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# Electoral Engineering in Divided Societies :

## The Choice of Electoral System and Contextual Conditions

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### Abstract

Traditionally, a profound disagreement has existed between centripetal and consociational theorists over which electoral system is best suited to managing ethnic conflicts in deeply divided societies. The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of the two groups' approaches, with a focus on the Alternative Vote (AV), Single Transferable Vote (STV) and party-list proportional representation (list-PR). The second part illustrates how the choice of voting system depends on the social and demographic conditions of a given society and why the application of preferential voting systems advocated by centripetalists should be limited under certain circumstances.

**Keywords** : preferential voting system; divided societies; consociationalism; centripetalism; socio-demographic conditions

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## 1. Introduction

Although it is widely recognized among scholars that the choice of electoral system has a significant impact on conflict management in poly-ethnic societies (Lijphart 2004: 96-7), no consensus exists among experts, particularly between centripetalists and consociationalists, about which electoral system is the most appropriate for ethnically segmented societies. As some theorists point out, the choice of electoral system is “ultimately contextual and will depend on the specific cleavages and divisions within any given society” (Sisk & Reynolds 1998: 7). Therefore, rather than following a crude “one-size-fits-all” approach for a wide variety of divided societies, we need to consider contextual factors such as social and demographic conditions in each society (Reilly 2001: 141). If this is the best approach, however, we must then question how contextual conditions provide different implications for the choice of electoral system. To address this question, I first examine the characteristics of three electoral systems—the Alternative Vote (AV), Single Transferable Vote (STV), and party-list proportional representation (list-PR) systems—and then show how two contextual conditions, (1) the people’s support for moderate political parties and (2) demographic distribution, impact the selection of one of the three electoral methods. In this paper, I argue that, because of the key features of preferential voting systems, namely the majoritarian nature and the premise of vote transferability, the adoption of ranked-ballot systems must be limited in certain social and demographic contexts. I use empirical evidence from Estonia, Northern Ireland, and Fiji as examples in my theoretical arguments.

## 2. Centripetalism Versus Consociationalism

### 2-1 The Alternative Vote

Defenders of centripetalism, such as Donald L. Horowitz, advocate the application of the preferential voting systems, particularly AV, for conflict management in deeply divided societies. In the AV system, usually operated in single-member districts (SMD), electors are allowed to rank candidates in the order of their choice (e.g., 1, 2, 3). A candidate who receives an absolute majority of votes (50 percent plus 1) is elected outright (Reilly 2001: 16). If all candidates fail to receive an absolute majority, the candidate with the lowest amount of votes is removed, and the ballots of the excluded candidate are distributed among the remaining candidates according to the electors’ secondary preferences (Reilly 2001: 16). This process continues until one candidate gains more than 50 percent of votes (Reilly 2001: 16). Therefore, AV is often classified as a majoritarian system. In this respect, the AV system is similar to the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) voting system with which it shares key features such as the “winner-take-all” principle and single-member district rules. However, the AV system is distinguishable from the FPTP system in that it allows voters to express different degrees of preference for each candidate rather than only their first choice.

## 2-2 The Single Transferable Vote

In contrast to the AV system, the STV system is usually categorized as a variant of PR systems, which are usually used for elections in multi-member districts (MMD). Under the STV system, the quota for each constituency, that is, the minimum number of votes required to be elected, is initially calculated by using the Droop quota formula.<sup>1)</sup> Subsequently, in the same manner as in the AV system, electors rank the candidates according to the order of their choice, and the candidate who satisfies the quota is immediately elected (Reilly 2001: 17–8). The surplus votes for the first winner are then redistributed among the remaining candidates according to the next choice marked on the ballot papers (Reilly 2001: 17–8). At this point, if no candidate fulfills the quota, the one with the lowest number of votes is removed, and his/her votes are reallocated to the other candidates (ibid.). This process is repeated until all seats for the electoral district are filled (ibid.).

## 2-3 Centripetal Effects

Proponents of the centripetal approaches insist that such preferential voting systems can contribute greatly to conflict management in ethnically segmented societies. This is because they change the nature of interactions among political actors from a hostile zero-sum to a cooperative positive-sum game (Reilly 2001: 5, 167).

According to centripetalists, for example, preferential voting systems give candidates and parties an incentive to attract broad support across ethnic lines (Horowitz 1993: 33). Under these systems, electors are expected to cast their second and third preference votes for moderate parties, irrespective of their ethnic origin. This possibility encourages the politicians and parties to moderate their political positions and cooperate with other ethnic parties in order to receive second and third preference votes from the electors outside their own ethnic support base (Horowitz 2000: 640).

Second, the preferential voting systems also motivate the ethnic parties to negotiate and bargain over competing political interests, offering an arena for inter-ethnic dialogues (Reilly 2001: 167; 2006: 816). Frequent face-to-face negotiations and compromise among the politicians from different ethnic groups mitigate the polarization of political positions and mobilization of ethnic radicals (Dawisha & Diamond 2006: 102). Such an argument is in line with James Fearon and David Laitin's theory that conflict-oriented interethnic relations are often caused by a lack of information about the "ethnic others" (1996: 717–9). If a lack of interethnic dialogues fosters tension between rival ethnic groups, then frequent and recurring interactions across ethnic divides would likely mitigate hostility and distrust among competing ethnic groups. This, in turn, would alleviate the centrifugal tendencies of ethnically cleaved societies. Conversely, as Cass R. Sunstein (2000: 74) argues, frequent group deliberation among homogeneous, like-minded people often shifts initial political positions toward a more extreme point, leading to social destabilization.

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1) The Droop Quota =  $\{y / (x + 1)\} + 1$ , where x is the number of seats to be elected in the constituency and y is the total number of votes cast. See Tideman, N. (1995) "The Single Transferable Vote," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 9 (1), p. 30.

Third, ranked-ballot systems provide politicians with incentives to form multi-ethnic centrist coalitions prior to the elections (Horowitz 2004: 511). Incentives for moderation and bargaining promote interethnic cooperation, such as cross-ethnic vote-pooling and preference swapping, through pre-election pacts among parties across ethnic lines (Reilly 2001: 56, 75, 176). Such interethnic affiliations might “make politicians reciprocally dependent on the votes of members of groups other than their own” (Reilly 2002: 157), and ethnic coalitions may adopt “ethnicity-blind” policies (Sisk 1996: xi) rather than ethnicity-oriented ones to maintain and promote an affiliation between competing ethnic parties.

#### **2-4 Consociationalism and List-PR System**

These centripetalist approaches can be contrasted with the consociationalist approaches advocated by Arend Lijphart and his followers. Consociationalism is characterized by four basic elements: (1) power-sharing among political elites (i.e., a “grand coalition”), (2) a mutual veto over crucial decisions that directly affect the members of each ethnic group, (3) list-PR that helps reflect the complexity of ethnic preferences to the distribution of legislative seats, and (4) a significant degree of segmental autonomy for each ethnic group (Lijphart 1977: 25–41). As these characteristics indicate, the essence of consociationalism is the clear differentiation of competing ethnic communities rather than bridging the cleavages among them.

For the proponents of consociationalism, the ideal electoral system is list-PR, in which parties provide lists of candidates to be elected and electors cast votes for the party lists instead of individual candidates (Lijphart 2008: 187). The major goal of list-PR is to reflect the diverse preferences of all ethnic groups into the distribution of parliamentary seats and to ensure fair representation of all ethnic parties without excluding ethnic minorities (Lijphart 2008: 181). In a deeply divided society, the elimination of political minorities results in the consolidation of an ethnic identity (Birnie 2007: 48) and hostility toward majority winners. In this respect, in ethnically segmented societies, it is somewhat optimistic to assume, as Adam Przeworski states (1991: 19), that electoral losers will accept defeat and peacefully anticipate the opportunity to promote their interests in future elections. Thus, for consociationalists, list-PR is the optimal electoral system for maximizing the proportionality and inclusiveness of ethnic minorities and, ultimately, for producing tension-free multi-party parliaments (Reilly & Reynolds 1999: 22).

In short, as centripetalists argue, the preferential voting systems have the potential to encourage reciprocal cooperation among competing ethnic parties through moderation, interethnic interaction, and coalition formation. However, the majoritarian nature of the preferential voting systems, particularly the AV system, raises questions about the appropriateness of the electoral systems in ethnically plural societies in which political exclusion of ethnic minorities often leads to the mobilization of secessionist forces.

### 3. Contextual Conditions: People's Support for Moderate Ethnic Parties and Demographic Distribution

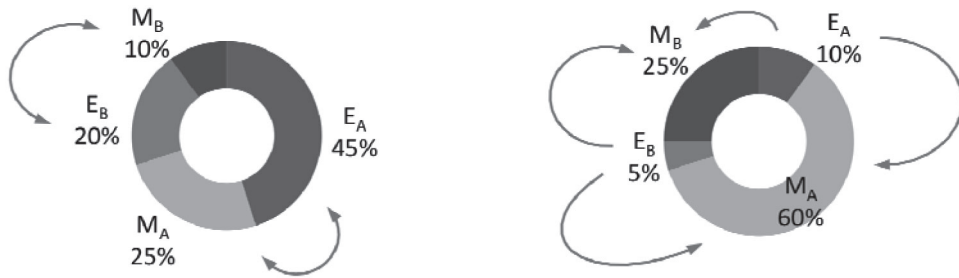
Whether the preferential voting systems are appropriate for ethnically divided societies is highly dependent on the contextual factors within a given society. In this paper, I focus on two contextual determinants: (1) The people's support for moderate ethnic parties and (2) demographic distribution.

#### 3-1 Model Case 1: Group A (70%), Group B (30%)

First, consider an ethnically divided society in which the proportion of the largest ethnic group population is more than 50 percent. For example, 70 percent of the population is dominated by Group A and 30 percent is comprised of Group B, and support for moderate parties is weak in both camps owing to factor such as strong hostility against the other ethnic group.<sup>2)</sup> In this society, many people in both groups would most likely support their own extremist or secessionist parties ( $E_A$  for Group A and  $E_B$  for Group B) rather than the moderate parties ( $M_A$  for Group A and  $M_B$  for Group B). Moreover, the strong hostility against the ethnic others might lower the frequency of vote transfers across ethnic divides (e.g., Figure 1.1.). In such a society, politicians from Group A have little incentive to appeal to the voters of other ethnic groups because they are able to secure support from their own ethnic base (Frankel & Grofman 2006: 647–8). For this reason, the preference order of Group A voters would be  $E_A > M_A > M_B > E_B$ , and that of Group B voters would be  $E_B > M_B > M_A > E_A$ . In this situation, if a majoritarian voting system, such as AV, was adopted, the candidates of ethnic parties from Group B would be easily eliminated from the race, leading to the dominance of Group A in each single-member constituency. Thus, it is clear that the AV system is inappropriate for this society. In addition, since the proportionality of the STV system is highly dependent on the transferability of votes (Lijphart 2008: 195), this is also not a desirable choice for this society because cross-ethnic vote transfers are unlikely. This model case is exemplified by the 1990 election in Estonia, in which an STV electoral system was adopted. In this election, most Estonian electors cast their votes to their own ethnic parties, and centripetal effects, such as cross-ethnic voting and vote-pooling between dominant Estonian-speaking communities and Russian-speaking minorities, were limited (Reilly 2001: 134). Considering this, the best and only choice for this case would be list-PR.

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<sup>2)</sup> This situation would often occur after a violent ethnic conflict or ethnic cleansing.



Notes: Arrows indicate expected vote transfers. Group A (EA + MA) = 70%, Group B (EB + MB) = 30%.

Figure 1.1. Frequent Intra-Ethnic Vote Transfers      Figure 1.2. Frequent Inter-Ethnic Vote Transfers

On the other hand, if we consider a society in which the majority of people prefer moderate ethnic parties, we might be able to anticipate cross-ethnic vote transfers from the removed candidates of radical parties to those of moderate parties (e.g., Figure 1.2),<sup>3)</sup> therefore, in this circumstance, AV could be an option. Nevertheless, under the majoritarian electoral systems, the demographic domination of Group A would minimize the political representation of Group B in each single-member district, making it undesirable to adopt the AV system. By contrast, the STV system would be a possibility for this society. For instance, the STV elections in Northern Ireland in 1998 successfully yielded centripetal outcomes through the frequent vote transfers of moderate electors, a phenomenon witnessed hardly in the area's previous elections (Reilly 2001: 136–7). Thus, for this society, list-PR or STV are recommended.

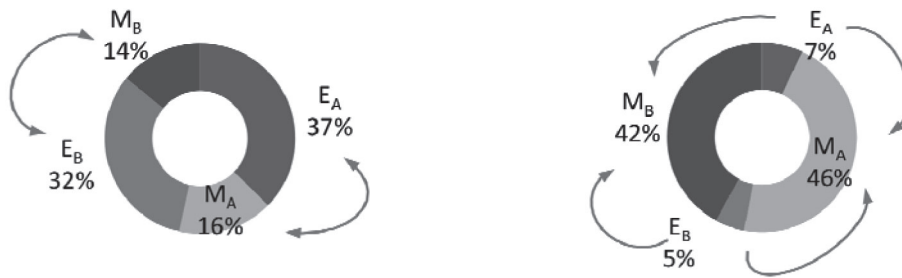
### 3-2 Model Case 2: Group A (53%), Group B (47%)

Next, we consider a society in which the population is divided into two quasi-equal-number ethnic groups, for example, 53 percent for Group A and 47 percent for Group B. If support for moderate ethnic parties is limited in both ethnic sides, for reasons such as a strong identification with their own ethnic groups or hostility against ethnic others, and vote transfers across ethnic lines are hardly expectable (e.g., Figure 2.1.), the choice order of Group A electors would be  $E_A > M_A > M_B > E_B$ , and that of Group B voters would be  $E_B > M_B > M_A > E_A$ . In this society, it is uncertain whether ethnic parties would be able to secure the majority support with the votes from their own ethnic base. Therefore, we could expect incentive-driven interethnic cooperation, as Horowitz and other centripetalists suggest. However, even so, in this case, the weak support for moderate ethnic parties may prevent their candidates from receiving first preference votes in each electoral district, putting parliament under the control of ethnic radicals ( $E_A$  or  $E_B$ ). The result of the 2001 Fijian election,<sup>4)</sup> which used the AV system, illustrates this situation. In this election, political positions of Fijian people were sharply polarized, and the voters' first preferences tended to be cast on radical ethnic parties of

3) The preference order of Group A would be  $M_A > M_B > E_A > E_B$ , and that of Group B would be  $M_B > M_A > E_B > E_A$ .

4) The population of Fiji is comprised of 52% indigenous Fijians and 44% people of Indian origins (Fraenkel & Grofman 2006: 632).

each group (Fraenkel & Grofman 2006: 636). In such a situation, if the AV system is used, radical ethnic parties might gain the most first preference votes from their own ethnic support base, and the parliament would most likely be dominated by a radical ethnic party, which in turn would destabilize the society. Therefore, the AV system is removed from the options list, and the list-PR or at least the STV system is recommended.



Notes: Arrows indicate expected vote transfers. Group A ( $E_A + M_A$ ) = 53%, Group B ( $E_B + M_B$ ) = 47%.

Figure 2.1. Frequent Intra-Ethnic Vote Transfers      Figure 2.2. Frequent Inter-Ethnic Vote Transfers

In contrast, if we can expect vote transfers across ethnic divides and moderate parties are the first choices for many people (e.g., Figure 2.2),<sup>5)</sup> the AV system could be included in the array of electoral system options along with the STV and list-PR systems. For example, the evidence from the 1999 Fijian election proved the centripetal effects of the AV system. In this election, as Horowitzian theorists expected, two multi-ethnic coalitions were formed, and preference votes were transferred across the ethnic line between native Fijian and Indian communities, which dramatically changed Fiji's political spectrum (Fraenkel & Grofman 2006: 633–4). Thus, under such social and demographic conditions, the AV system would be an option.

### 3-3 Model Case 3: Group A (40%), Group B (30%), Group C (30%)

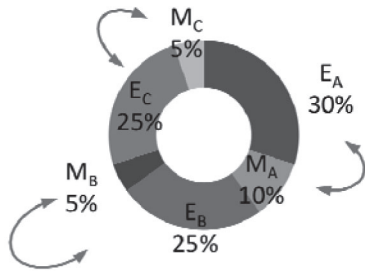
In the next example, we consider a society in which the proportion of the largest ethnic group population is less than 50 percent, for example, 40 percent of the population is from Group A, and the rest is comprised of Group B (30 percent) and Group C (30 percent). If support for moderate ethnic parties is very weak, because of reasons such as a strong identification with their own ethnicity or an abhorrence of other ethnic origins, and if votes are unlikely to be transferred to the parties of other ethnic groups (e.g., Figure 3.1.), the preference order of Group A would be  $E_A > M_A > M_B > M_C > E_B > E_C$  or  $E_A > M_A > M_C > M_B > E_C > E_B$ .<sup>6)</sup> In this society, both the preference order of Group A voters and the electoral strategies of the ethnic parties are uncertain. For

5) The preference order of Group A would be  $M_A > M_B > E_A > E_B$  and that of Group B would be  $M_B > M_A > E_B > E_A$ .

6) Of course, other preference orders are also possible, for example,  $E_A > M_A > M_B > E_B > M_C > E_C$ . The main point here is the fact that cross-ethnic vote transfers would be hardly expectable in this case.



example, the ethnic parties of Group A might cooperate with those of Group B and form a coalition to dominate the parliament, minimizing the representation of Group C.<sup>7)</sup> Such uncertainty of preference order and the possibility of coalition formation can also be expected for Group B and C. In such a society, if the AV system was adopted, a coalition of two ethnic groups ( $M_A$  and  $E_B$ ,  $E_B$  and  $E_C$ , etc.) would eliminate the representation of the third party. Therefore, this system is again removed from the menu of options, and the list-PR or at least the STV system is recommended.



Notes: Arrows indicate expected vote transfers. Group A ( $E_A + M_A$ ) = 40%, Group B ( $E_B + M_B$ ) = 30%, Group C ( $E_C + M_C$ ) = 30%.

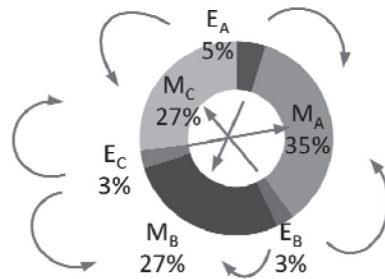


Figure 3.1. Frequent Intra-Ethnic Vote Transfers      Figure 3.2. Frequent Inter-Ethnic Vote Transfers

In contrast, if the majority of people prefer moderate parties rather than radical secessionist ones, and vote transfers across ethnic lines are highly expectable (e.g., Figure 3.2.),<sup>8)</sup> the incentive for politicians to cooperate with other ethnic parties and make an interethnic coalition becomes much stronger. In this case, as centripetalists argue, the preferential voting systems may promote multi-ethnic coalition formation. However, the high transferability of votes would make the possibility of a two-party coalition that excluded the third ethnic group far more likely. Thus, the best option for this society would be the list-PR system.

#### 4. Conclusion

I argue that the choice of voting system is highly dependent on social and demographic factors including the support for moderate ethnic parties and demographic distribution of ethnic groups. As the advocates for integrative approaches argue, the preferential voting systems may produce centripetal effects such as moderation, inter-ethnic communication, and coalition formation. However, the characteristics of the preferential voting systems, in particular, the majoritarian nature and the implicit assumption that votes are always transferable across ethnic divides, make the alleged centripetal effects highly contextual. The arguments of this paper are summarized in Figure 4.

7) A coalition of the ethnic parties of Group A and C or Group B and C is also a possibility.

8) In this case, the preference order of Group A would be  $M_A > M_B > M_C > E_A > E_B > E_C$ , for example.

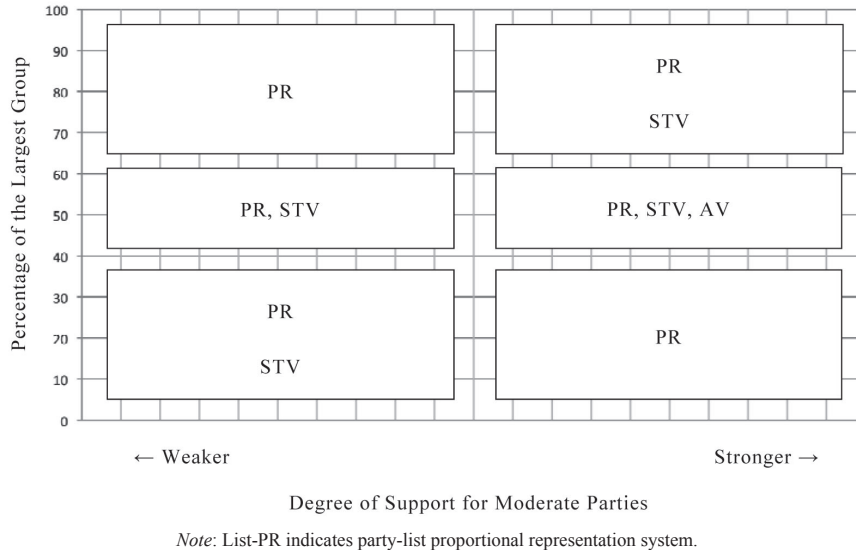


Figure 4. Choice of Electoral System and Contextual Conditions

Finally, it seems difficult for politicians and constitution writers to correctly assess the degree of people's support for moderate parties or their ethnic sentiments in a deeply segmented society. This difficulty arises because, as the examples of Estonia, Northern Ireland, and Fiji show, the support level for moderate ethnic parties or the degree of ethnic polarization can change over time *in the same society*. For example, the recurrence of ethnic strife would easily foster hatred and division among ethnic communities. Considering such sensitivity of ethnic cleavages and the dynamic nature of ethnic sentiments, it seems dangerous to assume *a priori* that the degree of support for moderate ethnic parties in a divided society would be always strong, and that a majority of electors would cast their votes irrespective of their ethnic origins. Therefore, this paper implies that list-PR, as advocated by Lijphart and other consociationalists, is the most stable and durable electoral system in conflict-prone societies.

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