COMPARATIVE EXERCISE

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

One of the hallmarks of a democracy is an electoral system in which every citizen can take part in regular, free, and fair elections. But elections are only truly fair if every vote cast is counted and if seats are divided among candidates competing for office in a way that reflects the balance of opinion in the electorate. Ideally, electoral systems should also produce stable governments, where a single party is in charge or a workable coalition of two or more parties can be agreed. Unfortunately, these ideals are difficult to achieve, because the math of most electoral systems means that some votes count more than others: it can take more votes to help one party win seats in a legislature than another party, and even in the United States the outcome of elections is rigged as a result of politically driven efforts to design electoral districts to benefit one party at the cost of another.

In an effort to achieve balanced elections, several different electoral systems have been developed, which fall into one of four categories: plurality, majority, proportional representation, and combination systems.

- **The plurality system.** Otherwise known as winner take-all or first-past-the-post, this is used for elections to the lower chamber in most English-speaking democracies, including the United States, Canada, and Britain. The country is divided into districts with roughly equal population size, and each district is contested by candidates representing different parties. Every voter casts a single vote, and the candidate who wins the most votes (a plurality) wins the district.

  The system is simple, usually inexpensive (except in the United States),

does not require much thought from voters, and gives each district a single representative. However, because it works in favor of parties that have solid blocks of support around the country (they win seats) and against parties whose support is more widely and thinly spread (they more often come second or third), it often leads to victorious parties winning a bigger percentage of seats than votes. It also provides no representation for voters who vote against the winner.

- **The majority system.** This is used in countries such as Australia and France and is set up in such a way as to require the successful candidate to win a majority of the votes. Like the plurality system, it is based on single-member districts, but the similarities end there. Australia uses a system known as *alternative vote,* which requires that voters—instead of voting for a single candidate—must rank all the candidates running in their district. The candidate with the highest average score wins. The system is not as simple as the plurality system because it demands more thought by voters, who have to develop an opinion about every candidate. It can also lead to even more disproportionate results than the plurality system.

  One variant is the *dual ballot,* used for presidential elections in Austria, Finland, France, Portugal, and Russia, and for legislative elections in France. Under this system, multiple candidates compete against one another in the first ballot, and a winner is declared if he or she wins more than half the vote. If no one wins more than half the vote, a second ballot is held that usually involves just the two highest-placed

candidates in the first round. The second round is usually preceded by bargaining among parties as the two final candidates try to encourage voters from other parties to support them.

- **Proportional representation (PR).** This is widely used in continental European liberal democracies but has so far been adopted by neither the United States nor Canada. Political parties win seats in proportion to the number of votes they receive, but PR comes in many different forms, none of which produces an exact reflection of the popular vote.

  The most basic form is the *party list system*. This divides a country into districts with roughly equal population size that are much bigger than the districts used in the plurality system and that are represented not by a single member but by multiple members. Each of the contesting parties publishes a list of candidates, ranked in order of preference. Voters then choose among the parties, and the seats are divided up among the parties in proportion to the vote they receive. So, in a 10-member district, if Party A wins 50 percent of the vote, the first five people on its list are elected. If Party B wins 30 percent of the vote, the first three people on its list are elected, and so on. A threshold is also usually used so that no party wins any seats unless it wins a minimum proportion of the vote, usually somewhere between 2 and 7 percent.

  A more complex version of PR is the *single transferable vote (STV)*. Voters must choose at least one candidate and must rank all the candidates they like, writing 1 next to the name of their favorite, 2 next to their second choice, and so on. To be elected, a candidate must win a minimum number of votes (or a quota), which is worked out by dividing the number of valid voting papers cast by the number of seats to be filled plus one. So if the number of votes cast in a district is 500,000, and there are five seats to fill, the quota would be $500,000 \div 5 + 1 = 83,000$. First preference votes are then counted, and any candidate winning more than 83,000 votes is elected. All the surplus votes for winning candidates are then transferred to other candidates. So if Joe Smith wins 100,000 first preference votes, his surplus is 17,000. All 100,000 of his first-preference votes are examined again to establish the distribution of second-preference votes among the other candidates. If Ann Jones receives 80,000 of the second-preference votes cast by Joe Smith supporters, then in addition to the 70,000 first preference votes she has received (not enough to get her elected), she receives $17,000 \div 100,000 = 0.17$ of an additional vote for each second preference, or $80,000 \times 0.17 = 13,600$ votes. This puts her above the 83,000 minimum, and she is elected.

  Although this is an achingly complex system as far as the electoral officials are concerned, it gives voters more control over how their votes are used than is the case with the party list system. It also ensures that no votes are wasted, because voters know that all their preferences will be taken into account. It was used in the United Kingdom for the first time in the Northern Ireland assembly elections in 1998.

- **Combination systems.** These use plurality and PR together, with some seats being decided with one system and others with the second system. The main advantage is

that voters end up being tied to individual representatives and smaller parties are able to win seats. A combination is used for legislative elections in Japan and has also been used for elections to the Scottish and Welsh regional assemblies in Britain. For example, Scotland has 129 seats in its assembly, 73 of which are decided by the plurality system, and the remaining 56 of which are divided among eight parliamentary regions, each represented by seven members. Voters cast two ballots: one for their constituency member and one for a party. Constituency winners are determined by a plurality, and the regional seats are divided among the parties according to the proportion of the seats they win. The plurality system usually works in favor of bigger parties, whereas the regional system works in favor of smaller parties, which tend to win no seats under the plurality system.

Looking at these options, it is clear that the plurality system is the simplest and quickest, but it is also potentially the least fair. The other options may take more thought and effort, but they have the benefit of more accurately reflecting voter preferences. But given the varying amounts of time, effort and thought that voters are prepared to put into the act of voting, which of these options is the most practical in real terms?