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**PH458**

**Case Study: Politics**

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# Introduction

# Political philosophy

- In the broadest sense, political philosophy is arguably the study of the fundamental concepts of politics.
- That is, the study of those concepts which are in play in the relation between individuals and the state.
- Several questions arise in this context. For example:
  - \* What form of government is best?
  - \* How should we characterise the people's 'will'?
  - \* Which principles should guide the distribution of benefits and burdens across individuals in a society?

# Political philosophy meets political science

- These and other questions are often pursued by both political philosophers (PP) and political scientists (PS).
- It's not always easy to discern the difference between them – especially true when we compare PP w/political theory.
- But differences do exist?

**Methodology:** PS employ the full gamut of scientific methods while PP stick to only logic & thought experiments.

**Scope:** PP tend to emphasise projects from the ground-up while PS are generally more pragmatic in their concerns.

# The question of voting


- One question whose correct answer engages the minds of both PP and PS is the following:

Assuming democracy is the best form of government, what form of voting best delivers it?

- The aim of this lecture is to consider voting from two perspectives:

(1) What does the available research on existing electoral systems teach us about related policy?

(2) To explore a radical idea of how to incentivise informedness through weighted voting.



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# Electoral Systems: The British Academy Report

# Choosing an electoral system: A policy review

- So-named is the report produced for the British Academy by academics: Simon Hix, Ron Johnston and Iain McLean.

**NB:** Help also from Angela Cummine.

- What is it? It's a policy review that synthesises the evidence in relation to the effects of different electoral systems.

“This report is intended to advise commentators, policymakers and a wider readership on the characteristics of the main types of electoral system and the issues affecting electors, political parties and system designers should they be implemented for elections to the House of Commons, the House of Lords, or any other elected body in the UK” (p. 8).

# Public understanding

- Its authors do not seek to endorse any position but to “[further] public understanding... in light of available research” (4).
- This is needed, in their view, as:

“public discussion is frequently passionate and intense but lacking in the discipline of academic standards of evidence – even though much evidence is available” (4).

“... public discussion is usually poorly informed” (p. 8).

**NB:** Even though they make no remarks about this, it’s worth noting that expert understanding can also suffer.



# Interests

- The report also notes the effect of interests on the choice of electoral systems.

“Interest groups, and political parties, have an incentive to highlight the advantages and to hide the disadvantages of the systems they favour. Politicians tend to favour the electoral system(s) under which they think they would win the most seats” (p. 8).

- This raises various questions, not all of which are posed in the report. For example:

*What, if anything, can be done to minimise the effect of interests on the choice of electoral systems?*

# Three main types of electoral systems

- The following are identified as families of electoral systems:
  - (1) **Single-member constituency:** One legislature seat per constituency. *Examples:* FPTP, AV and SV.
  - (2) **Multi-member constituency:** More than one legislature seat per constituency. *Examples:* STV, Open & Closed Lists.
  - (3) **Mixed systems:** These combine single-member constituencies with lists. *Examples:* MMP/AMP and MMM.
- Trend: Recently, most systems introduced, e.g. in post-Soviet countries, opt for systems falling under 2 or 3.

# Alternate election history

- One thing that the report doesn't do:

Predict what *would have happened had a different electoral system been in place* for a past election.

**Structural problem:** Such predictions are highly uncertain as changes influence party and electorate behaviour.

- Even so, the idea of is quite appealing and has been pursued by others.
- Indeed, it's closely related to the wider tradition of writing alternate histories – e.g. see Kathleen Singles (2012).

# Electoral change in the UK

- Recently, some changes have been proposed (e.g. AV) and some effected (e.g. House of Lords) in the UK.
- Some trends in voting patterns at the general elections:
  - \* declining support for the main parties
  - \* divergent voting patterns in different areas
- If these trends continue, Hix et al. argue that:

It'll be difficult for FPTP to produce EITHER single-party OR highly representative government.

# Academic findings

- Though research has been conducted outside of academic circles, this tends to be descriptive and non-comparative.
- Hix et al. focus on the academic research and summarise its findings. They identify 10 main conclusions.

## Some Provisos

**Focus:** National legislature elections (usually lower house).

**Uncertainty:** Trends between electoral systems and outcomes like turnout and represented parties.

**Contingencies:** These are ever-present, e.g. ethnic division.

## Some conclusions

- We obviously don't have time to go through all of them but briefly consider four.

“2. Turnout is usually higher at elections in countries with PR than in countries without... tends to be higher where citizens can express preferential votes... In general, the more choice electors are offered the greater the likelihood that they will turn out and exercise it” (p. 16).

“3. FPTP and AV are more likely than PR systems to produce single-party majority and long-lasting governments... because they translate the vote share of the largest party ... into an even larger share of seats”.

## Some conclusions (continued)

“7. There is no good evidence that any of the systems we consider here is ‘too complicated for voters to understand’, as is sometimes claimed” (p. 18).

“10. Because most election campaigns in single-member constituency systems are won or lost in the relatively small number of marginal seats, this provides an incentive for governments to focus not only their campaigning but also (some at least of) their policies on certain parts of the country only” (p. 19).

## Where does this leave us?

- Where does this leave us? That depends on our goals.

Goal: *higher turnout*. Action: We might try offering more choice through an open-list system.

Goal: *long-lasting government*. Action: We might try offering a FPTP system.

Goal: *evenly distributed policies*. Action: We might try offering a multi-member constituency or a mixed system.

**NB**: Recall that these are based on trends and as such they are defeasible strategies with no guarantee of success.





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# Informed Voting: The Case of Weighting Votes

# Informedness

- Recall what Hix et al. asserted to motivate at least one of the reasons they think their report is useful.

“public discussion is frequently passionate and intense but lacking in the discipline of academic standards of evidence... public discussion is usually poorly informed” (p. 8).

- Several other scholars concur with this verdict. As a result, various projects around the world attempt to change that.
- But there is a more radical approach that can be used in conjunction with this approach, viz. weighted voting.

## The key idea

- A *weighted voting scheme* is one where votes are multiplied by weights.
- That is, some holders of votes exert more influence than others in deciding the outcome.

### **Examples:**

Shareholders in a company vote on the basis of the number of shares they possess.

- *Cumulative voting*: Voters are allocated  $n$  (where  $n \geq 2$ ) votes but decide how to distribute them across candidates.

**NB:** Technically speaking, this is not weighted voting.

## Mill's 'plural voting'

- The idea of weighted voting in democratic elections goes at least as far back as J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* ([1859] 1977).

**NB:** See also *Considerations on Representative Government*.

- There, Mill proposes that extra votes should be allocated to those who are well-educated or vocationally well-placed.
- Though the above proposal has an elitist hue, it's worth noting that Mill endorsed *near* universal suffrage.

**NB:** But excluded the illiterate, very poor and bankrupt.

- He thought that widening participation would have positive effects like helping with character development.

# The motivation

- Qua a *consequentialist*, it's not surprising to find that he favours those means that bring about the best ends.
- All that matters is whether we can bring about the best outcome.
- Something like equality in relation to voting is not good in and of itself. It may be good in relation to other things.

“I do not look upon equal voting as among the things which are good in themselves” (1977: p. 478).

## The motivation (2)

- Mill, like Toqueville, is wary of the tyranny that may arise as a result of majority rule.
- He recognises that, under his proposed widened suffrage, such a majority would have a distinctive character.

“the great majority of voters... would be manual labourers; and the twofold danger, that of too low a standard of political intelligence, and that of class legislation, would still exist, in a very perilous degree” (p. 473).

## The motivation (3)

- **Question:** How do we avoid these dangers?

**Answer:** Through 'plural voting'.

- Such a voting system allows us to introduce some kind of political *competence* into the voting equation.
- How? By allocating votes to the more knowledgeable, who are presumably also more politically competent.
- In other words, he conceives of plural voting as the means to the best ends:

A more engaged and fruitful political process.

# The objections

- Objections to plural voting are often also objections to weighted voting. Latimer (2015) identifies three.

(1) PV helps sustain power inequalities and these are morally impermissible.

(2) PV may be impracticable in that the evaluations Mill calls for would probably result in disagreements.

(3) PV leads to bias compounding.

- He goes on to deny that these defeat plural voting and offers a hypothetical system of his own.



## Self-respect and moral impermissibility

- Beitz (1989) argues against PV by emphasising the harm such a system would inflict on those with only one vote.

“[t]he visible dilution of influence will appear as an insult, conveying public approval of pre-existing, demeaning social practices” (p. 37).

- Given the importance of self-esteem in many political philosophy projects, this is pretty damning verdict.

**Example:** Rawls (1999) asserts that “perhaps the most important primary good is that of self-respect” (p. 386).

- On Beitz’s view, such disrespect is morally impermissible.<sup>25</sup>

## Reasonable disagreement about competence

- Waldron (1999) argues against PV by doubting whether standards for competence can be agreed upon.

“Whether it is possible in the circumstances of politics to *justify* (or agree upon) criteria of wisdom etc. for the purposes of these differentiations is another matter” (115).

- Indeed, if the disagreement over who is amply rational, wise and experienced is reasonable, PV cannot be practiced.

# Demographic bias

- Estlund (2008) argues against PV by claiming that the biases of those with extra votes would proliferate.
- Such biases would, of course, also be objectionable to those who receive only one vote.
- Moreover, it is claimed that they would damage “the expected quality of collective decisions” (p. 215).

# Weighted voting: A dead end?

- Are these objections insurmountable?
- If not, (and even if you are not fond of the idea), what kind of modifications would such a system require to survive?



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The End