Department of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy

Undergraduate Coursework Coversheet

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Module Title	Introduction to Politics	Submission Date	09/03/2020
Coursework Tutor	Sarah Polani	Word Count	1990
Coursework Title	Is there a single best electoral system? If not, what are the main trade-offs between electoral systems?	Referencing System	Harvard
Bibliography included? (*Highlight as relevant*)	Yes		No

Please note: the Department of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy has a policy of online marking. You will be able to access your feedback via Moodle.

Abridged UG marking criteria (see handbook for further details)

	86+ First Steps: 98, 95, 92, 88	70-85 First Steps: 85, 82, 78, 75, 72	60-69 Upper Second Steps: 68, 65, 62	50-59 Lower Second Steps: 58, 55, 52	40-49 Third Steps: 48, 45, 42	30-39 Narrow Fail Steps: 38, 35, 32, 28, etc.	0-29 Clear Fail Steps: 28, 25, 22, 18, etc.
Knowledge and understanding	Exceptional knowledge and understanding	Excellent knowledge and understanding	Good knowledge and understanding	Adequate knowledge and understanding	Limited knowledge and understanding	Very poor knowledge and understanding	No knowledge or understanding
Clarity and strength of answer	Extremely clear, focused and convincing answer	Very clear, focused and convincing answer	A clear and focused answer	A generally clear answer but some inconsistencies and omissions	An unclear and unconvincing answer	An inadequate answer	No recognisable answer to the question
Structure and organisation	Outstanding structure and organisation	Excellent structure and organisation	Good structure and organisation	Adequate structure and organisation	Weak structure and organisation	Little discernible structure and organisation	No discernible structure or organisation
Critical thinking and analysis	Exceptional independent critical thinking	Excellent independent critical thinking	Good independent critical thinking	Some independent critical thinking	Little independent critical thinking	Very patchy or misguided thinking	No critical thinking or analysis
Engagement with relevant literature	Exceptional breadth and depth of reading	Excellent breadth and depth of reading	Good breadth and depth of reading	Adequate discussion of the relevant academic literature	Significant gaps and limited understanding of the literature	Very little reading on the topic and little understanding of the literature	No reading on the topic and no understanding of the literature
Use of evidence and/or methods	Exceptional awareness and use of evidence and/or methods	Excellent awareness and use of evidence and/or methods	Good awareness and use of evidence and/or methods	Some awareness and use of evidence and/or methods	Limited awareness and use of evidence and/or methods	Very limited use of evidence and/or poor grasp of methods	No use of evidence and/or no grasp of methods
Quality of writing	Exceptionally fluent and authoritatively written	Fluent and convincingly written	Clearly written but a few minor errors	Adequate level of academic writing but a number of errors	Poorly expressed and unclear writing	Very poorly expressed and unclear writing	Virtually unintelligible writing
Presentation and referencing	Faultless presentation and referencing	Excellent presentation with only the most minor errors	Good presentation and referencing with a few minor errors	Acceptable presentation and referencing but some errors	Poor presentation and barely adequate referencing	Very poor presentation and inadequate referencing	Unacceptably poor presentation and referencing

Is there a single best electoral system? If not, what are the main trade-offs between electoral systems?

This essay will make a comparison between the four main electoral systems. Since all the electoral system have strength and weakness, this essay will argue that none of them can be considered the best system. In order to achieve the aim of this essay, it will be divided into three main sections. The first section will be focusing on the purpose and the function of the election and electoral system. The second part will look at the procedures, strengths and weaknesses of each system. It will also provide a real-world election example to show that any system can fail to achieve its aim and that the functionality of a system is not only within the system itself but within the society that adopted it. Therefore, cannot be a universally ideal electoral system. Finally, it will provide a conclusion by summarising all the key points.

Elections are essential to have stable and recognised democracies. Three key points can summarise the purposes of an election. It enables the citizen to express their preference, it makes possible the representation of different views, and it provides legitimacy for the election-winner (Menocal, A. R., 2011). The mechanisms to achieve all these purposes are the electoral systems. The main function of an electoral system is to convert votes into seats (Menocal, A. R., 2011). In the modern world, we have a number of distinctly different elective systems. For the sake of simplicity, this essay will look at four types of elective systems: Plurality, Majoritarian, Proportional, Mixed.

A Plurality system is an elective process in which the winner is the candidate that gathers more votes than any other candidate (Norris, P., 1997). This type of elective system has different sub-types; one of them is the single-member plurality. In this system, territories are divided into areas that are all represented by a single member. The winner is the one that has collected the majority of votes. The majority is collected by the candidate that has at least more votes than any other candidate, or it has collected more than 50% of votes (Norris, P., 1997). It provides strong constituency representation because each voter has a single district representative. It ensures geographic representation because each district can express its preference. On the other hand, the single-member plurality can deliver an unbalance results, and it also does not represent political diversity present in the electorate (Boix, C., 1999). The Canadian election held in 2011 is a clear example of how this system can give an unbalanced result. In this election the conservative party won the majority of seats with less than 40% of the votes (Hague, R., Harrop, M., & McCormick, J., 2019, p 271). This means that all the other parties together gathered more than 60%. The result of this election is

unfair, and it cannot be the real representation of all parts of society. In this particular case, the system failed to give representation to the majority of the electorate.

The Majoritarian system is an elective system that requires the winner to gather the majority: the party who receives over 50% of all votes has the majority (Croley, S., 1995). Since it is not a given in a multiparty system that any single party is the first choice of a majority of voters, different subsystems have been developed with mechanisms to push voters toward forming a majority. One of the subsystems is called the two-round election. The two-round election has a simple procedure; the candidates run a first round-election if none of them has gathered the majority they run a second round. Usually, only the first two candidates of the first round run the second round. The candidate that gathers the majority in the second round is elected (Blais, A., Massicotte, L., Dobrzynska, A., Cox, G., & Duverger, M., 1997). The two-round election holds the advantages to give a chance to the voters to have a second thought concerning their vote. It also is simple to understand for the voter. Nevertheless, it is an expensive system because it requires two elections (Milesi-Ferretti, G., Perotti, R., & Rostagno, M., 2002). It can destabilize a fragmented society. It can result in a disproportional outcome, and also put voters under pressure because they need to vote twice (Blais, A., Massicotte, L., Dobrzynska, A., Cox, G., & Duverger, M., 1997). Ukraine is an example of a country that has held the two-round system. Ukraine's election in 1994 is an illustration of how this system does not always work well. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine was in a difficult situation. Many commentaries suggested at the time that the two-round election would be the best solution to ensure a stable and majoritarian government. The reality turned out quite different as all the parties were weakly organised. The geographical heterogeneity of partisan support led to the election of many deputies with narrow regional concerns, often associated with the interests of a specific ethnic group or economic sector. In addition, since the majoritarian system has the feature to enlarge the number of seats compared to the real votes, the Communists won 23 per cent of the seats despite gaining only 13 per cent of the vote. All this led to unpredictable outcomes and weakened democratic accountability. The Ukrainian experience illustrates that functioning of system depends not only on the system itself but also on the circumstances of the country that has adopted it (Kuzio, T., 1997).

Another sub-type of the Majoritarian system is the alternative vote system, which has only one election round where the citizens rank each candidate in order of preference. If none of the candidates gathers the majority as a first choice, the second-choice votes and then the third-choice votes are counted until a candidate has the majority. The alternative vote holds the advantages to be considered one of the best

systems for a strongly divided society (Renwick, A., 2011). It also enables votes to accumulate so that diverse but related interests can be combined to win representation. It allows the supporters of the minority candidate to have influence. However, the alternative vote holds the disadvantage to require literacy skills that not all voter may have. An example is the phenomenon known as 'Donkey voting', where a voter votes for candidates in the order they appear on the ballot (Orr, G., 2004). The alternative vote system also sometimes provides outcomes that are disproportional when compared to Proportional systems.

Proportional system is an elective system that assigns the number of seats in a parliament won by each of the competing parties in proportion to the number of the votes that each party has gathered (Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook, 2005). This system rarely gives a complete majority. In this system, the outcome of the election is often a coalition in order to form the new government. One of the most common sub-types of the Proportional system is the list system. In the list system parties make lists of candidates to be elected, and seats are distributed to each party in proportion to the number of votes the party receives (Ecevit, & Alper, Y., 2018). It holds the advantage to give the chance to smaller parties be represented in the parliament, and it rarely gives an absolute majority to a single party. It also wastes few votes compared to the other systems, since more than one party is elected, and it potentially offers more representative choices for voters. However, a weakness of this system is that weak coalitions between parties can lead to indecision, compromise and even legislative paralysis, compared to a single and stable majority. It also does not offer a clear idea to the voters before the election of what a future coalition might be and therefore reduces accountability to voters. This is because often the parties form coalitions after the election has occurred. A classic example of weak coalitions between parties leading to indecision, legislative paralysis, government crises and the fall of several government coalitions is Italy (Tarrow, S., 1977). Italy has in the past used the past proportional system but has switched to a Mixed system in recent years.

A Mixed system is a system in which voter's choice thought the combination of different elements from the Proportional and Majority systems. There are two main types of Mixed systems: parallel voting system and the mixed-member proportional. The parallel voting systems are those in which there are two separate elections, and voters vote for the district and larger regions (Lijphart, A., 1994). In Japan's House of Representatives, for example, 300 members are elected by Single Winner Plurality voting and 180 by Proportional (Hague, R., Harrop, M., & McCormick, J., 2019). Like the parallel voting system, the mixed proportional have two separate elections in which the voters for one decide to represent their single-seat

constituency and one for a political party. The seats are distributed in the way that is given first to the successful constituency and the second to the party candidate in the base of the proportion of the vote that they have received. (Farrell, D. M., 2011). The mixed-member proportional system and the parallel system hold the advantages to be proportional, and they allow the minority to express their power by being inclusive. They ensure that voters have geographical representation. It also gives the chance to the voter to give one vote for the party and another one for their single favourite candidate. On the other hand, they are complicated systems which might be difficult to understand for voters. They can create two classes of representation and often they are subject to strategic voting. The parallel system also has the disadvantage to waste more votes compared to the mixed-member proportional, and it does not always guarantee a fair proportion.

The choice of an elective system has an enormous impact on the health of democracy and on the society itself. The actors of the election are a voter and party and MP and the process in which they play their role can give a different outcome. The party or the MP that has received the majority of the vote should be able to take actions and be responsible for their actions to the citizens (Norris, P. 1997). At the same time, it is essential to give a chance to the minority of society to be represented in political life. According to Cruzan, politics has five laws, and the first law is called the law of minority rule. Cruzan argues that all governments in reality are minority governments. This is a given in dictatorships, but even in democracies parties capture or retain the presidency or the parliament with the votes of a minority of the "electorate". In democracies, the average turnout is about 75%, and the mean incumbent share of the vote is around 40%. Therefore, the average "winning coalition" averages 30%". Some system can discriminate against the minority by becoming a kind of 'elected dictatorship" (Cuzán, A. G., 2019). like the Majoritarian system. Other systems, like the Proportional, can give too much space to the minority and thereby leaving a country in a climate of instability. Other systems that try to cope with this problem can become too complicated, like the Mixed system. Therefore, there is no single 'best' system: these arguments represent irresolvable value conflicts. "For societies, which are riven by deep-rooted ethnic, religious or ethnic divisions, like Mali, Russia or Israel, the proportional system may prove more inclusive (Lijphart 1977), but it may also reinforce rather than ameliorate these cleavages. For states, which are already highly centralized, like Britain or New Zealand, Majoritarian systems can insulate the government from the need for broader consultation and democratic checks and balances. In constitutional design, it appears that despite the appeal of 'electoral engineering' there are no easy choices (Norris, P., 2004).

In conclusion, elections are fundamental to preserve the democracy and the functionality of a democratic country. There are four main elective system: Plurality, Majoritarian, Proportional, Mixed, and each of them has variety of sub-types. The Plurality system is the one in which the candidate who gather the most votes is the winner. The Majoritarian requires an absolute majority to select a winner. The Proportional system assigns the number of seats in proportion to the vote that each party has gathered. The Mixed system combines different elements from the Proportional and Majority systems. Each of these systems has different procedure and therefore different advantages and disadvantage. None of them can be considered the perfect system, because how they function depends not only on the system itself but also on the situation and characteristics of the society that adopted it.

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