Understanding electoral systems

Democratic electoral systems

How do we start thinking about elections? At one level they are deceptively simple: Politicians compete for public support. Voters respond on election day by indicating who they prefer. The votes are tallied and translated into seats in the Legislature. And the electoral system organizes, shapes and governs the process.

The electoral system determines the "exchange rate" between votes and seats — that is, how votes are translated into seats. How many and what kind of votes are needed to get a seat varies from system to system. As a result, different electoral systems give politicians incentives to organize and campaign in different ways. Some electoral systems may even create barriers for certain types of candidates. Different electoral systems give voters different kinds of choices, which can then affect the decisions voters make.

So while electoral systems may appear simple, upon closer examination they can differ in a multitude of ways, with decidedly different effects. Electoral systems are fraught with subtleties and complexities.

Characteristics of electoral systems

To understand electoral systems, three basic dimensions must be considered:
- *District Magnitude*
- *Ballot structure*
- *Electoral Formula*

District magnitude (DM)

District Magnitude refers to the number of representatives chosen from an electoral district.
- DM may range from one (i.e. one member is elected from a constituency) to the total number of seats (i.e. the entire province or country is one constituency)
- Proportional systems require some districts with more than one representative
- The limit to how proportional a system can be is determined by the district magnitude – increasing DM size will increase the potential for proportionality
- There is no need for district magnitudes to be the same in every electoral district
- The "personal connection" between voter and representative is likely to shift as the number of representatives from an area changes

Ballot structure

Ballot structure simply refers to the kinds of choices voters can make on the ballot paper when they go to vote. The range of choices includes:
- marking a single choice for a party or candidate
- indicating a set of preferences
- weighting choices by ranking candidates

The structure of the ballot can:
- influence the balance of control between the parties and the voters, with respect to who actually gets elected as a representative

- influence internal party decision-making with respect to nominations – closed list systems give the party "list makers" significant power
- control the nomination process, especially if it effectively determines election prospects, can affect the nature and strength of party discipline in the legislature

Electoral formula

The *electoral formula* determines how votes are turned into seats given the *district magnitude* and the *ballot structure*. It incorporates the mathematics and procedures for determining how many votes are required for election, and just who gets elected. It may also specify some kind of minimum electoral success – or "threshold" – before a party can gain any representation. While electoral formulas vary widely, they tend to be grouped by three basic principles: *plurality, majority, and proportional representation.*

Questions to consider

➢ *If elections are a contest, who are the contestants? Political parties or candidates?*
➢ *Do you want a proportional system? If so, how proportional must it be?*
➢ *Do you want to provide for local representation? If so, how big should the area represented be? How many representatives should it have?*
➢ *What kind of choices should voters have on their ballots?*
➢ *How important is it that the mechanics of the systems be simple and transparent?*

Additional Resources

This list of readings could be of interest to anyone wanting to know more about electoral reform. The Citizens' Assembly does not endorse the following books and articles or their projections. However, they are useful to illustrate some of the issues being considered by the Citizens' Assembly. A more extensive list is available on the Assembly's website.

Blais, André, and Louis Massicotte. 'Electoral Systems,' in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds.). *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996.

Farrell, D. *Electoral Systems: a Comparative Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001. [This is the book being issued by Assembly members as a reference book**.**]

Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999.

State Electoral Office of South Australia Website http://www.seo.sa.gov.au/
- Animated "How your vote counts" explanation of various voting systems
- Other useful resources

NOTE: More detailed information, including lecture notes, presentations and video recordings, is available on the Citizens' Assembly website.

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