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# The Debate Over Electoral Systems

André Blais

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**Paper No. 2**

**“The Debate Over Electoral  
Systems”**

**André Blais**

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The Debate Over Electoral Systems

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The argumentation supporting a given electoral system is necessarily two-fold. First there is an empirical assertion about the likely consequences of that system. Secondly, there is a value judgement on the desirability and goodness of these consequences. Through a close examination of the terms of the debate, I intend to: 1) clearly distinguish the empirical and the normative arguments; 2) assess the empirical assertions through a systematic review of the evidence, which will enable me thereafter to focus the discussion on the most plausible statements; 3) clearly identify the major values invoked in the debate.

One's position on this issue, as on any issue, depends on one's perception of the consequences of the options and evaluation of these consequences. This paper will deal with both facts and values. Facts and values, however will be treated differently. I will pay greater attention to empirical assertions. The reason is simple. It is easier to assess facts than values and it makes sense to start with simple tasks. Through a systematic examination of the evidence, I will be able to "clean up" the debate, that is to sort out the arguments that look plausible from those that do not. A sound argument has to be both empirically valid and normatively appealing. There is no need to discuss the normative aspect of an argument that does not satisfy the first condition. As for values, my sole objective is to establish which ones figure prominently in the debate.

There are many options when it comes to designing an electoral system, as there are many seven dimensions to be considered. Each of these options can be backed up by several arguments. Obviously, it will be impossible to review each of them. I have had to select those that seem to be the most important. There is inescapably a certain degree of arbitrariness in this selection. I have tried to be as fair as possible to each option. I start with the assumption that a good case can be made for almost any option and that it is crucial to understand the basic arguments in support of each of them. I believe that the best way to reduce the arbitrariness is to adopt an anthropological type approach designed to extricate the rationale of each option. In a first step at least, my objective will therefore be to look at a given option from the perspective of the proponents of that option and to summarize as sharply as possible their reasoning. Of course, this approach ought to be complemented by a more critical perspective and indeed I will question the validity of some empirical assertions by confronting them with the empirical evidence. Yet, I am convinced that an analysis which starts with the charitable assumption that each option has a good rationale and which rejects all options but one after having given each a fair hearing and having acknowledged that each had some interesting arguments in its favor is less likely to err than one that does not do so.

I start with and pay greater attention to electoral formulae, and more specifically to plurality and PR systems. The reason is simple: this is the way the debate is structured. As Lijphart and Grofman (1984) note, "the debate over electoral choice has often been... defined as a choice between

plurality on the one hand and list PR on the other" (p. 4). Because the debate is so structured and because plurality and PR systems are those most widely found in national elections, I will first examine those two formulae. I will also examine majority systems, the third type of electoral formula. I will thereafter move to a consideration of the various options related to the choice of ballot and constituency structure.

### 1. The Plurality Rule

"The proponents of the plurality rule argue that its great advantage is that it produces firm government... Their line of reasoning is that the plurality method, by discriminating against small parties, encourages a two-party system which in turn makes stable one-party government possible". (Lijphart and Grofman, 1984: 5).

The basic argument in favor of plurality systems lies with the virtues of stable one-party government. As Rose (1983: 30) observes, "the plurality system is meant to be a means of manufacturing a parliamentary majority". This raises three questions. First do plurality elections produce one party (majority) governments? Secondly, do plurality elections (and one-party governments) lead to stable government? Thirdly, why is one-party and/or stable government desirable?

Let us first tackle the question about the relationship between plurality systems and one-party government. There can be no doubt that one-party government is more likely to occur under plurality than under proportionality rule, as Rae's (1969: 99) data indicate:

"In 75 legislatures elected under P.R. formulae, the mean minimal majority was 1.96 parties. Typically, the support of the two largest parties was required for the formation of the majority. In 45 legislatures elected under majority and plurality formulae, the mean minimal majority was only 1.15 parties, suggesting that one-party majorities were more common".

Likewise, Rose (1983: 33-34) concluded that "the first-past-the-post electoral system is usually successful in manufacturing a parliamentary majority for one party" but adds that "the tendency ... is really strong only in the cricket-playing parts of the Commonwealth. It does not apply regularly in Canada, in Japan or France". Rose's conclusion is questionable, as Japan and France should be excluded, the latter being a majority system and the former using multi-member constituencies. The analysis should be restricted to those systems that proponents of the plurality rule have in mind, single-member district systems such as Canada, New Zealand and Britain. Blais and Carty (1988) indicate that 72 % of single-member district plurality elections produce a one-party legislative majority, compared to 10 % of PR elections. Blais and Carty (1987) also show that, everything else being equal, the probability of a one-party majority government is 40 percentage points higher in a plurality than in a PR election.

These findings can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, the plurality rule (in single-member constituencies) generates majorities most of the time and much more frequently than PR. On the other hand, it fails to achieve its basic stated objective three times in ten and it is not even the most efficient procedure in that regard: as Blais and Carty



(1988) point out, multi-member district majority elections have produced one-party majority governments nine times in ten. In short, the plurality rule greatly increases the likelihood of a one-party government but is not entirely successful on that score.

The second proposition concerns the relationship between electoral formulae and government stability. Two forms of instability have been examined: frequent elections and frequent changes of government. The available evidence indicates that elections are not more frequent in PR than in plurality systems (Bagdanor, 1984: 149; Rose, 1983: 28). The life expectancy of governments, however, is shorter in the former than in the latter. Most studies of government durability have not looked at the link between electoral system and durability; they have shown however that there is a strong relationship between one-party majority government, which is of course more frequent under the plurality rule, and durability. Blondel (1968: 199) concludes that "one-party government is the factor contributing most decisively to the stability of the government". The same conclusion has been reached by Taylor and Herman (1971), Sanders and Herman (1977) and Strom (1985). A more direct comparison is made by Powell (1982), who notes that "majoritarian constitutions are more stable than representational ones" (p. 153). The second empirical proposition of the proponents of the plurality rule - that it enhances government stability - is thus borne out.

This leads us to the third question, i.e. the virtues of one-party and/or stable government. Let us start with one party majority government.

Three positive consequences are usually pointed out. The first is its relationship with stable government to which I will return shortly. The second is cohesion. Everything else being equal, the fact that the government is made up of one party rather than several parties should ensure greater unity. To the extent that "representation expresses a desire for the exercise of unified power" (Spitz, 1984: 40) that "all rational decisions require the reduction of alternatives from many to a final choice of one" (Ibid: 21), and that "within a state characterized by popular sovereignty and formal political equality, participants--above all else--want to discover a way to proceed as a unit" (Ibid: 201), the selection of a majority party as the governor makes a lot of sense.

Of course, the contrast between majority and coalition governments should not be overstated. As Rose (1983: 42) notes, "a very large party with nearly half a nation's vote is likely to be a coalition too". Moreover, "a coalition government is likely to be less able to afford breaches of party discipline since dissenting votes on the part of the backbenchers ... may not only threaten the government's majority ... they also threaten the very basis upon which the coalition has been set up" (Bogdanor, 1983: 271). Still it is "more difficult for the Cabinet to hold together as a unity when the government is a coalition" (Ibid: 269).

The third virtue of one-party government is decisiveness. With one-party government, the outcome of an election is clear-cut: the party in power retains or loses office. With coalition governments, the outcome tends to be

fuzzy and, most importantly, the formation of the government is not directly determined by the results of the election:

"Concerning the question of who is going to run the country, the election results give no answer. They are not without meaning, but they have to be considered as only one of the data. Election results in a minority system produce a change in power relations; they change the minority positions in parliament and they influence the positions in the coalition talks, but they are never the only influence and sometimes not even the most important one".

(Vis, 1983: 155; see also Duverger, 1965: 391)

As a consequence, "ambiguity and compromise are introduced on a secondary level whenever coalitions are formed" (Downs, 1957: 155) and voters exercise lesser control over the government. It is more difficult to get rid of a coalition than of a one-party government. Rose and Mackie (1980: 20, table 8) indicate that governments are dismissed in 39 % of the elections in Anglo-American countries (mainly plurality systems); in Continental Europe and Scandinavia (mainly PR systems) they are dismissed in only 23 % of elections (excluding reshuffles, which are ambiguous cases). Indeed the fate of a party in a coalition has more to do with the internal dynamics of that coalition than with the party's electoral fortune: "in a coalition government, a reshuffle without reference back to the electorate is thus more than twice as likely to cause a party to lose office than electoral defeat" (Rose and Mackie: 1980: 21). Even advocates of proportional representation acknowledge that "plurality systems make it easier for the voter to bring about a qualitative change in the way he is governed" (Irvine, 1979, 25). In short,

plurality elections are more decisive and hence assure greater accountability.

Why, finally is stable government perceived to be an asset of the plurality rule? In a nutshell, the argument is that government stability enhances political stability. The basic assumption is that PR may produce unstable and weak governments, which in turn may threaten the very existence of a democracy:

"...highly fragmented multiparty systems... can lead to unstable or weak coalitions that are unable to cope with major problems... These results in turn may stimulate a loss of confidence in representative democracy".  
(Dahl, 1971: 122).

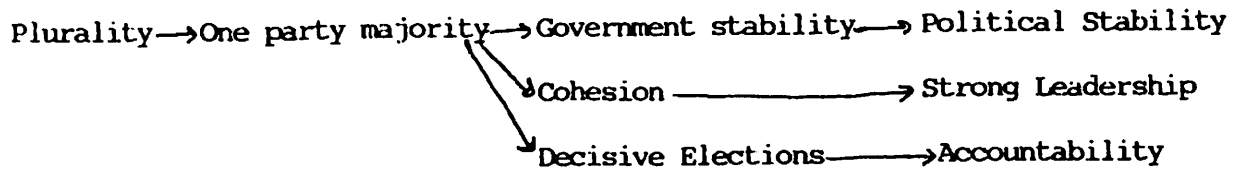
Powell (1982) has examined the link between government stability and political order across 27 countries. His findings "do not support the theorists who favor government stability as a factor enhancing civil order" (p. 107). Significant correlations however do emerge when one looks at a more homogeneous subset of 18 economically developed nations (Ibid.) Likewise, Blais and Dion (1988) show that among non-industrialized countries, the breakdown of democracy occurs more frequently in PR systems characterized by low government stability.

The most crucial (positive) consequence of the plurality rule is therefore one party majority government. One-party majority government provides government stability, which in turn enhances political stability,

government cohesion and thus stronger leadership and finally decisive elections, which allows greater accountability to the electorate. The whole argumentation can be summarized in the following schema:

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Figure 3.1



### Proportional Representation

"The main argument of the PR advocates is that a democratic legislature should be representative of all of the interests and viewpoints of the electorate, and hence that the only proper form of representation is proportional representation". (Lijphart and Grofman, 1984: 5-6).

The major virtue of proportional representation is a broad and fair representation. "PR starts from the premise that diversity should be accurately reflected in representative assemblies" (Sharman, 1980: 94). The basic objective is to have "an elected body reflecting the main trends of opinion within the electorate" (Lakeman, 1974: 271). Almost by definition proportional representation is fair since the PR formula is intended to give each party a share of the seats more or less equal to its share of the votes. Because representation is fair the government and more generally the political system are likely be perceived as legitimate. This legitimacy should ensure political harmony and order. Moreover, because the various diverse view-

points are represented in the legislature and, to a lesser extent, in the cabinet, the government is more likely to be respectful of the diversity of opinions. Of course, there is no denying the fact that, in the end, diversity ought to be reduced to unity (Spitz, 1984) but advocates of proportional representation argue that it induces greater moderation and instills a spirit of cooperation amongst parties (Finer, 1975: 30-31). In this way PR becomes part and parcel of the consensual model of democracy, a model based on the view that "political power should be dispersed and shared in a variety of ways" (Lijphart, 1984: 208). Through this consensus building mechanism, proportional representation fosters harmony and order.

Proportional representation is thus advocated as a means to achieve order and legitimacy through the incorporation of diverse viewpoints. This raises four questions. First, how accurately does proportional representation reflect opinions? Secondly, does it really allow for a greater diversity of viewpoints to be expressed? Thirdly does it foster consensus politics? And finally, does fair and broad representation contribute to the political order?

First, the issue of representation. Unsurprisingly, proportional systems are found to fare much better than plurality and majority systems in allocating seats to parties proportionally to votes. Rae's (1969, 96) data indicate that the average deviation between shares of votes and shares of seats is more than twice as great under majority and plurality formulae; similar results are reported by Lijphart (1984: 163; 1988, appendix 2).

There are problems with these findings. First, Taagepera (1984, 1986; see also Taagepera and Laakso, 1980) have shown that the degree of proportionality depends to a great extent on district magnitude. The point is well taken. Since, however, the great majority of PR systems have rather large districts and the great majority of plurality systems have single-member districts, the distinction may not have much substantial import.

Moreover to the extent that the objective of proportional representation is a fair distribution of power, it would be more appropriate to compare shares of government seats, since real political power lies with the executive. This has led Taylor (1984) and Taylor and Lijphart (1985) to develop and use the concept of proportional tenure, on the basis that "elections are primarily a mechanism of government creation" (Taylor and Lijphart: 1985, 388). Taylor and Lijphart present measures of disproportionality of government tenure over the 1945-1980 period, which indicate that there is also much disproportionality in PR systems, the later discriminating in favor of small centrist or special-interest parties. Still, the overall bias of PR systems is weaker (the average Loosemore-Hanby index is 20.2 in PR systems compared to 22,7 in majority-plurality systems). Moreover, Taylor and Lijphart's decision to measure disproportionality of tenure over a long period of time is questionable, since both the parties and the electorate do not remain the same over such a period. For short-term proportional tenure the difference between PR and plurality systems is certainly greater. In short, Taylor and Lijphart are right in focusing on proportional tenure and in

pointing out PR's bias in favor of small centrist parties. It remains that overall PR leads to fairer representation, even at the governmental level.

The second question is the extent to which PR leads to a wider array of opinions being heard in the legislature as well as in the cabinet. First, PR increases the number of parties contesting an election. On average there are 8 parties in a PR election and 5 in a plurality one; when one controls for other factors, the differential has been estimated to be 1.4 (Blais and Carty, 1988). The effective number of parties in the legislature is 20 % lower in a plurality than in a PR system (Ibid). These are rather substantial differences. PR makes it easier for minor parties to be represented in the legislature and that should allow for greater diversity of interests and perspectives to be aired. Likewise, most PR elections result in the formation of a coalition government and the mere fact that more than one party is represented in the cabinet suggests that it is easier for the government to be sensitive to the diversity of viewpoints.

The third question is whether PR fosters a willingness, among the political elite, to make compromises and to adopt a consensual political style. In a way the proposition is true almost by definition. Proportional representation produces coalition governments and party elites in a coalition cannot but make deals and compromises. It can be argued, however, that in a plurality system, parties, in order to survive, must act as pragmatic brokers, and shun programmatic appeals. The only difference between plurality and PR would then be that in the former case accommodations are reached before the



election while in the latter they are reached in the legislature. PR, by itself, does not make compromises any easier:

"The move to PR produces pressure toward ideology while discouraging convergence of parties, which instead are led to maximize the importance of their differences. The result is that while PR makes compromises among parties in the parliament more necessary, it also makes them more difficult to achieve. Parties that have taken ideological positions find pragmatic compromises difficult to make. Further the most likely coalition partners in the legislature are the parties in the most direct electoral competition, a situation hardly calculated to promote amicable cooperation".  
Katz, 1980: 121).

As a consequence, the proposition that PR fosters compromises is rather dubious.

This leads us to the final issue, which can be considered the acid test of PR: does PR, because it provides fair and broad representation of diverse opinions and interests, enhance the political order?

There is some indication to that effect. At least in some countries, the adoption of proportional representation seems to have improved the political climate. In fact, "perhaps the critical event in its development was the decision to adopt it in Belgium in 1899 because it appeared there to have real political success... After the adoption of the list system ... Cabinets had weaker majorities and shorter lives, but there was much less danger of permanent and irreconcilable division within the country" (Mackenzie, 1964: 75-76; see also Carstairs, 1980: ch. 6). The potential

divisiveness of the plurality system has been aptly demonstrated, in the Canadian case, by Cairns (1968: 62) who argues that "the electoral system has made a major contribution to the identification of particular sections/provinces with particular parties. It has undervalued the partisan diversity within each section/province. The electoral system has consistently exaggerated the significance of changes demarcated by sectional "provincial boundaries"" (see also Irvine, 1979). Even though Cairns may overstate the impact of the electoral system (Lovink, 1970), and may even have erred with respect to some of the electoral incentives of the plurality system (Johnston and Ballantine, 1977), the basic hypothesis that, in Canada, the plurality system has increased the visibility and salience of regional cleavages is hardly disputable. Even Duverger (1950: 39) acknowledges that "le scrutin majoritaire accentue la localisation géographique des opinions". Thus, La Palambora's (1953) contention that in countries like Italy, there is a high risk that "elections by plurality would so distort the political complexion of the country as to leave the unrepresented minorities no alternative to seeking new and perhaps violent means of achieving expression" (p. 703) is rather compelling.

Three studies have examined cross-nationally the link between electoral systems and political order. The first study is that of Powell (1982). His findings are the following. On the one hand, proportional representation tends to lead to higher voting turnout (table 4.4, p. 70, see also Jackman, 1987; Blais and Carty, 1989) and to inhibit protest activity (figure 6.3, p. 131). On the other hand, it does not seem to reduce rioting

or deaths by political violence, though the coefficients, in the latter case, are of the right sign. Powell (1982: 223) concludes that "the advantage of the representational parliamentary system is that it facilitates entry through the legitimate political processes ... minorities gain a national forum and their leaders become more closely tied to incentives of democratic involvement", and that at the same time "representational constitutional arrangements seem to encourage destabilizing representation of extremist practices" (*Ibid.* 151; see also Powell, 1986).

In short, Powell's analysis suggests that PR has two sets of consequences on the political order: a positive one, related to its producing more parties and a negative one, associated to its producing some extremist parties. The first effect is greater than the second, so that PR contributes positively, though only weakly, to the political order.

The second study is the one by Blais and Carty (1988). This study is in many ways similar to Powell's. It uses the same basic indicators of political disorder (protest, demonstrations, political strikes, riots and deaths from political violence). It differs, however, by confining itself to 19 advanced democracies (instead of the 27 examined by Powell) and by classifying countries on the basis of electoral formulae, instead of the rather odd procedure followed by Powell (who collapses majority and plurality systems and characterizes Germany, Ireland and Japan as mixed systems). They find disorder not to be less frequent with PR, contrary to what advocates of PR believe, but also find that a high degree of disparity between vote and seat shares tends to increase turmoil, a pattern usually predicted by the proponents of PR.

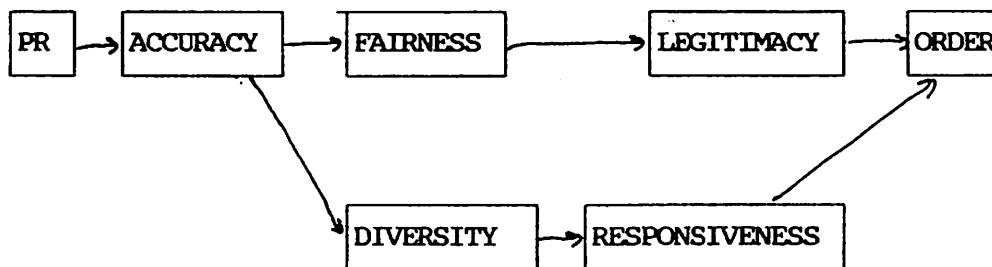
Finally, Blais and Dion (1988) look at democratic experiences in non-industrialized countries and show that those democracies which have adopted PR are less likely to survive than those which have adopted the single-member plurality system. They conclude that PR may be a risky choice in a new democracy.

The empirical evidence is therefore ambiguous. PR is not clearly superior to the plurality rule in promoting political order in advanced democracies and seems to be a risky choice in new ones. Still a case can be made for PR. It increases turnout and reduces the likelihood of great political disorder, which may occur when vote-seat disparities in a plurality election get very substantial.

In short, the basic argument in favor of proportional representation is that it provides a more accurate mirror of opinions, which makes for a fairer and broader representation, thus ensuring responsiveness, legitimacy and order:

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Figure 3.2



The link between PR and political order is problematic but there are indications that PR may have positive consequences in some cases. The diagram does not include another argument made in favor of PR -- that it promotes moderation -- because that argument appears to be dubious.

### 3. The Majority Rule

"The... majority system... may be preferable to plurality in two respects. First, from the perspective of the democratic principle, it makes it more likely that an elected representative has the support of a clear majority instead of a mere plurality of his or her constituents. Second, from a practical point of view it may be a potent weapon against antisystem parties; whereas the disproportionality of the plurality rule mainly hurts the smaller parties that are not regionally concentrated, the... system's disproportionality discriminates against extremist parties even when they are relatively large".  
(Lijphart and Grofman, 1984: 10).

There are two major arguments in favor of the majority rule: (1) those elected enjoy strong support, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of government; (2) it weakens extremist parties. These two conditions in turn contribute to greater political order.

Under the majority rule, the elected must obtain the support of at least half the electorate. The conditions for winning a seat are much less stringent with the plurality rule and proportional representation. Under the majority rule there is the guarantee that each representative is acceptable to a majority of voters, which is not the case with the other two formulae. It should be pointed out, however, that the majority rule in single-member

districts (which is the typical situation) offers no guarantee that the party (ies) forming the government has(ve) the support of a clear majority of voters. In the French 1968 election, for instance, the Gaullists obtained 60 % of the seats with only 36 % of the votes.

A more important argument of the advocates of the majority rule is that the majority principle is at the heart of democracy. Real political decisions are made through majority rules and it is "natural" to apply the same logic in the selection of decision-makers. In short, the majority principle makes sense in a democracy much more so than the plurality one.

The legitimacy of the majority rule is acknowledged even by its critics. Dummet (1984: 142), for instance, cogently argues that there is nothing sacrosanct about the majority principle:

"The question turns on whether it be thought more important to please as many people as possible or to please everyone collectively as much as possible. The latter is surely more reasonable. The rule to do as the majority wishes does not appear to have any better justification than as a rough and ready test for what will secure the maximum total satisfaction: to accord it greater importance is to fall victim to the mystique of the majority"...

He is however plainly aware that he is not likely to convince many people and is led to recognize the great legitimacy of the majority rule:

"The mere fact that many are imbued with the mystique of the majority bears on what voting procedures they will be disposed to accept as fair". (Ibid).

The second virtue attributed to majority voting is that it underrepresents antisystem parties. Some evidence of that effect is presented by Fisichella (1984), which shows that antisystem parties are significantly underrepresented in two-ballot majority systems (contemporary France but also Germany and Norway before World War I). Such evidence is not convincing since no comparison is made with plurality and proportional representation systems. Yet, the hypothesis has some prima facie validity. The two-ballot majority system encourages party alliances (Fisichella, 1984: 185) and makes life tougher for those extremist parties which are the least likely to come to some agreement with other parties. Blais and Carty (1988) have compared the percentage of seats obtained by extremist parties in plurality, majority and PR elections. They find that, everything else being equal, extremist parties' share of seats is indeed lowest in majority systems; their percentage of seats is typically 8 points lower than in a PR system and 2 points lower than in a plurality one.

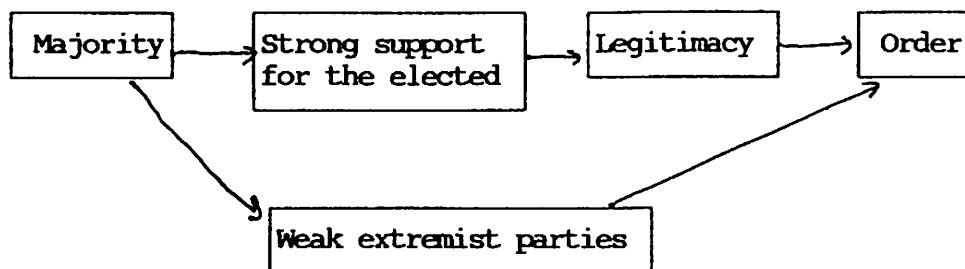
The basic claim of the advocates of the majority rule is that a system which produces representatives with strong and broad support and weakens extremist parties is likely to ensure legitimacy and order. That claim is of course extremely difficult to assess, more especially as the majority formula has been adopted in very few countries. Powell's (1982) study of political violence collapses majority and plurality systems and therefore cannot be of any use in that respect. Blais and Carty's (1982) analysis includes only two majority systems (France and Australia) and their findings are therefore most tentative. Some of their results are encouraging for the proponents of majority rule. Majority systems perform as well as PR and, contrary to what was observed in plurality systems, strong disparities between vote and seat

shares are not conducive to disorder. Other results in the same study are more disturbing. Most importantly, extremist parties' strength does not seem to lead to more political violence.

The basic argument in favor of the majority rule is that, because it makes sure that the elected have the clear support of the majority of voters and because it makes it difficult for antisystem parties to be represented, it ensures legitimacy and order:

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Figure 3.3




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We have shown that indeed the majority principle is perceived to be a highly legitimate one but that unfortunately the procedure does not guarantee strong support for the government. We have also shown that the majority rule does seem to weaken extremist parties: the evidence, however, suggests that extremist parties may not be a major threat to the political order. The case for the majority rule does not appear, then, to be a very strong one. Yet, there is some indication that the majority system performs as well as PR and



perhaps a little better than the plurality rule in preventing political violence.

#### 4. The Object of the Vote: Lists Versus Individuals

Whether voters should be asked to select amongst individuals or lists of individuals (or parties) is a question that emerges only in multi-member districts, that is when there is more than one candidate to be elected. As advocates of the plurality and majority rules usually favor single member districts, the debate has focussed on PR systems, more specifically on the choice between list PR and the single transferable vote.

The debate over these two types of ballot pertains to what PR is supposed to represent. Proponents of list PR believe opinions about parties constitute the primary basis of representation. List PR does not prevent the expression of opinions about individual candidates; indeed many list PR systems allow preferential voting, through which the voters indicate their preferences for individual candidates within a list (Marsh, 1985). It does, however, impose a constraint on voters; unless panachage is allowed, the voter must first choose a party and is allowed to express preferences amongst candidates nominated by that party.

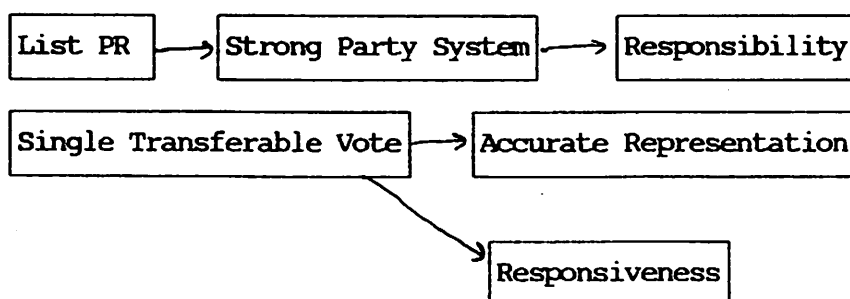
The basic argument for imposing such a constraint and for adopting list PR is that parties are a crucial component of a democratic political system that need to be preserved and strengthened. There is indeed strong

evidence that the single transferable vote leads to a weaker party system. As Katz (1980) has shown, the system induces candidates to attract personal support and not to encourage support for other candidates of their party. Electoral competition within the party hinders unity and cohesion. In Ireland, this problem is mitigated by the greater importance attached to constituency service over policy so that parties remain superficially united. Still, the single transferable vote, as indeed preferential voting in general, is detrimental to the development of a responsible party system.

The major argument in favor of the single transferable vote is that "it gives the voter maximum freedom to express his opinions" (Lakeman, 1984, 51). This freedom permits a more accurate representation of voters' opinions, about individuals as well as about parties and therefore a more representative legislature and government. This assertion is plainly undisputable. The debate over list PR versus the single transferable vote is therefore one over the relative virtues of a strong party system versus those of more accurate representation. The debate can be summed up in the following fashion.

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Figure 3.4



## 5. The Procedure: The Number and Type of Votes and the Number of Ballots

The voting procedure raises many issues, which vary across electoral formulae. Within list PR systems, the main issue is whether there should be preferential voting i.e. whether voters should be allowed to express their preferences among candidates on a given list. Within plurality systems, the debate is first and foremost between categorical voting, in which voters indicate only their first choice, and approval voting, in which they may vote for as many candidates as they want. Within majority systems, the choice is between the alternative vote, in which voters rank order their preferences and second and third preferences may be taken into account in order to elect a candidate with majority support and the two ballot (or even multiple-ballot) system in which a second ballot is held if no candidate obtains a majority of votes on the first ballot.

I will address each of these three debates. Before doing so, however, a general observation on voting procedures should be made. Everything else being equal, the more information the ballot reveals about voters' preferences, the better the procedure. The reason has been given with respect to the single transferable vote: the more information in the ballot the more accurate the representation of opinions and the more representative the elected. It follows that ordinal voting, whereby voters rank order the parties and/or candidates, is preferable to nominal voting, in which there is no order of preferences:

"We wish the outcome of the voting procedure to depend as closely as possible upon the preferences of the voters. We

therefore wish each voter's strategy to reveal his preference scale, and his preference scale to determine his strategy. The simplest and most natural method of doing this is to adopt a voting mechanism consisting of a single ballot in which each voter is required to write down all the outcomes in order. Such a mechanism guarantees him the opportunity to reveal all the preferences he may have between pairs of outcomes, and excludes his having to choose between distinct ways of casting his vote that do not correspond to any difference between possible preference scales". (Dummet, 1984: 155).

It also follows that approval voting, whereby voters may vote for as many candidates as they wish, is superior to categorical voting. It finally implies that two ballots are better than a single one, because they allow voters to reconsider their preferences. If accuracy and responsiveness were the sole criteria, one would then choose preferential voting in a list PR system and would opt for approval voting over categorical voting (the choice between the alternative vote and the two ballot procedure is a more difficult one: the former is better because it allows rank ordering of preferences but the latter permits a reexamination of one's preferences on a second ballot). Obviously, however, accuracy and representativeness are not the only values at stake and a case can be made for a less precise ballot on other grounds.

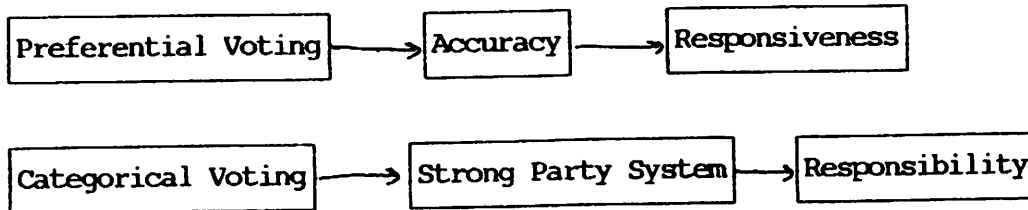
#### a) preferential voting in a list PR system

The case for allowing preferential voting in list PR systems is straightforward: the electors should be able to express their opinions about the candidates as well as those about the parties. Preferential voting provides richer and more accurate information about voters' opinions and feelings. The argument against preferential voting is basically one about its potential perverse effects on party cohesion. Candidates of the same party are in competition with each other and this is likely to weaken party unity.

The argumentation is therefore very similar to the one about the object of the vote reviewed above:

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Figure 3.5A



b) approval voting in a plurality system

There are three major arguments in favor of approval voting. First, like preferential voting it "provides the voter with more flexible options and thereby encourages a truer expression of preferences" (Brams and Fishburn, 1983: 4). Secondly "it discourages insincere voting" (Ibid: 32). Thirdly "it would help elect the strongest candidate" (Ibid: 4) and therefore "add legitimacy to the outcome" (Ibid: 8). The first argument has already been considered: preferential voting does indeed provide a finer representation of opinions and should enhance representativeness. The last two arguments require a more extensive discussion.

The question of sincere voting is a particularly difficult one. Brams and Fishburn start with a clear premise:

"Because we believe that a democratic voting system should base the winner of an election on the true preferences of the

voters, sincere strategies are of obvious importance to such systems" (p. 29).

Sincere voting is here opposed to strategic voting whereby one votes for candidates other than those he most prefers. Proponents of approval voting admit that it is not foolproof, that polls, for instance, may induce strategic voting (Ibid, p. 33). They argue however that it discourages insincere voting to a much greater extent than categorical voting: "In particular, if a voter divides candidates into only two classes-preferred and nonpreferred - there is never an incentive to vote for those not preferred" (Ibid, 33).

In a technical sense, the point has to be granted. But, as Niemi (1985: 818) correctly points out, sincere voting is not equivalent to honesty:

"..under approval voting one can be strategic and at the same time be (technically) sincere. Thus, for example, one can calculate whether you are more likely to get what you want by voting for 'a' or for "ab" even if you much prefer 'a' but you are regarded as still behaving sincerely (if your preference order is 'abc')".

In fact, there are different types of sincerity and insincerity (Merill and Nagel, 1987). Approval voting discourages strongly insincere ballots, in which a voter votes for a candidate that is not his most preferred one. It does, however, induce restrictive sincerity, in which a voter votes for fewer candidates than he approves of. It can therefore be concluded that approval voting in no way guarantees sincere voting but that it prevents the worst forms of insincere voting.

The other major virtue attributed to approval voting is that it helps elect the candidate with greatest overall support. The basic argumentation is aptly summed up by Brams and Fishburn (1988: 278).

"The salient difference between AV [approval voting] and PV [plurality voting] in multicandidate elections is that voters, by indicating that they approve of more than one candidate under AV, can help more than one to get elected. This feature of AV tends to prevent a relatively extreme candidate, who may be the favorite of a plurality of the electorate but is anathema to the majority, from winning. Whereas under PV an extremist can win if two or more moderate candidates split the centrist vote, under AV centrist voters can prevent the extremist's election by voting for more than one moderate. Insofar as the moderate candidates share the votes of their centrist supporters, then one will be elected and the proverbial will of the majority will be expressed".

The argument is indeed quite compelling.

There are two principal objections to approval voting: that it "could encourage the proliferation of candidates with fuzzy or ambivalent issue positions" and that "it could undermine and perhaps destroy the two party system" (Brams and Fishburn, 1982: 10). The two objections are difficult to assess. Whether approval voting will favour wishy washy candidates depends foremost on how voters react to clarity and ambiguity. It has been argued that ambiguity pays off in elections (Page, 1978) but the evidence sustaining that argument is very thin. Brams and Fishburn (1988) have examined ten elections in two professional societies, and have shown that the winners under approval voting were popular among all voters however many candidates they voted for. They conclude that "lowest-common denominator winners, who may have wide but only lukewarm support, are probably not a common occurrence" (p. 284). That first objection is therefore not a compelling one.

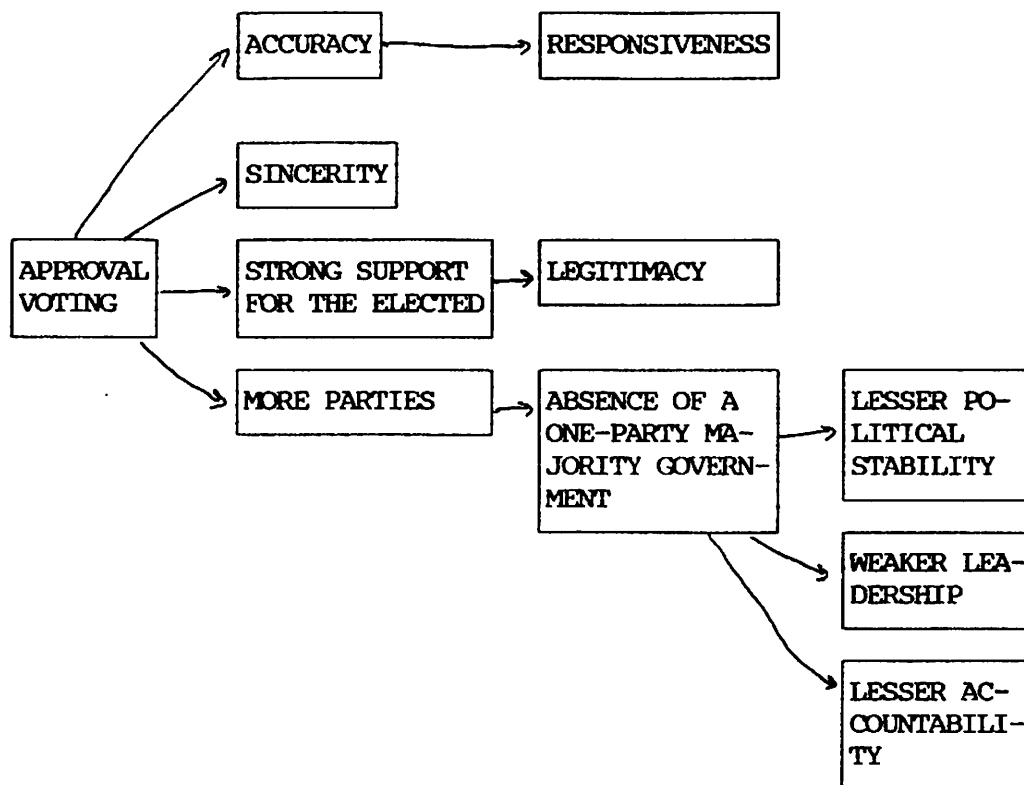
The second objection is that "its dynamic effect would probably be to increase the number of candidates offered... so that simple majority decision would almost never occur" (Riker, 1982: 90). This is why Riker, but also Merrill and Nagel (1987), while generally supportive of approval voting, do not recommend it in partisan elections "only because we fear its possible effect over time on the two party system" (Ibid, 22). These authors, however, have not specified the reasons why approval voting would lead to a greater number of parties (and smaller probability of a majority government). Is not the number of parties basically determined by the formula and district magnitude? If we are in a single-member district plurality system, will it make any difference whether we have a categorical or approval ballot? The mechanics of the plurality system is biased against parties with weak support and that mechanical effect would prevail with approval voting. There is however a major difference once we acknowledge that the electoral system affects the number of parties through two effects, a mechanical one and a psychological one (Duverger, 1950; Blais and Carty, forthcoming). As I have just indicated, the mechanical effect - parties with weak support are underrepresented - is fully preserved under approval voting. Not the psychological one, however. Categorical plurality voting induces voters not to support a weak party they may like very much because that party has no chance of winning the election and supporting that party would be a "wasted" vote. Voters do not have to go through these strategic considerations with approval voting: they may support both their most preferred "weak" party and their second choice. As a consequence "weak" parties get more votes and are less weak. Politicians would realize that it is easier for minor parties to get votes under approval voting; obstacles to the creation of new parties would be substantially reduced (Rosenstone et al., 1984). The claim that



approval voting would increase the number of parties, therefore, does appear eminently plausible.

In short, approval voting enhances accuracy of representation and sincere voting, which both enhance the responsiveness of the electoral outcome and helps elect candidates with strong support, thus contributing to the legitimacy of government. It is, however, less efficient than categorical (plurality) voting in reducing the number of parties and in producing one party majority governments.

Figure 3.5B



c. the alternative vote versus multiple ballots under majority rule

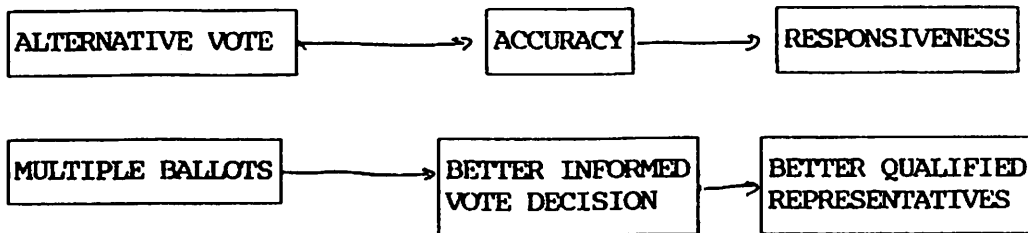
The majority rule imposes the most stringent condition for winning a seat: a candidate must obtain at least 50 % + 1 of votes cast. Indeed in most circumstances that condition is not satisfied by any candidate and there is therefore no winner. There are basically two ways to solve that problem. The first is to consider the whole range of voters' preferences: if no candidate gets a majority of first preferences, let us examine the second preferences of those supporting the weakest candidates... until we can find a candidate with a majority of "high order" preferences. This is the logic of the alternative vote, as practiced in Australia. The other approach is of course to resort to multiple ballots. That approach has many variants. In many cases, there are only two ballots and the second ballot is usually restricted to the two candidates who received the most votes on the first ballot (French presidential elections) or to those who have reached a certain threshold (French legislative elections) but there is also the possibility of multiple ballots, often with the rule that the weakest candidate on a given ballot is eliminated (this is the procedure followed for the selection of party leaders and local candidates in Canada).

There has been no discussion of the merits and limits of these two options, which are usually perceived to be quite similar, as the following quotation indicates:

"...majority-preferential voting is virtually tantamount to plurality - with runoff. The obvious differences are that preferential voting requires voters to order the candidates and never needs a second ballot".  
(Fishburn, 1986, 195).

Looking at the logic of these two procedures, one can make two observations. First, the case for the alternative vote is that it allows voters to rank order their preferences and thus provides more accurate information about their opinions and feelings. That information is richer than in the case of a two ballot procedure, which conveys much less about how each voter reacts to each candidate. Secondly, the case for the two ballot system has to be that the second ballot allows voters to reconsider their evaluation of candidates and parties. Converse and Pierce (1986: 364) report that in the 1967 French legislative election, 2 percent of those who were able to vote for the same party on the second ballot saw fit to vote for a different party. In the 1968 election, the percentages were 1 % in PC-UDR duels and 4 % in FGDS-UDR ones (Sondages, 1968 (30): 110). In the 1969 presidential election, 2 % of those who had voted Pompidou and 12% of those who had voted Poher on the first ballot voted against their "first" choice on the second ballot (Sondages, 1969 (31): 70). In the 1981 election 2 % of the Mitterrand and Giscard supporters on the first ballot switched on the second (Goguel, 1982, 168). In a typical election, then, 2 to 4 percent of the voters change their mind about their first choice; in some cases it may be up to 10 %. These are small figures but the proportion of those who would revise their second preferences is bound to be higher. That possibility to reconsider one's preferences should produce a better informed decision and the selection of better qualified representatives. The basic virtues of the alternative vote and of multiple ballots are therefore the following:

Figure 3.5C



## 6. The Basis of Representation: At Large Versus District Elections

The issues examined in the previous sections had to do with the formula and the ballot. I will now consider the structure of representation, that is whether the election is to be held at large or on a district basis and, if the latter, whether each district should have one or many representatives.

It is at the local level that the debate over at-large versus district elections has been the most acute. The basic argument in favor of at-large elections is well summarized by Engstrom and McDonald (1986: 203-204):

"At large elections ... would attract a 'better class' of council members and improve the quality of councilmanic decisions. Successful candidates within this system would have to appeal to more than a particular neighborhood or ethnic group, and therefore were more likely to be people of education and accomplishment... These 'better qualified' councilmanic representatives were in turn expected to make decisions on the basis of what they perceived to be good for the entire city, not just one geographic or social segment of it. This combination of council members with better judgement and a city wide decisional referent... would improve dramatically the quality of municipal government".

The major argument in favor of district elections is that it is a 'fairer' system, that is "a city council elected in this fashion is likely to be more 'representative' of the municipal population" (Ibid: 204).

The proposition that district elections are more likely to achieve fair representation has been examined in the U.S., mostly in terms of racial representation. The evidence fully supports the proposition, so much so that Engstrom and McDonald (1986: 224) conclude that it is "among the best verified empirical generalizations in political science".

It is much more difficult to ascertain the validity of the argumentation for at-large elections. How does one tell whether a candidate is "qualified" or not? However, the prediction that at-large elections induce representatives to adopt broader perspectives is more readily testable. Some findings tend to support the hypothesis. Lineberry and Fowler (1967) found that policy outputs are more weakly related to social cleavages in cities with at-large elections. Eulau and Prewitt (1973: 911) observe that in their study city councils elected on an at-large basis "see the city as a whole as their proper focus of attention". In the Netherlands, where there is one nationwide constituency, MP's are much less locally-oriented than MP's. of other countries (Gladdish, 1985).

The debate over at-large versus district elections is thus basically about the relevance of territorial representation. On abstract grounds, at-large elections would seem to be the "logical" choice. Since the purpose of an

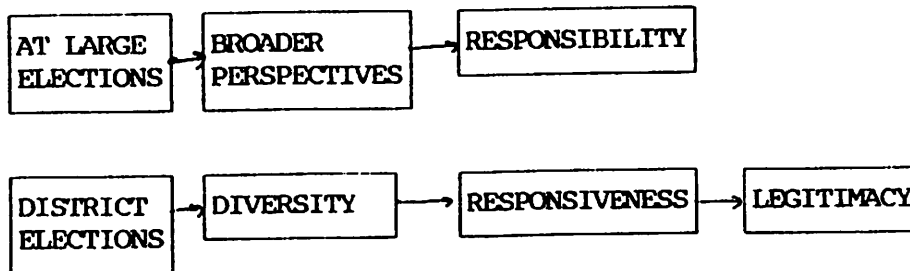
election is to select representatives who will have to make decisions for the whole polity, it makes much sense that these representatives be chosen by the entire electorate:

"... the idea of districting subverts the concept of a majority. If a representative is chosen by a method other than at-large voting in a single unit, then the results of the election will depend to some extent on the distribution of voters. Even when all parties scatter themselves fairly evenly within each and every district, the laws of chance militate against perfectly congruent arrangements and there is little hope that the majority in one constituency will be precisely the same size as the majority in another.... This implies that districting mentally isolates political equality". (Spitz, 1984: 38)

The case for district elections rests on the belief that such a "subversion" is needed in order to represent (minority, territorially concentrated) groups whose voices are unlikely to be heard if elections are held at-large. The concern of those who argue in favor of district elections is thus fair representation of diverse interests and the greater legitimacy that follows from such representation. The concern of those who favor at-large elections is breadth of perspectives and its implication for responsible government. When representatives are concerned first and foremost with the problems of their own districts, as they seem to be in the U.S. (Williams, 1985) and Ireland (Farrell, 1985), there is great risk of collective irresponsibility.

The following diagram illustrates the basic arguments on both sides of this debate:

Figure 3.6



### 7. District Size: Single- versus Multi-Member Districts

The argumentation over the virtues and vices of single and multi-member districts is very much part of the debate over plurality and PR systems. PR necessitates multi-member districts and supporters of plurality (and majority) systems claim that this is a major weakness of PR as multi-member districts destroy the direct link between an M.P. and his/her constituents:

"vital links between local communities and their elected MPs or councillors would be undermined by both List and STV systems. The whole principle of democratic accountability would be weakened..." (Hain, 1986: 45).

This assertion is taken seriously by supporters of PR. Irvine (1979: 67) concedes that in Canada, "no proposal is willing to totally abandon the single-member constituency system which is so much a part of our tradition and which can serve to keep M.P.s attention to constituents". Likewise, Bogdanor

(1985) dedicates a whole book to study the connection between the electoral system and MP./constituency relationships.

At first sight, the claim that single-member districts give voters a closer relationship with their representatives makes much sense. Single-member districts are smaller. Everything else being equal, it should be easier for voters to know their representatives, to convey them their views on what the government should or should not do and to reward or punish them for their performance. Supporters of multi-member districts (and of PR), however, argue that the links between MP's and their constituents in single-member districts are much weaker than they are sometimes believed to be. In Britain, "four electors in five were unable to mention anything their MP had done either at Westminster or for their constituency" (Crewe, 1985: 55). Moreover, "the MP's career depends more upon his party than upon his constituency" (Bogdanor, 1985: 294, see also Irvine, 1982), so that the incentive to maintain close ties with constituents is not that strong.

These are valid and relevant observations. Yet there are more sanguine indicators of the importance of local representatives. In Britain, 65% of voters recall the name of the incumbent (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987, 28). Moreover, single-member district elections produce a personal vote, that is those MPs who put in more effort in constituency work are rewarded by the voters: "variations in constituency attentiveness have an electoral effect potentially as large as one-quarter to one-half of the observed regional swings" (Ibid: 188). Moreover, the most important point is



that multi-member districts are conducive to weaker ties than single-member ones, as Scholl's (1986: 330) comparative analysis of British (elected in single-member districts) and French (elected in multi-member districts) members of the European Parliament show: "single-member districts appear to lead to representatives who have stronger constituency orientations and engage in more activities of benefit to their constituencies" (see also Loewenberg and Kim, 1978).

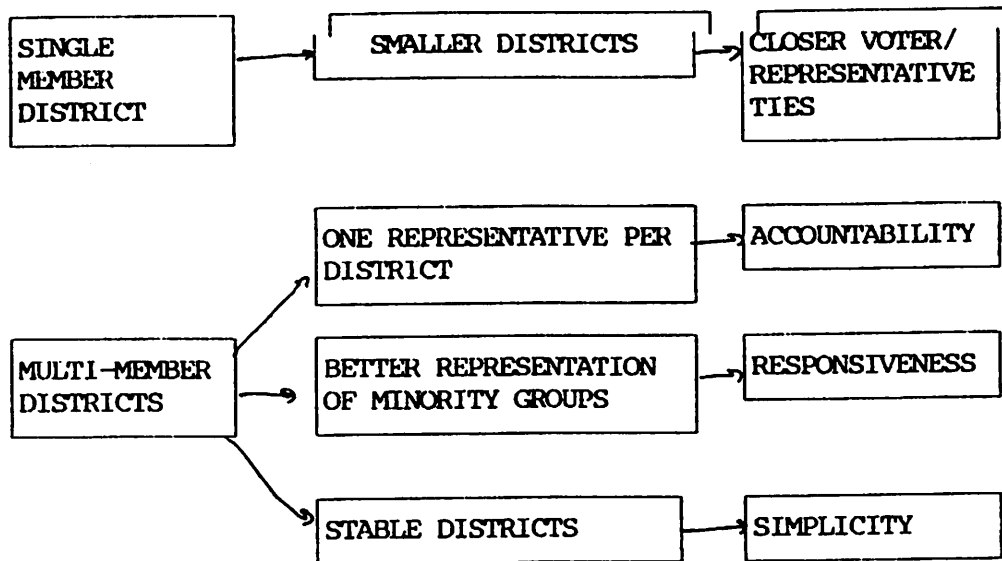
Single-member districts provide not only closer ties between representatives and constituents but also, and more importantly, greater accountability. There is one individual who is expected to defend constituency interests and who can be held responsible if those interests are not well protected, whereas in multi-member districts that responsibility is diluted among many MP's.

What is the case, then, for multi-member districts? They are perceived to have two major virtues. First, a fairer representation of various groups, especially minority ones. There is much evidence, for instance, that women are better represented in multi-member district systems, as parties strive for an overall balance among their candidates (Bogdanor, 1984: 114; New Zealand, 1986: 50). Secondly, multi-member districts provide greater flexibility and stability. Their size may vary across space and over time and that is a great advantage. Because their size is not fixed, it is easier to make districts fit sociological communities. Because the number of representatives per district can be made to change over time, population

shifts can be accommodated readily, that is by increasing or reducing the number of candidates to be elected, whereas single-member district boundaries have to be modified on a regular basis in order to keep their population of relatively equal size. In short, multi-member districts are more congruent and congruence enhances knowledge of and contact with representatives (Niemi et al., 1986). That advantage, however, is more than offset by the propensity of multi-member district representatives to have weaker constituency orientations, as was pointed out earlier; all in all, then, multi-districts do not enhance contact between voters and representatives. However, contrary to single-member districts, they do not require regular changes of boundaries, and that saves money and resources and avoids all the pitfalls involved in designing and redesigning districts (Baker, 1986; Balinski and Young, 1982).

We may therefore summarize the debate over the size of districts in the following fashion:

Figure 3.7



## 8. Conclusions

This review of the debate over electoral systems had three objectives: (1) sorting out the empirical and the normative dimensions of the argumentation; (2) sorting out the valid and the dubious empirical assertions; (3) identifying the basic values involved in the debate. Hopefully, this exercise will have clarified the debate and the issues. It should be obvious by now that each option implies both value judgments and statements about facts. I have paid particular attention to the latter and tried to establish their validity or lack thereof through a systematic review of the empirical evidence. Some of the empirical assertions have been shown to be highly

dubious or clearly wrong. In many cases, however, the evidence has tended to substantiate the arguments, though often with nuances. This indicates that the debate is about both what the actual consequences of electoral systems are and which values are the most crucial in the choice of an electoral system.

The values involved are numerous: stability, leadership, accountability, fairness, legitimacy, order, responsiveness, responsibility... That list has striking similarities with the list of the general and specific functions of representation, elaborated by Birch (1971: 107-108). According to Birch the general functions of representation are popular control, leadership and system maintenance and the specific ones include responsiveness, accountability, peaceful change, leadership, responsibility, legitimation, consent and relief of pressure. These similarities highlight the fact that the debate over electoral systems is very much about what democratic representation is or should be.

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