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CHOOSING AN
ELECTORAL SYSTEM
Issues and Alternatives

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American Political Parties and Elections

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Choosing an Electoral System

Arend Lijphart and Bernard Grofman

After several decades of indifference to electoral reform, the electoral system has again become a controversial question in many countries. Electoral laws are no longer regarded as unalterable facts, and there has been a renewed scholarly attention to the study of electoral systems. The aim of this book is to bring together in one volume, and in nontechnical form, all of the basic issues and all of the key alternatives for electoral choice, presented by scholars with widely varying electoral system preferences. We believe that *Choosing an Electoral System* is unique in that respect. The volume is not slanted for or against any particular system. The authors explore the factors that should be taken into consideration when political entities—from supranational organizations to local governments—choose their electoral systems, and the various alternatives from which choices can be made.

We sought out scholars from different countries—the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Australia—who represent a great variety of perspectives and interpretations. We are especially pleased that this volume includes new contributions by the four eminent scholars who were the main protagonists in the electoral systems debate of an earlier era: George H. Hallett, Jr., whose book *Proportional Representation* (coauthored with Clarence G. Hoag) was first published in 1926; Ferdinand A. Hermens, whose *Democracy or Anarchy?* appeared in 1941; Maurice Duverger, whose book *Political Parties* in its original French edition was published in 1951; and Enid Lakeman, whose book *Voting in Democracies* (coauthored with James D. Lambert), retitled *How Democracies Vote* in later editions, was first published in 1955. We have also tried to bridge a number of harmful gaps that have heretofore characterized the study of electoral systems: the almost complete divorce between students of comparative politics and social choice theorists, between political scientists and political

geographers, and between comparativists and students of American politics. William H. Riker, Steven J. Brams, and Peter C. Fishburn represent the axiomatic treatment of election systems typical of social choice theory (Chapters 10, 14, and 17); R. J. Johnston and Peter J. Taylor are political geographers rather than political scientists (Chapters 5 and 6); and Leon Weaver shows, in Chapter 19, that the United States is a rich mine of data which is too rarely tapped in the literature on comparative election systems.

CHOICES AND ALTERNATIVES

Plurality and list proportional representation (PR) systems account for most of the national electoral systems that are currently used. For instance, they are used for the national legislative elections (of the lower or only houses) in 17 of the 21 democracies that have been continuously democratic since approximately the end of the Second World War: the West European democracies plus the United States, Canada, Israel, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The four exceptions—countries that use neither list PR nor plurality systems—are France, Australia, Ireland, and Japan.

We believe that the debate over electoral choice has often been too narrowly and improperly defined—as a choice between plurality on the one hand and list PR on the other. Thus, in Part II of our book, we begin with a general discussion of competing values, including stability and proportionality—values which may be differentially satisfied by different electoral systems—and we devote Part III to the question of whether plurality and PR should be regarded as completely different and incompatible systems. Part IV deals with the single transferable vote (STV) as an alternative to both plurality and party list systems, and Part V is devoted to a survey of systems which aim at proportionality but use single-member district elections as one component of the electoral process. Part VI surveys methods, such as the limited vote, which are neither plurality nor strict PR. Finally, Part VII deals with the question of whether the recent electoral reforms in the United States and abroad, as well as the many proposals for reform, are the harbingers of major changes in electoral systems.

We have come to regard the dichotomy between PR and plurality as misleading for several reasons. First of all, the dividing line between majoritarian systems and nonmajoritarian systems (see Chapters 8 and 21 by Dieter Nohlen, Grofman 1975, and Grofman and Lijphart 1984) is more fundamental than that between plurality and PR. The plurality rule—also often referred to as the first-past-the-post or relative majority method—is only one of these majoritarian systems. The others are the double-ballot majority system, exemplified by contemporary France and discussed by Domenico Fisichella in Chapter 18, and the alternative vote or majority-preferential system, used in Australia and analyzed by J. F. H. Wright in Chapter 12.

Second, PR is not one electoral system but a general category that includes a great variety of systems. The two most important subtypes are list PR and the single transferable vote (STV), but these two methods differ fundamentally in their treatment of political party slates and in other aspects of their probable effect upon political competition.

Third, another legitimate dichotomous classification of electoral systems is to contrast the two basic methods of PR with all other systems. Richard Rose uses this dichotomy in Chapter 7. His non-PR category includes not only the plurality and majority systems but also the so-called semiproportional systems—the cumulative vote, limited vote, and the Japanese single nontransferable vote (SNTV)—methods which are discussed in Chapter 19 by Leon Weaver and in Chapter 20 by Arend Lijphart.

Fourth, there are substantial variations within the two basic subtypes of PR methods, and modifications (for instance, in district size and in threshold requirements for representation) can affect the extent to which any PR *method* satisfies the PR *principle* of providing proportionality between a group's vote share and its share of seats in the legislature. In general, the extent to which any election method, as embodied in practice, satisfies the PR *principle* is a matter of empirical investigation. For example, some plurality systems may, in practice, come closer to aggregate proportionality of result than some PR systems (see Chapter 5 by Peter J. Taylor and Chapter 7 by Richard Rose).

Fifth, plurality versus PR can be regarded as the principal contrast only with regard to legislative elections, or, more generally, elections of bodies with two or more members. When a single office, typically an executive office, has to be filled, all PR and semiproportional methods become irrelevant. The principal alternatives are now restricted to plurality, the double-ballot system, and the alternative vote—as well as the method of “approval voting” proposed by Steven J. Brams and Peter C. Fishburn (1983b) but not yet used for any significant election.

PLURALITY AND PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION: AN OVERVIEW

In the debate on election methods, two arguments predominate. The proponents of the plurality rule argue that its great advantage is that it produces firm government, or, in any case, that it is much more likely to do so than PR. Their line of reasoning is that the plurality method, by discriminating against small parties, encourages a two-party system, which in turn makes stable one-party government possible. Hermens and Duverger state this case forcefully and in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. The main argument of the PR advocates is that a democratic legislature should be representative of all of the interests and viewpoints of the electorate, and hence that the only proper form of representation

is proportional representation. Enid Lakeman cogently presents this rationale in Chapter 4. She does not, of course, favor all forms of PR equally: she prefers PR to plurality, but within PR she prefers STV to list PR. This is also the basic conviction of Hallett and Wright who specifically address the issue of STV in Part IV. In general, strong PR advocates tend to be strongly in favor of the STV form of PR. It is ironic that list PR, which is the most common electoral system in Western democracies, does not have any enthusiastic champions. STV may be the theoretically optimal form of PR in the opinion of the academics, but, in practice, list PR is more attractive to established political parties and hence much more widely used.

It is important to note that the PR and plurality advocates are not in complete disagreement. In fact, they tend to concur on two points. First, with regard to the empirical consequences of PR methods and plurality, the two sides agree that PR methods are likely to lead to greater proportionality and plurality to stable one-party rule. Second, they do not dispute that both proportionality and firm government are desirable goals. Their disagreement concerns the *priority* of these values. To the partisans of the PR principle, strong government based on disproportional representation is illegitimate, just as a dictatorial government, however effective and benevolent, would be unacceptable. For those favoring plurality, effective government has the highest priority; after that, they are not opposed to proportionality per se. For instance, Hermens is willing to accept a number of adjustments to plurality in order to achieve greater proportionality—or, at least, to limit the degree of disproportionality—such as supplementary seats to make sure that the party with the most votes will also get the most seats and that the winning party will not be too much over-represented (Chapter 2). For Duverger, PR is a threat to stable government only when the executive is dependent on a legislative vote of confidence in a parliamentary system. This logic leads him to accept, and even favor, PR for the election of the U.S. House of Representatives and American state legislatures (Chapter 3). In Chapter 6, R. J. Johnston reaches a similar conclusion.

In recent years, the debate on whether strong one-party government or proportionality should be accorded a higher priority has become more complicated: the intrinsic merits of each of these goals are now under serious and increasing challenge. Especially in Britain, as Enid Lakeman observes in Chapter 4, there is growing concern that alternating one-party governments cause too many and too sharp reversals in policy—and hence result in weak instead of strong government when the effects of governmental actions are taken into consideration (see also Finer 1975). Conversely, as both Peter J. Taylor and Johnston argue in Chapters 5 and 6, while PR systems do provide a roughly proportional share of legislative seats for large and small parties alike, they often fail to provide a proportional share of governmental power. Small parties may be fairly represented in a parliament under PR, but they may be completely irrelevant and powerless when government coalitions are formed. On the other hand,

they may be so fortunate as to hold the balance of power between much stronger parties—as is the case of the German Free Democrats—and, as a result, exert influence to a disproportionately high degree compared with their electoral support. PR clearly does not mean proportional power as measured by tenure in executive office, whereas the British plurality system, as Taylor shows in Chapter 5, has actually succeeded in achieving a high degree of proportional tenure over time.

Many other advantages and disadvantages of PR and plurality may be cited (see Mackenzie 1958, pp. 69–71). To the supporters of the plurality system, two further considerations are especially important: the close and clear contact that is established between the representative and his or her geographically defined constituency, and the unsurpassed simplicity of the voting method. Both of these advantages require that the plurality rule be applied in single-member districts, but this is almost universally the case in national-level elections. An additional advantage of PR is that it permits minority representation, not only for small parties but also, as the empirical evidence shows, of women as well as ethnic and cultural minorities. Moreover, PR can largely avoid the problem of gerrymandering, which is unavoidable under plurality. As Johnston points out, impartiality in the drawing of district boundaries is impossible (Chapter 6). The problem becomes less serious in multimember PR districts as the number of representatives per district increases; when there are about five or more members in a district, PR can be regarded as completely immune to gerrymandering.

A BRIDGEABLE GAP?

PR and plurality may be the main alternatives in choosing an electoral system, but the four chapters in Part III show that they are not clear and unambiguous alternatives. In Chapter 7, Rose shows that, when the actual degree of proportionality achieved by different electoral systems is examined, the difference between PR and non-PR systems is one of degree, not of kind. For instance, the most proportional plurality system, the United States, is even considerably more proportional than the least proportional PR system, Spain. Nohlen explains this discrepancy in Chapter 8 by drawing a distinction—which we believe to be a critical one—between the principles and the methods of proportionality and majority rule. In particular, in designing an electoral system, one may start out with a PR formula but then add several other rules—such as a relatively small district magnitude (the number of members elected in each district) and a high minimum threshold that parties have to surmount in order to gain any representation—that will yield a far from proportional result. Such a system follows PR methods but not the PR principle.

A specific example of the application of PR methods in order to achieve the principle of plurality is Rein Taagepera's original proposal to substitute two-

member PR districts for single-member plurality districts (Chapter 9). His premise is the empirical proposition that PR formulas will yield less and less proportional results as the district magnitude decreases. A two-member district PR system could achieve the functional purpose of plurality even better than the plurality method itself. And it would avoid some of the disadvantages of the plurality method, such as its strong incentive to gerrymander and its strong disincentive to the emergence of a major new party even when the electorate is dissatisfied with both parties in a two-party system. In a similar vein, Hermens proposes three-member districts as an acceptable alternative to the usual plurality method in single-member districts (Chapter 2).

Rose's chapter also argues that the type of electoral system is relatively unimportant with regard to the formation and composition of governments. William H. Riker agrees with this conclusion and further maintains that there is not much difference between PR and plurality in two other respects: they both represent minorities fairly well, but neither can pass a rigorous test according to various other important democratic criteria (Chapter 10). Since both systems are equally unfair and inadequate, the crucial consideration for Riker is how to prevent necessarily unrepresentative governments from doing too much harm by means of constitutional and political restraints like separation of powers, decentralization, and multipartism.

STV AND ADDITIONAL-MEMBER SYSTEMS

When the choice of an electoral system is considered in the abstract, there is a virtually infinite number of possibilities from which electoral reformers can choose. However, when we look at concrete situations, the choice is much more limited in two respects. First, the pressures for electoral reform are much stronger in plurality than in PR systems. Changes from plurality to PR are therefore considerably more likely than changes from PR to plurality. As Hermens observes, "any national adoption of PR tends to be irreversible" (Chapter 2). Second, if current plurality systems will shift to PR, they are likely to adopt either STV or the additional-member system instead of other forms of PR. For this reason, Parts IV and V of this book pay special attention to these two systems.

The attractiveness of STV and the additional-member system as models for electoral reform is rather paradoxical, because they are both rare phenomena. The vast majority of the countries that use PR have list PR systems. STV is used at the national level only in Ireland, Malta, and Australia—and, in Australia, only for the less important upper house. The additional-member system was devised for the *Bundestag* elections in the Federal Republic of Germany, and has not been adopted by any other country so far. The explanation of the paradox is that STV and the additional-member system are PR methods with special features that make

them attractive in countries with plurality traditions: they entail voting for individual candidates instead of, or—in the case of additional-member systems—in addition to party lists, and voting in relatively small districts. Wherever PR has been adopted at the subnational level in English-speaking countries—Northern Ireland, the Australian state of Tasmania, and local governments in the United States—it has invariably taken the form of STV (see Chapters 12, 19, and 22 by Wright, Weaver, and David E. Butler).

Part IV contains two chapters that are favorable to STV and two that are more critical of STV. Hallett has been a strong STV advocate since the 1920s, and he presents its case in detail in Chapter 11, starting with the controversial argument that the proportionality principle is clearly supported, if not mandated, by the United States Constitution as well as basic Supreme Court decisions. A special advantage of STV in the context of American politics is that it eliminates the need for party primaries. Wright evaluates the operation of STV in Australia in Chapter 12. Australia has been an especially interesting and active laboratory for experiments with preferential systems, both the alternative vote and STV—usually referred to in Australia as the majority-preferential and quota-preferential systems. According to Wright's analysis, the alternative vote has not been much of an improvement over plurality, but STV has performed well.

Richard S. Katz, and Brams and Fishburn subject STV to a critical examination in Chapters 13 and 14. Largely because STV is impractical in districts that elect many representatives, it cannot be as proportional as list PR with large district magnitudes or national supplementary seats. It would be an exaggeration, however, to deny that STV is a PR system. The fact that STV allows completely free intraparty choice to the voters is usually regarded as one of its main advantages, but it can also be considered a disadvantage because it weakens party cohesion and party responsibility just as direct primaries do. Moreover, STV can be shown to have a number of curious logical defects. Especially the fact that STV is not monotonic—i.e. that a candidate can be hurt instead of helped by receiving more higher preferences from the voters—is regarded as a fatal defect by its critics. The crucial question here, in our view, is how often such situations are likely to occur—a question to which we do not, as yet, have an answer.

Additional-member systems are examined in Part V. The German political scientist Max Kaase appraises its operation in his own country in Chapter 15. There is little doubt that the system has worked very well in most respects in West Germany, but, as Kaase cautions, this is due to several other factors in addition to the intrinsic merits of the additional-member system. One of its features that is sometimes praised—the voters' right to split their first and second votes—can actually be shown to be deceptive, since the second vote marks the decisive choice; it also contains the potential for serious abuse by two parties acting in collusion.

The additional-member model has attracted a great deal of interest, especially in Britain and Canada. William P. Irvine favors the application of the model

to Canadian parliamentary elections, and he scrutinizes its probable effects, as well as the different forms that it could take, in Chapter 16. One of the objections that may be raised against the system is that it does not provide much incentive to parties to win the district seats since a proportional share of the seats is guaranteed by the additional seats. Brams and Fishburn focus on this problem in Chapter 17. They show that there may be circumstances under which it would be better for a party's overall representation if it deliberately fails to win any district seats. It is possible to draft a rule to prevent such a manipulative strategy, but this would necessarily have a negative effect on the proportionality of the election result.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES

In Part VI, several other alternatives to both PR and plurality are discussed. In the category of majoritarian systems, the alternative vote and the double-ballot system are the principal alternatives to plurality. The alternative vote, mainly used in Australia, has already been treated in Wright's analysis of the different Australian preferential systems (Chapter 12). The double-ballot majority system is examined by Fischella in Chapter 18. It may be preferable to plurality in two respects. First, from the perspective of the democratic principle, it makes it more likely that an elected representative has the support of a clear majority instead of a mere plurality of his or her constituents. Second, from a practical point of view, it may be a potent weapon against antisystem parties; whereas the disproportionality of the plurality rule mainly hurts the smaller parties that are not regionally concentrated, the double-ballot system's disproportionality discriminates against extremist parties even when they are relatively large. As Fischella cautions, however, a number of important conditions have to be fulfilled in order to achieve this result. Moreover, the double-ballot system (under the name majority runoff) has been used in the American South and Southwest as a tool to reduce the representation of racial and linguistic minorities.

The remaining alternatives to PR and plurality fall in the category of semi-proportional and "mixed" PR-plurality systems. The most important of these is the limited vote (including, as a special case of the limited vote, the single nontransferable vote or SNTV). In Chapter 19, Weaver examines the operation of the limited vote in American local government, and in Chapter 20 Lijphart examines its use in Japanese and Spanish national elections. Compared with the very limited American experience with STV and the cumulative vote, the limited vote has been used much more widely, although it has not attracted as much attention and has not been adequately studied. Its greater capacity for survival in American politics, as Weaver points out, should recommend it to American electoral reformers. Lijphart evaluates the limited vote as well as plurality systems with special provisions for minority representation as possible compromises be-

tween PR and plurality. The SNTV form of the limited vote has been used in Japan for a long time, and has a number of definite advantages such as minority representation and simplicity. The same advantages can also be cited for New Zealand's system of plurality in single-member districts including a few special ethnic minority districts. But neither can be regarded as an ideal combination of plurality and PR.

HOW LIKELY IS ELECTORAL REFORM?

Since the beginning of the 1970s, there have been several major changes in electoral systems. STV replaced plurality for Northern Ireland elections in 1973. France introduced PR for the election of its representatives in the European Parliament in 1979 and for the regional elections in Corsica in 1982. And Japan adopted list PR instead of SNTV for the election of two-fifths of its upper house in 1982. In the United States, at the state and local level, Illinois abolished the cumulative vote for its lower house elections in 1980 as the result of a referendum, while multimember plurality districts have been replaced with single-member districts in a number of Southern and Southwestern states as a result of action by federal courts and the U.S. Department of Justice under special provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The entire presidential nominating process in the United States has also undergone a drastic transformation, in the direction of greater proportionality.

In addition, the electoral system has become a highly controversial issue in the other three Western democracies that use the plurality method for national legislative elections: Great Britain, Canada, and New Zealand. One strong stimulus has been the occurrence of the electoral anomaly that the second largest party, in terms of votes, has won a plurality of parliamentary seats, as in Britain in 1974, or even an outright majority, as in New Zealand in 1978 and 1981. The debate in Britain has also been stimulated by the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979 and by the commitment by all of the member states to adopt a uniform electoral system for future elections of this supranational parliament (see Chapter 22 by Karlheinz Reif). For the 1979 election, the British government recommended—but Parliament rejected—the list PR system as used in Finland for the election of Britain's representatives.

Finally, we should not overlook the major actual and proposed changes in earlier decades. Most of the countries that use PR now originally used majority or plurality systems. In Britain, plurality was almost abolished on two occasions, in 1918 and 1930, and the Irish parliament voted twice to abolish STV, but the voters decided to retain it in referendums in 1959, although by only a very narrow margin, and again in 1968.

Do these examples show that important electoral system changes are a realistic possibility and hence that crucial choices with regard to electoral systems will

have to be made? This book is obviously predicated on the assumption that electoral systems are at least potentially variable and are not complete constants, but it would be unrealistic to suggest that they are easily malleable and manipulable. It should be noted that the examples of recent electoral reform cited above do not include any changes in national lower-house election systems.

In Chapter 21, Nohlen argues forcefully that minor changes may be made with relative ease, but that major changes—especially shifts from plurality to PR and vice versa—are extremely unlikely. This means that the element of choice in electoral systems is narrowly circumscribed. In the chapter that follows, however, Butler surveys all of the pressures for, as well as the resistance to, reform of the British plurality system of elections, and he concludes that it is unlikely that it will *not* be reformed in the near future.

The slow and painful pace of electoral system change is also demonstrated in the final chapter by Karlheinz Reif. Even though the ten members of the European Community are formally and firmly committed to the adoption of a common electoral system for the European Parliament, they have been very reluctant to abandon their national electoral system traditions, not only with regard to the crucial choice of whether or not to use PR methods, but also with regard to a host of minor details of electoral procedure. On the other hand, Reif also shows that there has been considerable convergence. By embracing PR, France obviously took the biggest step in this direction. On the whole, the systems of electing the ten national delegations to the European Parliament are much more similar to each other than the systems of electing the ten national parliaments. Changes and choices in electoral systems may not be highly probable, but they are certainly possible.