

# Elections in Northern Ireland: systems for stability and success

## Executive Summary

*"Electoral systems are the key variables in the political process in a democracy, because to a large extent they determine who gets what, when and how."*

### 1. Introduction

With the current Talks process drawing to a close, Democratic Dialogue are concerned that the voices of community activists, smaller parties and women will be lost in what will be a key institution of any settlement—the assembly. A key gatekeeper to representation at this level will be the electoral system. This summary takes a look at existing systems elsewhere, revealing remarkable flexibility and readiness to adapt to new political contexts. The details of the electoral system—from the structure of the ballot paper to the size of constituencies—can influence the behaviour of both voters and parties, favouring some choices and discouraging others. We make suggestions as to the shape of electoral systems that will include the voices of all voters in its process and outcome.

### 2. The purpose of elections

Elections are a key link between citizens and policy-makers. And the electoral system used is an important variable in the determination of how citizens participate and are represented. As new political identifications begin to intersect with or replace older alignments and cleavages, the mechanisms for expressing and drawing together preferences have become more significant. Put simply, sometimes the electoral system is based on the expectation that a society is divided by social class or attitude into two roughly equal groups, which will be represented by competing parties or blocs of parties. In reality, social and attitudinal changes have brought on to the scene new issues—such as the environment, which cannot find a space given the constraints of the system. Adjustments to the electoral system can, and have been, introduced with the aim of achieving certain specific outcomes: more parties in the legislature, fewer parties elected, more women and members of minority groups and so on.

### 3. Key Features of Electoral Systems

The most important features commonly identified are:

- assembly size,
- electoral formula,
- ballot structure,
- district magnitude and
- thresholds of representation.

There is continued debate about the relative importance of these elements and to what extent they should be viewed as independent variables, but all can be seen as having some impact upon the eventual outcome of elections.

**Assembly size** might seem to be the least significant factor, but while it makes sense for small countries to have relatively small assemblies, "when assemblies are made extremely small, the chances of proportional election results are severely reduced." **Electoral formula** and **ballot**

**structure**, are part of the process of 'aggregating votes', that is drawing together the individual choices made by voters into collective outcomes. Ballot structure refers to the range of choices which a voter can express: does she have more than one vote, can she cast votes for more than one party, how many preferences can she register and so on. The electoral formulas translate votes into seats. Plurality and majoritarian systems have relatively simple formulas—the candidate with the biggest number of votes wins the seat, even if he has not won the votes of a majority, or the candidate with a majority of preferences takes the seat. The various PR systems, which allow for a greater range of preferences and have multi-member constituencies, have more complex formulas and ballot structures. All PR systems have multi-member constituencies—this is a defining feature of PR, though a few plurality/majority systems have more than one representative. **District magnitude** refers to the number of legislators elected from each district. In PR systems, as a rule, the greater the district magnitude the more proportional the system. Finally, **threshold of representation** refers to the percentage of votes required to have a chance of winning a seat.

#### 4. Common electoral formulas

For UK Westminster elections, of course, the system used is **single-member plurality**. This is a relatively straightforward system: voters, organised in territorial constituencies, are presented with a ballot paper containing a list of names of candidates, most of whom are attached to political parties. Voters choose one of these candidates only and the candidate whom the largest number of voters identify as their choice wins the seat, even if the largest number is a minority of the total number of votes cast. In the country as a whole, the party which wins the largest number of constituencies (again, even if this party has not won a majority of votes cast) will be the one to form a government.

With the **alternative vote system** voters elect a single constituency representative but are allowed to rank candidates in order of preference. When all first preferences are counted, provided no-one has a majority, lower-placed candidates are eliminated and their votes redistributed in accordance with second-preferences until one candidate has a clear majority over the others.

The **single-transferable vote system** allows voters to convey a lot of information about their preferences, and in particular to select among a range of candidates offered by the same party. Voters can also express support for more than one party, or for parties plus independents, on their ballot-papers. Although counting the votes is complex, this is also a relatively simple system to use in most contexts. Voters are presented with a list of candidates competing to win a variable number of seats in multi-member constituencies. They rank their preferences in order, and again are both influencing the choice of constituency member as well as the composition of the government.

**Party-list systems** are weighted in favour of the parties. As with the other mechanisms described, there are many possible variations: in the degree of choice given to voters, in the size of the constituencies and in the precise formula used to calculate how seats relate to votes. The basic principle is that parties are fundamental to the representation of opinion and that party representation in the legislature should be closely proportional to party support in the country.

Finally, there are **additional member systems**. The best known of these is the German system where the country is divided into 328 single-member constituencies, candidates being elected using a plurality system. On the ballot-paper, however, the voter has another vote which is cast for a party list, and which results in the election of a further 328 members. The object of this second vote is to compensate for disproportionalities at the constituency level; the number of seats going to party list candidates depends upon how many they have won at constituency level and on how

proportional that number is compared to overall support for the party in the country as a whole. 'Additional' seats are awarded to parties who have won fewer constituency seats relative to their overall share of the vote.

## 5. Bringing in excluded groups

We find that electoral systems change as the politics of particular states evolve and develop. PR systems were originally introduced in Denmark in the 1850s, for example, to offset the disadvantages of the German minority in Schleswig. Belgium introduced PR in the 1890s as a response to the problems of accommodating a three-party system.

It has been found that the features most conducive to electoral success for women candidates are: larger district magnitudes and a party list electoral system. In addition, rules which increase the representation of smaller parties-using largest remainder calculations, having the lowest possible thresholds-may in some cases also lead to greater numbers of women in assemblies, as smaller parties, with weaker competition for seats, tend to put forward more women candidates. It appears to be the "single-member" feature of plurality systems-combined with cultural attitudes which discriminate against women-that is the key to explaining their under-representation in parliaments elected under such rules.

## 6. Party responsibilities

The electoral system alone will not achieve proportional or even radically improved representation for women. The willingness of parties to select women for winnable seats is also important, and in the places where women have been most successful, parties have responded to pressure from women's organisations and/or from governments. A recent study of provincial elections in Argentina seems to indicate that a combination of larger district magnitude, a centralised party list system *and* a law requiring parties to field a minimum number of women candidates in the higher portions of the lists leads to an improvement in the numbers of women elected.

## 7. Possible systems: principles

The principles any electoral system should subscribe to thus involve:

- **proportionality and inclusiveness:** the fair representation of all sections of the population and of all shades of democratic opinion are desirable both in terms of social justice and because they promote identification with and a sense of ownership of political institutions and processes.
- **accountability:** giving a greater weight to the interests and values of all sections of the community means that political executives must take some account of them in setting policy agendas and decision-making
- **effectiveness:** having a broader range of opinions represented means that policy areas and ideas previously not considered will be heard and acted upon
- **accommodation:** assemblies elected on the basis of PR tend to lead to a situation where parties are encouraged to find points of commonality on which they can build rather than stressing division and difference; far from rewarding extremists, as is often alleged, these systems offer opportunities for consensus building

- **straightforwardness and intelligibility:** it should be clear to voters what will be the possible or likely outcomes of casting their votes in particular ways
- **minimise divisiveness:** the system should balance party-positional and individual-territorial aspects of representation

## 8. Possible systems: Practice

Any number of permutations are possible. Below we outline two, mixed, systems which we feel would result in an outcome in line with the above principles.

### • Mixed system A

An assembly of 110 members, electing 90 individual members from the current 18 Westminster electoral areas by STV, and 20 members from a regional list, with an award of 2 seats to each of the ten parties who cumulatively secured the highest number of votes. The ballot paper in each constituency would thus contain two sections:

- Constituency candidates to be selected by preferential voting; and
- The regional list to be selected by voting 'X' for a party.

There should be no limit on the number of nominated parties entitled to contest any election, and no threshold should be necessary, given the size of the voting population.

### • Mixed system B

An assembly of 108 members, returning 9 individual members from 6 constituencies by STV, and 54 party representatives from 1 Northern Ireland wide constituency. The ballot paper in each constituency would thus contain two sections:

- Constituency candidates to be selected by preferential voting; and
- The regional list to be selected by voting 'X' for a party.

The 6 electoral areas could be composed in two ways. One, electoral areas might become congruent with existing county boundaries, or they might be fashioned by grouping the existing Westminster constituencies in bunches of three. Thus the constituencies envisaged are:

1. Foyle, East Londonderry, North Antrim;
2. West Tyrone, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone;
3. East Antrim, South Antrim, Belfast North;
4. North Down, Strangford, Belfast East;
5. Belfast West, Belfast South, Lagan Valley;
6. Upper Bann, Newry and Armagh, South Down.

## 9. Conclusion

Insofar as arguments against PR have validity in any context, it is hard to see how they apply to Northern Ireland. For a regional assembly, in a small territory, with a relatively small population, arguments about strong territorial links between electors and representatives would seem not to apply. Counting and casting votes under any system would not be too cumbersome or complicated given the small electorate. The likely limited decision-making load of any new assembly would also appear to make PR particularly suitable in this context.

We have before us much literature, theory and practice of how to create manageable and fair election processes and outcomes. In crafting constitutional change, we cannot ignore them, for we will have to live with the results.