

Elections  
in Australia,  
Ireland, and  
Malta under  
the Single  
Transferable  
Vote

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Reflections on  
an Embedded  
Institution

*Shaun Bowler  
and Bernard  
Grofman, Editors*

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**Elections in Australia, Ireland, and Malta  
under the Single Transferable Vote**

Reflections on an Embedded Institution

*Edited by Shaun Bowler and Bernard Grofman*

*Ann Arbor*

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## **Conclusion: STV's Place in the Family of Electoral Systems**

*Shaun Bowler and Bernard Grofman*

In many ways, STV's place in the family of electoral systems is already set out and waiting. In Lijphart (1994), for example, Ireland and Malta rank fifteenth and twentieth, respectively, out of 37 countries ranked in terms of proportionality. This ranking based on actual electoral results places STV in the second, or middle group, of electoral systems: more proportional than the first-past-the-post systems such as the United Kingdom but not so proportional as list PR systems with large district sizes.

Debates over measures of proportionality and disproportionality have been central components of electoral studies research for at least a generation. It would seem then that once we fix STV's place in such rankings relative to other systems, we will have squarely established the family to which STV belongs, and that will be that.

But electoral systems can belong to more than one family. And although the discussions over measures of proportionality have produced one of the more concrete bodies of knowledge in political science, they have tended to turn attention away from aspects and attributes of electoral systems that are not necessarily so directly linked to proportionality. At the risk of stretching the analogy of family too far, individuals in a family group can be arranged in several different ways; for example, they may be part of a family by birth, by marriage, or by adoption. Which of these arrangements matters depends in large part on the question at hand we are interested in answering. Being interested in kinship relations as opposed to rules of inheritance can shift attention to different parts of the family tree—so, too, with electoral systems. Although

proportionality and its absence are clearly important to our notions of whether a system is fair or not, the question of fairness is not the only one we may pose to electoral systems. Indeed, one of the reasons why electoral systems research has proven such a fruitful topic of research is the way in which many topics may be addressed. One such topic has been the question, How proportional is this system? In answering that question, we find STV's place in one particular family tree. Once we begin to ask different questions, however, not just STV's place in the family tree but also the tree itself may change, and STV begins to look a lot more like some other systems.

Before the analogy becomes too thin, we can turn to answer the natural question at this point: What aspects of electoral systems, other than proportionality, warrant serious attention? And the natural follow-on to this question is, What happens to STV's family resemblance to PR then?

Understanding electoral systems is clearly important because of the effect that electoral systems have on politicians and voters. These effects are felt from the range of incentives—carrots *and* sticks—that electoral systems place in front of politicians and voters to dissuade them from acting one way and encourage them to act another way. Here we can identify, in a very general fashion, three different groups of incentives that electoral systems provide that have formed a core set of concerns for the chapters in this volume and that can, in principle, provide a means for ranking electoral systems just as does proportionality:

1. The incentive to encourage candidate-centered as opposed to party-centered politics
2. The difficulty that candidates and voters may face in behaving strategically, related to which is the difficulty put in the way of voters making choices that truly reflect their preferences
3. The consequences for party competition

### **Encouraging Candidate-Centered as Opposed to Party-Centered Politics**

Each electoral system provides different incentives to candidates to either stay within the fold of party discipline or to try to 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. Because the party organization 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 encourage candidates to seek a personal vote based, in part, on doing favors for constituents. The same can be said for ordinal systems such as cumulative voting, AV, and STV. And local personal votes might encourage candidates to begin to chafe at the party whip in the legislature. A local base may even be so strong as to encourage outright rebellion against the national party in both first-past-the-post and STV. But there is an important difference: Although in single-member districts a personal vote goes to the party, in systems such as STV personal votes can be gained at the expense of the party overall. As is well known, candidates in such systems are in competition not only with rival parties for preferences and votes but also with members of the same party.

There are several consequences here for the conduct of electoral politics, one of which lies in how much factional infighting parties are likely to generate. It would seem that list PR would help to produce very disciplined parties; STV, very undisciplined ones; and first-past-the-post, somewhere between the two.

For some writers this degree of discipline is more than a matter of taste. Madison and Woodrow Wilson, for example, took quite different views on the value of party discipline to the workings of representative democracy.

A second, and quite possibly broader, set of consequences comes in terms of the different styles of representation that these systems produce. Under both first-past-the-post and STV, representatives are likely to pursue the interests and complaints of constituents with some efficiency. Certainly some preliminary empirical evidence bears this out, but it also makes sense if we believe that the personal vote matters in such systems. Contrast this, however, with the proportional systems and systems with large district magnitudes, and the impact of the personal vote on a candidate's vote share becomes minimal. A few hundred votes more or less is of little consequence in a national election, but in a marginal seat in the United Kingdom or Ireland, it can mean the difference between victory or defeat.

Arising out of the incentives to run candidate-centered campaigns, therefore, are a whole series of consequences for who gets represented and how. Clearly, the family resemblance of STV changes when we introduce these concerns. STV begins to look much more like first-past-the-post than PR in terms of representational style and party discipline.

In terms of strategic behavior, however, STV does not resemble most other systems and is in a class by itself.

### The Difficulty of Behaving Strategically

The term *behaving strategically* is a wide-ranging one that can cover a multitude of sins. In terms of voter behavior, the simplest form of strategic voting is the British tactical vote, whereby a voter sees that his or her favorite party has no chance in the contest between the two larger ones and so votes not for his or her preferred party but the lesser of the two larger evils. For voters under PR systems, this is not nearly so much a concern, but even then voters can begin to calculate what would happen under various coalitional alternatives. More complicated forms of strategic behavior are seen under such multiseat systems such as limited voting (LV) and cumulative voting (CV). Under these circumstances, parties have to be careful to run the right number of candidates, and voters have to be careful to produce an equal share of votes among candidates from their party, just as under STV.

For some, strategizing and counterstrategizing of this sort is one of the more unappealing aspects of electoral politics because it smacks somehow of dishonesty and shiftiness. Democratic elections are, or at least should be, about telling the state what voters really want, not how clever they are at playing the game. For others, behavior of this kind, for good or ill, is simply inevitable. Unfortunately this is the case because having the vote reveal what voters truly want or prefer is important.

To be sure, it is possible to find examples under STV that parallel the tactical vote in the United Kingdom. The much-celebrated Dummett's paradox can, for example, be seen as a kind of strategic voting under STV should the voters concerned intentionally change their preference orderings that way. To do so, voters would have to know the preference orderings of every other voter and the number of candidates being run. Even after they knew this information, voters then could not sit idly by but would have to begin to calculate the order in which candidates will get eliminated or elected and would also have to begin to conceive counterstrategies against all the other voters who would be similarly calculating what will happen if they altered their preference ordering over the parties. To put it mildly, this would seem an impossible task. In fact, STV generally 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 that they would most like to see win.

Thus, for parties, STV has much more in common with CV and LV than any other system. For voters, however, STV stands in a class almost by itself in that the informational and computational demands placed on voters wish-

ing to vote tactically rather than sincerely are immense. One class of elections that does occupy the same stage as STV consists of those in which two, and only two, alternatives are being offered. In such cases voters have no choice but to vote for the alternative they prefer. The downside, of course, is that the voter has only two choices.

### Party Competition

The relationship between district magnitude and proportionality is, of course, well known. (Arithmetically, it is easier to gain a proportional division of 100 seats than of 2.) But district magnitudes may also be associated with the competitiveness of the election itself. With low district magnitudes, the gerrymandering of safe seats becomes easier, as does excluding minorities. Under STV, regulating district magnitude may be functionally equivalent to regulating the threshold of representation. The extent to which minorities gain representation, and the extent to which they are forced to build electoral coalitions, is therefore a controllable variable under STV (Rae 1995).

District magnitude, too, helps affect the overall competitiveness of a system. National-level list systems help depress the rate of turnover in the legislature. In, say, the U.K. system, each district involves a chance for an MP to be defeated. In a list system, a change of a few percentage points in vote shares has consequences only for those at the bottom of the list. But not just entry of new blood into existing parties but also the entrance of new parties themselves can be affected by district magnitude. A 5 percent threshold nationwide can be, as was intended, a large hurdle for new parties to begin. A 20 percent hurdle within one region---as in a five-seat STV district---might be much easier to obtain.

Putting these points together, we see that STV can affect the composition and extent of electoral coalition building and can help encourage minority representation. But there is another way in which STV can encourage these things. Both list PR systems and first-past-the-post force voters to choose sides by casting a ballot for one party or another. Whether it is for one party as opposed to another (as in the United States) or one party as opposed to three or four others (as in Germany) may not matter. The voter is compelled to take a stand. 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 spot systems such as list PR or first-past-the-post, whose ballots help reinforce party divides, candidates under STV and CV can make cross-cleavage appeals and have a vote base that bridges religious or

racial lines. It may be the case that societal divisions, as in the case of Northern Ireland, are not so easily soothed by mere campaign pledges. Nonetheless, at least in principle, voters under STV and CV have the potential to build bridges for themselves rather than wait for some coalitional possibility at the level of the legislature.

These three alternative dimensions of electoral systems point up the hybrid character of STV. In encouraging a personal vote, it looks more like first-past-the-post than PR (and sometimes goes further); in terms of the representation of minorities, it looks more like PR (and sometimes goes further); and in terms of forcing voters to register what they really want, it stands in a class almost by itself. STV may thus not belong just to one family tree but to several, depending on the kinds of questions we want to ask about electoral systems.

More importantly, the questions raised in this volume address representative democracy not just as an outcome but as a process. Although questions of proportionality are inevitably tied to the issue of whether an outcome of a democratic election is fair or not, this may say little about how such outcomes are achieved. Yet the collection of essays in this volume has shown that there are a variety of different ways of achieving fair outcomes. In fact, the process of democracy, even under the same electoral system, can vary quite markedly. The different ways of grouping electoral systems presented here are not only definitionally different from a concern for proportionality but also substantively different, pushing us to look not just at the winning but the taking part of the process. And in that taking part, the actions and choices of actors—primarily parties but to some extent voters—shape the outcomes we see. Outcomes under STV, therefore, are contingent on the actions of these actors, and the electoral system thus becomes just one piece of a wider democratic puzzle.

In light of the findings of the essays in this volume, perhaps it is time for the electoral studies literature to move on from its emphasis on proportionality and to turn to wider concerns of the electoral process.