


REVIEW ARTICLE

Preferential voting systems

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Enrico Biale 

University of Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, Italy
Corresponding author. Email: enrico.biale@uniupo.it

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Democracy acknowledges its members as free and equal by recognising them as full political agents rather than mere beneficiaries of policies chosen by others and by granting them the opportunity to exercise this role without incurring excessive burdens. This does not require that they directly participate in the decision-making process, because this form of participation would be particularly demanding and it will be limited to a few decisions. To properly embody the democratic ideal, citizens must have the opportunity to shape the political process and to challenge the choices made if these choices do not respond to their interests or ideas.

While many scholars have pointed out that political parties are needed to ensure responsiveness and accountability in a complex democratic system (they link citizens' interests to political proposals, reduce the informational complexities citizens need to cope with, and select candidates), parties cannot alone guarantee that citizens are treated as equal political agents. Without an inclusive and fair voting system that can ensure that the preferences of citizens affect the selection of their representatives and foster accountability (since the representatives seek to be re-elected and need to answer to their voters to achieve this aim), political parties will not empower citizens but curtail their control. The preferential voting system seems to be the ideal candidate to avoid this shortcoming, but it has been criticised because it might foster parochialism and the personalisation of politics by shifting power from parties to candidates who do not need to develop coherent programmes but answer to specific interests.

Despite the relevance of this debate, a systematic and comparative analysis of the benefits and shortcomings of this system is lacking. Gianluca Passarelli's *Preferential Voting Systems* fills this gap by developing a comprehensive and comparative analysis of this system and its impact on intraparty dynamics. This work is impressive because Passarelli does not only develop a clear definition of the system by ironing out many ambiguities that characterised the previous debate but evaluates the system's application in nineteen countries and its impact on the interactions between parties and citizens by providing data and analysing the system. Let me briefly clarify these features and then focus on the most interesting findings.

Passarelli rightly points out that while there has been increasing interest in the literature on preferential systems, no common framework or shared definition of the subject yet exists. To overcome this ambiguity, the book clearly states that in any preferential system voters can indicate a preference for a candidate on the party list and that these systems need to be differentiated depending on the power they grant to the preferences of the citizens – namely, whether their preference is the sole factor that determines the election of a candidate or whether the party plays a significant role as well (by ranking the candidates and requiring that candidates surpass a threshold to be elected). This definition allows Passarelli to distinguish between systems in which expressing a preference is optional, such as the open-list system (there is no threshold, and thus the vote alone determine the order of election from a party list) and the flexible-list system

(there is a threshold, and thus party rank influences the outcome), and those in which casting a preference is mandatory, such as the quasi-list system (the vote alone matters) and the latent-list system (party rank has influence because there is a threshold). Since the aim of a preferential system is to empower citizens and foster accountability, but these features depend upon the power and influence of citizens, to evaluate his data and to consider the impact of the preferential system on intraparty competition and voting behaviour Passarelli develops an index to measure the strength of preferential voting across countries. This index depends on different variables related to the level of voters' freedom (voting compulsoriness, preference-vote compulsoriness, preference-vote quota, number of preferences allowed) and parties' freedom (only voters matter, head of list is guaranteed, elected quota is reserved for parties, parties have a vote quota).

The book's analysis confirms that more open systems empower citizens (more incumbents are defeated), citizens tend to exercise their role (they participate in politics more and express their preferences more) when they have more power, and political systems are more open and volatile (they increase the number of parties, the distribution of preferences among candidates is more equal, and the expression of a preference is more dependent on the appeal of the candidates) when citizens are entitled to express their will in electoral terms.

Passarelli's analysis clearly provides a stronger basis to defend the preferential voting system and see how it can empower citizens and embody the democratic ideal. While I fully agree with this perspective, the voting system pursues these goals by curtailing the role of political parties and facilitating conditions such as the personalisation of politics that can undermine both the control of citizens and the fulfilment of democratic ideals. If political representatives have more power than parties, no incentives and resources will exist to develop coherent programmes that provide a political framework for the citizens and can be evaluated and challenged by them; there are only proposals that answer to particularistic interests. This might give representatives' constituencies influence over some decisions, but it curtails the control that the public at large has on the decision-making process. If this reconstruction is correct, there seems to be a potential conflict between electoral and partisan empowerment. It would thus be interesting to determine whether it is possible to overcome this conflict, and as a consequence to fully empower citizens, by focusing on the way in which political parties need to be organised to be more accountable and open without losing their fundamental role in a democratic system.

To conclude, scholars might further develop Passarelli's analysis by shifting the focus from the intraparty to the interparty dimension and systematically evaluating whether and how the internal organisation of political parties can empower both their members and citizens at large. Passarelli's data can provide fundamental insight into whether partisan and electoral empowerment are necessarily incompatible or whether they can be complementary if some requirements are met.

Preferential Voting Systems provides a fundamental contribution to the debate on democratic theory precisely because it does not only develop a comprehensive analysis of the impact of this voting system on citizens' empowerment but raises further research questions and provides the resources to address them.