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What should we vote for?

Posted on Monday 10th December 2012

Is there an ideal electorate system? As a recent Birmingham Brief demonstrated, we are often faced with a simple binary choice: do we want 'strong government' which can claim an empowering mandate, or do we want a government that represents, however messily, 'the will of the people'? If we want the former, in the UK at least, we have persisted with a first-past-the-post system. From time-to-time, though, we have had a dark night of the soul, wondered at the fairness of governments' claiming a mandate from a minority of voters actually supporting them, and flirted with alternatives.

Most recently we did this in the referendum on the Alternative Vote. That failed, but other changes, notably proportional representation in the devolved administrations, have come to characterise a more pluralistic approach to the ways in which we elect our representatives. That complexity in our system is further enriched if you add in multi-member European constituencies.

The orthodoxy for our sovereign British Parliament, though, remains the first-past-the-post system: a system that, since the Second World War, has never seen a party securing 50% or more of the votes cast, although the Conservatives in the 1950s came close.

At this point, the debate usually focuses on the idea of a 'fair' electoral system, with fairness being construed as proportionality. It is, however, at least worth asking the question whether there might be other priorities which trump, or at least qualify, that commitment to fairness as a quasi-mathematical principle. We have already seen one: the idea that, over time, a strong single-party government, with the largest minority of the vote, held accountable through frequent elections, is better than messy coalitions. Disraeli once said, 'England doesn't like coalitions'. Perhaps history is presently repeating itself.

At other points in history, though, other considerations have been paramount. Take the Founding Fathers in the United States. We are often told that the US has an odd system for its presidential elections, with voters not voting for a president but voting for delegates in an electoral college. State-by-state winner takes all in delegates to the Electoral College, so it is not only theoretically possible but it actually happens that the candidate with fewer votes will have more Electoral College delegates, and thus win.

But the Founding Fathers set up the Electoral College for a purpose. They wanted 'the people' to elect people who could judge who would make the most appropriate president. It was avowedly a system of elections with checks built into it, and a quasi-senatorial notion of how leaders should be chosen. The people chose wise delegates who, in turn, choose a president. It once sort of worked like this.

Now all of this is short-circuited. The Electoral College is a fiction not a reality, and we regard this aspect of eighteenth-century constitutional practice as quaint, misguided, and possibly politically patronizing. Though, before we dismiss it out of court, we operate other systems of appointment quite differently. For many public appointments, we don't trust the people to choose.

Until 1888 in England we used to elect coroners. Some democratic theorists have held passionately that we should elect judges. In other jurisdictions, for example the US, far more public officials are elected than they are in the UK. Our system still works of the presumption that, for all but a few public offices, appointment is a better principle than election. Given the risible turnout in elections for Police Commissioners in November, the public is probably satisfied with a low proportion of elected public officials. If you doubt that, just remember politicians' fears of electors' responses to 'unnecessary elections'.

It is also worth remembering that we used to do things differently. The advent of single-member constituencies of more-or-less equal size was a result of the Third Reform Act of 1884, and seen as a move towards fairness and proportionality. Before then there had been a mixture of single, double, and even triple-member constituencies, where voters had two votes in double and triple member constituencies.

This produced its own very distinctive terminology, because voters had more *choices* then they do in single-member constituencies. They could 'straight' (vote for two members of the same party); 'split' (vote for members of different parties); or 'plump' (cast only one vote, thus giving their preferred candidate a double advantage). The 'plumper' was often a very powerful vote, as I often told colleagues in elections in clubs where they can vote for more than one candidate.

Recalling the nineteenth-century electoral system is instructive in a number of ways. In the first place it reminds us that voters might want complex choices. They might not be party animals, and they might want to send complex messages best articulated through being able to vote for more than one candidate.

Secondly, it reminds us that voting can be a negative as well as a positive activity. Voters oppose things as well as support things, and one of the weaknesses of a Single Transferable Vote-type system is that it is difficult for voters to calculate how best to vote to oppose things that they passionately reject. What you stand against can be as honourable, powerful, and ultimately creative, as what you vote for.

So before you next rush to endorse a 'fairer' electoral; system, you might reflect on the deeper purposes of elections, the complexity of the democratic processes that elections seek both to capture and to facilitate, and on the importance of being able to oppose as well as to endorse. It's a much more interesting debate than our politicians currently want us to have, and it may yet be the saviour of our democracy which currently seems to have alarmingly little appeal to the younger generation.

David Eastwood
Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham

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