

# The 2011 Scottish Parliament election In-depth

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Summary  
Briefing



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# Summary Briefing

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Perhaps one of the most important questions raised by the experience of the 2011 election is whether action now needs to be taken to ensure that Scotland's electoral system can continue to meet the original aspirations and expectations of the advocates of devolution. In their new report, Prof John Curtice and Dr Martin Steven look at the election's successes and failures and see what lessons can be learned for the future of Scottish democracy. In light of their findings the Society has produced this summary briefing.

## Squeezing Smaller Parties

Although a more proportional system, the Additional Member System (AMS) has a number of features that favours larger parties over smaller ones.

In 2011, a majority of constituency contests were only fought by the four largest parties. Not only was this in sharp contrast to the position on the list ballot, but it meant that most voters had far less choice in their local constituency contest in 2011 than they had enjoyed in the general election in 2010.

## A PR Majority?

In all four elections since devolution, the party with the largest share of the vote has always won more than its proportional share of the seats. Equally, whether in coalition, minority or majority

Government, the ruling party or parties have never won 50% of the vote. That said, AMS is essential in ensuring the party that comes first in the popular vote does have the most seats.

## A parliament that reflects Scottish society?

The vision of a parliament where women can play a full role has never been fully realised. The list vote does undoubtedly better reflect social diversity. Other than the two major parties, all women MSPs were elected through the list, and the only ethnic minority MSPs were elected from the list. Indeed the proportion of women list MSPs is now only just less than 50% and although ethnic minority MSPs only constitute 1.5% of the Parliament, this is not too far off the 2% representation in the general population.

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However, the appearance of diversity on the list, and the chances of those individuals being elected remains largely in the hands of the political parties as the order in which the candidates are elected is still a so-called ‘closed list’.

The Society would argue that the list would offer a wider variety of choice, fairer votes, and improved democracy, were the regional list ballots an ‘open list’ where voters could choose who was elected.

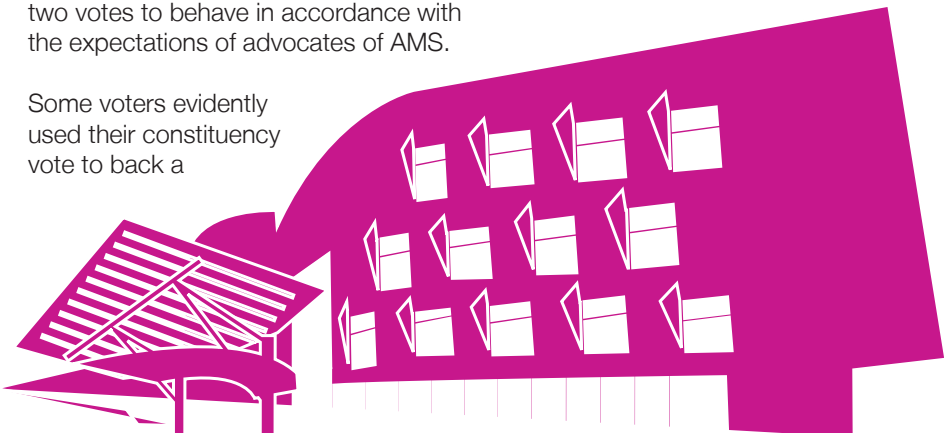
## Voter Sophistication

2011 demonstrated voters are willing to take advantage of the fact that they have two votes to behave in accordance with the expectations of advocates of AMS.

Some voters evidently used their constituency vote to back a

candidate whom they like rather than a party. Also, if the choice voters wished to express only appeared on the list ballot paper, they often only completed that one. This behaviour led to a much higher level of spoilt or blank constituency ballots than list ballots. The inconsistency between the parties as to how they treat the constituency ballot and the list ballot reveals a democratic weakness in the system that voters are attempting to overcome.

***The 2011 Scottish Parliament Election***  
by Prof John Curtice and Dr Martin Steven is available for download at [www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)



# Where next for Scotland?

## How can the Parliament better reflect Scottish society, truly offer choice to the Scottish electorate and meet the aspirations of devolution?

The Electoral Reform Society Scotland is keen to have this discussion with as wide an audience as possible. Since our inception we have argued for fairer votes and working to make sure every vote counts. The Scottish system of AMS is a vast improvement on First Past the Post, but could it be even better?

Scotland is an increasingly diverse country, with engaged citizens interested in debate and current affairs. Voting systems that favour large parties, to any extent, do not represent diversity or the plurality of views in society. If the strength and variety of the views of the population are not reflected in our Parliament and other decision making bodies, then the full potential of our democracy is not met.

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## Considerations for democracy in Scotland:

- Do two large parties really represent the diversity of opinion in Scottish society?
- Would a change to Single Transferable Vote give more real choice to voters, better express their wishes and allow smaller parties to get fairer representation?
- Are there other interim improvements to the system that would iron out some of the immediate concerns? A move from d' Hondt to Sainte-Lagué? Open Lists for the regional ballot?