COMPARING THE ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF FIRST PAST THE POST [FPTP], ALTERNATIVE VOTING [AV], AND PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION [PR] ELECTORAL SYSTEMS (2016/08/31)

(Attribution: Excerpt from my Paper "Electoral Reform in Canada" Metamode Institute, 2002; Refer to larger paper for detailed bibliography)

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Advantages of First-Past-The-Post System

The First-Past-The-Post [FPTP] system is widely seen to be unfair and many attempts have been made to improve or replace it in countries where it is in use. However, the system does have a number of advantages.

First, when operated with single member constituencies, it provides for a **direct relationship between the member of the legislature and the local constituency.** *The system is secret and simplest for the voter; and the voter's vote is NOT transferable, or manipulated by party hands. It is NOT perfect, but it is also how we, in western democratic societies, order our lives in any situation where there is competition for ONE winner.*

Second, because elections are contested at the constituency level, there can be a degree of local control over the party's choice of candidate, and parties must take some account of the constituency's wishes when selecting a candidate.

Third, the system elects the candidate who receives the largest number of votes. Candidates cannot be elected as a result of the transfer of a third or fourth preference, thus defeating the candidate with the largest number of first preference votes.

Fourth, the system is straightforward and easy to understand. Electors are not required to choose from vast lists of candidates or to exercise preferences they may not have. The system is uncomplicated and produces a speedy outcome.

Fifth, the system allows electors to directly choose the government and not be subject to backroom wheeling and dealing that can occur when a large number of parties are elected to the legislature.

Sixth, there is less opportunity for minority parties to be given power in proportionate to their electoral support.

Seventh, there is less likelihood of a proliferation of minor parties, which may make the formation of stable governments difficult.

Finally, because elections are contested at the constituency level there is a greater possibility of outstanding candidates being elected regardless of party support.

Disadvantages of First-Past-The-Post System

The main criticisms of the First-Past-The-Post system are as follows.

First, 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 the electorate.

Second, the First-Past-The-Post system is a winner-take-all system that can deny representation in the legislature to quite substantial levels of minority opinion and can provide large differences in the number of representatives elected with only a small difference in the number of votes obtained through the operation of the winning bonus.

Again, (1)**is it absolutely necessary to have all levels of minority opinion represented in a limited numbered legislature**?(2) Is failure to have these minority opinions represented deny the democratic rights of the minorities? (3) Does a vote for a majority representative at a specific moment in time mean that that particular representative cannot ever represent the will of the **minority** who did not vote for him/her? (4) Does under representation necessarily mean that minority parties are not heard? (5) Or that their views are not necessarily translated into law? (6) Are minority parties not part of the opposition (to the government) parties?

Advantages of the Alternative Vote System

First, it requires the winning candidate to obtain **a majority** of the vote. A situation is therefore avoided where a candidate can be elected on a little over one third of the vote, and where there are three candidates who are relatively evenly supported by the voters.

Second, the system also 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.

Third, the Alternative Vote system provides a dampening effect on the Plurality system's characteristics wherein there is a concentration of party representation on a geographical basis, and a tendency to provide an outcome of exaggerated majorities. Although party representation under the Alternative Vote system is more clearly aligned to voter support than under Plurality systems, the Alternative Vote system still produces working majorities and thus provides for stable government.

Fourth, the Alternative Vote system is relatively easy to understand and can produce relatively speedy results.

Disadvantages of the Alternative Vote System

The principal disadvantage of the Alternative Vote system and of Plurality systems as well, **is (1) that neither system necessarily reflects the wishes of the electorate.**

(2) Second, the degree of proportionality (i.e., members elected in proportion to voter support) is greater under Alternative Vote than under Plurality, but it does not achieve the degree of proportionality of Proportional Representation systems.

Third, the system is still subject to the winning bonus phenomenon and can also result in the party winning the highest number of votes still not receiving the largest number of seats--although this factor is largely dependent upon the geographic spread of party support and on the mix of parties contesting the election.

Can one measure the **"reflection of the wishes of the electorate"** in terms of pure absolute numbers?

Fourth, the system can often be unpredictable in its practical application, and can yield a result which may see the least unfavored rather than the most popular candidate elected. In an election where there is a political situation consisting of parties considered to be on the left, right and centre of the political spectrum, **the centre party** could receive preferences of both the left and right parties on the basis of being the least unfavorable option available, and thus become the winner.

Fifth, the Alternative Vote system has also been criticized **because it requires voters to express a preference for candidates where the voter may not wish to do so.** This situation can be overcome by allowing voters the option **of not expressing preferences if they so desire**. But then, does this not defeat the concept and purpose of "alternativeness?"

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3. **Proportional Representation, or [PR]**

Proportional Representation systems are widely used in **Europe** and in Australia for upper houses. **Proportional Representation systems attempt to relate the allocation of seats as closely as possible to the distribution of votes.** Many Proportional Representation systems have been developed to overcome the problems of proportionality that are associated with single member constituencies which use either plurality or majoritorian systems. **Multi-member constituencies** where there is **more than one vacancy are necessary for proportional representation to work well.** **Constituencies can range from the whole country or state to parts of the count**ry. WE DO NOT HAVE MULTI-MEMBER CONSTITUENCIES IN CANADA.

Proportional Representation systems can be broadly grouped into two categories:

 (a) List systems and

 (b) The Single-Transferable Vote system. In turn, List systems can be further divided into (i) Largest Remainder and (ii) Highest Average categories.

List systems may or may not allow the elector to choose between candidates of the same party.

 List systems can be either (1) closed, allowing no choice at all;

 (2) flexible, where the voter can vote for the party or a candidate;

 (3) open, where there is no party vote, but candidates listed in order;

 or (4) free, where the candidates are not placed in any order by the parties.

The basic concept of Proportional Representation systems is to allocate seats in a legislature or Houses of Parliament in a relationship which is

proportional to the number of votes cast in the election. To achieve this requirement a number of different and complex computational arrangements have been devised. These arrangements may or may not include the use of a quota**.**

 A quota in this context is the number of votes required to obtain a seat. The simplest method of determining a quota is to divide the number of valid votes by the number of seats to be allocated. This method is often referred to as the **Hare quota**.

Three alternatives to the Hare quota exist:

(1) The Hagen-bach-Bischoff quota, in which the number of votes is divided by the number of seats plus one;

(2) the Droop quota, in which the number of votes is divided by the number of seats plus one and adding one to the quotient;

 (3) and the Imperial quota, in which the number of votes is divided by the number of seats plus two.

The Largest Remainder system favours smaller parties over larger parties when using the Hare quota. The relative importance of remainders in the allocation of seats can be reduced by the use of a lower quota (Hagenbach-Bischoff or Droop). **Lower quotas** result in more seats being allocated on the basis of parties receiving a full quota and less being allocated by remainders. However, the use of a lower quota does not always overcome the proportionality problem of the Largest Remainder system.

To overcome problems associated with the **Largest Remainder system**, the **Highest Average system was devise**d. The object of the **Highest Average system** is to ensure that when all seats have been allocated the average number of votes required to win one seat shall be as near as possible the same for each party.

The Highest Average system can be used with or without a quota. When used with a quota, the system is sometimes referred to as **a Hagenbach-Bischoff system.** The system derives its name from the method of allocation of seats to parties. Under the system, each party's votes are divided by a series of divisors to produce an average vote. The party with the highest averages votes after each stage of the process is allocated a seat. After a party has been allocated a seat, its votes are then divided by the next divisor.

The Highest Average system has a number of different variations, depending upon the divisors used and whether a quota is used or not. The d'Hondt version uses the numbers one, two, three, four, etc. as its divisors.

The form of Proportional Representation familiar to most Australians **is the Single-Transferable Vote system used in elections for the Senate**, the Legislative Councils of New South Wales, South Australian and Western Australia and the Tasmanian House of Assembly. The Tasmanian system, referred to as Hare-Clark, differs from the system used for the Senate and States' Upper Houses in a number of ways. However, the basic concepts are the same.

In the Single-Transferable Vote system, voters are

 (1) required to rank individual candidates according to their preference.

(2) A candidate must receive a **<u>Droop quota</u>** in order to be elected.

(3) Any candidates whose first preference votes equal or exceed the quota are declared elected.

 (4) Votes surplus to the quota cast for successful candidates are transferred amongst the remaining candidates according to the second preferences recorded by the voter.

(5) The questions of which votes actually elect the first elected candidate and which votes are surplus and hence distributed can either be resolved by sampling or conducting a full count to determine the proportions favouring particular candidates.

 (6) The proportions are then applied to the first preference votes of the successful candidate.

(7) As each candidate receives a quota he is elected and his surplus votes are distributed.

(8) If all surplus votes have been distributed and not all vacancies have been filled then the candidate with the smallest number of votes is eliminated and his votes distributed.

(9) This process continues until all vacancies are filled.

The Single-Transferable Vote system can be explained simply in the following terms. If a voter wished to vote for a particular candidate, but the candidate was either so popular as to have no need for his vote or so unpopular as to have no chance of election, then the vote was "not wasted" but used to elect the voters' second choice candidate.

The need for the Droop quota in the Single-Transferable Vote system may require some explanation. (a) The Droop quota represents the smallest numbers of votes that will ensure election. (b)This can best be illustrated in the case of an election for one vacancy with two candidates. One candidate is required to poll only one more vote than half to ensure election. Thus, with 100 votes, 51 votes would ensure election. Similarly, in a five member constituency, six candidates can each receive one-sixth of the vote, but only five can get any more votes; therefore, any candidate who polls one more vote than one-sixth of the total must be elected. (c) If five candidates receive 17 votes (85 votes in total), then the remaining candidate must receive 15 votes. Thus 17 votes is the smallest number of votes that ensures election. Proportional Representation systems were developed **primarily to overcome the weakness of Plurality and Majoritorian systems in providing representation for minority opinions.**

*** But, compare the complexity of the PR voting systems for the voter, compared to the simplicity of the First-Past-The- Post system/ Majoritarian systems.

Use of proportional representation systems is widespread throughout Western Europe where the political landscape is typified by a large number of political parties. **The principal advantage of Proportional Representation is to provide representation to those parties in proportion to their electoral support**. Proportional Representation systems thus overcome the main criticism of plurality and majoritorian systems.

Do they really overcome the main criticism?

Some form of Proportional Representation would provide a solution to the problem found in the United Kingdom where the Liberal Social Democratic Alliance polled 22.6% of the vote at the 1987 House of Commons election, yet only won 3.4% of the seats. Democratic principles would suggest that this situation is unfair as nearly one quarter of the electorate is denied representation in the Parliament.

Disadvantages of Proportional Representation

The arguments against Proportional Representation are based on the **consequences of the system in providing representation to smaller parties.**

First, the proliferation of minor parties in legislatures as a result of proportional representation systems can result in **unstable government,** and in minor parties being in a balance of power situation.

Second, the election of a number of parties with no one party having a majority in the legislature may result in **unstable government and uncertainty** as parties **trade with each other to form coalitions and alliances.**

Third, the behind-the-scenes maneuvering and bargaining can lead to situations where **the resultant government follows policies that bear only a slight resemblance to the policies placed before the electorate by the parties concerned.** A minor party may, for example, be able to take advantage of this situation and **hold major parties to ransom** by imposing its wishes on the other parties in recompense for its support. In this political environment **governments are more susceptible to the whims of party officials rather than the wishes of the electorate.**

Fourth, *by its very nature it involves large multi-member electorates thus breaching the direct relationship between an electorate and its representative in the legislature.*

Fifth, the important electorate-based work undertaken by local representatives may be undermined by the lack of identification by a representative with a defined area.

Sixth, representatives may appear remote from the local constituency and owe their allegiance more to the **central party authority than to the local electorate.**