We begin with directly-elected presidents. As Figure 11.1 shows, in the mid-1990s, most directly-elected presidents were chosen by a majority system. This number is increasing as countries dispense not only with indirect election, but also with the plurality method, matching the trend in parliamentary elections (Negretto, 2008). The reason for the pre-eminence of the majority system in presidential elections is that it is more important to confirm majority backing for a single president than for every single member of a legislature. Plurality contests, in which the candidate with most votes wins on the first and only round, can lead to victory with an unacceptably small share of the vote. For example, Fidel Ramos became president of the Philippines in 1992 with just 24 per cent of the vote – hardly a resounding endorsement with which to send the winner to the highest executive office in the land.

Most majority elections for presidents employ a run-off between the top two candidates, assuming neither wins a majority on the first round. France is an influential case; French voters, it is said, choose in the first count and decide in the second. By their nature, run-offs create a possibility that the leading candidate in the first round fails to win election in the second; this outcome occurred in one third of the run-offs in Latin America between 1979 and 1992 (Peréz-Liñán, 2006). Most often, however, the winner leads in both rounds, as in France in 2012 (Table 11.3).

Given that most presidential elections are by national ballot, it is possible to require the winning candidate to obtain a certain level of support in the regions, as well as nationally. Such distribution requirements are still uncommon but they do encourage candidates to broaden their support. This virtue is important in regionally divided societies. In Indonesia, for instance, a first-round victory requires at least 20 per cent of the vote in a majority of provinces. However, distribution rules introduce their own dangers, including the possibility of a failed election.

We turn now to indirect election of presidents. As Figure 11.1 shows, almost one third of presidents manage to avoid the perils of direct election altogether. Many of these are chosen via indirect election in which a special body (which may itself be elected) supposedly acts as a buffer against the whims of the people. In Indonesia, for example, the Electoral College is still technically used to elect an incoming president. But the College survives only as a procedural and pre-democratic relic mandated by the constitution. Delegates to the College still assemble but, with the odd exception, they conscientiously follow the verdict of the state they represent.

Three other features of presidential elections, whether direct or indirect, are worthy of note. These are the length of term, the possibility of re-election, and the link with other elections (Box 11.2).