
WELLBEING FOR ALL: THE ROLE OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

促进共同福祉：选举制度的作用

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ABSTRACT

Wellbeing for all is the result of effective politics. However, in most countries, the political environment is dominated by ethnic, religious, and economic cleavages, which drive politicians to cater to a fraction of the population rather than to society as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to implement political institutions which encourage politicians to achieve wellbeing for all. But which institutions work? We suggest that much can be learned from Switzerland. While it has a highly diverse society, it is politically stable and economically wealthy. Traditionally, its success has been explained by federalism and direct democracy. We highlight the role of a third formal institution, the electoral system. Proportional and majority elections coexist at all levels of the Swiss state. In addition, the electoral system has specific features: majority elections usually take place in multi-seat districts, and they are often at-large elections, meaning that there is only one large district covering the whole jurisdiction.

The academic literature is often critical of multi-seat majority elections. However, the alleged problems regarding the representation of minority groups cannot be observed in Switzerland. The country's specific combination of proportional and majority elections plays a decisive role in securing efficient, stable, and inclusive political outcomes. Importantly, this institution can be transferred to other countries much more easily than extensive decentralisation or direct democracy.

A high level of wellbeing among citizens is not a divine gift. Instead, it is the result of effective politics. However, in most countries, the political environment is dominated by ethnic, religious, territorial, and economic cleavages, which encourage politicians to cater to a fraction of the population rather than solving societal problems and achieving wellbeing for all. Therefore, it is necessary to develop political institutions that redirect the politicians' focus to society as a whole. But which institutions are capable of doing so?

We recommend examining a largely neglected aspect of Swiss institutions. Although Switzerland is well-known for being economically and politically stable, its society is highly diverse with respect to languages and religions. Because Switzerland is experiencing extensive immigration, its share of foreigners is large (about 25 percent) and increasing. As the rate of naturalizations is high, the citizenry is growing quickly and has an increasingly diverse ethnical and cultural background. From 1960 to 2018, the Swiss population grew by 59.9 percent, which strikingly contrasts with other successful economies such as Germany (13.9), Austria (25.5), Denmark (26.5), or Sweden (36.5). Nevertheless, Swiss politics has maintained a strong focus on efficiency and is highly inclusive. Actually, political concordance, or consociationalism, is often seen as being a central element in Swiss politics (see Linder & Mueller, 2021). Not only do parliaments feature multiple parties but governments at the local, cantonal, and federal levels are, in general,

also composed of members of all key parties from all over the political spectrum. The standard explanations for these favourable outcomes are extensive decentralisation and direct democracy, which are characteristic for Switzerland. However, we believe that a third formal institution heavily contributes to Switzerland's efficient and inclusive politics: its electoral system. The idea was first suggested by Eichenberger (2015), Schafer (2019) and Eichenberger, Schafer, & Stadelmann (2019) provide empirical evidence, and Eichenberger, Portmann, Schafer, & Stadelmann (2021) a broad theoretical discussion.

THE POWER OF MULTI-SEAT MAJORITY ELECTIONS

The Swiss electoral system combines proportional representation with strong majoritarian features. At all government levels, the two electoral rules coexist. At the federal level, there are two parliamentary chambers with identical competencies. Members of the National Council, which has 200 seats, are elected by proportional representation. Members of the Council of States, which has 46 seats, are mainly elected by majority vote. At the municipal level and the cantonal level, citizens elect not only a parliament but also all members of government. Parliamentarians are elected by proportional representation; members of government are, in the main, elected by majority vote.

Three features of the Swiss electoral system serve to prevent extremism and support concordance. First, in general, the holders of offices that are especially attractive to politicians are elected by majority vote (members of local governments and the small Council of States are more influential than members of local parliaments and the large National Council). Therefore, politicians who aspire to hold an influential office have an incentive to take moderate positions. Second, in other countries, the majority rule is usually implemented in

single-seat districts. However, in Switzerland, it is implemented in multi-seat districts. Voters have as many votes as there are seats to fill, and they can freely allocate all or only a part of their votes to candidates (but they cannot cumulate votes on individual candidates). Third, members of cantonal and municipal governments are chosen via at-large elections, that is within one single district which covers the whole canton or municipality.

THE BENEFICIAL ROLE OF CHOOSEY VOTERS

In the academic literature, which mostly focuses on the United States, multi-seat majority elections are deemed problematic. There are fears that block voting—when citizens give all their votes to candidates from their favourite party—can dominate. The practice can result in the largest party winning all the seats, leaving minority groups unrepresented. Therefore, it has been argued that majoritarian elections being held in a large number of single-seat districts may lead to better representation for minority groups. Yet in Switzerland, minorities are usually well represented following a multi-seat majority election. Why is that the case?

In multi-seat majoritarian elections in Switzerland, voters tend to distribute their votes among candidates from different parties for two reasons. First, the use of proportional representation in National Council and local parliamentary elections leads to the presence of many parties (Duverger, 1954). Therefore, the ideological differences between parties and the psychological cost of citizens voting for candidates from a party that is not their favourite are small. In fact, voters may feel that some of these candidates represent their interests better, either for ideological reasons or due to personal characteristics, such as their professional background, gender, cultural roots, or private relationships.

Second, in Switzerland, people from different social and ethnic groups are in frequent contact for several reasons. For instance, public schools and universities are of good quality and, thus, attractive to all groups, military service is compulsory for men of all strata, and public transport is widely used by all socio-economic groups. Such contacts support voting across party lines and, thus, prevent block voting.

HOW EFFECTIVE POLITICS EVOLVES

The fact that many voters do not vote in blocks in Swiss multi-seat majority elections has important implications for the quality of representation and the moderation of politics.

First, voters who give some of their votes to candidates of other parties than their favourite party, cannot vote for a full set of candidates of their favourite party. As a result, the largest party does not automatically win all seats if it nominates as many candidates as there are seats to fill. But parties can increase their candidates' electoral prospects by reducing the number of candidates. Thus, all parties rush towards reducing the number of their candidates, which forces them to reduce the number even further. In the end, the number of votes per voter is much larger than the number of candidates per party, which induces the voters to distribute their votes over the candidates of several parties.

Second, the fact that block voting is not common and, thus, the number of candidates per party is smaller than the number of votes per voter, encourages candidates to take moderate positions close to that of the median voter. This may allow candidates to gain votes from those who feel close to other parties on both sides of the political spectrum. As long as the number of overall candidates is less than the number of seats doubled, the centripetal forces remain strong (Cox, 1990; Eichenberger et al., 2021). As these elections are at large, the successful candidates have to consider the broad interests of the whole

jurisdiction rather than specific local interests. As a result, the elected politicians have—despite belonging to different parties—a similar mindset, which allows them to cooperate in order to promote effective policies aiming at the wellbeing of all.

WHAT FOLLOWS FOR FRACTIONALISED SOCIETIES?

The design of the Swiss electoral system suggests promising opportunities. At-large multi-seat majority elections tend to produce proportional, moderate, and efficient outcomes. We hypothesize that this result would also apply if the voting system were implemented in other countries with diverse societies. However, it is absolutely necessary that multi-seat majority elections be held alongside proportional elections which generate a multi-party system. This is an important prerequisite for multi-seat majority elections not to end in block voting and thus landslide wins for the largest party, but rather end in concordance, inclusiveness, efficiency, and stable political decisions, or, in short, wellbeing for all.



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