

# [Proportional representation electoral system](https://assignbuster.com/proportional-representation-electoral-system/)

Critically compare and discuss the major differences and similarities between proportional representation and majoritarian electoral systems. Which criteria are the most important ones with which to judge an electoral system in a new democracy? How does each system perform on these criteria?

Resulting from an in-depth investigation into the establishment of new democracies, this essay explores the view that Proportional Representation electoral system (henceforth PR) promotes better stability, as opposed to the Majoritarian electoral system, which occasionally leads to instability. It is how a party interprets votes into parliamentary seats in each electoral system that determines which system to perform better. It is upon this factor that this essay will attest the claim that PR promotes an increase in social representation in parliaments. Although majoritarian systems do stipulate greater stability and accountability in governments, this does not support the belief that PR systems disregard a government’s stability or culpability; each system tends to highlight certain factors, where others do not. This essay will commence by explaining the elements that characterise both PR and majoritarian electoral systems, after which it shall be seen how each system performs in the criteria of accountability, social representation and stability in a new democracy. It is in a new democracy where the most support for the government is needed; this is resulting from the often controversial past experienced in these nations before evolving into a democracy. By looking at South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994, and their utilisation of the PR system, one discovers why in this context a PR system most suited.

The majoritarian system, which can be divided into two subsections, namely plurality and the second ballot majority run-off system, is the oldest electoral system having originated in the 12th century (Norris, 1997: 299). In both instances, the nation is separated into territorial single-memberconstituencies. Plurality decrees all citizens vote for a candidate party; while votes are counted, the party with the majority of votes in a specific constituency is granted the parliamentary seats for that region. The party with the most seats in the parliament will ultimately be the governing party (Norris, 1997: 301). For a government to come into power through the second ballot run-off system, the government would need to win the absolute majority of 50% +1; in cases where this does not occur, the two top contenders from the first round of elections run alongside each other in a second round of voting (Norris, 1997: 302). It is the majoritarian system of representation that sees larger parties winning a higher proportion of seats than the proportion of votes they gain in an election (Heywood, 2007: 256). This increases the chance of a single party gaining a parliamentary majority and being able to govern independently (Heywood, 2007: 256).

The PR system, which also divides countries into constituencies, is most often made up of multi-member districts, larger in size, which is geographically defined. Lists are presented by each party of their district’s number of parliamentary seats available; lists in some countries are open to voters, allowing them to rank their candidate preferences, whereas some lists are closed and only made visible to the party. Seats, instead of being given to the majority winner, are granted according to a party’s percentage of votes received (Norris, 1997: 303). This system guarantees an equal relationship between seats won by a party and the votes gained in an election. In instances were PR is implemented at its purest form, a party gaining 60 per cent of the vote would win exactly 60 per cent of the seats (Heywood, 2007: 256). PR systems, thus, make single-party majority rule unlikely, rather allowing for coalition governments or multi-party systems (Heywood, 2007: 256).

Each electoral system – majoritarian or PR – has its own advantages and disadvantages. It does, however, depend on a new democracy’s main concerns and its aims, hopefully to be achieved, that would decide which system to implement. “ New democracies have clearly come from somewhere disagreeable in terms of democratic values, and so because they have experienced a severe shortage of representativeness – as was the case with Mexico, Chile, South Africa, and Tunisia – they will overwhelmingly want to replace this with representativeness” (Pettinger, 2012). In order to achieve an increased representativeness, countries would most likely prefer the use of PR as it allows previously unheard minority groups the chance to voice their concerns.

In terms of government accountability, both systems contain different quantities of this within. The majoritarian system, which allows candidates receiving the most votes in a constituency to have a seat, bestows the masses the ability to hold someone responsible, in this instance the victorious party member, in a specific area. The masses have the choice, during each election, to give their support or help vote a certain member out of power. As a result, representatives of the constituency are further stimulated to help voice the concerns of the people in that area. This motivates service production in the most successful style and, simultaneously, fortifies the bond with the constituency (Norris, 1997: 305).

PR systems, which are able to produce single-party governments, usually lead to the establishment of coalition governments – “ unless one party wins a majority of votes” (Norris, 1997: 308). Following a survey of twenty newly established democracies, only 10 percent of PR systems led to the establishment of single-party governments (Norris, 1997: 308). Consequently, this lowered government accountability (also referred to as government responsiveness) as the populations cannot leave a single party responsible for choices made. Majoritarian systems, alternatively, are more often than not single-party governments. The aforementioned study mentions 60 percent of majoritarian systems lead by single-party governments (Norris, 1997: 308). With this in mind, as well as the fact that the controlling party is the dominant party in parliament in a majoritarian system, the party possesses enough power to carry out unpopular choices; they need not rely on minority parties’ support (Norris, 1997: 304). Furthermore, the domineering party would be held wholly accountable for their actions during their time in power, and following the end of their term would their performance be measured. At this time it would be decided whether or not to vote them out of power. In a majoritarian system, responsibility and power are viewed as one.

In a majoritarian system, the power that gives the ruling party in government the ability to pass legislation and implement party policies increases the accountability of that party (Norris, 1997: 304). This gives rise to government effectiveness, and stability. Resultantly, fragmentation, which occasionally occurs in the PR system, is prevented. PR thus leads to instability in some cases (Norris, 1997: 305). This instability becomes clearer depending on the lifespan government tends to have; this occurrence is due to the majority of the masses not supporting the government, as apposed to the majoritarian system.

It is when one considers social representation that one begins to see that a PR system is not necessarily more effective than the majoritarian system. By determining parliament seat rendering to the percentage of votes each party receives, the presence of smaller parties is ensured (Norris, 1997: 309). It is the fact that parties in a majoritarian system have support spread out in many areas that disadvantages the system despite overall greater support in the foundation (Norris, 1997: 305). This sees minority groupings excluded out of parliament as well as those groups experiencing lesser representation than warranted.

After the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, both the African National Congress and the National Party entered into negotiations in order to establish a democratic constitution that would allow for a swift transition; this realisation developed from a mutually hurting stalemate (Zartman, 1995: 147) that left neither side able to “ seize power by force” (Zartman, 1995: 148). Due to South Africa’s diversity, which can be summarised as 79. 4% Africans, 9. 2 Whites, 8. 8% Coloureds and 2. 6% Asian/Indian (Statistics South Africa, 2010: 4), social representation presented itself as a key concern during the transition into a stable democracy. Hendrik Verwoerd, who believed ‘ white men in Africa to not see peace and stability resulting from a satisfied nationalism’ (Verwoerd, 1960: 363), proposed ‘ no intermingling in the political sphere’ (Verwoerd, 1960: 364); this was the beginning of the oppression of many social groups, experiencing the domination of a nation ruled by one party. The adoption of the PR electoral system, which occurred following the amalgamation of the new democracy (Zartman, 1995: 45), would be to ensure the representation of all previously suppressed groups (Masiko-Kambala, 2008: 2). This system successfully maintained political stability despite having to reach a consensus while including various contradictory views. The PR system assured a diverse parliament, even though the system could not always ensure suitable accountability and stability (Norris, 1997: 305). Enforcing the majoritarian electoral system would have prolonged the aspect of Apartheid where certain groups were oppressed, the only difference is that the majoritarian system would oppress minority groups, whereas Apartheid oppressed South Africa’s racial majority. This would occur as parties would retain a majority in an area to gain a parliament seat, while the PR system presents any minority group the chance to win a seat (Norris, 1997: 303). Moving forward past a history of great violence and dissatisfaction amongst the populace, the PR system allowed an environment where all groupings were able to have their voice heard (Masiko-Kambala, 2008: 2); this would guarantee a great deal of support encouraging the new democratic government.

Having discussed both electoral system’s advantage and disadvantages with respect to each criteria with which to judge an electoral system in a new democracy, it can be concluded that each system is favourable in different instances. Where the PR system ensures a more diverse parliament, the majoritarian system is seen to generate greater responsibility and stability in government. It is purely a case of what a country views as the most important feature of governance at the time, and for South Africa’s case it would have been social representation, therefore ending in the implementation of a PR system; finding accountability or stability to be of more importance would have resulted in the establishment of the majoritarian system.