

# **Choosing the Who, the What, and the How: Maximizing Accountability and Representation through European Electoral Systems**

Candace Simms

## **Abstract**

The question of whether or not it is possible to maximize both responsibility and representation is a potentially problematic one. This paper first explores what is meant by responsibility and representation, and then moves on to an examination of different electoral systems in an effort to develop an idea of how the maximization of both responsibility and representation can occur. By considering both the main characteristics and specific examples of each type of electoral system – plurality and majority system, and proportional representation (PR) systems – it becomes evident that the maximization of both responsibility and representation is possible.

## **Introduction**

The question of whether or not it is possible to maximize both responsibility and representation is a potentially problematic one. Depending on an individual's school of thought, it could be argued that both are mutually exclusive; that achieving a high level of responsibility eliminates the possibility for a high level of representation, and vice versa. However, the other side of the argument is that with the appropriate electoral system and constitutional regulation it is possible to maximize both responsibility and representation, though it may be difficult. By first exploring what is meant by responsibility and representation, and then moving on to an examination of different electoral systems it is possible to develop an idea of how the maximization of both responsibility and representation can occur. By considering both the main characteristics and specific examples of each type of electoral system – plurality and majority system, and proportional representation (PR) systems – it becomes evident that the maximization of both responsibility and representation is possible, and most likely to result from the development of a proportional representation system.

## **Accountability and Responsibility**

Accountability is considered a “critical component of the debate over representation” which is sought by “all democratic political systems” (Downs, 1999: 87, 90), and should not be overlooked or seen as a separate thing from representation. But, what exactly is accountability, or responsibility? Essentially, it is the idea that political representatives have an obligation to accurately and effectively answer to those they are representing. It is expected that representatives will be held responsible for their actions, whether they be failures or successes, and that they will accept and act on criticisms or requests made of them by their constituents. Constituents expect that those they elect to represent their interests are acting to achieve greater benefits for the larger group, and not the individual representative.

When considering accountability, there are several problems which develop when trying to balance responsibility and representation. One is that in an increasingly modern world accountabilities are frequently diverted (Strøm, 2000: 262). This means that in order to attain a

maximization of both there needs to be an increased emphasis on who is responsible for what. Increasingly, it appears that elected officials are divided in their loyalties, splitting their interests between the constituents they are meant to represent, and their own personal or party interests (Strøm, 2000: 284), thus affecting the accountability of representatives. A second issue arises with the idea of collective principals between various candidates and parties, making voters' decisions complicated, and creating a complicated situation when looking to place responsibility (Strøm, 2000, 267-8). As a means of appeasing critical citizens, the idea of accountability payoffs has developed. The general trend is towards maximizing accountability payoffs, which has developed from the idea that there is a growing demand for increased government transparency that has led to a decrease in public support, and growing dissatisfaction with the actions of representatives (Downs, 1999: 88-9). The general hope is that by maximizing the benefits provided to citizens, officials will be able to increase satisfaction and appease those who criticize the accountability of representatives.

A final concern about accountability is raised by Kaare Strøm, who asks whether or not the manner in which a cabinet is elected matters in terms of accountability. For Strøm the answer is no, so long as the cabinet remains responsible to parliament (2000: 265-6). However, when considering electoral systems on a case-by-case basis it becomes clear that the degree of accountability varies for each, depending on whether or not the system is a plurality or majority system, or a proportional representation system. It should be noted that for either of these views to hold true, officials must remain responsible to the citizens they are representing.

## **Representation**

The second half of the question deals with the idea of representation. Representation is understood to be the act of symbolizing or acting on behalf of an individual, group, or thing. In democratic systems individuals are elected or appointed to stand on behalf of larger groups, or constituencies. These representatives are responsible for “the substantive interests of those who elected them through free and fair elections” (Rehfeld, 2006: 2). The inclusion of non-elected representatives is based on the argument that political representation goes beyond democratic elections and derives from the idea that an “audience” uses “rules of recognition” to identify the legitimacy of a representative (ibid). This leads to the question of the legitimacy of representation and the sources of representation. Arguably, legitimacy of representation is based on multiple variables and it is not uncommon to see several forms of representation mixed, in an attempt to move closer towards traditional ideas of representation (Mansbridge, 2003: 516).

One of the main questions regarding representation is why do citizens elect representatives at all? Strøm seems to answer this question with the idea of delegation and accountability. According to him, there are two main reasons why citizens support elected representatives. One is that not everyone has the time to devote to making significant decisions, and the other is that not everyone wants to be responsible for making decisions; inherently most individuals do not trust their ability to consistently and adequately make well-informed decisions (Strøm, 2000: 267). Thus, a “chain of delegation” develops from voters to the governing, and contains at least four levels. The first is a link between the voters and their elected representatives; the second is from the legislative to the head of government; the third is between the head of government and the heads of various governmental departments; and the fourth is from the heads of the executive departments to the civil servants (ibid). Conversely, the “chain of

accountability” runs in the reverse direction (ibid), and indicates a strong relationship between the concepts of responsibility and representation.

## **Electoral Systems**

The significance of electoral systems to the formation of government is that electoral systems are the mechanisms which translate the votes of citizens into executive or legislative seats. Specifically, electoral systems are seen as “a way to structure the democratic process of representation and decision making” (Strøm, 2000: 262). As Pippa Norris demonstrates, electoral systems are traditionally relatively stable, only facing minor amendments to their criteria (1997: 297). However, more recently there have been several “radical reforms” of electoral systems, in response to changing political culture and globalization (ibid). Currently, there are several variations of electoral systems, which create a wide variety of governmental structures across Europe; each with varying degrees of responsibility and representation.

Electoral systems vary based on several criteria, such as district magnitude, open/closed lists, and of course, electoral formulae (Norris, 1997: 299). While there is some debate over the classification of these systems, such as whether or not plurality and majority systems are separate, for the most part it is easy to identify the two main types of systems. The first is the plurality or majority system, and the second is the proportional representation system. While these are not the only systems used, they are the most predominant and seem to be the focus of the majority of discussion on electoral systems. It is through the application of these systems that states aim to maximize accountability/responsibility and representation, often achieving one before the other.

## **Plurality and Majority Systems**

The basic idea behind plurality systems is to create a “stable one-party government” with a majority of the parliamentary seats (Blais, 1991: 240-1). By “exaggerat[ing] the share of seats for the leading party” the government is seen as “manufactured,” rewarding the leading party while at the same time penalizing minority parties (Norris, 1997: 299-301). Supporters of plurality systems argue that by creating a single-party majority government there is an increase not only in stability, but in the ability of the government to make and enforce decisions. This can be traced through the idea that a “one-party majority government provides government stability, which in turn enhances political stability, government cohesion and thus stronger leadership, and finally decisive elections, which allow greater accountability to the electorate” (Blais, 1991: 242-3). On top of all of this, a single-party majority government offers the benefit of “decisiveness” (ibid). The outcomes of decisions are easily understood in plurality systems, and citizens are able to easily identify a figurehead for purposes of responsibility and accountability.

However, there are significant arguments against the use of plurality systems. The most predominant argument is that plurality systems do limit the representation of minorities, placing the “focus [on] effective governance, not representation of all minority views” (Norris, 1997: 301). Also, while plurality systems do create majorities more often than PR systems, they “fail to achieve [this] three times in ten,” and are not entirely effective in their main purpose (Blais, 1991: 241). While it is undeniable that there is an increase in accountability in plurality systems, this increased accountability is the result of decreased representation (Blais, 1991: 242).

The most obvious example of a plurality system is that of the United Kingdom, which employs first-past-the-post government, and is the only example of a majoritarian system in European elections (Norris, 1997: 309). While the main goal of plurality systems is to create majority governments, it should be noted that in the United Kingdom rarely does the governing party actually receive a majority of the votes (Norris, 1997: 301). Instead, the translation of a “relatively small lead in votes into a larger lead in parliament” creates “a manufactured majority”, allowing for decisive election outcomes and creating governments capable of passing whatever legislation deemed necessary without forming coalitions (Norris, 1995: 67).

Commonly referred to as the Westminster model, the electoral system in the United Kingdom is guaranteed to produce “strong but responsive party government” (ibid). Within each of the single-member constituencies voters cast a single vote for one candidate, with the parliamentary seat going to the candidate in each constituency with the largest number of votes. The party with the most members in parliament then forms the government. In the United Kingdom government control alternates between the Labour Party and the Conservatives, and fringe parties, such as the National Front and the British National Party, are prevented from gaining any real footing (ibid.) In addition, because of the particular relationship between voters and their representatives (MPs), it is believed that citizens have more of a “voice in the nation's affairs” and that elected representatives are “accountable to constituency concerns” (ibid). This creates a higher degree of accountability and allows for voters to easily place blame or credit because there is only one party in government, and each constituency has one particular representative responsible for their interests.

### **Proportional Representation (PR) System**

Proportional representation systems seem to focus on the inclusion of minority groups in the decision making process, with the belief that adequate representation along with accountability is integral to effective governance. As Blais points out “a broad and fair representation” is one of the main benefits of proportional representation (1991: 243), allowing for the “inclusion of minority voices” in government (Norris, 1997: 303). Expanding on this idea is the argument that because of its increased levels of representation PR systems are inherently fair, since the goal of proportional representation is to provide seats to parties equal to their share of votes (Blais, 1991: 243). As a result, there is a high level of awareness by government of the diversity of citizens in their state, increasing the likelihood that representatives will be respectful of the needs and opinions of all members of the state, not just the select majorities which are represented by other electoral systems (Blais, 1991: 243). The perception of “fairness” created by proportional representation makes it more likely that governments will be perceived as legitimate representations of a state (ibid).

PR systems achieve higher degrees of representation by encouraging greater involvement in the electoral process. Compared to plurality systems, PR systems tend to increase the number of participating parties in elections. On average PR systems have about eight parties in an election, while plurality systems tend to have around five (Blais, 1991: 244). As well, proportional representation tends to encourage the formation of coalition governments, meaning that not only is representation of minorities increased in the legislature, but also in the executive (ibid).

While increased representation is guaranteed by proportional representation, the way in which this is achieved in specific systems varies. The division of seats in constituencies is based on the number of votes each party receives, but there is a degree of variation to how this happens. One consideration is the electoral formula used. According to Norris there are several methods for achieving this, including the highest averages method and the largest remainder method (see Norris, 1997: 303). Another consideration is the idea of party lists. Open party lists, such as those in Italy, allow for voters to “express preferences for particular candidates on the list” (ibid). On the other hand, closed party lists only allow voters to vote for the party and candidate rank is based on party affiliation, such as in Germany (ibid).

The German electoral system combines the idea of proportional representation with a closed party list, and results in the most effective maximization of accountability and representation. Identified as an Additional Member System, the electoral system in Germany “combines single-member and party list constituencies,” providing voters with two votes: one for the candidate and one for the party of their choice (Norris, 1997: 304). This creates the dual-ballot system employed to elect the German Bundestag, and creates the opportunity for parties and voters to make strategic voting decisions (Ferrara and Herron, 2005: 19). An example of strategic voting would be a voter supporting the F.D.P in Germany and not the larger CDU, with the hope of forcing a coalition between the F.D.P and CDU, and eliminating the chance of a CDU majority (Baron and Diermeier, 2001: 934).

While the lack of limitation on potential parties seems to indicate that there would eventually develop a large quantity of parties, fragmenting German politics into a confusing mess, there have been limitations created to ensure that the ability to place accountability is not sacrificed to over-representation. The most obvious is the minimum threshold of list votes needed for a party to be granted seats. German parties must meet the five percent minimum threshold of list votes before they are granted seats in the Bundestag. The Niemeyer method governs the allocation of seats in Germany, and guarantees that the votes for party lists translate proportionally into seats (Norris, 1997: 304). This means that parties meeting the minimum threshold of votes cast for the party lists but not receiving any single-member seats are “topped up” until the number of parliamentary seats matches the percentage of votes they received (ibid). Through the emphasis placed on election performance and the enforcement of minimum thresholds, the German electoral system emphasizes a balance between accountability and representation.

Similar to the system in Germany, is the Italian electoral system which also uses proportional representation, but with an open party list. In Italy, both the dual-ballot and single-ballot mixed systems are used (Ferrara and Herron, 2005: 19). The Italian Chamber of Deputies is elected through the dual-ballot system, which, as previously stated, allows voters to choose a candidate and a party. Meanwhile, the Italian Senate is elected via a single-ballot system, where “voters only cast a single 'nonexclusive' vote”, selecting a candidate and a party list simultaneously (ibid). However, the political system in Italy is highly fragmented, with a large number of parties competing. This leads to the majority of governments formed as coalitions (Norris, 1997: 308), leading to more unstable governments than those in Germany.

## **Conclusion**

The correspondence between the concepts of accountability and representation is undeniable. Strøm's explanation of the chains of accountability and representation provides a good illustration of this relationship (2000). The significance of the relationship can also be seen with Andrew Rehfeld's considerations of representation, and the idea that unless representatives are actually standing for the best interests of those they represent, they may not be considered legitimate (2006). To be fair, "each regime type represents a particular trade-off among desirable (and less desirable) institutional properties" (Strøm, 2000: 262), and arguments for both can be made. However, moving beyond theory and looking at real world applications provides evidence in favour of the adoption of proportional representation as the best way of achieving a maximization of accountability and representation. Thus, by going a step further and examining specific types and examples of electoral systems which appoint representatives, it is revealed that while maximizing both accountability and representation is difficult, it is possible to achieve through the use of proportional representation. Specifically, the use of a mixed PR system, such as the ones in Germany and Italy, allows for the greatest potential maximization of accountability and representation. In this case, while the emphasis is placed on the accurate representation and inclusion of minority groups, there are certain mechanisms in place (like minimum thresholds) to ensure that accountability is also a priority, and that balance is achieved between the two.

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