Brief Note on Electoral Process in a democratic framework

The Importance of Electoral Systems

Political institutions shape the rules of the game under which democracy is practised, and it is often argued that the easiest political institution to manipulate, for good or for bad, is the electoral system. In translating the votes cast in a general election into seats in the legislature, the choice of electoral system can effectively determine who is elected and which party gains power. While many aspects of a country's political framework are often specified in the constitution and can thus be difficult to amend, electoral system change often only involves new legislation and can thus be subject to manipulation by unscrupulous majority.

Even with each voter casting exactly the same vote and with exactly the same number of votes for each party, one electoral system may lead to a coalition government or a minority government while another may allow a single party to assume majority control.

Electoral Systems and Party Systems

A number of other consequences of electoral systems go beyond this primary effect. Some systems encourage, or even enforce, the formation of political parties; others recognize only individual candidates. The type of party system which develops, in particular the number and the relative sizes of political parties in the legislature, is heavily influenced by the electoral system. So is the internal cohesion and discipline of parties: some systems may encourage factionalism, where different wings of one party are constantly at odds with each other, while another system might encourage parties to speak with one voice and suppress dissent. Electoral systems can also influence the way parties campaign and the way political elites behave, thus helping to determine the broader political climate; they may encourage, or retard, the forging of alliances between parties; and they can provide incentives for parties and groups to be broadly based and accommodating, or to base themselves on narrow appeals to ethnicity or kinship ties.

The Importance of Context

It is important to realize that a given electoral system will not necessarily work in the same way in different countries. Although there are some common experiences in different regions of the world, the effects of a particular type of electoral system depend to a great extent on the socio-political context in which it is used. For example, while there remains general agreement that plurality/majority systems tend to restrict the range of legislative representation and Proportional

Representation systems encourage it, the conventional wisdom that plurality/majority rules will produce a two-party system and PR a multiparty system is looking increasingly dated.

In recent years, FPTP has not always facilitated the aggregation of the party system in established democracies such as Canada and India, nor has it led to the formation of strong and lasting parties in Papua New Guinea. PR has seen the election of dominant single-party regimes in Namibia, South Africa and elsewhere. More broadly, the consequences of the choice of electoral system depend on factors such as how a society is structured in terms of ideological, religious, ethnic, racial, regional, linguistic or class divisions; whether the country is an established democracy, a transitional democracy or a new democracy; whether there is an established party system, or parties are embryonic or unformed, and how many 'serious' parties there are; and whether a particular party's supporters are geographically concentrated or dispersed over a wide area.

The Broader Democratic Framework

It is also important not to see electoral systems in isolation. Their design and effects are heavily contingent upon other structures within and outside the constitution. Electoral systems are one square of an interrelated patchwork of government systems, rules and points of access to power. Successful electoral system design comes from looking at the framework of political institutions as a whole: changing one part of this framework is likely to cause adjustments in the way other institutions within it work.

For example, how does the chosen electoral system facilitate or encourage conflict resolution between party leaders and activists on the ground? How much control do party leaders have over the party's elected representatives? Are there constitutional provisions for referendums, citizens' initiatives or 'direct democracy' which may complement the institutions of representative democracy? And are the details of the electoral system specified in the constitution, as an attached schedule to the constitution, or in regular legislation? This will determine how entrenched the system is or how open it may be to change by elected majorities.

There are two issues of this kind that are worth considering in more detail. The first is the degree of centralization. Is the country federal or unitary, and, if federal, are the units symmetrical in their power or asymmetrical? The second is the choice between parliamentarism and presidentialism. Both systems have their advocates, and the traditions of different countries may influence which is chosen or even foreclose debate; but the different relationship between legislative and executive institutions has important implications for electoral system design for both. The frequent debates over the direct election of mayors and heads of the executive at local level combine both issues.

In most bicameral legislatures in federal systems of government, the two chambers are elected by different (or incongruent) methods. This makes sense for two prime reasons which have to do with the theory underpinning federalism. First, the second (or upper) house of a federal legislature is there to represent the provinces or states of the country, and each unit often receives equal representation regardless of population or territory size (e.g. the US Senate or South Africa's National Council of Provinces).

Second, there is little point in creating a two-chamber legislature unless there is a degree of difference between the roles and possibly also of the powers of the two chambers, and using the same electoral system for both is more likely to repeat and reinforce the majority power that controls the lower chamber—particularly if the elections to both chambers are simultaneous. Upper chambers provide the opportunity for some degree of electoral innovation to include communities of interest which may not be fully represented in national elections to a lower chamber. But when elections take place at three or more levels, to the upper chamber of the legislature, the lower chamber of the legislature, and the institutions of government at regional level, it is crucial that the systems used are considered together. It may for example be possible to promote representation of minorities at regional level while discouraging or even prohibiting it at national level. Whether this is or is not desirable is a matter of political debate and choice.