

“A parliament that looks like Britain”

The ERS response to the Speaker’s conference

Executive Summary

- The Electoral Reform Society is concerned that the chronic under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people amongst our Parliamentarians is a sign of an unhealthy democracy. We believe that overhauling the electoral system will help address concerns about equal access to power and voter disengagement.
- The Electoral Reform Society believes that a multi-member proportional electoral system would enhance the representation of women, ethnic minorities and other non-traditional candidates. A multi-member single transferable vote system would give greater voter choice and produce fairer results in terms of party representation. This would enhance the legitimacy of the UK Parliament, build trust and ensure that everyone has fair representation of their views.
- We recognise that the under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people within the House of Commons and in public positions is a multi-faceted problem that requires a multi-faceted solution. However, a reformed electoral system would be an easily achievable change which would help generate broader cultural and organisational reform.

Introduction

1. The Electoral Reform Society is a national membership organisation and one of the UK’s leading authorities on democracy and elections. The Society believes in fairness and choice in the electoral process and therefore advocates

a change from our current First-Past-the-Post system to a more proportional system, the Single Transferable Vote. The Society is an active member of the Women and the Vote campaign.

2. Our response will consider most of the questions asked in the call for evidence; however, where we feel that two or more questions are best answered together, we have taken the liberty to do so. We have also concentrated on some questions more than others, not because we feel some of them to be unimportant, but rather because we deem our expertise to lie elsewhere or indeed feel that we would require more space to outline our comments than given in this short response.

3. We have concentrated in our answers on the representation of women and ethnic minorities rather than the disabled. We felt that we would not be able to provide any detailed insights in this area.

4. The Society notes that part of the original discussion around the Speaker’s Conference included a wider debate about political engagement as well as young people. We regret that the Conference seems to have dropped these issues from its remit.

Question 1, 2 & 3:

Are problems caused by the unbalanced representation in the House of Commons of different groups in society? If so, what are those problems? Is there a relationship between these levels of representation and voter attitudes to Parliament?

1. Electoral Reform Society research from July 2008 shows that this is unlikely to change much following the next General Election.

2. The Electoral Commission and Operation Black Vote (2002) 'Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities'

3. The Electoral Commission (April 2004) 'Gender and political participation', p.46/ 47

4. Sarah Childs and Julie Withey (2003) 'More than Toilets and Tampax? Sex and Early Day Motions in the 1997 Parliament', Paper presented to the EPOP Annual Conference

5. Nickie Charles (2009) 'Gender and political processes in the context of devolution', ESRC

5. The Electoral Reform Society subscribes to an understanding of representation in which elected representatives act in the interests of their local communities as a whole. We believe that a woman MP can represent a man just as well as a woman and vice versa, and that a White MP can provide good representation to BME constituents. However, we also acknowledge that the identity of one's representative can be important to voters and that who sits in the House of Commons has a symbolic significance that should not be underestimated.

6. Today only 1 in 5 MPs is a woman and there are only 15 Members of Parliament who are considered to be from an ethnic minority group. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that over 50 percent of the population are women and that the UK has an ethnic minority population of around 7 percent. This, if nothing else, is therefore an issue of fairness and one that raises questions about the barriers in the way of equal access to political power.¹

7. The under-representation of certain groups, such as women and ethnic minorities within the House of Commons exacerbates voter disengagement amongst these groups, partly as voter choice is severely restricted. This assumption is confirmed by research conducted by Operation Black Vote and the Electoral Commission in 2002 which concluded that greater numbers of black and ethnic minority MPs would encourage members of ethnic minority groups to become more involved in the political process.² In addition, evidence from the 2001 election shows that where a female MP was elected to the House of Commons, female turnout was 4 percent higher than that of men, which, although small, is statistically significant.

In addition, the sex of the MP also affected wider civic participation, with women showing less interest in the political campaigns in areas with a male candidate.³

8. The Society believes that women or ethnic minorities, as well as disabled people, elected into the House of Commons will bring in different experiences than for example a white male MP. This experience is essential to ensure that the political agenda and the policies debated within the House of Commons are at least aware of these varying views and can take them into consideration. A number of studies confirm that a greater proportion of female MPs support efforts to mainstream the issue of gender and raise women's concerns. Looking at the UK, for example, Sarah Childs and Julie Withey in their analysis of Early Day Motions (EDM) and the intake of 65 new Labour Women in 1997 has shown that female Labour MPs are more likely to sign 'women's EDMs' than their male counterparts.⁴ In addition, Professor Nickie Charles in her most recent and still ongoing study of the impact of women in the National Assembly of Wales also support the claim "that a gender balance among political representatives has an effect both on the way politics is done and on the policy issues that are prioritised".⁵

Questions 4, 5 & 6:

What are the reasons why more women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled do not become members of Parliament? Why don't more of these groups consider standing for election? Or, if they do, Why aren't more of them selected? Or, if they are. Why aren't more of them elected? What are the problems and

6. The median constituency in terms of the proportion of the White population is Tunbridge Wells, which was 97.5 percent White in 2001, according to the 2001 census.

7. Silver, Nate 'Why are there no Black Senators?', <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2009/01/why-are-there-no-black-senators.html>

practical difficulties encountered – at any point in the process of selection and election – by members of these underrepresented groups who are looking to become MPs?

9. The reasons why more women or people from ethnic minorities do not become members of Parliament are manifold and combine issues of political culture as well as the electoral system used to elect our MPs. The problems faced by aspiring politicians to some extent differ from party to party; however there are a number of issues that cut across party political lines.

Constitutional Barriers

10. The Electoral Reform Society believes that the First Past the Post electoral system used for Westminster elections is a barrier to equal representation.

11. Single-Member constituencies, characteristic of a First-Past-the-Post system, discourage parties from taking a risk at selection time reducing the possibilities for change. For this reason, women, for example, are on average still less likely to be selected for winnable seats than their male counterparts. Analysing the statistics from the 2005 elections, for example, the Conservatives were four times more likely to choose a man for a target seat than a woman, with less than a third of their women candidates being chosen for the 50 most winnable seats. In addition, the 33 seats where the Liberal Democrats had the highest hopes of winning, a little over a third of candidates were women. While this is likely to be to some extent a result of too few women getting through onto the approved lists (only 25 percent of, for example, the Liberal Democrats'

approved candidates in the UK are currently women), the current electoral system does little to encourage parties to reach out to potential non-traditional candidates.

12. The use of First Past the Post has also had an impact on the representation of ethnic minorities within the House of Commons. Most of Britain's BME MPs are from constituencies with considerably above average BME populations.⁶ Leading the table is Dawn Butler MP from Brent South, where the percentage of the Non-White population is 64.6 percent. At the other end of the spectrum is Ashok Kumar MP who represents Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, which has an ethnic minority population of 1.3 percent. Overall, there are only 2 constituencies that are represented by ethnic minority MPs with less than the national average of non-white residents, and 2 more with less than 10 percent non-white population. This fact does suggest that the demographics of a constituency matters.

13. A recent study in the US suggests that the chances of black Representative being elected is 1 in 10 where an area has less than 25 percent of African-American residents, the chances are even at 40 percent and pretty much guaranteed at over 50 percent.⁷ The politics of race in the US is, of course, different from that in the UK; residency is more segregated and politics is more organised on ethnic lines. There is more of a tradition of seeing political representation as being necessary for a community as a whole to be fairly and equally treated. This has been a factor in the court-mandated creation of 'majority-minority' districts through creative gerrymandering – recognition that electoral engineering has its role in ensuring a reasonable level of representation for particular

8. "There are of course cases where BME candidates have been selected and elected in a majority White constituency and vice versa. However, electoral arrangements matter, as will become even clearer in our answers to question 7.

9. Peter Riddell (2003) 'Candidate Selection: The report of the commission on candidate selection', Electoral Reform Society, London

communities. But Silver's finding of a steep curve between 25 per cent and 50 per cent is certainly consistent with what UK data we have.

14. A local party association in a constituency with a sizable proportion of its population being from an ethnic minority community is like to see this community as a more important factor in considering electoral strategy and may well choose a candidate from this community. In addition, in areas of high BME population, there will almost certainly be members of those communities who are active in the local political parties. Our electoral system determines that there are currently fewer than 60 single-member constituencies with more than 25 percent non white-population and only around 20 that exceed 40 percent. On this basis, the scope for much expansion of BME representation under the current electoral system is limited.⁸ The use of larger, multi-member constituencies would allow a greater number of electoral areas to contain that critical mass of BME voters, making increased BME representation more politically attractive to local parties in those areas.

Social and Cultural Barriers

15. Overall, the number of UK residents supporting political parties is diminishing. Only around 1.5 percent of the UK population is a paying supporter of a party. Of these 1.5 percent, only a fraction are what one would consider party political activists. The potential pool of candidates and those selecting local candidates is therefore even smaller and traditionally not particularly representative of wider society.

16. A traditional source of national party candidates, local councillors, are also struggling with diversity, with around 30 percent of councillors in England being women and only 3.4 percent being from an ethnic minority background. It seems fair to suggest that this, similarly to selection at the national level, is to some extent to do with the fact that political parties like to recruit from within their own ranks and are rarely seen to be pro-active about finding new recruits. Local parties generally have high expectations of their candidates, with anyone selected for a safe seat often having to prove allegiance to the party for many years.

17. Standing as a party candidate requires time and money which may present difficulties particularly for aspiring female candidates. Women still often have to juggle work and caring responsibilities and, statistically, some may be poorer than many of their male counterparts. Members of an ethnic minority group also often lack the resources and connections that are vital to succeed in politics, and although many are active in community work and campaigning within the voluntary sector, the link to party selectors is not automatically given.

18. Political culture in the UK is confrontational in its character. One only needs to take a look at Prime-Minister's questions to understand the extent of the 'Yah-boo culture' that prevails within the House of Commons. The electoral system has its part to play in the creation of this political culture, with 'winner-takes-all systems' exacerbating the oppositional nature of politics. This adversarial style of politics seems to disproportionately affect women, discouraging them from standing. Research by the Equal Opportunities Commission from 2002 shows that women are more likely to be discouraged

10. This comparison is based on data from July 2008.

11. Equal Opportunities Commission (2002) 'Man enough for the job? A study of Parliamentary Candidates', p.123

12. Pippa Norris (2004) 'Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour', Chapter 8

than men by the confrontational politics that is the reality of our current political system under FPTP.

Question 7

What actions could be taken by the Government to address disparities in representation?

19. Research on how to overcome inequalities in the political representation of minorities and under-represented groups has long considered the electoral system to play an important role. As highly acclaimed academics as Pippa Norris or Arend Lijphart, to just mention a few, have drawn attention to the impact the way we vote for our representatives has on women and/ or ethnic minorities. We therefore believe that any inquiry into how we can improve the situation in the UK cannot ignore this vital element.

20. In paragraphs 11 to 17 above the Society has outlined the barriers that the current First-Past-the-Post system poses to the fair representation of women and ethnic minorities in the UK. We have shown that the single-member constituency is detrimental to any efforts of increasing the representation of hitherto under-represented groups. This is confirmed by the fact that out of the 70 countries that have a better record than the UK in terms of women's representation, only 13 rely on a majoritarian system like First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) or the Alternative Vote.¹⁰

21. We therefore believe that a change in the electoral system away from the First-Past-the-Post to a proportional system, the Single Transferable Vote, is something that the Government should seriously consider. Whilst

an electoral system itself, cannot be expected to achieve equal and fair political representation, it would enable and encourage parties to act differently and open up access to political power for a wider range of possible candidates. This view is shared by many, including a large proportion of over 400 successful and unsuccessful candidates from the 3 main UK-wide parties as well as the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, who when asked which changes would be most effective at increasing the number of women in Parliament said that introducing a proportional representation system in addition to party training programmes would be beneficial.¹¹

22. Multi-member constituencies, characteristic of PR systems, would make it a rational policy for political parties to put forward a more balanced sheet of candidates. With parties taking into account the possibility that 2 or even 3 of their candidates may be elected within one constituency, it would seem logical for local parties to choose candidates that speak to all sections of society. For example, given that, as outlined in paragraph 8, ethnic minorities would be more encouraged to participate in the political process, i.e. voting, if there were more ethnic minority MPs, it makes sense for parties to attract this section of voters by offering them a candidate that appears to directly speak for them.

23. Pippa Norris has highlighted that the type of electoral system is also related to patterns of incumbency turnover. In her book 'Electoral Engineering' (2004) she highlights that under PR systems around 66 percent of all incumbents get elected again, with this being true for 70 percent of incumbents under majoritarian systems.¹² Although incumbency is in itself

13. Electoral Commission and Operation Black Vote (2002) 'Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities', p.26

not prejudiced against any particular type of candidate and the difference may seem negligible, she argues it is likely to have an impact on opening up more opportunities for challengers under PR systems, as it slows down progress.

24. As discussed in paragraph 17, women are perhaps more discouraged from standing as a political candidate than their male counterparts by our current 'Punch and Judy' style of politics. The possibility that a party may need to form a coalition government or rule as a minority government dependent on sporadic support from other parties to push through legislation, both not un-common occurrences under proportional representation systems, is known to create a more consensual style of politics. This may encourage those women currently put off by politics to get more involved and put themselves forward.

25. It is also interesting to note that research conducted by M. Anwar in 1998 and quoted in the report on voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities found that of all the ethnic minority respondents questioned in 5 constituencies who had never voted, 61 percent noted that they would be 'more likely to vote in a proportional representation system'.¹³ Should this translate into reality, a proportional representation system would go a long way to re-engage the UK's BME population with formal politics.

Question 8:

What actions have been, or could be, taken by political parties, campaigning groups or others to address disparities in representation?

26. All-Women Shortlists, as outlined in paragraph 11, have without doubt shown to work in the sense that they have increased the number of female Labour candidates as well as MPs sitting in the House of Commons even at a time of falling support for Labour. However, we would consider them a crude short-term measure aimed at overcoming the inadequacies of our current electoral system rather than a long-term solution. The success of these measures in the short-term should not distract the Government from making more wide-reaching changes that would support greater diversity in the long run.

27. We would therefore suggest that in addition to the Government changing the electoral system, there are also a number of other things that could be done to support a more varied range of candidates being selected and elected to the House of Commons. All of these would be complementary to a change in the electoral system.

28. First of all, we would support a move to monitoring the gender, age and ethnicity of local as well as national party candidates. Although parties are to some extent doing this at the national level, on the local level local councils and parties are often unaware of these characteristics of candidates standing for elections. We would consider this to be a vital first step.

29. In addition, given that running as a candidate at the national level is hugely expensive and time-consuming and may particularly for single-mothers or carers mean paying for extra child-care, we could envisage there to be something along the lines of a state-funded diversity fund that would provide

additional financial assistance to aspiring candidates with limited financial means.

30. Furthermore, selection committees should seek to recruit people from a broader pool than is currently the case. Local parties could be given financial assistance to hold open-day events specifically aimed at women, ethnic minorities and the disabled, allowing them to develop networks within formal politics. One would have to ensure, however, that any money is ring fenced as to avoid it being used for general campaigning activities.

31. Last but not least, we would also recommend that parties develop training and mentoring programmes for those candidates that may not have had the same educational and social opportunities to develop the skills needed to successfully win over a selection committee.

About us:

The Electoral Reform Society is a national membership organisation and one of the UK's leading authorities on democracy and elections. We conduct research into elections and democratic processes, and campaign for a change to the voting system.

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