

Proportional Representation In Iraq

The UN, in its infinite lack of wisdom, has proposed that Iraq should have a proportional representation (PR) election system. The Coalition Provisional Authority has agreed to this.

In PR, the people vote for a party and that party is allocated legislators in proportion to the number of votes they get. The best system is First Past the Post in which people elect a representative in a region rather than a whole country. As we have **written before**, proportional representation is bad, and we expect Iraq to provide an illustration of this in due course.

What do the Iraqis think? Aside from the Islamists, most Iraqis **favour First Past the Post**, according to Michael Rubin, Editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*. Why? Because they distrust political parties. This brings out an important point: In PR, there is simply no room for a candidate who represents local issues.

So why did the UN advocate PR? They say it will allow ethnic minorities to vote together across the country and get their interests represented. But according to Rubin, the fact of the matter on the ground is that these minorities often do not have many interests in common. For example, Shiite Turkmen in Tel Afar have little in common with Turkish speaking people in Erbil or Kirkuk. And of course, any minority that does not have its own party is in deep trouble under PR. Under First Past the Post, if a minority is concentrated in some areas, as Christians are, they could have chosen the candidate that best suited them without having to set up a party.

We guess that the UN has chosen PR more because of their collectivist world-view than any actual analysis of what would be best for Iraq. They think of people in terms of what groups they belong to rather than as individuals, and so they chose the most collectivist form of democracy they could find.

Sat, 06/26/2004 - 18:58 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

I gave some comments earlier

I gave **some comments** earlier about this issue. So I won't again go into my point that PR also has advantages which the district

system does not. But now I am interested in the following:

They think of people in terms of what groups they belong to rather than as individuals, and so they chose the most collectivist form of democracy they could find.

To be sure, any form of democracy is a form of collectivism. But could you expand on the question in what regard do you consider PR to be more collectivist than the district system?

Another point is, if you think that members of parliament should be representatives of their voters, why then should this representation be geographically oriented? In other words, why should people be limited to voting for people living within a certain distance from their home? Why not allow people to vote for any representative country wide (instead of for a political party) and then give each representative a voting power in parliament in proportion to the number of people he represents? For example, if there are 100 seats and person A gets 5% of the vote in the country, he would get 5 votes in parliament. If B gets 1% of the vote, he gets one vote in parliament.

Henry Sturman

by **Henry Sturman** on Sun, 06/27/2004 - 13:43 | [reply](#)

Collectivist PR

'To be sure, any form of democracy is a form of collectivism.'

No. It's an imperfect individualist institution that allows individuals to criticise governments.

'But could you expand on the question in what regard do you consider PR to be more collectivist than the district system?'

In PR you vote for parties not for individuals, thus it is impossible to elect an individual who is not affiliated to a party.

by **Alan Forrester** on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 01:21 | [reply](#)

an idiotarian responds

interesting contrarian perspective.

forgot to introduce myself, arbitrary aardvark.

my blog on election law issues is at ballots.blogspot.com.

first past the post systems tend to coalesce into one-party or two-party systems, and offer stability of a sort, and enable strong leaders. sometimes these elected bodies become facades for a strong-man with a military power-base. dissent tends to be limited, to the handful of issues at the location where party a differs, at least nominally, from party b. party c can have input into the debate if it willing to forgo power for truth.

PR does a better job of ensuring oppressed minorities get some voice and a piece of the action. However, some PR systems have had stability issues. Italy. Whether this was due to defects in the

form of PR used, or is inherent, i leave to the political scientists -

i'm just a lawyer, and a crazy one.

I spent much of my life working with the LP in the USA. Over 30 years, it's never elected a congresscritter, and most of its state reps have been in pockets where PR or fusion is allowed.

Here and there, the lp is emerging as a second party in one-party districts, but that is rare and mostly accidental.

The LP is as successful as it is precisely because it occupies a niche no one else wants. If therewere a move to PR, there would be lots of small parties, each looking after their own bloc or issue.

Currently, these tend to be factions within the two big parties.

The serious players have factions in both the big parties.

by a reader on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 01:27 | [reply](#)

huh?

You are (deliberately?) confusing two orthogonal concepts.

You shouldn't complain about PR because you want local representatives. The two have nothing to do with each other.

You should complain about having a single national constituency if you prefer local representatives.

Single Transferrable Vote PR-alike systems are fairer than first past the post, and can be used for local candidates.

by a reader on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 14:32 | [reply](#)

elitism

The appeal of PR for the UN may lie in simple elitism rather than in "collectivism". Ensuring that people vote for a "party" rather than individuals inserts an extra layer of abstraction between people and their leaders. This allows for some amount of control of who gets seats, at the party level, by elites in the proverbial smoke filled rooms. (Honestly, being in the US I have no idea how a party's "slate" (is that the word?) is chosen in PR.) The UN may hope to influence or control this process or at least have some reason to believe that the people who likely will, will do a "good" job of it by whatever criteria the UN has.

There may be some value in doing this, for reasons along lines outlined by reader #1 above, i.e. fear that direct "first past the post" elections (I don't quite understand that phrase - whaddya mean "first"? how did *time* enter this equation? - except that I know it's what the US has :) would lead to a stable but no-dissent strongman. (Although isn't that what the UN *wants* for Iraq? ;-)

However persuasive that reasoning may be, myself I oppose PR for my country and thus do not wish it on Iraqis. Of course, there are many things I would not wish for myself and do not wish on Iraqis to which they will be nevertheless subjected; the UN nontrivially influencing the direction of their country, for example. This PR thing is just an artifact of that, larger, tragedy IMHO.

--Blix

PR

Proportional Representation is not "just one thing" (in terms of election system)

Proportional Representation is in general achieved, more or less, in all other election systems but the single-seat-district system.

That is, it is kind of "ignorant" to say "this or that" about PR without specifying what the actual election system is, as well as what the political, economic, regional, historic, social, etc, etc realities are.

PR is often done per regions, to achieve Local Representation.

PR in general uses "Party lists", but they can either so-called "Closed Lists", the order pre-done before the election, or "Open Lists", the order is according to the personal votes the candidates get.

For larger populations PR is usually implemented through a "mixed" system, 50% of seats through local districts, 50% through larger region lists, closed or open. Furthermore the possibilities of having two votes, one local FPTP vote and one PR vote, or one must chose in which system one votes (nationwide party or local person).

That is, there are a minimum of two basic, major different dimensions to PR-systems, plus a handful of others.

Btw, Italy has actually been very stable, they have just had the same party shuffle some seats in the government every year... (additionally I doubt that many non-Italians understand what their election system is, it just as a much an election system as an PR system as an FPTP system, plus much more)

For anyone who wants to understand some of the basics (from an anglo-american perspective), some of it explained in these lectures

http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public/learning_resources/learning_materials/av

PPS I was actually searching fro that Bremer edict on Iraq getting the worst and most extreme of all PR systems, the one with a nationwide closed partylist, ridiculous to define something like that from USA...

PR

Btw, AEI did a "thing" on this topic today, somewhat tragic and funny.

http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.853,filter./event_detail.asp

SIkorski, frmr polish "Nato-guy", said

- americans do not usually understand PR

- then he talked about how bad PR is, repeated all the ignorant stuff, then that Poland is reforming, etc..

the funny one

- at the ends he recommended a PR system based on a mixed system..

That is, he obviously knew "it", but talked kind of differently until the very end..

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 23:05 | [reply](#)

PR

are mostly for Nations who are already "stuck" with single-seat-districts, a certain number of seats on parliament, and can neither

- combine former single-seat-districts to larger districts nor multimember districts

- add more seats to the parliament

Compare all those former single-seat-winner-takes-all anglo-american nations which already have changed, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, North Ireland, Wales, Scotland..Malta... most former colonies..

Even India has a PR senate..

Fairly well explained in that British COlumbia link I gave above

http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.853,filter./event_detail.asp

That is, seems Canada too has come to the end of FPTP...

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 23:12 | [reply](#)

PR

Correction, addition to the comment above, I had included it as a comment to

"Single Transferrable Vote PR-alike systems "

as in old newsgroup style, but it became html-tags..

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 23:15 | [reply](#)

PR

However, this a good explanation for nation wide list, although it does not specify "Open" or "Closed" lists

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The U.N. team decided that January's election for a 275-member national assembly will use a system of proportional representation based on lists. With the signatures of just 500 supporters, political parties, political groups and individuals can submit a list with up to

275 candidates' names to contest the election.

"I'm very much aware that one of the problems this election might have is intimidation of candidates," Perelli said.

"It is for this reason that choosing proportional representation at a national level - removing the politics from just the local level where people can be easily identified and taken down - is an extra layer of security for the candidates."

But Perelli said special measures will still be needed to use "the full powers" of Iraq's judicial system and the commission "to basically not allow people who make acts of intimidation to run for the election."

The commission and U.N. advisers also must guard against the intimidation of electoral authorities, election workers and observers, and voters, she said.

"The whole issue of fear is going to be a theme in this election," Perelli said, explaining that it is essential to overcome "the culture of fear" that surrounded elections under Saddam Hussein.

"This election will work as long as Iraqis start to trust the process" and recognize that their votes will be secret, "that the possibilities of retaliation against them are going to be minimized, that the electoral authority is going to play a fair game ... (and) that the vulnerable will be able to express their voice," she said.

Perelli said she believes "a silent majority" of Iraqis is eager to vote if "they were certain that there's not going to be a retribution or a retaliation."

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<http://www.iraq.net/printarticle4284.html>

by a reader on Tue, 06/29/2004 - 23:22 | [reply](#)

Re: Collectivist PR

"It's an imperfect individualist institution that allows individuals to criticize governments." It allows the criticism of certain government institutions, but does it allow criticism of (democracy) itself? A monarchy could allow criticism of the monarch (e.g. "Prince Philip would be a better king than King Richard") but not allow criticism of the institution of monarchy.

Could armed revolt be considered another institution that allows individuals to criticize governments?

by a reader on Wed, 06/30/2004 - 00:16 | [reply](#)