Electoral Systems and Voter Turnout

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28 April 2010
Standard Categorisation of Electoral Systems (borrowed from Reynolds et al., 1997):

Figure One: Electoral System Families

- **Plurality-Majority**
  - FPTP (UK, India)
  - AV (Australia, Nauru)
- **Semi-PR**
  - Parallel (Japan, Georgia)
  - SNTV (Jordan, Vanuatu)
- **Proportional Representation**
  - List PR (South Africa, Finland)
  - MMP (New Zealand, Germany)
  - STV (Ireland, Malta)

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Question:
What is the relationship between a country’s choice of electoral system and the level of voter turnout?

• Answer: Traditionally, available evidence has shown that voter turnout on average and over time was about 10 percentage points higher in countries employing some form of proportional representation (PR) electoral system than in countries with majoritarian electoral systems (i.e., systems based on plurality or majority).
Why is it so:

In PR system, each and every vote counts (at least above the electoral threshold (if any)), so it makes good sense for voters to participate, even for supporters of small parties. In majoritarian systems, the picture is more complicated, because of differences between ridings!

Under PR, there is more competitiveness among parties throughout the country (and in multi-member constituencies, if used), so parties have more incentives to campaign everywhere.

But…
... things are more complicated:

Results form previous research depend to a considerable degree on data from industrialised, long-time democracies (more or less the OECD countries). That makes these results less useful for universal generalisations (Blais and Dobrzynska, 2009).

In all kinds of studies, electoral saliency and the general political context – in particular the expected closeness of the election – come out as very important for turnout, oftentimes more important than the electoral system.
Criteria for Choosing an Electoral System
(according to Reynolds et al., 2005):

1. Providing Representation
2. Making Elections Accessible and Meaningful
3. Providing Incentives for Conciliation
4. Facilitating Stable and Efficient Government
5. Holding the Government Accountable
6. Holding Individual Representatives to Account
7. Encouraging Political Parties
8. Promoting Legislative Opposition and Oversight
9. Making the Election Process Sustainable
10. Taking into Account ’International Standards’
Would the introduction of a PR system in Canada increase voter turnout?

• Yes, in principle, because Canada belongs to the category of countries, where previous results should be applicable. But it would only happen if everything else was equal – and everything else is not equal!
• Most of the factors, which have caused the turnout decline here would still apply (political apathy, differences between nation and province political systems and traditions, civic duty norm, social factors of all kinds)
• Political context and expected closeness would still be important – but how that would change under PR is only to be seen. In New Zealand, the realities of the new situation was only absorbed over several elections!
Standard Categorisation of Proportional Representation Systems
(borrowed from Reynolds et al., 1997):

Figure Four: PR Variations

- **PR**
  - **One Tier Allocation**
    - **National Lists**
    - **Regional Lists**
      - **Open** (Netherlands)
      - **Closed** (Namibia, Israel)
    - **Free** (Switzerland)
  - **STV** (Ireland)
  - **Nat. + Reg. Lists** (South Africa)
  - **Regional Lists** (Denmark)
  - **STV + Bonus Seats** (Malta)
  - **Two Tier Allocation**
    - **National List + SMDs** (Germany)
    - **Regional List + SMDs** (Bolivia)
Lijphart’s Suggestions for Guidelines within PR:

- Must be simple to understand and operate (especially important in new (transitional) democracies)
- A high, but not necessarily perfect degree of proportionality (electoral threshold?)
- Multimember districts, which are not too large (to avoid too much distance between voters and representatives)
- Closed list PR (to avoid any kind of preferential voting (or ranking, as in STV), but also in order to encourage the formation and maintenance of strong and cohesive political parties)
Thank You!