



MAJORITARIAN V. PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract- In democratic countries, representation essentially implies elections which are competitive and leads to substantive linkage between voters and their representatives. The election of representatives is “the crucial institution that systematically induces policymakers to take account of what people desire in national policymaking. (Powell, 2010) (p. 225). The political situation of a country can be said to be largely dependent on the type of electoral system applied or followed. Majority Election Systems, Proportional Representative Systems and Mixed Systems provide a great scope to choose the government and the extent of public’s representation. But the main difficulties in selecting an electoral system is how to approach the contrast between governability and representability. The general perspective is that it is not possible to have a system that is representative along with assurance of sufficient concentration of power in few parties to give them necessary means to govern efficiently. Political democracy can be said to be a product of human choices as it is a product of context, which is the choice of institution that helps shape the behaviour of political actors. An electoral system is made up of a set of choices or factors which include *electoral formula, the district magnitude,*

ballot structure and electoral thresholds [Farrell, 1997, 2001]. Thus, this paper is a comparative study of different types of electoral systems and to study the pros and cons of Majority Electoral System and Proportional Representative System along with Mixed Electoral Systems. The paper aims at discussing the electoral system followed in India and have tried to give suggestions as to where there is any scope for improvement.

KEYWORDS- Majoritarian, Proportional Representation, Mixed System, Electoral System, First-past-the-post

I. INTRODUCTION

In democratic countries, representation essentially implies elections which are competitive and leads to substantive linkage between voters and their representatives. The election of representatives is “the crucial institution that systematically induces policymakers to take account of what people desire in national policymaking.” (Powell, 2010) (p. 225).¹ Regular and periodic elections have been regarded as the essence of democracy. In 2016, a total of 132 elections were held worldwide in coresidential, legislative or local contests [International IDEA, 2017].

¹ Martin Oost, *Effect of Electoral Systems on The Quality of Political Representation*, Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences,

University of Twente, December 2016, available at https://essay.utwente.nl/71516/1/Oost_MA_BMS.pdf (last visited on 5th January, 2021)



The electoral cycle



Source: Wall, A. et al., *Electoral Management Design: The International IDEA Handbook* (Stockholm, International IDEA, 2005).

Electoral systems are an important link in the chain that connects voter's preferences to their Government's policy decisions. Governance in representative government in all the low scale societies, in which people do not govern themselves but delegate political decision-making to a smaller group of public officials.²

² Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell, *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, Oxford Scholarship Online, Print ISBN-13: 9780199257560, 2005.

³ Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems", Vol 18(3), *Contrasting Political Institutions* special issue of the *International Political Science Review*, 1997.

In this paper, we are attempting to draw general impact of electoral systems, about the consequences of electoral systems followed in a country and merits of the various electoral system options available.

II. ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Electoral systems have shown stability with respect to democratic institutions. This can be implied that electoral systems are inherently conservative.³ In a given setting, the rules embodied in an electoral system are critical as to how a democracy is practiced. An extensive theoretical literature is available which explores the relationship between electoral systems and good governance. Electoral systems can be said to be the rules which are in the constitutions or laws that explains how votes are translated into seats. For example, a single presidential 'seat', a member of the parliament's seat, or the seat of a mayor or a local councillor. The election system is the most important aspect that influences the characteristics of a democracy, as well as how political parties conduct themselves during campaigns and mobilizations. Thus, it most importantly affect who wins and who loses in terms of number of seats won and who ultimately forms a government.⁴ Elections are facilitated by an electoral system that signifies "one important set of electoral rules that define how votes are casts and seats allocated" [Blais and Massicotte, 2002, p 40]. The following table shows the mechanism which are considered a part of electoral

⁴ Timothy D. Sisk, *International IDEA, Elections, Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Resource Guide*, available at <https://www.idea.int/gsod-2017/files/IDEA-GSOD-2017-RESOURCE-GUIDE-ELECTIONS.pdf> (last visited on 6th January, 2021).



systems [Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005, Lijphart, 2012; Norris, 2004].

MECHANISM	DESCRIPTION
Electoral Formula	Helps in ascertaining the method of counting the votes and to allocate it into parliamentary seats.
District Magnitude	Number of seats per district
Malapportionment	District Magnitude that are not in constant ratio with the voting population
Electoral Threshold	A party need a least number of votes to confirm a parliamentary seat.
Size of Assembly	Total number of parliamentary seats
Presidential Elections	Effect of chances to vote for presidential party in legislative elections.
Inter-Party Links	Vote aggregation among separately listed parties

Table 1- Overview of Electoral Mechanisms⁵

It can be said to include many other components such as, the regulation of candidacies, the facilities for registration and voting and the funding of the party campaigns. But the main feature of the electoral system is the process of translating votes into seats.⁶ As it can be said that election is the heart of the functioning of a democratic system, scholars had felt the need

to understand why different electoral systems are chooses and the impact such choices have on a variety of political outcomes, both at the individual level and at the system level.⁷

The main purpose for elections is to choose the head of the state, head of governments, member of parliament, or even president which totally depends upon the type of electoral system a country follows. So broadly type of elections can be divided into two i.e.:

- i. Direct Elections, example- France, Russia, Argentina
- ii. Indirect Elections, example- United States, India.

In direct elections, voters can directly cast the votes for a particular candidate or set of candidates, and in an indirect election, a group of representatives are elected which further elect the President or head of the State.

To understand indirect elections, it is important to understand what an electoral college is. When the general public casts the ballot and elects a group of electors which then elect a President or the State is known as the Electoral College. In a democratic country like India, it is very important for the voters to elect the representatives on constructive factors as they are in the end going to elect the nation's President. The most recent example of this is the highly contested election of 2000 in the United States where the Democratic Candidate Al Gore had more popular votes than the Republican candidate George W. Bush, but the latter had more Electoral College votes and was thus eventually elected.⁸ Farrell in 2017 and 2001 suggested that electoral

⁵ *Supra*, note 1.

⁶ *Supra*, note 3.

⁷ John T. Ishiyama, *Comparative Politics: Principles of Democracy and Democratization*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 1st edn, 2011).

⁸ *Ibid.*



systems are being made of a set of factors which broadly can be classified as the electoral formula, the district magnitude, ballot structure and electoral thresholds.

Electoral systems are important due to many reasons. It is usually presumed that these systems have an impact on the degree of fragmentation of the party systems which impacts the government effectiveness. They also help to solve the conflict in a way. Thus, it eventually helps to shape up the public policy outcomes and the incentives and behaviour of political actors. However, it is necessary to understand that the electoral systems do not exist in a vacuum.⁹ International IDEA 2017 has given the four principle functions which help identify the most critical question, why and how elections matter. These are as follows-

- i. *Legitimization*- Legitimacy essentially means free and fair electoral process which is free from any form of corruption, intimidation and restricted choices. Warren[2006] explores the complex relationships between democracy and the modern state, arguing that democracy emerged to provide such legitimacy for the coercive authority of the state.¹⁰
- ii. *Exercising accountability*- It is because of elections only that the party leaders are held accountable by the general public. The relationship between elections and accountability is not automatic which have been explored by Thomassesn in 2014.
- iii. *Choosing 'representatives'*- Representation is a wide term which covers representation on the basis of ideology or

ethnic, racial, religious etc. Hannah Pitkin in 1967 described

- a. Formal representation, which includes authorisation or a warrant to act, and accountability or incentives and sanctions for performance;
 - b. Symbolic representation, representing a concept such as class or gender;
 - c. Descriptive representation, the accuracy of resemblance; and
 - d. Substantive or issue-oriented representation.¹¹
- iv. *Exercising voice, aggregating preferences.*

However, one of the most enduring findings in the scholarly literature is that no electoral can maximize all the desirable outcomes that should flow from an electoral process such as legitimacy, inclusivity, accountability or producing a cohesive, responsive government [Gallagher and Mitchell 2005]. It is important to note that a particular electoral system will not work the same way in different nations.

TYPES OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

There are many different types of electoral systems in us around the world, and even within individual countries, different electoral systems may be found in different regions at different levels of government e.g., for elections to school boards, city councils, state legislatures, governorship, etc.

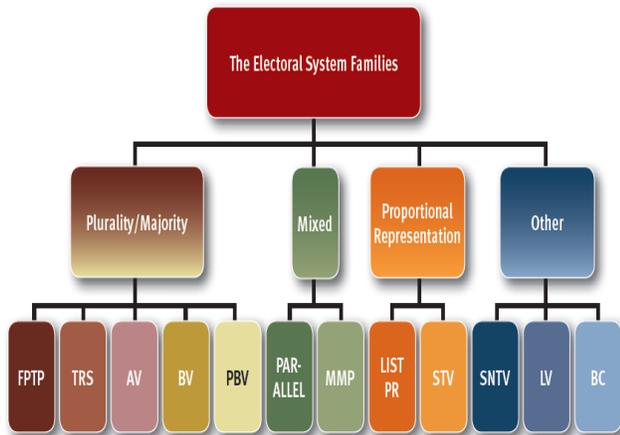
⁹ Alina Rocha Menocal, *Why electoral systems matter: an analysis of their incentives and effects on key areas of governance*, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, (2011).

¹⁰ *Supra*, note 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*



Families of electoral systems



Source: Reynolds, A. et al., *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2005), <<http://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-system-design-new-international-idea-handbook>>.

By Reynolds in 2005 broadly classified types of electoral systems into 3 main categories i.e., Plurality or Majority systems, Proportional Representation systems and Mixed systems. These categories are further sub-divided into more categories. Majority systems include First Past The Post [FPTP], Two Round Systems [TRS], Alternative Vote [AV], Block Vote [BV], and Party Block Vote [PBV]. List Proportional Systems [List PR] and Single Transferable Vote [STV] belongs to Proportional Representation systems. Parallel Systems and Mixed Member Proportional [MMP] are a form of Mixed system. Also, Single Non-Transferable Vote [SNTV], The Limited Vote [LT] and Board Count [BC] are referred to as other systems of electoral processes.

¹² *Supra*, note 3.

III. MAJORITARIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

According to a global assessment, majoritarian systems are used in 83 of 150 nations [Inter-Parliamentary Union 1993]. Also, the origin of this system can be traced back to 12th century and this is the easiest system of all. “Majority” is normally defined as 50% plus 1 votes. If no candidate gets a majority of votes, then a second round of voting is held, and only a selected number of members from the first round are allowed to participate. In some countries, such as Russia, the top two getters in the first round move on to the second round. In other countries, such as France, all candidates with a minimum threshold percentage of votes [12.5% of all registered votes] move on to the second round.

• FIRST PAST THE POST ALSO KNOWN AS PLURALITY ELECTIONS

This form of electoral system is used for elections to the lower chamber in 43 countries which include, India, United Kingdom, Canada, United States, New Zealand and many commonwealth states.¹² It is the simplest form as it uses single member districts and candidate centred- voting. The procedure is that the voter is presented with the list of nominated candidates and has to choose only one among the list. The candidate who wins the highest number of votes is the clear winner.¹³ One of the essential features of FPTP is that the single member constituencies are based on the size of the electorate. For example, in India, for a population of 1.3 Billion, there are 545 representatives, which means each member of Lok Sabha serves approximately 1.6

¹³ <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/es/esd/esd01/esd01a/default> last visited on 13th February, 2021.



million people. The geographical size of a constituency varies because of density of population, urban and rural areas. There is usually no minimum threshold for a candidate to pass and neither is absolute majority needed. For example, votes for a particular seat have been almost equally divided, Candidate A gets 35%, Candidate B gets 34% and Candidate C gets 32% of votes. Even though two-thirds of voters' support Candidate B and C but the plurality of votes is decisive.

- **TWO ROUND SYSTEM**

Two Ballot Majority Plurality is followed in the French fifth republic. In this form of system an absolute majority is required which means more than the half votes. If there is no clear absolute majority then, there is second round of voting. The point to be noted is that this system is different from majority run-off where only top two winning candidates can participate in the second ballot. Majority runoffs were used in the Presidential elections of France, Austria and Portugal.¹⁴ The advantage of this system is that it provides the voters with a very wide range of Candidates to choose from in the very first round. If there is no majority in the first round, then second round of voting is held.¹⁵

- **ALTERNATIVE VOTE**

In this system, voters have to give their preference among all the alternatives. If a candidate or a political party receives an

absolute majority then, that is the clear winner. But if there is no clear majority, then the weakest candidate is eliminated and the voters will have to for a second round of voting. If there is still no absolute majority, the same process is to be followed. This process can be followed n number of times till we have an absolute majority. Australian House of representatives use this system.¹⁶

- **BLOCK VOTE**

In multi-member districts, the Block Vote is simply the usage of first Past the Post voting. Each elector is given the same number of votes as the number of seats up for election, and they are normally free to vote for individual candidates regardless of party affiliations. They can utilize as many or as few votes as they want in most Block Vote systems.¹⁷ Voters normally get a single vote, just like in FPTP, however, unlike FPTP, there are multi-member districts, and voters choose from party lists of candidates rather than individual candidates. The party with the most votes in the district wins all of the seats, and its candidates are formally elected. There is no requirement to obtain an absolute majority of votes, as there is under FPTP.

ADVANTAGES

One of the main advantages of this system is that it produces clear winners or in some cases even winning coalitions. It is often argued that this system provides for incentives for political moderation¹⁸ in the

more moderate policies and prefer electoral, compromising and non-confrontational strategies over non-electoral, exclusive, and confrontational strategies. Moderation can take place at both ideological and behavioural levels that mutually reinforce each other

¹⁴ <http://www2.stat-athens.aueb.gr/~jpan/diatrives/Kalogirou/chapter2.pdf> accessed at 7:58pm on 15/02/2019

¹⁵ *Supra*, note 7.

¹⁶ *Supra*, note 3.

¹⁷ *Supra*, note 13.

¹⁸ **Moderation theory** is a set of interrelated hypotheses that explain the process through which political groups eschew radical platforms in favor of



political system [Powell, 2000]. There is also less likelihood of a proliferation of minor parties, which may make the formation of stable government difficult. Also, these systems are relatively easy to understand and can produce relatively speedy results.¹⁹ The Alternative Vote system overcomes the problem of vote splitting; voters can exercise a choice between two similar candidates without the fear that a third, unacceptable, candidate may be elected.²⁰

DISADVANTAGES

Majoritarian systems can result into manufactured majorities and disproportionate outcomes. Another disadvantage of this system is that it can inhibit majority representation and against smaller political parties and lead to tactical voting [Reynolds 2011].²¹ The critics have pointed out that it cannot be relied upon to provide a legislature reflecting the various shades of opinion expressed at the election and it does not necessarily place in power a government supported by the majority of electorate.²² The TRS also adds to the voter's burden, and there is occasionally a significant decline in turnout between the first and second rounds.²³ The Alternative Vote System has also been chastised for requiring voters to indicate a preference for candidate even if they do not want to.²⁴ Because it functions in a single-member districts, it provides outcomes that are disproportional when compared to PR systems. It demands a reasonable level of reading and numeracy to be used

effectively, and it provides outcomes that are disproportional when compared to PR systems.

IV. PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Proportional Electoral System is equivalent to inclusion of minority voices. It is said that proportional systems promote a politically knowledgeable population. The rationale underpinning all proportional representation (PR) systems is to consciously reduce the disparity between a party's share of the national vote and its share of the parliamentary seats. If a large party receives 40% of the vote, it should receive around 40% of the seats, while a minor party receiving 10% of the vote should receive 10% of the legislative seats.²⁵ Countries like Australia, Ireland, Fiji use proportional representation systems. PR can only be employed where there is impossibility of distributing a single seat to many parties.

• LIST PR

Only nine examples of the seventy-five Proportional Representation (PR) systems identified in the Global Distribution of Electoral Systems use MMP or Single-Transferable Vote (STV) techniques.

In its most basic form, List PR entails each party submitting a list of candidates to the electorate, people voting for a party, and parties gaining seats proportional to their aggregate vote share. The winning candidates are chosen from the lists in order in which

¹⁹ W. Glenn Harewood, *Electoral reform in Canada*, Metamode Institute of Public Policy, (2002)

²⁰ *Supra*, note 19.

²¹ *Supra*, note 4.

²² *Supra*, note 19.

²³ *Supra*, note 13.

²⁴ *Supra*, note 13.

²⁵ *Supra*, note 13.



they appear on the lists. South Africa's National Assembly features 400 members chosen through a closed PR List. In such systems, until all the seats are won by the percentage share of the parties, parties have to go down their lists till then. List PR along multi member districts is the most commonly used form of PR electoral system [Diamond & Plattner, 2006]. List PR is also further sub divided into open list and closed list. Closed list is where the voters cast vote in favor of a party and in open list voters cast vote for an individual candidate. Norris in 2004 quoted "This design aims at sharing power between multiple political actors to maximize deliberation, bargaining, and compromise".²⁶

- **SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE [STV]**

A list of all the candidates is given to the voter and the voter then has to rank them in the order of his preference. Candidates whose first preference votes amount to or exceeds the threshold are elected. The procedure for unfilled seats is that these are distributed to other candidates. This is done by distributing the 'surplus' votes of elected candidates to other candidates in proportion to the second preference marked on them. In case there are vacancies again, the lowest candidate is eliminated and his votes are transferred to other candidates again according to the second preference marked on them. The procedure goes on till all the seats have been filled.²⁷ This form of PR system is followed by Ireland, Malta and once in Estonia.

- **PARALLEL SYSTEM [MIXED]**

This system is also a family member of the Mixed Systems just like the MMP. Under this

system the seats are also allocated to the same chamber using two systems; the FPTP and also PR system. Unlike the MMP system, under the Parallel System there is no direct correlation or any linkage between the two seats in allocation of the seats. As the name suggests, the two systems are parallel to each other.²⁸ Under the Parallel System there are two ballot papers and voters directly participate in voting for both the FPTP and PR sections of the election.

- **MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM**

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) Systems, which are used in Germany, New Zealand, Bolivia, Italy, Mexico, Venezuela and Hungary, try to combine the best features of both majoritarian and proportional representation election systems.²⁹ Where the results of two types of elections are linked, with seat allocation at PR level which is dependent on what happens in the plurality or majority district seats and thus, compensating for any disproportionality, is known as Mixed Member Proportionality [MMP]. Germany, Bolivia, Lesotho have adopted this system.

- **ADVANTAGES**

Some of the more disruptive and 'unfair' results produced by plurality-majority electoral systems are avoided by PR systems. Large parties "seat bonus: are lowered, allowing tiny parties to enter parliament without needing to poll big number of votes. When thresholds are low, practically every vote case in a PR election goes to choosing a preferred candidate. This enhances voters' belief that it is worthwhile to go to the polls during election season since they can be

²⁶ *Supra*, note 1.

²⁷ *Supra*, note 14.

²⁸ *Supra*, note 13.

²⁹ *Supra*, note 13.



more confident that their vote will make a difference, however slight, in political outcomes.³⁰

DISADVANTAGES

It can result in unstable government because of proliferation of minor parties in legislature as a result of proportional representation system. There is no majority party which could be another reason for an unstable government and parties have to form coalitions and alliances.³¹ Governing coalitions that do not have enough common ground, either in terms of policies or supporting base. These 'coalitions of convenience' are sometimes contrasted with stronger 'coalitions of commitment' produced by other systems (For Example, the Alternative Vote), in which parties are mutually reliant on the votes of the other parties' followers to win elections.³²

V. CONCLUSION

To design an electoral system which is in accordance with the political, social, geographical conditions of a country is not an easy job. When deciding which system is best for the nation, there are certain factors that can be kept in mind. However, these, factors are not perfect as the world is dynamic, there is no surety as to how the country would react to a particular form of system. The factors are-

- i. Government Effectiveness
- ii. Responsive and Accountable Government
- iii. Fairness to minor parties
- iv. Social Representation³³.

India uses Single member Plurality system [SMPS] to elect the members of the lower house of its national parliament and state assemblies. This system makes it difficult for minority parties to gain representation [Lijphart 1994]. We would like to propose a suggestion that at the grass root level, i.e., the Panchayats, should use PR Systems to see whether this system is better for our country or not. If this experiment is successful then, the government shall think to bring such a reform across nation. But changing electoral rules can definitely alter citizen participation and satisfaction, which can either enhance or diminish the link between the voters and the policy makers. Thus, to conclude the paper, we have studied different forms of majoritarian systems as well as proportional representation electoral systems. It is not possible to say that any one of them is the perfect system. Every form has its own pros and cons which are dependent on various factors discussed above.

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³⁰ *Supra*, note 13.

³¹ *Supra*, note 19.

³² *Supra*, note 13.

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