

PART 1: REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

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In most democratizing countries, as in the South Caucasus, the initial stages of democratization at the local level often include citizens' first experience with local elections. The local level is a good place to start developing electoral participation since local elections are the element of democratic governance that is closest to the people and the right to vote and to choose among local office-seekers who are accountable at the ballot box is a necessary element of democracy.

1. The Importance of Local Elections

Sometimes politicians and voters alike attach a greater degree of importance and weight to national than to local elections. They argue that local elections rarely make much difference in political life. However, local elections have certain distinct characteristics as compared with national elections which give them considerable significance in political life:

- **As bellwethers of national political trends.** Local elections are important for their role in a broader national democracy. Their results are indicative of broader political trends and provide important information about the preferences, concerns and attitudes of the electorate.
- **Determining what matters most to voters.** Often issues in local elections are those that directly affect the daily lives of citizens; sometimes local issues are the ones voters care about most. The nature of the competition between parties and candidates and the issues that arise can be important indicators of what voters care deeply about and want the local authorities to tackle.
- **Minority inclusion.** Local elections can be very useful for allowing minorities to find inclusion in a country's political life. If a minority (e.g, a regional, ethnic, religious or occupational minority, such as farmers) is not well represented at the national or provincial level, local elections often provide the opportunity for it to gain some representation and sense of inclusion in government.
- **Development of national party systems.** There are also intricate linkages between local elections, party systems, and the formation of party systems at local level and national level. Local elections provide training grounds and valuable experience for those who aspire to office at the regional and national levels. This is especially true when the electoral system allows party-political candidacy for local office.

2. Elections: Legitimacy, Accountability and Trust

The principal function of elections is to provide **legitimacy** for public authority and give officials a mandate for specific action. Election campaigns serve many functions, such as clarifying issues and policies, holding candidates to account, communicating information among candidates and voters, and offering the public choices of solutions to community problems.

Elections are also a critical means of promoting public **accountability**. This involves not just the ability of voters to vote out of office elected officials who have not performed well in the public interest, but also the opportunity for elected officials to give an account of their performance in office. This includes explaining how public funds are spent, what the priorities of the local government are and how they are decided, and how problems and challenges that confront the community will be addressed.

The critical issue with regard to elections is the element of **trust**. Voters must be able to trust that elected officials will carry out their campaign promises and that they will engage in open, corruption-free governance. Candidates must be able to trust that if they lose a particular election they will still have a fair opportunity to win the next one (the concept of alternation in power). Minority communities must trust that, even if they do not win a majority of seats in the city council (for example), their interests will not be neglected and they will not be subject to systematic disadvantage by virtue of their minority group status. All actors in local elections must trust that the administration of the poll is free and fair and that the will of the voters will prevail.

When legitimacy, accountability and trust are in question, in many cases people will refrain from participating in local elections; low turnout rates in local elections—as the cases from the South Caucasus demonstrate—can be indicators of a deficit in public satisfaction with the local electoral process.

3. Electoral Systems in the Local Context

The choice of an electoral system is extremely important to local democracy. It determines who stands in elections, how the campaign is run, the strength and role of political parties and, most importantly, who governs. Electoral systems define and structure the rules of the game of political competition. The process by which these rules are adopted is critically important. In some cases, local municipalities have the right to choose their own electoral systems, whereas in others the electoral system is determined by national legislation. Even when there are national frameworks for electoral systems for local elections, it is important to highlight the alternatives given that the initial choices may need to be revisited for future electoral system reform.

Selecting an electoral system is a matter of careful design to meet the specific challenges of a given local setting. The choice of a particular system of translating votes into public positions entails decisions about—and sometimes trade-offs between—certain values, such as stable government, clear election outcomes, representation, accountability, links to constituencies, the importance of political parties, and the extent of voter choice between alternative candidates and parties.

Choosing between alternative election systems for a municipal arena means bargaining among interests over the objectives, meaning and form of elections. The choice may imply very serious decisions for a community, especially the choice between adversarial elections—choosing between candidates with sharply differing positions—and more collaborative democracy in which representatives to consensus-building forums such as city councils are chosen.

Electoral systems can be characterized by various features, including the size of the electoral districts, the electoral formula, the structure of the ballot paper and others. However, the primary attribute of an electoral system is the principle of representation, that is, majority versus proportional representation. The different types of electoral system presented in section 4 are all based on either the majority or the proportional principle of representation, or a mixture of the two.

4. Types of Electoral System

The three main types or ‘families’ of electoral systems are the majority, proportional and mixed (or semi-proportional) systems. Each has several distinct variations which are presented below.

4.1. Majority (Plurality) Systems

The distinct feature of majority (plurality) systems is that they aim to produce a majority winner even if it results in a disproportion between votes cast and seats won.

- **First-past-the-post (FPTP).** This is the simplest system. In single-member districts, the candidate (not the party) who receives more votes than any other candidate wins the seat; this does not necessarily mean that the candidate received an absolute majority of votes, simply a plurality.

- **Block vote.** The system is similar to FPTP with one exception: it is used not in single- but in multi-member districts. The block vote allows voters to have as many votes as there are candidates to be elected (e.g. if there are three seats, each voter has three votes). Voting can be either candidate-centred or party-centred, and the candidates with the highest number of votes win the seats.
- **Two-round.** If no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the first round, a second round is held between the top two (or, sometimes, more) vote-winners. Whoever wins the highest number of votes in the second round is declared elected, sometimes regardless of whether they have achieved majority support or not.
- **Alternative vote.** Under this system voters specify their first and alternative (second, third etc.) preference on the ballot paper. It is used in single-member districts. A candidate who receives over 50 per cent of first preferences is declared elected. If no candidate receives an absolute majority of first preferences, votes are reallocated until one candidate has an absolute majority of votes cast.

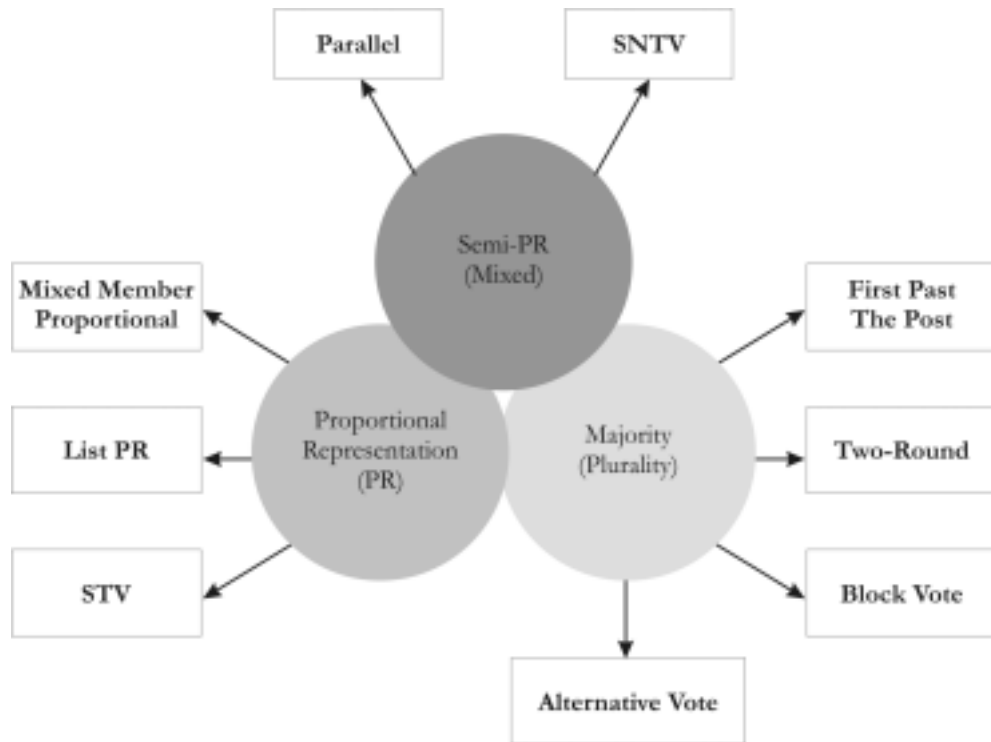
4.2. Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

In PR systems the share of seats won by a party (for example, on a city council) is roughly proportionate to its share of the vote.

- **List systems (List PR).** List systems enable each party to present a list of candidates to the electors, and the electors choose among parties. Parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the vote. The winning candidates are drawn from the party lists. List systems can be closed (or ‘fixed’, as the candidates cannot be changed by the electorate) or open (voters can indicate their preferences among candidates on the list). In some instances, parties can link their lists together through a mechanism known as *apparentement*.
- **Mixed member proportional.** In these systems, a portion of the council (usually half) is selected by plurality–majority methods, and the remainder is elected from PR lists. The PR seats are used to compensate for the disproportion that may occur in non-PR seats, so that the overall calculation leads to proportional outcomes in the assembly as a whole.
- **Single transferable vote (STV).** A preferential system used in multi-member districts. To win election candidates must exceed a specified minimum quota of first-preference votes. Voters’ preferences are reallocated to other continuing candidates when an unsuccessful candidate is excluded or if an elected candidate has a surplus. The overall effect of this system is proportionality in the elected assembly while elected officials have a link to a specific constituency.

4.3. Semi-Proportional (Mixed) Systems

- **Parallel.** In parallel systems, proportional representation is used in conjunction with a plurality–majority system but the two systems run in parallel, and the PR seats do not compensate for any disproportion (i.e. between the share of the vote won and the proportion of seats won) arising from the election of the candidates in single-member districts.
- **Single non-transferable vote (SNTV).** In this system, FPTP methods of vote counting are combined with multi-member districts, with voters having only one vote. Thus, the candidates who win the highest number, the second-highest number, the third-highest number of votes and so on are deemed to have been elected.

Figure 2: Types of Electoral System

5. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Different Electoral Systems

Each of the electoral systems presented above offers advantages and has its limitations. Planners of electoral systems should carefully consider their distinct characteristics as they establish a basis for local politics, shape the outcome of elections and define the behaviour of the participants.

Majority systems. Their simplicity has a strong appeal to voters, who can easily understand how their votes are translated into seats. Another positive feature is their ability to produce a majoritarian government which is more stable and unified in pursuing certain policies. Indeed, the majority system does favour strong parties and under-represent weaker ones. However, this can result in certain groups and minorities that are deprived of representation becoming dissatisfied, and will lead to their refraining from participation in politics and even, in some cases, to their choosing non-political means of manifesting and pursuing their interests. Furthermore, a declining or traditionally low voter turnout could also be attributed to the limited ability of a majority system to reflect the variety of views among the general public.

Proportional representation systems. Their major advantage is that they produce a better representation of the whole spectrum of voters' preferences. PR systems encourage the participation of minorities and under-represented groups in political life by giving them a better chance of transforming their votes into seats at elections. However, this building block of democracy can turn into a stumbling block when the variety of views and opinions in the government that emerges hinders consensus over a particular issue. In general, coalition governments are less effective in developing a common policy and can be less stable than majoritarian governments.

Semi-proportional (mixed) systems. Being a combination of proportional and majoritarian systems, mixed systems feature both their advantages and their shortcomings, and these have to be balanced after careful analysis of local factors.

Readers who are interested in more detailed information about electoral system design should refer

to the International IDEA *Handbook of Electoral System Design*. It provides a detailed overview of the issues related to electoral system design. In addition, the Administration and Cost of Elections project (www.aceproject.org), jointly run by IDEA, the International Foundation on Election Systems (IFES) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offers detailed information on electoral systems, legislative frameworks, electoral management, boundary delimitation, voter registration and education, parties and candidates, and vote counting.

6. Special Considerations for Local Elections

Although the above principles and features of electoral systems are equally applicable and relevant to both national and local elections, voting at the local level by its very nature has several distinct characteristics.

Elections to the position of mayor can be either direct or indirect. By indirect procedure, the mayor is elected by the members of the local council, and in direct elections it is the citizens who vote for competing candidates. Indirect elections by council members are often characterized by a resulting greater trust and confidence between the mayor and the council. Direct election of the mayor by the citizens, on the other hand, can put into office a politician who can have a more adversarial approach towards the council.

Elections to municipal councils are held according to a majority, proportional or mixed system (see section 4 above). In most countries, the electoral system for local councils is based on proportional representation. A PR system allows a clearer and more comprehensive reflection of the diverse social composition of today's cities. This is particularly true for growing urban centres, where an increasing population requires a proportionately higher number of seats on the municipal council. As a result, a larger number of city council members can represent the more diverse interests of their community. By contrast, elections to local councils in smaller municipalities are often based on the majoritarian system, which can reflect and cater for the more homogeneous nature of a small community.

Personality. Because local officials are especially well known to voters, often on a personal basis, and because cities often lend themselves to mayoral systems with a strong executive, the role of individuals and personality in local politics is more important. This emphasis on personality and individuals in politics tends to favour the adoption of majoritarian systems for the selection of the executive, often featuring 'run-offs' if no clear winner emerges in the first round of the electoral competition.

Geography and space. The geographical dimension of representation—electoral districts and their delimitation—is particularly important since issues decided at the local level involve matters of everyday life, such as service delivery, neighbourhood security, sub-municipal identity (neighbourhoods characterized by ethnic, religious, cultural or racial factors), economic development, transport, schools and so on. People identify themselves closely with the area in which they live and feel common interests with others residing in the same community. For this reason, many municipal electoral systems feature a 'ward' (small district), neighbourhood or sub-municipal system of electoral boundary delimitation. This can be beneficial in terms of ensuring representation, but it can also be problematic when minorities within these sub-municipal boundaries are not fully represented. Districting or boundary delimitation offers certain opportunities but also introduces potential problems.

One solution is the 'spokes of the wheel' principle whereby districts or wards are delimited not on the basis of definable communities but on the basis of segments of a circle emanating from the city centre as one might cut a pizza. That is, district boundaries are drawn in a way that divides the city up into several equal segments. This option may allow for districts to include both inner city and suburban communities and a greater mix of ethnic or class differences; in systems such as these, other urban boundaries such as those between neighbourhoods or geographical features are not taken into account when drawing the district boundaries.

7. Political Parties

In a democratic society political parties play a significant role as intermediaries between state and society which articulate and advocate public views and preferences. Political parties competing in elections are primary structures providing opportunities for citizen representation. In contrast to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or interest groups which focus on specific areas of policy, political parties strive to influence the political agenda across a broad spectrum of issues at both national and local level. For this purpose, they contest elections regularly, aiming to win office, and are equally active in the period between elections. Overall, political parties perform several important functions in a democratic society, including the following:

- articulating and aggregating public interests and preferences on a broad range of issues;
- educating citizens and mobilizing them to become politically active between and during elections;
- ensuring that leaders are established in office in non-violent fashion and changed or replaced peacefully; and
- recruiting and training political leaders.

To perform these functions effectively, political parties need to develop their structures and support bases in a coherent and systematic way. However, the challenges for the development of political parties in established democratic countries are different from those that affect transition environments. In established systems, party affiliation and voter loyalty are strong, the networks of party organization are well established, and political leadership within parties is more stable and cohesive. In transitional countries like those in the South Caucasus, the structure of the political parties is less established and thus more subject to the volatile entry and departure of new parties, often based around a charismatic individual or an identity group. Furthermore, many local and national elites in the South Caucasus are drawn from the former ruling party and these political leaders do not often reflect the broad base of contemporary society. All three case studies presented in this Guide illustrate how political parties often revolve around strong political leaders or clans rather than coherent political platforms, approaches to socio-economic development, and citizen-oriented programmes.

7.1. Internal Party Democracy

Being one of the building blocks of democratic society, political parties have a moral obligation to apply the principles of democracy not only in their external activities but within their own organizations as well. This concerns issues such as the recruitment of party activists and members, budget and policy-making transparency, tolerance for a broad spectrum of opinions and others.

An important democracy issue for local political party development is the ways in which party activists and members are recruited, and the extent and nature of grass-roots organization. The networks that centralize power in national governments can also be abused in order to create patronage networks that can feature anti-democratic practices such as nepotism and corruption.

Particularly important is the issue of inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups. In some countries a requirement in the form of a quota is placed on political parties to ensure that their candidates generally reflect the composition of the communities they serve. In some cases laws have even been adopted that require representation by traditionally under-represented groups, such as women. This change has revolutionized the ways in which political parties find, nominate and promote their candidates and relate to their office-holders. Some have suggested that these changes have also significantly broadened the agendas and policies of parties to include such diverse issues as public health, the care of children and the elderly, education and so on.

A series of questions can help structure evaluations of the relative democratic nature of local political organizations. The purpose of the questions is not to suggest that there is a blanket recipe for internal

party organization but rather to suggest the key issues that need to be discussed within an organization as it seeks to improve its internal democratic procedures.

CHECKLIST: Evaluating Democratic Practices in Local Political Organizations

- Are parties' internal electoral processes subject to external observation and monitoring, and are elections procedurally and substantively free and fair?
- Are candidate selection procedures transparent, open and fair? Are the criteria for standing as a candidate and the nomination and selection process clear and reasonable? How does the party deal with candidates who are clearly tied to narrow special interests as opposed to broader community-wide interests?
- Are candidates allowed to cross the floor (switch parties) once they have been elected, or is their election tied to representing the party? What is the balance between the exercise of individual discretion and decision making by party office-holders or candidates and the policies of the party?
- How are candidates selected at ward or district level and at large? Is the process accessible? What is the nature of the party's ties to the community that is represented?
- What are the procedures for funding candidates and the linkages between local campaign finance and regional or national level party coffers? Can the party receive donations from foreign sources? Can party funds be externally audited?
- Is the party open to the representation of communities that are often marginalized, such as women and young people?
- Is a neutral, independent agency (such as a court or electoral commission) empowered to oversee and supervise local political party practices?

The worldwide concern with the role of national political parties in local politics suggests that new, innovative ways need to be found in order to re-engage citizens in democracy and encourage their direct expression of their views. In a practical sense there are limits to the extent to which all citizens in large political entities (like large urban settings) can be involved; there are too many voices for all to be equally heard. One of the solutions may be further sub-municipal devolution; another can be improving the electoral system and fostering democracy internally through political parties. A third option is to expand civic participation beyond the traditional, and occasional, casting of a ballot as the primary means of citizen involvement in governance.

Indeed, there are exciting possibilities in developing new practices which take participation beyond the boundaries of traditional and formal representative democracy. Parties and the formal political institutions have an important role to play but they cannot be relied upon or given exclusive roles as mobilizers and organizers of involvement. The existence of community groups, civil society organizations and public forums, as well as opportunities for direct participation through citizen consultation, citizens' initiatives, referendums, and exchanges through information and new communication technology—all contribute to the openness of a system, and are explored in greater detail in Part 2.