Is Proportional Representation best, and if so, what type of country is it best for?

Throughout the world, several countries have experimented with Proportional Representation governments; some have succeeded and some have failed. Many external factors play significant roles in the success or failure of Proportional Representation, including, but not limited to, ethnic diversity, economics, and voter participation. The three articles by Arend Lijphart, Guy Lardeyret, and Quentin L. Quade provide opinionated viewpoints for both sides of the argument as well as offer small suggestions of future governing policies for developing countries.

First, Arend Lijphart’s article provides the majority of the pros for Proportional Representation. Lijphart (1991, 73) writes that Proportional Representation “is likely to be associated with multiparty systems, coalition governments (including, in many cases, broad and inclusive coalitions), and more equal executive-legislative power relations.” In essence, he means that Proportional Representation will divide power and distribute it amongst separate groups in different ways. He continues to explain the origins of Proportional Representation – it stemmed from the problem of ethnic and religious minorities – and its design would counteract the original problems of threats to national unity and political stability. It also grew from the demands of a rising working class who wanted to lower the thresholds of representation and the established, older parties’ fear of being usurped by younger, thriving parties. Lijphart (1991, 75) writes that these factors are relevant especially for countries “where there are deep ethnic cleavages or where new democratic forces need to be reconciled with the old antidemocratic groups.”

Lijphart showcases the debates between those who favor plurality and those for proportionality throughout his article. Proportionalists value keeping unity and peace among constituents and pluralists value “firm leadership and affective policy making” according to
Lijphart (1991, 76) “Proportionalists tend to attach greater importance to the representativeness of government while plurality advocates view the capacity to govern as the more vital consideration.” He continues to reiterate these statements throughout the article.

Lijphart seems to convey the idea that developing countries, especially those with deeply divided ethnic groups should look to Proportional Representation as a model to build their developing governments upon. The notion that most, if not all, minority parties will be granted an equal share in government seems like a prolific journey to embark upon. Lijphart’s idea of Proportional Representation providing unity and peaceful relations amongst several different parties would seemingly unite a developing country and provide it a firm base upon which it may build a stable government that many lack.

Lijphart wraps up his article by reinstating the need for Proportional Representation governments in developing countries, especially those with sharp ethnic divides. He (1991, 82) remarks upon alternating governments such as those in pluralist and two-party systems saying, “Alternations in governments were too ‘absolute and abrupt,’ occurring ‘between two sharply polarized parties’…What is needed…is ‘greater stability and continuity’ and ‘greater moderation in policy,’ which could be provided by a shift to PR and to coalition government.” These suggestions of Proportional Representation as a form of government for developing countries sound, at times, too good to be true. And they are. The next two articles both dissect Lijphart’s article while providing counterattacks against his proposition proving that Proportional Representation will not be the best option.

Guy Lardeyret (1991, 31) launches his attack with a crushing reality: “Bipartism favors governmental stability and decision-making capacity as well as periodic alternatives in power. Multipartism, on the other hand, is positively correlated with ephemeral government, periods
when the chief executive office goes unfilled, repeated elections, and long tenures in office for fixed groups of key politicians.” Lardeyret’s attack is fact-based – all one could do is look to the ridiculousness of France’s 4th Republic or the corruption of PRI in Mexico. History has shown that Proportional Representation governments are not a fool-proof solution to a country’s problems as Lijphart suggested.

Lardeyret (1991, 32-33) argues that Proportional Representation gives any well-organized pressure group a chance to win seats in government – which, in turn, will most likely cause a counteractive party to develop and emerge. This could be extremely dangerous for developing countries with deep ethnic divisions and recent civil wars. Proportional Representation also gives rise to extremist parties who can maneuver their way to the top much like the Nazi party did. Proportional Representation also seems to be a breeding ground for political corruption as much of the choosing of personnel and policies is done behind closed doors by the party rather than visibly by the citizens.

Quentin L. Quade (1991, 36) criticizes Lijphart’s article as well, believing it to be based upon questionable utopian foundations. He simply asks for more research and analyses to be conducted on Proportional Representation as Lijphart’s findings seem to be tailored to complement the good aspects of the system. He, too, asks where were the failed cases of Proportional Representation, such as France’s 4th Republic, in Lijphart’s article. He (1991, 41) also comments on Proportional Representation’s election policies: “Plurality…parties incline to be moderate, to seek conciliation, to round off their rough edges – in short, to do before the election, in the public view, the very tasks that Lijphart applauds PR systems for doing after the election.” Quade (1991, 41) wraps up his criticism by stating that Proportional Representation’s virtues can easily be had by a plurality system without the harmful vices.
These arguments were well-thought and intricate and all three seem to prove their opinion as reality. However, each opinion – as with any opinion – is biased. Proportional Representation is a good system of government – but only for certain types of countries. Developing countries reeling from ethnic conflicts or civil war do not need this type of system implemented as it would only create more tension amongst the different ethnic groups contrary to Lijphart’s opinion. However, a country with fewer minority groups and at least a semi-stable economy would most likely reap benefits from Proportional Representation such as the Scandinavian countries. Proportional Representation will only work for a country if the country fits certain criteria just the same as a two-party system works for the United States. However, the only true way to determine if Proportional Representation is best for a country is to implement it and see if it succeeds or fails. But that is both a risk and a cost that a country must decide to take.
