

**Electoral Systems in Southern European countries – Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece - an
introductory approach to the quality of democracy**

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I - Introduction

Electoral systems are a political institution that several scholars and politicians have considered the most studied field in the Political Science, since 1980 (Lijphart 1985; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). The electoral systems become a major issue studied because it was politically relevant.

With the “third wave” of democratization (Huntington, 1991), important decisions should be taken on which electoral systems in order to establish representative democracies. Therefore during the 1990s, the debate about electoral system moved from margin to mainstream on the political agenda. This shift produced growing awareness that the electoral rules are not neutral: the way votes are translate into seats means that some groups, parties, and representatives are ruled into the policy-making process, and some are ruled out (Norris, 1997: 3). It also reflects the factors that determine their genesis, their evolution and their shape in each country.

II – The conceptual framework

Electoral systems are, as Maurice Duverger states, «strange devices – simultaneously cameras and projectors. They register images which they have partly created themselves» (Duverger, 1984: 34). This statement advance that electoral systems are, at same time, the independent and the dependent variable in the political system. They are independent variable when it affects the nature of political parties and the party system, the politicians' behavior and the strategies of voters. When electoral systems assume the character of dependent variable, it means that politicians' preferences and conceptions determine what kind of electoral systems they choose.

For instance, David Farrell (2001: 4) argues that, «electoral systems determine the mean by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office». In other way, Michell Gallagher states that electoral systems are a «set of rules that structures how votes are cast at elections for a representative assembly and how these votes are then converted into seats in that assembly» (Gallagher, 2008:2).

Having both in consideration, we can assume that electoral systems and elections are the linkages between citizen's preferences and the representative government. They are the mechanism which establishes the representative democracy.

The choice of electoral system is one of the most important institutional decisions for any democracy. Electoral systems define and structure the rules of the political game; they help determine who is elected, how a campaign is developed, the role of political parties, and who governs. In addition, the choice of an electoral system can help to design specific outcomes, such as to encourage cooperation and accommodation in a divided society.

There are a large number of different electoral systems, and we could categorize into three main families: plurality/majority systems; proportional systems and mixed systems. Within these, there are “sub-families”: first-past-the post; block vote; party block vote; alternative vote; two round system, are all plurality/majority system; list proportional system and single transferable vote are the proportionally as a model. Mixed systems have features from proportional and majority systems.

Majoritarian Electoral Systems

This type of electoral system is known as "*winner takes all*" method. The focus is the effective governance, not representation of all minority views. The basic system of simple plurality of voting are characterized by: single-member constituencies; voters within each constituency cast a single ballot for one candidate; the candidate with the largest share of the vote in each seat is returned to office; and in turn the party with an overall majority of seats forms the government. The main advantages of the majoritarian model are the government effectiveness.

In the case of the system of *first-past-the-post* in parliamentary systems, it produces the classic "Westminster model" with the twin virtues of strong but responsive party government. This means that the winner is a single-party government, without coalition, that allows, with a majority of parliamentary seats, the ability to implement their political program without the need of political negotiations.

Proportional Electoral Systems

The proportional electoral systems correspond to what Lijphart classified as consensual democracy. The main goal of proportional representation is the inclusion of majorities and minorities.

The principle of proportional representation is that the seats in a constituency are divided according to the number of votes cast for party lists, but there are considerable variations in how this is implemented in different systems. Party lists may be open, in which voters can express preferences for particular candidates within the list. On the other hand, they may be closed, in which voters can only select the party, and the ranking of candidates is determined by the political party. The rank order on the party list determines which candidates are elected. Party lists may also be national, where all the country is one constituency.

The electoral formula varies among systems. Votes can be allocated to seats by highest averages method. This requires the number of votes for each party to be divided successively by a series of divisors, and seats are allocated to parties that secure the highest resulting quotient, up to the total number of seats available. The most widely used is the d'Hondt formula, using divisors (such as 1,2,3, etc.). The "pure" Sainte-Lague method divides the votes with odd numbers (1,3,5,7, etc.). The "modified" Sainte-Lague replaces the first

divisor by 1.4 but is otherwise identical to the pure version. An alternative is the largest remainder method, which uses a minimum quota calculated in a number of ways. In the simplest with the Hare quota, the total number of valid votes in each constituency is divided by the total number of seats to be allocated. The main advantage of the proportional system is the ability to minimize the distortion between the number of votes cast by the parties and the number of seats in the parliament.

Mixed Electoral Systems

Lastly, many newer systems use mixed systems. This kind of electoral system involves the combination of different electoral formula, although with a variety of alternative designs. One example of the mixed electoral system is those used in Germany.

III – Dimensions of Electoral Systems

Electoral systems translate the vote cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates. Electoral Systems are a complex subject, and vary according the number of key dimensions (Lijphart, 1994) such as:

- i)* The district magnitude (how many representatives/deputies each constituency elects);
- ii)* The ballot structure (the voters vote for a candidate or a party and it could expresses a single choice or a set of preferences);
- iii)* The effective thresholds (the difficult for a party to win its first seat by a given district magnitude);
- iv)* The electoral formulas (plurality/majority, proportional or mixed, and what mathematical formula is used to translate the votes into seats allocation).

Each of these dimensions exerts different effects on the electoral system and in the functioning of the political system. These elements have nuclear importance in the way political institutions work, their features determines, at least, the quality of democracy in that political system.

Some of these dimensions assume an extraordinarily importance when we analyze the proportionality, such electoral formula, district magnitude and structure ballot. The causes of the disproportionality of the electoral system aren't consensual among scholars and researchers. Douglas Rae (1960) found that the electoral formula has effects on proportionality, district magnitude has an even greater effect and, ballot structure has no effect. In other way, A. Lijphart (1990, 1994), state that the ballot structure may also have some impact, but he adds another factor: the assembly size. Another contribution in clarification of the causal elements of proportionality is proposed by Richard Katz (1997:137). He suggests that the electoral formula is more important than the district magnitude and he separate proportional from non-proportional systems.

Over the years, a number of different indexes to measure the proportionality have been developed by Rae (1967); Loosemore and Hanby (1971); Gallagher (1991) and Lijphart (1994), and all are «highly and significantly correlated» (Lijphart, 1994: 67).

IV – Consequences of Electoral Systems

Electoral systems have consequences for the political system in which they operate. A large literature has identified the most important consequences of electoral systems: the proportionality of votes to seats, on the number of parties, the production of coalition or single-party governments and the representation of social groups.

One of the major consequences of electoral system is the impact in the party system and in political parties. About that, Maurice Duverger identified some regularity between party systems and electoral systems, which became known as “sociological laws”. They assume theoretical generalizations, about the effect of electoral systems upon party systems. The author states the following prepositions:

1. *Proportional representation tends to lead to the formation of many independent parties;*
2. *The two-ballot majority system tends to lead to the formation of many parties that are allied with each other,*
3. *The plurality rule tends to produce a two-party system* (Duverger, 1986:70).

Since the first Duverger approach, a large of literature has been developed. This is an important issue for the political scientists but also for politicians. But for our purpose, we will not consider the entire discussion about the “Duvergerian laws”, their reformulations and confrontations (for that see D. Rae; Giovanni Sartori; A. Lijphart).

In conclusion, electoral systems shape the nature of parties and party system; the nature of party competition and the politician’s behavior and voter’s strategies.

V – The Electoral Systems in Southern European Countries – Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece

It is important to notice that a given electoral system will not necessarily work in the same way in different countries. The effects of a particular type of electoral system depend to a great extent of the socio-political context in which it is applied. The choice of electoral system depends of many factors such as: the structure of the ideology, the religious, ethnics, racial, region, linguistic or class divisions; whether the country is an established democracy, a transitional or a new one; whether there is an established party system or parties are unformed; and how many parties there exist, and whether a particular party's supporters are geographically concentrated or dispersed over a wide area.

These kinds of features are very important and point out the design of political institutions, especially the engineering of electoral systems, and the “rules of the game” in the access to political power.

Portugal

The overthrow of the dictatorship by the armed forces (MFA) on April 1974 opened the road to democracy. The electoral system was chosen by constituents and the electoral system adopted by Portugal was the proportional system, with closed party-list, and the voters vote in parties' lists. The seats are allocated by d'Hondt formula and voting is not compulsory.

In Portugal, the electoral rules have remained basically unchanged from the first election in 1975 to the Constitution of 1976, the electoral law of 1979 and later revisions of the Constitution. The single-Chamber Assembly is elected for a period of 4 years, and has seen its size reduced from 263 to 250 seats in 1976, and in 1979 to 230 since 1991 (2nd Constitutional Amendment 1989, and was introduced in the 1991' elections – VI Legislature). The Constitution states that we couldn't revise the criterion of proportional representation.

The number of electoral districts isn't specified in the Constitution. This number corresponds to the administrative district in the national territory, and they are 18 in

mainland; two in the Islands (Madeira and Azores) and two for the immigration constituencies (Law 14/79). The number of mandates in each electoral constituency varies according to the number of inhabitants.

Spain

The current constitutional arrangements in Spain date from 1977-78. The electoral institutions emerged from the context of the transition to democracy and the political option is the parliamentary regime. The Law for Political Reform (1977) and the Constitution of 1978 establishes the electoral rules based on proportional system. The major concern with the choice of the electoral system was *to produce an absolute majority of seats for a party with one-third of the votes* (law' preamble). Spain has a bicameral system – the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – but they have different electoral systems.

In the Chamber of Deputies is used the proportional system and in the Senate was adopted the limited vote (method which voters have fewer votes to cast than the number of members returned from the constituency), well known as “the chamber of territorial representation”, exists since 1978 Constitution. The limited vote system allows voters to cast three votes for individual candidates, presented in a single list in their province, and the four candidates that receive more votes are elected. A fixed number of senators are elected in each province.

The electoral constituencies in Spain match with administrative provinces. They are 50 provinces, and the number of deputies was fixed at 350 for the Chamber of Deputies. The seats are allocated according to the Hondt formula with a threshold of 3% of the votes in each electoral constituency. The ballot structure is a party list closed and blocked, without any choice from the Spanish voters to vote in candidates, just on parties.

The Spanish electoral system was designed to constrain the number of party's fragmentation (Montero, 1994, 1998), in a way to prevent the non-statewide parties. As every option, the choice of a kind of electoral system had consequences in the political system. In the case of Spanish political system, some impacts are evident: the proportional formula is successfully in

preventing fragmentation at the statewide level, but at same time, the territorial fragmentation of the party system is clear.

Spain is a multiparty system, with an average of twelve parties present in the parliament. With closed lists, the voters don't have the opportunity to express their preferences in candidates, but on party lists. This choice has a main goal: prevent the personalization of the candidates and avoid the electoral clienteles; party cohesion and stable governments; enhancing the dominance of party leaders over their parliamentary groups; minimize the territorial cleavages from Basque and Catalan regions, and excluded the small parties' forces from parliamentary representation.

Italy

The Italian electoral system is the product of the constitutional compromise of 1947, based on the choice of a parliamentary system. They had a "perfect" bicameral system – the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. For both they had a proportional representation until the first electoral amendment in 1993.

The end of cold war inaugurated a new period in Italian politics. The "Second Republic" begins with the "clean hands" inquire that exposed the some cases of political corruption, and made a revolution in the configuration in party system. This reform introduced some changes, especially in the system of representation in the lower and upper chambers, respectively.

The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate aren't elected by the same rules. The Chamber of Deputies elects 630 deputies: 475 of these are elected by single-member districts (SDM's) by plurality vote and the other 155 are elected in twenty-six multi-member constituencies, on party list. The seats are allocated by LR-Hare proportional representation formula. Other feature of this method is that the PR seats are allocated at the national level and the threshold is 4% of votes. The ballot structure is organized in two ballots: the first for a candidate in their district and the second for a list in their constituency.

To the Senate, the electoral system is different. The district magnitude is lower because the seats allocation are done at regional level by Hond't formula and the threshold

is too at regional level, that lead to regional parties the opportunity to access to representation.

Since the end of the Second World War, Italy has always been governed by coalitions. Until 1994, these coalition governments were always formed after the elections and were usually instable. Now, governments are empowered through the electoral process (previous electoral coalitions), that lead to a more proportional translation the votes into seats – the majority of votes corresponds to a majority of seats. This is the main impact of the electoral revision.

Italian political system is very complex. Their historical context and the social cleavages determined this kind of institutional design. The party system is very fragmented and the Cabinet is composed by political coalitions. The party system is known as “two-coalition parties”, because the stability of governance is polarized by two main parties, which have to join together in the government.

Greece

The Hellenic Parliament is composed by 300 deputies who are directly elected by universal suffrage for a four-year term of office. A total of twelve seats are allocated on a national level, while the remaining 288 seats are filled in fifty-six single- and multi-member constituencies.

Political parties, party coalitions and independents are allowed to present lists of candidates. Electors cast a vote for one to five candidates on a constituency list, depending on the number of seats; voting is compulsory until the age of 70.

Parliamentary seats are apportioned by means of a complex system of "reinforced" proportional representation, which has been modified several times since the restoration of democracy in 1974, following seven years of military dictatorship.

In the four general elections held from 1993 to 2004, multi-member constituency seats were initially allocated in each constituency by the Hagenbach-Bischoff method, in which an electoral

quota was calculated by dividing the total number of valid votes by the number of seats to be allocated plus one. The number of votes polled by each party was then divided by the electoral quota, and the result, was the number of seats allocated to the party. Single-member seats were filled by the plurality or *first-past-the-post* method, in which the candidate obtaining the largest number of votes in the constituency was elected to office.

The constituencies were then grouped into thirteen electoral regions, to distribute any remaining unallocated seats after the application of the Hagenbach-Bischoff rule. Party list votes were pooled at the electoral region level along with unfilled seats, which were then distributed in each region by the Hare method. Under this procedure, a new electoral quota was calculated by dividing the total number of valid votes by the number of available seats. The number of votes won by each party was divided by the quota, and the result, disregarding fractions, was the number of seats obtained by the party.

Any remaining unallocated seats were subsequently filled in two stages. First, the party with the largest vote total at the national level obtained all unallocated seats in constituencies where it polled the largest number of votes. Then, the remaining seats were distributed on a nationwide basis among parties (but not coalitions) by the Hare method, disregarding fractions; if there remained unallocated seats following this apportionment; these were awarded as well to the party with the largest vote total in the entire country. Finally, the twelve nationwide seats were allocated according to the largest average method, also known as the D'Hondt rule. In order to obtain a mandate, a party list had to achieve three percent of the vote at the national level (threshold).

Greece' electoral system is complicated. Under the new Greek electoral law, introduced in 2004, the 260 seats in parliament are allocated by proportional representation, and the remaining 40, automatically go to the party with the most votes. The 2007 and 2009 general elections were held under a new electoral law introduced in 2004, which automatically grants the winning party a majority premium of 40 seats, while the remaining 260 seats are distributed by proportional representation (PR).

VI – Conclusions

Despite many similarities in social, historical and political features among the four countries in Southern Europe – Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, these countries had developed democratic systems that vary considerably, and for these reason, we can't speak in a model of democracy in Southern European countries.

The adoption of certain electoral systems shapes the specific political and historical environment, the power of elites in each country and the balance of political parties, in a specific moment. The different trajectories from autocracy to democracy followed by these countries, contributed for different institutional arrangements. It reveals at different time and at different levels the development stage through democracy consolidation and the demands of each political system.

The electoral systems are an element that should be considered when we evaluate the democratic quality – they shape the nature of political competition, the representation features; the quality of political agents and the political parties; the system of government, the citizens' opinion and their satisfaction with politics and at least, the design of political institutions. A “good” choice of the electoral system could improve the quality of political system and the democracy.

The elections are the most important and institutionalized features of democratic regimes. Fair, regular and competitive elections are essential in democracy. It creates incentives for political actors by foresting the expansion and deepening of democratic qualities in the society.

To assess the quality of democracy through the choice of electoral system is a hard task. We cannot say that a particular country is more democratic than other, simply because it has x or y electoral system. However we can try to find some correlations between democracy's quality and the kind of electoral system. We this in the mind, we can consider the two dimensions that might assess the quality of democracy in this context, they are the competition and the representation. Through these two indicators we can analyze the democratic qualities of a particular country. The aim is to know which are the results and the effects it produces, not the reasons for their choice and which are the dynamics and the inputs that might contribute to the quality of democracy.

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