



Assessing electoral systems

Choosing among electoral systems involves deciding what sort of politics we want and then trying to determine what kind of electoral system will help give it to us – understanding that the same system can work differently and produce different results in different places. As we assess the workings of various electoral systems we want to keep in mind not only their individual characteristics but some of the *trade-offs* that might be involved in choosing one over another. A system which satisfies one of our goals may work counter to another goal. The following criteria and questions may be interesting to consider when assessing electoral systems. *Which of these characteristics are most important to you? And why is this?*

Various electoral systems have different impacts on:

The system of government

- stable and effective government
- electoral accountability
- parliamentary check on government
- fair representation for parties and groups
- democratic political parties

Voters

- degree of choice
- identifiable/local representative
- encouragement to participate
- equality of the vote

“Stable” government

Government stability refers to how secure the governing party is in power. The more tenuous a government’s hold on power, the more difficult it may be for it to make hard decisions and move quickly when necessary – for fear of losing support in the legislature and losing its hold on power. Generally, majority governments tend to be more secure and, at least in this sense, more stable. But such governments can become arrogant and insensitive to public opinion, unwilling to compromise and too easily dominated by autocratic leaders.

How important is the trade-off between government stability (which may mean a majority government) and a legislature that more closely reflects society’s social and political divisions?

Electoral accountability – for parties and individual representatives

Elections are about choosing representatives and governments. In order to make elections about a choice of governments, it is necessary that:

- voters can identify which *parties* were responsible for government decisions in the past
- political parties and candidates clearly signal their intentions with respect to possible future coalition partners
- representatives can be held accountable

What kind of accountability does a particular electoral system provide? How does it do so?

Parliamentary check on governments

One of the key tasks of a legislature is to scrutinize the work of government. The ability of a legislature to do this will depend largely on the rules and procedures it adopts, and the degree and kind of discipline that exists within the political parties. Effective parliamentary checks on government are likely to be found in multi-party legislatures where the government does not command an easy majority. But such minority governments tend to be less stable and accountability is more difficult to determine.

What is the best balance between parliamentary checks and stable, accountable government?

Fair representation for parties and groups

- “Wasted” votes - Under some electoral systems, the vote of someone who supports a losing candidate does not contribute to any candidate being elected.
Is that vote wasted? Is this a concern?
- Proportionality and representation of minority groups – The share of seats a political party wins more closely mirrors its share of votes under some electoral systems. Similarly, minority parties are more likely to win seats under certain electoral systems.
How important is proportionality and the representation of minority parties?
- Some electoral systems seem to produce more diverse legislatures than others, with better representation of all sectors of society including minorities and women.
Does the electoral system disadvantage some members of society?

Democratic political parties

Given the central position parties have in electoral competition, their basic features have a direct impact on the nature of a community’s politics. An important aspect of assessing an electoral system is how it affects the number and nature of the parties.

How would a change in electoral system influence the competitive relationships among parties, and what would this mean for the character of the legislature and government?

Voter choice

Different electoral systems create different choices for voters, such as: choosing among candidates from different parties, choosing among parties, or choosing among candidates from the same party. Voters may also be able to rank candidates or weight their vote.

How much and what kind of choice should an electoral system offer voters?

Identifiable representative

Elections allow voters to choose how they will be represented in the legislature. Under some systems, they choose an individual (as in BC); under others, they choose a party.

How important is it to British Columbians to have our own MLA? Is this more important in rural areas than in urban areas?

Encourage participation

Voter turnout rates are falling in most western democracies. Aspects of an electoral system that could affect voter participation are: clarity, simplicity and choice.

Do some electoral systems encourage participation in the political process?

Equality of the vote

Because of how electoral boundaries are drawn, some representatives can be elected from ridings with few voters, while others represent more populated ridings.

Does this mean voters are not treated equally? Are there counterbalancing arguments?

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

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