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David M. Farrell. *Comparing Electoral Systems.* London: Prentice Hall, 1997. xiv + 191 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-434077-7.

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A Textbook Treatment of Electoral Systems

In seven short chapters and less than two hundred pages David Ferrell has managed to provide a concise and very readable introduction to the world's major electoral systems. Although the text aims to make recent research in this area "more accessible to the lay and undergraduate audience" (p. xiii), it has much to offer not only to neophytes, but to seasoned comparativists and election system scholars alike.

In his easy-flowing prose, Farrell quite sensibly defines the "election system" as "the mechanism of determining victors and losers, which clicks into action once the campaign has ended" (p. 3). As such it must be distinguished from "electoral law," which refers more broadly to the entire "family of rules governing the process of elections: from the calling of the election, through the stages of candidate nomination, party campaigning and voting, and right up to the stage of counting votes and determining the actual elections result" (p. 3).

Consistent with the approach of most other scholars working in this field, Farrell divides electoral systems in two major groups, proportional and non-proportional, but also cautions the reader right at the beginning that no election system is without distortion. He devotes two chapters to non-proportional systems, starting with Britain's first-past-the-post (FPTP) or plurality system, the oldest and simplest of all, followed by a chapter on systems under which candidates must garner majorities in order to win: the second-ballot system (used in France) and the alternative vote system (found in Australia). Among the proportional representation (PR) systems, he differentiates three sub-types: (1) list PR, which is used in a large number of countries, (2) the German two-vote system, which is also known as additional-member or mixed-member system and has recently found favor elsewhere, and (3) the single transferable vote (STV), which is a candidate-focused variant of PR whose unique characteristics is that it does not presuppose partisan candidacies.

The survey of major election system alternatives spanning these five chapters is followed by an assessment of the political consequences of different arrangements. This concluding chapter addresses not only the classical hypotheses, namely those concerning the effects of the electoral formula on the party system and on government formation and stability, but uses other evaluation criteria as well (such as representation of women, voter turnout and spoiled ballots).

Studying election systems: How and why?

Before Farrell launches into the detailed discussion of each of the five distinct systems one by one, he alerts the reader to the different normative understandings of representation; on the one hand the view that the parliament ought to be a microcosm or mirror reflecting society at large, on the other the principal-agent conception of representation, which stresses the representation of political interests irrespective of whether the demographic characteristics of the representatives match those of the represented. Farrell contrasts these clashing fundamental premises–either of which defies easy characterization as right or wrong–with questions about the consequences and implications of different electoral systems, which are–at least in principle–amenable to resolution through the systematic study of the empirical evidence.

The introductory chapter also provides a convincing rationale for the renewed academic interest in the subject matter: election system choice is part and parcel of the constitutional engineering process in new democracies. Knowledge about the workings of different systems can and does inform this choice; but there has been a noticeable trend of increasing interest in election system reform and actual change in a number of well-established democratic nations as well, among the latter Italy, Japan, and New Zealand.

Nor is the choice merely a categorical one between proportional and non-proportional. Elaborating on the

point that no electoral system provides perfect representation, the author acquaints the reader with a number of structural factors that affect the degree of distortion (the respective roles of electoral formula, district magnitude and ballot structure are examined in detail in the chapters that follow) and identifies a variety of "artificial" measures that favor some parties while creating hurdles or barriers for others: malapportionment, gerrymandering, percentage thresholds, and laws restricting, or even banning, certain types of parties (such as anti-system parties in Germany). What is more, there is plenty of variation in the details beyond those that bear directly on proportionality. Indeed, the fact that no two countries have exactly the same system in itself attests to the large number and diversity of possible solutions, and the opportunities for institutional reform, whether it be in the form of major re-engineering or mere fine-tuning or tinkering.

The individual chapters on the five major electoral systems impress with their tight organization, lucid explanation of the more complex workings of some systems and electoral formulae, and the effective use of tabular data that illustrate vote-counting and seat-allocation procedures and document individual countries' experience with their election systems over time. These chapters provide the basic descriptive material which is necessary for an understanding of how different election systems work in theory and in practice, and is a prerequisite for any meaningful discussion over their respective merits. Throughout the book the author assesses the validity of the major arguments for and against different reform proposals in light of the empirical record.

In Chapter Seven, Farrell summarizes what is now known about the impact of different electoral systems at the macro level, most notably on proportionality, governmental stability, the number of parties, and representation of women and minorities. He also addresses the micro-level effects on voters and parties in the form of so-called "strategic" and "tactical" behavior, and concludes with a discussion of the politics of electoral reform. The chapter compiles a wealth of comparative data not only about the election systems found in different countries and their basic features, but also their properties, performance, and correlates.

In his review of the literature, Farrell takes care to present the major disagreements among the experts, whether conceptual (e.g., What is stability? Should we look at government longevity or policy vacillation vs. continuity?), or methodological (How do we compute an index of proportionality? What counting rule do we use for political parties in a system?). He sensitizes readers to the problem that different conclusions may be attributable to a lack of agreement on basic assumptions and ways of operationalizing variables. Farrell notes that the specialists also differ in the prescriptions they offer when it comes to the ultimate question of which system is preferable. Nor does he eschew the opportunity to offer his own.

Farrell's principal conclusion is an optimistic one (It is indeed a conclusion worthy of that appellation, not just another incantation of the refrain about the need for more research). Contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding the inevitability of a trade-off between key normative desiderata of electoral systems, Farrell assures us that "[w]e can have a proportional electoral system and, at the same time, a stable political system." How so? Because "the evidence in support of the argument that proportionality produces instability is tenuous" (p. 168). And which is the best electoral system, according to this author? Among all the alternatives considered in the book, Farrell opines, "the STV system perhaps comes closest to an ideal electoral system," because it "combines the virtues of proportionality with those of preferential voting" (p. 168).

Uses of the book

While this new textbook–apparently the first of its kind on this topic–does not provide enough substance for an entire course by itself, it can serve as an excellent introduction to the topic and all the major issues and controversies in a course on elections and election systems. It will do a good job preparing students to tackle more challenging fare, i.e., the technical literature with a narrower focus including the leading scholarly analyses of electoral systems and their political consequences starting with Douglas Rae's (1967) classic study, followed by Grofman and Lijphart's *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences* (1986), Lijphart's more recent empirical study of *Electoral Systems and Party Systems* (1994), and Taagepera and Shugart's *Seats and Votes* (1989).

Comparing Electoral Systems might also be used as reading for a unit on election systems in a thematic undergraduate course or graduate seminar in comparative politics, democratic systems, or Western European politics. It could easily serve as a supplement alongside a chapter on election system found in a topically structured stand-alone text on democracies or representative government (e.g., *Representative Government in Western Europe* by Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver, and Peter Mair [1992]).

Apart from classroom adoption, some instructors will find the book to be a useful and time-saving resource for

lecture preparation. Due to its user-friendly organization and conciseness it should be particularly valuable to those political scientists who do not specialize in this topic. But even experts will find some of the material instructive, particularly the country election data (which is fairly up-to-date), the information on recent reforms and reform debates in a number of countries, the comparative tables in Chapter Seven, and the sample ballots papers, which are not easily found elsewhere, much less assembled in a single book.

Didactic considerations

The presentation of the descriptive material and the analytical sections follows sound didactic principles. The author guides the reader from the familiar (i.e., the first-past-the-post or simple-plurality system) to the less familiar and more complex electoral arrangements. Throughout the text, key technical terms are either set in italics or bold face, and defined in the text. A number of them are also assembled in a separate glossary at the end of the book. Each chapter contains a concluding section, but wisely the summaries are not sufficiently detailed to tempt students to use them as a substitute for a reading of the whole chapter.

Finally, there is a bibliography that contains the most important works out of a literature which now encompasses–by one count–in excess of 2,500 items, and an index for easy reference.

The book is written for a British audience, but this is hardly a drawback, although it means that some of the terminology may be unfamiliar to American readers: *manifesto* is used instead of *party platform*; terms familiar to British readers, such as *FPTP*, are not included in the glossary, while other technical terms commonly used in American political discourse do not appear at all. For example, the book does not refer to microcosm and principal-agent conceptions of representation as demographic and substantive representation, respectively. It might be a good idea to adapt a future edition to the U.S. market and readership, with a more extensive assessment of what America might learn from looking at other countries' voting systems. This could be offered in lieu of, or in addition to, the discussion of what implications different systems have for the election reform debate in the United Kingdom, a question Farrell accords significant space throughout the book. A future edition customized for an American audience would, of course, also necessitate some other changes, such as the inclusion of issues and problems pertaining to electoral law and representation that are salient in the United States (e.g. reapportionment, electoral college, districting and redistricting, minority vote-dilution and race-based gerrymanders, at-large election systems, and primary elections).

Even in its present form, however, Farrell offers a primer on election systems that is commendably well-suited for a variety of courses offered in American universities. At the same time the volume is more than simply a college textbook, the author's modesty about its purpose notwithstanding. *Comparing Electoral Systems* not only explains the mechanics of major voting systems; it assembles and presents a rich amount of pertinent and up-to-date empirical data, takes stock of the state of our knowledge in the field, and synthesizes the growing literature in a now-vibrant area of scholarly activity which has important implications for constitutional engineering and political practice in many parts of the world.

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