What are the advantages and disadvantages of different electoral systems

Politics

A constant, albeit small, issue during general elections in recent years has been the possible transition of the UK from the majoritarian First Past the Post (FPTP) system to a more proportional one, such as Single Transferable Vote (STV). The main proponents of this system are the Liberal Democrats, whose former leader, Sir Menzies Campbell called their commitment to Proportional Representation (PR) " Absolute" (BBC News, 2007). The question remains however, what are the flaws with FPTP and which proportional system should be used to replace it, taking into account their implementation in other countries and their possible flaws.

The United Kingdom's current system is a single member plurality system, meaning that the country is divided into single member constituencies, where a single candidate is chosen to represent a single constituency, requiring only a plurality of the votes, not a majority to win (the " First Past the Post" rule (Heywood, 2007)).

This system's greatest advantage is that there is one representative for each geographical constituency. As a result a constituent knows who they have to speak to if they have an issue with which they require help. Other advantages include the creation of a strong government with a clear mandate which creates government stability as it is more often than not made up of one party.

The biggest problem with this system is the wasted vote issue, namely, all the votes made for a losing candidate and even many of the votes for a winning candidate are technically wasted, as the loser wins nothing and the winner did not require the extra votes above a plurality to win their seat. The

system also means that a party with country wide support, but no focused local support can miss out on seats (The " third party effect" (Heywood, 2007)). Countries which use FPTP usually end up as a two party state, for example the domination of the Republicans and Democrats in America, the Conservatives and Labour in the UK, etc.

While many of these issues might seem trivial, they can have profound political and cultural effects, take for example the Northern Irish House of Commons, which from 1929 onwards, was elected using the First Past the Post system, giving the Ulster Unionist Party almost total dominance of the house (69. 23% of the seats in 1965 compared to the 17. 31% of the Nationalist party who came in second place (Nicholas Whyte, 2002)). The supposedly unfair system coupled with blatant gerrymandering led to much anger within the Nationalist community, and the parliament was eventually disbanded in 1972, leading to Northern Ireland being run from Westminster for almost 30 years.

A modification on the standard FPTP system, traditionally used in France, is the Second Ballot System (SBS), which has the same single member geographical constituencies, but requires a candidate to have at an overall majority (At least 50%) to win. If this doesn't occur, all but the two most popular candidates are removed and a run-off occurs between the two most popular.

The advantages of SBS are that it ensures a candidate has an overall majority in his seat, as well as helping to ensure a government obtains its

mandate with a higher percentage of the popular vote than currently occurs. And, as with FPTP, it is still possible for there to be a strong government.

However, this system is only marginally more proportional than FPTP and it still gives the same unfair advantage to the big two parties. It also encourages abandonment of principles, with the two run off candidates appealing to the electorate who would not vote for them, leading to concessions by the politicians, or the electorate being forced into voting for someone they would normally vote against. This in turn could lead to a reduced turn out in the second ballot.

An example of the way the system can influence the electorate's decision can be seen in the 2002 French Presidential election, where Jacques Chirac won a landslide as a result of many left wing voters supporting him over his Far-Right opponent, Jean-Marie La Pen, as he was seen as the lesser of two evils (Resulting in left wing parties running slogans such as " Vote for the crook, not the fascist" (New York Times, 2002)).

Finally, we have the Alternative Vote (AV) and Supplementary Vote (SV) systems. In AV and SV there are single member constituencies, as per usual, but the voting is done preferentially. This means that under AV a person will mark their choices numerically with one being their first preference, and the lowest number being their last. In SV only two people are chosen, a first and second preference. If no one on first preference gets 50%+1 of the vote, then second preferences are factored in, and so on downwards until someone gets 50%+1. In SV, if your first vote isn't for one of the top two

candidates, your second vote is taken instead. If neither is for the top two candidates it is excluded.

While this system lacks the tactical element seen in SBS, it does not exclude people from affecting the vote indirectly. Since it is almost impossible to win on first ballots alone, a run off will almost always occur. As a result, the choice of a second preference can alter the outcome. This has been shown recently during the " Stop Boris" campaign to stop Boris Johnson becoming Mayor of London. It urged people to put Brian Paddick, the Lib Dem candidate as their second choice with Ken Livingstone or someone else as their first to have the best chance of stopping Boris from winning or entering the top-two, excluding many votes for him.

The aforementioned systems are Majoritarian, which effectively means that the winner, regardless of their percentage of the vote, is whoever has the most, this can and does result with people winning with only ~30% of the vote. This is considered undemocratic by some, with these systems being classed as " broken" (Nick Clegg, 2008).

The alternative are systems based on proportionality, where the basic principle is that, simply put, your vote share equates to your share of power. Therefore a party with 30% of the vote will have 30% representation of the legislative body they've been running for and in theory 30% of the power.

One proportional system is the Additional Member System (AMS). This system is a mix of FPTP and PR. Namely, a certain amount (50% in Germany, for example) of seats are assigned using the Majoritarian First Past the Post.

The rest are assigned using a Proportional List System, which is discussed in detail further on.

Now this system is designed as a compromise solution, to tailor to both proponents of Majoritarian and Proportional systems, as a result it includes the broad proportionality of PR while still allowing having a (admittedly with greatly reduced chances) Single Party government, providing a balance between fairness and strength.

This mix of different allocation systems can however cause large disparity and a possible two-tiered effect in a parliament, where some of its members are busy with constituency based duties and others are able to focus solely on their time in the parliament. They are therefore more able to, in theory, reach higher positions within the government.

Another proportional system is Single-Transferable-Vote (STV) which works by having multimember constituencies. Parties put forward candidates to each seat to fill as many seats as it has, and then the voters use a preferential vote to say who they want. To receive a seat, a candidate needs to fulfil a quota, decided by the droop formula which takes the number of votes cast over the number of seats plus one and then adds one to that. Seats are then allocated based on preferences until all seats are filled by people with the minimum quota.

This is an incredibly proportional system, it ensures that many different voices are heard and counted, which is particularly important in areas such

as Northern Ireland, where it is used, given the large amounts of sectarian violence that have occurred in the past as a result of unfair voting systems.

The chances, however, of a strong government are essentially wiped out under this system. This can however be a good thing. If one takes, again, the situation in Northern Ireland, despite having the most seats, the unionists are forced to work together with the nationalists simply because they cannot govern effectively, if at all, without their support. In other places, such as the Republic of Ireland, where this is used, there is less need for that sort of government and it merely becomes a burden.

Finally we have the List System. Under this system there are no constituencies and a person votes for the party they want in power. To decide who gets the seats, a party will have a list, which contains in order of preference the candidates who will get the seats. This list can be both closed or open, that is, be decided by the party leadership or by more grassroots members of the party.

This system, is, according to Heywood (2007), possibly the purest form the proportional representation possible. It is open to all parties and individuals and the seats in the legislature are decided and handed out only on the basis of proportion of votes, where it then becomes the prerogative of the party who to give them to. Votes are based solely on the party and there are no constituencies which can unfairly shift the balance.

Of course, as it is open to everyone, this leads to the splitting of votes with many smaller parties running and gaining seats. Therefore in some countries

(Such as Germany) a 5% minimum vote is required. This does not however fix the issue of it creating a monumentally weak government which will essentially be founded on convenience rather than ideological lines. One needs only look to Germany and Belgium for governments that are either weak, based solely on convenience or, often times, both, with Belgium going almost two years without an effective government due to infighting over trifling political issues.

From studying these different systems, be they majoritarian or proportional, we can see that, indeed, proportional systems are fairer. But would they work in Britain? Well, to answer this question will require delving into the realm of speculation, and thus can be based on personal biases. However, I ultimately believe that PR would not end up being fairer if it were introduced into our current system at Westminster. While the system would change, the overall ideas of two main parties would still exist, and since a coalition would be necessary, and neither man party would wish to work with the other, a third party would pretty much be able to stay in government constantly by simply working with the largest party each time, which is hardly fair.

Therefore, we need to make a compromise. We have a system which trades electoral fairness for governmental strength. Certainly it is not as fair as others, but it is a worthy trade-off to make if one wants a government that can effectively govern. That is not to say that PR is bad in all situations, however in our current system, First Past the Post is our best choice.