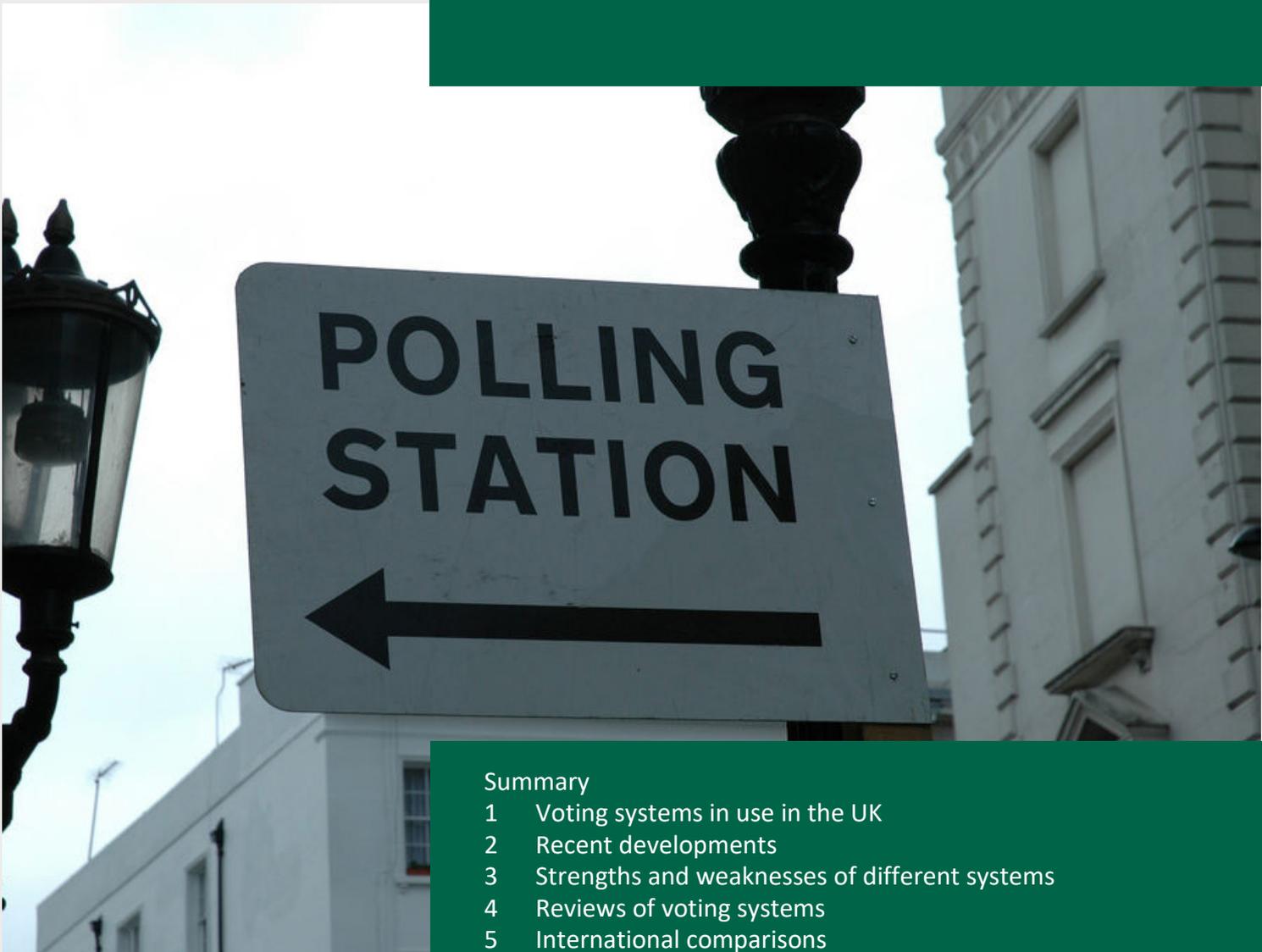


Research Briefing

10 January 2023

By Neil Johnston

# Voting systems in the UK



## Summary

- 1 Voting systems in use in the UK
- 2 Recent developments
- 3 Strengths and weaknesses of different systems
- 4 Reviews of voting systems
- 5 International comparisons

## Number

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## Summary

This briefing paper provides an overview of the different voting systems currently used for elections in the UK.

Until 1997 nearly all elections in the UK used the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. The exceptions were local and devolved elections in Northern Ireland which used the single transferable vote (STV) system from the 1970s. University seats in the House of Commons also used STV from 1918 until their abolition in 1950.

Since 1997 several different voting systems have been introduced for different elections across the country.

Currently, FPTP is used for elections to the UK Parliament, including in Northern Ireland, and at local elections in England and Wales.

Northern Ireland continues to use STV for local and Assembly elections. This system is a more proportional voting system than FPTP.

Elections to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) use a system known as the additional member system (AMS). This is designed to be more proportional and make the number of seats won by a party more closely reflect the share of the vote that party received.

Local elections in Scotland use the STV system.

It also outlines recent developments in the UK. These include the decision by the Senedd Cymru to allow local councils to choose whether they are elected by FPTP or STV, and proposals for the Senedd Cymru to adopt a new type of proportional electoral system for the next Senedd elections in 2026.

The briefing also highlights another recent development is the abolition of the supplementary vote system for mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections. From May 2023 these elections will use FPTP.

The types of electoral system used in the UK are summarised below.

## Electoral systems used in the UK

Voting system	Used for
First-past-the-post	House of Commons Local elections in England and Wales Mayoral elections in England Police and crime commissioners in England and Wales Scottish National Park authorities
Additional member system	Scottish Parliament Senedd Cymru London Assembly
Single transferable vote	Northern Ireland Assembly Local elections in Northern Ireland and Scotland
Alternative vote	Excepted hereditary peers in the House of Lords Scottish Crofting Commission elections

# 1 Voting systems in use in the UK

Before 1997 all elections in the UK, except for Northern Ireland, used the same voting system. Elections in Great Britain used first-past-the-post (FPTP). Elections in Northern Ireland, except UK Parliament elections, used the single transferable vote (STV).

However, since 1997 several different systems have come to be used across Great Britain. This section gives details of the voting systems currently in use in the UK.

## 1.1 First-past-the-post

In first-past-the-post (FPTP) the winner needs to win a plurality of the votes cast. This is where the winner polls more votes than any other candidate but does not need to receive more than half of all votes cast. Voters will mark their ballot paper with an 'X' to indicate their preference.

FPTP is the current system for electing MPs to the House of Commons. The UK is divided into 650 separate constituencies, each of which elects a single Member of Parliament.

First-past-the-post is also used for local elections in England and Wales. In England this covers principal local authorities (unitary authorities, county councils, London and metropolitan boroughs, district and borough councils), and parish and town councils. Principal local authorities are divided into wards, each of which elects a set number of councillors (usually 1, 2 or 3). Larger parish councils can be split into parish wards, but many parishes have a single election for the whole parish. Parish councils have 5 or more councillors.

In England, each councillor is elected for four years. In most local authorities in England elections are held for all councillors every four years.

In wards where two or three councillors are elected at the same time, the candidates that finish in the top two (or three as appropriate) are elected. Voters will have as many votes as there are vacant seats, so they may write two or three 'X's on their ballot paper next to their choices. In parish and town councils there may be five or more seats available, and voters will have

the corresponding number of votes. This is sometimes referred to as the block vote system (BV).<sup>1</sup>

Some English principal authorities, however, elect a proportion of councillors each year over a four-year cycle. This can either be election by thirds or election by halves. Councils electing by thirds have a third of councillors elected for their four-year term every year (with no elections in the fourth year). In councils electing by half, half the councillors are elected to serve their four-year term every two years. Voters will usually be electing one councillor at a time and will therefore place one 'X' on their ballot paper.

Local authority elections in Wales are held every five years and councillors serve a five-year term.

The Library briefing, [UK Elections in 2022 and beyond](#), sets out the election cycles for all elections.

Elections that use FPTP in the UK are:

- General elections for the House of Commons;
- Police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales (from May 2023 – see section 2);
- Directly elected mayor elections in England, including metro mayors and the Mayor of London (from May 2023 – see section 2);
- Councillors in principal council elections in England and Wales (district, unitary and county council elections);
- Parish and town council elections in England and community councils in Wales;
- Scottish National Park Board elections.

## 1.2 Additional member system (AMS)

The additional member system is used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd Cymru and the London Assembly. In this system candidates are elected either in a constituency or on a regional list. It is often also called the Mixed Member Proportional system.

The system was introduced for these bodies during the Labour Government of 1997-2001, following manifesto commitments to devolve power to Scotland, Wales and London.

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<sup>1</sup> IDEA International, [Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook](#) (PDF), 2008, p175

The system is designed to produce a more proportional result than FPTP. Some MSPs, MSs or London Assembly members will be elected in a constituency using FPTP, and some will be elected from a list. The total of members elected from both methods will usually be closer to the total share of the vote than electing by FPTP alone.

## How does it work?

### Voting

Voters have two ballot papers on polling day. One is used to elect a constituency member using FPTP.

The second is used to vote for a party. Parties are listed on a ballot paper and the voter places a cross next to the preferred political party. Several constituencies are grouped together to form a single region and a set number of people will be elected from that region's list. Voters in each region will vote on the same regional list.

In each region, parties will nominate candidates to have their names on the list. In London Assembly elections the whole of Greater London forms the regional list.

The lists used are known as closed lists. This means voters can only vote for a party, they cannot vote for individual candidates on the list. The party is in control of who appears on their list of candidates and in which order. Some other countries that use the additional member system use open lists. The formats vary, but with open lists, voters can choose individual candidates.

### Counting

The votes for each part of the elections are counted separately.

The FPTP seats are counted first. Once the winner in each seat has been declared the votes in the regional list election can be counted.

The regional list ballot papers will give a total for each party. The share of the vote in the regional list ballot is then used to help allocate regional list seats to make the final result more proportional.

After taking account of the results of the constituency elections, additional seats are allocated to parties to the required degree of proportionality using the modified D'Hondt formula. This takes into account the total votes cast in the area-wide ballot together with the number of constituency member seats that each political party has already won. An alternative formula can be used, the Sainte-Laguë formula. The two methods produce similar results but the D'Hondt method tends to favour larger parties and the Sainte-Laguë method tends to favour smaller parties.

For example, a region has 10 seats available. Five are elected using FPTP in constituencies and five are elected using the list. If Party A polls 50% of the

vote on the regional list preferences, but has already won all five constituency seats it will not receive any list seats, as it has already won half the available seats. The five list seats available will then be calculated for other parties contesting the election, based on their share of the list vote and the formula used.

Independents can stand on the regional list as individuals. Effectively they are a list of one, whereas parties will have several people on their lists. If an independent candidate polls enough votes to be allocated a list seat, then they win the seat. They are then removed from the remaining calculations as they are unable to win another seat.

The system for Scottish Parliament elections was proposed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1995, with the details devised by a sub-group, the Scottish Constitutional Commission. This system was a compromise designed to satisfy the conflicting aspirations of different parties within the Convention.<sup>2</sup>

In Wales, the Labour Party's proposals for devolution had included a devolved assembly elected using FPTP to elect its members. The Party had considered STV but ruled it out on practicality grounds of quickly creating new multi-member constituencies.<sup>3</sup> Tony Blair announced that he had asked the Wales Labour Party executive to look again at its preferred electoral system for the Welsh Assembly and a revised policy of an AMS system of 40 FPTP members with 20 additional members was agreed by the Welsh executive of the Labour Party in January 1997.<sup>4</sup> It was this proposal that was taken forward in the Government of Wales Act 1998 establishing the Senedd Cymru (then called the National Assembly for Wales).

In elections for the Greater London Authority, parties or independent candidates must poll over 5% of the list vote to be included in the calculations.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.3

### Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Single transferable vote is a form of preferential voting system, as voters can rank their choices in order of preference.

Voters have one vote. They use that vote by ranking candidates in order of preference by marking 1, 2, 3 etc against the candidates' names on the ballot

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<sup>2</sup> Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems, [Putting Citizens First: Boundaries, Voting and Representation in Scotland](#) (PDF), January 2006, p30

<sup>3</sup> Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales, [Report of the Richard Commission](#) (PDF), Spring 2004, p229

<sup>4</sup> Library briefing, [Wales and devolution](#), May 1997, p23

<sup>5</sup> Rule 7, schedule 2 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999

paper. Voters can rank candidates within parties or across different parties. The voter can make as many or as few ranked choices as they like.

STV is used for Northern Ireland Assembly elections and local council elections in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

In Northern Ireland, Assembly Members are elected in multi-member constituencies. The constituencies are the same geographical areas as Westminster constituencies. In local council elections, council wards are grouped into district electoral areas (DEAs) and these form multi-member constituencies for the election of councillors.

Councillors in Scotland are elected in multi-member wards, usually three or four councillors. When Scotland moved over to STV elections for local elections from FPTP, 1,222 single member wards were replaced by 353 multi-member wards.<sup>6</sup>

## Counting using STV

To be elected, candidates must meet a quota of the votes cast.<sup>7</sup> The quota is the smallest number that guarantees no more candidates can reach the quota than the number of seats available to be filled. The Electoral Reform Society, which campaigns for STV and believes it should be used for UK Parliamentary elections, has [produced an explainer](#) (PDF) on how the votes are calculated.

In the first count, all candidates' first preferences are counted. Any candidate passing the specified quota of first preference votes is elected. The surplus votes of the elected candidate (those votes received more than the specified quota) are then transferred to the remaining candidates based on the second preference listed on the ballot paper.

In STV elections in the UK, for surplus votes all second preferences (and at later stages where appropriate third, fourth, etc preferences) are examined and transferred. However, only a proportion of the actual number of surplus votes are transferred.

If a ballot paper does not have a second preference (or other subsequent preferences at later stages of the count) the ballot paper becomes non-transferable.

If a candidate is elected on the first count the first transfer will transfer their surplus votes above the quota. This is done by calculating all second preferences, but only transferring them in proportion to the actual surplus. For example, if the candidate reached the quota of 100 and their surplus was 25 (they had 125 first preference votes) all 125 second preferences would be

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<sup>6</sup> Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland, [Fourth Statutory Reviews of Electoral Arrangements](#),

<sup>7</sup> The quota is determined using the Droop formula:  $\text{total valid votes}/(\text{number of seats} + 1)$

reviewed but transferred at 25/125, or one fifth, of a vote each). This is why in STV counts candidates sometimes receive fractions of votes.

If after the transfer of surpluses another candidate reaches the quota, they will be elected, and their surplus can be transferred. If no candidate reaches the quota, then the candidate with the lowest vote is eliminated.

Eliminated candidates' votes are transferred to their second preferences at full value (that is 1 vote) unless the vote being transferred is from a surplus. In this case it is transferred at its lower value as calculated by the surplus transfer.

If the final seat to be filled cannot be allocated by a candidate reaching the quota (because all transfers that are possible have been calculated), the candidate with the highest number of votes but short of the quota is declared the winner of the final seat.

As the transfer calculations are complicated, particularly at later stages of the count, the method of transfer will also depend on whether counts are conducted manually (as in Northern Ireland) or by e-counting (as in Scotland's STV local elections).

There are different methods for transferring surplus votes. One method is transferring only a random selection of ballots equal to the surplus. However, this introduces a random element to the transfers. Most jurisdictions that count transfer all the votes of the elected candidate but at a value below 1, as in the UK examples.

The different methods of calculating transfers are briefly outlined in Annex G of the report by the independent [Expert Panel on Electoral Reform](#). The panel was commissioned by the Presiding Officer of the Senedd Cymru (then called the National Assembly for Wales) to assess options for reform of the Senedd (see section 2.2 for more).

STV counts usually take longer than FPTP counts because of these complexities.

## STV in the UK

When Northern Ireland was established in 1922, STV was used for local elections and for elections to the Northern Ireland Parliament. STV for local elections was abolished by the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1922.<sup>8</sup> A combination of the way voters were registered, FPTP, and gerrymandering meant Unionists dominated local elections.<sup>9</sup> STV elections for the Northern Ireland were also abolished for the 1929 Stormont election.<sup>10</sup> A combination of a Unionist driven boundary review process and a refusal by the Nationalist

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<sup>8</sup> Brendan O'Leary, A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume 2, p35

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hennessey, A History of Northern Ireland 1920-1996, p45-51

<sup>10</sup> Brendan O'Leary, A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume 2, p35

community to engage with the process led to FPTP constituencies where Nationalists lost seats.<sup>11</sup>

During attempts to restore some form of devolved government during the Troubles, STV was re-established as the preferred voting system. A Government White Paper in 1973, outlining proposals for a new Assembly for Northern Ireland, stated:

If the Assembly is to play a significant part in working out new structures and procedures, it is of particular importance that its membership should reflect the wishes of the community as accurately as possible.<sup>12</sup>

STV was also used for university constituencies in the House of Commons from 1918 to 1950. University seats were abolished in 1950.<sup>13</sup>

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of election was introduced to local elections following the passing of the [Local Governance \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#). This followed various consultations and was based on the recommendations of the Kerley Group, the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group.<sup>14</sup> These recommendations built on an earlier report on local government and its relationships with the new Scottish Parliament in 1999.<sup>15</sup>

The Kerley report considered various options for local elections. It considered that STV maximised the use made of each vote cast, and therefore ensures that those elected represent the spread of opinion within a ward, while maintaining a local link by using multi-member wards.<sup>16</sup> The Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition Government, formed after the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, implemented the proposals.

## 1.4

### Alternative vote (AV)

AV is also a preferential voting system. Under the AV system, voters are entitled to rank candidates in their order of preference, marking 1, 2, 3 etc against the candidates' names on the ballot paper. If a candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the first preference votes, then they are elected.

If no candidate reaches the 50 per cent threshold, then the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated, and their second preference votes are reallocated to the remaining candidates. This reallocation of the bottom candidate's votes – based on second, third and fourth preferences etc – continues until one candidate has a majority of votes.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920-1996*, p51-3

<sup>12</sup> Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, *Northern Ireland constitutional proposals*, Cmnd 5259, p11

<sup>13</sup> Library briefing, [General election results from 1918 to 2019](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Report of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group](#) (PDF), June 2000

<sup>15</sup> Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament, *Mcintosh report*, July 1999

<sup>16</sup> [Policy memorandum](#) (PDF), p3, accompanying the [Local Governance \(Scotland\) Bill](#)

The AV system is used to fill vacancies of an excepted hereditary peer in the House of Lords. The exception is when more than one vacancy is being filled at the same time. In this event the STV system is used.<sup>17</sup>

AV is also used to elect the six elected members of the Crofting Commission in Scotland.<sup>18</sup>

## AV referendum

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.

The [Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011](#) made provision for the next general election to be fought under the AV system, provided that the change was endorsed in a referendum.

A referendum was held on 5 May 2011.

In response to the question: "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?". 6,152,607 (32.1%) voted 'yes' and 13,013,123 voted 'no' (67.9%).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Parliament website, [By-elections in the House of Lords](#)

<sup>18</sup> Part IV, Rule 42 of [The Crofting Commission \(Elections\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2011](#), SI 2011/456

<sup>19</sup> Electoral Commission, [First UK-wide referendum in over 35 years delivers a "No" to changing the UK Parliament voting system](#), 7 May 2011

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## 2 Recent developments

### 2.1 Supplementary vote abolished

From May 2023 elections for police and crime commissioners and elections for directly elected mayors in England will be elected using FPTP.

Previously these were elected using the supplementary voting system (explained below).

Section 13 of the [Elections Act 2022](#) made provision for these elections to be conducted using FPTP in future. This provision was activated in October 2022 and means that from May 2023 all these elections will be held under FPTP.<sup>20</sup>

If any by-elections for existing mayors or police and crime commissioners are required before May 2023, they will be held under the existing supplementary voting arrangements.

The change required additional secondary legislation to make the necessary changes to the detailed conduct rules for those elections.<sup>21</sup>

This was a manifesto commitment from the Conservative Party in the 2019 General Election, with the Minister saying during the passage of the legislation, “this undertaking aligns with our belief that first-past-the-post is robust and secure and provides strong local accountability”.<sup>22</sup>

Opposition parties opposed the changes during the passage of the Elections Bill. Labour highlighted that, in the case of London, it would overturn a referendum result that approved the creation of the mayor with proposals that specifically referred to the supplementary voting system. The government rejected the criticisms, and the provision was retained in the Bill.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [Elections Act 2022 \(Commencement No. 3 and Saving Provision\) Regulations 2022](#), 25 October 2022

<sup>21</sup> [Local Authorities \(Mayoral Elections\) \(England and Wales\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2022](#), [Police and Crime Commissioner Elections and Welsh Forms \(Amendment\) Order 2022](#), [Combined Authorities \(Mayoral Elections\) \(Amendment\) Order 2022](#), and the [Greater London Authority Elections \(Amendment\) Rules 2022](#)

<sup>22</sup> [HC Deb 26 October 2021 \[Elections Bill \(Twelfth sitting\)\], c351](#)

<sup>23</sup> Library briefing, [Elections Bill 2021-22: Progress of the Bill](#), May 2022

## Supplementary voting

Under the supplementary vote, there are two columns on the ballot paper. Voters mark an X in the first column against the name of their first-choice candidate and an X in the second column indicating their second preference (although they are not required to pick a second choice, they can leave the second column blank, and their first choice will still be counted).

If a candidate receives more than 50% of the first preference votes, then they are elected. If no candidate reaches the 50% mark at the first stage, then all but the two candidates with the most votes are eliminated.

The second preference votes on the ballot papers of the eliminated candidates are then transferred to the remaining two candidates. The candidate with the most votes at the end of the process is elected.

## 2.2

## Devolved elections in Wales

Two significant developments have taken place in Wales, where responsibility for devolved elections has been devolved.

The Welsh Government has put proposals before the Senedd Cymru for reforming the voting system for Senedd elections and to increase the number of Senedd members. These are still being considered.

The Senedd has already approved powers for local councils to choose between FPTP and STV for principal council elections in Wales.

## Senedd elections

As the role of the Senedd has developed since its creation (as the National Assembly for Wales) in 1998, there have been moves to increase the number of Members and how they are elected.

Following the 2021 Senedd elections, the Welsh Labour Government and Plaid Cymru signed a [Co-operation Agreement](#) to work together on certain policy commitments from 2021 for 3 years. This included a plan to support plans to reform the Senedd, based on:

- an expansion of numbers to between 80 and 100 Members
- a form of election which is as proportional, or more proportional than the current system
- an electoral system that is simple and intelligible to the voter

- legislative gender quotas integrated into the electoral system as proposed by the Expert Panel on Electoral Reform (2017).

The [Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, appointed after the most recent Senedd elections, recommended](#) the Senedd should have 96 seats and Members should be elected using a closed list proportional electoral system using the D'Hondt formula.

The Welsh Government is expected to issue an update on work to progress these reforms by Easter 2023.<sup>24</sup>

## Background

### Richard Commission

In 2004, the Richard Commission recommended an increase in Members as part of suggested reforms of the powers and electoral arrangements of the Assembly. Although the devolution settlement was altered and the Assembly was granted greater powers as a result, the existing system of electing 60 Member using AMS remained.<sup>25</sup>

### Expert Panel on Electoral Reform

In 2017, the Senedd Llywydd (Presiding Officer) announced the establishment of an independent [Expert Panel on Electoral Reform](#) for Senedd elections. She had announced in 2016, with cross-party support, work to address concerns about the size and capacity of the National Assembly for Wales with 60 members following the devolution of greater powers.<sup>26</sup>

The final report of the Expert Panel was published in November 2017. It recommended that for Senedd Members to effectively scrutinise legislation and hold the Welsh Government to account, it needed an extra 20 to 30 Members.<sup>27</sup>

The Panel's preferred option was an Assembly of 89 or 90 Members to be elected by Single Transferable Vote based on 20 multi-member constituencies. It suggested an alternative approach might be 17 multi-member constituencies based on the boundaries of the 22 local authorities.<sup>28</sup>

It also identified two alternative approaches that the Senedd might want to consider: a flexible list system of proportional representation, a type of open list system but where the degree of influence voters have is limited by the

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<sup>24</sup> Welsh Government, [Written Statement, Update on Senedd Reform](#), 16 December 2022

<sup>25</sup> Library briefing, [Devolution in Wales: "A process, not an event"](#)

<sup>26</sup> Written Statement, [Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#) (Word), 1 February 2017

<sup>27</sup> Expert Panel on Assembly Reform, [A Parliament that works for Wales](#) (PDF), November 2017, p210

<sup>28</sup> As above, p214-5

application of quotas, candidate thresholds or other mechanisms, or adapting the existing AMS system to a greater number of Members.<sup>29</sup>

### Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform

In September 2020, a report by the [Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform](#) recommended legislation should be introduced early in the Sixth Senedd (2021-2026) to increase the size of the Senedd to between 80 and 90 Members with effect from the 2026 election.<sup>30</sup>

It consulted on the electoral system that should be used and STV was the clearly preferred option for many of those who responded, but opponents disliked its complexity.<sup>31</sup>

The Committee concluded that all Senedd Members should be elected by the same route, ruling out the status quo of the AMS method of voting currently used. The Committee concluded that Senedd elections should use STV:

We believe that the opportunity for voters to express nuanced preferences, the clarity of Member accountability, and the proportionality of electoral outcomes would increase participation and contribute to the revitalisation and reinvigoration of our democratic processes and institutions.<sup>32</sup>

It also noted that with the possibility of local councils in Wales moving to STV (see below) there should be consistency between the STV rules used if both Senedd and local elections were being conducted using STV.<sup>33</sup> This means that they should adopt the same counting method and method of transferring surpluses unless there were compelling reasons not to.

### Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform

Following Senedd elections in May 2021 a new committee was established, the [Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform](#). It was to consider the previous report and was tasked with making recommendations for policy proposals for a Welsh Government Bill on Senedd Reform.

It concluded that STV was not the appropriate method for election of Senedd Members because voting by ranked preferences was unfamiliar, and that “the method of translating votes into seats would be seen as complex and difficult to explain.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As above, p213

<sup>30</sup> Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform, [Senedd Reform: the next steps](#) (PDF), September 2020, p38

<sup>31</sup> As above, p51-2

<sup>32</sup> As above, p55

<sup>33</sup> As above, p67

<sup>34</sup> Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, [Reforming our Senedd: A stronger voice for the people of Wales](#) (PDF), p31

Instead, it recommended that the Senedd should have 96 seats and Members should be elected using a closed list proportional electoral system using the D'Hondt formula. This is the same system as was previously used for European Parliamentary elections in Great Britain (Northern Ireland used STV) and is also used for the list section of existing AMS elections for the Scottish Parliament and Senedd.

The Committee recommended the regions or constituencies used to elect from lists should be based on the 32 Westminster constituencies to be created from the current Westminster constituency boundary review.<sup>35</sup> These would be paired to form 16 multi-member Senedd constituencies.

The Committee's conclusions were not unanimous, but it noted they represented a majority that, if repeated in the full Senedd, would represent a super-majority (two-thirds of voting Senedd Members). This is important because changes to the electoral system or franchise of the Senedd must be agreed by a super-majority of Senedd Members to pass. The Committee was unanimous on the recommendation that any new legislation should integrate gender quotas and mandatory zipping to improve the diversity of those elected to the Senedd.<sup>36</sup>

The Welsh Government has responded to the report and said its role is to now develop the proposals for legislation that will take the recommendations forward in time for Senedd elections in May 2026.<sup>37</sup>

## Local elections

In 2021 the Senedd Cymru passed the [Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Act 2021](#).

Part 1 of the Act contains provisions for principal local councils in Wales to choose their electoral system from one of two options. They may stick with FPTP, or they may choose to move to STV elections. So far, no councils have opted to change to STV. Cardiff Council voted to reject STV and stick with FPTP in July 2022.<sup>38</sup>

The provisions do not cover community and town council elections in Wales, which must still be held using FPTP.

When consulting on whether to reform the voting system for Wales, the Welsh Government noted "the substantial presence of independent

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<sup>35</sup> See Library briefing, [Constituency boundary reviews and the number of MPs](#)

<sup>36</sup> Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, [Reforming our Senedd: A stronger voice for the people of Wales](#) (PDF), p43

<sup>37</sup> Welsh Government, [Response to the Report of the Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform](#) (PDF), undated

<sup>38</sup> WalesOnline, [Attempt to alter voting system in Cardiff fails](#), 22 July 2022

candidates” in local elections in Wales. It decided to restrict the choice of voting system between FPTP and STV because STV:

... produces election results which generally reflect the proportions of votes cast for the different political parties, groups and independents across the total area. This system does not present the same difficulties for independent or non-affiliated candidates as the ‘Additional Member’ or ‘Party List’ systems.<sup>39</sup>

Respondents to the consultation favoured STV over FPTP by a ratio of 55:45.<sup>40</sup>

A council may resolve to change the voting system if two-thirds of the elected councillors approve the resolution. If the council resolves to change to STV the council must inform Welsh Ministers, who may then direct the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales to review the electoral arrangements of the council.

Any council electing using STV will have multi-member wards of between 3 and 6 councillors. If a council wishes to revert to FPTP it cannot until after two sets of scheduled council elections have passed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Welsh Government, [White Paper: Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed](#), January 2017, p49

<sup>40</sup> Welsh Government, [White Paper – Summary of responses: Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed](#), July 2017, p49

<sup>41</sup> Sections 5 to 12 of the Act, which came into force on 6 May 2022

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## 3 Strengths and weaknesses of different systems

### 3.1 General principles

This section sets out briefly some of the arguments for and against FPTP or alternative voting systems usually referred to in reports or reviews of voting systems in the UK.

Various reports have tried to set criteria by which electoral systems should be judged. Any analysis of electoral systems is quick to point out that there is no perfect system, and each system has strengths and weaknesses (see section 4 for some examples). Any choice involves trade-offs between the competing priorities that different people place on what an electoral system should deliver.

The Jenkins Commission report of 1998 was tasked with recommending a replacement electoral system for elections to the House of Commons. Its terms of reference demonstrated the competing priorities. The Labour Government of 1997 said that any replacement should consider:

- broad proportionality;
- the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies;
- the need for stable government; and
- an extension of voter choice.<sup>42</sup>

#### Proportionality

Should an electoral system accurately reflect the proportion of voters who voted for each party in the number of representatives that are elected?

As noted in the first section some systems use single-member constituencies. These systems tend to be less proportional. There are two main ways of winning a single-member constituency:

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<sup>42</sup> The [Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System](#), October 1998 Cm 4090-I, chapter 1

- win the most votes, regardless of whether the candidate has a majority (a plurality of the votes) like FPTP elections to the House of Commons; and
- win a majority of the votes (over 50% of votes cast), which if it does not happen on the first vote can happen on the second. This can either be done in an instant run-off where second preferences are noted on the same ballot paper (such as Alternative Vote or Supplementary Vote), or it can be done by holding a second round of voting on a later date between the top two candidates (as in elections for the French Assemblée Nationale).

Some systems use multi-member constituencies. The multiple members can be elected in different ways, but they are usually more proportional, and those elected reflect the proportion of votes cast by voters:

- Preferential voting can allow voters to rank which candidates they want to see elected and seats are allocated based on analysing those preferences, such as STV;
- Proportional list systems, where candidates are elected from a list based on how many votes they or their party get.

Some systems use a mixed system, as demonstrated by the AMS system used in Scottish and Welsh parliament elections, where elements of more than one type of electoral system are combined. These are more proportional than FPTP and AV but are usually less proportional than STV or proportional lists.

A form of mixed systems in use in some parts of the world is the parallel systems. It works in a similar way to AMS, but it does not guarantee greater proportionality. The calculation of the number of regional/national list seats awarded to each party does not take into account the geographical constituency seats. It is also known as the mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system.<sup>43</sup>

Proportionality can also be influenced by the number of seats available in multi-member seats. In general, a larger number of seats in a constituency is associated with greater proportionality in election outcomes. For example, if only three or four seats are available, regardless of the system used, smaller parties will struggle to win seats. In larger districts more parties are likely to win seats. In a few cases the whole country is a single multi-member constituency, for example Israel and the Netherlands.<sup>44</sup>

Some proportional systems set a threshold requirement before a party can be allocated seats, for example of the London-wide members elected as

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<sup>43</sup> IDEA, [Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook](#), 2005, p112

<sup>44</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p59-60

London Assembly list members. This is usually to prevent small parties with little support being allocated seats.<sup>45</sup>

## The constituency link

The link between elected representatives and the electorate is important. Members need to be accountable to their voters and to be local representatives.

Territorial representation is a key feature of the FPTP system used for the House of Commons. One member is clearly identified with a single constituency.

Multi-member constituencies also have the territorial link, but constituencies tend to be larger. This has the potential to make it harder for local concerns to be represented as a wide range of issues and interests in a larger area compete for attention. A British Academy study on systems said the evidence suggests that MPs elected in multi-member districts with a system of preferential voting are just as likely to develop close connections with their local constituents as MPs elected under FPTP.<sup>46</sup>

List systems often cover an even larger territorial area and weaken the local link. Previous reports, such as the Arbuthnott Commission and the Richard Commission (see section 4.4 and 4.5 below), have found some confusion for voters around differences between the constituency and list votes and the perception of the role of those elected by each route.<sup>47</sup>

In the early days of the Scottish Parliament and the then National Assembly for Wales, both the Arbuthnott Commission and the Richard Commission reported on the tensions between regional list and constituency members. The Scottish Parliament's Code of Conduct state that regional MSPs must work in more than two constituencies within their region, thereby not concentrating just in one area, and that regional list MSPs should describe themselves as an MSP for the region and not select a single locality. Constituency MSPs must not describe themselves as the sole MSP for the area.<sup>48</sup> The Senedd Cymru Standing Orders says all Members have equal status and should not misrepresent the basis on which they are elected nor the area they serve.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> As above

<sup>46</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p109

<sup>47</sup> Expert Panel on Assembly Reform, [A Parliament that works for Wales](#) (PDF), November 2017, p133

<sup>48</sup> Code of Conduct for MSPs, [Section 8](#), 2021

<sup>49</sup> [Standing orders of the Welsh Parliament](#) (PDF), paragraph 1.10, September 2022

## Simplicity

Most evaluations of electoral systems have also highlighted the level of simplicity of the system for voters.

Supporters of FPTP point to its simplicity for voters to mark their ballot, for the votes to be counted and for voters to understand the link between their vote and the result.

Closed list systems are also easy to understand for voters. They need to make one choice, which is their preferred party, and then place a cross next to the party name. Open list systems are slightly more complicated as voters can make a choice of candidate on a list. That then counts as a vote for the party under the proportional list counting rules, but can have an effect where their preferred candidate gets elected before other candidates further up the party list.

Preferential voting, such as STV, requires voters to rank their preferences. Although a little more effort is involved, the premise is still simple for voters. The British Academy report on electoral systems notes there is little evidence that electors find STV (or open list systems) any more complicated than closed list PR. It notes that counting the votes may be complicated “but instructions to voters are not.”<sup>50</sup> The report does note, however:

when voters are asked to vote in two or more simultaneous elections using different electoral systems, the number of spoiled ballots increases.<sup>51</sup>

The choice of formula to calculate the results and who wins seats can also impact the proportionality of the results. The British Academy report notes the two main formula used for calculating list PR results are known as Sainte-Laguë and D’Hondt. Sainte-Laguë achieves greater proportionality and D’Hondt favours larger parties.<sup>52</sup>

A report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) from 2005 also notes that other elements impact on how easy it is to vote. Examples include how easy it is to register, how up-to-date registers are, and how easy it is to get to a polling station or apply for an absent vote.<sup>53</sup>

## Outcomes and accountability

The British Academy report then goes on to consider the trade-off between systems that produce a highly representative parliament, where seat

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<sup>50</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p18 and p79

<sup>51</sup> As above, p18

<sup>52</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p32-33 and 97

<sup>53</sup> IDEA, [Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook](#), 2005, p10

numbers closely match vote share, and results that deliver single-party government.

It notes that plurality and majority systems like FPTP tend to produce single party governments. This has the advantage of voters being able to identify who is responsible for policies and to hold the government to account accordingly. The downside is the results tend to be less proportional to votes cast. In some instances, this can call into question the fairness of the system. The start of pressure to reform the voting system in New Zealand can be traced to the 1978 and 1981 election results, in which the National Party retained office despite winning fewer votes than the Labour opposition. However, similar instances in the UK in 1951 and 1974 were seen as quirks in an otherwise sound system.<sup>54</sup>

More proportional systems tend to feature more coalition governments. This makes it more difficult for voters to assess which party in a coalition government is responsible for which policies, which makes it difficult to decide who to reward or punish in the next election.<sup>55</sup>

The IDEA report also highlights the importance of an effective opposition in a parliamentary democracy:

Opposition groupings should have enough representatives to be effective (assuming that their performance at the ballot box warrants it) and in a parliamentary system should be able to present a realistic alternative to the current government. Obviously the strength of the opposition depends on many other factors besides the choice of electoral system, but if the system itself makes the opposition impotent, democratic governance is inherently weakened.<sup>56</sup>

The report notes a major reason for the change to a mixed-member system in New Zealand, for example, was the systematic under-representation of smaller opposition parties under FPTP.

## Voter choice

When the Jenkins Commission considered voter choice it did so from the perspective of the FPTP system in the UK and the number of safe seats, noting that “many voters pass their entire adult lives without ever voting for a winning candidate but that they also do so without any realistic hope of influencing a result”.<sup>57</sup>

The Commission considered that FPTP did allow voters to remove a candidate even in a safe seat. It said any reform of the UK system should

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<sup>54</sup> As above, p11

<sup>55</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p18 and p79, p20-2

<sup>56</sup> IDEA, [Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook](#), 2005, p13

<sup>57</sup> The [Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System](#), October 1998 Cm 4090-I, para 33

maintain and preferably enhance voters' rights to express their view of individual candidates.

The IDEA report points out that individual accountability varies in electoral systems. It notes that plurality/majority systems like FPTP have traditionally been seen as maximising the ability of voters to remove individual candidates, but argues that "the connection becomes tenuous where voters identify primarily with parties rather than candidates, as in the UK."<sup>58</sup>

This can result in voters not voting for their first choice: that is, tactical voting. The British Academy report notes voters may make a choice to vote tactically if their main interest is in which party should be in government. If a voter's first choice has no hope of winning a seat, they may vote tactically for their second-choice party to deny victory to a third party. Or they may not engage at all and choose not to vote.<sup>59</sup>

In making recommendations on a new voting system for the House of Commons, the Jenkins Commission rejected using closed list systems. Closed list PR systems do not allow voters to make a choice between candidates. Instead, parties control where candidates appear on the list.

Although open list systems allow voters to make a choice of candidate on a party's list if they wish, most voters tend to choose a party only. In some instances, ranking individual candidates can lead to some candidates further down a list winning a seat, where had the list been closed that candidate would not have been successful.<sup>60</sup>

Mixed systems allow for split voting. Voters can make a choice at the constituency level, but then use their regional list vote in a different way.

STV gives the widest choice to voters. They can rank candidates in any order they wish and can select as many or as few candidates from a particular party, and they may also choose between parties.

## Parties versus individual candidates

The type of electoral system being used will have an impact on how a party and individual candidates will behave.

The British Academy analysis of electoral systems highlighted some of the issues.

In open list PR and STV elections candidates from the same party will be in competition with each other. Voters are more likely to be contacted by, or to have contact with, their members of parliament than citizens who live in

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<sup>58</sup> As above, p10

<sup>59</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p48

<sup>60</sup> IDEA, [Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook](#), 2005, p84

countries with either closed list PR or single-member constituencies. Candidates can make a virtue of being more independent from the party machine. The study found candidates elected via closed list PR systems tend to display high levels of party cohesion in parliament and to be beholden to their party leaders rather than their voters.<sup>61</sup>

Parties will need to decide how many candidates to put up to maximise their chances of winning seats. In list PR systems and mixed systems that incorporate lists this is straightforward. On lists a party will have at least as many candidates as it thinks it might win.<sup>62</sup>

In STV elections the strategies can be more complicated as parties should field neither fewer nor more candidates than its maximum expected number of quotas. In addition, the party needs to try and ensure first preferences for their candidates are evenly distributed between the candidates. If one candidate wins a large number of votes, other candidates of the same party risk being eliminated early. It is common in Irish STV elections for a party to suggest that its supporters rank order its candidates differently in different parts of the constituency, thereby distributing the first preference votes relatively equally across candidates.<sup>63</sup>

Electoral systems can also provide parties with an opportunity to improve the diversity of their candidates. These can include mandatory quotas for underrepresented groups, particularly women, or it can involve parties adopting voluntary measures. One example is all-women shortlists used by the Labour Party to select candidates in House of Commons elections.<sup>64</sup> Labour has also adopted zipping in elections to the Scottish Parliament, although not without controversy.<sup>65</sup> Zipping is a process where candidates on PR lists alternate between women and men and provide for a 50:50 gender split. The recommendations for reforming the voting system to the Senedd feature some form of gender quotas or mandatory zipping.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p23

<sup>62</sup> As above, 79

<sup>63</sup> As above, p79-80

<sup>64</sup> Library briefing, [All-women shortlists](#)

<sup>65</sup> LabourList, [Exclusive: Scottish Labour list selection ballot votes and results revealed](#), 1 February 2021

<sup>66</sup> Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, [Reforming our Senedd: A stronger voice for the people of Wales](#) (PDF), p44

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## 4 Reviews of voting systems

There is a great deal of literature on voting systems. This section highlights some reviews conducted by previous governments and selected other reports inspired by previous government policy.

### 4.1 Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System (October 1998)

In December 1997 the Labour Government established the Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead. This followed a 1997 manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons.

The Labour Party had examined voting reform in the early 1990s. An internal review, the Plant Commission, favoured scrapping FPTP by ten votes to six, but could not decide on which proportional system should be introduced.<sup>67</sup> At its annual conference in 1993 the party voted to hold a national referendum on proportional representation, but the conference also voted to retain FPTP for House of Commons elections.<sup>68</sup>

The Commission's remit was to recommend an alternative to the existing system for Parliamentary elections to be put before the people in a referendum. It was asked to recommend a system which would achieve broad proportionality; fulfil the need for stable government; extend voter choice and maintain a link between MPs and geographical constituencies.

In its report, published in October 1998, the Commission recommended:

...a two-vote mixed system which could be described as either limited AMS [additional member system] or AV top-up. The majority of MPs (80-85%) would continue to be elected on an individual constituency basis, with the remainder elected on a corrective Top-up basis which would significantly reduce the disproportionality and the geographical divisiveness which are inherent in FPTP [first past the post].

The Commission recommended within this mixed system, the constituency members should be elected by the AV and the top-up members should be

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<sup>67</sup> Daily Mail, Smith is snubbed on voting reform, 1 April 1993

<sup>68</sup> Independent, Delegates support motion calling for national referendum on electoral reform, 2 October 1993

elected using open lists.<sup>69</sup> It was a novel electoral system that is not used anywhere else.

The Government did not respond formally to the report and there were reported Cabinet splits over the proposals.<sup>70</sup> The commitment to hold a referendum was not fulfilled. The report was the subject of a debate in the House of Commons [on 5 November 1998](#).<sup>71</sup>

The then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, told the House:

The Government would now like to see a widespread debate about the merits of the report within political parties, in Parliament and among the public at large.<sup>72</sup>

## 4.2 Kerley Report (June 2000)

This was the report of the Renewing Local Democracy working group appointed by Scottish Ministers and chaired by Richard Kerley. Its remit was to consider ways in which council membership could be made attractive to a wider cross-section of the community, and councils could become more representative of the make-up of the community.<sup>73</sup> This built on work of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament, which reported in 1999, and recommended that local councils should be elected by proportional representation and a review should be established to recommend which system.

The Renewing Local Democracy working group was asked to advise on the most appropriate system of election, taking account of the following criteria:

- proportionality;
- the councillor-ward link;
- fair provision for independents;
- allowance for geographical diversity, and
- a close fit between council wards and natural communities.

The working group considered proportionality and the councillor-ward link to be the principal considerations. For that reason, it concluded that STV best met the requirements it was asked to consider.<sup>74</sup> Two dissenting

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<sup>69</sup> The [Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System](#), October 1998 Cm 4090-I, p50

<sup>70</sup> Independent, Blair fights Cabinet splits over vote reform, 30 October 1998

<sup>71</sup> [HC Deb 5 November 1998 c1032-1113](#)

<sup>72</sup> [As above, c1036](#)

<sup>73</sup> [Report of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group](#) (PDF), June 2000

<sup>74</sup> As above, p63

members of the working group said that the balance between proportionality and the councillor-ward link were not adequately satisfied by STV. A third dissenting member said AMS was preferable because it had a councillor-ward link and number of seats won by the parties is decided by the percentage of votes they receive, which they argued, was what voters expected to see.<sup>75</sup>

## 4.3 Independent Commission to review Britain's experience of Proportional Voting Systems in the UK (2003)

The 2001 Labour Party general election manifesto promised a review of the new voting systems introduced for the devolved administrations and the London Assembly during the Labour government's first term of office. A review was eventually conducted after the 2005 election.

An independent commission was established by the Constitution Unit of University College London to feed into that review. The Commission included members from all parties and was aimed at gathering evidence to inform any decisions about change of voting systems. It was jointly chaired by Peter Riddell and David Butler.

The Commission published its report, [Changed Voting Changed Politics: Lessons of Britain's Experience of PR since 1997](#) (PDF), in March 2004. The Commission did not make a recommendation of a particular system but analysed the merits of the different systems. It noted:

There is no single ideal electoral system. Different systems are associated with providing a strong and stable executive; representation of minority interests; proportionality in the relationship between the share of votes cast and the balance of party representatives elected; a clear link between the voter and their representatives. Different people will emphasise different factors.<sup>76</sup>

## 4.4 The Richard Commission (2004)

The Richard Commission, formally the Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales, was established by the ruling Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition after the first elections to the National Assembly to examine the powers and electoral arrangements of

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<sup>75</sup> As above, p66-8

<sup>76</sup> [Changed Voting Changed Politics: Lessons of Britain's Experience of PR since 1997](#) (PDF), p15

the newly created Assembly. Part of its remit was to examine the “adequacy of its...electoral arrangements.”<sup>77</sup>

The Commission considered whether the AMS system led to elections that were “appropriately representative of Wales” and whether any changes to the system were needed if the Assembly went on to acquire additional powers. The Commission found most of the concerns expressed in evidence focused on the role of AMs and their relationship with their constituencies.

It found the AMS system’s main disadvantage was:

it creates two types of AM with overlapping responsibilities: the single constituency Member and the regional Member who is one of four representatives covering the region which includes the constituency; in the present Assembly all Labour AMs are constituency Members and two-thirds of opposition AMs are regional list Members.<sup>78</sup>

The Committee found that studies suggested regional Members had less direct contact with constituents than constituency Members.

It also noted other criticisms: that the constituency part of the system was too large (40 seats to 20 regional seats) and favoured the largest party, and the closed lists used for the regional list element of the election reduced voter choice in favour of party control.

Like the Arbuthnott Committee in Scotland (see below), it found evidence that some people did not yet understand the voting system and the purpose of the second vote.

The Richard Committee conclusions on the AMS system at that stage were:

- AMS had achieved its objective of ensuring that the Assembly represents all the major political parties in Wales;
- Adjustments to AMS would not solve the issue of two types of Assembly member;
- Replacing AMS with FPTP was “not defensible”;
- If the Assembly was to increase in size the STV system would be the best alternative to the existing AMS system.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales, [Report of the Richard Commission](#) (PDF), Spring 2004, p1

<sup>78</sup> As above, p230

<sup>79</sup> As above, p238-9

## 4.5

## Arbuthnott Commission for Scotland (2006)

The Arbuthnott Commission, formally known as the Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems, was set up to look at the possible impact of boundary differences and multiple voting systems on voter participation in Scotland.

This followed the de-coupling of Westminster and Holyrood constituencies and the introduction of STV for Scottish local elections, to be used for the first time in 2007<sup>80</sup>.

The Commission reported in 2006.<sup>81</sup> It found some misconceptions amongst the electorate about the purpose of the regional list vote, with some seeing it as a second preference vote. It also found some voters found it “very” or “fairly” difficult to understand how seats were allocated in the Scottish Parliament.<sup>82</sup> A frequent finding was that the AMS system created two types of MSPs. It heard evidence of the tensions with some constituency members having accused regional members of “cherry picking” individual cases and local issues with a view to raising their profile and targeting specific constituencies in their region with a view to taking the constituency seat at the next election.<sup>83</sup>

The Commission considered retaining AMS, which it preferred to call a mixed member proportional system, or whether to recommend change to a different system.

It considered the benefits of STV over AMS but in the end ruled out STV. The reasons for this decision included the complexity of counting votes, the potential size of multi-member seats, particularly across the Highlands, and the link between how someone voted and the government that was elected could be less clear to voters.<sup>84</sup>

The Commission recommended revisions to the existing AMS, some of which were taken forward. It recommended clearer explanation of the ‘constituency vote’ and ‘regional vote’, so that voters could better understand that their list vote was not a ‘second preference’ vote. It also recommended local government elections should not be held on the same day as Scottish Parliament elections, to prevent voter confusion between different voting systems.

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<sup>80</sup> When the Scottish Parliament was established, the geographical constituencies used for the Scottish Parliament AMS elections had the same boundaries as Westminster constituencies, except for Orkney and Shetland

<sup>81</sup> Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems, [Putting Citizens First: Boundaries, Voting and Representation in Scotland](#) (PDF), January 2006

<sup>82</sup> As above, p32

<sup>83</sup> As above, p58

<sup>84</sup> As above, p38

One recommendation that was not taken forward was to use open lists rather than closed lists for the regional members. The Commission believed:

... open lists will strengthen the extent to which regional members might be held to account by their electors. This should reduce the perception that the first loyalty of regional members is to their party, which controls where they appear on the list, rather than the constituents who elect them.<sup>85</sup>

## 4.6 Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997 (2008)

The Labour Party's 2005 general election manifesto stated that the party remained 'committed to reviewing the experience of the new electoral systems'.<sup>86</sup> The Government's review of voting systems in the UK was subsequently published on 24 January 2008.<sup>87</sup> It did not make any recommendations for reform. The review stated that its aim was to "contribute to the knowledge base and debate on whether or not changes should be made to the voting system for the House of Commons".

The report's key findings were:

- PR systems do introduce a greater degree of proportionality, but other factors are important, such as turnout, distribution of votes across the country and constituency size.
- The new voting systems have led to more proportional allocation of seats in devolved administrations, which has resulted in more parties being represented in the elected bodies and given rise to a tendency towards coalition government.
- Internationally, evidence suggests more proportional systems can boost turnout, but this had not been the experience of the UK.
- It did not find that any voting system is inherently more confusing than another for the voter, in terms of casting their votes correctly.
- Positive action policies have a greater impact on increasing women's representation than more proportional voting systems.

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<sup>85</sup> As above, p46

<sup>86</sup> Labour Party Manifesto, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> [Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997 \(PDF\)](#), Cm 7304, January 2008.

- There has been little change to party campaigning, with continued emphasis on winning constituency seats.<sup>88</sup>

On the implications for Westminster of changing the voting system to some form of PR it stated:

45. A move to any form of PR for Westminster would imply a range of significant changes including:

- more small parties represented in Parliament (due to proportionality)
- greater tendency for coalition governments
- multi-member constituencies.<sup>89</sup>

The Government did not make any recommendations based on the review and stated that any proposed changes to the electoral system for the House of Commons would need to be endorsed by a referendum.<sup>90</sup>

## 4.7 British Academy Policy Centre (2010)

The British Academy report, published in 2010, came at a time of continued interest in voting reform. Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister, had promised a referendum on AV elections for the House of Commons and voiced support for an elected House of Lords.<sup>91</sup>

The report focused on the main features of electoral systems to inform debate on electoral reform.

It found some themes in common with the 2008 Government report, for example more proportional allocation of seats results in more parties being represented, that voting systems themselves did not always improve diversity of the representatives elected, and that there was “no good evidence that any of the systems we consider here is ‘too complicated for voters to understand’”. Like the Arbuthnott Report, the British Academy highlighted that using different systems on the same day for different elections can cause confusion. It stated that, when voters are asked to vote in two or more simultaneous elections using different electoral systems, the number of spoiled ballot increases.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> As above

<sup>89</sup> Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997. Cm 7304, January 2008, para 45 - 46

<sup>90</sup> Ministry of Justice Press Release, [Governance of Britain - UK Voting Systems Review](#), 24 January 2008

<sup>91</sup> The actual referendum in 2011 came about as part of the [Coalition Agreement](#) between the Conservative led coalition with the Liberal Democrats that was in power 2010-2015.

<sup>92</sup> British Academy, by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean, and Angela Cummine, [Choosing an Electoral System](#), March 2010, p18

But it also made other observations:

- The most important determinant of the proportionality of a system is the number of MPs elected from a multi-member constituency.
- Although turnout tends to be higher in more proportional systems, the effect is not particularly strong and “there is some evidence that highly complex electoral systems suppress turnout”.
- FPTP and AV result in many safe seats which incentivises parties to focus campaigning on a relatively small number of seats and can incentivise governments to focus policy outcomes on swing voters in marginal constituencies.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> As above, p15-20

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## 5 International comparisons

The sections below provide brief examples of the electoral systems used in selected overseas countries for their national legislatures. This should not be taken as an exhaustive list.

### 5.1 FPTP

FPTP is the second most used method of electing national legislatures behind list PR systems.

Countries that use FPTP include Canada, India, Belarus, Egypt, Yemen, Oman, several countries in the Caribbean and Pacific and several countries across sub-Saharan Africa, such as Botswana, Kenya and Zambia.<sup>94</sup>

FPTP is also used for most elections in the USA. The country's election system is highly decentralized, and some states have changed the voting system for federal elections. Alaska and Maine use a preferential voting system used for an instant run-off if no candidate wins 50% for Senate elections. In Georgia, a Senate election must go to a run-off if no candidate wins 50% on the first ballot with the top two candidates going forward to a new polling day a few weeks later. Some cities have moved to different systems of preferential voting.<sup>95</sup>

### 5.2 List systems

Overall, more countries use list PR than any other electoral system. List systems are common across Europe and Latin and South America. They are also used in some African countries, for example South Africa, Namibia, Algeria, and Morocco. In South East Asia, Indonesia and Cambodia use a list system.<sup>96</sup>

The list systems used vary and include both open and closed lists.

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<sup>94</sup> International IDEA [data tools](#), [Electoral System Design database](#)

<sup>95</sup> Electoral Reform Society, [A wave of cities across the United States switch to fair voting systems](#), 11 November 2022

<sup>96</sup> International IDEA [data tools](#), [Electoral System Design database](#)

## 5.3 Mixed systems

Mixed systems are the third most used system of election. However, most countries that have a mixed system use a parallel system, which as noted in section 3.3, does not use the regional list part of the election to make the result more proportional.

Countries that use the parallel system include Italy, the Russian Federation, Japan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Countries that use a mixed member proportional system, similar to the system used in the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, are Germany, Hungary, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea, Lesotho, Bolivia and Mexico.<sup>97</sup>

## 5.4 STV

Only [Malta](#) and [Ireland](#) use STV for elections to their national legislatures. They also use STV for local elections.

Elections for the Australian Senate use a preferential voting system with a system of counting using STV quotas and transfers. The voter can choose how to allocate their preferences. This is known in Australia as voting above or below the line, because of the design of the ballot paper.

Below the line voters can rank individual candidates as in a normal STV vote. Above the line voters can rank parties instead of individuals. Someone who has ranked a party number 1 will automatically have their first preference vote allocated to candidate number one on that party list when votes are counted. Their preference will then automatically transfer, if required, to the second, third, etc, candidates on the party list before transferring to candidate number one on the voter's second-choice party list.<sup>98</sup>

## 5.5 AV

Australia uses AV for federal elections to the House of Representatives. It is also used in Papua New Guinea.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> As above

<sup>98</sup> Australia Electoral Commission, [Voting in Australia](#) (PDF)

<sup>99</sup> International IDEA [data tools](#), [Electoral System Design database](#)



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