COLLECTION IV — ELECTORAL REFORM

Electoral Systems Comparison Guide

A side-by-side comparison of major electoral systems used in democracies around the world.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

Why the system matters

The rules for counting votes shape which candidates run, how they campaign, how many parties compete, and how closely the results reflect voters' choices.

Comparison

System	How it works	Used in	Strengths	Weaknesses
Plurality (first-past-the-post)	One winner per district. Most votes wins, even without a majority.	U.S., U.K., Canada, India	Simple. Clear link to a local representative.	Winners can have well under 50%. Spoiler effects. Encourages two parties.
Two-round runoff	If no one wins a majority, the top two face off in a second election.	French presidential elections; many U.S. primaries	Winner has majority support.	Costs a second election. Turnout often drops.

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Ranked-choice (instant-runoff)	Voters rank candidates. Last place is eliminated and votes transfer until someone has a majority.	Australia's House; NYC primaries; Maine, Alaska	Majority winner in one election. Reduces spoilers.	More complex ballots and counting.
Single transferable vote	Ranked ballots in multi-member districts; votes transfer until seats are filled.	Ireland, Malta, Australian Senate	Proportional while keeping a choice of candidates.	Complex counting. Larger districts.
Party-list proportional	Voters choose a party; seats divided by vote share.	Netherlands, Israel, Spain	Seats closely match votes.	Weaker local link. Party leaders control lists.
Mixed-member proportional	District seats plus party-list seats that top up results to match the vote.	Germany, New Zealand	Local representation and proportional results.	Two kinds of representatives. More complex.

Questions to ask about any system

1. Does the winner need majority support?
2. How closely do seats match votes?
3. Do voters have a local representative?
4. How many parties can realistically compete?
5. Is it easy for voters to understand and trust?

No system is perfect. Each trades off simplicity, majority support, proportionality and local representation differently.

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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