Electoral Systems and Political Stability: A Comparative Analysis of Democracies and Authoritarian Regimes

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ABSTRACT

This article compares critically electoral systems and Authoritarian regimes, with a view to unravel the system that promotes stability and the needed development in a society. Documentary sources were utilized in this work. The paper argues that electoral systems are critical determinants of political stability, but their effects differ dramatically between democracies and authoritarian regimes. While proportional systems generally promote stability in heterogeneous democracies through inclusion, and majoritarian systems can stabilize homogeneous democracies through decisiveness, authoritarian regimes use electoral systems to consolidate power rather than foster genuine representation. Yet authoritarian elections can backfire when opposition mobilization outpaces repression. Thus, electoral systems should be seen as conditional instruments whose success depends on broader political, social, and institutional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The design of electoral systems is one of the most fundamental questions in the study of political institutions. Elections constitute the bedrock of democratic governance, yet their role extends beyond democracies into authoritarian and hybrid regimes where they serve to reinforce or disguise autocratic rule. The way votes are translated into seats, how citizens perceive the fairness of electoral outcomes, and how political elites strategize within these institutional frameworks all affect the stability of political systems (Powell, 2000; Norris, 2004; Taagepera & Shugart, 2017). Political stability understood broadly as the endurance of regimes, the predictability of governance, and the absence of violent conflict is not merely a function of socioeconomic development or cultural homogeneity. Institutional design, particularly electoral system design, plays a decisive role in shaping the incentives of both citizens and elites. Electoral systems determine whether political actors have reasons to accommodate rivals, to compromise, or to exclude them altogether. In turn, these incentives influence whether political transitions occur peacefully or violently, whether governments endure or collapse, and whether regimes are perceived as legitimate by their populations (Lijphart, 1999; Norris, 2008).

The comparative literature reveals divergent pathways. In democracies, proportional representation systems are often associated with inclusive governance, minority accommodation, and higher levels of legitimacy, which may contribute to stability, especially in deeply divided societies (Lijphart, 1999). However, the also risks excessive fragmentation and unstable coalition governments if party systems are weak or if thresholds are set too low (Gallagher, Laver, & Mair, 2011). Majoritarian or plurality systems such as First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), by contrast, are praised for delivering decisive outcomes and single-party cabinets, but they may systematically exclude minorities and smaller parties, potentially fueling discontent in heterogeneous societies (Reilly, 2001; Norris, 2014). Mixed systems seek to combine the virtues of both, with varying degrees of success.

In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the picture is different. While elections in such contexts are rarely free or fair, they serve critical regime-maintenance functions. They allow autocrats to co-opt elites by granting them controlled access to legislatures, distribute patronage and rents, monitor loyalty, and project a façade of legitimacy to both domestic populations and the international community (Schedler, 2002; Gandhi & Przeworski,

2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Yet elections can also destabilize authoritarian rule when they provide focal points for opposition mobilization, especially in times of economic decline or elite fragmentation (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011). Thus, the same institution elections can either bolster or undermine political stability depending on its design and context.

This duality raises several important questions. Do electoral systems that promote stability in democracies also function in the same way under authoritarian regimes? To what extent does the structure of an electoral system majoritarian, proportional, or mixed determine regime endurance and societal peace? And how should new democracies or fragile states design their electoral institutions to balance inclusiveness with governability? These questions are not merely academic but deeply practical. They bear on constitutional design in post-conflict societies such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and South Sudan; on democratic reform processes in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Indonesia; and on the durability of hybrid regimes such as Russia, Venezuela, and Singapore.

The significance of this topic lies in its global relevance. Since the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991), a wide range of countries have experimented with different electoral systems, often under international guidance. The outcomes have been mixed: while some countries such as South Africa and Germany have achieved relatively stable political systems through inclusive proportional representation frameworks, others such as Israel and Italy have struggled with governmental instability. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes from Mexico under the PRI to contemporary Russia have demonstrated how carefully engineered electoral systems can prolong autocratic stability, at least temporarily. Understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars, policymakers, and reform advocates seeking to foster durable democratic institutions and avoid the pitfalls of authoritarian resilience.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a comparative institutionalist approach, synthesizing insights from both qualitative case studies and quantitative cross-national research. It draws on seminal works by Lijphart (1999), Norris (2004, 2014), Taagepera and Shugart (2017), and Gandhi and Przeworski (2006), among others, to highlight general patterns. Empirical illustrations from democracies (United Kingdom, Germany, Israel, India, South Africa) and authoritarian regimes (Mexico under the PRI, Singapore, Russia, China, Nigeria's hybrid tendencies) provide concrete evidence of how electoral systems shape stability in different contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Any rigorous analysis of the relationship between electoral systems and political stability requires conceptual clarity. This section therefore defines the key concepts, reviews scholarly debates on their dimensions, and outlines the analytical scope of this paper.

Electoral Systems: Definitions and Typologies

An electoral system can be broadly defined as the set of rules that determine how votes cast in an election are translated into seats in a legislative body or positions in the executive (Norris, 2004; Reynolds, Reilly & Ellis, 2008).

Majoritarian and Plurality Systems

These systems prioritize decisiveness and accountability.

The most common example is First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), used in countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and India. In this system, the candidate with the most votes in a district wins, regardless of whether they achieve an absolute majority. Variants include the two-round system (France), alternative vote (Australia's lower house), and block vote.

Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

These systems aim to ensure that the share of seats corresponds closely to the share of votes received. The most common form is party-list PR, used in Israel, South Africa, and many European states. Variations include

openlist, closed-list, and single transferable vote (STV) (Ireland, Malta). PR often requires thresholds (e.g., 5% in Germany) to prevent excessive fragmentation.

Mixed Systems

These systems combine elements of majoritarian and proportional representation.

Examples include Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) in Germany and New Zealand, and Parallel Systems in Japan and Russia. The logic is to balance decisiveness with inclusiveness, though outcomes vary based on the precise formula.

Beyond these families, there are electoral engineering innovations such as ranked-choice voting, majority bonuses (Italy, Greece), and reserved seats for minorities (New Zealand Māori seats, Rwanda's gender quotas). Each design embodies trade-offs between governability and representativeness.

Political Stability: Dimensions and Debates

Political stability is a notoriously contested concept. In its simplest form, it refers to the absence of violence or disorder. However, scholars have identified multiple dimensions that go beyond mere absence of conflict (Hegre, Bernhard & Teorell, 2020).

Regime Durability

The most common operationalization in political science. A regime is considered stable if it avoids collapse, sudden authoritarian breakdown, or democratic reversal. Huntington (1991) described stability as the ability of political institutions to survive across generations. For example, Mexico between the period 1929–2000 demonstrated remarkable regime stability despite authoritarian characteristics.

Governmental Stability

Refers to the endurance of governments and the predictability of executive turnover. In parliamentary systems, coalition governments may change frequently without regime breakdown, creating government instability but not necessarily regime instability. Italy's frequent cabinet changes illustrate this dimension (Gallagher et al., 2011).

Policy Stability

Defined as the consistency and predictability of public policy. Democracies with proportional representation systems sometimes experience fragmented coalitions that produce policy volatility, whereas majoritarian systems may produce more consistent policy direction (Powell, 2000).

Societal Stability

Relates to levels of civil conflict, protests, and ethnic violence. Societal stability may depend heavily on whether electoral systems accommodate minorities and prevent exclusion (Horowitz, 1985).

Thus, political stability is not a single outcome but a multi-layered phenomenon. A system may display regime durability while experiencing government volatility (as in Israel), or it may demonstrate short-term stability while sowing seeds of long-term unrest (as in many authoritarian regimes).

Electoral Systems and Stability in Democracies

The relationship between electoral systems and political stability in democracies has been a central focus of comparative politics for decades. While all democracies rely on elections to legitimize authority, the specific institutional design of electoral rules has profound consequences for representation, government formation, and regime legitimacy. This section examines the causal mechanisms linking electoral systems to political stability in democracies, reviews theoretical arguments, and illustrates empirical evidence across different cases.

Theoretical Linkages in Democratic Contexts

Electoral systems in democracies affect stability through two primary mechanisms:

First, Elite Incentives and Party System Formation: Electoral rules shape how political elites organize into parties, strategize for office, and negotiate coalitions. According to Duverger's Law, plurality systems encourage two-party competition, while proportional systems encourage multiparty competition (Duverger, 1954). Party systems, in turn, influence government stability: two-party systems often yield decisive single-party governments, whereas multiparty systems foster coalition politics that may be fragile (Mainwaring, 1993).

Secondly, through Citizen Representation and Regime Legitimacy: Stability depends not only on whether governments endure but also on whether citizens accept outcomes as legitimate. Systems that consistently exclude minorities risk generating grievances and destabilization. By contrast, inclusive systems that mirror societal diversity often foster greater legitimacy (Lijphart, 1999). Thus, electoral systems embody a fundamental trade-off between governability (clear, decisive outcomes) and representativeness (inclusion of diverse groups). Political stability in democracies often hinges on how well a system balances these competing logics.

Majoritarian and Plurality Systems

First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) is the most prominent majoritarian system, used in countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and India. Its primary advantage is decisiveness: it usually produces singleparty governments with clear majorities, enabling stable policymaking and accountability.

Stability Through Decisive Outcomes

In the United Kingdom, FPTP has historically produced stable single-party governments. Even when coalition occurred (2010–2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition), the system reverted to majority government in subsequent elections. The clarity of outcomes promotes governmental stability and continuity (Bogdanor, 2011). In the United States, while presidentialism introduces additional complexity, FPTP legislative elections have entrenched a durable two-party system, providing regime durability despite frequent partisan polarization (Aldrich, 1995).

Risks of Exclusion

The stability benefits of FPTP depend on social homogeneity. In India, despite being the world's largest democracy, the FPTP system has often marginalized smaller regional or caste-based parties, generating grievances. The rise of coalition governments in the 1990s demonstrated that FPTP is not immune to fragmentation when social cleavages are highly diverse (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009). In Nigeria's First Republic (1960–1966), majoritarian rules fueled ethnic exclusion and regional polarization. The inability to inclusively represent Nigeria's plural society contributed to political breakdown and eventual military intervention (Suberu, 2001). Thus, majoritarian systems can promote stability in socially homogeneous or moderately plural societies, but they risk destabilization in deeply divided contexts.

Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

Proportional Representation (PR) systems, by contrast, are designed to maximize representativeness. They are widely used across Europe, Latin America, and Africa, particularly in post-conflict or ethnically divided societies.

Inclusiveness and Minority Representation

South Africa's post-apartheid democracy adopted a closed-list PR system to guarantee inclusion of all racial and ethnic groups. The system fostered legitimacy by ensuring that formerly excluded communities gained representation, thereby stabilizing the fragile transition (Reynolds, 1999). Belgium and Switzerland exemplify how Proportional Representation systems allow power-sharing in ethnically or linguistically divided societies, helping to prevent conflict escalation through institutionalized inclusion (Deschouwer, 2012).

Risks of Fragmentation

However, PR systems may lead to excessive party fragmentation, producing fragile coalitions. Israel's Knesset, with a low threshold of entry (currently 3.25%), has historically produced fragmented parliaments and unstable coalition governments, averaging less than two years per government between 1949 and 1999 (Hazan, 1997). Italy's First Republic (1946–1994) similarly suffered from frequent cabinet turnover under PR, with more than 50 governments in 48 years, undermining policy stability though not regime survival (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2007).

Balancing Stability and Inclusion

Some PR systems employ thresholds or majority bonuses to prevent instability. Germany's Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system requires a 5% threshold, which filters out very small parties while preserving proportionality. This has contributed to Germany's reputation for stable coalition governance (Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001).

Mixed Electoral Systems

Mixed systems attempt to combine the benefits of majoritarian and PR rules. Their impact on stability depends heavily on institutional details.

For example, The German case: Germany's MMP system is widely regarded as a model of balance. Half of the Bundestag is elected through single-member districts, ensuring local representation, while the other half is filled through PR lists, ensuring proportionality. The 5% threshold prevents extreme fragmentation. The result has been stable coalition governments with strong legitimacy since 1949, contributing to Germany's political durability (Roberts, 2003).

Another example is the case of Japan and Italy: Japan adopted a mixed system in 1994, combining singlemember districts with PR lists. The reform sought to reduce corruption and foster a two-party system. While the system initially strengthened competition, Japan has largely reverted to dominance by the Liberal Democratic Party, showing that cultural and historical factors interact with electoral rules (Stockwin, 2021). Italy on the other hand shifted to a mixed system in 1993 in response to instability under PR. The reforms created more decisive outcomes but did not fully resolve chronic instability, as underlying fragmentation persisted (Katz, 2001).

In another development, Nigeria's Presidential System employs a unique majoritarian presidential electoral rule requiring both a national majority and at least 25% of votes in two-thirds of states. This formula promotes stability by incentivizing broad, cross-regional coalitions (Suberu, 2001). While not a mixed legislative system per se, Nigeria's presidential formula exemplifies how electoral rules can be engineered to accommodate diversity and reduce the risk of exclusion.

Presidential vs. Parliamentary Systems

The stability effects of electoral systems also depend on whether the broader system is presidential or parliamentary. Parliamentary Democracies: Electoral rules directly affect government formation. PR tends to generate coalitions, while FPTP produces majorities. The link between rules and stability is therefore more immediate. On the other hand, Presidential Democracies: Electoral rules for legislatures interact with separately elected executives. Even under PR, presidents may provide stability through fixed terms, though divided government can lead to gridlock (Shugart & Carey, 1992). For example, Chile's binomial system under Pinochet's 1980 constitution artificially over-represented the right, producing gridlock but also stability until reforms in 2015 (Siavelis, 2005).

Electoral Systems and Stability in Authoritarian Regimes

Unlike democracies, where elections are primarily designed to ensure representation and accountability, authoritarian regimes use electoral systems for a different set of purposes. Elections in authoritarian or hybrid regimes are rarely free or fair; instead, they function as instruments of regime control, elite management, and legitimacy projection. Electoral systems in these contexts are not simply technical rules for converting votes into

seats but mechanisms of authoritarian governance. This section examines how authoritarian regimes employ electoral systems to sustain political stability, the mechanisms through which elections stabilize or destabilize authoritarian rule, and empirical illustrations from a variety of cases.

Functions of Elections in Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian elections serve at least four distinct functions: Firstly, Legitimation Elections project an image of popular consent, both domestically and internationally. Even sham elections allow regimes to claim that they govern with the support of the people. For example, Egypt under Hosni Mubarak routinely held multiparty elections that were tightly controlled but used as symbols of legitimacy to international donors and domestic audiences (Blaydes, 2011).

Secondly, Elite Co-optation: Legislatures and local councils elected under authoritarian rules serve as arenas for distributing patronage and positions to elites. By granting elites controlled access to office, authoritarian rulers reduce incentives for rebellion. The People's Republic of China, for instance, allows limited village elections that co-opt local leaders while maintaining strict control over national power (O'Brien & Li, 2006).

Thirdly, Opposition Management: Electoral systems are designed to fragment opposition or channel dissent into harmless competition. For example, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico engineered rules that allowed opposition parties to win limited seats, thereby creating an appearance of pluralism while preventing real threats (Magar, 2018).

Lastly, Information Gathering: Elections provide regimes with valuable data about popular discontent and the strength of opposition. Even when manipulated, electoral results can signal regions of unrest or declining support (Schedler, 2002). Thus, elections in authoritarian regimes are not meaningless rituals but functional institutions that help sustain authoritarian stability at least under certain conditions.

Electoral Systems as Tools of Authoritarian Control

Authoritarian regimes carefully design electoral systems to achieve stability.

Majoritarian Systems in Authoritarian Contexts

Some regimes employ winner-takes-all rules to ensure dominance by the ruling party.

In Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, FPTP was used to marginalize opposition parties and inflate ZANU-PF's seat share even when its vote share declined. By controlling district boundaries and using a plurality system, Mugabe secured parliamentary dominance long after losing popular legitimacy (LeBas, 2006).

Proportional Representation in Authoritarian Contexts

Other regimes use PR systems to include multiple parties while maintaining dominance. Russia under Vladimir Putin illustrates this: reforms in 2007 shifted the Duma entirely to PR with a 7% threshold. While this created a façade of multiparty competition, the threshold and state dominance ensured the overwhelming supremacy of United Russia. Smaller loyalist parties were allowed to survive to create an appearance of pluralism (Hale, 2010). PR can also be used to fragment opposition: multiple small opposition parties may win seats but lack the ability to challenge the ruling elite collectively.

Mixed Systems as Hybrid Mechanisms

Mixed systems are particularly common in hybrid regimes. They allow authoritarian rulers to blend inclusiveness and control. Mexico under the PRI introduced proportional representation seats in the 1970s to placate growing opposition. The reform allowed parties like the PAN and PRD to enter Congress, reducing their incentive to mobilize in the streets. This inclusion stabilized the regime temporarily, though ultimately it opened space for democratization in the 1990s (Magar, 2018). Similarly, Singapore combines single-member districts with multimember "Group Representation Constituencies" (GRCs) requiring multi-ethnic teams. This system

reinforces the dominance of the People's Action Party (PAP) while presenting an inclusive face (Rodan, 2004). Authoritarian regimes thus adopt a variety of electoral system designs, often engineered with precision to balance control with the appearance of competition.

Mechanisms Linking Electoral Systems and Authoritarian Stability

Authoritarian electoral systems promote stability through several interconnected mechanisms: Firstly, Elite Bargaining and Distribution: Electoral systems allocate seats, patronage, and rents to elites. When managed effectively, this reduces elite defection and coup risks. Gandhi and Przeworski (2006) argue that legislatures in authoritarian regimes serve as "arenas for co-optation." For example, in Jordan, parliamentary elections allow the monarchy to distribute favors to loyal tribal leaders, maintaining elite cohesion.

Secondly, Opposition Fragmentation and Containment: By manipulating thresholds or districting, regimes prevent opposition unity. Russia's 7% threshold in the 2007 PR system effectively eliminated smaller opposition groups, ensuring United Russia's dominance. Similarly, in Egypt, gerrymandered districts limited the Muslim Brotherhood's representation.

Thirdly, Legitimacy through Ritualized Participation: Elections provide citizens with a sense of participation, however limited. This ritual of voting fosters a perception of normalcy and may reduce the likelihood of revolt. For example, in Singapore, high voter turnout in managed elections reinforces the PAP's narrative of consensual rule (Mutalib, 2000).

Lastly, Monitoring Dissent: Elections serve as a barometer of public sentiment. Even in heavily rigged contexts, declining turnout or increased votes for opposition can signal unrest. Autocrats use this information to adjust strategies. For instance, the Chinese Communist Party monitors village election outcomes to detect corruption and dissatisfaction at the grassroots level (O'Brien & Han, 2009). Despite their stabilizing functions, elections can also undermine authoritarian regimes. Electoral systems may inadvertently empower the opposition or create moments of mass mobilization.

Electoral Revolutions

In the early 2000s, a wave of "electoral revolutions" swept Eastern Europe and post-Soviet states. Manipulated elections became focal points for opposition mobilization. Serbia (2000): Fraudulent presidential elections galvanized protests that forced Slobodan Milošević from power. Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004): Manipulated presidential elections triggered mass protests, leading to a re-run that the opposition won. In these cases, authoritarian elections became moments of vulnerability rather than stability.

Opposition Unity under PR

While PR often fragments opposition, under certain conditions it can facilitate unity. In Chile's transition (1988–1990), opposition parties united under PR electoral rules to challenge Pinochet, eventually forcing a transition to democracy.

Legitimacy Backfires

Regimes that invite international observers may find their legitimacy claims undermined if fraud is exposed. For example, Kenya's 2007 elections, though in a hybrid regime, became a trigger for violent unrest after fraud was widely documented (Cheeseman, 2008).

Thus, authoritarian electoral systems are double-edged swords: they can stabilize regimes, but under certain conditions they open avenues for destabilization and democratic transition.

Case Studies

Mexico under the PRI

For seven decades, Mexico's PRI regime-maintained stability through a carefully managed mixed system. Opposition parties were granted limited representation through PR, reducing incentives for rebellion. However, as opposition strength grew in the 1990s, the system could no longer contain demands for change, leading to democratic transition in 2000 (Magar, 2018).

Russia under Putin

Russia has shifted between mixed and PR systems, each time designed to consolidate United Russia's dominance. The 2007 PR reform with a 7% threshold eliminated independent opposition parties. Elections reinforce regime durability but have also become focal points for protest (e.g., 2011–2012 demonstrations). Stability has been maintained largely through repression alongside institutional manipulation (Gel'man, 2015).

China's Village Elections

Since the 1980s, China has experimented with competitive village-level elections. While limited in scope, these elections provide information, co-opt local elites, and reduce grievances. They have not challenged national authoritarian stability but have improved governance at the grassroots (O'Brien & Li, 2006).

Comparative Case Studies: Democracies vs. Authoritarian Regimes

This section contrasts four pairs of cases: United Kingdom vs. Singapore, South Africa vs. Russia, Nigeria vs. Mexico, and India vs. China (local elections). Each pairing highlights similarities in electoral systems but divergent consequences for stability due to regime type.

United Kingdom vs. Singapore

The United Kingdom: Stability through Plurality

The United Kingdom employs a First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system for parliamentary elections. This majoritarian system consistently produces single-party governments, often with stable parliamentary majorities. While disproportional in translating votes into seats, FPTP contributes to clarity of responsibility and long-term regime stability (Bogdanor, 2011). For example, the Conservative Party won an outright majority in 2019 with just 43.6% of the vote, illustrating the seat bonus of FPTP. Political stability in the UK is reinforced by strong institutions, rule of law, and elite acceptance of electoral rules. Even when the system produces perceived distortions (e.g., the Liberal Democrats securing just 11 seats in 2019 despite 11.5% of the vote), losers generally accept results, preventing systemic instability. Criticism exists about underrepresentation, but the system has provided durable stability for over a century.

Singapore: Stability through Managed Inclusion

Singapore uses a mixed system combining single-member constituencies with multi-member Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), where candidates must run in teams including members of different ethnic groups. While formally competitive, elections are tilted heavily in favor of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) through districting, media control, and constraints on opposition. Like the UK, Singapore achieves high stability through decisive outcomes. However, unlike the UK, this stability is based less on representation and more on institutional engineering and authoritarian control. Elections legitimize the PAP domestically and internationally, while GRCs allow the regime to claim inclusiveness. Yet the lack of genuine competition means opposition voices remain weak (Rodan, 2004).

South Africa vs. Russia

South Africa: Stability through Inclusive PR

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has used a closed-list proportional representation system with no electoral threshold. This was chosen deliberately to ensure inclusiveness in a divided society. The African

National Congress (ANC) has consistently won majorities, but smaller parties are represented in parliament, reducing the risk of exclusion.

This inclusive PR system contributed to stability during the democratic transition, reassuring minority communities that they would have representation. It has also allowed for peaceful alternation at provincial and municipal levels, though nationally the ANC has remained dominant. Challenges of corruption, inequality, and declining ANC popularity exist, but the electoral system has prevented systemic instability in a deeply divided country (Southall, 2014).

Russia: Stability through Manipulated PR

In contrast, Russia shifted in 2007 to a pure PR system with a 7% threshold, later adjusted to 5%. While PR in democracies promotes inclusiveness, in Russia it has been manipulated to ensure United Russia's dominance. Smaller opposition parties are excluded, and only regime-friendly parties survive. The result is managed stability: elections appear competitive but are heavily skewed. This has ensured the endurance of Putin's regime but has also produced periodic crises when electoral manipulation became too blatant, such as the 2011–2012 protests after fraudulent Duma elections (Gel'man, 2015).

Nigeria vs. Mexico

Nigeria: Fragile Stability under Plurality

Nigeria employs a plurality (FPTP) electoral system for legislative elections and a modified two-round system for presidential elections. In theory, FPTP produces clear outcomes, but in practice it has fueled zero-sum politics in an ethnically divided society. Electoral competition is intensely contested along ethnic and regional lines, and losers often perceive exclusion. This has contributed to instability: electoral violence, post-election crises, and legitimacy deficits. For example, the 2011 presidential elections sparked violence that killed over 800 people (Suberu, 2019). Nigeria's plurality system amplifies exclusion in a fragmented polity, undermining long-term stability.

Mexico: Stability through Engineered Mixed System

During its authoritarian period (1929–2000), Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained dominance through a mixed electoral system. The system allowed some proportional representation seats to opposition parties, granting them controlled representation while ensuring PRI hegemony. This system stabilized the regime by reducing opposition incentives to revolt while projecting pluralism. However, by the 1990s, opposition strength grew, and the mixed system unintentionally facilitated democratization by institutionalizing multiparty competition (Magar, 2018).

India vs. China (Local Elections)

India: Stability through Democratic Plurality

India uses a plurality FPTP system for national and state elections. Despite frequent fragmentation, coalition governments, and political violence in some regions, the system has provided remarkable stability in the world's largest democracy. Regular alternation of power, including peaceful transfers between dominant parties (Congress, BJP, regional coalitions), illustrates resilience (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009). FPTP simplifies governance in a vast and diverse country, though it underrepresents smaller parties nationally. The system has nevertheless endured since independence, contributing to regime stability.

China: Stability through Controlled Local Elections

Since the 1980s, China has allowed village-level direct elections. These elections are competitive but limited: candidates must often be approved by the Communist Party, and higher-level offices remain closed. The purpose is to improve governance, reduce corruption, and co-opt local elites while preventing real political challenge. These local elections enhance stability by addressing grievances and channeling participation without

threatening national control (O'Brien & Han, 2009). They represent authoritarian adaptation: limited democratization at the grassroots to preserve regime dominance.

Cross-National Findings

Comparative studies confirm that electoral systems influence democratic stability, though effects are conditional.

Lijphart (1999), in his study of 36 democracies, finds that consensus democracies (PR systems with powersharing) are more stable in plural societies, while majoritarian systems perform better in homogeneous contexts.

Powell (2000) emphasizes the trade-off between representation and accountability, showing that PR enhances inclusiveness but can reduce decisiveness.

Norris (2008, 2014) finds that PR systems are associated with higher levels of legitimacy and citizen satisfaction, though not necessarily with government durability.

Hegre et al. (2020) demonstrate statistically that PR systems reduce the likelihood of civil conflict in divided societies but increase risks of government turnover.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The comparative analysis of electoral systems and political stability across democracies and authoritarian regimes reveals a paradox. On one hand, electoral systems are technical arrangements designed to translate votes into seats. On the other hand, they are deeply political instruments that shape legitimacy, representation, and stability. The same electoral formula majoritarian, proportional, or mixed can produce vastly different outcomes depending on the surrounding regime context. This concluding section draws together the major insights of the study and outlines policy implications for institutional design, democratic consolidation, and authoritarian resilience.

Across the United Kingdom, Singapore, South Africa, Russia, Nigeria, and Mexico, we observe that electoral systems serve different purposes in different regimes. In democracies, they are expected to balance inclusiveness with governability, enabling citizens to accept outcomes even when disappointed. In authoritarian regimes, they are tools of elite manipulation and regime survival, providing a veneer of legitimacy without genuine competition. In democracies, stability refers to legitimacy and peaceful alternation of power. Citizens and elites accept the rules, even amid disputes. In authoritarian regimes, stability refers to regime durability and elite control. Elections may stabilize the ruling party, but legitimacy is fragile and often manufactured. This distinction explains why systems that appear stable in authoritarian contexts (e.g., Russia, Singapore) can unravel quickly once legitimacy is challenged, whereas democracies, even amid turbulence (e.g., Nigeria), often have built-in pathways for adjustment.

There is no universal "best" electoral system for democracies. Instead, rules must be tailored to societal divisions, party systems, and institutional strength. Fragmented societies (e.g., South Africa, Nigeria) benefit from PR or mixed systems that ensure minority inclusion. FPTP in such contexts risks exclusion and instability. Homogeneous societies (e.g., UK, Canada) may sustain majoritarian systems without serious legitimacy loss, as citizens prioritize clarity and governability. Hybrid systems, such as Germany's mixed-member proportional (MMP), provide useful lessons. They combine proportionality with decisive governance, balancing pluralism and stability. For fragile democracies, such systems may offer a middle ground, avoiding the extremes of fragmentation or exclusion.

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