

## Comments and Reviews

Arend Lijphart & Bernard Grofman, eds: *Choosing an Electoral System. Issues and Alternatives*.

New York: Praeger, 1984. 273 pp.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of books on electoral systems. This might be due to the current and continuing discussion of electoral issues in countries like Great Britain, Canada, and New Zealand, but it is also a little surprising considering the low level of interest in such matters in most Western democracies. This was especially the case before the 1985 change in the French parliamentary electoral system, which was not foreseen by any of the authors and is thus not dealt with in the book.

The editors, well-known and very competent scholars, have not only edited this volume; they have also edited and coedited two other volumes within the field during the last few years (Grofman & Lijphart, eds., *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences*, 1984; and Grofman et al., eds., *Representation and Redistricting Issues*, 1982). It is obvious that they are in close contact with what is going on within this rather specialized field. Nevertheless, when reading this new book of theirs, one gets the feeling that they are close to being trapped between their wish to edit and publish and the difficulties of producing substantial new arguments and analyses in such a short time span.

The problem confronting the book appears immediately in its title, *Choosing an Electoral System. Issues and Alternatives*. It can hardly avoid giving the impression that there exists a real choice between electoral systems, after a careful and informed consideration of basic issues and main alternatives. But — as Dieter Nohlen stresses in one of his contributions — historical evidence shows that there is only very limited room for substantial changes in electoral systems. This is particularly so if one's main interest is in national lower-house electoral systems (and the validity of this consideration is not seriously challenged by the recent changes in France).

The idea of the volume is to proceed in a number of steps, from presenting the competing values to discussing the prospects for electoral reform. The section on the inherent values, which can be cut down to the question of proportionality versus stability, i.e. proportional representation versus plurality or majority systems, does include contributions by such prominent scholars as Ferdinand A. Hermens, Maurice Duverger, and Enid Lakeman. It is obviously a good idea to

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let these engaged authors open the discussion. However, the clarity of their arguments and the eloquence of their style cannot hide the fact that they do not have much to add to what they said decades ago.

The next step is a discussion of the differences between PR and plurality/majority electoral systems. In one of the chapters in this section Dieter Nohlen argues convincingly that electoral systems should not only be compared unidimensionally: since they obviously are means to different ends, majority and plurality electoral systems on the one hand should be evaluated by their ability to produce single-party governments of some duration; while PR systems, on the other hand, should be judged by their ability to produce correspondence between the parties' share of the vote and their share of the seats. Richard Rose nevertheless compares PR and non-PR systems in order to demonstrate (as he has done elsewhere) that the difference is only one of degree, not one of kind. This demonstration is interesting, but it misses the point raised by Nohlen, which the editors claim is a critical one. As so often happens in books of this kind, there is no real discussion between the contributors to the volume.

If a choice had to be made between electoral systems, it almost certainly would be in the form of a majority/plurality system changing to some kind of PR system, as in France. Empirically, real choice situation is therefore *within* the category of PR systems, not among all theoretically possible electoral systems.

The various varieties of list PR systems (with or without preferential voting) appear to be considered uninteresting despite their undoubted prevalence, and discussion about possible replacements for majority/plurality systems is thus mainly one of the advantages and disadvantages of the STV and the additional-member systems. George H. Hallett, Jr. is of course the advocate of STV, which is also supported by J.F.H. Wright. Richard S. Katz as well as Steven Brams and Peter Fishburn do, however, offer critical comments which should also be taken into account before choosing this system.

The additional-member systems are the concern of Max Kaase, William P. Irvine, and others. Kaase gives a mainly positive evaluation of the way the systems works in its West German version, while Irvine discusses the possible effects of its introduction in Canada *if* the present system were to be replaced.

The editors are probably right in saying that the additional-member system is the electoral system which has — at least in some of the few countries discussing a change in electoral system — attracted most interest, mainly due to the performance of the West German political system. It is therefore a pity that they do not dwell longer on this kind of system, but go on to other alternatives, such as the double-ballot majority system (or majority run-off, as it is called in the U.S.). Fisichella demonstrates the advantages of this system from the point of view of securing a systematic underrepresentation of anti-system parties. His evidence is mainly — but not exclusively — taken from France, which has now dropped the double-ballot system for national parliamentary elections.

Weaver examines the pros and cons of the operation of various systems either

mixing PR and plurality systems or systems to be placed somewhere between the two, using American local elections as his cases. And Lijphart ends this section by taking up other examples halfway between plurality systems and PR, trying to see if it would be possible to have the best of both worlds. His answer, based on a scrutiny of national electoral systems in Japan, Spain, New Zealand, and Lebanon, is that it is, unfortunately, not possible.

Having thus presented and more or less analyzed the various choice possibilities, the volume ends by looking at the prospects for electoral reform. Nohlen — again — comes up with a very convincing argument, showing how long it is since any basic change in national electoral systems took place and how closely most countries still stick to the representation *principle* they chose long ago. The historical evidence presented leads to the conclusion that there is only little room for changes in national electoral systems.

Since factors of such importance as were behind the last wave of genuine changes in electoral systems are not present now, Nohlen argues that within the systems of PR only less important mechanics and technical details can be changed. Even though he argues with clarity and persuasiveness, one should — again — remember the recent change in France. Indeed, in the very next chapter David Butler argues in favour of the view that the first-past-the-post system in Britain will not survive the end of this century. That remains to be seen, of course, but some of his points are very well taken.

The last chapter of the book is a short description by Karlheinz Reif of how a number of different electoral systems are used in the member countries when the European Parliament is elected every fifth year. The various European Parliament-electoral systems are, however, closer to each other than are most of the 10 national electoral systems.

The editors claim that the volume is not slanted for or against any particular electoral system. This is probably true for the volume as such, but it is certainly not true for most of the individual authors. And objectivity is not solely obtained by inviting authors from different camps and then letting them forward their opinions.

The other introductory claim is that the objective of the volume is to explore the factors to be taken into consideration when political entities choose an electoral system. It is a pity — it is the most disappointing aspect about the entire book — that the editors have not felt a need to explore in more detail how and when such a choice situation might occur. In his contributions Nohlen presents — convincingly, it so happens — one point of view. It is surprising that the editors can simultaneously accept Nohlen's points of view (p. 12) and take in other contributions that are written on the assumption that such a choice does indeed exist. It is, unfortunately, difficult to avoid the conclusion that this volume has fallen between two — or more — stools.

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