

ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS

Elections and referendums present people with the opportunity to cast a vote and express their will on how they and their country are to be governed. Representatives are selected to seats in parliament or other institutions through elections. Referendums, on the other hand, are votes that determine whether a particular issue is accepted or discarded. Elections are conducted in accordance with rules that direct the choices people make as they vote; these votes are transformed into parliamentary seats or the election of a president. In referendums, decisions on a given issue are not made by directly elected officials but by the people themselves. While elections are the norm in democracies, the manner in which referendums are used differ widely.

Election Regulations

An electoral system is a set of regulations that shape how people vote during elections and how these votes are turned into office allocations. In modern times, differences in who gets to participate in voting in democracies is a matter of detail and not of principle since, after rather hard-fought battles over the twentieth century, formerly disenfranchised groups such as working-class men, minorities and women all partake in the vote generally after the age of eighteen.

Types of Electoral Systems

The primary difference among electoral systems is between those based on single-member, majoritarian constituencies, or *first-past-the-post (FPP)* systems, and those based on *proportional representation (PR)* in multi member constituencies. In FPP systems, the most dominant party within the constituency wins the election, with no representation afforded to the rest of the parties involved. The alternative vote and two round systems are different iterations of this common structure.

In proportional representation systems, through many different methods, the principle of granting each voting bloc a 'fair share' in representation is achieved. In other words, the proportion of votes cast corresponds to the same proportion of seats allocated. Different iterations of PR systems are list and mixed systems, and the single transferable vote. The level of choice afforded to voters in PR systems to express their say in party candidates varies, with non-PR systems giving voters no say at all.

Both systems have their unique advantages and disadvantages. In PR, a wider variety of parties tend to be given a shot at election. On the other hand, FPP tends to allow more independence for individual members of parliament without overly centralised party control. Furthermore, members of parliament have a direct responsibility to a given constituency, so accountability may be stronger.

Referendums

While the majority of political decisions today are made by representative government, meaning through elected officials, in some instances a referendum is used which directly consults the people upon a specific issue requiring them to vote upon it. Referendums may be compulsory given the particular circumstance under review, such as if a country's sovereignty is concerned, or they may be optional in which instance they may be susceptible to political manipulation. Either way, a referendum may be triggered at the behest of a group of voters, called an initiative, or of a political institution such as the parliament. Referendums can be broken down to two kinds: decision-promoting and decision-controlling.

Arguments for and against referendums abound. Those for them cite that they enrich democracy via people's direct involvement, facilitate an explicit verdict on a discrete issue, add legitimacy to key issues, create a more well-informed electorate, and enhance democracy, when appropriately used, according to evidence. Those against them cite that lower quality policy decisions are being made by non-experts, that they may give biased majorities power to violate minority rights, that only the most invested on an issue vote, leaving others out, and that they minimise the decision-making process by choosing an issue *du jour*. Regarding the latter, in fact, the regularity of referendums is on the rise even though they are still few and far between. The available empirical data on referendums indicate that the fears of detractors and the hopes of supporters are overstated.

Adapted from Michael Gallagher, 'Elections and referendums' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press 2011)

Josep Colomer, *Handbook of Electoral System Choice* (Palgrave Macmillan 2004)

David M Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan 2010)

Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay, 'Sri Lanka Referendum: Jayewardene Consolidates Power' (1983) 6 *Strategic Analysis* 616, 621

Dinesha Samararatne, 'Sri Lanka's First Election Commission: Strengthening Electoral Management or Advancing Electoral Integrity?' (2021) *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 1, 21