Chapter 3
Evaluating electoral systems

In recent decades, debate about electoral engineering has moved from margin to mainstream on the policy agenda in many nations. Political discussions about electoral reform have largely revolved around the practical options, the sometimes-bewildering combination of trade-off choices, and the consequences of particular reforms to the status quo within each state. Underlying these pragmatic arguments are contested normative visions about the basic principles of representative government. The most fundamental debate raises questions about the ultimate ends as well as means of elections. The general consensus in the literature emphasizes that no ‘perfect’ bespoke electoral system fits every society. Instead, arrangements have to be tailored to different contexts and choices require trade-offs among competing public goods. The most common argument today revolves around the pros and cons claimed for majoritarian, combined, and proportional types of electoral systems, for example which is best for maximizing electoral participation or for containing ethnic conflict. Major questions underlying these empirical claims concern what forms of representative democracy are more desirable and what functions electoral systems should perform. Some studies of electoral systems fail to deal explicitly with the normative assumptions, preferring to focus exclusively upon the factual claims. Others present lengthy shopping lists of the alternative values that electoral systems are supposed to meet, emphasizing the desirability of, say, the inclusion of women, the management of ethnic conflict, or the importance of governability, agnostically letting readers pick and choose whatever values they regard as most important. A comprehensive list has the advantages of identifying all the possible claims that people can and often do make about electoral systems. Many practical arguments about reform are conducted at this level. But from this procedure it remains unclear why we should prioritize one value over another, or how values are logically connected to form part of a broader framework. What reasonable person could not want, say, both social inclusiveness in parliamentary representation and also effective governance, in a win-win situation, even if these values may conflict or contradict each other in practice.

A preferable strategy seeks to locate the normative values underlying the choice of electoral systems within coherent theories of representative democracy. In one of the most familiar frameworks of ideal types used in comparative politics, Lijphart contrasts ‘consensus’ (or ‘consociational’) democracies based upon proportional representation electoral systems with ‘majoritarian’ (or ‘Westminster’) democracies based upon majoritarian and plurality electoral systems. Consensus democracies are defined as those aiming at power sharing among multiple political actors to maximize deliberation, bargaining and compromise. Majoritarian political systems are envisaged as those concentrating power in the hands in the largest parliamentary party to maximize governability. This dichotomy represents an important typology, commonly used in the comparative literature. Yet the term ‘majoritarian’ can become confusing when used to refer simultaneously both to the type of democracy as well as to the type of electoral system that both bear these names. The term ‘Westminster democracy’ is equally inadequate, referring as it does to a form of parliamentary government exported from the UK to many Commonwealth nations decades ago, yet a system which can find few recognizable exemplars today, even in its original home. The term is also potentially misleading given that the Westminster House of Commons uses First-Past-the-Post, a plurality not a simple-majority electoral system, while the House of Lords currently remains an unelected body, an anomaly in the modern democratic world. The traditional terminology also seems to weight the deck by disingenuously framing the choice as one between either consensual (‘kinder’, ‘gentler’) democracy or effective majoritarian government, rather than understanding the central choice as between competing visions of the best form of representative democracy.

In a recent comprehensive study, G. Bingham Powell, Jr. proposes that the alternative ideal types can be conceptualized as ‘majoritarian’ or ‘proportional’ visions of democracy. Yet this strategy extends the term ‘proportional’, that originally referred to the PR type of electoral formula, to many other aspects of the basic political system or constitution that are conceptually distinct from the type of proportional formula per se, such as the distribution of power within the legislature. Moreover Powell does not classify some systems with PR electoral formula as
proportional democracies (such as Greece which is classified as majoritarian, or Ireland which is classified as 'mixed'). As a result it seems best to maintain a clear conceptual distinction to avoid any confusing slippage between ‘proportional representation electoral formulas’ per se and any notion of a ‘proportional’ democracy.  Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey, focusing upon two dimensions of political systems, develop another alternative typology used to understand presidentialism. The authors distinguish between ‘efficient’ political systems designed to maximize government accountability, disciplined programmatic parties, and identifiable policy mandates and ‘inefficient’ systems maximizing the provision of particularistic local concerns and personal votes. They also distinguish the ‘representative’ dimension, with systems reflecting either local or group interests. While the central typology is useful, the term ‘efficiency’, originally drawn from Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*, seems potentially misleading, since ‘efficiency’ is conventionally understood to concern the most appropriate means to an end, rather than any specific end goal per se. Hence there can be an efficient or inefficient delivery of particularistic ‘pork’ and patronage.  

For all these reasons, we will draw upon an older conceptualization suggested by the noted constitutional expert, Samuel Finer. In this study the central normative debate about the fundamental ideals that electoral systems should meet is conceptualized as one between either ‘adversarial’ or ‘consensual’ visions of representative democracy. This distinction captures the central features of the argument more closely than many of the current alternatives in the literature.

**The arguments for and against adversarial democracy**

Advocates of adversarial democracy believe that democratic political systems should promote government accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, through generating single-party executives, responsible programmatic parties, and vigorous parliamentary opposition. Electoral systems designed to give the leading party the majority of parliamentary seats, through the use of majoritarian and plurality electoral formula, are an essential, although not sufficient, component of adversarial democracy by connecting voter’s preferences directly to a representative in parliament and, indirectly to the party that enters government. The purported virtuous of these electoral systems, advocates claim, are that they maximize democratic accountability, strengthen citizen-member linkages, facilitate governability, generate decisive electoral outcomes, and encourage political responsiveness.

(i) Democratic accountability

Proponents of adversarial democracy envisage elections primarily as a critical link in the chain designed to insure that parties in government remain collectively accountable to parliament (on a day-to-day basis) and to the electorate (at regular intervals). This vision suggests that electoral systems which systematically reduce the multiple contenders for office to the leading parties which win power both simplifies electoral choices and clarifies responsibility for government decisions. In this ideal, the ‘In’ and the ‘Out’ parties compete for popular support by presenting alternative programmatic platforms, leadership teams, and candidates for elected office. In the words of Walter Lippmann: “To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when things seem to be going badly, this, in spite of all that has been said about Tweedledum and Tweedledee, is the essence of popular government.” By facilitating a veto on governing incumbents, elections function as instruments of democratic control. At the end of their tenure in office, the single party in government remains collectively accountable for their legislative record and policy performance, and if the ‘trains do not run on time’, or if there is evidence of corruption, malfeasance, or incompetence, then the electorate can punish the incumbent administration, if they so wish. In comparison, where proportional representation electoral systems generate multiparty parliaments and coalition governments, it is believed that this process makes it more difficult for voters to assign blame or praise for the government’s performance, and to reward or punish parties accordingly, even if the public becomes deeply dissatisfied with those in power. Proponents argue that under majoritarian and plurality electoral systems, the party with the largest share of parliamentary seats usually forms the government, so
that there is a direct link between the votes cast and the outcome for government. Where PR produces multiparty parliaments, the process of coalition building after the result, not the election per se, determines the allocation of Cabinet portfolios and government policies. For proponents of adversarial political systems, representative democracy is preserved by the ability of the electorate to reward or punish parties when asked to judge their performance and promises, by rigorous scrutiny of government actions, and by vigorous debate between government and opposition parties.

The closest analogy to adversarial democracy is the legal arguments propounded by public defenders and prosecutors, with the judge (constitutional courts) ensuring fair play, the news media functioning as official recorders, and the electorate serving as the ultimate jury. In the courts, the function of the defender and prosecutor is to argue the pros and cons of each case to the best of their abilities, within the boundaries of legal ethics, irrespective of their personal beliefs about the guilt or innocence of their client, because though the battle of courtroom debate it is believed that justice will be done. In this conception, drawing upon the classical liberal theory of John Stuart Mill, adversarial parliamentary debate reveals flaws in any political argument, weaknesses in policy proposals, and mistakes or errors by government ministers, and as such it is to be valued more than a false consensus that could potentially stifle debate, hide certain failings from the public eye, and exclude the full range of alternative proposals from consideration. Parliament ideally functions in this view as the nation’s forum for debate, where the government proposes and the opposition’s duty, like the public prosecutor, is to oppose in principle.

(ii) Strong voter-member accountability

At the local level, advocates argue that the link between citizens and their member of parliament elected in geographically-based single-member districts provides local communities with a voice in the nation’s affairs, as well as making elected members directly responsive to constituency concerns. Due to single-member districts and candidate-ballots, elected members are believed to remain individually accountable to their local party organization on a day-to-day basis and to all their local constituents at regular intervals. Members are thought to have stronger electoral incentives to provide constituency service, and thereby build a personal vote, in single-member districts using candidate-ballots. In this context it is believed that members will prioritize local constituency service, with individual casework sorting out problems such as housing or welfare benefits, as well as listening to community concerns and raising these matters in parliamentary debates. The independence and autonomy of MPs from the central party leadership is further strengthened where local party members and activists determine the recruitment, nomination, and selection process for parliamentary candidates in their constituency. By contrast, members are thought to be more accountable to party leaders under electoral systems with party-ballots, especially in large multi-member constituencies with closed party lists and nomination procedures controlled by the central party. Such a system is believed to promote parliamentary discipline within programmatic and cohesive legislative parties since the leadership has the power to sanction rebels by refusing their renomination.

(iii) Governability

Majoritarian and plurality electoral systems used in legislative contests have strong reductive effects designed to generate single-party executives and to limit the degree of party fragmentation in parliaments. What they thereby lose in fairness to minor parties, proponents argue, they gain in governing capacity, as the single party in Cabinet government is thereby empowered to implement their programmatic manifesto promises during their term of office, if they hold a majority of parliamentary seats and maintain the support of cohesive and disciplined parliamentary backbenchers. By systematically exaggerating the seat lead for the winning party with the largest share of votes, these electoral systems generate either a ‘natural’ or a ‘manufactured’ majority, producing a decisive outcome in seats. This process thereby legitimates the governing authority of the winner, even in relatively close contests in the share of the popular vote. Single-party governments, with an overall parliamentary majority, can enact whatever policies they feel are necessary during their term of office, taking difficult or unpopular decisions
where they believe these are in the country’s long-term interests, while knowing that they face the judgment of the electorate when their term ends and the potential sanction of losing power.

Given the concentration of executive power in the hands of a single party, the main check on the Cabinet during their term of office is a vote of confidence in parliament. Governments capable of surviving such a vote, which in practice usually means carrying their own backbenchers with them, often face few other effective curbs on power, beyond the courts. For advocates, this system has certain decisive advantages: providing government with the authority to legislate and the capacity to implement their policies, especially radical proposals; to respond decisively and in timely fashion to contingent events and sudden emergencies; to overcome parliamentary stalemate on controversial and divisive issues; and to take difficult decisions that may generate short-term unpopularity if they believe that these policies are in the country’s long-term interests. Majoritarian systems remove the need for closed-door post-election negotiations and policy compromises with other parties, or frequent coalition changes between elections. There is a single democratic chain of accountability within each nation stretching from citizens to particular members of parliament, from parliamentarians to cabinet ministers, and from ministers to civil servants implementing policies. Proponents believe that in this regard, the provision of accountable single-party government is more important than the inclusion of all parties in strict proportion to their share of the vote. Indeed the way that majoritarian and plurality electoral systems usually penalize minor and fringe parties can be regarded as a virtue, if this process prevents extremists on the far right or far left from acquiring representative legitimacy, thereby avoiding a fragmented parliament full of ‘fads and faddists’.

(iv) Decisive elections

Majoritarian and plurality electoral systems function as a substantial hurdle that systematically reduces the multiple number of parties and candidates contending for elected office so that, although electoral competition remains open as almost anyone can usually stand (with some minor legal regulations for matters like citizenship and age requirements), only the leading contenders win parliamentary seats and governing power. Where electoral systems succeed in fulfilling this function, proponents argue, they thereby have the capacity to generate decisive outcomes where voter’s preferences directly determine the selection of members of parliament and the overall distribution of parliamentary seats among parties. In turn, the majority of seats awarded to the largest party lead to the formation of single-party cabinet governments. Majoritarian electoral systems thereby maintain a direct and transparent link between the share of the votes cast and the single party in government.

(v) Responsiveness to the electorate

Yet proponents claim that government and opposition parties, and also individual elected members, remain ‘responsive’ to public concerns. In adversarial democracies, the governing party is entrusted with considerable powers during their term in office, with few checks and balances, but nevertheless it is thought that politicians remain sensitive to public opinion because they are aware that even a small swing in the popular vote in a competitive and balanced two-party system is sufficient to bring the opposition into office. This system can be envisaged as a pulley-and-weights mechanism where a modest pull on the electoral rope can produce a disproportionate displacement of weight. Proponents believe that these characteristics mean that under majoritarian systems governments are granted considerable power during their tenure in office, yet this power is shackled with ultimate accountability to the electorate. Moreover individual members are thought to remain responsive to their particular community, representing local interests and articulating diverse constituency concerns in national legislative debates, which may be a particularly important function in large and heterogeneous societies.

Critics

Yet critics suggest that adversarial democracy suffers from certain well-known dangers. In particular, adversarial democracy involves a zero-sum game between the ‘Ins’ and the ‘Outs’. If one party is repeatedly returned to government over successive elections, with a majority or even just a plurality of votes, the opposition has limited powers of checks and balances. Where
communities are divided into multiple cleavages, especially between enduring majority and minority populations, and where these social divisions and ethnic cleavages are reflected in party politics, then the balanced rotation between government and opposition implied in the adversarial model may be absent. Predominant parties can exercise undue power and trample over the interests of minority groups. Exacerbating adversarial debate may work in stable democracies and homogeneous societies, but in deeply divided plural societies and transitional democracies, critics suggest, where there is minimal agreement about the rules of the game as well as basic policy issues, this can be a recipe for disaster. The potential dangers, it is argued, are ‘elective dictatorship’, disregard for minority rights, administrative corruption arising from insufficient checks and balances, unfairness to minor parties, and public disillusionment if citizens feel that governments are unresponsive to their needs and if fragmented opposition parties mean that elections are unable to insure a regular rotation of parties in power.

Arguments for and against consensual democracy

To guard against these dangers, critics present many alternative visions of how representative democracy should function and what institutions are necessary as the structural foundations for these normative ideals. These arguments can also be discussed and framed in many ways, including as Madisonian, deliberative, or consociational models of democracy. This study focuses upon the arguments developed by Lijphart in favor of ‘consensus’ democracy, as the most systematic comparative treatment of the subject. The vision of consensual representative democracy emphasizes that political institutions should promote consensual decision-making, bargaining and compromise among multiple parliamentary parties, each with a stake in power, and dispersed decision-making processes. Proponents of consensual democracy suggest that proportional electoral systems facilitate deliberative and collaborative governance, reduce the barriers to minority parties, maximize voting turnout, and ensure that parliaments faithfully mirror the social and political diversity in society, all of which can be regarded as essential, but not sufficient, conditions for checking and balancing the power of predominant majorities.

(i) Facilitate deliberative and collaborative governance

For those who favor consensual democracy, the primary function of elections is to allow citizens to choose spokespersons to discuss, negotiate, and bargain on their behalf. Representation is less geographical than social. Far from concentrating collective responsibility in the hands of the single-party government, it is believed that the process of governance should be dispersed as widely as possible among elected representatives who are empowered to deliberate, bargain, and achieve compromise acceptable to all actors, with many institutional checks and balances, including multiple political parties in parliament, to ensure that plural interests are heard in a consensual decision-making process. The vision of democracy underlying this perspective is essentially more deliberative and collaborative than adversarial.

(ii) Reduce the barriers to minor parties

Advocates of consensual democracy emphasize the need for electoral systems to give fair and just representation so that the distribution of parliamentary seats reflects the share of the popular vote won by all parties. This process is thought to provide Madisonian checks to single-party government and majority predominance. For many critics, the traditional moral case against majoritarian electoral systems is based on the way this system systematically penalizes the share of seats awarded to minor parties who achieve a significant share of the vote but with support dispersed thinly across many districts, exemplified by the Canadian Progressive Conservatives in 1993, the Alliance party in New Zealand in 1993, or the British Liberal Democrats in 1983. All electoral systems winnow out the field of candidates and parties that enter office, by translating votes into seats. In theory, pure PR systems have little reductive impact, as the seat share received by each party reflects their vote share. In practice no PR system is wholly proportional in outcome, even with minimum vote thresholds, large district magnitudes and proportional formulas. But PR electoral systems are designed to allocate seats more closely to the share of the vote received by each party than majoritarian and plurality electoral systems, which prioritize different objectives. By facilitating the election of more minor
parties, PR systems also broaden electoral choice, providing voters with a wider range of alternatives. By contrast, by discouraging some minor parties from standing, voters face fewer party choices, although also simpler options, under majoritarian electoral systems.

(iii) Maximizing Electoral Participation

Under majoritarian and plurality electoral systems, supporters of minor and fringe parties with geographic support dispersed widely but thinly across the country, may feel that casting their votes will make no difference to who wins in their constituency, still less to the overall composition of government and the policy agenda. The ‘wasted votes’ argument is strongest in safe seats in single-member districts where the incumbent candidate or party is unlikely to be defeated. In contrast proportional elections with low vote thresholds and large district magnitudes, such as the party list system used in the Netherlands, increase the opportunities for minor parties to enter parliament even with a relatively modest share of the vote and dispersed support, and therefore increases the incentives for their supporters to cast a vote. Because fewer votes are ‘wasted’ in a PR system, it is believed that proportional representation systems should therefore generate higher electoral turnout than majoritarian or plurality electoral systems.18

(iv) Ensure Parliamentary Diversity

Proponents of consensus democracy also emphasize the importance of social inclusion, so that all voices and multiple interests are brought to the policymaking process, and in this regard they emphasize the need for diversity in the composition of parliaments. It is well established that certain social groups are over-represented in elected office, with parliamentary elites commonly drawn from predominant ethnic groups, men, and those of higher occupational status. While there are substantial variations worldwide, overall women constitute only one sixth (14.4 percent) of national legislators worldwide, with women usually lagging furthest behind in national parliaments using majoritarian electoral systems.19 Reformers have considered various strategies designed to widen opportunities for women and minorities, including legally binding candidate quotas, dual-member constituencies designated by minority group or gender, and affirmative action for candidacies and official positions within party organizations. Some of these mechanisms can be adopted in single-member districts, for example in the mid-nineties the British Labour party adopted all-women shortlists for nomination in half its target seats. But advocates argue that affirmative action can be implemented most easily when applied to balancing the social composition of party lists, for example by designating every other position on the candidate list for women.20 These mechanisms, proponents suggest, can also increase the number of regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities in parliament, although their effects depend upon the spatial concentration of each group. Socially diverse representation can be regarded as intrinsically valuable for consensus democracy, by improving the range of voices and experience brought to policy discussions, and also because the entry of minority representatives into public office can increases a sense of democratic legitimacy and develop leadership capacity.21 Proponents argue that it is important to maximize the number of ‘winners’ in elections, particularly in divided or heterogeneous societies, so that separate communities can peacefully coexist within the common borders of a single nation-state.22

Critics

Against these arguments, most critics of proportional representation emphasize certain well-known themes, arguing that these electoral systems are prone to generate indecisive electoral results and weak, ineffective, and unstable governing coalitions where it is difficult for voters to assign clear responsibility; create institutional checks and balances characterized by policy stalemate, administrative paralysis, and legislative gridlock; foster cautious, slow and incremental decision-making and limit the inability of policymakers to respond in timely and coherent fashion to a sudden crisis; encourage the legitimation of extremist parties on the far right and left; reduce the accountability of elected members to local parties and constituents; and weaken the inability of the electorate to throw out some ‘king-making’ parties that are semi-permanent members of coalition governments.
The alternative visions of democracy have often fuelled attempts to reform the electoral system to achieve either greater government accountability through majoritarian systems or wider parliamentary diversity through proportional systems. Underlying the normative debate are certain important empirical claims about the consequences of electoral rules for voting behavior and for political representation. We therefore need to go on to examine systematic evidence to see how far the normative claims are supported by comparative evidence. Do PR systems generate more opportunities for minor parties but also the dangers of excessive party fragmentation? Do majoritarian systems produce decisive outcomes where the leading party is empowered to govern alone for the duration of their term in office, but also exclude minor parties from fair representation? It is to these issues that we now turn.
### Table 3.1: The ideal functions of electoral institutions

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<tr>
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<th>Adversarial democracy</th>
<th>Consensual democracy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal function of the political system</strong></td>
<td>Should promote government accountability, transparency of decision-making, and responsible parties through single-party executives, effective opposition parties, vigorous parliamentary debate, and decisive elections.</td>
<td>Should promote consensual decision-making, bargaining and compromise among multiple parliamentary parties, each with a stake in power, and dispersed decision-making processes.</td>
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<td><strong>Ideal function of the electoral system</strong></td>
<td>The system should maximize electoral decisiveness by directly linking the votes cast to the parties and members elected to parliament, thereby providing an indirect link from voters to the party in government. The system should winnow the number of electoral parties and candidates that enter parliament and should ensure that the leading party gains a workable parliamentary majority.</td>
<td>The system should maximize electoral choice among multiple parties, should fairly translate vote shares into seat shares, and should be socially inclusive in parliamentary representation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal function of opposition parties</strong></td>
<td>Should provide adversarial scrutiny of government policy proposals and actions.</td>
<td>Should be part of the consultation process and act as an important check on the power of the largest party.</td>
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<td><strong>Ideal function of citizens</strong></td>
<td>Should be able to evaluate the performance of the governing party and the prospective policies offered by alternative electoral parties in opposition.</td>
<td>Should be able to evaluate the performance and policies of parties that are empowered to negotiate, bargain and compromise on behalf of their supporters.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal function of elected representatives</strong></td>
<td>Should act as community spokespersons reflecting local concerns and representing all local constituents in parliament.</td>
<td>Should deliberate, negotiate, and bargain as spokespersons on behalf of their party supporters.</td>
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<td><strong>Potential dangers</strong></td>
<td>May lead to ‘elective dictatorship’ characterized by entrenched power for predominant majority populations, disregard for minority rights, and lack of effective checks and balances.</td>
<td>May lead to problems of governance associated with extreme multiparty fragmentation, unstable governments, lack of accountability for the government and for elected representatives, and indecisive election results.</td>
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Figure 3.1: Models of representative democracy

A: Adversarial model

B: Consensual model


5 Richard Katz provides the most comprehensive overview of classic debates in the history of political thought, although some of the considerations in democratic theory are rather remote from the practical arguments commonly heard in policy debates, as well as from the operation of actual electoral systems. See Richard Katz. 1997. *Democracy and Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.


10 Samuel E. Finer, ed. 1975. *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*. London: Anthony Wigram. It should be noted that Lijphart uses the term ‘consensus’ democracy, not ‘consensual’, but it seems preferable to refer to this by the ideal mode of operation as a democratic process, rather than by its ideal end state.


