VOTING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM FACT BOOK

Electoral Reform Society


VOTING IS AT THE HEART OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP, AND OUR CHOICE OF VOTING SYSTEM CAN HAVE A DRAMATIC EFFECT ON THE KIND OF DEMOCRACY WE LIVE IN.
THE ELECTORAL REFORM SOCIETY IS ONE THE UK'S LEADING AUTHORITIES ON ELECTIONS, PROVIDING INFORMATION AND TEACHING RESOURCES ON VOTING AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Voting is about choice. We get to choose who represents us in Westminster,[1] in Europe, in local councils and more. And with elected mayors and local assemblies becoming increasingly common, we now have ever more opportunities to exercise our right to vote.

Yet fewer people are making that choice. Two out of five stayed at home at the last general election. Many don't believe that elections are a good way to have a say in how the country is run. If voting is going to be a powerful way of taking part in our democracy, we need to know that our vote really counts.

There are many ways of voting and counting these votes to work out who is elected. In the UK alone, there are six different kinds of election.

1. Words in black are explained in the Glossary

These *electoral systems* are building blocks of our democracy. If we don't get the system right for choosing our decision-makers, it's unlikely we'll get the right decisions. It's common sense that if we want fair results, we need to have a fair system. All systems, however, have their strengths and weaknesses.

Talking point: What is the most important feature of a voting system?

In 1997, the government promised people a choice on the voting system to elect the House of Commons. That choice never came.

In 2008 the government did a review of how elections work, but it was quite limited. You can find it at: http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/voting-systems-review.htm

The Electoral Reform Society published its own review of electoral systems which went into much greater detail, and can be found here:

http://electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/experiencesofelectoralsystems.pdf

Talking point: Which system should we have for elections in the UK?

This pamphlet looks at each area of the UK and how voting works there, so that you can make up your own mind.

We will look at the evidence on each electoral system and ask:

Is it fair?

We look at whether voters' views are fairly reflected by the election results or whether they see their votes wasted. Do all votes count equally? Do all election candidates have the same chance of winning a seat?

Who gets elected?

Some voting systems can make it harder for women, ethnic minorities, younger or older people to be elected. Do the people elected really represent the people who voted for them?

Do I have a real choice?

Does the system give power to the people? Do voters have an effective say at the ballot box? How sure can they be that their views will be taken into account?

How does it work in practice?

Different voting systems can affect the way politicians work together. Does it make it hard for them to do their jobs or work cooperatively? Do politicians make decisions themselves, or are they expected to do everything their constituents or their party tells them to? Does it encourage negative campaigning and squabbling between parties?

What do people think of the voting system?

Ultimately in a democracy, what the people think is crucial. Do people like the voting system? Is voting easy to understand? Do people even take part in elections under this system?

Chapter 2
Getting started
Some basic questions

Each chapter of this pamphlet explains briefly how votes are cast and counted. More detail can be found at, www.electoral-reform.org.uk, but first, a few basic questions.

What are elections for?

Elections are used in every democracy to select politicians to run an area, from the smallest local parish, to an entire country. Elections are held for several reasons:

- Elections offer every citizen a choice about how the world around them should be run.
- They are, with the right system, a fair way of choosing who takes power – the person who has the most support for their plans for how to use that

power is chosen to carry those plans out. The fact that they have won an election is a mandate for them to carry out their plans once elected.

- If elections are held at regular intervals, then they are a good way for people to keep a grip on the politicians in power. No government wants to lose office, so politicians in government are always mindful of needing to perform well enough to be able to continue winning elections.

Who can vote?

Every UK citizen over 18 years of age can vote in elections. If you are a citizen of a Commonwealth or European country you can vote in local and European elections in the UK. British citizens who live overseas can vote in general elections for up to 15 years. You must be registered to vote. Each household gets a form to fill in and return every year. More is available at: www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.

Women could first vote in general elections in 1918. Some people feel that the voting age should be lowered to 16, as this is the age at which citizenship education finishes, as well as the age when young people are able to get married, join the army and start to pay tax if they work. For more information see: www.votesat16.org.uk.

Who can be a candidate?

Since 2006, anyone over 18 who is eligible to vote can be a candidate in any election, although some people are unable to stand if they have certain jobs in the civil service or in local government. In local elections, candidates also have to have some kind of local link.

Before 2006, candidates had to be 21 years of age.

How are votes cast?

At polling stations, or by post. There have been experiments with electronic voting and text message voting, but these have not been widespread. In some elections, votes have been cast on the internet. Internet voting is a tricky issue, with a need to strike a balance between making the ballot secure, and making it easy for people to do.

What do the people who are elected do?

Elected officials represent people who live in their constituency. They raise issues relevant to their constituents in their parliament, council or assembly and can speak out on any issue which they feel is important.

If the government or an elected official wants to introduce new laws, they need to get the support of a majority of their colleagues, so much of an elected official's day-to-day job involves looking at proposed laws, looking into what their effects would be (intentional and unintentional), and suggesting changes.

They are also expected to spend a lot of time in their constituency. They take on casework for local constituents often who are having difficulty with grey areas of the law. MPs need the help of staff to do all this, so running an MP's office is very much like running a small business. Elected officials in devolved and local government often have less support and may rely more on volunteers.

Why are there different ways of electing people?

There is no easy answer to this. Different elections are governed by laws passed at different times, and so different governments have introduced different systems. Which system is the 'fairest' is a controversial topic.

Who decides what voting system is used?

Any new voting system needs to be passed as a law in parliament, with the support of a majority of MPs. The Scottish Parliament can choose the system for local elections in Scotland.

Are there any alternatives to elections to choose decision-makers?

Members of the House of Lords are not elected – instead, the majority of them are appointed by a committee, with the prime minister and by party leaders nominating candidates. The House of Lords is one of the few appointed legislative chambers in any democracy in the world.

Not electing members of the House of Commons has never been seriously considered, because MPs need to be seen to be accountable, and can only remain accountable through having stood for election.

VOTING FACTS
WESTMINSTER, HOUSE OF COMMONS

SYSTEM USED
FIRST PAST THE POST (FPTP)
PEOPLE ELECTED
646 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (MPS)
NUMBER OF PARTIES REPRESENTED
10 PARTIES AND 3 INDEPENDENTS
LAST ELECTION/NEXT ELECTION
MAY 2005, BY JUNE 2010
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
61.3%

Chapter 3
Westminster House of Commons

Background

The British Parliament is made up of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The system goes back some 800 years, but it can only be considered a modern parliament since 1918, when most adult men and women were allowed to vote.

Currently we only get to choose members of the Commons. The government is formed by the largest party in the Commons, and its leader becomes the prime minister.

The House of Commons is the most powerful elected body in the UK. Members of Parliament (MPs) can put forward laws and block government plans. Some of its powers were given to elected bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the process of

devolution, but it is still the only elected body that has a say in foreign policy, security and most taxes.

The voting system: how it works

At a general election each of the 646 constituencies in the UK elects one MP to represent them in parliament. Political parties choose one candidate each and voters put an 'X' on the ballot paper next to their favourite candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins, and is elected to a seat in the Commons: it's as simple as that.

This is the First Past the Post election system. Much like a race in which the winner is the first across the line these elections are 'winner takes all'. It does not matter how close the race was, there are no prizes (and no seats) for those coming second.

Is it fair?

It seems fair that in a single seat the person with the most votes wins. But candidates don't need to get a majority of votes, just more than their opponents. It means most MPs are elected when the majority of their electorate would have preferred someone else. Currently only one in three MPs can claim support from over half of the voters in their constituencies.

When we add up the votes across all the seats, the national results show that some political parties do better under this system than others. There are no prizes for coming second, so if a party is runner up in many seats it can win lots of votes but very few seats. In fact, in five elections during the twentieth

SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
FIRST PAST THE POST

VOTE FOR ONE CANDIDATE ONLY

1	JONES ALAN	LABOUR PARTY	
2	FOTHERINGTON JAMES	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	X
3	SMITH EMILY	GREEN PARTY	
4	ANDERSON RITA	CONSERVATIVE PARTY	
5	HEPWORTH BARBARA	INDEPENDENCE PARTY	

century, the party that won the most votes did not win the most seats. You might say the wrong party won the election.

In the 2005 election, one party won 600,000 votes in the UK but no seats at all. Another party, which won less than half this number of votes, won nine seats. The election result depends as much on where your supporters live as how many you actually have. As the number of seats parties win determines who governs the UK, it is a serious problem if there are doubts about the fairness of the system.

Who gets elected?

Women make up more than half of the population, but only one in five of our MPs. Some parties have used special measures to increase the number of female MPs and this has doubled the numbers over the last 15 years, but the UK still lags behind many other countries in electing women. There are 15 MPs from black and minority ethnic communities. If the number of ethnic minority MPs reflected the whole population, this number would rise to 50 MPs. The system makes it hard for people from these groups to get elected.

The system also makes it very hard for independent candidates, who do not have the backing of a party, to get elected. Between 1959 and 1997, only two Independents won a seat in the House of Commons at a general election. With only three Independents currently in parliament you can expect a successful MP to be from one of the major parties.

Do I have a real choice?

It depends which constituency you are in. The 'winner-takes-all' system has created 'safe seats', where we know which party is going to win beforehand. This can make voters feel as if it does not really matter who they vote for. Votes in the seats which are competitive are the ones that really matter to the outcome of the election: voters who live in these constituencies count more than voters in safe seats.

If your favourite candidate does not win, you have no more say in the outcome of the election. Sometimes, voters feel they can't vote for the candidate they really want, because their vote won't count and instead choose another candidate they don't particularly like, just because that candidate has a better chance of winning. But voters should be free to vote the way they want to without the fear of losing their say.

Voters cannot pick and choose between candidates for the same party in this system, which also limits their choice. The parties choose the candidates. With just one MP representing each area, people also have no choice about who they go to for help.

Does it work?

Supporters of this system argue that it gives clear results. We have already seen how First Past the Post will usually give a winner's bonus, where a party can win a bigger share of seats than votes. This can foster strong and stable government, because the ruling party has an advantage. This winner's bonus can create problems of trust and support for the

VOTING TALK

“Although I highly believe in the principle of voting, I also feel that my vote is undermined by the first past the post system which exists in the UK. As I live in a 'safe seat' constituency, the system renders my vote almost totally irrelevant.”
Farhana Hoque, Voter in Westminster

government though, as plenty of people voted for someone else but ended up unfairly represented.

What do people think?

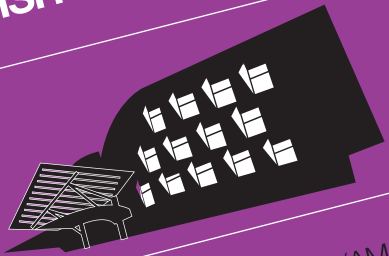
Some say 'If it ain't broke don't fix it', but when only six out of ten people who had the right to vote did so in the last general election there is room for doubt. In the safest seats, the turnout is 10 per cent lower than in the most competitive seats. This is because the system produces many 'safe seats' full of wasted votes, where the result is a foregone conclusion, parties have little incentive to campaign hard and people have less incentive to vote.

Talking point: Should we sacrifice fairness so we can have a strong government and a clear winner?

People in 'safe seats' tend to feel disengaged, especially compared to people in marginal seats – seats which are hotly contested, and regularly change hands. Politicians realise that elections are won or lost in marginal seats, and so often tailor what they say and do to the interests of voters in marginal seats, leaving voters in safe seats feeling taken for granted.

Opinion polls have often shown that most people are in favour of change. In 2006, an opinion poll asked 2,000 people if they wanted a change to a fairer voting system for the Commons. For every person who did not want to see a change in the voting system, there were five people who did.

VOTING FACTS
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT



SYSTEM USED
ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM (AMS)
PEOPLE ELECTED
129 MEMBERS OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT (MSPS)
NUMBER OF PARTIES ELECTED
5 PARTIES AND 1 INDEPENDENT
LAST/NEXT ELECTION
2007/2011
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
49%

Chapter 4
Scottish Parliament

Background

The Scottish Parliament was created in 1999 at the same time as the Welsh Assembly. It was set up as part of the government's plan for devolution, where powers over some matters were given to new, local elected bodies. The parliament decides how schools, hospitals and prisons are run in Scotland. It can make laws and it has some control over taxes.

There have been three elections for the Scottish Parliament. The same voting system has been used since the start. All members are called Members of the Scottish Parliament or MSPs, even though, as we shall see, they are elected in two different ways.

The voting system: how it works

Voters have two votes, one in a local constituency and one in a larger region of Scotland. There are 73

SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM

YOU HAVE 2 VOTES

PARTY VOTE	VOTE HERE	VOTE HERE	ELECTORATE VOTE
PEAR PARTY			ANDREWS, BILL PEAR PARTY
APPLE PARTY			BAILEY, MARY APPLE PARTY
CHERRY PARTY	✓		DENNIS, JOHN CHERRY PARTY
BANANA PARTY			FLAVELL, DAVID TOMATO PARTY
KIWIFRUIT PARTY		✓	NATHAN, BRYAN PEAR PARTY
TOMATO PARTY			SMITH, BOB LEMON PARTY
LEEK PARTY			ROSE, LYNN KIWIFRUIT PARTY
CELERY PARTY			
LEMON PARTY			
CHERRY PARTY			

constituencies, each of which elects one MSP. In every constituency, political parties put forward one candidate each. Whoever gets the most votes wins and is elected.

Each constituency is also part of a larger region: there are eight regions in total. Parties draw up a list of candidates in each region, and voters can choose their favourite party. Seven MSPs are elected in each region, based on the number of votes each party gets and the number of seats it has already won.

This is a combination of two different voting systems: First Past the Post, like the system used to elect the House of Commons, and a List system, like the system used to elect candidates to the European Parliament. We call this a 'mixed' system.

Is it fair?

The constituency part of the elections uses a 'winner-takes-all' system, just like the one at Westminster. Often, there are great differences between the number of votes cast for a party and the number of constituency seats it wins. This is because to win a seat, a party must come first. It doesn't matter how close the election was and there are no seats for second place.

The second part of the election – the lists – helps to correct some of this unfairness. Parties win seats in the regions where they have many votes but did not win as many seats as they were entitled to. They are compensated for the unfairness of constituency part of the election. The list part might 'add-on' a degree

of fairness, but it does not make the constituency part of the election fair. Overall the system is quite fair.

Who gets elected?

Women are well represented in the Scottish Parliament: 50 women or 39 per cent of the parliament. This is ahead of the House of Commons and also many other countries. Although Scotland's ethnic diversity is growing, so far there has only been one MSP from a minority background.

Some parties took special steps to ensure that women were elected. Also, the list part of the election means that parties choose a team of candidates at the same time. When they do this, they are more likely to choose a mix of people, and to promote people who are not typical politicians, like young people, for example.

Do I have a real choice?

This system gives voters two votes and this means they have two chances to have their say. Voters can vote for different parties in the two sections of the ballot paper if they want to.

In each constituency, there are between four and eight candidates standing. The political parties choose the candidates and the voters have no say in who the parties put forward. In a winner-takes-all election, only one or two parties in a constituency will have enough support to win the seat. A vote for another party is effectively wasted, because it has no influence on who wins the seat. Some parties do not put forward candidates in the constituencies, because their

VOTING TALK

“The good thing about the new system we used in 2007 is that it has made people from all over the political spectrum work together. It’s also meant that more people have a councillor who represents their political viewpoint.” Stuart Clay, Councillor

supporters are spread across many constituencies and they know they don't stand a chance of winning. The unfairness of the system limits voter's choice.

In the regions, each party puts forward a list of candidates. Parties choose the order of candidates and seats are allocated from the top of the list. Voters must choose which list they will support as a whole: they cannot support or reject individual candidates. So it's the party, not the people, that has the most say in which individuals get regional seats.

Does it work?

The Scottish Executive, or government, is formed by members of the parliament, usually from the largest party. Under the current voting system, it is unlikely that one party will have more than half of the seats. Sometimes two or more parties agree to form a joint government, called a coalition. For its first eight years, the Scottish Parliament had a coalition government, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats working together.

Some people feel that coalitions are less stable or clear about their priorities. Other people say it is good for politicians to cooperate. A coalition depends on parties working together and compromising. In Scotland, the two parties mostly got on well and the Executive made some important decisions such as opposing university top-up fees and banning smoking in public places.

The Scottish National Party currently forms a *minority government* in Scotland – a government where the

largest party has not been able to agree on a coalition with any other party, and so holds office without a majority in parliament.

Talking point: Should Scottish MPs be allowed to vote on things that only affect England & Wales?

Some people argue that a minority government is unstable, because it does not have a clear majority of MSPs willing to pass all of its laws. Others say that, in a balanced parliament, good laws are likely to get passed and bad laws are likely to be amended or stopped, so this leads to the healthiest type of democracy.

One other problem is that Members of the Scottish Parliament are elected in two different ways. The areas covered by constituency and regional MSPs overlap and there has been some confusion about the roles of the two kinds of member. There is also resentment by some constituency MSPs that they have the additional responsibility of looking after their constituents, while regional MSPs have more freedom regarding which issues they choose to get involved in. But many people regard constituency MSPs as being more important.

What do people think?

In 1997 voters in Scotland were asked in a referendum if they wanted a parliament for Scotland. Three-quarters were in favour. In the first election to the Scottish Parliament 60 per cent of people who had the right to vote did so. Fewer people voted in the next

Scottish Parliament election: turnout fell by 10 per cent, as it did in all UK elections during this period. In 2006, research found that people in Scotland thought that a proportional voting system was good for the parliament. Seven out of ten people thought it was not difficult to work out how to vote under this system.

Chapter 4
Scottish Local Government

Background

There are 32 local councils in Scotland, which can vary quite a lot in geographical size but all have the same powers and responsibilities.

Until 2007, local elections in Scotland took place under first-past-the-post. However when the new Scottish Parliament was created in 1999 the power to decide how local elections would be run was transferred to it. Some of the Scottish political parties wanted to see a more proportional system used to elect Scottish councillors, and in 2004, the Scottish Parliament agreed to change the system. Since 2007, elections for the Scottish local government have been by the single transferable vote (see Northern Ireland for more details).

VOTING FACTS
SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SYSTEM USED
SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE
PEOPLE ELECTED
1,222 COUNCILLORS
NUMBER OF PARTIES REPRESENTED
7 PARTIES AND 192 INDEPENDENTS AND LOCAL PARTIES
LAST/NEXT ELECTION
2007/2011
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
20–50%

How it works

Scottish Councillors are elected to represent a ward. In Scotland these wards are made up of three or four councillors. Every councillor in Scotland is elected at the same time, every four years.

Candidates are elected if they reach a certain threshold of votes, known as the quota. If your first choice is not elected, your vote can pass on to your second choice. Or if your first choice candidate has many more votes than needed to pass the threshold, your second choice is taken into account.

Instead of voting with an 'X' and electing just one person, STV means voters can put candidates in order and elect a small group of people. Voters rank the candidates by putting '1' next to their favourite, '2' next their second choice and so on – voters can pick and choose between parties and people to order their choices in any way they want.

Is it fair?

The results are quite fair: most voters help to elect a councillor and parties get more or less the same share of seats as their share of the vote. This means that since the 2007 elections most Scottish councils are run by coalitions, with no one party having overall control. This is a big change from 2003, where most councils were controlled by one party.

Who gets elected?

Like the rest of the UK councillors are still more likely to be older, white men. However in the STV elections in

2007 women who stood were more likely to be elected, and many more people below the age of 30 were elected. This was partly because many councillors decided to stand down, so new people were elected, and also because under STV more seats can be won by different parties and groups. Scotland has a smaller proportion of black and minority ethnic residents than some other parts of the UK, and there are still very few BME councillors.

Do I have a real choice?

Voters have a lot of choice in Scottish local elections. In 2007 each voter had on average 7 different candidates to choose from, almost double the number in the last election in 2003. This is because with STV a group of candidates are elected at the same time, so parties will put up more than one candidate if they think that they can win enough votes for more than one seat. STV also encourages smaller parties to stand candidates because the system means that people who vote for these parties can actually influence the result and voters can cast their vote for who they want, knowing that it will be transferred and still have an effect even if their first choice candidate does not win.

Does it work?

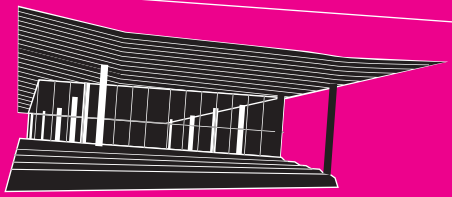
The change in voting system has made a difference in the way Scottish local councillors work, and it may take some time for Scottish local politics to get used to all the effects of the new voting system. Because voters rank their choices, candidates can attract votes as individuals as well as representatives of political parties. At election time, councillors need to show how

responsive they have been to the people in their wards and must be careful about criticising others, because they may need to get transferred votes to win.

What do people think?

Some people were worried that STV would be too complicated to use but most voters were able to fill in the ballot paper correctly in the 2007 Scottish local elections. Spoiled ballots (where voters have incorrectly filled in a ballot paper) were only slightly more numerous than average, and significantly fewer than in the elections to the Scottish Parliament.

VOTING FACTS
WELSH ASSEMBLY



SYSTEM USED
ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM (AMS)
PEOPLE ELECTED
60 ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (AMS)
NUMBER OF PARTIES REPRESENTED
4 PARTIES AND 1 INDEPENDENT
LAST ELECTION/NEXT ELECTION
2007/2011
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
43.7%

Chapter 5
Welsh Assembly

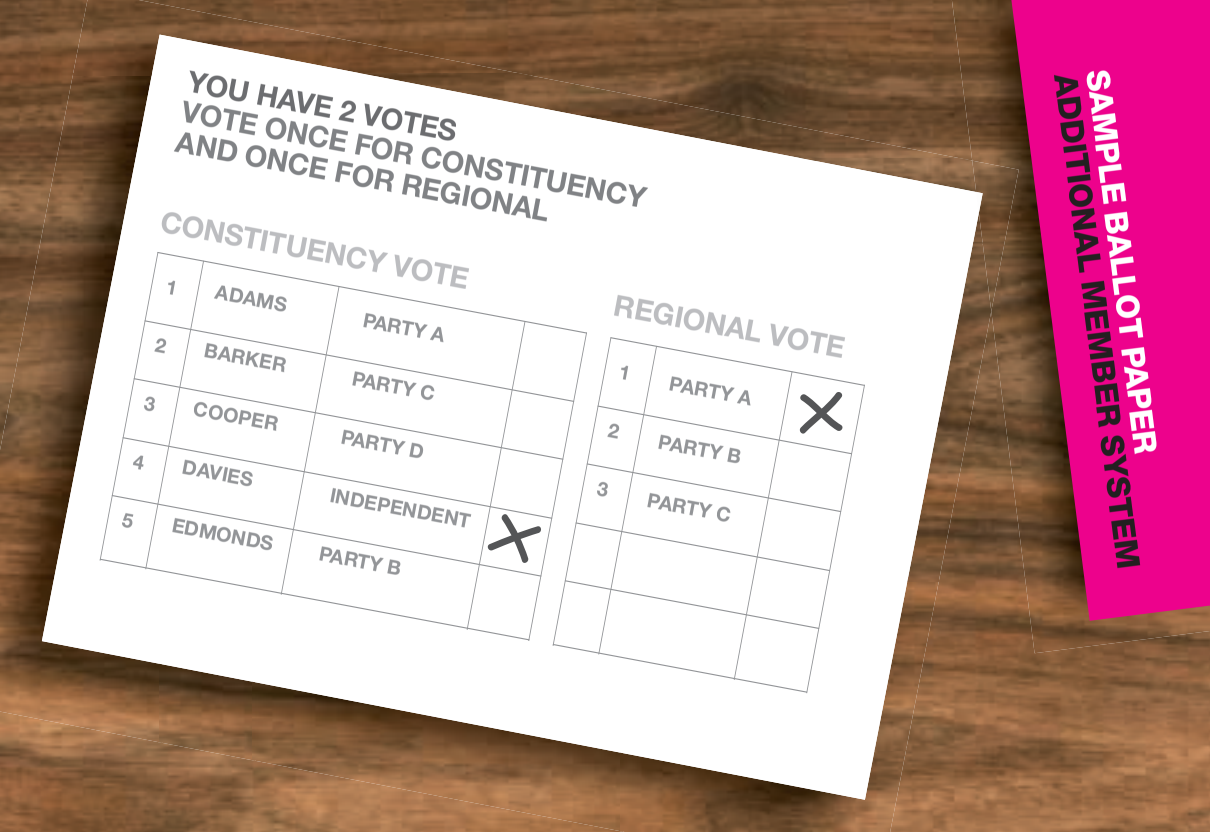
Background

The National Assembly for Wales was set up in 1999, the same year as the Scottish Parliament. This was part of devolution, giving some areas of the UK powers through local elected bodies.

The Assembly makes decisions about education, health, the environment, sport and other matters. The Assembly's powers are limited: it cannot set taxes and some of its decisions must be agreed by the government in London. There have been three elections for the National Assembly; the next will be in May 2011.

The voting system: how it works

Just like the Scottish system, voters have two votes, one for a candidate in a local constituency and one for a party in a larger region. In each constituency, voters


SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM
YOU HAVE 2 VOTES
VOTE ONCE FOR CONSTITUENCY
AND ONCE FOR REGIONAL
CONSTITUENCY VOTE
1 ADAMS PARTY A
2 BARKER PARTY C
3 COOPER PARTY D
4 DAVIES INDEPENDENT X
5 EDMONDS PARTY B
REGIONAL VOTE
1 PARTY A X
2 PARTY B
3 PARTY C

put an 'X' next to their favourite candidate and the one with the most votes wins.

Wales is also divided into five bigger regions. Four members are elected from each region, making up the remaining 20 Assembly Members. Each party draws up a list of candidates, from which the regional members are chosen, taking into account how many votes and how many seats the party has already won. So if a party has won two seats in the constituencies but its share of the votes means it should have five, the first three candidates on its list are elected.

In other words, the Welsh Assembly is elected by a mix of two different voting systems: First Past the Post and List Proportional Representation. (For more on the two systems, see the Westminster and Europe chapters.) The intention is to get the benefits of both systems, but as we see below it can cause problems.

Is it fair?

The picture is a bit of a mix. The first part of the electoral system in the constituencies can be quite unfair. If a party comes second in lots of seats, it can win many votes across Wales but end up with few constituency seats. The regional seats can compensate for this unfairness, because they go to parties which have been badly represented in the constituencies.

Basically, the Additional Member system 'adds on' fairness, it doesn't actually make the first bit of the election fairer. In each constituency, there are still many people who aren't represented, but in these

cases they tend to be represented by a regional member. Overall the system is quite fair.

Who gets elected?

In 2006, Wales broke the world record for the most women elected, with 31 women and 29 men. Women were a little bit more likely to be elected in constituencies than regions. This happened because the party which did best in the constituency seats took special steps to choose lots of female candidates. Choosing a list or a team of candidates can encourage parties to include different kinds of people, like more women, ethnic minority or young candidates.

Do I have a real choice?

The system gives each voter two votes and therefore the chance to have a say twice over. Voters can support different parties in the constituency and in the region, but their choices are limited in other ways.

Parties put forward one candidate each in the constituencies: voters can't pick and choose between people from the same party. If you like the party, but not the person they picked, your only way of voting for the party is to vote for the candidate you dislike. If your first choice does not win, your vote is effectively wasted, because it has no other influence on the outcome of the election.

At the regional level, seats are allocated in the order of the list that each party decides. This means that the voter has no choice about which people get elected. This could affect the priorities of list members: would

VOTING TALK

“It’s great that the result is representative as smaller parties get a share of power. As I get two votes I can vote for the candidate who I think will do most for me and still use my second vote to support my favourite party, so I get a bit more choice and can vote for who I really want. But it isn't very clear what the two different types of AM do, or who you should approach about problems.” Hywel, voter in Wales

they rather keep the voters happy or the party which put them on the list?

Does it work?

The Assembly government is formed from members of the Assembly. Sometimes this means a coalition government, with two parties making at least half of the Assembly Members working together on a common plan of action. At other times, the Assembly has also had a minority government, made up of slightly less than half the Members and this may be a little less stable. It is up to the parties to try to form a coalition or go it alone; the voting system doesn't dictate. The Assembly government has been able to implement a number of new policies for Wales, like free eye tests for under-25s and free school breakfasts.

Another problem is that there are two different kinds of members: constituency and list. There have been squabbles about the roles and rights of the different types of members. The constituency members are mostly from one party, while the other parties have more regional members.

What do people think?

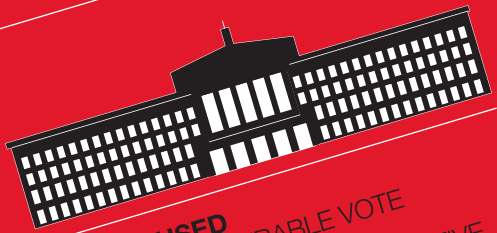
In 1997, the people of Wales were asked to vote about whether they wanted an Assembly in a referendum. The result was very close: 50.3 per cent for and 49.7 per cent against an Assembly. Half of all voters didn't even take part. This suggests some doubt about whether the Assembly was a good thing.

Since the referendum, turnout in Assembly elections has been low: 46 per cent of people voted in 1999 and 38 per cent in 2003. Only one in every five young people voted, though young people are the least likely to vote in all UK elections. These figures may show that voters are not happy with the Assembly or the way it is elected, but it could also point to lack of knowledge.

Talking point: Should political parties take special steps to make sure under-represented groups get elected?

In 2006, a major study into views of the Assembly found that most people were positive about it and wanted to see Assembly Members given more powers. More than half of Welsh people felt it had had a good impact on Wales and only one in ten felt it had been negative. No one said they found the voting system hard to use and most felt it was good to have a fair system to elect the Assembly. However, many people said they did not know much about the Assembly and this made them less likely to vote.

VOTING FACTS
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY



SYSTEM USED
SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE
PEOPLE ELECTED
108 MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (MLA)
NUMBER OF PARTIES REPRESENTED
7 PARTIES AND 1 INDEPENDENT
LAST ELECTION/NEXT ELECTION
2007/2011
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
64%

Chapter 6
Northern Ireland Assembly

Background

The Northern Ireland Assembly was set up in 1998. It was set up by a peace agreement, backed by political parties and the people in a referendum. This happened at the same time as devolution in Wales and Scotland.

The Assembly makes laws on health, education, housing and other matters. It cannot set taxes. Because of a falling out over the Northern Ireland peace process, the Assembly was suspended in 2002 and the UK government took over its powers. An election was held in 2003, though the Assembly was on ice so no one was quite sure what they were voting for. The 2007 elections went ahead, and the Assembly has had its normal powers restored.

The voting system used is called the Single Transferable Vote or STV. It has been used for most

elections in Northern Ireland since the 1970s, so it seemed the natural choice for the Assembly. Northern Ireland also elects its local councillors and Members of the European Parliament by STV.

The voting system – how it works

Northern Ireland has 18 constituencies and six people are elected in each. Every voter has one vote, but each vote is counted in a way that shows more about what voters think. Parties often put forward more than one candidate in each constituency. Voters rank the candidates by putting '1' next to their favourite, '2' next to their second choice and so on. This is a system for the discerning voter: you can pick and choose between parties and people to order your choices in any way you want.

Candidates are elected if they reach a certain threshold of votes, known as the quota. If your first choice is not elected, your vote can pass on to your second choice. Or if your first choice candidate has many more votes than are needed to pass the threshold, your second choice is taken into account.

Talking point: Is it better to have one representative in a constituency who represents everyone, or several representatives from different parties?

Instead of voting with an 'X' and electing just one person, STV means voters can put candidates in order and elect a small group of people.

SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE

THERE ARE 4 SEATS TO BE ELECTED
VOTE IN ORDER OF PREFFERENCE
VOTE FOR AS MANY OR FEW CANDIDATES AS YOU WISH

1	ADAMS	PARTY A	3
2	BARKER	PARTY C	1
3	COOPER	INDEPENDENT	4
4	DAVIES	WOMEN'S COALITION	
5	EDMONDS	PARTY C	2
6	FOGERTY	PARTY A	5
7	GILES	INDEPENDENT	
8	HARGREAVES	PARTY B	6
9	JONES	PARTY A	7
10	KING	PARTY B	

Is it fair?

The results are quite fair: parties get more or less the same share of seats as their share of the vote. The biggest parties can sometimes end up with one or two extra seats, but the difference is small. STV is not only fair to the major parties: it lets small parties and independent candidates with enough votes get elected. It allows all popular views to be heard.

Who gets elected?

Because parties can choose more than one candidate in each area, they can choose people who are different from each other. If they do this, they can attract more support from voters who care about different things: women and men; young and old; and people from different backgrounds. However, Northern Ireland's parties have been pretty slow to realise this.

There are only 18 women in the Assembly out of 108 (17 per cent). Whenever Northern Ireland has used other voting systems, parties were just as slow to put women forward and the number of women elected was small. This suggests that the voting system is not to blame.

Northern Ireland's ethnic minority population is very small, less than 1 per cent. The first ethnic minority MLA was elected in 2007. On average, Assembly Members and councillors are younger than in the rest of the UK. STV reflects Northern Ireland's religious groups well, and this is seen as very important to parties and voters.

VOTING TALK

“The good thing about the new system we used in 2007 is that it has made people from all over the political spectrum work together. It's also meant that more people have a councillor who represents their political viewpoint.”
Morag, a voter in Northern Ireland

Do I have a real choice?

Voters have a lot of choice under STV. You can choose between candidates as well as parties. Almost no votes are wasted: if your top choice is not elected, your vote will pass on to your number 2. You can put your least favourite candidate last. You don't have to stick to a particular party or vote for parties in order: you choose what matters most to you. As long as you vote in order (1, 2, 3 …) you can vote for as many or as few candidates as you wish. Voting down the list of candidates will never harm your top choice.

Does it work?

Northern Ireland's politicians have had some fallings out and this has affected the proper working of the Assembly. However, this has little to do with the voting system: some people argue this system can encourage politicians to work together, and this was why the system was introduced in Northern Ireland in the first place. When it comes to forming a government, no one party has enough seats on its own, so they have to work with others. There is a special system to choose government ministers in Northern Ireland, which is not connected with the voting system.

Locally, members who represent each constituency can do a better job for their area if they stay in touch, even though they won't be from the same party. At election time, politicians must be careful about criticising others, because they may need to get transferred votes to win.

What do people think?

While many people feel unhappy about politics in Northern Ireland, they feel quite positive about the voting system. In a survey at the time of 2003 election, most people felt their vote would count, although the way in which these votes translate into election results can sometimes be unclear to voters. Only a tiny number said they felt the result was a foregone conclusion. People are in agreement that STV is a fair system and good for Northern Ireland. Turnout of 63.5 per cent is higher than most of the rest of the UK.

VOTING FACTS
LOCAL COUNCILS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

SYSTEM USED
FIRST PAST THE POST
PEOPLE ELECTED
22,000 COUNCILLORS WHO MAKE UP 460 LOCAL COUNCILS ACROSS THE UK
ELECTIONS HELD
COUNCILLORS ELECTED FOR FOUR YEARS, BUT AT DIFFERENT TIMES. SOME ELECTIONS TAKE PLACE MOST YEARS
TURNOUT
BETWEEN 25 AND 50%

Chapter 7
Local councils in England and Wales

Background

Councils vary greatly in terms of size, budget, powers and organisation. Councils have between 20 and 120 elected members. They make decisions on local services, like recycling and leisure centres. Many councils also have a say in education, health and transport.

In some areas, there are different kinds of council. For example, a large county may have a county council plus a number of small district councils which cover just one town or rural area within the county. Where there are several kinds of council, they share powers. They are usually elected separately.

How it works

Councillors are elected to represent a ward. This is like a constituency only smaller; a constituency is made up

SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
FIRST PAST THE POST

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
VOTE FOR 3 CANDIDATES ONLY

1	**ANDERSON** LABOUR PARTY	
2	**BRYANT** LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	X
3	**CARMICHEL** CONSERVATIVE	
4	**DAVIES** LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	X
5	**ELSTON** CONSERVATIVE	
6	**FOGERTY** LABOUR PARTY	
7	**GRAVES** CONSERVATIVE	
8	**HARGREAVES** LABOUR PARTY	
9	**ILSON**	
10	**JONES** LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	X

of several wards. Each ward has at least one councillor and often two or three or more

Some councils elect all members at the same time. Parties put forward as many candidates as there are seats. If there are three councillors are to be elected in a ward, then each voter has three votes. Voters put three 'X's on the ballot paper next to their top three candidates. The people who come first, second and third win a seat. They often come from the same party, but not always.

Other councils stagger elections, so some of their members are elected each year. This can mean that the political parties are always fighting an election and voters can get tired of going to the polls. In a ward with three councillors, voters elect one councillor at each election. Voters put an 'X' on the ballot paper next to their favourite candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins.

This system is called First Past the Post and is used in English and Welsh council elections. In Northern Ireland and Scotland (from May 2007) local elections took place, using the Single Transferable Vote (for more detail, see Northern Ireland Assembly section).

Is it fair?

In three-member wards, voters often give their votes to candidates from the same party. Usually this means the party that is just ahead of the others wins all the seats – 'winner takes all'. It doesn't matter how close the race was. This can be very unfair to other parties,

which win a big share of the vote but end up with no seats. Occasionally, the seats in a ward are split between different parties, if a candidate wins more personal votes than a colleague from the same party.

Sometimes the results can be so distorted that the party with the most votes in a council can lose the election. In 2006, this happened in 12 councils in England. This is undemocratic and unfair both to voters and parties.

Who gets elected?

A typical councillor is male, white and in their 50s. In England, three in every ten councillors are women. In Wales, it is just two in ten. Only three in every hundred councillors are from a minority ethnic group, less than half the rate of the whole population. Even fewer young people are elected to be councillors: just one or two in every hundred councillors are under 30 years old. In other words, councils don't really reflect all the people who are affected by their decisions.

Being on a council is not a full-time job for most and the majority of councillors receive only a small allowance and some expenses for the work. Councillors have to spend around 20 hours each week on council work: fewer people with full-time jobs and families have the time to be on councils.

About eight in every hundred councillors are independents, not representing a party. Some areas have local community parties. This may be because councils have a local focus.

Do I have a real choice?

In 2003, 400 wards had no election because there weren't enough candidates standing. When this happens, these candidates automatically get seats. This gives voters no choice at all and is bad for democracy.

In many more places, choice is limited because only a small number of candidates stand. Even when there are many candidates to pick from, parties pick candidates and voters have little influence over who gets chosen. With three 'X' votes, you cannot give extra weight to your top choice. If your favourite party is not elected, your vote has no further influence on the result.

With three places to fill in every ward, it is sometimes hard for parties to find enough people to stand for all the council places available. On the other hand, if you want to stand in a council election, getting party backing is much easier than in other elections, so there are fewer barriers to women and young people being chosen. This is especially true where parties are choosing three candidates to stand in one ward.

Does it work?

Many councils are led by two parties working together in a coalition. Sometimes councils that have elections every year can see their make-up change frequently. If power changes between parties occur too often, this instability can be bad for local decisions. On the other hand, the voting system means that some councils have the same party in power for decades. Local

VOTING TALK

"People should have a meaningful choice about who represents them by having a multi-member constituency. This already happens for Council wards in London and it is fairer all round. Why should our voting system be the only area of public life where there is no competition between service providers?" Sabah Hussain, activist in Local Government

politics can become stagnant and voters may ask 'What's the point in voting?' if the same party wins every time.

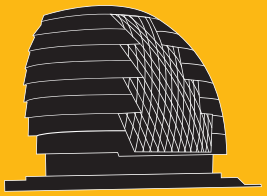
Sometimes popular parties win few or no seats on councils. Democracy works best when people with different views have debates and ask tricky questions. It is unhealthy when there is no opposition to the party which runs the council, as happens in many places.

What do people think?

Four in ten people vote in local elections on average. Many people are confused about the patchwork of different local councils and their powers, which have changed quite a bit in recent years. In a survey from 2003, only one in six people understood the pattern of elections for their council. Four in ten felt that their vote wouldn't make much difference to their local area, and among young people, the proportion was even higher.

Talking point: Why might people feel disengaged or uninterested in politics?

VOTING FACTS
MAYORS



SYSTEM USED
SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE (SV)
PEOPLE ELECTED
MAYORS IN 13 CITIES
NUMBER OF PARTIES REPRESENTED
3 PARTIES AND 4 INDEPENDENTS
LAST ELECTION/NEXT ELECTION
VARIES
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
20–50%

Chapter 8
Mayors

Background

Most councils have a mayor; usually one of the councillors takes the role each year. These mayors have a formal role, receiving visitors and representing the council at events, rather than real power. Since 2000, there has been a new type of mayor, elected by the people rather than chosen by the council. These mayors are leaders of their councils, they appoint advisers and have much power to make decisions.

Twelve cities decided to have an elected mayor; this was backed by local people in referendums. London has an elected mayor, though this role is slightly different again (see below). This is a tiny number in relation to all the councils in the UK.

The voting system: how it works

Voters mark their first choice candidate in the first

column of the ballot paper, and their second choice in the second column. Voters cannot choose any more candidates after these two.

All the first preferences are counted, and if one candidate has more than half of votes cast at this stage they win. If no candidate has more than half of the votes, only the top two candidates stay in the race. The second votes of the candidates who have been eliminated are now counted. The second votes are added to the first votes for the two remaining candidates. Whoever has the most votes after this second round wins; they do not need more than half at this stage.

Is it fair?

This system is designed to be fair by making sure the winner has broad support from voters. The second vote is supposed to give voters a second chance, so that even those who supported a losing candidate still get a say in the final outcome.

However, in an election for just one person, it is difficult to make sure that all votes count. In only 7 mayoral elections out of the 23 held so far, did the winner win more than half the votes, even after the second votes had been added. More than half of all voters ended up with a mayor they did not vote for, with either their first or second vote. This is not fair.

Cutting off the second stage at two candidates can be unfair as well. If there are only a few votes between the second and third placed candidate in first votes, why

SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE

IN THE FIRST COLUMN PLACE AN **X** TO INDICATE YOUR FIRST CHOICE FOR MAYOR, IN THE SECOND COLUMN PLACE AN **X** TO INDICATE YOUR SECOND CHOICE OF MAYOR

	CANDIDATE	FIRST CHOICE	SECOND CHOICE
1	LIVINGSTONE KEN	X	
2	JOHNSON BORIS		
3	PADDICK BRIAN		
4	BERRY SIÂN		X

should one get to stay in the race but not the other? Especially as a third-placed candidate may end up having far more second-preference votes than the top two candidates, and so may have otherwise won.

Talking point: Should we have elected mayors?

Who gets elected?

Of 13 mayors, two are women and none are from an ethnic minority background.

Quite a few of the mayors do not represent a political party; they are independent. This means the system can work for both party and independent candidates with popular support. Mayors are seen as local champions and are elected separately from the council, which may explain why independent candidates do well.

Do I have a real choice?

In this two-step system, people get two chances to have a say. You can cast a second vote, so if your first choice is not elected, you can still influence who wins. But it is often hard to guess which two candidates will go forward to the second stage. Many voters give their second vote to someone who is no longer in the race, so their vote does not count. The election would give voters more say if they could rank all the candidates, instead of having to guess which two would be left in the race.

Parties also have a big say in who gets elected, because they choose which candidates stand for

VOTING TALK

“The great thing about elected mayors is you know who is responsible for things locally – you know who to blame when things go wrong, who to go to get things changed and even who to say thanks to when things work out well. There is nowhere to hide when you are the mayor!”
Steve Bullock, Mayor of Lewisham

them. Voters cannot pick between candidates for the same party. The fact that independents can get elected does give voters more choice, but this is rare in elections for just one post – independents tend to get elected when multiple posts are up for elections, and so when people have several votes.

Does it work?

Because elected mayors are a relatively new part of the system, it is difficult to say how well the system works. They were introduced to give more leadership at a local level, and in some places the mayor has achieved this. It can be easier for local people to feel in touch with one person rather than a big council with many members. Mayors and councils are elected separately, so cities can end up with a mayor of one party and a council of another. In some places this has worked well; in others this can led to conflict.

What do people think?

Each city with an elected mayor has chosen to have one in a referendum. This suggests that there is quite a bit of support in those places for the mayor system. Twice as many local authorities have chosen not to have a mayor when referendums have been held. In four cities with mayors, there are campaigns to change back to the old council-only system.

One of the reasons put forward for having mayors was to increase the number of people voting and taking part in local politics. This has not really happened. Less than half of the people entitled to vote have done so. Turnout is usually between 30 per cent and 50 per

cent, but it has been as low as 20 per cent in some places. Elections under this system also have quite a lot of votes not cast in the correct way. This means that many people are confused about the two-stage system and unable to use it effectively.

London

The mayor of London is the best known of all the elected mayors. The mayor works with the elected London Assembly; together they make up the Greater London Authority. They were set up in 2000 as part of devolution, to make decisions about transport, the environment and other issues affecting the city of London.

The London Assembly has 25 members elected by the people of London. They are elected using the Additional Member System (like in Scotland and Wales), with 14 elected in local constituencies and 11 people elected from lists for the whole city. Five party groups have seats and, with the London-wide seats, the share of seats better reflects what people voted for.

The UK government wanted to have more of these regional assemblies across England. But when people in the North East were given the chance to have a regional assembly in a referendum in 2004, they did not back the plan. This was a big setback, and plans for other elected regional assemblies have been put on hold, meaning London is the only one in the UK.

VOTING FACTS
EUROPE

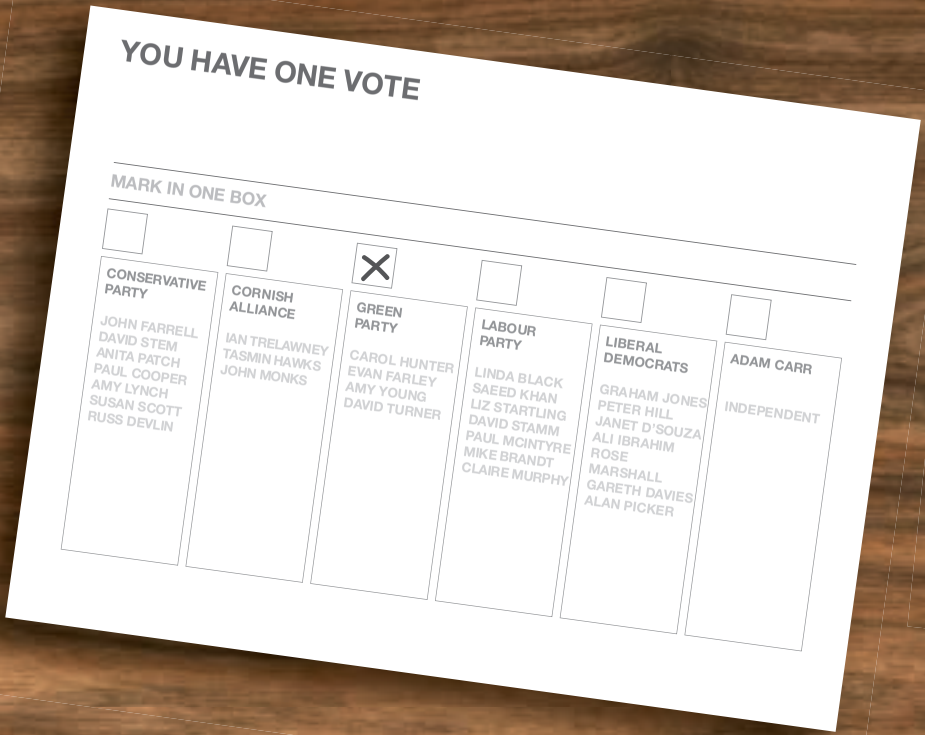
SYSTEM USED
LIST SYSTEM
PEOPLE ELECTED
78 (Out of 785) MEMBERS OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (MEP) REPRESENT THE UK
NUMBER OF PARTIES
7
LAST/NEXT ELECTION
2004/2009
TURNOUT AT LAST ELECTION
38%

Chapter 9
Europe

Background

The European Union (EU) is made up of 27 countries, or member states. These countries set up the EU to make decisions together on certain matters that affect all of them. The parliament is elected by European voters. It works with EU government and appointed Commissioners to make European laws and decisions (for more about the EU, see www.europa.eu).

Most Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sit in party groups with members from other countries who broadly share their political views. MEPs can ask questions, carry out investigations and decide on spending plans. The parliament meets in Brussels and Strasbourg. There are 21 working languages.



SAMPLE BALLOT PAPER
LIST SYSTEM

The voting system: how it works

For European elections, England is divided into nine regions, with Scotland and Wales each counting as one region. The number of MEPs for each region depends on the population: the smallest region has three MEPs and the largest has ten.

In every region, each party draws up a list of candidates. Voters choose one party and mark an 'X' on the ballot paper next to the party's name. Voters cannot pick and choose between the party's candidates: they must vote for the whole list. This is called a *closed list*. The seats are allocated to each party based on how many votes they win in each region. Candidates are elected in the order they appear on the party list. So if a party wins enough votes for two seats, for example, the top two candidates on its list are elected.

The parliament's elections are held at the same time across Europe. There are some differences in how each country elects its MEPs, but all use proportional systems. Great Britain has used this system since 1999. Before that, MEPs were elected by First Past the Post. Northern Ireland's three MEPs are elected using the Single Transferable Vote (see Northern Ireland chapter for more detail).

Is it fair?

The closed list system is fair to political parties: the number of seats each party gets is directly linked to the number of votes it wins in each region. Small parties have the chance to win seats, particularly in the

larger regions. However, it is very hard for independent candidates (candidates who are not standing for a party) to win enough support to get elected. This means the system favours parties and makes it more difficult for independents to win, as they have to stand on a party-style slate to get on to the ballot. It also favours voters who want to support a party and is unfair to those who want to support independents.

Do I have a real choice?

Voters can only choose between parties in this election. Voters cannot support individual candidates; they must accept or reject a party list as a whole. This limits voters' say a great deal.

Since parties have the biggest say in which candidates are elected, there is a risk that MEPs will feel they must answer to their party rather than to the voters. This is bad for the relationship between elected representatives and the electors.

Who gets elected?

Political parties have the strongest influence on who is elected because they choose the people on the party list. Some argue that this system is better for under-represented groups because parties have the power to promote them. However, this relies on parties choosing a mix of candidates from different backgrounds.

Some parties have taken steps to make sure that women are elected, for example, by making sure that every other candidate is a woman. Yet only one in four of our MEPs are women. This is a little better than the

VOTING TALK

“The closed list system is a step towards fairness because it distributes seats between the parties as the voters wanted, but it doesn’t give the voters the chance to choose which of the party candidates they prefer. It is therefore an imperfect system which means that the parties choose their representatives, and the voters' preferences in choice of candidate for the party are ignored. ” Chris Huhne, former MEP

House of Commons but still a lower rate than the rest of the European Parliament. Five MEPs are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, which is three times as many – proportionately – as in the House of Commons, and close to the BME percentage in the population as a whole.

Does it work?

Unlike other elected bodies, MEPs do not form a government. This means there is not the same need for stability to make sure a country is properly run.

MEPs represent their constituents in the European Parliament, and when they are there, they scrutinise the commission and amend legislation. Each region has a group of MEPs and there is no requirement for them to work together. Few people have direct contact with their MEPs.

What do people think of it?

The number of people who vote in European elections has always been low. In 2004, two out of five people voted, though this is more than in previous years. In Northern Ireland half of all voters took part in the same election.

Many people are unclear or unenthusiastic about Europe and the role of MEPs. Few can name one or more of their MEPs, though this was the same under the old system. Part of the reason is that European Parliament can seem distant from the people that elects the MEPs. Euro constituencies are very large and voters haven't voted for a person, but a party.

The closed list system is easy to use, as the voter simply expresses their choice of party with an ‘X’. However, the way in which these votes translate into election results is not very clear to voters.

Talking point: Do we still need political parties?

Chapter 10
Electoral systems

There are two main families of electoral systems.

Winner takes all

The key feature of this type of election is that one person is elected in each area or constituency. The 'winner takes all' because there are no prizes for coming second, no matter how many votes you get or how close the race is. These systems can also be called majoritarian systems because they deliver a clear majority for the winner. The two main systems in this family are:

- First Past the Post: the candidate with the most votes wins … and that's it (see the Westminster chapter).
- Alternative Vote: the winner needs more than half of the votes. Candidates are knocked out of the race

until someone has more than half. This system uses choice voting, where voters rank candidates 1, 2, 3 and so on.

- Supplementary Vote: one person is elected taking into account second choices of voters. It's almost choice voting, except voters only get to choose a number 1 and 2 (see Mayors chapter).

Proportional systems

The key feature of this type of system is that the share of seats each party ends up with is close to the share of votes it got. These systems can also be called proportional representation and they deliver fair election results. The main systems in this family are:

- List systems: parties put forward a list of candidates and voters choose a list. Lists systems can either be open, where voters can choose individual candidates on the list, or closed, where they can't (see Europe).
- Mixed systems: part of the election is in constituencies, to give local representation, and part from a list, to give a fair overall result (see Scottish and Welsh chapters).
- Single Transferable Vote: each constituency elects a small number of people, so there can be a fair result and local representation. This system uses choice voting, where voters rank candidates 1, 2, 3 and so on (see Northern Ireland).

absentee voting
Sometimes people can't go to a polling station because they are sick or away, but they can still vote by absentee vote. One way is to vote by post, where the voter is sent a ballot paper and posts it back to the election offices. The other is to appoint someone to vote on their behalf. This is called voting by *proxy*. Recently, the law has changed so anyone can ask for a postal vote if it is more convenient for them.

assembly
This is a name for an elected body.

ballot box
A secure box to collect ballot papers when people have voted and, after the end of voting, to transport them to where they will be counted.

ballot paper
A form that voters use to show their choice in an election. They usually have a list of candidates, parties and a place for voters to show their choice. In some places, people vote using special computers instead.

candidates
The people who want your votes to get elected. Candidates are usually chosen by a political party, and the party helps them campaign, but they can also stand as an independent.

coalition
Where two or more parties team up and work together. The word is often used when the parties form a government together.

constituents
People who live a constituency; every voter lives in a constituency and is represented in parliament.

constituency
An area used to organise voting and representation. The country is divided into constituencies and you can find out which constituency you live in at: www.theyworkforyou.com

democracy
A way of running a country where the people have a say. Usually, they choose people to represent them in a parliament and make decisions on their behalf.

devolution
Where the right to make some decisions is given (or 'devolved') from a national government to a local area. In 1999, the Scottish and Welsh people decided they wanted to make more decisions locally, and new elected bodies were set up to do this. These areas are still part of the UK; they are not separate countries.

elected body
A parliament, assembly or council that is elected by the people. Elected bodies have different powers: two key powers are being able to make laws and being able to set taxes.

elected representative
This is a general term for someone who is elected

elector
Someone who is allowed to vote.

electorate
All the people who are allowed to vote.

executive
The government.

government
The body that creates laws and runs the state. A government usually has more than half of the seats in a parliament (see Westminster for more detail).

independent candidate
Someone who stands for election but not for a political party.

mandate
When a party wins an election, it is said to have a mandate from the people to carry out what it promised to do if elected.

manifesto
What candidates or parties say they will do if they are elected. Manifestos are made up of policies for different areas of responsibility like health, education and the environment.

marginal seat
A constituency where the current MP has a very small majority is said to be a 'marginal', because only a small difference in votes could elect a different candidate.

opposition
Any parties that are not in government are described as being in opposition. They can still sit on committees that discuss laws and policies, raise important issues, keep an eye on what the government is doing and ask questions.

parliament
This is a name for an elected body that can make laws.

political party
Parties are made up of groups of who agree broadly on what they want to change, or how to run the country.

poll
Another word for an election.

polling station
The place people go to vote, usually there are a number in each constituency so people do not have far to go. They are usually in public places like village halls, schools and council offices. Inside the polling station there are a number of small booths so voters can make their choices in secret. Officials supervise the polling station to make sure that the election is carried out fairly and explain the system to anyone who is not sure.

referendum
A referendum is not an election – people are asked to vote for or against a proposal rather than to elect people to make decisions.

safe seat
A constituency where the current MP has a very large majority is said to be ‘safe’ this is because a big difference in votes is needed to elect a different candidate, which is often unlikely.

seat
Short for a seat in parliament or on a council. When a candidate wins an election, they get a seat in parliament or on a council.

turnout
The number of people who turn out and vote in an election. Turnout is one measure of how healthy our

democracy is: if people take part in elections they can have a say, but if they don't, their views will not be heard. Sometimes people don't vote because they don't trust the system to reflect their views. Turnout of more than 65 per cent is good, less than that is not very good.

voter
Someone who places a vote in an election. Almost everyone over 18 can vote (apart from members of the House of Lords, certain members of the immediate royal family and people in prison)

voting system
A way of organising the votes cast in an election to work out who is elected. There are different ways of voting, different ways of counting the votes and deciding who has won.

ward
A small area used to organise voting and representation, especially for local council elections. Each constituency is made up of several wards.

Westminster
The House of Commons and the House of Lords meet in a building called the Palace of Westminster, so they are often called 'Westminster' for short.

VOTING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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