Principles of Electoral System Choice

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Principles of Electoral System Choice

1. THE CHOICE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT institutional decisions for any democracy. In almost all cases the choice of a particular electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of the country concerned, and electoral systems, once chosen, often remain fairly constant as political interests solidify around and respond to the incentives presented by them. The choices that are made may have consequences that were unforeseen as well as predicted effects.

2. Electoral system choice is a fundamentally political process, rather than a question to which independent technical experts can produce a single 'correct answer'. The consideration of political advantage is almost always a factor in the choice of electoral systems. Calculations of short-term political interest can often obscure the longer-term consequences of a particular electoral system.

3. The choice of electoral system can have a significant impact on the wider political and institutional framework: it is important not to see electoral systems in isolation. Their design and effects are heavily contingent upon other structures within and outside the constitution. Successful electoral system design comes from looking at the framework of political institutions as a whole: changing one part of this framework is likely to cause adjustments in the way other institutions within it work.

4. For example, how does the chosen electoral system facilitate or encourage conflict resolution between party leaders and activists on the ground? How much control do party leaders have over the party's elected representatives? Are there constitutional provisions for referendums, citizens' initiatives or 'direct democracy' which may complement the institutions of representative democracy? And are the details of the electoral system specified in the constitution, as an attached schedule to the constitution or in regular legislation? This will determine how entrenched the system is, or how open it may be to change by elected majorities.

5. Two particularly important structural issues are the degree of centralization, and the choice between parliamentarism and presidentialism. Will the country be federal or unitary, and, if federal, are the units symmetrical in their power or asymmetrical? The relationship between legislative and executive institutions has important implications for electoral system design for both. A directly elected president without a substantial block of support in the legislature will find successful government difficult.

6. In presidential and semi-presidential democracies, the electoral systems for the presidency and the legislature therefore need to be considered together, although the different roles of the president and the legislature bring different factors into play in making the two choices of system. The synchronization or otherwise of the elections and the provisions which may encourage or discourage fragmentation of parties and the relationship between parties and elected members should be considered at the same time.

7. Electoral systems are today viewed as one of the most influential of all political institutions, and of crucial importance to broader issues of governance. For example, it is increasingly being recognized that an electoral system can be designed both to provide local geographic representation and to promote proportionality; can promote the development of strong and viable national political parties, and ensure the representation of women and regional minorities; and can help to 'engineer' cooperation and accommodation in a divided society by the creative use of particular incentives and constraints.

What Electoral Systems Are

8. At the most basic level, electoral systems translate the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates. The three key variables are the electoral formula used (whether a plurality/ majority, proportional, mixed or other system is used, and what mathematical formula is used to calculate the seat allocation), the ballot structure (whether the voter votes for a candidate or a party and whether the voter makes a single choice or expresses a series of preferences) and the district magnitude (not how many voters live in a district, but how many representatives to the legislature that district elects). Although this paper does not focus on the administrative aspects of elections (such as the distribution of polling places, the nomination of candidates, the registration of voters, who runs the elections and so on), these issues are also of critical importance, and the possible advantages of any given electoral system choice may be undermined unless due attention is paid to them. Electoral system design affects other areas of electoral laws: the choice of electoral system has an influence on the way in which district boundaries are drawn, how voters are registered, the design of ballot papers, how votes are counted, and numerous other aspects of the electoral process.

9. Even with each voter casting exactly the same vote and with exactly the same number of votes for each party, the results of elections may be very different depending on the system chosen: one system may lead to a coalition government or a minority government while another may allow a single party to assume majority control.

Electoral Systems and Party Systems

10. Some systems encourage, or even enforce, the formation of political parties; others recognize only individual candidates. The type of party system which develops, in particular the number and the relative sizes of political parties in the legislature, is heavily influenced by the electoral system. So is the internal cohesion and discipline of parties: some systems may encourage factionalism, where different wings of one party are constantly at odds with each other, while another system might encourage parties to speak with one voice and suppress dissent. Electoral systems can also influence the way parties campaign and the way political elites behave, thus helping to determine the broader political climate; they may encourage, or retard, the forging of alliances between parties; and they can provide incentives for parties and groups to be broadly-based and accommodating, or to base themselves on narrow appeals to ethnicity or kinship ties.

11. Those negotiating a new institutional framework or electoral law may wish to be as inclusive as possible and therefore to make entry to elections easy. Conversely, there are often concerns about the fragmentation of the party

system driven by the politics of personality and ethnicity, and the negotiators and designers may thus want to set the bar for representation higher. The flowering of a multiplicity of parties is, however, a feature of elections in countries emerging from authoritarianism, and unsuccessful parties usually disappear of their own accord.

Electoral Systems and Conflict Management

12. Different electoral systems can aggravate or moderate tension and conflict in a society. At one level, a tension exists between systems which put a premium on representation of minority groups and those which encourage strong single-party government. At another level, if an electoral system is not considered fair and the political framework does not allow the opposition to feel that they have the chance to win next time around, losers may feel compelled to work outside the system, using non-democratic, confrontationalist and even violent tactics. And finally, because the choice of electoral system will determine the ease or complexity of the act of voting, it inevitably impacts on minorities and underprivileged groups.

Criteria for Electoral System Design

13. When designing an electoral system, it is best to start with a list of criteria which sum up what you want to achieve, what you want to avoid and, in a broad sense, what you want your legislature and executive government to look like. Some of the desirable criteria may overlap or be contradictory: it is the nature of institutional design that trade-offs have to be made between a number of competing desires and objectives.

14. For example, one may want to provide the opportunity for independent candidates to be elected, and at the same time to encourage the growth of strong political parties. A system which gives voters a wide degree of choice between candidates and parties may make for a complicated ballot paper which causes difficulties for less-educated voters. The task in choosing (or reforming) an electoral system is to prioritize the criteria that are most important and then assess which electoral system, or combination of systems, best maximizes the attainment of these objectives.

15. The ten criteria which follow are at times in conflict with each other or even mutually exclusive. Establishing the priorities among such competing criteria is the most challenging task for the actors involved in the institutional design process.

Providing Representation

16. Representation may take at least four forms. First, *geographical* representation implies that each region, be it a town or a city, a province or an electoral district, has members of the legislature whom it chooses and who are ultimately accountable to their area. Second, the *ideological* divisions within society may be represented in the legislature, whether through representatives from political parties or independent representatives or a combination of both. Third, a legislature may be representative of the *party-political* situation that exists within the country even if political parties do not have an ideological base. If half the voters vote for one political party but that

party wins no, or hardly any, seats in the legislature, then that system cannot be said to adequately represent the will of the people. Fourth, the concept of *descriptive* representation considers that the legislature should be to some degree a 'mirror of the nation' which should look, feel, think and act in a way which reflects the people as a whole. An adequately descriptive legislature would include both men and women, the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, and reflect the different religious affiliations, linguistic communities and ethnic groups within a society.

Making Elections Accessible and Meaningful

17. Elections are all well and good, but they may mean little to people if it is difficult to vote or if at the end of the day their vote makes no difference to the way the country is governed. The 'ease of voting' is determined by factors such as how complex the ballot paper is, how easy it is for the voter to get to a polling place, how up-to-date the electoral register is, and how confident the voter will be that his or her ballot is secret.

18. Electoral participation is thought to increase when the outcome of elections, either at a national level or in the voter's particular district, is likely to make a significant difference to the future direction of government. If you know that your preferred candidate has no chance of winning a seat in your particular district, what is the incentive to vote? In some electoral systems the 'wasted votes' (i.e. valid votes which do not go towards the election of any candidate) can amount to a substantial proportion of the total national vote.

Providing Incentives for Conciliation

19. Electoral systems can be seen not only as ways to constitute governing bodies but also as a tool of conflict management within a society. Some systems, in some circumstances, will encourage parties to make inclusive appeals for electoral support outside their own core vote base; for instance, even if a party draws its support primarily from black voters, a particular electoral system may give it the incentive to appeal also to white, or other, voters. Thus, the party's policy platform would become less divisive and exclusionary, and more unifying and inclusive. Similar electoral system incentives might make parties less ethnically, regionally, linguistically or ideologically exclusive.

20. On the other side of the coin, electoral systems can encourage voters to look outside their own group and think of voting for parties which traditionally have represented a different group. Such voting behaviour breeds accommodation and community building. Systems which give the voter more than one vote or allow the voter to order candidates preferentially have the potential to enable voters to cut across preconceived social boundaries.

Facilitating Stable and Efficient Government

21. The prospects for a stable and efficient government are not determined by the electoral system alone, but the results a system produces can contribute to stability in a number of important respects. The key questions are whether voters perceive the system to be fair, whether government can efficiently enact legislation and govern, and whether the system avoids discriminating against particular parties or interest groups.

22. The question whether the government of the day can enact legislation efficiently is partly linked to whether it can assemble a working majority in the legislature, and this in turn is linked to the electoral system. As a general – but not universal - rule of thumb, plurality/majority electoral systems are more likely to produce legislatures where one party can outvote the combined opposition, while PR systems are more likely to give rise to coalition governments.

23. The system should, as far as possible, act in an electorally neutral manner towards all parties and candidates; it should not openly discriminate against any political grouping. The perception that electoral politics in a democracy is an uneven playing field is a sign that the political order is weak and that instability may not be far around the corner.

Holding the Government Accountable

24. Accountability is one of the bedrocks of representative government, whose absence may lead to long-term instability. Voters should be able to influence the shape of the government, either by altering the coalition of parties in power or by throwing out of office a single party which has failed to deliver. Suitably designed electoral systems facilitate this objective.

Holding Individual Representatives Accountable

25. Accountability at the individual level is the ability of the electorate to effectively check on those who, once elected, betray the promises they made during the campaign or demonstrate incompetence or idleness in office and 'throw the rascals out'. Some systems emphasize the role of locally popular candidates, rather than on candidates nominated by a strong central party. While plurality/majority systems have traditionally been seen as maximizing the ability of voters to throw out unsatisfactory individual representatives, this connection becomes tenuous where voters identify primarily with parties rather than candidates. At the same time, open list systems are designed to allow voters to exercise candidate choice in the context of a proportional system.

Encouraging Political Parties

26. The weight of evidence from both established and new democracies suggests that longer-term democratic consolidation—that is, the extent to which a democratic regime is insulated from domestic challenges to the stability of the political order—requires the growth and maintenance of strong and effective political parties, and thus the electoral system should encourage this rather than entrench or promote party fragmentation. Electoral systems can be framed specifically to exclude parties with a small or minimal level of support. The development of the role of parties as a vehicle for individual political leaders is another trend which can be facilitated or retarded by electoral system design decisions.

Promoting Legislative Opposition and Oversight

27. Effective governance relies not only on those in power but, almost as much, on those who oppose and oversee them. The electoral system should help

ensure the presence of a viable opposition grouping which can critically assess legislation, question the performance of the executive, safeguard minority rights, and represent its constituents effectively. Opposition groupings should have enough representatives to be effective (assuming that their performance at the ballot box warrants it) and in a parliamentary system should be able to present a realistic alternative to the current government. While the strength of the opposition depends on many other factors besides the choice of electoral system, if the system itself makes the opposition impotent, democratic governance is inherently weakened. The electoral system should hinder the development of a 'winner takes all' attitude which leaves rulers blind to other views and the needs and desires of opposition voters, and sees both elections and government itself as zero-sum contests.

28. In a presidential system, the president needs the reliable support of a substantial group of legislators: however, the role of others in opposing and scrutinizing government legislative proposals is equally important. The separation of powers between legislature and executive effectively gives the task of executive oversight to all legislators, not only the opposition members. This makes it important to give particular thought to the elements of the electoral system which concern the relative importance of political parties and candidates, alongside the relationship between parties and their elected members.

Making the Election Process Sustainable

29. The choice of any electoral system is, to some degree, dependent on cost and administrative capacities. A sustainable political framework takes into account the resources of a country both in terms of the availability of people with the skills to be election administrators and in terms of the financial demands on the national budget. However, simplicity in the short term may not always make for cost-effectiveness in the longer run. A system which appears at the outset to be a little more expensive to administer and more complex to understand may in the long run help to ensure the stability of the country and the positive direction of democratic consolidation.

Taking into Account 'International Standards'

30. Finally, the design of electoral systems today takes place in the context of a number of international covenants, treaties and other kinds of legal instruments affecting political issues. While there is no single complete set of universally agreed international standards for elections, there is consensus that such standards include the principles of free, fair and periodic elections that guarantee universal adult suffrage, the secrecy of the ballot and freedom from coercion, and a commitment to the principle of one person, one vote. There is also an increasing recognition of the importance of issues that are affected by electoral systems, such as the fair representation of all citizens, the equality of women and men, the rights of minorities, special considerations for the disabled, and so on. These are formalized in international legal instruments such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The Process of Debate and Future Change

31. The process through which an electoral system is designed has a great effect on the type of the system which results, its appropriateness for the political situation, and the degree of legitimacy and popular support it will ultimately enjoy. Some key questions of electoral system design are: What are the mechanisms built into the political and legal framework for reform and amendment? What process of discussion and dialogue is necessary to ensure that a proposed new or amended system is accepted as legitimate? Once change has been decided upon, how is it implemented?

What are the Mechanisms for Future Reform and Amendment?

32. While electoral systems are an extremely important institution affecting the way in which a country's system of government works, traditionally they have not been formally specified in constitutions, the highest source of law. In recent years, however, this has started to change. Constitutional provisions are usually much harder to change than ordinary laws, usually requiring a special majority in the legislature, a national referendum or some other confirmatory mechanism, which shields such systems from easy alteration.

33. However, the details of the electoral system are still more often to be found in regular law and thus can be changed by a simple majority in the legislature. This may have the advantage of making the system more responsive to changes in public opinion and political needs, but it also contains the danger of majorities in a legislature unilaterally altering systems to give them political advantage.

34. Electoral systems will inevitably need to adapt over time if they are to respond adequately to new political, demographic and legislative trends and needs. However, once a system is in place, those who benefit from it are likely to resist change. Without a major political crisis as catalyst, change at the margins may well be more likely in the future than fundamental reform. It is therefore worth getting the system as near as possible right first time.

35. The number of people, both in elite circles and in society generally, who understand the likely impact of a particular electoral system may be very limited. This is further complicated by the fact that the operation of electoral systems in practice may be heavily dependent on apparently minor points of detail. It is helpful to fully work through and explain the legal detail, and to make technical projections and simulations to show, for example, the shape and implications of proposals on electoral districts or the potential impact on the representation of political parties. Technical simulations can also be used to ensure that all contingencies are covered and to evaluate apparently unlikely outcomes: it is better to answer questions while change is being promoted than in the middle of a crisis later!

36. Voter involvement programmes, for example, inviting members of the public to participate in mock elections under a potential new system, may attract media attention and increase familiarity with new proposals. They may also help to identify the problems—for example, voter difficulty with ballot papers—which a new system may generate.

37. A process of change is complete only with intensive voter education programmes to explain to all participants how the new system works and with

the design and agreement of user-friendly implementing regulations. The most effective voter education—and election administrator education—takes time. However, time is often in short supply to an electoral commission organizing an election under a new system. All good negotiators use time pressure before a final agreement is reached, and this can be particularly true when a new electoral system is the product of hard negotiation between political actors. A wise Election Commission nonetheless needs to prepare as much as possible as early as possible.

Electoral System Choices

38. Once a decision has been made about the important goals to be achieved—and the important pitfalls to be avoided—in a new electoral system, there are a group of electoral system design tools which can be used to help achieve these goals. They include, among others, electoral system family and type, district magnitude, the relative role of political parties and candidates, the form of the ballot paper, the procedures for drawing electoral boundaries, the electoral registration mechanisms, the timing and synchronization of elections, and quotas and other special provisions. These tools will work differently in different combinations. It is worth emphasizing again that there is never a single 'correct solution' that can be imposed in a vacuum.

39. There are a multitude of detailed variations in electoral systems, but they can be divided into twelve main systems. Most of these systems fall into three broad families – plurality/majority systems, proportional systems, and mixed systems. All of these systems are discussed in depth in *Electoral System Design – The New International IDEA Handbook,* to be published in May 2005.

40. Five systems are in much more commonly used than the others. These are First Past the Post (FPTP) and the Two Round System (TRS), which fall within the plurality/majority system family; List Proportional Representation (PR), which falls within the proportional system family; and Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and Parallel, which fall within the mixed system family.

Plurality/Majority Systems

41. The principle of plurality/majority systems is simple. After votes have been cast and totalled, those candidates or parties with the most votes are declared the winners (there may also be additional conditions). However, the way this is achieved in practice varies widely.

42. First Past The Post (FPTP) is the simplest form of plurality/majority electoral system. The winning candidate is the one who gains more votes than any other candidate, even if this is not an absolute majority of valid votes. The system uses single-member districts and the voters vote for candidates rather than political parties.

43. The Two-Round System (TRS) is a plurality/majority system in which a second election is held if no candidate achieves a given level of votes, most commonly an absolute majority (50 per cent plus one), in the first election round. A Two-Round System may take a majority-plurality form, in which more than two candidates contest the second round and the one wins the highest number of votes in the second round is elected, regardless of whether they have won

an absolute majority; or a majority run-off form, in which only the top two candidates in the first round contest the second round.

Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

44. PR systems are consciously designed to translate a party's share of the votes into a corresponding proportion of seats in the legislature. PR requires the use of electoral districts with more than one member: it is not possible to divide a single seat elected on a single occasion proportionally. In some countries, the entire country forms one multi-member district. In other countries, electoral districts are based on provinces, or a range of permissible sizes for electoral districts is laid down and the election commission is given the task of defining them.

43. The greater the number of representatives to be elected from a district and the lower the required threshold for representation in the legislature, the more proportional the electoral system will be and the greater the chance small minority parties will have of gaining representation.

45. Under a List Proportional Representation (List PR) system, each party or grouping presents a list of candidates for a multi-member electoral district, the voters vote for a party, and parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the vote. In 'closed list' systems, the winning candidates are taken from the lists in order of their position on the lists. In 'open list' systems, the voters can influence the order of the candidates by marking individual preferences.

46. While open list PR gives voters much greater freedom over their choice of candidate, it can also have less desirable side effects. Because candidates from within the same party are effectively competing with each other for votes, open list PR can lead to internal party conflict and fragmentation. It may also mean that the potential benefits to a party of having lists which feature a diverse slate of candidates can be overturned.

47. District magnitude is in many ways the key factor in determining how a PR system will operate in practice, especially in the strength of the link between voters and elected members, and the overall proportionality of election results.

48. In many countries, the electoral districts follow pre-existing administrative divisions, perhaps state or provincial boundaries, which means that there may be wide variations in their size. However, this approach both eliminates the need to draw additional boundaries for elections and may make it possible to relate electoral districts to existing identified and accepted communities.

49. If only one candidate from a party is elected in a district, that candidate may well be male and a member of the majority ethnic or social groups in the district. If two or more are elected, balanced tickets put forward by political parties may have more effect, making it likely that more women and more candidates from minorities will be successful. Larger districts (seven or more seats in size) and a relatively small number of parties will assist this process.

50. All electoral systems have *thresholds* of representation: that is, the minimum level of support which a party needs to gain representation. Thresholds can be legally imposed (*formal thresholds*) or exist as a mathematical property of the electoral system (*effective* or *natural thresholds*). A formal threshold is written into the constitutional or legal provisions which define the PR system. An effective or natural threshold is created as a mathematical by-product of features of the system, of which district magnitude is the most important. For example, in a district with four seats using a PR system, any candidate with more than over 20 per cent of the vote will be elected, and any candidate with less than about 10 per cent (the exact figure will vary depending on the configuration of parties, candidates and votes) is unlikely to be elected.

Mixed Systems

51. Mixed electoral systems attempt to combine the positive attributes of both plurality/majority and PR electoral systems. In a mixed system, there are two electoral systems using different formulae running alongside each other. The votes are cast by the same voters and contribute to the election of representatives under both systems. One of those systems is a plurality/majority system, usually FPTP, and the other a List PR system. There are two forms of mixed system.

52. Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) is a mixed system in which the choices expressed by the voters are used to elect representatives through two different systems—one List PR system and (usually) one plurality/majority system—where the List PR system compensates for the disproportionality in the results from the plurality/majority system.

53. A Parallel System is a mixed system in which the choices expressed by the voters are used to elect representatives through two different systems—one List PR system and (usually) one plurality/majority system—but where no account is taken of the seats allocated under the first system in calculating the results in the second system.

54. While an MMP system generally results in proportional outcomes, a Parallel system is likely to give results whose proportionality falls somewhere between that of a plurality/majority and that of a PR system.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Electoral Systems

55. The table below summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of the principal electoral systems. It is important to keep in mind that these can vary from case to case and depend on a large number of factors. For example, turnout can in fact be high under an FPTP system, and a List PR system can produce strong legislative support for a president. Also, what is seen as an advantage in one context or by one party can be viewed as something negative in another context or by another party. However, the table does give an overview of the likely implications of the choice of electoral system. It can also give an indication of the relationship between electoral system choice and political/ institutional outcome, even allowing for the effects of differences of detail within each type of electoral system.

List Proportional Representation (List PR)	• Proportionality • Inclusiveness • Minority representation • Few wasted votes • Easier for women representatives to be elected • No (or less) need to draw boundaries • No need to hold by-elections • Facilitates absentee voting • Restricts growth of single party regions • Higher voter turnout likely	• Weak geographic representation • Accountability issues • Weaker legislative support for president more likely in presidential systems • Coalition or minority governments more likely in parliamentary systems • Much power given to political parties • Can lead to inclusion of extremist parties in legislature • Inability to throw a party out of power
First Past The Post (FPTP)	• Strong geographic representation • Makes accountability easier to enforce • Is simple to understand • Offers voters a clear choice • Encourages a coherent opposition • Excludes extremist parties • Allows voters to choose between candidates • Strong legislative support for president more likely in presidential systems • Majority governments more likely in parliamentary systems	• Excludes minority parties • Excludes minorities • Excludes women • Many wasted votes • Often need for by-elections • Requires boundary delimitation • May lead to gerrymandering • Difficult to arrange absentee voting
Two-Round System (TRS)	• Gives voters a second chance to make a choice • Less vote-splitting than many other plurality/majority systems • Simple to understand	• Requires boundary delimitation • Requires a costly and often administratively challenging second round • Often need for by-elections • Long time-period between election and declaration of results • Disproportionality • May fragment party systems • May be destabilizing for deeply divided societies
Parallel System	• Inclusiveness • Representation of minorities • Less party fragmentation than pure List PR • Can be easier to agree on than other alternatives	• Complicated system • Requires boundary delimitation • Often need for by-elections • Can create two classes of representatives • Strategic voting • More difficult to arrange absentee voting than with List PR • Does not guarantee overall proportionality
Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)	• Proportionality • Inclusiveness • Geographic representation	• Complicated system • Requires boundary delimitation

Considerations on Representation

Representation of Women

56. There are many ways to enhance the representation of women. Proportional systems tend to result in the election of more women. Electoral systems which use reasonably large district magnitudes encourage parties to nominate women on the basis that balanced tickets will increase their electoral chances. Some List PR systems require that women make up a certain proportion of the candidates nominated by each party. In plurality/majority systems, seats can be set aside in the legislature for women.

57. In addition to the choice of electoral system, there are also a number of other strategies that can be used to increase the number of women representatives. A certain number of seats can be reserved for women in the legislature. Also, the electoral law can require political parties to field a quota of women candidates. However, quota laws do not always guarantee that the target will be met unless there are mechanisms guaranteeing that women are placed in electable positions on party lists. Political parties may also adopt their own internal quotas for women as legislative candidates. Further details and data about quotas may be found on the IDEA/Stockholm University Global Database of Electoral Quotas for Women at www.quotaproject.org.

Representation of Minorities

58. There are also many ways to enhance the representation of minorities and communal groups. Electoral systems which use reasonably large district magnitudes may encourage parties to nominate candidates from minorities on the basis that balanced tickets will increase their electoral chances. A very low threshold, or the complete elimination of a formal threshold, in PR systems can also promote the representation of underrepresented or unrepresented groups. In plurality/majority systems, seats can be set aside in the legislature for minorities and communal groups.

By-elections

59. If a seat becomes vacant between elections, List PR systems often simply fill it with the next candidate on the list of the party of the former representative, thus eliminating the need to hold another election. However, plurality/majority systems often have provisions for filling vacant seats through a by-election. It is also possible to avoid by-elections by electing substitutes at the same time as the ordinary representatives.

60. In some circumstances, by-elections can have a wider political impact than merely replacing individual members, and are seen to act as a mid-term test of the performance of the government. In addition, if the number of vacancies to be filled during a parliamentary term is large, this can lead to a change in the composition of the legislature and an altered power base for the government.

External Voting

61. External voting may take place in person somewhere other than an allotted polling station or at another time, or votes may be sent by post or cast by an appointed proxy. It is easiest to administer under a nationwide List PR system with only one list per party, and most complicated under a system using single-member districts. Once cast, out-of-country votes can be included in the absentee voter's home district; counted within single (or multiple) out-of-country districts; attached to one or more particular districts; or merely added to the national vote totals when seats are allocated under a nationally-based List PR system.

Electoral Systems and Turnout

62. There is an established relationship between the level of turnout in elections and the electoral system chosen: PR systems are in general linked with higher turnout. In plurality/majority systems, turnout tends to be higher when national election results are expected to be close than when one party looks certain to win, and also higher in individual districts where results are expected to be closer.

Time to Prepare and Train

63. The time needed to set up the infrastructure for different electoral systems varies. For example, electoral registration and boundary delimitation are both time-consuming exercises which can lead to legitimacy problems. At one extreme, if all voters vote in person and voters are marked at the polling station, List PR with one national district may be feasible without either. At the other extreme, a plurality/majority system with single-member districts may require both if no acceptable framework is in place. And time is always required for training of election personnel, especially when new systems are introduced.

Electoral Systems and Political Parties

64. Highly centralized political systems using closed list PR are the most likely to encourage strong party organizations. Decentralized, district-based systems may have the opposite effect. Many other electoral variables can also be used to influence the development of party systems. Access to public and/or private funding is a key issue that cuts across electoral system design, and is often the single biggest constraint on the emergence of viable new parties.

65. Just as electoral system choice will affect the way in which the political party system develops, the political party system in place affects electoral system choice. Existing parties are unlikely to support changes that are likely to seriously disadvantage them, or changes that open the possibility of new, rival parties gaining entry to the political party system, unless there is a strong political imperative. The range of options for electoral system change may thus be constrained in practice.

66. Different kinds of electoral system also result in different relationships between individual candidates and their supporters. In general, systems which make use of single-member electoral districts, such as most plurality/majority systems, are seen as encouraging individual candidates to

see themselves as the delegates of particular geographical areas and beholden to the interests of their local electorate. By contrast, systems which use large multi-member districts, such as most PR systems, are more likely to deliver representatives whose primary loyalty lies with their party on national issues. Both approaches have their merits, which is one of the reasons for the rise in popularity of mixed systems that combine both local and national-level representatives.

67. The question of accountability is often raised in discussions of political parties and electoral systems, especially in relation to individual elected members. The relationships between electors, elected members and political parties are affected not only by the electoral system but also by other provisions of the political legislative framework such as term limits, provisions regulating the relationship between parties and their members who are also elected representatives, or provisions barring elected members from changing parties without resigning from the legislature.

68. The freedom for voters to choose between candidates as opposed to parties is another aspect of accountability. Many countries in recent years have therefore introduced a greater element of candidate-centred voting into their electoral systems, for example, by introducing open lists in PR elections.

Conclusion: Many Options, Key Principles

69. One of the clearest conclusions drawn from the study of electoral systems is simply the range and utility of the options available. There is a huge range of worldwide comparative experience. Often, designers and drafters of constitutional, political and electoral frameworks have chosen the electoral system they know best - often, in new democracies, the system of the former colonial power if there was one, or the system of the donor country whose technical adviser is most persuasive - rather than fully investigating the alternatives. Here is a summary of key principles.

Remember It's Part of an Overall Institutional Framework

70. It cannot be said too often that the electoral system is linked to the constitutional and political framework, and will work in different ways in different institutional settings. It is wise to make the choice of a pattern of institutions, and not choose an electoral system in a vacuum.

Keep It Simple and Clear

71. Effective and sustainable electoral system designs are more likely to be easily understood by the voter and the politician. Too much complexity can lead to misunderstandings, unintended consequences, and voter mistrust of the results. But it is equally dangerous to underestimate the voters' ability to comprehend and successfully use a wide variety of different electoral systems. Voters often have, and wish to express, relatively sophisticated orderings of political preferences and choices.

Don't be Afraid to Innovate

72. Many of the successful electoral systems used in the world today themselves represent innovative approaches to specific problems, and have been proved to work well. There is much to learn from the experience of others—both neighbouring countries and seemingly quite different cases.

Err on the Side of Inclusion

73. Wherever possible, whether in divided or relatively homogeneous societies, the electoral system should err on the side of including all significant interests in the legislature. Regardless of whether minorities are based on ideological, ethnic, racial, linguistic, regional or religious identities, the exclusion of significant shades of opinion from legislatures, particularly in the developing world, has often been catastrophically counterproductive.

Process is a Key Factor in Choice

74. The way in which a particular electoral system is chosen is also extremely important in ensuring its overall legitimacy. A process in which most or all groups are included, including the electorate at large, is likely to result in significantly broader acceptance of the end result than a decision perceived as being motivated by partisan self-interest alone. Although partisan considerations are unavoidable when discussing the choice of electoral systems, broad cross-party and public support for any institution is crucial to its being accepted and respected.

Build Legitimacy and Acceptance Among All Key Actors

75. All groupings which wish to play a part in the democratic process should feel that the electoral system to be used is fair and gives them the same chance of electoral success as anyone else. Those who 'lose' the election should not feel a need to translate their disappointment into a rejection of the system itself or use the electoral system as an excuse to destabilize the path of democratic consolidation.

Try to Maximize Voter Influence…

76. Voters should feel that elections provide them with a measure of influence over governments and government policy. Choice can be maximized in a number of different ways. Voters may be able to choose between parties, between candidates of different parties, and between candidates of the same party. They may also be able to vote under different systems when it comes to presidential, upper house, lower house, regional and local government elections. They should also feel confident that their vote has a genuine impact on the formation of the government, not just on the composition of the legislature.

Balance That Against Encouraging Coherent Political Parties

77. The desire to maximize voter influence should be balanced against the need to encourage coherent and viable political parties. Maximum voter choice on the ballot paper may produce such a fragmented legislature that no one ends up with the result they were hoping for. Broadly-based, coherent political parties

are among the most important factors in promoting effective and sustainable democracy.

Long-Term Stability and Short-Term Advantage Are Not Always Compatible

78. When political actors negotiate over a new electoral system they often push proposals which they believe will advantage their party in the coming elections. However, this can often be an unwise strategy, as one party's short-term success or dominance may lead to long-term political breakdown and social unrest. Similarly, electoral systems need to be responsive enough to react effectively to changing political circumstances and the growth of new political movements. Even in established democracies, support for the major parties is rarely stable, while politics in new democracies is almost always highly dynamic and a party which benefits from the electoral arrangements at one election may not necessarily benefit at the next.

Don't Assume that Defects can Easily be Fixed Later

79. All electoral systems create winners and losers, and therefore vested interests. When a system is already in place, these are part of the political environment. It may be unwise to assume that it will be easy to gain acceptance later to fix problems which arise. If a review of the system is intended, it may be sensible for it to be incorporated into the legal instruments containing the system change.

Assess the Likely Impact of Any New System on Societal Conflict

80. Electoral systems can be seen not only as mechanisms for choosing legislatures and presidents but also as a tool of conflict management within a society. Some systems, in some circumstances, will encourage parties to make inclusive appeals for support outside their own core support base. The use of inappropriate electoral systems serves to exacerbate negative tendencies which already exist, for example, by encouraging parties to see elections as 'zero-sum' contests and thus to act in a hostile and exclusionary manner to anyone outside their home group. When designing any political institution, the bottom line is that, even if it does not help to reduce tensions within society, it should, at the very least, not make matters worse.

Try and Imagine Unusual or Unlikely Contingencies

81. Electoral system designers would do well to pose themselves some unusual questions to avoid embarrassment in the long run. Is it possible that the system proposed is not detailed or clear enough to be able to determine what the result is? Is it possible that one party could win all the seats? What if you have to award more seats than you have places in the legislature? What do you do if candidates tie? Might the system mean that, in some districts, it is better for a party supporter not to vote for their preferred party or candidate?

Remember It Needs to be Sustainable

82. The electoral system chosen – with any associated requirements for electoral registration and boundary delimitation - will place human demands on the

election administration and financial demands on the national budget. Is it possible and desirable to make these resources available on a continuing basis?

An Electoral System Designer's Checklist

• Is the system clear and comprehensible?	
• Are the mechanisms for future reform clear?	
• Does the system avoid underestimating the electorate?	
• Is the system as inclusive as possible?	
• Will the design process be perceived as legitimate?	
• Will the election results be seen as legitimate?	
• Are unusual contingencies taken into account?	
• Is the system financially and administratively sustainable?	
• Will the voters feel powerful?	
• Is a competitive party system encouraged?	
• Does the system fit into the constitutional framework as a whole?	
• Will the system help to alleviate conflict rather than exacerbat it?	