ELECTION AND VOTING

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Contents

Summary

The article discusses and explains various aspects of elections and voting in the modern state. It considers the rationale of elections and the extension of the franchise as the central element in the spread of democracy. Also considered are the main types of electoral system, categorized into three types: firstly, majority voting in which a distinction is drawn between simple and absolute majority systems; secondly, systems based on proportional representation (PR) such as the list-highest average, list-largest

remainder (*d'Hondt*), single transferable vote, and mixed member systems; and thirdly, electoral systems which combine features of majority voting and PR, such as parallel and limited vote systems. The article further considers how presidential elections are conducted and the use and purpose of referendums.

The strengths and drawbacks of majority voting and PR are examined. Majority voting is the best guarantee of stable and effective government and avoids overly fragmented representation in the legislature. It also fosters closer links between the electors and their representatives.

On the other hand, majority voting results in significant disparities between votes and seats, leading to under or over-representation of parties in the legislature. It also gives rise to the so-called wasted vote. By contrast, PR ensures more representative institutions of government, with a greater correspondence between seats and votes, but may lead to weak and unstable government in polarized political cultures and weaken the links between voters and their representatives. For this reason, recent reforms of electoral systems have attempted to incorporate elements of both electoral systems.

Lastly the article consider the influences that shape the choice of voters and stresses the decline in stable voting habits based on social alignment and family and community socialization in favor of pragmatic voting in which voters alter their choices according to personal interests and media influence.

1. Introduction

At the very heart of a modern democracy are elections in which parties and groups compete for votes on a free and fair basis, to ensure that the institutions of government are representative of and responsible to the people. Even in authoritarian states, elections are held, though not on a competitive basis, for the purpose of underpinning the authority of the government by providing it with a stamp or appearance of popular legitimacy.

The outcome of any election is determined by rules and procedures under which the election is held, the integrity in applying those rules and procedures, the choices available to the voter and the various factors that affect the way he or she votes. The arrangements under which an election is conducted has assumed an added salience with the advance of democracy that has accompanied the demise of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the decline of one party and military rule, especially in developing countries, and the increasing concern with minority representation within the established democracies of the west.

The article will first examine the functions of elections and the extension of the franchise or suffrage (the right to vote). It will then consider the electoral system, i.e. the rules and procedures under which elections to legislatures, presidential elections, and referendums are conducted. Particular attention will be given to the different types of electoral system, including an evaluation of their merits and drawbacks. Lastly, the article will consider how voters are influenced in deciding how to cast their vote.

2. The functions of elections

The primary objective of a national election in a democratic system is the formation of government according to the will of the people. In a presidential system of government, the president, as head of government, is usually elected directly by the people, separately from the legislature. In the conventional parliamentary system, only the legislature is elected directly, and the government is then drawn from it. The second purpose of an election is to enable the electorate to choose a policy agenda or set of principles by which it should be governed. However, that choice does not normally entail selecting specific policy measures that a government must implement. Within the broad agenda on which it was elected, the government is left to decide what measures are best suited to meet its overall policy objectives.

Thirdly, elections are intended to make governments accountable to the people. Once a government has been given the opportunity to implement its measures, the electorate may then make a judgment of its record through a general election. If its performance is below expectations, due to failures of policy, poor leadership, or corruption, then the ruling party may be voted out of office. Elections also provide a means to ensure that checks are exercised upon a government through the representatives that are returned to the legislature. These checks are exercised in many ways: the rejection or amendment of legislation, questioning of ministers and officials, committee investigations, scrutiny of budgets, and perhaps most of all within the parliamentary system, the right to force a government to resign through a vote of no confidence.

The last purpose of an election is to legitimize government. Having been elected, a government may be regarded as having received the consent of the people, on the basis of which it can claim the moral right to govern. Even in authoritarian forms of government, such as one-party states, elections, as mentioned above, may serve to lend the government at least a veneer of popular approval, although genuine choice is limited or absent.

3. The franchise

The evolution of electoral politics has been characterized by the widening of the franchise or suffrage on the basis of class, gender, race and age, resulting eventually in universal suffrage, which is a common but not a universal feature of elections today (see *Political Parties*).

In the early phase of electoral politics as democracy evolved in the early nineteenth century, it was the norm for the franchise to be restricted to male property owners above the age of 25. In the course of time, it has been extended to include all social classes, and women. In addition, the age of enfranchisement in most countries has been lowered to 21 or 18 years. In certain countries, in the recent past, voting was restricted to particular racial groups, but over time racial barriers to voting have been similarly removed. The prime example has been South Africa, where, under the system of apartheid, only the white population enjoyed the right to vote in national elections. A crucial aspect of the dismantling of apartheid has been the extension of the franchise to all regardless of their race.

In some countries, the franchise has been extended and democratic elections instituted in one stroke, usually following a revolution or war that leads to the overthrow of a dictatorial system of government. In other countries, the process leading to a universal franchise has been gradual and incremental, the most notable examples being the United Kingdom and the United States. Even where it has been gradual, progress towards universal suffrage has occasionally been preceded by civil strife and popular agitation.

4. Electoral systems

As mentioned above, a crucial influence upon the outcome of an election is the rules and procedures of the electoral system. Important aspects of the electoral system are the population size and number of representatives of a constituency, the number of votes the elector can cast, and how many rounds of voting may take place within an election. Equally important are how votes may be cast—whether for an individual or a party or both, and whether as a single choice, multiple choice, or a rank order (preferential voting)—and the way those votes are counted and the criteria used to determine who wins or loses (see *Legislature*).

Three main types of electoral system may be identified: majority or plurality voting, proportional representation (PR), and semi-proportional representation. The most prevalent is majority voting, practiced in its various forms by just over 50 per cent of countries and semi-autonomous territories. A further 35 per cent have adopted PR while 22 per cent a semi-PR system.

5. Majority or plurality voting

5.1 Simple majority or plurality system

Under the majority system, the candidate or party who obtains a majority of votes is elected. The most prevalent form of majority voting is the simple majority system. Often referred to as the first-past-the-post (or winner-takes-all) system, the simple majority arrangement requires the voter to cast a vote in a single member constituency for one of two or more candidates.

The winner is the candidate who has secured the largest number of votes, without necessarily obtaining an absolute majority of votes. Given that constituencies are single member, their population size is usually quite small, with little variation from one constituency to another (see *Legislature*). Examples of countries in which simple plurality voting is practiced are the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, India and Malaysia.

5.2 Absolute majority systems

To prevent the return of candidates with less than an absolute majority of all votes cast, the majority system has been refined in certain countries. A common method of achieving an absolute majority outcome is to hold a second or run-off ballot between the two leading candidates, as in Ukraine, in the event of no candidate receiving a 50 per cent plus share of the vote first time round.

The second type of absolute majority arrangement is the alternative vote system employed in elections to the Australian House of Representatives. Instead of choosing one of the candidates, the voter ranks them in order of preference. A candidate is elected who achieves an absolute majority of first preference votes. Failing this, the weakest candidate is eliminated and his/her second preferences are redistributed. The candidate achieving an absolute majority with the additional votes is elected. If there is still no candidate with an absolute majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes after the first redistribution is also eliminated. His or her second preferences, and also third preferences on the ballots of the additional votes he or she received at the first redistribution, are then added to the votes of the remaining candidates in a second redistribution. This process is repeated until a candidate emerges with an absolute majority of cumulative votes.

5.3   Block vote majority systems

Another form of majority voting is the block vote arrangement which is simply the first-past-the-post system applied to multi-member districts. Each elector is given as many votes as there are seats to be filled, and votes are cast for individual candidates. The candidates who poll the most votes are returned in accordance with the number of seats to be filled. Amongst countries that have adopted this form of majority voting are Thailand, Fiji, the Maldives, and Bermuda.

A variant of the block vote system is the party block vote plurality. As in the ordinary block vote arrangement, several representatives are returned from each constituency. However, the voter has only one vote, which he/she casts, not for a candidate, but for a party list or slate, the size of which is equal to the number of seats to be filled. The party winning the most votes takes all the seats in the constituency, and the entire list is then elected. As with simple majority voting, there is no requirement for any list to secure an absolute majority. This arrangement is practiced in several countries including Lebanon, Senegal, and Singapore. In the last mentioned, the multi-member constituencies are known as Group Representation Constituencies, in which each party list must comprise at least one member from one of the minority ethnic groups.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. David S. Jones is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. Before coming to Singapore, he had been a professional officer in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the UK, and later an officer designated by the Overseas Development Administration in the U.K., lecturing at the University College of Botswana, Southern Africa. His research and teaching specialisms are public management, government budgeting, electoral analysis, and Irish politics, in which he has an extensive range of publications. He is the author of *Graziers, Land Reform and Political Conflict in Ireland* (Washington: Catholic University of America, Press, 1995).