

**IEAT working paper # 2:
ELECTORAL SYSTEMS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

Is there a “best” electoral system?

No, but there are some systems that work better for a particular society, and each society has different priorities. Every electoral system should meet basic objectives to be accepted as a legitimate system, but these can be met in many ways.

What are the objectives of an electoral system?

There are three objectives which should be achieved by any electoral system. It is not possible to achieve all of these objectives perfectly. But if the system fails to meet these objectives to a significant extent, it is likely that the results of the election will not be accepted by the voters.

1. Transparency:

The process should be understandable to everyone. All electoral activities should be open. Understanding the electoral process and being able to see it work builds trust among parties and voters in the process and in the result.

2. Inclusiveness:

All major interests of a society should be included in the electoral process and should feel included. Those who are excluded or feel excluded can become alienated from government, lose confidence in the electoral process, and may resort to violence.

There are other practical exclusions that need to be considered. For example, an illiterate or disabled person may not understand a ballot or be able to mark it. They must be given assistance, or the election is not fully inclusive.

3. Fairness:

People must feel that their vote and their opinion have just as much value as those of other voters.

How should an electoral system represent people?

An electoral result must express the wishes of the people in forming their parliament or council. Different election systems can produce different results.

Some societies believe that regional representation is the most important. However, strong regional representation can reduce ethnic representation. In other societies, independent candidates are very important. Ensuring representation for them can reduce the representation of political parties.

There are a huge variety of ways to represent people. Each way has its costs and benefits, and some are more common than others. Representation may be by region; gender; ethnicity; education; profession; religion; age; institutional membership; etc.

What is the current electoral system in Iraq?

The Council of Representatives election of 2005 used what is called a List Proportional Representation (List PR) system. People voted for parties. Then parties were allocated the same percentage of seats in the assembly as the percentage of votes that the parties received in the election. The seats were then awarded to each party's candidates from the list presented to the Election Commission before the election, in the order on the list. If a party won five seats, the first five candidates on the party's list took the seats. This version of List PR is known as a "closed list" because voters cannot change the order of candidates that has been decided by each party.

The January 2005 governorate elections used the same system.

What is a variation on the current system?

A different version of List PR uses what is called an "open list." In this system, voters are able to vote for individual candidates on the lists of the parties that they prefer.

On election day, instead of voting for parties, voters may be allowed to vote for one individual candidate, or for several candidates up to the number of seats to be filled. All the votes for individual candidates within the same party are added up to create a party total. Based upon this party total, seats are allocated to the parties, so that the percentage of seats allocated to a party is very close to the percentage of the votes the party's candidates received in total.

The main difference between the closed list and open list comes when the seats are awarded to candidates. In a closed list, seats are awarded in the order of the names on the list the party submitted to the Election Commission before the election. In an open list, seats are awarded in the order of votes received by individual candidates. This may be very different from the order the party proposed before the election.

In summary, a closed list is a fixed list that voters cannot change. An open list is a list that voters can change with their votes.

What are the benefits of the different types of List PR?

About half of all democracies use List PR. The reason is because it meets many of the goals of an electoral system very well. The simplicity of the system means the system is very easy to understand and this helps it to be transparent. Further, it is very inclusive because minority groups are normally represented in proportion to their percentage of the population. Finally, it is generally viewed as fair as seats are allocated in proportion to the votes. However, List PR does not result in a strong local connection between voters in a district and the elected

representatives. Systems such as First Past the Post (FPTP) work better in making this connection.

Both closed List PR and open List PR systems meet the main objectives of an electoral system well, but there are differences between the two.

Closed list PR strengthens party structures. The ballots are simpler and easier for voters to use and easier to count. Because of this simplicity, closed list PR is less expensive than open list PR. However open list PR does give voters control over which candidates on a party's list win seats. But open List PR is more difficult for voters to use, especially if the rules allow a vote for more than one candidate. It is more difficult to count, and more expensive to administer than closed List PR.

What are the alternatives to List PR?

First Past the Post

The most common alternative to List PR is First Past the Post (FPTP). This system uses single member districts. The winning candidate is the one who wins more votes than anyone else, even if he or she does not win a majority of the votes.

FPTP is a very simple system for voters and creates a very close local connection between individual representatives and their districts. But, introducing the FPTP system in Iraq would require agreeing on boundaries for hundreds of single member districts throughout the country. This is not possible at this time. Even in the most established democracies, drawing district lines is one of the most controversial, difficult and time consuming of all democratic processes and requires accurate geographic and population information.

Block Vote

Another alternative, but rarely used system, is the Block Vote (BV) system. The BV system has multi-member districts and voters have as many votes as there are seats. The seats are awarded to the candidates who win the most votes. This system gives voters the opportunity to vote directly for candidates, but does not weaken parties as much as other systems that are based on candidates. However, countries that have used BV rarely use it for long because of the significant disadvantages. For example, BV can allow parties to win almost all the seats in an assembly with a relatively small majority in actual votes. Also BV can weaken political parties and increase conflict and corruption within parties.

Other systems

Other systems exist, such as Single Transferable Vote (STV) and Alternative Vote (AV), but they are rarely used because of their relative complexity. Some countries have electoral systems that mix different elements of different systems. However the vast majority of legislatures use either the FPTP system or the List PR system.