



The single transferable vote and ethnic conflict: The evidence from Northern Ireland



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ABSTRACT

There has been a long-running debate amongst constitutional engineers between those who favour the proportional representation of parties (usually via PR-Closed List systems) and post-election power-sharing (Lijphart) and those who favour attempting to induce pre-election inter-ethnic ‘vote-pooling’ (Horowitz) as a more effective and stable method of governing divided societies. Less attention has been paid to the fact that other options are available. A leading candidate amongst these is the Single Transferable Vote (STV), a non-categorical ordinal ballot system that *may* be capable of combining the essential ‘fairness’ of proportionality with the centripetal benefits of some inter-ethnic vote-pooling. Northern Ireland is the only divided society with extensive experience of STV elections. This paper examines the empirical evidence before and after the 1998 Belfast Agreement by examining the operation of the electoral system at the Northern Ireland Assembly elections of 1982, 1998, 2003, 2007 and 2011. The main findings are that prior to the 1998 Agreement inter-ethnic vote-pooling in Northern Ireland was very close to zero. Afterwards (1998–2007) terminal transfers from the moderate unionist UUP to the moderate nationalist SDLP averaged 32 per cent (and 13 per cent in the opposite direction). Although most transfers clearly remain within ethnic blocs, these inter-ethnic terminal transfers are a change with the past and suggest that STV may be an appropriate electoral system choice for some divided societies.

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‘The hallmark of the plural society, and the feature that distinguishes it from its pluralistic counterpart, is the practice of politics almost exclusively along ethnic lines’ (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972, 20).

‘The most unambiguous instance of a plural society and a centrifugal democracy in the Western world is Northern Ireland’ (Lijphart, 1977, 134).

1. Introduction

There is a well-known debate amongst constitutional engineers between those who favour the proportional representation of parties and post-election power-sharing (Lijphart) and those who favour attempting to induce pre-election inter-ethnic ‘vote-pooling’ as a more effective and stable method of governing divided

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societies (Horowitz).² Lijphart has consistently advocated proportional representation³ – with a clear preference within this family for (mostly) closed list systems (for example see Lijphart, 2008a, 79), whereas Horowitz makes a case for the Alternative Vote (AV), a majority system that he believes to be significantly different from Single Member Plurality (SMP).

A potential problem with Lijphart's prescription is that voluntary ethnic power sharing is often difficult to arrange and sustain, and it is usually not premised on rationally incentivised pre-electoral cooperation but instead on mostly 'enlightened' post-election bargains. The problem with Horowitz's inter-ethnic 'vote-pooling' prescription is that he judges that this can best be achieved by adopting the majoritarian Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system because it has a high effective threshold.

In this paper I suggest that other electoral systems are compatible with power-sharing and may even under certain conditions help facilitate centripetal appeals that can serve as part of a self-interested electoral foundation for a consociational settlement. A leading candidate amongst these is the Single Transferable Vote (STV), a system that may offer 'the best of both worlds' in the sense that it can combine the overall fairness of proportionality with some preferential inter-ethnic vote-pooling. Please note though that I am not making any assertion that STV mechanically or inevitably produces inter-ethnic moderation. In fact STV can proportionally reflect extreme polarisation as witnessed in the pre-Belfast Agreement years before 1998. But it can also reflect some inter-ethnic vote-pooling if the voters of opposing parties are willing to continue their preferences beyond the candidates of their own ethnic group. Whether they do so and under what incentives is a matter that needs to be empirically examined.

Section 2 of this paper reviews Lijphart's criteria for making choices within the PR family and suggests that contrary to his advice, STV is just as valid a choice as list-PR. Section 3 re-examines the logic of vote-pooling as favoured by Horowitz, and in particular his conclusion that adopting AV is the best method of incentivising inter-ethnic vote flows. Section 4 suggests that STV might combine some vote-pooling with the inherent benefits of retaining PR in divided lands. Empirical evidence from before and after the Belfast Agreement is presented in Section 5.

2. Lijphart and the choice within PR

Lijphart's 'guidelines within PR' are that the system should (1) be simple to understand and operate; (2) have a high, but not necessarily perfect, degree of proportionality; (3) have multi-member districts that are not too large; (4)

adopt party list-PR; (5) and have 'closed, or almost closed lists... List PR with closed lists can encourage the formation and maintenance of strong and cohesive political parties' (2008a, 79). Lijphart has nominated the Danish system as 'the closest approximation to my "ideal" model', though he judges that its list system is too 'open' (Lijphart, 2008b, ix).

In the context of this paper the following question arises: why is party list-PR necessarily better for divided societies than STV? Lijphart clearly thinks so and has consistently argued that 'STV has several serious disadvantages for plural societies' (1991, 98; reproduced 2008a, 188–9). Lijphart makes four main criticisms of STV:

1. *Gerrymandering*: To be practical STV requires relatively small districts that elect 5–6 members. 'Such relatively small districts can be gerrymandered, which is highly undesirable in divided societies. List PR can easily be applied in much larger districts that are immune to gerrymandering' (Lijphart, 1991, 98–9).
2. *Too complicated*: 'STV is considerably more complicated for the voters than list PR; this is . . . a considerable problem in developing societies with large numbers of illiterate or semi-literate voters' (Lijphart, 1991, 99).
3. *Divided parties*: Lijphart cites Katz's well known claim that the intra-party choices allowed by STV ballots 'negatively affects party cohesion, which in turn negatively affects interparty negotiations' (Lijphart, 1991, 99).
4. *Disproportionality*: 'The small size of STV districts has an adverse effect on proportionality and minority representation, which is harmful in divided societies' (Lijphart, 1991, 99).

Lijphart concludes that 'these many disadvantages of STV clearly outweigh the advantage of reciprocal agreements to exchange second preferences.' (Lijphart, 1991, 99).

However, given that little supporting evidence is presented these judgments can usefully be re-evaluated. Before doing so, it is worth stating clearly that my purpose is *not* to argue the opposite of Lijphart (i.e. that STV is necessarily better than list PR), but rather to argue that both are valid choices for divided societies, and therefore to suggest that Lijphart has been too harsh in his criticisms of STV. Also, no claim will be made that STV or any other electoral system will necessarily lead to beneficial centripetal outcomes in divided societies. There are times (for example in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s) when the levels of violence and communal polarization are such that the vote-pooling that STV *could* facilitate will simply *not* emerge. More specifically, we should also be cautious in asserting which patterns are intrinsic to STV, partly because outcomes are always an interaction of electoral rules and other variables (Bowler and Grofman, 2000), and partly because STV is used in too few countries to be sure what its 'general' effects are (Gallagher et al., 2011, 389).⁴ Nevertheless, even with these qualifications it is still worth examining the

² This debate was re-engaged in an evaluation of the potential of preferential electoral systems to ameliorate conflict (Fraenkel and Grofman, 2004, 2006a,b, 2007; Horowitz, 2004, 2006, 2007). The focus in those articles was on the alternative vote and the case of Fiji.

³ Although he notes that ethnic power-sharing can be compatible with other electoral systems, even SMP: 'In India, too, power sharing has managed to coexist with the plurality electoral system inherited from the British. One reason is that plurality does not disfavour geographically concentrated minorities, and India's linguistic minorities are regionally based' (Lijphart, 2008a, 48; original 1996).

⁴ STV is used in Ireland and Malta for lower house elections, in Northern Ireland for local, European and Assembly elections, in Australia and India for their upper houses, and in Australia for some regional elections and most recently in Scotland for local government elections.

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