

The Parts and the Whole

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The papers which have reached me to date contain very useful additions to our knowledge. May I, however, limit myself to a few remarks on basic assumptions and conclusions, leaving the discussion of details to others?

Edward Still's "A New Measurement and Graphic Display of the Relationship between Seats and Votes" raises certain terminological questions. The author, like Lijphart and others, terms a discrepancy between the percentage of votes and seats a "disproportionality" and refers to "overrepresented parties." Does this mean that mathematical proportionality is the norm? If that should be the case what is taken for granted poses serious problems; I tried to discuss some of them in my paper entitled "Evaluating Electoral Systems." Harry D. Gideonse, as early as 1948, expressed the gist of it all in the simple remark that elections are not a mere "census"; they are concerned with the type of "consensus" which, in a democracy, must be constantly established and reestablished.

The dynamics of this process begins with the very formation of political parties, which are not, as marriages are (or were) "made in heaven." They arise from the wish to secure, exercise and retain political power. Under majority voting this can be done only by winning the largest number of voters. At the very start political leaders encounter what John Locke called "all sorts and conditions of men." In the United States which has, ever since its formation and perhaps now more than ever, contained a great deal of diversity, this is more the case than anywhere else. The barrier to success, and also the measure of the accomplishment, is higher under majority voting than under any other system.

This process also includes a tendency to bestow on parties exceeding a certain strength a premium of seats. This tendency greatly improves the chances of a democratic system to function. This applies particularly to countries with a cabinet form of government where a reliable parliamentary majority is vital for the constitution and the maintenance of a government.

Problems arise, of course, from overlarge majorities. These are frequent in countries with multiple-member constituencies where majority voting may become, as the Belgians put it, *un scrutin d'écrasement*, an overpowering system. This is a major reason why P.R. was adopted in countries such as Belgium, Greece and Turkey. There were, in these countries, times when the administrative apparatus was not considered capable of setting up single-member constituencies (which the countries mentioned have not done to this day). That has ceased to be the case long since. The same applies to the fear that single-member constituencies would favor excessive parochialism, a fear often expressed in France and other Latin countries. When majority voting in single-member constituencies was reintroduced in France in 1958, voters clearly showed that they were, by then, quite able to focus on national issues.

There can be excessive majorities even with single-member constituencies. They are an aberration, but they make it hard for an opposition to fulfill its function of effectively checking the majority and also preparing itself - in its mental attitude as well as in the training of personnel - for the time when it is to take over the government. However, where there is a will to make the necessary adjustments there is more than one way of doing so. The one real need is to move away from the mindset induced by P.R. terminology which has been implanted so firmly in so many minds.

Just a word on Wilma Rule's "Twenty-three Democracies and Women's Parliamentary Representation." P.R. does make it easier for women to be elected. Should this be a reason to favor it and disregard the general implications of P.R.? In France, for instance, the latest European elections, held under P.R., gave Jean-Marie Le Pen's "National Front" roughly ten percent of the seats with ten percent of the votes. In the following local (cantonal) majority elections he got just one of the more than 2000 seats available. His political vocabulary is reminiscent of that of the Nazis. At the Left, the Communists could translate all of their votes into seats in the European elections, without Socialist support. In the cantonal elections they had Socialist support in the second ballot but did not do too well. The election law now proposed handicaps them in the small départements where the threshold for election is high. But they can expect a good harvest in the larger départements where the threshold presents no problems for them, and they can elect their candidates without the support of more moderate groups.

Suppose the French Socialists get their dream result in next year's parliamentary elections: enough seats for Le Pen to deprive the moderate parties at the right of a majority, thereby opening up a chance for the Socialists to form a majority together with the more moderate Rightists. No stronger poison could be devised for the partners of such a combination. Some of their voters would be unhappy with this kind of coalition from the start, and the probable continuation of the present economic austerity measures would, ~~give~~ ^{drive} others to the Communists and the extreme Rightists. Would not many women agree that such an outcome is a rather stiff price to pay for the gain of some extra seats?

There is, finally, the recent acceleration of women's electoral gains in majority elections, in particular in the United States. The 1985 Conference of the Women's Political Caucus rejoiced that women now hold 15 percent of the seats in state legislatures, up from 5 percent in 1971, and 9 percent, up from 1 percent, of the mayors' offices in cities above 30,000. They still hold only 25 out of 531 members of Congress, up from 15 in 1971. But they know that the road to higher offices leads over the lower ones, and that momentum is now very much on their side. As one Atlanta delegate told the Washington's Post David Broder (The Washington Post, July 3, 1985), "The sky is the limit."

Nor should we overlook that while majority elections tend to bring the women to the fore who are equipped to enter the ranks of the movers and shakers, women elected under P.R. tend to be the type who earned their spurs in rather limited areas: education, social work, and other "women's concerns." When ~~reaching~~ cabinet rank they tend to be shunted off to minor departments, such as social welfare and family affairs. As to their chances if they have proven their mettle in majority elections suffice it to mention the cases of Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Thatcher.

Sandra Featherman's paper suggests similar comments. There is a difference between a black candidate elected by a segregated (if self-segregated) electorate induced by P.R. and one who has had to face the broad spectrum of a geographic constituency. When the latter is elected he is more likely to be accepted as an equal, and eventually as a leader, by his peers. Take the black mayors of some of our major cities. They may have received more black than white votes, but white votes provided the margin of victory, and in bids for reelection the white support seems to widen. In parliamentary assemblies we are now beginning to see blacks in positions of leadership — Speaker Brown in California and Congressman Gray in Washington come to mind. That is different from leadership in a black party shaped by P.R.

Such leadership will, above all, not promote a white backlash, something which P.R. is quite likely to do. If it tends to correct the "under-representation" of blacks, it does the same for the "under-representation" of intolerant minorities among the whites; what the National Front is doing in France a similar group should have no difficulty doing here.

Similar dynamics operate among blacks. During the 1964 campaign the Rev. Jesse Jackson, supported by Louis Farrakhan, took positions which it was difficult not to interpret as anti-semitic. Jackson corrected himself in the course of the campaign and went to Israel after its close; defeat is an effective teacher! Farrakhan was more inclined to stick to his guns but then, he did not intend to run for any office. Jackson, desirous of retaining that option, had to choose between moderation and political oblivion, but for the average voter he remains on trial.

We move to a different set of problems in Lawrence D. Longley's paper entitled "Changing the System. Electoral Reform Politics in Great Britain and the United States." In both countries Professor Longley could form his impressions on the basis of practical experience and close observation. As to England he asks how the new reality created by the emergence of the Social Democratic Party and its alliance with the resurgent Liberals "should be accommodated in the nation's electoral system." For some, of course, beginning with Gladstone, and most Liberals of his day, minor parties should do the accommodating—replace one of the major parties or fade out of the picture. That was also the view of Britain's leading political scientists, beginning with Walter Bagehot, and continuing with Sydney Low, the American Abbot Lawrence Lowell, Harold Laski and Ivor Jennings. When, however, the post-Gaitskell Labour Party began to threaten that unity on fundamentals on the need for which Walter Bagehot was in complete agreement with Lord Balfour, a reassessment of the situation was natural. Too many political scientists failed, however, to see two things: First, one cannot devise a political shortcut to what is essentially an economic problem. Second, political innovations, in particular when they take the form of P.R., may lead to unintended results, and then prove irreversible. (May I, for details omitted in the following remarks, refer to earlier publications, beginning with the chapter on England in Democracy or Anarchy?, 2nd ed. Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York 1972; "Electoral Systems and Political Systems. Recent Developments in Britain" in Parliamentary Affairs, Winter 1974; "The English Malady and English Political Thinking," in Verfassung und Verfassungswirklichkeit. The Living Constitution, Berlin 1974.) England's at first creeping economic crisis became apparent as early as in the 1870's. First a mere slowdown in economic growth it was, in the 1920's, aggravated when errors in monetary policy were combined with inflexibility in wage rates. Even so the one-party-majority system of government functioned brilliantly during the depression, with recovery beginning as early as in 1932. After the war the welfare state created burdens not anticipated by Lord Beveridge or Clement Attlee. The result was aggravated by trade union demands not adapted to reality; eventually there came the chaotic developments within the Labour Party which Wilson and Callaghan could not control. Since 1979 Mrs. Thatcher has tried to turn things around in a manner which much of the public failed to understand and to which the unions only partly adapted. Even so it would be advisable to concentrate on the economic area where the trouble started, rather than to propose the kind of revolution in the political system which P.R. would entail, with the end of popularly based co-party-majority government and new chances for extremists of the Right and Left.

Professor Longley makes some very perceptive remarks about factors

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which affected the demand for electoral change and the people who shaped it. May I add a few points? First, proponents of P.R. always had the advantage of organisation. For a generation the Proportional Representation Society was headed by Mr. George N. Humphreys, a true gentleman of the old school. He emphasised publications, demonstrations of the working of the STV, organized letters to the editor and the like. After an interval the energetic Erid Lakeman took over and intensified the work. She presided over a significant terminological change: The P.R. Society became The Electoral Reform Society, and the cause of reform was identified with that of P.R. Similar terminological changes were stressed: Calling ^{proportional} voting the "first past the post" system became more widespread, as did "winner take all" for majority voting. Thus the notion was conveyed that the former was as simplistic as the children's game and the latter a grab for all there was. It is sad as well as significant that this terminology became frequent in academic writings; even the cautionary quotation marks are now all but gone.

Inevitably the claim that P.R. was just and fair was made more strongly. Should not some attention have been paid to what a prominent philosopher had to say about what is a philosophical question? In December 1943, when patriotic Frenchmen were discussing how to replace the decrepit Third Republic, Jacques Maritain wrote (in the December 1943 issue of La République Française):

In order to eliminate every attempt to introduce the "Trojan Horse of proportional representation into the democratic structure, let us note that just as the common good is not a simple sum of individual goods, so the common will is not a simple sum of individual wills. Universal suffrage does not have the aim to represent simply atomic wills and opinions, but to give form and expression, according to their respective importance, to the common currents of opinion and of will which exist in the nation. The political line of a democracy must frankly and decidedly be determined by the majority, while the parties composing the minority play the part, also fundamental, of the critical elements, in an opposition which is not destructive, but as much as possible constructive and cooperative. Thus the majority and minority express the will of the people in opposite, but complementary and equally real, fashions.

Maritain, then, saw clearly that "justice" for ideological parts means injustice for the whole. His advice ignored, he lived to see the results of P.R.: three ideological giants came to dominate the scene and no two of them could form an effective coalition. Matters improved only marginally when bits of majority voting were introduced in 1951. They softened the lines somewhat with the presence of more independent groups, but the resulting disarray was still so great that, by 1958, the French were glad that General deGaulle saved them from the parachutists ready to take over.

As to the current English discussion it is interesting to note that the Church of England now evidently endorses P.R. without there having been any systematic discussion of the subject. Other groups have come out in favor of P.R., none more effectively than the Mansard Society through sponsoring of its Commission on Electoral Reform. Its chairman, Lord Blake, was indeed distinguished and so were its members. But was it impartial? This has been called in question, even by The Economist, which itself favors P.R.

This does not mean that the English opposition to P.R. lacks intellectual strength. Norman Lamont's pamphlet, "Electoral Reform - No Reform" is brief and brilliant. Its author, Minister of State for Industry since 1979, has taken himself out of the debate while holding that office, but prominent Conservative and Labour leaders have expressed themselves forcefully on P.R. and its implications. None of this is, however, reflected in the kind of publications reaching academic audiences.

It will be the task of our Study Group to establish the needed standards for the effective presentation of both sides of the issues confronting us.