

The Choice Argument for Proportional Representation

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Introduction

Single-Member Plurality (SMP): The electorate is split into territorial districts, and each district elects a single member of the legislature. The candidate who wins the most votes (not necessarily a majority) in a district wins election in that district.

Proportional Representation (PR): The proportion of seats each party wins in the legislature roughly matches the proportion of votes it receives in election. The simplest PR systems have a single, nationwide electoral district in which each party puts forward a list of candidates.

The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and India all use SMP.

Probably the Netherlands has the purest PR system. Some countries, like Germany, have a mixed-member proportional system: some candidates are elected from SMP districts but PR is achieved by a compensatory list tier.

Background

Here are some existing arguments in favour of PR:

Congruence: In the 1990s, several empirical studies suggested that PR produced policy outcomes closer to the median voter (e.g. Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000). But this was not confirmed by follow-up literature (Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010; Ferland 2021).

Matt Golder and Jacek Stramski, for instance, “find no significant difference between the level of congruence in proportional and majoritarian democracies” (Golder and Stramski 2010, 104).

Polarization: Lee Drutman (2020) claims that PR would address polarization specifically in the contemporary U.S. But there are many examples of polarization in non-SMP systems (Poland, Israel) and overall the causal connection between electoral system and level of polarization is unclear (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020).

Turnout: Several people support proportional representation on the basis that it increases voter turnout (Amy 2002, ch.7; Drutman 2020, 302-6). But (i) the empirical evidence is inconclusive (Blais and Aarts 2006; Smith 2017) and (ii) if we want to increase turnout, other policies (e.g. compulsory voting) will be much more effective.

PR is correlated with higher turnout among Western European countries. But the association dramatically weakens when one includes Latin American and Eastern European countries in one’s analysis.

Representativeness: Many people have observed that women and minorities tend to receive more representation in the legislature under PR systems than under SMP systems (Lijphart 1991; Amy 2002, ch.5-6; Drutman 2020, 313-16). But one achieve descriptive representation with quotas or reserved seats even under SMP.

India, for example, reserves certain districts for candidates from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The result is that the proportions of these groups in the Lok Sabha match that in the general population.

The main arguments for PR either (i) rest on shaky causal claims or (ii) point to consequences that can be better achieved by other policies (or both).

Democratic Autonomy

What makes democracy valuable?

Personal Autonomy: It is good for you to be author of your personal affairs, for you to be the one who decides who you marry, where you live, what career you pursue. This is not just instrumentally useful, but intrinsically valuable.

Democratic Autonomy: Analogously, it's good for citizens to collectively author their social and political affairs. It is intrinsically valuable for us to together decide the important features of our society.

Democracy facilitates autonomy by establishing a causal connection between what citizens want and what the government does.

Choices Sets Matter: A choice contributes more to your autonomy when you have a diversity of adequate options. An option is adequate when it is above a minimal moral and prudential bar. Options are diverse when they're dissimilar.

I also think that democracy is valuable because it contributes to equality. So both equality and autonomy matter to democracy.

Rousseau is the key modern source for this kind of view. But for more contemporary advocates, see Altman and Wellman 2009; Stiliz 2019; Wilson 2021; Lovett and Zuehl 2022.

Raz (1986, 373-78) is one important source for these claims. He goes through a series of cases to motivate them, although doesn't connect them to voting.

The Choice Argument

What are the consequences of differing electoral systems?

Duverger's Law: PR tends to lead to many more viable at the district level than does SMP. SMP tends to give voters a choice between just two candidates with a chance of winning (Duverger 1957).

This means voting for a third party, in SMP, will predictably have no influence on the outcome. So, it is not an adequate option for most voters. We can now give a very straightforward argument in favor of PR over SMP:

1. PR gives voters more diverse adequate options than does SMP.
2. Voters are more autonomous when they have more diverse adequate options.
3. So, PR makes voters more autonomous (than does SMP).

This effect is probably driven by strategic voters. Some proportion of voters abandon a party with no chance of winning. Note the most defensible version of the law applies at the district level, not the national level.

This argument has been briefly alluded to by other writers (e.g. Amy 2002, ch.4). But, somewhat surprisingly, it has never been developed in detail. I suspect this is because one needs a detailed theory of democratic autonomy to properly develop it.

Objections

Third Parties: Voting for third-parties influences outcomes via changing the positioning of leading parties. *Reply:* Often, voting for third parties is ineffectual. And it isn't a morally acceptable way to affect the position of one's preferred leading party when the alternative is very bad.

Consider, for example, people who voted for Ralph Nader in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Perhaps their voting for Nader pulled the Democratic party leftwards in subsequent governance. But it also meant Bush won the election, which I think many Nader voters should have seen as morally unacceptable.

Coalitions: Really, in PR systems one has a choice between coalitions rather than parties. And one's choice between coalitions is no more diverse than that between parties. *Reply:* Coalitions are distinguished by the relative strength of the parties in them. So one's choice between coalitions in PR systems is actually very diverse.

Knowledge: Diverse choices only contribute to autonomy when you know about your options. But there are too many parties in PR systems to know much about each one. *Reply:* One might know less on average about each party in PR than in SMP. But there's no reason to think that one's total knowledge about the parties is diminished by PR.

What about two-ballot systems?

So far, I've argued that PR is superior to SMP because it gives voters more diverse choices. But what about:

Two-ballot systems: There are two rounds of voting in these systems. In the first round, all but the top two candidates are knocked out. The second round is a majority-wins context between these candidates.

Two-ballot systems tends to have many competitors in the first round. So, maybe the diversity of choice in this round gives voters autonomy.

Autonomy and Choice: The autonomy of a choice contributes to citizens' autonomous authorship of their social and political affairs only when what they chose makes a causal contribution to those affairs. Voting for a losing candidate in the first round doesn't usually contribute to the election of the ultimate winner. So, the first round vote doesn't contribute to democratic autonomy.

This also explains why open nomination procedures (e.g. open primaries) don't reconcile democratic autonomy with SMP.

What kind of PR?

So, what kind of PR system does the choice argument support?

High district magnitude. You get more parties in larger districts (Taagepera 2007). The ideal is a single nationwide district.

Low legal thresholds. You get more parties when parties don't need to overcome a certain number of seats to get representation.

Minimize the winners bonus. D'Hondt leads to a seat bonus for large parties (Herron, Pekkanen, and Shugart 2017; Carey 2017). Better to adopt something like the Hare quota with largest remainders.

The key point here is that a coalition in which the FDP had the same number of seats as the CDU would behave very different to ones in which the CDU has many times more seats.

Why think total knowledge is what matters? because you don't diminish someone's autonomy by giving them extra choices they know little about.

For examples of two-ballot systems, think of France or most Latin American presidential election.

Single-transferable vote (STV) with single-member districts (as in e.g. Australia) is just a time-efficient two-ballot system. Instead of voters casting two ballots at different times they cast them simultaneously. But, for most voters, only the final round matters to their autonomy.

Although voters might have a lot of options in a primary, most of their votes won't contribute to the eventual winner's victory. Voting for Bernie Sanders in 2020 didn't make you the author of Biden's policies.

The interesting meta-point here is that we really get quite detailed institutional guidance from the choice argument. Considerations about voter choice do a lot to pin down ideal electoral institutions.

Open lists. Voters have more choice when they can vote for candidates within a party, rather than just for the party list.

Pure PR. There some evidence that mixed-member proportional systems lead to fewer parties (Shugart and Wattenberg 2003, 583-84). Better to adopt pure PR.

The choice argument is an argument for a pure PR system with a nationwide district, low legal thresholds, a maximally proportional electoral formula, and open lists.

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Obviously, that the choice argument supports these institutions isn't decisive reason to adopt them. They might have really bad consequences, and that might outweigh considerations of autonomy. But I don't think there's very much evidence that these institutions have bad consequences. The Netherlands is governed fine, after all.