

Electoral Systems

OUR SIMPLE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Britain's electoral system for the Westminster Parliament is about the simplest imaginable. Termed 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP), it is technically a plurality system in single-member constituencies, because the candidate with most votes (a plurality) wins the seat. No majority (50% + 1) is required. Voters are offered one candidate per party and may put a cross against one only. No ranking of candidates is permitted.

SOME ARGUMENTS FOR FPTP

FPTP defenders cite both macro- and micro-benefits. The system mostly produces single-party and therefore relatively stable governments, pledged to implement their manifesto policies, on which voters can later hold them to account. It also gives us all our 'own' MP to represent us and our particular constituency. The most popular candidate wins - and this is democracy.

SOME ARGUMENTS AGAINST FPTP

Critics see things differently. FPTP exaggerates the parliamentary representation of the leading party. It does produce single-party majorities - in Parliament and in local councils - even from minority votes. It also under-represents minority nationwide parties, like the Liberal Democrats.

Whilst this can be interpreted as producing 'strong' governments it can also increase the probability that governments will be unlistening and uncompromising.

FPTP can also produce a disincentive to vote, if your constituency is one that rarely, if ever, changes party hands. If you support the winning party, your individual vote is probably unnecessary. If you support another party you may feel your vote is wasted, and you may not feel personally represented by an MP whose election you opposed.

MAJORITARIAN SYSTEMS

In the EU, only Britain uses FPTP. Other countries' systems are more inclusive, more proportionally representative, or both. The system requiring least change for the UK would be the alternative vote (AV). We could keep single-member constituencies, but could rank-order the list of candidates: 1,2,3 etc. The winner would need over 50% of the vote: hence its categorisation as majoritarian. If, after the first count, no candidate has a majority, the lowest candidate or candidates are eliminated and second preferences redistributed until a majority is achieved.

NOTHING TO DO WITH PROPORTIONALITY

At present, 47% of all MPs are elected by less than 50% of their constituency votes. AV would mean that all MPs

could claim the support of a majority of their electorates, and considerably more voters would have contributed to their election. The supplementary vote, in which voters have just two preference votes, is very similar. It was used in the London mayoral election, the redistribution of eliminated candidates' second preferences enabling Ken Livingstone to raise his initial 39% to a decisive 58%.

Majoritarian systems, though, have nothing to do with proportional representation (PR). That is not their aim. Indeed, in 1997, AV might actually have exaggerated Labour's parliamentary majority even more than FPTP.

PROPORTIONAL SYSTEMS

Proportional representation is not an electoral system itself; it is the goal of many different systems. The commonest in Western Europe are party list systems in multi-member constituencies. Votes are cast for parties, rather than candidates, and seats allocated to each party according to proportions of votes won.

THE SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (STV)

Long favoured by the Liberal Democrats, STV, also in multi-member constituencies, is perhaps the most voter-friendly system. As with AV, voters can rank-order candidates, but they can also choose between several candidates from the same party. Ballot papers are longer and counting more complicated than with AV, but eliminated candidates' second preferences are redistributed in the same way until the constituency's quota of seats is filled.

With both open list and STV systems, women and ethnic minorities may stand a better chance of election, as parties will try to select as diverse a slate of candidates as possible.

ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEMS (AMS)

Long associated with West Germany, these hybrid or mixed PR systems have recently been adopted for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Greater London Assemblies. Voters cast two votes: one for a candidate in a single-member constituency, the other for a party list. The list seats top up parties' constituency representation if it falls short of the proportion to which their party vote entitles them.

HOW DO WE DECIDE THE BEST SYSTEM FOR US?

The present Government established a Commission chaired by Lord Jenkins to explore the various options amongst electoral systems and to make recommendations on which might be best for the UK. Lord Jenkins' Commission recommended an AV-based Additional Member System. However, the General Election of 2001 will use FPTP.

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ACTIVITIES

- 1 x 45 minutes.

AIM

- Understand the impact the electoral system has on the outcomes of elections.

CURRICULUM ATTAINMENT TARGETS

- 1e.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand what is meant by 'First Past The Post' and 'Proportional List' systems.
- Calculate election outcome according to two systems.
- Comment on the different outcomes.
- Think about the advantages and disadvantages of each of the systems.
- Begin to develop a personal response about preferred electoral systems.

RESOURCES

- Worksheets: Background to Elections Student Worksheet 3/A, 3/B, Electoral Systems.

TASKS

- 1 These 2 activities serve as an introduction to some of the more complicated issues covered in the background notes. Further links and ideas can be explored by visiting the websites of organisations campaigning on such issues, for example, www.charter88.org.uk
- 2 Go through the table making sure that students are clear that each of the boxes in the grid represents a different constituency, and that House Party, No Change and Radicals are names of political parties.
- 3 Ask students to calculate the results of the election according to the First Past The Post System. Check that everyone has the same results and agrees that House Party wins the election with a clear majority. Stress also that the Radicals fail to have any MPs elected at all.
- 4 Next, talk through the concept of proportional representation with the students to make sure they all understand the principle. Recalculate the result using

the simple formula on the second page. Stress the differences in the result here are NOT due to voting but to how those same votes are counted. (It should be clear that no party would dominate the House of Commons if this result were replicated across the country. House Party may have more representatives than No Change and the Radicals, but if No Change and the Radicals joined forces, they could prevent House Party from getting legislation passed. What is more, if the Radicals joined with House Party they would become a part of the government, a complete turnaround from their result in the first example, when the Radicals were left without any elected representatives).

- Ask students to think about the advantages and disadvantages of these two systems.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Find out the arguments used by politicians and campaigners for and against these two electoral systems.
- Try out different ways of counting your own mock election votes later in the pack.
- Examine other more complicated types of voting systems. These could include different ways of counting the same votes or different ways of voting. In the former category students could divide the grid into blocks of 4 to make bigger constituencies with 4 members, each of these could then be recalculated to see how the representatives would be divided up in each region. In the latter category one could consider ballots such as that used in the London elections with a Single Transferable Vote, through which voters can express a range of choices, in descending order of preference.
- Look at elections where other electoral methods have been used around the UK, what have been the implications of these.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Is there one fair way to hold an election, which everyone will agree on?
- What is more important - strong government or representative government? Are the two mutually exclusive?
- How would parliament change if the parties' number of MPs reflected accurately their proportion of the vote?

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<p>Ladchester</p> <p>House Party 80%</p> <p>No Change 10%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Girlville</p> <p>House Party 70%</p> <p>No Change 20%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Boss County</p> <p>House Party 60%</p> <p>No Change 30%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Cheesenham</p> <p>House Party 50%</p> <p>No Change 40%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>
<p>Pottershire</p> <p>House Party 40%</p> <p>No Change 50%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Hill Valley</p> <p>House Party 30%</p> <p>No Change 60%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Kidland</p> <p>House Party 20%</p> <p>No Change 70%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Wheaten Rye</p> <p>House Party 10%</p> <p>No Change 80%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>
<p>Still Town</p> <p>House Party 80%</p> <p>No Change 10%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Down Town</p> <p>House Party 70%</p> <p>No Change 20%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Dairy Leigh</p> <p>House Party 60%</p> <p>No Change 30%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>Lesson End</p> <p>House Party 70%</p> <p>No Change 20%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>
<p>Up Creek</p> <p>House Party 80%</p> <p>No Change 10%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>	<p>New Town</p> <p>House Party 60%</p> <p>No Change 20%</p> <p>Radicals 20%</p>	<p>Schoolshire</p> <p>House Party 10%</p> <p>No Change 46%</p> <p>Radicals 44%</p>	<p>Class Ridge</p> <p>House Party 10%</p> <p>No Change 80%</p> <p>Radicals 10%</p>

We vote in small geographical areas, called wards. In local elections each ward can elect its own representative. In general elections the areas are larger, they include about 100,000 people. These areas are called constituencies, and each one elects an MP.

The boxes above represent the fictional election results of 16 constituencies for each of the three political parties. There are several ways in which the votes can be used to work out who should form the government. In this exercise you will think about two methods of electing governments.

FIRST PAST THE POST

This is the system we use at the moment for general elections and most local elections. Each area elects the person with the most votes, but they do not need to get a majority.

In Schoolshire, the results were as follows House Party 10%, No Change Alliance 46%, Radicals 44%. The MP for that area would be from the No Change Alliance, even though 54% of local voters chose other people.

Use the following chart to record how many representatives each of the parties would have as result of this election if you were using this system:

Number of representatives for House Party	
Number of representatives for No Change Alliance	
Number of representatives for Radicals	
Using this method which party would form the next government?	

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THE PROPORTIONAL LIST SYSTEM

Some people argue that the First Past The Post system is unfair because it doesn't reflect the votes of everyone. For example, how would you feel if you voted for the Radicals? Other ways for counting votes aim to make sure everyone feels that their vote makes a difference and that Parliament reflects the diversity of voters' preferences. They want a government which is proportional to the votes cast, this means if 10% of people vote for the Radicals, they should have a 10% share of the parliament or council.

One of the simplest ways to make an election proportional is to draw up a list of all the candidates in all the parties and to work down the list until the right proportion is met. In the above example, every party might put 16 numbers on its list, if House Party wins 25% of the vote, this would mean that they send the top 4 names on their list to the parliament or council (25% of 16 = 4 representatives). This way Parliament actually reflects the way that everyone voted.

1. Can you think of any drawbacks to this system?

2. Recalculate the above election according to the proportional list system:

Total for each party / 100 = number of representatives

House Party $\frac{\text{Total}}{100} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ representatives

No Change Alliance $\frac{\text{Total}}{100} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ representatives

Radicals $\frac{\text{Total}}{100} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ representatives

3. Who would form the government in this example?

4. Which system do you think would be fairest?

5. Which system do you think would produce the best government?
