Electoral systems

Families of electoral systems

There are five types – or families – of electoral systems used in democracies around the world:

- Majority systems
- Plurality systems
- Proportional representation list systems
- Proportional representation by single transferable vote systems
- Mixed systems

Majority systems

The fundamental principle of majority systems is that the winning candidate must obtain more than 50 per cent of the vote. This may mean, when there are more than two candidates, some process is required for eliminating the least popular candidates and redistributing their votes to the remaining candidates to ensure an overall majority is achieved. This could be done either:

- Through a second round of voting – or *run-off election* – or
- Through a system where voters rank candidates on the ballot in order of preference – sometimes called an *alternative vote*

Plurality systems

British Columbia's current electoral system is a plurality system – the system now in use throughout Canada, both federally and provincially.

In plurality systems, individual candidates seek election in their electoral district and the winning candidate in each district is the one with the most votes – even if they get less than 50 per cent of voter support. This can result in such anomalies as a party achieving enough seats to form a majority government with less of the popular vote than the opposition party – as happened in BC in 1996.

Proportional representation systems (PR)

Proportional representation (PR) systems vary widely but all are designed to ensure that the range of opinion in the legislature reflects the range of opinion in the electorate. These systems distribute seats in proportion to the share of the vote received by each party or candidate.

There are two major types of proportional representation systems:

- PR-List systems
- PR by the single transferable vote (PR-STV)

Proportional representation list systems (PR-List)

In PR-List systems, each party offers voters a list of candidates for election and voters select between party lists.

Lists can be either "closed" or "open." If the lists are closed, candidates are elected in the order set out by the party. So candidates listed at the bottom of the list are less likely to be elected

than those at the top. If the lists are open, voters can indicate which candidate(s) they prefer on the party list.

Proportional representation by single transferable vote systems (PR-STV)
PR-STV is also designed to create a representative assembly that mirrors voter support. However, in contrast to PR-List systems which reflect support for political parties, PR-STV is based on voters indicating their preferences for individual candidates.

PR-STV systems ask voters to rank candidates on the ballot (which is called a preferential ballot). This allows voters to choose between candidates for the same party or from different parties.

Mixed systems
In some ways it is misleading to call mixed systems a distinct 'family' of electoral systems. As the name implies, these systems mix two (or more) different systems in an attempt to obtain the advantages of the different systems while minimizing their disadvantages.

The most widely used mixed systems attempt to balance two key principles that are often seen as mutually exclusive:
- Identifiable local representatives
- Some measure of proportionality

While there are many ways in which systems can be mixed, the possibilities include:
- Using different systems in different regions
- Using a mix of systems across the country
- Using different systems to elect different levels of government

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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.

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