Representation, Elections and Voting

'If voting changed anything they'd abolish it.'

Anarchist slogan

PREVIEW Elections are often thought of as the heart of the political process. Perhaps no questions in politics are as crucial as 'Do we elect the politicians who rule over us?', and 'Under what rules are these elections held?' Elections are seen as nothing less than democracy in practice. They are a means through which the people can control their government, ultimately by 'kicking the rascals out'. Central to this notion is the principle of representation. Put simply, representation portrays politicians as servants of the people, and invests them with a responsibility to act for or on behalf of those who elect them. When democracy, in the classical sense of direct and continuous popular participation, is regarded as hopelessly impractical, representation may be the closest we can come to achieving government by the people. There is, nevertheless, considerable disagreement about what representation means and how it can be achieved in practice. Although it is widely accepted that elections play a pivotal role in the process of representative democracy, electoral systems are many and various and debate has long raged over which system is the 'best'. Not only do different systems have different strengths or advantages, but there is no consensus over the criteria that should be used for assessing them. Finally, elections need voters, but there is little agreement about why voters vote as they do, and especially about the extent to which their behaviour is rationally-based, as opposed to being influenced by underlying psychological, social or ideological forces.

KEY ISSUES
- What is representation? How can one person 'represent' another?
- How can representation be achieved in practice?
- What do elections do? What are their functions?
- How do electoral systems differ? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- What do election results mean?
- Why do people vote as they do? How can voting behaviour be explained?

Representation

Representation is, broadly, a relationship through which an individual or group stands for, or acts on behalf of, a larger body of people. Representation differs from democracy in that, while the former acknowledges a distinction between government and the governed, the latter, at least in its classical form, aspires to abolish this distinction and establish popular *self*-government. Representative democracy (see p. 92) may nevertheless constitute a limited and indirect form of democratic rule, provided that the representation links government and the governed in such a way that the people's views are articulated, or their interests secured.

REPRESENTATION

The issue of representation has generated deep and recurrent political controversy. Even the absolute monarchs of old were expected to rule by seeking the advice of the 'estates of the realm' (the major landed interests, the clergy, and so on). In this sense, the English Civil War of the seventeenth century, fought between King and Parliament, broke out as a result of an attempt to deny representation to key groups and interests. Similarly, debate about the spread of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries centred largely on the question of who should be represented. Should representation be restricted to those who have the competence, education and, perhaps, leisure to act wisely and think seriously about politics (variously seen as men, the propertied, or particular racial or ethnic groups), or should representation be extended to all adult citizens?

Such questions have now largely been resolved through the widespread acceptance of the principle of political equality (see p. 90), at least in the formal sense of universal suffrage and 'one person, one vote'. Plural voting, for example, was abolished in the UK in 1949, women were enfranchised in one canton in Switzerland in 1971, and racial criteria for voting were swept away in South Africa in 1994. However, this approach to representation is simplistic, in that it equates representation with elections and voting, politicians being seen as 'representatives' merely because they have been elected. This ignores more difficult questions about how one person can be said to represent another, and what it is that he or she represents. Is it the views of the represented, their best interests, the groups from which they come, or what?

Theories of representation

There is no single, agreed theory of representation. Rather, there are a number of competing theories, each of which is based on particular ideological and political assumptions. For example, does representative government imply that government 'knows better' than the people, that government has somehow 'been instructed' by the people what to do and how to behave; or that the government 'looks like' the people, in that it broadly reflects their characteristics or features? Such questions are not of academic interest alone. Particular models of representation dictate very different behaviour on the part of representatives. For instance, should elected politicians be bound by policies and positions outlined during an election and endorsed by the voters, or is it their job to lead public opinion and thereby help to define the public interest? Moreover, it is not uncommon for more than one principle of representation to operate within the same political system, suggesting, perhaps, that no single model is sufficient in itself to secure representative government.

Four principal models of representation have been advanced:

- trusteeship
- delegation
- the mandate
- resemblance.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

UK philosopher, economist and politician. Mill was subject to an intense and austere regime of education by his father, the utilitarian theorist James Mill (1773–1836). This resulted in a mental collapse at the age of 20, after which he developed a more human philosophy influenced by Coleridge and the German Idealists. His major writings, including *On Liberty* (1859), *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869), had a powerful influence on the development of liberal thought. In many ways, Mill's work straddles the divide between classical and modern liberalism. His distrust of state intervention was firmly rooted in nineteenth-century principles, but his emphasis on the quality of individual life (reflected in a commitment to 'individuality') looked forward to later developments.

Trustee model

A **trustee** is a person who acts on behalf of others, using his or her superior knowledge, better education or greater experience. The classic expression of representation as trusteeship is found in Edmund Burke's (see p. 36) speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774:

> You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of parliament . . . Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion (Burke, 1975).

For Burke, the essence of representation was to serve one's constituents by the exercise of 'mature judgement' and 'enlightened conscience'. In short, representation is a moral duty: those with the good fortune to possess education and understanding should act in the interests of those who are less fortunate. This view had strongly elitist implications, since it stresses that, once elected, representatives should think for themselves and exercise independent judgement on the grounds that the mass of people do not know their own best interests. A similar view was advanced by John Stuart Mill in the form of the liberal theory of representation. This was based on the assumption that, although all individuals have a right to be represented, not all political opinions are of equal value. Mill therefore proposed a system of plural voting in which four or five votes would be allocated to holders of learned diplomas or degrees, two or three to skilled or managerial workers, and a single vote to ordinary workers. He also argued that rational voters would support politicians who could act wisely on their behalf, rather than those who merely reflected the voters' own views. Trustee representation thus portrays professional politicians as representatives, insofar as they are members of an educated elite. It is based on the belief that knowledge and understanding are unequally distributed in society, in the sense that not all citizens know what is best for them.

This Burkean notion of representation has also attracted severe criticism, however. For instance, it appears to have clearly antidemocratic implications. If

● **Trustee**: A person who is vested with formal (and usually legal) responsibilities for another's property or affairs.

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

UK-born writer and revolutionary. Paine was brought up in a Quaker family and spent his early years as an undistinguished artisan. He went to America in 1774 and fought for the colonists in the War of Independence. He returned to England in 1789, but, after being indicted for treason, fled to France as a supporter of the republican cause, where he narrowly escaped the guillotine during the Terror. Paine's radicalism fused a commitment to political liberty with a deep faith in popular sovereignty, providing inspiration for both liberal republicanism and socialist egalitarianism. He was an important figure in revolutionary politics in the USA, the UK and France. His most important writings include *Common Sense* ([1776] 1987), *The Rights of Man* (1791/92) and *The Age of Reason* (1794).

politicians should think for themselves because the public is ignorant, poorly educated or deluded, then surely it is a mistake to allow the public to elect their representatives in the first place. Second, the link between representation and education is questionable. Whereas education may certainly be of value in aiding the understanding of intricate political and economic problems, it is far less clear that it helps politicians to make correct moral judgements about the interests of others. There is little evidence, for example, to support Burke's and Mill's belief that education breeds **altruism** and gives people a broader sense of social responsibility. Finally, there is the fear traditionally expressed by radical democrats such as Thomas Paine that, if politicians are allowed to exercise their own judgement, they will simply use that latitude to pursue their own selfish interests. In this way, representation could simply become a substitute for democracy. In his pamphlet *Common Sense* ([1776] 1987), Paine came close to the rival ideal of delegate representation in insisting that 'the elected should never form to themselves an interest separate from the electors'.

Delegate model

A **delegate** is a person who acts as a conduit conveying the views of others, while having little or no capacity to exercise his or her own judgement or preferences. Examples include sales representatives and ambassadors, neither of whom are, strictly speaking, authorized to think for themselves. Similarly, a trade-union official who attends a conference with instructions on how to vote and what to say is acting as a delegate, not as a Burkean representative. Those who favour this model of representation as delegation usually support mechanisms that ensure that politicians are bound as closely as possible to the views of the represented. These include what Paine referred to as 'frequent interchange' between representatives and their constituents in the form of regular elections and short terms in office. In addition, radical democrats have advocated the use of **initiatives** and the right of **recall** as means of giving the public more control over politicians. Although delegation stops short of direct democracy, its supporters nevertheless usually favour the use of referendums (see p. 201) to supplement the representative process.

● **Altruism**: A concern for the welfare of others, based on either enlightened self-interest, or a recognition of a common humanity.

● **Delegate**: A person who is chosen to act for another on the basis of clear guidance and instruction; delegates do not think for themselves.

● **Initiative**: A type of referendum through which the public is able to raise legislative proposals.

● **Recall**: A process whereby the electorate can call unsatisfactory public officials to account and ultimately remove them.

● **Popular sovereignty**: The principle that there is no higher authority than the will of the people (the basis of the classical concept of democracy).

● **Manifesto**: A document outlining (in more or less detail) the policies or programme a party proposes to pursue if elected to power.

The virtue of what has been called 'delegated representation' is that it provides broader opportunities for popular participation and serves to check the self-serving inclinations of professional politicians. It thus comes as close as is possible in representative government to realizing the ideal of **popular sovereignty**. Its disadvantages are, nevertheless, also clear. In the first place, in ensuring that representatives are bound to the interests of their constituents, it tends to breed narrowness and foster conflict. This is precisely what Burke feared would occur if members of the legislature acted as ambassadors who took instructions from their constituents, rather than as representatives of the nation. As he put it, 'Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole'. A second drawback is that, because professional politicians are not trusted to exercise their own judgement, delegation limits the scope for leadership (see p. 300) and statesmanship. Politicians are forced to reflect the views of their constituents or even pander to them, and are thus not able to mobilize the people by providing vision and inspiration.

Mandate model

Both the trustee model and the delegate model were developed before the emergence of modern political parties, and therefore view representatives as essentially independent actors. However, individual candidates are now rarely elected mainly on the basis of their personal qualities and talents; more commonly, they are seen, to a greater or lesser extent, as foot soldiers for a party, and are supported because of its public image or programme of policies. New theories of representation have therefore emerged. The most influential of these is the so-called 'doctrine of the mandate'. This is based on the idea that, in winning an election, a party gains a popular mandate that authorizes it to carry out whatever policies or programmes it outlined during the election campaign. As it is the party, rather than individual politicians, that is the agent of representation, the mandate model provides a clear justification for party unity and party discipline. In effect, politicians serve their constituents not by thinking for themselves or acting as a channel to convey their views, but by remaining loyal to their party and its policies.

The strength of the mandate doctrine is that it takes account of the undoubted practical importance of party labels and party policies. Moreover, it provides a means of imposing some kind of meaning on election results, as well as a way of keeping politicians to their word. Nevertheless, the doctrine has also stimulated fierce criticism. First, it is based on a highly questionable model of voting behaviour, insofar as it suggests that voters select parties on the grounds of policies and issues. Voters are not always the rational and well-informed creatures that this model suggests. They can be influenced by a range of 'irrational' factors, such as the personalities of leaders, the images of parties, habitual allegiances and social conditioning.

Second, even if voters are influenced by policies, it is likely that they will be attracted by certain **manifesto** commitments, but be less interested in, or perhaps opposed to, others. A vote for a party cannot therefore be taken to be an endorsement of its entire manifesto or, indeed, of any single election promise. Third, the doctrine imposes a straitjacket. It limits government policies to those positions and proposals that the party took up during the election, and leaves no

Focus on . . .

Referendums: for or against?

A referendum is a vote in which the electorate can express a view on a particular issue of public policy. It differs from an election in that the latter is essentially a means of filling a public office and does not provide a direct or reliable method of influencing the content of policy. The referendum is therefore a device of direct democracy (see p. 92). It is typically used not to replace representative institutions, but to supplement them. Referendums may be either advisory or binding; they may also raise issues for discussion (initiatives), or be used to decide policy questions (propositions or plebiscites).

Amongst the advantages of referendums are the following:

- They check the power of elected governments, ensuring that they stay in line with public opinion.
- They promote political participation, thus helping to create a more educated and better-informed electorate.

- They strengthen legitimacy by providing the public with a way of expressing their views about specific issues.
- They provide a means either of settling major constitutional questions, or of gauging public opinion on issues not raised in elections because major parties agree on them.

The disadvantages of referendums include the following:

- They leave political decisions in the hands of those who have the least education and experience, and are most susceptible to media and other influences.
- They provide, at best, only a snapshot of public opinion at one point in time.
- They allow politicians to manipulate the political agenda and absolve themselves of responsibility for making difficult decisions.
- They tend to simplify and distort political issues, reducing them to questions that have a yes/no answer.

scope to adjust policies in the light of changing circumstances. What guidance do mandates offer in the event of, say, international or economic crises? Finally (as discussed in the next main section of this chapter), the doctrine of the mandate can be applied only in the case of majoritarian electoral systems, and its use even there may appear absurd if the winning party fails to gain 50 per cent of the popular vote.

Resemblance model

● **Microcosm**: Literally, a little world; a miniature version of a larger body, but exact in its features and proportions.

● **Descriptive representation**: A model of representation that takes account of politicians' social and other characteristics, usually based on the idea that they should be a 'representative sample' of the larger society.

The final theory of representation is based less on the manner in which representatives are selected than on whether they typify or resemble the group they claim to represent. This notion is embodied in the idea of a 'representative cross-section', as used by market researchers and opinion pollsters. By this standard, a representative government would constitute a **microcosm** of the larger society, containing members drawn from all groups and sections in society (in terms of social class, gender, age and so on), and in numbers that are proportional to the size of the groups in society at large. The idea of **descriptive representation**, or as it has been called 'microcosmic representation', has traditionally been endorsed by socialist, feminist and other radical thinkers. They argue that the 'under-representation' of groups such as the working class, women and racial

Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950)

Moravian-born US economist and sociologist. Following an early academic career and a brief spell as Minister of Finance in post-First-World-War Austria, Schumpeter became professor of economics at Harvard University in 1932. His economic thought, developed in *Theory of Economic Development* (1912) and *Business Cycles* (1939), centred on the long-term dynamics of the capitalist system and in particular the role of 'risk-loving' entrepreneurs. In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), Schumpeter drew on economic, sociological and political theories to advance the famous contention that western capitalism was, impelled by its very success, evolving into a form of socialism.

minorities at senior levels in key institutions ensures that their interests are marginalized, or ignored altogether.

The resemblance model suggests that only people who come from a particular group, and have shared the experiences of that group, can fully identify with its interests. This is the difference between 'putting oneself in the shoes of another' and having direct and personal experience of what other people go through. A 'new man' or a 'pro-feminist' male may, for instance, sympathize with women's interests and support the principle of gender equality, but will never take women's problems as seriously as women do themselves, because they are not his problems. On the other hand, the idea that representatives should resemble the represented undoubtedly causes a number of difficulties.

One of these is that this model portrays representation in exclusive or narrow terms, believing that only a woman can represent women, only a black person can represent other black people, only a member of the working class can represent the working classes and so on. If all representatives simply advanced the interests of the groups from which they come, the result would be social division and conflict, with no one being able to defend the common good or advance a broader public interest. Moreover, a government that is a microcosm of society would reflect that society's weaknesses as well as its strengths. What would be the advantage, for example, of government resembling society if the majority of the population are apathetic, ill-informed and poorly educated? Finally, the microcosmic ideal can be achieved only by imposing powerful constraints on electoral choice and individual freedom. In the name of representation, political parties may be forced to select quotas of female and minority candidates, constituencies may be set aside for candidates from particular backgrounds, or, more dramatically, the electorate might have to be classified on the basis of class, gender, race and so on, and only be allowed to vote for candidates from their own group.

ELECTIONS

Although controversy continues to rage about the nature of representation, there is one point of universal agreement: the representative process is intrinsically linked to elections and voting. Elections may not, in themselves, be a sufficient

condition for political representation but, in modern circumstances, there is little doubt that they are a necessary condition. Indeed, some thinkers have gone further and portrayed elections as the very heart of democracy. This was the view developed by Joseph Schumpeter (see p. 202) in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), which portrayed democracy as an 'institutional arrangement', as a means of filling public office by a competitive struggle for the people's vote. As he put it, 'democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men [*sic*] who are to rule them'. In interpreting democracy as nothing more than a political method, Schumpeter, in effect, identified it with elections, and specifically with competitive elections. While few modern democratic theorists are prepared to reduce democracy simply to competitive elections, most nevertheless follow Schumpeter in understanding democratic government in terms of the rules and mechanisms that guide the conduct of elections. This focuses attention on the very different forms that elections can take.

First, which offices or posts are subject to the elective principle? Although elections are widely used to fill those public offices whose holders have policy-making responsibilities (the legislature and executive, in particular), key political institutions are sometimes treated as exceptions. This applies, for instance, to the second chambers of legislature in states such as the UK and Canada, and where constitutional monarchs still serve as heads of state. Second, who is entitled to vote, how widely is the franchise drawn? As pointed out, restrictions on the right to vote based on factors such as property ownership, education, gender and racial origin have been abandoned in most countries. Nevertheless, there may be informal restrictions, as in the practice in most US states of leaving electoral registration entirely in the hands of the citizen, with the result that non-registration and non-voting are widespread. On the other hand, in Australia, Belgium and Italy, for instance, voting is compulsory (see p. 204).

Third, how are votes cast? Although public voting was the norm in the USSR until 1989, and it is still widely practised in small organizations in the form of a show of hands, modern political elections are generally held on the basis of a secret ballot (sometimes called an 'Australian ballot', as it was first used in South Australia in 1856). The secret ballot is usually seen as the guarantee of a 'fair' election, in that it keeps the dangers of corruption and intimidation at bay. Nevertheless, electoral fairness cannot simply be reduced to the issue of how people vote. It is also affected by the voters' access to reliable and balanced information, the range of choice they are offered, the circumstances under which campaigning is carried out, and, finally, how scrupulously the vote is counted.

Fourth, are elections competitive or non-competitive? This is usually seen as the most crucial of distinctions, as, until the 1990s, only about half of the countries that used elections offered their electorates a genuine choice of both candidates and parties. Single-candidate elections, for example, were the rule in orthodox communist states. This meant that public office was effectively filled through a nomination process dominated by the communist party. Electoral competition is a highly complex and often controversial issue. It concerns not merely the right of people to stand for election and the ability of political parties to nominate candidates and campaign legally, but also broader factors that affect party performance, such as their sources of funding and their access to the media. From this point of view, the nature of the party system may be as crucial

Debating . . .
Should voting be compulsory?

In 2005, some 33 countries operated a system of compulsory voting for some or all elected bodies, although only in a minority of cases was this enforced through the threat of punishment (usually by a small fine, or community service). However, while some argue that compulsory voting strengthens democracy, even seeing it as a civic duty, others point out that 'non-voting' is a basic civil right, whose infringement may make a mockery of the democratic process.

YES	NO
Increased participation. The almost certain consequence of introducing compulsory voting would be that turnout rates will increase. Voter turnout in Australia has thus been consistently around 94–96 per cent since the introduction of nationwide compulsory voting in 1924, having previously been as low as 47 per cent. Compulsory voting would, at a stroke, resolve the 'participation crises' that afflict so many mature democracies, in the process counteracting longer-term trends against voting in modern, individualized and consumerist societies.	*Abuse of freedom*. Compulsion, even in the name of democracy, remains compulsion: a violation of individual freedom. The right *not* to vote may, in some senses, be as important as the right to choose for whom to vote. Non-voting may thus be a conscientious act, a product of rational and considered reflection, an attempt to draw attention to, amongst other things, the lack of choice among mainstream political parties or, perhaps, to express a principled rejection of the political system itself.
Greater legitimacy. Governments formed on the basis of compulsory voting would be much more likely to rest on a popular majority (a majority of those eligible to vote), not just an electoral majority (a majority of those who actually vote). Declining turnout in the UK's non-compulsory system meant that, in 2005, the Labour Party was able to gain a comfortable parliamentary majority with the support of just 22 per cent of the electorate. Compulsory voting would therefore strengthen democratic legitimacy and ensure that governments do not neglect sections of society that are less active politically.	*Cosmetic democracy*. Compulsory voting addresses the symptoms of the problem but not the cause. Making voting compulsory would undoubtedly increase the electoral turnout, but it would not address the deeper problems that account for a growing decline in civic engagement. Higher turnout levels brought about through compulsion may therefore simply mask deeper problems, making it less likely, rather than more likely, that issues such as the decline in trust in politicians, and a lack of effective responsiveness and accountability, will be properly addressed.
Civic duty. Citizenship is based on reciprocal rights and responsibilities. The right to vote therefore involves a duty to exercise that right, and legal compulsion simply ensures that that duty is fulfilled (treating it like paying taxes, jury service and (possibly) military conscription). Moreover, enforcing the responsibility to vote has educational benefits, in that it will stimulate political activism and create a better informed citizenry.	*Worthless votes*. Generally, those who do not vote have the least interest in and understanding of politics. Forcing would-be non-voters to vote would therefore simply increase the number of random and unthinking votes that are cast. This may particularly be the case when some voters, because they only turn up through a fear of punishment, may feel resentful and aggrieved. This is an especially worrying prospect as such 'worthless' votes may, ultimately, determine the outcome of an election.
Countering social disadvantage. Voluntary voting effectively disadvantages the most vulnerable elements in society, the poor and less-educated – those who are, as research consistently shows, least likely to vote. Non-compulsion therefore means that the interests of the educated, articulate and better-off prevail over those of other groups. Genuine political equality requires not only that all *can* vote, but that all *do* vote. Only then can political equality serve the interests of social equality.	*Distorted political focus*. A final problem with compulsory voting is that it may distort the strategies adopted by political parties. Instead of focusing on the interests of the mass of the electorate, parties may be encouraged to frame policies designed to attract more volatile 'marginal' voters (that is, would-be non-voters), thereby leading to a decline in coherence and an increase in polarization.

to the maintenance of genuine competition as are rules about who can stand and who can vote. Finally, how is the election conducted? As will be discussed later, there is a bewildering variety of electoral systems, each of which has its own particular political and constitutional implications.

Functions of elections

Because of the different kinds of elections, and the variety of electoral systems, generalization about the roles or functions of elections is always difficult. Nevertheless, the advance of democratization (see p. 272) in the 1980s and 1990s, stimulated in part by the collapse of communism, has usually been associated with the adoption of liberal-democratic electoral systems, characterized by universal suffrage, the secret ballot and electoral competition. The significance of such systems is, however, more difficult to determine. As Harrop and Miller (1987) explained, there are two contrasting views of the function of competitive elections.

The conventional view is that elections are a mechanism through which politicians can be called to account and forced to introduce policies that somehow reflect public opinion. This emphasizes the bottom-up functions of elections: political recruitment, representation, making government, influencing policy and so on. On the other hand, a radical view of elections, developed by theorists such as Ginsberg (1982), portrays them as a means through which governments and political elites can exercise control over their populations, making them more quiescent, malleable and, ultimately, governable. This view emphasizes top-down functions: building legitimacy, shaping public opinion and strengthening elites. In reality, however, elections have no single character; they are neither simply mechanisms of public accountability, nor a means of ensuring political control. Like all channels of political communication, elections are a 'two-way street' that provides the government and the people, the elite and the masses, with the opportunity to influence one another. The central functions of elections include the following:

- **Recruiting politicians**: In democratic states, elections are the principal source of political recruitment, taking account also of the processes through which parties nominate candidates. Politicians thus tend to possess talents and skills that are related to electioneering, such as charisma (see p. 83), oratorical skills and good looks, not necessarily those that suit them to carrying out constituency duties, serving on committees, running government departments and so on. Elections are typically not used to fill posts that require specialist knowledge or experience, such as those in the civil service or judiciary.
- **Making governments**: Elections make governments directly only in states such as the USA, France and Venezuela, in which the political executive is directly elected. In the more common parliamentary systems, elections influence the formation of governments, most strongly when the electoral system tends to give a single party a clear parliamentary majority. The use of proportional representation (see p. 207) may mean that governments are formed through post-election deals, and that governments can be made and unmade without the need for an election.

- **Providing representation**: When they are fair and competitive, elections are a means through which demands are channelled from the public to the government. Short of the use of initiatives and the recall, however, the electorate has no effective means of ensuring that mandates are carried out, apart from its capacity to inflict punishment at the next election. Moreover, nowhere do elected governments constitute a microcosm of the larger society.
- **Influencing policy**: Elections certainly deter governments from pursuing radical and deeply unpopular policies; however, only in exceptional cases, when a single issue dominates the election campaign, can they be said to influence policy directly. It can also be argued that the range of policy options outlined in elections is typically so narrow that the result can be of only marginal policy significance. Others suggest that government policy is, in any case, shaped more by practical dictates, such as the state of the economy, than it is by electoral considerations.
- **Educating voters**: The process of campaigning provides the electorate with an abundance of information, about parties, candidates, policies, the current government's record, the political system and so on. However, this leads to education only if the information that is provided, and the way it is provided, engages public interest and stimulates debate, as opposed to apathy and alienation. As candidates and parties seek to persuade, rather than to educate, they also have a strong incentive to provide incomplete and distorted information.
- **Building legitimacy**: One reason why even authoritarian regimes bother to hold elections, even if they are non-competitive, is that elections help to foster legitimacy (see p. 81) by providing justification for a system of rule. This happens because the ritual involved in campaigning somehow confers on an election a ceremonial status and importance. Most importantly, by encouraging citizens to participate in politics, even in the limited form of voting, elections mobilize active consent.
- **Strengthening elites**: Elections can also be a vehicle through which elites can manipulate and control the masses. This possibility encouraged Proudhon (see p. 381) to warn that 'universal suffrage is counter-revolution'. Political discontent and opposition can be neutralized by elections that channel them in a constitutional direction, and allow governments to come and go while the regime itself survives. Elections are particularly effective in this respect because, at the same time, they give citizens the impression that they are exercising power over the government.

Electoral systems: debates and controversies

An electoral system is a set of rules that governs the conduct of elections. Not only do these rules vary across the world; they are also, in many countries, the subject of fierce political debate and argument. These rules vary in a number of ways:

- Voters may be asked to choose between candidates or between parties.
- Voters may either select a single candidate, or vote preferentially, ranking the candidates they wish to support in order.

CONCEPT

Proportional representation

Proportional representation is the principle that parties should be represented in an assembly or parliament in direct proportion to their overall electoral strength, their percentage of seats equalling their percentage of votes. The term is generally used to refer not to a single method of election but to a variety of electoral mechanisms, those able to secure proportional outcomes, or at least a high and reliable degree of proportionality. The best known PR systems are the party-list system, the single-transferable-vote system and the additional member system.

● **Plurality**: The largest number out of a collection of numbers, not necessarily an absolute majority (50 per cent or more of all the numbers combined).

● The electorate may or may not be grouped into electoral units or constituencies.
● Constituencies may return a single member or a number of members.
● The level of support needed to elect a candidate varies from a **plurality** to an overall or 'absolute' majority, or a quota of some kind.

For general purposes, however, the systems available can be divided into two broad categories on the basis of how they convert votes into seats. On the one hand, there are majoritarian systems, in which larger parties typically win a higher proportion of seats than the proportion of votes they gain in the election. This increases the chances of a single party gaining a parliamentary majority and being able to govern on its own. In the UK, for example, single-party government prevailed between 1945 and 2010 despite the fact that no party achieved an electoral majority during this period. On the other hand, there are proportional systems, which guarantee an equal (or, at least, more equal) relationship between the seats won by a party and the votes gained in the election. In a pure system of proportional representation (PR), a party that gains 45 per cent of the votes would win exactly 45 per cent of the seats. PR systems therefore make single-party majority rule less likely, and are commonly associated with multiparty systems and coalition government. The electoral systems described in the following Focus boxes range from the most majoritarian type of system to the purest type of proportional system.

Although in some countries the electoral system provokes little debate or interest, in others it is an issue of pressing political and constitutional significance. France, for instance, has changed its electoral system so many times that any statement about it runs the risk of being out of date. The second ballot (see p. 209) was abandoned for parliamentary elections in 1985, when France switched to a regional-list system (see p. 213), but it was reintroduced for the 1993 election. In the UK, although the majoritarian single-member plurality (SMP) system (see p. 208) continues to be used for general elections, since 1999 a number of more proportional systems have been introduced for elections to the devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Greater London Authority and the European Parliament. The confusing thing about the electoral reform debate is that the shifts that have occurred reflect no consistent pattern. In 1993, while New Zealand adopted proportional representation in place of the SMP system (see p. 214), Italy moved in the opposite direction, replacing the party list with the less proportional additional member system (see p. 211), before, in 2005, returning to the list system.

Electoral systems attract attention, in part, because they have a crucial impact on party performance and, particularly, on their prospects of winning (or, at least, sharing) power. It would be foolish, then, to deny that attitudes towards the electoral system are shaped largely by party advantage. President Mitterrand's twists and turns in France in the 1980s and 1990s were dictated mainly by his desire to strengthen Socialist representation in the National Assembly. Similarly, the UK Labour Party's interest in electoral reform since the 1980s has waxed and waned according to whether it appeared that the party could win under SMP rules. The party's conversion to PR for devolved bodies and its commitment in 1997 to holding a referendum on electoral reform for the House of Commons were, in part, a consequence of spending 18 years in opposition. It is notable that Labour's

Focus on . . .
Electoral systems: single-member plurality (SMP) system ('first past the post')

Used: The UK (House of Commons), the USA, Canada and India, for example. **Type**: Majoritarian.

Features:
- The country is divided into single-member constituencies, usually of equal size.
- Voters select a single candidate, usually marking his or her name with a cross on the ballot paper.
- The winning candidate needs only to achieve a plurality of votes (the 'first past the post' rule).

Advantages:
- The system establishes a clear link between representatives and constituents, ensuring that constituency duties are carried out.
- It offers the electorate a clear choice of potential parties of government.
- It allows governments to be formed that have a clear mandate from the electorate, albeit often on the basis of plurality support amongst the electorate.
- It keeps extremism at bay by making it more difficult for small radical parties to gain seats and credibility.
- It makes for strong and effective government in that a single party usually has majority control of the assembly.

- It produces stable government, in that single-party governments rarely collapse as a result of disunity and internal friction.

Disadvantages:
- The system 'wastes' many (perhaps most) votes, those cast for losing candidates and those cast for winning ones over the plurality mark.
- It distorts electoral preferences by 'under-representing' small parties and ones with geographically evenly distributed support (the 'third-party effect').
- It offers only limited choice because of its duopolistic (two-major-parties) tendencies.
- It undermines the legitimacy of government, in that governments often enjoy only minority support, producing a system of plurality rule.
- It creates instability because a change in government can lead to a radical shift of policies and direction.
- It leads to unaccountable government in that the legislature is usually subordinate to the executive, because the majority of its members are supporters of the governing party.
- It discourages the selection of a socially broad spread of candidates in favour of those who are attractive to a large body of voters.

landslide victories in 1997 and 2001 coincided with declining interest in the party in changing Westminster elections. However, other less cynical and more substantial considerations need to be taken into account. The problem, though, is that there is no such thing as a 'best electoral system'.

The electoral reform debate is, at heart, a debate about the desirable nature of government and the principles that underpin 'good' government. Is representative government, for instance, more important than effective government? Is a bias in favour of compromise and consensus preferable to one that favours conviction and principle? These are normative questions that do not permit objective answers. Moreover, in view of the complex role they play, elections can be judged according to a diverse range of criteria, which not uncommonly contradict one another. Electoral systems therefore merit only a qualified

Focus on . . .
Electoral systems: second ballot system

Used: Traditionally in France, but it is used for presidential elections in countries such as Austria, Chile and Russia. **Type**: Majoritarian.

Features:
- There are single-candidate constituencies and single-choice voting, as in the single-member plurality (SMP) system.
- To win on the first ballot, a candidate needs an overall majority of the votes cast.
- If no candidate gains a first-ballot majority, a second, run-off ballot is held between the leading two candidates.

Advantages:
- The system broadens electoral choice: voters can vote with their hearts for their preferred candidate in the first ballot, and with their heads for the least-bad candidate in the second.
- As candidates can win only with majority support, they are encouraged to make their appeal as broad as possible.
- Strong and stable government is possible, as with SMP systems.

Disadvantages:
- As the system is little more proportional than the SMP system, it distorts preferences and is unfair to 'third' parties.
- Run-off candidates are encouraged to abandon their principles in search of short-term popularity, or as a result of deals with defeated candidates.
- The holding of a second ballot may strain the electorate's patience and interest in politics.

endorsement, reflecting a balance of advantages over disadvantages and their strength relative to other systems. These criteria fall into two general categories: those related to the quality of representation, and those linked to the effectiveness of government.

Majoritarian systems are usually thought to be at their weakest when they are evaluated in terms of their representative functions. To a greater or lesser extent, each majoritarian system distorts popular preferences, in the sense that party representation is not commensurate with electoral strength. This is most glaringly apparent in their 'unfairness' to small parties and parties with evenly distributed geographical support, and their 'over-fairness' in relation to large parties and those with geographically concentrated support. For example, in 2010 in the UK, the Conservative Party gained 47 per cent of the parliamentary seats with 36 per cent of the vote, the Labour Party won 40 per cent of the seats with 29 per cent of the vote, and the Liberal Democrats gained merely 9 per cent representation with 23 per cent of the vote. Such biases are impossible to justify in representative terms, especially since the unfortunate 'third' parties are often centrist parties, and not the extremist parties of popular image.

Two-party systems and single-party government are thus 'manufactured' by the majoritarian bias of the electoral system, and do not reflect the distribution of popular preferences. Moreover, the fact that parties can come to power with barely two-fifths of the popular vote (in 2005 in the UK, for example, the Labour Party gained a House of Commons majority with 35.3 per cent of the vote) strains the legitimacy of the entire political system, and creates circumstances in which radical,

Focus on . . .
Electoral systems: alternative vote (AV) system; supplementary vote (SV)

Used: Australia (House of Representatives (AV)), and the UK (London mayor (SV)). **Type**: Majoritarian.

Features:
- There are single-member constituencies.
- There is preferential voting. In AV, voters rank the candidates in order of preference: 1 for their first preference, 2 for their second preference and so on. In SV, there is only a single 'supplementary' vote.
- Winning candidates must gain 50 per cent of all the votes cast.
- Votes are counted according to the first preferences. If no candidate reaches 50 per cent, the bottom candidate is eliminated and his or her votes are redistributed according to the second (or subsequent) preferences. This continues until one candidate has a majority. In SV, all candidates drop out except the top two.

Advantages:
- Fewer votes are 'wasted' than in the SMP system.
- Unlike the second-ballot system, the outcome cannot be influenced by deals made between candidates.
- Although winning candidates must secure at least 50 per cent support, single-party majority government is not ruled out.

Disadvantages:
- The system is not much more proportional than the SMP system, and so is still biased in favour of large parties.
- The outcome may be determined by the preferences of those who support small, possibly extremist, parties.
- Winning candidates may enjoy little first-preference support, and have only the virtue of being the least unpopular candidate available.

ideologically-driven parties can remain in power for prolonged periods under little pressure to broaden their appeal. The Conservatives in the UK were thus able to implement a programme of market-orientated reforms in the 1980s and 1990s while never gaining more than 43 per cent of support in general elections. When the majority of voters oppose the party in power, it is difficult to claim that that party has a popular mandate for anything.

Looked at in this light, proportional electoral systems seem to be manifestly more representative. Nevertheless, it may be naive simply to equate electoral fairness with **proportionality**. For instance, much of the criticism of PR systems stems from the fact that they make coalition government (see p. 239) much more likely. Although it can be argued that, unlike single-party governments, coalitions enjoy the support of at least 50 per cent of the electors, their policies are typically thrashed out in post-election deals, and thus are not endorsed by any set of electors. An additional danger is that parties within a coalition government may not exert influence in line with their electoral strength. The classic example of this is when small centre parties (such as the Free Democrats in Germany) can dictate to larger parties (for example, the CDU or the SPD in Germany) by threatening to switch their support to another party. Then, in effect, 'the tail wags the dog'.

The defence of majoritarian systems is more commonly based on government functions, and specifically on the capacity of such systems to deliver stable

● **Proportionality**: The degree to which the allocation of seats amongst parties reflects the distribution of the popular vote.

Focus on . . .

Electoral systems: mixed-member proportional (MMP) system; additional member system (AMS)

Used: Germany, Italy, New Zealand and the UK (Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly).
Type: Proportional.

Features:
- A proportion of seats (50 per cent in Germany, but more in Italy, Scotland and Wales, for instance) are filled by the SMP system using single-member constituencies.
- The remaining seats are filled using the party-list system (see p. 213).
- Electors cast two votes: one for a candidate in the constituency election, and the other for a party.

Advantages:
- The hybrid nature of this system balances the need for constituency representation against the need for electoral fairness. The party-list process ensures that the whole assembly is proportionally representative.
- Although the system is broadly proportional in terms of its outcome, it keeps alive the possibility of single-party government.
- It allows electors to choose a constituency representative from one party and yet support another party to form a government.
- It takes account of the fact that representing constituents and holding ministerial office are very different jobs that require very different talents and experience.

Disadvantages:
- The retention of single-member constituencies prevents the achievement of high levels of proportionality.
- The system creates two classes of representative, one burdened by insecurity and constituency duties, the other having higher status and the prospect of holding ministerial office.
- Constituency representation suffers because of the size of constituencies (generally, twice as large as in SMP systems).
- Parties become more centralized and powerful under this system, as they decide not only who has the security of being on the list and who has to fight constituencies, but also where on the list candidates are placed.

and effective rule. In other words, a lack of proportionality may simply be the price that is paid for strong government. In these systems, the bias in favour of single-party rule means that the electorate can usually choose between two parties, each of which has the capacity to deliver on its election promises by translating its manifesto commitments into a programme of government. Supported by a cohesive majority in the assembly, such governments are usually able to survive for a full term in office. In contrast, coalition governments are weak and unstable, in the sense that they are endlessly engaged in a process of reconciling opposing views, and are always liable to collapse as a result of internal splits and divisions. The classic example here is post-1945 Italy which, up to 2012, had had no fewer than 63 governments.

Supporters of PR argue, on the other hand, that having a strong government, in the sense of a government that is able to push through policies, is by no means an unqualified virtue, tending as it does to restrict scrutiny and parliamentary accountability. Instead, they suggest that 'strong' government should be understood

Focus on . . .

Electoral systems: single-transferable-vote (STV) system

Used: The Republic of Ireland and the UK (Northern Ireland Assembly). **Type**: Proportional.

Features:
- There are multimember constituencies, each of which usually returns between three and eight members.
- Parties may put forward as many candidates as there are seats to fill.
- Electors vote preferentially, as in the alternative vote system.
- Candidates are elected, if they achieve a quota. This is the minimum number of votes needed to elect the stipulated number of candidates, calculated according to the Droop formula:

$$\text{quota } 5 \quad \frac{\text{total number of votes cast}}{(\text{number of seats to be filled} + 1)} + 1$$

For example, if 100,000 votes are cast in a constituency that elects four members, the quota is 100,000/(4 + 1) + 1 = 20,001.
- The votes are counted according to first preferences. If not all the seats are filled, the bottom candidate is eliminated. His or her votes are redistributed according to second preferences and so on, until all the seats have been filled.

Advantages:
- The system is capable of achieving highly proportional outcomes.
- Competition amongst candidates from the same party means that they can be judged on their records and on where they stand on issues that cut across party lines.
- The availability of several members means that constituents can choose to whom to take their grievances.

Disadvantages:
- The degree of proportionality achieved varies, largely on the basis of the party system.
- Strong and stable single-party government is unlikely.
- Intra-party competition may be divisive, and may allow members to evade their constituency responsibilities.

in terms of popular support, and the willingness of citizens to obey and respect the government. Broadly-based coalitions may possess these qualities in greater abundance than do single-party governments. By the same token, 'stable' government could mean a consistent development of government policies over a number of governments, rather than a government with the ability to survive for a single electoral term. This is more likely to be achieved by coalition governments (in which one or more parties may remain in power over a number of governments, albeit reshuffled) than by single-party governments, in which more sweeping changes in personnel and priorities are unavoidable when power changes hands.

The electoral reform debate, however, constantly risks overestimating the importance of electoral systems. In practice, elections are only one amongst a variety of factors that shape the political process, and may not be the most crucial. Indeed, the impact of particular electoral systems is conditioned largely by other circumstances; namely, the political culture, the nature of the party system, and the economic and social context within which politics is conducted. Generalizations about the nature of coalition government are always highly

Focus on . . .
Electoral systems: party-list system

Used: Israel, and in countries throughout Europe, including Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, and the European Parliament. **Type**: Proportional.

Features:
- Either the entire country is treated as a single constituency, or, in the case of regional party lists, there are a number of large multimember constituencies.
- Parties compile lists of candidates to place before the electorate, in descending order of preference.
- Electors vote for parties, not for candidates.
- Parties are allocated seats in direct proportion to the votes they gain in the election. They fill these seats from their party list.
- A 'threshold' may be imposed (5 per cent in Germany) to exclude small, possibly extremist, parties from representation.

Advantages:
- This is the only potentially pure system of proportional representation, and is therefore fair to all parties.
- The system promotes unity by encouraging electors to identify with their nation or region, rather than with a constituency.
- The system makes it easier for women and minority candidates to be elected, provided, of course, they feature on the party list.
- The representation of a large number of small parties ensures that there is an emphasis upon negotiation, bargaining and consensus.

Disadvantages:
- The existence of many small parties can lead to weak and unstable government.
- The link between representatives and constituencies is entirely broken.
- Unpopular candidates who are well-placed on a party list cannot be removed from office.
- Parties become heavily centralized, because leaders draw up party lists, and junior members have an incentive to be loyal in the hope of moving up the list.

suspect, for instance. Whereas coalitions in Italy have typically been weak and short-lived, in Germany they have usually produced stable and effective government. Similarly, although majoritarian systems can produce significant shifts in policy as one government follows another, broad policy consensuses are also not uncommon. In the 1950s and 1960s, despite an alternation in power between the Conservative and the Labour parties, UK government policy displayed a remarkable consistency of policy direction, rooted in a cross-party commitment to Keynesian social democracy. Furthermore, it is far from clear what damage electoral systems can cause. Despite Italy's famed political instability, often blamed on its now-abandoned party-list electoral system, in the post-World War II period the north of the country at least experienced steady economic growth, making Italy, by the 1990s, the third most prosperous state in the EU.

What do elections mean?

The importance of elections cannot be doubted. At the very least, they provide the public with its clearest formal opportunity to influence the political process, and also help, directly or indirectly, to determine who will hold government

POLITICS IN ACTION . . .

Electoral reform in New Zealand: politics renewed?

Events: In a non-binding referendum in New Zealand in 1992, 85 per cent of electors voted to change the established single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, (popularly known as 'first past the post') with 71 per cent of voters backing the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system as their preferred alternative. In a binding second referendum the following year, MMP gained the support of 54 per cent in a straight contest against SMP. The first election using MMP was held in 1996, and it has been used in each of the subsequent elections. The issue of electoral reform had gained growing prominence in New Zealand after two successive elections (in 1978 and 1981) had been won by the 'wrong' party (the National Party won parliamentary majorities even though the Labour Party gained more votes). Other factors included growing discontent with the electoral system amongst Labour supporters, due to the National Party being in power for all but six years during 1949–84, and the belief that proportional representation would boost Maori representation.
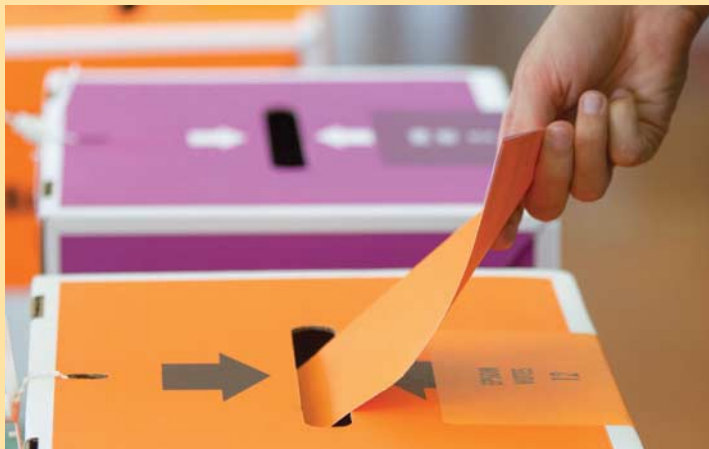
Significance: Has electoral reform in New Zealand been a success? As ever with electoral reform, the debate turns on how 'success' is defined. Supporters of electoral reform have argued that MMP in New Zealand has brought about greater responsiveness and accountability. The clearest evidence of this has been a significant widening of the representation of parties, both in the House of Representatives and in government. The Labour-National two-party system has undoubtedly been broken, giving way to a multiparty system. The average number of parties represented in the House under MMP has increased from 2.4 during the period 1946–93 to 7. Most tellingly, since reform, neither National nor Labour has been able to govern alone on the basis of a parliamentary majority. The succession of coalition governments that has resulted from reform has shifted the focus of New Zealand politics away from simple rivalry between National and Labour towards a more complex process of consensus-building, as both major parties look to forge alliances with smaller parties. After the 2011 election, for instance, National formed a coalition government through an agreement with ACT, United Future and the Maori Party. Moreover, since 1996, New Zealand governments have been minority governments for all but two years, a situation that allows parties outside of government, such as the Green Party, to exert a measure of policy influence.

However, criticisms of MMP continue to be voiced in New Zealand, not least by the National Party, which remains committed to a return to SMP. Critics claim that the two-vote system causes voter confusion and leads to the 'contamination effect', whereby views about constituency candidates affect the distribution of party-list votes. It is also far from clear that the introduction of MMP has had a beneficial impact on voter turnout, the second election under MMP, in 1999, having recorded the lowest turnout of any twentieth-century New Zealand election. Two, deeper concerns about MMP continue to be voiced, however. First, MMP has been portrayed as the enemy of strong government, in that, being divided, coalition governments are often unable to deliver decisive leadership. Second, misgivings have been expressed about the power of so-called 'pivotal parties', small parties whose policy influence greatly exceeds their electoral strength because they are able to do deals with both major parties. Concerns such as these encouraged National to call a further electoral reform referendum which coincided with the 2011 general election and offered voters a straight choice between MMP and a return to SMP. However, the resulting 58 per cent in favour of keeping MMP (a 4 per cent increase on the vote in 1993) indicated broad satisfaction with the new system and suggests that it is unlikely to be abandoned in the near future.

Public interest

The public interest consists of the general or collective interests of a community; that is, that which is good for society as a whole. Two contrasting notions of the public interest can be identified. Strong versions distinguish clearly between the interests of the public as a collective body and the selfish or personal interests of each individual. In the view of Rousseau and many socialists, the interests of the public are 'higher' than, or morally superior to, those of the individual. Weak versions recognize only private interests, and therefore see the public interest as nothing more than the sum of private interests.

power. From this perspective, elections are about results – in other words, who wins and who loses. This view is encouraged by media coverage, which, with the aid of opinion polls, increasingly turns elections into horseraces. Nevertheless, politicians are not backward in claiming that elections have a broader and more profound meaning. Elections are, in this sense, seen as nothing less than a visible manifestation of the public interest; in short, 'the public has spoken'. Political commentators also express their opinions, proclaiming, for instance, that elections reflect a 'shift in the popular mood'. The problem, however, is that all such claims and interpretations have a strongly arbitrary character; any attempt to invest an election with 'meaning' is fraught with dangers. The people may have spoken, but it is frustratingly difficult to know what they have said.

Many of these problems stem from the difficult notion of the 'public interest'. If such a thing as a 'public' interest exists, it surely reflects the common or collective interests of all citizens. This is precisely what Rousseau (see p. 97) implied in the idea of the 'general will', which he understood to mean the will of all citizens, provided each of them acts selflessly. The difficulty with this view is obvious. Quite simply, individuals do not, in practice, act selflessly in accordance with a general or collective will; there is no such thing as an indivisible public interest. All generalizations about 'the public' or 'the electorate' must therefore be treated with grave suspicion. There is no electorate as such, only a collection of electors who each possess particular interests, sympathies, allegiances and so on. At best, election results reflect the preferences of a majority, or perhaps a plurality, of voters. However, even then there are perhaps insuperable problems in deciding what these votes 'mean'.

The difficulty in interpreting election results lies in the perhaps impossible task of knowing why voters vote as they do. As is made clear in the next section, generations of political scientists have grappled with the question of electoral behaviour, but have failed to develop a universally accepted theory of voting. Voting, on the surface a very simple act, is shaped by a complex of factors, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, selfish and selfless. All theories are therefore partial and must be qualified by a range of other considerations. This can be seen in relation to the so-called 'economic theory of democracy', advanced by Anthony Downs (1957). This theory suggests that the act of voting reflects an expression of self-interest on the part of voters, who select parties in much the same way as consumers select goods or services for purchase. On this basis, the winning party in an election can reasonably claim that its policies most closely correspond to the interests of the largest group of voters.

On the other hand, it can be argued that, rather than 'buying' policies, voters are typically poorly-informed about political issues and are influenced by a range of 'irrational' factors such as habit, social conditioning, the image of the parties and the personalities of their leaders. Moreover, the ability of parties to attract votes may have less to do with the 'goods' they put up for purchase than with the way those goods are 'sold' through advertising, political campaigning, propaganda and so on. To the extent that this is true, election results may reflect not so much the interests of the mass of voters, as the resources and finances available to the competing parties.

A further – and, some would argue, more intractable – problem is that no elective mechanism may be able reliably to give expression to the multifarious preferences of voters. This is a problem that the US economist Kenneth Arrow described

in terms of his 'impossibility theorem'. In *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1951) Arrow drew attention to the problem of 'transitivity' that occurs when voters are allowed to express a range of preferences for candidates or policy options, rather than merely cast a single vote. The drawback of casting but a single vote is not only that it is a crude all-or-nothing device, but also that no single candidate or option may gain majority support. For instance, candidate *A* may gain 40 per cent of the vote, candidate *B* 34 per cent, and candidate *C* 26 per cent. The situation could, nevertheless, become more confused if second preferences were taken into account.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the second preferences of all candidate *A*'s supporters go to candidate *C*, the second preferences of candidate *B* favour candidate *A*, and the second preferences of candidate *C* go to candidate *B*. This creates a situation in which each candidate can claim to be preferred by a majority of voters. The first and second preferences for candidate *A* add up to 74 per cent (40 per cent plus *B*'s 34 per cent). Candidate *B* can claim 60 per cent support (34 per cent plus *C*'s 26 per cent), and candidate *C* can claim 66 per cent support (26 per cent plus *A*'s 40 per cent). This problem of 'cyclical majorities' draws attention to the fact that it may not be possible to establish a reliable link between individual preferences and collective choices. In other words, election results cannot speak for themselves, and politicians and political commentators who claim to find meaning in them are, to some extent, acting arbitrarily. Nevertheless, the latitude that this allows politicians is not unlimited, because they know that they will be called to account at the next election. In this light, perhaps the most significant function of elections is to set limits to arbitrary government by ensuring that politicians who claim to speak for the public must ultimately be judged by the public.

VOTING BEHAVIOUR

The growth of academic interest in voting behaviour coincided with the rise of behavioural political science. As the most widespread and quantifiable form of political behaviour, voting quickly became the focus for new techniques of sample surveying and statistical analysis. *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), the product of painstaking research by the University of Michigan, became the leading work in the field and stimulated a wealth of similar studies, such as Butler and Stokes' *Political Change in Britain* (1969). At the high point of the behavioural revolution, it was thought that voting held the key to disclosing all the mysteries of the political system, perhaps allowing for laws of mass political psychology to be developed. Even though these lofty hopes have not been fulfilled, psephology (the scientific study of voting behaviour) still commands a central position in political analysis. This is because voting provides one of the richest sources of information about the interaction between individuals, society and politics. By investigating the mysteries of voting behaviour, we are thus able to learn important lessons about the nature of the political system, and gain insight into the process of social and political change.

Voting behaviour is clearly shaped by short-term and long-term influences. Short-term influences are specific to a particular election and do not allow conclusions to be drawn about voting patterns in general. The chief short-term influence is the state of the economy, which reflects the fact that there is usually a link

between a government's popularity and economic variables such as unemployment, inflation and disposable income. Optimism about one's own material circumstances (the so-called 'feel-good' factor) appears to be particularly crucial here. Indeed, it is often alleged that governments attempt to create pre-election booms in the hope of improving their chances of gaining re-election. The chances that political and business cycles can be brought into conjunction are clearly strengthened by flexible-term elections that allow the government to choose when to 'go to the country'.

Another short-term influence on voting is the personality and public standing of party leaders. This is particularly important, because media exposure portrays leaders as the brand image of their party. This means that a party may try to rekindle popular support by replacing a leader who is perceived to be an electoral liability. Another factor is the style and effectiveness of the parties' electoral campaigning. The length of the campaign can vary from about three weeks for flexible-term elections to up to two years in the case of fixed-term elections, such as those for the US president. Opinion polls are usually thought to be significant in this respect, either giving a candidate's or party's campaign momentum, or instilling disillusionment, or even complacency, amongst voters.

A final short-term influence, the mass media (see p. 179), may also be of long-term significance if biased or partisan coverage reflects structural, and therefore continuing, factors such as press ownership. However, the pattern of media coverage may change from election to election. For instance, under Tony Blair's leadership, the UK Labour Party made concerted attempts to court the Murdoch press in particular, helping to explain the party's longest period in power, between 1997 and 2010. All such considerations, nevertheless, operate within a context of psychological, sociological, economic and ideological influences on voting. These are best examined in relation to rival models of voting. The most significant of these are the following:

- the party-identification model
- the sociological model
- the rational-choice model
- the dominant-ideology model.

Theories of voting

Party-identification model

The earliest theory of voting behaviour, the party-identification model, is based on the sense of psychological attachment that people have to parties. Electors are seen as people who identify with a party, in the sense of being long-term supporters who regard the party as 'their' party. Voting is therefore a manifestation of partisanship, not a product of calculation influenced by factors such as policies, personalities, campaigning and media coverage. This model places heavy stress on early political socialization (see p. 178), seeing the family as the principal means through which political loyalties are forged. These are then, in most cases, reinforced by group membership and later social experiences.

In this model, attitudes towards policies and leaders, as well as perceptions about group and personal interests, tend to be developed on the basis of party

Class dealignment

Class dealignment is the weakening of the relationship between social class and party support. Social class may nevertheless remain a significant (even the most significant) factor influencing electoral choice. The impact of dealignment has been to undermine traditional class-based parties (notably, working class parties of the left), often bringing about a realignment of the party system. Explanations of class dealignment usually focus on changes in the social structure that have weakened the solidaristic character of class identity, such as post-industrialism.

identification. Events are thus interpreted to fit with pre-existing loyalties and attachments. This partisan alignment tends to create stability and continuity, especially in terms of habitual patterns of voting behaviour, often sustained over a lifetime. From this point of view, it should be possible to calculate the 'normal' vote of a party by reference to partisanship levels. Deviations from this 'normal' level presumably reflect the impact of short-term factors. One of the weaknesses of this model is the growing evidence from a number of countries of partisan dealignment (see p. 217). This indicates a general fall in party identification and a decline in habitual voting patterns. In the USA, partisan dealignment is reflected in a decline in the number of registered Democrats and Republicans, and a rise in the number of Independents (up from 6 per cent in 1952 to 36 per cent in 2009). In the UK, it is demonstrated by a decline in the strength of allegiance to the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, 'very strong' identification with either party having fallen from 43 per cent in 1966 to 9 per cent in 2005.

Sociological model

The sociological model links voting behaviour to group membership, suggesting that electors tend to adopt a voting pattern that reflects the economic and social position of the group to which they belong. Rather than developing a psychological attachment to a party on the basis of family influence, this model highlights the importance of a social alignment, reflecting the various divisions and tensions within society. The most significant of these divisions are class, gender, ethnicity, religion and region. Although the impact of socialization is not irrelevant to this model, social-base explanations allow for rationality insofar as group interests may help to shape party allegiances. For many analysts, the sociological model is best understood as an 'interest plus socialization' approach to voting (Denver, 2012). This has perhaps been clearest in relation to social class (see p. 153).

Not uncommonly, party systems have been seen to reflect the class system, with the middle classes providing the electoral base for right-wing parties, and the working classes providing the electoral base for left-wing parties. The Labour–Conservative two-party system in the UK was traditionally understood in precisely this light. Peter Pulzer (1967) was able to declare, famously, 'class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail'. The sociological model, however, has been attacked on the grounds that, in focusing on social groups, it ignores the individual and the role of personal self-interest. Moreover, there is growing empirical evidence that the link between sociological factors and party support has weakened in modern societies. In particular, attention has been paid to the phenomenon of class dealignment. Evidence of class dealignment can be found in most western societies. For example, absolute class voting (the proportion of voters who support their 'natural' class party) fell in the UK from 66 per cent in 1966 to 47 per cent in 1983. In 1997, the Labour Party, for the first time, received more votes from non-manual workers than from manual workers.

Rational-choice model

Rational-choice models of voting shift attention onto the individual, and away from socialization and the behaviour of social groups. In this view, voting is seen

as a rational act, in the sense that individual electors are believed to decide their party preference on the basis of personal self-interest. Rather than being habitual, a manifestation of broader attachments and allegiances, voting is seen as essentially instrumental; that is, as a means to an end. Rational-choice models differ in that some, following the example of V. O. Key (1966), see voting as a retrospective comment on the party in power and how its performance has influenced citizen's choice. Others, such as Himmelveit *et al.*, (1985), portray voters as active, in the sense that they behave like consumers expressing a choice amongst the available policy options.

The latter view stresses the importance of what is called '**issue voting**', and suggests that parties can significantly influence their electoral performance by revising and reshaping their policies. It is generally accepted that this has been one of the consequences of partisan and class dealignment. This has also been encouraged by the pluralism and individualism that postmodernism (see p. 18) has fostered. The weakness of rational-choice theories is that they abstract the individual voter from his or her social and cultural context. In other words, to some extent, the ability to evaluate issues and calculate self-interest (the essence of instrumental voting) is structured by broader party attachments and group loyalties.

Dominant-ideology model

Radical theories of voting tend to highlight the degree to which individual choices are shaped by a process of ideological manipulation and control. In some respects, such theories resemble the sociological model, in that voting is seen to reflect a person's position in a social hierarchy. Where these theories differ from the sociological model, however, is in emphasizing that how groups and individuals interpret their position depends on how it has been presented to them through education, by the government and, above all, by the mass media. (The influence of the media on political debate and party competition is examined in greater detail in Chapter 8.)

In contrast to the earlier view that the media merely reinforce pre-existing preferences, this suggests that the media are able to distort the flow of political communications, both by setting the agenda for debate and by structuring preferences and sympathies. The consequence of this is that, if voters' attitudes conform to the tenets of a dominant ideology, parties will not be able to afford to develop policies that fall outside that ideology. In this way, far from challenging the existing distribution of power and resources in society, the electoral process tends to uphold it. The weakness of the dominant-ideology model is that, by overstating the process of social conditioning, it takes individual calculation and personal autonomy out of the picture altogether.

● **Issue voting**: Voting behaviour that is shaped by party policies and (usually) a calculation of personal self-interest.

SUMMARY

- Representation is a relationship in which an individual or group stands for, or acts on behalf of, a larger body of people. This may be achieved through the exercise of wisdom by an educated elite, through guidance or instructions given to a delegate, through the winning of a popular mandate, or through representatives being drawn from the groups they represent.

- In modern politics, representation is invariably linked with elections. Elections may not be a sufficient condition for political representation, but are certainly a necessary condition. For elections to serve representative purposes, however, they must be competitive, free and fair, and conducted on the basis of universal adult suffrage.

- Elections have a variety of functions. On the one hand, they have 'bottom-up' functions, such as political recruitment, representation, making government and influencing policy. On the other hand, radical theorists emphasize their 'top-down' functions, which include that they build legitimacy, shape public opinion and help to strengthen elites.

- Electoral systems are often classified as either majoritarian systems or proportional systems. In majoritarian systems, large parties typically win a higher proportion of seats than votes, thereby increasing the chances of single-party government. In proportional systems, there is an equal (or at least, more equal) relationship between the percentages of seats and votes won, increasing the likelihood of coalition government.

- Majoritarian systems are usually defended on the grounds that they offer the electorate a clear choice of potential governments, invest winning parties with a policy mandate, and help to promote strong and stable government. In contrast, proportional systems are defended on the grounds that they usually give government a broader electoral base, promote consensus and cooperation amongst a number of parties, and establish a healthy balance between the executive and the assembly.

- The meaning of elections is closely linked to the factors that shape voting behaviour. Amongst the various theories of voting are models that highlight the importance of party identification and habitual attachments, those that emphasize the importance of group membership and social alignment, those that are based on rational choice and calculations of self-interest, and those that suggest that individual choices are shaped by ideological manipulation and control.

Questions for discussion

- Is representation merely a substitute for democracy?
- What conditions best promote representative government?
- Are elections more significant in calling politicians to account, or in ensuring the survival of a regime?
- Is there inevitably a trade-off between electoral fairness and strong and stable government?
- Should electoral systems seek to deliver proportionality?
- Is there a 'best' electoral system?
- How successful are elections in defining the public interest?
- To what extent is voting behaviour a rational and issue-based activity?

Further reading

Birch, A. H., *The Concepts and Theories of Democracy* (3rd edn) (2007). A clear and thorough discussion of the concept of representation and the theory of representative democracy.

Farrell, D., *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (2nd edn) (2011). A clear introduction to the six principal types of election system currently used.

Gallagher, M. and P. Mitchell (eds), *The Politics of Electoral Systems* (2008). An analysis of the operation of electoral systems in 22 states that highlights the complex relationship between electoral systems and the larger political process.

LeDuc, L., R. Niemi and P. Norris (eds), *Comparing Democracies 3: Elections and Voting in the 21st Century* (2010). A wide-ranging collection of essays that examine the nature and health of electoral democracy and the significance of electoral systems.