Advantages and disadvantages of the PR system

In the previous article we defined the Proportional Representation (PR) as a term used to describe electoral systems in which the distribution of seats corresponds closely with the proportion of the total votes cast for each party or individual candidate. We also described four of the most common types of PR systems which are List system, Mixed Members Proportion, Choice Voting and Cumulative Voting. In this article we look at its advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of the PR system

The system is strongly praised for producing a representative legislature/local authority. It reduces the disparity between a party's share of the national vote and its share of the seats; if a major party wins 40 per cent of the votes, it should win approximately 40 per cent of the seats, and a minor party with 10 per cent of the votes should also gain 10 per cent of the legislative seats. This congruity between a party’s share of the vote and its share of the seats provides an incentive for all parties to support and participate in elections. Other advantages of the system include:

- It gives rise to very few wasted votes. A wasted vote is any vote which is not for an elected candidate. It can also include surplus votes for winning candidates who would have won anyway without the wasted vote. With the PR system almost all votes cast go towards electing a candidate of choice. This increases the voters’ perception that it is worth making the trip to the polling booth at election time, as they can be more confident that their vote will make a difference to the election outcome, however, small.

- It encourages the formation of political parties or groups of like-minded candidates to put forward lists.
It facilitates minority parties’ access to representation. Unless the threshold is unduly high, then any political party with even a small percentage of the vote can gain representation in the legislature/local council. This fulfils the principle of inclusion, which can be crucial to stability in divided societies and has benefits of a more balanced representation of minorities in decision-making bodies. Minorities win representation without specially gerrymandered districts.

It encourages political parties to campaign beyond the districts in which they are strong or where the results are expected to be close. The incentive under PR systems is to maximize the overall vote regardless of where those votes might come from. Every vote, even from areas where a party is electorally weak, goes towards gaining another seat.

Restrict the growth of ‘regional fiefdoms’. Because PR systems reward minority parties with a minority of the seats, they are less likely to lead to situations where a single party holds all the seats in a given province or district. This can be particularly important to minorities in a province which may not have significant regional concentrations or alternative points of access to power.

The disadvantages of the PR system include:

- It provides a route for extremists into the political mainstream, who would otherwise be excluded by the structure of First-Past-The-Post.
- It produces “weak” coalition governments rather than “strong” majority governments, which can lead to indecision, compromise and even legislative paralysis. It can also reduce accountability to voters, as an ousted party of government can reinstall itself by finding new coalition partners after an election.
• The adoption of list systems breaks the link between the elected representative and his or her constituency. This can break accountability of the elected to the electorate as they will not be identified with a particular geographical area.

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