



ESRC Devolution & Constitutional Change Programme



ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: COMPARING STV AND AV SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the possibilities of explicit “electoral engineering” -- designing electoral systems to encourage cooperation, bargaining and inter-dependence between rival politicians and the groups they represent – has become increasingly attractive for promoting democracy in divided societies. This article looks at one strategy of electoral engineering that I call “centripetalism”: the use of preferential, vote-pooling electoral systems such as the Single Transferable Vote and the Alternative Vote to encourage cross-ethnic vote-transfers, inter-ethnic bargaining and the development of broad, multi-ethnic political parties. This paper examines the empirical record of elections in a range of countries that use preferential voting systems – including Northern Ireland, Estonia, Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. It finds that centripetal strategies can influence the trajectory of democracy in divided societies, but that its application is dependent on some important facilitating conditions, including social and demographic factors.

DEMOCRACY IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES: ELECTORAL ENGINEERING FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Introduction

What kind of electoral systems can help democracy survive in countries divided by deep societal cleavages, such as racial, religious, linguistic or other kinds of ethnic identities? Because such identities tend to be invested with a great deal of symbolic and emotional meaning, aspiring politicians in such ‘divided societies’ often have strong incentives to “play the ethnic card” at election time, using communal demands to mobilize voters. As a result, around the world, elections held in divided societies often heighten ethnic tensions. The political rewards of ‘outbidding’ – increasingly extremist rhetoric and demands -- can be greater than those of moderation. In such circumstances, politics can quickly come to be characterised by centrifugal forces, in which the moderate political centre is overwhelmed by extremist forces, leading to zero-sum, winner-take-all politics. The failure of democratic politics is often the result.¹

Any strategy for building sustainable democracy in such circumstances must place a premium on avoiding this depressingly familiar pattern and instead find ways to promote inter-ethnic accommodation, multi-ethnic political parties and moderate, centrist politics. One way to do this is by the design of electoral rules. Because elections help shape broader norms of political behaviour, scholars and practitioners alike are in widespread agreement that electoral systems can play a powerful role in promoting both democracy and conflict management. For example, by structuring the incentives and payoffs available to political actors in their search for electoral victory, creatively-crafted electoral rules can make some types of behaviour more politically rewarding than others. Over the past two decades, the possibilities of such “electoral engineering” -- designing electoral systems to encourage co-operation, bargaining and inter-dependence between rival politicians and the groups they represent – has become increasingly attractive for those attempting to build democracy in divided societies.²

While there is widespread agreement on the importance of electoral systems in shaping the wider political arena, there is profound disagreement between political scientists as to which electoral systems are most appropriate for divided societies.

Two schools of thought predominate. The scholarly orthodoxy has long argued that some form of proportional representation (PR) is needed in the face of deep-rooted ethnic divisions. One influential study of the failure of post-colonial democracy in West Africa argued that divided societies need PR to “give minorities adequate representation, discourage parochialism, and force moderation on the political parties”.³ Such arguments foreshadowed, in part, the electoral recommendations of *consociational* approaches to managing ethnic cleavages in divided societies, which emphasise the need for divided societies to develop mechanisms for elite power-sharing if democracy is to survive ethnic or other conflicts. The scholar most associated with the consociational model, Arend Lijphart, developed this prescription from a detailed examination of the features of power-sharing democracy in some continental European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland), and there is disagreement over how far these measures can work (if at all) when applied to ethnic conflict in developing countries.⁴ However, there is little doubt that consociationalism represents the dominant — and according to Lijphart, the *only* — model of democracy for divided societies.⁵ In terms of electoral systems, consociationalists argue that party-list PR is the best choice for divided societies, as it enables all significant ethnic groups, including minorities, to “define themselves” into ethnically-based parties, and to gain representation in the parliament in proportion to their numbers in the community as a whole.⁶

In contrast to this orthodoxy, some critics argue that the best way to mitigate the destructive patterns of divided societies is not to encourage the formation of ethnic parties and replicate existing ethnic divisions in the legislature, but rather to utilise electoral systems that encourage cooperation and accommodation between rival groups, and therefore work to break down the salience of ethnicity rather than foster its representation in parliament. One core strategy, as advocated by Donald Horowitz, is to design electoral rules which promote reciprocal vote-pooling, bargaining and accommodation across group lines.⁷ Some electoral systems, such as that used for presidential elections in Nigeria, require the winning candidate to gain support from different regions, thus helping to break down the claims of narrow parochialism or regionalism. Others, such as Lebanon’s, attempt to defuse the importance of ethnicity by pre-assigning ethnic proportions in parliament and in each constituency, thus requiring parties to present ethnically-mixed slates of candidates for election and making voters choose between them on issues other than ethnicity.

However, the most powerful electoral systems for encouraging accommodation are those which make politicians reciprocally dependent on the votes of members of groups other than their own. In this article, drawn from a book-length study, I examine the empirical record of one such electoral innovation as a tool of conflict management: the use of ‘preferential’ electoral systems which enable voters to express on the ballot a rank-ordering of their choices between different parties or candidates. All preferential electoral systems share a common feature: they enable electors to indicate how they would vote if their favoured candidate was defeated and they had to choose between those remaining. It is this particular feature which distinguishes preferential voting systems. Such systems include the ‘alternative vote’ (AV) -- a majority system -- and the ‘single transferable vote’ (STV) -- a form of proportional representation.

AV is a majoritarian system used in single-member electoral districts which requires successful candidates to gain not just a plurality but an absolute majority of votes. If no candidate has an absolute majority of first-preferences, the candidate with the lowest number of first preference votes is eliminated and his or her ballots papers redistributed to remaining candidates according to the lower order preferences marked. This process of sequential elimination and transfer of votes continues until a majority winner emerges.

STV, by contrast, is a proportional system based around multi-member districts which, depending on the number of members elected in each district, allows even small minorities access to representation. Voters rank candidates in order of preference on the ballot paper in the same manner as AV. The count begins by determining the ‘quota’ of votes required to elect a single candidate.⁸ Any candidate who has more first preferences than the quota is immediately elected. If no-one has achieved the quota, the candidate with the lowest number of first preferences is eliminated, and his or her second and later preferences redistributed to the candidates left in the race. At the same time, the ‘surplus’ votes of elected candidates (ie. those votes above the quota) are redistributed at a reduced value according to the second, third etc preferences on the ballot papers, until all seats for the constituency are filled.

Because they enable electors to rank candidates in the order of their choice on the ballot, preferential systems can encourage politicians in divided societies to campaign for the ‘second-choice’ votes of electors and provide parties and candidates with an incentive to ‘pool votes’ across ethnic lines. To attract second-level support, candidates may need to make cross-ethnic appeals and demonstrate their capacity to represent groups other than their own.

Alternately, where a moderate or non-ethnic ‘middle’ part of the electorate exists, candidates may need to move to the centre on policy issues to attract these voters, or to accommodate fringe issues into their broader policy.

Either way, negotiations between rival candidates and their supporters for reciprocal vote transfers can greatly increase prospects for transfer votes flowing from ethnic parties to non-ethnic ones – thus encouraging, even in deeply divided societies, the formation and strengthening of a core ‘moderate middle’ sentiment within the electorate as a whole. Such negotiations can also stimulate the development of alliances between parties, and aid the development of multi-ethnic parties or coalitions of parties. Scholars have increasingly found that aggregative party systems, in which “one or two broadly-based, centrist parties fight for the middle ground”, can assist the consolidation of new or transitional democracies.⁹

This broad approach to conflict management has been dubbed ‘centripetalism’, “because the explicit aim is to engineer a centripetal spin to the political system — to pull the parties towards moderate, compromising policies and to discover and reinforce the centre of a deeply divided political spectrum”.¹⁰ A centripetal political system or strategy is designed to focus competition at the moderate centre rather than the extremes by making politicians seek electoral support from groups beyond their own ethnic community. Accordingly, I use the term centripetalism as a shorthand for three related but distinct phenomena:

- (i) the presentation of *electoral incentives* for campaigning politicians to reach out to and attract votes from a range of ethnic groups other than their own, thus encouraging them to moderate their political rhetoric on potentially divisive issues and forcing them to broaden their policy positions in the search for cross-ethnic electoral support;
- (ii) the presence of an *arena of bargaining*, under which political actors from different groups have an incentive to come together to bargain and negotiate in the search for reciprocal electoral support via negotiation on vote-transfer deals and hence, perhaps, other more substantial issues; and
- (iii) the development of *centrist, aggregative and multiethnic political parties* or coalitions of parties which are capable of making cross-ethnic appeals and presenting a complex and diverse range of policy options to the electorate.

A recurring criticism of centripetalism is that there are insufficient real world examples to support the case for using preferential voting as an agent of conflict management in ethnically-divided societies.¹¹ Recent years, however, have seen some remarkable recent experiments in using centripetal electoral rules to encourage inter-ethnic accommodation in divided societies as diverse as Northern Ireland, Estonia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Elsewhere, new democracies like Indonesia and Bosnia are actively considering such systems.¹² In addition, established democracies like Australia, the United Kingdom and even the United States are all showing increasing interest in the utility of preferential voting as a means of aggregating like-minded interests and combating ‘vote-splitting’ and extremist forces.¹³ A common theme is the desire to ‘engineer’ political behaviour, by changing the incentives for election that campaigning politicians must respond to. The following pages briefly survey the combined evidence on this issue to date.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is probably the best-known example of centripetal institutions encouraging inter-ethnic accommodation in a divided society in recent years, via the use of a preferential electoral system at the crucial 1998 elections held under the ‘Good Friday’ peace process. After 30 years of sectarian violence between Northern Ireland’s Catholic and Protestant communities, the Good Friday peace agreement of April 1998 provided for a range of new institutions aimed at managing the conflict between unionist and nationalist interests -- among them power-sharing elections to a new Northern Ireland Assembly held under STV rules. Although previous elections under similar rules had been held in 1973 and 1982 without success, the 1998 election resulted, for the first time in Northern Ireland’s history, in the formation of a ‘pro-peace’ power-sharing government.

One reason for this outcome was the way that the STV electoral system was able to transform moderate sentiments in the community into a pro-peace majority in the Assembly, via vote transfers. Analyses of the 1998 elections found that a significant proportion of the Northern Ireland electorate used their lower-order preferences to transfer votes from ethnic sectarian parties to non-ethnic centrist ones.

The use of preference voting assisted the peace process in a number of ways. First, it provided direct incentives to the major parties to moderate their position in the hope of attracting preference votes from moderate voters. The possibility of picking up lower-order preference transfers was instrumental in moving Sinn Fein, for example, away from violence and towards less extreme policy positions. This movement was rewarded by moderation-inclined voters -- as the increased flow of lower-order preferences to Sinn Fein from more centrist nationalist parties such as the SDLP at the 1998 poll indicated. Similarly, on the unionist side, STV encouraged those voting for anti-agreement unionist parties to transfer their lower-order votes to other unionist parties and candidates, many of whom were also 'pro-agreement'.

These vote transfers worked to the benefit of the political centre, allowing pro-agreement communal parties such as the (Protestant) Ulster Unionists (UUP) and Progressive Unionists (PUP), or the (Catholic) Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), to gain lower-order vote transfers from other pro-agreement forces. This process also benefited some of the non-sectarian 'middle' parties like the Alliance and the Women's Coalition (which received lower order preference votes from both sides of the political divide). As a consequence, the major centrist parties were proportionately over-represented in the new assembly. Pro-agreement parties such as the UUP and the SDLP gained additional seats on the back of vote transfers -- most clearly in the case of the UUP, which gained 26 percent of the parliamentary seats with 21 percent of the first-preference vote. In short, "some of the SDLP's and Sinn Fein's voters found it rational to reward David Trimble's UUP for making the agreement by giving its candidates their lower-order preferences ... likewise, some of the UUP's and PUP's voters transferred their lower-order preferences to pro-agreement candidates within their own bloc, amongst the others, and amongst nationalists ... Within-block rewards for moderation also occurred".¹⁴ This had a beneficial influence both upon the types of political alliances that could be formed and on the eventual composition of the new Assembly, over 70 percent of which was made up of 'pro-agreement' parties.

In short, pro-agreement parties on both sides of the sectarian divide benefited from vote transfers, which were essential in converting a bare 'anti-agreement' unionist voter majority into a 'pro-agreement' unionist parliamentary majority. This proved crucial to the eventual outcome: one study has concluded that the principal reason that a workable Assembly emerged from the 1998 elections "was the adoption, or re-adoption, of the single transferable

vote ... voters' lower-order preferences kept the Assembly on-track by reducing the numbers of seats that the anti-agreement unionist parties won in the election".¹⁵ In sum, the ability to transfer votes from the flanks to the center proved to be a key element in producing a pro-peace assembly. Of course, as its rocky recent history underlines, this may not be enough for the peace process in Northern Ireland to succeed -- but it raises its chances of doing so nonetheless.

Estonia

Another example of the use of STV in a divided country comes from the transitional 1990 election in Estonia, a society split between a majority national Estonian-speaking community (60 percent) and the minority (35 percent) immigrant Russian-speaking one. Estonia used a STV electoral system for its first post-Soviet national election in 1990. In contrast to Northern Ireland, however, analysis of this 'one-off' re-democratization election suggests little in the way of cross-ethnic voting or vote-pooling between the two communities. Studies found that most Russian electors, for example, voted predominantly for liberal democratic 'Russian' parties, and their second preferences "went overwhelmingly to reactionary imperialist Russian candidates rather than liberal but ethnically Estonian ones. Likewise, voters with Estonian first preferences continued with Estonian names".¹⁶ While there was some evidence of cross-ethnic voting, particularly support for Estonian candidates by non-Estonian voters, it is not clear whether this was a reaction to electoral incentives.

However, there is some evidence from Estonia that the early application of STV in the transition process from authoritarian to democratic rule did help to encourage the early development of aggregative, multi-ethnic party system -- itself a crucial agent of conflict management in divided societies. Some analyses found that STV's combination of proportional outcomes with individual (rather than group-based) candidacy and voting promoted the early development of a broad-based party system in Estonia, and restricted incentives for parties to form purely around ethnic lines.¹⁷ Other comparative studies of electoral system choice in Eastern Europe concluded that optimum strategies of electoral system design in divided societies should attempt to "represent groups equally to diffuse protest actions, while promoting systems of representation that accentuate individualism" -- and hence that STV may be "just the trick" for preventing ethnopolitical conflicts.¹⁸

Had STV been maintained on an ongoing basis in Estonia, it is likely that electoral strategies would have become more sophisticated as political actors grew more knowledgeable about the system and its effects. However, this was not to be: in 1992 the new parliament abandoned STV and changed the electoral system to a variant of list PR, after several leading parties calculated that a change of voting system could be to their benefit. The political effect of STV upon Estonian politics is thus difficult to evaluate, given the quickly changing conditions and the way it was adopted as a political compromise and then discarded for similar reasons. Taagepera points to two general lessons: first, that even a country with as limited a recent experience of free elections as Estonia had no problems with the relatively complex STV ballot, and second, that “whichever electoral rules one adopts, keep them for at least two elections before getting into the revamping game”.¹⁹

Australia

One of the most interesting recent examples of the use of preferential voting to foil political extremism comes from the unlikely setting of Australia, one of the world’s most stable democracies. Although not a divided society, Australia has an extremely diverse population, with almost 40 percent being overseas-born or the offspring of overseas-born immigrants, most of whom come from non-English speaking countries in southern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Preferential voting systems are used for all Australian jurisdictions, in the form of single-member AV systems in the lower house and proportional STV systems in the Senate. Over the years, preferential voting has tended to push the Australian political system away from extremes and towards the ‘moderate middle’, while also ensuring the election of governments which, in most cases, enjoy the majority support of the electorate. It has also enabled the development of partnership arrangements between parties -- with the long-running coalition arrangement between the conservative Liberal and National parties being the most prominent, but not the only, example. In recent years the other major party, the Australian Labor Party, has also benefited from preference flows from left-leaning minor parties such as the Greens and the Australian Democrats.²⁰

In most cases, the effect of such vote transfers has been to aggregate common interests on either the labour or conservative sides of politics, rather than align those interests against a common enemy. One graphic exception to this rule, however, occurred at the 1998 federal

election, due to the rising power of Pauline Hanson and her 'One Nation' party. One Nation represented a distinctively Australian version of the populist right-wing racist parties that had appeared in many European countries during the 1990s. First elected in 1996, Hanson campaigned on a platform of ending immigration, removing benefits and subsidies to Aborigines and other disadvantaged groups, drastically cutting taxation rates, raising tariffs, ending all foreign aid and removing Australia from international bodies such as the United Nations.

Following a protracted period of national and international media attention, the major Australian parties decided to join forces to eliminate what they saw as a dangerous aberration in the political system. One potent way of doing this was via the suggested distribution of lower-order preferences which the parties gave to their supporters at election time. At the 1998 election in Hanson's electorate, both major parties instructed their supporters to place her *last* in their order of preference when marking their ballot (in contrast to the more familiar tactic of suggesting their major party opponent – from Labor or the Liberal/National Coalition, as the case may be – be placed last).

The result was an instructive lesson in the application of AV rules to defeat an extremist candidate who commands significant core support but ultimately repels more voters than he or she attracts. Coming first in a nine-candidate field before the distribution of preferences, Hanson achieved the highest first preference total with 36 percent of the vote. But she received very few preference transfers from other candidates. As the count progressed into its final exclusion, almost three-quarters of the Labor candidate's preferences went to a Liberal, who won the seat with 53.4 percent of the overall (preference-distributed) vote, even though he was only the *third* highest polling candidate on first-preferences. This result, which was repeated in less dramatic fashion in other seats around the country, saw One Nation largely eliminated from federal politics (although it did win one seat in the Senate). By contrast, the almost certain result under a plurality system would have seen Hanson beat a divided field of more moderate candidates and taking a seat in the federal parliament. The Australian example thus demonstrates a preventive form of conflict management: the capacity of AV to privilege centrist interests and centripetal political strategies in a potentially divisive situation.

Fiji

One of the most comprehensive attempts at electoral engineering using centripetal approaches in recent years has taken place in Fiji, an island group in the South Pacific of approximately 750,000 people divided almost equally between indigenous and Indian Fijians. Fiji's indigenous population are a mixture of the Melanesian and Polynesian groups found throughout the Pacific islands. Fiji's Indian community, by contrast, are mostly the descendants of indentured labourers who came from southern India to work on Fiji's sugar plantations in the 19th century under British colonialism. Fijian society and politics has long been characterised by an uneasy co-existence between these two communities, with Indo-Fijians predominating in certain key areas of the economy (particularly the sugar-cane industry) and indigenous Fijians owning 90 percent of the land but holding limited economic power.

In 1997, ten years after two military coups brought down an elected government seen as overly close to the Indian community -- and in the face of economic stagnation, increasing Indian migration, and mounting international pressure -- a new power-sharing constitution was promulgated that attempted to push Fiji "gradually but decisively" towards multi-ethnic politics. It featured an innovative package of electoral and powersharing arrangements designed to promote the development of open and multi-ethnic political competition, including an AV voting system. By making politicians from one group reliant on votes from the other group for their electoral success, AV could, it was argued, encourage a degree of vote-pooling between rival ethnic parties which could help to encourage accommodation between (and within) Fiji's deeply-divided Indian and indigenous Fijian communities.²¹

Fiji's 1999 parliamentary election, the first held under the new constitution, provided an opportunity to put the new system to a practical test. Early signs were encouraging: political parties from both sides of the ethnic divide reacted to the changed incentives for election under the new system by making pre-election alliances. This meant that the election was effectively fought between two large multi-ethnic coalitions rather than between mono-ethnic parties of the past. Parties representing the interests of Fiji's three designated ethnic groups – indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians and 'General' electors (ie European, Chinese and other minorities) – formed the core of both of these coalitions. Because cross-ethnic preference exchanges underpinned both coalitions, they also prompted the development of new bargaining arenas which brought together former adversaries from across the ethnic divide,

encouraging a degree of cross-cultural communication which had been conspicuous by its absence at previous elections.²²

At the election itself, an unexpectedly strong vote for the Fiji Labour Party combined with a fragmented indigenous Fijian vote resulted in a surprise landslide victory for one of these groups, the so-called People's Coalition. Mahendra Chaudhry, the Fiji Labour Party leader, thus became Fiji's first ever Indo-Fijian prime minister. Labour ran largely on a multi-ethnic, class-based platform, and was the only party to gain a good spread of votes in both rural and urban seats, although it was a poor performer in the Fijian communal seats.

However, a number of other parties appeared to suffer at the hands of the system, leading to an imbalanced parliament dominated by Labour and its allies. Popular discontent on the part of many indigenous Fijians at the presence of an Indo-Fijian Prime Minister continued to simmer, and Prime Minister Chaudhry's sometimes outspoken advocacy of Indo-Fijian rights served to deepen mistrust over key issues such as land ownership. In May 2000, exactly one year after the 1999 election, a group of gunmen headed by a failed part-Fijian businessman, George Speight, burst into the parliament building and took the new government hostage, claiming a need to restore Fijian paramountcy to the political system. By the time the hostages were released and Speight and his supporters arrested, Fiji had returned to military rule. But in August 2001, Fiji went back to the polls under the 1997 constitution. Again, the election campaign was fought out by two broad coalitions – this time, the 'moderates' and the 'conservatives'. This election, held under the same AV electoral system, resulted in a quite different outcome to 1999, with the incumbent government of military-appointed indigenous Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase emerging victorious.

As this uncertain history shows, preferential voting was a mixed success in achieving the core objectives of stimulating the development of peaceful multi-ethnic politics in Fiji. On the positive side, the expectation of cross-ethnic vote transfers was fulfilled, the opportunities for inter-elite bargaining that the new rules provided were exploited and adapted by elites from both communities and, in combination with the expectations of places at the power-sharing cabinet table, served to significantly cool the rhetoric of the campaign. But the outcome of the 1999 election in particular was also highly disproportional, with the Fiji Labour Party gaining an absolute majority of seats with only 32 percent of the vote, while some other major parties gained substantial vote shares but few (or in one case, no) seats. Some observers linked this unbalanced electoral outcome to the coup of a year later. At the 2001

election, however, these imbalances were much less in evidence. Overall, the introduction of preferential voting appeared to play a modest role in breaking old habits of monoethnic politics in Fiji. Whether this is enough to build new routines of multi-ethnic politics into the future, however, remains to be seen.

Papua New Guinea

Another Pacific country, Papua New Guinea, offers perhaps the most compelling case for the use of preferential voting as a means of conflict management in ethnically-diverse societies. Papua New Guinea is a country of exceptional ethnic fragmentation, with some 840 languages spoken by several thousand competitive ethnic micro-polities, reflecting enormous ethnic, cultural and regional divisions. Indeed, more languages are spoken by Papua new Guinea's 5.1 million people than in all of Africa. Despite its amazingly fragmented society, Papua New Guinea also has one of the longest records of continuous democracy in the developing world, having maintained a highly competitive and participatory form of democratic governance since 1964.²³

In terms of electoral systems, Papua New Guinea's first three elections – in 1964, 1968 and 1972 – were conducted under AV rules, inherited from Australia, its colonial administrator until independence in 1975. This was replaced by a plurality system at independence – a move which had devastating consequences for the nascent political system.

Politics in Papua New Guinea is strongly influenced by the fractionalized nature of traditional society, which is comprised of several thousand competing 'clans'—extended family units—which form the primary (and sometimes the only) unit of political loyalty. Electoral contests are focussed on the mobilization of clan and tribal groups, rather than around issues of public policy or ideology. Elections thus often have the effect of underlining the significance of basic clan and ethnic attachments. Since independence, elections have also encouraged a 'retribalization' of ethnic groups, in which the economic importance of gaining political office has led to increasingly rigid group boundaries and inter-ethnic armed conflict.²⁴ Elections are thus one of the primary ways in which traditional enmities are mobilised in contemporary Papua New Guinea, even though in most cases contestation is very much for election to office itself, rather than larger concerns such as policy implementation, government formation or national ideology.

This was the case under both AV and plurality elections, and it remains the case today. The difference in pre-independence elections held under AV was that the electoral system appeared to encourage a degree of vote-pooling, cooperation and accommodation between the country's many small tribal groups, rather than the violent competition that has become the norm over the past decade. Vote-pooling in pre-independence elections took place in three primary ways, all of which were predicated on the assumption that most voters would invariably give their first preference to their own clan or 'home' candidate. The most common and successful method was for candidates who had limited 'home' support to campaign widely for second-preference support amongst rival groups. For this strategy to succeed, candidates needed to be able to sell themselves as the 'second-best' choice -- which meant, in general, someone who would look after all groups fairly -- and to campaign as much for second preferences as for first ones. A second strategy was for candidates with significant existing support bases to reach out to selected allies for secondary support. Traditional tribal contacts and allegiances could thus be utilised to create majority victors. A third strategy, and increasingly common by the time of Papua New Guinea's independence, was for groups and candidates to form mutual alliances, sometimes campaigning together and urging voters to cast reciprocal preferences for one or the other. These alliances were a response to the incentives presented by AV for campaigning on a common platform, whereby the sharing of preferences between aligned candidates was perceived as a rational activity which maximised prospects of electoral victory. They also appear to have given some impetus to the need to organise politically, and can thus be seen as the forerunners to the establishment of political parties in Papua New Guinea.²⁵

All of these patterns disappeared when preferential voting, which was viewed as a 'colonial' imposition from Australia, was replaced with a plurality system in 1975. With no incentives for cooperation, elections almost immediately became zero-sum contests between rival tribal groups. Most seats featured scores of clan-backed candidates, resulting in winners being elected on increasingly miniscule vote shares. At the most recent national election in 1997, over half of all seats were won with less than 20 percent of the vote, and fifteen winning candidates gained less than 10 percent. Related factors of electoral violence and 'vote splitting' -- friendly candidates with little hope of winning the seat standing in order to 'split' an opposition block vote -- have also become a problem. Indeed, changes in the nature of campaigning and increasing incidences of election-related violence have been two of the most marked effects of the plurality system. Under AV, the winning candidates in many

electorates were those who cultivated the preferences of those outside their own local area. Today, such spreading of the net is almost inconceivable in many parts of Papua New Guinea, as the risks of campaigning in a hostile area tend to overshadow the (marginal) possibilities of picking up significant numbers of votes from rival areas. In some regions, candidates are virtually restricted by personal safety considerations to campaigning only amongst their home clans, due to the very real possibility of violence if they venture into a rival's clan or tribal region.²⁶ Recent anthropological research has concluded that traditional tribal enmities have been reinforced by the plurality system, whereas a return to AV would enable the strengthening of traditional tribal allegiances, reciprocal relationships and peacemaking strategies.²⁷

Not surprisingly, this has encouraged a strong push for a return to the pre-independence AV electoral system. In August 2001, following several failed attempts, Papua New Guinea's parliament voted to return to a form of 'limited' preferential voting for future elections after 2002, with preferences limited to three. Along with moves to strengthen executive government, weed out corruption in politics and promote the development of political parties, this move was seen as part of a last-ditch reform process aimed at turning around Papua New Guinea's vibrant but chronically unstable democracy, which features shifting parliamentary coalitions and ongoing votes of no-confidence against the executive as part of the continual jockeying for political power. However, the main advantages of the electoral system reform are likely to be the changes they prompt in terms of electoral behaviour, and in reducing conflicts and tribal violence at the local level.

Conclusion

All of these cases provide important empirical evidence to evaluate claims that preferential electoral systems can, under certain circumstances, promote co-operation between competing groups in divided societies. This in itself is an important conclusion, as a recurring criticism of centripetal theories in general, and the case for preferential voting in particular, has been a perceived lack of real-world examples.²⁸ But apparently similar institutional designs also appear to have had markedly different impacts in different countries. In Northern Ireland, for example, it is clear that vote-transfers assisted the process of moderation at the breakthrough 1998 election. But the evidence from earlier elections held under similar rules in 1982 or

1973 -- or, for that matter, from Estonia's 1990 election -- is much more ambiguous. Similarly, Papua New Guinea's experience with AV in the 1960s and 70s was markedly more successful than that of its Pacific neighbour, Fiji, more recently. Why?

A key facilitating condition appears to be the presence of a core group of *moderates*, both amongst the political leadership and in the electorate at large. Centripetal strategies for conflict management assume that there is sufficient moderate sentiment within a community for cross-ethnic voting to be possible. In some circumstances, the presence of vote-pooling institutions may even encourage the development of this type of moderate core, via repeated inter-elite interaction within bargaining arenas. But it cannot invent moderation where none exists. It is likely that the lack of a moderate core at Northern Ireland's earlier elections -- and its clear presence in 1998 -- was a major factor in centripetalism's past failures as well as its more recent success there. This is reflected in part by the fact that, at the 1998 election, there were far more vote transfers from sectarian to non-sectarian 'middle' parties than there were across the ethnic divide *per se*.²⁹

The arguments for the moderation-inducing effects of preferential election rules are premised on the assumption that politicians are rational actors who will do what needs to be done to gain election. Under different types of preferential voting rules, however, 'what needs to be done' varies considerably, depending on the electoral formula in place and the social makeup of the electorate. For example, where a candidate is confident of achieving an absolute majority or winning the required quota of first preferences, they need only focus on maximising votes from their own supporters in order to win the seat. In cases where no candidate has outright majority support, however, the role of second and later preferences becomes crucial to attracting an overall majority. For this reason, some scholars such as Horowitz favour majoritarian forms of preferential voting like AV over the proportional variant of STV. In addition, Horowitz's case for 'vote pooling' is based on the purported benefits of cross-ethnic voting -- that is, the assumption that even in deeply divided societies, some electors will be prepared to give some votes, even if only lower order ones, to members of another ethnic group. In Northern Ireland, however, while vote transfers played an important role in promoting accommodation, these ran predominantly from anti- to pro-agreement parties on the same side of the sectarian divide, or from sectarian to non-sectarian 'middle' parties, rather than across the communal cleavage from a unionist candidate to a

nationalist one or vice-versa. While truly cross-communal vote transfers did occur, they were much less common than sectarian to non-sectarian transfers.

Second, *continuity of experience* appears to be an all-important variable: the evidence suggests that successive elections held under the same rules encourage a gradual process of political learning. Structural incentives need to be kept constant over several elections before attempting to judge the effects of any electoral package -- particularly with preferential systems, where the routines of deal-making and preference-swapping by politicians, and the understanding of these devices by voters, takes time to emerge. In the world's two longest-running cases of preferential voting, Australia and Ireland, it took many years for the full strategic potential of vote-transfers to become clear to politicians and voters alike. By contrast, one reason for the lack of vote-pooling at Estonia's 1990 STV election may have been that routines of interaction between political actors and the electoral rules had not had time to become institutionalized. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, the 25-year timespan between the first STV election in 1973 and the 'Good Friday' agreement election in 1998 provided a much longer period for political learning to occur. The Australian experience underscores this: rates of preference swapping at Australian elections have increased steadily over recent decades.

Third, the *social context* in which elections are held appears all-important. Countries like Northern Ireland and Estonia feature 'bi-polar' splits between two large and relatively cohesive ethnic groups, both of which were effectively guaranteed representation under STV's proportional election rules. But in 1998 Northern Ireland, there was also a third group: the middle, non-sectarian parties which were not clearly bound to either community. By advantaging the representation of this group, STV promoted outcomes which would not have been likely under AV or other majority systems, or under the more common party list versions of PR either. In other cases, however, where there is greater ethnic heterogeneity or a much smaller non-ethnic centre, STV may work less well -- indeed, did work less well at previous Northern Ireland elections. All of which suggests that a key element of any electoral engineering prescription must be a careful understanding of the prevailing social and demographic conditions -- particularly the size, number and dispersion of ethnic groups.

The importance of ethnic demography is highlighted by the two cases of Fiji and Papua New Guinea. In Fiji, most open electoral districts -- which are supposed to encapsulate a 'good proportion' of members of both major communities -- were drawn in such a way as to become

the preserve of one ethnic group or another. Because of this, genuine opportunities for inter-ethnic cooperation at the constituency level were rare, and most contests provided no opportunity at all for cross-ethnic campaigns, appeals or outcomes. Only six seats were genuinely competitive between ethnic groups at the 1999 election.³⁰ For the rest, clear Indian or Fijian majorities prevailed. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that relatively little cross-ethnic vote-trading actually occurred in most seats. Indeed, the Fiji case is a good example of the problems of using AV in a polarized political environment: it places great pressure on seemingly minor bodies such as boundaries commissions to come up with appropriately mixed constituencies. I have argued elsewhere that STV in small, 3-member districts would have been a better choice for Fiji, and indeed much of the current pressure for electoral reform there is focussed on the need for a more proportional system.³¹

Contrast this with the situation in Papua New Guinea, where the extreme fragmentation of traditional society meant that most electorates feature dozens of small tribal ethno-polities. To be elected under a majority system like AV, candidates had no option but to amass votes from a range of groups beyond their own: this was the only way to surpass the majority threshold. Under such conditions, candidates had a strong incentive to behave accommodatively towards rival ethnic groups to have a chance of electoral victory. Not surprisingly, levels of electoral violence were much lower under the AV system than under plurality rules at recent elections, where no such incentives have been present.

The situation in Northern Ireland is quite unlike Papua New Guinea, but is closer to the Fijian case. The evidence from there does not support the argument that AV works better than STV in a situation of bi-communal cleavage such as Northern Ireland. If anything, the Fijian example demonstrates the dangers of using overtly majoritarian electoral rules in such cases. Overall, the comparative evidence from such cases suggests that “no change” is the wisest recommendation to make for Northern Ireland.

¹ For good discussions of the interaction between ethnicity and electoral politics see Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Timothy D. Sisk, *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

² See, for example, Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Donald L. Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Giovanni Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering: An Inquiry Into Structures, Incentives and Outcomes* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Ben Reilly and

Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies* (Washington DC: National Research Council, 1999).

³ W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), p. 73.

⁴ See Lijphart 1977, op cit; Sisk 1996, op cit, pp. 27-45. See also Donald L. Horowitz, 'Making Moderation Pay: the Comparative Politics of Ethnic Conflict Management' in J.V. Montville (ed), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Lexington Books), pp. 451-76.

⁵ See Arend Lijphart, 'The Power-Sharing Approach' in J.V. Montville (ed), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, (New York: Lexington Books), pp. 491-509.

⁶ Arend Lijphart, 'Electoral Systems, Party Systems and Conflict Management in Segmented Societies' in R.A. Schreier (ed), *Critical Choices for South Africa: An Agenda for the 1990s* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press), pp. 10-13.

⁷ See Horowitz 1985, op cit; 1991, op cit.

⁸ The formula used divides the total number of votes in the count by one more than the number of seats to be elected, and then adding one to the result. For example, if there are 6,000 votes and five members to be elected, the quota for election is $6,000/(5+1)$, +1, or 1,001 votes.

⁹ Larry Diamond, 'Toward Democratic Consolidation' in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 239.

¹⁰ Timothy D. Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 19.

¹¹ See Arend Lijphart, 'The Alternative Vote: A Realistic Alternative for South Africa?', *Politikon* 18 (1991), 91-101; Sisk 1996, op cit, pp. 44, 62; Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner 'Introduction' in Diamond and Plattner (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. xxiv.

¹² At the time of writing, an AV system had been proposed but not implemented in both countries.

¹³ In 1998, the British Government's Jenkins Commission unveiled a proposal for "AV plus" – a mixed system with 80 percent of seats elected by AV, and the remaining 20 percent elected from a PR list to balance proportionality – as a proposed future electoral reform for Britain. In May 2000, a form of preferential voting was used for London's first-ever Mayoral elections. In the United States, preferential voting is becoming an increasingly prominent electoral reform option in a number of states including Vermont, New Mexico and California. Both San Francisco and Alaska have upcoming initiative ballots aimed at introducing the system.

¹⁴ Brendan O'Leary, 'The British-Irish Agreement of 1998: Results and Prospects', paper presented to the Constitutional Design 2000 conference, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, December 1999, p. 10.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Evans and Brendan O'Leary, 'Northern Irish Voters and the British-Irish Agreement: Foundations of a Stable Consociational Settlement?', paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Atlanta GA, September 1999, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Rein Taagepera, 'STV in Transitional Estonia', *Representation* 34 (1996), p. 31.

¹⁷ See John T. Ishiyama, 'Electoral Rules and Party Nomination Strategies in Ethnically Cleaved Societies: the Estonian Transitional Election of 1990', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27 (1994):177-192.

¹⁸ John T. Ishiyama, 'Institutions and Ethno-Political Conflict in Post-Communist Politics', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6 (2000), p. 65.

¹⁹ Taagepera, op cit, p. 36.

²⁰ See Benjamin Reilly, 'Preferential Voting and Political Engineering in Australia' in Marian Sawyer (ed), *Elections, Free and Fair: Australia's Experiments in Democracy* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2001).

²¹ See Constitution Review Commission 1996, *The Fiji Islands: Towards a United Future* (Suva: Parliament of Fiji, 1996).

²² See Brij V. Lal, *A Time to Change: The Fiji General Elections of 1999* (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change Discussion Paper 23, Australian National University), p. 6.

²³ See Benjamin Reilly, 'Democracy, Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict: Confused Theories, Faulty Data, and the "Crucial Case" of Papua New Guinea', *International Security* 25 (2000):162-185

²⁴ Andrew Strathern, 'Violence and Political Change in Papua New Guinea', *Pacific Studies* 16 (1993):41-60.

²⁵ For detail on these historical cases, see Benjamin Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 58-94.

²⁶ William Standish, 'Elections in Simbu: Towards Gunpoint Democracy?' in Yaw Saffu (ed), *The 1992 PNG Election: Change and Continuity in Electoral Politics* (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1996).

²⁷ Alan Rumsey, 'Social Segmentation, Voting, and Violence in Papua New Guinea', *The Contemporary Pacific* 11 (1999):305-333.

²⁸ Sisk, for example, wrote that "although vote pooling is theoretically compelling, there is simply insufficient empirical evidence at the level of national politics to support claims that subsequent preference voting can lead to accommodative outcomes" (1996, op cit, p. 62).

²⁹ See Richard Simmott, 'Centrist politics makes modest but significant progress: cross-community transfers were low', *Irish Times*, 29 June 1998.

³⁰ See Nigel Roberts, 'Living Up To Expectations? The New Fijian Electoral System and the 1999 General Election', paper presented to Citizens Constitutional Forum, Suva, Fiji, 18 July 1999.

³¹ Benjamin Reilly, 'Constitutional Engineering and the Alternative Vote in Fiji: An Assessment' in Brij V. Lal and Peter Larmour (eds), *Electoral Systems in Divided Societies: The Fiji Constitution Review* (National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1997).