moderation rather than one of sharp ideological polarisation.

Each of these factors can, in principle, provide a means for comparing electoral systems, just as does proportionality. We will discuss each in turn.

### **Encouraging candidate-centred not party-centred politics**

Each electoral system provides different incentives to candidates to either stay within the fold of party discipline, or to try and break away from it. A few simple examples will illustrate this general point. In list PR, for example, the chances of a candidate being elected depend on that individual's position on the party list: those at the top have a much better chance of being elected than those at the bottom. Since it is the party organisation which produces the list, candidates should, everything else being equal, be very wary of offending the party apparatus. In contrast, district-based systems such as first-past-the-post (FPTP) encourage candidates to seek a personal vote based, in part, on doing favours for constituents. So, too, in systems such as cumulative voting, alternative vote and STV. The personal base of power fostered by both FPTP and STV might permit legislators to disregard the party whip in the legislature without fear of retaliation at the polls. But under STV, legislators are not only in competition with candidates of rival parties for preferences and votes, they are also in competition with members of the same party – still further discouraging party loyalty.

Thus, if we evaluate systems according to how much factional infighting parties are likely to generate, it would seem that list PR would help to produce very disciplined parties, while STV very undisciplined ones, and FPTP comes out somewhere between the two. Note that the ordering of electoral systems along a party-centred/candidate-centred continuum is very different from that along the standard 'expected proportionality of seats to votes' continuum.

### **Developing localistic and clientalistic not policy-based politics**

A second, and quite possibly broader, set of consequences comes in terms of the different styles of representation that electoral systems may produce. Under both FPTP and STV representatives are likely to pursue the interests and complaints of constituents with considerable diligence. The pressure for developing a clientalistic base may be strongest in STV (or SNTV) systems, where candidates must distinguish themselves from their fellow party members seeking office within the same geographic constituency. A few hundred votes more or less is usually of little consequence in a national election, but in a marginal seat in the UK or Ireland it can mean the difference between victory or defeat. Contrast this, however, with the list proportional systems with

large district magnitudes where the impact of the personal vote on a candidate's vote share becomes minimal compared to that candidate's location on the party list. In the latter systems, we do not expect candidates to make local issues their top priority.

Some preliminary empirical evidence bears out these expectations about varying incentives for localistic politics in different types of electoral systems (see e.g. the Grofman summary chapter in *Elections in Japan, Korea and Taiwan under the Single Non-Transferable Vote* [edited by Grofman, Lee, Winckler and Woodall], University of Michigan Press, 1997 forthcoming).

In terms of incentive for a localistic and particularistic style of politics, STV again begins to look more like FPTP than like list PR.

### **The difficulty in making choices that truly reflect voter preferences**

Sometimes voters have an incentive to vote for other than their most preferred party or candidate. For FPTP contests with more than two parties the most important aspect of strategic voter choice is the so-called 'tactical vote', where voters see that their favourite party has no chance in the contest and so vote, not for their preferred party, but for the more acceptable of the two most electable evils. For voters under PR, in contrast, strategic calculations are not nearly so much a concern, unless one's most preferred party has no chance of capturing even a single seat. Voter disregard of strategic concerns is even more guaranteed under STV. To be sure, it is possible to construct examples under STV where truncating one's vote (i.e. failing to vote for a complete list) may seem like a desirable tactic for some voters but, in order to behave this way intentionally, real life voters would not only have to know the preference orderings of every other voter but also would need to possess uncanny computational skills. Similarly, while voting for candidates in other than the order one prefers them can sometimes be shown to be desirable under STV for some voters, use of such a tactic is virtually impossible to carry out in practice, for the same reasons given above. In general, STV presents such difficult calculations to voters seeking to behave tactically that it seems to make little sense to do anything other than register a sincere preference for the party they would most like to see win.

On the other hand, multi-seat systems such as the limited vote (LV) and cumulative vote (CV) foster various complicated forms of strategic behaviour. Here, parties have to be careful to run the right number of candidates, and voters have to be careful to try to produce an equal share of votes among candidates from their party.

Thus, when we look at electoral systems in strategic terms, the systems with which STV is often thought to be most similar, for example, to the LV and CV, now seem quite different from it. Moreover, although once again STV has a lot in common with list PR, it is STV

rather than list PR that is, in this case, anchoring one end of the 'incentives for tactical voting' continuum.

#### **Incentives for coalition-building and moderation not polarisation**

Both list PR systems and FPTP force voters to choose sides by casting a ballot for one party or another – whether that be for one party as opposed to another (as in the US) or for one party as opposed to three or four others (as in Germany). Under STV, as under CV, however, voters can – at least in principle – cast a preference for members of several different parties. In sharp contrast to categorical or 'X marks the spot' systems such as list PR or FPTP whose ballots help reinforce party divides, candidates under STV can make cross-cleavage appeals and thus search for a vote base that bridges, say, religious, racial or rigid ideological lines by asking voters to show preferences for them somewhere down the voter's ballot list after a first preference vote has been recorded. Similarly, voters under STV may choose to build bridges for themselves by voting for candidates of more than one party (or independents) somewhere on their list.

#### **Discussion and a heresy**

It is possible to think of other, additional, criteria by which we judge electoral systems beyond the four presented above and that of proportionality. But these criteria do serve to make the general point. **In our view, it is desirable for advocates of electoral reform to expand their focus from concern for proportionality and related concerns of fairness, and from the older debate about the link between electoral systems and cabinet durability, to consider other questions having to do with the nature of electoral competition and policy outcomes.** In addition to the traditional 'proportionality of results' continuum, we have presented four additional continua along which electoral systems can be compared. In encouraging a personal vote and in fostering localistic and clientalistic politics we find STV looks more like FPTP than PR and it may be even more extreme than FPTP; while in terms of allowing voters to register their true preferences it stands alone, although now closer to list PR than to FPTP. In terms of the potential for fostering cross-party bridges, list PR and FPTP look very much alike, while STV is virtually unique (although, of course, what is possible in theory may not obtain in practice). Which systems STV most resembles is not a straightforward question to answer. The answer depends upon which effects we want to examine.

Once we recognise that choice of electoral system has consequences for a number of aspects of politics, then it becomes clear there is a need for going beyond indices of disproportionality or cabinet durability to provide detailed empirical examination of what effects electoral systems actually have. For example, Arend Lijphart has recently been looking at

the consequences of electoral systems for economic growth, and a number of authors (including the present ones) have been looking at the link between electoral systems and the likelihood of political corruption. Moreover, once we recognise that electoral systems have multiple effects it becomes a certainty that there will be no system that is best with respect to all possible criteria of evaluation. Once that is admitted, then the field of normative debate about electoral system choice is significantly broadened and the nature of the debate should be less polemic, as we move to debate the nature of appropriate trade-offs among multiple competing criteria, all of which have something to recommend them.