



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-0207, 26 October 2017

E-petition relating to proportional representation

There will be a debate on the motion: That this House has considered e-petition 168657 relating to proportional representation. The 90 minute debate will take place in Westminster Hall on Monday 30 October at 4.30pm.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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1. Proportional representation

[E-petition 168657](#) is due to be debated in Westminster Hall on Monday 30 October at 4.30.

This petition was closed on 6 April 2017 having received over 100,000 signatures. It was due to be debated earlier in the year but the snap election of June 2017 meant it did not make it to the Order Paper.

The petition states:

To make votes matter, adopt Proportional Representation for UK General Elections

The vast majority wants PR. Our FPTP voting system makes Parliament unrepresentative. One party got 37% of the vote and 51% of seats, while 3 parties got 24% of the vote but share 1.5% of seats. FPTP violates the democratic principle of majority rule and causes problems like costly policy reversals.

The UK has never had a say on PR. As David Cameron himself said, the AV Referendum was on a system that is often less proportional than FPTP, so the rejection of AV could not possibly be a rejection of PR. In fact, so few voters wanted either system on offer that the turnout was just 42%.

There are tried and tested PR systems that keep the constituency link. They would make every vote matter equally, rather than allowing a minority of swing voters in a few marginal seats to pick the government.

The Government issued a response to the petition once it had reached 10,000 signatures.

First Past The Post (FPTP) is a robust method of electing MPs. A referendum on changing the voting system was held in 2011 and the public voted overwhelmingly in favour of keeping the FPTP system.

The Government's manifesto made a commitment to respect the will of the British people as expressed in the 2011 UK Parliamentary elections voting system referendum and keep the First Past the Post system for elections to the House of Commons. The Government, therefore, has no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons.

The Government is concerned that proportional voting systems would weaken the direct constituency link which is a key feature of our Parliamentary system, and under a proportional system the voting process is more complicated for the voter.

The Government's view is that the First Past the Post voting system is the best system for elections to the House of Commons. The system is well established and understood by voters and provides a clear link between constituents and their

representatives in Parliament. More often than not, it results in a government with a working majority in Parliament making decisive government possible.

At the voting system referendum in May 2011, electors were asked whether the Alternative Vote system (AV) should be used instead of the First Past the Post system for electing members of the House of Commons. The referendum produced a clear result with over 13 million voters rejecting the option for change to move away from the First Past the Post system, compared to over 6 million voters who voted for change.

Cabinet Office

There is a background paper written by the Library in 2014, on [voting systems in the UK](#) which briefly describes the different voting systems and how they operate.

The table below, taken from that note, shows which voting system is applied to each type of election in the UK.

Voting System	Where used
First Past the Post	House of Commons
	Local elections in England and Wales
	Scottish National Park authorities
The Supplementary Vote	Mayor of London and all other elected Mayors in England and Wales where there are more than two candidates.
	Police and Crime Commissioners.
Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Northern Ireland Assembly
	European Parliament elections in Northern Ireland
	Local elections in Scotland
Additional Member System	Local elections in Northern Ireland
	Scottish Parliament
	National Assembly for Wales
Closed Party List System	London Assembly
	European Parliament elections in Great Britain.
Alternative Vote (AV)	Excepted hereditary peers in the House of Lords.
	Elected members of the Scottish Crofting Commission

First Past The Past (FPTP)

The last major review of voting systems by Government was conducted by the Labour Government in 2008.¹ It summarised the pros and cons of the existing FPTP system as follows:

Main advantages:

- it is a well-established system in the UK. It is easy to understand and everyone knows how it works
- ballot papers are easy to complete – a cross by a single candidate. Counting, equally, is relatively easy – the candidate with the most

¹ *Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997*. Cm 7304, January 2008.

votes wins the constituency election and represents the people of that constituency at Westminster

- Members of Parliament represent constituents within a defined geographical area, which makes it possible to identify constituents and their representatives and to build links between them. It is possible for an MP to be reasonably independent of his or her party, if he or she retains the support of the local party
- the winner-takes-all aspect of the system encourages the major parties to maintain a broad appeal, thus discouraging extremism. It is also difficult for extremist parties to establish a strong enough base to win seats at Westminster
- the system allows the electorate to be decisive about who should be the party of government. Unpopular parties can be removed completely from power
- more often than not, governments have a working majority in Parliament, so that decisive government is possible. This enables the formation of a clear opposition in Parliament who can present themselves as an alternative to, and check on, the government of the day.

Main disadvantages:

- it is capable of delivering highly disproportional outcomes at the national level. Governments can be elected without a majority of the popular vote and can even win a majority of seats without winning more votes than any other party.
- many constituencies are 'safe' seats for particular parties, with little prospect of changes. Therefore people who do not support the majority party have no prospect of making their vote 'count'. Similarly, even voters supporting the winning candidate may feel that their votes serve only to increase an already large majority
- campaigning, particularly by the national parties, is strongly focused on a few marginal constituencies (and even specific areas within these constituencies). This trend is accentuated as campaigning technology becomes ever more sophisticated
- movements of opinion can be heavily exaggerated, with large swings in seats from one major party to another. Landslide majorities may not reflect public opinion
- governing parties equipped with large majorities may not pay sufficient heed to opinion in Parliament or amongst the general public
- small parties tend to be excluded from parliament unless they have a strong base in a particular region. Those with an even spread of support across the country are particularly penalised. This reduces the diversity of views expressed in Parliament, and alienates voters who do not wish to vote for the major parties
- in areas where most constituents do not vote for their elected MP, it can be difficult for them to feel properly represented.

Turnout

The decision of whether or not people vote is a complex interplay of various factors. There is international evidence that more proportional systems generally lead to higher turnout but this has not been the experience of elections in the UK. This may be in part because all elections that use alternative voting systems to FPTP are considered 'second order' elections and are sometimes seen by voters as of less importance than elections to the House of Commons.

The 2008 Government review of the impact of voter reforms highlighted the complex nature of whether or not people decide to vote:

Turn-out is the product of a complex set of factors. Various factors that could be considered to impact on participation in elections are voter knowledge, the reward from voting, the cost of voting, ease or difficulty of registering to vote, the impact of efforts to increase registration, political campaigning and the impact of the news media. Other factors include perceptions about the status of different elections and that some may perceive the General election as 'first order' and other elections second, or even third. This may be caused by the lack of awareness about the different powers of assemblies and parliaments and how they affect people's lives. Others include the range of political choices, closeness of the contest, whether people feel their vote counts, whether people feel politicians speak for them, whether they are aware of the election and if there are convenient methods of voting. For example, on convenience, we know that postal voting has been associated with a doubling of turn-out at local, European Parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections. We have not covered research into all the potential opportunities but provide the findings of some research that is pertinent to the concerns about the drop in participation in General elections.²

1.1 2017 manifesto commitments

The **Conservative Party** manifesto included a commitment to retain first past the post elections (FPTP) for the House Commons. It also contained a new commitment to extend FPTP to police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections.³

The **Labour Party** manifesto included a commitment to "establish a Constitutional Convention to examine and advise on reforming of the way Britain works at a fundamental level."⁴ It did not explicitly mention voting system reform but stated:

The Convention would look at extending democracy locally, regionally and nationally, considering the option of a more federalised country.

The manifesto committed the Party to an elected House of Lords but without and detail of how this would be achieved.

² Ibid, para 6.27, p95.

³ *Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future Conservative Party Manifesto 2017*, p 43

⁴ *Labour Party, For the Many not the Few, The Labour party Manifesto 2017*, p102

The **Liberal Democrats** have long supported electoral reform. Their 2017 General Election manifesto pledged to introduce STV for local government elections in England and for elections to the House of Commons.⁵ It also included a commitment to a reformed and democratic House of Lords but without explicitly mentioning a preferred electoral system.

The **Scottish National Party** also supports introducing STV for elections to the House of Commons.⁶

UKIP included a manifesto commitment to PR:

UKIP wants a fairer, more proportional voting system that makes seats match votes, and ends the inbuilt advantage the establishment parties have over smaller parties. A proportional electoral system that delivers a parliament representative of the number of votes cast, while retaining a constituency link, is one we strongly advocate.⁷

The **Green Party** supports proportional representation for Parliamentary and local elections.⁸

Plaid Cymru's manifesto also supported a more proportional system of voting.⁹

Of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, only the **Alliance Party** manifesto contained a specific pledge to support proposals for a more proportional system for House of Commons elections. The party's preferred system is STV. The party also supported direct elections to the House of Lords.¹⁰

⁵ *Change Britain's Future: Liberal Democrat Manifesto*, p90

⁶ *Stronger for Scotland: 2017 Manifesto*, p41

⁷ *Britain Together: UKIP 2017 Manifesto*, p58

⁸ *The Green Party for a Confident and Caring Britain*, p24

⁹ *Plaid Cymru, Defending Wales: Action Plan 2017*, p15

¹⁰ *Alliance Party, Change Direction: Westminster Manifesto 2017*, p11

2. 2011 referendum on AV

A referendum was held on 5 May 2011 on whether the electoral system used for UK general elections should be changed from the first past the post system to the AV system.¹¹ The referendum rejected the adoption of the AV. Library Research Paper 11/44, [Alternative Vote Referendum 2011](#), provides a full analysis of the result. In brief:

- There were 6.2 million 'Yes' votes (32.1%) in favour of the change.
- There were 13.0 million 'No' votes (67.9%) opposing the change.

All three major political parties had included sections on the electoral system in their manifestos for the 2010 general election. The Conservative manifesto stated that the party supported the first past the post system; the Liberal Democrat manifesto supported STV; and the Labour manifesto included a commitment to hold a referendum on moving to AV.

AV is not a form of proportional representation. In some circumstances the result in an AV election can be less proportional than FPTP.

FullFact published a piece in the run up to the AV referendum in 2011 which included the following:

Models of what past election results would have been in the UK under a system of AV give a mixed result. They show that in 1997 when Labour gained a big majority, AV would have produced more unrepresentative results.

On the other hand, the three elections previous to Labour's 1997 landslide would have seen more representative results under AV.

Both AV and First Past the Post (FPTP) produce unrepresentative results, in terms of how closely the make-up of MPs in parliament would represent the way people vote.

This is in comparison to full Proportional Representation (PR) systems of election which produce very representative results, but lose the constituency link that AV and FPTP maintain.¹²

3. Statistics

3.1 Opinion polls

Pollsters have not routinely asked questions on what people think about changing the UK electoral system to one of proportional representation. Questions about proportional representation tend to be included in opinion polls at times of when the results of an election is a subject of

¹¹ The referendum question, which was modified on the advice of the Electoral Commission, was "At present, the UK uses the "first past the post" system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the "alternative vote" system be used instead?"

¹² FullFact, [Does AV lead to more representative governments?](#), 5 April 2011

public debate, or when campaign groups specifically commission polls on the subject.

Because of the infrequency of opinion poll questions on proportional representation it is hard to measure trends in the level of support for and opposition to proportional representation over time.

The following analysis is based on two polls conducted within the last two years which the full breakdown of results are publicly available.^{13,14} The full question is shown along with the response categories offered. A link to the original source is provided beneath each table.

The polling company Ipsos-MORI has an [archive](#) of half a dozen opinion polls where respondents views on proportional representation were asked from the late 1970s to 2001, although as the majority of these were conducted in the 1990s (and are over 20 years old) they have not been included here.

BMG-ELECTORAL REFORM SOCIETY: APRIL 2015							
DO YOU AGREE, OR DISAGREE, THAT THE NUMBER OF SEATS A PARTY GETS SHOULD BROADLY REFLECT IT'S PROPORTION OF THE TOTAL VOTES CAST?							
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unweighted base	Weighted base
All respondents	34.4%	39.6%	20.2%	4.3%	1.6%	1,013	1,013
Gender							
Male	40.5%	37.8%	14.8%	5.7%	1.3%	488	492
Female	28.6%	41.3%	25.3%	3.0%	1.8%	525	521
Age							
15-34	33.9%	39.3%	23.4%	2.8%	0.6%	250	291
35-54	30.3%	39.6%	21.7%	6.2%	2.2%	317	358
55+	38.8%	39.8%	16.1%	3.6%	1.6%	446	364
Social class							
AB	43.3%	35.6%	17.3%	3.1%	0.8%	252	271
C1	28.5%	44.0%	22.2%	4.2%	1.2%	388	284
C2	37.2%	38.9%	16.3%	4.6%	3.0%	240	219
DE	28.7%	39.5%	24.5%	5.6%	1.6%	133	239

Source: [BMG-Electoral Reform Society, April 2015](#)

¹³ The [Make Votes Matter](#) website has published summary results from a total of four opinion polls on proportional representation in this period. The full breakdown of results, as reported by the polling company, rather than a newspaper article, could only be found for two of the opinion polls. Only these have been reported here.

¹⁴ Every effort has been taken to identify relevant opinion polls, and no opinion poll on proportional representation conducted by a BPC member during this period has been intentionally excluded (with exceptions listed in footnote 1) but it is possible some polls asking about proportional representation have not been identified. The polls shown here should therefore be treated as indicative of polling results, but the list of polls may not be comprehensive.

ICM-MAKE VOTES MATTER: APRIL 2017

IN PRINCIPLE, WOULD YOU SUPPORT OR OPPOSE THE UK CHANGING THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM FROM FIRST PAST THE POST TO A SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?

	Strongly support	Tend to support	Neither support nor oppose	Tend to oppose	Strongly oppose	Unweighted base	Weighted base
All respondents	26.0%	35.0%	19.0%	6.0%	4.0%	2,578	2,578
Gender							
Male	32.0%	32.0%	17.0%	7.0%	7.0%	1,308	1,263
Female	21.0%	38.0%	21.0%	5.0%	2.0%	1,270	1,315
Age							
18-24	20.0%	38.0%	20.0%	4.0%	2.0%	249	309
25-34	27.0%	35.0%	21.0%	3.0%	3.0%	469	413
35-44	25.0%	36.0%	18.0%	5.0%	3.0%	493	490
45-54	27.0%	33.0%	20.0%	8.0%	3.0%	457	438
55-64	33.0%	28.0%	16.0%	9.0%	7.0%	460	387
65-74	28.0%	34.0%	18.0%	8.0%	7.0%	324	284
75+	23.0%	40.0%	16.0%	8.0%	8.0%	126	258
Social class							
AB	29.0%	37.0%	15.0%	7.0%	7.0%	893	696
C1	25.0%	35.0%	18.0%	8.0%	4.0%	714	748
C2	26.0%	37.0%	22.0%	4.0%	2.0%	339	541
DE	26.0%	30.0%	22.0%	5.0%	4.0%	632	593

Source: [ICM-Make Votes Matter, April 2017](#)

3.2 2017 General Election under different voting systems

Predicting what the results of the 2017 General Election may have been under different voting systems, using the known number of votes and vote share, is not simple. The election was conducted under the First Past the Post system and the voting behaviour of the electorate may have been specific to that electoral system. If a different electoral system had been in place, peoples voting behaviour and voting preferences may have differed.¹⁵

In [The 2017 General Election: Volatile Voting, Random Results](#) report, the [Electoral Reform Society](#)¹⁶ overcame this issue by commissioning YouGov to run a post-election poll of 13,273 people to understand how they would have behaved under the Alternative Vote, Additional Member System, and Single Transferrable Vote electoral systems.

¹⁵ Electoral Reform Society, [The 2017 General Election: Volatile Voting, Random Results](#).

¹⁶ The Electoral Reform Society is a campaign organisation aimed at changing the electoral system in the UK. The ERS publish reports on the pros and cons on different voting systems and provide analysis of how UK elections may have resulted if different voting systems had been used.

To calculate the projected results for the Alternative Vote, the ERS calculated first, second, third (etc) preference share for a party in each constituency based on what the preference share was for that party in the region total.

For the Additional Member System and Single Transferrable Vote system the ERS needed to artificially create new multi-member constituencies and regional constituencies (by combining existing constituencies together). Once done, the ERS applied the voting methodology used for the Alternative Vote to the artificial constituencies.

The table below shows a summary of the ERS's estimates on how many seats each party may have received under the alternative voting systems, along with their difference to the actual 2017 General Election result.

PROJECTIONS OF THE 2017 GENERAL ELECTION WITH ALTERNATIVE ELECTORAL SYSTEMS							
	CON	LAB	LD	UKIP	GREEN	SNP	PC
First past the post	317	262	12	0	1	35	4
Alternative vote	304	286	11	0	1	27	2
Difference to FPTP	-13	+24	-1	0	0	-8	-2
Additional member system	274	274	39	11	8	21	4
Difference to FPTP	-43	+12	+27	+11	+7	-14	0
Single transferrable vote	282	297	29	1	1	18	3
Difference to FPTP	-35	+35	+17	+1	0	-17	-1

Source: Electoral Reform Society, [The 2017 General Election: Volatile Voting, Random Results](#).

4. Press Articles

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[Britain is a country where elections can still be bought](#): A new report shows parties are dodging electoral law. Under first-past-the-post they always will

Polly Toynbee, Guardian

12 Sep 2017

[How would parliament look under Proportional Representation?](#)

Martin Williams, Channel 4 News

24 Aug 2017

[Tactical voting surged in general election as voters tried to 'game' system, research finds](#): Voters switched allegiance at unprecedented rate in 2017 general election

Sam Lister, Independent

21 Aug 2017

[Ditching first-past-the-post really would be 'taking back control'](#): The underlying issue of Brexit was that British people are inadequately served by the current electoral system. This must change for the good of the country

Phil McDuff, the Guardian

1 Aug 2017

[Make Votes Matter campaign for voting reform gathers pace after election](#): During the 2017 election, as many as 68 per cent of votes were wasted because of the first past the post system. One non-profit venture wants to change that

Hazel Sheffield, Independent

19 Jun 2017

[Why don't we elect MPs by proportional representation?](#)

BBC News

17 May 2017

[Labour eyes proportional representation as party's elections minister backs voting shake-up](#): Shadow minister for elections backs the policy days before manifesto announcement

Jon Stone, Independent

4 May 2017

[Indy 100: Here's what the UK electoral map would look like with Proportional Representation](#): Earlier this week, the UK awoke to a hung parliament for the second time in a decade.

Louise Dore, Independent

May 2017

[MPs set to debate changing Britain's voting system to proportional representation](#): A petition calling for the change has hit 100,000 signatures

Jon Stone, Independent

15 Mar 2017

[Labour eyes proportional representation as party's elections minister backs voting shake-up](#): Shadow minister for elections backs the policy days before manifesto announcement

Jon Stone, Independent

4 May 2017

5. Further reading

Commons Library Briefing

Background to Voting systems in the UK, 26 Oct 2017

This Commons Library briefing paper provides brief details of the different voting systems currently used in the United Kingdom. It also notes recent developments relating to voting systems in the UK and provides information about previous government reviews into voting systems. The final section gives details of the voting systems used in selected overseas countries.

Electoral Reform Society

The Electoral Reform Society is an independent campaigning organisation that supports electoral reform. The ERS publish reports on the pros and cons on different voting systems and provide analysis of how UK elections may have resulted if different voting systems had been used. It has produced a Parliamentary briefing for the debate:

Westminster Hall Debate on PR 30th October 2017

Make Votes Matter

A cross-party campaign to introduce Proportional Representation to the House of Commons

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

The Campaign published a report earlier in 2017, *The Many, Not the Few: Proportional Representation & Labour in the 21st Century*.

The Executive summary of the report opens with:

A critical review of First Past the Post reveals that it fails to perform even the most basic tasks expected of a voting system. It is, for example, unable to guarantee that a party receiving the most votes wins the most seats. In our elections major parties routinely gain votes but lose seats or lose votes but gain seats, meaning that political power is divorced from public support.
(page5)

The Conservative Case for Reform

The group campaigns for STV to be used in elections to the House of Commons and in local elections in England.

Across swathes of the United Kingdom, people are denied the Conservatives politicians they voted for. Councils in many parts of the country lack the scrutiny they need to ensure the efficient delivery of services, and the accountability that should come hand in hand with public office.

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