

Electoral system and process essay sample

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In Britain as in America the voting system followed is what is commonly known as a Single-winner system

The most prevalent single-winner voting method, by far, is plurality (also called “ first-past-the-post”, “ relative majority”, or “ winner-take-all”), in which each voter votes for one choice, and the choice that receives the most votes wins, even if it receives less than the majority.

In political science, the use of the plurality voting system alongside multiple, single-winner constituencies to elect a multi-member body is often referred to as single-member district plurality or SMDP. Plurality voting is also variously referred to as winner-take-all or relative majority voting; however, these terms can also refer to elections for multiple winners in a particular constituency using bloc voting.

There is, however, no “ post” that the winning candidate must pass in order to win. The term first past the post (abbreviated FPTP or FPP) was coined as an analogy to horse racing only required to receive the largest number of votes in their favor. This sometimes results in the alternate name “ furthest past the post”.

Historically, FPTP has been a contentious electoral system, giving rise to the concept of electoral reform and a multiplicity of different voting systems intended to address perceived weaknesses of plurality voting. Plurality voting is used in 43 of the 191 countries in the United Nations for either local or national elections. In particular, plurality voting is particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom and former British colonies, including the United States and Canada.

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As I see it, this voting system has some advantages over other systems of voting. For one thing, it has the merit of simplicity. Plurality is the simplest of all voting systems. This implies specific advantages. It is likely to be quicker, and easier to administer; this may also imply that an election costs less to run. It may also have an effect on voters, because it is easy to explain and understand. Other voting systems may alienate some voters who find the systems hard to understand, and who therefore feel detached from the direct effect of their own vote.

In addition, not all voters see party politics or policies as a major issue. Some voters see an election primarily as a form of recruitment for an individual representative, a point of contact between the state and themselves. FPTP gives such voters a direct choice of single candidate, with no extra votes to be shared or balanced between parties. This may be especially important to voters who want to vote for individuals based on particular ethical frameworks that are not party aligned, and who do not want their vote to have a "side effect" of electing others they may not approve of.

Sometimes, the voters are in favor of a political party, but do not like specific candidates. An example was the premier of Alberta, Don Getty. His government was re-elected in 1989, but because of voter dissatisfaction with the way the government was led, Getty, the leader of the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party, was not re-elected by voters from his electoral district.

However this can also have the opposite effect. A candidate who is very popular among the electorate in general may lose if the candidate or the candidate's party is unpopular or has caused dissatisfaction in his or her

seat. An example was how Winston Churchill lost the 1945 UK Parliamentary elections. Churchill had over a 90% approval rating, but the Labor Party won overall defeating Churchill's Conservative Party and making Clement Attlee the Prime Minister.

Similarly, in the 1999 Ontario provincial election, Mike Harris and his Progressive Conservative party was re-elected to a majority government, but symbolic of the growing discontent among voters about cuts to education, his education minister and strong ally was resoundingly defeated by the opposition candidate.

It is often claimed that because each electoral district votes for its own representative, the elected candidate is held accountable to his own voters, thereby helping to prevent incompetent, fraudulent or corrupt behavior by elected candidates. The voters in the electoral district can easily replace him since they have full power over who they want to represent them. In the absence of effective recall legislation, however, the electors must wait until the end of the representative's term.

Moreover, it is possible for a winning candidate or government to increase support from one election to the next, but lose the election, or vice-versa. Also, it is generally possible for candidates to be elected if the party regards them as important even if they are fairly unpopular, by moving the candidate to a safe seat which the party is unlikely to lose or by getting a candidate in a safe seat to step down.

The arguments for a plurality voting system rely heavily on the preservation of the one person one vote principle (OMOV), as cited by the Supreme Court

of the United States, wherein each voter is only able to cast one vote in a given election, where that vote can only go to one candidate. Plurality voting systems elect the candidate who is preferred first by the largest number of voters. Other voting systems, such as Instant-runoff voting or Single Transferable Vote also preserve OMOV, but rely on lower voter preference to arrive at a candidate earning either absolute majority or droop quota, respectively.

However, proponents of other systems, such as approval voting, point out that the OMOV principle was made to control the magnitude of districts; that each district must be relatively in proportion to one another in population. Approval voting does not actually represent some voters more than others, so the OMOV principle would be a weak one to discount it on. In any case, it could be argued approval voting grants one vote for each candidate to each voter - which they may choose not to cast, and cannot vote cumulate on one candidate.

FPTP also encourages regional parties which can be very popular in one geographical region but have little or no support in other parts of the electorate. A good example of this is Canada, where, in 1993, the separatist Bloc Québécois formed the opposition, despite getting only 13% of the vote. To a much greater extent than many other electoral methods, plurality electoral systems encourage tactical voting techniques, like “compromising”. Voters are pressured to vote for one of the two candidates they predict are most likely to win, even if their true preference is neither, because a vote for any other candidate will be likely to be wasted and have no impact on the final result.

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The difficulty is sometimes summed up, in an extreme form, as: " It is often claimed by United States Democrats that the liberal Al Gore lost the 2000 Presidential Election to the conservative George W. Bush because some voters on the far left voted for Ralph Nader of the Green Party, who presumably would have preferred Gore to Bush".

Such a mentality is reflected by elections in Puerto Rico and its three principal voter groups: the Independentistas (pro-independence), the Populares (pro-commonwealth), and the Estadistas (pro-statehood). Historically, there has been a tendency for Independentista voters to elect Popular candidates and policies. This phenomenon is responsible for some popular victories, even though the Estadistas have the most voters on the island. It is so widely recognized that the Puertoricans sometimes call the Independentistas who vote for the Populares " melons", because the fruit is green on the outside but red on the inside (in reference to the party colors).

Because voters have to predict in advance who the top two candidates will be, this can cause significant perturbation to the system: Substantial power is given to the media. Some voters will tend to believe the media's assertions as to who the leading contenders are likely to be in the election. Even voters who distrust the media will know that other voters do believe the media, and therefore those candidates who receive the most media attention will nonetheless be the most popular and thus most likely to be in one of the top two.

A newly appointed candidate, who is in fact supported by the majority of voters, may be considered (due to the lack of a track record) to not be likely

to become one of the top two candidates; thus, they will receive a reduced number of votes, which will then give them a reputation as a low poller in future elections, compounding the problem.

The system may promote votes against more so than votes for. In the UK, entire campaigns have been organized with the aim of voting against the Labor party by voting for either Conservative or Liberal Democrats based on which is most popular in each constituency, regardless of the voters' opinions of the policies of these parties. If enough voters use this tactic, the first-past-the-post system becomes, effectively, runoff voting - a completely different system - where the first round is held in the court of public opinion.

A feature of the FPTP system is that invariably, voters can select only one candidate in a single-member district, whilst in multi-member districts they can never select more candidates than the number of seats in the district. Some argue that FPTP would work better if electors could cast votes for as many candidates as they wish. This would allow voters to "vote against" a certain despised candidate if they choose, without being forced to guess who they should vote for to defeat that candidate, thus eliminating the need for tactical voting. Such a system would also serve to reduce the spoiler effect. This system is called approval voting.

The most commonly expressed disadvantage — perhaps because it is easiest to express and explain — of first-past-the-post is that it frequently produces disproportional results, i. e. results in which a party's share of the seats does not match up with its share of the votes. Thus, substantial bodies of opinion

can be rendered irrelevant to the final outcome, and a party can obtain a majority of seats without a majority of the vote.

Examples include the recent United Kingdom general election of 2005 where the new government won a majority of the seats with less than 36% of the national vote. The disproportionate nature of this system also means that whole regions may have MPs from only one party. The British Conservatives won large majorities of seats in the 1980s on a minority of votes while almost all the Scottish seats were Labor,; this disparity created tremendous dissatisfaction in Scotland.

In spite of these drawbacks, the single non transferable voting system has continued to be preferred system of election in majority of democratic countries, and is likely to continue so.

References:

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