Criteria for Evaluating Election Methods

Political scientists, politicians, election administrators, and political activists have spent a great deal of time thinking about what makes a good election system. Virtually everyone agrees that a good system should promote majority rule, fair representation, high voter turnout, and stable government. Most of the political disagreements about election systems are usually over which criteria are most important, or over how well particular systems fulfill those criteria .

Some of the following criteria are interrelated, others overlap, and still others may be in conflict. Not all possible criterion are included,[i] but are based on a listing of options from Introduction to the Election Systems Study, League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, 2000.

- **Ensure Majority Rule:** A good election system should ensure that winning candidates have the support of the majority of the electorate. Candidates elected with a plurality rather than a majority of votes can have their political legitimacy challenged and their policies have a greater chance of being opposed.

- **Encourage Minority Representation**: This encompasses two concepts: minority defined by party affiliation; and minority defined in terms of race, ethnic background, sex, etc. Minority representation is essential to a fair election system. Minority rights should be protected and minorities must feel included in the election process.

- **Encourage Fair Gender Representation**: Currently, women are under-represented in the United States Congress. However, they receive better representation in local government.

- **Produce Fair and Accurate Representation of Different Political Views**: Legislatures should allow different parties and political views a fair share of seat, thereby accurately reflecting the diverse political perspectives of their constituents so that public policies will more likely reflect the will of the constituents.

- **Increase Voter Participation**: Voter participation is essential to a healthy democracy. Low voter turnout can indicate voter apathy or alienation. A fair and impartial election system can create a reason for voters to participate.

- **Encourage Geographical Representation**: Geographical areas may have different needs and requirements. Having a representative accountable to a specific area ensures that local concerns have a voice in governing bodies.

- **Encourage "Sincere" Voting**: "Sincere" voting happens when individuals vote for their first choice candidate.   In "strategic" voting, voters select someone other than their first choice in order to be genuine participants in elections or to contribute to the defeat of a less desirable candidate.

- **Maximize Effective Votes/Minimize "Wasted" Votes**: Effective votes contribute to the election of a candidate while "wasted" votes do not elect a candidate of the voter's choice. If a voter's candidate loses, she has cast what political scientists call a "wasted" vote and is not represented. A sound election system will reduce the number of "wasted" votes and increase the number of effective votes thereby increasing the number of people actually represented in a legislative body. ("Wasted" votes are inevitable in a single seat election.)

- **Provide a Reasonable Range of Voter Choice**: American voters often complain that they lack real choices at the polls. The type of system used for elections has a very large impact on both the number of candidates and the variety of political parties present on the ballot. Some election systems, plurality-majority systems in particular, tend to discourage minor parties from running candidates because they stand so little chance of winning under those rules. In contrast, proportional representation systems make it easier for minor party candidates to get elected, and more of them can appear on the ballot. Election systems can also affect the range of choices among candidates of the ksame party.

- **Prevent Fraud and Political Manipulation**: An election system should discourage fraud and political manipulation. Most current election systems have safeguards that make outright fraud unlikely but political manipulation of the rules and how they are applied does occur, most commonly through the use of gerrymandering: the drawing of voting district lines to favor certain incumbents or parties.

- **Encourage Competitive Elections**: Many voters are concerned about the lack of competitive elections in the United States. In November of 2004 incumbents seeking reelection to the House of Representative had a better than 99 percent success rate. In the U.S. Senate election in 2003, 25 out of 26 or 96 percent incumbents were reelected. Without competitive elections, it is difficult for voters to hold politicians accountable.

- **Easy to Use and Administer**: An objective election system also should allow citizens to easily cast their votes and understand the results of elections. Overly complex election systems or lengthy ballots may discourage some people from effectively casting their vote. Related concerns involve the ease and expense of administering various election systems including the cost of switching to those systems, and the ease of auditing the results.

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[i] Other important considerations include: promoting healthy political parties, ensuring stable government, encouraging issue-oriented campaigns, protecting fundamental rights which include freedom of speech and association, discouraging extremism, helping manage political conflict, being responsive to changes in public opinion, producing results viewed as legitimate, reducing campaign spending, establishing close links between constituents and representatives and evaluating whether or not an election method has a proven track record.