

Free and fair elections politics essay

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Free and fair elections and functioning electoral systems are the quintessence of democracy. Elections are used to “ ensure popular support and legitimacy for those who make governmental decisions.”[i]An electoral system is the set of processes that determine how political candidates are elected to office. These procedures include the ballot structure, how citizens cast their votes, how those votes are tallied, and how the winners are determined.[ii]Electoral systems are important in many ways. First, they have significant political consequences. Electoral systems shape the nature of parties and party systems, and they affect the behavior of politicians and the strategies of voters.[iii]

Additionally, electoral systems have a strong effect on the number of parties and consequently on the nature of competition in the party system. Electoral systems also affect the ways parties are organized and how they function internally. In addition, electoral systems also reveal the preferences of politicians and shape politicians’ behavior.[iv]Brazil pdf

Accordingly, there are a small number of states in the world that have very similar electoral or voting systems but continue to have dissimilar amounts of political parties. These similarities and differences are best illustrated when comparing the United States and France. Despite similar electoral systems, France has numerous political parties while the United States has only two major parties. It would be anticipated that France and the United States would contain a resemblance in its electoral system based upon the information that the original French charter was inspired by the U. S. constitution.[v]Essentially, both states use a first past the post, winner takes all style of electing their Presidents. The United States also uses a unique <https://assignbuster.com/free-and-fair-elections-politics-essay/>

system called the Electoral College to select a President from available nominees.[vi]

This paper will seek to analyze the similarities and differences between France and the United States' electoral systems. Firstly, the party system will be compared; secondly the electoral process itself, afterwards the heads of state, the question of reforms and finally the information provided will be summarized.

Party System

The structure of the party system in France is quite unique compared to other democracies. France has a multi-party system as opposed to the two-party system in the United States, and within those multiple parties, there is a great variety of internal organization.[vii] It was in France that the distinction between left and right first appeared and it is there that this distinction is of particular importance. However, the country has developed a multiple party system, so that the differences between left and right are far from clear. The parties have arranged themselves traditionally in the structure of the National Assembly, from the extreme left to the extreme right. The reason for the numerous amounts of political parties is for the most part historical. Successive regimes have passed, leaving their defenders as political parties or factions.[viii]

Therefore, each party then can be identified with a “ preferred” constitutional form and they each have their own particular ideology. France has gone through a succession of revolutions and regimes in which the new order never succeeded in entirely eradicating the advocates of the old. The

older doctrines and their defenders have found that the Cartesian tradition, which is “ a tendency to pursue theoretical distinctions to the end”, has encouraged their survival.[ix]

“ The Third and Fourth Republics knew two electoral systems, both of which encouraged proliferation: proportional representation which assures each tiny party of its share of representation and therefore does not discourage the voter from exercising a marginal differentiation in casting his vote, and the single-member constituency system combined with the second ballot which encouraged a multiplication of candidates, and therefore of parties, especially on the first round. This system of many parties inevitably produced political weakness and cabinet instability.”[x]

Now, in the Fifth republic, (enacted in 1958), the electoral system in France depends on the size of the municipality. “ In municipalities with more than 3, 500 inhabitants, the first half of the seats is allocated on the basis of absolute majority and the “ d’Hondt method” of proportional representation is used to distribute the second half of the seats between lists that received at least five per cent of the votes. Municipalities with up to 3, 500 inhabitants elect councils on the basis of absolute majority”.[xi]

In contrast, the American system as previously stated, is based on a two-party system, even though “ third” parties exist. “ This results in clearly defined political lines in the United States, without the formal need for coalition-building often required to create a ruling majority in a parliamentary system.”[xii]One factor contributing to the two-party system in the United States is the single-member district system of electing

Representatives. Single-member meaning “ means that whoever receives a plurality of the vote (that is, the greatest number of votes in any given voting district) is elected.”[xiii]

Moreover, the Republican and Democratic parties are the two main political parties in the U. S. “ The Republicans and Democrats have dominated American politics since the 1860s, and every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or Democrat”.[xiv]Despite that fact, so-called “ third” parties and independent candidates remain a part of American politics. “ Most third parties have tended to flourish for a single election and then die, fade, or be absorbed into one of the major parties.”[xv]

Presidential Electoral Process

The national election for the president of the United States is held every four years. These elections are far from straightforward in terms of its organization. The procedure for a national election goes on for a year.[xvi]A party must present nominated people to stand for election. Of those nominated, only one is selected by the party delegates at the national convention. This person then goes on to represent that party in the national presidential elections. The running mate for the presidential candidate is also announced. Moreover, “ the structure of primary elections can differ from state to state. Some delegates are elected in a straight ‘ first-past-the-post’ system while other states use a form of proportional representation to give a greater spread of representation among the delegates sent to a national convention.”[xvii]The delegates, when at a convention, vote for a candidate to run in the presidential election. After the national conventions, the two

parties' presidential hopefuls can focus on campaigning for winning the presidential elections.[xviii]

A unique feature of the American system is the Electoral College. When Americans vote for a President and Vice President, they actually vote for presidential “electors”, together as the Electoral College. The Constitution assigns each state a number of electors equal to the combined total of its Senate and House of Representatives delegations; at present, the number of electors per state ranges from three to 55, for a total of 538. It is these elector-candidates, rather than the presidential and vice presidential nominees, which the citizens vote for in the election. In most states, voters cast a single vote for the slate of electors pledged to the party presidential and vice presidential candidates of their choice. The slate winning the most popular votes is elected; this is known as the ‘winner-take-all’, or general ticket, system. Separate ballots are cast for President and Vice President. The electoral vote results are counted and declared at a session of Congress. A majority of electoral votes (currently 270 of 538) is required to win.[xix] In the recent American elections in 2008, Democratic candidate Barack Obama won the election with 53% of the popular vote along with 365 electoral votes over Republican candidate John McCain.[xx]

In comparison, in the French system, candidates for the Presidency must obtain 500 sponsoring signatures of elected officials from at least 30 departments or overseas territories. The post is directly elected in a two-stage voting system. A candidate who receives more than 50% of the vote in the first round is elected. However, if no candidate receives 50%, there is a

second round which is a run-off between the two candidates who secured the most votes in the first round. Nicolas Sarkozy, from the ruling UMP, won the second round of the Presidential election in May 2007. He gained 53% of the vote, finishing six points ahead of his Socialist rival, Ségolène Royal.[xxi]

Duties of the Head of State

The constitution of the French Fifth Republic was approved by public referendum on September 28, 1958. It greatly strengthened the powers of the executive in relation to those of Parliament. Under this constitution, presidents were elected directly for a seven-year term since 1958. However, beginning in 2002, the presidential term of office was reduced to five years and a constitutional reform passed on July 21, 2008 which limits presidents to two consecutive terms in office. The president names the prime minister, presides over the cabinet, commands the armed forces, and concludes treaties. Traditionally, presidents under the Fifth Republic have tended to leave day-to-day policy-making to the prime minister and government; the five-year term of office is expected to make presidents more accountable for the results of domestic policies.[xxii]

On the contrary, the American president's chief duty is to make sure that the laws are implemented. Presidents appoint all cabinet heads and most other high-ranking officials of the executive branch of the federal government. They also nominate all judges of the federal judiciary, including the members of the Supreme Court. Their appointments to executive and judicial posts must be approved by a majority of the Senate. The president is also the commander in chief of the US military and has unconstrained authority to

direct the movements of the navy, land and air forces. The president has the power to make treaties with foreign governments, though the Senate must also approve such treaties by a two-thirds majority. Finally, the president has the power to approve or veto bills passed by Congress, though Congress can override the president's veto by summoning a two-thirds majority in favour of the measure.[xxiii]

Electoral System Reform?

With respect to proposals by some American scholars and policy makers to get rid of the U. S. Electoral College system, most reformers advocate for a direct popular vote in the French manner and most also advocate a runoff (also like the French system) in the event that no candidate receives majority support (or or a lower figure such as 40%) in a first round election. But there are many Americans who believe that two presidential elections within a period of a few weeks would be too much.[xxiv] Moreover, The French are starting to embrace the concept of having primaries like the Americans. Even though these are not yet systematically organized, they are “ helpful in sorting out the candidates of each political party. In 2006, for example, the Socialist Party fielded three candidates, and party activists chose one of them, Segolène Royal, to represent them. It is not that unlikely to see that same process expanded in future presidential elections”.[xxv]

Conclusion

While comparing United States government to French government there are many similarities and differences discovered. To reiterate, France and the United States' citizens elect the president of the republic, and both

democracies do it by universal suffrage. The French, on the other hand, prefer a direct election. In other words, a two-round electoral process in which any French citizen can become a candidate given that they collect 500 signatures endorsing their candidacy. The Americans however have a different method. Every state chooses by “popular vote” a list of electors, each of whom represents one candidate. The list pledged to a candidate who wins a simple or absolute majority of votes takes all of the state’s Electoral College seats (essentially winner takes all).[xxvi] This two-step election process takes into consideration both “American demographics and political equality among the states of the Union, which is quite different from the French system.”[xxvii] France is a representative democratic republic like the United States. France differs from the United States in political organization. The difference is that the political power in France is split between the president and a prime minister, who leads the political party that holds majority in Parliament.[xxviii]

In addition, France is characterized by its multi-party system, whilst the United States is seen as a two-party system, even though “third” parties do exist. Also, Relations between France and the United States have become friendlier after Nicolas Sarkozy was elected President of France.

In 2007, Sarkozy delivered a speech before the U. S. Congress which was a strong affirmation of French-American friendship. During his visit he met with President George W. Bush as well as Senators John McCain and Barack Obama. This visit took place before the two senators were chosen as party nominees.[xxix] Both also met with Sarkozy in Paris after securing their

respective nominations in 2008; after meeting Obama in July, he was quoted saying “ Obama? C’est mon copain” which means “ Obama? He’s my buddy.” Because of Obama’s and Sarkozy’s relationship, relations between the two countries are expected to improve further.[xxx]