



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

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**International IDEA, Strömsborg, 103 34 Stockholm, Sweden**  
**Phone +46-8-698 37 00, Fax: +46-8-20 24 22**  
**E-mail: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int) Web: [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)**

# 5. Cost and Administrative Implications of Electoral Systems

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210. IN ANY COUNTRY, THE LOGISTICS CAPACITY AND THE AVAILABILITY OF SKILLED HUMAN resources may constrain the available options for electoral system choice, as may the amount of money available. Even when donor funding is available, issues of the long-term sustainability of electoral system choice are important.

This does not, however, mean that the most straightforward and least expensive system is always the best choice. It may well be a false economy, as a dysfunctional electoral system can have a negative impact on a country's entire political system and on its democratic stability.

Any choice of electoral system has a wide range of administrative consequences, including those addressed in the following paragraphs.

211. *The Drawing of Electoral Boundaries.* Any single-member district system requires the time-consuming and expensive process of drawing boundaries for relatively small constituencies. The way in which they are demarcated will depend on issues such as population size, cohesiveness, 'community of interest' and contiguity. Furthermore, this is rarely a one-off task, as boundaries have to be adjusted regularly to take population changes into account. FPTP, AV and TRS systems produce the most administrative headaches on this score. The BV, PBV, SNTV, LV and STV systems also require electoral districts to be demarcated but are somewhat easier to manage because they use multi-member districts, which will be fewer in number and larger. Drawing districts for an element of a mixed system poses similar challenges.

212. When multi-member districts are used, it is possible to avoid the need to adjust boundaries by changing the number of representatives elected in each electoral district—a method of particular value when established units such as provinces are used as electoral districts. List PR systems are often the cheapest and easiest to administer because they use either one single national constituency, which means that

no boundaries need be drawn at all, or very large multi-member districts which dovetail with pre-existing state or provincial boundaries. Recent UN-sponsored elections in Sierra Leone in 1996, Liberia in 1997 and Kosovo in 2001 were all conducted under a national List PR system, partly because the displacement of people and the lack of accurate census data meant that electoral authorities did not have the population data necessary to draw smaller districts.

213. *The Registration of Voters.* Voter registration is the most complex and controversial, and often least successful, part of electoral administration. By its nature it involves collecting in a standardized format specific information from a vast number of voters, and then arranging and distributing these data in a form that can be used at election time—moreover, in such a way as to ensure that only eligible electors engage in the voting process and to guard against multiple voting, personation and the like. The political sensitivity of these matters and the laborious nature of the task itself mean that voter registration is often one of the most expensive and time-consuming parts of the entire electoral process.

214. Voter registration requirements are influenced by the design of the electoral system. A system which uses single-member districts usually requires that each voter must be registered within the boundaries of a specified district. This means that FPTP, AV, TRS and BC (when using single-member districts) are the most expensive and administratively time-consuming systems in terms of voter registration, alongside Parallel and MMP systems which contain single-member districts. The fewer, multi-member districts of the BV, PBV, SNTV and STV systems make the process a little easier, while large-district List PR systems are the least complicated. Arrangements for registration for out-of-country voting may be particularly difficult.

The simplicity of List PR in this context has been a contributing factor in its adoption in some major transitional elections, such as South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. It should be emphasized, however, that variations in electoral systems have only a minor impact on the often extremely high cost of voter registration.

215. *The Design and Production of Ballot Papers.* Ballot papers should be as friendly as possible to all voters in order to maximize participation and reduce the number of spoiled or 'invalid' votes. This often entails the use of symbols for parties and candidates, photographs, and colours; a number of interesting ballot paper examples are illustrated in this Handbook. FPTP and AV ballot papers are often easiest to print and, in most cases, have a relatively small number of names. TRS ballot papers are similarly easy, but in many cases new ballot papers have to be printed for the second round of voting, thus effectively doubling the production cost; and consideration also has to be given to allowing sufficient time to print the papers for the second ballot. Parallel and MMP systems often require the printing of at least two ballot papers for a single polling day, and use two (or more) very different electoral systems, with logistical implications for the training of election officials and the way in which people vote. SNTV, BV, BC and STV ballot papers are more complex than FPTP ballot papers because they

will have more candidates, and therefore more symbols and photographs (if these are used). Lastly, List PR ballot papers can span the continuum of complexity. They can be very simple, as in a closed-list system, or quite complex in a free-list system such as Switzerland's.

216. *Voter Education.* Clearly the nature of, and the need for, voter education will vary dramatically from society to society, but when it comes to educating voters on how to fill out their ballot papers, there are identifiable differences between the different systems. The principles behind voting under preferential systems such as AV, STV or Borda Count are quite complex, and if they are being used for the first time voter education needs to address this issue, particularly if the voter is obliged to number all candidates in order of preference, as is the case in Australia. The increasing use of mixed systems, many of which give voters two ballot papers, also creates an additional level of complexity for voters. By contrast, the principles behind single-vote systems such as FPTP, PBV or SNTV are very easy to understand. The remaining systems fall somewhere in between these two extremes (see Table 8).

217. *Number of Polling Days.* FPTP, AV, BV, SNTV, List PR, Borda Count and STV all generally require just one election on one day, as do Parallel and MMP systems. Two-Round systems are more costly and difficult to administer because they often require the whole electoral process to be re-run a week or a fortnight after the first round.

218. *By-elections.* If a seat becomes vacant between elections, List PR systems often simply fill it with the next candidate on the list of the party of the former representative, thus eliminating the need to hold another election. However, plurality/majority systems often have provisions for filling vacant seats through a by-election. When other systems are in use, either approach may be possible: under STV, the Republic of Ireland holds by-elections for vacant seats in the legislature, but Australia does not do so for Senate vacancies. It is also possible to avoid by-elections by electing substitutes at the same time as the ordinary representatives, as is done for example in Bolivia.

By-elections are smaller and therefore less costly than normal elections, but in some countries they will nevertheless put a significant burden on the budget, and seats are sometimes left vacant for long periods because of a lack of capacity to arrange by-elections. This is an especially salient problem in some countries in Southern Africa where the HIV/AIDS epidemic often leads to a large number of vacant seats between elections.

In some circumstances, by-elections can have a wider political impact than merely replacing individual members, and are seen to act as a mid-term test of the performance of the government. In addition, if the number of vacancies to be filled during a parliamentary term is large this can lead to a change in the composition of the legislature and an altered power base for the government.

219. *The Count.* FPTP, SNTV and simple closed-list PR systems are easiest to count, as only one vote total figure for each party or candidate is required to work out the results. The BV and LV systems require the polling officials to count a number of votes on a single ballot paper, and Parallel and MMP systems often require the counting of two ballot papers. AV, BC and STV, as preferential systems requiring numbers to be marked on the ballot, are more complex to count.

**Table 8: Potential Cost and Administrative Implications of 12 Electoral Systems**

	Drawing Electoral Boundaries	Voter Registration	Ballot Paper Design and Production	Voter Education	Number of Polling Days	By-elections	The Count
FPTP	☹️	☹️	😊	😊	😊	☹️	😊
BV	😐	😐	😐	😐	😊	☹️	😐
TRS	☹️	☹️	☹️	😐	☹️	☹️	😐
AV	☹️	☹️	😊	☹️	😊	☹️	😐
PBV	😐	😐	😊	😊	😊	😊	😊
List PR	😊	☹️	😐	😐	😊	😊	😊
STV	😐	😐	😐	☹️	😊	☹️	☹️
Parallel	😐	☹️	😐	😐	😐	😐	☹️
MMP	😐	☹️	😐	☹️	😐	😐	☹️
BC	😐	☹️	😐	☹️	😊	☹️	😐
SNTV	😐	😐	😐	😊	😊	☹️	😊
LV	😐	😐	😐	😐	😊	☹️	😐

Key: 😊 = Low cost and complexity; 😐 = Medium cost and complexity; ☹️ = High cost and complexity.

220. *Sustainability.* The stresses which any electoral system places on a country's administrative capacity will be determined primarily by history, context, experience and resources, but Table 7 does offer some clues to the potential costs of various systems. A cursory glance shows that List PR systems, especially national closed-list systems, score well when it comes to being cheap to run and requiring few administrative resources. So does PBV. Next come SNTV and LV systems, followed by BV and FPTP; and a little further down by the AV, STV, Parallel, Borda Count and MMP systems. The system which is most likely to put pressure on any country's administrative capacity is the Two-Round System.