Implications of electoral systems

Every electoral system is structured differently and, as a result, each produces different results. Depending on your perspective, these results can be seen as either positive or negative. Yet it would be fair to say that each system has both positive and negative implications. In thinking about electoral systems, we need to keep in mind these implications and think about the "trade-offs."

Majority systems

- Regularly produce one-party majority governments, or coalition governments
- Identifiable local representative are chosen in and for each area
- Limit the representation of minor political parties but reduce the significance of "wasted" votes for these parties by enabling their supporters to contribute to the choice of large party candidates
- Governments and members are accountable through a direct electoral contest
- Allow the governing party or coalition to dominate parliament
- Distort the vote/seat relationship; there is no obvious, predictable connection between the two except that there is usually a large bonus in seat-share to the party with the most primary votes
- No representation for minority interests – unless these are geographically concentrated
- Provides a mechanisms for eliminating candidates and redistributing voter support – so a majority winner can be achieved:
    - Under the second ballot, two election periods are required
    - Ballot format for alternative vote (AV) is more complex than for a categorical choice
    - Generally, voters for minor-party candidates have a second chance to have their preferences counted; but not those who vote for the largest parties
    - Even though the second preferences of minor-party voters may count in the selection of winning candidates, votes do not count equally in electing members, and many votes – those cast for losing candidates – do not contribute to electing anyone

Plurality systems

- Regularly produce stable one-party majority governments able to easily dominate parliament
- Identifiable local representatives are chosen in and for each area
- Limit the proliferation of minor political parties
- Governments and members are accountable through simple electoral contests
- Systems are easy to use and to understand; voters have a simple either-or choice, often between two major parties
- Systems are familiar; we know how they work in our society
- Distort the vote–seat relationship so there is no obvious, predictable connection between the two
- Minority interests and small voices often get shut out
- Votes do not count equally in electing MLAs; many votes do not contribute to electing anyone

Proportional representation list (PR-List) systems

- Party representation in the legislature is determined by voters; the distribution of seats more closely reflects voter support for parties
- Minority voices are heard in parliament
- Almost all votes contribute to electing legislators
- Strengthen the role of parliament in choosing and checking the government
- Voter turnout tends to be slightly higher
- Do not produce identifiable one-party governments, so electoral accountability is reduced
- Do not provide identifiable local representative
- Individual politicians cannot easily be held accountable by voters

Proportional representation by the single transferable vote (PR-STV) system

- Produces a close match between a party's seat share and its vote share – but this varies with district magnitude
- Gives the voter the opportunity to vote for individual candidates as well as for parties, and the opportunity to choose among candidates from the same party or from different parties
- Permits candidates to be elected who appeal to a particular constituency
- Does not discriminate against independent candidates
- Requires a preferential ballot which is more complicated for voters
- Does not have single, geographically-defined, local members
- Is more likely to produce coalition governments
- May encourage regional and/or sectional politics and/or brokerage politics rather than politics based on province-wide issues
- Has the potential to weaken party control of candidates and MLAs

Mixed systems

Mixed systems are, by definition, various combinations of other electoral system families. As a result, the implications of any one mixed system are the implications of its component systems. Because the systems are mixed, these implications can interact in sometimes unpredictable ways. The most widely used mixed systems attempt to balance local representation and some measure of proportionality.

- Proportional representation systems generally increase the number of parties and the possibility of coalition government
- Some mixed systems create two types of members of the legislature: constituency members responsible to the electorate and list members who owe their position to the party list makers and have no constituency responsibilities
- Creating two types of members can create two types of parties: large ones that do the constituency work and small ones that promote particular issues

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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.

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform