

# Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in the UK in Historical Perspective

David Klemperer

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## About the Author

David Klemperer is a Research Fellow at the Constitution Society specialising in questions of electoral reform. He holds an MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History from the University of Cambridge, and a BA in History and Politics from the University of Oxford.

## Abstract

*The UK's debate on electoral reform is in need of historical perspective. Too often, the First-Past-the-Post electoral system (FPTP) used for Westminster elections is presented as a central part of a well-defined British democratic tradition stretching back centuries. This paper challenges this narrative by providing a brief history of electoral systems and electoral reform in the UK. In doing so, it highlights how the electoral system has been subject to constant challenge and change, and how a diverse range of different systems have been used.*

## Introduction

In April 2011, in the run-up to the Alternative Vote Referendum, then-Prime Minister David Cameron appealed to tradition in his defence of the existing First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system. Arguing that it was 'enshrined in our constitution and integral to our history', he contended that 'First-Past-the-Post isn't just one way of counting votes; it is an expression of our fairness as a country.' His comments were echoed by the Labour peer Lord Reid, at a time a fellow campaigner against electoral reform, who called FPTP 'the British way', and 'the foundation of our democracy for generations'.

Although widespread, this understanding of Britain's parliamentary democracy as historically inextricable from FPTP is a misconception, and one that serves to obscure the rich history of electoral systems and electoral reform in the UK. In fact, far from being an age-old inheritance, the uniform system of FPTP in single-member constituencies that we use today for elections to the House of Commons is a post-war creation. Moreover, rather than the natural and inevitable outcome of British democratization, its emergence was highly contingent: over the past two hundred years, a

surprising range of electoral systems have been used.

This paper injects some more accurate historical perspective into the discussion of electoral reform in the UK. Exploring the development of the British electoral system over the time, and the debates that frequently surrounded it, it will highlight the extent to which the electoral system has been subject to challenge and change. In doing so, it will show that any electoral reform today should be considered not as some kind of revolution, but as just one more stage in British democracy's long evolution.

## The Origins of UK Democracy

When the Parliament of the United Kingdom was first created by the Act of Union of 1800, which merged the old Parliament of Great Britain with the Parliament of Ireland, the electoral system for its House of Commons was far from the uniform system we know today. Voting itself was conducted by FPTP, the system in which electors vote for as many candidates as there are seats to be elected, (so one in a single-member district, two in a two-member district etc), and the candidate(s) with the most votes win. However, the size of constituencies, the franchise within them, and the number of MPs elected by them, varied wildly.

The franchise, limited to around 400,000 male electors, was particularly complicated. As today, constituencies were divided into counties and boroughs. In the counties, any man owning land worth more than forty shillings was entitled to vote. In the boroughs, there were six different kinds of electoral qualification, of which each borough used one or more. The result was that while in some borough constituencies, nicknamed 'potwallopers',

the electorate ran into the thousands, in others, the infamous 'rotten boroughs', the electors could number as few as seven.

These inequalities were exacerbated by the extreme disproportionality of constituency apportionment, which had been largely unchanged since medieval times. As a result, sparsely populated rural areas were grossly overrepresented, and new industrial centres underrepresented. Cornwall for instance, was represented by forty-four MPs, while Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds all lacked direct representation. Additionally, under 'plural voting' it was possible for business owners, property owners, and some university graduates to be eligible to vote in more than one constituency, and thus able to cast multiple votes.

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly to the modern British observer, most constituencies elected more than one MP. Although Scotland, Wales, and Ireland all used single-member districts, in England each seat was represented by two MPs. This was a legacy of 1264 and the summoning of England's first parliament by Simon de Montfort, when each county had been asked to send two Knights, and each borough two Burgesses.

For the system's defenders, the obvious inequalities of the electoral system were justified by the principle of 'virtual representation'. This was the doctrine according to which parliament represented not localities but interests. Supposedly, the hotchpotch of different franchises across the country worked to ensure that a healthy balance of different interests was represented in the House of Commons, meaning all groups were 'virtually' represented. Since the mid-seventeenth century however, reformers had rejected this logic. Movements and activists from the Levellers of the English Civil War, to the famous pamphleteer Thomas Paine, to the

demonstrators massacred at Peterloo in 1819, had all made equal-sized constituencies and a much wider franchise their key demands.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, these reformist demands were increasingly hard to resist. The industrial revolution had led to rapid urbanization, drastically increasing the geographical inequalities in representation. Even from the perspective of representing interests, the electoral system was manifestly out of step with Britain's new social reality. Moreover, economic hardship was leading to unrest amongst the working classes, and this manifested itself in anti-government agitation. In particular, the 1820s saw the emergence of active 'political clubs' across the country, entities whose primary purpose was to demand electoral reform.

In 1830, a new Whig government was formed under the leadership of Earl Grey, bringing to an end a long period of Tory rule. In 1831, this government introduced an electoral reform bill, and when this was narrowly defeated in the House of Commons, a general election was fought on the issue, and returned a substantial Whig majority. However, the government's reform measures were again defeated, this time in the House of Lords, and the result was a protracted national political crisis, with major riots taking place across the country. Only after two more changes in government, the threat of more serious popular violence, and an agreement by the King to create new Whig peers if necessary, was an electoral reform measure finally passed by both houses of parliament in 1832. It was this measure that soon became known as the Great Reform Act.

The precise significance and impact of the Great Reform Act has been hotly debated by historians ever since. On the one hand, the reform was relative moderate: it maintained plural voting, increased the number of electors by no more than 300,000

people, kept the electorate limited to approximately one in five adult men, and came nowhere near introducing equal-sized constituencies. On the other hand, it was a clear step in the direction of reformist demands: it went some way to regularizing the franchise (replacing most of the borough franchises with a single franchise for all male householders living in properties worth over £10 per year), abolished 143 seats in the smallest boroughs, and replaced them with 130 new seats in previously underrepresented areas. Perhaps most importantly of all, however, the Great Reform Act opened the way to further reforms in the years to come.

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Although in 1832 the Great Reform Act had been presented by its advocates as a 'final settlement' of the franchise question, it did the opposite of ending electoral reform as an issue. At an elite level, the franchise continued to be a central topic of political debate: in the 1850s and 1860s, parliament debated no fewer than six different reform bills.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, there continued to be major pressure from below. Throughout the 1840s, the radical working-class Chartist movement organized mass demonstrations and petitions in support of the 'People's Charter' a document comprising six demands: manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, an end to property qualifications to stand for parliament, the payment of MPs, equal sized constituencies, and annual parliaments. In the 1860s, the Reform League engaged in similar activism, and in 1866, after the failure of the Liberal government's Reform Bill, it brought over two hundred thousand demonstrators to Hyde Park. In 1867 a Conservative government, whose leading figure was Benjamin Disraeli, finally succeeded in passing the Second Reform Act. This more than doubled the electorate, by extending the franchise

to all male householders in borough constituencies, along with all lodgers paying at least £10 in rent, and brought the total to approximately one in three male adults.

By this time, however, the debate on electoral reform had been widened to include the question of the voting system itself. Over the course of the nineteenth century, faced with the prospect of mass democracy, and fearing the 'tyranny of the majority', numerous politicians and intellectuals had become pre-occupied with the question of how to ensure 'minority representation'. Many believed that only a new electoral system could guarantee minorities representation.

The first move in this direction had been made during the debates over the Great Reform Act, when a Conservative MP, Winthrop Mackworth Praed, had advocated a system that would later be called the 'Limited Vote'. He argued that in multi-member constituencies, electors should only be able to vote for fewer candidates than there were seats. This would prevent one party's candidates from sweeping the board, and ensure that minorities in those seats were represented.

In 1853, a Liberal MP, James Garth Marshall, devised his own scheme to ensure minority representation. Called the 'Cumulative Vote', his system gave each elector in a multi-member district as many votes as there were seats. However, it allowed voters to distribute their votes as they wished, including to cumulate multiple of their votes onto a single candidate. The idea was that any substantial minority group, should they cumulate all their votes onto a single candidate, would be able to secure at least some representation.

The most sophisticated such scheme, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Reform Bills were presented in 1852, 1854, 1859, 1860, 1866, and 1867.

was that advanced from the late 1850s by an intellectual named Thomas Hare. Although he used the term 'personal representation', Hare's system was effectively what we now call Single Transferable Vote (STV), and involved voters ranking the candidates in preference order. In each multi-member constituency, a quota for election would be determined, by dividing the total number of votes cast by the number of seats available. Any candidate receiving more votes than the quota would be elected, and any surplus votes they received above the quota would be redistributed in proportion to their voters' next preferences. Should more seats remain to be filled after this, the candidates with fewest votes would be eliminated, and their votes redistributed to their voters next preferences. These eliminations would continue, pushing more candidates over the quota, until all the seats in the constituency had been filled. Somewhat impractically, Hare thought that the entirety of the United Kingdom should form a single constituency. He promoted his system in lectures and pamphlets, and was famously supported in parliament and in print by no less eminent a figure than the philosopher, and Liberal MP, John Stuart Mill.

By 1867, then, the voting system itself was very much up for debate, and concerns about proportionality were being taken seriously. Indeed, the schemes for more proportional representation were not merely theoretical curiosities, but, in the case of the Cumulative Vote and the Limited Vote, systems that would be put into practice.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Second Reform Act included a limited(!) application of the Limited Vote. Like the Great Reform Act before it, the 1867 Act combined extension of the franchise with a redistribution of seats. Although the two-member structure was maintained for most English constituencies, one notable feature was the

creation of thirteen three-member constituencies in Britain's largest cities. In these constituencies, the Act instituted the Limited Vote, by allowing each elector to select only two candidates. The idea was to prevent single-party dominance of the cities, and to instead ensure that their representation more accurately reflected the partisan balance of their electorates. Although the motivation for this was nakedly partisan – Disraeli wished to weaken the stranglehold of the Liberal Party on Britain's urban centres – this was arguably Britain's first experiment with a form of Proportional Representation (PR).

In practice, however, the Limited Vote served to promote neither proportionality, nor the interests of the Conservative Party. In many cities, including, most famously, Birmingham, the strength of the Liberal Party's organization was such that it was able to coordinate the vote of Liberal electors to be spread evenly across all three of their candidates. This meant the party was able to win all three seats while receiving little more than 60% of the vote.

A more successful experiment with proportionality occurred at the local level, where the Cumulative Vote was introduced in 1870 for elections to the newly established School Boards. Education was a major flashpoint between Britain's different religious communities, and so the then Liberal government of William Gladstone was exceedingly concerned to make sure that all major religious groups would be able to secure representation on the school boards. In practice, the Cumulative Vote worked largely as intended, since the main religious groups were generally represented on the boards. Nonetheless, it was not to remain a permanent feature of British politics, since it died with the abolition of school boards in 1902.

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The last decades of the nineteenth century saw a

major step backwards for alternatives to FPTP. In 1884, under pressure from the radical wing of the party, Gladstone's Liberal government passed the Third Reform Act. This extended the vote to all male householders paying rent of at least £10, and so expanded the electorate to over five million. To secure the passage of this Act through the House of Lords, however, the Liberals were forced to agree to passing a Redistribution of Seats Act the next year.

To decide how these seats would be apportioned, and thus also what electoral system would be used, a cabinet committee was established, under the chairmanship of the radical Liberal politician Sir Charles Dilke. Although the commission considered both the Limited Vote and the Cumulative Vote, in the end Dilke cut a deal with the Conservative leader, Viscount Cranbourne (the future Lord Salisbury), that became known as the 'Arlington Street Compact'. Under this deal, all of the three-member seats, and most of the two-member seats, were abolished: for the first time, FPTP in single-member districts would become the norm across most of the UK, bringing the electoral system for the House of Commons far closer to what we have today.

Modern FPTP, then, was to a certain the product of a cynical factional deal: Cranbourne believed that splitting many of the Liberal-held two-member seats would create new single-member seats potentially winnable by the Conservatives; Dilke, meanwhile, saw single-member districts as a way to reduce the influence of the rival Whig faction within the Liberal Party, since in two-member Liberal seats the party had generally been standing one Whig and one radical.

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Of course, this settlement was no more permanent than any of those that had come before it. By the first years of the twentieth century, parliamentary reform was once again on the agenda, both with regards to the extension of the franchise, and with regards to the electoral system. The growing (and increasingly political) Labour movement, along with radicals in the Liberal Party, called for the full enfranchisement of the working class, and the abolition of plural voting. At the same time, the burgeoning women's suffrage movement, represented by the moderate Nation Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), and by the radical Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), demanded that women receive equal suffrage rights to men. In addition, 1905 saw the re-foundation of the Proportional Representation Society, who mounted a renewed push for the adoption of PR, specifically STV.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the rapidly evolving party system, the issues of political and electoral reform had gained new dimensions. The rise of socialist politics in the form of the Labour Party was challenging the Liberal-Conservative duopoly, that, outside of Ireland at least, had been consistently in existence since before 1832. The Liberals in particular now had to consider not only how reform of the electoral system would affect their position relative to the Conservative Party, but also how it would impact their increasing competition with the Labour Party. At first, the threat from Labour had been held in check by the Gladstone-MacDonald pact of 1903, in which Labour agreed to stand only a limited number of candidates, in return for a free run against the Tories in many of those seats. Moreover, the 1906 election had returned an almost unprecedented Liberal majority. However, after 1910 the Liberals' electoral position

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<sup>2</sup> The Proportional Representation Society had previously been founded in 1884, and waged a vigorous (though unsuccessful) campaign for the adoption of STV throughout the debates over the Third Reform Act, and over the subsequent Redistribution of Seats Act, but had largely fallen into abeyance by the 1890s.

was progressively weakening, and many Liberals were increasingly concerned by the prospect of more Labour candidacies.

Although many Liberals remained happy with the FPTP system, others, who worried about the potential for the Conservative Party to win seats due to a progressive vote split between Liberals and Labour, began to favour reform. Some were won over to PR, and specifically to STV, which was now by far the most commonly advocated PR system. More were attracted by a new system, the Alternative Vote (AV).<sup>3</sup> Under this system, elections would be held in single-member constituencies, and voters would rank candidates in preference order. If no candidate received a majority of first preferences, the candidate with fewest would be eliminated, and their votes re-allocated to their voters' second preferences. The eliminations would continue until one candidate received a majority.

For Liberal MPs, this system had the advantage of maintaining, for the most part, the existing constituency structure with which they were familiar, while also avoiding the dangers of a split progressive vote. In seats with a progressive majority, Conservative candidates would be kept out by the re-allocation of votes between the progressive parties, each of whose voters would no doubt mark the other as their second preference. Interestingly, after the Liberal government established a Royal Commission on Electoral Reform in 1908, it was AV that it eventually recommended in 1910.

The Labour Party was similarly divided on the issue of electoral systems, with neither the supporters of PR, nor the supporters of AV, managing to win a majority at party conference. While some sought reform as a means to allow Labour to break free

from its alliance with the Liberals, others had no wish to polarize supporters of the two parties. Even the Conservative party was far from united on the issue: although most Tories continued to support FPTP, often relishing the prospect of a divided progressive vote, others, faced with the future spectre of a fully-enfranchised working class, were increasingly wary of majoritarianism, since feared it could eventually lead to unchecked socialist rule. Moreover, in the context of a party bitterly divided over the issue of Tariffs, the increasingly beleaguered free trader faction found themselves tempted by PR's promise of representative for minorities.

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Despite the increasing prominence of the electoral system as an issue, and, more importantly, despite the radical and suffragist demands for an extension of the franchise, little action was taken on electoral reform before the outbreak of the First World War. The one exception was with regard to Ireland: during the debates over the Home Rule Bill, in response to concerns about the need to ensure minority representation and prevent sectarian conflict, the government partially acceded to the demands of electoral reform advocates. The Home Rule Act passed in 1914 stipulated that STV would be used to elect the Irish Senate, along with 31 of the 164 members of the Irish House of Commons. The Liberal government insisted, however, that this should not be seen as having any bearing on the question of the electoral system to be used at Westminster.

In wartime, however, the situation changed. Not only was Home Rule put on hold, but by 1916 the parties, temporarily all united in a coalition

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<sup>3</sup> AV was originally proposed in 1888 by Sir John Lubbock, the founder of the Proportional Representation Society, as a supposed improvement on the two-round electoral system then used in much of continental Europe.

government, agreed that the next election would have to take place on a much wider franchise, not least to include many of the as-yet unenfranchised soldiers. To resolve the specifics of this, a 'Speakers Conference' was called in 1916, bringing together 32 MPs and Lords from all parties.

The proposals this Speakers Conference presented in 1917 were radical: alongside numerous administrative changes, they proposed the enfranchisement of all men over 21, and of all women over the age of either 30 or 35. In addition, they advocated the abolition of FPTP, and instead proposed that STV be used to elect MPs in borough constituencies (approximately one third of the total), and that AV be used in all the rest. Although the government agreed to support most of the Conference's proposals, they rejected those relating to the electoral system, in part due to the hostility of Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Instead, the government gave the House of Commons a free vote on the issue.

At this point, although the Liberal and Labour parties were largely united in support of AV, they were divided on STV. Crucially, many Liberal MPs, although supportive of electoral reform, had no wish to see their own single-member constituency, with which they were familiar, and in which they were personally entrenched, merged into a new multi-member seat. Conservative MPs meanwhile were also attached to their own single-member constituencies, but mostly feared that AV would work to their disadvantage, and so defended FPTP. In a series of votes therefore, the House of Commons supported the adoption of AV, but consistently rejected any use of STV.<sup>4</sup> In 1918 then, the final bill passed by the Commons included the introduction of AV, alongside the enfranchisement of all men over

the age of 21, and the enfranchisement of all women over the age of 30 who met certain property and/or educational qualifications.

However, this bill did not make it through the House of Lords. The Lords had a Conservative majority, and like their party colleagues in the Commons, they were hostile to AV for reasons of party interest. Interestingly though, and unlike their counterparts in the Commons, the Conservative peers had been won over to PR. Many of them were free traders, but more importantly, most of them feared that without PR, the enfranchisement of the working classes would lead to socialist government. The Lords therefore amended the bill to re-include the use of STV for the borough constituencies, but also to maintain FPTP in the counties.

The result was a game of legislative ping-pong, in which the House of Commons repeatedly voted to refuse to accept the amendment from the Lords, who for their own part refused to back down. In the end, MPs, fearing that the Bill risked failing altogether, compromised. Although they refused to accept the introduction of STV, they dropped the measure to introduce AV, and so granted a reprieve to FPTP. This was enough to allow the bill to finally pass the Lords, and so to become the Representation of the People Act 1918.

In 1918 then, the survival of the FPTP system was the result of a disagreement between the two houses of parliament, each of which had advocated a different alternative to it. This failure to adopt any kind of PR put the UK in an unusual position relative to other European countries. Although before the First World War only Belgium used a PR system, in 1918-1919, as countries across the continent experienced or completed democratization processes, they almost

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<sup>4</sup> STV was rejected 169 – 201 in the free vote, and an attempt to re-introduce it at the Report stage was defeated 126 – 202. AV was accepted in the free vote 125 – 124, and an attempt to strike it out at the Report stage was defeated 150 – 121.

all adopted some form of PR.

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Interestingly though, the triumph of uniform, single-member district FPTP in the UK was not quite complete. For a start, neither plural voting nor business voting were entirely abolished. Most strikingly, university graduates maintained separate representation, through seven university constituencies which elected a total of 14 MPs. Five of these constituencies (Combined English Universities, Combined Scottish Universities, Dublin University, Oxford University, and Cambridge University) were multi-member seats, electing two or three MPs. In these seats, the provisions of the Representation of the People Act stipulated that elections were to be held not by FPTP, but by STV. STV then, has in fact been used for Westminster elections, serving as the means of election of no fewer than 34 MPs, (including former Labour Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald), across eight general elections, and 15 by-elections.

Moreover, in the months and years following the passage of the Act, British governments introduced STV for a wide variety of elections outside of Westminster. The 1918 Education Act instituted it for the election of Scottish educational authorities, the 1919 Government of India Act made it the electoral system for India's new Central Legislative Assembly, and, in 1921, British officials wrote it into Malta's new constitution.

Most importantly, STV was introduced for elections to Ireland, first at the local level, in 1919, and then in 1920 for the two newly created parliaments of Northern and Southern Ireland. Although the Parliament of Southern Ireland's existence was ephemeral, due to the Irish War of Independence

and the creation of the Irish Free State the next year, the use of STV was carried over into elections for the new Irish parliament (the Dáil Éireann), where it has remained the electoral system to this day. In the North by contrast, where politics was deeply sectarian, the protestant Unionist majority resented the representation STV provided to the catholic Nationalist minority. As a result, as part of a broader gerrymandering of the political system to their advantage, they abolished STV and returned to FPTP, first at local level, in 1922, and then, in 1929, for the Parliament of Northern Ireland.

Even at Westminster, the Representation of the People Act had not fully closed the question of electoral reform. In 1928, a Conservative government extended the franchise for women to all women over 21, making it equal to the franchise for men. Moreover, in an ironic volte-face, Lloyd George and the Liberal Party became advocates for PR, with the latter officially adopting it as policy from 1922. Crucially, politics had begun to be largely dominated by the Conservative Party, while the Labour Party had supplanted the Liberals as the largest anti-Conservative force, creating the Conservative-Labour duopoly we know today. The Liberal Party thus found itself squeezed between the other two parties, and so heavily disadvantaged by the FPTP system.<sup>5</sup>

In 1929, when a general election produced a hung parliament with Labour as the largest party, the Liberals were able to force them to revisit the issue, in return for supporting a Labour government. Labour rejected STV or any other kind of PR, since they were now confident of eventually winning an overall majority, and did not wish to see the introduction of any system which would force them into permanent cooperation with the Liberals.

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<sup>5</sup> The effect of FPTP on disadvantaging third parties is well known. For more on FPTP's impact see D. Klemperer, *The Electoral System and British Politics*, (Constitution Society Pamphlet, 2019).

However, the parties compromised on an Electoral Reform Bill that would have introduced AV. In 1930, this bill successfully passed through the House of Commons, and although it was rejected by the Lords, who remained as hostile to AV as they had been in 1918, it was expected to be eventually pushed through using the Parliament Act. But, by a twist of fate, it was not to be: the onset of the Great Depression saw the Labour government collapse in August 1931, to be replaced by a Conservative-dominated 'National Coalition' that shelved the issue. Electoral reform would not return to the agenda for many decades.

## Electoral Systems in the Post-War Era

The immediate post-war decades were the golden age of FPTP. In 1948, a new Representation of the People Act finally imposed it as a uniform system for parliamentary elections across the entirety of the UK, abolishing plural voting and the University constituencies. Over the following years, FPTP went essentially unquestioned: in an era when politics was entirely dominated by two parties, and when the electorate largely voted along class lines, the system seemed to work well, and election results were seen as accurately reflecting the public mood. Even in 1951, when the Conservatives won a majority of seats, despite Labour winning a majority of votes, no complaint was made. Both Labour and the Conservatives saw no need to change the system, and although the Liberals still remained committed to PR, they were barely able to win more than 10% of the vote, or more than a handful of seats. The next change to the electoral system only came in 1969, and even then, it was nothing more than a lowering of the voting age to 18.

In the 1970s, however, things began to shift. Firstly,

STV was re-introduced to Northern Ireland. In 1972, amidst the outbreak of the Troubles, and in response to sectarian Unionist abuses, the Parliament of Northern Ireland had been abolished, and direct rule instituted from London. In the same year, the UK government re-organized local government in the region, and, in an effort to promote power sharing between the protestant and catholic communities, decided to use a proportional electoral system for the new District Councils. Specifically, they chose STV, and this was also the electoral system used for the three province-wide elections to abortive bodies that took place in 1973, 1975, and 1982, which elected an Assembly, a Constitutional Convention, and an Assembly, respectively.

Indeed, on the British mainland it was also with regard to the creation, or potential creation, of new elected bodies that different electoral systems were often discussed. When James Callaghan's Labour government proposed the introduction of devolved assemblies for Scotland and Wales in 1978, the Liberals and the nationalist parties pushed for PR to be used, but were stymied by Labour and Conservative hostility. More notably, after Britain's entry to the European Common Market in 1973, direct elections took place for the European Parliament from 1979. In advance of this, in 1977, the method of these elections had to be decided, and the Liberal Party pressured the minority Labour government to use PR. Although the government backed the use of STV for Northern Ireland, it put the question of PR or FPTP for the rest of the country to a free vote, and the results of this vote show us something of the balance of opinion within the parties: the Liberal MPs all voted for PR, along with a around half of Labour MPS, and small minority of Conservatives. PR was thus defeated by 321 to 224.

More broadly, however, there was greater

discussion of electoral reform stemming from the social and political fragmentation taking place in Britain. In the two elections of 1974, the Liberal and nationalist parties all saw their votes and seats increase substantially relative to their previous performances. Not only did this represent a strengthening of parties committed to electoral reform, but the weakening of the two-party system both exacerbated and highlighted the disproportionality of FPTP. In February 1974 for instance, the Liberal Party received over 19% of the vote, but only 2% of the seats. In this context, the old Proportional Representation Society, now re-christened the Electoral Reform Society, saw a resurgence of interest and activity; campaigns for electoral reform were set up within both the Labour and Conservative parties; and in 1976 the Hansard Society published a report calling for FPTP to be replaced.

The problems with FPTP that arose in the 1970s became more acute in the 1980s. The creation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), largely a splinter from the Labour Party, further weakened the hold of the two main parties on the electorate, and further increased the disproportionality of results. In 1983 for instance, the SDP/Liberal alliance received over 25% of the vote, just two points shy of the Labour Party, but won only 23 seats, 186 fewer than Labour and only 3.5% of the total. Additionally, in the context of the bitter polarization caused by the policies of the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, there was increasing resentment at the ability of the Conservative Party to control a majority of parliamentary seats, despite winning little more than 40% of the vote. The result of both of these tendencies was a greater interest in electoral reform, as well as political and constitutional change more broadly, across the British left. This trend was reflected in the emergence of movements such

as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which demanded a Scottish Parliament, and Charter 88, which called for, amongst other things, a written constitution, an elected upper chamber, and PR.

Nonetheless, the 18 years of Conservative government between 1979 and 1997 saw almost no innovations or changes with regards to electoral systems in the UK. The one exception was in Northern Ireland, when in 1996, as part of the Peace Process, the government held elections for a Northern Ireland Forum. Interestingly, rather than using STV, the government chose to use a different form of PR, specifically the List-based PR using a D'Hondt formula. Like STV, List-based PR uses multi-member constituencies (in this case the entirety of Northern Ireland formed a single constituency). Unlike STV, though, rather than ranking individual candidates in order of preference, electors cast a single vote for a party, each of which has presented a fixed list of candidates. A mathematical formula (in this case D'Hondt) is then used to assign a number of seats to each party proportional to their share of the vote. Within parties, candidates are awarded seats in order of their pre-determined position on the list. In the case of 1996 Northern Ireland Forum election, the electoral method included an additional 'top-up' seats element: to ensure a wide variety of different groups were represented, the ten most popular parties each received an additional 2 'top-up' seats.

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The next major spate of reforms came following the landslide victory of Tony Blair's New Labour in the 1997 general election.

Over the previous few years, electoral reform had become an increasingly prominent issue within the Labour party, due both to the growing interest in constitutional reform on the left more broadly,

and a sense that FPTP had been keeping the party out of power. In 1991, a Working Party on Electoral Systems was established by Labour's National Executive Committee, under the chairmanship of the politics professor Raymond Plant. In 1993 this Working Party issued a report, the Plant Report, whose recommendations included the use of a new electoral system, the 'Supplementary Vote' (SV) for elections to the House of Commons. SV is essentially a modified version of AV, in which voters rank candidates preferentially, but are only able to express a first and a second preference. Should no candidate win a majority of preferences, all but the top two are eliminated, the votes of voters who voted for other candidates are redistributed to their second preferences, should their second preference be one of the top two. Whichever of the top two candidates has a higher total number of votes is then elected.

The Plant Report was never formally embraced by Labour, but the influence of a powerful pro-electoral reform lobby within the party, backed by senior figures such as Robin Cook, ensured that many of the demands of constitutional and electoral reformers were included in the 1997 Labour manifesto. Indeed, even before its publication, Labour had pre-agreed to a wide range of reforms as part of the Cook-Maclennan agreement with the Liberal Democrats, according to which the two parties would work together on constitutional issues.

In power, New Labour fulfilled in whole or in part almost all of these reformist promises, with the result that a plethora of new electoral systems were introduced to the UK.

Most importantly, Labour fulfilled its promises to introduce devolved government to regions across the UK, and the new administrations created

have served as laboratories for electoral reform. In 1998, following devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales, the government established a Welsh Assembly, and a Scottish Parliament. Having previously agreed to use a proportional system for these bodies, the government followed through, and specifically instituted the 'Additional Member System' (AMS) that had been demanded by the Scottish Constitutional Convention. This system combines elements of FPTP and PR, and involves electors voting for two different types of representative. Some representatives are elected by FPTP in single-member districts. However, as well as voting for a candidate within their district, electors also get to cast a vote for a party list within a larger region. Parties are then allocated a number of 'top-up' seats from their regional party list, such that the overall number of seats, (elected both directly and from the regional list), that each party has in that region, is broadly proportional to the percentage of the vote their party list received. In Scotland for instance, 73 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are elected by FPTP in single-member districts, while 56 are elected as top-up MSPs from the regional lists. In Wales, 40 Assembly Members (AMs) are elected by FPTP in single-member districts, while 20 are elected as top-up AMs from the regional lists.

The idea of the system is to combine broad proportionality with constituency representation, and this is generally how it has worked in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, the use of AMS had the additional impact of leading to further electoral reform: in 2007, the devolved Scottish government, at that time a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition, introduced STV for elections to local councils.

In 2000, London was also granted its own devolved institutions – a directly elected Mayor of London, and a Greater London Assembly. Like the Scottish

Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, the Greater London Assembly is also elected using the AMS system. However, in this case the government added the additional feature of a threshold: to be eligible to receive top-up seats, parties have to receive over 5% of the vote. For the direct election of the Mayor of London meanwhile, the SV system that had been recommended by the Plant Report for use at Westminster was introduced. In the same year, the government also introduced legislation to allow local authorities outside across England and Wales to switch to a mayoral model by referendums, and this legislation provided that in cases where such a switch occurred, elections for these new directly elected mayors would also take place using SV.

Finally, after the multiple efforts throughout the 1970s and 1980s to re-establish devolved governance in Northern Ireland, this was finally achieved on a permanent basis in 1998, with the conclusion of the peace process, and with the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Like most of its abortive forerunners, and like European and local elections in Northern Ireland, elections to this body are conducted using STV.

By the end of 2000, then, four major regions of the UK were using broadly proportional electoral systems to elect devolved administrations. Moreover, the previous year New Labour had also introduced PR voting to the entirety of the UK for European elections. Under the terms of the European Elections Act 1999, the electoral system used for electing Members of the European Parliament was changed from FPTP to List-based PR. Britain was divided into twelve regions, (the nine regions of England, plus Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), and in each region voters would be able to cast a vote for the party list of their choice. The seats would then

be distributed to the party lists according to the D'Hondt formula. As in 1977, an exception was made for Northern Ireland, which would continue to use STV.

Even the unelected House of Lords saw the use of new voting systems! Under the House of Lords Act 1999, although most hereditary peers lost their seats in the Lords, 92 seats were retained for them. The 92 peers to fill these seats were in the first instance elected by other peers using FPTP, but since 2002, whenever a vacancy has arisen due to the death of a hereditary peer with a seat in the Lords, it has been filled through a by-election, in which the remaining hereditary peers with seats in the Lords vote for candidates using AV.

The glaring exception to New Labour's electoral reforming zeal, however, and the only area where the government failed to follow through on the promises of the Cook-Maclennan agreement, was the absence of any move to reform the voting system used for the House of Commons. In the agreement, and in its 1997 manifesto, Labour had pledged to hold a referendum on changing the voting system for the House of Commons, with the alternative to FPTP to be decided by an expert commission. When they came to power, they did indeed set up such a commission, under the chairmanship of former Labour Cabinet Minister, President of the European Commission, and SDP leader, Roy Jenkins. The Jenkins Commission was tasked with proposing a system that would meet the four requirements of providing broad proportionality, stable government, the extension of voter choice, and a constituency link between voters and MPs.

On the basis of these requirements, in December 1998 the Jenkins Commission recommended a

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<sup>6</sup> This is "permanent" in the sense that it has not been abolished or superseded by any new structure. It has, however, been suspended, both between 2002 and 2007, and currently since 2017.

system called the 'Alternative Vote Plus' (AV+). This system is similar to the AMS used in Scotland and Wales, in that it combines directly elected representatives with regional top-up lists to create proportionality. However, rather than being elected by FPTP, the directly elected MPs would be elected by AV. In the eyes of the commission, AV was superior to FPTP because it ensured candidates elected in single-member districts commanded majority support. However, on its own it was not a proportional system, and for that reason they advocated the addition of regional top-up seats. Interestingly, they rejected STV on the grounds that the multi-member constituencies necessary would be too large, while list-based PR systems lacked a constituency link between voters and MPs.

Despite pressure from the Liberal Democrats, and from electoral reform supporters within the Labour Party, the government chose not to hold a referendum on changing the electoral system from FPTP to the AV+ systems proposed by the Jenkins Commission. Instead, the work of the Commission was essentially ignored. Labour's 2001 and 2005 manifestos merely promised to 'review' the Commission's report, along with the experience of the electoral systems in the devolved assemblies, and to 'assess' whether the electoral system for the House of Commons should be reformed. Both argued however, that any change should be ratified by a referendum, a point of disagreement with the Jenkins Commission, which had argued that some changes, such as a change from FPTP to AV, would be sufficiently minor as not to warrant a public vote. Interestingly, Blair's government did make one change to Westminster elections, if not to the voting system: the franchise was extended to many previously excluded homeless people, through the creation of provisions to allow those with no fixed address to vote.

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Although the failure of Blair's government to hold a referendum on electoral reform appeared to have blocked any prospects for change, the issue became salient again as the New Labour era drew to a close. In particular, in the aftermath of the MPs expenses scandal in 2009, there was a widespread feeling that Parliament was in need of reform, and electoral reformers within the Labour Party took the opportunity to revive the issue of replacing FPTP. Although influential figures such as the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, pushed for a full adoption of the Jenkins proposals, they were resisted by equally influential opponents of PR such as Jack Straw, then the Secretary of State for Justice, with a constitutional brief. As a result, Labour went into the 2010 election proposing a referendum on changing the voting system, but merely to AV. The Conservatives meanwhile continued to oppose reform, while the Liberal Democrats remained defenders of STV.

When the general election of 2010 resulted in a hung parliament therefore, electoral reform was a key issue in the negotiations that occurred between the Liberal Democrats and Labour, and between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Although the Labour leadership offered the Liberal Democrats to implement AV without a referendum, and to then hold a referendum on further reform, it was unclear if they would be capable of delivering this, as numerous Labour MPs expressed the intention to vote against any electoral reform at all. Instead, the Liberal Democrats ultimately accepted a coalition offer from the Conservatives, which included the less radical promise of a referendum on AV.

Unfortunately, when this referendum was held in May 2011, it was far from a model of healthy, democratic, deliberation. Not only did many on

the pro-reform side find themselves arguing for a system they considered a marginal improvement at best, but the official Yes to AV campaign made little effort to properly explain the issue to voters, instead deploying the rhetoric of crude anti-establishment populism. The No campaign, meanwhile, set out to deliberately obscure the issue, falsely presenting AV as giving some people multiple votes, and claiming that it would require additional public money to be spent on elections. In terms of the political parties, the Conservatives supported a No vote, the Liberal Democrats a Yes vote, while Labour took no official stance – although its leader backed AV, a majority of its MPs declared themselves to be against. In the end, on a turnout of barely more than 42%, AV was rejected by a margin of 68% of those who voted.

Although defenders of FPTP have argued that the overwhelming rejection of AV has resolved the question of electoral reform once and for all, this is not the case. Not only was the referendum in no sense a serious national debate, but it represented the rejection of merely one form of electoral reform, and one that was not the first choice of most reformers.

Moreover, the failure of AV did not succeed in putting a stop to further experiments with alternatives to FPTP. Although it was ultimately unsuccessful, the House of Lords Reform Bill proposed by the Coalition in 2012 would have created a new upper house elected using PR. Specifically, the system proposed was List-based PR using the D'Hondt formula, however with the added feature that voters would have been entitled to select a specific candidate instead of a list if they so chose. Moreover, like the Labour government before it, the Coalition created a number of new devolved authorities: as well as introducing SV for the 41 new directly-elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) created in 2011, it continued the New Labour

policy of making SV the electoral system for new directly elected mayoralities. Indeed, this has even continued under the single-party Conservative governments since 2015, with SV being the electoral system for the 'Metropolitan Mayors' that have been being introduced to 'city regions' across the UK since 2017.

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Today then, debates on electoral systems continue: The Liberal Democrats, along with other minor parties such as UKIP, the Greens, and the nationalist parties continue to advocate the introduction of a PR system to Westminster. The Conservatives meanwhile remain opposed to any further reform, and some Conservative MPs have even attempted to introduce legislation that would make FPTP the sole electoral system used in England. Within the Labour Party, the issue is contentious: a growing pro-reform movement claims the support of high-profile figures such as Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, but a large number of MPs and activists remain bitterly opposed. With regard to British politics as a whole, it is hard to envisage the issue being finally resolved any time soon, and there will likely always be substantial disagreement.

## Conclusion

Looking back over the past 200 years then, we can see that it was far from pre-ordained that FPTP in single-member districts would ultimately become the electoral system for the UK's House of Commons: it was neither the UK's original system, nor what many reformers had sought. Indeed, it only emerged in its current form after 1945, and on numerous occasions prior the House of Commons had voted to implement alternative systems. Rather than being the natural conclusion of democratization, FPTP's emergence as the 'default' system of British

democracy was highly contingent. However, there are some striking continuities in the more recent history of electoral reform in the UK. Firstly, since the early 1920s, the positions of the political parties have remained broadly consistent: the Liberals / Liberal Democrats have consistently favoured the adoption of PR, the Conservatives have consistently opposed any reform, and the Labour Party has been consistently divided on the issue, although often favouring preferential systems. Secondly, since even prior to the First World War, there has been a constant, cross-party willingness to innovate and experiment with electoral systems at the devolved level.

As a result, despite the continued use of FPTP at general elections, Britain today is remarkable globally for the exceptional variety of electoral systems in use. Every UK voter is eligible to vote in an election for public office that uses a system other than FPTP, whether that be at the local, devolved, or European level, and some are even eligible to use up to five different systems.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, with the exception of AV+, the main systems proposed by electoral reform campaigns are all currently at use in the UK, and one (STV) has even previously been used in parliamentary elections.

Overall, we see that the UK electoral system has constantly been subject to change, and that British democracy has never been specifically associated with just one way of voting. Reform of the Westminster electoral system, then, would be no revolutionary break with tradition. Instead, it would be one more incident in a long history of evolutionary change.

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<sup>7</sup> Voters in Scotland are eligible to use vote using five different systems: FPTP for Westminster, List-based PR for European Elections, AMS for Scottish Parliament elections, STV for local elections, and AV for local by-elections that are to fill a single vacancy, since STV for the election of a single candidate is equivalent to AV. Voters in London are eligible to vote using four: FPTP for Westminster and for local elections, List-based PR for European Elections, AMS for the Greater London Assembly, and SV for the London Mayor.



# Appendix 1

## Timeline of Electoral Reform in the UK

- 1800 Act of Union creates the Parliament of the United Kingdom
- 1819 'Peterloo Massacre' of electoral reform demonstrators.
- 1832 Great Reform Act passed, extending the franchise to one-in-five adult men; Conservative MP Winthrop Mackworth Praed advocates the 'Limited Vote' during the debates.
- 1838 Chartist movement founded to campaign for a 'People's Charter' containing six demands for parliamentary and electoral reform.
- 1842 Chartists present petition to Parliament with over 3 million signatures.
- 1848 Chartists present petition to Parliament with over 6 million signatures.
- 1853 Liberal MP James Garth Marshall proposes the Cumulative Vote.
- 1857 Thomas Hare publishes *Machinery of Representation*, arguing for the electoral system now known as STV.
- 1866 Liberal Reform Bill defeated; Reform League stages major protest in Hyde Park.
- 1867 Second Reform Act passed, extending the franchise in the borough constituencies and introducing the Limited Vote in thirteen three-member constituencies.
- 1870 School Boards established, to be elected using the Cumulative Vote.
- 1884 Third Reform Act passed, extending the franchise to all male householders paying at least £10 in rent.
- 1885 Arlington Street Compact – Redistribution of Seats Act passed abolishing all three-member constituencies, and most two-member constituencies; Limited Vote no longer in use, FPTP in single-member districts now the norm.
- 1888 AV first proposed by Sir John Lubbock.
- 1902 School Boards abolished in England, marking the end of the use of the Cumulative Vote.
- 1905 Proportional Representation Society re-founded.
- 1908 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform established.
- 1910 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform recommends use of AV.
- 1914 Government of Ireland Act provides for an Irish Senate to be elected by STV, and an Irish House of Commons to be primarily elected by FPTP, and partially by STV.

- 1916 All-party Speaker's Conference on electoral reform established.
- 1917 Speaker's Conference proposes AV be used in county constituencies, and STV in borough constituencies; free vote held in the House of Commons sees STV defeated, but AV passed; House of Lords rejects AV, re-introduces STV.
- 1918 House of Commons rejects STV, and abandons AV; Representation of the People Act passed, extending the Franchise to all men over 21, and to women over 30 - FPTP in single-member districts to be used, except in multi-member university constituencies which are to use STV; Education Act introduces STV for Scottish Educational Authorities.
- 1919 STV introduced for local government elections across the island of Ireland.
- 1920 STV introduced for the newly created Parliament of Northern and Southern Ireland.
- 1921 Irish independence sees the Parliament of Southern Ireland replaced by the new Dáil Éireann, but STV retained.
- 1922 Liberal Party adopts support for using STV at Westminster elections as party policy.
- 1922 STV replaced by FPTP for local government elections in Northern Ireland.
- 1928 Representation of the People Act expands franchise to all adults over 21.
- 1929 STV replaced by FPTP for elections for to the Parliament of Northern Ireland.
- 1930 Bill to introduce AV passes the House of Commons, but fails in the House of Lords.
- 1948 Representation of the People Act standardizes FPTP across the UK – university constituencies and plural voting abolished.
- 1969 Representation of the People Act lowers voting age to 18.
- 1972 Parliament of Northern Ireland Abolished; STV re-introduced for local government elections in Northern Ireland.
- 1973 Britain joins the European Economic Community; Northern Ireland Assembly elected by STV.
- 1974 Political instability and disproportional election results sees electoral reform return to the political agenda.
- 1975 Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention elected by STV.
- 1977 PR for European Parliament elections in Great Britain defeated in Parliament by 321 to 224 – FPTP to be used in Great Britain, and STV in Northern Ireland.
- 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly elected by STV.

- 1988 Charter 88 founded, advocating widespread political reform including the replacement of FPTP with a PR system.
- 1989 Scottish Constitutional Convention established to campaign for a Scottish Parliament.
- 1993 Labour Party Plant Report recommends adoption of SV for Westminster elections.
- 1996 As part of the peace process, Northern Ireland Forum elected by List-based PR.
- 1997 Cook-McLennan agreement on constitutional reform agreed between Labour and the Liberal Democrats; Labour wins a landslide general election victory on a manifesto including constitutional and electoral reform; Independent Commission on the Voting System (Jenkins Commission) established.
- 1998 Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly created after successful referenda, both to be elected using AMS; Good Friday Agreement - Northern Ireland Assembly established to be elected by STV; Jenkins Commission recommends AV+ system for Westminster be put to a referendum.
- 1999 Greater London Authority Act establishes a Greater London Assembly, to be elected by AMS (with 5% threshold), and a Mayor of London, to be elected by SV; European Parliamentary Elections Act introduces List-based PR for European elections within Great Britain; House of Lords Act removes all but 92 hereditary peers from the House of Lords.
- 2000 Local Government Act establishes process for the creation of directly-elected Mayors, to be elected using SV.
- 2002 Introduction of AV for House of Lords by-elections.
- 2007 Introduction of STV for elections to Scottish Local Government.
- 2009 MPs expenses scandal triggers re-opening of the debate on electoral reform.
- 2010 General election results in the first Hung Parliament since 1974; Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed.
- 2011 Referendum held on using replacing FPTP with AV, AV defeated by 2-1 margin; introduction of directly-elected Police and Crime Commissioners using the Supplementary Vote.

# Appendix 2

## Electoral Systems Used in the UK

### First-Past-the-Post (in single-member districts)

Each voter can vote for one candidate. The candidate with the highest number of votes wins.

Used in seats across the United Kingdom at general elections since 1832 - in most seats since 1885, in all seats since 1948. Also used for most elections to local councils in England and Wales.

### First-Past-the-Post (in multi-member districts)

The same as First-Past-the-Post in single-member districts, except each district elects multiple representatives. Voters have as many votes as there are representatives to be elected.

Used in seats across the United Kingdom at general elections between 1800 and 1918. Today used in elections to local councils in England and Wales.

### The Limited Vote

The same as First-Past-the-Post in multi-member districts, except each voter has fewer votes than there are seats to be elected.

Used at general elections in thirteen three-member constituencies between 1867 and 1885.

### The Cumulative Vote

The same as First-Past-the-Post in multi-member districts, except voters are allowed to assign as many of their votes as they like to a single candidate.

Used for School Board elections between 1870 and 1902.

### The Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Voters in multi-member constituencies rank candidates in preference order. In each constituency, a quota for election is determined, by dividing the total number of votes cast by the number of seats available. Any candidate receiving more votes than the quota is elected, and any surplus votes they received above the quota are redistributed to other candidates in proportion to their voters' next preferences. Should more seats remain to be filled after this, the candidates with fewest votes is eliminated, and their votes redistributed to their voters next preferences. These eliminations continue, pushing more candidates over the quota, until all the seats in the constituency have been filled.

Used for elections to Scottish local councils since 2007, in five university constituencies at Westminster elections 1918 – 1948, in Northern Irish local elections 1919 – 1922, at Northern Irish parliamentary elections 1919 – 1929, and at all local, devolved, and European elections in Northern Ireland since 1973.

### **The Alternative Vote (AV)**

Election takes place in single-member constituencies. Each voter ranks the candidates in order of preference. If no candidate has a majority of first preferences, the candidate with fewest is eliminated, and their votes redistributed to their voters' next preferences. Eliminations and redistributions continue until one candidate has a majority, and is declared the winner.

Used for by-elections to the House of Lords. Rejected in the 2011 Referendum.

### **The Supplementary Vote (SV)**

The same as the Alternative Vote except voters are limited to expressing only two preferences. After the first preferences are counted, if no one candidate has a majority, all but the top two are eliminated, and the second preferences of the eliminated candidates' voters are redistributed. Whichever remaining candidate has more votes after the redistribution of second preferences is the winner.

Used for the direct election of Mayors, and for the election of Police and Crime Commissioners.

### **List-based Proportional Representation (List PR)**

Voting occurs in multi-member districts. Each party presents a list of candidates, and each voter is able to cast one vote for the party list of their choice. Seats are distributed proportionally amongst the lists in each constituency according to the parties' vote shares using a formula. In the UK, this formula has always been the D'Hondt or 'Highest Averages' formula.

Used for elections to the European Parliament in Great Britain.

### **The Additional Member System (AMS)**

A combination of First-Past-the-Post and List-based Proportional Representation in which electors vote for two different types of representative. Each elector votes in a single-member district for a constituency representative using First-Past-the-Post, and in a larger, regional, multi-member district for a party list. Seats in the multi-member districts are allocated between the lists in such a way as to make the overall number of seats that each party has in that region (both directly elected in single-member districts and from the regional list), as proportional as possible to the percentage of the vote their party list received.

Used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Greater London Assembly.



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The Constitution Society

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London SW1H 9EU

[www.consoc.org.uk](http://www.consoc.org.uk)

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