

**British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform  
4<sup>th</sup> Weekend : Session 1 (Saturday morning)****Proportional Representation (PR-List) Systems**

This is a large family of electoral systems which are widely used in the European democracies. The details of individual systems – on all three key elements – can vary considerably from one version to the next but they share a set of common basic principles and objectives. It is easy to get caught up and even lost in all the details and possible combinations. It is not necessary to worry about them at this stage of our review.

**1 BASIC PRINCIPLES**

- Proportional Representation (PR) systems are designed to *distribute seats* among parties – this is different from plurality or majority systems whose focus is on *electing individuals* to the legislature
- The contestants are political parties seeking a share of the legislative seats
- PR systems aim to give parties seat shares that correspond to their vote shares. The systems are rarely perfectly proportional because of the way the key elements work

**2 KEY ELEMENTS*****DISTRICT MAGNITUDE (DM)***

- Must be greater than one (one seat cannot be shared) and can be as large as the size of the whole Assembly
- Not all districts need to have the same number of seats in the Assembly
- Many PR systems have two (or even 3) levels – called *tiers* – of electoral districts. Generally this allows votes not ‘used’ to allocate a seat at the first level to be transferred to the next and used there. The number of seats at this level may be fixed (*Denmark*) or it may be variable (*Belgium*)

**FORMULA**

- The basic idea is to adopt a mathematical method for allocating seats in proportion to votes. There are a large number of possibilities. As the examples in Farrell (p 71-79) show these different systems can produce somewhat different results
- **Largest Remainder** formula:
  - These involve establishing a **QUOTA** to determine how many votes it takes to win a seat.
  - You then divide the number of votes a party wins by the quota to get the number of seats
  - If there are some seats left over because not all quotas are filled then the party with the largest number of unused votes (the remainder) gets the seat  
(See Farrell Table 4.1 on p 72 for an example)
  - Quotas differ in their impact. Generally smaller quotas help larger parties
  - Widely used are *Hare* ( $\text{Votes} / \text{DM}$ ) and *Droop* ( $[\text{Votes} / \text{DM} + 1] + 1$ ) quotas
  - This formula generally works to the advantage of smaller parties
- **Highest Average** formula:
  - These formula involve dividing the votes won by each party by some number and giving the party with the largest average number of votes the seat
  - Quotas are not used in these calculations
  - The most common sets of numbers are called the:
    - d'Hondt divisors 1, 2, 3, 4, etc
    - St. Laguë divisors 1, 3, 5, 7, etc (or modified St.L. 1.4, 3, 5, 7 . . . .)
 (See Farrell Table 4.4 on p 77 for an example)
  - On balance these highest average systems are less accommodating to small parties
- The same formula does not need to be used for seat allocations at different levels if more than one tier is used
- In some systems parties can declare in advance that they are campaigning as separate parties but as electoral partners. That allows their votes to be pooled and treated as if they were for one single party for seat allocation purposes. That process is called **Apparentement** and works to the advantage of smaller parties
- Many PR systems establish a **THRESHOLD** which is some minimum percentage of the vote that a party needs to win before it is entitled to any share of the seats irrespective of the formula. This is done to keep small parties out of the legislature.
  - Thresholds may be established for getting a seat at the first level (*Spain*), in terms of the national vote (*Austria*), or both (*Sweden*)
  - Thresholds typically in the 2-5% range (see the chart in W3 S1 notes)

**BALLOT STRUCTURE**

- Voters are selecting between lists of candidates put forward by parties
- The ballot structure governs which candidates from the list are elected to sit in the legislature – see the examples provided by Farrell (p 84-86)
- **Closed lists** – Voters select a party of choice and candidates are elected in the order they appear on the list (*Israel*)
- **Open lists** – Voters are able to indicate which candidates they prefer on the list
  - Voters get to choose either party or candidate and so may influence place of individuals on the list by doing so (*Belgium*)
  - Voters choose among candidates as a way of signaling their party vote. Voters not parties thus determine which candidate from the list gets elected (*Finland*)
  - Voters have more than one vote and so can spread support among parties and candidates (*Switzerland*)
- Even when the district is the entire nation as in the Netherlands the lists can be regionalized to ensure candidates from all areas are elected

4 PR SYSTEMS

Designing a PR system involves making a series of choices:

- **DM** – What size should districts be? How many of them?
  - How many tiers? If more than one, are second tier seats to be used:
    - a) to absorb ‘unused’ quota votes (*Czech Republic*)
    - b) seats to provide for more proportional national results (*Sweden*)
    - c) a supplementary level of seats (*Poland*)

Some examples:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Seats (+ adj)</i>	<i>Districts (adj)</i>	<i>Size: Min – Max</i>	<i>Avg</i>
Austria:	183 (~13)	9 (2)	6 – 39	20.3
Belgium	212 (~7)	30 (9)	2 – 33	7.1
Denmark	175 (40)	23 (1)	2 – 15	5.9
Norway	157	19	4 – 15	8.3
Spain	350	52	1 – 33	6.7

- **Formula** – What formula should be used, at what level: what quota, what divisor?
  - Should there be a threshold? If so, what and at what level of allocation?

- **Ballot structure** – Open or closed list?

Each of these 3 key elements has an impact on the results. Both the DM and the Formula directly impact on the proportionality of the system.

- Larger DM → More proportional results
- More than one tier will generally help smaller parties achieve representation
- Largest remainder with Hare quota is most proportional
- Highest average with d'Hondt divisors is least proportional
- The differences among PR-list systems are generally marginal when compared to outcomes produced by plurality or majority systems
- In none of these systems is there much of a direct connection between individual voters and elected politicians
- Closed lists allow party officials great control over who gets elected and their subsequent political careers.  
The capacity to control who is on the list, and in what position, makes it possible for party elites to alter the success rates of groups such as women who have traditionally not been successful in getting elected in plurality systems.
- Open lists give voters more say over who gets elected from a particular party

**Some Examples:**

*Israel* DM=120 Formula=d'Hondt Threshold=1.5% List=closed  
2003 election - 13 parties won seats Largest=29%

*Holland* DM=150 (regional lists) Formula=d'Hondt Threshold=0.67%  
List=preferential  
2003 election - 9 parties won seats Largest=29%  
Took 3 months to form a government coalition after election

*Sweden* DM variable 2 Tiers: 2<sup>nd</sup> is corrective (14% of seats)  
Formula=Modified St. Laguë Threshold = 4% national OR 12% in local district List=preferential  
2002 election - 7 parties won seats Largest=41%

*Austria* DM variable 3 Tiers: corrective Formula=L Remainder (Hare) at lowest level; L Average (d'Hondt) at higher tier  
Threshold=4% or 1 local seat  
2002 election - 4 parties won seats Largest = 43%  
Took 3 months to form coalition government after the election

## 5 EVALUATION

### **Governments**

- ❖ PR systems generally produce coalition governments
- ❖ Governments can often take some time to form after the election when parties engage in coalition bargaining
- ❖ Coalition governments typically do not last as long as 1-party majorities but this is greatly influenced by local practice and political culture

### **Electoral Accountability**

- ❖ By facilitating multi-party competition and coalition governments PR makes it difficult for voters to hold any particular party responsible for government action or inaction
- ❖ Voters have no (or at best a very limited) ability to hold individual politicians accountable – either to effectively support or oppose them
- ❖ Makes elections more of an opportunity for voters to record their preferences than to choose among government alternatives. Where parties form semi-permanent alliances (e.g. Left vs Right) then elections can come to look more like those in plurality/majority systems
- ❖ Electoral shifts tend to be gradual

### **Parliamentary Check on Government / Role of Members**

- ❖ Coalition governments vulnerable to one or more partners abandoning the government leading to its defeat
- ❖ Parliament in a position to exercise more constraint on the government
- ❖ Forces the prime minister to share power with other leading politicians, especially those who lead (other) parties in the coalition
- ❖ Members generally free from servicing the detailed requests of voters

### **Fair Representation of Parties and Social Groups**

- ❖ Provides for representation of parties in legislature that broadly reflects their electoral support
- ❖ Works to increase the number of groups (e.g. women & minorities) in the legislature

### **Democratic Political Parties**

- ❖ Larger number of parties contesting elections and winning seats
- ❖ Tendency for parties to be more ideological, focused more on holding their supporters than attracting/converting opponents
- ❖ Major political bargaining occurs *between* parties, often post-election
- ❖ Parties tend to be more centralized and bureaucratized

### **Voter Choice**

- ❖ Amount and kind of choice a function of ballot structure.
- ❖ Open (preferential) lists give voters some choice. It is however limited for individual candidates' success is constrained by the ability of their party to first be allocated some seats

### **Identifiable Representation**

- ❖ Electoral districts typically too large to have any meaningful personal representation
- ❖ Few electoral incentives for politicians to service individual constituents

### **Encouragement to Participate**

- ❖ Complex counting makes it difficult to follow seat allocation processes
- ❖ Clear relationship between votes and seats makes it clear to voter the value of the vote
- ❖ More parties means more choice, but less likely to be a direct choice of government
- ❖ Voter turnout seems slightly higher (2-5%) in PR systems

### **Equality of the Vote**

- ❖ Most votes contribute to the election of some candidates
- ❖ With pure proportionality votes would all count equally in the election of party representatives

6 TRADE-OFFS

**PR System Strengths**

- Party representation in legislature determined by voters
- Increases the number of parties able to compete
- Minority voices heard in parliament
- Almost all votes contribute to electing legislators
- Strengthens the role of parliament in choosing and checking the Government
- Voter turnout tends to be slightly higher

**PR System Weaknesses**

- Does not produce identifiable 1-party governments
- Leads to the proliferation of minor parties
- Elections not clear choice of governments
- Does not provide identifiable local representative
- Individual politicians can't be easily held accountable by voters

7 PR FOR BC ?

Consider the last two elections in BC. The results in terms of seats were as follows

	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Liberals	44%	97%
NDP	56	3

If we had had a party list system and **IF** the same parties had run, and **IF** people had voted the same way the results might have been:

Liberals	42	58
NDP	40	22
PDA	6	--
Reform	10	--
Green	--	12
Unity	--	3
Marijuana	--	3

Note some obvious differences:

1. There would not have been a majority government in 1996
2. The Liberals would have been the largest party in the 1996-2001 legislature
3. 4 parties would have had a significant role to play in the 1996-2001 legislature
4. The Liberals might have got the first change to form a government but the outcome is unclear. The possibilities include Liberal or NDP minority governments, but there might also have been an NDP-PDA or a Liberal-Reform coalition – other logical possibilities (a Lib-Reform coalition) cannot be ruled out
5. The 1996-2001 government would have been more closely checked by the legislature. If that had been the case it might not have got into all the trouble that led to the 2001 result!
6. The 2001– legislature would have a much stronger working opposition
7. The 2001– opposition would have been divided among 4 parties
8. 2 of the 1996 parties might have disappeared in 2001 only to be replaced by 3 new ones

A couple of things that would not be too different:

1. In 2001 there would have been a Liberal majority government
2. Given its majority the 2001 Liberal government could pretty much do as it wanted

***But our assumptions are probably unrealistic:***

1. More or other parties might have been able to run plausible campaigns
2. More voters might well have been prepared to support minor parties if they knew their candidates stood a chance of being elected

Parties like the PDA and Reform that did pretty well in 1996 might have survived as viable political forces in the 2001 election

If that had been the case it might have left ‘less room’ for parties like the Greens, Unity or Marijuana to emerge in 2001. It is also likely that the largest parties would have shrunk, losing votes and seats to smaller ones

But of course we can extend this argument back in time and suggest we might still have Progressive Conservative and Social Credit parties if the had system allowed them to convert votes into enough seats to make a difference in the legislature

If BC’s parties been operating under a party list system we can safely predict:

- There would have been more of them competing and more of them winning seats in the legislature
  - The parties would be more centralized
- The party leadership would have more control over who got nominated and who got elected
- There would be more women in the BC legislature