

How the system works

Voters in Britain elect their Members of Parliament (MPs) using a voting system called First-Past-the-Post (FPTP).

Britain is divided up into 659 constituencies, each of which has roughly the same number of electors. Each constituency elects one MP who then represents all the people in that area. At an election, each voter is given a ballot paper with the names of all their local candidates – one from each party. The voter marks the ballot paper with an X next to one of the names on the list, either because they prefer that candidate or that candidate's party. When the votes are counted, the candidate with the most votes wins.

When the result in every constituency is known, then the party which has won the largest number of constituencies will form the Government and the leader of the largest party will become the Prime Minister. Occasionally, no party has enough MPs to govern on its own (more MPs than all the other MPs combined) and must work formally or informally with another party in order to have a majority in Parliament.

There are many problems with this voting system:

In each constituency, there will usually be at least three candidates standing – more often five, six or more. It is therefore very common for the winner to be elected with the support of less than half of those who vote. At the General Election in 1997, more than 40% of MPs did not have the support of a majority of their local voters.

Many people find that their favourite party has no chance of winning in their constituency and so cast a vote for the candidate they consider most likely to stop their least favourite party from winning. This is known as tactical voting.

Voters do not get much of a choice. The candidates are decided by the parties and all the voter can do is to pick between one candidate per party. Different candidates from the same party often have very different views on some issues.

Those people who voted for candidates other than the winner may feel that they are not properly represented. Although most MPs try very hard to represent everyone equally, a constituent who supports another party may feel they do not have a representative to turn to and MPs from other seats do not generally help people in constituencies other than their own.

Problems with this system



Mock First-Past-the-Post ballot paper

Across the country, the results from each seat do not add up to give each party their fair share of the seats. This is because the system is not a proportional one. What this means is that parties such as the Green Party, despite winning votes across the country in 1997, have no MPs. The Liberal Democrats gained 17% of the votes across Britain but won only 7% of the seats. The big parties also miss out – the Conservatives had no MPs in Scotland or Wales after the 1997 General Election despite winning many votes in both. Labour voters in counties such as Dorset and Surrey are also unrepresented.

Under FPTP, the party that forms the Government is likely to have the support of less than half of those who voted. No Government since 1935 has had the support of more than half of those who voted. FPTP is also unpredictable: in 1997, Labour won with a huge majority, despite getting only 43% of the votes – only 1% more than John Major got when the Conservatives won with a small majority in 1992.

The Electoral Reform Society is a membership organisation which campaigns for the strengthening of our democracy. If you would like more information, please return this form to: Electoral Reform Society, 6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU, or visit our website at www.electoral-reform.org.uk or call 020 7928 1622

Name

Address

Postcode

Phone

What are the Alternatives?

There are other ways of electing MPs.

The First-Past-the-Post system only became the sole voting system used to elect MPs in 1950 and other systems are used to elect members of the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, London Mayor and Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly, European Parliament and local councillors in Northern Ireland.

All of these other systems share the common feature of being proportional – making sure that the share of the seats each party receives is roughly equal to their share of the votes. Under a proportional system, more voters end up with a candidate of their choice being elected.

Some systems also allow electors more choice when casting their vote. Instead of simply marking an X, they can number the candidates in order of preference (1,2,3 and so on). This means that, if their chosen candidate has no chance of winning and no candidate has the support of more than half the voters, their vote can be transferred to their second choice and so have more chance of counting.

Because all votes count, there is much less need for tactical voting

This is the Alternative Vote (AV) and it is a preferential system and so gives voters more choice of candidates. However, AV is not a proportional system and so would not provide a fairer distribution of seats. The 'Jenkins Commission' has recommended that MPs be elected using AV+, a modified version of AV which is at least more proportional than the present system.

Some systems use larger constituencies which elect more than one MP. This allows natural communities – such as whole cities or counties – to be represented together instead of having unnatural divisions imposed.

In constituencies with more than one MP, each party will put up more than one candidate. Some systems allow voters to choose between the candidates of the same party. They can then cast their vote on the basis of gender, age or views on issues such as Europe, as well as on the basis of party. This system also makes it more likely that more women and black and Asian MPs will be elected.

The best system – which combines all of these benefits – is called the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and is used in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Australia and in elections for companies such as Shell UK, unions such as the National Union of Teachers and the National Union of Students and many other organisations big and small.

mark order of preference in space below

Curran, Magnus 75 Margaret Street Harlow House Party		
Darling, Steven 22a Ware Road Old Harlow Tea Party		1
Foulds, Claire 22 Brent Close Bishops Field Tea Party		4
Houghton, June 49 Harold Way Harlow Dinner Party		6
Patel, Jay 100 Stone Street Harlow House Party		
Shelley, Pam 2 Willow Drive Old Harlow Independent		5
Thomson, Roger 77 Marlow Way Harlow Dinner Party		
Underhill, Marc The Old Mill Sawbridgeworth House Party		3
Waterford, Emma 86 Moorfield Harlow Tea Party		2
Williams, Andrew 62 Chapelfields Potter Street Dinner Party		

Mock STV ballot paper

Electing Members of

Parliament