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French experience shows that an electoral system can produce different results depending on the social and institutional influences of the time.

Two-Ballot Majority Electoral Systems

Robert Elgie

The two-ballot majority system is an increasingly popular method of election. It has recently been adopted by Israel where it is used for prime ministerial elections as well as by a number of newly democratised regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland and Ukraine, where it is variously used for both presidential and parliamentary elections. In addition, the two-ballot majority system is also well established in Austria and Portugal where it is used for presidential elections, in the United States where it is used for gubernatorial primary elections in certain states and, most notably, in France where it is used for presidential, parliamentary, municipal and cantonal (i.e. departmental) elections.

In fact, the term 'two-ballot majority' electoral system is a generic one. Such systems are also known as dual-ballot systems, majority systems with second ballot, majority run-off systems and two-ballot (or double-ballot) plurality with run-off systems. For the most part these terms are interchangeable. However, it is worth noting that there are different forms of the two-ballot majority system and that the general consequences of this type of system (see below) may vary according to the particular form that is adopted. In this context a basic distinction may be made between two-ballot majority-majority systems and two-ballot majority-plurality systems. In both cases, and in common with all forms of this system, an absolute majority (more than 50% of the valid votes cast) is required for election at the first ballot. However, these two forms vary when no such first ballot majority is forthcoming. Under the two-ballot majority-majority system only the top two candidates from the first ballot are allowed to contest the second ballot (where one will necessarily win an absolute majority), whereas under the two-ballot majority-plurality system more than two candidates are allowed to proceed (meaning that only a plurality of votes is needed for victory). As a general rule, the first system is more majoritarian than the second. Even then, a further distinction should be made between the different rules for progression under the two-ballot majority-plurality systems.

1. See Robert Elgie, 'The Institutional logics of presidential elections' in Robert Elgie (ed.), *Electing the French President, The 1995 Presidential Election* (London, Macmillan, 1996), pp.51-72.

2. Maurice Duverger, 'Duverger's Law: Forty Years Later' in Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart (eds.), *Electoral Laws and their Political Consequences* (New York, Agathon Press, 1986), pp. 69-84. It should be remembered that Duverger defines a 'multiparty' system as being one in which there are more than two parties.

3. William H. Riker, 'The Two-party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science', *American Political Science Review*, 76:4 (1986), pp.753-66.

Here, there is usually some limit to the number of candidates who are allowed to contest the second ballot and so there is still a threshold which must be crossed in order to proceed. For example, in France when the two-ballot majority system was reintroduced for parliamentary elections in 1958 candidates needed to win only 5% of the votes cast at the first ballot in order to be eligible to compete at the second. However, in 1967 the threshold was raised so that candidates needed to win the votes of 10% of the *registered electorate* in order to proceed and in 1976 it was raised again to 12.5% of the registered electorate. As a general rule, the higher the threshold under the two-ballot majority-plurality system the more majoritarian are its consequences.

Over the years a considerable body of work has been conducted on the impact of the two-ballot majority electoral system. In particular, this type of system has been linked with two general consequences: multi-party competition tempered by alliances and disproportional electoral results. In the next section these consequences will be explored. In the final section, the impact of the two-ballot majority electoral system will be placed in context so as to build up a fuller picture of its effects. In both sections, the French case will be used to illustrate the various arguments.

General consequences of two-ballot majority electoral systems

The first general consequence of the two-ballot majority system is that it produces strong incentives for multi-party competition to occur at the first ballot and for alliance-building to occur at the second and decisive ballot.¹ This leads Duverger to conclude that two-ballot majority systems tend to produce multi-party systems tempered by alliances.²

Multi-party competition occurs at the first ballot because there are strong incentives both for parties to stand candidates and for voters to vote for them. Parties are encouraged to stand candidates because it takes less for them to 'win' at the first ballot of two-ballot majority systems than at the single and decisive ballot of first-past-the-post plurality systems. At the first ballot of two-ballot majority systems, 'winning' simply means crossing the electoral threshold and being able to compete at the second ballot. Therefore, any party which feels that it has at least a fair chance of doing so will be encouraged to stand. This situation favours the formation and survival of relatively small parties. In addition, parties are also encouraged to stand candidates because, even if they do not expect to 'win' and progress to the second ballot themselves, they may still hope to gain enough votes to influence the alliance-building process at the second ballot (see below) and, hence, the outcome of the election. In this way, as Riker states, two-ballot majority systems encourage parties to stand at the first ballot by allowing them 'to get a bit of political influence with relatively few votes'.³ Equally,

4. Robert Elgie, 'Christian Democracy in France: the politics of electoral constraint' in David Hanley (ed.), *Christian Democracy in Europe. A Comparative Perspective* (London, Pinter, 1994), pp.155-67.
5. Howard Machin, 'Representation and Distortion in the 1993 French Election', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 46:4 (1993), pp. 628-36.

two-ballot majority systems encourage voters to vote for small parties. At the first ballot voters can support the candidate who is nearest to their own preferences. In this way, rather like proportional systems, they can vote 'sincerely' for small parties or protest parties without fear of 'wasting' their vote. It is only at the second ballot that voters are encouraged to support the candidate who is nearest to their own preferences and who stands a chance of winning. Only at the second ballot, then are voters encouraged to vote 'usefully' and choose candidates from larger parties, even if such candidates represent their second preference.

Alliance-building occurs at the second ballot because parties usually need to gain more support at the second ballot than at the first in order to be elected. In the case of parties coming second or below at the first ballot the logic behind this point is clear. All other things being equal, they simply will not be elected unless they increase their support. Therefore, they do deals with parties which have been eliminated in order to widen their electoral appeal. They may even convince like-minded parties which have not been eliminated to desist from standing at the second ballot in order to increase the chances of defeating better placed rivals. Similar alliance-building incentives also apply to the party which topped the first ballot poll. If it does not seek out allies at the second ballot, then it runs the risk of being overtaken by a party which has managed to construct a successful coalition of support. For example, in France since 1958 the two-ballot majority system has encouraged second-ballot alliances between parties of the left on the one hand and parties of the right on the other. Whatever their ideological differences the socialists and communists have regularly constructed formal or informal second-ballot alliances in order to defeat the right, while the gaullists and liberals have regularly done the same in order to defeat the left. By contrast, the centre has been squeezed. The small Christian Democratic party has maintained an independent existence (consistent with the logic of the first ballot) but has been obliged to associate itself with the right-wing alliance (consistent with the logic of the second ballot) in order to maintain at least some political influence.⁴

The second general consequence of two-ballot majority systems is that they tend to produce disproportional electoral results. As Machin has demonstrated in the case of elections to the French National Assembly since 1958, two-ballot majority systems tend to produce results which are more comparable to British-style plurality systems than to proportional systems.⁵ For example, the right-wing gaullist-liberal (RPR-UDF) coalition won only 39.7% of the votes cast at the first ballot of the 1993 election but gained 77.8% of the seats in the National Assembly. As this result suggests, though, the French two-ballot majority system does not necessarily lead to single-party majority government. Indeed, unlike the British system, the French system has

6. Joseph A. Schlesinger and Mildred Schlesinger, 'The Reaffirmation of a Multiparty System in France', *American Political Science Review*, 84:4 (1990), pp.1077-1101.
7. David Goldey and Philip Williams, 'France' in Vernon Bogdanor and David Butler (eds.), *Democracy and Elections. Electoral Systems and their Political Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.62-83.

produced single-party majorities on only two occasions since 1958. In 1968 the gaullist party won an overall majority by itself and in 1981 the socialist party did likewise (although on both occasions these parties still formed coalitions as a way of rewarding their allies). For the most part, as in 1993, the multi-party and alliance-building incentives of the electoral system have tended to produce coalition majorities built around one or other of the left- or right-wing alliances that have contested the second ballot. These coalitions, however, have tended to be very stable. By virtue of the fact that alliances have been forged prior to the electoral consultation and because each of the partners has been aware that similar alliances will be necessary at subsequent elections, coalition governments have tended not to be subject to party defections. Indeed, even if inter-party tensions have been a permanent feature of the Fifth Republic's political system, only once in 1962 has the government actually been brought down in a vote of no-confidence. In this way, therefore, the French experience of the two-ballot majority system since 1958 has clearly demonstrated the majoritarian consequences of this type of system.

The two-ballot electoral system in context

Having identified the general consequences of the two-ballot majority system, it is now necessary to place these arguments in context. In particular, it is important to stress three factors which serve to shape the effects of this type of system. These are: sociological factors, institutional factors and the impact of the totality of electoral systems within a given state.

It is almost banal to say that sociological factors shape the consequences of electoral systems, but it is, nevertheless, worth emphasising this point. The experiences of the Third French Republic (1875-1940) and the Fifth French Republic both of which are associated with the two-ballot majority system are particularly illuminating in this regard. In the Third Republic, and in contrast to the Fifth Republic, political competition was centred around two cross-cutting social cleavages, clericalism/anti-clericalism and socialism/anti-socialism. In the Third Republic, and again in contrast to the Fifth Republic, centrist parties stood to gain from the electoral system. In particular, as Schlesinger and Schlesinger have stated, 'The Radical Party ... laid claim to the reformist position, translating its message – neither reaction nor revolution – into an effective electoral strategy for garnering second-ballot support'.⁶ As Goldey and Williams have noted, this meant that in right-wing regions the entire left voted for the Radical candidate at the second ballot as the only way of defeating the clerical parties. Similarly, in left-wing regions the clerical electorate also voted for the Radical candidate at the second ballot as the only way of defeating the left.⁷ In parliament, though, the result of this situation was that the Radical Party

and its centrist allies were ill-disciplined. Party cohesion was low as some deputies were inclined to look towards the interests of their anti-clerical/pro-socialist electorate, while others looked towards the interests of their pro-clerical/anti-socialist electorate. The resulting lack of party discipline was at least one reason why firm parliamentary alliances were difficult to secure and maintain. Governments relied on shifting majorities and, in contrast to their Fifth Republic counterparts, were frequently brought down. Therefore, as a result of different sociological conditions the same electoral system can be seen to have produced very different results under the Third Republic when compared with the Fifth Republic.

Just as sociological factors shape the consequences of electoral systems, so too do institutional factors. In the French case, the primacy of presidential politics and the introduction of the direct election of the president in 1962 has enhanced the majoritarian aspects of the two-ballot majority system. The president is the most powerful actor within the political system and the election of the president is the most important event in the political calendar. The presence of a powerful directly elected president has nationalised the process of political competition. It has meant that parties in the Fifth Republic have had to secure alliances at the national level and not at the local level as under the Third Republic. In turn, this has helped to increase the level of party discipline in parliament and has been a further factor ensuring that inter-party alliances have been relatively stable. In addition, the introduction of the direct election of the president has served to penalise (usually small) parties which have not had viable presidential candidates and has obliged them to become satellite parties of those which have. For example, the long term decline of the communists was accelerated because the party was never able to field a presidential candidate who had a serious chance of winning. By contrast, the socialists benefited from being able to stand popular candidates at presidential elections who attracted votes to the party through their campaigns. In these ways, then, the majoritarian consequences of the two-ballot majority system have been amplified in the Fifth Republic because it has been used to elect such an important political figure. Indeed, it is useful to contrast France with Austria and Portugal in this respect. In these two countries the two-ballot majority system is also used to elect the head of state. However, the Austrian and Portuguese presidents enjoy little more than ceremonial political powers. Consequently, in these cases the wider institutional architecture of the regime diminishes the majoritarian effects of the two-ballot majority system.

Finally, the impact of the totality of electoral systems within a given state must also be considered. In France the two-ballot majority system was in operation at all levels of representation from 1965-79. It was used for legislative and cantonal (departmental) elections after 1958, for

municipal elections after 1964 and for presidential elections after 1965. In this context, the general consequences of the two-ballot majority system were reinforced and helped to restructure the political forces in the country. Gradually, though, proportional electoral systems were introduced. In 1979 a national list system with a 5% threshold was adopted for elections to the European Parliament. In 1982 a 'dose' of proportional representation was included for elections to municipal councils. In 1986 a departmental list system based on the d' Hondt (highest average) formula with a 5% threshold was chosen for elections to regional councils. Finally, in 1986 (and 1986 only) a similar system was used for the election to the National Assembly. Machin has argued that the introduction of PR has had a major impact upon party competition and that 'small and extremist parties ... can now not only survive but even prosper...'.⁸ Leaving aside any sociological changes that may have occurred since 1979, it is apparent that the new more fluid and disaggregated French party system of the 1990s is at least partly a result of the increasing use of proportional representation and the countervailing effects that this has had on the generally majoritarian aspects of the established two-ballot majority system.

Conclusion

The two-party majority system is popular because it appears to meet two of the most oft-cited requirements of electoral systems. Firstly, it allows small parties to maintain an independent existence. They may find it difficult to win seats themselves but they may also be in a position to shape the outcome of elections and be rewarded as a result. Secondly, it creates a favourable environment for strong government. Parliamentary majorities are often forthcoming and disciplined parties are usually the norm. That said, as with any other type of electoral system, these requirements will only be met if the necessary sociological and institutional conditions also apply. In particular, the French experience has demonstrated the contrasting effects of the two-ballot majority system and has indicated the inherent difficulties of institutional electoral engineering.