Electoral Systems and Stability in Divided Societies

Introduction

Severely divided countries pose a particular problem when it comes to securing democratic stability. Such countries are characterised by deep cleavages representing 'sociocultural and ascriptive traits, such as race, ethnicity, language, religion or region' (Bogaards, 2003, p. 59). Other forms of social division, which focus on wider issues, do not diffuse the strength of these cleavages, making them particularly entrenched. Democracy is 'about access to power', determining who gets power and what benefits this entails (Horowitz, 1993, p. 18). The problem in a divided society is that access to power is often determined by ethnic identity, with politicians 'playing the race card at election time' to mobilise the votes of their own group (Reilly, 2002, p. 156). This often leads to significant groups being marginalised and permanently denied access to power, as voting patterns are predetermined by group identity. Furthermore, political appeals to one's own group leads to the demise of moderate politics, with the 'centrifugal' and escalating force of group appeals leading to the political centre being 'pulled apart' (p. ibid).

Democracy in a divided society can thus lead to a lack of both inclusion of all groups in the political process and a lack of moderation from politicians of all groups (Wolff, 2005, p. 62). Political inclusion is necessary to stability as one group will not accept permanent rule by another, given how deep these divisions are and the animosity that is often felt between groups (Horowitz, 1993, p. 19). Instability will often be the result of this as marginalised groups will resort to violence in an attempt to gain power, having lost faith in the democratic process. However inclusion alone is not sufficient, for inclusive governance 'can only run smoothly if there is a significant degree of moderation' from those involved so that political discourse can move away from the divisive issue of group identity (Wolff, 2005, p. 62).

This essay will argue that an appropriate electoral system is necessary for stability in a divided country. Since it determines the circumstances in which political power is achieved, an electoral system can facilitate inclusion of the divided groups in society and can 'reward certain kinds of policies and strategies and punish others' to promote moderation (Lal, 1997, p. 39). However, this is not sufficient. An electoral system's success is limited by the idiosyncrasies of each country, such as the number of divided groups, their geographical concentration and most significantly the level of the polarisation.

The Power of Electoral Systems

Electoral systems are the 'most powerful lever of political engineering for conflict resolution' (Horowitz, 1997, p. 22). This is because it determines how votes translate into seats in the legislature (Reilly, 2007, p. 60) and thereby determining many aspects of the functioning of democracy: what the parties look like, who is represented and by whom, and 'ultimately who governs' (Reynolds, 1999, p. 89). Therefore the electoral system is the gateway to power in a democracy. It can be manipulated to 'foster accommodative behaviour' by ensuring that groups are included in the political process by 'decreasing the incidence of zero-sum outcomes (Reilly, 1997a, p. 60). Furthermore by changing the incentives available to those seeking election, electoral rules 'can make some types of behaviour more politically rewarding than others, making it possible to incentivise inclusiveness and moderation (Reilly, 2002, p. 156). Thus, the electoral system is foundational to the political culture in a society; it determines from the beginning on which lines an election will be run. It is absolutely necessary for it to foster both inclusiveness and moderation so that stability can follow. While getting this right is only one part of the quest for stability, getting it wrong can make

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stability impossible.

First Past the Post

This point is illustrated by using first past the post (FPTP) as the electoral system in a divided society. Lewis argues that this is the 'surest way to kill the idea of democracy in a plural society', for it does not ensure the inclusion of all groups in the legislature and consequently does not create rational incentives for moderation from candidates (1965, p. 71). FPTP uses single member constituencies in which the candidate with the most votes wins. This is not appropriate in a divided society because it creates disproportionate results; since candidates only need more votes than any other single candidate, one could be elected with 26% of the vote if four candidates are standing, meaning that 74% of the constituency presumably do not want that candidate elected (ibid, p. 72). This then can mean that the party with a majority of seats may not have a nationwide majority of votes leading to a significant disproportion between seats and votes (Lal, 1997, p. 42). Consequently, there is no rational incentive to moderate: all candidates have to do is mobilise their geographical group support through 'communal appeals', which can lead to 'increasingly extreme rhetoric and demands' as candidates from all groups campaign based on group cleavages (Reilly, 2002, p. 156).

This disproportionate effect of FPTP is seen clearly with the results of the 1990 Zimbabwean general election, where opposition parties gained three seats out of 120 with 20% of the national vote, amidst a backdrop of inter-party violence (Reynolds, 1995a, p. 89). Similarly, its use in Northern Ireland allowed Protestants to 'convert their numerical majority into political dominance' (Bogaards, 2001, p. 2). FPTP has the potential to exacerbate division and conflict between groups, and create 'severe problems of governmental illegitimacy in divided societies' (Horowitz, 1997, p. 34); a minority group in a divided society will not have faith in a system which gives them 20% of the seats on 30% of the vote, or in which a rival group gains power with less than half the votes (Lewis, 1965, p. 72). Both these factors may foreseeably create instability, with an excluded or underrepresented group resorting to violent means to achieve power.

This clearly shows that the choice of an electoral system can exacerbate existing instability in a country and that a more appropriate system would avoid this immediate instability. However, the electoral system can achieve more than this negative role, it can positively improve stability by facilitating inclusion and moderation in a country.

Proportional Representation and Inclusivity

The orthodox view on how an electoral system could have a positive effect on stability was through party list proportional representation (PR), advocated by Lijphart and forming an integral part of his consociational approach to managing a divided society (1977, pp. 38-41; 1991a; 1991b). PR 'translates' votes into seats in the legislature 'as faithfully as possible', so a party with 30% of the vote either nationally or in a district should be awarded as close to 30% of the seats available as possible (Lijphart, 1977, p. 40). Thus Lijphart argues PR was 'designed to provide minority representation' (1991a, p. 75) and it mitigates the 'divisive, winner-take-all nature' of FPTP, which leads to disproportionate results, potentially disadvantaging minorities, and which is 'inherently unfair and undemocratic' (1991b, pp. 47-48). This is achieved through the inclusivity of PR, for it creates incentives for the divided groups to create their own political parties, and then to be represented fairly in the legislature in accordance to their size (Barkan, 1995, p. 106).

While PR's inclusivity is clear, it has severe drawbacks that limit its stabilising effect. Firstly PR does not foster strong links between the population and representatives, who are typically elected from large constituencies. This creates a lack of responsiveness to the needs of constituents and a lack of accountability; a candidate's chance of being elected under PR is dependent on their rank on the party list, and so favour with their party, not their reputation with constituents (Horowitz, 2003, p. 117). Barkan shows that this constituency link is crucial in agrarian societies, which brings into question PR's appropriateness for much of Africa and the developing world (1995, p. 107). In these societies political interests are localised, based on the provision of basic goods such as water and healthcare. Thus, candidates are evaluated on their 'potential for, or past record of, constituency service' (p. ibid). This is difficult under PR and could cause voters in these societies to become disillusioned with their new democracy if they do not have a

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local representative to champion their interests. This was one of the factors in the choice to use the alternative vote (AV) instead of PR in Fiji. The Constitutional Review Commission felt that voters wanted to have access to a dedicated representative or representatives because they shared 'common interests arising from their residence in a particular geographic area' (Reilly, 1997a, p. 91).

More significantly, PR merely recreates the cleavages of a divided country in the legislature (Quade, 1991, p. 37) making the election analogous to a 'census' (Horowitz, 1991, p. 98). Consequently, it does 'little to encourage cross-cutting cleavages and moderation' (Bogaards, 2003, p. 61) which can be dangerous for stability as it highlights the divisions between groups thereby serving to 'exacerbate the conflicts in a society' (Lardeyret, 1991, p. 32). Furthermore PR leads to instability when it comes to government formation. Either the group with a numerical majority can govern alone, seemingly perpetually as its votes depend on group membership only; or, when no group has a majority of seats, PR provides no encouragement to work together other than out of self-interest to create a parliamentary majority. Such arrangements have been labelled as 'coalitions of convenience', in contrast to the 'coalitions of conviction' based on 'inter-ethnic compromise' (Horowitz, 1991, p. 170). Horowitz shows from examining PR elections in Uganda in 1962 and Nigeria in 1959 that these coalitions quickly fail and leave the conflict worse off than it was before the election (Horowitz, 1991, p. 171).

Preferential Systems and Moderation

An electoral system can have a greater impact on creating an enduring stability than just facilitating inclusiveness. Horowitz argues that the test of an appropriate electoral system for a divided society is not just its ability to achieve proportionality, but its ability to 'encourage parties to seek intergroup compromise and accommodation' (1991, p. 165). This can be achieved through employing the alternative vote (AV) or the single transferable vote (STV) systems.

STV and AV operate by requiring voters to rank the candidates in order of preference, and the difference between the two is 'manifested in the way votes are translated to seats' (Reilly, 1997a, p. 75). AV requires a candidate to receive 50% plus one preference. If on the first count no candidate achieves this with first preferences, then the bottom candidate is eliminated and the preferences of whoever voted for the bottom candidate are redistributed. This is repeated until a candidate reaches the quota.

STV operates in multi member constituencies, and so requires a lower quota calculated by dividing the number votes by the number of seats to be filled plus 1. This could be as low as 25% of all votes in a four-member constituency (Reilly, 1997a, p. 75). As with AV, votes for eliminated candidates are redistributed according to preference; but, unlike, AV 'superfluous votes' for already elected candidates are redistributed too (Bogaards, 2001, p. 5).

Candidates for election are rational actors, who will 'do what needs to be done' to secure their election (Reilly, 1997a, p. 76). Under a preferential voting system, a candidate may be required to rely on preference votes from a group other than his own in order to reach the quota set, this is known as vote pooling (Horowitz, 1997, p. 25). In order to attract votes from other groups, candidates will have to 'moderate their appeals', moving away from appeals of group membership to more substantial policy issues (Mitchell, 2008, p. 11); a voter will not give a second or third preference vote to a candidate from another group unless sure that candidate treats all groups fairly.

This therefore creates a 'centripetal spin' which focuses 'competition at the moderate centre rather than the extreme' (Reilly, 2002, p. 159), having the effect of making the division between groups less pertinent, facilitating stability by moving political discourse away from a focus on group division as is the case with PR. This allows society to move on from conflict and discuss matters of policy, such as healthcare and education. Preferential voting also facilitates stable government by creating incentives for a 'coalition of conviction' as those elected will have to deliver on their 'ethnically and racially conciliatory intentions' to maintain inter-group support (Fraenkel & Grofman, 2006, p. 627). This is in contrast to the 'coalitions of convenience' which were prone to collapse and more instability.

Despite this, Arms (1997) argues against the use of preferential voting systems in divided societies. In his view they put the encouragement of 'multi-ethnic government first' by twisting 'the content of votes… toward a particular

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objective' instead of representing the will of the people as PR does (p. ibid 99). Thus, by setting the democratic system against group-based candidates, it deprives groups of their 'due representation', which may force such groups to 'seek redress outside the democratic system' through violent means thus creating instability (p. ibid 99). Arms concedes that multi-ethnic politics is desirable, but does not consider manipulating the electoral system to be the correct way to achieve this (1997, p. 99). However, as shown above, a simple PR electoral system can exacerbate divisions in a society, and while focusing on accurately representing the will of the people is a noble goal, there can be no democracy at all in an unstable society full of conflict. Efforts must be made to reduce the divide between groups, and the electoral system is the best placed to do it as it is the foundation of a democracy and can have a wider effect through society, as 'these mechanisms work at the voter level, not at the elite level', encouraging all politicians to moderate and look beyond their groups (Horowitz, 1991, p. 197).

Northern Ireland

The empirical record of AV and STV attests to this. STV has been a success in Northern Ireland in the post-1998 elections. Mitchell shows that there were modest, yet significant transfers between moderate unionist and nationalist parties: 'transfers from the moderate unionist UUP to the moderate nationalist SDLP averaged 32% (and 13% in the opposite direction)' (2008, p. 23). More significantly, both the DUP and Sinn Fein moderated their positions in order to attract moderate voters in their own groups who supported the other group parties. This is an example of intra-group voting, but still exerted a discernible influence on Sinn Fein to move 'away from violence and toward less extreme policy positions' (Reilly, 2002, p. 160).

Furthermore, given the centripetal forces at work here, moderate positions were rewarded and smaller neutral parities, like the Alliance and Women's coalition, benefitted (ibid). Thus, this shows the strong effect the electoral system can have on wider society. By incentivising moderation, it can help mitigate the divide between groups. While the divide still exists in Northern Ireland, the growth of the neutral Alliance party shows that, incrementally at least, the differences are becoming less pertinent politically.

Papua New Guinea

AV produced a similar result in Papua New Guinea, 'one of the world's most heterogeneous societies', divided into thousands of clans which are the 'primary, and often only, unit of political and social loyalty' (Reilly, 1997a, p. 79). Nevertheless, AV 'mitigated' the 'extreme fragmentation of clan alliances' by incentivising inter-clan vote pooling (Horowitz, 2006, p. 653). Candidates, understanding what needed to be done to get elected, reached out to voters of other clans, travelling widely to campaign to them and translating speeches and materials (Reilly, 1997a, p. 80).

Candidates who had more votes after the first count were often defeated by those who gained a wider spread of preferences after distribution (Reilly, 1997b, p. 3) by moderating their position by portraying themselves as 'someone who would look after all groups' (Reilly, 1997a, p. 80). This proves that AV can 'encourage cooperative and accommodative political strategies' successfully in a divided society (pp. ibid, 82). After 11 years of successful moderation and vote pooling, AV was replaced by FPTP (Reilly, 1997b, p. 5). This proved disastrous. The first FPTP elections in 1977 led to half the legislature being elected with less than 30% of the vote and elections were reduced to ugly divisive campaigns of mobilising one clan against others, leading to outbreaks of violence (p. ibid). This then is proof of how an appropriate electoral system is necessary to promote stability in a divided society. Picking an electoral system that does not accommodate inclusion and moderation will lead to instability and destroy the democratic process from the outset. Only by getting the type of electoral system right can democracy and stability have a chance.

Fiji

While the above shows how electoral systems are a necessary tool in securing stability, there is only so much they can do to achieve this for 'they operate within a larger political universe' (Stockwell, 2005, p. 391). The success of an electoral system is dependent firstly on 'political geography' and 'social composition' (Bogaards, 2001, p. 26). This was seen with AV's application in Fiji. Fijian society is divided between the majority indigenous Fijian population and

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the minority Indian community, and has experienced instability resulting from military coups and indigenous Fijian political dominance (Fraenkel & Grofman, 2006, p. 362). In an attempt to ameliorate the conflict between the two groups, AV was chosen to be the electoral system for the 1999 parliamentary elections with the specific aim to 'foster multi-ethnic cooperation' through vote pooling (Lal, 1997, p. 40).

Despite appearing promising at first, AV failed. The AV elections were 'the most disproportional in Fiji's… history' (Stockwell, 2005, p. 388). A 'coalition of convenience' was created to oust the incumbent government, and so, no moderation was necessary in order to attract preference votes (p. ibid). A year later, a coup which 'sharply polarized' society, leaving it more divided than before the elections, demonstrated by support for extremist ethnic parties in the 2001 election (Fraenkel & Grofman, 2006, p. 363). AV failed because Fiji is a bipolar society in which groups are geographically concentrated: of the 71 seats available in the legislature, only 23% had 'majorities of less than 70% for a single ethnic group' (Horowitz, 2006, p. 656). Thus, in many seats there were no incentives to attract cross-ethnic votes. One could reach the 50% plus 1 quota based on their own group's support alone. This is 'almost inevitable in a bi-polar society where settlement is not evenly dispersed' (Bogaards, 2001, p. 9).

Limitations of Electoral Systems

This is in distinction to Papua New Guinea, which is comprised of many clans which hold no geographic majority and therefore candidates had to attract votes from other clans (Reilly, 2004, p. 18). Fiji is more analogous to Northern Ireland and so STV would have been more appropriate. STV is more proportionate than AV, with its lower quotas, which would mitigate the problematic disproportion AV led to (p. ibid). Furthermore, with multiple parties per group in Fiji, as in Northern Ireland, the country could benefit from centripetal moderation fuelled by the need to attract preferential votes from the moderate parties in one's own group.

This then shows that there is only so much the electoral system can do, for it cannot modify or ignore limitations inherent to each country and still create stability. The electoral system 'must be tailored to the specific needs and desires of each society', not the other way around (Reynolds, 1995b, p. 123).

However, there will be societies in which the electoral system can exert no influence if the polarisation of society is too strong. This was the case of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, when its society was beset with the breakdown of civil order through inter-community violence (Mitchell, 2008, p. 17). Consequently it is not surprising that the 1973 STV elections failed to incentivise moderation and vote pooling. This was taken as evidence by opponents of STV of its ineffectiveness in divided societies (Horowitz, 1997, pp. 28-29; Bogaards, 2001, p. 5). Yet, no electoral system could have incentivised vote pooling and moderation in these circumstances; as Mitchell bluntly puts it, 'appropriate electoral systems can help but they cannot work miracles' (2008, p. 17).

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been shown that the choice of an appropriate electoral system is a necessary part of securing stability in a divided society. The wrong choice of electoral system can have a powerful negative effect, leaving the conflict worse off. As well as preventing further escalation of the divide, an appropriate electoral system can create powerful incentives to moderate methods as in Northern Ireland and Papua New Guinea. Since it is at the foundation of the democratic system, incentives to moderate can work at the voter level and throughout society, making the electoral system a key determinant of a country's political culture. However, the electoral system is not a panacea, it cannot change the composition of the society to which it is applied, and must work around these limitations.

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Written by: Jay Crush
Written at: University of Kent
Written for: Dr Ben Seyd
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