

# Political science

with Professor André Blais  
and Professor Damien Bol

## Talking points

### Knowledge

1. What is political science?
2. What is an electoral system?

### Comprehension

3. Why is it challenging to measure the effects of different electoral systems?
4. What are some advantages and disadvantages of proportional representation (PR) and first past the post (FPTP) systems? Can you think of any further pros and cons not mentioned in the article?

### Application

5. André mentions that electoral systems that allow voters to cast votes for more than one party may help combat polarisation. Why do you think this might be?
6. What do you think are some of the specific reasons that countries use different electoral systems? Think about countries you are familiar with in your answer.

### Analysis

7. Why do you think that FPTP electoral systems tend to have fewer parties running for election than PR systems? Why do you think voter turnout might be higher in systems with more parties?

### Evaluation

8. Many people are concerned that populations around the world are becoming increasingly polarised and losing faith in democratic processes. Why do you think this might be the case, and how might this trend be combatted? Use examples from your own country or other countries in your answer.
9. Many important election and referendum results in recent years have been unexpected; even the most sophisticated models have failed to accurately predict voting outcomes. Why do you think this is? How might further research or new technologies help to make predictions more accurate?

## Activity

To assess how different systems can affect voting patterns and outcomes, André and Damien run experiments where volunteers can vote on an issue under different electoral systems.

Design a hypothetical issue with a number of 'candidates' to vote for. For example:

- Your school is asking students to vote for a new dessert in the school cafeteria.
- Your school is asking students to vote on new sports equipment.
- Your local council is asking citizens to vote on what to do with an unused plot of land.

These scenarios can use FPTP as only a single candidate can win. For an added challenge, design a scenario that could be supported by PR – for instance, the number of votes that any dessert receives determines how frequently it will be served.

Now, choose two variations in electoral systems to test. For example:

- Single-vote FPTP – everyone votes for their favourite candidate (option), and the most popular wins.
- Two-vote FPTP – everyone votes for their favourite and second favourite candidate. 'Favourite' votes award candidates 2 points and 'second favourite' votes award candidates 1 point. The candidate with the most points wins.
- Think of your own variations.

Divide your class into two groups. Get one half to vote using one system, and the other to vote using the other system (both should do so anonymously).

Note: after both groups have voted, you could then swap the groups, so they vote again using the other system. This would produce more data points and mean that everybody has voted under each system, which may reduce the chance of other variables influencing results. However, think about how voting under a second system, having already experienced the first, might influence students' voting patterns.

Collect and tally all votes:

- Does the winning 'candidate' change depending on which system you use?
- Which other factors (e.g., different group preferences due to small sample size) might have had an impact?
- Are there any polarising candidates (that people either love or hate), and does their election success vary depending on the system used?
- Which system do you think is fairer for your specific scenario? Can you think of scenarios where you would think the other system would be fairer?

## More resources

- Damien's website includes information on his projects and selected publications, including research into voter turnout, polarisation and attitudes to democracy: [www.damienbol.eu/research.html](http://www.damienbol.eu/research.html)
- This video from TED-Ed addresses the question 'which voting system is the best?' through a hypothetical Mars-based scenario:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaxVCsnox\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaxVCsnox_4)

- This Testbook webpage explains the differences between PR and FPTP voting systems: [testbook.com/key-differences/difference-between-first-past-the-post-and-proportional-representation](https://testbook.com/key-differences/difference-between-first-past-the-post-and-proportional-representation)
- To learn more about what can happen after elections, read Dr Svitlana Chernykh's Futurum article on post-election protests: [www.futurumcareers.com/why-do-post-election-protests-occur](https://www.futurumcareers.com/why-do-post-election-protests-occur)