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CAPITULO 1

PASTA Nº:	30
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ELECTORAL SYSTEMS:  
A COMPARATIVE INTRODUCTION

LEITURA  
RECOMENDADA

# 1

## The Study of Electoral Systems

### 1.1 Why Study Electoral Systems?

For people who do not specialize in this area, electoral systems are usually seen as a big 'turn-off'. It can be difficult to instil much interest in the subject of counting rules; to enthuse about the details of how one electoral system varies from another. After all how many wars were fought over whether the electoral formula was 'largest remainder' or 'highest average'; how many politicians have been assassinated over the issue of 'single transferable vote' versus 'single member plurality'? Pity the student on a hot Friday afternoon who has to struggle through the niceties of the 'Droop quota'. Pity the teacher who has to burn midnight oil getting to grips with the issue of 'monotonicity'. It does seem fair to pose the question: why bother? What is the point of spending time examining electoral systems?

Several reasons can be given. First, a very large and growing number of people specialize in electoral systems, so *somebody* must think these systems are important. In actual fact, the interest in studying electoral systems is quite new. As recently as the 1980s, scholars drew attention to how undeveloped was this branch of the political science literature (Lijphart 1985; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). But even then it was already clear that this was likely to become a major field of interest. In his *International Bibliography on Electoral Systems*, Richard S. Katz (1989) listed some 1,500 works 'dealing with the forms and effects of representation and electoral systems'. By 1992 this list had grown to 2,500 works (Katz 1992).<sup>1</sup> These have included some very significant developments in the

methodology of studying electoral systems. For more than thirty years one name has dominated over all treatments of electoral systems. The seminal work by Douglas Rae (1967) set the trend on how to study electoral systems and their political consequences. It is only in recent times that Rae's work has come under closer scrutiny as scholars such as Gary Cox, Michael Gallagher, Richard Katz, Arend Lijphart, Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera have sought to develop and improve on some of his ideas. Their work (and the work of others) needs to be incorporated into the textbook treatment of electoral systems. This is one of the major functions of this book.

Second, electoral systems are worth examining because they have become politically interesting. With the process of democratization, in Mediterranean Europe in the 1970s, across Latin America and parts of Africa more recently, and perhaps most dramatically towards the end of the 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, important decisions had to be taken on which electoral systems to adopt in the fledgeling representative democracies. As we shall see in later chapters, in none of these cases was the single member plurality system chosen; in only one case (and only briefly) was the single transferable vote system selected. It is interesting to speculate on the reasoning behind these particular decisions, which we shall do in Chapter 8. Of even greater interest is the recent trend towards reform of existing electoral systems, notably in Italy, Japan and New Zealand – all during the 1990s – and also in a host of other countries where electoral reform has been placed high on the political agenda. This contradicts the impression that electoral reform is rare, occurring only 'in extraordinary historical situations' (Nohlen 1984: 218). These reforms also indicate a growing sympathy for 'mixed' electoral systems (for a long time associated almost solely with postwar Germany), as we see in Chapter 5. Suddenly electoral reform actually looks possible; it is more than some theoretical notion of unrealistic, out-of-touch academics.

There is a third reason why it is important to study electoral systems and that is because they are important: they define how the political system will function. Metaphorically, electoral systems are the cogs that keep the wheels of democracy properly functioning. In almost any course on politics the following themes generally feature as important topics for consideration: elections and representation; parties and party systems; government formation and the politics of

coalitions. In each of these areas, the electoral system plays a key role. Depending on how the system is designed it may be easier or harder for particular politicians to win seats; it may be easier or harder for particular parties to gain representation in parliament; it may be more or less likely that one party can form a government on its own. In short, there are important questions about the functioning of political systems which are influenced, at least in part, by the design of the electoral system.

Apart from their primary function of ensuring the smooth running and accepted legitimacy of the system, electoral systems are designed to fulfil a number of other – often conflicting – functions, such as reflecting the wishes of voters, producing strong and stable governments, electing qualified representatives and so on. In selecting a particular design of electoral system, the 'electoral engineers' have to take important decisions about which function to stress most. As a result, no two countries have the same electoral system.

It is important to distinguish between electoral *laws* and electoral *systems*. Electoral laws are the family of rules governing the process of elections: from the calling of the election, through the stages of candidate nomination, party campaigning and voting, and right up to the stage of counting votes and determining the actual election result. There can be any number of rules governing how to run an election. For instance, there are laws on who can vote (citizens, residents, people over seventeen years of age, the financially solvent and so on); there can even be laws, such as in Australia or Belgium, obliging citizens to turn out to vote. Then there is usually a set of rules setting down the procedures for candidate nomination (for example, a minimum number of signatures or a deposit). The campaign process can also be subject to a number of rules: whether polling, television advertising or the use of campaign cars is permitted; the size of billboards; the location of posters; balance in broadcasting coverage, and so on.

Among this panoply of electoral laws there is one set of rules which deal with the process of election itself: how citizens vote, the style of the ballot paper, the method of counting, the final determination of who is elected. It is this aspect of electoral laws with which this book is concerned. This is the electoral system, the mechanism of determining victors and losers, which clicks into action once the campaign has ended. This is the stage where the political pundits take over from the politicians; where the television companies dust

off their 'pendulums' and 'swingometers' and wheel out their latest computer graphic wizardry. Campaign slogans and electoral re-creations have ended. All attention is focused on thousands of people shuffling ballot papers in 'counting centres' throughout the country. (At least, this is the situation in Britain. In other countries, the counting and even the voting is done by computer.) Politicians, journalists and (some) voters wait with bated breath for the returning officer to announce 'the result'. TV presenters work long into the night, probing with their panellists the meaning of the results and assessing the voters' 'verdict'.

This scenario of 'election night coverage' is common to most political systems. There may be some variation in detail, but the basic theme is similar: we the voters have voted, and now we are waiting to see the result of our votes, in terms of who wins or loses, in terms of the number of seats won by each of the parties. It is the function of the electoral system to work this transformation of votes into seats. To put this in the form of a definition: *Electoral systems determine the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office.*

## 1.2 Classifying Electoral Systems

Inevitably, the world of electoral systems is crowded and complex: one country's electoral system is never the same as another's (although in some cases the differences are quite small). Given the range of variations among the different electoral systems, this makes life quite difficult for the analyst seeking to produce an acceptable typology. One option might be to simply base a classification of the systems in terms of their *outputs*, that is, with reference to the process of translating votes into seats where one distinguishes between those systems which have 'proportional' outcomes and those with 'non-proportional' outcomes. The essence of proportional systems is to ensure that the number of seats each party wins reflects as closely as possible the number of votes it has received. In non-proportional systems, by contrast, greater importance is attached to ensuring that one party has a clear majority of seats over its competitors, thereby (hopefully) increasing the prospect of strong and stable government.

At first glance, a classification based on the outputs of electoral

Table 1.1 Proportional and non-proportional results: two 1983 elections

	Vote (%)	Seats (%)	Diff. (%)
<i>Britain</i>			
Conservative	42.4	61.1	+18.7
Labour	27.6	32.2	+4.6
SDP/Liberal Alliance	25.4	3.5	-21.9
<i>Germany</i>			
Christian Democrats	38.2	38.4	+0.2
Social Democrats	38.2	38.8	+0.6
Free Democrats	7.0	6.8	-0.2

Source: Electoral returns.

systems would seem eminently sensible. Take two diametrically opposite cases, such as Germany and Britain. Table 1.1 provides a useful demonstration from 1983 of how the two systems varied in terms of the number of seats awarded to the third party. Despite polling a quarter of the national vote, the British SDP/Liberal Alliance (a precursor to the Liberal Democrats) was awarded less than 4 per cent of the seats. By contrast, the German Free Democrats' proportion of seats reflected very closely the party's share of the vote. It would seem to make perfect sense, therefore, to have a classification that places Britain and Germany in distinct categories.

But, as ever, reality is never quite so simple. There are different degrees of proportionality; indeed, most authors go so far as to talk of an in-between category of semi-proportional systems (Bogdanor 1983; Lakeman 1974; Reynolds and Reilly 1997). The question then becomes one of deciding on where to locate the different electoral systems. As we shall see in Chapter 6, this focus on 'outputs' has led some scholars, for instance, to locate the single transferable vote in the semi-proportional category, based largely on a review of its performance in one country (Katz 1984). More generally, there is the problem of supposedly proportional systems (such as the list systems used in Greece or Spain) frequently producing less proportional results than supposedly non-proportional systems (such as the single member plurality systems used in the USA or Britain).

An alternative approach to classifying electoral systems – and the basis for most of the existing typologies – entails breaking the electoral system down into its component parts and focusing on the *mechanics* of how votes are translated into seats. Douglas Rae (1969) was the first to distinguish three main components of an electoral system: ‘district magnitude’, ‘electoral formula’ and ‘ballot structure’. While these terms may sound grandiose, in fact their meaning is quite simple, and they will be used throughout the following chapters to structure our examination of the different electoral systems covered in this book. District magnitude (DM) refers to the size of the constituency (‘district’ in American parlance; ‘electorate’ in Australian parlance), measured in terms of the number of seats to be filled. For example, in the USA and the UK, which both use the single member plurality system, each constituency elects just one legislator (DM = 1); by contrast, in Spain, which uses a list system of proportional representation, on average each constituency (or region) elects seven legislators (DM = 7).

The ballot structure determines how voters cast their votes. Here the common distinction is between *categorical* ballots, such as used in the USA or the UK (see Figure 2.1), where voters are given a simple either/or choice between the various candidates on the ballot paper, and *ordinal* ballots, such as in Ireland (see Figure 6.1) or Malta, where voters can vote for all the candidates, ranking them in order of preference. Finally, the electoral formula manages the translation of votes into seats. As we shall see in later chapters, there is a large range of electoral formulas currently in operation (and theoretically a limitless supply of alternatives), but in essence they break down into three main families: plurality, majority and proportional.

Having outlined the three main components of electoral systems, the next stage is to determine exactly how to use them in developing an appropriate classification of electoral systems. As we shall see in the following chapters (and particularly in Chapter 7), there has been a lot of discussion about the precise effects of the three components on the performance of electoral systems. The general consensus is that district magnitude has the greatest effect on the overall proportionality of the result: the larger the district magnitude the more proportional the translation of votes to seats. This might lead us to expect that a classification of electoral systems should base itself first and foremost on this component. The fact is, however, that most of

the existing classifications tend to be based on the electoral formula first, only taking secondary account of the other features of electoral systems (Blais and Massicotte 1996; Bogdanor 1983; Lakeman 1974). More sophisticated classifications are available which give equal attention to all three components of electoral systems (Blais 1988; Taylor and Johnston 1979), but while these may produce more theoretically appropriate typologies they also tend to be somewhat unwieldy.

By way of compromise, this book will adopt a mix of several approaches. In this introductory chapter, the electoral systems used in most of the world’s existing democracies will be classified on the basis of electoral formula. This is no more than an administrative convenience, helping to group the following five chapters. In each of these chapters the classification will then be refined in terms of all three electoral system components. Finally, in Chapters 7–9 the electoral systems will be reassessed in terms of their outputs, paying particular attention in Chapter 7 to questions of proportionality as well as to their strategic effects.

Table 1.2 provides some preliminary information on the world of electoral systems. Fifty-nine democracies are grouped according to the four main electoral formulas in use. For the most part, these are the same countries identified by Lawrence LeDuc and his colleagues (1996) in their survey of democracies in the mid-1990s, and by Arend Lijphart (1999a) in his more recent survey of *Patterns of Democracy*. These countries were selected on the basis of size (only countries with a population of 2 million or greater are included) and measures of ‘political freedom’. The latter is based on the most recent (1998–9) Freedom House annual survey of ‘freedom country scores’, selecting those countries which achieve a score of 4.0 or less.

Of the main families of electoral systems dealt with in this book, the plurality system (called ‘single member plurality’ in Chapter 2, often referred to as ‘first past the post’) predominates in Anglo-Saxon democracies. Eleven (of our sample of 59) countries use it, included among them some of the largest democracies in the world. Indeed, the case of India, with an estimated population just short of one billion, is singularly responsible for the fact that the plurality system is used by a plurality of the world’s voters (53 per cent of our sample; for similar trends, see Reynolds and Reilly 1997: 20). In Chapter 3 we will examine the majority systems, which, though less popular (only used by 3 per cent of the population in our sample

Table 1.2 The world of electoral systems in 1999

	Freedom score <sup>a</sup>	Population <sup>b</sup>	
<i>Plurality systems</i>			
Bangladesh	3.0	127.6	} 11 countries (18.6%) 1,574.5 m (52.8%)
Canada	1.0	30.7	
India	2.5	984.0	
Jamaica	2.0	2.5	
Malawi	2.5	9.8	
Mongolia	2.5	2.5	
Nepal	3.5	23.7	
Papua New Guinea	2.5	4.4	
Thailand	2.5	60.0	
United Kingdom	1.5	59.0	
USA	1.0	270.3	
<i>Majority systems</i>			
Australia	1.0	18.6	} 3 countries (5.1%) 87.5 m (2.9%)
France	1.5	58.8	
Mali	3.0	10.1	
<i>Proportional systems</i>			
Argentina	3.0	36.3	} 29 countries (49.2%) 548.8 m (18.4%)
Austria	1.0	8.1	
Belgium	1.5	10.2	
Benin	2.0	5.6	
Brazil	3.5	169.8	
Bulgaria	2.5	8.2	
Chile	2.5	14.8	
Colombia	3.5	38.6	
Costa Rica	1.5	3.6	
Czech Republic	1.5	10.3	
Denmark	1.0	5.3	
Finland	1.0	5.2	
Greece	2.0	10.7	
Ireland	1.0	3.6	
Israel	2.0	5.6	
Latvia	1.5	2.5	
Madagascar	3.0	14.5	
Mozambique	3.5	18.6	
Netherlands	1.0	15.7	
Norway	1.0	4.4	
Poland	1.5	38.6	
Portugal	1.0	9.9	
Slovakia	2.0	5.3	

Table 1.2 Continued

	Freedom score <sup>a</sup>	Population <sup>b</sup>	
Slovenia	1.5	2.0	} 29 countries (49.2%) 548.8 m (18.4%)
South Africa	1.5	42.8	
Spain	1.5	39.1	
Sweden	1.0	8.9	
Switzerland	1.0	7.3	
Uruguay	1.5	3.3	
<i>Mixed systems</i>			
Bolivia	2.0	7.8	} 16 countries (27.1%) 769.4 m (25.8%)
Ecuador	2.5	12.3	
Germany	1.5	82.1	
Hungary	1.5	10.2	
Italy	1.5	56.8	
Japan	1.5	125.9	
Lithuania	1.5	3.7	
Mexico	3.5	98.6	
New Zealand	1.0	3.6	
Panama	2.5	2.6	
Philippines	2.5	77.7	
Russia	4.0	146.9	
South Korea	2.0	46.4	
Taiwan	2.0	21.9	
Ukraine	3.4	50.1	
Venezuela	2.5	22.8	

<sup>a</sup> Freedom House combined average ratings 1998–99, where countries ranked 1.0–2.5 are designated 'free', those ranked 3.0–5.5 are 'partly free', and those ranked 5.5–7.0 are 'not free'. Only those countries with a score of 4.0 or less have been included.

<sup>b</sup> In millions. 1998 estimates. Only those countries with a population of 2 million or greater have been included.

Sources: LeDuc *et al.* (1996); Massicotte and Blais (1999); Reynolds and Reilly (1997); Wilfried Derksen's Electoral Web Sites (<http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/election.htm>); CIA World Factbook 1998 (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>); Freedom House, Annual Survey of Freedom Country Scores (1999) (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>).

countries), are used by two leading democracies – Australia and France.<sup>2</sup> The proportional systems come in two main forms: the single transferable vote (used in Ireland and Malta and dealt with in Chapter 6), and the far more popular list systems (dealt with in Chapter 4). As Table 1.2 shows, proportional systems are used by the plurality of countries in our sample; however, in many cases these

are quite small countries, so that in total just 18 per cent of the population (of our sample countries) use proportional systems.

The final group of mixed electoral systems, which are dealt with in Chapter 5, have only recently come into their own as a distinct category. The principal defining characteristic of these systems is that they involve the combination of different electoral formulas (plurality and proportional) in one election. For a long time, mixed systems were 'dismissed as eccentricities, transitional formulas, or instances of sheer manipulation doomed to disappear' (Blais and Massicotte 1996: 65). This was not without good reason for they were only used by a handful of countries which, with the exception of postwar Germany (where the system is generally referred to as 'additional member'), were not noted for their democratic longevity. Since the early 1990s, with the new 'wave' of democratization, mixed systems have become quite fashionable, in our sample eclipsing proportional systems for the status of second most commonly used systems (based on population size). According to Massicotte and Blais (1999), a total of 29 countries currently use some form of mixed system.

Chapters 2–6 deal with the operation of each of the systems in turn, in each case describing how the system works, how it has adapted (if at all), and the political context in which it has operated. Having dealt with each of the systems in some detail, the book concludes, in Chapters 7–9, with an assessment of the political consequences of electoral systems, dealing with such questions as: proportionality versus stability; the role of representatives; party campaigns; and the potential for strategic voting.

As pointed out earlier, central to any discussion about electoral systems and their reform are questions of stability and the representation of minority interests. One is often seen as, at least partially, a trade-off against the other. A main contention of this book is that this argument is fallacious, that an electoral system can allow for maximum representation of minority interests without necessarily threatening the stability of government. We will return to this point in the concluding chapter, having reviewed the comparative evidence in Chapters 2–6.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the different electoral systems, however, it is necessary to deal with two issues central to the study of electoral systems: (1) the issue of representation, and (2) the attempts to, as it were, 'artificially' influence the effects of electoral systems.

### 1.3 Conflicting Views on the Meaning of 'Representation'

The precise meaning of the term 'representation' can vary markedly. The basic distinction is between a 'microcosm' and a 'principal-agent' conception of representation (McLean 1991; Reeve and Ware 1992). The first of these is associated with proponents of proportional electoral systems, the second with supporters of non-proportional systems. A classical exponent of the microcosm view was John Adams, one of the founding fathers of the USA, who said that parliament 'should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason, and act like them' (quoted in McLean 1991: 173). Taken literally this perspective is similar to the governing principle behind public opinion polls: that is, the notion of a representative sample. In other words a society which is made up of the following sorts of ratios – men:women 50:50; urban:rural 70:30; middle class:working class 40:60; black:white 20:80 – should elect a parliament which reflects these ratios in microcosm. To put it another way, parliament should be a 'representative sample' of the population. Obviously it is impossible to achieve a perfect representative sample, but the aim should be to get as close as possible to it. On this view, as Raymond Plant (1991: 16) explains, 'the representativeness of a parliament is accounted for by its proportionality'. It is a sociological mirroring of society.

According to the microcosm conception of representation, therefore, it is the pattern of composition of the parliament that matters; but, according to the principal-agent conception, it is the decisions of the parliament that matters. The basis of the principal-agent conception is the notion of one person acting on behalf of another. The representative is elected by the people to represent their interests. In this case, even if the parliament comprises a preponderance of 50-year-old, white, middle-class males, it is representative providing it is seen to be taking decisions on behalf of the voters. It is less important that the parliament is statistically representative of voters, and more important that it acts properly in the interests of the citizens; composition is less important than decisions.

In his excellent summary of these two positions, Iain McLean (1991: 172) observes that each 'seems entirely reasonable, but they are inconsistent'. There is no reconciliation; either you support one perspective or you support the other. Either you are in favour of a parliament that is a microcosm of society, or, instead, you have a

view of parliament that stresses its ability to act properly in the interests of all citizens. Ultimately it is a normative judgement call: 'The PR school looks at the composition of a parliament; majoritarians look at its decisions' (McLean 1991: 175). On this basis therefore we can see that it is not possible to draw firm conclusions as to which is better, a proportional or a non-proportional electoral system. Nor, indeed, can any firm conclusions be drawn over *which* particular electoral system is best. This latter point is demonstrated very clearly by Richard S. Katz in his magisterial study, *Democracy and Elections* (1997a). On the basis of his review of 14 models of democracy and their potential fit with alternative electoral systems, Katz's conclusion is deliberately and unapologetically non-committal: 'there is no universally correct, most democratic electoral system, notwithstanding a variety of "one size fits all" prescriptions offered by committed advocates of particular systems' (1997a: 308; see also pp. 181–3 below).

Once we delve more deeply into the question of specific electoral system consequences, however, it is possible to find other more empirical areas where conclusions can be drawn. Some systems are apparently associated with greater degrees of governmental stability; some systems promote smaller parties better than others; there are effects on the nature of parliamentary representation (for example, 'delegate' versus 'trustee' roles) and on the organization and campaign styles of political parties; and there are effects on the representation of women and ethnic minorities. It is possible to be far more definitive in assessing such individual themes, and we will return to them in Chapters 7–9.

#### 1.4 Built-in Distortions to Electoral Systems

As will become all too readily apparent in due course, no single electoral system achieves full proportionality: all electoral systems distort the election result, with some parties benefiting more than others. The best a proportional electoral system can hope to achieve is to minimize the degree of distortion.

Quite apart from the 'natural' distorting effects of electoral systems (which is the subject of Chapter 7), there are instances where electoral engineers resort to added 'artificial' measures, seeking to direct the distorting effects in their favour. There are four such meas-

ures which merit discussion here: two of which are most common in (though by no means exclusive to) non-proportional systems, characterized as they are by constituency representation, and two of which are generally found in proportional systems, in which efforts are made to minimize the explosion of minor (and especially extremist) parties. Let us deal with each in turn.

First, there is the practice of *malapportionment*. This refers to a situation in which there are imbalances in the population densities of constituencies that favour some parties over others. This can happen as a matter of course, by population shifts not being compensated for by a redrawing of constituency boundaries. But it can also be engineered on purpose. Take, for example, the case of a governing party reliant on rural votes which fails to redraw the constituency boundaries to take account of rural depopulation. Malapportionment was a serious problem in the USA prior to the 1960s when the Supreme Court (most notably in *Baker v. Carr* 1962) started to play a more active role in ordering the regular reapportionment of district boundaries. By the end of the decade the problem of malapportionment had been largely removed (Baker 1986; Peacock 1998).

It is possible to build in measures in the country's electoral laws to protect against such practices. The Irish constitution, for example, contains a clause which ensures that each MP must represent between 20,000 and 30,000 voters. If the government does not meet this requirement it faces a constitutional challenge. In 1968 the governing Fianna Fáil party (whose traditional electoral base is rural) sought to have this clause diluted in a constitutional referendum, but was resoundly defeated.

In his review of comparative trends, Katz (1998) shows how malapportionment can be caused by a range of different factors. For instance, a requirement that certain regions retain a minimum number of parliamentary constituencies regardless of population movements prevents any allowance being taken of population shifts over time: examples of this include Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which have fixed numbers of UK parliamentary constituencies set by law. Similar issues arise wherever laws are enacted (such as in the Canadian province of Alberta or parts of Australia) to limit the physical size of constituencies in sparsely populated rural areas. In general, malapportionment is found to occur wherever 'criteria other than the exact equality of population are also to be taken into account in defining constituencies' (Katz 1998: 252). As Rossiter and

his colleagues (1999a) demonstrate, the requirements set by British law – such as, for instance, those relating to the City of London, or regarding the treatment of county boundaries – have over time set limitations on the efforts of successive (independent) boundary commissions to achieve a degree of population equality in constituency representation.

A second strategy commonly employed in non-proportional electoral systems (though also found in some proportional systems) is *gerrymandering*. This refers to the practice in which constituency boundaries are redrawn with the intention of producing an inflated number of seats for a party, usually the governing party. There are two ways of achieving this. The first method is to divide one party's supporters into smaller pockets across a range of constituencies so as to ensure that they are kept in a permanent minority in each of the constituencies formed, thereby preventing this party from winning any seats. Wherever the party is too large to allow such a method to work, an alternative tack is to try to minimize the number of seats it can win by designing the constituency boundaries in such a way that where the governing party's vote is high it stands to win a lot of seats and where it is low it stands to lose a few seats.

The term 'gerrymander' came from the shape of a constituency designed by Governor Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts in 1812. It was so long, narrow and wiggly that one journalist thought it looked like a salamander, and it was accordingly dubbed a 'gerrymander'.

Gerrymandering is generally seen as a common phenomenon in the USA, especially since the onset of computer cartography, and the parties have perfected systems of 'redistricting' to their advantage in those areas where they are in power. For instance, Douglas Amy (1993: 44) refers to a case in the 1990 House of Representatives election in Texas where the Democrats won the bulk of the congressional seats despite the fact that the Republicans had virtually the same vote: the vote tally was Democrats 1,083,351, Republicans 1,080,788. He argues that, at least in part, this reflected a successful gerrymander. A more famous example was in California in 1982 where one constituency (or district) 'designed to protect the incumbent Democrat . . . was an incredible 385-sided figure' (Amy 1993: 46). (For some wonderful examples of recent winners of the Elbridge

Gerry Memorial Award for Creative Cartography, see Baker 1986: 272–3.)

While there may be many apparent examples of gerrymandering, it is necessary to introduce a degree of caution to these interpretations, however. A bad result for one party may have as much to do with an unusual constituency shape as it has to do with the naturally distorting effects of the plurality electoral system. Furthermore, there is always the possibility that a swathe of voters may have switched parties. Mark Rush stresses the need to treat some of the examples of supposed gerrymandering with a pinch of salt. As he comments: 'The contention that a gerrymander results in the actual denial or impairment of a group's representational opportunity presupposes the existence of durable, identifiable groups of voters. But not all groups are so durable or identifiable' (Rush 1993: 5).

Clearly the more identifiable the group, such as on the basis of racial or ethnic characteristics, the more certain we can be about whether we are dealing with gerrymandering. Although there has been much debate over this (for a review, see Whyte 1983), the former devolved government in Northern Ireland (in existence from 1920 to 1972) is often seen as a good example. The Unionist-dominated system was accused of practising a comprehensive system of gerrymandering to protect the interests of the majority Protestant population. A much-cited example is the case of Derry City in the 1960s. As Table 1.3 shows, despite the fact that Catholic voters outflanked

Table 1.3 Gerrymandering in Northern Ireland? Derry City in the 1960s

	<i>Total seats</i>	<i>Nationalist seats</i>	<i>Unionist seats</i>	<i>Catholic votes</i>	<i>Protestant votes</i>	<i>Total votes</i>
South Ward	8	8	0	10,047	1,138	11,185
North Ward	8	0	8	2,530	3,946	6,476
Waterside Ward	4	0	4	1,852	3,697	5,549
Total	20	8	12	14,429	8,781	23,210

Source: O'Hearn (1983: 441).



Protestant voters by a ratio of 1.6:1 (that is, 14,429 as against 8,781), the Nationalists (predominantly supported by Catholic voters) won just 8 of the 12 seats in the Council, so that Unionist councillors out-flanked Nationalist councillors by a ratio of 1.5:1.

In the USA, in the wake of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA; and its subsequent amendments), affirmative racial gerrymandering, involving the creation of 'majority-minority districts', became a prominent means of trying to increase the representation of black (and other) minorities, particularly in the southern states. Such moves have been put in jeopardy, however, as a result of recent Supreme Court decisions (most notably *Shaw v. Reno* in 1993), which have judged racial gerrymandering as unconstitutional on the grounds that it flouts the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause. This has left the people involved in redrawing district boundaries in a no-win situation: 'their districting plans must somehow comply with the VRA's remedial requirements without being unduly conscious of race and thereby offending the Court's interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause' (Cain and Miller 1998: 144-5; Karlan 1998). In the light of these new restrictions, attention has now turned to the possibility of switching to more proportional electoral systems as an alternative means of improving minority representation (Engstrom 1998; and see below, pp. 43-4).

Gerrymandering is generally associated with non-proportional electoral systems which have single-member constituencies. However, there are instances of its use in proportional systems, particularly in the case of the single transferable vote electoral system, which is characterized by multi-member constituencies (Mair 1986). The most notorious example in recent Irish history was in the mid-1970s when the minister responsible for boundary revision, James Tully, sought to redesign the constituency boundaries to benefit the governing coalition of Fine Gael and Labour. In the subsequent 1977 election the plan backfired badly, largely due to the fact that the swing against the governing parties was much higher than anticipated. As a result, the loss for the governing parties was exaggerated by the effects of the attempted gerrymander. As Richard Sinnott (1993: 79) noted, this 'incident has contributed a new term to the political lexicon. The minister responsible was James Tully, and a tullymander is a gerrymander that has an effect opposite to that intended.'

For established, mainstream politicians, one of the drawbacks of

proportional systems is that they tend to produce proportional results. It is easier for smaller parties and for independents to win seats. There is a danger that counted among these will be political extremists, who in the eyes of the established politicians threaten democracy and give Proportional Representation (PR) a bad name. To try to minimize the risk of too many minor (and especially extremist) parties, it is common for PR systems to include *minimum electoral thresholds* (usually a minimum vote percentage, or minimum number of seats won) which a party must pass in order to be granted any seats in the parliament. Therefore even if under the electoral rules a party could actually win some seats, if it fails to surpass the threshold it is not awarded any seats. The most famous of these electoral thresholds operates in Germany. After the unstable experiences of PR under the Weimar Republic (1919-33) where successive governments were held hostage to the vagaries of minor parties, the German system operates a rule that a party must win either 5 per cent of the vote or three constituency seats in order to pass the electoral threshold (for further discussion, see Chapter 5).

As we shall see in Chapter 4, electoral thresholds are quite a common feature of PR systems, though they can vary greatly in size and method of operation. The lowest threshold in use is in the Netherlands where a party must win at least 0.67 per cent of the national vote to gain parliamentary representation. In Denmark the threshold is set at 2 per cent; in Poland it is 7 per cent. In Sweden a party must win either 4 per cent of the national vote, or else 12 per cent of the vote in one constituency, to be eligible for seats. In some systems a party which fails to pass a minimum electoral threshold is allowed to keep the seats it wins, but it is prevented from receiving what are known as 'top-up' seats, thereby ensuring an in-built advantage to the larger parties. Such top-up advantages are enjoyed, for instance, by larger parties in Austria, Greece, Iceland and Norway (for more details and discussion, see Chapter 4).

A final means of distorting the translation of votes to seats is to introduce a range of *party laws* to restrict the activities of certain categories of parties. The most controversial of these laws are the ones which seek to ban parties from running in elections, or, at least, to make it difficult for them. Again Germany offers the best example with its party law banning 'anti-system' parties, although this has been used very infrequently (Poguntke 1994). Less explicit are the

various legal restrictions on the operation of certain types of parties. For instance, in the 1980s in Northern Ireland a full panoply of legal restrictions were brought into play which made life very difficult for the Sinn Féin party. Its candidates were banned from the airwaves (until 1995), except during the final three weeks or so of the formal election campaign. (A similar ban in the Irish Republic from 1973 to 1995 was even more restrictive in that it included the election campaign.) Also a matter of some controversy for Sinn Féin candidates was the non-violence declaration which all Northern Ireland candidates were required to sign.

### 1.5 Conclusion

In general, however, there is relatively little the established politicians can do to try to influence the effects of electoral systems on the political process. Ultimately the main factor determining the influence an electoral system can bring to bear on a polity is the way in which it has been designed, whether in terms of the degree of electoral proportionality it produces, the type of party system it engenders, the degree of choice it offers to the voter, or other such factors.

These issues can only be assessed through an examination of the different electoral systems on offer, exploring how they operate and with what consequences. This is the function of the remainder of this book, which examines each of the five main families of electoral systems in operation starting, in Chapter 2, with the oldest and simplest single member plurality system. Chapter 3 deals with the two main types of majoritarian system. List systems are dealt with in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 reviews the main types of 'mixed' systems, paying particular attention to the long-established German variant. Finally, the single transferable vote system is dealt with in Chapter 6. The last three chapters deal with comparative themes in the study of electoral systems. Chapter 7 considers their systemic and strategic consequences. Chapter 8 turns things on their head, this time looking at electoral systems in terms of their causes rather than their consequences. The book concludes, in Chapter 9, with a review of the debate over electoral systems and stability.