Electoral Rules

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INTRODUCTION

Against all odds, Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election and became the 45th President of the United States. It was a shock: Most journalists and political analysts had predicted the victory of Trump's major opponent, Hillary Clinton. How come so many people were wrong? The answer starts with the electoral rules that govern the presidential election in the U.S. In a sense, the predictions were not wrong, since Clinton got more votes than Trump (almost three million more) — but this is not what decides who wins. What matters is the votes in the electoral college. Each state has a certain number of electoral-college members that is more or less proportional to its population, and these members give those votes to the candidates using the system of their choice (see below). Donald Trump got 306 electoral-colleges votes, whereas Hillary Clinton got 232 (the final count was 304 to 227 because seven electoral-college members ultimately decided to abstain). This is where the predictions failed because the results in some states were very close indeed.

This story demonstrates the importance of electoral rules and their intricacies. In many ways, they shape electoral results, and thus have tremendous implications for both politicians and citizens. For example, Hillary Clinton would have been the 45th President of the United States if the method used to elect the President of South Korea had been used instead (see below). This chapter deals with electoral rules, what they are and how they s hape political life. We define electoral rules as the rules that govern:

1. How many candidates are to be elected in how many districts?
2. How do voters express their views on the ballot?
3. How are the votes counted?

Presidential nominee Donald Trump appears at a rally in Wilkes-Barre Pennsylvania, on October 10, 2016.
Matt Smith Photographer / Shutterstock.com

Throughout the chapter, we use the terms electoral systems and electoral rules interchangeably when we refer to these rules. There are numerous election-related regulations we do not discuss in detail here — for instance, how different countries address questions of campaign finance, political advertisement, and voter registration. Although important, these elements fall beyond our scope; see Chapter 7 for some of this. Instead, we provide information about the electoral systems in place in large contemporary democracies, that is, those countries that are categorized as liberal democracies as of 2020 by the project "V-Dem"[1] and that have a population of at least 10 million. There are 18 such countries, as Table 1 (starting on the next page) shows. For each of them, we gathered data on the latest presidential and legislative (lower chamber) elections; given limited space, we confined ourselves to national elections. This is not to say, however, that state, regional or local elections are not important in their own right.

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[1] The V-Dem project gathers data on the (non)democratic status of all countries of the world throughout history. See https://www.v-dem.net/en/.

The first section below is conceptual and descriptive. We present and clarify the key terms that we use to distinguish the various electoral systems and present the electoral systems used in our sample of large democracies. Then we examine the major consequences of these electoral systems, both the direct consequences on electoral outcomes and the broader effects on the functioning of democracy.

THE VARIETY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: AN OVERVIEW

❖ **What are the two major electoral systems used for presidential elections?**
❖ **What are the three elements that define electoral systems in legislative elections?**
❖ **What is a ranked ballot system, and in which country is it used?**

Across the world citizens cast their ballots in many different ways and their votes are also counted in many different ways. We examine the two types of elections that are usually considered the most important, presidential (that is, election of the president as head of the government in the executive branch of the state apparatus,) legislative elections (that is, elections of the assembly or parliament, that is the legislative branch of the state apparatus).

Table 1. Countries included in the chapter and their electoral rules

Country	Election year	Average district size	Ballot structure	Electoral threshold	Electoral formula (legislative)	Electoral formula (presidential)
Australia	2019	1.0	Ranked ballot		Majority	
Belgium	2019	13.6	Open list		PR	
Canada	2019	1.0	One candidate		Plurality	
Chile	2017	5.5	Open list		PR	Majority runoff
France	2017	1.0	One candidate		Majority/plurality	Majority runoff

Germany	2017	Multi-member districts: 25.6; Local districts: 1	Closed list (multi); One candidate (local)	5%	Mixed	Majority runoff
Ghana	2020	1.0	One candidate		Plurality	
Italy	2018	Multi-member districts: 12.8; Local districts: 1	One candidate	3%	Mixed	
Japan	2017	Multi-member districts: 16.0; Local districts: 1	Closed list (multi); One candidate (local)		Mixed	
Netherlands	2017	150.0	Open list	0.67%	PR	
Portugal	2019	10.5	Closed list		PR	Majority runoff
South Korea	2020	Multi-member districts: 47.0; Local districts: 1	Closed list (multi); One candidate (local)	3%	Mixed	Plurality
Spain	2019	6.7	Closed list		PR	
Sweden	2018	12.0	Open list	4%	PR	
Taiwan	2020	Multi-member districts: 13.3; Local districts: 1	Closed list (multi); One candidate (local)	5%	Mixed	Plurality
Tunisia	2019	6.6	Closed list		PR	Majority runoff
United Kingdom	2019	1.0	One candidate		Plurality	
United States	2020	1.0	One candidate		Plurality	Majority

Note: Data comes from authors' personal collection and consultation of Election Passport and Wikipedia. We calculated average district size in dividing the total number of parliamentary seats on the number of districts. In countries using a mixed system, we counted the districts for special groups (overseas or indigenous) in the group of multi-member districts. We reported electoral thresholds that are nationwide.

Presidential elections

Presidential elections are simpler, since the goal is to elect ONE person. Out of our 18 countries, six have presidential elections; the others have a parliamentary system with a prime minister. In such a case, the prime minister is usually the head of the party that wins the most seats in parliament — though see Chapter 4 ("Making and Breaking Governments") for complicated variations on this theme.

The simplest approach is to allow citizens only one single vote. In such a context, the candidate with the most votes is elected. This is a single vote **plurality** system. Only one country in our sample uses such a system: South Korea. A key issue is that a candidate can become president with a relatively low vote share since they only need to get more votes than any other candidate, and many candidates may be on the ballot. For example, in 1987, Roh Tae-woo was elected with only 37% of the votes, beating out four other candidates. Hilary Clinton would have been elected in the 2016 Presidential election in the United States because she got 48% of the votes and Donald Trump 46% of the votes.

The other approach consists in imposing a second criterion for being elected. In these countries, it does not suffice to have most votes, one needs to have a **majority** of the votes (that is, more than 50%). This ensures that a large portion of the population supports the president. The way it works is that if no candidate gets a majority of the votes there is a second vote, also known as a second round, a few weeks later between the top two candidates in the first round. This is called a majority-runoff, which is the most common system for presidential elections. In our sample, it is used in Chile, France, Portugal and Tunisia. In those countries, second rounds are quite frequent. For example, in France presidential elections since 1965 have always required a second round. There are other electoral systems used to ensure that the winning candidate gets a majority of the votes, like the instant-runoff system, but these are only used in legislative elections (see below).

Cover of the Financial Times after the first round of the French Presidential election in 2017
Hadrian / Shutterstock.com

There are other more complex systems for presidential elections. As mentioned above, in the United States what matters is not the number of votes that a candidate gets, but the number of electoral-college votes. Each state can choose the system they use to assign their electoral college votes. Most use a single-vote **plurality**, which means that all of the state's electoral votes are given to the candidate that gets most votes in the state. It is thus not impossible that the candidate with the most votes in the whole country fails to be elected because they have fewer electoral college votes than their opponent, as was the case in the 2000 (George W. Bush vs Al Gore) and 2016 elections (Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton). It is important to note that a candidate needs to get an absolute majority of the electoral college votes — at present, 270 of 538 votes — in order to be elected president. If no candidate receives a majority, the U.S. President is elected in a special ballot of the House of Representatives in which each state has only one vote.

Legislative elections

Legislative elections are more complicated because there is more than one person to be elected. Each country uses a different electoral system that corresponds to a certain combination of three elements: district size, ballot structure, and electoral formula.

Legislative elections usually imply the presence of districts. Districts are geographical partitions of a country, which may or may not correspond to administrative boundaries (like a city, county, or province). These districts are important because it is at this level that votes are counted and transformed into seats.[2] A key element of any electoral system is district size (also called district magnitude), that is, the number of legislators elected in the district. At one extreme we have countries with single-member districts, in which there is only one candidate elected. This is the case in Australia, Great Britain, Canada, France, Ghana, and the United States. Figure 1 shows the districts in the 2020 elections in Ghana. At the other extreme, we have countries with only one district. This is the case in the Netherlands. The 150 seats of the parliament are elected in one large district whose boundaries correspond to those of the country. In between, we have countries that use districts of varying size, with an average around ten (see Table 1). The district size in those countries might vary a lot. In Spain for instance, the two districts that correspond to the largest cities (Madrid and Barcelona) have more than 30 seats, while the majority have between three and five seats.

Figure 1. Map of electoral regions and constituencies of Ghana in 2020

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[2] Note that in some countries like in Sweden, there are multiple layers of districts.
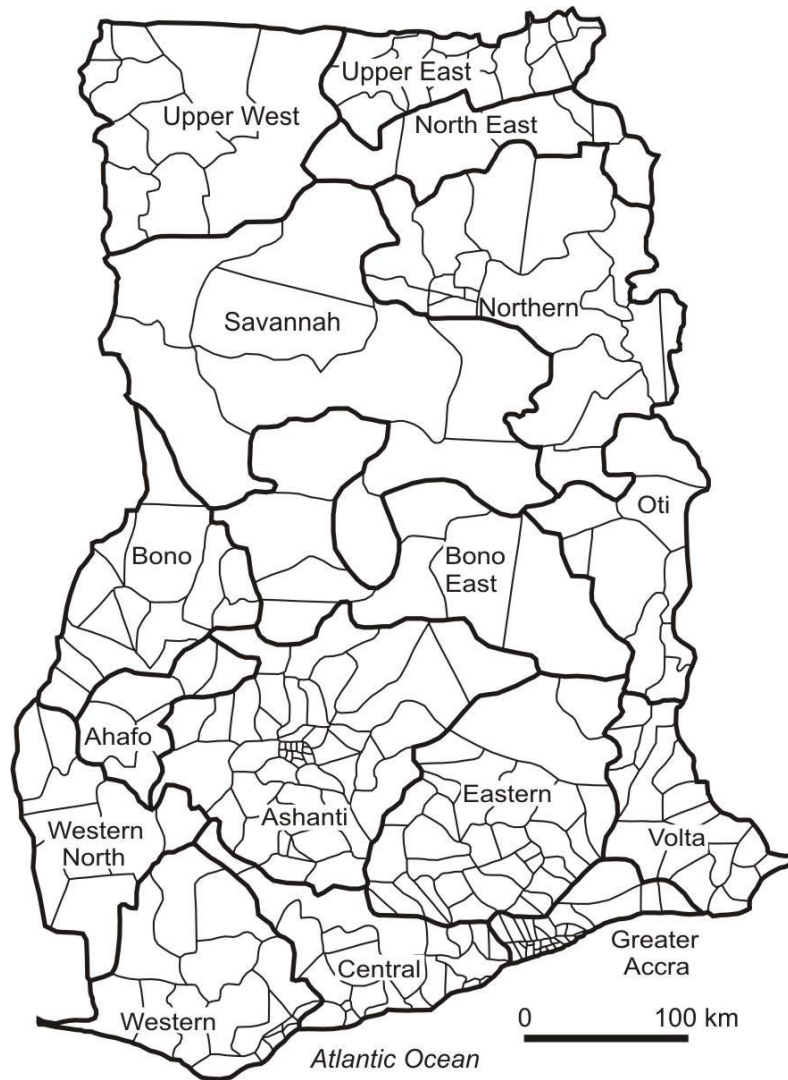
Note: This map was created by the authors by merging geographical data from the [regions](#) *and electoral* [districts](#) *in Ghana from Wikipedia.*

The second element that distinguishes countries and electoral systems is the ballot structure. Ballot structure defines the way people cast their vote. There are two sub-elements here: (1) whether people vote for candidates, parties, or both, and (2) whether they have one or several votes (See Table 2 for a classification of countries based on their ballot structure). Let us start with the simplest case: countries in which voters have only one vote. There are six countries in our sample where voters have one vote and this vote is for a candidate, who is usually associated with a party: Britain, Canada, France, Ghana, Italy, and the United States. There are three countries (Portugal, Spain and Tunisia) where voters only have one vote but this vote is for a party, not a person. There are obviously candidates for each party, but the choice of who

takes office is made at the level of the party. Voters cannot express preferences among the candidates on that list. This is called a **closed-list system**.

Table 2. Ballot structures and examples of countries that use these rules

	Vote for parties	Vote for candidates	Vote for both
One vote	E.g., Portugal, Spain, and Tunisia	E.g., United Kingdom, Canada, France, Ghana, Italy, and the United States	
Multiple votes		E.g., Australia, United States (State and Congressional elections in Maine and certain local elections)	E.g., Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Belgium, Chile, the Netherlands, and Sweden

Note: The data comes from the authors' personal collection.

In other countries, people have several votes. As before, in some cases, voters can only vote for candidates. This is the situation in Australia, where voters have a ranked ballot, that is one in which they are invited to indicate their first, second, third choices, and so on. In the United States, this system is called ranked-choice voting. The ranked-choice system is used for state primaries and congressional elections in Maine and for local elections in more than 20 cities across the United States including Minneapolis, New York, and San Francisco. This electoral system allows voters to express a nuanced political preference, but it also makes the counting process more complicated (see below).

In some countries, voters have multiple votes, for both parties and candidates. In Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, voters have two ballots, on one of which there is a list of candidates in a local district and another with just a list of parties in a larger national or regional district. These are **mixed systems**. In other countries like Belgium, Chile, the Netherlands, and Sweden, the ballot contains a list of parties and a list of candidates for each party. Voters first pick one party, and then one candidate (or several candidates depending on the country) within this party list. These are **open-list systems**. Open-list systems are often considered more democratic than closed-list systems because voters have more impact on the final electoral outcome thanks to their preferential votes for candidates within party lists. Imagine an election in which a party gets three seats: These seats will go to the first three candidates on the

party list in a closed-list system. In an open-list system, these three seats will go to the candidates who receive the most preferential votes.[3]

A ballot with multiple votes for the 16th Bundestag in Germany
[Wikipedia](#)

The last element distinguishing electoral systems is the electoral formula. This refers to the way votes are counted, that is, the rule according to which votes are translated into seats. There are three basic criteria: **plurality**, majority, or **proportionality**. The first two rules are generally applied in single-member districts while proportionality can only be applied in multi-member districts.

The simplest rule is plurality rule; the candidate with the most votes wins, no matter how few votes that may be. This is sometimes called the "first-past-the-post" system (FPTP). This is the prevailing formula in the United Kingdom, Canada, Ghana, and the United States.

The other rule that is applied in single-member districts is the majority rule, with two variants in France and Australia. In France, there are either one or two rounds. In the first round (as in presidential elections), a candidate needs to obtain a majority, or more than 50%, of the votes in the district in order to be elected. If no candidate has a majority, there is a second round in which only

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[3] In reality most of the countries that use an open-list system have a sort of hybrid system in which the candidates elected depend on both the number of preference votes that they get and their order on the party list.

the candidates who obtained at least 12.5% of the vote (among all eligible voters) in the first round are eligible to participate. In that second round, the candidate with the most votes is elected. This system is also used for some state elections in the United States, like Louisiana and Georgia.

Another type of majority rule is used in Australia. In that country voters rank order the candidates from the most to the least preferred. There is only one round of voting but there can be many rounds of counting. We first count the number of first choices of each candidate. If a candidate has a majority (more than 50%) of first choices, they are elected. If not, we proceed to a second round, in which the candidate with the fewest number of first choices is eliminated. Since that candidate is eliminated, we distribute their vote to the candidates that were ranked second in these ballots. If a candidate has a majority of the votes in that second round they are elected, otherwise we proceed to the third round, and so forth. This process continues until a candidate obtains a majority of votes. This counting is also the one used in ranked-choice ballot elections in the United States. A drawback of this system is that it takes some time before results are announced. In Australia, for example, it usually takes a few days for results to be announced.

The third electoral formula that is used for allocating seats in the legislature is the proportionality rule, also known as proportional representation (PR). This formula concerns seven countries in our sample. This is applied in multi-member districts. The principle is simple. Suppose that there are ten seats to be allocated in a district. If a party has 30% of the votes, it should get 30% of the seats, hence three seats. There are a number of mathematical formulas that are used to determine how many seats should be given to each party (D'Hondt, Hare, Droop, Sainte-Laguë), some of them are slightly more favorable to larger parties, others more favorable to small parties, but the logic is always the same: The proportion of seats that a party gets more or less corresponds to its vote share.

Note that the proportionality principle is easier to apply in large districts, where there are many seats to be allocated. Let us imagine a small district with two seats. In such a district, a party that got 20% of the votes will probably not get any seats. If there are two other parties, one with 50% of the votes, and other with 30% of the votes, these two parties will get one seat each. It is only in large districts that small parties have a chance to obtain a seat in the legislature.

Citizens cast their ballot on election day in Indonesia 2019
Hamdan Avivi / Shutterstock.com

In many countries, the proportionality formula is qualified by other rules that make the system less proportional. These extra rules usually aim at reducing the number of parties in parliament. The most frequent of them is the presence of an electoral threshold, which is a minimum of votes that a party needs to even be considered in the distribution of seats. In Sweden for instance a party needs to get 4% of the national vote to be qualified for seats. About half of the countries of our sample that use proportional formula have such a threshold (see Table 1).[4]

Finally, the last electoral formula is the one used in mixed systems. In these countries, the translation of votes into seats is made by combining plurality and proportionality. The goal of these systems is to combine the advantages of both. Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have such systems. In the last four cases, the plurality and proportionality formula are applied independently, and they are thus called parallel.[5] In the case of Germany, the two formulas are applied jointly in a way that gives priority to proportionality. The German system is often called compensatory.

Let us start with parallel systems. To see what these terms mean in practice, let us walk through some examples of these systems in action. Japanese voters participate in two independent and concurrent elections to select, with two separate votes, the 465 members of the House of Representatives. First, they vote for a candidate in their local single-member district (there are 289 local

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[4] In Table 1, we consider only national thresholds but there are also local thresholds. In Sweden, for instance, a party needs at least 4% of the vote at the national level or 12% in the local district.
[5] Note that South Korea has both a parallel and a compensatory component.

districts); those candidates are elected according to the plurality rule, that is, the candidate with the most votes wins. Second, they vote for a party list in their region (there are 11 regions and a total of 176 seats). The regional seats are allocated to the parties according to the proportionality rule (the D'Hondt method). Importantly, the two votes are cast at the same time on Election Day. Note that Italy uses an unusual type of parallel mixed system. Voters have one vote, but this vote counts twice: once for a candidate at the local level, and once for the party associated with this candidate at the national level. Besides this specificity, the system functions just like the one in Japan.

A woman looks at a candidate poster board in Japan.
Ned Snowman / Shutterstock.com

The last mixed system is the German one, and it is different since it is compensatory. As in Japan, German voters have two votes — one for the local candidate in their district and one for a party, with the candidates ultimately chosen from the party list. In principle, there are 598 members to be elected in the Bundestag. Half the candidates — the first 299 — are elected in local single-member districts according to the plurality rule, while the other 299 are chosen on the basis of proportionality at the national level. The difference with Japan is that the two systems do not work independently of each other. The total number of seats that a party gets depends on its total vote share. Let us imagine that a party gets 10% of the party list vote. According to the proportionality principle it should get 10% of the total seats in the Bundestag, that is, 60 seats. So the German system looks at the number of seats that the party has won in local districts and subtracts that number when allocating the proportionality seats nationally. If that party had 10 of its candidates elected in the local districts it gets 50 additional proportionality list seats; if the party won only five seats in the local districts it gets 55 additional seats. Adding these seats

to ensure proportional representation nationally can mean the ultimate size of the Bundestag exceeds 599; as of 2021 there were actually 709 seats assigned.

Table 3 plays out a thought experiment: what if Japan used the German method? How would the results differ?

Table 3. Estimated seat share of the seven main political parties in the Japanese 2017 general election using the German mixed-system

	Vote Share 2017 General Election (%)		Total Seat Share 2017 General Election (%)	Estimated Seat Share with the Mixed-Member System Used in Germany (%)
	Constituency	PR Bloc		
Liberal Democratic	47.82	33.28	61.08	35.91
Constitutional Democratic	8.53	19.88	11.83	18.78
Kibō	20.64	17.36	10.75	16.47
Komeito	1.50	12.51	6.24	11.86
Communist	9.02	7.90	2.58	7.41
Innovation	3.18	6.07	2.37	5.77
Social Democratic	1.15	1.69	0.43	0.16

Data for the vote share and seat share in the 2017 general election in Japan: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan](#)

> NOTE: The mixed-system in Japan allows voters to cast two votes at the same time; one for the 289 constituency seats elected with the plurality rule and the other for the 176 seats determined by proportional representation in each larger electoral bloc (D'Hondt method). In Germany, the mixed-system is compensatory which favors greater proportionality, while still allowing a certain local representation. Half of the initial seats (299) are attributed to single-member districts using the plurality rule. The other initial 299 seats are determined by proportionality at the national level based on every party's share of the national vote. However, when attributing the proportionality seats, every party's constituency seats are deducted from the number of seats that they should be receiving if all 598 seats were determined proportionally. Consequently, there ends up being more than 598 seats in the Bundestag. In order to receive proportionality seats a party needs to receive 5% of the total

valid votes or three constituency seats. In the fourth column, we translated the vote shares in Japan into seats using the German electoral rules. To replicate the German division of seats, we attributed 289 seats for the constituency seats and 289 initial seats for the proportionality seats. To simplify the process, we ignore the overhang seat rule implemented in 2013 in Germany. The Liberal Democratic party does not receive any proportional seats as they received more constituency seats than their national vote share. We attribute the proportional seats to all of the other parties that received 5% of the valid votes or three constituency seats, and deduct every party's constituency seats from their proportionality seats. We notice that every party's final seat share is much closer to their national vote share when using the German mixed-system.

Review sheet: Overview of the variety of electoral systems

Key points
— There are two electoral systems for presidential elections: the single-vote plurality system and the majority-runoff system. The key difference between the two is that the majority runoff system imposes that a candidate only wins when they have a majority of the votes, which often requires a second round.
— There are many electoral systems for legislative elections. We distinguish them by three elements:
1. The size of the district: whether there is one legislator elected in the district or several;
2. The ballot structure: whether voters have multiple votes and can vote for candidates/parties/both;
3. The electoral formula: how votes are translated into seats.

Key terms
— **Closed-list system** — System in which voters vote for a party list, not for candidates within this list.
— **Open-list system** — System in which voters vote for a party list and also for one or several candidates within that list.
— **Ranked-choice voting** — System in which voters rank the candidate by order of preference (first, second, third, or more)
— **Plurality** — Rule according to which the candidate with the most votes is elected.
— **Majority** — Rule according to which a candidate must obtain more than 50% of the votes to get elected.

> — **Proportionality** — Rule according to which the share of seats that a party obtains in a given district corresponds to its share of votes, also known as proportional representation (PR).
> — **Mixed system** — A system that combines plurality (or majority) and proportional representation in the transformation of votes into seats.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

- ❖ **Which electoral system leads to the highest number of parties in parliament and government?**
- ❖ **Which electoral system favors the representation of women and racial minorities?**
- ❖ **What is the best electoral system for democratic political representation?**

The big question is of course whether electoral rules matter, that is, whether they make a difference for the way politics works in any given country. We first examine the direct immediate consequences on the outcome of the election. We discuss the impact on the number of parties in parliament and government, turnout, and the representation of women and racial minorities. Second, we examine the broader consequences for democratic representation understood as elected politicians acting as effective representatives of the population in making policies that are in their best interests.[6] These consequences are often the indirect consequences of the electoral outcome, but they are particularly important as they have normative implications for the quality of political representation, and in turn democracy. Table 4 provides some data on some indicators that we use in this section for our sample of 18 countries.

Table 4. The consequences of electoral rules

Country	Turnout (legislative)	ENPP	Type of government	Proportion of women in parliament	Average citizens' satisfaction with democracy
Australia	92%	3.2	Single majority	30%	1.7
Belgium	88%	9.7	Coalition majority	41%	1.5

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[6] Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 515–28.

Canada	68%	2.5	Single minority	29%	1.7
Chile	47 %	3.1		23%	1.5
France	49%	3.0	Coalition majority	40%	1.5
Germany	76%	5.6	Coalition majority	31%	1.5
Ghana	79%	2.0		13%	
Italy	73%	2.9	Coalition majority	36%	0.9
Japan	54%	2.5	Coalition majority	10%	1.6
Netherlands	82%	8.1	Coalition majority	33%	1.7
Portugal	49%	2.9	Single minority	40%	1.0
South Korea	66%	2.9	Single majority	19%	1.0
Spain	66%	4.9	Coalition minority	44%	1.7
Sweden	87%	5.6	Coalition minority	47%	1.9
Taiwan	75%	2.2	Single majority	42%	1.7
Tunisia	42%	3.7	Coalition majority	25%	
United Kingdom	67%	2.5	Single majority	34%	1.5
United States	67%	2.0		23%	1.8

Note: Data comes from authors' personal collection and consultations of [Institute for Development and Electoral Assistance](#)*,* [Gallagher Electoral Systems Website](#)*,* [World Bank](#)*,* [Comparative Study of Electoral Systems](#)*, and* [Wikipedia](#)*. We only consider the type of government of parliamentary systems. In presidential systems, the government is chosen by the president and thus does not depend on the electoral systems of the legislative election. As for the average citizen's satisfaction, we calculate the average of the latest wave available in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The measure goes from 0 (not satisfied at all) to 3 (fully satisfied).*

Direct consequences on the electoral outcome

In a seminal book, French political scientist Maurice Duverger[7] argued that "the plurality rule [employed in single-member districts] tends to produce a two-party system." This has become known as Duverger's Law.[8] Duverger's law implies that systems using proportional representation (PR) tend to produce nations (and governments) with more parties. Duverger argues that a multi-party system is the "natural" state of affairs, as different parties better represent the variety of interests and values in a society, but that the plurality system reduces the competition to two main parties for two reasons.

The first reason is mechanical: Small parties are systematically underrepresented, that is, their seat share in parliament is substantially lower than their vote share, simply because of the mechanics of the plurality system. As only the party with the most votes wins the seat, smaller parties do not get anything. For example, in the 2019 Canadian election, the New Democratic Party received 16% of the votes nationally but won only 7% of the seats, while the Green Party won only 1% of the seats with 7% of the votes. The second reason is psychological: supporters of small parties realize that their party is underrepresented and progressively abandon it because they do not want to waste their vote for a party that has no chance of winning. This is often referred to as strategic or tactical voting.[9] For the exact same reason, candidates from small parties also have an interest to tactically cooperate with a larger party. If they are in competition with a large party, their chances of winning are very small, but if they sign an agreement in which the two parties pledge not to compete against each other, their chances of winning increase. This is common in a country like France, in which there are several parties that are close to each other in ideological terms. Left-wing parties like the social-democratic and communist parties for example, often form a pact before the election in deciding not to compete against each other. There are thus districts with a

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[7] Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. John Wiley and Sons. (1954), page 113.
[8] Duverger also studies the majority system with two rounds, which was frequent in Europe in the early twentieth century. We have only one instance of such a system in our sample of 18 countries: France. For a discussion of the French electoral system, see André Blais and Peter J. Loewen, "The French Electoral System and its Effects" *West European Politics* 32, no. 2 (2009): 345-359.
[9] Damien Bol and Tom Verthé, "Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. 2019.

communist candidate, and others with a social-democratic candidate, but not both at the same time.[10]

Is Duverger's law valid? It depends on how one counts parties. The law is disconfirmed if this means that no third party is supposed to receive any vote under plurality rule. But the law is confirmed if this means that there are typically only two "effective" parties in a given district, that there are only two "major" parties in parliament, or that there are substantially fewer parties under plurality than under PR. If we examine all democratic legislative elections held under plurality and PR between 1945 and 2015 and look at the percentage of the vote obtained by "third" parties, that is, all the parties except the two that got the most votes, the mean percentage of the vote received by all such third parties across the 143 elections studied is 13% nationally, and just 10% at the district level.[11] Clearly, plurality does not produce a pure two-party system, but this is not very far off. In sharp contrast, "third" parties are much more successful in PR elections, where they typically get 48% of the vote nationally and 32% at the district level.

Another approach is simply to count the number of parties. The problem is that not all parties matter equally. A party with 10% of the votes or the seats should not count as much as one with, say, 45%. To solve this problem, we often use a measure called the "effective number of parties",[12] which gives a greater weight to parties with more votes and less weight to smaller parties. For example, in the above example with two parties having 45% of the vote and one 10%, the effective number of parties is 2.4. The effective number of parties in countries with plurality is 2.6 at the national level and 2.3 at the district level. This is higher than two but not too far off, and clearly less than in PR elections, where the corresponding figures are 4.6 and 3.8.[13]

It is also important to take into account seats in parliament. If one compares the countries in our sample that use PR (Belgium, Chile, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Tunisia) with those using plurality rule (Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States), the difference is clear. The effective number of parties in parliament is 2.3 under plurality and 5.4 under PR. There is wide variation across PR countries, however. For example, the effective number of

[10] André Blais and Indridi H. Indridason, "Making Candidates Count: The Logic of Electoral Alliances in Two-Round Legislative Elections," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 193-205.

[11] André Blais, Ruth Dassonneville, and Michael Lewis-Beck. "La loi de Duverger est-elle valide ?" In *Duverger revisité : regards critiques sur un scientifique.* 2020.

[12] Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera. "'Effective' number of parties: a measure with application to West Europe." *Comparative Political Studies* 12, no. 1. (1979): 3-27.

[13] Blais, Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck. 2020.

parties is extremely high in the Netherlands while much smaller in Spain. This is because of the district size. The Netherlands has one national district, from which all 150 members of the legislature are elected. As a consequence, any party that gets at least 0.67% of the vote is represented in the legislature. In Spain, the country is carved up into 52 districts and many districts elect three to five legislators. It usually takes more than 15% of the vote in a given district for a party to win a seat.[14] [15] As a consequence, there are fewer parties in parliament in countries in which districts are small.

As above, try a thought experiment to see how this matters – this time, what if Spain used the Dutch system? Table 5 lays out one answer.

[14] Lijphart, Arend. *Electoral Systems and Party System: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies, 1945-1990.* New York: Oxford University Press. 1994.
[15] Taagepera, Rein, and Matthew S. Shugart. *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems.* New Haven: Yale University Press. 1989.

Table 5. Estimated seat share of the six main political parties in the Spanish 2019 general election using the Dutch proportional representation system

	Vote Share 2019 Election (%)	Seat Share 2019 Election (%)	Estimated Seat Share with the PR system used in the Netherlands (%)
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	28	34.29	28.57
People's Party (PP)	20.8	25.43	21.14
Vox	15.1	14.86	15.14
Unidas Podemos	12.9	1.00	13.14
ERC – Sobiranistes	3.6	0.37	3.42
Citizens (Cs)	6.8	0.29	6.86

Data for the vote share and seat share in the 2019 Spanish general election: Government of Spain, Ministry of Interior

> NOTE: In Spain, there are 350 seats in the Congress of Deputies. The autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla each elect one representative, whereas the 50 other provinces initially each obtain two seats. The remaining 248 seats are then attributed to the provinces in proportion to their population. Within each province, seats are allocated using proportional representation, and more specifically the D'Hondt method. In the Netherlands, each parties' seat share is much closer to their vote share, as there is only one national district. The 150 seats within this district are also attributed using the D'Hondt method. In the third column, we estimate the seat share of each of the six main political parties in the Spanish 2019 general election using the PR system used in the Netherlands. We use the D'Hondt method to distribute the 350 seats as if they were given within one national district. Consequently, we notice that each parties' seat share is much closer to their vote share. This system advantages smaller parties such as Podemos, whereas larger parties receive a smaller share of the seats.

What about the effect of the electoral system on the number of parties in governments? At the end, most of the important decisions are made by **governments** — that is, the small group of politicians that form the executive branch of the state apparatus that is led by a president or prime minister, rather than by **parliaments** — that is, the larger assemblies that from the legislative

branch of the state apparatus. We focus here on **parliamentary systems** — that is, those countries where the outcome of the legislative election determines the formation of the government, such as the United Kingdom. In presidential systems such as the United States, the cabinet is formed by the president, sometimes with approval of the Senate.

The opening of the parliamentary session in Greece 2017.
Alexandros Michailidis / Shutterstock.com

There are four types of government. On the one hand, we can distinguish governments where all the members of the cabinet are from the same party — **single-party governments** — and those where two or more parties agree to govern together, known as **coalition governments**. On the other hand, we can distinguish governments that hold a majority of the seats in the legislature (and as a consequence can count on majority support for their decisions) — majority governments — and those that do not have a majority in the legislature and therefore must get the support of opposition parties for their decisions — which are known as minority governments. Combining these two distinctions we get four categories: single-party majority, single-party minority, coalition majority, and coalition minority. The question is: What type of government do electoral rules tend to produce?

Let us start with the plurality rule. The assumption is that the plurality rule leads to the formation of single-party majority governments. Since there is a two-party system, one of the two main parties has a majority of the seats in the legislature and forms the government. Is that really the case?

Two of our 18 countries have the plurality rule and a parliamentary system: Canada and the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, the government that was formed after the most recent election (2019) is indeed a single-party majority government, in which all the ministers (including Prime Minister Boris Johnson) are associated with the Conservative Party. Is it always like this? Almost. Out of the 27 governments that have been formed in the country since 1945, 24 have been single-party majority ones; there have been two single-party minority governments and one instance of a majority coalition, between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, from 2010 to 2015. Basically, governments in the United Kingdom are of the single-party majority type. What about Canada? The government that was formed after the most recent election (2019) is also a single party (Liberal), but it is a minority one. All of the 24 governments that have been formed since 1945 in Canada have been single-party but, contrary to the United Kingdom, minority governments have been relatively frequent; 10 of these 24 governments did not hold a majority of the seats in parliament.

These data confirm that plurality rule makes **coalition governments** very unlikely.[16] Most of the time, the plurality rule produces single-party majority governments, but there are quite a few instances of single-party minority governments, especially in countries with strong regional or linguistic divisions like Canada. PR elections, in contrast, usually produce **coalition governments**. Five of the six governments that were formed in the PR countries in our sample are **coalition governments**; only one of them, Portugal, is a single-party minority government,[17] and there are no instances of single-party majority government. There have been a few cases of **single-party governments** in the past in countries like Austria, Ireland, Norway and Spain.[18] In Spain for instance, the government has in fact always been composed of a single-party since 1979, and until the 2020 legislative election after which leader of the social-democratic party Pedro Sànchez formed a coalition. The growing party fragmentation we observe in contemporary democracies makes single-party majority governments very unlikely under PR. If you want to have single-party majority governments you must have single-member districts, and even here there is no guarantee, as the Canadian case shows.

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[16] An important exception is India where coalition governments are more likely despite the use of a plurality rule.
[17] We leave aside Chile, which has a presidential system.
[18] Bassi, Anna. "Policy preferences in coalition formation and the stability of minority and surplus governments." *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 250-268.

Political campaign posters of presidential candidates Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), who in 2020 formed the first coalition in Spain.
Olaf Speier / Shutterstock.com

The most frequent type of government in PR countries is a majority **coalition**. That is, one party holds the most seats and adds other parties to its government in order to have a majority of seats in parliament. This is sometimes a formal requirement to be approved as a government like in Belgium. In other countries like Sweden, this is more an informal requirement that facilitates decision-making. But there are also minority governments, both single-party (see Portugal) and coalition (see Spain and Sweden) ones. There is greater diversity of types of government in PR systems because there is a much wider range of electoral rules, especially with respect to district size. That said, the great contrast between countries with single-member district plurality and those with proportional representation is that single-party majority governments are the rule in the former case and the exception in the latter. Table 6 serves to classify a number of countries based on the type of government their electoral system produces.

Table 6. Classification of countries based on their type of government

	Minority government	Majority government
Single-party	E.g., Canada (2019); Portugal, and Spain (until 2020)	E.g., United Kingdom, Australia, Canada (2015), and Taiwan
Coalition	E.g., Spain (2020), and Sweden (2018)	E.g., Belgium, Netherlands, Tunisia, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan

Note: The data comes from the authors' personal collection.

Let us now talk about the effect of electoral systems on turnout. One of the arguments advanced in favor of PR is that it fosters higher voter participation, which is deemed to be a sign of healthy democratic performance.

PR may contribute to higher turnout for three main reasons.[19] The first is that PR produces more parties, and the presence of more parties means that voters have more choice, meaning they are more likely to find a party that defends their interests and values. Thus, they are less prone to stay home on election day. The second is that PR leads to greater competition between parties. That leads to higher turnout since voters are more inclined to vote when there is a close race. In single-member districts there are many safe seats — where a party is so popular in the district that others stand no chance — and voters are less interested in casting a vote when the result of the election is a foregone conclusion. But in PR systems even small parties can win seats and so few people feel that their votes do not count. A third possibility is that PR is seen as a fairer system because it gives parties the number of seats proportional to their vote share. As a consequence, people perceive the electoral outcome as legitimate and they are more inclined to participate in the first place.

Is turnout really higher under PR? The answer: No. A study that re-analyzes more than 130 published studies on the determinants of turnout comes to a clear conclusion: "most studies show that PR has no influence on [...] electoral participation".[20] This is also what we observe in our sample of countries, which shows the turnout rate in the last legislative election held in our 18 countries (see Table 4). If we compare the mean turnout in countries with PR and in those with a plurality or a majority rule, we find little difference. (We leave aside countries with a mixed system as well as the two countries -- Australia and Belgium -- with compulsory voting, where turnout is exceptionally high for obvious reasons.) Mean turnout in the five countries with plurality or majority rule (Canada, France, Ghana, the United Kingdom and the United States) is 66% while it is 62% in the six PR countries (Chile, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Tunisia). The highest turnout is observed in a PR country (Sweden) but so is the lowest (Tunisia). In short, the empirical evidence suggests that turnout is *not* higher under PR.

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[19] Blais, André, and Kees Aarts. "Electoral systems and turnout." *Acta politica* 41, no. 2 (2006): 180-196.
[20] Stockemer, Daniel. "What affects voter turnout? A review article/meta-analysis of aggregate research." *Government and Opposition* 52, no. 4 (2017), page 704.

There may be many reasons for this null finding but we should note that, contrary to what is often argued by advocates for PR systems, it is not clear that the presence of more parties actually contributes to higher turnout, unless there are very few parties. The number of parties does make a difference on turnout when there are two or three parties. In French legislative elections, for example, turnout in the second round is indeed higher in districts where there are three qualified candidates instead of two. This is because citizens who do not feel close to one of the two first parties are more likely to vote when there is a third party.[21]

Finally, does PR foster a more diversified legislature? It is a well-established fact that women and racial, linguistic or religious minorities tend to be underrepresented in parliaments and governments (see, for example, Chapter 11.) Yet, a good functioning democracy should ensure **descriptive representation** of all social groups to constitute a mirror of society in terms of sociodemographic characteristics like gender and race.[22] [23] The question is therefore whether some electoral rules can mitigate that underrepresentation. One argument in favor of proportional representation is that it contributes to the election of more women and minority candidates. Is the argument valid?

Before examining the evidence, a few observations are in order. First, the electoral rule is only one of the factors that affect the relative representation of women and minority candidates. There are many other factors at work, among which the resources that these groups do or do not have, historical legacy, and most importantly, the presence or absence of quotas that guarantee a certain threshold of representation,[24] [25] or even political culture, that is, attitudes towards marginalized groups in society.[26] The question is whether proportional representation makes some additional difference.

The second point is that we should not expect the impact of electoral rules to be necessarily the same for women and minority groups. The reason is that

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[21] Bol, Damien, and Ria Ivandic. "Does the Number of Candidates Increase Turnout? Causal Evidence from Two-Round Elections." SSRN Working Paper. (2020).

[22] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *The concept of representation*. University of California Press, 1967.

[23] Descriptive representation can contribute to the substantive representation of all social groups, which is achieved when decision makers make policies that are profitable to all social groups. The question of substantive representation is discussed further when we talk about responsiveness and accountability.

[24] Krook, Mona Lena. "Women's representation in parliament: A qualitative comparative analysis." *Political Studies* 58, no. 5 (2010): 886-908.

[25] McDonagh, Eileen. *The motherless state: Women's political leadership and American democracy*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

[26] Ruedin, Didier. "Ethnic group representation in a cross-national comparison." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 335-354.

minority groups tend to be territorially concentrated (the members of the group tend to live in the same areas) while women are dispersed uniformly across areas. This difference, as we show below, has important consequences.

What is the effect of the electoral system for the representation of women and minorities? We observe a better representation of women and minority groups in PR countries, especially when districts are large. The reason is that it is easier to diversify the field of candidates when there are 10 districts with 10 seats each than when there are 100 districts with one seat each. To be sure, the fact that it is easier does not mean that more women and members of minority groups will run and get elected. It is still possible for a party not to have any female candidates in a 10-seat district and it is possible for a party that is keen to achieve gender parity to make sure it has many women candidates in the 100 single-member districts. This is for example the case of the Labour and LibDem parties in the United Kingdom that have some internal quota rules that ensure a minimum number of women candidates. Yet, parties are more likely to field a diversified set of candidates in a multi-member district, and as a consequence we would expect at least slightly better gender representation in multi-member districts.

As shown in Table 6, in our six countries with single-member districts (Australia, Canada, France, Ghana, the UK and the US), on average 28% of elected politicians in parliament are women. In our seven PR countries (Belgium, Chile, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Tunisia), that average is 36%. Another way to look at this is to examine what happens when there is electoral reform. New Zealand, for instance, changed in 1993-94 from single-member districts to multi-member ones under a compensatory mixed-system where proportionality dominates.

In Figure 2, we show that the mean percentage of women in the legislature in the three elections preceding reform was 17% but increased to 29% in the three post-reform elections. This is a substantial increase of 12 points. Still, we should be careful about attributing the entire change to one change — during the same period there was also an increase of 7 points in the representation of women in Canada, which kept its single-member district plurality system throughout. This might be due to the evolution of a societal norm favoring the election of women during the period. In a nutshell, multi-member districts help, but only a little.[27]

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[27] Paxton, Pamela, Melanie M. Hughes, and Matthew A. Painter. "Growth in women's political representation: A longitudinal exploration of democracy, electoral system and gender quotas." *European Journal of Political Research* 49, no. 1 (2010): 25-52.

A demonstrator carries a sign that reads: "Elect More Women"
Erin Alexis Randolph / Shutterstock.com

Figure 2. Women in parliament in New Zealand and Canada
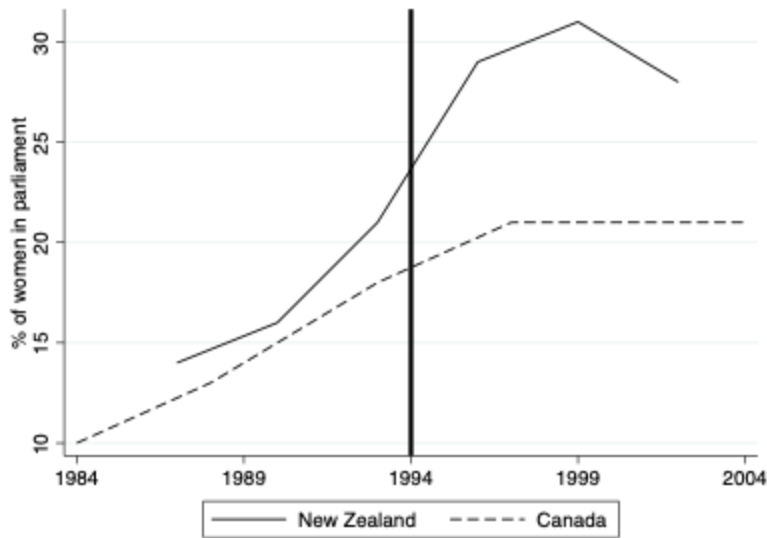
Note: The thick vertical line is the date at which New Zealand switched from a plurality system to a mixed compensatory system. Data comes from the World Bank.

What about the representation of racial, linguistic, and/or religious minority groups? The first point to be made is that not all minority groups are underrepresented in single-member majoritarian systems. It all depends on the size of the group, its territorial concentration, and boundary delimitation. While small dispersed groups are clearly disadvantaged, things are different with groups that are regionally concentrated. Francophones in the province of Quebec, for instance, are a minority in Canada but a strong majority within the province, and as a consequence they are in fact overrepresented overall. In the United States, the Voting Rights Act has promoted the creation of African-American and Latino-majority districts. As a consequence, 12.6% of the members of the House of Representatives elected in November 2020 are black, the same percentage as in the population.[28] It is for that reason that (single-member district) majoritarian systems are not inherently inimical to ethno-regional parties. The situation is similar in PR systems. The relative success of ethno-regional parties depends "on the specific interaction of ethnic geography with constituency magnitudes, legal thresholds, and other institutional factors in each country."[29]

There is also a debate in the literature about whether women or minority candidates perform better in closed or open lists. This question concerns PR elections in which the parties present a list of candidates in each district. Under a closed list, voters vote for a list. If a list has 20% of the vote in a 10-seat district, it has two seats and the two candidates on the top of the list are elected. In an open list system, voters vote for a list and also for the candidate that they prefer on the party list. Suppose the party has two seats, as in the previous example; the two candidates with the most personal votes on that list are elected.

Whether a closed or an open list is most favorable to women and minorities depends on the presence of party or voter bias. If voters are biased against women, women would do better under closed lists since voters will not support women in the ballot and that will prevent them from being elected. But if parties are biased against women and voters not, women would do better under open lists since parties will put women at the bottom in their closed lists, a place where they are unlikely to be presented. The question is who, parties or voters, are more strongly biased against women (or minorities)? Some recent

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[28] Latinos and Asians remain underrepresented, however. 8.7% of those elected are Latinos, compared to 18.5% of the total population. The equivalent numbers for Asians are 3.4% and 5.9%. We thank David Lublin for generously providing these numbers.

[29] David Lublin, *Minority rules: Electoral systems, decentralization, and ethnoregional party success.* Oxford University Press, 2014, page 113.

studies show that at least in Western democracies, voters are less likely to vote for a woman than a man.[30]

The indirect consequences for democratic representation

Democratic government implies that political decisions are made *by* and *for* the people. Along this line, two key requirements are that elected politicians are *responsive* to citizens in making decisions that reflect their will, and that citizens hold these politicians *accountable* in making sure that they do a good job.[31] **Responsiveness** and **accountability** are the first two topics that we discuss in this section. Finally, we turn into a broader indicator of the quality of democracy: whether citizens are satisfied with the way it works in their country.

A government is responsive when it makes decisions that are aligned with citizens' will. Research on the topic uses two measures of responsiveness. First, some studies rely on the distance between the government's ideology (left-right, or liberal-conservative) and that of citizens; a government is deemed to be responsive when its ideological position is close to that of citizens.[32] In the scientific jargon, we talk about ideological congruence; there is "high ideological congruence" when the ideological orientation of the government resembles that of most citizens.

Second, some researchers examine the actual policies implemented by the government and compare those to citizens' views on the matter.[33] For example, they check whether social spending increases when citizens ask for more social spending.[34] A key advantage of this measure is that it allows researchers to measure responsiveness between elections. Whereas ideological congruence rarely varies between elections because the composition of parliaments and governments rarely changes, policies change more frequently. Hence, focusing on the correlation between policies and public opinion allows researchers to

[30] Sona N. Golder, Laura B. Stephenson, Karine Van der Straeten, André Blais, Damien Bol, Philipp Harfst, and Jean-François Laslier. "Votes for women: electoral systems and support for female candidates." *Politics & Gender* 13, no. 1 (2017): 107-131. See also Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, "Gendered perceptions and political candidacies: A central barrier to women's equality in electoral politics," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 1 (2011): 59-73.

[31] Powell, G. Bingham, and G. Bingham Powell Jr. *Elections as instruments of democracy: Majoritarian and proportional visions.* Yale University Press, 2000.

[32] Blais, André, and Marc André Bodet. "Does proportional representation foster closer congruence between citizens and policy makers?." *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 10 (2006): 1243-1262.

[33] Stimson, James A., Michael B. MacKuen, and Robert S. Erikson. "Dynamic representation." *American political science review* (1995): 543-565.

[34] Wlezien, Christopher, and Stuart N. Soroka. "Political institutions and the opinion–policy link." *West European Politics* 35, no. 6 (2012): 1407-1432.

have a more direct and dynamic measure of responsiveness. An important limitation is that the data are generally available only with respect to a few policy issues, which may or not be typical.

What are the consequences of electoral systems on responsiveness? The answer to this question depends on the measure of responsiveness that is used. When responsiveness is measured using ideological congruence, we observe similar levels of responsiveness in PR and plurality/majority systems. This seems counterintuitive at first glance because there are more parties in parliament in PR systems (see above). This means that more citizens see their ideology represented in parliament, simply because there are more ideologies represented in parliament.[35] Yet, this does not mean that their ideology is represented in government.

The countries in which the ideological congruence between citizens and governments is the largest are those in which the parties in government are ideologically centrist. Given that in all countries some citizens are right-wing and others left-wing, maximum level of congruence is attained with a position between these two camps. On average, citizens are indeed centrist. Under PR systems, this situation is usually attained because parties form **coalition governments** with some centrist parties, some more right-wing, some more left-wing. Consequently, on average, the government tends to be ideologically centrist as well. In majority/plurality systems, there is often only one party in government (see above), which means that there is a risk that this single party is less centrist and thus further away from the median voter.

Yet, governing parties in majority and plurality systems are usually centrist. The reason is that, by nature, these systems incite parties to take a centrist ideological position because there is only one candidate elected in each district, which means that they need to convince a large group of voters. Furthermore, because there are relatively few parties under plurality and majority (see above), they do not need to take an extreme position to differentiate themselves from their competitors. The consequence of these two mechanisms is that parties, at least the largest ones who end up in government, are relatively centrist.[36] In sum, the level of ideological congruence is similar under all electoral systems. Yet, this congruence is achieved via two different paths:

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[35] Golder, Matt, and Jacek Stramski. "Ideological congruence and electoral institutions." *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2010): 90-106.

[36] Bol, Damien, Konstantinos Matakos, Orestis Troumpounis, and Dimitrios Xefteris. "Electoral rules, strategic entry and polarization." *Journal of Public Economics* 178 (2019): 104065.

government coalitions in the case of PR systems, and moderation of party positions in the case of majority and plurality systems.

Studies that measured responsiveness as the extent to which the policies implemented by the government follow citizens' views about these policies as measured in nationally representative surveys, usually find a high correlation between the two. For example, when citizens want more public spending, governments spend more, and when they want less, governments spend less.[37] Yet, they also find that the correlation between government spending and public opinion is weaker under PR.[38] The reason is that governments that are formed by a coalition of multiple parties, which are more common under PR systems (see above), can hardly adapt their policies to changes in public opinion in between elections. Each change in policy requires possibly protracted negotiations between parties in order to find an agreement. An example of this can be found in Belgium, where governing coalitions traditionally decide upon all the policies that will be implemented in the next four years of the legislature before forming the government.[39] This reduces the chances of disagreement between parties in government between two elections, but it also leaves little room to adjust policies to changes in public opinion.

Actually, the correlation between government spending and public opinion is as high in countries that use PR *but* in which there is only one party in government (typically because district magnitude is small) as in countries using a majority or plurality system.[40] By contrast, governments are less responsive in countries in which the government is composed of a large coalition including many parties. The number of parties in government is the key variable explaining why responsiveness is greater in plurality and majority systems, which most of the time produce single-party governments.

Governments are accountable when they do what they said they would and are held responsible for their performance by voters. Accountability is an interactive process between voters and politicians. Voters first elect politicians, who then fulfill (or not) the pledges that they make during the electoral campaign. Thus, voters reward or punish these politicians at the next election

[37] Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson. (1995)
[38] Wlezien and Soroka. (2012)
[39] Lieven De Winter and Patrick Dumont. "Do Belgian parties undermine the democratic chain of delegation?." *West European Politics* 29, no. 5 (2006): 957-976.
[40] Benjamin Ferland, "Government Responsiveness under Majoritarian and (within) Proportional Electoral Systems." *Government and Opposition* 55, no. 4 (2020): 595-616.

in voting them in or out of office depending on how good of a job they have done (in the scientific jargon, we talk about "retrospective voting").[41]

Campaign posters in South Africa for the 2019 general election.
[*Wikipedia*](Wikipedia)

Much as with responsiveness, research on the topic has used two different measures of accountability. The first, called economic voting, has a long history in political science. It relies on the idea that the economy is a key political issue about which (most) citizens care. Unlike other issues that can be divisive like the legalization of drugs or how thorough prosecutors need to be, nobody is in principle against a healthy and dynamic economy. Along this line, some studies evaluate whether voters punish governments when the economy is going badly and reward them when it is going well. The strength of the correlation between the governing party's vote share and economic indicators like GDP per capita, growth, unemployment, or inflation when it comes time for re-election, is a measure of accountability.[42]

A second measure of accountability consists in listing all the pledges made by parties and politicians during the electoral campaign, and then systematically checking whether those pledges are fulfilled once they are elected. This measure has the key advantage of being a direct indicator of the concept of

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[41] Morris P. Fiorina, "Economic retrospective voting in American national elections: A micro-analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* (1978): 426-443.

[42] Lewis-Beck, Michael S. *Economics and elections: The major Western democracies.* University of Michigan press, 1990.

accountability, but it requires a time-consuming coding exercise, as parties and politicians make hundreds of such pledges during electoral campaigns.

What are the consequences of electoral systems for accountability? This time, the two measures lead to relatively similar results: majority and plurality systems lead to higher levels of accountability than PR systems. Regarding the first measure, there is a strong positive correlation between the vote share of the governing party (or parties, in case of **coalition government**) and GDP per capita, and a strong negative correlation with unemployment.[43] Put simply: as the economy improves (worsens), votes for the governing party increase (decrease). These are clear indicators that voters hold governments accountable with regard to the state of the economy.

One can then divide countries in the extent to which there is or there is not "clarity of responsibility," or in other words, counties in which citizens can easily identify who is responsible for economic policies, and therefore who is responsible for the good or bad state of the economy, from those in which this responsibility is blurred. A key variable in this regard is the electoral system: a majority/plurality system is associated with high clarity and PR with low clarity. It then appears clearly that the correlation between governments' vote share and the state of the economy is larger in democracies with high clarity than in others, suggesting that accountability is greater there.[44] [45] [46] Accountability works a bit better in plurality and majority systems, since who is responsible for economic policies is easier to identify in the former than in the latter.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] Ruth Dassonneville and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. "Rules, institutions and the economic vote: clarifying clarity of responsibility." *West European Politics* 40, no. 3 (2017): 534-559.

[45] G. Bingham Powell, Jr., and Guy D. Whitten. "A cross-national analysis of economic voting: taking account of the political context." *American Journal of Political Science* (1993): 391-414.

[46] This has also been expressed by Alexander Hamilton in Federalist 70: "Plurality [of parties] tends to conceal faults and destroy responsibility.... It often becomes impossible, amidst mutual accusations, to determine on whom the blame or the punishment of a pernicious measure, or series of pernicious measures, ought really to fall. It is shifted from one to another with so much dexterity, and under such plausible appearances, that the public opinion is left in suspense about the real author...Who is there that will either take the trouble or incur the odium of a strict scrutiny into the secret springs of the transaction? Should there be found a citizen jealous enough to undertake the unpromising task, if there happens to be collusion between the parties concerned, how easy it is to clothe the circumstances with so much ambiguity."

Citizens waiting to cast their vote in Nevada on Election day 2020.
Trevor Bexon / Shutterstock.com

The second measure of accountability is more direct and consists in counting the number of electoral pledges fulfilled by politicians and parties once in government. The first important finding of studies that use this measure is that governments do fulfill a majority of their pledges, around 60%.[47] This is more than what people usually think, and a reason for that might be that broken pledges receive more media attention than the fulfilled ones.

The country with the highest proportion of fulfilled pledges is the United Kingdom (more than 80%) and the lowest (in their sample) is Italy (around 45%).[48] This seems to give an advantage to plurality and majority systems. A closer inspection reveals that the key element is whether the government is composed of a single party or a coalition of parties. Countries that use a PR system but have single-party governments, like Portugal, fare almost as well as those that use a plurality or majority system (a bit less than 80% of electoral pledges are fulfilled in Portugal). The reason is that parties in coalition governments necessarily have to cooperate and thus compromise, and it is often impossible to satisfy everybody; coalition partners sometimes make contradicting pledges during the campaign. For the same reason, minority governments also fare lower in terms of pledges fulfilled because they need to compromise with parties in parliament to pass legislative bills.

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[47] Thomson, Robert, Terry Royed, Elin Naurin, Joaquín Artés, Rory Costello, Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, Mark Ferguson, Petia Kostadinova, Catherine Moury, François Petry and Katrin Praprotnik. "The fulfillment of parties' election pledges: A comparative study on the impact of power sharing." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (2017): 527-542.
[48] *Ibid.*

In a nutshell, plurality and majority systems are associated with slightly higher levels of accountability because they tend to produce single-party governments where voters can easily identify the party responsible for political and economic outcomes, and where parties do not have to compromise about their electoral pledges. Note that within the family of PR systems, those that have an open list seem to perform better in terms of accountability. For example, there was a large scandal in Bavaria in 2013 involving about a third of local politicians who unduly hired their relatives as their personal assistants. Those who were found guilty were much less likely to be re-elected in the upcoming elections. This may be due to the open-list system used in Bavaria, in which voters can punish individual politicians for their wrongdoing and continue voting for the party that they like.[49]

Another reason why coalition governments reduce accountability is the way coalitions are formed. In single-party governments, it is the party that comes first (in terms of seats, and usually in terms of votes) that governs. In coalition governments, smaller parties join the largest one to form a coalition that has a majority of parliamentary seats. Voters do not have their say in coalition formation, which happens after negotiations between politicians behind closed doors. A party can thus enter the government despite being unpopular. This breaks the very dynamic of accountability according to which citizens vote parties in and out of government. For instance, the small centrist party FDP in Germany stayed without discontinuity in government from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, alternating coalitions with the center-left and center-right party. This happened without respect to the electoral performance of the party. All in all, then, governments tend to be somewhat more accountable in countries with a plurality or majority system.

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[49] Rudolph, Lukas, and Thomas Däubler. "Holding individual representatives accountable: the role of electoral systems." *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 3 (2016): 746-762.

Voting procedure during the 2020 general election in Ghana.
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Finally, a common way to evaluate the quality of democratic representation across countries is to ask citizens what they think about the way it works in their country. Many cross-national surveys thus include a citizen satisfaction with democracy question such as: How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country, on a scale from not satisfied at all to very satisfied? Responses to such a question capture the general mood of the population regarding the overall democratic performance of the political system.[50]

Under what electoral system are citizens more satisfied? On average, those who live in a country that uses a majority or plurality system are equally satisfied with the way democracy works in their country than those who live in one that uses a PR system.[51] We find the same results in our sample of countries when we look at the average of citizens' satisfaction in the most recent available survey across the countries of our sample. For example, the average is the same in Belgium and the United Kingdom (around 1.5 on a scale from 0 to 3). This suggests that electoral systems are equally good at democratic representation from the point of view of citizens.

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[50] Canache, Damarys, Jeffery J. Mondak, and Mitchell A. Seligson. "Meaning and measurement in cross-national research on satisfaction with democracy." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2001): 506-528.
[51] Anderson, Christopher J., and Christine A. Guillory. "Political institutions and satisfaction with democracy: A cross-national analysis of consensus and majoritarian systems." *American Political Science Review* (1997): 66-81.

Yet, there is a subtle difference. There is more variation in people's attitudes under plurality and majority systems.[52] There is a gap in satisfaction between those who vote for the governing party (or parties in case of a coalition government) and those who vote for other parties is smaller under PR than under plurality and majority. While "winners" and "losers" are almost equally satisfied in countries like Belgium (61% of winners, against 57% of losers satisfied), the winning-losing gap is greater in the United Kingdom (70% of winners, against 43% of losers satisfied). This is explained by the general functioning of the PR system that is more consensual and inclusive of opposition parties, which makes those who vote for losing parties less dissatisfied. By contrast, the adversarial and winner-take-all nature of plurality and majority systems implies that winners are very satisfied and losers very dissatisfied.

The winner-loser gap in citizens' satisfaction is far from being anecdotal. It has important implications for the survival not just of the government but of the regime itself. A building block of democratic regimes comes from the popular support for the principles of democracy and government for and by the people. When citizens stop believing in those principles, the system is at risk of collapsing into a civil war or an authoritarian regime.[53] Yet, democracy means that sometimes one's favorite party loses the election, and it is important that even in this situation one continues to support democratic principles and the system in place. In other words, losers need to accept their defeat with the hope that they might get "luckier" next time.[54] This resonates with recent events in the United States with Donald Trump and his supporters who refuse to concede the victory to Joe Biden after the 2020 Presidential election (arguing that there has been electoral fraud, although there is no evidence of it). This event has the potential to destabilize the democratic system in place in the country. For this reason, PR systems contribute to the stability of democratic regimes in decreasing the gap in citizens' satisfaction between winners and losers.

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[52] *Ibid.*

[53] Claassen, Christopher. "Does public support help democracy survive?." *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 1 (2020): 118-134.

[54] Anderson, Christopher. *Loser's Consent Cep: c C.* Oxford University Press, 2005.

Trump supporters storm the U.S. capitol on January 6th, 2021
Thomas Hengge / Shutterstock.com

Within the family of PR systems, those that are open-list do not seem to produce more satisfaction than those that are closed-list, despite their natural appeal given that they give more choice to voters. On average, citizens are equally satisfied regardless of the list type.[55] Yet, the open-list tends to exacerbate the winner-loser gap among supporters of the same party: Those who support candidates who got a large number of preferential votes are more satisfied than those who support candidates with fewer votes.[56] In a nutshell, although citizens are generally as satisfied under every electoral system, the rules organizing elections have consequences for the gap in satisfaction between winners and losers. On this criterion, PR systems seem to perform better due to their inclusiveness.

CONCLUSION: WHICH IS THE BEST ELECTORAL SYSTEM?

When we look at how elections are held in contemporary democracies the most striking fact is that there is a huge variety of options. There can be many small districts or only one for the whole country, people may have one or more

[55] Bosch, Agustí, and Lluís Orriols. "Ballot structure and satisfaction with democracy." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 24, no. 4 (2014): 493-511.
[56] Bol, Damien, André Blais, Xavier Gillard, Lidia Nunez Lopez, and Jean-Benoit Pilet. "Voting and satisfaction with democracy in flexible-list PR." *Electoral Studies* 56 (2018): 23-34.

votes, they may vote for candidates, parties or both and the formula for deciding who is elected can be plurality, majority, proportional representation, or a combination of them. It should also be clear that each system has its advantages and disadvantages. There is no perfect system.

What would be our recommendation for a new democracy? The answer has to be: It depends on what your priorities are. If you wish to ensure good descriptive representation and you want to make sure that the losers will graciously accept defeat, proportional representation has an edge. But if you wish to ensure strong government responsiveness and accountability, majority/plurality has an edge. In short, like many things in life, the choice of an electoral system depends on what you care about.

Review sheet: The consequences of electoral systems

Key points
— Voter turnout is not higher under PR than under plurality, but there are more parties in parliament as well as in government under PR than under plurality.
— PR systems tend to favor the representation of women and racial minorities, but this effect is very small compared to other factors like the presence of quotas or other specific representation rules.
— Plurality leads to a higher level of responsiveness and accountability than PR.
— Citizens are equally satisfied under plurality and PR, but the gap in satisfaction between winners and losers is larger under plurality.

Key terms
— **Single-party government -** A government in which all ministers are from the same party
— **Coalition government** - A government in which ministers come from different parties. These parties agree to form a coalition that will then rule the government.
— **Descriptive representation** - The fair representation of a group like women or racial minority in parliament. The proportion of members of this group in parliament should be equivalent to their proportion in the population.
— **Responsiveness** - The fact that governments make policies that correspond to the views of citizens
— **Accountability** - Condition according to which governments are held responsible for fulfilling their electoral promises or doing a good job.