Chapter Ten Short Answer (Answers Below)

1. Explain the significance of the “filtering effect” of an electoral system.

2. Explain the relationship between accessibility and incorruptibility in the voting process.

3. Explain the electoral trade-off between representation and proportionality.

4. Explain the argument(s) in favour of fixed-term elections.

5. Compare and contrast mixed-member proportional and parallel electoral systems.

Answers

1. Electoral systems convert votes into legislative seats. Because no electoral system perfectly represents the preferences of voters, it is useful to be able to speak of a filtering effect. The filtering effect is the difference between the number of parties running electoral candidates and the number of parties electing legislative members. Measuring the filtering effect of an electoral system involves calculating the effective number of electoral parties (factoring in both the absolute number of parties and their share of the vote) and the effective number of legislative parties (again, factoring in both the number of parties and the relative number of seats they win).
2. Free and fair elections must be both accessible and incorruptible. Accessibility is key because of the principle of universal suffrage. If the legitimacy of a government depends on the claim that it has the support of the people, then all those eligible to vote must have a real opportunity to participate in the voting process. This tends to produce a substantial logistic expansion, as more voting opportunities are added to the process. Incorruptibility speaks to the issue of accuracy. Voters must be free to choose, and the choices they make must not be subject to outside manipulation. This can produce moments of tension. For example, voters require the privacy to vote without fear of oversight (or in some circumstances, repercussion or consequences), yet a degree of supervision is necessary to prevent corruption (e.g., ballot stuffing) or coercion. The increased complexity of voting processes seeking to maximize accessibility can also open up new opportunities for corruption, as recent experiences with electronic voting suggest.
3. In pluralist systems, particularly systems producing a single member per district, there is a clear, personal, relationship of representation. Constituents of a district know which politician represents them, and can approach them directly; in fact, this is the fundamental representational task of the member. The downside to such arrangements is that there is no guarantee that the person elected in the district reflects the representational choice of the bulk of the electorate; while all voters have an identifiable representative, there is no guarantee that it is someone they want representing them. In pluralist systems, the distribution of seats more accurately reflects voter preferences, but there typically isn’t the direct personal connection of pluralist approaches. The representational dynamic is typically undertaken by parties. While a voter can be more confident that their electoral preferences have been reflected in electoral outcomes (i.e., their party is more likely to have won seats), the connection between the voter and those in the legislature is mediated by the corporate institution of the party.
4. In the absence of fixed-term elections, calling an election is typically at the discretion of the head of government, subject to (usually formal) approval of the head of state. This gives the head of government tremendous influence over the outcome of the election, particularly when they have a majority. Under such conditions, a head of government can time the election so as to favour his or her own party, for example, following a period in which a number of popular policies have been introduced, or when the opposition faces some sort of detriment. When this option is removed, and elections are fixed, it introduces a degree of predictability into the electoral cycle (although for politicians, it increases the degree of chance, since they have only limited control of the circumstances that may be relevant to their electoral success.
5. Both mixed-member and parallel electoral systems divide seats into those which will be allocated by constituency and those which will be allocated proportionately. They differ on the basis of proportional distribution. The mixed-member system reserves the second group of seats to offset inaccuracies in the constituency distribution. In other words, if the distribution of constituency based seats deviates from the distribution of the popular vote, seats from the proportional side of the ticket will be allocated to correct the inaccuracies. In contrast, parallel systems allocate the second pool of seats according to strict proportionality. While this does include an element of proportionality, it does not result in a strictly proportional outcome.