CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

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1. The choice of an electoral system hinges on two sets of judgments: *empirical* judgments about the likely consequences of the various options and *normative* judgments about how "good" or "bad", and "important" or "trivial" these consequences are. In this paper, I concentrate on the second dimension.

2. On the basis of which criteria should we assess an existing or proposed electoral system? There are two ways to address this question. The first is deductive reasoning. It consists in identifying the objectives that are ascribed to elections in a democracy and in deducing from these objectives the criteria that must be met for these objectives to be achieved. The second approach is inductive. It consists in reviewing the debate over electoral systems and in identifying the criteria that are most often invoked as crucial by proponents of various options.

3. I follow both approaches here. I start with a theoretical reflection. I ask: Why do most of us believe it is a "good" thing that those who make the decisions in government be chosen by the people in a fair and honest election? I argue that there are two major benefits that are generally presumed to flow from democratic elections and I examine the conditions that must be fulfilled for these goals to be achieved. As I show, these conditions help us to specify criteria for assessing electoral systems.

4. I then review the debate over electoral systems and point out the most prominent normative judgments that underlie preferences for some electoral systems over others. I show that the values invoked in the debate overlap to a good extent with the criteria I had deduced from my theoretical discussion of the role of elections in a democracy. The overlap is not complete, however, and the review of the debate suggests additional criteria to be considered.

5. Before embarking on this exercise, I wish to clarify what I mean by an electoral system. I define an electoral system as the set of rules which govern the process by which citizens' opinions about candidates and parties are expressed in votes and by which these votes are thereafter translated into the designation of decision-makers (see Blais 1988). The implication is that an electoral system comprises the constituency structure (how many constituencies are there? how many representatives are to be elected in each constituency?), the ballot structure (how are electors supposed to express their opinions?), and the electoral formula (what conditions must be fulfilled in order to be elected?). I focus on the electoral formula but the constituency and the ballot structure must also be taken into account.

What Should Elections Accomplish?

6. There are two major reasons why most of us believe that we are better off with elected representatives than with a dictator. The first is that the policies adopted by elected representatives are more likely to reflect the views of the majority. The second is that conflict is more likely to be dealt with peacefully in a democracy.

7. We believe, or hope, that the holding of elections increases legislators' sensitivity to public opinion and that, as a consequence, there will be congruence between what citizens want and what

governments do. But how and why exactly is this consequence supposed to occur?

8. The seminal work is Downs (1957). According to Downs, the crucial mechanism is *accountability*. He shows that, if politicians attempt to maximize the probability of being elected (or re-elected), they will propose policies that correspond to the views of the greatest number of electors[1] and they will implement these policies if they are elected in order to increase their probability of being re-elected next time.[2]

9. There is no guarantee that legislators will follow public opinion. Once elected, legislators and governments are free to do what they want. But electors are able not to re-elect them if they feel they have not done a good job. Electors have an a posteriori control over their representatives and this creates an incentive for these representatives to be sensitive to the views of their constituents. This suggests a first criterion for assessing an electoral system: Does it produce legislators and governments that are easily *accountable* to voters? The concern here is that it should be easy for voters to determine who is responsible for the decisions that are being made and to dismiss those people if they have not performed adequately.

10. Is popular control strictly ex post in a democracy? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that there is nothing to prevent legislators from doing what they want (provided it is not illegal or unconstitutional) during their mandate. But there is some indirect a priori control in the sense that the threat of being defeated at the polls creates incentives for politicians to be attentive to the wishes of their constituents.

11. Is this the only reason why there may be greater congruence between public opinion and public policies in a democracy than in a dictatorship? No. There is a second mechanism that I would call *representation by reflection*. If electors vote for parties and candidates that best represent their views, the legislature is likely to reflect the overall distribution of viewpoints and perspectives in society. If opinions in the legislature accurately reflect those in society, the decisions that legislators and governments make should resemble those that citizens would have made in a direct democracy.

12. There is no guarantee that a legislator who shares my perspectives will not start behaving differently once elected. This is why we need a posteriori control and accountability. But it is not unreasonable to assume that, everything else being equal, our interests are more likely to be defended by legislators who are similar to us. Here is a second criterion for assessing an electoral system: Does it produce legislatures and governments that are broadly *representative* of the electorate?

13. The second major virtue generally perceived in elections as an institutional device is that they allow citizens to resolve their conflicts peacefully. Votes substitute for arms. This raises the question of why, or under what conditions, losers in an election peacefully accept the outcome of the election.

14. There are three main reasons. First, because they believe that some basic rights will not be infringed upon by the government. This is why we have institutions such as a charter of rights and

freedoms. Second, because they believe that, even though they may have lost this time, there is a real possibility that they will win another time (in the next election) or place (they may lose in a federal election but win in a provincial one). Third, because, even though they do not like the outcome, they recognize that the procedure is legitimate.

15. Let me elaborate on the last two points. Consider a small minority group within a democratic polity that always finds itself on the losing side on the major issues of the day. Even though legislators may be selected through perfectly democratic elections, this group may well feel that electoral democracy is deeply unsatisfactory. Groups will accept the outcome of elections provided they feel that the process is *fair*, that it is not systematically *biased* against them.

16. The issue at stake here is the place of majority rule in a democracy. Two partly contradictory observations must be made about majority rule.[3] The first is that it is absolutely central in a democracy. Majority rule is the *only* rule that is consistent with the view that each individual should count the same in society. Spitz (1984, 106; see also Barry 1991, 27) makes the point: "Once there is a state formally made up of political equals, and once there are differences of opinion within that nation about how to proceed or who shall have authority, then allegedly there is only one rule for making decisions that the society can adopt with the right of each member of the electorate to count for one, and no one for more than one." Or, as Rae (1971) put it, the maximum possible proportion of the electorate who can lose in a vote is smaller under the majority rule than under any other rule.

17. At the same time, the majority rule is unacceptable to a group that systematically finds itself on the losing side. Such a group is likely to prefer secession (if it is territorially concentrated) or rebellion (substituting arms for votes). Among the remedies to such a problem, we find a charter of rights and freedoms that protects individual rights, and federalism, which opens the possibility that groups which are on the losing side in one arena will be on the winning side in another. These institutions may help but they may not be sufficient. People are unlikely to accept electoral institutions if they feel that these institutions are systematically biased against their interests. This leads me to enunciate a third criterion: Does the electoral system produce legislatures and governments that are *systematically biased* against certain groups or interests? I call this criterion *fairness* (and it is indeed the concept that is most widely used in the literature) but in my mind what really matters is the absence of a systematic bias. People may be willing to accept an electoral system that is not completely fair at one point in time, provided it is not systematically biased against their group or perspective.

18. Losers in an election may finally accept the outcome because they perceive the electoral procedure to be legitimate. But what makes the election device legitimate? To a good extent it is probably the recognition that elections make legislators more sensitive to the concerns of ordinary citizens and that they allow conflicts to be resolved peacefully.

19. But there is more. I would argue that what is most critical for an election to be judged legitimate is the perception that each vote counts the same. This is so because the most fundamental principle in a democracy is that each person should have equal rights. Hence a fourth criterion: In the election, does *each vote count equally*?

20. It could be objected that equality and fairness are closely associated. An electoral system that is biased against a group cannot be characterized as fostering the equality of citizens. There is indeed some overlap between the two concepts. But in my view, equality is a positive notion that refers to individuals whereas fairness entails the absence of a systematic bias towards specific groups and over a longer time horizon.

21. This theoretical discussion has led me to suggest four criteria for assessing electoral systems: accountability, representativeness, fairness, and equality. I have indicated that there is some overlap between fairness and equality. Is it the same with representativeness? Again, the answer is yes but only partly. An election that produces a legislature that is broadly representative of groups and perspectives is likely to be perceived to be fair. But there is a difference. If a dominant group is under-represented in a legislature or government, the electoral system may be deemed to be failing in terms of representativeness but not to be biased.

22. It is clear, however, that there is some affinity between representativeness, fairness and equality and that accountability belongs to a different domain. Those who are most concerned with the first three criteria wish to improve the quality of representation to prevent exploitation of some groups in society over others. Those who are more concerned with accountability give priority to citizens' capacity to "throw the rascals out," possibly because their greatest fear is "protection of individuals and groups from tyrannical exploitation by government" (Katz 1997, 309).

23. My list of criteria very much resembles the list proposed by Dunleavy and Margetts (1995). Their list is the following: political equality, representation of viewpoints, accountability, and the importance of elections. The only difference is that I have included fairness while they have added what they call the importance of elections.

24. Fairness does not appear in Dunleavy and Margetts because it is subsumed under representation; the capacity of minorities to win seats is discussed under that rubric. For reasons indicated above I believe it is useful to distinguish the two notions but this is certainly a debatable position as the two overlap to some degree.

25. Dunleavy and Margetts also refer to "the importance of elections," what I would call the decisiveness of elections. They indicate that "elections should determine changes of government; there should not be a disconnection between voters' verdict and the constitution of governments" (Dunleavy and Margetts 1995, 14). In my view, this is part of the accountability requirement. When elections do not determine who will form the government, politicians are no longer accountable to voters.

26. The preceding discussion has allowed me to identify the broad principles according to which electoral systems should be assessed. It remains to be specified *who* exactly should be accountable or representative: each individual legislator, the legislature as a whole, or the executive?

27. Those who stress the importance of accountability are usually concerned first and foremost about the possibility of getting rid of a government, which makes sense if we assume that most of the actual legislative power resides with the executive. According to the same logic, we should pay attention to the representativeness not only of the legislature but also of the executive, not only in one election but over a number of them (see especially Taylor and Lijphart 1985).

Reviewing the Debate over Electoral Systems

28. The theoretical reflection on the functions of elections has led me to identify four criteria for assessing electoral systems: accountability, representativeness, fairness, and equality. Are these the main values that are invoked in the debate over electoral systems?

29. My answer would be a qualified yes. A number of years ago, I wrote a review of the debate over electoral systems, that is, of the main arguments put forward by proponents of various options. I reviewed the international academic literature on the topic.

30. At the end of my article, I indicated that "the values involved are numerous, such as, stability, leadership, accountability, fairness, legitimacy, order, responsiveness, and responsibility" (Blais 1991, 257). Accountability and fairness are there. What I then called responsiveness corresponds very closely to the notion of representativeness. I did not then mention the equality requirement but the view of Dunleavy and Margetts (1995, 13), that "no voter should formally be allocated an influence greater than others" underlies much of the judgment about the fairness and legitimacy of electoral systems.

31. Proponents of electoral systems refer, however, to a number of values that have not been mentioned yet. This suggests that the list of criteria has to be expanded. The first two I will add are: *effectiveness* and *accommodation*.

32. An important aspect of the debate over electoral systems is stability. A standard argument against proportional representation (PR), for instance, is that it may produce unstable governments. This raises two questions: Is stability always a good thing? and Why is it a good thing?

33. It is difficult to argue that stability as such is always good. We would be concerned, I think, if the same government were to rule over a very long period of time. Too much stability may be bad. This is why I do not put stability on my list of criteria.

34. At the same time, it is difficult not to agree that the state cannot adequately function if governments are reconstituted every month. We want an *effective* government, a government that is capable of effectively managing the state. Too much instability is (rightly) perceived to undermine government *effectiveness*.[4] I prefer to talk about effectiveness than about stability because the former is a more inclusive criterion. A minimum degree of stability may be a necessary condition of effectiveness but there are others, such as a minimum level of cohesion within the cabinet.

35. Another value that is often invoked, this time by proponents of PR, is that of compromise. As I have argued above, majority rule is absolutely central in a democracy. And if we want a government that is accountable to the people, the party(ies) in power must be able to implement the policies it (they) had promised during the election campaign. But we do not want the government to have too much power either; we do not want it to be able to impose its will unilaterally all the time. We want a government that is both firm and open-minded, that is willing to make concessions to preserve social peace. We want some form of consensus-building, as Lijphart (1984) has argued.

36. It is impossible to reach all collective decisions by consensus. This would entail a veto power for all groups and a most ineffective government. But we hope that governments will try hard to find compromises in order to prevent social conflicts from becoming too divisive. We want governments to manifest a *sense of accommodation*.

37. There is a tension between effectiveness and accommodation. A government that is effective gets out to implement the policies it had advocated during the election campaign. A government that seeks accommodation will consult widely before making final decisions and will look for compromises that will be acceptable to as many groups as possible. These objectives are partly contradictory. Some balance must be struck between the two. It seems to me that most people want to prevent extreme ineffectiveness and complete absence of accommodation. I thus propose a fifth criterion: Does the electoral system produce legislatures and governments that are *both relatively effective and accommodating*?

38. The debate over electoral systems also raises issues about the role of parties in a democracy. According to most analysts, parties are absolutely essential in a democracy. As Schattsneider (1942, 1) put it in his famous defence of political parties, "The political parties created democracy and … modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."

39. Canadians tend to agree. Three-fourths of Canadians support the view that without political parties there cannot be true democracy (Blais and Gidengil 1991). This does not mean, of course, that people are satisfied with what parties actually do. In the same survey, more than 80 percent complained about parties' squabbling and their incapacity to provide clear choices on issues. The point is that even though many Canadians do not like what they see they recognize that they cannot do without parties.

40. What is the utility of parties in an election, from the perspective of voters? Or, to put the question differently, what would voters miss if there were no parties? The simplest answer is that parties reduce voters' information costs (Downs 1957). There are two reasons for this. First, it is easier for voters to ascertain the positions of the main parties on the major issues of the day than it would be, in the absence of parties, to determine the positions of the major independent candidates. This is so because parties live longer than individual candidates, and voters can rely on past history to get an appreciation of their general orientations. Second, voters are able to anticipate what kind of policy is likely to be implemented if a certain party wins since that party will form the government. What kind of government might be formed remains extremely difficult to assess if every candidate is on his or her own.

41. For these reasons, we want an election to produce a strong party system. This may create another problem, however. With "party government," the party decides and individual legislators do not have any role to play. They have to vote the way their party tells them to. The consequence is that electors do not have any control over their local representative.

42. Here again, there is a tension. We want strong parties and parties are meaningless if they are not cohesive. It is cohesion that allows voters to anticipate what policies will be adopted if a certain party forms the government. But we do not want parties to be too strong. We want our local representative to be sensitive to our concerns and not to always cave in to the dictates of the party.

43. The upshot, again, is that we want to avoid the extreme situations where the parties would lack any cohesion or where they would entirely control the behaviour of their elected members in the legislature. Hence my sixth criterion: Does the electoral system produce *relatively strong parties and relatively strong local representatives*?

44. There is a final issue to be considered, and it concerns the quality of the information provided by the vote. Let me start with a truism. The more *precisely* voters are allowed to express their views on the ballot, the greater the likelihood that what governments do will reflect what citizens want.

45. The truism may seem trivial but is has important implications. We should prefer a ballot in which voters are allowed to express not only their first choice but also their second or third choices, and a formula that takes into account these second or third choices. Likewise, we should prefer a system in which voters are allowed to express their specific views about the parties, the leaders and the local candidates over one in which those distinctions cannot be made.

46. In the same vein, we should prefer an electoral system in which there is strong congruence between vote choice and preferences. In other words, we would like voters to vote *sincerely* rather than *strategically*. A strategic vote is a vote cast for a party (candidate) that is not the most preferred, motivated by expectations about the likely outcome of the election (see Cox 1997; Blais and Nadeau 1996). In a single-member plurality system like Canada's, the most typical form of strategic voting occurs when electors vote for their second choice because they perceive their first choice not to have any chance of winning in their constituency.

47. We want voting to be as sincere (and as little strategic) as possible because the more sincere the vote is, the more accurately it reflects voters' preferences among the parties and the candidates. And representation by reflection works only if voters vote for parties or candidates that are closest to their views about what governments should do. In the absence of correspondence between true preferences and vote choice, it is hard to see how voters could exercise control over their representatives.

48. For all these reasons, we should look for an electoral system in which the vote reflects as precisely as possible citizens' preferences. As we all know, however, precision cannot be achieved without cost. The most obvious cost is complexity. Ranking the ten candidates running in one's constituency from one to ten is clearly more demanding than just indicating one's first

choice. Likewise, the two ballot system *à la française* provides more information than the single ballot we have, but it requires voters to go to the polls twice rather than once. In other words, we also like simplicity. This leads me to propose a seventh criterion: Is the vote both *simple enough and a relatively precise reflection of citizens' preferences*?

Conclusion

49. My reading of the literature on electoral democracy and on the debate over electoral systems has led me to formulate the following criteria for assessing existing and proposed systems: accountability, representativeness, fairness, equality, effectiveness, accommodation, party cohesion, freedom for local representatives, simplicity and precision.

50. It should be obvious by now that no electoral system can fully satisfy all of these criteria, particularly as some of these are contradictory. This is especially the case with the last six criteria, which I have presented in pairs to highlight the tension between them.

51. The existence of so many, and sometimes contradictory, criteria means that the choice of an electoral system is a very difficult one. A perfect system does not exist; each option has its advantages and shortcomings. In the final analysis, the choice of an electoral system hinges on value judgments about which of these criteria should have priority.

52. I would argue that in such a situation we should aim for a solution that is satisfactory rather than optimal. There is unlikely to be consensus in society about the rank order of priorities among all these criteria. A more prudent approach would be, in my view, to devise an electoral system that is devoid of serious shortfalls with respect to these criteria.

53. Let me end with a word about the Canadian context. My presentation was meant to be theoretical. I believe it is important to distance oneself from the peculiarities of our situation and to reflect on the bases on which we should assess democratic institutions in general. Moreover, we are likely to overestimate our distinctiveness. The arguments put forward by advocates of the various options are basically the same all over the world.

54. This being said, there is a special emphasis in Canada, and it is on the question of regional representation. It is no accident that the most important proposal for electoral reform in Canada, advanced by the Task Force on Canadian Unity, was meant "to contribute substantially to the building of national parties in the regions from which they are effectively excluded from Parliament" (Irvine 1985, 106-107). And it is no accident that, according to its author, the major advantages of the most recent proposal "concern the incentives for nationwide political appeals and its strong tendency to reduce under-representation of some regions in the governing party" (Weaver 1997, 511).

NOTES

1. This is particularly so in a two-party system. Things are more complicated in a multi-party system.

2. This assumes of course that these politicians intend to run again in the following election.

3. The discussion that follows refers to the use of the majority rule in a direct democracy or in the legislature, not to its use for the election of legislators.

4. This very much resembles the criterion of governability suggested by Dunleavy and Margetts (1995).

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