

The Role of the Electoral System in the Resolution of Ethnic Conflict

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Abstract

In an ethnically divided country, democracy tends to fail. Under the usual types of electoral system, ethnic parties are likely to form, which can exacerbate the ethnic conflict. However, it is possible to design electoral systems which encourage the formation of *pan-ethnic* parties, moderate parties which are responsive to, and which get their votes from, all ethnic groups. In this paper, as an example, one such electoral system, the Distributed Alternative Vote, is explained. The electors of each ethnic group are registered on a separate ethnic electoral roll. Single-member constituencies are used, which are ethnically balanced, containing electors from each ethnic group. In each constituency, that candidate is elected who is most successful in getting votes from each ethnic roll.

Two modifications of the system are explained, one to dispense with the need for the ethnic classification of individual electors, the other to provide candidates and parties with the incentive to avoid discrimination against one or other gender. Lastly, a proposal is made for a scheme of elected and publicly funded lobbies, to increase the representativeness of the democratic system.

1. Pan-ethnic parties and the resolution of ethnic conflict

In ethnically divided countries, democracy rarely functions well. Under the usual types of electoral system, parties tend to divide on ethnic lines, and each tends to become mono-ethnic, that is, it appeals to and draws votes from only one ethnic group. When parties are mono-ethnic, it is unlikely that a government can be created which is stable and equitably responsive to all ethnic groups. If one party gets a majority of seats and forms a single-party government, as in pre-1972 Northern Ireland, this government will tend to be unresponsive or even oppressive towards the ethnic minority. If no party gets a majority of seats, and a majority coalition is formed in the normal manner, this is likely not to include the parties of the ethnic minority, so that again the government will tend to be unresponsive to the minority. Alternatively, the “consociationalist” solution might be attempted. This seeks to achieve power-sharing between the ethnic groups by forming a grand coalition containing parties from each group, where each group has a veto, at least on certain important issues (Lijphart, 1977). However, this is likely to be unworkable and prone to deadlock, especially when the ethnic conflict is severe, and power-sharing and compromise are most needed.

What therefore seems to be required is an electoral system which discourages ethnic nationalism, and gives each party the incentive to become pan-ethnic, that is, to draw its candidates from each ethnic group, and to respond to and seek votes from each ethnic group. With such pan-ethnic parties, the ethnic power-sharing would take place not *between* the parties, as under consociationalism, but instead *within* each party. Instead of the consociationalist scheme where mono-ethnic parties negotiate after the elections in the attempt to reach a compromise, the system would give each party the incentive to draw up before the elections its own compromise policy which responded to the concerns of each ethnic group.

If such a pan-ethnic system could be achieved, the ethnic minorities would be well protected: whatever party won the election and formed the government, it would always be a pan-ethnic party, and the government would be responsive to the needs of the ethnic minorities, as well as to those of the majority. If no party obtained a majority of seats, a normal majority coalition could be formed, and there would be no need, in order to protect the minority, either to form a “grand coalition” of all major parties, or to give each ethnic group the power of veto.

It is often asserted that the introduction of democracy into a divided society is likely to exacerbate the ethnic conflict. This assertion may well be justified, if the new democracy uses one of the conventional electoral systems, which allow or even encourage the formation of mono-ethnic parties. However, it is possible to design new electoral systems which provide a strong incentive to form pan-ethnic parties, moderate parties which are responsive to, and which get their votes from, all ethnic groups. Such new electoral systems are put forward as means by which ethnic conflict can be peacefully managed and resolved. More generally, it is the contention of this paper that the electoral system is a potentially

important means of resolving ethnic conflict, one that appears to have been neglected by most researchers in this field.

2. The Distributed Alternative Vote

As means of reducing ethnic conflict, I have proposed a range of new electoral systems which in different ways provide this pan-ethnic incentive (Chapman, 1996, 1997). In this paper, in order to illustrate the potential role of the electoral system in the resolution of ethnic conflict, I put forward another of these pan-ethnic-making systems, referred to as the *Distributed Alternative Vote*, or DAV for short. DAV is a modification of the Alternative Vote (the system currently used in Australia to elect the lower chamber of the legislature), this modification being designed to provide the incentive for each party, and also each candidate, to get votes from each ethnic group.

To explain DAV, let us first explain the Alternative Vote from which it is derived. Single-member constituencies are used. Electors vote by putting the candidates standing in the constituency in order of preference, writing in “1” against the first-preferred candidate, “2” against the second-preferred, and so on. In the first stage of the counting, each vote (i.e. ballot paper) is allocated to the candidate for whom the voter has indicated first preference. The candidate who has fewest votes is excluded, and his votes are transferred, each vote going to that continuing candidate for whom the voter has indicated next preference. The candidate who then has fewest votes is excluded. And so on, for as many stages as is necessary, votes are transferred and candidates are excluded, until one candidate has at least half the total of votes held by the continuing candidates, and is declared elected.

DAV is similar to the Alternative Vote in that it uses single-member constituencies, and in that the electors vote by putting the candidates in order of preference. However, under DAV, the electors are divided into ethnic groups, and each constituency is ethnically balanced, having about the same proportion of each ethnic group as does the country as a whole. Thus the electors of any one group are registered on their own separate ethnic roll. Also, a “general” roll may be created, for those persons who do not belong to any of the specified ethnic groups. In each roll, including any general roll, the electors are divided into about equal-sized sets on a local basis, the roll being divided into as many sets as there are representatives to be elected. Ethnically balanced constituencies are then created, each constituency consisting of one set of electors from each roll. Hence a typical constituency will not normally be a compact area, but will consist of several perhaps widely separated areas, each area containing a set of electors from one ethnic roll.

The objective of DAV is to give each party and each candidate the incentive to get votes from each ethnic group. DAV therefore requires that, in order to get elected, a candidate should not only get the highest *overall* percentage of votes (that is, percentage of votes from all rolls), but also get an “adequate” percentage of votes from each ethnic roll. But how much is an adequate percentage? In this context, an adequate percentage of votes for a candidate C from any ethnic roll is taken to be the following: at least two-thirds of the *overall* percentage of votes for C.

Thus the method of election under DAV is as follows, for any one constituency. Each vote is allocated to the candidate for whom the voter expresses first preference. Each candidate’s number of “points” is then calculated. A candidate’s number of points is whichever is less, *either* two-thirds of his overall percentage, *or* his lowest percentage of votes in any one roll (other than the general roll, if there is one). The candidate with fewest points is excluded, and each of his votes is transferred to the continuing candidate for whom the voter expresses next preference (if there is a next preference expressed). The points of each continuing candidate are recalculated, to take account of the votes which have been transferred, and the candidate who then has the lowest points is excluded. And so on, if necessary, transferring votes, recalculating points, and excluding a candidate, until only one candidate is left, who is elected.

3. The political effect of DAV

Essentially, DAV operates by excluding, at each stage of the counting, that candidate who has the lowest number of “points” as defined above. A candidate loses points by getting a low percentage of votes in any one ethnic roll, a percentage less than two-thirds of his overall percentage. Thus in order to avoid having many of its candidates excluded, a party has the incentive to get an adequate percentage of votes from each

ethnic group, that is, to get from each group at least two-thirds of its overall percentage. In other words, it has the incentive to become *pan-ethnic*, appealing to each ethnic group and getting its votes about equally from each group.

When DAV is introduced, the existing parties, having been formed under the previous electoral system, will most probably be mono-ethnic parties of different ethnic groups. This mono-ethnicity will tend to make them lose seats under DAV. Thus it is likely that pan-ethnic parties will be formed, by merger of these mono-ethnic parties. Several of them from different ethnic groups will merge to form one pan-ethnic party, which adopts a compromise policy responsive to the concerns of each ethnic group, and puts up candidates from each ethnic group. Alternatively, new pan-ethnic parties might be formed to take advantage of the opportunities under DAV, by persons independent of the existing parties, drawn from different ethnic groups.

To investigate the effect of DAV in more detail, let us suppose that DAV is to be used in a hypothetical single state of Israel-Palestine, where Jews and Palestinians have equal citizenship, but are registered on separate ethnic rolls. Let us consider the situation in one constituency, in which the candidates of four parties are competing, these being J and P, two extreme mono-ethnic parties, Jewish and Palestinian respectively, and M and N, two pan-ethnic parties, each formed by merger of one or more of the more moderate Jewish parties with one or more moderate Palestinian parties.

In this constituency, most Jews vote solely according to Jewish interests, either voting JMNP (that is, J first, M second, N third, P fourth) or JNMP, while a small minority of them vote MNJP or NMJP, doing so either out of loyalty to the original Jewish parties which merged into M and N, or out of an active preference for compromise and moderation. In the same way, a majority of Palestinians vote PMNJ or PNMJ, and a small minority of them vote MNPJ or NMPJ. No Jews vote first preference for P, and no Palestinians vote first for J.

In the first stage of the counting, votes are allocated to the first-preferred candidates. J gets zero points, because of his zero votes from the Palestinians, and P gets zero points because of his zero votes from the Jews. M and N get well above zero points, because each gets votes from both the Jewish roll and the Palestinian roll. Thus J and P have fewest points, and J is selected by lot to be excluded.

In the second stage, J's votes, all in the Jewish roll, are transferred, some to M and some to N. Thus P still has zero points, having no votes in the Jewish roll, and so P is excluded.

In the third stage, P's votes, all in the Palestinian roll, are transferred, some to M and some to N. M has fewer points, and so is excluded, and N is declared elected.

This example illustrates how, under DAV, when pan-ethnic parties and mono-ethnic parties are competing for a seat, the pan-ethnic parties have the advantage, and the seat goes to one of the pan-ethnic parties. Note that this moderate result is achieved, even when a large majority of voters are extremists, voting first preference for one or other type of extreme mono-ethnic party.

Clearly, DAV gives any mono-ethnic party a powerful incentive to broaden its appeal, and become pan-ethnic. If it does not, it will simply lose its seats to more pan-ethnic parties. Thus in a short time, use of DAV can be expected to produce a legislature consisting of pan-ethnic parties, ensuring a moderate government which is responsive to each ethnic group.

4. Ethnic-Area DAV

The form of DAV discussed above in sections 2 and 3 can be described as Ethnic-Roll DAV, since it requires that the electors of different ethnic groups should be separately registered on their own ethnic electoral rolls. This ethnic classification of individual electors will clearly be a difficult operation to carry out, wherever it has not been done already (as it has been in Israel-Palestine). Thus it is of interest to know that there is another form of DAV which will allow this ethnic classification of individual electors to be dispensed with, in any country where the different ethnic groups are to a sufficient extent geographically segregated. This system is referred to as Ethnic-Area DAV, and the way it operates is as follows.

For each ethnic group which it is sought to protect, more or less mono-ethnic areas are found, in which all or nearly all the electors belong to this ethnic group. In the total area inhabited by a given ethnic group, the electors are divided into about equal-sized sets on a local basis, the electors being divided into as many sets as there are representatives to be elected. For the remaining areas where the ethnic groups are mixed, again the electors are divided into about equal-sized local sets, again as many sets as there are representatives to be elected. Ethnically balanced constituencies are then created, each constituency

consisting of one set of electors from each ethnic group, and one set of electors with different ethnicities. Hence a typical constituency will not normally be a compact area, but will consist of several perhaps widely separated areas, each area containing a set of electors from one ethnic group, and one area containing electors of several different ethnicities.

In each constituency, the election is then held as under Ethnic-Roll DAV, by the exclusion one by one of the candidates with fewest “points”. Under Ethnic-Area DAV, a candidate’s number of points is whichever is less, *either* two-thirds of his overall percentage, i.e. his percentage of votes in the whole constituency, *or* his lowest percentage of the votes in any one of the sets of electors other than the set with several different ethnicities.

Ethnic-Area DAV could be used in a unified Cyprus, to elect an assembly for the whole island. The north is inhabited by Turkish Cypriots, and the south by Greek Cypriots. Thus each constituency would consist of an area in the north and an area in the south. As was argued above, this would elect an assembly of pan-ethnic parties, each of which would have the incentive to be responsive to and acceptable to both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

Another country in which Ethnic-Area DAV could be used, is Iraq. The Kurds have areas of concentration in the north, the Sunni in central Iraq, and the Shia in the south. Each constituency would consist of four areas, one inhabited by Kurds, one by Sunni, one by Shia and one by electors from several different communities. Each party and each candidate would then have the incentive to get votes about equally from Kurds, from Sunni, and from Shia, and so to adopt a moderate policy acceptable to each of these communities.

There is concern that the introduction of democracy, at least by means of one of the conventional electoral systems, might lead to the formation of mono-ethnic parties, and so to undue domination by the majority Shia community. Use of Ethnic-Area DAV could be expected to avoid this problem, by the formation of an assembly of pan-ethnic parties, in each of which the Sunni and the Kurdish minority communities, as well as the Shia majority, have adequate influence.

5. A hybrid system

In some countries, it might be more suitable to use a hybrid system, a combination of Ethnic-Roll and Ethnic-Area DAV. In this hybrid system, some ethnic groups, those which have sufficient mono-ethnic areas, are treated as under Ethnic-Area DAV. Some other ethnic group, which is widely dispersed, and without significant mono-ethnic areas, is registered on a separate ethnic electoral roll, and local sets of electors are created as under Ethnic-Roll DAV. Each party and each candidate will then have the incentive to get an adequate percentage of votes from it. In this way, a hybrid system could offer a small and dispersed ethnic minority much greater protection than it would have obtained under straight Ethnic-Area DAV, while avoiding the task of the ethnic classification of the individual electors of the major ethnic groups.

6. Gender voting

DAV can be modified to provide parties and candidates with the incentive not to discriminate in policy against one or other gender. The principle is that a candidate loses “points”, and so has a greater chance of being excluded, if he or she gets a significantly lower percentage of votes from one gender than from all the voters.

Thus in this modified DAV, the votes of men and of women are counted separately. A candidate’s number of points is whichever is least of the following: (1) two-thirds of his overall percentage from all voters; (2) three-quarters of whichever is less, his overall percentage from men or his overall percentage from women; (3) his lowest percentage of votes in any one roll other than the general roll. The candidate with fewest points is excluded, as before.

With this revised formula, a candidate will lose points if his overall percentage from one gender is less than eight-ninths (that is, two-thirds divided by three-quarters) of his overall percentage from all voters. Thus a party which so far has discriminated against one gender, let us say women, and which gets a percentage of votes from women which is much less than eight-ninths of its percentage from all voters, will lose seats, and how many seats it gets will depend *solely* on its votes from women. The party will therefore have the incentive to adjust its policy more in favour of women, in order to increase its seats.

7. Advisory Representatives

An assembly elected by DAV will consist of generalist parties, ones which follow a compromise policy moderately acceptable to all sections of the electorate, rather than a policy which appeals strongly to some one interest or section. There will be an absence of niche parties, parties which cater for some special interest or section. This feature of DAV might create some dissatisfaction, especially if the previous electoral system to which people had become accustomed was some form of proportional representation, which allowed diverse small parties to get elected, to match the divisions in the electorate.

One answer to this problem might be to have, along with the DAV-elected legislature, a second chamber elected by some form of proportional representation, with powers in the legislative process in parallel to those of the first chamber. However, this arrangement would tend to create a situation of frequent conflict between the two chambers, especially if, as would be likely, the second chamber consisted largely of mono-ethnic parties from different ethnic groups.

Therefore, this article proposes, as an adjunct to the DAV-elected legislature, a system of elected *Advisory Representatives*, who have only *consultative* status, and are without any powers in the legislative or governmental process. In brief, electors vote for these Advisory Representatives (ARs for short), the ARs are paid income in proportion to these votes, and this income both gives them the incentive, and provides them with the resources, to lobby on behalf of the electors who have voted for them.

To explain the scheme in more detail, the elector has one vote, which he may give to one AR, or may split between any number of ARs, in any way he likes. Each AR's total of votes is then found, and he is given a certain amount of income for each vote obtained (let us say, for each vote, 1/3000 of the average income in that country). However, there are two exceptions: (1) the AR gets no income if he gets fewer votes than some minimum, let us say 500; (2) he gets no more income than some maximum, let us say six times the average income.

The voting is carried out not by use of the normal ballot paper, but by the "coupon" method, which is as follows. (A method of voting similar to this, is described in Mackenzie (1958, page 137)). A coupon is printed for each AR, and it bears the AR's name and message, and most important, his personal bar-code. The ARs distribute their coupons to electors they think might vote for them, and also make their coupons available at any polling stations where they think they might have support. The elector votes in the privacy of the polling booth by putting the appropriate coupons in a special envelope provided to him by the polling officer, putting in more than one coupon for a given AR if he wishes. To count the votes, each envelope is opened, and the coupons in it are read by a bar-code reader attached to a computer, which calculates the total votes of each AR. For example, if an elector had put in his envelope one coupon from A and two coupons from B, this would be counted as one-third of a vote for A and two-thirds of a vote for B.

The coupon method should be used for the first election of the Advisory ARs. But in later elections, a ballot paper could be used, bearing the names of those ARs who got most votes in that area in the previous election (let us say the top 50 ARs). Any other ARs who sought support in the area would be voted for by means of coupons.

How then can these Advisory Representatives be expected to operate in practice, and what functions can they be expected to perform? Since they will have no powers in the legislative process, and since they will be extremely diverse in their interests and concerns, it seems unlikely that they will want to meet as a body, in the same way as a conventional second chamber would do. Instead, the ARs will act separately, each lobbying on behalf of the electors who have voted for them with government or parliament or perhaps with business, operating in a similar way to the interest groups which exist at present.

These ARs will be better able to articulate the various interests that exist in society, than would any large generalist party, which would be primarily concerned to find a compromise which had wide support. The ARs will be continually seeking new interests and causes to represent, in order to attract votes from them. Thus latent interests which at present are not organised at all, will be articulated and will be able to exert influence. This scheme can be expected to reduce the likelihood of demonstrations and riots, since it provides a more peaceful and effective way of making known to the authorities the needs and grievances of the people.

In conclusion, the Advisory Representatives scheme can be regarded as a means of developing and strengthening a country's "civil society". It is a neutral procedure for introducing public money into the informal aspects of the democratic process, which avoids the potential bias of arbitrary grants.

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