
QuickGuides

Review of voting systems

Foreword by Richard Burden MP
Chair of the All Party Group on Electoral Reform



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The Government review of voting systems

Key findings from the Ministry of Justice 'Review of Voting Systems'

A report from the All Party Group
on Electoral Reform

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By Richard Burden MP

**Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group
on Electoral Reform**

Earlier this year the Government published a review of voting systems in the UK. This is a comprehensive look at the UK's experience of electoral systems over the last eleven years. It is an important contribution to the debate about the strengths and weaknesses of different voting systems, and the options for electoral reform.

Try to talk to people in abstract terms about the detail of different voting systems or the technicalities of the UK constitution and they are likely to glaze over. Understandably so. But ask them how they think decisions should be made, about the influence they should have as citizens, and you get a different response. Ask them – and it is clear people do care about how we do politics.

How we do politics – the political culture we operate in – is partly shaped by our electoral system. That is why we should be asking voters what they want from the political system in this country and considering how alternative electoral systems can contribute to different forms of politics.

We need to engage the public in this debate about what our political system looks like – whether it be how they are represented locally, reforming the House of Lords or how they vote for Members of Parliament.

I welcome the Government's Review and the valuable contribution it makes to this debate. But this debate needs to break free of Westminster – it needs to be with and between the voters. This report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform picks out the key findings from the Government's Review and offers our view on the way forward. Hopefully it will help to open up and encourage such a debate.

Introduction

What was the review of voting systems?

The review of voting systems was a chance for the government to take stock of the voting systems put in place in the new assemblies and parliaments of the UK since 1997, and to consider whether in the light of this experience, a change in the voting system for the House of Commons should be recommended.

The review reflects on a process the Labour government started in 1997 that could yet lead to the reform of the electoral system for the House of Commons.

Following a manifesto commitment from the incoming government for a referendum on electoral reform, an Independent Commission met, under the leadership of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, and reported in 1998 in favour of a new voting system for the House of Commons. The Jenkins report proposed the Alternative Vote Plus – the Alternative Vote (AV) with a small regional top-up element to make parliament more representative of the votes cast.

No action followed after Jenkins, and the referendum promised in 1997 never happened. However away from Westminster, new voting systems with proportional elements were introduced for devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, elected mayors, the Greater London Assembly and the European Parliament. Devolved government was restored in Northern Ireland with a proportionally elected Assembly. ■

So, in both 2001 and 2005 Labour's manifesto promised to conduct a review of how the new voting systems had been working, and how this experience relates to the case for electoral reform for Westminster. The *Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United*

Kingdom since 1997 was finally published in January 2008 by the Ministry of Justice as a fulfilment of these earlier pledges.

The review was not a definitive statement of policy. It was a piece of desk-bound research, drawing on evidence from earlier research and commissions of inquiry. As its authors stated:

“The purpose of this review is to contribute to the knowledge base and debate on whether or not changes should be made to the voting system for the House of Commons. We have set out to provide, as much as possible, objective information to contribute to this debate but not to make judgements or recommendations that are inherently political in nature. We understand that this review may receive comments from many sides and we welcome contributions to a healthy debate.”

The review is therefore part of a continuing process of debate, and not meant to be an official closing of options on that debate.

It is the “end of the beginning” for the Labour Government’s exploration of electoral reform and establishes the basis for the debate for years to come.

The purpose of this publication is simple. We want to see this contribution to the debate from the Government reach a wider audience, by taking a 196 page document and turning it into a 36 page pamphlet.

AMS or MMP?: Acronyms explained

Electoral system enthusiasts sometimes seem like they are speaking an entirely different language. But behind the mass of jargon and acronyms are some very real implications for government and the governed.

The Review reflected the sheer diversity of voting systems in use throughout the UK for public elections. These systems and how they are used in the UK are explained below:

System	Description	UK Application
First Past the Post (FPTP)	FPTP voting takes place in single-member constituencies and the voter simply puts a cross in a box next to one candidate. The candidate with the most votes in the constituency wins.	Westminster Parliamentary elections and English and Welsh local government elections

Continued...

System	Description	UK Application
List systems	Political parties produce lists of candidates for election in multi-member constituencies. Lists can be 'open' or 'closed'. Open lists mean that voters can indicate their preference for a candidate within a list, whereas with closed lists voters simply vote for the party as a whole.	"Closed" lists are used in the European Parliamentary elections in England, Scotland and Wales
Additional Member Systems (AMS), also known as Multi Member Proportional (MMP)	Electors cast two votes, one for a constituency representative under FPTP and one for a party list which allows a certain number of seats to be allocated proportionally.	Scottish Parliament elections, Welsh Assembly elections, London Assembly elections
Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Voters fill in a ballot paper marking 1,2,3 etc against the candidates in order of preference. Counting takes preferences into effect and elects the most popular candidates to represent multi-member constituencies.	Northern Ireland Assembly elections, Local Government elections in Northern Ireland and Scotland

System	Description	UK Application
Supplementary Vote (SV)	Voters mark a X against their first preference and another X against their second preference. The winning candidate must either get a majority of first preferences, or be the leading candidate after second preferences have been counted.	London and Local Mayoral Elections
Alternative Vote (AV)	AV uses preferential voting like STV, so voters mark their ballot paper 1,2,3 etc. However AV is used when there is only a single position to elect.	Not currently used in the UK

The short, short version

The key findings from the Government review of voting since 1997 ran as follows:

PR changes the dynamic between government and parliament

Proportional representation (PR) elections were associated with the formation of minority and coalition governments in Scotland and Wales. PR was found to change the way in which governments are formed and the relationship between the executive and parliament.

PR gives more representation to smaller parties

More parties tend to be represented in bodies elected under PR than under FPTP. It has given smaller parties like the Conservatives in Scotland and Wales, the Lib Dems in London, Greens, UKIP and Scottish Socialists representation.

Those PR systems that create two different “types” of elected member cause friction

There has been friction between constituency and regional members in Scotland and Wales, involving disputes over constituent representation and aggravated by the differences in party allegiance between constituency and regional members.

Some systems are more proportional than others

The most proportional system in use in the UK is the six member Single Transferable Vote (STV) method of election for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

PR does not automatically help turnout as many factors are involved

The turnout for all these elections, except for the Northern Ireland Assembly, is considerably lower than in general elections, but there are many factors which affect turnout.

The criteria

The report's authors attempted to use a common approach to each of the different electoral systems in play in the UK.

This pamphlet uses exactly the same objective criteria set out by the reports authors:

- The proportionality of the outcome
- Voter participation
- The impact on the stability and effectiveness of government
- The impact on the voter in terms of choice, ease and understanding, and the connection between the voter and the representative
- Social representation – the extent to which those elected represent society
- The impact on political parties and candidates
- The impact on the administration of elections

Proportionality

Proportionality means the ability of an electoral system to deliver representation broadly in line with votes cast. Proportionality has been accounted for as a desirable feature of the new electoral systems since 1997.

Conclusions reached:

“All the newly introduced voting systems have achieved a greater degree of proportionality than FPTP, although only STV in Northern Ireland has achieved what academic observers consider to be close to genuine proportionality.”¹

Other factors have an influence on the disproportionality or otherwise of an election result than just the type of system used. The more seats there are in a multi-member electoral district, the more proportional it will tend to be. Elections in FPTP in particular are affected by factors like boundary determination, differential turnout and the distribution of support for each party.

Voter participation

The review looked at the impact of different electoral systems on participation in politics, as measured through voter turnout. Though this is often seen as a measure of confidence in the democratic system, the drivers of voter non-participation are complex.

Conclusions reached:

Proportional systems were found, on international comparison, to be associated with higher voter turnout than First Past the Post and other majoritarian systems. The highest turnouts were found in countries that used STV and list PR for their elections, with mixed systems (i.e. Additional Member) falling in the middle.

However, Proportional Representation (PR) elections in Britain have seen a lower turnout than in general elections, although in Northern Ireland Assembly elections also see a relatively high turnout.

Many factors affect turnout in elections. Among these factors are the perceived importance of the body being elected, how much public awareness of the election there is, and how easy it is to actually go and vote.

¹ Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997, Executive Summary, Paragraph 21

Stability and effectiveness of governments

The ability or otherwise of an electoral system to produce a stable government capable of taking decisions is an important feature of that electoral system. As the chamber that sustains the government, this is particularly important for the House of Commons, but it is less important for instance in the European Parliament.

Conclusions reached:

Proportional systems are less likely to produce majorities for a single party than FPTP, and are likely to produce a modest increase in the number of parties represented.

Proportional systems therefore tend to mean that governments are formed by a coalition between two or more parties, or without an overall majority in parliament. Both these forms have been seen in Wales and Scotland since 1999, with a majority Labour-Lib Dem coalition in Scotland from 1999 to 2007 and a minority SNP government since May 2007.

The process of forming a government, and deciding on policy, is different in PR systems. Governments tend to take longer to form and agree on their policies.

However, coalitions can be stable governments and can stay in office for a long time.

Public opinion, while favouring the principle of proportionality, is concerned about the implications of having more smaller parties in parliament.

“We do not find a difference between PR systems and FPTP in terms of delivering stable and effective govern-

ment although, with a greater number of parties involved under PR, the political landscape can be more dynamic. In the experience of the UK, coalition governments can be just as stable as single-party governments.”²

Impact on the voter

The review examined how the different systems worked from the point of view of the voter. This took into account the voters' perceptions about their ability to have a meaningful choice at the ballot box as well as the practical ease of casting a vote. It also looked at the impact on the voter in terms of their relationship with the representatives they elected.

Conclusions reached:

Voters have more choice under proportional systems in Britain and elsewhere. "One of the main benefits of PR, and in particular STV, is that voters have a greater degree of choice in elections and a greater chance of their vote counting in terms of who gets elected."³

Although there had been well-publicised problems with the Scottish elections in 2007 the review did not find new electoral systems to blame for voter confusion. "We do not find, on balance, any evidence to suggest that voters find one voting system easier or more confusing than another voting system."⁴ The report goes on to note that "combined election with different voting systems have caused voter confusion and problems of invalid votes, largely due to the design of ballot papers and information provided to voters, with some evidence of a greater impact in socially deprived areas."

In terms of coming to a view about which sort of system is best for the relationship between the MP and constituents, the review concluded that this was essentially a political judgement. Both FPTP and STV make for a direct relationship. "In conclusion, FPTP has the simplest direct relationship between representative and constituent. STV also

allows for a direct relationship, but there are a number of potentially competitive representatives and greater choice for the electorate... Whether the connection between constituents and representative is stronger under FPTP or STV (both candidate based systems) depends on one's perspective about whether there should be single or multi-member constituencies and representatives."⁵

3. Paragraph 6.169
4. Paragraph 6.170
5. Paragraph 6.113

Social representation

An election is the mechanism by which we create our representative democracy. The extent to which an electoral system can promote or obstruct a socially representative parliament is therefore very important. The review looked at how electoral systems affect the way different groups in society are represented in political institutions.

Conclusions reached:

Electoral systems are only one of several factors that affect the representation of women and minorities.

The policies of political parties are a crucial element, and the Labour Party's candidate selection policies have been the principal reason for the increase in women's representation at Westminster and the relatively high levels of women's representation in Wales and Scotland.

Internationally, proportional representation systems are generally better for women's representation.

In conclusion, "on the criteria of social representation, the newly introduced voting systems have improved the situation of women, although Labour's positive action policies have also been an important contributory factor. There has been very little improvement in the representation of BME groups across all voting systems and it is clear that for both ethnic and gender representation, party behaviour in terms of selecting candidates is more critical than the voting system alone."⁶

Political campaigning

Different electoral systems create incentives for parties to campaign in different ways and focus on different areas in their search for votes. The review looked at whether party campaigning and the ways in which parties interacted with supporters and the electorate had been affected by the newer electoral systems.

The review found that the new systems in Britain had so far had a limited effect on the strategies political parties adopt and the way they go about campaigning.

The report was cautious about making conclusions about the relationship between electoral systems and political disengagement.

Administration

The issue of how to make sure elections are run fairly and efficiently is brought to greater prominence when there are more complicated electoral systems, overlapping jurisdictions, combined elections and other changes in electoral law and practice.

“Given these existing challenges, careful consideration would need to be given to any change for Westminster, and the consequential impact on the progress already made, and progress yet to be made in the administration of elections in the UK.”⁷

Interaction with Lords reform

Lords reform was outside the terms of reference of the review, but it did mention the Lords in the context of making a parliament with two elected chambers work effectively.

“Further research and analysis would be needed to consider complementary systems and appropriate models for Westminster. It is clear that the voting system for the House of Commons should not be considered in isolation from proposals for a substantially reformed House of Lords.”⁸

What the review didn't say

Local government

English (and Welsh) local government were deemed outside the remit of the report. This excludes an important part of the background as to how FPTP works in Britain. However, successive official reports have studied local government in Scotland (McIntosh and Kerley), Wales (Sunderland) and England (the Councillors' Commission under Dame Jane Roberts). All these reports have been in favour of STV in multi member wards, or at least giving councils the option to pursue local electoral reform.

The Alternative Vote (AV)

The possibility of introducing the Alternative Vote for Westminster elections was not covered, presumably because it has not been one of the systems in use in Britain since 1997. However, AV has been given some attention as a possible reform at Westminster level and the government's views about the system would be of interest. Although - as a single member and majoritarian system - it shares some of the characteristics of FPTP that are discussed in this report, it allows electors to rank candidates in order of preference rather than voting for one by with a single x on the ballot paper. AV therefore ensures that the winning candidate in each constituency receives at least 50% of votes cast there. The report discusses the distinction between FPTP and PR systems without exploring some of the possibilities such as AV or AV Plus, the compromise between AV and more proportional systems that was recommended the Jenkins Commission. Both should feature in the continuing debate.

So where to now?

The government's response to its own review was low-key. It took up the review's contention that the system for the Commons and a reformed second chamber should be approached together, and argued that further active consideration of the Commons should wait until there was a concrete plan for Lords reform.

The latest White Paper on Lords reform has left the question of the electoral system for the Upper House open, thereby further delaying the question of reform of the Commons.

The government, while welcoming a hypothetical debate, did not follow publication of the review with any information about what it intends to do to foster such a debate in Parliament or through existing mechanisms such as the Governance of Britain process or a forthcoming Speaker's Conference. In fact, the recent publication of the Governance of Britain 'One Year On' document was clear that there were no planned next steps to debate electoral reform.

The view from the APPG

A long time in coming, this review has nonetheless been a useful contribution to the debate on electoral reform.

It has demonstrated that some of the arguments most commonly used to attack electoral reform are at best overdone, at worst complete myths.

By contrast, although it encourages caution about claiming too much, it finds many of the arguments for electoral reform to be robust in the light of the impartial evidence.

The government's review does not argue the case for electoral reform. But its contents are an acknowledgement that a coherent, reasonable case exists for electoral reform. There is nothing in it which could lead one to think that reform is inherently a bad idea, or impossible, or futile.

To reform or not is a political decision, based on which values are most important in one's choice of system. The debate, we can all agree, will continue.

However, it cannot continue forever. Ministers have in the past indicated that there will be a referendum should there be the case for reform to a more proportional electoral system; in many people's eyes the existence of a case is demonstrated by the review. The group does not believe that it is appropriate that, alone of all elected representatives in the UK, MPs are in charge of deciding their own electoral system and that the beneficiaries of the current system have a veto on whether change should be considered.

The process now needs to go beyond Westminster, and involve members of the public being given the opportunity to consider the issues in detail. Options for a proportional sys-

tem, or even simply a change to preferential voting, need space to be seriously debated. We believe that the Governance of Britain process should have the electoral connection between people and government at its core.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform is confident that arguments for change are strong, and the Government's review only strengthens that confidence. We look forward to the debate, and eventually to fairer elections in Britain

This publication has been produced by the All Party Group on Electoral Reform. We are a group of Members of Parliament and Peers who work to foster discussion on, and promote the cause of, electoral reform.

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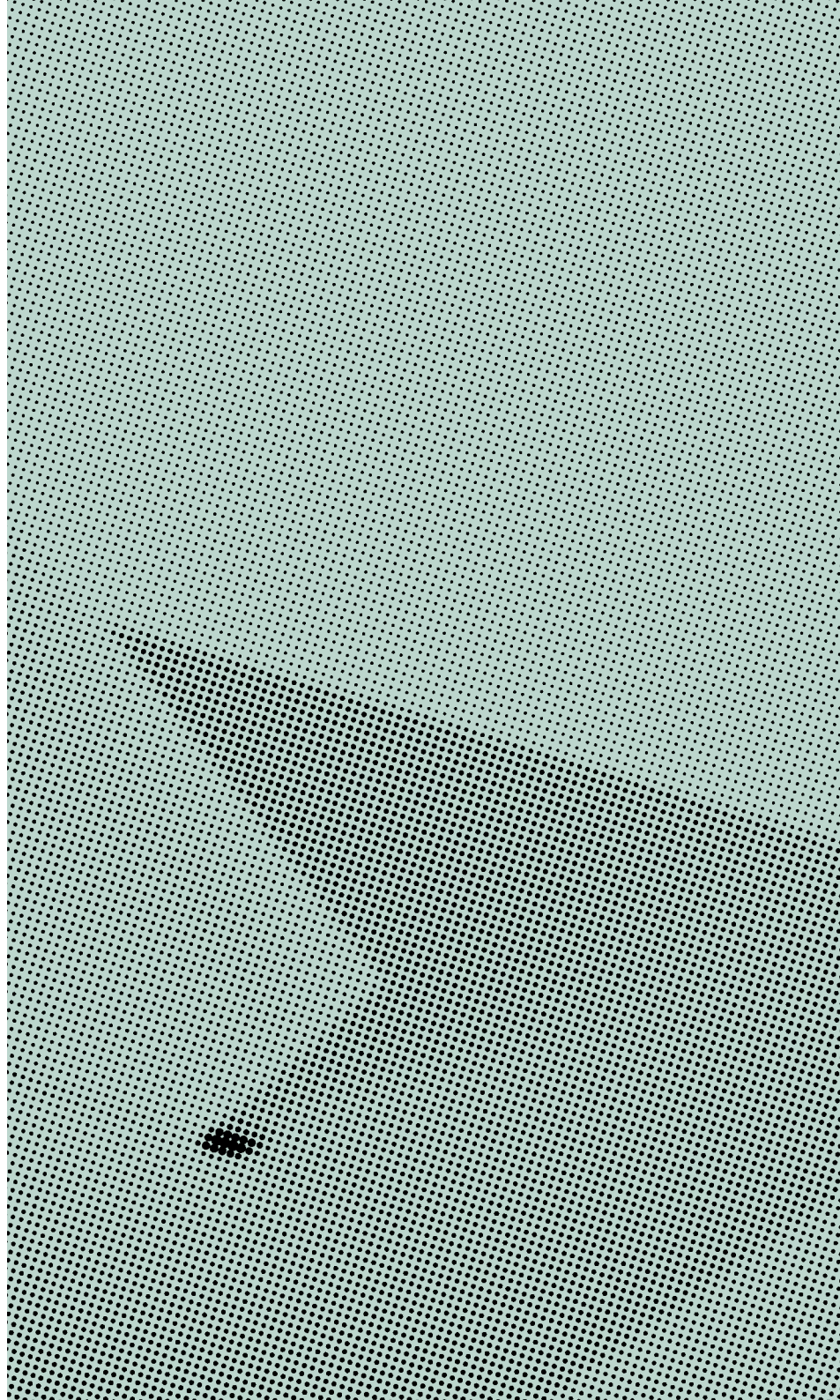
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Review of voting systems

In January 2008 the Government published a review of voting systems in the UK. A comprehensive look at the UK's experience of electoral systems over the last eleven years, it was intended to inform a debate on possible electoral reform for Westminster.

However, to be meaningful this debate needs to break free from Westminster itself – it needs to be with and between the voters.

This report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform picks out the key findings from the Government's Review and offers their view on the way forward to open up and encourage such a debate.

The All Party Group on Electoral Reform is a group of MPs and Peers who meet to foster discussion on, and promote the cause of, electoral reform so that election results broadly reflect the votes cast during the elections of the United Kingdom.

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