

critical overview of electoral systems

1. 2. 3



CONTENTS

- **Introduction**
- **Single Member Systems**
 - First Past The Post
 - Supplementary Vote
 - Alternative Vote
- **Multi-member Systems**
 - Single Transferable Vote
 - Party List
- **Mixed Systems**
 - Additional Member System
 - Alternative vote +1
- **Key Milestones for Reform**

INTRODUCTION

You only get one vote for your MP every four or five years, but even then, your choice is limited because each party only offers you one of its candidates.

Thanks to the oddities of our **First-Past-the-Post** system, approximately two-thirds of the seats are 'safe' because one party has a huge majority and always wins, so your vote is unlikely to make a real difference. This leaves many areas of the country as 'electoral deserts' where a party has no hope of winning a seat despite having lots of supporters.

Perhaps it is no wonder that fewer and fewer people are bothering to vote, or even to register. Frustrating, isn't it? But there is a better way...



Your Voice, Your Choice, Your Vote

First-Past-The-Post is not the only voting system. In fact, different systems were used to elect MPs right up until 1950. In recent years we have seen different, often fairer, voting systems being used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, London Assembly, European Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly.

The way in which we vote is important and will determine the style of government and the service that voters can expect from their representatives.

First-Past-the-Post relies on single member constituencies. Each of the 646 MPs in the UK is the sole representative for his or her area. Some systems use larger constituencies, each electing more than one MP.

With this type of system, there is likely to be more than one party with MPs in each area. Other systems do not have constituencies as we understand them, just large regions or even a single electoral area for the whole country.

Voter Choice

FPTP allows voters only to place an X against a single candidate. Some voting systems allow voters to rank candidates 1,2,3 and so on. This is known as preference voting.

It gives voters more choice and means there is more chance that their vote will count. If their first preference vote does not count, then their vote is transferred to their second choice or even further until it counts.

A simple form of preference voting, using single member constituencies, is called the **Alternative Vote (AV)**. AV gives voters more choice than FPTP but does not necessarily produce a result which is more proportional overall.

First-Past-the-Post means that each party only has one candidate, chosen by that party rather than by the electorate. So a person who wants to vote for their favourite party has no choice of candidate.



Because First-Past-the-Post is a 'winner takes all' type of voting system, it often leads to very disproportionate results. A party can get a much larger or smaller share of the seats than it gets share of the votes. Many people think that this is wrong and that the number of seats each party gets should be roughly the same as its share of the votes.



SINGLE MEMBER SYSTEMS

Single Member Systems are voting systems which are used to elect one representative per constituency. The principle Single Member System is our current one, First-Past-The-Post.

First-Past-the-Post

The system is used:

House of Commons and local elections in Great Britain (but not in Northern Ireland) and in USA, Canada and India.

How the System Works:

The current system for electing MPs to the House of Commons is called First-Past-The-Post. There are 646 separate constituencies across the UK each electing one single Member of Parliament.

In order to vote you simply put an 'X' next to the name of the candidate you support. The candidate who gets the most votes wins, regardless of whether he or she has more than 50% support. Once members have been individually elected, the party with the most seats in Parliament, regardless of whether or not it has a majority across the country, normally becomes the next government.

Arguments used in favour:



It is simple to understand.

The voter can express a view on which party should form the next government.

It tends to lead to a two-party system. The system tends to produce single party governments, which are strong enough to create legislation and tackle the country's problems, without relying on the support of any other party.

It provides a close link between the MP and their constituency.

The system represents the views of the people, as the candidate with the greatest support wins through a fair process.

The UK's democracy is one of the strongest in the world, it works and since no system is perfect, why should we go through the massive overhaul of changing?

Arguments used against First-Past-The-Post:

Only one MP is elected in each constituency, so all the voters who did not vote for him or her are not represented. Their votes do not help elect anybody and so are wasted, they could have stayed at home and the result would not have been altered.



In 2005, in Great Britain, 19 million voters cast ineffective votes - that is 70% of those who voted. A high proportion of these voters are the same people every time, e.g. Conservative voters in County Durham or Labour voters in much of Surrey.

There is a lack of choice given to the voters. The candidates are selected by a small number of party members, and voters can only choose between parties. If the candidate selected for your party has views with which you disagree, you are left with no alternative choice within that party.

Voters are represented unequally. In 2005, the average number of votes per MP elected was: 26,906 for Labour, 44,373 for Conservative and 96,539 for Liberal Democrats

Concentrated support for a party produces biased results. In 2005, Conservative support was spread thinly over most of Scotland. They got 15.8% of the vote, and only 1.7% of the seats. The Liberal Democrats got 22.6% of the Scottish vote and a similar share of the seats (18.6%) because they had strong support in a few constituencies and minimal support in most of the others.

The system leads to many people casting negative votes i.e. voting against the candidate they dislike most rather than for the candidate they like best.

The way the boundaries of constituencies are drawn can affect the results. Governments are often accused of gerrymandering, adjusting the boundaries of constituencies to influence the results.

In 2005, Labour won 35.2% of the total vote cast, but got 55.1% of the seats in Parliament, giving them power to form a government. Taking into account the low turnout (61%), only 1 in 5 of the registered electorate actually voted for the Government.

SINGLE MEMBER SYSTEMS cont...

The Supplementary Vote (SV)

The system is used:
to elect the Mayor of London.

How the System works:

With the supplementary vote, there are two columns on the ballot paper - one for the first choice and one for the second choice. Voters are not required to make a second choice if they do not wish to. Voters mark an 'X' in the first column for their first choice and a second 'X' in the second column for their other choice.

Voters' first preferences are counted and if one candidate gets 50% of the vote, then he or she is elected. If no candidate reaches 50% of the vote, the two highest scoring candidates are retained and the rest of the candidates are eliminated.

The second preferences on the ballot papers of the eliminated candidates are examined and any that have been cast for the two remaining candidates are given to them. Whoever has the most votes at the end of the process wins.

Weaknesses:

SV suffers from all the disadvantages of AV, and additionally does not ensure that the winning candidate has the support of at least 50% of the electorate. SV does not eliminate the likelihood of tactical voting.



SINGLE MEMBER SYSTEMS cont...

The Alternative Vote (AV)

The system is used:

in the Australian House of Representatives

How the System Works:

The same constituency boundaries are used as we have now, and voters would elect one person to represent them in parliament, as we do now. However, rather than marking an 'X' against their preferred candidate, each voter would rank their candidates in an order of preference, putting '1' next to their favourite, a '2' by their second choice and so on. If a candidate receives a majority of first place votes, he or she would be elected just as under the present system. However if no single candidate gets more than 50% of the vote, the second choices for the candidate at the bottom are redistributed. The process is repeated until one candidate gets an absolute majority. The alternative vote is not actually a proportional system, but a majoritarian system. It looks most similar to the current electoral system.

Arguments used in favour:

- It retains the same constituencies and so the bond between members and their constituents is not lost.
- Extreme parties would be unlikely to gain support by AV and coalition governments would be no more likely to arise than they are under First-Past-The-Post.
- All MPs would have the support of a majority of their constituents.
- It prevents MPs being elected on a minority of the vote. In 2005, only 34% of British MPs were elected by more than 50% of the votes in their constituencies. This is a decline from 2001, when half of MPs could claim 50% support of their constituents.
- It removes the need for negative voting. Electors can vote for their first choice of candidate without the fear of wasting their vote.

Weaknesses:

- Whilst it does ensure that the successful candidate is supported by a majority of his or her constituents, it does not give proportionality to parties or other bodies of opinion, in parliament. Research by Democratic Audit in 1997 showed that the results could actually be even more distorting than under First-Past-The-Post.
- It also does very little to give a voice to those who have been traditionally under-represented in parliament.
- There is no transfer of powers from party authority to the voters, and it does not produce a proportional parliament.

MULTI-MEMBER SYSTEMS

Multi-Member Systems, as the name suggests are those which are used to elect more than one representative to each constituency or area.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The system is used:

in the Australian Senate, the Republic of Ireland, Tasmania, Malta and Northern Ireland for local elections and elections to the European Parliament.

How the System Works:

Each constituency would elect between 3 and 5 MPs depending on its size. Voters rank the candidates, putting a '1' for their favourite, a '2' for the next, and so on. If the voter's first choice candidate does not need their vote, either because he or she is elected without it, or because he or she has too few votes to be elected, then the vote is transferred to the voter's second choice candidate, and so on.

In this way, most of the votes help to elect a candidate and far fewer votes are wasted. An important feature of STV is that voters can choose between candidates both of their own and of other parties, and can even select candidates for reasons other than party affiliation. Thus, a voter, wishing for more women MPs could vote for a woman from their own party and then all other women candidates, whatever party they stand for.

Arguments used in favour:

STV does more than other systems to guarantee that everyone gets their views represented in parliament and that they have a say in what is done by their elected representatives. STV is the best option for:

- Putting the power in the hands of the voters.
- Keeping MPs linked to the people who voted for them. Most voters can identify a representative that they personally helped to elect and can feel affinity with. Such a personal link also increases accountability.
- Making parliament reflect the views of the voters.
- Only a party or coalition of parties, who could attract more than 50% of the electorate could form a government. Any changes would have to be backed by a majority since public opinion is reflected fairly in elections under STV. This is far more important than that a government should be formed by only one political party.
- It enables the voters to express opinions effectively. Voters can choose between candidates within parties, demonstrating support for different wings of the party. Voters can also express preferences between the abilities or other attributes, of individual candidates.
- It is simple for voters to use.
- There is no need for tactical voting . Voters can cast a positive vote and know that their vote will not be wasted whatever their choice is.
- It produces governments that are strong and stable because they are founded on the majority support of the electorate.

Weaknesses:

- The system does not produce such accuracy in proportional representation of parties as the party list or additional member systems.
- It breaks the link between *an individual* MP and his or her constituency.
- Constituencies would be 3-5 times larger than they are now but with 3-5 MPs.
- MPs may have to spend an excessive amount of time dealing with constituency problems and neglect the broader issues.
- There are critics who say that this system could lead to permanent coalition governments, but this would only happen if the voters as a whole want it.
- It is disliked by politicians, since it would remove power from them and give it to the electors, and many MPs with safe seats would lose the security they feel now.

Answering the Common Arguments Against STV

It could destroy the link between MPs and the constituents

Under STV, the constituency link is retained, albeit between several MPs and an enlarged constituency. The accountability of MPs to their constituencies is actually increased in that, unlike the current single-member constituencies, no individual MP has a safe seat. Due to the reduction in security of tenure brought about by STV, all MPs will need to win their seats on merit. Voters also tend to feel a natural link with the whole of Leeds, for example, rather than an allegiance to Leeds North or Leeds Central. They may prefer to have real influence with the MPs representing the whole of the city, rather than hold one MP responsible for their sector. The idea of working together, as a team with other representatives in the area is the norm for local government, where working together for a local ward, is often seen as advantageous.

STV could cause internal party rifts

In most cases, party solidarity and loyalty will inhibit individualistic campaigning, and even if this were to happen, a party could exclude a future ticket to a recalcitrant candidate. There is intra-party competition in every election system. With First-Past-The-Post, it is internalised within the selection and re-selection process; with Party Lists, it becomes a permanent internal competition for a high place on the list. In order to maximise its total support in a multi-member constituency; a party is likely to put up a balanced team of candidates. Under STV all existing MPs can stand for election, and may have an advantage in being better known than their new colleagues.

MPs could become bogged down in casework.

There is no evidence in Britain that local casework-based candidates poll better than national names, often voters like to be represented by national names who may have little day to day contact with the constituency.

The ballot papers would be too complicated for the public too understand.

Electors are perfectly able to cope with STV ballot papers. The first Northern Ireland Assembly election under STV in 1973, which produced a 70% turnout, is a good example. The voters elected representatives from both sides of the community in every constituency.

MULTI-MEMBER SYSTEMS cont...

Party List

The system is used:

in most countries in continental Europe, South Africa, Israel and Russia, and was used in Britain for the 1999 European Election (Northern Ireland will retain STV).

How the System Works:

There are many variations of party list voting, but the most basic form is the **closed party list** system. The system is quite simple; rather than voting in a single-member constituency for a specific candidate, electors vote for a party in a multi-member constituency, or sometimes a whole country.

Each party's list of candidates, ranked according to the party's preference, is published on the ballot paper. All the votes are counted and each party receives seats in the constituency in the same proportion as the votes it won in that constituency.

A quota is calculated for the constituency - the number of votes required to win one seat. Those who become the party's MPs, will be those placed highest in the party's list of candidates. Voters simply vote for the party, they have no say as to which candidates are elected.

An **open party list** system is one that allows the voter to vote either for the list as published or to vote for an individual candidate, wherever that candidate appears on the party's list. The possible effect of this is to alter the order in which candidates have been placed on the list, and therefore the list of successful candidates, while still registering support for the voter's preferred party. Seats are allocated according to the number of quotas won.

Arguments used in favour:

- The strength of such systems are that they guarantee a high degree of party proportionality. If a party receives 32% of the vote, then it will get 32% of the seats in parliament. Every vote has the same value.
- The system is also very simple for voters, who have only to make one choice for a party out of a small selection.

Weaknesses:

- With closed party lists, voters have little or no effective choice over candidates, they only get control over which party is in government, but with no control over the members of that government.
- Party lists do nothing to ensure fair representation for traditionally under-represented groups in society, and in fact could do the opposite, since party leaders are most likely to choose people from a similar background to represent the party.
- Parties can stifle independent and minority opinion within their ranks. Because of the very large constituencies, there is little chance for accountability to voters and no local connection between members and voters. The system keeps power out of the hands of voters and firmly in the hands of party leadership.

MULTI-MEMBER SYSTEMS cont...

Additional Member System (AMS)

The system is used:

in Germany and also New Zealand since 1993, (in New Zealand it is called Mixed Member Proportional Representation or MMP). The new Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were both elected by AMS in May 1999 and 2003 as was the London Assembly in May 2000.

How the System Works:

Several variants of Additional Member Systems have been proposed, but basically they are a combination of the First-Past-The-Post system and party list voting. The purpose is to retain the best features of First-Past-The-Post while introducing proportionality between parties through party list voting.

Each voter has two votes, one vote for a single MP via First-Past-The-Post, and one for a regional or national party list. Half the seats or more are allocated to the single-member constituencies and the rest to the party list. The percentage of votes obtained by the parties in the party list vote determines their overall number of representatives; the party lists are used to top up the First-Past-The-Post seats gained by the party to the required number. So if a party has won two seats in the constituencies but in proportion to its votes should have five, the first three candidates on its list are elected in addition.

Arguments used in favour:

- It results in broadly proportional representation along party lines while ensuring that there is a directly accountable MP for each constituency.
- It retains a number of single-member constituencies.
- It has produced strong and stable governments in Germany (but not single party governments)
- Each elector has at least one effective vote. Even if they see no chance of winning in the single member constituency, people can use their second vote for a party they support and still have a limited say through an additional member.
- The separation of the vote, allows the voter to make an expression of popular approval or disapproval which is not possible under First-Past-The-Post. Because the first vote does not affect a party's total representation, a voter can use it to express personal support for a candidate without necessarily helping that candidate's party.
- AMS would give people the government they wanted, keeping the link between MPs and voters as well as giving some value to all votes, via the additional members.

Weaknesses:

- It combines many of the faults of First-Past-The-Post with many of the defects of the list systems of PR.
- Half of all MPs are not directly accountable to any voters, just to their party leadership, and have no constituency.
- It creates two types of MP, one with a constituency role and duties and one without such a base.
- To retain some constituency MPs, constituencies would have to increase in size.
- The parties would retain power over selecting candidates for constituency seats and would have complete control over choosing their Additional Members.
- Those who are under-represented today may not fare any better under AMS.
- In Germany a party can win more constituency seats than its total entitlement, and is allowed to retain its extra seat(s) and the total membership of the Bundestag is increased by that number over the standard 656.

MULTI-MEMBER SYSTEMS **cont...**

Alternative Vote Plus **(AV+)**

How the System Works:

Like AMS, AV+ is a mixed system composed of two elements, a constituency element and a top-up. Voters would have two votes - one for a constituency MP and the other from a regional list.

The constituency MPs are elected by the Alternative Vote (AV). The so-called 'top-up' MPs are elected on a corrective basis from open party lists.

The system is not currently used anywhere in the world. It is the system proposed by the Independent Commission on the Voting System (chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead) to be put to the electorate in a referendum as an alternative to First Past the Post for UK General Elections.

Arguments used in favour:

- In the constituencies, the winning candidate has the support of at least 50% of the voters.
- People can vote for the candidates of their choice without fear of wasting their votes. A voter can vote for, say, the Green Party, knowing that if the Green Party candidate is not successful then their vote will transfer to their second preference. Tactical voting is no longer needed.
- It is a broadly proportional system.
- Everyone will have an incentive to vote, because their vote will count.
- In the top-up section, voters will be able to choose the best candidate to represent their party.

Weaknesses:

- Constituencies will be slightly larger than at present.
- As with AMS, there will be two categories of MPs.

KEY MILESTONES FOR REFORM

The road toward electoral reform has been a long yet steady and well-documented one. Devolution in Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland has paved the way for the introduction of several new electoral systems in Britain, to the extent that many people now have experience of voting under other systems than First-Past-The-Post.



The Plant Report (1993)

An internal Labour Party report commissioned by Neil Kinnock, the Plant Report signified a major shift in Labour attitude towards proportional representation and electoral reform, and away from its traditional attachment to First Past the Post (FPTP)

The Jenkins Commission (1998)

The first step towards fulfilling a 1997 Labour manifesto promise for a referendum on voting systems to the House of Commons, the Jenkins Commission studied elections to Westminster. It recommended a system it created itself – the Alternative Vote Plus (AV+). We're still waiting for the next step promised in the 1997 Labour manifesto – the referendum itself

The Sunderland Commission (2002)

An investigation into Welsh local government, the Sunderland Commission recommended the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The Kerley Report (2002)

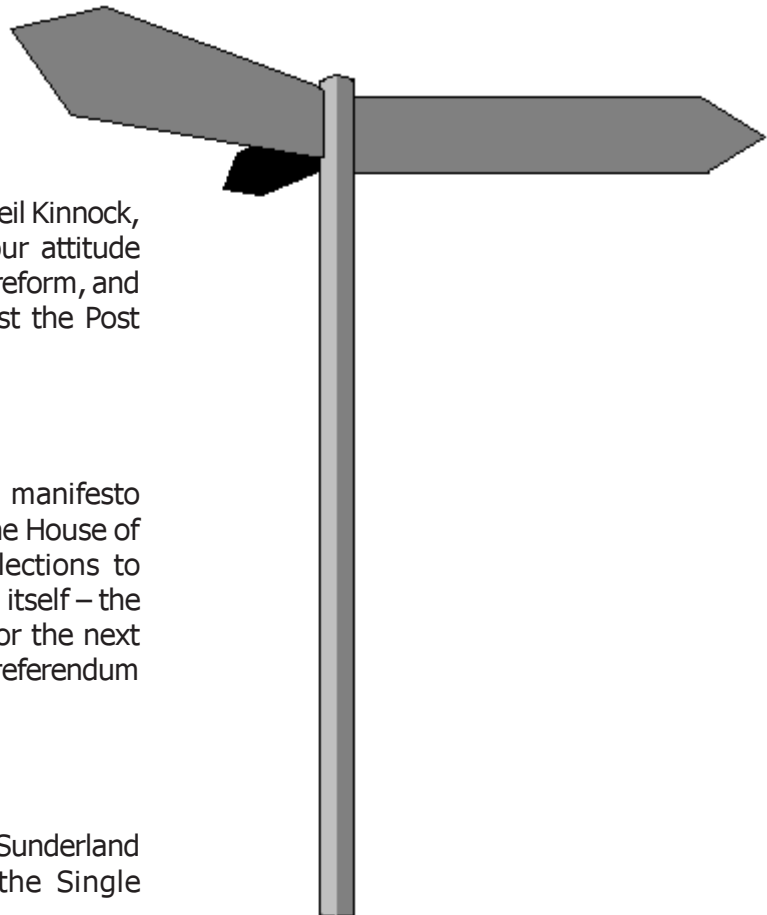
An investigation into Scottish local government, the Kerley Commission recommended the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote (STV). This was a more decisive follow-up to a previous investigation into Scottish local government, the McIntosh report, which also recommended the adoption of STV

The Richard Commission (2004)

A comprehensive investigation into the Welsh Assembly – its powers, role, size and method of election – the Richard Commission recommended the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The Independent Commission into Proportional Representation (ICPR) (2004)

The ICPR was commissioned to investigate the effects of proportional representation in the UK. It did not (and did not intend to) recommend any particular system. Instead it effectively sifted the good arguments from the bad, on both sides, based on evidence taken from the experiences of proportional systems in the UK. For example, it found no evidence to support the claim that PR leads to unstable government or an increase in fringe parties (arguments used by the anti-PR lobby), nor to support the argument that PR in itself increases turnout (a long-standing argument of pro-PR campaigners)



The Arbuthnott Commission (2006)

An investigation into all levels of Scottish politics and elected institutions, but focusing mainly on the Scottish Parliament. It recommended a package of modifications or 'tweaks' to the Additional Member System (AMS), but with the further recommendation that if these did not work then the Single Transferable Vote (STV) should be introduced. The Arbuthnott Commission also recommended the adoption of STV for Scottish European elections, rejected the proposal to ban dual candidacy in AMS elections to the Scottish Parliament, and recommended that the polling day for local elections to be conducted by STV be held separately from the AMS Scottish Parliament elections. Whilst recognising that it was outside of the Commission's remit, the Arbuthnott report also recommended the adoption of a proportional system for Westminster elections

The POWER Inquiry (2006)

An independent inquiry into the state of British democracy, the **POWER** Report recommended a package of initiatives to reconnect politics and the people, to increase turnout and participation, and to revitalise British democracy. One of these recommendations was "a more responsive voting system" which, given the descriptions in the report and the emphasis on voter choice, can only mean the Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The Government Review of Electoral Systems (????)

In its 2005 manifesto, the Labour Party made the following pledge:

“

“Labour remains committed to reviewing the experience of the new electoral systems – introduced for the devolved administrations, the European Parliament and the London Assembly. A referendum remains the right way to agree any change for Westminster.”

”

We are told that there is a desk-bound review taking place, but we have yet to see any evidence of its activity. Currently, the Government is resisting calls for a public and open review.

X-Change is the youth & student wing of the Electoral Reform Society

We want to bring young people together, to share ideas and take control of our futures and the politics we'll inherit by debating how to make things better.

We want to help other young people organise campaigns and become more politically aware and active, working together to really make a difference.

We encourage citizenship teaching, and produce resources to help citizenship teachers and school councils, as well as speaking at schools and colleges on electoral reform.

6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU
t. +44 (0)20 7928 1622
f. +44 (0)20 7401 7789

x-change@reform.demon.co.uk

www.x-change.org.uk

