

# **A SHORT HISTORY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN WESTERN EUROPE**

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Andrew McLaren Carstairs

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*By*

ANDREW McLAREN CARSTAIRS

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# *A Short History of Electoral Systems in Western Europe*

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## *Introduction*

The years 1864 and 1885 may be regarded as milestones in the history of electoral systems in the parliaments of Europe, because in each of these years there was held an international conference to consider and assess new ideas which had recently been put forward on the subject of electoral reform.

In September 1864, in Amsterdam, a conference of the Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales devoted two days to the examination of the system of proportional representation which had recently been devised by the English barrister Thomas Hare. This system, which has come to be known as the 'single transferable vote', is the system which has been most widely advocated in English-speaking countries ever since. The conference was significant, however, not because of the specific recommendations which were examined and discussed, but because it marked the growth of a general movement in favour of proportional representation in place of the majority systems which had, to an increasingly notorious extent, resulted in some countries in the election of parliaments which did not fairly represent the opinions of electors, and in which minorities were often greatly under-represented.

Hare's publications (from 1857 onwards) were not the first occasion on which the principles of proportional representation, or representation of minorities, had been advocated. Origins of ideas are inevitably hard to trace, but reference was commonly made to two individuals in particular who seem to have been among the first to make an impact with their ideas on the subject. One of these was the 'Radical Duke' of Richmond who, in 1780, proposed in the British House of Lords that for elections to the House of Commons the country should be divided into constituencies as nearly equal in population as possible. This was not, of course, proportional representation of parties or of minorities, but ensured only that each member should represent an equal number of the population; but the duke's proposals sowed the idea of proportionality. Also, the method he advocated, which was to divide the total population by the number of seats in parliament, and arrive at a quota or quotient of population which each member should represent, was basically the same as the method used later in some systems of proportional representation, including the single transferable vote.

The other individual, more famous and more widely quoted than the 'Radical Duke', was the Marquis de Mirabeau who, in a speech made to the Assembly of Provence in 1789, put forward the argument that the composition of a parliament should reflect in accurate detail the will of the electorate. Just as a map reproduces on a small scale the various

features of a landscape, so should a parliament reproduce on a small scale the desires of the electors. Parliament should be a mirror of the political opinions of the whole electorate.

Earlier than Mirabeau, two French mathematicians, Jean-Charles de Borda (in 1770) and the Marquis de Condorcet (in 1785), had been the first (effectively at least) to draw attention to some technical problems involved in securing fair and accurate results from elections. It was Mirabeau's imagery which fired the imagination, but it was largely the practical difficulties of putting such ideas into effect which were responsible for a delay of some generations before they were applied to elections for any parliamentary institutions in Europe.

Meanwhile, many varieties of electoral system were devised, and some experiments in proportional representation occasionally took place. Histories of these were later compiled by the electoral reformers Ernest Naville in Switzerland and Maurice Vernes in France. But it was with the publications of Thomas Hare and John Stuart Mill in England that the movement in favour of proportional representation may be regarded as having 'taken off into sustained growth'.

The Hare system, in its earlier versions, proposed that the whole nation should be a single constituency, and this novel suggestion deterred many potential supporters of proportional representation. Also, in its earlier forms, the results of the system were liable to be influenced by random factors and chance, and it was thus open to criticism by those who sought a system which would be consistent and accurate as well as fair. There was therefore much debate in the 1860s and 1870s about the relative merits of alternative electoral systems. A principal forum for this discussion was Switzerland, where the distorted representation of communities divided by race, language and religion created political difficulties which were particularly acute. In 1865 the Association Réformiste de Genève was founded, and from 1868 onwards its bulletins disseminated ideas on the subject derived from leading thinkers in many countries. In 1867 the association adopted as its recommended system of proportional representation a *list* system of election, devised (perhaps first) by Victor Considérant in France in 1834, and developed by Antoine Morin in Switzerland in 1862.

In Belgium, where communities were also deeply divided by language, an electoral reform society was formed in 1881, entitled the Association Réformiste pour l'Adoption de la Représentation Proportionnelle. One of its founders was Victor D'Hondt, whose system of proportional representation of parties was formulated in the following year. One of the earliest acts of the new Belgian association was to convene an international conference on electoral reform, which was held in Antwerp on 7, 8 and 9 August 1885. Its proceedings were recorded in the monthly journal *La Représentation proportionnelle*, published by the Belgian association. It

was expected, and perhaps intended, that this occasion would provide the platform for a debate between the supporters of the Hare and the D'Hondt systems, and a decision in favour of one or the other.

So far as the debate between the Hare and D'Hondt systems was concerned, the conference of 1885 was a disappointment. The most active delegates were those from Switzerland, France and Belgium, and although there were representatives also from Germany, Italy, Holland and Denmark there was none from the recently formed Proportional Representation Society in England. Sir John Lubbock, chairman of that society, wrote to express his regrets at not being able to attend, and the only British contribution was a paper written by Thomas Hare, which was read to the conference in the writer's absence.

As regards a choice between electoral systems, the conference came to a decision in favour of the D'Hondt system. At the end of the proceedings a motion was proposed by Maurice Vernes of France and seconded by Eduard Hagenbach-Bischoff of Switzerland, and was carried without dissent by members of the conference. The terms of the resolution, translated from the French, were as follows:

The international conference on proportional representation, convened by the Association Réformiste Belge, and assembled at Antwerp on 7, 8 and 9 August 1885, resolves:

- 1 that the system of elections by absolute majorities violates the liberty of the elector, provokes fraud and corruption, and can give a majority of seats to a minority of the electorate;
- 2 that proportional representation is the only means of assuring power to the real majority of the country, an effective voice to minorities, and exact representation to all significant groups of the electorate;
- 3 that while the particular needs of each country are recognised, the D'Hondt system of competing lists with divisors, adopted by the Belgian association, is a considerable advance on the systems previously proposed, and constitutes a practical and efficient means of achieving proportional representation.

The D'Hondt system, and variations of the party-list and divisor systems on which it is based, are those which have universally been adopted in those countries of Continental Europe which have discarded majority systems in favour of proportional representation, and the decisions of 1885 must have contributed to this outcome. Appropriately, it was in Belgium that the system devised by the Belgian, Victor D'Hondt, was first adopted, in 1899. By 1920 proportional representation had been adopted in most countries of Western Europe, and it is with the history of electoral systems in these countries that this work is mainly concerned.

A distinct feature of the electoral systems in Europe is the variety of devices which were adopted. Although their basic principles were largely similar, based on D'Hondt, each country adopted a system which in certain important respects was different from every system adopted anywhere else. The differences are due to the variety of circumstances which influenced the process of electoral reform in each country. No electoral system is adopted without reference to the framework of constitutional and political institutions within which it must operate; and these in turn have been shaped by history and custom, and by internal relations between communities which may differ in race, language and religion. These aspects of historical development must be taken into account when one seeks to understand the changes in the electoral systems in each country.

It is also generally the experience that changes in electoral systems were brought about as a result of practical compromises between divergent political interests, or in pursuit of the aims of a particular political party. It would not be correct to assume, however, that political idealism and the search for theoretical perfection in electoral systems did not play a significant part in the progress of electoral reform. It was, after all, some variation of systems devised by the theorists which was generally adopted, particularly those devised by Thomas Hare, Victor D'Hondt, Eduard Hagenbach-Bischoff and A. Sainte-Laguë.

In Part One of this book a brief analysis will be given of the principal types of electoral system which were used in Western Europe. It is not possible to adhere to any chronological scheme, since different countries were at any given time at different stages of development. Instead, the countries of Western Europe will thereafter be grouped in a manner suggested by some features which they have in common.

Part Two is devoted to Belgium and the Netherlands, starting with Belgium, which was the first country in Europe to establish proportional representation for its popular assembly. The historical evolution of these two countries was influenced by their unification at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and the independence movement in Belgium thereafter. (Luxemburg is omitted, although it has an interesting electoral system which enables electors to exercise an effective choice between individual candidates as well as parties. Apart from a chapter by Dieter Nohlen in *Die Wahl der Parlamente*, the handbook referred to below, there is a shortage of literature on the history of this electoral system.)

Part Three includes the Scandinavian countries, and also their Nordic neighbour, Finland. The dynastic and constitutional relationships between the Scandinavian countries had a profound influence on their constitutional histories, and a bearing on the electoral systems which they adopted. The parliamentary histories of Norway and Finland were closely linked with the struggles for independence in those two

countries. One feature which the Scandinavian countries had in common was that, unlike most other countries in Europe which adopted proportional representation, they were each largely homogeneous in race, language and religion, and were in this respect not faced with political problems arising out of differences between communities. In Finland there existed a Swedish or Swedish-speaking minority which was better educated and more affluent than the Finns, but this was a factor of diminishing importance. All the Scandinavian countries eventually adopted a version of the electoral system devised in 1910 by the Frenchman A.Sainte-Laguë, while Finland adopted a distinctive system unique in Europe.

Part Four refers to Austria and Switzerland, which are examples of states deeply divided between different races, languages and religions, and which carried the principles of proportional representation further than most other countries.

Part Five includes the Great Powers on the Continent, Italy, Germany and France, each of which had a quite distinct history of electoral systems and of electoral reforms.

Part Six relates to Ireland and the United Kingdom. The Republic of Ireland is the only independent nation in Western Europe, apart from Denmark and Malta, in which the single transferable vote has been adopted for parliamentary election. It was in the United Kingdom that the system was devised, and the history of the electoral reform movement in the United Kingdom is largely a history of unsuccessful attempts to have this system adopted for elections to the UK parliament.

During the long periods of dictatorship in modern Spain and Portugal electoral systems in those countries were incapable of representing the political views of the population, and they have therefore not been included in this study.

The focus throughout is on the popular or lower chamber of parliament, where more than one chamber exists. Upper chambers (in some countries called the second chamber, and in others the first) are rarely intended to be fairly representative of the whole population, and where elections for such chambers take place at all the precise nature of the electoral system is rarely of major importance. There are exceptions, and where the composition of the upper chamber, or elections to that chamber, have a bearing on proposals for electoral reform, these circumstances will be taken into account. Also excluded are elections to the European Parliament. It is intended that a common electoral system should be adopted for future elections to this parliament, and if this is achieved the elections held in 1979 may be the only ones using the systems then adopted separately in each country.



## REFERENCES: INTRODUCTION

There is no work of reference in English which corresponds to the monumental series edited by Dolf Sternberger and Bernard Vogel, *Die Wahl der Parlamente und anderer Staatsorgane: Ein Handbuch* (Volume I, Europe). This has superseded the earlier standard work by Karl Braunias, *Das Parlamentarische Wahlrecht*. The handbook reviews the political theory of democracy, examines the various electoral systems which have been used, and gives a history of the electoral system in each country, accompanied by lists of documentary sources, historical statistics of election results and extensive bibliographies.

As a guide to the constitutional context within which parliamentary institutions have been developed and electoral systems introduced, there is the series edited by Albert B. Blaustein and Gisbert Flanz, *Constitutions of the Countries of the World*. This gives a chronological summary of past constitutional developments, and is continuously brought up to date.

For histories of election results reference may be made to Stein Rokkan and Jean Meyriat (eds), *International Guide to Electoral Statistics*, and to T. Mackie and R. Rose (eds), *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, the first of which indicates in tabular form the main changes which have taken place in the electoral systems used. For recent election results information is provided in *Keesings Contemporary Archives*. In these works only overall election results are given for each nation. If one wishes to examine in detail how an electoral system has operated and influenced the results it is necessary to have the figures for individual constituencies, and this information has to be sought in fuller reports or studies of particular elections.

PART ONE  
*Electoral Systems*



# 1

## *The Earlier Electoral Systems*

In the nations of Western Europe in the nineteenth century and in the earlier decades of the twentieth century there was a general movement in the direction of more democratic political institutions which took several different forms, each of which tended to reinforce the others. There was a movement for the establishment or strengthening of parliamentary institutions, with governments becoming responsible to parliaments, and parliaments increasingly able to influence or control the appointment of governments. Extensions of the franchise for parliamentary elections enabled an increasingly large proportion of the population to gain representation in parliament. The growth of political parties, sometimes at first in parliament itself and later in the electorate as a whole, made possible the more effective representation of particular sections of the population, the development of more coherent political policies and the exercise of greater influence on governments. With these developments it became a matter of increasing concern that the elected members of parliament and the parties they supported should fairly represent the various interests and opinions of the electorate. The struggle to attain any one of these objectives in particular might be achieved in a different order. The history of the electoral systems in each country will have to take into account the constitutional and political context within which it operated; but this section of the work is concerned in the first place with the various electoral systems by means of which it was possible for electors to gain representation in parliament.

In Western Europe systems of proportional representation were introduced for parliamentary elections between 1899 and 1920, and these have continued, with some modifications and interruptions, until the present day. Before the establishment of proportional representation (hereafter, in accordance with common practice, abbreviated to PR), there was a considerable variety of electoral systems in the different countries. Unlike

the United Kingdom, most countries had systems which required that elections should be by an absolute majority in a first ballot, and if this did not result in the election of the required number of members one or more additional ballots were required, the rules for which varied considerably. In some countries which provided for two-ballot or multi-ballot elections these were held in single-member constituencies, as in Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway. In others, which included Belgium, Luxemburg and Switzerland, they were held in multi-member constituencies. Only in Denmark and Sweden were elections held in single-member constituencies in a single ballot, with a simple or relative majority ('first past the post') sufficing in that ballot. In Finland, the remaining country in Western Europe which adopted PR, there was no period of transition between an Estates system and a single-chamber parliament elected by a system of proportional representation.

The requirement of two or more ballots was intended to avoid a situation in which a member is returned to parliament with the support of only a minority of electors in a constituency. The additional ballot or ballots were intended to give a further opportunity for the election of a member by an absolute majority, after some members had voluntarily withdrawn, or else had been eliminated in accordance with previously established rules. If there was still no absolute majority, then a relative majority would have to suffice.

However, it became increasingly evident in many countries that while such a system might lead to fairer representation in a particular constituency, it did not necessarily lead to fairer representation in parliament of the different political parties which existed in the nation as a whole. The geographical distribution of votes for parties, or more precisely their distribution between different constituencies, might be of such a kind that a party which had a large number of votes in the nation (or a region) as a whole, might not return a correspondingly large number of members to parliament; and indeed a party with more votes than another might return fewer members. Table 1.1 is intended to illustrate how the distribution of votes can distort the representation of parties, and why the requirement of absolute majorities in each constituency may fail to provide any remedy.

Suppose three parties, A, B and C, contest an election in which there are 6 million electors divided between 100 constituencies, with exactly 60,000 electors in each. For simplicity it is assumed that the nation can be divided into southern and northern constituencies, and that within each of these areas the votes of each party are evenly divided between the individual constituencies. Then party A, which has a substantial majority of votes in the fifty-one southern constituencies, wins every seat there; and party B, which has a substantial majority of votes in the forty-nine northern constituencies, wins every seat there. In this example party A

Table 1.1 *Absolute majorities and disproportionate representation*

	<i>Party A</i>	<i>Party B</i>	<i>Party C</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>51 southern constituencies</i>				
Votes	1,560,600	275,400	1,224,000	3,060,000
% of votes	51	9	40	100
Seats	51	0	0	51
<i>49 northern constituencies</i>				
Votes	235,200	1,587,600	1,117,200	2,940,000
% of votes	8	54	38	100
Seats	0	49	0	49
<i>All constituencies</i>				
Votes	1,795,800	1,863,000	2,341,200	6,000,000
% of votes	30	31	39	100
Seats	51	49	0	100
<i>Result:</i>				
	<i>Percentage of Votes</i>	<i>Percentage of Seats</i>		
Party A	30	51		
Party B	31	49		
Party C	39	0		

has the fewest votes but an absolute majority of seats, while party C has more votes than either of the other two parties, but has no representation at all. In every constituency one party has an absolute majority, but in the country as a whole there is a great discrepancy between votes and seats.

In practice, of course, it is likely that where elections are held in single-member constituencies support for each party in each area will be concentrated more heavily in some constituencies than in others, and that each party will succeed in gaining at least some representation. The more numerous the total members of parliament, and the more numerous (and smaller) the individual constituencies, the more likely will it be that each party, including minorities, will gain representation. Nevertheless, the representation which each party gains will be determined not simply by the number of votes it is given, but by how these votes are distributed. A disproportionately small number of seats will be gained by a party whose votes are widely dispersed among constituencies in which it is in a minority, or else are heavily concentrated in a small number of con-

stituencies where they pile up much larger majorities than are needed for the election of members.

When elections are held in multi-member constituencies the discrepancies which arise between votes and seats in majority elections are not essentially different, but they tend to be exaggerated. In the Western European countries the 'block vote' was used in such constituencies, which meant that each elector had as many votes as there were seats in the constituency. It commonly happened that electors would cast all their votes for candidates of the same party, that all candidates of one party would have a majority of votes over all candidates of any other party, and that all seats would be gained by members of the same party. A slight 'swing' in votes from one election to another might suffice to displace every sitting member of one party by members elected by their opponents. It was the experience of anomalous results of this kind, depriving entire communities of representation, as it did on occasions in the canton of Geneva, which gave impetus in the nineteenth century to the movement for electoral reform.

One suggested remedy for such anomalies in multi-member constituencies was the adoption of the system of the 'limited vote'. Under this system, electors were not permitted to vote for as many candidates as there were seats, but only for fewer candidates. It was intended that this should limit the number of members any one party could elect, and therefore make it correspondingly easier for smaller parties to gain at least some representation. This system was adopted for elections in some constituencies in the United Kingdom between 1867 and 1885, but was not adopted for parliamentary elections in the Continental countries before the adoption of PR. The system was not, in fact, appropriate for the achievement of a fairer representation of parties, and the reasons for this may be demonstrated by a practical example.

Suppose there is a multi-member constituency in which three members are to be elected, but each elector may cast only two votes. There are 46,000 electors, and the total possible number of votes is therefore 92,000. The election is contested by two parties, of which party A is supported by 30,000 electors (and 60,000 votes), and party B by 16,000 electors (and 32,000 votes). Examples are given in Table 1.2 of three possible results of an election. These examples show that the device of the limited vote can only offer the possibility that seats may be more fairly distributed to minorities than otherwise, and cannot exclude the possibility that they will be just as unfairly distributed as under the 'block vote'. They also show that the system may not result in a proportional allocation of seats. In such an election a reasonably proportional result would be achieved if party A obtained two seats and party B obtained one, but it happens that this result was not achieved in any of the examples given.

Table 1.2 *Limited vote elections*

	<i>Party A</i>		<i>Party B</i>	
<i>Election 1</i>	Candidate	Votes	Candidate	Votes
	a	20,000*	d	16,000
	b	20,000*	e	16,000
	c	20,000*		
		<u>60,000</u>		<u>32,000</u>
	Result	3 seats		no seat
<i>Election 2</i>	a	30,000*	d	16,000*
	b	15,000	e	16,000*
	c	15,000		
		<u>60,000</u>		<u>32,000</u>
	Result	1 seat		2 seats
<i>Election 3</i>	a	30,000*	d	11,000
	b	15,000*	e	11,000
	c	15,000*	f	10,000
		<u>60,000</u>		<u>32,000</u>
	Result	3 seats		no seat

(Asterisks denote successful candidates.)

One of the defects of this system is that the results can depend on a deliberate and organised manipulation of votes. A party will seek to estimate accurately the total number of votes their candidates may expect to gain, and therefore the optimum number of candidates they should nominate – neither too many, so that the votes are too thinly spread between them, nor too few, so that large numbers of votes are wasted. Equally important, votes must be evenly spread between them, so that each receives the minimum number of votes required for election. In Election 1, party A secured a favourable distribution of votes and captured all three seats, while in Election 2 party B succeeded in gaining two seats out of three, in spite of having far fewer votes than party A.

When the limited vote was in operation in the United Kingdom, the Liberal Party 'caucus' in Birmingham acquired much skill in directing its supporters how to vote, so that too many votes were not given to one candidate and too few to another. Such manipulation discredited the limited vote system, and led to its discontinuance in 1885. This was perhaps one reason why no similar system was adopted on the Continent.

Another device intended, like the limited vote, to improve the chances of minorities in multi-member constituencies, is the 'cumulative vote', that is to say, a method which entitles an elector to cast two or more



votes in favour of one candidate. For purposes of party elections this system has defects similar to the limited vote, since the results will depend on the number of each party's candidates and the manner in which votes are distributed between them. This device is, however, used in certain proportional systems to allocate seats between individual candidates.