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1

The Study of Electoral Systems

1.1 Why Study Electoral Systems?

For people who do not specialize in this area, electoral systems are usually seen as a big ‘turn-off’. It can be difficult to instil much interest in the subject of counting rules; to enthuse about the details of how one electoral system varies from another. After all how many wars were fought over whether the electoral formula was ‘largest remainder’ or ‘highest average’; how many politicians have been assassinated over the issue of ‘single transferable vote’ versus ‘single-member plurality’? Pity the student on a hot Friday afternoon who has to struggle through the niceties of the ‘Droop quota’. Pity the teacher who has to burn midnight oil getting to grips with the issue of ‘monotonicity’. It does seem fair to pose the question: why bother? What is the point of spending time examining electoral systems?

Several reasons can be given. First, a very large and growing number of people specialize in electoral systems, so somebody must think these systems are important. In actual fact, the interest in studying electoral systems is relatively new. As recently as the 1980s, scholars drew attention to how undeveloped was this branch of the political science literature. The doyen of electoral system research at the time even went so far as to say that ‘the study of electoral systems in undoubtedly the most underdeveloped subject in political science’ (Lijphart 1985: 3; also Taagepera and Shugart 1989). Even then it was already clear that this was likely to become a major field of interest. In his International Bibliography on Electoral Systems, Richard S. Katz (1989) listed some 1,500 works ‘dealing with the forms and effects of representation and electoral systems’. By 1992 this list had grown to
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2,500 works (Katz 1992). These have included some very significant developments in the methodology of studying electoral systems; to the extent that this field can now more accurately be characterized as a ‘mature’ and well developed one (Shugart 2008).

For more than forty years one name has dominated over all treatments of electoral systems. The seminal work by Douglas Rae (1967) set the trend on how to study electoral systems and their political consequences. It is only in recent times that Rae’s work has come under closer scrutiny as scholars such as Gary Cox, Michael Gallagher, Bernard Grofman, Richard Katz, Arend Lijphart, Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera have sought to develop and improve on some of his ideas. Their work (and the work of others) needs to be incorporated into the textbook treatment of electoral systems. This is one of the major functions of this book.

Second, electoral systems are worth examining because they have become politically interesting. With the process of democratization, in Mediterranean Europe in the 1970s, across Latin America and parts of Africa since then, and perhaps most dramatically towards the end of the 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, important decisions had to be taken on which electoral systems to adopt in the fledgling representative democracies. As we shall see in later chapters, in none of these cases was the single-member plurality system chosen; in only one case (and only briefly) was the single transferable vote system selected. It is interesting to speculate on the reasoning behind these particular decisions, which we shall do in Chapter 8. Of even greater interest has been the apparent rising interest in reforming existing electoral systems, notably in Italy, Japan and New Zealand – all during the 1990s – and also in a host of other countries where electoral reform has been placed high on the political agenda. This appears to contradict the impression that electoral reform is rare, occurring only ‘in extraordinary historical situations’ (Nohlen 1984: 218). These reforms also indicate a growing sympathy for ‘mixed-member’ electoral systems (for a long time associated almost solely with postwar Germany), as we see in Chapter 5. Suddenly electoral reform actually looks possible; it is more than some theoretical notion of unrealistic, out-of-touch academics.

There is a third reason why it is important to study electoral systems and that is because they are important: they define how the political system will function. Metaphorically, electoral systems are the cogs that keep the wheels of democracy properly functioning.
In almost any course on politics the following themes generally feature as important topics for consideration: elections and representation; parties and party systems; government formation and the politics of coalitions. In each of these areas, the electoral system plays a key role. Depending on how the system is designed it may be easier or harder for particular politicians to win seats; it may be easier or harder for particular parties to gain representation in parliament; it may be more or less likely that one party can form a government on its own. In short, there are important questions about the functioning of political systems that are influenced, at least in part, by the design of the electoral system.

Apart from their primary function of ensuring the smooth running and accepted legitimacy of the system, electoral systems are designed to fulfil a number of other – often conflicting – functions, such as reflecting the wishes of voters, producing strong and stable governments, electing qualified representatives and so on. In selecting a particular design of electoral system, the ‘electoral engineers’ have to take important decisions about which function to stress most. As a result, no two countries have the same electoral system.

It is important to distinguish between electoral laws and electoral systems. Electoral laws are the family of rules governing the process of elections: from the calling of the election, through the stages of candidate nomination, party campaigning and voting, and right up to the stage of counting votes and determining the actual election result. There can be any number of rules governing how to run an election. For instance, there are laws on who can vote (citizens, residents, people over seventeen years of age, the financially solvent and so on); there can even be laws, such as in Australia or Belgium, obliging citizens to turn out to vote. Then there is usually a set of rules setting down the procedures for candidate nomination (for example, a minimum number of signatures or a deposit). The campaign process can also be subject to a number of rules: whether polling, television advertising or the use of campaign cars is permitted; the size of billboards; the location of posters; balance in broadcasting coverage, and so on.

Among this panoply of electoral laws there is one set of rules which deal with the process of election itself: how citizens vote, the style of the ballot paper, the method of counting, the final determination of who is elected. It is this aspect of electoral laws with which this book is concerned for the most part. This is the electoral system, the mechanism of determining victors and losers, which clicks into action once
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the campaign has ended. This is the stage where the political pundits take over from the politicians; where the television companies dust off their ‘pendulums’ and ‘swingometers’ and wheel out their latest computer graphic wizardry. Campaign slogans and electoral recriminations have ended. All attention is focused on thousands of people shuffling ballot papers in ‘counting centres’ throughout the country. (At least, this is the situation in countries like Britain and Ireland. In other countries, the counting and increasingly also the voting are done by computer.) Politicians, journalists and (some) voters wait with bated breath for the returning officer to announce ‘the result’. Television presenters work long into the night, probing with their panellists the meaning of the results and assessing the voters’ ‘verdict’.

This scenario of ‘election night coverage’ is common to most political systems. There may be some variation in detail, but the basic theme is similar: we the voters have voted, and now we are waiting to see the result of our votes, in terms of who wins or loses, in terms of the number of seats won by each of the parties. It is the function of the electoral system to work this transformation of votes into seats. To put this in the form of a definition: Electoral systems determine the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office.

1.2 Classifying Electoral Systems

Inevitably, the world of electoral systems is crowded and complex and becoming more so all the time: one country’s electoral system is never the same as another’s (although in some cases the differences are quite small). Given the range of variations among the different electoral systems, this makes life quite difficult for the analyst seeking to produce an acceptable typology. One option might be to simply base a classification of the systems in terms of their outputs, that is, with reference to the process of translating votes into seats where one distinguishes between those systems which have ‘proportional’ outcomes and those with ‘non-proportional’ outcomes (e.g. Norris 2004). The essence of proportional systems is to ensure that the number of seats each party wins reflects as closely as possible the number of votes it has received. In non-proportional systems, by contrast, greater importance is attached to ensuring that one party has a clear majority of seats over its competitors, thereby (hopefully) increasing the prospect of strong and stable government.
At first glance, a classification based on the outputs of electoral systems would seem eminently sensible. Take two diametrically opposite cases, such as Germany and Britain. Table 1.1 provides a useful demonstration from 1983 of how the two systems varied in terms of the number of seats awarded to the third party. Despite polling a quarter of the national vote, the British SDP/Liberal Alliance (a precursor to the Liberal Democrats) was awarded less than 4 per cent of the seats.3 By contrast, the German Free Democrats’ proportion of seats reflected very closely the party’s share of the vote. It would seem to make perfect sense, therefore, to have a classification that places Britain and Germany in distinct categories.

However, as ever, reality is never quite so simple. There are different degrees of proportionality; indeed, most authors go so far as to talk of an in-between category of semi-proportional systems (Bogdanor 1983; Lakeman 1974; Reynolds et al. 2005). The question then becomes one of deciding on where to locate the different electoral systems. As we shall see in Chapter 6, this focus on ‘outputs’ has led some scholars, for instance, to locate the single transferable vote in the semi-proportional category, based largely on a review of its performance in one country (Katz 1984). More generally, there is the problem of supposedly proportional systems (such as the list systems used in Greece or Spain) frequently producing less proportional results than supposedly non-proportional systems (such as the single-member plurality systems used in the US or Britain).

An alternative approach to classifying electoral systems – and the basis for most of the existing typologies – entails breaking the
electoral system down into its component parts and focusing on the mechanics of how votes are translated into seats. Douglas Rae (1967) was the first to distinguish three main components of an electoral system: ‘district magnitude’, ‘electoral formula’ and ‘ballot structure’. While these terms may sound grandiose, in fact their meaning is quite simple, and they will be used throughout the following chapters to structure our examination of the different electoral systems covered in this book. District magnitude (M) refers to the size of the constituency (‘district’ in US parlance; ‘riding’ in Canadian parlance; ‘electorate’ in Australian parlance), measured in terms of the number of seats to be filled. For example, in the US and the UK, which both use the single-member plurality system, each constituency elects just one legislator (M = 1); by contrast, in Spain, which uses a list system of proportional representation, on average each constituency (or region) elects seven legislators (M = 7).

The ballot structure determines how voters cast their votes. Here the common distinction is between categorical ballots, such as used in the US or the UK (see Figure 2.1), where voters are given a simple either/or choice between the various candidates on the ballot paper, and ordinal ballots, such as in Ireland (see Figure 6.1) or Malta, where voters can vote for all the candidates, ranking them in order of preference. Finally, the electoral formula manages the translation of votes into seats. As we shall see in later chapters, there is a large range of electoral formulas in operation (and theoretically a limitless supply of alternatives), but in essence they break down into several main groupings: plurality, majority, proportional and mixed.

Having outlined the three main components of electoral systems, the next stage is to determine exactly how to use them in developing an appropriate classification of electoral systems. As we shall see in the following chapters (and particularly in Chapter 7), there has been a lot of discussion about the precise effects of the three components on the performance of electoral systems. The general consensus is that district magnitude has the greatest effect on the overall proportionality of the result: the larger the district magnitude the more proportional the translation of votes to seats. This might lead us to expect that a classification of electoral systems should base itself first and foremost on this component. The fact is, however, that most of the existing classifications tend to be based on the electoral formula first, only taking secondary account of the other features of electoral systems (Blais and Massicotte 1996; Bogdanor 1983; Lakeman 1974).
More sophisticated classifications are available which give equal attention to all three components of electoral systems (Blais 1988; Taylor and Johnston 1979), but while these may produce more theoretically appropriate typologies they also tend to be somewhat unwieldy.

By way of compromise, this book will adopt a mix of several approaches. In this introductory chapter, the electoral systems used in most of the world’s existing democracies will be classified on the basis of their electoral family. This is no more than an administrative convenience, helping to group the following five chapters. In each of these chapters the classification will then be refined in terms of all three electoral system components. Finally, in Chapters 7 and 10 the electoral systems will be reassessed in terms of their outputs, paying particular attention in Chapter 7 to questions of proportionality as well as to their strategic effects.

Some preliminary information on the world of electoral systems is provided in Appendix Table A.1, and the main trends are summarized in Figure 1.1. In the figure, the world’s 88 recognized liberal democracies are grouped from left to right roughly according to their anticipated degree of proportionality (an issue dealt with in detail in Chapter 7). These are the same countries identified by Lawrence LeDuc and his colleagues in their 2010 edition of their definitive Comparing Democracies series. As they note in the new edition, this list of countries has, since their previous editions, considerably expanded (see Le Duc et al. 1996). In large part, this reflects the ongoing process of democratization across the world (although it should be noted that in the mix – or more accurately not in the mix any more – are a number of countries that have dipped below the accepted ‘Freedom House’ scale that is deployed here to distinguish liberal democracies; for discussion, see Le Duc et al. 2010: 10–20); it also reflects a decision to include all the world’s democracies, not just the larger ones (in the previous edition of this book countries whose population was less than two million were excluded).

Of the main families of electoral systems dealt with in this book, the plurality system (called ‘single-member plurality’ in Chapter 2, often referred to as ‘first past the post’) predominates in Anglo-Saxon democracies. Nineteen (of our sample of 88) countries use it, included among them some of the largest democracies in the world. Indeed, the case of India, with an estimated population or more than one billion, is singularly responsible for the fact that the SMP system is used by a majority of the world’s voters (based on population – the
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Figure 1.1 The world of electoral systems in the late 2000s

Notes: AV: Alternative Vote; MMM: Mixed-Member Majoritarian; MMP: Mixed-Member Proportional; SMP: Single-Member Plurality; SNTV: Single Non-Transferable Vote; STV: Single Transferable Vote; 2R: Two-round. The population figures are 2009 estimates. The classification of liberal democracy is based on Freedom House (2009) estimates: countries rated 3 or below on their 7-point scale of political rights and civil liberties.

Source: Appendix Table A.1.

figure is 52 per cent of our sample). In Chapter 3 we will examine the majority systems (alternative vote and the two-round systems), which, though less popular (between them only used by just over 3 per cent of the population in our sample countries), are used by two leading democracies – Australia and France. The proportional systems come in two main forms: the single transferable vote (used in Ireland and Malta and dealt with in Chapter 6), and the far more popular list systems (dealt with in Chapter 4). As Figure 1.1 shows, proportional systems are used by the majority of countries in our sample (51 per cent using list and just over 2 per cent using STV); however, in many cases these are quite small countries, so that in total just 31 per cent of the population (of our sample countries) use proportional systems (virtually all of these using list).

The final group of mixed-member electoral systems, which are dealt with in Chapter 5, have only recently come into their own as a distinct category. The principal defining characteristic of these
systems is that they involve the combination of different electoral formulas (plurality or majority, and proportional) in one election. For a long time, mixed-member systems were ‘dismissed as eccentricities, transitional formulas, or instances of sheer manipulation doomed to disappear’ (Blais and Massicotte 1996: 65). This was not without good reason for they were only used by a handful of countries that, with the exception of postwar Germany (where the system is generally referred to as ‘additional member’), were not noted for their democratic longevity. After the early 1990s, with the new ‘wave’ of democratization, mixed-member systems started to become quite fashionable, for a while probably eclipsing proportional systems for the status of second most commonly used systems (Farrell 2001a). As we shall see in Chapter 5, however, many of the countries that adopted mixed-member systems in the 1990s abandoned such systems later, for the most part adopting list PR instead. As a result, while there are still a respectable number of countries using mixed-member systems (at least the mixed-member majoritarian variant), this family collectively (at 15 per cent of the total number of countries and 14 per cent of the world’s population) is now in third position, after list PR and SMP systems.

Chapters 2 to 6 deal with the operation of each of the systems in turn, in each case describing how the system works, how it has adapted (if at all), and the political context in which it has operated. Having dealt with each of the systems in some detail, the book then proceeds, in Chapters 7 and 10, to assess the political consequences of electoral systems, dealing with such questions as: proportionality versus stability; the role of representatives; party campaigns; and the potential for strategic voting.

As pointed out earlier, central to any discussion about electoral systems and their reform are questions of stability and the representation of minority interests. One is often seen as, at least partially, a trade-off against the other. A main contention of this book is that this argument is fallacious, that an electoral system can allow for maximum representation of minority interests without necessarily threatening the stability of government. We will return to this point in the concluding chapter, having reviewed the comparative evidence in Chapters 2 to 6.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the different electoral systems, however, it is necessary to first deal with an issue that is central to the study of electoral systems – namely representation.
1.3 Conflicting Views on the Meaning of ‘Representation’

The precise meaning of the term ‘representation’ can vary markedly. The basic distinction is between a ‘microcosm’ and a ‘principal–agent’ conception of representation (McLean 1991; Reeve and Ware 1992). The first of these is associated with proponents of proportional electoral systems, the second with supporters of non-proportional systems. A classical exponent of the microcosm view was John Adams, one of the founding fathers of the US, who said that parliament ‘should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason, and act like them’ (quoted in McLean 1991: 173). Taken literally this perspective is similar to the governing principle behind public opinion polls: that is, the notion of a representative sample. In other words a society which is made up of the following sorts of ratios – men:women 50:50; urban:rural 70:30; middle class:working class 40:60; black:white 20:80 – should elect a parliament which reflects these ratios in microcosm. To put it another way, parliament should be a ‘representative sample’ of the population. Obviously it is impossible to achieve a perfect representative sample, but the aim should be to get as close as possible to it. On this view, as Raymond Plant (1991: 16) explains, ‘the representativeness of a parliament is accounted for by its proportionality’. It is a sociological mirroring of society.

According to the microcosm conception of representation, therefore, it is the pattern of composition of the parliament that matters; but, according to the principal–agent conception, it is the decisions of the parliament that matters. The basis of the principal–agent conception is the notion of one person acting on behalf of another. The representative is elected by the people to represent their interests. In this case, even if the parliament comprises a preponderance of 50-year-old, white, middle-class males, it is representative providing it is seen to be taking decisions on behalf of the voters. It is less important that the parliament is statistically representative of voters, and more important that it acts properly in the interests of the citizens; composition is less important than decisions.

In his excellent summary of these two positions, Iain McLean (1991: 172) observes that each ‘seems entirely reasonable, but they are inconsistent’. There is no reconciliation; either you support one perspective or you support the other. Either you are in favour of a parliament that is a microcosm of society, or, instead, you have a view
of parliament that stresses its ability to act properly in the interests of all citizens. Ultimately it is a normative judgement call: ‘The PR school looks at the composition of a parliament; majoritarians look at its decisions’ (McLean 1991: 175). On this basis therefore we can see that it is not possible to draw firm conclusions as to which is better, a proportional or a non-proportional electoral system. Nor, indeed, can any firm conclusions be drawn over which particular electoral system is best. This latter point is demonstrated very clearly by Richard S. Katz in his magisterial study, *Democracy and Elections* (1997a). On the basis of his review of 14 models of democracy and their potential fit with alternative electoral systems, Katz’s conclusion is deliberately and unapologetically non-committal: ‘there is no universally correct, most democratic electoral system, notwithstanding a variety of “one size fits all” prescriptions offered by committed advocates of particular systems’ (1997a: 308; see also pp. 191–4).

Once we delve more deeply into the question of specific electoral system consequences, however, it is possible to find other more empirical areas where conclusions can be drawn. Some systems are apparently associated with greater degrees of governmental stability; some systems promote smaller parties better than others; there are effects on the nature of parliamentary representation (for example, ‘delegate’ versus ‘trustee’ roles) and on the organization and campaign styles of political parties; and there are effects on the representation of women and ethnic minorities. It is possible to be far more definitive in assessing such individual themes, and we will return to them in Chapters 7 to 10.

1.4 Conclusion

These issues can only be assessed through an examination of the different electoral systems on offer, exploring how they operate and with what consequences. This is the function of the remainder of this book, which examines each of the five main families of electoral systems in operation starting, in Chapter 2, with the oldest and simplest single-member plurality system. Chapter 3 deals with the two main types of majoritarian system. List PR systems are dealt with in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 reviews the main types of mixed-member systems, paying particular attention to the long-established German variant. Finally, the single transferable vote system is dealt with in Chapter 6.
The last four chapters deal with comparative themes in the study of electoral systems. Chapter 7 considers their systemic and strategic consequences. Chapter 8 turns things on their head, this time looking at electoral systems in terms of their causes rather than their consequences. Chapter 9 extends the discussion into an examination of other institutional features that have a bearing on how elections operate. The book concludes, in Chapter 10, with a review of the debates over electoral systems and stability.
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