

Electoral Systems

An electoral system is a set of institutional formulas producing a collective choice through voting. The main elements of an electoral system are: assembly size or total number of seats; district magnitude or number of seats to be elected in a district; the electoral rule to allocate seats from votes; and the ballot permitting the voter different choices. Different rules and procedures have combined these elements in many ways to produce a variety of electoral systems in the real world.

In late medieval and early modern assembly elections in local communities with homogeneous electorates, relatively simple electoral systems prevailed. A typical system until the nineteenth century was composed of: (1) multi-member districts; (2) plurality or majority rule; and (3) an open ballot. Essentially, voters could vote for their preferred individual candidates, and those with the higher numbers of votes were elected. This type of electoral system can produce a consensual individual representation of the community, especially in contexts of high economic and ethnic homogeneity in which it is relatively easy to identify common interests and select collective goods. Such systems have survived at the local level in some countries, and they are still typically used in meetings and assemblies of modern housing condominiums, neighborhood associations, school and university boards, professional organizations, corporation boards, and students' and workers' unions.

However, in contexts of relatively complex and heterogeneous electorates, simple electoral rules create incentives for the coordination of candidacies and voting. Forming a list of candidates, a faction, or, in more modern terms, a *party*, may move voters to vote *en bloc* rather than for individuals weighed separately. In multimember districts using plurality rule, voting *en bloc* (or the *general ticket*) may produce a party *sweep* or overrepresentation by a single party. Once partisan candidacies and partisan voting emerged in a number of countries by the mid-nineteenth century, some political leaders, activists, and politically motivated scholars began to search for new electoral rules and procedures that could reduce single-party sweeps and exclusionary victories. The two main options were either retaining plurality or majority rule but in smaller *single-member districts*, or retaining multi-member districts but using new *proportional representation* rules.

RULES AND PROCEDURES

In a small single-member district, a candidate that would have been defeated by a party sweep in a larger multimember district may be elected. Thus, this type of system tends to produce more varied representation than the old system with voting *en bloc*. Several *majoritarian* rules can be applied. With simple plurality, the winner is the candidate supported by only a *relative majority*, that is, by a higher number of voters than any other candidate but not requiring any particular number, proportion, or threshold of votes. In practice, this makes it possible for generally binding decisions presumably

decided by “majority” to actually be won by only a minority of voters. Plurality rule has traditionally been used in England and the United Kingdom and in modern times in former British colonies, including the United States, Canada, and India. Plurality-based electoral systems are also called *first-past-the-post* and *winner-takes-all* systems.

With other rules based on the majority principle, if no alternative receives an absolute majority (more than half) of the votes, further rounds of voting are implemented, these rounds either requiring a simple plurality or reducing the choice to the two candidates with the highest numbers of votes in the first round. Such *majority-runoff* systems have traditionally been used in France, among other countries. A variant requires voters to rank all candidates, and includes several counts of votes (instead of several rounds of voting), until a candidate obtains the most preferences, as in the *majority-preferential* electoral system used in Australia (also called *alternative vote* or *instant runoff*).

Proportional representation in multimember districts allocates seats to multiple parties competing in an election on the basis of the votes received. The basic mathematical formulas that make this principle operable were invented in late eighteenth century for apportioning seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among differently populated states. These formulas were reinvented in Europe in late nineteenth century for the allocation of parliamentary seats to political parties with different numbers of votes. A proportional representation formula defines a quota of inhabitants or votes worth a seat. The “simple” quota (as devised by both Alexander Hamilton [1755/57–1804] and Thomas Hare [1806–1891]) is the divisor between the total number of inhabitants or votes and the total number of seats. But it usually requires an additional criterion to allocate some of the seats, most commonly to the *largest remainders* after the quota is used. In contrast, the smaller *highest average* or *distributive number* (as devised by both Thomas Jefferson [1743–1826] and Victor d’Hondt [1841–1901]) is sufficient to allocate all seats. This quota can be calculated after the election by several procedures, including trial and error, a series of divisors, or by lowering the simple quota until it fits.

Different forms of ballots may either force a categorical vote or permit some choice of individual candidates. *Categorical ballots* are used in single-member districts where voters can vote for only one candidate, as well as in multimember districts where voters can vote for only a closed list of candidates or en bloc. In contrast, *open lists* permit voters to select one or several candidates from a party list. With the *double vote*, voters choose both a closed party list and one individual candidate. The *open ballot* permits voters to vote for individual candidates from different parties. The *majority-preferential vote* and the *single-transferable vote* require voters to rank individual candidates.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM CONSEQUENCES

Elections in single-member districts by plurality or majority rule always produce a single absolute winner, who may have the support of only a minority of voters as a first preference. A winner by plurality or by second-round majority might be defeated by a losing candidate by absolute majority if a choice between the two were available. Majoritarian rules may thus induce nonsincere or “strategic” voting that favors the voter’s second-best or less-rejected candidate, so as to prevent the victory of a least-preferred one. In contrast, proportional representation electoral systems are more inclusive of several groups. Since most votes count to elect seats, they promote a more sincere revelation of preferences by voters.

In parliamentary elections with multiple single-member districts, plurality rule typically gives overrepresentation to one or two parties at the expense of others and fabricates a single party's absolute majority of seats, thus permitting the formation of a single-party cabinet. In contrast, multiparty parliaments based on proportional representation tend to produce multiparty coalition governments based on a majority of seats and popular votes. In practice, there is a paradox: "majoritarian" electoral systems often create governments with minority electoral support, while proportional representation rules, which were initially devised to include minorities, tend to produce governments with majority electoral support. In plurality-rule electoral systems, a small change in the total number of popular votes can provoke a complete alternation of the party in government. Proportional representation systems, where parties may have opportunities to share power with different partners, produce more policy stability in the long term.

THE CHOICE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

In general, the *Micro-mega rule* applies: the large prefer the small and the small prefer the large. Specifically, dominant and large parties prefer small assemblies and single-member districts that are able to exclude others from competition. In contrast, multiple small parties prefer large assemblies and large districts with proportional representation that can include them. Existing parties tend, thus, to choose electoral systems that are able to crystallize or consolidate the previously existing party configurations and systems.

However, the size of the assembly is a structural variable positively correlated to the country's population and difficult to change dramatically. In large countries, such as Australia, Canada, France, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States, a large assembly can be sufficiently inclusive, even if it is elected in small, single-member districts, due to the territorial variety of the representatives. In small countries, by contrast, the size of the assembly is small and, as a consequence, the development of multiple parties favors more strongly the adoption of inclusive, large multimember districts with proportional representation rules. Proportional representation was first adopted for parliamentary elections in relatively small countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and other western European democracies in early twentieth century. In the long term, both the number of countries and the number of democracies in the world increase, while large countries decentralize, leading to an overall decrease in the size of democratic assemblies. This induces the adoption of more inclusive, proportional representation electoral rules.

In addition, the number of parties tends to increase under any electoral system as a consequence of the broadening of suffrage rights, as well as initiatives to politicize new issues and change the public agenda by groups seeking power or new policy decisions. Indeed, plurality rule provides incentives to form only a few viable large candidacies or parties. But coordination fails with relative frequency, due to the costs of information transmission, bargaining, and the implementation of agreements among previously separate organizations. Lack of coordination may produce defeats and no representation for candidates, groups, and parties that have significant support among voters. Parties unable to coordinate themselves into a small number of candidacies to compete successfully under plurality rule tend to choose electoral systems that can reduce the risks of competing, giving all participants greater opportunities to obtain or share power.

There is, thus, a general trend toward proportional representation over time. Nowadays, most democratic countries in the world use electoral systems with proportional representation rules. Likewise, for presidential elections, plurality rule tends to be replaced with second-round majority rules permitting multiparty competition in the first round. Many countries have also introduced a greater element of individual candidate voting. In fact, none of the new democracies established in countries with more than one million inhabitants in the “third wave” of democratization (since 1974) has adopted the old British model of a parliamentary regime with elections in single-member districts by plurality rule.

SEE ALSO [Cleavages](#) ; [Democracy](#) ; [Franchise](#)

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Source Citation: "Electoral Systems." [International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences](#). Ed. William A. Darity, Jr.. Vol. 2. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. 560-562.

Majority Rule

The principle of majority rule in elections and decision-making was introduced in medieval Germanic law and canon law as a consequence of failures to make decisions by unanimity. In fact, in any community, the formation of two or more factions or parties may lead to procedures requiring the counting of votes and the achievement of a majority threshold.

The majority principle has been praised for being the only system that satisfies the following criteria: (1) decisiveness, but only when there are no more than two alternatives (e.g., candidates, parties, or policy proposals) to choose from; (2) anonymity or voter equality; (3) neutrality with respect to issues, so the status quo or the largest group does not have an advantage; and (4) monotonicity, or a positive response to changes in voter preference.

If there are only two alternatives along a single issue or ideological dimension, such as the left-right axis, majority rule tends to give the victory to the alternative closer to the median voter's preference. By definition, the median voter—that is, the voter whose preference is located in an intermediate position with less than half of voters on each of the two sides—is always necessary to form a consistent majority in a single dimension. Since the median voter's preference minimizes the sum of the distances from all other individual preferences, the winner by majority rule in a two-alternative contest minimizes aggregate distance and thus maximizes social utility.

However, this model relies on two strong assumptions: a single-dimensional issue space and only two alternatives. If the set of issues submitted to a majority decision is not bound, the introduction of new issues creating a multidimensional space can change the winner. In a multidimensional space, an alternative—such as a party or candidate's platform that includes a “package” of proposals on several issues—can make the majority winner unpredictable, depending on which issue takes higher salience in voter choice. In the long term, there can be a series of successive winners relying on different salient issues, with no foreseeable “trajectory.”

When there are more than two alternatives, even in a single-dimensional space, majority rule can be indecisive and unable to produce a winner. Several procedures loosely related to the majority principle can then be adopted. With plurality or relative majority rule, the winner is the alternative that obtains a higher number of votes than any other alternative while not requiring a particular proportion of votes, a result that may imply minority support. Plurality rule has traditionally been used for political elections in the United Kingdom and in former British colonies, including the United States, Canada, and India. Majority runoff requires an absolute majority of votes in the first round of voting, while in a second round the choice can be reduced to the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes in the first round, so as to secure majority support for the winner. Such a system is used for presidential elections in France and in some other countries, including many in Latin America. A majority-preferential vote also requires an absolute majority of voters' first preferences, while successive counts of further preferences are made to find a candidate with majority support. This system is used in Australia.

With both plurality and majority-runoff or majority-preferential voting, the median voter's preference can be defeated or eliminated in the first or successive rounds. This implies that the nonmedian winner by any of these procedures might be defeated by another candidate by absolute majority if the choice between the two were available. Extreme minority candidates who are broadly rejected by citizens can paradoxically win by these procedures, based on the majority principle. Majority rule is, thus, dependent on irrelevant alternatives; it encourages strategies aimed at altering the number of alternatives, such as divide and win and merge and win, as well as nonsincere or strategic votes in favor of a less-preferred but more-likely-to-win alternative.

Even when majority rule is decisive and maximizes social utility, as in a single-dimensional space with only two alternatives, it can produce a tyranny of the majority, where one group always wins and there is a permanent losing minority. There has been a long history of concern with the perils of the tyranny of the majority for good democratic governance. Remedies include constitutional guarantees on individual and minority rights, judicial review of decisions made by a majority, mechanisms requiring supermajorities and consensual decisions, and separate elections for different issues, as can be provided by institutional frames of division of powers and decentralization. With separate elections, different majorities and minorities may emerge on different issues, thus creating a broad distribution of political satisfaction or social utility.

If a permanent minority subsists, it may try to secede and establish its own independent democratic system. A previous minority within a large country would then become a local majority and increase the total number of citizens identified with collective decisions and social utility. However, a consistently outvoted minority may not be able to secede because it lacks the military capability to do so or would have to accept resource-poor land or territory.

The major alternative to the principle of majority rule is proportional representation. This system implies representative government, that is, decision-making in two stages: election by voters and decisions made by elected representatives. If the two stages are decided by majority rule, the winner is "a majority of the majority, who may be, and often are, but a minority of the whole" (Mill 1861, chap. 7). In contrast, if the voters' election is held with proportional representation and the elected representatives make decisions by majority rule, typically by forming multiparty legislative and cabinet coalitions, the system will generally produce a close fit between electoral and legislative majorities. Nonmajority principles are, thus, necessary to guarantee majority government.

SEE ALSO [Democracy](#) ; [Majoritarianism](#) ; [Majority Voting](#) ; [Plurality](#) ; [Tyranny of the Majority](#) ; [Utilitarianism](#)

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Source Citation: "Majority Rule." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Ed. William A. Darity, Jr.. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. 560-562.

Multiparty Systems

Electoral competition among a high number of parties and the formation of multiparty coalition governments are typical features of most democratic regimes. In contrast, two-party systems producing single-party governments are characteristic of a few of the oldest, institutionally frozen democracies, including the United Kingdom of Britain and the United States of America. In the past, two-party systems were considered a sound formula for effective and stable government. But the expansion of suffrage rights and the diffusion of democratic regimes, not only in continental Europe but also across the rest of the world, has confirmed Robert Dahl's early intuition: "It might be reasonable to consider multiparty systems as the natural way for government and opposition to manage their conflicts in democracies, while two-party systems, whether resembling the British pattern or the American, are the deviant cases" (1966, p. 334).

The degree of multipartyism can be measured not only by the absolute number of parties in the system, but also by their relative size. For this purpose, several indices of fractionalization, including the "effective number" of parties, have been proposed in which each party is weighed by its proportion of either votes or seats (depending on the electoral or legislative focus of the analysis). A conventional estimate is that multiparty systems exist when there are at least three *effective* parties. In other words, there is still a two-party system, even if there are more than two parties in the assembly, if two of the parties are sufficiently large (as happens, for instance, in the British House of Commons). About three-fourths of more than eighty democratic countries with more than one million inhabitants at the beginning of the twenty-first century have multiparty systems, that is, more than three effective electoral parties.

MULTIPARTY ELECTIONS

In any complex society, multiple parties can be formed on the basis of the politicization of new issues if political entrepreneurs take the initiative to introduce policy proposals alternative to the status quo. Potential issues to be politicized include defense, security, taxes, freedom, trade, school, property, family, welfare, the environment, race, and so on. The corresponding parties raising new policy alternatives have historically been called conservatives, liberals, radicals, socialists, Christians, agrarians, greens, ethnic, regionalists, and many other labels. In two-party systems, the agenda can be manipulated by shifting salience to only one or a few issues at a time, which usually produces high polarization between the two parties. In multiparty systems, by contrast, multiple policy issues can be given salience by different parties at the same time, thus broadening the public agenda and the opportunities for citizens' choice.

There has been some discussion over the propensity of multiparty systems to promote either "moderate" or "polarized" electoral competition. Polarization indices capture the degree of party concentration of votes or seats and the relative distance between various parties' policy positions. Obviously, polarization is minimal when there is only one, internally compact party—that is, when all voters prefer the same policy, which is indeed a rare occurrence in a democratic regime. But polarization is maximal when the number of parties is two, they have similar size, and are located at a great distance from each other. In countries with more than two parties, the higher the number of parties, the

lower their relative distances (because intermediate, relatively close positions emerge), and the lower the degree of polarization in electoral competition among them.

A traditionally illustrative case is Switzerland, where there are a high number of parties and a high degree of policy consensus among them. Systematic analyses have shown that, in general, high fractionalization, that is, a high number of parties, is associated with low polarization.

In fact, most democratic party systems have moderate degrees of both party fractionalization and party polarization. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, multiparty systems exist in democratic countries such as Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, as well as in the European Parliament and many other institutions.

MULTIPARTY COALITIONS

In multiparty assemblies, decision-making usually requires the formation of majority multiparty coalitions. In most parliamentary regimes, cabinets are formed with more than one party. In regimes with separate powers, multiparty coalitions are also frequently formed both for legislative decisions and in support of presidential cabinets.

When parties form coalitions, they usually prefer partners with relatively close policy and ideology positions in order to maintain consistency with their own positions and win voters' credibility. As a consequence, majority coalitions typically include the median legislator's party, which can be located around a centrist, moderate position. If there is proportional representation, the median party corresponds to the median voter's choice. As the median voter's position minimizes the sum of distances from all the voters, this outcome can be considered relatively socially efficient. In contrast, in a two-party system with a majoritarian electoral rule, a single party may receive a majority of seats in the parliament on the basis of a minority of popular votes, which does not necessarily include the median voter. On average, multiparty coalition cabinets based on proportional representation are substantially closer to the median voter's position than are single-party cabinets based on plurality or majority rules.

In multiparty cabinets, the distribution of offices among parties may follow two criteria. On some issues of general interest, such as economic policy and interior and foreign affairs, the parties in the coalition tend to compromise on intermediate and moderate policies. Over time, even if some partners of the successive governmental coalitions change, there is a significant degree of consensus and continuity on major policies, in contrast to frequent policy reversals when single-party governments alternate. On other issues, separate portfolios are allocated to different parties according to the issue on which they are most prominently defined—such as finance for liberals, education for Christians, labor for socialists, agriculture for agrarians, environment for greens, culture for regionalists, etc.—which may satisfy people with intense issue preferences.

LARGE ELECTORAL RULES

The formation of multiple parties promotes the choice of inclusive political and electoral institutions. In general, if there are only one or two large parties they prefer small assemblies and single-member electoral districts with plurality rule, that is, institutions able to exclude others from competition. In contrast, multiple small parties prefer large assemblies and large electoral district magnitudes (that is, high numbers of seats per district), the latter using proportional representation rules, able to include them in the system.

But the pressures from multiparty systems to adopt inclusive electoral rules work differently in countries of different size. In large countries, a large assembly with the number of seats positively correlated to the country's population can be sufficiently inclusive. In the United States, for instance, the ideological range of Congress members, in spite of belonging formally to only two parties, is similar to that of typical multiparty systems in Europe, including conservative, Christian-democratic, liberal, and social-democratic positions. This derives from the fact that each representative is elected by the rather homogeneous population of a small territory in a very large and heterogeneous country. The two parties are large umbrellas for varied representation.

By contrast, in small countries in which small assemblies do not create large room for political variety, the development of multiple parties favors more strongly the adoption of inclusive, large multimember districts with proportional representation rules. A relevant development is that the average size of democratic countries decreases as a consequence of the fact that the number of countries and the number of democracies in the world increase. As the number of parties also increases within each democratic country, more and more countries tend, thus, to adopt electoral systems with rules of proportional representation.

All in all, traditional two-party systems, which reflected early political developments in relatively simple societies with limited suffrage rights, have been associated in recent times with high electoral polarization, adversarial politics, socially biased, minority governments, and policy instability. In contrast, multiparty systems, which result from widespread and continuing initiatives for policy and ideology innovation in democratic countries, are associated with inter-party competition and cooperation, broad public agendas, coalition governments with majority social support, consensual and relatively stable policy-making, and inclusive political institutions.

SEE ALSO [Democracy](#) ; [First-past-the-post](#) ; [Party Systems, Competitive](#) ; [Plurality](#)

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Josep M. Colomer

Source Citation: "Multiparty Systems." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Ed. William A. Darity, Jr.. Vol. 5. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. 321-323.