



Extracted from *Electoral System Design: the New International IDEA Handbook*

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1. Overview

Introduction

1. THE CHOICE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONAL decisions for any democracy. In almost all cases the choice of a particular electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of the country concerned, and electoral systems, once chosen, often remain fairly constant as political interests solidify around and respond to the incentives presented by them. However, while conscious design has become far more prevalent recently, traditionally it has been rare for electoral systems to be consciously and deliberately selected. Often the choice was essentially accidental, the result of an unusual combination of circumstances, of a passing trend, or of a quirk of history, with the impact of colonialism and the effects of influential neighbours often being especially strong.

2. Any new democracy must choose (or inherit) an electoral system to elect its legislature. Equally, political crisis within an established democracy may lead to momentum for electoral system change, and even without political crisis campaigners for political reform may attempt to put electoral system change onto the political agenda. Decisions to change, or indeed to keep in place, an electoral system are often affected by one of two circumstances:

- either political actors lack basic knowledge and information so that the choices and consequences of different electoral systems are not fully recognized;
- or, conversely, political actors use their knowledge of electoral systems to promote designs which they think will work to their own partisan advantage.

The choices that are made may have consequences that were unforeseen when they are introduced, as well as effects which were predicted. These choices may not always be the best ones for the long-term political health of the country concerned, and at times they can have disastrous consequences for its democratic prospects.

3. The background to a choice of electoral system can thus be as important as the choice itself. Electoral system choice is a fundamentally political process, rather than a question to which independent technical experts can produce a single ‘correct answer’. In fact, the consideration of political advantage is almost always a factor in the choice of electoral systems—sometimes it is the *only* consideration—while the menu of available electoral system choices is often, in reality, a relatively constrained one. Equally, however, calculations of short-term political interest can often obscure the longer-term consequences of a particular electoral system and the interests of the wider political system. Consequently, while recognizing the practical constraints, this Handbook attempts to approach the issue of electoral system choices in as broad and comprehensive a manner as possible.

4. This Handbook is aimed in particular at political negotiators, the designers of constitutions and those involved in debate on political institutions in new, fledgling, and transitional democracies. However, as the crafting of political institutions is a critical task not only for new democracies but also for those established democracies that are seeking to adapt their systems to better reflect new political realities, the Handbook also seeks to address the likely concerns of those persons in established democracies who may be designing or redesigning electoral systems. Given this target audience, much of the academic literature on the subject is necessarily simplified, while at the same time the Handbook attempts to address some of the more complex issues inherent in the area. If the Handbook appears to be sometimes overly simplistic and at other times unduly complex, the explanation will usually lie in the attempt to balance the two objectives of clarity and comprehensiveness.

While the contexts in which emerging and established democracies make institutional choices can vary enormously, their long-term purposes are usually the same: to adopt institutions which are strong enough to promote stable democracy but flexible enough to react to changing circumstances. Each type of democracy has much to learn from the experiences of the other.

Institutional design is an evolving process, and this Handbook seeks to distil the lessons learnt from the many actual examples of institutional design around the world.

5. Much constitutional design has taken place relatively recently: the global movement towards democratic governance in the 1980s and 1990s stimulated a new urgency in the search for enduring models of appropriate representative institutions, and a fresh evaluation of electoral systems. This process was encouraged by the realization that the choice of political institutions can have a significant impact on the wider political system. For example, it is increasingly being recognized that an electoral system can be designed both to provide local geographic representation and to promote proportionality; can promote the development of strong and viable national political parties, and ensure the representation of women and regional minorities; and can help to ‘engineer’ cooperation and accommodation in a divided society by the creative use of particular incentives and constraints. Electoral systems are today viewed as one of the

most influential of all political institutions, and of crucial importance to broader issues of governance.

6. While the focus of this Handbook is on electoral systems at national level, the options discussed are those available to any community seeking to organize a vote. The Handbook may therefore be of value not only to designers of national, local and supranational institutions but also, for example, to professional associations, trade unions and civil society organizations.

How to Use this Handbook

7. Through providing this detailed analysis of choices and consequences, and showing how electoral systems have worked throughout the democratic world, this Handbook aims to achieve two things: to expand knowledge and illuminate political and public discussions; and to give designers of constitutions, political frameworks and electoral legislation the tools to make an informed choice and thereby avoid some of the more dysfunctional and destabilizing effects of particular electoral system choices.

8. The Handbook begins with a discussion of what electoral systems actually are (and what they are not), and why they are important to a nation's political success and stability. It then suggests ten criteria to be used when trying to decide which electoral system is best for any given society (paragraphs 27–45) and discusses issues relating to the process of review and change. Having set up this framework, it describes in chapters 2 and 3 the different systems and their possible consequences. The advantages and disadvantages of each system are drawn from historical experience and the writings of scholars in the field.

9. There are a large number of different electoral systems currently in use and many more permutations on each form, but for the sake of simplicity we have categorized electoral systems into *three broad families*: plurality/majority systems, proportional systems, and mixed systems. Within these there are nine '*sub-families*': First Past The Post (FPTP), Block Vote (BV), Party Block Vote (PBV), Alternative Vote (AV), and the Two-Round System (TRS) are all plurality/majority systems; List Proportional Representation (List PR) and the Single Transferable Vote (STV) are both proportional systems; and Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and Parallel systems are both examples of the mixed model. In addition, there are other systems such as the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV), the Limited Vote (LV), and the Borda Count (BC) which do not fit neatly into any particular category (see figure 1) and can be regarded as three further sub-families.

10. This family tree is designed to provide a clear and concise guide to the choice among systems. While rooted in long-established conventions, it attempts to take account of all the electoral systems used for national-level legislative elections in the world today, regardless of wider questions of democracy and legitimacy. The systems are classified by the process on which each is based, rather than their outcome: while results in countries

that use a proportional system are normally more proportional than results in countries using a plurality/majority system, this is not always the case.

11. After describing the mechanics and consequences of each electoral system, chapter 3 moves on to address a number of issues which can relate to all electoral systems, such as the representation of women and minorities, communal representation, election timing, compulsory voting and absentee or out-of-country voting. The focus of this Handbook is on electing legislatures such as national assemblies or lower houses of parliaments or congresses, but electoral system options for choosing a president, for electing the upper house of a legislature in bicameral systems, and for electing local government bodies are also discussed in chapter 4, and we examine the particular issues facing elections to supranational bodies such as the European Parliament, as well as the electoral implications of different forms of federalism, both symmetrical and asymmetrical, and autonomous jurisdictions.

Chapter 5 deals with the important cost and administrative implications of electoral system choice, and we conclude in chapter 6 with some advice for electoral system designers, culled from the experience of a number of experts who have helped draft constitutions and electoral laws around the world. The annexes include a table listing the electoral system particulars of 213 independent countries and territories, a glossary of terms, a bibliography of further reading, and examples of the effects of electoral systems and boundary delimitation.

12. Interspersed throughout the text are 18 case studies which attempt to root the abstract theory of electoral system design in practical reality. The authors of these case studies, experts on the politics of their assigned country, were asked to address the following questions. What is the electoral system and how did it come into being? How does it work in practice? What aspects of the system work well? On what grounds is it criticized? And, if there was a change at some stage, why was there a change, and does the new system fulfil the requirements expected of it?

13. This Handbook does not aim to provide all the answers to electoral system design; instead, the hope is to provide enough information to allow for an informed choice, and to open windows to a much broader discussion of which electoral systems may work best in a given country. The Handbook is not prescriptive: no formula exists, or can exist, to tell the reader, for example, that a society which is 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Christian and has a three-party system and a history of violent secessionism should have a particular type of electoral system. What it does do is to suggest parameters of the available choices and, in so doing, provide a structure for making an informed decision. Through the examples and case studies, the reader from one country should be able to identify how similar problems and needs have been addressed in other parts of the world. Every country is different, but the uniqueness usually rests on its particular concoction of basic socio-political factors, for example, the way in which a society and culture defines the concept of representation, the salience of ethnicity or the history of internal conflict. For this reason the would-be electoral system designer

is recommended to begin with the criteria for choice (see paragraphs 27–45) and try to prioritize the issues which are particularly important to his or her country; he or she can then move on to the options available and their likely consequences and the process of consultation and debate that will precede the adoption of a new electoral system. The quest for the most appropriate electoral system thus involves assessing the available choices against the chosen criteria (always with history, time and political realities in mind) in order to identify one or more options which will suit the needs of the country concerned. It also involves following a process through which the final choice will be accepted as legitimate.

What Electoral Systems Are

14. At the most basic level, electoral systems translate the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates. The key variables are the electoral formula used (i.e. whether a plurality/majority, proportional, mixed or other system is used, and what mathematical formula is used to calculate the seat allocation), the ballot structure (i.e. whether the voter votes for a candidate or a party and whether the voter makes a single choice or expresses a series of preferences) and the district magnitude (not how many voters live in a district, but how many representatives to the legislature that district elects). It must also be stressed that, although this Handbook does not focus on the administrative aspects of elections (such as the distribution of polling places, the nomination of candidates, the registration of voters, who runs the elections and so on), these issues are of critical importance, and the possible advantages of any given electoral system choice will be undermined unless due attention is paid to them. Electoral system design also affects other areas of electoral laws: the choice of electoral system has an influence on the way in which district boundaries are drawn, how voters are registered, the design of ballot papers, how votes are counted, and numerous other aspects of the electoral process.

The Importance of Electoral Systems

15. Political institutions shape the rules of the game under which democracy is practised, and it is often argued that the easiest political institution to manipulate, for good or for bad, is the electoral system. In translating the votes cast in a general election into seats in the legislature, the choice of electoral system can effectively determine who is elected and which party gains power. While many aspects of a country's political framework are often specified in the constitution and can thus be difficult to amend, electoral system change often only involves new legislation.

16. Even with each voter casting exactly the same vote and with exactly the same number of votes for each party, one electoral system may lead to a coalition government or a minority government while another may allow a single party to assume majority control. The examples presented in annex D illustrate how different electoral systems can translate the votes cast into dramatically different results.

Electoral Systems and Party Systems

17. A number of other consequences of electoral systems go beyond this primary effect. Some systems encourage, or even enforce, the formation of political parties; others recognize only individual candidates. The type of party system which develops, in particular the number and the relative sizes of political parties in the legislature, is heavily influenced by the electoral system. So is the internal cohesion and discipline of parties: some systems may encourage factionalism, where different wings of one party are constantly at odds with each other, while another system might encourage parties to speak with one voice and suppress dissent. Electoral systems can also influence the way parties campaign and the way political elites behave, thus helping to determine the broader political climate; they may encourage, or retard, the forging of alliances between parties; and they can provide incentives for parties and groups to be broadly-based and accommodating, or to base themselves on narrow appeals to ethnicity or kinship ties.

Electoral Systems and Conflict Management

18. These different impacts underline the important role that electoral systems often have in terms of conflict management. It is clear that different electoral systems can aggravate or moderate tension and conflict in a society. At one level, a tension exists between systems which put a premium on representation of minority groups and those which encourage strong single-party government. At another level, if an electoral system is not considered fair and the political framework does not allow the opposition to feel that they have the chance to win next time around, losers may feel compelled to work outside the system, using non-democratic, confrontationalist and even violent tactics. And finally, because the choice of electoral system will determine the ease or complexity of the act of voting, it inevitably impacts on minorities and underprivileged groups. This is always important, but becomes particularly so in societies where there are a substantial number of inexperienced or illiterate voters (see chapter 5 on Cost and Administrative Implications).

Psychological and Mechanical Effects

19. Electoral systems are generally considered to have both 'mechanical' and 'psychological' effects. The mechanical impact is most apparent in the way different electoral systems tend to encourage different kinds of party system. Plurality/majority systems often tend to have a constraining effect on party numbers, while proportional systems tend to be more 'permissive', resulting in a greater diversity of parties. The psychological impact of electoral systems reinforces this mechanical effect: under FPTP rules, voters who wish to support a minor party are often faced with a dilemma as to how best to avoid 'wasting' their vote, as only one candidate can be elected from any single-member district. The result of this dilemma is that many voters will not express their sincere choice but rather will vote for another candidate (usually from a major party) who they believe has a realistic chance of winning the seat. The overall effect of

this is to strengthen larger parties at the expense of smaller ones. Proportional systems or systems that allow multiple ballot choices, by contrast, are more likely to facilitate the election of small parties, and hence the pressure to vote strategically is reduced.

The Importance of Context

20. It is important to realize that a given electoral system will not necessarily work in the same way in different countries. Although there are some common experiences in different regions of the world, the effects of a particular type of electoral system depend to a great extent on the socio-political context in which it is used. For example, while there remains general agreement that plurality/majority systems tend to restrict the range of legislative representation and PR systems encourage it, the conventional wisdom that plurality/majority rules will produce a two-party system and PR a multiparty system is looking increasingly dated. In recent years, FPTP has not facilitated the aggregation of the party system in established democracies such as Canada and India, nor has it led to the formation of strong and lasting parties in Papua New Guinea. PR has seen the election of dominant single-party regimes in Namibia, South Africa and elsewhere. More broadly, the consequences of the choice of electoral system depend on factors such as how a society is structured in terms of ideological, religious, ethnic, racial, regional, linguistic or class divisions; whether the country is an established democracy, a transitional democracy or a new democracy; whether there is an established party system, or parties are embryonic or unformed, and how many 'serious' parties there are; and whether a particular party's supporters are geographically concentrated or dispersed over a wide area.

The Broader Democratic Framework

21. It is also important not to see electoral systems in isolation. Their design and effects are heavily contingent upon other structures within and outside the constitution. Electoral systems are one square of an interrelated patchwork of government systems, rules and points of access to power. Successful electoral system design comes from looking at the framework of political institutions as a whole: changing one part of this framework is likely to cause adjustments in the way other institutions within it work.

22. For example, how does the chosen electoral system facilitate or encourage conflict resolution between party leaders and activists on the ground? How much control do party leaders have over the party's elected representatives? Are there constitutional provisions for referendums, citizens' initiatives or 'direct democracy' which may complement the institutions of representative democracy? And are the details of the electoral system specified in the constitution, as an attached schedule to the constitution or in regular legislation? This will determine how entrenched the system is or how open it may be to change by elected majorities (see paragraph 49).

23. There are two issues of this kind that are worth considering in more detail. The first is the degree of centralization. Is the country federal or unitary, and, if federal,

are the units symmetrical in their power or asymmetrical? The second is the choice between parliamentarism and presidentialism. Both systems have their advocates, and the traditions of different countries may influence which is chosen or even foreclose debate; but the different relationship between legislative and executive institutions has important implications for electoral system design for both. The frequent debates over the direct election of mayors and heads of the executive at local level combine both issues.

24. In most bicameral legislatures in federal systems of government, the two chambers are elected by different (or incongruent) methods. This makes sense for two prime reasons which have to do with the theory underpinning federalism. First, the second (or upper) house of a federal legislature is there to represent the regions or states of the country, and each state often receives equal representation regardless of population or territory size (e.g. the US Senate or South Africa's National Council of Provinces). Second, there is little point in creating a two-chamber legislature unless there is a degree of difference between the roles and possibly also of the powers of the two chambers, and using the same electoral system for both is more likely to repeat and reinforce the majority power that controls the lower chamber—particularly if the elections to both chambers are simultaneous. As noted below (see paragraphs 189–192), upper chambers provide the opportunity for some degree of electoral innovation to include communities of interest which may not be fully represented in national elections to a lower chamber. But when elections take place at three or more levels, to the upper chamber of the legislature, the lower chamber of the legislature, and the institutions of government at regional level, it is crucial that the systems used are considered together. It may for example be possible to promote representation of minorities at regional level while discouraging or even prohibiting it at national level. Whether this is or is not desirable is a matter of political debate and choice.

25. Until recent years there were few examples of enduring democracies using presidential systems. However, the commitment to presidentialism in for example Latin America and parts of South-East Asia means that the question now asked is: What aspects of institutional design help make presidentialism work? There is some evidence from the Latin American experience that stability can be problematic in countries with presidential constitutions and highly fragmented party systems, and that there are tensions between divided executive and legislative branches when the presidential electoral system is over two rounds, the legislative system is List PR and the elections are not held concurrently. However, it appears helpful to adopt an electoral system which makes it likely that the party or coalition supporting an elected president has a significant block, although not necessarily an absolute majority, of elected members of the legislature.

26. Plurality elections for the presidency and simultaneous presidential and legislative elections are often seen as helping to focus the party system into fewer and more viable challengers for power. However, there can be serious dangers in combining the great power that is vested in the hands of a directly elected president who is head

of the executive with the use of a plurality method in a diverse or ethnically divided country where no single group has an absolute majority. The result can be devastating for legitimacy or indeed for the success of a peace process. A presidential electoral system may complement a federal system by requiring a successful candidate to achieve a winning vote not only nationwide but also a significant fraction of the vote in a minimum number of the states of the federation (as in Indonesia or Nigeria: see paragraphs 187–188).

Criteria for Design

27. When designing an electoral system, it is best to start with a list of criteria which sum up what you want to achieve, what you want to avoid and, in a broad sense, what you want your legislature and executive government to look like. The criteria which follow cover many areas, but the list is not exhaustive and the reader may add a host of equally valid items. It is also true that some of the criteria outlined overlap and may appear contradictory. This is because they often are contradictory: it is the nature of institutional design that trade-offs have to be made between a number of competing desires and objectives.

For example, one may want to provide the opportunity for independent candidates to be elected, and at the same time to encourage the growth of strong political parties. Or the electoral system designer may think it wise to craft a system which gives voters a wide degree of choice between candidates and parties, but this may make for a complicated ballot paper which causes difficulties for less-educated voters. The trick in choosing (or reforming) an electoral system is to prioritize the criteria that are most important and then assess which electoral system, or combination of systems, best maximizes the attainment of these objectives.

Providing Representation

28. Representation may take at least four forms. First, *geographical* representation implies that each region, be it a town or a city, a province or an electoral district, has members of the legislature whom it chooses and who are ultimately accountable to their area. Second, the *ideological* divisions within society may be represented in the legislature, whether through representatives from political parties or independent representatives or a combination of both. Third, a legislature may be representative of the *party-political* situation that exists within the country even if political parties do not have an ideological base. If half the voters vote for one political party but that party wins no, or hardly any, seats in the legislature, then that system cannot be said to adequately represent the will of the people. Fourth, the concept of *descriptive* representation considers that the legislature should be to some degree a 'mirror of the nation' which should look, feel, think and act in a way which reflects the people as a whole. An adequately descriptive legislature would include both men and women, the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, and reflect the different religious affiliations, linguistic communities and ethnic groups within a society.

Making Elections Accessible and Meaningful

29. Elections are all well and good, but they may mean little to people if it is difficult to vote or if at the end of the day their vote makes no difference to the way the country is governed. The ‘ease of voting’ is determined by factors such as how complex the ballot paper is, how easy it is for the voter to get to a polling place, how up-to-date the electoral register is, and how confident the voter will be that his or her ballot is secret.

30. Electoral participation—at least as a free choice—is also thought to increase when the outcome of elections, either at a national level or in the voter’s particular district, is likely to make a significant difference to the future direction of government. If you know that your preferred candidate has no chance of winning a seat in your particular district, what is the incentive to vote? In some electoral systems the ‘wasted votes’ (i.e. valid votes which do not go towards the election of any candidate, as distinct from spoiled or invalid ballot papers, which are excluded from the count) can amount to a substantial proportion of the total national vote.

31. Lastly, the actual power of the body being elected helps determine whether its election has any meaning. Hollow elections in authoritarian systems which offer no genuine choice, where legislatures have little real influence on the formation of governments or on government policy, are far less important than elections to legislatures which actually have the power to determine central elements in people’s everyday lives.

32. Even within democratic systems, the choice of electoral system can influence the legitimacy of institutions. For example, the Australian Senate between 1919 and 1946 was elected by a highly disproportional electoral system (the Alternative Vote in multi-member districts), which produced lopsided and unrepresentative results. This tended to undermine the actual legitimacy of the Senate itself in the eyes of both electors and politicians and, some observers argued, also undermined public support for the institutions of federal government in general. After the system was altered to a fairer proportional system (the Single Transferable Vote) in 1948 the Senate began to be perceived as more credible and representative, and thus respect for it and its relative importance in decision making increased.

Providing Incentives for Conciliation

33. Electoral systems can be seen not only as ways to constitute governing bodies but also as a tool of conflict management within a society. Some systems, in some circumstances, will encourage parties to make inclusive appeals for electoral support outside their own core vote base; for instance, even if a party draws its support primarily from black voters, a particular electoral system may give it the incentive to appeal also to white, or other, voters. Thus, the party’s policy platform would become less divisive and exclusionary, and more unifying and inclusive. Similar electoral system incentives might make parties less ethnically, regionally, linguistically or ideologically exclusive. Examples of how different electoral systems have worked as tools of conflict

management are given throughout this Handbook.

34. On the other side of the coin, electoral systems can encourage voters to look outside their own group and think of voting for parties which traditionally have represented a different group. Such voting behaviour breeds accommodation and community building. Systems which give the voter more than one vote or allow the voter to order candidates preferentially provide the space for voters to cut across preconceived social boundaries. At the 1998 Good Friday agreement election in Northern Ireland, for instance, vote transfers under the STV system benefited ‘pro-peace’ parties while still providing broadly proportional outcomes. At the 2003 election, however, a shift in first-preference votes towards hard-line parties tended to outweigh such effects.

Facilitating Stable and Efficient Government

35. The prospects for a stable and efficient government are not determined by the electoral system alone, but the results a system produces can contribute to stability in a number of important respects. The key questions are whether voters perceive the system to be fair, whether government can efficiently enact legislation and govern, and whether the system avoids discriminating against particular parties or interest groups.

36. The perception of whether results are fair or not varies widely from country to country. Twice in the United Kingdom (UK) (in 1951 and 1974) the party winning the most votes in the country as a whole won fewer seats than its opponents, but this was considered more a quirk of a basically sound system (FPTP—see paragraphs 76–79) than an outright unfairness which should be reversed. Conversely, similar results in New Zealand in 1978 and 1981, in which the National Party retained office despite winning fewer votes than the Labour opposition, are credited as starting the reform movement which led to the change of electoral system (see the case study on New Zealand).

37. The question whether the government of the day can enact legislation efficiently is partly linked to whether it can assemble a working majority in the legislature, and this in turn is linked to the electoral system. As a general rule of thumb, plurality/majority electoral systems are more likely to produce legislatures where one party can outvote the combined opposition, while PR systems are more likely to give rise to coalition governments. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that PR systems can also produce single-party majorities, and plurality/majority systems can leave no one party with a working majority. Much depends on the structure of the party system and the nature of the society itself.

38. Finally, the system should, as far as possible, act in an electorally neutral manner towards all parties and candidates; it should not openly discriminate against any political grouping. The perception that electoral politics in a democracy is an uneven playing field is a sign that the political order is weak and that instability may not be far around the corner. A dramatic example of this was the 1998 election in Lesotho, in which the

Lesotho Congress for Democracy won every seat in the legislature with only 60 per cent of the votes under an FPTP system. The public unrest that followed, culminating in a request for military intervention in the country by the Southern African Development Community, demonstrated that such a result was not merely unfair but also dangerous, and the electoral system was consequently changed for future elections (see the case study on Lesotho).

Holding the Government Accountable

39. Accountability is one of the bedrocks of representative government. Its absence may indeed lead to long-term instability. An accountable political system is one in which the government is responsible to the voters to the highest degree possible. Voters should be able to influence the shape of the government, either by altering the coalition of parties in power or by throwing out of office a single party which has failed to deliver. Suitably designed electoral systems facilitate this objective.

40. The conventional wisdom in this area may be simplistic. Traditionally, plurality/majority systems like FPTP were seen as leading to single parties taking office, while PR systems were associated with multiparty coalitions. While the broad logic of this association remains valid, there have been sufficient examples in recent years of FPTP elections leading to multiparty cabinets (e.g. in India) or of PR elections leading to the election of a strong single-party government (e.g. in South Africa) to raise doubts about the automatic assumption that one kind of electoral system will lead to particular governance outcomes. But clearly, electoral systems do have a major impact on broader issues of governance, for both presidential and parliamentary systems.

Holding Individual Representatives Accountable

41. Accountability at the individual level is the ability of the electorate to effectively check on those who, once elected, betray the promises they made during the campaign or demonstrate incompetence or idleness in office and ‘throw the rascals out’. Some systems emphasize the role of locally popular candidates, rather than on candidates nominated by a strong central party.

Plurality/majority systems have traditionally been seen as maximizing the ability of voters to throw out unsatisfactory individual representatives. Again, this sometimes remains valid. However, the connection becomes tenuous where voters identify primarily with parties rather than candidates, as in the UK. At the same time, open and free list systems and STV are designed to allow voters to exercise candidate choice in the context of a proportional system.

Encouraging Political Parties

42. The weight of evidence from both established and new democracies suggests that longer-term democratic consolidation—that is, the extent to which a democratic regime

is insulated from domestic challenges to the stability of the political order—requires the growth and maintenance of strong and effective political parties, and thus the electoral system should encourage this rather than entrench or promote party fragmentation. Electoral systems can be framed specifically to exclude parties with a small or minimal level of support. The development of the role of parties as a vehicle for individual political leaders is another trend which can be facilitated or retarded by electoral system design decisions.

Most experts also agree that the electoral system should encourage the development of parties which are based on broad political values and ideologies as well as specific policy programmes, rather than narrow ethnic, racial or regional concerns. As well as lessening the threat of societal conflict, parties which are based on these broad ‘cross-cutting cleavages’ are more likely to reflect national opinion than those which are based predominantly on sectarian or regional concerns.

Promoting Legislative Opposition and Oversight

43. Effective governance relies not only on those in power but, almost as much, on those who oppose and oversee them. The electoral system should help ensure the presence of a viable opposition grouping which can critically assess legislation, question the performance of the executive, safeguard minority rights, and represent its constituents effectively. Opposition groupings should have enough representatives to be effective (assuming that their performance at the ballot box warrants it) and in a parliamentary system should be able to present a realistic alternative to the current government. Obviously the strength of the opposition depends on many other factors besides the choice of electoral system, but if the system itself makes the opposition impotent, democratic governance is inherently weakened. A major reason for the change to an MMP electoral system in New Zealand, for example, was the systematic under-representation of smaller opposition parties under FPTP. At the same time, the electoral system should hinder the development of a ‘winner takes all’ attitude which leaves rulers blind to other views and the needs and desires of opposition voters, and sees both elections and government itself as zero-sum contests.

In a presidential system, the president needs the reliable support of a substantial group of legislators: however, the role of others in opposing and scrutinizing government legislative proposals is equally important. The separation of powers between legislature and executive effectively gives the task of executive oversight to all legislators, not only the opposition members. This makes it important to give particular thought to the elements of the electoral system which concern the relative importance of political parties and candidates, alongside the relationship between parties and their elected members.

Making the Election Process Sustainable

44. Elections do not take place on the pages of academic books but in the real world, and for this reason the choice of any electoral system is, to some degree, dependent on the cost and administrative capacities of the country involved. Although donor countries often provide substantial financial support for the first, and even the second, election in a country in transition to democracy, this is unlikely to be available in the long term even if it were desirable. A sustainable political framework takes into account the resources of a country both in terms of the availability of people with the skills to be election administrators and in terms of the financial demands on the national budget.

For example, a poor country may not be able to afford the multiple elections required under a Two-Round System or be able easily to administer a complicated preferential vote count. However, simplicity in the short term may not always make for cost-effectiveness in the longer run. An electoral system may be cheap and easy to administer but it may not answer the pressing needs of a country—and when an electoral system is at odds with a country's needs the results can be disastrous. Alternatively, a system which appears at the outset to be a little more expensive to administer and more complex to understand may in the long run help to ensure the stability of the country and the positive direction of democratic consolidation.

Taking into Account 'International Standards'

45. Finally, the design of electoral systems today takes place in the context of a number of international covenants, treaties and other kinds of legal instruments affecting political issues. While there is no single complete set of universally agreed international standards for elections, there is consensus that such standards include the principles of free, fair and periodic elections that guarantee universal adult suffrage, the secrecy of the ballot and freedom from coercion, and a commitment to the principle of one person, one vote. Moreover, while there is no legal stipulation that a particular kind of electoral system is preferable to another, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of issues that are affected by electoral systems, such as the fair representation of all citizens, the equality of women and men, the rights of minorities, special considerations for the disabled, and so on. These are formalized in international legal instruments such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in the various conventions and commitments concerning democratic elections made by regional organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Conclusions

46. The ten criteria outlined above are at times in conflict with each other or even mutually exclusive. The designer of an electoral system must therefore go through a careful process of prioritizing which criteria are most important to the particular political context before moving on to assess which system will do the best job. A

useful way forward is first to list the things which must be avoided at all costs, such as political catastrophes which could lead to the breakdown of democracy. For example, an ethnically divided country might want above all to avoid excluding minority ethnic groups from representation in order to promote the legitimacy of the electoral process and avoid the perception that the electoral system was unfair. In contrast, while these issues might still be important to it, a fledgling democracy elsewhere might have different priorities—perhaps to ensure that a government can enact legislation efficiently without fear of gridlock, or that voters are able to remove discredited leaders if they so wish. Establishing the priorities among such competing criteria can only be the domain of the domestic actors involved in the institutional design process.

The Process of Change

47. The process through which an electoral system is designed or altered has a great effect on the type of the system which results, its appropriateness for the political situation, and the degree of legitimacy and popular support it will ultimately enjoy.

Electoral systems are very rarely designed on a blank slate where no precedents exist. Even the design efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq have historical multiparty competitive precedents to draw on (albeit distant in time and casting little light on what may work in the future).

Some key questions of electoral system design are: Who designs? That is, who puts the idea of electoral system change onto the political agenda, and who has the responsibility for drawing up a proposed new or amended system and through what type of process? What are the mechanisms built into the political and legal framework for reform and amendment? What process of discussion and dialogue is necessary to ensure that a proposed new or amended system is accepted as legitimate? Once change has been decided upon, how is it implemented?

Who Designs?

48. There are several ways by which electoral systems come into being.

First, they can be inherited without significant alteration from colonial or occupying administrations (Malawi, Mali, the Solomon Islands and Palau being examples).

Second, they can result from peace process negotiations between communal groups seeking to bring an end to division or war (e.g. Lesotho, South Africa and Lebanon). In these circumstances the electoral system choice may not be open to full public scrutiny or debate.

Third, the system may be effectively imposed by the groups responsible for post-conflict political reconstruction (e.g. the Coalition authorities in Iraq and the appointed Transitional National Council in Afghanistan).

Fourth, elements of a previous authoritarian regime may have a strong role in designing a new electoral system during the period when they are being divested of power (as in Chile).

Fifth, an expert commission may be set up to investigate the electoral system alone (as in the UK or Mauritius) or as part of the broader constitutional context (as in Fiji). This may lead to recommendations being put to a national referendum (as was the case in New Zealand) or to a legislative vote on the commission's recommendations (as in Fiji).

Sixth, citizens may be involved more widely in the design process by the establishment of a non-expert citizens' assembly on the electoral system. This was the approach adopted by the Canadian province of British Columbia; it led to a recommendation for a change from FPTP to STV that would be put to a province-wide referendum for decision (see the case study on British Columbia).

British Columbia: Empowered Citizen Participation

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

The government of the Canadian province of British Columbia, with the full endorsement of the province's Legislative Assembly, has initiated a historic, unique and precedent-setting process on electoral reform by establishing the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. This is the first time that a government has given a randomly selected group of citizens the opportunity and responsibility to independently review the electoral system and have its recommendation submitted to the public for approval at a referendum.

The 1996 election for the British Columbia provincial legislature was conducted under an FPTP system. It resulted in the New Democratic Party (NDP), with 39 per cent of the popular vote, winning 39 seats in the Legislative Assembly—more than the 33 seats gained by the Liberal Party, which had won 42 per cent of the popular vote. The NDP, with less popular support than the Liberal Party, thus formed the government for the next five years. This result motivated the Liberal Party to make electoral reform a priority in its political campaign for the next election. At the 2001 election the Liberal Party promised to implement electoral reform through a Citizens' Assembly: following an election victory which gave it 97 per cent of the seats in the legislature with 58 per cent of the popular vote, it clearly had the mandate to pursue these objectives.

The typical approach used in Canada for the development of public policy issues where the government is seeking public review is to establish a commission or board of public inquiry, usually led by judges, experts or political leaders. After inviting submissions from the public, and following a period of wider consultation, the government makes a decision on the actions that will follow, taking into account the report produced by the commission.

The blueprint of the Citizens' Assembly and the framing of its terms of reference were prepared by Gordon Gibson, an author on democracy and former political party leader active in business and public affairs, and the new government in consultation with electoral reform experts. There were two unique and precedent-setting features for British Columbia: the people appointed would not be experts or specialists in the field of electoral reform, but would instead be randomly selected citizens from across

the province; and, if a change were recommended, the question would be put directly to the citizens of the province at a referendum and would not be filtered through the government.

The Citizens' Assembly that resulted was a non-partisan and independent group of 160 men and women of all ages from across the province of British Columbia, chosen by random selection from the electoral register. The selection phase was designed to give a balanced list of men and women, reflective of the age distribution of the population of British Columbia as reported in the 2001 census, including two members from the aboriginal community, and representing the whole of the province. This was followed by an intense learning phase for the Assembly during which various electoral system experts produced learning materials (all also available to the general public) and held sessions with the members to inform them of the different systems available and discuss their advantages and disadvantages.

At the conclusion of the learning phase a report, *Preliminary Statement to the People of British Columbia*, was sent to various groups in society, including members of the Legislative Assembly, libraries, municipal district offices, schools and universities, to inform the public of the preliminary conclusions of the Citizens' Assembly. This report was followed by a phase of public hearings, during which about 3,000 people attended some 50 hearings held in all areas of the province. During the subsequent deliberation phase, plenary sessions and discussion groups were held at which the Assembly narrowed down the choice of electoral systems to two and, as a group, sketched out the details of each system. The first day of that phase featured a repeat of some of the best presentations heard during the public hearings—presentations that advocated a variety of electoral systems and features. The objectives of all these phases were to identify the elements essential to a British Columbian electoral system, review thoroughly all electoral system options in the light of these elements and, most importantly, to increase public awareness, inclusion and participation. The three essential elements arrived at in the end were voter choice, local representation and proportionality. Finally, in late October 2004, the Assembly presented its recommendation, in which it supported (by 146 in favour to seven against) changing the FPTP system to STV. The completion of the Citizens' Assembly process then required the publication of the formal final report and the submission of the recommendation to referendum.

This participatory model attracted significant interest from groups across Canada. The concept was recommended to other governments within Canada as a good way of involving citizens in issues that should be the domain of citizens, and a similar process to the one in British Columbia was initiated by the Ontario government.

Other elections in Canada have also contributed to the growing support for a review of electoral processes. Federal majority governments have often been elected with significantly less than 50 per cent of the popular vote. As a result, a number of initiatives for a change of the electoral system at federal level, including Fair Vote Canada (FVC), have emerged, as have many individual lobbyists and advocates.

There is reason to think that the experience with the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly will have significant impact on the future of the debate on electoral system change, and on the process of review and change in particular, on a federal level in Canada. Following pressure from both the NDP and the Conservative Party, the

following amendment to the Speech from the Throne was unanimously accepted in October 2004: ‘an Order of Reference to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs instructing the committee to recommend a process that engages citizens and parliamentarians in an examination of our electoral system with a review of all options’.

The future impact of the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on the process of review and change of electoral systems on an international scale remains to be seen, but it is safe to say that its establishment and work have raised interest in and added to the empirical knowledge of participatory processes around the world.

What are the Mechanisms for Reform and Amendment?

49. While electoral systems are an extremely important institution affecting the way in which a country's system of government works, traditionally they have not been formally specified in constitutions, the highest source of law. In recent years, however, this has started to change.

Today, a number of countries have 'embedded' details about the electoral system in their constitution or in a separate schedule to the constitution. The significance of this for electoral reformers is that constitutionally entrenched laws are usually much harder to change than ordinary laws, usually requiring a special majority in the legislature, a national referendum or some other confirmatory mechanism, which shields such systems from easy alteration. For example, the South African constitution states that the electoral system for the National Assembly elections shall result 'in general in proportionality' and so reform options are limited to PR-type systems unless a constitutional amendment is made.

However, the details of the electoral system are still more often to be found in regular law and thus can be changed by a simple majority in the legislature. This may have the advantage of making the system more responsive to changes in public opinion and political needs, but it also contains the danger of majorities in a legislature unilaterally altering systems to give them political advantage.

50. The opportunities for reform rely on both the legal mechanisms for change and the political context within which calls for change are made. Not all movements for electoral system change are successful. Almost all recent examples of major change have occurred in one of two sets of circumstances. The first is in the course of a transition to democracy or shortly afterwards, when the whole political framework is 'up for grabs'. The second is when there is a crisis of governance in an established democracy. Two examples are the perceived illegitimacy of two successive majority governments elected with fewer votes than their major opponents in New Zealand, and the perception that high levels of corruption in Italy and Japan were endemic to the political system rather than the results of the actions of particular individuals. The cases of New Zealand and Japan are illustrated in case studies in this Handbook.

51. Even when there is huge popular distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system, change still needs to be agreed by the current holders of power. Political elites are only likely to act if they can see benefit to themselves from change or if they are frightened of the electoral consequences to themselves of failing to change. Even when convinced, they will, unsurprisingly and almost inevitably, seek to choose a system that maximizes the benefit to themselves. If they are unsure how this can be achieved or if different interests seek different solutions, negotiated compromises may be likely—perhaps involving mixed systems. However, agreements and changes may not turn out to have the effects intended by their proponents or may produce other, unintended effects. In Mexico, reforms in 1994 designed by the governing party to

make concessions to the opposition led to the most disproportional result in recent years (see the case study on Mexico).

52. The cases of South Africa and Chile illustrate the fact that political realities and the desire of ruling parties to maintain their power and influence can be just as much a block on electoral system reform as legal hurdles. In South Africa there have been widespread calls for an element of local accountability to be built in to the closed-list PR system of large electoral districts under which elected representatives are perceived as detached from their electors. These were reinforced by the majority findings of a presidential commission which reported in January 2003, but the government shied away from changes that would reduce its control over candidate selection and caucus voting behaviour, and declined to entertain reform (see the case study on South Africa). In Chile General Pinochet's legacy was to rig the electoral system to advantage his allies. More than a decade after his removal from power, that system remains effectively unchanged (see the case study on Chile).

53. In New Zealand (see the case study), the use of referendums during the process of change resulted initially from a political move—an attempt by the leader of one major party to wrong-foot the other major party during a general election campaign. In the first referendum, the electorate was asked whether it wanted change at all and to indicate its preferred new system from four options. In the second, the chosen new system was pitted against the retention of the previous system. As a result, the new multi-member proportional system was adopted with a clear expression of public legitimacy.

54. Electoral systems will inevitably need to adapt over time if they are to respond adequately to new political, demographic and legislative trends and needs. However, once a system is in place, those who have benefited from it are likely to resist change. Without a transition or a major political crisis as catalyst, it appears that change at the margins may well be more likely than fundamental reform. In post-conflict transitions, this creates a tension between the practical constraints that may affect the implementation of elections driven for example by the political imperatives of a peace agreement, and the desirability of getting the system right at the beginning.

To try to engineer improvements within existing systems, reformers may consider changing district magnitude (see paragraphs 113–118), threshold levels (see paragraph 119) or quota formulae (see annex B). Many significant reforms proposed in the past few years have involved adding a List PR element on to an existing FPTP system to create a mixed, more proportional system (e.g. the changes enacted in Lesotho and Thailand: see the case studies).

Advice on Debate and Dialogue

55. It is the task of reformers not only to understand the legal form of the technical arguments for and the implications of potential change but also to understand and be able to explain the political arguments and the implications for the wider political

framework of the country. Significant voices in civil society, academia and the media may contribute to developing a public perception that change is necessary. But a sufficient number of those in power will need to be convinced of the benefits, including the benefits to themselves.

56. Even with the current increased interest in electoral systems, the number of people, both in elite circles and in society generally, who understand the likely impact of changes may be very limited. This is further complicated by the fact that the operation of electoral systems in practice may be heavily dependent on apparently minor points of detail. Reformers may need not only to fully work through and explain the legal detail that would be necessary to implement change, but also to make technical projections and simulations (often using data from previous elections) to show, for example, the shape and implications of proposals on electoral districts or the potential impact on the representation of political parties. Technical simulations can also be used to ensure that all contingencies are covered and to evaluate apparently unlikely outcomes: it is better to answer questions while change is being promoted than in the middle of a crisis later!

57. Voter involvement programmes, for example, inviting members of the public to participate in mock elections under a potential new system, may attract media attention and increase familiarity with proposals for change. They may also help to identify the problems—for example, voter difficulty with ballot papers—which a new system may generate.

Advice on Implementation

58. Voters, election administrators, politicians and commentators all tend to be comfortable with what is familiar. Years of use may have smoothed the rough edges of established systems. A new system can thus be a leap into the unknown, and problems in implementation can arise from its unfamiliarity. This cannot be avoided completely, and the planners of change cannot sit back when legislative changes are in place. A process of change is complete only with intensive voter education programmes to explain to all participants how the new system works and with the design and agreement of user-friendly implementing regulations.

59. The most effective voter education—and election administrator education—takes time. However, time is often in short supply to an electoral management body (EMB) organizing an election under a new system. All good negotiators use time pressure before a final agreement is reached, and this is particularly true when the new system is the product of hard negotiation between political actors. An effective EMB will nonetheless prepare as much as possible as early as possible.

Assessing the Impact of Change

60. Having discussed the process of change in some depth, a word of caution is needed. Because electoral systems have psychological as well as mechanical effects, the long-term effect of changes may take some time to work through. Parties, candidates and voters may take two or three elections to fully observe and respond to the effects and incentives of particular changes. The tendency towards mixed systems may accentuate this, as the overall effect on candidates and voters of mixed incentives may be less clear.

Judgement may be necessary as to whether problems in a new or amended electoral system are merely transitional or whether they show that the system is fundamentally flawed and requires urgent amendment or replacement. In the aftermath of George Speight's 2000 coup, such a debate is currently taking place in Fiji: will the Alternative Vote settle down so that parties and voters respond to incentives for inter-ethnic moderation, or does the course of events since its adoption in 1997 indicate that it is fundamentally unsound in the Fijian context?

Trends in Electoral System Reform

61. The Italian referendum in 1993, leading to a change to a Mixed Member Proportional System for the elections the following year, marked the beginning of a series of significant changes in electoral systems all over the world. In the vast majority of the cases, changes have been made on the margins, with a new seat allocation formula, a new number of electoral districts, or an extra few appointed members in the legislature; but as many as 26 other countries have since followed Italy's example and gone through reform processes that have altered their electoral system completely (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, the trend is rather clear. Most countries that have changed electoral systems have done so in the direction of more proportionality, either by adding a PR element to a plurality system (making it a Parallel or MMP system) or by completely replacing their old system with List PR. The most common switch has been from a plurality/majority system to a mixed system, and there is not one example of a change in the opposite direction. The new plurality/majority systems all come from within the same family except for the case of Madagascar, which moved from a List PR system, not to a pure plurality/majority system, but to a hybrid where the FPTP share is larger than the List PR share.

Table 1: Recent Changes to Electoral Systems

Previous System (Family)	New System(Family)			
	Plurality/Majority	Mixed	Proportional Representation	Other
Plurality /Majority	Bermuda (BV to FPTP)	Lesotho (FPTP to MMP)	Iraq (TRS to List PR)	Jordan (BV to SNTV)
	Fiji (FPTP to AV)	Monaco (TRS to Parallel)	Rwanda (FPTP to List PR)	Afghanistan (FPTP to SNTV)
	Montserrat (FPTP to TRS)	New Zealand (FPTP to MMP)	Sierra Leone (FPTP to List PR)	
	Papua New Guinea (FPTP to AV)	Philippines (BV to Parallel)	South Africa (FPTP to List PR)	
	Mongolia (BV to TRS)	Thailand (BV to Parallel)	Moldova (TRS to List PR)	
		Ukraine (TRS to Parallel)		
		Russian Federation (TRS to Parallel)		
Mixed		Mexico (Parallel to MMP)	Macedonia (Parallel to List PR)	
			Croatia (Parallel to List PR)	
Proportional Representation	Madagascar (List PR to FPTP & List PR)	Bolivia (List PR to MMP)		
		Italy (List PR to MMP)		
		Venezuela (List PR to MMP)		
Other		Japan (SNTV to Parallel)		

Note: Independent countries' and related territories' reforms to electoral systems for national-level legislatures (for countries or territories with bicameral legislatures, the system for the lower house) over the period 1993–2004. Kyrgyzstan changed from a TRS to a Parallel system and back to TRS again within this period and is not included in the table.

Design Components

62. Once a decision has been made about the important goals to be achieved—and the important pitfalls to be avoided—in a new electoral system, there are a group of electoral system design tools which can be used to help achieve these goals. They include, among others, electoral system family and type, district magnitude, the relative role of political parties and candidates, the form of the ballot paper, the procedures for drawing electoral boundaries, the electoral registration mechanisms, the timing and synchronization of elections, and quotas and other special provisions.

These tools will work differently in different combinations. Their use may depend on the level of information that is or can be available within a society, for example the numbers, diversity and location of the population. Their effect will also depend on other institutional framework tools, such as the choice between parliamentarism and presidentialism, the requirements for registration and management of political parties, the relationship between political parties and elected members, and the role of instruments of direct democracy—referendums, citizens' initiatives, and recall. It is worth emphasizing again that there is never a single 'correct solution' that can be imposed in a vacuum.