Advantages and disadvantages of FPTP system

Advantages of FPTP

First Past The Post, like other plurality/majority electoral systems, is defended primarily on the grounds of simplicity and its tendency to produce winners who are representatives beholden to defined geographic areas and governability. The most often cited advantages are that:

- It provides a clear-cut choice for voters between two main parties. The inbuilt disadvantages faced by third and fragmented minority parties under FPTP in many cases cause the party system to gravitate towards a party of the ‘left’ and a party of the ‘right’, alternating in power. Third parties often wither away and almost never reach a level of popular support above which their national vote yields a comparable percentage of seats in the legislature.

- It gives rise to single-party governments. The ‘seat bonuses’ for the largest party common under FPTP (e.g. where one party wins 45 per cent of the national vote but 55 per cent of the seats) mean that coalition governments are the exception rather than the rule. This state of affairs is praised for providing cabinets which are not shackled by the restraints of having to bargain with a minority coalition partner.

- It gives rise to a coherent opposition in the legislature. In theory, the flip side of a strong single-party government is that the opposition is also given enough seats to perform a critical checking role and present itself as a realistic alternative to the government of the day. It advantages broadly-based political parties. In severely ethnically or regionally divided societies, FPTP is commended for encouraging political parties to be ‘broad churches’, encompassing many elements of society, particularly when there are only two major parties and many different societal groups. These parties can then field a diverse array of candidates for election. In Malaysia, for example, the Barisan Nasional government is made up of a broadly-based umbrella movement which fields Malay, Chinese, and Indian candidates in areas of various ethnic complexions.

- It excludes extremist parties from representation in the legislature. Unless an extremist minority party’s electoral support is geographically concentrated, it is unlikely to win any seats under FPTP. (By contrast, under a List PR system with a single national-level district and a large number of seats, a fraction of 1 per cent of the national vote can ensure representation in the legislature.)

- It promotes a link between constituents and their representatives, as it produces a legislature made up of representatives of geographical areas. Elected members
represent defined areas of cities, towns, or regions rather than just party labels. Some analysts have argued that this ‘geographic accountability’ is particularly important in agrarian societies and in developing countries.

- It allows voters to choose between people rather than just between parties. Voters can assess the performance of individual candidates rather than just having to accept a list of candidates presented by a party, as can happen under some List PR electoral systems.
- It gives a chance for popular independent candidates to be elected. This may be particularly important in developing party systems, where politics still revolves more around extended ties of family, clan, or kinship and is not based on strong party political organizations.
- Finally, FPTP systems are particularly praised for being simple to use and understand. A valid vote requires only one mark beside the name or symbol of one candidate. Even if the number of candidates on the ballot paper is large, the count is easy for electoral officials to conduct.

Disadvantages of FPTP

However, FPTP is frequently criticized for a number of reasons.

These include:

- It excludes smaller parties from ‘fair’ representation, in the sense that a party which wins approximately, say, 10 per cent of the votes should win approximately 10 per cent of the legislative seats. In the 1993 federal election in Canada, the Progressive Conservatives won 16 per cent of the votes but only 0.7 per cent of the seats, and in the 1998 general election in Lesotho, the Basotho National Party won 24 per cent of the votes but only 1 per cent of the seats. This is a pattern which is repeated time and time again under FPTP.
- It excludes minorities from fair representation. As a rule, under FPTP, parties put up the most broadly acceptable candidate in a particular district so as to avoid alienating the majority of electors. Thus it is rare, for example, for a black candidate to be given a major party’s nomination in a majority white district in the UK or the USA, and there is strong evidence that ethnic and racial
minorities across the world are far less likely to be represented in legislatures elected by FPTP. In consequence, if voting behaviour does dovetail with ethnic divisions, then the exclusion from representation of members of ethnic minority groups can be destabilizing for the political system as a whole.

- It excludes women from the legislature. The ‘most broadly acceptable candidate’ syndrome also affects the ability of women to be elected to legislative office because they are often less likely to be selected as candidates by male-dominated party structures. Evidence across the world suggests that women are less likely to be elected to the legislature under plurality/majority systems than under PR ones.

- It can encourage the development of political parties based on clan, ethnicity or region, which may base their campaigns and policy platforms on conceptions that are attractive to the majority of people in their district or region but exclude or are hostile to others. This has been an ongoing problem in African countries like Malawi and Kenya, where large communal groups tend to be regionally concentrated. The country is thus divided into geographically separate party strongholds, with little incentive for parties to make appeals outside their home region and cultural–political base.

- It exaggerates the phenomenon of ‘regional fiefdoms’ where one party wins all the seats in a province or area. If a party has strong support in a particular part of a country, winning a plurality of votes, it will win all, or nearly all, of the seats in the legislature for that area. This both excludes minorities in that area from representation and reinforces the perception that politics is a battleground defined by who you are and where you live rather than what you believe in. This has long been put forward as an argument against FPTP in Canada.

- It leaves a large number of wasted votes which do not go towards the election of any candidate. This can be particularly dangerous if combined with regional fiefdoms, because minority party supporters in the region may begin to feel that they have no realistic hope of ever electing a candidate of their choice. It can also be dangerous where alienation from the political system
increases the likelihood that extremists will be able to mobilize anti-system movements.

- It can cause vote-splitting. Where two similar parties or candidates compete under FPTP, the vote of their potential supporters is often split between them, thus allowing a less popular party or candidate to win the seat. Papua New Guinea provides a particularly clear example.

- It may be unresponsive to changes in public opinion. A pattern of geographically concentrated electoral support in a country means that one party can maintain exclusive executive control in the face of a substantial drop in overall popular support. In some democracies under FPTP, a fall from 60 per cent to 40 per cent of a party’s share of the popular vote nationally can result in a fall from 80 per cent to 60 per cent in the number of seats held, which does not affect its overall dominant position. Unless sufficient seats are highly competitive, the system can be insensitive to swings in public opinion.

- Finally, FPTP systems are dependent on the drawing of electoral boundaries. All electoral boundaries have political consequences: there is no technical process to produce a single ‘correct answer’ independently of political or other considerations. Boundary delimitation may require substantial time and resources if the results are to be accepted as legitimate. There may also be pressure to manipulate boundaries by gerrymandering or malapportionment. This was particularly apparent in the Kenyan elections of 1993 when huge disparities between the sizes of electoral districts—the largest had 23 times the number of voters the smallest had—contributed to the ruling Kenyan African National Union party’s winning a large majority in the legislature with only 30 per cent of the popular vote.
Advantages of PR systems

In many respects, the strongest arguments for PR derive from the way in which the system avoids the anomalous results of plurality/majority systems (insert link to glossary) and is better able to produce a representative legislature. For many new democracies, particularly those which face deep societal divisions, the inclusion of all significant groups in the legislature can be a near-essential condition for democratic consolidation. Failing to ensure that both minorities and majorities have a stake in developing political systems can have catastrophic consequences, such as seeking power through illegal means.

PR systems in general are praised for the way in which they:

- Faithfully translate votes cast into seats won, and thus avoid some of the more destabilizing and ‘unfair’ results thrown up by plurality/majority electoral systems. ‘Seat bonuses’ for the larger parties are minimized, and small parties can have their voice heard in the legislature.

- Encourage or require the formation of political parties or groups of like-minded candidates to put forward lists. This may clarify policy, ideology, or leadership differences within society, especially when, as in Timor-Leste at independence, there is no established party system.

- Give rise to very few wasted votes. When thresholds are low, almost all votes cast in PR elections go towards electing a candidate of choice. See pcb02b to read who may determine the selection process in political parties. This increases the voters’ perception that it is worth making the trip to the polling booth at election time, as they can be more confident that their vote will make a difference to the election outcome, however small.

- Facilitate minority parties’ access to representation. Unless the threshold is unduly high, or the district magnitude is unusually low, then any political party with even a small percentage of the vote can gain representation in the legislature. This fulfils the principle of inclusion, which can be crucial to stability in divided societies and has benefits for decision making in established democracies,
such as achieving a more balanced representation of minorities in decision-making bodies and providing role models of minorities as elected representatives.

- Encourage parties to campaign beyond the districts in which they are strong or where the results are expected to be close. The incentive under PR systems is to maximize the overall vote regardless of where those votes might come from. Every vote, even from areas where a party is electorally weak, goes towards gaining another seat.

- Restrict the growth of ‘regional fiefdoms’. Because PR systems reward minority parties with a minority of the seats, they are less likely to lead to situations where a single party holds all the seats in a given province or district. This can be particularly important to minorities in a province which may not have significant regional concentrations or alternative points of access to power.

- Lead to greater continuity and stability of policy. The West European experience suggests that parliamentary PR systems score better with regard to governmental longevity, voter participation, and economic performance. The rationale behind this claim is that regular switches in government between two ideologically polarized parties, as can happen in FPTP systems, makes long-term economic planning more difficult, while broad PR coalition governments help engender a stability and coherence in decision making which allow for national development.

- Make power-sharing between parties and interest groups more visible. In many new democracies, power-sharing between the numerical majority of the population who hold political power and a small minority who hold economic power is an unavoidable reality. Where the numerical majority dominates the legislature and a minority sees its interests expressed in the control of the economic sphere, negotiations between different power blocks are less visible, less transparent, and less accountable (e.g. in Zimbabwe during its first 20 years of independence). It has been argued that PR, by including all interests in the legislature, offers a better hope that decisions will be taken in the public eye and by a more inclusive cross-section of the society.
Disadvantages of PR systems

Most of the criticisms of PR in general are based around the tendency of PR systems to give rise to coalition governments and a fragmented party system. The arguments most often cited against PR are that it leads to:

- Coalition governments, which in turn lead to legislative gridlock and consequent inability to carry out coherent policies. There are particularly high risks during an immediate post-conflict transition period, when popular expectations of new governments are high. Quick and coherent decision making can be impeded by coalition cabinets and governments of national unity which are split by factions.

- A destabilizing fragmentation of the party system. PR can reflect and facilitate a fragmentation of the party system. It is possible that extreme pluralism can allow tiny minority parties to hold larger parties to ransom in coalition negotiations. In this respect, the inclusiveness of PR is cited as a drawback of the system. In Israel, for example, extremist religious parties are often crucial to the formation of a government, while Italy endured many years of unstable shifting coalition governments. Democratizing countries are often fearful that PR will allow personality-based and ethnic-cleavage parties to proliferate in their undeveloped party systems.

- A platform for extremist parties. In a related argument, PR systems are often criticized for giving a stage in the legislature to extremist parties of the left or the right. It has been argued that the collapse of Weimar Germany was in part due to the way in which its PR electoral system gave a toehold to extremist groups of the extreme left and right.

- Governing coalitions which have insufficient common ground in terms of either their policies or their support base. These coalitions of convenience are sometimes contrasted with coalitions of commitment produced by other systems (e.g. through the use of AV), in which parties tend to be reciprocally dependent on the votes of supporters of other parties for their election, and the coalition may thus be stronger.
- Small parties getting a disproportionately large amount of power. Large parties may be forced to form coalitions with much smaller parties, giving a party that has the support of only a small percentage of the votes the power to veto any proposal that comes from the larger parties.

- The inability of the voter to enforce accountability by throwing a party out of power or a particular candidate out of office. Under a PR system, it may be very difficult to remove a reasonably-sized centre party from power. When governments are usually coalitions, some political parties are everpresent in government, despite weak electoral performances from time to time. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany was a member of the governing coalition for all but eight of the 50 years from 1949 to 1998, although it never gained more than 12 per cent of the vote.

- Difficulties either for voters to understand or for the electoral administration to implement the sometimes complex rules of the system. Some PR systems are considered to be more difficult than non-PR systems and may require more voter education and training of poll workers to work successfully.