ESCE
Electoral System Change in Europe since 1945

Electoral System Change in Europe since 1945: Iceland

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With thanks to:

Section 1: Overview of Icelandic Electoral System Changes since 1945

The electoral system in operation in Iceland in 1945 was introduced in 1942 and had emerged through a process of gradual evolution from a majoritarian towards a proportional system. The first element of proportionality was introduced into the Icelandic electoral system in 1915, when six seats were created in addition to the 34 one- and two-member district seats, these six seats were elected by d'Hondt PR (three every six years for twelve-year terms) (Hardarson 2002: 135-6; Hardarson and Kristinsson 2010: 954). A further step towards proportionality was taken in 1920, when a four-member district was created for Reykjavik elected using the d'Hondt list system (Hardarson 2002: 104). The proportional component in the system was expanded in 1934, with an increase in the Reykjavik district magnitude from four to six and the introduction of an upper tier of eleven seats (added to the 38 district seats) (Hardarson 2002: 104). This upper tier was filled on a compensatory basis using d'Hondt, though only parties that had won at least one district seat could receive upper-tier seats. In 1942, the formula used in six two-member districts was changed from plurality to d'Hondt PR (Hardarson 2002: 104).

Thus, the system in place in 1942 was half way between MMP and two-tier PR. This was replaced in 1959 with a pure two-tier PR system, and this basic type has survived in Icelandic elections ever since. The personalization of the system was reduced in 1959, partly through the removal of single-member districts and partly through restriction of the weight of candidate preferences expressed by voters within lists (cf. Kristjánsson 2004: 156). The reforms of 2000 reversed this somewhat, by increasing the weight attached to preference votes.

Section 2: Relevant Electoral System changes in Iceland since 1945

Table 1. Summary of Icelandic Electoral Laws and Amendments since 1945 – relevant to this project

Law	Amendment	Date of enactment	Location	Relevant for the research
80/1942		7 Sep 1942	scan on file	Yes, but pre-1945
	87/1942	15 Sep 1942	scan on file	
	56/1946	7 May 1946	scan on file	
	83/1949	16 Aug 1949	scan on file	
	91/1949	21 Sep 1949	scan on file	
	20/1950	2 Mar 1950	scan on file	
	43/1953	27 May 1953	scan on file	
	66/1953	11 Nov 1953	scan on file	
	60/1956	26 May 1956	scan on file	
	19/1957	5 Apr 1957	scan on file	
	36/1957	13 May 1957	scan on file	
	91/1957	27 Dec 1957	scan on file	
	9/1959	12 Mar 1959	scan on file	
52/1959		20 Aug 1959		Yes
	45/1961	29 Mar 1961		
	6/1966	6 Apr 1966		
	15/1974	5 Apr 1974		
	37/1979	29 May 1979		
	89/1979	22 Oct 1979		
	90/1981	31 Dec 1981		
	15/1982	24 Apr 1982		
	97/1982	31 Dec 1982		
	4/1983	15 Mar 1983		
	49/1983	22 Apr 1983		
	3/1984	14 Mar 1984		
	66/1984	1 Jun 1984		
	2/1987	5 Mar 1987		
80/1987		16 Oct 1987	pdf on file	barely
	66/1989	29 May 1989	pdf on file	
	10/1991	19 Mar 1991	pdf on file	
	9/1995	27 Feb 1995	pdf on file	
24/2000		19 May 2000	pdf on file	Yes
	15/2003	26 Mar 2003	pdf on file	
	50/2006	1 Jul 2006	pdf on file	
	162/2006	1 Jul 2007	pdf on file	
	88/2008	1 Jan 2009	pdf on file	
	7/2009	5 Mar 2009	pdf on file	
	16/2009	20 Mar 2009	pdf on file	

The Constitution of Iceland contains considerable details on the electoral law, including (until 1999) full details of the districts and the allocation of seats to those districts. Changes to the electoral law that have changed these provisions have therefore been accompanied by constitutional amendments as well, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Constitutional amendments relating to the electoral system in Iceland, since 1942

Law	Date of enactment	Basic import	Relevant for research
33/1944	17 Jun 1944	Sets out full constituency structure	Replicates 1942 electoral law
51/1959	20 Aug 1959	Replicates changes to constituency structure in the new electoral law passed on the same day	Replicates 1959 electoral law
9/1968	28 Apr 1968	Changes franchise, most notably lowering voting age from 21 to 20	No
65/1984	13 Jun 1984	Foreshadows 1987 changes to assembly size and district structure; reduces voting age to 18	No
56/1991	31 May 1991	Technical changes	No
77/1999	1 Jul 1999	Removes details of districting from const; sets parameters that foreshadow changes in 2000 law	Yes

Section 3: Details of previous electoral systems and electoral system changes.

3.1 The 1942 Electoral System

The 1942 electoral system enshrined a mixed system: the lower tier was a mix of SMP, PR in 2MDs, and PR in one 8MD (Reykjavík); this was supplemented by a nationwide upper tier with 11 seats. In detail:

Assembly size. The 1942 law provided for an assembly (Alþingi) of 52 members. The Constitution of 1944 stipulated a maximum of 52 members (Article 31)

Districts and district magnitude. Both the electoral law and the Constitution stipulated that there would be 21 SMDs, six 2MDs, and one 8MD (Reykjavík) (1942 Electoral Law, Article 5). In addition, there would be 11 national compensation members. These were not assigned to districts (as they are now).

Nature of votes that can be cast. Wherever PR was used (2MDs, Reykjavík, and the upper tier), voters voted for a list. Within the list, voters had the option to re-rank the candidates and could also strike a candidate out. (This has remained unaltered in subsequent years.)

Party threshold. There was no threshold at the district level. The threshold for the national tier was that a party had to have won at least one district seat.

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. Allocation in SMDs was by simple plurality. In the 2MDs and in Reykjavík, d'Hondt was used.

Allocation of seats to parties in the upper tier. D'Hondt was used on a compensatory basis. Specifically, all votes across the country were counted, but the first divisor for each party was one greater than the number of seats the party had won in the districts.

Allocation of seats to candidates. A system based on the Borda rule was employed. If there were (say) six candidates on the list, then the candidate placed first (by the party on a ballot paper where the list was not re-ordered by the voter; by the voter where the voter did re-order) received one vote. The next received 5/6, the next 4/6, then 3/6, then 2/6, and finally 1/6 for the candidate placed last. If a voter struck a candidate out, that candidate received 0 and lower candidates were raised one place up the list. All such votes were then summed and the party's seats were filled in order of these summed votes.

This procedure may be clarified by a hypothetical example. Consider a district in which five seats are available. 150 votes are cast for Party X and Party X receives two of the five seats. 125 of the voters for Party X cast their ballots unaltered. The remaining 25 all cross out the first candidate and place a '1' next to the second candidate, leaving their ballot papers otherwise unaltered. There are ten candidates on Party X's list. Candidates are called A, B, C, etc. The candidates receive the following votes shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Hypothetical vote calculation under the 1942 system

Candidate	From unaltered ballots	From altered ballots	Total
A	125	0	125
B	9/10x125 = 112.5	25	137.5
C	8/10x125 = 100	9/10x25 = 22.5	122.5
D	7/10x125 = 87.5	8/10x25 = 20	107.5
E	6/10x125 = 75	7/10x25 = 17.5	92.5
F	5/10x125 = 62.5	6/10x25 = 15	77.5
G	4/10x125 = 50	5/10x25 = 12.5	62.5
H	3/10x125 = 37.5	4/10x25 = 10	47.5
I	2/10x125 = 25	3/10x25 = 7.5	32.5
J	1/10x125 = 12.5	2/10x25 = 5	17.5

Candidate B is therefore elected first and candidate A second.

For the upper tier, parties could have a national closed list or their seats could be allocated to their best losers in the districts. The party's first seat went to the party candidate who had secured most votes without being elected and the second to the candidate who had secured the highest percentage of votes without being elected. The third seat went to the first candidate on the closed national list, if the party had presented such a list. Seats continued to be filled cycling between these three criteria, subject to the provision that only one seat could be allocated per district to each party, until all seats were filled (Hardarson and Kristinsson 2010: 955).

At least in principle, voters had considerable capacity to influence individual seat allocation under this law (cf. Helgason 2010: 4). But there were very few cases in which a candidate was elected who would not have been elected under the party's ranking (or vice versa). Baldur

Simonarson (personal communication) reports that in fact there were only two cases in all national parliamentary elections before 1959: in 1946, a Conservative candidate in Reykjavík was pushed down the list and not elected (though he did gain a seat following the death of an MP in 1948); in 1916, a prominent feminist candidate was pushed from fourth to fifth on the national list of the Home Rule Party; the party secured three seats; one of those elected became ill in 1918; the reserve who was called in was the man lifted up to fourth place.

Note that under this system it becomes easier to change the order of the candidates on a list as the number of candidates on that list *rises*, because the gaps between the candidates get smaller. If there are four candidates on a list, then just over one fifth of voters need to make the optimal change (rank their favoured candidate 1 and strike out the candidate immediately above) in order to push their candidate up one place. If there are 10 candidates on the list, just over one in eleven voters must do the same.

3.2 The 1959 Electoral Reform

The 1959 reform replaced the mixed system with a straight system of two-tier list PR. It significantly weakened personalization, partly by removing the SMDs and partly by reducing the weight of voters' candidate preferences. In detail:

Assembly size. Increased from 52 to 60 (Article 1 of the constitutional amendment, revising Article 31 of the Constitution).

Districts and district magnitude. The 28 lower-tier districts under the old system were replaced with eight districts, five of them electing five members each, two electing six members, and one (Reykjavík) electing twelve members (Article 5). As before, 11 members were allocated from the nationwide upper tier.

Nature of votes that can be cast. This was unchanged. Note (with regard to the degree of choice voters had among candidates) that Article 1 of the constitutional amendment (revising Article 31 of the constitution) stated that each party's list should, as a rule, contain twice as many candidates as the number of seats available in the district.

Party threshold. There was still no threshold at the district level. The threshold for the national tier remained that a party had to have won at least one district seat.

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. D'Hondt was used throughout (as before in all the proportional elements).

Allocation of seats to parties in the upper tier. D'Hondt was used on a compensatory basis, as before.

Allocation of seats to candidates. As Helgason (2010: 4) notes, the voters' capacity to change the order of names on the lists was greatly reduced. Article 110 of the new electoral law stated that the procedure outlined above in relation to the 1942 law was now used to calculate only one third of the final number of votes deemed to have been received by each candidate, while the party's unaltered ordering determined the remaining two thirds.

Using the same hypothetical example as above, the procedure for determining the final list order was therefore as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Hypothetical vote calculation under the 1959 system

Candidate	Votes based on actual ballot papers (1)	Votes based on party ranking (2)	Sum of (1) and (2) (3)	(3) divided by 3 (4)
A	125	150x2 = 300	425	141.67
B	137.5	9/10x150x2 = 270	407.5	135.83
C	122.5	8/10x150x2 = 240	362.5	120.83
D	107.5	7/10x150x2 = 210	317.5	105.83
E	92.5	6/10x150x2 = 180	272.5	90.83
F	77.5	5/10x150x2 = 150	227.5	75.83
G	62.5	4/10x150x2 = 120	182.5	60.83
H	47.5	3/10x150x2 = 90	137.5	45.83
I	32.5	2/10x150x2 = 60	92.5	30.83
J	17.5	1/10x150x2 = 30	47.5	15.83

Column (1) contains the results of the calculation of the votes as actually cast (that is, including both altered and unaltered ballots): this is the same as the 'Total' column under the 1942 rules. These figures now contributed one third of the overall distribution of votes across candidates. The remaining two thirds of the overall distribution was determined by the party's own ranking, as shown in column (2). That is, the party having received 150 votes, its first candidate was given 150 votes, which was given double weight. The second candidate received 9/10 of this, and so on down the list. The votes based on actual ballots and the doubled votes based on the party's ranking were then summed (column 3) and this sum was then divided by 3 (column 4) in order to obtain the final number of votes assigned to each candidate. As can be seen, in this example A is now elected first and B second, illustrating the fact that it was harder under the 1959 rules than under the 1942 rules for voters to change the order of the candidates within a list.

For the upper tier, parties were no longer allowed to present a closed list. Seats were otherwise allocated to candidates as under the 1942 rules.

3.3 The 1987 Electoral Reform

This reform took place in two stages. First, Articles 31, 33, and 34 of the Constitution were amended in 1984. The key point in the terms of this project is that Article 1 of the amendment revised the constituency structures laid out in Article 31 of the Constitution. Second, the 1987 electoral law replicated this and also changed the electoral formula at the lower (but not the upper) tier from d'Hondt to Hare and largest remainders. These reforms increased proportionality by increasing the number of compensatory seats and reducing malapportionment: since 1987, no party has been overrepresented. The new electoral law was, however, highly complex and widely criticized for being incomprehensible. In detail:

Assembly size. Increased from 60 to 63 (Article 1 of the constitutional amendment, revising Article 31 of the constitution.

Districts and district magnitude. The districts were substantially changed in order to reduce malapportionment resulting from population drift to Reykjavík. Nevertheless, the overall structure did not change much. There were still eight lower-tier districts. 54 of the seats were allocated to the districts in the Constitution (and in Article 5 of the Electoral Law), with four 5MDs, two 6MDs, one 8MD, and one 14MD (Reykjavík). At least eight of the remaining nine seats were to be allocated to the districts before the election in order to reflect population. One seat could be allocated after the election, in order to help ensure proportionality across parties. Article 5 of the Electoral Law sets out the details of this. In the elections of 1987 and 1991 there was indeed one such wandering seat – "Flakkarinn", the "vagabond". Following the 1995 amendment, however, this was abolished and all of the seats were allocated to districts before the election. The details of this districting are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Details of districting under the 1987 system

	Seats allocated in constitution	1987		1991		1995		1999	
		Seats allocated before election	No. seats filled	Seats allocated before election	No. seats filled	Seats allocated before election	No. seats filled	Seats allocated before election	No. seats filled
Reykjavík	14	18	18	18	18	19	19	19	19
Reykjanes	8	11	11	11	11	12	12	12	12
West	5	5	6	5	5	5	5	5	5
Westfjords	5	5	5	5	6	5	5	5	5
Northwest	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Northeast	6	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6
East	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
South	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Total	**54**	**62**	**63**	**62**	**63**	**63**	**63**	**63**	**63**

Source: We are grateful to Sigríður Vilhjálmsdóttir of Statistics Iceland for her assistance in locating this information in Statistics Iceland, *Elections to the Althingi (Reports)*.

The size of the upper tier was not absolutely fixed. The constitutional amendment said, "Up to one fourth of the seats of each constituency can be allocated, according to section a and b of paragraph 2 in this Article, with consideration of election results in the whole country. The same applies to allocation of seats according to section c in the same paragraph." (Article 1c). This meant that, for each district, the greatest possible whole number of seats, up to one quarter of the district magnitude, was allocated to the national tier. Hardarson (2002: 147-8) says the number of seats in the national tier went up from 11 to 13.

Nature of votes that can be cast. This remained unchanged. There no was amendment to that part of the constitution that states that each party's list should normally contain twice as many candidates as the number of seats available in the district.

Party threshold. A threshold was introduced at the district level at two-thirds of a Hare quota; seats were eliminated one at a time and the threshold was then recalculated.

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. The system was switched from d'Hondt to Hare and largest remainders (Hardarson 2002: 147-8).

Allocation of seats to parties in the upper tier. D'Hondt was used on a compensatory basis as before.

Allocation of seats to candidates. Provisions were adopted identical to those in place in Norway. In essence, this meant that a candidate could move on a party's list only if at least half of the party's voters had made changes to the list order in respect of that candidate (private communication with Þorkell Helgason). In practice, this condition was never met.

3.4 The 2000 Electoral Reform

This reform again took place in two stages. First, Article 31 of the Constitution was amended in 1999, removing constituency details and setting out a new structure. Second, a new electoral law was passed in 2000, setting out constituency details and increasing the weight attached to personal votes. In detail:

Assembly size. This stayed at 63 (Article 1 of the constitutional amendment, revising Article 31 of the constitution.

Districts and district magnitude. The details of the constituencies were removed from the Constitution. Rather, the constitution says that there will be either six or seven constituencies. The Constitution (Article 31, as revised) says that six seats are allocated in each constituency according to the results in that constituency.

Article 6 of the 2000 Electoral Law delineates six constituencies. Despite what it says in the Constitution, three of these are 10MDs and three are 11MDs, though the National Electoral Commission has power to vary this if malapportionment becomes too great (Article 8).

Of these seats, nine seats are allocated in each district according to local votes, while the remaining one or two seats are allocated from the nationally pooled seats. Thus, there are nine seats in the upper tier and 54 in the lower tier (Article 8).

Nature of votes that can be cast. This was not changed. Voters are presented with lists containing candidates in the order determined by the parties. Article 82 of the electoral law states that voters first vote for one of the party lists. Article 82 goes on to say that voters can, if they wish, reorder the candidates by placing numbers next to their names; they can also strike through the name of a candidate.

As before, each party's list must contain twice as many candidates as the number of seats available in the district (Article 31 of the Electoral Law).

Party threshold. There is no threshold at the district level. The threshold for the national tier is now 5 per cent of the national vote (Article 108).

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. The system switched back to d'Hondt (Article 107).

Allocation of seats to parties in the upper tier. D'Hondt is again used on a compensatory basis. Specifically, all votes across the country are counted, but the first divisor for each party is one greater than the number of seats the party had won in the districts (Article 108).

Allocation of seats to candidates. The system was in most respects moved back to that in place before 1959, the exception being that list variation is limited so that only candidates in the upper part of the list as presented by the party can be considered for election. The upper part consists of twice the number of candidates that have been elected from the party's list (from either the lower or upper tier) in each district, subject to a minimum of three candidates (Article 110). Article 110 goes on to specify the vote received by each candidate on the list:

> A candidate who occupies the 1st place on an unaltered ballot paper, or who is ranked in that place on an altered ballot paper, receives one vote. The candidate who in the same way is in 2nd place receives a fraction of a vote as follows: the denominator is the ranking number, while the numerator is that number reduced by 1. The numerator is then reduced by 1 for each successive place.

The "ranking number" here is the number of candidates from the list who are considered for election. For example, if a party in a constituency has received three seats, then its "ranking number" is six, meaning that the candidates in the first six places on its list are considered for election. A candidate placed first on an unaltered ballot paper or ranked first by the voter on an altered ballot paper (provided she or he was in one of the first six places on the party's list) receives 1 vote. A candidate placed second on an unaltered ballot paper or ranked second by the voter on an altered ballot paper (again provided she or he was in one of the first six places on the party's list) receives 5/6 of a vote, and so on down to the last candidate, who receives 1/6 of a vote. A candidate who has been struck off by a voter receives zero. (This last point appears not to be explicitly stated in the law, but is stated by Helgason (2010: 18).)

Thus, list votes and candidate votes are given equal weight in determining the total number of votes for each candidate. The places are then filled in order of these numbers of votes.

In terms of the hypothetical example introduced above, the determination of final list order proceeds as in Table 6.

Table 6. Hypothetical vote calculation under the 2000 system

Candidate	From unaltered ballots	From altered ballots	Total
A	125	0	125
B	3/4x125 = 93.75	25	118.75
C	2/4x125 = 62.5	3/4x25 = 18.75	81.25
D	1/4x125 = 31.25	2/4x25 = 12.5	43.75
E	0	0	0
F	0	0	0
G	0	0	0
H	0	0	0
I	0	0	0
J	0	0	0

The party has won two seats, so only the first four candidates on the list as ordered by the party are in the running for election. As under the 1942 rules, the 125 unaltered ballots give the first candidate 125 votes and the remaining candidates declining fractions of this. This time, however, the denominator is just four, rather than ten (four being the number of candidates in the running) and the numerator series starts (with the second candidate) at one less than this. The altered ballots are also assigned as under the 1942 rules, again with the exception of the lower denominator. The two parts are summed to determine the final ranking.

It can be seen that A is elected first and B second, whereas under the 1942 rules B was elected first and A second. This illustrates the point already noted in relation to the 1942 rules, that it is easier for voters to change the order of the list when the number of candidates under consideration – and therefore the denominator – is higher. The restriction of the counting procedure only to 'ranking' candidates thus means that lists remain less flexible than under the 1942 rules, though they are more flexible than between 1959 and 2000.

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Project funding provisions