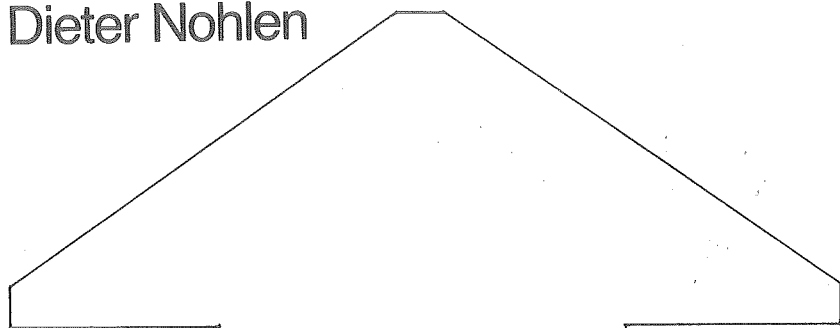


Elections and Electoral Systems

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Democracy and
Social Change

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT  STIFTUNG**

Contents:

	Page
Introduction	5
1 Meaning and Functions of Elections	7
1.1 The Notion of Elections	10
1.2 The Meaning of Elections	11
1.2.1 Elections in Western-Liberal Democracies	11
1.2.2 Elections in Socialist Political Systems	13
1.2.3 Elections in Authoritarian Political Systems	14
1.3 Functions of Elections	15
1.3.1 Functions of Competitive Elections	16
1.3.2 Functions of Non-Competitive Elections	19
1.3.3 Functions of Semi-Competitive Elections	19
2 Voting Rights and the Process of Political Democratization	21
2.1 The Democratization Process in Industrial States	23
2.2 The Democratization Process in the Third World	27
3 Electoral Systems: Formulae for Power	29
3.1 Basic Issues of Electoral Systems	31
3.1.1 How Important are Electoral Systems?	31
3.1.2 In What Direction do Electoral Systems Exercise their Effects?	32
3.1.3 How Should the Impact of Electoral Systems be Assessed?	33
3.2 Basic Types of Electoral Systems: The Majority/Plurality System and the Proportional Representation System	34
3.3 Principles of Decision: Majority and Proportionality	35
3.3.1 Political Consequences of the Majority/Plurality Formula	36
3.3.2 Political Consequences of the Proportionality Formula	37
3.3.3 A Comparison of the Political Consequences of the Majority/Plurality and Proportionality Formulae of Decision	37
3.4 Principles of Representation: Election by Majority and Election by Proportional Representation	40
3.4.1 What Constitutes the Majority/Plurality and the Proportional Representation Electoral Systems?	44
3.4.2 The Political Consequences of the Majority Principle and the Proportional Representation Principle of Representation	46
3.4.3 Criteria for the Assessment of Electoral Systems	51
3.4.4 Preconditions Governing a Successful Application of the Majority Formula	54

4	Structures and Consequences of Electoral Systems	59
4.1	The Division of a Country into Constituencies (Electoral Districting)	61
4.1.1.	Equal and Unequal Representation	63
4.1.2	Gerrymandering	65
4.1.3	Magnitude of Constituencies and the Degree of Proportionality	67
4.1.4	Regional Distribution of Constituencies of Various Sizes	73
4.2	Candidacy, Voting Rules and Ballot Forms	76
4.3	Formulae of Calculating the Votes	80
4.3.1	Thresholds of Representation	81
4.3.2	Formulae of Calculating the Votes	82
4.3.3	Different Levels of Calculating the Votes and Allocating the Seats	87
5	The Electoral System of the Federal Republic of Germany	91
6	The Transfer of Electoral Systems	97
	Summary of the Theses	100
	Select Bibliography	103

Charts

1.	Growth of Enfranchisement in Selected Western Industrial States	26
2.	The Principle of Majority Representation	41
3.	The Principle of Proportional Representation	43
4.	The Electoral System of the Weimar Republic (1920-1933)	53
5.	Changes of Majority in Sri Lanka	57
6.	Threshold of Representation and the Size (Magnitude) of Constituencies	68
7.	Distribution of Seats according to the d'Hondt Proportional Representation Formula in Constituencies of Varying Sizes	69
8.	Voting and Calculation of Votes in Elections to the German Bundestag	93
9.	Allocation of Seats in Elections to the German Bundestag	96

Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to provide an introduction to a very political subject. After all, elections involve political power, and the question of who wins power is decided by arrangements of suffrage and electoral systems — and not merely by votes! This means that the issues of suffrage and electoral systems are matters of power. We need only think back to the struggle to obtain universal and equal suffrage in today's western democracies, which began with the French Revolution. These endeavours were not finally decided until the 20th century when men and women acquired full civic rights upon reaching the age of majority. Or let us recall the struggle by political parties and especially that by the Social Democrats in Germany to obtain a just electoral system and a parliamentary representation approximately in accord with the votes cast. All countries have experienced a comparatively tough and protracted fight to achieve recognition of the bases of democratic representation. In many countries of the Third World, this fight is in fact linked to the very desire for democracy.

Although the subject of suffrage and electoral systems is very political by nature, it nevertheless forms a highly theoretical and technical field of study. Questions of political power the resolution of which is attempted by means of the electoral law and the electoral system are often garnished in political theory: for example by providing a democratic theoretical basis for an electoral system which assures the party in government of remaining in power. It argues that the best electoral system should operate, but in fact it means the most favorable system for the government of the day. Furthermore, matters of political power are embodied in technical details or hidden behind them. Consequently, the rules of political debate require of the political opponents to be masters of technical details.

The purpose of the present publication is to provide a basic knowledge of electoral systems. Moreover, it aims at exhibiting the political effects of technical arrangements and at heightening the reader's awareness of the close relationship between institutional procedures and questions of political power.

This publication focusses on providing basic information on the following subjects:

- The meaning and functions of elections under various political systems
- The history of election laws and voting rights
- The political consequences of electoral systems
- The advantages and disadvantages of majority/plurality systems and proportional representation systems