

British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 3rd Weekend : Session 2 (Saturday afternoon)

Majority Electoral Systems

This session and the following four sessions over this and the next weekend meeting of the Citizens' Assembly will deal in some detail with each of the families of electoral systems discussed in Ken Carty's presentation during this morning's session. The aim is not to make each member of the Citizens' Assembly an expert on all electoral systems, but to provide enough information to enable the Citizens' Assembly to make informed assessments of the range of electoral systems available to British Columbia as a parliamentary representative democracy. The survey of each family of electoral systems will follow the checklist provided on the last page of the text handout for the previous session (Weekend 3 : Session 1, page 8).

We begin with majority electoral systems. This is not the kind of electoral system currently used in British Columbia, but it is a good place to start. It has some features in common with the plurality system (first past the post, FPTP) used in British Columbia, but some important differences in terms of balloting, the way successful candidates are chosen, and the influence of small parties on the outcome of elections. And it is a system which was tried in British Columbia for the provincial general elections of 1952 and 1953.

Note that electoral systems can be modified in many ways; this survey deals only with the major characteristics of the voting systems under review.

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Where there are only two contestants in an election, one must gain a majority of votes. If there are more than two competitors, the one with the most votes need not gain a majority—a plurality will do.

Candidate X	15 votes
Candidate Y	45 votes (= a plurality but not a majority; 55 voters did not vote for Y)
Candidate Z	40 votes

This is the problem addressed by majority electoral systems; how to ensure that the successful candidates at an election will always be supported by a majority of votes. Majority systems achieve this by forcing voters to make a final choice between two candidates or parties even if more than two are contesting the election. There are two ways of doing this:

- ***The second ballot (two-round) system:*** under this system, a first round of elections is held, and all candidates who gain a majority of votes in their electoral districts are declared elected. In those electoral districts where no candidate gained a majority of votes, another election is held a week or so later. This second election is contested only by the two candidates who gained the most votes in the first election. This forces the supporters of any other candidates to make a final choice between these two candidates, one of whom must gain a majority of votes. At the end of the second round of elections, all elected candidates will have gained majority support even if some of that support came from the second choices of voters who preferred a different candidate at the first round of elections. They have been forced to choose between the two most popular candidates.
- ***The alternative vote (AV):*** under this system, voters must fill in a preferential ballot, ranking the candidates in the order of the voters' choice by placing the numbers 1, 2, 3 and so on, until all candidates are ranked with consecutive numbers. After voting has been completed, the ballot papers are sorted and the number of first preferences (a ranking of '1' on the ballot paper) calculated for each candidate. Those candidates with a majority of first preferences in their electoral districts are declared elected (this will always happen if only two candidates are contesting the riding). In electoral districts where no candidate has a majority of first preferences (that is, where there are three or more candidates), the candidate with the least number of first preferences is excluded, and the excluded candidate's ballots are recounted to determine which candidate still left in the count will benefit from the second preferences (a ranking of '2' on the ballot paper). This process of exclusion and reallocation of preferences continues until one candidate gains a majority of the vote.

The beneficiaries of this reallocation process are usually the two candidates in each electoral district with the most first preference votes. Again, AV forces voters who support minor party or independent candidates to express a second choice for one of the two most popular candidates or parties.

Majority systems give the impression that governments are elected by majorities and that politics is 'really' about a two party (dichotomous) choice. But the majorities are manufactured by the electoral system and may deny representation to minor parties with a significant share of the popular vote.

2. KEY ELEMENTS

District magnitude (DM)

- DM can be any number but is often 1 (BC used 2 and 3 member districts for the 1952 and 1953 elections under AV). As the DM increases beyond 1, the system can produce very disproportional results.
- It is not necessary to have the same DM in every electoral district (see BC experience, above, for example).

Ballot structure:

There are major differences between the second ballot and AV systems. For the second ballot, the ballot structure is simple and the same as a plurality system

- Voters are typically presented with a list of candidates.
- Simple marks [**X**] are placed beside the chosen candidate.
- Or, as the French case, the voter chooses one of a number of prepared party ballots and deposits this as the voter's choice.

For the AV system, the ballot is more complicated; it requires a preferential ballot

- Voters are presented with a list of candidates.
- The voter must rank the candidates in the voter's preferred order using a sequence of numbers starting with '1' for the most preferred candidate. Under some systems, the voter need not rank all candidates, but may do so.

Formula:

Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for individual candidates, not parties. Reflecting the different ballot structures, there are differences in the procedures for counting the votes. For second ballot systems:

- All candidates with a majority of votes are declared elected.
- In electoral districts where no candidate gains a majority, a second round election takes place.
- At the second round election, only the two candidates with the most votes in the first round can compete. The successful candidates at this election will gain a majority and are elected.

For AV, the formula specifies that:

- All candidates with a majority of first preference votes are declared elected
- In electoral districts where no candidate gains a majority, the candidate with the smallest number of first preference votes is excluded, and the second preferences from the excluded candidate's ballots are redistributed. If no candidate gains a majority after this redistribution, other candidates are excluded and their preferences redistributed until a candidate gains a majority.

Note that, under AV systems:

- Only the second preferences of the least successful candidates are redistributed.
- Parties are free to run candidates in as many or as few electoral districts as they choose.
- Parties may wish to influence the way their voters assign their preferences by suggesting a party preferred way of filling in the ballot paper.

3. VARIATIONS

For the second ballot, variations revolve around district magnitude (DM), and the rules for the exclusion of candidates for the second round of elections. The elections for the French National Assembly, for example, indicate that any candidate who wins more than 12.5 percent of the votes in the first round can contest second round elections. This makes the French system a hybrid majority/plurality system. (At the French National Assembly elections in June 2002, only 58 of the 577 deputies were elected at the first round election.). For other examples, see Farrell (2001) pages 50-55.

For AV, apart from DM, the major variations deal with the number of preferences which can or must be assigned on the ballot paper. Australia uses AV (called preferential voting in Australia) for 7 of the 9 lower houses of the 1 national, 6 state and 2 territory parliaments in the Australian federation. At elections for all but two of these 7 parliaments, all preferences must be assigned (full preferential voting). For the remaining 2 parliaments, no more than 1 preference need be assigned (optional preferential voting).

For full details of the Australian variations on AV, see the Electoral Council of Australia website at: <http://www.eca.gov.au/>

Another form of AV is cumulative voting where only two preferences can be expressed no matter how many candidates are standing. The second preference is only counted if no candidate gains a majority on the first count.

4. EXPLORATION OF HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

For the second ballot, examples have already been discussed in the section above. For AV, there is a simplified ballot set out in the PowerPoint presentation which accompanies this handout. There is also an animated example provided by the State Electoral Office of South Australia on its website which can be found at: <http://www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm> (click on 'Continue', then 'Exclusion (Bottom up)').

For both second ballot and AV systems, the key to how the electoral system works is the role of minor parties. By forcing the electorate to make majority choices, the 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 more chance of electing candidates than under a plurality FPTP system, but they may be able to influence policy by trading their second preferences for policy commitments from one of the large parties.

Majority systems have usually been adopted by a coalition of parties to discriminate against a third party. Australia adopted AV to accommodate the emergence of the Country Party (now National Party) which threatened to divide the anti-Labor vote to the benefit of the Australian Labor Party. A similar situation occurred in BC at the 1952 provincial elections where the Liberals and the Conservatives tried to use AV to stay in power and prevent the NDP from gaining government. They may have succeeded in their second goal, but failed in the first.

5. EVALUATION

Both majority systems—the second ballot and AV—have similar effects on the political process. First there is the question of impact of majority systems on the working of government:

Majority government:

- It is designed to produce one-party governments or well established coalition governments with majority support in parliament.

Electoral accountability:

- Majority systems encourage 2-party competition.
- They stimulate government versus opposition contests that make elections a forum in which voters can effectively choose who is to be in office.
- Majority systems may force large parties to accommodate the policy demands of small parties as a consequence of deals over the assignment of voter preferences at elections.
- Majority systems allow voters to support or oppose individual local candidates.
- Majority systems provide for local representation (especially with a low DM).

Parliamentary check on government; role of members:

- Majority government frees governments from serious parliamentary scrutiny (executive dominance of the parliamentary process).

- Majority government allows for a prime ministerial style of government ('the friendly dictatorship').
- All members of the legislature have the same electoral standing and a similar identifiable constituency (even if the DM varies).

Fair representation of parties and social groups:

- Majority systems can create big distortions between vote shares and seat shares
- Majority systems have under-represented some groups (women and minorities) in political and legislative life.

Democratic political parties:

- Majority systems work to produce a small number of large parties in parliament, but give some incentive for small parties to exist and to express distinctive interests.
- Large parties tend to be non-ideological, pragmatic vote gathering machines seeking to attract the median voter but may have to accommodate the preferences of smaller and more ideological parties at election time.
- Political bargaining over government policy usually occurs within parties or governing coalitions.
- Parties may be decentralized to accommodate local electoral demands.

The impact of majority systems on voter choice can be summarized as:

Choices for the voter:

- For second ballot elections, the choice is a simple, candidate based choice; the voter may be required to make a different choice at the second round elections.
- For AV, the choice is candidate based but preferential ballots are required and voters must rank all or some of the candidates.

Identifiable representation:

- Local communities (defined by area) have an individual member (or members) elected to represent them.
- There are strong incentives for elected members to service constituents and local party.

Encouragement to participate

- For the second ballot system, personalized choice and simple counting makes for a transparent, understandable process.
- For AV, there is a personalized choice but this is coupled with a ballot paper requiring the ranking and numbering candidates which is more complicated than a single categorical choice (X). This may result in an increase in spoiled ballots.
- Individuals in areas where their party has a big advantage may have a reduced incentive to vote.
- Individuals who support small parties have some incentive to vote because their second ballot choice (or second preference with AV) may help to decide the winner.
- Under AV with compulsory preferences, some voters for small party candidates may be disinclined to vote because their preferences will end up supporting a large party; that is, it reduces the ability of these voters to make a protest vote against the largest parties. Under the second ballot system, voters can simply stay away from the second round election.

Equality of the vote:

- For votes to be of equal weight under majority systems, electoral districts must be of equal size.
- This requires the continual redrawing of the district boundaries in a highly mobile society.
- Votes for the leading candidates contribute to the election of a representative; voters supporting other candidates may assist one of the leading candidates to be elected.
- It can be argued that voters for small parties have two bites of the cherry; they can make their first choice and then have a second choice counted. Voters for large parties only have their first preference counted (although, under the second ballot, they can always change their mind if there is a second round election).

6. ASSESSMENT OF TRADE-OFFS

Majority system strengths:

- Majority systems regularly produce one party majority government, or well established coalition governments.

- Majority systems produce an identifiable local representatives chosen in and for each area.
- Majority systems limit the representation of minor political parties but reduce the significance of the ‘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.

Majority system weaknesses

- Majority systems allow the governing party or coalition to dominate parliament.
- Majority systems distort the vote/seat relationship; there is no obvious, predictable or regular connection between the two except that there is usually a large bonus in seats share to the party with the most primary votes.
- Minority interests (unless geographically concentrated) are denied representation.
- 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; many votes do not contribute to electing anyone.
- Under the second ballot, two election periods are required.
- The ballot format for AV is more complicated than for a simple categorical choice.
- Under AV, voters for minor party candidates have a second chance to have their preferences counted; this is denied to those who vote for the largest parties.

7. MAJORITY SYSTEMS IN BC

Majority systems could be adopted in BC with little change to the style of parliamentary or electoral politics. They are, after all, systems designed to generate majority support and reward the largest two parties, much like the current plurality systems. The biggest change would be to give the supporters of minor parties the chance of having some influence over which of the two largest parties won government. And AV has been tried in BC for the provincial general elections of 1952 and 1953.