UK voting systems: Briefing paper and Discussion Report

Briefing paper

Each of the voting systems below is used somewhere within the UK political system. System A is used for UK Parliamentary elections. Should it be replaced by one of the other systems?

Systems A, B and C are Non-proportional representation in Single-member constituencies

A. First-past-the-post

First-past-the-post is used to elect MPs to the House of Commons. The UK is divided into constituencies and at a general election, voters put a cross (X) next to their preferred candidate on a ballot paper. Ballot papers are then counted and the one candidate who has received the most votes is elected to represent the constituency.

B. Alternative Vote (AV)

Under AV, voters rank candidates in order of preference by marking 1, 2, 3 and so on next to names of candidates on a ballot paper. A voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they like or just vote for one candidate. The first preference votes are counted (those with number 1 next to their name). If a candidate receives more than half of the first preference votes then they are elected. If not, the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated. Their second preference votes are reallocated to the remaining candidates. If by then a candidate has more than half of votes then they are elected. Otherwise, the process of elimination and reallocation of preference votes and is repeated until one candidate has more than half of the votes, and is elected. This process is used by the Labour Party to elect the leader.

C. Supplementary Vote (SV)

The SV system is similar to the AV system, except that only two preferences are allowed. First preference votes are counted and if a candidate has more than half of these then they are elected. Otherwise, all but the two candidates with the highest number of votes are eliminated. Second preferences of the eliminated candidates are allocated to the two remaining candidates and the candidate with the most votes is then elected. SV is used to elect the Mayor of London and other elected mayors in England and Wales.
**Systems D, E and F are Proportional representation in Multi-member constituencies**

**D. Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

Large multi-member constituencies are required for STV, electing several representatives rather than just one. Voters rank candidates in order of preference by marking 1, 2, 3 and so on next to the names of candidates on a ballot paper. A voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they like or just vote for one candidate. Each candidate needs a minimum number of votes to be elected, known as a *quota*. The quota is calculated according to the number of seats and votes cast (quota = (number of votes/(number of seats + 1))). The first preference votes for each candidate are added up and any candidate who has achieved this quota is elected. If a candidate has more votes than are needed to fill the quota, their surplus votes are transferred to the remaining candidates - in fact all of their votes are added to those of the next preference, but with weight ((number of votes/quota) - 1). If some candidates do not meet the quota, the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated and their second preference votes are transferred to other candidates (with weight 1). These processes are repeated until all the seats are filled. A computer is needed to implement this system! STV is used for electing the Northern Ireland Assembly and for local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

**E. Additional Member System (AMS)**

Under AMS, voters are given two votes; one for an individual candidate and one for a party. Individual candidates are elected to single-member constituencies using first-past-the-post, AV or SV. From the second vote, representatives (additional members) are elected proportionally to a larger region. The percentage of votes obtained by the parties in the party vote (second ballot) determines the overall number of representatives including those elected for the single member constituencies after taking into account the seats gained in each region by each party in the first ballot. The Additional Member System is used to elect the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the London Assembly.

**F. Closed Party List**

Multi-member constituencies are required for the Closed Party List system. A voter marks one cross on the ballot paper next to the name of the party they wish to support. Once the ballot papers have been counted, each party gets the number of seats proportionate to the number of votes it has received in each constituency. As voters choose parties rather than candidates, and the parties provide a list of candidates in order. If 2 of a party’s candidates are elected, then the top two
names on the party list are chosen, and so on. The Closed Party List system is used to elect Members of the European Parliament.

Further reading
Systems used in the UK:
http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/elections-and-voting/voting-systems/
For more systems see:
http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems

UK voting systems: Discussion Report

It was felt that each of the systems presented had advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the first-past-the-post system (A) is that it is simple and familiar. It is also straightforward to count, and for the counting to be checked.

The Alternative Vote system (B) retains the single member for each constituency, and thus the direct link between a Member of Parliament and a geographical locality. It was stressed that AV is not a form of proportional representation, even though it is sometimes described as such. In fact, it can result in less proportionate results than first-past-the-post. AV would have the effect of weakening the control of party machines, as candidates supporting similar policies could stand against one another without fear of splitting the vote and helping a party that they both oppose to be elected. In particular, unpopular candidates imposed by Central Office might be challenged by popular local candidates of the same party. Scenario 5 in the Appendix presents a situation showing how tactical voting can undermine the intentions of the AV system. This requires good opinion poll predictions of likely outcomes, and a disciplined vote by a substantial block of supporters of one party for a candidate of another party in the first round in order to eliminate a stronger rival. Unfortunately, the AV system is the one alternative that has been put to the country in a referendum and rejected. It was pointed out that the arguments in favour of AV had been very poorly presented, allowing the vote to be swayed by the personalities of the proponents rather than merits of the system itself.

The more representative systems are also more complicated. They require large constituencies represented by multiple Members of Parliament. This weakens the link between MPs and people in the constituency, and increases the chances of an MP hearing the views and concerns only of those who voted for him or her. It was felt that the actions required of the voters were fairly simple, ordering candidates by preference or choosing a party, and that detailed knowledge of how the votes
were interpreted would not be required. However, checking that the votes have been interpreted correctly would be more difficult for parties and candidates. The Closed Party List system (F) places great power in the hands of party machines, as they have complete freedom to choose and order their candidates. Independent candidates would face a great challenge under this system. It is difficult to see how a constituency electorate can express approval or disapproval of an individual MP’s performance when they are up for re-election. These problems are partly present in the Additional Member System (E). Even the Single Transferable Vote system (D) would reduce accountability of individual MPs, as voters would need to keep track of the activities of several members during a Parliament.

It was felt that the issue of reforming the voting system was the most urgent of the issues discussed at the meeting. It was also felt that backing one of the fairer schemes could be a vote winner for Labour, with supporters of other left-leaning parties perhaps willing to support us in order to see such a system being adopted.