

Indirect STV Election: A Voting System for South Africa

Jason Eisner

University of Cape Town
Affiliate, ANC Claremont Branch

“Winner take all” electoral systems are not fully representative. Unfortunately, the ANC’s proposed system of proportional representation is not much better. Because it ensconces party politics, it is only slightly more representative, and poses a serious threat to accountability.

Many modern students of democracy favor proportional representation through the Single Transferable Vote (STV). In countries with high illiteracy, however, this system may be unworkable.

This paper proposes a practical modification of STV. In the modified system, each citizen votes for only one candidate. Voters need not specify their second, third, and fourth choices. Instead, each *candidate* specifies his or her second, third, and fourth choices. The modified system is no more difficult for voters than current proposals — and it provides virtually all the benefits of STV, together with some new ones.

Motivation and Background

Democratic principles and voting systems

Why worry about voting systems at all? How could one system be “more democratic” than another?

The aim of democracy is simply to carry out the wishes of the people. All citizens must have equal say in the decisions of their government. This is the principle of *representativity*. Its slogan is “one person, one vote; one vote, one value.”

As everyone knows, citizens usually express their wishes indirectly. They elect delegates to govern on their behalf.

Such an indirect democracy must respect the additional principles of *choice* and *accountability*. The people must be able to choose exactly those delegates who will best carry out their wishes, and they must have the power to ensure that their delegates act properly.

Although representativity, choice, and accountability are fundamental to the democratic ideal, they are not present in all democratic countries.

In particular, a country’s voting system has far-reaching effects on the nature of its democracy. A voting system can empower the people, or it can leave power in the hands of an elite. One system may encourage constructive debate, while another may reward petty politics. The wrong voting system may be responsible for a non-representative or unaccountable government.

If we want a government that is truly of, by, and for the people, therefore, we must carefully consider how that government should be elected.

This paper will discuss four voting systems, three of which would not be appropriate for South Africa. The fourth is a promising new system called Indirect Single Transferable Vote, or ISTV. This paper will argue that ISTV can meet the demands of democracy *and* the demands of efficient government. It does not suffer from the defects

of the other three systems; and it has several features that would promote cooperative, stable, and effective government.

Majoritarian ward-based system

The most traditional voting system divides a country into precincts along geographical lines. Each precinct, or ward, elects one delegate of the national assembly. The delegate is chosen by majority or plurality vote of the ward's residents.

This ward-based system has a great strength in that it ensures accountability. A ward can elect anyone it pleases, and can refuse to re-elect a delegate who fails to carry out its wishes.

Unfortunately, the system also has several serious problems.

First of all, losing votes are never heard. If a two-candidate local election splits the vote 55% to 45%, then nearly half of the ward's voters have no representation whatsoever in the national assembly.

Second, the precincts may be divided, accidentally or deliberately, so as to favor one group of voters over another. With the right boundary lines in place, a minority party may gain control of the national assembly. The National Party in South Africa has consistently engaged in this sort of strategic, anti-democratic redistricting.

Finally, the system encourages an unfortunate form of bipolar party politics. A party that splits apart, or proposes multiple candidates, is almost certain to lose its majority. Thus every local election is inevitably fought between only two candidates. To make things worse, both candidates' platforms are designed to woo the median voter, who must be included in any majority.

In the United States, for example, every election is a contest between Democrats and Republicans for the "moderate" vote. Neither party dares to split, and a vote for a small third party is a wasted vote.

Is there full political debate in the US Congress? Is there full political debate even during Congressional elections? Is the minority black vote ever heard? No, on all counts, because most voters never have the opportunity to elect delegates who represent their views. The real power lies with those who choose the two candidates. Active party members and centrist voters have all the influence in this process.

In short, a majoritarian ward-based system may ensure accountability, but only at the high cost of representativity and choice.

Party-proportional system

To avoid the distortions of a majoritarian system, a voting system needs to achieve proportional representation. A ward with many views should not be limited to one delegate. It should elect many delegates, or help to elect many delegates, in such a way that the national assembly accurately reflects the politics of the national electorate.

The ANC has tentatively endorsed a system where parties (not individuals) are represented in proportion to their support. A popular party would have the privilege of filling many seats in the national assembly, and even a small party would be entitled to a few representatives.

The scheme is meant to ensure that all points of view are heard in the assembly. Any party with demonstrable support would have a guaranteed place in the public debate.

This is an admirable goal, but the particular system proposed has serious flaws. For when a democracy prevents its citizens from choosing their representatives as they see fit,

and instead limits them to a choice among formally established, monolithic parties, then it has disempowered them in a very real way.

The lack of choice and accountability is obvious. Suppose you are an ANC supporter. You want to vote for ANC candidates; but you are not permitted to specify *which* ANC candidates best represent your views. Nor can you hold any one ANC representative to account without voting against the entire ANC slate.

Someone might argue that if you prefer one party candidate to another, you should make your preference known within the party. But this argument is unconvincing. The party you support may not ask your opinion: it may not be wholly democratic. Indeed, you may not even belong to it.¹

The only guaranteed recourse you have against a party slate is to vote for a different party. In practical terms, however, there will never be enough parties to represent all viewpoints and combinations of viewpoints. You may be dissatisfied with your party, but not have any other party worth voting for.

Consider the following scenarios:

- (1) An NP supporter is disturbed that there are so few women on the NP list. She wants to favor female candidates in her voting. But she can do so only by abandoning the NP and casting her ballot for the DP, whose policies she dislikes.

Result: She frowns and votes for the largely male NP slate.

- (2) A young, charismatic DP member has attracted attention for his innovative environmental proposals. Some DP members want him to stand for the national assembly. Unfortunately, he does not command quite enough votes within his own party to appear on the DP's list.

He has the backing of environmentalists in the ANC and the NP, so his total support in the region would seem to entitle him to a seat. But the constitution says he must choose one party. He cannot run on a combination of three tickets.

Result: He is not nominated by any party.

- (3) A regional ANC delegate accomplishes nothing in the national assembly, because he spends all his time giving speeches to the larger ANC branches.

Most citizens do not attend branch meetings, cannot name a single thing this delegate has done for them, and would like to see someone else representing the region. Yet this man is invariably nominated onto the party list by branch members.

Theoretically, the voters could express their dissatisfaction by not voting for the ANC at all — but who else can they vote for?

Result: Accountability is lost: the party protects the unproductive delegate from the voters. He remains in the assembly for many terms.

- (4) An IFP delegate defies her party's official stand and backs a major piece of ANC legislation. Many Inkatha supporters are tired of petty obstructionist politics and support her vote.

¹If every citizen belonged to the party he or she voted for, there would be no need for election campaigns. In fact, there would be no need for elections. The parties could just present their paid-up membership lists as proof of support!

But IFP leaders, who do not want their party to be upstaged by the ANC, are incensed that she has broken ranks. They refuse to nominate her at the next election, although she has the support of many voters.

Result: She loses her seat. Other IFP delegates take note and decide not to defy party leadership in future.

- (5) The ANC splits over the issue of unemployment. Half of the ANC would like to see immediate full employment at any cost, while the other half (supported by some unions) is afraid that wages would suffer.

The national election is bitter. Each of the new parties paints the other as the enemy of the working class. Several broad-based ANC politicians, whose supporters are divided between the parties, can no longer get nominated by either one.

Result: Many voters become disenchanted with both new parties, and cast their ballots elsewhere. The ANC loses its parliamentary majority. Furthermore, the two halves of the ANC now operate separately and find it difficult to work together.

What do these unfortunate scenarios have in common?

First, they are all entirely plausible, even likely, under the party-proportional system.

Second, they illustrate the lose-lose aspect of the system. To the precise extent that a party stays together, it fails to offer its voters choice and accountability. Issues may sometimes arise that can split a party. But a split is costly in both financial and political terms, and it works against members who straddle the fence.

Third, whenever the party “machine” has different interests from the party’s voters, its delegates may not even be representative, let alone accountable. This is evident in scenarios (1), (3), and (4). For example, a political party dominated by men will nominate male candidates, even if many of its voters would like to elect female candidates. In a political party with few active or influential members, a delegate need not be responsive to anyone else but those members. And it is quite possible for party leaders to play politics against the interests of their supporters.

These objections can be summarized in a complaint: “I don’t *want* to vote for a party — I want to vote for a person!” It seems somehow undemocratic to filter the will of the people through the will of the parties. If the goal of proportional representation is to ensure that all voices are heard in the national assembly, then why should the voices be limited to the official compromise positions of a handful of organizations?

Parties in national politics

Are parties really so terrible?

Of course not. There is nothing wrong with parties as such. In fact, there is a great deal right with parties. They play a vital role in developing policy platforms, persuading voters, and negotiating within the national assembly.

Parties should and will continue to exist. But for the constitution to treat every party as a wholly unified, monolithic camp of people — which it is not — and vest enormous political power in its internal decisions, is for it to deny choice and accountability to its supporters. In the final analysis, it is simply unfair to the voters.

How about *democratic* parties? Don’t they provide choice and accountability? Why on earth *shouldn’t* their internal decisions have political power?

Fair enough. Some parties may try quite hard to listen to their members.

It is true that in its ideal form, the party-proportional system could achieve a high degree of democracy. Suppose the ANC used proportional representation even when drawing up its candidate list. ANC feminists would be entitled to put a certain number of women on the list; ANC environmentalists could add a Green candidate or two; and so on. This would ensure a balanced and representative slate. Each delegate would be accountable to the contingents within the party that supported him or her.

If all parties were that democratic and put forth such balanced slates, then the national assembly would indeed reflect the national political spectrum.

But this vision raises troubling questions. Even assuming that parties can and will be fully democratic, how about the many party supporters who are not party members? How about candidates whose support is fragmented among several small parties? And finally, by what voting system should the party settle on its nominations?

This last question is the telling one. For suppose there *is* some fair way for a party to elect individuals to a proportional slate. Then surely the electorate as a whole could use the same procedure, and directly elect individuals to a proportional parliament.

And if the electorate could, somehow, directly elect its candidates to a proportional parliament, then all the problems with the party-proportional system would vanish.

In true democratic spirit, citizens who were not active in parties would have an equal voice, just as illiterate citizens would have an equal voice. There would be no rigid party boundaries forcing politicians to make rigid choices — to throw in their lot with NP candidates, Communist candidates, or Zulu candidates, against all others. And finally, the delegates would be directly accountable to the citizens who voted for them as individuals.

Single Transferable Vote (STV) system

Fortunately, this is possible. There *are* ways to achieve proportional representation by voting for individuals. It would be pointless, otherwise, to complain about the party-proportional system.

The celebrated system of Single Transferable Vote (STV) is designed to meet this goal.

STV tries to represent every viewpoint according to its strength. In this respect it is just like the party-proportional system.

The difference is that citizens vote for individuals, not parties. That means they can pick the delegates they like best, and hold those delegates directly accountable.

As in the traditional ward-based system, the country is divided geographically. Each ward elects not one but several delegates, who represent it proportionally.

The key feature of STV is that the election considers the full preferences of all the voters. Votes are never disregarded. This empowers the people. A vote cast for a losing candidate is not ignored, because it is *transferred* to the voter's second choice. Similarly, if a popular candidate wins by a landslide, her extra votes do not go to waste; they are *transferred* to her supporters' second choices.

It takes a complicated system to count ballots under STV. But voting itself is as easy as 1, 2, 3. A voter simply ranks his or her favorite candidates, like horses — Piet (1), Thabo (2), John (3), and so on. Then the counting system considers everybody's rankings.

An example of STV

A non-numerical example may serve to illustrate the counting system. Suppose a small ward can elect only three delegates. There are eight candidates running for those three positions:

Thabo	(ANC)
John	(ANC)
Mathombo	(Inkatha)
Piet	(DP)
Anna	(NP - progressive)
Donald	(NP - centrist)
Rian	(NP - conservative)
Wimpie	(CP)

Under STV rules, each candidate in this ward needs one more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total votes to win. This number of votes is called the quota. Only three candidates can possibly have a quota at the same time.²

1. Thabo gets more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the first-choice votes, so he is elected with votes to spare.
2. Thabo's ballots all list John as second choice. So John gets Thabo's extra votes. But John does not have a quota yet.
3. No one else has a quota, either. So Piet, the least popular candidate, is eliminated. Piet's votes are also transferred to John. John almost has a quota now — but not quite.
4. Next Donald is eliminated. Some of his votes go to Anna, and some go to Rian (according to the preferences listed by the voters).
5. Mathombo is eliminated. Some of his votes go to Anna, and some go to John.
6. With Mathombo's votes, John has passed the quota. Therefore John is elected.
7. John also has a few extra votes. Who gets those extra votes? They can't go to Thabo, because Thabo has already won. And they can't go to Piet or Mathombo, because those two have already lost. But most of John's ballots list Anna as their next choice (4th or 5th choice). So the votes go to Anna.
8. At this point, there is one seat still empty. The remaining candidates are Anna (1st place), Wimpie (2nd place), Rian (3rd place).
9. Rian, the least popular candidate remaining, is eliminated. Some of his votes go to Anna, and some of them go to Wimpie.
10. In fact, Anna has now met the quota. Anna gets the third seat (by a slim margin).

So the final result is that Thabo (ANC), John (ANC), and Anna (NP) have been elected as the three representative delegates.

Who elected them?

Thabo was elected in the ordinary fashion, entirely on first-choice votes. But John was helped by second-choice votes from the supporters of Thabo, Mathombo, and Piet. And Anna won only because of a coalition of transferred votes from NP, ANC, and Inkatha supporters.

It is important that the ANC voters did list Anna as a later choice. Without their transferred votes, Wimpie could have won the third seat. In other words, there were not

²Just as only one candidate can possibly have more than half the votes (a majority), only three candidates can have more than a quarter of the votes each.

enough ANC supporters to elect a third ANC delegate — but the extra votes from the ANC did manage to keep the CP candidate out.

How STV secures proportional representation

If the voters happen to fall neatly into parties, and refuse to transfer their votes across party lines, then STV acts just like a party-proportional system.

Suppose the voters in a certain 8-delegate ward refuse to transfer their votes across party lines. For example, every NP supporter votes only for NP candidates. Then votes are transferred only among candidates of the same party.

Each 1/9 of that ward's total vote, or 11%, earns one of the eight seats. So such an election might have the following results:

ANC	44%	—>	4 seats exactly
NP	29%	—>	2 seats, plus 7% untransferred votes
CP	16%	—>	1 seat, plus 5% untransferred votes
DP	10%	—>	0 seats, plus 10% untransferred votes
Other	1%	—>	0 seats, plus 1% untransferred votes

Because the untransferred votes did not help anyone win, only 7 seats have been allocated. The DP is closest to electing an additional candidate, so under the STV rules, their top candidate will receive the 8th and last seat.

This is one of several reasonable systems for allocating votes proportionally. On average it gives a slight advantage to large parties. But that is not an adequate reason to reject it. Mathematicians have proved that *no* proportional system can satisfy all the usual criteria of fairness. In fact, all the voting systems discussed in this essay happen to favor large parties.

0–10%	no seats	no representation
11–21%	1 seat	13% representation
22–32%	2 seats	25% representation
33–43%	3 seats	38% representation
44–55%	4 seats	50% representation
56–66%	5 seats	62% representation
67–77%	6 seats	75% representation
78–88%	7 seats	87% representation
89–100%	8 seats	100% representation

In practice, of course, there often will be inter-party transfers. This is a good thing for the voters and for their parties. Once a voter has ranked all the candidates from his party, he or she is wise to list candidates from other parties.

In the example above, 23% of all ballots did not help elect any candidate. Those 23% of voters could have had more influence if they had so chosen. For example, if the CP voters had all listed NP candidates at the bottom of their ballots, as 4th, 5th and 6th choices, their extra 5% would have given the NP control of the eighth seat. Presumably, the CP would have preferred this to the actual outcome, in which the seat went to the DP.

In summary, if there are no inter-party transfers, then STV allocates seats like a party-proportional system. Each party's seats are filled exactly as if the party had held a primary election using STV.

But if there are inter-party transfers, then STV allows voters to elect compromise candidates to contested seats. In this sense, STV is *more* proportional than the party-proportional system.

Is STV practical?

It should be obvious, by now, that STV is highly democratic.

More than any other major voting system, the STV system of ranked choices allows all citizens an equal voice in the government. And because every voter's ballot helps to elect a particular delegate, the elected delegates are accountable to their supporters.

STV does not even permit parties to be undemocratic. Several candidates from the same party can run against each other without fear of splitting the vote. This means that STV lets voters choose their parties' candidates at the same time as they choose their parties.

In other words, STV combines democratic primary elections with democratic general elections — all on a single ballot, and all at no expense to the parties.

It is for these reasons that so many students of electoral systems have supported STV. Their confidence has been borne out by experience. The system has been used with great success in the legislative elections of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Australia, and Malta, among other places. STV-elected governments have been marked by stability, compromise, and attention to voters.³

Apparently, the complex counting procedure has not troubled voters in these countries. Voters have the assurance of their parties that the system is fair. And as for the voting process itself, it is easy enough to mark first, second, and third choices on a ballot. Very few ballots in these elections are invalid.

Many people, including high-placed ANC members, agree that STV would be an excellent system for South Africa. Their only formal objection has been a practical one. About two-thirds of South African citizens are illiterate. They might have difficulty filling out the ballots.

The objection carries some weight. In more traditional systems, the voter need only mark the name of his preferred party or candidate. An election official can help him to do this. But under STV, the same voter has to find the names of several candidates on the ballot. Then he has to write numerals next to them in his order of preference. Even with a lot of help from an election official, this might be too confusing for a voter who cannot read and study the list of names.

Happily for all, there is a solution to this practical problem. The rest of this paper describes a new, modified version of STV — a version that overcomes the literacy objection.

The Indirect STV System

In the new election process, the voter only has to choose *one* candidate. Any unused votes will automatically be transferred to a second-choice candidate — exactly as in standard STV.

But the voter does not have to name a second choice. Instead, the first-choice candidate decides how his or her extra votes will be used.

In our sample election, John himself might have the following ranked preferences:

³See Vernon Bogdanor, *What Is Proportional Representation? A Guide to the Issues* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1984).

- 1 John (ANC)
- 2 Thabo (ANC)
- 3 Piet (DP)
- 4 Mathombo (Inkatha)
- 5 Anna (NP - progressive)
- 6 Donald (NP - centrist)
- 7 Rian (NP - conservative)
- 8 Wimpie (CP)

John publicly commits himself to this list before the election. A vote for John, in the new system, is a vote for the whole ranked list.

In other words, anyone who casts a ballot for John is automatically voting for Thabo as second choice, Piet as third choice, and so on. Everything else works exactly like standard STV.

Party slates

In effect, what happens is that the citizens vote for their favourite candidates, and the candidates vote for each other. Political scientists would call this an indirect election. So we can call the new system “Indirect STV,” or ISTV.

There is a useful twist to the system. Voters may cast ballots for non-candidates. For example, you could vote for a party. Perhaps the ANC has officially endorsed the following list in your ward:

- 1 Thabo (ANC)
- 2 John (ANC)
- 3 Piet (DP)
- 4 Anna (NP - progressive)
- 5 Donald (NP - centrist)
- 6 Mathombo (Inkatha)
- 7 Rian (NP - conservative)
- 8 Wimpie (CP)

Then instead of voting for John or Thabo, you could cast your vote for the official ANC list. As delegates were elected or eliminated, your vote would be transferred from candidate to candidate down the list, courtesy of the ANC.

If most citizens cast their votes for parties, ISTV is nothing but a refined ward-based version of the party-proportional system. On the other hand, if voters are dissatisfied with the party lists, they can take the initiative to choose their representatives directly.

In this way, parties still play a constructive and powerful role in nominating candidates. But accountability is preserved: the people retain the power to vote for the candidates they like best.

Split slates

Under ISTV, voters have slightly less control than they did under STV. For instance, it is impossible to vote for John as first choice without also supporting Thabo and Piet. Each voter must choose an entire ticket to support.

A knowledgeable voter will therefore consider the entire ticket when voting. Under certain conditions, some candidates may want to split their tickets.

Perhaps Donald, the centrist NP candidate, is uncertain who should be his official second choice. If he picks Anna, he may alienate his more conservative supporters, who will vote for Rian instead. On the other hand, if he picks Rian, his more progressive supporters will go off and vote for Anna.

Donald guesses that about half his supporters would prefer Rian as second choice, and the other half would prefer Anna as second choice. So he promises to divide their votes accordingly.

It is important that Donald be allowed to divide votes in this way. If he backs only one of the other NP candidates, he will not be representing his supporters fully. By splitting his slate, he allows people to vote for him and for the NP in general, without making them throw too much weight behind either of the more extreme NP candidates.

The technical details are not too complicated. Donald's official slate looks like this:

- 1 Donald
- 2 Anna (50%), Rian (50%)
- 3
- 4 Mathombo
- 5 Wimpie (70%), Piet (30%)
- 6
- 7 John
- 8 Thabo

If Donald receives extra votes from the public, his second choice will be split 50-50. He will transfer half of his extra ballots to Anna, and half to Rian.

Suppose Rian is subsequently eliminated. Then all Rian's ballots have to be redistributed. Any ballots Rian got from Donald should be divided evenly between Donald's third choices, who are (again) Anna and Rian. But Rian can no longer use the votes. So the ballots are all transferred to Anna.

If Donald's fifth-place votes come into play, then they are split between Wimpie and Piet. This time the split is uneven. 70% of the transferred ballots go to Wimpie first; the other 30% go to Piet first. (In effect, 70% of Donald's ballots rank Wimpie fifth and Piet sixth; the rest list them the other way around.)

Three or more candidates could be co-ranked in the same way.

The election procedure

The details of an ISTV election would be quite straightforward. The election would run something like this:

1. Potential candidates collect signatures from local voters. A candidate needs some minimum number of signatures in order to run for office.
2. The candidates declare their intent to run. (They submit their signature lists to election authorities by some deadline.)
3. The candidates campaign for support over a period of a few months.
4. Political parties name their recommended lists of candidates, if any, in each ward.
5. The collegiate election: The candidates vote for each other, using STV rankings. They may split the rankings. No votes are counted, but the ballots are made public.

6. The general election (about two weeks later): The public votes by secret ballot. Each citizen is entitled to vote for one candidate or party.
7. The independent election commission counts the votes using STV. A vote for any elector is a vote for that elector's STV ballot.
8. The results are announced.

The only novel element is the collegiate election (step 5) — which voters are free to ignore.

Illiteracy is still a problem under this system: it is always tricky to vote without reading. But ISTV makes voting much easier than STV does. The instructions are simple: “Mark your favourite candidate. If you have no favourite candidate, mark your favourite party.”

Those instructions can be easily explained to any voter. An illiterate voter may have trouble finding the right box to mark. But an election official can provide assistance.

Is it too “difficult” for voters to choose individuals?

The truth is that any democracy must ask voters to choose individuals at some point. That fact is not unique to ISTV — nor should it be.

In a traditional ward-based system, citizens must vote for individuals. In a democratic party-proportional system, party members must elect individuals onto the party list. So ISTV is not more demanding than these other systems.

One might wonder about the simplicity of the ballot. South Africans often mention Namibia's first general election, in which voters only had to choose among party symbols.

Careful ballot design would also help South Africa's illiterate voters. A small party symbol might be printed next to each name. The parties themselves would be listed at the top of the ballot, in large type, beside large or repeated party symbols.

Photographs next to the names could be helpful as well. After all, ISTV candidates are local candidates who have campaigned locally. Voters will often know what they look like.

In some imaginary ward, an ISTV English-language ballot might look something like this (party symbols and photographs are *not* shown in this figure):

<input type="checkbox"/>	ANC	African National Congress
<input type="checkbox"/>	AZAPO	Azanian People's Organization
<input type="checkbox"/>	CP	Conservative Party
<input type="checkbox"/>	DP	Democratic Party
<input type="checkbox"/>	LP	Labour Party ⁴
<input type="checkbox"/>	IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
<input type="checkbox"/>	NP	National Party
<input type="checkbox"/>	PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress
<input type="checkbox"/>	SACP	South African Communist Party

<input type="checkbox"/>	Bezuidenhout, Evita	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luthuli, Albert
<input type="checkbox"/>	Biko, Steven	<input type="checkbox"/>	Moroka, James
<input type="checkbox"/>	First, Ruth	<input type="checkbox"/>	Smuts, Jan Christiaan
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gandhi, Mohandas	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sobukwe, Robert
<input type="checkbox"/>	Kadalié, Clemens	<input type="checkbox"/>	Verwoerd, Hendrik
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lourens, Oom Schalk	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zulu, Shaka

Asking voters to mark a *single* box on such a ballot is quite reasonable — and they will welcome the increased choice. Of course, the exact form of the ballot is open to debate. The final decisions are up to the election commission.

Note that a party-proportional ballot would not be much shorter than this one. South Africa has nine or ten major parties at present — all of which would be on the ballot. Some illiterate voters would need help just to choose among the parties.

Moreover, under a party-proportional system, parties would be likely to split apart. So the party-proportional ballot would only become longer with time.

An ISTV system, by contrast, helps keep parties together. Under ISTV, a party can tolerate internal disagreements without splitting — and still offer choices to its supporters.

Some Criticisms of Indirect STV

Do coalitions break down?

Some students of politics distrust proportional representation. They point out that in most countries using proportional representation, no party ever wins a majority. Then the country must be governed by a coalition of parties.

They go on to say that coalitions are a bad way to govern. Parties enter into coalitions without the consent of the voters. The parties have trouble cooperating with each other. And small parties have too much power, because they can threaten to withdraw from the coalition and dissolve the government.

⁴Although the LP has no candidates in this ward, one can still vote for the LP party slate. The candidates on that slate belong to other parties; however, the LP has decided to support them.

These critics claim that in the interest of stability, it is better to have a unitary government than a coalition government. Some single party should be chosen to lead the country — even if that party does not have a majority.

This is an argument against all forms of proportional representation. Party-proportional, STV, and ISTV systems would all lead to government by coalition some of the time.

However, ISTV is likely to yield the most stable coalitions. A key feature of ISTV is that delegates rely on each other's support to get seats. A party will win more seats if it has the support of another party that is ideologically close to it.

For this reason, coalition partners have a strong incentive to work together. If one party refuses to cooperate, the other party will refuse to help it get elected next time. This threat has teeth. A party that does not cooperate with its coalition partners will lose representation, and some of its delegates will lose their jobs.

In fact, individual delegates are accountable for their failure to cooperate. If two parties are formally in coalition, and a delegate of one party refuses to compromise, the MPs of the other party will stop helping him or her get elected.

So if a small party is in coalition with a large and popular party, the small party's delegates have ample incentive to be good partners: they depend on the large party's support. This contrasts with the party-proportional system, where a small party can bring down the government with impunity.

ISTV even gives voters some control over which coalitions are formed. Parties indicate in advance whom they might cooperate with — a party's potential allies are ranked on its ballot. Voters are free to reject a party on that basis.

It should be added that because ISTV encourages parties to stay together, parties will be bigger than under other proportional systems. Hence coalition governments may be less common in the first place. In Ireland, for example, the number of parties decreased gradually from nineteen to three after STV was adopted. Single-party government has been the rule there rather than the exception.

So the coalition “problem” is not a reason to reject ISTV. Indeed, coalitions should be both less common and more effective under ISTV than under the party-proportional system.

Would parties be strong enough?

A more serious criticism of ISTV is that it might weaken parties. A strong party can be an effective instrument of social change.

To be strong, a party must stand together and vote together. The problem with ISTV is that it lets party members compete with each other for seats. Under ISTV, dissent would be aired in public. And the parties would have less control over their candidates.

Participation and accountability

The first answer to this criticism is that it is anti-democratic. The whole point of a democratic system is to accommodate dissent. Dissenting views *should* be aired in public. The people should be allowed to choose among them.

Furthermore, accountability is part of democracy. South African liberation groups have always stressed that elected officials must be accountable to the people. But when parties order their delegates to vote one way or another, the delegates are no longer fully accountable to the people. They are accountable to party leaders instead.

Party unity

Part of the criticism stands, however. The people may *want* strong parties, parties that have some control over their delegates. Parties are like unions. Even if a party has internal disagreements, and even if those disagreements are public, there are still times when the party must compromise and act as a unit. Voters might be willing to sacrifice some choice in order to achieve better unity.

Obviously, party-proportional elections give parties plenty of control. If a party wins sixty seats in the national assembly, it is up to the party structure to fill those seats. Delegates who defy their parties on important issues are risking their jobs.

STV, by contrast, does not give parties much control at all. Delegates under STV are accountable to their constituents, not their parties. STV elections are contests among individual politicians. Of course, delegates of one party may still decide to work together against other parties. But party leaders cannot easily discipline delegates who are out of line. The best they can do is threaten to withhold campaign funds.

So one system achieves unity at the expense of democracy; the other, democracy at the expense of unity.

Indirect STV is an excellent compromise. The ISTV mechanism — unlike STV — provides for party slates. So the party structure still has some influence. Many voters with no particular preference among candidates will simply vote for their party's recommended slate. This gives parties a measure of control over their delegates.

Indeed, voters who *want* centrally led, unified parties can deliberately vote for the party slate rather than for any individual. This way, they increase the influence that party leadership has over party members. If voters are dissatisfied with party leadership, however, they can vote for the particular individuals they prefer, thereby electing them and boosting their independence. Thus both party leaders and elected delegates are held accountable.

Debate

It may be too pessimistic to say that dissent will weaken parties. Ironically, ISTV may actually help parties strengthen their platforms.

ISTV specifically encourages constructive debate within parties. To win a seat, a politician needs the backing of other candidates from his or her party. So the best way to get elected is to convince many other candidates that you have thought about the issues, that your views are correct, and that you can come up with useful new ideas.

Popularity among the masses is not always enough under ISTV. You also need the votes of other popular candidates. To get those votes, you have to prove yourself to the other candidates: prove that your heart is in the right place and your ideas are better than the next person's. Demagoguery will not accomplish this — only substantive debate.

And substantive debate among candidates could make party platforms stronger, more coherent, and more unified than ever.

The bottom line is that there are two kinds of disagreement. Candidates may disagree about goals and priorities — in which case voters should be permitted to choose among them. Or they may simply disagree about the best way to achieve shared goals — in which case some of them are right and some are wrong.

ISTV allows voters to choose in the first kind of disagreement, and encourages candidates to convince each other in the second kind. In this way, it achieves the best of both worlds.

Bribery, patronage, and back-room deals

It can be argued that ISTV has the potential for corruption. One candidate could be bribed to list another as second choice.

But the truth of the matter is that all politics has the potential for corruption. A vote implies trust. If you vote for a candidate who is willing to betray your interests in return for a bribe, then he will eventually sell you out anyway: if not during the electoral process, then during his term of office.

In any case, candidates' second choices are public knowledge before the election. If Treurnicht listed Mandela as second choice (or vice-versa), he would not get many votes.

Among honest candidates, the payoffs for support are far more benign. Suppose Molofe is a very popular candidate who is certain to win. Akers is trying to become her second choice. For Akers to succeed, and gain Molofe's surplus, he must lay out his program and convince Molofe that he is worthy of support — that he will vote in close accordance with Molofe's own principles.

So the "price" of Molofe's support is a guarantee that Akers will usually vote with her. Such a guarantee is entirely in keeping with proportional representation. After all, Akers will be elected with the help of Molofe supporters, and it is appropriate that his actions reflect their views. If Molofe is elected with 150% of the quota, and the extra 50% helps to elect a grateful Akers, then Molofe's supporters get a kind of extra half-delegate by virtue of Akers' cooperation.

Similarly, suppose Naidoo is a fiscal conservative who will draw some votes, but who is unlikely to be elected. She lists Henman as her second choice. She is eliminated, but with the help of her votes, Henman is elected. In return he gives her a job high up in a government agency.

Thus, although Naidoo does not have enough votes to become an MP, her support does earn her an influential position in the next tier of government. This is a *democratic* form of patronage. It expands proportional representation into appointed government. It is far preferable to the usual system of "your friends out, my friends in."

Summary

In conclusion, ISTV seems to be a superior electoral system on virtually all measures. The following chart summarizes the four systems discussed in this paper.

	Ward-based majoritarianism	Party-proportional	STV	Indirect STV
Representativity	Low	Medium	Very High	High
Voter choice	Low	Medium	Very High	High
Delegate accountability	Medium	Low	High	High
Ease of voting	High	Medium	Low	Medium
Role of parties	High	High	Low	Medium
Stability of parties	High	Low	High	High
Party accountability	Low	Low	N/A	High
Stability of coalitions	N/A	Low	Medium	High
Quality of debate	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Democratic patronage	Low	Low	Medium	High
Influence of ordinary voters (outside parties)	Low	Low	High	High
Usual size of ward	1 delegate	Large region	5 delegates	5–10 delegates
Geographical representation ⁵	Only for majority party	Possible	Yes	Yes

ISTV is highly democratic. It gives the people a wide range of choices; thanks to the system of transferred votes, it represents viewpoints proportionally; and it holds both delegates and parties accountable to their supporters.

ISTV also promotes constructive government. It encourages similar candidates, and similar parties, to work together and discuss issues of mutual concern. It does not require them to fight each other unmercifully for votes.

Finally, ISTV avoids the pitfalls of standard STV. It provides a clear role and mission for parties; and it does not make voting unnecessarily complicated.

ISTV should be acceptable to everyone in South Africa — big parties, small parties, and cross-party movements; fighters for democracy; voters who are active in politics and voters who are not; illiterate voters; even voters whose first-choice candidates lose.

If we want the new South Africa to be a thoroughly democratic and effectively governed country, ISTV deserves the most serious consideration.

⁵For example, are CP voters in Cape Town represented? How about DP voters in Bloemfontein?