Is it high time for India to switch over to the Proportional Representation (PR) method of elections?

by

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Abstract

A large number of democratic countries today have adopted the Proportional Representation (PR) method of election. There is a general consensus that the PR method is fairer than the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) method of election currently in vogue in India. The paper discusses the three main variants of the PR method and argues for the introduction of PR method of election for both the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha.

1. Introduction

General elections to the *Lok Sabha* and *Vidhan Sabha* in India are conducted currently based on the **'First-Past-the-Post' (FPTP)** method. Under this method whosoever, amongst the contesting candidates, gets the highest number of votes is declared elected. It follows 'the rule of the simple majority' and is often described as "the-winner-takes-all" system of elections.

If the votes get divided between several candidates, then a candidate may get elected to the *Lok Sabha* or the *Vidhan Sabha* even with twenty-five (25) per cent of votes. Such an elected candidate cannot, however, claim to truly represent his/her constituency since the majority of the voters (75%) did not vote for him/her. In such cases, moreover, the larger number of votes would appear to have gone waste as they failed to influence the election results.

A perusal of the Lok Sabha elections (2019) shows that out of the 543 elected members, only 98 members had obtained more than fifty (50) per cent of votes. The Election Commission of India has yet to bring out a similar analysis for the Lok Sabha elections, 2024. Several political parties in the past including the erstwhile Bhartiya Jan Sangh, and in recent years the CPI (M) and the AAM Party have argued for adoption of the PR system. Both the CPI (M) and the AAM Party promised to implement the PR system in their Lok Sabha (2014) election manifesto if they would form the government.

The Proportional Representation (PR) method of election, as an alternative to the FPTP method, is discussed below in Section 2. Section 3, 4 and 5 dwell on the main variants of the PR method, namely (a) the Preferential PR method, (b) the Closed Party-List PR method and (c) the Open Party -List PR method. Section 6, on the other hand, chronicles the process of election to the Rajya Sabha, which is based on the PR method. Finally, Section 7. concludes with some final remarks.

2. Proportional Representation (PR) method

Under the PR method of election, seats to the state/ national legislative assembly are distributed <u>in proportion to the votes</u> cast in favour of each party or candidates. Thomas Hare (1806-1891), a lawyer by profession, insisted on reforming the FPTP method of election prevalent in Great Britain by switching over to Proportional Representation (PR) method of election. It was supported by Hare's contemporary - the eminent British political philosopher - John Stuart Mill.

A large number of democratic countries today have adopted the PR method of election for their state/ national assemblies, which includes Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, European Union, Finland, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sri Lanka, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey.

2.1 Hypothetical results of the Lok Sabha election (2024), if PR method was followed:

Although India does not follow the PR method of election, attempts have been made in recent years to examine the possible outcome of the Lok Sabha election (2024) if India had followed the PR method (*Rangarajan, 2024*). Table 1. below provides the election results to the Lok Sabha election (2024), both based on the extant FPTP method and the hypothetical case of the PR method.

Table 1. Actual and Hypothetical results of the Lok Sabha election (2024)

S.No.	Political Parties	% Vote Share (x) @	Seats under the FPTP method@	Seats that would have been won under the PR method (543*x/100) #
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1.	BJP	36.56	240	**199**
2.	INC	21.96	99	**119**
3.	SP	4.58	37	**25**
4.	AITC	4.37	29	**24**
5.	YSRCP	2.06	4	**11**
6.	BSP	2.04	0	**11**
7.	TDP	1.98	16	**10**
8.	DMK	1.82	22	**10**
9.	CPI (M)	1.76	4	**9**
10.	RJD	1.57	4	**9**
16.	Others	21.3	88	**116**
	Total	100	543	543
Source: @ Election Commission of India (https://results.eci.gov.in dt. 7.1.2025). # Author's calculation.				

A perusal of Table 1. above would show that the seats won by each political party in the Lok Sabha election (2024) was not in sync with the share of votes received by them. This becomes clear if the figures in column (3) are compared with the figures in column (4). The hypothetical distribution of seats in proportion to the votes by each party is shown in column (5). Since formation of government in a democracy is the game of numbers, India

may have witnessed a different kind of coalition politics, and perhaps a different outcome as a result of the PR method of election.

It is, at the same time, important to recognize that there are different kinds of PR methods of election. These may broadly be grouped in the following three categories: (a) the Preferential PR method, (b) the Closed Party-List method and (c) the Open Party-List method. A brief description of these methods is given below.

3. Preferential PR method

Under the Preferential PR method, elections take place <u>for each constituency</u>. Whether as candidates of political parties or as independent candidates, individuals contest the elections from their respective constituencies. In this respect, it is similar to elections under the FPTP method. However, unlike the FPTP method, **no candidate** is declared elected unless he/she crosses the threshold number, that is, more than fifty (50) per cent of the total votes.

The **voters,** on the other hand, are required <u>to rank the different party candidates</u> or <u>the independent candidates</u> in order of their preference - from the most preferred to the least preferred candidate (BOX 1). In the absence of ranking a minimum number of candidates, let us say four or five candidates, the vote is declared invalid.

BOX 1.
Ballot Paper: Preferential PR method

The significance of <u>ranking the candidates</u> as the first preference, the second preference, the third preference and so on (i.e., 1,2,3,4... against the empty box of every candidate) - is soon realised when no candidate is able to cross the threshold number, that is, more than fifty (50) per cent of votes in the first round of counting. In that case, a second round of counting takes place by eliminating the candidate with the least number of votes and

transferring the voters' second preference candidates marked on those ballot papers to the intended candidates as his/her first preference vote.

If no candidate is able to cross the threshold mark even in the second round of counting, then a third round of counting takes place by eliminating the candidate with the least votes and transferring the voters' second preference votes on those ballot papers to the intended candidates and see if any of the remaining candidates has crossed the threshold mark. This process is continued until a candidate is elected. Elections to the *House of Representatives* in Australia, for instance, is conducted based on this method (may go to the Link: https://youtu.be/W1MsyKazjRA?si=fD_Nzp_q8h94mFG7).

Three distinguishing features, therefore, set the Preferential PR method apart from the FPTP method, namely,

a. the necessity of a candidate to obtain more than 50% of votes to be declared elected,
b. the necessity of every voter to rank the candidates failing which his/her vote is declared invalid,
c. the necessity of counting votes in several rounds until a candidate is found to have crossed the threshold mark > 50% of the total votes cast.

4. Closed Party-List PR method

Under the Closed Party-List PR method, the voters cast their vote **for the multi-member constituency or for the full house** rather than for a single representative. This distinction differentiates the Closed Party-List PR method from the Preferential PR method. Apportionment of seats in the legislative body - amongst the political parties - is done based on the per cent share of votes received by each party. If a political party gets thirty (30) per cent of votes for a house comprising 100 seats, then it has a claim on 30 seats.

The political parties, in turn, are required to provide **the list of their candidates** in order of their importance to their parties as their first choice, second choice, third choice and so on, ahead of the elections. Accordingly, the ballot paper shows the order of the candidates against the party symbol of each party. Assuming further that the political party contested 60 seats, then the candidates figuring from one to thirty (30) from the top in the Party-List only can get elected.

In the process of allocating seats to the political parties, however, complications may arise from the typical distribution of votes as well the number of seats to be filled in. This issue is overcome by using the **D'Hondt Rule** or the *Highest Average Rule*. According to this rule, seats to each party is allocated in turn through iteration as explained below.

The first seat is allocated to the party with the highest average number of votes by dividing its total number of votes by number (1). This is followed by dividing the remainder with (1+1=2) and so on, as shown in Table 2. In the next round, the highest average number of votes for all the parties is once again compared, and the next seat is allocated to the party with the highest number of votes.

Table 2. Distribution of five (5) seats under the Highest Average (D'Hondt) method

Political Parties	Total Votes Received	% share of Votes	/1	/2	/3	/4	Seats Won
A	40000	20	40000	20000	6667	1667	One seat
B	70000	36	70000	35000	11,667	2917	Two seats
C	38000	19	38000	19000	6333	1584	One seat
D	48000	25	28000	14000	4667	1167	One seat
	1,96,000	100					

5. Open Party-List PR method

The Closed Party-List PR method <u>does not give voters the freedom to choose the candidates from the party concerned</u> since the ranking of candidates in the Party-List is pre-decided by the political parties. The Open Party-List PR method overcomes this limitation. *The voters in the Open Party-List method have the choice to cast their vote above the line for the party of their choice or below the line for individual candidates by ranking them* (Box 2.).

Box 2. Ballot Paper of Open-List PR method of Elections

	Vote for the Party of your choice			
	Party-A	Party-B	Party-C	Party-D
		OR		
	1	1	1	1
Rank the Candidates	2	2	2	2
	3	3	3	3
	4	4	4	4
		5	5	5
		6		6
		7		7

If the voter decides to vote for the party of his/her choice, then he/she is required to cast his/her vote to one party without ranking. The apportionment of seats is done on the same principle as under the Closed Party-List method, that is, based on the per cent share of votes won by each party.

If, however, the voter votes for the candidate by ranking them, then each candidate has to cross the threshold number, that is, more than fifty (50) per cent of votes or *the required quota of votes* to win a seat. The calculation of the required quota of votes is done based on the methodology described below.

5.1 *Calculation of the threshold number (quota) of votes:*

In the case of a **single member constituency**, that is, electing one representative from each constituency, the threshold number (quota) of votes (>50%) under the PR method works out (to be equal to) = (Total number of votes /2 +1 vote). This may also be written as:

$$\text{Quota of votes} = \{\text{Total number of votes} / 1 \text{seat} + 1 \text{seat}\} + 1 \text{vote}\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots (i)$$

In the case of **two-member constituency**, the quota of votes works out to:

$$\text{Quota of votes} = \{\text{Total number of votes} / 2 \text{ seats} + 1 \text{ seat}\} + 1 \text{ vote}\dots\dots\dots (ii)$$

The quota of votes in a **multi-member constituency,** similarly, may be found out by dividing the total number of votes by the total number of seats to be allocated +1seat and adding one (1) vote. In order to account for the fractional values, moreover, the rule becomes:

$$\text{Quota of votes} = \{\text{Total number of votes} * 100 / \text{number of seats} + 1 \text{ seat}\} + 1 \text{ vote}\dots\dots (iii)$$

The above method to find out <u>the threshold number of votes</u> to win a seat in a multi-member constituency is also known as the **Droop's Quota** and is generally preferred over other approaches to calculate the threshold number (quota) of votes.

5.2 Preferential voting and election through exclusion:

Assuming further that no candidate is able to cross the quota of votes necessary to win a seat, then a second round of counting takes place. The candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated and the second preference of the voters on his/her ballot paper is transferred to the intended candidates as the first preference vote. Whosoever crosses the quota of votes in the second round of counting – *with the addition of second preference vote* - is declared the winner. If no one crosses the threshold mark in the second round, then a third round of counting takes place and so on until a candidate gets elected.

5.3. Transfer of Surplus Votes:

Furthermore, in the case of a candidate exceeding the quota of votes, then his/her surplus votes are transferred to the candidate of his own party - short of votes - based on the following ratio:

$$\textit{Total number of surplus votes/Total votes received}\dots\dots\dots\dots\dots (iv)$$

As such, if the surplus votes are 200 and the total votes received are 2000, then only 20 votes would be transferred against 200 surplus votes.

6. Election of members to the Rajya Sabha in India

The members of the Rajya Sabha are elected by the electoral college *comprising the members of the Vidhan Sabha* from each State/Union Territory. Election of the members of the Rajya Sabha is, therefore, indirect. Each State/Union Territory is, moreover, considered as a single **multi-member constituency** from where a given number of members of the Rajya Sabha have to be elected. Schedule 4 of the Constitution of India provides the allotted number of seats to the Rajya Sabha, from each State/Union Territory.

Voting is done *based on ranking of candidates*, and each candidate is required to cross the **quota of votes.** The calculation of quota of votes is done following the Droop's Quota method, that is, following the rule mentioned above:

Quota of votes = {Total number of votes*100/number of seats+1seat} +1vote...... (iii)

In the case of candidates short of votes in the first round of counting, second round of counting takes place accounting for the second preference votes based on the exclusion method. In case of surplus votes with some candidates, his/her surplus votes are transferred to the candidate of his/her own party at the worked-out ratio.

Since one-third of the members of Rajya Sabha retire every two years, election to only one-third of the total number of seats takes place at a time. Since U.P., for instance, has been allotted 31 seats, elections for members to the Rajya Sabha takes place in the manner of (10+10+11 seats). As U.P. has 403 members in the Vidhan Sabha, the quota of votes based on the Droop's Quota rule for U.P., when eleven members have to be elected, works out to:

[403*100/11 +1 vote = **3665 votes**].

7. Conclusion

There is a general consensus that the PR method of election is fairer than the FPTP method. The issue of *'which method to adopt for holding the general elections in the country'* came up for discussion in the Constituent Assembly (1946-1949). Most members of the Constituent Assembly were, however, concerned about the evil of the *'Separate Electorate System'* introduced in India by the ruling British elite and its bureaucracy. Getting rid of it was the priority of the Constitution makers. It has, therefore, been argued that the FPTP method got accepted in India for holding the General Elections, as prevalent in Great Britain, by default and has continued since then.

The PR method has, nonetheless, been adopted for electing the members of the Rajya Sabha - which came into existence later in April 1952. A similar system may be envisaged for (direct) election of Lok Sabha members. **Every state may be considered as a multi member constituency**, and the voters given the choice to vote either for the party or for the candidates by ranking them as under the *Open Party-List PR method*. Elections to the Vidhan Sabhas likewise may also be conducted on the same principle.

The PR method of elections would make the political parties go beyond their "vote banks" for increasing their chances of winning the election by appealing also to the less inclined voters outside their "vote banks". In the absence second/third preference votes, it would be difficult normally for candidates to cross the threshold number (>50%) of votes. At the same time, given the diverse society as that of India and the deep-rooted historical prejudices of caste and religion, it would be difficult to predict for sure how will this play out if PR method of elections is introduced in India.

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