



Majority systems

Under the majority electoral system, a candidate must receive more than 50 per cent – a majority – of the vote to be elected. When there are only two contestants in an election, unless there is a tie, one will inevitably win with a majority of votes.

But, when there are more than two in the race, it is unusual for one candidate to get more than 50 per cent of the voter support right away. In order for a candidate to attain a majority in this case, a process is needed to eliminate the *least* popular candidates and redistribute their votes to the remaining candidates.

There are two ways to redistribute voter support in majority systems:

- 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*

Second ballot

Under this version of the majority system, voters are often required to vote more than once. Each time they vote, they are able to vote for only one candidate. France currently uses this system to elect members to its National Assembly.

Ballot – round #1

On the first round of elections, if a candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the votes in his/her electoral district, that candidate is declared elected. If no candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the votes on the first ballot, a second vote is required, perhaps several days later.

Ballot – round #2

In most cases, in this second round of voting, only the two candidates who received the most votes on the first ballot in each electoral district can compete. In this way, successful candidates are elected with a majority.

Alternative vote (AV)

Under AV, there is only one round of voting, but there may be several rounds of counting the votes. Rather than voting for just one candidate, voters are able to rank the candidates – “1” indicating first preference, “2” indicating second preference, and so on. This is called a *preferential ballot*. AV was used in BC in the 1952 and 1953 provincial elections.

Counting – round #1

On the first round of counting, all first-preference votes are counted. If a candidate gets more than 50 per cent of the first-preference votes, that candidate is declared elected.

Counting – round #2

If no candidate receives more than 50 per cent of first-preference votes, the candidate with the least number of first preferences is removed from the race. Then the excluded candidate’s ballots are sorted and reallocated to the other candidates based on the second preferences indicated on those ballots.

Counting – round #3 (and so on)

If no candidate gains a majority after this redistribution, this process of eliminating a candidate and redistributing his/her votes is repeated until one of the remaining candidates gains a majority.

An animated example of AV can be found at www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm - click on 'Continue', then 'Exclusion (Bottom up)'.

District magnitude (DM)

The district magnitude is the number of representatives that can be elected – or the “seats” – in an electoral district. The DM varies, but is often one. DM can vary from electoral district to electoral district. In majority systems, as the DM increases beyond one, the system can produce very disproportionate results.

Ballot structure

As discussed, the ballots for second ballot and AV systems are very different.

Formula

Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for individual candidates, not parties.

How the system works

The key to how majority electoral systems work is the role of minor parties. By forcing the electorate to make majority choices, these systems reinforce the dominance of large parties, but give the voters who support small parties some say in the choice of which large parties will win the most seats. Small parties have little chance of electing candidates but may be able to influence policy by “trading” their voters’ second preferences for policy commitments from one of the large parties – that is they align themselves with a larger party and encourage their voters to select that larger party as their second preference in exchange for policy concessions.

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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